

MAGICAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION



PERFECTLY WICKED

ALBANY WALKER

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MAGICAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION BOOK 3



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About the Author

Also by Albany Walker

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I DON'T LIKE MAKING PLANS,
THEN WORDS LIKE
PREMEDITATED GET THROWN
AROUND.



“*T*hey’ll give it back, Pop.” I give the security agent a placating smile for dealing with Dad. I’m sure he’s not the first cop who didn’t want to give up his firearm.

“I know they’ll give it back. I just don’t see why they need to take it in the first place,” Dad grumbles before finally placing his gun in a plastic tray.

The security officer hands over a ticket printed out from a small handheld machine. “If you lose this, you will have to file a claim and wait seven days before you can get it back.”

Dad gives the man a glare I like to call the hairy eyeball, shoves the ticket deep into his pocket, then steps away from the security checkpoint.

Belinda eyes the main floor lobby, clinging to the strap of her purse with both hands as if she’s ready to use it as a weapon.

“Come on, guys.” I motion to the bank of elevators, inviting them to lead the way. I work up on the seventh floor, and that’s where Lewis’ office is. She’s probably already been alerted that I’m in the building. Dad places a comforting hand on Belinda’s back and guides her forward. My familiar, Percival, is perched on my shoulder with his long tail partially wrapped around the back of my neck. It’s strange how quickly I’ve grown used to his comforting weight, and it’s even better now that his little claws aren’t threatening to pierce my skin.

The elevator ride is quiet and slightly awkward. Dad doesn’t want to be here, while Belinda seems to understand the necessity, but I’d bet she’d rather be anywhere else too. When the number six illuminates, I straighten

my shirt and smooth a hand over my hair. It feels like I've been away a lot longer than a couple of weeks.

The floor is bustling with people when we exit the elevator. My team isn't the only one that occupies this level, but we take up the bulk of it. I spot Ambrose with his arm propped up on top of a cubicle divider. He seems to be deep in conversation with Johnson, another agent on our team. I pass them without interruption, skirting the room to head straight to Lewis' office.

The security here is better than Elmwood's, but I could still get in and out without detection, Percy brags.

I reach up and scratch between his ears. "We'll get you registered so there won't be any need for sneaking about after we talk to Lewis."

I'll find you when you're done. I smell a vole, he tells me and climbs down my shoulder, hopping onto a desk we pass.

All the blinds are closed in Lewis' office, but her door is open. I do a quick rap on the window anyway and announce myself. "Afternoon, Lewis. May we come in?"

She looks up from her computer, her dark eyes sharp and assessing as she gazes at me. "Bishop," she greets and gives me a slight nod. There are two vacant chairs in front of her desk. I motion for Belinda and Dad to take those while I stand off to the side. Dad starts to lower himself, but then he sees me standing and reconsiders. I give him a small shake of my head, and he finally sits down.

Lewis regards them both. "Mr. Bishop, Ms. Miller."

"Marty is fine," Dad supplies. His voice isn't exactly curt, but he doesn't sound pleased, so the fact that this isn't a social call is obvious.

Lewis doesn't reply to his offer of familiarity. Instead, she laces her fingers together on her desk and gets right to the point. "I appreciate you coming in to talk with me, both of you." She's trading glances between them, making sure to include Belinda in the conversation. "I'm sure I don't need to tell you what a dangerous man your husband is—"

"*Ex-husband,*" Belinda corrects. "He would never give me a divorce, but I haven't considered myself married in a long time, nor do I need a reminder of his character."

Lewis nods. "Good, that should make this simpler. We were able to get an arrest warrant for him in Vegas. It took us a little time to get a judge's approval, but you helped with that. The fact that he marked you with

tracking sigils against your will was more than enough evidence to get a case started on him.”

Belinda presses her elbow to her side. I bet her arm is right over the ruined sigil Lewis is referring to. Dad reaches over and places his hand on top of Belinda’s thigh, giving her the gentle reassurance of his presence.

“After obtaining an arrest warrant, my team went to pick him up. We wanted to handle the arrest ourselves and gather any further incriminating evidence there might have been instead of giving it over to the Vegas field office, but the house was damn near empty.” Lewis sits back in her chair. I know from personal experience she hates thinking someone got the jump on her. Judging by the way her dark eyes are narrowed and the set of her jaw, she thinks that happened here.

“He abandoned Desert Regency?” Belinda asks disbelievingly.

“As I said, the estate was nearly empty, except for a message he intended to be delivered to you.”

Belinda swallows thickly, and her voice is a light whisper when she asks, “What did it say?”

“I’d actually like you to take a look at it and maybe confirm it did indeed come from him,” Lewis replies while watching Belinda closely.

“I’m sure you have several ways to confirm the note came from him. Why do you want her to look at it?” Dad questions dubiously.

“Bursa’s DNA is on the letter, that’s already been confirmed, but I’d like her to speak to his state of mind. Would this have been something he wrote himself, or had someone else help him with? I’d like to know as much about him as possible.”

Dad’s brows drop. He’s probably thinking the same thing I am—what was in that message?

“I’ll look at it, but I’m sure it was William. He never needed anyone to help inspire terror. I think he saw it as one of his greatest illusions, hiding all the nastiness that lives inside him behind what he shows everyone on the outside.”

Lewis flips open a folder to the left of her computer. The top piece of paper is a sheet of stationary with neatly scrawled script. “This is a copy, so there’s no need to worry about any hidden spells that will target you. We had a multiplier mimic the text exactly as it was for safety reasons. The original is being analyzed.” Lewis still handles the paper with care,

touching only the corner to turn the sheet around while it's on the desk so Belinda can get a look at it.

Belinda leans forward just a little, and I watch her eyes move from left to right as she reads the message. I'm too far away to read it myself, but Dad must be reading along with her because he blurts out, "Over my fucking dead body." He stands up so abruptly, his chair scoots back. "Why would you show her that garbage?" He moves to shove the paper toward Lewis, but Belinda stops him by placing her hand over the sheet.

Ever so slowly, she turns her face up and to the left to look at Dad. "This isn't anything I haven't seen before, Marty, and I'm sure she has good reason," Belinda defends.

Dad lets out a loud huff and spins away from the desk, but I think he wants away from the letter more. I move into his place so I can read the message.

My dearest Lindy,

Let me start by apologizing for not being able to speak to you in person—yet. Rest assured, I cannot wait to be with you again. I have missed the taste of your flesh and the feel of your fragile skin under my hands.

I want you to know I'm not angry with you, dearest. Not because you scored my mark, making it so much harder for me to find you, nor because you killed Benjamin. He should have known better than to approach what is mine. He deserved death, just like anyone else who dares to try and keep us apart, so I thank you for that, my sweet.

Please be patient with me. I promise I'm coming for you, and I will not let anything stand in the way of getting you back where you belong—with me. This time, I will be so much more careful, and I'll make sure no one will ever be able to take you from me again. I will mark you on the inside so it can never be erased. Don't worry about the pain, dearest. I'm sure it will hurt far less than what you have put me through.

It's only a matter of time before you will be back in my arms. I can smell the scent of lavender that clings to your skin now, though I do prefer mint. I'm counting the moments, just as I know you are.

*Always and forever, you are mine,
William*

HEXES, he sounds completely insane. One second, he implies someone kidnapped Belinda to take her away from him, and in the next, he acknowledges she left him. Don't even get me started on the fragile flesh comments. He sounds like a fucking cannibal, not a lover.

Belinda leans back, and I see a single tear race down her cheek unchecked. It's pissing me the fuck off. This man is a monster, talking about branding her on the inside so she can't get rid of his mark. I can't imagine what he must have put her through.

Lewis closes the folder, covering the letter, but the damage can't be undone. We all have his words in our heads.

"The lavender," Belinda murmurs softly. "He's been close."

"What do you mean?" Lewis inquires.

"The only way he would know I smell like lavender is if he's been close enough to smell it."

"Your calming spells," I surmise.

Belinda nods. "He always gave me mint everything. Mint tea, mint soaps and lotions. He wanted a baby." She slides her palms roughly down her thighs. "I didn't start using lavender until well after I left."

"Is that something he could have guessed?" Lewis offers.

"Anything is possible, but I doubt it. It's not as if he didn't allow me to use it or I avoided it. It seems too specific to be a guess." Belinda looks up from her lap.

"How'd you let him get away?" Dad blurts loudly. He's mad and not even trying to hide it.

"I'm guessing he left right after Mark LaPointe was released. Mr. Bursa is a very skilled illusionist, and he used that to make it seem as if he were still at home. He's also very well-known and respected in Vegas, so we didn't think he would run from an illegal tracking charm," Lewis answers very calmly. I know she's not happy he got away either, but this is personal for Dad.

"It wasn't just an illegal tracking charm, he—" Dad stops abruptly and looks over at Belinda.

"I know that, Mr. Bishop, but that was all that was on the arrest warrant. We were waiting to charge him with the other offenses once we had him in custody."

“Someone needs to stop him from breathing, not arrest him.”

“Pop!” I warn, then look over at Lewis. That is not something you say in front of an SSA for the MBI. Plausible deniability and all that shit. I’m hoping we’re all going to pretend he didn’t just say that.

“Is there anything else you can glean from the message, anything that might be useful, such as your observation about the lavender?” Lewis asks Belinda.

“Since you called us in here, I’m assuming you know that wasn’t lovey-dovey. It was all a threat,” Belinda states while wringing her hands together.

“That was very clear, Ms. Miller, and the fact that you think he’s already been close to you only strengthens my resolve to take action. I think we have a good chance of apprehending him with your help.”

“How?” Dad demands after coming to stand behind Belinda’s chair.

“I want you to go to a safe house—”

“Bullshit.” Dad shakes his head.

“Hear me out, Chief Bishop.” It’s the first time Lewis has used Dad’s title, and it works, stopping him from saying more.

“What you’d really be is sitting ducks. I think the only chance we have of getting William Bursa is tempting him with Ms. Miller.” Dad shakes his head at the idea, but Lewis just gives him a look, one that says, *Shut up and listen*. “We would make it look like you’re being moved to an MBI safe house, but you’re a cop, and you think you can take care of yourself—”

“I *can* take care of Belinda and myself,” Dad grumbles, missing the point.

Lewis continues to talk as if he didn’t interrupt. “After a few days, you get cocky and call your daughter to check on her, or call someone from work, then Bursa tracks down your location. We can’t make it too easy though, or he’ll know something is up,” Lewis cautions.

“I think you’re giving this asshole too much credit. How would he track the call?” Dad asks doubtfully.

Lewis looks over at me. “I’m sure LaPointe told Bursa everything that happened in Hill Crest, so I’m confident he knows about your connection,” she says, referring to him being my father. “I’m working under the assumption Bursa already knows a great deal about Agent Bishop. We’re talking about someone who plans ahead. He knew we were coming for him, and he left a note. It wasn’t to mock us. He doesn’t even think enough of us

to bother. It was meant solely for you, Ms. Miller. Frankly, I'm surprised you've been able to avoid him as long as you have on your own."

"You're right—he would already know everything about Marty and Frances," Belinda admits. "That's why you should just take me to the safe house to trap him. Put them in a different location, someplace safe."

"Maybe Frankie should come with us then," Dad suggests, ignoring Belinda's plea to let her go alone. It seems he may be considering the plan, even though he's been arguing against it.

"I'll be good with the guys, Pop. Nobody is getting past Felix's wards without us knowing."

"William's magic is all about finesse. He can't break wards with brute force, but he can make you think he can and trick you into coming to him," Belinda tells me earnestly.

"Maybe for other people, but I can feel magic when it's cast. I would know if he tried anything like that," I reassure her, and hopefully Dad too.

"Wouldn't it be better if we just went home and waited for him?" Dad offers.

"You could. I would put a team on you, a team Bursa would know to look for, and he would just wait until someone dropped their defenses, then strike. This way, we remain in control the entire time, even if it doesn't look that way," Lewis reasons.

Belinda looks up at Dad. "Marty, stay with Frances. I'll go to the safe house."

Dad looks over at me, his lips turned down in a full frown. He appears torn, but he doesn't need to be. I can take care of myself. Besides, Bursa isn't after me. It's Belinda he wants. I'm just an inconvenience.

"Pop, I'm good. I'll stick with the guys. The house has stronger protection spells than Fort Salem. Don't worry about me, either of you."

I THOUGHT I WAS AN ATHEIST
UNTIL I REALIZED I WAS A SEX
GOD.



We spend another hour in Lewis' office, finalizing the plan, which mostly consists of a lot of waiting on all our parts. I've been instructed to take a few days off and not to return to my apartment.

It wouldn't be hard for Bursa to find out I'm staying with the guys, but having a trail from my house to theirs isn't smart—I've got to make him work for it.

Dad's not happy they are heading right to the safe house without any of their things, but Belinda takes it like a champ. It's not the first time she's left everything to get away from Bursa, but I do hope it's the last.

"Be careful, kiddo." Dad holds onto my upper arms and looks right into my eyes.

"I will, promise. You too." I wrap my arms around his back and hold on for a few long seconds. I have complete confidence my dad can take care of himself, but it doesn't mean I won't worry about him.

I'm the one to pull away first, and when I do, I glance over at Belinda. She's wringing her hands again, looking as anxious as a goat under the full moon. I take one of her hands between mine and give her a soft smile. "It's cliché, but try not to worry. It's a good plan." She doesn't respond, so I pull her in for a very light hug, being mindful of her cues to make sure I'm not making her uncomfortable. Once my arms are around her, I feel her weight fall against me as she sinks into my embrace. I step back after just a moment and release her hand.

"Thank you," Belinda tells me softly.

"I'm going to go find Percival and get him registered before he ends up triggering an alarm or stealing something." I point over my shoulder with

my thumb.

“Percival?” Lewis asks.

“I found my familiar at one of the crime scenes. A mink,” I inform her while walking toward the office door.

“Why does that not surprise me?” Lewis shakes her head slowly, and a trace of a smile graces her lips. “I’ll keep you updated,” she tells me in dismissal, and I exit her office, stepping onto the busy main floor.

Weaving in and out of desks, I head over to mine, waving and saying a few hellos as I pass. Ambrose is at his desk now, right across from mine. He sits up, tracking my movement as I pull out my chair to sit down.

Percy pops out from under my desk, causing Ambrose to jump and let out a curse. I snicker as I rub between his ears. Now that our bond is complete, it’s easy to sense when he’s close.

“You’re finally back.” Ambrose abandons his workstation, crossing the aisle to join me.

“Not for long. I’m taking a few days off.”

Ambrose meets my eyes. “Willingly? I figured you’d fight tooth and nail after hearing Lewis’ plan.”

I pull out my desk drawer to see my phone lying on top of other miscellaneous office supplies and snacks.

“You never want to take time off,” Ambrose continues when I don’t respond right away.

“Sometimes I do.” I’m feeling defensive, even though I know he’s speaking the truth. I’m always the one who volunteers when people want time off or when something comes up and they can’t work.

Ambrose crosses his arms over his chest and looks down at me.

“It’s been a crazy few weeks,” I mumble while placing my phone in my pocket.

“Is your dad going to the safe house?” He changes topics, thankfully.

“Yeah, Lewis is getting him and Ms. Miller set up.”

“You’re welcome to stay with me. My building has good wards,” he offers. It’s not exactly surprising, but it is unexpected, especially since he seemed to understand there was stuff going on with the guys and me.

“Uh…”

Oh, finally, maybe the day isn’t lost after all. Call Grayson, he’ll snap this one’s neck. Percy sits up on his hind legs and chitters.

“Percy,” I scold.

What? If your mates had a lick of intelligence, they would have gotten rid of him when he first showed up. You have far better chances of breeding with the other three anyway, even if they don't feed you enough.

"Thank you for the offer, but I'm good," I tell Ambrose while ignoring how bloodthirsty my mink is.

"Not to be an ass, but your building doesn't have shit for security. You shouldn't stay there."

"I put up some of my own wards, but I'm not staying there anyway. I'm going back to Hill Crest."

I feel like this is the information he was fishing for, but the way his face falls makes me think he might not have been expecting it.

"You grew up with them, huh?" he asks, but his tone is so different, softer and a little sad.

"Yeah."

"You never really talked about why you left home and didn't go back. I'm assuming they had something to do with it."

"It's complicated." This isn't the first time I've used that as a description for our relationship.

"But you're still going back there?" Ambrose gives me a flat smile, one that doesn't reach his eyes. I feel like he's judging me.

I push my chair back so I can stand up. "I am going back," I admit.

Ambrose steps away from my desk, giving me more space. "Maybe this time when you come back, you'll actually leave the past behind you," he says before turning and walking away from me.

"Doubtful," I mutter under my breath. We may still have some things to work through, but I'm not walking away from the guys this time. More importantly, I don't think they would let me if I tried. I'm confident they would fight for us now too.

I'm going to tell Grayson he offered his den to you, Percy comments as if it's the ultimate sin.

"That would just make him hate Ambrose, and we have to work together." I scoop him into my arms and head in the opposite direction of Ambrose. We have paperwork to fill out for his registration.

Fine, I'll tell Remy. He'll just take off his ear to serve as a warning instead of killing him.

I pause and look down at Percy. "You think Grayson is more dangerous than Remy?"

Without a doubt. Remy is confident he can keep you, while Grayson is willing to do anything to make sure he does.

That actually kind of makes sense, which is a little disturbing. “What about Felix?”

He would never see Felix coming. I swear I hear a smile in Percy’s tone.

“No wonder you like him so much.” I snort, then resume walking toward the elevator.



“I’M SHOCKED your dad went for it.” Remy leans back after cleaning his plate. I’m still nibbling on my second helping of bacon cheeseburger meatloaf. It’s delicious, but I think I’m going to snip Percy’s tail next time I see him. Remy keeps making my portions bigger and bigger.

“He wasn’t thrilled, but he knows it’s probably the quickest way to get rid of Bursa.” I just finished filling them in about Lewis’ plan, informing them I’m getting a few days off.

“I’m talking more about you. Nobody thinks you should be at this safe house too?” Remy says, nudging my plate closer to me, urging me to keep eating.

“I’m not the target, Belinda is. Besides, I told them I would be safe here with you guys. I can find another place to stay if you’re worried he’s going to come here.”

Yes, Agent Decker did volunteer his place, Percy chimes in. Hexes, he likes to stir shit up.

“Agent Decker, the guy you work with who was at the police station?” Felix looks over at Remy and Grayson.

“Why are you mentioning Mr. Steal?” Remy pulls a face, telling me just how much he likes this being brought up.

“His name is Ambrose Decker. Not Mr. Steal,” I correct. “He only offered for me to stay with him to be polite.”

“Oh, sure, he was just being nice,” Remy scoffs. “I didn’t forget his name. We all know he would *rather* be Mr. Steal Your Girl. He’s the kind of dude who just sits back and waits for you to fuck up so he can pounce.”

I give Remy a droll stare. “Are you planning on fucking something up?” I realize that’s a loaded question when Remy’s brows jump high on his

forehead.

Gray is the one to answer. “Nobody is fucking anything up. And we trust you.” He says the second part slowly while sneaking a quick look at Felix as if he’s checking if that’s the right thing to say.

I pretend I can’t see Felix’s tiny nod in encouragement. Knowing Gray is making an effort is sweet, and it makes me a little swoony. When his sharp jaw tics as if he’s clenching his teeth, it reminds me there’s a little more grit under that boyish sweetness now.

“We’re not worried about him coming here, we’re just worried in general, but I’d rather have you here than in some fake safe house anyway,” Felix chimes in.

Remy steepled his fingers after placing his elbows on the table. “Days of being trapped in the house with nowhere to go... Whatever will we do?” His voice is light and airy, making it clear he’s teasing, but the way he swipes his tongue across his bottom lip and his eyelids droop shows he knows exactly what he would like to do.

“I’m not under house arrest.” I smirk in response. “You guys don’t need to babysit me either.”

Felix rises from the booth, taking his plate over to the sink. “How many times has stuff like this happened before?” he asks after turning around to face the table again.

“With work?” I question, even though I know that’s what he means. “It hasn’t.”

“But what you do is dangerous?” Felix challenges, disguising his statement as a question.

“What are you getting at?” I ask. I can tell he’s leading somewhere with this.

“Being with you and making sure you’re safe isn’t babysitting. It goes deeper than that, and you know it,” he replies, still watching me.

“I know that, Felix. I just don’t want you to feel like you can’t live your lives.” I take turns looking at each of them.

“It’s tough knowing you could be in danger and we have to let you go.” He takes in a deep breath as if he’s preparing for something. “So maybe you could give a little too. Let us be a little overbearing for a minute. We just got you back,” he finishes.

“You’re acting like I told you I didn’t want you around.” I shake my head in disbelief.

“You have, like twenty times,” Gray exaggerates.

“In the beginning, I might have tried to avoid you, but I never said I didn’t want you around.” I look at the table and give a small shrug. “I was trying to escape a messy situation and a freshly broken heart,” I admit.

“No broken hearts allowed.” Remy lays his hand over mine. “But it does occasionally feel like you’re pulling away from us.”

His tone is unusually serious, so I peer up at the side of his face. “I guess I got kind of used to being and doing things on my own,” I murmur softly. It’s the truth. It’s been a long time since I’ve shared so much of myself with anyone. I don’t want to feel like a burden.

Grayson curses softly under his breath and readjusts himself on the bench. I can’t tell if the frustration I hear in his tone is at me or because of me.

“I didn’t mean that as a dig,” I tell them.

“I know you didn’t,” he snaps, then stands up. It seems as if he’s moving away from me, but I might just be overthinking it.

“I don’t know what to do.” Grayson looks over at Remy with a heavy frown.

“What do you mean you don’t know what to do?” I ask, because it feels like it has something to do with me even though he’s talking to Remy.

“I don’t know what to say or do to make you feel better. It never used to be so hard.” Gray makes it sound like a direct challenge.

I scoot around the booth so I can stand up too. This is about his ability to pick up on my emotions, not just reading into what I say and do. “First, I’m entitled to how I feel, and it’s not your job to make me feel better—”

“Wrong,” comes Grayson’s retort while I’m still speaking. “Especially when it’s mostly my fault.”

I’ll address him always taking the brunt of the blame in a minute, I need to finish my thought. “Second, of course it’s harder than it used to be—we’re not kids anymore. There’s history and insecurities to work through.”

He points at me as if I’ve said something profound. “That’s the problem. I don’t want you to question everything as if you’re worried about how we’ll think or feel about it. You never did before.”

“I never had reason to,” I blurt out, then take a deep breath. I don’t want to get into a yelling match. “If you want this to get easier for *all of us*” —I widen my eyes, hoping he hears the emphasis of my words— “you have to

stop blaming yourself and taking on all the responsibility for everything that did or didn't happen. We all own pieces of that, Gray, not just you."

Grayson looks me up and down, and if I didn't know better, I would think he's mad at me, but I don't think that's true.

"I can't just flip a switch and forget the past several years and everything I felt over that time. There's going to be bumps along the way when feelings get hurt or we get mad at each other. If you're expecting something different, get over it." I give him a long once-over myself. "I'm not walking away this time. If you want to get rid of me, you'll have to do the work yourself."

The second the last word is out of my mouth, Grayson shoots forward, eliminating the space between us, and gets right in my face. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Remy take a step forward as if he may get between us, but he pauses when Gray shuts his eyes ever so slowly and wraps his arms around my back before hauling me against him so tightly, I have to strain to take a breath.

"That's what I needed," I hear him murmur against my hair. "That conviction."

I snuggle a little closer, feeling the soft material of his shirt against my cheek. The problem with giving him what he wants, that certainty he's looking for, is that it's going to take some time to find when it comes to things outside of my control.

TO CARE OR NOT TO CARE. THAT
ISN'T EVEN A QUESTION.



Felix and Remy file out of the kitchen, leaving me wrapped in Gray's arms. Eventually, I lean back and search his face. His eyes are downcast, looking me over as if he's committing my features to memory.

"Take a picture, it will last longer," I tease, hoping to lighten the mood.

"I don't want to be the reason we don't work," he says with all seriousness, and the small smile on my face falls away.

"Gray," I murmur softly and reach up to touch his cheek. His eyes fall closed again, and he lets out a long, shuddering breath.

"I'm still adjusting to...feeling everything, and I don't want to fuck something up," he admits when he opens his eyes to meet my gaze. He's opening up a little, telling me he's trying to adapt to no longer having his emotions stripped. Well, I hope he isn't planning on doing that anymore.

"I'm not going to run away and hope you follow me this time. If we have a problem, we'll work it out and deal with it, like adults," I add as a subtle reminder we're not kids anymore.

"It's tough to relinquish control. Everything in me is screaming that if you're unhappy, I should do something to fix it." He strokes his fingers over my cheek while continuing to examine my face.

"I don't expect you to fix it, I just expect you not to be the one pissing me off." I grin up at him.

Without another word, he lowers his head and seals his lips to mine in a kiss that's a little too demanding to be considered sweet. I wasn't expecting it, but it certainly isn't unwelcome. I move my lips under his, returning his

nibbles and pecks until he takes it one step further and slips his tongue into my mouth.

My hands tighten so I'm no longer embracing him, instead holding on for dear life as he moves his mouth over mine. Butterflies flare to life in my stomach and heat pools lower as his hands move down, and then he pulls me even closer with a palm on the small of my back.

Desire that seems too strong to only belong to me swells within me, and I find myself about ready to rip his clothes off to get closer to him. Gray jerks his head back, and a little of the urgency I was feeling fades, but the need to have him naked doesn't really lessen.

"Sorry," he mutters as his eyelids lower, making it harder for me to see his hazel eyes.

"Unless you're apologizing for stopping, I really don't want to hear it." I drag his mouth back down to mine by fisting his shirt and tugging.

Our kiss starts where the last one ended, with his tongue in my mouth and my hands gripping him tightly. "Counter or table?" Gray asks in a voice so husky, it should be a sin.

"I don't want to break the table, so counter," I reply, lifting his shirt as he wraps his hands around my waist, preparing to pick me up. It's pretty clear neither of us wants to waste time going to the bedroom when there are perfectly suitable surfaces here.

Gray spins and sets me on the edge of the island. The moment he pulls back, he ducks his head to help me remove his shirt, then gets to work on mine. He takes a moment to admire my bra, and the wave of desire I felt from Gray before hits me again, and it makes me feel almost drunk with longing.

While he's busy looking, I reach for the button on his pants and pull down the zipper. I watch his throat work as he swallows and looks down at my hands. His dick is so hard, I'm not sure I'm going to be able to get it out of his pants unless I pull them down, so I peel the material back and shove down at the same time.

He makes a soft noise when his shaft is free of the restrictive fabric. In the next second, Gray encircles both of my wrists with one of his hands and tugs to the side, pulling them away from his erection and shifting my position a little as he does so.

His lips find the hollow of my collarbones, and he kisses and licks up the side of my neck. His breathing is rough, but so is mine. "Lie back," he

orders, nuzzling his nose against me. I turn to look behind me to make sure I'm not going to land on or in anything, but Grayson jerks my hands and demands, "Lie back," again. This time, there's a little more weight to his tone.

Looking directly into his eyes, I lower myself onto the cool marble, understanding he needs me to give him the control he's seeking. I arch my back so only my shoulder blades are touching the stone. He's still holding my wrists, but now they are resting below my belly button, placing his fingers just a few inches shy of where I want them.

Slowly, he releases his hold and takes a step back. I keep my hands where he left them and wait for his instructions, because I'm confident they are coming. He doesn't keep me waiting long. "Take your pants off."

On cue, I open my fly and lift my ass to get the material out from under me. Grayson steps back even farther and glances around the kitchen. His eyes land on something to the left, but I don't care enough to see what has his attention. Instead, I scoot back, draw my heels up on the island, and finish taking my pants off by lifting up onto my toes.

Gray returns with a stool from the other side of the island. He places it right in front of me as if he's about to belly up to the table for a feast. Hells to the hexes, yes!

He grabs my ankles and tries to pull me down, but my back sticks to the stone and I end up laughing and rearranging myself.

When I feel the edge of the counter under the back of my thighs, I stop and waggle my eyebrows at Gray. "Super sexy, right? I've got all the moves."

Completely unaffected by my teasing, he reaches forward and lifts my hips and ass, hauling me even closer to the edge. My legs dangle off the counter until he fits the backs of my knees over his shoulders. I can feel the heat of his body, and it only makes me want him even more.

Okay, so maybe now is not the time for joking, especially when he runs his finger up the center of my panties and pushes a little deeper when he reaches the top of my cleft. The fabric is thin, but still too thick if it's keeping his touch from me.

I lift my hips to chase his hand when he removes his touch altogether. I stare up at the high ceiling, taking measured breaths as I wait for his next touch. I gasp when I feel something brush my inner thigh, realizing it's the scruff of his jaw. Distracted, I don't expect his fingers to curl over my hips

and peel down the last barrier between us, but I'm more than ready, so I lift my hips to help. He turns his lips to the side and places wet, open-mouthed kisses high on the sensitive skin of my inner thigh, only stopping to completely remove the lace. It's a tiny appetizer of what's to come once he has me naked.

"Grab the edge," Gray orders before delivering a lick up my pussy. I wrap my fingers over the end of the counter and melt into the marble. As if he's savoring the experience as much as I am, Gray makes a noise I can only call a growl, but I don't have any time to dwell on it because he dips right back in and pulls my clit into his mouth.

My back arches clear off the counter, and I stutter out, "F-Fuck." The feeling is intense, just like Gray, and he doesn't give me any time to adjust before sucking even harder. I cry out and grab the sides of his head with my hands. As if my touch spurs him on, he pushes even closer like he can't get enough of me.

Flattening his tongue, he licks me again from bottom to top. I tense in anticipation when he reaches my clit, but this time, he just flicks me a few times before going lower to slide as deep inside of me as he can get. My inner walls tighten, working to get more of him, but he just continues to push in and out before moving up to my clit. This time when he circles and flicks his tongue over me, it's not enough. I want that delicious pressure again. It makes me feel out of control and on the edge of something I can't even explain.

I dig my heels into his back and pull his head in a little deeper, hoping he gets the hint. Without warning, he jerks back, stopping everything. I snap my head down to look at Gray. His eyes are wild, and his lips are glistening. "Grab the edge," he demands again while looking at me from under his brow. I release the death grip I have on his hair and slide my hands down until I'm holding onto the counter again.

He watches me for a moment longer, then lowers his head, keeping his eyes locked on mine. When he goes right for my clit and sucks, I tip my head back and arch so fast, it feels more like a spasm than an actual intentional movement, but I'm not fucking complaining.

For the next ten minutes, Gray takes me to the brink of orgasm more times than I can count. Every time I'm close, he stops just shy of allowing me to crest. I'm sweating, and my hands hurt from gripping the edge of the counter, but I'm not letting go. I am about to start begging though.

I let out a whimper when I get close to coming. Thinking about him teasing me again is almost more than I can bear. “Gray,” I plead as a tremor begins in my lower body.

“I know, baby,” he murmurs between my legs. Taking mercy, he finally slides his fingers into me while continuing to use his mouth and tongue on my clit. The relief I feel is damn near euphoric, but it’s eclipsed quickly by the intensity of my orgasm. With my head tossed back, I let him hear just how much I’m enjoying everything he’s doing. He only stops licking and sucking when I try to scoot away from him.

My legs shake in earnest when he rises from the chair and leans over my body. Gray’s chest heaves against mine as he stares down at me. “Are you trying to kill me?” I pant as I finally release my hold and stretch my stiff fingers so I can wrap my arms around his back.

Instead of replying with words, Gray lowers his head, his jaw tight and lips damp with my slickness, and kisses me deeply. His shoulders shift and bunch as he pushes his pants down to remove them completely, but his kiss never suffers from his lack of concentration.

Moments later, his hot, hard dick is pressed against me. Fisting his cock, he slides the velvety tip up and down my slit before shoving himself inside me with a hard thrust. I break our kiss to cry out, and it’s mingled with Gray’s groan. Once he’s balls deep, he curls one of his arms under my back and grips my shoulder from the opposite side, effectively securing me against him.

In the next moment, he pulls out of me slowly only to slam forward again. His grip on my shoulder is the only thing that keeps me in place. My mouth drops open as my breath flees my lungs in a huff. Realizing the precedent has been set, I lift my head and bury it in Gray’s neck while squeezing my arms around his back, ready to hold on for the ride.

Every strike is as ruthless as it is satisfying. I drag my knees up high on Gray’s side, and it opens me up enough so I can feel him grinding against my clit with every slap of his skin against mine. His intensity is almost punishing as his body finds a home in mine. Over and over, he crashes into me until I’m nearly dizzy with the need to either come again or scream, but my body needs another release of some kind.

“Not yet,” Gray growls breathlessly, as if he knows exactly what I’m thinking. I let my eyes close as a protest slips from my lips. He’s crazy if he thinks I’m going to hold off. I intentionally squeeze his cock with my inner

muscles, and his rhythm falters—I know I have him. With a dark smile on my lips, I do it again as soon as he’s buried deep inside me, but then I keep milking him. Instead of pulling out, he grinds against me. The pressure against my clit and the feeling of him moving inside me is enough to send me over the edge. I’m no longer controlling the spasms in my pussy, my orgasm takes over and does it all for me.

“Fucking hell,” Gray curses, but it comes out more like a praise. I know my orgasm pushed him into his own, and I like knowing it. Grayson likes control, but I love making him lose it.

My arms fall off his back and onto the counter. The cool stone is welcome now that my skin is overheated. Gray lifts his chest off mine and stares down at me with a glare that holds no reproach. “You did that on purpose,” he accuses. My only answer is a grin.



THE CHIME above the door to Jimmy’s Diner tinkles a welcoming tune as Felix pulls the door open for us to enter. I glance around quickly and note there are fewer women making up the crowd, but they still make up the bulk of the diners.

Gray pulls me the rest of the way in by tugging on my hand. I think back to the last time we came here. He wouldn’t even really speak to me then. What a difference a few weeks make.

The counter seats are all taken, unlike last time. Remy stops short when he notices and lets out a disgruntled sound. “Looks like you’re old news, Broussard,” I tease.

Without missing a beat, Felix walks over to a table in the middle of the room. Gray pulls up short when he realizes where Felix is headed. He lifts his chin and looks around, searching for a booth, I’m sure. I have no idea how they convinced him to sit at the counter bar, but it looks like he wants to draw a line at sitting at the tables.

“Want to wait?” I offer. Gray looks down at me with a curious expression. “For a booth,” I clarify.

“No, it’s fine.” He pulls out a chair for me and takes the one next to it. Remy and Felix sit across from us.

I lean over, so my head is nearly on his shoulder, and ask him softly, “Why do you prefer booths?”

Gray meets my eyes, and I see something flash across his features that makes me want to take the question back. “My grandfather...” He looks out over the table, taking his eyes from mine. “I avoided him most of the time, but he was always at dinner.” I watch as Gray rolls his big shoulders and neck.

He doesn’t need to say any more. I know his grandpa was a prick. I saw the bruises to prove it. I scoot my chair a little closer and keep my head on his shoulder. It’s been a long time since Gray had to worry about his grandfather *disciplining* him. That shit stopped when Gray stood up to him when he was about thirteen, but the fact that he still prefers booths proves his treatment had lingering effects.

A slightly flustered waitress who looks fresh out of high school makes her way over to our table with a notepad in her hand. When she notices who’s at the table, she looks over at the bar as if she’s wondering what we are doing here instead of there.

“Hey.” She focuses her attention on her hand that’s now poised over the notepad, her pen at the ready to jot things down. “Will this all be on one bill?”

“Yeah,” Remy answers quickly, then adds, “Double up the Greek platter for me, and I’ll take an orange juice and water.”

She scribbles on the pad, then briefly looks up, letting us know she’s ready for more orders. “Turkey club for me with fried pita and garlic sauce,” Felix tells her. Nobody has even looked at the menu, but I don’t need to either.

I’m next in line, so I say, “Bacon cheeseburger, extra pickles, and fries, with mayo and ketchup on the side.”

Gray is the last to order. “Grilled chicken sandwich, no tomato, and vegetables for the side.”

“Drinks for anyone else?” She glances at everyone but Remy.

“Water,” I pipe up. Gray orders coffee, and Felix opts for water also. Once she’s gone, I lean over the table and quietly ask, “Why the hell do you guys come to a greasy diner if you’re going to order the healthiest shit off the menu?” The last time we came in, everyone had burgers.

“It’s good,” Remy defends with a shrug. “Plus, we like Jimmy.” He gives a chin jerk to someone behind me, and I peer over my shoulder to see

the round owner with a towel over his shoulder behind the bar counter. I wave and smile, which makes Jimmy's eyes crinkle as he returns the gesture.

Halfway through my burger, Gray stiffens and slowly turns his head to look behind us. I follow suit and notice an older man. He's kind of wiry, but not too thin for someone his age. His eyes are on me, even with Grayson staring him down.

"Can I help you?" I ask after wiping my mouth with a napkin.

"Frankie Bishop, right?" His eyes are a deep brown, so dark they are nearly black, standing out even against his sun aged skin. There's an aura of magic around him that feels as if he's either just stirred a spell or he leaks magic, which isn't all that uncommon, especially if you're above a seven. What is a little uncommon is the fact that I can feel him through my shields without any effort at all. It makes me think he might even be an eight or higher.

"Yes." I turn a little more so I'm facing him better.

"I'm looking for your dad. I stopped by the house, then the station, but Scotty said he's away." The end of his statement comes out more like a question. It is a bit unusual for Dad to be away. As far as I know, the only time he left Hill Crest was when he would come to visit me, and that was typically day trips when he had time off.

"Oh yeah, he's out of town for a few days," I confirm.

"He didn't answer my calls either," the man says.

"Yeah, he's taking some time off. Is it urgent?" I ask, taking another long look at the man. He appears a little frazzled, almost jerky with his movements. I can't say exactly why, but something looks off about him.

"I need to talk to him," he states.

"I'm sorry, but he's unavailable for a few days. Is there something I can do to help?"

"It's private." The man looks around, noting we have several people's attention, including everyone at my table. I'm torn. Half of me wants to reiterate that if he wants to talk to Dad, it will be a few days, but the other half is itching to see what has this man seeking out my father. "Can you call him and tell him to return my calls?" he finally requests after sending a glare around the room.

"Eugene," Grayson says, and it takes the man a moment before he looks over at him. "What's going on?"

The man, Eugene, lets out a heavy breath and his shoulders slump. I can see he's struggling with this, and it's not any easier that everyone around us seems to be waiting to see what gossip they can pick up.

"Would you like to step outside?" I offer.

Eugene barely lifts his head, but his eyes find mine and he gives me a tight nod. I move to stand, but Grayson rises with me. I don't bother arguing, the look on his face tells me it's not worth my time, so we head out of the diner in a single file line, with Felix and Remy right behind us.

"Aisling is missing," Eugene states the moment we step away from the door and have some privacy.

My eyes widen. He spoke as if I would know who this person is, and I'm a little surprised he wants to keep the fact that someone is missing under wraps. "Who is Aisling? Did you report this to Scotty or anyone at the station?" I question. My luck, it's going to be a fucking goat or something.

"My wife. And no, I trust your dad," he says, eyeing me. "Didn't he tell me you went to the academy? Are you working for HCPD now?"

"No, sir, I'm an MBI agent," I tell him and quickly glance at Gray. He must know this man since he addressed him by name. "You should go down to the station and make a report about your wife. How long has she been missing?"

"Since this morning, that's why I need your dad," he replies and rubs a callused hand over his gray hair.

"Sir, you need to go to the station and report this. My dad isn't available, and I can't tell you when he will be."

"If I go down to the station, everyone is going to be talking about it again, and Aisling doesn't like everyone knowing our business," Eugene blurts out. He seems a little upset, but madder about the situation than the fact that his wife is missing. Maybe I'm reading him wrong.

"Again, this has happened before?" I can't hide my incredulous tone.

"Aisling had a stroke two years ago," Felix murmurs under his breath.

"She gets confused sometimes," Eugene defends. "She hasn't run off."

I look over at Gray, and he gives me wide eyes as if he's saying, *Maybe she did run off.*

"Can you help until your dad gets back?" Eugene questions as if this entire thing is exhausting, which I'm sure it is, but I feel like I would be a

hell of a lot more concerned. He's acting more aggravated than anything, but it sounds like this is something he's dealt with before.

"We should get the HCPD involved," I tell him. I'm supposed to be lying low, not taking on another case off the books.

"I doubt she even got far from the house. Your dad always handles it himself," Eugene says, and it sounds like both a plea and an insult, or maybe I'm just feeling bad because I want to tell him no.

"She doesn't work for the HCPD," Remy replies with a little bite in his tone, so maybe I'm not imagining the attitude.

"I know, but she's smart like her dad. He told me," Eugene argues.

"I'll take a look around, but if we don't find her pretty damn quickly, I'll notify the HCPD myself." I cross my arms over my chest.

"Or you could talk to your dad," Eugene counters. "He'll tell you he's helped before."

"I'll take care of the table," Remy inserts, giving Eugene a dirty parting look as he stalks past the man. I'm not even sure if Eugene notices though, he seems to be intent on staring at me.

"You think she's near your house?" I question. Remy already knew I was going to help, which is why he went back inside to clear the bill.

"She usually doesn't go far, but sometimes she hides in the barns or outbuildings. She gets confused," he says again, and for some reason, it doesn't sound any better now than it did the first time.

"Give me your address, I'll meet you there." There's no way I'm riding with him, not that I think the guys would let me. I'm going to have to ask Remy to use his SUV. I really need to find out what the hell happened to my car.

I AM NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR
WHAT MY FACE DOES WHILE YOU
TALK.



Remy sits behind the steering wheel, staring at the old Victorian home. When I asked to use his SUV, he offered his chauffeur services instead. I'm not even mad. Eugene was giving me weird vibes, and that was before I saw his house.

You do bring me to the nicest places. Percy is perched on my shoulder. *I wonder what forgotten things we'll find.*

"Don't take anything that doesn't belong to you," I warn him, then lean past Remy to get a better look at the property. "Do you know anything about him and his wife?"

"No. We should have made Gray come." He puts the vehicle in park.

"He had work to do," I argue and reach for my door handle.

"Work?" Remy snorts. "More like he had to go play referee between a bunch of entitled townie pricks and new businesses that want to come in. You'd think they'd be happy to bring in more tax revenue, but all they care about is maintaining the Hill Crest name." As if to prove a point, Remy lifts his hands and gestures to the massive, ornate house in front of us. It's old enough to belong to one of the founding families.

There's a timeworn sign hanging from a post with the year 1857 and the name Doby near a freestanding light post. "Think this place has been in the family that long?"

"Could be," Remy replies after closing his door and meeting me near the brick path that leads to the front porch.

"He knows we're coming, right?" I question as we make our way up the path. The place seems dark, even though it's the middle of the afternoon

and the sun is shining. All the curtains seem to be drawn closed along the front.

“Yeah, maybe we’ll get lucky and he’ll have already found her.” Remy raps on the screen door hard, and it bounces against the frame.

Heavy footfalls sound from inside, growing louder as someone approaches the door. I know it’s Eugene because I can feel his magic pushing against my shields through the barrier of the house. “Looks like he’s home,” I mumble, and the door opens seconds later, revealing the older man. He scans me quickly, then his gaze bounces over to Remy, where it lingers for just a moment before returning to me.

Instead of inviting us inside like I would expect, he pulls the door closed and comes out onto the porch. “I looked around again while I waited,” he says, and his tone suggests he’s not happy that we didn’t come with him directly when he left the diner. “Did you call your dad?”

“No, I think it would be best if we reached out to the station. Pop is currently not in a position to help us.” I hope mentioning the PD again will make him reconsider alerting the police to the situation, but he ignores my comment.

“Since there are two of you, we can cover more ground.” Eugene looks off to the side of the property.

When we were pulling up, I noticed a few barns behind the main house, along with a field that looks as if it can be hayed since the grass is so long.

“You sure she’s not inside?” Remy inquires. “I know these old houses usually have lots of places to hole up.” Grayson grew up in a house like this, but it was near the center of town and probably twice as big. We didn’t play at his house often, only when his grandfather was away, but when we did, hide-and-seek was our favorite game. It could have lasted hours if we wanted it to.

“I’ve looked time and again, called for her, and haven’t heard a peep,” Eugene states. “You can check the stables.” He nods his head to the left while making eye contact with Remy. I roll my lips in. Remy isn’t one to allow people to tell him what to do, so I’m curious to see how this is going to go.

Without allowing Remy a chance to reply, he swings his gaze to me and says, “You come with me. We can check out the back barn.”

“Nah, that doesn’t work for me.” Remy crosses his arms over his chest and looks down at Eugene. “If you need a fucking search team, then you

can call the PD. She stays with me.”

Eugene’s jaw tightens as if he’s grinding his teeth. “If we’re all in the same place, she’ll be able to move around and we’ll never find her.”

“Take it or leave it. I don’t give a shit that you don’t want anyone knowing she ran off. If you were actually worried about her, then you’d be asking for help from everyone,” Remy reasons.

“Check the stables. I’ll wait out back to make sure she doesn’t slip into another building.” Eugene stomps off the porch and continues around the side of the house.

“Fucking dick.” Remy doesn’t even try to keep from being overheard.

“I think he’s worried,” I say, placing my hand on Remy’s forearm, but I’m not sure that’s the truth. Eugene seems upset, but maybe not for the right reasons.

“Bullshit.” Remy snorts, placing his hand over mine to keep it on his arm as he walks toward the front steps.

The stables are easy to spot. The large door is open, allowing for some of the sun to breach the building and shine onto the packed dirt floor. “When we find this lady, let’s make sure she wants to go back to him before handing her over,” Remy tells me softly.

I squeeze his arm in confirmation. When we enter the barn, I look around, noting all the empty stalls and heavy dust lingering on the wooden walls and beams. “Doesn’t look like they have used this in a while,” I comment.

I would agree. Percival climbs down my shoulder and hops off once he reaches my leg to do a little investigating of his own.

“Not for horses anyway.” Remy breaks away from me and walks ahead. “Aisling,” he calls loudly. It doesn’t exactly echo, but the sound does reverberate around the structure. “Maybe you should try,” he suggests quickly after, realizing hearing a strange dude yell for her might not inspire a woman to come out of hiding—if, in fact, she is hiding. I can’t shake the feeling that Eugene may have more to do with her disappearance than he’s admitting, but then why would he seek out my dad?

“Hello, Aisling,” I call loudly, but I can’t project the way Remy can. We give it a few seconds and listen, but I don’t hear even a creak that she might be in the barn. Slowly, we make our way toward the back of the building, passing a few rooms with doors as we do. Remy pushes each door open and peers inside. The farther we get into the building, the gloomier it becomes,

but there's still enough light to be confident we aren't missing a woman who's hiding.

As we approach a wooden door on the back wall of the barn, I hear a skittering sound. My breath catches as I look to the left where the sound came from just in time to see a thin, orange tail disappear behind some loose hay piled on the floor.

"Crap, that scared me," I mumble, only now realizing I'm much closer to Remy than I was before the sound. He wraps his arm over my shoulders and tugs me closer to his side.

"Don't worry, I'll protect you from the ferocious kitty," he teases.

He's still smiling when we exit the barn. I squint against the light and look around for Eugene. "Didn't he say he would be out back?"

"Yeah." Remy searches the area much in the same way I am. "There he is." He lifts his chin, and I finally notice Eugene. He was hidden near the side of the next building, concealed in the shadow created by the roof overhang.

Before I can tell him we didn't find anything in the stables, he slips back behind the building. I can only assume he wants to head around back to make sure she doesn't exit when we enter. "Is it just me or is Eugene a little strange?" I keep my voice light and teasing, but truth rings in my words.

"I think he sailed past a little strange a long time ago," Remy replies and hauls open the door of the next barn when we reach it. I'm hit with the odor of decay, but thankfully, it's not that fresh in your face smell.

Remy pinches his nose and makes an expression of disgust. "Damn, something died in here."

"Yeah, we should have a look around." I pull my phone from my pocket and activate the flashlight. The beam of white light allows me to make out all the large shapes, and I realize it's almost entirely filled with junk—old farm equipment, cardboard boxes that look as if they would disintegrate if handled, lopsided bales of hay, and a bunch of other garbage piled up all over. There isn't even a path you can walk through, and I'm not climbing over this crap.

"Percy," I call, knowing he'll hear me. Movement farther back grabs my attention, and I shine the light on it. My fearless mink is deep into the space. His sleek head pokes up from behind an old plow. "Is there anything

human other than us in here?” I question, hoping his nose can filter through all the smells.

No, not here. The death you smell is another cat. There seems to be quite a few of the creatures lurking about. I imagine him sniffing haughtily.

“What about Aisling? Have you caught the scent of a woman at all?”

“What’s he saying?” Remy touches the back of my arm with his fingers before Percy has a chance to respond. I hold up my finger, asking him to wait a moment.

There was something on the porch, but nothing back here, nor on the ground or in these two buildings. I don’t think she’s been out here in a while. The house...that’s another story.

“He doesn’t think she’s been out here in a while. At least we don’t need to dig through all this crap to see if she’s hiding.”

Instead of trying to make our way through all the stuff piled up to the back of the building, we exit the way we entered and walk around the side. When I don’t spot Eugene, I examine the horizon. I don’t see anything else he could hide behind, so where could he be?

“Where the fuck is he?” Remy snarls, looking around.

“I don’t know. Something about this feels off.” I keep my voice low in case Eugene is lurking close by.

“You think?” Remy snorts, turning around to look behind us, then snaps, “Fucker.”

I turn to follow his gaze and see Eugene approaching us. “I really don’t think she’s out here,” I tell him.

“There are other buildings farther back,” he replies, pointing behind me.

“Maybe, but how would she get out there?” I cast my eyes over the tall grass. I don’t see a walking path or trail, or any tracks a vehicle might use.

“We’ve lived here for over twenty years. She knows her way around,” Eugene scoffs.

“You said you realized she was gone this morning. When was the last time you saw her?” I question.

“Last night. She was upset she burned dinner and went up to bed early.” Eugene thumbs the side of his nose and sniffs.

It’s apathetic, or it seems that way to me. “Does that happen often?”

“What, her burning dinner or going to bed early?” He lifts his thick white brows while his face remains stony.

“Getting upset,” I clarify.

Eugene shrugs halfheartedly and rolls his eyes just enough for me to notice. “Baking chicken isn’t that hard.”

Something makes me think he was the one who was upset, or maybe Aisling was worried she upset him. “Do you think that’s why she left, because she was upset?”

“No, I think she got confused,” he retorts without hesitation. “If you aren’t going to help me look for her, can you call your dad?”

“I think I’ll just call the station and let Scotty know. This isn’t any kind of place for someone to be lost.” I make a point of looking around the farm but give the house a good hard look too.

“They aren’t going to do anything anyway. She hasn’t even been gone twenty-four hours.” Eugene slaps the side of his leg.

“If there’s a reason for them to think she may be in danger, or the circumstances are unusual, they will.” I pull out my phone and dial the HCPD, not waiting for Eugene to object again.

“Hello, Hill Crest Police,” Deloris answers. Even after all this time, I still recognize her voice.

“Hey, Deloris, it’s Frankie.” I keep my eyes on Eugene, even though a wave of nostalgia passes over me. It’s been a long time since I’ve spoken to her. I usually just call Dad’s cell phone.

She lets out a little gasp and then says, “Frances Bishop?”

“Yeah, it’s me.”

“It’s been too long. I was madder than a wet hen when I heard you were in town and didn’t stop by to see me. Your daddy isn’t here, but you probably already know that,” she rambles.

“Yes, I know he’s not there. Who’s on shift this morning?”

“Moore is here. Scotty is out checking on the bus route. Impatient fools, we almost had an accident last week when a car didn’t stop for the flashers. Can you believe that?”

“I can.” I nod, trying to speed this along. “May I speak with Officer Moore? I think we have a little bit of a situation.”

“Oh dear, he just went to the boys’ room. I’m afraid he might be a while, he had three cups of coffee this afternoon. Can I help you with something?” Deloris offers.

“Aisling is missing.” I realize then I never confirmed her last name, or Eugene’s for that matter.

“Eugene’s wife, oh no. Not again,” she says softly.

I turn my back to Eugene, whose eyes are locked on me, not looking very happy, but at least he didn't try to warn me off calling again. "Yes, he mentioned Dad has helped him find her before." It's clearly a question.

"Bless his heart, yes. She had a stroke a while ago, and the poor thing gets confused." I sag a little. Knowing that Eugene was telling the truth and this has happened before comes as a relief. He seemed to think that only Dad knew about this, but it's clear Deloris knew too.

"Eugene mentioned that," I confirm.

"I'm surprised he told you about it. Usually, your dad handles it alone. Poor thing, she's going to be upset when she gets her wits about her."

I look down at the ground, feeling a little guilty that I was so suspicious of Eugene. "I'm out at his place helping him look around. Can you let Moore and Scotty know? If we don't find her soon, we might need some help."

"Oh, you betcha. It never took your dad more than a day or two to find her," Deloris replies, completely unfazed.

"A day or two?" I look over at Remy, who seems to be eyeballing Eugene, making sure he stays put while I'm on the phone.

"Well, there was that one time, right after she got out of the hospital, when she was gone four days, but that was a while ago," she continues, as if someone missing for four days isn't a big deal. "I'm sure she will turn up soon."

"Let's hope so," I mumble, feeling a little deflated. I thought calling the station would be akin to calling in the troops, but I don't think that's the case.

"I'll make sure to get a note to Baldwin when I leave for the day if I don't see him. He'll be in this evening. We're a little short staffed with your dad gone. I'm so glad you're there to help the Dobys," Deloris coos.

"Happy to help," I say, but my tone would beg to differ.

"All right, now let me know when you find her," Deloris responds, and I know the call is coming to an end.

"I'll keep you updated. Bye." I hit the red icon to end the call, then gather my wits for a moment before facing Eugene again.

"Can I expect the whole town to be out here any minute or was that your dad?" he calls loudly. His posture is stiff, as is his jaw.

"Not my dad," I answer. "I spoke to Deloris from the station, she's aware there have been incidents in the past, as are the other officers."

Eugene shoves his hands into his front pockets and lets out a harrumph. “Surprised the entire town’s not talking about it then.”

“Where else should we look? Where has Dad found her?” Something about this entire thing still feels off, but I figure the sooner we find her, the sooner we can make sure she’s okay and be done with the Dobys.

Eugene looks to the right, and his brow furrows deeply. “I found her near the strip once.”

“The strip?” I question.

Eugene shakes his head and amends, “The creek.”

That’s an odd slipup, but it’s not as if I’ve never thought one thing and said another. “Is that on your property?”

“Yeah, out that way.” He points toward the tall grass field.

I look over at Remy. “Please tell me your SUV is a 4x4?” I really don’t want to walk through that.

He scoffs. “Do you know what that shit would do to the paint?” It’s more of a rhetorical question. Looks like we’ll be hoofing it.

FAILURE MIGHT BE YOUR ONLY OPTION.



Once we get into the grass, it's not as bad as I had imagined. Sure, it's tall, but it's kind of sparse too so it's easy to find places to walk, which means Aisling might have come this way. I haven't seen Percy since we were in the barn. He's still hunting for treasures, otherwise I would ask him if he's picked up on anything.

"Not much farther," Eugene calls, but it's not the first time he's uttered those words. For being as old as he is, I'd think he'd be huffing or at least look winded, but he doesn't. He is, however, still leaking magic, so that might have something to do with it.

"Feels like we're zigzagging back and forth. Are you sure you know where the creek is?" Remy questions.

"I know where it is," Eugene snarls and stomps ahead a few more paces.

"He doesn't have a fucking clue," Remy mumbles under his breath. "There's no way a *confused* older lady could make this trek unless she had good reason to." I agree with his statement, but I don't voice it while Eugene might be able to overhear me.

"See!" Eugene snaps victoriously. I go up on my toes, but I have no clue what he's talking about. After about fifty feet, the ground slopes down a little and gets soggy. I can't see any creek yet, but it must be close.

Remy lets out a grunt when we finally reach the edge of the grass. There's a heavy line of trees on the other side of the bank, making it seem improbable that someone would have crossed over the water, and this side is too marshy to do much but focus on your footing so you don't slide into the creek.

I look to the left and right just to make sure I'm not missing an area that might be more habitable. "There isn't anyone out here," Remy observes, voicing my thoughts.

"Maybe it was earlier in the spring last time," Eugene replies as if that would explain how it would be reasonable to think she was out here.

"Should we walk down the bank?" I offer.

"I don't see any point." Remy crosses his arms over his chest and glares at the side of Eugene's head.

Without any further explanation, Eugene turns around and heads back the way we came, leaving us to trail after him. He doesn't seem bothered by the wasted trip. Maybe it's because he was hopeful she was here and we eliminated that possibility, so he doesn't feel as if it was wasted time at all.

By the time we reach the barn and the house comes into view, dusk is upon us. My feet ache a bit, and I have mosquito bites in more places than I want to discuss.

Finally, I thought I might have to walk out and rescue you, Percy remarks from nearby. *Find anything interesting?*

"No, how about you?" I keep my voice low so as not to be overheard by Eugene. He's well ahead of us anyway.

A light came on in the house. I catch sight of Percy as he hops across the ground, coming closer to me before scaling my pants. *Well, it flickered a few times.*

"That's very interesting." I reward him with a little scratch between the ears.

Even more interesting are the wards on the house. I couldn't get past them.

"Oh, I bet that pissed you off." I snicker.

Quite, but it also makes me curious.

"Me too," I agree.

Eugene stops when he reaches the side of his house and turns to face us. It's hard to make out his features, but his posture is rigid. "There's no use looking in the dark," he states as if it's our fault the sun is quickly falling behind the horizon.

There's truth to his words, even though I hate the thought of leaving someone alone in the dark, especially a woman who might genuinely be confused, but he's right. We really don't have another option right now, unless he wants to try scrying for her. It's been in the back of my mind to

suggest it all day, but it only gives a general location, and Eugene seemed confident Aisling was near the house, so it would have been rather fruitless to put forth the effort for something we already knew.

I still feel compelled to mention it though. “Should we try a locating spell?”

Eugene makes a disgusted sound. “She can’t have gotten far. If putting in the work is too hard for you, I can do it myself.”

“Knock off the attitude.” Remy levels his glare on the older man. “She has been putting in the work, if you hadn’t fucking noticed.”

I place my hand on Remy’s arm. “I’m just trying to get options out there,” I tell Eugene. “I don’t like the idea of her being out at night all by herself.”

“When she gets back, I might just tie a rope around her this time,” he mumbles, and I think it’s supposed to be funny or lighten the mood, but it falls flat. It feels more threatening than it does anything else. I think he realizes it also, because he rubs the back of his knuckles across his jaw and adds, “I’ll be out first thing in the morning looking for her.”

I nod. “Does she have any friends she might have called or visited?”

“Not really anymore, we keep to ourselves,” Eugene replies.

“I’ll be here at dawn. Where will we be looking?” Having an idea of where and what we will be doing will make things a little easier.

“There are a few more places on the property we could check.” Eugene looks off to the left. “If you could talk to your dad, he might give us a few more ideas,” he adds, turning his attention back to me.

Hexes, he’s relentless. “I’ll see what I can do,” I answer noncommittally.

Remy places his hand over mine and leads me back to the car, going around to my side and opening my door for me. Percy jumps from my shoulder onto the back of the passenger seat, then moves to the center console while I get in.

Once we’re back on the road, Remy gives me a quick glance, then returns his attention to driving down the isolated dirt lane. “You’re not coming back alone,” he tells me flatly, as if he’s expecting me to argue with him about it.

“That guy gives me the heebie-jeebies, so I would welcome the company. I want to ask Gray about him,” I add more to myself.

“What did the cops say?” Remy relaxes back into his seat.

“Not much. Deloris confirmed that Dad has helped find her in the past, and the longest she’s ever been gone was four days.” I say the last part with as much incredulousness as I feel.

“Four days?” Remy is just as shocked, if his tone is any measure. “That can’t be safe. If she has medical shit going on, I’m sure she needs medicine, right?”

“You’d think, but Eugene seems to be more worried about what everyone thinks than he is about Aisling. If she has prescriptions, they may not even get it, for all we know.”

“That’s fucked up.” Remy pauses. “I don’t think your dad would go for something like that.” He shakes his head.

“How would Dad even know? It’s not like he can call the doctor and see if he prescribed anything, then ask the pharmacy if it’s been filled. It would be illegal for them to give him that information.”

Remy lets out a loud huff. “What about you, Percy? Did you pick anything up?”

The wards on the house are fresh, only a few days old at the most, he says, and I repeat the info for Remy to hear.

“It’s tempting to call Dad,” I admit.

“You have to wait for him to call you though, right? That’s how you guys set it up.” Remy slows the SUV and turns down the drive to their house.

It’s still a sight to see, even in the dark. The ambient glow from the outdoor lights gives the house a warm, inviting feeling. “Yeah, and it won’t be for another couple days. I’m hoping we’ll have found her before then.”

“We will,” Remy replies reassuringly. I wish I could shake this uneasy feeling I have and grab a little of the confidence he exudes.

“We’re home!” Remy hollers from behind me after we enter the house.

I duck and send a glare over my shoulder, to which he gives a slight wince. Percy darts away from us. I probably won’t see him for the rest of the evening, so I call, “Night!”

Footsteps down the hall pull my attention in that direction, and I see Felix standing several feet away. His glasses are slightly askew, and his hair is a dark mess. He makes me want to curl up under a blanket and do dirty things to him.

He tilts his head to the side and lifts his hand in an invitation for me to come to him. When I get close enough, he tangles our pinkies together and

pulls me as if I weren't moving fast enough.

"What's wrong?" he questions while searching my face.

"We didn't find her," Remy answers for me. "And that guy is weird as fuck. Where's Gray?"

Remy is already moving deeper into the house as if he's going to search for Gray on his own, but Felix answers anyway. "Office, I think." He sounds distracted, but his eyes seem entirely focused on me. "You okay?" he presses once Remy is gone.

"Yeah, it just feels wrong to be back here, safe" —the moment the word is out of my mouth, I feel Felix snap the wards into place, as if it was a reminder for him to do so— "and comfy, while Aisling is lost out there somewhere," I finish.

"Do you want me to go out and look for her?" Felix offers sweetly, and I know all I would have to do is say the word and he would.

I'm shaking my head before I even answer. "No, it's too dark to do any good. Plus, this isn't the first time it's happened, and she's always been found safe. Something about this just gives me bad vibes," I confess.

"Talk to me about it," he offers and guides me down the hall to an area I haven't yet explored, at least not with the guys. I passed through this room the first night I was here but didn't stick around long. I was too restless to stop when I found it.

Felix sits in the corner of a large sofa, and I climb on after him, sitting so close I'm nearly in his lap. The moment my head hits his chest, a sigh leaves my lips and I relax against him. Our fingers are still tangled together over his thigh, and the connection is more than welcome.

I look around the rest of the room. It's a typical living room, with two couches and a couple chairs all stationed with optimal viewing of the huge television on the wall. It still has that un-lived-in feel like most of the rest of the house, and I wonder why that is when I can see little touches of them all over the place.

"Do you guys hang out in here often?" I ask.

"Sometimes. Is that really what you want to talk about?" Felix prods.

"I do want to know why I always feel like I'm missing part of this house." I snap my fingers and look over at him. "It feels cold, like Gray's house before he snuck us back to his playroom. As if you're keeping me in the part reserved for company." I finally put my thoughts into words.

Felix twists his lips and furrows his brow. “First, we don’t really get company. The three of us, now four, finally” —he gives me the eye— “have each other.”

“What are you guys talking about?” Remy plops down on the sofa next to me. He has a white drink in his hand that looks like a milkshake, but when the stench of spinach wafts over to me, I reconsider asking for a sip.

“Frankie thinks we have hidden rooms, like when you were a kid.” Felix tips his chin in Gray’s direction after he takes a seat in one of the chairs. The teasing way he says it makes me think my suspicions have been way off.

“Shit, that would have been cool as hell. Why didn’t you think of that?” Remy slaps Felix’s shoulder lightly after placing his arm behind my neck.

“You think it’s cold.” Grayson looks around the living room as if he’s seeing it for the first time.

“Not cold,” I immediately defend. “Unlived in.” I don’t think that sounds much better, though, as Gray’s eyebrows dip over his eyes.

“You want to break a few vases, doll?” Remy winks at me, reminding me of the first time Grayson invited me over to his house.

My mouth drops open, and I gasp. I can’t believe he brought that up like it’s funny. I snap my head in Gray’s direction, and he has a soft smile on his face. The consternation that was there moments ago is gone.

Memories of the time he witnessed me crying all those years ago barrel into my thoughts.

I’D NEVER BEEN in a house like his before, and to say I was in awe was an understatement. I was looking up at the high ceiling that was painted with runes, not paying attention to where I was going, when I bumped into a pedestal that held a vase. Remy was quick enough to steady the pillar, but the vase already had too much momentum. It toppled over and hit the floor, shattering into a million tiny pieces, right along with my heart.

Gray’s family was rich, and my dad would never be able to replace the vase. Tears were already brimming on my lashes when I looked up to see Gray staring at the floor with an expression of sheer devastation on his face.

A woman in a uniform came running down the hall seconds later. She gasped, then covered her mouth when she saw the mess at my feet. Right

then, I wished for my magic to manifest and hoped that I would have some ability to fix the mess I'd made, but we were too young for that.

Gray didn't look at the woman at all. He took two long strides and was right in front of me, close enough that I could see the blue flecks in his hazel eyes. I'd never forget the way the glass sounded under his shoes, like grit, but with a sharp note too, as if the glass was cutting into the floor.

He searched my eyes for a single moment, then turned so he was standing in front of me, blocking me from view.

"Please tell Grandfather I had an accident. I lost my footing and slipped, knocking over the vase in the process." Gray's tone was flat, devoid of emotion. I'd never heard him sound like that, so formal. That was the only thing that stopped me from correcting him. It was my fault the vase broke, and he was taking the blame.

"You had an accident," a man hissed, making the words sound sharp and disbelieving.

"Yes, sir," Gray replied. I couldn't stop staring at his back, it was so rigid, it didn't even look like he was breathing. No one else around us moved either. I wasn't the only one worried about what was going to happen. I was afraid to see the person the voice belonged to—no, that was wrong. I knew who the voice belonged to. I was afraid for him to see me.

"How unfortunate," Gray's grandfather chided. He knew Gray was lying, and I had a bad feeling he was going to get in even more trouble for that.

I opened my mouth to tell him it was my fault, but in the same second, Gray loudly blurted out, "My friends should go," covering anything I might have managed to get out, then he added softly, "Then I can clean this up."

"I think that would be good," his grandfather agreed, but his voice was even colder than before.

Gray spun in place and walked forward, ready to bowl me over if I didn't move. Remy and Felix each flanked my sides, and I was forced right out the door I came through only minutes before.

Once we were outside, the heavy door slammed shut behind us, and I heard the sound of a lock clicking into place.

"Oh no." My lips finally worked, but my voice was just above a whisper. "I have to go tell him I broke the vase." I took one step forward, but Felix grabbed my hand, stopping me. I looked over my shoulder to see

what the heck he wanted, but the expression on his face stopped me. He looked sad, like the day Remy accidentally broke his wooden sword.

“It’s okay, buttercup,” Felix said, but I didn’t believe him. “Grayson will clean it up and we’ll see him later.”

I shook my head because I knew it wasn’t going to be that simple. “I can’t let him get in trouble for me. It was my fault. I wasn’t looking where I was going,” I confessed.

When I faced the door again, Remy stood in front of me as if he was going to block me if I tried to knock on the door. He was bigger than me by a lot, but I was faster. He had been kind of clumsy this summer. I’d heard Dad say it was because he had a growth spurt. I didn’t care, I just liked being able to beat him in a race. I thought about darting around him now, but he crossed his arms over his chest and frowned down at me. “We need to go. Sticking around is going to get him in more trouble.”

His words made my stomach hurt in a weird way. I didn’t want to get him in even more trouble. I bit my bottom lip, and Remy tilted his head to the side. I bet he could tell I was about to cry and thought I looked weird.

“Fine, I’m just going to go home.” I turned and realized I was still holding Felix’s hand, so I tugged free and jogged across the grass to get to the side road. It was going to be a long walk home, but I wasn’t leaving yet. I just wanted Felix and Remy to think I was.

Once I made it to the tree line, I slowed down and looked over at the house. Remy and Felix were walking up the driveway, going the other direction. I bet they were going to the park, which meant I was going to circle back in a few minutes to make sure they wouldn’t see me trying to sneak back to Grayson’s window.

I might have never been in Gray’s house, but he had pointed out his window lots of times when we played in the yard.

I was breathing hard by the time I finally made it around the block and could see Gray’s house again. I didn’t see any signs of Remy or Felix, so I darted over the grass and put my back against his house next to his window. I knew if I got caught, I might get Gray in more trouble, but I had to see him. I needed to tell him I was sorry. Plus, I couldn’t get rid of this weird feeling in my stomach.

I peeked into Gray’s window. At first, I thought I had the wrong room, because it didn’t look like a kid’s room. There weren’t any toys or a TV, just

a huge bed that looked like my dad's, all neat like it had never been slept in, and dressers, no toys or anything.

Just as I was about to duck away and recount the windows, I noticed a book on the nightstand. It was something we were assigned to read in class, so I knew he'd been here. This must have been his room.

I looked around again. I really didn't think this through. I didn't know what I should do now. Glancing around the yard to make sure no one was looking, I pressed my fingers against the glass and pushed up. It glided up easily, surprising me. I stood there for a minute, trying to convince myself to leave, but I couldn't do it.

With an easy hop, my head was in the window and my feet were dangling off the ground. I quickly scrambled the rest of the way in, trying to be as quiet as possible. My heart slammed against my ribs. Dad took people to jail for things like this.

Crouched down, I glanced around the room, searching for a place to hide. There were a couple of doors, but if I opened the wrong one, it could lead into the house, so that was out.

The bed was my only other option. Thankfully, it was high enough for me to get under. I lifted the fancy sheet hanging off the side and peered under the bed. I wasn't sure what I expected, but there was nothing under here, not even dust or socks and wrappers like I kicked under my bed so I didn't have to clean them up.

Once I scooted under, my breathing finally settled so I didn't feel like I was huffing. I got creeped out a few times, thinking there might be spiders crawling on me or something, but that faded after a while.

I thought I either fell asleep at some point or got really close, because I jumped and gasped when the door finally opened. Heeled shoes clicked on the wooden floor, and I held my breath. "I won't tell your grandfather this was open again. I don't think you need any more trouble today." A woman tsked as if she was doing Gray a favor.

Hexes, I'd forgotten to close the window. "Get out of my room," Grayson ordered, but it didn't even sound like him.

The heels clicked away, and the door snapped closed. I heard something hard hit the door right after and flinched. This might have been a really bad idea. Grayson had every right to be very mad at me, and I snuck into his room, chancing him getting in more trouble. *So dumb.*

“Remy, is that you?” Gray lifted up the sheet, and his eyes widened when he saw me. “Frankie.”

“I’m so sorry,” I blurted out but remained under the bed.

“What are you doing here?”

“I should have admitted it was me right away, but then Remy and Felix said we needed to go or you would get in more trouble, and I left the window open. I’m so sorry.” I said it all so fast, I didn’t even know if he understood half of it.

“Come out from under there.” Grayson leaned forward to reach for me, but he winced and blew out a heavy breath before trying again, moving slower.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, scooting out on my own.

“Nothing,” he lied. I opened my mouth to call him on it, but snapped it closed instead. Gray sat on the floor next to me once I was out. Our backs were up against his bed, and I had my arms wrapped around my knees.

“I’m so sorry, Gray. I’ll talk to my dad. We’ll figure out a way to replace it.”

“You don’t need to replace it, it’s fine. He doesn’t even care about the vase.” Gray lifted his knees like mine and started to raise his arms as if he might put them on his knees, but he winced again, his face turning pale before he slouched back to his original position.

“Did you hurt yourself cleaning up the mess?” I questioned, looking at his hands, expecting to see a cut or something, but Gray balled up his fists and shook his head.

“I’m fine. Where did the guys go?” I could tell he didn’t want to talk about it, but I knew something was wrong.

“Don’t know. I told them I was going home and circled back,” I admitted.

“Why did you come back?” Gray stared at the side of my face, and I got a weird feeling in my stomach, like I was on a rollercoaster.

I turned to look at him and told him the truth. “I wanted to make sure you were okay.” His hazel eyes widened a bit, and his cheeks turned red.

He was blushing. I almost asked him why, but I didn’t. Instead, I thought about all the times I’d blushed in front of the guys lately, knowing it always happened when I thought about how cute Grayson was or how the way I felt about the guys was changing. I would get that rollercoaster

feeling when Felix held my hand or Remy picked me up and ran down the field with me in his arms.

Heat rose in my cheeks, and I looked down, wondering if he would notice. I didn't know what to say or do, so I just sat there.

"I'm okay," Gray finally answered, and I peeked over at him.

"I'm sorry I let you take the blame for me. I'll tell your granddad the truth." I swallowed thickly.

"No, don't even talk to him." Gray took hold of my hand in a tight grip. He didn't seem mad, more like he was worried.

"Okay," I agreed softly. "If you tell me what happened."

Gray narrowed his eyes. "Promise not to tell anyone and not to talk to him," he demanded, and I nodded jerkily.

Gray released my hand and gazed out into the room. "It's not that big of a deal," he began, but I didn't believe him. "For punishment, he makes us stand with our arms out, and if we drop them, he uses the cane. Most of the time I just drop my arms and take the lashings because he always does it anyway, and that usually gets it over with faster," he confessed casually, as if he hadn't just admitted to his grandpa beating him.

That was why he was moving slowly and flinching. "Does your mom know?" My voice was thick, and it was only then I realized I had a few tears falling down my cheeks. It was my fault Gray got hurt.

Gray snapped his head to the side and looked at me. I schooled my features, and Gray pretended not to notice I was crying.

"Did you read the book for class?" I asked the first thing that popped into my head that didn't have anything to do with his family.

"I'm not done yet," he replied, and we continued to stare at each other.

"Me either. Want me to read it for you?" I offered, thinking I could just tell him everything that happened and save him from doing it. It was the least I could do.

"Sure." Gray turned to the side and grabbed the book. His movements were measured but not stilted. My eyes roamed over his back, and I wanted to ask to see, but I didn't.

Gray dropped the book into my lap, then climbed up off the floor using his knees before walking over to the door and locking it. I watched him as he ambled back and reached his hand down to help me stand. I looked at his proffered hand, then back into his eyes. "Aren't you mad at me?"

“Why would I be mad at you?” he inquired. Not waiting for me to reach for him, he grabbed my arms and started to tug. I rose mostly on my own when I realized what he was doing.

“It’s my fault you got in trouble,” I explained and joined him on the bed.

“No, it’s his. Believe me, he would have found a reason to do it sooner or later. Are you going to read that to me or what?” he questioned.

I looked down at the book, realizing he thought my offer was to read it out loud to him. “Are you sure me being here isn’t going to get you into more trouble?” I asked.

“Positive.” He patted the bed, encouraging me to lie down.

I spent the next hour reading to Gray, even when I knew he’d fallen asleep. I only stopped when he turned on his side and curled around me. It was too tempting not to lift his shirt and look at his back. The red welts made me cry again, and I knew he heard me because he whispered, “It’s okay,” before cuddling even closer and falling back asleep.

OF COURSE I TALK TO MYSELF.
SOMETIMES I NEED EXPERT
ADVICE.



The warm palm on my leg brings me back to the present. I look over at Felix and hum something close to a “Huh?” It feels like I’ve missed something in the last several minutes.

“We’ll all help you look for her tomorrow,” Felix promises, wrongfully assuming I was distracted by thoughts of Aisling and her whereabouts.

“Oh.” I nod. “Thanks. I hate to pull you away from what you have going on, but in this case, I feel like it’s worth it. I could really use the help. The station doesn’t seem to think it’s that big of a deal.”

Felix squints a little, making me think he’s now realizing my thoughts were not on Aisling. He opens his mouth as if he’s about to say something, but Remy cuts him off. “We’ve been thinking.”

“We, as in the three of you? That’s never good,” I joke.

“Oh, doll, you know we have the best ideas.” Remy smirks, and it makes me think dirty, dirty things. They do have wonderful ideas, but I can’t let him know I think that. His head is already big enough...both of them.

I give him a droll stare, waiting.

“Since you have a little time off, we should complete the bond,” Remy suggests simply, as if it’s just a little matter that we can get out of the way, no problem.

I choke on the air in my lungs. It’s not like this was completely unexpected, but it still catches me a little off guard. “You have all talked about this?” I’m sure my eyes are as wide as they can get as I pass my gaze over the three of them.

Gray waits for me to lock my eyes on him and nods once. "It's been a long time coming." He licks his bottom lip, and there's something eager, maybe even hungry, in his eyes as he watches me.

I lean forward to give myself a little room, because I'm surrounded by Felix and Remy and that can make any girl's head swim with ideas, and I need a clear mind for this conversation. "You know there's no going back once we do it. No changing your mind. It's for a lifetime," I warn. We went over all this as kids, but it's hard to comprehend the magnitude of something so big when you're so young.

"I think we've all pretty much proven that's true for us anyway." Felix rubs a circle on my back with his palm. I don't know why this feels so scary, it's a dream come true for me.

"Do you not want to complete the bond?" Gray asks while giving me a sideways look that makes me think he's worried about my answer.

"No, I mean yes, I do. That's not it. It's just, I want to make sure we're all certain," I reply, stumbling my way through my explanation.

"Then that's settled. We'll complete the ritual as soon as we find the lady," Remy declares.

All I can think to say is, "Aisling, her name is Aisling," in response, but on the inside, I'm having a little freak-out. When I look up, Gray is still watching me, but my calm exterior doesn't fool him. He knows exactly what I'm feeling. That, for some strange reason, calms me. At first, I force myself not to overthink it because I'm worried about how he will feel about me having cold feet, but then I realize that's not it at all. Him knowing what I'm feeling calms me because I'm reminded I can share those concerns with him. Feeling them doesn't mean I don't want the bond. It just means it's a big decision, one that warrants some thought.

Grayson is holding some tension in his shoulders, but it's only noticeable once he relaxes back into the chair. I know he only gets my emotions, but the wave of calm that washed over me must have soothed him too.

"Now, didn't I promise to give you a tour of my bedroom?" Remy offers. "I promise that room will feel lived in."

I snort and the heavy feeling from a few moments ago fades even more. I want this, I want them, now there's just the small matter of finding a missing woman.

“So, you guys each have your own room?” I question. When we were kids, the thought of having separate space never really came up, but it’s not like we sat around and talked about our living arrangements too often.

“Yes,” Felix states emphatically. I expected that response from Remy, but not so much from Felix.

“He’s a pig,” Gray deadpans.

“Not making my bed the moment I’m out of the sheets does not make me a pig. Maybe it makes you a little neurotic that you do,” Felix retorts.

“He can be a bit obsessive, but don’t you worry your pretty little head. We always knew we’d get you back here.” Remy leans in closer and teases, “Willingly or not. There’s a room we can all share, and I have a feeling Mr. Uptight will find other things to fixate on now instead of the state of the sheets.”

I look over at Gray. His lips are twisted in a way that seems to convey, *He’s probably right*, and the lack of arguing confirms it for me.

“So where’s this room?” I’ve never been a shy girl, and the offer to sleep between the three of them sounds too damn good to pass up.

“That’s my girl.” Remy hops up and grabs my hand to tug me with him as he barrels out of the room and into the hallway.

At one point, I suspect he’s about to pick me up and haul me over his shoulder when I’m not going fast enough, but a stern, “Remy,” from Grayson causes Remy to deflate, and he actually slows down a little so my legs can keep up.

Remy opens a door on the main floor I’ve probably walked past a few times and never thought twice about. I bump him with my shoulder so I can get a look inside, but the room is dark, cast mostly in shadows, so I can’t really make anything out.

Releasing my hand, Remy enters the room and nearly disappears. The glow of light from the hall reflecting on his white shirt allows me to follow his movements until I hear the click of a lamp being turned on.

A bubble of laughter erupts from me as soon as I see the bed. It’s comically large, as if someone gathered up four king-sized beds and squished them together to make a giant, squarish shape.

Shaking my head, I look around, noting three other doors leading off the room, but no windows. I can’t believe Felix would have agreed to this, let alone designed it. There’s supple carpet under my feet and a few pieces of

furniture that look rather artsy for the guys—a low bubbly looking chaise lounge and an oversized sectional sofa—but they flow with the room nicely.

The walls are bare of any art or pictures but painted a beautiful midnight blue. I suspect that, and the lack of windows, is what makes it feel so dark when the lights are off.

“I can see why you don’t want to make the bed,” I tease. It will take all four of us to change the sheets. I bet the comforter weighs at least ten pounds.

Felix lifts his hand and points at me as if I’ve hit the nail on the head. I chortle again. I can just imagine each of them in this massive bed, fighting over the blanket, like having a sleepover every night.

“So do we each get a corner?” I point to the bed, acknowledging the fact that there are pillows on both ends. The side near the wall, where a headboard would usually be, has a table on either side. “I call this side.” I dash over and hop on the bed, kneeling.

“You don’t get a side. You get the middle,” Gray announces, coming over to my side and nudging me back until I’m indeed in the middle of the bed. I expect to feel a break in the mattresses where they have been joined together, but it’s one solid surface, or it at least it feels that way.

“Did you have this specially made?” I plop down on my butt and look over the sea of bed. We could fit eight people comfortably.

“I like this shape better than just having it wide.” Felix shrugs. “And this way, Remy doesn’t try to spoon me when he doesn’t get to lie next to you. He can sleep down there.”

Remy clicks his tongue. “That was one time, Felix.”

“Once was enough. My ass still hasn’t recovered.”

I burst out laughing again. I can just imagine Remy and his monster cock grinding against Felix. “I was sleeping,” Remy defends and chucks a pillow at Felix, who deftly catches it and sets it with the others next to the head of the bed.

“I’m just trying to avoid a repeat.” Felix adjusts his glasses, but the movement doesn’t hide his smile.

“Whatever, it was only a semi anyway,” Remy mumbles and leans over the bed. In the next second, I’m being jerked down by my ankle. My shirt is all the way up my back and half choking me, my boobs are the only thing that stops it from ending up completely around my neck.

“Do you see how mean he is?” Remy sends a glare over my head, looking at Felix. I’m flat on my back under him, and I can’t imagine many other places I’d rather be. My mouth goes a little dry. “I was sleeping,” he reiterates as if he needs to defend himself. “Dreaming about a girl I’d seen early that day.” His voice goes softer, deeper.

I narrow my eyes. Remy wouldn’t dare tell me about him fantasizing about another girl, especially when I’m in prime position to knee him in the balls.

“She had on this stupid blue jumpsuit that was so big she was swimming in the extra fabric...until she bent over.” His eyes are locked on mine, and when he snakes his tongue out to wet his bottom lip, my stomach hollows.

“You don’t still have that hideous thing, do you?” he asks before slowly planting a kiss on the side of my mouth. “I might need you to put it on for me and change my oil or some shit.”

I crack a smile. Now I know what he’s talking about. In school, when we went to mock crime scenes, we had to wear blue overalls that zipped up the front. They did resemble a mechanic or janitorial uniform.

I wrap my arms around his neck and tilt my head back to give him better access as he continues peppering kisses on my jaw and down my neck. “It wasn’t a fashion statement. We had to wear them when we did labs. If you want to role-play, I’m sure you can come up with something better than me changing your oil.”

Remy pulls back and looks down at me. “Who said anything about role-playing? I need my oil changed.”

I swat his arm, but he just gives me a naughty smirk before lowering his mouth to mine for a scorching kiss. My heart is already beating fast, and he’s barely touched me. I hear some subtle noises and movement around us, but Remy is too damn distracting with his tongue and lips for me to break away.

A warm caress up my side and bare stomach sends a shiver of delight through me, and when it continues up under my shirt to cup my breast, the feeling is amplified. I slit my eyes open and notice the lights are dimmer. The feeling in the room has also shifted from light and sweet to a different kind of playful.

I turn my head to the side and look for Gray and Felix. Remy doesn’t miss a beat as he continues to lick and suck his way down my throat to the

top of my chest. When he comes into contact with my shirt, he pulls back enough to slide it over my head.

Felix crawls closer when my eyes land on his. His glasses are gone, placed on the bedside table. The green of his irises is somehow brighter, nearly hypnotic as he gazes back at me. I feel the cup of my bra being pulled down, and Remy doesn't waste any time latching his mouth tightly onto my breast.

My back arches off the bed, and I thread my fingers into his hair, encouraging Remy to keep going. Felix licks his lips as he continues to approach. Once he's near enough to touch, I reach out to him, and he takes my hand, slowly bringing my wrist up to his lips for a kiss before moving up my arm until Felix is near my right breast, while Remy still sucks and bites my left.

When I look down, I finally see Gray. He's standing near the end of the bed with his eyes locked on my face and his hands hanging in fists at his sides.

It reminds me so much of when we were young. Gray was always a little more reserved. It took some time before I realized just how much he liked to watch, that it was more than just learning what I liked or what he wanted to do. He got off on watching me with Remy and Felix, but he always wanted to be the last one to touch me, and damn if all his watching didn't pay off, because Grayson Hale could make my body sing. Even when I didn't think I could have another orgasm, he could wring more from me. Now, I can also see he likes the control of it all, as if he is the mastermind and he's using all the tools at his disposal.

Felix cups the bottom of my breast and pushes it up so my nipple meets his mouth. After a sweet kiss, he gets to work catching up with Remy, licking and nipping until my hips are swiveling.

Not to be outdone, Remy slides his palm down my stomach and cups my pussy over my pants. Kissing his way back up to my ear, he murmurs, "You ready for all three of us, doll?"

I swallow, and my inner muscles tighten at the mere thought of having all of them. When I don't answer fast enough, Remy continues as if he needs to convince or possibly warn me. "I'm taking your pussy, Felix gets your ass—this time—while Gray gets to watch us fuck you to oblivion. Then, he'll have his turn."

Instead of telling him I'm game, I show him by grinding against his palm that's still between my legs. He gives me something to push against when he tightens his hold. "I'll take that as a yes please." Remy breathes his words over my skin, and I drag in a shaky inhale.

I feel hands on the waistband of my pants and know it's Felix. I lift my hips as he shimmies the material down my legs, taking my panties with them. Lying nearly naked between them sends a hot flush over my skin.

Remy rolls over so he's on his back, but he urges me to follow by cupping the back of my neck. I lift my leg to straddle his hip. His pants are still on, so I lower myself to his stomach, making sure my hot flesh is against his skin. Without prompting, he reaches behind me and starts to remove his jeans.

I plant my palms on his chest and toss my head back. This may not be the ideal way to ride Remy, but I can get myself off just like this—it wouldn't be the first time. Felix's voice, soft and deep, carries through the room, along with a spark of magic. "*Agua.*" I look over my shoulder just in time to see him breathe over his cupped palm, and a few droplets of water spill from his hand. Felix's connection to earth magic makes it just as easy for him to draw moisture as it would be for him to gather soil.

My eyes are drawn lower as he slicks his wet palm over his cock. I'm thinking he's going to need a little more than water for lube, but then I get sidetracked by Remy when he presses both of his hands against my thighs and squeezes tightly.

"Come here." Remy beckons me with a jerk of his chin. As soon as I lean down and place my mouth near his, he nips my bottom lip. "I think I promised to use you until you couldn't walk."

"That's what healing charms are made for, right?" I taunt, knowing I don't have to worry about him really hurting me.

A wicked smile crosses Remy's lips. "Saddle up, doll." I feel the head of his cock as he guides himself toward my entrance. I'm already wet. Let's face it, when I'm around the three of them, it's a near constant state.

It takes him a moment to get lined up, but then he starts pushing inside, and I lift a little as the pressure builds. Just being wet isn't always enough for Remy, I need to be soaked.

He lowers his lids and tightens his grip on the back of my neck so I can't escape, not that I want to. "Slow and steady or quick?" Remy asks through clenched teeth.

I open my mouth to answer, but it's clear he wasn't speaking to me when Gray responds, "Both." My brow furrows because I don't even know what that means. Remy lets out a dark chuckle, and I feel it rumble against my chest.

His hand on my neck stays put, but he sweeps the other one over my hip and applies a little pressure to my lower back while lifting his hips enough that he inches deeper inside me. There's a slight burn, but the good kind—the kind where you can't tell if it hurts or feels good.

After my breathing settles, he does it again, placing more pressure on my back and lifting his hips so I sink a little farther onto him. I start to pant. He has to be close to being fully sheathed.

This time, Remy pulls out a little before pushing in deeper. Our eyes are locked, his lidded and mine hazy with lust. I moan. I'm getting full. I need him to move. I'm craving the delicious friction of him sliding in and out of me, so I push down without him prompting me.

The tightening of his palm on my nape should have been a warning sign, but I ignored it. A startled yelp flies from my lips when Remy jerks his hips up and impales me on his cock.

I pat his chest as if I'm trying to tap out, while my inner muscles spasm from the quick invasion. Now I know what they meant by both. When I look up to call him a dirty name, Remy's head is thrown back in sheer bliss, even his mouth hangs open as he pants harder than me. I watch his throat work as he swallows, and a strangled moan passes his lips.

The distraction provides just enough time for my body to adjust to his. That doesn't mean I won't get him back for this at some point, I just have to figure out how I'm going to do that.

Fingers trail over my back, and I move into the touch like a cat. I feel the heat of Felix's body as he leans over me and gently kisses my shoulder. "You okay, buttercup?"

I feel lips drag over my skin, and I nod before replying with a soft, "Yes." I'm more than okay, I'm a needy bitch. The slight pain is long gone, and I'm wondering if I shift back and bounce down if I will be able to recreate it.

Felix kisses my back sweetly while he runs his hands all over me, cupping my ass and brushing his palms over my nipples. I start to move against Remy, using my knees on the bed for leverage to rock and roll my hips.

I feel his fingers between my legs, and I lift up enough so just Remy's tip is still inside me. Gathering my wetness, Felix slides his fingers back and forth over my ass, using it for lube. Remy bucks his hips up as if he's desperate to have me swallow him again. I hold my breath, waiting for the overfull sensation to return, but it's absent. All I feel is pleasure, especially now that Felix has started touching me too.

I look to the right to see Gray standing in nearly the same position, but naked. I let my eyes roam over him. He's not as muscular as Remy is, but damn if he isn't perfect. The dips near his hips stand out against his groin as if pointing right to his dick. He takes a step closer, almost like my gaze has pulled him in.

Felix maneuvers himself nearer to my back, and my eyes fall closed as he starts to push inside me. This might actually be too much too soon.

"Slow down," Gray orders, sensing my unease. Felix stays close, but he's just barely rubbing against me instead of trying to slip inside. Oh, I remember this. I like this.

I open my eyes to see Gray fisting his dick, telling me he's enjoying the show. As if he was waiting for me to see him, he strokes himself once, then squeezes his tip before sliding back down and doing it again.

My body relaxes against Remy as he continues to move in and out of me, slowly fucking me while holding me tightly against him. I can't move much from the way I'm trapped between him and Felix, but I don't need to because their every push, pull, and grind does the work for me.

It doesn't take long before the friction from Felix isn't enough. I want more. "Felix." His name leaves my lips like a plea, and he knows what it means.

Remy slows his pace, allowing Felix to push inside me. There's a combined sound that follows, and I'm pretty sure it comes from all three of us. The pressure is almost too much, but Felix retreats just enough to make me miss the overly full feeling. My arms are curled under me, and I bury my face in Remy's neck as I ride out the sensations.

The next several minutes are a delicate balance of sweet agony and what the fuck was I thinking. The thought of begging them to come runs through my mind more than once, but every time I consider opening my mouth, I tip over the knife's edge into straight pleasure.

Felix's hands roam over my upper back, trailing down my spine and across the flare of my hips as he sets the pace for all of us with shallow

thrusts.

Remy is breathing hard. “Hecate, you’re so fucking tight.” He groans, and I know he’s close to coming. I’m probably strangling his dick with Felix inside me too.

Felix shifts a little, pumping down more, and it puts just enough pressure on my pubic bone that it feels like I’m grinding my clit against Remy.

The breath leaves my lungs as the triple sensations start to build, pushing me toward climax. Every thrust from Felix has me riding Remy harder. My body is strung so tight, the second I feel an orgasm just out of reach, I plead, “Don’t stop. Just. Like. That.”

Felix’s breathing changes to a pant, but blessed be, he keeps the same rhythm, and I sink into an orgasm moments later.

“Thank fuck.” Remy groans. His abdominals become so tight I lift off his belly as he comes inside me. Felix slides in a little deeper, causing the slightest burn, so my orgasm cuts off slightly sooner than I’m ready for, but I can’t complain. He drops his forehead to my back, just barely pumping against me.

Once my breathing slows, I mumble, “Hexes, I can’t believe that didn’t kill me when we were younger.”

“We did a lot more prep work,” Remy says, sounding tired. “A finger, a thumb, good lube. We’ll stock up next time.”

Felix moves, and I feel his cum trail out after him. More prep work sounds good, I’m a little sore. Remy rolls to the side, taking me right along for the ride, dislodging his cock in the process.

I feel warm skin at my back and realize at some point Gray must have gotten in the bed. His hand slides over my side and hip until he’s curled around me. I tuck in my ass a little. I don’t want him getting any ideas. He makes a tutting sound right by my ear that makes me think he’s either reading my body language or my emotions.

Gray’s lips and mouth press against my shoulder as he kisses and licks his way up to my nape. I arch into his touch, loving how well he reads me and how sweet and attentive he is. It’s not long before the soft caress of his fingers and lips are no longer enough.

I need to feel more of him, so I turn over to face him and press my lips against his. Our tongues meet, and he lets out a soft moan. I love knowing I’m affecting him enough that he makes those sounds for me.

Trailing his fingers up my side, Gray brushes his thumb over my nipple. It causes a ping between my legs, making my inner muscles tighten up as if he were already inside me.

I hook my thigh over his hip, but Gray has other ideas. He rolls me over onto my back and positions himself between my legs. Ending our kiss, he pulls back and looks down at me with hooded hazel eyes, his lips slightly parted as he takes deep, even breaths. Our bodies are already lined up, so when he starts rocking his hips forward, I feel his cock brushing my entrance. Instead of pushing in deeper, he lowers his head and kisses my chest until his lips latch onto my nipple, and then he sucks on me with enough pressure to have my back arching off the bed.

With my eyes closed, I run my hand down his body until I feel the base of his cock, then I curl my fingers around him so I can stroke him. The slight movement has the head of his dick teasing my pussy lips again, proving too tempting for both of us.

He releases my nipple and kisses his way back up until he whispers, “Are you wet for me?” in my ear.

“Yes,” I answer out loud, because I know he wants to hear it. My fingers tighten as I continue to stroke him.

“Slip me inside,” he demands softly, and I widen my legs even more while running his dick up and down until he’s barely inside me. From there, Gray rocks his hips forward, and my head rolls back, exposing my throat.

I feel his wet tongue as he snakes it along my neck while he’s buried deep inside me, and I squeeze him. After a few, unhurried thrusts, he snaps his hips forward hard and fast. My eyes fly open, and on the next thrust, a moan leaves my lips.

Gray fucks me hard and deep, and every plunge pushes me closer to the edge until I feel like I’m about to lose control. When he slides his hand down my leg, locks his fingers around my ankle, and lifts, I know it’s about to get even more intense.

Kneeling, he has even more control as he slides nearly all the way out before pounding back in. His free hand skims over my other leg, but instead of going down, he skates his fingers to my center and rubs his thumb around my clit, circling until I’m a quivering mess.

The sounds I make and the way my body squeezes his let him know it’s only a matter of seconds before I’m going to come, so he ups his game. “Pinch her nipples.”

I throw my head back and cry out as the first spasm grips me, and I come, long and hard, while Gray's cock is buried deep inside me and Felix's hands caress my body.

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MOST DAYS, MY BIGGEST
ACCOMPLISHMENT IS KEEPING
MY MOUTH SHUT.



Early the next morning, we all pile into the SUV. Percy is hunched on the center console, looking out the front window. He was waiting for me this morning after I got out of a long, hot shower.

The sun is just coming over the horizon when we pull onto the Doby property. I have an uneasy feeling in my stomach, and I think it's more than just concern for Aisling. Eugene rubs me the wrong way for some reason. "He didn't even leave the porch light on," Remy remarks as he pulls the vehicle around to the front of the house.

Gray ducks his head so he can see out the driver's side window and glares. "That's fucked up," he comments harshly and reaches for his door handle.

Magic is thick in the air, as if a spell was just cast, as my feet hit the dirt packed ground. I cast my eyes over the property to see if I can perceive any noticeable changes, but everything seems the same.

Someone is stirring, Percy says, confirming my assumption.

The front door opens before we reach the porch steps. Eugene makes his way out of the house and lets the screen door snap closed behind him. There's a shadow in the doorway, but it's too dark to make out who or what it is.

"Found her last night," Eugene announces, dragging my attention away from the door. He's looking us over with his eyes slightly narrowed. "I hope you all don't go spreading rumors around town." There's a wide divide between us, so he speaks rather loudly, or maybe that's a little hostility I hear in his tone.

"Aisling is home?" I take a step forward. "When?"

“Last night, not long after you two left. I took another look around the barn, and there she was, camped out in the loft.”

I open my mouth to deny that could be true, but my mink beats me to it. *Bullshit*, Percy snaps, and I’m so taken aback by the curse that I don’t respond to Eugene.

“Not the barn we were in.” Remy crosses his arms over his chest, denying the implication that we somehow missed his wife when we did a walk-through.

“Where is she? I want to talk to her.” I focus on the door. The slim silhouette of a shadow is still there, lingering in the darkness of the house.

“Why do you want to talk to her?” Eugene asks, sounding affronted.

“Why *don’t* you want us to talk to her?” Gray retorts.

“Aisling,” Eugene calls through clenched teeth after a brief pause.

An older woman pushes out of the screen and comes up short behind Eugene. Her lips are pulled down in a hard frown, and she’s holding herself stiffly.

“Aisling, how are you?” I question slowly.

Eugene scowls at the side of her face, but she never looks over at him. “I was confused,” she answers, not really addressing my question.

“How are you feeling now?” I press.

“I’m not confused anymore.” Aisling’s silvery hair billows in the light breeze. It doesn’t look like it’s been brushed, and when she reaches up to tame some of the flyways, I notice her hands are dirty, as if she’d been digging or planting this morning.

A loud noise from the house startles me, and I look at the still open door. “Is there someone else inside?” Felix asks.

“No, must have been the wind.” Eugene doesn’t look fazed as he responds. Aisling, on the other hand, slowly looks over her shoulder with a strange, nearly hopeful expression on her face.

The sense of unease I was already feeling mounts. “We should probably get you checked out by the doctor,” I offer, not really knowing how to address the commotion from inside. Considering it’s not that windy, I doubt Eugene’s claim holds any truth.

“She’s fine. She told you she wasn’t confused anymore. She has an appointment next month. We’ll talk to the doctor then.”

“Frankie wasn’t asking you,” Remy tells Eugene. “Why don’t you let your wife speak for herself?”

“I have an appointment in a few weeks,” Aisling parrots back to us.

A flash of light from one of the upper windows draws my attention, but when I look up, there’s nothing to see but the sun reflecting off the glass. Just as I’m about to look away, I notice another shadow, but this one is more opaque, almost wispy as it glides past the window.

“Did you see that?” I ask no one in particular.

“What?” Felix questions, lifting his eyes to follow my gaze.

“I saw something move in the house,” I mutter softly.

Eugene and Aisling hear me, and she looks up as if the roof of the porch isn’t there to block her view while he snaps, “There’s nothing in the house. You didn’t see what was right in front of you yesterday, and now you’re seeing things that aren’t there.”

I know she wasn’t in that barn or anywhere close for that matter, so does Percy and I trust him, even if I could believe Remy and I somehow missed her.

“Man, you’re getting on my nerves. She wasn’t in the barn, were you?” Remy directs the last part of the question to Aisling.

“I was confused,” she repeats, making me think she still is, or worse, she’s afraid to say anything else.

“I left another message for your dad.” Eugene makes it sound like an insult. “I still want to speak with him when he gets back. Any idea when he might turn up?”

“No,” I tell him flatly. “Aisling, do you want me to take you to the doctor?” Every one of my instincts is telling me something is off here.

“No.” She shakes her head quickly.

“What happened to you there?” I motion to the dried dirt on her fingers.

Eugene turns his body to face hers, and I watch him glare at the side of her face again. Aisling flips her hands over and looks at them as if it’s the first time she’s noticed the state of her fingers. “I must have forgotten to wash up,” she quietly admits while curling her hands into balls, as if that might hide what we have all seen at this point.

“Why don’t you go do that?” Eugene tells her with a jerk of his chin toward the house.

“I can help,” I offer and hop up the front steps quickly. Eugene moves as if he might try to block me from going into the house, but I just stare at his face, waiting to see if he’s really going to do anything.

While Eugene and I are having a stare down, Aisling is looking back and forth between her husband and me as if she's not sure what he's going to do either. Eventually, he shifts to the side just the tiniest bit, and I know he's not going to put up too much of a fight.

Percy darts ahead of me, slinking into the house so quickly I'm not sure Eugene even notices because he's still busy watching me.

Aisling turns and takes a step, but it's slow and measured, as if she's waiting for Eugene to stop her. When he doesn't, she enters the house.

The moment I cross the threshold, the heavy feel of magic brushes against my skin, confirming my suspicions about what I felt outside. A spell has recently been evoked. I finger the ring on my thumb, grateful for the shield. What the hell kind of magic does Eugene cast that makes him ooze so much?

The living room or den is right off the front door. "Sorry about the mess." Aisling picks up a few pillows that are on the floor and fluffs them before placing them back on the sofa. There are a few other items out of place—a lamp that's been knocked over and papers strewn about. I glance around, noting everything else looks neat and orderly, other than what appears like it might have been from a recent event.

Aisling ignores the larger signs of disarray and heads through an archway to a bright, airy kitchen. I look behind me to see Eugene following us through the front door. I know I won't have a lot of time to talk to her alone.

I hear Gray ask, "What the hell happened in here?" but I ignore Eugene's response and move closer to Aisling, and hopefully out of earshot of the others.

Aisling reaches for the hot water tap, but before her hand can grasp the faucet, water starts pouring from the sink. She freezes with her hands outstretched as if she's startled. "Is this old place haunted?" I'm only half joking. I know I saw something upstairs.

"It didn't used to be," she mumbles under her breath, then sets about washing her hands. As the dirt rinses free, some scrapes and cuts are exposed. Aisling scrubs as if she doesn't even notice the small abrasions.

"Aisling." She lifts her gaze to mine. Her eyes are heavy, as if she's tired or sad, maybe both. "Are you safe here?" The words are just loud enough for her to hear.

Her dark eyes roam over my face for a moment. “Don’t tell your dad about this,” she tells me instead of answering.

“Does he know the situation here?” I counter.

“There is no situation here. I get confused sometimes and wander off. I’m seeing straight again. That’s all there is to it.” It’s the most confident I’ve seen her since I’ve been here, but something about it feels disingenuous.

“Then why don’t you want me to tell him?”

Aisling looks past me to the archway, and her features harden just a little before her eyes land back on mine. “It’s my business, and I don’t need anyone else getting involved.”

One of the kitchen chairs scoots a few inches across the floor, making a loud screeching sound. I take a quick step back. Ghosts make me uneasy, and there’s no doubt there’s one here with us now. There’s no other explanation for what just happened.

“Who’s slamming things around in here?” Eugene stalks through the door with a scowl on his face. He’s looking around as if there might be someone else besides Aisling and myself in the kitchen.

“I don’t know what you mean,” Aisling tells him in a dull tone. All the fire that was in her just moments ago is gone. She’s back to the submissive woman from the front porch, but now that I’ve seen the energy she can possess, I can also see that the way she’s looking at him isn’t just from fear. There’s something else in her gaze, anger maybe.

Eugene narrows his eyes. I think he noticed the shift in her demeanor too. “As you can see, she’s home, and I’ll be keeping a tight leash on her so she won’t wander off again.” Eugene directs his gaze toward me. “Let your father know I expect him to come around once he finally gets back to work.” Eugene means it as a clear dismissal.

I stare at him for a long moment. I really don’t have a reason to stay since Aisling won’t allow me to help her, but I don’t want to leave her here with him either.

“Thank you for helping look for me,” Aisling tells me as if she, too, wants us to leave.

“Mind if I stop by tomorrow and check in on you guys?” I fake a smile. I’m hoping my request will work two-fold. One, to warn Eugene I’m coming back so he doesn’t do anything to hurt Aisling, and two, to let Aisling know she’s not alone. I’ll come back every day if I need to.

“That’s not necessary.” Eugene scowls.

“I insist. It’s the least I can do until my father is back since you want to speak with him so badly.” I don’t drop the smile. I probably look and sound a little deranged, but this guy doesn’t scare me, however, I need to play it cool. I don’t want him pissed at me and taking it out on Aisling.

Eugene casts his eyes over me again, letting his gaze trail from head to toe, and it feels smarmy. When he moves his tongue behind his teeth, the feeling intensifies.

“Since you insist,” he finally agrees, but his tone makes it clear I’m not welcome.

I pretend not to notice his displeasure and turn to face Aisling again. Normally, I wouldn’t give my back to someone like Eugene, but I’m confident the guys will keep an eye on him. “Let me give you my number in case you change your mind and want to see the doctor. Don’t hesitate to call for anything,” I tell her while looking right into her eyes.

Aisling stares back at me for a long moment before gathering a notepad and pen from a nearby drawer. I recite my number for her slowly and have her read it back just in case.

Knowing I can’t force her to leave, even if that’s what my gut is telling me to do, I walk out of the kitchen with a feeling of unease trailing after me.

Eugene escorts us all the way to the front door. He stops mid-step, and I follow his gaze to the ground, seeing my silky mink waiting there. *His magic doesn’t fit*, Percy observes with a twitch of a whisker. I want to ask what he means, but Eugene shoves open the screen, all but kicking us out of the house.

The heavy door closes behind us the second Gray is on the porch. “I really don’t like leaving her here,” Felix says, reaching for my pinky to lock our fingers together.

“Me either,” I confirm.

“Not much we can do about it.” Gray looks back at the door. “Maybe she’ll talk to your dad.”

“Maybe. We should go though. I don’t want to make things worse for her,” I murmur softly.

Once we’re in the car with Percy secured on my lap, I stroke my hand over his back and ask, “What did you mean in the house, about his magic not fitting?”

I'm not quite sure. His magic has touched the house, but it hasn't seeped into the soil or foundation.

Gray turns so he's looking into the backseat. "What's he saying?"

"He thinks Eugene is as fucked up as we do," Felix answers for me.

"Why would she stay with him?" Remy muses out loud, but it's as if he's speaking to himself.

"She was different when we were alone. Not so..." I struggle to find the right words.

"Scared?" Gray snorts.

"Maybe," I concede. "But she seems pretty aware of the presence in the house too. They have a manifestation, and she made it seem like it was a new development."

Percy surprises me by saying, *Maybe it's just making itself known, but that energy has been in that house for a very long time.*

Felix fills the others in on Percy's thoughts on the ghost while I think about his claim. "It—the spirit seemed helpful toward Aisling. It turned on the water for her."

"Spirits don't just manifest on their own. They are either conjured or created by a tragedy. Has there been any terrible deaths in the house or on the property?" Felix leans forward as he addresses Gray.

"Not that I know of, but it's not like I'm the town historian."

"Can you find out?" Felix urges.

"Not at six-thirty in the morning, but I know a few people I could talk to," Gray agrees after sitting back in his seat.

"Want to get breakfast?" Remy asks after a short pause. "Afterwards, we can head into the woods, finish the ritual, and fuck all day. Do you think we'll be able to hear Percy once it's done?" He glances at Gray.

Dear Hecate, hear me now! Very loudly, he adds, *Drop me off at home before the debauchery.*

I snicker and cover my mouth, but then the gravity of what Remy said sinks in and my chuckle dies slowly. I don't even hear how Gray responds.

The car is very quiet, so quiet, I feel like my breathing is way too loud and I try to calm it, but it only ends up making me sound like I'm about to start hyperventilating.

"If you're not ready..." Felix murmurs softly, and I'm pulled into the green depths of his eyes. I recall the first time I felt so completely transfixed

by him. Until that day, he barely even spoke to me, and just like that, the memory consumes me.

We'd been playing for a while when Grayson's mom called him in for dinner. Remy was always lured by the thought of food, so he went home to eat too, leaving just Felix and me at the park. I didn't think he liked me much. I could count on one hand how many words he'd said to me.

"Bye." I waved over my shoulder, even though it seemed like he was going to stick around. Felix pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose, not even acknowledging that I spoke to him even though he was looking right at me.

I was halfway up the block when I realized I'd left my jacket on the monkey bars. Dad told me I would have to cut Mrs. Prescott's grass all summer if I lost another one, so I jogged back.

I noticed Felix first. He wasn't in the field where I'd left him. Instead, he was next to the swings with my jacket folded over his arm. I stopped as he approached.

"You forgot this," he said, still holding my coat. His voice was deep, way deeper than the other guys', but I liked the way it sounded.

"Thanks, I would have gotten in so much trouble," I told him gratefully. When I went to reach for the jacket, he twisted, keeping it out of my grasp.

"We would have helped with Mrs. Prescott's lawn. Want me to walk you home?" His eyes were kind of squinty behind his glasses, like he thought I was going to say something bad. I couldn't believe he knew about cutting her grass.

"You won't get in trouble?" I asked. Felix had never been to my house, and I always had to tell Dad exactly where I was going and when I'd be home.

"No, sorry I didn't offer sooner." He looked down at the ground before handing over my jacket.

"It's okay, I'm not a baby," I said. I was always so worried about the guys thinking I couldn't do what they could.

"I know you're not, but I don't want anything happening to you." I got a funny feeling in my stomach when he said that, just like when Mr. Brutti said we were going to have a pop quiz.

I didn't know what to say, so we just ended up staring at each other. That was when I noticed how green his eyes were. My lips parted, and I almost blurted out how pretty they were, but a rush of air came out instead.

For a second, I thought I lost my voice, but that feeling of excitement and nervousness built in my stomach, and I realized I liked Felix. I *liked* him, liked him. It wasn't a surprise. I liked all three of the guys, but it was the first time I could admit, even to myself, that I didn't want him looking at other girls, especially with those pretty green eyes. They would all think they loved him, and he was mine.

I take a deep breath, returning to the present. "Your eyes are so pretty." Not for the first time, I tell him what I didn't have the nerve to say back then. "I'm ready."

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IF AT FIRST YOU DON'T SUCCEED,
IT'S ONLY ATTEMPTED MURDER.



The ride home is pretty quiet, considering the bombshell that just landed. I expect Remy to make some crass comments or make a joke about rushing home before I change my mind, but none of that happens.

The same self-doubt I struggled with years ago tries to worm its way into my thoughts. Maybe they don't really want this, or I'm making them think this is our only option so they have to take it.

Gray starts to fidget in the front seat like he can't get comfortable. Percy is the one to break the silence. *Is this ritual going to turn you into a praying mantis?*

"What kind of question is that?" I snap.

"What is she talking about?" Remy looks back at us in the rearview mirror.

"He asked if she was going to turn into a praying mantis," Felix answers.

I expected more frivolity. They are acting as if it's a death sentence, so I thought you might be planning on killing and consuming them after the ritual, considering their less than exuberant response. Just so we're clear, I fully support you and your dietary habits.

"I am not going to kill or eat them, Percival," I snarl through clenched teeth.

"What?" Remy starts to chuckle, but it dies a quick death when what I said finally sinks in. "I don't think I want to know what he said." Remy looks over at Gray.

I don't blame him. I wish I could unhear it myself.

“We’re exuberant,” Felix defends, seeming more offended by that accusation than the part where I murder him.

Percy makes a chittering sound that comes off like dark laughter. *Maybe it’s not her who isn’t ready.*

“That’s enough,” I mutter softly, and thankfully, Felix doesn’t try to argue. Point made, Percy climbs his way up my sleeve and circles his tail around my neck before settling on my shoulder for the rest of the ride home.

When Remy puts the SUV in park, he says, “I don’t know what just happened, but it got kind of weird in here, right?” His tone is light as he passes his gaze around the cab.

“Percy said we acted like her agreeing was a death sentence,” Felix tattles.

I huff and get out of the car. “See what you started?” I scold the mink on my shoulder.

My dear witch, I didn’t start anything. I just brought it to their attention. You are the keystone, and they needed a reminder. With those parting words, Percy scampers down my leg and disappears behind the house.

“I’m going to put chiggers in your nest,” Remy yells after Percy’s retreating form. His eyes seek me out when he’s done threatening my familiar. “The demented little death spawn would probably find a way to make them attack me.”

Of that I have no doubt. Percy is as sneaky as he is ruthless. “Is he right though?” I ask, getting to the point. I’m not going to dance around this.

“About saying we think finishing the bond is a death sentence? Hexes, no!” Gray exclaims.

“I think we’re all just a little freaked out it was that easy,” Felix adds.

“We’re waiting for the other shoe to drop,” Remy explains.

“I don’t think it’s been easy,” I reply, telling them all the truth. “I’ve been scared of it not happening, scared of going through with it.” I toss my hands in the air. “I just want us to be us. I want to wake up with Felix’s glasses on the nightstand and Remy’s dirty clothes on the floor and for Gray to bitch about it.” I point to each of them in turn. “But I don’t want to think I trapped you for the next eighty years.”

“Eighty? Set your sights a little higher, doll.”

“You are not trapping us, and truth be fucking told, I would be perfectly okay with trapping your ass with us.” Gray crosses his arms over his chest,

daring me to prove him wrong.

“I would have already done it if I were able to when you were in my circle,” Felix confesses softly while looking up at me through his dark lashes. “But you started this, and you need to be the one to finish it.”

“There’s no going back,” I warn again. “This is until death, maybe even after.”

“We don’t need convincing.” Remy takes a step closer, crowding me. He’s always been the one with all the confidence, and why shouldn’t he be? He’s gorgeous, endearing, and has a python for a cock.

I start to crack a smile at my thoughts, and he grins in return without even knowing why I’m smiling. “I’ll leave my dirty shit on the floor every day,” he promises and leans down to kiss me.

Gray groans. “Let’s get what we need before I have to renegotiate the terms.”

It’s been years since I’ve actually thought about the binding spell and what we used or started to use. *What if I forget something?*

I must utter those words out loud, because Felix answers, “I still have everything.”

“Wait, like the original things we used?” I don’t know why this would surprise me, but it does. When I left the circle that night, I never went back. Him having everything is proof they stuck around a lot longer, or at least visited the site again.

“Yeah, I collected everything. I didn’t want any of it to get damaged, since I knew we’d finish the spell at some point. I wasn’t expecting it to take this long to convince you though.” Felix grins at me while walking backwards toward the house.

The slight taunt said in jest may have hurt a few days ago, but it doesn’t now. Is that because we all finally moved on from the mistakes of our past, or because I know we’ll be rectifying them soon?

Either way, I don’t care. I’m past wanting to place blame, even on myself. I want to embrace what we will be, not what could have been.

Gray wraps his arm around my neck and tips his head against mine. I feel a sigh shudder through his entire body, and I realize he’s absorbing my emotions. This is what he asked of me—confidence in our bond, in them.

I wrap my arm around his back as Felix spins around and starts to jog toward the house. Not to be left out of any kind of physical contact, Remy scoots in close to my other side, and I reach for his hand.

Felix is out the door in under two minutes. He has a large satchel over his shoulder and a confident stride as he approaches us. “Got it.” He pants slightly, as if he was rushing. His green eyes are a little wild behind his glasses as he looks us over.

I’m slightly embarrassed to admit that I no longer know the way to our spot. When we used to come here, there was a trail in the woods, but I don’t know where that is since the house they built is mucking up my senses. “Lead the way.”

Remy chuckles darkly, and I know I’ve been caught. “Little Miss I Know Where I’m Going can’t remember how to get there?”

I give him a little jab with his own elbow as I push my arm into his. “I had to learn where it was, you guys were always screwing around and leaving me.”

Remy lowers his head and his voice. “Because we always liked finding you.”

I hum in response. His voice is deep, husky, and it brings me back to a time when we snuck off together.

The sun was high when we first slipped past the old barn off Route 23, but the canopy of trees above me and the heavy clouds coming in were making it much darker now. I glanced up every few steps to make sure I could see Remy’s back. His size and white shirt made it fairly easy to track him—until I looked up and he was no longer visible on the trail.

“Remy.” My mouth worked nearly as fast as my heart as it beat against my chest. We’d left school after lunch, just the two of us, so we could head down to the pit for a swim. I had no idea it was going to rain this afternoon, and I didn’t think he did either.

A fat drop of surprisingly cold water landed on my shoulder. “Crap,” I hissed and picked up my pace. “Remy, you better not leave me,” I shouted as more and more drops of rain fell from the sky.

I was tempted to just head back to my bike. I doubted I was going to want to swim when I was already cold from the rain, but I wasn’t going to leave Remy. How could he have gotten so far ahead of me?

A crack of thunder had me ducking my head. Wasn’t there something about not being around trees in a storm? “Remy,” I called again, hating the little bit of insecurity in my voice. The guys didn’t tease me as much about being a girl anymore, not that I ever really let them without teasing them right back, but I still felt the need to prove myself sometimes.

I stayed on the path, even though it was a little overgrown. I'd been here enough to know it would eventually lead to the swimming hole. My steps became a little slower as the ground grew slick with mud. Dad was going to be pissed I ruined another pair of sneakers, but even if I turned back now, they would already be caked with mud, so I might as well see it through.

"Remy, you are such a jerk," I mumbled as I watched my footing over a downed log.

"What was that?" he asked softly, and I let out a bloodcurdling scream. He poked his head out from behind a tree about ten inches away from me. As soon as I stopped flapping my hands, I rushed toward him so I could kick him in the balls the way he taught me, but I ended up tripping over a tree root and falling instead.

I let out another scream, this one in sheer frustration as I picked myself up. When I looked at the knees of my pants and the palms of my hands, I winced. Hex, why didn't it hurt until I saw the blood and scrapes?

"Oh shit," Remy cursed and came out from behind the tree. I shoved him and left a muddy handprint on his white shirt. I hoped it got him in trouble.

"Why do you have to be such a jerk?" I yelled. I was mad at him, but even madder at myself. If I wasn't trying to get him back for scaring me, I wouldn't have fallen.

"I didn't mean for you to fall. Are you okay?" He took my hand gently in his and tried to brush away some of the dirt.

"I'm fine," I snapped. My knees hurt and I was embarrassed, but I'd live.

Remy was hunched over with my hands close to his face when he looked up at me. The black circles in his eyes were huge, covering up most of the blue. When he licked his bottom lip like he was about to say something, my aggravation shifted to something else. I wanted him to kiss me.

That thought made my stomach hurt. Remy was gorgeous. All the girls at school talked about wanting him to be their boyfriend, even in front of me. They acted like I wasn't even there, or worse, like I was a boy too, just an ugly one that no one cared about. There had even been a few times when they pretended to be nice to me. I knew it was just because they thought I was their ticket to the guys.

The sound of heavy rain arrived well before the drops. It took a few long seconds for it to filter through the leaves of the trees to make it down to us. Neither of us moved as we got soaked.

After several long moments, a shiver racked my body as I took a deep breath. That seemed to knock Remy out of his trance. I expected him to let my hand go, but instead, he reached for me and shielded me from the rain, tucking me under his arm. "Come on," he yelled over the heavy downpour.

Hunched under his shoulder, I hurried with him as we made our way over the last few feet of the trail to the clearing where the pit was. The usually calm water looked more like a lake with tiny peaks and waves from the rain.

Remy guided us to the far end where the rocks and hill sloped up, and then he found an alcove just big enough for both of us to squeeze into, well, mostly. His back was still getting wet as he provided a shelter for me.

"How can it be so cold?" My teeth chattered as I held myself as tightly as I could, half to keep warm and half to give him as much room as possible.

Remy looked down, and I noticed how dark his eyes were again. There was something about the way he was looking at me that made me want to fix my hair and make sure my face wasn't a mess.

"How are your hands?" he asked, and his voice sounded deeper than usual. I flashed my gaze down to my chest where I had them cradled against me.

"Fine," I muttered. Truth be told, I'd forgotten all about the slight sting.

"Let me have a look," he said, and I opened my fingers. It felt weird because my hands were between us, pretty much resting on my boobs. Maybe he'd notice I'd started to get them.

There were still some streaks of dirt, but I was able to see the small cuts and scrapes a little better now after the downpour. A rush of warm air fell over my fingers, and I realized Remy just blew on my palm. Something low in my stomach clenched, and I made a strangled sound.

His head shot up, and our eyes locked. "I can kiss it better," he teased, but his voice didn't sound like he was joking.

"Uhm," I managed to say just before he leaned down and kissed the tip of my fingers. The tightening in my stomach happened again, but this time, warmth came with it.

Remy didn't stop with one kiss. His lips trailed over my palm—he didn't even try to avoid the scrapes—until he kissed the inside of my wrist.

I felt all loose, like my knees wanted to give out, but I didn't want him to stop what he was doing, so I forced myself to stand still. "Any up here?" he asked, never taking his lips from my skin as he continued up my arm.

There wasn't, but my throat was too dry to say that, and I wanted him to keep going, so I didn't say anything. When he reached my shoulder, another shudder worked its way up my back, and Remy breathed heavily against my neck.

I felt his tongue slide up my throat, and I tipped my head back so he could continue to trail it higher. He took another step closer to me and moved the hand he didn't kiss out from between us. Without too much thought, I wrapped it around his back.

This wasn't the first time I'd touched Remy, not by a longshot, but it was the first time I'd touched him like this. My fingers were nearly dancing as I tried to touch everything I could reach on his back.

His lips swept over my jaw, and I tipped my chin down. I was afraid he would stop and make a silly joke, but I was more afraid he wasn't going to kiss me on the lips before he did.

I turned and pressed my lips to his cheek. I puckered the way he did, and Remy paused. When he didn't pull away, I did it again and again until I could hear how heavily he was breathing. I liked how it sounded, like we just finished running around, but we were standing still.

Another heavy crack of thunder sounded above us, and I leaned back, startled by the noise. I'd forgotten it was even raining.

Remy was looking down at me when a flash of lightning lit up his face. In the next second, his lips were on mine and he was kissing me, really kissing me.

I'd thought about this with him, Felix, and Gray a bunch of times. I'd even pretended to kiss my hand, but nothing prepared me for the way it would feel when Remy licked my bottom lip.

The snap of a twig under a foot jars me back, the memory leaving a warm feeling low in my belly. I look around at my surroundings, taking in the trees and brush just as we move into a clearing. I expect to feel a swell of familiarity, but I don't. Not until a surge of magic comes from Felix and the ground literally shifts.

Then a twinge of the past floats over me as if carried on the breeze. My magic, mingled with all three of theirs, dances across my skin as if to welcome me back. It reminds me so much of the house they built, and in this moment, I know why I always felt like something was missing. The guys even said it, but I wasn't ready to believe or hear them—I was missing. Our essences should always be woven together like this. After feeling this before, even briefly through the started ritual, and then having it taken away is enough to make anything feel empty.

"It's like we just left," I whisper. The vines Felix intertwined are still supple and green, even though their roots are long gone. I glance up at him, knowing this is his doing. The vines wouldn't have needed to survive to continue to hold the magic, but he made sure they did. How often does he come here?

Felix bends down, places the satchel he was holding near his feet, and pulls the zipper back. Another plume of magic erupts, and the scent of cinnamon fills the air.

He sets a wooden spell sphere onto the ground. That must have been what was preserving the things in the bag. Slowly, he removes several items. I cover my mouth when I see the tin of rosemary we stole from Gray's house. It wasn't even for spelling, it came from the grocery store, but we wanted it and he got it for us. I totally forgot about it until this moment.

My eyes leap to his, but he's busy carefully picking up a few stray leaves and twigs from the area around the circle.

Remy crouches next to Felix and pulls a battered spell pot from the depths of the bag. The way he cradles it in his big hands makes it clear he thinks it's delicate. I look behind me, wondering how I ever made it out of these woods while crying as hard as I was. I don't even remember making it back to the road, if I'm honest.

"Ready to enter?" Felix is standing now with all the items within reach. His eyes linger on me for a moment, waiting. I try to say yes, but I just end up nodding.

"Don't step on the circle," he warns, looking at all of us in turn.

I'm the first to lift my foot and take a wide step into the circle. Once I'm inside, Remy follows. Every hair on my body stands on end, and the feeling only grows as Gray and Felix join us.

There's a buzz in the air that makes me want to shake my hands out, but instead, I reach for the spell pot and ingredients, suddenly very eager to get started.

"Vanilla for lasting love." My fingers shake as I run my nail down the center of the bean, and a few damp globs of paste drop into the pot.

Gray fidgets.

"Rosemary and saffron for success." I dump what's left of the two items into the bowl, and I feel my hair swirl as if the wind is blowing. I finger several rods of cinnamon. "Cinnamon for love, protection, and happiness," I mutter and place three long sticks into the bowl, one for each of the intentions.

I look up to see Felix extending his hand to me. In his grasp are four licorice roots, already bound together with several pieces of our hair. With the pot in my palms, I offer it to him so he can include the roots in the spell. "Licorice root to bind," he says, placing the bundle in the pot.

I shift so Remy is in front of me. He winks at me and plops his contribution into the pot. "Ivy woven into an infinity symbol so the bond may never be broken."

The wind picks up again as I turn to face Gray. This is as far as we got last time. When I looked at his face and felt his apprehension, I lost my nerve and everything came crashing down.

He's holding an athame in his fist, but I don't feel any of the worry or fearfulness I did that night. Without hesitation, Gray lifts his other hand and scores a line down the center of his palm, then he fists his hand over the bowl so several heavy drops of crimson blood land on the ingredients within, mingling with the other elements. The magic in his blood flares, and I can feel him all around me for just a second. There's no doubt or unease, just an overwhelming feeling of relief. "My blood to bind," he states.

Reaching over his body, Gray hands the knife to Remy, who acts quickly to slice his hand and add his blood to the spell. "My blood to bind," he repeats, then passes the knife to Felix without flinching. His essence fills the circle, but it's not laced with magic the way Gray's was.

My heart starts beating even faster. This is going so quickly. We're only halfway done with the blood magic, and the spell feels so potent, I can't imagine it growing even stronger.

Felix is more measured when he cuts his hand. When he opens his palm, there's more blood than the others had. I almost open my mouth to ask what

the hex he did, but he speaks before me. “My blood to bind.” A rumble under my feet actually shakes the ground as if a train is passing by, while a sense of calm I associate with Felix surrounds me.

I tighten my lips and take the blade he’s offering me, exchanging it for the spell pot so my hands are free. Athame in hand, I look up at the guys. With a silent prayer on my lips and in my heart, I slice my palm. The blade is so sharp, I’m not even sure I cut myself until the blood weeps to the surface. Reaching out, I drip magic and blood into the bowl and recite the final words. “My blood to bind thee to me.”

The blast of magic that follows knocks me on my ass. It takes me a moment to catch my breath and realize the spell is complete. When I’m strong enough, I lift my head off the ground to see I’m not the only one down for the count. Remy, Gray, and Felix are all flat on their backs right along with me, but there’s an awareness within me that lets me know they are okay.

“Ah, fuck,” Remy wheezes roughly, though his tone doesn’t suggest he’s in pain. If anything, he sounds turned on.

It takes a moment for my eyes to focus, but I see Remy leaning on his hand, half sitting, half kneeling. His eyes lock on mine, and warmth rushes over me from head to toe. Damn, what was that?

I have every intention of getting up and checking on him and the others, but I can’t make myself move just yet.

I lick my lips. “Remy.”

“Coming, doll,” he promises, and sure enough, after an extended blink where I might have actually dozed a little bit, he’s right over top of me.

I reach up and place my palm on his cheek. “Are you okay?”

He leans into my touch. “That depends. Can I die from a hard-on? I’m seriously lacking blood everywhere else in my body.”

I click my tongue. “I’m being serious.”

“I’m not joking about my dick aneurysm.” Remy drops his weight on top of me, and I do in fact feel his massive dick poking my leg. “Gods, you smell so fucking good.” He inhales by my neck and swivels his hips. Well, damn, if that doesn’t just do it for me, or maybe it’s just him that does it for me.

“What about Gray and Felix? Are they okay?” I know the answer, but I feel compelled to ask anyway. With a little effort, I wrap my arms around Remy’s back. I have no idea why I feel so weak. I probably should have

done a little more research on the spell. I read it years ago, but I don't remember it saying anything about the aftermath. Then again, I might not have even bothered to look. We were young and dumb.

"Sleeping," Remy replies, not wasting the effort on extra words. Then his hands are on me, and I get lost in the sensation of his skin on mine. Remy tugs at the waistband of my pants.

"Why aren't you sleeping?" I lift my hips.

He gets one leg of my pants completely off and leaves the other hooked on my foot. After a little more fumbling, he's lined up with my center and shoving my panties to the side. "Need you," Remy murmurs, and I'm not sure if it's an answer to my question or just a statement.

He slides a finger inside me, and my arms tighten around his back. I don't know if it's my connection to him or just the growing need within myself, but there's a desperation building between us that is damn near combustible.

After a few pumps of his hand to make sure I'm ready, he pulls out and fills me with his cock in the next breath. I expect him to be rushed or frenzied, but Remy takes his time inching deeper and deeper with each stroke.

He hunches his shoulders and places his forehead on mine while moving his lower body in a slow, steady rhythm designed to either make me go insane or become addicted to the way he makes me feel. It might already be too late for the latter.

Our eyes are locked, so when his lips tip up in a smile sure to devastate, my heart skips a beat. He's mine.

I slide my fingers into his hair, and his eyes slowly close as he relishes my touch. "You're mine," Remy says, rocking his hips against me in a slow grind, almost as if he's answering my thoughts with his own.

I tug his face down to mine and nip his bottom lip before sliding my tongue into his mouth. His pace quickens, and when he skims his hand over my belly then lower, between my legs, to finger my clit, I let out a moan.

"That's it. Squeeze me. Take what you need." Remy pants between kisses on my mouth and chin. I let my eyes fall shut as the sensations become overwhelming and an orgasm starts to build.

"Look at me," he orders, then nips my jaw with his teeth. My inner walls spasm, and I give in to the demand. "I want to watch you come around me and see how good I make you feel."

I part my lips, and my head just barely nods in agreement.

With a few more strokes, Remy gets his wish. My back arches, but he never slows his pace. My orgasm rolls over me in waves of pleasure that never seem to last long enough, but Remy flicks my clit every time the tremors of my inner walls threaten to slow, making it last until I'm so sensitive, I get jumpy.

"You know I think you're beautiful, doll, but when you take my cock... I can't even put it into words." Remy kisses my neck and ear, still breathing hard.

"Are you saying you love me because I can take you balls deep?" I tease.

Remy groans, and I feel his dick twitch inside of me. "Keep talking about how deep you like it." He rocks his hips.

I grin and lift my head off the hard ground. "I have a stick dangerously close to my ass, and ants might have taken up residence in my hair. Maybe we could hold off on round two until we make sure Felix and Gray are alive. And...I don't know, maybe find someplace a little more accommodating."

Remy jerks himself up, reaching down for me before he's even fully standing. "Can't have a stick in your ass. I haven't even tapped that since you came back." He uses his big hands to brush some of the dirt off the backs of my legs.

"Yeah, wouldn't want to ruin that for you." I snort.

He rises and squeezes my cheeks just enough to purse my lips and taunts, "Thanks for looking out for me. Good girls get good dick," he promises, then he plants a hard kiss on my lips before releasing me to walk away. I stumble forward because his departure was a little unexpected, as is the dip in my stomach from him calling me a good girl again.

"Wake up, you lazy bastards," Remy shouts. He doesn't seem to be lacking energy at all. What the hell is up with that?

I take my pants all the way off and shake them out before pulling them back up my legs. Felix slowly starts to stir, while Remy taps—well, lightly slaps Gray's face.

"If you don't stop hitting me, I'm going to make you feel the insecurities of a fourteen-year-old boy," Gray snarls.

Remy stands back and chuckles. "Just making sure you're okay."

“Uh-huh, and I’m sure the pep in your step has nothing to do with your fingers smelling like pussy.” Gray sits up, cradling his head in his hands.

“It’s not my fault you were literally sleeping on the job.” Remy shrugs unapologetically.

“Why does my skin feel too tight?” Felix ignores Remy and Gray’s banter, rolling his shoulders.

“I feel like a million bucks,” Remy chimes in.

“Why is that?” Gray finally stands up, even though he seems a little unsteady.

“Magic.” Remy smiles and waggles his brows. “I can feel it. I bet I could cast just as well as you now.”

I stretch out my fingers in an effort to test my own magic, but I don’t feel any different. “Is that true? Can you feel more magic?” I glance between Felix and Gray.

“Maybe. I have some pressure behind my eyes that’s giving me a headache,” Gray admits.

“Well, I guess there’s something good that comes from not having enough of my own magic to cast a fart.”

“What are you, like twelve?” Felix chastises Remy while dusting himself off.

“I don’t feel any strange magic,” I tell them.

“You’re the caster, so it makes sense that it would be your energy binding us to you.” Felix approaches me slowly while looking me over from head to toe. “How do you feel otherwise?”

“Kind of the same.” I wince a little, reassessing my body again.

Felix picks up my hand and I think he’s just going to hold it, but instead, he flips it over and runs a finger over the freshly formed scar on my palm. “You seem disappointed,” he remarks, looking up from my hand.

“No, never,” I deny quickly. “It’s dumb, but I was expecting...” I shrug, not knowing what to say.

“Our names tattooed on your ass?” Remy supplies. “I want mine to say, ‘Remy’s good girl.’”

Felix continues to ignore Remy and strokes his finger over my scar again. I can’t deny how sensitive it is, or maybe it’s just his touch I’m susceptible to. Turning my palm again, he guides my hand up under his shirt and places it against his chest, where I can feel his beating heart.

My lips part as he stares down at me. The connection I was doubting is there, it's just deeper than I expected it to be, rooted in our souls and our very beings. I'm part of them, and they are part of me.

With my free hand, I reach up to find my own heartbeat and swiftly realize they are beating in time, as if synced. "Come here." I beckon Gray and Remy over excitedly. The hand that was on my chest is already outstretched, waiting to see if theirs match too. Gray makes it over first. I shove my hand under his shirt without invitation to find exactly what I'm looking for—a perfect rhythm.

"Remy, lift your shirt up and come here," I demand, turning my head to the side so I can plant my ear on his chest when he does. His is thumping right along with the rest of us. It's surreal.

"What happens when one of us gets excited? Will it stay like this, even when we're not together?" I keep my eyes closed as I just feel them.

"I want to know if we'll be able to hear the killer weasel," Remy says, and I pull my head back from his chest and grin. Why the hell did we wait so long for this?

GOOD EVENING, I SEE THE ASSASSINS HAVE FAILED.



*A*fter spending the afternoon naked and extremely satisfied, I'm summoned to the kitchen after a very long, hot shower with the promise of food.

Felix is at the island, opening boxes of takeout. He's shirtless, and I can't help but lean against the doorframe and admire him.

As if sensing my attention, he looks over his shoulder and presses the tip of his finger to the bridge of his glasses. I know I'm grinning, but his answering smile makes mine grow larger. "Someday, I will know every line and shadow," I promise, referring to his tattoos.

"I welcome the process. Hungry?" he offers.

"Starving. What did you get?" I make my way closer to him. Even though we spent hours tangled together, I lean my head on his shoulder, craving the nearness.

"Gray ordered." I can hear Felix's eye roll.

"So, everything on the menu," I confirm. The screech of a chair being pushed across the floor startles me enough that I jump.

When I turn around, there's no one else in the kitchen. Felix is facing the direction of the sound too, his brows furrowed.

"What was that?" I mumble.

"I don't know," Felix replies, but he doesn't seem bothered. I, on the other hand, am a little freaked out. It's not the first time I've heard a chair move on its own recently.

Seconds later, Gray enters the kitchen. "Took them long enough," he grumbles, making his way over to the island covered with boxes. I'm still looking around the kitchen. An uneasy feeling has settled in my chest.

When nothing else strange happens after a few more long seconds, I tell myself it was just my imagination or there's a reasonable explanation. I don't want to think about the other option.

Gray sets four plates on the island, the serving utensils already shoved into boxes. "You better make your plate before Remy makes it for you," Gray warns.

He's right—Remy always gives me way more than I can eat. That snaps me into action, and I take a proffered dish.



I'M JUST ABOUT to drift off to sleep on the couch, curled up with my head on Felix's chest and my feet in Gray's lap, when a loud noise has me nearly jumping out of my skin.

Remy is already standing when I glance around to see what could have made the crash. "What the hell?" Gray mumbles, and his hold on my legs tightens.

"The wards are up," Felix says, looking around as well.

"There's no way that was from outside, right?" Remy heads toward the entrance of the living room.

"Where are you going?" I sit up as Gray releases my feet and stands as if to follow Remy.

"To see what that was," one of them responds, prompting me to follow with Felix right behind me.

Remy breaks off and heads toward the kitchen, while Gray continues toward the front door. I'm torn over which one to follow, so I end up walking down the long hall between them, flipping on lights as I go and looking around.

"Find anything?" Remy hollers.

"No," Gray answers as we all meet up back near the entrance to the kitchen. "It didn't sound muffled enough to be from upstairs."

"Shit, where's Percy?" I dart to the left, knowing his den is still in the room the guys gave me when I first came here.

Their footfalls on the steps behind me are loud. Remy manages to pass me on the stairs and makes it into the room before I can.

"Percy?" I call the moment I enter the room.

Was there a stampede planned and I missed the memo? he drawls.

“Are you okay? Did you hear that noise?” I kneel next to the closet.

Remy snorts. “Has he always sounded like an English teacher?”

I heard you clamoring up the stairs as if there was a coyote on your heels. Percy ignores Remy and the fact that he can be heard by yet another person.

“No, before that there was a loud crash. Like something fell or broke.”

Shall we investigate? Percy sounds rather excited by the prospect. Sometimes, I think he likes what I do more than he actually likes me.

“We were. Frankie wanted to make sure you were okay,” Felix tells him.

I’m fine, darling witch. Let’s see what’s afoot.

“Afoot?” Remy questions with a chuckle.

Happening, occurring. You dolt, Percy snaps, then darts out of the room.

“You know I can hear you now, you little asshole,” Remy shouts after my familiar.

“I’m pretty sure that’s why he said it.” Gray exits the room as Remy mumbles under his breath.

I suspect I know the cause of the noise, Percy says shortly after making it downstairs.

“What?” I look around, but I don’t see anything out of place.

The presence from the farmhouse is here.

Dread fills my gut so quickly, it’s as if I expected this very thing. “A spirit shouldn’t be able to do that unless he wasn’t earthbound or he came from a cemetery,” I say mostly to convince myself. Ghosts that inhabit places or are attached to people are usually tied to them for a reason—a family connection, the home they lived in, or someone involved in their untimely or tragic death—but none of those reasons tell me how this spirit could have followed me home.

Ghosts with enough energy can do a great many things. Percy’s whiskers twitch, and the little hump in his back gets more pronounced. It seems as if he’s quite unnerved too.

I look over my shoulder, not liking the thought that someone could be lurking around unseen. “There has to be a reason it’s here, right? Should we try to speak to it?” Felix suggests.

“I don’t know. Even acknowledging its presence can give it power.” I don’t think I want to jump into anything too quickly, but it could be my

apprehension making me leery. “I’ll reach out to Lewis tomorrow. The MBI has entire teams dedicated to working with spirits and infestations. Maybe they can give me some advice.”

For now, I suggest you ignore its attempts to get your attention. Percy’s advice sounds sage to me.

“Want me to salt your den?” I know I will be doing our room to make sure we don’t get any unwanted visitors tonight.

There’s no need. I cannot be possessed, nor am I worried for my safety. However, I do believe it’s a good idea for you to do so.

“Am I the only one who thinks that was super ominous and creepy?” Remy bounces his eyes around our group.

Gray shifts on his feet, but I’m the only one that concurs. “Definitely.”

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THERE'S SOMEONE FOR
EVERYONE. FOR YOU, THAT
PERSON IS A PSYCHOLOGIST.



The thick line of salt I spread in front of our closed door is still intact the next morning. I use a hand broom made from natural fibers to sweep up the large crystals and dispose of them. The barrier did its job, but using the same materials again would be careless, because I don't know if the full integrity of the salt is still intact.

I look at the bathroom door. The water is running, so I know Felix is still in the shower. I'm avoiding leaving the room by myself, even though Remy and Gray weren't in bed when I woke up and I'm pretty sure they are in the house somewhere.

"Come on, Frances, it's a ghost. You deal with worse shit than that every day." I square my shoulders and reach for the door handle, and then I scream the moment I open it. Gray is on the other side of the door. I almost run right into him in my haste to prove I'm tougher than I feel.

"Oh, baby," he coos sweetly, but there's too much mirth in his tone for it to feel like genuine concern. "I didn't mean to scare you."

"You didn't scare me," I challenge. "You startled me."

His hands come up to my shoulders as he fights a smile. "Either way, sorry." I could pretend I'm aggravated, but I'd rather get a sympathy snuggle out of it, so I step even closer and rest my head on his chest as he rubs his palms over my arms and continues around to my back.

"You guys are up early. Anything going on?" My voice is a little muffled against his chest, but it's still clear.

"Just Remy trying to kill me," he answers. "I came up to shower. You good?"

“I’m fine. I was just going down to make a call and see if anything else happened last night. I was thinking about going over to Aisling’s too. I want to check up on her and see if she knows anything about our guest.”

“Well, don’t leave without me,” he murmurs, planting a kiss on the top of my head.

“You don’t have anything else going on today?” I feel a little bad that they feel like they need to go with me, but not bad enough that I’m not going to take him up on his offer. If this was work, someone from my team would be with me.

“Not really. It’s a pretty cushy gig.”

“Is that why you do it?” I lean back with my arms still wrapped around his back so I can see his face.

His eyes dart away from mine, and he looks over my head. “I do it because there’s no one else who will.”

“But do you enjoy it? Is it what you want?” I urge.

Finally, Gray looks down at me. “It’s not what I had planned, but it works for now. Sometimes, I hate it on principle, but that’s only because I like to pretend I didn’t have a choice. I did—*do* have a choice. Besides, it makes my grandfather crazy, knowing he can’t control me, and I love that part.” Gray smirks before leaning in to give me a light kiss on the lips.

“As long as it makes you happy,” I tell him, and that’s the truth. It’s not the life I would have predicted for him, but the town is flourishing, and I trust him to know what he wants.

“You make me happy.” He steps forward, urging me backwards into the room. The shift in his tone and the fact that he’s trying to get me back into the bedroom suggests he has other things on his mind than a shower at this point.

The rattle of coins hitting the floor has me turning. There’s a penny rolling along the ground with a few other coins that seem to have been swiped off the bedside table. Gray makes a huffing sound that I feel rise from his chest.

“I should probably go make those calls,” I mumble, not acknowledging what just happened. I don’t like knowing it’s in our room.

“I’ll be down soon.” Gray steps away from me and moves toward the bathroom door. “We should have put a second shower in here. I see your dick almost as much as I see my own.”

I snicker and make my way out of the room. It may seem like I'm in a hurry, but that's because I want to call the MBI before everyone gets busy for the day, not because I'm scared of the ghost in the room. That's what I tell myself anyway.

After gathering Percy, I head to Felix's casting room. The supplies I'll need to make sure I have privacy are in there, and it's as good a place as any to call Lewis. Once I spread a thick line of salt at the door, Percy takes off to explore and I pull out my phone.

Lewis answers on the second ring. "Lo."

"Hey." I get comfortable in a chair. I can see the embedded circle and tree in my peripheral vision. I think this is one of my favorite rooms in the entire house.

"I thought you were calling in a couple days." She's referring to the scheduled call I have with my dad. My supervisor is never one to beat around the bush.

"For that I am. This is unrelated."

"I have a feeling you being on my team is always going to be an adventure. What's up?"

"I was honestly trying to mind my own business," I hedge.

"Uh-huh," she hums, and I can't tell if she believes me or not.

"Long or short version?"

"Give me the relevant details. I have a meeting in...seven minutes."

"Missing woman, this isn't the first time it's happened with her. She has a medical history. Her husband came to me for help when my father wasn't around. The woman, Aisling, turned up, but I'm suspicious about the entire situation. I can look into that on my own, but I think a spirit attached itself to me when I was at her house."

Lewis makes a whistling sound. "Not my area of expertise. How serious has it gotten?"

"Small things so far, but definitely making itself known. I'm being proactive," I tell her instead of admitting how much it freaks me out.

"I know someone that used to be on the entity team. You might know her. She's on Wuornos' team now, Lisa Nash."

"I do know her!" I exclaim, rather surprised. She mentioned she'd only been on the team for a year, so I guess I shouldn't be that stunned. Plus, I would much rather talk about this with her than someone I don't know at all.

“Just because I’m too damn nosy, let me know how this plays out,” Lewis tells me.

I chuckle and promise, “Will do. Thank you for the info. I’m going to give her a call.”

“Speak to you soon,” she says, and the line goes dead. I thumb through my phone and find Nash’s contact info, debating whether or not I should call her directly. I shoot off a text first.

ME: Hey, it’s Bishop. I have an issue I’ve been told you might be able to help with. Give me a call when you have time to talk.

I LEAVE the screen open for a few minutes to see if she’s going to respond right away, but when Remy walks into the room, avoiding the salt line like a pro, I put my phone on the table and admire his post-workout glow. Damn, the man is perfection. His hair is damp with sweat, making his blue eyes stand out even more than usual.

“What are you up to?” His breathing is labored, making his chest rise and fall rapidly.

“I just got off the phone. Are you done punishing yourself for the day?”

“This isn’t punishment, doll. I’m just doing the necessary work.” He comes a little closer and grabs my hand to pull me up to my feet. Once I’m out of my seat, he plops his ass into it and tugs me back into his lap. Remy lets out a heavy sigh before telling me, “Someday, not too far in the future, my only job will be cooking dinner and taking care of you. I’ll get all squishy and soft, and you’ll always have to be on top because I’ll have a bad back.”

“Wow, you’ve put some thought into this,” I tease. I can’t see Remy ever getting squishy or soft, even though I wouldn’t mind.

“Especially the part about you being on top.” He pats my leg. “What’s on the agenda for today?”

“I’m going to go back to the Doby place. I want to check on Aisling and talk to her about some other things.”

“I have some stuff today. Are Gray and Felix going with you?”

I'm instantly curious about what he has going on. "Gray said he could come. I haven't talked to Felix about it. What's on *your* agenda?" I settle a little deeper into his embrace.

"I'm supposed to see my agent, but if you need me to go with you, I can," he offers, almost sounding hopeful.

"No, you take care of your stuff," I urge.

Remy rolls his eyes. "He always wants me to pick up more sponsors. It gets on my fucking nerves."

"You poor thing. Everybody wants this face." I take hold of his chin.

Remy snorts. "He almost had me roped into endorsing an apothecary that specializes in dick enhancements. He told me it was for male body positivity."

I cover my giggle and smile with my hand. "What tipped you off? Was it when they wanted a close-up of your third leg? He probably thinks you use them yourself and wouldn't mind promoting it."

"Come to think of it, the wardrobe chick was awfully handsy." When my jaw drops and I give him a glare, he pulls me to his chest. "I'm teasing. You're the only one I let near my custard launcher."

"Hecate, I don't want to know what I just walked into." Felix dutifully steps over the salt line as he enters the room. "Gray asked me to tell you he'd be down soon."

"Thanks." I notice the way his long-sleeved shirt fits just tight enough to hint at what's underneath while hiding so much at the same time. I get a little bit of a thrill knowing I'm one of the only people who gets to see all of him. Damn, he's sexy.

Felix is completely unaware that I'm ogling him as he walks over and leans against the table. "Are you two going somewhere?"

"He's going to go with me to see Aisling."

Felix nods as if he expected that answer. "I'll join," he tells me.

"Damn it," Remy curses.

"What's his problem?" Felix tilts his head toward Remy.

"He can't play today. He has work." I pat Remy's arm.

"Maybe next time, champ," Felix taunts. Before Remy can voice a snide response, my phone vibrates, and Nash's name is displayed on the screen.

I snatch it up quickly as if she'll hang up if I don't answer it right away. "Who's Nash?" Remy asks as I hit the green icon.

"Hello?"

“Hey there, Bishop. Already realized how much you need me?” she replies in a friendly tone.

I grin. “What can I say? I’m lost without you.”

Remy sits up, and I nearly fall off his lap. Nash chuckles. “Your text said you needed help.”

“Lewis mentioned you used to work with the entity team.” It’s a statement, but I still wait for her to confirm it.

“I did, are you on a case?”

“Not really, but it started that way. I think I have an attachment.” I hate even admitting it out loud.

I hear her suck in a breath through her teeth. “Ooh.” It pretty much echoes how I feel about the situation. “Do you have any experience with entities?”

“Just the basics we learned in the academy. I didn’t take any of the advanced classes, since it wasn’t part of my field or a prerequisite for my magic type.”

“Any idea who the entity is?” Nash inquires.

“No. I’m heading over to the house where the presence first made itself known to talk to the owner. I’ll see if she has anything to share with me. I don’t know how helpful she’ll be though, she’s older with some health conditions. She did acknowledge the house might be haunted, so there’s something.”

“That’s a good place to start. In the meantime, I have some protection amulets that work against possession. I’ll get those to you, but in the meantime, stock up on salt. If you think you have enough, get more,” Nash advises.

I like that she’s taking this so seriously, but it only makes me more nervous. “Is there anything specific I should ask her?”

“Sure, but finding out why it attached itself to you is just as important. Do you have a connection to this woman? Is she family?”

“No, yesterday was the first time I ever met her, and I’d only met her husband the day before that, but my father has had dealings with them.”

Nash hums. “That’s a bit unusual. Has there been a recent death you’re aware of?”

“No again,” I admit.

“That could complicate things a little more. It could mean this isn’t an earthbound presence.”

“I know, which is why I want to say thanks for getting back to me so quickly.”

“Let me get those amulets ready. Find out anything you can, like how long it’s been active and what kind of activity it’s known for. If she knows who it is or how it was created, that would be very helpful information,” Nash instructs.

“Will do,” I chirp.

“Give me a call after you speak with her. We can set up a time to meet later.”

“Thanks again, Nash. Oh, and I’m with the guys, so could we have four of those amulets?” I wince while asking, but any protection she can offer is worth how bad I feel for inconveniencing her.

“I’ve got you,” Nash replies easily. “I’m going to get to work. Call me when you get done.”

“Sounds like a plan, bye.” When I hang up, Felix and Remy are waiting patiently for me to fill them in, which I do.

Once Gray is ready, we head out to the car and Felix climbs behind the wheel, while I slide into the backseat with Percy, leaving the passenger seat for Gray. The ride over is becoming familiar, and the closer we get, the more the nervous feeling in my stomach increases.

“It would be best if I could talk to Aisling alone, but I doubt Eugene is going to cooperate. Do you think you could convince him to show you his barn or something?” I’m half teasing, but I’ll welcome any intervention they might be able to offer.

“Not even Remy’s charms work on him, not that he was even nice to the man, but he usually doesn’t even need to be,” Gray remarks.

“He seems to be fixated on your dad. We might be able to work with that.” Felix glances over at Gray, who nods in agreement.

“He is, that’s a good idea. Maybe you guys could let him overhear you talking about me speaking with my dad or something.” I lean forward just as we’re about to turn down the Dobys’ driveway.

Magic lingers in the air again when we exit the car. “You don’t know anything about his magic, do you?” I ask Gray.

“No, he’s always been quiet, more of an observer when he comes to town halls and such. He’s always seemed invested in what happens in the community, but I know more *of* him than actually knowing anything *about* him,” Gray says while looking up at the house.

“Why do you ask? Are you sensing something?” Felix observes.

“It’s just heavy, as if he leaks magic or I’m always arriving just after he finished stirring.”

Eugene opens the door as we step onto the porch. His eyes are narrowed as he sends a glare in my direction. “Hi again,” I chirp with a plastic smile covering my face.

I do believe it’s the former, Percy says, confirming what I suspected.

“I didn’t think you’d have the nerve to come back here after failing the tasks you were here to help with,” Eugene sneers, leaning his shoulder against the doorframe. Something about his posture looks off, but I can’t put my finger on why he looks strange.

Instead, I focus on his insult. It’s clearly designed to make me feel inadequate or doubt myself. It doesn’t work. Especially considering I know there is no way Aisling was where he said he found her, at least not when we were in the barn. “I’m persistent.” I widen my smile even more. “I’d like to speak with Aisling.”

“I’m supposed to just go fetch her because you told me to?” The fact that I didn’t ask clearly bothers him, but I really don’t give a shit.

“I don’t mind going to find her myself.” I take a step forward, and Eugene moves quickly, too quickly for someone his age, to block me. It’s then I realize why his mannerisms feel off—he doesn’t carry himself like an old man. Come to think of it, I don’t think he ever has. I just didn’t notice.

Something in my gaze must give away my thoughts, because Eugene’s mien shifts enough for me to take notice, almost as if he’s slouching or hunching his shoulders. “I’ll call on her to speak with you if it means you’ll leave us alone,” he concedes, backing closer to the door.

When he slips inside the house, I look at Gray and Felix. I don’t want to ask them if they noticed anything out loud, but I hope my eyes can convey my thoughts. Gray lifts his brows while returning my gaze. I think he detected something too.

“Why are you back here?” Aisling asks, shoving the screen door open and storming out. Her hair is still a mess, and she’s wearing the same clothes I saw her in yesterday. I look down at her hands, noticing a few of the scratches are red and raised, but they are clean.

“I wanted to see how you are,” I reply, keeping my voice light as if I didn’t notice her clear aggravation at my appearance.

She lets out a ragged huff and peers over her shoulder. I watch her eyes narrow even more when she spies her husband in the door. She may not be happy to see me, but if I were a betting woman, I would say she's holding more anger for Eugene than she is for me.

I clear my throat, deciding to use her manners to get myself an invite into the house. "Could I trouble you for a cup of water?"

Aisling pats the side of her leg in a fidgeting movement. She looks at me, then at the doorway again. "I suppose," she finally agrees with a disgruntled grumble.

"We'll wait out here," Felix offers, then turns to face Gray as if he assumes Aisling, myself, and Eugene are going to head into the house, then adds, "Marty was pretty cheerful this morning."

I watch as Eugene tilts his head to the side, and I know he's listening. I continue to follow Aisling into the house, and she takes me right to the kitchen. I notice that the mess in the living room from yesterday has all been cleaned up, even the broken lamp.

Aisling opens the cabinet above the sink, pulls down a tall blue glass, and fills it with water before handing it to me. I take a quick sip but focus mostly on her. "Are you doing okay?"

"I'm fine, but you need to stop coming here," she murmurs under her breath while looking at the door.

"Why?" I pretend to be confused.

"You just do."

"The last time I was here there was an incident. The water turned on." I change the subject to see if she's more willing to talk about this. "You said the house didn't used to be haunted. Do you believe it is now?" I take another small sip of water.

"What does this matter?" Aisling fiddles with a washcloth near the side of the sink.

I get right to the point. "Because I believe the presence that was here followed me home yesterday." If Aisling won't allow me to help her, I can't force her, but I need to get to the bottom of what else might be happening here.

She makes a gasping sound of surprise, then shakes her head as if to deny my claim. "No," she whispers.

"I wish I could say I was joking." I reach up to run my hand over Percy, who is still sitting on my shoulder. He usually likes to go off and explore on

his own, so there must be something about this exchange he wants to witness.

“Eugene,” she says slowly, reaching for the counter as if she needs it to steady herself.

“What does he have to do with it?” I ask cautiously.

“What? Oh, nothing,” Aisling replies dismissively, searching the table like it may offer an answer.

“Is he a medium?” I urge. That could explain why his magic always feels active. Maybe he sent the entity after me.

“Eugene? No,” she scoffs.

“What is his natural affinity for?”

“Thermal resistance. He was a firefighter before he retired.” Aisling tips her chin in the air proudly. It’s a little strange to see, since it seems as if she can barely stand Eugene when she looks at him. Maybe it wasn’t always that way.

“Is that how he knows my dad?” Firefighters and police are often called to the same scene. Maybe that’s partly why everyone at the station acted as if Aisling’s disappearance wasn’t a big deal. They might really trust Eugene, but I feel like I’m missing something about him.

“They’ve known each other a long time,” she says, not really answering.

“I need to find out who this spirit is and what it wants. Do you have any clue?”

Aisling brings her hand up to her face and rubs her temple. “I just can’t see it,” she mutters.

“See what?” I step a little closer.

“I think you just wanted an excuse to come back here.” Aisling turns her cloudy brown eyes toward me. “Stay out of my business.” The same hardness I noticed yesterday is back in her tone. “You need to leave, and don’t come back. I don’t need you or your busybody father checking up on me.”

“If you can give me some more information on the presence here, I’ll let you be,” I cajole, even though I don’t have any intention of abandoning her. “Do you know who it is? Has someone died recently?”

Aisling’s lips fold down in a heavy frown. “I can’t help you.” Her voice is just above a whisper.

I open my mouth to tell her I disagree, but I'm interrupted. "Looks like you've had your drink." I'm not aware of how much of our conversation Eugene heard, but I know my opportunity to gather information is gone.

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WHEN I SAID, “HOW STUPID CAN
YOU BE?” IT WASN’T A
CHALLENGE.



I stomp down the stairs, no longer concerned with what Eugene or Aisling think of me. They won't be welcoming me back. Percy clings to my shoulder with ease.

Gray and Felix are waiting near the footpath that leads up to the porch. Felix reaches out as I head toward them. “Sorry we couldn't keep him occupied longer,” he murmurs after wrapping his finger around mine.

“It's okay, she wasn't cooperative anyway. Thank you for trying.”

“Did you get anything useful?” Gray asks once we're loaded back in the car.

She's lying, Percy interjects.

“Aisling? About what?” I watch my familiar settle himself on the seat next to me.

Eugene's magic. There's no way he's that powerful if thermal resistance is his ability, not unless he had a fire in his pants, and I didn't see any smoke.

“Yeah, I thought that was a bit strange myself. At first, I believed she was going to admit he had something to do with the entity.”

Why did she bring him up at that exact moment if not for that reason? I'm not convinced Eugene doesn't have more to do with this.

“Something definitely isn't adding up,” I agree, tugging my phone from my pocket. “I need to let Nash know I didn't learn anything useful and find out when and where she wants to meet.” I send her a quick text.

ME: Meeting was a total bust. Her lips are locked tighter than the spell vault. I'm available whenever you are. Let me know what works for you.

HER RESPONSE COMES QUICKLY.

NASH: I'm almost done. Send me your coordinates for a slip.

I HAD ASSUMED I would go to her, but honestly, this is even better. If she sees what's going on at the house, she'll have a better idea of how to help me get rid of the entity. When I text her back, I give her the coordinates and ask her for at least ten minutes to make sure I can get back before she arrives.

"Nash is bringing the amulets to the house," I inform Felix and Gray. "She was on the last case. You might have noticed her. Pretty brunette, she talked to Remy in the lobby."

"When you ran away?" Gray confirms.

"I wasn't running," I scoff, even though that's exactly what I was doing. "Anyway, she's coming to help." Neither of them comments on my little fib as we make the rest of the short ride home.

Even though I know it hasn't been anywhere near ten minutes, I'm eager to get home, so as soon as Felix parks the car, I jump out, leaving the door open for Percy to follow. I want Nash's help, but there's also a very small part of me that feels self-conscious about her seeing the house.

It's a big house that clearly cost a lot of money. While it wasn't that surprising to me, since Gray has always had money and Remy plays for the Titans, it may seem a bit ostentatious to an outsider. Then there's the fact that I live here now too, which I'm only really thinking about now. I haven't contributed to anything, yet here I am.

"What's going on?" Gray rubs his hand over my back while looking down at me. I don't know how long I've been staring at the house.

"I live here," I murmur, voicing my thoughts.

"And that's a problem why?" He must be sensing my unease.

I try to put my feelings into words. “It’s not a problem, it’s just a really nice house. It was easier when it was just your house, not that I’m saying it’s mine now, but I live here.”

Gray slides his hand up until his fingers wrap around the back of my neck, and then he applies a little pressure until I’m looking in his direction. “This is your house.” His words are said with vehemence while he stares directly into my eyes.

“I don’t even know where everything is.” I grin, trying to deflect how surreal it feels that so much has changed in such a small amount of time, yet everything feels as if it’s finally fallen into place.

“We’ll make time to defile every room soon, but for now, it doesn’t matter. Every inch of this place was made with you in mind. You are what makes this house a home.” He doesn’t take my opportunity to lighten the mood. Instead, Gray pulls out the big guns and makes me feel special, needed, and wanted.

I rock up on my tiptoes and steal a kiss. “Thank you,” I tell him. If Nash or anyone else judges me for living here or in a run-down studio, they can shove their opinions up their asses.

When I start to pull away, Gray holds me in place with his hand still on the back of my neck. He gives me a few more soft pecks before sliding his tongue along the seam of my lips. My stomach does a free fall, and I sigh against his mouth.

Gray lets out a soft, barely there chuckle while pulling back, leaving me wanting so much more.

Felix, who must have walked right past us to get into the house, pokes his head out the door. His face is rather blank, but that says a lot.

“What?” I question hesitantly.

“Ash is here,” he says slowly.

“Ash,” I repeat, and it takes a second for me to come up with an answer for the unfamiliar name. “Remy’s assistant,” I supply quickly.

“Yeah.” Felix nods. Why does he seem nervous? It’s making me nervous.

“I thought Remy had an appointment?” Gray and I walk to the door, which Felix holds open for us.

“There, in his den,” he tells me, not really answering my question.

I check my phone. Nash could be here soon, but I feel the need to go meet this woman, especially with how weird Felix is acting. “Okay, let’s go

say hi,” I suggest.

The short walk to Remy’s den feels like I’m walking into doom. Knots form in my stomach and my palms feel sweaty.

As I take the final few steps, I notice Gray and Felix, who both came with me, start to hang back just enough to make sure I’m the first to enter the room. With my heart in my throat, I keep my footsteps soft as I push the heavy door the rest of the way open and peer inside.

Remy is sitting in one of the large chairs near the fireplace, and his head is turned in my direction, so he sees me the moment I walk in the door as if he was waiting for my arrival. “Hexes, I thought something was wrong.” He sags. It’s then I notice how his hands are clawed over the arms of the chair as if he was preparing to stand. When he settles his ass back in the seat, he rubs a palm over his chest.

I noticed the woman right away as well, but I was too focused on Remy to pay her much mind until now. I shift my gaze to her. She’s already watching me. “Hi.” I give her a small wave. It’s strange walking in here and seeing her look so comfortable in this space, knowing she’s been here many times before, way more than me, yet I feel as if she’s the interloper.

“Hello.” She gives me a slight chin dip while maintaining eye contact.

Remy clears his throat. “Frankie, this is Ash, my assistant. Ash, this is Fran—”

“Ces,” I cut him off. “Frances.” I don’t know her. My friends call me Frankie.

“Frances.” Remy’s eyebrows are high on his forehead. I can see him looking at me in my peripheral vision.

I walk over and lean my hip on the side of Remy’s chair. “What are you up to?”

“Just going over some info for a small press release before meeting with my agent.” I finally take my eyes off Ash and look down at Remy. His gaze is on mine, and he’s looking at me like he always does, like I’m the only person he sees. The insecurity I was feeling melts away.

I turn a little more so I’m fully facing him before placing my palms on his cheeks and giving him a swift kiss. While my lips are still close to his, I say, “Nash will be here soon.” As I start to pull away, Remy holds my hand against his cheek.

“Okay, this won’t take too long. I’ll come find you guys as soon as I’m done.” He plants a kiss on my lips in return.

When I hear a gasp, I twist my neck to see Ash. The gaping of her mouth would make me assume she's surprised, and the fact that her eyes are cast down has me running a hand over my ass.

I'll keep an eye on her. Percy's voice snarls through my mind, and my eyes find him immediately. He's on the low coffee table with his back all hunched up like a pissed off cat, giving Ash a murderous glare.

At least I know she wasn't shocked by my butt. *If she makes a move on the big one, I'll chew off her nose.*

Remy makes a stunned sound, but I just reach forward and give Percy a soft stroke down his spine. I'm not worried, but that doesn't mean I can't show my appreciation for his loyalty.

"Damn, that's a lot creepier when you hear shit like that coming from him," Remy whispers.

"Hear what? What did you hear?" Ash asks, stealing glances at Remy, but never really taking her eyes off Percy.

The doorbell rings through the house, and I bolt upright. "Nash is here. I'll leave you three to it." My steps are extra light when I leave the room—confidence can put a pep in your step.

Gray beams at me when I reach the door. I nearly trip over my own feet, but Felix reaches out and catches me before threading his fingers through mine.

"He's funny." Gray nods toward Percy. I don't know about funny, but he sure is faithful. I have no illusions that Percy is joking. I think he would go after someone he saw as a threat in a heartbeat.

"Come on, I don't want to keep her waiting." I tug on Gray's arm with my free hand when I start moving again.

Once we're far enough away, and I don't have to worry about being overheard by Ash or Remy, I nudge Felix. "Sheesh, you had me worried I was going to walk in on them kissing or something."

He does a double take of my face. "What? Why would you think that?" I just roll my eyes and tug on his hand to speed him up. I don't have time to get into an explanation right now.

I'm huffing when we finally reach the foyer. Nash has her back to us when I open the door as if she's looking over the property. Slowly, she turns toward me with one brow tipped up. She says, "Nice digs," then steps over the threshold, entering the house.

“Felix designed it,” I blurt out, unsure how to take the compliment I had nothing to do with. “This is Felix, by the way.” I move a little closer to him. “And this is Grayson.” I gesture to Gray, who closes the door behind Nash.

“Lisa.” She gives them both a soft smile in greeting.

“Remy’s in a meeting, he’ll be out later,” I tell her, even though she didn’t ask and probably doesn’t care. It’s a little strange having her here helping me with personal crap when we don’t know each other well. I’m flustered, and it’s showing.

“I will need to see him to invoke the charm for him, but there’s no hurry. Do you have a place where we can chat?” Nash questions, ignoring how strange I’m being.

I try to shake off my oddness and just be myself. “Sure, come on, let me show you around.”

Nash and I walk side by side while Felix and Gray trail a few paces behind us. I lead her to Felix’s spell room. The salt I put down this morning should still be good so we can conserve what we have. I haven’t had a chance to place an order at the apothecary for more.

Nash dutifully avoids the salt barrier, then peers up, getting her first good look at the room. “Oh,” pops out of her mouth when she notices the live tree.

“Felix again.” I smile. This time I’m bragging a little, but a girl can be proud of her man.

After sweeping her gaze around the room, Nash gets right to the point. “Are you sure you have an attachment? I’m not sensing anything unusual.”

“I’m not positive, but I don’t have any other explanation. Yesterday, a chair slid across the floor in the kitchen, and that’s the same thing that happened at the Dobys’. Then last night, there was an unexplained crash when we were watching TV. I checked on Percy, my familiar, and he recognized the presence as the same one that was at the Doby residence.”

“Has anything else happened since then?” Nash watches me intently, taking in all the information.

“I salted the door when we went to bed, but this morning after I swept it away, some coins were pushed off the bedside table.” It’s the first time Felix has heard the story. He clears his throat in a way that makes me think I should have told him and Remy sooner.

Nash nods. “Are you sure you didn’t pick it up on the last case? We spent a lot of time in cemeteries,” she reminds me.

“No, I’m pretty careful. I actually thought you guys were a little reckless, and I trust Percy. He said it came from the Doby house.”

Nash nods. “I figured, but I wanted to ask just in case. You’ve mentioned the Dobys. That’s the same people your dad has a connection to, but you didn’t know, right? What about you guys or Broussard? Do you know them?” It’s not lost on me that she used Remy’s last name. She’s a fan, and that’s what he’s known by.

“Only in passing,” Gray admits. “He comes to some town events and meetings.”

“Let’s start from the beginning then. Why were you there in the first place?” Nash asks.

I invite her over to a small seating area and tell her the story, leaving out the details of where my father and Belinda are. It’s not relevant other than my dad wasn’t here to help like usual.

Nash listens patiently, waiting until I’m done to ask a few questions. “Why lie about where he found her?”

“No fucking clue, but that woman was not in the barn.” I shake my head.

“Seems strange not to admit where he really found her.”

I agree with Nash’s statement, but I don’t have any insight as to why he did it.

“You think he’s abusive?”

“Something was off, and like I said, there was evidence of a struggle in the living room. She’s been pretty clear she doesn’t want my help though, she even said not to tell my dad, and Eugene acted like all he wanted was to see or talk to my dad,” I offer, even though it’s not helpful.

“And when you asked her about the entity today?” Nash urges.

“She acted like it wasn’t possible, but she still half acknowledged there is a spirit in the house. At one point, I thought she was going to say Eugene had something to do with it, and that would have made sense to me. The man leaks magic like a sieve, so I thought maybe he had a connection to the spirit world and sent the ghost after me.”

“Maybe she’s protecting him?” Nash muses.

“Not with the way she looks at him. I think if Percy offered to chew his fingers off, she would let him.”

Nash tilts her head and gives me the side-eye after my statement, but she doesn’t ask me to clarify. “Well, if she’s not going to help, we’ll need to

do our own research—county records, obituaries, deeds, anything that will tell us who has lived and died in that house. I’m hoping it’s just a spirit, especially with such small demonstrations of its ability, but it could just be ramping up if it’s something more serious.”

“Gray is the mayor. He can help us get info on the land and such.” I look to him for confirmation, and he nods in response.

“That’s a good place to start. It might be helpful to speak with your dad too. If he has a connection to them, he may know the answers to some of the questions.”

“I won’t be able to reach him until tomorrow. He’s dealing with his own shit right now, unrelated,” I explain.

“We can wait until tomorrow. In the meantime, I bet you have enough space to offer a friend a room?” Nash inquires. Her shoulders are a little high, and the look on her face makes me think she regrets asking as soon as the words are out of her mouth.

“Hex yes! I would offer even if we didn’t have this issue. I hate to pull you into this mess, but I really appreciate your help.” I look over at Felix, hoping that’s okay. He rolls his eyes as if to say I’m nuts for even asking.

“Good, I think it will be helpful to figure out what’s going on here,” Nash replies.

“TRUST ME, YOU CAN DO IT.”
VODKA.



“Let’s go over a few things just to make sure we’re all on the same page.” Nash pulls a small velvet bag from her blazer pocket and places it on the table. “First, we don’t talk about or acknowledge the entity in a space where we can be overheard. If it does something to get our attention, just ignore it. Recognition will empower it.”

I know these things, but it’s good information for the guys to hear, and I can use the refresher. It’s hard not to react when something falls or moves right in front of you.

“The salt barrier is a good start, but I brought a few things that are a little stronger.” Nash takes out a slightly larger satchel and unties the little string holding it closed. I can hear things clanging together on the inside. “This will be our safe room,” she says, rising and walking toward the door. “If something happens, we come here.”

Nash crouches near the salt line and places some crystals a few inches away from the barrier. I recognize them after getting a better look when she heads back to her seat. Black tourmaline is good for protection and dispelling any negative energy, while citrine cleanses and blocks negative vibrations, aiding in mental clarity. The last stone is much larger than the others, and it’s been smoothed, allowing me to see right through the crystal clear areas and the milky whiteness of others. But what makes this stone so special are the thick, black needles of tourmaline running throughout the quartz. The clarity of the pure quartz will act as a magnifier for the tourmaline, making its natural properties even stronger.

“The salt will still need to be replaced daily, but the crystals will act as an additional barrier and can remain in place.” Nash retakes her seat,

depositing the larger bag on the table and gathering the smaller one into her lap.

“I have the amulets ready to invoke for each of you. Will Broussard be around soon, or should we move ahead without him for now?” Nash passes her gaze over the three of us.

“I can find out.” Felix stands and makes his way swiftly out of the room.

“How’s the team?” I ask Nash. I really want to ask about Flannigan, but I hold off.

“Good. Wuornos is still working to get the kid settled, so we don’t have an active case, hence why I could come so quickly.”

“Well, that worked out nicely for me.” I grin.

Nash twists her lips a little. “Me too. I was starting to go a little stir-crazy sitting around. Wuornos usually keeps us pretty busy, but this project has all his attention.”

I let out a tiny chuckle. “Not going to lie, he’s kind of intimidating. I could tell he has a one-track mind with some things.”

Nash begins to nod, and she might have replied, but she’s cut off by Remy’s and Felix’s voices as they approach. “Thanks for getting me out of there. He can talk for hours about nothing.”

Felix steps over the salt and stones. Remy’s eyes move up and down, noting his friend’s movement, and then he does the same. “What did I miss? Hey.” He tips his chin toward Nash, acknowledging her. The tops of her cheeks tinge pink as she meets his eyes briefly before looking away.

When Remy stops near the side of my chair, I look up at him. “Nash is going to stay with us and hopefully help get this situation sorted. This is our saferoom. We’re not supposed to talk about the ghost or acknowledge it anywhere but in this room.” I think that’s everything, but I look at the others to fill in anything I might have left out.

“What do the rocks do?” Remy hasn’t studied magic in a long time. His interests always lay elsewhere, and then when he manifested and found out he was only a two, he dropped all magical courses that were not required.

“They add protection and deflect negative energy,” Nash answers simply. I feel even more gratitude toward her in that moment. A lot of people might have talked down to him for his lack of awareness, but she didn’t.

“Nash has the protection amulets. We could probably do yours first if you need to get back to your meeting,” I tell Remy, then glance at Nash for confirmation.

Remy makes a dismissive tsking sound. “I gave him half the day.”

“That was maybe twenty minutes,” Felix corrects him.

“You try talking to him. It felt like I lost half my life.”

“This will be quick and easy,” Nash inserts, interrupting the bickering before passing each of us a small wooden spell disc that’s already been tied to a cord. “Like most charms, they need to touch your skin to be effective. Blood of the wearer will activate them, so that means no mixing them up, and you really shouldn’t even take them off.”

That’s fairly standard for personal charms. I am a little surprised that it’s a disposable wooden disc and not something that would last longer though. As if reading my thoughts while I examine the smooth circle, Nash adds, “Just like salt, the spell erodes and weakens over time, using the disc is more of a reminder it’s not a permanent fix.”

“Good to know.” I move to loop the cord around my neck, but I feel Remy’s hands over top of mine, taking over the job. I hold the disc against my chest where I want it to lie while he adjusts the strings and ties the knot. As soon as it’s secured, I stab the side of my finger on my shield necklace and pierce my skin—the blood that lingers on the tiny needle will only strengthen my shields. Once I have a fat bead of blood welled up, I smear it on the wooden circle. The smell of fresh sage envelops me for a moment, but it disappears just as quickly. If there was any question if Nash created these herself, it’s now gone. Her signature, while somewhat unfamiliar, is easily recognizable to me.

I move to stand so I can help Remy with his amulet. When he tries to bend over, I use his shoulder to push him down into the chair I vacated. Making sure I’m not choking him, I tie the ends of his cord in a tight knot so it can’t come off when he’s working out. I can just barely see the wood circle at the top of his shirt. It looks a little strange, since Remy doesn’t wear shields and protection jewelry like I do. He twists his neck from left to right, proving it feels as foreign as it looks.

Felix already has his tied when I turn to him, but Gray is waiting for me, holding his in his fingers, so I walk around behind him and knot his too. “Do you need a prick?” I ask him.

“Got one of those, but I could use your needle.”

I expect a joke like that from Remy, but Gray about knocks me out of my socks with that one, especially with Nash here. It takes a moment for it to sink in, but once it does, I don't hold back the chuckle. Leaning over his arm, I offer my pendant. Gray stabs his thumb against the metal then squeezes his finger for the blood to bead up.

When I finish, Felix is waiting to use my pendant. I didn't think of it before offering, but this is a really good way to renew the protection they put into this necklace when they gave it to me years ago.

Lastly, I go back to Remy, and we complete invoking the charms. "Now it's time for research and acting as normal as can be. If this is a new manifest, it might not know your patterns and idiosyncrasies yet, but still try to behave as if you normally would. Negative entities feed off of anything like disruption, chaos, anger, and even frustration."

"Good thing it wasn't here a few weeks ago," I mumble under my breath, which makes Nash grin. "How about we grab some lunch? Then we can see about getting into some of those records you mentioned."

"Sounds good, I'm starving." Remy hops up.

"Is Ash still here? Will she be coming?" I try to adjust my expression so it doesn't look like my eyebrows are going to disappear into my hairline, but I think I'm a little slow.

"Shit, I forgot she was here." Remy looks at the doorway like she might materialize there. "We probably shouldn't leave her alone in the house with you know what hanging around. She's under an NDA, so can we bring her? Otherwise, I can't come," Remy pleads.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Nash's head moving from left to right as she looks between the two of us. "I don't care if she comes. Is she going to want to come back to the house once she finds this stuff out though?"

One corner of Remy's lips curls up. "Maybe not." He shrugs.

"That leaves you going to her then if you have shit to do," I warn.

He waves his hand dismissively. "We can do that over the phone or on a video call. She was here today so she could capture a photo of us, but we've got other stuff to do, so that can wait."

"A photo of us?" I question.

"To put in the statement," Remy confirms.

I pinch my temples. "About a minute after that information is released, I'll no longer be Frankie or Bishop, I'll be Broussard's girl."

“Tough titties, doll. Suck it up,” Remy teases before I can even think of an argument as to why that shouldn’t happen.

“Fine, fine, but do we really need a picture? Can’t we just say you’re off the market, taken, wifed up?” I do a little tiny bit of pleading of my own. The wifed up part doesn’t even scare me, which is pretty surreal.

“You’re such a pain in my ass, Bishop,” Remy snarls, but there’s no heat in his words. “You have to agree to come to every game when you’re not working.” He points at me as he makes the demand. I nod eagerly. “You have to meet me in the hall after the game.” I nod again, but narrow my eyes. This bargaining chip is only worth so much, and he’s pushing it. “You have to sit in the family box.”

“No, uh-uh, nada, not happening. You blew your wad on that one.”

Remy gasps, and his mouth falls open in mock horror as my words register. I’d nearly forgotten Nash was with us. I peek over in her direction to see her biting her bottom lip, trying not to laugh.

“You, young lady, have a dirty mouth,” Remy chastises with the haughtiness of a schoolmarm. “Besides, you know I only blow my snatch syrup on you,” he adds right when we reach the door to his den.

Ash is now the one with a wide-eyed stare, but her attention is blissfully on Remy. “Would you care to join us for lunch?” I offer politely with possibly the worst ever transition.



MY VOTE for Jimmy’s wisely gets overruled when we realize half the town will be there for lunch, more than happy to eavesdrop on our conversation. Instead, we end up at a chain place that has a bar that I’m told is popular with the work crowd.

It’s not lost on me that our group is made of three men and three women and a mink, but our dynamics are much different than one might first assume. When we’re shown to our table, I have a moment where I worry about the seating arrangements being awkward, but Felix and Gray take the seats on either side of me while Remy takes the one straight across the table, leaving Ash and Nash to take the seats on the ends.

I glance around, noting everyone does indeed seem to be engrossed in their own table affairs, before picking up the menu. The waitress is quick to

come over. “Is this all on the same bill?” Her eyes scan our group.

“That’s fine.” Gray nods his head once.

“I have cash,” Nash offers hurriedly.

I start shaking my head in denial. “Feeding you is the least we can do.” Ash stays quiet for the exchange, but for her, this is sort of a working lunch too, so I’m not surprised.

The waitress takes everyone’s drink order and promises to return shortly, giving us a little time to look over the menu.

“What are you getting?” Remy asks immediately.

I peer over the top of my oversized menu, knowing he’s probably talking to me. “Percy, do you see what I have to deal with now?”

A mate that finally shows concern for your needs. How horrible. He deadpans the last part of the sentence.

“I always showed concern,” Remy mutters under his breath.

Ash stares at the side of Remy’s face with a frown.

“Percy is my familiar,” I inform her.

“Your familiar?” she repeats, and it may be the first time I’ve heard her speak.

“Yeah.” I brush my hand affectionately over his head. I’ve gotten very comfortable with him hanging out on my shoulder.

“Oh, but Rem was talking to him?”

“*Rem*” —I make a face at Remy about the nickname Ash used, and he rolls his eyes— “was responding to Percy.” I return my gaze to Ash.

“Your familiar,” she says again, not understanding how Remy could hear him. Maybe I should have just ignored her questioning gaze and let her think whatever she wanted.

“I can hear the homicidal weasel because we’re bonded.” Remy drops the comment as if he’s talking about the weather.

“Bonded?” Ash questions with wide eyes. “But you just...” She leaves the rest of the statement hanging, just like her bottom jaw, but I know what she was going to say. *We just got together.*

“It was a long time coming. What are you getting, doll?” Remy tries again.

I dart my eyes back to the menu. “Still looking.” I thought they’d already talked about this. He said he was going to put out a statement and she was here to take pictures.

Thankfully, the tension I feel at the table is broken up when the waitress returns with our drinks. I busy myself by studying the menu while she asks if we're ready to order.

"Do you need a few more minutes?" Felix asks, and I shake my head.

"No, go ahead and start if everyone else is ready."

"I'll have steak fajitas." Gray goes first, then places his arm around the back of my chair. The waitress moves around the table, taking everyone's order, leaving me for last.

"I'll have the Cajun chicken and shrimp with mashed potatoes." My eyes go to Remy after I order to cheekily ensure it meets his standards.

"That's all?" he says, but he's smirking, so I know he's teasing.

"If I'm still hungry, I'll nibble on some of the three appetizers you ordered."

Remy points at me like I've hit the nail on the head. "Always thinking about you."

I grin and get a little swoony, because that's what you do when your gorgeous man flirts with you, but I rein it in quickly, because it's not just us at the table. "Are we going to head to the town hall when we get done here?" I direct my question to Gray.

He nods. "The village clerk should have most of what we're looking for. I can make copies of everything and bring it home if you would prefer," he offers.

"We might as well just come with you. The more eyes the better, right?"

Gray continues his slow nod at my words.

I turn my attention to Nash, who's been quiet since we sat down. I'm a little at a loss for what we should talk about. I can't get too much into work with mixed company, and I don't want to put her on the spot and ask about Flannigan either.

"Do you live in the city?" That feels like a safe topic.

"I'm in the city now, but I grew up in the suburbs," she answers. "This is where you all grew up?"

"Us." I gesture between the guys and me. "How about you, Ash? Where do you call home?"

"I have a place in Greenville, near the practice facility," she answers.

"I'm excited to go to a game instead of watching the highlights," I admit.

"You haven't been to a game?" Nash gasps.

“Not one. I’ll be going to a few in the fall. Want to come with?” My tone is hopeful. I know she follows football, so my chances are pretty good.

“Hexes, yes, I do. Can you get us good seats?” Nash directs her question to Remy, who chuckles in response.

“I’ll see what I can do.”

After that, the chatting comes a little easier. I do my best to include Ash as well, but she spends a lot of time looking at her phone, seemingly engrossed with whatever she’s doing.

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I WOULD CHALLENGE YOU TO A
BATTLE OF WITS, BUT I SEE YOU
ARE UNDERPREPARED.



*A*fter dropping Remy and Ash back at the house, Gray parks the SUV in front of the town hall. It's a grand brick building with lots of windows and a tall clock tower jutting up from the roof. Four pillars span across the front entrance, holding up the porch roof, and there's a short set of stairs leading to the main doors.

The four of us exit the car. Nash and I sat in the back, while Gray and Felix took the front. "You guys can wait here if you want," Gray offers again, and I start to get suspicious of his motives.

"It's almost like you don't want me around." I jut out my hip.

"You know that's not true." Gray gives me a light scowl.

"Then what gives?"

"The trustee offices are here," Gray tells me, and it takes a second for the information to make sense.

"*Oh.*" I narrow my eyes. Nash is kind enough to wander away from the three of us, giving us a little privacy while she pretends to examine a fountain in the courtyard.

"I don't know if she's here, I don't see her often, but—"

"But you wanted to warn me. Admirable, Mayor Hale."

"Knock it off." Gray rolls his eyes.

"Do you think I'm going to cause a scene?"

Gray continues to look into my eyes. "No, I don't want you to feel blindsided."

"Oh," I say again, this time with much less sarcasm. "Thank you. I'm glad you told me, and just so you know, I wouldn't make a scene."

I would, Percy chimes in. *I can put some dead slugs in her desk drawers*, he offers happily.

“No,” Felix, Gray, and I all chorus together.

“Come on, we’ve got this, guys.” I give Gray a reassuring smile, then head over toward Nash. “Sorry, living in a small town has its drawbacks,” I tell her once I reach her side.

“No worries,” she replies.

“If we run into someone named Tiffany, feel free to give her the stink eye,” I joke, giving her a little bit of an explanation without going too much into our drama.

“Can do,” she confirms with a tight nod.

As we enter the building, Gray ushers us up a wide wooden staircase to the upper floor. Percy doesn’t even warn me before he crawls down my arm and jumps to the bannister. I’m a little nervous when he disappears down a hall, going in a different direction than we are, but not enough to try and stop him. Knowing him, he’ll just come back with some pilfered items no one will miss.

We pass a few office spaces with closed doors, but Gray ignores them all, heading to a larger area with chairs and tables spaced throughout the room.

There’s a counter height wall separating us from an office area against the far wall. An older woman with tight curls and a bright smile lifts her head up from behind a computer monitor as we approach. “Mayor Hale,” she greets, and it ends up being a cross between a wheeze and gasp.

“Afternoon.” Gray leans his elbow on the counter. “I have a question about some property records.”

The woman picks up and shuffles a few papers that were lying in her workspace while her eyes look everywhere but at Gray. “Absolutely. What can I do for you?”

“I’m interested in a specific area.”

“Do you have the lot number or address?” the woman inquires.

Gray looks over at me questioningly but answers the woman. “It’s the Doby place. I think we have the address.”

Before I can search my phone for the house number, the woman speaks up. “Eugene and Aisling? What do you want that for?” She finally glances up at Gray with her wrinkled brow furrowed, as if her curiosity got the best of her, but then she looks away again and resumes shuffling the papers.

“They are out on Route 4. I think I can find it.” She swivels in her chair and makes her way over to a door only accessible from behind the desk area.

“Is she scared of you?” I whisper once the door shuts.

“Probably,” Felix admits at the same time Gray denies it.

Gray scowls and reiterates, “She’s not.”

We don’t have to wait long before the woman returns with a long scroll tucked under her arm and a much smaller folder in her grip. “Would you like to use the records room, or will you be taking these to your office?”

“What do we have here?” Gray asks instead of answering.

“The original survey of the property, and the title transfers throughout the years. It’s not much, the Dobys have held the deed for a long time.”

“How would we find out if there have been any deaths on the property?” Gray inquires.

The woman’s head pulls back, making the loose skin under her neck resemble a gobbler. “Deaths? I don’t know of any deaths, but I suppose you could check the historical society or the library. They keep news archives. Have you asked Eugene? Aisling’s memory can be a bit touch and go, poor thing, but Eugene is sharp as a tack.”

“As prickly as one too,” I mumble under my breath.

“What was that?” she asks. Her pursed lips and narrowed eyes make me think she heard me perfectly. I give the woman a clearly fake smile in return. Felix wraps his pinky over mine and jiggles my hand.

“This is something I’m working on alone for now,” Gray tells her and gathers everything she’s laid on the counter separating us from her work area. “I’ll go over these in my office. Thank you for being so helpful.” I have a feeling Gray added the last part so she won’t be so intimidated if he needs to speak to her again.

We all follow Gray back down the stairs, passing some glass walled offices and the city council meeting room. I’ve always thought the wooden benches make it look like a courtroom, especially with the long bench up front where all the trustee and council members sit.

Gray’s office has a large door with a golden plaque engraved with *The Offices of Mayor Grayson Hale* scrolled across it. The first room we enter has an ornate desk stationed in the center of a long wall. I know right away this isn’t Gray’s actual office. The young woman rising from the seat behind the desk could be the first clue, but it’s just the general feel that gives it away even before that.

“Mayor Hale, I wasn’t expecting you today,” she remarks, letting her eyes roam over the four of us as we file in behind Gray. Her lips lift when she sees Felix, but her tiny smile slips when she notices our fingers are intertwined.

“We’ll be in my conference room,” Gray tells her, barely looking in her direction.

“Afternoon, Faith.” Felix gives her an easy wave as we pass by. Her smile is back in full force when she responds.

“Hi, Felix. Can I get you guys anything?” she offers politely.

Felix looks at me, then at Nash after I shake my head, letting him know I don’t need anything.

“Actually, can you tell me where the bathroom is?” Nash directs her question to Faith.

“Right back out in the hall, first door on the left.” Faith points toward the door we entered through.

“You can use the one in my office.” Gray dismisses Faith’s response, then pushes open a heavy wooden door that leads to another hallway with a series of doors. “Right in there. We’ll be at the end of the hall.”

When the door closes behind us, cutting off our view of Faith, I tug on Felix’s hand to get his attention. “No wonder she has a crush on you. Gray is about as cuddly as a porcupine.”

Felix pushes his glasses up his nose. “She doesn’t have a crush,” he replies dismissively, but we both know he’s full of it.

Gray is already spreading out the large scroll on a conference table with eight chairs surrounding it. I release Felix’s hand and head over to a corner to hold it down, while Felix takes the opposite corner, allowing Gray to pull down the bottom.

It reads like Greek to me. There’s an irregular square with numbers and a squiggly line, which I’m pretty sure represents the river we walked to a few days ago, but I’m not even certain about that. Gray must come to a similar conclusion, because he releases his end, and it rolls up, snapping at my fingers to return to its usual state.

“Let’s look at the deed history.” Gray pulls out the chair at the head of the table and flips open the folder. Some of the papers are yellow with age, but the parchment and ink seem to have held up fine over the years, so everything is neat and easy to read.

I jot down notes in my phone of the four generations who owned the home before Eugene and Aisling, starting with Robert and Elizabeth Doby.

“There’s not enough here.” Gray flips through the papers again as if he may have missed something.

The door to the conference room opens and Nash slips inside. “What did we find?” she asks.

“Not much, just names,” I answer.

“It’s a start,” Nash says, leaning over Gray’s shoulder to look at the documents. “We can use these names to track their families, either through the historical society like the records clerk suggested, or the magical registry.” Nash meets my eyes.

“Damn, that’s a good idea. It’s almost like you know what you’re doing,” I joke.

Nash smiles. “That’s not news, Bishop.”

Gray gathers up pens and a few pads of paper from his office and brings them back to the conference room after we decide to use both resources. Nash and I move to the opposite end of the table. She uses her phone to pull up magical records using the names Elizabeth and Robert Doby.

Their family bloodline and abilities take us about fifteen minutes to copy down, ending with Eugene and Aisling. It seems they never had children.

Gray is still on the phone when we get done. Once he hangs up, we compare notes. He has more general information, like dates of large storms where people died, some fires, and even years when the loss of crops resulted in famine, but nothing specifically about the Dobys or their property.

“We’ll need to do more research on these names. Hopefully, your local papers have gone digital.” Nash doesn’t sound deterred from the task.

Instead of the library, we use the search engines on our phones after dividing the list of the Dobys’ original descendants.

Other than a few obituaries, we only find one news story between us. “I have something.” Felix holds his phone close to his face, and I can see his eyes moving quickly from left to right.

“What did you find?” I set my phone down to give him my undivided attention.

“Eugene and Aisling had a child that died tragically over fifty years ago when he fell off a horse and broke his neck in what was called a *freak*

accident.” Felix looks up from his phone.

“That doesn’t explain how it could have attached itself to me, but it might explain why Aisling wasn’t forthcoming about it.” I glance around the table to gauge the others’ thoughts.

Nash winces, as if the news didn’t go over as well as I hoped it would. “Oh no, what’s that look for?” I wilt a little myself.

“That’s not typically the kind of death that creates a ghost. I’m worried they may have conjured his spirit. If that’s the case, any number of things could have attached itself to the entity and appeared with it.”

I lower my head to my hands and let out a groan. Of course it wouldn’t be easy or straightforward.

“At least we have someplace to start,” Felix soothes. I blow out a big breath and lift my head. He’s right, and feeling sorry for myself wouldn’t be helpful anyway.

“Not to mention you have me.” Nash smirks. “We’ve got this, Bishop. You didn’t baulk when you were sitting across from a necromancer that raised half a cemetery. This is cake in comparison.”

A bubble of laughter erupts from me at the look on Gray’s face after hearing Nash’s jab. I didn’t think his eyes could get that wide.

“Hecate,” Felix curses. “It’s probably a good thing we don’t know what you’re doing most of the time.”

“Come on, let’s return all this stuff to the clerk and head home. Remy texted me three times, wondering when we would be back.”

“He hates being alone.” Gray sighs and begins to rearrange the large plot map and folder while I gather all of our notes.

When we reach his secretary’s front office, Gray stops near the side of her desk. “I’ll be in to go over the motions for this month’s meetings soon. Email me anything that gets added to the agenda.”

“I sent a couple things over this morning,” she says, almost as if she’s asking if he knows this.

“I’ll go over everything,” Gray promises before ushering us toward the door.

“I’ll run this stuff back up,” Felix offers, taking the items from Gray and bouncing up the stairway, so our steps are a little slower than they might have otherwise been, which leads us to run right into Tiffany as she’s walking down the hall.

Gray must notice her before I do, because I end up bumping into his shoulder when he stops dead in his tracks.

Nash picks up on the unease and pauses near us. There's a moment that feels much longer than the second it truly is when I get to examine Tiffany while she's staring at Gray. I notice the slight tightening around her mouth and eyes, and the flaring of her jaw as she clenches her back teeth.

Once she's scanned him from head to toe, her eyes move over, and that's when she notices me. Her mouth never opens, but the way her shoulders move forward as if she gasped makes me think she's holding her breath. I know the feeling.

I've thought about what I would say to her a hundred times over the years, but in the moment, I couldn't come up with one of them if there was a spell aimed at my head. My arm is still pressed against Gray's, so it's easy for him to slide his hand up my back and rub between my shoulder blades.

"I heard you came back," Tiffany finally speaks. Her voice is soft, but it fits her. She's still pretty, and I'm surprised I don't hate her face as much as I thought I would. Maybe I would feel differently if I wasn't bonded to the guys and Felix didn't pretty much fuck me to sleep last night, but I don't want to snatch her bald or even punch her nose.

"Yeah, I'm back," I eventually reply, and it's not even meant to be a dig. There's an awkwardness that builds between us that I don't know how to breach. I'm not sure if we should just walk away or what, but Nash solves the problem for me.

"Here comes Felix. You guys ready?" I think I love her. She's definitely my new best friend.

I look up to see Felix coming down the stairs with Percy in the crook of his arm. "I'm ready," I answer, and that's all it takes for Gray to put a little pressure on my back, urging me forward, and we leave her behind us in more ways than one.

I CAN TELL TODAY IS GOING TO BE
A “DOESN’T PLAY WELL WITH
OTHERS” KIND OF DAY.



When we reach the car, I send a text to Remy to let him know we are on our way home. Surprisingly, I don’t get a response. We texted back and forth a few times while we were in Gray’s office, and he was always quick to get back to me. We’re almost home now, and I still haven’t heard from him.

“What’s wrong?” Gray asks, looking in the rearview mirror.

“Nothing really.” I try to ignore the weird feeling in my stomach, but he must be picking up on the nervousness that seems to be growing with every passing minute.

I stroke my fingers over Percy’s back in a slow pattern until we pull up to the house. The garage door is open, and the car Remy drove to the restaurant with Ash isn’t parked inside. “Where do you think he went?” I ask, then gather up Percy to get out. Maybe that’s why he hasn’t responded—he’s driving.

“I don’t know, he didn’t mention anything,” Felix murmurs.

“Maybe he took Ash somewhere, like a hotel or something. When she comes, she usually stays a few days at a time.” Gray doesn’t need to say why she won’t be staying here this time. It’s pretty evident, and not just because we have a ghost. I can admit I’m not cool enough to let her bunk here.

Nash calls, “Hey,” to get my attention when I would have just gone into the house. I wait for her to round the car. “When we get inside, just go about your normal business. I’d like to see if it will manifest or if I can get a feel for what’s here,” she tells me.

I nod distractedly and agree, “Sure,” but really, I’m wondering why I can’t stop thinking about Remy and where he is. Maybe it’s a side effect of our bond, but that doesn’t seem right.

Gray and Felix hear Nash’s request, so there’s no need to repeat it.

We find ourselves in the kitchen. I wander around like a lost soul while the others get drinks. Felix even grabs a snack. I don’t know how he can eat right now, I’m still full from lunch.

Nash starts to make small talk. “So, you designed the house. Are you an architect?”

“Yeah,” Felix confirms.

“I can’t imagine knowing how to do something like this.” Nash looks around the room.

“I can’t imagine sitting across from a necromancer, so…” He leaves the sentence hanging.

“Oh, that wasn’t me. It was your girl. She was all in for that kid from the word go. Anybody else would have probably wanted him locked up for the murder, but she was team Gavin from the beginning.”

“Murder? He killed someone and he’s a kid? There’s so much to fucking unpack with that.” Gray moves over to the booth.

“Did you design the inside of the house too?” Nash sits across from Gray but directs her question to Felix. She’s not wowed by my actions, and she shouldn’t be.

Before Felix can respond, the glass Gray got out hits the floor and shatters. We all look in that direction, but none of us say a word about it.

“I did all the hard fixtures and then helped with the other stuff.” Felix picks right back up where we left off, and our conversation continues as if nothing happened.

After another few minutes, I look at my phone again. There still isn’t anything from Remy, so I try to call him instead. The line rings several times before his generic voicemail picks up, telling me to leave a message.

“He’s still not answering,” I announce right in the middle of Gray telling Nash what new fast-food chain is trying to come to Hill Crest. “Something feels off. Am I overreacting?” I want one of them to tell me yes, but Gray and Felix just look at each other instead.

“I think I have Ash’s number,” Felix says, pulling out his phone. “Maybe he had to go see his agent or something.” After just a brief pause, he makes a call.

“Hello, yeah, this is Felix.”

I breathe out a heavy sigh. She’ll know something.

“I was just wondering if you knew where Remy was. Can you give me a call back?” My heart falls a little when I realize she didn’t answer either. “I’ll text her. She probably doesn’t know my number.” Felix’s thumbs move quickly across the screen, then he sets his phone faceup on the table so we can all see if she replies.

Several scenarios start to worm their way into my mind. Did they get into a car accident? Or is it something more mundane like Gray suggested and Remy had a meeting?

That doesn’t feel right though. A niggle of concern festers, making it impossible to ignore. What if this has something to do with Bursa? He’s kind of been an afterthought in all this since I’ve been here. Finding Aisling and making sure she was safe became center stage. Now, we’re dealing with this entity bullshit.

I hit Lewis’ number from my speed dial. “Lo,” she answers.

“Anything new with Bursa? Any news?” I don’t bother with a greeting.

She cuts right to the chase. “Nothing on our end. What’s going on, Bishop?”

“I don’t know. I have a bad feeling, and I can’t get a hold of one of my men. The guys I’m with,” I explain.

“You think it has something to do with Bursa?” I hear a door close, and the background noise over the line lowers.

“I don’t know, but something is off, and I don’t think it has to do with the shit going on at the house. Nash is here, she gave us charms, plus there’s been recent activity on that front.”

Now that the thought is out there, I grow even more anxious. “Bursa is a skilled illusionist. He can make people think and see shit that isn’t true.” I cradle my head in my free hand. “I should have warned them about this.” I’m kicking myself right now for diminishing the threat.

“Bursa hasn’t hit the radar once since he disappeared. What makes you think this has anything to do with him?” I can hear Lewis typing on her computer. “I just made contact with someone at the safe house, everything is fine there. They said your dad is a pain in the ass, but all cops are.”

I blow out a breath. That’s good to hear, but it doesn’t help with Remy’s disappearance. “I don’t have anything solid on why I would think it’s Bursa,

but Remy wouldn't just vanish. We texted back and forth an hour ago. He knew we were coming back soon, he was waiting for us."

Felix's phone rings. "Hang on, this might be something," I whisper, not even listening to see if Lewis replies.

Felix blessedly hits the answer button, then the speakerphone icon right after. "Hey, Ash, is Remy with you?" he asks.

"No, I left when you guys got home." She sounds confused.

"When we got home?" Felix looks up at me. His face is a little pale.

"Yeah, I was on the porch, about to slip, when you guys pulled up." She makes it sound like he must be crazy for not noticing her.

"Oh fuck," I mutter.

"What's going on?" Ash questions hesitantly.

"You only saw the car, not who was in it?" I question.

"It was the Cadillac. I know Rem's car."

"Hang up, she won't be any help," I tell Felix. To Lewis, I say, "It was Bursa. There's no other explanation because it wasn't us."

"What's his play here?" Lewis questions, not because she doesn't believe me, more like she wants to run through possible scenarios.

"Make Remy think it's me and see if he can get any information about where Belinda is?" I offer my first thought. "I don't think Remy would fall for it. We're bonded, and even if we weren't, Remy would know it wasn't me," I argue once I have a second to think.

"What else could Bursa try?"

"Maybe a swap or trade of some sort."

"Everything says this guy is too smart for that," Lewis reasons.

"But he's getting desperate, right? Otherwise, he wouldn't try something like this. Desperate people are not rational."

"He might not be able to convince Remy he's you, but could he convince Remy that he has you by using illusions to try to force Remy to tell him what he knows?"

My stomach hurts, and I feel like I might throw up. "He could try, but Remy doesn't know anything."

"Bursa doesn't know that. Like you said, he's not thinking rationally."

"I need to go. I have to find him."

I'm about to hang up on Lewis when she calls out, "Wait!" I don't hang up, but I don't respond to her either. "Is there anything we can use to track him? He's a big deal athlete or something, right?"

“Yeah, he plays for the Titans.” My voice is flat. This is wasting precious time.

“Sometimes they put tracking spells into expensive items, like bowl rings and watches. There are rules about using them to find people, but I can get around that.”

I’m shaking my head before she even finishes. “Remy doesn’t wear jewelry, but it was worth a shot, thank you. I need to go.”

“You have our full resources on this, Bishop. I’ll put out the word here and see what else I can dig up. Keep me updated.”

I’m already standing up from the table when I say, “Thank you,” and hang up.

“What are we doing?” Gray and Felix both rise with me.

“I’m going to try scrying for him. Maybe if I’m fast enough, I can get a lock on him before Bursa blocks me. I need something important to him, something he touches or even wears often.” I look to both of them for help. They have been around Remy a lot more than I have over the last several years.

“We’ll find something.” Felix nods.

I leave the kitchen at a near jog, with Nash trailing behind me, and head into Felix’s spell room. “Percy, I need your help,” I announce, knowing he’ll come.

I’m not careful at all as I shove things to the side in a bid to find the right tools. Something crashes to the floor, and I don’t care enough to look at what it was. I find a large wooden bowl. The interior is charred and blackened. I would bet it’s a garbage bowl, something Felix tosses his used matches and burnt offerings into, but it’s created the perfect vessel for a scrying surface.

Paper is easy to find. Felix has scrolls of it everywhere. I scan a large, heavy piece, not caring that I might ruin what’s on it but concerned that it could tamper with my spell. Finding no flaws, I tear off a large piece and set it to the side with the intent to have Felix draw what I need.

“How can I help?” Nash offers. My eyes almost skid past her, but then I see the bag she pulled the crystals from earlier today.

“Do you have any more stones? An obelisk?” I ask hopefully.

“I have a few others.” She hustles over to the larger bag and dumps the contents onto the table. A rough smoky quartz catches my eye. It’s not an obelisk, but it is pointed at one end. I can make it work.

“Can I have this?” I hold it up for her to examine, but I would use it even if she said no.

“Anything you need.” She waves her hands over the remaining crystals.

Felix enters the room. He’s breathing a little hard, and he has an item fisted in his grip. It looks like a piece of clothing.

I extend my hand, waiting for him to pass it over. When the thin material hits my palm, I shake it out to examine it. “This—this can’t be his.” Did I explain what I needed wrong? It’s a shirt, and when I look closer, I realize it’s familiar.

“He keeps it with him, even when he travels,” Felix explains hurriedly. “It’s important to him, he’s had it forever.”

“But it’s mine,” I argue. “I don’t know if this will work, and we need to hurry.”

“I have his toothbrush.” Gray holds up a fancy ass black electric toothbrush.

“Are you kidding me?” I look between the two of them, at a loss.

“I didn’t think the gym equipment would work,” Gray replies.

“I’ll try this.” I shake the shirt clutched in my fingers. “Felix, can you draw the surrounding area in the center of this paper and the alphabet around the perimeter?” I make a circle on the paper. “It needs to fit in here.” I point to the bowl I’ll be using. He nods and picks up the metallic marker I placed with the paper, getting right to work.

I reach behind me and unclasp my necklace, then let one end loose so my charms fall off the chain and land on the table with the remaining stones. Nash reacts, trying to catch them before they hit the floor.

“Gray, I need water. Distilled would be best if we have it.”

“On the shelf, it’s labeled,” Felix tells him without looking up from the paper.

I loop my necklace around the crystal until the stones swing like a pendulum from the chain. Once I know I have it set, I light a candle with a long ceremonial lighter. I know I’m rushing and should slow down, but every moment lost feels like too much.

After giving the candle a few moments to burn, I pinch the flame between my fingers and mutter, “Gather,” then open my hand and direct the flame I stole from the candle into the bowl. “Cleanse.” I don’t have time to be fancy. My words hold enough intent to ignite the entire interior surface for one brief second before the flame dies, doing exactly what I wanted.

I collect the bowl, my newly made scrying chain, and the shirt, then I head over to the circle Felix crafted. Placing my back to the tree, I sit on the cool ground and try to center myself. Percy climbs up to my shoulder, fortifying my strength.

Gray follows us over and extends the jug of water to me, which I pour into the bowl cradled between my butterfly legs.

The water becomes inky black once the bowl is full, reflecting the charred interior and making the perfect black mirror. Now I just need the map from Felix. I turn to see him still hunched over the table. I want to tell him to hurry up, but the way his elbow is moving quickly back and forth tells me he understands the urgency.

When he stands back and examines the paper, I lose my battle not to rush him. "Come on," I urge.

Felix snatches the paper and brings it over. "I tried to make it detailed enough but still cover as much area as possible," he says, handing me the heavy sheet. The golden lines are neat and precise. I can point out several landmarks spanning well beyond anything I would have managed to draw myself.

"Thank you, it's perfect." I meet his worried gaze with my own. "I'm going to set the circle now. This is a long process," I warn just so they don't attempt to interrupt.

"I've got you," Nash promises, meaning she won't let them try to stop the spell.

I touch my finger to the circle and whisper, "*Clausa.*" The magic already filling the space is heavy, rebounding off of my erected magical barrier and settling over me. I sway a little.

Remy's presence is with me, just as Gray's and Felix's is. Proof of our bond. "I feel him," I croak out through a tight throat.

"He's going to be fine," Gray soothes, but it comes out more like a demand.

I wrap the shirt around my fist and gather the end of my necklace in my fingers, making sure the fabric is touching the chain. With my other hand, I slowly place the paper onto the water. The golden lines remain on the surface, but the paper slips to the bottom of the bowl, useless now as it disappears into the depths.

Closing my eyes, I intone, "What we seek, we shall find. Show me what is mine." The words flow over and over in my head, repeating on an endless

loop. My only thoughts are of finding Remy. I visualize him in my mind just as I saw him this morning.

A tug on the chain prompts me to open my eyes. I blink several times, trying to clear my blurry vision so I can see where it's indicating.

"He's not far," I offer and cough right after. My throat is so dry, I must have been here awhile. The tautness of the chain is a constant tug. I wish there was a way to use this to track him. As soon as the thought forms, I whisper words I wasn't expecting to say. "Sought and found, guide me to what I have been denied." The accumulated magic in the circle abruptly drops over my head and splashes some of the water out of the bowl and onto my legs.

Nothing remains of the golden map but shimmering slicks floating on the water. All the definition is gone, but the pendulum is still tugging as if directing me where to go. I look up at Felix and Gray. Their shocked expressions probably mirror mine. "I think it worked."

No thinking, it worked. Percy sounds proud and confident.

"Did you just turn a scrying spell into a tracking spell? You shouldn't be able to do that," Nash whispers.

"Says who? Because I'm pretty sure I just did." I can't let her doubt infiltrate my confidence. Belief is almost as important as intent.

TELL ME HOW I HAVE UPSET YOU,
BECAUSE I WANT TO KNOW HOW
TO DO IT AGAIN.



The tug on the chain remains consistent, almost like the needle on a compass always finds north, even after I step out of the circle. I keep the shirt and chain clenched in my hand. There's no way I'm letting go and chancing the spell dying. "The scry pointed to the other side of town, we should head that way."

"Should I call for backup?" Nash asks, and she touches her side as if feeling for her weapon.

"We don't know where we're going yet, and I don't want to alert Bursa that we're on to him."

"I'll tell them to be on standby," she offers, and I can't think of a reason why that wouldn't be a good idea.

"Okay, but I don't want him slipping away with Remy," I warn. Nash steps over to the side of the front door and speaks into the phone. I use the time to tell Gray and Felix, "Bursa is an illusionist. He's a pretty big deal on the West Coast. He can make you see shit that isn't real, but we have an advantage. We know what to look for, and I can feel magic, so I should know if he's casting."

A painting hanging on the wall crashes to the floor, breaking the frame and shattering glass all over. I open my mouth, ready to scream that I don't have time for this shit, but Gray places his heavy hand on my shoulder, stopping me.

He brings me back to the topic. "One thing at a time." He meets my eyes. "What kind of illusions? Can he look like you?"

"Yes, but you guys would be able to tell. He would only fool someone who doesn't know the person well. He can make you see other things

though, like tricking your mind into seeing more gruesome things like one of us dying or being hurt. Those images are harder for your mind to distinguish from the truth because it's processing the trauma too."

"You think that's how he got Remy? I can't see him going along otherwise," Felix muses.

"It could be, just remember our bond. He can't mimic that or make it go away. Remember, I could feel Remy when I entered the circle, so I know he's okay," I remind them.

Nash comes back over to us after ending her call, and the front door flies open. Instead of being pissed, I just use it to get out of the house faster.

"Damn, it's like it wanted us to leave," Felix mutters as we climb into the SUV. This time, I'm up front so I can direct Gray where to go.

"Head toward Rawsonville Road. Near the park." Felix used it as a landmark on the map and that was near where the pendulum pointed.

The ride feels long, even though we reach a fork within ten minutes. Gray makes a right turn to head toward the park, but the chain tugs in the opposite direction. "Stop!" I lay my hand over his leg, and he slams on the brakes. "We have to go the other way." I look down at the quartz wavering just a little to the left.

Gray puts the SUV in reverse and the tires spin as he floors the gas. The moment we're heading back in the right direction, the pulling settles to the same constant pressure. Another mile or two pass without incident and the area, even in the dark, becomes familiar. "Is that Route 4?" I point to the stop sign about a half a mile up reflecting the headlights.

"Yeah," Gray replies quickly without suspicion, but something in my gut shifts.

"Don't the Dobys live on Route 4?" Nash leans forward from the backseat.

"Make a right," I say once we slow down for the intersection. There's no one around, so Gray rolls right through the turn. Sure as shit, the pull on the chain remains the same. I know from being out here so often recently that there isn't much else out here.

"Holy shit," I whisper as things start to fall into place. "Stop." I don't have to be loud for Gray to listen. He hits the brakes, and we screech to a halt in the middle of the deserted road.

"Wrong way?" Gray asks with his hand already on the shifter.

“No, it’s the right way.” I turn so I’m looking at Gray and can see into the backseat at the same time. “He’s been playing me this whole time.”

“Who? I don’t understand. Is it not working?” Felix is agitated.

“The tracker is working. It’s taking us to the Doby place.” I really don’t have time to tell them everything I figured out, but I need to warn them.

“What?” Gray scrunches up his face, and the lights from the dash make him look macabre.

“Eugene,” I spit. “At least his obsession with my dad makes more sense now.”

“Wait, Bursa is controlling Eugene?” Gray questions.

“No, I think Eugene has been Bursa this entire time. Think about it. It would explain why Aisling acted so strange and warned me away.” I don’t even delve into my spirit theory. It’s not relevant right now.

Gray rubs his hand on the back of his neck. “He did act like a woman beating fuck.”

“Do you want me to notify the team?” Nash takes my word as the truth.

“See if they can drop a no-slip net over the area. I don’t want him getting away again.” I start thinking of the best way to get Remy out of this. I have no idea what Bursa has done to him. He could be torturing his mind for all I know.

Nash is speaking to someone on the phone, but I can’t focus on her right now. I need this to end and for everyone to walk away—well, everyone but Bursa. I kind of want to strangle him with my bare hands right now.

“I sent our location. They need twenty minutes to assemble, slip, and set up the EMF disrupter.”

My leg starts to bounce. I don’t want to wait, even though I know it’s the right thing to do.

Felix sums up my feelings, commenting, “This is going to be the longest twenty minutes of our lives.”

“Let’s find a place to park so we’re not in the middle of the road,” I tell Gray. He flips off the automatic headlights and uses the parking lights to guide us to the side of the road before turning those off too. I don’t expect Eug—Bursa to happen upon us, but it’s better to be safe than sorry.

As the seconds begin to tick by, I start to worry I’m wrong. What if I’m seeing something that isn’t there? But it makes too much sense. I can’t believe I didn’t see it sooner. The ghost is probably the real Eugene, that’s

why he could follow me. His death was too recent for him to be tied to any location.

“Poor Aisling,” I mutter.

“Do you think she was in on it?” Nash asks.

“No, I think Bursa killed her husband and stashed her away someplace so he could tell my dad she was missing again and lure him to the Dobys’ house.”

“Has it been twenty minutes yet?” Felix inquires.

“Close. I’ll get a text when we have the green light. How do you want to roll in, Bishop? I have a few of those invisible spells,” Nash offers.

For the first time all night, a smile lifts my lips. “I could kiss you.” I turn to see her in the backseat.

It’s too dark to see her answering grin, but I can hear it when she says, “I think you have enough lips. You don’t need to add more to the list.”

“You’re right, but damn, I need to be more prepared like you. I don’t carry anything other than my shields.” I reach up with my free hand and realize I don’t even have those tonight. All my charms are back at the house.

Nash tries to make me feel better. “Give it time. You’re always called in for special circumstances or fall into cases.” A light flashes, and she looks down at her phone. “We have the go-ahead. EMF disrupter is in place, and there are agents surrounding the property. He’s not slipping past us.”

“They all know about his ability?” I open my door, and the others follow me.

“Everyone has been made aware,” she confirms.

“Do you have any cuffs?” I wince.

“Yep!” She pulls her hand out of her pocket, and there are two charm discs in her palm. Reaching behind her back with the other, she produces the cuffs. “We can go in pairs. Are we activating out here or closer to the property?”

I take one of the discs and the cuffs, then look at the guys, who are silently waiting for instructions. “I think I should drive up. I’ve stopped by unexpectedly once before, so it might not trip too many red flags.”

“I don’t like it.” Gray crosses his arms over his chest.

“Me either. Can we just sneak in and slit his throat?” Felix offers.

Told you he was a killer, Percy singsongs.

“We can’t just sneak into the house, not when he has the place shielded. Percy said his wards are strong. We either need him to come out, or we need him to allow us to come in,” I remind them.

“Damnit,” Gray curses.

“I think it’s our best bet. Who knows what he will do to Remy and Aisling if we go in full tilt? If he thinks I’m alone—”

You won’t be alone, dear witch. Percy interrupts me with the reminder. It’s not that I forgot about him, it’s more that he’s become a part of me.

“Good, I doubt he knows any other minks that would gnaw through his Achilles’ heel either.” Gray tips his head respectfully to Percy.

“If he thinks it’s only us, he may assume he has the upper hand and drop the shield, allowing the rest of you to get inside without him realizing it,” I continue.

When no one argues, I hand a charm disc over to Gray. “This will only stop you from being seen, not heard or felt, so be mindful of your surroundings,” I warn them. “Are you okay if Felix shares yours?”

Nash nods. “Yeah, that works.”

We climb back into the car with me in the driver’s seat this time. “I’ll drop you guys as close as I can, then drive slowly the rest of the way up so you can stay with the car.”

“What’s the plan once we get inside?” Nash asks.

“Find Remy and detain Bursa, preferably in that order, but getting Bursa locked down so he can’t use magic might be more pertinent.”

“Shouldn’t one of us have the cuffs then?” Felix suggests.

“If you think you can get close enough to him without him noticing, slip them on. Moving around in a confined space with the charm will probably be tough.”

“I’ll take the cuffs,” Nash says, approving of the plan. While I trust Gray and Felix to knock the guy out, I don’t know if they have enough finesse to get him locked down, but she does.

“Okay,” I agree.

When I can just make out the Doby house in the distance, I warn everyone, “I turned off the interior lights, but be quick getting out and don’t slam the doors.”

“We’re good. Please be careful,” Felix murmurs with his hand on my shoulder.

“I will, you too.” I wish I could give him a hug or a kiss, but I have to settle for the brief touch instead.

I stop the car and they pile out swiftly as instructed, and once Felix jogs around the vehicle to be closer to Nash, the three of them disappear right before my eyes. I continue down the drive as if I never stopped.

The anxious feeling is eating away at my stomach again. I want to hit the gas hard and tear into the house so I can demand he give me Remy and Aisling, but I know I can’t. Instead, I focus on keeping my breathing steady and even, trying to come up with a viable reason I might show up this late at night.

The moment I turn off the car, I open my door. Magic blasts me, stronger than ever before. It confirms my assumptions. Without my shield amulet, I feel Percy’s nails clawing into my shoulder as he clings to me, but it’s easy to ignore.

“Are you here?” My lips barely move as I whisper.

“Here,” Gray whispers softly, panting. Maybe I was going too fast. I don’t have time to feel bad now. The porch light flicks on before the front door creaks open slowly.

Eugene, or at least his visage, is standing behind the screen, silhouetted against the doorframe. Seeing him now, I don’t know how I ever fell for the old man act.

I stand rooted in place, waiting for him to say something, anything, but he just looks at me from the shadows of the house. My first step forward is measured, because I’m half expecting him to slam the door in my face. When he doesn’t, I grow a little more confident in my stride.

From the bottom step, I can make out his face slightly better, and that’s when he finally speaks. “Another house call? Are you here to check up on Aisling again?” His voice is darker, and I don’t think he’s trying nearly as hard to hide. He doesn’t really fit in the role he’s been trying to play, or maybe it’s just easier for me to see through the illusion now that I know the truth.

“Would you believe I was in the area?” I play it cool with a tiny curl of my lips that could almost be seen as a smile.

“Whatever could you be doing way out here?” He pushes the screen open as if he’s inviting me in, but not making any moves to come outside.

I decide to play on his insecurities and flatter him at the same time. “Oh, you probably wouldn’t understand. You’ve been married for a long time,

and I can tell how much you love your wife.” I purposely don’t use Aisling’s name as I walk up the few steps to the house.

“Marriage is hard, especially when one of the people in the relationship doesn’t value the other,” he tells me.

I nod my head as if I’m listening intently to his sage words and hold the screen open. There’s something stopping me from going right in. I want to give the others a chance to get close so they can slip in with me.

“I usually talk to my dad about this stuff, but he’s not going to call me until tomorrow. Something brought me here. I’m sorry to intrude.” I look down at the ground, feigning submission.

“Your dad must be really busy not to have time for you. Come on in,” he offers.

I take a step forward, and I feel something brush against my back. It gives me the nerve I need to step over the threshold. “Thanks, I won’t stay long.” I step toward Bursa, so he’ll have to give me a little more room.

The magic in the house is even more potent. I can’t believe I thought he was leaking this much. I rub my hand over my arms in turn, feeling the need to dispel the dense weight pressing against me.

The imposter leads me to the empty kitchen. I keep my eyes peeled and my head on a swivel, but I don’t see any evidence of Remy or Aisling. “Aisling isn’t asleep, is she?”

“Oh no, she’s hanging around somewhere,” he states rather flatly. It gives me a chill. I look over my shoulder, wondering if the others made it into the house yet.

“Have a seat, Agent Bishop, and we can discuss why you really came here.”

DON'T JUDGE ME BECAUSE I'M
QUIET. NO ONE PLANS A MURDER
OUT LOUD.



The person before me shifts from an aging man to one about thirty years younger. If I didn't already hate him, I would say he's attractive for a guy my dad's age. He leans against the counter in a way I've seen Remy and others do countless times.

I let out a heavy breath as I lower myself into the chair like he asked. I still want him to feel empowered, I know that's something he craves. "I'm not that good of an actress, huh?"

He tilts his head to the side. "Better than you'd think actually. I'm just that good. I am curious though, how did you figure it out?"

"Tell me where Remy is, and I'll tell you all about it." I fold my hands together on the table.

"He's a curious choice for someone like you," Bursa comments instead of answering my direct request.

I play along. "What do you mean?"

"He's nearly a dud and easy to manipulate. He allowed someone else to come between you." Bursa wrinkles up his nose a little as if he truly doesn't understand why I would be with Remy.

"Which is the worse offense?" I inquire, but I'm really wondering how he knows so much.

Bursa looks up at the ceiling, as if he's really thinking about the question. Percy slowly moves down my arm and settles on my thigh instead. I stroke his back a few times. I want to see if Bursa notices my familiar's move and will pay attention if Percy slips away.

"I don't think I would have seen past the first issue to see the other flaws," he finally admits.

“Remy’s lack of natural magic is not a flaw,” I snap, not intending for it to come out as harshly as it does, but I don’t like people talking shit.

Bursa’s gaze never once acknowledges Percy, which was what I was looking for. The next time he looks away from me, I’m going to urge my mink to search the house. I also need to think of a way to get Bursa away from the counter. Nobody is going to be able to get close to him while he’s standing like that. It’s not like Nash can just reach across him and slap the cuffs on his wrists.

“Is that it? Does having someone so much weaker than you by your side make you feel powerful? If you choose someone more powerful, someone you have to break to your will, it’s even better. We’re not all that different,” he says conversationally, warping my words.

Another wave of magic blossoms from Bursa. I try not to give away that I can feel it, but my eyes want to track the direction I feel it traveling in. A chill skates down my spine when I hear a high-pitched scream that definitely sounded like a woman. Was that Nash?

I look behind me where the sound seemed to have come from, but I don’t see anything out of the norm. When I glance back at Bursa, he’s watching me intently.

“Does Aisling need help?” My voice is pitched low.

“That wasn’t Aisling.”

I lick my lips. “Who was it?”

“Why don’t you tell me?” Bursa lifts his brows, and another scream splits the air as if on cue.

I place my palm on the table, preparing to stand, Percy hops off my leg and scurries under the table. *Don’t let him fool you, witch. That was meant to sound like you.*

Realization dawns as I rise. He’s using his magic to try to fool the others. He knows they are in the house. “How can you be so sure it’s not Aisling? She might need help.” I stare at Bursa, hoping Percy goes to check on the others.

“She hasn’t made a peep since yesterday. Poor thing exhausted herself over the past few days,” he mocks. I watch, mystified, as a wooden cutting board gets swiped off the counter and crashes into Bursa’s hip. He reacts to the attack by bending to the side to get away from the slab of wood, but the object already hit its mark and falls to the floor, narrowly missing Bursa’s foot.

“You can do better than that.” Bursa pulls himself to his full height and acts as if the cutting board didn’t hurt him at all.

“I didn’t do that.” I back away a step, making sure not to hit the chair behind me.

“One of your friends then?” he asks conversationally.

I shake my head in denial, but my gaze is drawn upward when the simple light fixture above the table starts to swing back and forth by an unseen force. Hexes, even knowing it’s probably the real Eugene still freaks me out.

“It must be the other agent she was seen with today,” Bursa muses to himself. “Nash, I think her name was.” The fact that he knows that is downright creepy. I wonder how he found that out.

“It’s not her. I think you already know who it is.” I’ve put a little more space between us, since I don’t want him lunging and getting his hands on me.

“Don’t tell me the old coot convinced you the place is haunted?” He snorts dismissively.

“I didn’t need convincing. I saw the evidence with my own eyes.” I dart my gaze up to the moving light, then back down again so as not to take my eyes off Bursa for long.

“That man didn’t have the energy to create a ghost.” Apparently, Bursa doesn’t put a lot of faith in other people or their abilities.

A decorative plate flies off the wall and smashes into the side of Bursa’s head. He lifts his arms in an attempt to protect himself, but he isn’t fast enough. The thud is loud, but the shattering of glass when the plate falls to the floor is even louder.

There’s an angry red mark on Bursa’s temple running down to his ear. When he clenches his jaw, I see the area right over his cheekbone beginning to swell with what might end up being a goose egg. The magic coming from him wavers for a moment, as if he briefly lost his concentration.

“I think you offended Eugene,” I mumble. It was more of an observation than it was meant to be a taunt, but I don’t think he sees it that way.

Bursa takes a quick menacing step forward, but a look of complete and utter shock covers his face in the next second when he looks down at something neither of us can see. I expect to see something move or fly

across the room, what I don't expect is to see Nash and Felix materialize right before my eyes.

Nash is breathing hard, and I swear there's a sheen of tears in her eyes, but the absolute hate filled gaze she's throwing at Bursa could easily rival my own. With her gaze locked on his, and her hand clinging to the single cuff she managed to get around his wrist, she growls, "Put your hands behind your back, you sick fucker."

My mouth falls open. While that was completely called for, it was also completely unexpected coming from Nash. Bursa lifts his chin in the air, and I think he might try to fight, but a knife appears, pushed up against his throat hard enough to cut him. We're not talking a thin little razor slice either. This is from a dull kitchen blade that has torn the skin more than made a smooth cut.

Bursa licks his lips and moves his free hand behind his back, narrowly avoiding Gray, who is holding the knife and all up in Bursa space as if he's looking for a reason to use the blade.

"Where are Remy and Aisling?" I ask while Nash moves with him to put his already cuffed hand behind his back. A smile forms on Bursa's lips, even though he's been completely incapacitated. I don't like that look.

"You'll never find them alive." My heart skips a beat at his words. Felix reaches over and punches Bursa in the side of the head, hitting the same spot the heavy plate did, and the swelling splits open. Bursa blinks slowly a few times, and that's when I see an apron of blood flowing from his neck.

There's a sharp clang when Gray throws the knife that was in his fist to the floor and uses both of his hands to hold up Bursa—he would have fallen otherwise.

Nash drops Bursa's arm and the dangling cuff she never attached, then starts yelling, "We need a healer. We need a healer in here now!" while pulling out her phone. She repeats the same thing through the phone, and I hear someone burst through the front door.

Everything is happening so fast, but it somehow feels like it's in slow motion too. "We need him alive," Nash orders. Bubbles start to gurgle out of the gash in Bursa's throat, and a funny sound comes with it.

"Hecate, did you use a chainsaw?" a somewhat familiar voice remarks, but I can't focus on anything but the blood coming from Bursa. Every drop lost means there's less of a chance to find out what he did with Remy. "Lie him down," the voice instructs. "Give me some room."

Felix and a pale Gray step backwards, bringing them closer to me.

“Keep him alive, Kline. We need to see what’s in his head.” Bursa’s eyes widen at Nash’s words, as if everything that was already happening was okay, but the thought of someone getting into his head is more than he can handle. More choking noises sound, but they are cut off abruptly when magic fills the room—healing magic.

“He’ll be fine,” Kline coos. “Neck wounds bleed, especially when you nick the carotid. He’ll have a nasty scar though, and I’m not making any promises about his vocal cords, but we don’t need those anyway, not when we can see every little thing for ourselves.” Kline leans over Bursa, talking directly to him in a taunting manner. The man twitches a few times, like he’s actually trying to fight Kline from saving him, but his effort is fruitless.

Wuornos walks through the doorway with Lewis at his side. “Hello, Bishop,” he greets conversationally, and I notice he has a shadow behind him—Gavin, the necromancer. Should a kid be seeing this?

Gavin walks directly to my side and looks at the floor, seeing the same thing I am—a whole lot of blood. “He’s a bad guy, right?” He turns his head to examine me.

I nod because I don’t know if I’m capable of more.

“Why not let him die then?” He shrugs.

“He has information I need and—” I try to think of another reason we shouldn’t just let him bleed out, but I come up blank. Maybe my brain isn’t working right.

Gavin nods like he understands now. “I can reanimate his corpse, but his soul won’t be there to answer your questions,” he explains. I nod again, because in some strange way, I think it’s his way of saying he’s sorry he can’t be helpful if Bursa dies.

“Kline thinks he’ll make it,” I state out loud, hoping it will help bring meaning to the words.

“I just reacted,” Felix says, looking like he’s in a daze.

“I wanted to punch him too, it’s okay.” I wrap my pinky around his cold finger. Gray is quiet. I look over at him. While his face is still pale, it’s calm too. “It’s not your fault,” I tell him. “Bursa created this mess, we just reacted to it.”

Gray looks at me, his hazel eyes steady, and murmurs, “He’s rotten on the inside. I would have been doing him a favor.”

I’m a little shocked by the cold statement, but I try not to let it show.

“He’s ready to be moved.” Kline stands up from his crouched position, and two medics move in to flip Bursa onto a gurney, none too gently from the looks of it. “He’ll need a transfusion to speed up the healing, we want him fresh for his truth probe.”

“Which I will be handling myself,” Wuornos informs the room.

Bursa makes a strangled sound, and his lips move, but nothing more than air passes from his mouth.

“Safe travels, Mr. Bursa. I’ll be seeing you very soon.” Wuornos pats the side of the gurney, letting the medics know they can move Bursa. I notice Percy slinking along the wall to avoid being stepped on as people start filing out of the house.

Lewis allows everyone to pass, then makes her way over to me. “Looks like my elaborate plan to get Bursa to come to us was a bust. Thankfully, you’re a good closer and you got it taken care of anyway.” Her dark eyes reflect her smile when she continues, “I put a call in to the team with your dad. He and Belinda will probably be here soon. I don’t think they will be able to hold him off for long.”

I ignore everything else she said. “I need to find Remy.”

“And you’ll have the support of the entire MBI. We have a team on the ground already searching the property,” she informs me. “Do you have any clue where he might be holding them?”

“They can’t be far. I made a tracker, and it led me here,” I tell her and shove my hand into my pocket. When I pull my fist out and open my palm, the stone is no longer attached to the chain. Both lie idle in my hand. My heart sinks.

“You crafted a tracker?” Wuornos inserts himself into the conversation.

“It was a scrying spell. I adapted it.” If he wants to charge me with use of unsanctioned magic, he can, right after I find Remy.

“Are you sure you wouldn’t like to work for me?” he asks instead.

“We’ll find them, Bishop.” Lewis ignores the Assistant Director of Seers trying to recruit me after I just admitted I may have used illegal magic.

At least we know who to call if we need to hide a body, Percy observes.

Gray starts coughing as if he’s choking on his own air. I think it has more to do with what my mink said though.

“Bursa said we’d never find them alive. I’m worried he’s done something,” I share, voicing my concern about what Bursa promised.

“Frankie, you know he’s okay, right?” Gray places his hands on my shoulders and directs me to look at him. I agree and follow the movement of his head when he nods, because I can still feel that glowing piece of Remy within me.

“We need to find him,” I repeat uselessly.

“We will, they are loading Eugene—” Gray closes his eyes briefly. “Him into the ambulance. They’ll look in his head and find out where Remy is.”

“Move out of the way!” a loud voice shouts. Drawn by the familiar timbre, I look toward the doorway and spot my dad shoving his way through the crowd of people who are still gathered in the kitchen. “Frances,” he bellows with his eyes darting around, spotting me before I can answer.

“Pop.” My voice is weak, more like a plea.

“What’s going on? Are you all right?” He barrels through the rest of the group to get to me. Gray steps to the side so Dad can run his eyes over me.

“I’m fine. He took Remy, we need to find him.”

“Bursa took Remy?” Dad’s brows furrow like he finds that hard to believe.

“He must have used an illusion,” I explain. We all know Remy wouldn’t have gone with Bursa any other way, and there’s no way he would be strong enough to overpower Remy.

Dad takes his eyes off me for the first time and looks around the kitchen. “Where are Eugene and Aisling? They know the area better than anyone.”

“Eugene is... I’m pretty sure he’s dead. I’m hoping Aisling is with Remy, but I don’t know. When I asked Bursa about her, he said she was hanging around and that she hadn’t made a peep in a while,” I caution just in case he hurt her.

“Fucking bastard,” Dad curses.

“We searched the house,” an agent I don’t know announces. “It’s empty.”

“What about the barns and outbuildings?” Dad prompts.

“Pop,” I call loudly to get his attention. I need to give him a rundown of what’s been happening and see if he has any insight. “Bursa was pretending to be Eugene. I think he stashed Aisling away somewhere to make it look like she was missing. The next day when she was home, her hands were all

dirty and scratched up.” I rub my fingers together, wondering if it’s some sort of clue. “Do you have any idea where he would have put her?”

“Did you check the root cellar?” Dad snaps and looks around the room.

“I didn’t find a basement.” The man who originally spoke glances around to see if anyone else has anything to add.

“There isn’t a basement. It’s behind the house.” Dad turns and makes his way toward the door with Percy, Gray, Felix, and me all on his heels.

Dad stops abruptly when he reaches the bottom step of the front porch. “I need a light, give me a light.” A woman rushes over to his side, with no questions asked, and spreads open her hands, producing a glow brighter than any flashlight could. The orb stays lit when Dad accepts it into his own palm.

Walking slowly and moving the light from left to right, he canvasses the lawn behind the house. I scan the horizon, but I have no idea what I’m looking for.

“There we go,” Dad announces and hustles over to a small mound near some crumbling stones. It’s as if there was once a small building here, and this is all that remains of the foundation.

Dad hurries around the knoll, and I realize there’s a door built into the side of the hill that wasn’t visible from the other side—an old wooden door that is barely propped in place. My heart sinks. That door could never hold Remy, it’s falling apart. As if to prove my point, Dad pulls on the thing and it doesn’t swing open. Instead, it falls, scratching the side of his head and face as it comes down.

“Watch out!” I say much too late. Dad doesn’t even acknowledge the door hit him, let alone slow down, as he ducks his head and enters the space.

Gray grabs my arm, stopping me from going in after Dad, then positions himself in front of me to go next. The space is dark and musty, and even with the bright orb, I can’t see all the way to the back of the cave. Felix just stands in the doorway behind me, peering over my shoulder, while Dad stomps his foot around on the ground as he moves farther and farther back as if he’s looking for something. Over the noise, I hear a faint holler and drop to my knees.

“He’s down there.” I dig at the ground as Dad continues to test the floor with his shoe. My finger finally catches on something other than dirt and rocks, something metallic, a large ring. When I tug and nothing happens,

Gray takes a step back so he's right up against the damp dirt wall and tugs on the ring. The floor shifts, and dirt and pebbles rain down below as Gray opens the trap door.

The cavern is pitch black. "Remy!" I shout, and my voice echoes back to me.

"Hey, doll," Remy croaks weakly.

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THERE'S NO NEED TO REPEAT
YOURSELF. I IGNORED YOU JUST
FINE THE FIRST TIME.



I start weeping and rambling incoherent words, thankful we found him. Dad thrusts his hand with the orb into the hole, illuminating the space, but Remy still can't be seen.

Felix gently lays his hand on my shoulder. "Stand back, let me see."

I hustle to get out of the way, and Felix drops to the ground, lying flat on his belly so his head is over the hole. "Describe the situation to me, Remy."

"No fucking clue. It's dark...and the ground is hard. That's all...I've got." He sounds exhausted.

"Why does he sound so far away?" I ask, not expecting an answer.

"How did you get down there?" Gray questions, lowering himself to the ground so his legs are dangling into the pit like he may jump in.

"Take this, I'm going to get some help." Dad shoves the orb toward Gray.

"That old fucker...pushed me. Don't trust...him. Just...toss his ass down...here. I'm pretty sure I could...kill him even with...a broken shoulder and...leg." He takes several breaths between words as if he doesn't have a lot of air.

"Your leg and shoulder are broken?" I shout as if it's his fault.

"I can still kick...his ass," Remy argues, but his voice is soft, belying his words.

"You'll have to wait until after they stitch up his neck to kill him. Felix punched him in the side of the head while I had a knife to his throat."

"He's not...dead? Come on, Hale...you can do...better than...that." Remy's words are getting even slower.

“I can’t help if I can’t see.” Felix ignores Remy trying to make light of the situation.

“How fucking deep could it be? Can’t you shift the dirt and lift the ground under him or something?” Gray snaps at Felix.

“I can’t risk it. He could have a back or neck injury.”

The heavy thud of footsteps shakes the ground of the shed, and more dirt and pebbles fall into the cavity. “Be careful, I don’t want this place collapsing on him,” I warn. “Do you have a ladder? More light?”

A petite woman works her way to the front of the new arrivals. “I can levitate,” she says, panting.

Gray pushes his palm toward the woman to give her the light. Once she has it cradled in her palm, her heels lift off the ground first, then her toes, until she’s several inches above the dirt floor.

“We’re sending someone down,” Dad yells. I expect Remy to say something smart, about being able to get out himself, but there’s nothing.

Felix is still lying on the ground looking into the hole. I plant my feet on either side of his hips to allow room for someone else while I watch the woman slowly lower herself.

“I see him,” she calls, then gasps.

“What’s wrong?” I cry out.

“Hey.” I watch her crouch, and it takes my mind a moment to understand what I’m seeing. The crumpled shape in front of her is Remy. His eyes are closed, and the side of his face is scraped and dirty. “Can you hear me?” she asks softly, placing her fingers on the side of his neck to feel for a pulse.

Remy doesn’t react to her touch or voice at all. “Don’t you fucking try it, Broussard!” I scream. “Wake your ass up right fucking now!”

His eyelids flutter. “Trying...doll,” he mumbles before his eyes fall closed again. I collapse on Felix’s back, not caring one bit that all my colleagues are seeing me fall apart.

“Unless you can help, clear the room.” Lewis pushes into the space with Kline right behind her.

“Shit, that’s a long way down.” The healer whistles. I want to throw up just from thinking about Remy falling all the way down there.

Gray comes over, lifts me up from Felix’s back, and cradles me to his chest. When he starts to walk toward the door, I begin to struggle and fight him. “No, I need to make sure he’s okay.”

“We need to give them room so they can help him. Remy’s a tough bastard, he’s going to be fine,” Gray promises. I’m still pulling at his shirt, but I don’t have enough energy left to put up much of a fight.

“Promise, Gray. Promise he’s going to be okay.”

“I promise. He’s too stubborn not to be.” Gray stops walking when I can just make out the light coming from the root cellar. He releases the hold he has on my legs and allows my feet to touch the ground, but he keeps me locked against him in a tight embrace.

The minutes tick by, and everything feels fuzzy and muted, like I’m trapped in a bubble with just enough air to survive but not enough to actually take a deep breath.

“They are moving him,” Felix shouts from the doorway.

In my fog, it takes me a moment to register his words. Gray must process them much faster, though, because he calls back, “Where to?” and starts to take a step. My feet aren’t ready to move yet, so I stumble a bit before he bends down and hoists me up by my butt. I wrap my legs around his waist, and he carries me over to Felix.

“Hospital. There’s too much trauma.”

Felix’s words still echo in my head an hour later when I’m standing at the reception desk for what must be the fifth time, asking if they have any news.

“I promise I will notify you as soon as I know anything,” the woman behind the desk tells me with more patience than I would have had after the second time of me asking.

“I know. I’m sorry, thank you.” I lower my head and return to pacing in front of Felix and Gray. They stopped trying to tell me to sit down about forty minutes ago. I feel like if I stop moving, I’m going to fall apart again. Percy is curled up in the seat next to Felix, and he almost looks like he’s sleeping, but I can feel his eyes tracking me.

“Remy Broussard,” a man calls loudly, and my feet suddenly stop moving. There’s a man, a doctor, dressed in wrinkled green scrubs with a matching cap on his head.

“We’re with Remy,” Felix says from beside me. When did he get there?

“Which one of you is Frankie?” he asks, and I raise my hand. The doctor was looking at Gray and Felix, expecting one of them to answer, so it takes him a moment to notice my hand lifted in front of my chest.

The corner of his mouth tips up. “He warned me you would hurt me if I messed anything up.”

“Did you?”

His eyebrows shoot up like my question surprised him.

“No.” He chuckles. “Surgery went well. It’ll be a little while before you can see him, he’s just waking up.”

“What kind of surgery?” I question. No one told us he was having surgery.

The doctor is completely calm and relaxed, which should make me feel more comfortable, but it freaks me out.

“He had a lot of internal bleeding. I suspected a punctured lung, but the chest tube wasn’t enough to relieve the pressure, so we opened him up and had a look around. I cauterized a few lacerations on his spleen.” The doctor purses his lips and gives a tiny shrug as if it’s no big deal, then adds, “The healer did the bulk of the work, I just shone up his interior and gave him a little breathing room.”

“So he’s okay?” I’m nodding my head as if that can influence the doctor to agree with me.

“He’ll still need surgery on his leg,” he cautions. “The swelling needs to go down before we can do that though, or cast his arm, but he’s going to be fine.”

I burst into tears. Felix wraps his arm around my back and curls me against his chest before he explains, “She was worried.”

“It’s completely fine. The nurse will call down when you can go back and see him. Give it an hour or so.” I think Felix shakes the doctor’s hand, because I feel his chest flex a few times, but I just sob with relief.

Eventually, Felix guides us over to the chairs, and I finally sit down. Percy climbs into my lap, and I run my hand over his back in slow, steady strokes. I’m still filled with anxiety, but the crying jag helped release a little of the restless tension that was making it impossible for me to sit still.

About thirty minutes later, the receptionist leans over the desk and gestures for us to come over. “They are ready for you.” She scans all of us and nibbles her bottom lip. “I’m only supposed to let two of you back, but...” She trails off.

“Thank you.” I walk over to the door that leads to the back before she can change her mind.

Once we're through the doors, I falter. I'm not sure where we're supposed to go. When I turn to ask the receptionist, there's a man in scrubs heading our way. His eyes take in the three of us and Percy on my shoulder. "You're here for Broussard, I can take you up."

"Is he awake?" I question him as he leads us down a hall to a bank of elevators.

"I haven't seen him, but I'm sure he is or they wouldn't allow you up to see him." He pushes the button for the third floor after we all load into the elevator.

The man peeks at me from the side. I smooth my hair. I probably look like a hobo. "Somebody said it was *the* Remy Broussard, the one who plays for the Titans."

I don't know if I should confirm that or not. It's not until that moment that I realize what an effect this is going to have on Remy's career.

"This better not get leaked to Witchy Times or WNN." Gray gives the man a hard glare.

The door of the elevator opens, revealing the same white floors most hospitals have, but the lights are noticeably dimmer. The man is quick to exit and make his way to the left, where we find an even wider hall and a nurses' station a few steps down. "They can take you to his room. I really hope he's okay, I'm a big fan." The man hangs back a little as we make our way over to the nurses' station.

The woman behind the counter gives us a wide smile. "Hey, Janet is still in there with him, but she should be just about done." She rounds the desk with a quick step and walks right toward us. Our group splits, and she sticks her head in the door directly behind us. "Are we ready for visitors?" she chirps.

"I'm ready to get the hell out of here," Remy grumbles.

The nurse glances back at us and rolls her eyes before pushing into the room and jerking back a privacy curtain that surrounds the door. "You don't get the good meds when you leave," she warns.

"Who said I wanted them?" I swear I hear Remy pouting, but when I see his face, it's confirmed. His full lips are turned down, and so are his eyes. His skin is a little sallow, and he's lacking his usual healthy glow, but he also doesn't look like a man who just had surgery, though his arm is in a sling resting on his chest.

My bottom lip trembles, but I swallow the lump in my throat and force a smile to my lips. “You may not want the meds, but they also control your food.”

Remy’s head jerks up when he hears my voice. There are shadows under his eyes, and his lips look dry. My façade cracks a little when he goes to lift his arms and winces, instead only lifting the one not in the sling. “Come here, doll. They were poking around in my insides, and I suddenly feel the need to apologize to you.”

A strangled half laugh, half sob bursts from my lips. Only Remy could turn this into a sex joke about the size of his dick. I don’t waste any time reaching the side of his bed and placing my forehead against his pillow right next to his head.

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IF YOU SEE SOMEONE CRYING,
ASK THEM IF IT'S BECAUSE OF
THEIR HAIRCUT.



*S*pend a long time touching Remy and rearranging his blanket to make sure he's comfortable. Mostly, I'm trying to convince myself he really is okay. Felix and Gray each give him half hugs and layer on attention too.

"So what happened to Eugene?" Remy finally asks once we all settle.

"He's in custody. Can you tell us what happened before we found you?" I don't want to push him to talk about it, but I'm curious how he lured Remy from the house.

Remy drops his head back to the bed and rolls his eyes. "It was so fucking dumb. He showed up saying Aisling was missing again and asking for help. I thought it would be another chance to ask her about the ghost. I should have been suspicious when he led me right over to that shed, but it's not like I thought the old bastard would Sparta kick me into a twenty-foot hole."

"What about Aisling? Did you ever see her?" While I can selfishly admit Remy has been at the forefront of my mind, I haven't forgotten about her.

"No." Remy shakes his head. "She really is missing then?"

"I'm not sure. The MBI searched the house and didn't find her. Wuornos is going to put Bursa through a truth probe, so he'll find out what happened to her if they don't find her on the property."

"Bursa?" Remy looks between us with a clear question in his gaze. "The librarian's ex? What does he have to do with this?"

"Everything. Bursa was Eugene the entire time. He used his illusion magic. That's why he was so obsessed with my dad."

“No shit!” Remy murmurs.

“Yeah. From the beginning, this was all about finding Belinda. He used Eugene and Aisling and fooled us all.”

“What about the real Eugene?” Felix questions from his place near the large window. I already admitted in the house that I thought he was dead, but that’s not everything.

“I won’t know for certain until we get some evidence or find Aisling.” I’m not giving up hope she’s alive. “But I think he might have been the entity that followed us home. He wasn’t haunting us. He was trying to get us to help his wife.”

“Bursa killed him.” Gray scrubs his palm over his face. I know how he feels. I wish I could erase the realization out of my head. It’s not easy to think about.

I nod with conviction. “It explains how he could have followed us to the house. His death was fresh, so he was untethered, and knowing he was leaving behind his wife to an unknown fate would have been enough to create the perfect scenario for a haunting.”

When I finish my explanation, I look over to see Remy’s eyes drifting closed for extended blinks. I rub my hand down his good arm a few times and his eyelids open, but his blue eyes are tired. It might be the meds, but I’m sure a good bit is just exhaustion. He tries to scoot over a little, making a face when he doesn’t get far.

“Bed’s too small. Let’s go home,” he mumbles, and I realize he was trying to make room for me.

“In a little while,” I promise and run my fingers gently over his face, steering clear of the few scrapes. His lips part, and his breathing deepens almost instantly.

For the next two hours, we barely speak as we allow Remy to rest. Felix is sitting in the windowsill with his back against the glass and his eyes closed, while Gray is in the only other chair in the room. I think he finally fell asleep too.

I’m perched on the side of the bed, thinking Remy’s words are true—this bed is too small. I catch myself taking extended blinks and leaning occasionally to the side, but I fight to keep myself upright and awake.

The nurse enters the room slowly and looks around before bringing her finger up to her lips in a hushing gesture then tiptoes into the room. I go to move when she comes to my side, thinking she’s trying to check on Remy,

but she lays her hand on my shoulder and whispers, “There’s someone here who wants to speak with you.”

I nod and follow her out of the room. The hallway is bright compared to Remy’s room, so I squint and wipe my tired eyes. Nash is near the nurses’ station with a sad smile on her face. “Hey, I’m so sorry to bother you, but I wanted to check in and make sure everything was okay and see if you guys needed anything.”

I rock my neck around on my shoulders. “We’re fine. Sorry I haven’t called anyone.”

“You’re fine,” she scoffs, dismissing my claim.

“Remy’s going to be okay,” I tell her, and I almost want to cry again. “He had some internal injuries from the fall they fixed. We haven’t talked about the long-term effects this might have on him. He still needs surgery on his leg and his arm is...broken too, I guess. I think that just needs to be casted though.” I’m stammering and struggling with the fact that I know I brought this into their lives, and I need someone to talk to about it.

“I should have been more careful,” I admit.

Nash starts shaking her head before I can finish. “No playing the blame game, Bishop. You know as well as I do that he doesn’t blame you.”

“What if he can’t play anymore?” I whisper. “Remy loves football.”

“Girl, that man can hire the best healers there are to help with his recovery. That’s not even an issue,” she reasons.

“I feel really bad.” A tear leaks down my cheek.

Nash tsks her tongue and moves closer to wrap me in a half hug while still looking over at me. “I’m not going to feel bad for you. You have two other dicks to ride while he heals.”

I stop crying immediately and gape at Nash. My mouth is probably hanging open, but then I laugh. I laugh so hard my stomach hurts, and she starts chuckling with me.

“I can’t believe you don’t hate me,” I say through giggles. “I would hate me.”

“Hecate, I tried,” Nash admits with her arm still around my shoulders, but I can hear her smile.

“Perspective,” she says after I calm down. “He’s going to be okay. You’re all going to be okay. Let the other stuff sort itself out when this isn’t so fresh.”

“Thank you.” I mop up my face with my sleeve.

“You’re welcome. I have something to thank *you* for though.” She leans in a little.

“What?”

“You were right about Flannigan.” She bites her bottom lip to hide her wide smile.

“I knew it,” I chirp. “I’ve been wanting to ask so badly.”

“We went out a few days ago. He’s...” She looks up, and her face gets all dreamy, and I don’t even need her to finish.

We spend a few more minutes chatting in the hall before I start to get anxious about returning to the room. I think she notices how I keep rocking back and forth and takes mercy on me. “We’ll catch up later. We still have the entity to deal with.”

“Hopefully not. Did you hear anything about Aisling?”

“They found her in the back of the cave. She was dehydrated and a little banged up, but she’s tough for an old lady.” Nash tilts her head to the side. “What do you mean hopefully not?”

“I think the ghost was the real Eugene. Now that Aisling is safe, I’m hoping he will move on.”

“Oh, damn.” Nash looks past me. “That would be a hell of a lot better than having a demon on your ass. I might actually feel sorry for you then.”



THE CIRCLES under Remy’s eyes look a little better in the morning, but he didn’t have an easy night. The nurses were in and out several times. I know it’s their job, but it makes it hard to get any decent rest.

“I need to call Ash and the team,” Remy says after Gray helps him from the bathroom. He’s gone rather pale again, but I can’t imagine it’s easy moving around with a broken leg and arm, even when you have help.

“I have Ash’s number.” Felix holds out his phone. Instead of lying on the bed, Remy sits with the heavy boot and his leg dangling off the side to make the call.

“Hey, Ash,” Remy says softly. “Some shit went down yesterday, and I’m out of commission. I need... There are some things I need from you first, like Coach’s number. You can just text it to me here, I don’t have anything to write on. I’ll also need you to call Kaden for me and let him

know he needs to cancel anything he has scheduled for me until further notice.” Remy’s head hangs low.

My heart sinks at seeing him like this. Being careful not to bump the plastic boot covering his leg from his foot all the way up to his knee, I angle myself closer to stand right in front of him. His voice gets a little muffled when he drops his forehead to my chest and continues speaking. “After I talk to Coach and the team doctors, we’ll need to prepare a statement.”

Standing this close, I can hear Ash speaking and the shrill panic in her voice, but I can’t exactly make out what she’s saying.

“I’ll be fine in a few weeks,” Remy assures her, but his voice lacks conviction. Ash shrieks again. “I don’t know, I’ll have to see what the healers and doctors say. I need Coach’s number, Ash. We can talk about this shit later.” He leans back a little, which enables me to see his face. The bruising on the side of his jaw is light, but it still makes his blue eyes stand out even more than usual.

As if he can feel my eyes on him, he looks up and meets my gaze. The fatigue is still there, but the quirk of the corner of his mouth and the way he licks his lips gives me hope my Remy is surfacing with every passing minute.

“I’ll give you a call when I get out of here so we can set up the other stuff.” Remy pulls the phone away from his ear and uses his thumb to hit the red icon to hang up.

“Remember when I had you tell my mom I fell out of the tree?” Remy purses his lips and looks off in the distance. “Think you could talk to my coach?” I know he’s joking, but I reach for the phone anyway when a text message comes through from Ash with what I’m assuming is the coach’s contact information.

“As an official MBI agent? I can tell him what a hero you are and how you played a major role in apprehending a wanted man.” I waggle my eyebrows.

“Hell yeah.” Remy furrows his brow and nods his head. “Keep it light on the details though, I know this is a high clearance case.” Remy winks and tugs the phone out of my hand. “I’ll tell everyone you fell madly in love with me when I saved your life.” I snort, but as long as he’s joking, I know he’s going to be okay.

Remy’s call to the coach seemed to go pretty smoothly. He gave a few more details than he did to Ash, but still kept things a little vague, actually

saying he didn't know how much he could tell him yet other than his own personal involvement.

About ten minutes after the call, the same doctor we met in the emergency waiting room enters with a light knock on the door. "Hey, Mr. Broussard, it's good to see you without a chest full of blood."

Remy reflexively rubs his good palm over his sternum. "It's good to be able to take a breath and not feel like I'm underwater. I'm guessing I have you to thank for that."

"You don't remember me?" The doctor crosses his arms over his chest, but he's relaxed, smiling.

"Not at all, sorry."

"It's okay." The doctor briefly looks over at me, then returns his gaze to Remy.

"What am I missing?" Remy frowns.

The doctor snickers and moves to stand in front of Remy. "You warned me about Frankie. I thought it was one of those two when I went into the lobby." He tilts his head, motioning to Felix and Gray. "Lie back and let me have a look at your incisions."

Remy does as he's told. "You don't have to worry about them, she's the one to watch out for."

"I can see that." The doctor prods around Remy's belly, making him wince, but he recovers quickly. "Everything looks great here. I got a call from your doctors. They want you transferred over to the team facility to see the ortho."

Remy nods, we were expecting this. Not to insult this doctor or hospital, but Remy's body is worth millions to him and his team. I'm happy to know he's going to be getting the best care available.

"It'll take us a few minutes to get your paperwork ready, but you should be out of here soon. They left coordinates for their facility with me, so I'll make sure the nurse gets that to you when you sign your release paperwork."

"Thank you." Remy extends his good hand to the doctor to shake.

"Pay me back when you get back on the field. I'm expecting a good year for the Titans." The doctor smiles at all of us before walking out of the room.

"Why don't you guys head home? I'll probably be in the MRI and with healers for the foreseeable future." Remy sighs.

“I’ll come with you now. I may have to go to work later or tomorrow to give my report.”

“Even more reason to go home and get some rest,” Remy argues.

I make the short walk to his side and lean forward so my lips are near his. “I’m going with you.” I kiss him quickly, making sure he knows he doesn’t really have a choice in the matter, then look at Gray and Felix. “We’re good. I’ll let you know if I need to go into work or if we learn anything,” I tell them, since we certainly don’t all need to be there.

Gray is the first to walk over and embrace me. With a lingering kiss to my temple, he says, “See you at home. Be safe.” Then to Remy, he adds, “Keep an eye on the old ones, they are sneaky.”

“Shut up.” Remy snorts, then grabs his stomach as if the sudden movement hurt.

Felix is next to come over. He cradles my face in his palms and kisses me long and slow before placing his forehead on mine. “Think the agency has any need for an architect with earth magic? I’m really feeling like a career change is in order.”

“They would be lucky to have you, but you’re not changing careers for me. This isn’t the norm. I promise.”

“We’ll see,” Felix says, then kisses me again roughly before following Gray out the door.

“You know he’s going to apply before you even get home, right?” Remy is smiling when I look over at him. I just roll my eyes.

I'M JUST HERE TO ESTABLISH AN ALIBI.



“*H*e’s asleep,” I tell Felix and nearly collapse onto the couch next to him. I just left Remy in the room, tucked in for the night. He’s understandably tired after the long day of tests and meetings with healers and doctors.

They developed a treatment plan and set the date for the surgery on his leg. If everything goes as well as they promise, Remy should be able to start playing a few weeks into the practice season. I’m only now allowing myself to feel the relief that came with the prognosis.

Felix lifts his arm and allows me to sink a little closer to him. My eyes are heavy, but I need to speak to Lewis before I go to bed.

“Did you eat anything?” Gray asks, leaning into the room from the doorway.

“I did. Ash brought us lunch.” My tone conveys a little snark. I wasn’t expecting her to be there and to be so involved with the process. It was so awkward to sit there with someone I don’t know and watch her worry over someone I love. I would have rather eaten out of the vending machine or gone hungry if I knew she was going to stick around after.

“Why don’t you go to bed then? I know you didn’t get much sleep last night.” Felix strokes his fingers over my arm.

“I will soon,” I promise with every intention of picking myself up from Felix’s embrace and getting my phone.

“Should we just leave her?” Gray asks, and I feel his fingertips caressing my jaw. I burrow deeper into the inviting warmth I’m curled against. I must have fallen asleep.

“I’ll bring her to bed when she wakes up,” Felix murmurs softly, but my head is on his chest, so I hear him anyway. I try to muster up the strength to open my eyes but fail miserably.

Sometime later, a shrill noise has me lifting my head and looking around for the source of the sound. Felix curses, and I realize I’m lying on him, not just leaning against him anymore.

The room is dark, but I know we’re still on the couch. “Sorry, go back to sleep.” He runs his hand over my hair and back.

“What was that?” I rasp, nuzzling my nose into his neck. Damn, he smells good. When was the last time I took a shower?

Felix palms the back of my head and neck, delving his fingertips into my hair to massage my scalp. “Nothing important,” he answers, and I swear his voice is huskier. Suddenly, I’m more awake but no longer concerned with the sound.

I kiss his neck, and a deep sigh slips past his lips. My next kisses are open-mouthed, and I make sure I drag my lips over his throat until I flick the tip of my tongue out to taste his jaw.

His hand tightens in my hair, spurring me on to keep kissing and sucking until he turns his chin down and captures my lips with his. I slide my leg over so I’m straddling his hips instead of being wedged between him and the back of the couch.

I’m glad I had the foresight to change into comfy clothes when we got home. I can feel how ready he is for me through his sweatpants. Felix slips his hand under the back of my shirt, and I shiver—not from the cool air, but from his touch. His fingers dance along my spine, only stopping to apply pressure to the small of my back so I’m grinding down on him.

Our kiss is slow and sensual. It makes me want to strip him bare and lick every inch of his skin before sinking onto his cock. I slide my hands under his shirt to feel his warm skin. In my mind, I can see all the inky lines covering his chest, and I imagine tracing them with my fingers.

Felix skims his hands up my sides, his thumbs caressing the swell of my breasts, but it’s just a tease as he continues up to remove my shirt. We stop kissing long enough for him to toss the fabric away, leaving me bare from the waist up. I use the time to get rid of his shirt too. When he leans up to get it off his back, we bump noses. I chuckle and nuzzle him again as I move lower to lick my way down his body.

My tattoo gets extra attention. I love that there is a permanent mark of me on him, even if I'm the only one that knows what it means or that it's even there. Felix tugs on my hair again when I decide to move a little lower. His hips lift when I run my tongue around his belly button and tug on the waist of his pants to pull them down.

I kiss his tip sweetly when he's fully exposed, then look up so I can see his face when I take him into my mouth. He doesn't disappoint. His eyes are lidded and locked on mine as I wrap my fingers around him and give him a squeeze.

His tongue darts out to wet his bottom lip before he sinks his teeth into it, waiting. With my eyes still on his, I open up and take Felix's cock into my mouth. He's thick and warm against my tongue, and I can already taste how badly he wants me. I know it's not going to be long before he's pulling me away from his dick so he can finish inside me. I lick and suck until he's groaning my name and nearly helpless beneath me.

The moment I let his cock pop free from my lips, Felix jerks me up and then his lips are on mine, devouring me as if to punish my mouth for making him so desperate. His hand goes to my hip, and he shoves my pants down, trying to get them off, but our position makes it nearly impossible, so I lift up and slide them down myself before straddling his hips again.

His heavy dick is pushed up between us, so I slide up and down his shaft, fitting him between my lips. The crown of his cock is so wide and thick, I have to stop myself from getting off like this.

Felix lifts his head off the couch and captures my nipple between his lips while his hand caresses my other breast in unison. Seeing him under me and watching the sheer pleasure on his face when he has to stop sucking on me to let me hear how good I'm making him feel damn near makes me crazy with lust.

Moving my hand behind me, I grab the base of his cock, and this time when I slide down, I make sure he slips inside me. "Fuck," he growls, and with renewed vigor, he sucks and licks my nipples.

Felix slides the hand that was pinching my hard tip down until he's gripping my ass, pushing and tugging me harder against him. It's my turn to moan now. I like being on top and allowing him to control my movements. It feels like I'm submitting even from a position of power.

He flexes his hips up with every stroke, making sure he goes as deep as possible. Every thrust has little huffs passing my lips until I'm so close to

the edge, I can already feel my inner muscles milking him.

He leans back and watches my face as I tilt my head back. He skates his hand between our bodies and spreads my lips with his fingers, then pinches my clit between his pointer and middle fingers. I come immediately. It's intense enough that I have to grit my teeth so I don't shout. Felix uses his other hand on my hip to hold me in place while he drives into me fast and rough until he, too, moans through his release.

Within seconds, I collapse on his chest, not caring if I'm crushing him as I catch my breath. He starts stroking my back with his fingertips, and I shiver and tuck in even tighter. When I think I might fall back asleep, he taps my butt, and I instinctively move to the side so he can get up.

Felix scoots the rest of the way out from under me and rises, kicking his pants off his legs as he walks away naked. His ass is bare of any tattoos, and I grin when I think about asking him if he'll put a buttercup there, or better yet, a print of my lips.

When he returns, it's with a warm wet cloth that he slides up the back of my legs and between them. I look over my shoulder to see his eyes are focused on my body as he spreads my legs and wipes the cloth down my pussy with gentle strokes to clean me. It might not be as good as a pee and a shower, but I'm not complaining.

"Want to go to bed?" Felix whispers, leaning over me. I shake my head, and the corner of his mouth lifts before he climbs back onto the sofa and pulls me against his chest.



"SORRY I DIDN'T CALL YESTERDAY," I say in greeting to Lewis.

"You have your hands full," she replies, not really excusing it but not seeming mad either.

"It's going to take me a few days to write up my official report. Do you want me to come in and brief you today?" I offer.

"I have meetings all morning. Damn Bursa. We have to do a press conference." She sneers the last part.

"That bad, huh? I was going to ask, but I wasn't sure how far they would be with the truth probe, considering his injury."

“The transfusion was barely done before Wuornos had him hooked up. I think he spent three hours in that man’s head and several more after transcribing what he saw. We have shit on Bursa going back over twenty years.”

I squeeze my temples between my fingers while holding the phone with my other hand. “That sounds like a mess.”

“You’re not kidding. I don’t know if I should give you a raise or hand you over to the AD so he can deal with you,” Lewis drawls.

“Neither?” I suggest with a lilt in my voice.

“I’m teasing, Bishop. I hate the bureaucracy of all this, but I became an agent to put people like William Bursa away, and that’s what you do. I’m not letting you go, even if I have to do a press conference.”

I spend the next ten minutes filling my supervisor in on what happened leading up to the night we captured Bursa. I don’t think anything I have to say comes as a shock, considering she already has the field report from Wuornos, but the little tidbit about suspecting the real Eugene was my ghost does seem to intrigue her.

“It’s definitely plausible, but let me know if there is any recurring spirit activity.”

“I will. I’ll get to work on that report too,” I promise.

“Take a few days with your family. When you’re ready to get back to work, let me know and I’ll get you up to speed on what we’re working on.”

“You guys have another case?” I don’t know what it says about me, but I’m already interested.

“Take a few days, Bishop,” she repeats with more emphasis in her tone.

“Okay, you’re right. I’ll call you after Remy’s surgery,” I tell her, and we hang up shortly after.

“That didn’t sound too bad,” Gray remarks after taking a sip from his cup. I look at Remy. He’s not even wearing the sling anymore. His arm is already doing a lot better after his sessions with the team healers. If the break in his leg hadn’t been a fracture, I bet he wouldn’t even need surgery. It’s amazing what money can buy.

Felix takes a break from loading his breakfast plate into the dishwasher and looks at me, waiting for an answer.

“It wasn’t bad at all,” I confirm. “Though she did mention transferring me over to Wuornos’ team, but I think she was joking.”

Ah, long and creepy. I don't think we've seen the last of him, Percy chimes in.

“He is a creep,” Remy agrees, and Gray nods.

My phone dings with a text, and Ambrose's name flashes at the top of the screen. I make eye contact with Remy and Gray, since they are close enough to have seen his name too.

When I open the screen, his text is there for us to read.

Ambrose: Lewis said you'll be back soon. Study up on sacrifices. We have a case.

I feel Felix reading the message over my shoulder after he joins us at the table. “Yeah, I'm definitely joining the academy.”

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Albany lives in Michigan where she's happily married to her high school sweetheart. She spends most of her time juggling her four children's extracurricular activities, with her nose stuck in a book. When not reading you can find her writing her very own book boyfriends. Albany's passion is writing romance with real characters that are far from perfect, but always seem to find their own happily ever afters.

If you enjoyed my book, or any other consider leaving a review.

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