

HEX BOUND

HILLCREST
SUPERNATURAL

3

BEN ALDERSON

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Hillcrest Supernatural #3

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CONTENTS

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty.](#)

[Dedication](#)

Moon Struck Hillcrest Supernaturals, #3

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Chapter One

Savi

I can't feel. It's as if the wind has ceased. I watch the dried, dying leaves in autumnal shades blow in the silent breeze. They scrape against the cement and smack into the legs of those I silently stalk.

I haven't moved since my gaze landed on the familiar figures. I know they can see me, if only they would turn toward my direction, but the predator in me has fallen silent. I should move, hide, watch from the darkness of the street, where I would be safe, but instead, I stay illuminated by the lights.

Behind me, the loud base music strums through the brick walls that enclose my once-favorite vampire club. Inside, even now, vampires dance and feed. They have no idea how dangerous their everyday lives have just become, for just outside, supernatural hunters linger.

Something touches my shoulder, and I nearly catapult into the air. I shriek, and I've recovered my senses. Just as the hunters, who are busily chatting with Jane, the elder witch, toss gazes my way, I pull Chad into the safety of the shadows. I sense my brother's confusion, but I cover his eager mouth with my hand before he can protest. With my eyes, I tell him to remain silent. He nods, and I pry my hand from his face.

I toss a glance over my shoulder. The men have returned their focus on Elder Jane. Part of me wishes to warn her, but I can't risk exposure. They've seen my face. They know I've escaped their compound, their *prison*. I don't know what pretext they're offering as a cover for being in Hillcrest, but I know they're here for me. They want revenge, vengeance for the many lives stolen during my daring escape.

Suddenly, a thought occurs to me.

I must tell the alpha.

Zane.

Alpha of the Hillcrest wolves.

And my sire, for it was his bloodline that turned me into the half-vampire half-werewolf creature I am today.

I may have survived the bite his brother inflicted on me (mainly thanks to George's magical influence), but resurrection has come at a cost. Apparently, blind allegiance to the Hillcrest alpha is said cost.

I want to hate myself for immediately thinking of Zane's safety over my own, but I can't. I feel drawn to him in ways I've never experienced. He is probably used to this form of devotion, but I certainly am not. If he thinks I will willingly leave my life to parade around Wolfsbane Forest with him and his pack, then he has another thing coming.

"Savi, what is going on?" Chad whispers. I can sense his fear to speak. His words are soft, almost inaudible. I point to the group. Chad watches them carefully before shrugging. "I don't know them."

Hunters, I mouth. His skin pales, which is a difficult task for a vampire. Our skin is already so pale it's almost pearlescent. As the blood drains from his skin, I know exactly where it's going. As it fuels his rage, his desire to kill will become so overwhelming he'll be forced to act upon it. And with that, he will risk his life.

I can't let him.

I want nothing more than to end their lives, but revenge must come from my hand. They nearly killed me during my captivity. I could have stopped them, ended it, if only I'd given them names. I refused, and I won't let that be for nothing.

I yank Chad back and dash down the alleyway. With each step I take, I feel his resistance. He fights me as I put more and more distance between him and the hunters. He pushes back, grunting against me, but my body is a solid slab. I won't let him break through me.

When I'm sure we're out of earshot, I slam my palm against Chad's chest a bit harder than intended. He stumbles backward but catches his footing before falling.

"Stop!" I shout. "*Think* about what you're doing."

"I know *exactly* what I'm doing, Savannah. Now get out of my way."

"What about George?" I ask, knowing it's a low blow but not caring. Just as I expected, George's name gives Chad pause. "You have no idea

what you're getting into with them, Chad, and right now, I need you to focus on George. His mother was just murdered in front of him, and he has to deal with the supreme, who is going to cash in that favor sooner rather than later now that *they're* here." I'm careful not to use their names. They may be out of earshot, but other supernaturals are not. I don't want to create a mass hysteria.

"They need to pay for what they did to you," Chad growls. His jaw is clenched, so I can barely understand the words he seethes.

"They will." I cross my arms over my chest. Never in my life have I been as sure as I am in this moment. The hunters *will* pay for what they did to me. "But it will be by my hand."

Chad nods sharply, the muscles in his jaw bulging. I know he's not happy with me, but I can't worry about that right now. I need Chad to help George so I can stop the hunters.

"George is in trouble, and I can't split my focus," I say.

"George needs you too, you know," Chad says. The comment shoots straight for my heart.

"He's in good hands with you," I reply simply.

"Do you even hear yourself? You're acting like you don't even care about him."

I roll my eyes. "Of course I care about him. I wouldn't be in this situation if I didn't care about him! But I won't spend the rest of my life worrying that they are going to find me or him *or you*. I will end this. I will end them. I have to go back." I swallow the knot that forms and gnaw on my lower lip as I watch Chad consider my words. I see the array of emotions flash across his stubborn face, from surprise to disgust to anger.

"You don't seriously think I would let you go back there?" he snaps.

"I left them," I say, whispering.

He arches a brow but remains silent.

"There were dozens, Chad. Dozens and *dozens* of supernaturals caged, tortured, dying. Every day, more die. When I was freed, I barely tried to help them. I have to go back. I can't just leave them. I can't..."

I didn't realize I was hyperventilating until Chad pulled me into his arms. He held me until my chest stopped hurting and my eyes stopped stinging. Every time I think about that place, about what happens there, the world seems to fall silent. It's like I'm trapped in the darkness, but I can feel it closing in on me. And I can't stop it. I'm smothered by the one thing I

used to cherish. After all, vampires are supposed to be friends with the night.

Chad soothes me with words of wisdom and optimism, but I try not to focus on them. I know everything won't be okay. I know we won't figure this out together. I need to do this alone, even if it costs me my life. If offering my existence in exchange for ending their operation is the cost I must pay, then I will do so willingly.

I sniffle as I pull away. "You need to go home."

Chad snorts. "You don't really think that's going to happen, do you?"

"George won't want to be alone forever, and when he calls, you need to be there. You need to hold him, tell him you'll always be there for him. Just... love him better than his mother did."

It took an extra twenty minutes of convincing Chad to wait for me at home, so by the time I returned to the club, the hunters and Elder Jane were gone.

Where would she have taken them?

Think, Savi. Think!

I'm sure her ability as the town's "police chief" is the reason why they were speaking with her. I'm also sure they didn't just walk up to her and tell her they're looking for an escapee. The supreme warned me that humans are investigating the bonfire massacre, which George and I witnessed. No one but Will knows that, of course. We took care of all of our indiscretions, but now I fear this past mistake may have come back to bite us in the ass.

Would she have taken them to the site of the massacre? At this hour, I doubt it. The moon shines down upon me, beckoning me to transform into the beast. I consider it, because a wolf's nose is hard to fool. I could transform and find them by their scent. But that would leave me in wolf's form with no clothes to change back into.

Unable to think of another option, I dash for the town hall. At the center of Hillcrest, the building stands tall. Many supernaturals walk the halls of this building. It's where the council meets and laws are passed. It's also a stand-in for our jail. Of course, that part is never used. Supernaturals don't have many laws. In fact, our number one rule—not to kill a human—is punishable by death, so we don't usually lock up vampires or wolves in the cells. But we needed something to convince passersby, like these intruders.

The building is several stories high. Spotlights are positioned perfectly to illuminate many of the windows. Flags blow in the breeze as I take the steps to the front doors two at a time. I yank open the dark wooden doors and listen as my feet smack the marble floor of the lobby. Even at this late hour, the room is bustling with workers. Supernaturals don't require as much sleep as humans, so we tend to work long hours.

"May I help you find something?" A large man approaches me. He's wearing a suit, but it doesn't hide the ink stains across his hands. I'm betting he's heavily tattooed beneath the jacket.

"I'm looking for Elder Jane," I say. I don't need to introduce myself, because my eyes are the only ticket I need. My red irises betray my identity as a vampire. Thankfully, the room is dark enough so he probably can't tell I also have flecks of gold in my irises—something no other creature has. That is, unless there's another hybrid I don't know about.

The man stopping me wears colored contacts, but those never look natural. He's trying to hide his differences from the human onlookers. He narrows his gaze at me now. "She's busy. You should go home."

His words are a warning. He's not asking me to leave. He's telling me it's dangerous to be out tonight. I'm thankful, but I know more about these monsters than he does. It's really *me* who should be protecting *him*.

"Not until I see Jane," I say. I speak each word slowly and emphasize them with a tap of my finger against his chest. His broad shoulders are thickly muscled, and even though he towers over me, I don't back down.

Suddenly, I hear her. She's speaking to the men, telling them about a nice hotel we have in town. She offers to make a reservation for them. They decline and tell her they'll see her tomorrow morning. She confirms that she will take them to the site of the alleged massacre but not until the morning.

They're walking toward me now, and I panic. Quickly, I thank the guard, who was busy insisting I leave during the time I was eavesdropping on one of his bosses, and rush out the door. I don't stop running until I'm slamming shut the front door of my home.

Tomorrow.

Tomorrow, she takes them into the woods, where I'll be waiting.

Tomorrow, I end this.

Chapter Two

George

Father doesn't blink. His chest does not rise nor fall. If it is possible to look through his pale, moonstone skin, I might be able to see empty veins of blood and a heart missing its rhythm.

He simply stands in front of the door, preventing me from escaping, arms crossed over his chest. Everything about his face seems calm and tranquil, whereas his stance suggests he is paranoid and angry.

"Georgie." He calls my name, the one he coined for me when he was alive.

I rub my eyes, hard, but he doesn't disappear. I blink, but still he stands before me when I reopen my eyes.

"I am really here, my boy."

"How?" That's all I can manage to say. I'm not sure my question is literal. *How* is he here? Would he even know the answer? Perhaps I should ask the universe for answers. Or Abraxon...

His voice is as clear as the many crystal orbs that fill the dark-oak shelves that line his study's walls. It's as deep as it once was, and it's tainted with his subtle English accent—despite the fact that he never visited abroad. He said his accent came from his father, my grandfather, who moved to Hillcrest from across the sea before Father was born.

"I understand you will have many questions about—" he gestures with his hands down at his body. Even that subtle movement alone shakes shadows from his skin. "Well, this *predicament* I am in."

"How—" I begin to ask again, but this time, my question is directed solely at Father.

"Am I here?" Father finishes for me. "Georgie—"

“Please!” I snap. “Do not call me that.”

“But it is what I always called you...” His brows furrow in a strange sadness.

He repeats that name in a sad attempt to prove he is who he says he is, and not just some phantom in Father’s form, but it doesn’t need to pass his lips again. And honestly, it’s not enough for my skeptic mind.

“Prove you are my father,” I command.

“We both know I do not need to give proof to something that is a fact. I can see it in your eyes, Georgie. You know I am not a trick of light. It is me.”

I tilt my head in a nod, mouth agape and heart beating at a considerable rate. I am certain even Father can hear it.

Do not trust him. Abraxon’s voice is riddled with distrust.

“If you are my father...” I hesitate.

The corner of his lip turns up. “I am.”

“Then how are you still within the plane of the living? Years ago, you died before my very eyes. This—” I point toward his almost water-like chest “—should be *impossible*.”

“I would suggest we ask your mother, but since you have crossed the threshold of my study, I am to believe the *witch* has died.” Father’s expression is neutral as he refers to Mother’s passing. “I can’t say I’m upset by her death. I have waited many years for someone to help me. Now she cannot stop my heir from knowing the truth.”

In his honesty, he says so much. It’s almost *too* much to hear. I want to clap my hands over my ears and scream like a child, but I know I cannot.

“But you love—*loved*—her.” I narrow my gaze at him. How can he speak of Mother this way? Was their entire marriage a sham? If so, how had I not known?

“Tolerated, my boy. I *tolerated* her, just as I’m sure you have since my... departure. You know as well as I do how possessive she could be.” He moves toward me, feet walking yet never touching the ground. “I am so sorry I had to leave you with her. It was never supposed to happen that way.”

I cringe as his transparent hand floats toward my shoulder. I expect the sensation of his touch to make me wince, but I feel nothing. He’s a mere wisp of freezing air. The cool breeze soon passes.

“You fear me?” he asks.

“I don’t know what you are!” I half-shout, eyes clamped shut. My muscles have tensed, turning me into a statue. I wait for this *thing* to move away from me so I can escape this room.

I hear Father’s faint *tsk* and sense his presence move away. “You already know what I am—a spirit, ghost, a phantom confined within the walls of this prison created out of your Mother’s unmatched desire for more power. This place has prevented me from truly passing on.”

“And why would she do such a thing?” I ask. Mother was powerful, but she was an Alcott through marriage, not blood. Her magic was not as raw as Father’s or mine. It is not impossible for a witch to entrap a spirit for a short period of time. Such a spell can be invaluable when the dead has answers the living seeks. But to keep a spirit trapped within the physical realm for as long as Father has been here takes a *great* deal of power—power Mother always wished she possessed.

“I suppose she did this for you, in case you needed me. Your mother understood a day would come when you would require a *specific* kind of guidance. This is something only I could provide.” He exhales slowly, loudly, dramatically. “Much has changed, my boy.”

He did this, Abraxon hisses.

“You did this,” I mirror what the demon murmured in my mind.

Father is quiet, too quiet. Until this point, his expression has remained plain, mundane, now, it cracks into a smile.

“I see you and the demon have joined completely. Hello, Abraxon, my dear friend. Oh, how I have missed your irritating voice within my mind. If only you could have kept me company all these years...”

Abraxon chuckles at Father. *The feeling is not mutual. I have not missed him.*

With a single breath, my confidence is renewed, and I’m sure I owe that to Abraxon. I take two steps toward the door. Father sidesteps, once again blocking my exit. Chin held high and shoulders back, I show Father that I am not the weak boy he left behind years ago.

“Let me guess, Father,” I spit. “You are here for my power just like Mother and her coven—”

“*My* coven,” Father corrects before waving a hand for me to continue.

“You trapped yourself here because you knew a time would come when Mother would be gone, and then you could return and control me just

like Mother tried to. Admit it!”

“Ah, ah, ah.” He wiggles his index finger at me. “Wrong, my boy, very wrong.” His lips part as a deep chuckle escapes them. Even the room seems to shiver with amusement as if it mirrors Father’s emotions. Dust billows from shelves as the tomes shift under an invisible force.

“Then explain yourself,” I insist.

“Your mother entrapped me here, for she thought by doing so, she would one day be able to control me. But all I want is to leave this place, to move on.” He put his hand over his heart and looks into the distance, as if he’s staring right through me. “I swear to you, my boy, I have no ill intentions. I just want to pass on properly. After all, that is what I deserve. The dead should not walk among the living. All I want is your help to make this dream a reality for me.”

A strange sensation erupts within me. It’s a feeling that doesn’t belong to the demon. As much as this encounter has unnerved me, the thought of losing father *again* saddens me. The ghost before me hardly qualifies as a dad, but since Mother just passed, a part of me feels the smallest bit relieved to have Father here. I’m not alone anymore. Regardless of how I feel, I can’t say it aloud. Not even Abraxon is teasing me with his normally taunting voice.

“Like you said, it was Mother who kept you here. Since she passed, you can now leave.” My bottom lip trembles as a tidal wave of grief sneaks up on me once again. And my emotion doesn’t seem to go unmissed by Father. I can sense his desire to reach out for me. I too wish he would act upon it.

“If only it were that easy, my boy, my Georgie boy.” Father’s tone dips and his posture slumps. “Your mother may be dead, but the spell is unbroken. It will take more than her death to allow me to pass.”

“Then I will do it,” I say with as much vigor and confidence as I can muster. “How hard can it be?”

Father smiles. “I cannot tell you how pleased I am to hear you say that.”

In this moment, I am ready to unleash spell upon spell, hex upon hex, to break down the barrier that keeps Father’s spirit within these four walls.

“Steady, my boy.” Father raises both hands. “It will take an educated witch and strong magic to unravel the mess your mother created.”

Was that meant as an insult? It sure sounded like one. I try not to let his words upset me.

“Move away from the door, and I will find Mother’s grimoire to remove this curse on your spirit.” Although I have never seen Mother’s sacred book, I am sure she has one. Every witch does.

“You will not find that tome within this house,” Father says quickly. “Nor will you find the reversal spell anywhere within it. Your mother was a paranoid, organized beast. She would have destroyed the reversal incantation moments after she trapped me in here just in case a moment like this ever happened.”

He is right.

“Then what was her purpose of trapping you here? Clearly, this was premeditated; otherwise, she would have let you move on.”

“Who knows? Maybe just to make me suffer.”

Abraxon slithers within my core. I try to sense the demon’s thoughts, but I only feel its distrust. It is as if the demon acts as my own lie detector of sorts.

“What of the coven? Would she have—” I begin.

“They cannot know, George. Do you understand?” Father asks, interrupting me.

His use of my full name stings. He only ever said it when he was angry with me. Although he didn’t seem upset, his use of my full name still does not sit right with me.

Countless books fly off the shelves, slamming onto the floor around my feet. It is as if Father’s obvious stress shocks the very room and all of its contents. Even the surrounding air thickens.

“I...” I lose my thought.

“They will do everything in their power to keep me here, Georgie. You must understand. It is very important that you deal with this curse yourself. Only you can know about me.”

He looks at me, gaze locked with my own as he pleads for my secrecy, and I cannot deny him.

“It’s our little secret, Georgie.” He smiles.

“Okay,” I tell him, nodding.

Father takes a moment and seems to scan me from face to foot. Scorching light behind his sunken eyes sparks; it’s an expression that could have melted me on the spot. “I am very proud of the man you have become.

It is a blessing that I get to see you once again, like this, just like I predicted. I knew you would become a strong, powerful witch.”

In this moment, I want to rush and throw my arms around him. I restrain myself under the memory that Father and I have never hugged. Only when his lifeless body lay beneath me did I grant myself a moment with his cold embrace as Mother left us to hide his grimoire.

“Tell me what I must do,” I say.

“You must search for anything on the topic of breaking curses, entrapments, or imprisonments of souls. It may take a few different spells, but we should soon find one that will work. I will try to help by providing as much knowledge on the matter as I can, and I am certain Abraxon, my old friend, will aid you with the power you will need to strengthen the magic.”

Will I? Abraxon whispers within me.

“I have school soon. Perhaps the academy will have books on those subjects.”

Father claps his hands together, but there is no noise. “Brilliant, Georgie. Start there.” His praise warms me from the inside out. “In the meantime, I can help you understand Abraxon as I have spent years with him. With my grimoire again in hand, I will teach you what I know, and you will become a powerful adversary.”

Savi comes to mind. Hybrids... Perhaps Father could tell me more about the black magic I used to save her?

Master Alcott, Abraxon says. Ever the teacher, always the preacher.

Its comment rattles around my mind, but I’m not sure what it means.

“Would you like that?” Father asks, urging me to reply as I waver in my own moment of internal thinking.

“I would,” I say a bit too excitedly. “I would very much like that.”

Father flashes a subtle grin. “Morning is only a few hours away. Perhaps you should retire so you are refreshed for tomorrow.”

I nod. He is right. With everything that happened, I need to be clear in my mind to deal with the next day.

Father sidesteps the door and relaxes his arms to his side. “We will see each other tomorrow with hopefully good news.”

“I hope so. I will try to find answers,” I tell him.

“Trying is all I can ask for.”

I hold my breath as I leave the room, fighting the urge to cry. His words have always had this effect on me. They're raw, honest, and kind. Never did I think I would feel this way again. At least, not after the way my relationship with Mother deteriorated after Father died.

All at once, my grief over her passing dissipates, and I'm filled with an undeniable happiness over having Father back. I'm not sure how long he'll be here, so I plan to take advantage of his presence.

The door to Father's study closes shut behind me, and I stop with my back to it. Finally, the tears flow freely down my cheeks, leaving a chilled trail in their wake.

Why do you cry? Abraxon asks.

Because... I think. *I'm no longer alone.*

Abraxon is quiet before replying.

What next?

Next? I deal with Father without giving into the selfish part of me that wants to keep him here for as long as possible, and then I deal with Savi and Chad. I hope no one comes looking for Mother until I'm ready to deal with her death. When all of that is taken care of, I will...

We will, Abraxon corrects.

I reply to the demon this time. *We will fix the mistakes made, mistakes we both created. But first, I need to sleep, and I know you are going to be respectful of that... aren't you?*

Of course. Abraxon's voice becomes faint. *Master.*

Chapter Three

Savi

Centuries ago, Hillcrest was founded as a safe haven for supernatural beings. Those who could abide by the rules set forth would call this town home, without fear of exposure or regular human contact. Only a few bloodlines from the original settlers remain. Among them are George's family and mine.

Mother used to tell Chad and I stories about the council. Believing this town would flourish, the leaders of three supernatural factions—the vampires, the witches, and the werewolves—came together and offered their eternal souls to join the council. The strongest witches came together, forming the first coven of Hillcrest, and called upon the darkest magic, cursing the tributes with immortality.

Today, the council members still reign, passing down laws; selecting the next generation's elder, alpha, and supreme; and ensuring Hillcrest remains the sanctuary it was promised to be.

The day the tides turned red and the sun refused to rise is considered a historical day in Hillcrest. The black magic caused devastation across the land, and because the witches' spell cost many their lives, that dark magic has been forbidden ever since.

If the council ever discovered George tapped into that darkness to save my soul the day the wolves attacked, they would vow to take our lives as penance. For fear of uprising, they would be forced to make such hasty decisions. If another witch tapped into that power, who knows what he or she could conjure... The council's fierceness is to protect us all.

The council has been in leadership since Hillcrest's founding days, yet the only souls to lay eyes upon them now are the faction leaders. They've

been reclusive ever since that fateful night. As citizens of Hillcrest, we ask no questions. We don't wonder *why* the council refuses to be seen by the supernaturals they swear to protect.

As I stalk Elder Jane, I consider our town's history. The council resides in confined quarters located deep inside of Hillcrest town hall. These areas are only accessible by the faction leaders. Mother always told us this was to protect them, to keep their existence a secret. If humans ever discovered the supernatural world—and that these particular supernaturals are, in fact, immortal—a war would ensue that would devastate the earth. For fear of retaliation by the humans, they stay away from prying eyes. I often wonder if they fear being seen because the dark magic that cursed them with immortality also changed their appearance. I can throw on sunglasses to hide my crimson irises, but maybe their attempts to cover what they are aren't quite as simple.

I pass through the threshold and enter the town hall. Sneaking past the lobby guards is easy, because they are focused solely on Elder Jane's sudden appearance. Whispers have enveloped our small town, reaching the eager ears of every supernatural around. Word of humans lingering, investigating, questioning, our residents have secluded themselves to each household. Many are staying inside, refusing to answer their doors when the men come knocking. Thankfully, no one has showed up at my house yet, because I'm not so sure Chad can fight the urge to open the door and instigate a fight. He wants vengeance. He wants to murder the beings that tortured me, even if it costs him his life. And it will. Sadly, my brother is unprepared for what's to come.

I hide in the shadows of a small corner, watching as Elder Jane directs the guard to hold all visitor requests for the day. She is canceling the meetings she had planned as well. She tucks a loose strand of her frazzled hair and scans the room. Just before her gaze lands on me, I step back into the comfort of the darkness. I pray she doesn't see me.

She turns, leaving the guard who's still stammering over questions about rumors he's heard, and walks away. Her feet smack the marble floor and loud echoes of her hastiness permeates around the room. The guard is too distracted by her abruptness to even notice me slip past him.

Elder Jane and I exit the main lobby. The door to safety slams shut behind me. I follow her down a long corridor of hallways. At any moment, should she glance behind her, she will see me. There's nowhere to hide, but

I can't stop now. I'm fully committed and a bit obsessed with finding out more about the hunters and what the council actually knows. Have they known of their existence this whole time? Did they refuse to tell us? Or are they still in the dark? Maybe they truly believe they're humans investigating a disappearance.

Elder Jane walks quickly. Her clothes are oversized and flowy, blowing in the breeze as she shuffles down the hall. I assume her attire was made for an easy night at home and not something she ever expected to wear around town. It reminds me a bit of loose-fitting pajamas. The material looks soft and smooth to the touch, like silk, but her buttoned up top is too large for her small frame. The pants scrunch at her heels, dragging against the hard floor as she slides effortlessly toward her target. Her entire outfit is the color of vampire eyes. I find that interesting.

Elder Jane comes to an abrupt stop. I halt and sink against the floor. I push myself against the cream-colored walls as firmly as I can, wondering if it were possible to simply mold myself into the wall itself. I know I'm not blending in. If she turned back, she would see me clear as day. My skin isn't cream; it's more of a pale, pearlescent white. But I had to at least *try* to be less obvious. Mother used to encourage me to join the guards of Hillcrest. She'd scoff at the idea if she saw me now. I shake my head, trying to focus. I can't worry about Mother or the past.

Beside the door Elder Jane faces, there is a silver box with a large screen. This is where she places her hand. I watch a neon green light scan her handprint like we've exited Hillcrest and entered the next *James Bond* film. A loud buzzing rings, and the door clicks open. Before I can react, she's twisting the handle, entering the room, and slamming the door shut behind her. What the hell just happened? Witches are known for their magic, not the human's technology.

I dash toward the door but think better of scanning my own handprint. Instead, I place my palms firmly against the hardwood and press my ear to the door. I close my eyes and listen. The door is thick, but my senses are stronger. I hear the rustle of movement, the shuffling of feet, and the opening and closing of another door.

"My liege," Elder Jane says softly. I imagine her bowing or falling to her knees or some other form of blind devotion. "Forgive me for calling upon you at this hour." I arch a brow and glance at my wristwatch. I guess it is early in the day. Most supernaturals do prefer the evening hours. "I have

news. The humans in town are investigating the alleged disappearance of a dozen or so college students from the next town over. I haven't any information regarding the students, but I am looking into it."

"Do what you must to force them out of Hillcrest. Our people are already concerned. We must unify during these dark times. We must show Hillcrest we can handle any threat."

The speaker's voice is unfamiliar. It is rough, deep, dark... I can't picture him, and I can't tell if he's a witch, vampire, or werewolf. But something in his tone resonates with me. It's as if my soul calls to him from deep within me. Could I actually know this supernatural? Have I met him years ago and simply forgotten the encounter? Maybe some witch voodoo wiped my memory.

But how could that be? The council members have been locked in their castle for centuries. No one, save for our fearless leaders, has seen them. I don't understand the familiarity that's washing over me, and sadly, I don't have time to consider my feelings. I know Elder Jane won't be in there for long. I doubt she will willingly waste his time. And if she catches me lingering in this hall, I'll likely have to answer for my indiscretion with my life.

"Yes, my liege," Elder Jane says. Again, I picture her bowing her head, agreeing to whatever order he passes down. This man must be a witch. Supernaturals tend to stick with their own kind. I can't imagine Elder Jane taking orders so easily if they were passed down by a vampire or werewolf.

"Help the humans. Make their trip uncomfortable and quick. Only if you must, *take care* of the problem."

"Yes, my liege," she says again. "I will keep you updated on my progress."

I hear her approaching footsteps, and I panic. Quickly, I turn on my heel and dash down the hall. I reach the door in record time and open it slowly. The guards are busy escorting visiting supernaturals out of the lobby, so I have just enough time to slip through the door before—

"Halt!"

I freeze, gaze landing on a set of red, glaring irises. A guard stares directly at me. Behind me, the door closes shut. He knows I've just eavesdropped on Elder Jane and that I've been in a section of the town hall that's forbidden to even him.

Shit!

I run, feet slamming against the marble flooring. The noise of my escape echoes through the room, bouncing off the walls, mentally trapping me in this moment. Flashes of images fill my mind. I consider what would happen to me if I were caught. Would they question me, or would I be put to an immediate death?

Another guard lunges toward me, and I leap over him. He growls his disapproval, and I know he's mere seconds from unleashing his inner wolf. I body slam the door, flinging it open so carelessly the glass windows shatter as it smashes against the stone wall beside it.

And I'm running. I run until my legs ache and my chest burns. I run until I realize I'm running for Wolfsbane Forest, not my home. I run until I cross the threshold into werewolf territory and feel a sudden sense of safety course through my veins. I run until I realize the only place I want to be is among the wolves, beneath the moon, and away from the chaos that is Hillcrest.

Chapter Four

George

I force myself not to watch the clock that hangs on the wall above the teacher's desk. No matter how many inhalations separate each glance, I cannot help but believe that by looking I slow down time.

This is my first period of the day, and already, I want to go home. As my ass numbs due to the awkward wooden seat, the building regret of not seeing Father before I left for the academy grows. I should've visited him, even if only to say good morning. Now, I am stuck here until the final bell rings. On and on, Mrs. Tate drones about literature, a lesson I usually love. I believe it is similar to the lessons humans would have in their mundane schools, but within this class, alongside the materials humans studied, we are also assigned novels on the history of witchcraft and other spell-based tomes that have been translated by foreign witches all over the world.

Before today, I enjoyed the immersion of past witches' teachings, yet now, I want nothing more than to hear the bell signal for the end of class. It doesn't help that Abraxon's whisperings have not stopped filling the void within my mind.

You are acting with haste, he warns.

I grip the edge of my table, knuckles turning white, and think, *you refer to me as a master, yet you question my actions as if you are above me.*

I question what I believe to be as acting out of character.

Oh, you know everything about me, do you?

No, Abraxon confirms. *But I know a lot about your father. I know how his mind works. He has always feared death, yet now, he begs for it. Do you not think it is strange?*

Your distrust is misplaced and unwanted. How can Father fear death when he is already dead? Now, stop with this annoying chatter.

I expect the demon to argue, but he does not. Instead, he replies a final time before falling silent once again, *Believe it or not, George, I have your best interests at heart.*

“You are a demon. You have no heart,” I grumble.

“Yes, Master Alcott?” Mrs. Tate calls to me from the other side of the room. “Do you have something to share about the piece of dialogue?”

I am completely lost, and I am sure every student watching me can see it.

“If you have something to add, Master Alcott, please do so. Otherwise, wait until after class. I do not tolerate conversations while I am teaching.”

I lower my chin to my chest and apologize. “Sorry.”

With everything I have, I try my hardest to concentrate as Mrs. Tate drones on about our author of choice today. The only thing I seem to take from this portion of the lesson is her skill of making a perfectly good book sound boring.

For the fourth time in the past half hour, my phone buzzes. I know it’s either Savi or Chad. And for the fourth time, I ignore their persistence. Just the thought of speaking to either of them displeases me.

They are never going to stop until they both get answers as to why we are ignoring them.

I fight a yawn and reply to Abraxon, *By tonight, Father will have moved on and that will be one less conversation I need to lie about.*

That is only part of the truth, but I know I do not need to voice the rest of my decision to my demon. Savi stopped me from seeking revenge. The desire to kill the alpha still bubbles within me.

The only reason I came to the academy today was for information that would help me free Father from his study. Plus, I need to keep up the illusion of normality. If I miss classes, someone would either come looking for me or call Mother.

And that would be one very short phone call.

“Master Alcott...” Mrs. Tate calls, her voice riddled with annoyance. “The answer, please.”

Ever since she first called me out at the beginning of class, I became her prime target for the rest of the day. I know she is trying to catch me not paying attention, and until now, I was doing a pretty good job of listening to her boring lecture.

I sit up straight, dropping both my elbows from the table. Blinking away my own concoction of tiredness and confusion, I ask her to repeat the question I so clearly missed.

“Tell me why you think our love interest decides to be the one to embed the knife into the chest of the woman who holds his affection?” She puts a hand on her round hips and leans on one leg. Her entire posture suggests she believes I cannot answer.

Unfortunately for her, I know the answer to this question, as it is very close to home.

“Possession,” I say, voice clear and loud. “She did not hold the same feelings for him as he did for her. Being selfish and riddled with lust, he decides that he will kill her to stop anyone else from having a chance to take his love away forever.”

“And can you explain what the author was trying to depict in the scene that follows her death?” Her gaze narrows on me.

“Stupidity. Taking the same knife that took her life, he uses it to kill himself, believing that in life, he may not have her, but in death, she would have nowhere to go but to be with him. They are two spirits trapped in an eternal place... together. It’s classic human ideology of warped love.”

Mrs. Tate swallows her pride, and the entire class turns their backs on me to face the chalkboard.

“Interesting take on the novel’s ending, Master Alcott, but with literature, any answer with enough reasoning behind it can be correct. This time, I gave you an easy one, but next time, my question may be more challenging for you, George. I suggest you pay attention.”

I smile and long for her attention to shift elsewhere. Mrs. Tate then goes on to explain how the novel was written by a human, but the story is actually about a forbidden romance between a witch and a human. Of course, human readers never knew this, but the signs were there. Any witch could see them. Sadly, a human fell in love with a witch, and because the treaty prevented them from being with each other, they both plotted to die so they could be with each other in the afterlife.

The author's biography at the end of the book explains how he was "practically possessed" when writing this story. Mrs. Tate and the majority of the class believe that he most likely was possessed. After all, he was a human in love with a witch. Spells were in order.

"The council created the treaty for many reasons—one being the separation of supernaturals. To keep bloodlines and power pure and to prevent the extinction of our kind, we are only to be with a being of the same species—witches with witches, wolves with wolves, and so on. To go against the treaty would mean breaking a most sacred law."

Mrs. Tate hammers on about the author once again, delving into more sinister reasons why the two lovers died. Was it a true plot on their behalf? Was the author of the story truly possessed to write this story?

"And can someone please tell me what would happen if the council's treaty is broken?"

Her jade eyes scan the sea of hands that are tossed into the air.

"Yes, Leon."

She picks the boy sitting two seats behind me. Right behind him is Samuel, whose eyes burn straight into mine.

Who is he? Abraxon asks, referring to Samuel.

Someone who wants me to join his coven.

You don't want to join his coven? Abraxon questions.

I'm a solitary witch.

Not with me around...

Abraxon makes a valid point.

Leon, the boy speaking, seems familiar to me. Over the many years I've attended classes at the academy, he and I shared many classes together. Unlike Samuel, whose element is fire, Leon is a top air performer during our physical lessons.

He stands from his desk, chair squeaking. "Death. Just like the lovers in the story. The council will call for the blood of the two beings who broke the treaty and kill them."

"That is right," Mrs. Tate says with a crooked smile.

Chad's face morphs in the dark behind my eyes. Hearing the reality of our affection brings it home for me. Death. *If we are caught...*

All thoughts and feelings come to an abrupt halt. My blood rushes as loud as the ocean within my mind.

“George Alcott!” Mrs. Tate screams across the room at me. No longer am I in my seat. Instead, I am standing and running out of the classroom. “Where in the Goddess Earth do you think you are going? Class has not been released!”

“I’m not feeling well,” I reply, and it’s not a total lie. I cannot tell if it’s Abraxon that makes my stomach churn or something far sinister. I’m long gone down the corridor before Mrs. Tate can even reply.

On and on, I run, until I am in familiar surroundings. Elder Jane’s office is nearby. Why have I come here? It isn’t like I am going to tell her anything. If I did, maybe she’d turn me straight over to the council so they could burn me to ash for breaking the sacred treaty.

Elder Jane’s office door is closed, so I slide myself down the wall beside it until my knees are up to my chin. My hands shake uncontrollably as I pull out my phone and hover above the call button to Savi.

You really want to speak to the person who stood in the way of you avenging your own blood’s death? Abraxon has a hint of humor in his voice.

Don’t pretend you care that Mother has died.

I fist my hand around my phone, threatening to snap it in half beneath my grip. As much as I want to call Savi, I can’t. It’s the same invisible barrier that is stopping me from returning her calls and messages.

But soon, I’d have to face her and Chad. Oh, how I want to see him right now. He’ll tell me it’s all going to be okay, that we’ll be safe.

I gather my bearings and take a deep breath, hoping it will squash whatever comments my lurking demon is preparing to make.

I knock on Elder Jane’s door.

Silence.

I try again, but there’s no response.

Reach out, Abraxon tells me. *You can sense if she is close.*

Latching onto the air, I slip the element beneath the gap in the door and notice that the office is empty. Before I can turn to leave, the demon taunts me into staying.

Ah, ah, ah, we are not leaving. We cannot return to your father empty handed. Go in.

There is a part of me that knows I cannot sneak into Elder Jane’s office, but that voice of reasoning is so silent these days. Going against my

better judgement, I listen to the demon and enter the office, uninvited and unwelcomed.

Now what? I ask him.

Search for anything that may help your father.

I scan the books first, glancing at the spines for any words that might describe Father's predicament. Mostly, they are just binders with documents for the students attending the academy. Only a few books are clearly labeled as to what they hold.

Elder Jane's office is as neat as it was when I last visited days ago. The teapot is laid out and ready for her return, even her handbag is left hanging over the side of her desk chair. Wherever she has gone, she must be close. The thought of her returning makes me speed up my search.

After wasting several minutes, I slam my hand into one bookshelf to exude my frustration.

What has the shelf ever done to you?! He is snarky today.

"Abraxon, would you stop!" I yell aloud, unable to contain this argument within my mind without the looming threat of a headache. "If you have nothing helpful to say, don't say anything at all."

I am trying to help, he hisses in my mind.

"Then spare any demonic senses you have to aid me in my search. I have no clue what I am looking for, and your comments are not helping."

"Whose comments?"

I'm startled by a voice from behind me. Samuel. His voice is pinched in confusion as he peers around the room for whomever I am talking to.

"No one," I snap, rushing to leave. "Excuse me." He is blocking my exit. An iron grip wraps around my upper arm and stops me from running away.

"Who is Abraxon?" Samuel asks, fingers tightening.

I try to pull away, but it is a wasted effort.

"Please," I beg. "Let me go." I fear what will happen to him if Abraxon feels threatened.

"No. Mrs. Tate sent me to look for you, and I'm not returning without you. Just wait until she finds out where you've been! Sneaking around Elder Jane's office? Now whatever will they do when they hear about that?"

He sounds like a predator that taunts his victim with both his tone and the knowledge he has. But little does he know, I am no victim.

Abraxon doesn't make a sound, but I sense his growing power. Like the bubbling of a kettle, its hiss grows, and I'm ready to burst.

"You are hiding something, George."

"What gave that away?" Abraxon's confidence coats my words in an unfamiliar sound.

"Your eyes..." Samuel stammers, not answering my back-handed question. "They... They are..."

Before I can wonder what he sees when he looks at me, Abraxon fills me to my core. My mouth is forced open as a snake of dark shadow bursts free. I can't breathe. I can't move. I can only watch as the darkness spills into Samuel's mouth with such force that it devours the boy's scream before it can pierce the otherwise silent room. I watch as Samuel's wide eyes roll into the back of his head.

Like the snapping of an elastic band, the shadow, Abraxon, rushes back into me and settles down, full as a kitten after a bowl of cream. The interaction lasts no more than a few seconds.

Samuel stands still in the same spot, seemingly petrified. His eyes are closed, and his chest rises and falls gently as if he sleeps. I wait with bated breath for him to say something, anything.

What have you done? I scream internally at the demon.

I devoured his memories before he was able to share my name with anyone else.

I slam my hand to my chest as I take several steps backward, leaving the confused Samuel swaying in the place where he stands. Mere seconds later, his eyes flutter open.

"George." Samuel blinks several times and shakes his head, even rubbing his temple with pinched brows. "Mrs. Tate told me to come retrieve you."

I nod, worried anything I say or do will reverse whatever magic Abraxon used on Samuel.

"I was coming to see Elder Jane, but she is not here," I tell him, clenching my hand to stop my shivering nerves.

Samuel glances past me, still looking concerned about something. "Elder Jane is out all day today."

At least Abraxon's memory wipe only affected Samuel's most recent thoughts.

"That explains it then." I keep my reply short and follow Samuel back to class.

You could have really harmed him, I think.

To prevent him from knowing about me, I am willing to risk his life. Knowing my name gives him power, George. Never can anyone outside of your bloodline or your coven know my name. Never!

With his final word, the demon contracts within me, causing a sharp pain to work its way up my spine. This pain is riddled with his own threat—a threat directed at me.

Chapter Five

Savi

Old Oak looms over me, and I want nothing more than to sit beneath its soon-to-be-bare branches and sink into the mound of crunchy, dying leaves that clutter its base. I yearn for the days when life wasn't so hard. Like when George and I would spend hours on end at Crest Coffee or prancing through these very woods. We broke a lot of rules, but we never hurt anyone.

Not until that night.

Not until I dragged him into the woods, while he protested crashing the humans' bonfire bash. I wouldn't listen. He needed to get out more, to have fun. He told me he was mourning a romantic relationship that died. I had no idea he was in love with my brother or that Chad broke his heart. Instead of giving him the time he needed, I forced him to break out of his comfort zone and party hard.

I stare at the scene of the crime. Behind me is Old Oak, where I told George to meet me that night. Before me is the small clearing, where the humans thought they were safe. To my right is the tree line, where the wolves were hiding, waiting for their moment to strike. To my left is the cliff ledge, where George used his magic to send the alpha's brother over the edge and to a watery grave. Everywhere I look, I see decisions. I decided to come to the party. I decided to ignore the wolves. I decided to walk away from George in favor of beer. I decided to save the human...

Will.

Hunter.

Not human.

I exhale slowly, running a hand through my loose hair. I scratch at my scalp before letting my long locks fall to my shoulders. I trudge into the center of the clearing. Turning on my heels, I assess the area. The wolves cleaned up their mess, and then George and I returned later to make sure nothing could tie the devastation to us.

But the longer I stay here, the more I sense George, his magic, and the battle that took place. I can't explain it, but I *feel* him here. As if he were standing beside me, his scent lingers. I close my eyes, and I can hear his hearty laugh, feel his playful shoulder knock mine. I swallow hard and focus on his essence.

How did everything get so messed up? I felt his heart break the moment his mother was taken from him, and I stopped him from enacting vengeance—something I still ache for. I didn't have the luxury of investigating my parents' death. But I wish I did.

The subtle echo of a twig snapping underneath the creatures weight sends electric shocks through me. My eyelids jolt open instinctively, and I'm scanning the woods before I can consider how ridiculous it was to come out here in the first place. What idiot goes to the site of a massacre *during* an investigation? Is it even possible for me to continue to make stupid decisions? I mean, haven't I met a quota by now?

The moment my gaze meets his dark, piercing stare, I bare fangs and charge, wholeheartedly, with a mindset to kill. I'm leaping through the air just as he's telling me to wait, but I don't listen to his words. Like he is to me, they're meaningless. They're lies.

I land atop him, straddling his frame. I grip his torso between my legs, and I take pleasure in the flash of pain that crosses his perfect face. His dark skin is ashy and paler than usual, as if he hasn't rested in the days since I escaped the torment of that place. I take pleasure in knowing he's suffered.

"How did you find me?" I hiss. My hand is around his throat, and I dig my free elbow into the crevice of his chest. I'm mere inches away from his heart. I could so easily slam the arch of my arm against his breast bone and listen to it cave as his life gives way to death—death by *my* hand. I deserve this, don't I? It's retribution. No one should endure what I've suffered and be forced to simply walk away.

He grumbles something inaudible. I'm sure he's trying to tell me that he can't explain his appearance without the ability to speak, but suddenly, I don't care *why* he's here. I only care that he's *alive* when so many

supernaturals aren't because of his doing. How many supernaturals are there because of his doing? How many times has he led the hunters to attack and kidnap innocents just like he did to me?

"I would have died in that place because of you," I seethe.

"You're... alive... because of... me."

I tighten my grip on his neck and bury my elbow deeper into his chest, but just as I'm about to inflict enough pressure to end his existence, I stop. I release him and sink back. Sitting on his torso, I'm intimately aware of every way his body is touching mine.

"Why did you stop?" he asks, hacking. He reaches for his throat, and tries to soothe it with his touch.

"I told you that I'm not a monster." As much as I want to kill him, I'm not sure he's deserving. He did atone for his mistakes against me the moment he offered me his blood and helped me escape. By the logic that that's not enough, I should die for my crimes too.

"But I am," he whispers. "Is that what you think? You think I'm a monster?"

I stare into his eyes and gnaw on my lower lip. I consider his words. Do I think he's a monster? I think his people are monsters. hunters think *we're* the abominations, yet they are the ones who cannot live peacefully with us. hunters torture for fun and kill for sport. I kill to survive, and I never allow my victims to feel the pain of death. Every single human I've killed died with his or her lips turned upright into a smile. They practically begged me for it. Never have I *ever* tortured someone the way they have. Are they not the definition of a monster?

"I think you knew what I was, and you led them to me. I think you let them take me, knowing I would be... *questioned* the way I was, and I think *that* makes you a monster." I shudder as I remember the moments I was abused.

I stand abruptly, no longer feeling the butterfly tingles in my gut whenever Will is near, and step back. He too stands, and as we stare at each other, time seems to slow to a near standstill. I've never wished to be a mind reader, but in this moment, I ache to hear his inner thoughts. Does he agree with me? Does he believe his actions make him a monster? Does he see his people for what they truly are? He was born into this mess, but that doesn't mean it needs to be his destiny. Their way of life will rule him only if he allows it to.

“I apologized and let you feed from me. Do you know what that means to me? My people would kill me if they ever found out.”

His jaw clenches, matching his fists, and I ready myself for an attack. Everything about him sends the predator in me into overdrive, yet I can’t find it in myself to hurt him. After all, he’s right. He did save me. Without the blood, I wouldn’t have had the strength to compel my freedom. I wouldn’t have been able to overpower the executioner either. I shiver, cringing at the thought of the monster who violated me.

“What is it?” he asks, taking a step toward me. His voice is soft, as if he really is concerned for me right now.

I put my arms up. “Stop. What is this? What are you doing here?”

“I knew you would be here,” he says simply.

I’m not surprised. Other than George, he is the only other survivor of the bonfire massacre. Of course he would think to find me here. That fact makes my insides burn. How could I have been dumb enough to come back here? My decision making skills are deteriorating by the second.

“Why are you looking for me? Because I escaped? If you think for even a second that you have the power to bring me back to that place, then—”

“I don’t want to bring you back. I just... I just wanted to make sure you were okay. You were in pretty bad condition when you escaped. I wasn’t sure you’d survive the night, even though you... fed.” He visibly cringes, and I imagine he is replaying that night in his mind. I’m not sure how many of his people he saw me kill, but I fed from most of the hunters who stood in my way of escaping.

“I’m fine, but if you don’t find a way to get the hunters out of Hillcrest, *you won’t be.*”

He arches a brow, crosses his arms over his chest, and leans back confidently. “Is that a threat?”

“It’s a promise,” I say, stepping forward to close the space between us. He isn’t the only confident one here. “The hunters need to leave before this turns into a bloodbath. You and I both know what happened that day. Tell them, and walk away.”

“They’re not in Hillcrest to investigate the massacre. I already told them about the wolves. Why do you think you were taken in the first place? I knew you weren’t human the moment you kept those wolves from tearing out my throat.”

“Then why are they in Hillcrest?” Deep down, I already know why, but I need to hear it from him. He needs to say it aloud to make it real for me.

“For you.”

I swallow the knot that forms in my throat. “Why? What do they want with me?”

“You survived more torture sessions than any supernatural could ever endure. They *know*.”

“Know what?” I ask softly, praying he’s not about to say what I think he’s going to say.

The wind blows softly as I watch Will. His mouth moves in slow motion as he answers my question. Everything I’ve feared would happen is coming true. The hunters are real, supernaturals are dying, I’ve been changed, and my secret is out. The more people who find out the truth about what George did to me, the more dangerous this world becomes for those I love. Chad and George will suffer the consequence of association. Simply knowing me will get them killed.

“They *know* you’re different.”

Chapter Six

George

Samuel walks steps behind me the entire way back to class. His movements are slow and disjointed. As if his feet are not working properly, he trips on every other step. Unfortunately, that is not the only strange thing about him. It's impossible not to notice how unusually quiet he is. Only the shuffle of his feet and growing panting breath is what I can hear. I tell myself I feel this way because of my increasing paranoia, but it's as if I can actually sense something is not right with him after Abraxon's magical intrusion.

I peer over my shoulder at him, and notice the vacant expression in his eyes. They are framed by nightly circles. His skin seems pale and sickly. It's as if he is sleeping and moving without knowing it.

I don't try to strike up a conversation because I worry I would say the wrong thing. But by the time we reach the door to the classroom and Mrs. Tate looks down her nose at me, I no longer sense Samuel.

"Just in time for the final bell," she says, brows pinched. "Now I must ask what you have done with Samuel." Her gaze flickers over my shoulder to the empty corridor behind me. A chorus of squeaking chairs fill the room as the class moves to get a better look.

At first glance, it does seem that Samuel is not with me. This is only because Mrs. Tate isn't looking around the corner at the two feet sticking out around the bend. I almost expected something like this to happen. Time seemed slow before, but now, it stops completely.

"What is it?" Mrs. Tate calls to me. She probably noticed my change in demeanor. She saunters over to stand beside me, and as she lays her gaze

on the horror before me, I'm sure the entire class can hear her catch her breath.

We both race for where he lays across the ground. The closer we get, the more I notice his frantic shaking. His arms and legs jolt violently, his mouth foamy with unknown white froth. His eyes roll into the back of his skull, flashing the red veined whites of his gaze.

Mrs. Tate kneels on the floor beside him, thrusting her knitted shawl beneath his head to stop it from knocking against the ground. The commotion of her shouts for help drive students and teachers out of multiple classrooms within the same corridor. Soon, the entire place is riddled with bodies, and I am forced to the back of the crowd.

I get a view of his body rising, held by invisible hands, then hovering ahead of the group. In moments, he is gone. All that is left is the whispering of students trying to work out what happened. They stare at me with eyes glowed in intrigue and accusation.

"He's still alive," someone says.

"He's been hexed!" another student mutters.

Before long, they all disappear, each not wanting to waste the lunch hour. I am left alone in the hallway with nothing but Abraxon to answer for his crimes.

You said you only wiped his memory! I accuse.

That is what I did. Perhaps your containment of me is causing my own abilities to become erratic.

Erratic?! You almost killed him!

I clench my fists as the demon turns the accusation toward me.

Yet the witch is still alive, is he not?

Don't play games with me, Abraxon. Not now. Not ever. You forget it is my body you claim to be imprisoned within, which makes me your captor. Act out again, and I will personally banish you.

My legs lift off the floor, and I am weightless. The sensation is sudden before I am slammed into the wall next to Mrs. Tate's classroom. Pain screams down my spine under the impact.

Threatening me, George, will not do you any favors.

The demon lifts me and pins my body to the wall. His control is strong, too strong. For the first time, I sense pure horror within me. I'm terrified for my own safety. No matter how hard I resist, my neck is forced to turn so my face is looking right into the reflection created by the glass

panes that frame the door. I suck in a breath as I regard the boy looking back at me. Dark eyes, shadowed veins, a cunning smile... All features that do not belong to me.

We do not need to hate each other, for I want nothing more than to work with you, George. The lips on my reflection move, but my own face is still. *We can help each other.*

“Let go of me,” I command aloud. “Now.”

No one is close enough to hear my cries. In a way, I wish someone was. Maybe an onlooker could help me rid my body of this parasite.

My own reflection pulls a face, one of intrigue. Then the smile increases tenfold. Before I can speak, I regain control of my body, and I drop to the floor in a heap. Abraxon relinquished control just in time for the patter of feet that echo around the corridor.

“George, not you as well.”

I recognize the student from someone who shares my last class, but I don’t stick around long enough to answer her. Off the floor, I am up and moving toward the main doors of the academy. I need to get away. Too much has happened for me to stay and look for books to help Father escape. With Samuel possibly on the brink of remembering what he saw, I have to get out of here.

A coven would come together in an attempt to save him. Would their magic recognize mine within Samuel’s body? Would it notice his missing memories? Either way, I am certain Elder Jane—when she finds out—will have enough power to unearth what really happened.

And when she does, I will become the hunted.

“Father?” I push the door to his study open.

“You call for me as if I might not be here.” His voice greets me before I see him.

Leaning up against his messy desk, he looks nowhere else but me. Like before, his body is transparent. His skin melts in bouts of shadow, slithering into the air but dissipating into nothingness. Still, I am not used to seeing him like this. In fact, I am not used to seeing him at all.

Just resting my gaze upon him, I get a bubble of fresh excitement as I did before. Soon, when I consider he will not be here forever, the sinking emotion of great sadness follows.

“I’ve got some bad news,” I tell him, expecting his facial expression to mirror my own disappointment. But instead, he smiles, honest and warm.

“Do not fret, son. We have plenty of time to find the right incantation. For now, we can focus on you, Abraxon, and me. If that is what you want—”

“Yes!” I shout, interrupting him. “I mean, yes, I’d like that very much.”

“Then sit down and let us talk.”

The entire way home, I expected anger and wrath from Father, the very same reactions I remembered from when he was alive, but this reaction is a welcomed one. Perhaps Father’s entrapment has done wonders for his anger management.

A chair slides out from the desk and makes its way toward me. Again, I am reminded of just how powerful my father is, even in this phantom form. I take it and sit, feeling like a student with his teacher.

“It has been too long since I have been in this situation,” Father admits. “I should ask you how your day has been, shouldn’t I?”

My answer is pre-planned. On the walk home, I decided not to mention Abraxon’s outburst with Samuel and then again with me in the corridor. I can’t have Father thinking I am anything but strong.

“Besides classes and searching for anything that might help me free you, it was a rather uneventful day.”

Father leans all his weight on one leg while placing his hand on his hip. “I admit, sometimes those days are the better ones.”

I sense Father’s awkward tension. He does not know what to say next, so I fill the silence with my own question, uncaring if Abraxon can hear me. “How do I control the demon?”

Abraxon stirs internally, and Father’s reply is quick. “You don’t. It is a partnership of sorts. An alliance. A mutual understanding both you and the entity come to. One cannot simply control an unearthly being. Why do you ask?”

“It’s nothing.”

“This is Abraxon we are referring to, and I know too well just how unruly he can be.”

He. I suppose his voice was deep and gruff, but I assumed that was because we share my mind.

Father steps toward me, face tilted with such honest compassion for me. “Do yourself a favor and get to know Abraxon. Let him get to know you. If you are anything like me, which I don’t doubt, you will be able to work through minor disagreements.”

I don’t need to tell Father of Abraxon’s eruption, because he seems to know from his own experience with the demon. I want to know more about their past.

“George, I have been thinking...”

I can’t place why his words cause butterflies in my stomach.

“Yes?” I urge him to continue.

“I have read over these books within this room countless times, and I dare say that I am overly bored. Would you lend me my grimoire? I know it belongs to you now, but I’d very much like to familiarize myself with my old teachings. It’s been a long while since I swam within those pages.”

I nod, unable to think why that would be a bad idea. “Of course, I should have asked if you wanted anything from beyond the study.”

“I want many things, but in this form, I need very little. Who knows, perhaps your mother was sloppy and missed important details in my grimoire. Maybe there’s something that will help free me,” Father says, rubbing his hand across his jaw. “Can’t hurt to look.”

“Do you want me to stay with you?” I ask.

Father looks up slowly, eyes bright as if they glow with life. “I would like that very much, Georgie.”

“So would I.” I smile.

The rest of the day passes while I sit cross-legged on the floor of the study with Father beside me. Not once did Abraxon stir and ruin this moment. Page by page, we flip through the book, cover to cover, start to end. We talk about the plethora of hex and charm work he created when he was my age. He mentions spells to clear a person’s mind of worry and incantations to block another witch’s physical abilities. I know what this is. Dark magic. But with Father next to me, the thought of using such power doesn’t disgust me. His excitement is infectious, enough to make me *want* to try these spells.

We speak of many things, even after the book is placed back on the floor and forgotten. He asks me about Mother and her coven. He even asks about my life beyond this house.

No matter how elated I feel to share these moments with Father, I don't tell him about Savi and Chad. Not yet. But not because I don't trust him. I don't tell him because of what Savi did. Even now, I can't dwell on it for too long without the tickle of fire dancing on my fingertips.

"You are tired," Father says as I yawn. "Go and rest up. You have another day of searching tomorrow."

"I'm fine." I try to brush him off, because I'm not yet ready to leave him.

"I insist, Georgie. Go and sleep. I'm not going anywhere."

I find myself questioning him like a child would, "Promise?"

He closes his emerald eyes and smiles. "Promise."

Father was right. I am extremely tired. As I lie down, head resting on my pillow, I pull my phone out and open the thread of messages between Chad and me.

I miss you, I text. *See you tomorrow?* I shoot him the quick response, but before I can turn off my phone, I get a reply. Tilting the screen back up so my phone flickers to life, I see his message.

I cannot tell you how relieved I am to hear from you. Tomorrow is perfect. It's a date.

Chapter Seven

Savi

I can't think. I can't breathe. I'm focused solely on Will's words. *They know*. The hunters *know* I'm different. I assume this is why the executioner took such *care* when he tortured me repeatedly, but hearing this confirmation aloud makes my thoughts real. It's the realness of them that anchors me to the ground now.

"I can't believe it!" I shout.

Will arches a brow. He doesn't understand that I'm on the verge of a mental breakdown. I need to vent, rant, and build a time machine that takes me back to Old Savi during a time I can promptly smack her across the face for making such awful choices. Well, actually, just *one* choice.

"I can't believe this is my life now. I made *one* bad decision, and now, everything is falling apart. Every time I think I've gotten things under control, *something else happens*. I mean, how much more can I handle? What else can go wrong?"

I'm no longer rooted to the ground. Instead, I'm walking around in a circle, waving my arms frantically, and yelling at the sky like the gods can actually hear me. I hear Will chuckle from behind me, and I just about lose my cool.

Spinning on my heel, I'm inches from his face before he even realizes I've moved. With my index finger planted firmly against his broad chest, I say, "This is *your* fault, you know. If you and your stupid friends didn't come to my neck of the woods, we wouldn't be in this mess! If there wasn't a bonfire, I wouldn't have tried to get George to go into the woods that night!"

I'm shouting, and I don't care. I'm tired of trying to figure out how to get myself out of a mess. I'm tired of being in danger. I'm tired of lying to my friends in order to protect them. I just want to hop onto the next bus out of Hillcrest and never look back.

But I can't do that. This is my home, and my actions have led to this nightmare. The supernaturals of Hillcrest are in danger, and they don't even know it. It's only a matter of time before the hunters launch their attack and kill innocents.

"We have to stop them," I say aloud. I hold Will's stare, daring him to fight me on this. He knows this is wrong. They have to be stopped.

"It's not that simple," he says.

"Protecting innocents is a simple choice, Will. This is the moment you decide the kind of man you are. Are you the kind who stands aside and watches the massacre of innocent people?" I ask.

He exhales sharply. "You're not *people*. You're an abomination."

There's that word again. *Abomination*. George's mother called me the same thing moments before Zane, the wolf alpha, ended her existence.

"And what are you, Will? Because we both know you're *not human*. I tasted your blood, remember?" I lick my lips, and he's transfixed in that moment. "Your blood is dosed in magic, isn't it? So tell me, *what* exactly are you?"

He swallows hard, and I watch the Adam's apple in his throat bob deliciously. I ache to crawl into his arms and sink my fangs into his soft skin. I don't share his memories anymore. I drank from so many that night, their thoughts became a muddled mess in my mind. I'm grateful I don't have to bear the executioner's truth, but I do wish I could peer into Will's soul and see what other secrets he may be hiding.

I arch my back and stand on my tiptoes, angling toward him so our lips nearly brush. It would take little effort on his part to eliminate the space between us. I feel the heat of his skin against my own as we share a breath. His catches in his throat, and I know it's not just because of me.

"Don't move," I whisper. I rest my palms against his chest, and I fight to tune out the hammering beats of his heart. I lean against him, and he wraps his arms around my waist. Together, we melt into each other. My soft curves rest against his hard muscles, and we wait.

With each footfall, I sense them approach. There must be at least half a dozen, and their presence only grows louder. I know they are heading

straight toward us, and if Will and I don't move quickly, they'll see the intimate embrace we've adopted.

"We have to move," I say softly. I turn back to face him, and our lips brush. I gasp at the connection. His lips are full, soft, and so incredibly warm against my own.

I blink, and we're standing behind the base of a thick tree. I turn within Will's grasp. He doesn't release me, and when I try to pull away from him, he only holds onto me tighter.

"Don't move," he whispers into my ear. His breath is hot on my skin, sending a shiver down my spine.

We watch as Elder Jane steps through the tree line. Several men in full-on army gear follow her into the clearing. I know these men to be hunters even though I've never seen them before. Their humanized military gear gives away their cover. I fear for the elder's safety, but from where I hide, I can't do much to protect her.

The hunters are interrogating her about her investigation into the disappearances of several dozen college students who were said to have attended a bonfire party in these woods. The elder is calm, having a challenging response to each accusation. Elder Jane has been the "police chief" of Hillcrest for as long as I've been born, so I'm sure she's used to humans coming in and questioning her ability and the strange things that happen in this town. Though Hillcrest is considered a safe haven (for supernaturals, anyway), we don't have the greatest backstory. Too many humans go missing after venturing across our border...

The longer they speak to her, the harder it is to hear their words. As each minute ticks by, I become more aware of Will's arm wrapped around my waist. I've never had an intimate relationship with someone before, choosing instead to spend my time with family and George. I'm a loner and a bit of a homebody. I stick to the shadows and mind my own business. I've never felt that *pull* shown in movies, but for some reason, I *feel* something for Will. Is it because of his ex-girlfriend's memories that once clouded my judgement? Is it because I tasted him or he saved me? I don't understand the connection we share, but I ache to explore it.

I want to hate him. I hate his kind, and I should hate him. My actions brought me to that place, but he led them to me the night they abducted me. If he didn't do that...

I exhale slowly, shaking my head. I have to stop blaming others for my crappy decisions. It's not Will's fault that I ended up in that place. I chose to go to the bonfire. I chose to kill his girlfriend I wish I made better decisions, but I didn't. I'm in this mess because I'm a horrible vampire.

I don't realize I'm trying to pull away from Will until he yanks me back. His lips reach my ear in record time, and he tells me to shush. I zoned out and didn't realize a hunter was seconds from discovering our really bad hiding place.

I panic, and the darkness within me coils until it balls into a knot so tight, I fear I may scream. It's heavy and strong, and just when I think I finally regain control, it blasts out of my core. Suddenly, I'm weightless and overwhelmed by this ecstatic pleasure. I gasp as the darkness within me takes hold of the world around me, enveloping Will and me in a swarm of bright silver lights.

And then the hunter turns the corner, and we come face to face with my greatest enemy.

Except he doesn't see us.

Instead of shouting for help, revealing our cover, the man scans the area and continues walking. I watch him retreat until he disappears into the woods. The seconds tick by, and before I realize what's happening, the man tells his friends he hasn't found anything.

Only then do I notice Will's death grip around my waist. He's pulling me against him so tightly I don't know where he ends and I begin. His fist is clenched, his dark knuckles softening in color as he tightens the squeeze he has on reality.

I try to turn in his arms to reassure him that we're going to be okay, but I can't move. He's frozen behind me, stiff and unyielding, and I fear speaking will only alert the hunters to our presence. So I grasp his fists of fury and rub my hands over his bare skin as far as I can reach. Slowly, Will softens and loosens his grasp on me. I lean against him, and we breathe in unison until the hunters make their retreat.

"That was close," I whisper.

"How did he not see us?" Will asks, keeping his voice low.

I shake my head. "I have no idea. He looked right at us just before walking past. He should have noticed—"

"You can come out now, child," Elder Jane says.

I squirm in Will's arms until I'm facing him. Jaw slack, eyes wide, we mirror each other's shock. How did I not notice she didn't leave with the hunters? Did she hear us talking? Does she know Will's with me? What am I going to say to her? George and I have worked so hard to hide my transition from the council, and now, in the light of day, the witch elder is going to see me for what I really am.

And George and I will die for what he did to save me.

"We haven't much time, girl," Elder Jane says.

Without speaking, I mouth for Will to stay hidden. I see reluctance in his eyes, but he does agree to stay here while I speak with the elder. I thank him before turning on my heel to emerge from the shadows, exposing myself to the one person who could inform the council of George's *abomination*.

Chapter Eight

George

Nightmares have always filled me with terror. Unlike dreams, my nightmares seem more real somehow. They're more tangible in a way. The worst part is how I feel like I'm actually awake, trapped within them. Deep down, I know I am asleep, and no matter how hard I try, I simply cannot wake up.

Swaddled in a thick darkness that bares teeth and claws, my nightmare tries to snatch me, bite me, nick me. I open my mouth to scream, but it fails me. It's as if the darkness itself is devouring everything I give into this dreamscape.

The freezing sensation within my body starts at my feet and crawls slowly up the rest of my body. As the smoky shadow slithers toward my head, I sense the darkness taking control of my body as it prepares for its final meal.

My feet and calves are numb now. Soon enough, my waist is immobile and stiff. My lungs are shallow, and it becomes harder to breathe. As the shadow reaches my neck, I take my final breath, inhaling as deep as I can, knowing that soon enough, I will not be blessed with the ability to breathe.

"George," a voice calls from the dark. "George..."

I am fearful to respond—not that I *can* even speak in this state. Now, the darkness has its smoky hands over my mouth, stopping me from even attempting to reply.

Something hard grabs onto my shoulders and jolts me.

Once. Twice. Thrice.

The incantation to a spell that gives the caster clarity during a difficult time floods my mind, but without my voice, I am weak and unable to spell cast.

“Wake up!”

A voice pierces the silent darkness. This voice sounds different somehow. It’s not the darkness speaking to me now.

“George, come on!”

I sense the urgency in this voice. Before I can consider the caller’s panic, all at once, a light so incredibly bright bursts through my imprisonment and rushes over me, clearing my body of the lingering darkness.

I blink fast, rubbing my hands over my eyes to help me wake. I gawk at the intruder. “What are you doing here?”

Chad hovers, leaning over me with his hands gripping both my shoulders. His furrowed brows and slack jaw only highlight how worried he seems. “You wouldn’t wake up, and you were making strange noises. I thought you were in pain or sick or something.” Chad speaks quickly, and I don’t miss that he isn’t answering my question. “Are you all right?”

Covered in sweat, I just sit there, waiting for my eyes to adjust to the light and my mind to comprehend seeing Chad here, in my room, in a house that’s supposed to protect Alcott witches from supernatural intruders.

“Chad, what are you doing here?” I sit up, unable to deny the strange ache that runs down my back and up my arms. “You shouldn’t be here.” As I say that aloud, I question myself as to why. Mother is not here anymore, so Chad is under no particular threat. But still, I am used to wanting to keep my friends far from this place. Father is down the corridor in his office, and I wonder if he senses Chad’s presence.

“After you messaged me last night, saying that you wanted to see me, I couldn’t wait any longer. You’ve been ignoring all of my messages and calls. Forgive my lack of patience.” Chad raises his brows, flashing his puppy-dog eyes. “I’ve missed you.”

I throw my arms around his neck and pull him onto the bed with me. The sudden rush of happiness and relief for seeing him crashes into me. Quickly, I’m overwhelmed by the sensation that these feelings were held back somehow.

Abraxon. Had he smothered my true emotions so I didn’t feel the desire to respond to my friends?

“I am sorry I have not messaged or answered your calls, but it has been really...”

Chad places a cold kiss on my forehead, which distracts me from what I was saying.

“You do not need to say anything. I understand how hard it has been for you. You forget that both Savi and I lost our parents to a supernatural murder too. The only difference here is she and I had each other to get us through the difficult times. I’ve been so concerned about you being all alone here. I can’t even count the number of times I have almost come over to see you. With everything we uncovered before the attack, it has been pure hell giving you the time and space you asked for.”

For a moment, I just let him hug me as I consider my thoughts. There is one constant memory that haunts the back of my mind. It’s something Mrs. Tate said about the treaty and a forbidden romance. With Chad here, I cannot help but cringe at the thought of the story we studied during that lesson.

Are you going to lie to him? Abraxon’s voice resonates from the deep dark pits within me.

Lie about what? I question.

Your father...

I take two large deep breaths, and I bury down Abraxon’s comments. I don’t need to answer him—no, I *shouldn’t* answer him. All he wants to do is taunt me. I want to enjoy this moment with Chad without having to think about anything else except for the way he smells of cedar wood and spices and how his body feels so cold pressed up against mine. He’s so familiar to me; it’s strange to think we’ve been spending so much time apart.

“Like you said, I just needed some time,” I whisper into his hair as I pull him closer.

“Do you need more?” Chad asks.

“Everything is still very raw for me,” I say.

Why don’t you tell him why you really didn’t want him around? Abraxon mumbles.

“But I’m glad that you came to see me,” I finish.

“Have you heard from *her* coven?” Chad’s voice deepens into a slight growl as he asks about the dark coven that disappeared after Mother’s death.

“Not yet,” I tell him. I hope my words clear the tension that stiffens his body. “Besides school, I have just been at home... alone.”

“Good,” Chad says too fast. “You promise you’ll tell us if they return?”

“Us?” I repeat his words.

“Savi has been just as worried, perhaps even more than me. She’s just been... occupied.”

I must have physically shifted at the mention of Savi because Chad sits up and looks me up and down. His brows crease, like he’s thinking hard, choosing his words carefully.

“Do you blame her?” he asks finally.

How I feel about Savi right now is much more complicated. I know she didn’t kill Mother, but she did stop me from seeking revenge in the moments after Mother’s murder. No matter if it was instinctual to protect the alpha or not, she stopped me. For that, I feel... bitter.

“Can we talk about something else?” I groan.

“She loves you, George. You need to understand that. She feels horrible about—”

“Please!” I snap, hands pressed on either side of my head. “We need to talk about something else.”

Chad takes a breath and straightens up. “The hunters are back, George. These are the people who did those terrible things to Savi—all because she refused to tell them your name. This is why we have been trying to get a hold of you. This is why I’m here now. I was worried about you. I couldn’t wait any longer to warn you.”

My breath hitches in my throat. “They’re back?”

“They’re in town. Last I saw, they were speaking with Elder Jane about something.”

“Why?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe for Savi. Maybe for something else entirely...” Chad stands and walks to the window that faces out into the cold morning beyond. “Whatever their gain is in Hillcrest, it makes me uncomfortable. I need to protect Savi, and you and I cannot do that when we are apart like this.”

I struggle to grasp what he is saying because a deep anger bubbles within me, making listening to him nearly impossible. No matter what Savi did, I will never forget the way Savi hobbled toward us after emerging from

the forest. She was covered in puncture wounds and soaked in her own blood. I can't imagine the pain she experienced for days on end. The memory of seeing her that way will remain with me forever. It's still as fresh as any other memory I hold true. A new desire for revenge cuts through me, and this time, I know Savi will not stand in my way.

"A storm is brewing in Hillcrest, George, and I do not think it will be long until the downpour covers this town entirely." Chad turns to face me and extends a hand. "Will you help me keep her safe?"

I throw my legs over the bed, Abraxon pulsing within my chest. "If they lay a finger on Savi, I will be certain to remove it myself." The wind outside picks up, smacking against the glass beside Chad.

Chad smiles weakly and opens his mouth to reply when a bang sounds off beyond my room. In a blur, he moves, racing to the door and throwing it open. We both look out upon the empty corridor. To Chad, everything seems normal, but I know something is wrong. The door to Father's study is open, moving slightly as if the momentum of it opening was just calming. But Father cannot open his door.

"Stay back," Chad growls, hand stopping me from following him toward the room. "It could be hunters."

I push past him. "This is my home, Chad. There is nothing inside this house but us. The house would tell me if we had an intruder."

"Did the house tell you I was here before I woke you?" Chad asks his question, already knowing the answer.

"No, it didn't," I whisper.

Regardless of his restraint, I knock his arm out of my way and walk toward Father's study. As I reach for the door, I notice how hard my hand is shaking. Has Father left me? Is this it? Am I forever alone again?

"See," I say, peering into the room, praying Father is still inside. "There's nothing to see." I close the door before I can get a good look inside, because I need to prevent Chad from seeing anything *of interest* inside the room. I'm not sure how I can explain a phantom figure, if it's even possible for Chad to see the ghost.

Before the door fully closes, Chad's hand snakes out and stops it. With a harsh push, he knocks the door open and steps inside the room before I can stop him. My discomfort of him being in Father's private study is overwhelming, but I can't think of a good argument to stop him. Instead of fighting, I follow in after him.

He spins in circles, looking for what could have made the odd noise. After all, we *are* supposed to be alone in this house. He stops in the middle of the room and faces me.

“There’s nothing here,” he says, confused and defeated.

But Chad is wrong. *Very* wrong.

Behind him, separated by mere inches, Father stands, his face pulled by thunderous rage and disgust. His unblinking gaze is pinned to the back of Chad’s head, his lips moving slightly as if to whisper a spell. Chad does not sense or see him. But I do, and I fear the later confrontation. How am I to explain the vampire?

“Then let’s get out of here,” I tell him, unable to ignore the pure hatred Father is showing toward Chad simply because he’s a vampire and we’re witches. Like Mother, Father hated vampires during his living life. It seems that even in death those strong feelings have not changed.

Chad raises his nose and sniffs the air, pulling a face of revulsion. “It smells like something died in this room.”

Father’s face pinches even more at the insult.

“It does,” I reply, not wanting to explain why it might smell that way. Getting into the conversation of it being locked for so many years would only create more questions.

I usher Chad out of the room only to hear Father’s whisper behind me.

“Leave the door open,” he instructs.

Chad doesn’t react to Father’s voice, but I do. I obey, leaving the door open slightly before guiding Chad back into my room.

“What now?” I ask, turning to face him. I can tell from his stiff shoulders and vein-covered neck that he is still on edge. I find myself raising two gentle hands for his chest and pressing my palms against him. This is the only way I think I can help calm him.

“We need to do something about the hunters before *anyone*—witch, vampire, or wolf—gets hurt.”

A thought passes through my mind. It’s aided by Abraxon, who is still quiet. “The academy. Elder Jane needs to know.”

Chad steps back. “The elder witch? Are you sure we should tell her?”

“Elder Jane has control and access to enough power to protect this town. She needs to know. If what you are saying about the hunters is true,

then we are all in danger. Think about what they did to Savi. They'll do the very same to others who may not be able to withstand the torture. If the hunters get hold of the right supernatural, they can reveal some pretty serious secrets. This could mean our end."

Chad nods in agreement. "When do we go?"

"Now," I say, rushing for my drawers and pulling out a set of plain clothes. "We go now before she leaves the academy to complete whatever task she is given for the afternoon. Elder Jane never stays on academy grounds after lunch."

In the corner of my eye, as I pull on my thick, moss-colored knitted jumper, I see Chad peer at the clock.

"Then we better get going," he agrees.

In only a few short moments, we are out the door and on the main street of Hillcrest. During our trek to the school, I considered the fact that vampires aren't allowed on academy property. We're not even allowed to speak about the school to anyone who doesn't attend.

And here I am, taking the brother of a hybrid I created straight toward its gates.

Chapter Nine

Savi

Elder Jane tries to hide her shock, but she fails miserably. I can't help but wonder what she's thinking as I slowly approach from behind the tree. Can she see and sense my differences like others have? Is that why she seems surprised to see me here? Or maybe she's surprised to see a vampire so deep into werewolf territory. Will she ask if I overheard details of the investigation? Will she ask me to remain silent on the matter so we don't create mass hysteria?

"I shall admit that I'm surprised to see you here, Savannah," Elder Jane says. Her dark brown hair is pulled back into a sloppy bun that rests atop her head. Her eyes seem hollow and dark. I wonder if she's slept since the hunters invaded. I know I haven't. "I'm glad to see you're home safely. George is a student of mine, and he was quite perplexed over your sudden disappearance."

"Yes, I—uh..." How much do I tell her? Do I admit what happened? Do I tell her these hunters are monsters, not humans. I should warn her, right? But warning her means exposing more secrets. The truth means putting George and Chad in danger. I can't do that, not until I speak with them and we create a plan that protects us all. "I was forced to deal with a personal matter. I left abruptly, so I couldn't warn George before leaving." There. I didn't *really* lie.

She nods and takes a step toward me. I'm not sure when I stopped approaching her, but she clearly noticed. With each step she takes, the knot in my throat hardens. How close is too close? I can't allow her to sense my differences, not without endangering George in the process.

“Do you know what the humans are doing in Hillcrest, Miss Danvers?” she asks.

I suck in a sharp breath. George once told me how Elder Jane is renowned for her keen intuition. She can sense a liar in a field of honesty. George believes her innate abilities are what granted her the title of elder. The council bypassed qualified candidates—like George’s mom, who has ties to the founding families of Hillcrest—in favor of Jane. (Although, George’s mom was psychotic, so maybe they just considered mental health when determining who would become the elder witch) If I am not careful, Elder Jane will find out everything and likely sentence both George and I to death for our involvement.

“I wasn’t trying to eavesdrop, but I couldn’t help hearing the whispers overtaking Hillcrest. It seems there is an investigation into the disappearance of local college students.” I choose my words carefully, never referring to the intruders as *humans*. I don’t want to lie to her, and I certainly don’t want to mislead her. These *parasites* aren’t humans.

Again, she nods. “I find it interesting that you are here, where the humans allegedly spent their final moments, during the very time an investigation has begun.”

I blink away her innuendo, pretending I haven’t the slightest clue what she’s hinting at.

“Tell me, child, what is a vampire doing on werewolf territory?”

“I—um, I’m taking a walk.”

Taking a walk? Seriously! Why did I not consider having a cover story ready in case I got caught doing something stupid, like eavesdropping on the council meeting or sneaking around Wolfsbane Forest?

“Must you lie, Savannah?” she asks. “Truly, we haven’t the time.”

She’s close—too close—and I must make my decision. Either I let her see what I am, or I give her something else. I doesn’t take me long to weigh my options, because she’s only steps away from seeing what I really am. I throw up my hands to stop her, but she speaks before I do.

“I sense George’s magic, Savannah. How is George involved here?”

“We witnessed the attack, but I swear it wasn’t our doing,” I blurt. I panicked when she mentioned George. All I want to do is protect him from the mess I’ve created.

“Tell me everything,” she orders.

“I overheard a conversation about the bonfire, and I convinced George to attend with me. I thought he could use the break. Things at his house are always... tense. He refused at first, because there was a full moon that night, but I told him the wolves would never break the treaty. I thought we would be safe,” I say. I frown as I mentally relive that night. If I just would have listened to him and gone home, our lives would be so different right now.

“Continue,” she says.

“Everything was fine. I stayed out of sight, so no one could see my eyes. We stayed away from the fire’s light and toward the shadows. People left us alone until...” I gnaw on my lower lip, my gaze flickering to the spot where George used his magic in front of humans. I can’t tell her that. She’ll kill him if she found out he broke a top rule.

“*Until what*, Savannah?” she asks, unable to hide her annoyance.

“Until we heard the wolves. It was too late. We couldn’t stop them. There were dozens. It was over almost as soon as it began.”

“And why do I sense George’s magic even now?”

I couldn’t tell her he used his magic to kill a werewolf, even if he was protecting himself or the humans. Exposing magic is forbidden. There is no gray area. Either you risk exposure or you don’t. And George did.

Elder Jane exhales sharply, silently encouraging me to pick up my storytelling pace.

“We came back to cover up the crime,” I whisper.

“And why would you do that?”

“To protect Hillcrest. To protect exposure.”

She nods. “I suppose I can’t chastise you both for that. It’s what I would have done if you came to me that night. And I do wish you did. It wasn’t your responsibility to clean up the alpha’s mess.”

I cringe when she mentions Zane, the alpha. Sure, he should have kept his wolves at bay, but the humans shouldn’t have been that deep into Wolfsbane Forest either. I’m sure the wolves thought they were safe to hunt animals, like they always were when they’re under the moon’s sway. I never spoke to Zane of that night, but I’m sure he regrets the massacre. After all, it did lead to his brother’s demise.

“I’ll deal with the alpha, but right now, we have more important things to worry about, like getting these humans off our trail. They’re right about

the disappearances, but unfortunately, we can't provide them with any leads. We'll have to get creative if we want them to leave town."

I nod. "Elder Jane, there's something you need to know about these... *humans*."

The loud vibrations of a silenced mobile phone echo through the woods. Elder Jane pulls her phone from her pocket, glances at the screen, and frowns. She tells me to give her a moment, and I am grateful. I need time to figure out how to explain the existence of hunters to the elder witch without implicating George.

"Hello?" she says.

Do I tell her about my abduction and the many torture sessions?

"Yes. I understand." Her voice is tight.

What about Will? Can I save him just as he saved me?

"Don't move. I'll be right there."

I turn on my heel just as she turns off her phone.

"I'm sorry, Savannah, but we'll have to continue this another time. I must tend to something urgent."

"Is everything okay?" I ask.

"It will be."

"Is there anything I can do?" I call, but she's already running back toward town with speed I didn't know witches could possess. She may not be as fast as a vampire, but she's definitely making great time. Thankfully, I didn't have to find the right words to explain the existence of hunters, but soon enough, she'll learn about them and their true intentions for being in Hillcrest. Maybe if Zane informs her of their agenda, she'll forgive his transgression.

Almost as if I summoned him with my thoughts, the wolves appear. One by one, they cross the threshold of the tree line. With their golden eyes on me, I can't help the moment when my lips curve into a smile. Closing the space between us, I approach them without caution, running a hand through the many manes of fur. One by one, they rub against me, coating me in their unique scents which I've come to appreciate.

"Savi?" someone calls.

I turn to face Will, who's been cornered by the wolves. One hand holds a gun and the other a dagger, and he has both pointed at the slowly approaching wolves. Seeing my pack mates in danger sparks a sudden wash of rage to flood through me.

Will is no longer the hunter who saved my life. He's the hunter with a weapon drawn and dagger unsheathed. He's the hunter threatening the lives of those who continue to protect me.

And that I will not allow.

Chapter Ten

George

Before we step more than three feet onto the long driveway that leads up to the academy, we are rushed by teachers. Countless bodies run across gravel and grass, hands waving and voices raised. Their clear aggression and panic is pinned on us.

“Holy sh—”

Someone shouts my name, overpowering whatever Chad was saying.

“What under the Goddess’s sun are you doing bringing one of those here?” a teacher screams.

Chad mocks her tone, “One of *those*?”

“It is forbidden,” a low-voiced teacher growls. His gray beard tickles his round stomach, making him look nothing less than the humans’ idea of a wizard.

“Take the vampire! We must clear his memory,” someone shouts.

The larger teacher reaches a hand for Chad, who hisses, teeth bared, in his direction. He falters, hand still hovering close to Chad but not close enough to touch.

“George!” Mrs. Tate’s face is as red as a boiled beet. “You’ve overstepped every line your ancestors have ever drawn, but bringing a vampire *here* of all places? Do you understand what you have done?”

“Yes,” I tell her plainly. It is difficult to pay her much attention, because three other witches, who move cautiously toward Chad, try to help capture my boyfriend. Between the witches and Abraxon, who moves like a sickness in my stomach, clearly excited by this confrontation, I’m beginning to feel ill.

“You have nothing else to say?” Mrs. Tate asks.

The commotion has caused student witches to peer out of the frosted-glass windows of the academy’s main building. I see the outlines and shadows as more join to watch a witch with a vampire in a place that no other supernatural knows exists.

But here I am, with Chad, and I am not being stopped now. Not when I must to see Elder Jane and save our beloved town.

Long nails pull at my skin as Mrs. Tate grips hold of me. My yelp is conjured from my own surprise, not pain, but Chad doesn’t know that. Quickly, he breaks free from the witches who’ve encircled him, and he’s by my side. His eyes glow like fresh blood on snow, his anger directed at Mrs. Tate, who stumbles backward.

“Stop your... *friend*, or we will be forced to intervene,” Mrs. Tate spits. Glowing flames tickle to life across her hands.

I clap my hands, forcing the air to enhance the sound. It gets the full attention of the surrounding teachers.

“We are here to see Elder Jane,” I announce.

“Not happening,” a younger teacher says, his eyes narrowed at me. “We cannot put the elder in danger.”

“You really believe I would bring danger to my own school? To Elder Jane?” I ask, trying not to laugh at the stupidity of what he said.

“At this point, George Alcott, we don’t know what you are capable of doing,” Mrs. Tate replies.

She has a point, Abraxon chuckles. And they are never going to let you through unless you persuade them...

That is against the code, I reply.

You’ve broken rules tenfold at this point. Do it again before more witches come to restrain you both.

Abraxon is right. If this is going to work, I need to act fast. Even so, in this moment, I don’t want to admit it, but I don’t really know what I’m going to do about this mess.

I will help, Abraxon whispers to me.

The teachers’ shouting ceases almost immediately as I look up to them. I catch my own reflection in the eyeglasses of one who stands close to me. Black eyes look back at me.

“I am here to see Elder Jane. I command you all to let us through,” I say, invoking as much trepidation as I can muster. Chad is still and silent

beside me, but I sense his confusion. He doesn't understand what I'm doing. "Now!"

Abraxon's own voice mimicks mine from within, filling every vein in my body with his presence. His power is both deadly and intoxicating. His words are my own just as mine are his. Together, in this moment, we are truly one.

But it ends almost as quickly as it began. The group of teachers rock backward, their gazes settling back into the real world.

"Come with me," Mrs. Tate says. "I am taking you to see Elder Jane for this. The rest of you return to your classes."

Not a single teacher resists what Mrs. Tate says. In fact, they hardly look at Chad or me again.

"Follow me," Mrs. Tate says.

I grab onto Chad's hand as we follow Mrs. Tate toward the academy and through its main doors. With each footfall, I feel that this will all unravel badly, but our guide does not snap out of the persuasion I used against her.

On and on, we walk. Chad's wide eyes scan every possible inch of the academy's innards. He is the first vampire in Hillcrest's history that has ever stepped into the academy. And he is sure making the most of absorbing every detail. After this, I know he will have a multitude of questions for me—questions I will gladly answer if we get through this alive.

I don't count on being able to use my magic on Elder Jane. She is different to me. She means... more. Silently, I warn Abraxon to leave her alone, and in the same breath, I order him to leave me alone while I deal with her.

We reach her office door before I register that we've moved this far into the academy. It is open. Elder Jane leans against her desk as if she's been waiting for us.

"That is far enough, Mrs. Tate," Elder Jane says from across the room. "Leave the boys with me. Please return to your class for the meantime."

Our entranced guide nods in agreement and moves away, leaving us alone with the elder. Before she is fully out of sight, I catch the nasty glare Mrs. Tate gives us. Jokes on her. If she knew what I achieved, she would truly have a reason to hate me even more than she already does.

"Close the door behind you. The draft is an unwanted guest."

Chad is as frozen as winter ice, but my hand urges him to follow me. I release him only to close the door.

“Thank you for seeing us,” I tell her.

“I did not have much of a choice. I am certain members of my staff and your fellow student witches have told you just how scandalous this is, George. Never did I expect this from you of all witches. I understand you made friends within the vampiric world, but I did not think you would be foolish enough to bring one here.”

I lower my gaze to my feet, cheeks warming under Elder Jane’s calm anger. It lingers beneath her tongue as she speaks.

“Do you not have anything to say for yourself?” she interrogates me. “Or what of you, Master Danvers? I suggest one of you speak immediately. I demand an explanation.”

“This is my doing,” Chad’s voice is dark but not because of aggression. He would be a fool to share that emotion with Elder Jane. He may be fearless, but he knows this is not the time nor place for such an outburst. “I came to George with important news, and he felt that you should know about it.”

Elder Jane’s gaze flicks to me, but her body doesn’t move. “George, is what he says true?”

“It Is. I understand bringing him here is a risk, but I had to take it. I swear, I only have the good of Hillcrest on my mind.”

Elder Jane sighs and moves around her desk, taking a seat in preparation for her following question. “And what you have to say next will shock me? It will make this betrayal okay? I highly doubt it, George. Do you understand what I am dealing with at the...”

She stops and looks to the door. Raising a hand, she waves it in a circular motion three times as she whispers an incantation. Like the suction of a vacuum, I sense the sound in the room being sealed within. She’s using a silencing charm, keeping out the noise that lingers in the hallway so we’re not distracted. When she is done, she rests her aged, ring-covered fingers on her polished desk and carries on.

“Forgive me, boys, but I am dealing with humans. A group has moved into town on the trail of the missing humans. They’re investigating a mass disappearance.”

Chad clears his throat. “They are not humans.”

Elder Jane snaps her head back and blinks dramatically. “Are you suggesting I am telling lies?”

“Not at all.” I can see the panic on Chad’s face. It pinches his handsome features and creases his forehead. “All I mean is that you are being misled. They don’t want you to know what they are. They want you to believe they’re humans.”

“The humans? You’re saying they’re tricking me?”

“They are hunters, Elder Jane. Supernatural hunters” I clarify. “These are the very same beings who kidnapped Savi, my friend and Chad’s sister. They tortured her to the brink of death. I saw her with my very eyes, and she herself has confirmed that they are in fact the hunters who kidnapped her. They’ve invaded Hillcrest, Elder Jane, and they plan to do evil things.”

Elder Jane is silent for a moment as she swallows my words. I can see her neck bob as she fights to understand the reality of our situation. Her knuckles turn white as she presses down on the desk to still her obvious shaking.

“Hunters... in Hillcrest? Bold accusations, boys. Are you certain?”

Seeing her try to control what has to be panic makes my own legs shiver. Elder Jane is the leader of the witches. She is equally powerful as she is wise, but the simple word of hunters is causing her to melt in her chair until she looks small and childish.

“I swear it,” Chad says.

She stands abruptly. “Forgive me, but I want to speak with Savannah. I need to know everything she knows. *Everything*. Let me dig into her mind to understand what the murderers are doing here.”

I reach for my phone in my pocket. “We can bring her to you.”

“No. I must speak with her now.”

Wind rushes throughout the room as Elder Jane conjures her element. Furniture scatters to all four corners, creating a large empty space within the center of her office.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“We, Master Alcott, are going to conjure Savi here at this very moment. I will not wait to speak with her. Not with news that’s this crucial to our survival. Please, have Master Danvers move and stay out of the way until the spell is complete.”

I don't need to reiterate Elder Jane's words to Chad. In a blink, he is completely out of our way.

Conjuring spells are tricky but not impossible—especially not with access to Elder Jane's power. It doesn't take long for cream and purple pillar candles to be placed in a complete circle around the empty space in the room.

"Light them," she tells me.

Abraxon stirs, reminding me without words that fire is no longer an element I am to fear.

I close my eyes and take a breath. As I exhale, I feel the warmth of the room increase. Opening my eyes, I see the tall flames that dance on each of the candle wicks.

"Feed your energy into the enclosed circle, and I will do the rest," Elder Jane orders.

There is no time for questions. Elder Jane opens both arms to her side and raises her chin. Foreign words spill out of her mouth in a blend of sounds. The space within our enflamed circle spins with vicious air, turning into a vortex and blurring what lies within.

I push my energy toward it, containing the power and keeping the fire burning on the candles. Abraxon lends a hand, making it easier to contain the spell.

I want to look at Chad, but I fear if I take my concentration away for even a moment, this will fail. And I cannot let that happen.

My hair jostles in the wind. My mouth dries and my heart thumps. The spell continues until Elder Jane fists her hands, calling off the magic and stilling the room.

I squint through the calming vortex at the shape within. Savi stands in the center of our circle. She is the same Savi I've always known. My soul connects to hers, and I know she's there. But something is off about her. She looks different. The shifting air that weaves with the glowing magic distorts her features at first, making it close to impossible for me to see what unnerves me about my best friend.

Slowly, she turns to face us. Her usual beautiful face is marked with features of the wolf that lies dormant. Her piercing yellow eyes meet mine, and her jaw opens, a howl piercing the otherwise silent room.

Uh oh, Abraxon chimes in. *I guess the secret is out.*

"No," Elder Jane breathes, hand on her chest. "It cannot be."

“I can explain—” I begin, but Elder Jane’s face contorts into horror, and she screams.

“HYBRID!”

Chapter Eleven

Savi

I shout for Will to stop, to think about what he's doing. Briefly, his gaze meets mine, but it's not long before he's back staring at the wolves, bouncing on the balls of his feet as if the beasts will pounce at any moment.

I call off the wolves, but they do not listen. Why would they? I'm not their alpha, and Will is part of the organization that killed so many of their pack members. In their eyes, he deserves to die for what his people did. And are they wrong to feel that way? Even the humans agree an eye for an eye is acceptable.

As I wonder if Will *should* pay for his crimes—because I'm sure I'm not the *only* vampire he led the hunters to—I find myself rushing forward and standing between the wolves and their prey.

"I don't need your protection!" Will shouts.

I roll my eyes. Men are always so sensitive about women racing to their rescue. "I think me protecting you shouldn't be your biggest concern right now."

"You're right. My biggest concern is how supernaturals can turn on each other in the blink of an eye! This is why we..."

He stops, and I turn on my heels to face him fully.

"This is why you what, Will?" I say, daring him to finish that sentence.

He swallows heavily.

"Say it! Say the words!" I shout, but he simply averts his gaze, refusing to look me in the eye. "Look at me and tell me that this is why you *murder* supernaturals."

Anger boils in the pit of my gut, threatening to spill over, and I let it. I don't ignore what I am or how it makes me feel. I just... *be*. I let myself be

who *I am* now. And *right now*, I'm one pissed off hybrid.

I begin my transition before I even realize it's happening, but I don't want to fully change. I want him to hear my words. He needs to know how messed up his life is, how *wrong* it is. Of all beings, I shouldn't judge him. I was just as clueless only weeks ago. But I learned my lesson, and it's time he learns his.

"Supernaturals are not the problem, Will. *Your people* are the problem. Sure, we need a treaty in place and a government to police our actions, but we don't go around torturing and killing others *just because we can*."

"Really, Savi? Are you sure you should be the one who talks to me about what's right and what's wrong? After all, we met during similar circumstances," he counters.

"I have *never* let one of my victims feel even an ounce of pain. I compelled them into a happier life. They were grateful during their final moments with me. Your people *never* offer such reprieve."

I'm inches from him now, jabbing my index finger against his chest so hard he winces. The moment my claws extend and I slice his skin, I realize just how out of control I can be when I'm angry.

"What *are* you?" Will asks.

I step back, falling into the waiting line of wolves. They nudge into me, rubbing their furry snouts against my legs. It's a comfortable feeling that reassures me that I'm okay.

I glance down at my hands and see my claws. I'm beginning my transition, but my desire to still be able to communicate with Will must have slowed it to a near halt. I thought only the alpha had the power to do that.

I turn to face him, and his cold stare greets me. Before I can ask what the hell is going on, the sudden echoing of familiar voices is all around me. I don't understand her words, but I know she speaks to me. I spin in circles, searching for her. She makes her presence known, yet she hides. I cannot see her, but I hear her all around me.

The wolves are staring at me curiously, watching as I turn round and round. Do they not hear her too? Are her words for my ears alone? Or is it my heightened senses in this in-between moment that allow me to hear her?

Before I can ask if Will understands her words, I am swallowed in darkness. I hear Will's shock and the distant howling of the wolves, and somehow, I know I'm no longer with them. I know little of witch magic, but

I'm sure George is the cause of this. What other witch could harness such a powerful display of magic?

I try to still my hammering heart, but the darkness is enveloping me. I try to fist my hands at my sides, but my claws scrape against my skin. My ears twitch at the slightest of sounds, and I know I'm not alone in this place. I don't know where I am, but other souls lurk here. They surround me now as if I could bring them with me, back to the world of the living.

I see a flash of a familiar face. She smiles at me even when I'm in this form, as if I've never looked more beautiful to her. I gasp as she slowly approaches, but already, she's fading away as I'm pulled free from the darkness that she's stuck in.

"Mother?" I whisper.

And then she's gone, and I'm standing in the crosshairs of two witches. My gaze lands on Chad, who hovers in the corner. Lines of worry crease his eyes, which grow wide as he trails my frame.

Someone shrieks, and I turn away from my brother, scanning the room until I face the noise maker. Her scream pierces my ears, and they twitch in response, blocking enough of her screech to make listening bearable.

"Hybrid!" Elder Jane shrieks.

Quickly, I transition back into my vampire form, if only to convince her that I'm no threat. I feel my elongated fangs and claws retract, and my ears shrink. My hair returns to normal, no longer coating my pale skin. The process takes seconds, but that's all she needs.

Magic rushes all around me. I hear George shout something to Elder Jane, but even I know it's no use. She won't stop, and she won't listen. Her first instinct is to kill, and I can understand that. It was once my first instinct too. But even though I can appreciate her response, I will not yield to it.

Her words echo in my mind—*trapping spell*. She wants to confine me here, hand me over to the council. She's no different from the hunters who caged and tortured me. We must be better than that. We must be better than the humans who burned witches alive in the 1600s, and we must be better than the hunters who kill today.

Her magic swirls around me, clinging to my skin in a powerful attempt to harden my limbs like stone. It coats my arms and legs, and I know I must fight Elder Jane if I wish to free myself and escape the council.

Inside of me, the darkness stirs, just as it did in the forest when Will and I were nearly caught by his fellow hunters. Abraxon coils within me, aching

to be released.

And I let it. I offer the control it so desperately craves.

Swirling within me, it coats every fiber of my being, strengthening my frail frame and forcing away Elder Jane's magic. I watch her reaction as the darkness within me combats her efforts. Her shock turns to fear, and she mumbles something under her breath.

"What are you?" she whispers.

The moment she realizes she cannot cast a spell and plant me firmly in place, her feelings for me become much more sinister in nature. The soft swirling magic she sent at me turns the air into daggers. One after another, she thrusts the element at me with a mindset to kill. No longer does she want to trap me here. No, she wants to provide the council with a *corpse*.

It's only a matter of time before she makes the connection that I am what I am because of George, and with my lifeless body, she'll offer up George's too. Probably even Chad's. Elder Jane will kill anyone by association if that means sending a message to the other powerful witches in Hillcrest. Using black magic means signing your own death certificate.

Elder Jane sends blasts of power my way, and although each collides firmly into my torso, the pain is unusually bearable. It's as if she barely makes a mark. Her forehead moistens as she continues her assault, and I watch as a bead of sweat dribbles into her eyes.

Is this a joke? Is she really exerting this much energy? Sure, her assault stings, but it's hardly painful enough for me to crumple under her power. I'm not sure what's going on, but I know we haven't much time. We're in an office, and I'm sure there's more witches just beyond the closed door.

I don't want to hurt the elder witch, but she's offering me no other choices. I smile at the thought that she knows and there's nothing she can do to stop me. Just as that final thought enters my mind, I release every ounce of the darkness that's within me. It blasts from my core, slamming into everything and everyone around me. As if I'm a bystander in the midst of a war, I stand in the aftermath of my darkness. The walls crumble, furniture turns to dust, and the people I love succumb to an inevitable defeat.

Chapter Twelve

George

Pure light exploded from Savi's chest. At first, it vibrated across her skin, like a boiling fire, but it was different, lighter. It didn't seem hot, but it wasn't cold either. The blast had a comfortable, familiar feeling to it. Then in a single breath, her arms flung wide, and her mouth opened. Darkness followed.

Perhaps her light snuffed out everything else and left the world in obsidian. At least, that's what it first felt like. After that initial blast and the inevitable darkness, I fell to the floor in agony.

My vision doubles as I scan the rubble. Cold air tickles the grime and dust on my skin, even kissing the bloody cuts that are scattered across my legs and hands. My jeans are in tatters, flashing the pale skin beneath.

How much time have I lost?

Lifting my neck hurts, but Chad is there, reaching out for me. His face is covered in the same pale dust that coats my hands and exposed skin. Just seeing him settles my vision enough to scan the room.

Elder Jane's office is in rubble. The sky is open above us, and the walls are in ruin. It's as if we were never in her office to begin with. The wind picks up as my panic increases.

"Where is Savi!" Chad cries, his voice able to slice through the strange floating detachment of my concentration.

Savi.

She was right there, with skin of glowing amber and hair of sun-spun gold.

Magic.

It oozed from every pore on her body.

“Savi!” Chad yells, yet still I am unable to focus on one thing for long. I lift my hand to my head and find out why.

An egg of a bump is sore to the touch, standing atop my skin. Mother would tell me as a child that a bump was always “better out than in.” A mundane saying for those without the healing spells within a witch’s grimoire. My bumps never lasted long, not when her cold hands would heal me.

“Look at me, George. Look at me!”

“Where?” I ask, Chad’s words sounding misplaced and out of order.

His hands hold my cheeks and stop me from looking around at the destroyed room, toppled walls, and brick covered floor. Should this make me worry? Why cannot I find my panic and urgency?

Focus, George, a darker voice tells me. Sit up and help the girl.

Had I hit my head hard enough to forget the demon that lurks within me?

Arms hoist me from the floor. Chad supports me against his own frame.

“Savi!” he shouts again.

I see two bodies, but with the amount of rubble that covers them both, I am unsure who is who. Is Savi one of them?

Of course she is. Think. Clear your mind, Abraxon reprimands me, but I want to laugh.

Then one of the piles begins to move and a hand snakes out, pushing snapped wood and plaster out of the way. Chad releases me and races for her. Quickly, he frees Savi, whose face is as white as fresh snow.

“Are you all right?” he asks, scanning her from head to toe.

Savi looks at me and nods my way. “Is he okay?”

Chad shakes his head. “We need to get out of here and stop the bleeding.”

I know they are talking about me, but I’m not worried about *my* bleeding. I just want to know why *they’re* not bleeding.

Vampires, George. You know this. They heal quickly. His voice sounds strange.

Are you worried about me? I ask Abraxon. He shivers with a strange urgency.

Behind Savi and Chad, in a place where they cannot see, I watch as bricks and rubble lift from the ground on invisible strings of air. I lift a hand

and point, mesmerized by the magic trick. Chad and Savi turn their heads, following my finger to what holds my infatuation.

“Get down!” Chad cries.

In one beat of my heart, the floating debris slices through the air toward Savi. Abraxon moves my hand and calls forth its power. In one single moment of clarity, I wonder why I didn’t do it first. Abraxon conjures the element of air, shielding us from attack. One by one, the pieces of broken bricks slam into my elemental wall.

Elder Jane stands, hair disheveled and a river of blood leaking from a gash on her temple. Her hands are twisted, her mouth moving as she calls on magic that even Abraxon cannot place. She is fueled by anger and pain. She screams with hatred but her wincing expression tells of the agony the explosion has caused her.

“Demoness! Disgusting. You cannot leave the protection of my academy alive. You are an abomination!” Elder Jane shouts her frantic, disjointed words. She spits saliva tainted by blood onto the floor.

All around us, the commotion of incoming teachers echoes. As they approach, I see their faces. Students follow them, ignoring the shouts for them to stay back.

Savi and Chad are still hunched on the ground together, arms wrapped fiercely around one another. I hear names of hate called at the both of them. Even my name is thrown into the mess.

“Seize them!” Elder Jane commands to the many teachers around us, although her gaze is pinned on me. Is that regret I see behind it? Or do I see something more sinister?

This is my fault. I tell myself that over and over, my headache only increasing by the second.

Pathetic! Abraxon hisses within me. *You don’t even realize that you’ve created the most powerful living beast.*

Savi stands, shivering. Chad hisses, teeth bared and ready to do anything to protect his one and only sister. And I stand, weak and unsure, looking at the only woman I ever truly looked up to give the death command to my best friends. Savi should not be killed for this. She didn’t ask me to turn her into... into...

I will not watch this, Abraxon says, interrupting my mind. He fills my entire body with his essence. I have no control as he takes over. The open sky above us brings down natural light over us all, but Abraxon

extinguishes every part of it with his darkness. He twists the light into a circle that roars with air like that of a hurricane.

Beckon them, Abraxon tells me.

“Savi, come to me!” I shout, gaze flicking to Elder Jane, who watches this strange circle of shadow grow from a speck to a bizarre, shifting hole.

Jump, Abraxon orders.

Savi reaches for me, and my body falters once again. Is Abraxon consuming my lingering energy or is the blood loss catching up to me?

Abraxon moves my legs for me, making me sidestep into the unknown. I pull Savi along with me, knowing Chad will follow right behind us.

Heat bursts beside us, warming my cheek and licking across my hair.

Fire.

Someone sent fireball after us. The witches began to attack just as the dark hole devoured us. Savi cries out, but I cannot see in the dark to know if it's from shock or if the flame actually touched her skin.

I expect to fall freely, but I don't. The darkness lasts for only a second before my feet touch solid ground. The world around me is still black until, like a cloud across water, it skitters away.

The dark clouds disperse, and we are left to look upon a different scene. No longer do the crumbled walls of Elder Jane's office surround us. No longer are we looked upon by the accusing eyes of witches brimming with magic and hate.

Tall pines tower over us. A large expanse of identical huts goes on for as far as I can see. But it is the mixture of human bodies and wolves that walk freely among each other that snatches my breath from my lungs.

We traveled through the dark, straight into the heart of the wolves' camp.

You are welcome, Abraxon says snidely before falling silent.

Heads and snouts snap our way. Savi calls out in relief, falling to her knees and pressing her head onto the mossy ground.

I stumble, reality slamming into me at full force. The hairs on my arms stand on end. Chad takes cautious steps backward, eyes unmoving from the creatures that surround us. I cannot help but relive flashbacks of

the fight we three had alongside these creatures. These beasts are ruled by the alpha, and the alpha murdered my mother.

I ball my hands into fists and bite down on my lip to stop my head from spinning.

“Breathe,” Chad says. His gaze is glued to his sister, who reaches out to the man who walks toward us, parting the sea of wolves like a false prophet. “Take my hand and don’t let go.”

Chad’s fingers link with mine, and he squeezes.

“I am not leaving you,” I whisper.

Much has happened. With the attack and my injuries, I should focus on myself and what I just did to escape the academy. Elder Jane will be hunting us now. There’s nowhere safe we can hide if we stay in Hillcrest. I should worry about that and about how I’ll save Father if I can’t even get home.

But seeing the alpha again ignites an inferno.

One only his death will put out.

Chapter Thirteen

Savi

I walk toward Zane, who opens his arms to me. Something about seeing him after the hell the witches just put us through sets me at ease. I know I am safe here. I know the wolves would die to protect me. As someone who has very few allies, I appreciate how much he tries to make me feel comfortable around him and his pack.

We embrace, and I can feel the angry stares on my back. I glance over my shoulder. George and Chad hold hands, and I can see George is losing his battle to control his emotions. He wants nothing more than to kill the alpha. But I can't let him. Not just because our sire bond prevents me from putting my safety first, but because Zane killed George's mom in order to protect *me*. He made a decision he knew went against the treaty. He risked his neck to save mine. Not many would do that for me.

When Zane pulls away, he says, "I was worried about you, *mali volk*. You simply vanished."

I nod. "I know. I'm sorry. I was summoned by the witches. *Involuntarily*, I should add."

Zane's gaze lands on George, and I can hear my best friend's heart rate increase. He's trying so hard to keep his cool, and really, I'm honestly proud of him. I can't say I'm sorry his mother is dead—she did kill my parents after all—but I know how hard it must be to hold back when all you want to do is lash out.

"We have a problem," I say, and his gaze flickers back to my own. "The witches know."

Zane's eyes widen slightly before returning to normal. I'm sure the world finding out his newest recruit is, in fact, *different*, isn't exactly

information he wants revealed.

“Tell me everything,” he urges.

“George summoned me to Elder Jane’s office, and since I was, you know, in half-wolf form, she freaked out, screaming to the others that the *abomination* must die. You know, I’m really starting to take offense to that word.” I cross my arms over my chest.

“Did she hurt you?” he asks. His gaze swipes up and down the length of my frame—such an intimate moment for a public place. The other wolves watch on, some in wolf form, as their alpha awaits my answer.

“George is worse,” I say. I turn toward my friend and mentally assess the damage done. He’s covered in gashes and clutching his stomach. I’m not sure what lies beneath, and I worry it may be worse than he can heal on his own. “He used a lot of magic to get us out of that place before Elder Jane could—”

“He’s too weak to heal himself,” Chad interjects. His main concern is for his boyfriend, and I don’t blame him.

I nod. “Of course.”

“We have a healer, but I’m not sure her methods will work on a witch,” the alpha says.

“I’ll be fine,” George sneers.

I exhale loudly. “George, we haven’t the time. Vendettas can wait. The witches—and hunters—won’t. We need to figure out what we’re going to do, where we’re going to stay.”

“We can’t exactly go home,” Chad agrees. He holds George’s hand and runs his thumb against the soft skin there. I yearn for a love as strong as the love they share. Sure, I love my brother, and I love my best friend, but it’s not the same. Sometimes, I wonder if I’ll ever find someone who will look at me the way they look at each other.

“You can stay, *mali volk*, as long as you wish,” Zane says.

“And my friends?” I ask.

“We’ve never allowed their kind here, but for you...” He smiles, his eyes shining brightly. “We’ll keep them safe.”

“George?” I ask, knowing his answer will be what determines if we seek refuge among the wolves.

He exhales sharply and scans the increasing number of wolves that surround us. Shrugging, he says, “For now.” Inside, I know he’s screaming that this *isn’t over*. “I should get started then.”

“Get started?” I question.

“Elder Jane has the entire academy’s resources behind her. They’ll find us here in no time at all. We must put up protection barriers to stop their magic from locating us,” George explains.

I nod. “But are you strong enough?”

“I have to be,” he says simply, and my heart aches for him.

“What about Savi?” Chad asks.

“What about me?” I say.

“Are we all going to ignore what just happened? Savi, you—you... exploded! I may not be a witch, but I can recognize magic when I see it!” Chad yells. He throws his arms out to his sides, as if we need a physical representation of what just happened.

I run a hand through my hair, shuddering as I recollect everything that’s happened over the past few hours. Hunters are in Hillcrest, and they’re looking for me. Somehow, I used magic to protect Will and me from being seen by his fellow comrade in the woods. I used it again to protect myself from Elder Jane’s ruthless attacks. It flows through me even now. I can feel it inside of me, but I know it doesn’t belong there. The magic feels... *darker* than even the wolf’s blood flowing through my veins. Maybe everyone is right. I am an abomination.

“We’re not ignoring what happened, Chad, but right now, we have more important things to worry about. We need protection, and George needs to heal.”

“You used magic, Savi,” George says.

“Maybe you can help George with the protection spell,” Chad says quickly.

I snort. “Do you really think I have that kind of control? I mean, if I *can* use magic. I’m not completely certain we even know that for sure. What if it only looked like magic? I mean, I’m already part-vampire, part-wolf. How would it even be possible to throw in part-witch too?”

“You can use magic, Savi. The demon... He said I lost part of myself that night, when I saved you from the wolf bite.” George glares at Zane, but only briefly. When his gaze lands back on my own, it’s softer and filled with sorrow. “It’s like a piece of me is stuck in you, and I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to get it back.”

I pull George into a hug, noticing how he squirms beneath my grasp. “I promise, we’re going to fix this, fix *you*. You’ll be whole again. If it’s not

supposed to be in me, then we'll get it back in you." I kiss his cheek before he pulls away from me. "Until then, you need to heal." I put up my hand, stopping George from the argument that rests on his lips. "You can't very well protect us when you're this weak. We *both* know that."

"Our healer's cabin is just over here," Zane says, turning toward the row of identical homes. "She has spare rooms where we keep our wounded. Thankfully, they're all vacant at the moment. Avel, show our guests to Althea. She will do what she can."

"I'll be there in a minute," I say, offering my friends a soft smile to let them know that I'm okay to be left alone.

"He'll need your help," Chad says, voice stern.

I nod. "I know. This'll only take a minute." I meet George's gaze. "I'll do what I can to help."

George winces as Chad tries to steer him toward the healer's cabin. "You're no novice, Savi. Not with part of my magic trapped in your body. Give yourself some credit." He winks, desperately trying to and failing miserably at hiding how much pain he's actually in.

I watch as they walk away with Chad toward the healer's house. Soon, we'll cast a protection spell around the wolves' home to protect us all, but until then, George must regain his strength. After all, even with George's magic cloaking our location, it's only a matter of time before the witches find us. His spells won't last forever, not with the resources of the council on our enemy's side.

I wait until I'm sure Chad is out of earshot, and then I turn back to the wolves. I thank them again, and I catch sight of a shirtless Mekhi. He smiles at me, but my attention is on his bare torso. Small scars are splattered across his chest, and I find myself drawn to them. I'm reaching for him and running a hand across his sun-kissed skin before I realize that I've even moved.

"These are my favorite scars, *mali volk*," Mekhi says.

I look up, meeting his gaze. He's tall, like Zane and Chad, so tall I have to crane my neck back to get a good look at him when we're this close.

"I got them from you."

Memories from that night dance before my eyes. I remember the day I was bitten as if it happened just yesterday. I know it wasn't that long ago, but I remember it in great detail. I remember the fight, the pain of being bitten, and my desperate attempt to save us from the wolves.

“I remember... I grabbed a handful of stones and threw them. They made impact, but I missed the heart.”

Mekhi chuckles. “I’m grateful you’re aim isn’t the greatest.”

I swallow hard and whisper, “That’s the thing... I never miss.”

To think Mekhi would have died by my hands makes my insides burn. He hasn’t been in my life for long, but I feel connected to him—and to all the wolves—in ways I don’t understand. I know it is because of the blood bond we now share, but it feels like he’s been in my life forever.

Movement from behind Mekhi catches my eye. In the distance, I see Will, caged and pacing, eyes on me.

“Will!” I shout as I push past the wolves, who part to allow me through. I’m at his side in a flash, and the wolves struggle to keep up. “What happened? Why are you in here?”

He grumbles something unintelligible under his breath before shouting, “Ask your *friends*!”

I turn to face Zane, who now stands mere feet behind me. “What is going on?” I don’t hide my annoyance.

“When you left, we didn’t know where you went. For all we knew, this hunter did something to you. I wouldn’t allow him to simply walk away.”

“But he’s been in there this whole time, even after I told you the witches did this. Why didn’t you release him?”

“*Savannah*, we cannot simply allow him to walk away. He knows too much.”

I gasp. “Are you suggesting what I think you’re suggesting?”

“The hunter must die,” the alpha says plainly.

“You know I won’t let that happen,” I growls.

“Why? Why do you continue to protect him after everything we’ve lost to his kind?”

“He saved my life, Zane. I would not have escaped that prison if he didn’t...” My lips tingle as if the taste of his blood still lingers there. “We’ve *all* made mistakes. Forcing him to pay for his with his life is what makes us monsters. Be better than that.”

Time seems to stop as Zane considers my request. As the alpha, I’m sure he can use some kind of mind compulsion to force me to do his bidding against my will, but I pray he will not. If he wishes for a *real* relationship with me, then it needs to be on *our* terms, not just his.

“If he turns on us, the blood will be on *your* hands, *mali volk*.”

I nod. “But he won’t.”

“You trust him completely?”

“I trust him with my life.”

Chapter Fourteen

George

We are led into a clearing within Bane's Forest, occupied only by an endless row of wood cabins which align perfectly around the tree line. The identical houses surround a massive fire pit at the center of the small clearing. Savi and Zane are speaking with a newly freed Will, but they're out of earshot. The werewolf guiding us is completely silent. He probably doesn't want us to be here as much as I want to go home and pretend this all never happened.

If it wasn't for Chad's cool familiarity next to me, I am sure I would explode being this close to the creatures that aided in Mother's death.

"Never did I think we would be relying on the wolves for sanctuary," Chad says as he squeezes my hand. "But it goes to show that so much can change in such a short time."

"This is not right," I reply. "The wolves are beasts. We do not need them to keep safe. I can do that on my own."

Chad falters as we walk. "Funny thing is, George, you also have changed. The wolves are gracious enough to help after everything we've done to them. I understand why you hold such hate in your soul, but you need to look past it if you are ever going to be at peace..."

I could feel myself wanting to snap at him. I tear my hand out of his grasp and narrow my gaze until it slices right through him. "Let me, for argument's sake, turn the tables. Would you ever break bread with those who killed your parents? How about live among them?"

Chad is silent for a moment. I can almost see the wheels turning in his mind.

“In a sense, George, I do break bread with someone who should be an enemy to me. In fact, I deeply care for said person. You forget that your parents were part of the coven that killed my parents. Ever since we discovered the truth, Savi and I have not treated you any differently. We trust that you are not like them. I think you should offer the wolves the same courtesy.”

“I’m sorry,” I say.

He smiles weakly at me, but this conversation is over—for now, at least. I skip a few feet in front of him, hoping he gives me the space I need. By the time Chad and I enter the healer’s cabin, I regret every word I’ve said.

“Althea will aid in your healing.” Our guide points to the woman waiting for us in the cabin. She turns toward us with a bright, wide smile to greet us.

“You can leave them here,” she says, her voice as thick and sweet as honey. “Boys, welcome. No need to tell me who needs the help. I can see from here just fine.” Her warm eyes are glued to me. It makes my skin itch.

All around us are crystals covering oak shelves. In bundles, dried herbs hang from the pitched ceiling, each one emitting a different scent. At first glance, I would have mistook this place as a witch’s home, because these are the same items I have in my own home. But the woman is a werewolf. I can tell just from her eyes and the earthly scent that clings to her apron.

“Please, take a seat.” Her hand gestures for the cushion-covered cot behind her.

I don’t like this. “I am fine. I don’t need *your* help.” My voice comes out of nowhere. Even Chad coughs to try and cover up my abrupt rudeness.

“You are bleeding all over my wood floors. Now, come and sit down. I cannot promise my techniques will work on a witch, but I am happy to try.”

“No,” I tell her again.

“George!” Chad snaps, “A little more thanks would not go amiss.”

“It is okay,” Althea says, already moving for the door. “I know when I am not wanted. Please, make yourself comfortable and use what you need to heal your wounds. If you have a change of heart, I will be more than happy to return.”

My muscles ache as I hobble over to the cot. Chad's annoyed gaze burns into the back of my head, but I don't turn to acknowledge him. Regardless of our conversation outside and no matter how much I know he's right, I simply cannot accept the help of the wolves after what the alpha did. Not yet. Possibly not ever.

"I trust this will be fine for you, *mali volk*," Zane speaks with Savi as if she is the only one in the cabin. He never blinks when he regards her. His wide, powerful eyes seem to drink up every part of Savi. Will, the hunter, notices it too. He physically shies away from the interaction as if it offends him. Or maybe he burns with jealousy... I find their relationship intriguing, but I haven't had a spare second to talk to Savi about him. How does she feel about the hunter?

"Thank you," Savi says beneath her breath, looking down and eyes fluttering.

Zane looks up from Savi and scans the room. "Where is Althea, our healer? She was asked to come and aid in the healing."

I physically tense at his question, and sadly, the alpha witnesses the act. I don't like to appear weak around him, but thankfully, that's all he needed for his question to be answered.

"Never mind," Zane says. His gaze returns to Savi. "Call me if there is anything you need."

"I shall," she replies, cheeks warming.

He raises his hand, and it lingers on her upper arm for a quick moment before dropping. Zane's entire expression melts into something darker as he looks over us all a final time before leaving. As his eyes land on me, I find my lips turning upward and Abraxon stirring with hunger.

"What now?" Chad asks, leaning against the wall beside the cot. The cabin is large enough for three or four to sleep in. It has three beds, one smaller than the others. There's a few pieces of dark wooden furniture scattered around the room, as well as a log burner that seems not to have been used for many years.

"George needs to heal," Savi says.

"I am fine!" I snap again. My discomfort grows by the minute.

"Stop being stubborn. The scent of your blood coats the air, George. You're not well." Savi brushes off my reply and strolls toward a set of drawers. She begins to rummage through them. "There must be something

here that can help,” she says. Her back facing us as she searches. “Maybe there’s a tonic to stunt the bleeding. That’s a thing, right? Witchy tonics?”

Magic, Abraxon purrs. She can heal us with magic.

“Savi, come here,” I ask her, and I sit down on a stool near me. I’m unsure how long my own legs can hold me upright.

“What is it?” she asks.

“We’ve established that you are not just a vampire and werewolf mix. Not with the magic you displayed at the academy. You can heal me.”

She shakes her head viciously, brown hair tumbling over her face to hide her worry. “I wouldn’t know where to begin.”

We can teach her.

“I can teach you,” I say, mirroring Abraxon. “Otherwise, I am going to be weak for days.” I look to Chad, knowing full well that he just confirmed how situations can change in such a short span of time. “We don’t know when the next fight will happen. It might be soon.”

Savi kneels on the ground before me and rests both of her hands in mine. “Tell me what to do, and I will try.”

“Trying is all I ask,” I whisper.

Calling upon magic with someone else is not something I’ve ever done before. Being solitary, I kept to myself, steering clear of covens and their needy ways. But looking into Savi’s red and gold-flecked eyes, I feel as if I am about to unravel magical secrets to her.

She can do this. You can do this.

Thanks for the vote of confidence, I reply.

“Magic is instinctual, as you already know. Your body overpowered your mind, which resulted in your... explosion. That is your soul’s way of protecting you. But instinctual power usually comes in an aggressive form. For witches, it would show in one of the four elements—whichever is more in tune with the witch.”

Savi interrupts me, saying, “But you can control all four. I know this.”

“I can. It’s rare but possible for a witch to control all four. You have already shown that fire is an element you can control, because it was the first to aid you when you felt danger,” I tell her.

“That was the explosion?” Chad asks from his post. “Fire?”

“It was,” I tell him, unable to look into his eyes for long. “And once I am healed, we will see what other elements you can link to. If it really is

my magic you have within you, you'll be able to tap into all of them like I can."

It is, Abraxon says.

"I'll have you calling upon the great winds and rushing waters in no time." I smile but wince as a jolt of pain shoots up my spine and into the base of my skull. Even Abraxon coils as if my physical pain hurts him in the same breath.

"Are you all right?" Chad asks. I open my eyes to find him sitting beside me. He takes my cheeks in his cupped hands and kisses me on the head. "How about we skip the chatter and just get you healed, okay?"

I nod, wanting nothing more than to rid my body of this lingering agony.

"I can leave..." I almost forgot about the hunter who hasn't made a sound since we arrived in the cabin.

As he speaks, Chad snaps his head and points a finger at him. "Stay right there."

Will raises both hands and steps back into the shadows of the cabin. He's gone but still here in the same heartbeat.

"Chad, Will saved me. Remember that, okay?"

Savi's words settle across Chad's strong face until the creases around his lips settle and the bulging vein on his neck disappears.

Before anyone else shouts something, I rest Savi's hands on my chest. She has to adjust her stance to get comfortable, which is the most important aspect when completing such an intricate, calm spell.

"To heal someone from more minor ailments, the magic must be as calm as lake's water. It is bright and light, positive and welcoming. As long as you focus on your intent, the injured person shall be healed."

"Is it really that simple? No funny words or a dead Latin language?" she asks.

I raise a brow in contest. "Come on, Savi, you should know by now that Latin is nothing but Hollywood's way of making witches seem more... mystical."

"Yeah because witches need a lot of help in the mystical department," Savi says sarcastically.

"Focus," I tell her. "Close your eyes and breathe. Think about what it is you want to do to me. Well, saying that aloud makes me more nervous."

Savi slaps my hand. "Oh shut up and let me focus."

I relax at the hint of her smile.

The cabin is silent as Savi tries to heal me. In truth, I don't expect much, not from a novice. But the moment I stop talking, I sense the growing warmth beneath her palms and catch the glow that comes from her skin.

Every breath I take is slow and loud. All I can focus on is Savi. It is not the first time I've ever been healed before, but this is a completely different experience. I close my eyes and feel her silver light penetrate me. Like reaching, caring hands, it courses through my body, looking and fixing all the injuries it passes. Her presence finds Abraxon. Like a wondering dog, I sense her regard him.

Hello, Savi.

We haven't spoken about the demon Mother and her coven completed the possession ritual in the forest. Perhaps this is a conversation we need to have when I am healed and we are not under threat from Elder Jane.

"Better?" Savi asks, her face screaming in her own disbelief in herself.

"More than better, Savi. You did it on your first try!" I tell her, standing and stretching out my arms. All the cuts and gashes have disappeared, hardly leaving behind a scar. My muscles no longer ache, and my head is filled with clarity once again.

Savi rocks back on her feet and considers her words before speaking. "That felt..."

"Euphoric?" I ask.

"That's an understatement."

"Good magic has that effect. It is the darker powers that leave you feeling drained and... not yourself," I reply.

I can see the flash behind her eyes. She wants to ask me about the demon, but this isn't the time and place. I'm thankful, because I don't want to talk about Abraxon in front of Will.

"I think I need to lie down after that," Savi says, looking at me and Chad. "Do you mind if you give me a moment?"

Her eyes flicker to Will. I catch her hint.

"Sure, come on, Chad. I have a grimoire to conjure if Savi and I are ever going to throw up protection charms around this camp."

“What about—” Chad begins, eyes pinned to Will.

“I said come on!”

Taking him by the hand, I practically pull Chad from the cabin, leaving Savi alone to deal with Will.

Conjuring something without flame is not impossible, but it sure is hard. No matter how much fire Abraxon lends me, Father’s grimoire will not listen to my calls.

“It’s as if it doesn’t exist,” I tell Chad, focusing my energy on the circle of orange flames around me. “I’m calling it, but nothing... is... happening.”

I sag back onto my heels, exhausted from trying. With a wave of my hand, the circle of fire dies out, not a single slither of smoke left in its wake.

“Then we go back and personally collect it,” Chad suggests.

“If Elder Jane is really searching for us after what we did, I have no doubt that she will have some witches stationed at my home.”

Just saying that aloud causes my stomach to jolt. Will they see Father if they went snooping? I did leave the door open for him.

“Can you create a protection spell around the camp without it?” Chad takes my hands and holds them close.

With my thumb, I run circles around his skin to calm myself. “I can, but they will not nearly be as powerful as they would be if they were coming from Father’s book.”

“All we can do is keep trying then...”

We stop talking and turn to the cabin. Perhaps it is the lack of the roaring fire, but suddenly, we can hear clearly. We listen as Savi and Will talk inside the cabin.

Chad presses his finger to my lips to keep me quiet.

First, we string sounds and words together. At least, that’s what I have to do. Chad can listen without any problems. He relays what he hears, “Hunters invading town. Hillcrest will be under attack. They want Savi and much more. Revenge on the humans killed. A war is coming...”

I hold my breath after everything Chad says. Even after he finished speaking, I find it hard to conjure my own voice again.

“This is bad,” Chad says, solidifying my own thoughts.

We don’t care if they still want privacy. Chad and I both stand from the dewy grass beyond the cabin and push through the front door.

“If what Will said is true, I am going to need your help again,” I tell Savi. “We have a camp to protect.”

Chapter Fifteen

Savi

I'm alone with Will, and my skin feels like it's on fire. Something about finally connecting with the darkness inside of me has set me alight. Because I've been wrong this whole time. The thing inside of me was never really darkness. It only felt that way because it wasn't truly *me*. But now that I've connected with it, allowing it to mingle with my own essence in new ways, I see it for what it really is.

It's George.

It's light and pure and earthy and everything that's magical about my best friend.

It's his missing piece.

I sit on a cot and sink my head into the palms of my hands. I want nothing more than to run away and leave behind our problems. But I know my friends and the wolves would not follow, and for some reason, I can't imagine leaving them all behind.

George misread my eyes when I asked for space. I want to be alone, but I'm not. I glance up and meet Will's gaze. He eyes me cautiously from the other side of the room, and I know he's assessing how he can possibly continue the relationship we've formed. I'm not like what he expected, because I'm sure he never thought he'd encounter a... tribrid. Tribrid? Is that what I am? And what does that mean? I still *feel* like the vampire I was born to be, yet I also feel the call of the moon. And now, I feel the earth's magic that flows through everything and everyone.

Will crosses his arms over his chest, and I can't help but notice how the muscles in his arms bulge. His shirt strains to contain his frustration. He exhales slowly as his gaze swipes up and down my small frame, lingering a

little too long on some parts. I know he sees me as a girl. My vampire camouflage allows me to blend in among humans or even hunters. But now he knows I'm not *just a girl*.

"So you're a witch as well?" Will asks.

His skin is so rich and dark and smooth. I'm suddenly overwhelmed by the urge to touch him. But I won't. I can't. He knows as well as I do that this would never work. We come from different worlds—four to be exact. There's the world of the hunters and then the vampires, the wolves, the witches... Every time I think about what I am, everything we've learned, my head aches.

"I am," I say plainly.

"Did you know? This whole time, I mean."

I consider his question. Did I know? Not definitively, no. But on some level, I think I did. I knew something lurked within me, and at times, when it would speak to me, it *sounded* like George. It even *felt* like him on occasion.

"I suppose I didn't until earlier today, when the hunter suddenly couldn't see us even though he was just feet away."

"Are you the only one?" he asks.

I shrug. "Honestly, I don't know. George's bloodline is strong. Magic is innately powerful, but strength is inherited. I suppose there could be other witches out there who can call upon the same dark magic George conjured to save my life."

"So you were born a vampire and then bitten by a wolf?"

I nod. "The bite is deadly."

"George used magic, which inadvertently turned you into... *this*."

"Yes," I say softly.

"There's only one thing I don't understand," he says, dropping his arms so they dangle at his sides.

"Hm?" I ask as he slowly walks toward me and sits on the cot at my side. The mattress sinks lower as it struggles to hold both our weight on a bed meant for just one.

"Why don't I hate you?" he asks.

"Because I'm not the bad guy..."

He's close, too close. I inhale the breath he's just exhaled. The bare skin of my arm brushes against his own, sending electric shocks straight to my heart, which is hammering so hard I'm certain it's going to break free from

my chest and run for the hills, just like my mind wanted to do only minutes ago. I stare into his eyes until I can't take it any longer, and then I look away. I bounce the ball of my foot on the ground and scratch my palms as I wait for him to do *something*, anything at all. I hate this. I hate the way he makes me feel. But most importantly, I *hate* that he's a hunter.

"I'm going to tell you something, and you're not going to like it," he says.

I close my eyes and exhale slowly. That's not *exactly* what I had in mind when I internally begged him to say something already. I think the last thing I need right now is more bad news.

"Why?" I ask.

"Because you've saved my neck more than once, even after our debts to each other had been repaid."

I shake my head. "No, I mean, *why* won't I like it?"

He clears his throat. "The hunters came for you, yes, but that's not all. They're invading Hillcrest with the intent to attack."

The room falls silent as I try to process his words. "They didn't come for me?"

"They came for you. As retribution for the lives lost during your escape, they want you, but they want this town, too."

"What? What does that even mean?"

"This town was built for supernaturals, Savi. They know that, and war is coming."

Before I can even respond to the knowledge that the hunters plan to kill every supernatural in Hillcrest, Chad and George barge into the room, not bothering to close the door behind them. I didn't consider that they might be eavesdropping on my very private conversation with the hunter they despise. Just another stupid mistake to add to my overflowing list of mess-ups. Although, in this case, they've saved me the time it would have taken to clue them into a dangerous situation.

"If what Will said is true, then I am going to need your help again," George says. "We have a camp to protect."

"You mean, you want *me* to help with the boundary spell?" I ask. I don't hide my shock. Sure, I helped with a basic healing spell, but invoking the magic needed to protect an *entire* community sounds like a hefty job for this fledgling.

"You *can* do this, Savi. Just trust yourself and trust your magic."

“George... What if I mess up?” I whisper. I can’t be the reason the wolves are slaughtered. “If my magic fails, *everyone dies*.”

“I’ll be with you every step of the way. We’re stronger together, Savi. I know we can do this.”

“There isn’t enough time for you to teach me,” I say.

“I don’t need to teach you *everything* all at once. One thing at a time. Today, we learned about connecting, healing, and protection spells. Tomorrow, we’ll learn something else.” He smiles, and I can’t help but feel a sliver of hope ignite within me.

“You’re strong enough to do this, Savi,” Chad agrees. “We all see it. It’s time you do too.”

He’s right. They’re all right. I’m arguably the most powerful creature in existence, and I’m worried about failing? I should be excited to tap into the magic George left within me, because control over all three parts of myself will only make me a more formidable opponent. If I gain enough control, I can protect my friends, and I can finally put to rest this ridiculous ripple effect of bad decisions.

Before I can ask what George needs from me, his phone rings. The sound echoes around the quiet room, bouncing off the walls. The high-pitched jingles match my newfound cheery mood. That is, until Chad glances at the screen and what little color he has in his vampiric skin drains, revealing the true fear that lies beneath his usual façade.

Chapter Sixteen

George

I don't recognize the number. Not as it flashes its black digits across my screen.

"Who is it?" Chad asks from beside me.

"No clue," I tell him, prepared to pocket it. "I should—"

"Answer it, George, it could be important."

"Of course, sorry. Perhaps it's Elder Jane calling me to chase me down. She'll keep me on the phone for sixty seconds so she can track me." I roll my eyes, but there is something serious in Chad's stare that causes me to pause. "You know who it is, don't you?"

He doesn't bother to cover it up. "Unfortunately, I do. Answer."

Before it stops ringing, I quickly accept the call and press the cold plastic of the phone to my ear.

"Master Alcott, I was about to think you were ignoring me," a soft yet deadly voice regards me. "I thank the lucky stars you decided to pick up."

The supreme. I know the curl of her purring voice. Even though I've only seen her once.

"Supreme." I keep my voice as neutral as possible. Could she hear the chatter of wolves in the background? Would she know where we are hiding and hand us over to the witches in order to cash in another favor later on?

"Not even a hello, a how are you?" she asks. I can almost imagine her sliced smile as she speaks.

"What can I do for you?" I ask as politely as possible.

"Straight to the point, just like your father."

I almost choke as she mentions him.

“I need you to come to me this very moment.”

“Why?” I say, widening my eyes for Chad to know this is serious, though I’m sure all the vampires in this room are eavesdropping without any issues.

“Not that I need to give you a reason, but we have a... well, a rather large issue at hand, and I need your assistance. Of course, I am calling upon the favor you owe me, so I expect you are not going to question me again.” Is that a twang of stress that scratched beneath her forced calm tone?

Savi is breathless from concentration, her eyes narrowed on me. She’s listening to what the supreme is saying on the other end of the call.

“Why?” I ask again.

The supreme releases an annoyed breath. “George, we are under attack. I have information that suggests a hoard of supernatural hunters are in Hillcrest, so you will come here and help me protect my kind. That is what you owe me. Now, come.”

“But...” I look at my friends. How could I leave them? Savi reaches for Will without looking at him, as if her touch will protect him. Even Chad snakes an arm around my back. Vampires are so clingy sometimes.

“Now, Master Alcott. I mean it.”

The line is cut off. I lower the phone slowly. Will told us about a possible war, but I didn’t expect it to come so quickly.

“I can’t leave you,” I say aloud. “Not if the hunters are already here...”

“If you refuse her, George, she’ll make you pay in ways you can’t even fathom,” Chad tells me. “Don’t worry about us. We’ll be protected here.”

“You sound like you are trying to get rid of me.” I choke out a panicked laugh.

“Not at all!” Chad almost shouts with urgency. “But you are in more danger staying away from the supreme.”

“Savi?” My hands are already shaking.

She smiles softly and whispers, “We will be fine. The wolves will protect us, and Will, Chad, and I can handle any army, right?” She winks playfully, but her face reflects that she doesn’t trust her own words. I appreciate her attempt to try to calm me, but I can see through her façade.

Listen to them. I am always with you. We can handle the supreme should she attack us.

"I need to go home first," I tell them.

Savi calls out the name of a wolf she spoke with when we arrived. He rushes across the clearing toward me, chest puffed and chin raised high.

"Avel will take you to the border of the forest. That will give you enough time to go home before the supreme begins to wonder where you are." Savi doesn't even ask her friend before commanding him to do this.

"Are you sure? You don't mind?" I ask Avel.

With his eyes on Savi, he says, "If this is what you need..." His skin rips, giving way to fur beneath. In seconds, he is on all fours, jaws ajar and yellowed eyes locked on mine.

"Climb on," Savi tells me. She's by my side now, a hand on my back, urging me to get on the back of Avel, a werewolf. This feels all sorts of wrong, but what choice do I have? There's no quicker way than on a werewolf's back.

"Keep everyone in the boundaries of camp, and try your hand at your own makeshift protection spell. Believe in yourself. That's all it takes. The moment I can, I'll return, okay?"

Savi presses her forehead into mine as I latch onto the wolf's back. "Stop worrying. We will be fine and so will you. The supreme will not put you in harm's way. You're too important for that." She winks.

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?" I ask.

"Why? Did it not work?"

I don't get to answer her sarcastic reply because Chad comes to me. His large, cold hands take my face, and he pushes his lips to mine. For that moment, I am lost in his kiss. It's so warm even though the rest of him is frozen.

The wolf I sit on makes a throaty noise to remind us of the moving world, but I ignore him, pulling my Chad in closer. Only when we both need to take a breath do we break apart.

"George, don't be long."

"I will try," I whisper back to him.

I can sense his desire to say something else, but it never comes out. Suddenly, the winds roar in my ears as Avel pounces away from my friends.

I can't work out if the tears that stream down my cheeks are because of the force we run at or if it's the strange sense of loss I feel as I leave my

friends behind in the darkness of uncertainty.

As I rush through Hillcrest toward my home, I'm thankful for the setting sun and darkening skies. There is no sign of an attack, nor is there sign of life from other supernaturals.

If an attack is truly coming, the witches will be too occupied protecting themselves to look for us. Abraxon fills my mind, and I am thankful for his company.

How do we fight the unknown? I ask him.

Without reluctance.

Good to know. I tap my forehead.

Avel leaves me at the very edge of the forest. I hop off his back and turn to thank him, but he's already running away. I shrug it off and run as quickly as I can the rest of the way to my house.

Just as I left it, my home is silent and empty. I rush up the stairs to Father's study. As I enter the room, I slam the door shut behind me.

"Father, the hunters are coming to attack. I am... Father?"

The room is empty. Father's phantom form does not appear to me even as I call for him. My teeth chatter incessantly, because the air is freezing.

"Father?"

Still nothing. No response. Has he left me? Is he okay?

Yes, Abraxon says. *I do not sense him either.*

My heart sinks into the pit of my stomach. My legs turn to jelly, and my eyes fill with tears. "He wouldn't just leave without saying goodbye."

Perhaps he found a way to pass on. He has been a prisoner for so long. He may have just given into the elation of finally being free.

I shake my head vigorously. "No, he can't do this to me. I helped him, and he couldn't even say goodbye?"

Abraxon is silent. He offers no apology or calming words. I am left to talk to myself. I want to scream with anger. Cry with boiling sadness. It's not like I didn't know this was coming. But so soon? I thought I would have time to come to terms with being alone before he left for good.

"It's me," I call out again. "It's Georgie!"

Nothing. Not even his nickname for me conjures him out of the shadows.

"Georgie..." I say again, my throat dry and head thumping with a sudden pain. "It's me."

Silence is my enemy. I hate it. Never do I want to be left in this silence again. This house could burn for all I care. I curse this home. I hate it!

I will never leave you.

Abraxon causes a reprieve in my overwhelming sadness. Have I gotten that desperate that I rely on a demon for company?

I exit the room, slamming the door closed behind me for a final time.

“The book is missing,” I say aloud.

I thought as much.

“He couldn’t even leave me with that as a reminder?” My sorrow is quickly morphing into anger. “I am not worth even that?”

I’m sure there’s a reason your father dealt with it.

“I suppose I will never know!” I shout, banging my feet down the stairs and throwing an angered hand for the front door. My intense emotion fuels the wind, and I command it. The door opens fast, slamming into the wall and smashing the stained glass all across the carpet. I step over it, unbothered.

Careful, George. We need our energy for the fight.

I pause, taking in the evening air and looking over my shoulder at my house for what feels like the last time.

“Believe me, Abraxon. I have enough energy to fuel me. I will show the hunters just what a hurricane really is.”

Chapter Seventeen

Savi

Ever since George left to answer Ophelia's call, I've been racking my brain trying to figure out how I can release him from the supreme's clutches. There's nothing I want more than to relieve him of his debt to her, but now, it's probably too late. He's already gone.

I sink to my bottom, resting on the many rows of seating that surround the centralized fire pit. I must admit, I never expected the wolves' sanctuary to be so... homey. The rows of identical wood cabins remind me of the many streets that form Hillcrest. Although the houses look different, most are the same old Victorian style. The main difference is the elaborate design. The homes in Hillcrest are several stories high with intricate detail, whereas the cabins here are small, basic. I suppose that's because vampires and witches spend much of their lives indoors, whereas wolves spend as much time running under the moon as they possibly can.

I scan the area. My newfound allies are busy preparing for the winter. They're harvesting crops for food when they're not in their beast forms. I smile as some make eye contact with me, and a slow, comforting tingle swoops its way through me when I see they smile back. It will never not be weird that I'm one of them now. One of them yet different at the same time.

It's interesting that some of the wolves are preparing for winter rather than helping to protect us from impending doom. The wolves live a very different life than I ever imagined. Sure, most are preparing for war, but the few who opt to prepare for the long winter ahead give me more hope than the others.

The small clearing I'm sitting in is nestled between a half-moon shaped row of cabins. There aren't many, so I assume most share their resting place. The fire pit is at the heart of the small clearing, but only I sit at the

seating that surrounds it. Everyone else is bustling, preparing for what's to come—whether that be winter or war.

Chad is keeping his eyes on Will, who has been walking the border of the compound ever since George left. I know he fears he'll be tracked here, and honestly, I do too. But I've resolved that we can't stop what's to come. It's odd, but ever since I tapped into my magic, a sense of peace has settled over me. I only wish I could extend the feeling to everyone else. We cannot stop what's to come. We can only hope for the best.

My gaze lands on my brother, who is sulking closely behind Will, who has just completed his hundredth round of border patrol.

"Honestly, guys," I shout. I shake my head when their gazes land on me. "Maybe we should spend this time relaxing?"

In Chad's eyes, I see his attempt to argue. He silently conveys to me that he will go wherever Will goes, and that's that. I shouldn't protest any further.

I shrug and return my sights on my surroundings. Wolfsbane Forest is breathtaking this time of year. We're nearing the end of autumn, and soon, the snow will come. I don't particularly like the cold, but I know that's because it keeps away many tourists. Sure, Hillcrest is beautiful in the snow. The glittery flakes seem to cast the small town alight with glee. But with each winter, fewer and fewer tourists venture into the woods. And that hindered my preferred lifestyle. Of course, I know I can't kill anymore—not with my mistakes splashed across news headlines.

The forest is glowing with shades of amber, crimson, and gold. I truly believe there isn't a more beautiful place on earth than this little town we're fortunate enough to call home. It saddens me that we may have to leave this place if the war against the hunters turns... sour.

Will plops down beside me, and it shakes me to think I've let my guard down around him so much I didn't even realize he was approaching me. I was too busy thinking about losing my homestead. Perhaps Chad is right to be weary of Will. At least one of us is on his A-game.

I listen for Chad, and he promptly sits directly behind us, like a true big brother. I groan and toss a look of annoyance over my shoulder at him. He offers a wide smile, one that displays too many of his pearly white teeth. If he wasn't my brother, I'd think he was a sociopath who's desperately trying to look normal (and failing *miserably* at the feat).

Will shifts beside me and eyes Chad, who quickly turns his sketchy grin into a look of absolutely terror. He narrows his eyes, a grimace twisting his beautiful features into one of disgust.

“For Goddess sake, Chad,” I say, defeated. I know he won’t leave us alone, not without George here to distract him. Suddenly, a thought occurs to me. Perhaps he’s playing the role of an overprotective brother *because* George is gone, and Chad can do nothing to stop or protect him. My brother has always adored his role of being the eldest child, and when our parents died, he made it his mission in life to be a better role model. I suppose that’s around the time he broke off his taboo relationship with George. With my parents gone, he took on the burden of raising me. Of course, I was nearly an adult and could raise myself, but I did covet the times spent with him.

“You know an awful lot about me, Will, and I have yet to learn more about you,” I say, trying to ignore the death-glare daggers on our backs. Of course, I know Chad is directing them at Will, not me, but we’re so close our thighs nearly brush. I’m certain the glares are hitting me too, even if by mistake.

He shrugs, and I know this to be a game of nonchalance.

“Tell me about the hunters then,” I urge. After all, if he’s not going to tell me about *him*, he may as well tell me about *them*.

“It wasn’t supposed to be like this,” he whispers. I wait for him to continue, but his gaze is glued to the sight before him. I’ve seen this very look on other faces before. His eyes are focused on the woods that surround us, but his mind is elsewhere. I’m sure this is exactly what I look like when I succumb to the memories hidden in each drop of blood I drink.

“What was it supposed to be like then?” I ask. I turn toward him, and our knees touch. A surge of electricity rushes through me, and I gasp. The noise that escapes my lips is soft yet raw with hunger. Will’s gaze finds mine, and I wonder if he felt it too. Quickly, I jerk my leg back and offer a few inches of space between us.

“My father leads an army by enforcing a mission to rid the world of evil, but he’s a hypocrite. By doing this, he kills innocents. I saw children in Hillcrest, and I know he’ll kill them too if he senses even the subtlest trace of magic in them.”

I swallow the lump in my throat. Now is probably not the right time to tell him that the first chance I get, I will kill his father.

“He believes all supernaturals are evil, but...” Will shakes his head, his gaze pinned on the ground. “I’m not so sure anymore.”

“No one—not even supernaturals—is *born* evil. It’s the choices we make that determine our legacy. I’m sorry this is hard for you, and it’s an awful situation, but soon, there will come a time when you must choose your path. Will you follow in your father’s footsteps or will you carve your own destiny?”

Will is quiet for a long time as he considers my words, and I don’t rush him, for I’m in a similar situation. The moment I lost my parents, I derailed. I submitted to the darkest desires every vampire faces, and my indulgence cost many their lives. I’m not too stubborn to admit I’m mainly the reason we’re in this mess in the first place. If I lose even a single loved one to the hunters... I don’t know what I’ll do. I don’t know what darkness I’ll inhabit in the name of vengeance, but I’m certain it will be rash and bloody and raw.

“How do we truly know if someone is evil?” he asks.

“By judging their actions, not by our assumptions,” I say confidently.

“That would mean waiting until it’s too late. Judging later means they’ve already committed an evil act.”

“It does,” I say, nodding. “But we haven’t the magic to foresee devastation before it occurs. I suppose we should be grateful for that. We don’t have to make assumptions here. We’ve seen this before, during the witch trials. On the basis of simply *believing* certain people were witches, the accused were forced to endure horrific tests. Those who weren’t immediately hung or burned at the stake were offered to prove their innocence. Stones were tied to their feet, and they were dropped into the deepest depths of the sea. If they freed themselves, they were witches and burned for their crimes. If they could not free themselves, they were human, but sadly, they drowned. Tell me, Will, who is the monster in these situations? Is it the men who tortured these people for being labeled as different? Or is it the women who died for fear-driven propaganda?”

“Can it really be that simple?” he asks.

“Sometimes, it can be. Thankfully, we’re in a time when it truly is *that simple*. Look around you. You’re surrounded by a pack of wolves. Two born-vampires are within an arm’s reach of your throat. A witch, who’s now run off to repay the promise he was forced to make in order to free me from

your people's grasp, has more power than you can imagine and he uses that magic to keep *us* safe. We're not your enemy, Will."

"These are the same creatures who killed dozens of humans during the full moon. Their leader, who watches us even now, threatened to kill me not that long ago. Your brother watches me with disdain, and I can see, if only you'd let him, he would gladly end my life. How can you say you're *not* my enemy?" he counters.

I exhale slowly. "You're right. The wolves made a regretful decision that led them too close to humans during their most savage of moments. The alpha should have known better. He should have kept them away, and those humans should be alive today. But it's in their nature to be predators, and I can't fault them for what they did. But I can praise them for the many other moons they succumbed to and did not kill, for that takes more strength than you could ever hope to experience."

"You're no different, I suppose," he says, meeting my gaze. His eyes are tired, his skin ashen, and I wonder how long it's been since he's had a good meal and a good night's rest.

"I'm not," I say slowly. "I've allowed myself to become the very monster that your people hunt, but believe me when I say that Hillcrest is *not* full of beasts. We're... gentle monsters." I chuckle.

"Your treaty really works?" he asks.

I nod. "It does. Sometimes, mistakes are made, and there is a hefty cost. But everyone, even humans and hunters, make mistakes. It's what we do afterwards that defines us."

"My mother was killed in front of me by a vampire," he whispers. He speaks so softly I wonder if he even spoke at all.

"I'm sorry, Will. Really, I am."

"Do you ever wonder about the families of the people you've killed?" he asks.

I clench my jaw shut and close my eyes before speaking. I keep them closed as I answer his question. "They haunt me every day."

He doesn't respond right away. I feel him inch closer to me. His legs brush against mine before his hand is placed firmly on my back. He rubs away the pain that engulfs me as I relive every horrible kill. Finally, after the reel of faces has looped in my mind ten times over, I open my eyes, turn my head, and find him only a breath away.

"Your regret is what makes you worthy of saving," he whispers.

His gaze lands on my lips, and I follow suit. His breath is hot on my skin, and I breathe each of his exhales. His musky scent smells like the earth and the sea. His hand at my back softens, and I lean into him. The world around us silences. No longer are we surrounded by wolves or my brother, who I'm sure is groaning miserably at the sight of his baby sister.

There is only Will and me and the moment our lips brush.

I close my eyes and open my mouth to him. He tastes like magic and honey. I reach around and tangle my fingers in the short, tight curls of his afro. I tug gently on the ends, urging him to deepen his kiss, to open his mouth further to me, and he obliges. The moment his tongue swipes mine, the silence of the world is broken by the loud bangs and screams that pierce such a beautifully perfect moment.

We pull away, breathless, and my senses slowly return.

Shouting.

Gunshots.

I blink, my vision blurry, as I turn away from Will.

Hunters.

I see them as they approach, weapons drawn, eyes on us. They've witnessed our intimate exchange, and I know there is no way this beautiful moment won't end in bloodshed.

Chapter Eighteen

George

I make my way to the only place I've ever seen the supreme: the vampire club. I'm assuming she's there, waiting for me.

Night blankets Hillcrest. It's so dark even the gleaming stars seem to hide behind the night veil. Street lamps create orange pools across the cobbled side streets and a harsh wind rushes down the narrow lanes, kissing my neck and leaving my skin stinging. Perhaps I am underdressed for the fight I am walking into. But then again, the mixture of anger and sadness within me seems to warm my limbs and ready them for anything.

I really need a release of these retched emotions.

To battle the cold, I conjure fire to dance across my hands. The moment the orange and red tongues spring to life, I feel its comfort spread all across me.

Careful, you might be seen.

I snort. "I welcome anyone who wants to stop me, Abraxon. I am not scared."

Up ahead, I see the club. From the outside, it looks unused and quiet. But as I step closer, the front door swings open to the familiar face of the supreme's bodyguard. Stepping aside to let me enter, he doesn't say anything to me. As a warning, I keep the flames dancing across my hands.

As the door clicks shut and the scrap of the lock is fixed into place, I look up and notice the many differences compared to the last time I visited. Bright and florescent, all the lights are on. There are no windows. The club is no more than an oversized prison room that doesn't allow anyone to look in or out. The only window I remember is the one in the supreme's office. Maybe that's how she saw me coming just before sending her guard to let me in.

Countless vampires stand around, hardly a space between one another. Tables and chairs have been removed, allowing more room for the ungodly number of creatures to stand around. And what makes it worse is every crimson eye is on me.

I see the trepidation, the distrust in many glares. I don't blame them. I walked into their sanctuary with fire at my fingertips and a storm of emotions in my heart.

Abraxon laughs. *Imagine how they would react if they knew about me.*

"Master Alcott." The supreme's voice slices across the hushed whispers of the vampires. It sounds as if she comes from nowhere and everywhere at the same time. "How glad I am that you decided to join us."

I will the wind to carry my voice higher and louder, "Tell me what I need to do so I can leave."

The sea of bodies separates, allowing the supreme to stroll across the floor toward me.

Her hair, the shiny color of midnight, is up, revealing her delicate milky neck. Her dress-suit is replaced by a more casual pair of trousers, brown boots, and a hugging, long-sleeved black top.

"I would offer you a drink, but we have far too much to do."

She extends a hand, nails painted deep ruby red, and waits for me to take it. I do, only letting go of the flames the moment before I touch her. It is impossible not to notice the flicker of panic that creases the side of her eyes. We shake hands.

"I trust that once I am done here, my debt is paid in full," I say.

The supreme drops my hand and spins on her heel. "Why don't we take this conversation into my office. I wouldn't want anyone to listen in."

I want to object and tell her that the vampires will hear whatever we say no matter where we go, but for some reason, Abraxon stunts my voice. All I am left to do is follow her through the club, down the path made by vampires and up the floating stairs to her office.

Looking over the rail at this height, I notice just how many vampires are in the club. I thought there was a lot when I was down there with them, but up here, I am surprised yet again.

"Save for a few, every vampire in Hillcrest stands below you," the supreme says from her doorway before ushering me inside. "I was serious when I said I need your help to protect them."

I follow her in. "I walked through town, and I didn't see a single hunter. Forgive me, but the threat you say is coming seems to be nonexistent."

"Oh, they will come," another voice says from behind me.

I didn't notice the third body in the room when I first entered the supreme's office. I spin around as the speaker closes the door behind me. I recognize her instantly. Unlike the movies, it doesn't take minutes of thinking to put her face to a place. I see her now as I had before, strapped to the chair in Mother's basement. I remember her face at the door as I helped her escape, using the darkness to restrain Mother.

"Kim, meet Master Alcott... Again."

Kim crosses her arms over her chest and leans on a leg. Her features are full of disdain for me. Having her so close to the supreme, I can see just how similar they both are. Same dark hair, sharp chins, and high cheek bones.

"You see, George, Kim has been missing for several days, and when she finally turned up at my club and revealed to me what happened, well, I must say I am extremely surprised. Care to tell me what transpired?"

I can't take my eyes off her. "Kim, I am so sorry for what she did to you. You should never have been taken by her."

Kim is silent. I plea with my eyes, but she refuses to speak.

"You freed her from your mother's wrath," the supreme says. "I'm interested as to why she took Kim in the first place."

"I had no hand in that decision," I say quickly.

"But you do have a hand in other vampires your family has taken. Isn't that true?"

Her question stumps me. I choke on my reply.

She is baiting you.

"As I said, I had nothing to do with it or any others."

The supreme leans against her desk, crossing her ankles. "And your magic, pray tell, what was the dark shadow you seemed to control during Kim's escape? Dark magic? What Kim told me seems... strange."

"It was alive," Kim says. "I know that much."

"I do not need to answer any of this. I am here to help protect the vampires, and that is it. My debt is paid."

"Yes," the supreme purrs. "Your debt is paid, but your mother's is owed to me. Once you successfully keep my vampires alive, you will bring

me to your mother. I shall make sure that a different debt is paid... in full."

Dead. Dead. Dead. That single word vibrates around my skull, overwhelming me. How do I tell them Mother is dead without revealing everything else that has happened?

Savi. The dark coven. Abraxon. Me. I can't offer the supreme that much leverage.

The supreme opens her mouth to say something else as I battle my inner thoughts, but she falters. Her head snaps around to her window.

"They have arrived," she says.

I follow her gaze and take steps closer to the window. Finally, I share in what she sees. A horde of bodies walk through the street beyond the club. Vans follow, only stopping to release a dozen or so more hunters into the street.

At the head of the group all is a man. He drags a baseball bat along the ground. Even from this distance, I can see it is chipped and stained brown from old blood. His followers stay close to his back, each carrying weapons in their rugged, scarred hands.

"There are too many of them." The supreme's voice is thick with tension. "What are they doing?"

She points to a small group of hunters who run into a closed shop. After kicking down the door, they disappear inside for barely a moment before dragging out three others by the hair.

Witches, Abraxon says, confirming what I already thought.

"Looks like they have found their first prey," the supreme says.

I can't focus on her words, not when three of my own kind are thrown onto the ground before the horde who proceed to jab their gun muzzles into their huddled-up bodies. The young one screams, a blood curdling sound that ignites my blood.

My feet move for the door, but the supreme's sharp voice stops me, "You are not leaving this place."

"And you are going to stop me?" I say, eyes filled with burning annoyance.

In a blink, the supreme has moved with a speed unmatched by any other vampire I've seen. She blocks the door. "That is precisely what I am going to do."

I sense the power building in my veins. One breath and I could move her out of my way, but I have enough sense to listen.

Another voice sounds out from the street beyond. We all rush back to the window to see what's going on. Elder Jane stands at the other end of the street, facing off the horde alone. Nightly wind pulls at her gray hair, billowing her shawl around her strong frame. Black shadows smoke off her skin, teasing the surrounding night. She showcases her power to the many who stand before her.

That is not her power, George. Abraxon fills my eyes with her aura, allowing me to see more into the street beyond than I could before. All at once, I notice the true difference of Elder Jane. Something I could not see before.

Her skin literally melts off in waves of black smoke. It's as if she has stepped clean out of a raging fire. Even her eyes are full of dark light.

"What is happening to her?" I ask Abraxon.

"To whom?" the supreme interjects, one brow raised above her ruby eyes.

I snap my mouth closed, unable to find a response to her. Had I really spoken aloud rather than sharing it silently with my demon?

Careful, George.

"I need to help her," I say.

"No."

"But—"

"Master Alcott, the elder of your kind is strong enough to fend for herself. Or she's simply stupid enough to put herself in the direct path of the hunters. She should be with her own kind, protecting them as I am with mine."

I want to scream my frustration.

Both the leader of the hunters and Elder Jane are shouting at one another from a distance, but I cannot hear from inside. From the shiver of Kim's ears, I am sure the vampires are having no issues hearing their argument.

Out the corner of my eye, I see another huddle of hunters move for the club. It is followed by shouts from downstairs. Harsh hands push at my back.

"Go!" the supreme screams, eyes wide. "Protect them."

It's time to meet them.

"If harm befalls any of my kind, I will hold you accountable," the supreme threatens.

I turn at the top of the stairs, flanked by the two bodyguards, as the supreme and Kim remain behind in the office. The door is slammed shut, leaving me to the watching eyes of the many vampires below.

“You ready?” I ask Abraxon aloud, shivering as his cold reach wraps around me.

Instead of replying, the sudden explosion of energy lights me up from the inside, and the darkness of the club shivers.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” I say.

The doors to the club bang three times before flying off the hinges. hunters run in, stake like daggers and guns held high. The vampires hiss in a large chorus, bending on knees to prepare for battle. And I, with a power that is fresh and strong, throw myself over the banister of the stairs and call upon the wind to keep me afloat as I rain shards of dark shadow down on the attackers.

Chapter Nineteen

Savi

Werewolves transition all around me, their skin tearing to allow for the plush fur coat that's always hidden beneath. Mothers carrying infants run toward the safety of the woods. Will screams for his comrades to cease fire, but they ignore his order.

Chad's no longer sitting behind us, silently eavesdropping during our intimate moment. Now, his hand is wrapped tightly around my arm, and he shouts for me to run. I could. In the blink of an eye, Chad and I could disappear, but that would mean leaving the wolves to fight our battle. Somehow, the hunters have tracked us here, and I know they won't leave until they've captured me. I suspect Will is going to be labeled a traitor after what they saw. Why else would the hunters stare at him with such disdain?

He storms toward them, shouting something incoherent. The rapid-fire bullets have ceased as weapons reload. The wolves shift and run toward their enemy. Only seconds pass before Will reaches his comrades. They narrow their gazes and spit at his feet as he approaches.

I recall his memory from when I drank his blood. Thankfully, I drank from many sources that day. The more I drank, the less I could distinguish actual memories from the puddled mess within my mind. I only had to live through select moments of Will's past. One included a training day. He wanted so desperately to make friends, but he was only viewed as the heir to leadership. No one took him seriously. Watching him kiss me was a betrayal that will only amplify their hatred.

I shake my head. Silently, I tell my brother I can't leave him, and I see his disappointment. I want to tell him that I would understand if he left

without me, but I know he'd refuse. He left me once in the midst of howling wolves, and I know he would die before doing it again.

Reluctantly, he releases my arm, and together, we charge our attackers. There's no time to think, to reconsider, to convince the hunters that we aren't their enemy. I suppose even if there were time, the latter would be a lie. I absolutely am their enemy. I have planned my revenge every second of every day since my escape, and I will see it through.

We reach the hunters in seconds, wolves at our tails. Will is still arguing, telling the men to stand down. One hunter lowers his weapon, and I see relief wash across Will's face. He thinks his ally is listening, but even I know he's not. His naivety will get him killed one day.

The hunter lunges for Will, slamming him to the ground. I run toward them, and I feel the moment Will's back connects with the earth. The grass and soil respond to his abrupt smack, as if it received a lashing. It vibrates on impact. I'm not sure if it's the wolf or witch in me that connects so perfectly with the earth, but I'm grateful for the warning. I can sense each footfall, hear each rushed inhalation.

The moment Will tries to stand, the hunter brings down the muzzle of his gun and nearly smacks Will into unconsciousness. Will puts up his hands in defeat, but his former ally is not interested in his surrender. He points his weapon, and I watch as his finger slowly pulls the trigger.

My senses hasten, and a single urge to save Will drives me forward. I reach him in the few seconds it takes for bullets to rapid-fire from a chamber. I turn to bypass the assault, sparing my heart but several bullets collide with my arm. The bullet shells become fragmented bits that slice through muscle. The sensation is so strong I lose my footing and skid to the ground. The back of my head smacks against the cold, hard earth, and pain shoots through my spine.

I shriek, ignoring the pain ringing through my head from ear to ear. I rip the sleeve of my shirt to bare my wounded arm. My already pale skin turns an ashen white, my usual soft-blue veins turning black as the foreign substance liquefies within me.

Chad reaches me after sidestepping the group of hunters targeting him. He drops to my side and squeezes my arm so tightly I'm sure it will break off. He shouts something at me, and even though I can hear him, I cannot understand his words. Everything in my body is screaming at me to fear the substance spreading through me. The overwhelming desire to gnaw

off my own arm so the substance does not reach my heart becomes too great to ignore.

I hear myself shout something about being poisoned, and I don't recall the exact moment I register Chad's fangs piercing my skin. His teeth tear through my flesh, but the pain of the poison has already enveloped me.

I know he's going to suck the poison from me, risking his own life. We know nothing about this magical bullet. It is strong enough to bring a tribrid to her knees, so it may be deadly to my vampire brother.

I push Chad off of me, and he stumbles backward, colliding into Will, who's managed to somehow escape his captors. My vision clears as I blink away the tears that spill. My gaze lands on Chad. Will has him pinned down. He's shouting something about the poison coursing through my veins. Chad responds by telling him he won't let me die.

Two hunters approach from behind, readying their attack. Before my brother realizes he's in danger, they're behind him. Weapons are drawn just as hot, sticky fire shoots from my now-extended arm. I fling myself forward, lurching as I scream with the fire that escapes my grasp. The men are engulfed in the flame that was once nestled deep in my core. I call upon the fire element without any real assurance. I don't know how I controlled it well enough to direct it only at our attackers, and I don't know how to send it away.

I stand, feeling the blissful heat that sizzles over every inch of my body. My skin is warm, and I know I'm flushed. It's such an odd feeling to feel this inexplicably *warm*. Magic blossoms within me, and I feel the other elements practically ache to be tapped into. They swarm together in my core and spread through every fiber of my being.

All around me, a battle ensues. Wolves tear through flesh, easily overpowering the few hunters who dare to venture this deep into Wolfsbane Forest. I know I should cease the fire. I should return the magic back into my soul, but I cannot. Seeing the wolves endangered by these vicious beasts masquerading around like *they* are the world's saviors only fuels my anger.

I'm growing hotter by the second as I deepen my connection to the fire magic. Sweat dribbles down my forehead. I'm not sure if I'm hot because of the fire or because I'm concentrating so acutely on trying not to burn my friends.

I don't look at Will. I'm sure watching your friends burn to death isn't a pleasant sight, and I don't care to see the disgusted look in his eyes.

He'll hate me for this, I'm sure of it. It takes only seconds for the flames to claim their souls, and the hunters fall lifeless to the ground.

"Savi."

Chad's voice is a soft whisper at my ear. He doesn't need to speak the words for me to know his wishes. He pleads for me to stop, to release the magic before it consumes me entirely. He isn't part witch, so he doesn't understand. The magic has already consumed me. I am a puppet in its play, and it wants revenge.

The sharp howl of an injured wolf breaks my concentration, and the fire recedes, reentering my core, smothering itself. I feel odd without the heat at my fingertips. Though I felt its flame, it did not hurt me. Now, I feel... empty.

Snarls erupt all around me as wolves fight to take back their homestead. I scan the area, seeing that they have the upper hand, but I know this is a losing battle. We may claim victory here, but these hunters were sent by a larger army. And their leader is Will's father.

"We have to help them," I call. I don't look at Chad, but I know he will help me. I never consider meeting Will's gaze either, for I fear the anger that surely resides there.

"Are you well enough?" Chad asks, his voice laced with uncertainty.

I squeeze my hands into balled fists, my knuckles turning impossibly white. Smiling, I say, "I've never felt better."

I remember the poison that laced the bullets, and I wonder if every bullet encased such a weapon or if that bullet was meant for me alone. The fire magic burning every orifice of my body must have nuked the liquid, making it harmless. For the first time since that night, I'm grateful George cast such a powerful spell to revive me. He may have lost a piece of himself as part of the black magic used, but without his essence lingering in me, I wouldn't have been able to fight off the poison. That is, of course, assuming he couldn't have revived me another way.

I charge a group of hunters, not waiting for my brother to be reassured that I am strong enough to battle on. The moment I reach a small group, I jump into the air. The heels of my feet make contact with two jaws, and the men are flung backward. I land firmly on the ground just as wolves finish the two hunters.

Across the field, I watch as a mother with a toddler on her hip is cornered by a group of hunters. Her back is flush against one of the many

wood cabins that line the clearing. I wonder why she didn't run with others as my fear nearly chokes the life from me.

Suddenly, I'm propelled forward, giving no care to anything else around me. I hear Chad or maybe Will shout my name, but I ignore the voice. I have to help her. I have to save the baby boy clinging to her arm. His innocence will not die by their hands.

I don't see the hunter running toward me until it's too late. He's withdrawn his blade. It's long like a sword with a blade thick like a machete. It glistens when the light hits it. If angled *just right*, it could blind me. The handle is black and jeweled, and I wonder if the stones have any meaning.

My assessment of the weapon takes mere seconds—too few to halt but enough to grant me the realization that I can't turn away. I must take the brunt of the assault.

The hunter smiles. His eyes sparkle with his intent, and I swear that he's surrounded by a bright white light. Perhaps it's the blade blinding me after all. His silhouette is outlined by... feathers? Wings? I can't distinguish the shadows that flare out from his shoulders.

The moment blade meets flesh, I am pinned down by the realization that I will die here tonight. Even after everything George and I have done to protect our mistakes, I will die. Inch by inch, I feel the formidable metal. It's cold, lifeless, just like my body soon will be.

My gaze flickers to the woman and child. Wolves aid her now, and I find my lips turning upward. I smile knowing the boy will live on. He will grow up knowing of the hunters, and that knowledge will strengthen his generation. No longer will they kill supernaturals in the name of their lord.

The blade has penetrated me fully, piercing straight through my back. I jerk against the strong arms that hold me in place. The hunter's smile is hard, cold, brutal. His face is inches from my own, but I can't focus on him. All I can hear are the steady beats of my heart in my head.

He jerks his arm back, and I feel every inch of the blade slice through my core. He missed my heart, but he sliced through my spine. It's an injury I could heal from, but not before he finishes the deed.

I fall into a heap on the ground. Again, my head smacks the earth, and I feel the tingle of dying grass against my bare arm. My veins have since returned to their normal color, and as I stare at the sky, my thoughts are with

George. I wonder where he is right now, if he's okay. Is he staring at the sky while thinking of me?

The hunter grips the handle of his blade with both hands and holds it above me, angling the tip of his weapon with my widened eyes. He plans to plant the weapon firmly into my skull, effectively ending my existence. I can only blink and watch as he quickly thrusts his arms downward.

The flash of dark gray fur blurs before me. I hear the distinct yelp of metal piercing flesh followed by abrupt echoing of orchestrated howls. The night air thickens with their grief. The wolves howl, and their agony rips through me, slicing straight to my core.

I swivel my head against the compact earth and stare directly into the lifeless eyes of Zane, my werewolf alpha. His cold eyes stare back at me, his jaw open, tongue snaked out and hanging over his canines. Protruding prominently from his torso is a black jeweled handle. It contrasts against the alpha's dirty fur.

A soul-crushing scream rips its way through my chest and escapes my lips. Tears blur my vision, and I want so desperately to blink away the salty substance. But in doing so, I'll reaffirm the vision of Zane before me in my memory. Instead, I scream and howl and curse the hunters for taking him from me, from us.

I don't stop crying until a shadow figure hovers over me. The hunter who stole the alpha's life stands proudly above me. He grasps the handle of his weapon, twisting the blade for dramatic effect.

When he finally withdraws the weapon, the wolves silence their howling serenade, and the world erupts into blood and darkness.

Chapter Twenty

George

Vampires and hunters alike react to the storm of magic I rain down on the club. Spinning wind keeps my feet above the heads of them all. Some hunters look up at me, but the vampires are too focused on those who rush them.

The elements are my puppets, and I their puppet master. I choose them wisely. Fire could catch and destroy the club and everyone within it. Although that thought elates me strangely, I stay with air as a safe choice.

The hunters look no more than zombie survivors from horror movies. They wear rugged, earth-tone war clothes. Their weapons decorate every spare place on their bodies. They're not like Will.

I hardly have a moment until the first vampire goes down. Her piercing scream smashes flute glasses on the shelf next to her. A stake, made from dark wood, protrudes out through her small chest. She's fallen to the ground. Her frail hands clutch at the stake until all the color drains from her skin, and she looks like an empty shell of gray. Other vampires near her reach out and pull her toward them and away from the hunter.

Now he is all mine. Abraxon's laugh fills the club. He is now out of my prison of flesh and dancing among the dark corners of the room. The hunter looks up. Not a speck of fear fills his brown gaze as he stares at me. I take in every part of him, looking down at the boy I am about to destroy. His lips are thin and pale, his nose short and pointed. His hands are murderous, his mind hateful.

I raise a hand toward him. "Bring him to me."

Abraxon answers, the darkness becoming physical matter that separates from the walls in a shroud of pure darkness. This stops the hunters

from attacking the vampires. A clicking noise explodes around us all. All eyes are on the slithering mass of shadow that moves around the room like a black silk cloth. Abraxon drops the frozen hunter whose mask of hate now melts away, revealing the scared child beneath.

Around his waist, Abraxon constricts, lifting him off the floor until he dangles like a rag doll before me. The hunter doesn't even bother to struggle. He knows it would be wasted effort.

Others around him raise guns, but the rushing winds beyond the club race through the open door and rips them all from the inside out until there is no one left to watch.

The vampires race for the doors and lock us in once again. As a unit of one, they hold them shut before more hunters have a chance to come back in.

"You shouldn't have come here," I tell the hunter in Abraxon's grasp.

I think he is going to reply, but when the gob of spit exits his mouth and lands on my chin, I know I am wrong. I laugh, winds picking up around my feet as I stay in the air.

"Yet another mistake to add to your list," I tell him.

Abraxon does not rest. The hunters face turns pink, then garnet, then blue. His mouth splits open, a cry escaping, but he lacks the breath to scream.

Now he is mine.

Abraxon cackles with delight, strangling the boy's waist. Loud cracks of bone sound off and tickle me with pleasure. Abraxon drops him, for the angry vampires who wait beneath us are hungry. In moments, they overwhelm his helpless body and devour his blood for killing one of their own.

"George," the supreme calls out. From my height, she is close beside me. Her eyes are wide with shock, but the corners of her mouth pull up on either side, which contorts her face into one of pure desire. "Kim was right about your power."

She doesn't have to say anything else. She clearly saw it all. Abraxon slithers in the air beside me like a ghostly sheet of black material. The supreme looks to him and back to me.

"Go out there and make sure no other hunters find their way inside," she commands.

I nod, lowering the winds until my feet touch the floor.

“Good luck,” she says. “To both you and your... companion.”

Ah, thank you, Abraxon clicks aloud, shocking the supreme even more.

Commotion at the doors takes all my attention. The vampires who hold them in place struggle as a force tries to break in. The sound of gunfire lights up the night from outside. Puckered holes damage the door, giving us peepholes to the outside. The harsh smell of smoke wafts in.

“Go!” the supreme calls, pouncing from her balcony to land among her kind. “Deal with them out there, and I will deal with mine in here.”

I don’t question her. Instead, I move for the doors.

Abraxon, you need to hide, I think. I cannot have the hunters beyond nor Elder Jane seeing my demon. Enough vampires have seen him within the club walls tonight.

If you say so...

As if I took a breath of freezing winter air, I know that Abraxon is now back within me. His echoing presence has returned within my limbs.

With my hands, I signal the vampires to stand away from the doors. They do so with speed. The hunters beyond take their chance to push the doors wide, but I raise my own power in defense. Conjured witch wind builds behind me. My arms tense with power. Pushing with force toward the open door, my wind races forward until it rips both the flooring and the doors, pushing them all toward the unknowing hunters beyond. Like dominos, they fall beneath the weight of the doors. A gaping hole gives us all a view to the world beyond the club.

I take several steps forward, sensing the vampires preparing for their own fight. Into the night, I walk, magic lingering at the tips of my fingers.

Are you ready? I ask my inner demon.

Let us devour them, he answers.

Once I turn the corner to see the main street, I am directly at the back of the large group of hunters. Before they see me, I stop, pressing my back into the outer wall of the club.

“If only I was part vampire,” I whisper to Abraxon.

I am darkness, George, and as I am joined with you, that makes you one with my power. Ask for it to aid you, and it will.

“What do you mean?” How I could call upon the darkness was beyond me.

We do not have time for lessons, George. Call for the darkness as you do fire, air, or earth. Ask it, will it, command it.

Abraxon is right. I am moments away from being found from a wandering hunter. If I need to hide, I need to tap into his power just like he does with mine.

I close my eyes and raise my hands before me. It is not about *seeing* the power I control, but feeling it deep within my soul. There is no better place to command the darkness than being in it. And I am certainly in it right now.

Either Abraxon aids me or it's simpler than I thought it'd be. My hands fumble until they brush over slick ropes of darkness. In my mind's eye, I can see it clearly. With both hands, I grab on, twisting the dark rope around my arm, twice, until I am certain I have it firmly in place.

Opening my eyes, I see the world in a different light. Shadows slither and snake from buildings. They move like live beings, turning their attentions to me as I take my first step forward.

“This is...”

Beautiful, Abraxon answers for me. *You are one with my shadows now, so you can move unseen.*

As Abraxon suggests, I step forward, now an assassin of the dark, in *his* domain. Around the corner, I walk, no longer worried that I will be seen, and as I get closer, my prediction comes true. No hunter turns to see me.

On and on, I walk until the clear voice of Elder Jane can be heard. I only stop when I am almost beside her, looking on at the leader of the hunters. I spare Elder Jane a glance. She, unlike the hunters, still has the strange shadows coming from her body. Being this close, I can hear them sing. It's as if my head has been dunked beneath the ocean and I listen to its deep music. The sounds given off are a symphony that both turn my stomach and lull me into a false sense of... familiarity.

“This is your final warning,” Elder Jane calls, winds carrying her voice high. “Leave now, or the bloodshed will be on your hands.”

“Then it is not too late, for we are here for bloodshed. Hillcrest is an infested town, one that must be cleansed by the brave warriors behind me. Once we have dealt with you, the world will be freed of one less hellion.”

Elder Jane does not reply. Instead, she raises her left hand in signal. If it wasn't for the shift of the front line of hunters and their captivated gazes, I would not know what she did.

Behind us, witches step onto the street. Teachers from the academy and even the eldest students join our battle. Their faces are pinched with fury for this war, and their bodies tense with anger. But still, only Elder Jane exuded the shadows.

"You have your people, and now, I have mine." Elder Jane's lips thin even more, and her cheeks blush with color. "Hunter, you are not welcome within the boundaries of Hillcrest. As our sacred duty of protection, you have forced my hands. Leave."

With her final word, countless witches lift their hands, and a hurricane of wind explodes across the street, aimed for the hunters. Many topple over as soon as the conjured witch winds connect with them. Some kneel to keep their position. The winds force the hunters to slide and skid away, which causes another group of witches to rush forward. Their hands are bouncing balls of fire. As their muscles flex and the balls of flames are launched into the night sky, a chorus of loud pops sounds. Witches fall to the ground.

Bullets. Careful, George.

Abraxon is right, I can see the gleam of metal weapons that are held in the hands of hunters, who somehow found their way atop nearby buildings.

Before I can think of an escape plan, everyone runs—witches and hunters alike—right at each other. Some move straight through me as if I am no more than a ghost.

Before more witches succumbed to the mundane bullets of the hunters, I raise my own unseen magic and call for fire to warm the metal. Even from the high distance of their perches, I catch their cries of pain and the clattering of guns as they fall a great distance onto the street.

We must return to the supreme, Abraxon calls within my mind. We must protect her club, not the street.

Abraxon is right, but seeing my fellow witches battle the hunters only urges me to stay.

More witches drop down, lifeless, but not without a hunter in return. I move straight into the huddle of the fight. The ground rumbles, shaking as

a vicious gauke races beneath my feet. Elder Jane is up ahead, her crown of gray hair flying within the wind. Her sights are focused on Will's father.

He raises a gleaming silver sword, one that belonged in the divine books of warrior angels. It almost glows with flame. Its hilt is made from a twist of white gold and brass. It swings down toward Elder Jane, who raises the earth before her to block it. As the sword connects with the slab of stone, a blast echoes off of it.

Elder Jane is knocked off her feet, landing a long distance away near startled witches. My feet carry me until I hover above her. I know she cannot see me, but I must help.

Suddenly, the war pauses as another sound explodes around us.

Howls.

I clutch at my chest as the sad chorus of wolves deafen me. Deep in my very heart, I can feel the pure emotion that laces their grief-stricken cries. I swear, among them, I hear the shriek from Savi's very own lungs.

"The alpha is dead!" Will's father shouts, thrusting the point of his sword into the sky. Up ahead, a bolt of white lightning cuts across the dark clouds. A rumble of thunder sounds only seconds later.

It can't be. The alpha can't be dead...

It is true. You felt the emotion as much as I did.

Elder Jane is still splayed across the ground, her aged body struggling to stand. Before the leader of the hunters can make his way to her, she raises her eyes and looks straight through me. No, she looks straight *at* me.

Her mouth opens slightly. "Georgie, help me."

Georgie.

She has never used it when speaking to me.

Only one person in my life had ever used that name.

It cannot be...

Elder Jane's eyes drop from mine, and she looks behind me. Still in my phantom form, I follow her gaze to see Will's father hold his sword of power in both hands, and he raises it like a hammer.

Time slows as he swings the heavenly blade down. I turn back to Elder Jane and can see the smile that twists her lips up. She doesn't fight back. The metal winks with light as it careens down toward her. Instantly, I raise my arm to block it, knowing it will pass straight through me and slice into her.

“Father?” I ask. “How?”

Time doesn't give me a moment to gain an answer. Not as the tip of the sword slices into the shadowy skin of my arm. I open my mouth as the pain burns through my mind. The dark screams in response. Abraxon explodes out of my cut arm instead of blood. As a mass of dark shadow, he slams into the hunter and throws him into the nightly air.

My eyes close as Elder Jane reaches a hand for me. Her fingers brush across my cheek. I blink my eyes open, and I am moving. I'm floating through the air away from her as my body is carried away by Abraxon. No one else notices since I am still one with the shadows. But Elder Jane can see me.

No, that is not Elder Jane.

Only one person calls me Georgie.

In and out, I fall from consciousness.

The sword cut me, but it should not have been able to do that.

I close my eyes again.

When I open them, I am on the floor in the club, and the supreme is leaning over me. I know I am no longer a shadow, but that's not what alarms me. I no longer feel Abraxon's presence. No longer am I one with the shadows as my arm leaks blood onto the floor. It's red ruby and spills like a waterfall.

“Help...” I manage to ask the supreme, whose hungry eyes cannot stop looking at my arm. “Please.” I can still hear the war beyond the club.

“Poor boy,” the supreme whispers, kneeling beside me and pressing her nailed hand onto the cut to stop the bleeding. “I can help you, but that will mean you owe me something else.”

“Please...” I can only manage to beg.

“So be it.”

She lifts her hand to her mouth. Pink and plump, her tongue snakes out. She licks up her palm, taking my blood within her mouth. As the supreme drinks my blood, her eyes roll into the back of her head. I cannot tell if I feel sick from watching her or my loss of blood. When she finally looks at me again, her eyes are narrowed. Anger boils beneath her skin.

“You helped her,” she says. “You helped kill my vampires. And since your mother is dead, her punishment will be paid with your death. Luckily for you, I am not ready for that to happen yet. Oh no, *the fun* is only beginning.”

It takes a moment for the jumbled words I hear to make sense. She drank my blood, and with it, she saw my memories. The supreme invaded my past and found what she had wanted to know about Mother. My deepest secrets unveiled.

Abraxon, help me...

“Sleep, George, for when you wake, you will be in hell,” the supreme purrs, pushing two fingers into my wound until the pain is so intense, I give into the darkness yet again.

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