



REJECTED BY THE WINTER WOLF

THE BLOOD
WITCH'S CURSE,
BOOK ONE

S. MASSERY

REJECTED
BY
THE WINTER
WOLF

S. MASSERY

OceanofPDF.com

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To Perseverance

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INTRODUCTION

Hello dear reader!

Thank you for joining me on Astra and Kian's journey! I am so excited for you to dive into this world.

Please be warned of some potentially distressing content, including brief descriptions of (light) torture, discussion of mother fatalities in childbirth, and forced drug usage.

Kian's wolf wanted me to advise you that he does not share under any circumstances.

Happy reading!

xoxo,
Sara

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CHAPTER I

ASTRA

Instinct, a silent alarm, snaps me from sleep. My skin buzzes, the tang of fear sharp in my mouth like blood. I try to puzzle what jarred me awake, but the small room is completely silent. My heartbeat is too quick, my breathing shallow.

I had a thought, a half-imagined memory, but now it's gone.

A nightmare, perhaps.

Footsteps pound down the hallway, and my door swings open. A candle's low flickering flame precedes my mother. It casts her face in warm light, and the hall behind her is swathed in darker shadow. For a second, *déjà vu* hits me, as if we've done this already.

Her mouth is open, ready to awaken me. Her energy is palpable in the tight space—rushed, worried. Afraid. We've spent so much time together; I know her body language like she's already spoken aloud.

I sit up and shove the blankets from my legs.

"Come, Astra."

That candle flickers wildly with her movement. Wax drips down over her knuckles, but she doesn't seem to even notice. I inhale her familiar lavender scent as she pushes my clothes at me, then boots. She's barely dressed herself. Boots peek from under her long blue nightgown, a knit wrap covering her arms and upper half.

"There's not much time." Her voice cracks out, a warning rumble before the *boom* of thunder. It goes straight into me, through me.

The feeling of repeating swells. Does she feel it? The last time this happened...

"Don't linger in the past," she commands.

I shake it off and hurry to put on the clothes she dumped in my lap. Once I'm done, I follow her down the hall. She picks up my worn leather bag, the one she made for me when I turned fourteen, and pushes it into my arms. Her gaze roves over my face, taking in every detail.

I'm taller than her now. Our similar features slipped away with age. When I was a child, we looked more alike. Our hair, our face shape. Now, just the bold golden blonde of our hair ties us together. My face is rounder, cheeks fuller. She's lithe, where I've got padding on my hips, my waist, thighs, and breasts.

"What did you see?" My voice is hoarse with sleep and fear.

Her brows furrow, and she shakes her head. "Too much to explain."

That *déjà vu* is still clinging to me, and I try to brush it off. Four years away from my home has shifted my perspective on my childhood—which is why I should've questioned why Mom wanted me to come back so urgently.

I hook the bag over my shoulder. I'd packed it myself only a week ago when she asked me to visit, regretfully leaving my apartment in the city behind, but it's heavier than before. "Where are we going?"

My voice is hushed, regardless of the ward around the cottage that blocks eavesdroppers from listening in. Some things can supersede even powerful wards. She taught me that.

My mother pulls a necklace from her pocket. The amethyst stone swings between us for a moment, catching the candlelight. "Put this on."

"I—"

"It will protect you. Please, Astra."

My heart inches into my throat. A bad feeling slithers through me, oily and dark. It twists up my insides and demands I refuse. But I can't argue with her. Not like this.

"Okay." I slip on the necklace, letting the stone settle under my shirt. It's warm against my sternum.

"Go north," she says. "Do not stop for anything or anyone."

"Mom." I grip her free hand. "What's going on? Why north? Why *now*?"

Her gaze burns through me, and I get the sense that this is killing her more than me. There's agony in her eyes, and something darker than fear. Terror, maybe, but also some sort of resignation. I've never seen my mother truly afraid until right this second.

“They’re coming, my love.” She grasps my hand with her free one, bringing my knuckles to her lips. “If you do not go, they’ll kill you. You’re too valuable. I’m sorry—that’s why I brought you home. They would’ve found you in the city, where I couldn’t protect you.”

I jerk back. That icy fear rises inside me again. The vicious nightmares that have haunted my sleep since I was a child flicker in front of my vision, a slideshow of images I’ve never been able to forget. I blink rapidly, trying to will them away.

The knowledge that this has happened before sings under my skin.

Except, her words don’t make sense. I’m not valuable. Not like her.

“They want a Seer. And he wants to break the curse.” Her voice sounds a million miles away, and her eyes are glazed. She’s seeing the future. “If you help him, in return, he’ll help you.”

“Who?”

She shakes off the vision and focuses on me. Her lips press tight, her expression *sorry*. She opens the door and ushers me outside. Through the enclosed porch, out the open screen door. She gives me a push once I’m on the damp grass.

“Run, Astra.”

The amethyst burns on my chest, seeming to echo her words.

She’s not coming with me. She motions again, eyes wide. The taste of blood blooms across my tongue, choking me.

I sprint across the clearing around our cottage and into the tree line. There’s no moon tonight. Even the stars are hiding. I fumble my way through the forest I was raised in, trying not to get tangled in brush and branches that reach for me. It’s familiar and strange all at once. Four years is long enough for the woods to remake themselves into something unrecognizable. I trip over roots and slide on fallen pine needles.

I don’t make it far at all when a *crack* splits the air behind me.

A sickly-sweet scent fills my nose, and my body goes still against my will. My heart pounds, threatening to burst out of my chest, but my every muscle locks.

I know this smell with a horrible intimacy.

Demon.

The veil between our world and theirs is at its thinnest during a new moon. It’s enough for stronger creatures to force their way into our realm—

or for someone to drag them through. I heard enough horror stories about it as a child to give me nightmares. And by the time I saw my first one...

The stone on my chest is so hot. It's got to be burning a hole through my skin.

The pain makes me move again, and I turn back for my mother. I get to the edge of the clearing, and I don't find the quiet, dark house I left. Every light inside blazes on. It's a beacon, calling to... something. Not me. I'm supposed to be long gone.

Above the cottage is a roiling shadow, darker than the night. It plunges down, covering the house, seeping in through the cracks.

Light explodes out again, and I clutch the tree. The ground trembles.

My mother's power is fierce, but it's rarely put on such display.

The shadows coalesce into a solid shape at the front of the cottage. The doors blow outward, and something throws the demon backward. My mother strides out, her hair floating. Her gaze lifts. Even from this distance, she finds me with unerring accuracy, and she shakes her head like I've disappointed her.

"Run," she mouths.

The demon rises. It's huge, and the light seems to cower away from it. It slinks toward her again, then opens its jaws and screeches. I grab my head and cover my ears. The noise is indescribable, a piercing blade sliding into my eardrums. The ground seems to tremble under my feet—but my mother doesn't flinch.

She stands off against the demon with nothing in her hands.

On the other side of the clearing, movement catches my attention. A wolf appears, stalking out of the darkness. I fight the urge to duck back for cover. There must be something I can do. My stomach churns, and the stone at my sternum burns in warning.

Wolves are dangerous to our kind. There's a fifty-fifty chance it will kill my mother after it slays the demon. Or it may just go for my mother first.

Depends on its rage.

I'm going to be sick.

The wolf's amber eyes catch the light from the house and refract it back. It's a huge thing, even from this distance. Its muscles ripple under dark fur. I can't tell who has its attention—the demon or my mother.

The demon pays no heed to the approaching wolf. It screams again, digging its clawed feet into the earth, then charging my mother. I scream

along with it and fall to my knees. It's all I can do to keep my eyes locked on my mother.

Instead of defending herself, she looks at me. Horror flashes across her expression.

The sweet, rotting smell envelops me, and shadows spreads like oil across the grass under my boots.

I wheel around.

A demon coalesces in front of me. The black smoke comes together, solidifying into a body.

I squeak. I don't know what to do—I've never had to fight a demon before.

After what feels like an eternity—but is probably only a few seconds—it's fully formed. The smoke billows around its edges, and shadows fall from its body and land on the ground.

The smell fills my nose, and then the black smoke surrounds me, cutting off my vision. I can't breathe. I can't even think, but I hear it getting closer. I imagine it reaching for me, and I lift my arm on instinct.

Something rips through my sleeve and skin, burning my forearm.

I scream and slam my hands together, trying to keep my arm, which may be mangled, up in front of my face. I'm not prepared for this—I don't know how to defend myself. I can barely control any magic at all, just a faint stream of it. That won't be enough to save me.

A rushing noise fills my ears, and a *pop*, as if the air pressure has changed around me. The oxygen is sucked from my lungs. My muscles burn, and pain lances through me in waves.

I hit the ground hard—but it doesn't make a dent in the agony racing through me. My mouth opens and closes.

The sensation vanishes as quickly as it came on, leaving me panting.

I lie still and try to make sense of what just happened. The stone has lost its heat, but my hands tremble. I dig my fingers into the dirt, taking a bit of energy from the earth. It seeps through my limbs, cold and soothing. A balm to my aching muscles. After another minute, I sit up.

And stare in wonder.

I'm still in *a* forest, but there's no more clearing in front of me. No cottage, no demons, no mother. I rise slowly, my body stiffer than it's ever felt. I reach out and brace myself on a tree trunk, and the ground slants.

My body revolts with the upward motion.

I lean over and heave until I vomit. Eventually, I pick my head back up and examine my surroundings. It's not familiar in the slightest.

How?

Did my mother send me away?

Transporting something—or, I suppose in my case, *someone*—is dangerous. Punishable in some covens. It takes a great dose of power, and my mother just used it on me.

With a cry, I realize that I have no idea what happened to her. Whether she fought the demon facing her or if she was too distracted by what was happening to me.

If they killed her... or if the wolf did.

Wolves, I correct. Those beasts never travel alone. It doesn't matter that I just saw one. I'm sure there were others lurking in the shadows.

I pat myself down. I managed to keep my bag still on my shoulder. My sleeve is ripped. There's a cut on my arm, blood rolling down the outside of my wrist and dripping off my fingers. The arm I raised to protect myself against the demon.

My bag. I can staunch the bleeding with something.

I drop to my knees and rip it open, sifting through it. There are the clothes and small bag of toiletries I brought with me, plus unfamiliar items Mom must've stowed in it. There's nothing I want to ruin in order to stop the bleeding. Not one of my few clean shirts.

With a sigh, I rip my shirtsleeve and use it to wrap the wound. I tie it off and tug the knot tight with my teeth, groaning.

It hurts like a thousand bee stings.

Of the new things, a smaller leather pouch filled with stones stands out. I run my fingers over them and close my eyes for a moment. The magic my mother sank into them calls out to me. There are some surprising ones that I pass by, but my index finger pauses on one that contains a concealment charm.

It's as familiar to me as breathing, seeing as how I made this one with her just the other morning.

I slip the stone into my bracelet and flip it back over, wincing slightly as the stone settles on my skin. The leather bracelet came from a witch who specialized in such creations. Most witches can infuse stones with magic. Holding them to our skin, hidden from sight, gives us the advantage to call

upon that power at any time. Unlike drawing magic from our bodies, which drains us—and has severe limitations.

My skin tingles, accepting the charm's slight transformation.

It hides the Mark that identifies me as a witch—the one that puts me in more danger than I'd care to admit. Some witches get lucky, and their inky-black Mark appears in places that can be easily concealed. Their ribs, breasts, upper legs. Their backs, even. It's an utterly unique identifier to the witch who bears it.

Mine crawls up the left side of my neck, over my jaw, and into my hairline behind my ear. Mine splits into branches akin to a bolt of dark lightning. As large as a man's hand resting against my neck, fingers splaying on my jaw and wrapping around. It's impossible to hide without magical assistance.

I search the rest of the bag. My clothes, a tiny leather-bound book of handwritten spells, a knife.

Finally, I locate the true gold, my wallet, and phone, at the bottom of the bag. I take my cell out and turn it on. While it loads, I try to keep calm. There could be many outcomes of that fight.

It doesn't bode well that she sent me away with two demons afoot, *plus wolves*. She should've been more focused on protecting herself. Fending them off. Defending our home.

My mother is one of the most powerful Seers of her generation. She saw the demons coming. Clearly, she saw a way to get me out of dodge... although I can only guess if that was her first option. Did she see me turn around and come back for her?

I open the maps app. After a moment, my location appears as a solid blue dot in a landscape of dark green. I zoom out a little, squinting at the screen. I'm in North Dakota.

Go north, my mother ordered.

Well, I'm certainly fucking north now.

Up until a few minutes ago, I was in Colorado.

She didn't just send me a few miles—she sent me a few *states* away.

I swallow thickly and climb to my feet. I zoom back in and find a town. It doesn't look too far, so I set my course in that direction. I'll just go into town, find some hotel or motel, rent a room until I can get my energy back up, then figure out how to get back to Colorado.

"You can do this," I whisper.

The sun has risen by the time I make it into the town. There are a few people out, and I draw curious gazes from all of them.

I pat down my hair, then my clothes, but soon realize that it's not my appearance. It's *me*. Small towns this far north, almost touching Canada, can't possibly get many visitors.

Certainly not ones who walk in with just a backpack.

Even still, I make it to the tiny town square without anyone calling out to me. There's a bed and breakfast on one of the corners, a *vacancy* sign swinging in a gentle breeze. I head for it and slip inside. A bell chimes loudly over my head.

A girl sits at a desk to my left. Her head is bent over a newspaper, pen poised in her hand, but she comes to attention at the noise. "Good morn... Oh, you're not Pete. Can I help you?"

I clear my throat. "I was hoping for a room."

She stares at me a beat, then shuffles the newspaper to the side. "Are you okay?"

I glance behind me, but the street is empty. "I'm fine."

Relatively speaking.

We stand in silence for a moment, then she seems to snap back into business mode.

"We don't get many new folks," she says. "Queen bed or two doubles?"

"Just the one bed is fine." I pause. "How do you not get much new business?"

She takes my ID and shrugs. "Some travel in for work, so they're frequent fliers. We get to know them. Beyond that, we're not much of a tourist town. The owners don't mind it when it's slow, and I get a lot of reading done."

"The quiet must get boring?"

Her expression changes. "Could be worse. How many nights will you be with us?"

"Um... two. Maybe three."

"I can do two to start, we don't mind when guests extend. And normally check-in is later, but we have some clean rooms. Instead of charging you for last night, I'm just going to finagle it, okay? Start your two nights tonight. I just need a credit card."

I can't imagine anyone would be tracking that. Still, the first card that I pull out of my wallet is one I haven't seen before. It has my name on it,

though.

Another one of my mother's messages? Or protections?

I slide it across the desk, and she runs it. After a pause, she lifts a key from a hook behind her. The number four is etched on the key's tag. She returns my card but keeps the key.

"Let me show you to your room. It can be a little bit of a maze since it's a converted mansion. The house doesn't follow conventional numbering systems." She smiles brightly and motions for me to follow her down a hall off the foyer.

We pass room six, then five. Turn. Three.

Then, finally, four.

"Breakfast is included," she adds. "It's, um, seven to nine every morning. You're right on time."

As if to remind me of my impending hunger, my stomach growls. It's almost seven a.m., and suddenly, despite the nightmares I'm sure to have, breakfast sounds great.

"Thank you."

I lock the door and drop my pack on the floor. The room is cute. White wallpaper with silver flowers. The queen bed has a white quilt, and the rug at the foot is pale blue. So are the curtains that flutter over the cracked windows.

To my left is a bathroom. I go in and stop short, staring at myself in the mirror. I look... *normal*. But normal is relative. The version of me who the girl at the front desk saw is disheveled. Hair a mess—there's no hiding the *leaves* in my hair, my God—and dirt smeared across my cheekbone.

I unclasp the bracelet masking my features and set it down. There's a slight tingle across my skin, and the black Mark slowly darkens as the charm's illusion fades away. It draws my eye, and I press my finger into one of the jagged, tapered lines on my jaw. When it first came in, it was raised like an actual scar. It hurt as a fresh cut would, too.

Over the years, it's settled into the semblance of a tattoo. My hair is the same, with bits of debris in it, but now visible is the gash on my arm. It soaked through the fabric I tied around it.

The silence presses in on me, and I still stifle my emotions. I've been operating on autopilot, fueled by adrenaline. I'm not safe, even if it appears that way now. I can't afford to fall apart. I don't know what happened at home. To my mother.

Part of me thinks I'd know if she died. If something terrible happened to her, I'd feel it.

Right?

I shrug off my bag and pull out the pouch of stones. I dump them out and take stock.

Mom gave me a set of powerful gemstones. Some seem to have been made and not used by her, but others are her personal ones. The amethyst around my neck is from her collection. I sense her magic in it differently than the others, and I can almost smell her scent with me. Lavender, with a hint of spice. A pang of regret hits me hard.

She's all I have. And yet, I left her.

Her words come back to me, and I jolt. I need to write this down, or else I'll forget. Mom's words have always been important—and something has always been wrong with me, because after a while, they'll slip out of my mind like sand blowing across the desert.

There's a pad of paper and pen on the nightstand, and I sit heavily on the edge of the bed. Best to write it down now, while the memory burns behind my eyelids.

I write them down and set it aside, returning to the bathroom. Before anything, I need to clean myself up.

With a deep sigh, I untie my bloody shirt and lean down to clean my arm in the sink. Once the dirt and debris have washed away, I pluck one of the stones from the pouch and close it in my fist. Its warmth envelops me, sliding under my skin. A healing stone. My skin knits together and seals closed. My forearm itches unbearably, but I force myself to ignore it. Soon, all that's left on my arm is a pink scar.

I set the stone aside. It still has magic in it—it would probably heal one more wound. Maybe.

I leave everything in the bathroom and return to the bed. I grab the paper and scan the words I scribbled.

Her cryptic visions aren't new. In fact, I grew up trying to decipher them. She could predict a spring storm, for example. Easy things like that. Others never made any sense. Some made sense after a long time. As a child, I had a desk drawer filled with scraps of paper that contained quotes from her.

And then there are the visions she never told me about. The ones that may have shifted the future too much for another person to see.

Those are the ones I truly fear.

They're coming, she had said. *They want a Seer. He wants to break the curse. Help him and he'll help you.*

Help me with what, Mom? Not to mention, I have no idea about any curse, or who *he* is. If her *they* refers to demons, and not the wolves as I originally suspected...

I shudder.

Wolves hunt witches and demons alike. While demons are true monsters, witches have always tried to live in peace. We're humans with magic—that doesn't make us abominations. That doesn't make us evil.

My ugly truth is that I'm grateful for the demons. I'm *grateful* that they give the wolves something else to chew on. Because when the wolves aren't focused on those black-souled beasts, they're hunting witches.

Their mortal enemy.

They know no bounds when it comes to witches—and I've seen their ruthlessness firsthand.

Demons, they hunt because it's their duty. They kill them to keep our world safe.

Witches...

Well, it started with one witch.

One wolf.

And one betrayal.

Now we're all paying for it.

Wolves strike fear in my heart like no other, simply because I know I'm dead if they see my Mark. I'm dead if they smell my magic. Or worse—I'd be dragged back to their pack for them to do with me what they please.

There are too many stories.

Too many nightmares that keep us from lulling into a sense of safety.

It doesn't matter how many witches are in a coven. It doesn't matter how much power we have. Wolves will always be the predator. And we're their favorite prey.

So why do I get the sinking feeling the *him* my mother referred to is a wolf?

CHAPTER 2

KIAN

My hunters come back with their heads bowed, reeking of failure and fear.

I grit my teeth and remain where I am, kneeling in front of the fireplace. A single candle burns in the grate, the flame twisting and turning in the air. In it, I'm supposed to be able to see my future. The Silver Ridge Pack's future.

But there's nothing.

My father could do this with ease. I still remember sitting on his lap as a child, one of the few times he had me laughing as he made the flames jump and dance at his will. And when I was learning, trying to adapt the fire to my desires, *nothing*.

Diluted power, my father would mutter, extinguishing the fire and leaving me sitting in the dark.

But after he'd died, I realized it wasn't diluted.

Just different.

Now, their failure rankles as sharp as mine did to my father. The quiet, simmering rage under my skin flares hotter, but I don't tear my gaze away from the flame.

"Speak," I order.

Even if I can't control the flame, I will control my pack.

"The demons took the Seer, Alpha," one says.

The only one not strangled by fear: Jessamine. My sister.

I lift my head.

She comes closer, holding out a cloth. "But her daughter escaped."

I take the cloth from her, with half a mind to just throw it into the fireplace and be done with it. But then the texture catches my attention. The cloth is soaked in blood.

Jessamine lowers herself to the floor at my side, her head bowed.

Unusual behavior for my unruly, headstrong sister.

My curiosity is officially piqued.

“Leave us,” I say to the others.

They rush to the door, closing it quickly in their wake.

“Speak, sister.” I sit back on my heels and consider her.

We were raised as pups together. She’s ten months younger than me—a sign that my father wasted no time after my mother died. Maybe loneliness drove him to it, or his inner wolf’s nature. Either way. Had I been old enough to understand it, I may not have forgiven him for it.

But I needed him. And it was hard to harbor hate when he could pry into my mind.

As such, she’s one of the only people I truly care about.

Another lesson instilled by my father: trust only your family. And even then, know that their intentions may not always align with yours.

Well—that turned out to be good advice. He was alpha of our pack. When I came of age, I had a choice: continue to bow my head or challenge him. I resisted for as long as I could, until old age slowed him down and my wolf couldn’t bear bowing any longer.

Sometimes I wonder if Jessamine will betray me in equal measure.

“I’m pregnant,” she says softly.

My mind screeches to a halt. All thoughts cease to exist—except one.

Pregnant.

The unbeatable death sentence for female wolf shifters.

I take her hands. Her mate is one of my only other friends, if I can go so far as to call him that. Roman is loud, boisterous, charming. He won her heart easily, set by fate, and the whole pack celebrated for weeks at their union.

True mate bonds are rare. Rarer still for them to come from within the same pack.

Still. She’s *pregnant*?

“I thought you were taking precautions.” My chest is tight.

Her fingers grip mine, and a tear slips down her cheek. “We were... until we decided to stop.”

I must be squeezing too tight—but she doesn't remove her hands from mine.

My wolf is restless, woken up by the news. He whines low in his chest, but I contain the sound to our mind. The thing that I've been striving to change appears before me, but now with a ticking clock hanging over it.

"I will fight this," I vow. "Damn it, Jessamine. Is a pup more important than your life?"

She shakes her head. "I can't explain it. I can't begin to describe how empty our home was beginning to feel. And the pups that we helped raise last year... It just worsened the ache."

Fuck.

"How far along are you?"

She eyes me. "Twelve weeks."

We'll get her to forty if we're lucky—but wolf pups tend to come early. And violently. So, at most, there are twenty-eight weeks to go.

The countdown to her death begins in the back of my mind.

"I wanted you to know first," she says, rising to her feet. She kisses my forehead. "Soon enough, the women will catch the scent, and my secret will be out. But for now, I'm going home. I've been away from Roman for too long."

Guilt strikes me. I let her go on this forsaken mission when she should be spending time with Roman. What little time she has left.

Her hands slip from mine. I watch her leave. I turn over this new revelation, this new horror. Of course there was a possibility of Jessamine becoming pregnant. It's the instinct inside all of us that drives us to procreate, even in the face of death. But I thought—I don't know, I thought there would be more time. Or perhaps, I assumed she would be the one to resist it.

Then I look down at the blood-soaked cloth on my thigh.

A witch's blood.

Without thinking, I raise it to my nose and inhale.

My eyes roll back.

Her scent is the sweetest poison. It infiltrates my lungs, lingers in my nose and on my tongue. Under the metallic bite, she smells like honey and lemon. Unbidden, I draw up a mental image of her. A girl with a devious smile and daring eyes. A figment of my imagination.

Witches can't be trusted.

I take hold of the imagery, sinking my wolf teeth into her throat and ripping it out. The girl's mouth contorts, but she's not fucking screaming. There's not a sound I can picture, but blood pours down her front, and she slumps to the ground.

It's the sort of mental exercise I've honed. A way to defeat my fears and enemies from taking over my mind.

It satiates some of the feelings rotting in my chest, but only just enough to think about a plan of attack. My wolf is right there, pressing against my skin. The low whine of discomfort echoes inside my skull. He's distressed. He wants to save our sister, too.

I know.

But that means making moves I've only ever considered in passing. It means a true act of war against the witches. Not just killing them but taking one. Forcing her to use her magic for me—or drain it from her blood and use it myself.

Hunt. Blood. Kill.

I'm in agreement with the wolf.

I shed my clothes and open the balcony doors. The cool night air greets me.

My room is on the second floor, but it's no matter. I leap out and shift mid-air. The familiar pain of muscles and bones realigning, fur emerging, is over in an instant. I hit the ground on all fours and release a howl.

It isn't quite an open invitation, but I know there are a few who will take it for what it is.

They sense my distress in wolf form, but I can't share the reason with them. Let the pack blame it on the demon, on *another* Seer we've let slip through our grasp.

We're always searching for a witch to end our misery—but none have been strong enough. The Seers we tried to capture have died, too weak or unwilling to help me. They couldn't stand the torture, and their powers flamed them out... or they saw me coming and ended their lives themselves.

So many witches. So much blood soaking into the ground.

And it's not enough.

But why did the demons take *this* Seer?

I turn my thoughts away from the witches and the curse that lingers in our blood. It's been so long, it seems to have been forgotten by them. They

live normal, human lifespans. Eighty, a hundred at most. They know we hate them. They know we hunt them. But the witches don't know *why*.

I gnash my teeth.

It's better that they forgot. That they don't use the curse as a weapon against us.

But it doesn't mean we don't punish them for it all the same.

My wolf surges through the trees, angry at my line of thinking. We bound over logs and brush, scaring rabbits out of their hiding places. Our gazes linger on their retreating form, but we keep to our route.

Members of our pack join the run. I catch their scents and eradicate the witch's blood from my nostrils.

A solution will come tomorrow, my wolf promises. For now, run with me.

He doesn't often speak. Human thoughts are tiresome, never-ending things. I should know—I can't seem to ever turn my mind off. For him to speak, to cut through my noise, means my thoughts are too loud.

The woods are dark, even with our enhanced sight. The moon is absent, cloaked in shadow. We're more human than not, even shifted. The power balance swings in the demons' favor.

Alpha, Griffin, one of my hunters, calls through the bond. I've caught a demon scent.

This close to our territory?

He shows me an image of where he's loping.

My wolf's hackles rise. We swing in his direction, our pace increasing until we're flying. It's a rush. Four wolves who joined me follow close behind, near silent on the pine-needle-padded forest floor. I catch up to Griffin, and the sweet, rotting scent fills my nose. He lets me take the lead.

Wolf shifters are one of the few beings who can kill a demon.

A witch's bone knife, properly prepared, is another.

Wolves are naturally impervious to demon magic. The shadows and darkness demons fight with doesn't control us as it does humans. They can't slip beneath our skin and use us.

I slow to a walk and issue orders through our mind bond to the wolves around me. They split off, and Griffin stays with me. The demon is close. I see it move ahead of us, dragging something behind it.

Griffin whines, flattening himself to the ground.

I glance at him, confused, a split second before a blast knocks me backward.

Hot air.

Fire.

Diluted magic, my father booms in my ears.

It singes my coat, and I land on my side. The breath is forced from my lungs.

“Dogs,” the demon calls. His voice echoes through the trees. “You think you can so easily defeat us?”

There are more than one. The stars are suddenly blotted out, darkness descending rapidly. I force myself up and howl, rushing forward.

The least I can do is go out with the demon’s skin between my teeth. I break through the tree line and sprint forward.

But the demon has gone.

Now, a young girl sits in the clearing, surrounded by burned marks in the grass. She must only be eleven, twelve. Her eyes are pitch-black, and her hair moves around her head like she’s underwater.

She rises to her feet.

“You did not stop us from taking the Seer,” the demon says. It’s fucking creepy to see a child open her mouth, and a deep, rasping male voice emit from it. “We will continue to take over this world.”

The girl raises her hands. Another blast of fire comes at us, but I leap to the side.

Coral, one of my smaller beta wolves, rushes the girl. The witch lifts her hand and sends her flying backward. The taste of magic is potent, and my beta lands hard on her side. Fire licks at her fur.

I lunge through the witch’s circle and sink my teeth into her shoulder. She screams, batting at me, but I shake her as hard as I can. Her neck snaps, and she goes limp.

The fire engulfing Coral extinguishes just as fast.

Black smoke pours out of the wound on the witch’s neck and dissipates into the air.

I turn to go to Coral and slam into a perimeter. The energy knocks me backward. Panic laces under my resolve. I reach for my wolves in my mind, but there’s nothing.

The witch’s circle has cut me off completely.

I try again and get the same result. Then again. Pain lances through my shoulder. I shout, but no one hears me. Fucking witches.

Finally, when I've all but dislocated my shoulder, Griffin notices. His bark is muffled. He races forward and digs at the circle, breaking the markings apart. Something *cracks* through the air, and the magical barrier shatters around us.

Was it a trap? A circle meant to capture?

Coral is writhing on the ground, her agony coming through the bond loud and clear. The two others are trying to help her, but they're doing no good.

Everyone stop, I command, my alpha voice searing through their alarm.

They drop to the ground, ears flattening back against their heads. I lunge forward, going to the now still Coral.

I will not lose another wolf.

And a female to boot.

I shift back to my human form and land at her side, quickly patting down Coral's body. Checking for the damage, putting out the last of her smoking fur. There's a lot... a lot of damage. My throat closes. Her fur has been singed away, leaving patches of burnt skin.

She whines, her wolf eyes open wide. It only intensifies what I feel—both the guilt

“Shift,” I command.

She does without thinking, curling into a naked ball in front of me. The skin down her side, from her ribcage to her hips, is charred black. She has other wounds, some oozing from pink and shiny skin, and she almost immediately starts to tremble.

“Easy. It'll be okay.” I hover my hands over the worst of her injuries.

My healing magic is slow to respond to my command, and I curse the new moon. We wait for several tense minutes as it flows through her injuries, repairing the worst of the damage and easing her pain.

Finally, her breathing relaxes.

I scoop her into my arms, careful to avoid the injuries. Griffin walks with me, the other two in their wolf form. One of them rushes ahead, hurrying to wake our medic. By the time we arrive back, all the lights are on in the women's shared house. The unmated women all live here—if they want. Others choose to live alone, but most wolf shifters aren't built for that

sort of solitude. There's a sheet spread across their kitchen table, and I lay her down on it carefully.

Some are drawn downstairs by my presence. Others linger in the shadows or outside.

The medic, Antonio, stands waiting for us with his head bowed.

I step back and watch him for a moment. Someone hands me a pair of sweatpants, which I take with a small nod. Eventually, though, my skin crawls with the need to move. The restlessness is all me. My wolf is satiated for now, more distraught than anything. Seeing a pack member's fur alight is a horror I'd wish on no one but our worst enemies.

I turn on my heel and stride out, my mind full of puzzles.

There are demons in our territory. Not only that, but a witch, too. A witch under their control. Setting traps for us—this is more organized than I've ever seen. That's the worrisome part.

This has to be the Seer's fault.

I cross the small village, my head held high in case someone is watching out their windows. Some of my wolves worry too much when we go, and their anxiety can be contagious if not managed. I try to focus on tempering my emotions, emitting calm confidence.

It's a façade, but I'm good at faking. Even to my pack's mental bond.

In my room, my gaze is drawn to the bloody cloth. The scent I worked so hard to banish is right back in my nose, demanding attention.

Every instinct is screaming at me that this witch is important—that she knows something. She'll give me what she saw, and everything she knows on top of that. Because if her mother is powerful enough for the demons' cause, perhaps she's strong enough to break the curse, too.

My blood stirs at the prospect of a new hunt.

The little witch will never see me coming.

CHAPTER 3

ASTRA

My limited knowledge of covens comes from my childhood memories and the stories my mother used to tell me. How they operate, how they welcome visiting witches. She didn't tell me those stories to teach me. They were tales she whispered by the flickering fire pit under the summer moon, or curled up on the couch while a blizzard raged beyond our cottage. Drowsily, dreamily, her half-full glass of wine dangling from her fingers.

She told me so she wouldn't forget her past. And maybe she told me to preserve it.

I was too young to fully understand covens when my mother and I were in one... and by the time I came of age, it was too late. We were on our own.

If there's a coven in this tiny North Dakota town, they'll find me. They'll sense my magic, however weak it is, and send someone for me. Covens are in tune with the land, especially territory they consider *theirs*.

My mother warned me that covens could be prickly to newcomers. Obstinate, set in their ways, and highly secretive. The pictures she weaved of the covens she encountered... I'll walk a thin line between their hostility and generosity just by entering the town.

But it's not like I set out to invade their space, and I have no interest in learning their secrets. I could use their help, though. And I can feel their presence in this town. It's a different sort of energy, humming underneath the sounds of the lives of non-magical humans. A frequency that resonates if I close my eyes and sit very, very still.

It's been two days since my mother sent me here, and I haven't heard from her... or about her. The service on my cell is spotty at best, hovering

between a bar and nothing at all. I've connected to the internet, but that doesn't help me much. Mom was never a fan of technology.

My appetite has been nonexistent, as well. The front desk girl watches me curiously as I pile food up and take it back to the safety of my room to ration for the day. This system allows me to keep to myself.

Until tonight.

The lock on my window makes a scraping noise, pried from the outside. I sit at the foot of my bed, my bag packed and leaning on my leg. In my palm is a vine. The leaves open and close, over and over again.

Just enough magic to catch their attention.

And yet, I'm tired from it. It's pathetic, to have used up my reserves on what amounts to a silly parlor trick.

My window inches upward, and I curl my hand around the vine. I suck the life from it, leaving it brown and crisp. It disintegrates, the pieces drifting between my fingers.

"Clever girl," a female voice says from the shadows outside my window. "Calling to us when you've recovered from your travels. Although you had to know that we were aware of your presence as soon as you crossed into our territory."

Well, damn. I was hoping I had avoided their detection.

A flame appears in her palm. The sudden illumination flickers over her face—she's far younger than I was expecting. She's still in her teens, if I had to guess. Just her upper torso and face are in the window, one arm propped on the sill. Her dark hair is swept into a high bun, and her brown eyes seem to almost glow in the firelight.

A witch with fire magic. And maybe air, since she was able to get the lock open.

"My means of travel were... strenuous," I say, mainly because she seems to require an answer. My chest tightens, and nerves flutter through my limbs. They sent a *teenager* to come collect me. A teenager with much more power—and control—than I have.

It gives me the impression of a show of force, without them raising a hand.

"Come with me," she says. It's definitely not a question.

I nod anyway. "Out the window?"

Her nose wrinkles. "Kristin would ask too many questions if you went out the front."

The one who checked me in. Not a morning shift employee—the night shift, if she’s here now. That makes sense, I suppose.

The witch steps back. I climb through the window with my bag over my shoulder and drop noiselessly to the ground. I’m taller than her, but she still feels intimidating. She’s all sharp angles, more like my mother’s build than mine. I follow her down the main street, my senses on high alert. All the shops are closed, leaving the road deserted.

Her flame is gone. The only light that guides our steps are the dim streetlamps and the moon.

Even though she’s smaller, her stride is quick. And before long, I’ve got a stitch in my side demanding attention—and for my steps to slow.

“What’s your name?” I ask.

She’s been watching me out of the corner of her eye—pretending not to, of course. But now she fully looks at me, and her lips pull into a smirk. “Names have power, you know.”

I incline my chin. I’m sure they do, although I’m not sure what she thinks I would do with it. Maybe it’s the fear of the unknown that keeps her mouth shut. And if she doesn’t want to answer, then I won’t give her anything of me either.

It makes me wonder how many visitors this coven has had. In the last year, in the last decade. As far as I can tell, this town is tiny and quiet. I’ve never heard my mother mention a coven on the edge of Canada.

We go down a side street, into a residential neighborhood. All the homes here remind me of the cottage. Warm, small, cozy. It’s clear that none of them are large spaces, but their owners care for what they have.

I tip my head back and focus on the stars.

Just like home, they’re brilliant. Unhindered by city lights and smog, even the faint ones shine. It still takes me a minute to pick out the familiar constellations. To orient myself amongst them from this new location.

That thought alone is unsettling. That something so distant can be so similar and yet wildly different. It creates an ache in my chest, and I hate the longing for home. All I want to do is go home. So, so badly.

“Here,” the girl says.

Her voice jars me, and I snap back to attention. We’re in front of a two-story home. Unlike the rest on the street, every light blazes through the windows. It’s the middle of the night, but I’m not an unexpected visitor.

She climbs the porch and disappears inside. She leaves the door open, presumably an invitation.

I hike up the steps. My bag suddenly feels like a million pounds. The amulet at my chest doesn't react, and I keep pushing forward. My steps slow. There's a new twinge in my muscles, and fatigue wraps around me. There seems to be twenty steps up to the top of the porch, not five.

This is important, tired or not.

I make it to the doorway and press my hand to the frame. I actually have to catch my breath, to force my lungs to expand. I steel myself against the pressure and grit my teeth. With a measured step, I cross the threshold.

The feeling dissipates like it was never there. The tired soreness, the weight of my pack, the way it was hard to breathe. It all vanishes.

A ward.

How dumb can I be? Did my mother teach me *nothing*? If I was paying more attention, I might've detected the ward before walking blindly through it.

"Well done," someone says.

The foyer is brightly lit, with stairs directly ahead of me. To the left of the stairs is a hallway that goes to the back of the house. Another wider hall leads to the right, to a set of French doors that are currently closed. There's a room immediately to my left—a front room, maybe specifically for entertaining.

That's where a different witch sits, smiling at me. She's older than the teen. Her hair is dark, spun through with gray, and clipped back loosely at the nape of her neck. Her skin is dark, smooth, and unblemished. There's an amulet around her neck, too, hanging over her black t-shirt and the bib of her overalls. Her stone is dark green with thin veins of white.

Jade.

"Foes cannot make it past the stairs," she says mildly. "They tend to combust if they don't turn back. It creates quite the mess."

My brows pull down. Even on our darkest nights, my mother and I never had such a vicious spell guarding our cottage. Maybe we should've—things would've turned out differently.

"Do you often run into foes?" I ask.

She smiles. "No. But every few years, someone thinks they can come in and steal our power."

What kind of place did my mother send me to? One with a strong coven, apparently.

“Sit, child.” She gestures to the chair across from her. “And tell me why you’re in our town.”

Not a question.

I go to the chair and sink into it, setting my bag between my feet. My skin prickles, but not from the use of magic. Nope, this is straight up nerves.

“I’m not sure why I’m here. I didn’t come by choice.”

Her brow rises. I cannot, for the life of me, pinpoint an age to her. Somewhere between thirty and ageless. I’ve met a few witches like that. Sometimes, magic erases time’s wear on a body—or at least slows it. Others have the misfortune of being eaten alive by their magic.

My mother always warned me of casting outside of my abilities, with a worried frown sent in the direction of my hands. She said I’d run myself into an early grave if I wasn’t careful. I didn’t want to end up skeletal before I turned twenty, so I listened.

Just another message to heed from the powerful Seer.

“Curious.” She glances over her shoulder to the doorway. “Come here, Sybil.”

Another witch enters the room quickly. Her speed makes her seem eager, while the girl who retrieved me lags. The new arrival’s age is easier to guess. Her hair is completely white, lying smooth down her shoulders and back. It almost reaches her elbows. Her skin is almost as pale, with a few weathered wrinkles around her eyes. And those are bright blue—the most colorful thing about her.

She comes right to me and leans in.

It takes everything I have to not react or flinch back.

She inhales, her nose almost touching my hair.

“Yes,” she murmurs. “You’re familiar to me. Your name?”

I press my lips together, thinking of the teen’s earlier words: that names have power. Something I never really had to worry about, between the sheltered life with my mother and the witches who visited us, and then my short time in the city, outside of magic.

“Perhaps a show of faith.” She gives me a knowing smile.

She’s *amused*?

“I’m Sybil. This is Dortha, our coven leader. And the girl who retrieved you is Amy. She’s our newest witch, just fifteen years old. She has a smart mouth, which you no doubt encountered, but we like to stoke that flame instead of extinguish it.”

Interesting. I commit their names to memory and give them my own.

“Astra Somnium.”

Sybil takes the seat beside me. There’s a wide collection of chairs in this room, belying just how many witches probably fill these seats at coven meetings. They may all be here, even, lingering upstairs or in hidden hallways. Listening.

She reaches for my hand and clasps it without warning. Her gaze shifts, and she stares into nothing.

Dortha sighs but otherwise remains silent. I resist the urge to pull away.

When Sybil dials back in, her pupils are blown wide. She refocuses on me and releases my hand. “Dream.”

“What?” Amy asks.

“Somnium is Latin for dream,” Sybil says with a frown. “I’ve only known one *Dream* in my lifetime.”

My breath catches.

I don’t realize I’ve gripped the arms of the chair I’m in until my nails bite into the wood. It seems I don’t know anything anymore.

“Lenora Dreamstone was one of the most powerful Seers in the country.” Sybil watches me closely. “I knew her when she was a child. She predicted...”

Dreamstone?

“I’ve never heard the name Dreamstone,” I interrupt.

Is that my mother’s first name? Yes. But Sybil said she *was*—not is. She’s alive.

“I didn’t choose to come here,” I whisper. “Regardless of who you think I am or who some ancestor of mine was. A demon attacked us. My mother sent me away so I wouldn’t...”

Sybil stares at me. Pieces seem to click into place. “Your mother is Lenora.”

“She shares the same first name.” I shrug and glance around, but there aren’t very many friendly faces here. And a seed of doubt is planted. “She always went by Somnium. I don’t know anything different.”

Do I?

We left the coven when I was very young. For a while, we moved around every few weeks. We finally settled in our little cottage in Colorado, far removed from town. What were we running from? And could she have changed our name to hide us?

“When was the attack?” Dortha asks.

“Two days ago.”

“Nonsense.” She shakes her head. “She’s been dead for nearly twenty years.”

I relax. “You have the wrong person, then. My mother is alive.” Pause. “Well, she was when I left her. And I need help to find her, to see if she’s okay—”

“How old are you, child?” Dortha asks.

I push my shoulders back and face her. “Twenty-four.”

Dortha tilts her head. As one, she and Sybil rise and disappear down the hall. Amy stays seated in the corner, drilling me with a hard gaze. I almost expect my sleeve to catch on fire.

I draw one leg up and wrap my arms around it, and we wait in silence for them to return. I strain to hear anything, but there must be more protections on the house. No sound travels into the room. No creaking floorboards over our heads, no voices. Just a ticking clock on the wall, marking each second that passes.

Finally, Sybil and Dortha return. They both stop in front of me.

“There’s a simple way to find out if you’re telling the truth,” Dortha says.

I narrow my eyes.

“Let Sybil do a reading.”

My mother has given me readings before. She wanted to teach me to defend my mind against others, so she used... extreme measures. All the while insisting that this was for my own good. That if I could keep her out, I could keep anyone out. It doesn’t require much magic, just strength of mind.

She wanted to ensure that my thoughts and memories remained my own.

Even though I don’t think I ever quite succeeded at shutting her out entirely, I was able to keep *some* secrets. Like the chocolate I snuck into my room, or my first kiss... Nothing big. Nothing life changing.

I have a feeling my future and hers both rest on this moment. And my failures aside, I find myself nodding. Agreeing. I don't possess any magic to connect with Spirit. I don't have the power to see into the past or the future. I can barely scry for the present.

Sybil, though...

Time to negotiate. I straighten and meet Sybil's gaze. "If you do a reading that satisfies your questions of my lineage, I want your help finding her."

Sybil's gaze is fixed on me, her blue eyes almost brightening with the intensity. "Deal."

We shake on it.

Lightning flashes outside. A split second later, there's a clap of thunder over our heads. The sound shakes the house.

Sybil raises her attention to the ceiling, and she smiles faintly. "I love signs like that. The universe loves to move in mysterious ways."

Dorthea and Amy rearrange the front room. They shove two chairs into the center of the space, facing each other, and the rest get moved away. They turn off all the lights except a lone lamp between us.

Sybil gestures for me to sit. Goosebumps rise on my arms, but it's too late to back down. I grit my teeth and try not to let my fear override my control. She could be more powerful than my mother, and she'll get through my limited barriers. Into the things I don't want her to see. Or she'll take my memories and twist them—or take them away. Put me into a stupor and drain my power.

Improbable ideas, but fears nonetheless.

I don't have much power to give. My mother ensured I was guarded in other ways. Better ways. It didn't always work, but she tried. I tried.

Sybil holds out her hands.

I place mine over hers, palms facing down. Her callused fingers brush over my wrists, and her grip goes from gentle to fierce in a split second.

Her power is cool water that slips under my skin. The smell of the sea fills my nose.

I close my eyes as she presses at my mind. Her power is probing. Testing. It finds the cracks I left for her, and the water-like magic surges through. It's a testament to her strength—and a warning that I can't let my guard down for even a second.

She hums, and her magic reverberates in the air. Salt and water and something sweet, like honey or burnt sugar.

Sybil flips through memories, lightning-quick, flashing behind my eyes. Growing up at the cottage, my mother teaching me simple spells. Sitting cross-legged in the forest opposite her, encouraging a flower to bloom.

Even faster, moving forward in time.

At the same time, she's tasting my power. Her fingers drag across the leather bracelet on my wrist, the one that hides the stone with the concealment charm. She can see me with my Mark, the snaking vines up over my neck and jaw. She sees the demons and the wolves from that night. The bright light, the way it felt to travel by magic. My mother's face looming out of the dark in my bedroom, startling me from sleep to urge me out.

She finds the barrier and pushes at it. When I don't give, she applies more pressure. Her grip on my hands tightens. Her power sharpens into a spear, and pain lances through my head.

But it doesn't give.

Jesus, she's strong. But maybe, for once, I am stronger.

Cold sweat dots my brow by the time she withdraws.

Her hands relax and pull away with her magic, receding like the tide.

I open my eyes and drop my hands to my lap to hide my tremble.

"I don't know what to make of you." She exhausted herself. Her eyes are bloodshot, her lips twisted. "You're full of secrets."

"But is she Lenora Dreamstone's daughter?" Amy asks. There's true reverence in her voice.

"The one and only, who is alive and well," she confirms. "Until three nights ago, at any rate. Come with me, Astra. I'll make good on my promise to help you locate your mother. The old gods will hold me to it. But then, you must leave."

My legs shake when I stand. I muscle through it and grab my bag. She leads me down the hall toward the back of the house. We enter a room no bigger than a closet tucked under the staircase. She's tiny enough to pass under the doorframe without bending, but I have to duck to not smack my head.

There's fabric on the walls, and two small chairs at a tiny round table. A pitcher of water and a stone bowl wait for us in the center.

She gestures to the fabric. “This helps me keep the visions straight. And *this*,” her hand moves to the bowl, “allows me to show guests the visions. Please sit.”

“You said you knew my mother? Personally?”

She hums and sets up for us. Water splashes into the bowl. “Her mother brought her to my coven—a different one, far from here—when she was just a young girl, begging us to teach her. Lenora was having frightful nightmares about one of her teachers dying. She’d wake up inconsolable. Non-magic interventions were unsuccessful, and at a certain point, her mother was willing to try anything. The poor man. Doctors discovered his cancer only a couple months later, and he was dead within the year. Lenora and her mother stayed for a few years while she mastered her powers, and only rarely did they get the best of her. But she went on to serve many masters...”

It’s strange to think that my mother had a whole life before me, and all I have is the stories she told me. I couldn’t say if they were real or fiction, trumped-up truths or downplayed for a child’s ears.

“Do you have anything of hers?”

I nod once, leaning down and grabbing the pouch of stones from my bag. I keep ahold of the stones and hand her the empty pouch, which she sets on the table in front of her. She rests two fingers on it and closes her eyes.

We sit in silence for a moment. She sways slightly, and soon, a scowl forms. She mutters, then reaches up and clasps an amulet that hid under her shirt. She squeezes it, mumbling faster.

I hold my breath, but hope swells. The hairs on my arms stand up straight with the crackle of energy flowing through and around her.

This is it—the answers that I need. I can feel my mother’s essence. It’s a live thing in the room with us.

Or maybe it’s just my imagination.

All at once, the tension breaks. And with it, my hope drains.

Sybil opens her eyes and sags back in her chair. With a look of regret, she withdraws her hand from the pouch. “I cannot see her. All I can sense is that she’s alive, but she’s masked in shadows. It could be her own magic protecting her, or it could be something else.” She examines my face. “I will read your future. If it intersects with her... if there’s a possibility of it, then we will find it. All I need is a drop of your blood.”

I stuff the stones back into the pouch, considering her solution. My mother has always hesitated to tell me of the future. Even the last time I saw her, she kept things vague. She did not want to influence outcomes, unless it was a matter of life or death.

Which makes me wonder if she saw that she'd live through this. What had she said about the mysterious *he* who shall find me? And supposedly help?

Sybil centers the bowl of water, not waiting for my agreement. Her voice rasps through a spell, and the still water suddenly ripples. She retrieves a knife from a side table and motions for me to give her my hand.

Apprehension spikes through me. I have a collection tiny silver scars across my left palm from the same such rituals with my mother, but now there's an added element of danger. This is a stranger, in an unfamiliar place, and I am the only person who can protect myself.

If Amy thought names held power, I wonder her views on volunteering a drop of blood?

My stomach twists, but... I want to find my mother. And at this rate, I know it's more than just returning home. She's not there.

She's alive. She's *somewhere*. Sybil said as much—now it's just a matter of locating her.

Sybil sets a wad of gauze by my arm. "For after."

I give her my hand, and she slices the pad of my index finger. The blade is so sharp, I barely feel the cut. She sets the knife aside and squeezes my digit, encouraging a bead of blood to form. When it wells up, she overturns my hand and flicks it downward. The drop falls.

It lands in the water with a hiss.

Sybil releases my hand and murmurs something.

I pull back and hold the gauze to the cut.

The water churns. I stare at it, feeling the same reaction in my stomach. Goosebumps break out across my back, running down my arms, and unease fills me. It isn't like her other method. This is different.

I don't like this.

Sybil chants words under her breath, trying to direct the power. Her eyes roll back, and her body goes rigid.

The only thing that keeps her from falling backward is her death grip on the edge of the table.

"Sybil?"

Her eyes snap open, falling to the water. Steam rises, as if the water is hot enough to boil.

Out of it emerges a wolf. The beast isn't made of water, not that I can tell. The white wolf's form solidifies.

The temperature in the room plummets, but all I can do is stare at the figure materializing from the bowl.

The wolf is all white, probably about the size of my palm. It hovers just over the roiling water. Black blood drips from its jaws. It pays us no attention as it steps down off the water, moving around the table. Its paws leave behind bits of frost in its wake, and its size swells. Sybil and I both shove our chairs away.

"What's going on?" I ask.

The Seer doesn't reply, but the wolf's gaze swings around. It seems to look at me, or maybe through me.

When it hops to the floor, it's the size of a medium dog. It barely fits in the space between us, with everything else in the room.

And the room is ice cold.

I scoot backwards until my chair hits the wall. My terror climbs, but I can't move. The wolf raises its nose, sniffing the air. It's already locked on me, but now it seems to sharpen. As it moves, the edges of the wolf blur. I hold onto the *it's not real* portion of my brain, forcing myself from panic to analytical.

The creature moves too easily through the space. It doesn't knock anything over. It looks solid, but it isn't. The ice it leaves behind is a whisper of its presence.

Frost crawls across the floor in every direction. The table freezes over, and then the stone *cracks*. The water doesn't flow out, though. It stays suspended, as if clinging to the stone by magic of its own.

"Not possible," Sybil whispers.

The wolf lunges at me.

I scream.

Sybil upends the bowl, but it's too late. The beast's teeth graze my neck. My amulet burns, suddenly white-hot against my sternum. The chair breaks, legs snapping, and I pitch sideways. I hit the floor hard, and the wolf disintegrates.

The stone bowl lies in pieces. Water drips on the floor. I stare at it in shock. The only trace of the wolf is the frost that still clings to the fabric,

the floor, the table.

I didn't know that was possible.

I don't even know what *that* was.

"Get out." Sybil's voice is a quiet crack of a whip.

My muscles scream at me, but I force myself up. "What just happened?"

Sybil grabs the front of my shirt. Her sudden physicality shocks me, but she shakes me once when I try to get away. Wordlessly, she yanks the door open and drags me into the hall.

The brighter light of the hall sears my eyes.

Dorthea and Amy are still in the front room, but they both leap to their feet at our abrupt appearance. Sybil tows me past them.

"Leave," Sybil hisses at me. "Your mother is lost to you now."

"What happened?" Dorthea asks, following us onto the porch. "Sybil."

"She's caught the attention of the Winter Wolf," Sybil tells them, the words venomous.

Her chest heaves, and she shoves me off the porch. I tumble down the stairs and land in a heap on their walkway. My bones jar. I bite my tongue, and blood blooms in my mouth. I spit on the concrete and climb to my feet.

All I can do is stare up at Dorthea and Sybil.

The latter looks unnerved, and her voice is colder than her scrying room. "She's been marked for death. If she doesn't leave our town, she'll take us to the grave."

Winter Wolf.

My mind spins.

Dorthea makes a noise. "Astra, your concealment charm..."

I examine my wrist. The leather cuff is still there, but blood drips down my hand from the cut to my index finger. I pull out the stone and focus my attention on it. The magic is gone, and the stone crumbles to dust in my hand. It mixes with the blood.

Sybil grabs Dorthea's arm. "Listen to me. He's coming. He reached through my scrying and *marked her*."

Amy appears beside her coven leader and tosses my bag off the porch. It lands with a thump beside me. The porch light flickers, then brightens.

Whatever they see in the new light makes Dorthea and Amy cringe backward.

“Leave,” Dorteia says firmly. “Please. We’ve lived in peace with the nearby wolves for generations, but our coven would not survive the Winter Wolf’s pack.”

My ego is bruised, my body aches. I press my hand to my neck, where my Mark is, and shudder at the spike of pain.

My hand comes away wet with blood. My heart thumps a steady, fast pace. It recognizes a different kind of magic singed into my skin, and it’s deeper and darker than this coven will ever admit.

I don’t feel my fear. Numbness has taken over. Or shock.

I pick up my bag and sling it over my shoulder. This was not how I pictured this going. Once Sybil offered her help, I thought it might be easy. That’s laughable, because now I have way more questions than ever. If coming here was supposed to provide me with answers, all it’s done is give me the opposite.

But if there’s one thing I refuse to do, it’s to grovel at the feet of witches who think they know better. So, my heart thundering, and the scent of blood in my nose, I stride away without a backward glance.

She’s caught the attention of the Winter Wolf.

He marked her.

He’s coming.

CHAPTER 4

KIAN

The now-familiar taste of blood is on my lips when I wake, followed by the scent of honey and lemon. A scent that has been embedded in my brain since my hunters tried to take the Seer and came back empty-handed... except for her blood.

Her.

Mystery girl. Daughter of the Seer.

A witch.

But the taste of blood is new—and so is my wolf's smugness. It radiates in my chest, and I envision him being quite pleased with himself.

What happened? I ask him.

She is our future, he responds. *And she's in North Dakota.*

I grunt and push myself to my feet. I don't bother turning on any of the lights or question how he knows. Somehow, I can feel that, too. The magic curls through my blood in the most foreign way.

Since I was a pup, I've had an affinity for unusual magics. My father didn't do much to explain, but one of our elders did. She took me aside and told me the story that changed my whole outlook on the world.

Once upon a time, a wolf fell in love with a witch...

I wish I could go back in time and rip that witch's throat out.

My great-great—however many generations back—grandfather was the one to do the falling. And the breaking. But while the curse affects all female wolf shifters, it's in *my* blood. Passed down from parent to child, over and over and fucking *over* again—and finally, to me. And Jessamine.

The curse was so strong, the witch left a piece of herself behind in the wolf—and thus, *us*.

I get dressed and head outside, where my bike waits for me. I could track the witch in my wolf form, but it's been too long since I've been able to ride. Duty has kept me close to home in recent months.

Plus, my bike handles the mountain roads better than paws. It takes less exertion, which means more energy saved for capturing the witch.

Keep the pack safe, I tell Roman. I'll be back soon.

I feel his question, but I retreat from our mental link without answering.

The roar of the engine soothes me. The wind snatches at my hair, my clothes. The smell of rain and earth fills my lungs. I lean forward and urge the bike faster.

I don't know how the witch could disappear without a trace. I've been puzzling through it with no answers.

My first stop is to the Seer's cottage. I want to see it for myself and get a better sense of the witch we almost had in our grasp, and the one who I now hunt.

But it's gone. I almost can't believe it.

The only trace is a charred circle in the grass. The smell of smoke ruins the other scents I might've been able to pick up. If I hadn't seen the cottage in my wolves' memories, I wouldn't have believed it stood sturdy not twenty-four hours prior.

I've never seen demons behave like that. They're generally not as organized, but this destruction feels intentional, which made it dangerous. My hackles rise—and stay up—until I find drops of blood from the daughter.

She made it to the tree line. I follow her scent further in, but then she seems to double back. And there I stop. I look back and forth from the charred circle to here.

She turned back.

Bleeding, she stood here with a direct line of sight to her home.

I can smell the lingering odor of the demons. The vegetation seems to be holding onto it. There are no answers for what happened after. I've never seen a demon behave in the way they did that night, and neither had my hunters.

Even shifting and examining the area with my heightened senses leaves me questioning everything.

I leave and go north, toward the collection of covens that dot the mountain towns in Wyoming, Montana, the Dakotas. We've long since kept

track of them, the same way they know where we live. It keeps them alive.

Well, it usually does. Today, I don't care.

I interrogate the first witch I come across, but her power fails before she can tell me anything. Then another.

For two days, I've leave a trail of bodies in my wake.

Every minute that passes without a resolution increases the tension in my body. I'm almost *too* aware of Jessamine's timeline.

And yet, no one knows the daughter. They can't tell me anything—not her name, her age, her powers. I have her scent and blood and the desire to hunt her down. I've become obsessed with it.

It's madness, but something tells me she's the key.

It doesn't help that my wolf is just as eager—but I suspect it's for an entirely different reason. He just hasn't revealed it to me, yet.

Who is this mystery witch. With the power to evade all the local covens' knowledge? Perhaps that was her mother's doing. The Seer kept her daughter tucked away for one reason or another, and I'm determined to uncover it.

It takes another day and a half to get to North Dakota, thanks to my roundabout route. I stop only to rest for a few hours and hunt, satiating the gnawing hunger in my belly. I ride through a quiet town, and my wolf stirs. Part of me wants to just park and shift, but something keeps me from doing that.

Instinct.

The smell of magic rides on top of the air. I look around the town square, the hairs on the back of my neck standing up. There's a coven in this town, lurking in the shadows. But it's subtle. I appreciate how much they've concealed themselves. They're more fearful of wolves. Or perhaps they've just been awaiting my arrival.

I climb off the bike and follow the pull of magic into a diner.

Inside, the singed smell doubles. A woman with white hair lifts her head at my entry, her deep-blue eyes piercing into mine without flinching. She's sitting alone at a booth, and she doesn't seem surprised to see me.

I'd bet my life that she's a Seer. But one who still willingly meets me, instead of collecting her coven and fleeing into the mountains. Or anywhere out of my path of blood...

Things just got interesting.

I slide onto the bench opposite her.

“You’re looking for the girl,” she says without preamble. Her voice sounds ancient. Her skin is smooth, except for a few feathered wrinkles around her eyes. The depth in her gaze betrays her age.

She puts her hands up, as if to placate me. She has an amulet around her neck, but nothing adorns her fingers or wrists.

The fact that I’m sitting here at all, instead of dragging her out by her hair, is its own mystery. I suspect that she knows exactly who I am and who I want to find.

“Did word of what happened to those who didn’t answer my questions spread?” I question.

She shakes her head slightly. “I doubt anyone you’ve talked to had run across her. But we have. We hosted her in our home for less than an hour, and she left shortly after. She wasn’t welcome here.”

I raise my eyebrows. I haven’t heard of witches turning on another.

“Is it standard witch practice to cast out one of your own?”

A waitress comes by with a mug of coffee. She sets it down in front of me and darts away. Her heart is pounding far too fast for normal. I eye her retreating form, but I brush off her fear. This type of small town exists around a coven. It happens sometimes. Magic, even for those who don’t know of its existence, can get used to the feel of it. When it’s calm. When it’s scared.

And as a predator, I elicit a reaction from the coven, which in turn affects the humans.

As demonstrated by them rejecting the witch I seek.

“Best coffee in town. That’s why I picked this place.” She lifts her mug to her mouth and takes a sip. “She wasn’t welcome here because of you.”

My skin crawls at the idea of being spied on—future or present me. That’s what happened, isn’t it? The Seer saw that I was tracking her.

“You must know I’ve been searching for a Seer of my own,” I comment, if only to get some sort of reaction from her.

But to be honest? This conversation isn’t doing it for me.

I want answers, not more questions.

She sighs. “I do. I also know my time in this realm is coming to a close. If you’d like to try and twist me to serve your needs, that time will end sooner than either of us would like. And then neither of us will fulfill our destiny.”

Destiny. Fate. Gods meddle in mortal affairs all the time, and we're no better for it.

I hate it all.

Still, I detect a sliver of fear—and that, I can most certainly work with. I lean forward, ignoring the coffee and bracing my forearms on the table. I pitch my voice low. “What makes you think you wouldn't be of use to me? Your death isn't my problem.”

“My power is nothing compared to the Seer you failed to capture.” She tips her chin up. She isn't afraid to expose her throat. “But I can do a reading for you, if you'd like.”

“No.” I shove back from the table.

I'm restless. Irritated that her word games have got the best of me. It's been a while since a witch was able to play me. I go to leave, then turn back.

“What's her name?”

She smiles down at her coffee. “There's power in names, Winter Wolf.”

I stare at her, but she doesn't look up again. The waitress returns with the witch's meal, and she takes away my mug.

I've been thoroughly dismissed.

For the first time since I was a pup.

Anger flashes through me, strong as a whip, and I curl my hands into fists. Option two—drag her out by her hair—sounds more valid. I tried the nice way, didn't I? Look how well it worked.

I stride forward and hit a solid wall of air.

The corner of her lips curves up. “Do not test us, wolf. I gave you enough to find your girl—now leave us in peace. Should you learn to do that, you might survive the year.”

The singed scent of magic rises in the air again. I grit my teeth at her thinly veiled threat and scan the room slowly, surprised to find myself surrounded by curious gazes. Humans and witches alike.

“Fine. But after I find her, perhaps I will return here.” I smile down at her. It's more of a bared-teeth grimace, but whatever. I fucking hate Seers. “If only to enjoy what little this town has to offer.”

“Try east,” she suggests. Then the Seer goes right back to her breakfast.

Fuck.

I stride out and straight back to my bike. As tempting as it is to shift, I won't abandon my bike here. It cost too much; it means too much to me.

Sentimental about so few things, I find it hard to part with what I am attached to.

As soon as I'm outside of the town limits, well out of reach of human eyes and ears, I pull off the road and stash my bike in the trees. I strip my clothes off and take a running jump, shifting mid-air.

My paws land softly, and my wolf takes charge. I'm happy to let him. He bounds forward, racing through the trees almost silently. Birds take off, rabbits scurry for cover. The forest is alive with smells and sounds.

I miss my pack.

I reach for my sister. She's in wolf form, too. She feels my attention and sends me an image of where she is, sniffing through the sand next to the docks at the lake a few miles from our pack village.

How are you feeling? I ask her.

Her wolf is small, even for a female. She's red and white, and one of the fastest I know. Not as fast as me, but we share a father. Of course she's fast.

She sends me another image, of Griffin and Roman wrestling in the sand. The peace and contentment that accompanies it soothes me. It makes the ache that my journey is carrying me farther away from my family seem less sharp in my chest.

Something on the wind catches my attention. I break off my connection with my sister and slow my pace, my nose going up.

Blood. It takes a few precious seconds to get a better lock on it, then I follow the scent to its source. Once there, I stop short. There's dried blood here. I paw at it, and the scent rises.

Honey.

Lemon.

Fuck.

Of course she was sent here by magic. But I mean *here*, to this very spot. Where it hasn't rained, and the spiced magic scent underlies her honey and lemon and blood.

I shift back, kneeling naked in the pine needles and dirt. I press my palm to the earth and try to understand how her mother did it. And why.

Maybe it was a mindless, quick decision. Anything to get her daughter to safety, and this was the softest landing spot.

Or... maybe it was part of a grander scheme? Something she saw in the future?

I sigh and rise. I've discovered where she came from, and her tracks will inevitably lead into the town. What I should've done was circle the perimeter to find out where she *left*.

I shift again, my bones popping and fur bursting forth. Her scent is even more powerful like this, again, and my gut churns. My wolf seems particularly keen on the smell, but I can't discern why. All I know is that the hunt presses in on us, and our heart picks up speed. We will chase her until we can sink our teeth into her for real. Until her screams are loud enough for it to echo in my mind for weeks to come.

All this for a witch I haven't even laid eyes on yet.

FOR A WEEK, I search every fucking town I come across east of the coven's.

Finally, exhausted, I coast into a small city on the border of Minnesota. It's possible that the witch continued across the border, or she veered off course since the last time I caught her scent—which was two days ago.

I sleep for a couple of hours in a motel, scrub off the grime in the shower, then go search for a real meal.

There's only so much rabbit and squirrel I can take.

A loud tavern half a block down from the town square draws my attention. It's a quick walk to the front door, and the music emanating through it seems to pulse in my chest. I eye the forest at the tavern's back, at the dense shrubbery. Out here, towns are wilder. The forest presses in even when humans try to beat it back.

Inside, there are a lot of people. The noise level is much higher than anything I've encountered in my last few stops. The bar is packed, every chair filled.

A band sets up in the corner.

A waitress carrying a tray of drinks directs me to grab any empty chair. Someone gets up from the end of the bar, and I take their vacated seat.

My gaze travels over the other people perched on barstools. There's a collection of cowboys and town folk. A lot of flannel and cowboy hats, baseball caps.

I pause on a blonde girl. She sits at the opposite end, her shoulders drawn up like she's trying to hide. Or escape notice. Her hair is half up, part

of it loose around her neck, and the rest knotted on top of her head. She sticks out because she's different than the rest of the townsfolk, even withdrawn as she is.

A bartender slides a beer in front of me, and I nod my thanks. It quenches some of the thirst but not much. I order food and wave the bartender off from any other questions, ignoring the way she stares. Human women often get stuck on my features, but she isn't the one I want to look at me.

The blonde sips water from a plastic cup. She has a plate of food in front of her, half-eaten, and her fingers drum on the bar top. There's a leather cuff on her wrist. She wears a thick, oversized black hoodie, the sleeves pushed up to her elbows. The rest of her is hidden under the bar. She's nearly shoulder-to-shoulder with the woman beside her, but they don't interact.

I watch her through her meal, and through mine. But even so, she seems oblivious. I can't tear my gaze away from her. I don't know why. Maybe because she's pretty? With full lips and a heart-shaped face, and her blonde hair falling over her shoulders, I don't know who *wouldn't* find her attractive.

When she rises, her food finished and paid for, water cup drained, her movements are jerky. She has curves that the giant sweatshirt almost completely masks. Her jeans are ill-fitting, tight at her hips and loose everywhere else. The hems are mud-splattered and rolled up over black boots. My mouth waters when she heads for the exit with a bag slung over one shoulder.

The door opens ahead of her, admitting a man and woman, and the wind pushes in with them.

It catches her scent and throws it my way.

I inhale on instinct.

But I don't expect *her* scent. The one I've been chasing, the one I've been *hunting*. It isn't mixed with blood—it's just her.

I toss cash on the bar without a thought and leap to my feet. My heart pumps faster, the thrill of getting so close to my prize making my blood riot. My wolf is suddenly restless, too, pressing at my skin. He wants to be the one to sink his teeth into her skin, to pin her to the ground...

Outside, the street is empty.

I take a breath and listen. The forest pushes in at us, encroaching on businesses and homes and the tavern.

Did she go back to wherever she's staying to pack? To flee? If she sensed me, she kept her cool. Her heartbeat didn't fluctuate.

No.

My head whips to the left, and I stalk around the side of the building. My senses open up, stretching them past the noisy bar.

She went into the forest.

Why?

I jog through the trees until the tavern is out of my line of sight. It takes all my willpower to keep a tight grip on my wolf long enough to get my clothes off. And then he's breaking past my barriers, erupting into fur and claws.

We smell her immediately. My wolf tips his head back and howls. The sound echoes in my ears, and I immediately miss the answering howls that would usually accompany me.

It's a warning that the hunt is on, and if I was her, I'd be very afraid. I've never been on the receiving end of that threat, but I can imagine the fear. I've tasted it in our foes who came to a violent end at our claws and teeth. But it isn't death that awaits her.

We lope through the forest. Our enhanced vision shows her tracks, but her scent is enough to follow her. She must be sprinting full-out to have disappeared so quickly. Which means she knew who I was. Something kept her in her seat at the bar, though.

I howl again, and the ache in my chest that wishes for my pack intensifies.

She's prey. Simple as that. And she can only run for so long.

She leads me to a clearing, and I catch sight of movement through the trees on the other side. The sun is setting, casting the forest in strange, dancing shadows. Her blonde hair streams out behind her, the tie that held some of it back now gone. She doesn't look back. She might hear us coming, but survival instincts drive her to just go faster.

We stretch out, running now. My wolf enjoys this. His focus on her intense. He's separate from me in that. I taste her fear and feast on it, while he analyzes the way she's running, her muscles, weight shifting with every step. He almost knows where she's going before she does. His movements in his body come naturally, as easily as walking on two legs is for me.

And then she's there, just ahead of us. Her bag is gone, so it's just her. Running like a scared little rabbit.

We leap and collide with her. She hits the ground hard and rolls, immediately trying to dislodge me. Her fight is a surprise—it's not often we get that.

Witches tend to fight with magic, but few are trained to use their magic as a weapon strong enough to stop us. One-on-one, wolves have the upper hand.

But this girl...

She kicks into my belly hard, pushing my jaws away from her. The physical fight is what's new to me—and what throws my drive into high gear. My growl rumbles through me, but it doesn't do anything to still her. If anything, she comes at me harder. Shoving and squirming and kicking at me.

I'm giant, though.

I drop my weight, pinning her in place. My gaze catches on the leather cuff on her wrist, which reeks of magic. My lips automatically pull back in a silent snarl. It must go.

My teeth catch on it easily, and I rip it off.

With its removal comes disillusionment, and a ripple of power that seems to fall off her body. I barely register the huge witch Mark across her neck—my attention, and that of my wolf, is drawn to the jagged, bloody wound under it.

My wolf understands it, even if I don't. And for the first time since he appeared within me, he flicks my control *out*. I'm thrust into the back of my mind, suddenly just a bystander. I don't have time to speak before he acts.

He licks her wound.

There's satisfaction seeping through him, satisfaction and some primal instinct that's guiding his actions. Her blood coats our tongue, and we shiver with the pure power that floods us. Above all, there's one word that echoes in my wolf's thoughts.

Mine.

No, no, no. I shove at the wolf's control over us, trying to take it back. He can't claim her, of all women. He can't want a fucking witch.

He bats my attempts away with ease, completely ignoring me.

She still struggles, her hand pushing weakly at our head.

His teeth snag on the chain around her neck, and for a moment I think he's going to snap it off. But then a burning sensation rips through us, the worst pain I've ever felt.

The shift is forced on me.

I don't know the last time I've had that happen either.

My bones shorten, my fur recedes into smooth skin, and the burning fades. It takes me too long to realize that I'm back in control of my body and my mind.

And I'm lying naked on top of the witch.

I go completely still, rising only enough so I'm not making out with her collarbone. Waves of revulsion and anger course through me, but I can't tell who I'm more upset at—her or my wolf.

The witch, unbothered by my change, pushes at my chest. "Get off."

I narrow my eyes, but I don't trust myself to speak. My wolf is fucking ecstatic that I haven't moved. He's restless under my skin—and I don't trust him to reemerge. He wants her, that much is clear. And he's making my body react to the witch, too. My blood is too hot; my skin tingles in an unfamiliar way.

But the *why* is a mystery.

Just like her.

Something tugs at my legs. My eyes go wide a second before I'm yanked off the witch. I go upside down, dangling by a fucking vine by my ankles.

"What the fuck?" I roar.

She scuttles backward and slowly stands. She holds her palm to the wound on her neck, letting out a low hiss of pain. "You made it worse."

It was already fucking bleeding when we found her.

I reach up and yank at the vines. They're thick and unyielding, and I take out my frustration on them. Nothing works. Tonight seems like a night for new experiences.

Shift, my wolf suggests. *We'll take her far from here.*

I flop, hanging upside down. My hair brushes the grass. She hasn't retreated, though. She's still staring at me with a mixture of horror and curiosity.

"My wolf wants back out." My voice rasps. It always does after the shift. My vocal cords take a second to catch back up to our human form. "I don't think you want that, witch."

She crouches in front of me and presses her palm to my chest. Little zaps of electricity go through me. I don't know what the fuck she's thinking or what she's trying to do. Stop my heart? Kill me when she thinks I'm helpless?

Rage bursts through me. I shove her away from me as hard as I can. She stumbles and falls backward, her brows coming together. She's a mess, with blood running down her collarbone and into her sweatshirt. Her black Mark is similar to the vines she cast, spreading up her neck and jaw, into her hairline. It's the most obvious Mark I've ever seen, and it just makes the revulsion in me that much worse.

The only reason she's still breathing is because I need her. The taste of her power is reason enough. She's got more power than I've ever tasted, and with a sureness that I've been missing, I acknowledge that she can break the curse. We don't need the Seer. Just her.

But if this is the game she wants to play—*fine*.

I shift. My wolf's legs slip easily through the vines, and we land on our side. I keep myself firmly in control of our mind, lest he do something completely nuts. But he has our physical body. He operates it better anyway.

He rushes her.

She screams again, then spins and runs. Adrenaline sings through us.

My wolf wants the hunt.

He enjoys the chase.

She's prey, but better.

CHAPTER 5

ASTRA

The giant white wolf stalks me through the forest. His presence behind me is unmistakable. I splash across a stream and try not to let panic override my senses. Getting lost would do me no good, and I've only got a grip on the geography if I focus. At present, though, most of my focus is on not tripping.

I mean—what the hell?

He could catch me at any time, but he doesn't. I keep seeing flashes of his white coat through the trees, just in my periphery. He's either stoking my fear or enjoying playing with his food.

My bracelet with the new concealment charm is gone, ripped away. Blood runs down my neck from the wound the shadow-version of the wolf gave me, aggravated by him... *licking* it. I shudder. The thought is so gross.

I didn't register touching his wolf. Didn't want to feel his fur or his teeth, because I was sure I was going to die anyway.

In fact, I'm pretty sure I'm going to die now.

Nightmares flash before my eyes. Witches being slaughtered in front of me.

Stop that.

I scour the ground for anything I can use as a weapon. Anything sharp...

I slow to snatch a rock and keep moving, darting through the trees. We're approaching a full moon. It's been more than a week since the attack and the new moon that let demons enter our world. This moon is gaining strength—as are the wolves.

Is his pack close by?

Is he herding me toward them, for them to rip me apart? The awful things wolves will do to witches, just for existing...

He howls, and my chest tightens. There isn't another howl, though. No answering call. So maybe he's on my own. My odds of surviving one wolf are better than me against an entire pack, right?

Keep moving, Astra.

My mother is alive. I focus on that, first and foremost.

Wait.

Fuck.

He wants to break the curse. Help him and he'll help you—or something like that. I wrote it down, but the paper is lodged in my bag, which I stowed near the edge of town. I didn't want the wolf to have access to the stones or my possessions...

But my mother seemed so confident when she told me. And here I am. North, alone. Being stalked by a wolf who has already broken my skin once.

Oh God.

I skid to a halt.

Am I going to turn into a wolf?

No. I doubt wolf shifter bites work like that. He wasn't even a real wolf when he bit me... But his teeth certainly felt real enough.

"Done running?"

The Winter Wolf, in his human form, strides out of the trees. He's completely naked. Scars and tattoos decorate his torso. My eyes trail lower, then snap back up to his face. His dark hair is shorter than I'd expect for a wolf. A few pieces fall across his forehead. And, unfortunately, he's handsome. That's probably the least of my concerns at the moment, right? My gaze drops again, and my face burns at the size of his... erm. *Package.*

Who *am* I? One look at this guy, who is probably going to rip me to pieces, and I'm about to drool. It's not like I haven't seen a guy naked before. Right? Well, that guy was normal. Human. And he definitely didn't have an eight-pack. Or tattoos. Or muscles. Or—

For God's sake, stop.

He's still yards away, and I know that distance can be closed in a heartbeat. But I grip the rock tighter and vow to use it if he attacks me.

"Didn't anyone tell you it's rude to play with your food?" I blurt out.

He tips his head, his lips twisting. I think he might smile. I just called myself food, after all. But no such thing graces his expression, and my thoughts turn darker. Maybe he'll shift and get this misery over with.

But then who will save my mother?

She only has me.

"What do you think wolves do with their prey?" he asks.

Taunt it, toy with it.

A question for a question. I scowl at him.

"You can't go back into town with that," he adds, motioning to the side of his face. He closes the distance between us slowly

Meaning my Mark.

I shrug. "I don't need town to survive."

"No, but you might need me."

He's bluffing, right?

"Why would you say that?" I demand.

Another howl breaks open the night sky. I feel that sound down to my bones. It's more menacing than his earlier howl...

I look around, like that will give me a freaking clue. I'm so far out of my depth.

"You've ventured into another pack's territory." He steps closer. Now he smiles. No, worse than that. The grin that curves his lips is wicked. He's *enjoying* this. His eyes are dark, his expression cold. "I simply alerted them that prey was available for the hunt."

"Why?" I back away from him, but he keeps coming. Until I'm stopped short by a tree.

He strides forward until he's in my space, invading my senses.

I unwillingly inhale his scent, hating that I don't particularly mind it. I try to put my finger on the mix. Sandalwood and fresh rain, maybe. A heady combination that is probably, unfortunately, all him.

He's the first wolf shifter I've ever spoken to, and this isn't quite how I saw it going. I guess I always envisioned there to be no conversation when the day came for me to die.

Isn't that sad? I think all witches consider that they might meet their death with teeth in their throats. I used to dream about it. Especially when I was younger, and I overheard my mother talking on the phone to someone about the then-recent wave of attacks...

His eyes flash. “You need to come with me, and it was either give you the option to come willingly, or let my wolf take matters into his own... teeth. Or, you can run away again. And someone else will snatch you up.” He tilts his head. “What they’d do to you is out of my control.”

More howls join the first. They aren’t really close, but definitely closer than that first one. And again, I feel phantom teeth in my throat and hot blood coursing down my chest. That’s the only end for me.

The blood drains from my face, leaving me lightheaded. There don’t seem to be many good options here. I clearly couldn’t keep one wolf away from me, let alone a pack of them.

And while this one hasn’t made moves to hurt me, it doesn’t mean he won’t.

He straightens to his full height, towering over me. He reaches out and runs his hand down my arm. The movement surprises me so much, my fingers loosen on the rock. He plucks it from my grip and throws it behind him. Disarming me from my only weapon.

“Come with me, witch. Or face the consequences of a full pack hunt.”

I pause.

Contemplate it, and the gravity of what’s at stake.

Help him, my mother said. If this is the *him* she was even referring to.

I don’t trust it. I don’t trust him—and I trust his wolf even less. I know the power he holds. How strong wolf shifters are. Their loyalty lies with their pack... which is why I’m uncertain of his motives with *me*.

He narrows his eyes, then raises his hand to my throat. He wraps his fingers around it, pushing me back against the tree. *This is it*. He’s sick of my indecision and is going to end it.

My power gathers. I could pry him off me—unless his fingernails lengthen into claws and he tears my throat out like this. With his face in mine.

Heat pours into me, and my heart skips a beat. Or four.

It’s a different sort of heat. Not like the amulet or my magic. This comes directly from his palm, lacing through with my magic. My skin prickles under his hand, and the ache in my neck fades. After a moment, it disappears altogether.

Did he just heal me?

I stare at him, dumbfounded.

He steps back. “Climb on my back.”

“Wha—”

He falls forward and shifts.

Up close, it’s even worse. His bones seem to snap and reshape, although it’s soundless. It’s over in a second, and the huge white wolf meets my eyes. His are blue, similar to his human eyes. Not quite the same. Deeper blue, something between the fathomless ocean and a sapphire.

I don’t like that I notice that.

I’ll pretend I didn’t.

His tongue lolls out, a dog smile, and he lowers his front legs, some sort of play bow bullshit, in front of me.

I can’t move. I’m frozen against the tree, my fingernails digging into the bark. But the sounds of other wolves are closing in, their excited yipping and howling seeming to bounce off the trees around us. He swings his giant head and stares at me.

“Fine,” I mutter. I throw my leg over his back and jump a little to get all the way on. My fingers slide into the fur at the top of his neck. He’s shockingly soft, the fur thick and warm.

He lurches to his full height, and I tighten my grip on him. My heart is pounding out of control.

I’m sitting on a wolf.

Did my mother predict *this*? She’s probably cackling at the sight, wherever she is, as long as this doesn’t end with my violent demise.

He takes off, and I almost lose my balance. I fall forward, wrapping my arms around his neck and burying my face in his fur. Maybe I could strangle him like this, once we’re free of the other wolves. For now, I need him. He made sure of that.

His loping stride covers so much distance—it must be true that he was messing with me before. He could’ve caught me easily, but he preferred to make it *my* choice? To accept his help?

Low branches snag at my hair and my clothes, and I keep my eyes shut tight. Until I remember something.

“Wait,” I call out hoarsely.

He slows a fraction, his ears pointing back at me.

“My bag. By the tavern.”

His sides vibrate with some sort of grumble, but he changes his direction slightly. There’s another howl behind us, then a sharp bark. I

clutch at the white wolf when he suddenly spins, his body flattening as he sprints.

Something comes out of the shadows, passing over us. Searing pain cuts through my back. It knocks me off the white wolf, and I hit the ground hard. Black spots pop in front of my eyes. I grope around for purchase through loose dirt and rock. My back is on fire, but I push myself back to my feet. To stay still, to lie down, is to die.

I really, *really* don't want to die.

A low snarl drags my attention away from the direction my captor ran. A brown wolf stalks out of the tree line, his lips curling back to reveal dagger-like teeth. He's not as large as the Winter Wolf, but there's hate in his amber eyes.

Seeing his wolf's expression in comparison to mine is alarming. Well, not *mine*. The Winter Wolf. The one not actively trying to murder me.

This wolf would kill me without hesitation.

I swallow. My breathing is shallow. Every deeper inhale pulls at my screaming muscles. I can't do much now, with empty hands and fear holding me hostage, and not enough magic to save me. If I even knew where to begin—which I don't.

What good is magic if it can't keep me alive?

The brown wolf collides with me, his claws catching my shoulders and forcing me to the ground. His hot breath hits my face, saliva dripping down on my skin with his growl.

I'm going to die.

The certainty hits me like a punch to the gut.

The panic that I felt with the white wolf is nothing compared to now. Fear explodes inside me, blotting out everything else. My magic swells—the small stream of it that I have always had access to suddenly floods. It builds until I can't contain it anymore.

When I scream, it pours out of me.

My vision goes white.

There's a *pop*, pressure changing, and then everything goes silent. The weight on me vanishes.

I open my eyes. The air smells different. It's colder.

I'm not in the forest anymore. There are no trees hovering over me. The night sky is endless, spreading in every direction. A million glittering stars are almost close enough to touch. Cold wind pushes at me, and I inhale

crisp, frozen air. I sit up and cry out. My back burns. It's worse than any agony I've faced before. I try to look over my shoulder and only see my torn hoodie and blood.

The pain pulses through my torso. It's worse now that I know it's there.

I need energy. I need to heal.

I reach for something—*anything*—alive that can lend me its support.

But there's nothing close. I'm on a slanted rock high above the tree line. The summit of a mountain looms over me.

I lie back down on my side, curling into myself. Tears flood my eyes, blurring my vision.

"Mom?"

She's the one who sent me away before. Did she come to my rescue again? Why didn't she show herself—or run with me?

The power didn't come from me, that's for sure. It takes powerful magic to do that. Far more powerful than I've ever been capable of reaching.

A witch's magic awakens soon after she hits puberty. It's a terrible double whammy. First comes blood, then comes volatile magic. And the Mark.

A memory resurfaces of my mother and I sitting outside our cottage. It was still new to us back then, half of our possessions still in boxes inside. She had been searching for a safe place for us, and she seemed determined that this would last us a while.

She was right. It did last a while. Not forever, though, but I digress.

My period had arrived, and I could feel a new presence in my blood. It pressed at me from inside, determined to seek escape.

My mother sat with me into the night until it happened. Until magic arched out from me and the Mark carved itself into my skin. I can still remember that pain, the way it felt like someone was dragging a hot poker across my neck.

I passed out.

When I woke up, it was just a tendril of power. A slow-moving stream that wound through me. It didn't stop my mother from teaching me everything she knew, from spells to attacks. It didn't matter to her that I could only master basic spells. Concealment charms for my Mark that never lasted as long as I wanted it to, alarm spells to guard my space. Simple earth magic, like flourishing a vine or forcing a bud to bloom.

We never sought out a coven for me to learn. She wrangled other teachers, passing witches who were drawn into her orbit, to teach me their specialties. They were just passersby on their way to their destinations, and what they could teach me only satisfied my mother.

I always wanted more.

More people, more connection, more tools.

Moving to town was my attempt to procure that for myself, but fear held me back from the witches. Working at the newspaper, although I didn't do anything very important, helped me connect with humans. Coworkers. Imagine that, after more than a decade of running and hiding, I was allowed to live in a town with people who didn't have any inkling about the paranormal.

And no matter how hard I tried to break through my fear, I still lived by the rules embedded in me by my mother: no covens, no friends.

How did I get here?

I search deep inside myself, but my thoughts are muddled. Memories and nightmares blend together. A white wolf pacing the edge of our property, flashing through the trees. The white wolf has been stalking us, his blue eyes always locked on me. Blood flowing from my mother's palms. A storm racing across an open sky. Black birds taking off amidst flashes of lightning.

The magic I rely on is gone.

But there's something else.

An ache that sits behind my ribs, almost tangible.

Instinct drives me to touch it with my energy. That hurts, too, so I let it go. The pain fades along with my consciousness. My vision flickers with black spots, and it could be a lot easier if I just laid back and closed my eyes.

I *should* want to stay awake. I should want to live.

But I'm not sure how I can survive this.

"Get up," I mumble to myself. "Get up, get up, get up."

I force my limbs to move. My legs tingle, and my head swims when I try to stand. My balance is shot.

I crawl. Hands and knees, shuffling and sliding and scraping my skin open. A screaming pain yawns through me, tempting me into the darkness.

I want to survive, so I hold it off as long as possible. I keep going until my muscles give out, and I fall face-first onto the rock. My mouth opens

and closes, but I've lost control of my body. Blood trickles down my arms, dripping onto the rock. I've been bleeding too much.

Lost too much blood. I close my eyes.

I just need a little rest. Then I'll keep going.

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CHAPTER 6

ASTRA

“**Y**ou brought a witch here?” Female. Angry.

“She called to me.” The white wolf. Winter Wolf. Whatever name he goes by. His gruff voice is unmistakable and sends a trickle of warmth through me. “What was I supposed to do? Leave her to die? You know how rare—”

“You’re putting our pack in jeopardy,” a third voice whispers. “You could’ve taken her anywhere, and you come *here*.”

“I will not be questioned,” he thunders. “Not even by you, sister.”

First thought? *He has a sister.*

I’m not sure why that surprises me, but it does. It’s like learning the monster under your bed has a baby at home.

Second thought: *What does he mean, I called to him?* I most certainly did not call to him. I think I’d rather choke on my own blood... which I was well on my way to doing. On the top of a mountain that I didn’t climb.

I crack my eyes open and glance around. My mouth is dry, my lips bleeding. I lick them to no avail—there’s not even a speck of liquid on my tongue. I’m in a large bed, the thick blankets tucked in around me. The only light source comes from a fireplace, the yellow and orange flames crackling through a log. The room itself is spacious, but it gives the impression of being cozy. There are two chairs in front of the fire. Framed photos on the mantel above it.

Here must be his pack’s territory. And I’m in someone’s room, borrowing their bed.

My chest tightens. I push myself upright, and a flash of pain lances through my back. I groan and fall back, waiting for the residual feeling to

subside.

The door swings open, and the Winter Wolf fills the frame. Human, of course. And thankfully clothed. He flicks a switch on the wall closest to him, and the lamps on either side of the bed flare to life.

I raise my hand, blocking the light from my eyes.

Even *that* hurts. The muscles in my arms ache and pull.

I've been put through a freaking meat grinder, but I survived. Somehow.

He closes the door behind him and strides farther into the room. I slowly drop my arm. He stops beside the bed. His blue eyes seem to spear into me. I don't like how they rub me raw. I'm already too vulnerable for my liking.

"Witch." He says, a greeting as much as an insult.

"Dog." My temper might be the only thing left uninjured.

He narrows his eyes. "I need to look at your back."

"Why?"

"Because my cousin dragged his claws through your skin and it almost killed you." His eyes flash darker blue. "Reason enough?"

My jaw works. What would be really nice, instead of dealing with his brutishness, would be a glass of water. But more than the thirst is my curiosity.

"Your cousin?"

"Our fathers were brothers. Twins."

Rare for wolves. Supposedly. I don't really know.

He offers his hand. I wait for it to turn into a claw, for him to end me for good. I have so many questions, and he's giving me the sense that he'd answer none if only to drive me crazy.

When nothing crazy happens, I put my hand in his. Our palms slide together, and a tingling sensation flows through me.

"Do you feel that?" I ask.

Is it like a warning that I shouldn't be touching him? It doesn't feel bad, necessarily, but maybe it's going to rot me from the inside. A curse meant to keep witches and wolves separate.

Maybe lightning will strike us, or the roof will cave in, or...

He shakes his head, a mask slipping over his features. I didn't realize it wasn't there until it returns. His expression remains stony as he helps me sit up, then guides my upper body forward. His hands move to the shirt—*oh my God, I'm not wearing my shirt.*

I pinch the hem between my fingers. It's cotton. White. A few sizes too big, which is saying a lot. I never fit into my mother's clothes. She was—is, *Astra, she's still alive*—stick-thin, whereas I grew curves and held on to them.

“Did you see her?”

He lifts up the back of it, careful not to touch my skin. The warm air buffs against my spine, and goosebumps break out along my arms.

“Who?”

I scowl at my lap. “My mother. When she got me out of there?”

He's silent for a long moment. Too long.

“Where are my clothes?” I ask instead, trying to remain neutral.

Of course he won't answer anything about my mother. He was hunting for her, too, wasn't he? Or his pack... some wolves were there for her, and I can only assume it was his.

I have a hell of a lot more questions—like how he found me, how he got me back here, how I supposedly called to him. Why I'm not wearing my own clothes... although I think it was probably because they were ripped to shreds by his cousin.

Did he see me naked?

My stomach churns.

“Our medic tried to heal you,” he finally says. “But his magic didn't work on you.”

“I need to see it.”

He frowns.

I look over my shoulder and meet his eyes. “If you're seriously telling me I have a wolf's claw marks on my back, I want to see the damage.”

“Fine.” He stands and pushes the blankets off my legs.

He doesn't offer me any assistance as I swing my legs over and put my feet on the floor.

My face flames at my bare legs. They're covered in bruises... and the shorts I'm wearing aren't mine either. They're fitted and soft, like cut-off sweatpants. Not his.

Whatever his name is.

I stand and go to the tall mirror in the corner. He follows me silently. He doesn't say anything when I turn around and try to get the shirt out of the way. He just reaches out and lifts the material for me. He's standing right in

front of me, his chest practically touching mine. I look up at him, but he's studiously ignoring me. His gaze is fixed on my back, in the mirror.

When I crane back around, I gasp.

There are four deep gouges in my skin, diagonal across my back—from right shoulder to left hip. They're partially closed, the blood scabbed over and dark. The torn skin around each is jagged and bright red, which doesn't seem like a good sign.

They don't look fresh. How long have I been unconscious?

"Infection," he explains in a low voice. "We did what we could, but as I said, my medic couldn't get it to stick. He's never tried to heal a witch before. We don't know if your kind is... impervious."

"But your magic worked?" I step back to put more distance between us.

He doesn't release the shirt, though. He easily tows me into him and puts his hand over the largest of the wounds. Like when he put his hand on my throat, his hot magic slips under my skin. It's hot and itchy.

"I can heal you," he concedes. "But I will *never* deplete all my strength for you."

"Noted." I roll my eyes. "I expected you to leave me for dead, so..."

The pain lessens in degrees. It's like he's spreading a balm across my skin. I grip his arm, ignoring the fact that, under other circumstances, I'd never willingly touch him, let alone put myself in the same room as him.

Or ride on his back.

Bile climbs up my throat.

As soon as I'm well enough to leave, I will.

I groan at the sensation spreading across my back. My knees wobble, and he shifts us so he's half supporting my weight. His other hand stays on my back.

"I won't heal you all the way," he warns.

"Obviously," I bite out. Still, it feels great. Itchy, warm, *splendid*. My magic, which has lain dormant until now, rushes up inside me.

Brighter.

My lips part as I push into the well of it. There's... *more*. And I don't understand where it's coming from or how I suddenly have more reserves.

"You smell of magic," he says suddenly, dropping his hand. He backs up, leaving me to stand on my own. "If you hurt any of my pack, I will make sure your death is twice as painful."

I glower at him. "I won't hurt anyone who doesn't hurt me."

“Don’t expect kindness here. You use your magic for any reason, and you’re as good as dead.”

“I’ll leave, then.” I look around the room. “As soon as you point me toward my boots.”

He laughs. *Laughs.*

“You think I brought you here just to heal your wounds? Let you sleep in my bed, then send you on your way?” His voice climbs toward incredulous.

I huff. No, I suppose I hadn’t thought of his motivation at all. I should’ve, though. I should’ve been anticipating this—the other shoe about to drop—as soon as I woke up. No wolf shifter helps a witch out of the kindness of their heart. Not after hunting them through the woods and tracking them for who *knows* how long.

He smiles, and it’s a bit like he’s baring his teeth at me. I don’t like this smile. It promises pain and bloodshed and violence. He’ll take what he wants from me, then kill me.

“We were after your mother,” he adds. “But in her absence, you’ll do.”

My expression drops. The wolves who came out of the forest following the demon—that confirms they were his. Which means we were never going to get out of there on our own. But it also means he didn’t see her in the woods when she saved me.

One question remains: What the hell did he need her for?

So... “I’ll do *what*, exactly?”

“You’ll find out soon enough.” He strides for the door.

The door closes swiftly behind him, followed by the *snick* of a lock.

I glance around the room again. There’s a bathroom attached, at least. It’s not lost on me that this is *his* room. He admitted as much. When he could’ve easily thrown me in a spare room, or a dungeon, or... I don’t know. A cage. Maybe the irony of a dog putting someone in a cage is a little too much. I clap my hand over my mouth to suppress my giggle.

I’ve officially lost it.

Help him and he’ll help me. I don’t know who else my mother could’ve been talking about. If we’re going with the obvious, all signs point to the Winter Wolf.

I just need to remember that I might be able to save my mother—if we don’t succumb and kill each other first.

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CHAPTER 7

KIAN

My sister sits at the table in my kitchen, glaring at the ceiling. I'm sure she's focused on the sound of the witch moving around my bedroom, but I'm more interested in what *she's* learned. She only just returned this afternoon.

The witch has been sleeping for almost two days.

I rap my knuckles on the table, and Jessamine's attention jerks back to me.

She growls.

I ignore it, serving myself a plate of food brought over from the lodge. I'll take a bowl up to the witch when we've finished our conversation. My hunger for more knowledge supersedes her hunger.

If the witch wasn't here, I would've gone with my hunters.

Silver Ridge Pack has been settled here for almost a hundred years. My father's father bought the land from the government for a steal. It's about an hour outside of the nearest town by car—faster by bike or in wolf form. The less eyes on our odd behaviors, the better.

This land is a hike to get to on a clear summer day. Winter makes it impossible for humans to travel this deep by anything other than snow mobiles, and we can hear those coming from a long way out. It gives us an extra layer of protection from other packs, or witches who think to act against us.

Not that they've ever struck first... but it's better to be prepared.

On the lower half of the property, we own a brewery and apple orchard. Our pack meticulously cultivates the trees every year, supplying apples to stores across the northwest. Our beers and ciders go even farther.

Some of my wolves handle the transportation, driving trucks across the country bearing our logo and making sure our goods are protected. Those who like to remain on the fringes, but still have a home to return to, are well suited for the job. It gives me a unique worldview... and opportunity to speak with other packs.

Because of such allowances, our pack numbers have swelled in the past few decades.

Then there are the hunters. Jessamine and her mate are hunters, as well as a couple of other trusted, bloodthirsty betas. I lead them personally when I'm not otherwise caught up in pack responsibilities.

"We took down four more demons," Jessamine says.

I eat and try not to think about her putting herself—and the pup growing inside her—at risk. Roman is probably giving her enough shit as it is.

"They seemed stronger. None had witches like the one you encountered, but one said that the end of the wolves was upon us." She shrugs, digging into her own bowl. "You know how they like to brag." Her gaze still lifts occasionally, but she seems satisfied that the witch won't suddenly drop through the ceiling.

I grunt. "If they have the Seer..."

"About that." Jessamine sets her fork aside. "She wasn't just any Seer."

I narrow my eyes. We were only put on this Seer's path because of an interrogation with another witch. One who ranted about the powerful, covenless witch who thought she was above them all. Our captive met a quick death once she'd told us where to find the covenless one.

We did our research, of course. Spent time asking townsfolk, *humans*, about the woman who lived a mile away. The one who kept to herself. Who had a daughter who had only recently moved back home.

My hunters had come back with almost too much detail. The Seer had integrated herself deeply into the village, but it seemed to happen almost by accident. In small increments, like she was trying to resist... but unable.

There was less said about the daughter.

But they still knew of her. And they may very well notice her absence. With any luck, they'll assume the pair packed up and moved on.

However, with the way my sister is watching me, I can tell there's something else. Something worse.

I learned a long time ago that surprises never end well.

We can prepare for years and still be caught off guard. Such is the nature of dealing with witches and demons. It doesn't help that the humans couldn't seem to recall the Seer's name, or her daughter's. A curiosity that boiled down to a different sort of concealment spell.

They knew her face, they knew her comings and goings, but they couldn't tell me her name. Or what she did while she was in town.

"Tell me."

"The Seer is Lenora Dreamstone."

I stare at Jessamine, waiting for the smile to say she's kidding. Lenora Dreamstone is something of a legend. One of the most powerful Seers of her generation—and she's supposed to be dead.

If that was false, and it clearly was, did she fake her death to protect her child?

Everyone knows the story of Dreamstone's death. That tale is almost as famous as she is.

Now it's my gaze that lifts to the ceiling, my hearing pressing upward.

The witch's footsteps are slow across my bedroom. Her heartbeat is slow, too. Steady.

Lenora Dreamstone's daughter.

The taste of her blood, and the power in it, makes more sense.

My father ensured that I knew everything about our enemies. Witches and demons alike. He needed me to be intimately familiar with who we were fighting and *why*. His methods were extreme, yes. I can't say they were unnecessary, though. They shaped me into who I am today.

There's no way the daughter of one of the most powerful Seers in the country didn't inherit any of her mother's power.

She should've seen me coming.

And when I attacked her, she fought physically. The vines that yanked me up were clever, not strong. There's something that isn't adding up, and I contemplate the taste versus the presentation.

"What's her name?" I don't want to care, but my wolf perks at the question. He doesn't particularly care about names either. He doesn't have a human name. But he wants to know her in all aspects, and this is just another part of it.

Jessamine hesitates. My gaze cuts to her, and she finally relents.

"Astra Somnium."

I rise suddenly, feeling too hot for my skin. My sister watches me, and I hate the weight of it. I'm too restless. Off-balance. I find a bowl and portion out some of the casserole for the witch.

Astra.

She was damaged when I found her. When she called to me like...

Like nothing I've ever felt before.

Damaged and dying, and for a split second, I was completely out of control. The red haze of fury overtook my vision, and it was all I could do to stay human and push enough healing energy into her skin to keep her alive.

I downplayed it with her. The claw marks on her back were ten times worse when I carried her into pack territory. Her heartbeat was erratic, her breathing shallow and labored. Every inhale hurt—and not just her.

Me, too.

She had left a trail of blood in her wake, across the flat shale rock face. She was only meters away from reaching a straggly clump of plants.

And what if she had reached them?

Desperation made her call to me. A last resort.

And only luck—or fate—made sure I arrived on time.

My pack didn't welcome her. Why would they? Why should *I*? We do not save witches, and we certainly don't bring them home with us.

Which means something is wrong with me. Something I need to eradicate.

Jessamine says nothing when I head upstairs. My footsteps are silent, my breathing rationed. I contemplate abandoning the food and letting her go hungry. There's something thrilling about knowing her stomach is in knots, chewing at itself, while food is just out of her reach.

My wolf whines. It vibrates in my throat, and I'm slow to realize it's coming out of me. I bite my tongue hard enough to taste blood, but the pain only draws out the sound.

Stop, I won't let her go fucking hungry, I snap.

The sound trails into silence.

Besides, hunger won't help her heal any faster. She only serves a purpose if she's at full strength, and purpose will keep her safe while she's here.

That doesn't tackle the matter of how I'm going to wrestle her into cooperating with my plan. Carrot or stick?

I unlock the door and go inside, finding her curled in one of the chairs by the fireplace. It's burning low, nearly out, but still enough to warm the air in front of it.

The year moves swiftly toward winter, with snow threatening any day. Wolves burn hotter than humans, and the temperature feels okay to me, but perhaps she's cold. She certainly trembles like she is.

Winter is my season. It's in the name I carry, and the ice that lingers under my skin, and a semblance of the fur of my wolf.

She doesn't move when I enter, or when I set the bowl down on the small table beside the chair. She's got one leg up under her, the other pulled up with her arms wrapped around it. She hunches forward. My attention is drawn to her back. Blood from the wounds has seeped through the thick cotton of my shirt, staining it pink. The fabric sticks to her skin.

Her eyes are open. She didn't fall asleep sitting up.

"Astra."

Her brows lower. "How do you know my name?"

Her gaze is locked on the fire. I want it on me. An impulse that guides my next words.

"Your mother was taken by demons."

Her expression doesn't change, but she does what I desire and focuses on me. She rests her cheek on her knee, and I *hate* the sadness that hides in the depths of her gaze. She tries to hide it, but I'm usually good at reading people.

My wolf's whine is building back up. It takes everything in me not to let that sound out. He wants me to heal her, to save her from torment. To put everything back together and make her happy—

I can't. I won't do that and put my pack at risk. Not with everything at stake.

"Taken," she repeats. She considers that information, absorbing it with a short nod. Her attention shifts to the food. "That doesn't answer what you wanted with her... or what you'll want from me."

"I know." I curl my hands into fists.

She's too beautiful. Like she's going to burst out of her body and transform into a star. I don't know if she realizes she practically glows. Her eyes, her hair, her lips. The curves of her breasts and hips and ass. Wolf shifter females are all lean muscle, but she seems soft.

"You know my name," she says. "What's yours?"

I hesitate for only a second. Weighing what dangers could come from a first name. But just as quickly, I conclude that I'd rather she didn't call me *dog* all the time.

"Kian."

She nods. "And your wolf?"

"He doesn't have a name that we'd pronounce."

She unfolds herself and stands. Her lips pull into a grimace, her back undoubtedly hurting. She drifts closer to me, stopping short of reaching out.

"I'm not going to turn into a wolf, right?" She touches the thin white lines of the bite just under the Mark.

"No." Although my fucking wolf likes the sound of that. "There's a process to creating new shifters. It doesn't happen with one bite."

I don't bother adding that only alphas can create shifters, and they have to do it with the intention of transforming someone. And since I'm ninety-eight percent sure my wolf didn't intend to turn her, we should be fine.

She lets out a breath. "Okay. And, um..."

"Yeah?"

"Are you going to kill me?"

No, my wolf answers immediately. The word reverberates in my brain.

The question shouldn't surprise me, but it does. The little witch doesn't realize the power she holds—and the way I need her. She's a temptress of the worst sort. She seems innocent, but she's far from it—and that makes her dangerous. Given my unfortunate fascination with her...

Well, it goes beyond fascination.

Obsession?

I sigh, irritated with my own line of thoughts. "Not yet, Astra Somnium."

I head to the door and shed my shirt. Her slight intake of breath chases me. That would be a heady sound if I didn't know who and what she is. But it stirs my blood all the same, and my cock twitches in my pants. I ignore my impending erection and shrug out of my clothes, leaving a trail of them on the floor as I go. She follows me down the stairs, all the way to the front door.

Bold creature.

I almost respect her for it.

"Don't leave the house," I warn her over my shoulder. I hop off the porch, shifting seamlessly mid-air. The familiar pain is just a flash, and my

wolf surges to the forefront of our mind. Together, we bound away.

We need to run. We need our pack.

I focus on the scents we're inhaling. I need to get the witch's out of my godforsaken head—or else I'm going to do something that I'll regret.

Something permanent.

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CHAPTER 8

ASTRA

“He told you that demons have her?”
I wheel around.

There’s a wolf shifter sitting at the table with a clear view of the front door... and me. She’s beautiful, but in a warrior way. Her hair is long and dark, a few shades off from Kian’s, and braided over her shoulder. Her skin is golden, probably hard-won from days in the sun. She’s all sharp angles, but her face could be an angel’s. Full lips, high cheekbones. Her dark eyes... well, they’re filled with hate. Not really an angel characteristic, unless we’re talking about the Devil.

I know, without even seeing her move, that she’s probably killed a few witches.

Maybe more than a few.

But I register her words. They’re the same ones Kian said to me, trying to corral me into cooperation. But she says it with more menace... and glee. The smile behind her tone, the way she wants a reaction out of me, burns the fear right out of me.

I will not yield to a she-wolf.

“You look like a scared little deer in the headlights,” she observes. “What will you do with that knowledge, hmm? Maybe you’ll try to leave us?”

I narrow my eyes and shut the front door. It closes with a loud *click*, and it seems final even in my ears. An answer all by itself.

No, I’m not leaving.

Mainly because I can hear the howls of the pack outside the door, and if I ran, I think they’d catch me. And probably do more than just shepherd me

back to safety.

One shifter in human form is better than a pack on the hunt. That's what Kian convinced me of when he forced me onto the other pack's territory. And I ended up with claws in my back, nonetheless.

"We don't want you here," she adds.

"I don't think your alpha feels the same way." I enter the kitchen.

She stiffens when I pull out the chair across from her and sink into it. If Kian wanted her to murder me, I doubt I would've made it out of bed. He told me to stay in the house, knowing she's here. Which means as much as she might seem to *want* to kill me, I'm hoping she won't.

There's also the possibility that Kian is a stupid idiot, and he's left me alone with a murderous she-wolf.

"What's your name?" I ask.

She glowers at me. "You think I'm going to give you any information about me?"

"Why not? Aren't wolves impervious to witch magic?" I wiggle my fingers in her direction. "We could test out a hex if you're unsure..."

She scowls.

I hide my smile. She either tells me her name, or admits without saying that she's afraid of whatever power I might have. I know it doesn't amount to much at all, but she doesn't.

Thinking about power shifts me back to thoughts of my mother and where *she* really is. If she's with the demons, that means she didn't save me—someone else did.

But who?

"Jessamine, if you're so curious," the wolf shifter says grudgingly.

"Astra."

"I know." The energy radiating off her in waves isn't fear. It's revulsion.

Just because of the Mark on my skin and the magic in my veins? Magic that I reach for and find... lacking. The earlier surge of it is gone, leaving me with exactly what I've known all my life.

My magic is practically nothing, especially compared to my mother's. I should be okay with that, but instead, I feel hollow.

"Where did the demons take her?" I ask.

"I don't know." And even if she did, she wouldn't tell me.

I imagine that's what the smirk is for anyway.

Anger flashes through me. "You brought it up to torture me, then?"

“Something like that, yeah.” She lifts one shoulder. “The alpha forbade me from physically harming you. Isn’t he kind? He left me a lot of wiggle room.”

My skin crawls, and I glance around the room again. As much as I hate to admit it, it’s a cute kitchen. If I didn’t know it belonged to wolf shifters, I might even feel at home here. I drum my nails on the table and try to picture it owned by anyone else. Like my mother.

We couldn’t scry her... perhaps it’s because she’s in the shadow realm?

A chill sweeps up my spine.

I’ve never heard of anyone going into the shadow realm. Witches summon and banish demons, if the coven is powerful enough. And sometimes demons tear their own way through the divide between the realms. The wolf shifters take care of those.

There should be stories about demons taking prisoners back to their realm—but there’s not. I think back on all the bedtime stories—the warnings that masqueraded as lullabies—my mother told me, perched on the end of my mattress or snuggled in beside me.

Did she ever mention it? Did she *see* this happening?

Jessamine still watches me, and her disgust is making me nauseated.

I guess I got lucky, growing up with my mother. We dealt very little with outside people, and biases, and hatred. To be confronted with it so suddenly, so viciously, is hard to swallow.

I haven’t *done* anything to her, and she’d rather kill me than let me exist.

I push myself up, and the chair squeals. My back protests, but I ignore it. Jessamine’s gaze follows me as I storm toward the stairs. Thankfully, she doesn’t follow.

I only go back to Kian’s room to get the food. Then I step out into the hallway and check the remaining rooms. I pick the one farthest from him and close the door behind me. It’s got a bed, a dresser. Two windows facing... well, I don’t know what direction they’re facing. Maybe south, if I had to guess. The bed is made with a plaid blanket, the sheets folded back, and four fluffed-up white pillows. Why did he give me his room in the first place? He could’ve put me in here. There’s too much... *muchness* in that gesture.

The fact that it might mean anything at all spins my head around.

I take a seat on the floor, leaning back against the bed. I can't tell if I'm nauseous from my situation or from hunger. I set the food down beside me and allow my thoughts to stray to the Winter Wolf.

Kian as a man is cold. Intimidating.

His wolf is even worse.

If I could escape, I would. But if I run, I'd be dead in minutes. Wolves like to chase. Hunt. It's ingrained in them. It could even be an accident. One little swipe, and I'd be gone.

I can't give Kian that satisfaction. But there must be some other way...

I force myself to finish the food—a surprisingly good chicken and broccoli casserole. It doesn't make me feel better, but I don't feel worse. In the bathroom, I clean the bowl and fill it with fresh water. My scrying has a very low success rate, but my motivation is higher than ever.

Maybe...

When my mother and I practiced, she'd hide in the woods and instruct me to look for her in the scrying glass. She wanted me to find her that way, or to describe what was around her. But there was no danger in that. No pressing need, beyond my frustration.

Now, I'm desperate.

I put my hands on either side of the bowl and concentrate on it. The surface trembles, then goes completely still. It darkens until I see only a reflection of my face.

I focus on my mother. Her smile, the sound of her voice, her smell.

The face shifts. Changes. The Mark disappears, and the angles of the face sharpen.

Holy shit, it's working.

My mother stares straight ahead. Her arms are bound behind her back in chains, her hair loose. The outfit she wears is torn, hanging from her shoulders in tatters. Shadows move behind her, around her. They wind up her limbs, but she doesn't seem to notice. There's a cut on her chest. Blood stains her front, drenching her shirt.

Pain lances through me.

I cry out.

The water sloshes, disturbing and then vanquishing the image. The pain radiates through my back, and I fall forward. The pain is horrifying, and my mouth opens on a silent scream. I can't seem to get any sound out. I dig my fingers into the floor, trying to escape the agony. I might actually be on fire.

The smell of burning flesh sticks in my nostrils.

The amulet at my chest is ice-cold. I shift my weight enough to grip it, willing it to help, but it just goes colder still.

Hot when I'm in danger.

Non-reactive and warm when I'm safe.

It hasn't gone cold on me until now. I let out a choked noise as frost slips out of it, coating my palm. It travels down my arms, at such odds with the searing across my spine. I crack my eyes open and watch it move up my shoulder.

It clashes with the fire, and the pain explodes. It takes root in my bones, until I'm afraid the sensation will never fade.

My scream breaks free, shattering the silent bubble around me.

I scream until my voice disappears, extinguishing like a candle being blown out. I claw at the floor, but it's not going to give me respite. No matter how I twist, the agony doesn't ease.

The door crashes open.

The sound splinters through the noises coming from my throat.

A growl fills the room. I catch a blur of white fur passing over me. It slams into something, and the heat in my back lessens. It retreats well enough for me to crawl to the wall, as out of the way as I can get. I roll onto my side and curl into myself, staring at the scene playing out in front of me.

Kian's wolf pins a demon to the floor. They're both large, especially in this room, but while Kian is fully solid, a huge mass of muscle and fur, the demon is smoke-like.

The wolf's teeth flash, and he rips into the demon. Black blood coats his teeth, drips down his lips. There's a never-ending snarl emanating from him, while the demon is silent. Dead already—and probably never really *alive* to begin with.

I shudder and slowly release the amulet. It doesn't feel cold anymore—but *I'm* cold. Shivering like I've never known heat before. I push myself into a sitting position, drawing my legs up to my chest. I need warmth. There's still frost on my skin.

This stupid protection stone. I almost tear it off, but I'm afraid to make any sudden movements. The wolf continues to decimate the demon until it bursts into black smoke.

Then he lifts his head and looks over his shoulder at me.

I can't take my eyes off him. Off the black blood that stains his white fur around his mouth. It drips down his chest. His sapphire-blue eyes burn into me, hotter than anything else in the room.

It's too similar to my nightmares, and I shudder.

I don't know who I'd rather face—the demon or the wolf.

He pads across the room in my direction, eyes fixed on me.

"Don't," I whisper. If I had more strength, I'd tell him to fuck off. Or get out of the room. As it is, I can barely keep my eyes open.

He ignores me, approaching until he towers over me. He really is freaking huge. From this angle, his head is giant. I don't expect him to lower it and press it into my chest.

I shudder.

I stare down at the top of his head and try to piece together what he's doing. This isn't how predators treat prey, unless they want to play with their food first. But he keeps up the pressure, and he knocks me back. I fall onto my forearm, ignoring the burst of pain on my back.

I crawl away from him, toward the center of the room, trying to get clear of the giant wolf. He takes up too much space in here. His fluffy tail is stiff and high, and he seems tense. His eyes track me, but all I want is to get out.

He approaches again.

My stomach twists, and I shove at him when he gets closer. I'm not prepared for him to lower himself on top of me. His weight hits me, forcing me flat to the floor.

His paws are as big as my head. His head rests on my shoulder, next to my Mark. Next to the remnants of the bite his shadow form gave me. He huffs out a sigh, like *this* is what he wanted all along, and it ruffles my hair.

"Get off of me." I poke his shoulder. "What are you doing?"

He doesn't acknowledge me. Not that I thought he would. And all my squirming and shoving doesn't do anything.

Jessamine rushes into the room and stops dead. She stares at us, and I raise my eyebrows. I can move my arms and head. I'm fairly certain my back is even more wrecked than it was earlier. And my reality is that I'm painfully vulnerable.

"Can you get him off?" Never thought I'd resort to pleading with the she-wolf, but here we are.

He lifts his head and growls at her, gnashing his teeth.

Her expression twists. “If you want me to look at her, I can. Unless you’re content to crush her to death.”

The snarl that comes out of him rumbles through his chest, vibrating down into mine. I’m still so fucking cold, but having him on top of me... if I forget who and what he is, it’s not so bad. He’s warm. I curl my fingers into his fur, and he exhales.

It’s surprising how soft his fur is.

Jessamine stays, watching the wolf with a furrowed brow. He puts his head back down and seems disinclined to acknowledge her again. I stare at the ceiling. My back is in agony, but I don’t say anything about it.

It seems like penance for accepting what’s happening.

We stay in position for too long. My skin slowly loses the frost, and I stop shivering. He’s *hot*, better than a raging fire, but it’s starting to get uncomfortable.

And he shows no signs of moving.

“How long are we going to stay like this?” I finally ask.

“Until he thinks you’re not hurt,” Jessamine answers.

“I’m fine.” I prod at Kian’s shoulder again. “Do you hear me, dog? I’m good. You can get off me now.”

He doesn’t move.

Fucker.

I squirm and shove at him until the wolf raises his head again. His eyes bore into mine, and I try very hard not to focus on the blood around his mouth. When his mouth opens, his tongue lolling out in some version of a dog smile, my stomach twists. I can *smell* the blood and his hot breath. His teeth are too close to my throat.

If he doesn’t get off me, I’m going to hyperventilate.

Actually, the way he’s staring makes me think he’s trying to mind-speak. Do wolves communicate that way? Is that a thing? I mean, it must be. In the wild, real wolves probably operate solely on vocals and body language. I don’t know—I’ve never asked a real wolf. But I’ve never asked a shifter either. It seems like one of those closely guarded secrets. Their packs are secretive, in general. Way worse than witch covens.

“Get up or I will curse you into oblivion,” I whisper. “As soon as you let your guard down, I’ll ruin you.”

Kian’s weight shifts. And then *he* shifts.

I try not to let that startle me, but it's still odd to go from looking at a giant white wolf, who seems eager to *not* kill me, to a very angry, very naked Kian crouched over me.

Lord help us.

I keep my eyes above his waist. Which isn't easy, because all his muscles seem to be guiding my eyes down...

"Alpha," Jessamine starts.

"Leave us, sister." His voice is growly, what I'd imagine his wolf might sound like.

Sister. The conversation from when I first woke up comes back. I should've recognized her voice. Their resemblance makes sense, as does the way she's protective of him. I'm sure the whole pack is protective of him. They're all probably aware of my presence and hate that, too. But he also trusts her not to kill me unless he commands it.

She vanishes down the hall without a backward glance.

"A demon in my own home." He grips my wrists and hauls me upright along with him, backing me against the wall. Ignoring my injuries and his nakedness. "And you threaten to curse me... into oblivion? Tell me, witch, what would that look like? Because it seems like we're both already cursed."

I glower, yanking at my wrists. His grip is impossibly strong. His fingernails lengthen, digging into my skin.

"Nothing else seemed to be working. You're covered in blood. You pinned me to the freaking floor."

He bares his teeth. "Did you summon a demon to try and kill me?"

I scoff. Even if I did—but I definitely didn't—I wouldn't admit shit to him. That would be asking for trouble.

"You don't even know what goes into summoning a demon, asshole. There's no way I'd do that."

He leans in, inhaling at my neck. "You smell of magic."

"Fuck off," I snap.

I squirm again, trying to free myself from his grip. What I *won't* do is tell him I was just trying to find my mother. That seems a little too much like admitting a weakness he can use against me, and he's got enough ammunition as it is.

"Let. Go. Of. Me."

He chuckles. His nails cut into my skin, and drops of blood roll down my forearms. He drags my wrists over my head, keeping them locked there with one hand.

I open my mouth to argue, but his other hand covers my mouth. He pins me in place with his hips, regardless of my wriggling. And it doesn't seem to matter what I do.

"You're an impossible creature," he growls.

"And you're a psycho," I answer, my voice muffled by his palm.

He moves his fingers a bit, as if curious if I'll continue.

"You wanted to abduct my mother. Didn't get there in time, so you take me instead? Almost get me killed in the process—"

"Yes, Astra." He leans in. "And I'd do much worse than that to save my pack."

"I'd forsake your whole fucking pack to save my mother," I hiss.

His gaze drops to my lips. "We have something in common, then."

My tongue darts out and wets them. Nerves, maybe.

Is he going to kiss me? He's naked.

We're in the middle of an argument.

Also, he's a fucking wolf. A witch hunter. He's probably got more witch blood on his hands than anyone I've ever met.

"I don't see the common ground," I manage to whisper.

"Really?" He shifts his weight, and my *God*. He has an erection. It presses into my belly. It's hard and long, and the weight of it is surprising. He seems unashamed of it—or he wants to draw my attention to it. Just another thing to keep me off-balance.

I saw him naked once, I don't need to again.

"You'll fight to the death for the person you love," he supplies.

I slant my gaze away from his searching one. His words ring true, and it's the same for him. Except he doesn't love one person—it's his whole pack. A hundred shifters versus my mother.

"If you want my help..." *Don't fucking look at him, Astra.* It's getting harder to breathe in here. Sweat pricks my skin. I give in and turn my head back, meeting his ice-blue eyes. "I need the truth from you."

He lowers his head and stops a breath away from my mouth. There's a sudden ache between my legs, crashing through me like nothing else I've ever known. I don't understand my body's reaction to him, and I fight to smother it.

“Really, Astra?” His voice curls in my ear. His breath touches my lips.
“But what if I don’t think you’re ready for it?”

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CHAPTER 9

KIAN

I leave her trembling against the wall.

The *truth* that she demands isn't so easily torn from my lips. The truth has been a pack secret for a century. I won't admit to a witch what we can barely stomach aloud ourselves. We've endured it in silence.

It twists inside me like a living thing, always haunting me. The clock hanging over Jessamine has worsened the feeling.

A hundred years ago, a witch cursed wolf shifters—but it originated with my bloodline. It comes with unusual magic, but it also comes with guilt.

It seems like my own fate hangs in the balance with this one.

I like her, my wolf says. His voice is a surprise—and with those words, not a welcome one.

Well, don't.

He huffs. I *know* he likes her—when we shifted, with her watching, it took everything in my power to keep us loping *away* from her. But then she screamed, and I swear we could hear it from across the village. His instinct took over.

Breaking down the door to the guest bedroom, I've never seen such a sight.

A demon in my house. Hovering over Astra. The thing was clawing *into* her back as she'd lain there, but there was ice on her skin. It was having a difficult time because of it. Like it had to break through that layer, first, and was struggling.

Another sign that things aren't what they seem.

She doesn't have a water affinity. She seems to have mastered basic spells, and that's it. The power that we tasted last night isn't evident. There's no trace of the magic we witnessed when my cousin attacked us. The scent of her magic tonight is barely a tendril, as impossible as that sounds.

She must be lying. Masking her power somehow, or it's receded after the massive explosion of it in the forest. More things to consider, more to contemplate. A witch's ability to deceive should never be underestimated.

My cousin is another matter.

Gage is furious with me. He's always been a bit obsessive over things that shouldn't matter, but somehow end up mattering the most. Like the witch. I lured him into a chase, then took his prey away.

Well, to be fair, she took herself away.

We weren't meant to linger in his territory for so long. I didn't expect her to argue with me when I laid out what I had done and what would happen. I thought she would agree. Or better, beg. I would've pushed her farther if I knew I could get her there.

He wasn't supposed to catch her.

But Gage is fast, and as alpha of his pack, he knows his land better than most wolves. That was where he got the jump on us.

On *me*.

Unlike a lot of wolf families, Gage and I did not grow up together. My father and uncle were constantly at war with each other growing up, and their father, at the time the alpha of the Silver Ridge Pack, encouraged the violence. Everything was a competition.

My father challenged his and won, and he exiled his twin. My uncle was accepted into the neighboring pack, and two short years later, fought and won against the alpha that had welcomed him in.

Gage and I were both born from wicked men, but I don't know whose upbringing was worse. We only saw each other when the pack leaders needed to meet. Back then, it was a whole production, and not just between my father and uncle. Those week-long summits were the only time my cousin and I spent time together, and it was often without supervision.

We did not get along.

He left a message for me earlier. The demand in his voice made my skin crawl. He thinks Astra belongs to him—and he wants me to bring her to

him. He doesn't realize I pushed her there. He thinks I wandered into his territory and took something meant for him.

He can't have her, my wolf whispers. He sends me an image of his teeth sinking into my cousin's throat, ripping it out.

I frown.

"What are you going to do about the witch?" Roman catches up to me on the path toward the orchard.

He's Jessamine's mate and one of my best hunters, although he doesn't look like it in human form. Tall and lanky, with bright-red hair, he gives off the air of a goofball more than a warrior. Right now, he sports his regular grin, but his eyes are a bit too wide. The stress rolls off him in waves.

I inhale sharply, taking in the sourness of worry that borders on fear—from my beta, who fears almost nothing—and I stop walking. There are a few reasons he could be in this state. The first would be the *predicament* he's put my sister in as her mate. The second would be the witch.

If I ignore the first, the second seems reasonable.

No matter how many late-night runs we go on, no matter how much I reassure my pack that everything is fine... they're not going to believe it until they know the truth.

The truth is exactly what Astra asked for, too.

I told her it didn't exist. But what I meant was, there's not *one* truth. If I tell her the wolves' truth, the secret my pack hides from the world as a species, then there's no telling what she could do with it. And if she ever gets free of me, she could tell other covens. Powerful ones. What would they do with our secret?

We can't fucking procreate without killing our own females.

The witches could wipe us out.

"Call for a meeting tomorrow morning," I direct to Roman. There, I'll tell my pack what they need to hear. "Every able body should be there."

Roman nods, but he hesitates to leave my side. My mind is loud, and the orchards always give me a modicum of peace. I know they do the same for my hunters.

"You can join me," I offer against my better judgment.

Roman and I have not discussed his mate and her pregnancy. And how I could *kill* him for putting her in this position. The rational side of my brain knows that this was bound to happen. Instincts for it are rooted in our wolves, and some urges are harder to shut out than others.

But that doesn't mean I don't want to strangle him. Because of him, I'll have to watch my sister die.

He grimaces. "Jess wanted me to talk some sense into you."

Of course. I can only imagine what it's about. Her pregnancy is the first to pop into my head. Truthfully, it's barely left. But there's also the matter of our cousin, Gage. And Astra. In fact, it's almost certainly about the little witch.

Snickering amusement from wolf echoes in my mind. One of us enjoys thinking of her.

"I could just tell you, instead of you trying to figure out what I'm talking about," Roman laughs.

"Out with it, then."

"She's concerned about the witch." His tone gets on my nerves.

I only wish I could control my reaction to his disdain. My eyes narrow; my lips pull back to expose my teeth. "I have Astra under control."

He stops walking, his head automatically bending away. Exposing his throat in a show of submission. I almost keep stomping on, just to leave him behind, but I'm not that big of an asshole.

I face him and somehow get my expression back to neutral.

"Astra." His surprise radiates toward me.

Her name sounds like a garble of letters in his mouth, and he can't seem to fathom that I just said her name out loud—he can't imagine that I even *know* her name, let alone use it.

But it's a fine name. It suits her.

"Jess isn't the only one worried. You've been keeping secrets from the pack." He steps closer, although he shudders to do so. His voice *and* his gaze are low when he continues, "We don't need you to pour your heart out, but everyone has questions."

The last few months haven't been easy. The demons have been pushing through with higher frequency. We've lost six females in the last two years from our pack alone, and I loathe that our numbers keep dwindling. Our numbers will continue to shrink, whether we bury our heads in the sand or face it. And all the while, I've felt this desperate sense of urgency building inside me.

My father gave me this pack only for me to watch my females die off one by one. I think he's laughing from the grave.

I must break this curse. I *need* to stop the dying, more than anything else. The next one to die will be my sister. More than demons, more than bordering wolf packs trying to nose into my territory, saving *her* is my top priority.

So, yes, I've been hell-bent. I've been focused.

Obsessed, even.

We're so fucking close to figuring this shit out. The Seer, finding Astra—it's going to work.

He of all people should understand, but he's right. In my effort, I haven't paused to give my pack any sort of explanation. They know I disappear occasionally.

They know I've returned with a witch, and they already hate her. They don't understand what she can help me with because I haven't bothered to tell them.

I rub my eyes.

"I'll speak with the pack tomorrow," I say. "But, Roman, I need you to know that if my sister dies..." I can't finish the sentence. What would I do in my grief? Kill him? Exile him?

Shame fills his features, but he's already nodding. "There's no if, Alpha. *When* she dies, I'll cast myself out. Or I'll fall upon your claw. Whatever fate you decide."

Before I caught Astra, Jessamine's fate—and the fate of all female wolf shifters—was sealed by the curse. Now, a tiny blossom of hope has planted in my chest.

And how I hate it.

It's dangerous. It's insane. Thinking of my sister being around to raise her pup is almost nonsensical, but I've latched on to it. And that hope is as hot as a coal between my ribs, not letting me forget that it's there. I only need to breathe upon it, and it'll burst into flames.

"Stick with *if*," I utter. "I'll continue on alone from here."

He contemplates my words in silence and inclines his chin. He knows a clear dismissal when he hears one.

Leaving him behind, my thoughts circle back to Astra. The demon. Her frozen skin.

The power, then lack of it. Why didn't she fight the demon off? It almost killed her. If I hadn't been there, it would've crawled inside her. I've never seen such a thing, unless that's what happened to the girl. She was

possessed. She opened her mouth and the demon spoke. The demon controlled her magic.

Would it have been able to control Astra?

Unless that was her plan. She could be a skilled actress that I've let slip right into the middle of my pack. She could've summoned the demon, even though she denied it with surprising vehemence.

Too many mysteries to solve.

Her mother should worry both Astra and me. Finding the answer to that should be priority number one.

What does a demon want with a Seer?

I know what *I* wanted from her. I wanted the way to break the curse. I wanted her to give me the best path to succeed. Jessamine's countdown ticks away in the back of my mind. From twenty-eight weeks, down to twenty-seven. Soon to be twenty-six. The weeks will pass by too quickly, and eventually, my sister's pup will emerge into the world.

I need Jessamine to live through it.

We lost one sister already. She succumbed to the wolf instinct, the same one that has caught Jessamine in its snare. The one that drives us to mate, to breed. To have children. The one that completes the curse—and kills mothers before their newborns have drawn their first breath.

My wolf stirs at the idea of mating, even knowing that future.

I've got him to worry about, too.

There's a process for completing the mate bond beyond fate's hand at work. Once you've found your mate, it doesn't just *connect* you, like snapping your fingers.

There are steps. Rituals. Things that have been the way of wolves since before my father's father could remember. But they always used to whisper that it was to make sure both wolves want it. That they agree.

But I now think that's just a way to undermine fate. At the very least, the wolves can give fate a run for its money. Having felt the pull of my wolf toward Astra, I don't know how anyone would reject their mate.

But not a witch.

The first is the bite.

Smugness radiates from my wolf. He's paying attention to my line of thought, following along as I consider what else would need to happen for Astra and me to complete the bond.

I grimace.

She won't be able to finish her side of the mate bond as a witch—and for that, I'm thankful. She would have to bite me in wolf form. Impossible.

Only an alpha can turn someone. If it's done against a human's will, it's punishable by death. The other pack alphas police each other.

Next, my wolf and I would get the urge to stalk her, to obsess over her. I've seen my pack males go through it. Then there's sex. A fight for dominance. And when those things are all accepted willingly, the female goes into heat.

That spurs on its own sort of agony.

Fucking. A *lot* of fucking.

We have four mated pairs in the pack. My sister and Roman. An elder pair who took steps to make sure she never fell pregnant. Unfortunately, she has the scars to prove it. The other two are still relatively young by our standards. It's miraculous that they found each other. But my heart aches to think of what may happen in the years to come.

The rest of my pack haven't found their mates. Some will leave to find them, driven by the desire to connect. But some will stay, fearful of the curse, of finding someone to love only to lose them. There will always be females and males who remain single in the packs. That's the way of things.

Except for me. My duty as an alpha dictates that I must find a mate. That I must carry my line on, even if it means my mate's death.

My wolf's growl echoes in my head. He sends me an image of Astra, her belly swollen, her blonde hair loose around her full breasts. Of little pups he'd chase around the yard while she watched on. As if I would have hybrid children with her. As if she would survive me, and I her.

Stop, I snap at him.

He puffs up his chest in my head and ignores me. It takes more effort to block him out tonight, but I manage it by the time I reach the orchards.

I hop over the wood post fence and stride down the wide lane between two rows of trees, heading for the tiny home in the center of it.

The elder mated pair, Erin and Matteo, reside there. They like their solitude, so the orchard was the best place to put them. When pups are born, and their mothers gone...

Sometimes the males are too devastated to care for them. Erin and Matteo take them in for a time, until sense returns to the pup's father. Having the space to run in the orchard, and the guidance and wisdom of the

mated pair, is beyond what any pup could dream of after suffering the loss of their mother.

Those two raised me far more than my dad ever did. Especially when I was young. Although back then, they were young themselves.

The door opens before I can climb the porch. Warm light pours out onto the sloping wood, and Erin smiles softly at me.

“I thought I heard your distressed huffing.” She steps aside and lets me enter.

Her hair is dark, with strands of silver shot through it. It’s pulled into a braid that swings down the center of her back. She’s one of the smallest wolves in our pack, but she makes up for it with daring. When she was younger, my father used her to run messages to his brother up north—which is how she found Matteo. And luckily, Matteo left his pack and followed her back to us.

She wraps her cardigan tighter around her and motions for the couch. She collects mugs and a kettle and sits across from me, silently making my tea the way I used to drink it as a teenager.

It’s been some time since I’ve had a chance to sit with her. There are fresh lines around her eyes, her skin tanned from being outside. There’s more silver in her long hair, but her posture is as straight as ever. Her eyes are clear, and they analyze me with the swift familiarity of someone used to these late-night visits.

Quiet souls often attract the chaotic ones.

And hers is quiet. Always.

“Matteo will be back soon,” she says softly. “If you were wanting to talk to him.”

I shrug.

She hides her smile in her mug. “You seem discontented, Alpha. Might it have to do with the Dreamstone girl?”

I pause. “How do you know that?”

“I have eyes. I have ears.” She sets her mug aside. “I knew her mother.” Great.

Tell her, my wolf urges.

“My wolf is... infatuated,” I hedge.

Her smile falters. She knows what I mean without saying it.

Outside, Matteo stomps the dust off his boots. The door opens, and he enters his home.

He's huge, and larger yet as a light-brown wolf. He was one of my uncle's sigmas. A loner type, only in the pack by choice. He's composed of giant muscles and a gruff smile under a thick, graying beard that would make a mountain dwarf jealous.

Unfortunately, dwarves are in the make-believe category, along with fairies and Santa Claus.

Anyway, they fell for each other hard and fast, the mate bond singing between them.

It's funny how I used to think the mate bond was some foolish, invented or exaggerated thing. How could you feel another person echoing inside you? How could fate put your perfect match on this earth for you to find—and then make it a challenge?

As they like to tell the story, Erin made the first move. She snuck up on him and attacked, and their fate was sealed.

He fell rather quickly, too. Why wouldn't they? Only an idiot would fight destiny...

"Alpha," Matteo greets me. "What brings you by?"

"Woman trouble," Erin tells him.

She might be the only elder who can raise a blush to my cheeks. I'm suddenly thrust back into adolescence, running to them after my father tried to pair me with another woman in our pack. I didn't understand, at the tender age of fourteen, what he expected of me until she took her shirt and bra off. The nudity itself wasn't shocking. I expected her to burst into her wolf form. But she left her skirt on and... touched herself. Cupped her breasts and pushed them up like they were an offering to me.

Then it clicked—and I bolted straight for Erin and Matteo.

They found the situation somewhere firmly between horror and amusement, trying to stifle their laughter at the predicament I found myself in, while also mortified that my father was trying to pair me up so young.

"This ought to be good." Matteo chuckles. He sits beside his mate, running his hand up and down her back. "Who's the lucky woman?"

"A witch," Erin supplies. She leans into his touch. "Who else for our Kian?"

"No need to sound so gleeful." I roll my eyes. "And it's not good. She's impossible."

Matteo hums. "You know, it's been a hundred years, give or take, since an alpha wolf fell in love with a witch. Look how that ended."

Ouch.

“Are you trying to dissuade me? Because I don’t need the pep talk. My wolf does.”

“No, no.” The older man holds up his hands in surrender. “Not dissuade. But perhaps...”

“Perhaps what?” I stare at him. “You think I should even entertain it? I thought you’d agree with me that she’s dangerous. I’d rather kill her and damn myself than take on another curse. I can’t repeat my ancestors’ mistakes.”

Matteo glowers at me. “You take everything so seriously, Kian.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “My wolf wants her, but the mate bond would be impossible to complete. Even if both of us want it, it would make us linger in some almost-bond.” I let my gaze drift to the ceiling. “And trust me, neither of us are entertaining this.”

“So she knows?” Erin asks.

“No.” I frown. “I don’t think so.”

She smiles, but I can’t even consider that future.

The last witch-wolf relationship ended with a fucking curse on both our species. Well, mainly on ours. But it turned us into the monster that lurks behind the witches, the nightmares that live in their heads, and that seems like a punishment on them, too.

“You could change things.” Matteo takes Erin’s mug into the kitchen.

I sit back and sip my tea, discontented. I was hoping they’d make me feel better. They’d tell me to get rid of her, and that would make it easier to follow through.

“Why did you bring her here?” Matteo asks when he returns.

“She might be able to help me break the curse,” I tell him plainly.

They both go silent. The curse has informed many parts of our lives. It’s a stain on our history. I can’t even fathom what it would be like to be free from it.

“How does she feel?” Erin asks. “Has she shown any inclination...?”

“In helping us? She hates us as I hate her.” My skin is hot. My stomach turns at those words, but I force my emotions—and the wolf’s—out of the equation. My pack comes before all else. There’s no room for the weight of her in the back of my head that isn’t altogether unpleasant.

“Don’t become your father,” Erin says softly.

I growl. There's a time and a place for her mothering. I accepted it as a kid. Even as a teenager, as unruly as I was. But now, it rankles on my nerves.

"Erin," Matteo scolds.

She bows her head in submission.

After a long moment, I stand up. I can't bear if she thinks I'm like him. I've worked hard to separate myself from the monster I must call Father.

He's done terrible things in the name of our pack. He hunted witches for longer than I've been alive, but he didn't just kill them. He used them like sport. Pulled the magic from their veins for his own use. Twisted them, drained them until they were nothing more than a husk.

There's nothing he wouldn't have done for his family. He always said it.

And that's what I've been telling myself, as well.

"I've got to go," I mutter. I bolt for the door, guilt and shame intertwining with my anger.

Erin is right. With Astra in my possession, I'm following exactly in his footsteps. The exact path I swore I'd never walk.

CHAPTER 10

ASTRA

The sun has just broken over the treetops when Kian enters my room. He doesn't knock. If I had hackles, they'd go up.

I glare at him from my position by the window, crossing my arms. It stretches the aching wounds in my back, but I ignore it to keep up my glower. I was scouting the likelihood of finding a stone to imbibe with a concealment charm while musing options for escape.

Neither opportunity seems optimal.

He glances around, as if expecting more demons to be lurking in a corner. When he's satisfied the room contains only me and my boredom, he gestures for me to come closer.

I slept alone last night in a different guest room, with the dresser shoved in front of the door. The original room I picked wasn't an option, what with the broken door from Kian's wolf's grand entrance, and I couldn't go back to his room.

This morning, I woke as the sky was beginning to lighten and snuck into the hallway bathroom. I may have cried in my sleep, which would explain my puffy eyes. I have dark circles, too. And more than a few scrapes and bruises across my arms and face.

Instead of dwelling, I brushed my teeth and showered, lingering under the hot water. Perks of staying in the alpha's house, I suppose, is having a fully stocked guest bathroom at your disposal.

The shower chased away the lingering chill in my bones, but it did nothing to soothe the gouges in my back that the demon re-aggravated. I could heal myself a little if I was allowed outside, but the wolf's warning to stay inside sat heavy on my shoulders.

I finger-brushed my hair and re-dressed in the same clothes they put me in. The sweatpants-material shorts, the white t-shirt that has bloodstains on the back. Kind of gross, but I don't know where my bag went, and I have no other option.

Then, I waited.

Now he's here, and I'm rather regretting moving the dresser at all.

I stop in front of Kian, running my gaze up his body.

He has stubble on his cheeks, and his dark hair is messed up. His white t-shirt seems an awfully lot like the one I've got on. Jeans, boots. He's attractive. Full lips, square jaw, piercing blue eyes.

I tilt my head back and meet his gaze. *Mistake.*

His lips pull back just the slightest, but his gaze gets hotter, or darker, or *something*. He could be the one with witch magic in his blood, with the way he's ensnared me with a single look.

He motions for me to turn around.

I do it quickly and let out a slow breath as our staring contest comes to an end.

But then, maybe giving him my back is worse.

He tugs the hem of my shirt all the way up to my neck. I gasp and cover my front, trying to keep the fabric over my stomach.

He makes a noise in the back of his throat. At what, I couldn't guess.

"How did the demon get into my house, Astra?" He presses his palm to one of the three wounds, forcing healing magic into my skin.

My lips part. The burning sensation dulls, replaced by warmth spreading along my back.

"No idea," I force out.

"What were you doing?" His palm is getting hotter. He leans down and runs his nose up the back of my neck. He moves into my hair.

I'm stiffer than a board, unable to do anything but let him do whatever he's doing. My heart pounds. His other hand is on my hip, and his fingers dig into my skin.

"I..."

God, his touch is too much.

"I was trying to find my mother," I finally whisper.

"And did you?"

Alarm bells go off in my head. *Danger, danger.*

"No," I lie.

He goes still for a moment, curved around me. Touching me way too intimately for someone who threatens my very existence.

But then he backs away, leaving me cold all over again.

I roll my shoulders back, surprised at how much better it feels. Still painful, but...

“Do you want to know why you’re here?”

I face him and nod. My body hums in sudden anticipation and fear. He was after a Seer. I’m not one, not even close. So, why?

His eyes gleam.

He reaches forward and snags my wrist, dragging me into his body. His lips touch my ear, and goosebumps break out across my skin.

“We’re going to track down a blood witch and make her break a curse.”

Oh no.

He doesn’t give me any time to process that—and really, that’s a lot to fucking process. He grips my upper arm and leads me out of the room. Down the stairs, which I stumble over in my hurry to keep up with his long stride. He doesn’t slow in the slightest, his hold on me only tightening.

Blood witches are dangerous. They practice dark magic, using blood and sacrifices to bolster their power. They call demons to do their bidding. Without blood magic, it takes an entire coven to make a circle powerful enough to contain a demon. Every time a blood witch dips into that power, their soul corrupts further.

They’re exiles. Seeking one out is a death sentence.

I peek up at him. “Are you going to tell me about this curse?”

“What?”

“You said there’s a curse, but what is it? Are you going to tell me?”

“No.” He scowls.

We leave the relative safety of his house. He’s got his own village out here, a collection of houses surrounding his. There seems to be a main gravel road that winds through them, with driveways branching off. But like Kian, everyone else seems content to get around on their own two feet.

Or four.

He doesn’t seem to notice—or care—that I’m not wearing shoes. Rocks dig into my feet, and I limp along next to him until he moves silently to the side of the road. To a strip of grass.

I don’t thank him. If he wanted to save me the trouble, he could’ve given me my shoes back. But I am glad I can walk normally. My toes dig

into the soft green, and I draw in little bits of energy with every step. It's about as subtle as I can make it.

I spot a covered motorcycle tucked against the house we're rapidly leaving behind. There's a truck next to it. Beyond the collection of houses is a large warehouse with four garage doors, currently closed tight. If the other houses have vehicles, they're hidden away like Kian's.

Does he keep the keys to the truck inside it?

Or maybe in the house somewhere, like the kitchen?

I wouldn't last five minutes trying to outrun a wolf pack, but driving...

We keep going to an even larger building that seems to be at the center of their homes. It's one story with a wide wraparound porch. Beside it is a clearing with a fire pit in the center and logs, presumably for sitting, circling it.

It would be charming if I wasn't sick to my stomach. There are wolf shifters heading toward the door, and some cast ugly glances my way.

"Ready to meet the pack, witch?"

I try to pull free, but it's too late to turn around. And really, I'd rather not look like a scared rabbit in front of all these bloodthirsty murderers.

How many covens have they decimated?

They're under his control. That should bring comfort—because Kian doesn't want me dead yet—but a tingle of fear rushes down my spine. I don't trust him not to sic them on me if I speak out of turn or argue or... anything that I seem to be unable to avoid.

Is it my fault my mother raised me to be headstrong?

No.

Maybe.

Just keep your mouth shut, you'll be fine.

We enter the building. It seems to be a lodge of sorts. Most of the space is taken up by tables and chairs. There's a swinging door in the back with an open window beside it, giving me a glimpse of an industrial kitchen.

Those who eat together... I don't know the rest of that saying. But it probably isn't good.

But I suppose it means they don't just feast on live animals. Casserole aside. Actually, that casserole was surprisingly delicious. Did it come from here? Packaged to-go for their precious alpha? They probably would've spit in it if they knew I was going to be eating it, too.

My gaze flicks around, although I try to be discreet. I'm drawing *all* of the attention, probably due to the Mark crawling up the left of my neck.

Pack hierarchy is clear in this room. We stride down the center aisle. In the front are the wolves who must be Kian's betas. I spot Jessamine sitting beside a tall, lanky redhead, another slender woman, a second man. They occupy the table front and center. Spreading out behind them are more women and men who just have different energy about them. There are definitely more men here. Two or three men for every one woman. I don't think I trust a she-wolf, but males scare me infinitely more.

The hair on the back of my neck stands up. I tense, digging my heels in a bit. It comes too late, though, because we've arrived at the front of the room. He turns us to face his pack.

"Greetings," Kian says, and the murmuring stops.

He doesn't raise his voice—duh. Wolves have heightened senses. No use shouting when the whole room can hear a pin drop. I'd do well to remember that if I want to escape.

Escape... that reminds me. I haven't yet figured out how my mother transported me and how the hell Kian found me. What was it he said outside the room? That I called to him?

Some psycho-babble bullshit.

"Greetings, Alpha," the pack responds.

My skin crawls as their attention turns to me. Some hot, some chilled. All angry. All ready to kill me if I so much as twitch the wrong way.

My amulet is warming up again.

I stare down at my bare feet. My skin is streaked with dirt, bits of loose grass clinging to my toes.

Kian clears his throat, and gazes snap back to him.

"I know many of you have questions for me." He inclines his chin. "I've been acting with our best interests at heart. I seek to end the curse that has plagued us. But this path is going to take me away from you for a while."

I narrow my eyes. He didn't say that.

Yeah, he said we were going to track down a blood witch. But I assumed he meant he was going to interrogate me, or use me to find covens, or... I don't know, scry for one.

Scrying did not work out so well for you last time, Astra.

"The witch has promised her help to break our curse."

That gets a bigger reaction. Gasps and horrified looks. The room breaks out into murmurs, some much louder than others. Kian lets them voice their protests uninterrupted. The anger doesn't stop building, though. If anything, it seems to swell.

I shift my weight. It's all directed my way, isn't it?

Kian raises his free hand. "Enough."

They stop.

"This is not up for discussion. This is not a debate. Matteo is in charge while we're gone. You know the rules."

He's taking me away from here. Really.

The relief that courses through me is strong enough to knock me over.

"What if she betrays you?" someone calls.

My head jerks up.

Jessamine. She leans forward, her chin propped on her fist. "Will you kill her?"

I scowl at her. "I'm not an idiot."

She smiles.

Kian releases my arm. The amulet is heating against my skin in warning, but I step away from him anyway. Closer to his sister.

"He just said I promised to help," I say. It was a slight fib on his part, but whatever. I'll roll with it. *For now*. "Do you think my word means so little?"

She rises. "I think your word means less than the dirt under my shit, witch. *I* think my brother is a fool to put his faith in you—"

Something we have in common.

"—and you're better off put down."

"You hide behind this curse," I scoff. "You think that's the root of all your problems. The real problem is that you're afraid, *dog*."

She lunges for me.

The amulet goes white-hot, and I raise my hand against her attack. She collides with me, and we crash to the floor. Her weight bears down on me, digging into my flesh. Her knee in my stomach, her forearm across my throat.

I can't breathe.

I press my hand to her face, knowing it won't do any good, but it's the only part of her skin I can reach.

Until she starts screaming.

She scrambles off me and flops on her side. Her back arches. She screams like her lungs are burning, continuing even after my hand has fallen away.

I stare at her from the floor, absolutely bewildered. My throat aches, but it's nothing compared to whatever she's going through.

Kian hauls me up. He releases me just as fast, swearing under his breath.

"Get her out of here," he orders, pointing to his sister.

Two men rush forward and grip Jessamine under her arms. They haul her toward the door. Not fast enough for me, though.

"She burned me," Jessamine shrieks. She lowers her hand, which had covered the side of her face.

There's a red mark—a burn, true enough—coloring her tanned cheek and jaw.

In the shape of a handprint.

The door swings shut behind them, and my gaze slowly lifts. Kian's one hand is balled into a fist. But his other palm is red, too, where he grabbed me.

"Anyone else doubt my decision?" Kian booms.

Silence.

"Then get out of my sight."

They scurry to comply. I watch them all rush away, until it's just Kian and me.

"Astra," he says in a low voice.

I force myself to look at him.

He opens his hand. His palm *is* burned. The skin is... gods, it's practically melted. As I watch, the skin seems to knit itself back together. Within seconds, there's no trace of injury. I don't know what to do with that except shiver in fear.

What use is my power against him if he can heal that quickly? How could I possibly get the upper hand when I'll lose it just as fast?

The real mystery is how I burned them both.

He leans in. I don't think he'll touch me, but I'm proven wrong when he grips the back of my neck.

"What did I promise you, witch? About using magic?"

"I don't know what happened. *She* attacked *me*. Maybe the amulet..." I shake my head, fear bleeding through my voice. I reveal the purple stone. I

shouldn't, because it's obviously powerful enough to keep me safe. Or warn me of danger, at the very least.

"Or you're more powerful than you think," he replies. "In which case, you're more of a danger than I thought. You've got no control."

I wrinkle my nose and lean back, but his grip on my neck only tightens. Maybe he'll make good on his threat to make my death twice as painful. Whenever that happens.

"On that note, I don't think I'm going to be very much help to you on the whole blood witch thing." I shrug. "Sorry."

"You shouldn't apologize until you know how I plan to use you."

You know what? That's a fair statement.

My gaze drags down his body, then back up. Against my will. He's not even naked, for fuck's sake. The first thing on my list is to stop thinking about his abs.

"How do you plan to use me?" I inch closer. "My mother is the Seer, Kian, not me. I don't know how to find a blood witch."

He smiles. "That's where you're wrong."

I swallow.

He's right anyway. I do know how to find a blood witch.

But it'll cost both of us to do it.

CHAPTER II

ASTRA

“Wake, Astra.” My mother’s lips touch my forehead. “We have a visitor.”

I yawn and force my eyes to open. Pale-blue light streams in through the windows, signaling the return of the sun. Dawn has arrived. And with it, a new witch.

We only get visitors when someone knows where to find us, and my mother ensured that’s a rare thing.

But visitors also bring news of the witches from the outside world. That’s how I refer to them, anyway. There’s our inside world of my mother and me. Everyone else is beyond. And if they deign to stay a few nights, I can almost always talk them into teaching me something.

I dress quickly and follow my mother outside. We hike through the early morning mist in silence, until we reach the road. Then we wait.

And wait.

“How do you know it’s today?” I eventually ask.

My stomach cramps with hunger. I should’ve grabbed an apple on the way out the door. The sun is high enough to glimmer through the trees, burning away the mist and dew. It’ll be noon before we get back home. Perhaps later.

“I just know,” she replies.

Eventually, a woman comes around the corner, walking down the middle of the worn dirt road. She has a canvas sack slung over her shoulder and a wide-brimmed straw hat perched on her head. It doesn’t do much to hide her cherry-red hair or her unusual style of dress: tweed skirt and vest, a

light-purple button-down shirt underneath it. The sleeves are rolled up, revealing the Mark on her inner arm. It's in the shape of a starburst.

"Good morning," my mother calls.

The witch smiles widely. "Lenora!"

"Cecelia," Mother replies.

"How the hell did you find this place?" Cecelia stops in front of us and drops her sack to the grass. "I've been hiking for ages."

"It's only a mile outside of town." I press my lips together and glance at my mother. I sometimes speak without thinking. We've been working on it.

Cecelia's amber eyes travel over me. "Your girl, Len?"

My mother doesn't respond. It's clear enough that I'm hers. We look alike. And even though I'm barely thirteen, I'm almost as tall as her. My birthday was last week. We celebrated with ham and cheese sandwiches toasted on the stove, and a chocolate and raspberry cake with a candle stuck in it. It was great.

"Has she awakened?"

"Last year," I answer before my mother can.

My Mark is concealed—my mother prefers it that way when she introduces me to new witches.

"Feisty thing, aren't you? Would you carry my bag for me? My back aches from traveling from farther than your little town."

I bite the inside of my cheek and lift her sack. It weighs a ton, but it doesn't matter. I've been hauling logs since we moved here. Hefting an ax to split the wood, learning how to store it so it doesn't rot.

My mother loops her arm through the witch's and leads her to our cottage. I follow close behind, trying to catch their words. My bad habit is becoming lost in my own thoughts. Sometimes they sweep me away, and my body just continues without me.

Their conversation remains light. I'll be evicted from my room and set up on a mattress roll in my mother's room until our visitor leaves. I linger in their peripherals as they discuss the outside world.

An alpha stealing witches, decimating covens. Demons bursting through the barrier at an alarming frequency.

"Something has to change," Cecelia says. "Please tell me something changes."

My mother glances at me, then back to her friend. "It will."

“We’re fighting a losing war,” Cecelia continues. “That’s why I’ve come. To plead for you to return. To take a stand—”

“I cannot risk it,” my mother hisses. “What would you have me do with Astra? Leave her here to grow up without me?”

“No—”

“Come, my darling.” My mother holds her hand out for me.

I rush to her side. Her arm curls around my waist, cinching me close.

“Cecelia is a very special type of witch,” she says in my ear. “She can talk to the dead.”

My mouth drops open. “How?”

“She’s a spirit witch, like me. But as you know, it evolves inside each witch differently.” She traces a pattern on the table. Her nail catches on one of the knots. “Cecelia will teach you how.”

Her friend opens her mouth to refuse. She shakes her head at us, but my mother just stares steadily back.

I don’t know how she always gets her way, but eventually, the friend folds. Cecelia gestures for me to pull out the chair between them and sit. I tuck my legs under me, resting my forearms on the table.

“Spirits are souls,” Cecelia begins. “Some dead haunt—those are what humans would call ghosts. But spirits exist peacefully, and they can travel the astral plane, which makes them excellent sources of knowledge.”

“What kind of knowledge?”

“Locating things or people. Especially if they have any connection to the dead.” Her eyes gleam. “This is not like what a blood witch does, Astra. A blood witch uses dark magic to call demons to this world from the shadow realm. They are a bastardized, imitation version of a spirit witch—and it’s important for you to know the difference.”

I soak up her words and dutifully nod. Mother briefly mentioned blood witches, but this might be the first opportunity to learn more.

“Spirit witches simply ask the spirits to help us. And when we’re done, we let them rest.”

“A demonstration,” my mother prompts.

I JERK AWAKE, my pulse hammering. I glance at the clock on the nightstand, unsurprised that it’s the middle of the night. My vivid dream is a memory. The fact that I’m having it seems like a message straight from my mother.

Outside my open window, wolves howl. It sounds mournful, although I don't think it's meant to be. There are many different voices tonight, calling to each other.

Wolf howls have long haunted my dreams. I suppose it's lucky that I didn't dream of them tonight, too.

Either way, Kian and his pack are preoccupied. Maybe he's saying goodbye? One last run under a waning moon?

I pause. The demon came through the scrying glass so close to a full moon, it should've been impossible. I hadn't considered that last night, in the heat of things. It doesn't help that Kian fries my nerves, and his wolf seems set on tormenting me whenever he can.

We leave in the morning. I'm not sure where we're headed, but I'm not convinced Kian knows, either. I'm fairly sure we're both flying blind. I could be wrong. He holds his cards close to the vest. It's possible he has a plan, and I'm along for the ride.

After the little fiasco of a morning meeting, he took me for a walk along the property. I saw a fence in the distance, guarding a grove of old, twisted trees, but we didn't get that far. He seemed content to let me stretch my legs in the sunshine without interacting with anyone else.

At one point, I stopped and tipped my head back to let the sun warm my face and relish in the flourish of life around me.

I don't know if he realized I continued to restore my meager power as we went.

But, as *nice* as that was, he brought me right back to his house and guided me upstairs. I wasn't locked in the spare room, but it was strongly advised that I don't leave until we head out in the morning. The chill in my bones returned almost immediately.

I didn't attempt to scry again.

Now, I slip from bed and tiptoe to the door. It takes me a moment to push the dresser aside, wincing at the scraping noise. I get it back enough to crack the door and slip into the hall. Kian has yet to return my bag, although I have a sneaking suspicion that he stubbornly has it hidden somewhere.

If I tell him I want it, he'll never give it back.

I set my jaw. The first chance I get to escape, I'm taking it. But first, I want to find my stuff.

The door to his bedroom is open. The faint glow of a fire in the grate is the only light source, and I creep closer. I pause and listen, then continue.

When I get to the doorway, I scan the room.

Empty.

I enter.

It's a few degrees colder in here, even with the fire. The windows are open, as are the large doors that lead to a balcony. I didn't attempt to go out there when he made me rest here, and I avoid it now.

I check his closet first. It's full of the smell of *him*. It isn't unpleasant, but it's unwelcome in my nose. I can't help but catalog it anyway.

Sandalwood.

The way it smells before it rains.

I inhale deeper, then force myself to move along when I come up empty-handed.

I grit my teeth and search under his bed, then in the bathroom.

Nothing.

"Come *on*." It has to be here. Somewhere.

"Looking for something?"

I almost jump out of my skin.

Kian stands in the doorway, leaning on the jamb. His arms are crossed, but it doesn't really hide... any of him.

He's naked. *Again*.

"Why are you naked?" I turn away, covering my eyes. I've decided that if I'm going to survive this, I can't keep staring at his dick. Because I do. Every time he's fucking naked, I'm drawn to his abs and his mysterious tattoos, and then my eyes naturally go lower.

"Because my wolf doesn't like clothes."

There's a click as his door shuts.

"Why are you in my room, Astra?"

"I was hoping to find some better clothes than the same shirt and shorts I've been wearing for who knows how long."

He hums. "And where would you find that?"

"In my *bag*, which I'm convinced you have hidden somewhere."

He brushes past me, disappearing into his closet. When he reemerges, I peek at him. He's got sweatpants on. No shirt, of course. He catches me looking and grins.

Then tosses me something.

I snatch it out of the air, then narrow my eyes. The bundle is my clothes, folded and rolled and tied together with twine.

“Are you kidding me? Where’s—”

“What do you *really* want, Astra? Your little bag of magic stones?” He holds up the pouch. “This one, maybe?”

I drop the clothes and rush him. He laughs when I shove him, because he doesn’t move an inch. *Infuriating shifter*. I reach for the pouch, but he holds it above my head. And I refuse to jump for it. That would be too humiliating, even for me.

He moves into me. I drift away, still reaching for the pouch. It’s taunting me. *He’s taunting me*.

“It’s not yours,” I snap.

My back hits the door.

My eyes go wide, but I’m... caught.

He tosses the pouch behind him and presses his palms to the door on either side of my head. He leans down, and my heart skips. His lips touch my ear, then drift lower. His lips on my Mark is an odd feeling. It tingles, but the sensation rushes between my legs.

When his teeth dig into my neck, I shudder. My eyes roll back, and I grip his waist without thinking. My pinkie finger brushes the waistband of his sweatpants, but my palms are flat on his skin. He’s burning hot, and a shiver runs up his spine at the new contact. I dig my nails in, but I can’t tell if I’m trying to push him away or pull him closer.

I’m playing with fire—and so is he.

He bites and sucks at my skin. His tongue soothes the spot. It’s a heady feeling, but I keep my mouth shut. My head automatically tips to the side, giving him more room.

Not. Good.

I can’t stop it.

He grinds his erection into my hip.

I’m grasping firmer at his waist, definitely pulling him closer. Against all of my better judgment.

His hands slide down my sides, over my hips.

Without warning, he grips the backs of my thighs and lifts me. I squeak and throw my arms around his shoulders. He spreads my legs and steps between them, and I groan at the new contact. His dick, separated by my shorts and his sweatpants, touches my core.

It’s unnatural and perfect all at the same time.

“Take what you need,” he says in my ear.

“I don’t need anything.”

“Your arousal has the sweetest smell, witch. You can’t hide that from me.”

He nips my throat again.

“That’s really fucking irritating,” I gripe.

He keeps doing things to my neck. I let my head fall back as I roll my hips forward. He cups my ass and urges me to do it again. I grind shamelessly on him, my mouth open and breaths coming fast. He doesn’t raise his head from my skin, but his lips travel across my collarbone. Each kiss sears into me, like he’s giving me a brand.

I don’t hate it.

I want to hate it.

It doesn’t take long for tingling pleasure to shoot through me. I shudder in his grip and dig my nails into his skin. I hope I leave marks.

“That’s it,” he groans. He presses into me until my tremors stop.

Reality creeps back in slowly. First my heartbeat, then the chill in the air. My heaving chest. The heat coming off his skin. His hands holding me by my thighs.

What the fuck did I just do?

I stare at him, wide-eyed, and he seems just as taken aback.

He drops my legs and backs away from me. His eyes are dark, his expression distinctly wolfish. His eyes glint bluer than his normal irises. And the way he’s staring at me...

My knees wobble, and I’m glad the door is at my back. It’s the only thing keeping me upright.

“Go,” he orders.

I squint at him. “What?”

“Now feels like a good time to tell you that my wolf is obsessed with you. And after that display, you should get out of here.”

I freeze. My chest tightens. Has all the oxygen been sucked from the room?

“Obsessed?” I choke out.

“He thinks you’re our fate-promised mate, obsessed,” he says through gritted teeth. His tone is a little rough, as if he’s not fully here.

He moves backward and puts more space between us.

“He got the better of me,” he adds under his breath.

He’s twitching.

“My restraint isn’t all here tonight.” His voice is getting more hoarse. “Unless you want me to give in and fuck you where you stand—and then suffer the consequences of that—I need you to *go*. Put that dresser back in front of the door.”

He doesn’t have to tell me a third time. I dart forward and grab my clothes, then the pouch of stones that he must’ve dropped at some point. I feel for the doorknob at my back, unwilling to take my attention from him.

The shadows seem to darken in the room around us. Kian’s presence draws all my attention, and I don’t know how to reconcile what the hell just happened.

Finally, I grasp the knob and twist sharply. I yank it open and slip out, hurrying back to my room.

There’s a crash behind me.

In the safety of my room, I shove the dresser back in front of the door. Not a second later, a lone howl sounds from right outside. He’s probably under my window. Can wolves jump?

I don’t dare look out—but I slam the window shut and lock that, too, just in case. If I had more magic, I’d put up a ward. I’d protect myself better.

I grasp the amulet around my neck. This will have to suffice for now.

I drop my clothes on top of the dresser and flick off the lights. I’ve got a new headache forming between my eyes.

Even after I climb into bed, it takes a long time for my heart to slow. I grip the blankets and try to will away the remaining pulse between my legs. It feels different than anything I’ve experienced before. *More*, I guess. Any orgasm I’ve given myself is desaturated compared to the kaleidoscope of color this one shot through me.

I’m in such trouble.

In the dark, it’s easier to admit to myself the truth. There’s a little part of me that would’ve wanted him to fuck me. I haven’t felt that way in—oh, I don’t know, ever?

My wolf is obsessed with you.

I’m screwed. But at least I got my clothes and stones back.

CHAPTER 12

KIAN

I lope past the boundary of my territory. Griffin and Roman keep pace with me, on high alert. There's a hundred-mile strip of land between my territory and Gage's. No-Man's-Land, our fathers called it. The only way to remain at peace is to keep a buffer between us. But it isn't just us—our fathers needed the space, too.

He's here, Griffin warns.

He catches a scent, and we aim northwest to follow it.

We slow to a trot, crashing through underbrush, and emerge in a small clearing.

Out here, we're miles and miles from the nearest towns. Mountains rise around us, and the scent of rain permeates the air. Humans haven't tainted nature out here, and unless there's an errant hiker, we won't be discovered.

Just the way we like it.

My cousin steps into the clearing in his wolf form. His golden eyes reveal his anger. I accept it but don't offer to reach out and mind-speak. If I wanted to do that, we wouldn't need to travel here. He has two betas with him, too. They stay on the fringes, like Griffin and Roman. I spot them darting through the shadows, pacing behind their alpha.

We both shift, although I suspect we won't be in human form long.

"Kian." His tone is harsh, guttural. He seems even more irritated than his body language belied.

I maintain a stoic expression. "Gage. You look... well."

His yellow hair is longer than the last time I saw him as a human. It now hangs to his shoulders. He runs his hand through it, then shrugs. He's leaner than me, his muscles smaller. Of the two of us, he weighs less, not that it

makes him any less dangerous. He's quick. The few times we've wrestled in recent years, it's been a toss-up between the two of us. I have the power and muscle; he has a leg up on agility.

Our fathers trained us how to be the best fighters. Fighting for control is an instinctual thing in a wolf pack, but the best way to come out on top can be learned. And for alphas, it's life or death.

"Where is my witch?" he asks.

My wolf bristles. I've got him under wraps, but Gage's eyes gleam like he saw my reaction as plain as day. This won't be so much a conversation as a test.

"I don't believe we came to the agreement that she's yours." I try to keep my voice even. My wolf shows me an image of tearing into Gage. Always blood and glory with him.

"What were you doing so far north anyway? You know our rules."

My wolf gives zero fucks about Gage and his territory. He doesn't respect my cousin as an alpha of anything. But if Gage knew that, this would be a much more unpleasant conversation.

"You intercepted us on neutral land," I say instead. It's not altogether a lie. We *were* in his territory at one point. By the time he caught up with us, we were out of it.

Semantics.

He glowers at me. "I don't think—"

"The witch is in my possession to do with as I please. You had her... and then you lost her. Or did you forget that part of your hunt? The part where you lost her?"

Anger flushes his skin.

"To keep a witch, you have to best her," I continue. "Subdue her."

"I had her—"

"Until you didn't." I shrug. "You know how this comes across, Gage? You're no better than a toddler who lost a toy that was never his. Stomping around and throwing a fit. It's not a good look on you."

"Don't fucking condescend to me." He closes the distance between us.

At my back, Griffin growls.

Gage stops just shy of arm's reach, but he's on the verge of losing it. His eyes are ambering, and his shoulders automatically hunch as his spine elongates. His short fuse will be the death of him.

“Shift,” I goad. “Lose your temper. Go on, cousin. We all know your control isn’t entirely in your grasp on a good day.”

It wouldn’t matter, except to embarrass him in front of his wolves. And mine.

Sometimes, rumors and gossip do more damage than anything else.

He reins it in, his jaw ticking. He throws his shoulders back and scowls. “You have the witch? Give her to me. Otherwise, you won’t like what happens next.”

I scoff and wave him off. “You don’t have a leg to stand on. And you dragged me out here just to listen to your weak arguments and petty threats. What a fucking waste of time. Goodbye, cousin.”

I turn my back on him and shift, and my wolf’s emotions blast through me. His intense anger mixes with mine, merging into a restless need to get back to her. Gage is fucking psychotic if he thinks I’m giving Astra over to him.

Our muscles flex as we sprint through the underbrush. My wolves are on either side of me, spreading out, but they enjoy the run. I’m trying to stem the flow of underlying rage and panic.

We won’t let her out of our sight, I tell my wolf.

He doesn’t seem impressed by that. I know it’s not enough for him. This danger is very clearly present. Gage’s nature makes him unpredictable. And I do not like things I can’t foresee.

Seer, my wolf says.

Yeah, well. If we had a Seer, we wouldn’t have Astra.

I let him take more control and draw back, mulling it over. When I take Astra out of here, we need to go in the opposite direction of Gage’s territory. He wouldn’t risk my ire by crossing through mine, but he would seize every opportunity to take her on neutral land.

That went interestingly, Roman says when we cross back into Silver Ridge Pack land.

I glance at him. *He thinks he has the upper hand. He’s only known our pack as an ally.*

Our fathers made it that way. Said we could either drive each other extinct or figure out a way to coexist. The brothers did it. So have we...

Go figure he’d lose his cool over my witch.

The wolf chuffs in my head at the possession, and I grimace.

We slow to a nice lope before we break the tree line, and I sense a visitor at my house before I see her. We round the warehouse, and I sigh.

Jessamine camps out on my front porch. Her annoyance is broadcast loud and clear, even from here. It could be because Roman asked her to babysit the witch instead of accompanying us. She's already barefoot, but she jumps to her feet as soon as she sees us, shedding her clothes.

"Run with me," she says to Roman's wolf.

She shifts before he or I can get a word in, trotting off with her tail swishing.

Just before my porch, I shift. I tug on the folded sweatpants my sister left for me and head into the house. The screen door slams behind me, and I immediately pause.

There's a distinct smell of something burning.

My hackles go up. I glance around the space carefully, not wanting to miss a shadow—or an ambush. It's not the sweet, rotting scent that always accompanies demons. I follow it into the kitchen, where the smell worsens. I have to pinch my nose shut and breathe through my mouth to even get through it—but somehow, that's worse. The smell has a *taste*.

Thick black smoke pours out of the closed oven door.

An oven I don't think I've used in years.

We eat in the lodge with everyone else. And if I don't want to be social, one of my wolves delivers food to me. I keep some of it stocked in the fridge just in case.

"Astra," I yell, turning off the oven before it erupts in flames.

She comes around the corner and stops short. She's in a new t-shirt, one of the ones from her pack that I tossed at her last night, and jeans. Jeans that hug her curves and hips. Her hair is pulled over her shoulder in a braid that starts at the crown of her head.

The last thing I want to do is find her beautiful, but here I am. Struggling not to gape at her like a moron.

Her eyes widen. "What is that smell?"

"Did you turn on the oven?" I bark.

She wasn't even in the room, and she almost burned the house down. A fire could've easily cut off her access to the stairs or the front door. She's human. An injured one, at that. How would she fare jumping out of a second story window?

My wolf whines.

I can't handle it. I run my hands through my hair and try not to lose my cool on her.

Her brows furrow. "There was a vegetarian pizza in the freezer—"

"It's not even lunchtime," I snap.

She puts her hands on her hips, ignoring the way the acrid smell brings tears to her eyes. "I'm *hungry*, and I don't like to eat a lot of meat. All your leftovers are *steak*."

"Oh my fucking God." I turn away from her and shove the window over the sink open. I'm not going near that oven—but she has other plans. Before I can stop her, she opens it. More smoke belches out.

Along with my ruined containers.

"What the hell?" She stares at the melting plastic. "Why do you have those in your *oven*? Are you insane?"

I bump her out of the way and slam the door closed again. I don't want to even look at it. The oven will be a mess to deal with at a later date. Right now, I'm struggling to control myself. And the way she looks is not making it any easier. God, I want to strangle her. But I also want to pat her down and make sure she didn't breathe in any of this vile shit.

I step toward her, and she goes back. I force her out of the kitchen, where the air is a little more clear.

"What's insane is not checking an unfamiliar oven before you turn it on."

She scowls. "You're a dick."

"And you're a goddamned nightmare," I retort.

Oh, that gets to her. Her cheeks redden, and the color spreads across her whole face. Her heart rate increases, and I can see the flutter of her pulse in her throat. Her whole body changes except her Mark, which remains black against her skin. And my silvery bite just below it.

She's flustered and, for some reason, pissed. Is it because I'm yelling at her? She *needs* someone to yell at her and bring her to heel.

Submission, my wolf agrees. But he also likes her fire. He is keenly aware whenever we're around her, storing bits of information. This goes in a file, too: she never used her oven as storage. She doesn't eat a lot of meat. She's fucking stubborn even when she's wrong.

Her mouth opens and closes, but it seems that all the good comebacks evade her. When she can't come up with anything, she flips her hair off her

shoulder and glares at me. Without a word, she turns and stomps away. Her braid swings across her back.

I hide my smile. Fighting with her is satisfying. I'm in a whole different mood than I was fifteen minutes ago.

I open all the windows downstairs and go outside, if only to breathe non-contaminated air.

She's hungry, my wolf murmurs.

He sends images of presenting her with a fresh-caught rabbit. Then he seems to change his mind because it's replaced with a bear in an instant.

Like we'd ever take down a bear without cause. A *bear*? That would feed most of my pack. And she just said she didn't like meat.

Now you're being obtuse.

I huff and continue toward the lodge. Inside, a few of my wolves are clearing the last remnants of breakfast and setting up for lunch. Some wolves choose to cook for themselves, but I liked the community-building aspect of eating together. This building went under construction from a meeting place to what it is today shortly after I took over from my father. I added the kitchen, removed rows of hard benches and a pretentious podium, replacing it with tables and chairs.

A place for us to be together in human form.

Plus, I know some of my wolves are shit at cooking, though they'd never admit it.

The wolves in the main room call out greetings as I pass, and I nod to them. I duck through the swinging doors into the kitchen. Down one long row of stainless-steel equipment and counters stands Marjorie.

She's ancient, and she only shifts when need dictates. Her hair is white, and her skin holds a thousand wrinkles. Her dark brown wolf's face is almost completely white now, too, when she joins us on the full moon. She's closing in on 110 years old, but she's the best damn cook in the state. There's no way she'd sit at home and simply exist.

Most of us do better with jobs. Erin and Matteo taught me that purpose, even for the smallest, weakest wolves, helps confidence and mental health.

Marjorie has a notepad in one hand, a pencil in the other, and a younger wolf running around calling out inventory. Both pause when I stop before her.

"Go on, child," she says to the boy. "Have some time in the sun."

His gaze flicks to me, and I nod. He scurries out without a backward glance.

“Alpha.” She straightens as much as her bones allow. “How can I help you?”

“Do you have anything already made that doesn’t have much meat?” I grimace. “A certain witch has decided now is a good time to have particular taste.”

The elder chuckles. “Some witch covens are strictly vegetarian or pescetarian. It’s not odd to consider that this one would carry on one of those traditions.”

I frown. “Even if she’s covenless?”

“Well, all the more curious.”

She shuffles back toward the walk-in fridge, and I follow at her pace. I hold open the door for her, pushing through the plastic flaps.

“Why is that curious?” I ask.

“Covenless witches aren’t protected.” She glances over and elaborates, “Covens can join their powers together when there’s need. For big spells or wards, for example. If this witch is on her own, then she’s truly alone.”

“She visited a coven, but they made her leave.”

Witches within covens aren’t protected either. Not when we tear them apart.

She pokes my chest. “Have you asked her?”

“No. I didn’t think that was important.”

Something crackles in me. A static that just seems to get louder. My would-be mate is covenless, *unprotected*, as Marjorie says. My wolf wants to know. I feel his interest in my chest.

“If she’s going to help you, then I think all of her is important. Don’t you?”

I sigh. “It would be easier to use her and be done with it.”

Her amusement is clear, even if she doesn’t outwardly laugh at me. I take the plastic container from her and follow her back into the kitchen. She motions for me to remove the lid, and I dump it into her waiting pan.

She adds rice and a different sauce, tossing the vegetables in it, then plates it for me.

“Thank you, Marjorie.” I cover her hand.

“Good luck, Alpha,” she calls.

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CHAPTER 13

KIAN

Astra emerges from the cabin with her bag slung over her shoulder. I narrow my eyes. “Where did you find that?”

“It was empty and stashed under your bed.” She makes a face. “You expect me to just hold all my clothes in my lap? Don’t worry—I noticed you did something else with my wallet.”

I pull her slim leather wallet from my pocket. *That*, I was planning on returning. Not her phone, though. I don’t need her calling in reinforcements and screwing me over. Her wallet unfortunately had nothing of interest inside.

Her driver’s license had a boring black and white photo from a few years ago, which we analyzed for far too long, the credit cards were of no use to me. I’m not in need of her money.

What *was* interesting was the faintest hint of lavender caught in the leather. From her mother, I imagine.

Astra comes down the steps and stops beside me. She seems more comfortable in her own clothes—the boots, jeans. Different from earlier: she’s wearing an oversized hoodie that definitely doesn’t belong to her.

She took that from my closet.

It’s a *Colorado Springs* olive-green sweatshirt Erin brought back for me on one of her many trips. While my pack sticks to the outskirts of major cities—or avoids them altogether—she has traveled to quite a few of them. It fits me perfectly, but it swamps Astra.

And fuck if it doesn’t look perfect anyway.

I never want it back.

“It’s getting colder,” she murmurs, her cheeks getting pink again.

“I didn’t say anything.”

“Well, you thought it.”

I shrug. I did think it. I shouldn’t have, but I’ll think it louder if it brings her blush back.

This feels forbidden. The weight of my pack rests in the back of my mind, along with Jessamine’s countdown. Dealing with Gage was a drop in the bucket of shit on our to-do list.

I take her bag from her and offer the plate and fork from Marjorie. She takes the items, her eyes narrowed, and goes to the porch steps. Without a word, she sets the plate on her knees and takes a bite.

Her eyes close.

Satisfaction rolls through me. I can’t move. I just watch her devour it in minutes. She wipes her mouth on the back of her hand when it’s gone.

“Someone will return the plate to the lodge,” I say.

She sets it down and rises, folding her arms over her chest. I can feel her silent question: *Now what?*

“Ready?”

Being in an enclosed space with the witch for hours will be a test of my patience. I’d ask myself if I’m ready, but I know the answer.

“When I don’t know where we’re going or have any control over my future? Sure, I’m ready.” She heads for the passenger side of the truck.

I roll my eyes. “You should get used to not being in control. You seemed to like it just fine last night.”

“Last night was your fault, not mine.”

Oh, interesting. Her blush—and her arousal—suddenly are all I can focus on. I inhale slightly, then shake my head. I need to get that out of my brain and my nose. Last night shouldn’t have happened, but it did. No use trying to make both of us feel like shit by regretting it.

Still.

“You were the one grinding on my cock,” I reply.

She yanks pointedly on the door handle. It doesn’t budge. Her breathing comes faster. Is it because she’s never talked about sex before? Or done what we did? She tries again, but it’s futile.

I allow my lips to curve into a smirk. “Not that one.”

Astra pauses. “What do you mean, *not that one*? There’s no other one.”

I pull the cover off my motorcycle with a flourish. “This one.”

She glowers at me. “No.”

“I didn’t ask.”

Truth be told, I was going to take the truck. Trapping her arousal between us in the cab seems like a very bad idea, and the bike clearly scares her. I want her off-balance. Once she gets her footing, she’ll find a way to try and escape. She won’t succeed, not with the mate bond dragging me toward her. It flares in my chest, aching more as soon as I pay the slightest bit of attention to it.

“I’m still saying no.”

I fit her bag into the compartment under the seat. It slides in nicely alongside mine. It helps that we both packed light. This bike is built for speed, not leisure. Or comfort.

It suits us. We’re not built for leisure or comfort either. There’s no going slow or coddling each other. Whatever we have is fast and reckless. That’s all there can be.

Still, I won’t lie and say I don’t have other motives for picking the bike. At the top of the list is that this gives me an excuse to touch her. That will temporarily satiate my wolf’s growing need to get close to her, to abate the aching behind my ribs.

My wolf bit her and started a process I can’t undo. We need to finish it one way or another.

I never thought I’d find a mate. I never looked, although my father tried shoving she-wolves in front of me constantly to see if one would trigger it. After he died, I stopped caring. Controlling a pack of this size is a full-time job. I have hundreds of wolves—much more than the core families that have settled here—under my leadership. They’re all in my head, consciences I can call up to communicate with when I need it. But they’re *there*, as heavy as guilt. Demanding that I do right by them.

Hunting witches and demons has been one of my pack’s main purposes, outside of making good, full lives for ourselves. My father raised me to be ruthless, and that’s exactly what I’ve been. Cutting down covens, searching out Seers who can tell me how to break the curse, even *questioning* a blood witch or two. But none had the power or the knowledge that I need.

“Where are we going?” She’s trying to change the subject, nervously fiddling with her sleeves.

“Have you ridden a bike before?”

She scoffs. “Of course I have.”

She's lying. She eyes it like *it's* going to bite her—and of all the things in front of her, she really only has to worry about my wolf.

I grin. "With a motor?"

Pause. *Glower*. "No."

"You'll like it. It's like a broom—don't you witches get off on riding wood like that?"

Her mouth pops open. "Fuck off," she sputters.

There's her spirit.

I somehow suppress my laugh and straddle my motorcycle. I pat the seat behind me. "Climb on, nightmare."

"Don't call me that."

I narrow my eyes at her. What the hell does the word *nightmare* draw up in her head? To cause such a reaction, it must be big. My wolf grumbles in the back of my mind. He's tired from our exertion this morning, but he wants to know why, too.

Instinct says she'd just shut down if I pried, so I shake loose that curiosity.

"Get on the bike, Astra."

She contemplates it, then approaches. She swings her leg over, and I point to where she should put her feet. Her knees come up on either side of my thighs. She tenses when I start it up, the engine turning over with a loud purr.

Music to my ears.

I glance over my shoulder. "Hang on."

"To what?"

I rev it, then put us into gear. We shoot forward, and she grabs the back of my shirt. Her legs squeeze mine. It's the only thing that keeps her from going flying, and I automatically slow.

I reach back and take one of her hands, moving it around my waist. She adjusts her other one without my help. Her palms press into my abdomen. For a second, I remember how her skin burned when I tried to touch her in the lodge. But then I shake it off. I can heal fast—all wolves can. My sister is fine. Annoyed, sure, but fine. That's probably why she did nothing to stop Astra from burning all my containers to shit.

Younger sisters are so good at payback.

Astra hugs me tighter when the road narrows. This long part of the drive is winding and descends out of the mountains for a long while. I push the

bike faster, leaning forward. My movement drags her with me. She protests, trying to fight it, and I tap her hand.

“You have to lean with me,” I call. “And don’t fight the turns.”

She groans. I feel it more than hear it, because her chest is smashed against mine.

“This is sadistic,” she replies.

After a moment, I feel her weight settle on my back. Heat flushes through me, and I ignore the way my cock jumps to attention. Her heartbeat fills my ears.

She stays like that for over an hour, completely still. My mind wanders, but it never goes far from the mate bond that’s singing between us. Can she feel it? The way this is so right and wrong at the same time is a painful realization.

It shouldn’t feel right at all.

I shouldn’t want the witch to touch me, or to touch her in return. But my control doesn’t work like this, as shown by our moment against the door last night. Loathing and peace take up equal space in my chest.

Her death grip on me eases as soon as we cross from gravel to pavement.

“Thank God,” she murmurs, barely audible over the roar of the engine.

I reach down and pat her leg without thinking. To comfort? She doesn’t need that from me. Well—she might need it, but I shouldn’t want to give it.

She picks her head up off my back and finally looks around. We’re still a good way outside of the closest city, but there are signs of life. A stop sign, a driveway vanishing into the trees. Around the corner is a gas station, and I need to put some distance between us before I combust.

This place is used to us coming in every so often. It’s the closest place to fill up our bikes and equipment. Every other month, I come down in the truck and refill our gas cans. The owner doesn’t particularly like me, but he also doesn’t object either.

I coast into the lot and park next to a pump.

Astra is a bit slow to climb off. Her legs are unsteady. I cup her elbow to stabilize her and get a scolding look in reply. She yanks out of my hold as soon as she gets her balance back.

“Can you show me how to get my bag? My wallet.”

I raise my eyebrow. “What do you need money for?”

She pauses. “I’m thirsty.”

“You don’t need money.” It’s a selfish instinct to provide for her that makes me say it. I instantly hate it, but it’s too late now. “I’ll get it.”

“I don’t want to owe you anything.”

She doesn’t, does she? That eases the self-guilt building in my chest. I’m not doing this for her—I’m doing it to spite her.

“Well, too fucking bad.” I head into the store.

She huffs behind me, then follows. Grudgingly. I swear, her footsteps are more like stomps.

The guy behind the register is the owner. His brows rise when he spots me. “Didn’t think I’d see you for another few weeks yet, Kian.”

I lift one shoulder. “You know my plans are always changing.”

Astra pushes in behind me, her hair swinging in front of her face and barely concealing her Mark. She isn’t using one of those stones she snuck back. Or, okay, took back after I got a little distracted. That could be the real reason she wanted to get into her bag.

When I first saw her in the bar, she was concealing her Mark, but she didn’t smell like magic.

I snap my fingers. I knew I had to be careful around her.

She avoids the man and darts down the closest aisle, heading for the cooler in the back. I follow her, snagging a chocolate bar. My secret weakness. I keep track of the top of Astra’s head as she moves from waters to sodas, then farther down.

While she looks for something, I head to the front.

I toss the candy on the counter, then lean against it to watch for the witch. And to make sure no one else comes in and fucks with us.

“Do you pay any mind to those news reports?” the store owner asks.

I raise an eyebrow. “Not a big fan of the news these days.”

He nods his agreement. “Same. This time, they’re saying a bad virus is going around.”

“What sort of virus?”

“The hospitalized ones? Blood coming from their eyes, thick as sludge. Brain bleeds, I guess. No other warning. It’s been traveling through the small communities in Utah.”

My gaze lifts just as Astra appears from the deepest aisle. She has an armful of things.

I bite back my frown at the sheer amount of shit she holds. Soda, water. Those pre-packaged sandwiches. Bags of different flavors of chips.

“What?” she snaps at me. “I suppose you’d rather eat raw steaks than a tuna sandwich?”

She got *me* food?

“Forget it.” She tosses the stuff on the counter and snags two sandwiches, ready to put them back.

I haul her back by her arm. “I like tuna just fine.”

“I—” The owner gapes at her. “Your face. What—”

She ignores him and glares down at my arm. “Let go of me, Kian.”

I like the way she says my name. Especially angry.

“Or what?” I goad.

“Or...”

“Kian—?” the owner blubbers.

“I’m going to wait outside. You sure know how to be an asshole.” She shakes me loose.

I glance at the guy, who seems just as surprised as me. The bell over the door *dings* with her fast exit.

The owner gets over his shock faster than me. “Women. Can’t live with em, can’t live without em. That’s what my brother always says, anyway. Is her face okay?”

“What?” I find her out the window. She’s gone past my bike, standing on the edge of the road. With her fucking thumb out, like someone is going to pick up her hitchhiking ass. “Yeah, she’s fine. It’s a temporary tattoo.”

I’m totally fucking distracted. I toss him cash and take the bag from him. She’s hot and cold. I can’t figure out her mind games either. Did she wear my sweatshirt just to piss me off? Does she know she’s damn sexy in it?

My throat closes. I’m not attracted to a witch. I don’t enjoy the way her eyes dip down to my dick when I’m naked in front of her. Nudity in any wolf pack is common. Most of our children don’t wear clothes until they start school. But she doesn’t see *me* that way. Like it’s normal.

To her, it’s anything but.

I’ve smelled the lust on her skin and the arousal between her legs.

A truck rumbles to a stop beside Astra. The window rolls down.

Oh, absolutely fucking *not*.

“Hey, little lady,” the guy in the cab says. “Where you heading?”

“Anywhere away from here.” She’s got her hand on her hip, jutting out like she’s posing for him.

I narrow my eyes and lengthen my stride. She's going to get someone killed if she's not careful.

His gaze lifts to me, and understanding flickers in his eyes.

The lock on the passenger door pops up, and Astra jerks the door open without hesitation.

She's leaving me. Just like that?

I drop the bag and charge into the road in front of the truck. He barely hits the brakes in time, not that it would matter. I'd survive—he wouldn't. They both stare at me through the windshield. He's surprised. She's mad.

He hits the horn. I slam my hands on the hood hard enough to dent it. She'll learn I'm not fucking around, and I won't be made a fool of in front of a stupid human.

"Get out of the fucking car," I order her.

She shakes her head.

Obstinate.

I bare my teeth at her, but it does nothing. She thinks she's safe.

"Look, man, I'm just trying to help her out—"

I round the car and yank his door. The whole thing comes off, ripping free from the body with a shriek of metal. I drop it and grab him next, pulling him onto the asphalt.

"What the fuck?" He clings to my wrists. "You lunatic—"

I drag him to the opposite side, across a ditch and into the forest. My blood is rushing through me, my wolf as angry as me. But for a different reason. He thinks she was going to leave him. He's upset. I'm furious for almost losing the witch. To a stupid fucking human offering her a ride.

I'd find her again, but that's not the point. Humans can't be trusted. He could've done anything he wanted to her. He could've driven down a quiet road and robbed her, raped her, or killed her—

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Jesus. She *asked*—"

"Kian, stop."

I ignore Astra, too. My skin is hot. I want to rip the guy's throat out and coat her in his blood. I'll tear him limb from limb for thinking he could take her away from me. Fuck everything, all I can focus on is the white-hot roaring anger flooding my system.

A vine catches my ankle.

More wind around my other foot, climbing rapidly up my legs.

"Astra," I growl.

I crane around and find her at the edge of the trees, kneeling with her fingers pressed into the soil.

“I said *stop*,” she says, her voice echoing. Distorted by magic. “Let him go.”

I glare down at the trembling, pathetic human. The sour stench of urine fills the air, and his pants darken at his crotch.

Gross.

I yank him up, so his face is inches from mine. He’s not tall enough. His feet dangle inches above the ground.

His fear is visceral.

I’d love nothing more than to fulfill whatever he’s thinking will happen, to rip him to shreds and leave him for the crows. But not with the greenery working its way up my torso. The vines slide under my shirt, creeping and hugging my skin. It tickles more than it hurts.

Can Astra feel me through them? Does she know they’re working their way across my abs, twisting and slipping up across my ribcage? In a moment, I’ll be rendered immobile. If I’m not already.

I settle for a threat to dispense with the man in front of me.

“You so much as glance at her on your way back to your truck, and I’ll kill you.”

“O-okay,” he stammers.

I release him, and he falls on his ass. He scrambles backward. When he’s far enough away, he jumps to his feet and rushes back to his truck.

Sure enough, he gives her a wide berth, his head bent down.

That helps. But *what* it helps, I can’t say. Just a little ease of the pressure inside me, letting off enough steam to hold back my temper from exploding.

The vines wrap around my wrists, pulling them behind my back. My wolf surges forward in my head, slipping into the driver’s seat. The fucking masochist.

“You like to be the dominant one, little nightmare?” my wolf asks her. His voice is grittier than mine. Less practiced. His vowels are rougher. He seems content to hold us in human form. For now.

She shivers. Her hair is drifting around her face, and her pupils are dilated. Her fingers are still in the earth, kneeling across the clearing from me. The scent of magic sings the air, but it’s sweet, too. Her magic and her smell are intertwined, and we inhale as one. Her, me, the wolf.

“I don’t just roll over for anyone,” my wolf says. “You’ve got to earn it.”

She rises and brushes her hands off. She comes closer, drawn as if by a tether she’s unable to fight. “Wouldn’t you know it? That’s exactly how I feel.”

I laugh. My wolf laughs, rather. Her words move him. He wants to bite her again. To bring out *her* wolf. He wants to chase her through the forest and pin her to the ground—

“Go back to the bike,” I manage. He’s sending me flashing images of *exactly* what he wants, and how he wants it. His energy is spiking, and it’s getting harder to wrestle my muscles under my willpower.

“Why?”

“Because my wolf wants to devour you.” A snarl echoes through my chest. *My wolf*, not me. For giving away his game. Although the fear in her eyes does something to both of us. “I don’t think you’re ready for that.”

Finally, I smell her fear. I battle my wolf’s desire to shift and rip through the vines that hold us, even as they stop moving. She turns and rushes away, and I hold myself still until she disappears completely.

CHAPTER 14

ASTRA

I stole a phone.

The gas station guy didn't seem to notice me slip it from under the front counter—he was too busy gawking at my Mark. It came with minutes. I haven't had to load minutes onto a disposable phone in *years*.

At the diner I found, the waitress had a spot with an outlet.

It turned on just fine straight out of the package, but better safe than sorry.

And as I watch, it starts vibrating with an incoming call. Something about it seems urgent. I'm not sure why I think that. I don't answer it.

The screen goes dark, the call going to a voicemail I haven't set up. A second later, the same number calls again.

Who would even have this number?

Okay, universe. I'm listening.

I hit the green button and bring it to my ear. "Hello?"

"Astra?" The voice is familiar. Warm like cinnamon.

Funny enough, I just had a dream about her.

"Cecelia?"

"I'm outside, honey."

I look out the window. A new car turns in the lot. Its headlights are on, the red-haired witch behind the wheel visible through the windshield.

Kian's been gone for too long. I practically ran into town on the heels of his warning, convinced that he was going to chase me down.

I resisted the urge to try and hitchhike again. Like a good little captive, I've been sitting here. Waiting. And when I confessed to the waitress that I

could only afford iced water, she tutted and brought me a mug of coffee. I almost cried.

And I did cry when I realized I only wanted one person to call me. The one person who can't.

My skin prickles, like I'm being watched by more than the witch outside, but I ignore it. I thank the waitress again on my way out, turning my pockets inside out for any change and finding it painfully empty, then hurry to Cecelia's car.

I open the passenger door and duck down, meeting her warm gaze. She nods, as if to encourage me to get in.

It's been eleven years since I last saw her. Her hair is still the same vibrant red, but there are new wrinkles around her eyes. She gained a little weight. Her sense in fashion still seems to be the same, with a long wool skirt and not-quite-matching cardigan. I'm not sure how she isn't sweating to death in all that fabric.

She reverses out of her parking spot and pulls onto the road. She checks both ways, then takes a left. We ride in silence until the signs for an interstate come up. Her car rattles a bit when she steps on the gas and gains speed.

Her hand hovers over the music, which has been playing classical piano, and switches it to a country station. The difference is jarring—and worse when she increases the volume.

"He's following." She glances at me. "He's about to turn back and go for his bike, though. That should buy us some time."

I crane around, as if I might be able to spot him through the woods that flash by on either side. I didn't realize he was so close to the diner. I grip the handle on the door and try to keep breathing.

Another five minutes pass, then Cecelia blows out a breath. "Gone."

"How do you know?"

She hits the button to silence the music. "We've got another passenger."

I raise my eyebrows. She seemed to always keep spirits close... or maybe they're drawn to her because she can communicate with them.

The car's speed still climbs, and we reach another highway. She takes the exit with a quick jerk of the wheel, the car bumping and vibrating on its new path. It protests the speed, the direction. This rust bucket may fall apart before we reach our destination.

But all I can think about is that she's getting me away from Kian. I slowly relax into the seat.

"How are you, Astra?"

"I'm fine."

"Kidnapped by the alpha of the Silver Ridge Pack shouldn't constitute as *fine*, my dear." She eyes me. "Did they hurt you?"

"No." Not him, specifically. Now doesn't seem like a good time to mention the gouges on my back.

"Was he after your mother?"

From *they* to *he*. I focus on the scenery out the window. This highway is quieter, only two lanes instead of four. We're heading southwest toward Utah. This way through northern Colorado tends to be a bit rough, with lots of curves through the mountains, but Cecelia doesn't seem bothered. She drives with one hand on the steering wheel and her other resting on the gear stick.

"Astra?" she prods.

"He wanted a Seer, but now he needs a blood witch." Even saying it sends a spike of anxiety through me. I manage to quell another shiver, but goosebumps erupt down my spine and the backs of my arms.

Cecelia sighs. "Your mother called me two months ago. She gave me your phone number, then a time and place to be. That place was the diner. The time was..." She checks her watch. "Twenty minutes ago."

My jaw drops. "She gave you the number you called me on? And told you where to get me?"

She *saw* the phone number of the cell phone I decided to grab on a whim. She knew the exact moment I'd be able to get away from Kian. I cover my face. She couldn't have told me about any of this? Let me in on the plan?

No, of course not. She never did.

"She didn't say much about it—just that it would be important. And then she lightly suggested I keep my great-aunt Dolores near." She snorts. "Auntie was taken by the Silver Ridge Pack when she was a teenager. She apparently spent some time with them before they killed her, and they didn't keep her in the most favorable conditions. She followed Kian and let me know when it was safe to get on the correct highway."

What the fuck?

First—if my mother knew I'd be this far from home, there may have been more that she saw. Like the demon attack on our home, or Kian coming for me. How far did her predictions go?

"It wasn't just the wolves who came for us," I say in as even a tone as I can manage. "The demons got there first, and they're the ones who took my mother."

I lived in a city for a while. It was my chance of being normal, right? My mother encouraged it. And when I decided that it was too much, and I wanted to come home, she met me on the road. The same as we did for all the rest. It reminded me of every time she woke me up early to meet the visiting witches.

She welcomed me with open arms. My room was ready for me. And a week later, everything changed.

Cecelia frowns. "Rumors have been circulating about demons abducting witches. I scarcely wanted to believe it."

Something in her tone makes me think she *does* believe it—and she may have already known about my mother being taken to the shadow realm. Mother could've informed her of that vision, too.

"Where are you taking me?" I finally ask.

"My coven." A smile lights up her face. "They're wonderful, and our leader has already agreed to offer you safe haven."

When I met Cecelia as a thirteen-year-old, she was a wanderer. It isn't uncommon for witches to feel the need to travel. It's the pull of the earth and their magic that tends to guide them where they need to go.

I'm glad she found a coven. And now she's paying back my mother's hospitality tenfold, giving me shelter when I need it most.

My heart squeezes.

"Thank you," I whisper.

I had a coven, once. I'm not sure if I was in it as exactly as an adult witch. It belonged to my mother, and my mother belonged to it.

I wasn't awakened at the time. I didn't know if I would even have magic. I only remember flashes of that period of life. Mother's best friend was the coven leader. They were thick as thieves until the end.

I close my eyes and fight off the horrific flashbacks. It's been a while since those have made an appearance.

"Maybe you shouldn't take me to them." My voice is small. "The Winter Wolf is after me, and if you bring me to them, you'll just be in

danger.”

“I understand your fear.” She reaches over and pats my shoulder. Her hand slips down my back.

I gasp, arching away from her touch.

“What’s wrong?” Her foot comes off the pedal, and the car heaves as it slows. “What was that?”

“Just a little injury,” I manage, holding my breath until the wave of pain passes. “It’s fine.”

“You said they didn’t hurt you,” she says carefully.

“Well, they didn’t. It was a wolf from a different pack.” I add a lie, “It only hurts when I hit it.”

“We’ll heal you when we get there. Those savage wolves.” The last bit is said as a curse.

I lean back against the seat carefully, maneuvering so the worst of the injuries aren’t pressing into the leather. A safe, warm feeling envelops me. I can sense the magic radiating out of Cecelia like a calming blanket descending over me. It should alarm me, but I don’t have the energy.

Before I know it, a hand on my arm is shaking me awake.

I sit up and rub my eyes, then take in the new view.

We’re in a valley with sharp, treeless red rock mountains rising around us. Cecelia’s car is parked in the driveway of a large two-story home. The dirt and stones leading up to the front door are an orange-brown color, and sagebrush lines the gravel walkway.

Utah.

“Ready?”

I nod and climb out of the car. I follow Cecelia to the door, which she opens without knocking.

“Is this your place?” I ask.

“I live here,” she answers.

A non-answer, really, but it isn’t unheard of for coven witches to reside together. She leads me through a huge, open front room to the back of the house. We find another woman in the kitchen, fixing herself a steaming drink in a mug.

“Welcome back,” she says to Cecelia.

Her gaze turns to me. She’s got kind eyes, but other than that... I can’t lock down her appearance. As soon as I absorb a detail about her, it slips away.

“Astra Dreamstone?” the woman asks.

My heart skips. There’s the Dreamstone name again.

“Maeve,” Cecelia whispers. It’s not admonishing. Or anything, really. Just a barely audible warning.

The witch waves her off, her smile curling wider. “It’s a pleasure. I’d recognize you anywhere. You look just like your mother.”

I smile tightly. “Thank you, ma’am.”

“Maeve is our coven leader,” Cecelia says to me. “I’d like to take a look at your wounds before we get carried away, Astra. Do you mind?”

My stomach knots. I’d prefer not, but my mother trusted Cecelia.

I turn around, and Cecelia helps me pull the sweatshirt over my head from the back. The fabric sticks to the open wound, and I cover my mouth to suppress the urge to yell. I keep Kian’s sweatshirt pressed to my front.

After I retrieved my bag from Kian’s closet, I stole the sweatshirt and a few strips of gauze and tape. The wounds didn’t stop oozing, and the shirt I wore earlier was all but ruined by bloody stains. What was I thinking, taking his sweatshirt?

It may have given him the wrong idea. I saw how he looked at me when he realized. The last thing I should do is goad the wolf shifter. I press my face into the fabric and inhale. His scent is right there. It’s a weird little comfort in a sea of chaos, my body roiling in turbulence.

Cecelia works off the bandages, then gasps. She spins me back around, her hands on my shoulders. I’ve never seen her eyes so wide, her pupils dilating. Her magic sweeps out of her, knocking into me.

The amulet around my neck suddenly goes hot.

“What have you done?” She shakes me slightly.

I gape at her. “What are you talking about?”

Maeve comes up beside me and touches my back.

I let out a hiss of pain and dig my fingers into Kian’s sweatshirt. It’s the only thing keeping me from rushing away.

“Demon blood.” She holds up her finger and shows me a smudge of black, like ink, on the pad.

I crane my neck to see the wounds for myself. No matter how I twist, the movement makes my muscles scream. This morning, they were... well, maybe not *fine*, but they seemed okay. Red around the edges, the blood oozing out. I assumed infection, but there would be time to deal with it. Kian’s been healing them bit by bit.

Maeve steers me toward a mirror, and I gag.

The jagged rips through my skin are as black as my Mark. They're leaking black blood that rolls down my spine. I swipe at it, bringing my wet fingers around to examine it.

"This isn't possible. It was fine earlier. Showing early sign of infection, but it wasn't *black*." I meet Cecelia's gaze. "How could this have happened?"

"Tell us every encounter with magic since the new moon," Maeve orders.

I bite my lip.

"There's evidence that a demon tried to possess you," Cecelia says carefully, perhaps reading my distrust as indecision. "But I know your mother taught you how to defend yourself against that. She wouldn't have let you become..."

I search inside myself for any foul, *dark* magic. There's my own well of power, and something under my ribs. I remember drawing on that, trying to heal myself with it on the mountain. I tell them about the odd thread-like feeling—leaving out that I transported, mainly because I still don't know how my mother managed it—and then describe waking up in Kian's house. How I burned Jessamine's face when she attacked me, and the amulet, and scrying for my mother...

"Wait." Cecelia raises her hand. "What did you see when you scried for her?"

"I don't know. Shadows and stuff."

Her expression turns furious. "You looked into the shadow realm."

Judging from her tone, that's not a great thing.

At the time, though, I didn't know where she was. "I—"

"You allowed through the demon who attacked you. You pulled a demon through into our realm without even a witch's circle to contain it—"

"Kian killed it," I interject.

"You trust the *wolf*," Maeve spits. "And how many more demons slipped through while you were incapacitated?"

"I didn't know," I offer in a small voice. I hadn't thought of it. I wasn't unconscious. I remember every excruciating detail of the encounter, as much as I'd love to forget.

Maeve sighs. "The damage has been done. We need to call the coven to expel the rest of the demon blood from her."

Cecelia guides me upstairs, into an empty bedroom. She motions for me to sit on the bed and hands me a white t-shirt. I slip it on, setting aside Kian's sweatshirt.

"I have to ask you another question, Astra." Her gaze sharpens. "And I want you to know, I ask you this as your mother's close friend. I want to protect you."

"Okay..."

"Has he said anything about mating?"

I rear back. "*What?*"

"Wolf shifters are not to be trusted. You know what they can do—"

"I know what they do." I stand, trembling with anger. "I know exactly the sort of power they have. You're out of line asking that question of me, Cecelia. Friend of my mother or not. If you think I'd mate with a murderer—"

Her gaze shutters. "Fine."

"I'm safe now, aren't I?"

She hesitates, standing just out of reach.

I know I'm not. I know he'll never stop looking for me now that he's gotten a taste. Wolf shifters aren't built to let things go—and as he's an alpha, I'd bet Kian is even worse. But *mating*? She can't be serious. She isn't. She's just thinking the worst.

I go to her, taking her hands. I still remember the warmth of her voice as she communicated with the spirits. She showed me so many magical, elusive things that week. While I don't have that power innately, she gave me a path to talk to the dead if I needed it. She taught me like I was grown, even though I was anything but.

That friendship, the *kinship*, isn't so easily forgotten.

"Please help me," I plead. "I just need to find a way to save my mother."

Her eyes fill with tears. "Of course I will, dear girl. We're going to save both of you."

CHAPTER 15

ASTRA

It doesn't take long for the coven to arrive. Downstairs, they greet each other as family. Their chatter is loud and friendly until Maeve tells them why they've been summoned—then the noise drops. I feel their collective magic prick the air. It's like they're probing at mine, and I tighten my mental defenses.

I hold my magic close, shivering in just the thin t-shirt and pants. Sweat dots my brow, and pain radiates out from my back the longer I sit still. I keep my hands in my lap and my gaze on the window that points out toward the mountain range in the near distance. It takes concentration to not fidget, but I think I'd make my mother proud.

Finally, when the sun has moved behind the ridgeline, and the sky is painted in streaks of orange and pink, Cecelia comes to retrieve me.

She brings me downstairs in silence, her features tense. There are over a dozen women here. The formal dining room is covered in candles. Their flames flicker ominously around the room. On side tables and a hutch. Many of the witches hold a candle, as well.

Cecelia motions for me to remove my shirt and climb onto the empty table.

"Lie on your stomach," she says to me. "And remove the amethyst, please. It won't let us fully help you."

I suffocate my embarrassment and do as she instructs. Nudity is part of coven life the same way it's ingrained in shifters. My mother and I didn't have such a relationship, and I loathe to let them see my naked skin.

Still. I slip the necklace off and put it with the shirt. I lie facedown on the cold wooden table, tensing all over as my breasts and stomach touch the

polished surface.

Candles are placed around me. Hands shift my hair off my back, twisting it and resting it over my shoulder.

My nerves will eat me alive.

I take slow, deep breaths. It's an attempt to rein in the panic, but it's not working.

One voice strikes up. Maeve, I think. She's right above me, at the head of the table. Her features still distort, ever-changing with the concealment charm. Cecelia stands beside her, in my direct line of sight. Her brows are pinched, but she smiles when my gaze meets hers.

Hands grasp my wrists and ankles.

Something drips over my skin. It's hot, but not unbearable. It rolls off my back and drips onto the table. They pour the liquid higher, up my spine. Foreboding follows a heartbeat later, sharper than a knife slipped between my ribs.

"First, we rip the bond away," Maeve orders.

My brows furrow.

Bond to the demon? It didn't possess me.

They chant as one, the words foreign. I don't know why I can't understand it. Their faces slip away as I stare, but the grips on my arms and legs strengthen. I feel the pull under my ribcage. It's stretched like a rubber band, reacting to their words. It hurts.

Rip the bond away.

It occurs to me that when I asked Cecelia about my safety, her hesitation could've had nothing to do with Kian... and everything to do with this covenant.

"Wait. Stop." I struggle against the hands. "I don't want that."

My own magic rises inside me, swift and sure. It burns through their cloying magic, and I take my first deep breath since I walked inside this cursed house. I hadn't even noticed the pressure, the fatigue in my limbs, until it lifts.

Someone screams.

Maybe it's me.

The tether in my chest is burning. I can see it in my mind getting weaker, a rope fraying along a knife's edge. Instinct drives me to wrap my magic around it. They feel like two separate pieces inside me, but they

collide when I tangle them together. My magic is hotter than theirs, like wildfire compared to a single candle.

The screams get louder. My throat burns. My fingers dig into the edge of the table.

There's a *crack*, a whip through the air, and that burning feeling explodes out of me. It doesn't hurt—suddenly all the pain stops, and everything goes silent.

No more chanting, no more hot liquid, no more searing pain in my soul. It all just stops.

My ears strain, but there's nothing. Not even the ticking hand of a clock signaling time moving forward. I can't lift my head.

Darkness pushes at the edges of my consciousness. I expended too much energy, but I need to be able to defend myself. My heart beats a frantic rhythm, and I fight to stay awake. I press my forehead to the wood and register the *tap-tap-tap* of blood hitting the floor. My nails ache, broken from gripping the edges of the table.

I'm not safe.

Not until a low growl fills the room.

Relief washes through me. As strange as it is, I recognize the sound. And then I let go.

CHAPTER 16

KIAN

Astra escaped. I feared as much, but I didn't expect her to have help. Another witch.

I hunted the witch's car until she got moving faster than even I could sustain, and I had to turn back for my bike. I cursed myself out the entire way back. Then, shifted back into my human form, I raced out of town on my bike, chasing her wake.

I made a mistake and continued north—exactly the route the witch wanted me to take, I think, until I realized there was no sign of them. I retraced my steps while my anger stoked hotter and hotter.

Following Astra was hard to explain. Harder to reason. The tug in my chest guided my efforts, making sure I took the right turns. All I had to do was trust my instinct.

Instinct is a fickle thing. Over the years, I've had to rely on it and ignore it in equal measure—but undoubtedly, things always go better when I give in and listen to it. Like finding Astra in the first place, my gaze drawn to her like a magnet. Fighting demons and witch covens alike. Trying to find the Seer.

Ah, well, there was too much planning with the Seer. She probably saw us coming from miles away. But did she see the demons?

My wolf won't stop whining. He thinks we pushed her away on purpose, that it's my fault the witch got to her. And while that may be true, I also know that he would've made things a lot worse if I gave in to *his* instinct. The one that tells him to bite her, to turn her.

Imagine that? A wolf-witch hybrid?

My pack would never forgive me. My betas might stay loyal, but I'd face more challenges than any other alpha. Being mated to Astra the only way I could, with her as a wolf, would result in both of our deaths.

That doesn't stop me from trying to find her.

I'm on the verge of losing hope, going on nothing but tracking the smell of fumes from the witch's car, when I feel it.

An intentional pull.

It's faint, but exactly how it felt after Astra vanished out from under my cousin. When she called to me on the edge of consciousness, and I followed the sensation directly to her. She was calling for help. She was calling for *me*.

I didn't tell her that. I hated it at the time. I hated that my wolf had tied us together, that he started the mate bond process, that I could feel Astra in my chest. She's closer than I hold my pack, even. And every instinct that I keep shunning wants more from her. More from the bond. But right now, I'm grateful for the small piece of it that I do have.

She seemed confused about how I found her, and I wasn't going to reveal it. She doesn't need to know the way of packs and mate bonds. Anything I tell her, she could use against us.

But then it comes again, and I give in to it. I leave my bike on the side of the road and shift outside of a town on the edge of a cluster of mountains. Besides the town, there's nothing around for miles on end.

If a witch was going to hide anywhere, it may as well be here.

My wolf form feels her bond even more strongly. He guides us down a series of streets, constantly trying to catch her scent, until we reach a quiet neighborhood. The houses are far apart, set for privacy, but no one is outside.

Searing pain burns through me, and I suddenly shift back. Viciously, like my wolf is ripped away from me. My knees hit the gravel a second before my palms, the bite of pain nothing compared to the agony that suddenly echoes in my chest.

The intensity is too great. It's wave after wave of assault on the mate bond, and I drag my gaze up to the house.

Maybe she was running *to* them—to destroy the bond. Maybe I didn't give her enough credit, and she did recognize it for what it is. And now she wants to burn it out of her?

That will destroy us both.

But then I hear her scream from within the house. It's guttural. Not of pain, but of fury.

We rise to meet it.

I can't control the shift again. My wolf just bursts out of me, my willpower a thing of the past. My bones snap, and we pant with the renewed ache of it.

Her scream gets louder, notes of pain sliding in amongst her anger.

The mate bond, our fragile start of it, is unraveling.

No, it's being torn out of her. I've heard stories of this happening, but not in a long, long time.

I lurch toward the house. There are too many cars parked out front—the whole fucking coven must be inside.

It's the worst pain I've felt.

We're burning on the inside. My wolf practically disappears in the back of my mind, but we don't shift back to my form. I can't do that again so soon because it would only exhaust us more.

I lunge for the front door and hit a fucking ward. It throws me backward without mercy, and I hit the ground on my side.

Fucking witches.

I pick myself up and grab on to the bond in my mind, trying to keep it from falling apart.

Suddenly, it flares. New magic coasts along it, flowing into me. *Her* magic. I'd recognize its feel, its scent. It wraps around the bond like a balm, easing the pain.

The ward explodes. As a human, it wouldn't be visible. Maybe just the crackle of energy being displaced. But as a wolf, I see the bare hint of blue hue shatter and dissipate on the wind.

Then, silence.

I leap forward again, hitting the door with my front paws. It creaks and gives, falling forward. I go with it and land in a wide foyer. It's this kind of opulence that makes my disgust double.

I listen, but the only sound in the house are faint heartbeats. A lot of them.

The bond pulses, still intact. Somehow. I follow it to the back of the house, to a room off the kitchen. I round the corner and stop dead at the sight before me.

My lips pull back, and a growl pours out of my throat.

She's facedown on the kitchen table, wearing only her jeans and boots. Her fingers twitch on the table, curled around the edges. There's black liquid seeping from the jagged claw marks in her back, and I snarl at the heavy copper scent of blood in the air. Her forehead is pressed to the table, the planes of her back tense and tight. I pick out her sluggish heartbeat.

All around her are a dozen witches, but they're all on the floor.

Unconscious. Their heartbeats are slow, but not nearly as bad as Astra's. The rise and fall of their chests are shallow.

I pick out Astra's heartbeat again. It should soothe our bond, but it only makes me angry. Her nails are bloody and torn, her blood dripping to the floor. Her body suddenly relaxes. Her hands, which held so tightly to the edges of the table, slip off.

She was holding it together to survive.

She would've survived, too, with or without me. If I wasn't here, I have no doubt that she would've pushed herself up from the table and limped out on her own two feet.

Rage like I've never known fills me. They would've killed her for the bond that ties her to me. They nearly succeeded.

I tear into one of the downed witches before I can stop myself. She doesn't wake, but there was never a chance for her. I rip through her jugular and her windpipe. The familiar burn of witch blood coats my tongue and jaw, my neck and chest. I shake her body, snapping her neck for good measure before jerking free and moving past her.

To the only one who matters.

My wolf nudges Astra's limp hand, licking at her fingers. Her blood is sweet, but there's no trace of magic.

She doesn't respond.

This is gonna hurt.

I shift back into my human form. My muscles scream at me, but I put my discomfort aside. I crouch in front of her, our faces are level. I brush her hair out of her face, examining her expression. She's breathing but unconscious. My skin prickles at the danger we could find ourselves in, alone and surrounded by a coven of witches. Even though they, too, are incapacitated.

Packs hunt covens. There's never been a good instance of a single wolf taking on a coven as long as I've been alive. Pack hunting keeps us safe,

keeps us alive. And with the death toll the curse exacts on us, we can't afford to lose any more than we do.

I scoop Astra up and carry her out of the room, my jaw set. No matter the danger here, they need to pay.

They hurt her.

Kill them all, my wolf says, reappearing in my mind with a vicious snarl.

The snarl pours out of me, too. Astra doesn't wake up when I set her down on the couch. The tips of her hair are stained pink and black, the blood from her back giving off a pungent smell that's entirely unlike her.

I roll her onto her side and examine the marks again, then press my palm to the wounds. I pour my healing magic into it, more than I've ever given her before. But her magic is curling inside me, too, humming in my blood. I've never felt such a thing, and I know it came from the blast she sent down our mate bond.

It's something mated pairs can do... if they have magic to share.

So I use that and continue to heal her.

More black, thick like tar, seeps out of the wounds. Her skin doesn't knit together for a long time. The black liquid continues to leave the wounds and soak into the couch cushions beneath her. Only when her blood runs red again does her skin start to repair itself.

For some reason, I can't make myself stop. Not this time. Not until it's almost fully healed, and the marks are the shiny pink of new skin.

Her magic has ebbed to barely a whisper inside me, but it's still sweet and light. And I find myself wanting to hold on to that tendril, to not waste the precious, if undeserved, gift.

I lean forward. My forehead touches her shoulder. But only for a moment. Then I cover her with a blanket and stand.

It's time for vengeance. But not for me. *For us.*

CHAPTER 17

ASTRA

I wake up swinging.

Someone catches my fists, folding my arms to my chest. My heart thunders, and I blink, dazed. It's dark in the room. I'm no longer on the kitchen table, and it's not a witch in front of me.

It's Kian.

My eyes fill with tears.

Kian, who I ran from. Who I left behind with Cecelia, who shouldn't have been able to find me. Who has a space dedicated to him under my ribs, who I can feel next to me as surely as I can feel my own heart beating.

Mate, my soul whispers.

The mate I nearly destroyed because I trusted a coven over him.

A lump forms in my throat.

His eyes hold all the pain that I went through, and I can just tell that it wasn't a one-sided event.

"You okay?" His voice is low.

I shake my head, and the welling tears spill down my cheeks.

Sorry doesn't seem like it will cover it.

He sighs and pulls me into him. I don't have the chance to brace. He wraps his arms around me tightly, banding one across my lower back. The other cups the back of my head.

Wait. I don't hurt.

He guides my head to his chest and strokes my hair. He's not wearing a shirt, so my cheek is on his bare skin. And somehow, that's better. Like something can heal inside me, too.

It's too tender. Devastatingly so.

“Did I call to you again?” I sniffle and wipe my nose.

“You did.”

“Sorry.”

He leans back slightly, his brow furrowing. “Why are you sorry?”

“I—”

“You just learned what my father taught me years ago: that you can’t trust anyone.”

“Even you?” I blink up at him. “What am I supposed to do about you?”

He looks away. Seems he doesn’t have an answer for the tether between us. The mate bond. They didn’t give it that name, but as soon as I think it, it rings true.

He had said his wolf was obsessed with me—is that what drives it? I search for it again, but I can’t wrap my magic around it, can’t seem to do anything *to* it. Not like before.

There one minute, dormant the next.

“Easy, witch,” Kian groans.

He shifts me, swinging my legs over his. And then I’m in his lap, still cradled to his chest. “You shouldn’t be able to feel it so much as to manipulate it. Not yet.”

“What does that mean?” I try to think back. “When you said your wolf was obsessed with me... I thought you meant he wanted to turn me.”

“No. Well, yes. It seems like fate wants us together. Forever.”

I swallow. “Okay, so how do we stop it?”

“Besides nearly killing both of us by trying to destroy it, just keep doing what you’re doing.”

“And what am I doing?” I ask in a low voice. I can’t quite touch what the coven was going to do—and I don’t know how to voice that it was them, not me, who decided to tear it out.

“Resisting my wolf’s brash attempts at seducing you.”

I laugh. I can’t help it. If his wolf thinks he’s been *seducing* me, he’s wrong. I don’t know how to make that clear to Kian’s other side, though. I’ve been terrified of the beast... and he wants to spend an eternity with me?

No way.

“Did you heal my back?” I ask instead.

“I did.”

“You didn’t worry it would deplete you?”

“Astra.” He shakes his head, his gaze going to the ceiling. “You gave me a shot of your own power—which tastes like heaven and crack at the same time, by the way. I still feel it in my blood. But I should’ve healed you fully before we left the pack.”

“And the demon blood?”

“Extracted. No thanks to the coven.”

Oh, shit. I lurch out of his hold. He stays where he is on the couch. This is the first time I’ve ever towered over him. He’s broad-shouldered, and he reaches out to grasp my hips. His thumbs edge under the sweatshirt that I definitely wasn’t wearing before, brushing my bare skin.

My cheeks heat.

I was shirtless when they did their...

“I have them out back,” he informs me, unaware of where my thoughts were heading.

“What?”

He rises and takes my hand, guiding me toward the back door. I’m still trying to figure out what that means when he opens the sliding glass door, admitting us into the large, unfenced backyard.

The dozen coven witches sit in a circle, bound and gagged. They notice him—*us*—immediately. Their eyes give away their fear, but none of them move otherwise. Why haven’t they run?

I step forward and smell blood. My hand flies up to cover my mouth. They didn’t escape because they can’t.

He’s staked them to the ground. Ribbed metal poles, rebar, stick out through one of their thighs.

The stench of blood is all I can smell.

“It’s hard to avoid the femoral artery,” Kian informs me. He runs his knuckles along my jaw. “But I have a lot of practice in restraining witches.”

I shudder. I open my mouth to tell him that he shouldn’t brag about such things—that this isn’t normal behavior. But then I snap my mouth shut again, because it *is* normal. For him. For a witch hunter, for a wolf who rips apart covens purely because he hates them.

Us.

He releases me and goes to one of the younger witches. I don’t remember her. I don’t really remember any of them, except Cecelia and Maeve. This one looks like she’s a few years younger than me. He takes a

fistful of her hair and yanks her head back. With her neck exposed, she lets out a terrified moan through the gag. The sound is agonized.

There's a puddle of blood under her leg, and even still she tries to move away from him.

"What are you doing?" I hurry to his side. "This is madness—"

"They tried to rip us apart, Astra." His words are aimed at the witch in his grasp.

He shifts his nails into claws and digs them into her throat. They slide through her skin too easily. And he withdraws a moment later, not ripping her apart as I thought. But at the spray of blood, I understand.

He punctured her jugular.

Blood spurts out of her neck from the claw marks in time with her heartbeat. We watch it arc across the circle, and she squirms and struggles until she's lost too much blood. It takes less than two minutes for her to lose consciousness.

We watch it in silence. Her death, I mean. Her spirit leaves her body, but I don't have any prayers for her to guide her on her way. I don't know if she's destined for a better place or a worse one, and it's a relief to not be the judge or jury.

I don't have it in me to be surprised at the violence. I should've known this would happen from the moment Cecelia appeared in that no-name town. Did my mother know this is how it would end, too? Did she know what she was going to subject me to when she sent Cecelia to me?

Or maybe there were other choices, other paths, that we could've taken. Maybe if I realized what the mate bond was sooner, and I kept it a secret. Or maybe—

Maybe, maybe, maybe.

How many what-ifs am I going to put myself through before I take responsibility? Before I shuck the idea of my all-knowing mother planning everything out down to the last breath I take?

I straighten my spine slowly, like the idea of standing on my own, unbound by fate, is a new one to me. And when I face Kian, he's ready for me.

He meets my gaze, and there's a challenge there.

"It's not just me they're repulsed by," he says quietly. "They saw something inside *you* that connected you to me, and they wanted to eradicate it. No matter the cost to either of us."

The yard is lit by hung string lights and some torches that Kian might've set aflame around the perimeter. I find Cecelia's red hair and cut across the circle to her. She, too, has a metal stake in her leg, dug deep into the ground. Her blood comes out of the top and bottom in little drags, forced out by every squeeze of her heart.

She's not dead. I could spare her if I wanted.

Her hands are bound behind her back. Rope across her mouth, wrapped around her head. It's a nasty way for Kian to keep them, but why haven't they used magic?

I tug the rope out of her mouth, and it falls around her neck.

Her gaze goes from pain to imploring. "This is my family, Astra. Please. You of all people know how much family means to a witch—"

"Did you know they were going to try and remove the bond?"

She nods. Tears drip down her face. "I'm sorry. As soon as you mentioned it, Maeve knew. It's an abomination, Astra. Please. Let us help you—"

"Help?" I shake my head. "You almost killed us."

"I'm sorry." She lets out a sob. "I never meant for this to happen. Your mother was one of my closest friends—"

Was. "She's still alive," I interrupt. "And I don't know if she foresaw this betrayal. She'd never do this to me. But Cecelia, why didn't you leave while Kian and I were inside?"

She presses her lips together. Her eyes shift to her left, and I follow them. To the woman whose face no longer shifts with deception.

"Cecelia."

"Your magic overpowered us," she whispers. "We couldn't hold it. We burned out."

I rock backward on my heels. My magic is diminished, that's true. But no more than it normally is... A glance back at Kian reminds me of his earlier words. That I gave him a dose of my power through the mate bond, and he used it to heal me.

How?

Why didn't you tell me I had this sort of power, Mom?

My mother is not here to answer my questions.

But there's one more thing Cecelia can do.

I yank the stake out of her leg.

She shrieks at the burst of pain and falls backward. I toss it away and lean over her. I cup her cheek, brushing away the tears. I make soothing noises under my breath until she stops focusing on the pain and starts focusing on me.

“I need you to do one more thing for me,” I tell her.

Her eyes are wide, but she nods anyway. Her breath comes in sharp pants.

“Find me a blood witch.”

Someone makes an alarmed noise. One of the witches beside us, who overheard my request. The flames jump brighter around the edge of the yard. Above us, a bulb shatters.

Power returning to the coven?

Kian lunges forward. He shifts, his body almost blurring as it contorts and changes. He lands as the white wolf, shaking out his fur. Screams rise all around us. Their energy spikes, the fear and adrenaline so strong, even I can almost smell it.

“The Winter Wolf,” Cecelia whispers. “Oh gods. We didn’t know you’re bound to *him*. We’re all going to die.”

“Yes,” I agree.

And I’m going to be part of it.

“How could you? After—”

I press my thumb into the wound in her thigh, and her shout of pain cuts off her words. The white wolf’s head swings around, his gaze lingering on me. Then my bloody hand.

If I didn’t know any better, I’d think he approves of it. But I don’t want the wolf’s approval, so I keep my gaze pinned on Cecelia.

“I need the address of a blood witch. Right. Now.” I press harder.

She’s openly sobbing, trying to get away from me.

“Fine,” she cries. “Godsdamn you, Astra. I only know of one—she lives in California. Outside of LA.”

“I’m going to need you to confirm that.”

“Get your thumb out of my thigh and I’ll tell you,” she gasps.

I do as she asks.

She rolls onto her side and throws up into the dirt. Her eyelids flutter, and her chest heaves. Finally, she goes still. Her lips move, mouthing inaudible words, and a quiet chill surrounds us.

Her eyes open wide, fixed on something over my shoulder. Listening to her aunt, maybe, or another spirit come to do her bidding.

Then she sags. “14398 Willoughby Street in Hesperia.”

I rise.

Kian is suddenly in my space, knocking me backward. Chilled wind whips around us, but he doesn’t seem to even notice. He digs his teeth into Cecelia’s shoulder, shaking her hard.

Her neck audibly snaps.

I open and close my mouth. The wind dies along with her, and shame fills me.

Kian swings back around, fixing me with his blue gaze. He nudges me, his head giant but insistent.

I don’t have it in me to argue, so I go back to the edge of the house. I force myself to turn back around, though, and watch him. I need to know the monster I’m bound to.

He kills them all quickly, with silent efficiency. With the address of a blood witch, there’s nothing else this coven can give him. And with their power returning, they’re more dangerous left alive and on our trail.

I did my role, and he’s playing his. But just because it’s what we do, doesn’t mean I have to enjoy it. I sink to my knees while he goes around the circle. He saves Maeve for last. The witch ignores him, her gaze burning into me. I feel the first pricks of her power just as he reaches her.

And with a vicious snap of bone, she dies.

It’s so unlike how I thought it would go.

When he’s done, he shifts and kneels in front of me. He reaches out and puts his fingers under my chin, lifting it.

“What now?” I ask, my voice wooden. I think about the blood witch. And the blood of witches spilling into the earth. The sacrifice they make unwillingly, that the earth will give to other witches in the future. A secret we hold close.

He smiles, because his plan is back on track. And he didn’t even have to use me to get what he wanted.

“Now we’re going to pay the blood witch a visit.”

CHAPTER 18

ASTRA

I sit on the front deck and wait for Kian to return.

He said he had something to take care of and shifted before I could ask any questions, leaving me alone in the coven house. I showered and found a shirt that fit relatively well. I contemplated hunting for jeans, too, since the waistband of mine is stained with blood. However, finding jeans to fit my curves is painful at best.

So I figure I can deal with a little blood if it means I don't have to scour every single room to find pants that may not be comfortable in an hour.

Dawn was approaching by the time I finished. The sky lightened in shades of blue and orange. I stood at the window and watched four wolves arrive. They didn't bother with the house, skirting around it. They dragged the bodies out beyond the yard, into the wild brush that these houses back up to. Over the rise came the unmistakable plume of smoke.

They were burning the bodies.

That was over an hour ago. Kian hadn't joined them, so where he went is still a mystery. The sun inches higher, wicking away the chill of night.

I'm restless. There's another shoe about to drop, I can feel it. But now I'm afraid to leave. If that was his goal, if he somehow orchestrated this entire thing to keep me from running away... he succeeded.

He and I have an undeniable connection. Who else might turn against me because of it?

The sun touches my face, and I close my eyes.

"What are you doing?"

My eyes fly open.

Jessamine stands in front of me, her hands on her hips. She seems pissed, and I haven't said a word to her. Does she have any joy in her life? Or is she just miserable twenty-four seven?

My bet's on the latter.

"What a pleasant surprise," I lie. "Did you have fun?"

She grins. "It's always fun to burn a witch."

I narrow my eyes.

"There's another coven that we're going to track down," she continues. "We detected traces of magic on our way over here, so it's worth investigating. Those things shouldn't be allowed to fester, don't you agree? Better to just... exterminate the issue."

"Careful, Jessie, or one day you'll hunt something that hunts you back." I raise my hand and pretend to examine my palm. "How's your face, by the way? Still looks a little melted."

Fury crosses her expression, and she steps forward.

Tries to step forward.

The vines are going to get me in trouble one day. But we're in the desert, so it isn't too much of an ask for the sagebrush to put a few knots over her ankles. They seem grateful for any drop of magic, and it seeps out of me before I can stop it.

She falls forward and catches herself on her hands and knees. When she realizes what I did, she rips at the sage with impressive strength.

"You bitch," she growls. "You're going to pay for that—"

I cross my legs. My magic itches under my skin. "I have a feeling I'll be doing a lot of penance soon. Should I add your name to the list?"

She finally gets free and takes a quick step backward. Then another.

"Just don't get in my way," she snaps.

I sigh.

A rumbling down the street draws my attention. A familiar black truck coasts to a stop in front of the house, and the window closest to me rolls down. Kian leans over, shoving open the passenger door.

I brush the dust from my legs and walk slowly toward him. I eye the truck, then him.

"What, no more bike?"

"Not this time. Get in."

I sigh. "You're so bossy."

Still, I climb into the cab without further argument. My bag, which had been abandoned in his bike, sits in the backseat next to his. He pulls away from the curb, and the only sound in the truck is the low rumbling engine.

Immediately, the silence is overwhelming.

"I learned something." I pick at my nails and peek at him.

"Okay..."

"I was scrying my mother, right? Well, that's how the demon got through."

He grunts. "You're telling me the demon who attacked you had come through your little looking glass?"

"It was water, but yeah." I stifle a yawn. "I think it was also trying to possess me."

He tenses. His hands flex on the wheel. "I've seen that before."

"Demons possessing witches?"

"Yes."

"That's not good."

That has to be new, right? My mother never mentioned anything like that happening. It was never in any of the lessons. She taught me how to guard my mind—if I had to know how to fend off a demon from taking my body, she would've included it.

We get on one of the highways and head south.

"You know, um, I don't think I said thank you." I clear my throat and rub my arms. "I didn't think they would do that to me without..."

"Without your permission?" He laughs. "Witches never ask permission. They just cast their magic without any thought of repercussions."

He's talking about the curse. The curse he won't tell me anything about.

"There's a clean sweatshirt in the back," he adds.

I frown and twist back to grab it, considering his little speech about witches. And permission. Like he asked permission to hunt me down and take me with him.

Hurt cycles through me. I'm struck speechless. I've tried to help him. I only ran off once... okay, twice, if you count when his cousin attacked me. But other than that, I've gone along with his schemes. No matter the amount of force he applied, I didn't actively object.

And he still thinks I'm part of the problem. That I *am* the problem, wholly. I'm a witch. When he says *they*, he's including me in that. Even if

he's talking about a curse cast from a blood witch who knows how long ago, or now.

This isn't going to work for me.

I shrug on the sweatshirt and fix my hair, then glance over. I'm trying hard *not* to think about the way his scent is wrapped around me again. And the way I like it a bit too much.

"If you want my help, I need you to stop hunting down covens."

Kian eyes me. He suddenly slams on the brakes. The truck squeals as we grind to a halt, and I fly forward. The only thing that stops me from crashing into the dash is the seat belt across my chest and hips.

He leans over and grips my jaw, dragging me across the middle seat by my face. "Let's get one thing straight, little nightmare. *You* don't get to dictate anything. You do as I say, and you'll live through this."

I glare at him.

"Besides." He leans in closer, running his nose up the side of my face. "I know what you really need. I can smell your desire from here."

I shove at him. It does no good, but his smile widens. I feel it against my temple.

"I don't want that," I say. "I wasn't even thinking that."

"What you want and what you need are two different things, baby." His mouth trails lower, past my ear and dipping to my neck.

God, my skin is hot.

"What you *want* is to pretend your life can go back to normal. But what you need is to get out of the fucking truck and *run*."

I jerk back. His eyes are dark, his pupils dilating. He's serious—but in a different way than I was expecting. In a way that says he's going to catch me and do wicked things, not monstrous things.

Or maybe both.

Is it a distraction, or is it exactly what we *need*, as he so kindly put it?

Am I crazy for wanting to find out?

I unbuckle my seat belt and shove the door open.

At the very least, it gives me space between us. Room to breathe, to take out my growing anger on someone besides Kian. I fly out and leap across the water drainage ditch, sprinting into the field. A good distance away is a tree line, a mountain climbing up out of the flat earth. I don't think I'll be able to make it that far, but I push myself anyway.

Running is the bane of my existence, but the burn in my lungs reminds me that I'm still alive. So fuck it.

Kian wastes no time closing the distance between us. "Better hurry, witch."

His voice floats ahead of him, spurring me faster.

In a strange way, I feel better than I've felt in days. Maybe it's that my back is finally healed or my magic is coming back. Either way, I focus my energy into my speed. My mother and I used to go for runs, but I definitely slacked off when I moved away from her. It's as comfortable as sludging through mud.

He laughs behind me.

I reach the tree line, and two steps later, Kian attacks. I squeal when we go down in a tumble of limbs, and he forces me onto the ground. I buck him off and climb back to my feet, scrambling through the trees.

"What the fuck?" I yell.

He doesn't answer. Doesn't try to taunt me. I risk a glance over my shoulder, wondering where the hell he went, and slam into his chest.

He shoves me into a tree.

I knee him in the balls.

He's not expecting it and keels over, choking. As much as I'd like to stick around and watch the aftermath, I get the hell out of there. That's always the first thing they teach you in self-defense. Don't wait around to see if your move worked.

Adrenaline sings through my veins, waking me up inside. I steal power from the earth with every step, healing my sore muscles and replenishing my strength.

I run another few minutes, weaving between trees, then slow to a stop.

Kian is gone.

I spin in a low circle. My heart is hammering too loud for me to concentrate on anything else, and this part of the forest is thick with vegetation.

The snarl that rips through it, though, is hard to miss.

There's a flash of white fur, blurring toward me.

I barely have time to get my hands up.

Kian shifts as he collides with me, and down I go.

He lands on top of me, stretching my arms up over my head. His hard body is touching every inch of me—and what comes to mind is far dirtier

than *he's going to kill me*. In fact, I think I'd rather go back to those morbid thoughts than entertain the desire coursing through me. It makes me want to curse him and wrap my legs around his hips at the same time.

But then he opens his mouth and ruins it.

"It didn't work." He frowns.

"What does that mean?"

His gaze flicks from my eyes to my throat. "Maybe you just need something scarier. You think I won't kill you."

"I'm pretty sure you won't." I narrow my eyes. "But why do I need something scarier?"

"To bring out your power again."

I pause. "What?"

"I tasted it, you know. The night we met. And now your power is barely there, like it's..."

I pull at my wrists, still pinned above my head. "Let go of me."

"No."

"Kian."

He dips his head down to mine, pressing his lips to my ear. "My wolf is content for the first time since you had your arms wrapped around me on the bike. So would you rather we stay like this, or I can shift back..."

My blush is so hot, it hurts.

"Was he worried when I left?" I ask lightly. "About a little witch?"

"About the witch he thinks he's going to mate with, yes."

I swallow.

"Well, that's..."

He sighs and touches his nose to my hair again. And I fidget the entire time... until I feel something stiffening between us.

Oh my God.

I push at him harder, squirming away. He lets me, watching with dark eyes. My gaze drops to his dick, which is swollen and pointed in my direction. I shouldn't be mesmerized by it, but *damn*.

"Are you a virgin, Astra?"

I choke. That breaks my staring contest with the cock, and I drag my gaze up.

"What have you done? And with who?" He's smiling, but there's now a hard glint in his eyes. The wolf is right there, too, keenly interested in my answer.

I shiver and rise, dusting off my clothes.

“You don’t have to worry about that,” I eventually land on.

We’re not going to talk about my sexual history, that’s for sure.

I gesture to him. “Did you abandon your clothes somewhere, you heathen?”

The tension in Kian’s face doesn’t completely break, but he does nod. I march through the brush in a general guess of where we came from. I’m not about to admit that I’m completely lost. What if I had to make it back to his truck? I’d be stuck for ages.

He catches up to me in wolf form. He moves so silently, I flinch when he bumps my arm with his head.

I sigh.

He does it again, until I reach out and wrap my fingers in his fur at his shoulder. His head lifts, and his fucking tail wags. He’s happy—it’s like I’m a teenager, asking if I can hold a boy’s hand. It makes me uncomfortable, but when I loosen my grip, his lips curls. A silent, automatic snarl.

Okay, *fine*.

He steers me in the right direction. It’s actually not so bad with his wolf beside me. He doesn’t so much as look at me as long as I’m touching him. We stop, and I gather his clothes, grumbling about how he should create a backpack he can wear in wolf form. Then we continue on.

I’m amazed at how far we ran. We reach the edge of the trees and continue into the large field. In the distance, his truck waits for us on the side of the highway.

He wanted to chase me to see if I could tap into my powers... but I can’t figure out if that’s because he wants *me* to have it, or because he has another use for me.

And if it is the latter... what does he want?

CHAPTER 19

KIAN

We're being followed.

I don't know of any packs in Utah, which we're currently speeding through, but here we are. I sense them at intervals, like they're stationed along the road waiting for us, and then they pass out of my range. There's a car trailing us, too. It's currently almost a half mile back, keeping pace with us, but the lack of other feedback is going to drive me nuts.

It's the same way Gage would be able to sense a rogue wolf in his territory. Alphas have the presence of mind, and the strength of it, to project their senses wider than other wolves. So in that regard, we're at a slight advantage, but it's not the same in a moving vehicle, passing through an unknown territory.

I glance at Astra. She's curled in the seat beside me, her eyes shut. There's still some dirt on her skin, but I like that about her. That she doesn't notice or care about being dirty. Her Mark is visible, and I have to tear my eyes away from it. In all my years hunting down witches, no Mark has ever been so... startling. There's nothing quiet about it, nothing to detract attention from her jawline and eyes and hair.

I shake it off and focus on the task at hand. I feel Griffin in the back of my head and open our line of communication.

Do you know of any newer packs in Utah?

He seems immediately concerned, but he answers, *Not that I know of...*

Smart wolf, he knows better than to ask why. And yet, I feel inclined to warn him.

We're being followed.

He perks up. His wolf stops moving, and I sense the attention of my other hunters homing in on him. *What do you want us to do, Alpha?*

Be on alert—but no need to rush over here just yet. What’s the update on the coven?

Griffin’s wolf whines, but it’s abruptly cut off. *The coven was ready for us. They took us on a wild goose chase, then disappeared.*

I grunt and cast another glance at Astra. She’d be happy to hear that report. After all, she asked me to stop hunting witches. If we’re going to break the curse, then I suppose witch-hunting would come to a natural end... If wolves could get over their trauma long enough to forgive them.

Would that happen? Would we just... forgive the witches for years of generational trauma? I grew up without a mother because of the original curse. Every wolf I know has faced the same thing.

With a sudden pit in my stomach, I find myself missing the she-wolf who birthed me. I truly do separate her from the ones who raised me, my father and Erin and Matteo, but a sense of longing blocks my throat.

Father never talked about her. They weren’t fated mates. Just two wolves who had chosen each other, if only to serve a purpose. He didn’t love her. I have to believe that he didn’t, because he raised me to use she-wolves to secure my line and nothing more.

Erin and Matteo sorted me out back then. They were the voices of reason echoing in my skull when my father sought to mold me into his shape.

Still. The idea of growing up with a mother...

I want Jessamine’s pup to experience that. The curse has to be broken.

We’ll track the coven down, Griffin vows.

No. I surprise myself with the command. *Go back and assist Matteo. I’ll call for you if I need you.*

“You have a concentration face,” Astra whispers. She stretches, arching her back and sticking out her breasts like a fucking temptress. Her joints pop and crack, and she sinks back into her seat with a satisfied expression.

Does she know how hard it is to rein in my desire to complete this stupid bond?

I should drop her off on the side of the road and drive away as fast as I can.

“Pack business,” I answer after a beat.

“So you *can* talk to them in your head. I figured as much.”

“Sometimes.” I eye the rearview mirror. The car behind us has fallen back enough that I can only see it on straightaways. “Well, I can reach them all the time. But I only talk to them sometimes.”

She pulls her hair out of its tie and runs her fingers through it. “Why are you driving like a bat out of hell?”

I check my speed. Ninety-five, although it feels like we’re crawling on this long stretch of mountain road. I shrug at her. “We have places to be.”

“Right,” she mumbles. “The blood witch. Can we stop to pee?”

“Seriously?”

“I’m a human, Kian, as much as you might think I’m the scourge of the earth. I still have bodily functions.”

She can’t possibly think that I consider her the scourge of the earth. First, that’s fucking dramatic. Second, she’s growing on me. Does my skin crawl when I think too hard about sitting next to a witch? Yes. Of course. It’s not like I can just erase that overnight.

But also...

She’s incredibly alluring.

I frown. “Hold it. We can’t stop.”

She crosses her arms. “We need to stop at a rest area in the next twenty minutes or I’ll pee on your seats.” Her lips quirk. “I don’t think your sister would like that too much. She’d think I’m marking my territory like a dog. Would your wolf be into that?”

“For the love of God,” I mutter. It’s a visual I certainly don’t need, but my wolf *does* like the idea that she wants to mark her territory.

She smiles at me.

My heart—and cock—leap.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

I press the truck even faster, ignoring when it shudders as we pass a hundred miles an hour. Her smile slowly fades, replaced with suspicion.

We come up on a rest stop too quickly. Two miles. Then one.

Suddenly, the car with the wolf shifters is right behind me, keeping up with the truck.

“There will be another one,” I say under my breath.

“Kian—”

I put my hand on her thigh, and for once, it shuts her up. In the rearview mirror, I can see two shifters in the car. Their heartbeats confirm it.

We fly by the rest stop, and she groans.

There's traffic up ahead. Not much, but more than I've encountered so far. I use it to brush off the car following us, and a semi truck switches into the fast lane behind me to pass another.

It gives me an opportunity to put distance between us, and I take it. Astra's hand lands on top of mine. I don't want to tell her what's happening and have her freak out on me. We've already been through a lot.

When the car is finally out of my range, I let out a little sigh. I don't ease up on our speed, though. It's reckless to drive this fast with Astra next to me, but I have to keep her safe. There's no other reason we'd be accosted.

"This one." She points to a sign that announces another rest stop in five miles. "Please."

"Okay. Fine."

We come up on it in record time, and I reluctantly lift my foot from the gas pedal. The exit road splits into two lanes, and I follow the sign for passenger vehicles. The rest area is small, with just a few vending machines, bathrooms, and some fenced in areas for dogs.

I wrinkle my nose.

The first scent to hit me when we step out of the truck all the way at the far end is shifter. I don't recognize the scent, though. And this being a rest stop on a thoroughfare, in the middle of nowhere, there's bound to be a pack out here.

Maybe a small one.

Or just some wolves passing through.

Either way, I don't have enough evidence to force her back into the car.

Before I can circle around, she hops down and hurries for the restroom.

"Astra," I growl. "Wait."

She pauses for me to catch up with her. I expand my senses. Nothing stands out, but that doesn't mean shit. She eyes me like I'm acting weird, and I can't really blame her.

I follow her to the restroom, then overtake her and go in first.

"This is for women," she snips.

I check all the stalls, examine the space, then wave her in. There are no windows she could feasibly get through. The door is the only entrance and exit.

"I'll be outside."

“Don’t listen to me pee.” She pokes me on her way into the first stall. “I mean it, wolf. That’s a line you should not cross.”

I shake my head. Bodily functions are pretty normal. And growing up surrounded by folks with extra-sensitive hearing, you get used to being unwittingly all up in everyone’s business.

Just outside the restroom, I scan the parking area. There are only trucks parked in a separate lot, separated by trees. Cars pass by the rest stop on the highway. Part of my attention is on Astra, but most of it is on the approaching car. The one that was following. It parks at the top of the row of spots, and the two shifters get out. They stop on the sidewalk and stare me down.

“Can I help you?” I ask softly, knowing they can hear me.

“We want the witch,” one says. “She’s got a bounty on her head.”

My wolf is silent, his deadly focus on the wolves in front of us. My senses are still stretched, waiting for any sign of something bad. For a tiny rest stop, it’s busy. New cars pull in. A large family piles out of a minivan, heading for the restrooms.

I want to tell them to stop, but that’s ridiculous. They’re human.

The family divides by gender and splits off with their designated parent, at the same time that the wolves start toward me.

“Who put a bounty on her?” I ask them.

The taller of the two tilts his head. “Alpha of the Mountain Creek Pack.”

Gage.

I’m going to kill him. I’m trying to be done with this blasted curse. He’ll thank me later, if he stops getting in my way. And then he’ll owe me for it. *They all will.*

“You’re not in his pack.” I narrow my eyes. “Leave. This doesn’t concern you.”

The other one nudges his companion. His eyes are wide. “Y-you’re the Winter Wolf?”

I bare my teeth. It doesn’t have the same reaction as it would in wolf form, but I’m about to snap their necks just for questioning me. Witnesses be damned.

They both back away, then turn around and hurry to their car.

I blow out a breath and return to the restroom door to wait. I can hear the females inside. Their noises all sort of run together in the echoing room.

Footsteps approach the door, and I straighten.

The minivan family—a mother and two daughters—come out. Then another woman. My brow furrows.

Something's wrong.

I push into the women's restroom, as I did five fucking minutes ago, and find it the exact same way: empty. My body moves to high alert, and I hurry back out. She didn't get by me this way. I cut through to the truck parking lot.

What sort of idiot am I? I focus on the bond, which ensures I'm going the right way.

"Winter Wolf," a deep, booming voice calls behind me.

I jerk around. The bond tugs me in the opposite direction, but suddenly Gage's right hand man is in front of me. He's a huge guy, bald and taller than me by six inches. He probably outweighs me in muscle, too. He likes to show off his muscles by wearing ridiculous tank tops.

He crosses his trunk-like arms over his chest.

"Gerald," I reply. I edge backwards. "A little bit outside your territory, are you not?"

He follows me. "My Alpha sent me."

I scoff. "Yeah? Why's that?"

He kicks off his shoes. "I challenge you, Kian."

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CHAPTER 20

ASTRA

One minute I was washing my hands, and the next, a woman walked in, raised her hand, and I lost consciousness before I could fight back. Magic, of course.

I wake up miles away from the rest stop, with no sign of Kian.

And honestly, I've been trying not to have a panic attack.

I'm in the backseat of a truck, and two male shifters sit in front of me.

I don't know what to do. And that goes for all fronts. Kian, this wolf shifter, my mother, the demons, the coven that attacked me. Burying my head in the sand isn't an option, although I wish it could be.

The truck moves too fast to jump out. Too fast for Kian to catch up to us in his wolf form. And that lead me down another rabbit hole—do I *want* Kian to find me? To save me?

And my mother's warning... *You need to help him. In return, he'll help you.*

What's to say she was even talking about Kian? Mate bond be damned.

Suddenly, everything is uncertain. Even my mother's words, which float in my mind with an ethereal quality. Stuck there by magic, maybe, or grief.

The shifters that transport me say nothing the entire journey. And it takes a while. Hours. The whole way, I stew. I think I'd rather be unconscious. Instead, I rest with my forehead on the glass, considering my meager options.

My one attempt at conversation is met with a snarl, so I stay quiet.

At some point, we pass an invisible line. They both relax, tension bleeding away. They smile at each other.

Other wolves appear along the road to watch us pass. Their howls send tingling fear down my spine.

I can't tell if they're upset or happy. It all sounds the same. They could be mournful or excited, angry or elated.

A mansion rises out of the forest. We crest a hill, and I get a good look at the front of it. It's made of dark logs and a thousand windows. Something moves in one of them, a quick blur of shadow, and my skin crawls with apprehension. My mind could be playing tricks on me.

As soon as the truck is thrown into park, there are men at my door. They open it and drag me out, binding my wrists with leather cord. I stretch my meager magic out, trying to sense the danger ahead. It snaps back at me tenfold, a knife plunging into my mind, and I almost black out. Only their grip on my arms keeps me upright. They hurry me toward the house, and my feet slide on the ground. My fight doesn't matter. They easily outmuscle me.

I am deposited into a formal living room, where a man sits stretched out on one of two couches. He points to the other, and I slink over. I perch on the edge, trying to ignore the discomfort in my shoulders.

He brushes his finger along the barrel of the gun in his lap, then smiles at me.

I don't know why he needs a gun. He smells like the forest. My mom would sometimes, too, from long days spent collecting herbs and plants. This is different. This scent is wilder, something dark and feral.

He's a wolf, just like the ones that took me. *Took* instead of *killed*.

The entire known history of wolves versus witches has always ended in witches' deaths. Every story whispered from the witches who came to stay in our cottage, spoken softly over crackling fires and with wide-eyed glances at my mother, was the same. Small covens wiped out, wolf packs raging out of control.

There are consequences for those actions. Consequences wolf shifters know nothing about. They probably don't even consider it. I saw the way they handled the coven in Utah. It was with disregard—and probably disgust.

I press my lips together. If I become one of the countless fallen witches in the wolf shifters' path to wipe us out, I'll be just another consequence.

It's not comforting. The witches who told such stories meant for it to be soothing, and maybe to some, it is.

Those stories haunted me at night. And if anything, they spurred my will to live.

When they try to kill me, I need to be ready. I need to fight back with everything I can and *survive*. Especially now. My mother is counting on me. I feel the small stream of magic inside me, resisting the urge to slip into it.

“You’re trembling, witch. But you’re not nearly as afraid as the first time I saw you.”

“Kian will come for me.” I lift my chin with some sort of false bravado.

“My cousin will certainly try,” he agrees.

Cousin.

“Do you know who I am?”

I look around at the absurd display of wealth. “Alpha of somewhere, I imagine.”

“Mountain Creek,” he supplies. “For now, you can call me Gage.”

He rises, and I shrink away. It doesn’t matter much with my wrists bound. He grabs my upper arm and hauls me to my feet. I resist, but it doesn’t matter. He bodily turns me around and pushes up the fabric of my sweatshirt, exposing my back. “Let me see it.”

There’s only one wolf who would be interested in that.

“You’re the one who attacked me.” A sick feeling snakes through my gut.

Kian had gone to meet with him—the alpha of the pack whose territory he drove me onto. But while I assumed it had been resolved, I’m now confident that wasn’t the case. How long has he been stalking me?

And is it really about me, or just taking one of Kian’s toys?

Now, at least, I’m a little more sure that Kian won’t abandon me. His pride wouldn’t let another alpha steal his witch.

His witch.

That’s where I’m wrong, I fear. I don’t belong to Kian, and he would agree with me.

“My marks are gone.” Gage grunts, answering my last question in part. He releases my sweatshirt. “Did my cousin heal you?”

“No.” I let out a breath and face Gage.

The memory of Kian’s hand pressed against my skin, his magic slipping under my skin, is so visceral I can almost feel his hot palm there now.

“Not even a little,” I lie.

His gaze flicks over me again. “I notice you’re missing an amulet.”

I lift my hand to my throat.

It's true—I had searched for the necklace at the coven house, but it had vanished. The protection stone my mother gave me was nowhere to be found.

"I've been looking into that mysterious power of yours," he continues. "The one that let you seem to disappear without a trace from right under my nose."

I don't reply, but it doesn't seem to matter. He's just talking to hear his own voice. To stoke fear in me over my future. I close my eyes and consider my past. The last few weeks of pain and uncertainty. Of losing my mother. I focus on that specific, sharp pain, and use it to ground myself. To keep my heartbeat steady, my breathing even.

I'm not skilled in tricking wolf shifters.

Up until Kian, I had never met a wolf in his human form.

"Turns out, there are some protection spells that will do that." Gage eyes me. "Is that what happened, witch? Did you rely on a stone to get away?"

Maybe.

Maybe.

That would make sense, wouldn't it? My mother's magic infused in the stone, some sort of last-ditch effort to keep me safe. Extra power infused in the stone with love. It would explain how I'm capable of such a thing, even without her with me.

The high doses of power Kian tasted could've come from *her*, and the stone, and it had nothing to do with me at all.

That's more believable, especially as I search for the well of magic inside me and find just a trickle of power. Nothing compared to what I would need to do half the things Kian wants.

I suppress my laughter.

Everyone thinks I'm so fucking powerful, but I've never been weaker.

Gage smiles. "I look forward to finding out."

The air prickles with something foreign, and I shudder. Automatically, I reach for my magic again, and the same blinding pain stabs my mind. As soon as I release it, it stops.

Gage just keeps on smiling. "There's another use for you, by the way. After my wolves tear Kian apart." He leans in and inhales. "Then, no one

will stop me from draining every last drop of magic from your body. Over and over again, until you're nothing more than an empty shell."

That's not possible.

Wolves can't do that.

But Gage motions behind me, and a shifter grabs me. He tows me backward. I fight now, struggling against them and getting nowhere. My magic flares, but it's not enough. I've got nothing, no reach with the earth, no sign of life in this house except the wolves. I throw my weight backward, but I'm a feather battling iron.

Useless.

We leave Gage behind and go down a hall off to the side, then descend two flights of stairs. They stop me in front of a metal door. It's got inscriptions around the frame in Latin. My heart thunders, and I squint at the worn markings. My Latin is *rusty*. Covens might require it, but my mother didn't. I can't translate it in time.

One of them gets the door unlocked, and we enter another long hallway. This one is dark and lined with doors. There are square windows in each of them at eye level, and I flinch when one fills with a face.

A woman. Her cheeks are gaunt, her skin pale. Her sunken eyes follow me until we get out of sight. But there are more of them. More women shuffling up to their doors to see who's being dragged in, each in worse condition than the last.

No men.

A deep sense of foreboding sweeps through me. The air gets thicker by the second, seeming to press into my skin. It almost hurts how much it weighs on me, as if trying to burrow into my bones.

"That's your fate, witch." One of the shifters chuckles. "Don't worry, though. After the first few times, you'll be as docile as a pup."

"Shut up," the other one grunts. "Leave the torture to the alpha."

My throat works, and my mind is trying to keep up, or at least untangle what I'm seeing. It doesn't make sense. None of it.

"Are you trying to turn them?" I blurt out.

One grimaces. The other scoffs, like the idea is ridiculous.

No, then.

I swallow.

They look worse than burnt out. Wolves can't orchestrate that, though. They don't have that connection to magic like we do. And no witch would

betray her sisters to help wolf shifters.

You did, a small voice in my head whispers. *You killed a coven. You're siding with Kian. Helping his cause and searching for a blood witch.*

Dark magic can be used to drain a witch's magic, but it's been forbidden for centuries.

My mother spoke about it in my lessons. I couldn't stop thinking about it, especially at night. I woke every morning trembling like a leaf, my head full of images of my arms cut open by a bone dagger, and a hooded, evil blood witch standing over me.

So he has a blood witch. And blood witches do not care about what is forbidden.

Gage wants my power for whatever reason. He wants these other witches' power, too. Who knows how long he's been syphoning off of them, over and over. Just as he promised he'd do to me.

I'm going to throw up.

The men open one of the last doors in the hallway. They untie the cord around my wrists and shove me through. It slams behind me before I can even stumble to a halt. The sound echoes around me, seemingly magnified. I spin in a slow circle, impossibly tired. I rub my wrists and roll my shoulders, but even that doesn't make me feel better.

There are no windows. Just a single light bulb over my head, trapped in a metal cage. There's a thin mattress on the floor, and a metal toilet and sink in the corner.

Whatever hope I managed to hold on to deflates.

The oppressiveness hasn't let up. If anything, it's worse. Sweat rolls down the back of my neck, and I shift my weight. My options are limited, and I can't feel the earth. That's the strangest thing. We're underground, or very nearly, and it's more like I'm a thousand feet in the air. My breath lodges in my throat.

Instinctively, I call on my magic.

It's not there.

I close my eyes and concentrate harder, fighting my growing panic. All I feel is the echoing drum of my heartbeat, but besides that? There's *nothing*. Not even the bond with Kian.

And all I feel is empty.

CHAPTER 21

KIAN

She's gone.

There's a dull rushing in my ears, and a blip as the fragile mate bond in my chest extinguishes. Not all the way—but enough to freak me out.

I press my hand to my chest, trying to make sense of it. Trying not to panic.

I have shifter blood under my nails, and flecks across my neck and chest. The wolf that challenged me is dead, but the fight took too long. By the time his heart stopped, Astra was too far away.

It was a clever trap, and I fell right into it.

Shame on me.

Jessamine and Roman pick me up on the side of the highway.

We're on our way back to my territory, to be surrounded by the Silver Ridge Pack who all felt the sharp ripple of my agony. They're in the back of my head always, but now they're louder than usual. They want to know what happened and if I'm okay.

I assure them that I am, and then I mute them out.

Roman and Jessamine are silent on the drive. There's too much to say, and not a lot either. I should've kept them closer, involved them more. But I didn't want them to be around Astra. I didn't want to share her before I had decided about her.

My sister's contempt is hard to mask, and Roman's uncertainty doesn't sit right with me, either. Astra's introduction to my pack was weak, at best.

How am I supposed to tell them that she's my mate? My hunters now know—after the Utah coven—and they didn't take it well.

I sigh.

Gage has her. If I want to negotiate for her without tipping my hand, I'll need to give up something big. Or...

Or I just take her back, rules be damned. Who cares that our fathers worked out a way for the two packs to coexist in the northwest? Who gives a *fuck* if entering his territory with intent on violence is an act of war?

I'd rip his whole pack to shreds to get Astra back.

She's the key to saving my sister.

But I can't feel her, and I don't know for sure that Gage has taken her back into his territory. He could be hiding her in Canada, or they might've cut west after leaving the rest stop.

There hasn't been a war between wolf packs in centuries. The last one was between two brothers. That was before the blood witch's curse, when full-blooded siblings were more common. That war was long and bloody.

Wolf shifters can live for a long time. Over a hundred years, maybe two if we're lucky. That's quite a while for brothers to hold grudges, to keep fighting over and over again.

Back then, changing humans into shifters was more common, too. Especially without consent. That created angry, spiteful wolves who wanted to take their anger out on *something*. Or, in their case, a pack of *someones*.

"Maybe Gage won't escalate," Roman murmurs.

My sister snorts from the backseat, and I nod along with her skepticism. He's already escalated.

My wolf is radiating fury, but I'm trying not to let that blend with my own emotions. One of us needs to be rational. And while he's envisioning ripping Gage's head from his shoulders, I must think about *my* pack.

I am thinking of our mate, my wolf says. *What are we without her?*

I don't have an answer for that.

CHAPTER 22

ASTRA

I don't know how long I'm locked in the room before the door creaks open. At least an hour, maybe more. I reached again and again for my magic, only to find the task hopeless. It's only slightly better than the pain when I tried upstairs.

After that, I tried to get the attention of the other witches.

No one responded.

Maybe it's warded or soundproofed or both.

Gage fills the doorway with one of his wolves behind him, the huge guy's hands balled into fists like I'm going to try and take on two shifters. My gaze goes from the larger one to Gage. He's dressed in a dark-green button-down shirt and black slacks, and his blond hair is combed and tied at the nape of his neck. He's dressed to go out for dinner, not visit me in this cell.

I loathe it. The gel slicking his hair, his smug expression.

"I want you to meet someone," Gage says, stepping aside.

A woman appears from behind him, slipping into the small room with me. Her dark hair is bound in a braid, and her dark eyes find mine immediately. Unlike the other women in the cells, her features seem healthier. Not bright, but just on the cusp of it. Her skin is pale, and while she's about my height, she's half my size. Slender, verging on too thin.

She looks familiar, but I can't place it.

The way she moves has me on edge. She inches around me, but I try to keep both her and Gage in my line of sight.

"This is Sonia," he says idly. "Sonia, say hello."

The girl darts forward and grabs my arm with both hands.

She doesn't speak—instead, she pushes her magic into me. It's the first magic I've felt since they put me down here, but it doesn't join or awaken mine. If anything, it repels it.

It's ice speeding through my blood, freezing me from the inside out. The attack of it is violating, seeping into my bones until I can't think straight. All I can focus on is the cold and her hard gaze on my face.

"I think she gets it," Gage says.

The magic withdraws.

I shudder and fall away from the girl. The wall keeps me upright, barely, and I wrap my arms around my stomach. I wait for the thawing to begin, for my magic to start working again, but I stay cold.

Damn it.

"Sonia has been with me since she was a young girl." The wolf shifter eyes her. "She's powerful. And hungry."

I don't want to ask him. I don't want to fucking engage with him, to encourage this. I'll be as uncooperative as I possibly can be, until the very last second. Because that's what this asshole deserves.

Unfortunately, he doesn't seem to care. He continues, "My father liked to experiment. It's something his brother partook in, too. That's Kian's father, so we're clear."

He smiles brilliantly, but my stomach just twists.

"Imagine the power of a witch... convoluted by the monstrosities of a vampire." His eyes light up. "Not only a witch, but one who deals in blood magic."

I shake my head and immediately break my vow of silence. "That's impossible."

He motions for Sonia. Faster than a wolf shifter can move, she comes at me. I barely have time to raise my hands before her body collides with mine. She's slender but *strong*, and we hit the wall. The impact rattles my bones, but it's nothing compared to the sensation of her teeth sinking into my throat.

I flail, trying to get her off me.

She easily captures my hands, pressing them to the wall on either side of me.

Her tongue laps at my skin, her throat working as she swallows mouthfuls of my blood. My head swims.

I'd heard stories about vampires. That they have venom in their fangs that incapacitate their victims. Their bite is supposed to lessen the pain—and amp up the desire.

I feel none of that. She's making sure I feel every second of this. My mouth opens and closes, and a scream builds in the back of my throat.

She isn't just drinking my blood—she's pulling out the dormant power, too. The power I still can't seem to get a grip on by myself. The power that I lost as soon as I came down here, which is dragged out of me with every gulp.

And it *hurts*. More than the blood loss, my magic being ripped out is like being burned from the inside. I squirm and cry out, and it does absolutely nothing to lessen the agony.

“Enough.”

Sonia's grip loosens. She flies backward, but it's not her doing. The large man Gage brought with him has her by the back of the neck, wrestling with her. She keeps trying to claw herself back to me. Her eyes are wild, her dark hair loosening from the braid that contained it.

My blood runs down her chin.

I shudder and cup my neck with my bound hands. The bite throbs, but worse is the pit inside me. My magic was blocked to me, but now it's *gone*. I'm so fucking cold and empty, and it radiates with a new agony I never could've fathomed.

Gage leans forward. “Monstrosities like her exist to further my pack's reach. Do you understand that, Astra?”

She went for my unMarked side. But as for Gage... if what he's saying is true, he created her. Or his father did. One way or another, they forced her to become something else.

She was a witch, and now she's a vampire...

“I don't think I understand,” I whisper. “Is she the only one?”

His smile is as frozen as the ice she pushed under my skin. Perhaps she chose the ice instead of fire because it's her affinity—or perhaps she just wanted to remind me who I'm dealing with. I turn away from him and focus on Sonia. She's calmed slightly, but her eyes are unfocused. She weaves in the large shifter's grip, and her skin is glowing.

“She's drunk on your power. Isn't it fascinating?” Gage stands and goes to her.

He holds out his hand, and she practically falls into his embrace. Her head tips back, and Gage...

He kisses her.

Her mouth opens; her body arches into his.

I slip down the wall, barely able to keep my eyes open.

It's only once they break away that Gage glances at me. "We'll come back to replenish your magic, Astra. Dare I say you're the best Sonia has tasted?"

Sonia nods, her hungry dark eyes locking on to me again.

They slip from the room, the door locking behind them, and I curl on my side.

And I finally cry.

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CHAPTER 23

ASTRA

A day.
A week, then two.

Four.

Seven.

A pattern forms.

Gage has a gift from the vampire-witch hybrid that he bestows upon me: metal cuffs that block me from my magic. They attach together and connect to a chain around my waist. His lackey, the big guy, escorts me outside every few days. I sit in the sunshine, my magic so depleted that it takes an eternity for the earth to replenish it. I can't even help it along by pulling the energy into myself. It's the worst sort of helplessness. I barely have the strength to make it out of the cells.

Spots of dead grass appear around the house in the field, a record of where they drop me. It isn't willing on my part, but I can't stop it.

After, he takes me back down to my cell, where Sonia waits for me with a small smile.

What she does with my power, so infused with it by the time one of Gage's shifters drags her out that she's glowing with it, I have no idea.

The thin mattress in my cell is my only respite, where I lie as darkness flickers over my vision and sweeps me away.

But my dreams don't let me off so easily.

Kian visits me there. Not the man, but the wolf. In his shadow form, much like how he came to me through the scrying glass, he slips through the forest ahead of me. I give chase, calling after him until my voice is hoarse.

And only when I fall does he return, his deep-blue eyes seeming to spear into a part of me I'm starting to forget.

When I wake, that piece falls away like it was never there.

Pleading with Sonia doesn't work. Cutting myself open and making an offering to the earth, dripping it through the cracks in the concrete, doesn't work. Calling for the other witches... doesn't work.

And finally, the day comes when I'm hauled out onto the lawn behind the house and there's no amount of nature that can replenish what I've lost. There's a layer of snow on the ground, the grass going dormant, and my connection to the earth is gone.

A shadow looms over me, but I don't have the energy to even open my eyes. I don't remember the journey through the house, although my heels ache from bumping against the steps as I was dragged backward up the stairs.

I know I'm going to die. I gave up thinking Kian would rescue me weeks ago, around the same time I began to doubt that I could save myself.

And now? I'm not of use anymore.

The shadow crouches beside me, two fingers pressing into my neck. Near the bite that never has a chance to heal. A finger under my nose checks my breathing.

I wait for death and darkness.

Instead, the cuffs that I've worn since my first time outside fall away from my wrists.

CHAPTER 24

KIAN

The mate bond explodes back into existence.

I stop what I'm doing and drop to my knees, covering my head with my hands. Not my chest, where the source of the feeling is. But my head, where the *pain* is.

It's blinding hot, a sizzling pain that rips through my whole body. It's worse than when the covens tried to rip the bond from Astra. It's worse than anything I've felt before.

I fall forward, my forehead touching the snow, and anger spikes through me.

It's not my anger, but Astra's. And hers only stokes mine, cracking me open.

My white-hot rage gives way to the fur and teeth of my wolf.

He's of similar mind, fury and fear for her blending until I can hardly separate them.

She's alive and she's upset and she's in so much pain, I don't know how she's still breathing. It feels like she's being flayed open by a thousand knives.

"Alpha."

I whirl, my wolf in control, and his teeth snap millimeters from my sister's face.

To her credit, she doesn't flinch or back away. She stares at me with uncertainty, her expression pained.

Jessamine drops to her knees. Her head bends, the long line of her neck bared to me.

"You're broadcasting it," she whispers. "It hurts."

Fuck. It takes all my effort to staunch the flow of Astra's pain across our bond. The bond I thought was gone for good. And I, like an idiot, sent it out to my entire pack.

I get myself back under control and apologize to everyone.

Jessamine sighs. Her expression immediately loses some tension, but the worried creases between her eyes don't leave.

She sits back on her heels and cups her belly. It's rounder now, protruding slightly. She had her twenty week checkup the other day. She won't come with us when we enter Gage's territory.

"What's happening?" she asks. "What changed?"

War, my wolf says. It's time.

And I can't help but agree. I needed a sign from Astra, but I think my cousin is too smart for that. My hunters have patrolled the No-Man's-Land between our territories, crept along the borders of his undetected and reported back. I've been charting his patrols, his numbers, for seven weeks.

And now, something new.

I think Gage is tired of my waiting.

If I knew Astra was being tortured—

I shift back as suddenly as I did in the first place. Bones snapping, muscles stretching, fur receding. It hurts, but I need the pain. I accept it for what it is, even though it's over in a flash.

I accept the clothes she holds out, and she makes a face. "The pack will realize what happened. They know the pain we all felt wasn't yours."

The mate bond.

"I'm going to reject it." I head for the lodge.

She trails after me. "Is that why you haven't gone after her? You could've saved yourself the trouble and rejected it weeks ago. Found another witch to help with your plan."

My wolf growls at the idea. *He's* not on board with rejecting Astra. He wants her. He's been the most difficult to control during this time, because if he had his way, we would've already stormed Gage's territory.

"I've been trying to see if she's even alive," I mumble.

We knew, my wolf whispers. Just not where.

"And now?" Jessamine asks.

Now, we know where.

"Get the hunters together, as well as those willing to fight with me," I tell her. "She's being kept in the northernmost part of his territory."

The pain has eased. Whatever was happening to Astra is over now, and the bond is as dormant as it was before.

It doesn't matter. It was all I needed to bring her home.

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CHAPTER 25

ASTRA

Gage storms into my cell. I barely lift my head, but it doesn't matter. He picks me up like I weigh nothing.

The cuffs on my wrists cut into my skin, and blood smears across my shirt. The markings are in Latin, the same as what marks the door to the witches' hallway. And above every door. They're containment spells. I finally puzzled it out one morning, half asleep and trying to distract myself from the pain.

He carries me upstairs. The fury rolling off him is new. His hair is messier, and it's dark out. Like he rolled out of bed and came straight to me.

There's a large deck off the sliding back doors. It overlooks the field where he's been forcing me to replenish my magic, although there's a thicker layer of snow across the boards and the grass. I barely remember being dropped in the snow yesterday. Those memories are lost in a haze of pain from Sonia's draining.

"What's happening?" I slur, exhaustion lingering in my voice.

He lets my feet touch the deck, but I'm not strong enough to stay standing. When he steps back, I crumple.

"The Winter Wolf has come to try and steal you." He says it loud enough that his voice carries.

I drag myself up on my forearms and peer out through the railing slats. My breath catching at the sheer number of shifters who now fill the clearing.

Too many men, most of them shirtless and ready to shift, watch Gage like he's a savior. Perhaps he is in a way. He could've saved them. But he's going to try and kill Kian if the latter wants me, and he's been killing

witches—*torturing witches*—for who knows how long. Months? Years? *Longer?*

I run my finger over the cuffs, holding my breath. I want my magic back. There's a disconnect that has made me realize just how fragile humans really are.

Human women, especially.

Gage drags me upright, propping my feet under me, and pushes me to the railing. I hold onto it so I don't fall again. My legs tremble.

"The Winter Wolf has come with violent intent," he says to his pack. "For this."

He's talking about me.

Seven weeks of grunge and filth cling to me, the bruised bite mark at my neck hidden by my hair. My shirt and jeans have dried blood stained into the fabric.

A lone howl breaks the uneasy silence.

My skin prickles. I rub the cuffs again, but they're the vampire hybrid's doing. I don't know how they come off.

Something moves on the edge of the clearing, and I focus hard on it. *Wolves*, in their animal form. More than the human-shaped men who fill the clearing are tucked out of sight. On purpose? As a trap?

"He comes onto *our* territory, after killing *our* brother. And he wants to take something that doesn't belong to him," Gage yells.

The shifters in their human form jeer and shout.

I swallow.

Kian howls again, and I try not to show a reaction. But my eyes fill with tears anyway. There are too many conflicting emotions. Dread, hope, adrenaline. Fear. The fact that I even recognize his howl...

He shouldn't have come. He should've cut his losses and found the blood witch to break the curse.

Maybe he'll take Sonia. She's a blood witch—she could help him if he survives.

A lump blocks my throat. My nails bite into the railing, hard enough that one of them cracks. The cold embeds in my skin. The feeling of death has been following me, and right now, it stands at my shoulder.

As if I summoned her, Sonia appears at my side. There's a ghost of a smile on her lips. Does she know what's coming? Has Gage told her all about his plans for us?

She reaches out and presses her finger into the bite wound on my neck. Blood coats her finger, and she sucks it into her mouth.

Gross.

Her smile widens.

“Don’t touch me,” I snap, a new edge in my voice.

It’s Kian, maybe. I’d believe it if I could feel the bond. But he’s far away, and it’s just us up on this porch. Gage and me and her.

“What happened to you?” I ask in a softer tone. “Why would you turn on your own kind?”

“She doesn’t have her own kind,” Gage says. He sheds his shirt. “She’s a hybrid. She’s singular.”

I grimace.

There’s a rush of murmurs, just louder than the wind, and our attention is drawn back to the darkening clearing. A white wolf pads past the tree line.

My heart skips—then takes off running. It pounds in my ribcage harder and harder, like it wants to escape into the trees with Kian.

It’s been almost two months since I’ve seen him. I almost gave up hope.

He’s the lesser evil, but that doesn’t mean he isn’t still, you know. *Evil*. Sexual tension or not. That shouldn’t even factor in, because they’re only meant to cloud my judgment.

Regardless of the fact that he ripped apart a coven to get to *me*.

Regardless that he’s going to do the same to this pack.

Fuck. He needs to win this fight.

Gage stares down at him, his jaw ticking. He seems mad. Maybe he had some more speeches to give to his pack so they’d fight harder for him.

“Greetings, cousin,” he calls down to the white wolf.

Kian shifts. It’s smooth and easy, a blur of movement, and then he’s in his human form.

His gaze locks on me. The weight of it is a heady rush, and I hold tighter to the railing. He scans me, his focus dropping to the cuffs on my wrist, then the woman beside me. His blue eyes are furious—for *me*.

See what I mean? He’s dangerous to a girl’s willpower. He doesn’t even acknowledge Gage until I give him a small nod that I’m... well, I wouldn’t say *okay*. But I’m alive, and that’s enough for now.

Someone throws him sweatpants, and he puts them on without comment.

“Cousin,” Kian finally answers.

“You’re here to pay for your crimes,” Gage says. “For murdering one of my pack, they demand retribution.”

There’s another howl. Then another. They rise all around us, each singing their own tune. And then they all pour out into the clearing. Gage motions behind him, and floodlights kick on. The clearing is suddenly illuminated far better, showing a vastly outnumbered Kian. Humans and wolves of Gage’s pack surround the alpha of the Silver Ridge Pack—and still, the Winter Wolf only smiles.

It’s full of menace and confidence, and I try to suppress my shiver. Even surrounded, he doesn’t so much as flinch.

“You want a war, Gage, you’ll get one. That’s a promise.” Kian steps forward. “There’s a reason our fathers fought so hard for peace between our packs. They were equal when they were alphas. But now... you’re slacking. With a witch on your side or no.” His nostrils flare, like he disproves of it.

Does he realize she’s a vampire, too?

“You also had a witch,” Gage reminds him. “Until you lost her...”

“I’m not lost yet.” My voice is hoarse. I’m not dead yet—and that’s the only way I’ll truly be lost. Even if it feels like I’m dying every time Sonia bites me.

Kian smirks.

Gage glances at me. He takes a step in my direction, and I bump into Sonia in my backpedaling. She shifts to the side, not stopping me from putting distance between me and the wolf shifter.

“Fight me like a wolf,” Kian snarls. He draws his cousin’s attention back to him. “Unless you wanted to bring me here to prove that you couldn’t fight me one on one?”

Gage’s eyes flash. “Are you challenging me?”

Kian inclines his chin. “I want my witch, cousin. If that means I need to challenge you, then so be it. But I’m not coming for your rank or your wolves. Just her.”

A rustling goes through the watching wolves. They press closer, eager to see what their alpha does. This seems like a brash way for them to determine who gets to keep me. *My witch*. Gosh, that does something to me. It takes me a second to put my finger on it.

Fucking butterflies in my chest.

Gage needs no further prompting. He leaps over the porch railing. It's at least ten feet to the ground, but he shifts mid-air—tearing through his pants in the process—and lands as a brown wolf in front of Kian.

Kian meets my gaze for a split second, then shifts. The borrowed sweatpants fall off him, too, and the white wolf shakes out his coat. In this form, he's larger than Gage. I don't think I really took the time to admire how beautiful he is compared to others. I can't say I have much experience with other wolves, so, there's that. But seriously. He stands with a regality that can't be faked.

The wolves form a circle around them, tightening it until there's no room for either of them to leave it. And they're all on Gage's side, although they stand still and silent. Sonia and I have the perfect view from up here.

Gage makes the first move. Kian takes the hit, and they roll across the grass. My knees go weak. I haven't stood this long in a while, and I lower myself to a crouch. I can't watch this. But there's no way to turn off the sound of their hits, the snap of their teeth. The snarls and howls of the shifted members of Gage's pack. And not watching is worse, because my imagination runs away with me.

They're a flurry of movement, trading glancing blows and lunges, until Kian sinks his teeth into Gage's shoulder. *Hard*. He releases Gage to move out of range, and blood drips from his jaw. In seconds, Gage's shoulder soaks with blood. The brown wolf limps around the edge of their cleared space, his lips curling in a snarl.

Gage catches Kian in the side, raking his claws down his ribs. The blood stands out in sharper relief against Kian's white fur, and drops fall to the torn-up snow. They're both circle each other a little slower.

I'm going to be sick.

Kian continues to go for Gage, and I watch it all through the vertical slats. Something tells me he was playing with Gage at first, but now that's done. He figured out the missing puzzle piece, and the fight shifts dramatically in Kian's favor. He pins Gage under him, his teeth in his neck. He shakes once. A cruel warning.

The hate in Gage's eyes is visible even to me. But he stops fighting. The submission comes as a wave of relief.

Kian tips his head back and howls. The wolves around him are still, maybe shocked, but then... they disperse. They back away, heads lowered

and avoiding Kian's gaze, until they get to the edges of the clearing and disappear.

Kian steps off Gage and bounds up the deck stairs. The white wolf is bigger than I remember. Funny how memory distorts. My ass hits the floor, and I lean my shoulder on the slats. Sonia stands beside me. One look at Kian, though, and she doesn't need any more excuse to flee—she rushes back into the house with vampire speed.

His eyes track her, his lips pulling back until he seems satisfied that she's gone.

His attention zips to me, and he shifts back into human form. I'm too tired to follow the transformation. But he comes and crouches in front of me, and his expression is so fucking worried. The bond in my chest is a little stronger now that he's right in front of me, but it's not what it was.

I throw my arms around him.

He catches me, rocking back on his heels, but his arms band around my back. Just for a moment, I can breathe.

"Break later," he whispers in my ear. He rises and sets me on my feet.

He's right. Now isn't the time to show weakness in front of the enemy, although they all seem to have disappeared. Even Gage, the spot he was lying in the snow now empty.

This time, my legs hold me.

Kian's lips flatten into a line. I don't know if Gage has more tricks up his sleeve, or if Kian planned for them. My thoughts are still sluggish.

He tips his head and starts for the stairs, but I don't move. I glance back toward the door, my heart lurching. I need to get these cuffs off, and I don't think Kian will be able to manage it. It's strange magic, and I don't—I can't handle being separated from mine for longer.

"Sonia," I call. I break away from Kian and go into the house. I catch myself on the frame of the sliding glass door, then force myself inside. "Sonia."

Kian growls behind me. "Astra. It's not—"

There's a slight rush of wind, and suddenly the vampire hybrid skids to a halt in front of me. Her chin tips up, her eyes appraising.

She's not immediately going for my throat, so...

I lift the cuffs. "Please. I don't know you. I don't know what kind of life you have here. But *please*."

She eyes me. I can see the thoughts moving behind her gaze. She wants something. She's not hungry, she can't be. She just had her fill of me, didn't she? She's brimming with my power.

But maybe she wants it anyway.

I nod to her.

She lets out a grunt and presses her fingers to the cold metal. Magic slides across it, and the cuffs crack open. They slip from my wrists, falling to the floor and rolling away. Immediately, my magic flickers back to life.

It's a weak, pitiful flame. But the mate bond strengthens, and I exhale.

Kian makes a noise behind me. He can feel it, as well, I'd bet. I feel *him* standing there. Whether it's more sensitive from the lack of contact these past few weeks or because the bond is getting stronger—which seems irrational, illogical—I don't know. I tug at it, and he takes a step toward me.

Sonia's gaze flicks to my neck, and I give her a tiny nod. I don't know what I'm agreeing to, but suddenly she's on me. Her hands dig into my upper arms, keeping me still, and her teeth latch on to my neck.

My magic flares to life.

It doesn't hurt. Not like when she drags my magic out of me. She's not taking that. It's just my blood that she's gulping down, feeding the vampire side of her. Her tongue works against my skin, and a numb euphoria travels through me.

My eyes flutter closed.

"Stop," Kian says, but his voice is coming from a long way off.

It just feels good. For the first time since I got here, maybe even longer, bliss courses through me with every beat of my heart.

"Stop."

Sonia staggers backward, and my knees give out. Strong hands catch me around my waist before I can hit the floor, and my body just... relaxes. Because it's Kian, and he's soothing some deep part of me by touching me. He sweeps my hair back, exposing the long row of overlapping bruised, open bites down my neck that never healed.

He curses and closes the most recent wound, the prick of his healing shifter magic the first sliver of warmth I've felt in so long. It dissipates too quickly, and I'm left frozen again.

Kian picks me up and carries me out of the house. Down the steps. I rest my head on his shoulder and try to keep my eyes open. They drift closed on their own after a while, until his steps change.

I force myself to be more alert. To wake up.

There are no streetlights on the gravel road he marches down. The moon is tucked behind clouds, and the night air has a bite all its own. I'm already so cold, I don't know that I can even shiver at this point.

I've been cold since Sonia's first demonstration of power.

But Kian is warm.

My eyes close again until he stops walking.

We're beside his truck. Two wolves appear out of the shadows. One smaller brown one, another massive gray. They shift wordlessly into Jessamine and her mate—I only recognize him from the lodge, when he rushed to help her after I burned her face—and go to the back of the truck, finding clothes.

Kian opens the passenger door and sets me carefully on the seat.

The male tosses a pair of sweatpants to Kian. I hadn't even realized he was naked. Didn't care. But Kian pulls them on quickly, then turns his attention to me. His fingers ghost over my cheekbone, then down the right side of my neck.

"Tell me," he says in a low voice. "What did he do to you?"

I wince. "There's not much to tell that you can't piece together."

He presses his palm to the other bites on my neck, and healing magic seeps into me. I tip my head back and let out a low sound. Something caught between a moan and a sigh. It feels good and warm, and I really just want to climb into his lap and stay there.

He came for me.

"I felt your pain. I know he hurt you." He brushes my hair back. "Where else?"

"I don't know. You might feel it; I can't feel anything."

"Alpha," Jessamine's mate calls. "We should go."

Kian nods. They climb in the backseat, and Kian gently moves my legs inside the vehicle. He meets my gaze one last time, then closes the door between us.

I can't tell if I'm actually safe or if it's just wishful thinking.

CHAPTER 26

KIAN

Astra falls asleep next to me almost as soon as we leave, curling in on herself and putting her head on the console between our seats. Her soft, even breaths are the only sound in the truck.

But that doesn't mean we're not talking.

She looks like she's been tortured, Jessamine says, her tone almost sympathetic.

I rake my gaze over Astra and silently catalog the changes in her. She's lost a lot of weight. Her blonde hair is matted and dark brown. Her skin is pale and nearly translucent. I can see too many bluish veins. There's a ring of bruises that linger on her neck, opposite the Mark. The Mark seems even darker against her white skin. It's the only thing not affected by her treatment.

You should've taken his pack, Roman says. He leans forward and carefully moves Astra's hair off her neck, eyeing the bruising. *What are these?*

Vampire, I reply.

But not just that. She had magic. She released those cuffs from Astra's wrists with just a little pulse of magic.

Vampires drink blood. They can taste power, but they can't wield it. Not the way a witch can. If they could, I'm sure they would hunt witches as surely as wolf packs do.

Gage has a vampire? This from Jessamine.

A made one, I reply. I keep the witch part to myself, my skin crawling. Hybrids don't exist. They're impossible. Witch magic burns out anything else, or the other side takes over. Vampires don't have heartbeats, and their

magic was lost a long time ago. Wolves... well, no alpha would purposefully turn a witch into a shifter.

The divide between species is too great.

Let us out here, Jessamine says. *We'll travel back to Silver Ridge and get another vehicle.*

I coast to a stop to let her and Roman out, eyeing her rounding belly. She sheds her shirt, then pants. Soon, she'll stop shifting until she gives birth. Until...

Roman gives me a look. I turn my attention away from them and focus ahead. We're on a long stretch of straight road that leads into the mountains. They toss their clothes into the truck, and Roman gently shuts the door. They shift and dart away, disappearing into the trees.

I was going to bring everyone I could. But when I faced them in the lodge, I—I couldn't. They were scared, both of me and what they felt. Most of my wolves had not been involved in any conflict beyond witch hunting.

And now I wanted to risk it all to save one? I couldn't ask them to put themselves in danger for her. Instead, another opportunity presented itself.

Gage could never resist a challenge, and no one dared to object to my plan.

But when I saw her on the porch, I almost changed my mind about leaving my cousin alive.

Astra doesn't wake with the disturbance. I get back on the road, and once I'm up to speed, I take her hand and place it onto my thigh. I cover it with mine and push more healing magic into her, as easy as breathing. Maybe I can't erase what happened to her, but I *can* heal as much of her as I can.

We've got a long way to go, the mission to save my sister climbing back to my first priority now that I have Astra back. She can rest while we travel, but we have to make it to the blood witch.

I drive until my eyes burn and I'm forced to stop.

The sun is high—I've driven through the night and then some. My stomach growls, and I glance *again* at the witch sleeping beside me. She's probably hungry, too. When's the last time she ate?

My one job was to keep her safe, and I failed spectacularly. I didn't recognize the risks involved with Gage or accurately predict the lengths he'd go to, to get her back.

I frown and turn off the interstate. She stirs at our change in speed, but she doesn't wake until I've found a restaurant and parked in front of the entrance. I squeeze her hand and run my thumb across her knuckles.

After a minute, her eyes open. She sits up slowly, tucking her hair behind her ears. It's greasy and stringy, matted in some spots, like she hasn't washed it since I last saw her. And judging from the grime on her skin, she probably hasn't.

She stares at the restaurant, her brow furrowing. Her lips purse.

"What?" I finally ask.

"I..." She shakes her head. "You want to go to a steak house?"

"Better than tuna," I say mildly, hopping out. "We need to eat."

At the mention of food, her stomach growls.

She climbs out of the truck like everything hurts, although I spent most of the night feeding her body a steady stream of healing magic. My own reserves are low, sharpening the pang of my hunger. She follows me to the front of the truck.

I eye her, then shed my sweatshirt. It leaves me in just a t-shirt in the middle of winter, but she doesn't object to me shoving the heavy fabric at her. In fact, she puts it on in a hurry. It engulfs her, and my cock twitches. It has horrible timing.

But I like her in my clothes.

She lifts the collar to her nose and inhales. Pink blooms across her cheeks.

I grin. My heart thunders. She leads the way into the restaurant, and I smell the singe of magic a second before Astra seems to change before my eyes. Her Mark disappears, the grime melts away. My hackles rise, but I can't object. If she walked in as she is, they'd probably call the police.

As it is, the hostess blinks at us with uncertainty. She leads us to a table, dropping menus and striding away. We're both *other*. Maybe it's that.

There are some humans who are more sensitive to us in that regard.

"I'm going to clean up," Astra murmurs as soon as I've sat.

I rise again.

She eyes me. "What are you doing?"

"Do you remember the last time you were left in a bathroom unattended?" I roll my eyes. "If you think I'm letting you out of my sight, you're deluded."

Her whole face grows red, but she doesn't object until we get to the door marked *women*. I push in ahead of her, and she lets out a squeak.

It's just a one-person bathroom. No stalls. My stubbornness sets in, and I lock the door.

The scent of her magic, the mix of honey and lemon that is *her*, fills the room. Her glamour falls away, revealing her Mark, the dirt clinging to her skin. The shadows under her eyes are worse in the glaring fluorescent lights.

She crosses her arms. "What are you doing?"

"Humor me, Astra." My voice is husky. I need her close, if only to destroy the mate bond once and for all. To rid myself of this need to be so close to her. It's painful. Why do wolves choose this?

All I can focus on are her damn lips. She leans on the sink counter, gripping its edge, and tips her head back when I step up close to her.

I kiss her.

Can't help it.

What starts gentle becomes an inferno. She grasps at my waist, and I draw her closer. I want her flush against me. I nip her lower lip. She gasps.

I take advantage, sliding my tongue into her mouth. Every inch of me wants to possess her, and I can't hide this feeling—I won't. Not after I just strode into my cousin's territory and fought him. Not for myself, not for the betterment of my pack. For *her*.

I nip her lower lip again, coaxing a whimper from her. Her hands fist my shirt. I lift her onto the counter and spread her legs, stepping between them. She locks her ankles behind me, and our kiss never breaks.

Does she like my taste?

Does she feel how deep my obsession runs?

Did she miss me or pray that I would come?

I hope she didn't give up.

Her hands coast under my shirt, across my abdomen. Her fingers find the healed claw marks from my fight with Gage, seeming to probe for a reaction. When I give her none, she moves lower. She unbuckles my pants and shoves them down.

I tense when she wraps her fingers around my shaft. My hips flex, sliding my dick in her grip. Her hold is too light, but her inexperience is charming.

“Have you done this before?” I ask her. Has she touched someone else like this? Because I’ll hunt them down and cut their appendages off.

She shakes her head.

I exhale and curl my hands over hers, squeezing. The thought of taking her firsts fills me with relief. I don’t want to share her, I don’t want to think about anyone else touching her. It’s bad enough that she kissed someone else before me.

“Good,” I manage.

She slides her hand up and down. “Show me how you like it, then.”

Goddamn it.

“Kiss me,” I order.

I keep my hand over hers, doing what she wants. I show her how to get me off. But then her lips land on mine, and I’m a goner either way. Her tongue flicks against my lower lip. I open for her, sucking her tongue into my mouth and tangling it with mine. I cup the back of her neck with my free hand.

“Good girl,” I whisper. My hips move, my cock sliding in our grip, and I jerk faster until my balls tighten.

I pull back and point my cock over her hip, aiming for the sink. I hiss at the sensation and the way her fingers automatically tighten again. It twitches in her hand, and my cum hits the sink bowl. Bliss radiates up my spine.

Her lips touch my jaw.

“Thank you for coming to get me,” she says softly.

When I’m spent, I catch her lips in one more kiss. It’s sloppy and wet, and I hope it fucking conveys that I wanted to find her so much sooner.

I drag my thumb under her lower lip, collecting her saliva. She deserves to come, too. I’m just not sure her body can take much more assault right now, especially without food.

Someone knocks on the door, and Astra jumps.

It gives me some modicum of satisfaction that she’s rattled. I wet a paper towel and clean myself up, righting my sweatpants.

The knock comes again.

“One second,” Astra finally responds, her voice hoarse.

She doesn’t object when I pull my sweatshirt off her and sling it over my shoulder. I grab more paper towels and wet them to clean her face in

steady, gentle strokes. She tips her head to the side, giving me more room to swipe it down her neck and remove the remnants of dried blood.

My chest tightens at the wreckage of her skin. It's knitted itself back together now, but we can only do so much.

"Thanks," she finally whispers.

My throat works. "Why are you thanking me? This is my fault."

She doesn't respond, and I go through three more wads of paper towels before I'm satisfied. I lean in and press my lips to the mark my wolf left on her. It's now just a silvery scar on her collarbone.

Finally, I step back. She shrugs the sweatshirt back on, and I offer her my hand. She takes it after a moment of hesitation. Her face gets red, and then the magic glamour she used before slips back over her features. This way, I'd almost be convinced she's as healthy as before, and startlingly ordinary. Even the dried blood on her jeans is obscured.

I unlock the door, but she doesn't let go.

Right outside, an older woman waits with a pinched expression. Her eyebrows hike in disbelief, and I snicker. I lead Astra back to the table. She takes her pick of the booth benches, and she doesn't say anything when I slide in after her. I hook my arm over the back, just over her shoulders, and spread my legs. My knee touches her thigh.

We're out of place in here, it's true. There's white linens on the tables, the servers are all in black attire. Most of the other patrons are wearing business clothes, having meetings over a meal or entertaining clients.

She's in a sweatshirt and bloody jeans, and I'm in a t-shirt and sweatpants.

I'd be self-conscious if I cared. We scan the menu, and her cheeks get even redder.

"What do you want?" I ask.

She lifts one shoulder. "Probably just a side salad. If you still have my wallet."

I narrow my eyes. "And if you didn't see the prices?"

"I don't know, the grilled salmon or something. Not that I have money, unless it's in the truck." She faces me and raises her eyebrows.

"Don't worry about the money," I tell her. "Astra. Why couldn't I feel you?"

She frowns. "He had wards on the house. And the cuffs—they blocked *everything*. My magic was the point, but even our..."

“Bond,” I finish. “Until two days ago.”

“I wasn’t able to replenish my magic anymore,” she whispers. “Someone took the cuffs off and put them back on after Sonia drained me again.”

“She was draining your magic?”

My wolf growls in my mind, emerging from his slumber. He’s been quiet since the fight. Exerting dominance over another wolf had him energized until the adrenaline faded.

We don’t like the idea of someone preying on our girl.

“She was a blood witch... and a vampire.” Astra sighs, rubbing her eyes. “I don’t know what they were doing with the magic once she had it. They had so many witches when I first got there. But by the end, it was just me.”

Fuck.

“And the mate bond?” Her voice trembles. “That’s real, isn’t it?”

“You feel me?” I pull on the thread between us. It vibrates like an instrument, resounding a beautiful note in my chest that only we can hear.

She touches it, too. It’s softer, weaker. A testament to the magic she’s lost. She’s currently burning through the rest of it to keep this glamour in place.

I put my finger under her chin, guiding her head back around to me. She meets my gaze with some reluctance.

“I find you absolutely stunning. Mark and all. My wolf knew the fate of us before we did, but it *is* fate. Destiny. Whatever you want to call it. It’s pushing us together.”

“I won’t become a shifter,” she says in a low voice. “I’m not perfect for you.”

“I’m an alpha,” I respond. “I’m not typical. Neither are you. That’s enough.”

“Welcome in,” a waitress interrupts. “Can I get you started on anything? Drinks?”

I order for both of us, ignoring Astra’s quiet protest. Salmon for her, steak for me. Potatoes. Vegetables. A side of mac ‘n’ cheese. Waters for both of us. And a side salad, just to see if I can get her to smile.

It works.

But I order everything to-go, because she’d probably be better off with a shower and a real bed than made to sit here and expend magic for an hour.

“We could go back and find Sonia,” Astra says. “See if she’d help us. She’s a blood witch...”

“And a vampire. They’re loyal to their masters and those who can provide for them. That’s not us, that’s Gage. Even if she was a blood witch, she’s something else now.” My stomach swoops. “All the more reason to find our own.”

I nod to myself. We’re still on the same path. Find the blood witch, end the curse. Rescue Astra’s mother. That last one wasn’t on *my* to-do list, but it’s only fair. She helps me, I help her.

Right?

“Do you think Gage will strike back?”

“If he does, we’ll handle it.”

He’s embarrassed, and he’s clearly inherited our bloodline’s calculating nature. If he chooses to come at me again, it will be a well thought out plan. I make a note to keep an eye on his pack, then redirect my attention back to Astra.

She shudders. Then, even more surprising, she leans into me. Puts her head on my shoulder. “I miss my mom. She’d know what to do.”

“Would she?”

Astra fiddles with the cuffs of the sweatshirt. “Of course she would.”

“She could’ve seen all of this coming.” I pick up a lock of her hair and twist it around my fingers. “She could’ve seen exactly what would happen. And maybe she even pushed the pieces so it would unfold like *this*. Maybe she knew that you were fated to mate with me, and she didn’t do anything to stop it.”

“Why?” She lifts her head and stares at me.

“Because sometimes, little nightmare, we have to go through hell to find our peace.”

She swallows. “The only way we’re going to find out for sure is if we ask her.”

It’s a challenge—but I’m not going to shy away from it. Not after what we just went through. My wolf agrees.

Eventually, though, we’ll have to face the other problems looming over us: the mate bond, the fate of the witches and female shifters, the demons.

The life of my sister, and the future of my pack, all hangs in the balance.

CHAPTER 27

ASTRA

One room.
One bed.

I narrow my eyes at Kian, but he just shakes his head. I glance over my shoulder and contemplate storming back up to the front desk, demanding another room. Or a room with two beds, at least.

He seems unbothered. Of course he does—he asked for this while I wandered the lobby of the quirky hotel, holding on to the last remnants of the glamour by my fingernails.

After our lunch in the car, parked facing the trees, we drove for another few hours. It's getting dark out, which just reminds me that I have even less choice than I'd like. Venturing outside in the dark doesn't seem like a good idea in an unfamiliar location, at any rate.

"Close the door," he says.

I let it slam shut, then flip the deadbolt for good measure. He drops our bags on the bed, and I'm startled to find *my* bag, packed to the brim. It's fuller than when my mother shoved it into my hands... how long ago? Two and a half months ago?

Curiosity tickles at me, but we have bigger things to worry about. Namely, our sleeping quarters.

"What's the plan?" I cross my arms. "Trick me into your bed?"

"Do you see any tricks here, Astra?" He rolls his eyes. "I'm not letting you out of my sight, and they didn't have any rooms with two beds. Deal with it."

I grumble, but he ignores me.

He unzips his bag and rifles through it. I'm curious about what a wolf shifter takes on a road trip to hunt down a witch. I inch closer until I'm peering over his shoulder.

There's a few t-shirts, another pair of sweatpants—darker gray, but still that alluring color, damn him—a black zippered pouch, underwear...

He glances back at me, and I jump.

"Do you like what you see?" He smirks.

"Nope. It's rather boring, actually."

"Yours was, too. We have that in common."

He searched my bag—and hid it from me—because he didn't trust me. Totally different.

"We're opposites," I argue.

"Opposites attract." He straightens to his full height. "Or did you decide to ignore what's happening between us?"

I scoff.

He grabs the hem of my sweatshirt—*well, his*—and drags it up and over my head. He drops it and moves on to my shirt. I'm not sure why I'm letting him do it—maybe just because I'm intrigued? Because there's an insatiable ache between my legs that's been there since he saved me?

He takes off my shirt. It joins the sweatshirt on the floor. He traces my Mark, and goosebumps rise on my arms. I fight the urge to cover myself. I'm not lean like a wolf shifter, or even like half the witches I know. And while I lost weight as Gage's captive, all it's done is make my skin sag. My breasts have always been big, my stomach soft.

I smell *awful*.

He steers me into the bathroom and turns on the water. It hisses out of the pipes, and within a minute, steam billows off the stream. He picks up the little shampoo and conditioner bottles supplied by the place and sets them on the edge of the tub.

"Are you going to watch me shower?"

Fuck, my voice is raspy. Like maybe I *want* him to watch me wash the filth off me.

"No." He rubs his ear. "No, I'm going to check the perimeter and make sure no one tracked us here."

He leaves me standing in the bathroom alone. Naked.

A little bit of hurt winds through me, but I force it away. I set a few towels within reach of the shower and step under the burning-hot water. I

can't remember the last time I took a decent shower. It feels like heaven sluicing down my body, and I groan.

I'm finally feeling warm again, too. On the inside. I think that's Kian's doing.

It takes me almost forty-five minutes to feel clean enough to emerge. Somehow, the hot water doesn't run out on me. I dry myself carefully. I hardly recognize my body anymore. The trauma I endured has healed on my skin, but only time might heal my mind.

Jury's out on that one.

I finger-comb my hair, wrap a towel around my body, and take a deep breath.

I can't stall any longer.

The only light is a lamp on the bedside table. Kian sits on the edge of the bed, his elbows on his thighs, and he watches me when I exit. The pulse of magic inside me is so faint, it's almost like I'm still wearing the cuffs. But I can close my eyes and dip into it and assure myself that I'm still okay.

Kian's gaze is stuck somewhere between my breasts and my eyes, and I inch forward again. I need to be honest with him.

"I didn't date anyone when I moved away from home," I say quickly. "Because guys don't see me. If you know what I mean."

His brow lowers. "Banish that insecurity, little nightmare. I take pleasure in looking at you. And touching you. And talking to you, even when I want to sometimes strangle you. I'd like to show you how much I enjoy it." His pupils are large, the blue almost totally obscured.

I don't know why I find myself nodding yes, I want that, but he doesn't hesitate to hold out his hand. I take it carefully, and he tugs me forward, until I'm standing between his legs.

He peels my towel away far too easily. It falls away from me, revealing my naked body. My heart is going to jump out of my chest at this rate. His hand finds my hip, steadying me just when I need it. He leans in and kisses my sternum, right between my breasts.

"You're fucking perfect," he mumbles.

His scruff tickles my skin. My focus follows him as he moves lower between my breasts. My nipples are hard little pebbles. He cups one of my breasts, his thumb brushing over the sensitive nub. The burst of pleasure that washes over me is unexpected. I grab shoulders before I lose my balance.

He meets my gaze and smirks. He kisses my belly, over the stretch marks that I've always masked with a concealment charm, up the tip of my untouched breast.

He sucks my nipple into his mouth, his tongue flicking at it. My back arches, and I try not to wriggle away from him. It feels so good. Wetness floods between my legs, and he inhales. Then groans. He pinches my other nipple.

I shift my hips, restless.

He adjusts, moving me so I'm sitting on his leg. My core is right against his thigh, and all it takes is a roll of my hips for the pleasure to smolder between my legs.

After a moment of indecision, in which he ignores what I'm doing and keeps giving my breasts the bulk of his attention, I grind on him. And fuck if it doesn't feel *good*.

Filthy, unbelievable noises come out of my mouth. I can't seem to form coherent words, but he's reacting all the same. Until he suddenly leans away.

I whimper.

He shakes his head once, then scoots backward. He grips my hips and urges me to straddle him higher. His waist, then his chest.

I stare down at him. "What are you doing?"

He keeps pushing at me until I crawl over him.

"Tasting you," he says. He stops me and drags my ass down. His face is *right there*. Between my legs.

Hot embarrassment flushes through me, and I lift again. Resisting the allure of him.

"Kian," I protest.

"Sit on my face, Astra," he orders. "Suffocate me, I don't care. I'll die happy."

I bite my lip, but he pulls me down. My pussy makes contact with his mouth and my brain stops working.

If I thought his leg was good, it's nothing compared to his mouth. His grip on me ensures that I can't escape, and I don't know if I want to run away or grind down harder.

He licks and sucks, paying attention to the spots that make me shiver, make me jump. He doesn't do a half-assed job. He's devouring me like this is his only reason for existing. And I've never had that before. Never had a

guy seem so *into* me, that they'd want to give me pleasure for pleasure's sake.

His tongue thrusts inside me, and oh my God. I've explored with fingers, but other than that... virgin status.

I hold on to the headboard when he takes my clit in his mouth. He sucks, licks. *Bites*. I see stars. That shouldn't turn me on, but I get wetter when he does it. His groan only confirms it.

Eventually, an orgasm sneaks up on me.

He slips a finger into my pussy, and I clench at the sudden intrusion. He curls his finger inside me, rubbing a spot that sends zaps of pleasure coursing through me. It tips me over the edge, and I come wordlessly. My thighs tense, and I'd rise if I had the strength. Instead, he just rides out my orgasm with his tongue flicking my clit and his finger inside me.

He slowly pulls his finger out. He rolls me onto my back and crawls up my body.

"Your smell," he growls. "Your *taste*. You're divine. Made for me. There's no other reason you'd be such a temptress."

His lips skate along my jaw, and finally, he catches my lips. His tongue presses into my mouth, and I get a taste of myself.

The flavor is surprising. It tastes better mixed with his saliva. He braces his weight on his forearms, on either side of my head, and nips my neck. A little prick of teeth to cut through the pleasure.

I freeze.

He freezes.

I push away the pain associated with teeth in my neck, but the fear rises up my throat like I'm right back in that cell.

When I wrestle my mind back under control, Kian hasn't gone anywhere. He's rubbing his nose along my collarbone, content to wait for my death grip on his hair to loosen.

"Sorry," I breathe.

He rises back up so we're nose to nose. "Not your fault."

And he's still fully clothed.

"I could be sent from the Devil," I say lightly. "No way something divine could be so unlucky."

"I don't believe in the Devil," he tells me. "We're spoon-fed tales of all-powerful beings who are supposed to dictate our life. I just believe in fate, and the powers of the moon, and life itself."

My mother believes much the same. Fate, anyway, and the stars. She said that our lives, our futures, were constantly shifting. There wasn't just one path for us—but sometimes, outcomes were inevitable. No matter what we did. That's fate.

"You and my mom might've gotten along," I say.

He chuckles. "Not anymore."

"Why?"

"When she learns I've defiled her daughter?" He's amused—*laughing*. The noise that comes out of him goes straight to my heart.

Damn you, heart.

"You haven't completely defiled me," I mutter.

He rolls off me, back to his feet. "And I won't."

"Why not?"

"So many questions."

He's not saying it like a bad thing, so I wait him out. He places my bag on the bed and meets my gaze.

"Sex will spur on the mating bond."

"And that's bad." I look away, my cheeks heating. Of course it's bad. A witch and a wolf can't mate.

"It's already there." He sits back down and presses his hand to my sternum. "But it isn't too late to stop it."

My throat is dry. I try and fail to swallow. "It would be bad to complete it?"

"Yes, Astra."

So he wants to stop the bond. Somehow. I knew that in the back of my mind. The rational side that isn't caught up in him.

I miss the warmth of him. He balls his hands into fists over and over, until he finally seems to come to some decision. About the truth, maybe. *Finally.*

"The bite triggered the beginning. Sex is part of it. Stalking you, dominating you." His eyes flash. He might be imagining it now. After a beat, he continues, "The farther we go, the more wrapped up in it we'll get. The more we'll feel it. The lead up to the final piece is all-consuming. That's how it works. It *wants* us to mate, because it's wolf instinct. It drives us to procreate, even—"

He stops talking.

“Even what?” I rise, too, ignoring that I’m naked. “And what’s the final piece?”

Nudity can be its own form of armor, judging by the way his gaze sweeps my body before returning to my eyes.

“You can’t become my mate,” Kian snaps. “It requires you to be a wolf, and you’re not. You’re a witch. The type of witch who can endanger my entire pack.”

I scoff. I unzip my bag and dig for some clothes. Fabric suddenly seems like a necessary barrier right now. He’s so fucking infuriating.

There are more clothes in here than I had before. I touch items with tags on them, and my brows furrow. This is *not* the time to get into that, so I bypass them for something familiar. Shorts and an oversized t-shirt.

I shrug them on in a hurry and am even more pissed to discover the shirt smells like him. Did he wear it before packing it? What the fuck?

He can’t go on and on about not mating, and me endangering his pack, and whatever other bullshit he’s selling, *and* put me in clothes that smell like him.

“You’re the one who won’t tell me a damn thing about this curse,” I retort. “How am I supposed to help you break it if I don’t know what I’m dealing with?”

“You’re missing the point.” He glares at me. “You want to get so sucked in to being my mate, but I will *not* turn you into a wolf. Which means you can’t bite me and complete one of the steps to finishing the mate bond. We’d be left in limbo forever. The pull of it would kill us. Do you understand me?”

I throw my hands in the air. “You’re being dramatic. You’ve never had a mate before, right?”

“Don’t be cute right now,” he warns. “Don’t try to glaze over this. *Think*. How long did it take you to master your magic? Weeks? Months?”

“Years.” I brush off his words. I see through his tactic. “I’m not asking to be a wolf shifter, Kian. I don’t *want* to become the thing that has haunted me for years. And guess what? Every time you call me *little nightmare*, it reminds me that *your* kind has been at the forefront of said nightmares since I was four.”

I yank my boots on and head for the door.

He doesn’t try to block me. I fling the door open and stomp out, and he doesn’t say a goddamn thing. The door slams shut and thunders in the silent

hallway. No one seems to give a shit. No one pokes their heads out or yells at me as I storm away.

Fuck him.

Fuck his wolf for biting me, for kidnapping me and then getting *me* abducted, for thinking that I could do anything to break a curse. For setting me back *weeks* saving my mother.

I want to find the blood witch for her, and he wants to find her for the curse. It still leaves the question of why he needs *me*.

He doesn't. His wolf is in charge of that one, I fear. He could've moved on and let Gage kill me. I was on the cusp of it.

It was selfish of him to come for me.

And selfish of me to stay.

I touch my neck. I almost wish I carried some physical reminder of trauma with me. Instead, it's all locked up in my head. Even the marks the cuffs left are gone. But I close my eyes and Sonia's teeth cut into my skin, her tongue lapping at my blood. The cold creeps through me. The burning agony in my chest.

Tears fill my eyes. I haven't cried in a really fucking long time. I didn't let tears shed in the cell. At times, I was too tired or too angry. And I really didn't want to show Gage a drop more of vulnerability than he already saw.

What if I can't get over it?

What if he broke me?

Fear shoots through me, and I slip on the stairs. I tumble and land in a heap on the landing, my muscles aching.

Another prick of fear, swallowed by an avalanche of anger.

The wolf shifters are manipulating me at every turn.

I involuntarily call up the trickle of power I have left. It's not all there, waiting for me to tap into it. It's still sick and starving, just the same as me.

But I lean into what I have, and I slam my hands to the step above me.

Instinct. Desperation.

Anger.

It comes in a wave. My vision goes white. My hair stands up.

And for the first time, I transport on purpose.

CHAPTER 28

KIAN

I rush into the stairwell. I was letting her get air, but she wasn't going to make it out of the inn without me.

At the sound of her fall, I jump into action. Angry or not—and she definitely is, judging by the emotion crawling through our bond—she's still my witch.

She's at the bottom of the stairs, sprawled on the floor. She looks at her palms, and her expression isn't angry, it's sad. Her skin glows, and she seems to choke on nothing for a moment. The pressure in the stairwell builds. She lets out a noise of frustration and hits the step above her.

The pressure *pops* in a blast of searing light. It's too bright to keep my eyes on her, and when I look next, she's gone.

I inhale the scent of magic and glance around. Honey and lemon. Nothing else.

The feel of our bond is so subtle. I hurry down to where she was just lying. I touch the step she hit. Her magical signature is here, marked on the worn carpet.

My wolf's panic slams into me. He seems more concerned about the bond than where she went. He paces in my mind's eye, and I close my eyes to better focus inward. I examine the bond.

It's intact, I tell him.

Where? He's agitated.

I shake my head. She's far away. Too far to make any fucking sense.

My wolf growls. He wants out. He wants to track her down and make it better, because he thinks I caused this. He thinks I shouldn't have told her we weren't going to proceed with the stupid mate bond.

To him, it's painfully obvious that we *will* complete it.

Apparently, I'm the only one thinking with any sense.

Astra can't be turned into a wolf shifter. With her magic, she'd be an abomination. No better than the vampire witch who drained her dry. And I'd be just like Gage, experimenting with dark magic and witches.

Witch and wolf magic aren't compatible. Everyone knows that.

I need her. I want her. But at the end of the day, I can't have her.

I grind my teeth and return to the room. I could wait or hope for her to come back. That would mean giving her the time to do so.

The overwhelming feeling in my chest isn't optimism. It's abandonment.

My wolf is upset, but he doesn't say anything else. He doesn't offer insight or a solution. We're just... We're careening down a path I can't get off of.

I reach for Griffin. Unlike Astra, I can pinpoint his location easily. There are so many threads connecting me to my pack, but I'm closest to my hunters. And they're closest to me.

Griffin, Coral, Jessamine, and Roman are nearby. There are other hunters, too, but they're finishing disposing of a coven they found. Erasing any sign of them for the humans, keeping the town safe.

Astra disappeared, I tell him. *Be ready in case I need you.*

His alarm shines through. I know what he's thinking. We only just found her, and she's gone again? I'd laugh if I didn't want to shout.

It's fine. Stand by.

I push his echoing concern away, too.

Now, though, I see our hunt through Astra's eyes. And I'm reminded that she asked me to stop hunting covens. Covens that may or may not be minding their own business, destroyed by our hate. Families ripped apart...

But what did I do while she was gone?

I doubled down.

"I hate her," I mutter. I have the constant reminder of what she is plastered on the side of her face, but even *that*, I find endearing.

Sometimes.

It's her save-the-witches attitude that rubs me the wrong way. Why shouldn't it? I have no doubt that she feels the same about me and my ideology.

My wolf slides a memory at me, hemmed in by a silent admonishment I haven't felt from him before.

I know better than to resist it.

I sit on the edge of the bed that still smells like her arousal and close my eyes. I'm immediately engulfed in it. I was ten at the time, still a child in so many ways.

MY FATHER STRIDES through the open door of Erin and Matteo's house. I look up when I see him, my hands pausing on the toy trucks I was smashing together. He doesn't bother to even glance at Erin, whose head immediately bends. I don't like that. I don't like that he makes her fear him so much that she lowers almost her whole body when he enters a room.

And he walked into their house like he owned it.

Well, he does. He likes to remind me that he owns everything around here, right down to the pack members.

"Come with me," he orders, his gaze fixed on me.

I drop the toys and hurry to his side. I've learned that much, being around him. Hurrying to follow his directions is the way to appease him. To keep him from getting too angry, too fast.

He leads the way through the orchard, back up to the houses. His is the biggest, right in the center. Except we bypass it and continue into the woods beyond. Even though I struggle to keep up with his long stride, he doesn't slow.

"Your weakness isn't my problem," he's said on more than one occasion.

It forces me to remain silent, too. I'm too busy focusing on my breathing and my steps to bother looking around, and it isn't until he stops that I jerk my head up.

At the sight, I almost run.

Almost.

My father catches my arm, frowning and yanking me close.

There's a witch on her knees in the clearing. I can't figure out her age. Her face keeps changing, bit by bit, until my mental image of her is all screwed up. She's got two ropes around her neck. They're held by two of my father's men, one on either side of her. They keep a good distance away. Ten, fifteen feet each.

She has a gag in her mouth. Her hands are bound so tightly, her fingers are bright red.

"She has cast a concealment charm on herself," my father tells me. "That's why you can't figure out her face."

I nod, still staring. Still trying to make sense of it.

"Why do you... have her?" I ask.

His hand moves from my arm to my shoulder. He assumes that I won't run since my initial surprise has passed. He may be right. I can only imagine the punishment if I disappointed him—or worse, disrespected him—in front of a witch and two of his betas.

"To teach you," he says. He prods me forward. "Find the gemstone and crush it."

I go toward her on shaky legs. My back aches from keeping my shoulders thrown back and trying not to tremble, but I keep walking until I'm right in front of her.

Her bound hands are also attached to her waist. She can't lift them to push me away. Can't do anything but stare at me.

Blue eyes.

Brown eyes.

Almond-shaped, then round, then thin little slits.

Green.

Blue again.

I visually search all over, then eventually, reluctantly, pat her down. I find the stone in a necklace down her shirt, and my face heats when I lift it from between her breasts. I yank it off her and drop it to the ground, grinding it between my heel and a rock until it cracks.

There's a faint whoosh of air past us, and her features stop changing.

Hazel eyes, a bit too small and close together. Her brows lower. Her hair is light brown, and I don't understand why she would want to hide herself.

She seems fine. Ordinary, but...

"Find her Mark," my father orders.

Nothing on the visible skin of her arms, her legs.

I have to open her clothing. I glance back at my father, who nods. Her skin is smooth and pale. After a moment, her eyes shift away and focus on something other than me, while I fumble the buttons. Her shirt parts, exposing her breast.

My heart stops.

Just under her nipple is the Mark. It's black, like a scar and a tattoo combined. Another burst of fear wraps through me, and my father growls.

I stumble back, leaving her like that. With her shirt open...

"You know we hunt witches, Kian." He's suddenly behind me, speaking into my ear. "But did you know that some witches can see the future?"

"N-no," I stammer. "How?"

He shakes his head. "Vile magic. They consorted with the Devil. That's how they were gifted their powers."

He strides forward, and anger flashes across the witch's face. He ignores it and rips the gag from her mouth.

"You will look into my son's future," he says. "Or you will suffer immeasurable pain before your life ends. You see that much, don't you?"

He touches the Mark. Or maybe her nipple. Either way, the witch shudders.

She wets her lips. "I need my hands."

My father shrugs. His fingernail elongates into a claw, and he slashes through the bindings. Before she can move, he grips her throat. That same nail cuts into her skin just under her ear.

"If you make one wrong move, it won't be just you I kill. Every witch you've ever come into contact will die the same way."

Her lips part, but she nods. She remains on her knees, but she reaches out and offers her hand. Palm up.

How can one hand induce such fear in me?

"Kian." The warning in my father's voice is enough to jumpstart me into action.

I set my hand in hers.

Her fingers immediately tighten, and her eyes roll back. We wait in silence, then she goes rigid.

"Alpha," she murmurs. "Winter Wolf. A witch..."

"What witch?" my father demands.

"The one who will end everything. They're destined to collide in blood. A world drenched in shadows. The Prince of Darkness. Water meets fire in the depths of despair. I can't see who wins..."

She releases me and falls to the side. The ropes tighten around her neck, hanging her for a moment. She jerks back awake and grasps at the ropes, using them to get herself back to her knees. Her lips part. Her chest heaves.

She straightens her shirt slowly, eyeing me now with... suspicion.

My father is behind her. I don't know if she even notices. He places his hands on either side of her head. His expression is furious. I can smell it on him, rising by the second.

Her gaze meets mine for the first time.

"Good luck surviving her, Winter Wolf," she whispers.

He snaps her neck.

I RUB MY EYES. "Are you saying that what the witch saw is coming true?"

Sometimes it's easier to just talk out loud rather than think at him. It makes me feel like I'm not alone—which I am. Speaking makes me forget for half a second.

Yes, my wolf replies.

"That's a stretch." I rise and resume my pacing. "Prince of Darkness? What the hell did the rest of it mean?" I stop, narrowing my eyes. "You kept that crystal clear. Why?"

Because I knew we would need to remember.

Right.

Well, one thing is true: the witch and I collided.

And what she can end is the curse, if we get so lucky. But now, I have a more pressing concern: like where the hell Astra went. And if she's okay. Maybe she depleted her magic and can't return. Maybe she doesn't know how.

I grit my teeth and head out the door.

If anything, my wolf will be able to track her better than me.

At the edge of the woods, I shed my clothes and shift. Immediately, that pulse of a bond is strengthened. I let him follow his instincts and hope that it'll guide me right to her. Argument or no, she can't do that. She can't just... disappear on me like that.

He yanks on the bond harder than I ever would've. I wince at the sensation that rebounds through our wolf chest. He puts his nose in the air, scenting, then suddenly takes off running.

Do you think the blood witch will have the answers we need? I ask suddenly.

I think it would be wise to assume that she'll give us information. Whether or not it will lead to the answers we seek, and whether or not that information can be trusted, is another matter.

Awfully wordy for a usually quiet wolf.

I ponder it as we run, but he forces me back into the present. I sense his innate joy at the way his muscles stretch and the wind in his fur. He speeds up, sprinting through the woods with his tongue lolling out. He's happy to be here, even when worry crowds in.

I absorb it and let it lift my mood.

If nothing else, we get to run.

He skirts the edge of the town, the lights flickering through the trees in the distance. The sounds of human life filter toward us, too.

That witch was the first to call us the Winter Wolf. It wasn't until almost ten years later, shortly after my twentieth birthday, that I earned the name in earnest.

My wolf snickers.

He likes that memory.

We can reminisce later, I tell him.

He huffs.

Suddenly, pain lances through the bond with Astra. The pain obscures everything else. We stumble and fall, and I can't stop my shift back to human. I land at the base of a pine tree, naked and sore.

It takes me a moment to focus through the agony. It feels like I'm being ripped from the inside out. I hate that this isn't the first time I've felt it. That this is similar to how I felt when Gage had her.

My heart skips, pounding faster through the pain. Did he grab her again? Did the vampire witch find her?

It abruptly cuts off. The pain. The strength of the bond. It's all radio silent.

CHAPTER 29

ASTRA

One minute I'm in the stairwell of the hotel after an argument with Kian. And the next, I'm surrounded by sunshine. The landscape is craggy and barren, the sun hot on my skin. I stand slowly and spin in a circle, my jaw working. In the distance is a huge city. And farther beyond it, glittering with its perpetual motion, is the ocean.

I've never seen the ocean in person before.

I shield my eyes from the sun. I'm not sure exactly what to do. I could try to get back to Kian, I suppose, but part of me relishes the panic he must've been feeling. It's what he deserves after what he said to me.

Well, I hoped he was panicking.

He wants us to reject this bond. It's completely illogical of me to want to *keep* it, even though I don't want to be a wolf. But the connection is something precious, and it deserves safe-keeping.

Doesn't it?

Besides the city, there's no sign of life. I turn again, and movement over the ridge catches my attention.

A woman with a big floppy hat and a walking stick comes marching down an invisible path toward me. Her gaze lands on me from a far distance away, although she doesn't seem surprised.

"Astra Somnium," she calls. "Yes?"

I flinch.

"Yes," she mutters, more to herself than me. "Come."

She heads off in a new direction, and I have no choice but to follow. Well, I have a choice. I could stay here and die of dehydration or get lost and eaten by a mountain lion. Wouldn't that be a nasty surprise?

I pick myself up and follow the best I can. I slip and skid my way down a rocky path, almost wiping out a time or two. After a few minutes of silence, the woman glances back.

"I'm Beatrice," she introduces. "I believe you've been looking for me."
And that's that.

My nerves make me jittery. I'm so tired of being tired and sore and afraid. I follow the witch down the side of the mountain and try not to pass out. Or throw up.

She's somewhere between my mother's age and mine. Her blonde hair is long and wavy, loose around her shoulders, although the hat hides most of it and shades her face.

Eventually, we make it to a little cottage perched on the side of the mountain. She hops up the steps, a spring in her gait, and I hobble after her. If I knew I was in for a hike, I would've put on better shoes.

She leads me down a narrow hall and into a small kitchen. There's not a lot of space to maneuver with how she's filled it. The counters are covered in supplies. There's a round wooden table in the center, with a tight space to walk around it.

"Sit," she orders. She places a water bottle on the table.

Without waiting for me, she takes one of the two chairs. I drag out the one opposite her, sinking into it slowly. The place feels familiar, but I can't put my finger on it.

"Your Mark is beautiful," she says suddenly, leaning forward. She braces her forearms on the table, gaze fixed on my neck. "I've never seen such a gorgeous thing."

My face heats, and I try not to raise my hand to cover it. I've been hiding for so long, sometimes it's easy to forget that covens look at Marks to determine power. It's an old tradition, one my mother insisted didn't carry much weight anymore. Any witch of true power could hide her Mark or manipulate how people see it.

"Were you searching for me?" she asks. She nudges the water bottle closer to me.

I accept it and drink half of the cold water in long gulps before I consider her question. "That depends on who you are."

Her brown eyes seem to blacken. The whole room dims as power rolls off her body. My mouth dries, even with the water I just drank, and I shrink back.

“I practice dark magic, Astra Dreamstone. Some call me a blood witch, a covenless monster. What do you see?”

I clear my throat. “I just see a woman who helped me down off the mountain.”

Her smile completely erases the darkness that just seemed to be peering out at me from inside her. A switch flips. I squint at her and I can’t find a trace of it. Even though I just witnessed it.

I shiver.

“I didn’t want to leave a sister stranded. Please, Astra, make yourself comfortable. You look... flushed.”

More like flustered. “I don’t know how I got here. I don’t know a lot of things.”

I unscrew the bottle’s cap again and take a long swallow. I just need to get it over with and tell her the truth. She can accept or reject it from there.

But if she rejects it... or *me*, then I’m back to square one.

“You have strong magic, although it’s heavily burnt out,” she says. “I could sense it even before you arrived.”

I’m silent.

“Do you know what happens when you travel via magic?” Her gaze bores into me. “It’s like dropping a stone into the ocean. The water around it is affected, and that ripple doesn’t stop when it’s out of sight. It goes in every direction, leaving nothing untouched. That’s why it’s banned in most conservative covens. A ripple can be too hard to change—or stop—if it gets out of hand. And impossible to control.”

“So, um, are you saying I shouldn’t do it?”

She grins, hooking her arm on the back of her chair. “That’s one thing I won’t ever say.”

Because she’s a rule-breaker.

“All I mean is for you to be aware. There are some who hide behind their ignorance. What does that do? It creates problems. Especially hidden ones, like rot.” Beatrice sighs. “Such is the way of things now. Coven leaders don’t want to teach their witches how to defend themselves. They’re content to sit back and watch the wolf shifters wipe them out of existence.”

I sit up. “That’s true. They don’t teach us how to fight them.”

“They use ignorance to mask that there are solutions. A wolf shifter isn’t as affected by our magic? I’m sure you’ve come up with other options, having been traveling with one.”

We go quiet again. I don't have an answer for that. She *would* know I was traveling with Kian. I bite my lip, but she waves off my worry.

"Here's a secret, Astra: there are no such things as secrets." She cracks a smile. "So what can I do for you? Honestly, this time."

I smile at her joke, but it fades quickly. "My mother was taken by demons."

She nods. "I heard."

"How?"

"Spirits," she says simply. "Your friend, the one who betrayed you? Cecelia? Well, for one, she didn't get my address quite right. I'm obviously not living surrounded by neighbors. A long time ago, she trained me to communicate with spirits. Lucky for me, they liked me better. She tried to teach me the normal way of scrying and the seeing into the future, too. But, alas, I can only scry when I give the glass a drop of my blood. And I can only see the future when I sacrifice a piece of my soul."

I stare at her.

"So the spirits are the way to go," she finishes. "Spirits, while finicky, unruly creatures, are desperate for something. A taste of magic, usually, that lets them feel something. Imagine existing on this plane but being unable to feel the wind? That gift is more gentle on my body, and more precious to them, than scrying my life blood away or peering into the future and shattering my soul more."

More. As in, she's done it before.

The weird part is... she's charming in a quirky way. She seems like she could be a replacement for Sarah Jessica Parker if they wanted to remake *Hocus Pocus*. Thin, pretty, blonde. Carefree, sort of.

But so fucking dark.

"I need to know how to rescue her from the shadow realm," I say in a rush. "Please. Can you help me?"

She watches me. Deciding. She nods slowly. "I'll do my best. But there's a process. Steps to follow to ensure we get *all* of her—not just her body. Do you understand?"

My eyes widen.

There's a chance we could bring her back, only for her soul to be left behind? Or her mind?

"Simply going there and coming back with her isn't going to work," she says. "Demons leave their souls behind when they travel here—why would

a witch's soul be any different? Anyway. Shall we begin? I have a feeling your wolf is going to track you down one way or another... Let's give him something to get his blood pumping, hmm?"

"What does that mean?"

She waves her hand at my chest. It's covered, but she seems to look straight at the silver scar Kian's wolf left behind.

"The bite. I assume the mating bond has begun, which means you *should* be able to feel him. All I'm proposing is to use him as the first step in our ritual to save your mother."

I narrow my eyes. "It won't kill him, will it? Or stop this...?"

"Interesting." She appraises me. "You would want to salvage the mate bond? Even knowing what awaits you at the end? I suppose what happened to Cecelia's coven is answer enough, but I thought you might have changed your mind in the following weeks."

"To be frank, I have no idea what's waiting for me. I think I can count on pain and suffering, but I'm getting used to that. Either way, I don't care. He's promised to help me for my help in return."

She scoffs. "Stupid wolves, always hunting for a way to break the curse set on them a hundred years ago. He goes about it in a way that makes me question their morality, don't you agree?"

Well, yeah.

"And morality is the reason the curse was cast in the first place." She waves her hand.

"I..." I look around her kitchen again, this time trying to understand her. Who is this blood witch who lives in the middle of nowhere? She clearly doesn't socialize very much, from what she said earlier about talking to people. Or witches, maybe. "Can I see your Mark?"

She smiles. "Of course."

She rises from the table and unbuttons her shirt with slow, smooth movements. I'm not entirely fazed—a lot of witches have Marks on their ribcages or stomachs—but then she reaches behind her and unclips her bra. She bares her breast to me.

There's a swirling pattern just below her nipple.

"Interesting placement, don't you think?" She rebuttons her shirt, now without the bra, and sits back down. "I swear I won't permanently injure the bond between you and the Winter Wolf. I won't kill him, either. But we do need a sacrifice."

She holds out her hand in offering.

Do I trust her?

Not really. But...

I take her hand anyway.

There's an echo of magic around us, binding us to her promise. She grins at the noise, examining my hand in hers before she releases me.

"Be right back," she murmurs. She keeps muttering, her words too obscured to hear her clearly.

The only words I catch are, *stronger than I thought*.

Is she talking about me?

After a few minutes, she returns with supplies. She sets a small handheld mirror on the table between us. The glass is scratched with use, the brass framing dull. She also has a bone knife and a crystal glass of water. A sapphire is at the bottom of the glass.

She extends her hand to me, palm up.

This is fine, I lie to myself.

I give her my left hand. She turns it so my palm is up, then picks up the knife. I wince in anticipation. She quickly slices it across my palm.

The pain is delayed, traveling down my arm only after the blood wells up on my palm. She keeps my hand cradled, but I don't attempt to pull away.

She speaks a foreign tongue under her breath. Italian maybe, or French? It's too fast for me to place it. Magic usually works just fine in our native language—so maybe that's hers. Either way, I feel her magic lap at the edge of mine.

I squeeze my eyes shut, tamping down my reserves on instinct. She doesn't attempt to draw my magic out. It's just trying to connect, I think. I'm still weak. She could overpower me like this. She could rip through my defenses and kill me.

After all, she only promised not to hurt Kian. Nothing was said about my safety.

Beatrice goes quiet and tips my palm over the mirror. A drop falls, then another.

Maybe she wasn't joking about scrying with blood.

The surface of the mirror ripples. She grips my hand tighter, feeding it more blood, until the glass absorbs it. The mirror vibrates. It's so slight, if I wasn't staring at it with such horror I might've missed it. But it transforms

under my gaze, the scratches and dullness disappearing. The finish is replaced with shine, the whole thing gleaming in a matter of seconds.

Her murmuring picks back up. She releases my hand and takes the knife again, this time cutting herself. She dips her blood-tinged fingers into the crystal glass and fishes out the sapphire. Carefully, she presses the gemstone into her cut. She takes my hand like she's shaking it, aligning our cuts. Our blood drips down together, mixing, and it sizzles on the mirror.

This time, the magic is dragged from me without my consent. I cry out, but she doesn't relent. She pours it into the stone, her voice rising.

I look up.

Her eyes are pure black.

Foreboding lifts the hair on my arms and the back of my neck.

She continues speaking, her grip on my hand firm. Something descends over me, and I can't move. Panic rises in my chest, swift and strong.

The mate bond.

Her lips twitch, like she senses it, and now she pushes magic *into* me. It encases the mate bond in fire.

In my mind, I hear Kian scream.

Figment of your imagination.

But it burns me, too. My back arches, my mouth opens. I can't make a sound, my throat locked, but I scream in my mind.

The mirror flashes gold, and Beatrice drops my hand.

I sag backward, her magical hold on me releasing. I cup my bleeding palm and flinch.

The sapphire is embedded in my skin.

Beatrice finishes her spell and falls back in her chair, too. Her chest heaves. We sit in silence until she catches her breath.

I have a hundred questions I should've thought of *before* the spell.

But I was intrigued, and now I have a feeling I'm going to pay for it. Why would I trust her? Why would I think she would help me just because I asked for it?

Because she knew my name. Because she was a kind face after weeks of nightmares.

"Give me your hand," she says, reaching for me.

I do.

She runs her finger along the cut, healing it easily. She touches the sapphire embedded in my palm, and it flashes bright blue. Then it sinks into

my skin, which knits closed around it. I flex my fingers, but I can't tell that it's there. If it even is—it could be an optical illusion for all I know. I run my nail across my palm, but I only feel skin.

"What the fuck was that?" I whisper.

"The sapphire holds blood magic now," she says. She gestures to the mirror. "And so does the mirror. When you activate the two together, it will allow you to see your mother without demons coming through the scrying glass."

"Is it...?"

"It doesn't turn your soul black, if that's what you're asking." She stands. "It takes quite a bit more blood magic than that—and this wasn't you. It was my spell. I put our magic together into the objects for you to use."

"Thank you," I whisper.

"This is just the beginning," she warns. "The shadow realm is exactly like ours. Think of an overlay. If you peek behind the curtain here, you'd see one small slice of their realm. If you go to Maine, for example, you'd see another entirely. She could be kept in one corner of it, tucked out of the way, and you'd never find her."

Well, fuck.

"That complicates things."

"You can use the mirror to scry for your mother, or you can look through it and see the shadow realm where you stand." She points to it. "Try it. There's no spell, no magic words—just reach for the power in your palm like you'd use any gemstone. Your will can direct it."

I pick up the mirror, which has returned to its dull state. It's so innocuous in its appearance. When I search for the stone in my palm, its glowing, hot power greets me. I dip into it and guide it toward the handle of the mirror.

Immediately, the mirror undergoes its transformation. The metal shines, the mirror's glass clears—and then ripples. It gives way to one hell of a sight: a world of shadows. I'm not scrying, not searching for my mother. I'm seeing a duplicate of our world dripping in darkness.

There are no demons in sight, but the earth curves the same way, the mountain rising ahead of me. In the shadow world, Beatrice's home doesn't exist.

I shudder and turn in a slow circle.

A demon looms in front of me—almost on top of me—and I shriek. I leap backward and collide with the table. Its edge jabs into my hip. The demon doesn't notice, continuing on, and for a moment the mirror shows only black while the demon passes through the space we stand.

I fight my revulsion. A thin layer separates our realm from the shadows—and witches like Beatrice, and even some covens, continually drag demons to our world.

I release the power on the mirror and stone, and it fades back to normal.

I set it facedown and examine my palm again. The stone isn't there. However the blood witch hid it, I can only detect it when I'm trying to reach for its stores of magic.

"Holy shit," I mumble. My mother never taught me this.

Beatrice laughs. "I'm glad you're impressed. Now, when your wolf arrives tomorrow, he can help us with the second piece."

I frown at the table. "Tomorrow?"

"We're in California, darling. Even he can't travel that far without stopping." She shrugs. "Especially if he suddenly feels like he hasn't slept in seven weeks."

I narrow my eyes at her. "You know about...?"

"A witch hears rumors. Spirits love to gossip, you know?" She loops her arm around my waist and helps me up from the table. She guides me into a tiny, crammed living room. "Let's get you some proper rest, and we'll deal with the wolf when he arrives."

"I'm sorry."

She waves me off. "You aren't responsible for his actions. Or his cousin's. I'm going to make you a tea to replenish your strength. Sit tight."

"You know he'd rather torture you into finding out how to break that shifter curse than help you help me. Right?"

"I'm aware. And I'm not afraid of the Winter Wolf."

I sigh.

She points to the overstuffed couch and heads back to the kitchen. I sit and groan at how comfortable it is.

A second—or maybe longer than that—she shakes me awake. She forces a mug into my hands and helps me lift it to my mouth. It tastes like honey and lemon, but the significance escapes me. That's the last thing I remember.

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CHAPTER 30

ASTRA

I wake outside, surrounded by dead grass. My fingers curl in the dry dirt, and I turn away from the sharp brightness of the sun.

I feel better. Surprisingly rested.

I'm not sure how I got out here, though. I sit up slowly, wary of dizziness, and glance around. The blood witch's cottage is only yards away.

The door bangs open and Beatrice appears with two mugs in hand.

She's dressed in a gauzy black dress and black boots. Her blonde hair is pinned out of her face. She glances around at the dead grass and nods to herself.

"Your magic reserves were low," she comments. "Lower than I had expected. I should've asked you before taking some for the mirror. But the earth seemed to want to help you."

I take the mug she offers. "It's not your fault."

"I knew you had been taken." She sighs. "And that you transport yourself. The farther the distance, the more power it takes."

My jaw works.

The tea has a fruity scent to it, but I don't drink it. Not until I get some answers, anyway.

"How do you know that?"

She shrugs. "I've been around for a while. You learn things." Her gaze moves across the mountainside. There are no trees, no cover. Just her cottage built halfway into the hill. Brush and rocks surround her home. "Do you think I always lived here? Alone?"

"I don't know."

“I didn’t,” she replies. “I’ve lived more lives than you could imagine. So, the earth? Seemed a bit remorseful while you were asleep.”

“They would throw me out into the yard every few days. I was kept underground, but it was warded. And after....” I grimace. “I’d wake up like this.”

“Did you offer the earth anything?”

“My blood through the cracks in the concrete. It didn’t work.”

“Didn’t it?”

My brows furrow.

She shrugs. “Drawing life from the earth isn’t easy. Life is precious no matter the form. We make sacrifices to it, and it, in exchange, gives to us.”

“How do you know?”

Her gaze steadies on me. “Because I give my blood to the earth, Astra Dreamstone, and in return, it keeps me alive.”

She steps back suddenly, brushing invisible lint off her dress. “Come inside while I make breakfast. Your wolf will be here soon.”

I focus on the thread that connects us, not surprised to find its pulsing rhythm like a second heartbeat. From there, I turn my inspection inward. My palm tingles, but I do my best to ignore that. It’s easier than thinking about the sapphire containing the blood magic buried under my skin.

Beatrice is right. He’s getting closer.

I go inside, and she directs me to a bathroom around the corner. I brush my teeth and braid my hair, feeling somewhat normal. At least I didn’t have any nightmares. In fact, I slept surprisingly well.

When I return to her kitchen, she sets a plate in front of me. Sausage, eggs, potatoes.

My mouth waters. Besides the meal Kian fed me, I haven’t had more than scraps in *weeks*. She follows it with a mug of coffee and a little pitcher of creamer. A bowl of sugar with a matching spoon. And the mug of tea, which I haven’t worked up the nerve to taste yet.

“Wow.” I sniff the food. “You went all out.”

“I enjoy cooking for other people.” She joins me at the table, helping herself to the sugar and cream for her own coffee. “I couldn’t resist. By the way, the tea is harmless. Just some herbs that help with easing the central nervous system.”

At my raised brow, she leans over and takes a sip from my cup.

“Okay, okay,” I mumble. I drink the damn tea.

We eat in relative silence, but I find myself peeking up at her occasionally. I want to know if she did something to keep the nightmares away, or if it was pure luck. I have so many questions, but none of them seem appropriate for the time.

She lifts her head when we're almost completely done. "He's approaching."

I feel it, too. The bond between Kian and me is getting more intense. It's almost as if he's reeling himself in off a line, using that to track me down.

My heart skips.

Does he care about me or just what I can do for him?

"He won't be able to get in, but his wolf's senses are sharp. We shouldn't discuss anything that happened last night unless you want him to know." She picks up a bag and slides it across the table to me. "Take this with you when you go."

"But you're going to help me—"

"I'm afraid our plans must change." She smiles sadly. "If we continue on this course, we'll both die."

"Wait." I reach for her. "You—you *said* you'd help."

She avoids my hands. "I have helped you. I've started this process with you, and we will meet again in the future to continue. But I am doing my best while also trying to stay alive." She hesitates. "What if your destiny never included finding your mother again? What if she's gone for good?"

I jerk back.

"There are dark times coming, Astra." Her gaze burns as sure as her words. "You want allies. All the help you can get. But you also need to know how to keep those allies alive." She points to the door. "I need you to take him far away from here, or he'll kill me on sight. And you might not survive his fury either."

I don't want her to die. I don't know if this is premonition spoken through the spirits she mentioned or if she can see the future. It doesn't matter—she helped me, and now she's in danger. Because of *me*.

I round the table and throw my arms around her, hugging her tightly.

Did I expect to get all sentimental about someone I just met?

No.

But also... on some weird level, I feel like I know her. Like I can trust her.

Her arms come up, and she grips me harder, her breath hitching. Too soon, she releases me.

"I'll find you when it's safe," she assures me. "I sympathize with the weight on your shoulders."

The weight. Whether that's my mother or the curse or something else, I couldn't say. And I've run out of time to ask.

I take the bag and hurry out the front door.

It swings shut behind me, and the glimmer of a ward pushes me forward. *Out.* It's like her hand is between my shoulder blades, propelling me.

Another few steps forward, I glance back and watch in amazement as the cottage shimmers out of existence.

Like it was never there at all.

Kian might still sense her, though. I can't be caught so close to her home.

I rush down the mountain. I pull on the bond, trying to lure him toward me. I don't know if it works, but after five minutes of fast jogging, I slow to a stop. I turn in a small circle on the path and find a rock to sit on.

The white wolf appears on the path above me. He spots me and tips his head back, howling his victory. The sound vibrates the air, and my body sings. It's a stupid, bond-driven reaction to be happy to see him. To feel the rightness of it as much as I hate it.

He rushes forward and shifts mid-stride, taking the last few steps as a human and sweeping me up into his arms. He wastes no time, patting me all over, examining me with a precision that *should* worry me. But it doesn't. Instead, the warm feeling swells in my chest.

He *was* concerned. He *does* give a shit about me.

"Where's the blood witch?" he asks in the next breath. "You found her, didn't you? Did she attack you?"

I sigh. So maybe it wasn't concern for my well-being. Rather, his concern over fatal injuries caused by a supposedly evil witch and my ability to find her again.

"She's long gone."

He stares at me, then his jaw tics. He lifts his head and scans the horizon, the mountainside. He might shift back and track her by smell, but I just want him to *stop*. Stop thinking about the curse and the blood witch and

just focus on... this. Does he feel the same amazing sensation spreading through my chest now that he's close?

Instead of the annoyance and frustration bubbling through from his words.

"I'll just track your scent back to her," he says.

He shifts before I can stop him.

No. I don't think. I just lunge at him.

He's not prepared for it and takes my weight in his side, dropping low. We roll, and I end up under his wolf. I wrap my arms around his thick neck.

I traveled by magic once. Sonia traveled with more than one person. So why can't I take him with me? Especially when Beatrice seemed to imply that I could. She spent the night ensuring my power returned, and the earth gave it back to me.

Desperation fuels me more than anything as I tap into my magic.

Kian struggles against me, rising and lifting me half off the ground with him. Because he could shake me off and potentially injure me, he isn't going as hard. For once, his perception of my injuries work in my favor.

"No," I snarl.

I release my magic, and we explode in light.

CHAPTER 31

KIAN

It's worse than a shift. My body compresses and *pops*, then there's nothing for a split second. Just a white void. We float through it, bodiless. My wolf whimpers. And then we're released, the pressure fading, and Astra is still clinging to my neck. She's under me, holding so tight that she's almost choking me.

And while I don't mind her closeness, I want to rage against her effort to stop me.

I look around, and my heart hammers faster.

We're not in California anymore.

"Shh." She strokes my fur. "I think we're back..."

Hotel.

Bed.

It smells like us in here. Us and air-conditioning. Everything is right where we left it.

"Shift back," she says softly.

She transported us back to the hotel she disappeared from yesterday evening, and she did it like it was nothing. My wolf is just as speechless as me, although the smug pride in him is hard to stomach. He's *proud* of picking a powerful mate, whereas I just feel... revolted.

And maybe a little impressed.

I shift, my muscles popping and skin stretching seemingly even more painful this time. Her arms are still looped around my neck, and she pulls me flush against her. I don't have it in me to resist right now, so I let her hug me.

“You raced all the way across the country. And I refuse to believe it was because you feared the blood witch. You couldn’t have known I even got there until you were close enough. You did it to find *me*.” She buries her face in my neck.

I slide my hands under her back and grip her tightly. “I did.”

“And then you *ruined* it,” she adds. She pinches my side.

“Hey,” I snap. I capture her hand and pin it to the floor at her head. Our fingers intertwine on the rough rug.

She inhales, her nose touching my skin, and I stiffen. She’s smelling me? My wolf preens at that. If he was a cat, he’d be fucking purring.

“Astra,” I try.

When I rise on my forearms, she uses her remaining arm around my neck to pull me down again.

“Fuck off and just let me stop aching inside.” Her words are muffled by my shoulder.

I narrow my eyes at that and roll us to the side. It’s easier this way, so I’m not crushing her. Being in the bed would be even better, but whatever. The floor will do.

I brush my hand across her hair, sliding my fingers through the strands. She lets out a little breath at the contact, so I do it again. I stroke her hair until she lifts her head out of the crook of my neck.

“Are you hurt?” I finally ask. I mean—I know *something* happened. That’s why I wanted to get to her so badly. I barely slept last night, running straight through to get to her. No truck, no plan. It was the pain that stoked my fear. But now it just seems like a dream.

“You’re telling me you didn’t feel it?”

The pain traveling down the bond, she means.

“I did. What was it?”

She looks down. “Nothing.”

“Liar.”

Her head shoots back up at that, but I keep petting her hair. I like the sensation of it. Her hair is soft, and her eyes dilate the more I do it. For once, I don’t feel the pressing need to dominate her or bite her—I just want to make sure she’s okay.

Odd thought to have about a witch.

“I felt it,” I say again.

She rubs her chest. “I haven’t been right since. Until now.”

The bond, she means. And it's true—the more we touch, the less it aches. It was damaged, I think, by whatever she went through. But did Astra do it on purpose? Did she... did she meet the blood witch and discover something? If she hadn't, or if the blood witch had been cruel, she wouldn't have stopped me from hunting her down.

My distrust spikes, even as I hug her closer.

What a mess.

"I wish I never met you," she confesses.

I close my eyes, for once completely agreeing with her. "Same."

After a while, I pick her up and move to the bed. I drag my sweatpants back on and hug her close again, my fingers still in her hair.

She falls asleep first, and I ease a tendril of healing magic into her. She doesn't stir, but she relaxes further. Pride is a fickle emotion, and I'm feeling it tenfold. She's in my arms. She didn't completely run away. She's not fighting me. My magic tells me she's not actually hurt.

She feels better than she did when she left, which is curious.

She won't be yours forever, I remind myself.

But she could be...

If I change her.

As I told her—that won't happen. That can't happen. The consequences would damn us. My pack would turn on me.

The pride sours when I remember *why* Astra came back to me. She's protecting the blood witch. She met her, something happened, and she wouldn't let me search her out. Knowing that I—

Well, maybe that's the problem.

Tell her, my wolf murmurs.

No.

What's the worst that could happen? You know she's bound to you—if she doesn't like it, you turn her into a shifter and then make her obey.

I shake my head. *I doubt she'd obey even if she was a wolf.*

He sends me an image of him standing over a light-furred wolf, his teeth in her neck. Not hard but forcing her to submit. Excitement races through him at the thought, followed by longing. Then sadness.

This is what I'm keeping from him by refusing to change her.

We need sleep, I tell him. *We'll discuss this tomorrow.*

Be careful, Kian. We're playing a dangerous game...

I close our connection and shift closer to Astra. I slide my knee between her thighs and loop my arm over her waist. This feels so right and wrong at the same time.

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CHAPTER 32

KIAN

Please don't let me dream of my past.

As it turns out, I don't. I hold her through her twitching dreams, her face going taut with terror. But it eases when I stroke her hair again, so I do that into the morning. I greet the sun rising over the trees, somehow less tired than I would expect.

I detach myself and leave her in bed. She immediately rolls onto her stomach, spreading her body across the mattress. I chuckle when she buries her nose in my pillow, then grabs on to it.

Even if we both fight it, our bodies want to join.

I clean myself up, then venture downstairs. I find a table in the breakfast area of the hotel and wait for my hunters to arrive. They're no doubt confused about our location change, as they raced after me toward California. They were afraid for me to face a blood witch alone.

They didn't have to backtrack too much, and now I need an update. I need to right my priorities, block Astra from blurring them, and focus on the important things I've forgotten.

Like why I'm even doing this.

Griffin shows first, wearing a pale-blue sweatshirt and black sweatpants. Jessamine follows, her sundress a bit at odds with the cooling weather. Roman arrives right behind her, his sharp gaze scanning the café. His outfit more closely resembles Griffin's: a t-shirt and black sweatpants.

Easy clothes to get on and off with all the shifting we do.

They draw attention in the dining area. One of the couples drinking coffee by the window stops their conversation to watch them.

It's their energy, their in-sync movements. Their confidence maybe, or beauty.

Dad prided himself on a gorgeous pack. Some old, ugly rumors suggested he curated his pack to be the strongest and the best-looking. Vanity was definitely in my father's capabilities, so I don't find myself doubting the rumors' potential.

"Morning," I greet them.

"Alpha," Griffin says quietly. He sits beside me. "Coral is checking the hotel perimeter."

We're about two hours outside of Vegas right now, although I'm not sure Astra knows that.

Jessamine and Roman go for the buffet. They collect enough food for the soon-to-be five of us, dropping off the plates and winding back through the tables to grab coffee. By the time they return, Coral arrives. She sits beside Griffin with a stoic expression, her arms crossed over her cropped t-shirt.

She seems better now. Recovered from her encounter with the witch's circle and the demon. Obviously, she's fine enough to shift and travel, but there's a burn mark across one side of her face, down her neck.

In a way, it reminds me of Astra's Mark. And that, in turn, reminds me of how Astra was able to burn my sister with only her hand.

"Nothing outside," Coral says. "Do we expect trouble?"

"It's better to be prepared," Griffin admonishes.

"Where's the witch?" She glances over her shoulder at the doorway, then picks up a pastry. She might seem unbothered, but she holds tension in her shoulders.

"Do you have a plan?" Jessamine asks. Her hand settles on her stomach, which seems to have grown in the short time I've been away.

My gaze ticks from it back to her face, and my brows furrow.

Twenty weeks. The halfway point. Every day that passes might as well shave a piece of *my* life away.

I'm going to lose her. I can feel it.

"I don't have a concrete plan."

I spot Astra enter, but my wolves don't. I frown slightly, feeling her tugging on the mate bond like it's a yo-yo. And it's led her right to me. Her gaze locks on the table, her lips pressed together in irritation. Traces of sleep still cling to her. Pieces of hair that were caught up in a braid fall

loose around her face. Her cheeks are pink. She's wearing a different t-shirt, one of her own, with a sweater over it and black leggings. She so far hasn't touched any of the new clothes.

"There were some complications," I say to my hunters. "We're handling it."

"We," Roman repeats. "You and the witch?"

"Him and the witch," Astra confirms, stopping beside him.

He almost falls off the chair.

The corner of her lip tips up. She sits in the last remaining chair, evening out our five to six.

Silence meets her.

My wolf is amused at this show of confidence, and I personally am curious to see what she does next after sitting at a table full of shifters.

She plucks a waffle off my plate and bites into it with a viciousness that seems to set my wolves on edge. She devours the whole thing while they watch, then licks her fingers clean. She takes a mug at random—it's probably Roman's, I think, judging from the way his eyebrows hike—and fixes it the way she likes.

Some cream, a packet of sugar.

"Well, don't let me stop your discussion. What am I handling with your master?"

"He's not our master," Jessamine snaps.

Astra quirks her eyebrow. "He says jump, and you don't even bother asking how high. You just do it. Sounds like—"

"He's our *alpha*." My sister leans forward. "Which is a position of respect—"

"I don't think the BDSM community would like you implying that the title of master *doesn't* hold respect, dog." Astra sets the mug down. Her gaze flicks down Jessamine's body, to where my sister still has a hand pressed to her belly. She takes the new curves in stride, only taking a steadying breath at the clear marker of time passing. But then she focuses on me. "Why are they here?"

"Because we need to figure this out together," I say under my breath. "Seeing as how you ruined our only lead."

She scoffs. "I didn't ruin it. I just didn't include you when I handled it."

"You know, then? A way to break our curse?"

She doesn't respond. In fact, she seems a little guilty—like maybe she didn't even ask. The longer I watch her, the less convinced I am that she solved the mystery of how to break the curse.

I think something else happened—perhaps something worse—and now she's trying to figure out a lie to go with it. The payment it required might explain the pain I felt.

The niggling sense that I should just tell her what the curse is and why we need to break it returns full force. We're all silent, hoping she'll speak, but I know she won't tell us shit until we start giving her some answers, too.

Jessamine seems more inclined to break her arm than tell her anything. Coral wouldn't, and neither would Griffin.

In the end, it's Roman who decides for me. He has more to lose than I do if we fail. I'd lose my sister, but he'd have to watch his mate die. And then raise their child, if it survives.

And if it's a female... he'll do it again with his child when she grows up and finds *her* mate.

"Jessamine will die if you don't break the curse," he says to Astra.

He doesn't seem afraid of her—not after her display with the food. It's like she's laid out her cards with that one move, and he's read her for what she is.

I wish he'd tell me.

We already know. My wolf chuffs.

She straightens, suddenly serious. "Why?"

"Because she's pregnant." His voice is pained. "And the curse takes all female shifters from this world in childbirth."

Jessamine glares daggers at him. The way he stares back at her makes me wonder if they're having a silent conversation. Their eyes both go a little unfocused, but the witch beside me doesn't notice. She's too horrified by the information she's digesting.

Astra covers her mouth, swallowing her words.

I don't think I've seen her shocked into silence in... well, since I've met her.

She drops her hand. "Is that possible? How—"

"It's our reality, witch," Jessamine growls.

"Why on earth would you get pregnant?" Astra stares at her.

She doesn't understand it—and to be honest, I don't either. Although when my wolf thinks about Astra in the future, it isn't like he imagined her

without pups running around her legs, driving us crazy.

Stop it.

“It’s biology.” Coral seems confused by Astra’s question. “Even if we wanted to fight our nature—at some point or another, instinct drives us to create new life.”

I glance sharply at her. She’s emitting a wave of sadness, and I don’t understand why. Not until Jessamine reaches across the table and puts her hand on top of Coral’s.

Astra kicks me under the table and gives me a *look*.

I shake my head. It would be really handy to mind-speak with her right about now, because even she seems to understand Coral’s weird reaction.

“You haven’t found a mate?” Astra asks her with an unexpected gentleness.

Ah.

Fuck.

Coral’s gaze lifts and locks on to Astra. *If looks could kill.* “I’ve dated a few wolf shifters, but I haven’t found anyone who wanted to connect with me. So, no.”

Yeah, double fuck.

I was one of those guys. Before my father died. We were both teenagers, and my father was shoving me at every eligible she-wolf in the pack. Of course we dated. It got my father off my back, and I was able to learn a woman’s body without fear of judgment. I thought we were pretty clear after the first few months that it was a matter of convenience. Orgasms and skating through life without the pressure to mate.

And then my father died, I became alpha, and for the first time, I was able to feel her emotions. What I felt... it wasn’t a friendly, convenient relationship. She was hiding that she was falling for me.

I wrestled with indecision for half a day. Did I let her down easy? Break it off and blame it on my new role, or grief, or *whatever*? Did I tell her the truth?

In the end, I went with honesty. I promised her that she would find a mate.

That was ten years ago, and she’s still alone. That’s my fault.

“I’m sorry,” I tell her.

Whether or not she thought we would eventually mate is unknown. Mate bonds and love don’t always hold hands at first—take Astra and me

for example.

Fate is fickle like that.

"I don't blame you, Alpha," Coral whispers. "I just feel..."

"Empty," Jessamine finishes.

Astra makes a face. Her nose scrunches; her brows furrow. "I'm never having children," she declares.

I stare at her. "What?"

Her head slowly swings back to me. "I'm never having children. I'm not getting pregnant. I'm sorry that your kind was cursed. It sounds horrific. But do you honestly expect me to be okay with your response to the situation? One bad witch doesn't represent all of us."

We're all staring at her now.

She shakes her head, her face turning red. "You can try to justify the slaughter of my people all you want, but I will *never* accept it. And I'd rather burn my uterus out of my body than have your baby inside me."

I feel the sting of that far worse than I should.

It's not like I wasn't already rejecting her for the Mark on her skin, the magic in her veins. I shouldn't be surprised she doesn't give a shit about the curse—and pregnancy, in general. She doesn't care that in twenty weeks, my sister will die.

Astra seems to read the emotions at the table, because she shoves back in her chair and jumps to her feet. "I'm going to find my mother. That seems to be the most proactive course of action, while you chase your tails over a grudge you've been holding for a fucking century."

She storms away, weaving past empty tables and out of the hotel's restaurant. She turns left, heading for the exit.

"You want to mate with her," Coral says, her voice dull. "She's a real gem."

"She's got a point," Roman groans. He rubs Jessamine's shoulder. "I know you guys don't like her because she's a witch, but she has every reason to hate us. We kill covens. Torture witches. At the end of the day, it's misguided hate. And it's pointless. The only witch who has shown an inkling of being able to help us wasn't even affiliated with a coven."

He means her mother.

I get up wordlessly and follow Astra.

I don't like that Roman agrees with her, but I can't fault him for it either.

She's sitting on a bench outside. We're in the mountains just above the desert—we had stopped here because we were originally going to be cutting through Vegas, then across the state lines into California. Straight shot toward Los Angeles County.

But now, it's pointless to continue without knowing what Astra learned.

I take the seat beside her. I can't stop myself from reaching out and taking her hand. She lets me, which is a good sign. She's not so pissed that she won't touch me.

"When I was fourteen, my father tried to find me a mate."

Her jaw tenses.

I fight the smile that wants to overtake my face, satisfied with her reaction.

"It wasn't going to happen," I assure her. "In fact, I'm not quite sure it works like that. I mean, maybe it does for some wolves, but others are blessed with fated mates. I guess I always held out hope that I'd be destined for someone special. Someone who wanted me just as fiercely. Fate's gift to me." I shake my head. "What a fool I was."

She glances at me, then away.

"Even before that, my father's pack was comfortable with the natural order of things. Nudity, mating, pregnancy. It wasn't hidden from children—I mean, the sex was, of course—but by the time I went through puberty, my father didn't really have to sit me down for any sort of talk. I knew what I was supposed to do. Find a mate. Fuck her, put a baby in her belly. Care for it when she inevitably passed away. Start again."

Astra shudders. "That's horrible."

"I agree, little nightmare."

I raise our joined hands to my mouth, kissing her knuckles to lessen the sting of the nickname. I know she said it reminds her of me, of wolves, but it seems apt to remind myself that her kind is fearsome, too.

"What happened to your father?" she asks.

"He died a painful death."

We lapse into silence.

"Okay," Astra says. "When's the next new moon?"

"Just over two weeks. Tomorrow is the full moon. Why?"

She sighs and scrubs her face. "Well, I've been thinking... and I don't know if we can do anything until then. But I have a plan. A tentative one."

My brow rises. "Are you going to fill me in on that plan?"

Her smile is wry. “Well, I was going to leave it for a surprise, but it’s probably better if you know ahead of time. Don’t think you can talk me out of it, though. I’ll do it with or without you.”

I motion for her to get on with it.

She takes a breath. “We need to capture a demon.”

“What?”

“And interrogate it,” she finishes.

She’s got to be fucking joking.

I tip my head back and laugh. Interrogate a demon—I’ve never heard of such a thing. I mean, for one? They’re terrible, awful creatures. They’re otherworldly, and I’m not sure they speak English unless they’re using a human body. Which leads to the second: they’re dangerous. They can possess people. They don’t really have many physical limitations.

“We use a witch’s circle,” she says. “We put one in it, ask it a few questions...”

“Have you *met* a demon?”

She lifts one shoulder. “I came face-to-face with one once. That was right before they took my mom. Oh, and then the one that tried to claw into my back. That was fun.”

Jesus.

“I’m not sure they react to torture.”

“We could douse them in holy water.” Her expression is so fucking hopeful.

She’s cute. *Attractive*. I look away and will the blood rushing straight to my dick to go elsewhere. I can’t get a hard-on while she’s talking about interrogating demons.

Well, I guess I can, because her gaze drops to my lap, and her lips part.

She shifts closer, rising on her knees. Her lips brush my ear, and her breasts press into my arm. God, that’s punishment enough, knowing I can’t touch her exactly as I want. I remain still until she speaks.

“Was it the torture or the holy water that did it for you?” she whispers.

I growl and turn sharply. I grip the back of her head, not letting her escape. She stays perfectly still as my lips touch hers. Once, twice. The bare minimum of kissing.

She leans away with a small frown. “I can’t do this in-between shit, Kian. I’ve...”

I wait, but she doesn’t continue.

“You’ve what?”

She shakes off whatever thought was plaguing her and stands. She makes a show of brushing off her legs and gazing back toward the hotel.

“Where are we anyway?”

“Outside of Las Vegas.”

“Really?” She spins and faces west, like she can see the city from here.

I snort. “Yeah. We were going to go through it—”

“We *were*?”

Don’t focus on how disappointed she suddenly sounds.

“Have you not been?”

“To Vegas?” She scoffs and paces away from me. “When the hell would my mother have taken me there?”

I’m suddenly much more curious about the life she led up until I burst into it. “You went to school, though, didn’t you? College? You could’ve gone away on a weekend trip with friends, boyfriend—”

“I spent weekends at home,” she says curtly. “There always seemed to be something calling me back. So I never got the chance...”

“You want to?”

She sighs and tucks her hair behind her ear. “Yeah, of course I want to go to Sin City. Who wouldn’t?”

“Well, we can go.”

Fuck, Kian.

She fucking lights up like a damn Christmas tree.

Caving is easy, though. She didn’t even really ask, and this is something I can give her. Let her see the strip, the millions of people, the insane atmosphere. Maybe it can mend the bridge between us so she tells us what she’s hiding. Earn her trust, and she’ll open right up.

And... I wouldn’t mind seeing that smile again.

Yeah, I’m not sucked in too far or anything.

I want to see her smile again, my wolf grumbles suddenly.

I suppress the urge to roll my eyes and reach for her hand again. She’s still all lit up, her expression... well, I ignore the surprise and focus on the happy.

“One night on the strip,” I say.

“Three,” she counters. “For the full experience.”

“Two, and that’s as high as I’m going—or we’ll skip it altogether.”

“Deal.”

I shake my head and push her toward the door. Gently. I can't believe I'm doing this, but at the same time... I think I'm going to enjoy her reactions. Every breath of excitement, every noise that comes out of her mouth.

This is as much about my pleasure as it is about hers.

“Go pack, little nightmare.”

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CHAPTER 33

ASTRA

Kian got rid of his hunters. At least, as far as I can tell, they're not following us.

We're in the fucking desert, with no cars in sight. It's wild how drastically the landscape has shifted from the woods of Colorado. The mountains that rise in the distance could be jagged teeth scoring into the sky. The mountains seem big now—I can't imagine standing at the base of one.

And then there's the city.

Las Vegas glitters like a mirage in the distance, a small cluster of skyscrapers that refract the sun and draw the eye.

Eventually, we get close enough that we're coasting into town.

I lean forward. We pass a neon *Welcome to Las Vegas* sign sitting on a little grass island, surrounded by tourists.

We're here.

I bounce in my seat, my excitement uncontainable. I've seen movies about Vegas, of course. A coworker at the paper I worked at once went for a bachelorette party and came home with fantastical tales of nightclubs and thundering music, male strippers, a hotel that looks like the Eiffel Tower and another that displays a huge water show out front. Casinos you can get lost in for days. A pool that mimics the beach.

I mentally add to my list of things I want to see up close one day: beach, Eiffel Tower, male strippers.

Kian smiles at something. "Close your eyes."

I glance at him. "What? Then I'll miss it."

"Close your eyes, Astra. Trust me."

I scoff. I definitely don't. I've been thinking about this drive into the strip since we left.

But maybe he's got something better planned, so I shut my eyes. And I keep them shut, ignoring the urge to peek, until the sun leaves our faces. The truck tilts down, bumping and curving, and he finally stops us.

"Okay," he says.

We're in a... parking garage.

I scowl.

He laughs and climbs out, and I follow. He makes quick work consolidating our two bags into one. He keeps touching all my stuff. I know he's added things to it, too. And somewhere along the way, I lost track of the pouch of stones from my mother.

Maybe they're in the bag. I don't know.

I watch him until I feel weird about it. There's only so much I can study him while he handles my underwear before he catches on.

It's unfair that he's so hot. And kissable. I don't understand our chemistry. The way we're always drawn together. I'm so... ordinary. Basic witch. Plain features. A soft—and that's being generous—figure. He's the opposite. Handsome to the point of being a pain in the ass about it. He may as well be carved from stone, with not an inch of fat on him.

If he were human, he'd have already found a girl and married her.

That stings.

Deep down, I know there are two things that made Kian come for me time and again. The first is his twisted logic that I can help him with the curse. And the second is the mate bond. It's not my face or my power or my personality. It's outside forces and his stubbornness.

"I don't like your expression," he murmurs. "Something troubling you?"

"You are," I grumble.

He pauses. "Astra."

"I..." I sigh. "No, I didn't mean it like that. I just mean, I don't know. I'm still a little confused as to why you're giving me the time of day. Besides this." I wave my hand at my Mark, then freeze.

Shit.

I forgot. I almost walked out on the street with my Mark in full view.

I hold out my free hand for the bag. "I need that."

"No you don't."

“Yes I fucking do. In a city full of people? I’m not walking out of here like this—”

He growls and grips my throat. I yelp in surprise as he walks me backward, and I can’t see where he’s taking me until he has me pressed to a concrete column.

“I’m not sure what I need to say to convince you that you were made for me, little nightmare.” His gaze drops to my lips. “That means your temptress body. Your mind. Everything down to your soul.”

I close my eyes. His hand at my throat is capturing my heartbeat—but I’m sure he can hear it, too. It’s pounding out of control.

“I need a stone for a concealment charm,” I admit. My eyes are still fucking closed like a baby.

Maybe that’s why I don’t try to avoid his kiss. I don’t see it coming.

Except—I knew it was coming. It’s why I closed my eyes in the first place.

His lips touch mine, and sparks run under my skin. He licks at the seam of my lips, and I open for him. His tongue slides into my mouth. I moan at the contact, bringing my hands up and fisting the front of his shirt.

He coaxes my tongue to spar with his. I push his out of my mouth and into his, following, and explore *his* mouth. The ache between my legs increases, and we’re only kissing. I nip his lower lip, tugging it between my teeth.

He growls low in his chest—but it isn’t scary. I feel the vibration along my knuckles.

We kiss like that, back and forth, until we’re breathless. He rests his forehead on mine. My heart is going nuts, galloping away. My lips are swollen.

“Wow.” The word slips out, and my face heats.

I haven’t kissed like that. I had one *almost* hookup in college, when a guy friend and I stripped down naked and tried... Well, we tried to have sex. But he kissed me, and it sucked. And then he kept kissing me. My neck, my breasts.

I didn’t like it.

I made him stop, and he yelled at me. Called me a tease. He was so fucking angry as he closed his pants over his erection, he couldn’t even look at me.

“Where’d you go?” Kian tips my chin up.

“Just thinking about the past...”

His brows lower. “Kissing me made you think of another guy you kissed?”

My face heats, and I tighten my grip on his shirt. “No. Well, it reminded me of the only other time I tried to have sex—”

His jaw tics, but then he pauses. His gaze sweeps up and down me. “Tried?”

I release him. “Yeah, *tried*. I’ve never had sex before.”

The asshole fucking grins at that.

I try to push him away, but he doesn’t even move. I may as well shove the concrete at my back for all the good it does.

But then he grabs my thighs and lifts me higher up the column. He kisses the corner of my lips. “What happened to the guy who tried to fuck you, Astra?”

I shiver at the dark thread in his tone. “Um, he... I didn’t want to. It didn’t feel right with him. He got mad.”

“What’s his name?”

“I’m not telling you that.” I have no doubt Kian would track him down.

He runs his nose up and down my throat. It’s weirdly territorial and a little hot. I let him rub on me for another minute, then poke at his shoulder.

“Kian,” I prod. “We’re in Vegas, and we’re lingering in a freaking parking garage. Take me to see the sights.”

He straightens, that smug smile still in place. He sets me back on my feet and reclaims my hand. Then the bag that goes over his shoulder. We call the elevator and ride it in silence, and I smooth my hair. I don’t remember it being so messed up...

“Why were you rubbing on me like I was catnip?”

He snorts. “Catnip is for cats.”

“Well, you were acting like one—”

“I was overcome by the urge to mark you with my scent,” he says.

That shuts me up.

“It soothes my wolf,” he adds.

Well, anything to soothe that beast...

I open my mouth to reply, but the elevator doors glide open—and the view steals my words.

We’re in a huge casino. There are no windows to speak of, but there are aisles of dinging, light-covered machines. There’s a bar to the left filled

with people. The *noise*...

I glance at Kian, and there's new stress around his eyes.

Okay, maybe not the best place to bring an enhanced-sensed wolf shifter.

I shake that off and tow him forward. If he had a problem with it, he would've said something. Probably.

I drag him down aisles, passing a million slot machines, then tables of people playing cards. Except I don't know where I'm going, and we're right back where we started.

Well, that didn't go to plan. I didn't even find an exit.

"This way," Kian finally says. He's clearly trying to hide his amusement.

He leads me in the other direction and takes a turn I had missed. We weave through the casino for another minute, then the doors seem to magically appear. We step outside, and I lift my hands to block the sun.

We had only been out of it for minutes, but it seems brighter. It's not as bad as being tossed out of my cell into the grass once a week, though. My pupils burn as they contract.

My eyes adjust, and my jaw falls.

We're... It's...

"Wow," I whisper.

"Same reaction my kiss got," Kian notes under his breath.

I elbow him and lead him farther down the street. There's a huge pool in front of one of the hotels with a crowd gathering in front of it. There are palm trees. The streets are huge. Then—*oh my God*. Paris! The Eiffel Tower! There's a funky building with a wavy front—the one we just emerged from. I don't know what it's called.

"Look," Kian says in my ear. He points back toward the pond.

Suddenly, music from across the street swells, and water shoots out of the pool, easily fifty feet in the air. It's joined by other jets of water, and it takes me a second to realize it's almost dancing along with the music.

I stare in awe.

This is what the coworker was talking about. I just couldn't imagine anything so grand.

He lets me watch in silence, and I join in the tourists' applause.

"Come on," Kian says once the show has ended.

He tugs me back into the hotel, but it's easier to find the reception desk this time. He holds my hand tightly as he checks in, and my face heats when he asks for a room with a king bed. And a view.

"We only have a suite available," the hotel employee says. "It does have an excellent view of the strip."

"We'll take it."

I gape when he hands over a credit card and ID. She inputs his information and hands it back, along with room keys. She tells us how to find the elevator, sparing only a single glance at me.

Her eyes don't even stray to my Mark.

Did I conceal it without thinking?

I catch my reflection on the polished brass and immediately see the dark snaking lines. Didn't hide it, then.

But the more I look around, the more I realize that I'm the least interesting person here. Others are covered in tattoos or wear weird, outlandish clothing. Someone walks by with pointed, obviously fake ears sticking out of their hair.

Huh.

Maybe I should've moved to a city a long time ago.

Kian squeezes my hand. "Ready?"

"Yeah."

I've ridden in an elevator before. We took one up from the parking garage, but that was quick. And the newspaper office in town had one, although there were only four floors, and the walls were dull metal and plastered in posters. This one is polished mirrors all over, and there are a hundred buttons. Kian picks a floor seemingly at random.

My stomach swoops at how fast we rise. And for how long.

It opens with a chime. A few turns and a long hallway later, he stops at a door.

I've never stayed in a large hotel before—that little quirky one was the first, and I don't really know if I could say we *stayed* there. I mean, we did. Eventually. But I wasn't too interested in figuring it out with Kian. I just went where he led.

"How did you know what floor to go to?" I ask him.

He pauses. "Have you stayed in a hotel before?"

"Yeah..." I shrug. "Last night. With you. And that bed and breakfast, but the girl led me to my room."

He seems flustered for a minute. He taps the number beside the door. “This is our room number. The first digit—in this case, two digits—indicate what floor we’re on. All the rooms on this level start with one-four. Because we’re on the fourteenth floor.”

Interesting.

“All hotels do that?”

“Yeah, generally. It’s an easy system for guests to find their room without assistance.” He taps the key card against the door. It lights up green, and it unlocks with a *click*. “Although the fourteenth floor is a lie. We’re on the thirteenth.”

I stare at him. “What? They just... skip a floor?”

“People think thirteen is unlucky.”

“And they think there’s a witching hour.” I shake my head. Numbers and superstition go so far that a hotel skips naming floor thirteen as such? Ridiculous.

He waves the key in front of the lock and holds the door open for me. I duck under his arm. There’s a short hall, with a bathroom on the right, and then it opens up into a sitting room. Straight ahead is a huge window, currently mostly blocked by curtains. On the right after the sitting area are French doors that lead into the bedroom.

I bypass the couch and coffee table, the television on some sort of stand and a desk built into it, and go to the window. I shove the curtains open and stare out.

It’s even better from up here.

Kian steps up beside me. “Just wait until it’s dark out. It’ll all be lit up with different colors.”

I glance up at him, then back down to the street.

They all seem like ants from this height.

With sudden, dizzying clarity, I realize that this is another first. Being this high off the ground.

I press my palms to the glass and close my eyes.

Without a word, Kian wraps his arms around my waist. He tugs me back flush against his chest, and then his chin touches the top of my head.

I breathe out and slowly open my eyes again.

There are mountains in the distance. The same ones we saw driving in, but they seem farther away and closer all at once.

“You okay?” he asks.

Am I? I don't know. My mind can't keep up with the changes, but all I can do is keep moving forward. Keep trying to find my mother, this detour, and the seven weeks I spent captive, aside.

Guilt stabs me. It's been seven weeks.

What if Mom thinks I've abandoned her?

I step out of his embrace and go to the bag. I need... I just need the distraction tonight. It's Vegas, after all. He came here because of me.

My fingers brush the wallet my mother had shoved into the bag so long ago, and I hold it up for him to see. "How about we try our hand at gambling?"

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CHAPTER 34

ASTRA

“**Y**ou’ve got twenty-one, young lady,” the man beside me crows.

The dealer pushes another stack of chips my way, and I laugh. I’ve quadrupled my money, and the old man sitting to my left seems to get more and more delighted with every deal of the cards.

He’s not faring so poorly himself.

Kian sat beside me for a while, but he quickly ran out of chips. He wordlessly got up from the table and took a walk, but I sense him returning to me.

The tether between us is getting more intense. Like the more time we spend together, intimate or not, the more it solidifies.

“Ms. Somnium,” someone says on my right.

I glance back and come face-to-face with a devastatingly handsome man. He wears a suit and tie. His short brown hair is perfectly styled into place, although it’s the cut that gives him away. It’s a little outdated. Militant, even.

My skin prickles.

I sense Kian moving faster now, but then I spot the security the suited man brought with him.

“I need you to come with me,” the man continues, as if there wasn’t some dramatic pause between us.

“It’s just luck, sir,” my new friend says. “She didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I’m not accusing her of wrongdoing,” the suit man says smoothly. He produces a hundred-dollar chip from his pocket and flips it to the player.

My stomach twists.

“Come along, Ms. Somnium.”

He points to my chips, and one of his security comes forward and reaches past me. He collects them all in fast, easy movements. He puts them in a fabric bag, then straightens. His face remains blank, passive. Waiting for me to make a choice.

Well, I suppose I don’t really have one.

I slide off the stool and follow him toward the elevators. I glance around, but I don’t spot the hulking wolf shifter. I resist the urge to tug on the bond. I’m not in trouble, not yet. We step into the elevator with one security guard. The rest stay below, their backs to the elevators. I don’t sense Kian’s frustrated worry until the doors slide shut, trapping me inside.

Maybe it’s not a good idea to get in the elevator with strange men, Astra.

The man beside me ignores me completely until we reach the *P* floor, whatever that is. The doors open, and he steps out first. I’ve got no choice but to follow him.

We’re high up. Way higher than our hotel room. The walls are made completely of glass, letting in a considerable amount of light. To my left is a collection of cubicles filled with people. They wear headsets and ignore our arrival. To the right are offices, and they seem to have the only actual walls on this floor separating them. Never mind that the fronts of their offices are glass.

He leads me past them all, though, to the far corner of the building.

Beaumont Sanders, the engraving on the glass door reads. No job title, so he must be high up enough to not need one. Which is a little worrying.

Why bother with me?

“Are you Beaumont?” I ask.

He inclines his chin. “You can call me Beau.”

I nod slowly and walk into his office. I run my fingers over the back of the white leather couch, bypassing his giant glass desk and going to the windows.

Definitely higher up than our floor. Maybe double it, given the size of the people on the street. Nothing more than specks from this height.

“Do you like the view?” he asks.

“Not really.” I step back and turn away, only to find him right in my face.

I hadn’t heard him move.

Dread ices my limbs.

"It's interesting," he says in a low voice, reaching out like he's going to touch me. His index finger stops just short of my jaw. "Most witches don't venture into cities at all, let alone mine."

Vampire.

The word floats out of nowhere, bursting in front of my eyes like a strobe alarm.

I ball my fists and eye him with new interest. "I've never met a vampire before."

It's not quite a lie. Sonia was hybrid. *Other*, as Gage said.

His eyes light. "No? Pity—some say I'm the worst of them."

"You're not the first to say that to me. Just the first of your species." I smile tightly and inch around him. I take a seat on the couch and cross my legs. Seems sensible, seeing as how my knees are threatening to give out on me anyway. "So this is your city, then?"

"I rule the most powerful clan in the city. In a way, it's mine, yes." He sits across from me. "I'll admit, you're not quite what I expected when I was informed a witch was gambling in my casino."

"Is that a metaphorical possessive, or...?"

"No, this I own it outright." He smirks. "And two others on the strip."

"Hmm." Of course it's our luck that Kian chose this one. Guess our night will be cut short.

"Did you always go by Somnium?" He leans forward.

My brow furrows, and I find myself caught in his gaze. His eyes are light brown, the shade of honey in shadow. I mimic his body position and lean forward, too.

He asked me a question that I really need to answer.

"No," I say. "My mother changed it after our coven was murdered."

Why did I say that?

It's fine. Just keep talking.

"Before, she went by..."

The bond between Kian and I flares up inside me. I gasp and touch my chest, like I can stop the sparking sensation. There's a commotion down the hall, and Beau breaks our stare. I sag back against the couch. My heart is going a thousand miles a minute, my breathing heavy.

What the fuck just happened?

Beau's office door smashes open, and Kian storms inside. He sees me sitting there, relatively unharmed, and then the vampire.

"Wolf," Beau hisses, his upper lip curling. His fangs descend, and he leaps to his feet.

Holy shit.

I believed it, but I didn't *really believe it* until right fucking now.

"Did you fucking touch her?" Kian growls. He doesn't seem to be in complete control at the moment. His body vibrates, energy twitching his muscles. His eyes are a sharper blue, more his wolf's than his.

I leap off the couch and rush between them. I grab Kian's face and drag it down, until his eyes bore into mine.

"I'm okay," I say. "I promise."

"He tried to manipulate you."

Yeah, his voice isn't all here either.

"I'm fine, wolf," I whisper.

"Might I remind you, Winter Wolf, that shifting here would be considered an act of war. Besides, your stench was all over her," Beau says in a dry voice. "Makes her a bit unappealing, in my taste. Still. A wolf and a witch together? Nothing could catch my attention faster."

I frown. An act of war? Vampires are crazier than I would've thought.

"That's not helpful," I say over my shoulder.

Kian growls.

"Keep it together." I press my hand to his chest. "We're all good. Just had a little chat."

"A chat with a vampire," he spits. "Over my dead body."

"That can be arranged." Beau straightens his cuffs.

He *looks* indifferent, but I'd imagine he's anything but.

"What the hell is wrong with both of you?"

"For one, we're mortal enemies..." He goes to a bar cart in the corner and pours a drink. He holds a glass out to us.

Not a bad idea.

I leave Kian and take it from him, keeping eye contact as I swallow the dark liquid.

Its smokey scent fills my mouth and nose, and it burns a path down my throat. I choke on it. "That's disgusting."

Beau grins.

Kian growls again, lower. "Astra, step away from him."

“He had me alone for at least five minutes. He could’ve killed me then,” I point out. Not that I’m not in danger, but... you know. I guess I’m a gambler at heart. *Oh, yeah.* “Where are my chips?”

Beau laughs. “I like your fire, witch. You know, we could use more allied witches such as yourself to join our ranks.”

I bristle, even if I have no idea what that means. “No, thanks.”

“We offer protection against the dogs.” He shrugs. “Many powerful covens have come to us in the past.”

Kian frowns, absorbing his words.

Another thing to contemplate later?

“Let’s, um, move on.” I pluck Beau’s glass from his hand and bring it to the still-shaking wolf shifter. Adding liquor to the mix will either improve our situation or drastically worsen it.

Time will tell.

“My chips?” I ask again. I go to the couch.

I’m about to sit when Kian beats me to it. He drops down beside me and grabs my hips, towing me onto his lap. I wriggle until I’m comfortable, although the more I shift, the more his fingers dig into my thighs.

“Normally, witches wouldn’t get them back. Using magic to gamble is severely frowned upon.” He scowls.

“I didn’t use magic, though.”

“You weren’t relying on *intuition* to tell you when to bet more or less, when to stay, when to ask for another card...”

“I was just guessing.” I cross my arms. “My powers are... limited. Basic, even.”

Kian doesn’t believe me, but I believe myself. I’ve got no spare magic, nothing hidden out of reach. I’m completely ordinary. Minus the random teleporting I’m still trying to figure out.

The vampire misses nothing. His gaze turns contemplative, more like we’re a puzzle to be hammered out than nuisances in his office. He’s unnaturally still on the couch across from us.

“I could tell you for certain. About your power.” His grin is wicked, and his fangs slide back down. “I’ve got quite an affinity for magical components.”

That’s tempting... but his teeth in my throat is definitely not tempting. My heart beats faster, and I swallow hard. I’m not in a cell anymore, at Sonia’s disposal. I’m not Gage’s captive. I focus on the thread of magic

inside me, grounding myself to it. We're so high up, I almost can't connect to the earth at all.

I'm not in cuffs.

Kian wouldn't let the vampire hurt me.

"I'll pass," I manage. "And we didn't know we were staying in your hotel. Do you have a problem if we stay the night?"

"Are you going to disrupt my customers or swindle me out of more cash?"

"Well..." I frown. "I've never been here before, so I don't know. I hope not."

Beau pauses. "You've never been to Vegas?"

"No. Actually, I haven't really had any experience in a city as large as this one. Or any city." I nudge Kian. "He was kind enough to offer to take me to see it. But most of my time has been spent in small towns or in no towns at all."

It hits me—not for the first time—how isolated I was growing up. My mother didn't want me coming into contact with anyone she couldn't account for. I didn't go into town on days when strangers would be rolling through. I stuck to a few friends in town and her, and that was it until I got the job at the local newspaper. But my circle stayed small out of fear. Even in college, I kept things predictable. After a while, the few friends I made stopped calling.

Beau and Kian share an indecipherable look.

"Okay," Beau finally says.

"Okay?" I crane back and meet Kian's gaze.

To my frustration, I can't even read *his* expression. And it seems like I've been getting a little better at that nowadays. Except right now. It's a blank slate.

"For a price," Beau clarifies.

Kian seemed to expect that because his gaze ticks to me.

The vampire wants my blood.

"I..." I stand and move away from them.

Sonia took my blood and my magic over and over again. The thought of more teeth in my skin sends a shudder of revulsion up my spine.

"It would unlock some mysteries about you," Beau says. "Which I'd be happy to share..."

"How much?"

He shrugs and examines his fingernails. "Just a pint or so."

Kian growls. "So much?"

"*Fine*, a swallow or two."

"You don't want me to do it?" I guess, my gaze on Kian.

"I don't," he says. "But I also wanted you to experience Vegas..."

"And I'd be happy to play tour guide," Beau says. "If your dog can get over himself."

Kian bristles. He rises and joins me by the window, and I have to actively stop myself from leaning into him.

He can't be my source of comfort.

"Can you get along with him for a night?" I whisper to the wolf shifter.

He sighs. "Probably. I've stomached worse."

"Me?" I crack a smile.

I've already decided to do it. Just call me a blood bag for vampires. It's not like I can reveal my trauma to the vampire. I already told him I hadn't met another of his kind, and it's true enough. But that seems like it would open another can of worms and a whole new line of questions I'm not ready to deal with.

Like if the wolf shifters need vampire interference.

But where have the vampires been as the wolves eradicated covens across America?

Kian taps my cheek, drawing my attention back to him. "Careful, Astra. I might start to think you're flirting."

I roll my eyes. And, weirdly enough, I'm feeling more confident about the whole blood-sucking thing. Which is ridiculous. I don't want his teeth anywhere near me. But Vegas just seems so... interesting. And different.

It would be a shame to leave now.

"You'll stop him if he loses control and tries to kill me?" I ask.

Beau scoffs. "I wouldn't. My control is impeccable."

"You might," Kian snaps. His gaze fixes on me. "Yes, little nightmare, I'd come to your rescue." He follows me across the room to Beau. "You're much too valuable to lose."

"Your dynamic is quite intriguing." He watches us intently.

There's humor in Beau's words, a teasing that takes me by surprise. He might be enjoying this game.

I mean, I guess he could've just kicked us to the curb or took what he wanted with his mind manipulation. Or left me as a cold husk in the

basement...

My nerves come roaring back when Beau holds out his hand. His lips are curled in a small smile, almost demure. Waiting, though, for permission. Under the mask is a predator—and I'd be careful not to forget that.

I give him my hand.

His skin is cold. That's the first thing I notice—and then he raises my wrist to his mouth, and his fangs descend again.

My panic flares in me like a beacon. My magic rushes through me, reacting to my fear, and my hair lifts off my shoulders.

The vampire's hold on my hand tightens, and suddenly Kian is at my back. I shudder, but Kian grasps my waist. His thumbs inch under my shirt, rubbing my skin, and it's the only thing that keeps me from bolting.

With inhuman speed, Beau latches on to my wrist. The pain is nothing more than a pinch, followed immediately by a flood of ecstasy. I stare at Beau's mouth, his lips on my skin. His throat works.

My knees go weak, and only Kian's grip keeps me standing. He takes more of my weight, his growl vibrating through my chest.

I was resistant to this?

It's bliss. Like the last time Sonia bit me, but a thousand times better. My eyes close, and my head tips back. Peace radiates through me. My heart slows.

"That's enough," Kian says.

I let out a noise of protest.

Beau seems to agree. I can feel his frantic energy

Kian growls louder, and suddenly, he grabs Beau's jaw and squeezes. The crack of bone slips past the fog in my brain. The vampire hisses in pain. His fangs slide out of my skin, and he jerks back. As soon as he releases me, I slump into Kian's arms.

I stare at my bloody wrist, my senses sharply returning to me.

Beau touches his jaw. He manipulates it and glares at Kian. "That was unnecessary."

"Her heartbeat," Kian snaps.

My head hurts, and trying to track their conversation is making it worse. "You—"

"It's the venom in our fangs." Beau gives me a pitying look. "Better that our prey enjoys it, don't you think?"

I'm still leaning heavily on the wolf shifter at my back, but I don't bother telling him I already know.

Beau covers my wrist, and hot healing magic—at total odds with his ice-cold skin—slides into me. The bite knits itself together, leaving just a bloody echo.

Kian hasn't released me. I glance back to find his expression stormy, and his fingers tighten on my hips. If anything, he seems less in control now. His wolf is right at the surface, peering back at me.

I cover his hand with mine. "I'm okay," I assure him, then step away. My vision flickers, and my head swims.

He lifts me off my feet in an instant, and I squeeze my eyes shut. He sets me down on the couch, facing off against Beau. "Was it worth it, bloodsucker?"

"Quite."

Something cool presses into my hand, and I open my eyes. A box of juice with a bendy straw is now in my weak grip.

Kian perches beside me and helps me raise it to my lips.

I swallow the sugary liquid. My mouth is unusually dry, and my magic flickers dimly under my ribs.

"Your magic is exquisite." Beau takes a seat across from us, his attention fixed on me. "I haven't tasted anything like it in centuries."

Kian eyes me.

"Um... solid genetics?" I don't know what to say beyond that.

Beau appraises us. He shakes his head, like my excuse is the dumbest thing he's heard. "Your magic is being suppressed. Blood can't hide it, and magical genetics can't be tasted like that. It's clear you don't know how strong you could be."

"Suppressed?" I shake my head. "No. By what?"

I've never heard of such a thing.

The vampire pulls a handkerchief from his pocket and dabs at the corner of his mouth. "That is a matter to be discussed at an earlier hour. Now is the time to experience Vegas, Ms. Somnium."

Kian and I exchange a glance. I'm not sure whether I can trust either of them, but Kian at least seems to be an ally here. Our request was rather simple—we wanted to explore Vegas. Well, *I* wanted to do that. I'm pretty sure Kian's plan was to indulge me for a day before dragging me back into his pack's territory, then force me to help him.

A little give and take, I suppose...

Beau straightens his suit and licks the last drop of blood from his thumb. "You'll see a side of Vegas you'll have never seen on your own. I can promise you that."

I perk up.

Kian grimaces. "Is it safe?"

"If you stay with me, yes."

I'm already nodding. Danger, spice, and everything nice. Just what a girl needs on her first trip to Vegas. Kian shakes his head, but I ignore it. We're doing this. Well, I am. With or without him. My mother kept me so isolated. And... somehow, someone suppressed my power. It's only natural for me to assume it was her.

I don't know how, though. Or when.

Or *why*.

So this is my rebellion—and no one is going to stop me from taking this night for myself.

CHAPTER 35

KIAN

The absence of our new guide's heartbeat is unsettling. The only vampire I've met before was someone my father knew, and I was too focused on other things to think about his still heart.

Beaumont Sanders leads us to the elevators with inhuman grace, reminding me with every step that he's a killer. Vampires have an edge on wolf shifters in speed. He could turn and snap Astra's neck before I'd be able to stop him. I put myself between them, ignoring her huff of indignation. Better upset than dead.

Rules set in place by our wolf and vampire ancestors dictate a delicate truce. We interact as infrequently as possible, and we *never* reveal our powers. Wolf shifters are secretive, yes, but no more secretive than vampires. It's always been drilled into me that however closely I guard my own mind, they've fortified theirs better.

I've heard of Beaumont Sanders before. He's older than my father, even though he looks to be about my age. I'm fairly certain he took over his clan in a bloody war fifty years ago, and that's how news of his name made it to us in Colorado.

Astra's arm brushes mine. She clearly isn't getting my unspoken *stay behind me* order, and I glance down at her.

She seems too fragile in a place like this. We're surrounded by bloodsuckers—I can feel the sleepless death that keeps them immortal clinging to their skin like a coat of armor. It's a curious sensation, cold and buzzing. It lingers just under the edge of my conscience. I didn't notice it when we first entered the city, or his particular resort. There was too much noise, too many humans.

When I was a teenager, my father summoned me to the same clearing where he held the witch. That vampire, though, seemed only there to teach me a lesson. He was composed, his hands clasped behind his back. His expression was quiet, appraising. And when my father told me to attack him, I got my ass handed to me.

He was just another tool along my path to become alpha. My father carved me out of stone—but I still had to be strong enough to withstand the tide.

I shake off those lingering memories. The fear that stuck in my nostrils, the way his fangs slid into my skin. Punishment for my slow actions.

It was necessary.

Astra's hand slips into mine when the elevator jolts down. The lights flicker, and I glance sideways at our bloodsucking guide. He seems unbothered. Even when the elevator picks up speed, dropping so fast that Astra's hair lifts. The weightlessness turns my stomach, and I squeeze her fingers.

"What is this?" I growl.

Beau smirks. "Scared?"

Fucker.

The lights go out in the elevator. Astra yelps, and I push her swiftly behind me. The need to protect her rises through me, and my wolf is right there with me. She clutches the back of my shirt.

We slam to a halt, and dimmer lights come on. My wolf wants to burst free, but I grit my teeth and hold it back. Shifting in an elevator would be sure to harm Astra, not protect her.

"Be calm, dog," the vampire says. "We've arrived."

He seems no worse for the wear. Not a hair out of place. The elevator doors chime.

"We're below the casino," Astra whispers, pointing to the digital counter above the rows of floor buttons.

—16.

Negative fucking sixteen?

The elevator doors slide open and admit us out into... a street.

It's nighttime here. We're at the top of a winding cobblestone path that slopes downhill, toward the main street of a small town. That's how it appears, anyway. It doesn't make logical sense.

My brows furrow, and I almost dig in my heels. Too late, Astra has moved past me, and she and the vampire step out. I follow quickly, and the elevator doors close behind us. I glance back and stop in my tracks.

The doors are gone. The path continues up the hill as if there was no interruption at all.

I inhale sharply and get a whiff of magic. Not Astra's. A mask of layers. My hackles rise, my muscles tensing. *Danger*, my instinct screams. I have visions of walking out into an attacking coven. A trap laid perfectly to ensnare us. Or me.

"What is this place?" Astra asks the vampire.

I hurry to catch up, ready to demand that he take us back. But then I catch sight of the wonder on her face, and I pause.

This is why we came to Vegas, right?

She's staring around like she's never seen anything so magical.

Beau is silent. We continue down the hill and into the street. We're suddenly framed in by buildings stretching up toward the... sky? Ceiling? My skin crawls at my lack of understanding. There's a moon up there, but it's not *my* moon.

The shops are strange. Potions and spell books, a shop advertising different blood type selections, a gym. Farther down are restaurants with open fronts. People spill out of all of them, laughing and drinking. Minding their own business. Until I extend my senses and detect more magic. Individual signatures.

"Calm, shifter," Beau says, his form blurring as he rushes to my side. "Did you think everyone stays so isolated as your pack?"

Astra eyes me.

"Have you been inside the New York, New York?" Beau asks casually.

"Once." I grit my teeth.

"It's supposed to appear like you're outside. Same thing, plus a little..." Beau waves his hand. "Extra."

"I love it," Astra breathes.

Of course she does.

I press closer to her, so on edge that I'm almost on top of her. We go into one of the shops, and Beau leads us down an aisle of magical items to a spiral staircase. We descend into darkness. I can see the edges of the stairwell, the black-painted brick, the pipes overhead. But even that isn't enough. We're getting deeper.

He raps on a metal door four times, and he hums as we wait.

Then it opens with a giant creak.

A small woman stands in the doorway. She wears a necklace rimmed with gemstones, each one seeming to emanate its own light. Her thick, dark brows lower when she spots me. My defenses go up.

Witch.

Trap, my wolf whispers.

"It's okay, Ruby," Beau says to the woman. "They're my guests."

She contemplates it, then steps aside. Her gaze lands on Astra and sticks.

"Traitor," she murmurs when we pass.

Astra ignores her.

It's a lush bar, everything dark wood and velvet. The ceilings are low, giving a certain air of secrecy. As if the secret door and knock didn't also do that. It's not as loud as it should be for the amount of people filling the space. The bar is packed with people. *People*, as in... vampires. Witches. And something *other* that I can't quite get a grasp on. Beings that have magic but don't register the same way the prior two species do.

Beau leads us to a booth in the back, and we sit.

"What is this place?" Astra asks.

A waitress—another witch—comes by with three empty glasses. "What'll it be?"

"Whiskey," Beau orders. "And our house special for my guests."

She waves her hand over the glasses, and the amber liquid appears in one, and an opaque orange drink fills the other two. She sets the glasses down and her eyes go wide when she sees Astra. "Your Mark..."

"Leave us," Beau orders in a firmer tone.

She complies.

I lift my glass and sniff. Citrus and an underlying hint of liquor.

"What is it?" Astra asks.

Beau runs his finger around the rim of his glass. "Tequila and orange juice. Grenadine if our bartender is in a good mood."

She raises her glass and keeps it mid-air. "To new friends."

My lips press together. She wants to be friends with him?

She elbows me, and I grudgingly lift my glass, too. Beau clinks his to ours and takes a sip.

I follow suit. The sharp orange flavor isn't enough to cut through the bite of alcohol, but it tastes surprisingly good. I take one swallow, then gulp the rest of it down.

Astra lowers hers, eyes wide. She wipes the back of her mouth and frowns.

Heat explodes through my stomach, up into my chest.

It's been a while since alcohol has hit me like this. My shifter magic makes it almost impossible to get drunk. I try to heal it away, but it doesn't work. My head feels light, and I stop trying.

Astra giggles, then slaps her hand over her mouth.

"That's strong," she says between her fingers.

Beau grins. "I know. Want another?"

His pupils dilate, and she nods wordlessly. He plucks her glass from the table and raises it. Another witch sweeping past the table stops and smirks at Beau. She touches the glass, and it fills with the orange liquid.

"Get drunk with me," Astra whispers in my ear.

I start to shake my head—but then her hand lands on my thigh.

"Please." Her lips are right fucking there. So close to my skin, her hot breath is a caress.

"I'll have another," I concede. "But I'm not getting drunk. One of us has to keep our senses."

"That's what I'm here for," Beau murmurs. He's watching us keenly.

A shiver rushes through Astra.

The witch fills my cup and moves along without a comment about Astra's Mark. She doesn't even look, and she's gone before I can catch more defining features.

Astra clinks her glass against mine, and we both toss them back.

I groan at the heavenly taste.

Did I just *groan*?

"When's the last time you cut loose, Kian?" Beau asks.

I lick my lips and shift in my seat. The heat spreads, carrying my tension away. "I don't know. Never."

Astra gasps.

I look down at her. My brows pull together.

She's the single most beautiful creature I've ever seen, and she doesn't even realize it. Doesn't seem to know how much power she has over me—regardless of her magic. Suppressed or not.

We need to figure that out.

Beau finishes his drink and slips from the booth, beckoning us to follow him. We head down an aisle and then down another flight of stairs, this one curving in a spiral. Astra, behind me, keeps her hands on my shoulders. I ignore the way that sends little electric zaps through me, straight to my dick.

The stairwell gives way to a massive dance hall. There's a DJ up on a platform, a glittering full-face mask hiding his features. The music beats through us, and I almost rock back.

"Dance," Beau says, and it sounds like a fantastic idea.

I grab Astra's hand. We move through the gyrating bodies until we're swallowed up by them. When we've gone far enough, I stop and face her.

She loops her arms around my neck, but I want her closer. I relish the feel of her curvy, soft body on mine. I dig my fingers into her hips. The music coerces us into dancing, until we're in sync with everyone else.

Astra tips her head back and closes her eyes. Her blonde hair cascades down her back. Her Mark is pitch-black against her pale skin in the neon lights, and I itch to touch it.

I'm not sure why I'm not touching it.

I lean down and trail my lips across her jaw, down the side of her neck. I don't want her to panic, but she doesn't seem to mind it on her Mark side. There were no bites there from her time with Gage.

Her little gasps are only evident from the hitch in her chest and the way her fingers tighten on my shoulders.

"Kian," she whispers, her mouth at my ear.

I push my knee between her legs. We're still dancing but inextricably connected. My thigh touches her core, and she groans slightly as she grinds on me.

Fuck.

The bodies bump into us, jostling us deeper into the crowd, but no one so much as glances at us. We're invisible—and that, in and of itself—is a heady sensation.

I have so many eyes on me all the time, but now I just have Astra's stormy gaze, burning with lust, to contend with. And it unlocks something inside me.

I catch the back of her neck and slam my lips to hers. She doesn't try to pull away—not that there's anywhere for her to go. Pride and desire and

need surge through me.

Astra is *mine*.

She's kissing me back with just as much vigor, and I lift her by the backs of her thighs. She wraps her legs around me, her arms winding around my neck. Her chest is smashed to mine, and it takes restraint to keep from tearing her clothes off.

It doesn't stop me from grinding my cock against her core, though. Layers of clothes separate us, dulling the sensation. I just want *more*.

She nips at my lips. Her moan goes straight through me. There's a new wild side of her. She's become feral, and I relish it. Her fingers thread through my hair, tugging my head to the side. She drags her mouth down my jaw, to my throat. Her teeth on my skin. Not quite a bite, but a hint of it.

My dick hardens.

I growl deep in my chest. I navigate through the dancers to a quiet, dark hall. I drop her legs and waste no time tugging her leggings down, guiding her foot out. Then she's right back up in my arms, and her back slams into the wall.

She grabs my face and kisses me harder. Her hands slip from my face and go to my jeans, and in a matter of seconds, my cock is free. She guides it between her legs and lets me take over. I run the head of my cock through her wetness, and she moans. It's low, like a purr in her chest, and it almost undoes me right there.

How long have I waited for this? For her?

I cover her Mark with my palm, pushing her face into the wall. Her chest rises and falls, and I relish the smell of her. I bite at her Mark. She's soaking wet around my cock head, which still teases her entrance.

"Kian, *please*."

When she moans again—telling me she *likes* the little snaps of pain that come with pleasure—I thrust into her.

There's the slightest resistance, but that, too, breaks.

She arches her back and cries out. I direct her lips back to mine, and she digs her nails into my skin. I still, deeply seated inside her. But the feel of her clenching around me, squeezing my cock, is too much. It's like she's touching all of me, everywhere at once.

She sucks my tongue into her mouth, and I growl again. She draws my possessive instinct out of me, until only one thought remains.

Mine.

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CHAPTER 36

ASTRA

The pain is wicked and delicious. My body is on fire, and I squeeze my thighs around Kian's hips. He's the only one who can ground me, and his dick inside me is unlike anything I've felt before.

It's the most welcome invasion.

He kisses me harder, and his fingers trail across my clit. I gasp into his mouth when he presses on the bundle of nerves. Somehow, he knows exactly how to work me up, until the buzzing in my abdomen is too much to ignore.

My spine hits the wall with every thrust, and I tighten my hold on him. I hope I'm leaving marks in his back, but my nails are pitiful claws compared to a she-wolf's.

My head falls back, and he immediately bites my throat. It's not like the vampires, because it's his flat teeth and I only feel the bubble of pure pleasure from it. He doesn't break the skin and suck my magic out.

"Fuck," I groan.

His lips and teeth trail down to my collarbone. He touches the mark left by the shadow version of his wolf, and pain blazes through me.

I cry out and look down. His teeth are in my skin—his *human* teeth—but now he's drawing blood all the same. I grip his hair and yank his head back up. My blood is on his lips.

"Come for me," he growls, rubbing harder on my clit.

The pain, the sharp desire—it's not so much his order as it is the buildup of sensation that shoves me over the edge. My pussy spasms around his cock, and my body tenses. Euphoria like I've never felt hits me like a tidal wave.

I've barely started to regain my senses when he pulls out of me, drops my legs, and turns me around. I brace my forearms on the wall automatically, and he grips my hips. He yanks me out farther, until my back is more horizontal, and thrusts back into me.

This new position creates a fuller sensation, and my head hangs down. I squeeze my eyes closed. His movements take on a newfound urgency, pounding into me with an animalistic frenzy. Each thrust threatens to spark into a wildfire.

He slams into me and stills. His cock throbs, and he lets out a hiss, coming inside me. I close my eyes and enjoy the pulsing pleasure. I could stay like this forever. Or spin around and kiss him again. Wait for him to be ready for another round. He seems just as content to stay still, his hips rocking the slightest bit. Chasing the last drops of a high.

A blast of cool air wipes away the haze.

And with that comes startling clarity.

I just had sex with Kian.

No, no, no.

I dig my nails into the wall. Panic constricts my throat. We said we wouldn't. *I* said *I* wouldn't. Sex is one step closer to this godforsaken mate bond being solidified—and he's already outright refused that.

Horror is a bucket of ice water dumped over my head.

And I think he feels the same way, because he slips free of me and staggers backward. I yank my pants back into place and straighten. There's wetness between my legs that I ignore. I can't even fucking meet Kian's gaze.

He just took my virginity in an underground, supernatural nightclub. Against the wall where anyone could've seen us.

Clapping draws my attention to the mouth of the hall. Beau appears a second later, grinning at me. "That was quite a show, Ms. Somnium."

I scowl.

"What did you do to us?" Kian chokes out.

I finally work up the nerve to glance at him. He's got his hand on his chest, his eyes wild.

Beau waves his hand. "Liberation through libation. The only sacrifice, though, was your virginity."

My lips flatten. I don't know how the fuck he knows—

“I can smell the blood between your legs, dear Astra,” he says in a low voice. Almost conspiring.

“Get the fuck away from her. What did you *do* to us? My wolf—”

“Is napping.” Beau rolls his eyes. “Although he may be pissed to learn he missed the fireworks.”

“I can’t feel him.”

Kian sounds... *worried*. While I’m growing more and more sick.

“That drink made us do this?” I ask Beau, trying to focus on him. “It made us...”

“It acts as alcohol does.” Beau shrugs. “But it does have a certain effect on mates. Which, really, it isn’t my fault fate deems you irresistible to him, and vice versa. Is it?”

Fuck.

Kian seems too lost in his mind to focus on me.

And me? I’m going to have an internal meltdown.

I hurry past Beau and back into the mob of dancing bodies. I should’ve known better than to trust a vampire—or a *wolf shifter*.

The crowd has gotten rowdier, the dancing more sensual. Hands reach for me as I pass, catching locks of my hair, trailing over my arms, shoulders. There’s probably something about the sex, the *sacrifice of my virginity*, that’s affecting them this way. It seems like everyone is in a haze.

I shove people away from me, my lungs restricting. My vision blurs.

Someone snags my wrist and holds on, whipping me around.

“Dance with me.” A man with half-lidded eyes watches me, his fangs already visible.

I shudder. “No, thanks.”

As soon as I fend him off, more hands grab at me. I’m dragged farther into the dance pit, crushed between gyrating bodies.

“I can smell it on her,” a female purrs.

They tug at my clothes.

“Stop it.” I slap them away. But there are too many, pressing close enough that I can barely twist around.

Fear chokes me.

I thought my magic was supposed to swoop in and save me—that it would explode outward and flatten everyone. But all I feel is a shuddering darkness winding through my veins.

What if sex with Kian, if losing my virginity to him, is my downfall?

What if that little bit of power I had was only good while I retained my innocence?

I'd heard of that happening. Stories from visiting witches. They wanted me to stay safe, I think, but my mom always shook her head and told me to ignore them when she discovered what they'd said.

"Release her!" Kian's voice cuts through the music.

It starts raining. Pouring. I squint upward. I thought we were inside. Was that another trick, or is this? The crowd doesn't mind it. A cheer goes up.

Within seconds, everyone is drenched—except for me. The drops seem to move around me. As I watch, the water on the dancing crowd crystalizes. It freezes over, frosting on their skin, their clothes.

Someone shrieks.

The crowd parts, and Kian strides straight for me. Power crackles out of him, and my jaw drops. He's—

With a flick of his wrist, icy water creeps up my leggings. I spot the puddles under my feet and frown when it doesn't just crystalize, it solidifies.

"You've got to be kidding me." I tug at my foot, but the ice holds fast. "What is this?"

Kian stops in front of me and grips my throat. I let out a squeak, but his hold tightens. Water bleeds from his fingers, rolling down my skin.

He has magic?

And he's completely lost it.

His eyes are dark, with no sign of the bright blue of his wolf. He's gone mad, succumbing to the magic that's built up inside him.

Power can consume a witch if she's not careful. I sat diligently and absorbed stories about witches who used too much power. Sometimes their magic temporarily burns out—like the Utah coven when they tried to rip away my mate bond. Other times, the power takes over and burns its *host* out. The mind never recovers from that.

It was always in the context of witches, though.

As far as I know, shifters don't *have* magic.

But Kian clearly does, and he's about to be swallowed up by it. I'll admonish him, or hate him, for keeping the secret later. Right now, I have to help him.

Against my better judgment, I reach for his face. I cup his cheek. The hand around my throat squeezes, and the air stalls in my lungs. My chest burns, my face heats. Around us, the supernatural beings who were dancing, who were messing with me, are trying to scramble away. But the ice holds them, too.

Kian's eyes flood completely black, and the people around us start screaming.

I cast a glance at them, my brows lowering. I don't understand why until one faces me, and I spot the blood running out of his eyes. Bleeding tears. It comes out of his nose, it's on his lips. My own mouth opens and closes.

It isn't affecting me, I don't think, but it still isn't good.

Okay, okay.

Come on, magic.

The ice stabs into my legs, like it's trying to eviscerate me. The sharp pain brings tears to my eyes. My magic is nowhere, and his is everywhere.

Draw it out.

That voice is my mother's, not my own. It's like a shadow crawling up out of the depths of my memory, but I cannot tell if it's friend or foe.

More people fall to Kian's water magic. I'll be one of them if I don't catch my breath.

So, the same way I would to a plant or the earth, I pull his magic into me. There's such a well of it, I doubt he realizes what's happening at first. Or perhaps he's never had a witch try this with him—I'd guess this is a closely guarded secret in his pack.

A wolf with witch magic.

And yet, as I draw it out of him, it merges with my magic like they've known each other forever. I could get high on this feeling. It doesn't blister or burn, it feels like... sunshine. The good kind.

He jerks, his black eyes coming back to mine, and I grip the sides of his face harder. I hold him and mentally *yank*, the pressure inside me climbing, until I can't contain it anymore either.

However, I can direct it. Like a sliver of my own magic, but fifty times more potent, I *create*.

Storm clouds form above us, rolling and dark. Thunder cracks. Rain pours down again, but it's warm. This water touches both of us, and my hair and clothes are soaked in seconds.

His grip on my throat loosens.

Thanks for that lesson, Mom.

I free myself from the ice as easily as snapping my fingers, melting it away. The rain continues to come down in heavy waves, but the screaming has stopped. No more pain. The warm water washes away the ice.

I take his overflowing magic and expend it safely, as nothing more than a conduit.

Mom wanted me to know how to handle powerful magic, even when I had none for myself. Now, it takes a while for the flow of it inside him to dim again, to be wrestled back under control by both him and me.

Kian's eyes return to normal. He tips his head back, eyeing the clouds. Letting the water sluice over his face.

We're both drenched. His dark hair is slicked to his head, and he runs a hand through it, clearing it from his eyes. He blinks slowly as his mind returns.

The hair on my arms rises, and I glance around. The people—vampires and witches and more—pick themselves up off the floor. They seem pissed. We're going to have a mob on our hands at any minute.

"We need to leave," I murmur.

My voice is hoarse, and Kian locks on to that. His brows draw down, and confusion surfaces. He might not remember what he just did. The rush of power overtaking a witch, if stopped in time, can leave them in a daze.

But when *I* lose control, I just... transport myself away. Convenient.

Not.

"Come with me." I ignore the pain in my throat and lead him to the exit, pushing through the bodies.

Kian clutches my hand through the cobblestone streets and up the hill. The farther we walk, the colder I get. I let the rest of Kian's magic out in increments, seeping into the stone around us. I don't want to hold on to it.

We find the elevator surprisingly easily, the doors open and waiting for us.

My skin is ice when we step inside, except for Kian's hot hand still trapped in mine.

There's no sign of Beau—and I don't want to wait around for him either. I hit the button for our room's floor.

As soon as the doors close, Kian steps closer. He curls around me, holding me close—and gentle. As if I'm the breakable one. As if I didn't

just witness him damn near kill a room full of people.

It's because I'm shivering, I realize. My teeth are clacking together.

I have ice in my bones, in my blood. This is worse than when Sonia filled me with ice. This, I took willingly. I took *his* magic, the water affinity, and used it as my own.

I don't know if there will be a consequence waiting for me.

The elevator chimes, announcing the arrival to our floor. I slip from his hold and exit, moving fast down the hallway. In reality, I don't know how much more energy I have. Between the drink and the sex—

God, don't think about that.

—and the magic, my own levels are severely depleted.

I make it, though. And I wait with my gaze averted while Kian unlocks our door. He opens it and lets me pass.

"Astra," he whispers. "I—"

I beeline for the window and put my hands on the glass. It's dark out now, the whole Vegas strip lit up in neon colors. Just as Kian promised.

There's no warmth here. We're in the middle of the desert, and I can't find any heat to draw from. Nothing to soothe the ache in my bones.

Were I in the forest, surrounded by life...

But up here, all around me is just glass and metal and *him*.

And I'd rather be anywhere else.

CHAPTER 37

ASTRA

“Please.”

My heart skips. I don’t even know what he’s asking, but it tugs at me all the same.

“That isn’t how I wanted this to happen, Astra, I can promise you that.” He steps up behind me.

I meet his gaze in the window’s reflection, and I don’t flinch away from him when he reaches out. He recoils as soon as his fingers brush my biceps.

“You’re freezing.”

I nod. I don’t know what else to say to that effect—it’s not like I can deny it. He reaches for me again, and this time his movements are surer. He guides me into the huge bathroom. He leaves me standing in the center and turns on the shower. It’s a large glass one, with space for a whole lot of people in it.

Within seconds, steam billows out and clouds the glass.

He moves around me quietly, shutting the bathroom door, picking out the tiny shampoo and conditioner bottles from the counter. Then he stops in front of me and reaches for the hem of my shirt.

He hesitates.

I hesitate.

But he seems to steel himself, because he takes the bottom of the wet fabric and drags it up. I raise my arms, letting him remove it completely. The steam has reached us, fogging the mirror and wrapping around us.

He kneels, and my breath hitches when he tugs my leggings down. Then he goes fucking still, and I don’t understand it until he leans forward.

His forehead presses against my abdomen.

“Kian.” My voice is hoarse. “What are you doing?”

“This isn’t how I wanted this to go,” he says. “*Fuck*. I took your virginity, Astra. How can you ever forgive me for that? I—” He squeezes my thighs. “Let me make it up to you.”

I swallow. “How?”

He lifts away from my body and tips his head back, meeting my gaze. There’s no sign of the wolf. And strange enough, I miss that. Knowing the wolf is right there under his surface, watching and listening and... trying to get close to me.

I shut my eyes.

This is just Kian.

And me.

The pull toward him just under my ribcage is still there.

He helps me step out of my leggings, my shoes and socks. He runs his hands over my calves, and his healing magic seeps into me. My skin is bruised where his ice held me, but it clears as he inches higher.

“You have water magic.” I force the words past my lips.

“Yes.”

Impossible. If I hadn’t seen it, I wouldn’t believe it. If I hadn’t felt it—

“How?” A repeated question for another matter entirely.

He doesn’t pause in healing me. I lean back on the counter, letting it take some of my weight. My knees are weak, my thighs trembling. He parts my legs and stares at my center, which is...

Oh God.

My cheeks flame.

There’s blood smeared on my inner thighs.

Beau said he could smell it—but damn it, I thought he was exaggerating.

Kian runs his finger through the blood, then higher. Brushing straight down my center. I curl forward and clutch his shoulders.

This isn’t the haze of the drink-induced lust. This is just us.

“Come on,” he murmurs, rising.

My hands stay on his shoulders, and he holds my waist. He walks me backward into the shower, adjusting the temperature so it doesn’t scald us. It’s still almost too hot, a direct contrast to the ice inside me.

Kian puts his hand under the stream, and we both watch the water pool on his palm and drip off. Then he drops his hand and leans into me,

touching his lips to mine.

My heart skips again, like a damn drama queen.

I rise on my toes and push back into him, sealing our lips together. I wind my arms around his neck. He got into the shower with his pants on, but his dick stiffens against my belly. The fabric presses into my skin.

I whimper into his mouth.

“Let me show you how it should’ve gone,” he says, his lips still moving on mine.

I nod.

He takes only a moment to tear off his soaked pants, then returns to me. He lifts me and holds me, my back pressed to the wall. His hands under my ass urge me to wrap my legs around his hips. I do, feeling more like an octopus than human. I peek down at his cock, which runs up my center. He shifts his hips, rubbing the tip over my clit. My head falls back, and he continues to do it.

Pleasure bursts out in little waves through me.

He doesn’t stop until I dig my nails into his neck and crack my eyes open. He steals another kiss. His tongue strokes in my mouth, tasting me—and that even feels hot compared to the chill inside me.

And then his cock notches at my entrance, and my muscles tense.

But he doesn’t force himself in me or even flinch. He coaxes my tongue into his mouth, nips my lower lip. He brushes along my hips and sides, his fingers splayed across my skin, until I release a shuddering breath.

Only when I release the tension does he inch into me.

It hurts.

I squeeze my eyes shut, but almost immediately, his magic floods into me. Now that I know what it is, what he has, I drop my own walls around my power for a second. The way they merge is pure joy.

The cold vanishes, filling me with ecstasy instead.

I’ve never felt anything like it.

Kian thrusts into me, and my control over my magic—ingrained deep in my bones from my childhood—snaps back into place.

We both groan, and I open my eyes to find his expression wondrous. He reaches up and strokes the side of my face, pushing my wet hair away. His cock slides in and out, his hips moving slowly. Each inch he gives me feeds the sensation of fullness. And then he stops, so deep I can feel him pulse inside me.

Holy.

Shit.

Now's not the time to think about my mother, but I can't help but think that this is so fucking far from the agony she used to warn me about.

My muscles involuntarily clench around him, and Kian breathes out harshly. His nostrils flare.

"Fuck. When you do that, Astra, I think I may just explode right now."

I shift my hips. "Maybe you should do something about it, then."

He grunts and draws back. His magic is still under my skin, thawing me from the inside out, and it seems to combine with his stranglehold over my emotions. He pulls out and thrusts back in slowly. His gaze bores into mine.

"Don't look away," he orders, his voice pained.

I nod, and he moves faster. His thrusts inside me stoke a fire, until pleasure zips through my core. He reaches between us and rubs my clit, rolling his hips to get even deeper. I continue to stare into his eyes even as he brings me to the edge—and then shoves me over.

I come, my eyelids fluttering. I try to keep them open, but the pleasure is unbearable. There's something different about coming with him inside me. I clench around him, trying not to scream.

Kian's grip on my hips is bruising. He chases his climax, and his noises slip past his gritted teeth.

He comes inside me. For a second time.

I don't have the energy to be irritated or even slightly upset by it. I just hold on to him, breathless with what we did.

He steps sideways, taking me with him, and turns up the heat on the water. He pulls out of me. The loss is... startling. Like I was fine, and now I'm empty. He lowers my legs back to the floor.

There's a seat built into the shower stall, and he motions for me to sit. I go, mainly because my legs are trembling now that I'm back on my feet.

The vampire put us on the same side for once, and we gladly went. Easily put aside our own angers and ambitions and just existed. Imagine if it was like this all the time?

If we didn't have to return to reality.

"The witch who cursed the wolf all those years ago," Kian starts in a low voice, adjusting the showerhead so it sprays my legs, "left a piece of her magic in him."

My eyes widen.

He kneels in front of me with a washcloth, blocking the water. He squirts soap onto it and runs it over the sole of my foot, taking his time and pushing his thumb into my arch. I groan at the sensation.

"Fire magic," he continues. "It was passed down through our bloodline for ages. We don't have massive amounts of power, but enough to become alphas and to keep our pack safe."

"But..."

He runs the soapy cloth up my calf. "But I don't have fire magic."

Water. *And a whole hell of a lot of it.* I bite my tongue. He has to know... I mean, unless his magic is usually barred to him the way mine is to me.

He parts my legs and washes higher, swiping between the apex of my legs. I lean back, bracing myself on my elbows, while he cleans me. He sighs. The sight of him kneeling in front of me is almost criminal.

"Astra," he whispers. "Do you forgive me?"

"That's a loaded question," I reply carefully. My stomach flips.

I feel the prick of magic in the air, and warm water rushes over my skin. It sweeps the suds away, down my legs and past Kian.

"I've never been without my wolf. And then you left, and I thought..."

He suddenly groans, jerking forward.

"Uh-oh," he grunts.

"Uh-oh?" I reach for his shoulder. When my fingers connect with his skin, I gasp.

He's burning hot.

"He's waking up—" Kian lets out another groan and curls farther into himself. His voice gets raspy when he says, "I'm pretty sure I'm going to lose control in a second. I'm trying..."

Oh, fuck.

A wolf in a Las Vegas hotel room would *not* go over well. Not for me, or him, or the regular humans... and the vampire will probably murder both of us.

"Okay, okay." I rush out of the shower and pluck a towel off the rack, then find our bags. I sling them over my shoulder and hurry back to the bathroom. I'm thinking I just need to transport us out. It'll be fine.

But Kian is already mid-shift. And fighting it.

His fingers are more like claws, and he's flat out in the shower. His spine is humped, and fur is sprouting from his skin. His shoulders are

distended. His nails scrape across the tile, leaving jagged lines. It's grotesque, but my heart bleeds for him all the same. That's got to be fucking painful.

"Okay, okay, shit." I grab his wrist and yank with all my weight.

He slides a bit across the tile. He growls, and the sound vibrates through me.

"I know, I know." I swear and pull him more, until he's out of the water.

He weighs a *lot*. I draw up my magic, but it's not working. My panic is making things worse, not easier.

"Help me out here, wolf," I mutter.

Kian's head shifts, and the wolf's blue eyes stare up at me.

Angry.

Great.

"I don't know why you're..." I shake my head and keep hauling, until his arm literally ripples in my hand. I fall backward and scooch away from him as he completes the shift.

To echo Kian's previous statement: *Uh-oh.*

The white wolf appears a hundred times bigger in this bathroom. He steps forward, a growl pouring out of his mouth. His lips are curled back, exposing his bared teeth.

I scramble as far as I can go, but he leaps at me all the same. His paws hit my chest and knock me down, and he snaps in my face. Tears flood my eyes. Not voluntarily—I sure as hell wouldn't want to show the wolf any weakness—but damn it. Fear has me in a chokehold. I can barely swallow, let alone talk.

He moves too fast, opening his mouth and closing his teeth around my skin, the space between my neck and shoulder. The same place he bit as the shadow-version.

Except now his teeth dig in, and the prick of pain loosens my tongue.

This is where he's going to kill me?

Naked in a bathroom, with the water still fucking running.

CHAPTER 38

KIAN'S WOLF

I'm dragged out of the depths of hell and set back into my mind.
But it isn't enough.

Though the magic in the drink that imprisoned me has burned through, the remnants of shackles are hot against my mind-skin. I'm not in control. I don't know what control is anymore. All I feel is the lingering agony of being kept in a pit of fire, burning without death.

I register Kian and Astra.

Astra.

Astra.

There's blood on her skin, between her legs.

My human body feels different, too. Cold and hot. He took her while I was trapped.

The rage burns bright—and only one thing will make it right.

Kian is aware of me. He reaches for me in his head. To soothe himself or me, I couldn't say. It's not enough for placating words.

Words are never enough.

I stretch out and take over. *Try* to take over. He fights me, and we're caught in mid-shift. Each warring for power, for control. He's still talking, streams of words that flow on deaf ears.

He took Astra while I was suffering.

He didn't let us follow our instinct, didn't wait for me to solidify our mate bond.

He stole her from me.

I roar, and I'm faintly aware of Astra's hands on my skin. *My* skin. I push Kian out the rest of the way and *shift*. My bones crack, snap into

place. I growl, the rage a terrible storm inside me. I stare at Astra, willing her to understand that her innocence was not Kian's to take alone.

Our mate bond will not be secure unless my magic is with him, and I don't feel the difference. Don't feel its strength—just the same as it was before.

Instinct drives me forward, and anger. The room smells of her blood and fear, the scent heady. If she were a wolf, I'd force the shift upon her and discipline her in her tougher form. But even as I leap at her and knock her down, as I would a pup, her pain rattles through me.

I bite her. It's not hard, but it's enough to give her an awakening of my own power.

She's terrified. Her hands remain at her sides; her eyes leak salt water.

Enough, Kian screams.

The sound is deafening. Not meant for this form.

Not meant for me.

I shove him down, down, down. My teeth sink farther into Astra's skin, blood welling up, and she whimpers. She's babbling, noise that I want to comprehend, but there's just the rushing in my ears that blocks her meaning.

Her eyes open, glassy with tears. And then... carefully, slowly, she turns her face away and extends her neck.

Submission.

My growling cuts off abruptly. My blood sings.

Joy floods my body, and I revel in the feeling of her opening herself to me—wittingly or not. I open my jaw and let her fall back flat to the floor. Her chest heaves, but I ignore it and touch my nose to her throat. My magic is different than my human's. It floods out of me on instinct and closes the bite. It heals her throat, too, although where that injury came from, I can't say.

She reaches up tentatively and curls her fingers into the fur at my neck.

It would be considered a threat if it wasn't *her*. The mate bond is firmer now. I can't yet feel her emotions, or her mine, but I sense the new path to her mind.

I slowly lie down beside her, draping my paw over her chest. She eyes me but doesn't let go. If anything, her grip on my fur strengthens.

I forgive you, I tell her. Human words.

She blinks, her mouth parting at my voice in her head.

Mind-speak is a gift for mates passed down from our ancestors. Alphas have more control and can reach others. Even now, I balance the rest of my pack in the back of my mind. Their chatter, their emotions, are distant. The white noise babble of a river.

This is my first opportunity to communicate with my mate without the human's vocal cords, or his filter of what is appropriate, or his iron grip of control on his two-legged form.

Instead of words, I send her whole-picture thoughts.

Us in a forest. Her wolf, sandy blonde and lithe, running with me under a full moon. Our flashing legs, the scent of a rabbit. The adrenaline of a hunt.

Her fingers slide through my fur. Her scent is more honey than lemon right now, her heartbeat finally coming back under control. Kian washed away the scent of their coupling, but it's still there. Still taunting me.

"Let me up," she whispers.

Not willing to test our mind-speak.

I grumble and don't move.

"It kind of hurts lying flat on the tile..."

I raise my head and meet her gaze. She wipes away the leftover tears on her cheeks, and I rise. She uses my shoulder to propel herself up, and I follow her into the large living room.

It doesn't smell like sex in here either.

Good.

I sniff the bed, along the wall. My instincts have my hackles raised. I don't like this place and the way the floor shifts slightly under my paws.

She sits on the bed and watches me examine the bedroom, then the other room that has more bulky furniture. I put my front paws on the windowsill and stare out, and my heart thuds harder.

We're really freaking high up.

Unnatural.

I glance back at Astra, hurrying to her. My urgency to leave pushes through our mind-speak, until she kneels in front of me and shakes her head.

"Where is Kian?" she asks me.

My lips curl, anger reigniting.

"It wasn't his fault. And you're saying it yourself—you don't like this city. But I can't get you out of here like this. Not in a vampire's hotel."

I huff.

She sighs, too, and sits back on her heels. “Take your time, then. I’m going to bed.”

I sit abruptly. She drops the towel that was shielding her body from me. It would be so easy to just bite her with the intent to change her...

No, Kian roars. His control, the force to shift, comes surging back.

But he’s weak, and I bat him away with ease.

I focus back on Astra again. I settle on the floor to watch her. She retrieves the bags and dries off, then finds clothes. She chooses constricting, movement-limiting things. She’s fascinating, though. Her little expressions when she gets lost in her own thoughts. How she sucks her lower lip between her teeth, shimmying and pulling the black fabric up her legs.

We need to talk, Kian says.

I click my teeth, drawing Astra’s attention.

You can’t just take over like that. We were drugged—

The vampire. I agree. And besides, Astra had already said as much.

I’m sorry.

I send him one of his own memories—the one I wasn’t privy to experiencing.

Shame emanates from him.

She belongs to both of us, Kian eventually says.

I am nameless. And sometimes, I am bodiless. But I’m not without emotion, and right now I just want to be hurt. I don’t realize my eyes are closed until I feel a presence at my side.

I crack one eye open to find Astra curling up beside me, in the curve of my body. She has a mirror in her hand, and she leans against my side. The scent of her magic fills my nostrils, and then the mirror’s surface seems to ripple.

Her reflection disappears, and a smoky, dark world appears. It seems to be a bird’s-eye view of this world, but only if it had been completely decimated. Fires ravage a scorched earth, and dark beings move through them.

This isn’t something she should be looking at.

I nudge her.

She waves me off, intently staring. Her palm is glowing blue.

Her magic is... different. Off.

Blood magic.

The metallic scent floods the room, but I don't know if she can smell it. When she glances at me, her eyes aren't black. I taste the copper on my tongue, and the whine that slips through my teeth is involuntary.

Her sadness grows the longer she stares into the mirror, leaning so far forward that her nose almost touches it. I nudge her again, but she doesn't respond. She swings the mirror side to side and seems to be looking for something.

I don't understand.

I think I do, Kian whispers.

We watch until the blood smell recedes, leaving only her honey-and-lemon scent behind. And she sags forward, dropping the mirror to the floor. She buries her face in her hands and goes completely still.

I shift.

It happens naturally, both Kian and I aligned in the truth that he can offer her more comfort in two-legged form than I can. Our bones crack and reconfigure, my fur recedes. My teeth, my snout. There's more pain along with this shift, our spine snapping straight.

My control loosens. I stay up front and present when Kian takes over. He moves us behind Astra, sliding our hand up her back. Her skin is hot to the touch, and she trembles.

He runs his palm over her shoulder, down her arm. To her wrist, which he flips to see her palm. And the dark-blue gemstone that sinks back into her skin.

CHAPTER 39

KIAN

Astra leans into me, but I'm still staring at the mirror on the floor. And the gem I thought I saw. But now her palm is smooth, and I'm left wondering if it was a trick of light. A figment of my imagination.

What I saw... what my wolf saw... it was real, wasn't it? She didn't say a spell. But my nose wouldn't lie, and I smelled the blood magic in the air. It's gone, like it was never there, and I'm left doubting myself—and her.

"I think our Vegas trip is over," Astra says softly. "We shouldn't have come here."

I grunt.

She's partially right—we shouldn't have come when we have other pressing concerns. But my need for her to have a spark of joy, to experience something she hasn't before, was too good to ignore.

I consider asking her if she practices blood magic.

That's what it seemed like. But there's no trace of that smell now, and I force myself to set it aside. I've put her through enough tonight.

"We need sleep, and then we'll leave." I motion to the bed. "It's been a long day."

Her smile is faint. "That's underplaying it. It's been a long seven-ish weeks."

There's a new awkwardness between us that wasn't there a few hours ago. Because of the sex, and the drink, and the vampire. Once she's asleep, I'll go find him and punish him for what he did to us.

It isn't his place to interfere.

I agree, my wolf says. But we can't leave her.

I feel that, too.

The mind-speak is new. I wonder if just my wolf can communicate with her, or if I can, too. I push a thought at her—but her mind is walled off. Barred to me.

My wolf's satisfaction is hard to miss.

I go into the bathroom. Straight back into the shower to get the sweat off me. And calm my hot blood.

Besides, there's a more urgent matter: I showed half of a supernatural nightclub that I have magic. And now Astra knows, too.

It's our power. We can use it how we see fit.

You're being unusually chatty, I tell my wolf.

He huffs in my head. I scrub down fast and shut off the water. The bathroom is a mess of water and gouged marks, even bits of white fur. A wolf in a hotel room... ridiculous. The bloodsucker will just have to send me the fucking bill, I guess.

When I reemerge into the bedroom, the lights are off and Astra is in bed. She's curled on her side, facing the large windows. They're still open, and her attention is focused on the lights.

It's our only night in Vegas. We can't just go to sleep.

"Get up," I say.

She sighs.

"Come on, get up." I whip the blankets off her body.

She curls into herself.

I go around to face her and kneel beside the bed. We're eye level. I run my hand up her thigh, stopping at her hip.

"You don't want to experience the Vegas strip nightlife from in here, do you? That's no better than watching it on television." I offer her my hand. "Trust me."

Tears flood her eyes. She makes no move to wipe them away or hide them.

"That's the problem," she whispers. "I'm starting to trust you—and I know that's going to get me hurt the worst."

My wolf preens that she's coming around, that we're winning her over, but I know it's worse than that. That we only get one chance at trust. The problem is, there's way too much at stake for either one of us to give in to this.

Astra has her goals.

I have mine.

“One night,” I say instead. “And then we can go back to mutual dislike.”

She snuffles and sits up, swiping at her cheeks. Carefully, she nods. I smile at her and grab her bag, rooting for clothes. I still when I touch the mirror tucked away in it. My fingers graze the handle, and I try to sense any magic in it—but it’s empty. It’s just a hunk of metal and glass.

My brows furrow.

“Kian?”

“Here,” I murmur, setting the whole bag beside her. “Find something.”

I hunt for my own clothes. By the time I’m dressed, she is, too. Her wet hair has been finger-brushed and is loose around her shoulders. I automatically reach for her, my magic lighting up inside me. Now that I don’t have to hide it around her, it’s easy to call it up. I draw the excess water from her hair, pulling it into a sphere between us. She watches, her lower lip caught in her teeth, until I direct the sphere into the sink.

“Fascinating,” she whispers.

I smile.

She combs through her hair again, but it’s perfectly dry. The silky blonde strands cooperate, lying in gentle waves over her shoulders. No makeup—but she doesn’t need that. Black tank top, black jeans. Her Mark.

We match.

I hold out my hand to her, and she hesitates for just a moment before she takes it.

Blinding pain ricochets through my head. Astra screams, dropping my hand and covering her ears. I do the same, only vaguely aware that the pain is coming from a noise. My wolf shrinks away from it, howling his agony.

The door opens, and Beau strides inside—followed closely by the witch who let us into the club. One of her stones is glowing, and her lips move soundlessly.

A spell.

I drop to my knees beside Astra, that sound destroying me from the inside out. I can’t even fucking twitch with this noise in my ears, in my brain. It holds my muscles hostage, seems to be liquidating my brain.

It cuts off abruptly, leaving both of us panting and shivering on our knees.

Astra reaches for me again.

Beau's form blurs, and his boot lands solidly on my chest. He sends me flying backward.

I crash into the wall and slide down. The vampire is on me in a second, and it's only instinct that I manage to get my hand up in time. I catch him around the throat and shove his snapping teeth away from me, regaining my footing.

Across the room, Astra faces off against the witch. She flexes her hands over and over, and I curse myself for forcing her to practically drain herself to stop my earlier rampage. If not for me, she could've gotten us out of this.

Beau snarls at me. My wolf is sharp, lending me his power. We're on the edge of shifting—and if we weren't still in a hotel room, I would do it.

The noise blasts into Astra and me again. I manage to keep my eyes open, wondering if I can tear out the witch's throat before she kills us.

But Astra's hair is floating around her face. Blood drips from her ears, but she's completely still. Her hands remain at her sides.

Not for long.

The witch's expression is pinched with fear. There's a pulsing in the air. Something great and heavy pressing down on us. Even Beau has gone still, focused on Astra. With nothing more than a twitch of Astra's finger, the air shifts. The witch's head snaps to the side, the *crack* of bone unmistakable.

The noise vanishes. I gasp for air, my hackles rising. My wolf wants to take over, to shake the witch until we're sure she's dead. But there's still a vampire to deal with.

His form blurs, and he goes to the fallen witch. Scoops her up and tosses her over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

"Leave," he orders, his voice hard. "And never return."

"Fine by me," Astra murmurs.

The broken door doesn't close behind Beau, but he leaves all the same. I stagger to her side, dimly aware of my pack's inquiries. They're all questioning my safety, so they must've sensed the pain. I ignore it for now and sit on the bed. My muscles ache, and when I touch my ear, my finger comes away wet with blood.

I focus in on Astra. "Have you always had air magic?"

She looks from her bloody hands to me, then back again. Slowly, she shakes her head. Tears fill her eyes. "N-no." Then lower, more to herself, "Why can't I escape death? What's wrong with me?"

I go to her, pulling her into my chest like it's the most natural thing in the world. My wolf is proud of her. Proud to have chosen a strong mate. It's the only warmth left in me, because the human side of me is afraid.

For the first time, fear takes the lead.

I have a witch in my arms, and I need to bend her to my will. I've *been* bending her—and she's gone along with it. She's been my little captive, letting me kiss her, shuffle her from place to place. I've saved her from witches and wolves and vampires. And now she's saved both of us.

But when it comes down to her saving my entire species?

I don't know if she'll do it.

She could be as powerful as her mother—or more. Once we figure out why her powers are being suppressed, and how to break it, then she could break the curse herself.

It would eliminate the need for a blood witch. Maybe Astra can navigate a way through the curse or crush it entirely.

I take a deep breath, my nose in her hair, and try not to get swallowed up by the thoughts bolting through my mind. Hope carts away the fear, quieting the alarm bells ringing through my body.

That hope will ruin me.

But...

She'd do it for me. She'll do it if she loves me.

So even though my plan wasn't to give in to this mate bond, I feel my resolve harden—and my plan pivot.

My wolf watches me play it through. He likes the idea of going through with the bond. Of course he does. It's his instinct, though. Not mine. And that's where our desires separate.

For me, this is a tool. I'm no better than my father, contemplating ways to manipulate my mate into doing the things that need to be done.

Mate.

Love.

Sacrifice.

After all, I'd give anything to save my sister, save my pack, save my species. And that includes destroying the witch who has fallen in love with me.

CHAPTER 40

ASTRA

No one stops us on our way back to Kian's truck. I don't feel much like talking or touching. My skin tingles. My ears are ringing. It seems surreal to be on the other side of...

I don't know what happened.

But my magic is wild in my chest. It's thrashing, desperate to get out, and I'm having a difficult time containing it.

One slipup, and it'll come bursting out of me.

Kian navigates us away from the strip with ease, and I watch the glamorous pocket of life disappear in the rearview mirror. The loudness and flashing neon lights and millions of people fade away, back to the desert. We're heading east, most likely toward his pack.

Two hours into our drive, with the only conversation between us being Kian asking if I was hungry, and my grunt of denial, my bladder is the most pressing issue. I finally glance at him, unsurprised to see his jaw tense and his grip white-knuckled on top of the steering wheel.

"Can we stop at the next rest area?" My voice is quiet in the cab.

The muscle in his jaw jumps. The veins in his forearms stand out, another testament to how rigid he is. I can make out the harsh lines of him even in the dark. The faint glow of the clock on the dash is the only thing illuminating the truck's interior now that we've left the city behind.

It's not *my* fault Beau attacked us with the witch—but he's acting like it is.

"It's late," he finally voices. "We'll just stop at the next motel. You can pee there."

I shift my attention back to his face. "Excuse me?"

“You’ve been squeezing your thighs together for the last five miles. I was wondering when you were going to cave and ask. Since there’s been no trace of your arousal for the last... twenty miles or so.”

“Bastard,” I mutter. My magic itches to break free again, and I wrap my arms around my stomach. As if that would do anything. I don’t know what’s wrong with it. Or me.

There’s still a bit of dried blood in my ears. I’ve never seen a witch use air magic that way—channeling the noise frequencies into a weapon—but it gave me a spur-of-the-moment idea.

Offensive magic.

My mother and I never got into that. My silly vines that have tripped up Kian on more than one occasion were all the defense I had—but that’s not the same as attacking first. I don’t know how I snapped the witch’s neck. One minute I was thinking it, and the next it happened.

What happens when we go back to Kian’s pack lands, and his sister decides they’re better off without a witch in their midst?

What happens when Kian is called away, and someone slips into my room in the middle of the night with a knife? Or simply their claws?

I glance at him again, my body tense. “You seem pissed. But it isn’t like *I’m* the one who wolfed out—”

“The full moon is tomorrow,” he says in a low voice. “Or did you forget that? I’m operating on limited control. I’m not angry. I’m tired. I’m stressed. My wolf craves the company of his pack, and we’ve been gone for far too long.”

I bristle.

He jerks the steering wheel, swerving onto the shoulder. A dust cloud rolls in front of the truck, illuminated by the headlights.

“Go pee,” he says sharply. “I changed my mind about the motel. It’s better if I just drive through the night to get us back.”

I grit my teeth. “Fine.”

I unbuckle slowly and reach back for my bag, then open my door. My legs wobble when my feet hit the gravel. He doesn’t comment that I’m taking my bag with me—there were a few folded napkins in it, last I checked. Maybe he’s making excuses for me or he just doesn’t want to poke at me any more tonight.

How hard would it be to disappear?

To leave Kian, leave everything behind?

I go two steps more and sink to my knees, digging my fingers into the dry, dormant grass. My bag, looped around my arm, hits the ground beside me.

There's no rhyme or reason for us to be together. To continue with this mate bond.

Not when I heard every fucking word go through his mind, the cracked door between us letting in the whispered, scheming thoughts of the villain in the next room.

Mate me.

Use me.

The magic under my skin has been roiling ever since. Even as I held my composure, kept my emotions indifferent. Not letting him sense anything wrong with me except my upset at our evening gone awry.

Kian plans to destroy me from the inside out by getting into my *heart*—the one place I never thought I'd let him in. And yet, inch by inch, he's been digging through my guard, rooting through my soul. I let him inside *me*. And the pain of what he wants to do is unbearable.

My magic agrees.

"Astra," Kian calls. His voice is off.

Worried?

Fake worried.

The grass under my hands, with so little life tucked away in their roots, blackens.

I will find my mother on my own.

I'll break this mate bond.

I'll leave Kian and his pack to rot.

Promises I give to myself and the earth.

The anger pouring out of me is stifling hot. It's burning me alive.

Transporting has saved me in the past—but I need something different. I need to make sure Kian won't just tug on the mate bond and come running after me.

I turn my hand. The sapphire is visible in my palm, pulsing with the bluish hue. It's lit from within, the dark power it stores begging to be let loose.

Without thinking, I draw on it. The blood magic floods into me, and I wrap it around the mate bond. Harden it.

Contain it.

“Astra, *stop*—”

I don’t feel him. I gag, my stomach heaving. There’s a metal prison in my chest where the mate bond was. He’s getting out of the truck, and I cast a glance over my shoulder. He stumbles, his hand pressed to his chest.

“What are you doing?” he yells.

“What you would’ve done,” I call back, forcing myself to rise.

My voice is a hundred years old, echoing with power. My hair lifts. The blood magic has freed the rest of my magic, too. The chains around it, the suppression, it all falls away—but there’s no way to control it. I meet Kian’s eyes as the grass under my feet continues to die. It spreads, rippling away from me in pure energy. The passenger window on the truck fractures, spider cracks crawling through the glass.

And Kian just stares at me, one hand still over his heart. The other is raised toward me, as if meant to protect himself from me.

From *me*.

I’m not the bad guy here.

I’m not the one who set all of this into motion.

Wind whips around us. The truck shudders, and the wind slams into it. It’s lifted off its tires, thrown across the road. There’s nothing left between Kian and me.

No emotions either. I can’t feel our bond.

“I’m only doing what you would’ve done,” I repeat, my voice somehow slipping through the windstorm. I sense that he hears it. “I just beat you to it.”

I bring my hands together a second before he lunges for me.

This time, Kian won’t be able to find me.

But I’ll harness my power. Find my mother. And then I’ll come for him. And every shifter who thinks hunting witches will be tolerated any longer.

My palms collide, and my vision goes white.

And I disappear.

To be continued...

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WHERE TO FIND SARA

Thank you so much for coming along on this crazy journey with me.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

S. Massery is a dark romance author who loves injecting a good dose of suspense into her stories. Originally from Massachusetts, she now lives in Southern California with her dog, Alice.

Before adventuring into the world of writing, she went to college in Boston and held a wide variety of jobs—including working on a dude ranch in Wyoming (a personal highlight). She has a love affair with coffee and chocolate. When S. Massery isn't writing, she can be found devouring books, playing outside with her dog, or trying to make people smile.

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