

MOON STRUCK

HILLCREST
SUPERNATURALS

2

BEN ALDERSON

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HILLCREST SUPERNATURALS, #2

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Hillcrest Supernaturals, #2

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CHAPTER ONE

George

NORMALLY, I ENJOY THE WALK TO HILLCREST ACADEMY, ESPECIALLY during the colder months, when the air is riddled with its crisp bite and the ground is littered with leaves tainted in autumnal shades.

But today is different.

Very different.

It's a short walk from my home to the academy. On the outskirts of Hillcrest, situated on a hill west of the town, the academy sits proudly. Humans, and other supernaturals, think nothing of it. Its façade is that of a house, mirroring the many Victorian-style manors of Hillcrest. But to witches, it's a second home, a place of learning and honing the craft.

Years ago, it was a hospital. Built to accommodate war and pestilence, the estate catered to the dying. It was one of the former elder witches who reclaimed it for what it is now.

Within the walls are classrooms, common rooms, restrooms, and libraries. Hillcrest youth who are blessed by the goddess must attend from the age of six onward. Graduation comes only once a student has completed three requirements: the student must be trained in the craft, join a coven, and pass the Test of Fives.

I run up the long drive, which is framed by tall pencil pine trees. Like shards of emerald, they point to the sky—earth's way of protecting the school from humans' watchful eyes.

The driveway is covered in crumbled white chalk that stains the sides of my boots, but I don't care. Normally, I would walk up the plush lawn, but today, my mind is too occupied to overwhelm myself with such mundane issues.

Savi is all I can think about.

She's been missing. The last time I saw her, she was surrounded by wolves, protected by a field of wolfsbane. After a day passed without word,

I tried to find her. I tried every locator spell I could think of, and every spell provided the same information.

Savi is nowhere.

Literally *nowhere*.

Her presence was absent on every scrying board, looking bowl, and soul-calling pendant I used. It's been two days since the attack, since Chad and I left her behind to face the wolves in Wolfsbane Forest. She hasn't texted or called, and every method of scrying has failed me.

This is why I'm forced to come here, to beg the witches for help.

Together, Chad and I tried everything to get through to Savi. I used the reliable crystal and map technique. I even took a strand of Savi's hair from a brush in her room, wrapped it around the metal chain of my scrying crystal, and dangled the stone over a map of Hillcrest. I should have felt the crystal pull to her location, but it was dead still—not even the breeze from the open window could move it.

I tried scrying with water, using my sway over the element to cast a vision of her location across the surface of the water, but it showed me nothing.

I tried everything, every trick I knew, and failed.

Even though all the signs point to her being gone from this world, I *know* she is alive. Scrying may tell me she's nowhere, but inside, I don't believe that. I would know if my best friend were dead.

We would know.

The dark voice that echoes from the pit of my body speaks to me internally. It has become a constant sensation in the days since Savi has gone missing. It seems the more I use magic, the more the darkness speaks to me. Does it feed on my power? Does it grow stronger as I grow weaker? The voice is feeble, but it's there. Sometimes, it is so quiet I mistake it for being my own inner thoughts.

But I can't think about these things right now. I need to focus on finding Savi. Instinctively, as if she's part of me, I know she's in duress. She needs me, and I'm not sure how much longer she can wait.

A burst of hot fire shoots past my face, snatching me from my worried mind.

"Hey!" I scream, pointing toward the two young witches who are conjuring their elements on the academy's front lawn. "Watch it, would you?"

I rub my face, praying to the goddess that my hair is not burned off completely.

“Alcott,” one whispers to the other before snatching his satchel and running inside.

They were not the only two enjoying this crisp autumn day before classes begin. Wrapped up in wool jumpers and thick coats, students of all ages relax on the lawn, tree stumps, and stone steps. Some look up at me as I barrel past, but many ignore me. They’re too busy sharing their past weekend plans; I’m sure what I have to say would trump anything they’ve been through.

“Thought you were too cool for school.”

A familiar voice is speaking to me, but I ignore him. I take the first step up the stone stairs toward the academy’s main doors.

“Did the task Elder Jane set us on make you miss all of this? Couldn’t stay away, could you?”

Leg cocked beneath him and hand holding tightly onto the strap of his bag, Samuel is leaning against the elaborate stone railing of the steps. Slicked back across his head, his blond hair is so faded it’s almost white. His amber eyes stand out against his pale skin.

“Something like that,” I say, offering a pathetic smile and ushering past him.

As the first word comes out of his mouth, I know exactly where this conversation is going. “You know, we have space in our coven for another...” Samuel says, eyes as alluring as his facial expression. “I know you are set in your... *strange* ways, but if you want respect, you are going to need to join a coven. You cannot be a solitary witch forever.”

I shake my head. “Sam, this isn’t the first time I have turned down your advances—”

He raises a hand, stopping me. “Just hear me out, George. I know you are used to people begging you to join their covens, but I’m not about to drop to my knees in desperation. What I will say is you need us as much as we need you.”

“And pray tell, how? Why do I need you?” I take another step up, getting closer to the door, closer to escaping this conversation.

“Without a coven, you will not pass the last year’s test. Do you want to be stuck here forever? I know I don’t. And by joining us, you will stop these unwanted advances. Doesn’t that sound like a relief?”

“So your interest has nothing to do with having an Alcott or the power that was passed down to me?” I ask, knowing already that it has *everything* to do with *who* I am. He doesn’t want *me*. He wants my power. He wants bragging rights.

“All I want is to see a witch with your potential join a coven with equally strong witches. It’s the only way you’ll truly flourish.”

It sounded like my own mother had wormed her way into Samuel’s mind. Everything he said sounded rehearsed.

“What do you say, George?” Samuel extends a hand for me. “You can’t do it without us.”

“I can do it alone,” I reply.

“A solitary witch has not passed the test since...”

The darkness slithers within me, filling my mouth with an answer. “Since my father passed it years ago. Don’t worry about me, Sam. I will be just fine without you and your coven.”

I leave him, slamming the door closed behind me. Samuel is not a bad person, but there is a pungent air of gross confidence that makes him seem arrogant.

Keeping my pace slow until I am out of his view, I break into a run, unstopping until I reach Elder Jane’s office.

It was not me who answered Sam. I mean, I wanted to say it, but I wasn’t in control. In the dark depths of my body, the presence laughs.



“George Alcott, please come in, and stop hovering outside of my door. Your inability to make a decision makes me anxious.”

Elder Jane speaks to me through her closed office door. For the past two minutes, my balled fist has been floating a few inches in front of the solid wood slab.

I pause before entering and wonder if this was the right idea. I could be making a huge mistake in trusting Elder Jane with the news of Savi’s disappearance.

“I’m waiting, Master Alcott...”

Swallowing my nerves, I push open the door. Peering inside, I offer the woman sitting behind the desk a warm smile, one that lacks any real fire but

would do well for hiding my true feelings.

“If you have come to brief me on the... *task* I sent you on days ago, you should know it is far too late. I grew tired of waiting for your update.”

She’s referring to the day she sent Samuel, Dani, and me to investigate the human’s death in Bane’s Forest. That was the day I discovered Savi’s secret—that she kills humans. It was that revelation, and the events that followed, that prevented me from returning to Elder Jane. I feared she’d discover what I knew. Elder Jane is known for her extraordinary intuition. I’m only here today because I’ve exhausted all other options.

“I—” Before I can apologize, Elder Jane interrupts me.

“Take a seat, George,” Elder Jane says. She stands and raises her hand, pointing to the seating before her desk. I don’t notice the air’s shift until the chair is pushed toward me by an invisible force. “Apologies that are not heartfelt should not be given.”

I wonder if she can see me shaking as I take my seat. Putting my hands beneath the desk and out of her view, I try everything to stop them, to calm my nerves, but I cannot. When I fist my hands, my legs begin to shiver.

“Perhaps a drink will ease your throat enough for you to tell me why you have come,” Elder Jane says. “I do hope you like tea.”

I don’t. I am more of a coffee drinker, but not wanting to offend Elder Jane, I nod politely and watch her take a China tea cup from beside a pot. She pours the liquid to the rim, not once taking her stormy gaze off me.

“Thank you,” I say as I take the cup she passes to me over the desktop.

The warmth of the liquid passes through the china and fights the chill in my fingers. I grip tightly onto the handle and take a sip. Hibiscus and spice. The very same taste that fills the room with its scents.

“Now, what is it I can do for you, George? I sense that it must be something important...”

The tea helps me swallow the lump of nerves in my throat.

“I’m sorry if it is not my place, but I need guidance,” I tell her.

She waves a hand. “Go on.”

“My friend is missing.”

“Another missing person? Well, this does add to the mystery of recent events.” Elder Jane leans in, her own cup of tea in hand. “Who, and *what*, is this friend of yours?”

It is not common for witches to befriend other supernaturals, but even Elder Jane knows that I don’t let old traditions interfere with my life. Unlike

my mother, Elder Jane has seen me with Savi on multiple occasions, yet never questioned me.

“Savannah Danvers, a vampire.” I use Savi’s full name, sure that her ancestry will spark recognition in Elder Jane. Like my family, Savi’s family has long-standing ties in Hillcrest. I pray that will help my cause.

“And why have you come to see me?” Elder Jane’s gray brows rise.

Again, I take another sip, thankful I have something to keep me busy as I conjure the courage to tell the truth.

“I have no one else to turn to.”

“Your mother?” Elder Jane asks. Briefly, she offers a look of disgust.

“She’d be happy to hear of a missing vampire,” I say, not divulging what else Mother would do to the vampire if she found her.

“Then she has some sense.” Elder Jane stands from the desk, cup in hand, and moves for the large window that sits behind her. The morning light halos around the aged witch, making the wiry, unruly hairs that stray from her bun stand out. “I admire your bravery, George. It takes courage to visit an elder and ask for help regarding a vampire, but there truly is nothing I can do. It is not my—or your—territory. Even so, have you considered there may be no foul play? Vampires are impulsive creatures. It is not unheard of for them to simply get up and leave town. With our binding rules, some simply wish not to reside here. Those who leave like to believe that the rest of the world is less... how do I say it? *Imprisoning* than Hillcrest. Would it be so farfetched to think she simply left?”

“That is the problem. I would not be worried if she left, but I’ve tried scrying. Everything points to her being missing. Gone. Her presence does not show itself on any of my tools and techniques. It’s as if I am searching for someone who doesn’t exist.”

She peers over her shoulder at me. “Then take it as a divine sign that you should not meddle in this.”

“Please...” The begging tone in my voice is hard to miss. If I grip any harder on the China cup, it would surely crumble in my hand. “I understand this is hard for you, but I have nowhere else to go. Please, Elder Jane. Savi is really important to me. I need to find her...”

Elder Jane regards me. She pauses, taking a labored breath before sighing heavily.

“It has been many years since I have seen a witch so entangled with the welfare of another supernatural. I cannot help but wonder if those feelings

are endearing or misplaced.”

There is another pause. Elder Jane finishes the contents of her cup and gestures for me to do the same. “As I told you, George, this is not something I can help with. Witches do not meddle in vampire concerns, so if you are seeking advice or help, you are looking in the wrong place.”

Something about the way Elder Jane speaks to me does not sound like dismissal. Emphasis on her words is aptly placed. It’s as if she is trying to tell me something without actually saying the words.

“I don’t understand,” I say, urging her to continue.

“I am an elder *of witches*, George. If you come to me with quarrels about our own, I can help—just like the alpha looks over his wolves and the supreme looks over her vampires.”

She walks to me, takes my empty cup, and ushers me to the door.

“Do you understand?” she asks.

“I do,” I say, nodding. Her advice is clear. “Elder Jane, thank you.”

Her hand rests on my shoulder. “You have strong bloodlines, George, so you must be careful when mingling with other supernaturals. I can see you’re determined to find your friend. I fear others may use that against you.”

“I understand.” I offer her a smile, one with meaning. I’m grateful she’s leading me to the one person who can help me: the vampire supreme.

“Wait,” Elder Jane says as I leave.

When I turn back around, I notice she is staring into my cup. Lines of worry crease her aged face. As she looks up at me, I can taste that something is wrong.

“Is there anything else you need to tell me, George?” I cannot deny the distress in Elder Jane’s question.

“No. Nothing,” I lie.

I wait to see if Elder Jane is going to push on, but she doesn’t. When she moves, I notice the flecks of tea leaves stuck to the bottom of my cup. She shows me on purpose; her movement is too precise.

The shape the soggy leaves have taken resembles a broken circle—an omen, an opposite to the never-ending snake. It means death, the broken circle of life.

My heart sinks.

She has read my tea leaves without my consent. She has seen something within them that has caused the painting of fear to cross her face.

“Close the door on your way out, George, but remember, it is *always* open for you should you need to consult me further...”

I bow my head. “Thank you, and I will be careful.”

There is an undeniable sinking feeling in my chest as I leave, but with all the other feelings of horror that rattle through me, I keep it buried.

For now, I have Savi to worry about.

CHAPTER TWO

Savi

TWO DAYS HAVE PASSED SINCE I WAS TAKEN. THOUGH I HAVEN'T BEEN given the luxury of a time piece, I know this to be true. With each nightfall, the moon rises, and she calls to me. I feel her bathe the night in bright white rays, and I want nothing more than to run beneath her grace, wild and free.

I ache to escape my captivity, but not just to meet the moon. The constant rumble of my stomach tells me I don't have much time. I haven't fed since they took me, and I'm growing weaker as each second passes.

My throat is scratchy and dry, and each time I swallow, hoping to trick my stomach into believing saliva is blood, I nearly keel over from starvation. I cough, jolting upright as my lungs clench within me. My wrists are bleeding from the ropes which bind them.

"Do you like my new toys?" a man asks.

I do not look at him, but I know he's referring to the binds. At first, they used only ropes to tie down me. After I nearly escaped, they switched to these. While still ropes, spikes have been woven through the threads. Even the subtlest of movements sends a point digging into my flesh. And I need to be careful. They won't feed me, so I must save my strength for the moment I truly need it.

"I said, do you like my new toys?"

My captor is standing before me now, having left the safety of his metal chair that's several feet behind him. His chair is all that's in this room aside from the one I'm strapped to.

The sound of his hand striking my cheek bounces off the moldy, concrete walls of the small room. It echoes all around me, filling my head. I cringe at the noise of bones crunching.

And then, I feel the pain.

I clench my jaw shut and groan loudly. The man is laughing now. I'm used to the pleasure he takes in my pain. He's broken more of my bones in the last day than most vampires break in a lifetime.

Already, my body works to heal the damage done, but I can feel its struggle. I need to feed, to refuel, before it's too late. Vampires aren't immortal, and without a fresh supply of strength, I won't survive many more days like this.

"Tell me about the boy."

For days, I've been strapped to a chair in a tiny room with questionable air supply. I've been left alone with this monster, and he's only asked me one thing: who is the boy in the woods? My lack of response frustrates my captor.

But I'll never tell him.

To be honest, I'm not sure which boy he's referring to. Both Chad, my older brother, and George, my best friend, were with me the night they shot poisonous darts at me and brought me here to rot.

Either way, much to his dismay, my lips have remained sealed.

"Is he worth it?" the man asks. His voice is soft, comforting. This is the first part of the same game he's played with me for two days. At first, he's nice, and then... he's not nice anymore.

"Is he worth this pain?" the man continues.

I keep my eyes on the ground. I'm hunched over as far as the ropes will allow, and I stare at my feet. My boots are scuffed and caked in dirt. My jeans are dirty and torn. My skin is bloodstained. My wounds are fresh as my body's healing response slows to a near halt.

"Just tell me his name, and this will all stop. I promise."

He's crouched beside me now, whispering in my ear. I close my eyes and listen to the darkness within me. It tells me to be strong, to wait.

George is looking for you.

I know he is. I know he'll find me. He's the most powerful witch in all of Hillcrest, even if he doesn't know it yet.

Chad won't let you die here.

I don't need the darkness to remind me that I'm all my brother has. After our parents' sudden death, we became orphans in a town divided by supernatural factions. Because our lineage dates back to Hillcrest's founding factions, our parents were legends to the vampire clan, but Chad and I stay as far away from politics as possible. Now, Chad and George are all I have, and I won't do anything that puts them in danger.

The sharp smack of his whip cascades all around me, enveloping me in a shocking screech as leather hits skin. The piercing cry that escapes my

lips can't possibly come from me, but it's me nevertheless who's screaming.

He lashes out again and again, only offering me reprieve to ask for the name of my comrade. I only unseal my lips when they tremble. My eyes sting as tears threaten to spill, but I refuse to give him such pleasure.

He will not break me.

I hear the leather whip, now coated in my blood, fall to the ground, and I brace myself for what's to come. In the days I've been trapped with him, he always follows the same pattern: hand, whip... knife.

I hear his quick footsteps as he moves from behind me to stand in front of me. Squeezing my eyes shut, I think of happier times. I pretend I'm home, eating dinner with Chad and George. Even though Chad and I are on a liquid diet, George still cooks a feast. We slurp our meals while he devours what he slaved over in our kitchen. That's how we spent most holidays growing up. My parents encouraged my friendship with a witch and would invite him over often. They never asked why he didn't want to spend holidays and evenings at home with his mother.

Just as I'm remembering an awful joke Chad told us last year during our first holiday as orphans, I feel the blade sink into my chest. Each inch of metal piercing my flesh is agonizing. My body, no longer able to keep up with the constant attacks, doesn't even bother healing my latest infliction.

I slump over in my seat, the spiked ropes digging even deeper into my wrists until I'm sure they are protruding out the other side, and welcome the decline in my senses. The muffled sounds of my captor fall mute on my ears, and my eyelids grow heavy. I beg for the darkness, praying it will envelop me in its sweet bliss.

Unfortunately, the darkness doesn't last long, and I wake on the cold, hard stone floor of my cell. I'm not sure how much time has passed. Is this a new moon I'm sensing? Have I been unconscious more than a day?

I moan as I wake, the sensations of the day's events still lingering. It takes all of my remaining energy to try and push myself off the ground, but I only succeed in crawling closer to the barred door of my cell. The walls are concrete and several layers deep. The first night I was tossed in here, I tried to break free. Instead of breaking stone, I broke my hand after just a few punches.

I slump against the wall and hiss as my wounds make contact with the cool stone. I squirm until the pain lessens, careful not to touch the door. The metal bars that slam shut are several inches thick and wired to one hell of a

shocking system. The night I tried to break free, I thought I'd pry them apart. The moment I gripped the metal, a shockwave erupted within me that was so powerful I was thrown backward and knocked unconscious.

That was *after* I'd already broken my hand. Clearly, it wasn't my night.

The wall is cool against my skin, and I welcome it. It's been the one constant source of comfort since I got here. The back of my shirt is hanging on by a thread—literally. My top won't be able to sustain many more whips, and I refuse to wear the clothes they've tossed into my cage.

"You're too rebellious," an unfamiliar voice whispered me the night I came here.

"Who's there?" I asked, squinting as I tried to adjust to the darkness. But as soon as I did, a bright light illuminated the entire room. It stayed on just long enough for my senses to re-adjust before shutting off again. The lights haven't stopped their assault on my senses since.

"They don't like the ones who fight back," the voice continued. I was so disoriented I couldn't tell if I was speaking to a man or woman, a vampire or werewolf.

"I'm getting out of here," I said confidently.

I never thought I'd still be here, days later. I never thought I'd welcome the darkness or pray for leniency, knowing my captors could only grant leniency in one way...

I shift my weight to ease my pain, and the concrete wall scratches against an open wound. I hiss, arching off the wall. A single tear escapes my will and slides down the curve of my cheek. Though I can't see it, I know its wake is the cleanest I've been in days.

The slow drum of footsteps approach my cell, and I look up in time to make eye contact with *him*. He's the boyfriend of the girl I killed. He's the friend of the man who's keeping me here, who's torturing me day after day. I may have killed their kin, but I never treated my prey with such sadism.

I clench my jaw tight, seething. He blocks the light and crouches beside me. A few inches and a set of electric bars are all that separate us. If I were fast enough, I could reach through the bars and slam his face against the metal. But my strength is gone, and so, I resort to pettiness.

"I never should have saved you," I whisper, thinking of the night of the full moon, the bonfire, and the hungry werewolves. If I would have left him to die, I wouldn't be in this mess right now.

I turn away from him, not wanting to look into the eyes I once found so captivating, and I hear him gasp. It's been days since I last saw him, so he hadn't the opportunity to see his friend's latest work.

The softest of touches caresses the skin of my exposed back. I flinch beneath it, even as it tries to soothe. I glance over my shoulder to see the boy, one hand grasping the metal bars that nearly killed me and one hand outlining my wounds that may never heal.

"I'm sorry," he whispers. In his voice, I sense his truth. I'm sure he never meant for this to happen to me. My time here was supposed to be quick. I know that. He only wanted answers. But answers are the one thing his friend can never beat out of me. He may take my blood, my sweat, my tears, but he'll never know the names of those I will die to protect.

I turn to face him. The movement is slow, painful, and I try my best to hide my discomfort. The last thing I want is for him—or his friend—to think he's won. He will never break me.

"Let me go," I beg, assuming the attempt is a worthless cause but trying nonetheless.

He reaches forward and runs his thumb along the curve of my jaw. My gaze narrows in on the vein pulsating beneath the soft, smooth, dark skin of his wrist. My fangs ache, and a growl erupts from my chest. I turn quickly, but he's faster than my weakened state. Before I can bring my lips to his wrist, he's already out of my cage and taking several steps backward.

I shield my eyes from the blinding light as I scream to be freed. I promise them death if they don't release me, and my fellow supernaturals howl in response. I didn't realize there were so many, but as I sit back and listen, dozens upon dozens rumble in their cages—all wishing for the freedom they so rightly deserve. We may have been born animals, but that doesn't mean we were meant to be caged. Not all animals are monsters.

"I told you, son. They're just animals. And some need to be put down."

CHAPTER THREE

George

CHAD THROWS OPEN THE DOOR TO HIS HOME BEFORE I REACH IT.

“Quickly,” he says, ushering me inside. His crimson eyes scan the streets. The midday sun casts shadows, so he searches for unwanted eavesdroppers. Over the past two days, his paranoia has grown to incomparable sizes. He’s kept himself confined within the walls of this house most days, having interactions with others only when I came around, which was quite frequently; I didn’t like the thought of leaving him.

The moment he closes the door behind me, he throws his arms around my body and pulls me close. I press myself into him and breathe, involuntarily synchronizing with his shallow breathing. I inhale deeply, soaking up every bit of his natural scent.

“It’s been hell,” Chad mumbles, his chin resting atop my head.

“It’s been two hours,” I reply, trying to break the moment with some sarcasm. Hecate only knows we need some light-hearted moments.

“Has it?” In his tone, I can hear that Chad doesn’t believe me. “Why does it seem that time stretches thin? Is it the universe’s way of punishing me for losing her?”

I pull back from him and peer up. My breath nearly catches as I admire his cut jaw and strong cheekbones. This boy—*this man*—is a work of art.

“Come on, Chad, enough of that. You keep trying to convince yourself that this is your fault, but it’s not. So stop.”

He pulls a face—lips tight and brow arched. “Far from it. I’m exhausted.”

I can tell he is tired from the dark circles that frame his beautiful eyes. Even his skin, though naturally pale, seems almost ivory in color.

“You need to—”

“Eat,” Chad interrupts. “I need blood. I haven’t fed in days. Maybe that will clear my mind.”

“Why not?”

“Can’t stomach anything.” His answer is simple, but I know it is not the complete truth.

“I can leave, Chad. If you need to feed, do it. You don’t have to starve yourself just because I am here.”

I’ve never seen Savi or Chad... drink. And over the past two days, it is not like he had much of a chance with me around all the time. If I wasn’t sitting on his sofa while he paced the room, I was next to him in his bed.

“What if I don’t want you to leave?” he asks, unblinking.

“Mother will be looking for me soon,” I admit. The thought of her turns my stomach. The last time I saw her was when she was sprawled on the floor of our basement—after the darkness held her in a cocoon of unwavering shadow. I haven’t returned home since, nor has she tried to contact me after the one message she sent the night of the fight with the wolves.

“But Savi still hasn’t come back,” Chad says.

My heart sinks uncomfortably.

I made a promise to Chad that I would stay with him during the search, but with each day that passes, we can’t remain holed up in his home, waiting for her to simply walk through the door.

“Oh, really?” I roll my eyes, fighting back the desire to shout. It is a strange feeling of annoyance that floods through me. Again, the darkness constricts inside of me as if it is laughing. “I had no idea.”

Chad stumbles back, shaking his head. “Maybe you should leave.”

A labored breath escapes me. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to sound like that...” I want Chad to encase me in a hug again.

“It might be for the best,” Chad explains. “Maybe your mother can help us? I know you have been reluctant to ask for her aid, but perhaps she will understand if—”

“No.” My reply cuts him off. My mother can never know about this.

For years, I hid my friendship with the vampires from Mother. I would not give in now.

“Why?”

I needed an excuse, and thankfully, I have the perfect one.

“Because I’ve spoken with Elder Jane this morning, and she has given me a lead.”

“You what?” Chad gasps, flashing his pearly whites. “I thought you were going to that school.”

I offered Chad small details of the academy, which broke ironclad rules of secrecy that witches were bound to years ago, but I didn't worry about the consequences. Instead, I just added secrecy betrayal to the ever-growing list of things I've done in the past week that could throw me into a vat of boiling trouble.

"I did. Elder Jane, although also managing the police station in town, runs the academy. I asked her for help."

"And?"

"She said she couldn't. Witches don't interfere with the dramas of vampires."

Chad's shoulders rise before my eyes. I can sense his tension and anger at her words.

"But she does know someone who could help. She mentioned the supreme."

There is a drawn-out moment of silence. Chad blinks. Once. Twice. Thrice. Then he spins on his heels, turns for the kitchen, and stalks off.

"What's wrong?" I call after him, running to catch up.

I flinch as the door to the fridge is thrown wide, slamming into the cabinet beside it.

As the bright, florescent light spills into the unlit room, all I see on the shelves are rows of blood bags.

Chad snatches one from the belly of the fridge and, effortlessly, rips off the cap. In a flash, the nozzle is in his mouth, his eyes rolling toward the back of his head. He drinks, taking long, slow gulps. His Adam's apple bobs with each swallow.

I stand at the cusp of the room and watch as the bag of blood is drained before me. My mouth dries, and my throat closes. It is a simple, necessary act, but it turns my stomach, twisting it into knots.

I wait in silence as Chad drinks. Clearly, something I said drove him to feed.

He pulls the bag from his mouth and inhales deeply. His lips are stained red, and even his teeth have a pink sheen to them. A single dribble runs out the corner of his mouth, but it doesn't get far before his tongue strikes out and laps it up.

"Now," he says calmly. "Tell me again what this elder told you to do."

"Speak with the supreme," I reply.

The rise and fall of Chad's chest is noticeable now. Something about what I've said panics him. I can taste it.

"Why would she send a *witch* to see the supreme?" Chad speaks slowly, his voice low, as if he's speaking to himself, not me. He runs his hand across his jaw. His thumb trails his lips for a slight moment as he is lost to his thoughts.

"I don't understand," I say. What's the problem? If the supreme can help us find Savi, then I must speak with her.

Chad snaps his gaze to me. "I will not let you see her alone."

I swallow. "Of course not. I don't even know where to look for her."

There is nothing relaxed about Chad's demeanor. "Do you trust this elder? Does she truly believe the supreme can help us locate Savi?"

I tilt my head, nodding. "She seems to think so."

"Goddess," Chad hisses, his fingers curling into fists, bones clicking. "If this is our only chance at finding her, we must take it. But..." He slams his palms onto the counter top; the muscles of his forearms bulge with tension.

"Chad, what is it?" I step forward, reaching a hand for him.

He looks up, slowly, and peers at me through his lashes.

"The supreme is not someone who gives free favors. I do not want Savi or *you* to be on her radar. She's a snake—one with a powerful bite. And the moment a witch—an *Alcott* witch—wanders into her lair seeking help, she will do anything to make sure she has you and your power under her control."

"But she has the power to help find Savi?" I question.

"Oh, she can help. She has eyes *everywhere*. If anyone can find Savi, she could. I thought about contacting her, but I know the danger she possesses. Savi would never forgive me if I sold my soul—or yours—in exchange for finding her."

There is something more Chad knows about the supreme—something he is keeping to himself. His worry is clearly masking his horror. I read his lies from his stance, his expression, and the aura that surrounds him. But even as I consider Chad's fear, the darkness within me yearns to meet the supreme. It taunts me to go. No, it wills me.

"I will not stand back and willingly admit that *this* is our best option at finding Savi." Chad's fingers curl in on themselves as his hands ball into fists which dangle at his sides.

“But it is our only chance,” I say. “We’ve tried scrying, spells, and every other magical locator I could think of. I can’t find her. If the supreme can help, we need to let her. Each day that passes is another day Savi could be in real danger. We don’t know how much time she has left, Chad. It’s been days. What if she needs to feed? We can’t let her starve into madness.”

“I know...” Chad sighs. “I just—it feels like I’m choosing her life over yours, and that’s not fair to you.”

I shake my head. “I want to do this. No, I *will* do this. With or without your help. So we’re going. Tonight. You can take me there, but I will be the one who speaks with the supreme.”

“Absolutely not—”

I put my finger to Chad’s mouth, so close to his teeth he could bite into me with one slight movement. But that doesn’t scare me. I never fear for my safety when I’m around the Danvers.

“Do not refuse me, Chad. It has to be me. I’m the one who can offer her a fair trade: a favor from an Alcott witch in exchange for Savi’s life. It’s worth it. Savi is worth it. Either you take me to the supreme, or I will find her alone.”

Chad’s gaze flickers between my eyes. I wait for him to refuse me again, but I know he won’t. He knows I’ll be safer with him around.

“You are a determined little *witch*,” he says. “One day, that is going to get you in serious trouble.”

I lean against him, standing on my tiptoes, lips close to his. “That day came long ago, Chad. Don’t forget it.”

He tips his head closer to mine, lips grazing. “You better go home and get changed. If you want to get close to the supreme, you are going to need to play a part.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“Just make sure your neck is showcased. If you want in, they will need to think you are going there for one thing. And that *thing* isn’t to see the supreme.” There is something frightening in his eyes as he speaks.

“Pray tell, is my neck my entrance fee?” I arch a brow.

“In a manner of speaking, yes.”

I pull back. Wanting nothing more than to place my hand on my neck and run away, I turn and slowly walk for the door. Chad doesn’t stop looking at me. His cold stare tickles down the back of my head and ignites the top of my spine, which runs a chill down its length.

Why do I feel such a way for him? He is a monster, after all. But so am I—and so is the rest of the world. Perhaps feeling stalked like prey under his hunger stare is what excites me.

My hand wraps around the door handle, and I pull it open an inch.

I turn back to look at Chad a final time, but my breath snatches from my lungs when I see that he is inches behind me. His hand wraps around the back of my head, and he dips me. I feel his strong, unwavering arms keeping me from falling to the floor.

“Remember, George,” Chad purrs. “Not all vampires are like Savi and me. Others will take one look at you and wonder what you taste like. Some will even do anything to fulfill their wonder.”

“Tell me,” I whisper. “What do you think they will find?”

Something shrouds Chad’s face. It’s an expression I cannot place, but the mystery of it warms and chills my body at the same time.

“George Alcott,” Chad says. “It is a question I have often wondered the answer to.”

The hairs on my arms stand on end. My mouth drips with moisture as I look up at him. In that moment, I would give him everything.

Before I can admit it, he stands me up, puts both hands on my cheeks, and plants a kiss upon my forehead. He lingers there, lips on my skin. In a way, I think it will never end... At least, I wish it would never end.

If he asked to taste me, I don’t think I could say no. Part of me wants him to. Part of me wants to know what it would feel like to be so *consumed* by him.

As if I could *ever* refuse him.

“Let me come with you,” he says when he pulls away.

“Trust me, you don’t need to.”

The thought of Chad being anywhere near my house is more frightening than most things.

Chad reaches for the door and pulls it open the remainder of the way.

“Please, let me come with you. If I stay in here any longer, I am going to get a serious case of cabin fever.”

I fight the urge to refuse him. But I can’t, not with his doe-like, pleading eyes. They mask the worry I have for Mother.

“If I come with you, you do not need to return for me. We could go straight to the supreme, wasting no time in getting answers. Savi would be home that much sooner.”

He makes a good point.

“Okay,” I say, my blood igniting with a mixture of nerves and excitement. “But you must listen to what I tell you to do. You cannot come inside.”

I nod. “Understood.”

He doesn’t push any further. Instead, he reaches for the leather jacket that hangs on a nearby hook and wraps it around his shoulders.

“After you, George,” he whispers. “I’ve often wondered what your home was like. I guess I’m about to find out.”

I force a laugh, walking ahead of Chad. Again, like the darkness overtook my own voice back at the academy, it now consumes my control. I know Chad should not be anywhere near my house, but the thought of this danger only excites the presence within me. It hungers for it. It yearns for excitement the way I yearn for Chad.

I try to convince him to turn back, but I cannot bring myself to tell Chad to go away.

Goddess, help me, I think. Do not let Mother sense Chad. Do not let her do to him what she has done to so many vampires.

CHAPTER FOUR

Savi

I'M CONVINCED THE CONSTANT DRIPPING WATER SPILLING ONTO CEMENT IS meant to drive me insane. I watch each droplet. They move in slow motion each time I focus on them. They fall from a crack in the ceiling of my cage and splatter against the floor in the far corner. Enough has pooled there for me to take a sip. I crawl over, careful not to stretch my back, not to irritate my wounds, and lick the dirty floor, pretending its blood I'm consuming.

I think their evil plan is working. I really am losing my mind.

I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand, even though I know there is nothing to clean. I consider crawling back to my perch near the cage door. I like sitting there, because I can watch passersby. I pretend I know what they're thinking. I pretend I'm strong enough to compel them to free me. I pretend I'm going to survive this...

I lie on my back and moan as the cold cement cools my lashings. These are the only moments of relief, of pleasure, this place offers me.

My shirt is torn where his knife assaulted my chest. Softly, I touch it. That wound has almost healed over. In my final moments, I'm able to control my power, telling the magic in my blood to focus on certain tasks over others. I've long since given up the idea that I have enough power to compel someone here. Besides, they seem smart enough to never make eye contact with me. A knife wound to my heart will kill me, so each time his blade enters my chest, I tell my power to focus there, and it obeys, rethreading each strand of muscle, reforming bone, and resealing skin. The process is long and painful, but it's better than death. I haven't given up hope that George's magic will locate me, that Chad will break down the door to this place and leave a wake of blood and bone in his pursuit of his baby sister.

I close my eyes as the droplets of water splatter against my forehead. I imagine I'm in the bath. Water is cascading down my frame. I watch as it swirls around the drain until it disappears. I open my eyes and shimmy

backward until the droplets drip into my open mouth. It might not be blood, but it couldn't hurt to ingest *something*. I hope it'll trick my aching stomach, and the ever constant grumbling of starvation will finally cease.

I don't know how much time passes as I lie on the floor, but I don't move until my jaw hurts. I close my mouth and let the water coat my chapped lips. I close my eyes and try to rest, but my mind wanders to my first night in this place.

I was stronger then. The moment I woke after they tossed me into this cage, I began my escape attempt. I put everything I had into breaking down the barriers they used to trap me here. My constant assault against the cement enclosure is what caused the ceiling to crack. I didn't give up until a small voice from a nearby cage made its way to my ears.

"You must stop," the voice said. "They'll come for you if you make too much trouble."

"Who will come for me?" In truth, I had so many questions: who are you? Where am I? How long have you been here? What is this place? Who are these people? I could have asked questions until I'd fallen weak and died.

"The executioner."

"I'm sure I've already met him," I said sarcastically.

The first night he tortured me, I healed quickly. This fascinated him. The other vampires he experimented on didn't heal as quickly, so he thought it wise to test my power. With each additional cut, whip, hit, my strength was dwindling. I needed to refuel, but of course, I knew he'd refuse.

Now, I consider calling out to that voice, but I know no one will respond. They have long since silenced my comrade. The day he suddenly stopped talking to me, I knew what happened. They saw the friendship we were forming, and that was against the rules, I'm sure of it. The last thing they wanted was a rebellion. So they eliminated the problem. Now, no one speaks to me, and I speak to no one. I won't be the cause of another death.

I close my eyes and embrace the darkness that envelops me. Soon, the executioner will request I be brought back into his lair, and I need my strength to survive another questioning.



The clanking of the metal cage door jars me awake. I'm not sure how long I slept. Has it been days since I closed my eyes? Or merely minutes?

My neck is stiff as I struggle to face the intruder. I fear it can only be one: the executioner. When my gaze meets a familiar set of eyes and I'm too weak to protect myself, I hiss, fangs bared, stomach growling, and nerves firing.

He kneels beside me and brushes away hair from my eyes. Sliding a hand behind my neck, he lifts me in his arms with ease. Though I'm not surprised. I have become nothing but a skeleton wrapped in skin.

I'm eager to snap my jaw shut around his neck, but instead, I rest against him, closing my eyes and inhaling deeply. His skin is soft against my own. It's been so long since I've touched another person. I crave for that connection, even though the person holding me is the last person I should want to be near.

He sets me down so I lean against the wall, and I nearly cry as he breaks our embrace. It takes everything I have not to beg him to hold me just a moment longer. I know I shouldn't want these things, but internally, emotionally, mentally, I'm breaking. They're winning. And it's killing me that I believe I'm not strong enough to withstand another questioning.

"I need you to know I didn't mean for it to happen like this," he says. "You weren't supposed to be... tortured."

I struggle to nod. Giving up, I whisper, "I know."

"I just wanted to know *why*. *Why* did you kill her?"

The corners of his eyes are creased as if from agony. The dark circles beneath their once vibrant brown color tells me he too hasn't slept in days. But it's the pain in his voice that leaves me with a distaste I can't shake.

"Because it's what we do," I say.

"That's all? That's why? You have no reason?" he asks. He's frantic. Like any human, he *needs* to understand why tragedy has befallen an innocent, but I live in a world of darkness and monsters. Sometimes, there are no reasons. There are only actions and consequences, and right now, I'm suffering for mine.

"I didn't choose her," I continue. "She was... convenient."

He snuffles and clears his throat. My answer may not have been what he hoped to hear, but it is the truth. My truth. And he needs to accept that.

"Will..." I whisper his name. We lock gazes briefly. Before this, before I was taken, I wouldn't have needed more than those few seconds to compel

him. But now, my weakness prevails. "I'm sorry."

He clenches his jaw shut as he considers my words. I don't expect him to accept my apology, but I need him to believe it. Truly, I am sorry, though I'm not sorry for killing, because that's *who I am*. I'm a vampire. Preying on humans is in our nature. If this weren't meant to be true, we would be able to survive without their blood. But we cannot. Though I am not sorry for hunting, I am sorry for killing *her*. And that has to be enough.

"I can't forgive you," he says.

"I don't want your forgiveness," I counter. "I just want you to know."

He swallows. "How many?"

I try to shake my head, but it's no use. My body is stiffening as the last bit of blood I consumed days ago struggles to do the work of a dozen blood bags.

"Don't ask... what you don't... want to know."

"You're dying," he says bluntly.

I don't respond, because he doesn't need my validation of his words. I am dying. Part of me is hopeful, happy. Death means no more pain, no more questions. Maybe I'll see my parents again. But death also means no closure. George and Chad will continue their pursuit until they track me here, where the executioner will be waiting for them. My end can't be theirs too.

"Did she suffer?" he asks.

"No," I whisper.

"How do you know? How do you know it didn't hurt?"

"I... compel. No pain."

My eyelids are heavy, and I struggle to keep them open. My arm is heavy, and it falls from my lap to the floor in a loud thump.

"Can't... move."

My eyes burn, but my eyelids refuse to close. Tears sting in my body's last ditch effort to save my sight.

"Do you want to die?" he asks.

My vision blurs, and I can no longer see him clearly. I struggle to respond, my jaw too heavy to answer.

His hands envelop my face and angle my head so I stare directly into his eyes. The dark pools of chocolate brown irises plea with me to answer him, but I cannot. I'm far too weak.

"Yes or no? Do you want me to end it quickly? Or do you want to live?"

Do I want to live? Do I want to continue this torture until my body gives way just as it is now? Do I want to willingly force myself back into this position instead of accepting the gracious offer death if giving me? Do I want the pain, the hunger? Do I want to keep licking the floor and praying the water somehow turns to blood?

“No,” I whisper.

“You haven’t time. Be clear.”

I gasp as the point of a blade rests against the scarred skin of my chest.

“Do you want me to end your suffering?”

Tears from my stinging eyes slide down my cheeks. Do I accept his offer of leniency? Or do I keep fighting? And what do I fight for? For another chance to be tortured and questioned?

Or for Chad. For George. For their safety. If I die here, they’ll never know of these beasts. They’ll search for me until their olden days, or they’ll search until a path leads them here. I can’t be selfish. I must accept the pain.

“No,” I whisper again.

“You want to live?” he asks.

“Yes...”

As my final seconds on this earth and in this place tick by, the smell of fresh human blood coats the air. My tongue is dry and stuck to the roof of my mouth, but somehow, I begin to salivate. It smells as sweet as ripe berries.

The moment the tart liquid slathers my lips, I’m opening my mouth to it. It smears my tongue in its embrace and stains my face. Each drip of blood eagerly spreads across my skin, splashing onto my chest.

With each swallow, I feel my system rebooting. I drink deeply, swallowing as quickly as I can. I fear I don’t have much time left, and I must drain the source before he changes his mind, before he realizes the mistake he’s made.

I groan as I suck long and hard. This blood tastes like nothing I’ve ever experienced. It’s sweet yet sour, strong yet vulnerable. I don’t miss the subtle traces of magic in each drop, but I don’t think about that. I may be draining a witch, but I have no choice. George would forgive his one transgression. I hope...

Almost as soon as it began, the blood flow stops. My victim is ripped from my embrace, and I stumble backward. I only had a few seconds with

his offering, and I pray it's enough to rejuvenate my body so I may find the strength to escape this place.

My eyelids flutter open, and my gaze narrows in on the bloodstained wrist that was offered to me. Will stands, wobbling slightly. The bright red puncture marks stand out against his dark, smooth skin.

In a flash, he's slamming closed my cage door, once again locking me in. I stare up at him from where he left me slumping on the floor. I don't hide my shock.

"Why?" I ask, confused.

"You saved me that day. If it weren't for you..."

Flashes of the bonfire play in my mind. I caught wind of the humans partying on werewolf land during a full moon, and stupidly, I thought the treaty would keep them at bay. I brought George there to drink, dance, and forget the hell our lives can be. When the wolves attacked, I saved only two: George and Will. I thought he didn't see me. I tried to stay invisible as I stopped the wolf from devouring him.

"This makes us even," he says. "Besides, I didn't bring you here to be tortured."

"You just wanted answers," I say slowly.

He nods. "And you gave them to me. Whether I like them or not."

"What happens now?" I ask.

"I'm no longer in your debt."

He turns to walk away, but just before he's out of sight, he hesitates ever so slightly. Nearly turning to face me once again, he throws me a quick glance over his shoulder before leaving me alone to relish in the taste of his blood on my lips.

CHAPTER FIVE

George

I HALT WALKING A FAIR WAY DOWN THE STREET. FINALLY, THE DARK presence allows me enough control to command my legs to stop.

“You need to wait outside,” I tell Chad. “Hide.”

“Why the secrecy? Don’t you want me to meet your mother?” His question is more of a joke, but I can’t see past my panic.

Instead, my throat tightens. “Not today.”

Perhaps he can hear something in my tone, because he seems to be taking me seriously.

“All right, I will wait outside and melt into the shadows, like a true vampire.” He winks. “I promise, no one will know I am near... besides you.”

Though he jokes, Chad’s words relax me. Finally, I feel that I can breathe.

I cannot tell Chad about my mother’s intense hate for vampires, not without telling him what she does—what *I* have done.

Chad waits where I leave him, and I feel his gaze on me as I take the path toward my front door. By the time I reach it, I no longer feel his stare tingling the back of neck. But I do sense his presence, so I know he’s close.

For confidence, I take a deep breath before I grasp the door handle and push open the solid wood barrier.

Our house can sense the Alcott bloodline. Just as my ancestors did before me, I spelled it to forbid entrants who don’t share my blood or who don’t receive a personal invitation to enter. The house has had magic in its walls for centuries, and now, it’s almost as if the house itself is alive.

As if these very walls wish to help me, they whisper as I enter. Of course, they don’t actually speak to me; it’s more of a feeling I get the moment I close the front door. The house warns me with each step I take, sending shivers up my spine. It tells me Mother is here.

But Mother is not alone.

By the time their voices reach my ears, I'm already expecting them. Countless women and men loiter in the living room, which is to the left of the foyer. Everyone falls mute as I peer inside the room.

"My George..." Mother rushes to me, wrapping an arm around my shoulders and pulling me inside the room so everyone gets a full look at me. "I have been wondering where you have been."

My blood almost freezes entirely as Mother plants a kiss on my cheek—something she has not done for... well, as long as I can remember.

"I told you this morning that my coven is meeting here this week," she says.

I want to say no, because she didn't tell me. She never tells me anything. In fact, the last I had heard from her was the text she sent me two nights ago, but with the many watching stares of her coven, I too fall mute. Instead, I smile and study the group as Mother introduces me.

I shake hands and spread thanks as the many compliment me on looking so much like Father. They never cease the compliment. With each new witch I meet, I grow more and more queasy. I don't want to look like *him*.

But the darkness flips inside me. The coiled snake stretches as if it enjoys the compliments.

I want to pull away from the hands and run for my room. But I can't show them how their words frustrate me. As Mother says, frustration is weakness. *Any* emotion can be considered weakness.

"Are you here to join us, George?" someone asks me. She's a short, round lady with red-veined cheeks and a neat, black bun of hair. I've already forgotten her name. I've already forgotten *all* of their names.

"Oh, yes, we do hope you can."

The rest of the witches agree in unison. Some even urge me to take a seat on the chair in the corner of the room.

"Um, no." I try to explain, but my effort is wasted as I'm guided to the leather one-seater and made to sit and watch them."

Movement of a shadow out the window catches my attention. Is it Chad? Knowing he is close seems to calm me. Although, he's probably wondering what I'm doing lounging about when I'm supposed to be getting ready to meet the supreme.

"Shall we begin?" Mother asks.

"I really must—"

The look she gives me snatches my words from my mouth. Her brows are sharp and furrowed, her eyes full of tension and disdain.

“Is there a problem?” she asks me. “What is more important than our coven meeting?”

“I apologize, Mother,” I stand and face the rest of the coven, “but I need to get ready and leave for—”

“For what?” Mother questions.

The coven does not react to her anger. They still smile, hands clasped serenely before them. It is their calm natures that fill me with fear.

As she questions me, her coven mates wrap cloaks around their shoulders, which had been strewn across the coffee table in the middle of the room. Sewn onto the breast of the dark material is a white symbol I’ve never seen before. Even so, I know I should fear it. The hairs on my arm raise as I assess the upside down placement of the pentagram.

Someone conjures a flame in their palm. The heat warms me even from a distance. The orange light reflects off the sheen material of the cloaks and distracts my attention.

Finally, I answer Mother’s question. “I promised a witch at school I would attend his coven meeting. I thought it might be time I choose my own coven...”

Lying is easy, especially when I use Samuel as my scapegoat. Mother’s expression morphs from surprise to disbelief. A few of Mother’s coven members whisper to each other, looking at me as they do so.

Another conjures his element, reaching for the water in a glass and lifting it into a crystalized orb that hovers before him.

“I should leave—” I say, backing for the door.

“George,” Mother calls as my hand reaches for the door handle. “You are not still cross at me for the other evening, are you?”

“What?” I ask.

“Because really, I should be angry with you, but I have decided to put it behind me.”

I look to her. “I don’t understand.”

The instinctual burn of my gut is churning. Something is wrong here. The smile on her face is full of malice. Mother is leading me down a path that every other witch in this room seems to be clued into—except for me.

“I’m referring to the vampire you helped escape, of course. We should have killed it. That is why we are here. We must scry for the creature, so I

can finish what I started.”

Not a single coven member seems shocked by her words. In fact, their expressions seem to melt into bared teeth and narrowed glares, as if the mention of a vampire irks them all. Could they be just as volatile as my mother?

“You need to stay and help us, since it is your mistake that caused us to lose the murdering beast,” Mother explains.

“I—I...” Words fail me. We can’t have this conversation. Not today and not with Chad so close. Can he hear this? Does he know what I’ve done?

“Speak up, child,” the short, round witch calls out. No longer does her nice demeanor reflect her expression. She seems as annoyed as my mother. “Do not stumble over your words.”

Mother raises a hand to stifle the witch’s comment. I watch her face turn from anger to a scorned dog. She lowers her gaze and fiddles with her fingers like a child.

“Go, George. Attend this other coven’s meeting, but remember, we are family. If you are going to join a coven, it should be *this* one.”

I try and keep my face void of expression as I leave them in the room. Closing the door behind me, I rush up the stairs, thankful to be away from the watching eyes of Mother’s coven. Were they all in on Mother’s murderous ways? I always thought this was only her affliction, but their excitement suggests I was wrong.

When I get into my room, I shut the door and mark the spell for it to stay closed. Moving my hands, I wrap the threads of my power to ensure not a single member of the coven comes looking for me.

“Well, that is a change in events...” Chad’s voice greets me.

The strange encounter with the coven diluted my senses. I didn’t notice the open window and the boy who stands before it.

“How in hell’s name did you get in?” I ask, rushing forward and closing the window, but not before I look around to see if anyone saw him enter.

“The window was open. I took a chance,” Chad says.

But the house would never let a vampire in. Unless... unless it felt my desire to keep Chad a secret. I’m sure I didn’t leave my window open. Did the house open it for him? Has the magic used within these walls over the years given it more power than we realized?

“It is not safe for you here.” I push him to leave, trying to keep my voice a whisper.

“Why? Because of the coven of witches who seem to think that killing vampires is as normal as making a cup of English tea?” His one brow raises as he stands his ground.

“You don’t understand—”

“Nor do I want to, George. Do you know how serious this is? If they are killing vampires...” He shakes his head, running a hand through his hair.

“Mother only kills those who break the trea—” I stop myself from defending my mother. “You heard her. I helped that vampire escape.” I pray he doesn’t ask if there were any others I *didn’t* let live, because I’m not sure I can keep lying to him anymore.

Chad pulls a face, his lips tight with stress.

“You need to leave, Chad. I will meet you outside, but please, *go*.”

Having him in my room exhilarates me. Knowing Mother is below us thrills me even more. But the sane part of my mind, the part untouched by the darkness within, knows it is too dangerous. I can’t have Chad on Mother’s radar.

“Be quick,” Chad says as he reaches for the window, lifts it open, and climbs out into the night.

I fear he’s angry with me, but before he jumps down, he leans forward and kisses me. Maybe I’ve gotten away with the sins of my past...

“I will,” I reply, eyes still closed. By the time I open them, he is gone, lost to the shadows beneath the window.

No one stops me when I leave my room, walk down the stairs, and exit the house. I hear music, a type of chatting that floats beneath the slip of the door. The coven meeting is underway, and they’re lost to a ritual of some kind.

I only stop briefly by the door to listen, but it’s hard to make out what they are saying. They sing in a language I’ve never heard before.

Putting it in the back of my mind, I leave for Chad. I find him waiting for me at the end of my street. Illuminated by its yellow glow, he is leaning against a light pole. When he looks up, he takes a long moment to trail his gaze all over me.

“Perfect,” he purrs and wraps his arm around my waist. Although we are in the fringes of night, I still worry about people watching from the protection of their home. But Chad sweeps me off in the direction of main town before anyone can get a good look.

The nightly chill tickles my neck, and Chad's earlier comments come flooding back.

"Will this do?" I ask, gesturing to my ripped jeans and V-neck maroon t-shirt that hugs my thin frame.

There is something hungry in the look Chad gives me as we walk. The red of his tongue flashes between his teeth. "Unfortunately, it will."

"Why unfortunately?"

"You look irresistible. The cold brings out the veins in your neck, but the moment they catch whiff of your witchy scent, I think we will be in more trouble than this is worth."

His threat intensifies the cold of the night. I want to wrap my arms around my waist as we walk for the location of the supreme. In that moment, I remember I never asked Chad where we were heading. Only when I see the flashing lights of a club ahead do I piece it all together.

Chad's grip gets tighter as we pass the bouncers and enter the dark, bass-booming corridor of the club's entrance. Once we enter the main room, I can't help but notice the overwhelming number of crimson eyes on me. No longer am I cold within the night. I am cold beneath the icy gazes of uncountable vampires.

My body is alight as my magic stirs to life in response, but it's Chad's silent distress that scares me the most.

CHAPTER SIX

Savi

HIS MEMORIES HAUNT ME AS I LIE ON THE CEMENT FLOOR. EVERYTHING HE wished to keep secret is now replayed over and over again in my mind. I see his most intimate moments when he tells the girl I killed how much he cares for her. I see his childhood, how he watched his mother sacrifice herself to save him. He escaped from that vampire attack. She didn't.

His memories flash before my eyes in bits and pieces like a movie reel. I experience his love, his pain, his hatred. His soul is angry with supernaturals for everything they've done. They stole his childhood, his mother, his freedom. Now, he walks a destined path by his father's side. His father, an unrighteous man preaching morals to his people, forces Will into servitude of the cause. I watch as he tells Will it is his responsibility to someday dethrone him.

I close my eyes and struggle to focus on just one memory, for the reel of flashbacks is making me queasy. Never before have I drunk from a human to experience such vivid images of his darkest secrets.

Suddenly, I am no longer in my cage. I am in Will's memory. I *am* Will.

I stand in line, waiting among others. The room is large, the walls cushioned by a dark blue padding. The floor is soft and squishy under my feet. I focus on that, wiggling my toes, trying to burrow them into the padding.

Across the room, there are tables lined side by side. The tops are full of various weapons. I am interested in one of the daggers. Its black handle houses a sparkling jewel. For some reason, it calls to me. I ache to run over and hold it in my hand, but I know I cannot. Father would not allow that. I must wait my turn.

My attention is taken by the two men beside me. They playfully wrestle. I can tell they're as eager as I am, but I do not show it. I hide my emotions, just like Father taught me.

“One day, you will lead our people, young William. You must remain strong, steady. Show no weakness,” he once told me.

I nod at a man standing beside me. He grumbles something inaudible and turns away from me. I know I’m not liked. I can tell because no one will be my friend. I am my father’s son. I am next in line to lead our people. They don’t like that.

Suddenly, I’m remembering a time I entered the cafeteria. I thought I’d sit by all the others. I needed them to see that we can be friends. My birthright to rule didn’t matter. As soon as I set my tray down and took a seat, the room fell silent. Quickly and in unison, every one stood, leaving behind half-eaten food. I ate alone.

“Hunters!” The game maker’s voice is loud. I blink away the memory of that awful day. “Ready yourself!”

Before us, several experienced hunters stand, weapons drawn as they wait for the order to attack. I prepare my body for the physical assault I’m about to endure as I face my fellow hunters.

I always hated training...

A slamming door jolts me back to reality. Hunters. These people call themselves *hunters*? I wonder if I should keep this information to myself or use it to bargain for my freedom.

I roll onto my side and struggle to stand as I brace myself for the attack. Except it doesn’t come.

The slamming door was not to my cage, but to another. I watch as a girl, younger than me, is dragged by two hunters. I know from experience that the only thing down that hall is the room of the executioner.

The girl, a vampire, struggles to break free from their grasp. She fights, kicking and screaming, begging not to be brought back to him. They ignore her pleas.

Shoeless, she slams her feet against the ground, using the balls of her feet to stop their ascent. They push against her, and her feet burrow beneath the concrete floor. When they lift her small frame, her feet are yanked free from the floor, returning as bloody stubs. Concrete is embedded beneath her toenails, and some of her toes are broken at awkward angles.

“Stop!” I yell. I run toward the cage door but come to an abrupt stop just before gripping the deadly electric bars. “Leave her alone!”

The men ignore me, but her gaze flashes to mine. Her eyes, flooded with tears, plea with me to save her. But I can’t. I can only pray she remains

strong for the executioner's questioning.

I'm sorry, I mouth to her before she's out of sight.

A door slams shut, and moments later, the two hunters who brought her into the room walk past my cage. They smile and chat about meaningless nonsense, giving no care to the life they just sentenced to pain and torture.

"How can you do this to us?" I yell, but they pay me no attention.

The seconds tick by as I stand in my cage, waiting for the girl's return. By the time the door opens, I've gnawed my lip so thoroughly it bleeds.

Slowly, the executioner steps into my view, dragging behind him the corpse of the vampire he just murdered. I watch as he takes each slow step. He pulls her by her ankles. Her frame much smaller than his, he easily holds both her feet in one of his hands. Her pale skin now a lifeless gray, she is covered in dark black veins. No longer crimson red, her eyes are murky and white. The color of her dark brown hair has faded as life left her mortal coil. Now, it is splayed behind her, sweeping the dirty concrete floor as she is dragged across it. The executioner's knife, which I have come to know intimately, is protruding from the girl's chest, planted squarely in her heart. He's smart. He's waiting until he is sure she perished before he removes the weapon, for if he withdraws it too quickly, she could heal and recover from the injury, like I have each night he plunged the weapon into my chest.

I gasp and meet the gaze of her attacker.

He smiles and says, "You're next."

Realization strikes me then. He's given me several days to cooperate, but the moment he realized I will not answer his questions was the moment I sealed my fate. In this moment, I decide Will's offering will not be in vain.

With our gazes locked, I bring forth the little bit of strength Will granted me by offering me a taste of his blood. Ignoring my need to recover from my countless torture sessions, I focus everything I have into compelling this man.

"Stop," I say when we lock gazes.

The man stops abruptly. I sense his fear, his shock. He furrows his eyebrows as he struggles to understand what is happening to him. I bet he never imagined I would still have this kind of power. After all, I haven't fed in days. Or so he believes...

"Do not speak," I say when he opens his mouth. "Release her."

Her legs fall to the ground in a heap.

“Remove the knife,” I say, even though I know it is too late for her. I wish I could have saved her, but I know I can save the others from knowing the torment this man enjoys inflicting.

He withdraws the weapon.

“Plunge it into your chest,” I order.

A smile crosses my face as he turns the blade inward. Just as he brings his arms out and begins the blade’s descent, a screeching alarm sounds. I fall to my knees, covering my ears with both hands and crying out, “Stop!”

Tears in my eyes from straining myself to block out the noise, I see the executioner, arms before him, a knife inches from his chest. He’s frozen in time, waiting for my order. I hadn’t meant for my shriek to save him.

In the distance, I hear dozens of stomping feet. The hunters are assembling.

Something is wrong.

The alarms, the chaos, *this is my chance.*

“Open this door,” I order.

He drops the knife and walks over to my cage. The clicking of the door unlocking is music to my ears. Never in my life have I been this happy.

I stand and thank him. I mean it too, even though I allow only seconds to pass before I’m standing in front of him, fingers wrapped firmly around his neck as I pull him toward me. I sink my fangs into his flesh. We sway, back and forth, timed with his screams. I didn’t grant him the mercy of compelling the pain away, so he will feel every moment of his life escaping him and entering me.

I feel him shrivel beneath my grasp, but I do not release him until every drop of his offering has entered my eager belly. I smile as I step over his corpse and, licking my lips, stare into the angry eyes of a half-dozen hunters.

CHAPTER SEVEN

George

THE HEAVY BEAT OF MUSIC VIBRATES UP MY LEGS FROM THE STICKY FLOOR of the club. Each step seems to rattle my bones, but I cannot blame all of my shaking on the music. I shake viciously because of the countless crimson eyes that feast on me from every shadow within this room.

Chad pulls me close, his arm never leaving my waist. His fingers gently dig into my stomach muscle as he leans his head down and whispers into my ear.

“Drink?”

I can hardly find the courage to nod in agreement, but perhaps a drink would help give me the strength I need to deal with what is to come.

Chad guides me to the main bar, never once releasing me from his grasp. The vampires surrounding us are dressed in form fitting leather. The bartender spins bottles and pours ruby-colored liquids into crystal glasses. One vampire in particular catches my eye, and I tense as she wades through the smoky room toward us.

“What will it be?” she purrs. Her red-painted nails run up the stem of a used champagne glass. Mostly, her gaze is pinned on Chad, but every few seconds, she shoots me an odd glance.

“The supreme. I request an audience,” Chad spits, one hand still on me, keeping me close.

It’s impossible not to see the shock crease over the vampire’s face. She jerks so sharply she almost knocks the used glass off her tray.

“I’m afraid that’s not poss—”

Chad simply raises a hand to cut her off. “The witch is here for the supreme. How do you think she’ll react to hearing that you turned away an Alcott?”

The vampire mouthed my last name and looked to her fellow barman.

“Can I get you both a drink while you wait?” the vampire adds.

“Water for the witch. A crimson kiss for me.”

Chad lists off our order, and the vampire disappears into a dark corner of the bar, where the walls are lined with bottles and empty glasses. I want to scold him for dropping my name. If this gets back to the witches, I would be done for. And worse, if Mother ever caught word that I was in an establishment run by the supreme, she'd have my head before she even tried to go after the supreme.

We stand in silence until the vampire brings our drinks over. Her movement is a blur, so fast that I almost stumble back at the shock of her sudden presence.

"Water," she purrs, sliding the glass across the sheen, wooden bar. "For the Alcott." My stomach turns as the vampire plays with my name. "And for you, handsome... straw?"

The question is as playful as her facial expression. Before Chad can answer her, the other bartender drops off a tumbler brimmed with a dark liquid. Its coppery scent reaches my nose even from this distance.

Blood.

Chad simply ignores her, turning his back on her until he faces the dancing crowd. But I still stare. At first, I am surprised by the bartender's fearful expression—until I realize it's not Chad that strikes her dread. I turn and see the vampire approach.

"Chad Danvers, I must admit, it has been an *awfully* long while since you last visited my establishment. After the last time, I believed you would never return. *And with a witch.* I say, things certainly have changed."

The woman who regards Chad is beautiful. Ethereal. If angels were real, I'm sure she would be one. With a waterfall of dark hair that only extenuates her red eyes, milky skin and high cheekbones, plush lips the shade of apples, she is absolutely stunning. Not once does she look at me. Only to Chad, who she seems to know intimately.

"Supreme." Chad bows his head.

Only then do I notice the gaggle of burly vampires around her. And how the occupants of the club parted like the Red Sea to allow her through. There is even a rich scent that seeps from her two-piece, pinstriped suit. Clearly, the supreme is an important woman to the vampires, just like Elder Jane is to the witches and the alpha is to the wolves.

"Thank you for agreeing to meet with us," Chad says as he raises his head.

“Well, I’m here more for my desire to target the pungent smell of magic coating the air. A witch’s arrival is never missed, Mr. Danvers, as you well know. Or perhaps you have forgotten, since there seems to be a strong scent of magical protection that is practically oozing off of you as well...”

Chad doesn’t respond, so the supreme takes this opportunity to assess me. She stares, dragging her gaze up and down the length of my small frame. From face to feet and back again, the supreme looks at me, not missing a single flaw in my fake courage. Unlike other vampires, her gaze does not cause a chill to wash over me. Instead, it burns, leaving me cold as ice.

“Welcome, George Alcott. I commend your bravery for walking into such a place and not concealing your true identity.”

My throat dries, tightening so thoroughly I have to take a sip of water. Once I gulp two healthy mouthfuls, I clear my throat and reply. “Thank you for seeing us.”

“Let’s just say I’m intrigued by your request to speak with me. Come and follow me, boys. I am certain what you have to say should not be spoken among these eavesdropping ears.”

I look to the club, and again, everyone is watching. No one dances. No one is moving. All eyes are on us and the interaction before them. A witch is here to see the supreme. I can only imagine what that seems like from a vampire’s perspective.

The supreme turns on her heels and moves back through the club, bodyguards in tow. We follow behind them, slipping past the vampires who stand in our way.

The room she takes us toward is up a flight of metal stairs at the back of the club. I hold onto the railing as the frame swings under all of our weight. I’m not quite as light on my feet as the vampires are. They move effortlessly, like true predators, whereas I stomp my way up each step, careful not to tumble over the side railing. Once we reach the door at the top of the stairs, I’m glad to be on a solid, still ground. Of course, the nerves fluttering in my stomach doesn’t help my situation.

“Can I get you anything stronger than water, George?” the supreme asks as she takes her seat behind an ornate desk that looks straight out of an old-time movie. “My club may cater to vampires, but I do stock hard liquor in case our... *other* visitors need something to dull their senses.”

I feel Chad stiffen in the chair next to me.

“No,” I say quickly. “Thank you, but I am fine with the water.”

“Then let’s not waste any time. I’m sure you’re just as busy as I am. Tell me, what can I do for you, George?” Slowly, she runs her fingernail down her chin, across her throat, and into the dip of her low neckline. I swallow the lump in my throat. The supreme’s gaze flickers to it, lips parting ever so slightly.

“We are here because of a missing vampire. Someone important to us both.” I can’t miss the clear intrigue that spreads across her face, lifting her narrow brows high toward her hairline. “I’ve exhausted my skills and resources in trying to find her, but nothing works. This is why we are here, to ask for your help.”

“Never have I known a witch to care for a vampire’s whereabouts. May I ask why you are so invested in finding this missing girl?”

Chad’s hand reaches for mine and squeezes. The supreme watches the movement, her eyes narrowing.

“She is a friend. In many ways, my only friend.”

“*Friend?*” The supreme issues a breath and conjures a smile. “How... progressive. A witch and a vampire... friends. And the two of you,” she glances between Chad and me, “I can smell the... *tension* between you.” She taps her long nails against the wood of her desk. “What would your treaty say about you two? That interests me more than a missing vampire.” I expect Chad to release my hand, but he doesn’t. He only grips tighter. “Unlike your elder witch, I like to think of myself as a forward thinker—much like you, George. For now, I’ll keep your *relationship* a secret between the three of us. It intrigues—no, *excites* me to see this connection you’ve formed.”

I can see the excitement in her stare. It is lit from the inside out, burning like a fire within her.

“Can you help us?” I ask bluntly. “I was told to see you for guidance. As the leader of the vampires, you are the last person we can turn to.” I don’t hide the desperation in my voice.

The supreme stands and gestures for Chad, almost shooing him away. “Please, Mr. Danvers, wait for us outside. I would very much like to finish this conversation alone with the Alcott.”

“I won’t leave him.” Chad’s voice is monotone and cold. I’m sure it took courage, but I know he fears for my safety.

The supreme clears her throat. "You seem to have forgotten your place here, Mr. Danvers. You know as well as any that my deals are dealt in confidence. Now, considering our history, I'll grant you leniency for your transgression, but do not mistake my kindness for weakness. Leave. Now."

My throat tightens at her words. "It's fine. I'll be fine," I tell Chad, trying to reassure myself, as well as him.

Chad doesn't move for a moment, as if he's frozen in time. I wonder if he will refuse her again. I pray he will not. As soon as Chad stands, the supreme calls for a guard, who escorts Chad out, leaving me alone with the leader of the vampires.

But I am no threat to her. We both don't require protection... I hope.

She underestimates us.

The door slams shut, making me jump. In my fear, I blurt the only question I care to ask. "So you *can* help?"

"Of course, but not without a promise from you in return. A successful businesswoman would never strike a deal without collateral."

Something sinister passes behind her red eyes, but I have to ignore it. If this is truly a chance to find Savi, I have to take it. She's worth whatever the supreme has waiting for me.

"What kind of promise?" I ask.

"When I need your assistance, I will call upon you. I expect you to be there, immediately and without question, and handle whatever situation I present you. That is the deal, Mr. Alcott. Accept or find this girl on your own," she says.

No words come to my aid, so I nod. The supreme extends a hand for me. I take it, feeling just how cold she is. It's like taking a bare handful of snow in the deep of winter. As soon as she releases my hand, I'm filled with dread. *What have I just done?*

"Of course, I will need her name," the supreme says, turning from me and rubbing her hand down her trouser leg.

"Savannah Danvers." Saying it aloud takes a pressure off my shoulders.

Her name makes the supreme pause. I see the recognition cross her face. She frowns slightly, her eyes lost in some memory. Only when I clear my throat does her gaze return to mine. She smiles then. "I should have guessed. That would explain Chad's insistence." Her voice is softer now, and I wonder what history this woman has with the Danvers family.

The supreme reaches over her desk for her black smartphone. She picks it up, presses a single button, and places the phone to her ear. I try to halt my breath so I can focus on the voice who answers. Being in the dark panics me more than asking for her help in the first place.

“It’s me,” she says, forgoing pleasantries.

I can hear someone respond on the other end, but the noise is no more than a subtle chorus of fuzz and high-pitched tones. Rarely do I wish for a vampire’s heightened senses, but in this moment, I desperately wish to share Chad’s gifts.

“It’s time you return your favor. Send out your wolves, and locate the scent of a missing vampire.”

Wolves? Surely not. My heart picks up speed, so frantic it clogs my hearing with its incessant beats. She called the *werewolves*? They’re the last creatures we need to confide in!

“Savannah Danvers. I trust you can search for her scent, and...” She stops speaking and listens to the voice on the other end. Time seems to slow as she considers the speaker’s words. “Is that a fact? How interesting.” She glances my way with a knowing look. As if, in that moment, she’s uncovered all of my secrets. “Regardless, call me when you *smell* something.” She clicks off the phone, abruptly ending the call. She hands me a small square of paper and a black pen.

“Write down your number, and I shall contact you when I find her.”

“I—I...” I want to ask about the wolves, but I can’t find the words. Instead, I scrawl my number on the paper, which she quickly snatches from me when I’m done.

“I’ll be in touch soon.”

She is dismissing me, so I stand and make my way toward the door. I move slowly, feeling like I’m floating above my body and something else is in control.

“If you have any more information to share about the disappearance of Miss Danvers, you know where to find me. *Anything* might be of interest and can help me locate her.”

I swallow the knot that forms in my throat, grasp the door handle, and push into the hallway. I can’t even offer her a final glance. Something about her words, her tone, tells me she knows.

“Goodbye, George,” the supreme calls from inside her office. “For now, at least.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Savi

THE SUDDEN SURGE OF POWER WASHES OVER ME. THE EXECUTIONER'S sacrifice may not be enough to both heal and strengthen me, but it will certainly be enough to escape this prison. I can heal at home.

My veins tingle as my body absorbs the blood offering. I feel drunk, high on his life. Though it was a necessary kill, I know I will soon regret it. The moment his memories of torturing and maiming supernaturals surface, I'll be the one left to repent for his sins. I can only hope Will's memories will be stronger.

But I can't worry about that now. I can't worry about what the executioner's blood will make me feel, see, because a half-dozen hunters in soldier-gear are stomping their way toward me. They move in unison, their boots smacking the concrete floor in an intentional beat. I don't have to compel them to spill their inner thoughts to know this is the music of their soul. They live for the kill. I see the confirmation of their excitement on their faces.

As they approach me, the rumbling thunder of caged supernaturals empowers me. It pains me to know I likely won't be able to save them. The power of the executioner's blood wanes even now. Had I been at full strength when I drained him, I would have been refueled for days. I can only pray it was enough to see me through my vengeance.

They move together, as if they've been training for this all their lives. And I believe that to be true. I don't know where I am, but this place obviously trains humans to be supernatural hunters. Ironically, I never thought a place like this could exist, even though the witch trials are more than enough proof that humans fear and will kill what they do not understand.

I brace myself as all six attack at once. Ignoring the cheers from my caged supernatural comrades, I pounce, flipping through the air so that I am nearly flying above the men. When I land, I take two by surprise. I reach for

their throats, slamming their heads together. They fall as mushy heaps to the ground, and I can't help but chastise myself for the wasted food.

"Two down," I taunt. I'm confident I can outmaneuver my attackers, even if they are stronger than me at the moment, even if they're better armed.

I dash across the room, moving side to side, as tiny wooden bullets shaped like baby stakes are shot toward me. I spin, jump, and nearly fly from the ground to avoid being hit. They move past me in slow motion. I stare at one a second too long, and by the time I realize another bullet is parallel to my cheek, it has already made impact, leaving a deep, crimson gash in its wake.

I clench my jaw shut as I come to a screeching halt. I wipe away the blood that cascades down my cheek, licking it off my hand. I enjoy the grimace strewn across their faces as I indulge, if only for a moment, in the taste of my own blood. Vampires may not feed from other vampires as a true source of food, but our own blood is fair game. Their disgust is ever so pleasing.

In the distance, I hear more men approaching. I must move quickly. As much as I'd like to draw out the fight, taking my time ending each one of their lives as repent for what they did to me and to the others, I don't have the luxury of time.

I run toward them, quickly closing the distance. I fall to my knees and slide until they're only an arm's reach before me. Bullets pelted toward me fly overhead. The noise of shots fired echo all around me, bouncing off the walls. Steadily, the men shoot, still firing where I was once but no longer stand. Even in my weakened state, they are no match for my speed, but my strength is dwindling, my power surge waning.

I reach for the heels of the two men before me, yanking them forward. They cry out as they teeter over. Their heads smack against the cement floor as I crouch. Fists to faces, I end their lives with little effort on my part.

I stand, slamming my hands against the guns of my final two attackers. They waver sideways, offering me just enough time to reach for their throats. They too fall. I stand in a heap of blood, bodies, sweat, and spit.

Cages rattle all around me. Exhausted, I turn, listening as even more approach. Dozens and dozens of combat boots smack concrete as even more make their way toward me. I hear gunshots in the distance. Wolves howl, and men scream.

If I'm going to make it home tonight, I have to worry about my neck and no one else's.

As I take the first step toward the door, it pains me to leave them behind. I know how they suffer. I dash to one of the cage doors. Inside, a vampire cowers in the shadows. When she sees me, she approaches, and her eyes beg me to save her. I reach for the bars, thinking I can pry them apart, but the closer my fingers come to the metal cage, the more I feel the rush of electric energy fueling an outstanding alarm system.

I know if I touch this door, or any of the others, I will die. The shock may only knock me unconscious, but the men who find me will surely drive a stake through my heart as payment for killing their brethren.

I shake my head and speak softly. "I'm sorry."

I stumble backward, nearly tripping over the body of a soldier.

"Please, don't leave us here," she says.

The pounding of boot against cement is louder, and I know I have only seconds to make my decision. Either stay, fight, and die or run, hide, and survive.

Quickly, I reach for each of the men I killed, tossing a body in front of each cage. Blood splatters as I slam them down. Slowly, it begins its descent into each cage.

"Drink," I order. "Good luck..."

And with that, I leave them. I dash out of the small room that contained our cages and run into a long corridor. I choose a direction, running toward the sound of howling, screaming, and shots fired.

Each time I pass a door, I cringe at the thought of what lies behind it. Could it be more supernaturals? Another torture room? The exit? I take a chance in running this direction; I'm hoping the hunters are guarding the exit and that I'm not running farther from freedom.

With each step I take, I feel my energy draining. I need to refuel, or I won't make it out alive. I make a promise that the next human I come across will be the one I eat. I don't think about the fact that killing a human is what got me into this mess in the first place.

At this point, it's kill or be killed, it's see my family again or let them mourn me.

I skid to a screeching halt. The corridor spills into a large open room, decorated just as plainly as the rest of this place. There's nothing but cement floors, concrete walls, and bright lights. Hunters are everywhere,

each fighting a losing battle against a hungry wolf. There must be dozens. How did they escape from their cages? I assumed the sirens overhead meant danger, but they couldn't compel their release, like I did.

I step out from the shadows and make eye contact with a familiar set of dark brown irises. Will stands before me, gun in hand, blades strapped to his waist. He's close enough to touch, and all I can think about is the promise I made to myself.

Kill or be killed. A dark voice within me taunts my earlier words.

I'm hungry, starving, and the memory of his sweet blood lingers on my tongue. I swallow the knot that forms in my throat as I close the space between us. As I do, he adjusts the angle of his gun so it rests against my chest, flush with the gaping wound in my chest, a physical reminder of being stabbed repeatedly by the executioner.

"You know I can't let you leave," he says.

"Then why save me?" I counter.

"Because I didn't sign up for torture," he says plainly. "I didn't sign up for... *this*."

Behind him, a wolf charges toward us. I can hear the pounding of his feet against pavement, even above the chaos echoing around us. The beast will save me from his gun, because Will doesn't seem even the slightest bit of concern that a battle is raging. His focus is on me and me alone.

"The tip of your gun is bloody," I say. "Do you know why?"

He breaks my gaze to glance down. Any other time, that would have been his downfall. In the mere seconds it takes him to look from my eyes to my wounded chest, I can rip out his throat. He would be dead—his body a taut heap on the ground, my belly full of his blood.

But something stops me. No longer am I plagued by the memories of his dead girlfriend. It's not even *his* memories of the lost boy he used to be that stop me. It's *him*. The man before me risked his life to save mine. Without his help, I'd already be dead.

I can't kill him, but he won't let me walk away. So what am I to do?

"I will leave this place tonight, Will," I promise.

"I believe that you will try," he says.

"Please don't make me have to hurt you."

He arches a brow. "Would you? After what I did for you? Do you live by a code, or is my father right? Are you just an animal?"

The wolf leaps, jaw agape, drool spilling onto the floor, claws bared and ready to rip apart every fiber of Will's being.

"We're not so different, you and I," I say.

Will blinks, and I've casted his gun away from me with the subtle jerk of my hand. He blinks again, and my arm is wrapped around his body; I spin us so we change positions. My movements are too fast for Will, who teeters behind me, grabbing onto my waist to steady himself. His arm around my waist grips tightly, and my pulse races at the connection. It's been days since I've felt comfort, and I struggle with the realization that I cannot welcome it. Not because he's a hunter. Not because I'm a vampire. Not because we are clearly meant to live in separate worlds. But because a wolf is seconds from impaling my weakened flesh with its razor-sharp teeth.

The wolf's eyes widen in surprise as it makes impact with me. Recognition flashes before its eyes, and it flails its legs about, as if it could stop mid-air. But like a semi-truck on an icy road, I know it cannot simply *stop*. So I push it away, knowing my body cannot withstand the force of its bulk making impact, and watch as it is flung across the room. Deep within me, my heart sinks as I watch it slam into a group of hunters.

I gasp as one slams its knife repeatedly into the wolf's belly. It howls in response. One by one, the men turn on the wolf. Pushing away the welcoming embrace of the hunter by my side, I run to the wolf's aid.

One by one, I dodge the hunters' attacks. I leap over some, choosing the easy way out of an attack. But I'm not so lucky with others. I fall to my knees, sliding across the floor, watching as dozens of wooden bullets dance above me. By the time I reach the wolf, I've successfully avoided all of my attackers. I'm not proud of myself, but I'm still alive, so I can't complain.

I reach the wolf just as another hunter lifts his knife. Seconds before blade meets flesh, I catch his arm. Wrapping my fingers around the man's wrist, I squeeze until I hear bone crack, but the man does not flinch. Anger boils in the pit of my gut, and I let it spill over. I reach for him, taking his smug face into my hand. I twist his head, snapping his neck. As the blade falls to the ground, I snatch it up, planting it firmly in the chest of the other hunter beside me.

"Two down," I say, grinning.

I leap over the wounded wolf, backhanding one attacker while blocking a hit from another. I kick in the man's shins, and he falls to his knees before

me. Grabbing onto each side of his head, I jerk my arms from side to side until the man's head no longer faces me.

Focusing my attention on my final victim, I close the very small distance between us. Grabbing him by the throat, I lift him in the air until his feet dangle. He scratches at my hand with one hand while bringing down his blade in another. The knife makes impact, impaling my shoulder. I cry out, dropping the man as I stumble to the ground. Withdrawing his weapon, I quickly sink it into his neck.

I turn and face the wolf, who pants and whines beside me. Its fur is matted and bloodstained. His chest heaves as it struggles to breathe. I know it can't withstand another hit.

All around me, bodies fall. Wolves perish. But in the distance, the doorway leading to stairs is unprotected. I scan the crowd, searching for Will and finding him sparring with another wolf.

Now is your chance, the darkness croons.

I glance back to the wolf. He cannot walk alone. I don't need to test him to know this to be true. He steadily bleeds, the pool of blood growing larger, thicker, darker as each second passes. I'm sure his alpha has some magical concoction that would heal him, for wolves are never seen by the local healer of Hillcrest.

I stare into its eyes. I know only seconds pass, but it feels like an eternity. Its golden irises look oddly familiar. It nudges its nose against me just before a long, sticky tongue swipes across my skin. I shiver in response. Something about this wolf feels so very... familial.

I cannot leave him to die.

I shimmy an arm beneath the wolf, and it groans in response.

"I'm going to try to get us out of here," I whisper.

I pull it closer, wrapping an arm around its large torso.

"We have to move quickly..." I grunt.

Only as I pull the wolf's frail frame into my arms do I realize its snout is resting against my bare neck. I swallow hard.

"No funny business, got it? I'm not some tasty treat. I go down, and we both go down."

Again, the wolf licks my skin, and this time, I physically shake. Although it tickles, I can't say I don't like the sensations building within me. Something about this wolf feels like home. I feel like I've known him forever. He feels... like George or Chad.

I take two steps before stumbling, sending the wounded wolf flying through the air as I trample over him. I grunt as I roll onto my side. I brush my hair from my eyes just in time to feel the compression of gun muzzle against my forehead. I dare a peek and stare into the hungry eyes of another hunter.

I should have known my escapades wouldn't go unnoticed. The moment his finger begins to pull the trigger, the world seems to slow. I blink through each moment, knowing I am not fast enough to stop him. Not now. Not while I'm this weak.

But before he can pull the trigger flush with the metal frame, he is mauled by a wolf. Greedily, the wolf tears through the man's clothes until his screams echo no more. Turning back, the wolf nudges me to stand, pushing me toward the door.

"We can't leave him," I say, spinning from its control.

I drop to my knees and usher the wolf into my arms. The other wolf lowers its head, nudging his fallen comrade. I pull the wounded onto his back, and he jerks him farther until he's cradled center mass. Together, we climb the stairs to freedom, escorted by the remaining wolves.

Among a blaze of gunfire and through a mountain of death, we emerge victorious.

CHAPTER NINE

George

BY THE TIME WE WALK INTO THE BELLY OF THE CLUB, NOT A SINGLE vampire pays us attention. I find it strange, and I've been living in this town long enough to know there's a reason for everything. I wouldn't be surprised if our interaction with the supreme put her mark on us. She's claimed us as hers—and to be harmed by her alone.

I want to leave, but Chad doesn't look at me long enough for me to tell him. Instead, he guides me back to the bar and orders another round of drinks. And then another. By the third, he is swaying ever so slightly. He knocks them back, one after another, only to order more. By the fourth, even the barmaid begins turning her pointed nose up at him.

I have always wondered what effect alcohol would have on vampires. It seems they *can* feel alcohol's effects, but they can handle many more drinks than humans—or witches. I couldn't even finish my first glass of water—the same one from when I arrived—before Chad finished a half-dozen drinks.

Chad has his head in his hands when three vampires approach us from behind—even I didn't sense them. When a hand slinks around my chest and tugs me back off my stool, I gasp. My surprised scream pierces the quiet room, echoing through the entire establishment.

I try to push my attacker away, but thickly muscled arms hold me down. They seem to be everywhere, like the limbs of an octopus squeezing the life from its prey. I scratch and slap, pinch and twist, but my efforts are moot.

“Struggling only makes it more exciting, *witch*.”

He spins me around so I am facing him. His face—handsome and devilish—is inches from my own. He's shorter, like me, and his dark hair is caked with styling product. A strong copper scent permeates from his mouth. His plump lips are stained red.

“Let go of me!” I struggle, but his strength surpasses my own.

I sense someone rustling behind me.

“Gerroff him,” Chad slurs.

“Can you believe it, boys? Chad Danvers has graced us with his presence, and I see he’s bagged himself a good one. I wonder how the Alcott witch tastes...” The vampire dips his mouth to my neck, and my blood freezes like water in a shallow stream—cold and hard.

I can’t move. My mind fails to connect with my arms and legs. Instead, I am still, morphing into the perfect prey.

“Even your scent...” The vampire inhales deeply. “No wonder you have bewitched him. I can barely contain myself. One little nip wouldn’t hurt, right? We do love to share...”

The tickle of a cold kiss brushes against my skin, and my mind no longer controls my body.

The darkness does.

It explodes from my very being. The feeling is pleasurable. It’s a sudden buildup of tension that conjures from nowhere but soon fills every cell and cradles every bone in my body.

As simple as breathing, it is *freeing*.

The music fades into silence. The swaying bodies of vampires drunk on blood and booze disappear from view. All I see is the vampire whose hands touch me.

In a blink, he is off me and skidding across the floor, taking vampires down with sheer force. It is not the element air that I willed to aid me.

It’s something different.

Something *darker*.

A blanket of darkness that sprays out of my hands like boiling oil.

I raise my hands and see the dark shadow swirling around my clenched fists. My muscles spasm as I prepare to throw them out before me, but a hand lands heavily on my shoulder.

“Let me,” the voice says.

Chad pushes past me, racing across the club at speeds I can’t even see. One moment, his hand was on me; the next, he is leaning over the vampire, his hand hugging the beast’s ivory throat. Chad flexes his strength, lifting the assailant carelessly off the floor. He lifts him carelessly.

The darkness within me laughs gleefully as it watches Chad throw fist after fist into the vampire’s jaw. Blood sprays across the floor beneath the boys, but none of it belongs to Chad.

I cling to my elements, which warn me of the imminent danger. Just as other vampires charge me, I conjure a shield of sharp wind to surround my body. The makeshift wall stops the other two vampires from getting any closer. Beyond it, they hiss and snarl, flashing pointed canines at me. Tongues lap against lips. Faces crinkle with angered lines.

“Blood slave,” one spits, running nails down my protective shield.

Hurt them, the darkness whispers.

The other cracks his neck from side to side and says, “Pretty boy, let me taste you.”

Hurt them!

No, I respond internally.

“Come on...” The vampire moans like an impatient child. “Let us in.”

The darkness begs for me to act out, but I push it down. I try everything in my power to control it, slapping my hands to the sides of my head, blocking out its pleas.

I look to the shadowy stairs at the back of the room, where movement catches my attention. Perched on the second floor landing, the supreme watches us with arms crossed over her chest and a cunning grin strewn across her ethereal face. Her eyes are on me, waiting, watching. I see the flash of burning intrigue in her deep, ruby eyes. She wants to see my power.

I flex and relax my hold over the element air, but instead of dropping it completely, I throw it out on all sides, not caring who it hits. No longer do I worry for the two vampires or their surroundings.

I run for Chad. He is on the floor, panting, and the other vampire is scurrying away on all fours.

“We need to leave.”

I wrap my arms around his chest and pull him toward me. I feel his reluctance, but he does not ignore me. He tries to stand. Wobbling, he seems out of breath and exhausted. The booze has likely almost worked its way through his system.

“Chad, you are going to need to help me,” I scold.

This time, he listens and works hard to stand alone. I take his arm and wrap it around my shoulders. It’s impossible not to notice the bruises and cuts across his skin.” He leans his weight against me as we walk. Just as they did for the supreme, the vampires part for us both to leave. Not a single one stands in our way. Even though I think we may be in the clear, I keep my magical shield around us both.

Gone is the darkness, back into its cage within. It curls in on itself, resting yet again.

I don't stop walking until the night air brushes against my skin. I feel it blow away the awful club stench from my skin. Instinctively, my feet keep moving until the club is far behind us. Only when the club is but a distant memory do we stop and rest.

"Why did you do that?" I shout, pacing before Chad, who sags against the wall of a closed shop on Main Street. "Do you know what this means? *Every single* supernatural in that club just saw us there, saw us leave the supreme's office. They could tell someone! They—they could—"

"For you," he mumbles, chin to chest. His eyes are closed, and his breath is labored. "I did it for you."

"Well, perhaps I didn't need you to save me!" I yell. I want him to look at me. I want him to understand how serious this is.

Chad slowly raises his face to mine, opening his eyes only a sliver. "If I didn't step in, they would have hurt you, and I couldn't let them *touch* you a moment longer."

"I was waiting for the right moment. I could have dealt with it and then we would have all left without making such a scene." I take his hands in mine and raise them into the dull light of the street lamp. "You've hurt yourself."

He looks down as well, eyes scanning over the red and blue marks around his knuckles. "They will heal."

"That's not the point. You'd never be hurt in the first place if—"

"If what?" he interrupts, fire in his voice. "If I let you unleash your magic across a room of vampires? If I let you expose yourself and your power? Do you know what my kind would do with that knowledge? Do you know how they could use that against you?"

"I—" I nibble my bottom lip, unable to give him an excuse. The supreme watched, not once stopping us as we attacked her kind. Did she want to see what I could do? Was she testing me for whatever task she calls on me for?

"I know you can protect yourself, but in this case, I needed to do it for you."

I sigh a heavy breath that causes the hairs on my arms to stand on end. Looking to the moon, I decide it must be well into the early morning by

now. I wish we were both safe in our beds, not arguing on an empty Hillcrest street.

“You don’t understand,” he says. “When non-vampires go into *that* club, they are going there for one reason only.”

“What reason?” I ask.

“They go for the thrill of being fed on. Those vampires back there thought that’s what you were. That’s why they reacted the way they did.”

Although the thought makes me sick, he does make sense. “*Blood slave*... One of them called me that.”

Chad pulls a face, which is full of knowing, before flashing a sympathetic smile. “So you understand why I had to intervene?”

I ignore him. “We need to get you home, Chad. You’ve been drinking and you’re wounded.”

He shakes his head, the balls of his cheeks growing red. “That too will pass.”

“That’s great, but you can’t even keep yourself upright without that wall. And... and I *want* to go home.”

I don’t. That is a lie. But it is better than staying outside after what just happened. The vampires could come back for a second round the moment their bruised egos are too hard to ignore.

“I’m sorry,” Chad whispers. His stare is thrilling. Not for a single moment does he drop his attention from me.

I shake my head, wanting nothing more than to put this behind us. “Can we just go?”

“Can you help me?” The corner of his lip turns up into a wicked grin.

“Fine,” I sigh, moving close to him. As I wrap my arm around him, his own hand reaches out for me. It clings onto my wrist and gently pulls me close.

Then his lips are on mine.

I feel his arms wrap around the base of my back and pull me close so our bodies are locked together. In that moment, I forget everything. I melt into his kiss, losing control of my body.

He holds me up as he guides me into a more favorable position. My body ignites, ridding me of the night chill. His tongue slithers against mine, flicking and teasing. A moan escapes, urging his kiss to deepen. Time becomes a distant memory as he holds me close, his every movement clouding my mind.

When we finally pull back, we are both breathless. His lips, and the space around us, are red. I lift a finger to my mouth and sense its quiver. I swipe my tongue across the plump skin, and it tastes like blood. Even though it should, it does not repulse me.

“Well, I didn’t expect that,” I whisper.

“You should never know what to expect when you’re with me.”

His reply is warm, like the crackling of a fire. His tone alone makes me lean into him again, straining my neck up to show that I want—no, *need*—another.

“Shall we take this home?” he questions.

I part my lips and nod, eyes flickering between both of his.

A sharp tug in my stomach snatches my breath away. I stumble, hand clapping to my stomach to still the pain. I shriek.

“What? What’s wrong?” Chad asks, leaning down toward me to get a better look. Confusion is etched across his perfect face.

The dark coil of power springs again, kicking my innards. I sense it trying to tell me something, but for once, its mocking voice is silent. Even so, it’s warning me. I can tell.

“I don’t know,” I hack out, head spinning from the sudden discomfort.

Chad wraps his arm around me, leading me away from the wall and in the direction of his home. He mumbles something, but I can’t hear him anymore. All I know is the burning sensation in the pit of my gut is growing stronger with each step we take.

I wince, trying to make sense of the pain the darkness causes. Is it angry with me for not listening to it at the club? I wait for the darkness to respond to my silent question, but it is silent.

Maybe this isn’t the darkness’s doing? Maybe it’s as confused and scared as I am? Even the air around me tingles with knowing. It’s as if the elements hide a secret from me.

The next rush of pain has me nearly keeled over, but this time, it’s different. It *feels* different. With the pain comes the flash of a familiar face in my mind’s eye. I’ve been waiting for this very sign for days.

It’s Savi.

I sense Savi.

CHAPTER TEN

Savi

I FORCE OPEN THE DOORS THAT LEAD TO THE BASEMENT, WHERE I'VE BEEN trapped for days. My entourage follows closely behind me. The room is empty. In fact, the entire building, usually bustling with noise, has fallen silent. It's an eerie quiet—one where I'm left wondering if I'm actually still trapped in my cage, unconscious, in the throes of death's embrace.

I struggle to breathe, to move, to lead the wolf pack toward freedom. I lean against a wolf, the heat of its coat sending shivers down my spine. I wish to tell them it'll be okay, that we'll make it out of here, but I cannot find the strength or will power to lie. Because the truth is, this is only the beginning. Even if we do make it home, they will come for us.

Made of wood stained so dark it's almost black, the doors to the room's sole exit are open. The closer I walk toward them, the more they tower over me. I glance back, my gaze settling on the half-dozen or so wolves escorting me from the building. I swallow hard, telling myself that everything will be okay. Wolves and vampires are hardly friendly, but we fought side by side back there. That has to count for something, right?

I glance down, eying the trail of blood I'm leaving behind. With my body's healing responses stalled, I'm bleeding out. I know I haven't the strength to run if more hunters are waiting beyond our exit.

Outside, I breathe deeply, welcoming the moon's rays on my skin. Briefly, I close my eyes, feeling rejuvenated by her. I know it's a lie. The moon couldn't possibly give a vampire strength. Sure, we appreciate darkness, but our love affair with the moon typically ends there.

The sensation is subtle as it tickles my nose. I open my eyes, running my tongue over my dry, cracked lips. I smell... *home*. I smell the fields of wolfsbane, the coffee at Crest, and the strong aroma that always permeates from George's house. It fills the air and blankets me in a comfortable bliss. I don't know where we are, but I know I'm not far from Hillcrest.

“Wolfsbane Forest,” I whisper, smiling. Behind me, a wolf nudges me forward, as if he were ushering me to move faster, but I am distracted by the vision of beauty before my eyes.

A lively, lush forest surrounds us—a place I was sure I’d never again see or visit. I’m sure this is the very same forest that surrounds my home town. I spent years running through these woods. I know its sounds, its smells. Inhaling deeply, I smell the scent of the wolfsbane that grows rampant. Wolfsbane Forest is the only nearby place to find the wild plant.

But how could I be so close to home and never rescued? How could Chad not sense me? How could George’s magic not lead him here?

I stumble through the gates of the compound, and the moment I cross the threshold to freedom, I glance back. What was once a lively, technologically advanced building is now a crumbling factory. Confused, I turn to fully face the building that held me captive all this time.

I stand at the far edge of Wolfsbane Forest, a place I dared never to *fully* explore for fear of being too far from home on werewolf land, and see... nothing. This is the perfect place to abduct, torture, and kill supernaturals. Even their magical façade has me turning away. If I were simply a passerby, I’d think this place was abandoned for years. Something pulls inside me. The urge to turn back, to go inside, to investigate, is gone. This place steals lives and manipulates emotions.

I stare at the multi-story building. Most of the windows are broken, and the front door is supported by only one hinge. A strong gust will surely knock it down. Even the nature that surrounds it—the grass, brush, and trees—look dead. Nothing about this place appeals to me. I try to take a step forward, to once again cross the threshold of the gate, but something stops me. A nagging sensation inside me tells me to turn back, to walk away, and to leave this place. If I wasn’t sure I’d just left a fully functional building, I would listen to this gut instinct.

A wolf’s growl brings me back to reality. I spin around, nearly losing my balance as I expect to find another hunter. Instead, I see the group of wolves staring at me, silently begging me to follow them. And I do. Because what other choice do I have?



The walk back toward Hillcrest is long, daunting, and utterly exhausting. When the trails are too wild, I find myself needing the support of the wolves, who, strangely, don't seem to mind a vampire hanging on their overgrown fur.

The closer I am to Hillcrest, the more I ache to be home. I wish for Chad's embrace, for George's smile. I wish for my refrigerator stocked full of blood bags and my soft, warm bed. I wish for the security of a locked door and George's magic spells.

But I know they are not taking me home.

They lost pack members in the fight to escape, and even now, those who remain are wounded. No one escaped unscathed.

Hours seem to pass before we reach their home. A small community of small, identical, log cabin-style homes is situated deep within Wolfsbane Forest. The wolves live their lives here, rarely venturing into Hillcrest town. Their young grow up in this community, staying far from the witches and vampires. In a way, the wolves very much are outcasts, but it's their savage nature that dooms them to a life of solitude. Sure, they—*usually*—follow the treaty, but it's far easier for a wolf to break the rules than a witch.

The cabins form a circle around the center of the community. A large fire pit is situated at their center. In a way, the setup reminds of a witch's circle or a coven ritual. I wonder if the wolves ever drew the same connection.

Nestled beside a house, almost hidden to the point where I nearly miss it, is a large cage made of the same logs that form the cabin homes. It's empty, but I can't help wondering who—or what—is usually kept there. A shiver runs its course through my body at the thought of being locked up... again.

No one dares visit here without an invitation from the alpha. With an escort of a half-dozen wolves bringing me here, I suppose I have one.

"Hello, Savannah," the alpha croons. His voice is cool, calm, and oddly soothing. "We meet again."

Not realizing I was using the wolf's strength as much as I was and not wanting to look weak, I push myself off the wolf that had been supporting me through the forest. I try to stand tall, but the straighter I stand, the harder it is to withstand the gut-wrenching pains enveloping my entire body.

As he approaches me with caution, I assess the situation. I could flee, but am I in any real danger here? The last time we met, we were in a fight

to the death over the loss of his brother. George and I are responsible for that death, and the treaty says a life for a life. Supernaturals live by that code, but for some reason, the alpha seems... different.

He walks slowly, and I consider his body language. Nothing about him feels threatening. In fact, I feel drawn to him in ways I can't explain. He looks the same—tall, tan, shaggy black hair that falls to his shoulders. Shirtless and wearing low-rise jeans, I can admire his leanly muscled frame. Barefoot, he closes the space between us. He's close now, so close I can touch him.

"I don't want any trouble," I say. His eyes are the same golden color that graces the wolf form. We don't know much about the wolves, but I do know the glowing golden eyes in human form are the sign of an alpha.

"And yet, trouble follows you everywhere, *Savannah*." My name rolls off his tongue, and I cringe when I realize I like the way it sounds. Something about this meeting feels *different*.

Beside me, a wolf transforms from beast to man. The very same wolf that ushered me out of the building and assisted me through the deepest parts of the forest stands nude beside me. His fur now skin, his eyes now a pale blue.

"Zane," the man says as he bows his head to his alpha. "You should know that she fought beside us. If it weren't for her, Avel would be dead." He makes eye contact with me. "And she came here willingly."

"Thank you, Mekhi. Tend to your brother," Zane, the alpha, says.

Mekhi nods and trudges away. Before he's out of earshot, I yell for him. "Mekhi!" He stops and tosses a glance over his shoulder. "Thank you." My words are a whisper, and I'm sure he can't hear me. But I know he understands their meaning.

He smiles and says, "I'm glad you survived, *mali volk*."

Before I can question what he called me, he's gone, vanishing into one of the many cabins that clutter the small clearing where the wolves call home.

"*Mali volk*?" I ask Zane, assuming the alpha would understand his wolf-talk.

He smiles. "Do you really think I'll spill all of our secrets during our first meeting?"

"Our *first* meeting?" I question.

“You didn’t think, after our last encounter, that this would be the last time you saw me, did you?”

I exhale slowly. “Our last encounter involved a fight to the death.”

His smile widens. “My desires have changed. I have no interest in harming you.”

He extends his arm, and the world seems to still as he tucks a loose strand of hair behind my ear. He’s so close I have to stare at the sky just to look into his eyes. The space is so intimate; I inhale each breath he exhales. My pulse races even though his remains strong and steady. The beats echo around me, and I crave him in ways I cannot fathom.

His thumb traces circles across my skin until it rests in the corner of my eye. He rubs my skin there ever so slightly.

“Incredible,” he whispers. “I’ve never seen... You are truly something special, *mali volk*.”

I consider what he sees when he looks at me: a half-dead vampire who survived days of endless torture. But before that, I was bitten by a werewolf, killed, and brought back to life by George, who used some pretty hefty black magic to return my soul to this mortal coil. I haven’t had a moment since my rebirth to consider what this means, what happened to me. The only clear physical change is my eyes. Normally crimson red, they are now speckled with flecks of gold.

His eyes linger far too long on me, and I know he feels the same internal pull that I feel for him. It’s similar to what I felt the moment the hunters began plunging their knives into Avel, Mekhi’s brother, back at the mysterious compound. I feel connected to them in ways I’ve never felt to anyone else before—not to my brother, my parents, or George. I wonder if this is what compulsion feels like for my victims.

“Let’s get you home. Important people are looking for you,” he whispers, his breath hot on my skin.

“I feel safe here.” My words escape me, as if my lips have a mind of their own. Even as I say them, I regret my honesty. Internally, I’m screaming, trying to remind myself that I very nearly died the last time I was this close to this man.

Briefly, his eyes lower to my lips before he stumbles backward, breaking this ridiculous connection. I need to get myself together. I have places to be, family to warn, and hunters to kill.

I walk backward until I am nearly hidden within the brush that surrounds the trees—all the while keeping my eyes on Zane. The moment I'm among the trees, I turn and run as fast as I can, which, in my weakened state, is quite laughable.

As I head for home, for *true* safety, I hear a soft voice in the distance.

“Until we meet again, *lep volk*.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

George

AS IF THE WORLD FINALLY REVEALED ALL ITS SECRETS, I KNOW IT IS SAVI who caused the reaction within me. Whatever magic kept her hidden for so long no longer works. Did the supreme do this? Has she found her already?

The darkness within me bubbles with glee. It seems to share the rush of relief that follows knowing she will finally come home. I feel her pull me toward her, and I know, somehow, this is the darkness's doing.

I stumble back, losing my balance as Chad physically reacts to something. He raises his head, eyes on the dark sky, nostrils flaring.

"Do you..." I am at loss for words, because it's hard to believe this is happening. Savi is *finally* coming home.

"Savi," Chad breathes, and then he grabs my hand with an abrupt force.

Before I can register what's happening, we are running. I know Chad can move faster than me, but he is holding back, allowing me to keep my own natural pace.

It is impossible to ignore his panic. He smelled her scent just as I felt her presence. But something seems different. I expected excitement the moment he is finally reunited with her, but excitement isn't what's etched on his face. No, this is different. He's *panicked*. Something about her scent must be fueling his frantic reaction. Maybe he can sense someone with her?

I stumble over my own feet, unable to act as my mind numbs to the coiling power inside. Its hysterical movements make me sick.

I fall, tripping over my own feet. Before I tumble into the gravel, I am swept off my feet and into Chad's arms.

I blink, and the world around me blurs as Chad runs, full speed, toward Savi. No longer hindered by my inability to match his speeds, I rest against him, letting him take control.

We are running toward his home—the Danvers' manor. And the closer we get, the more my stomach spasms increase. I silently chastise the erratic

behavior of my darkness within. It feels as if it is real, like a physical entity moving inside me. Twisting and turning, it moves my innards with it.

Ahead, I spot the point of the manor's roof, but suddenly, we stop. Chad drops me to my feet and steps forward, gaze pinned on the dark street beyond the house.

Savi.

Standing in the middle of the street, she is there.

The moment I acknowledge her presence, the darkness halts moving and calms.

"Oh, goddess!" I scream, elated. I run for her, but the closer I get, the more I see what caused Chad to panic.

Blood covers every part of Savi's small frame, much of it exposed. If her skin is not red from gore, it is blue and black from the map of bruises across her neck, arms, and face.

"Savi?" I raise my hands for her. I want to pull her into my arms, stop her shaking. She looks at me, chest rising slightly with shallow breaths. She takes small steps like a young child and stumbles beneath her own weight. Just as her skull is about to make impact with the cement, Chad is there, keeping her upright.

I slap a hand over my mouth to stifle my cry. Puncture marks leak fresh blood that pools in a puddle at her feet. Dried blood tears stain the dark circles beneath her eyes. Her boots are covered in dirt and grime, and her jeans are as shredded as her shirt. It isn't until Chad wraps an arm around her and guides her to the manor that I notice her back.

It's completely exposed.

My stomach lurches, a gag bursting past my lips. I'm breathless as I lean over and retch nothing but air and water onto the ground.

Her back is a mess of rips and tears. Her skin is *completely* mutilated in every possible way. Vampires are creatures gifted with the ability to heal quickly, so to have this degree of markings means she has experienced endless torture and starvation.

Again, I retch, and more bile spreads across the street, creating my own puddle of sloppy mess beside my feet.

I can't—no, I *shouldn't*—look at her anymore. Every time I do, I see more evidence that she has spent the last several days in literal hell. But no matter how many times I repeat that in my mind, I cannot take my eyes away from her.

Savi, *my Savi*, is home. After days of searching, she's finally found her way back to us.

And we will do everything in our power to keep her safe from whatever beast—or beasts—that did this to her.

With his baby sister in his arms, Chad leads Savi to the front door of their house, kicking it open with a single blast of his foot. Inside, they both disappear down the dark hallway, leaving me to catch my breath alone in the night air.

Savi, what has happened to you?

The dark snake jolts within me, saying, *Go and see... Go and see.*

My desire to be by her side is strong, but I cannot. I remember the pain she is caused when I am close, and by the look of it, she's experiencing all she can handle right now. I have to give her space and time to heal—no matter how strong the urge to race inside and hold her is.

Chad is with her. She's in the best care and with the best person right now. I know he will keep her safe, help her heal.

A mighty roar explodes from inside the Danvers' manor.

Chad.

He is shouting something.

Certain I am not going to gag again, I run for the open doorway and enter, slamming the door closed behind me before eavesdroppers can listen in.

I hear more shouting and slamming doors coming from the kitchen. I run for the room, not caring about my own safety.

Savi is lying on the floor, eyes open and chest heaving. Chad is kneeling beside her, his torso and limbs covered in her blood.

He looks up at me and shouts, "Blood bag. Bring me them!"

Having spent many days lounging about this manor, I know where the Danvers keep their supply. Throwing open the fridge door, I am greeted by rows upon rows of bags filled with ruby-colored liquid.

"Quickly, she is not healing!" Chad's words fill me with dread. "She needs to feed, or we'll lose her."

I stick my hands into the bottom shelf and scoop up as many bags as I can in one swipe. Making sure I don't get too close to Savi, I drop the bags at Chad's side and step back, covering my mouth with my hands. My entire body is tense with worry for her.

My own mouth tastes vile, but I cannot focus on that—not as Chad rips into the lid of one bag with his teeth and leans toward Savi’s face. He lifts her head from the floor and begs her to open her mouth.

As if she senses the blood close to her cracked lips, she opens her mouth. Her fangs lengthen ever so slightly in response. Chad puts the open lid into her lips, and she drinks. Her throat bobs as the blood bag is drained in seconds. Once that bag is empty, Chad offers her another. He repeats this over and over again.

“I will kill whoever did this,” Chad promises. No longer frantic, he speaks slowly, calmly. The more Savi drinks, the more relaxed he sounds, his anger dissipating into sadness. “This is all my doing. I should never have left you.”

He speaks to Savi, but her mouth is full. She is in the fringes of pleasure as she drains the blood bags. Some escapes the corners of her colorless mouth and dribbles down the side of her lips, mixing with her own drying blood that covers her chest.

“More!” Chad barks at me.

I follow his order, not wasting a second. As if it’s not enough, Savi drains the offerings effortlessly, until each is no more than a scrunched-up sleeve of semi-see-through plastic with only mere smears of blood left in them.

Chad rocks back from his feet and slumps onto the ground beside Savi. His hand holds hers as she closes her eyes.

“Savi, tell me who did this to you,” he says. Red tears swell in his eyes, and his entire body seems to shake with anger.

I can’t move, not as I watch the puncture marks across Savi’s body slowly knit together. The blood bags are working. She is healing. Her skin becomes flushed with color, and her lips retain their usual pinkness. Even so, she does not open her eyes.

We can help her... at a cost. The voice fills my head. It’s so loud my ears ring.

I know what it wants me to do. Using the dark magic, I could heal her.

What cost? I ask it.

Let me inside of her.

My blood freezes like the surface of a lake in the middle of harsh winter. No. I cannot help her if that is the cost. No matter how much the

darkness wants me to—with its singsong, alluring tone—I cannot listen. I cannot subject her to this evil.

“Say something,” Chad reacts to my silence, putting his head in his hands.

“I—I am sorry. Savi is going to be okay. Let her heal and rest, and then she can tell us what happened. We cannot do anything until she wakes up.”

Chad leans against Savi, resting his forehead on her stomach. “My only job as her brother is to protect her, and I’ve failed. Do you think she’ll ever forgive me? I did the one thing I promised her I’d never do: leave her. If I didn’t leave her in that clearing, this wouldn’t have happened.”

Her mouth opens as if she is going to respond, but she doesn’t speak. All she offers is a raspy breath.

“George, promise me we will find whoever did this to her and make them pay.”

I nod. “Yes, of course, but for now, just breathe. We have her back. That’s what’s most important right now.”

“I need to get her to bed. She cannot stay on the floor.”

“Careful,” I say as he sweeps his arms under her back and lifts her from the tiled floor.

“Bring me more blood,” Chad instructs as he exits the kitchen. “She is going to need her fill when she wakes.”

I don’t argue. Instead, I move for the next shelf in the fridge and follow after Chad with full arms. When I reach her room, I stay in the hallway just outside her door. I try to stay far enough that I don’t seem to cause her pain but still close enough that I can see her.

Pain.

I can’t imagine what she has experienced. I remember the marks that cluttered her back. What did that? Why was it done to her? How long did she suffer? Like Chad, I want answers. I wish she would wake and tell us what happened. I want to know who to cast my vengeance upon. The anger that fills me bubbles deep inside of me, but I don’t tell Chad. I need to be his source of strength and comfort. If it were up to him, we’d be burning down the town in search of answers. We have to be patient, and I need to think clearly so I can remind him of that.

She looks peaceful in her bed, dark hair haloed around her head as she rests. Her hands are clasped over her stomach in a peaceful manner. Even her breathing has evened.

Chad drags the chair from her makeup table across the floor and sits beside her bed. His back is to me, but I don't need to see his face to know he is crying. His shoulders shake violently as he stares at his nearly dead sister.

"She will be all right," I say from the door. I speak aloud for myself more than for him, but I know he needs to hear it too.

Chad sobs. "This is my fear. Seeing my baby sister and only remaining family in such torment..."

"Stop punishing yourself," I order. "We both left her that night. It is my fault as much as yours, so stop."

"The wolves must have done this," he says, sounding utterly defeated.

I shake my head. "No, this can't be them. It doesn't have their usual mark. They are vicious beasts. If it were them, she wouldn't have survived."

Chad rests a hand on her leg and takes a slow breath. "Tenfold. I will make them repay this tenfold."

Savi moans, stopping my response to Chad's threat.

"What is it?" Chad leans over her. "Say it again, Savi."

He sounds like a child, riddled with panic. Again Savi opens her mouth, and this time, her words are clearer, louder, bolder. They cut through the room and silence us both.

"They'll come for us..." she whispers again.

"Who, Savi? Who will come for us." Chad knocks over the chair as he stands abruptly. "Tell me who they are. Please!"

But she doesn't. Not another word slips past her lips. Instead, she rests. The wrinkles around her eyes soften, and the tension in her body diminishes. Finally, sleep claims her.

"Come, Chad. Let her rest." I raise a hand for him, trying to urge him to follow me out of the room.

"No, I will not leave her," he snaps. "I will never leave her again."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Savi

EVERYTHING HURTS. IT'S A PAIN I CAN ONLY COMPARE TO DYING, WHICH, sadly, I *have* experienced.

Twice.

My eyelids are heavy, and I struggle to open them. When I do, the world is too bright. My vision blurs as my eyes sting. Tears form, making the situation so much worse than it has to be.

I try to wipe my eyes, but my arms are heavy. I feel as though I've been asleep for weeks. I'm sure that's not true. Hours, maybe, but not weeks. At least, I certainly hope *weeks* haven't passed.

I blink away the tears, and slowly, my vision returns. The cloudiness dissipates, and I'm left staring at my bedroom ceiling. A rush of warmth overtakes me as the giddiness sets in.

I'm home.

I'm lying atop my blanket and pillows, struggling to sit up, and only when I fail repeatedly do I realize I'm not alone. My neck throbs as I jerk my head to the side. In my doorway, I see Chad and George. I stare at them, smiling.

Until Chad wraps his arm around George's waist and pulls him into a passionate embrace. I gasp, but the subtle sound that escapes my lips isn't enough to break their trance. They are much too consumed with each other.

"Chad?" I whisper, voice hoarse.

Only then do the two pull apart.

I blink, and Chad is at my side. George remains in the doorway. I wonder if his fear-stricken reaction mimics my own confusion.

"Savi," Chad whispers as he sits on the bed beside me.

"What's going on?" I ask. My throat is dry, and my chest aches each time I speak.

"You're home, Savi. You're safe now."

He pulls me toward him, hugging me, holding me, and I nuzzle against him, resting my head in the crevice of his neck. The absolute agony I feel in this position is muffled by the overwhelming joy I feel at being home.

I survived. As often as I feared I may not break free of that place, I didn't succumb to the torment of being there.

And apparently, quite a lot has happened since I disappeared.

I push against Chad, but he doesn't give way until I mumble something against his skin.

"You're suffocating me," I say when he finally pulls away to listen to my complaints.

"I'm sorry. I'm just... I'm just so happy you're home, safe."

"For now," I whisper. Something flashes across Chad's face. His features change. In an instant, he's not the carefree, fun-loving brother I used to know. He's angry, furious. I know he's going to ask me what happened to me, but I don't want to talk about it. I just want one minute of time that belongs to me, not *them*. "What's going on with you two?"

George, still standing in the doorway to my bedroom, clears his throat, and Chad's features soften. I arch a brow at the quite obvious effect George has on my brother. How had I never noticed this before? We used to be inseparable until, one day, something abruptly separated us. Ever since then, Chad has made it his mission to be an absolute jerk whenever George was around.

"Are you... together?" I ask. This time, I point my question to George. He opens his mouth to speak but quickly snaps it shut again.

"It's complicated, Savi," Chad says. He sits back, giving me the space I need. I lean against my bed's headboard, grunting and groaning with each move I make to shimmy myself backward. "You're still weak. You need to feed."

My stomach grumbles at his words, but I'm too stubborn to admit that I am hungry. "How long has this been going on?"

"Savi..."

"How long have you both been lying to me? How long have you been hiding this? Did Mom know? Dad?"

Chad shakes his head. "Of course not. Can you imagine? A vampire and a witch? We never told anyone."

"Not even me?" I whisper. "Do you think so little of me that you think I'd care, that this would bother me?"

“No, Savi,” George says, finally speaking. He leaves the safety of the hallway behind and enters my room. “We never wanted to hide it from *you*.”

“We just wanted to keep it a secret from everyone else. Never you,” Chad continues.

“But you didn’t tell me!” My body burns, and my pulse races. I can’t tell if it’s the hunger or my anger at being lied to for all these years.

“We just wanted to protect it. If word got out...” George says, closing the space between us.

He’s only feet from me now, and suddenly, I remember this pain. Ever since George used black magic to bring me back, I cannot be near him. After spending days apart, I almost forgot. I thought the pain would end the moment I escaped that place, but I was wrong.

“George,” I whisper, keeling over. As the fire burns within me, it bubbles over, erupting within, shredding everything in its wake. I release an earth-shattering scream that I’m sure our neighbors hear.

“Get out!” Chad shrieks, nearly pushing George out of my bedroom.

“I—I’m sorry,” George mumbles as he stumbles backward. He trips over his feet and falls to the ground just outside my bedroom. As Chad rises to help him, he says, “I’m fine! Stay with her.” But Chad doesn’t listen. He leaves my side to tend to George.

“Are you sure you’re okay? I didn’t mean to push you out like that. I just—”

George waves him off. “Don’t worry about it. I’m not made of glass, Chad. Besides, I should leave. She’s awake now, and my father’s book must have an answer to this... reaction.”

“You don’t have to leave, George,” I say. “You just can’t come that close anymore.” My voice is a whisper as I consider my words. What does this mean? I can never hug my best friend? I can’t sit in the same room as him? We can’t visit Crest Coffee or run away in the woods together? This can’t be my life now.

“I’m glad you’re safe, Savi,” George says. “I promise, I’m going to fix this. I’m going to end this pain.”

I smile and rest my head against my headboard. “I know you will.” I ache to touch him. I just want one hug, one more embrace, before I live a life without George. At least he has Chad now... they’ll never be alone.

Chad returns, closing the door behind him.

“No,” I shriek, sitting up so quickly a sharp pain shoots through me. “Leave it open. Please.”

Chad twists the knob and opens the door, leaving it only slightly ajar. It’s enough to make me feel like I’m not trapped in a cage.

“Savi...” He walks toward me and plants himself beside me. Broad shoulders angled toward me, thickly muscled arms crossed, short hair ruffled from many sleepless nights, and eyes narrowed, if I didn’t know him, he’d come across as quite the formidable opponent. But his *serious face* doesn’t fool me. He’s still my brother. He’s still a big softy when it comes to his baby sister.

“Do you love him?” I ask.

He smiles. “I do.”

“For how long?” I ask.

That stops him. He considers my words, and I can imagine him reliving all of his cherished memories. The thought makes me smile in return. Sadly, the only affection I’ve ever experienced myself is familial love.

“In a way, I’ve always loved him.”

“I’m happy for you. I just wish you would have told me.”

He reaches forward and brushes away my hair that’s matted to my skin. It’s been days since I’ve cleaned myself, so I expect his effort to be quite the feat. “So do I.”

“Do you have any blood?” I ask, rubbing my stomach.

He nods as he leans over and grabs a small black box. Unclasping the lid, he opens it to reveal several blood bags and a few ice packs to keep them cool.

“How many have I had already?” I ask.

He eyes me cautiously. “This will be an even dozen.”

I gasp. Normally, a blood bag or two every few days is enough to sustain a vampire. But one dozen in a day’s time? How can one vampire even drink that much?

“You nearly died, Savi,” Chad says, answering my unspoken questions.

I sniffle as he rips open the bag and offers it to me. I ignore his stares as I quickly drain the pouch’s contents. Even as I slurp down mouthfuls, I know this will not be enough. I need more.

“Savi?”

“Hm?”

“Who are they?” Chad asks. The confusion I feel must show, because Chad continues. “Before you passed out, you said they will come for us. Who are they?”

Flashes of all I experienced dances before my eyes. The pain of the constant torture, of being stabbed and lashed repeatedly, is still strong. I can still taste bile on my tongue from the moments I was whipped until I tossed up the acid of my stomach.

“Savi, you’re shaking,” Chad says as he scoots closer to me. He tosses my empty blood bag aside as he pulls me against him. He wraps his arms around me and rocks us together. “What happened to you?”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

George

I PRESS MY BACK AGAINST THE WALL AND SLIDE DOWN TO THE FLOOR. MY legs cannot support my weight as I listen to Savi answer Chad's question. Every part of me reacts to the violent words that spill from Savi's mouth as she shares the truth—a truth I cannot bear to listen to but also cannot stop myself from eavesdropping on.

Do they know I'm still here, listening from the hallway? I should have gone home for Father's book, but I cannot leave. I need to know what happened to Savi, to my friend... my Savi.

I press a hand to my mouth and one to my stomach, praying not to retch at what Savi says. Clear images conjure in my mind, recreating the horror Savi has been through.

Am I punishing myself by listening? I want to share her pain. I wish I could take it away, but I cannot. Because the darkness, the parasite within me, causes her more pain when I'm near. She doesn't deserve this pain, especially after what she has been through at the hands of these monsters.

On and on, she explains, her voice iron clad and strong. It is Chad who breathes heavily as he cries over Savi's truth.

When I can't take any more, I stand and leave. My footfalls across the landing and down the stairs are loud. They will know I have been listening, if they didn't already hear my muffled whimpers. Besides, I don't bother to close the front door quietly.

Standing in the street, I take in the fresh morning air. I cannot remember the last time I actually slept, and my muscles seem to punish me for it. But there is no time to rest, not even now when Savi is home.

I need Father's book. The very one I leaned over as I tried to bring him back from the cusp of death. It has been years since I gripped its worn binding. The last time I saw it, it was in Mother's hands when she picked it up from beside Father's dead body, just before she turned her back on us

both. She took the book into Father's study and slammed the door shut. I haven't been allowed inside his office since that day.

The walk home is slow. I want to run, but I can't. I feel sick with nerves and anticipation. The memory of Savi's terror leaves a mark on my soul. I have nothing left in me—except exhaustion.

Mother must be asleep. The house is still and quiet. I press my hand to the wall just inside the door, searching for answers, but the house does not respond. If she is awake, I should have sensed that.

I take cautious steps up to my room, where I proceed to lie down on my bed. I close my eyes against the light, which now streams in through my window. When I open them again, I know much time has passed. The streams of light have moved, and I hear noise in the lower part of the house. It's Mother, I'm sure.

How long have I slept? My blood electrifies within my very veins at the thought of time passed. It wasn't the plan to waste time, and now my chance at finding the book without Mother knowing is over. Sadly, I cannot wait for her to fall asleep again. I need the book now.

I am slow and clumsy as I pull out a fresh pair of jeans and a dark navy jumper from my drawer. I carry them into my bathroom and lock myself inside. Hoping a cold shower will wake me, I stand beneath the stream, chanting every incantation I've memorized, hoping to wake me.

I glance up at the spout. The water hits me with pressure, splashing onto my skin and dripping down my body. I wash the night away. Scrubbing the memory of the club and the supreme from my skin.

A tingle spreads from my face all the way down to my toes as the freezing water aids my whispered spells by waking my senses and clearing the fog within my mind. It helps, calming everything except the coiling power inside of me. I cannot deny the growth of this dark presence.

As I step out of the shower, dry, and dress, all I can think about is whether or not the book will have answers. What do I do if it can't help Savi and me?

I stand before the mirror and stare at my reflection. I look like shit. Dark circles surround my green eyes; even my hair looks dull and lifeless. My jumper hangs off me, hardly fitting my shoulders anymore. Even the sleeves are stretched and have to be rolled up to stop them from constantly falling past my hands. My jeans, which drape off one side of my hip, will

need a belt to keep them in place. The more I look at myself, the harder it is to remember when I last ate a proper meal.

Something in my eyes catches my attention. I lean over the counter and look closer, trying to make out what just happened. When my face is inches from the glass, my breath fogging the mirror, I see it again. My irises seem to change in color, flashing entirely black.

A menacing laugh erupts within the room. I slap my hands over my ears and stumble away from the mirror, unable to look at my reflection.

No. What I just saw was *not* my reflection. That was something else. Something *worse*.

Answers await you. Even its taunting voice is louder in my head.

I rush out of the bathroom, leaving my wet towel strewn across the floor. Mother will scold me for being messy, but I do not care. I *need* that book. Is it the realization that I hope to find answers about the darkness that causes it to be bolder, stronger? Perhaps. Or maybe it is making me weaker with each day that passes? I sense it growing, sapping my energy. The weaker I get, the louder the internal voice becomes. I am fighting for control of my own body, but it seems to be winning.

I creep onto the landing and listen for Mother. She is downstairs, busy in the kitchen. The wafting scent of cooked breakfast greets me. I take this chance to peer into her open room.

I push my hand to the wall and whisper to the house, begging it not to alert Mother that I'm snooping in her private quarters. The landing creaks in response. Was that the wind outside, or did the house agree to keep my secret?

My steps are silent as I walk into Mother's room. At the doorway, I scan every inch of the perfectly clean space. Her bed is made, and everything is in order. It's no reflection of Mother's hidden, imperfect reality.

I can't search for the book in Father's study, not without asking for Mother's permission. She locked the room years ago, but maybe she brought it here for reading material? I am hopeful.

I reach for the darkness, which is moving like an excited child.

Will you help me find the book? I ask it. Part of me knows it will not refuse me. Its frantic twisting reflects its shared desire for me to find it.

A sharp pain responds, causing my knees to rock. I almost cry out at the overpowering feeling. It scares me, pains me, but I must keep looking for it.

Is it close? I ask.

It shivers again, spinning deep within me. Is it searching for it?

No, it answers simply.

I want to question it, to ask how it knows, but I believe the darkness. I trust in what it tells me. After all, it needs my body as much as I do.

“Can I help you, child?”

I turn on my heels to find Mother standing behind me. Almost choking on my own surprise, I swallow the lump in my throat and stand tall.

“Father’s book,” I tell her. “Where is it?”

She smiles slowly. “At last, you have asked. I was beginning to believe you would never express interest, but I suppose so much has changed about you.” Her gaze is perceptive. We both know she has seen the darkness within me when I—*when it*—attacked her.

“You want to know what is happening to you?” she asks me.

“I need answers, yes.” I don’t explain what answers I need. I cannot tell her about Savi, about what I have done to her.

Mother reaches a hand for me, letting it hover a few inches away from my chest. Her eyelids flutter, and she takes a hulking breath. “It grows, my boy. Oh, how it grows.”

A frozen chill spreads up my arms. “What grows?” I ask. Something in Mother’s aging eyes suggests she knows more than she’s letting on.

Ignoring my question, she says, “The book will be here this evening. If you want it, you must be here as well. Is that clear?”

“Why tonight? Why can’t you give it to me now?”

Mother sighs. “Because without my coven, we will not be able to retrieve it. I shall call them, but you must also be here. Only then will you get *your* book. Let us help you, my boy. We can fix the pain it is causing you.” She reaches a hand for my shoulder. I hold my breath, trying not to flinch as her fingers grasp my shoulder.

“I do not need your coven’s help. I only need Father’s book.”

Her eyes glitter with pleasure. “No, my boy, it belongs to you now. All the power within its pages is now yours.” She turns her back on me before I can question her more. “I shall alert my coven of tonight’s... *meeting*. Until then, I have prepared breakfast for you. By the looks of it, you need to eat. You are allowing it to weaken you.”

I am left standing in her room, watching her walk away.

Allowing it to weaken me? *She knows!* The way she refers to the dark power suggests it is much more than a magic spell gone awry. She speaks of

it as if it is living.

Before I let panic and fear truly overwhelm myself, I pull out my phone and text Chad. First, I hover over Savi's name, but it's too hard to even consider messaging her right now.

Instead, I send the message to Chad and tell him that I am staying home for the evening so I can get the book from Mother. Pocketing the phone, I go back into my room and close the door. This is the only place I feel truly safe when I'm in this house.

I consider everything Mother said. Why the coven? What do they have to do with the darkness? Again, a vision fills my mind, just like what happened right before we found Savi. This time, I see a symbol—the very symbol Mother's coven wears on their breast pockets.

Soon... the darkness whispers.

I glance at the mirror in my bedroom and see my smiling face staring back at me.

But I was never smiling in the first place.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Savi

THE ROOM IS SILENT AS I CONSIDER HIS QUESTION. I'M SITTING, LEANING against the cold, hard headboard of my bed, listening as the ceiling fan swirls air all around me. Each whoosh of the blades sends me further into my mental, mind-numbing abyss.

Outside, leaves are falling. I watch as they are carried by the wind, and I wish I were them. They're wrinkled, fractured by the world's chaos—just like me. They're broken, hollow, damaged by things beyond their control. *Just like me.*

But they get to fly away, leaving behind all that hurts.

I don't have it so easy.

Flashes of memories—*tragedies*—play on a loop behind my mind's eye. Telling Chad the truth about my experiences will only anger him. Do I want him to look at me and only see what I've endured? I want him to remember me as his fun-loving younger sister, not a tortured vampire.

Can he bear witness to my torment?

More importantly, *should* he? Even I don't want to keep these memories.

I pick at the dried blood that's caked around my nailbed. I know Chad won't let me wash until I've given him *something*. I see it in his eyes. He doesn't want to know what happened to me; he *needs* to know. His urgency is as strong as my desire to shield him from the truth.

But we aren't children anymore. He can't keep me safe from the monsters lurking in the shadows.

"They call themselves *hunters*," I begin. "Never in all of the stories Mother told us about vampires, or the different factions, have I ever heard of such a creature."

I eye Chad curiously. Has he heard of them? As if he can read my mind, he shakes his head.

“They look like humans, but they’re not. It’s a disguise.” I scratch at my palms, looking everywhere except at Chad. “They’re... stronger than any human I’ve ever encountered.”

Chad waits for me to continue. He sits on the opposite side of my bed, one leg anchored beneath him while the other dangles over. His arms are crossed, and his shoulders are squared toward me. I’m thankful for his patience. Confronting what they did to me is making my stomach queasy, and I can’t afford to get sick right now, not after drinking a dozen blood bags.

“I almost escaped the first night. I killed two of them, and their blood was... mesmerizing. They tasted like pure energy. I felt so strong, even though I’d just fought the wolves.”

Chad winces. I picture him remembering that night. The night we fought the wolves, back when they actually wanted me dead. Chad was injured, and George had to bring him home to heal. They were forced to leave me behind.

“Don’t,” I say.

Chad eyes me curiously.

“You didn’t do this to me, Chad. If you and George were there... it could have been worse.”

“You don’t know that.”

“They saw George and me at the cottage. Every day, they would question me about him. They wanted to know who he is, where he lives. They knew he was a supernatural, because he was with me. They wanted to take him too.”

Chad runs a hand through his matted hair as he exhales slowly. I know what he’s thinking. He wants to know what I told them. He wants to know if George is in danger, but he doesn’t want to ask me that. I decide to put his mind at ease.

“They didn’t break me,” I whisper.

He frowns, reaching over to touch me. I wince as his thumb makes contact with the curve of my jawline. “But at what cost?” he asks.

“I would die before I endangered you or George,” I say.

“You almost did.”

“I came close,” I say, nodding. “One night, after a really bad... *questioning*, I could feel myself slipping away. I wanted to be strong for you.” My tears drip in steady streams as I confess my darkest moment. “I

wanted to make you proud and hold on, but the darkness was there and it was warm and soft and the ground of my cage was cold and hard, and I couldn't. I couldn't do it anymore. I couldn't let him hurt me anymore, so when the emptiness came, I wanted it. I wanted to die." I hiccup, crimson tears staining my bed sheets in a bloodbath.

Chad pulls me against him and holds me tightly. He rubs my back, whispering promises he can never keep. He tells me it'll be okay, that I'll make it through this, that he will find the people who did this and make them pay for what they did to me.

"Death was close that night. If it hadn't been for..."

I stop speaking. How much do I want to confess? Do I tell him I drank from Will, the very same hunter who got me into this situation? He investigated his girlfriend's death, discovered my secret, and brought them to me. He watched as they abused me day after day, only choosing to save me when he had no other choice. Do I share the secrets his memories spill?

"If it hadn't been for what?" Chad presses on.

I clear my throat and sit back, pulling away from his embrace. I need to think clearly, and being surrounded by my brother's scent isn't helping the situation.

"If it hadn't been for Will," I say. "The human. He's... a hunter."

Chad's eyes nearly bulge out of his skull as he considers my words. Yes, Will deserves this reaction—and a *whole lot* of pain—but he did save me. He offered me a drink from his own wrist. What other hunter would do that?

"He saved my life, Chad."

"He's probably the one who did this to you!" he shouts, jumping from my bed. He paces my room over and over again until I can't stand it anymore. I imagine a trapped animal locked in a cage at the zoo, and it makes my skin crawl.

"Stop! Sit down. Calm down. Let me explain." I scratch at my skin on my palms, drawing blood. Only then does he relax and return to his seat.

"Every day, they would lock me in a room. This man, a hunter, I guess, would ask me the same question. He wanted George's identity. He promised me he'll end my pain if I just told him who the boy in the woods is. Every day, I refused to answer. Every day, he did the same thing. First, he struck me."

My hand moves to my cheek involuntarily. I know I've had more than enough blood bags to heal my wound there, but somehow, it still hurts. I wonder if that phantom pain will ever cease.

"When I didn't answer, he would walk around me, slowly. Each step dragged on. I think he liked that best. The mental torment. He would unravel a whip he kept hooked to his belt and let the end slap the concrete floor. The sound would echo around the room, bouncing off the walls until all I hear is that noise. It would play in my mind over and over until the only thing that could muffle it is the sound of my own screams. He would lash me over and over again, stopping only to remind me that it would all stop if I just told him George's name."

My insides are burning, like the darkness that creeps there has been set ablaze and all it can do is burn the hollow remnants of my soul. I left pieces of myself behind at that place, and I'm not sure if I can ever become whole again.

"Only when his arm tired would he stop and, goddess, would that take a long time. I think I've counted one hundred lashings on the nights he was really upset with me."

My back aches. The sharp stings of his whip dancing across my skin are gone, but in their wake, they have left behind ghosts. These reminders may not be as forceful as the first time, but they are real, and somehow, I know they will stay with me until the day I die.

"When he was done, he would roll his whip back into a ball and re-strap it to his belt. He refused to clean it, and he liked to remind me of that. He said he's broken many supernaturals with this weapon, and he is confident it too would break me."

I sniffle, wiping my eyes. I don't dare meet Chad's gaze, for I fear the anger and hatred that lives there. I know it is as pure and raw as anything I've ever experienced.

"He would finish by unsheathing his dagger. Just before he plunges it into my heart, he would tell me that tomorrow is a new day. And I always knew what that meant. Every day, I would wake up on the cement floor of the cage they kept me in, and my first thought was never about freedom. It was to wonder what time it was and how long I have before the executioner would come for me."

"The executioner?" Chad asks, his voice almost a whisper. I have heard this tone many times before. He's trying to reel in his emotions, keep a level

head. Often, he'd fail at this.

"That's what we called him. He's the only one I've ever seen torturing and killing supernaturals."

"Is he—"

"I killed him during my escape."

"Good," Chad says plainly.

I nod, and we sit in silence. The sound of footsteps smacking the stairs reaches my ears just as our front door slams shut. Chad and I remain silent, because we both know George was listening from the hallway. I hate that he knows the truth, but like Chad, he needs to hear it, I think. He doesn't *want* to know what happened to me at that place, but he *needs* to know.

"You said you saw him kill other supernaturals?" Chad asks.

"There was a vampire in the cage next to mine. He killed her..."

Chad clenches his fist until his knuckles turn white. "How many are there?"

I shake my head. "I don't know. I wanted to save them. You have to believe me. But I was out of time. If I didn't run, I wouldn't have gotten out." I plea with him even though I know he doesn't care about the others. I'm sure he wishes them well, but his priority has always been me, my life, my safety.

"I know. It's okay. We'll figure this out, Savi."

I smile as he uses my childhood nickname. I welcome the warm, fuzzy feelings it invokes.

"I thought I'd never see you again," he whispers.

I reach over and thread my fingers through his. "I stayed strong for you. I knew you needed me."

"You are strong, Savi. Stronger than you know."

I scoot closer to him until our legs are touching and I can see all the beautiful swirling colors of his crimson irises. He smiles.

"What?" I ask.

"You're still the same Savi I remember, but at the same time, you're not."

I arch a brow. "What does that mean?"

"Your eyes are speckled with gold. Your skin isn't as cool as I remember."

"George... He—"

"He saved you. I know. And it did something."

“It changed me.”

He nods. “Do you know how much?”

I shake my head. “I *feel* different, like on the inside. And other supernaturals are treating me diff...” I stop myself. How much can I admit to him? Can I tell him about the wolves? About the alpha?

“What other supernaturals?”

I huff, exhaling sharply. I may as well be all in at this point. “I only escaped because Will, the hunter, offered me blood. He gave me just enough to strengthen my compulsion. I was able to get out of my cage right before there was a break in.”

“A break in?”

“They kept us in a facility deep within Wolfsbane Forest. Either George and I have walked by it a hundred times without noticing or it’s so far beyond the wolves’ protection—”

“The wolves? Did they break in?”

I swallow hard before nodding. “We fought side by side. I’m not sure I could have gotten out without their help.”

“The alpha, did he—”

“No. He sent others.”

Chad snorts. “Of course he did.”

I don’t elaborate anymore. I don’t tell him I went to the wolves’ village. I don’t admit that I have feelings brewing for the alpha that are forming an undeniable amount of respect for him and all he does for his pack. And I sure as hell don’t show him my scar—the one that’s the aftermath of the wolf’s fangs piercing my skin. But now, as I think about it, it burns. Somehow, I can *always* feel it. The skin whispers to me in ways I don’t understand.

“I should shower,” I say, hoping he’s heard enough.

He doesn’t speak as I retreat to my bathroom. By the time I’ve returned, freshly bathed and newly strengthened as the blood from a dozen bags works its way through my system, he’s still sitting on my bed, head resting in his hands as he stares at his feet. He doesn’t have to tell me about the reel of images that play in his mind. I know he’s envisioning the torture they put me through and how he left me in the woods that night. What he doesn’t believe is that I’d want it no other way. Knowing he was safe was what helped me remain silent every time the executioner’s whip smacked my skin.

I need to distract him, so I blurt out the only thing I can think of that will take his mind off of what I told him. “We should call George.”

He sits back and eyes me cautiously. “He can’t come over. Not until he finds a way to reverse the pain side effect.”

“I just... I want him to know I’m not upset with him for hiding your relationship. I’m happy you for you two. If only I could find someone as amazing.”

He smiles, and it lights up my world. This moment is what I fought for, why I held on when everything around me was crashing down.

“He knows, Savi. He understands that you—”

A sharp sting shoots through my body, permeating from deep within me. The shock waves flutter about, swarming with the dark passenger I keep nestled deep within my core. As I keel over, my cell phone vibrates on my nightstand.

“Savi!” Chad shouts. He’s by my side in a flash, helping me to my feet.

“George... It’s George,” I wheeze.

I stare at my phone. Chad dashes over there, picks up the call, and puts it on speaker phone.

“George? Hello!” Chad says, voice frantic.

We listen to chanting, not understanding the meaning behind their words. By the time we realize we are eavesdropping on a witch’s most intimate of occasions, it is too late.

George’s scream pierces the silence of my bedroom. It is an earth-shattering shutter that penetrates straight to my soul.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

George

I SPENT THE REST OF THE DAY LOCKED WITHIN MY OWN THOUGHTS. It didn't help that the strange presence within me buzzed with a nervous energy from the moment I left Mother until she called me down. This meant only one thing: her coven has finally arrived.

I couldn't eat the meals she prepared because of my nerves. Instead, I slept the day away, choosing that darkness over the one within me.

Before I drifted off, I peered at my phone to see if Chad or Savi messaged me. I did the same when I finally woke, but still, I had no messages. Maybe they didn't want me around anymore. After all, I'm the reason Savi was killed, changed, and taken.

I listen to the chorus of people entering our house. The front door opens and closes so many times I lose count. Beyond my window, I watch the darkening sky give way to the moon. I wasted an entire day in the grasps of sleep, and I wonder what Chad and Savi were doing. Is she healing faster now? Perhaps she'd drank their entire supply and they're out fetching more.

I can make out my faint reflection in the window. The fogginess warps my features. Running a finger down my cheek, I am certain I catch yet another ominous smile.

What are you doing to me? I think.

You mean, what am I doing to us? the darkness responds.

"Georgie!" A sickly sweet voice calls to me from downstairs. It's not Mother, so it must be one of her coven members. "Come and join us, darlin'. We are ready for you."

Yes, join them, Georgie, the darkness hisses.

I hate that nickname. Even though it's been years since I last heard it, I seem to despise it more than I used to. Father gave me the name, and he even used it in his final moments. As he was dying, he tried to speak to me, but he was too weak to say anything beyond *Georgie*.

I shiver, hairs standing on end. I know the coven members wait for me to respond, but words are impossible to grasp. Chad and Savi's faces flicker in my mind. I'm reminded that this is for them. Even if all I can do with this book is take away her pain when I'm near, then this would be worth it. But I pray I learn more. The dark presence alluded that he was within Savi as well. I need to know if that's true.

Dressed in the same clothes I slept in, I leave my room. As I expected, a woman stands at the bottom of the stairs, smiling up at me as I come into view.

"There you are," she purrs, hand on her hip. "We are all waiting for you." Her fake smile does not hide the malice on her tongue.

She is dressed in her cloak, which is traditional coven attire. The cloak itself is a symbol. It's a way of blocking the mundane of a witch's life and solidifying the witch in the mindset of magic for the casting of spells and completion of rituals.

My gaze trails her frame, and my breath catches when I see what she's holding. "Father's book," I say, eyes glued to the worn-bound spine that faces me.

The witch looks at her hands. "Oh, this? Yes, you will have it soon enough. Follow me, Georgie..." She turns her back on me, cloak dusting the flooring.

"Where is Mother?" I call before taking a step toward her. My stomach jolts, so I rest a hand on it to calm the tugging.

The witch doesn't even look over her shoulder when she responds. "She is waiting for you with the others."

This time, her voice is less singsong and more commanding. Even if I want to ignore her, I can't. My legs move, one step at a time, down the stairs to where she waits. Like sheep to a shepherd, I follow her into the living room.

Sage incense waft through the air, clouding my nose and throat. I want to cover my mouth and cough, but I don't. I can't. It stings my eyes and makes them water.

I've never seen so many coven members in such a small room. I take a second to look around, noticing all of the furniture has been removed, leaving the room sparse enough for this many to fit comfortably.

Where is Mother? Better yet, *who* is Mother? Everyone who watches me has her dark cloak hood up, covering her face, just revealing a chin.

Some are men, and some are woman. I can see the difference because of the wiry hair that covers jawlines.

But which is Mother? I want to call out for her, but fear I would sound like a child. And this fear imprisons me.

Do not fear them. We are far more powerful than they will ever become.

The dark voice is louder than ever, bouncing around the candle-lit room in an overwhelming echo. There must be hundreds of candles around. A flickering amber glow dances around the windless room.

Candles cover the carpet, and the melting wax drips onto it. I'm surprised Mother would allow such a mess. Even dark mauve and midnight blue candles clutter the bay window and the mantle above the fireplace.

As I take in my surroundings, my heart begins to sink. This is not a normal coven meeting.

No, it is not.

"You are here for your father's book." Mother's voice greets me from somewhere in the room. The witches part to allow her through. She does not lift her hood as she speaks to me. "As promised, I have brought it here, but first, you must understand the contents."

"What is going on?" I ask, willing Mother to sense my anger and fear as I cut holes into her with my eyes.

Mother removes her hood and turns, blending into a sea of witches.

"Blessed be, Abraxon," a witch says before bowing and giving Mother the book.

Abraxon? I'd never heard that name before, but the darkness's reaction to it scares me. The coven chants in unison. They are one ominous voice of mixed pitches and tones, and the darkness within me moans in response.

Mother tips her head to look at me when she takes the book, and she sucks in a harsh breath as if the book burns under her touch. "This grimoire belonged to your father and his mother and her mother before that. For generations, the Alcott line has written secrets inside these pages for those who harness the bloodline's power. George, this power has been passed down to you. But I warn you just like your father was warned by his mother: this is no ordinary book. The shadows within the pages tell of a new story, a new power that grows stronger with every generation's sacrifice. Are you ready to embrace Abraxon?"

I'm shaking. No matter how hard I fist my hands or bite into my lower lip, I can't cease the tremble that runs through my body.

“George, I need an answer for us to begin,” Mother says.

“Begin what?” I say, hoping my voice shows confidence but failing miserably. I squeak like a child.

“The ritual, my darling son. For you to fully embrace this book’s power, we must complete the ritual.”

I take several steps backward. “Ritual? I didn’t agree to this. I want the book, and you said you would give it to me—”

“And I will. In time. First, you must do this for me, for us. We have all waited for you to come into your power. Do not deprive us any longer.”

Deprive us? Waited for my power?

No, they have waited for me, and now, I have returned.

I step back for the door, but I hear it click shut behind me. I turn frantically to see more coven members cornering me inside the room.

“We are not here to hurt you, Georgie,” one whispers. “Let us help you.”

“No,” I fumble for the handle, trying to push them out of my way. “I don’t want to do this anymore. Let me leave.”

Mother sighs from behind me.

“Believe me, George, I never wanted it to happen this way, but you leave me no choice.”

My heart misses a beat.

“I am afraid we are not going to let you leave, Georgie. You have two choices: either do as we say willingly or by force,” a male witch threatens. He’s blocking me from leaving the room. As he speaks, the flames jump on the many candles. It’s a showcase of his power and control over the fire element.

My tongue swells in my throat, stopping me from arguing, but my hands work. I put my fingers into my pocket and grasp my phone. Like anyone else my age, I do not need to see what I am doing to complete my task. I rely on muscle memory to place the call. Leaving my phone inside my pocket, I pray they’ll answer.

I lift my chin high and pin my shoulders back, hoping to exude strength. “If you know of my power, then you know not to try and stop me from leaving.”

Mother simply raises a hand in response, and the entire room of coven members shift stances. A group raises clawed hands my way.

In seconds, I cannot breath. Air fails to fill my lungs, blocked by the witches control over the element. I try and grasp control on it, to block their attempts, but all I can do is scream as I try to breathe. The darkness spasms inside of me, willing me to let it help, but I'm suffocating. I claw at my throat and drop to my knees, submitting to the many hands that lift me from the floor and carry me into the middle of the room.

Once they release me, I am allowed to breathe again. Although they've granted me air, they've removed my ability to move my body. My limbs completely ignore my orders as the coven's magic holds me down. I am sprawled on the floor, arms and legs pinned wide beneath an invisible force, as if the earth beneath me is tugging me down, clinging to my life's energy.

Mother stands above me, holding the book over my body. Is it my delusion or do I see the book quiver under her touch? On the worn cover, I see a symbol. It's the very same one that is on all of the cloaks. It's the same symbol I've seen over the past few days.

"We call forth Abraxon to command the new host." Mother is screaming. Her voice causes the house to tremble beneath her words.

Agony courses through me. My spine lifts off the floor, bending uncomfortably. I scream, but no sound escapes. No matter how much I try, I cannot move my arms and legs.

"Bless us, great Abraxon, with your presence and power. Fill this vessel to the brim. Live through—"

The darkness swirls around my body like a vicious storm. The more it grows, the more pain I experience. It laughs within me, blocking Mother's words.

But in a single moment, everything stops.

A loud crashing sounds from beyond the room. The second Mother ceases her chant, the pain dwindles. I regain control of my limbs, so I move quickly to push myself up off the ground.

Our front door lies in broken pieces, shattered as it was slammed into a wall across the hall. It nearly landed on the witches standing nearby. I squint through the smoky, sage-filled air to see a figure standing in the now-empty doorway.

Savi.

Her eyes glowing with hues of gold and crimson, she opens her mouth and releases a deafening roar that fills the room with life, power, and formidable strength.

Instinctively, the witches cast their magic toward Savi—*my Savi*. But the darkness inside me is bigger and stronger than ever before. No longer does it remain nestled in my core. It's gained control of my mind.

Unleash, George. Unleash...

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Savi

I CAN'T RUN FAST ENOUGH. EVEN AS TREES AND HOUSES BLUR PAST ME, I know I'm too late, and that dread roots deeply within me.

I will never forgive myself if the hunters have found George.

I chastise myself for not better preparing George and Chad. I didn't want to provide the details of my whereabouts, and now, I've put the only family I have in danger.

"Savi, wait!" Chad calls out, but I don't want to listen. I don't stop until Chad reaches me, yanking me backward by the arm. I nearly slam into him.

"We can't stop! George needs us." I plea with him, begging him to see my way for once in his life. My brother and I have always been close, but our personalities clash in moments like this. I'm reckless by nature. He usually can't see past his reservations.

But we don't have time to stop or think. We must charge, head first, into the abyss and pray we're not too late—for George's sake.

"We need a plan. We can't just rush into a witch's house! Think about what you're doing right now."

We're standing on George's front porch. I've walked past his house many times, but I've never been inside. For some reason, he never wanted to introduce me to his family, and I was okay with that. I could understand family drama better than anyone.

I consider Chad's request. He wants me to think clearly. He wants me not to be rash.

It's as if he doesn't know me at all.

"Fuck this," I growl.

Before Chad realizes I've freed myself from his grip, I'm already facing the front door of George's house. Firmly, I plant my foot against the solid oak, sending it flying through the foyer of the old Victorian manor.

The air is heavy with incense and magic. I feel my skin tingle as I cross the threshold. Silence is in the air as I enter and turn to face the dozen or so

witches who encircle George. A look of horror creases his smooth skin, my best friend stands as I approach them.

With fangs bared, I release a long-buried howl. In the distance, the many wolves of Hillcrest respond to my anger, but I ignore them. My focus is solely on the witches who have already begun to call upon their elements.

“Savi?” George whispers. He tries to take a step toward me, but an older woman pulls him back. I assume she is his mother. She narrows her eyes as I growl in response to her long, boney fingers gripping the flesh of my friend.

Gasps fill the room, breaking my concentration.

“It can’t be,” someone says.

“Impossible!” another shouts.

I offer the other witches little regard. They may be calling upon their elements to protect them from me, but my focus is on George’s mother. She seems the least worried about me breaking in, giving her full attention to George instead of me.

She yanks him toward her, turning him so he faces her completely. She grips his jaw, pulling his face so their gazes meet. I can see the discomfort on George’s face, but he does not cry out. I hear him clench his jaw, teeth grinding as he listens to her.

“What have you done, boy?” his mother says. Her voice is deep, scratchy. Though her displeasure is evident, I don’t worry about the aftermath of her words. I only care about freeing George from her grasp.

Chad steps out of the shadows, hands clenched into white-knuckle fists at his sides. His muscles bulge and strain against the fabric of his t-shirt.

“A vampire!” a witch gasps.

My stomach twists in agony as I take a step closer to the witches, to *George*. I don’t understand the pain I feel when he’s near me, but I can’t worry about that now. I’ll have to push past it to protect my friend, to free him from the witches. If we make it out alive, maybe he can finally give me some answers.

I watch the shock that registers on George’s face. I’m sure a vampire duo busting down the door of a witch’s house is an unwritten no-no rule, but I’m sure George doesn’t expect less of me. He knows I’m reckless, and he knew I’d react this way the moment he called us. It was a cry for help, obviously.

I can't help but be grateful. Though we stand in the crosshairs of powerful, angry witches, I don't see a single hunter. But even though we're safe now, I know we're not safe forever. They may not have found George today, but in time, they'll come for me. And they'll likely find *him*. They'll also find a town full of supernatural creatures, and they'll try to burn it to the ground. If we survive this fight against the witches, I plan to do everything in my power to stop the hunters' operation. No longer will they be allowed to hunt, torture, and kill supernaturals in the name of some divine legacy.

I fully enter the room where the witches stand, and I prepare myself for their attacks. These people are part of a coven—they're probably his mother's coven mates. I know George hasn't joined them, because he often vents to me about his mother's persistence when it comes to that obligation. So I have no intention of hurting them—unless they force me to. I just want to get us out alive and with the book in hand.

I scan the room for it now. The older woman beside him, with wrinkled, pale skin and messy black hair twisted into a frayed bun atop her head, clutches it in her hand. Her dark eyes narrow at me, as if she's daring me to take another step. And I do, because there's nothing she can do to stop me from taking that damn book.

Before I can react to call out a peace offering, Chad charges the room. He dodges several elemental attacks, leaping over fireballs and twisting around hurricane winds aimed directly at him. While these witches may be powerful, they are no match for a vampire's speed.

I know my brother will be fine, so I return my attention to George, who's wrestling the book from the woman's grasp. I run forward just as a fireball is flung toward me. It lands center mass but quickly extinguishes itself. I don't even feel the pain of the flame, and my clothes aren't charred. I shrug, assuming the man is a baby witch. I got lucky. I could have been engulfed in flames and turned to ash before my family's eyes.

I smile as his face betrays his horror. He blinks, and I'm already before him. I strike out, landing a quick smack to his chest. He flies backward, slamming against several other witches who were launching their attacks against my brother. They all tumble to the ground in a messy heap and struggle to stand.

I turn to face George just as the woman who I assume is his mother holding the book smacks him across the face. He stumbles backward, his

shock evident. I'm outraged that she would do that to her own son. Anger boils within me, but before I can react, George stops me dead in my tracks.

He's standing several feet from her now, and he's visibly shaking. He tenses, scowling, and releases a deafening shriek. Throwing his hands out, he unleashes power. I've watched George practice magical spells before, but I've never seen anything like this. The energy released seeps from every surface of his exposed skin, like it's *his* essence that is propelled from his body. It spreads, enveloping the entire room before I can escape. One by one, as the dark mist reaches the witches, they fall, gripping their chests, screaming in agony. Soon, the only ones standing, unharmed, are Chad, George, and me.

Eyes wide, George looks at the mess he's left behind. Gasping, he stares into the foggy darkness, as if he sees something we cannot. Inside me, my own darkness twists, as if it too were begging to be released. I hear the distant sounds of beasts, and I wonder if the wolves are coming to our aid.

"The book!" I shout, and quickly, George snaps it from the ground. He clutches it to his chest and rushes over to me.

"Let's get out of here," Chad calls, already running for the door.

As we emerge from the darkness of the manor with grimoire in hand, I know we are not victorious. The witches will come for us, and we will pay for the magic George used.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

George

EVERY TIME I PEER OVER MY SHOULDER, I SEE THE WINCE OF PAIN ACROSS Savi's determined face. It's dark out, so I can't look for long—not with the threat of tripping over the uneven ground a reality with every footfall.

Still, adrenaline rushes through my veins like an angered river, but the roaring of it racing through my body blends with a new force, a *stronger* force. Even now, I hear the echo of the witches' chant in my mind. Like water to a seed, their words urge the darkness to grow. Instead of being present in only my stomach and mind, it spreads, and I can almost feel it in my arms and legs now. Even my fingers and toes tingle with this unwanted presence.

Abraxon.

Is it a dark power? Or is it something more?

I fear I know the answer even now as we barrel through the streets.

I hug the grimoire to my chest as we run through Hillcrest toward Bane's Forest. It was Savi who shouted our final destination as we left my house, leaving a littering of witches across my living room floor.

With each blink, I see the replay of darkness that seeped from my skin and slammed witches out of my way, and away from my friends. It washed over my living room, painting walls, flooring, and ceiling in blackness.

I remember seeing eyes staring back at me, countless yellow glaring irises hiding within the shadows I released on the room. The beasts within the darkness tore claw and tooth until not a single person was left standing. Then, like the pull of a plug, it rushed back within me. For those elongated moments, I couldn't breathe as the cold breath of power flooded back within me.

I want to forget, but I can't.

The barrier of Bane's Forest is ahead, so close I could reach out and touch it. Once we pass within the shadows of tall pine, I feel safer than

being on the streets of Hillcrest. I am certain it is only a matter of time until the witches regain their composure and come after us.

But for now, the stone cottage should keep us safe. My own protection charm will shield us from their combined searching powers.

And I need the time the cottage provides. I need to search the grimoire for answers to the pain I cause Savi... and more.

Despite the cold chill of night, the grimoire warms my chest. My hands are glued to its leathered, worn face. I will not let go of it for anything.

A blur of fast movement to my left catches my breath and attention.

Savi.

She now leads us. Chad's still beside me, silent as a guarding statue. I worry if he keeps looking behind us with each step we take, he might break his own neck.

I want to call out for Savi to wait, but I know she will meet us at the cottage in her own timing. Instead, I pick up my own speed, ignoring the twisting within my entire body, and don't stop until I see the cottage ahead.

"Get inside," I say to Chad, who has not broken a sweat—unlike me. My legs and lungs ache from the run. "If you leave the perimeter, they can find us."

Chad does not argue with me. He steps across the shattered paneling of the deck and passes Savi, who is sitting with her legs pulled to her chest, eyes pinned toward the sky.

"Are you all right?" Chad asks her.

Savi doesn't look at him as she responds. "Just find out what is wrong with me. Quickly. I feel... different."

She turns her face away from me as I pass. I know it's to mask the agony that pinches her features, but I sense it. There's a pull within me as I pass, like something is reaching for her. Is what the darkness said true? Is it like a magnet pulling for its other part? Did I unknowingly leave a piece of the Abraxon puzzle within Savi that night?

Chad pulls up a chair in the dark cabin. "Here. Sit down."

I thank him with a weak smile, sit, and rest the heavy grimoire on my lap. Chad stands behind me, hand on my shoulder as we look down upon the book.

"Do you think we will find something useful?" I ask him, brushing my hand across the leathered skin of the book.

“After what we have been through just to get our hands on this thing, I certainly hope so. Otherwise, this would have all been for nothing.”

We don’t waste time discussing the repercussions of what is to come. Soon, we will have to leave the cottage, and the witches—Mother’s coven—will find us. And when they do... well, I don’t know what is going to happen.

They may tell Elder Jane, who will tell the council, what we did. Or maybe the coven will just try to complete their ritual. There are too many possibilities that await us, and none of them have a happy ending. The most important thing right now is to focus on helping Savi.

I open the book, and my breath falters, an unnatural reaction. The pages are yellow and brown around the edges but perfectly cream toward the center. The first three are unmarked.

“Do you know what you are looking for?” Chad whispers to me.

I shake my head. “Healing? Resurrection? Anything that explains the power I used on Savi to bring her back.” I couldn’t tell him that I would recognize the page when I found it. It’s the same page I stared at the night I failed to revive Father.

I don’t get even a few pages into the book before Chad’s hand stops me from continuing my search. He presses down on the page, a finger sharp with accusation.

“I know this mark.” Anger coats every syllable he speaks.

“It’s the symbol of Mother’s coven. Surely, you noticed it stitched into their cloaks tonight when—”

“Wait. Stop.”

He tries to silence me with his firm tone, but we don’t have time for this. “What is it?” I ask.

“This symbol... It’s part of your mother’s coven?”

“Well, yes...” I trail off, confused.

Chad walks away from me with heavy feet. I swivel my back on the chair to look at him. His index knuckle is shoved into his mouth, where teeth bite down on his skin. Even his shoulders are high and tense.

“Tell me, Chad. What is this symbol?”

“That symbol...” He shakes his head, as if the words actually hurt him to speak. Face blushed, he is red with frustration. “That symbol was carved into my parents’ skin when they were found. It was on their dead bodies.”

I almost throw the book with disgust across the dark cabin.

“I could never forget that symbol. My parents’ *killers* left that mark—their mark—behind.”

I don’t hear what he says next as he buries his head in his hands and squats to the floor. There is a part of me that wants to drop the book and rush for him, but Savi is close by. She is likely listening in. I’m not ready to remind her that we kept this part of our lives a secret from her.

Instead, I flick the page over, so we’re no longer staring at the symbol. But in doing so, I see something as equally terrifying on the following page.

“Abraxon,” I say aloud, and my body reacts. A sharp pain starts at the base of my feet and floods every cell of my body. For a single, yet seemingly never ending, moment the floor falls from beneath me, and I am covered in darkness. As if I am pulled from the freezing grasp of water, I am suddenly back in this dark, dank room. Chad says my name, but I am too focused on the text to respond to him.

*Abraxon, beast of night and blood,
Flood the host with thy power and lineage. May you forever live and thrive.
King, we are not worthy.
Demon Abraxon, fill our sacrifice.*

My ears ring in the silence.

“George!” Chad says, cutting through it. “Did you find something about Savi?”

“No, sorry.” I shake my head and blink several times to clear the ringing in my mind. “This... This says...”

“Demon? Sacrifice? Who is Abraxon?” Chad reads aloud, his body close to mine. When he speaks the demon’s name, I press my hand to my stomach to still the dark presence’s twisting. I refuse to believe Mother would do this to me, her own son, but I cannot shake the truth.

Abraxon.

That same name.

Their horrible chant.

I’ve heard stories of demon possessions while studying at the Academy, but they were nothing more than tales of terrible power before the council, before the treaty, before the factions formed and agreed to live peacefully.

Turning the page, I find a dark, hand-drawn image that makes me want to cry out. Someone covered two side-by-side pages in black ink, only

leaving color in the form of cream circles in the shape of sharp, angry eyes. I can't deny the similarity of this drawing and what I witnessed at home tonight.

"It can't be..." I mumble, hands shaking as I try to maintain my grasp on the grimoire.

Even Chad is quiet, as if he is finally putting together what he saw at my house and what this image confirms.

"Do you think this is real?" he asks. "A demon possession? I mean, even vampires have our own stories of it. Some believe angels and demons are the true source of our differences from humans. But surely, witches come from angels, and vampires... Do you think this is what happened to you and Savi that night? A possession?"

I ignore his question and focus on the where the two pages connect. Deep red splashes of ink are seeped into the crease. That's the color of Mother's coven. Seeing it against the black ink background, I can't help but notice these shades work together to resemble a face. There are two almond-shaped circles beside each other, and those are surrounded by a circle and then split with an angry X. With a trembling finger, I point to it, guiding Chad's eyes in its direction.

"The symbol for the demon Abraxon," I tell him, although I am sure he's figured that out too.

"Your mother, and her coven, worships a demon, George." Chad is breathless as he speaks. "That has been outlawed ever since the treaty formed."

The night explodes with a scream so loud that we both jump to our feet. The book nearly falls from my tight grasp, but I quickly tuck it safely beneath my jacket. It should be safe there... for now.

By the time we are outside, we see the noise is coming from Savi. Her mouth is open and eyes wide as she locks onto the bright moon that hovers above the cottage. The white light bathes us all where we stand in the small clearing of pines.

Again, Savi screams, but this time it morphs into something else. Something... more. A howl. I heard this very same call after she broke into my home. But this time, it's full of pain, not anger and determination.

Chad and I call her name, but she doesn't look at us. Even when Chad moves closer to her and rests his hands on her shoulders, pleading for her to

respond, she is silent, transfixed but the nightly orb above us, like she is a prisoner to the moon.

This can mean only one thing.

Again, she howls, and my blood curdles thick in my veins. Mixing with her mundane cry is something more. Again a growl that permeates from deep within her.

I can't tell if it's the moon's rays that reflect in her wide eyes, but the golden color of her irises seems brighter than ever before. It almost overwhelms her natural crimson color.

She shivers, and her skin actually ripples like the broken stillness of a lake. She jolts upright, and in the silence of the night, we listen as each bone snaps into its rightful place.

Mother's words echo in the back of my mind.

What have you done, boy?

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Savi

THE MOON CALLS TO ME, AND HER VOICE IS BEAUTIFUL, SOOTHING, UTTERLY encompassing. Never using real words, only her ability to completely transcend my soul by her sheer grace, she begs me to submit to her will. And I would love nothing more than to please her.

No longer sensing Chad or George, I feel her all around me. As the clouds clear, her light shines upon everything, from the packed earth to the yellowed leaves to the bare branches which sway in the breeze. I feel her in everything all at once.

With each breath, she enters me. Slowly, she seeps into my pores, filling each and every empty space that I never realized existed within me. Until this day, I thought I was complete. I thought I was happy, at peace.

But I was wrong.

As she caresses me, whispering to me of untold power, she grants part of herself to me. But something else lingers in the deepness of my essence, and it isn't happy. It wants power, but not her power.

It wants George.

I feel its insatiable hunger for him. Somehow, I know releasing this evil from my mortal coil and allowing it to re-enter George will result in the destruction of so much. The pain I feel whenever George is near is miniscule compared to what the rest of the world will feel if the demon becomes whole.

Abraxon.

The witches spoke of the demon, and I know part of it lingers within me now. Ever since George revived me, offering a piece of his mortality to mend my fractured soul, I felt... different. At times, I felt moody and out of control. I lashed out like a hormonal teenager. Other times, like right now, I felt at peace. These coveted moments have only been brought by the moon—I know that now.

George is walking closer to me. I do not see him, nor do I look in his direction, but I know this to be true.

Because the demon whispers when George is near, and when he's close enough to touch, Abraxon lashes out as it aches to latch onto George once again.

It needs him. I understand that now. It needs to be whole within George so it may take control of George's rare gifts.

But I can't let that happen.

I won't let that happen.

I feel someone's grip tighten around my shoulders, but I cannot look away from the moon. I am transfixed by all that she promises me. I know the others cannot hear her whispers, for they are only for my ears.

The louder Abraxon becomes, the more soothing her voice. There is strength in her words—and only fear in Abraxon's. He worries his control over me is fading.

And he's right.

The moon assures me I will become strong enough to fight the internal battle I'm forced to face until my dying breath, for this was the sacrifice I made to survive the werewolf bite.

"I'm ready," I whisper.

"Savannah!"

Chad's use of my full name shatters my grip, and I lose concentration. He's scared, but he doesn't have to be. I'm under the protection of the moon now.

"Take me," I whisper.

I'm falling to my knees, shrieking until my screams become howls. Though I bark, listening as each and every bone in my body twists and snaps, I feel no pain. Somehow, I know this is because the moon has offered me her strength. She withstands the pain so I do not have to, and her compulsion is stronger than anything I've ever experienced.

Chad and George are scared. I hear it in their screams as I fall onto all fours. I watch, screaming, as my hands turn to paws and my skin shreds. Beneath it lies plush, thick fur that's the color of the midnight sky—so dark in comparison to my pale, pearlescent skin.

Almost as soon as it began, I know it's over. The noise of bones breaking ceases, and I'm left to listen to Chad's cries and shouts.

“Oh my goddess, Savi,” George whispers. His beautiful face is distorted by his shock. He stands beside Chad, both visibly shaking. I don’t know when they distanced themselves from me, but now, they stand so far away I ache to be near them. Only when I want to tell them it’s okay, that I’m okay, do I realize I cannot speak their language in this form, though I understand their words.

I take a cautious step forward, and Chad pulls George behind him, a clear sign of protection. He’s unsure of my restraint. After all, I am fairly reckless in vampire form, and wolves are known for their savageness.

I try to tell them that it’s really me, but my words escape my lips in growls and barks.

“Savi, if you can understand me, stop approaching. We need to know we can trust you,” Chad says. His voice is stern, but I can hear how it hitches. He wants to protect George and himself. He doesn’t want to do that by hurting me, his sister, but he fears he’ll have no choice.

I stop and lower until I’m lying down. I cannot submit to him, but I can assure him that I’m no danger. I whine, lowering my head, praying he’ll understand my meaning.

“I think she’s okay, Chad. Look at her,” George whispers.

I hear them approach. The ground shakes beneath their weight. I focus on it, transfixed by my newfound senses. As a vampire, my senses were powerful, but now that I’m in wolf form, they seem even greater.

I don’t notice how close Chad and George get to me because I’m staring at the soil, watching each speck of dirt. I’m fascinated by it. So much so, when I feel a hand tap my ear, I jerk my head upright. Chad stumbles backward, falling the ground in a heap. Before he can do something he’ll regret, I lean in and swipe my tongue across his jeans leg.

“Fuck,” Chad says, breathless. “My heart is hammering so fast right now.” He rests his hand against his chest, feeling his heartbeat, and George chuckles as he helps him to his feet.

“I told you she wouldn’t hurt us.” George faces me, kneeling in front of me as he smiles. “Savi would never hurt us.”

I nudge my snout into his hand, and he runs his fingers through my coat. He scratches me ear, and it is by far the most pleasurable moment of my entire existence. If this moment ever ends, I’ll be an extremely unhappy vampire-wolf. Vampolf?

As I'm chuckling internally at the word I've just created and taking a mental note to talk to George about it later, the wind shifts. My hair stands at end. The steady beat of a strong heart echoes in my mind. I salivate, allowing the drool to spill over my jaw. It splashes to the ground, and I quickly stand, throwing myself between my family and whatever hides within the shadows.

"What is it, Savi?" George asks. I feel them both beside me. Each time they move, they brush against my fur, sending vibrations that spark, jolting me alert.

I growl, a deep howl escaping my lungs just as the darkness that surrounds us is illuminated by several dozen sets of golden irises. The wolves that patrol these woods are privy to my transition, and I must wonder just what they would do with that information.

One wolf steps forward. Immediately, I recognize him as the alpha, but not because of his features or the way he carries himself, walking toward me with ease and confidence even as I bare my canines. The recognition is instinctual. Something deep within me awakens. Without hesitations, I cease my defensive nature. I calm, watching as he closes the space between us.

Lep volk. I hear the alpha's words, but I don't understand how.

My ear twitches and my heart races in response. I'm embarrassed by the way my body responds to him. It's raw, animalistic. There's a hunger there, a desire... It's so real I can't distinguish if it's truly me who feels this way or if it's some creepy wolf thing.

I hear him laugh. It's full and hearty, though his snout never moves. In my mind, he repeats me.

It most certainly is a wolf thing, my Savi.

It feels as though the world is crashing down all around me. It's hard to breathe, to think. My Savi? A wolf thing? The alpha is all around me. He's in my thoughts, in my gut, in my heart. I don't understand the pull I feel for him.

How have you found us? I think.

You are born from my bloodline, lep volk. I will always find you, he responds.

The wolves howl in response. Apparently, they too are listening, though I focus solely on the alpha. He's invading my mind and personal space. He's close enough to touch, and my limbs burn the closer he becomes. I

ache to submit to him. I can feel it rooted deeply within me. But I'm stubborn and reckless. I refuse to submit.

In time, you will, he replies. His tone is carefree, as if he knows his words to be true.

Suddenly, the events of the last couple weeks weigh heavily on my soul. I don't understand what's going on. That night, George saved me. He used the darkest of magic, which has since clutched onto my essence, refusing to release me. I still feel it lurking within me, but the pain is fading. Surrounded by the strength of the moon, I wonder if I can defeat it.

Not the moon, lep volk. Your strength comes from what you are, the alpha says.

I don't understand what he means. I never felt more powerful than when transfixed by the moon.

No, mali volk. You are only powerful because you have accepted what you are... the alpha counters. The moon guides you, but she does not wield you.

The realization of his words come crashing down on me. If he is right, if George blended the blood of two species, creating a concoction of power by using dark magic that I'm sure has long been forbidden, then I am more powerful than I could possibly even imagine. The evil within me, left behind by George himself, may be strong, but I can defeat it. If the moon does not wield me, then I shall not grant this darkness control either.

I turn my back to the alpha, knowing he has no desire to harm me, and face George. I feel the pull of the darkness like a fire that spreads throughout my body, but in one instant, I blink, forcing it out, muffling the fire so that the pain I feel when George is near becomes nothing but embers in the ashes. Even so, I know I must be careful. This fire has not been smothered. The embers still burn bright red, and I know they are eager to bloom once again.

I feel George reach for me, running his hands through my fur. He smiles as he meets my gaze, and in that moment, I wish I could tell him that everything will be okay, that the pain is gone, and that we will make it through this... together.

But in Hillcrest, moments of peace and clarity are all too quickly extinguished.

"Hybrid."

Her voice pierces the silence of the night, a cutthroat accusation on her lips that penetrates to my gut. Her words lash out at me, fueled by an impossible hatred for everything that I am.

In this moment, I know she will do whatever she must to end me.

It is kill or be killed.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

George

Savi is warm, so warm. I run my hands through her thick, midnight-colored fur, tugging gently as I would a dog. She presses her strong neck into my touch, urging me to carry on. I sigh with relief. *Finally*, I can be close to her again. My presence does not seem to cause her pain while she's in this form.

A low pleased growl escapes from the dark abyss within her throat. I can almost hear her saying my name. I want to throw my arms around her and hold on, uncaring of the many golden irises of the wolves who watch us.

Chad still hangs back, pent up with nervous energy. I look back to him, but his own gaze is glued on the pack of wolves. Does he fear them? My mind and body lack the usual panic I should feel. I don't know if it's Savi's powerful company, but with her by my side, I do not feel threatened.

Werewolf. Savi is a *werewolf*... No, she is more than that. She's part wolf, part vampire. A wolfpire? Is this really real?

Mother's voice echoes from the dark woods and solidifies my thoughts. "*Hybrid*," she hisses.

Our attention snaps to the direction of the ominous voice. Growls erupt from the pack of wolves behind Savi. They sense danger as obvious as smoke in the air. Even the skin of Savi's snout pulls back, flashing moon-white canines. Spit connects her jaws, and her furred lips quiver.

Chad lowers his stance until he is squatting on bent knees. Before I can urge him to run to take cover, the chanting begins. Mother's voice rises above the rest.

"Hybrid! Beast! *Abomination!*"

The moonlight splashes across her face, illuminating her sharp, hollow features. Loose from its bun, her hair is frayed and wiry. I chastise myself for allowing Chad and Savi to leave the safety of the protection circle I cast years ago. Because now, they've found us.

"You've done this, boy, and you alone must correct your mistake." Mother's eyes are on me as she walks closer, not bothering to offer a glance toward Chad or the pack of wolves.

I release my grip on Savi, who is trembling. I can sense her desire to attack as if it were my own.

The coven's chanting grows louder, filling the night with foreign words from a language long forgotten. Even I don't recognize it, but I can tell the darkness within me does. With each word, its power increases. An intense pain cramps my stomach, and I drop to my knees, slamming against the dry forest bed. No matter how loud the growling of the wolves becomes, I still hear the chanting as the witches finish their ritual.

I muster enough energy to cry out a name—the name in Father's grimoire, the name Mother and her coven called out when the ritual began.

"Abraxon!" I cry. My voice is rough but loud enough to get the coven's attention. They each falter enough for Mother to reply.

"Have you read your father's book?" she asks, her smile warping beneath the pale light of the moon. "Do you know what is to come? It is your birthright, boy, passed down by your father."

"*Demon*," I manage to say. "You're allowing a demon to... to possess me."

"Wrong. The demon has always been within you. We are simply finishing what *you* were born with, what *you* started."

I started? Does she mean the power I used to bring Savi back?

"This is not my doing!" I shout.

Another jolt of agony rips through me. His eyes full of concern, Chad looks between Mother and me. I can tell he aches to run to my side, but the threat of the coven is too great. He must focus on the witches and ready himself for their attack.

"Wrong again, my boy. This *is* your doing. Years ago, as your father's body lay cold beneath you, you cast a passing spell, unknowingly beginning the ritual. Your father and I planned your path in this world before you were even born."

Passing spells are common among witches. They are like living wills or letters of the deceased to humans. But instead of willing items, witches pass power, energy.

“No...” I shake my head. That is not the spell I cast. “I was trying to save him! That is what you told me to do.”

“Must I explain that you’re wrong again, George? How blind can one be to the truth? You were preoccupied with grief and panic to see that the spell I asked you to cast was in fact a passing incantation. You allowed the presence that filled your father to fill you. You’re the next generation, so you’re even more powerful than your father was. Look at the proof before us all, and see what Abraxon has allowed you to do.” Mother points at Savi, whose dark pelt stands to attention down her curved spine. “A hybrid! The first of its kind in generations. These beasts were feared and hunted centuries ago, and you have created one with little knowledge or understanding of your true potential. Your father could never *dream* of completing such a feat.”

I did do this.

We did this, the darkness whispers.

Abraxon.

Not darkness.

A demon.

The witches have stopped chanting, so I know the ritual is nearly complete. Thankfully, the pain has stopped, and I can focus on night and how it hums around me. I hear it clearly, like it whispers to me.

I hear the darkness within me sigh as if relieved. *Hello?* I ask, thundering the question around my mind.

Finally, we are one, George.

Panic rises in my chest, the burning thrill flooding my body.

“George, you are whole. Join us now. Let my coven guide you and your new power.” Mother extends a hand for me. The coven follows suit, stepping out of the shadows, and I see they have surrounded us. In a large circle, they extend both arms out beside them. No one noticed—not even Chad or the wolves.

Their dark hoods are raised above their faces, the strange emblem flashing across their breast pockets in a clear threat. This is the same mark Chad claims covered his parents’ dead bodies.

“Murderers!” Chad screams, followed by Savi’s powerful roar that shakes the very trees in the forest. She too must see the symbol. Chad’s fangs lengthen, and Savi snarls, both capturing the coven’s attention.

“George.” Mother ignores Chad and Savi, her voice gentle as she calls for me. “Come, my son. Join us.”

Must we? I ask Abraxon.

I do not like her, it says. *She speaks to you as you are nothing, but we are powerful. We are more than her and this pathetic coven.*

Now that the demon is whole, I can hear its voice as clear as if it stood beside me. It is deep yet soft, dark *and* light, a multitude of pitches and tones that blend together to make one voice.

The demon and I share the same thought. I have the book, which will provide me with answers to my questions, but even though the demon is reluctant to go with Mother, part of me longs to take her hand.

I find my legs moving without permission. Chad hisses my name, but I am moving for Mother. Only when I get two steps before her do I stop. She speaks three words, and my world shatters.

“Kill the hybrid.”

The command is aimed for the coven of witches, not to me. In the breath that follows her command, I sense the elements explode.

I spin on my feet, facing Savi, who cowers briefly, tail hooked beneath her legs as she peers at the coven and waits for their magic.

Wind increases, roaring like a caged animal. Water thickens in the air, pulling from the trees and puddles that cover the forest bed. The very ground shakes, trees dancing and leaves floating from the ground, spinning into a vortex of sharp edges. But it’s the flames that send fear shooting through every limb of my body.

Fire springs to life at the feet of those who command it. In lines of racing heat, they cut across the ground toward Savi with such furious speed that I fear she won’t have a chance to move. Destroying the dry bed of the forest, which only fuels the flames, the fire is nearly upon her.

With a powerful pounce, the alpha is airborne, slamming into Savi’s side until she is thrown out of the way of the flames. In the place she stood moments before, the lines of fire reach each other and explode into a pillar of magic.

What shall we do, George? Watch or end this? Abraxon asks.

End this, I say.

I move forward, hands extended beside me. The elements conjured do not belong to me, but I know I can use them as my own—even fire. *Finally*, I sense fire call to me, begging me to use its strength, but before I can, Mother rips her iron grip around my shoulders and pulls me back. She whispers something into my ear, and my body stiffens.

“Do not be a fool, boy. The hybrid will die tonight.”

Her words have turned my body to stone, so I can do nothing but watch. In seconds the coven’s circle is broken as the witches are forced into battle. Chad and the wolves are surrounding Savi, trying to protect her. Teeth snap out at witches, who rush the group. Some pack members spring and jump atop witches, devouring flesh with their teeth and claws.

Chad moves with speed, his body no more than a blur. Witches fall around him, clutching their throats and chests as he rips his own nails and teeth into them.

Mother pushes me to the floor and throws both arms wide. Wind knocks into the wolves and Chad, sending them flying on all sides. Yelps of the wolves as they smash into trees echo loudly in my mind.

“Silly beast,” Mother screams as she steps face to face with Savi. “As powerful as you are, I cannot have you running around this town. You must die, just as you should have before my fool of a son brought you back.”

Mother keeps one hand out toward Savi, pulsing air atop her to keep her pinned to the ground. She struggles under the weight of the element. Mother pulls an antler-handled athame from her cloak. She strengthens her hold on Savi with each step she takes.

“You’re suffocating her!” I screech.

Like the melting of a candle, Savi’s wolf form slips from her, leaving behind her naked vampire form, weak from magical assault. Curled in on herself, Savi whimpers on the floor as she gasps for air, skin pale beneath the watching moon. Wolves howl as they anticipate what is to follow. Even Chad’s scream rips through the night, but he too falls to his knees as witches steal his breath.

I can help.

Yes! I will Abraxon to do something, anything. *Please, save her.*

I shiver and explode with dark energy. A blanket of darkness fills the small clearing, just as it did back home. The scene before me mirrors the pages in my father’s grimoire. Yellow eyes of the demon fill the blanket of darkness.

Mother screams.

A wolf growls in pure, heated anger.

I cannot see what is happening, not as Abraxon devours light. Now freed from my frozen body, the demon moans with pleasure.

Suddenly, I can move, and I know Mother's spell upon me has broken.

Abraxon recoils, seeping back into my body through my mouth until we can see once again.

Witches run, so the werewolves are no longer held down by their power. Chad stands, hands grasping his throat as he takes hulking breaths. Savi shivers on the ground, but it's what is next to her that pulls a piercing cry from my throat.

The alpha, muzzle stained red, stands above Mother. Her neck is snapped, bone protruding from her aged skin. Her eyes are open, and they're looking right through me. A large pool of blood spills beneath her. It seeps from the puncture marks that scatter across her neck.

Dead.

She is dead.

Killed by the alpha.

The alpha.

Just as the wolves act on instinct, so do I. I throw myself up from the floor, anger and hate focused on the alpha, who licks Mother's blood from his lips. Pure power explodes from my hands. Abraxon does not show itself to me, for I do not need the demon's power to kill the alpha—payment for what he has done.

Fire.

I command the flames, sending a tidal wave of heat toward the wolf. It races across the forest for the beast. Seconds is all it takes.

But my fire never reaches the alpha.

Savi moves fast, standing before him in the blink of an eye. I try to pull back, but it's too late. The fire devours her. Full of horror, I suck in a panicked breath.

My heart seems to stop as I watch the fire lick up Savi's naked body, covering it like a grand dress of orange and red, but when she should cry out in pain, she is silent.

Only when the flames die do I notice the silver shimmer around her body. It keeps the fire inches from her skin.

Magic.

My magical essence surrounds her, protecting her.

A terrible explosion of grief makes me lose control of my legs. On all fours, I cry into the ground, face pressed to the dirt. I cannot focus on any one thing as the pain of Mother's death overwhelms me.

My mother has been murdered, killed by the alpha who chose to protect Savi. I aided this monster, allowing Abraxon to coat the world in black and give the alpha time to move for Mother.

She is dead, and the blood is on my hands just as much as it's on his.

Mother is dead, Father is dead, and I'm all alone—left with nothing but the presence of a demon within my blood.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Savi

I thought I was having a horrible night *before* I was standing nude in front of my brother, best friend, psychotic witches, and pack of wolves. Just when I thought my evening couldn't possibly get any worse, I was surrounded by fire but enveloped in a bright, shimmering light. Thankfully, I didn't feel the heat of the flame or the lick of pain that should have followed.

George once explained elemental magic to me when we were kids. He told me never to tell a soul that he could control all four. All witches could conjure the elements, but most could control only one. He said fire was the strongest yet most vulnerable. It was a witch's best defense against other supernaturals, but that power came at a cost. Unlike air, earth and water, fire has no effect on other witches. It's harmless, he once told me. But for some reason, even when he conjured the others, he never once invoked fire.

At least, not until today. Not until Zane, the alpha wolf, killed his mother. Not until he tried to avenge her death, and I stopped him. Not until he cast the raging flame directly at me.

I'm standing nude in the darkness of night, knowing every single supernatural creature around me has senses heightened enough to see my vulnerability, but I don't care.

I look down and see splashes of crimson coat my bare chest. My tears fall and splatter against my subtle curves like the bottom of a riverbed. And I don't stop them. Instead, I watch as my best friend breaks.

After the death of my parents, I indulged the darkest parts of me. I took my very first human life, and I continued to kill even when Chad begged me to stop. What he didn't understand was that I *couldn't* stop. I *needed* to kill, because it was the only way I felt something.

I always believed the worst part of losing loved ones was selfishness. I wanted them back because I didn't want to feel the pain of loss anymore. Even when death was merciful, by nature, I was still selfish.

But the selfishness of death isn't the worse part.

The worst part of death is the broken, empty, soulless thing we become when we lose someone who was the best part of us.

My parents made me better—a better daughter, sister, friend, and, yes, vampire. When they were alive, I *wanted* to be better, stronger, smarter. The moment they died—in that very second I discovered them—I succumbed to the shell of the girl I once was.

And now, as I watch George, I see him breaking. He's slouched on the ground, having fallen to his knees. Blood coats the charred grass at his feet. His skin is paler than usual, even though I can hear the steady beats of his heart eagerly pumping fresh supplies of blood to limbs. His upper lip is coated in a slick layer of sweat, and his bottom lip trembles. His pupils are dilated, even though the grass surrounding us still burns brightly. His hands are shaking, so he wraps them around himself. He teeters back and forth, and I know he is already on the edge.

All of this takes only seconds, but I am frozen in time. I can't let him break, but I cannot move. I cannot speak. And I certainly cannot beg for forgiveness, because I have stolen the one thing I would have offered my eternal soul to have.

The ability to avenge the death of parents.

A fowl shriek escapes him. The high-pitched screech is riddled with pain and it sinks directly into my heart, like dagger to flesh.

Before him, his mother stares. Her eyes are glossy, her vision ice cold. She does not move, but even in silence, when her soul has left her mortal coil, she holds a presence over George, who cries for her.

We spoke of his mother so few times I don't even know her name. All I really knew about her was that George hated going home at night, and he hated her constant pressure to join a coven, to use his magic and become more powerful.

But in death, we forget the short comings of those we love, and that is what fuels our desire to shut off our emotions, to let go, to break.

The retreating footsteps of the other witches fall silent to my ears as I take another step toward George. I'm cautious. I don't want to upset him, but also, so much has happened...

I discovered the meaning behind his spell. I am an abomination—two supernaturals at once.

I learned to trust my inner strength to defeat the darkness and pain. It sickens me to know that I must test this under these conditions.

George's magic didn't harm me. Though I still don't understand how or why, I fear those answers will only be given with more prices to pay.

Before I'm able to reach George, I feel Chad rush to my side. He pulls off his coat and drapes it over my shoulders. I smile, sliding my arms into the sleeves before fastening the buttons. Somehow, the coat feels... wrong. Something about standing nude beneath the moonlight felt... right. I can only assume this is a side effect of the bite. The wolf in me is eager to run wild and free. She doesn't like to be caged or wrapped up in someone else's modesty.

"George," I whisper as I sink to my knees. I sit on my legs and reach for him. I run my fingertips up and down the length of his arm, but he never moves. It's as if he doesn't even register my presence. And I fear I may already be losing him. "Please, George. Say something."

"Baby?" Chad whispers. He too is crouched beside George. He sits and pulls George toward him. Without much resistance, Chad is able to pull George onto his lap. I watch as my brother soothes my best friend as he cries, screams, and moans in fits of anger, fear, and pain. His voice is often muffled by Chad's t-shirt, but I needn't heightened senses to understand him.

George blames himself for his mother's death, and he's angry with the alpha. I swallow hard and glance back. The wolves have retreated to the woods, but I still feel them. I feel their eyes on me, but this time, it feels different. They watch me not as prey or as another predator, but as one of their own. They watch me out of protection, and I worry this isn't the only behavior change I'll have to get used to.

I scan the tree line until my gaze lands on a familiar set of golden irises. Somehow, I recognize him above all others. There's something in his piercing gaze that sends shockwaves shuddering through my frame. I could chalk up the shiver to being nearly naked, but I know it's a lie. There's something between us. I jumped to protect him without giving second thought to my own safety. I didn't know the fire wouldn't harm me, but more importantly, I would still give my life to protect him. And that is a feeling I am not okay with.

Though I am not in wolf form, I hear him in my mind. The alpha—*my alpha*—tells me to be safe. He calls me his weird pet name before retreating into the darkness. Like the witches, the wolves retreat until Chad, George, and I are once again alone on the forbidden lands of werewolf territory. Though, I guess they are no longer forbidden to me. I shake at the thought.

Chad stands, scooping George in his arms. Before he can take even a single step toward Hillcrest, George is sitting upright, screaming and pounding his fists against Chad's chest.

"We can't leave her!"

I stare at his mother, and her lifeless eyes stare back at me. Even in death, her eyes hate me, calling me the names her lips cannot. Voiceless, she still speaks with such hate. Knowing she has something to do with my parents' death, I would love nothing more than to leave her here to rot. Silently, I wish her to spend an eternity being eaten by the many creatures who call these woods home. But I know I cannot do that to George. He needs me right now, and he needs me to be understanding. In time, Chad and I will learn the truth. We just need to accept that that won't be tonight.

"Savi." Chad's soft voice breaks the staring contest I was having with George's dead mother.

"I can bury her," I say.

"Would you?" George asks. His voice, too, is soft.

I smile as I unbutton Chad's coat and let it fall to the ground in a heap. Chad jerks his head away, clearing his throat.

"Modesty, Savi. Honestly," Chad says.

He doesn't understand why I am unashamed, and what he doesn't realize is that he doesn't understand because he isn't a wolf. The thought aches my heart. When I was just a vampire, I always had him. Chad always understood, always backed up my reckless nature. He defended my careless actions when my parents thought I went too far. But now, I'm alone. No other creature like me exists, so no one will ever truly understand my ways, my feelings, my actions. It's a cross to bear, and I'm not sure I'm strong enough to face it alone.

I morph. Dropping to my knees, my skin tears, turning to fur. My hands extend to paws. My bones snap, transforming into the powerful frame of a wolf. Mere seconds pass between the moment I am vampire to the moment I become beast. It's so quick, I wonder if onlookers would miss my transition in the blink of an eye.

I find a spot beside the brick cottage where George and I used to spend hours playing. It is shaded by an overgrown oak tree, and I thought that to be fitting. After all, George and I would escape all too often to these woods, meeting at Old Oak.

I dig. I fling dirt behind me until I've gone deep enough to bury a body. When I turn to face the others, I see the mound of earth piled high. I pull her toward the hole, dropping her hardening frame into the ground, letting the earth have its way with her betrayal to the many gifts it gave her at birth. I cover her, and when I'm done, I return to vampire form and quickly redress.

During the slow walk back to Hillcrest, I pick at the soil that's embedded beneath my nails, a constant reminder that buried deep beneath the forbidden grounds of Wolfsbane Forest is the very person who knows what happened to my parents the night they died. I worry Chad and I may never learn the truth, and that's a hard pill to swallow.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

George

The house is silent, for the dead cannot make sounds.

Ever since Savi and Chad reluctantly left me at my front porch, I can't help but notice how incredibly still everything is inside.

Although they were persistent, I didn't want my friends to follow me in. Just the thought of being around anyone turns my stomach. They tried to fight my decision, but in the end, they understood.

"What about the front door?" Chad asked, looking down at the shattered bits that remained after Savi kicked it off its hinges.

"I'll enchant it." One simple mumble of words and the ripple of an illusion stood where the door used to be. Anyone passing by wouldn't see the truth.

Grief is heavy, but with the added weight of this insidious silence, it's almost unbearable. Now, I stand in the foyer, looking at the destruction left behind. The door is discarded across the floor in pieces. The wallpaper is scratched and ripped. Dark smudges mark the wood floors.

I take careful steps and look into the living room. It looks as if a storm passed through and devoured every morsel of normality. I don't have enough energy to waste with worrying about cleaning it up—at least, not now.

I explore every room in the house, searching, hoping. Will Mother be waiting with her frowning face and narrow frame? Will she be in the kitchen, cooking supper, or in the basement, torturing a vampire? Will she be asleep in her room?

I know where she is as I pass from room to room. She's in a deep hole within the ground, her cold body covered by soil and darkness. Knowing she's gone leaves me with a strange feeling. They say you don't know what

you have until it's gone, but I never thought that saying would ring true for her. The woman made my life miserable ever since Father died. But here I am, standing in the doorway of her clean, organized room, and I have a hole in my heart, my soul, my life.

Parentless.

No longer am I George *without a father*. I am George *without anyone*.

You have me, Abraxon says.

Relief warms me from deep within my chest. *You won't leave me?* I ask.

Never. We are one now.

I know I should fear his words, but I don't. Nothing can be worse than being alone. Not even sharing a body with a demon I know little about. The demon's presence gives me strength, but even with his power, I couldn't stop the alpha from killing my mother.

You wish to avenge your fallen mother?

The thought of avenging Mother fills me with a rush of adrenaline. It's my right to kill the alpha for what he did. *Life for a life. Blood for blood*. That is what the treaty states. I have the right to collect my blood atonement.

My lips curve into a smile.

But what of the girl? Abraxon asks.

Savi...

Her sire bond will force her to stop you.

Abraxon is right. Savi stepped in front of the fire, blocking the alpha, and instead being hurt by my magic, she felt nothing. It never even touched her, not with the shimmering gleam that surrounded her.

Will you choose vengeance over your friend?

I shrug, almost imaging the darkness in full form, standing in Mother's room. *Savi is my friend, but she cannot stop me from taking what is owed.*



Time is as meaningless as everything else. I find myself waking on Mother's bed, shivering. Morning light streams through the window, highlighting the dancing spectacles of dust in the bright rays. The window is open, and the air is cool, the sky is blue, and not a cloud is in sight. It's beautiful for such a vile day, for today is my first day as an orphan.

Sleep did me well. I feel as though my mind is clear. Thankfully, I didn't dream, so I wasn't haunted by memories.

I sit upright, and Mother's sheets crumple around me. I glance around the room, wondering what to do today. Do I speak with Elder Jane? Did Mother's coven report the attack? If they had, wouldn't someone already be here, insistent on an inquisition?

I trust the coven would not tell a soul. *They* attacked other supernaturals, and *they* completed a demon possession ritual. Both are equally forbidden. If they were to tell the elder what happened, they would be sentenced as harshly as the rest of us. It's only a matter of time before the coven returns for me—unless I find them first.

Of course, the wolves would not speak of this. For beastly creatures, they are the best keepers of secrets. And with Savi now *half*-belonging to them, they won't risk telling the council. They would be forced to kill her, and that would mean the wolves would lose their strongest ally.

So this leaves me to deal with the issue. Soon, the council will wonder why Mother doesn't visit town anymore, and when they cannot find her, they'll want answers. I could lie and tell them she died of natural causes, but I know my expression would give me away. Just the thought of dismissing Mother's death makes me angry. For now, I want to deal with the wolves. The alpha must pay for what he did, and once I've taken care of him, I don't care who knows the truth.

Until then, I should eat, but I'm not hungry. I know I need to maintain my strength, but I don't even have the desire for a drink. I want nothing more than to curl back into a ball and drift off into an empty, dreamless sleep.

I want to see Mother again, but the thought makes me want to scold myself. How can I miss someone who did such awful things? I cannot justify my own feelings, but I accept them for what they are.

Perhaps I can scry and call for her spirit to return for one last conversation. Witches have communicated with the dead before. Only powerful witches can complete such spells, and what's more powerful than an Alcott possessed by a demon?

I spring from Mother's bed with a new mission in mind. Mother's spell books are kept in Father's study, which is behind the crimson door at the end of the corridor on the second floor. I haven't been inside for years, and I've mostly forgotten the room was even part of the house. I know it will be

locked by a spell, but perhaps Mother's death has lifted the spell that keeps it shut.

I run for the room, and when I reach the door, I find it stuck. Slamming my palms into the door's surface, I will it to open, but if Mother's spell still holds, it is the house that must make the decision. I apologize for hitting the wood and ask for entry. For the first time since I came home last night, the house finally makes noise. I wonder if it too grieves her death. Like a sharp intake of breath, the door opens, allowing the strong scent of jasmine and sage to waft into the hallway.

Sometimes, locked doors are meant for more than keeping one out...

I dismiss Abraxon's words. Who knew it was even possible for the demon to feel worry or express words of caution? Perhaps my soul is poisoning it just as it poisons me.

This is not Mother's study. If it were, everything would be clean and organized, but instead, the room is a mess. Books are in piles on the floor, some open and some closed. A desk sits in front of the blue and yellow stained-glass window. It's covered in scrolls and other strange relics. This room definitely belongs to my father. From the smell to the way it looks, this room was his secret escape, his sanctuary.

I take three small steps into the room, and my blood goes cold. Abraxon slithers and coils within me.

I hear the chimes jingle, but there shouldn't be chimes here or anywhere in the house. I know that, because I know what that means. Chimes come from Never, a place where the souls of the supernatural dead are trapped when they have no place to claim as their final resting place. The noise is as much of a welcome as it is a warning. It is a sign that the dead still linger.

"Mother?" I say, wondering if it is her soul that has come to visit me. Did she sense my desire to see her? I didn't even need tools or to chant to summon her? Just my will alone worked?

Beware, Abraxon whispers. Its warning slices through the elating happiness that envelopes me as I consider I might see her again.

The slamming of the door behind me makes me scream, a short burst of terror and surprise. I spin around toward the noise, searching for what caused the door to close. Spirits cannot touch the physical or the living.

I look at the figure leaning against the now-closed door. This person is not Mother. In fact, this person isn't a woman at all. It's a man—tall, dressed in a dark coat with a bowler hat tipped over his head, causing a

shadow to cover his features. Dark smoke slithers from the phantom's frame. He is broad, strong. His lips familiar, his chin pointed and covered in coarse, gray hairs. The ghostly man raises his head slowly, allowing the light from the window to reach his pale face.

"Too long, she kept me prisoner within this room, but you have finally freed me."

"Who are you?" I demand, letting my anger spill into my words. It's hard to focus on the phantom's face. It moves like water rippling after a heavy stone has been thrown, but without a name, I will not be able to see past its spelled layer of protection. Without a name, I will not be able to command it to leave my home.

"Now, now, is that any way to speak to your father?"

The room spins violently. As clear as day, the phantom's façade falters, revealing its *real* form.

"*Father?*" I can barely speak, my voice but a whisper.

"Yes, my lad, it is me. I am back."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Savi

I stare at the dark manor that looms before me. Like my own home, it's one of the many Victorian-style houses that litter the streets of Hillcrest. Like my own, its walls surround a broken family.

"I think we have another problem," Chad says, breaking the silence. Slowly, I turn on my heel.

"We can't worry about me right now," I say.

Chad shakes his head. "Not you. George."

I arch a brow, my interest piqued.

"In order to find you, we had to go to the supreme. I wasn't in the room with George when he spoke to her, but when they were done, she agreed to help find you."

"The supreme? How could you let him go to her? How could you let him go *there*?" The supreme fancies a lifestyle that many vampires wish they could enjoy. She feeds from "blood slaves," as she likes to call them. Taking George there was an awful idea.

"We didn't have another choice. He tried every scrying spell he could think of. He even asked Elder Jane for help. In fact, she's the one who sent him to the supreme."

I groan internally. George isn't familiar with the vampires' world. It's dark and dangerous—nothing like what he's used to. Witches practice magic peacefully, happily enjoying their existence and thanking their goddess for their gifts. Vampires are creatures of the night. As shadow stalkers, they innately crave taking lives. This is why it's so hard to maintain the damn treaty.

"I think he made a deal with her, Savi." I eye him cautiously as he continues, "And not a good one."

I swallow the knot that forms in my throat. My stomach twists at the thought of George aiding the supreme. He has no idea what mess he has gotten himself into with her.

But I intend to get him out of it.



The club's security lets Chad and me pass without any issues, and suddenly, I'm transported in time. The moment I pass the threshold, memories of my darkest days—the ones that followed the loss of my parents—come rushing back. I spent countless days and nights here, relishing in all that vampires can truly be when there's no treaty in place. The supreme welcomed me like I was the daughter she never had. To the other vampires, I was royalty. I hunted and killed without remorse, and I was proud. Now, I'm ashamed of what I let myself become after my parents were killed.

I scan the dance floor, where vampires flutter together like moths to flame. I watch as the many vampires sway their hips to the beat of the music. With eyes closed and lips stained from drinking too much blood, they smile, raising their arms to the ceiling. I shake my head, wondering how some can be so fortunate while others are struggling to survive.

The room is dark, but Chad and I have no issues making our way toward the back of the club, for the darkness is meant to keep away prying eyes which do not belong, like witches or even some humans. Although most know what they're getting into when they enter this particular establishment, some tourists do not. They think it's just a dance club. In a lot of ways, it is, but unfortunately, the entry fee is one's life.

The many seating areas are taken by vampires choosing not to dance. A hearty laugh draws my attention. I witness a human girl straddle a vampire's lap, practically begging him to drink from her. And he does. As a thank you, he compels her to feel an ecstasy far better than any commercial drug could ever offer her. I lick my lips and look away, reminding myself that I'm here to see the supreme, not to fall back into bad habits.

As we make our way past the bar, I notice each stool is taken. There seem to be more vampires lingering in this club than I've ever seen before. I wonder if they're on to us, if they know why we've come to speak with the supreme about George.

We take the steps two at a time, and without knocking, I enter her second-floor office. She grumbles something under her breath about needing better security before our gazes meet. I can't explain the feeling that washes over me. When I was lost, she was there. She became so much more than just a familiar vampire. In the time since, we've slowly grown apart. I no longer needed to escape in this place, and I know that upset her. Even so, I see the flash of happiness that dances in her eyes when she sees it's me who entered her office without permission.

I smile softly. I'm often left awestruck when I look at her. Ethereal and breathtakingly beautiful, she is tall, with long dark hair, milky skin, piercing crimson eyes, and a keen sense to uncover one's darkest secrets. She can either be a powerful ally or a dangerous enemy. If I were smart, I'd keep my distance. But in a long string of stupid mistakes, I never listen to my gut.

"*Savannah*, it's so good to see you," she says. Her voice is smooth, and she pulls me into a hug. Quickly, she pulls away, holding me at an arm's length. Her nose crinkles as she stares down at me. "My goodness, child, you smell like a wet dog. Haven't you bathed since you returned home?"

I smile, chuckling awkwardly as I free myself from her grasp. I take several steps back, feeling vulnerable under her glare, and cross my arms over my chest. Silently, I pray she cannot see the differences—my eyes, my complexion, my temperature... There are so many now. I'm not sure how I'll be able to keep this secret.

"I'm delighted you've been returned home. I trust Zane was a gentleman," she continues. Her casual use of the alpha's name sparks unwanted jealousy. How does she know him? She's always been known for her connections, but could her relationship with Zane be more than that?

"I wanted to talk about the agreement you made with George," I say confidently. If she could read my mind, she'd know I don't actually know anything. Maybe there isn't an agreement in place, but if history proves right, then she'll believe my bluff.

"The witch?" she asks.

"Yes. The witch," Chad intervenes. He stands beside me, towering over my small frame. His arms dangle at his sides, hands clenched.

I reach over and clasp my hand around his balled fist. I rub my thumb against his skin, and he loosens his grip. I need him to relax. If she senses we're hiding something, she'll pry until we squeal. And goddess knows what she'll ask when she holds my secret over us.

She *tsks* Chad with her index finger. "Don't speak out of turn, boy." Again, he's iron-fisted. I groan internally as I consider my losing battle.

"I'd like you to reconsider the agreement. Relieve him of his obligation to you," I say.

"No. Certainly not." She speaks quickly, not even considering my request. "The witch and I made a verbal agreement. I upheld my promise by sending Zane to find you. Must I remind you that our word is binding? I expect the witch to keep his promise as well."

"You and I both know you would have sent Zane to find me even without a promise from George. Our family ties go back generations. You owe my mother this, Ophelia." I use her name, refusing to call her by her title. I know this will upset her, but she will not show it. This is a business meeting, and in such a setting, the supreme must be proper. Even so, she narrows her eyes.

"Remember your place, young Savannah. Returning you to your brother is more than enough to relieve me of my debt to your family."

"You won't even consider my request?" I ask, resorting to begging. I'm not too desperate to offer her a final plea. "What if I am indebted to you instead? I give you my word. Relinquish George."

"Your word is no good to me. I need a witch. Besides, I have my pick of vampires just outside my office door." She smiles.

"You *need* a witch? What have you planned for him?" I question.

"I've heard the whispers that have befallen our great town just as I'm sure you have. Humans have come to investigate the disappearance of college students. With humans lurking in the shadows, one cannot have too many friends."

"By 'friends,' you mean those indebted to you," Chad says, using air quotation marks for emphasis.

"I will not discuss this again. Leave me," she says, waving us off with her hand. As if we've already left, she returns to her paperwork, paying us no attention as we slowly retreat.

The night air feels different as it caresses my skin. No longer soothing, it brushes against me harshly, as if in warning. The door to the club slams shut behind us, and I scan the street, feeling oddly on edge.

Chad is speaking, but I can't understand his words. My heart is hammering in my chest so loudly I'm sure the group I stare at can even hear it across the street. My hands, now clammy, shake at my sides. I can't

breathe, and with each gulp of air I inhale, my lungs burn. I feel rooted to the cement yet so light I could float away. I almost wish I really could.

I remember the supreme's words of warning. Humans are coming to town, and they plan to investigate the disappearance of college students. I know she's referring to the bonfire massacre—the very same one George and I are witnesses to. Save for Will, we are the sole survivors.

In the distance, I watch Elder Jane speak to the intruders. She welcomes them, assuring them that her department is doing all they can to investigate the disappearances. In her capacity as our town's "police chief," she's doing her job. She pretends Hillcrest is just like any other town.

But it's not. It's a town for supernaturals, and she's just offered free reign in her investigation to the very people she need fear.

Because these visitors aren't human.

As I stare into the familiar eyes of my greatest enemies, I see these intruders for what they really are.

Hunters.

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