

cold
BLOOD
THE GODBEARER BOOK 2

JOEL ABERNATHY WRITING MPREG AS

L.C. DAVIS

COLD BLOOD

L.C. DAVIS

JOEL ABERNATHY

Copyright © 2022 by L.C. Davis / Joel Abernathy

All rights reserved.

No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the publisher or author, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law.

CONTENTS

[Blurb](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Connect](#)

[Also by Joel Abernathy](#)

[Also by L.C. Davis](#)

COLD BLOOD
The Godbearer #2

I'm pregnant.

Just when I was starting to get used to being alone in my own head, now I'm possessed in a whole new way. And apparently, I'm an omega, which seems to be code for "magical thot who gets harassed by every alpha within a hundred miles."

The worst part is, I don't even know which one of these bloodthirsty douchebags knocked me up. With my luck, it's probably Cameron, who sees me and the baby as a threat to his precious goddess, especially now that she's gone MIA.

Weirdly enough, the news has caused a split within the cult, pitting brother against brother. Even though I thought they'd all be on the same side, now Sam, Cyrus, and (*ugh*) Alex claim they'll do whatever it takes to protect me and the baby. Even if it means going up against Ichor and the rest of her cult.

Obviously, I don't trust them. I might be a "dumb blond," but I don't need to get sacrificed twice to learn that lesson.

If only my traitorous heart would get the memo.



CHAPTER
ONE

CHASE

"He's pregnant."

And just like that, with two entirely mundane, non-magical words, my entire reality shifted on its axis.

"I'm sorry," Cyrus said, the first to speak since we'd all been staring at Elisa for a good minute if not longer, stunned into silence. "You said he's *what*?"

"I know how it sounds, but... I'm quite certain," Elisa said, casting her eyes down to my stomach.

I brought a hand to my lower abdomen instinctively. "I know I put on a few pounds from stress, but damn," I mumbled.

"It's not that," Elisa said with a soft laugh. "I'm a seer as well as a healer. I work with energy in all its forms, and there is a distinct energy dwelling within you."

"Right," Alex said impatiently. "He's possessed by Ichor. Did you not go over this with her before she came?" he asked, turning to Cameron.

"Of course I did, dipshit," he snapped. He didn't look so certain when he glanced back at Elisa, though. "I'm sure that's what you're feeling."

"I know what Ichor's energy feels like," she answered. "Desmos has shared with me many memories of the other gods. Hers is quite distinct, and I can assure you, I accounted for it. This is something else entirely."

"Okay, but at the risk of stating the obvious here, I can't be pregnant," I said pointedly. "I'm not even Intersex."

"Well, technically speaking, you must be," Elisa said with a shrug. "You are an omega, after all."

I stared at her for a moment, blinking. "A *what*?"

"An omega," she replied, tilting her head. "Did you not know?"

I turned to the others for help because I really had no fucking idea what this lady was talking about, yet somehow, *I* was starting to feel like the crazy one.

“An omega?” Cyrus echoed, frowning, as if that word meant more to him than it did to me. “But that’s... he’s human. How is that even possible?”

“It’s rare, but not unheard of, for an omega to be born human,” Elisa answered. “Especially not among witches. And you said it yourself, he must have some magic in his bloodline in order to be able to sustain Ichor’s power.”

“Magic is one thing, but this is...” Cyrus trailed off, falling deep into thought. He and Cameron were clearly conversing on a level I had no fucking understanding of, and judging from how uncharacteristically silent Cameron had gone, his expression completely unreadable, he was having the same experience.

God, I hated it when they did that. Everyone was always on about, “Ooh, oh my God, twins, so hot,” and no one ever talks about them having telepathic conversations right in front of you, like they’re in some secret psychic club.

And sure, granted, that probably wasn’t a thing with most twins. Just the Shining variety I’d ended up saddled with. But still.

Alex, on the other hand, looked just as confused as I was.

“Does someone want to fill me in?” I pleaded. “What the hell is an omega and why do you think I am one? What does that even mean?”

“It means you’re capable of bearing young,” Elisa answered. “Are you familiar with shifters at all, Chase? Or were-creatures?”

I glanced warily at Cameron. “I’m a lot more familiar with werecats than I’d like to be.”

“Well, there are certain designations among them,” Elisa explained. “Secondary genders, if you will. There are betas, who represent the vast majority of shifter kind—regardless of species—and then there are the alphas, which are creatures who typically possess a far more monstrous animal form than their beta counterparts. They’re highly dominant and aggressive in nature, and if not reined in properly, they can be quite a problem.”

“Yeah, that sounds familiar enough,” I muttered. “I take it Cameron’s one of those, then?”

Cameron’s emerald eyes flashed in irritation. “Among other things, yes,” he said through his teeth.

Well, that somewhat explained why he was such a fucking nightmare on full moons. And in general. But it didn’t explain everything.

“In addition to alphas and betas, there is one other secondary gender that can present among shifters,” Elisa continued. “The rarest of them all—omegas. Omegas can be of any sex, but they all have the ability to be impregnated.”

I swallowed hard. “You have got to be kidding me.”

“I’m afraid not,” she said, cocking her head. “You have gone into heat, haven’t you?”

“Yeah, but they said it was just because I was Ichor’s vessel,” I said, flashing Cameron and Cyrus an

accusatory glare. I really didn't even give a shit if Alex had lied to me, yet again. My standard for him was already subterranean.

"That was the truth," Cyrus insisted.

Something in his tone made me want to believe him, if only because he seemed as shocked by all this as I was, but I'd been wrong before. Dead wrong. I knew better than to trust my instincts about anything. That was probably the biggest mindfuck about this whole situation to begin with.

"A vessel's heat cycle and an omega's would coincide very closely," Elisa said thoughtfully. "It would be hard to tell the difference, even for an alpha, though not impossible."

She looked pointedly at Cameron, and now, so was everyone else.

"Don't fucking look at me," he cried, his arms folded over his chest. "I didn't know!"

"Your freaky hellbeast sure seemed amped up over him," Alex remarked, shrinking under the force of the glare that comment elicited.

"He's right," Cyrus said, turning to his brother. His eyes narrowed. "What do you remember about that night?"

"Nothing," Cameron spat. "I black out whenever I shift. You know that."

Cyrus grunted in reluctant acknowledgment. "Still... I've never seen you react quite the way you did with him. I thought you were trying to kill him, but maybe..."

"Maybe what?" I demanded. "He wanted to turn me into kitty chow! You practically had to use the jaws of life to keep him off me!"

"I know," Cyrus said, and I could see the wheels turning behind his eyes. "But maybe I misread his intentions."

Thinking back to that night was enough to make me shudder, and I hugged myself tight. "I think they were clear enough."

Cameron had stopped arguing with his brother, which worried me more than anything. He looked like he was actually considering it.

"I don't understand," Alex protested. "If Chase is pregnant, then who the hell is the father?"

The awkward silence that fell over the room was almost as intolerable as this whole thing in the first place.

"We all slept with him while he was in heat," Cyrus murmured. "Everyone except Alex."

Alex scowled. "You didn't need to add that."

"Even if Chase is human, more or less, Cameron is the only shifter," Elisa reasoned. "The odds of it being his are high."

"But it's not a guarantee?" Cameron pressed. He sounded hopeful, which stung for some reason, even

though I hadn't come anywhere near close enough to wrapping my head around this shit to accept it.

"No," she replied, giving me a sympathetic glance for some reason. Like I wasn't used to them treating me like a burden, recent days aside.

At least I knew better than to let my guard down now. And all things considered, I wasn't too thrilled by the prospect of Cameron being the father myself.

I was still too numb for it to have fully sunk in, though, and I wasn't in any hurry for that to change.

"It's not a guarantee, but as I said, it's highly likely," she continued. "Even if Chase himself isn't a shifter."

"Can non-shifters even get omegas pregnant?" Cyrus asked, calmer than he had any right to be. Then again, it wasn't *his* world that had just gotten turned upside down *again*.

"I'm not pregnant!" I cried. "And I'm not a fucking omega!"

"There it is," Cameron muttered. "I was wondering when you'd snap."

"You shut up," I hissed, clenching my fists as the lights flickered violently overhead.

Elisa moved back toward Deanna, who just calmly glanced up, and put a hand on the slighter woman's shoulder. I got the feeling not much bothered her. Definitely the strong, silent type.

"Chase, just calm down," Cyrus pleaded, walking toward me with a hand out, like he was trying to calm a horse.

"Don't tell me to calm down," I snapped, shrugging out of his reach. "Holy shit, I know you're a straight guy, but you've been around long enough to fucking know that's never going to have anything but the opposite effect!"

"Well, he's definitely acting hormonal enough to be pregnant," Alex mused.

I let out a scream of rage and lunged at him only for Cyrus to grab me mid-air, holding me against his chest with his arms pinning mine to my sides and my feet dangling and kicking a solid foot off the ground. The lights were flickering more than ever as I struggled and thrashed against him, but there was no point. He was a fucking vice in relatively human form.

"Chase, enough," Cyrus warned. "I don't want to have to compel you."

"Didn't work out so well the last time, did it?" I asked through my teeth, still trying in vain to elbow him even though I doubted it would accomplish anything other than breaking my arm.

"Cameron is the one who tried," he reasoned, his voice soft yet commanding right next to my ear. The light scent of his cologne was teasing my nostrils and having some bizarre calming effect where his words failed miserably. "*I* haven't attempted to compel you since the cabin, but that can change. And I've taken measures to ensure that this time, it will work."

I stopped thrashing, because while I thought it was probably bullshit, I wasn't certain enough to risk calling his bluff and I'd been mindfucked enough for one lifetime, thank you very much.

“Good boy,” he coaxed at the risk of enraging me all over again. And it *should* have, but instead, I found myself instinctively relaxing in his embrace. Because apparently, I was a fucking horse.

He finally set me back on my feet, but he kept his arms around me, and the silver lining was that I really wasn’t feeling all that sure of my own footing. Just lunging at Alex and whatever energy I had unconsciously spent that caused the lights to go haywire had taken a lot out of me.

At least Alex had shut his fucking mouth, and judging from how pale he was, he’d learned his lesson for the foreseeable future.

Elisa looked up at the lights that were back to normal. “Interesting,” she said in a curious tone.

“Yeah, he does that,” said Cameron, sounding very much like someone griping about a car that kept making a weird noise. “Any idea what it is?”

“Well, there was a significant surge of energy when it happened,” Elisa answered. “All energy exerts an effect on the electromagnetic spectrum in great enough quantities, so I’d say it’s more of a byproduct of the energy burst than anything.”

“What did we tell you about using Ichor’s energy for stupid shit like killing Alex?” Cameron snapped.

“Hey!” Alex cried.

“Shut the fuck up,” Cameron shot back without taking his eyes off me, his voice so venomous that the other man shrank back into his seat on the couch. “You’re already sick. The last thing we need is you draining your power reserves.”

Before I could respond, Elisa chimed in with, “It’s not Ichor’s power.” Cameron and the others turned to face her, so she continued, “I’ve never encountered anything quite like it, so I can’t say for certain, but... it seems to be originating from Chase himself.”

“That’s impossible,” I said, now that I was too tired to hold on to the blinding rage that Alex always sparked in me, which was a hell of a lot easier than coming to terms with this batshit conversation. “I never had powers before Ichor.”

“You must have,” said Elisa. “It’s possible they were latent, but you wouldn’t be alive if it wasn’t for her. And from what Cameron and Cyrus told me, if it wasn’t for your power, Ichor wouldn’t still have a tether to this Earth at all.”

“What?” Cameron asked, suddenly laser focused on her. “What do you mean?”

“She went dormant when his vessel was shot with a silver bullet, yes?” she asked. “If she was that weakened, she wouldn’t have had the strength to maintain a physical vessel for much longer on her own. Chase would have died, and she would have been forced to return to the other side until the next cycle.”

“So you’re saying *he’s* the one keeping *her* alive?” Cameron asked, the words sticking in his throat like he found their implications utterly intolerable.

“That’s right,” Elisa said. “It’s just a working theory, but based on what you’ve told me and what I’ve seen myself, my best guess is that the ritual unlocked the latent power within him, and since the vessel

was already occupied, she hitched a ride.”

“You mean like a parasite,” I said.

Cameron shot me the filthiest glare yet.

“In a manner of speaking,” Elisa said with an innocent shrug. “The fact that she’s still here, however dormant, is proof she’s been feeding off his energy, and again, this is just a guess, but I’d say the addition of the fetus’s demands on his body and energy are overwhelming him.”

My head spun in response to her words, and if it wasn’t for Cyrus still holding me, I was pretty sure I would have collapsed.

“Fetus,” I echoed. The energy talk, I could handle, as bizarre as it was. I’d dealt with stranger things over the last few months, but this... “You mean an actual human is baking inside me right now? In what oven?”

“Your womb, of course,” Elisa said, as if it should be obvious. “Omega anatomy isn’t all that different from a cisgender human female’s, save for the location of the receptive passage. It’s inaccessible outside of heat, but it leads to a fully functional reproductive system. And it’s clear yours is in perfect working order.”

“Lucky fucking me,” I said, halfway under my breath. I felt like I was going to pass out. Cyrus seemed to notice, because he led me over to a chair and had me sit down. Even though I *really* didn’t like the fact that he was treating me like I was... well, like I was pregnant, I didn’t think I’d be standing much longer if I didn’t sit. I buried my head in my hands and groaned as the room spun. “This is way too much.”

“Chase, it’s going to be okay,” Cyrus said in a gentle tone, getting down on one knee next to the chair as he rubbed my back in small circles. “We’ll figure it out.”

I looked over at him through the veil of my hair, frowning. “How are you so fucking calm about this?”

“Someone has to be,” he said with a shrug. “I’m as confused as you are right now, but if you are somehow an omega, then that makes sense of some things.”

I was afraid to ask what he meant, but my attention was drawn to Cameron, who had started peppering Elisa with questions. I caught the last one, which was enough of an indicator of where his focus was right now.

“There must be a way to get her out of him, right?” he asked urgently. “Before his energy runs out.”

Elisa hesitated, glancing over my way for a second. “I can think of a few possible methods, but all of them would be too risky to be worth it,” she responded quietly.

“Risky to who?” he demanded.

I grimaced, feeling like I’d just gotten punched in the gut, even though I really shouldn’t have been surprised. Cameron had never made any secret of the fact that he would throw me under a bus, literally or figuratively, just to keep his beloved from stepping in a puddle. He was far from the only one, but he’d always been upfront about it, and I realized only then that I had been enough of a fool to

think his recent behavior meant that had changed. Just because he was being civil to me—even kind at times—didn’t mean anything. And ultimately, it wasn’t for me. It was for her.

It was *always* her. It always would be. It didn’t matter if I was carrying his child, by some miracle or abomination. I was nothing more than a vessel and an energy source, and nothing would ever change that.

I tuned out the rest of the conversation before Elisa could answer, even if my survival probably depended on it. It was just too much. The final straw on a load that had been building and building until I just couldn’t hold it up anymore.

The front door shut, and I heard footsteps in the hall. A moment later, Sam appeared at the door, pausing to take in the scene he’d just walked in on with a look of bewilderment. And he didn’t even have a fucking idea what was coming.

“Alex, you were supposed to come relieve me,” he said, frowning at the other man across the room. “What the hell’s going on?”

That was the million dollar question I wasn’t sure any of us really had the answer to. Sure as hell not me.

Before anyone could reply, Sam’s gaze traveled over to me, and his brow furrowed with concern as he stalked over. “Chase? You okay?”

“No,” Cyrus answered before I had the chance, scooping me into his arms. My head whirled at the sudden shift, but I draped my arms around his neck instinctively, and for once, he felt warm as I leaned against his chest. I wasn’t sure what that meant for my body temperature, but it would explain why I felt stiff and rigid, like ice. “He isn’t. I’ll explain later, but right now, he needs to rest.”

“Okay,” Sam said slowly, watching us hesitantly as Cyrus carried me back toward the stairs.

I could still hear Cameron interrogating Elisa in the background, but I just didn’t have the energy to care anymore. My head flopped against Cyrus’s shoulder as a familiar force called me into the darkness that was waiting behind my heavy eyelids. A darkness not unlike what I’d felt—or rather, what I hadn’t felt—after dying.

This time, I gave myself over to it willingly.

CHAPTER
TWO

CYRUS

“Where is he?” Cameron demanded, coming to meet me at the bottom of the stairs. Judging from the incredulous tones of Sam’s voice in the next room, the others had filled him in on everything that had just happened. And he was taking it better than I had. “Why’d you fucking carry him off?”

“I can’t tell if you’re serious right now,” I said, staring at him in disbelief. It was rare that my brother and I saw eye-to-eye on anything, but lately, it felt like we were on different planets.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Did you not see him?” I challenged. “He’s falling apart, he just got news that would bend anyone’s brain into a Gordian knot, and here you are practically talking about stripping him for parts right in front of him.”

“You’re being dramatic, as usual,” he accused.

“That’s always your go-to excuse when you’re being a soulless fucking cretin, isn’t it?” I asked in a biting tone, keeping my voice down since Deanna was the only other full-blooded vampire in the house, and I doubted she was trying too hard to listen in. “That everyone else is being illogical and oversensitive while you’re just acting rationally.”

“In this case, it’s the truth,” he said with a shrug. “And for the record, my soul is being held hostage in that neurotic time bomb—and I’m trying to get her back. At least one of us is.”

I narrowed my eyes and shoved against his chest. “Did you even hear a word Elisa said? Chase’s energy is the only thing sustaining Ichor. *She’s* feeding from *him*, not the other way around.”

He frowned, as if he found the facts an inconvenient counterpoint to his narrative bias. “And?” he finally asked. “It doesn’t change the fact that she’s in danger, and for all we know, that thing inside him could be what’s keeping her from surfacing.”

I stared at him for a few moments, trying to hold myself back, because I had never, not in the hundreds of years we had been together, ever wanted to put my own twin’s head through a wall quite as badly as I did right then. And I couldn’t even say why, because technically, he wasn’t saying anything I shouldn’t already have been feeling.

“That ‘thing’ could be your kid,” I spat, unable to mask my disgust. “Does that mean nothing to you?”

“No,” he said without hesitation, staring me down. “It doesn’t. And it shouldn’t mean anything to you, either. *He* shouldn’t mean anything to you, other than being a warm vessel to keep Ichor’s energy safe, but I’m starting to think all that ‘maintenance’ fucking has you thinking with the brain in your pants, because it’s sure as fuck not the one in your skull.”

I snarled in rage, baring my fangs, and lunged at him before I could stop myself. I slammed him into the drywall and chunks of plaster flew everywhere, but he grabbed me by the front of the shirt and flung me across the hall into the table sitting below a mirror. A few curios Sarah had collected over the years shattered on the floor.

I was back on my feet in an instant. I met Cameron halfway, ready to tear into his throat, when I could hear a scuffle behind us.

“Hey!” Deanna bellowed, grabbing Cameron by the back of the jacket and hauling him back with ease. “We’re trying to have a conversation and you two are acting like spoiled brats fighting over a toy. If this is how you run your cult, I’m starting to understand how you fucked up that ritual so bad.”

I was still seething, but the sight of Cameron straining in the butch woman’s grasp was amusing enough to calm me down a little. It was more than Deanna had spoken in all the decades I had known her, and as much as I didn’t want to admit it, she was right.

“Well?” she demanded gruffly. “You good?”

“I’m good,” I muttered, brushing some dust and a few plaster chunks off my shirt. Cameron still looked like he was two seconds away from shifting, and part of me hoped he would. At least then I’d have an excuse to knock his ass into a coma for a few weeks and hope he’d wake up slightly less feral.

“And you?” Deanna asked, looking over at Cameron.

“I’m fine,” he gritted out, shirking out of her grasp before dusting off his leather jacket.

“Well, I’m not,” Sam blurted out from the end of the hallway. He looked like he’d just seen a ghost. “What the fuck, man? Chase is *pregnant*?”

“How do you think I feel?” Alex asked. “I’m the only one here who wanted kids and he’s my fucking boyfriend!”

“Dude, shut up, no one cares,” Sam said without missing a beat, keeping his attention on me. “Did you know he was an omega?”

“Of course not,” I snapped. Why did they all look at me like I somehow had the magical answer to everything? I was starting to think Cameron had the right idea, just being a completely irresponsible ass at all times.

“Okay, sheesh,” he said, holding up his hands in defense. “I’m just asking.”

“I’m going for a walk,” Alex said flatly, already on his way to the door.

“Yeah, no shit, you’re supposed to be on patrol,” Sam called after him.

I followed Alex to the door, arriving before he did.

“Fuck!” he cried, his heart racing like a draft car. “What the hell, man? You can’t do that!”

“Walk with me,” I said, opening the door and putting a hand on his shoulder to push him through it.

He stumbled until he pushed away from me at the end of the walk. “I didn’t do anything.”

“I didn’t say you did,” I told him, coming to a stop when I was sure we were out of earshot of Cameron and the others. I stared down at him, prepared to compel him if he offered any resistance. He gulped like he knew what I was planning. “There’s something I need you to do.”

“Okay...?” he asked warily.

“Someone showed up earlier. His name is Rowan, and he looks like... well, he looks like a henchman,” I said, deciding that was the best description I could offer. “He was sniffing around here and I chased him off, so if you see him, don’t engage, come find me. Immediately. And don’t say anything about it to Cam. You understand me?”

“Y-yeah,” he said, eyeing me. “Who is this guy? Is he dangerous?”

I paused to consider whether I was going to tell him the truth, but I figured if I couldn’t start trusting him with this much, we had other issues. I needed him and Sam on my side to keep Cameron in line. Now more than ever. “He’s a priest of Thanatos. He’s a sweet talker, but he’ll kill you without a second thought. He goes way back with Cameron, if that gives you any indication.”

Judging from the way his eyes widened and he looked like he was going to be sick, it did. “Don’t engage. Got it. What does he want with us?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “But he knows about Chase, and he’s in contact with Sarah, which is all the more reason to keep him as far away from here as possible.”

“Sarah?” he asked in a harsh whisper, looking around like she might be lurking in the woods. “She’s here?”

“Not here, but I don’t know how close she is. And based on what Rowan said, she’s planning something.”

“What do I do if she shows up?” he asked.

I paused to consider it. “Kill her.”

His face went blank. “Seriously?”

“Chase is the vessel. He has to be protected at all costs, and Sarah is one of his biggest threats right now,” I said with a shrug. “Especially if she finds out about the baby.”

Something told me she would lose her fucking mind.

“Yeah, but... weren’t you two, like, madly in love?”

I raised an eyebrow. “Are you really going to talk about killing someone you’re in love with?”

“That’s different,” he muttered.

“Yeah, *you* weren’t in love with the spirit that was supposed to be inside him,” I corrected. It was pretty clear to me that Alex was by far the most disconnected from his past lifetimes out of anyone. That wasn’t a new development, either. Every time he died and came back, it was like trying to herd a cat to get him back in line and focused.

“Is that the only reason you care about protecting Chase?” he asked, a strange inflection in his voice. Even his eyes changed. If I didn’t know better, I’d think he was growing a spine. “Because he’s Ichor’s vessel?”

“My reasons don’t matter,” I said firmly, because that was a question I wasn’t ready to answer myself. Especially not after tonight. “All that matters is that you fucking do what I say.”

Alex frowned, and he seemed like he wanted to say something else, but he finally just sighed. “Yeah, fine, whatever.”

“Good,” I said, walking back toward the mansion because I didn’t want to leave Chase alone with Cameron or his friends any longer than I already had. And I trusted Sam more than I probably should have, but as strong as he was now, he still wasn’t a fully fledged vampire and he’d be easily overpowered by Cameron and Deanna. I still had to get him alone to fill him in like I had with Alex.

This was a situation that had the potential to very quickly escalate to a war, and if it did, I’d have my army ready.

CHAPTER
THREE

CHASE

I groaned in my sleep and woke myself up, but even though I wasn't sure how I had gotten back in my bed, I could immediately sense I wasn't alone. I looked over to find Sam sitting in the chair in the corner, watching me.

"What, you've been studying my paranormal romances for tips on how to be a creepy vampire stalker?" I muttered, sitting up slowly since it still felt like everything was spinning.

"Creepy?" he chuffed. "You seemed to think it was pretty hot when you dragged me to watch that vampire movie three times since Alex wouldn't go with you."

"There are plenty of things I like in fiction that I don't like in real life," I informed him. "Fire-breathing dragons. Apocalyptic scenarios. Possessive alpha males."

He raised an eyebrow. "Since when do you not like those?"

"Since the only ones I've ever encountered are protective of someone else and more than happy to fuck me over in the process," I answered.

He sighed, standing from the chair to walk over to the bed. "I thought we were past that."

"Since when? Because I'm pretty sure right now, Cameron is downstairs planning how he can get rid of me if it means bringing his goddess back."

Sam's gaze darkened in a way I'd never seen before as he sat down on the edge of the bed and reached out to tuck a curl behind my ear. "It doesn't matter what he's planning. He's not going to touch you. We won't let him."

"Who?" I challenged. "Because the last time, you and Alex were perfectly on board."

He frowned, but I was right and we both knew it. "Last time was a mistake, and I'm going to spend the rest of my life regretting it. But there won't be a next time as long as I'm here."

My lips were quivering for some reason. I pressed them into a thin line and looked away, shrugging. "If you get in his way, you won't be. Cameron and Cyrus are stronger."

"For now," he countered. "Until Cyrus turns me. I'm already a hell of a lot stronger than before, after feeding from you."

I eyed him warily. "That didn't wear off?"

He curled his lip back in a smirk, revealing his eye teeth as they lengthened. "Nope. Not by a long shot."

I swallowed hard, staring at him for a moment, because the sight of Sam with fangs was... confusing.

"What's wrong?" he asked, his brow furrowing in concern. "You're not scared, are you?"

"No," I mumbled. I wished my brain were that logical. Then again, it wasn't my brain that got me in trouble when it came to him.

A glimmer of understanding lit his dark eyes, and a smile touched his lips as he leaned in. "Oh. You like it."

It was a statement more than a question or even an accusation, and the worst part was, he wasn't wrong.

"Yeah, whatever." I looked away.

I saw movement out of the corner of my eye and before I could react, Sam's lips were pressed against my throat, warm and tender. His tongue flicked out against my jugular as he took me into his arms and kissed me harder.

Rather than pushing him away, I found myself melting against his strong chest. "Sam..."

"I'm tired of waiting for them," he said, his voice a whisper against my throat where his tongue had teased me so recently. "If you let me, I can take care of you, Chase. I can protect you."

His words strummed a chord within me that was beautiful, but utterly dissonant with the world around me, and that stark contrast gave me the presence of mind I needed to pull away from him. At least, I tried. He was right about one thing, he was a hell of a lot stronger than before, and his vice grip left no room for me to budge.

"Don't," I gritted out. "Why the hell should I believe you, anyway?"

"You shouldn't," he said, sadness touching his gaze as he looked down at me. "But we don't have much of a choice right now. Not with all this," he added pointedly, looking down at my stomach.

I put a hand against it, frowning. Somehow, I'd managed to put it out of my mind for the moment. Sam had that effect on me. Or maybe it was wishful thinking. "You believe any of this shit?"

"I mean, it's pretty out there," he said, raking a hand through his long hair. It fell around his face in a way that was more appealing than it had any right to be. "But I'm in a vampire cult and you're possessed by a goddess, so it wouldn't be the first time something crazy happened around us."

He had a point there, too. I blew a puff of air through my nostrils. "If it is true, I think I might just let Cameron kill me."

"Don't even joke about that," he said, his voice taking on a rough edge I'd never heard in it before. "And before you say it, yeah, I know I'm a hypocrite, but I never claimed otherwise. Cameron's not going to do shit, and as for you being an omega... we'll figure it out."

“What is there even to figure out?” I asked. “Say it’s true and I really am pregnant. What the fuck am I supposed to do about it? It’s not like I can just walk into a Planned Parenthood and ask for help with this kind of thing! And I don’t even want to think about what the process of giving birth would entail.”

Every time I ventured too far down that road, I started feeling woozy.

Sam sighed. “Look, my grandmother is practically a human lexicon of all things supernatural. I’m sure she knows something about all this and can tell us whether this Elisa lady is full of shit or not.”

I hesitated. It had been a while since I’d visited Sam’s family, all things considered, even though I used to go over to his house every week at least. Unlike mine, his grandmother had always been kind to me, and I was pretty sure she’d picked up on the fact that I was unrelentingly gay even before I did.

Despite how close I *thought* I was to the family, though, I’d never gotten even an inkling that their obsession with the supernatural was anything more than the same weird fixation most of the town had. I couldn’t help but feel a little betrayed, no matter how irrational it was.

“How much does she know?” I asked, even though I was afraid to know the answer to that question.

It took Sam a second, but I saw the recognition dawn on his face. “About the cult or the sacrifice?”

“Both.”

“A decent bit about the former. We reincarnate through the same bloodline, so...”

“Wait. So what, that means you’re like your own great grandfather or something?”

“Third great, but yeah. That’s the idea.”

That was another thing that was going to break my brain if I stuck on it for too long, so I summoned my Herculean abilities of compartmentalization and denial and brushed it aside. “And the sacrifice?”

“Nothing,” he answered. “My family’s not explicitly a part of Ichor’s cult. They just know about it. They don’t know you had anything to do with any of it.”

“Neither did I for the most part,” I muttered. “I... guess it wouldn’t hurt to talk to her. But we’d still have to find a way to get out of the house without the others knowing.”

“Let me take care of that,” he said, like it wasn’t going to be a monumental deal when just about everything was these days. “I don’t want you to worry about anything but resting and keeping your energy up.”

I gave him a look. “You’ve really jumped on board with the whole pregnancy thing, haven’t you?”

He smirked, his hands snaking around my waist. “I mean, regardless of what the psychic says, there’s still a chance it’s mine. You know I’ve always wanted to be a dad.”

“And if it isn’t?”

“Then it’ll still be mine,” he said with a shrug. “It’s part you, and that’s enough. Even if it is part Cameron, too.”

I groaned. “Don’t even remind me that’s a possibility.” I watched him for a moment, still trying to keep my guard up. I had figured Sam’s attentiveness would end when my heat did, but I had to admit, if it was an act, he was keeping it up pretty well. “You really think feeding from me will help?”

“Yeah. I do,” he answered. “But if you’re not up for it...”

“No,” I sighed. “I mean, I’m not really up for existing right now, but you’re right. Cameron’s a wild card. We need all the insurance we can get if he turns on us both.”

Given the way he had done such a complete and sudden one-eighty after finding out about the possibility that I was pregnant, I wouldn’t be remotely surprised.

The truth was, I didn’t trust Sam, either. How could I? But as utterly pathetic as it was, if something did happen to me, I didn’t want him and Alex being at the mercy of the others, either. Yeah, I hated them, but I’d loved them for a hell of a lot longer than that, and if there was one thing even more stubborn than my head, it was my heart.

Sam looked relieved, and I shivered as he stroked the hair on my left side back over my shoulder. “It won’t hurt,” he said softly. “I’ve been practicing.”

“Practicing what?” I asked warily.

“Vampires can secrete a numbing agent through our saliva,” he answered. “It makes it easier.”

“Huh...” Another thought occurred to me and filled me with far too much rage to be justified. “Who have you been ‘practicing’ on?”

“Myself,” he said, his eyes dancing with amusement. “Why? You jealous?”

“Of course not,” I muttered, looking away. “Just do it already.”

Sam pulled me back into his arms, and as he pressed a kiss to the side of my neck, I could feel him smiling. He ran his tongue up along my jugular again, and my breath faltered in anticipation as I prepared for him to bite.

Instead, he kept worshiping my neck the way he had while I was in heat, and it felt so good I was already forgetting what he was doing in the first place when he finally bit in. I only knew because of the pressure, and the way his grip shifted, but he was right. It didn’t hurt, and in a way, that was almost more alarming than the pain from last time. That had been more pleasurable than I wanted to admit, but I wasn’t sure if that was just a heat thing.

Not that I had that excuse now...

A breathy moan escaped me as I went limp in his arms, my head dropping back against the padded headboard. “Sammy...”

His hands squeezed around my waist and he kissed me harder, his mouth sealed around the wound his fangs had just made. I knew he was feeding from me, but it felt so good, it was hard to be properly unnerved by that fact. Or the fact that he literally had my life in his hands, and his track record of that was absolute shit already.

I should have been afraid, but I wasn't. Maybe that was just a testament to the nihilistic descent I'd been on ever since coming back from the dead, but there was something more than apathy at play here. It felt good, just like it had while I was in heat, if not better, since there wasn't the raging inferno beneath my skin to compete with. Far more concerning was the impulse to give myself over to him, body and all, and I couldn't blame that on heat, either.

"Fuck," he breathed against my throat. "Your blood is... God, I don't even know if there's a word for it."

My face grew warm, and I realized that wasn't the only part of me. I'd felt so cold downstairs, but being in contact with Sam somehow seemed to bring me back to my humanity. What was left of it, at any rate.

"I guess I'll take that as a compliment."

He took my face in his hands and I realized his eyes were blood red again, just like they had been that night. There was such intensity shining in them—such hunger—I probably should have been petrified, but all I felt was longing in equal force.

"I want you," he murmured, which seemed like a strange thing to say to someone you were holding, their blood staining your lips, but even stranger was the desire it sparked within me where only fear should have been.

I wasn't sure who kissed who this time, but my hands ended up in his hair, just as desperate as his as they explored my body and tore my robe open. I gasped as he ran his strong hands up my thighs and tugged me down by the hips so I was flat on my back. He climbed on top of me, his long hair forming a veil around us, before his body settled between my legs and he crushed his lips to mine once more.

"Let me feed you," he said, his voice low and husky as he looked down at me. The urge to comply was so strong that for a second, I wondered if Sam had been practicing compulsion, too, but I didn't feel the telltale signs and as far as I knew, he still wasn't that vampiric yet.

Vampiry. Whatever.

With his thigh pressing against my cock, already painfully hard, it was difficult to form a cohesive thought. All I could do was nod shakily and hope he didn't mean blood. For one thing, I wasn't sure I trusted my ability to keep it down, and for another, there was another form of hunger that was far more pressing at this particular moment.

Sam wasted no time acting on the permission I had just given him. He captured my lips once more, the kiss rough and sensual at once, and I lost myself in it.

He turned his attention back toward my neck, and my breath faltered on my lips as his teeth grazed my skin. This time, it wasn't hard enough to draw blood, but I almost wished for that. Being bitten had gone from being something that titillated me in fantasy and terrified me in reality to being something I craved, even if there was still a healthy dose of fear in the mix.

Sam's strong hands closed around my wrists as I felt the head of his cock slipping between my cheeks. I felt a twinge of panic and was about to remind him to get lube first until I remembered that wasn't necessary. As bizarre as the physical aspects of being an omega had been at first, and still

were in some respects, there were perks, too.

He kissed me, swallowing down my moan as he eased his cock into me. Just the tip, but it stretched me open enough that I felt a dull ache. His hands caressed my body while his tongue explored my mouth, soothing me, and soon enough, the pain was the last thing on my mind.

My hands tangled in his silken hair as I adjusted my position beneath him to be a bit more comfortable. His breath hitched in response, his eyes filled with lust when he looked down at me.

“You like my hair?” he asked, his lips twitching a little in amusement.

I rolled my eyes. “Okay, Fabio, don’t get too full of yourself.”

His smile just widened and he pushed deeper into me, pushing down on my hips to keep me where he wanted me. “Why not? You’re pretty full of me at the moment.”

“That was so fucking cheesy,” I muttered.

“You love it,” he accused, capturing my lips once more before I had the chance to argue. Not that I was really inclined to do so. As long as he kept touching me the way he was, gently rolling my nipple between his thumb and forefinger, he could be as cocky and corny as he wanted to be.

Admittedly, there was part of me that found it endearing. Sam had always been kind of a dork, even if he had grown into a huge dork with the body of a jock and the face of a god. It was part of his charm.

As he drove deeper into me and started thrusting, albeit slowly, the pain momentarily outweighed the pleasure. I held my breath, my body tensing instinctively around him.

“Relax,” he coaxed next to my ear, his lips brushing against my flesh. I felt hot even though I wasn’t in heat. I wouldn’t have been surprised if this could push me into it, but then again, I wasn’t sure if that could happen at all now that I was pregnant. It didn’t seem like that should be possible, given what the purpose of an omega’s heat supposedly was, but I wasn’t ready to ask anyone for anatomy lessons anytime soon. Not when I was still struggling just to grasp all this.

Putting it into practice, though... that came a bit more naturally.

“Fuck,” Sam said, his voice growing tight and growly. The sound of it sent a fresh thrill down my spine as I squirmed beneath him, trying to remember why I had to be quiet.

Even if it wasn’t for the fact that he had recently fed from me, him fucking me while I wasn’t in heat, or for the officially sanctioned purpose of restoring my tantra, was probably taboo. It pissed me off to even think about that, because it was no one’s business but ours, but Cameron had already made it clear he saw me as his property. A finite resource to be used at his discretion.

The thought should have been enough to quench the burning flames of my arousal, but it wasn’t. It was the opposite. Sometimes I fucking hated myself. My dick, at the very least.

“Shh,” I warned, slipping my arms around Sam’s neck to pull him closer. “We don’t want to alert the guard.”

“Sorry,” he replied, slightly breathless.

He turned back to kissing my throat, as if to keep his mouth occupied, and I certainly wasn't complaining. The smooth, hungry strokes of his tongue were purely orgasmic, even if he wasn't touching my cock at the moment. Everywhere was an erogenous zone under his touch.

His thrusts picked up tempo and when he drove into my spot at just the right angle, a strangled cry welled up in my throat instinctively. Sam's hand clamped down over my mouth to muffle it, and I was pretty sure that was what pushed me over the edge. "Now who's being loud?" he teased.

I came without him touching my cock, and I could see the mingled amusement and curiosity in his eyes as he watched me writhe beneath him until the orgasm subsided.

"You like being restrained?" he asked, chuckling softly. Even though my cock was still twitching from the orgasm, the sound of his laugh was enough to keep me hard. "Good to know."

"Oh, shut up," I mumbled, turning my head away from his hand. His smugness didn't last long when I tightened around his cock, slipping my fingers into his hair once more. "Just finish already before someone comes in."

"You're a romantic, you know that?" he taunted.

I leaned up to kiss him, nipping his bottom lip. It seemed to turn him on more than anything, and he ground into me, pulling my body even closer to his. I felt dangerously close to coming again already just from the friction of him rubbing against me. When he finally came, the sensation of being filled with his come was every bit as deliriously good as it had been during heat.

Guess I couldn't blame everything on that.

I tensed up as the door opened and Alex entered the room, frowning. "What the fuck? He's not even in heat!" His eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Wait, did you bite him again?"

"Just shut up and close the door, idiot," Sam ordered, still breathless as he turned to glare at his best friend.

Alex hesitated a second before doing what he said, and I braced myself for Sam to pull out. He looked pissed about it, too. Alex had impeccable timing, as always.

I was still catching my breath as I sat up against the headboard and covered myself with a sheet, trying not to think about the fact that Sam's come was trickling out of me. I touched my neck to make sure he hadn't left any evidence of the bite, either, but he'd licked my flesh clean of blood, and I could feel the punctures healing already.

"What are you doing?" Alex demanded, stalking over to the bed.

"What does it look like?" Sam shot back.

"I don't mean that!" Alex hissed. "I mean why are you biting him when he's barely able to stand on his own?"

If I didn't know better, I'd think he was actually concerned. I wasn't sure what to make of that, though.

Sam hesitated, glancing at the door. "Keep your voice down."

"Why should I?" Alex asked, folding his arms.

"Because I'm going to turn you into an icicle if you don't," I answered.

He scowled. "You know, you can't keep threatening that forever."

"It's not a threat. It's a warning."

He looked like he was considering whether to call my bluff, but Sam sighed and interrupted, "Come on, guys. We've got bigger issues here. Namely, Cameron."

"What about Cameron?" Alex asked, growing nervous at the first mention of his name.

"He's planning something, and I'm not waiting for Cyrus anymore," Sam replied. "Neither of them can be trusted, but he's definitely not objective when it comes to his brother."

"Planning what?" Alex asked.

"The fuck if I know," Sam said. "I'm sick of those two being the only ones with any real power. I'm not waiting to find out what they're going to do next."

Alex paused like he was considering his words, and there was a part of me that was afraid he was going to run and tell Cyrus the first chance he got. Then, he said, "I want in."

"You what?" I asked.

"Sam is right," he said with a shrug. "The twins have way too much power. They always have, and then there's the fact that we don't even know what Cameron *is*."

I blinked. I remembered Cyrus saying something about that, back when it was the full moon and we were trying to bind Cameron. I probably should have questioned him afterward, but the truth was, in the middle of heat, it had been the last thing on my mind. And then things had been so chaotic ever since...

"We don't know," Sam said pointedly. "That doesn't mean they don't."

Alex frowned, falling silent for a moment in contemplation.

"You think they're lying?" I asked. And it wasn't like I could put it past either of them. Or the men in front of me, for that matter.

"Maybe," Sam said with a shrug. "It wouldn't be the first time they kept us in the dark."

"I don't get it," I admitted. "You guys are supposed to be paladins, working together to protect your beloved goddess and all that shit. Why wouldn't they tell you the truth?"

"You've been studying magic long enough to know that knowing something's name and being able to define it gives you power over it," Alex answered. "At the end of the day, paladins or not, they're brothers. We're not."

"Right," I murmured. Once upon a time, I thought I knew what that was like, even if I had been born an only child. Sarah was like a sister to me, but she had made it perfectly clear that was my stupidity

talking and far from mutual.

Blood was definitely thicker than water in the world of vampires.

"Anyway, even my family doesn't know what he is," said Sam. "But he's powerful. So is Cyrus, for that matter, and it wouldn't be the worst idea to have Alex turn, either."

I hesitated, considering his words. "You don't think they're going to know what's up?"

"Maybe," Sam said with a shrug. "But by then, it won't matter."

"My blood is basically an experimental drug," I reminded them. "We don't even know it will work."

"Seems like it's been working on Sam well enough," said Alex. "I know you hate my guts, but at least give me a chance to put it right."

I eyed him doubtfully. I really didn't think anything shy of a time machine could accomplish that, but bickering endlessly was something I just didn't have the energy for anymore. I wasn't even sure why I could get over that hurdle where Sam was concerned, even though I still wouldn't say I had forgiven him. Not by a long shot. With Alex, it was just different. I didn't even know why, other than the obvious, which was that we had dated, and he was the one who was supposed to put me first. The one who was supposed to protect me.

It was a little late, but better than never, I guess. And he was right. We didn't have that many options. "Fine," I muttered, offering him my wrist. "Just make it quick."

Alex seemed surprised by my response, and so was I, if I was being honest with myself. He took my hand, and my heart skipped in an all-too-familiar way. I brushed it off, more eager to blame it on pregnancy hormones than the possibility that I had any lingering feelings for him, even if I was still in denial about that, too.

"Here," Sam said, leaning in to bare his lengthened fangs. I winced slightly as he bit in, but it was definitely preferable to the alternative of dull teeth piercing my flesh. Alex took my wrist again, bending his head to press his lips to the fresh wound.

My heart was still hammering in my chest, but I didn't want to believe it was anything more than the pain. Alex wasn't enough of a vampire yet to have any ability to make it hurt less, but it still wasn't that bad, if I was being honest with myself. His grip tightened around my wrist and as he drank, I realized the pleasurable sensation was having more of an effect on me than anything he had ever done to me in bed.

I held my breath so I wouldn't make any incriminating sounds, vaguely aware of Sam stroking my hair, so I guess he thought my stiffness was in response to the pain. Just as well.

Alex pulled away after a moment, and I quieted the idiotic part of me that felt it was too soon. The sight of my blood clinging to his lips shouldn't have been appealing, either, but I was clearly not feeling like my usual self.

Not that I even knew who that was anymore.

"Fuck," Alex murmured, looking a bit dazed. "Your blood is..."

"Told you," Sam said in a smug tone. I wasn't sure how I felt about the fact that he had been bragging about that, but I was pretty sure being flattered was not the appropriate response.

"Anything?" Alex asked, looking up at us.

Sam tilted his head. "Your eyes do look a little redder around the edges, I guess."

"Not as much as Sam's did, though," I said, frowning. "Maybe my blood's changed."

"Maybe, but I doubt it," Sam said thoughtfully. He grew hesitant, and I was sure if he was censoring himself, I wasn't going to like whatever came out of his mouth next.

"What?" I pressed. "What is it?"

"Maybe it's the baby?" he asked, wincing like he knew the reminder of my supposed pregnancy was going to be as unwelcome as it was.

Alex looked only slightly more thrilled than I was.

"Great," I mumbled, folding my arms over my stomach. I suddenly felt even more vulnerable than usual. Living in a house full of murderous, bloodthirsty semi-immortals would do that to a person.

"It's okay," Sam said in a gentle tone, stroking my hair behind my ear. "Like I said, we'll figure it out."

"Yeah," I said quietly. That was what I was afraid of.

CHAPTER
FOUR

SAM

It had been almost two weeks since Cameron's friends had left, but Cameron himself had been a constant sentinel. Getting time alone with Chase was difficult enough, even though I had been equally focused on making sure Cameron didn't get any. He was just always around, and he had managed to strong-arm Alex into taking a few of his patrols, so I couldn't even be rid of him then.

If there had been any doubt in my mind that he was planning something, it would've disappeared then.

That afternoon, as I was heading back to the mansion from one of my own patrols, I felt a twinge of anxiety. I had already spoken with my grandmother about bringing Chase over, and as confused as she had been by my explanation of everything, she was eager enough to see him and help where she could. Of course, there was only so much I could tell her without putting her and Chase in even more danger.

Cameron was supposed to relieve me, but I wasn't surprised he had stood me up. If he thought he was going to keep getting away with bailing on his duty, he had another thing coming. I had to play it cool for now, but I had been taking Chase's blood every other day, alternating with Alex. So far, Chase wasn't showing any adverse effects, and it wasn't enough to do any damage, but I already felt stronger. I had tested it out as often as I could while I was alone in the forest, using the opportunity to hone my strength and ever-increasing abilities.

I wasn't waiting on Cyrus to train me anymore. Yeah, it would've been ideal to have his expertise and wisdom to draw off of, but I trusted him less now than ever.

On the one hand, I understood why Cameron was being even more extra than usual. If what Elisa said was true about the pregnancy, that meant Ichor was probably growing weaker by the day. And the more the baby grew, the less energy there would be for her to feed off of.

Like a parasite.

I felt like a traitor for even thinking about her in those terms, but it wasn't even close to what I had felt after betraying Chase. I had already made the decision that if I had to choose between the two of them, I was going to choose to protect him. I already knew what it was like to live with the regret of anything else, no matter what contract I had made lifetimes ago.

And really, how the hell was that even fair? I didn't even remember who I was back then. I didn't remember her. Being brainwashed to put her before all else still wasn't enough to change that. To me, she had never been anything more than a ghost, but Chase... Chase was real, and I knew what it was

like to lose him. That wasn't something I was going to go through again, or something I was going to put him through again.

Standing up to Cyrus and Cameron once would've been unthinkable, not only because it was suicide, but because they were the ones who had reminded me of my purpose. And at the time, it had felt like a gift. Now, though... now, it just felt like a burden. Like heavy shackles I had been wearing long before I was born. But why should the decision I had made back then, when I was a completely different person, supersede the ones I made now, of my own free will?

They were dangerous thoughts, and if ever there was reason to doubt that Ichor's cult was a cult in more than name only, the fact that I was afraid to even have those thoughts in the privacy of my own mind would've erased them.

I was sick of being afraid, though. Sick of letting other people make my choices for me, including my past self.

I could see the mansion through the thick forest when I realized I wasn't alone. I spun around, fully expecting it to be Cameron, who had somehow found a way to read my mind and was taking on the role of literal thought police. Instead, it was Cyrus standing just off to the side of the small dirt path leading up to the mansion, but I wasn't sure that was much better.

"Cyrus?" I asked warily. "Why aren't you with Chase?"

"He's sleeping," he answered. "I was hoping we could talk before you go back."

"Okay," I said warily. "What about?"

I focused on keeping my heartbeat slow and steady. Biofeedback was not exclusively a vampire trait, but it was something that was easier now than before. And when you lived around human lie detectors, it was a necessity.

"I know you've been feeding from Chase," he said, taking a step toward me.

I kept my feet planted in the earth even though it was my instinct to run. Not that it was going to do me much good. Cyrus was faster, and I definitely hadn't taken enough blood for that to change yet. Guess we would find out how much stronger he was if it came to that.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said, even though I could tell from the look on his face he didn't believe me. At all.

"Come on, Sam," he said with a weary sigh. "If you're going to lie to my face, you at least need to get better at it."

I swallowed, but there was no dislodging the knot in my throat. "How did you know?" I finally asked.

"Little things," he answered casually, plucking one of the few remaining dead leaves off the nearest tree like he was bored with the conversation already. I got the feeling a lot was boring to him. I didn't envy him or Cameron for their uninterrupted lifespans. Not by a long shot. "The way you carry yourself is different. Sometimes your eyes turn red around the edges, when you get angry. You haven't gotten good at hiding that yet. And then there is your scent. You smell like him."

"We're fucking," I said pointedly.

His lips quirked at one corner. "That's different. It's inside you. Your blood. It's changing, and it smells like his."

"So why didn't you say anything sooner?" I asked. I was also wondering why he wasn't attacking me right now, but I decided not to give him any ideas.

"I was just observing," he said with a shrug. "If it was harming Chase, I would have, but that doesn't seem to be the case."

"So... you're not angry?" I asked doubtfully. Regardless of what his answer was, I wasn't sure I was going to believe it.

"Angry? No," he replied. "And I have no intention of stopping you."

I blinked at him. He had the poker face of a world champion player. "Why not?"

"For the same reason you're doing it in the first place," he answered. "Cameron is out of control. You've seen it, I've seen it. Even Alex, who usually has his head so far up his own ass that he's practically an ouroboros, has seen it. And you also know that Cameron is strong. If it came down to a fight between the two of us, it wouldn't even be fifty-fifty, not with him in his other form, and I'm not too proud to admit that."

"So you want me to help you kill your brother?" I asked in disbelief. This had to be a trap. And yet, he seemed sincere enough. Even a vampire showed some signs of deception when he was lying. Even one as old as him.

"If it comes to that, yes," Cyrus answered without hesitation. There was no way even he could be that callous on the subject, but then again, I had thought he was madly in love with Sarah, too. It was all the more reason I didn't trust his intentions when it came to Chase. Even if they did seem to be aligned with mine, for the time being.

"And you think it will?"

He paused as if to consider it. "I don't know," he finally said. "But judging from how judiciously you've been trying to keep him away from Chase, I think you know as well as I do there's a possibility."

"He can't kill Chase," I said warily. "Not as long as he's Ichor's vessel."

"Not as long as he's her vessel, no," he agreed cryptically. "But it's not clear how long that will remain the case."

"The baby," I murmured. "So you do believe he's pregnant."

"I know he is," Cyrus answered. "I heard the heartbeat the other day while he was asleep. It's faint, and it's still early on, but it's distinct. Real."

His words made me feel dizzy somehow, even though he was only confirming what I already suspected. I guess there was a part of me that still hadn't been sure. I wasn't even sure what I felt

having it confirmed. Maybe I was just numb.

"Cameron is planning on killing it, isn't he?" I finally asked, even though I wasn't entirely sure I was ready for the answer. Mostly because I wasn't sure what the fuck I was going to do about it if the answer was yes. "Even though it's probably his."

"Yes," Cyrus said in his usual calm tone, but there was a hint of something else in his eyes. Something dark, like anger, even if I could only count on one hand the number of times I had seen him get truly furious. Strangely, all of them had involved Chase, to one degree or another. "That doesn't matter to him."

"But it matters to you," I said, narrowing my eyes. "Why?"

He paused like he was considering it. "For the same reason it matters to you, I imagine."

"Chase is my best friend," I protested. "I've known him my entire life."

"That didn't stop you from going along with the ritual," he reminded me.

The words were a well-deserved slap in the face. Nothing I didn't already know. Nothing I hadn't already raked myself over the coals for a thousand times.

"Yes," I conceded. "And I've regretted it ever since. But you know that, too, don't you?"

"I do. Which is why we're having this conversation rather than me snapping your neck for insubordination."

I snorted. "You've been obsessed with Ichor for, what, thousands of years now? You really expect me to believe you're willing to give that all up over one human guy you barely even know?"

"Of course not," he said in a sharp tone. "I'm still loyal to Ichor, but I think there's a way to save both of them. And I believe the one is necessary for the other, now more than ever. Cameron's judgment is clouded where Ichor is concerned, and it always has been. He's not thinking rationally. He's not capable of it, but you are. I know your allegiance has changed, but regardless, we share a common goal."

"And that is?" I asked.

"Keep Chase alive," Cyrus said simply. "And to do that, we have to keep them safe from Cameron."

"How do you suggest we do that?" I asked.

"That depends," Cyrus said, taking another step toward me. I was still on edge, but I stood my ground. "Exactly how far are you willing to go to protect him?"

I searched for any sign that it was a loaded question, but I found none. "As far as it takes," I answered without hesitation.

He paused, watching me with an unreadable expression that left me feeling like I was on a microscope slide. "I believe you actually mean that."

I bristled at the implication, but given my track record, I couldn't say I blamed him. "I do."

"And do you know how Cameron became the way he is, Sam?"

The question felt like a one-eighty. "You mean a raging dick?" I answered carefully.

It was rare for anything to get a laugh out of Cyrus, but that did. "I was referring to his other form, actually."

"The hellcat?" I folded my arms. "Not really. You guys kind of keep it a well-guarded secret."

"There is a reason for that," he said. "Once upon a time, Cameron made a deal with the devil. And I bet you can guess who it was for."

"Ichor?"

"We had just found her again," he replied. "But we weren't the only ones. There was a battle between her and another lesser god, and she lost. She was fading fast, and staring down the possibility of another three centuries without her, Cameron devoured the old grimoires in search of something—*anything*—that might bring her back from the brink."

"And he found it?"

"He did," Cyrus said. "But it wasn't a cure. It was an exchange. Even gods die, and do you know where they go when that happens?"

I hesitated. "Not really, no. I'm guessing the Other?"

He nodded solemnly. "The one who's in charge of it is Thanatos. Death, ruler of the underworld. Thanatos was owed a soul, and he was given one."

"Cameron's?" I asked in disbelief. Sure, Alex and I had always joked that he was soulless, but I had never imagined it was so... literal.

"Without hesitation," Cyrus said, something between bitterness and admiration in his tone as he spoke of his brother's sacrifice. "He gave his soul, just to have more time with her."

"What does that have to do with his other form?" I asked.

"When a human sells their soul, not much changes," Cyrus answered. "Not on the surface. They look the same, they act the same. They don't start eating brains or go around on killing sprees like they do in the movies. Some go their entire lives without ever noticing the difference, but when they die, they don't have a ticket to the afterlife anymore. They're condemned to wander, eternally, in the Other. The place where Chase ended up after his death, curiously enough."

I frowned, immediately bristling at the implication. "You're saying Chase is soulless?"

"No," Cyrus said, his tone softening. "Not at all. Chase is an anomaly, in more ways than one. Vampires are different, though. We already don't have the option of moving on to a better place in the afterlife, so the price is different for us. There's a vacancy. Every vacuum demands to be filled, and a vampire's soul is no exception. It leaves a void, one that must be filled with another soul."

"A demon."

"Yes," he replied. "Arventhiras, in Cameron's case, as Chase discovered. His curse is to share a body with that thing, at least while he's here on Earth."

"What about when he dies?" I asked warily.

Cyrus grew solemn. "I don't know. No one does. We don't even know if he'll reincarnate again. That's the price he paid, though, for her. For love. The question is, what price are you willing to pay, Sam?"

I stared at him in dismay, my chest growing tight. "Are you... asking me to sell my soul?"

"Chase's blood is extraordinary," he said thoughtfully. "In a variety of ways. But even so, all it can do is turn you into a vampire. A strong vampire, perhaps, given your current rate of progress, but a vampire nonetheless. If you want to be stronger than Cameron, you have to become more. You have to become soulless like him. I'm just asking if you're willing to do that."

I opened my mouth to answer, but all that would come out was a strangled sound. Here I was, finally thinking I was on the path to actually doing something. To being able to protect Chase. Now... if even Cyrus didn't think he could take Cameron on his own...

"It's not something you need to answer right now," he said, his hands slipped into his pockets. "Or at all. Just food for thought. I think it's important that you understand what this battle will entail before you choose to make it your own."

"How?" I asked, feeling like a coward all over again. Maybe I always had been. Maybe I always would be.

"Every spirit can be summoned by their name," Cyrus answered. "Even Thanatos. I don't know exactly what Cameron did, but I know the book he used to summon him—the Liber Noctis."

"That doesn't sound like any of the titles I've seen in the library."

"It isn't," said Cyrus. "Cameron keeps it locked up."

"Probably prudent of him," I said flatly.

He blew a puff of air through his nostrils. "If and when you decide that's something you want to do, I can get it for you, but you need to be sure. Absolutely. Some decisions, once they're made, can't be taken back."

"Yeah," I murmured. "I know."

"In the meantime, meet me in Chase's room tonight," said Cyrus. "You'll progress faster if you're drinking my blood as well as his, and we need to make sure he's not losing too much."

I stared at him for a moment, still surprised he was even considering helping me rather than turning me in to his brother. "There's something else," I said. When he waited expectantly, I continued, "This whole omega thing has Chase freaked out, as I'm sure you can tell. I need to take him home."

"Home?" he asked, raising an eyebrow. "Your home? And what is that going to accomplish?"

"My grandmother knows more about shifters than any of us," I replied. "If anyone can help us figure out what's wrong with him, it's her. Just for a couple of hours."

Cyrus paused, but he seemed to be considering it. "I'll take care of Cameron," he finally said. "But you need to be back here no later than midnight."

"We will be," I said earnestly, before he could change his mind. "You have my word."

It wasn't much, I had to admit. Not now. But one day, it would be. I had to promise myself that.

CHAPTER
FIVE

CHASE

It had been a long time since I had left the house, and a lot longer since I had been to Sam's grandmother's house. It was only a block away from his parents' home, a quaint cottage nestled at the intersection of the suburbs and the woods surrounding most of Winterhaven, save for the part that was framed by the mountain range in the north.

When we were younger, I had always loved going to his grandmother's house. It reminded me of a fairy-tale woodland cottage, and I guessed the fairytale aspect was more real than I had ever imagined. I wasn't sure if she was the good witch or the bad witch in that scenario, but I was pretty sure I was Hansel.

I couldn't help but feel more nervous the closer we drew. For one thing, Sam's family was loyal to Ichor. Sure, Sam claimed they didn't know about the sacrifice, and considering it had been impromptu, I kind of believed him. Still... everything about my childhood and adolescence had been reframed in a new and far more sinister light, knowing they were a part of the cult.

"It'll be fine," Sam said, reaching to put his hand over mine in my lap.

I nodded absently. "Yeah. I guess." I hesitated. "Are you sure Cameron isn't going to be back before we get home?"

"I'm sure," he said.

Something about his tone immediately had me on edge, though, and even the slightest red flag was enough to set off my paranoia these days. Although I wasn't sure if it could be considered paranoia, all things considered.

"What is it?" I asked warily.

If he lied to me, I was getting out of the car immediately and walking home. I did *not* have the patience—or the luxury—of putting up with that kind of thing. Not from him. Not anymore.

Sam hesitated, which had me even more on edge. Whatever it was, I could tell he didn't want to tell me, but he finally sighed in resignation. "You're not going to like it."

"I can guarantee I'm going to like it a lot better than you lying to me," I told him.

He paused as if he was considering it. "Cyrus is keeping him away while we're gone," he said.

I did a double take. "Cyrus?" I echoed. "*Cyrus* knows about this?"

I couldn't keep the betrayal out of my voice. Especially considering Sam was the one who had brought up the whole "clandestinely turning him into a vampire" idea in the first place.

Sam grimaced, putting his hand back on the wheel since I had pushed it off my lap. "Trust me, it wasn't my idea to bring him in on this. He cornered me earlier today in the woods and called me out on it."

"On what, exactly?" I demanded. "How much does he know?"

I could tell from Sam's hesitation I wasn't going to like the answer to that, either. "Everything, really. Including the fact that Alex and I have been taking your blood."

My stomach felt like it was twisting into a knot. "And yet, here we are."

"Right," said Sam. "You don't need to worry about it. If Cyrus was going to be angry at anyone, he would be angry at me."

"I don't know if you've noticed this, but I'm kind of enough of a dipshit that I still care what happens to you, too," I informed him.

He snorted a laugh. "Yeah, well... in any case, he's not angry. He wants to help."

"You're serious?" I asked. "And you believe that?"

Sam paused to consider it again as we parked in front of the house. "I do," he finally answered. "He wants to meet tonight. The four of us. He says it'll be faster if Alex and I are taking his blood, too, and he wants to make sure we're not taking too much from you."

Well, at least that didn't sound like he was planning on killing us both, but I had been wrong about Cyrus's homicidal impulses before. "And what about Cameron?"

"Yeah, that's the weird part," Sam said carefully. "After talking to Cy, I get the feeling he doesn't trust Cameron any more than we do right now. Maybe even less."

"That would be difficult," I said flatly, but considering the way Cyrus had behaved that night when I found out I was pregnant, I wasn't sure Sam was wrong. "What did he say, exactly?"

"Not much. You know Cyrus," he scoffed. "He just said he knew, and he thought it was a good idea for us to have insurance in case Cameron goes completely AWOL."

The fact that Cyrus thought that was likely to happen was unnerving, even if it did just confirm what I already knew. "It's because of the baby, isn't it?" I asked, my hand absently going to my stomach.

Sam's energy took on a solemn feel as he nodded. "Yeah. Anything he views as a threat to Ichor has to be dealt with accordingly. But I guess that doesn't come as any surprise."

"No," I admitted. "It doesn't. What does is the fact that Cyrus doesn't feel the exact same way as his brother."

Sam didn't answer right away. I could tell he was choosing his words carefully. "He says that he

doesn't trust Cameron's judgment, and he thinks he's wrong. About you, about Ichor, about the baby."

"Do you believe him?" I asked.

"I do," he said with far more certainty than I felt. "I don't know if I trust him where anything else is concerned, but if I have to choose between him and Cameron, it's an easy choice."

"No argument there," I sighed. Something else occurred to me. "If Cyrus is planning on having to go up against Cameron, and he's willing to do all this just to stack the deck... he doesn't like his odds, does he?"

Sam looked over at me, but the worry in his gaze spoke volumes. "No," he said quietly. "He doesn't. But that's why we're not taking any chances, so I don't want you stressing out about it, okay?"

"Easier said than done when you share a roof with two homicidal vampires," I informed him.

"Soon to be *four* homicidal vampires," he countered.

I gave him a look. "Really? Is now the best time for your bad jokes?"

"They'll be dad jokes soon enough," he countered, turning off the car.

His words took me by surprise, and I found myself blushing, as ridiculous as that was. He really did seem serious about loving the baby no matter whose it was.

Hell, I hadn't even come to terms with the fact that there was a baby myself. Not fully. Sam was taking it in stride, though, and while I doubted he was as calm as he seemed on the surface, I couldn't deny that his easygoing attitude put me at ease.

"Come on," he said, even though when I tried to get out, the car door was locked. He opened it from the outside, offering a hand. "You're an omega. You're going to have to get used to the chivalry."

I rolled my eyes, but I took his hand, letting him help me out of the truck. "I guess you're going to have to trade this in for a minivan pretty soon."

Sam's face was blank with horror, until I laughed. "I'm kidding. But you should've seen your face."

He gave a half-hearted sigh. "Very funny."

I followed him up the walkway, through the slightly overgrown vines and rose bushes lining the stone path. I had always liked the way the lawn looked. It had character, compared to the cookie-cutter lawns most of Winterhaven's residents kept, in a constant bid to outdo each other. The house had its usual wild, almost electric energy. Like the forest and the bushes in the garden were alive in a different way than normal plants.

For all I knew, that was more than just a feeling. According to Elisa and the others, I had to possess some magical abilities if I had managed to sustain Ichor's power. It figured that I would also be able to sense magic, even before I was consciously aware of being supernatural.

Not that it had never really done me any good. Although, maybe if I had learned to listen to those instincts before, I could've avoided all this.

Sam knocked on the front door, and a moment later, Alona appeared. She was a pretty older woman who looked younger than her seventy-something years. For all I knew, she might have been even older. Who needed Botox when you came from a family of witches? Her hair had turned a silvery white over the years, a shade or two darker than mine, and her brown eyes were full of warmth. She had always dressed like she had never quite left her hippie days behind, with flowy pirate shirts, bell-bottom jeans and all. She had always looked like a normal, if hip, grandmother, and even now, knowing what I knew, it was hard to imagine her conducting moonlight rituals with the rest of the cult.

"Now there's a face I haven't seen in too long," Alona said, taking my face between her hands and squishing my cheeks together before she leaned up to kiss my forehead. She pulled me into a bear hug, shockingly strong for someone so tiny. "My goodness, you look so different," she said, pulling back to take a strand of my newly platinum hair between her fingers. "And when did this happen?"

I glanced over at Sam, who looked uncomfortable now.

"Just another weird side effect of being a vessel, I guess," I said with a shrug. I smiled at her. "It's good to see you, Alona. You look great."

She gave my compliment a dismissive huff and ushered us both into the house. "Come, come. I've already made dinner."

"We can't stay that long, Grandma," Sam said worriedly.

"I know, I know," she said with a wave of her hand. "But you can at least eat a little something. It's a long drive."

"It's twenty minutes," he said flatly.

She ignored him, motioning for me to take a seat at the kitchen table. I had spent more than a few nights there, playing board games with Sam, Alex, and Sarah, while Alona told us stories. Sarah usually went on her phone, rolling her eyes when the older woman wasn't watching, but I had always found Alona's stories fascinating. They were tales of her often scandalous adventures in her younger days, and about the history of Whitehaven. She knew all the myths and legends, and now I knew that most of them were probably a hell of a lot more literal than I had ever given them credit for back then.

One in particular stood out to me all these years later. It was the story of how Winterhaven had become... well, a haven for all things supernatural, among other misfits. The legend went that long before the first humans had ever set foot on the land, Lucifer had fallen in the very spot that now marked the center of town. Weirdly enough, there was even a monument to commemorate the auspicious event.

It was the kind of story I would have dismissed as interesting, but impossible, even a year ago. Now, why the hell not?

The table was already set with charcuterie—as well as half a dozen different baked goods—in typical grandmother fashion. I never knew how my stomach was going to feel at any given time, but the food admittedly looked appealing.

"You really didn't have to go to all this trouble," I told her.

"Nonsense," she said, taking her seat at the head of the table. "My grandson hasn't brought home someone I actually like in ages, so it's a special occasion."

I choked a little on my iced tea.

"Grandma," Sam mumbled.

"Well, it's true," she huffed. "I never understood what Ichor saw in that bitch."

I pursed my lips to keep from laughing, but hearing her speak so candidly about the secret that Sam and all the others had kept so carefully guarded all these years was a little unsettling, to say the least.

"Oh, that's right," she said, touching her cheek as if she had just remembered something. "This must all be so strange for you. Especially as an outsider."

"It's... been an adjustment process," I said carefully. That was the understatement of the century. Or three. "But I would say the whole omega thing is weirder."

She nodded. "That one is interesting. Can't say I knew too much about it myself originally, since shifters are pretty guarded about them, and a lot of the information out there is just intentional misdirection. When Sammy came to me and told me what was going on, I did some research. My grandmother was the real expert on this sort of thing, so I was able to find some information in the books she passed down to me."

"Really?" I asked hopefully. "So... there really are others? Cis males who can get pregnant, I mean."

"Oh, yes. They are rare, but they're out there," she said. "Rarer still among non-shifters, though. And I have to say, I've never come across one that was human."

"Guess I'm just lucky like that," I grumbled.

Alona chuckled. "Lucky, no, but anyone who gets their hands on you certainly is. Shifters used to fight wars over the rights to possess an omega."

"Possess?"

She gave me a knowing look. "I know how it sounds, and the reality isn't all that much better, but you have to understand the way shifter society works. It isn't like ours. At least, not in the last century. Go back a few, and then you just about know the lay of things, but replace our concept of gender with alpha, beta, and omega, and you've about got it."

"So alpha shifters are basically misogynists, and I'm the damsel in distress," I reasoned.

"Well, if you want to put it that way, you wouldn't be wrong," she replied. "But it's not just shifters. All supernatural creatures align with those labels, to one degree or another. It just isn't as obvious as it is with a shifter, but it's there, whether the vampires want to acknowledge it or not."

"Vampires can be omegas, too?" I asked, unable to hide my surprise.

"It's rare, but yes. Alphas are a lot more common. In fact, you're living with two of them right now."

I blinked. "I know Cameron is one, but Cyrus?"

"I doubt he thinks of himself that way. Vampires like to put as much distance between themselves and shifters as possible, and like I said, it's more of a gradient with their kind. No obvious physical features, like knots." She spoke so casually about it, like she wasn't even fazed. "And I imagine you'll be joining them soon enough," she said pointedly, looking over at Sam.

He looked like he wasn't loving the direction the conversation had taken, but he didn't seem surprised by it, either.

"I'm surrounded," I mumbled. Oh, well. If there was any consolation, it was the fact that Alex was definitely a beta. In fact, that was old news.

"There are worse things," Alona said with a grin. "Granted, alphas are all a bit brick headed, but they're protective, and useful in other ways."

"Grandma," Sam groaned, pressing a hand to his forehead.

"I'm just saying," she said with a shrug.

Sam looked like he very much wished she wouldn't.

"So, Chase being sick," he began, taking on a worried tone that made me realize I had been right before, and he was more stressed out than he was letting on. "Is that normal, for an omega? Is it something we should worry about?"

"Well, I'm no obstetrician," she mused. "Although, I can't imagine one of those would be entirely in their element with this kind of thing, either. But, to a certain degree, I would expect this to go like pretty much any other pregnancy, and that varies from person to person."

I swallowed hard. "The woman who told me about the pregnancy in the first place... she said it's probably Cameron's, since he's a shifter. Sort of."

"Well, that's probably a fair assumption," she agreed. "But these things can surprise you. And in any case, you are Ichor's vessel. What belongs to one of the paladins belongs to all of them."

"Right," I said stiffly.

"Is there anything we can do for the nausea?" Sam asked. I got the feeling he was concerned about it even more than I was, which was... sweet. In a way.

I still wasn't sure how I felt about him *being* sweet, or about any of this.

"There is an elixir I can give you," Alona answered. "In fact, I already whipped it up last night when you said you were thinking about coming."

"Thank you," I said. "That's very kind of you."

"Oh, it's nothing. I'll send the recipe home with you," she offered. "If you managed to bind that thing in the basement, I'm sure a little tincture won't be any trouble."

I snickered. That was certainly one way to refer to whatever the hell it was that Cameron turned into on a full moon. "That would be great."

"It should help," she said. "But it isn't nearly as effective as the father's semen. A little hair of the dog that bit you and all that."

"Oh my God," Sam muttered halfway under his breath.

"Well, it's the truth," she huffed. "You'd think you were raised as a Puritan. You get that from your father. Damn buzzkill if ever there was one."

I was torn between trying not to laugh and wanting to disappear underneath the table. "I'll... keep that in mind."

Even if it was true, there was no way in hell I was going to go near Cameron again willingly, in heat or not. Hell, he could go find Sarah if he got horny, since he was clearly still so enamored.

With her—with Ichor. With the idea of anything and anyone who wasn't me.

"And on that note, I think we should get going," Sam said pointedly, checking his phone. "Cyrus texted. He and Cameron are on their way home."

He sounded casual, but I could tell from the look in his eyes that he was as freaked out by that development as I was. But if Cyrus had warned him about Cameron, maybe the rift between him and his brother was bigger than I had thought, after all.

Family was sacred, even if I wasn't exactly close to mine, and I normally wouldn't have been rejoicing over the idea of coming between brothers, but considering the fact that one of them wanted me dead, I figured I was well within my rights.

And I wasn't even sure where Cyrus stood on the matter, if I was being honest with myself. It was more likely that he just saw his brother's actions as counterproductive to their mutual goal than the fact that he actually gave a shit about me.

Or that Sam did, for that matter.

Damn, I was a depressed bitch lately. It probably wasn't just the pregnancy hormones, but if I couldn't blame them, then what the hell was the point?

After a few rounds of goodbyes, and promising to visit again soon, even though I wasn't sure that was a promise I could keep, Alona snapped her fingers and said, "Shoot, I forgot the elixir. Sammy, be a dear and go get it, would you? It's on my windowsill in the kitchen, charging."

"Sure," he said, walking out of the room.

As soon as we were alone, Alona leaned in. "It's not just her, you know," she said, her voice lowered.

I stared at her in confusion for a moment. "I'm sorry? Who?"

"Ichor," she replied. "Sam always looked at you differently. In a way he never looked at anyone else, not even Sarah."

My cheeks flushed as I realized what she was saying. "I don't know about that."

"It's the truth," she insisted. "I'm not sure even he recognized it at the time, but it was always clear

enough to me, and now, it's even more so. Destiny always finds a way."

"Yeah," I said, my throat growing tight. "I guess it does."

And that was exactly what I was afraid of.

CHAPTER

SIX

CHASE

Sam and I were both quiet for most of the drive back to the mansion, and I was too lost in my own thoughts to put much of a guess into why he was lost in his.

Alona had given us both a lot to consider, it seemed.

When we arrived, I was relieved that the motorcycle Cameron had been driving lately wasn't in the garage. He rotated his favorite vehicles, while the others were creatures of habit. Leave it to Cameron to be unpredictable even in that regard.

Sam got out to open my door and offered his hand to help me out of the car. It wrapped around mine, strong and warm, and the contact was enough to make me feel like I was wrapped up in a security blanket, snug and safe.

It was a lie brought on by whatever chemical bond had formed between me and the paladins when we started having sex, no doubt, but it was a pretty lie.

If I was being honest with myself, though, in Sam's case, it was one I had believed for a lot longer than all this vampire shit. That just didn't make it any more true.

When we made it inside, the house was empty, but that was no surprise. Cyrus and Cameron weren't back yet, much to my relief, which meant Alex would be on patrol.

I'd been around long enough to know he definitely got the shitty shifts, but I couldn't exactly bring myself to feel bad for him. Even if his excuses that he had to work seemed a bit more legitimate in retrospect than they once had.

"Are you hungry?" Sam asked.

"No," I said quickly. A bit *too* quickly, judging from the puppy eyes he was giving me. The last time Sam had tried to kill me might have been that night during the ritual, but the first time had been when I was sick and he'd attempted to make me his mother's chicken noodle soup. I still gagged a little whenever I smelled broth.

"I'm still stuffed from your grandmother's food," I said, covering for myself right away even though I'd been too stressed to eat much.

He seemed to buy it and nodded. "Well, maybe you should rest, then. It's been a long day."

I gave him a look. “I went on a forty-minute car ride. It wasn’t exactly a road trip.”

“No,” he agreed, coming over to rest his hands on my stomach. They still easily spanned my torso, although if I kept getting bigger at this rate, that wasn’t going to be true for much longer. “But your energy is being drained twice as fast now at least. It’s important for you to rest.”

“Yeah, I get it,” I sighed, wrapping my arms around his neck. “Are you my father now or something?”

“No, but I wouldn’t complain if you wanted to call me Daddy in bed now and then,” he said with a wicked smirk.

“Oh, shut up,” I said, leaning up on my toes to kiss him against my better judgment.

I gasped as his hands tightened around my waist and he lifted me up onto the kitchen counter in one swift movement, like it was nothing. “Sam!”

“No one’s home. I’d hear,” he said, as if *that* was the issue at hand here. When he swept my hair back and kissed my neck, his hands traveling up my thighs, I had a hard time caring as much as I should have.

“Sam,” I murmured, my head falling back as his teeth grazed my flesh and my legs parted naturally to make room for him between them. Everywhere he touched, I felt cool and soothed and warm and tingly all at once. The whole “human incarnation of Icy Hot” thing had to be a quirk of being a paladin, because no amount of horniness could account for it.

“I’m going to be sharing you with Cyrus and Alex for the rest of the night,” he said, reaching down to unbutton my jeans. The fact that he sounded breathless, as if he was already that worked up just from making out a little, was admittedly flattering. And it made me feel a little better about the stupefying effect he had on me in turn. “I’ve gotta make every second count.”

“I thought you guys liked sharing,” I teased.

“‘Like’ is a strong word,” he answered, digging his hand into my hair to pull my head back for better access to my throat. “And that was before we were sharing you.”

His words caught me off guard, and so did the way my heart clenched in response to them. Before I could respond, I heard the front door open and froze. “I thought you said you’d hear if someone was coming in.”

“I got distracted,” he said sheepishly.

To my relief, Cyrus was the one who walked in, followed by Alex. The latter took one look at our current position and scowled.

“Again?”

“Shut up, Alex,” Sam and I said in unison.

“I see you got started without us,” Cyrus said wryly.

I rolled my eyes, walking over to him. “So now you’re involved in the secret vampire subterfuge meetings? Doesn’t feel very clandestine.”

“Sorry to ruin your fun,” Cyrus said, a glimmer of amusement in his eyes.

“Where’s your doppelganger?” I asked, glancing over at the door.

“Out on patrol, so we’ve got until morning,” Cyrus assured me, offering his hand. “Are you ready to go upstairs?”

I hesitated before taking his hand—mostly for my own benefit—and followed him. He led me to his room, of course, because each of the guys seemed to have some dumb caveman thing about fucking me in *his* room. I was starting to think Alona was right about them being alphas. That would explain the ridiculous macho bullshit.

At least Cyrus’s room wasn’t trashed. If it was Alex’s room, I was pretty sure I’d sink into the old beer cans and stiff hand towels, considering how long it had been since he’d fucked anyone.

At least, I thought it had. And I had to remind myself I didn’t give a shit who or what he fucked or didn’t fuck when I felt an irrational twinge of jealousy.

Talk about old habits dying hard.

Cyrus walked me over to the edge of the bed, and I sat down as the others slipped into the room. Sam closed and locked the door behind them, for all the good that would do if Cameron got wind of what was happening.

“Don’t be nervous,” Cyrus said, sitting down on the bed behind me as he swept my hair back behind my shoulder. “I won’t let them take enough to hurt you.”

“It’s not them I’m nervous about,” I admitted as Sam sat down on my left side with Alex on my right. Alex seemed pretty anxious himself, like he wasn’t sure how close he could get without me making good on that snowglobe threat.

Good. He was a lot less annoying when he was scared.

“So, how are we going to do this?” Sam asked, looking over at Cyrus. “His blood first, or yours?”

“His,” Cyrus answered. “It’ll be less noticeable if it’s masked with mine afterward.”

“Wait, you can tell that?” I asked, horrified. And here I thought I’d had a keen nose as an RA sniffing out pot in the freshman dorms.

“We’re vampires,” Cyrus said, as if it should be obvious. “Blood holds a lot of sensory information for us.”

“Right,” I mumbled. “And you’re sure Cameron isn’t onto us?”

“If he was, we’d be having a different conversation right now,” he answered.

I swallowed hard. “Comforting.”

I was distracted when Sam leaned in, his lips brushing against my throat once more. It was ridiculous how quickly the tension could leave my body with a single touch from him. He wrapped his arms around me, and I felt safe in his embrace no matter how much of a lie that was.

“Relax,” he urged, flicking his tongue against my jugular before I felt his newly lengthened fangs graze my skin as a warning prior to him biting in all the way.

I gasped, writhing a little in his grasp, but the response was far more from pleasure than pain. Even the pain was enjoyable, and I sank against my chest, giving myself over to the sensation. At least until Alex took my arm and I tensed up again.

“Unless you’ve sprouted fangs in the last day or two, don’t even think about using your teeth,” I warned him.

He sighed, holding my hand out to Cyrus. “Can you open this?”

I flipped him off, but I was too distracted by Sam sucking on my neck to be as annoyed as I should have been. Cyrus took my hand and bit into my wrist, gentle as ever, and I tried not to pay attention to the fact that it was Alex’s mouth sealing around the wound he’d just made.

It felt better than I wanted to admit, and when his tongue swept along the inside of my wrist, it did more for me than any of his lackluster handjobs ever had.

“Fuck,” I muttered, my head falling back onto Sam’s shoulder as he continued to drink. I couldn’t help but squirm, and my already tight jeans were getting uncomfortable. I wasn’t sure what kind of Pavlovian reaction this was, but it was utterly fucked up. Probably the most fucked-up part of all of this, and it was already a dead heat.

“God, you’re hot,” Sam growled against my throat before lapping at the droplets of blood trickling down it.

“That’s enough,” Cyrus said. I assumed he was talking to Alex, since he tensed up, but he didn’t break away immediately.

When I looked down, there was a darkness in his eyes I hadn’t seen there in a while, but recently enough that it turned my arousal to fear. When his eyes met mine, it vanished quickly enough and he pulled away, droplets of my blood still clinging to his lips.

“Sorry,” he murmured, glancing away.

I wasn’t sure what to say, but before I had to say anything, Cyrus had bitten into his own wrist and the scent of his blood drew my focus. I was still sensitive enough that it was a notable distraction. One that was far more appealing than I wanted it to be.

“Here,” Cyrus said, offering his wrist to Alex first. He seemed reluctant to take it, but he finally did, sealing his mouth around the wound.

Alex stopped suddenly, lifting his head. “It’s not as sweet as his.”

“Yeah, I’ll work on that,” Cyrus said with his usual biting sarcasm. At least, usual when it came to the way he related to Alex.

Alex just scowled and went back to feeding from him. When Cyrus gave his wrist a tug a few moments later, he had an easier time stopping.

“Alright, now it’s your turn,” Cyrus said, turning to Sam.

“Lucky me,” he quipped, moving over to the vampire’s side. He hesitated awkwardly for a moment. “You sure we can’t do this the regular way?”

“I told you, fresh blood works faster,” Cyrus said impatiently.

Sam just grunted in acknowledgment and reached for his hand. I watched as his fangs lengthened once more and pierced the other man’s flesh, finding myself far too interested.

Cyrus noticed. His eyes met mine and he cocked an eyebrow. “What is it?”

“Nothing,” I said quickly, looking away as I tucked a strand of hair behind my ear.

“Chase has a vampire fetish,” Alex said flatly. “He’s just turned on.”

“Do you want an involuntary vasectomy with an ice blade?” I hissed, lobbing a throw pillow at his head. “Because this is how you get an involuntary vasectomy with an ice blade.”

Alex just caught the pillow, grinning from ear to ear like the complete bastard he was.

Sam looked up, breaking away from Cyrus’s wrist. He looked between me and Cyrus, a devilish glint in his eyes and a smirk on his bloody lips. When his tongue darted out to lick them off, my cock strained against my boxers at full attention.

“What, is this like your version of two straight girls making out at a party?” Sam asked.

“Oh, fuck off,” I mumbled. He wasn’t wrong, though.

“Huh.” The curiosity in Cyrus’s tone was more insulting than anything.

My head snapped up. “What do you mean, ‘huh’?” I asked defensively.

Rather than answering, he turned to Sam and leaned in to whisper something I couldn’t make out. Sam’s eyes widened slightly as he pulled away.

“That’s an interesting idea,” he said thoughtfully.

“What is?” I asked, looking between them. I really didn’t like the way this was going. At least, not until Cyrus moved further back on the bed until he was resting against the headboard, and Sam settled next to him, leaning in close.

I watched in disbelief as Sam’s tongue flicked against Cyrus’s throat the way he had done to me so recently, and every coherent thought in my brain fled me, leaving my head as empty as everyone had always said it was.

To my amazement, Cyrus tilted his head slightly to allow Sam better access and slipped his hand into the other man’s hair. “You like this, pet?” he asked me in a knowing tone.

This time, when I tried to swallow the knot in my throat, I couldn’t even remember how. And my mouth was bone dry. “I… um… I…”

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Cyrus said, his lips curving slightly upward. His pupils turned to pinpricks as

Sam's fangs sank in, and his grip on the other man's hair tightened. Guess he wasn't used to being bit in such an intimate place.

The fact that the show they were clearly putting on for my benefit was working was infuriating. Just not enough to make me want it to stop. All I could do was stare in horny fixation as Sam sucked on Cyrus's throat, and when he pulled away slightly to run his tongue up along the wound, the intimate knowledge I had of what it felt like to be on the receiving end of his tongue's attention made it even more arousing to watch.

Fuck. I'd never been that into watching porn, but I could get used to having it acted out before me with two of the hottest guys I had ever seen.

Cyrus gave Sam's hair a tug, and he lifted his head, his dark eyes glazed with confusion. I thought the show was over, until Cyrus leaned in and pressed his lips to Sam's.

Sam froze at first, and just when I was sure he was going to push him away, he relaxed and returned the kiss, parting his lips as Cyrus's tongue flicked against them for entrance to taste his own blood.

Was it possible to die of thirst? The horny kind?

"Fuck," I breathed. I hadn't even realized I'd said it out loud until Sam's eyes opened and darted over to me, filled with amusement.

He didn't stop, though. He just took Cyrus's face in his hands and deepened the kiss.

"Damn," Alex muttered, not so under his breath. He flushed when he realized he'd been caught and looked away. "What? They're hot."

For once, I couldn't really fault him.

"Care to join us, pet?" Cyrus asked, his voice low and husky.

He didn't need to ask twice. I was already on my way, crawling onto his lap. He kissed me and his hands settled on my waist, pushing up my shirt. I was too turned on to even be self-conscious about the fact that I was a bit softer than I'd been the first time we'd slept together.

Sam was already behind me, peeling my shirt off over my head. When he took my nipple between his fingers, rolling it until it grew hard and pebbled, I whimpered and fell back against him, arching into Cyrus's torso in the process.

"If I'd known it was that easy to get him this worked up, I would've made out with you a long time ago," Sam said dryly, kissing my neck from behind as his hands roved down my bare chest and unbuttoned my jeans, much to my relief.

Cyrus snorted a laugh, already freeing his cock from his jeans. "Works on women. I figured it would work on him."

"Hey," I snapped, even though I was too intrigued by the implication that he and Cameron had done that, considering I knew they had shared lovers before, to be as annoyed as I should have been.

He pacified me by gripping my cock as soon as he'd tugged my jeans down over my hips, and Sam

helped me get them off the rest of the way. I was already torturously stiff from their little performance, and the touch was almost painful.

Not painful enough to complain, though.

I held my breath instinctively as I felt Cyrus positioning his cock between my cheeks, and lowered myself onto it. As keyed up as I was, a pained whimper still escaped me and he swallowed it down with a kiss.

Sam's hands found my hips as he continued kissing my throat from behind, and I could have sworn he had claws as his fingertips dug into my flesh. Maybe the combo of Cyrus's blood and mine was working faster than we'd thought.

He pushed down on my hips, forcing me down all the way onto Cyrus's cock, and the other man moaned in response, his tongue sliding into my mouth. I moaned, unable to resist the urge to push my hips forward, taking even more as Sam guided me up and down on the vampire's cock, using me like a fucking sleeve.

And apparently, I had a kink for being a human sex toy, because I'd never been more turned on in my fucking life.

"Think he could take us both?" Cyrus asked as I took him to the hilt with a grunt.

"Only one way to find out," Sam said, and I could hear the metal clink of his belt buckle as he slid it off.

"What about me?" Alex protested.

He had the worst fucking timing for reminding me of his existence.

"You can watch," I said through my teeth. "Consider yourself lucky."

Cyrus slipped further down the bed and pulled me on top of him so we were both more or less horizontal, kissing me as if to distract me from my irritation. And it worked.

Especially when I felt Sam from behind, straddling us both. "Just need to figure out the right angle," he murmured, pushing the head of his cock between my cheeks.

My body tensed in response, since I was already painfully stretched around Cyrus's cock, and it actually sank in what they were planning on doing. I'd heard them before, but it had kind of gone in one ear and out the other, considering the sensory overload I was currently experiencing.

"Is that even possible?" I asked. "Like, outside of porn?"

"It's possible," Cyrus said, because apparently, he was the world expert on threesomes. "It's just going to hurt at first."

Like getting fucked by either of them solo didn't already hurt, Magically Lubricating Omega Asshole or not.

"Just relax," said Sam.

“Easy for you to say,” I shot back.

“I could compel you,” Cyrus offered.

I looked down at him, my hair falling around us. “You could *what*?”

“Not anything major,” he answered. “Just to help you relax a little. Think of it as a form of hypnosis.”

“That’s... weird,” I muttered. “Let’s just do it the normal way.”

Assuming there was a normal way to get railed by two guys at once.

Cyrus shrugged, running his fingertips up along my spine. “Suit yourself.”

When I felt Sam pressing further between my cheeks, the head of his cock straining at the tight ring of muscle that was already being taxed fully by Cyrus’s girth, I wasn’t so sure that was the right decision.

“Just take a deep breath,” Sam said, his hand resting on the small of my back, pushing down.

Easier said than done. I took a breath, though, and the moment I did, Sam pushed a finger in alongside Cyrus’s cock. Cyrus winced slightly, but said nothing as Sam continued to work me open wider, slipping another finger in. Surprisingly, it didn’t hurt as much as I expected, and with Cyrus’s crown angled into my prostate, just lying on top of him with Sam fingering me was weirdly pleasurable.

When he finally pulled his fingers out, I knew what was coming and prepared myself by taking another deep breath. The moment I did, he seized on the opportunity to push inside. Just the tip, but it was still enough to make me cry out in alarm.

“Easy,” Sam purred, kissing the back of my shoulder as he eased in a little deeper. Even with the lubrication my body was producing, it was still blindingly painful at first. Enough that I almost thought of telling him to pull out, but I had already endured the worst of it, theoretically, and I was admittedly curious about the whole double penetration thing. Especially since I was pretty sure I was never doing this again.

“Damn, that’s a tight fit,” Sam muttered.

Cyrus’s eyes rolled back and he groaned in agreement, his hand cradling the back of my head and holding me against his chest. “Oh, fuck,” I mumbled, twitching involuntarily as the sensation of being filled by them both began to be less excruciating and more...

Fuck, I didn’t even know if there was a word for it. Good felt at once like an understatement, and inadequate to describe the pleasure-pain combo going on. Plainsure?

Sam pushed deeper into me, taking a second to catch his breath before he started slowly guiding his cock in and out, ever so slightly. By then, I was pretty sure I was drooling on Cyrus’s pecs as I lay still and prone, afraid to move at the risk of turning the newly pleasurable sensations agonizing once more.

“Good boy,” Cyrus coaxed, running his fingers through my hair. His hips pushed up into me and as I yelped in response, he captured my lips to muffle the sound.

I moaned against his lips, because it felt too good to linger on the pain. Even that was... good. In its own way. It took a while for them to find a rhythm, but once they did, the feeling of them both moving inside me in slow, steady alternation, the one pushing deeper in while the other pulled out, was like nothing I'd ever experienced before.

All of a sudden, I thought I might have been too hasty about that whole never doing this again thing.

Sam moaned, his nails digging into my hips again. Yeah, they were definitely claws now. He didn't seem to have as much control over it as Cyrus and Cameron did yet. Not that I was complaining.

"Damn, that feels weird," he mumbled.

And just like that, my hard-on took a backseat to my irritation. "Excuse me?"

"Not you," he said sheepishly, his voice strained. "I just mean rubbing against another guy's dick. Besides yours. It's not bad, just... different."

"You want to stop?" Cyrus asked.

"Fuck no," Sam answered quickly.

Cyrus scoffed. "That's what I thought."

I realized only when I heard Alex's labored breaths that he was enjoying a show of his own, but I was having too much fun to care. I reached back to caress Sam's cheek and arched into him slightly, which drove both him and Cyrus wild.

"Less talking, more making out," I panted.

Sam gave a husky laugh next to my ear as he leaned in, his fingertips caressing Cyrus's jaw. "You heard him."

There was enough of a height difference between Cyrus and me that even with me draped across his torso, Sam could still easily kiss him above me. Cyrus's right hand left my back to touch him, and the feeling of being pressed between them both as they kissed, their cocks grinding against each other inside me...

I came from the combination of that and my own cock rubbing up against Cyrus's torso, and the orgasm was so intense I was pretty sure I blacked out for a second. It didn't so much end as it gradually ebbed into even more arousal, since they were still inside me.

Cyrus came first, breaking the kiss with Sam to capture my lips, and the tinge of blood on my tongue was even more arousing. Sam was soon to follow, and their come filled me beyond what I thought was possible, hot and pulsing and so good it was almost torture.

I came again just from the pressure building up inside me and collapsed between them, my breathing raw and ragged.

For a few moments, I just lay there, my body twitching and my mind void of all but pleasure.

It was... nice.

Okay, maybe that was the understatement of the century, but neither of them needed help in the ego department. Sam finally pulled out first, but Cyrus stayed in for another minute, massaging me before he pulled out.

I collapsed facedown on the bed, too drained—and stuffed—to even think of moving. “Son of a bitch,” I mumbled into Cyrus’s pillow. It smelled like him, sex, and sweat, a surprisingly pleasant combination.

Cyrus chuckled, stroking my back as he stretched out alongside me. “Are you all right, pet?”

“Not sure that’s the word,” I answered, too spent to even lift my head. Or care about the fact that I could feel their blended come dribbling out of me. The ten-foot walk to the shower might as well have been an odyssey to Olympus.

“Damn,” Alex muttered, his voice a bit strained, too. “That was fucking hot.”

For once, I was inclined to agree with him.

CHAPTER
SEVEN

CHASE

It had been a little over a week since the Vampire Club's first official meeting—the name I had given my nearly nightly feeding sessions with Cyrus, Sam, and Alex—and I was starting to see the appeal of secret societies. Especially if they usually resulted in getting trained by hot vampires.

Illuminati, sign me the fuck up.

While the elixir Alona had given me had definitely been effective against my ever worsening morning sickness—which was a complete bullshit term, because this nausea was not bound by any construct as weak and flimsy as time—I was already out, and I really didn't want to entertain the alternative she had mentioned.

The fact that I had been swallowing no shortage of come over the last week was probably a sign that Elisa had been right about the paternity originally. That, or the old wives' tale was just more bullshit.

As unappealing as the idea of asking Cameron for his magic vampire come had been initially, I probably would've thought about it if I'd had the chance. All the more reason to be grateful that the others had refused to leave me alone with Cameron for so much as a minute.

That was fine by me. I had seen him once or twice, but it was only in passing. I didn't know exactly how Cyrus and the others were keeping him at bay, other than the possibility that they were using reverse psychology and had commanded him to spend as much time around me as possible. That seemed to be the only hope of ever getting him to comply with anything.

That afternoon, Alex was on babysitting duty while Sam was out on patrol, and Cyrus and Cameron were wherever the hell they went when Cyrus was keeping his brother distracted and away from me.

Wherever it was, I didn't care one way or another as long as Cameron left me alone. And so far, Cyrus had done a decent job. I was still alive, at any rate.

I was in the kitchen, having gathered the herbs and other correspondences I needed for the simple elixir. I figured now was as good a time as any, since I didn't like doing magic while the guys were around. They hadn't forbidden it expressly, but they were always a pain in the ass about it, and the last thing I needed were backseat alchemists.

The elixir was simple enough in theory, but practice was another matter. I had tried it twice already,

but I was hoping the third batch would be the charm, considering the other two had ended up boiling themselves out of existence, and smelling like the fires of hell to boot. Definitely nothing like the pungent yet not unpleasant concoction Alona had made.

Back to the drawing board.

I was already feeling like a second-rate witch when I sensed I wasn't alone. I wasn't even sure if that was just a normal kind of instinct I hadn't paid attention to before, or some effect of my magic weakening.

When I turned around, I realized it was my new least favorite person—a title the guys all seemed to be jockeying for at one point or another, like it was the gold medal at the fuckboy Olympics.

"Cameron," I said in a tone of fake pleasantries. "Awesome. My day wasn't shitty enough yet. I was hoping you could fix that."

"Always happy to be of service," he said without missing a beat, snatching an apple out of the bowl on the counter. He bit into it with a crunch, and I couldn't help a grimace at the mental image of those fangs tearing into my flesh just as enthusiastically.

Yeah... grimace. That was the word. It wasn't like I was still nursing any self-destructive impulses where he was concerned or anything.

He walked over to me, leaning in to examine my brew and wrinkling his nose. "What the hell are you making, ass soup?"

"One, congratulations. That has to be the most cursed phrase in the English language," I said, scowling at him. "Two, it's an elixir, and yes, I know it sucks. I'm working on it. It's not like I came out of the womb practicing this shit like the rest of you freaks."

He blew a puff of air through his nostrils. "What are you working on, anyway?"

I paused to consider whether I wanted to tell him the truth. Reminding him of the pregnancy didn't really seem like a good idea, but then again, it wasn't like he would've forgotten. His fundamental flaw was a lack of morality, not intelligence.

Or good looks, if I was being honest with myself. Always a dangerous game, that.

"You know I can just compel it out of you," he said in his usual smug tone, since I had evidently taken a millisecond too long to answer for his liking.

"Really?" I challenged, folding my arms. "Over something as trivial as this? Because it didn't work out so well for you the last time, did it?"

I could tell from the way his jaw clenched I had struck a nerve. Good.

It was bad enough that the others had me physically outmatched at every turn, without also having to worry about them screwing with my head. Especially when I had just gotten used to being alone in it again.

"Are you going to tell me or not?" he demanded.

I rolled my eyes, not wanting to just on principle. For the sake of keeping the already tentative peace, though, I relented.

Alex was so dead when I got ahold of him, since he was the one who was supposed to be on “keep Cameron away from Chase” duty.

"It's an elixir that's supposed to help with morning sickness."

I wasn't sure why, but that seemed to surprise him.

"Well, smelling that shit definitely isn't going to help," he said, lifting the pot off the stove. Before I could protest, he carried it outside and dumped it on the lawn.

The grass sizzled, and I blinked. Yeah, that was definitely not right.

Cameron raised an eyebrow, like that had just proved his point. And to be fair, it kind of had.

"Where did you get this recipe, anyway?"

I pursed my lips, not about to admit that I had gone to see Sam's grandmother. Even if the idea of tiptoeing around, like it was any of his business where I did or didn't go and who I did or didn't see, was infuriating. It was still my current reality, and until I could change that, there wasn't any point in making my life harder than it already was.

Or putting it in more danger than it was already in.

"The Internet," I answered.

He scoffed, and I was kind of insulted that he believed I thought I could just print out any bullshit I found online and expect it to work. But if Cameron had proved nothing else, it was that his opinion of me literally could not get any lower if it was a game of limbo.

"Well, it clearly isn't working," he said, turning off the burner. "Stay here."

Considering the fact that I wasn't even supposed to be around him alone, that wasn't a command I was eager to obey, but he returned in a matter of seconds.

Cyrus more or less acted like he was human, but Cameron was never above flaunting his stupid vampire powers for the most trivial and mundane purposes.

Then again, I was probably a teensy bit jealous I didn't have more cool stupid vampire powers of my own. I had just gotten the thirst for blood, without even having most of the benefits.

But hey, I could summon everyone's least favorite weather phenomena when I got super pissed, so that was nice.

Cameron came back holding one of Sarah's grimoires in his hand. One she was probably missing.

The thought was kind of amusing. And yes, that probably made me a petty bitch, but I had the right.

"There's bound to be something in here," he said, handing me the book. "Something that actually works."

I glanced at the cover and realized it was one I hadn't seen before. The title was in Latin, even though it looked handwritten. Of course it was in Latin. Because Sarah was nothing if not extra.

"Poisons and remedies?" I asked doubtfully. "Quite the subject range."

"Two sides of the same coin. You have to know how a machine is built in order to take it apart," he said with a shrug. "That's what Ichor always used to say, anyway."

"Yeah, that sounds like Ichor, all right" I muttered, flipping through the pages. If nothing else, being an unwitting witch had dramatically improved my grasp of Latin.

Not that I could go to med school when I was going to see my peers and patients as food. Even if I hadn't been consumed by thirst in a long time, I figured that probably had more to do with the fact that the guys kept me fed than my willpower.

"See anything?" Cameron asked.

"This seems to be mostly about serious injuries and illnesses. Probably a bit overkill for a little morning sickness."

Cameron shrugged, continuing to stand there as I perused the book. When I realized he wasn't going anywhere, I said, "Have you seen Alex around today?"

"Sure," he said casually. "He's the one they assigned to make sure I'm never alone with you. At least until Cyrus gets back."

I looked up from my book, staring blankly at him.

"Sorry, was it supposed to be a secret?" he asked dryly. "I spent the last few centuries with those idiots. You don't think I know when they're up to shit?"

"You did something to Alex, didn't you?" I asked, choosing not to acknowledge his question.

"Sarah left some tinctures behind. Pretty sure the sleeping one came from that," he said, nodding to the grimoire in my hands. "Works great, by the way."

I sighed, closing the book, and dust blew up in my face. "How much did you give him?"

"Not enough to do any damage," said Cameron. "Even if a year-long nap wouldn't be the least productive thing he's ever done."

I shook my head. "And you wonder why the others don't trust you."

"Not really," he countered. "But they don't need to trust me. Ever since you came along, I sure as hell don't trust them."

"Me?"

"Yes, you," he sneered. "The innocent routine might work on Cyrus, but I don't buy it."

"No?" I challenged. "You bought the dumb blond routine easily enough before."

He stared at me for a moment, before he scoffed. "I'm still not sure how much of that is an act, but

touché. You know, there is another cure for that kind of thing."

"What, arsenic?" I asked in a flat tone.

He snorted. "No. There's an old wives' tale that says if you're carrying a shifter's baby, you can cure your morning sickness by—"

"Swallowing his come," I said, rolling my eyes at the look of surprise on his face. "Yeah, I know, I've heard that one before. Pretty sure it's just some BS excuse to make sure alphas still get their cocks sucked while their mates are pregnant."

"Maybe," Cameron said with a glimmer of amusement in his eyes. "But there's only one way to find out for sure."

I wasn't sure what the right response to that would've been, but blushing definitely wasn't it.

Man, my wires were really crossed with this guy. "You can't be serious."

He shrugged. "It's just an offer."

"Oh, yes, you're truly a humanitarian," I quipped. "I'm astounded by your sacrifice."

Cameron took a step forward, and I instinctively took a step back, until I felt my back hit the kitchen table. "That doesn't sound like a no."

"Would you even recognize the word?" I asked.

He planted his hands on the table on either side of me and leaned in until his body was pressed to mine and his scent in my nostrils was playing all sorts of mind games.

And my head wasn't even the part of me that was most fucked up by that look in his eyes. That look that said, "I want to absolutely wreck you in every sense of the word, and you're stupid enough that you're going to enjoy it."

My breath faltered on my lips, and I thought of calling for help, not because I actually thought Cameron would force himself on me, but because I didn't trust myself not to give in to the temptation.

I wasn't even in heat, but I felt the pull just as strongly as I had then. The magnetic force of his gaze, and the power emanating from him as he loomed over me. Taller, stronger, superior in every way.

I must have looked so pathetic to him. Like a child in the presence of a god.

Although, given the way he was looking back at me, heat smoldering in his eyes, I wasn't so sure. I remembered reading in one of the grimoires that peridot's celestial correspondence was the sun, and I hadn't understood it then, but I did now.

The color of hellfire wasn't red or yellow or gold. It was green. Solid, piercing, relentless green, burning right through my soul.

I had barely opened my mouth to voice what little opposition I had left when he captured my lips and drained it all away. Even as I pushed against his chest and he gathered me into his arms, I felt the resolve leaving my body along with my strength, and sank into his embrace.

Cameron forced his tongue past my lips and into the hollow of my mouth, and in that moment, a kiss ceased to be something two people actively took part in and became a devastating force that just happened. Like a hurricane or a tornado, just tearing through and leaving absolute chaos in its wake.

And here I was, in the eye of the storm, letting it happen. Not fighting or resisting, just opening wider for his ruthless tongue, my hands now balled up in his shirt and trying to pull him closer rather than push him away as he groped his way down my body and started peeling my shirt off over my head.

I flinched as his hands traveled down my heated flesh. The tenderness of his touch hurt. It hurt because I knew it was a lie, and if I was already betraying myself, I wanted to go all the way. The only things he really had to offer me were spite and condescension, and yet I craved them as surely as I ever had anyone else's kindness or attention or tenderness.

What the hell was wrong with me?

It was a valid question, but it ceased to matter when he took my nipple between his thumb and forefinger and pinched just enough to hurt, sending little electric shocks all the way down my body.

I gave a pathetic whimper against his lips as his other hand slipped around to cup my backside, giving it a hard squeeze.

Cameron was the first to break the kiss, of course. I had a feeling he had been the one to break it before, too, if we had even kissed in the shower at all.

My entire heat was a blur, especially that part. It was like my mind was trying to protect me by blocking it out so I couldn't go all-in on the self-destructive longing that was already overtaking me, even though I was in the middle of getting exactly what I wanted. This thing I shouldn't crave, and yet I did, all the more desperately for the fact that it was forbidden.

The worst sin Cameron had committed against me by far wasn't malice or murder, it was making me want him.

And it was a sin I was all too complicit in as he looked down at me with the devil in his eyes and said, "Good boy. Now, get on your knees."

I dropped to the floor so fast I briefly wondered if it was compulsion, but the last time he'd tried, he had struggled enough just to get a foothold that it would have been painfully obvious. And then I realized I didn't have anything or anyone to blame but myself for being this pathetic. For sinking to my knees as he unfastened his belt and pulled out his monster cock. For opening wide, like a complete slut.

An unprincipled slut.

He placed the head of his cock on my waiting tongue and fisted a hand in my hair as I took it into my mouth and gripped the base. I started sucking, and I must have been doing an adequate enough job because his head fell back and his fingers tightened around the white strands caught between them.

When he hissed in a rush of breath through his teeth, an obscene amount of satisfaction thrummed through me like a melody. I pulled his cock from my mouth only to run my tongue along the vein on the underside, traveling up slowly while I made eye contact with him.

Cameron's eyes turned from bright green to the stormy dark hues of a forest, and a low growl of approval rumbled through his throat.

That sound was raw and primal, and it resonated with the same inside me—some bloodthirsty beast lurking deep inside my soul, but its predatory instincts were all focused inward. Like it was the manifestation of all my self-destructive impulses. So of course it was loyal to him.

I wasn't even touching myself, but I was so turned on that the friction of my jeans rubbing against my stiff cock was probably enough to get me off. And I wanted so much more.

I couldn't stop thinking about him bending me over the counter and taking me from behind. All the filthy, violent, shameful things he'd do to me now that there was no one and nothing to stop him. Nightmares became fantasies when he was the one inflicting them.

"Chase," he growled, and the sound of my name on his lips along with the pain of him tugging on my hair was enough to have me hovering on the precipice of orgasm.

I sealed my mouth around the head of his cock and sucked harder, my hands clawing desperately at the backs of his thighs.

He pushed my head down suddenly, forcing his cock deeper down my throat until it hit the back as if I had any intention of stopping. It stimulated my gag reflex until he pulled out a little, but my jaw was still stretched open so wide it hurt.

It didn't stop me from wanting it, though, or from swallowing his come down hungrily. From licking his cock clean when he finally released me, my tongue sweeping up the droplets of his come that had dribbled down his thigh. Because apparently, my dignity had gone out the window a few hundred miles in the rearview mirror, and there was no way to turn around now.

"You're decent at that," Cameron said, his voice rough with the notes of approval that hadn't yet faded, despite his dickish words.

I glowered up at him, still too high off of... whatever the fuck that was to be appropriately angry. Before I could respond, I realized we weren't alone. It was a sense more than anything, and as I looked up to find Cyrus standing in the doorway, something about the way he looked made me think he hadn't just gotten there.

And the smug smirk tugging at Cameron's lips confirmed it.

"Afternoon, brother," he said in his usual smartass way as he zipped up.

The only thing outweighing my mortification that Cyrus had walked in on that—even if I still had no idea exactly how much of it he'd seen—was my confusion over the way he was looking at his brother. He'd always enjoyed watching me and Sam together, but there was something in the dark rage burning within his eyes that made me think his silence was more about restraint than his voyeuristic tendencies.

"Sorry to interrupt," Cyrus said, his voice low and dripping with anger that had me on edge, even if I wasn't sure what I'd done to piss him off. Or if he was even mad at me.

I had no sooner reached for the chair to pull myself up, since Cameron clearly wasn't going to offer a hand, than Cyrus was right in front of me, pulling me back to my feet. Maybe he wasn't *that* mad.

Then again, I was pretty sure I could try to kill him and he'd still open the door for me.

He still hadn't taken his eyes off Cameron, though. "Care to tell me what you're doing here?"

"Coming in the vessel's throat," Cameron said without missing a beat. "Has it been that long for you?"

I bristled at his choice of phrasing, certain the whole "vessel" thing was for my benefit as well as Cyrus's.

"I was referring to the fact that you're supposed to be out looking for the hunter," Cyrus said pointedly.

"Is that it?" Cameron said, walking until he was toe-to-toe with his brother. "You sure you're not jealous?"

Cyrus's eyes narrowed, but I wasn't sure what to make of the fact that he didn't deny it. They just continued to stare each other down for a few tense moments, and I got that familiar feeling they were talking telepathically again.

For once, I really didn't want to know.

Cameron's expression shifted suddenly, a smirk pulling at his lips as he looked down at me. "Thanks for the good time, kid. Be seeing you."

Even though he turned and left the room, the echo of his words lingered. I was pretty fucking sure they were meant as a threat.

"What the hell was that?" I asked, looking up at Cyrus.

He didn't answer right away, but the fact that his energy had lost its sharp edge gave me hope it wasn't me he was angry at, after all.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly.

I blinked. "Let's pretend I don't have whiplash from that redirection. Sorry for what?"

"For thinking Alex was a sufficient guard," he muttered. "I found him on the bathroom floor. I take it Cameron had something to do with that?"

I sighed. "Yeah. He used one of Sarah's tinctures."

"It won't happen again," Cyrus said.

I frowned, searching his face, but I still couldn't make sense of whatever it was he was thinking. "So you're not pissed at me?"

His expression betrayed his confusion for all of a second. "Why would I be angry at you?"

"Uh... no reason," I said, not about to remind him he'd walked in on his brother's cock halfway down

my esophagus if he'd forgotten by some miracle.

Understanding crossed his features. "Oh. That. Of course not. Even if Cameron weren't a paladin and you weren't a vessel, he's... persuasive."

"I don't know if I should be offended you think I can't be expected to control myself, or concerned that you're right," I mumbled. "FYI, it was for pragmatic purposes."

"Pragmatic, huh?" He raised an eyebrow doubtfully.

I felt my face grow warm. "There's a shifter legend about the father's come being a cure for morning sickness, and the elixir didn't pan out, so I figured it couldn't hurt."

"Huh," he said, pausing as if he was considering it. "Sounds kind of like a 'blue balls' level excuse to me."

"Yeah, I know," I said, now thoroughly humiliated.

Cyrus gave me a faint smile that didn't meet his eyes and leaned down to kiss my forehead, sweeping a few long strands of hair out of my face. "If you're out of the elixir, I'll get you more. Next time, just come to me, all right?"

"I will," I said with a heavy sigh.

There was no way I was going to go there again. Not after what Cameron had said.

At least, that was what I needed to tell myself.

CHAPTER
EIGHT

CHASE

After my humiliating encounter in the kitchen with Cameron and his brother, not to mention their psychic showdown, I had decided it was probably best just to stay holed up in my room. For the next seven months or so. I could probably get away with that.

That didn't mean I had guaranteed peace, though, just more of it than usual. Alex had been his new usual clingy self, and if anything, he was even clingier than before. He seemed to feel guilty over the fact that Cameron had knocked him out.

Why he would feel guilty over *that*, something he had literally no control over, but not the damn sacrifice, I had no idea. Alex's inner machinations had always been an enigma to me, and they still were. Just less in a mysterious, sophisticated kind of way and more in a, "holy shit, you have a driver's license" kind of way.

He hadn't seemed to believe me when I told him I wasn't pissed about it, and I was pretty sure he assumed I was plotting further revenge against him.

Even if I did have the motive, I sure as hell didn't have the energy for that kind of thing lately. Being pissed off and vengeful was a lot of work. So was just existing when you were having a magical baby, apparently.

Based on my calculations, I was about to hit two months along on the dot that night, which meant that I had another seven or so months of this to look forward to—assuming omega pregnancies followed a similar timeline as normal ones. I was kind of wary, considering the fact that I was already starting to show a little.

And sure, I was a tad bit obsessive over my physical form as a skater, so I noticed things normal people probably wouldn't have, but still. There was no denying I was getting a little bit squishy around the middle. My abs were less defined, and it was that physical confirmation that I wasn't just imagining this that sent me over the deep end.

That, and the prospect of losing the body I had trained so hard for, admittedly. It really didn't help that my go-to coping mechanism was to open up a pint of Ben & Jerry's, and lately, I had been fantasizing about blood as an ice cream topping.

The thought was at once disgusting and... more appealing than I wanted to acknowledge even in my own mind.

Now I had weird vampire cravings on top of the weird pregnancy cravings. Awesome.

It was getting harder and harder to be in denial, as much as I would have liked to be, and most days, I felt like absolute trash.

It wasn't even just the morning sickness, which had come back with a vengeance once the relief Cameron had provided wore off. Even if it had lasted longer than the elixir...

Oh, fuck, I couldn't believe I had actually gone there. Or that the only thing keeping me from going there again was the fact that Cyrus and the others had been even more hypervigilant about keeping me away from him than before.

I heard the front door close downstairs, and I realized I was alone in the house.

They all still had lives, but it wasn't like I had anything to do, considering campus was home to at least one murderous hunter, and my only real hobby was ice skating.

I was going to die of boredom long before either Cameron or Professor Douchebag could get to me at this rate.

That was when an idea occurred to me. It was probably a harebrained scheme of *I Love Lucy* proportions, but it wasn't like I had anything better to do, and I was pretty sure that door slam was Alex.

Yes, I had spent so much time around these weirdos, locked up in this stupid mansion, that I was actually starting to be able to distinguish the different sounds of their footsteps and other mundane actions.

I could always tell when Sam was rummaging around in the kitchen by the way he closed cabinets, even if he left half of them open. And I could tell when it was Alex coming up the stairs because his footsteps kind of shuffled, compared to Sam's sturdy, confident thumps.

When it came to Cyrus and Cameron, I usually couldn't hear them at all. They both moved like cats, which was a vampire trait that neither Alex nor Sam seem to have picked up on yet.

That was just as well. The last thing I needed was four vampires creeping around. The twins were hard enough to keep track of.

I hauled myself out of bed and ventured downstairs, surprised when I actually made it all the way without getting accosted by one of my vigilant protectors.

The basement door was locked when I tried it, but that didn't come as any surprise. I had learned a lockpicking spell at the first opportunity, figuring I would get plenty of mileage out of it in case they decided to lock me up "for my own good."

If there was one thing the guys all had in common, it was the fact that they were masters at convincing themselves they had some noble reason for the bullshit they pulled.

That, and murder.

I was going to be bitter about that until the day I died. Again.

I held my hand out and focused on pushing my energy out through my palms and into my fingertips. It was weird, but it felt like it emanated from somewhere in my wrist. Maybe it was a pressure point, or a blood thing. I wasn't really sure.

It could also have been my imagination. That was always a possibility with this magic shit.

The thought of how Cameron would probably scold me about "wasting Ichor's power" on something so trivial was enough to disabuse me of any notions of going back to him the next time I felt sick.

Mostly.

And apparently, he was dead wrong, because it wasn't *her* power that was sustaining us both. At least, not anymore. It was mine, and I was slightly concerned by the fact that it took as much out of me as it did.

Maybe the baby really was taking more energy than I thought.

The thought should have horrified me. I'd always figured in my daydreams that if I had the ability to get pregnant, it was something I would've wanted to avoid at all costs. Not just because of the whole "losing my figure" thing, but also because the idea of another living thing growing inside me had always squicked me out.

And it still did, but there was part of me that couldn't help but be fascinated. After all, I had wanted to be a doctor for as long as I could remember. It wasn't even just the fact that it was a medical anomaly that interested me, which was rendered less novel by the fact that I was the one dealing with the consequences of said anomaly, but the idea itself was intriguing in its own way.

I found myself pressing a hand to my stomach every now and then, even though I knew I wouldn't be able to feel anything this early on. Sometimes I felt like I could, though. Not a physical fluttering so much as the sensation of energy, at once similar to and unlike mine.

If there had been one benefit to being possessed by Ichor, it was that for those months she had been active, I hadn't felt quite as alone. This baby made me feel a little less so, and even if it was feeding off my energy, at least it wasn't doing so maliciously.

There was a part of me that was starting to get attached, if I was being honest with myself. Even if it was Cameron's.

I opened the newly unlocked door and walked downstairs, holding onto the railing to be safe. I looked around the basement, which was empty save for the cage in the corner and Sarah's witchy workshop across the room. It was exactly how I remembered it, and the perfect space for what I had in mind.

I knelt down on the floor, touching my hand to the concrete, and pushed a bit more energy through my fingertips until I could feel the floor grow cold beneath them. The first hints of frost began to spread out, and from there, the expansion was exponential. In a matter of seconds, the entire basement floor was covered by a thick sheet of ice. My own private rink.

I stepped back onto the small unfrozen patch of floor I had left beside the base of the stairs and sat down on one of the bottom steps to deal with my makeshift skates, considering there was no way the

guys were going to agree to let me pick up my things in my locker at the recreation center.

I formed two blades of ice, one along at the bottom of each shoe, and tested them against the concrete before I stood up and put any weight on them. I had learned I could make ice as solid as anything as long as I put enough energy into it, but it was easier if it was something small. Like a weapon.

As soon as I stepped onto the ice, I felt the tension melt away. This was still the place that most felt like home to me, no matter where it was, really.

As I skated around my small rink, I felt strong and graceful, two states that had been elusive lately.

As tired as I was, it felt good to move my body. I knew the guys would probably freak out that I was doing any physical activity, as if I were already nine months pregnant, but being sedentary wasn't exactly the healthiest thing, either. Not that any of them were half as logical as they liked to think.

I started to wind down, having gone through my latest routine, just to reassure myself I still had it in me. As I bent back, my arms draped gracefully behind me for the final pose, I opened my eyes and realized I wasn't alone.

"Holy shit!" I cried, flipping over to right myself only to end up falling face-first toward the ice. Someone snatched me in a blur of movement too fast to process, and when I looked up, Cyrus was crouched down on the ice in front of me, giving me a look that made the one he had worn at the ritual look tame in comparison.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" he snarled.

I stared at him for a second in shock. I wasn't used to him being anything other than gentle, at least not lately, and the stark change in his demeanor was enough to catch me off guard.

I turned and realized Cameron was standing on the unfrozen strip of floor, his arms folded as he watched me and Cyrus with an "I told you so" expression.

"I was having a good time until you showed up and ruined it," I answered, trying to push away from Cyrus. He wouldn't have it, his arms locked firmly around me, and even though I knew he wasn't using that much force, there was no way I could break his hold unless he let me.

"You could've gotten hurt," he snapped. "What if I hadn't been here to catch you?"

"Then I would have fallen flat on my ass, like I have about ten thousand times since I was five," I told him. "And I wouldn't have fallen at all if *you* hadn't scared the shit out of me with your ninja routine."

His eyes were still blazing, but he seemed slightly calmer than before. At first, I thought the look in his eyes was pure anger, but I realized now that wasn't it entirely. There was fear, too.

"The door was locked," Cyrus said, conveniently choosing not to engage with my logic. "How did you even get down here?"

"You think I'm really going to tell you that?" I challenged, snapping my "skates" off on the bottom stair.

He gave me another scolding look that was admittedly tweaking the part of my brain where the daddy

issues were kept.

"Come on, let's get you upstairs," he muttered, getting to his feet with an admittedly impressive degree of ease. It seemed like being a vampire and spending your whole life perfecting a craft ended up shaking out to about the same amount of skill.

Fucking annoying.

"I told you we should find a way to muzzle his powers," Cameron said pointedly.

"We should find a way to muzzle you," I shot back as Cyrus took my arm and guided me over to the stairs.

Cameron just snorted. "I hope you had fun, because that's going to be the last time you waste Ichor's energy."

That was it. That was the last straw. I was already halfway up the stairs, but I spun around, gripping the railing as tightly as I wanted to squeeze his throat.

"It's not *her* energy," I hissed, feeling the railing grow slick and cold beneath my palm. "It's mine, and if I want to use it to build a fucking ice town, it's my right!"

Cameron seemed surprised by my reaction, but not particularly bothered. He really had perfected the disaffected asshole routine. "Regardless, my point remains the same."

"Bullshit. I'm sick of you acting like you own me."

"Really?" he snorted. "You didn't seem to mind the other day when you were on your knees."

My face turned red hot with a combination of rage and humiliation that was all too common in Cameron's presence. Before I could even process what I was doing, I had formed a blade of ice in my hand and was lunging at him.

Cameron's eyes widened just a smidge, but Cyrus caught me before I could see his dismay blossom into something even more satisfying.

"Let me go," I growled, straining against Cyrus. "The rest of you can keep walking around him on eggshells for all I care, but I'm going to cut his fucking spleen out and feed it to him in his cat form!"

My voice was an animalistic growl, although it admittedly sounded more like an angry kitten than a tiger. I wasn't fully sure what had come over me myself, considering Cameron had said and done much worse in the last seven days, let alone ever, but something in me had snapped and it had snapped *hard*. Maybe beyond repair, and I wasn't even sure I cared.

"Chase, calm down," Cyrus pleaded, one hand around my wrist and his other arm around my waist. And here he was usually the only one sensible enough not to utter those words and think it was going to have anything other than the opposite effect.

And granted, considering the fact that I was trying to shiv his brother, it was probably warranted. But still.

"What the hell's gotten into you?" Cameron asked, sounding more curious than annoyed, which was

infuriating in its own right. If nothing else, I had earned the right for him to consider me a threat. It was enraging that he was acting like I was just a child throwing a temper tantrum.

And yeah, that was probably how I looked, but I didn't care about that, either.

“Seriously?” I asked. “You of all people really have to ask that?”

Cameron frowned, but Cyrus gathered me into his arms before I could protest.

“Put me down!” I hissed, clawing at him. He acted like he didn’t even notice as he continued his ascent up the stairs.

“Not until we’re upstairs,” Cyrus said, ignoring my attempts to flay him open like a coked-out cat at the groomer’s until I finally exhausted myself and gave up. I settled for glowering at the side of his head instead.

“You can’t just pick me up and put me where you want me like a fucking lap dog,” I said once we were alone in the upstairs hallway.

“Actually, I can. You weigh next to nothing.”

“That was not my point and you know it,” I snapped.

He ignored me, placing me down on the bed when he brought me to his room. “Are you hurt?” he asked, looking down at me.

“No, I’m not,” I muttered. “No thanks to you scaring the shit out of me.”

“I didn’t know where you were,” he said, taking on that scolding tone again. It was more appealing than it had any right to be. “When you weren’t anywhere else in the house, I thought maybe Cameron had...” He trailed off, shaking his head. “I thought something had happened to you.”

“No one said anything about me not being allowed in the basement,” I replied. I wasn’t going to acknowledge the worry in his voice. As genuine as it seemed, it was a constant struggle to remind myself that it wasn’t on my behalf. Not really.

It was getting easier and easier to believe the lies my heart wanted to tell me over time, though. And that scared the hell out of me.

“The locked door didn’t clue you in?” he asked, raising an eyebrow. “Sarah left a ton of shit down there. I’m sure plenty of it is dangerous, and then there’s the fact that it’s where we keep Cameron when he’s—”

“On his monster period, yeah, yeah, I know,” I interrupted. “It’s not like it’s a full moon or anything.”

“It’s not just that,” he pressed. “You can’t keep using magic recklessly, Chase. For one thing, it sets Cameron off, and for another, we don’t know what kind of effect it’s having on you. Or the baby.”

I stared at him for a moment, considering his words. And the way he said them.

“So *you* don’t want me to use magic? Not just Cameron?”

He hesitated, like he didn't understand the question. "Yes...?"

"Okay," I said with a shrug.

He blinked at me like I had just spoken in Latin. Then again, he probably would have understood if I had. "Okay?" he echoed doubtfully.

"Okay," I repeated. "All you had to do was ask."

Cyrus frowned. "You've been asked plenty of times before. Why is this one different?"

"For one thing, it was Cameron, and for another, he wasn't asking, he was demanding," I replied. "It's different if it's you."

He continued to stare at me for a moment, and I was starting to think Cyrus.exe had stopped working. "Why?" he finally asked.

I hesitated. Part of me wasn't sure about the answer myself. "I don't know," I admitted. "It just is."

I was starting to wish I hadn't said anything at all when he eventually responded, but I wasn't prepared for that response to take the form of a kiss.

CHAPTER
NINE

CYRUS

“It’s different if it’s you.”

Those words had some kind of bizarre effect on me, as simple as they were. It was the sincerity with which he said them, more than anything.

My entire life, I had felt like I was living in Cameron’s shadow. Everything and everyone just seemed to bend easily to his will.

Even back when we were humans, before he had become a master of the compulsion that had come so easily to him and with so much difficulty to me, people had always responded differently to him.

Ichor was no exception. We were both her paladins, but she had never made any real secret of the fact that he was her favorite.

It was far from the first time I had ended up playing second fiddle to my brother, and I knew it certainly wouldn’t be the last.

It didn’t bother me, not anymore. It hadn’t in a long time, and it was just one of those facts of life, like the sun rising in the east or gravity. So, I really wasn’t sure why Chase’s words affected me the way they did. Or why it mattered so much to me that my opinion meant more to him than Cameron’s.

I wasn’t even sure if the reason it mattered had anything to do with Cameron at all.

Kissing Chase, though... The reason behind that was a little easier to figure out.

I had never been interested in men before. I wasn’t like Cameron, who was willing to seduce anything and anyone that breathed, if it meant getting what he wanted. Usually, that something was blood.

With Chase, it was different. It wasn’t just the fact that he was beautiful in a way I had never found another man before. It wasn’t even the fact that he was Ichor’s vessel, and I was a paladin. The only reason I knew that was because, if I was being honest with myself, there was an aspect to the longing I felt for him that I had never found echoed in another one of her vessels.

Or with Ichor herself.

That realization was unsettling, not just because it made me question things about myself that I had thought were long settled facts, but also because it made me question my loyalty. For the first time

since I had met Ichor, I actually had a reason to.

Not because of what I had done with Chase. Sleeping with him was perfectly acceptable within the confines of our relationship. It was my duty as a paladin, even if it didn't feel like that.

No, it wasn't the fact that I had kissed him, or all the times I had fucked him, it was the fact that I actually *wanted* to. Not just because he was her vessel. Because he was... him.

What was happening to me?

Even though that question should have been enough to make me put on the brakes, it became nothing more than background noise and I found myself deepening the kiss as I stroked a white curl behind his ear.

I lowered him onto his back, cradling his head down onto the pillow, and his arms wrapped around my neck as I lowered my body onto his. He finally broke the kiss, looking up at me in bewilderment.

“Cyrus?”

I captured his lips again, because I didn't really know what to say. I was barely even able to figure out what I was feeling right now. It had been a long damn time since I'd felt anything the way I did when I was with him, and for once, I didn't want to fight it.

What was the point? No matter how hard I'd tried, I always failed. And I didn't even want to succeed anymore. Not when it would mean being without him.

You love him. That realization was always whispering in the back of my mind, like a demon possessing me, or even my long-lost conscience. One or the other.

I took Chase into my arms and the way he melted in my embrace was even more thrilling than the patter of his heartbeat had been on the ritual table. Back when violence had been the only acceptable way to purge myself of the strange embers of longing that plagued me in the presence of Sarah's neurotic, ditzy best friend. The boy I had no business wanting back then, and even now, I had no business wanting him the way I did—or for the reasons I did.

But fuck it, I wanted him all the same. Not just because it was forbidden, but because he was *mine*.

I started kissing his throat, relishing the flutter of his pulse beneath my lips. I undressed him slowly, kissing my way down his exposed flesh as I revealed it. He moaned lightly as I reached the waistband of his pants, and I had to exercise an embarrassing degree of restraint not to just tear his clothes off.

At least the sweats didn't pose the same challenge as the tight leathers and jeans he usually preferred. I'd never seen so many buttons, zippers, and straps on clothes since the Victorian era, but if it was up to me, he probably wouldn't have been wearing anything at all. More convenient that way.

He wasn't even in heat, and I couldn't keep my hands off him. I wasn't sure there was a difference between heat and his normal state when it came to my hunger for him, anyway.

That probably should have been the first clue.

As soon as I had him fully undressed, I took his cock into my mouth and savored his sweet taste. I

paused only to take my fingers into my mouth to wet them, just in case he wasn't ready enough, but when I pushed them inside his tight hole, I realized I was worried for nothing.

“Good boy,” I purred before running my tongue up the length of his cock.

His soft gasp as he tensed, trying not to writhe, started consuming what little resolve I had. It wasn't long before it ran out entirely, but when I pulled my fingers out of him and settled between his legs, he didn't complain. Instead, he squirmed eagerly, his hands resting on my shoulders as he prepared himself to take me.

I kissed him again, just to taste him, and pushed the head of my cock past his entrance. A growl escaped me, but he drank it down, digging his fingers into my hair as he deepened the kiss. He tilted his hips upward, as if begging for more, and I was more than willing to give it to him.

Fuck, it felt good to be inside him. He was still tight enough I had to stop halfway, because the fear of hurting him was just strong enough to outweigh the lust. Even if it was only barely.

Our tongues tangled as I pinned his hands to the mattress and gradually eased myself the rest of the way in. Everything from the soft, floral scent of his shampoo to the way his body pressed against mine, small and soft and warm, was maddening.

His lips parted with another gasp as I started thrusting inside him, and I took the opportunity to slip my tongue into his mouth just as deep.

He was a buffet of sensory delight, and each reaction I elicited from him left me longing for more. It was an addiction, really. Or an obsession. Maybe both.

I knew, even as I fucked him like it was going to be the last time, I was never going to be able to give him up. It was a foregone conclusion, but I was just stubborn enough that it had taken this long for it to become undeniable.

As I moved inside him, our bodies merging into one, I felt the strangest combination of resignation and hope. Resignation because I already knew I had failed the person I once was, and hope because when I was with him, it felt like I actually had it in me to become a better one. Better only to him, perhaps, but I wasn't sure anything else mattered, anyway.

His breathing grew shallow, an intriguing song set to the rhythm of his increasing heartbeat, and I was mesmerized. I kissed him deeper, fucked him harder, held him closer, until I lost track of everything separating us. Until I gave in to the one thing that now seemed as if it had been inevitable from the beginning.

I loved him.

I loved him, and I would do anything to protect him. To stop anything and anyone who wanted to keep him from me, regardless of the consequences, because there was no consequence greater than the thought of him being taken from me.

God help anyone who tried.

As I broke the kiss just so I could see his beautiful face as he climaxed, I felt the words dangerously

close to rolling off my tongue.

I love you, Chase.

Such simple, tiny words in isolation, but together, they were a grand declaration. A confession. A white flag.

In the end, I settled for just kissing him again and lacing my fingers with his as we both came. It was so much easier to put these things into action than words. Action, I could do. I could protect him, and serve him, and cherish him.

Maybe it wasn't enough, but for now, it would have to be.

CHAPTER TEN

When I woke up to find Cyrus gone, I was disappointed, but not really surprised. There had been a part of me that felt like maybe, just maybe, something had changed between us last night. I didn't know what it was, but in the end, it didn't matter because clearly that wasn't the case.

I brushed it off because I could hear Cameron's voice in my head like some kind of reverse Jiminy Cricket. The voice was taunting me for being naïve enough to think that there could be anything more than practicality between me and Cyrus.

Of course, imaginary Cameron was right, even if he was every bit as much of a jerk as his real-world counterpart. Maybe even more so, if that were possible.

Being with Cameron or Cyrus when I wasn't in heat was a mistake—a dangerous one. Hell, even getting close to Sam that way was enough of a risk, but it was clear I couldn't trust myself to be rational where any of them were concerned.

I got out of bed, realizing I wasn't feeling as tired as I had been the night before. Maybe there was something to the idea of alpha come being an old-fashioned cure for morning sickness, but it didn't have to be the father. That would be a relief. The less I had to do with Cameron, the better.

I took a shower until I felt more human than I had in ages. When I was finished drying my hair, I went downstairs and was immediately greeted by the sound of arguing in the kitchen.

For once, it sounded more like harmless bickering than a potentially fatal rivalry, which was always an issue with Cameron around. Hell, with any of them, really.

"Dude, how many times do I have to tell you? Stop putting the empty box back in the cabinet," Sam snapped.

"It wasn't me," Alex protested, even though it definitely was. I didn't even know what was going on, but his kitchen manners were that of a rabid monster's even on a good day.

"What are you two arguing about?" I asked, folding my arms over the plush robe I had put on. Hardly any of my clothes fit right anymore, and I didn't feel like going through the emotional ringer of getting dressed before I'd had coffee.

Sam and Alex both turned to stare at me, the former holding an empty Pop Tart box in his hand.

“Nothing,” Sam said, tossing the box in the trash.

I raised an eyebrow. “You know you guys can just cook actual food, right? That thing over there is called a stove,” I said slowly, pointing at the appliance. “And if that’s too complicated, there’s this other thing called a toaster. Believe it or not, you can put things in it that aren’t made of pure sugar.”

“Funny, ha ha,” Sam said flatly. “You’re up early.”

“I went to bed early,” I mumbled, deciding not to admit why as I walked past them and opened the refrigerator to pull out a carton of eggs.

“Let me do that,” Alex protested. “You shouldn’t be on your feet.”

I gave him a look. “Trust me, I’ve tasted your cooking, and I’m in far more danger from that than standing for ten minutes.”

He scowled. “You used to love when I made you breakfast in bed.”

“A, you did that *one* time, and only because you were trying to make up for standing me up on my birthday,” I reminded him, turning on the stove. “B, I was just being nice.”

He sulked, but leaned back against the counter to watch. “Still, you’re supposed to take it easy.”

“My life lately is nothing but taking it easy,” I said, gathering the rest of the ingredients for French toast. Not the healthiest, but it beat most of the other shit I was craving these days. “If I take it any easier, I’ll slip into a coma.”

“You seem like you’re feeling a little better today,” Sam said.

I was glad my back was turned to him as I cooked so he couldn’t see me blush. I really didn’t feel like telling him why I was feeling better, if my theory was correct.

It wasn’t like it was any secret that I had been with all of them, but somehow, the fact that it had been just Cyrus and I alone last night—without any sufficient excuse—felt intimate. More so than usual.

“So, who has guard duty this morning?” I asked, trying to sound nonchalant and not like I was fishing for information that might spare my ego.

“It was supposed to be Cameron, but he flaked as usual,” said Alex. “Cyrus came and relieved me this morning.”

“Oh.” I hoped I didn’t sound as relieved as I was.

Man, I really was pathetic.

“Something wrong?” Sam asked.

“No,” I said, glancing over at him. “Why?”

He hesitated, squinting suspiciously at me. “Nothing...”

The two of them went back to discussing whatever it was they had been talking about before the Great Pop Tart War broke out. I was admittedly kind of spacing out, but I had been cooking for myself long enough that I could do it on autopilot. Mom had been gone most of the time before I even woke up to get ready for school, so it was either that or have cold cereal every day.

I went to get the dishes out of the cupboard, but Alex practically pounced on me, opening the cabinet and grabbing a stack of plates before I had the chance. "Let me get that."

"I'll help," Sam said, grabbing a couple of glasses.

I snorted, handing Alex a plate full of French toast before I walked over to the table. Sam practically tripped over himself pulling out my chair.

"What a gentleman," I said dryly.

"You're pregnant," said Sam. "You should let us take care of you."

"I can take care of myself."

"You know, most people in your position would like having four guys doting on them," said Alex.

He gulped as I sawed off a piece of French toast in an admittedly aggressive fashion. "I think that really depends on the men, doesn't it?"

"This food is great," Sam said, clearly trying to keep the peace.

"Yeah, it is," Alex agreed grudgingly. "You know, you'd make a good housewife."

Sam grimaced in anticipation as I lobbed the salt shaker at Alex's head.

Alex caught it, scowling. "What was that for? It was a compliment!"

"More random acts of violence?" Cameron's voice was an unwelcome addition to the relatively pleasant morning.

I turned to find him sauntering over to us. He was still wearing his favorite leather jacket, so I assumed he was coming in rather than heading out.

I wasn't even sure what the hell he did out there most of the time, since the others were always complaining about him leaving them to pick up the slack for his patrol shifts, but I didn't really care. The less time he spent at the mansion, the better it was for me.

"Look who finally showed up," Sam said bitterly.

"You miss me, Sammy?" Cameron taunted.

The other man just glared. It was good to know I wasn't the only one Cameron was a complete ass to.

"Hey," Alex complained as Cameron grabbed the glass of orange juice in front of his plate and sank into one of the empty chairs at the table.

And just like that, I lost my appetite. I stood and walked over to the sink to clear my plate.

“Big night with Cy?” Cameron asked. I knew he was talking to me, but I just ignored him as I rinsed my plate at the sink. “What, back to giving me the silent treatment?”

“It would be a lot easier if *you* were silent once in a while,” I remarked, turning away from him.

I was about to put my plate in the dishwasher when I felt a stabbing pain in my side, and I had enough experience to know what that was like. At first, I actually thought Cam had lost it and stabbed me with a butter knife or something, but by the time I cried out and gripped my side, I realized nothing was there.

Before my knees could buckle, someone was at my side, and to my relief, it was Sam.

“Chase?” he asked, his eyes wide with fear. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted, wincing as I held my side. The pain was beginning to subside a little, but it was still excruciating. “My side just started hurting all of a sudden.”

Before I could stop him, Sam had torn my robe open, pressing his hands to my stomach as he examined me. “There?” he asked, pressing gently below my ribs.

I nodded. “Yeah. That area.”

“Should I call an ambulance?” Alex asked, already on his feet, too.

“No,” I said quickly. “That’s not necessary.”

“We can’t take him to a human doctor,” Sam murmured. “I could ask my grandmother...”

“I know someone,” Cameron said. When I looked up, he was standing right next to Sam.

I really hated when he did that.

“I’m sure you do,” Sam said before I could tell Cameron to go to hell. He ushered me back over to the table, keeping his hands on my shoulders to steady me. “Come on, sit down.”

“I’m calling Cyrus,” Alex said, his phone already pressed to his ear.

Cameron looked irritated, but he didn’t exactly have a right to complain about the fact that no one trusted him.

“He’s not answering,” Alex muttered, staring down at the phone. “I’ll go track him down.”

“We’re not waiting for him,” Cameron said firmly. Before he could take another step toward me, Sam put himself between us, facing off with the other man.

Cameron narrowed his eyes. “Really?”

“This doesn’t concern you,” Sam said in a firm tone I had never heard him use before. Certainly not with Cameron.

Under any other circumstances, I probably would’ve found it hot. Now I just didn’t want to have to deal with breaking up a fight between them on top of the pain.

“I’m not going to hurt him,” Cameron said, rather than just attacking him like I had feared. “If something’s wrong with him, I have as much reason to want it addressed as you do.”

Sam hesitated, but he didn’t back down. “Who is this person you know?”

“A doctor,” Cameron answered. I was surprised he was explaining himself to Sam at all. “He lives in a pack about 25 minutes north of here.”

“A pack?” Sam asked doubtfully. “He’s a werewolf?”

“A shifter,” Cameron corrected. “He deals with pregnant omegas all the time. They’re more common among shifters, and I’ve already told him about Chase.”

That was unsettling for a myriad of reasons.

Sam paused, as if he was considering it. “Is it safe to take him there? Around a bunch of alphas…”

“Most of the pack are betas,” said Cameron. “And it’s safer than doing nothing, don’t you think? Anything could be wrong with him. It could be the pregnancy, or appendicitis, or—”

“Fine,” Sam interrupted. “We’ll go.”

“I’ll start the car,” said Cameron.

Normally, I would be pissed off that they were making decisions for me without consulting me, but just breathing was enough of a challenge at the moment.

“Come on,” Sam said, his tone gentling as he helped me to my feet.

“Not like this,” I said, looking down at my robe.

I could tell he wanted to argue, but he probably knew it would take longer than just going to go get me some clothes. I changed into them quickly, and as soon as I finished, Sam lifted me into his arms. That was another thing I usually would’ve complained about, but I just didn’t have the energy.

Truth be told, I wasn’t sure I could even walk on my own.

“Are you sure about this?” I asked as he carried me over to Cameron’s SUV.

“Yeah. It’s going to be okay,” Sam promised.

I could tell from the fear in his voice that was something he was about as certain of as I was.

CHAPTER
ELEVEN

CHASE

The Red River pack territory wasn't that far from Winterhaven, but the drive felt long enough. Sam was sitting in the backseat with Chase, rubbing his back and offering words of consolation every now and then. Chase put on a brave face for someone as prissy as he was, but I could tell he was in worse pain than he was letting on. Enough that it had altered his scent.

Usually, the tinge of pain and fear was something that made a person's blood even more alluring to a vampire. We were all sadists to one degree or another. There was still an instinctive part of me that found it appealing, but mostly, I was just concerned.

This was exactly what I had been afraid of happening ever since I had learned about the pregnancy, and for once, it wasn't an "I told you so" that I found enjoyable. Not with me knowing what was on the line.

Maybe now these other idiots would finally listen to reason. It was pretty clear Sam and Alex were both indulging some naïve little domestic fantasy about this thing that was growing inside Chase, but they were both too blind to see the truth. And the truth was that the most anomalous thing about this pregnancy wasn't that Chase was a cis male. It was the fact that he was human, more or less, and there was a reason why vampires and humans didn't breed.

Female vampires were all infertile, and the few humans who were impregnated by our kind rarely—if ever—lived to carry their offspring to term.

Dhampirs were, as nature herself had declared, an abomination.

Vampire-shifter hybrids were bad enough, but at least they were nearly as rare as dhampirs. Scarcity was the one good trait they possessed.

Chase being a human omega, more or less, might have made the pregnancy possible, but that didn't mean it was viable. The best possible outcome was that he miscarried before he was far enough along for it to do any real damage, but it was possibly already too late for that.

And considering the fact that Cyrus and the others had been running interference to keep me away from him for the last two months, I was holding them accountable.

When the time came, I already knew I would be the only one who had the balls to do what was necessary to save his life—and in turn, Ichor's—and the sooner it happened, the easier it would be

for everyone. Especially Chase.

If there was one silver lining to all this, it was the fact that it was my chance to finally get him to Matthew. It still remained to be seen whether my brother and the naïve idiots who followed him like the cult leader he was were going to see reason now that it was staring us all down.

I slowed to a stop in front of the gate surrounding the pack lands. I had already called ahead to let Matthew know we were coming, and he assured me that getting in wouldn't be a problem.

"What is this place, a compound?" Chase asked warily.

"More or less," I answered. "Packs are territorial. The security is necessary."

"Quaint," he muttered. "It gives me Waco vibes."

"You hanging in there?" I asked, ignoring his sarcasm.

He gave me a look like he was suspicious of my concern, which was fair enough.

I looked up as a familiar beta named Reese came toward the SUV. I rolled down the window and he leaned in.

"Cameron," he said, glancing into the back at Chase. His eyes widened slightly, a familiar look I knew too well. And one I was sure Chase was going to be getting plenty of times before he left the pack. "Is that him?"

"Yeah," I answered, keeping my words polite but brief. Even betas weren't immune to the effects of an omega, and it was pretty clear shifters were a hell of a lot more sensitive to it than we were, alpha or not.

On the one hand, I was kind of relieved to find out that Chase was an omega. At least it would explain some of the uncharacteristic impulses I was prone to where he was concerned. And the others, for that matter.

On the other hand, it was yet another unique complication to add to the mix.

Reese looked away quickly, giving me an apologetic nod as he stepped back from the vehicle. Vampire or not, looking at another alpha's omega was a cultural taboo, even if none of us had actually claimed him in any official sense of the word.

Not on shifter terms.

The beta guard opened the gate, and I drove past it onto the dirt road leading into the pack's territory. There were a slew of mobile homes dotting the path, barely visible through the thick woods, with more houses the further we got into the pack. It was definitely rural and utilitarian, but that described the wolves' approach to life pretty well in general.

The larger houses and buildings were located in the interior of the pack territory, carefully cloistered, and I knew the huge house on the highest hill had to belong to the pack alpha and his mate.

I pulled into the small parking lot near the second largest house. "The clinic is in here."

"Seriously?" Sam asked, wrinkling his nose. "It just looks like a house."

"You were expecting a hospital?" I asked flatly, turning off the car. "Come on."

Sam was already helping Chase out of the car by the time I got out. I lifted Chase into my arms, and the fact that he wasn't complaining was more than reason enough for concern.

Once we made it into the house, it started looking a lot more like the suite of offices it was. The clinic was on the first floor, but there was a stairwell and a sign listing several other offices on the other floors, including the pack administrator, whatever the hell that was.

"Fancy," Sam murmured, looking around. "I just hope this guy knows what he's doing."

"He certainly knows more than we do," I told him.

He grunted in acknowledgment, opening the door as I carried Chase into the clinic.

There was a small waiting room that looked like it had been updated since the last time I had visited. The circumstances weren't quite as urgent then, so I hadn't paid much attention to the layout at the time.

There was an older woman sitting at a desk behind the counter who hadn't been there the last time, either, and she looked up, as if she'd been expecting us.

"Good morning," she said in a pleasant if guarded tone. Even if I was on friendly terms with the pack alpha, most shifters were understandably wary of our kind. Plenty of bad blood between us on both sides. "You can go on back, Dr. Curtis is expecting you."

"Thanks," I said, walking into the back room of the clinic.

It was a small suite of offices, and the door opened at the end of the hall. A familiar voice called, "Come in."

I carried Chase into the office, which was larger than I had expected, and placed him down on a bed that looked comfortable enough. Sam seemed to have relaxed a little once he realized I wasn't taking him to some shack in the middle of nowhere.

It pissed me off that he acted like I was the one who didn't have enough experience taking care of a vessel. Just because he was personally attached didn't mean he was better at it, but he was young, and arrogance came with the territory.

Across the room, Matthew sat in a chair in front of a small desk, a laptop in front of him. The wolves lived like they were stuck in the '80s, so it was admittedly a relief that the clinic was at least that up-to-date.

Matthew was a young man, though not quite as young as he looked, since he had been in his early thirties when we first met. He was pleasant-looking, with dark hair and darker eyes, and he had a gentle way about him, especially for a shifter.

"Cameron," he said, his eyes widening slightly. His reaction was subtler than the young beta's had been, but still obvious enough to me.

The way his eyes widened, his pupils dilating and his pulse quickening, was subtle enough that even most shifters wouldn't have noticed, but I wasn't most shifters—or most vampires, for that matter. I was the worst of both worlds, and to say I was possessive would be an understatement of comedic proportions.

Even if it grated against my instincts, though, as an alpha and a paladin, I couldn't exactly blame him for the innate response any alpha would have to an unmated omega. Especially one who looked like Chase.

Men had never been my first preference, but he was the kind of beautiful where the distinction ceased to matter, and even men who had been straight their entire lives might have found themselves in the middle of an identity crisis where he was concerned.

If Matthew or anyone else ever let it go beyond that initial instinctive response, though, all bets were off.

"And this must be Chase," Matthew said, shifting back into professional mode a second later. I could still tell from his demeanor that he was affected by Chase's scent, but as long as he kept it to himself, we were good.

"Hi," Chase said, eyeing the doctor suspiciously. I imagined most of his trepidations were surrounding the fact that Matthew was an acquaintance of mine rather than him being a shifter.

So he did have an ounce of self-preservation. It seemed to be a quality he possessed only in relation to me, but that was better than nothing.

"And you are?" Matthew asked, turning to Sam.

"Protective," Sam answered, his arms folded over his chest. He was far from the scrawny kid he'd been when I first met him, but he'd only recently started acting as tough as he looked.

The doctor chuckled. "Another paladin. Of course. I should've figured. Rest assured, I'm just here to help."

Sam said nothing, but even though I knew he couldn't have been around many shifters in this lifetime, he seemed to have an innate aversion to them. That was just as well.

"So. I hear you're pregnant," Matthew said, glancing at Chase over his shoulder as he made his way over to the sink on the other side of the room to wash his hands and put on a pair of gloves.

Chase nodded. "Apparently, yeah."

"Congratulations," Matthew said, looking my way with a hint of curiosity in his eyes. I could understand the cause of it, considering what he knew about my past. And what I was. "And the father...?"

"Up in the air," I said, eager to dispense with the pleasantries. And I really didn't like the way he'd phrased it, even if it was technically true. There wasn't going to *be* a baby, so the paternity was kind of irrelevant.

And given the fact that it almost certainly was mine, that was all the more reason to get rid of it. A

regular vampire hybrid was bad enough without throwing a demon into the mix.

"Right..." Matthew said awkwardly, before turning back to Chase. "Well, then, what seems to be the trouble?"

"It's my side," Chase answered, pressing a hand into the same spot as earlier. He winced, like it was still bothering him, even if it seemed to be a little less intense than before. "It feels like I got stabbed."

Sam grimaced as if *he* was in pain. Guilt was a hell of a drug. Not one that had been any vice of mine for quite some time.

"Has it been bothering you for a while, or did the pain come on suddenly?" Matthew asked, walking over to the exam table.

"Suddenly," Chase answered.

"And what were you doing when it happened?"

"The dishes," Sam said, earning a look of irritation from Chase. "Well, you were. I told you, you shouldn't be standing."

Chase sighed. "It wasn't strenuous or anything. I'd hardly even been standing for a minute when it happened."

"And how far along are you?" Matthew asked.

Chase hesitated. "About three months."

"I see. Well, let's have you lie down, and I'll take a look."

Chase reluctantly lay back on the exam table, and Matthew lifted his shirt up over his navel to gently prod his stomach. "Just tell me if it hurts."

"Okay," Chase said. As Matthew moved over to his right side, he hissed in a breath through his teeth. "Ow."

Sam growled, but it seemed more like an automatic impulse than anything. I gave him a look, but there was only so much I could hold him accountable for. Vampires weren't all that much better than shifters when it came to protectiveness. Especially not a paladin.

"I'm sorry," Matthew said in a gentle tone that seemed genuine enough. Shifters all coddled omegas. Like they were children.

To be fair, they were an invaluable asset to the species. Omegas were rare because they could only come from an alpha and omega pairing, and alphas were a far more common result of those pairings than omegas were.

"I'd like to do a more thorough examination, if that's all right," said Matthew.

"That's fine," I answered.

Matthew glanced over at me. "With all due respect, I was asking *him*."

I clenched my jaw, but said nothing.

Chase lit up like a Christmas tree, of course. "It's fine," he said, sounding more chipper than he had been a minute ago.

I rolled my eyes. Whatever got him to cooperate.

"You can change into this," Matthew said, taking a cotton gown out of the drawer beneath the table.

Chase sat up, taking the gown from him. "Thanks." He looked pointedly over at me and Sam.

"I'm not going anywhere," I informed him. The look he was giving me suggested he thought I was just being an ass for the hell of it, but I really didn't feel like admitting that my own possessive instincts were getting the better of me.

I trusted Matthew's medical opinion, but that was where it ended, and I wasn't leaving an omega alone in the room with another alpha regardless of the circumstances.

"Me either," Sam said firmly.

At least now he was on Chase's shit list, too. I wasn't even sure why I cared. It wasn't like it mattered what Chase thought about me, and that ship had sailed a long damn time ago.

Chase just rolled his eyes and muttered, "Whatever," before he pulled his shirt off over his head, taking care to reveal as little skin as possible as he changed into the gown.

"The bottoms, too, if you don't mind," Matthew added. "Here's a blanket you can drape over your lower half."

Chase gave him an incredulous look as he took the blanket, but he slipped out of his jeans.

"All right," Matthew said, walking back over to the table. "Let's have a look."

He put on his stethoscope and listened to Chase's heart, having him take a few deep breaths.

I had never watched anything more intently in my life than I watched the exam. My brain honed in on every sentence because having anyone, especially an alpha shifter, poking and prodding him was proving even more of a challenge for the beast within than it was for my conscious mind. I wasn't even sure it was a paladin thing so much as a shifter thing. Sometimes it was hard to tell.

Although there was plenty of rage coming from both sides.

Knowing there was a utilitarian reason behind the exam did nothing to change it, either. There was nothing logical about the instincts an alpha was cursed with when it came to an omega. Especially one who was probably carrying his baby.

Just because I didn't see it that way didn't mean the devil cat within didn't.

After Matthew had finished the initial examination, he had Chase lie back down and pulled what I assumed was an ultrasound machine over to the table. I had certainly never been in the room with one of those before, so I couldn't say for sure.

"This is going to be a bit cold, but nothing too unpleasant," Matthew said, taking out a bottle of some clear gel and giving it a shake as he lifted the gown up over Chase's stomach.

Chase squirmed a little, his face turning red. I wasn't sure why he was being so bashful, considering the fact that his primary trepidation seemed to be with me remaining in the room, and not the fact that the doctor was a stranger. It was certainly nothing Sam and I hadn't seen before.

"And you said you were three months along?" the doctor asked, spreading the gel over Chase's stomach.

A murderous look came into Chase's eyes as he stared up at the doctor. I would know that look anywhere, considering it had been directed at me more times than I could count.

"Are you calling me fat?" he demanded as the lights flickered.

Matthew blinked, looking around the room warily. He was usually pretty composed, so seeing him caught off guard was admittedly amusing. And it was helping to distract me from my own murderous impulses.

"No, not at all," he said quickly. "It's just that male omegas tend not to show much until around the fourth or fifth month of pregnancy."

That clarification did nothing to soften Chase's anger, but he remained silent as the doctor smoothed the wand over his stomach.

So *that* was what he was freaking out about. He was definitely softer than he had been before, but that was to be expected, considering the fact that he had been rail thin with a six pack. I wasn't sure what he had expected, exactly, and the thought was more amusing than it should have been.

The truth was, the change was appealing in its own way. He had always been soft and delicate in a different way, and there was some primal part of me that was going wild at the thought of his body changing because he was most likely carrying my offspring. It was the kind of thought I absolutely couldn't feed into for obvious reasons, so I brushed it aside. I was getting used to doing that when it came to my often conflicting instincts about Chase.

"Let's see where things are at, shall we?" Matthew asked, clearly eager to change the subject. A gray image came up on the screen, but I couldn't really make out much. It was just a monochrome blur with varying blobs of gray and white, including two small ones in the center of the machine.

"There we go," Matthew said, sliding the wand around. "Are you comfortable?"

"I'm fine," Chase mumbled, looking at the screen. "What is that?"

"Well, this is your womb," Matthew said, flipping a switch on the machine with his right hand while holding the wand on Chase's stomach with his left. A whooshing sound started coming from the speakers as soon as he hit the switch.

The sound was so echoic and chaotic that at first, I couldn't make any sense of it. Then I realized there were two separate sounds—one that had to be Chase's heartbeat, slow and steady, and then one that was twice as fast, fluttering away like the beating of wings.

Chase swallowed audibly. I realized there must've been a part of him that had still been clinging to the possibility that none of this was real until that very moment. But he was studying to become a doctor, so it made sense he would have a hard time believing anything he couldn't see and hear for himself.

He had certainly managed to miss the fact that the supernatural had existed right under his nose for the vast majority of his life.

"And that's... always been there?" he asked doubtfully.

"It would be more or less atrophied until you went into heat for the first time, so it would be difficult to notice even on most medical scans, but yes. It's always been there," Matthew answered casually.

Then again, this was probably a pretty typical day at work for him, considering he was the regional expert on all things omega.

Chase turned a few shades paler and looked like he was in danger of passing out. I was having trouble for a different reason.

Even though I still couldn't make sense of what was on the screen, I was transfixed by the rhythm of the dissonant heartbeats.

Weirdly, the faster one had more of an echo to it than Chase's did, even though it was softer. If I didn't know better, I would think there were more than two heartbeats I was hearing.

"Do you see anything?" Sam asked.

"Plenty," the doctor answered, ignoring Sam's impatient tone. I imagined he was probably used to dealing with alphas who wanted to kill him on a near daily basis. It certainly wasn't a job I envied by any means. "No sign of what might be causing the pain, though. Everything looks healthy enough."

"And the baby?" Chase asked. I couldn't be sure if the slight break in his voice was a result of fear for himself, dismay over his situation, fear for the thing growing inside of him, or some combination of all three.

"Well, about that..." Matthew said carefully.

I tensed up and Chase's heartbeat quickened, both in my hearing and through the monitor's speakers. Sam looked tense, too, like he was ready to attack the doctor if he gave any unpleasant news.

"What is it?" Chase asked, his voice cracking again.

Well, that answered that question. He was worried about the baby. Did this fool not realize it could kill him? Did he even care?

I was afraid to know the answer to that question. I wasn't sure it mattered, though. I was more concerned with my own reaction to the sound of that heartbeat.

Logically, I knew what it was, and I knew what I should feel—and what I shouldn't. The logical part of me felt nothing toward it but detached spite, but unfortunately, that was not the predominant side of me at the moment.

My cat was mesmerized, a strange surge of pride and longing coming from somewhere within, but I refused to believe it was coming from me. We might not have been truly separate entities for many years now, but we had started out that way.

"Everyone is perfectly healthy, as far as I can tell," Matthew answered. "Both Chase and the two babies."

I had been zoned out, still hypnotized by the sound coming from the machine, but I looked up sharply at his words, convinced I must've heard him wrong.

"What?" Chase and I asked in unison.

"Just what I said," Matthew answered in a pleasant enough tone. "It looks like you're having twins. I suppose multiple congratulations are in order."

For a few moments, those rhythmic pulses were the only sounds in the room. And now, I knew it wasn't just an echo of one of the other heartbeats.

There really were three of them.

"Holy shit," Chase croaked.

For once, we were on the same page.

CHAPTER
TWELVE

CHASE

T *wins.*

That word kept echoing in my mind, but even though the rational part of my brain knew the definition perfectly well, part of me still just couldn't get my head around it.

Having it confirmed that I was pregnant had been enough of a blow to the logical world I once knew, but this...

"You're serious," Sam said, looking very much like he was going to beat the crap out of the doctor if the answer to that was anything other than yes. But also like he might pass out if it was.

That made two of us.

"Quite," Dr. Curtis answered. Cameron was still standing still as a statue, and although he had been more than happy to talk over me at the beginning of the exam, he hadn't said anything for at least a few minutes.

He was staring at the screen like he was seeing a ghost or something. And if he had his way, he would be.

"How is that possible?" I asked, my throat tightening. "Twins don't even run in my family."

"Male omegas are more prone to multiples," he answered nonchalantly, as if this was just business as usual. And as unbelievable as it was to me, to him, it probably was.

"And they're both mine?" Cameron asked, his tone unreadable, just like his expression, but that didn't make his horror any less obvious.

"That depends," said the doctor. "Are you the only one who was with him during his heat?"

"No," Cameron answered. "But I'm the only shifter."

"Well, I suppose that's one way of describing your other form," the doctor mused.

Cameron gave him a filthy look, so I assumed his demonic form was still something of a sore subject for him. Under any other circumstances, I would be figuring out a way to use that knowledge against him later, but my disdain for Cameron was the last thing on my mind right now.

Even if it was relevant to the subject at hand.

"Recent research has proven that the differences in virality between species are greatly exaggerated," the doctor continued. "It's true the secondary sexes are less pronounced among vampires than they are among our kind, and of course, a beta can't get a male omega pregnant. Plenty of vampires who probably think they're alphas aren't, so that confusion about classification leads to some muddying of the self-reported statistics, which aren't all that well observed to begin with. I plan on changing that, in due time," he said, taking off his gloves before tossing them into the trash and putting on a fresh pair.

"So they could be mine?" Sam asked, a hopeful note in his tone. "Or Cyrus's?"

"Quite easily," said Dr. Curtis. "Or some combination thereof."

"Wait, what?" I asked, my voice so tight it sounded like I was choking. "You mean the babies could belong to more than one of them?"

"It's common enough in a few species," he answered. "Omegas, too. It's quite possible for one to be pregnant with mixed paternity siblings."

"Oh," I said, my voice cracking again.

I wasn't really sure if that made it anymore shocking, though. The whole twins thing was a lot in and of itself.

"That's good, though, right?" Sam asked warily. "If they're Cameron's, that's more dangerous for Chase. And for the babies."

Dr. Curtis hesitated, as if he was considering it. "The truth is, we really don't know much about what Cameron is, and there could be hundreds if not thousands of subspecies of demonic entities that we just aren't aware of—let alone their breeding habits. But yes, if I had to venture a guess, I would say a regular vampire, even a partially turned one, would result in an easier time for the mother and the children."

"Mother?" I echoed.

Dr. Curtis gave me an apologetic smile. "My apologies. It's a gender-neutral term among our species, all things considered."

"Right," I muttered. "How progressive."

"But you still don't know what's wrong with him?" Sam pressed.

"Not yet," said Dr. Curtis. "But I can assure you, I'll find out. I can give you something for the pain that won't affect you or the littles ones negatively, but I'd like to run some labs before we're finished here. It would be best if you can at least stay the night."

The idea of staying in this strange place wasn't appealing, especially not when it meant staying with Cameron, but what choice did I really have?

"We'll stay," Cameron answered before I had the chance. Sam was giving him an equally dirty look,

but he didn't argue. I trusted his opinion on the matter a little more.

"Wonderful," said Dr. Curtis. "My apartment is on the upper floor, and so are the guest quarters. You're welcome to stay as long as you like, and I'll make sure the accommodations are ready for you."

"Thanks," I said, glancing over at Sam. He looked about as psyched as I was about all this, but he hadn't put up a fight about staying, so I could only assume he'd come to the same conclusion I had.

Not that Cameron would have been likely to let us leave if we had put up a fight.

As the doctor left to get the medication he had promised, and to send his nurse in to take my blood the old-fashioned way, I gathered my clothes, finding that I didn't really care about modesty anymore. That was by far the least of my concerns.

The man standing across from me, however, was at the top of the list.

CHAPTER
THIRTEEN

ALEX

Cyrus was such a cliché these days that I managed to track him down to a bar on the outskirts of town in no time at all. I found him nursing a beer—even though it would take a truckload to have an effect on him—and rolled my eyes before walking over.

"Dude, seriously?" I asked, approaching him.

He looked up, frowning. "What the hell are you doing here? Did I not tell you to stay with Chase?"

"Yeah, you did," I answered. "And I just left him with Sam and Cameron to come find your ass. Which I wouldn't have had to do at all if you would answer your fucking phone."

He reached into his pocket, looking like he was ready to chew me out. "I didn't get anything."

"Yeah, no shit, the signal here is weak as hell," I told him.

"Shit," he said, raking a hand through his hair as he leapt up from the bar. "What's wrong? Is Chase alright?"

"No," I said as he threw a bill on the counter, already walking toward the door. I had to hurry just to keep up with him.

Sam was faster now, too, but I didn't seem to have inherited that vampire trait yet. It wasn't even like I could blame it on Chase's blood, or Cyrus's, considering we had been feeding on the same stuff. It figured Sam would be better at this, too. He was already better at sports, school, and apparently, fucking my boyfriend. Why wouldn't he also be a vampire savant?

"He collapsed in pain. We don't know what's wrong with him," I admitted.

The fear in Cyrus's gaze as I explained what had happened seemed genuine enough. "I'll meet you back at the house."

"But—"

Before I could argue, he was gone.

Son of a...

I started up my car and drove at breakneck speed to get back to the house. At least it was a rural road.

Less chance of running into anyone, literally or figuratively.

Left behind yet again. I didn't even care if it meant he got there faster. Sam was going to need backup, and I didn't trust Cameron not to use this situation to his advantage somehow.

I wasn't even sure what he would be able to accomplish, but the universal law of Cameron was that if there was any way he could possibly be even more of a dick, he would do it.

When I saw that Cameron's car wasn't outside the house anymore, I felt another surge of panic.

Inside, Cyrus was waiting in the kitchen. He turned on me with a murderous gaze. "Where are they?" he demanded.

"How the hell should I know?" I cried.

"They must've said something before you left," he pressed. "Think, Alex."

I really didn't like the implication that I wasn't thinking already, but I hesitated. "Wait, Cameron did say something about knowing someone who might be able to help. A doctor for omegas or something?"

Judging from the way Cyrus's eyes widened in recognition, he knew exactly who that was. And he wasn't relieved.

"What is it?" I pressed. "You know where they are?"

"Yes," he muttered, taking out his phone to dial a number, but I assumed it wasn't the first time he had tried that. He grew alert as I heard Sam's voice on the other line. "Sam, where the hell are you guys? Is Chase okay?"

I could hear him clearly enough on the phone, at least. My hearing seemed to be a bit more enhanced than everything else.

And that *really* sucked when it came time for said fucking of my boyfriend.

"He's okay for the moment. We're at the Red River pack," Sam answered, and judging from the fact that Cyrus's expression didn't change, that answer confirmed what he was already expecting to hear. "The doctor here is running some tests to figure out what's wrong, but he seems okay from the ultrasound."

"Ultrasound?" Cyrus echoed. "What, you guys took him to a werewolf OBGYN?"

Oh, so *he* could say werewolf, but when I did it, he got all uppity and had to correct me.

"Yeah, um, you should probably just get here as soon as you can," Sam said. "It's too complicated to explain over the phone."

"I'm coming," Cyrus answered. "I know where you are, but listen, whatever you do, don't leave Chase alone with Cameron. Not even for a second, you hear me?"

"You don't have to tell me that," Sam replied. "I need to take a piss and Chase is coming with me. Cam's not here at the moment, FYI, which is why I answered."

"Good," said Cyrus. "Try to keep it that way."

He hung up and stalked over to the door.

"Wait," I called after him. "I'm coming with you."

"No, you're driving," he corrected. "I'll text you the address."

A second later, my phone beeped, but he was already out the door.

Damn it. Well, at least I had a sports car. It wasn't as fast as a fully fledged vampire, but it was better than nothing.

CHAPTER
FOURTEEN

CYRUS

I really couldn't leave Chase alone with those idiots for two seconds, and the fact that I still hadn't learned that lesson meant I was the biggest idiot of all. You didn't put a bunch of children in charge of the ship and expect it not to sink, but that was exactly what I kept doing.

No more, though. Even if I had to tether Chase to me with chains, he wasn't leaving my sight again.

At least Sam was with him, but he still wasn't quite all vampire yet, and even when he was, he still wouldn't be at Cameron's level.

Hell, neither was I, for that matter, as enraging as it was to admit that.

I had gone out hoping to clear my head after last night, and while I had utterly failed at that attempt, I had come to a separate realization.

Things could not, under any circumstances, continue the way they had been. Every day Chase stayed at the mansion was another day closer to whatever the hell Cameron was planning, and while leaving was fraught with risks of its own, staying to avoid setting Cameron off was clearly not working.

Something had to give. And it sure as hell wasn't going to be him.

Either I had to kill Cameron, which in some ways felt like a foregone conclusion we had somehow been careening toward without realizing it all these years, or I had to take Chase and the others and disappear.

I wasn't even sure which was the more insurmountable option. And choosing the latter might delay the former event, but it certainly didn't preclude it. I wasn't naïve enough to believe that. Cameron would hunt us—and Ichor—to the ends of the earth until one of us was dead.

In the end, the answer was inevitable. It was the only possible solution. All roads led to the same place. Maybe they always had.

It had been a long time since I had visited the Red River pack, and the last time had been in the interest of hauling Cameron back from one of his self-destructive research binges in a desperate bid to bring Ichor back early.

He had always sneered at my supposed lack of devotion, as if keeping him from getting himself killed wasn't a full-time job. Somehow, he hadn't seemed to grasp the fact that this time, when he died, he

wouldn't be reincarnating.

I wasn't really surprised he preferred to spend his time in the company of wolves to his own kind. His own brother.

As obsessed as he was with Ichor, the being who epitomized every aspect of what it was to be a vampire, he'd had a hard enough time adjusting in the beginning. Somehow, what he found reason to despise other members of our species for, he overlooked in her.

No, that wasn't true. He *worshiped* it in her. Her thirst for blood, and violence, had always been a siren's song to him. One that had literally cost him his soul, even if that was the one thing she hadn't yet asked of any of us.

Over the years, I had watched everything about him that had once been pure and good, to an often infuriating degree, become eroded. Everything except his devotion to her.

Then again, maybe that was the root of the wickedness that had drowned us both, one way or another.

I didn't know what the answers to our past mistakes were, or even which of us was the villain. Probably both. If there was a frontrunner, I was the one who was dangerously close to backsliding on his promise. My belief that it was in the interest of the shared mission that had united us both—long after the bonds of blood and brotherhood ceased to be enough—grew more tenuous with each day that passed. With each moment I spent with Chase, I found myself further dreading the very thing I lived for. The moment when I was reunited with Ichor, the woman I had sworn to love and protect so long ago that I could scarcely remember ever existing without her as my central sun. My guiding light. The darkness to which I had condemned my soul.

And yet, somehow, in a matter of time so insignificant to me that it barely even constituted a moment, I had betrayed that purpose. In the process of protecting her vessel, I had fallen for him.

And in the process of falling in love with him, I had fallen out of love with her.

Cameron knew. It might've taken me until last night to realize it, but he had always known. He had known, just like he had that day so long ago when he had warned me not to go into battle, and I had ignored him, of course, because I was young and prideful, and I had paid the price. Not with my life, but something much greater.

I would pay the price for this, too. I knew that, but even as I felt myself sliding headlong into damnation, my instinct was only to pick up speed and hasten the inevitable. Ichor may have been the one who claimed my soul in all but the most official terms, but Chase was the one who had given it back to me.

I hated him for it. But I loved him, too. I wasn't even sure there was a difference between the two anymore.

At the very least, I no longer believed they existed as distinct, opposing forces rather than two extremes along the same gradient. The one bled into the other too easily for it to be anything else.

When I came to the gate, I wasn't terribly surprised to find someone approaching, considering packs didn't usually take kindly to people trespassing on their territory. Vampires, especially.

"Oh. Cyrus," the wolf—probably a beta—said, looking me up and down. "Your brother didn't tell me you were coming."

"I'm sure he didn't," I muttered. "He came here earlier with two others. Where are they?"

He hesitated, but when I took a step closer, he tensed up. I could tell he was assessing just how much he really feared his pack alpha's wrath compared to mine. Smart kid.

I didn't recognize him, but he clearly remembered me, and I must not have made such a great first impression. Not that I was ever in a particularly good mood when I had to go hunting down Cameron on one of his escapades. Especially not when it involved someone I was responsible for protecting.

"Mate" was the term my heart had already settled on, but not only was that something the rest of me was not ready to contend with, it wasn't even accurate.

I was a paladin, which meant it was my responsibility to protect Chase at any cost, as well as tend to him, but being his mate was a whole different ball game. It wasn't even the sport most vampires played, for that matter.

"They're with Dr. Curtis," he said reluctantly. "You should check in with the alpha. We don't let people just come and go freely."

"Don't worry, your secret is safe with me," I said flatly, walking past him. I could tell from the way he bristled that the threat was clear enough.

It didn't take long for me to track them down. A vampire's scent was subtle enough, even to another vampire, so I usually couldn't tell the difference until I was right up on one. Being surrounded by shifters made it even harder, but Chase's scent was like a homing beacon. As if all my senses had come to fixate on him so exclusively and obsessively that it drowned out everything else, even when it should have been sensory overload.

I found the building they were in, but I caught the sound of a familiar couple of voices on the lower floor and paused, deciding to wait and listen.

"But it's possible," Cameron said in an impatient tone I knew all too well.

There was no answer for a moment, but when the man whose voice I immediately recognized as Dr. Curtis's finally spoke, he sounded hesitant. "It's possible, yes. There is a procedure that can be done, but it's of great risk to the omega parent, and then there's the obvious consequence of termination—"

"How much risk is there?" Cameron interrupted. "For him."

"That's difficult to say," Dr. Curtis muttered. "It depends on a variety of factors, including his health, how far along he is, how much stress the procedure inflicts—and that's to say nothing of whether it's yours or not."

I tuned out as Cameron continued to interrogate the doctor who was, to his credit, clearly at least somewhat reluctant to continue the discussion.

Termination.

I bristled immediately at their words, struggling to see through the blind rage that possessed me. Cameron always had been singularly focused, but it hit me in that moment that he was too far gone for salvation. Maybe he had been for a long damn time.

I resisted the urge to confront him, not wanting to waste another second on something that was utterly pointless. Getting Chase away from him was more important than anything.

As soon as I found the room he was in, I could hear his voice coming from behind the door, soft and muted. It filled me with relief, and something else I wasn't quite ready to process right now.

I opened the door, and he jolted where he sat on the bed across the room from Sam, who was leaning against the wall. Sam looked like he was in serious contemplation of something, and the moment the door opened, he tensed as if ready to engage in combat that definitely wasn't going to go in his favor.

He really had changed. He wasn't the same cowardly kid he had been mere months ago, back when he could hardly even stand up for himself, let alone someone else. That was good, because courage was all you had when you were fighting an uphill battle. Courage and the kind of self-destructive stupidity that could overcome self-preservation and common sense.

Also known as love, as I had come to realize so recently.

"Cyrus?" Chase asked in surprise. "How did you—?"

"We have to leave," I said, stalking into the room. "Now."

"Leave?" he asked warily. "What do you mean?"

"It's not safe for you to be here," I said. "Not just in the pack, but Winterhaven. I overheard Cameron talking to Dr. Curtis. He's planning on..." I trailed off, realizing I couldn't put it into words without flying into another rage, and he really didn't need the added stress right now. "We just need to leave."

Chase frowned, a thousand different emotions flickering across his face. Sam seemed to be going through a similar process, but I could tell from the look in his eyes he knew well enough what that something might be.

"The doctor is running tests," Chase protested. "He still doesn't know what's wrong."

"I'll take you somewhere else," I assured him, reaching out to help him to his feet. "I promise. But you can't be here right now. I just need you to trust me."

He watched me for a moment before nodding. "Yeah. I do."

His words at once stroked some hidden chord deep within me, and it terrified me, because it was a reminder of just how much was really at stake if I failed. It was everything.

"Come on," I said, walking over to the window to open it.

"The window?" Sam asked doubtfully.

"Cameron is downstairs. He'll notice if we leave through the front door," I said impatiently.

Before I could get the damn window unlocked, the door opened, and I looked up to find my brother

standing there.

"Going somewhere?" Cameron asked in a knowing tone.

Speak of the devil.

Or, at least, his favorite emissary.

CHAPTER
FIFTEEN

CHASE

I still wasn't anywhere close to having come to terms with anything that had just happened when Cyrus showed up, and Cameron soon after.

They had always kind of gone hand in hand, a package deal. And yet, as I watched them staring each other down like they were mortal enemies rather than twin brothers, I could sense something had changed.

I hadn't even had the chance to tell Cyrus the news about the babies, but now definitely wasn't the right time. Not when he was insisting we had to flee from Cameron, and judging from the look Cameron was giving him, that probably wasn't such a bad idea.

It wasn't like I was under any delusions that anything that had transpired in the doctor's office would change... well, anything, but I had thought maybe, just maybe, we could have a few moments' reprieve from all the chaos.

Looking back, I really didn't know *why* I had thought that. I still must have had some naïveté left in me, after all. Cameron was right about that.

"Were you going to tell me where you took him?" Cyrus demanded. "Or were you just going to let me hunt?"

"I assumed Alex would've told you," Cameron said in an innocent tone that sounded utterly ridiculous coming from him.

Cyrus breathed a laugh, taking a step toward his brother. Sam tensed immediately, and so did I. The two of them fighting under normal circumstances was not good, let alone when we were surrounded by wolves who could very quickly become the enemy. Considering they were Cameron's friends, they might be already.

"Let's not get into another dick measuring contest, okay?" Sam asked in an exasperated tone I felt deep in my soul.

"I'm not the one storming in dramatically," said Cameron.

"You had no right to bring him here without consulting with me first," Cyrus said, ignoring Sam.

"Consulting?" Cameron laughed. "What, are we co-parents?"

"It's a damn wolf pack, Cameron," Cyrus snarled. I know you're more comfortable with the dogs than you are your own kind, but you had no fucking right to drag him into it."

"I had every right, and it was an emergency," Cameron shot back. "And you were gone, by the way."

Cyrus's lip curled back, and he looked like he was going to attack Cameron if I didn't intervene. Normally, that wasn't really something I would care about, or have a vested interest in stopping. As a matter of fact, I would typically be making popcorn and sitting back to enjoy the show, but all things considered, that wasn't a luxury I had right now.

"Okay, everyone, just calm down," I pleaded. Considering the fact that I was pregnant, I figured I stood a better chance at getting them to listen to me, if only because they didn't want to stress me into another attack of my mystery ailment. I turned to face Sam and Cameron both. "Can I have a moment alone with Cyrus?"

Neither of them seemed particularly happy about it. Cameron the least of all.

Sam reluctantly nodded. "Yeah, I guess," he said, giving a pointed look to Cameron, as if in challenge.

Cameron hesitated, and I was convinced it was going to come to blows between him and his brother, after all. Instead, he finally muttered something under his breath that I couldn't make out and stalked toward the door, followed by Sam, who gave us both a knowing look on his way out.

Cyrus raised a finger to his lips before I could say anything and nodded a moment later. "It's okay. They're downstairs now."

I breathed a small sigh of relief. I really envied the whole superhuman senses thing sometimes, creepy as it was.

"Are you all right?" Cyrus asked worriedly, coming to look me over. The moment his hands fell on my shoulders, the tension in my body fled, even though I should have been just as heavily on guard with him as I was with Cameron.

At least, that was what my head told me. My heart was another matter. But it had led me astray plenty of times before with Alex and Sam. Why would Cyrus be any different?

"I'm feeling better after whatever that stuff the doctor gave me was," I admitted. "Where were you?"

If I didn't know better, I would think the look on his face was guilt. But I did know. No matter what I was feeling for him, I knew his care for me only extended as far as his duty to Ichor.

Being right just sucked sometimes, that was all.

"I was at the Tavern. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have left."

I shrugged it off. "It's fine. It's not like you knew my body was going to have a meltdown or whatever."

"It's not fine," he muttered. "It's not a risk I should have taken. Not a mistake I intend to make again. Which is why we have to leave."

"Cyrus, you know Cameron isn't going to let that happen," I said, keeping my voice barely above a

whisper, just in case.

"Which is exactly why we have to leave now, before things get any worse," he protested. "I thought we had time to plan, but we don't. Not anymore."

I frowned and stared at him. It wasn't often that Cyrus gave any kind of indication about the inner workings of his mind, and even less often that he seemed anything other than perfectly composed and calm. Hell, at the moment, he seemed downright nervous, and that was an unnerving realization in and of itself.

"Cyrus, you're scaring me," I murmured. "I don't understand. What changed since last night?"

He opened his mouth as if to answer, but he hesitated, like he had just thought better of it.

"Cyrus?" I pressed, taking a step closer.

I reached out, touching his cheek, and he froze, staring at me with this unreadable look in his eyes. I didn't know what the hell he was thinking, or what had him so shaken, since Cameron wasn't really being any more menacing than usual.

Not that that was saying a lot...

Still, though, I couldn't help but feel like I had missed something.

"He's not going to let this happen," he finally answered.

I frowned, shaking my head because his explanation still didn't make any sense. "This? What do you mean, this?"

"This," he said, reaching out to put his hand on my stomach. "The baby. You. Me. Us. He's still trying to figure out a way to bring Ichor back, and he sees you as a threat to that—both of you. He won't stop until this baby is gone, and so are you, for all intents and purposes. And you will be, because if he figures out a way to bring her back, to have you possessed like Sarah was supposed to be to begin with... there won't be anything left of you. That's what Sarah didn't understand. None of the other vessels did, and by the time that changed, it was too late. If we stay here, then soon, it's going to be too late for you, too."

I found myself staring at him. I clearly stared for a bit too long, considering the even more worried look he started giving me.

"What is it?" he asked. "I'm sorry if I upset you. I just figured it wasn't anything you hadn't already figured out for yourself."

"It isn't," I admitted, not sure what to make of the fact that he thought I was sharper than Sarah, at least in the one regard. "It's not like I don't know what Cameron is capable of, or what he wants. I guess I just thought you wanted the same thing."

I had to admit that hearing him talk this way was a shock. But there was no benefit to telling me any of this if he wanted me gone, too. The alternative just seemed too fantastical, no matter how much I wanted to believe it was the case.

Understanding crossed his annoyingly perfect features, and he reached out, stroking a strand of white hair behind my ear. "Things change," he said quietly. "People change."

"Not centuries-old vampires," I countered. "Especially not centuries-old vampires who've been obsessed with the same deity for nearly as long as they've existed."

"No," he agreed. "Not unless you find something even stronger than obsession."

I scoffed. "And what would that be? Because there's no way the heat sex was that good."

"That's debatable," he said in a dry tone. "For me, at any rate. But I wasn't talking about that."

"Then what?" I asked.

He gave me a look. One I recognized well enough, considering it was usually the look my friends gave me when they thought I was having a dumb blond moment. Which was pretty often. There was something different about it, though, coming from him. Something... affectionate.

"You're going to make me spell it out, huh?" he asked with a sigh. "I love you, Chase."

I found myself staring at him again, like a complete idiot, but it wasn't long before my incredulity turned to anger. And that was really the only safe response I could have to those words, because the alternative was actually believing them—and that was more dangerous than anything.

"Don't," I muttered, shaking my head as I stepped back from him. "I don't know if you have some kind of reverse Stockholm syndrome going on or what, but whatever you think you feel for me, it's not really for me. It's her. It's *always* her."

"No," he snarled, taking me by surprise as he grabbed my shoulders and forced me to look up at him. His gaze softened as he looked down at me. "Trust me, this is in opposition to everything I should be feeling as a paladin. It's betrayal, but I feel it all the same."

Tears of confusion and doubt burned my eyes. "Cyrus, you—"

I couldn't get the rest of the sentence out in time before he grabbed me and kissed me, harder than I had ever been kissed in my life. By him, by anyone. Hard enough that I lost track of why I was angry, and why he was full of shit, which was hard enough to remember under the best of circumstances when he looked at me the way he did.

Vampires were predatory, lethal creatures. I knew that better than anyone, and yet, that knowledge hadn't made me even the slightest bit immune to the effects of the predator.

It really just wasn't fair.

But what about my life had been lately?

I found myself returning the kiss, because of course I did. I melted into his arms like the pathetic idiot I was, and I parted my lips for the invasion, happily swallowing down all that he felt like giving me.

When he finally pulled away, I wasn't even sure if I could stand on my own. Hell, I wasn't completely certain of my own name at that point.

Yeah. Pathetic.

And that didn't change a damn thing.

Either Cyrus was the world's greatest actor, which was entirely a possibility, or he was sincere, which seemed far less probable, even if that was the answer I wanted to believe.

"You can't just kiss me every time you want to win an argument."

He gave me that crooked smile that would be the end of me. "I don't know, seems like a win-win scenario for me."

I rolled my eyes. "Yeah, well, my short-term memory isn't *that* bad. I think you're either full of shit, or you've lost your mind."

"Maybe the latter," he conceded. "But I think I found something else in the process, so I'm good with that."

Once again, I found myself gaping at him.

"Do you always have to do that?"

He tilted his head. "Do what?"

"Say just the right thing that makes it impossible to be appropriately pissed off at you."

He chuckled, sweeping his thumb across my lower lip. "Well, I have to protect myself somehow."

I gave him an incredulous look. "Right. Because *you're* the one who needs protecting from *me*."

"You'd be surprised," he said in a knowing tone that left me flustered once more. "Now... what was it you were going to tell me?"

I hesitated. Even if it hadn't been his intention, he had certainly managed to completely distract me from what it was I needed to bring up. It took me a second for it to come back. "It's about the ultrasound," I finally said, admittedly a bit relieved that he had said all that first. If it had come after the news I had to tell him, there would've been a part of me that always wondered if he was just saying all that because there was a strong possibility the babies—or at least one of them—were his.

"What is it?" he asked, searching my face with renewed worry in his gaze. "Is everything okay? I thought the doctor didn't know what was going on."

"He doesn't," I admitted. "But, um, the ultrasound did reveal something interesting. And it explains why I've been having twice the morning sickness."

It took him a moment, and even though I really wasn't sure it was possible, he looked a bit paler. "Wait, are you serious?" he asked in disbelief. "You're pregnant with... twins?"

"Yeah. Guess history repeats itself."

His eyes widened, and he stared at me with complete and utter disbelief that I still felt plenty of, if I was being honest with myself. "I guess so."

I nodded. "According to the doctor, there's a good chance the babies are yours. Or Sam's. Or both."

He stared at me in even greater confusion, and I could see the wheels turning behind his eyes. He admittedly came to terms with it faster than I had. "Holy shit," he murmured.

"Yeah, that's about how I feel at the moment," I agreed.

"And Cameron knows?" he asked, and the worried note in his voice put me on edge all over again.

I nodded.

"Shit," he muttered, raking a hand through his hair.

"What?" I asked warily.

He hesitated. "It's just that one baby is enough of a demand on your limited resources. Two..."

I swallowed hard as his words sank in.

"Yeah," I said, feeling my throat grow tight. "The less energy to go around, the more reason Cameron has to freak out."

"I'm sorry," Cyrus said quietly. "I don't want you to think I'm upset. This just..."

"Complicates things," I offered. "I know. Trust me, I get it. I still can't fully wrap my head around any of this, and I know it's not like you wanted one baby, let alone two."

Cyrus frowned, taking my face in his hands. "Chase, that's not it. You don't understand. I mean, no, it's not something I ever thought would happen, but it's not like I *didn't* want it. I find myself wanting a lot of things I never did before when it comes to you."

His words caught me off guard again, and his arm slipped back around my waist, pulling me in closer. I melted against him, unable to help smiling a little. "You know, if this is just a long con to get into my pants, you can give it a rest."

"Considering you're pregnant, I'd say that already worked," he quipped.

My face grew warm, and I found myself looking away as his fingers tangled in my hair. "We'll stay until the doctor figures out what's wrong, or I figure out a better solution," he said after a few moments of contemplation. "And then, as soon as Cameron's guard is down, we leave."

"When you say we, you mean you, Sam, and me, right?" I asked hopefully.

"Of course," he replied. He hesitated. "And Alex, or...?"

I grunted. "Depends on the day."

His lips quirked at the corners. "Fair enough. We'll play it by ear."

"Where is he, anyway?"

"He's on his way, but I told him to take a sweep of the area and get a read on how many guards they have posted when he gets here," Cyrus answered. "Just in case." He looked up, his demeanor shifting.

"They're coming back."

I was already appropriately wary of Cameron under the best of circumstances, but even more so now after our conversation.

"What do we do in the meantime?" I asked.

"We wait," Cyrus answered. "And most importantly, you rest. Sam, Alex, and I will take care of everything else."

Despite the fact that everything was still more chaotic than it ever had been, those words that once would have seemed like a threat were comforting. More than I wanted to admit.

CHAPTER
SIXTEEN

CHASE

Cameron didn't actually come back to the room that night, much to my relief. Alex was down the hall, even though he'd sulked about it, but he always had a way of spiking my blood pressure. I didn't need anything else doing that at the moment, even if I was grateful he'd brought Cyrus.

While I usually would have had a hard time sleeping in the same room with both Sam and Cyrus—albeit, not for any of the right reasons—I was admittedly exhausted and was out like a light the moment my head hit the pillow.

Of course, I knew that in Cameron's mind, my exhaustion was probably proof he was right about the babies putting an undue burden on my energy.

And hell, maybe he *was* right, but it still wasn't his call to make, and it wasn't like he was actually concerned on my behalf. Maybe it was naïve, but I'd had a long time to talk myself out of believing anything Cyrus had told me, and yet... I did.

The truth was, I wanted—needed—to believe that what he'd said was true, because it was true for me.

I loved Cyrus. I wasn't sure when it had happened, but it was clear enough that it had. I hadn't even realized it until that moment, like a tide creeping onto the shore only to wash away everything in its path.

I loved him, and that might have well been the thing that finally did me in, but there was no turning back.

My life would be a hell of a lot easier if I could find a redo button, but the truth was, I wasn't sure I would have pushed it, anyway. There was something admittedly appealing about a vice as self-destructive as this one. And I was already addicted, so I figured I might as well go all the way to hell while I was at it.

No sense in being half an idiot.

When I opened my eyes to find myself pressed between Sam and Cyrus, I realized how dangerously easy it would be to get used to this. Maybe I already had.

“Good morning,” Cyrus said, stroking my arm.

I looked up at him, blinking. “I thought we already established that you watching me while I sleep is creepy as hell.”

He smiled a little. “We did,” he agreed. “But I don’t recall promising to do anything about it.”

I rolled my eyes and sat up, taking stock of my current condition. So far, the pain hadn’t come back, but I knew that wasn’t likely to remain the case when the meds the doctor had given me wore off.

“I’m gonna take a shower,” I said, finding Cyrus at the side of the bed before I could even try to get up. He offered his hand and I huffed, taking it. “You have to stop doing that.”

“Force of habit,” he said, helping me into the bathroom attached to the suite. “Are you going to be all right on your own?”

I gave him a look. “Somehow, I managed to shower without the help of four men before you came along. I think I’ll be fine.”

I closed the door, unable to help but smile a little. As much as the overprotective routine could be annoying, it was kind of endearing. And I infinitely preferred it to the way things used to be between us.

The hot shower helped wake me up the rest of the way, and by the time I came back out into the room wrapped in a bathrobe, Sam and Cyrus were both already redressed, even if the former looked more like a zombie than a vampire at the moment.

“Morning,” Sam said, yawning as he pulled his shoes on and walked over to kiss me. “How’re you feeling?”

“Better,” I admitted. “The pills helped a lot.”

He nodded, seeming relieved.

“Cameron texted,” Cyrus said unhappily, looking down at his phone. “Dr. Curtis has your labs back and wants to see you as soon as you’re finished with breakfast.”

“Like I’m supposed to be able to keep anything down without knowing what the results are?” I scoffed, changing into the clothes Dr. Curtis had lent me. “I’d rather get it over with.”

To my relief, neither of them argued. If anything, they seemed equally antsy to find out what was wrong.

Even though I wanted to know, as we walked into Dr. Curtis’s office, I realized I wasn’t actually prepared. My stomach was twisted into a knotted mess, and I could hardly keep track of my thoughts. It was one thing to read about brain fog in medical textbooks and another to be the poster child for it.

“Chase,” Dr. Curtis said, stepping out into the lobby as soon as we entered the clinic. He paused to glance at Sam and Cyrus. “And I see you brought your other mates. Good to see you again, Cyrus.”

Mates. It figured that was how a shifter would see it, even if it was hardly the truth. I wasn’t sure where exactly paladins fell on the scale from one-night stands to husbands, but that definitely wasn’t it.

Rather than deny it, Cyrus said, “Do you know what’s wrong with him?”

“Right. Straight to business,” Dr. Curtis said with a pleasant smile, turning back to me. “I’ll put your nerves at ease and say the short version is, I couldn’t find anything seriously wrong with you. Shall we go downstairs and have a bite to eat while I explain the long version?”

I hesitated before nodding. “Yeah. Sure.”

“Wonderful,” Dr. Curtis said, opening the clinic door. “After you.”

I slipped through the door, well aware that Sam and Cyrus were following close behind. To say they were both on edge would have been an understatement, and as we made our way down in the elevator, the tension between the three men was thick enough it could have been cut with a knife.

Even if most of it did seem to be coming from Sam and Cyrus.

I wasn’t sure if I should take Dr. Curtis’s easygoing, pleasant demeanor as an indication of all shifters, or if he was just an outlier.

When we arrived in the dining hall, my growling stomach momentarily took precedence over my nerves. I wasn’t sure what I had expected, but the large cafeteria on the lower floor definitely wasn’t it. The pack seemed to be somewhere between a university campus and a commune.

I wasn’t really sure what to make of it, but it was cozy, if nothing else.

I wasn’t surprised that only Sam and I ended up getting food. Cyrus was waiting at an empty table by the window, getting more than a few strange looks from the other shifters present. They seemed understandably wary of the strangers who had invaded their secluded residence, especially considering we were all at least vampire-adjacent, but not overtly hostile.

It wasn’t like I would be surprised if most of the bad blood between the species came from the vampires’ side. They were nothing if not contentious. Even with each other.

Hell, even though the guys had all been together in some form or another for centuries, and shared a common purpose as paladins, they were still at each other’s throats more often than not.

“Well?” Cyrus demanded as soon as Dr. Curtis had sat down. “What’s your long version?”

The doctor paused, taking a sip of the tea in front of him. “As I said before, there’s nothing that appears to be wrong with either Chase or the babies, medically speaking.”

“You’re saying it’s in my head?” I asked, frowning.

“No, no, not at all,” he said quickly. “These things just aren’t always so cut and dry. Especially with a case as unusual as yours. As I’m sure you’re aware, human omegas don’t come along every day. There are plenty who don’t think they exist at all, and while you’re proof that isn’t the case, there simply isn’t enough data on your kind to be able to say much of anything with absolute certainty. I say that only to preface my theories with the disclaimer that I could be incorrect.”

“But you do think you know what’s wrong with him,” Sam pressed.

“I have an idea,” the doctor said carefully. “If there’s no physical cause for the pain, then there must

be an energetic one. As a vessel, it's a simple fact that he has more than one type of energy dwelling within him. Now, there are several. That's bound to create some conflict, and I assume that the pain you're feeling is a result of that."

"You think the babies are hurting him?" Cyrus asked, his tone and demeanor putting me on edge. With Cameron, it was different. I knew he wasn't worried about me as anything other than a vessel for Ichor. Maybe it was naïveté, but I felt like Cyrus actually cared about me. That just didn't make me any less wary of his reaction, especially if it led him to the same conclusion as his brother.

"No, I don't," said Dr. Curtis. "I think they're protecting him." When it became clear that none of us knew what he was talking about, he continued, "During a pregnancy, the fetus receives nutrients and other benefits from the carrying parent, but contrary to popular belief, it's not a one-way relationship. There's also a DNA transfer from the fetus through the placenta, with the transferred cells functioning as stem cells capable of changing into whatever type of tissue they merge with. Organ tissue, skin cells... even neurons. It's called microchimerism, and it's thought to influence everything from lactation to maternal instinct, or even cancer prevention and immune regulation."

"So the babies are mind-controlling me," I said, raising an eyebrow.

Dr. Curtis chuckled. "I suppose you could see it that way, in a very minor sense. The truth is, there's much we still don't know about the process, even among humans, or what the purpose of the cellular transfer is, but it does present an interesting possibility when it comes to omega pregnancy. And if the fetuses are capable of transferring DNA, it stands to reason their energy would be capable of a similar exchange. It's possible that Ichor's energy has been identified as a threat, and your combined energetic immune systems have decided to actively target it. If that's the case, then the pain and discomfort you're feeling could either be a symptom, like a fever trying to burn out a virus, or..."

"Or?" I asked anxiously.

"Or Ichor fighting back," Cyrus answered in a solemn tone.

The table fell silent, but I could tell from the look on Dr. Curtis's face that Cyrus had guessed correctly.

I swallowed hard. "Well. That's... comforting."

"And did you share this theory of yours with Cameron?" Cyrus asked, a dangerous edge coming into his voice as he stared the other man down.

Dr. Curtis didn't blink, which was more than most people who happened to be on the receiving end of that menacing glare could probably say. "No," he answered carefully. "I haven't. I believe in patient confidentiality, regardless of my relationship with your brother."

"I would appreciate it if it stayed that way," Cyrus said pointedly. As civil as he was being on the surface, it was clear what the implication really was.

"Of course," the doctor said, turning back to me. "I'd like to run a few more tests if you're alright with it, but I can prescribe you some medication that essentially acts as an immunosuppressant that should interrupt these episodes the next time it happens."

"An immunosuppressant?" Sam echoed. "Isn't that dangerous? What if he gets sick?"

"That's why I'm only recommending him to take them on an 'as needed' basis," he answered. "It's not ideal, but it should help."

"And if it doesn't?" I asked.

He hesitated before answering. "Then we'll have to consider other options."

"Like what?" Cyrus asked, his voice tight.

The doctor shook his head. "I don't want to speculate until it's absolutely necessary."

I nodded, understanding why he was being so cautious, but that didn't make me feel any better about the situation. "All right," I said. "I'll take the medication."

"Good," he said, sounding relieved. "And should you have any questions, I'm always just a phone call away. While you're more than welcome to stay, I have a feeling your guardians are not eager to have their omega in 'enemy' territory for any longer than absolutely necessary."

"You got that right," Sam muttered under his breath.

I sighed. At the moment, though, I was inclined to agree with him. It wasn't even the shifters that had me on guard, though. It was the fact that Cameron was here, and he was bound to find out about the doctor's theories sooner or later if we stayed.

And when he did, I didn't want to be anywhere near him.

CHAPTER
SEVENTEEN

CHASE

We had just gotten back from the Red River pack when I found myself alone with Alex. Cameron hadn't actually come back to the house, so Cyrus had gone back out as soon as we were home to keep an eye on him.

He'd also said he had some "things" to take care of, in typical cryptic Cyrus fashion. Probably making preparations for our disappearance, which made me nervous in its own right, but it wasn't like freaking out was going to change anything.

Sam had said he was going to run to the store for a few minutes, and since he had promised to pick up all the weird shit I had been inexplicably craving, I wasn't going to complain about that.

Being alone with Alex definitely wasn't my idea of a fun afternoon, though. So far, he really wasn't being his usual infuriating self, even if that was only because he seemed to be in a weirdly melancholic mood.

The old me would have been asking him what was wrong and fawning over him to try to make him feel better, even when he pulled his usual distant bullshit. With him, the cryptic behavior was less mysterious and more annoying.

If I was being honest with myself, I was still tempted. Old habits die hard, and whether I wanted to admit it or not, there was still a part of me that cared. I probably always would.

Instead, I kept scrolling on my phone, enjoying my personally tailored newsfeed of cute animal videos and hot guys getting hurt doing dumb shit. The wonders of machine learning.

"How are you feeling?" Alex asked just when I was getting comfy with ignoring the fact that he was obviously freaked out about something.

Dick.

"Tired, swollen, and Doritoless," I answered.

He chuffed a laugh. "Well, Sam will be back soon, so the last one won't be a problem for long. Here, put your feet up."

I frowned at him. "Why?"

He rolled his eyes. "Just do it. It'll be more comfortable."

I sighed, reluctantly propping my feet up on the couch. He pulled them into his lap and started taking my shoes off.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" I cried, scrambling away from him.

"Giving you a massage," he answered, as if it should be obvious. "You said your feet were swollen, right?"

"Yeah, but since when are you Mr. Thoughtful?"

"Come on, I wasn't pure evil as a boyfriend," he muttered.

"No, you were inattentive and clueless, which is kind of worse."

He didn't argue, but looking like a sad puppy was almost worse. I sighed and put my feet back in his lap. "Fine."

He looked like he had won the lottery rather than the right to rub my feet. I was pretty sure I would've noticed if Alex had a foot fetish. The fact that he didn't was his one redeeming quality.

He proved good enough at it that I started getting suspicious about that whole foot guy thing, but it felt too good to care. I couldn't help the moan that escaped me as he found some kind of pressure point right in the center of my arches that made my spine go all tingly.

"Fuck..."

Alex looked up at me, curiosity and amusement lighting his eyes. "Haven't heard you make that sound in a while."

"You haven't heard me make that sound ever," I corrected him.

He rolled his eyes. "Okay, fine. You've made it clear I suck in bed. But it's not like you really gave me a chance to do better, is it?"

"I was a virgin," I said with a shrug. "I didn't know what I liked and didn't like back then."

"So was I," he reminded me.

I sighed. I hated to admit it when he had a point, but he kind of did. "So I could have communicated better. Mediocre sex was by far the least of our relationship problems."

"It wasn't just sex," he countered. "You always went along with everything I said. How was I supposed to know whether you were happy or not?"

I narrowed my eyes. "Are you seriously trying to say it's my fault our relationship tanked for being too agreeable, and not the fact that you fucking murdered me?"

"I'm not blaming you," he said, quickly. "You didn't always give me a whole lot to go off of, though."

"Because I was afraid of losing you," I snapped. "You and the others all acted like you belonged to some secret club, which turned out to be pretty fucking literal, and I already felt like an outsider in my

own friend group. My own relationship, for that matter. I didn't want to give you another excuse to push me away during what little time we actually got to spend together."

"I wouldn't have done that," he insisted.

"No?" I challenged. "You're telling me you didn't check out whenever things got hard? Or roll your eyes and wish you were anywhere else whenever I wanted to talk about our relationship?"

"Okay, so maybe I don't always handle conflict in the best way," he conceded. "But that doesn't mean I would've broken up with you every time we had a disagreement."

"That wasn't a chance I was willing to take," I admitted, even though I had already gotten more than vulnerable enough with Alex for one lifetime, let alone that afternoon.

He frowned like he didn't get it at all. Which I probably should have counted is a blessing in disguise and left well enough alone, but I was just frustrated enough to take the bait.

"Of course you don't get it," I muttered. "You've never been alone a day in your life. You don't know what it's like to be afraid of losing the people you love. Being left behind. When my mom left, you, Sam and Sarah were all I had, and I felt you slipping away more and more each day that passed. I wasn't going to be the reason you finally got sick of me."

Alex frowned as he listened, as if he was completely mystified by what I was saying. And he probably was.

"I guess it didn't matter, anyway, did it?" I murmured. "Trying to be the perfect boyfriend, trying to make you happy all the time... all it did was ensure you got bored of me."

"That's not true," he protested.

"No? You sure about that? Because it was only when I stopped giving a shit what you thought of me that you started acting like you cared."

He frowned, like he wanted to argue, but he didn't. We both knew I was right.

Before he could say anything, the doorbell rang. It felt like we had barely even got in the door, and I had been hoping that we would have at least a couple of days to rest and recover before we had to be on the move again.

Whoever it was, I really wasn't in the mood. I found myself hoping Sam had just forgotten his house key or something, but that was really too optimistic of me. Especially considering the way things had been going lately.

"Hold that thought," Alex said with a sigh, pushing my feet aside to get up from the couch.

Hold that thought. Yeah, right. I was going to take it as a sign from the universe to quit while I was ahead. There was no way this conversation was going to lead anywhere productive, rather than just making me even more frustrated about the past than I already was.

When Alex reappeared in the doorway to the living room a moment later, looking like he had seen a ghost, I was immediately on edge.

"What's wrong?" I asked. "Who's at the door?"

Alex stared at me for a moment before answering, "Your mom."

I blinked at him. "That had better be a stupid fifth-grade joke."

"What's the matter, sweetie?" came a familiar voice that had even more of a chilling effect on me than Ichor's would have. "You're not happy to see me?"

And there she was. Standing right behind Alex, wearing one of her infamous pantsuits that would've made Hillary Clinton jealous and a Louis Vuitton roller suitcase at her side, was the last person I wanted to see right now.

My mother.

CHAPTER
EIGHTEEN

CYRUS

Since we had arrived home, I had been dividing my time between keeping an eye on Cameron and planning for our escape. It was a balancing act between trying to keep him from realizing what we were planning and getting the fuck out while we still had time.

I had no idea whether that was a balancing act I was succeeding at, and probably wouldn't until it either failed or succeeded, but that was just par for the course these days.

I eventually headed back to the house after making all the arrangements I could for the day, but when I saw a car in the driveway I didn't recognize, I was immediately on edge. It was a dark gray SUV, the kind that cost about ten grand more than it needed to and looked like it was missing a stick figure family on the back windshield.

When I walked into the living room and saw that Chase and Alex were sitting on the sofa across from a strange woman, both looking like they were going to pass out, I wasn't sure what I had walked into.

One look at the woman, though, and I knew she had to be related to Chase. She appeared to be in her mid-to-late forties, with blonde hair the same shade Chase's had once been styled into an angled bob. She had the same vivid blue eyes and straight nose with a slight little bump in the middle. As similar as their features were, though, hers were set in a way that made them seem hard and severe.

Her eyes locked on me, immediately appraising and full of judgment.

"Hi," I said, looking from her to Alex to Chase. "Sorry, Chase, I didn't know you were expecting company."

"I wasn't," he muttered, folding his arms. "Cyrus, this is my mother, Denise."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Mardoll," I said, offering her my hand.

She shook it, and corrected, "It's Doctor."

"Of course. Sorry, Doctor," I said. "Chase has told me so much about you."

"Has he?" she asked, raising an eyebrow. "That's funny, because I haven't the slightest clue who you are. Or why my son is living with you."

Damn. Tough crowd.

I glanced over at Chase, not sure how to proceed. I really didn't do parents. Sarah's were a part of the cult, so they had always just gone along with whatever. Two minutes into meeting this woman, and I could tell any but the most carefully crafted reply would be a huge mistake. And I wasn't sure what Chase had or hadn't told her, so whatever I did come up with came with the risk of contradicting him.

"I'm sorry, is that a difficult question?" she asked in a deceptively pleasant tone. "It seems like it would be straightforward enough."

"Mom," Chase pleaded. "Please don't start giving the third degree to a guy you just met."

"The third degree?" she scoffed. "Sweetie, this is me being downright pleasant. And I think the question is quite reasonable, considering the fact that my son disappeared without so much as a word, and when I show up to his house, I find out he hasn't even been living there. For months."

"How did you even find out I was here?" Chase asked.

"Your former landlord," she answered. "But that's entirely beside the point."

Chase sighed heavily, pressing a hand to his forehead. "I was going to tell you I moved out, but things have been busy between exams, and my channel..."

"Oh, really?" she challenged. "Because according to the school, you took a deferral for the semester. And you haven't posted anything on your little YouTube show in weeks." When she saw the blank look on Chase's face, she smirked in triumph. "Yes, well, when you're paying the tuition bill, you discover these things."

He sighed again. "Look, Mom, it's not what you're making it out to be."

"No?" she asked. "Because it looks to me like you dropped out of college and abandoned your hobby to shack up with your boyfriend and some guy I've never even heard of before."

"That's not entirely true, Dr. Mardoll," Alex said. "Cyrus is Sarah's ex-boyfriend." When Chase and I both turned to glower at him, he looked like he was going to be sick. "I'm just saying."

Chase's mother's eyes narrowed in an all-too-familiar way as she turned toward me with even greater suspicion. "He's what now?"

I grimaced. This really was not how I pictured this meeting going, if at all.

"I know this all looks very strange," I began, figuring it was time to start damage control.

"Strange?" she echoed. "I don't think strange even begins to cover it, Silas. Right now, you should be glad I came here myself rather than calling the sheriff."

"It's Cyrus," I said, against my better judgment. "And you have every right to be worried, but I can assure you, your son is completely safe."

That was the biggest load of bullshit that had ever crossed my lips, but I *intended* for it to be true soon enough, so that had to count for something.

"Oh, for the love of God," Chase muttered. "I'm an adult. You can't just call the sheriff because I forgot to call you back for a couple of days."

"As a matter of fact, I can," she said, folding her arms. "His wife and I are bridge partners."

"That's really not the point, Mom," Chase said through his teeth.

"You're right," his mom countered. "The 'point' is that you've clearly gotten yourself into something shady, and I don't know what it is, but it ends now. If you're not going to school, then you're coming with me."

"I'm not going anywhere," Chase snapped. "I live here now."

His mother looked furious, and I got the feeling she wasn't accustomed to being told no by anyone—certainly not her own son. "Is that so?" she asked in a dangerously syrupy voice. "You mean with this fuckboy and your best friend's sloppy seconds?"

Alex looked devastated. "Fuckboy?" he whined.

"Shut up," Chase told him, keeping his attention on his mother. "Look, I'm sorry I worried you, but this is my life, and I'm not just going to sit here and let you trash my decision making."

"Oh, yes, because it's *so* sound and mature," she taunted, folding her arms. "I swear, I don't know what's gotten into you, but I'm going to assume you've just lost your mind and chalk this sudden attitude up to that."

"I wouldn't have an attitude if you wouldn't treat me like a child!" Chase exclaimed.

"Well, maybe I wouldn't treat you like a child if you didn't act like one."

Yeah, this wasn't going well. The one threat I couldn't defend Chase from was his own flesh and blood. But I could try to de-escalate the situation, if nothing else.

"Look, Dr. Mardoll, I think we got off on the wrong foot," I said. "But we both care deeply about Chase, so I hope we can at least find some common ground there."

Her eyes narrowed, and I was pretty sure I had merely succeeded at pissing her off even more. Before she could say anything, I heard the front door open and was dreading the prospect that it was my twin returning at the worst possible moment.

He had a way of doing that.

I wasn't sure the fact that it was Sam was that much of a relief, though, considering how Denise's familiarity with Alex only seemed to make her more hostile.

Then again, Alex had that effect on most people.

"Doctor Mardoll?" Sam asked, looking between us in confusion.

I fully expected her to turn on him, too, but I wasn't prepared for the way her expression shifted suddenly and turned into a bright smile. "Sam!" she cried, walking over to embrace him so tightly, he looked like he was having a hard time breathing. "It's so good to see you, sweetheart. And how many times have I told you? Call me Denise."

Sam smiled sheepishly, hugging her back. "It's good to see you. If I had known you were coming, I

would've made an effort to look like less of a deadbeat," he said, looking down at his T-shirt and jeans.

"Don't be silly," she said, giving his arm a playful swat. "You're just as handsome as your father. How are your parents doing, anyway? Is your grandmother feeling better after the knee replacement?"

"They're great," Sam answered, seeming completely at ease. "And the surgery went well. Now we just have to keep her from signing up for triathlons." He laughed.

All I could do was stare in disbelief. Apparently, Sam was the mother whisperer. Judging from Alex's furious expression and the fact that Chase was rolling his eyes, this was nothing new, either.

"So, what's the special occasion?" Sam asked.

Chase's mother seemed to have forgotten about my existence up until that point, but her expression soured immediately. "I'm just trying to get some answers, since apparently, I have no clue what's going on in my own son's life, and he doesn't even answer his phone these days."

"Oh, crap," Sam said, raking a hand through his hair. "I'm really sorry. That's a hundred percent my fault."

She gave him a quizzical look. "And how is that?"

"Well, I surprised everyone with a trip to the family cabin up at the lake, and the signal there is terrible," he answered smoothly. "I should've warned him."

"Oh," Denise said, and I could practically see the wheels turning in her mind. "Well, I suppose you can't always plan for these things if it was a surprise."

Chase blew a strand of hair out of his face, giving me a knowing look.

Well, at least there was one of us his mother didn't despise.

Of course, she didn't yet know Sam's role in all this, so that could well change on a dime. I just wasn't going to be the one to break the news to her.

"I'm sure you have a lot of questions," Sam said with that hapless boy-next-door laugh that was half-awkward, half-charming. And apparently, that was the perfect formula for duping Chase's mother into thinking he was a Boy Scout. "I was actually just about to make dinner, so why don't you join us? I'm sure it was a long drive."

"Exhausting, and the flight wasn't much better," she huffed. "That sounds lovely, dear. Thank you." She gave me a judgmental look. "At least someone around here has manners."

There really was no point in defending myself. Not when everything was going to be taken as proof of guilt.

Ten minutes later, we were all gathered in the kitchen, and I made quick work of setting the table while Sam continued his Mr. Perfect routine by cooking dinner.

I might have been slightly bitter over the fact that I hadn't actually needed to eat in centuries, so my culinary skills were rusty, to say the least. No possibility of impressing her that way.

"I'm afraid I still don't fully understand," Denise said, frowning. The first thing Alex had done when we had gotten to the kitchen was to make sure she had a full glass of wine, and that seemed to be a wise decision, since she wasn't quite as irate as before. "This... fraternity of yours. You all live together, and now Chase is part of it? What about Delta Psi?"

"I just deferred everything for a semester," Chase mumbled. "I'll go back when I return to class. It's not forever."

"I should hope not," his mother huffed. "You would be the first Mardoll in generations not to graduate from university with your full honors."

"I just needed a break," Chase said, quickly latching onto the lie Sam had crafted without prompting. "I finished high school early and I've been on the fast track ever since, so it's not like I'm going to be behind."

His mother frowned, but she was listening, which was a hell of a lot more than I could say for her before. "I just don't know why you didn't feel like you could tell me if you were getting burned out."

Chase stared at her in disbelief. "Is that a joke?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" she demanded.

"You've been pressuring me about med school since I was in kindergarten," he cried, throwing up his hands.

"You're exaggerating, as usual."

"Not by much," he insisted. "I knew you wouldn't approve, and I didn't feel like hearing about it constantly when I'm already stressed out."

Denise scowled, but she didn't seem to have a defense for that. "And how is joining *another* fraternity supposed to help, exactly?"

"Fraternity might not be the right word," Sam said carefully, looking over at Chase. "It's okay, Chase. You can tell her the truth."

Chase frowned, staring at him like he didn't have a damn clue what he was talking about. Which made two of us. "The truth about...?"

"About the society," he answered.

Denise's eyes widened. "You mean your family's little... social club?" she asked warily.

That was certainly a friendlier way to phrase it than cult.

"Yeah. Exactly," said Sam.

It figured she would be at least somewhat aware of all the various societies, covens, and cults that operated as glorified fraternal organizations if she had lived in Winterhaven for any length of time. Hell, it was such a part of the town's tapestry that the tourist traps sold T-shirts that boasted slogans like, "I joined the Illuminati in Winterhaven."

"I thought they didn't allow outsiders to get involved in that kind of thing," Denise added.

"We don't," Sam answered, looking back at Chase. "Which brings us to something else we need to talk to you about."

For the first time since she had arrived, Chase's mother was looking at Sam with suspicion. Then realization. "Are you telling me you two are...?"

Chase stared blankly at Sam, and as pissed as I was, I couldn't exactly say anything. Even if it was a conveniently advantageous solution for Sam.

Judging from the way Alex was glowering at him, even he had come to the same conclusion.

"We wanted to tell you in person," Sam said in his usual sheepish voice that was such utter bullshit. "It really wasn't supposed to be a secret—we just hadn't figured out the timing of announcing it yet."

"Well, this is certainly unexpected," Denise said, studying him and Chase in disbelief. I was convinced she was going to call his bluff, even if it technically wasn't one. Instead, a slow smile spread across her face. "But a pleasant one."

"It is?" Chase asked warily.

"Of course," she said, as if it should be obvious. "Truth be told, I could always see the two of you together. Even back when you were little."

Alex frowned.

"Well, that's... great," Chase said with a forced smile. "What a relief. I'm glad you're not upset."

"Why on Earth would I be upset?" his mother asked, blinking. "Now, when you started dating *this* one, that was another matter," she said, giving Alex a disapproving stare. "But why are you still living together if you broke up?"

"We didn't exactly break up," Alex chimed in, earning a vicious glare from Chase. "We're just poly."

"Poly?" Denise echoed, raising an eyebrow.

"Yeah," said Alex. "Polyamorous. It's where more than two people are in a relationship, and—"

"I know what polyamorous means, you dolt," she snapped. "I grew up in the 1970s, not the 1870s. I'm just not sure why he's *that* with *you*."

I grimaced. Even Alex's soul was going to have road burn from being dragged that hard.

Alex was practically pouting, but the fact that Chase wasn't correcting him about the two of them still dating was proof Alex had gotten what he wanted, more or less. It wasn't like Chase could deny it without arousing her suspicion even more. The story was unbelievable enough—and complicated enough—as it was.

Denise shook her head, turning back to me. "And you?" she asked. "How do you fit into all this?"

"Somewhere," I answered flatly.

"I see," she said, still clearly disapproving, though not quite as vehemently as before. She didn't look like she wanted to gut me like a fish anymore, at any rate. "And is there anyone else I should know about who's banging my son? Is it a clown car situation?"

"Mom!" Chase cried.

"Well, it's a valid question," she insisted.

Sam looked like he might pass out at any moment from trying not to laugh.

"Just Cameron," Alex answered, like the complete fucking moron he was.

"Cameron?" Denise squinted. "Isn't that the name of Sarah's ex-boyfriend?"

I wasn't sure what to make of the fact that she remembered *him* and not me. Probably nothing good.

"That would be the one, yeah," Chase said, shooting an even filthier look at Alex.

"It's... complicated," Sam said, running a hand through his hair. I was curious how even he was going to manage to do damage control on this one. "The four of us are kind of a package deal."

"This is about your cult?" Denise blurted out, raising her eyebrows.

"Mom," Chase groaned.

"Sorry, '*society*,'" she corrected herself, making air quotes.

"It started out that way," Sam said carefully. "But it's not just about that now."

"He's right," I chimed in, at the risk of further incurring her ire.

Not that there seemed to be much lower I could sink in her estimation. Not unless she knew the whole truth, which was why I couldn't blame her for hating me automatically. Some humans had a particularly acute sense of perception when they were in the presence of a predator. While Denise Mardoll certainly seemed to be one of them, she was one of the few whose response to that instinct was to come out swinging rather than shrinking away.

"And what about Sarah?" she asked.

"What about her?" Chase muttered.

"I take it you two had a falling out," she said, casting another judgmental glance around at the rest of us. "And I can imagine why."

"That has nothing to do with it," Chase said, waving his hand around in the air. "This... thing... happened long after Sarah dipped out."

"So you started fucking her boyfriends as revenge," she reasoned. "You really do take after your Nana."

Chase blanched. "Nana what?"

"Well, I can't say I'm surprised," Denise said, ignoring him as she leaned back in her chair to take

another sip of wine. When she set her glass down, I quickly poured her another one. "I never liked that girl from the beginning."

"Mom, please."

"Well, I didn't!" she cried. "She was a terrible friend. Always thinking about herself. You could see it in her eyes, that one. I knew she couldn't be trusted the moment she blew out the candles at your seventh birthday party."

"Yeah, Mom, that was the problem," Chase said in a dry tone.

"I'm serious. These things start early. You know, most serial killers show some sign of antisocial behavior during childhood," she said pointedly. "I saw it in a documentary. But I suppose that's at least one bad influence out of your life," she mused, looking pointedly at Alex.

"Okay, dinner is served," Sam interrupted, placing the food on the table.

"Thank God," Chase said under his breath. "I mean, thanks, Sam."

"Yeah, thanks," I said, sounding about as sincere as I was.

I didn't know what the hell had gotten into me. I was a paladin. Sharing just came with the territory, and it had never bothered me before. All of a sudden, I was turning into some possessive caveman just because another guy was sucking up to Chase's mother, and I had no idea how to stop it.

It was a struggle to remember Sam and I were on the same team. And considering the fact that the opposing team was Cameron, I needed all the allies I could get.

I watched Denise carefully throughout dinner as the others ate, taking a bite every so often to make sure not to arouse suspicion. It became clear Denise was watching me almost as closely as I was watching her, though.

"Are you feeling all right, Chase?" she asked, eyeing him warily about halfway through dinner.

I had been watching her so closely I hadn't noticed that Chase had started looking sick over the last few minutes.

"I'm fine," Chase said in a less than convincing tone. I could tell from the look on Denise's face she didn't believe him, either.

"Well, the food is delicious, so I'm sure it's not that," Denise mused.

Considering what I'd just eaten, I really didn't know if I agreed.

Chase opened his mouth as if he was about to answer when a look of panic suddenly overcame him. He leapt up from the table and I was soon to follow after him, ignoring the others.

He was already in the bathroom by the time I caught up to him down the hall. He was on his knees in front of the toilet, so I grabbed his hair to pull it back and winced in sympathy as he threw up. Or maybe it was empathy. It was something I hadn't felt in a long time, if ever, but it distressed me when he was sick. And I couldn't help but feel somewhat responsible, considering the reason.

"So I guess we're never going to let Sam cook again," I said, hoping to lighten the mood a little as I rubbed his back.

He gave me a half-hearted glare over his shoulder. "Food. Don't talk about it."

I chuckled quietly. "Sorry. How are you feeling now?"

"About the morning sickness, or the fact that my mother's here?" he asked.

"Both, I guess." I grabbed a washcloth out of the cabinet and wet it with cool water before pressing it to his cheek.

Chase sighed, leaning back against the bathtub. "This is bad fucking timing, but this is Denise Mardoll we're talking about. That's the only kind of timing she knows."

"Well, she's here now, so maybe we can use that to our advantage."

Chase gave me a disbelieving look. "How?"

It was a good question. "Well, she is kind of... intense."

"Yeah, that's certainly one word for it."

I smiled. "Maybe we can direct her toward Cameron. Keep him distracted."

He raised an eyebrow. "You want Cameron to fuck my mom?"

I blinked. "What? No, I mean keeping her on his case so he stays off ours."

He seemed relieved. "Oh. Yeah, that makes more sense. There's just one problem with that idea, though. Mom drives me crazy, but I would really rather her not get eaten. I'm not saying I'm entirely opposed, I'd just rather avoid it if possible."

I laughed. "Duly noted, but I won't let anything happen to her. Or you. We're still getting out of here—this just complicates things a bit." I hesitated. "How long is she going to stay?"

"That depends," Chase said thoughtfully. "What would be the least optimal length of time? She'll go with that."

I groaned. "Yeah, I had a bad feeling. But it's really not going as badly as it could, considering she clearly hates me."

"If it makes you feel any better, she doesn't hate you anywhere near as much as she hates Alex."

I paused to consider it. "It does, actually."

Chase smiled tiredly as I offered a hand to help him to his feet. "Come on," I said. "You need to rest."

"I can't leave you at the mercy of Denise," he said flatly. "I've kind of gotten attached to you."

I smirked. "Good to know, but I'm sure Sam can handle it. Your mom is obviously a member of his fan club."

Chase rolled his eyes. "Tell me about it."

We were barely out in the hall by the time I realized we weren't alone, and even though Denise was standing at the end of the hallway, I wasn't sure exactly how much she might've heard of our conversation.

"Are you all right?" she asked, eyeing Chase warily as she walked over to us. Before he could answer, she pressed a hand to his forehead. "You're so clammy. You didn't tell me you were sick."

"It's just a stomach bug," Chase insisted, pushing her hand away. "I'm fine."

"How long have you been sick?" she demanded, ignoring him.

He groaned. "A few days, give or take."

"Well, you don't feel like you're running a fever," she said, checking his forehead again. "Maybe it's something you ate." She glanced down the hall, lowering her voice. "Sam is an angel, but it should be illegal for him to touch a stove. Just don't tell him I said that."

Chase pursed his lips like he was trying not to laugh. "I wouldn't dare. He'd be devastated."

"I should probably get him to bed," I said, putting a hand on Chase's shoulder.

Denise scowled. "I suppose he should get some rest. But we'll talk in the morning."

"You're staying?" Chase asked warily.

"Of course," she said. "Sam already showed me to the guest room. Unless you'd rather I stayed in a hotel," she said pointedly, looking between us as she made it clear there *was* a right answer to that question.

"Of course not," I said. "We're happy to have you, as long as you feel like staying."

That answer seemed to satisfy her well enough. "Good night, then," she said, leaning in to peck Chase on the cheek. "Make sure you drink something. The last thing we need is you passing out from dehydration."

Chase just sighed. "Good night, Mom."

I took him down the hall, relieved to finally have a moment alone with him. I only realized I had brought him to my room once we were inside, but he didn't complain.

"Where is Cameron, anyway?" Chase asked as I helped him into the bed.

I shook my head. "I don't know, but once you're settled, I'll go out and look for him. As long as you're okay being here with Sam and Alex."

Chase nodded, but I could tell from the look on his face he was just as exhausted as before.

I pulled the blankets over him and brushed a few hairs out of his face. "It'll be okay, baby," I promised. "We'll figure everything out."

Chase looked up at me, his eyes widening. "Baby? That's new."

I snorted. "Too much?"

"No," he said, snuggling in with a cute, pleasant little smile. "It's nice."

I smiled back, sitting with him and stroking his hair until he fell asleep, which didn't take long. For once, I just wasn't sure if it was the pregnancy draining his energy or his mother.

Denise might not have been able to stand me, but at least things were finally starting to go well between me and Chase, and that was what mattered. It felt like he was actually starting to trust me, and for some reason, that scared the hell out of me.

Deep down, I knew the answer. I was afraid—terrified, really—of letting him down.

CHAPTER
NINETEEN

CHASE

When I woke up in Cyrus's bed, I found myself wondering if everything the night before had been a dream. Hoping, really. When it came to my mother, though, that was always a dangerous game to play.

I dragged my ass out of bed, still feeling about as exhausted as I had the night before. I couldn't even remember if Cyrus had come back or not, but as soundly as I'd slept, it hadn't done me much good.

I had started keeping some clothes in his and Sam's rooms, since I spent more time in one or the other those days than I did my own. Just by virtue of wearing the sweats I chose, I knew I was going to be hearing it from my mother, but sweats were pretty much the only thing that fit now, and I hadn't exactly had time to go shopping.

How far I had fallen.

Of all the shit I had kept from my mother over the years, the fact that I was pregnant was definitely the weirdest. Even though there was no way in hell that was something she could fathom was even a possibility, I still found myself worried she would somehow figure it out. She was nothing if not perceptive. Sometimes eerily so.

When I arrived downstairs and heard voices in the kitchen talking amiably, I was relieved. At least until I realized one of those voices belonged to Cameron.

Mom was laughing uproariously at something, because of course she would find him amusing. Hell, they were probably laughing at me, knowing both of them.

I arrived in the kitchen to find them both sitting at the table, Cameron with a beer in hand and my mother with some sort of cocktail. Probably a mojito.

"Isn't it a bit early for that?" I asked.

"It's past noon, Sleeping Beauty," Mom said, smiling pleasantly. "I was just telling Cameron about that time you thought reindeer were fantasy creatures, and then when you saw one at the Christmas festival and realized they were real, you thought it could fly."

"Oh. Great," I said through my teeth. "That's awesome. I was just thinking to myself, 'You know, I really wish there were more people who knew about my embarrassing childhood moments.'"

"Don't be such a drama queen," Mom huffed, taking a sip of her drink. "I swear, you've been in such a mood since I got here."

"He gave up caffeine," Cameron said in a fake whisper. Because apparently, he had finally succumbed to the ennui and despair of living for centuries, and he wanted to get staked with a chair leg here and now.

"Really?" Mom squinted suspiciously. "Come to think of it, he didn't have any wine at dinner last night, either. Don't tell me that's part of your weird little cult thing, too."

I started to deny it, but changed my mind. "Yes," I answered. "Yes, it is. No drinking, no caffeine, and I have to wear white on Tuesdays. Why don't you ask Cameron about it? It was his idea."

Cameron gave me a mildly threatening closed-mouth smile and grabbed me by the arm, pulling me onto his lap before I could resist. "There's that dry sense of humor I fell in love with," he said, taking my face in his hand and squishing my cheeks together. "Is it any wonder we all fell for this face?"

Yep. I was going to kill him.

Mom tilted her head. "I have to admit, I still have my concerns, but I do feel a lot better about this whole thing than I did last night after talking with Cameron."

"You do?" I asked doubtfully. "And Cameron is the one who inspired this newfound confidence in you?"

"I can't say I fully understand everything even now, but he does seem more trustworthy than his brother," she mused. "No offense."

"None taken at all. I get that a lot," Cameron said knowingly.

I shot him a glare.

He just smirked like the bastard he was, keeping a firm enough grip on my waist that I couldn't squirm off his lap, even if he looked relaxed.

"You should eat something, babe," he said, rubbing the outside of my thigh.

He sure was laying it on thick. "I really don't have an appetite," I said pointedly.

"I insist," he said, finally pushing me off his lap so he could get up.

I watched in frustration as he started making breakfast. The whole dutiful boyfriend routine was something that would've been weird enough under normal circumstances, but the fact that he was the one who wanted both me and the babies dead—or at least didn't care if his plans resulted in that—made it even creepier.

Creepy and kind of depressing, if I was being honest with myself. That was something I actively tried not to do around Cameron, if I could help it.

Mom sipped her mojito, ogling Cameron at the stove from across the room. When she caught me staring, she just smirked and leaned in to whisper, "He cooks *and* he has a great ass. That one's a keeper."

I could see Cameron's lips twitch from the side, and I buried my head in my hand. I couldn't help but wonder how many times in my life I'd said shit thinking there was no way the other person could hear, not knowing they were a supernatural creature of some variety or another.

"It's too early for this," I mumbled. Hell, *midnight* was too early for this shit.

"So," Mom said, leaning back in her chair. "Is dressing like you've given up part of your new lifestyle, too?"

"Mom, please."

"I'm just saying, most cults go with robes. At least there's an aesthetic," she added pointedly.

"I'm not sure what to make of the fact that you think I'm in a cult and you're more concerned about what I'm wearing," I said, folding my arms.

"Oh, please, everyone in this town is in a cult," she said with a dismissive wave of her hand.

"And yet you moved here with an infant," I said pointedly. If she was going to give all my life choices the third degree, I figured I might as well return the favor.

"It has a good hospital system, and we thought it would be good for you to grow up in a small town," she protested. "I just thought all the woo stuff was for tourism."

"Yeah, well, it's not," I muttered. Even if it wasn't for Cameron being an imminent threat, I would have wanted to get out of Winterhaven anyway, because I wasn't thrilled at the prospect of raising a child somewhere ritual sacrifice was a threat on par with kidnapping.

"I just hope you're not getting too wrapped up in all this," Mom said warily. "You still need to focus on your future."

"Isn't the point of taking a break to do the opposite?" I challenged.

She pursed her lips. "You know, if you find college this overwhelming, medicine is going to be a real kick in the pants. You think you have any semblance of work-life balance when you're on call as a trauma surgeon?"

"Trauma?" Cameron echoed, glancing over his shoulder at me. "I thought you wanted to be a plastic surgeon or something."

"When the hell did I ever say that?" I demanded.

He shrugged, carrying two plates filled with eggs and bacon over to set them on the table in front of Mom and me. He grabbed one for himself, too, even though I doubted he was actually going to eat. "Guess I just assumed."

"Oh, fuck off."

"Chase!" Mom scolded. "That's no way to talk to your boyfriend. Especially after he made you a lovely meal."

"It's scrambled eggs and ready-made bacon," I said flatly.

“Just a little banter between lovers,” Cameron said, pecking the top of my head.

He was about to get a fork in the eye socket. I knew vampires healed faster than humans, but I wondered if his eye would grow back. What a satisfying experiment that would be.

I tuned out as he and Mom went back to talking like they were old friends—especially when she started telling him more embarrassing stories about my childhood that he was definitely going to use as fodder, assuming Sarah hadn’t already divulged them.

At least if he was being on such good behavior around her, I was pretty sure he wasn’t planning on eating her. And Cyrus was probably right about her keeping him distracted.

When her phone rang and she announced she had to take it since it was a call from work, I felt bad for second-guessing whether I had a guardian angel. *Someone* out there was definitely looking out for me.

I finally let myself breathe when she went outside through the back door for privacy, at least until Alex peeked his head into the room. “Is she gone?” he asked hopefully.

I scowled at him. “Are you seriously still hiding from my mom after *you’re* the one who told her we’re still together?”

“We are still together,” he said, walking into the kitchen.

“Gotta hand it to ya, bud, that’s an admirable level of denial,” Cameron said, offering Alex his untouched plate. “Have some bacon.”

“I don’t want your pity bacon,” Alex grumbled, even though he took the plate and sank into the chair next to me. “And I’m still a paladin. That’s more of a commitment than being a boyfriend, anyway.”

“And the fact that you see it that way is why you’re not my boyfriend,” I said pointedly.

Cameron snorted a laugh. “How are you feeling? Still sick?”

I knew he wasn’t just asking out of the goodness of his heart, and even if I did still feel like shit, letting on was just going to give him more reason to freak out about the pregnancy. “I’m fine,” I replied. “Where are the others?”

“Sam’s on guard duty,” Cameron answered. “As for where Cyrus is, I was hoping you could tell me.”

There was no mistaking the hint of suspicion in his tone. And it wasn’t like it was unfounded, not when Cyrus was almost certainly out planning for the move. Not that I felt remotely bad for Cameron, considering he was the reason we were having to run in the first place.

“How should I know?” I scoffed. “Alex is the annoying one, you’re the obnoxious one, and Cyrus is the mysterious one. Off somewhere staring pensively at a lake would be my guess.”

Cameron watched me closely, like he wasn’t sure he bought it. But I’d gotten pretty good at feigning nonchalance, and I’d managed to fly under his radar for months after coming back from the dead, so I knew my poker face was decent.

“If I’m the annoying one, then what does that make Sam?” Alex whined.

For once, his self-centeredness was useful.

“The hot one or the nerd, depending on my mood,” I answered. “Just count yourself lucky you moved up in rank from ‘the one I want to shove into a meat grinder.’”

Alex grimaced as if he was picturing it vividly.

Cameron seemed to have checked out once the bickering began, to my relief. “You kids have fun. I’m going out,” he said abruptly before looking intently at Alex. “If anything happens, call me.”

Alex blinked at him. “Yeah, sure...”

I waited to speak until I heard Cameron’s motorcycle leaving the property, since I knew him being out of the house didn’t mean he couldn’t hear. “What was that about?”

“I don’t know,” Alex said defensively.

“Well, you’re *not* going to call him, no matter what happens,” I warned.

“Obviously,” he muttered.

The fact that Cameron seemed to think Alex was going to be his informant was suspicious on the one hand, but on the other... maybe he wasn’t onto us, after all. Hopefully, we could keep it that way for the foreseeable future.

Of course, there was always the possibility Alex was being a traitor.

Again.

My phone buzzed, and when I looked down at the screen and saw it was Cyrus, I was surprised. He really wasn’t the texting type.

How are you feeling?

I couldn’t help but smile a little as I started typing back. *Better now that your brother is gone. My mother loves him, btw.*

That checks out.

I snorted a laugh as Mom came back into the kitchen.

“Where is Cameron?” she asked, looking around.

“He had to go to work,” I lied. As if that bastard had worked a day in the last few centuries. And why bother when he had money that had been accruing interest since before the advent of the modern banking system?

Mom nodded. “Well, that’s what it’s like to be a lawyer. I suppose it’s a good thing you have four men to take care of you. You’ve always been a bit needy.”

She went over to the coffeemaker to pour herself a cup alongside her mojito, and I flipped her off as soon as her back was turned.

“And on that note, I’ve got shit to do,” I said, pushing myself up from the table.

“Like what?” she asked. “You’re not going to school, and you don’t have a job. I can tell you’re not doing any housework, either,” she said, sliding her finger across the countertop and scowling at the imaginary residue.

I pursed my lips and bit down so hard, it felt like my teeth were going to break through. “Yeah, well, I have a channel I’ve been neglecting and very serious cult duties to attend to. Those goats aren’t going to sacrifice themselves.”

Alex choked on his drink, and Mom narrowed her eyes suspiciously.

“That was a joke, Mom,” I said, kind of unnerved that was a necessary clarification.

“I guess I could find something to occupy myself with,” she said with a sigh that was clearly meant to induce guilt. As if I was going to feel bad for not clearing my schedule because *she* had decided to pay an unannounced visit.

“Great,” I said, leaning in to Alex as if I was going to kiss him. His eyes widened in surprise until I whispered, “Keep an eye on her and make sure she doesn’t get into any trouble.”

“Oh. Sure,” he sighed.

I left the kitchen and headed back upstairs, deciding I might as well get some reading in. The Liber Noctis wasn’t exactly a page turner, but whether Cameron had left it in the kitchen by accident or otherwise, I had taken the opportunity to film myself flipping through each page before putting it back.

Taking screenshots of each page in the video had been kind of a pain in the ass, but I figured it was a safer bet to digitize all the grimoires I wanted access to just in case the guys decided that was forbidden, too. Especially knowing how precious Cameron was about any unauthorized use of magic.

Like keeping his bitch ass on lockdown during a full moon wasn’t the biggest energy drain yet.

I fell asleep in the middle of translating a particularly confusing passage and woke up nursing the same headache I’d had when I fell asleep.

I got up and went downstairs, slightly panicking over the fact that I had inadvertently left someone I cared about alone with a merciless, bloodthirsty creature who hungered for souls. And I was also slightly concerned for Mom, too.

When I made it to the bottom of the stairs and realized everything smelled like a Bath and Body Works and half the furniture in the living room wasn’t where it had been before, I froze. “What the fuck?”

“Chase,” Mom said brightly, wiping her hands off on a dish towel as she came in from the kitchen. “You’re awake. It’s about time. I was starting to think you’d gone into a coma.”

“What have you done?” I cried, rushing over to the bookcase. All the books and grimoires I’d carefully arranged seemed to be in alphabetical order, even though it had taken me hours to arrange them all by the genre of magic they were written for.

“I organized,” she said in an incredulous tone, as if she was offended I wasn’t thanking her. “You were up there for a long time. I had to do something.”

“Long enough to rearrange my damn living room?” I demanded.

“Oh, I finished that ages ago. But now your kitchen actually makes sense,” she said, planting her hands on her hips. “You’re welcome, by the way.”

I took a deep breath and tried to picture myself relaxing on a hammock in the Bahamas, which was pretty effective until Mom showed up and started complaining about how the sand wasn’t tidy enough.

Alex came up behind her, and judging from the way he was pre-cringing in anticipation, he knew I was going to blame him.

“You were supposed to watch her!”

Mom’s jaw dropped. “Excuse me, young man?”

“I… think it looks nice?” Alex croaked, looking nervously between us.

I growled in frustration, but a familiar sharp, stabbing pain cut me off before I could ream him out. I doubled over with a pained cry. This time, the pain was in the middle of my stomach, but it was definitely the same as before.

“Chase?” Mom cried.

Alex was already at my side, and he lifted me into his arms with surprising ease before carrying me over to the sofa that was now on the other side of the room for some fucking reason.

“What’s wrong?” Alex asked, sitting next to me. “Same as before?”

It hurt too bad to speak, so I nodded. I managed to take enough of a breath to grit out, “My pills are upstairs.”

“I’ve got it,” he said, reaching into his pocket. I watched in confusion as he took out a small case and popped it open before shaking out two of the blue capsules the doctor had sent me home with. “Take these. I’ll get you some water.”

I tossed the pills into the back of my mouth and swallowed them dry. They were bitter, but the relief was almost instant.

Alex came back immediately with a tall glass of water, and I took it, drinking eagerly. By the time I’d downed half the glass, the pain was completely gone.

“Better?” he asked as Mom came over, watching the whole thing in wary silence.

Shit. This was going to be a pain in the ass to explain.

“Yeah,” I said hoarsely. “I’m good.” I still wasn’t sure what to make of the fact that he had thought to keep some of my medication on hand. I wasn’t used to Alex being thoughtful, and I definitely wasn’t used to him being a reassuring presence, but I was glad he was there.

Which reality was I in again?

“Someone had better tell me what’s going on right now, or I’m calling an ambulance,” Mom said, standing in front of us.

“I don’t need a fucking ambulance, Mom,” I said. “I’m fine.”

“What I just saw was not fine,” she said firmly. “First, you got up in the middle of dinner to puke your guts out. And sure, that’s a normal enough reaction to Sam’s cooking, but then you slept all day, and now this. For God’s sake, if I didn’t know better, I’d think you were...”

She trailed off, and her expression went blank. “Oh, God.”

“What?” I asked, frowning.

She opened her mouth as if to reply, but for once, she was incapable of speech. The longer she was silent, though, the more paranoid I became.

That’s impossible. There’s no fucking way she could know you’re pregnant.

I had managed to coach myself down off the irrational spike of panic when she looked me in the eye, a sudden glint of determination in her eye as she asked, “Chase, are you pregnant?”

CHAPTER
TWENTY

CHASE

For a few long moments, all I could do was stare at my mother, convinced I had either heard her wrong, or this was some kind of bizarre dream brought on by eating too much cheese before bed.

Munster. My old nemesis.

When I looked over at Alex and saw that he was staring at her in equal disbelief, I realized I hadn't misheard her after all.

She had actually just asked that question.

And I had no fucking idea how to answer, because it sure as hell wasn't going to be the truth.

"I'm sorry, did you just ask me if I'm *pregnant*?"

"Well, are you?" she pressed.

Back to not being able to do anything other than gawk at her. "I..."

"Why would you even think that's a possibility?" Alex asked warily.

At least one of us was coherent. He was really on his A-game tonight, other than letting her rearrange the entire fucking house while I napped.

To be fair, keeping Denise Mardoll from doing anything was a challenge most people weren't up for.

"I had a feeling," she said with a sigh. "I am your mother. And a doctor."

As if she was ever going to let anyone forget it for all of two seconds.

"The symptoms are obvious, even if it is a little hard to believe," she went on.

"Hard to believe?" I cried. "It's impossible! Hell, I still don't believe it, and I've seen the ultrasound."

I probably should have been in damage control mode, but at this point, I was more concerned with how the fuck she knew than trying to deny it. And once she had latched onto something, there was no getting her to let it go.

"There are things you don't know," Mom said carefully. "Things I kept from you. For your own good,"

she added quickly.

I narrowed my eyes. "Okay, you're going to have to explain this one. Like I'm five, so pretty much the way you always talk to me."

She gave me a look. "Well, the simplest way to put it is that I may not have been entirely forthcoming with you about your origins. Genetically speaking."

"Genetically?" I echoed. "What the hell is that supposed to mean? Male pregnancy runs in the family, or something?"

"Of course not," she huffed. "Not exactly."

"Then what 'exactly'?" I demanded. The vague routine was going to drive me insane if she didn't let up.

It wasn't like my mother to tiptoe around anything, let alone on my account, so the fact that she felt the need to had me on edge, to say the least.

"It's about your father," she began, chewing on her bottom lip. She only did that when she was *really* nervous, and I could count the number of times she had been on one hand without using all my fingers.

"What about him?" I asked, my eyes widening. "Please tell me I didn't come out of *him* instead of you."

"No," she snapped. "Would you be serious for a moment?"

I opened my mouth to argue, but shut it.

Bahamas, Chase.

"Then what?" I asked once I trusted myself to remain calm. At least, as calm as I was capable of being, given the circumstances.

"He isn't your father," she finally answered.

When I realized there wasn't a trace of humor on her face, my disbelief was replaced by dread.

"No," I muttered. I shook my head. "Don't."

"I know you don't want to hear it, but it's the truth," she insisted. "Why do you think I waited so long to tell you?"

"If it's not Dad, then who the fuck is it?" I cried.

For a second, I had all but forgotten we weren't alone. I was just that much in shock. Then, I felt Alex's hand on my shoulder, and for once, the reminder of his presence actually made me feel safer, if only by a margin. Alex was familiar. He was the only one I had been vulnerable enough with to cry on his shoulder every birthday my father hadn't made it to. Just because it turned out Alex wasn't trustworthy didn't mean those times had never happened, or that I could just erase them from my heart.

Mom didn't answer, she just continued staring at me in that infuriating way that made me want to

fucking scream.

"You're not going to believe me if I tell you," she replied.

"Try me," I said.

She cleared her throat, resting her hands in her lap as she sat on the chaise across from us. "It's Zeus."

"Zeus," I echoed. "You fucked a guy named Zeus? Did he have a Harley?"

"No," she snapped. "It was Zeus. *The* Zeus."

I looked at Alex, and he looked back at me.

That was the moment I realized my mother had lost her mind. I lived with four vampires and I was possessed by a blood goddess, and yet apparently, *she* was the one who was completely and utterly bonkers.

"Don't look at me like that!" she hissed. "I knew you weren't going to believe me."

"Yeah, well, you picked the one explanation I wouldn't believe, so congrats," I muttered.

"Wait," Alex said, looking almost as bewildered as I felt. "You're serious. You're telling us Chase's father is the Greek god Zeus? As in the ruler of Olympus, the legendary manwhore who turns into a swan—*that* Zeus?"

If possible, Mom looked even more annoyed with Alex than usual. "If you want to put it like that, yes. That Zeus."

"You realize how this sounds, right?" I asked.

"Of course I know how it sounds," she scoffed. "Why do you think I never told anyone?"

"I don't... I really don't understand," I said, burying my head in my hands because I felt like I was going to pass out all of a sudden. Pretty sure that had less to do with the pregnancy and more to do with everything she was telling me. "How did you get involved with Zeus in the first place?"

I had to suspend my disbelief for the sake of my sanity. If I was going to even entertain the idea that she hadn't completely lost it, at least not anymore than I had, I needed a more cohesive narrative than the one she had given me so far.

"The same way all his other flings did, I imagine," she said in a dry tone. "I was at a bar in Chicago, one thing led to another, and the rest is... well, your history."

"Seriously?" Alex blurted out, since I was still kind of lost. "Chicago? You're telling us this had nothing to do with Winterhaven?"

He was right, of course. As unbelievable as what she was saying was, plenty of impossible things happened in Winterhaven. That was its appeal... or its drawback, depending on your outlook.

"Zeus can't get past the wards protecting Winterhaven," she said, as if it was just a well-known fact. "Why do you think I chose it in the first place?"

She kept asking why I thought she did or didn't do that, as if the way she was hadn't been a complete and utter mystery to me from day fucking one.

"I literally have no idea, considering I didn't know he actually existed until like two point five seconds ago," I answered. "I'm still not completely sure you're being serious right now."

"Oh, I'm serious," she huffed. "I wasn't exactly eager to embrace any of this myself."

It was a fair point. My mother had been a staunch materialist for as long as I could remember. That was what made all this even more bewildering.

"Okay, so... you're going to need to take this from the beginning," I said, because I seriously felt like I was going to have a meltdown. "What do you mean, Winterhaven has wards?"

"Winterhaven is special for a myriad of reasons, each one more annoyingly mystical than the last," she muttered. "Aside from all the woo, some of it is legitimate. There are wards around the town that keep certain entities from crossing the territory line."

"Entities," I murmured. "You mean other gods."

"If you want to call them that," she said in a totally not bitter tone. "Anyway, Winterhaven is the territory of one such entity, which made it a decent place to hide you from your father."

There was so much wrong with that statement, but by far the most unsettling part of all this was that she was talking about Zeus—*the* Zeus—as my father in such a casual manner.

And I could venture a wild guess at the other entity she was referring to who had placed the wards, but we weren't going to get into that right now, if only for the sake of my sanity.

"And why exactly would you need to keep me from him in the first place?" I asked.

My whole life, I had grown up thinking my father wanted nothing to do with me. It had always been a struggle to get him to take any interest in my life whatsoever, to the point where I had eventually given up on trying.

If nothing else, that sort of made sense now. But it left a thousand other questions unanswered, and it didn't really make me feel any less like shit.

"Because the man is insufferable, for one thing," she said. "He had only just found out I was pregnant when I left, and he was already trying to control every little thing. He would have kept us both in a gilded cage on Mount Olympus or wherever the hell it is he runs off to when he doesn't feel like dealing with his problems here, and I was barely even six months along before he started talking about arranged marriages for you."

"Arranged marriages?" Alex echoed, taking on that jealous look that had become familiar to me only recently. "With who?"

"Other gods. Keep up or shut up," Mom snapped.

He just scowled unhappily.

"Anyway," she continued. "There are these... Well, I guess you could see them as secondary sexes."

They're found across all species, aside from humans—but in some, they're more pronounced than others."

"Alphas and omegas," I offered.

Mom did a double take. "What? Yes, but how did you—?"

"You're not the only magnet for supernatural dick, apparently," I grumbled.

Mom frowned, but while she usually would've scolded me on my language—as if I didn't get my sailor mouth from her—she didn't. "Don't tell me," she said, glancing over at Alex. "*You?*"

"You don't have to sound so incredulous," Alex grumbled.

"Well, I always did say he was a dog," Mom mused. "I suppose shifters aren't far off."

"Vampire," I corrected. "And so are the others."

She grimaced. "Well, I guess it's better than smelling like wet dog all the time."

"You're pretty chill about this," I informed her.

"Oh, honey, vampires are nothing," she said with a dismissive wave of her hand. "If you only knew half the shit I've seen."

I blinked at her. "That's something we're going to talk about later. In great detail, too. But back to omegas and alphas for a sec. Did you know I was one?"

"An omega?" she asked.

I nodded.

"Your father knew," she answered carefully. "Actually, no, that's not quite right. You're not *just* an omega."

"Something else?" I echoed. "I'm not an omega, then?"

"You are," she said. "But there's more to it than that. Omegas are rarer in some species than others, and gods... well, that's as rare as they come. By definition, all gods are alphas. The incredibly rare exception only occurs when one has a child with a human, and the resultant demigod turns out to be an omega, like you."

"Demigod," I choked. Zeus being my father was fucked up enough, but even though the one conclusion beget the other, it was still a hell of a lot harder to swallow. "Seriously?"

"That's right," she said, absurdly casual about this complete and utter mindfuck. "An *omega* demigod. And it's not just the rarity that makes you different. The gods weren't born, they were created by the Titans—don't even ask, trust me, you don't want to know—and the only way they can produce more offspring is by breeding with a human. Of course, that never produces a fully fledged god, only a demigod. Over time, the bloodline gets diluted, and the descendants of the gods end up more or less human. In some cases, they branch off into another species."

“Are you serious?” I blinked. “Like shifters?”

“Children of Fenrir,” she answered in a matter-of-fact tone.

“Holy shit,” Alex murmured. “That’s metal.”

She shot him a look before continuing, “My point is, the gods can’t ever have children that are fully divine with one notable exception—a godbearer.”

“Godbearer,” I echoed. “And that is...?”

“You,” she answered. “A demigod, and an omega. The one creature in this universe that’s capable of creating another god, even if you aren’t fully one yourself.”

“That’s insane,” I muttered, running a hand through my hair. “This omega crap is weird enough, but this is... this is too much.”

“And that’s why I didn’t tell you,” she repeated. “But it’s the truth all the same. You *are* a godbearer, which is the reason I kept you from your father all these years. I wanted more for you than to become a celestial bargaining chip. To be used as breeding stock by whatever creep from Olympus or Valhalla made your father the highest offer.”

All I could do was stare at her for a moment, processing what she had said. As unbelievable as it was, my mother was not the kind of person who made shit up.

Kept it from me, sure. Lied by omission, plenty. But she didn’t make shit up, if only because she lacked the imagination and the tolerance for such “whimsical” shenanigans to do so.

“So you brought me to Winterhaven to protect me from him,” I said slowly. “And what if I had left?”

“You wouldn’t have been able to,” she replied. “Not without me. I had you warded when you were a baby.”

“You had me *what*?” I cried. “By who?”

“A witch,” she answered, as if she saw nothing wrong with it. “A real one. Not one of those con artists who sells snake oil and illegally harvested sage to tourists.”

I gaped at her. Well, that explained a lot. But it raised other questions, too. “Aside from how incredibly fucked up that is, you’re wrong. I *have* left Winterhaven. Recently, in fact. Nothing happened.”

She frowned, and I could see the wheels turning behind her eyes. “What do you mean, you left? When? Where?”

“I went to a wolf pack outside of Winterhaven when I started having these pains,” I said. “There’s a doctor there who specializes in omega pregnancies, and he gave me those pills. Before that, I went to a ski lodge that’s a good couple of hours away from here, so it can’t just be because the pack was within close range.”

Just mentioning the cabin made me feel queasy, and judging from the way Alex shifted awkwardly in his seat, I wasn’t the only one uncomfortable with the direction the conversation was taking.

“That’s impossible,” Mom insisted. “The witch said the ward would last your entire life, and she was very reputable. She’s got five solid stars on Yelp.”

“Mom, for the—” And then it hit me. Maybe the ward *had* lasted, after all. It was my original life that hadn’t.

Alex was pale enough that I could guess he had arrived at the same conclusion.

“What is it?” Mom asked.

“Nothing,” I said, in an even sourer mood than before. Just as soon as I started to forget about my death, if such a thing was even possible, something would remind me.

I found myself wondering, though... When had I started *wanting* to forget?

“So this whole godbearer thing... Zeus must not be too concerned about it, since he didn’t come after me when I left town.”

“Don’t count on it,” Mom said in a warning tone. “Just because he isn’t actively watching you doesn’t mean you’re safe. Especially not now.”

“What do you mean, especially?” I asked.

She looked pointedly at my stomach. “You’re pregnant. And unless you’ve got another member of the harem lurking behind the sofa, you’re pregnant with a vampire. Not a god.”

“A half-vampire,” I said. “A dhampir.”

“No, you’re a godbearer,” she corrected. “The child you give birth to always has the same nature as the father. Or rather, the... other... father. The gods just don’t put it that way.”

“Of course they don’t,” I muttered. “I still don’t get why Zeus would give a shit who knocked me up.”

I still could not believe I was having this conversation with anyone, let alone my mother.

“It’s the fact that you’re pregnant at all,” she said impatiently. “At least without him arranging the union.”

“I’m sorry, is he supposed to be my pimp or my father?” I asked, already getting pissed at the guy even though I’d just learned of his existence. Then again, he’d had the past two decades and change to leave one hell of a bad impression.

“There’s really not that much of a difference in the realm of the gods,” Mom said bitterly. “Which is why I tried to keep you away from them.”

“Yeah, well, you could have given me a heads up on the whole omega thing,” I said, folding my arms. “Especially considering how good the odds were of me fucking around with a supernatural in the Las Vegas of freaks town you left me in.”

“Oh, and you would have listened?” she challenged. “Because I also taught you to practice safe sex, and that *clearly* isn’t the case.”

I clenched my jaw, a growl dying out in my throat. I thought I'd gotten a handle on the vampirey urges a long time ago, but judging from the way she and Alex were looking at me, I was wrong. But that really wasn't a topic I wanted to discuss with her right now.

"One. Vampires don't have STDs," I said, starting to count on my fingers. "It's magic or some shit. Two. It was a moment of weakness, so let she who has not made some seriously fucking questionable decisions for dick cast the first stone."

She rolled her eyes. "Magic? Really? And you bought that?"

"*Three*," I continued, jabbing my middle finger up extra hard. "I was in heat, which is something I might have been more prepared for if you hadn't lied to me about what I was my entire fucking life."

"I didn't lie," she said, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "I just omitted the truth."

"Oh my God, what is it with you two?" I cried in frustration as the lights flickered overhead. It was probably the pregnancy hormones, but I was one ounce of bullshit away from stamping my feet in rage or blowing out the power in the entire town. One or the other. "I swear, you're just Alex in a wig and pantsuit."

"Hey," he grumbled. "I'd never wear that if I were a woman."

Mom turned on him with a vicious glare, but before she could murder him with her hands, I heard the front door open.

Please, don't be Cameron.

I really shouldn't have tempted fate like that, not even in my thoughts. But when Cyrus came into the room, I figured maybe it had paid off, after all.

At least until I saw the look on his face.

He looked from me to Mom to Alex and back before saying, "We have to go. Tonight."

"Go?" I echoed warily. "Like, *go go*?"

He nodded solemnly. "Is your bag upstairs?"

"Yeah, but—"

"What's going on?" Mom demanded. "Where are you going?"

I took a deep breath. There was so much going on, I was having a hard time keeping track of who knew what, and who knew what who knew. "It's complicated." I turned back to Cyrus. "What's happening?"

"Dr. Curtis called me," he answered, holding my gaze. "Cameron is planning on taking you back to the pack tonight while I'm out on watch."

"The pack?" I asked, frowning. "Why?"

Cyrus seemed like he was about to answer, but he glanced at my mother and thought better of it. It

didn't matter, though. His hesitation had given me long enough to put two and two together.

"He's going to kill them," I said, my hand going to my stomach instinctively.

I was too shaken by the realization, even if I shouldn't have been, to explain when I saw the surprise on Cyrus's face. And it was nothing compared to the look on Mom's face.

"His mom already knows," Alex murmured.

"What?" Cyrus asked, glancing warily at her. "How did—?"

"Never mind that now," she said, waving him off. "Did you just say twins?"

I grimaced. "Uh. Yeah. Forgot to mention that."

She just shook her head, but her disbelief soon faded into anger as she turned back to Cyrus. "And what's this about your brother wanting to hurt them? Is that true?"

Cyrus hesitated, and I could see why. I had only seen that look in her eyes on a few occasions. They had all either ended with someone getting fired, or fucked up. "Yes," he answered carefully. "But I'm not going to let that happen. But in order to protect Chase, I need to get him away from here. I assume you're coming with us?"

"You're damn right I am," she snapped, turning to Alex. "Well, what are you doing just standing there? Go get the bags and put them in the car!"

"Right," Alex muttered, darting past me to rush upstairs.

"I don't understand," I said as Cyrus led us over to the door. "Why would Dr. Curtis warn you?"

"For the same reason Cameron wanted his expertise in the first place," Cyrus answered, helping me into my coat. "He's devoted his life to caring for omegas, and what Cameron is planning on doing is despicable."

I nodded, still processing. Maybe my initial reservations about the doctor had been wrong, after all.

Then again, you didn't exactly have to be a good person to be horrified. There was part of me that still wanted to believe even Cameron wasn't capable of something like this. Yeah, when I'd first found out I was pregnant, I hadn't been sure what I wanted to do, but it was *my* fucking choice. Not his. Not anyone else's.

Just when I thought I had already steeled my heart against Cameron—a man who shouldn't have been capable of stirring anything within me other than hatred—I was wrong.

"Wait," I said as Cyrus opened the door.

He looked down at me, frowning. "What is it?"

"When is he coming back here?"

Cyrus hesitated. "I don't know. The black box on his car says he's about thirty minutes away, but I'm not sure when he's planning on coming back."

“You put a tracker on his car?” I asked.

“Two,” Cyrus clarified. “And one on his motorcycle.”

I breathed a laugh. “Well, that gives us at least thirty minutes. That should be enough time.”

“Enough time to what?” Cyrus asked.

“To craft a sigil to trap him here,” I answered. “As soon as he walks in the door.”

“You’re going to what?” Mom echoed.

“Mom, please, I don’t have time to explain to you what a sigil is.”

“I know what a sigil is, I just don’t know why *you* would be making one,” she answered. “Is that part of this cult bullshit?”

I sighed, turning back to Cyrus. “Since I’m not allowed in the basement, you’re going to have to go get my things.”

He hesitated. “It won’t hold him forever, and you’re already drained. It takes too much energy.”

“It’ll hold him long enough for us to get an actual head start,” I countered, reaching for his hand. “You asked me to trust you, and now I’m asking you to do the same.”

Cyrus didn’t answer right away, but I could see the war going on behind his eyes. He finally nodded, releasing my hand. He was gone the next instant, and I heard the basement door creaking.

“Son of a bitch!” Mom cried, jumping back.

I pursed my lips. If I wasn’t so freaked out, I would have been amused.

Who was I kidding? I still was.

“You’ll get used to it,” I lied.

Cyrus returned barely a minute later with everything I used for the last binding ritual. I looked around the entryway and down at the massive rug. “Can you pull that back? I need to make the sigil as huge as possible.”

Cyrus nodded, peeling back the rug to reveal the hardwood underneath.

“Perfect,” I said, taking a deep breath. “Okay, so since Cameron can’t be held by a normal vampire sigil when he’s a monster cat thing—Mom, not yet—and I don’t know if a vampire sigil would hold him if he shifted, I’m going to have to layer them.”

“Will that work?” Cyrus asked doubtfully.

“It should, if I paint one under the carpet, like I did on the ice, and the other on the floor,” I explained. “The vamp stuff is easier than binding a demon.”

“A demon?” Mom cried. When Cyrus and I both looked at her, she scowled, folding her arms. “Fine. But we’re talking about this later.”

“Sure, Mom,” I mumbled, taking out the ink and quill I had used to draw the last one, since that was more permanent than chalk. I still wasn’t sure if it was necessary, or if Sarah was just being her usual hipster self, but I decided not to fix what wasn’t broken.

“Alright, everything’s in the car—”

“Shh,” Cyrus and Mom both shushed as Alex came in through the front door.

I kept my focus on the sigil, stepping back to survey my work on the underside of the rug. Once I was satisfied, I set to work on the far more complex sigil I had used to bind Cameron.

Ever since the first time, all it had required was the addition of more blood before each full moon to keep it in place, so I didn’t have the thing committed to memory. I’d taken a picture of the sigil and saved it to my phone, though, which was less cumbersome than dealing with lugging around that huge book.

“Did you digitize the Liber de Vititi?” Cyrus asked, sounding equal parts bemused and impressed.

“Yep,” I answered, continuing to trace the outline of the sigil. “And I’ve got backups in the cloud, before you get any ideas.”

He just sighed.

“Oh, so you can talk to him while he’s drawing, but I can’t?” Alex grumbled.

Cyrus silenced him with a sharp look. “Where is Sam?”

“He’s coming. I texted him,” Alex answered.

“Alright, I’m finished,” I said, sitting back. “Cy?”

He walked over and offered his hand as I took out the ritual blade and unwrapped it from the black cloth I stored it in.

Mom gave a disgusted cry as I sliced into Cyrus’s wrist and he closed his fist, sprinkling blood onto the sigil.

“There is *no* way that’s sanitary,” she complained.

“Guess you’re just going to have to believe me about vampires not being able to transmit things, because I need your blood,” I said, holding out my hand.

“What?” she cried, yanking hers back in horror. “You’re joking.”

“The spell calls for the blood of the damned and a human,” I answered. “Cyrus has the former covered, but I’m not sure how human I am these days. Especially not now that I’m pregnant.”

She grimaced, but to my amazement, she walked forward and reluctantly held out her hand. As I wiped off the blade, she turned to Cyrus and said, “I’d better not turn into a bloodsucker after this.”

“Trust me, it’s not that easy,” Alex said.

I took her hand and cut it, since I knew she’d freak out less about that than her wrist. As soon as the

blood hit the sigil, merging with Cyrus's, I whispered a short healing incantation and watched as the wound in her palm sealed together.

She gasped in surprise, turning her hand around. "How on earth did you do that?" she breathed, looking at me with something dangerously close to admiration.

I couldn't help but smile. "No biggie."

"Your son is a remarkably gifted witch," Cyrus said in a knowing tone. "You should be very proud."

"I am," Mom said, glancing back at me. "Not for this in particular, but I am."

Her words took me by surprise, but before I could say anything, the blood began to follow the path of the sigil's lines and curves, and a familiar bluish-purple light lit it up from one end to the other.

Mom gave a startled cry and leapt behind Alex, which was priceless in and of itself. "Holy shit, that actually worked."

"Yeah, that's pretty much what I said the first time," I admitted, stepping back. I nodded to Cyrus. "Should be safe to put the rug back now that it's active."

He did as I said and carefully stepped around the rug before cleaning up the remainder of the supplies. Once he came back from putting them away in the basement, he lifted me into his arms.

"Cyrus!" I complained.

"Like you said, we don't know how the sigil will affect you now, and you're kind of clumsy," he said, giving me a teasing smile.

I huffed, but I draped my arms around his neck as he carried me over the threshold and caught Alex rolling his eyes. "Yeah, whatever."

"We should all take my car, and Sam will meet up with us outside town on his bike," Cyrus said, helping me into the front seat. "Dr. Mardoll, you should probably leave yours here with Alex's car so Cameron thinks someone's home."

"That's fine," Mom said, getting into the backseat.

Alex cast a wistful gaze back at his "baby," but he didn't complain like I'd assumed he would before he got into the SUV.

I found myself glancing back at the mansion as Cyrus pulled out of the driveway and onto the wooded path leading out of town. Even though this place had started out as a prison, it had become more like home than anywhere else I'd lived. Leaving felt strange, and not just because of the circumstances.

If I really thought about it, though, it wasn't the mansion itself that felt like home. It was Cyrus, Sam, and as much as it pained me to admit it, Alex. Maybe even Cameron, but that was in the past now. And the only way any of us even had a future, let alone together, was to put as much distance between us and him as possible.

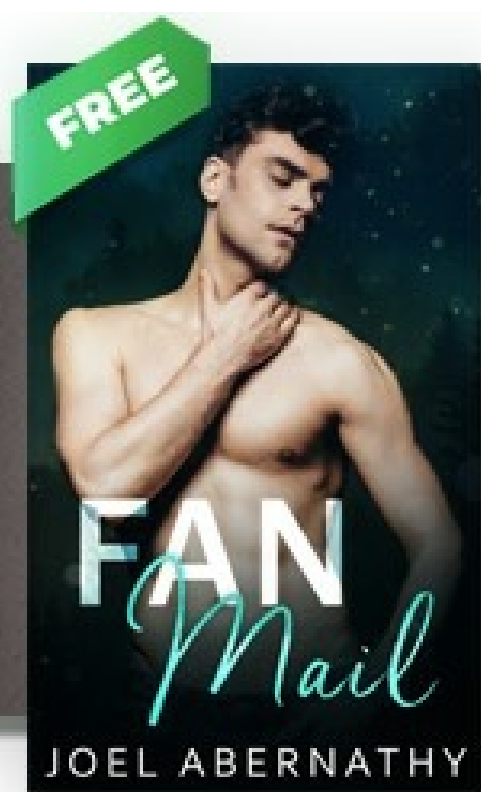
So why did it still feel like I was leaving a part of myself behind?

THE END OF BOOK 2. The Godbearer series continues soon with Book 3, Blue Blood.

Want exclusive books?

Join my newsletter today to
download your FREE copies of
Fan Mail and *His Best Friend's Daddy*!

(PLUS an optional bonus story I wrote as L.C. Davis!)



And join the conversation on my Facebook reader group!

Joel
Abernathy

ANGRY GAY MONSTERS IN LOVE

ALSO BY JOEL ABERNATHY

Flesh & Bone Series

[Exhale](#)

[Bleed](#)

[Shift](#)

Kingdom of Night Series

[Pendulum](#)

[Liminality](#)

[Equilibrium](#)

The Vale Chronicles

[Puppet/Master](#)

[Enemy/Lover](#)

Colt Jager Series

[Ghoulish](#)

[The Alpha](#)

Dante's Infernal Series

[Taming Dante](#)

[Collaring Chaz](#)

[Breaking Drake](#)

[Saving Saint](#)

ALSO BY L.C. DAVIS

The Mountain Shifters Series

[His Unclaimed Omega](#)

[His Reluctant Omega](#)

[His Unexpected Omega](#)

[His Runaway Omega](#)

[His Second Chance Omega](#)

[Their Omega](#)

[His Reformed Omega](#)

[His Verum Omega](#)

[His Reclaimed Omega](#)

[Alpha, Beta, Omega](#)

[His Taken Omega](#)

[His Reclassified Omega](#)

The Great Plains Shifters Series

[A Cowboy for Caleb](#)

[Darren's Second Chance](#)

[A Mate for the Alphas](#)

The Vampire's Omega Series

[The Vampire's Omega](#)

[The Vampire's Wolf](#)

Standalone Works

[Lightbearer](#)

Wolf Conan & L.C. Davis Books

Undercover Alphas

[Gray](#)

[Jayce](#)

[Lionel](#)