

CRIMSON BITE



HILLCREST
SUPERNATURALS

1

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
DANIELLE ROSE
&
BEN ALDERSON

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HILLCREST SUPERNATURALS, #1

DANIELLE ROSE
&
BEN ALDERSON



OFTOMES PUBLISHING
UNITED KINGDOM

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ASIN: B07HPCW91K

Cover design by Covers by Christian
Editing by Narrative Ink Editing LLC
Book design by [Red Umbrella Graphic Designs](#)

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CHAPTER ONE

Savi

I FEEL HER PRESENCE BEFORE I KNOW SHE'S THERE. SOMETHING INSIDE OF me... sparks. The fire ignites, my hair stands on end, and a shiver tingles in the deepest parts of me.

The clichés are real. And sadly, for *her*, so are vampires.

My pulse races at the thought of her. She's close. Too close. In the distance, I see her now. She doesn't know I'm watching her, waiting, hiding in the shadows, hungry for my escape.

I blink, and suddenly, I'm behind her, closing the distance. The space feels oddly intimate. That's the worst part: the intimacy. The connection. The quiver within me begs to be sated. I don't want to feel this way. Not for her. Not for any of them. But I can't help it. I just *do*.

Soon, my feelings won't matter. They'll fade away as the blood—*her blood*—consumes me. Spilling like milk over tile on a broken kitchen floor, it will reach every inch of me, covering every crevice of my mortal coil. I crave to bathe in it, to become anew again.

I crave her in ways I could never explain. My need controls me... and I let it. In fact, I like it. I like succumbing to its will. In these moments, nothing is complicated. The chaotic world I live in is but a distant memory. There's only me, only them.

I watch her as she tosses a glance over her shoulder. She doesn't see me. They never do. I melt into the shadows like a true night stalker. I see her face. Her unrecognizable characteristics intrigue me. Who is she? Why is she here? Locals know to steer clear of these woods, for they are controlled by the wolves. I dare fate, tempting her as I walk the forbidden paths of overgrown brush. The treaty says my people aren't welcome here. But I see no one around to keep me away. This girl, one of the many tourists drawn to the small, picturesque town of Hillcrest, must be lost.

Her pulse quickens, her breath coming in quick bursts that only further excite me. Her hair clings to the back of her neck, and I reach to brush it

away. Her neck is exposed to me. Her skin is pale and soft and smooth. My mouth waters.

I gnaw on my lower lip, offering only enough pressure to hold me in this moment. I fear I may become so high off the scent of her natural musk I'll float away. Fighting the urge to twirl the loose strands of damp hair around my finger, I linger on the back of her neck a moment too long, and she turns abruptly.

But I'm already gone, hiding behind a nearby tree.

She twists, her legs giving way as she tumbles to the ground. I leap for her, wrapping my fingers around her wrist, and I pull her into my arms. She shuffles between her feet, regaining her composure.

She thanks me, mentioning the seclusion of the forest. She thought she was alone.

I see it in her eyes. Her gratefulness turns to shock and then fear. Only then does she realize I haven't yet released her from my grasp. I need not be a mind reader. I've met many victims this way. They all scream the same pleas. But my desire is far too loud, muffling any chance they have at reasoning with me.

Her gaze meets my own, and she falters. A gasp escapes her as she takes me in. I may have average looks, but my red irises convince even the most diligent skeptics that I'm a vampire. I indulge in the look of horror that creases their tight, smooth skin.

In these moments, when the hunger controls me, I'm a monster.

"Shh. Don't speak. Don't scream," I say.

She whimpers, tears threatening to spill. Humans invoke such strong emotions so quickly. Her heart slams against her rib cage with such force it nearly catapults into my eager fangs. She shakes, the autumn chill kissing her exposed skin.

"Calm down."

I offer the order in a whisper, and visibly, she calms before me. Nearly sinking in my arms, she smiles. I trace the curve of her neck with my finger, and she leans against my hand.

"It won't hurt," I promise. It's a lie. It does hurt, but she'll never feel the pain. Not now. Not anymore. I run my tongue against my lips, scrapping the twin points of my fangs.

She smiles and says, "No, it won't hurt."

Maintaining my compulsion took actual effort tonight. I couldn't skip feedings or wait as long as I had anymore. I need to feed regularly, like the others did, even if that risks exposure, even if that risks upsetting *him*. George. My best friend since I was old enough to walk. I hate hiding this part of myself from him, but I can't bear to show him the monster within.

I lean against her as a growl erupts from within me. The noise, deafening in the silence of the night, sounds as though it should come from a rabid beast, not me. I sink my fangs into her skin and relish in the taste of her warm, liquid embrace. She moans against me until falling limp in my arms. I consume everything she has to offer. I know I should stop, should let her live. But my monster knows no reasoning.

Bits and pieces of her life flash behind my closed eyes. Her memories, once alive in her blood, now live within me, showcasing the pain of human mortality. I see her with a boy. They embrace. He kisses her, running a hand through her hair. They pull away, frantic. She tells him of a party deep within a hidden forest. *This forest*. It worries him. He doesn't want her to go, but she insists. He won't let her go alone.

As her last breath echoes in my ear, I think only about the poetic beats of her stilling heart.



I watch the sun wish the moon goodbye as the day breaks. The shadows enveloping my world dissipate as the light kisses my skin. I struggle to welcome it. Being born and not bitten grants me many pleasantries, like being a day-walker and using compulsion. Even though I know I'm blessed, I embrace the dark. Vampires were made to stalk as night-walkers. I can't deny the way the moon speaks to me.

I think about the girl as I walk home. Her memory of a party in the woods nags at me. I know the area she spoke of. A tiny cliff, a secret spot, shielded by Wolfsbane Forest on one side and drenched in the fishy sea air of Raven Cry Lake on the other. Protected by the wolves, it's a hidden oasis.

I glance up, shielding my eyes from the sun. My vampire senses are heightened, and though the sun's light stings, it does not hide what I seek. Invisible during the daylight hours to weaker eyes, the moon shines above me, beckoning, promising more midnight misadventures.

If my new-found memories are true, the party is tonight—as is the full moon. When darkness falls, Wolfsbane Forest will be crawling with hungry, undisciplined werewolves. Those bitten, not born, can't control their change—or the inevitable ravage nature that follows. The elder wolves maintain order, making assurances to locals that the wolves will only hunt in the woods. *Stay in. Stay safe.* But what of tourists? What of horny, thirsty college students from the next town over? Stealing a soul here and there is something I can justify. Killing dozens for sport is just plain cruel.

As I take the last few steps home, I think about George. He's likely slowly waking now, the sunlight hot on his tan skin. Unlike me, he relishes in the daylight. Sometimes, we're so different I wonder what he sees in me. In him, I see the boy who became my very best friend when I had no one else. He saw something in me I have yet to see: innocence. He never sees the monster, and I work hard every day to be the hero in that narrative.

The cream-colored concrete steps to my family's Victorian manor are glaring at me, and all I can think is, *they know*. They know I've broken the one rule enforced by Hillcrest's council: don't kill. It seems simple, but any vampire would scoff at that thought. There's nothing *simple* about encaging a predator. I feel like a lion in a protected nature preserve. Sure, I'm *free*, but the tracer embedded under my skin keeps track of my every move. That's not really *freedom*, is it?

I slip inside the front door and speed-walk to my room. I can still catch a few hours of sleep before my brother notices I went missing. I make it down the foyer, through the sitting room, and up the first three stairs, thinking I'm definitely in the clear.

"Savannah?"

I curse internally. Spinning on my heel, I face my intruder. "Morning, Chad."

"Have you only just gotten in?" He frowns and glances at the antique Grandfather clock our grandmother bought decades before we were born.

I don't answer since it doesn't seem like a literal question.

He crosses his arms over his chest, the sleeves of his shirt straining around his arms. I inherited my many wonderful traits from our recently departed mother—like my dark brown hair, my small frame, and my feisty attitude.

"Just what were you doing out this late?" he asks.

I shrug. Why answer? I mean, what can he really do? I've reached that golden age where living at home is semi-embarrassing. High school is over. College is months away. We're orphans living in a manor passed down to us by generations of Danvers vampires. Our ancestors insisted we never move from our family home, so we're stuck here... together.

He steps forward, his bright red gaze scanning my frame. He wants me to falter, but the blood coursing through my veins is tainted with the personality of an outcast girl whose only care in the world was her sexy boyfriend and college frat parties.

He will find no weakness today.

Closing his eyes, he inhales deeply, and I feel my chest clench. His eyelids dart open, and his narrowed gaze zones in on... me. He closes the space between us. His voice a whisper, he says, "You've fed? Where? Who? When?"

I exhale slowly and shrug. "I had to. I skipped my last feeding."

"You *what*? Why would you even take that risk?"

"It's really not a big deal. She wasn't a local."

"Are you sure?"

I nod.

"You compelled her?"

Again, I nod. Must we ask mindless questions, dear brother?

"Did anyone see you?"

"Clearly not..."

He exhales sharply as he leans against the banister. "Is she okay?"

I swallow the knot that forms and nod. "She's fine."

I lied, but he left me with no other choice. If I admit my indulgence, he'd be forced to report me to the council, and they don't take kindly to vampires killing humans. Feeding from and compelling tourists is one thing. Preferring blood bags, they don't approve of it, but I don't think they'd require my life if they found out I occasionally indulge myself. But murdering humans has never been allowed. At least, not since the factions created our treaty, the simple piece of paper detailing the dos and don'ts of Hillcrest supernaturals.

He arches a brow. I can see that he's unconvinced, but I'm not in the mood. I'm exhausted, oddly aroused every time a new memory of my victim's boyfriend surfaces, and a bit annoyed that my own brother doesn't trust me enough to keep myself out of any real trouble. Obviously, I

wouldn't kill a local, and I'm smart enough to cover my tracks. By the time the tourist's body is found, it will be mauled by the wolves during the full moon. This is arguably the best time to break the treaty.

As I stomp up the stairs and lock my bedroom door, I hear his complaints, but with each step I take, his voice becomes increasingly muffled. I'm too tired to play the doting younger sister. Still annoyed, I pull out my cell phone and send George a good morning text.

You free tonight? I ask.

Is that even a question?! What do you have in mind? he replies.

It's a surprise. Meet me by Old Oak at sunset.

I plug in my phone to charge, fall into bed, and let thoughts of full moon parties and sexy dark-skinned college boys drift me to sleep.

CHAPTER TWO

George

HE IS TIED TO THE CHAIR BEFORE ME, HEAD BOWED TO HIS CHEST. FROM the moment Mother walked me into the closed-off room in the basement of our home, I knew he was one of the *freshly made*, newly turned. A light sheen of sweat coats his pearlescent skin, which is so ivory his veins stand out proudly—blues and reds filled with pointless blood of a victim he had fed on. His hands shake as he grips onto the edge of the old oak chair, and the smell of death hangs heavily in the air each time he opens his panting mouth.

Mother shuts the door behind us, locking it from the inside. The turn of the latch makes me jump. I used to wonder why she locked us in when there was no one else in the house who would ever stumble down here. This has always been our secret, one not even her coven knew about. Since Dad died, her secrets only intensified. They drove her into a strange sense of hate and madness that frightened me. Currently, that hate is pinpointed on the creature in the chair.

“Begin,” she tells me from the shadows of the room.

I step forward slowly and take a breath that seems to last a millennium. Breathing always helps me connect to that hidden part of me—the earthly part of my soul which links me to my abilities. It clears my mind, sharpens my senses, and wakes my will. These are key components to what inevitably comes next.

Lightning spreads through my muscles, bones, and blood. If I had a mirror, I would see the emerald glow within my eyes. It is subtle enough that the mundane of Hillcrest would not notice a difference, but to my people, it is a sign of my rank, my bloodline.

“Name,” I command, raising a hand toward the slumped figure. The air in the room is suddenly thick, enough for me to bend it to my will. The force pushes at the sharp chin of the man before me until he is forced to look back at me. He is young. His eyes are blood red, so deep and rich in

color that I'm lost in them for a moment. Another face is conjured in my mind, but I push down the memory with vigor. I won't let myself think of *her* when I do this. Savi could never know what happens here.

"What a pretty boy. If you wanted to tie me up, you should have simply asked."

"Name," I repeat. Mother will scold me for entertaining the turned. Getting the information I need is most important; I cannot allow for idle chatter.

"I know why you ask for it, *witch*."

"Name."

Many weeks have passed since the last time Mother made me do this. My tactics are rusty and weak. It doesn't help that I don't see the point, nor do I enjoy when Mother requests this of me. But I can never turn her down, not after what happened to Dad. It is hard to refuse anything she asks of me. Having me as a puppet seems to help her cope with Father's absence. No matter how warped that seems to me in the quiet of my mind. Regardless, she is my mother. I owe her this as her son—or, at least, that is what she tells me.

"I can smell your blood, so rich and delicious. Can I... May I," the turned licks his lips, running his already blood-stained tongue across the two points that extend over his bottom lip. "Then I will give you my name. I promise."

"Enough. Provide me his name, George," Mother chimes in from behind me, her calm voice putting me more on edge than the threat of being fed from by the creature before me. I know what she wishes me to do.

I turn to the small, covered window which crests the wall behind the turned. A single look is all it takes for the blinds to start recoiling up. As it does, the morning sun begins to burst through, sliding across the floor toward the turned's feet.

"Name," I say again, keeping my voice as stern as Mother's would be.

The turned is now transfixed by the sun which creeps toward him. He tilts his head like a new puppy that had never seen wondrous light before. I add it to a mental list of proof that he is in fact one of the turned. Only born vampires, like Savi, can walk in the blessed sun. Those bitten lose that privilege the moment they become the monster, the predator.

Not all vampires are like that. Savi isn't. She is good. I'd know. I've been around her for as long as I can remember. The treaty stops vampires

from feeding on humans—something Savi and her brother follow honestly. Whereas those turned do not have sense of what is right and wrong. Before Mother brought me down this morning, she told me of the crimes the vampire before me committed. He fed, killed. And to kill means you too can die. It is the only way Mother and I would get away with this if anyone found out.

As the sunlight begins to creep over the vampire's boots, he squirms, snapping out of his trance and focusing on the pain the sun causes him. I will the blinds to cease opening for only a moment. Already, smoke seeps from his boots. The room is silent save for the sizzling of his skin.

"Name, or I will keep the light moving across you until you combust entirely."

The threat leaves a bad taste in my mouth. It makes my skin crawl as I say it to him. Mother seems delighted as she sighs from behind me. I hear her rub her hands together with glee. I can practically taste her excitement.

"No—" he says, so I allow the blinds to continue opening.

"Marcus. My name is Marcus."

I flick my wrist, and the blinds fall back down, fully covering the morning sun and bathing the room in darkness.

"Now, that was not so hard, Marcus."

"Shut up." Flecks of Marcus's spit fly across the room. "What do you want from me?"

He is panicking now. Vampires may be undead, but they value their lives. They always tell their secrets in the end.

"You have been caught feeding on Hillcrest's land, which violates the treaty put forth by our ancestors. Do you understand what your actions mean?"

"I follow no rules," he shouts at me. Smoke slithers into the air from where the morning sun touched him. "I bend them, break them. That is what *I* do."

Marcus begins to laugh so wildly the hairs on my arms stand on end. Is it the pain of the sunlight's kiss or his deep panic that causes such a deranged reaction?

"You may not follow the rules, but we do. We make them, we enforce them, and we ensure they are followed," Mother says, and I glance back. Her face is covered by the darkness. Her long mane of honey-colored hair is all I can see as she speaks. "George, do it. I have heard enough."

“Wait!” Marcus struggles to free himself from the chair. The veins in his neck bulge with tension, because he knows what is coming. It’s Mother’s favorite part. And my least.

I spin toward her, refusal on the tip of my tongue, but a single look from her stifles my cries.

“He must be cleansed for his actions. Clean him with fire, George. Do not make me ask again.”

Looking back at Marcus, I finally see a shred of the boy he would have been before he became one of the turned. He could have been innocent. I wonder if he chose this life.

Tears of blood cut down his sharply angled cheeks, dripping onto the cement floor. My stomach turns, but not from sickness. I have only seen a vampire cry once before. Savi’s blood tears stained the shoulder of my jumper as she released her pain after her parents died.

Now, Marcus’s tears invoke the same emotions I felt during those dark times. Vampires cry blood. It is a reminder that they, unlike other supernaturals, are unliving. Thriving only on the blood of the victim from which they feed. A vampire who cries is showing great weakness, yet it is I who feels weak. My hands are shaking as I lift my palms to face Marcus.

Fire. The hardest element for me to tether and control. I don’t understand why Mother asks me to do this when she knows I lack confidence in this power. Maybe she enjoys seeing me struggle. I wouldn’t put it past her.

The only way for me to call upon fire is to do it like I did in a failed attempt long ago. Even now, as I glance at my palm, I see the sliver of a scar across my soft skin.

Blood. It’s the key to power. One drop, and I can call upon my magic. Is this what Mother wants? To turn me into *him*? To force my hand? To become a killer?

No. I can’t risk using it, not after what happened to *him*. Not after my great failure.

Closing my eyes, I try to breathe, but my throat is closing on me. I feel the familiar warmth of magic in my blood, flooding my veins and tingling my skin. But my fear of the element always stops it from going any further. Air, earth, and water are part of me. Elements that happily follow my control. But fire hates me as much as I hate it.

“Pathetic,” I hear Mother say from behind me.

The moment I process her words, I hear him. His screams make me shy away. Heat billows ahead of me, bright orange and yellow, as Mother's conjured fire devours the vampire. He withers within the dancing flames, his skin melting and bones disintegrating.

Witch fire is powerful enough to kill vampires and werewolves, but it is harmless against other witches. It was my ancestor's warped way of turning a witch's weakness into her strength. So many souls had been killed by fire for possessing magic before the treaty. Fire was used to eliminate witches. Now, we control it. Except, I don't. The scar on my chest tingles as I shy away from Mother's flame. I know it cannot hurt me, but it is all too real. I rub a hand over my shirt, massaging the scar. It is a reminder of everything I lost all those years ago.

If Mother had not secured our home with sound charms, the families living within the Victorian-style homes lining our street would have heard the vampire's screams. But that was part of our legacy. Only we were forced to listen to the cries of each vampire who entered our home.

Mother's features were highlighted by her fire. Her green eyes, like mine, glowed with the presence of her magic. Her pointed, sloped nose and plump lips were creased by her smile. The only difference was our skin tone. She was pale with rosy cheeks and clear skin. The only two things I inherited from Father were my tan skin and the strange power I kept tucked within me.

Once Marcus's screams are silenced by the fire, Mother retracts her palm into a fist, and the flames recede. All that is left are the charred marks across the floor and wall. The chair remains untouched because of yet another charm Mother had placed in this room.

"That went on longer than I hoped. We should see to breakfast."

I stand, shell shocked, unsure how she can so easily disregard what just happened. "I'm not hungry."

The smell of burning flesh is inescapable, making me feel like I will vomit across the charred floor at any moment.

"Oh, come on, George. You need to eat."

"I will get something on the way out," I say, moving for the door before she can stop me.

"Wait." She grabs my upper arm, nails pinching my skin beneath the material of my long-sleeved black top. "You know we had to do this. We

must keep these beasts in line and carry on what your father started. It is our legacy.”

“Legacy, Mom? Really? To murder and kill?”

“We do only what we are forced to do. That is what the treaty states.”

I pull myself from her grasp and throw open the door. “I won’t be in tonight. Don’t cook for me.”

I don’t let her reply. I barrel up the staircase, jumping over the second step as I always do, and run for my room. Shutting the door, I whisper a minor locking spell to stop Mother from following me. Not that she would dare. She never comes up here to see me.

My clothes were clean this morning, but I shower again and put on a fresh set. I can’t let anyone else know what happened, which would be troubling, because my paranoia is on level one hundred.

I check my phone to see Savi’s reply for a text I sent her before Mother called me down.

It's a surprise. Meet me by Old Oak at sunset.

Sunset can’t come soon enough. I check the time on my phone and see that I am going to be late for the Academy. Even if Mother tries to force food into me, I will decline. Sweeping my bag from my bed, I leave my room, breaking the locking charm and thinking about tonight over and over again.

I need time away from Mother and the unrealistic pressure she puts upon me to be like Dad.

Truth is, he was the last person I would want to become. If I thought Mother was bad now, she was nothing compared to *him*.

CHAPTER THREE

Savi

I STARE AT MY REFLECTION IN THE MIRROR, AND I SEE *HER*. HER BABY BLUE eyes, dirty blonde hair, and tan skin. Our differences mock me. Her eyes are sad, accusatory. They ask me why I killed her. I look away, unable to answer their silent question.

I shake away the feeling that her spirit is here, watching me. The after effects of fresh human blood is ecstatic, but when the ecstasy wanes, I'm left with only remorse.

I close my eyes, and suddenly, I'm in her life. Her memories envelop me in an uncomfortable bliss. The worst part of hunting is the erotic connection. The worst part of killing is reliving my victim's memories. Over time, they'll fade. I'll barely remember her face. Her memories will become a muddled mess in the pool of lives I've stolen over the course of my life.

I don't want to kill, but the hunger tempts even the strongest of hearts. To be honest, I'm not sure how the earliest settling vampires of Hillcrest convinced their witch brethren to enact a treaty. How could anyone believe a vampire, rather than the hunger, was in control in those crucial moments fang met skin? The second blood hits my tongue, I'm no longer in control. It takes everything I have to stop feeding.

I stride toward my bedroom window. In the distance, the sun is setting. I inhale deeply, letting the cool air of autumn nestle deep within me. I love this season. I love the crunch of dying leaves under my feet. I love the crisp breeze that tickles the back of my neck, an odd sensation for a vampire. I love escaping to the orange, yellow, and red speckled forest bordering our sleepy town, where George and I have spent countless days dreaming of easier lives. We never talk about the chaos. It's our number one rule. Our friendship is an escape, and it has never bothered us that we turn heads in town. Even with the treaty, supernaturals still very much live separate lives. I guess George and I are rebels at heart.

I glance at the clock on my bedside table. I've managed to sleep through the day—a rarity for me. Vampires don't need much sleep, but after this morning's inquisition, I am not in the mood to lounge around the garden until it is time to meet George.

Sliding my phone into my back pocket, I exit my room. I tiptoe through the hallway that connects my room to the manor's other bedrooms. I'm able to make it to the stairs without the heels of my boots smacking the hardwood floors. I dash down the stairs before I realize all this stress was avoidable; I could have just leaped from my bedroom window and hid among the overgrown brush in our side garden. He never would have looked for me there.

Standing between me and my way out of this house is Chad, arms crossed, lips pursed, tiny vein in his forehead protruding like it always does when he's annoyed or angry. I've seen this very same glare dozens of times before. I roll my eyes as I make my way toward him.

"Don't be so dramatic. I'm going out with George."

He arches a brow as if interested. "Where?"

I shrug and try to push past him, but it's no use. His frame is solid, and if I slam my hand against his chest, sending him crashing through the front double doors, he'd probably make a pretty good argument for canceling my plans. So I rein in my emotional mess and hear him out.

"Savi," he says. His voice is soft, and it pulls at my heart strings. Before our parents died, Chad and I were close. George and I spent countless evenings curled up in the parlor, watching movies or playing games. Chad usually joined us. Even when the movies bored me and I started drifting to sleep, Chad would stay awake late into the night to keep George company.

"We're just going to take a walk, maybe stop at Crest Coffee. I'll be home early tonight."

He glances at his wristwatch before meeting my gaze again. "You promise?"

I nod.

"You know what day it is?"

I exhale sharply. "Of course."

I know he expected an answer even though his question was moot. Of course I know what day it is. Vampires could sense the full moon almost as well as the wolves. On this day, we stayed indoors to avoid conflict. Werewolves in their true forms were monstrous beasts. Double the size of

an average wolf, their heightened senses in dog-form matched our own. They were true contenders under the full moon's sway.

"It's not safe out there tonight," Chad warns.

Suddenly, triggered by his words of caution, my mind wanders. I'm no longer standing in the manor's foyer. My brother is no longer mere feet from me. Instead, I'm standing in a hallway, a long corridor of doorways extends on both sides of me. Posters emphasizing school spirit and football signups clutter the wall I'm leaning against.

I am frozen, paralyzed, and at the will of *her*. As her memory unfolds, I must bear witness to her truth. Unable to change what has already been, I am at a standstill—and I'm not even wearing my own underwear. It's as though my essence has been wrapped in her skin.

I watch as though I'm her. I stare at the girl she's speaking to, and their closeness makes me assume they're friends. She's as close as Chad was to me only seconds ago. Of course, I'm still with him physically. Chad will understand the dazed look on my face, as though I'm lost in thought, as being a side effect of an all-human blood diet. It will only fuel his desire to keep me—and George—inside tonight.

But I have to know... Who was this girl? Why was she in a forest only frequented by werewolves and two rebel supernaturals? The wolves do an excellent job of keeping away prying eyes, so how did she, a tourist, a mundane, find her way past their security measures?

Someone laughs, and I'm brought back to this moment. Already, though, it's slipping. I'm losing her memory of this place. I listen as she makes plans to host the bonfire in Wolfsbane Forest.

"It's remote," she argues. "We can get away with anything there."

"Yeah, but I've heard whispers about that town," her friend replies, brow furrowed.

She's smart to be afraid. Hillcrest's picturesque setting draws in tourists, but every year, dozens go missing—mainly because of me. We follow rules passed down through the generations: don't feed from locals, and don't expose magic to humans. The treaty says vampires feed from blood bags, and wolves hunt animals.

But reasoning with a monster is a fool's dream.

When the sight of blood bags makes me queasy, I indulge. I take myself out for a big meal, and I cover my tracks.

At first, I told myself as long as my victims are left alive and without memory of the attack, the witches of Hillcrest would turn a blind eye. But I was so good at hiding my attacks, no one ever suspected what I was doing.

When the lust, the hunger, became too much, I took my very first life. And it was inexplicable. The way the blood cascaded down his skin, splashing onto the ground, was... the true definition of art. It was a beautiful modern piece with thick splashes of crimson dripping in every direction. My first was messy, but I took my time with him. Slowly, I drained everything he had to offer, and his last breath was music to my ears. He awakened something in me that night, and since then, I haven't been able to sustain myself for long on blood bags.

A loud bellow interrupts my memory of my first kill. Soon, he's in my sight. My lips curve as she smiles when their eyes meet, and I feel her heartbeat race. I imagine this is what humans refer to as their hearts skipping a beat. I wouldn't know. I've never felt this... *consumed* with emotion. This girl was completely and irrevocably in love with this boy.

And I killed her.

He strides closer, smiling widely. When he reaches her, he pulls her into a tight embrace.

"Hello, gorgeous. How was your exam?"

I stare into his eyes, feeling everything she feels for him in that moment, and it aches. I want to pull away. I want to scream at him to stop. This feeling, it gnaws at my insides, erupting within me. Even as I crave to escape his grasp, I've never wanted something so badly in my life.

But I can do nothing. I'm merely a bystander in her love affair. I wish to run my hand up the length of this torso until my fingers tangle together behind his neck.

His neck. His wonderful, beautiful, blood-filled neck. I stare at the vein hidden beneath layers of untouched skin...

I want him. I want him splayed out before me, gripping my body as I indulge in the liquid gold swarming through his veins.

I've never wanted to feed so badly in my life. I know her emotions are affecting me. Her memory grips my throat, holding me in place. I want him the way she wants him. But I also want so much more. I want all the things he never gave *her*.

I didn't pay attention to her response, but I don't care. Academics don't matter to the dead.

He leans down, brushing his lips against hers, and I nearly lose my mind. My fangs ache, a physical pain I've only experienced when I wait far too long between feedings. Now, they crave something more, something new, something... taboo.

"Savannah?"

Chad's voice echoes around me, bouncing off the walls of the corridor I'm standing in. Meanwhile, my host leans against her lover and continues her speech, trying to convince her concerned friend that having a bonfire where people will be drinking in an isolated area is a good idea.

I already know the ending. Somehow, she agrees to host the party, without ever considering she could be one of those people who disappeared from the mysterious seaside town of Hillcrest.

Focusing on the feeling of the human embracing my host, I blink several times as the walls around me crumble down, molding into the familiar shell of my home. Shaking my head, I move unsteadily, teetering back and forth on my feet.

And I know he's gone. The memory has passed, but I can't help but pray for more stolen moments with this human boy.

I mumble a line I've regurgitated many times about feeling lightheaded even though Chad has long since discovered my secret hunts.

"Are you sure you're well enough to go out tonight?" he asks once the spinning stops.

I nod and, finally, push past him. I can't hear anymore tonight. I know he doesn't approve of my extracurricular activities, and if I give him the chance, he would spend the next decade lecturing me on the risk I'm taking by breaking the treaty.

But in these moments, when I experience the simplest moments of a human existence, it's worth the risk. Even so, I'm reminded of the time Chad discovered my secret.

"Even if *one* vampire breaks the treaty, it can be voided. Do you want that? Do you want a war?" he asked me the night he smelled a fresh kill on my breath.

I was too stubborn and too hurt by our parents' sudden unexplained death to answer him.

"The *whole* family will be implicated if the council finds out. By doing this, by being this reckless, you're not only risking your life, but you're risking *mine* too."

CHAPTER FOUR

George

THE WALK TO OLD OAK IS SOLITARY. TIME AWAY FROM MOTHER, WORK and the incessant coven invitations is a blessing. It's a bonus that I get time with Savi. From the moment I wake 'til sleep, I play the devoted son, which, in my mind, is a curse, not a gift. With Mother's persistent reminding at home and my teachers and peers vying for my attention and companionship at the Academy, I can't escape what it means to be the latest of the Alcott bloodline. But their admiration isn't for me; it's for my power. There is only one person in this entire world who I trust, one person I happily call my friend, who I know, with all fibers of my being, would never use me.

Savi.

When I'm with her, I don't think about my obligations. With her, I am free to become anything I want to be. And I believe, I hope, she feels the same about me.

Hillcrest is in the fringes of autumn, but even though there is a sharp bite of the cool night air, when there is a full moon, a witch is *always* warm. The bright rays kiss my sleeveless arms and warm me. It has something to do with our power being innately gifted from the earth. Mother used to tell me tales of a time when the moon fell in love with the earth, and their union provided witches with extra energy during such nights. Those were only stories, a way of explaining the unexplainable through the means of fantasy. But whatever the reason for this reaction to the moon, I am thankful.

I opted to wear a short-sleeved, black t-shirt, one of many I own. In fact, black is practically the only color in my wardrobe—besides the blue-washed jeans that I adopted as my favorite this season. My black boots are laced tightly, leaving no room for my toes to wiggle. As I walk, they cause the brown-toned leaves that cover the ground to crunch and snap, informing the forest of my presence. Wolfsbane Forest is thought to be safe, but at night during a full moon, it is a different place altogether.

It is only a short walk up the main path to the cliff near the tree Savi and I named Old Oak when we were children. It's a place far enough from reality that we could relieve ourselves of the pressure of life and far enough into Bane's Forest that no one with a lick of sense would come looking for us—not with the forest being werewolf territory. Long ago, I made my own charm, one that I weaved from my power and securely locked around both Savi and me. It allows us to pass through the dense woodland without being sensed by the wolves. Even during a full moon, as long as we stay out of their way, the wolves would never find us.

My legs burn as I walk the steepest part of the hill toward the cliff. Even with the charm, I watch the shadows of the forest with intent. Looking for any signs of lurking beasts with hungry golden eyes. It's still early enough in the evening that the shifting would not have happened, but rogue werewolves do not follow the rules. It is not unlikely that they could be hunting now, trying to get the goods before the rest of their kin.

I reach Old Oak, and I believe Savi is not here. That is until she steps out from behind the tree with a sheepish grin.

"Well, well, here I was thinking you would be flying in on a rickety broom," Savi jokes, offering me a playful smile. Her dark-brown hair is soft and thick over her narrow shoulders, and her pale skin glows the same tones as the moon that hangs behind her.

"Since when have I ever used a broom to do anything but sweep a floor?" I wink, pulling her into a hug. It's been a few days since I last saw her, and I couldn't help myself. "Hell, when have I ever swept a floor?"

"Good point. The George I know would never clean. Not when his mother can pay for someone else to do it."

I knock my shoulder into hers. "No talk of Mother or family here. You set that rule, remember?"

"Rules." Savi smirks. "If we followed rules, we wouldn't be here, about to party with college humans who are careless and blind to the beasts that lurk around them." She grabs onto my arms and pulls me farther into the forest. A flickering of orange light amongst the trees illuminates the darkness.

"A bonfire," I say. My stomach turns, but I hide my discomfort at the thought. "If that doesn't scream 'werewolves we are here, come and get us' I don't know what does."

“We will be fine. You worry too much.” Savi’s red eyes are lined heavily with liner.

“How did you know about this party anyway? I can’t imagine you got a personal invite. I *clean* as much as you *hang around with other people*.”

“What do you mean you can’t imagine it? I might not be *George Alcott* popular, but I know people.” She playfully bites her lip.

I laugh, hearty and full of honest emotion. “Humans, Savi. We are talking about humans.”

“Okay, okay. I didn’t *exactly* get a *personal* invite, but I did overhear some girls gossiping about it at Crest Coffee. I thought it would be a good way to kill some time and enjoy the night.”

Crest is the only coffee joint in town. It became a regular haunt of mine, even if I didn’t have a taste for coffee. It is not uncommon for tourists or mundane visitors to use it as a stop off. I could lose hours sitting there, eavesdropping on the conversations about trivial issues the humans had. They never worry about the next time their mothers would bring a vampire back to torture; they never face the pressure to join one of the local covens. They have no idea that it’s basically turning into a war between those who want someone from the Alcott line in their coven.

“Savi, it’s a full moon. What about the wolves? One sniff of this party and they will be like flies-to-crap. This is a feast they’re begging to devour.”

“Come on,” Savi drones, hooking her arm in mine and pulling me down the beaten track toward the party. “Would you stop worrying? You know the wolves will not risk breaking the treaty by killing humans on Hillcrest land. You need a drink, and trust me, I need a dance.”

“Who is the one complaining now?” I say.

I want to ask her why she needs a dance so badly, but I can’t. That is another one of our rules: never ask about our day. We used to, but after constant negativity, we opted to pretend our sucky days never happened.

It is not long before the bass from music reaches my ears. The ground shakes, pine needles bouncing from the forest bed in rhythm. Even the trees seem to sway in the windless air, dancing to the alien beat of music that rarely reaches them here.

“If I knew they were going to play *this*, I would never have suggested coming.” Savi scrunches her nose in displeasure. I know her taste well enough to know she appreciates a lighter base. On the other hand, I can

appreciate this music. I like the way the sound travels up my legs and spreads across my veins. It's how I feel when I use my magic.

"It is not that bad and you know it," I say.

The humans who are running the party are ballsy. They set up the bonfire right next to the cliff face that drops down to Raven Cry Lake. One drunken step too far and it would be death for whoever fell over its side.

"Do you recognize anyone?" I ask Savi as we walk into the bustling crowd of swaying bodies. Some of the boys have shadows of beards, and the girls are tall, cigarettes in hands and smoke seeping out from their painted lips. They must be around our age—eighteen or nineteen. Their youth would explain why the party is so far into Bane's Forest. Being of illegal age to drink is something humans kept secret. I'm happy when I realize don't recognize the many people chatting, dancing, and laughing around us as we flutter throughout the party. The boys of Hillcrest were either boring or not witches. But these boys... Well, I have my pick and freedom to let my eyes wander.

"Look at him! He's your type." Savi points to a ginger-haired boy with a red-and-green checkered shirt that is unbuttoned slightly, showing off his broad chest. "I dare you to—"

"*Oh no.* Not tonight. No dares," I interrupt.

"How else are we going to have fun?" she asks.

"Dance, drink, and pretend we're human," I say.

Savi shrugs. "Then you wait here, and I'll get us a drink. But don't be shocked if I ask that boy if he has a number to pass onto you."

"Savi..." I groan, rolling my eyes as she walks backward, winking.

I don't mind being left alone. It gives me a moment to watch the people around me as if I am no more than a shadow cast across the forest bed by the bonfire. No one pays me mind. I like it like that.

A few boys stumble past me, intoxicated by drinks or the vibes from the party, I didn't know. One bumps into me, sparing me a snarl as if it were my fault.

"Watch it," he snaps.

I chuckle to myself, turning my back on him.

"Something funny?" He spins me around, his touch as rough as his temper.

I wave a dismissive hand. "Nope." I try and turn my back on him again, which only pisses him off more.

“Sure as h-hell s-sounds like it.” He stumbles over his words, fists clenched and ready at his side. “Why don’t you... you share it with us.”

“Hell. Now that’s an interesting concept. One often wonders if the beasts that roam around hell are real. Imagine starting a fight with one without ever realizing it until it is far too late.”

The drunken man points his thumb at me and turns to his companions. “Think we should shut this freak up.”

My blood boils in an instant. *Freak*. I hate that word.

I clench my own fists, which the boy notices.

“Looks like our little freak is ready for a fight as well.”

I look at the boys through squinted eyes and whisper, “You have no idea.”

The drunken man strikes, reaching for my t-shirt, which he balls up in his fists, pulling my face close to him. His breath is as striking as the dark circles around his dull eyes. His build is bigger than mine, taller and muscular. There wouldn’t be a chance of me fighting him without magic—something humans are forbidden to know about. It is as strict as the rule for not killing other supernaturals. But that rule has an exception: if a supernatural has already killed another supernatural, vengeance can even the score.

“I suggest you let me go,” I tell him, waiting for Savi to return at any moment. She could twist this boy into a pretzel and leave him on the ground. For a small girl, her vampirism gives her strength unmatched by mere humans.

The two boys standing behind the intoxicated boy clap, starting their chant low and building up until they are practically shouting. This gets the attention of the rest of the crowd, who watch with drunken hunger in their eyes.

“Do it,” one of them tells the boy, who is now inches from my face.

“Yeah, hit me.” I reach for his exposed wrist and touch it. It is all I need to retrieve his name from his cloudy mind. “Michael, do it.”

A moment of confusion crosses Michael’s face. “How do you know my name?”

I can’t stop the corners of my lips from turning up. I sense the tingle of a vampire’s glare on the back of my neck. Savi is watching, stalking from the unseen shadows of the party, waiting for her moment to pounce. In the darkness, she blends into the shadows. In the night, the humans wouldn’t

notice her red irises, but this human, a drunken college student teetering the edge of bursting my personal space bubble, would be too close. He'd see she's different. I shake my head, silently telling her to stay back. We've been friends so long I know I don't have to speak aloud for her to understand my silent message.

"I asked you a question." I cringe from his harsh breath.

"Hit him." The scream comes from the group that had gathered to watch. "Mike, do it!"

I see Michael grit his teeth, and I know it's coming. The veins in his neck bulge as he lifts his arm.

The bated silence of the group breaks as the howling begins. My heart almost stops. A sharp sting permeates from my knee as Michael drops me to the floor. I'm pinned beneath his body.

"What was that?" Michael glances back at his friends as more hollowing fills the surrounding forest.

"Sounds like wolves wanna join the party!" someone shouts.

Everyone laughs but me.

I try and scramble backward to Savi, who I'm sure is waiting for me so we can escape with our lives, but Michael turns back to me as I try to wiggle free.

"Not so fast. We are not done with you, party crasher. Are those your friends in the forest trying to scare us?"

Friends. I could laugh at the statement. No one is *friends* with the wolves. The howling stops, which gives Michael a new sense of control. He laughs as the heat of the bonfire gets warmer against my back. I am cornered between him and the flames. Instantly, I regret telling Savi to stay away. I consider yelling for her, but I fear she may be in the midst of her own battle.

Michael stares at me, the fire reflecting in his gaze. "Lost for words? Looks like someone is finally scared silent. This is what you get for coming uninvited."

"You all are the uninvited ones," Savi says as she emerges from the woods. Her voice distracts Michael, and I push him off me. I stand, readying myself as I look into the dark forest. I can sense the creatures watching us.

"And you are?" Michael asks. "Another one of his friends? Did you try to scare us off with those wolf noises? Not going to happen, beautiful."

“No, and my name is not beautiful,” Savi says through gritted teeth. Her fists are clenched at her sides, and I pray she won’t do something reckless.

“You don’t expect me to believe the noise came from actual wolves, do you?” he asks, arms crossed and lips curled into a prideful smile.

Another howl sounds from behind me. Frozen in fear, I don’t turn. Michael leans into me, squinting at the woods beyond the bonfire. “Is that —”

The wolf leaps through the flames, landing on top of Michael. His screams of horror are soon stopped as his throat is locked between the jaws of the werewolf. The copper scent of blood fills the air; it’s so thick I can taste it.

I see the blur of black and gray as more werewolves rush into the party, causing everyone to erupt into screams. All around me, humans fall, covered by the beasts that bite and rip into flesh and bone. Mockingly, the full moon winks from behind the clouds, causing my skin to warm. I raise my hands, calling forth my magic until the trees bend under my force.

Winds rush throughout the screaming crowd, powerful and true. I aim for the biggest werewolf, sending it far into the night sky. Its howl causes all the werewolves with blood-stained snouts to look up as their kin disappears over the face of the cliff.

The forest explodes into anger and teeth.

CHAPTER FIVE

Savi

THE PLASTIC CUPS OF STALE BOOZE SLIP FROM MY HANDS, SPLATTERING TO the ground. The cheap beer splashes on my feet, drenching my shoes in dollar store liquor. I was waiting, in the shadows, where no one but George could sense me. His altercation caused a scene, and I knew the last thing he'd want is a red-eyed vampire breaking up a fight.

I heard them in the distance, but I never expected them to attack—not with an ironclad treaty like a noose around their necks. It's worked as a leash for decades. What changed? Taking the occasional life is something easily hidden, but exposing a pack of wolves and murdering dozens of tourists during the full moon is just stupid. The council won't have to do much digging to uncover the truth of what happened here tonight.

The ground rumbles as they approach. I blink and dozens of wolves dash before my eyes. Even with my heightened senses, they manage to surprise me. Under the full moon's power, vampires and wolves are matched in strength, but not ferociousness. They're savage by nature, and in wolf form, that nature is amplified. I may be a monster, but I'm nothing like them.

The plastic cups crack under my weight as I fully emerge from the trees. I argued with the intoxicated human only seconds ago, and already, he's dead. The stench of his blood thickens the cool night air, and my stomach grumbles in response.

I search for George. My heart sinks when too many seconds pass before I find him. I saw him only moments ago, fighting with the intoxicated frat boy. Where could he have gone? What if he's hurt? I push through the crowd, ignoring cries for help. Agony stings in the pit of my gut—not for the many victims falling around me, but for George. I fear only one life lost tonight.

I see him in the distance. I try to call out to him, but as I do, the air shifts. It's a sensation I'm familiar with. When George and I were kids, we

would practice our abilities on each other. I'd use my strength to outmaneuver his magical attacks. But his power then is no match for his strength now.

I swallow the knot that forms, knowing I can do nothing but wait for the inevitable. At first, it's only pin pricks, like a thousand needle points stabbing me everywhere at once. This is the moment I fear; the pain will only grow worse as time passes. For now, it is manageable... but this is only the beginning.

George's magic is a brutal attack against my heightened senses as the elements bend to his will. Air, being his most yielding power, makes daggers out of a slight breeze. I fall to my knees as his magic lashes out at me. He's told me stories of the power passed down over the generations of Alcott witches, and as the sole heir to that fortune, when angry, he is a force to be reckoned with. Thankfully, I've never been at the brunt of that blade.

Hands over ears, I scream as the air around me targets anything supernatural. The noise is so loud I'm sure my head will burst. Steady streams of blood cascade down the curves of my frame as my skin is torn open over and over again. My full meal last night has amplified my healing powers, but this only means I am torn open, healed, and then slashed once again.

And I cannot stop it, because I'll never hurt George. If I must, I'll withstand the strength of his fury until my final moments. If this were any other witch, I could easily snap his neck with a flick of my wrist—that is, if I were within reaching distance.

Suddenly, the pain stops. With his release of the elements, the world seems to fall silent. No longer are my senses pelted with his power. Slowly, the soft whimpers of crying humans echo in my head. But their pleas fall mute on my ears, for my fangs are deafening.

Blood.

It's *everywhere*.

My nose twitches in response. My throat is dry, my lips chapped. I'm weakening as what little energy I have left finishes healing wounds inflicted only moments ago. My reactions are involuntary now. The hunger is all around me, enveloping, encompassing, and I cannot stop myself.

I open my eyes and see a red sea slowly creeping toward me. I bend down and swipe my tongue along the crimson blades of grass. I moan as I

swallow it down. I crawl to the nearest body, and in a final attempt to save her life, the dying human screams. I jerk back, falling on my bottom.

I glance around. Patches of moonlight shine on dismembered humans and the beasts feeding on them. I shake away the hunger, disgusted that I nearly fed. What if George saw me?

Gasping, I think, *George*.

I drop my arms to my sides and dig my fingers into the ground, pulling up fistfulls of grass as I stand. Wobbly at first, I regain my composure and find George. No closer to me than before, he's staring out into the distance. I feel only slightly guilty when a wave of relief washes over me, knowing he didn't see me in my weaker moment.

Just beyond him is the edge of the cliff, where jagged rocks meet the waves of Raven Cry Lake. What is he doing?

"George?" I say far too quietly.

Something catches my eye. Distracted, he doesn't see the wolf charging him.

I scream his name, but he doesn't respond. Slamming my feet against the ground, I put all of my waning energy into strengthening my legs. I watch as the wolf dashes toward him at speeds too fast for human eyes. As it pounces, drool spilling from its open snout, I leap, nearly spinning in the air until I crash into the wolf's torso. Thickly muscled yet supremely soft, I wrap my arms around the beast and squeeze, flinging it through the air until it smacks against the base of a nearby tree.

I embrace George and squeeze him tightly. "Are you okay?"

He nods against me and quickly pulls away. His eyes are glossy, pained, and I know there's something he's not telling me. He runs a finger along the curve of my cheek. I glance down. My blood is dripping down his hand.

"The magic..." I wipe away what remains and insist I'm okay. His magic targeted all supernaturals, and unfortunately, that included me.

Shaking his head, he stumbles over his words of apology. I didn't want him to see what his magic had done to me. I didn't want him to know if he didn't release me when he did, I may not have survived.

A scream erupts from the other side of the field. Echoing through the air, it vibrates off my skin, shaking to my core.

I know that voice. I've heard it before. In *her* memory.

I turn on my heel, facing the aftermath of the full moon's destruction. My eyes adjust to the distance, and I watch as the human boy battles a

werewolf. I stand in awe as he strikes the beast with a broken tree limb. He may have outsmarted the wolf, but this is a battle he cannot win.

"I have to help him," I say. I turn back to receive a sharp nod from George. In the silence between us, I know he'll be okay, and I know he'll use his magic to protect me as I reach the human. I know he doesn't understand why *this* human is important to me, but I can't let him die. Not while her memories, her love, are flooding my veins.

I run toward the boy, *her* boy, and watch as the werewolves charging me are flung away. Even though I don't watch him, I know George is using his magic to target those threatening me. I'm grateful and almost confident I'll be able to actually save the human.

Within seconds, I reach the human and offer a silent thank you to George. Cornered by three wolves, with more likely coming, he doesn't even notice me. I yank one back by the scruff, and the wolf slides across the field, the ground burrowing in its wake. I backhand the second, sending him catapulting through the air until it slams into a group of wolves that are feasting on the remains of several victims.

I turn back to find the human pinned down by the wolf. Without thinking, I reach for it and slam my forehead into the back of its head. Unconscious, it falls to a slump. He'll wake up with a nasty headache, but at least he'll wake up. He can thank the treaty for that.

As the boy shimmies out from beneath the slumbering wolf, I panic. How am I going to explain my survival? How am I going to explain these beasts? If I break the treaty's number one rule—*don't expose magic to humans*—I'll be sentenced to death. Humans are good at rationalizing what they see. If he doesn't see me, he'll convince himself these were real wolves on the prowl, not shapeshifters under the full moon's sway. Without options, I dash toward George and grab his hand. In a flash, we're hidden behind the base of Old Oak.

"There are more!" George is frantic, desperate to save the remaining humans.

"We can't do anything for them," I say. George may not like it, but we can't let them see us. If any were to survive, they'd know our faces. How would we explain this to the council and not look guilty? Fraternizing with humans may not be against the rules, but it's certainly frowned upon.

"But we have to!" George argues.

"They're already gone," I whisper.

George is a powerful witch, but his senses are no match for mine. What he *sees* are humans screaming, begging for help. What I *hear* are the slowing beats of each dying heart. They're lost. All save for one. I watch as the sole human I saved runs, abandoning his friends. Maybe he sees what I see: death. Lost causes. Even if they were to survive the blood loss, they'd transition—bitten by werewolves and forced to join the seclusion of Bane's Forest. Only the wolves can help them now.

"We need to get out of here," I say.

He shakes his head. "I can't. I can't leave them..."

We don't speak. Hours pass as we wait, listening to the wolves clean up their mess in sloppy smacks that make my stomach twist. We listen as bones break until the sun begins to rise and the wolves retreat to their dens.

Stepping out of the shadows, we walk toward the cliff. Though the ground is stained in blood, the bodies of those sacrificed are hidden in the bellies of the beasts.

George faces the lake and calls upon his magic. Pulling water from Raven Cry, he washes away any evidence of a crime. The water cascades over the earth until it returns back to the lake, a red tide of truth familiar to no one but us.

"The good news?" I say.

"Oh, I dare you," George responds.

"At least we didn't kill any wolves. We don't have to worry. The council will never know."

"Savi," George says, his voice low, soft. I follow his gaze down the side of the cliff, where the water crashes against rock, and gasp as I take in the corpse of a lone wolf.

CHAPTER SIX

George

SAVI SLAMS THE DOOR BEHIND US. THE ENTIRE HOUSE SEEMS TO SHAKE. Dust floats down from the high vaulted ceilings, covering us like a fresh layering of winter snow. The ancient-looking foyer dwarfs me with its dark wood floor and towering walls. I've always admired Savi's home and the way it makes me feel like I've just walked onto the set of an old film.

The hallway is dark and ominous. Not a single light is on in any of the many rooms on the first floor. The parlor is empty. I can hardly see into the adjacent sitting room.

Savi looks to the shadows as if something will come rushing out, but then turns to me and points to the stairs.

"Meet me in my—"

"Savi!" a deep voice calls from the landing. "Is that you?"

"Who else would it be?" she calls back.

Savi spares me a look, eyes wide and finger to lips as she pushes me into the shadow of the staircase.

"I got back later than planned," she continues.

The rest of her apology drowns out.

Chad.

My heart picks up, enough that I am sure he can sense it. He used to comment on my racing heart, but that was when we spoke. It's been months... He's no more than a memory to me now, and I'm just a bad dream to him, I am sure. I gnaw on my lower lip as he approaches Savi.

"I know you are hiding a witch," Chad replies, and shivers run down my back. "I am not going to miss that... stench."

I feel the boiling anger bubbling as Chad disses me. He is trying to prove a point. Ever since we stopped seeing each other, he tried everything in his power to make me feel most uncomfortable. Savi doesn't know how much his words hurt; she never knew of our secret relationship. I bite down on my lip to hide my discomfort at his remark.

“Chad, it’s George. Calm down.”

“I live here as well, you know. It would be grand if you’d warn me before inviting someone over,” Chad replies.

“Get a grip.” Savi rolls her crimson eyes. She takes my hand and pulls me toward the bottom step. Sheepishly, I peer up at him. It’s been a while since my gaze has found his. It used to warm me from the inside out. Now, it only pulls on the deep string of regret within me.

His hair, like Savi’s, is dark, almost so nightly black that it reflects the light from the glass chandelier behind him. It’s shorter at the sides and longer on the top, with slight curls spilling over his crown. I once ran my fingers through those curls. It seems like a lifetime ago now.

His skin is stark white, his eyes the classic red which had inspired so many stories. His jawline is sharp enough to slice the softest of fingers. But never mine. He never hurt me. Not physically, anyway.

Handsome.

It’s the only word that could pull together the many thoughts rushing through my mind.

Chad Danvers is a handsome devil.

He considers me with an expression I cannot place. The lines around his eyes soften a touch, and his mouth relaxes, morphing into the face I once knew. Then he shakes his head and looks to Savi, his tone changing instantly.

“I want *him* out of here within the hour.”

Savi groans, “Your wish is my command, Chad.”

He spares me a final glance and walks out of view, disappearing through the dining room and into the manor’s kitchen.

“We can do this another time,” I say, gaze glued to the spot which Chad stood in. I expect him to return, but he doesn’t.

“Ignore him, George. I’ve no idea what’s gotten into him.”

I nod, not wanting to give her an explanation as to why he acts that way toward me.

“Top of the stairs and first door on the right?” I ask, changing the subject. My throat is coarse as I ask for some water.

“Sure. I’ll get you something. Just wait in my room,” she tells me.

I take two stairs at a time before Savi can say anything else. Skipping the final one, I land on the wooden landing. Most of the furnishings on this floor look even older than the house itself. Everything in this house seems

to be made from a dark wood. Ornate mirrors hang above decorated dressers. The walls are covered in a cherry paper, the occasional piece of art breaking up the dark color.

I repeat the instructions and move for the closed door. It too is made from dark wood, the handle a brass knob that feels cold under my touch. I turn it and push it open, getting a glimpse inside Savi's hideaway. Her sanctuary.

I walk to the bed, which is covered by a deep-red comforter, and sit on the edge, hands shaking in my lap. I still sense the lingering power at the tips of my fingers, a presence left over from my outburst. The rush of magic was dark, exhilarating, and... different. Even now, my blood sings for release. I could have stopped everything at the bonfire; it would have been so simple.

In the silence of Savi's big room, I hear the mocking comments made from the intoxicated boy, Michael. I see his face and want nothing more than to cause him pain.

Blood. Just one drop.

Then I see the werewolf and how its jaws so easily wrapped around the boy's throat and ripped it out.

Blood.

I'd seen enough of it tonight. It pulled me back from the cold pits of my mind. That lack of control scares me.

I can't be like him. I can't give into that forbidden part to me...

But that is not the only haunting memory that fills my mind and body.

The werewolf.

Every time I close my eyes, I see the creature falling out of view. I hear the heavy thud that vibrated up my legs and into my core. The lack of life that I could no longer sense over the edge. And the body I spied as I peered over the cliff face and into the abyss before Savi yanked me away.

I killed a supernatural. I should be used to it after what Mother has me do, yet I know this time was different. It was my own doing. No one moved my hand. I alone killed. I alone broke the treaty.

Savi soon rushes into the room, glass in hand, and closes the door.

"Here," she says, passing the drink to me.

I take a sip but instantly want to vomit it back up. I fight the urge and finish the glass. Looking back to Savi, I see she's not got one for herself.

"Not thirsty?" I ask.

“It is not water I need, but I respect you enough not to drain a blood bag right in front of you.”

“I don’t mind,” I said. Did I? I have never seen Savi feed, and I never truly thought about it. I know she has to drink blood to survive, but she has always kept that part of herself hidden from me.

“Well, I do,” she replies, waving off the subject. I’m grateful, because it’s not blood bags and sour stomachs that interest me right now. If Chad wants me to leave in an hour, then we have to address the elephant in the room.

“What am I going to do, Savi?” I drop my neck, chin to chest. “If someone finds out what I’ve done, I will be handed over to the wolves and killed.”

“George, take a breath. I’m not going to let that happen to you, all right? No one is going to find out.”

“You’re going to willingly help a murderer?”

“No,” she says. She takes a seat beside me and squeezes my knee. “I’m going to *willingly* help a friend. The wolves attacked first. That stands for something, and they killed humans. The council won’t side with them after that. Besides, your status among the witches will help you if this gets ugly.”

Savi’s gaze is lost to a spot on the wall.

“If this gets ugly? All it takes for me to be discovered is for the body to be turned in. Magic leaves a residue. Elder Jane will read the remains and trace it back to me.”

“They can’t link you to a body that doesn’t exist...” Savi says.

“What do you mean?” I furrow my brows.

“We go back and deal with the body. You’re a witch. Can’t you call upon fire and burn it until nothing is left? Or cast a charm or something?”

I shake my head and rest my forehead against my palms. “I appreciate that you want to help, but even if we did hide it, it will end up getting out. These things always do.” My response is muffled yet clear enough for Savi to hear. She reaches out and cradles my hands in her own. She’s cool to the touch—a sensation I’m not unfamiliar with.

“You’re not thinking clearly. Sleep on it. You’re too tired to make a decision right now anyway.”

Savi’s gaze meets mine. Her face is masked with concern for me. Seeing it causes my eyes to prick with tears. My hands shake in hers, and my leg begins to twitch from my nervous energy.

“I really don’t feel good about this.”

“Trust me. I’ll take care of this, George. I’m going to take care of *you*. Elder Jane, the wolves, the entire council, they’ll have to go through me if they want to get to you.”

I pull her into a hug, and we remain like that, locked in each other’s embrace, for a long while. When I finally pull away, I don’t feel any better about my situation, but I don’t admit my feelings to Savi.

“Shall I walk you home?” she asks.

We both peer outside the large bay windows lining the wall and stare at the sun, which hangs bright above Hillcrest.

“No, stay here. I don’t want your brother wondering what is going on. Besides, I could do with some fresh air,” I say.

I could do with some time alone, I think.

“I want you to text me the moment you are home,” Savi says.

“I will,” I reply.

Savi wraps her arms around me and squeezes. Her embrace lasts only a brief moment before she holds me at arm’s length. “Just, please, sleep on it. Don’t say anything until we talk later, all right?”

I nod, pulling from Savi’s grip and walking toward her door.

“George, promise me. Say it aloud.”

“I know you want to help me, Savi, but I killed someone today,” I say, ignoring her desire for a promise.

“It was an accident,” she says firmly.

“The treaty does not discriminate. Murder is murder; we know that.”

Savi moves to my side in the blink of an eye. Her red eyes flashing. “Murder is not so black and white, George. It’s... complicated. If we’ve learned anything from the treaty, it’s that sometimes, murder can be justified. Why else would the council allow for that eye-for-an-eye clause?”

I look at my own reflection in her worried eyes. I look tired. Dark circles hang proudly beneath my green stare; even the whites of my eyes are covered in red. Savi is right. No good would come from telling Mother now. In truth, she would most likely be on my side anyway. If I were to tell anyone, it would be Elder Jane.

“All right,” I tell her. “I’ll call you in the morning.”

Savi pulls me into another hug. “Sleep well, okay?”

“Okay,” I whisper, losing myself in her embrace.

As we leave her room, I glance to Chad's bedroom door. Many times, I used to sneak inside to spend time with him. *She could never know.* I look away, burying the longing I have grown so used to living with.

Savi guides me to the front door and waves to me down the street. I don't need to see her to know she is watching me until I turn onto a different street. The kiss of her vampire gaze tickles the back of my neck all the way. But I sense another. I glance up to Chad's window. By the time I scan the height of the looming manor, no one is there. I see nothing but the sway of his curtains as they are closed.

My home is only a few blocks away, on the sloped street that leads into the heart of Hillcrest. Like Savi's house, it's old, an original build in Hillcrest. Our houses were some of the first built when our ancestors crossed the waters and settled here.

Hillcrest is deserted this time of day. Not a single soul passes me as I walk home. Witches would have left their coven meetings, and the vampires would still be soaking up blood at the nearest bag banks. I try not to think about the wolves. Would they be looking for me? My charm should prevent them from getting close to us again. That gives me a slither of comfort as I walk through the gate to my house.

All the lights are off inside. Mother is probably still asleep. I don't need a key to unlock the door; it is linked to my blood. The house recognizes Alcott witches as if it were alive. To anyone else, it would stay closed, but to me, it opens willingly. It would seem the years of magic practiced within the walls of this house allowed it to absorb the very power my family has. It feels as alive to me as any other living thing. It breathes. It speaks through the many creaks and groans of the hollowed walls.

When I was younger, *Father* told me the sounds I heard at night were the ghosts of our ancestors, who were trapped in this house for eternity. They were forced to watch us in everything we did. But that was not the only warped lie Father fed me. There were too many to count.

I know Mother will not wake, but I still move through the dark house silently. I worry if I see her, I'll spill what I've done the second my gaze finds hers. She has a way of breaking down my walls and seeing into the secrets I keep buried from everyone else.

Closing the door to my room, I finally let the tears fall. I drown further into my guilt and let the fear of not knowing overtake all my senses. In

truth, I know the werewolf is not the only life I've taken—not after the tasks Mother forces me to complete.

Normally, I'd block out the vampires I tortured. Keeping my distance, emotionally, makes it easier for me to forget what I've done. But this is different. Savi has seen that monstrous side to me. But even though she's seen what I've done, she still fights for me. And maybe she is right. Maybe there is a chance I could get out of this mess.

Like the Danvers vampires, the Alcott bloodline extends back to the original settlers of this town. Our ancestors helped create the treaty we follow today. Maybe Mother could manipulate what I'd done like she manipulates everyone around her.

But the dead wolf is not the only problem we face. The humans witnessed my magic and Savi's strength and speed. The wolves can be passed off as mundane creatures, hungry and wild. But we... we are different. Savi said they were lost to the wolves, but what if she was wrong? What if someone survived to tell the story of a day when a witch and a vampire saved humans from werewolves?

I bury my many worries and climb into bed. No matter how hard I try, sleep is hard to find. I stare at the ceiling, occasionally glancing out my bedroom window, until I can no longer ignore my problems..

CHAPTER SEVEN

Savi

I'M STALLING. I KNOW THIS, BUT RIGHT NOW, THERE'S NOTHING WORSE than what's to come. I fear his reaction. I fear his questions. I fear he may already know what George and I did...

I sulk down the stairs that spill into the first floor sitting room. To my right, the manor's front double doors. Straight ahead, one of the many entrances to the manor's wraparound conservatory. Both are viable options. I can slip out undetected, never having to listen to Chad's unwanted words of wisdom.

I exhale slowly and glance to my left. The dining room, with attached butler pantry that leads to the kitchen, looks somber this morning. We never redecorated the manor after our parents passed. And Mother never redecorated after inheriting it from her parents. As I look around, I find nothing but faded wallpaper and rooms cluttered with antiques. I suppose we Danvers vampires have been too busy living our lives (or secretly breaking the treaty) to worry about the mundane, like light fixtures and paint swatches. This house has been in our family for generations, and it certainly looks like it.

I tiptoe toward the kitchen. Maybe I lucked out? Maybe Chad's still fast asleep. I can snag a few blood bags and dash out of the house before he even knows I've gone.

As I enter the dining room, my eyes are drawn to the large stained-glass window that faces the back garden. I can't see them now, through the glass stained by blended autumnal colors, but I'm sure even the trees are screaming at me to run the other way.

As I pass through the corner butler's pantry, I come to a halt. A thin piece of wood carved into a formfitting door is all that sits between me and whatever may be in the kitchen. I close my eyes and listen for any muffled sounds.

Nothing. I hear *nothing*.

Maybe I did luck out.

I push open the door, my heart sinking when my gaze lands on Chad. He's sitting at the corner table where we rarely eat family meals. Arms folded, newspaper spread across the table top in disarray, as if he were searching for the answers to my whereabouts last night but finding nothing.

I turn away from him and yank open the refrigerator door. Stocked full of a few of George's favorite snacks and Chad's favorite type of blood, there's not much else. I sigh and grab a blood bag. I empty the thick, cold liquid into a mug and nuke my breakfast in the microwave—all while conveniently missing Chad's glares.

"I know what you've done," he says. His voice is strong, angry.

He speaks only after the microwave's timer has sounded and I'm holding the mug midway to my lips. I freeze. I assume only seconds have ticked by, but it's more than enough time for him to see me falter at his words. But most importantly, I choose not to misinterpret his accusation.

"What do you mean?" I choke out. My voice is squeaky, and I groan internally. Is it possible to look guiltier?

The swift grinding of the chair legs scratching against the tile floor rings in my ears. Before I can react, he's beside me. He turns on the television Mother installed so we could enjoy family dinners in the kitchen rather than in the formal dining room. I still remember the day Mom brought it home...

"When do we ever have time to eat as a family?" I asked as Chad was installing the mini television set.

"Mom thought we could watch the cooking channel together."

I arched a brow. "We don't eat."

He chuckled. "She has this insane idea to add blood to human food. She's already working on a recipe for spaghetti and blood balls."

I sniffle as Chad's voice brings me back to reality. "Hm? What?"

"Look," he says, pointing the remote toward the television screen.

Time slows as I watch the newscaster report that local police have found a body. They are investigating, with formal updates coming every hour. Should any tourists be watching the program, it would seem as though Hillcrest were like any other town. But I know. I can spot the differences. The "police chief" making statements to the press is actually the elder witch in charge of finding the girl's killer.

"Please tell me this wasn't you," Chad says.

But I can't. I'd lie to protect him, but lying, at this point, would only hurt him. I can't tell him the truth either. So I remain silent.

"Christ, Savi! Have you any idea what they'll do to us?"

How did they find her? I dumped her body deep within Wolfsbane Forest, knowing the full moon would bring out the beasts, who'd take advantage of my leftovers. Had the party drawn them away from my offering? Are the only marks on her body those from my fangs? I have so many questions and not a lot of time to find answers.

Wincing, I quickly drink the mug of blood, which has now cooled to room temperature. Blood bags taste *old*. I don't understand how the others survive on this alone. I drop my mug into the sink a little harder than intended, listening as the slightest of fractures carve their way into the ceramic cup. *Great*. That was my favorite blood mug.

"Better get used to that taste, Savannah, because you're on a tight leash after this mess."

I roll my eyes and push past him. I force open the door to the pantry and dash toward the front door.

"Savi!" Chad calls after me, but it's no use. I'm already gone.



I run through the woods, listening for any sounds of patrolling wolves. I hear nothing but the sounds of nature: the trees swaying in the cool autumn wind and the distant crash of the sea's waves against the cliff, where yet another one of my problems remain. The animals are buzzing as they prepare for winter.

The forest borders Hillcrest's sole cemetery, which is where I find myself since I can't just barge into Elder Jane's investigation of the girl's death. I may be guilty, but I'm not stupid. Only an idiot would show up at her own crime scene.

Twigs snap under my feet as I make my way into the cemetery. From here, I can eavesdrop. Maybe they forgot to spell the area. Maybe they have no leads... I was careful, after all. I didn't leave any evidence behind—aside from the glaring marks on her neck that scream "a vampire killed me."

I curse inwardly as I struggle to focus on the investigation. I hear nothing save for the sounds of a semi-busy cemetery. Nearby, supernaturals

mourn their loved ones. I kneel beside a tombstone with the hopes of looking less obvious. If I didn't come here to pay my respects, why else would I be hanging out in a cemetery? *Cliché much...*

Just as I'm about to give up on listening for clues, someone approaches me from behind. I spin until I face the intruder, ready to fight for my escape if necessary, and I'm staring into the dark brown irises of one pissed off human.

"It's you," I whisper.

"What are you doing here?" I can tell by his tone that he's angry, but underneath it all, I can practically *feel* his pain.

"I'm... looking f—"

"For what?" he interrupts me. "What are you looking for?"

"Answers," I say quickly, instantly regretting my honesty. Chad chastises me for my lies, but the truth is the only thing getting me in trouble lately.

He crosses his arms over his chest. "I saw you at the party. I've never seen you before that. Who invited you? How'd you know about it?"

"I go to Hillcrest College," I mutter. It's not an answer to his question, but it's not necessarily a lie either. I did enroll after graduation. I just haven't given it much thought since then. After my parents' death, I didn't want to think about my future with only Chad by my side. So I gave into the darkness, and I haven't looked back.

"Then who invited you to the party?"

He leans in, towering over me. As I stare into his eyes, I struggle to convince him that I am not the enemy. I'm sure his next question will be about the party's aftermath, and I have no story in place. What am I supposed to say? He survived because I saved him. Had he seen George and I escape? Had he seen George use his magic or my vampire speed? Did he

—I gasp as the world stills.

Oh my god.

My eyes! My crimson irises staring back at him... How could I have been so stupid?

I break his gaze and stumble backward, desperately needing the safety space provides. *Think!* What can I do? If the girl's death doesn't end my life, exposing magic to a human will.

It's an overcast day, and when the clouds clear, giving us the briefest of moments of reprieve, the sun is behind me, blinding him. I face the blazing ball of fire now. It's hot on my skin. During the human's inquisition, I watched as he squinted to see me more clearly. I glance up, looking to the sky directly above me for answers. I'm shaded by the trees in a dark corner of the cemetery that greets the forest. It's possible he didn't even notice my eyes. I mean, if he had, he would have said something, right?

Quickly, I pull out my pair of emergency sunglasses, which I keep in the inner pocket of my jacket. They're always there *just in case* a tourist stumbles down the same sidewalk I'm walking on. I struggle to open them before sliding them onto my face.

Please let this work. I really can't risk another kill right now—not with the council investigating the girl's death.

I turn to face him and watch as he studies me curiously. He opens his mouth to speak, and I completely crumble. Before I realize what I'm doing, I find myself running. I can't risk the forest, so I sprint through the cemetery at an agonizingly slow pace. Vampire speed is out of the question, so I run like a human. Sadly, he catches up to me with practiced ease.

I feel him grasp my arm and yank me backward. I stumble as I'm turned toward him. We crash to the ground in a sloppy heap. Whispers surround me as, I'm sure, onlookers pray I can maintain our secret. I brush off their obvious concerns as I try to push the human off me.

Everything within me is on edge. I've never been this close to a human when not hunting. I turn my head, and my gaze is parallel with the dark skin of his bared neck. I exhale slowly. I'm so close I could swipe his skin with my tongue. It would take little effort for me to end his life right here, right now. He has no idea how dangerous this situation has just become for him.

I find myself wrapping my arms around his muscular frame. It's as if my limbs have minds of their own. While one hand works its way along the length of his back, the other grips the back of his neck, holding him in place.

I could taste him *so easily* right now. It would be quick, painless for him. My fangs ache, and my stomach growls. His heart beats against my chest, sending shockwaves down my spine and to my toes.

He isn't moving, even without compulsion. He simply waits, allowing me to hold him in place. The only thing that betrays his courage is his heart. It beats faster even while his breath remains even.

“Please,” I whisper.

He shivers when my breath hits his skin, but he says nothing. And he doesn’t move.

Reluctantly, I release him. My arms fall to the ground in thuds. I dig my nails into the dirt, welcoming the pain as twigs embed themselves beneath my nails. I grind my teeth, clenching my jaw until he finally pulls away.

When he stands, he offers me his hand, but I turn to my side and jump to my feet on my own. The last thing I need is to rip off his arm and suck the marrow from his bones.

I’m not facing him, but I know he’s still there, watching me, waiting for a reaction or a reason as to why I suddenly ran away from him.

I face him, arms folded against my chest, nearly squeezing the life out of me as if I were him. I’m standing at a crossroads. I can’t outrun him without my vampire speed, and I can’t admit to what I’ve done with these damn mourning eavesdroppers nearby. I can’t kill him while the council investigate the girl’s death, because then covering my tracks all these years would have been for nothing. If he won’t let me leave and I can’t risk staying, what am I to do?

My phone buzzes in my pocket, and I pull it out to find a text from George.

We need to talk.

Quickly, I respond. *Can’t until later. Something’s come up,* I text, ditching George for the boy who haunts my dreams.

CHAPTER EIGHT

George

I DREAM OF FUR AND BLOOD. IT'S A HOWLING AGONY, TAUNTING ME FROM the dark corners of my mind. The werewolf stays out of sight, no matter how many times I will it to show itself to me. But when it finally does, I find myself pinned to the unseen floor, frozen in sleep paralysis. Yellowed eyes of the dribbling beast hovering above me, his equally yellowed teeth are bared and ready to devour me. I try and scream, but no sound comes out. Reaching for my magic is pointless. I am weak. I am captured prey.

Although I know it is a dream, I am still filled with horror. Usually, being an Alcott witch, I can control my lucid dreams. But tonight is different.

In my dreamscape, no matter how hard I try to lift my arms and push the wolf from above me, I cannot. All I can hear is the voice that slips past the open, spit-linked jaws of the werewolf.

You did this. The wolf speaks to me. *They'll find my body, and they'll turn you in. You will be theirs...*

I close my eyes to the snarling face of the beast and will it to leave me. But when I open them again, another horror stares back at me.

Chad.

He dips his face in close to my neck and kisses it. His lips soft and welcoming as they once had been. Then he sits up, broad chest glistening against the dark shadows of the dream.

We can't do this anymore. If they find out...

Just like the first time he said those words to me, I begin to cry.

Please, I beg. You promised you'd never hurt me. I love you...

Chad laughs, his face warping before my eyes into the werewolf I killed.

No one loves you, murderer. They all hate you. Every. Single. One.

My shoulders shake violently, causing the dream to shiver and lose focus.

“Wake up.” Mother’s voice cuts through the dream like ice cold water. “Get up now, child. I need you.”

I crash out of the dreamscape, gasping for breath. Without touching it, I know my head is covered in a fresh layer of sweat. Even the swan-feathered pillow is damp.

Mother stands above me, wild hair collected in her famous bun and pinned back by numerous hidden clips. Her eyes are creased with concern, but her lips are turned up into a smile.

“What is it?” I grumble, expecting her to tell me she knows what I have done. Her son is a murderer. But would she care? She has me kill in secret. Is there a difference? I often feed into the darkness she promotes.

“I need you to get up.” She claps, excitement lacing her voice. “I have something I want you to see.”

Promptly, I climb from bed and follow Mother out of my room, across the carpeted landing, and into her own bedroom. It is simple, like her. Only a touch of white wood furniture and a hideous glass cabinet fill the empty space. A plush rug covers the scratched wooden floor beneath it. Like how Mother hides her marked personality behind her smile and bright eyes, the carpet covers the damaged floor.

The TV is playing on the wall. Mother picks up the remote from her bed and turns the volume up for us both to hear.

The newscaster stands beside Wolfsbane Forest. I can recognize those trees anywhere. My blood chills. He is interviewing Elder Jane, who—to the unknowing eye—is the police chief of Hillcrest. She speaks of a body that has turned up—a mundane girl. We both listen as she tells us of the details and memorial being held at the local cemetery in a few hours. She asks those watching to come forward with any information they might have relating to the death. A flash of a reward comes up on the screen, but I don’t focus on it. My mind is preoccupied with a rush of relief that it was not the mention of the wolf I killed.

I stand with my fingers to my mouth as I listen intently to what Elder Jane has to say. Mother quickly turns the TV down before I can finish taking in the information.

“Vampire kill. It must be. Explains the marks that were left on the body,” Mother says. “Which means they have broken the treaty again. This time publicly.”

Mother is smiling like a Cheshire cat, teeth white and perfect, adding to her normal façade. I know why she smiles. This means, if she finds the vampire first, she can kill it—or I can.

“It could be the wolves,” I say. “The body was found in Wolfsbane Forest. Why would a vampire feed there?”

She shrugs. “That is what you are going to find out for me. Join the council’s investigation. Find me information before anyone else.”

“How?” I ask, unable to hold her gaze for too long.

“I want you to go to the memorial and see if you can pick up any details. No matter how big or small. Anything could lead us to the beast that did this to the innocent.” Innocent is the word Mother used with humans. I used to think it sounded as if she truly cared for them, but then I realized the truth. It is her way of putting herself above them. She likes the idea of humans being weak and in need of help. It gives her purpose.

I shake my head. “We should leave this to Elder Jane and the council. I don’t think—”

“I don’t know why you are refusing me!”

“I’m not.”

“Yes, you are. You are refusing what I ask of you. I am your mother, and I deserve your respect and cooperation. After everything I have done for you—brought you up alone, kept this roof over your head, shared my power with you—you dare refuse me?”

There it is. The cracks in Mother’s illusion of normality. Her hands shake as she clenches them into fists at her side, even though her eyes are glazed with real tears. Such a slight comment can send her into a meltdown.

She has enough power in her hands to make me do anything against my will. But she knows as well as I do that she would never need to use it on me. I could never say no to her.

“I’ll go,” I say quickly, trying to calm her shouting.

Instantly, Mother’s face relaxes its stressed lines, and she releases a long sigh. “Grand. Then go. The memorial starts shortly, and I want you to weed out any vibes that you can relating to the girl’s death. I want answers *before* Elder Jane forces her pointed nose into this mess. I *must* find the vampire first.”

“I’ll try,” I say.

“I am sure you will.” She rubs a hand down my cheek in a quick moment of caring. Then in a blink of an eye, she’s scowling. “What are you

still doing standing around?”

I rush out of her room, straight back for my own. Her sporadic outbursts put me on edge, and I was already inches from teetering off and into the abyss after what I did yesterday.

With the urgent need to get out of the house, I dress quickly. I look for something to blend in with the memorial goers that wouldn't also be uncomfortable, but this is all I have. I will need to get in and out undetected. I decide to pull on a pair of black jeans and a long-sleeved black t-shirt. For strength I loop my amethyst charm around my neck and put it beneath my t-shirt. It will grant me mental clarity. Going into the thoughts and minds of those around me takes a large toll on my ability and energy. The crystals help my control. I've only had to do it once before, and it almost broke me. I will not let it happen again.



I watch Savi from the tree line beyond the memorial. Her arms are crossed over her chest as she too watches on as the memorial goers Hoover around within the grounds. I don't have the chance to join the line of mourners, not when I spot her. Even from this distance, I see her concern. But I cannot get too close. Her enhanced senses would pick up on my presence the moment the wind changes direction. The farther I am, the better.

This is not how I would normally act around her, but the turning of my stomach proves that something is off. That only intensifies when I spot the boy. The same one she saved the night prior. It seems that I am not the only one who spots her as he proceeds to chase her down as she leaves in a hurry. I try and follow, sticking to the tree line, but out of earshot so I can't hear what they are saying to each other.

Anger bubbles when the boy grips Savi's arm to stop her. I want to rush over to her, but something is keeping me away. Instead, I pull out my phone and text her.

We need to talk, I type and hit send.

There is a long pause before she replies. I watch her pull out her own phone while the boy has his back to me. She reads the message and replies.

Can't until later. Something's come up.

I watch my screen to see if she says anything else, but when I look back up she is walking off, with the boy in tow.

Her message leaves a bad taste in my mouth. Instead of walking back for the memorial, I turn and leave. Why is Savi here anyway? There might be one person who has the answer to that: Chad.



“Chad,” I say as he opens the door. Naturally, I take a few steps back from him to still my discomfort at seeing him again, but it doesn’t help.

“What are you doing here?” he says, looking behind me for someone. “If she sees you—”

“Savi’s not with me, which is why I’m here to see you. Trust me, I wouldn’t have come if I didn’t see a need,” I bite back. He could at least act like he is not repulsed to see me.

Conjuring courage, I push past him and walk into his home.

“Please, come in,” he says, sarcasm clear in his tone. He slams the door and stalks me all the way into their kitchen. “I have nothing better to do than speak with you.”

“You’ve changed,” I say, keeping my eyes forward and not looking back at him.

“No, I haven’t. You just didn’t know me properly before.”

I laugh, pulling out a bar stool and taking a seat. “Trust me, Chad, I think we both know I knew you very, very well.”

“If you are here to rub my tainted past in my face, don’t bother wasting your time.” He folds his arms over his chest, which tightly pulls the buttons of his plaid shirt. “You know where the door is.”

I spit out what it is I came to say. “Why was Savi at the memorial for the human girl who turned up dead in Bane’s Forest?”

Surprise cuts Chad’s handsome face. “She’s your friend. Why don’t you ask her?”

“I was supposed to see her this morning, but she cancelled.”

“Then she has finally seen sense in being your friend,” Chad says.

“Wouldn’t you like that. In fact, I saw her walking off with human boy, who, from what I overheard at the memorial, was the dead girl’s boyfriend.”

“Ex-boyfriend,” Chad corrects, “I saw him on TV being interviewed. Savi is grown. She does what she wants to do. I don’t have claim over her actions. Only she is to blame for them.”

“To blame for them? And what is it she should be blamed for?” My stomach turns, the answer already creeping in the back of my mind.

“I want you to leave, George. You waltz into my home, demanding answers, which you know as well as I, that I don’t have.”

He is lying. I can sense it like a pungent smell. I reach out to touch his arm, knowing I can read him if I make contact, but he moves swiftly and is standing at the other side of the room in a single blink. “Go, George, before I’m forced to make you leave.”

“If you are hiding something, I will find out,” I say, turning to leave.

“Why are you so invested in this girl’s death?”

“Because by this afternoon, fellow witches and I will be sent to the forest, and the moment they pick up the scent of who or what killed this girl, it will be too late to help.”

“You’d be willing to help the girl’s killer?” he asks, gaze unable to hold my own.

“I think you and I both know what is going on here.” I turn to leave. “I trust you still have my number. Drop me a message if you come up with any answers.”

“Wait.” Chad moves close to me, body standing in the doorway, stopping me from leaving. He smells of strong lavender, a scent I used to admire. His eyes swirl with tones of ruby and blood as he looks deep into my very soul.

“What Chad? What can you say now?”

“Just... don’t do anything rash, okay?”

“And what does that mean?”

“Speak with Savi first. You owe it to her.”

I slip past him, my heart beating at full speed. “If she were not preoccupied with the human boy, maybe I would. But she canceled on me, so how am I supposed to speak with her.”

“George, please.”

“Thanks again, Chad. And don’t worry. I won’t be around again in a hurry.”

I clench my fists as I walk away from him, fighting the urge to turn back around. Never did I think we would get to this. But secrets do not hold

people together; they only push them apart. And whatever secret Savi is keeping will have the same effects.

I pull my phone out to ping her a message when I see a text from Mother. She tells me Elder Jane is waiting. I know very well the wrath of Elder Jane when she is kept for too long. During such an important inquisition, I have no time to mess around.

I run straight for Bane's Forest. Each footfall mirrors the beat of my own anxiety. By the time I reach Elder Jane, I am ready to burst.

CHAPTER NINE

Savi

THE ROOM FALLS SILENT AS WE ENTER TOGETHER. VAMPIRE AND... HUMAN. Everyone at Crest Coffee is a supernatural. Tourists stop in for a quick pick-me-up, but this place, this town, was founded for supernaturals. If the human notices how the room fell silent the moment we entered, he doesn't say anything.

I scratch my palms as we stand in line to order our drinks. I can feel his eyes on me. The predator in me wants to lash out. I fight the urge to show him how uncomfortable I am under his gaze.

"Savi, hey." I meet Kim's gaze and offer a polite smile. Her black hair is pulled back into a tight bun, but loose strands stick to her slick forehead. She's short, like me.

Kim owns Crest Coffee, and our family ties span decades. Her mother was one of my mother's best friends. They met when my mother was traveling in Asia, where Kim's family once called home. Occasionally, when she's desperate, she'll ask me to cover a shift. I welcome the opportunity to leave the manor, even though I suck at making drinks.

"Kim, the usual," I say. My usual drink, of course, is blood. After all, I'm a vampire.

"And for you?" Kim stares at the human, eyes wide, hands shaking, jaw clenched in a fake smile.

For goodness sake, Kim, can you look any more obvious? I fight the urge to roll my eyes.

"Small coffee. Black," he replies. Again, either he's completely oblivious to everyone's discomfort, or he simply doesn't care. I'm not sure which intrigues me more.

"Got it, and on the house," she says, eyeing me. I send her a silent thank you, as I've only just now realized I left the house without grabbing my wallet. Having the human pay for my drink after I killed his girlfriend—and will probably have to kill him—just seems... wrong.

Kim quickly pours a small black coffee and hands it to the unwelcomed visitor before escaping to the backroom, where an industrial-sized refrigerator holds all the *special order* items, like blood. Though I can't see her, I can hear her every movement, from the refrigerator door opening to the blood bag ripping open to the splash of the liquid hitting the bottom of the cup to her rumbling stomach. She presses a few buttons on the backroom microwave, and I'm fixated on the smell of warming blood. I lick my lips in anticipation. Before I know it, she's in front of me, handing me my drink with a special straw made of bamboo. It hides the crimson residue left behind after each drink. I thank her and turn toward the human.

"Inside or—"

"Outside," I interrupt as I adjust my sunglasses.

He nods, and I follow him to an empty table just outside the café's front door. At first, we sit in silence. I wait for him to speak, to accuse me of something or explain why he came back here.

"So, *Savi*." I flinch as he says my name, and I realize I don't know his. It feels like an odd power trip. As if answering my silent question, he adds, "Will."

"Will," I whisper.

I blink, and I'm gone. No longer sitting outside Crest Coffee in downtown Hillcrest, I find myself in an unknown place. The space is small, and it digs into my sides as I lean against something hard yet yielding. I pull away, and I see him. Pupils dilated, chest heaving, lips full and wet, he pulls me onto his lap. I'm clumsy as I crawl my way onto him. Leaning back, the sound of a car horn startles me. I giggle, and he smiles. I lean forward to kiss him, and strands of blonde hair fall into my eyes. He brushes them back as our lips meet.

"Savi?"

I blink away the memory and swish my drink. "I'm sorry, what?"

"Are you okay?" he asks, a brow arched.

I nod and take a long slurp of my drink. He watches me, grimacing.

"Where did you go just now?" he presses on.

"Hm?" I say, pretending I have no idea what he's talking about.

"One minute we were talking, and the next... It's like you weren't even here with me."

I shrug. "Sorry. Just a lot on my mind today."

He nods. "I'm sure."

I stare into his eyes, wondering what he means. I could compel him, but that would require me to remove my sunglasses. Only born-vampires can use compulsion, so it's considered taboo. The argument made long ago was that it's not *fair* to those turned. That's a ridiculous reason to deny this part of us, but still, I *try* to follow the rules. And compelling a human in the middle of town square wouldn't exactly help my cause right now.

"What were you doing at the cemetery?" Will asks.

"Mourning," I say quickly.

"Mourning..." he trails off, but it's evident in his tone that he wants me to clarify my response. This angers me. Who is he to demand an alibi from me? He's the unwelcomed one in this town.

"My dead family," I say bluntly, hoping he'll get the message. "Why were *you* there?"

"The memorial is today."

My heart sinks. Of course it is. I thought the cemetery looked busier than usual today. I assumed the visitors were supernaturals, but obviously, the cemetery that borders the forest where her body was found would be the perfect memorial meeting point.

"I'm sorry for your loss," I say, and for once, I mean my words. I'm sorry I killed her, I'm sorry I'm in this mess, and I'm sorry I put the distraught look on his face. Guilt washes over me like a tidal wave sure to drown me.

"I don't mourn only her," he says.

"What do you mean?"

"You were there when it happened. I *saw* you."

I swallow the knot that forms in my throat, and for the second time today, I choose not to misinterpret his meaning.

"Saw me do what?" I ask. All of my senses are alerted to his every movement, every breath. The monster in me speaks now, begging me to end his life before he can spill my secrets to the world.

"You were at the bonfire," he says, pausing to take a drink of his coffee. "When... when *they* attacked."

"The wolves," I whisper.

He nods.

"Are there any others?" I ask.

He shakes his head.

"No one else survived?" I continue.

“No one else has been found. Their bodies... No one has reported their deaths. Don’t you find that a bit odd?” he asks.

No, I don’t. The wolves cleaned up that mess, I’m sure of it. They’ll be reported as missing, not dead. Not unless Will goes to the police and tells them what he knows. They’ll kill him, of course, but after he’s been *dealt with*, the council will look into his accusations. They’ll find proof of the murders. And somehow, they’ll discover what George did. I can’t let that happen. I *won’t* let that happen.

“Why haven’t you gone to the police, Savi?”

I can sense his anger. His body temperature is rising, and as it does, his blood warms. I take a deep breath, letting the scent linger over my tongue. This boy, this human, is breathtaking. I’ve never felt so... enthralled before. I’ve never wanted to taste someone so badly. I wish he were my first. But if he were, I can only imagine the monster I’d be today. Already, I can tell his blood will be lifechanging.

“Don’t you find it a little suspicious?” he asks.

“I suppose I could ask you the same question,” I say as I suck up what remains of my drink. Will’s grip on his disposable coffee cup tightens, and I hear the slightest fracture in the paper.

Behind him, I watch other supernaturals cross the street, intentionally avoiding us. After the news report today, vampires are steering clear of humans. I understand their concern. Even the wrongly accused face the same fate: death. Just look at the witch trials. Many of the claimed souls were human. That was what prompted the treaty. Laws were enacted to ensure peace between the factions—and humans. One by one, small towns were developed to house supernaturals, and little by little, we lived our lives without daily interactions with *them*, with *humans*. But look where I am now. Sitting beside a human, while my supernatural comrades hunt me. I can only hope my mistakes won’t cost Chad—and George—their lives.

Without looking, I toss my empty cup in the air behind me, and it lands in a garbage can several feet away.

“Nice shot,” Will says.

I shrug it off, even though he’s right. It was a nice shot. Probably too good for a human, but it’s something I’ve done many times before, from this very table. Only this time, George isn’t sitting across from me. Even so, Will makes me feel... comfortable. Like how I feel with George, only different. I don’t understand why Will is affecting me the way he is, and I

can't wait until the girl's blood—and memories—are completely out of my system. I can't risk feeling this way for him. I need to protect my own, not him.

"Why haven't you gone to the police?" he asks.

"Why haven't you?" I counter.

"Because it sounds crazy. Think about it: on the night of the full moon, we were attacked by these enormous wolves."

He's struggling to describe what he saw that night. That's good. Maybe his mind will trick him into rationalizing what happened.

"No one would believe me. They'd think I was crazy or on drugs or something."

"It does sound farfetched," I agree.

He winces as though my words hurt him. "You were there. You know what happened. We need to make this right. We have to go to the police."

I groan. For fucks sake. The last thing Hillcrest needs right now are human police officers investigating the disappearance of a group of college students. Once they catch wind of the girl's death, they'll be all too eager to take over the investigations.

I nod, knowing what this means. I exhale slowly, unable to shake the feeling that swells in my heart. It swarms within me, choking, suffocating, until it spills over, dripping down my cheeks.

I hear him gasp as he studies my face. Instinctively, I reach to shield myself. My fingertips are stained crimson. I jump from my chair and run. I run as fast as I can, not caring about exposing the truth behind the dots he's surely connecting now that he's seen my tears.

My feet slam against the concrete sidewalk that leads to my house. I rush inside the safety of home and don't stop until I'm tucked neatly beneath the covers of my bed. I hide there, knowing Chad wouldn't dare enter. The floor creaks behind my door, and I know he's there, waiting for permission I'll never grant. I refuse to let him see me like this—so caught up in the girl's memories and feelings for a boy I don't even know.

He is unstoppable, headstrong on a righteous path, and that's all I need to know to be intent in my choice. The moment I made my decision, pain stronger than anything I'd ever felt encompassed me. The monster in me chuckled as I regretted my past kills.

I don't pride myself in killing, but I don't stop myself either. And now, I must deal with the consequences of my actions.

Even though the girl is long gone, dead and soon to turn to ash as her remains are set aflame by the town's Elders, her memories live on within me. I fear I may never silence them or her or these feelings she's invoking within my cold heart.

But there is one thing I do know, wholeheartedly and as sure as I am that my identity as her killer will be revealed.

I have to kill him.

CHAPTER TEN

George

“I HAVE PICKED THE THREE OF YOU FOR THIS TASK, AS YOU ARE THE BEST pupils I have, and I know you will get the job done quietly and efficiently.” Elder Jane stands before us, the sun creating a halo of light around her wiry frame. Under the cover of her day job, she is dressed in her police chief uniform I have always known her to own. But beneath the tie and jacket, I know the truth. She was chosen by the council to lead the witches in Hillcrest. I always wondered why Mother was not picked, since our ancestry line is stronger and older than Elder Jane’s, but it seems the council did not see Mother as ‘well enough’ to lead after Father’s death. Mother never covers her disdain for Elder Jane. Her jealousy is evident whenever she is mentioned.

Regardless of what Mother thinks, I like Elder Jane. I always have. She is levelheaded, just, and kind. Not once has she wasted breath to force me to join a coven. She always respects my choice to be a solitary witch—unlike Mother, who thinks I’m weak for not joining and leading a coven. She tells me every chance she gets that I don’t take after her since I lack her ability to manipulate and control those weaker than me. In my mind, that is something I am thankful not to have.

“I trust you will return with answers as soon as you can. This inquisition is messy. It will not be long until the humans begin asking questions regarding her death,” Elder Jane says.

“I heard they are blaming a supernatural,” Dani says. Dani is a quiet witch with long sun-strand hair and chestnut eyes almost too big for her face. She was in my class of witches trained alongside Elder Jane. Like me, she kept to herself. I would often see her gaze glued to the pages of a different book every day.

“Rumors are toxic, but in this instant, true. I regret to say, whatever you find will be important and possibly incriminating evidence against the supernatural who committed this crime,” Elder Jane explains.

“But that would mean they have broken the treaty,” Dani replies, brows creasing and hands rubbing together. “Does the council know?”

“Of course they know,” Elder Jane rolls her stormy green eyes. “Which is why I need you to cease your questions and go now to find out what has happened. Wolfsbane Forest is vast, so you each must split up to find some answers. I’d like, very much, that this inquisition and any evidence you find remain confidential. I fear if news leaks before a proper investigation is complete, the vampire clan and wolf pack may become rabid toward each other. We are here to control the situation and ensure a fair penalty is in place.”

“Dad told me the wolves are to blame because of the full moon last night.”

“Samuel, be sure to tell your father that gossiping is frowned upon by the council. He should know better than to spread fake news.”

Samuel’s pale face reddens before he looks away from Elder Jane. He is the youngest of four brothers and, from my understating, fire is their element.

Witches can tap into all four elements, but it is uncommon to have great control over more than one. Samuel controls fire, and Dani controls earth. That is why they have been picked, I guess. Plus, being trained by Elder Jane grants them favor in these situations. But me? I know why I join them. I have control over all four elements. My bloodline permits it. Elder Jane uses me, just like Mother, during certain situations. It is not uncommon for her to call me, but this is different. I feel it in my bones.

For the tenth time, I check my phone to see if Savi has replied, and all that glares back at me is the empty screen. Was she still with the human boy? And why? Chad acted strange, enough to make the nagging doubt in my mind double. Somehow, call it intuition, I know Savi is involved in this girl’s death. I only hope I’m proven wrong.

Elder Jane takes a call and waves us off without another word. From the hush tone of her voice, I can sense it’s not a positive conversation. I don’t envy her, not with a human death and the wolf death and multiple missing teens she doesn’t even know about yet. I could clear up the latter two problems by telling her what happened last night, but telling her I witnessed the wolves’ feast would throw Savi and me in the middle of the missing wolf case—the wolf I killed. Soon, I’m sure, the alpha will come to her and

claim he senses a witch's involvement in the disappearance of his pack member, but I can't worry about that now. I must focus on the task at hand.

Dani, Samuel, and I walk in a line toward the forest's edge and ready our powers. From training, I know a witch's spell casting can come from three different places in his or her body. Some come from the mind, others the soul, and rarely the heart. Three ports of energy in a witch, neither one more powerful as a source than the other, but having a place to call on helps with concentration.

A simple thought combined with an exhale is all I need to open the twisting coil of power deep inside of me. In my stomach, chest, and mind, I feel my awareness stretch like a waking cat. With my awakened power, I sense Dani and Samuel do the same. Although there are no visual signs of being a witch, I can still feel the way another connects to his or her innate ability, like the brush of breath on cold skin or the warm kiss of the sun. It's how I know when a vampire is near. I feel the same tingle that creeps down the back of my neck. It is one of my own gifts. All Alcott witches remain alert around other supernaturals. This extra sense was needed before the treaty, when enemies came at us from all sides.

Before me, I see a blur of a presence streaking through the forest. It looks like silver-colored steam, like strands of moonlight that cut through windows at nightfall. This light that lingers in the forest is a sign that someone has been here.

It's me.

It's my imprint left over from last night, when I met Savi.

My heart skips a beat as I worry they might sense it, but deep down, I know that would be impossible. Thanks to the cloaking charm I put on both Savi and me, it would take a powerful witch to break my spell. Dani and Samuel don't have that kind of power.

"Why don't you both take the main path? I will skirt around and see what I can find," I say.

"George Alcott, you don't change, do you? Never wanting help from anyone..." Samuel grunts as he rolls his sleeves to his elbows. "I knew this would start with you wanting to go alone. Do you want Elder Jane's appreciation that desperately?"

"Sam, stop," Dani interrupts.

"Well, if you think I am sticking with you, Dani, you are wrong. My coven would never let me live it down." Samuel stalks off into the shadows

of the forest, leaving Dani and me behind.

Dani mumbles something under her breath.

“He is a prat,” I say, using an old English term that Father used when he was alive. “Don’t let him get under your skin. I know I don’t.”

Dani shrugs. “It shouldn’t bother me, but it does. The McCain brothers are all the same. Notorious for being big-headed, egotistical asses. I can’t help but find them each as grating as the next.”

“Then we both agree on something,” I reply. “Want to search together? I could do with your skills.”

“Sweet, but that’s a lie. We all know you can do this alone.”

“Perhaps, but the company would be nice.”

Dani fights a smile and nods.

I wave my hand. “Lead the way.”

Turns out Dani is not as quiet as I previously thought. She bombards me with questions regarding mundane topics like reading and movies. I didn’t question her as she walks off path through the forest. She seems to know where she is going.

There is something about Dani that lights up as she speaks on things she loves. We move from books to movies to boys, ending in convulsions at mention of a disastrous date she had recently.

“What about you? I don’t see you around with anyone much.”

“Nope. Hillcrest is so small. There really is no one I am interested in enough to put effort and time into entertaining,” I reply. “Even the thought of it makes me skin crawl,” I say, squirming.

“Don’t I know it,” she laughs. “Although, I am talking to a girl, not that it will go anywhere. She’s human, and plus, it’s strictly online. My family wouldn’t appreciate me talking to her.”

“Because she’s a girl?” I ask, pulling a face of disgust.

“Goddess no, they don’t care about that. Their issue would be because she is human. So backward right? I mean, what does it really matter? It’s not like witches and humans have never been with each other before, so I don’t see the big issue. If she were a vampire or wolf, *then* I’d understand.”

I fake a laugh, an image of Chad conjuring in my mind’s eye.

Thankfully, Dani stalls, hands raised around her as if she is reading the gentle touch of air. Her sudden stop brings me back from my distraction, and I open my awareness again to read the location.

“It happened here.” Dani’s voice deepens as she continues, “I sense a struggle and loss of blood. The earth still feels her death like an echo of a memory.”

She proceeds to look around the forest bed for remnants, but I know she will not find any. Not with what I can see.

The imprint left in the air is familiar to me. It’s a blur of crimson and silver. The silver represents my own energy mixing with the other. This is the energy I used when creating the protection charm. Crimson has always represented Savi. My Savi.

I also see the imprint of the human girl’s dull gray energy. It is directly beneath where Dani is standing. I fear if she touches the bloodless ground, she will see what I see, know what I now know. How could Savi do this?

I can’t help the relief of knowing that Dani will not sense Savi’s presence. Not with my cloaking charm across it. But I can see it, and the damage is done.

“I don’t see anything else but the dead human’s imprint,” I lie, distracting Dani.

“Strange. Perhaps it didn’t happen here, and the body was just planted here before it was found?” Dani suggests.

“Why don’t you keep looking, and I’ll tell Elder Jane what we’ve found so far? Perhaps we need someone else to assess the area?”

“Good idea,” she agrees.

“You think you will be all right out here?” I ask.

Dani nods, already walking away from the area of question. “Of course, you really think the wolves will risk breaking the treaty to hurt me?”

Her question is light and innocent, but it turns my stomach. It seems it isn’t the wolves she need fear...

I fake a smile and turn to leave, worried if I open my mouth, I will either scream or vomit. Only until I am far enough from Dani do I begin to run. My legs are strengthened, fueled by my frantic heart.

Savi drinks blood from blood bags and the occasional animal, but this proof goes against everything I’ve ever believed to be true. Chad must have known. That is why he acted so out of character when I confronted him. If he was hiding this, what else could he have kept from me?

Anger, confusion, betrayal... emotions burn through me as I run through town. As I make my way toward Savi’s house, I consider what she’s done. Savi killed an innocent, but so have I.

My head spins, causing me to stall. Gasping for breath, I send a text, knowing Savi could not ignore this one.

Meet me at your house, I message. I know you killed the human.

She replies almost instantly. *Hurry.*

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Savi

MY EYES BURN FROM THE LOSS OF TEARS SPILLED. THE PAIN IN MY GUT still lingers, but I'm too weak to cry again. The ache is something new, something I haven't felt since the night I killed the girl.

Hunger. Real, raw, honest hunger. I drink a blood bag daily, but that's only to maintain strength. I don't crave it. I never have. But I'm weak from crying blood, and I need to refuel. I need my strength for what's to come.

The boy. The human collegegoer who's messing up my life. If I hadn't saved him the night of the bonfire massacre, I wouldn't be in this position right now. The irony weighs heavily on me. I killed a girl but then saved a boy. Shouldn't that balance out the universe?

I turn over in bed, sheets tangling around me as I wrap myself in a cocoon of fabric. Staring out my bedroom window, I watch the clouds dance across the sky. In a few hours, it will be nightfall, and the mistakes I've made will be cast in shadow, where they were always meant to remain. I don't like seeing them splashed across television screens.

The breeze picks up, sending more yellowing leaves flying from their once-home. Our garden is filled with them now. Chad and I aren't exactly gardeners, and we've put the care Mother had for this manor to shame. If I survived this inquisition, I'd be better. A better sister, a better friend, a better vampire...

I glance at the clock and groan. It hasn't even been thirty minutes, yet it feels like hours have passed since I ran away from my problems at lightning speed.

I know he saw me. I dashed out of there with vampire speed. He blinked, and I was gone. How am I to explain that if I see him again?

I grunt as I stand and walk to my *en suite* bathroom. My eyes are puffy, my cheeks stained red. I splash some water on my face to clear the evidence. Vampires are seductive creatures by nature, but I wouldn't exactly call us emotional. Chad will be suspicious if he sees me this way. I reapply

some makeup, and only when I look semi-normal, I exit my bathroom, making my way to the kitchen to refuel.

Unsurprisingly so, I find Chad waiting for me in the hallway. We don't speak, and I'm sure the look on my face is conveying the fact that I'll stab him in the eye with a fork should he even ask about my day. He wraps an arm around my shoulder, and I lean against him. We stay that way for a long while, until the pain becomes but a distant memory.

"It'll get easier," he promises. "Once her blood is completely out of your system."

I nod. I'll keep her memories forever, of course. That's the price I pay for taking her life, but unlike now, they'll hold no control over me. Only I can call them forth, not some triggering word, feeling, or place. By day's end, she will be gone, and my mind will be clear.

Tomorrow, I'll kill the boy, and all will be right in my world.

I hope.



I finish my third blood bag and wash the mug, setting it on the shelf to dry itself. Mother used to chastise me for doing that. It leaves water stains, she said. Knowing that I may soon see her leaves me in a funk. While I do miss my parents, I'm not ready to leave this place yet. Sometimes, I wish vampires were immortal, like they are in the many films and television shows to embrace this century. Other times, I don't want that burden.

A hard knock at our front door startles me. Chad eyes me curiously as we both inhale deeply, attempting to sense who our visitor may be. I fear they've come for me, to haul me away like the criminal I am. Just as I'm about to repent for my sins, my mind clears, focusing on only one thing.

The boy.

The boy!

How stupid could he be to come here? How did he find me? He couldn't have possibly followed me home. I was too fast for his human senses, this I'm sure.

My shock must register on my face, because Chad looks furious.

"A *human*?" he spits out.

I race to beat him to the front double doors, but we open them simultaneously. My gaze slides up the lengthy frame of our intruder. He's as tall as Chad, but where Chad's muscular frame is bulky, Will's is lean. Even without Chad's vampire strength, he could end Will's life with little effort.

"Give me a minute," I say to Chad, who doesn't move. "Chad, please."

He tears his gaze away from Will's to stare down at me. In those few seconds of silence, he says all he needs to say before retreating to the parlor. If I thought he'd actually listen to me, I'd tell Chad waiting in the room adjacent to the foyer isn't exactly giving us space.

"Come in," I say. I close the door behind him, and we stand in silence in the dark entry way. In this light, he can't see my red eyes or pearlescent skin. In this light, I'm just a girl standing before a boy asking him what the hell he's thinking for stalking me.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. I pull it out to see two texts from George.

Meet me at your house. I know you killed the human.

My throat tightens, my chest heaving. I choke out a breath, and my phone slips from my grasp. It crashes to the ground, bouncing once, twice, before landing at my feet. As if in slow motion, Will reaches down to pick it up. In the corner of my eye, I see Chad emerge from the parlor. I inhale. I exhale. I blink. My breath is loud in my head. The blood in my stomach is heavy, as if it's formed into a rock. I feel rooted by it, by the blood of a human donor. Muffled voices echo around me, but I can't understand them.

Will glances at the screen of my phone as he hands it back to me, but I don't take it. Instead, I watch him. I watch the recognition of those little letters as they register in his mind. I watch as his eyes widen before narrowing at me. It was the slightest fracture in his perfect persona. Had I not been looking at him in that moment, I never would have seen it.

I don't take back the phone, so Chad steps beside me and yanks it free from Will's white-knuckle grip. Still unmoving, I watch as Chad reads the text from George. Jaw clenched, he types a quick reply, angling the phone toward me.

Hurry, he responds.

I fear what he will do to protect me. I don't know what happened between George and him, but Chad once cared for him. I saw the way he looked at George, with respect, with love. George is my family, and I know

Chad feels—or *felt*—that same way. I never asked what happened between the two of them, and I suppose, now, I'll never know.

Chad slaps my phone into my hand before ushering an unwavering Will out the front door. As he does, George approaches. His face is contorted in such anger, such uncertainty. My heart aches just looking at him, so I glance away, ashamed.

I hear Will argue before the front door slams shut, and the only souls haunting the Danvers Manor are the three of us. Staring at the ground, I wait for someone else to speak.

"Don't deny what you did," George says. His voice is laced in anger as his words lash out at me. I wince as they make contact.

"I'm sorry," I whisper. *I never wanted you to find out this way...*

"You're only sorry you've been caught," George counters.

"So the others know?" Chad asks.

His voice is cool, calm, collected, and I want to smack him upside the head. *How can you be so calm right now?* I scream internally, but on the outside, I'm simply the shell of the vampire I used to be.

"I haven't told anyone yet," George says.

"Yet?" Chad asks. "So you plan to tell them?"

George pauses before exhaling slowly. "I haven't decided."

I meet his gaze, unable to hide my shock. What I've done is monstrous, but how can he say that? I would give my life to protect him, to hide his secrets, like the one haunting us from the base of Wolfsbane's cliff.

"Don't look at me that way, Savi. *You killed an innocent human!*"

"You don't understand!" I shout.

"You can't understand. You're not *one of us*," Chad clarifies.

I reach for my brother, placing a hand atop his forearm. I need him to reel in his disdain for George while we figure out what to do. As if sensing my silent plea, he nods.

"I can't help it," I whisper, trying to help George understand what I did. "It's *who I am*."

"So you've been killing all this time? How many, Savi? How many have there been?" George asks, disgusted.

I cower at his words, unable to look at the repulsion in his eyes. "Please, stop looking at me like that." I wipe the tears that spill. "You don't understand. You'll never understand! You don't know what it's like to deny who you are."

“Are you kidding me, Savi? Do you realize who you’re talking to? All I do is hide my truth, deny who I am.”

I shake my head. “It’s not the same. You’ve never had to hide who you are from me. You’ve never told me your truth and watched me look at you the way you’re looking at me right now. I can’t stand it! I can’t stand the *hate*, the *disgust*, the *shame* you’re giving me right now. I’ve *never* looked at you this way, George, even when you shared the things you’ve done.”

I barely make it through my monologue. I hiccup each word, tears spilling as I sniffle. My voice is weak, and my words slur together as if I’ve been drinking. But I know he understands my meaning. *The werewolf*. He has killed just like me. And I told him we’d take care of it. I told him he’d be okay. I’d protect him.

Unlike me, his first instinct was not to protect me, but to shame me. As unforgiveable as that is, my heart is still breaking for my best friend. I desperately need his forgiveness. Not because his forgiveness grants me safety from the council, but because I love him. He and Chad are all I have. I can’t lose this. I won’t survive it.

Before he can respond, his phone buzzes, and I watch as he glances at his incoming text message. He gasps before reading the message aloud.

“It’s my mom. She said the wolves have reported one of their own is missing... Savi, if they find—”

I spring forward and take his arm. “Come on, we should go before the hunting party goes out. There’s still time.”

We leave Chad in the parlor, his face twisted with confusion. As I pull the door closed, I tell him I’ll explain later. What I don’t acknowledge is that I may not be coming back...

CHAPTER TWELVE

George

WE DON'T TALK THE ENTIRE WAY TO WOLFSBANE FOREST. I CAN SENSE Savi's lingering discomfort from our conversation that had to end so abruptly. But regardless, her words still batter around in my mind. She is right. How could I look at her with such disgust after what I've been made to do? I know the answers lie with what Mother has me do to vampires. The panic I feel roots from that. If Mother ever finds out what Savi has done, I know in my heart that she would have me hurt her, regardless of what Savi means to me. But the question I ask myself... would I do it? My heart says no. The dark coiling power within me says yes.

"What happened here..." I say, taking the back paths through Wolfsbane Forest to the location of the bonfire. "With the human boy?"

"It is hard to explain," Savi mumbles.

"Then try," I say. "I want to know everything."

Savi gives me a look, eyes wide and lips taut. Then she sighs and tells me her truth. "When I drink blood, I can see into the thoughts and memories of those I feed from. The girl, the one who... died, was in a relationship with the boy. I saw it as plain as day. It's hard to distinguish real life from the memories sometimes, which is why it's hard to let go of her emotions for him. It doesn't help that he is hellbent on finding answers. But if I'm being honest, that's not the only reason I agreed to see him."

"Why did you want to see him?" I ask.

"He was at the party when the wolves attacked. He saw what we can do."

"He did?" My suspicions were true.

"I'm afraid so."

I couldn't speak. In one day, we broke the treaty tenfold between us. Exposing magic to humans, killing an innocent, and murdering another supernatural... So many crimes between only two of us.

My hands begin to shake uncomfortably. Even sticking them in my pockets doesn't stop their frantic shivers.

"Then he read your text message," Savi says, adding to my burning worry.

"No..." I stop walking, taking a moment to lean against the large oak beside me. Its rough bark helps still my anxiety as I use its energy to ground me. "If he tells anyone—"

"Then we will both be sentenced. I won't let that happen, George. I... I was going to kill him too you know." I can see the shame on Savi's face as she admits it. "It's the only way to protect you, us... to ensure he can't tell anyone what he saw that night."

"You can't. We both know that," I say, not sure how I feel about Savi's confession. I'm grateful she'd go to such lengths to protect me, but the bodies are piling up. Literally.

"I can," she says plainly, shocking me. "But I won't."

She looks away, picking at her nails as she riddles in her silence. I want to comfort her, but I find it hard to conjure the right words. For the first time, I see the danger Savi possesses.

"We should keep moving. Let's worry about the wolves first and deal with all this other crap later," she says.

I nod, pushing myself from the tree. Staying behind Savi, I keep my gaze on the back of her head, watching as her dark-brown hair sways with each step. She seems like such a mundane creature, human and soft. But she hides inner demons just as I do. We wear these masks to cover up what we really are. For once, I finally see just how similar we truly are.



I spot Old Oak up ahead. For as long as I can remember, this has been our meeting place. Usually triggering happy childhood memories, all I think about today is blood and death.

I know we are close to the bonfire. Only a short walk, and we will reach our destination. I connect to the air around me, trying to sense another presence. Dani and Samuel should've left the forest by now, hopefully with no answers regarding the human girl's death. Now, Savi and I are alone and can deal with the next mess on our ever-growing list.

“See the ground? That’s where the fire was.” Savi points through the tree line, and sure enough, I see the charred earth left behind from the bonfire. A table is still strewn across the grass, red cups littering the space around it. But no bodies remain of the humans who became food for the beasts. It’s not uncommon for the wolves to clean up after themselves. Unlike the stories, they’re clean—or smart—creatures when it comes to massacres. And they don’t waste meat.

Savi takes my hand, her touch cold. Having her close helps. We walk together to the cliff’s edge, which drops down toward Raven Cry Lake. In daylight, it’s easy to see the ground far below, but I can’t see the platform in the fringes of night.

“We need to get down there,” Savi says. “Are you feeling up to it?”

Wind rushes, urging us to fall into its embrace. I hear it singing, like a siren, wanting me to jump.

Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath and call upon the element of air. It rears its presence at my call. I open my palm and reach for it, pulling its hungry rush of energy toward me. I can feel every morsel of it around me. I sense the creatures burrowing beneath the mossy ground and the shift of wind beneath birds’ wings. I’m everywhere. Pure power rushes from my soul and out of my hands. The air across the lip of the cliff face hardens, and I step forward. One foot at a time, I move from solid earth to equally solid air.

Next, I call on earth.

Loose stones from the cliff separate and form a plate beneath my feet. I need the extra strength for when Savi joins me for our descent.

“Hop on,” I say to her.

Savi frowns, looking at the swirling mass of air and earth at my feet, and she shakes her head. “I think I’d rather jump than rely on that.”

I shrug, the rush of power making my head light. “Meet you down there?”

Savi dips her chin and smiles, looking at the drop as a challenge.

“First one to the ground wins.”

For a moment, we forget the chaos our lives have become. It reminds me of our days before the bonfire. There were so many childish actions and daring encounters. It was what took us out of our daily worries. Perhaps we did it now to cope with what might be waiting on the rocky ground below.

Twisting my wrists, I will the whirling elements to move. My stomach flips as I begin to lower into the abyss. Savi screams with glee, throwing herself over the edge beside me. She falls fast, disappearing beneath me. All I can see is the face of the cliff inches from my own. White chalk blends in with dark dirt. I pass empty nests and divots sized to hide small animals. The rush of wind beside me is thrilling.

Soon enough, we reach the pointed bed of rocks that crown Raven Cry Lake.

The earth and air disperse as my feet touch down on the ground. I lower my arms to the side, silently thanking the elements for their help. My brown curls are the last thing to still.

I turn for Savi, who is breathless, hair a mess around her gleeful face.

"I'll never understand the recklessness you possess," I tell her.

Savi claps a hand over her mouth, repulsion crunching her face. Her sense of smell is stronger than mine, but her reflex causes my heart to race. She smells the body. What else could be the reason behind her reaction? I look around, trying to find it, but from my vantage point, I see only the points of rock and small pools of water that surrounded them.

The lake shines azure to our side. I peer up and see the top of the cliff. The height causes my stomach to twist with excitement. I did that. I came down here and not a single bead of sweat caresses my forehead. Mother is right about one thing: using our magic *is* thrilling.

But in the back of my mind, I recognize a feeling of unease. Savi walks ahead, hand still over her mouth, as she searches the distance. I follow her steps, reaching my legs over a jagged stone. She stops, and I almost bump into her. Disrupting the beauty is a terrible stench. I see Savi, one hand on her stomach and the other over her mouth. Finally, I'm close enough to sense it, close enough to see the corpse.

"It's here—"

Something stirs in the shrubbery, causing a murder of crows to explode from their hidden perch. I freeze on the spot. Arms and legs refusing to move an inch for fear of being caught. Savi also stills, looking around with her pointed teeth bared and brows creased. The rush of blood hammers in my ears as we both glue our gazes to the moving undergrowth, and we watch as wolves slip out from their concealed locations.

"Looking for something?" A man says from where he stands behind the three wolves. He is tall, broad. Black hair is piled atop his head, twisted in a

messy excuse of a bun. Even his beard is dark and wiry. His tan skin is marked, scars covering almost every exposed part of him. I know what they are—duel marks from his kin.

“Who asks?” Savi stands her ground, already her surprise has melted from her face.

“I have seen many beings—both welcomed and unwelcomed—pass through these woods, but why would *your* kinds come now during such tense times?” the man asks, ignoring Savi’s question.

“Why the bodyguards?” Savi references the wolves, a growl stuck in her throat. “Does our presence concern you?”

“On the contrary.” The man smiles, flexing his broad shoulders. “I didn’t sense your presence. I still don’t. Why is that? How can you stand before me, yet be invisible to my sense? A wolf’s nose is a difficult thing to trick.”

I fist my hands to hide my nerves from the wolves and say, “We are exploring. There is nothing wrong about that.”

“No one explores this far into Wolfsbane Forest. Do not offer such a weak excuse. You are looking for something and so are we. I bet you can help us find... it.”

“We don’t know what you are talking about,” I say.

I peer at the body of the werewolf I killed. It lies only feet away, pierced by a piece of stone. My spell has protected my secret, hiding the remains from prying supernatural eyes, save for Savi’s, of course.

I watch as the wolves begin to corner Savi, sending her farther away from me.

“I’m only going to ask this once, and then things are going to be very bad for the two of you. Which one of you killed my brother?”

“Come on, Savi, we should leave,” I urge.

The moment she takes a step toward me, the wolves pounce.

“Run,” Savi screams as the wolves make contact. The world slows as Savi is buried by fur. All I can hear is my own breath in my ears. The man watches on with glee, hands rubbing together.

The coiling of power twists within me. It is strange, new.

I can help. All you need to do is let me.

The voice rings through my head. I don’t recognize it, but I don’t care. In that moment, it is hard to register anything but the fact that I cannot see Savi beneath the scrapping wolves.

I have to help.

Giving into my power, I grab hold and refuse to let go. The man snaps his head to me, but it is too late. The elements are under my control.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Savi

I'M FALLING, AND THE RUSH OF WIND, THE TINGLE OF MAGIC IN THE AIR, IS formidable, freeing. I've never felt such peace.

But then it ends, and the world comes crashing down.

George jokes about my recklessness, but he has no idea just how reckless I can be. He wants to know my secrets, my desires, what makes me do the things I do when dusk falls like a cold blanket over Hillcrest, but he can never know how monstrous I can be.

The wolf's body is missing. At least, that's how powerful George's magic manipulates the universe around us. Of course, it's still there, and I can see it. His magic only hides the body from those who shouldn't see it.

The pungent odor of its rotting corpse is all around me. I nearly vomit the blood I had before embarking on this ride to Truth Town with George. The smell is so bad, I lose track of everything around me. George is speaking, and though I can see his lips moving, I can't hear his words. I gag, my heightened senses focusing solely on the mistake before us.

The wolf was broken by the fall. Its legs are twisted uncomfortably beneath its frame. Even after death, it remained its true form—the wolf—which tells me we've killed a purebred, one that was born, not bitten. The revenge taken for its lost life will be devastating, for its bond to the wolves is through blood.

Its dark hair is matted and chunks of flesh are missing. The predators of the forest have found their way here, picking away at what remains. Apparently, George's spell only covered our tracks from the supernatural. A slop of bile works its way into my throat, my liquid diet threatening to overtake my control.

A murder of crows echoes around me. I shield my eyes from the sun as I watch them fly away. I stare at the dark, murky depths of Raven Cry Lake. The air is chilled, and the slowly setting sun is hot on my skin. If we want to beat the night, we haven't much time to dispose of the body.

As I turn on my heel to face George, something catches my eyes. The shrubs around us rustle. George's heartbeat echoes all around me, and I struggle to focus on what could be hiding in the brush. With a finger to my lips, I silently tell George not to speak, but he isn't looking at me. His eyes are glued to the rustling shrubs.

I take a step forward as three large wolves emerge from the shadows. Snarling, with drool seeping from their graying snouts, they approach without caution, as if they assume I will yield to the strength they carry in their true forms. With the sun still high in the sky, I know these too are pure wolves. Born with a ferociousness I pray I'll never experience.

He asks if we're looking for something, as if we're stupid enough to admit to any wrongdoing. I don't miss the fact that he doesn't answer my questions either. Not that I need him to. My questions were a test to see how much he'd tell us. The man is tall, muscular, with long, dark hair and skin marked by his countless fights. If vampires didn't heal fast, my skin might tell my stories too.

George is several feet away from me, and before I can dash to his side and get us out of here, I'm cornered by the beasts, while their leader shouts accusations. I've decided to ignore him, my sole focus now on the ravage wolves inching closer and closer toward me. I'm pushed up against the lake now, my heels sliding over the edge into the abyss. This is a dangerous part of Raven Cry, and I fear I haven't the strength to withstand the current before the wolves succumb to their nature.

The wolf George killed managed to land on a small platform of jagged rock and earth that's not frequented by visitors. With the news of a missing wolf reaching the ears of Hillcrest, I'm not sure how we'll explain being this far into Bane's Forest. Admission would cost us our lives.

The waves of Raven Cry Lake splash against my legs as I walk to the very edge of the ledge. I hear George tell me we should leave. I nod, but when I take a step forward to stand by his side, the wolves pounce.

I yell for George to run as I brace myself for their attack. I backhand the wolf to my left, offering only a side-glance as he is flung back into the brush from which he emerged. If he has any sense of survival, he will stay there. As I plant a solid kick center mass to my frontal assailant, the wolf at my right slams into my body. I'm unstable and unable to withstand his assault. I hear the slightest of snaps as my bones break beneath its unwavering strength.

And I'm falling.

My head slams against the jagged rock of the ledge on which we're perched. I'm dazed and lights dance behind my eyelids. I roll onto my back, ignoring the sharp pain resonating through my leg. It works its way up my spine, and I shriek. Already, I begin to heal. But without resetting my bones, I'm healing as is. Later, George may have to break and reset my leg before I can properly walk away from this mess. But that's a worry for another time. Right now, I have to focus on fighting while wounded. Already outmatched, I can't risk being outstrengthened too.

Jaws snap before my eyes, but I reach forward to hold my attacker at bay. Mere inches are between its sharp, yellow teeth and my porcelain skin. I grunt as I put all of my energy into shoving him off me. He budes only slightly, but it's enough for me to wedge my good leg between us, and I catapult him into the air before kicking him into the lake. The current will keep him busy, and if I'm lucky, he'll drown.

I spare a quick glance at George, who is surviving his own battle against the deceased wolf's brother. The moment he emerged from the shadows, I recognized him as the leader of the Hillcrest wolf pack. I've heard stories of how powerful he is. In order to become alpha, the wolf is put through trials—the last being a fight to the death against the current alpha. It takes a strong wolf to survive the hell they're put through. George will need my help if he expects to survive.

I roll onto my side, having no time to consider my options. I grab a handful of rocks, and as I'm charged by the beast I hoped would remain in the bushes, I throw them, grunting as I put as much force as I can behind my arm. They slice through the air, the loose strands of my hair whipping past my ear as I release the stones. Just as the wolf leaps, several of the rocks make impact, ripping through its flesh. The beast falls to the ground, a howl escaping its bleeding chest. Unless one of the rocks penetrates its heart, I didn't land a kill shot, but I'll take what I can get.

I hear the final wolf approach before I even process what's happening. By the time I sense real danger, it's too late to move. Weaponless, I can do nothing except wait for it to land. It pounces, and I'm smothered in ratted, dirty fur.

At first, I feel it on top of me. I'm smothered in a pungent, filthy blanket. The first time I touched a wolf was at the bonfire. I leapt in front of it to save George, and when I wrapped my arms around its torso, I

remember feeling surprised by how soft it was. But this beast is nothing like that one. Its fur is rough, scratchy, and I ache to push it away. It smells like a wet dog or sodden carpet with a thin layer of dust. I gag as I take in a mouthful of swampy fur.

I hear the crunch of bone, and I feel the exact moment teeth sink into my flesh. Quickly, the pain works its way through my body, and a fire erupts within me, scorching every fiber of my being. Within seconds, it manages to find the deepest parts of my soul and burrow there. It's as if I've been set on fire, and all I can do is watch myself burn.

A scream escapes my lungs with such fury, such force, such pure unstoppable pain, everything around me silences. My voice doesn't sound like my own, and I only know it was real because I'm paralyzed, trapped in a dying body, forced to watch its demise. I yearn to roll into the darkest depths of the nearby lake, where I'm sure this fire must burn out.

I can't move. I can't see. I can only feel. I can only scream. And I do. I scream as the agony of the werewolf bite washes over me tenfold until darkness falls upon me.

But even in the dark, the pain remains.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

George

SAVI DISAPPEARS TOWARD THE EDGE OF THE LAKE, LEAVING ME TO DEAL with the man. His eyes glow, intensifying the golden tones that mark him as a werewolf. As he takes steps toward me, his hands morph into claws, his teeth into jagged stairs of points and stains.

Only one can shift and still keep part of his human identity.

The alpha.

The answer rings true as I back up, almost tripping over a fallen branch. Leader of the wolves, master of the shift, sire to many... I killed the brother of the most powerful werewolf in Hillcrest.

And now he wants revenge.

"I've never tasted witch, but my ancestors have. In fact, I grew up listening to stories of your delectable blood. How it curdles and gets sweeter the more you drink. Flesh that's tainted with energy. They said the heart is the best part." His voice is a deep growl, throaty and threatening. "Since you have killed one of my own, the treaty grants me my vengeance in return."

My hands press against the cold face of the cliff. In the distance, I hear a chorus of growls from both the wolves and Savi. I can only glance her way for a brief moment. Lowering my guard gives the alpha enough time to flash closer to me.

"I... didn't do it," I lie, unable to convince myself. Unseen to the alpha, the body he seeks is so close to my right I can see its lifeless eyes.

"Are you certain?" He squints, tongue lapping across his lips.

"If you hurt us, you will be the one breaking the treaty," I say. "Is that a risk you are willing to take?"

That stalls him for a moment. He breaks his gaze and looks up toward the top of the cliff. Releasing a sigh, I expect him to call off the wolves and agree. But then his smile returns, flashing every single tooth he has to offer.

“I think I will take the risk. You see, my people told me of one witch and one vampire who intervened at feeding during the full moon. It left me baffled. It is not often I come across two beings who have spent millennia in hatred traveling together. Forgive me, boy, but I am putting two and two together. And do you know what it points to?”

I can't breathe, let alone conjure a reply.

He lifts a claw and points it at the space between both of my eyes. “You. It points to you.”

I sense his attack before it happens. The ground whispers to me, warning me of his feet which swivel in place. The air screams, urging me to drop. And I do.

The man's clawed fist connects with the stone wall where my head was only seconds before. I have only a moment before he reaches down, so I throw as much power as I can toward him. The earth shakes violently at his feet, small fissures opening around him. He looks down and jumps with grace away from the opening in the ground. He lands away from me, so I finally have the space to move. Raising my palms, I will the air to listen to my wish. All the shouts of Savi fighting the wolves are drowned out as my magic rushes for the man. Streams of silver rip leaves from trees and dirt from the ground, battering it toward the alpha. He cowers, covering his face with his long arms to protect himself. I scream into my power, fueling it with as much vigor as I can muster.

I hold it for as long as I can before my body sags, exhausted and breathless. So much energy wasted in my attempt to fight.

The alpha looks up at me with burning hate. He is covered in dirt. It stands out against his skin like flecks of night against snow. His knees bend, arms raised to his side, and he flashes his claws threateningly.

He is airborne, flying across the space between us. Flesh turns to fur. His face elongates, snout stretching to life. His body does not get smaller, but it does give way for the true beast to take form. Once his hands, now paws, touch down on the ground, he is no longer a man, but a monster. His wrinkled face snarls, exposing many rows of teeth. His claws cut into the soft ground of the forest, and his fur raises in hackles down the dark sheen of his arched back.

Fire is the only element to stop him, the only element wolves are repulsed by. But even the thought of reaching for it scares me more than the

beast that's preparing its attack. I haven't a moment to think as he runs toward me.

I lift my arms, calling for the water in the lake to help, but it rises lazily and slow. I throw myself to the ground, muscles screaming and skin aching atop stones.

The wind is driven from my lungs as the heavy paws land on top of me, pinning me down. I look into the open mouth of the wolf, at the dark abyss of its throat. Drool dribbles between teeth and lands on my cheeks and chest. I want to recoil, but the force of the beast is too strong to move.

I feel blood prickle on my shoulder as its claws dig into me. Blood. A rush of darkness spreads throughout my body at the presence of my blood. It starts at the wound and fills my soul and mind. The claws rake down more on my skin, only bringing forth more of my gore and, with it, a new power, one I had kept hidden since Father's death.

I twist my wrist to make my palms face the belly of the wolf. The spears of dark shadow come to mind, and I will them into reality.

I hear a scream.

Savi.

I wouldn't have thought too much of it, but the alpha jumps off of me and runs for the dark coverage of the forest as if the very noise startled it.

I'm shocked by his sudden disappearance. My mind still a rush of new power that wants escape, so strong I can't register what is happening around me. Once the spinning in my mind stills, I roll my head to look and see two other wolves follow after their leader. One's muzzle is stained red, and the other has a wounded chest. I was certain three wolves came with him, but where is the third?

I stand, body reeling with fresh power. I sense the darkness at the tips of my fingers, begging for escape. Wobbling on my feet, I step forward, past a crest of rocks, and see Savi. She is face down on the ground beside the lake. Behind her, I spot the body of a wolf floating in the water, unmoving. I rush for her, dropping to my knees beside her. She is breathing; I can see the subtle rise and fall of her chest. But her eyes are closed, and her skin is lifeless and dull.

She's moments from death.

"Savi!" I choke, panic closing my throat.

Rolling her over onto her back, I feel something wet against my hands. Pulling them back, they are covered in blood. Savi's blood. The material of

her top is stuck messily to her shoulder, covered in thick red that weeps from many puncture marks.

“Savi,” I breathe, panic taking over. I rush my hands across her body, searching for more signs of possible injuries. “Open your eyes, Savi! Come on, open them...”

I shake her one good shoulder, but she does nothing to show she can hear me. Pulling the material back from her shoulder, I see the damage. Her veins around the puncture marks are visible and black. Werewolf bites are venomous to most, but deadly for vampires, just like vampire bites are lethal to werewolves. No one has ever survived a bite from both species before. I can see the poison as it works through her body, infecting her, killing her.

I cry, letting loose the tears that fill my eyes. Pressing both hands to her chest, I sense her life fading, her source of energy dwindling like the emptying of a well. My power whispers to me, telling me she hasn’t much time.

A life for a life. That is what the treaty deems acceptable. Is that why the alpha ran off? Did he know Savi would die from this bite? Did he see the wolf floating in the lake? Or did he leave thinking Savi has now paid my debt for me?

You can save her.

My blood sings to me as it dribbles down my own skin from the puncture marks on my shoulders.

You can do it this time. You will not fail.

It is a dangerous game to play. I know that well enough. But if there is even a sliver of a chance that it could work, I can’t give up.

I waste no time in worrying and pondering. If this can save Savi, I have to try. No matter what happens to me in the process.

The blood leaking from my many wounds is not enough to invoke the magic in full. I would need more.

I raise my palm and see the silver mark of my faded scar. Last time I tried this, I couldn’t bring *him* back. Father. But this time, I will not fail. I *want* to save Savi, a feeling I lacked when Mother presented me with Father’s dying body. I didn’t want to help him, and my power knew that. But this time, it should sense my desperation to save Savi.

I pick a stone from the floor beside Savi’s body and press the pointed part to my palm. Dragging it across, I call out in agony as it rips open my

skin. Red warmth pools in my now fisted palm as I collect the power and ready it.

The darkness is strong. I can almost taste it. I fight a giggle as the new feeling rushes through my mind, making me lightheaded and giddy. A shadow of light spins around my fist, faster and faster. Soul. That is what this is. Spirit. For such dark, forbidden power, it does look beautiful. Bright and strong, it's magic that goes beyond the other elements' limitations.

I press both hands together and close my eyes, visualizing Savi alive. Then I press my bloody hands to her, one above her heart and the other above her wound. I can feel my blood snake from me and blend with her own, filling her poisoned veins.

As I close my eyes, all I can sense is the dark, thick, penetrating shadow. I can't see past the darkness, but I don't need to. I can feel Savi in the shadows, sense her soul. It's hurt. It cowers in the corner of her weakening body.

Let me help, my power says to her soul. *I can make the pain go away.*

It's too late, she replies.

As if challenged, I release everything I have to prove her wrong. *It is never too late...*

The blood magic tethers to Savi's fading soul and pulls it from the shadows. In my mind, I watch as her crimson essence is yanked back into her own body and secured with part of my own soul. It breaks away from me, sending a terrible agony across my body. Like lightning, it slams into me, ripping part of my own consciousness away.

I drown in pain but don't stop forcing my soul toward Savi. I see it, a sliver of light as it is offered to her. And then I see nothing.

Opening my eyes, I fall back, head connecting with the ground. I'm exhausted. I have no energy to even lift my gaze and check on Savi. I close off the blood magic and sense the natural power recoil from me in fear.

The earth is cold beneath me, unwilling to help. But it soon comes around. I can feel its tendrils of presence as it strengthens my body, yet I can still feel its anger toward me, its shame.

With enough strength in me to sit up, I thank the earth for lending its energy, even if it didn't want to.

Savi is still in the same place, but her veins are no longer black, her wounds closing. Her eyes flutter but still are closed. I reach over and press

my palm to her body once more and sense her life. It is there, but so is something else. Something new that was never part of her energy before.

“What have I done?” I breathe, looking at the girl I saved, but at what cost?

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Savi

THE DARKNESS IS ALL AROUND ME, AND IT MOVES, LIKE IT HAS A MIND OF its own. I feel myself cowering away from it, retreating from the shadows I once held dear to my heart. I search for light in the midst of the abyss, finding nothing but empty seclusion. As a vampire, I should welcome the silence, the loneliness, but something about this feels different, darker, unnatural.

Sound echoes in the distance, but it's muffled by the ever-increasing pain. My senses rapid fire, and though I feel something approach, I cannot retreat. I must face the darkness that's overtaking me. Even so, I'm unprepared to fight. I'm weak, hungry, and out of time.

It's closer now, and I brace myself for it. My legs buckle, and I cower. I've never been a coward, but rarely do I ever become the prey. I don't know what to do when I'm no longer the predator.

I hear the savage, relentless beating of a heart—*my* heart. My stomach spills into my mouth, and I force it back down. The metallic taste of stale blood makes me queasy. But I welcome it. I cherish anything that makes me feel alive.

I see nothing, but I know it's there, watching me. I can *feel* the darkness hovering in the air, waiting for my weakest moment, waiting to strike like snake on vermin. My stomach twists, and the steady knocking of an internal intruder coils within my mind. I try to push it away, but it's no use. This intruder is stronger than me now, so I crumble and wait.

Let me help, the intruder says. Its low voice tries to soothe, but it cannot hide the demonic sound of its words. It promises to relieve my pain, but I do not trust this shadow stalker.

It's too late, I think. I struggle to free myself from its grip as it reaches for me. I glance down, and see I'm nothing but a wisp. My hands dissipate into dark crimson smoke as the darkness entwines with me.

It is never too late... The promise of those words rings true all around me. The voice is menacing, and I cannot relinquish the idea that this force is pure evil. Fear is not something invoked easily, yet I cannot help but tremble under its presence.

“What have I done?” the darkness whispers. Only this time, it morphs into the voice I know.

George.

The darkness is... George?

I reach for him, begging for his help. I latch onto the darkness and welcome its warm embrace. I feel him all around me, linking his soul to my very own. I feel the connection even though I do not understand his magic. It feels... permanent, as though he has bonded us for life. Too late to escape his grasp, I simply wait for the inevitable.

My eyelids flutter open as I inhale deeply. My breath comes in short, loud bursts as I heave uncontrollably. I feel as though I haven't welcomed air in centuries. My lungs ache, and as I take in too much air, I hack. The pain resonates through my frame in deep, sharp shocks. I find myself wishing for the painless darkness once again.

Arching off the ground, I squeeze my eyes closed. Everything is bright, too bright. It makes my eyes water. I dig my fingers into the ground. The pain of shards of rock getting caught beneath my fingernails muffles the sounds of the waves crashing beside me. Though I can hear *everything*, from the fish swimming in schools beneath the mirrored water top of Raven Cry Lake to the animals readying themselves for winter within the confines of Wolfsbane Forest, a comfortable silence begins to settle over me as I slowly adjust to my heightened senses.

The smell of decaying meat penetrates the layers of light and sound. I roll over, gagging until I expel everything I can. The stale blood coats my tongue, and I want nothing more than to dive into the treacherous waters and never return for air. Even when done, I dry heave, unable to ignore the smell of our past mistakes haunting us. It's everywhere all at once. I feel it seeping into my pores, enveloping me in rotting mush.

Something caresses my back, and I open my eyes. With a force I've never known, I push myself away from the unwanted presence and nearly catapult myself up and onto the cliff that overseas these shadowy depths of Raven Cry Lake.

I'm spinning in circles, trying to find my attacker. My head aches, my chest heaves, and the blood coursing through my veins feels... wrong. Something isn't right. I'm awake, yet the shadows within my soul still linger. They cling to me for life even if it means we both perish.

"Savi!"

I hear George call to me, but I cannot see him. Not until he grabs me by my shoulders, facing me squarely in front of him, do I believe he's really there.

"George," I whisper when I focus on a familiar set of emerald irises. My lungs ache as I breathe him in. And he smells utterly delectable. Instinctively, my fangs elongate. It isn't until they push against my bottom lip that I realize something isn't right.

I push him away from me and stumble backward until I'm flat against the wall of the cliffside. Chest heaving as I gasp for air, I reach forward and run my fingertips over my fangs, one hand for each tooth. In a frenzy, I ramble on about the darkness and the pain. Even now, everything hurts.

I scan my surroundings, watching in panic as George approaches me slowly. He's careful not to startle me, just like my many victims before him. They too considered me with caution. A sense of comfortable familiarity washes over me as I view George as prey.

"Savi..." George speaks slowly, calmly, but his eyes are wide. I gasp when he's close enough to touch. I ache to reach for him, but the moment I yearn to touch him, a malevolent thought crosses my mind as I hunger for George.

"Stop!" I shriek. "Don't come closer."

I look past him, considering my options of escape. I could climb the wall of the cliff and retreat within the deep woods of Wolfsbane Forest. I could dive into the darkest depths of Raven Cry Lake.

My gaze settles on something floating in the water. The wolf's corpse moves with each passing wave, slowly making its way toward the jagged rocks where land meets sea. Its coat is matted, the dark strands of fur highlighted by the setting light. Its lifeless eyes are open, its jaw ajar, tongue floating beside its bloodstained snout. My stomach grumbles at the sight of it.

"Something's wrong," I say, swallowing. I'm fixated on the wolf, unable to look away until George's words propel my mind back to him.

"Your eyes..."

Instinctively, I reach for them. Though my fingertips are sensitive to touch, my eyes feel normal, unlike my fangs, which seem longer, thicker than the two tiny points barely noticeable to humans that I was born with.

“They’re... crimson with... flecks of gold.” George struggles to find words, but the horror on his face is evident. It screams *what have we done?* He seems shocked, disgusted almost, by me. I can’t help the anger that overcomes me.

“I feel different,” I say, ignoring the desire to lash out at him.

A rustling in the brush alerts me to an onlooker’s presence. I blink, and I’m already behind George. I blink again, and I’m in the brush, tearing through the trees like a savage beast. I hear its scream, but I ignore its fear. Just as I’m about to tear teeth to flesh, a strong wind frees my victim from my grasp. I growl as my dinner escapes before I stand and face George, who is mere feet from me, arms erect after he called upon his power to stop me.

“Calm down! It was a squirrel. What is going on with you?”

I frown and turn back toward the animal, which has retreated to the highest branch of a nearby tree. Without meaning to, I calculate the time it would take for me to reach it. I know I can be at its side before it even realizes it’s still in danger. Shaking my head to clear the images of me devouring a whole, living squirrel, I struggle to find the words to explain my actions, but I fall mute. Vampires can’t survive for long on the blood of animals, so I’ve never had a hankering for squirrel meat before. But now, all I can think about is tearing into its flesh.

“What’s happening to me?” I whisper as I fall to my knees. I stare at my palms. They’re smudged with dirt and bloodstained from our fight with the wolves. I look at my hands, and the lines are the same. My skin is still pale and cool. But somehow, they’re different. They’re not *mine*. They do things I wish they didn’t, as if they control me.

“It’s going to be okay. We’ll figure this out,” George says, looking around cautiously.

He approaches me, and a sudden ache roots itself in my gut. I groan as it becomes stronger the closer he becomes.

“Stop,” I say as I keel over. “It hurts...”

“What hurts?” George asks after coming to a halt a few feet from me. He frowns as I wrap my arms around my stomach.

“Everything,” I say as I try to catch my breath.

“Try and explain. I can’t help you if you are not being clear,” George says. I hear him swallow, and his heartbeat quickens. I imagine him beneath my grasp. His skin is tan and soft, and I see myself strangle him in my mind’s eye, his untouched skin wrinkles beneath my fingers.

I shriek, scratching my fingernails against my scalp as I try to physically tear away the images I’ve just conjured. The darkness that brought me back tempts me to explore my desires, but I tell myself it’s a lie. I would never hurt George, even if he’s hurting me.

“It hurts when you’re close,” I whisper as I close my eyes. “Please... Just stay away.”

I can’t tell George the truth. I can’t admit that the closer he is to me, the more I want to rip off his head. The closer he comes, the more the darkness tears its way through my flesh, breaking my bones.

Though I don’t see him, I hear his footsteps as he takes several steps backward. The pain eases until I can finally reopen my eyes.

“I’m sorry,” George says, gaze on the rocky ground. He doesn’t understand, but neither do I. Something is wrong with me, and I know it’s his doing.

I swallow the knot that forms in my throat, threatening to choke the life from me, and I sense the darkness from before. It’s inside of me, nestled so deeply I wonder if it’s trying to hide. I fear, with this shadow self, the worst is still to come.

“What did you do, George?”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

George

I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO TELL HER, BECAUSE IN TRUTH, I KNOW LITTLE OF what I've done. I lost control. I gave into the swirling, tempting darkness that lives within of me. I allowed it space to take over, to use my body and magic in ways that should've been impossible. One moment, Savi was dying, her soul dwindling like the flame of a candle in a storm. But my power stilled that storm and rushed strength back into the flame. Her wounds healed, and her eyes blinked with new colors. Whatever I did was not normal or natural. I helped Savi cheat death.

"They could come back at any moment," I say to her as Savi tries to stand. She stumbles, face crumpling in agony. She even let out a howling cry which stirred the very waters in the Lake.

"I can't, George. The pain is too much."

"You need to let me help you." I move closer and touch her arm with my hand. She hisses, eyes narrowing at me.

"Don't touch me!"

Her words are not a request, but a clear threat.

"Okay, okay." I raise my hands in defeat and step back. "But if the wolves return, especially if they know you are alive, we will both be in even more pain. The blood debt has not been paid, not with you... alive."

Saying it aloud felt strange. Admitting she'd cheated death made me feel shy among the elements. Would they hate me for what I decided to do? I interrupted the natural balance, a balance I should respect from afar. I wonder if Father looks upon me with pride in his eyes. Something I never achieved from him during his short life.

"Let them come for me," Savi growls, the gold in her eyes intensifying. "I have my own debt to claim."

I try to use the elements to sense if anyone is watching. I don't feel them in the air, but I do notice one thing. Savi is different. But in what way I cannot understand. Her very essence is tainted by something new.

“The cottage. The one we used to play in,” I say. “We should head there. At least we won’t be out in the open. It still has my charm on it, so we should be hidden within it.”

“You think it is safe there?” Savi asks. I see she is not convinced from the furrow of her brows.

“It is better than staying out here.” I turn for the rockface. “Do you think you can make it up?”

“Yes.” She sounds certain. “As long as you keep your distance. I know this sounds strange, but the closer you are, the more pain I am in.”

I nod, turning for the cliff face and looking up at our destination.

“I should help—”

Savi springs forward, moving with strange grace. I am certain she ran on all fours the first few strides before throwing herself at the rockface and climbing. With increased speed, she jets up, sending cascades of rock and stone down upon me. I raise a hand to block them only to see her reach the top in a few blinks. She didn’t wait for what I had to say. Not as she clawed her way up the cliff face until she was standing at the top, looking down at me.

“Don’t wait for me...” I say to myself, spinning my hands as I call forth the air element. I feel its reluctance to help me, but it still listens. Is it stubborn or scared? I cannot decide.

With a rush from my magic, I’m weightless, lifted up through the air and leaving the ground below. I concentrate, trying to push as much power into reaching Savi as possible. Part of me thinks she has left me, for her urgency to keep distance between us was clear. I don’t understand her pain. What about my presence does this to her?

Once my feet touch down at the top of the cliff, back near the ruins of the bonfire, I drop my control of the air. My magic recedes quickly, almost like it cannot get away from me fast enough. Breathless, I stumble forward, catching myself before I fall to the ground.

“Took you long enough,” Savi says, turning her back away from me as she inspects the tree line. I take a step closer to her, and she steps even farther away.

“Have I done something to upset you?” I ask, her attitude clear and off putting.

She sighs, pauses, and shakes her head. “No, I just don’t feel right. Can we just... find this cottage. I’m sorry.”

I sense the insincerity in her tone. She is lying. Before the events of today, I never thought she could lie to me, but now, I know that is untrue. But then again, how am I any better? After what I have done, after the things Mother has forced me to do, I am no more than a cloaked hypocrite.

“Follow me,” I say, leading the way.



The cottage is not hard to find.

Close to Old Oak, it is no more than a glorified stone building, hardly big enough for one person, let alone two. It used to be fine when we were younger, smaller, but as we approach, I can see that is not the case now.

Dying vines wrap around the rusted face of the cottage, hungrily feeding into the smashed windows and door-less frame. The rotten decking circles the front of the cottage, no more than a death trap. Just looking at it, I can see that our feet would smash straight through the paneling and into the overgrown shrubbery beneath.

“I don’t remember it being so... dull.” Savi’s attention is pinned to the building before us.

“Me neither. It’s been so long since we last visited that I can’t remember what ever stopped us.” No one else would have used it since we left as we aged, not with my cloaking charm keeping the cottage and its inhabitants hidden in Wolfsbane Forest.

“We grew up, no longer needing the protection of four walls,” Savi says as she moves forward, stepping around rotting wood and overgrown weeds.

I follow behind her, using my connection with the earth to move the weeds and thorn-covered vines without the need to break them.

Savi grabs hold of the railing as a panel breaks beneath her foot. “This place may be hexed by your magic, but it is more dangerous than I remember. Are you sure we’re safe here?”

I nod, too busy watching where my own feet touch to really respond.

It is dark inside. I can’t see my hand in front of my face. Only the glow of Savi’s eyes pierce the dark. I scrunch my nose, displeased with the horrific scents that cling to this place. Had animals crawled in here to die, thinking they were safe from the wolves that hunt them?

My feet crunch over unsure lumps, and I squirm.

“You definitely don’t want to know what you just stepped in. Can’t you light the way?” Savi asks. “Turn your fingers into candles or something?”

I know what she asks, but the thought of creating a flame turns my stomach more than seeing the wolves again.

But I can’t admit that to her.

Instead, I focus on my palm and close my eyes. Imagining the warmth of the sun against my bare skin, I call for fire to greet me. I will it to bloom on my hand like the opening of a rose on a bright summer day.

But it resists.

Why would it listen to someone who fears it so much? Out of the elements, fire has control of me—mind, body, and soul.

“I can’t,” I say, conjuring a fresh lie for Savi. “I’m exhausted. I don’t think I can use magic at all for a while.” Thankfully, I was walking behind Savi when I called upon earth to clear my path as we approached the cottage. If she had seen my display of magic, I wouldn’t know what to say to her now.

The stirring darkness in the pit of my stomach lifts its head as if to disagree. It knows I am not exhausted; it knows I can still use magic. Pushing it down, I try to clear my mind.

Leave me alone, I warn it. I don’t need you.

You did, and you will again, it replies, hissing and coiling tighter as if it wants to suck the life from me.

I slap my hand to my stomach and still the moan of discomfort that wants to spill past my lips.

From the dark, I hear Savi. “What you did back there... I was faced with a darkness, George, but it felt like you. I could hear your voice calling to me from the shadows. I thought witches could only call upon the elements?”

Unsure of how to discuss this with her, I consider my words carefully before I respond. I’ve never told anyone about the power within me. My parents knew, but Mother hasn’t mentioned it in years, not after my failure when I attempted to save my father.

“Most witches can conjure all four elements, but we have complete control over just one. It’s like a specialty. In extreme situations, witches can call the elements, but maintaining control for long would be impossible if it’s not *their* special element. This connection to the earth and the elements is what makes us witches. Rarely, we meet a witch who can access

complete control over all of the elements. My father could, and so can I. Maybe I can do more? Maybe it has something to do with my Alcott bloodline?”

“Whatever you did is not new to you. I sensed its clarity. You knew what you were doing. Since there’s clearly something very wrong here, we have to talk about it.”

“I—”

“George, listen. I killed a human. You killed a werewolf, and I killed a wolf that was trying to kill me. Whatever makes you hesitant to tell the truth is pointless. We are *both* in deep shit right now. You don’t need to lie to me, because we’re in this together.”

“Blood magic,” I spit it out.

“What is it?”

“A forbidden power that was banned centuries before Hillcrest was even a town. Blood magic is a power reserved for those with the most potent of bloodlines.”

“Blood magic, bloodlines... I guess the connection makes sense. So we add this forbidden power to the ever-growing list of things we shouldn’t have done?”

I nod, knowing her heightened senses can see me in this darkness. “If I didn’t use blood magic, you would be dead right now.”

“I know, and I appreciate what you did, but what does it mean? Power comes with a price. What have you paid to save me?”

Silence falls between us as Savi waits for my answer, but I don’t have one.

“My father had a book. Maybe it will have answers. We could go get it and—”

“No!” Savi snaps. “I can’t go back yet. If the wolves sense that I’m alive, they will come for us. Or they might tell the council what we’ve done. We’ll pay for this with our lives, George. I need to stay here until we have answers.”

“I can go back alone. This place is protected by my charms. No one would know you’re here. But how long are you planning on staying? You can’t live here for the rest of your life. People—*Chad*—will notice you’ve gone missing.”

“Trust me, I have *no* plans to stay here for long. We just need answers before the wolves, the human boy, and the council all come knocking.

They'll want answers too, George. And right now, we don't have anything to say."

She had a point. "Okay, I will go and get some supplies and my father's book. It should contain answers. I'll be back as soon as I can."

I reach out for Savi, but she jolts away. I can hear her feet scurry across the hard floors.

"Please..." Her voice is strained. "It still hurts when you get too close. I can't take the pain right now. I need to be strong. Will your father's book explain this? Maybe it can be reversed?"

"I hope so," I say, fear coursing through my blood as I step outside, leaving Savi alone.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Savi

THE LONELINESS CREEPS OVER ME AS I WATCH GEORGE LEAVE FOR SUPPLIES. I send a silent prayer to whoever will listen that he finds his father's book and that it has the answers we so desperately need.

Without George here, my mind is clear, and the pain is completely gone. The darkness still speaks to me, but its muffled voice is easily ignored for more important matters, like why the hell we ever found this place peaceful.

I kick the dirt at my feet and run my hands along the stone walls. The mortar between the aging stones is cracked. I chip away the rough edges, listening as the hardened paste falls to the floor. I run my fingertips along the grooves until I reach a window. The glass has long been shattered, if there was ever glass at all. We never decided when the stone retreat was built, but I wouldn't be surprised if it were built long before glass was used for windows. We're certain this cottage was home to one of the first settlers.

I scan the tiny space. A small, corner-standing woodburning fireplace is the cottage's sole heat source. I consider lighting it for when George returns but nix the idea. No one knows I'm here because George's charms have hidden this place, but I don't want to press my luck. A smoke stream coming from a remote part of Wolfsbane Forest is likely to attract unwanted attention.

I plant myself on the ground and lean against the doorframe. I stare into the abyss, and though night has fallen on Hillcrest, the moon's light illuminates the forest. Vampires are friends of the night, and being blessed with the ability to see clearly is part of the reason I'm in this mess. If I couldn't hunt, I wouldn't kill. But now, I see so clearly, I have to wonder if my eyes are betraying me. Is that really the sun I see in the sky and not the moon?

Sitting, I rest my feet on the decaying wooden porch and stare at my legs. My dark jeans are fitted beneath my combat boots. My legs, short and

leanly muscled, look just like the legs I've seen for nearly two decades. But I know they're not.

I stretch out my arms before me, and the sleeves of my jacket pull up my arms, exposing my wrists. My veins are a deep blue against my pale skin. My nails, painted black, are short, and my hands are dirty. Save for the grubbiness, I look no differently now than I did *before*. But like my legs, my arms are lying; they aren't mine.

I look the same, but I feel different. My thoughts are my own, but there's another voice there. It's deeper and darker than anything I've ever felt. It is like the hunger, and I can feel its desire to take control.

Time passes slowly as I wait for George to return with good news. I'd love nothing more than to go home, crawl into bed, and pretend these last few days never happened. But I'm no longer the child who used to play within these stone walls. We can't lie to ourselves anymore.

George and I are in real trouble.

I consider waiting for him, but I know there's no point. Either I can waste what little time we have left before getting caught, or I can take care of the problem for good.

Before the thought enters my mind, I'm already running. I shouldn't have waited, because now, I may not beat George back to our cottage retreat. But I have to take care of this. I have to do this... for him. He risked his life to save mine, and I'll do the same for him.

As my feet slap the ground, I listen to the sound resonate through the loose soil. Yellowed leaves crunch beneath the weight of me, and I smile. The air is crisp, cool, and clean. I can't imagine living anywhere else, and if I want to stay, then I have to get rid of the wolf.

The moonlight is hot on my skin. I close my eyes and listen as nearby animals slumber. In the distance, I can hear the rowdy wolves. They mourn their dead and celebrate their living. Anger boils in the pit of my gut as I think of their leader. It was he who made me this way. Sure, George's magic lit the candle that engulfed me in flames, but he wouldn't have called upon fire if that wolf just stayed away. If the wolves hadn't come for revenge, I wouldn't be... like this. A wave of hatred stronger than anything I've ever known rushes over me, and soon, I'm drowning.

I skid to a stop as I reach the cliff, and I fight the urge to run to them and feed until there's nothing left. I've never wanted to kill as badly as I do right now. This feeling is worse than any hunger I've ever felt. The

darkness within me clings to it, even as I try to desperately cast it out. As I leap off the cliff's edge, I hear the softest of chuckles coming from deep within me.

I land effortlessly and silently on the small ledge beside the crashing waves of Raven Cry. The wolf I killed earlier is gone, washed away or in a watery grave at the bottom of the lake. Either way, he's fish food now. And sadly, he isn't my problem.

I turn on my heel and close the space between us. I'd like nothing more than to forget about the dead wolf and instead worry about the side effects of George's revival spell, but I know the traces of his magic is all over this wolf. The council would sense it. They'd sentence him to death, and I couldn't let that happen. After all, he never would have been at that stupid bonfire if it weren't for my infatuation with the human. Thankfully, the girl's blood has worked its way through my system, and with the last drop digested, her love for him has dissipated.

I struggle to focus on what really matters, like eliminating evidence of our involvement in the broken treaty and learning just what George's blood magic has done to me. Even as I stare at the decaying meat before me, my mind still wanders back to what George did. I'm grateful for his sacrifice, but what does it mean? I feel different, but so does every college graduate who returns to their childhood bedroom. I look at myself, and I see the girl I once knew. The darkness speaks to me, but after years of succumbing to the hunger, am I really any different?

I crouch and assess the damage done. The wolf's frame was crushed as it smashed into the ground. George's magic pushed him over the edge with a force I've never seen him release. A jagged rock protrudes from the center of the wolf's abdomen. I grasp the top of the rock and pull it toward me. It snaps from its base, and after tossing it aside, I brush off my hand to remove bits of the dried blood that caked on the stone.

"Just what am I going to do with you?" I say.

I don't expect an answer, so when I hear something approach, everything within me sparks to life. I jolt upright and try to locate the daring soul. It can't be George. He still expects me to be at the cottage. Even if someone were to find their way this far into Wolfsbane Forest, no one would propel down the cliff's edge. This part of Raven Cry is known for its dangerous undertow. Only a fool with a death wish would swim here.

Quickly, I consider my options: I leave in the same horrible situation George and I were in to begin with, making this trip back pointless, or I risk moving the body and disrupting George's spell that ensures no one but he or I can sense the wolf's remains. I have only seconds to make my choice.

Groaning, I latch onto the matted fur of the beast and lift it into my arms. Putting all my energy into my legs, I leap off the ground until I land firmly at the top of the cliff. As I run, I hear them. The howls of dozens of wolves tell me George's spell has been broken, and more wolves will be on my trail.

The beast is stiff in my arms. I hold it close to my chest, cradling it like a child, as I breathe through my mouth. I can't risk breathing in the smell of its decaying flesh. I fear I'd pass out. I hold too tightly and feel a small rupture burst inside its stomach. I gag as the smell permeates toward me.

I can hear the rumbling of the many wolves charging me from behind, and I know there's only one place I can go where they will not follow. Long ago, when George and I were young, we stumbled upon a small valley in the center of the forest, one that the wolves would die to protect. The day we found their secret, we learned the true meaning behind Wolfsbane Forest's name.

I crush the small purple plant that grows wild in this field. A perennial, the toxic plant returns, year after year, tempting the enemies of the wolves. When the treaty was enacted, the leader of the wolves ensured only they would have access to such a dangerous weapon. But though they protect the plant, they do not control it. Even now, it grows wild.

I make my way to the center, listening as the wolves cease their attack. When I'm safely away, I turn toward them and smile as I drop the wolf's body. I take several steps backward as the wolfsbane reacts to its presence. Seconds tick by as the wolf's body is engulfed in flames.

Even from afar, I see the anger erupting among the wolves. They part for their leader, who has given up his human form in favor of the more dangerous wolf. Our gazes meet, and I'd swear he is surprised to see it is I who uncovered his missing brother (after all, I'm supposed to be dead). I watch his recognition of me turn to anger, and the look in his eyes is one I know personally. I've felt that burning desire to take a life more times than I can count.

The body sizzles and bursts into flames. The smell is rancid, the smoke as black as night. I look out, and the forest is speckled with glowing golden

irises. The wolves have surrounded me, and I know I must fight my way back to the cottage, back to the life George has granted me.

But the proof of what George and I have done will forever rest here. The traces of his magic will burn until there's nothing but charred earth, dead plants, and ashes carried by the wind.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

George

THE MOMENT I OPEN THE DOOR, MOTHER IS THERE.

“I found the murderer,” she says, face alight with glee. “The one who killed the human girl.”

“What? No...” I stumble over my words, shocked by Mother’s sudden excitement as she bombards me.

“Since you disappeared and left me with no options but to do the job myself, it was I who found the vampire girl.”

My heart races. Savi. I just left her. Had she been captured in such a short period of time?

Mother is already pulling my arm toward the door to the basement. I try and pull back, but her grip tightens.

I can’t speak, not with the panic I feel for Savi. Will she be strapped to the chair in the basement, waiting for me?

I stumble down the wooden stairs that spill into the basement and see a small frame of a figure, hooded and strapped to the chair. My palms dampen and eyes dry. I can’t blink, not as Mother lets go of me and rushes for the figure.

“You have failed me, son,” she says. “And I would still be cross if I hadn’t found the killer myself. Your task was simple, yet I waited and waited, and you told me nothing of your time after seeing Elder Jane.”

“You shouldn’t have,” I spat, unable to hide my panic. “If Elder Jane finds out you have—”

“That hag can bury her head deep in the dirt for all I care. I should be Elder. I should be the one making decisions. The fact that you question me on this only boils my blood more, boy.”

Mother’s hand grips the hood of the girl and crushes the material in her fist. A vein on her head protrudes, matching the strain of her muscles as she fights her anger.

“I didn’t mean to disappoint you. I just—”

“Just what, boy? What is it that you have been doing while I have been forced to search for the killer?”

I can't tell her, nor can I lie. She would sense it. The hooded figure gargles, trying to break free, which saves me from having to answer. Mother's attention is snapped back to the prisoner, forgetting she was even waiting for my response.

The chair rocks, legs clattering on the ground as it jumps in her attempt to break free.

Mother yanks off the hood, causing midnight-colored hair to fall to the girl's shoulders in a messy heap. The girl flashes her pointed canines and hisses.

“Silence.” Mother slaps a hand down on the girl's face, making me cringe. The girl is not Savi. That, at least, is a blessing. I recognize Mother's victim, but my mind is so mashed I cannot even recollect where I know her from. Regardless, this vampire is innocent. She didn't kill the human. The *real* murderer is waiting for me at the cottage deep in Bane's forest.

“Now, George, do what I need of you and rectify your tardiness.”

“How do you know she is the one who did it?” I question Mother, holding my ground. I cannot hurt another. I won't.

“She told me so...”

Mother's response shocks me, but the vampire does not deny it. Instead, she tries snapping her teeth at Mother's hand the moment it gets too close.

I'm lost for words, left in the corner of the basement to watch as Mother calls forth the flame in the palm of her hand.

“You know what needs to happen. We destroy her, rid the world of her evil and protect those who need it. Just like your father and his father before him, this is your birthright, George.”

“I can't...”

Every time I blink, I see Savi's face in the place of the snarling vampire girl. I can't hurt another, not one who is innocent. I've seen enough death today for a lifetime.

“What did you say?” Mother's face warps with confusion, her eyes widening and lips tightening. “Do my ears play tricks on me?”

“I can't,” I repeat louder. Even the vampire girl looks up in shock at me.

Mother laughs, a high trill sound that goes straight through me. “Of course you will. It is what you were born to do. You must follow in the

footsteps of your ancestors.”

I shake my head. “I will not do it, Mother, and you cannot make me.”

“Oh, I think I can.”

She leaves the girl’s side and strolls toward me, flame extinguishing in her fist as she clenches it. Her own teeth are bared. I feel the pain across my cheek before Mother even raises a hand to me.

Let me help.

The dark snake within me twists and rears up its head.

You know I can stop this. I can protect you. Let me help you.

I pinch my eyes and cower.

No, I tell the darkness, forcing it back down.

With my eyes closed, I don’t see Mother’s hand until it leaves its mark on my cheek. I stumble back, eyes pooling with tears as I regard the deranged woman before me.

“You made me do this, boy. If only you would listen, it would have been fine. But you choose to ignore me, over and over again. You defy me, just like you did when you let your father die.”

Please.

I want to slap my own hands over my ears to block out her comments.

“I will not stand by and let you defy me again, George. This has gone far enough.”

She raises a hand to hit me again, and I flinch. The moment of stress opens my mind to the darkness, which fills every morsel of my being.

“Stop!” I shout, opening my eyes to see Mother frozen mid-slap. Her eyes are wide and unblinking. They look me up and down, but not even a hair on her head moves as the darkness holds her prisoner.

Do you feel in control now?

Yes, I reply.

Not a sound comes out of Mother’s mouth, because it is time for her to listen to me.

“You will not harm this vampire,” I tell her. “Not with me in the way. Enough times, I have given into your control. But I’m no longer your puppet, Mother. Not anymore.”

The voice is not mine. I can see through my own eyes, but it is as if I am watching from the dark corner of another room, witnessing as the darkness speaks for me. I can even hear the scratchy nature of the voice. It

is lower than mine, deeper and malevolent. I can see my reflection in Mother's wide gaze. My heart skips a beat as I see myself in her eyes.

My body moves against my will. My hand raises, and the chains around the vampire break. They unravel to the floor in a song of clicks. In a burr, she stands, offering me only the slightest of side glances before she is gone. But that moment is all I need. I know this girl.

Kim.

Savi's good friend Kim, the owner of Crest Coffee, where I spend a good deal of time. The same Kim who grew up alongside Savi and her brother, because their parents were longtime friends. Savi once told me her mom met Kim's mom while traveling in Asia, and somehow, they both ended up in Hillcrest to raise their families.

I hear the front door slam shut as Kim runs toward freedom. I don't know what to think. I'm sure Kim will tell Savi or Chad, and they will finally know that I too have been keeping secrets.

"Why..." Mother croaks, her voice barely audible as the darkness wraps its presence around her neck.

"Because monsters like you must be stopped."

In one blink, she is dropped to the floor, and her eyes roll to the back of her head. The darkness retreats all at once, causing my mind to turn and stomach to lurch. I gag above her, finally back in control.

I drop to my knees beside her, but no matter how much I shake her, she doesn't wake. Her chest rises and falls slowly, but her gaze does not flutter.

I rock back and cry. My body is not my own. Somehow, I allowed the darkness to control me more than it ever has before. It used to be no more than a feeling, but now, I sense its presence as it pushes up against my fractured soul.

Savi.

I have to get to her.

Running from the basement, I leave Mother across the floor. She will wake, and when she does, her storm will devour everything in its path.

But I can't worry about her right now. There is only one place I need to be. Forgetting Mother and the book, the urgency to speak with Chad before Kim does consumes me.

I run through the streets of Hillcrest, wind snatching my tears, and I don't stop until I reach my destination.



I don't bother knocking on the door to Savi's home. Instead, I throw it open and burst in, shouting for Chad.

He races down the stairs, taking two at a time. I throw myself into his arms, something I'd never thought I'd do again, not after everything that has happened between us. I sense his reluctance to wrap his arms around me, but as my tears stain his cream shirt, he squeezes me.

"What happened?" His voice is soft as he runs his hand through my hair. "Where is Savi?"

"I've done something terrible," I tell him. "I've kept secrets, and I hurt my mother and left Savi alone in Bane's Forest. I just don't know what to do."

He holds me at arm's length, his face screwed in confusion. "What is going on? What has happened to Savi?"

"She was dying," I say through my sobs. "A wolf bit her, and I was losing her. It should have been me, but they got to her. I had to... I couldn't bring her back without using the darkness. And now, I feel like I am losing myself. I am so scared, Chad."

"Is she hurt still?" Chad is surprisingly calm. He stares down at me, looking through his long lashes.

I shake my head, "No, she is okay. I had to use forbidden magic to save her, but it worked. And now, it wants *me*."

"You need to take me to her." His words are not a request.

"I can't..."

"No, George. You *can*, and you will. Savi is all I have left in the world. I will not take no for an answer."

I look into his crimson eyes, the very same ones which made me weak in the knees. They used to make my heart skip beats and would stay in my mind even after I left him.

"I've missed you," I whisper, regretting the words as soon as I say them. Am I delusional?

Chad drops my arms and steps back.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said anything." I put my face in my hands.

"Take me to Savi, please."

Swallowing my pride, I nod. "But we need to get some supplies first. She is going to need some for the time being."

“No, Savi is coming home. I will not leave my sister, my only blood, alone on werewolf territory.” He moves past me for the door and ushers me out. “Let’s go.”

I lead the way, Chad’s gaze never once looking at me as he focuses on the path ahead. If he didn’t have a clear reaction, I’d think he never heard my confession. Without light within Bane’s Forest, it is hard for me to find my way. Thankfully, Chad doesn’t have this problem.

“I don’t sense her,” he says. “I should be able to, but I can’t.”

“And you won’t,” I reply. “The cottage she waits in is charmed. I did it to protect us from the wolves. There’s a subtle charm on her, too. She can be seen but not sensed. It was the only way to meet in the forest and not be in danger.”

“Yet look at the mess you are both in. Charmed or not, Savi could be dead right now. None of this would have happened if you two stayed out of the woods.”

Chad is right, so I don’t even try to argue. We walk the rest of the way in silence. As soon as we’re close to the cottage, I skip ahead, wanting to go first and warn Savi that her brother is here.

“Savi, I’m back,” I say into the darkness of the cottage. I wait for a reply but hear nothing. Not a single breath responds back to me.

My blood chills.

“Savi?” I call again.

“What is going on?” Chad says, stepping cautiously behind me.

I turn to him, my tongue swollen with panic.

“She is not here.”

On cue, the night lights up with the howls of countless wolves. The noise echoes across Bane’s Forest, loud and intrusive. Chad doesn’t wait for me before he is running. We both shoot through Bane’s Forest toward the howling, which grows louder and louder. Up ahead, we see something through the break in the trees that makes us both stop.

Savi.

She stands in the middle of a field, the burning body of a werewolf beside her as countless wolves surround her.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Savi

TIME SEEMS TO SLOW AS I SCAN THE SMALL, TREE-LINED CLEARING. I PACE in circles, eyeing my attackers while searching for the easiest escape, but of course, there isn't one. Freedom from this wolfsbane field will come at a cost. One I fear may be too great to bear.

I close my eyes, focusing on the gnawing feeling within me. I don't need to see them to know they are there, watching me, waiting for me to emerge from the safety this field grants.

I haven't much time. George will return to the cottage, see I'm gone, and come looking for me. I can't risk him running into all of Hillcrest's wolves. I'd also prefer it if he didn't witness them rip me apart, limb by limb.

I take a step forward, and the wolves howl in response. It's so loud I'm sure their reaction is heard by drunken college students in the next town over. I ball my hands into fists at my sides. After all this work George and I have done to protect our involvement in the broken treaty, I cringe at the thought of exposing magic simply because too many wolves howled at once.

I take another step and consider bargaining with the beasts, but what have I to offer? They want blood—blood I've already spilled. As revenge for their fallen comrade, they took my life. I gladly offered my soul in exchange for George's, but how was I to know he would simply bring me back?

"It doesn't need to come to this," I say. I don't bother yelling. In their wolf forms, their senses are heightened like that of a vampire's. I'm well-matched against one wolf in this form, so fighting my way through an entire pack is just reckless. But if there's one thing I'm good at, it's reaction by instinct rather than thought.

"There's no need to shed more blood," I continue. They bark in response, a clear chuckle at my feeble attempt to spare lives. I knew it was

moot. A life for a life, and technically, I'm no longer dead. But giving away the second chance I've been given feels wrong.

Out of options and nearly out of time, I ready myself to outrun them, but just as I find a narrow opening in the clearing that would lead straight to the cottage, I lock gazes with the only non-golden irises in the forest.

George and Chad hold hands as they watch me. A shimmer of magic surrounds them, preventing the wolves from sensing their nearness. George lowers his magic just enough for me to acknowledge their presence. Both are unable to hide the fear in their eyes. All I want to do is explain how it came to this. Chad would understand that I was trying to protect George, but would George forgive me? I promised I'd wait for him to return to the cottage, and I broke that promise and ended up making things worse.

"I'm sorry," I whisper as I stare into my brother's crimson irises. Tears pool in the corners of his eyes, and I know my fate is finally sinking in. Surviving an attack from this many wolves would be a miracle, and frankly, I'm fresh out of those at this point. I wouldn't let George use his magic on me if this ends badly. I don't know what he did before, but I can *feel* I'm not natural. "We—" I clear my throat "—*I* never meant to hurt anyone. Always remember that. No matter what happens. No matter what the council says."

I tear my gaze from my brother to see the alpha wolf emerge. He growls, a roar erupting from his chest that sends a shiver from my ears to the very tips of my toes. I assume he mistook my apology as meant for him, and I don't correct him. After all, I *am* sorry it has come to this. No one was supposed to die that day at the bonfire.

"You should leave," I say, staring at the black-haired alpha, but knowing my friends would understand I am speaking to them. "I have to do this alone."

My final admission has my enemy's ears twitching in response. The beast's eyes narrow, head tilting as it considers my statements. He turns to face his pack and growls. In unison, they begin to howl. A few wolves break from the pack and begin sniffing the surrounding area, and I know we've been caught. The wolves may not sense the intruders, but George's magic can only hide Chad and him for so long.

Just as I consider offering them what they want—my life in exchange for theirs—my fellow comrades run toward the safety of the wolfsbane

field. Breaking their connection, Chad dashes toward me, easily outrunning George. He's by my side in a matter of seconds, but focus isn't on him.

"George!" I scream. I bypass my brother's embrace as I run toward my only true friend. Time passes as slow as a steady heartbeat, and I can hear George's screaming in my mind.

Three beats pass by the time I reach him, but he's already using his magic. Calling upon the element of air, he blasts his power out of his body, and wolves on all sides are propelled away by an invisible force.

Once at his side, I yank his arm, flinging his body past me and into the safety of the field. He falls against Chad, and together, they crumple to the ground. Though my family is safe, I find myself on the wrong side of the wolfsbane.

Chad's cries for my safety are a distant memory as a wolf charges me, making impact. I'm tossed through the air as if I were one of the many yellowed leaves cluttering the forest floor on a windy day. I slam into the tree, crying out as something pierces my stomach. I push off the trunk and tumble to the ground. My blood drips steadily from a broken, low-hanging tree limb just above my head.

Already, I feel myself healing, the pain diminishing, and my anger multiplying steadfast. I'm on my feet when the surrounding wolves lunge for me. My fist greets my first attacker, and I give no pause to the fact that I send him flying into a welcoming field of toxic flowers. The darkness within me sparks to life, relishing in the fact that that wolf will soon burst into flames. His comrades will be forced to watch him die just as they forced George to watch me die hours earlier.

I leap over my next attacker before backhanding another. I move with such effortless grace I have to wonder if this is the tradeoff for death. If it is, I'll take it.

By the time I've dodged a half-dozen more wolves, it feels as though I'm dancing. Their attacks are predictable and come as if they lunge in slow motion. I anticipate each bite, each snarl, each savage leap. In my mind, I fight to the slow strums of classical music, but even as I'm swaying to the beat, I'm reminded that every performance must come to an end.

I'm jolted from my dance and back to reality. Surrounded by the bodies of several Hillcrest wolves, I gasp, hands bloody and coated with matted fur. Before I can react to the idea I may have killed more wolves, I'm stunned by a mind-numbing scream.

Chad.

CHAPTER TWENTY

George

CHAD STOPS DEAD IN HIS TRACKS AS THE HOWLS LIGHT UP THE NIGHT around us. He takes my hand in fear, squeezing tightly.

“Stay close,” Chad says.

“Wait,” I pull back as he walks forward. “I can keep you hidden from the wolves, but you need to stay connected to me.”

We both glance down at our entwined hands. I imagine the protection charm I have created expanding from my skin into a bubble which encases us both. As long as he stays touching me, I can keep enough power up to keep him hidden. If he lets go, the wolves will sense him.

Again, the wolves howl and rush around us, not once noticing our presence, not when their golden gazes are pinned to Savi as she stands in the middle of the field.

Unlike the wolves, Savi can sense us. She stares directly at Chad and me. Her brows crease. I can also taste her distress at seeing us.

I want to shout, to ask her why she left the protection of the cottage. But I can't, not as we are surrounded as more wolves join those who watch Savi. One sound, and they will hear us. Keeping us invisible to their senses takes more power than the normal charm.

I feel Chad pull against my hand, trying to break free, and with it, the charm wavers. Savi's eyes widen. Can she sense it? I hold on tighter to her brother's hand while holding my breath.

Savi and Chad share a moment together regardless of the distance. Her mouth is moving, and her face is pinched with sadness. I look up to Chad and see a dribble of blood fall from his eyes as he listens to whatever Savi is saying. I don't have the sense to make it out, but the wolves do. They turn their attention to us, sniffing the air as if they are missing something. Savi's attention has caused them to look for who she speaks to. Their tongues lap the empty air to find what only she can see.

Then everything changes.

Chad tugs his hand free and runs. I sense the snapping of the charm, making him visible to the wolves' eyes. Confused, they attack, but their hungry snaps miss him.

Straight through the field, he runs for his sister, my magic no longer protecting him. In response, some wolves growl and snap in my direction, trying to find where Chad came from. Some try and go after him but soon halt as the wolfsbane herb brushes against their paws.

He left me alone and surrounded by the enemy. Chad and Savi watch from a distance. In the brief moment that follows, I see the regret in Chad's eyes. He knows what he has done, what it *could* cost.

In another blink, Savi is running for me, screaming my name. The moment she leaves the protection of the field, she will be bait.

I ready my power, calling on the winds to spin and build into a powerful storm. The element rests at the tips of my fingers, and the moment Savi gets close enough and the wolves bend their long legs to pounce, I throw out every inch of power. Bodies slam into trees. All I can hear is the wolves' whimpering.

Then I am airborne.

I watch the ground disappear as I am flung toward Chad. Time doesn't slow down as my body smacks his and we both tumble to the ground. My head spins and the muscles in my back scream in agony. Chad groans beneath me, which helps me register what happened. Savi threw me, sent me away from the wolves and to the protection of the field.

I look up from the ground to search for her. Her limbs thrash frantically as she fights off wolves who try and stop her from reaching the protection of the field. Effortlessly, she wins, leaving a trail of injured wolves behind her.

The alpha notices and steps forward toward Chad and me. I grip hold of Chad without even realizing. His presence is all I need.

Savi moves with unimaginable speed, standing between the alpha and us. With her back now to me, I can't see her face, but I can hear her growl louder than any other around us.

The alpha releases the mightiest of roars, even the wind recoils in fear. Savi doesn't flinch or show a sign of horror. In the next moment, he pounces. Darkness coils inside of me as I watch him charge my friend.

Jumping for the floor, I run, leaving Chad on the ground. But he moves with lightning speed and stops me, his hand on my chest.

“I go. You stay,” he says, pushing me backward slightly.

“No.”

I look over his shoulder for Savi, but I can't see her. The ground rumbles beneath my feet, mirroring my anxiety, as I call for earth's aid. A split in the ground runs from my feet to the edge of the field, where wolves wait for us. They tumble into the hole I created, their barks and whines echoing across the jagged walls of the hungry earth.

Chad sees my power and does not refuse my help again. We both run for the opposite end of the field to fight the wolves who have us surrounded.

I can't focus on Savi or Chad. I can only keep my attention on the snapping jaws before me. Conjured bursts of wind send beasts scurrying into the shadows. I command my elements, causing trees to quake and leaves to gather in streams of pointed arrows. Everything I do is to keep the monsters at bay, giving us time to reach Savi.

The more power I use, the more the darkness seems to turn with pride. I sense its desire to help, but what I need is fire.

Flame would drive them away. But even with all the training the school has given me and all the guidance Elder Jane offered, I can't build the courage to call upon fire.

Chad moves like water, weaving in and out of the wolves. He brings his fists down onto snouts and clashes his nails across bellies and jaws.

In his wake, like Savi, he leaves a littering of bodies.

I focus my attention on a group of three wolves who join our fight. Saliva drips between their pointed jaws, and their golden eyes narrow in on me. Bending my knees, I prepare myself, raising my hands to my side to call for a new element.

Inspired by Chad, I reach for the water within the bodies of the wolves before me. I latch onto the presence, pulling it toward me. The wolves drop to the forest bed before they can attack me.

I stumble over my foot, my power draining me. I sense more circling around us, but my mind is foggy.

Release me.

I want to answer it, but before I can, a scream stops my heart entirely. My head snaps to see Chad drop to the ground, claw marks decorating his chest. His hand clutches his wound instead of fighting off beast that pounces atop him.

No longer does the darkness within me need my permission to help. It fills every fiber of my being, and I take a back seat in my mind. Shadows of strange power leak from my hands, wrapping around the wolf atop of Chad.

Like before, I am no more than a witness, seeing my body move under something else's control.

The darkness scoops beneath the wolf and lifts it from Chad. Suspended in the air, the wolf has no means to move. It attempts to break free, but I don't let it.

With a mind of its own, the shadows seep into the wolf's body until I sense its soul. Like the coiling of a serpent around its prey, the darkness loops itself around the wolf's soul, tethering itself to it, and then it pulls.

It happens so quickly that if I blinked, I would have missed it all. The wolf's life blinks out of existence, its soul smothered by the darkness. Like tentacles, it reaches out for the rest of the wolves who try and get close. They regard it with fearful gazes and snarls. Chad tries to stand. Not a single wolf tries to attack as the darkness spreads out around us, forming a new layer of protection.

"Run!" Savi screams, but I am not in control of my body to see who she speaks to. Chad is on his knees, blood pouring from his wound. He is in no state to fight anymore. Once the darkness recedes and returns my body to me, I know we will be done for. The wolves may not come close to us as the darkness is around, but they grow in numbers beyond my protection, ready to pounce the moment they can.

"George, run! You... ah... You must leave here. Take... Chad."

Savi's panic is palpable. She screams across the field to me. The alpha is on the ground beneath her, struggling to pull Savi's hand from his neck. To hold down an alpha, she must hold an enormous amount of power.

Listen to her. You must leave. You must live... it tells me.

As I watch from the dark space in my mind, I sense my body move, help Chad up, and run. The darkness still spins around us the entire way out of Bane's Forest.

Every now and then, Chad would stumble and fall, and the wolves who follow us would howl in excitement. This was a chase for them.

Only when we burst onto the open streets of Hillcrest do we stop. Thankfully, the wolves do not pass the threshold of the forest, because my darkness snaps back into the pit of my stomach, giving me full control of

my body again. Like I've come up for air after being in the belly of a deep lake, I gulp for breath.

Chad is back on the floor, slumped as his wound struggles to heal.

"You left her," he accuses. "Why did you listen to her? We need to go back!"

I can't explain, not now.

"I wasn't in control," I say.

"I saw that much—" He winces, hissing as he tries to stand up.

I look back to the forest at the many golden eyes that watch us. Reaching for Chad, I place my bare palm on his arm, and immediately, I see the confusion in the wolves' eyes as they look for us. The charm is back up. They won't be able to sense us as we leave.

"Savi will be fine," I tell him, remembering how she held the alpha down gave me hope she could get out of there alive. "But you will not be if we don't get back and heal you up. You know as well as I that wolves slow your healing process. Unless you want to bleed out on the street?"

Chad doesn't complain as I help him up off the street. Only a couple of curses slip past his lips as we walk toward his home. For luck, I wrap the cocoon charm around us again. It stops those around from seeing a bleeding vampire being carried by an Alcott witch from Bane's Forest. That would trudge up questions—questions we don't have time to deal with.

Each step I take, I turn back, searching for a sign that Savi made it out. A part of me knows she is fine. Deep down, like an intuition, I sense her escape from the wolves. But another part of me also notices the silence. It's a strange connection with her—one I've never noticed before.

I send a silent thought for her safe return and stumble into her home. Closing the door behind me, I put my worries to bed and prepare myself to help Chad heal.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Savi

THE WOLVES TRY TO STOP ME FROM REACHING MY BROTHER, BUT I FOIL every attack. Nothing will stop me from getting to his side. As I emerge from the woods, mere feet from the safety of the wolfsbane, I see them. Chad is lying on the ground, hand clutching his bloody chest, and George is by his side, a dark, shadowy mist surrounds them both. The wolves remain at bay, but their eyes betray their eagerness to pounce. I don't know how long they have before George's magic fails to protect them. I see the weakness in his eyes, in his touch, in the way he moves. He's struggling for control, and the moment he loses it, the wolves will feed.

I have the alpha, now in human form, pinned beneath me. The surprise on his face fuels my energy, and he struggles to free himself from my grasp. Just as I'm about to land the final blow that would leave Hillcrest's wolves without a leader, something nags at me. The darkness deep within stings as if it's begging to be released. I feel its desire to join George. I offer a quick side-glance to my friend.

"George, run! You—"

Something attacks me from behind. I cry out as I'm tumbling forward. My forehead smacks the cold, hard ground, and momentarily, I'm dazed.

"You have to leave here. Take... Chad," I say. I speak softly, and I worry George cannot hear me over the sounds of the forest.

I roll onto my back and stare at the sky. The wolfsbane growing all around me tickles my bare skin, and the stars dance above me.

"Keep him safe," I whisper, a final plea to protect the only family I have left.

A shadow figure hovers over me, blocking my view of the moonlit sky. I roll my head against the soft soil to try and get a better look at him. The feet beside me are large and hairy, the toenails caked with dirt. The sharp point of my attacker's foot makes contact with my side. Instinctively, I roll away, tumbling until I'm far enough to stand again. I waver slightly,

lightheaded from my fall. A glance over my shoulder tells me I'm alone. George heard my cries and retreated. I can only hope his magic will stand strong until he reaches the safety of Hillcrest town.

With each step backward I take, my attacker's long, lean legs make two more forward. Soon, we're dancing. I'm dodging his attacks with extreme speed, and he's laughing at my own feeble attempts to stop him.

"Aren't you the least bit curious why I can walk among these *leeches*?" the alpha wolf asks me as the wolves howl their approval from the field's edge. He spits at the flowers growing and smashing the ones beneath his bare feet. His long, dark hair falls before his eyes, and he pushes it back with a hand before meeting my gaze. His golden eyes are ablaze with fury.

"You're their alpha," I breathe. "I'm sure there's all sorts of things you can do that they can't."

"You do incredibly stupid things for being such a smart vampire." He spits his words at me, as if the word *vampire* tasted bad.

I ignore him as he tells me of his power, of the many wolves ready to strike the moment I leave the safety of the wolfsbane field. He's right. I can only stay here for so long. Either I fight him, the strongest of the wolves, within its barrier, or I fight them, the dozens of wolves ready to feed, ready to avenge their fallen brethren.

I can't help but wonder how I got into this mess. The bonfire was absolutely not worth the hell George and I have been living since then. Next time I suggest to cut loose and party with humans, I hope George smacks me over the head.

The alpha's mouth curves into a menacing smile. I almost don't see it—the dead giveaway that he's preparing his attack—because his bushy, overgrown beard nearly hides his thin lips.

He lunges, and jumping into the air, I land a perfect full twist layout. I avoid his sloppy attack and end up behind him. I leap into the air and plant both feet into his back, sending him lurching forward. I land less gracefully but recover quickly. I'm on my feet before he can even turn to face me.

The wolves are loud, their howls, barks, and roars are likely heard by every neighboring town, but I ignore them, desperately trying to tune them out as I face their alpha.

His back glistens with sweat, and the moon's rays illuminate each of his scars. They twinkle under the light as tiny silver streaks against overly

tanned skin. He's nude, and I fight the urge to land a cheap shot. That would be easier, but I'm no coward.

He turns abruptly to face me, and I can practically see his skin sizzling from anger. With narrowed eyes and jaw clenched, he runs at me with a newfound determination. I backflip through the air, enjoying my newly discovered gift for gymnastics.

Just as my feet meet earth, I fall, and before he can realize what I've done, he's already trampling over me. The moment his legs are on either side of my narrow frame, I slam my fists against his inner calves with such force I hear muscles tear. He falls to the ground, shrieking in agony.

I jump to my feet and look down upon him with a smile on my face and a song in my heart. As a vampire, I may not be stronger than the alpha wolf, but I'm definitely more creative.

I crouch beside him. A hand full of dark, wiry hair, I yank his head to the side to bare his neck. He meets my gaze, fear in his eyes as my fangs elongate. My stomach rumbles as I inhale his musky scent.

He gasps. "It can't be..." I loosen my grip slightly as I consider his admission. He jerks away and stumbles backward. I stand and take a few steps backward. One by one, the wolves cower under my gaze. Falling to their sides, they submit to my glare, lying on their backs, legs spread, noses to the ground.

I swallow the knot in my throat and return my gaze to the alpha. He shakes under my presence. I frown. What the hell is going on? Internally, I'm laughing. I'm enjoying every second of their willing defeat, but in truth, I know it is not me who laughs. It's the darkness within me. That thought makes my chest burn.

I take the exit he's offering me. I land a final blow to his chest, watching as he is flown backward through the air. He disappears into the forest. Though I cannot see him, I hear him assault the trunk of a faraway tree.

I'm running. I leap over the few remaining wolves and dash through the forest. I don't stop running until the sounds of wolves fall mute to my ears. By the time I finally stop, I'm in an unfamiliar part of Wolfsbane Forest. George and I have hiked many acres, but out of fear, we've never crossed the threshold of the forest that faces nearby towns. I'm sure that's where I walk now—close to the college town and far from home.

The slightest of stings sends shockwaves through my arm. I can feel the poison work its way through my veins even as I quickly work to remove it.

I bring it before my eyes, expecting to find a dagger by the amount of pain spread through my veins, but instead, I witness a small, black dart.

I spin in circles, sensing my surroundings. Just as I pick up the faintest of heartbeats, another dart penetrates my skin. This time, it lands squarely in my chest. I rip it out and stumble backward, trying to run.

My feet are heavy, my legs weak. My arm aches where the original dart landed. I struggle to breathe, but I won't risk resting.

I'm running, yet my feet move so slowly I have to assume I'm dragging hundreds of pounds of weights behind me. I fall against a tree, and as I push myself off, I falter, tumbling to the ground.

I crawl, digging my fingers into the ground. The dirt is packed tightly. The veins in my hands are black as the toxin works its way through my system. I can feel it everywhere—in my blood, my heart, my mind. I gasp for air, the noise escaping my mouth is a weak whimper.

I struggle to turn over, but when I'm on my back, I stare up at the trees that tower over me. My eyes flutter shut, and I fight to reopen them. I have to wake up. I have to fight. I hear them approach. My eyelids are heavy as I open them. My attackers move quickly and in unison. If I wasn't facing them now, I'd swear only one was approaching.

The poison has hardened my muscles so that I'm paralyzed. Though this means the pain is gone, the overwhelming sense of dread that washes over me has not been muffled.

I cannot move. I cannot speak. And when an unfamiliar face points a weapon at me, I can do nothing but plea with my eyes.

The shot of a single dart echoes through the trees. Birds calling this forest home flutter away, squawking their fear. If only I had wings, I too could join them.

My urge to fight is overtaken by the poison enveloping my world, and as I retreat into the shadows, I sense the presence of the evil that lingers within my own personal darkness.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

George

CHAD LIES ON THE BED BEFORE ME, HIS HANDS RESTING ON THE PLUSH sheets. His skin is almost as pale as the white bedding around him. Only the tufts of dark hair across his chest and lower stomach stand out.

I sit beside him, legs folded as I rub the wet muslin cloth across his forehead and wounded shoulder. His temperature spiked since returning home, and no matter how many charms or healing spells I throw at him, it's hard to lower it.

A werewolf scratch has a similar poison to a bite, except instead of causing death, it slows the healing response. Chad's body tries to refuse my help; it's as stubborn as he is.

Regardless, each time I complete a healing spell, the slash across his chest seems to get smaller, and the redness decreases before my very eyes.

I'm exhausted from using the darkness—or, rather, the darkness's use of me. Even now, my limbs don't feel like they belong to me. Chad tried to question me on what he saw, but I avoided his questions. He knows little of a witch's power, so I explained the darkness is a perk of the Alcott bloodline.

"Have you heard from her?" Chad breaks the silence, asking the same question for the third time since we got back. I peer to my phone, which rests on the bedside table, but the screen is still dark. I didn't need to look at it to know she has not called or messaged. I haven't heard the alert, but checking still makes me feel like I am doing something.

"Not yet. But I'm sure she is fine. This is Savi we are talking about."

It is hard to believe my own words. Part of me knows she is still alive. I feel her like a tugging in my gut. Even the darkness, which has been considerably quiet since we left the woods, seems to agree.

"If she is hurt, I will never ever forgive myself. My one task was to look after her after our parents died, and I've failed multiple times. She is such a

free spirit, and I let her be. Perhaps I should have limited her freedom. Maybe she wouldn't have gotten into this mess if I had."

I dab the cloth on his head, swiping the sweat from his thick brows. "You know that would never work. Do you really think Savi would ever listen to you, or anyone else for that matter?"

Chad shakes his head on the pillow. "She kills humans, and I let her. Part of me is scared to tell her to stop, because I know the urge. It's our instincts. If my parents were here, they'd shun me for my lack of action..."

"Chad, no." I rest my hand on his cold shoulder. His muscles ripple under my touch, and my stomach jolts in response. "You mustn't think like that. Ever. I know as well as Savi that you're a good brother to her. All I have ever seen is you doing what you think is best for her. Your parents would be proud."

"I left her, surrounded by wolves, while she fought an alpha. How do I have her best interests at heart?"

Chad is right. Saying it aloud makes it sound much more serious, but she told us to leave. If we would've stayed, we would be nothing but meat between hungry jaws. "You saw what I saw. She was winning against him. She's stronger than you know. We need to stay positive."

He turns his head slowly to face me and opens his eyes. I catch my breath as his red gaze holds me prisoner.

"Did you mean what you told me earlier?" he asks.

"What?"

"That you missed me?"

"Yes. I did... do. I do," I say, stumbling over my words.

"Why?" His question is as innocent as it is brash. "Why would you miss me after what I did to you? You deserve better than me. You should know that."

"Don't tell me what I deserve."

I can't help the twist of anger. I buried it for so long after he put an end to whatever we had between us. One day, we were fine, sneaking behind Savi's back and sharing moments together. I never thought it would end. Even as I think about it now, I can remember the day when Chad was suddenly cold, distant. He disregarded me, never explaining why he didn't want to see me again.

"I deserved answers, but you never gave them to me. I tried many times to get through to the boy I knew, but I lost him... If you want to give me

what I deserve, then give me an answer. What happened to us?"

Chad pauses, looking at a space on the wall as he lets my question sink in.

"I did it for you," he says.

"For me?" I ask.

"Because I care about you." Chad forces a smile that lasts only a moment.

"Care about what exactly? Because from my point of view, what you did was entirely unfair. If this is your way of making yourself feel better, don't bother telling me. I don't want to hear it."

I put the damp cloth in my lap and squeeze, trying to calm my emotion. I'm annoyed and angry at his confession.

"You may find it hard to understand, but it made sense in my head." He taps his finger against his temple. "How long do you think we could have kept it up? Ignoring the fact that you kept a relationship with your best friend's brother from her, we are completely different. I'm a vampire. You're a witch. We aren't meant to be in relationships together. Word would get out, and we would be shunned. I couldn't put you through that..."

"I told you, over and over, that I would go through that for you."

I can feel tears in my eyes, blurring my vision. I could tell myself the tears were from exhaustion or from thinking about Savi. But I'd be lying to myself. This is the first time I have seen and spoke to *my Chad*, the man I fell in love with over a year ago. He's guarded his emotions and honesty for so long. But for once, his walls are crumbling, revealing the lover I once knew.

A single drop of blood slips out the corner of Chad's eye and runs down the side of his face, staining his pillow. I move, leaning over him and dabbing the blood droplet with the cloth.

My face is close to his, enough for me to smell the copper of the blood mixed with the mint of his breath. I catch myself, fingers brushing across his cheek. His eyes flicker from my gaze to my cheeks to my mouth and back. The entire moment drags on.

His arms snake out, wrapping around my back and pulling me close. He is gentle yet firm, the sign of a boy who knows what he wants. Slowly, he runs one hand up my back, sending shivers across my arms. He comes to a stop at my hair, fingers lacing through my brown locks. Then he leans up off the bed and presses his mouth on mine.

The touch starts off gently, with the pressing of my lips against his. I suck in a breath, leaning every inch of my body against his. Nearly timeless, it lasts for a long while. When he pulls away, I try to go in for another kiss, but his crimson eyes look into mine. A deep desire lurks in those depths.

I look at his wound, which is no more than a faded memory. His body has healed. Finally, I feel like I can touch him without causing pain. I rest my palms on his chest, just above where the scratch was, and hold his gaze.

“Do you have it in you to forgive me?”

I smile. “That depends.”

“On?” he says, reaching up to kiss me again.

I rest my mouth on his and whisper, “Show me how sorry you are, and I’ll think about accepting your apology.”

“Deal.”

We kiss again. Chad rolls me onto my back, scooping his hand in the curve of my spine and lays me down. He doesn’t complain of pain and discomfort. In this moment, locked together, I don’t think such feelings are even possible to register. All thoughts are lost as we explore each other. Occasionally, we pull back for breath, but not long before diving back into the sea of passion—passion that built over the past year. So many wasted moments are made up in this one kiss.

But then my phone dings.

We pull away from each other clumsily, and I reach for the phone, pulling it into my hands. The screen flashes, but it is not a text from Savi.

“What is she saying?” Chad says, wiping the corners of his mouth with a thumb and finger.

“It is not Savi,” I tell him. “It’s from my mother.”

I read the short line over and over. I wonder if Chad can see the hairs on my arms stand on end or if he can hear the fear in my heart as it picks up in speed.

“Are you okay?” Chad asks, studying my reaction. “What’s wrong?”

I place the screen to my chest and force a smile. “Nothing important, but I do need to go.”

Swinging my legs over the side of the bed, I stand, regretting that I have to leave him. I don’t want to, but I must.

My lips throb gently from our intense connection. I want to press my fingers to them, but I resist. Worried that Chad might see them shaking, I

keep my arms at my sides.

“Was the kiss that bad?” Chad asks.

“Far from it. Something has come up at home, and I don’t want to have Mother thinking something is wrong by ignoring her.”

“Will you come back after you have seen her?” Chad asks.

“The moment I can come, I will.”

Chad nods. “I’m not going anywhere until Savi comes home. If I hear from her, I will tell you. Please do the same with me.”

He slumps back onto the bed and pressing the heels of his palms into his eyes.

“She’s fine. She’ll be home soon.” I sense her within the darkness like her life is a secret it is holding onto. Somehow, I just know she’s alive. “I’m going to come back with some of my scrying tools and my grimoire. We can find out where she is with it. Maybe she is hiding within Bane’s Forest at the cottage? It would be the safest place for her.”

His lips pull tight. “Don’t leave me for too long. The silence will drive me crazy.”

“I won’t.” I pull on my jacket and move for the bedroom door. “I promise.”

“You always were good at keeping them,” Chad says.

I smile, looking at him from the doorway. I grip onto the doorframe and squeeze, wanting so desperately to tell him what the message said, but I keep quiet.

“Back soon,” I say. If I wait another moment, I might spill what I just read on my phone. But I can’t tell him. Not yet.

He shouts something from his bedroom, but the loud banging of my feet down the stairs drowns out his words. I rush into the foyer, out the front door, and onto the street.

Chad and I are only beginning a new relationship, and already, I’m lying to him. I’m not going home. I can’t. But I can’t stay with Chad either. I need Savi. She would know what to do, how to react to this message.

I move down the street until I cannot see Savi’s home anymore. Pulling my phone back out of my pocket, I re-read the message again and again, punishing myself each time I absorb Mother’s words. I say it in my head, and then I say it aloud. Each time, her words get worse.

Your father is proud.

The words speed around in my mind.

Father.

He is dead.

He died in my hands. Attempting to save him was my greatest failure.

What could she mean? A strange sensation crawls across my skin, prompted by the turning of the dark coil within me.

Your father is proud.

Can I excuse this message as part of Mother's unusual behavior? Has what little sanity she had left after Father's death finally shattered? Is she broken after our last encounter? Did my actions tip her into the abyss of insanity?

Proud.

Father is proud.

Throughout my childhood years, all I wanted was for him to be proud of me, but time after time, test after test, I failed him. And when he needed me most, I couldn't perform. I couldn't save him—and part of me didn't want to. He always had been a monster.

The weather chills with the greeting of dawn. The sky taints a mixture of yellows and blues as the sun rises above Hillcrest. I stand in the middle of the empty street. Turning in circles, I face both ways—one points toward Bane's Forest and the other toward home.

But which do I take?

You know where to go...

I pinch my eyes, trying to block out the darkness's whisperings.

What are you? I ask.

Proud. I am proud.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Savi

THE SLIGHT KNOCKING ECHOING THROUGH THE ROOM IS DRIVING ME INSANE. I've been listening to it for hours—ever since I woke up in this room. I'm tied to a chair, hands behind my back. The rope binding me together scratches at my skin. Across the room, I see my jacket and mobile phone. Every few seconds, the screen lights up. I don't have to see the messages to know they are from George and Chad. They're probably furious that I'm not home yet. They have no idea how badly I wish I were home.

With each passing moment, my anger grows. I have so many questions: where am I? Who brought me here? Did Chad and George make it home? Is Chad okay? My questions play on an endless loop in my mind. That, and the sound. I glance at the contraption. It's small, the frame made of wood. Six metal balls dangle in the center. The two ends take turns smacking the center balls over and over again.

If I don't get out of here soon, I'm definitely going to kill someone again. And I promised George I wouldn't do that anymore. If I go back now and confide that I've broken yet another promise to him, he will probably get upset.

But all I can think about is ripping off someone's head, because the pitter patter of the steel balls are making me lose my mind.

A small window illuminates the dank room I'm in. The walls are stone and covered in grime. Even from where I sit, positioned directly in the center of the room, I can see their slick surfaces. I cringe at the thought of being in here. The musty air is all around me, and for once, I wish it were true that vampires didn't need to breathe.

My memory is foggy, but I distinctly remember the thin, black dart I withdrew from my arm. Who shot it at me? Even considering what I did to the wolves, this seems a bit dramatic.

Directly in front of me is a mirror, and to the right of it, there is a door. Behind that wall, there are three beings. I hear each and every one of their

steady heartbeats. I've no sense of time since I woke, so I don't know how long I've been here. But I've been here long enough to know I have every intention of ripping out their hearts and eating them whole.

It's safe to say, I'm tired, I'm hungry, and I'm pissed off.

I don't try to break the rope tying my hands together. The last time I did, a jolt worked its way through my system. Whenever I try to free myself, this happens. They, my abductors hiding behind their mirrored threshold, trigger it, I'm sure of this.

"Pathetic," I mumble to myself, and a vicious jolt works its way through my system. I do not cry out, but I do clench my jaw shut and groan my way through the pain. "I certainly hope you plan to kill me, because it's only a matter of time before I break through these ropes." I stare directly at the mirror, making eye contact with each person watching me. I may not be able to see them, but I sense their essence.

The window to my left is open to the outside world. Thick metal bars are supposed to keep me inside, but I'm sure I can pull them free. The only question is, can I fit through that small hole?

Since George hasn't come to rescue me yet, I assume this place is protected in some way from his magic, which means I must fight my way out by myself. I'm angry enough to happily take them down, but do I have the power? They aren't exactly stupid.

The soft thump of shoe against concrete vibrates off the walls of the small room. I can't help but smile as they approach and enter the room. Just when I considered them to be smart, they show me their faces.

Two of the three enter the room, slamming the door shut. The first stands beside the door, leaning against it with arms crossed. He frowns at me, narrowing his eyes and never looking away. Sadly, I must submit first by glancing away.

The bolder of the two walks directly before me, sliding a chair against the concrete floor. The scratching noise is loud in the small space, and I feel myself wince. Internally, I chastise myself for showing weakness.

The two men look identical, and I can only assume they are either twin brothers or closely related in some way. They're tall, at least a foot taller than me. Their gray hair is cropped short, and their clothes resemble human military attire. Supernaturals keep their distance from humans, but I've seen their military in movies George made me watch long ago. Their skin is pale and wrinkled, their eyes so dark brown they look nearly black.

“Tell me your name,” the man before me says as he sits on the chair he dragged over.

I hold his gaze and say nothing. Does he really think he can break me? It takes a lot to kill a vampire, and being one that was born, not bitten, it will take even more effort to end my life. By the time he realizes that, I’ll have found a way to free myself. And then I’ll rip out his throat. The darkness within me smiles at the thought, and I have to wonder who put it in my head—*it or me*.

Before I even have enough time to recite my full name, the human’s arm swings forward, boasting an impressive dagger, and comes down on my leg. The metal sinks into the flesh of my thigh, nicking my femoral artery. I shriek, his bold move both painful and shocking.

“Let me guess,” I say, breathless. “Good cop, bad cop?” I eye my two attackers and contemplate which will be the first to die.

I twist my hands behind my back, feeling the rope give way ever so slightly. If I bide my time and slowly break through the fibers holding me here, I can free myself without them ever noticing.

A sharp jolt shutters through my body as I twist my wrists once again. “Fuck!”

“Tell me your name!” the man shouts. I can sense his frustration with me, and we’ve only just begun. I don’t have the heart to tell him a career in torture may not be his wisest choice.

The man reaches forward and twists the knife in my leg, nearly severing my artery. I can feel myself healing as every second passes, but I am quickly approaching desperation. I need to feed if I expect to smash my way through the windowed wall. Thankfully, these two idiots have locked themselves in this room with me as if they were meals-on-wheels.

“What *are* you?” the man asks. He gnaws on his lower lip, waiting for my response.

Seriously? *You* abducted *me*, and you don’t even know who you kidnapped? This is probably the worst abduction attempt ever made in the history of time. Not to mention, they should have done a little research first, because this rope won’t contain me for long.

My stomach grumbles. The hunger slowly works its way into my mind, and soon, it’s all I can think about. I close my eyes and imagine sinking my fangs into this man’s neck. The darkness within me is giddy, hopeful I’ll soon strike.

“You’re killing her,” the other man says.

I open my eyes, and we lock gazes. Is he really concerned about my wellbeing, or does he take his good cop title too seriously?

“We won’t get any information from her if she’s dead,” he adds.

Never mind... He’s just become as much a part of my dinner as this other asshole.

“She’s not afraid,” my abuser responds.

He’s right. I’m not, but I should be. In truth, I cannot survive for much longer. But the darkness within me gives me strength, and it fuels the fury building in my gut. I’ve never felt such hate and anger before. I want to lash out at anything and everything around me. I want to fight, to kill. I want to appease the hunger that burns my throat and threatens to spill over.

I want to *kill*.

“Why?” good cop asks.

“Because she’s *something else*.”

I feel my fangs lengthening as my breathing slows. I focus on the pattering of their heartbeats and that of the third person just outside the walls of this room. By the time he reaches the door to save his friends, they’ll be dead.

With one quick jerk, I break the rope. It falls to the ground in shreds, but I’m already standing. The knife that once called my inner muscles home is in my hand. I throw it at the door, purposely missing the man standing there. It lodges between the door and its frame, locking us in.

Smiling, I listen to the taps of metal upon metal as I lunge toward the older human. The music within me springs to life, and I dance, swaying to the beat. I suppose the metal balls weren’t there to torture me after all. They were there to torture *them*.

When I step back, I wipe away the drip of blood that curves down my lip and onto my jaw. I lick my lips and admire my work. The man is dead, his throat shredded, blood drained, and eyes wide with fear. Two heartbeats passed since the moment I freed myself, and I was too quick for his delayed human responses.

I turn to face the other man, who now cowers and screams for his fallen brethren. I smile, distracted momentarily by the pounding against the door. Someone calls out, ordering the man to move away from the door. I blink in response, something tugging deep within me.

Recognition.

I know that voice. I've heard it somewhere before.

I leap at the man, blocking his pathetic attempts at keeping me at bay. I have him by the throat, and as I angle his neck to feed, I hear the bones of his neck snap. Quickly, I drain him before the blood becomes old.

He falls to the ground in a heap the moment I release him. As I lick my lips of his remains, the door to the room crashes from the frame and slams against the stone wall on the opposite side of the room.

My final abductor enters, and I swallow the last mouthful of blood I'd been relishing. I'm at a standstill, staring into the eyes of the face I know.

"You..." I whisper.

But it cannot be. Never, in all of our encounters, did I suspect—

He lunges toward me, and his fist makes contact with my jaw. The slight crunch of my bone is all I hear as I'm flung backward. I smash into the mirrored wall, the glass giving way to the force propelling me. I don't stop flying through the air until another wall braces my fall. I slide down, shards of glass scraping against my exposed skin.

Dazed, I look around. I'm outside the room but still stuck in the building. I'm not quite sure I can consider this progress.

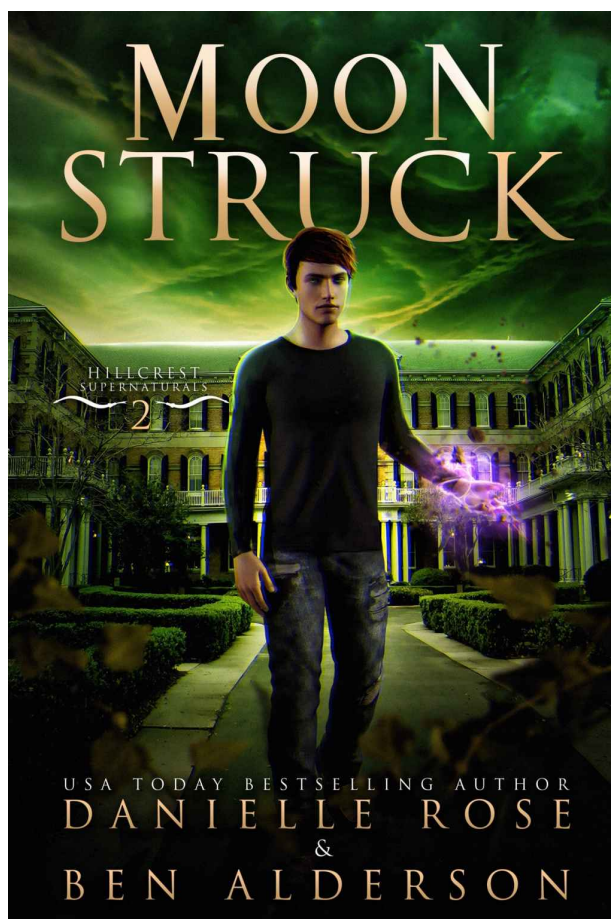
The crunch of broken glass under weight catches my attention. We make eye contact as he approaches. I struggle to my feet, but I'm not quick enough. He's in front of me, hands wrapped around my throat. He slams my head against the wall once, twice. Stars dance behind my eyes as I begin to lose consciousness.

In a moment of desperation, I claw at the skin around his wrists, hoping I've enough strength to rip open the veins fueling his desire to end my life. He winces as I dig deep, offering me just enough time to smash my head into his nose. Blood spills over, drenching us both. He stumbles backward, and I slam my hand against his chest.

I run, my feet hitting the ground with such ferocity I now find myself among a labyrinth of hallways. An endless number of doors surround me, taunting me. One may lead to freedom, but most probably lead to a worse hell than what I've already experienced since my captors invited me over for dinner.

I'm soaked in the blood of my enemies, but I don't care. The only thing that haunts me is the face of the boy I saved at the bonfire and the look in his eyes as he nearly strangled life from me only moments ago.

THE NEXT SPELLBINDING INSTALLMENT IN
THE HILLCREST SUPERNATURALS SERIES...



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dubbed a "triple threat" by readers, Danielle Rose dabbles in many genres, including fantasy, thrillers, and romance. The USA Today bestselling author holds a Master of Fine Arts in creative writing from the University of Southern Maine. Visit Danielle on the Web: www.droseauthor.com.



Ben Alderson is a collaborator in the NYT bestselling anthology, *Because You Love to Hate Me*. He grew up in Berkshire, England. In addition to writing, Ben also runs Oftomes, a successful micro-publishing house. He enjoys reading, traveling, Greek food, music, and anything fantastical. Visit Ben on the Web: www.benjaminoftomes.com.

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