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THE  
FOUR

# BROKEN

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LAYLA FROST



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# A FRIENDLY WORD FROM YOUR ALL- POWERFUL, RESIDENT WITCH

Look. I get it, okay? Talking to the reader is a big no-no. Who do I think I am with this fourth wall break, Deadpool?

I wish.

The damage I could do with those Katanas. Plus, we both love chimichangas.

But that's neither here nor there.

It's been a while since we've stepped into this world of magicks, mayhem, and soul suckers who can suck a big bag of

—

Ahem.

You get it.

If *Broken* is the first book you're reading in this series, throw it back. No, not your ass. Your reading list.

And then maybe your ass.

This series is made to be read in order. If you dive in here, you'll be more lost than me in the grocery store after five

edibles.

Start with *Styx*. I'm not the star, but let's face it... I'm *always* the star.

If you've read *Styx* and absolutely adored *Stoned*—because who wouldn't—then you're good to read on.

And if a little refresher would help, I've gotcha, boo.

Cue the music. Cue the montage. Cue the spoilers for *Styx* and *Stoned*, so proceed with caution.

And cue Stellan to feed me grapes.

Previously on:

**AS THE FOUR GET TURNED UPSIDE DOWN**

**DAYS OF OUR FOUR**

**FOUR LIVES TO LIVE IMMORTALLY**

**THE FOUR AND THE SOULLESS**

**PASSIONS**

(I don't have a soap opera spoof for that one, but it was just too batshit crazy not to mention. Do you even remember that shit? It was... Oh, right, the recap.

My bad.)

In *Styx*, Denny inherited her grandmother's house, only to find it haunted by Nate. First, he was a voice. Then, a dude without memories.

After some hijinks and fuckery, Denny and Nate ended up targeted by Absolve.

Absolve:

ab·solve

/əb'zôlv,əb'zälv/

*Improper noun since there's nothing proper about them*

A group of thunderscunts that hide behind a hatred of all things magicks, all while using dark magicks to steal souls for their

power. Out to take over Heaven, Hell, and everything in between.

See also: Micropenis

After more hijinks and a different kind of fuckery(gross), Nate and Denny ended up in love. Nate got his memories back to learn he was Thanatos.

You know.

Death.

And Denny was actually Hades.

That ol' story.

They went to worship their powerful witch friend, and...

Okay, fine. They went to tell me that I'm Nate's sister.

And, yes, that makes me War.

Sing your own *War* lyrics here. I'm not getting hit by copyright violations.

On to *Stoned!*

In the beginning, we found our fearless heroine in her amazingly epic yet epically destroyed novelty stores after a break-in. One of the responding detectives was her mate.

It was a very big day for me.

We were attacked a few times, which really sucked because I wanted to be the one attacking.

Maybe violence. Maybe jumping Stellan's handsome bones.

Either way.

Soul stealers doubled up the douchebaggery with human trafficking. My immortality was in question. My powers were on the fritz. I took a bullet. And Stellan learned about magicks before meeting with the devil and an archangel.

A detective, the devil, and an archangel walk into Heaven...

I just know there's a joke there.

Stellan returned to find a gunman in my store.

That time, it wasn't me who made the ultimate sacrifice, and now I'm sobbing just thinking about Lea. Eat some cotton candy in her honor.

But not cheese-flavored. Never cheese-flavored.

Shudder.

And there you have it. You're all caught up and refreshed. The usual message from Layla will not be in the front of this book.

For reasons that will become obvious, it's written to be read after the story.

Or not at all. She's not the boss of you. You can totally skip it.

Hell, just skip to the smut, you naughty little perv, you.

Whatever you decide, enjoy *Broken*!

Now, if you'll excuse me, my mate just chuckled, so I'm legally obligated to ride his face.

Has anyone seen the handcuffs?

~Juno



# PROLOGUE

## LILITH

“LITHYYYYY, LET’S GO,” MY BEST friend whined as she pulled me across the park.

I wasn’t sure how much faster I could go without sprinting. Wood chips were already wedged in my flip-flops as I rushed to keep up with her.

“Don’t call me that,” I snapped for the billionth time in our friendship.

Everyone else called me Lily—short for Lilith. Hannah knew calling me Lithy irritated me.

Which was why she did it.

Constantly.

“I won’t if you’ll hurry.” She looked over her shoulder and smirked. “Lithy-lou-hoo.”

“I’m hurrying, I’m hurrying.” Shaking the wood chips out of my sandals as I moved, I muttered, “I thought you said they’d be here all day.”

“They will be, but why miss even a second of it?”

*Because it’s a thousand degrees.*

*With a thousand percent humidity.*

*And there are, like, a thousand other fun things we could do instead.*

I didn’t say any of that.

Hannah might have been more boy crazy than I was, but as her bona fide best friend, I was mandated to have her back. And in that case, it meant hustling through the park on a hot Saturday afternoon to watch the boys play basketball.

“He’s here,” Hannah hissed excitedly, booking it double time. “And he’s *shirtless*.”

I followed her rapt gaze to see that all the boys were. The gangly teens—with barely-there muscles and string bean bodies—flexed and posed like the greased-up bodybuilders on TV.

Keeping her eyes on them, Hannah led me to the best picnic table. It was positioned on a small hill with a view of the entire park. She climbed up to sit on the table with the high schoolers, wiggling her butt around so they’d move to make room for me.

If any other soon-to-be eighth grader tried that, they would end up in a trash can.

Or worse.

But not Hannah.

“I’m totally gonna marry Trey.” With a swoony sigh, she pulled her Bonne Bell lip gloss from her purse. She slathered the bubble gum-scented goop onto her lips before the wind immediately whipped her hair into the sticky mess. She held the tube out to me, but I shook my head and pulled out my own go-to.

Carefully applying my Dr Pepper Lip Smackers, I leaned closer to her. “I think you’re skipping some steps.”

“Okay. First, I’ll start dating him when school starts. We’ll date all through this year and high school. And *then* we’ll get married after graduation.”

Trey Mason was the newest in a long line of future Mr. Hannah HARRISES. And like the others, he didn’t know it.

Not yet, anyway.

Everyone fell silent when the boys split into teams and began. I tried to watch the game—if it could even be called

that.

Very little game was being played.

Everyone hogged the ball to go for three-pointers that barely made it across the court. Or dunks that came up multiple feet too short.

“They’re just trying to show off,” I said.

Hannah’s voice didn’t hold the same boredom. “And it’s working.”

Totally over the whole thing, I let my eyes wander to the playground. If there was a free swing, I might have been able to convince Hannah to move there. But there was no way she’d climb on the monkey bars or up to the top of the play tower. Not with the boys and high schoolers there.

Since the swings were filled with little kids, I looked over at the small fountain. Again, there was no way Hannah would go walk around the edge like we used to.

*Being an almost teenager sucks.*

I twisted to check out the skate park behind us.

The guys there showed off, too, but it was far more entertaining. A few rode bikes around, going back and forth on the ramps as they worked to do wheelies, spins, and jumps.

Skateboarders took turns on the half-pipes and long metal bars. The sound of plastic wheels hitting concrete and wood sliding against metal carried over to me. Something about it was almost musical.

Like the basketball players that’d caught Hannah’s eyes and heart, the skaters were almost all shirtless. And again like the basketball players, they all looked similar.

Lanky bodies.

Shaggy hair.

Shorts that hung off their butts to show the tops of their boxers.

*Hmm. Maybe Hannah's on to something with the shirtless thing.*

As if reading my thoughts, she got close to my ear. “Whatcha looking at?”

I jolted and whipped back to face her. “Nothing.”

“Uh-huh. You're totally perving on those guys.”

“I was just looking around.”

“Yeah, looking around at all their booodies,” she singsonged. Her eyes darted around, and she scrunched her nose. “Not my thing, but whatever.”

I eyed the basketball players and likely had the same expression. “Well, at least we don't have to worry about fighting over a guy.”

“Pfft, we wouldn't anyway. We're better than that.”

She had a point.

Hannah's interest in the actual gameplay dwindled to nonexistent, and we chatted between eyeing the groups of boys. She told me about her master plan to put herself in Trey's path, pausing only when I had a suggestion.

Her scheme might have been bonkers—bordering on MTV's *True Life: I'm a Stalker* territory—but the best friend code still applied.

An hour later, after we'd moved from boy talk to celebrity boy talk, everything went all... weird.

“Sooooo, then I was team Loooooogan, but stilllll team...” Hannah's warbly words faded out.

Like it was filled with helium, my head spun and got floaty. A chill ran down my spine, making the hairs on my arms and the back of my neck stand.

*The skate park.*

*Skate.*

*Park.*

*Skate park. Skate park. Skate park.*

*Skateparkskateparkskateparkskatespark!*

At the growing urgency of my random thought, I looked over.

And saw *him*.

He was way taller than the other boys there. A few were likely the same age, but something about him seemed older.

A vibe.

It was different. *Everything* about him was different.

Instead of the requisite shell-toed Adidas or bulky DCs, he skated in a pair of boots—Hannah called them *shitkickers*. It was over ninety degrees in the Massachusetts summer sun, but he wore a pair of black jeans with rips in the knees. They didn't look painted on, but they weren't sagging. Despite being at a park, his tee was crisp and white, and the sleeves were rolled to show his muscular arms.

His overgrown blond hair was pushed back, and his expression was solemn.

Brooding.

He was the best skater there by a long, half-piped mile, but he didn't show off. He was in his own zone, doing his own thing.

Some of the other skaters stopped to watch as he easily maneuvered the pipes, beams, and dips. A group of high school girls from our table scurried over, whispering frantically about stolen cigarettes as they tied their shirts up.

Even with his avid audience, he just continued skating. Landing trick after trick without so much as a smirk.

I'd never seen anyone—on TV or the movies or anything—as beautifully cool.

*He's like that old actor who died really young.*

*Jimmy Dean.*

*No, wait, that's the sausage guy.*

*James Dean.*



*He's a skater James Dean.*

A gentle tug at my ponytail yanked me from my thoughts, and it was like the world around me came back into place.

“Did you hear what I said?” Hannah asked.

“No, what—”

“Oh my God, it's him.” Her tug on my hair became a sharper jerk as she harshly ordered, “Turn around. Do *not* let him see you.”

“Why?”

“He's a bad dude.” I tried to glance back at him, but she frantically shook her head. “He got kicked out of school and has to go to a special one for criminal teens.”

The high schooler next to Hannah leaned over to join in the gossip. “I heard he beat a principal up so bad, they had to go to the hospital.”

“I heard he *killed* them.” Hannah wiggled her fingers. “With his bare hands.”

“You're both wrong.” A high schooler sitting on the other side of the table with her back to ours looked over her shoulder. She didn't elaborate as she chomped on her gum like she wanted to savor the flavor *and* the attention.

“Then what is it?” the other girl finally asked.

“He slept with some teachers. Like, a lot of them. They finally had to kick him out because he seduces the pretty female teachers and gets them fired.”

Hannah rolled her eyes. “Teachers wouldn't do... *that* with him. Especially if they know they're gonna get fired.”

The girl gave a knowing smile. “They would if it was worth it. And I heard it's *totally* worth it.”

Even drenched in sweat, I shivered like I was suddenly freezing. Goosebumps spread across my skin like braille. My stomach twisted so sharply, it made my vision fuzzy as black pushed in on the edges.

I stood, nearly falling.

Hannah jumped off the table. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m fine. Just too much sun on an empty stomach,” I said weakly.

“Let’s go to my house. I’ll make you my specialty.”

Hannah’s tuna melts usually convinced me to do almost anything—like cutting each other’s bangs or sneaking out to a house party at the end of her block. But with my stomach in knots, the thought of eating made me want to barf in the bushes.

“You don’t have to leave,” I offered.

Girl code loyal to the end, Hannah didn’t even glance toward the basketball courts again. “Let me grab my purse.”

Unable to stand still without swaying, I slowly walked down the small hill to the sidewalk. My flip-flops barely touched the concrete when the world went sideways. My palms and knee burned instantly, and pain radiated from my hip to steal my breath.

Hannah stormed down the hill, a girl on a mission. “You asshole.”

*I’m the one who got hurt. How am I the asshole?*

Before I could voice my question, she continued past me to stop in front of someone. I couldn’t see who except they had scrawny chicken legs and wore Nikes. “Ever heard of paying attention?”

“You should ask your friend,” whoever shot back.

“And you should open your eyes so you can see your way straight to Hell.”

Deep breathing, I screwed my face up. My eyes squeezed shut as the burning increased.

*Don’t cry, don’t cry, don’t cry.*

*Everyone witnessing me get knocked on my ass is bad enough. I’ll literally die before I cry in front of high schoolers.*

A low voice from close to me suddenly rumbled, “Say you’re sorry.”

*Please don’t be talking to Hannah.*

I felt only a marginal amount of relief when it was a squeaky boy voice that argued, “She’s the one who should’ve paid attention.”

“It’s called a *sidewalk*, not a side-wannabe-baller-path,” the deep voice said. “Now apologize.”

His order was barked in such a firm, threatening tone, *I* would’ve apologized—had there been any air left in my lungs.

“Sorry,” the kid muttered, clearly not meaning it.

That set Hannah off more. “You’re such a jerk.”

She launched into some creative name-calling, but my focus was pulled when someone moved closer to me. Even with my eyes closed, I could feel his nearness. Just like I somehow already knew who was there, looming over me before I even opened my eyes.

*Him.*

The violent murderer and teacher banger.

As soon as his gaze dropped to meet mine, his narrow-eyed glare turned into a wide stare. He held our eye contact for long moments that seemed like forever before his brows lowered.

I wasn’t sure I’d ever meet anyone so tall. It hurt my neck just trying to look up at him.

He must’ve known it, too, because he crouched in front of me. “Let’s take a look.”

I scrambled back. “I’m fine.”

He gave me another smile, and it was so damn beautiful, the pain and embarrassment disappeared.

Everything disappeared.

He offered me his hand, and I took it automatically. “Lennon Gwyn.”

“Awesome,” I breathed. Cringing, I blurted, “I’m Lilith Alexander, but everyone calls me Lily.”

“Nice to meet you.” Without giving me the chance to pull my hand away, he stealthily slid his down to encircle my wrist and lift it to inspect my palm. “That’s gotta hurt like hell.”

It likely did, but his fingers around my wrist were all I could feel.

That was why it was unfortunate when he released his hold because the burning pain rushed back.

“Let’s see your knee,” he ordered.

Distracted by his smile again, I automatically shifted to do as he said—hissing out a breath as my tender butt and hip pressed against the concrete.

He carefully removed some stuck pebbles from my skin. “Man, that dickhead really got you.”

“I’m fine,” I tried, tugging self-consciously at my tie-dyed Soffe shorts.

Tossing his big backpack to the ground, he pulled out antiseptic spray, a gauze strip, and a big Band-Aid. A small smirk pulled at his lips when he glanced up at me. “I eat concrete so much, my mom made me pack some first-aid shit.”

“You live with your mom?” I was surprised a murdering sex maniac didn’t stay in a juvie group home or some sort of sketchy motel.

“Of course. Where else would I live?”

I almost blurted my thoughts but was saved from sounding like a judgy witch when he did a sneak attack with the antiseptic spray.

“Shit, that hurts,” I hissed, fighting back embarrassing tears again.

“Yeah, sorry.” He patted the side of my knee reassuringly just as Hannah approached and made an unintelligible choking noise.

Making quick work with the Band-Aid, Lennon pushed his hair out of his face in a way my teenage brain instinctively knew to memorize. He moved on to tend to my hand, though he wrapped that with gauze rather than a bandage. “Clean these scrapes up later.” He held out the spray bottle. “Use this to prevent an infection, or they’ll hurt worse.”

I shook my head, not accepting it. “I have stuff at home.”

He pressed it into my uninjured palm. “Just in case.”

“You need it.” I tried again to push it back to him.

“Trust me, my mom buys it by the case. I’m good.”

I held the bottle to my chest like it was a treasure. “Uhh, thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” After double-checking his handiwork, he zipped his bag and stood before offering his hand. When I took it, he helped me up.

But he didn’t release me right away.

His brows lowered as he cocked his head to the side.

And I bet my own face mirrored the expression.

Because like a jumbled melody I knew but couldn’t place, something familiar hit me.

The moment was broken when Hannah grabbed my arm and yanked me back. “Thanks for helping, but uhh, we gotta go.” Her tone was filled with frantic urgency. “Tuna melts are waiting.”

His eyes stayed locked with mine for a long moment before his expression smoothed, and he slowly released his hold. “Don’t wanna keep a good sandwich waiting.”

Hannah gave me a little jerk. “Let’s go.”

“Right,” I whispered, my mind still muddled. “Thanks again.”

Giving a cool one-shoulder shrug, he dropped his board to the ground. “It’s what I do. See you around, Lilith.”



He rode off like a bat out of hell, expertly swerving to avoid people.

“You’re gonna get murdered. Just straight up murdered. We should call the police.”

Pulling my attention from his retreating back, I laughed at Hannah. “And tell them what? A rumored murdering teen gave me a Band-Aid?”

“Yes. No. I dunno. That was just... crazy.” Hannah scanned me. “Seriously, are you okay?”

That was the craziest part of it all.

I was completely pain-free.

The dizziness I’d had was gone. My knee, hip, and hand no longer hurt. They didn’t even sting.

*Him.*

*Lennon did this.*

Shaking off the stupid thought, I smiled at my best friend. “I’m fine.” When she didn’t look convinced, I threw the back of my hand up to my forehead. “But if I don’t get a tuna melt in me, I just may perish.”

“Oh, woe is you.”

“Right? It’s a life-and-death situation.”

“You’re right. My sandwiches are that good.”

We started toward her house. When we walked by one of the basketball courts, Trey jogged over. “Ay, Hannah, hold up.”

My heart surged for my friend, but she didn’t stop.

She walked *faster*.

“What’re you doing?” I whispered, knowing she wouldn’t play games. Plot and scheme, sure, but not play games.

Ignoring me, she shouted, “I’ve gotta get my *injured* friend home.” She gave a playful finger wave over her head. “No time for a wannabe baller.”

Remembering Lennon's insult, my eyes went wide. "Was Trey the one who knocked me over?" I gasped. "Did you get in *his* face?"

"That asshole knocked over my girl and didn't even pause to apologize?" She tsked and shook her head. "He's totally out as my future hubby."

"You're a good friend, but—"

"First of all, I'm the *best* friend. Get it right. Second, no buts. He's an asshole." Slowing our pace again, she looped my arm with hers. "Now, let's get you that sandwich before you get murdered."

"It's a fitting last meal."

Even as I joked, I knew deep in my twelve-year-old bones that Lennon would never hurt anyone.

*He's a healer.*

## CHAPTER ONE

# BROKEN

## LENNON

**D**<sup>ING.</sup> As the elevator door slid open, I moved as far to the side as I could. I lifted my newspaper to block my face and, more importantly, the ID badge that hung from my chest pocket.

*Maybe I could try to unclip it and shove it in my pocket.*

*No, that'd just draw more attention to it.*

My day was already off to a shitty start. I didn't have the time—or patience—to get hassled for free medical advice.

And they would. It never failed.

In the hall.

The cafeteria.

While I got coffee.

Hell, while I took a leak.

People saw my tag and decided to launch into an extensive story—if I was lucky.

If I was unlucky, they dropped their pants or lifted their shirt to show me a mystery rash or infected sore.

And it always went the same.

I told them I couldn't legally give a medical diagnosis. Beyond that, I simply had no clue since I wasn't a derm, infectious disease doc, or whatever other specialty they asked about.

They responded by getting irate while claiming I didn't help because then I couldn't overbill their insurance.

I was beginning to hate people and did my best to avoid them. That was usually easy in the morning since I parked in the doctors' private lot and took the back elevators to my office.

But since the lot was closed due to an excess of black ice, I'd had to park on the roof of the regular garage. It'd made me late and frustrated as hell—and that was before I became preemptively annoyed at whoever entered.

*Look.*

*Her.*

*Look!*

*Wait, what the hell?*

Ignoring the errant thoughts, I clenched my jaw and went back to scanning the paper, but I couldn't seem to process any words.

The elevator started down, and a soft ringing filled the air, like whoever was making a call. When a muffled voice answered, the other rider spoke. Her voice was raspy and soft and so damn *pretty*. "Mom, can you hear me?" She paused for an answer. "I'm in the elevator. Traffic was a pain, and then there were no spots in the garage. I've been circling... It doesn't matter. I'll be there in a few. Do you need a coffee? Okay, yeah." She paused again. "Wait, who's that? Who's there?"

A loud *clang* echoed in the small car, making the woman yelp as the elevator screeched to a halt.

*Just what I fucking need.*

Not looking up, I reached over and hit the emergency call button on the panel.

"Holy shit," the woman wheezed. "Mom, the elevator stopped. Yeah, I'm fine. Who's there? Put me on speaker."

Out of my peripheral, I saw the woman shift closer to the windowed rear wall.

“What’s that mean? Mom, can you hear me?” Practically pressed to the glass, she lifted onto her toes and tried again. “What does he mean? Mom, can you—” Her words were cut off by a loud beeping that signaled a dropped call.

*Look.*

Dropping the paper, I gave in to my brain’s demand and looked at the woman for the first time.

*Her.*

*Her.*

*Wow.*

She was probably five foot eight or so. Her boots, tight pants, and cinched coat hid most of her body but none of her curves or her long legs. A bright purple winter hat was pulled down over her wavy dark brown hair.

Strikingly beautiful blue eyes met mine. Worry filled them as she glanced back at her cell, holding it higher. “Sorry, I hate when people are on their phone in public, I just...” She took a shaky breath.

“What’d they say?” I asked, surprising myself.

And her, based on the way she jolted. “Just medical jargon I don’t understand.”

I lowered the paper and tapped my ID. “Maybe I can help.”

“You’re a doctor?”

“Got the mountain of med school debt to prove it.”

I expected the usual onslaught of questions, but she just nodded and tried her call again.

It didn’t connect, but the emergency intercom came to life, and a crackling filled the car. “Anyone hear me?”

“Yes,” I answered loudly.

The intercom crackled again. “The elevator is stuck.”



“No shit, hadn’t noticed,” I muttered, making the woman give a soft laugh that hit me in the gut.

“We’re working to get it going again. Should only be a few minutes.”

“Right,” I drawled before feeling like an ass. My patients would wait or reschedule. The woman was clearly missing an important appointment. Squashing her hope she’d be out in time wasn’t helping.

The crackling cut off, leaving us in silence.

“Want to try my phone?” I unlocked it and held it out to her.

She reached for it immediately. Her fingertips barely grazed my hand as she took it, but my brain went stupid.

*Her.*

*Her.*

*Her!*

The word echoed in my head.

*What the fuck is wrong with me?*

*I need to get laid.*

“Just once,” she muttered distractedly.

It took me a second to realize she meant trying her call once and not me getting laid once.

But that one second was all it took for my body to tighten, my cock growing hard down my thigh.

*What kind of sick bastard gets hard at a time like this?*

Embarrassment and guilt filled me. Like I was a damn teenager, I shifted my messenger bag to hide my hard-on. I was tempted to pry the doors open with my bare hands so I could get away from the woman fucking with my head.

I had no clue what the hell was going on with me. It wasn’t like I lived in a monastery away from women. I’d been around them. Talked to them. Spent time with them that didn’t involve

talking. But my brain suddenly decided to let my dick do all the thinking just because she was hot.

No. That was an understatement.

She was the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. But the intensity of my reaction still surprised me.

Unsettled, I pulled a coin from my pocket and moved it between my fingers as I watched her lift onto her toes and lean against the glass. The muffled sound of the phone ringing was loud in the silent space.

"Mom, can you hear me?" she asked when the call connected.

"Hello?" the woman on the other end answered.

"Mom?"

"Hello?" Her voice sounded far away as it cut in and out. "No one's there."

The call disconnected, and the woman inhaled sharply. Her shoulders slumped and worry took over her expression.

"Tell me everything," I ordered softly when she handed my phone back.

"No, that's okay. I'm sure you've got—"

"Nothing to do but be stuck in this elevator?"

Her lips tipped as she studied me. She must've believed my genuine interest—even if I didn't believe that truth—because she launched in. "It's my dad. He's been having hip and back pain for a while, but he brushed it off. When he finally went to the doctor, the *doctor* brushed it off as arthritis and stress. I fucking hate doctors." She offered me a tight smile. "No offense."

"None taken."

"The pain and numbness got bad enough to cause some instability, so my mom took him to urgent care this morning. I don't have all the details on that other than they mentioned some horse thing?" And then they told my mom to take him right here. He's never even ridden a horse."

*Cauda equina syndrome.*

“Anyway, she called me, I rushed over, but people drive like assholes and park like they’ve got rabid ferrets down their pants.” She gestured around us. “That’s how I ended up stuck in here with you instead of in there with them.” Another smile, though that one was not as tight. “No offense again.”

“None taken again.”

“My mom thinks it’s a slipped disc.”

There were a lot of causes of pain, numbness, and cauda equina syndrome, and a slipped disc was one of them.

“It could be,” I told her honestly. “It’s not the best thing, but not the worst. And almost always treatable.”

She bit her lip, looking out the glass wall before meeting my gaze. Her expression was set with determination as she raised her chin. “We’ll figure it out. We have to.” Her face crumpled, her stoic strength shifting to painful vulnerability that was a different kind of strength. “We *have* to. He’s my best friend. I just have this feeling, and I can’t... I can’t lose him.” Her last few words came out choked as she burst into silent tears that wracked her small frame.

I’d delivered a lot of bad news. A gentle shoulder pat or hand squeeze was as physical as I ever got.

And even that was rare.

Distance was a necessity for doctors. Those who couldn’t separate their work from themselves ended up burned out... or worse. We faced death and pain and suffering every day. We saw the way it tore families apart. How it left people shells of their former selves. Being unable to help everyone was a bitter pill we were forced to swallow.

One that led some doctors to swallow it down with other pills, liquor, or a bullet.

Keeping ourselves emotionally removed from patients while still being a good doctor was a fine line, but one I’d learned to walk.

I launched myself over that line and pulled her into my arms.

The woman came willingly, clutching my shirt at my sides as she cried. “I’m sorry,” she gasped, inhaling deep, shuddering breaths as she fought for control. “I never cry.”

“Then it’s long overdue,” I whispered, rubbing her back.

Like most of my thoughts and reactions in the short time, I had no clue what I was thinking. It was unprofessional, inappropriate, and out of character for me. Common sense screamed in my head to let her go.

I held her tighter.

After a minute, her tears stopped, though she still trembled. Another minute passed, and she tensed, giving an embarrassed laugh. “Bet this isn’t how you saw your workday starting.”

When she pushed away, I grudgingly released my hold.

“I got mascara on your shirt.” Her damp cheeks flamed red.

I didn’t bother to look down. “I keep an extra in my office.”

“I’m still sorry.”

Reaching out, I cupped her face in both hands and wiped the black makeup smudges away. Her eyes widened at my touch, but she didn’t shift away.

She leaned *closer*.

Her lids began to lower before shooting open even wider than before.

“Lennon Gwyn?” she breathed.

*Even a saint would get hard from hearing her whisper their name in that damn voice.*

“My parents were Beatles fans—”

“I know you.” She touched my ID badge.

*I’d sure as fuck remember you.*

“I mean, I think I know you,” she amended. “How many Lennon Gwyns can there be?” Gripping my shirt again, she tilted her head back to look at me. “You skateboard.”

My brows lowered at the blast from the past reference. “A lifetime ago.”

“I got knocked down at the park when I was, like, twelve. You patched me up.” Her gaze went to my ID. “Makes sense you’re a doctor now.”

I looked down at the gorgeous woman and vividly remembered the day as if it’d just happened. It’d been the moment I’d decided to apply for med school.

“Lilith,” I muttered, something fuzzy hammering at the back of my mind. “A kid playing basketball knocked you over.”

Though it wasn’t a question, she nodded. “I still have a little scar on my knee.”

She kept hold of my shirt, and I kept hold of her face as we stood in stunned silence.

“I can’t believe—” Her words were cut off by a loud whirring. She jumped away when the elevator started moving. “Oh, thank goodness.”

Grabbing a card and pen from my bag, I jotted down my cell and handed it to her. “Call or text if you need any medical jargon explained. Or just need to talk.”

She took the card and held it to her chest.

The prickling sensation in the back of my brain increased, bordering on painful.

As soon as the door slid open, maintenance and hospital staff rushed in. They talked and pressed buttons. I didn’t pay attention to whatever apologies and explanations they offered her, likely fearing a lawsuit. But I did pay attention to her.

There was another round of apologies that she walked away from.

And I followed.



Once we entered the lobby, she looked up at me. “Thanks for letting me ruin your shirt.” Turning, she took a few backward steps. “And for making me feel better.”

She spun around and kept going toward the ED, but the words echoing in my head pushed themselves out.

“It’s what I do.”

CHAPTER TWO

TAKE CREDIT

LILITH

ONCE I ROUNDED THE CORNER, I paused for a second. Just long enough to breathe deep and steady myself as I scanned the ceiling direction markers.

Things rarely rattled me. My friends lovingly—usually, at least—called me a robot. But the phone call from my mom had panicked me. Getting trapped in the elevator had freaked me out.

And the man—Lennon—had shaken me to my core.

I hadn't thought about him since I was probably sixteen or so. But before then?

It'd been bad.

For years after our run-in, I'd looked for him every time I passed the skate park. Hopped up on hormones, cheesy boy band love songs, and even cheesier teen movies, I'd conjured the fantasy of him skating back into my life.

Then I'd grown up. I'd gone away to college. I'd forgotten about the man-boy who'd kickstarted my swan dive into boy-crazyhood.

The odds of us meeting—let alone getting stuck in an elevator together—had to be astronomical.

But fate and the universe always had a way of interceding when needed. Kindness and a doctor's listening ear had been *very* much needed at that moment.

Spotting the signs that led the way to the emergency department, I booked it double time. I skipped the elevator in

favor of the stairs, taking them quickly down to the ground floor before following the signs again. Reaching the security desk, I gave my dad's name as I held out my license. My fingers shook so badly, the card looked like it was made of pliable, wiggling paper.

The security guard gave a gentle smile as she handed over the sticker badge. "He's in bed ED34, left-hand side. Go through the double doors, make a left, then a right when you reach the providers' station. Follow the half circle till you get to his room."

"Thanks," I muttered, my foggy brain trying to remember all she'd said.

"Good luck."

I followed her directions and eventually got there since I'd accidentally turned right instead of left. When I spotted my dad's room number, I gingerly pushed the curtain aside. I geared up to throw myself at him for one of his amazing hugs...

Empty.

He wasn't there.

Neither was my mom.

Hell, neither was the bed.

I stepped out into the hallway to check the room number when someone spoke behind me. "Are you Lily?"

Whipping around with my racing heart in my throat, I nodded.

Reading my panic, the man offered a reassuring smile. "I'm your dad's nurse, Dave. He's having an MRI. They just took him"—he glanced at his watch—"not even two minutes ago, so it'll be a while. Your mom said she was going to see if you were still stuck in the elevator and then get coffee."

"Thank you." Relief edged out some of my worry.

Like one percent of it, but still. That was some.

“Were you really stuck in the elevator?” he asked. “I thought she was kidding.”

“A parking garage one, but only for a few minutes.”

“My shift is over in about an hour. I think I’ll take the stairs.”

“That’s probably a good idea.”

He looked over his shoulder and waved at another nurse, halting her progress before turning back to me. “Do you need anything?”

*Yeah, a time machine so I can have answers right now, a vat of coffee, and a million dollars.*

“No, thank you,” I said instead.

He gave me another reassuring smile before making a beeline to the other nurse. They took off toward their station, but not before I heard him ask, “Did you hear about the elevator?”

Taking off my coat and hat because the room was a billion degrees, I paced the small space for a few minutes. I sat just to immediately stand and pace some more. When that did nothing to calm me, I brought out my phone and saw I had a waiting message from my mom. I opened it to see a link about cauda equina syndrome.

Mom was more tech-savvy than most people her age. Hell, she was more tech-savvy than people *my* age. It wasn’t a surprise she’d already consulted Dr. Google.

Clicking it, I started reading. When I reached the causes section, one word stuck out.

*No, it’s not that.*

*Nope.*

*No way.*

I opened a new tab, my thumbs moving despite my brain’s fervent dismissal of the possibility.

*Cancer symptoms.*

The amount of information, misinformation, contradictory information, and unresearched information was enough to make my mind spin.

Variations.

Treatments.

Statistics.

Staging.

Grading.

Each valid-sounding website was rivaled by ten that offered conspiracy theories, supposed cures, and even some claims that cancer was a sign of the impending apocalypse.

*There's a reason doctors say not to search symptoms online.*

*Could be a common cold.*

*Could be terminal brain cancer.*

*Could be the end of all humanity.*

*Good luck!*

Overwhelmed and scared out of my mind, I exited the window and closed my eyes. I inhaled deeply, fighting to settle my racing heart and worried soul.

I worked to suppress the ominous feeling that lingered in the back of my mind.

*I'm just being dramatic.*

*A worrier.*

Just as I got control of myself, my mom came in, double fisting coffee.

“Thank the gods you’re okay.” She pulled me into a hug that nearly spilled coffee down the front and back of my shirt.

“We were only stuck for a few minutes,” I reassured her. I felt guilty my non-emergency had added to her stress when she had enough on her plate.

“We?”

*Yes. We. Us. Lennon and me.*

*Oh, shut up brain. You're delirious.*

I internally rolled my eyes at the flare of fancifulness that resurged from my teenage years. “There was a doctor in there, too.”

“What kind?”

*Huh. That's a good question.*

Most moms would likely ask because they hoped their daughters would meet and marry a nice doctor who could give them a picket fence and the requisite two-point-five kids—a morbid thought when taken literally.

But not my mom. She likely only asked out of curiosity because she was a talker.

Like mother like daughter.

“I didn't ask,” I told her. “We didn't really talk.”

*I just broke down and got makeup all over his crisp shirt.*

Taking the outstretched cup from her, I redirected the conversation to what was important. “What's going on with Dad?”

“The numbness was worse today, and he almost fell getting dressed. He asked me to take him to urgent care before work.”

*If he asked to go to the doctor, it must be worse than we know.*

I kept that to myself even though she'd likely already had the same thought. “What'd urgent care say?”

“I didn't go back with him, but the doctor came to the waiting room and told me to drive him here.”

“He told you?”

“That cauda-whatever-whatever is numbness in the saddle region. They were probably concerned his foot might go numb. He still drove.” She shrugged. “You know he isn't a fan of my driving.”

That was putting it mildly.

Dad hated it.

Everyone stuck behind her hated it.

Any unsuspecting curb in her path hated it, too.

I opened my mouth to chide her for taking the risk before closing it. As bad as it could've been, it was still probably safer.

My mom was mellow in most areas of her life. She rarely wore makeup. Her graying blond hair was kept fashionably short so it required little styling. Most of her wardrobe was casual slacks, hippie tunic tops, and sensible shoes—exactly what she wore right then.

She made the perfect HR officer because she put people at ease and was an expert at defusing situations, thanks to her chillness.

The one area Mia Alexander was *not* laid back in was driving. It stressed her out, and she ended up going too slow while white-knuckling the wheel as though she was cruising like a speed demon.

“Has he been having any other issues?” I asked instead.

Mom's pale skin—the ultimate, natural mood ring—flushed, and her voice raised an octave or five. “Uhhhh.”

“What?”

“When he went to the doctor a couple of months ago, he told him he was having issues getting... you know. The numbness is in *that* region.”

I fought a grimace.

*I should not have asked.*

That didn't stop me from pushing for all the info. “What did his doctor say?”

“You already heard how he dismissed the pain as arthritis and gave him that cortisone shot that didn't help. And with the *other* stuff, he blamed stress and relationship problems even

though Dad told him neither was true. Plus, Dad's not mad at himself, if you get what I'm saying..." She took a sip of her coffee while I worked to keep mine down. "I don't know if you're aware, but there's a thing that happens to men in the morning—"

"I know, I know!" There was no stopping the way my face contorted in horror and disgust at hearing my mother talk about morning wood.

Mom shrugged. "Well, I didn't know. I've just been taking credit for it."

I burst out laughing. The specifics might have been disturbing—and something I'd repress—but I couldn't deny that was funny.

I was still anxious to get off the topic, though.

Thinking of what I'd read, I gently broached the subject I didn't want to think about. One that I kept circling back to despite my efforts. "In that article you sent me, it mentioned cancer..."

"No, it's not that." Mom's tone wasn't filled with false earnestness that would make me think she was in denial. It was dismissive and factual.

I kept my voice light, not wanting to transfer my unease to her. "Just with Dad's dad—"

"That was completely different."

My grandfather had died of cancer when my dad was only eight, but he'd been a heavy smoker, an even heavier drinker, and had lived in a time where safety regulations were *rub some dirt in it and have a beer*.

"Dad doesn't smoke and rarely drinks," she pointed out. "It's just a slipped disc. His back has always been a mess."

That was true. He'd already had surgery on his shoulder and his neck. A slipped disc made sense.

And once a doctor confirmed it, the pit in my stomach would go away.



Keeping one eye on the door, I did my best to distract my mom. We discussed restaurants, new tech stuff, and whatever else came up. The longer we chatted, the more food came up. It wasn't a surprise when Mom's stomach growled.

"I didn't eat this morning before the appointment," she admitted with a laugh.

"Why don't you run and grab a scone or something?"

Indecision crossed her face. Her gaze darted from the doorway to the clock to the spot where his bed would be returned. "You sure?"

My mom also wasn't mellow when she was hungry.

No.

*Hangry.*

It was in everyone's best interest that she ate.

I nodded, but when she still didn't move to stand, I told her, "The nurse said it would be a while. Even if he gets back as soon as you leave, I'll be here."

"Message me if there's any news."

"I will."

Once she left, I pulled out my phone and read the article again before googling some more. There were work things I needed to do that would've offered a distraction, but I couldn't stop my obsessive research.

I was on my fifth website with the same info when my phone vibrated.

Hannah: How's Papa A?

I'd called her while I'd circled the garage over and over, even though I hadn't had much info to tell her then.

I still didn't.

Me: I haven't seen him yet. He's having an MRI.

Hannah: Let me know when you find out.

My dad was a funny man with a kind soul and a giant heart. We'd always been close, and that meant my friends became his unofficial kids—because if I liked them, they had to be good people.

If Mom and I were tied as the most worried, Hannah was a close second.

Me: I will.

Although it was unlikely she'd even remember our park encounter with the rumored teen murderer, I was going to tell her about my elevator reunion with Lennon. My thumbs hovered over the screen, but my brain refused to type the words. It was like he was a secret I didn't want to share.

It made no sense.

But little about my reaction to him had.

When I'd entered the elevator, my brain had screamed at me to look to the side. To look at the man hiding behind his newspaper. To force him to lower the paper to look at me. I'd shoved the demands aside to focus on calling my mom, but it'd taken more effort than it should've.

It was like my subconscious had recognized him.

I certainly hadn't. He wasn't the cute skater boy anymore.

His white tee and torn jeans had been replaced with a tailored dress shirt and slacks that likely cost more than I spent on food in a month. His dirty blond hair was still a little long and pushed back, but it still looked professional.

No errant pieces that got in his face while he applied bandages.

Unsurprisingly, his sense of style wasn't the only thing to change in over a decade. His face had lost the last traces of boyishness. It was angled and masculine and far too attractive. His lean body had changed from lanky to muscular. It'd also

grown even taller. I hadn't thought that possible since I distinctly remembered him being the size of a giant Viking.

At least in my teenage daydreams.

They hadn't been far off since he had to be around six-six. At five-nine, it wasn't often someone made me feel dainty, but standing next to him had.

My memories were old. Clouded by juvenile fantasies bred from too many romances. They'd likely been twisted and embellished each time they were recalled.

But I remembered his hazel eyes being softer back then. Kinder. Warm in their intensity, making my stomach flip before I was old enough to truly understand why.

In the elevator, they'd been shrewd. Alert.

*Cold.*

There'd been no warmth that soothed. No compassion. No gentleness.

I could've been wrong, though. A few stressful minutes in an elevator didn't make me an expert.

Despite the random circumstances and heightened emotions—or maybe because of them—there'd been something... I didn't know. Something weird about our interaction.

The good kind, but still...

Weird.

So, even though I usually told my best friend everything, I exited from my texts without mentioning Dr. Lennon Gwyn, former murderer and salacious seducer.

I tried to distract myself with Facebook scrolling and Instagram hearting, but it didn't work. My mind drifted to the repetitive articles I'd read. I wondered how extensive surgery for a disc was. I mentally reviewed my schedule, trying to see what could be rearranged so I could be there to help.

They might have ticked by like three hours, but only twenty minutes passed before the privacy curtain opened. A

bed was wheeled in, but I didn't get a view until transport moved out of the way.

I barely held in a wince.

Seeing my big, strong dad in the hospital bed hit like a punch to the gut. But his wide smile when he saw me was a balm to my heart.

"Hi, sweetheart." He reached out for a hug that I happily gave.

"How're—" My question was interrupted when someone else came in.

She used hand sanitizer as she asked, "Mr. Alexander, how're you feeling?"

"Good. But call me Henry."

"Henry. Got it. I'm Annabeth. I'll be your new nurse."

"Nice to meet you." He gestured to me. "This is my daughter, Lily."

"I could tell," the nurse said.

That was the usual response people gave because there was no mistaking I was my father's daughter—and not just because of our sarcastic sense of humor. My mom was fair, with blond hair and pale blue-green eyes. I had my dad's olive skin and dark hair—though his eyes were brown and mine were blue.

Annabeth clicked away on the keyboard for the wall-mounted computer. "Can I get you anything?"

"No, can I get you anything?" he shot back, making her laugh.

Dad was friendly to a fault, especially to people who had to put up with a lot of bullshit.

"If you change your mind," Annabeth said, "just hit the button on your remote."

As she left, Dad turned to me. "Tell me Mom is eating."

I skewered him with a look. "Do you think this is my first *hangry* rodeo?"

“Thank God. I was worried I’d have to bribe transport to stop by a minimart on my way back. Or maybe just keep me there longer.”

I laughed for a second, but the noise was cut off when my heart lodged in my throat. “How bad is it?”

Dad hesitated before he sighed. “I kept having to sit at school yesterday. And then Mom had to leave work early to pick me up.”

My dad had been teaching high school history since, in his words, ‘the dawn of history.’ He rarely sat, preferring to move around the room to point at this map or that poster. After being on his feet all day, he usually walked home.

It wasn’t a short walk, either. Far longer than I’d voluntarily do once, much less on a daily basis.

But like my mom, my dad was a patchouli-scented hippie. He liked the fresh air. The connection to the world around him. The brief glimpses of nature in the concrete jungle.

That he’d had to sit was a bad sign. A ride home cemented the unease I hadn’t managed to shake.

“Did urgent care blow you off like your doctor?” I asked. “Mom said they just sent you over here.”

Dad gave me *the look*.

It was hard to explain, but after a lifetime of being best pals, I knew it right away. It was the one that said we were about to be sneaky.

Like when I was a kid, he’d take me to get gas but then buy me a candy bar even though it was before dinner.

Or when he used to pull me out of school on unseasonably warm winter days. According to him, that kind of weather was the universe’s way of saying we should eat Thai before spending an afternoon walking the street filled with headshops and hippie bookstores.

*The look* usually meant good things.

But not that time.

“They checked my prostate a few times,” Dad admitted.

And, being my father’s daughter, I jokingly asked, “Because there’s something suspicious or because you always wanted to know what it felt like to be a Muppet?”

It took a minute to get our laughter under control because each time we settled, we’d make eye contact and crack up again.

Once we were finally calm, I tried to get us back on track. “What else did they say?”

“Not much really. Just that things weren’t responding properly.”

*If his disc is pressing against the nerves, it makes sense it’d cause problems. Maybe that means they’ll do the surgery today.*

Even as I thought it, I couldn’t shake the doubt.

The *fear*.

CHAPTER THREE

ONE WORD

LILITH

WHEN MY MOM RETURNED A few minutes later, she handed me another coffee and offered my dad a scone, but he turned it down.

*Uh-oh. That's not a good sign.*

The same worry crossed my mom's face at the uncharacteristic denial of food, but she quickly hid it as she dragged a chair over to sit. "Did I miss anything?"

"Just us being hilarious," Dad said before recounting our jokes.

Her eye roll said she wasn't amused, but the hint of a smile gave her away.

My experience in hospitals—or at doctor's offices in general—was almost non-existent. Of course, I'd had regular well-visits but had never broken a leg or gotten the flu or anything serious.

The only time I'd set foot in the emergency room was when Hannah had a brutal bout of food poisoning. I'd forced her to go, and we'd waited forever just to be seen. Then forever for them to run a few tests.

And then we'd waited an even longer forever for her results.

Things took time. There was a whole process. Even with my limited knowledge, I knew that.

So when a young doctor came in a *very* short time later, that perpetual pit in my stomach grew to a bottomless chasm.

My heart raced into overdrive.

*Nothing gets done this fast.*

*Not unless there's something wrong.*

The doctor introduced himself before he asked my dad to recap what'd brought him in—as if all that wasn't in the visit notes. He asked a million follow-up questions about his specific symptoms.

My impatience grew when he pushed for more details, all while staying solemn and tight-lipped.

*Just tell us!*

*Spit it out and get it over with!*

Fucking *finally*, the doctor set his notes down. His expression somehow became even more somber. “The MRI showed significant lesions on your spine.”

*Never mind.*

*Don't spit it out.*

*Don't get it over with.*

*I take it back. Now you have to, too.*

Dad's face lost both its perma-tan and its perma-smile. “What does that mean?”

It was what I'd read about.

What I'd feared.

What I'd *known* even before the doctor softened his voice. “I'm sorry, Mr. Alexander, lesions like this are indicative of cancer.”

My mom gasped and practically climbed into the bed with my dad, hugging him as tight as the awkward angle would allow.

Clinging to him as our world was flipped upside down.

Other people—the kind who these things happened to—talked about the antiseptic smell of the room. The bright lights. The beeps, clangs, and every other hospital noise.



They talked about these inane details they'd never forget.

I didn't understand that because, at that moment, the room could've been on fire. The doctors could've been nude. A rock concert could've been happening in the corner with the devil himself on drums.

And I wouldn't have noticed.

I was too busy trying to make sense of it all.

Cancer.

One word.

Just one simple word that I'd read about. That I'd heard a million times before.

A word that was for other people. Not us. It didn't happen to us.

A toxic word, fitting of the toxic disease.

I tried to focus on what the doctor said. Tried to connect the words that suddenly had no meaning inside my head.

Tried to fathom how cancer, in all its ugliness, was now for us.

It'd happened to us.

To him.

My buddy. My pal.

My best friend in the entire world.

*The doctor is wrong. What is he, like, twelve? He doesn't know what the hell he's talking about.*

My dad cut off the doctor's analytical explanation of lesions. "I know what they are. I asked what it *means*?"

"We won't know until we run more tests," the doctor evaded. He took a weighty pause, and I braced, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

It didn't drop.

It was launched.

“But it’s important for you to know,” he finally continued, “bone cancer itself is rare. It’s more likely the cancer started somewhere else.”

*No.*

*No.*

*No, no, no, no.*

In my ill-advised and intimidating Google search, there’d been sections about how doctors staged cancer. And even though I’d been scanning, I remembered because it was the same on each website.

Cancer that had traveled was Stage IV.

Meta-something-or-another.

A million questions ricocheted in my head, but I didn’t ask a single one.

Because if I did, it would be confirmed. I’d lose the thin thread of hope I had that it was misinformation from the internet.

It would be true.

It couldn’t be true.

I swallowed a sob so I didn’t upset my parents. I didn’t want them to know what I did. Not before they had to.

“We’re going to admit you upstairs while we run these tests,” the doctor told my dad. “I’m not sure which floor or when. But while we find you a bed, the nurse will be in to draw some blood for labs.”

“Well, I was hoping it wasn’t just for their collection,” Dad muttered, funny even when shell-shocked.

As soon as the doctor left, my mom moved back to hug him tight. My dad returned her embrace, soothingly rubbing her back. “Why’re you crying?”

When she sat, wiping at her cheeks, it was my turn to hug him. I tried to hold back my tears, but they fell quickly. I

returned to my chair but reached out to rub his shoulder while my mom clutched his hand.

“Why’re you both crying?” he rephrased.

Mom gave a scoff. “You know why.”

“But why’re *you* crying? *I’m* the one who has cancer.”

Wrong as it was, Dad and I started laughing—likely bordering on hysterical—at his dark humor.

“You guys are sick,” my mom scolded.

I shrugged. “Says the person who said I could ask Great-grandma why she liked cats so much since she was in the coat closet.”

“What? She was in there.”

“Her ashes were!”

“Still counts.”

Joking might not have solved anything, but neither did tears.

I half listened while Mom planned what they needed to get from home, and Dad kidded that he’d just wait there for her.

“What’s that, sweetie?” my dad asked suddenly, making me jolt.

I looked down to see what he was talking about.

Squeezed tight in my grip was a business card. One I didn’t remember pulling from my pocket. One that was offered out of professionalism.

One I was surprised to realize I wanted to use.

Badly.

I shook my head and gave my dad a smile. “Nothing.”

*Everything.*

When I shoved it back into my pocket, I immediately regretted it. Like a child with a security blanket, something about feeling the thick cardstock had helped.

It didn't make sense, but I didn't have time to think about the hows and whys. I took comfort where I could find it and imperceptibly pulled the card out again.

I ran my thumb along the raised text and felt the tiniest bit stronger.

Or like I could fake it.

And that was good enough.

LENNON

NOTHING.

No, that wasn't true.

Glancing at my phone for the millionth time that hour, I had a shit-ton of notifications. Emails. News alerts. A couple of missed calls. A handful of texts.

But none of them were from Lilith.

I could've given some bullshit excuse that my concern was because it was my job. To care for people. To help.

But lying to myself did as much good as using a pinwheel to put out a roaring blaze.

And, fuck me, did I feel that fire.

My interest in Lilith was far from professional. That alone should've been enough to make me step away. I didn't get involved with people at the hospital. Other doctors, nurses, administration staff, patients... Hell, I wouldn't even ask out the coffee kiosk girl—despite my buddy Finn's constant urging.

I didn't mix business with pleasure.

It'd been a long time—too damn long—since I'd even mixed pleasure with pleasure. I tried to remember the last time I'd had sex.

I couldn't.

Fuck.

Or not, I guessed.

Between that and the fact Lilith was gorgeous—an angel’s face with a body made for sin—it was no wonder I couldn’t get her out of my head.

There was a knock on my open office door, and I dropped the phone like I’d been caught looking at porn.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to startle you.” Suze, one of my nurses, stood in the doorway. “Gregory Malder is waiting in room three.”

I glanced at the time on my computer. Not only had I barely touched the paperwork I was supposed to work on, but I was also running behind schedule.

Once that happened, it was a hard hole to climb out of.

*Shit, I’m gonna have to work late or come in tomorrow.*

“I’ll be right there.” I opened Gregory’s file to refresh myself.

*An epilepsy med check.*

*That should be quick, and I can make up some time.*

Closing my laptop, I gathered the rest of my things and stood when the air was knocked from my lungs. Despair crashed over me. Like I’d been punched in the gut, I stumbled back and barely stayed upright.

The feeling faded until only a buzzing in my head remained. Painful and disorienting, I clutched my desk even as my legs wanted—*needed*—to move.

I released my hold to rub my temples.

After dragging seconds, the pain disappeared as though a switch had been flipped. No easing. No residual discomfort. Just there and then gone.

*What the hell is wrong with me?*

CHAPTER FOUR

WEEBLES WOBBLE IN  
NATURE  
LILITH

**H**ALF-ASLEEP, I FLOATED IN the space in-between. My thoughts were fleeting and barely formed except for one.

*Him.*

*I need to know him.*

I rolled over and burrowed deeper beneath my blankets. Something fuzzed around the edges of my pleasant, exhausted delirium.

Pushing in.

Stealing my breath. Stealing my heart. Shattering it.

Broken.

*Cancer.*

My eyes shot open. The ache returned to my chest as memories of the previous day catapulted to the forefront of my mind.

For those hazy few moments, I'd been able to forget.

I'd been able to breathe.

Reaching over, I grabbed my phone.

4:00 a.m.

I collapsed back and closed my eyes, though I knew I wouldn't be able to sleep.

I missed the hazy moments.

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I *NEEDED THIS.*

Standing beside my little SUV, I tilted my head back and closed my eyes. I inhaled deeply.

Soaked in the sun on my skin.

Breathed in nature—the scent of freshly fallen snow and the lush evergreens.

It was a welcome change to the cloying scent of antiseptic cleaner and the sight of cream hospital walls I'd had the day before.

After Dad had gotten transferred into a regular hospital room, I'd stayed while my mom went home to pack everything they would need for their unexpected stay. Once it'd become obvious that nothing else would be happening that night, I'd left so they could rest. I'd wanted to go back first thing, but I had a client who'd been booked for months. My parents would've been pissed if I canceled—especially at the last minute.

*Value time, yours and others. It's a finite gift from the universe.*

One of the perks of being raised by hippie parents was that an appreciation for Mother Earth and the universe was instilled in me from the time I was a baby. My bedtime stories were always about the beauty of the world and all who inhabited it. The miracles of nature. And when Mom was feeling fanciful, stories of fate and the universe.

We weren't full-on tree huggers. We'd never chained ourselves to redwoods or broke into construction sites to vandalize equipment. I'd just been raised to make sustainable choices that made a difference. Composting, using metal straws before it was hip, never littering, things like that.

Appreciating and connecting to the world around me.

And I was grateful because that connection gave me a creative edge as a photographer.

I had a gift.

It sounded conceited, but it was the truth.

Feeling the tension melt away under the sun's heat, I took one last deep breath before grabbing my camera bag. I trekked through the snow, stopping to take test photos in different spots. By the time I narrowed down the best backdrops, I was sweating despite the cold winter air.

*I should've worn a skirt and just dealt with the wet hem. I'm going to smell ripe by the time we're done.*

With that thought, I hurried back to the car and switched from my coat to a hoodie, liberally reapplying my deodorant in between.

Just as I was zipping the thin sweatshirt, a massive SUV pulled in. It was shiny—like the road salt and snow didn't dare touch it.

*I wonder if they'll need to run my credit before I'm allowed within five feet of it.*

It wouldn't have mattered because I didn't approach. Those first few moments when clients arrived gave me the opportunity to see the real them. To get a feel for their vibe and translate that into pictures they would love. Once I aimed my camera, it would be forced perfection or tense awkwardness.

The driver's door opened first, and a man stepped out. He would've been handsome had it not been for the scowl on his face. He scanned the area, and I could practically see his internal eye roll.

When a very beautiful pregnant woman stepped out of the passenger's side, I waited for the man to help since the ground was snowy and slick. Instead, he leaned back into his open door, grabbed a cloth, and wiped around the wheel well.

The pregnant woman gave me a wave and a friendly smile before opening the back door to get an adorable little boy.

Again, without assistance from her husband. He was focused on his car and his reflection.



I took a step to help, but it was unneeded. She sped walked my way—confident and capable despite the large belly and the kid she held effortlessly.

*Work it, Mama.*

*Dad should get his head out of his ass and help, but still. Good on you.*

Putting her son down, she shot me a smile, though her brows were lowered. “Hi, are you Lily?”

“I am. Gwen?”

“That’s me.” She scanned me quickly, failing to hide her predictable doubt and concern. “You’re younger than I expected.”

*If I had a dollar for every time I heard that, I wouldn’t have to work. I could just book the appointments, have the client say that, and go home.*

I grinned at the boy hiding behind his mom’s legs before transferring my smile to her. “I get that a lot.” Not giving her the chance to let her doubt fester, I showed her the images on my camera’s display. “These are some spots I thought photographed well.”

She gasped and the tension seeped from her body, excitement taking its place. “These are beautiful. Do you do a lot of landscape photography?”

“Only before a session. I prefer people.”

Her gaze darted from my camera screen to the spots I’d captured. “These don’t even look the same. I already had high hopes after seeing your online portfolio, but now I’m so thrilled.” She bounced on her heeled booties, and I worried she’d topple. My panic must’ve shown because she laughed. “Don’t worry, I weeble wobble, but I won’t fall down.”

The husband finally came over to tell his wife, “There’s a creek over there. I’ll have to add it to my fishing rotation this spring.”

*Yeah. Because it’s not like you’ll have a newborn at home or anything.*

When he deemed me worthy to look at, his scan of my body was not quick like his wife's had been.

Not by a long, skeevy, uncomfortable minute.

Gwen turned a blind eye and introduced him since he hadn't thought to. "This is Samuel, my husband."

"Nice to meet you," I said dismissively, making his eyes narrow. Crouching, I gave my attention to someone who deserved it. "And what's your name?"

"Jude." The little boy peeked around his mom, giving me a better view of dark brown curls that were adorable in their unruliness.

I already knew they'd photograph beautifully against the lush greens and bright white snow.

"Hey, Jude." As soon as I said the title of The Beatles' song, my mind went to Lennon.

*Well, I made it all of twenty minutes without thinking of him.*

*A new record.*

Since our elevator reunion, I hadn't been able to get my mind off him. My thoughts seemed to switch between him and cancer. Cancer and him.

Or both at the same time.

My obsession with cancer made sense.

My growing one with him threw me for a loop. Especially when I compulsively reached down to feel his business card in the pocket of my leggings.

"I like your name," I told Jude, ignoring my own insanity. "My name is Lily."

"I like your name, too."

"Thanks, I got it for my birthday."

He grinned.

"How old are you?"

He held out a little hand, still chubby with residual baby fat, and extended five fingers.

“You’re five? Wow, that’s basically a grown-up. Do you have a job? Are you married yet?”

He gave me a small burst of laughter before catching himself. Swallowing it down, he hid behind his mom again.

“He’s shy.” There was no hint of an apology in Gwen’s tone. She merely stated it as a fact, not that it was wrong or a flaw.

*Really good on you, Mama.*

“He’s spoiled and babied,” Samuel muttered.

Ignoring him, I gave Jude a thumbs-up. “Shy is cool. Those are the smart ones. The observers.” Moving my focus off him before he got uncomfortable, I gestured toward the first setting I’d picked. “Ready?”

We walked over, and I let the family arrange themselves before tweaking and adjusting. Once they were in a natural position—well, as natural as posing could be—I backed up and raised my camera to my eye.

Beautiful lighting bounced off the white snow to give an ethereal aura. The colors were brighter. Nature was lush around them. It was symbolic of impending spring and Gwen’s pregnancy. Birth. Beauty. Fresh starts.

New worlds.

We moved all over the gorgeous area to get different shots. By the time we finished, my hand ached. I was soaked with sweat and running low on battery—mine and the camera’s. I’d taken countless pictures.

And each one was worth far more than a thousand words.

## CHAPTER FIVE

# TACHYCARDIA IN A CAN LENNON

“I’M DYING!”

“Ma’am, you’re here for ankle pain.”

“It hurts so bad! I’m dying from pain, and you took that asshole first. He just got here!”

“His fingers are broken. You’ve been walking in and out all night to smoke. Now, you need to calm down, or I’m going to call security.”

Glancing at the scene in the emergency department waiting area, I didn’t envy the nurses who had to put up with similar—or worse—every damn day.

Swiping my badge to open the door, I headed straight for the hub in the middle of the circular layout. I stayed out of view as I scanned for Finn. He wasn’t at any of the computers, but the exhausted expressions and bustling staff said it all.

It’d been a hell of a Saturday night already, and it wasn’t even eight. The peak stupidity was yet to come.

I was about to leave when there was a sudden shout followed by unmistakable retching.

*Found Finn.*

He exited a room a few minutes later, drying his hands as he spoke to a nurse. Catching sight of me, he called, “You’re late.”

“I had something to take care of. And you’re not even done.”

Approaching, he gestured to where each room was occupied, including the extra beds that lined the halls. “Full fucking moon tonight. Tweaker stuck scissors in his dick. It was the finger part, too, not the blades. How the hell did he even...” He grimaced and shifted, though his horrified expression had an edge of wonderment. “Never mind, it’s better I don’t know. It’d ruin the mystery.”

“You’re sick.”

He shrugged, not looking insulted or ashamed. “Anyway, they just brought in a poor bastard who got his ass handed to him. He won’t let us call the cops, but they broke a couple of fingers bad. I barely touched one, and he lost his dinner on himself. I’m waiting for Anders to consult, but I’ll be ready in twenty.”

*That means I have an hour.*

*Minimum.*

After my long day, I’d been tempted to cancel drinks with Finn. But knowing him, he’d have shown up at my place with takeout and beer. I needed caffeine if I was expected to stay awake in whatever bar he dragged me to.

“I’m going to get a coffee,” I told him. “Want one?”

“Grab me a Monster.”

I grimaced. “You’re better off snorting a line of sugar.”

“It’s that, or I’m falling asleep on the bar.”

“Fine. You want *Male Chauvinist* flavor or *Fourteen-Year-Old Who Swears at his Mom*?”

He chuckled. “Surprise me.”

“*Bro Who Punches the Wall and Cries* it is.”

“My favorite.”

Rather than walking by the rooms, I pushed open the door behind me.

“That’s the long way,” Finn pointed out.

“I know, but I have two hours to kill.”

“Told you, it’ll be twenty minutes.”

“See you in five hours.”

His response was cut off by the door closing.

I started for a vending machine to grab Finn’s liquid tachycardia in a can.

*Cafeteria.*

*Go to the cafeteria.*

My steps slowed.

I hated the damn cafeteria. There were too many people—interns, med students, patients and their families—who thought a doctor grabbing something to eat was an invitation for conversation. It wasn’t worth dealing with just to get dried-out, overpriced food.

But at eight, the dinner crowd would be gone. And cafeteria coffee was shit, but it would still be better than the sludge in the vending machine. I could’ve gone up to my office to brew a cup there, but I knew myself.

I’d get sucked into paperwork and would lose track of time. I might not have particularly wanted to go, but I wasn’t a dickhead.

Not to Finn, at least.

Changing direction, I took the elevator up, following the twisting halls. When I walked through the entryway of the cafeteria, my eyes immediately went to the side of the room.

To *her*.

*What’re the chances?*

Lilith stood near a table of picked-over desserts and stale pastries from that morning. Like it wasn’t winter, she wore a long, flowy purple skirt and a tight gray tank top that ended high enough to give me a glimpse of her tanned, toned skin.

It was sexy as hell.

It also set me on edge because I wasn’t the only one getting the glimpse.

*Mine.*

*No one should see what's mine.*

I didn't know what the fuck had gotten into me. And right then, I didn't give a damn.

Caffeine forgotten, I walked over just as she blew her wild hair out of her face to give me a view of her glaring at the table.

“Everything will be hard as a rock,” I said from beside her.

She must not have noticed anyone approach because she jumped a mile at my words. She turned and her polite smile grew to a grin. It lit up her face as she breathed, “Lennon.”

My name from her mouth hit me in the gut and cock.

I had the uncontrollable urge to pull her to me so I could taste her mouth and she could feel what it did to me. I also had the uncomfortable and nagging sensation that I was forgetting something.

Something important.

Ignoring both, I pretended to be a decent human who thought with something other than his dick. “How's your dad?”

Her smile fell, but her shoulders went back, and her chin went up. Proud. Stubborn.

*Strong.*

“He has...” She inhaled and forced the word out. “Cancer.”

“Did they say what kind?” I asked.

She gave a quick headshake. “We'll be meeting with a... uh... cancer doctor after all the labs and scans are back.”

Cancer was—*fuck*, it was the worst. I might not have been an oncologist, but I dealt with brain tumors. Unbiased in its invasion, it didn't discriminate with who it infected. What lives it stole. What families it tore apart.

Who it left broken.

Nothing I could say would make anything better, so I said the only thing I could. “I’m sorry.”

Forcing a small smile, she shook her head. “It’s fine, we’re... They...” Tears filled her eyes as she shook her head faster, trying to rapidly blink them away. “It’s not fine. It’s shit. It’s unfair and shit and just so fucking *awful*.”

“Lilith...”

She took a step toward me and then an instant one back, putting more distance between us.

And damn, that killed.

At least until she explained. “I can’t cry. I’m staying with my dad tonight, and if I go to the room all puffy and splotchy, he’ll feel guilty.” Squeezing her lids shut, she inhaled deeply. When she opened them again, there was a hint of humor. “Plus, I already got makeup on one of your shirts. If I ruin a second one, you’ll send me your dry-cleaning bill.”

“Never.” I shrugged. “I’d have my billing department send it.”

She burst out laughing, her face lighting again.

“Why didn’t you text me?” I asked suddenly. I regretted it when her laughter cut off and her eyes went wide.

*Great job, dickhead. Maybe because she’s dealing with her own shit and doesn’t have time to talk to a stranger.*

*Maybe because she doesn’t feel what you do.*

*Maybe because she’s sane and didn’t give you a second thought while you’ve spent more than a day obsessing over her.*

I was about to apologize for being an inconsiderate bastard when she spoke. “I... uh, thought you only gave me your card to be polite.”

“I wouldn’t do that.”

She arched a brow, and her tone was teasing. “You wouldn’t be polite?”



*No.*

*Not that polite.*

I wasn't outright rude—usually—but I'd been told I could be cold. Abrupt. Detached.

I didn't admit that. "I wouldn't have given you my number unless I wanted you to use it."

A *beep* sounded from my pocket.

Figuring it was Finn telling me he was ready, I ignored it.

Lilith tucked her hair behind her ear and opened her mouth, but before she could speak, my emergency tone loudly echoed around us.

*Not Finn.*

*Damn.*

Reaching into my pocket, I silenced the page. "I'm sorry, I have to go."

Before I did something stupid—like touch her—I started for the door.

"Lennon," Lilith called.

I spun back to face her as I walked backward.

"I did want to use it." She hesitated, doing the hair tuck again before adding, "Badly."

"Good. Because I wanted you to." I didn't hesitate before adding, "Badly."

She smiled, and it would've hit me in the gut and dick again had it not been for the emergency I was leaving to deal with.

And the headache that felt like it split my brain in two.

CHAPTER SIX

TIME MANAGEMENT  
SKILLS OF A CARROT  
LILITH

**D** *O IT.*  
*Just do it.*

*Why am I not doing it?*

*Do I not know how to do it?*

*Channel my inner Olaf and Shia and Nike, and just do it.*

Waiting at the coffee kiosk, I stared down at my phone like something would magically happen.

It didn't.

Shocking.

Since smart phones apparently weren't smart enough to automatically craft the perfect opening text, I was on my own. After more thought than I cared to admit, I settled on a real banger.

Me: Good morning.

*There. That wasn't too bad. Nice and simple.*

*Except he has no clue who it is.*

*Bah!*

I was about to break the cool person's code regarding double texting when he messaged.

Lennon: Good morning, Lilith. How're you?

Me: How'd you know it was me?

Lennon: I don't give my number out often.

Lennon: And you're the only person I hoped to hear from.

I tried not to read into what was likely a throwaway comment. Keyword was *tried*. That didn't stop it from burrowing into the warmth it created.

Before I could respond, he broke the cool person's code by *triple* texting.

Lennon: You didn't answer my question. How're you?

Me: Tired but good. The night was uneventful, even if I did jolt awake at every creak and squeak. How're you?

Lennon: Better now. Are you still at the hospital?

Me: Just grabbing a coffee on my way out. Are you here?

Lennon: For once, no. But I wish I was.

There was no stopping my romantic heart from putting on its glasses and reading *alllll* into that.

---

**S** *HUT THE EXQUISITELY DESIGNED FRONT DOOR.*

After a quick stop home to shower and change, I'd gone straight... well, straight to more coffee. But after that, I'd rushed to the site of another maternity shoot.

The location had been booked directly by the clients, but I'd wanted to come early to explore the space before their

arrival.

It didn't disappoint.

As in, I was tempted to move my belongings in and refuse to leave.

Rather than the expected lodge with folding chairs and a mountain of dust, the cabin was rustically posh. Exposed beams. Crafted, dark-stained woods. A beautiful fireplace surrounded by stacked stone.

*The park was beautiful.*

*But this is awe-inspiring.*

*A literal example of picturesque.*

My mind took off at a thousand frames a minute. Each place I looked was a new pose. A new idea. A new chance to capture beauty.

Making a few trips, I loaded my things inside, though the space didn't require much. On my last run, my phone chimed in my pocket and my heart squeezed.

I wasn't sure if it was with panic, anticipation, or panicked anticipation.

Probably all three.

I dumped the bags as soon as I crossed the threshold and pulled my phone out just as it chimed again.

Lennon: Hopefully you're enjoying your Sunday and not avoiding me because I freaked you out.

Lennon: Or you're getting some needed rest.

Lennon: And these messages are going to wake you. Shit, sorry.

In my rush to caffeinate and get to the cabin, I hadn't had time to return his texts. I also hadn't been sure what to say without throwing myself at him in a way that would freak *him* out.

Me: I'm not sleeping, and you didn't freak me out. Promise. It's just been a crazy morning.

Lennon: Why? Is everything okay with your dad?

Me: Sorry, I didn't mean for that to sound vague and dramatic. My craziness had nothing to do with him and everything to do with the fact I have the time management skills of a carrot.

Me: Dad has a riveting day of tests and labs but not much else. You should know nothing gets done on the weekend.

Lennon: That's not true... a lot of golfing gets done.

Me: Do you golf?

Lennon: Not unless it involves a windmill and getting a ball into a clown's mouth.

Me: That's an interesting fetish...

Lennon: That made me laugh out loud, and now the other people at the store are looking at me like I'm unhinged.

Me: You just might be. I mean, I try not to judge, but the clown/balls thing...

Lennon: You did it again.

Me: Did what?

Lennon: Made me laugh.

Me: You seem surprised.

Lennon: It's not a common occurrence.

It gave me a little ego boost that I could do that, but a pang hit my heart that laughter wasn't a common occurrence. I couldn't imagine dealing with the bullshit of life without humor.

Before I could ask him why, a car pulled into the lot. Not wanting to leave him suddenly again, I typed quickly.

Me: I have to run, but I'll message later if you want.

Before he could reply, I put my phone on silent so I wouldn't be tempted to look every time it dinged. I pocketed it as I moved to the side of the open doorway to watch the couple arrive.

A man got out of the driver's side first and rushed around the car. Like she was fragile, he carefully helped his pregnant wife climb out. He looped her arm through his, shuffling slowly even as she tried to take bigger steps.

"It's slippery," he warned as they neared the door.

"There's, like, two centimeters of snow on the ground," she shot back.

"It's still snow. And there could be an uneven sidewalk underneath. Or a layer of ice. Or—"

"Baby, I'm fine."

"I know, my love. And I know that because I've got you."

My heart swooned at his concern for his wife and their baby.

*Busy day my heart is having.*

*I guess I'm in no place to judge Lennon's laughterless life considering I can't remember the last time anyone made my heart go wonky.*

When the couple walked through the door, a mega-watt smile lit the woman's rounded face. "Lily?"

"That's me."

"Hi, I'm Celia. This is my husband, Rob." Before I had the chance to respond, she turned and fully took in the cabin.

And her husband took her in while she did.

Celia was around the same height as me—five-foot-nine or so. Her already curvy body was rounded farther by an eight-month belly bump. She had beautiful blond hair and big brown eyes.

Her husband, in contrast, was over six feet of seemingly solid muscle. He had clipped short dark hair, a neatly trimmed black beard, and dark eyes.

*I can't wait to see how they look on camera.*

"Wow." Joy lit her face, which was already bright with a full-on pregnancy glow. "I've only seen pictures online because the price to rent it was..." Her *EEK* expression said it all.

I glanced around. "I've never even heard of this place, so thank you for bringing its gloriousness to my attention."

"Honestly, up until the drive here, I thought we were using a different venue." She didn't attempt to force an attitude to tease him about the venue sneakiness. There was nothing but gratitude and love in her voice. "You'll have to thank my husband."

Rob kissed the top of her head. "My love wants pictures here, so this is where she gets them."

Celia looked about ready to melt like the snow outside, so I pointed at a cozy chair. "Why don't we start there?"

Like always, I let the couple pose themselves first. In one sudden movement, Rob sat and tugged his wife down onto his lap, making her yelp and laugh.

I managed to snap a picture of the very tail end but wished I'd gotten the whole thing on film.

I made some very minor tweaks, but they looked comfortable and natural. Like they'd be snuggled close, even if it wasn't for a picture.

Giving in to temptation—and my swooning heart—I checked my phone quickly.

Lennon: I want. Badly.

Smiling, I put the camera to my eye.

*These shoots are when I really love my job.*



CHAPTER SEVEN

VOYEURISM... AND NOT  
THE GOOD KIND  
LILITH

S PINNING.  
My thoughts.

My head.

My stomach.

“You’re sure it’s prostate cancer?” my mom asked for the third time in as many minutes.

“Yes,” the oncologist repeated calmly, also for the third time in as many minutes.

*He must have infinite patience.*

*Or should I say... patients.*

Stifling my inappropriate and borderline hysterical laugh, I watched as he brought up my dad’s lab results on an iPad.

“The prostate releases something called PSA, or prostate-specific antigen. That number should be under four. Your husband’s was seventy-four.”

“I’ve always been an overachiever,” Dad joked, making Mom swat his arm. “Hey, you can’t do that. Didn’t you hear?” He gestured down at the hospital bed he was in. “I have cancer.”

My mom looked up at the ceiling and grumbled something unintelligible. She was likely praying for restraint so she didn’t smother him with a pillow.

The oncologist seemed amused, though he was trying to hide it and stay on topic. “Your scans showed some significant tumor growth. A few clusters are pressing on your spinal cord, causing your numbness. A radiation oncologist will be in to see you later today to discuss radiation. Who is your PCP?”

Before Dad could answer, my mom hissed, “He doesn’t have one.”

The doc’s brows lowered as he tapped the screen. “I thought I saw—”

My mom’s mood-ring-complexion turned red. It wasn’t even needed since her words were loaded with so much acid, it was shocking they didn’t corrode the air as she spoke. “That bastard should lose his damn license. He dismissed my husband’s concerns. We could’ve...” Her voice cracked, tears filling her eyes as her scowl deepened. “We could’ve caught this *months* ago.”

“I’m sorry.” The doctor’s apology sounded sincere even though he wasn’t at fault. “With the disease as progressed as it is, there’s no guarantee a few months would’ve made a difference to his prognosis. But that’s no excuse. You’d be well within your rights to file a complaint against him.”

“I will,” my mom huffed, though some of her anger had already ebbed away.

*Okay, so my mom is not chill while driving, hangry, or when it comes to my dad’s well-being.*

“We’ll put you in touch with some new options,” the doctor said. “In the meantime, a provider from our cancer center will be in to meet with you later today regarding your future outpatient visits. Radiation oncology will also be in. Because of the bone involvement, an orthopedic doctor may also be called for a consult. Meanwhile, we’d like to run a few more tests ...”

As the doctor rattled off specialists and testing like it was a grocery list, my chest grew tighter and tighter. Black spots floated around the edge of my vision until it tunneled. I looked at the room from far away.

From a dream.

A nightmare.

But I was awake. I was living the nightmare. I'd pinched myself enough to know.

It took every ounce of strength and stubbornness and spite I had to force oxygen into my lungs. I exhaled and did it again. And again. And again. But it didn't help. I was left with a hollow chest and a swimming head.

*Don't pass out.*

*Get your shit together.*

*Dad needs you to be strong.*

That did it. I got a tenuous hold on my panic, but it was only temporary. It bucked in my chest. Kicked at my resolve. I couldn't try to hold it in forever, or I'd fall apart. If I was going to be his rock, I needed to lean on someone, too.

And even though I knew I'd be having a drunken night at Hannah's, she wasn't who I reached for.

As the doctor left, I grabbed my phone and typed a quick message.

Me: I need you.

I wasn't expecting a response right away, but I got it anyway.

Lennon: Are you at the hospital? Come to my office. Silver elevators in the wing where the specialists are. Floor 3, suite 4.

Me: I'll be there soon.

Mom and Dad were talking, but I'd missed most of what they'd said. Stuff about work and money and schedules. All the logistics that were impacted by the fucking disease.

Locking my emotions down, I stood. "I'm going to go for a walk and stretch my back. And maybe also grab a coffee or

twenty. Want anything?"

My dad's eyes narrowed. "We can talk in front of you. You don't have to give us privacy."

*Unintentional bonus, but that's all the more reason to give them some time.*

I snorted. "I don't think privacy is a thing after all the... *marital relations* questions you've had to answer in front of me. I'm just a little sore and a lot thirsty."

Appeased, he smiled and grabbed my hand. "Bring me a blended coffee with extra whipped cream. And instead of coffee creamer, have them use ice cream. And instead of coffee, have them use extra ice cream."

"So you want a milkshake."

"Well, I didn't even think about that, but now that you mention it... Yes. Strawberry."

"Got it. Mom?"

Tears brimmed her eyes as she stared at my dad. Her sad, small smile wobbled before falling.

My dad turned, likely to razz her about not jumping at the chance to get her favorite beverage. But when he saw her face, his own smile fell.

That was the moment.

The moment it sank in for them.

The moment jokes couldn't touch.

The moment they realized how badly the toxicness in my dad's body had poisoned them and their dreams for the future.

I was an outsider. A voyeur to their pain. I didn't belong there. I *shouldn't* be there. Despite my dad's claim that they didn't need privacy, they did.

And I needed to get out before the wobbly beam holding up my walls gave out, and they saw the broken mess hidden behind my facade.

Without a word, I forced myself to go slowly until I reached the hallway. My steps sped up, tears blurring my vision as I followed the maze of corridors and elevators.

Reaching the third floor, I swiped at my cheeks and hoped I didn't look like a crazy lady. I slowed my steps again, checking the suite numbers until I reached his.

It didn't even occur until that moment that I'd never asked what type of doctor he was.

SUITE FOUR: PEDIATRIC NEUROLOGY.

*Huh. Wouldn't have guessed that.*

A woman behind the desk looked at me, likely wondering why the hell a woman without a kid would be at a pediatric specialist. "May I help you?"

Before I could answer, the door to the back was thrown open. Lennon looked almost as frantic as I felt, his brows lowered with concern.

Trying for calm, cool, and collected, I took a few steps toward him.

Not at all trying for calm, cool, and collected, his long strides ate up the remaining distance between us before he took my hand. He didn't seem to care—or even notice—the looks and whispers we got. He kept his hold tight as he pulled me to a room at the very back of the hall.

Once the door closed behind us, he turned to face me. "Lilith."

That was all it took. At just my name in his gruff, concerned voice, the wobbly beam was kicked out. My walls fell.

Crumbled to dust.

And so did I.

Because in my heart of shattered hearts, I knew I could fall apart. That Lennon would hold all the broken pieces of me until I could put them together again.

Pulling me into his arms, he did just that. He didn't try to tell me everything would be okay. Or that I needed to be strong. Or even press to know what had happened.

He just held me, letting me cry and ruin another of his pristine shirts.

I didn't want to tell him because I didn't want to say it. I didn't want to send the words into the universe and make them real.

But they were real.

And so I choked out, "My dad has stage four prostate cancer."

"Lilith," he muttered soothingly, rubbing my back. After I got control of another burst of fresh tears, he spoke again. "What's his PSA?"

"Seventy-four."

"Fuck," he cursed, low and harsh.

It made me feel better to hear it but even better to repeat it. "Yeah. Fuck."

*And a lot of other much worse words that haven't been discovered yet.*

I let myself soak up just a little more of the comfort he offered before shifting away. His embrace tightened before he very slowly released me.

"Lilith—" His phone on the desk began ringing.

When it became clear he was going to ignore it, I tipped my head. "Answer it. Please. I'll wait."

After a long moment, he moved to his desk. And I took the opportunity to check out his office.

It was...

Bad. It was bad.

It reminded me of a display office featured in a catalog to sell desks and chairs. And not a particularly upscale or luxury listing, either. More like the budget ones.

The space was cold and clinical. Generic. Other than his accreditations and awards, nothing was personal. No photos. No knickknacks. No mug declaring him the world's best doctor.

Or even just the world's okayest doctor.

*I'm going to shoot him...*

*Like, with a camera. Not in the murder kind way.*

"Get Silas to cover my next patient," Lennon said into the phone.

Catching his eye, I shook my head and hooked a thumb toward the door.

"Hold on." He pressed a button before saying, "It's been a long time since I've played charades, so help me out."

"I have to get back."

"No, it's—"

"Really. My dad has a bunch of specialists coming by, and I don't want to miss anything."

He looked torn.

"I've already been gone too long." I took a step toward the door because if I didn't force myself to go right then, I could easily convince myself to stay for five more minutes. Then another five.

Then another and another and another.

"Wait." Pressing a button again, he told whoever, "Never mind, I'll be out in a few." He hung up and walked back to me, not stopping until we were practically touching. "You sure you're okay?"

"No. But I'm better than I was ten minutes ago, so I count that as a win."

"I'm glad. What specialists is he seeing?"

"Someone from radiation. A new PCP. Outpatient oncology." My chest tightened as that feeling of being

overwhelmed returned, but it was less than before. More manageable.

I didn't feel like I was going to barf and pass out, so it was also a win.

“Did they tell you who the oncologist was?”

“No. At least not that I remember, but it was a long list.”

He pulled his cell from his pocket. “What room is your dad in?”

“Floor six, room 6471.”

He touched the screen a few times before returning it to his pocket. “I'll make some calls.”

“Thank you.”

As much as I wished I could freeze time and avoid the real world with him, we both had places to be.

I reached out and gripped the doorknob. “And thank you for... this. I needed a little escape.”

“Lilith, I—” he started before there was a knock on the door, making me jump and him growl. “I'd like to finish a damn sentence.” His hand covered mine on the knob, and a jolt of electricity shot through my veins.

Not the metaphorical kind.

Not the swoony, cheesy kind of zing from movies.

A literal supercharged electrical shock that made me gasp and Lennon grunt.

I looked over my shoulder just in time to catch the wince he quickly hid.

I didn't get the chance to ask if he was okay before he opened the door. Positioned behind me, he didn't step away or remove his hand from over mine.

The waiting nurse's curious gaze remained on me even though she spoke to him. “Need me to cover room three, Dr. Gwyn?”



“I’ll be right out,” Lennon said, still right at my back. Close. Too close for my sanity and his professionalism.

I slid my hand from under his and turned, craning my neck to meet his eyes. “Thanks again.”

He squeezed my upper arm. “Text me.”

“I will,” I whispered.

It was my turn to ignore all the curious glances as I followed the exit signs. When I stepped into the elevator, I leaned against the back wall and took a deep breath.

Then I stood tall and lifted my chin, ready to face the consults like a badass.

Well, ready to fake being a badass.

Which was basically just as good.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

# DON'T BE A PHDICK

## LILITH

“MISS, GET ME A GLASS of white wine.”

Gritting my teeth, I pasted on the customer service smile I'd perfected after being a server in college. I used the voice to match to repeat for the fifty-millionth time, “I'm sorry, I'm not a server.”

*And I'd think the massive camera in my hand would give that away.*

Of course, I knew that wasn't true. For them to notice the camera would require they looked at me as more than a background object.

The snooty woman just blinked at me—same as the other four men and women who'd asked me to fetch them drinks, hors d'oeuvres, or even Cuban cigars.

Where they thought I had those stashed in my sleek little black dress, I didn't even want to know.

Thankfully, a smartly dressed server swooped in to offer the woman a glass of wine from a silver platter. She caught my gaze and rolled her eyes as she spun away to hydrate the asses.

I meant masses.

After the whirlwind couple of days of specialists and consults, I'd barely had time to breathe. I hadn't slept much, thanks to nightmares and intrusive thoughts. I was farther behind on my edits than I'd ever been. I'd responded to Hannah's and Lennon's texts with quick updates but hadn't had the time or energy to delve into anything.

In the face of all that mental and physical exhaustion, the last thing I'd wanted to do was take pictures of the rich and richer. But the corporate gigs paid the bills more than the family shoots did, so I was stuck. It wasn't like the company could postpone their event to accommodate my bad mood.

Holding in a sigh, I scanned the clusters of decked-out executives. I wasn't sure what they did, something with investments and smaller companies. All I knew was the *casual* Wednesday night cocktail party was to celebrate their profitable year.

*I wonder how much they spent to celebrate the money they saved this fiscal year. Even more important, I wonder how much of that money was saved thanks to the overworked and underpaid staff who are missing from this shindig...*

*My guess is most.*

*Oh well. At least it's easy work.*

I brought my camera up and started snapping away.

*And a good distraction.*

LENNON

**B**<sup>EEP</sup>.

Snatching up my phone, my mind went to Lilith.

Actually, when anything happened, my mind went to her.

But it wasn't her name on the screen.

Finn: Get your ass down here.

*That's not good.*

Me: Medical or personal?

Finn: Both, but mostly personal.

Me: I have a patient in five. Can it wait?

Finn: For your enjoyment's sake, you better hope.

Me: What the hell does that mean?

But he didn't respond.

I switched to my text thread with Lilith, but there was nothing since my message that morning. I thought about texting her again, but I was already nearing creepily obsessed. I didn't need to push it into needs-a-restraining-order territory.

*How long has it been since I was into someone like this?*

*Actually, better question...*

*How long has it been since I simply gave a shit about someone?*

I had no answer for either.

Putting it out of my head, I went to see my next patient. It was just a routine checkup that was over in less than fifteen minutes. Once they left, I checked my cell. Finn still hadn't answered. Knowing him, his surprise could be a hot woman, a patient with some wild object stuck inside some orifice, or a rare medical diagnosis.

There was only one way to find out. I took the back way down to the ED.

And walked into chaos.

But not of the medical kind.

Instead of people in scrubs rushing around, the area was filled with people in suits.

From my position out of view, I couldn't see Finn.

But I sure as hell heard him.

His loud shout carried through the whole treatment zone. "Attention! Unless you're a medical professional or in need of medical care, get the hell out of my ED." When no one moved, he added, "Otherwise, I'm going to start giving enemas first and asking questions later."

That did it.

Most of the suits trailed out—some to the waiting room while others went out the exit that led to the ambulance bays.

There was a sound of metal clanking and someone shouting, but I couldn't make out what they said—not that I really tried.

“Someone discover an alien or was there an accident at a CIA meeting?” I asked Finn when he approached.

He tilted his head toward the door I'd come through. Pushing it open, he still remained silent as we walked to a corner where we could see both directions to know if someone approached.

Leaning against the wall, he pulled an energy drink from his white coat pocket. “What happened to you last night?”

“Told you I had to get caught up.”

“Yeah, you always say that, and then you come out on whiskey Wednesday.”

I hooked a thumb over my shoulder. “You want a full rundown of my daily itinerary, or are you going to tell me what's happening in there?”

“Been an interesting few days in the ED.” Finn milked the moment as he took a dramatic pause to drink his liquid sugar.

“I know you're loving this, but good gossip or not, I have a patient right after lunch.”

“Well, if you would've come to drinks—”

“Finn.”

“Fine. So it started first thing Monday morning when a patient got served with divorce papers.”

“*In* the ED?”

“Technically, it was observation. First, the poor sucker got his fingers broken so bad, he had to have a complex surgery. He was supposed to get discharged, and instead, he got

dumped. Dude lost his fucking mind, too. Baker had to call security.”

I arched a brow. “Baker?”

Finn learned and called every nurse, tech, transport, doctor, and whoever else by their first name. He felt like it showed that every job was equally important and that he saw them as more than faceless drones beneath him.

The only reason he’d refer to someone by their surname was because they were a conceited doctor he wanted to knock down a peg.

Or he needed to put some distance between them.

I’d met Abby Baker when she’d interviewed for a nursing position in my practice. She wasn’t right for my team, but she’d gotten hired in the ED. Her being an elegant, leggy blonde—his exact type—likely explained his need for space.

He didn’t verbally speak, but his nonverbal middle finger confirmed my theory.

Since I wasn’t in a place to judge anyone’s romantic attachments—or obsessions—I dropped it. “So what’s with all the suits today?”

He took another swig. “We’ve got a real-life Batman doling out vigilante justice.”

I still didn’t get why it required that kind of presence. “And they all want a ride in his Batmobile?”

“They’re here because three men were attacked last night. Different times, different places, two common links.”

“Which were?”

“They’re all people in positions of power. And they’re also scumbags.”

“No shit?”

That the Venn diagram of *CEOs* and *pieces of shit* was basically a circle wasn’t surprising.

That they faced any sort of consequence was.

Finn lifted his fingers to count off. “One got jumped after beating on his... hired date. One got it outside of his secret apartment with his secret side chick—who happens to be underage.”

If those were the two pricks he led with, I had to know... “And the last?”

“This is where it gets extra good.” Finn took another dramatic pause, another drink, and another notch of my limited patience. It was worth it when he smirked and said, “David Birgs.”

My lip twitched.

David Birgs was a grade-A asshole and the perfect example of why medicine being treated like a business was a deeply flawed system.

When I’d first started at my practice, he’d been a higher-up at an insurance company we dealt with often—un-fucking-fortunately for us and our patients. They found every excuse and loophole to deny or outright drop coverage. There’d been some rumblings about him taking things too far, so he’d left.

And got a job at the hospital doing the exact opposite.

Rather than restricting treatments to the bare minimum, he pushed for more—even when nothing warranted the orders.

More testing.

More visits.

And more billing.

He hassled every department about their budget and did all he could to cut corners and costs.

He was a dickhead.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Cops said they got a call at about five this morning for an unconscious body found on a running trail. When they got there, he was still out cold *and* covered in evidence. Pictures and papers showing it all. He stole from the hospital. Took bribes to push different devices, drugs, and supplies. Bragged

about declining coverage for racist and sexist reasons. Forced sexual favors for job security. Whoever did it used permanent marker to write insults and his own quotes all over him.” He raised his brows. “*All* over him.”

I could almost picture it, and my lips didn’t twitch. They spread into a grin. “Sounds like he finally got what he deserved.”

“They all did. And I bet there are a lot of people shitting bricks today, worried this Batman will come after them next.” Draining the rest of his drink, he straightened from the wall and shrugged. “The only downside is their stupidity is now my problem. I’ve gotta patch these assholes up, deal with the hospital’s lawyers and PR team, and duck the press. If I have to deal with all that, you’re coming out with me tonight.”

“Maybe.”

“Not maybe. Yes.”

“I’m behind,” I started, stifling a yawn.

He eyed me. “You said you stayed home last night to work. And it must’ve been a late one because, no offense, you look like shit. How’re you still behind?”

Not about to tell him the truth, I relented. “A drink or two. But you’re buying me coffee right now. Otherwise, you’ll have to hunt down which exam room I fell asleep in.”

“Deal.”

Heading up to the coffee kiosk, we joined the long line while Finn told me about the new car he had his eye on.

Which, Finn being Finn, meant he’d have it by the end of the week.

Knowing this, I asked, “Which car are you trading in?”

“I haven’t decided whether I’m getting it.”

“Yes, you have.”

He smirked. “Look, I’m a man of few vices. Fast cars, energy drinks, and hot women.”



“So you’re a fifteen-year-old who talks shit on Xbox and then loses, punches the wall, and starts crying?”

“Fuck off. But also, shit, you’re right,” he said under his breath. “At least I—” He started before his eyes went over my shoulder. “I know your rule with women in the hospital, but you’ve got to at least look at the future Mrs. Finn Jones.”

But it was unnecessary.

*Her.*

*Turn.*

*It’s her.*

*This one.*

My brain went wild, racing incoherently as the buzzing returned as a low strum. The hairs at the back of my neck stood. And my damn dick got instantly hard.

I didn’t *have* to look to see who he was referring to.

But I did anyway.

Lilith walked through the lobby, her sexy leg peeking out of the slit in her high-waisted skirt with each step she took. Her white tee was short and didn’t meet the waistband of her skirt, showing that damn line of tanned skin between them.

She looked like she should be moving in slo-mo with fans blowing her wild brown hair.

Actually, she looked like a goddess who belonged on a tropical island in the summer—*not* a hospital in the middle of a Massachusetts winter.

Finn was saying something to me, but I didn’t pay attention to anything but Lilith.

And thank fuck for it because that meant I got to watch her eyes land on me. The sexiest smile curved her full lips, and her steps sped up as she headed straight for me.

“You know her?” Finn asked.

Before I could stop myself, the illogical truth shot out. “She’s mine.”

His response was a garbled echo as my vision tunneled. Excruciating pain split my brain like someone was in there going to town with an ice pick. The world rippled, and I was on the verge of passing out. Before I lost my hold on consciousness, it faded instantly.

Leaving me confused but pain-free. Completely fine.

Lilith reached me and breathed, “Hi, Lennon.”

And fuck if those two words didn’t rock me like it was the raunchiest dirty talk. That time when my head swam, it was because all my blood had gone straight to my dick.

“How are you?” I asked.

She smiled but shrugged. “Not bad.”

“How’s—” A loud and annoying throat-clearing interrupted me.

“Aren’t you going to introduce us?” Finn asked.

*Hell no.*

*I don’t want you—or any other man—to even look at what’s mine.*

Keeping my possessiveness to myself, I pretended to be sane. “Lilith, this is Finn Jones—”

“*Doctor* Finn Jones,” he amended like a PhDick.

Lilith smiled and took his outstretched hand. “Lily.”

*I’m going to have to break his fingers.*

Before I had the chance, Lilith dropped his hand and looked up at me.

“You go by Lily?” I asked. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because I like when you call me Lilith.” Her eyes went over my head to the big clock, her smile falling. “I have to go, but would you like to go to dinner sometime?”

With all she was dealing with, I’d held off asking her out. It hadn’t seemed like the right time. It also hadn’t been the kind of question I wanted to ask over text since I wasn’t a kid.

I wasn't expecting her to beat me to it, but that didn't mean my answer wasn't immediate. "Yes. Tonight?"

Grinning, she nodded. "That works."

"Text me your address. I'll pick you up at seven."

With a blunt honesty that surprised me, she said, "I can't wait."

Further surprising me, she closed the distance between us to hug me.

Shocking the absolute hell out of me, I didn't give a single fuck that I was at work and in the open. My arms instantly wrapped around her.

*This one.*

*Her.*

Her body relaxed as she let out a soft sigh. Both were cut off when she tensed and pulled away.

As much as I hated to, I let her go before my limited control snapped.

Before I held her tighter so she could feel what she did to me.

Before I told her that her body against mine would be the fantasy and her content sigh would be the soundtrack each time I stroked myself.

Before I claimed what was mine.

Or, more likely, before I freaked her out and made her run from me.

Her cheeks were pink when she stepped away and tucked her hair behind her ear. "Look, I didn't ruin your shirt."

"There's always next time."

She gave a soft laugh. "See you tonight."

"Can't wait."

Taking another step back, she glanced at Finn. "And it was nice to meet you."

“You, too,” Finn said, slow and stunned. Lilith was barely out of earshot when his rapid-fire questions began. “Who is she? Why didn’t you tell me about her? Why is she here? You hugged her?”

“That last one wasn’t a question,” I pointed out.

“It *is* because I’m still not sure I believe what I just saw. It could’ve been a stroke. Or a hallucination.” He snapped his fingers. “A tumor.”

*A tumor.*

*The headaches and intense pain.*

*The odd thoughts and personality changes.*

*The buzzing sensation.*

Everything—every last one of the symptoms I’d been experiencing—fit with a brain tumor.

But it also fit a million other things.

*I’m like a hypochondriac who checked WebMD and is convinced he has a brain tumor. It’s more likely due to stress and lack of sleep.*

Finn waved his hand in front of my face. “Are you listening to me?”

“Not if I can help it.”

Shaking his head, he stepped forward in line. “I don’t even know what to say right now. How many times have you said you don’t date patients?”

“She’s not a patient.”

“Then why’s she here? She didn’t have a case and a suit that screams naughty secretary, so I know she’s not a pharmaceutical rep.” His gaze followed her. “Though I think reps would be a hell of a lot more successful if they wore her outfit.”

*Great, now I have to break his hand and jaw.*

I clenched my own jaw with restraint. “Her dad is a patient here.”

“Okay, how many times have you said you don’t date the family of patients, the staff, the subcontractors, or pretty much anyone who’s even driven by the hospital? And what did you mean that she’s yours?”

*That she’s mine, and I’ll kill anyone who fucking touches her.*

I shrugged. “Just letting you know I was interested before you tried to move in, *Doctor.*”

“Can’t blame a man for trying. How’d you meet?”

I used the remaining time in line to give him a quick, vague recap. Once we had our coffees, I took a big swig and then smiled.

Finn eyed me with suspicion. “What?”

“I have to cancel drinks tonight.” Walking toward the elevator, I lifted my cup but didn’t turn around when I called, “But thanks for the coffee.”

“You bastard.” He paused. “Actually, I’m not even mad. Good luck tonight. Don’t do anything you’d usually do.”

I fought the urge to flip him off.

Because he had a point.

## CHAPTER NINE

# NORMAL

## LILITH

“YOU’RE FUCKING WITH ME.”

Rolling my eyes, I inhaled deeply and searched for patience while simultaneously reminding myself that Hannah was my best friend.

And I was sure there were very good reasons she was, though I had trouble remembering them right then.

*I’m glad I didn’t tell her Lennon was the murderer man-whore from the park all those years ago, or this conversation would be even more ridiculous.*

For the thirteenth time—literally, I’d kept count—I said into my cell, “No, I’m serious.”

“A date.”

“Yes.”

“With a *doctor*?”

“Yes.”

“Like, a real one? Not just some guy who offered to give you a physical?”

I laughed. “Yes! He’s a pediatric neurologist. I’ve been to his office, and it’s not a sketchy room in an abandoned warehouse.”

“I just can’t believe you’re going on a date, period. But especially with a doctor.”

“Why is that so hard to believe?”

“Just...”

At her hesitation, I glared, though she couldn't see me. “Should I be insulted?”

“No, it's not like that.” She paused. “Remember junior year when you got a B on that photography assignment? You didn't leave our apartment for like two weeks. Or when you and Micah broke up, you holed up in your room even though you were the one to dump him. Or—”

“I get the examples, but not your point.”

“You always deal by turning into a hermit. You disappear. And with what you're going through with your dad... Don't get me wrong, I think it's awesome you're dating. It's just unexpected.”

She had a point, not that I would admit it to her.

“Plus, it's with a *doctor*,” she said with even more emphasis.

“Why do you keep saying it like that?”

“Because it's so... respectable. He won't hit you up for rent money or steal your TV to buy *art supplies*. And, yes, I was doing air quotes because you know damn well he used that cash for blow.”

Again, I couldn't argue because she had a point. A few of them. A few cringy, awful, hindsight's-twenty-twenty points.

I did not have good taste in men. I'd always gone for the creatives.

A rocker who'd made it his mission to sleep with any girl who bought his merch and stroked his big... ego.

A starving artist who loved to offer *constructive criticism* so harsh, I nearly quit photography. Of course, he'd never sold a single painting and had to stop painting because he'd snorted his supplies—literally and figuratively. After he'd gotten canned from bartending and couldn't afford coke, he'd started huffing.

It'd been ugly.

Yet still not as ugly as the *influencer* trust fund kid. Or the other rocker.

Since I couldn't argue, I evaded. "Blow? What're you, an extra on *The Wire*?"

"Don't deflect."

"And med school is expensive. Maybe he's in a lot of debt and planning to steal my kidney and leave me in a tub of ice."

"Deflecting," she singsonged.

"Fine. Yes, he's respectable. He's handsome and wears tailored dress shirts that are probably more expensive than my rent, which is why it's extra unfortunate I keep ruining them."

"Wait, what?"

"Long story. Anyway, he is different from my usual type, but I think that goes in the *pro* category."

"In all caps and underlined three times."

I rolled my eyes but...

Yeah. Maybe even four underlines and some arrows.

But I wasn't admitting that, either.

"So what's he like?" Hannah asked. "If he's working in pediatrics, I'm guessing he's either a gentle teddy bear or a big ol' goofball."

"Neither. I'm actually surprised he works with kids. He's definitely gentle, but it's... rusty. Unfamiliar. He's pretty serious."

I thought about his eyes.

*Cold.*

Then I thought about how he held me when I needed it. How he smiled at me. How he looked at me.

*But capable of being hot.*

*So hot.*

"Serious *and* a doctor?" Hannah asked. "You're just switching everything up."



“I’ve dated serious guys before.”

“You’ve dated pretentious guys. Big difference.”

*I need a new best friend. This one knows me too well.*

“Moving on since I’m right,” she continued, “what’re you wearing?”

“That’s a naughty question to ask. At least buy me dinner first.”

“The *doctor* is already doing that. And I’m betting he’s actually going to pay instead of going dutch or conveniently *forgetting* his wallet. Hence why I’m asking since this is uncharted territory.”

I glanced down, which was stupid because I knew exactly what I wore. I’d spent way too long trying on every article of clothing I owned.

“Hold on.” After snapping a weirdly angled pic of my dark gray skinny jeans, purple off-the-shoulder tee, and nude booties, I sent it to her.

The phone jostled before she gave a catcall whistle. “Sexy. And perfect. You look like you tried but not *triiiiied*.”

My shoulder relaxed. “Thank goodness because I do not have time to change.”

“Are you meeting him somewhere?”

“No, he’s picking me up.” I checked the time. “Any minute now.”

“I’ll let you go so you can stalk the window. Let me know if you need to cancel lunch tomorrow.”

I gave a short laugh. “I’m pretty sure the date will be over by then.”

“Not if it goes well... wink wink, nudge nudge.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’ll text later.”

“You better.”

We said our goodbyes before I moved to do exactly as she’d predicted—stalk the window.

From my spot on the second floor, I had the perfect view of the street in front of my apartment building. I'd positioned a heavy wooden chest in front of the window, and my mom had sewn a padded cushion for the top. One of my favorite things to do was sit there and people watch for hours. I'd love to take pictures of the world going by, but that would've been intrusive and creepy.

A date was different, though.

Or, at least, that was what I told myself.

Because when a car that was far too expensive to be in my neighborhood parked, I brought my camera to my eye and held my breath.

Lennon climbed out, and I clicked away.

*Huh.*

I lost sight of him moments before the doorbell on my wall rang out.

Walking to the system, I couldn't look away from the screen on my camera as I distractedly pressed the button to unlock the main door.

I studied the picture. It was good. I might have been two stories up, but the lens on my camera made it look like two feet. The image of Lennon in dark slacks and an azure-blue sweater with the sleeves pushed up was crystal clear.

Hurrying to my spare bedroom that served as an office, I grabbed my prime lens and returned to the living room just as he knocked.

I set the camera and lens on my catch-all table and opened the door. "Hey."

"You shouldn't unlock the door without checking who it is," Lennon said.

"Weird greeting, but okay."

His expression softened as he took a step closer. "Hi. Use your intercom."

Maybe it was his proximity. Or the deep, intimate tone of his voice filling my space. Or the way his cold eyes seemed to warm the longer he looked at me.

Whatever the reason, I stupidly hooked my thumb over my shoulder toward the window and freely admitted, “I knew it was you.”

His eyes didn’t warm.

They blazed.

The distance between us disappeared as his hands spanned my waist. “You were watching for me.”

It wasn’t a question, but I still tried to deny it. “I just happened to—”

“You were watching.” His eyes dropped to my lips, and I thought he was going to kiss me. Hoped he would. Instead, his voice quieted to a rough rumble. “You were excited.” I opened my mouth to argue, but he added, “So was I. This whole damn day dragged.”

“Can I take your picture?” I blurted.

His brows lowered, but a small smile tipped his lips. Releasing my waist, he stepped back and held out his arms. “Go for it.”

I nodded and moved to the table, giving him my back. My hands shook as I switched the lenses, and I worried I’d drop one and break it. Closing my eyes, I took a few calming moments.

Once I chilled out, I turned and held up the camera. “Ready?”

“Whenever you are.”

With his words echoing through my head, I put the viewfinder to my eye and froze.

“What’s wrong?” Lennon asked.

“What?”

“You’re frowning. Do I have something in my teeth?”

“No, no. You look normal.”

“Wow. What a compliment. You’re good for a man’s ego.”

I lowered the camera. “I just meant—”

“I’m kidding. Take the picture.”

Positioning the camera, I made some adjustments before taking a handful of pictures. When I was done, I brought up the previewer and clicked through, studying them.

“Can I see?” Lennon asked, his sudden closeness startling me.

I angled the screen.

And then I held my breath.

It whooshed out when he looked at me with a hint of surprise but a load of sincerity. “You’re really talented.”

“Thanks.” I didn’t bother with false modesty, but that didn’t make his compliment mean any less.

“Are you sending that to someone?”

My brows lowered. “Huh?”

“Isn’t that why you took it? A safety precaution in case I turn out to be a serial killer.”

“That’s silly.” I shot him a mischievous smirk. “What’re the chances we’re *both* serial killers?”

He didn’t give his usual quick, sexy chuckle. He burst out laughing, and like his gentleness, it seemed rusty.

It was a shame because his laughter was as attractive as the rest of him.

Since his idea was better—and sounded less insane—than the truth, I pulled my cell from my pocket. I took a picture of the screen and texted it to Hannah before immediately turning off the alerts on our text thread. I set the camera on the table, grabbed my purse, and tossed my phone in. “Ready?”

“Whenever you are.”

Like earlier, something about the way he said the innocuous words burrowed into my chest, warming me from the inside out.

*Either he's really good or my craptastic dating history has sunk my standards to record lows.*

*More likely, it's a little from column A and a little from column B.*

CHAPTER TEN

THE BEST

LILITH

**T** TAKE IT BACK.

*It's nothing from column B and all from column A.*

*All.*

Lennon really was that good.

He'd nailed the drive to dinner by not shying away from the topic of my dad while also letting me lead the conversation so I could talk as much or as little as I wanted. I'd worried it'd be an elephant in the luxury car—something we both wanted to talk about but didn't for fear of ruining the mood.

He'd nailed the restaurant by taking me for tapas—a safe yet adventurous choice.

Then he'd further nailed the date by ordering basically anything I'd expressed a passing interest in. Our table was loaded with small plates of every variety.

We dug in once the server finished bringing our food—or technically, once she had to pause because there was no space left.

Between bites, I leaned back and tried to look serious. “Like any good doctor does, let's start by reviewing your history.”

His brows shot up, and I could've sworn there was a hint of panic mixed with his amusement. “What do you want to know?”

“How old are you?”

“Thirty. You?”

*Only seven years difference, but it feels like much more.*

“Twenty-three,” I said. “Favorite color?”

“Blue. You?”

“Purple. Favorite kind of food?”

He gestured to the smorgasbord in front of us. “Good. Good food is my favorite food. You?”

“Cheese. And tacos. And dessert. And... good. Good food.” Since he looked a little too comfortable with my softball questions, I threw in a curveball. “Ever been arrested?”

Jerking back slightly, Lennon laughed. “No.”

“Not even as a wild teenager?”

His lips curved into a sinful smirk. “Never even beat up a teacher or anything.”

“That’s disappointing.” I sighed dramatically. “And the rumor I heard was it was a principal, and you killed him with your bare hands.”

“Good to know the legend grew after I graduated.”

“That’s not even all of it. The full story was you were sleeping with so many teachers that he had to confront you, so you killed him.”

Grimacing, he shook his head. “Well, that explains some of the interesting interactions I had the summer before I left for med school.”

I popped a Korean beef dumpling into my mouth, my eyes closing at the burst of spicy sweet heaven. “Okay, I could eat my weight in these.”

My eyes shot back open when Lennon said, “Two more orders of those, please.”

The server I hadn’t even noticed walked away as quickly as she’d appeared.

“We have no room for the plates,” I pointed out.

“We will by the time she gets back.” He pulled a serving of mini crab cakes in front of him. “Do you have any other history questions for me?”

“Did you get kicked out of high school?”

He barked out a laugh. “No, but that sounds a lot cooler than the truth.”

“Which is?”

“We moved from New York to Cambridge when I was thirteen, but I only went to public school for a few months.” He gave me a half smile that was a little sheepish and a little uncomfortable but a whole lot charming. “I went to a gifted school for a year, then graduated.”

“You graduated from high school at *fourteen*?”

*Note to self: Do not mention that I only graduated on time thanks to a prayer, a miracle, a fervent plea to the universe, and one single percent in math.*

At his nod, I asked, “What’d you do after graduation?”

“Took a bunch of college classes. Not enough to get a degree in any one major, but enough to see what I wanted to do.”

“And you decided on medicine,” I surmised.

“No, actually, I decided on law. But then I met you.”

My brows shot up so far, I must’ve looked bug-eyed, but I couldn’t seem to lower them as I squeaked, “Me?”

“That day at the park when I patched you up. It felt... *right*.” There was a weightiness to his words that made me think he was talking about more than his career.

Or maybe I was projecting.

Working to keep my voice nonchalant, I moved on before I spilled my guts about how I felt. “What made you decide on pediatric neurology?”

“Kids don’t lie.”



His answer surprised me, but it was true. The kids I worked with reminded me of little drunks—blunt and honest.

“My first patient this morning,” he continued, leaning forward as he spoke, “was this cute little five-year-old girl. She looked up at me with huge eyes, and in a sweet, lispy voice, she told me she hated my tie.”

I laughed. “Well? Was it a bad tie?”

“She said it was boring.” He tipped his head and lifted a shoulder. “She was right.”

“They usually are.” I ate another dumpling before probing further. “So that explains the pediatrics part. Why neurology?”

“It’s good money.”

His answer made my stomach sink.

I didn’t grow up with an abundance of money. We did fine enough and never went without the *needs*, but the *wants* waited for Christmas or my birthday. I appreciated what I had. Our yearly vacations were small, but I treasured them because I knew my parents worked hard, budgeted, and sacrificed to give them to me.

As an adult, I was able to pay my bills and have a little mad money, but I wasn’t rolling in it. And that was fine for me. My apartment was tiny and filled with estate sale and clearance finds. But everything was pretty, and I loved the small space I’d made my own. The way I figured, my ass was just as comfortable on a couch that cost a couple hundred as one that cost a couple thousand.

Probably more comfortable, actually.

But I couldn’t help but wonder what he’d thought of my shoebox apartment in a walkup building in a not-so-great neighborhood. Or what he thought of my job that was not *good money*.

I didn’t fault him for making a fiscally responsible choice. That it was his first answer—and possibly the lone deciding factor—was a different story.

As my mind raced, comparing my life with my assumptions of his, I realized what a hypocrite I was.

*I'm worried he'll judge my artsy career and discount life, but I'm the one making assumptions.*

I'd barely finished my thought when he added, "And what makes people tick fascinates me."

"How so?"

"I almost went into law because figuring out what drove people to commit crimes interested me. Everyone is different. Two opposite people with different upbringings, lives, and motives could commit the same crime. But after that day at the park, I realized I could be a neurologist. I could still explore what makes people tick at the source—and make a bigger difference while I did it."

The sinking in my stomach turned to a swirling because *that* answer was a million times better.

"So you like puzzles," I said.

"I always have. Some are easy. The correct medication plus the correct dose and the puzzle is complete. Others take more work. I have to twist and rearrange the pieces until it all fits together."

For someone who initially claimed his motives were financially based, he wasn't detached. His eyes lit with excitement, and his voice grew more passionate as he talked about his job and some of his trickiest patients. It was more enthusiasm than I'd have expected from the aloof doctor who hid behind a newspaper in the elevator.

*He's a healer.*

I could've listened to him for hours, but when the server brought over the extra orders of Korean dumplings, the spell was broken. His stories cut off abruptly as he forced a smile.

*Damn you delicious bastards for interrupting.*

Lennon twisted things onto me. "Your turn."

“Mah tuhn wahhh?” I asked around a mouth of burning hot amazingness.

“What kind of doctor would I be if I didn’t start with *your* history?” He made a steeple with his fingers, tapping the tips. The motion drew my eyes from his fingers to the sexy veins in his hand, down to the shifting muscles in his exposed forearms.

*I want those hands on me.*

*It should be illegal for one person to be so attractive.*

It took a lot of effort, but I pulled my eyes back up to his and smiled. I hoped it was a normal one and not an I’ve-just-been-thinking-naughty-thoughts-about-you one.

Based on the fire in his gaze as he stared at my mouth, I’d say I failed.

Which kinda meant I’d succeeded.

I licked my lips.

Lennon made a low, rough noise, somewhere between a growl and a groan.

I gasped.

He dropped his arms.

I leaned forward automatically—instinctively.

Lennon shifted.

The cock-blocking—or, more accurately, clam-jamming—server dropped off fresh drinks and again broke the moment.

But it also stopped us from breaking the laws of public decency by launching across the table at each other.

My chest rose and fell as I breathed deep, fighting to clear the haze of lust that’d tightened my body and made my nerves raw.

Lennon sat back so the server could clear away the plates I hadn’t even noticed he’d emptied. After a moment, he spoke—though there was still a sexy edge to his voice. “How’d you get into photography?”

“I needed another credit to graduate from high school,” I answered without thought, contradicting my earlier decision not to highlight the difference in our education. Already in for a penny, I went in for the whole dummy pound. “I wasn’t a good student.”

I watched for any sign of disapproval from the brainiac doctor, but I was being defensive again.

The only reaction I got was a genuine smile. “But if you were a better student, you wouldn’t have needed that credit. That means you wouldn’t have discovered how skilled you are.”

I couldn’t hold back a grin, both at his very true point and his praise. “Exactly. I had no clue what I wanted to do before that point. Not a single idea. I chose the class because I figured it’d be easy, but I fell in love and couldn’t imagine doing anything else. The first time I held a camera, it just felt...”

“Right,” he finished for me. “Chance circumstances, a chance meeting.” He arched a brow. “A chance broken elevator...” His teasing faded, and there was no mistaking or projecting the intensity in his gaze. “One thing can change *everything*.”

*Whatever this is, he feels it, too.*

I held the eye contact, my insides heating and melting. Tightening and twirling. For the second time in the short period, my reaction to him was so visceral, it almost scared me.

*Almost.*

But mostly, it thrilled me.

That time, it was me who cut the moment short, not Ms. Cock-block. “Was that the only question on the history form?”

*Is it just me, or does my voice sound breathy?*

Lennon smiled, but it wasn’t charming or small.

It was the wicked one of someone who knew the effect he was having.

*Okay, not just me, then.*

“I’m just getting started,” he rumbled.

*Oh, hell yeah.*

*No, wait. Oh shit.*

*Oh... something.*

---

**D** *ON’T BE AWKWARD.*

*Don’t be awkward.*

*Don’t be awkward.*

Talking both to myself and the situation in general, I tried not to make an idiot of myself as Lennon parked outside my apartment.

True to his word, he’d just gotten started with his questions. They’d ranged from heavy to light to random. Not only had he asked a million questions, but he’d also actually listened to my answers.

Maybe it was a sign that the bar for men was literally in hell, but that kind of attentiveness was rare.

That had evolved into easy conversation. I could’ve happily sat there for hours, but once the food was finished, dessert was devoured, and the restaurant was nearly closed, it was time to go.

Just as Hannah had predicted, Lennon picked up the check with zero hesitation. When I’d offered to split it, he’d offered a *look* before sliding his card into the little book.

It’d been, hands down, the best date of my life.

But the closer we got to my apartment, the more I started thinking about how to end the date.

Did I invite him in?

Did I go for the kiss?

Would he?

Would I go for the kiss while he went for a handshake, and then I'd fall flat on my face and die of embarrassment?

Which had happened when I was a freshman in college, minus the death part—well, physical death. Socially and emotionally, I'd totally died a little.

All my fretting had been for nothing. Not because I changed my mind about asking him in. Or because he declined my offer.

But because I didn't have to speak at all. Neither of us did.

There was no awkward small talk or waiting for the other to make the move. Our easy conversation morphed into a just as easy silence as Lennon took my hand and helped me out of his car. He kept hold of it as we walked up to my floor, only releasing me so I could unlock the door.

Once I opened it and stepped inside, he stayed back.

I didn't ask if he wanted to come in.

There was no *asking*.

My voice was soft but confident. "Come in."

And that was all I got out before his mouth *finally* crashed down onto mine. The door slammed shut behind him before his large hands cupped my head to take control of the kiss.

Of me.

When I gripped the sides of his sweater to pull him closer, he moved us suddenly until my back was slammed against the wall. His fingers holding my head took the brunt of the force. A picture frame rattled, and something fell off the table, but I didn't give a damn. Not about anything other than getting more.

Needing it.

Because of our height difference, his back was arched so he could meet my lips, creating a space between us. One I didn't want. I lifted onto my toes, trying in vain to fit my body to his.

I was tempted to tackle him to the ground, but before I could, he deepened the kiss and slid one of his hands down from my cheek.

Circling my throat.

Grazing my exposed shoulder.

Along the curve of my breast.

Spanning my waist.

Gripping my hip.

Moving to cup my ass. *Roughly.*

Using the bruising hold, he yanked me against him, his hard thigh between my legs. It wasn't the hard body part I wanted, but I was too mindlessly wrapped up in him to care.

Horny can't be choosy.

His other hand released his hold on my face. It moved away before coming back to curl around my ribs—his thumb resting right below my breast. My breath caught as I silently willed him to touch me. To strip off the fabric that created an infuriating barrier.

For something to happen.

A loud beeping filled the air.

*That is not the something I meant.*

“Ignore it,” Lennon growled against my lips, nipping at my bottom one.

“Kay,” I murmured back before opening wider for his tongue to push in and taste and take and *own*.

Despite his order and my ready agreement, the beeping cut through the frenetic kiss. It wrapped itself around my mind and pulled me further into reality. Not ready to be rational just yet, I hooked my fingers into two of his belt loops and tugged him closer until his hardness was pressed between us.

At the feel of the thick, long length, a trickle of apprehension traveled through me.

But a Niagara Falls-size wave of arousal drowned it out.

Lennon's hand slammed onto the wall near my head. Like it pained him, he violently tore his mouth away. He rested his forehead against mine while he bit out a series of harsh curses. All the while, the beeping continued like a taunt.

*Beep-beep. Beep-beep. Beep-beep.*

*No-sex. No-sex. No-sex.*

*The night of the clam-jam.*

I took a shaky breath. "Is that work?"

"Yes."

"Which means it's an emergency," I surmised.

"Yes," he repeated, not moving away.

As badly as I wanted to continue what we were doing, knowing there was an emergency worked like a cold shower to my lust.

Kinda.

Because I intended to release my fingers from the loops, but my body moved on its own and pulled him closer.

His cock ground against the side of my stomach, and I wantonly used his thigh in a feeble attempt to alleviate the tension that coiled deep inside me. He hissed out a groan and took my mouth. Brutal. Frantic.

Desperate.

But much too quick.

When the kiss ended that time, he took a large step back to put distance between us. I leaned on the wall, hoping I looked cool and casual.

In reality, my trembling legs couldn't support me.

"You've gotta go," I stated, as if he didn't know that.

"Wish like hell I didn't, but yes." His handsome face was like something etched out of marble by the most skilled hands in existence. At that moment, he was taut as a statue, too. His jaw was clenched, making his muscles tense as he held himself rigid. He took a half step before halting. "Wanna kiss you,



Lilith. But if I do, I'm not going anywhere. Not until I've memorized the feel and taste of you."

My body clenched, painfully aware of how empty it was.

Lennon tilted his head toward the door. "Lock up after me. I'll call you tomorrow."

Before I could respond, he walked out and closed the door behind him.

Pressing my fingertips to my swollen lips, I slouched against the wall.

*If I slide down to the ground, I'll be a literal wilting wallflower after just some kissing...*

*I can't wait to find out what happens when he follows through with his threat to memorize me.*

I nearly jumped out of my skin at the single loud knock. "Lock."

Following Lennon's order, I twisted the deadbolt and slid the chain into place.

"Good night, Lilith."

Not a good one.

The *best* one.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

# SACRIFICE THE TUNA MELT FOR LOVE

LENNON

**H**EADING INTO THE HOSPITAL THE morning after my date with Lilith, I didn't waste time with back entrances or abandoned hallways.

I walked right through the main lobby to follow the twists and turns that led to the elevator. I didn't hide behind a newspaper, but no one talked to me anyway.

My expression and I knew why.

Stepping out, I bypassed the check-in and security to scan my badge. The automatic system was too damn slow, so I slammed through the double doors. Eyes shot to me, but I wasn't paying attention. Following the curve, I scanned the rooms quickly.

*Shit, maybe he's on nights this week.*

I pulled my phone out of my pocket and was about to page him when Finn walked out of the last room.

He looked my way before doing a double take. After speaking to a nurse at the desk, he walked over. "What's up?"

I tilted my head toward my usual hidden corner, remaining silent until we were there. I handed him an energy drink.

He took the can but didn't crack it open. His curiosity outweighed his sugar craving. "Why're you he—"

"I need you to order an MRI," I interrupted.

"Why don't you do it?"

"I don't want my name attached to it."

Finn went on alert. “Who’s it for?”

I pulled a coin from my pocket and flipped it along my knuckles. “Me.”

#### LILITH

“TELL ME EVERYTHING.”

“Let me sit first.” Weaving through customers, I spotted a table in the hip deli around the block from Hannah’s work.

Hannah waited until my butt had just barely touched the chair. “*Everything.*”

I never had a shortage of drama to share with her. Crazy clients. Weird outfits or poses. Unusual weddings or conventions or events I’d been hired for.

Not to mention lots of dating disasters, thanks to the real winners I’d picked.

But that was all bad—or at least weird—drama. I didn’t usually have *positive* juiciness to share. I wanted to milk it.

“Hmm.” I picked up the menu and scanned it as though I was going to get something different. I never did. “A Rueben sounds good.”

“Don’t act like you’re not going to get the tuna melt. You get it every single time.”

I shrugged. “They have the best.”

Hannah made an indignant gasp. “Excuse me?”

“Other than yours,” I clarified.

“No, no, I see how it is. I don’t need your pity.” Sighing dramatically, she looked to the side. “I think the only thing that would make me feel better after this grievous insult would be to hear about your damn date already.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t crash the date once you saw the picture.”

“Picture? What picture?”

“I texted you.”

“I just got the one that said you were home safe with all your internal organs still in place.”

Pulling my phone out, I loaded the picture and handed it to her.

“Holy hotness, Batman.” She used her fingers to zoom it. “A picture of a picture isn’t cutting it. When is your next date? Maybe I’ll move in with you for a few days so I can meet him in person.”

“We’d kill each other before I left on the date.”

“Good point.”

We’d lived together in a minuscule apartment during college, and it was a miracle we hadn’t killed each other. She was a neat freak to the extreme—ruthless with a scrub brush and her trusty label maker. I was a... creative.

Fine, I was a mess.

I liked organized chaos. Clutter. I liked to spread my work out on every surface so I could see it from different angles and in different light.

When we’d graduated, she’d channeled her type-A personality and boldness into being an awesomely efficient office manager for a large payroll company. It was a perfect fit, but it also meant she’d had to move nearly an hour away.

Good for her career, but sucky for us. Since my schedule was flexible, I made the drive once a week for lunch, and she came for dinner every other week.

Or more often if either of us needed.

My phone dinged in her hand. “Oh, a text.” She cleared her throat. “My dearest Lilith, my loins burn for you.”

I reached for my phone, but she pulled it out of range. “If his loins are burning, he should probably write himself a script.” I tried again but missed as she swiped the screen and waggled her brows. “Dearest Lilith, I want to give you a very thorough physical. And a damn fine dicking down.”

“Ugh.”

Hannah and I both glanced at the businessman sitting alone at the table next to ours. His disgusted grumble was accompanied by an admonishing glare.

I was pretty sure it was to make us feel ashamed of ourselves.

Hopefully our laughter let him know where he could stick his opinion.

I held out my hand. “What’d it really say?”

“I don’t know.” She passed me the cell. “I turned the screen off when it came through.”

Putting in my passcode, I brought up my messages and was happy to see the text had indeed been from Lennon.

Lennon: I had fun last night. I have work stuff tonight, but dinner tomorrow?

“No three-day-rule bullshit,” Hannah noted. “I like him more and more.”

“Me, too.” I typed out a message to him.

Me: I had fun, too. And I’d love to have dinner.

I put my phone away as the server approached, setting down my Diet Coke and Hannah’s cold brew coffee without us having to order.

He put his fingertips to his temple and closed his eyes. “Let me guess... BLT, extra bacon, add cheese with a side of mac salad.” He scrunched his face. “And a tuna melt with Cajun fries.”

“Shock. Awe. How ever did you know that?” Hannah deadpanned.

“Magic.” He opened his lids and shot her a flirty smirk. “It’s one of my many skills.”

“One of these days, we’ll switch up our orders. Then what’ll you do?”

Walking backward, he put his outstretched thumb and little finger up to his head like a phone. “Alert Ripley’s Believe It or Not.”

As soon as he turned around, I leaned closer and singsonged, “He wants your body.”

“Not interested.”

“Why? He’s cute.”

“He is. *And* he knows it. He’s totally got fuckboy vibes. Hookups are fine, but I don’t fuck where I eat. Things could get weird. He’d get all obsessed with me, and then we’d have to find a new lunch place.” She took a drink of her coffee. “Good sex is not worth giving up delicious sandwiches.”

*I’d quit coffee and tuna melts for Lennon.*

“Anyway, tell me about Lennon. Other than he’s not your usual type.”

“He’s my new type.”

Her brows went up. “The date went that well?”

I didn’t need to think about it.

The conversation.

The food.

The kiss.

“Yup,” I said with zero hesitation.

CHAPTER TWELVE

IF THIS MRI MACHINE'S  
A'ROCKIN', DON'T COME  
A'KNOCKIN'  
LENNON

**H**<sup>ER.</sup>  
*Brooms.*

*Cackling.*

*Drowning.*

*Healer.*

*So sick.*

*So lost.*

*Her.*

*Broken.*

*Half.*

*Missing.*

*Herherher.*

*Her!*

Jolting awake at a loud knock, my heart slammed against my rib cage. It took me a second to figure out I was on the couch in my office. In that same second, the hazy memory of my dream faded. I was left with a sense of urgency but no idea why.

“Come in,” I croaked.

The door cracked open, and Finn stuck his head in. “Your magnetic resonance chariot awaits, Mr. Doe.”

Right.

After asking Finn to order the MRI, I'd gone to work for the day. He'd texted in the afternoon to say the scan wouldn't be until that night. I'd decided to stay in my office and work on a potential medical article, but I must've dozed off.

*That doesn't bode well for the quality of the article if it bored its own writer to sleep.*

*What time is it?*

"It's a little after nine," Finn answered like he'd read my thoughts.

"Mind reader now?" I opened one bleary eye to glare at him.

Or the blurry spot that I assumed was him.

"I wish. Reading your boring thoughts would cure my insomnia."

A couple of weeks prior, and he'd have been right. But not anymore. Not since Lilith. My thoughts revolved around her.

Wondering what she was doing.

How she was doing.

Then they'd take an inevitable turn to thinking about what I wanted to do with her. To her. Have her do to me.

Reading my mind would be like watching a mental porno, but I wasn't telling him that.

Sitting up, I ran my hand through my hair. "I thought you were off tonight?"

"I'm covering till midnight."

I stood and stretched, my back cracking. "An hour sleeping on the couch, and my back is killing me. I'm fucking old, man."

"You're only two months older than me," Finn pointed out.

I paused for a second.

*Shit, he's right.*



As long as he wasn't on call, Finn went out almost nightly. He *dated* women who got younger and leggier. He spent his hard-earned money on nice cars that he liked to tinker with in his spare time. He'd get them souped up and then trade them in for something new.

On the opposite side, I stayed in almost nightly. I worked on paperwork. Brushed up on new research and treatment options. Wrote the occasional paper for a medical journal. I rarely dated. My car wasn't budget, but it was still practical. I saved and invested in a broad portfolio that was profitable but safe.

We didn't seem like the same generation, let alone the same age.

He lived.

And up until that fateful elevator ride, I'd barely existed.

*Maybe it's those nasty energy drinks that keep him young.*

Grabbing my stuff, I locked my office before we navigated the dimly lit hallways.

"I hate this place at night," I muttered.

Finn scoffed. "You hate it during the day, too."

"I don't mind the place. It's the people I hate."

"Medicine is a bad field to be in if you don't like patients." He hesitated. "Have you given any more thought to doing something different? Move someplace with a big research institute where you can get behind the scenes. All the medicine, none of the people."

During the last whiskey Wednesday that I'd actually shown up to, Finn had broached the subject of me transferring to a different field. He hadn't gotten far before dropping it.

That didn't mean my brain had done the same.

"I thought about it a lot," I admitted. "Seattle and California have made tempting offers. But... this is where I'm supposed to be."

"Even with all the people?"

“I like the kids. You can keep the idiot adults.”

“No, thanks. I’ve got an abundance.” The elevator doors slid open, and we got on before he asked the question I knew he’d been dying to. “You going to tell me why you need an MRI?”

“Headaches.”

“I’m assuming you’re not talking about the normal ones that need ibuprofen and time.”

I grimaced just thinking about the stabbing agony. “No.”

He turned to face me, examining me without getting as in my space as he’d likely prefer. “How often?”

“A couple of times a week but getting more frequent.”

*And more intense.*

When Lilith had invited me in the night before, I hadn’t planned to stop at a few kisses. I sure as fuck hadn’t wanted to leave. But the pain had gotten so unbearable, even her addicting taste hadn’t been enough to overpower it. I’d tried—fuck, I’d tried—but my head had started to swim. I’d reached into my pocket to set off my beeper.

It’d given me an excuse to leave that hadn’t risked hurting her feelings.

Even with the invisible spear stabbing into my brain, I’d gotten pulled back to her. Lost in her taste and how fucking perfect she felt.

When I’d been on the edge of passing out, I faked another beep to force myself to step away. My dick had been willing to risk it, but common sense figured an unconscious man at her feet might’ve put a damper on her evening.

I’d barely managed to stumble outside before throwing up tapas in her bushes. Although the Korean barbecue dumplings had been amazing, they didn’t have the same appeal coming up.

It was true that doctors made the worst patients. I should’ve gotten checked out after the first or second

headache, but I'd made excuses to dismiss the pain. Since it'd become severe enough to interfere with my life and my plans to be in Lilith's bed—and *in* Lilith—it was time.

“Jay is on in radiology,” Finn told me.

“He knows this is unofficial?”

“Yeah. I figured I'd have to bribe him, but since you apparently pass your patient gifts to them, they like you down there.”

Catching his glare, I shrugged. “What the hell am I supposed to do with a hundred Edible Arrangements and cookie bouquets?”

“Send them to the ED.”

I raised a brow. “You'd be in a sugar coma.”

“Worth it.”

The elevator doors opened in the nearly empty basement.

“This is Arkham.” Finn used his arm to hold the door open, though he didn't step out. “Which is why I'm heading back to the chaos of the busy and well-lit emergency room.”

“Leaving me to get murdered?”

“If it makes you feel any better, I'd have tripped you at the first sign of a psycho clown. This way, you have a chance.”

I walked into the hallway. “Asshole.”

“Hey, I have babies at home to think about.”

“You don't have kids.”

He put his hand to his heart. “My cars are my babies.”

“If something happens to you, I'll tell everyone your last wish was to scrap those cars and use the material to produce Priuses.”

“You monster!” he hissed in mock outrage. Or maybe not mock since he did love those cars. His expression smoothed out as he gave me one last clinical scan. Since he didn't have x-ray—or magnetic resonance—vision, it did a fuck lot of

nothing. “The report will come to me, but I won’t open it. Good luck.”

Before I could respond, he moved his arm, and the doors slid closed.

As I made the rest of the winding trip alone, my rational brain kept insisting I was a hypochondriac. That I’d dove into the anxious hysteria that could come from research.

It was a common occurrence in med school when students learned about all of the horrible things their brains and bodies were capable of. I’d managed to avoid it back then, but maybe it’d hit on a delay.

Or maybe my issues stemmed from being burned out. Purposeless. Maybe my good intentions had been steadily siphoned by idiots, liars, and a system built entirely around making money rather than helping people.

Maybe my headaches were my body’s way of objecting to the bullshit.

There was only one way to find out.

Reaching the secured entrance, I was about to scan my ID when I noticed the cafeteria tray wedged in to keep the door cracked. I pushed it open the rest of the way, and the tray clattered.

“Thought you were going for stealth, Doc?” Jay grabbed the tray and tossed it on one of the rolling laundry carts.

I shrugged. “Trying to keep it exciting.”

We spent a few minutes talking, partially to see if someone came to investigate the noise but also so he could find out why I was there.

“You should’ve come down earlier.” The younger man crossed his arms. “And just so we’re clear, *Mr. John Doe*, if you get another one of those trays of cookie dough brownies—and I’m talking *dough*, not that dried-out brookie bullshit—it comes to me and me alone.”

“You’ve got my word.”

He held the eye contact for a second longer before giving a firm nod. “Go change into a gown. Lock everything up, including your beeper and cell. Anything I should know about? Screws, plates, piercings?”

“No.”

“When you’re done, meet me in there, and I’ll get the contrast going.”

I stripped down and regretted not putting on boxers that morning when I pulled on the ridiculously thin gown. After securing my belongings in the locker, I hesitated.

*Me in this stupid dress with my ass and balls catching a breeze would make for a hilarious picture. Bet it’d go through the whole hospital in under fifteen minutes.*

*Is it really worth risking that just so I can kiss Lilith?*

*Yes.*

*No, wait.*

*Fuck yes.*

Opening the door, I saw Jay setting up the contrast.

“So you know,” he said, not looking at me, “I’m a professional. You now owe me a tray of cookie dough brownies and a bottle of *that* bourbon.”

I knew exactly which one *that* referred to.

The occasional bottle of wine, liquor, and even weird black water wasn’t uncommon to receive from grateful parents, pharmacy reps, or medical device reps—no matter how often I insisted it wasn’t needed or even welcomed. The only exception was the bourbon an epilepsy patient’s dad barreled. It was the richest, smoothest bourbon I’d ever had. It didn’t seem very potent, but it was delicious.

He didn’t owe me a single thing for working until I’d found the correct medication and dosage that allowed his son to live a typical life.

But if he felt like giving me a few bottles of nectar of the gods bourbon, who was I to say no?

“Hey, that’s the one thing I keep,” I said.

Jay shrugged. “Shouldn’t have doubted my integrity.”

“Extorting me is the way to show that?”

“That and getting to the bottom of these headaches.”

After getting me hooked to contrast and positioned correctly on the bench, Jay secured my head in a plastic cage and slid me into the machine. A moment later, his voice echoed through the speaker system. “Want the radio on?”

“I’m good.”

“Okay. Call out if you need me. Otherwise, I’m leaving you alone instead of talking with you during the transitions.”

The machine whirled to life around me, loud and annoying.

*I feel like I’m in a damn donut.*

“Try to sit still.” Jay’s voice crackled.

“I am.”

“Don’t even move your mouth or clench your jaw. Be completely still.”

“I am,” I repeated before returning to my statue impression.

“That’s—” The rest of his words were cut off by the loud rumbling of the machine.

The sliding bench underneath me began to vibrate like a massage chair. It was almost enjoyable—so long as I ignored the fact it wasn’t supposed to do it and was potentially going to explode.

I tried to sit up, but the secured cage wouldn’t give. “What’s going on?”

The vibrations increased, the whirring growing louder.

“The system was acting up, but it’s fine now. Keep staying still.”

But it wasn't fine. The machine was no longer vibrating. It shook and rattled, the heavy weight slamming against the wall.

I tried to find leverage to slide the bench out but couldn't.

There was a crash followed by the low rumble of talking, but I couldn't make out what Jay said.

I grabbed the headpieces and tried again to move. "Let me out!"

Only a high-pitched squeal of the MRI answered me.

There was another loud noise, and then I couldn't hear anything over the roar of the machine.

It violently quaked as bursts of sparks exploded around me.

*Holy shit, it's really going to explode.*

*I'll be damned if I let anyone or anything—especially a fucking MRI machine—take me away from Lilith.*

That lit a fire in my gut, but it was too late.

Everything stopped.

The rocking.

The sparks.

The rumbles and squeals.

Even the normal buzzing of the machine.

It all cut off abruptly. The only noise was the soft squeal of the bench being pulled out.

When the cage over my face was removed, it wasn't Jay who stood over me. Instead, there was a woman with crazy pink and blue hair. "Man, did it take us forever to find you."

I tried to follow what she said, but the pain in my head returned. Rather than stabbing, it was the pins and needles of a sleeping limb. That sounded less painful, but it wasn't. It was agonizing, and the random woman's talking didn't help.

*Hopefully, Jay has already called security.*

“What?” I worked to get my ears to hear over the droning in my head. “Who’re you?”

Another buzz and a flash of blinding light filled my head.

*Shit, I’m dead.*

“Kind of but not really.”

“What?”

“You’re kind of dead but not really.”

My eyes narrowed as I sat upright quickly. I scurried back until I smacked my head on the machine. “Did you just read my mind?”

*No. Nope. I must’ve said it out loud.*

“No,” she said. I started to settle until she continued. “You broadcasted it. You’d be shit at poker.” She tilted her head. “Wait, you’ve got doctor money. I take back what I said. You’d be great at poker. We should play sometime.”

“Pixie,” someone said disapprovingly from out of my view.

She just shrugged. “Worth a try.”

I scrambled off the bench to get away from the insane lady—albeit with a fitting nickname.

As soon as I stood, the pins and needles in my brain increased, turning into static on an old TV. My vision tunneled. Spun. Twisted in a vortex as pain seared through me.

“Shit,” the mystery woman cried, moving fast. “Someone get Kesha to yell timber ’cause he’s going down.”

That was the last thing I heard before I lost consciousness.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ALWAYS WITH THE  
RERUNS  
LENNON

*T HIS METHOD IS UNUSUAL, 'TIS true, but 'tis the last hope for your dear Maribeth. 'Tis an anomalous spell she's caught. I shall be here, tending to and monitoring her at all times. I shan't leave lest she be well and spry enough to close the door after me.'*

Static.

*'Leech treatments, Doctor?'*

*'No, I shall try something new—a method I've been hard at work researching. I'm agog to see if it shall be as miraculous as I predict.'*

Hazy.

*'My last doctor said that my blood was haunted, and cocaine would assist in removing the spirits.'*

*'Your last doctor was a vazey hornswaggler.'*

Smoke.

Billowing.

Surrounding.

Swallowing.

*'Mrs. Nesbit has sent a neighbor boy to fetch you, Doctor. She says it's urgent.'*

*'Mrs. Nesbit always says that, and it's little more than a sore leg or gas. She's a chatter-mag who needs a new hobby.'*

*‘Should... should I tell the young boy to tell her you won’t be attending to her ailment?’*

*‘No, I’ll go. I always go.’*

*Always. Always. Always.*

*Always!*

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“S HOULD I SMACK HIM A BIT?”

“Pixie.”

“What? That’s what they do in the movies. Well, that or smelling salt, and I don’t have any of that. Do you think pink Himalayan salt would work?”

“Or you could always, I don’t know, use your magicks.”

“Oh. Right.”

Groaning, I threw my arm over my eyes. “Go argue about magic somewhere else.”

“*Magicks*,” the woman emphasized as if it meant something.

“That’s what I said,” I muttered.

“You said magic. This is magicks.”

“Is there a difference?”

She gave a frustrated huff. “Uhhhhh, I’m pretty sure there’s a mighty big difference between a dude doing card tricks and the most powerful witch in the whole universe.”

*Witch?*

*No... War.*

*Death.*

*Famine.*

*Pestilence—me.*

*The Four.*

*Created to stop dark magicks from causing the apocalypse.*

Like sucker punches to the head, who I was—who *we* were—hit me so hard, it nearly knocked me back out. I held on to the thread of reality and forced myself to stay conscious through the onslaught of memories.

Centuries.

Sitting up from where I was sprawled on the floor, I glanced around the unfamiliar office. Or, based on the quantity of books that lined the floor-to-ceiling shelves, the small library.

Crouching next to me, the woman's expression was somber. "We need to talk."

I scrambled to my feet, but not to get away like earlier. Instead, I took her hand and pulled her into a hug. The last time we'd been so close, she smelled like clear seas, salty sand, and fresh fruit.

Right then, cotton candy and coffee wafted from the woman.

No, not *the woman*.

I released her just as she moved into a stoic man's hold. Her words were aimed at me. "We need to talk..." Studying me, she tentatively added, "Lenuson."

At that name, my brain constricted in my head painfully. It felt like it was about to cave in on itself as my body tingled with the urge to run. "I can't do this right now."

Juno—at least that'd been her name hundreds of years ago—gripped my arm. "Shit is straight-up crazy right now. Literally insane. We have a shit-ton to talk about and little time to do it."

"We'll have to find it," I muttered, turning and heading for a door. My head hurt too badly to focus, and her words continued to warble in and out.

I needed to go home and sleep for a month.

"Absolve is here."

That time, Juno didn't have to grab my arm. Her urgently hissed words stopped me in my tracks.

A pit grew in my gut as a jolt of instinct tensed my body to fight. I scanned the place. "Here?"

"Not *here* here. Absolve are in this time. Searching us out. Planning something."

"You're sure?"

She nodded. "Thanatos and his mate have fought them."

*Thanatos.*

*My brother.*

I didn't have the chance to ask for specifics when she continued. "Stellan and I were targeted next. I took a bullet to the stomach and—"

"You were *shot*?" Anger and concern battled inside me, both as a doctor and a brother.

But she just shrugged, a cocky smirk on her face. "Yeah, but it didn't do shit. They could shoot me all damn day, it wouldn't matter. I'm too powerful for those douchebags."

"Fucking hell, pixie, that's not funny," her mate bit out, looking pale.

*I wonder how long he's known.*

"Less than a week," she answered even though I never asked out loud. "But he was in Heaven for most of that, so it doesn't really count."

At my glare, she raised her hands, palms out. "Hey, you're the one still broadcasting. If it helps, it's already getting spotty. I just filled in the blanks."

*Gods, that's got to get old knowing everyone's inner thoughts. What people say out loud is bad enough.*

"See?" she said. "That time I only caught the 'Gods' part, which I'm assuming was followed by 'Juno is the most powerful person ever,' right?"

*Still goes by Juno.*

*Still arrogant as ever.*

The tension headache tightened like a vise around my head as my logical brain fought with my absurd reality.

I was caught somewhere between severe déjà vu and that horrible experience of thinking I was awake, only to actually wake up and realize it'd been a vivid dream.

It was disconcerting mentally.

Physically, it made my head pain unbearable until my stomach churned with nausea.

Juno shot me a sympathetic smile. "It'll take a couple of days for your brain to connect *this* you to the *past* you."

"Where have you been all this time?" her mate asked me.

"Fine, be all responsible and focused and on topic," Juno huffed. "Where've you been?"

"I don't know," I answered honestly.

They shared a look, Juno giving a nearly imperceptible headshake.

Her mate lifted his chin. "Have you always lived in Cambridge?"

"No. Born here, my dad's job moved us to New York until I was thirteen, and then we moved back."

"Technically, *here* is outside of Salem," Juno put in. "I'm assuming you mean Cambridge."

I looked toward the window even though I couldn't see anything but nighttime darkness. "How'd we get to Salem?"

"I poofed us."

"You *poofed* us to Salem? You can't take me to a different city. I don't have my phone. I have patients who might need me."

*Or Lilith.*

*Fuck, what if she's been trying to reach me?*

“Hey!” Juno snapped defensively. “I was putting a shit-ton of power into making sure your MRI came up clear and that the dude running the test didn’t see the machine going fucking crazy. I couldn’t keep it up forever, so I got us out of Dodge before you had to explain why your brain doesn’t look like a normal human’s.”

*Shit, I didn’t even think about what Jay saw.*

Juno crossed her arms. “Yeah, you’re welcome, buddy.”

Because expending that amount of power was incredibly taxing, I grudgingly said, “Thank you.”

She smirked and shrugged like it was no big feat. “I always said I was the most powerful.”

And she had. Years and years ago, she would endlessly remind us that she was the most powerful of The Four.

Not that we doubted her. She’d just liked to point it out.

Clearly, nothing had changed.

Her mate, likely used to her bragging, continued questioning me. “Have you seen anything out of the ordinary? Someone who seemed off? Any threats or near misses that seemed like accidents at the time?”

“One question at a time.” Juno patted his chest before saying to me, “You’d think he was a detective or something.”

I looked at the man and surmised, “You’re a detective.”

He extended his hand. “Detective Stellan Reddick.”

*Red.*

*Not subtle, are they?*

I shook his hand. “Lennon Gwyn.”

Juno smirked. “Not subtle, are they?”

“Stop reading my thoughts.”

Her brows shot up. “I didn’t. Why, did you think that?”

“Yeah. *Red.*”

“Ha, I know. *Red-dick.*”

I grimaced, not wanting to think about my sister and any color of dick.

“But *Lennon Gwyn*,” she emphasized, like it was a big deal.

“My parents were Beatles fans.”

“Your name is about as subtle as a brick to the face.” Juno paced the small space. “Gwyn means fair. Or is it white? Either way, your coloring is fair, plus there’s the whole Pestilence-on-his-white-horse thing, so it fits. And Lennon means lover.”

“Okay.” Again, I didn’t get the importance of that.

“And you’ve always cared about other people, putting their safety and well-being first.”

“I have?”

*I hate people.*

She stopped suddenly. “Do you not?”

Shrugging, I admitted, “Not anymore, I guess.”

“But you’re a doctor,” she pointed out. “Why’d you become a doctor?”

“It’s good money.”

Her eyes went wild as she crossed her arms. “*Money?* You became a doctor... What about... I mean, okay, but you always... Don’t you remember—”

Stellan wrapped an arm around her waist, and she instantly relaxed. “We need to focus on now.”

I shook my head. “No, I need to get back home before there’s an emergency.”

*Or before my psyche succeeds at tearing my brain in two.*

Despite my insistence, I didn’t head for the exit. My eyes were drawn to the window on the opposite side of the room. I couldn’t tear them away. Something poked at the back of my mind.

“Commando. I’m surprised. As uptight as you are, I’d have bet you were a tighty-whities kinda guy. With extra starch.”

I glanced down to see I still wore the hospital gown from my MRI. The open back let in an uncomfortable draft.

*Hell.*

Closing my eyes, I tapped into the repressed power that sat heavily below the surface. As if I still practiced magicks as easily as I breathed, the thin gown was replaced by a tee and sweats.

It might have taken minimal effort, but the impact on my already struggling mind was immense. Another ice pick made with a serrated, barbed blade stabbed into my temporal lobe.

My wardrobe change was aptly timed, though, because the door opened behind me. Whoever was there almost saw more than they expected.

Juno sighed. “We agreed you’d wait in the hall so we didn’t overwhelm him.”

“I got impatient.”

Turning, I took in the man filling the doorway. He wore jeans and a hoodie as he stood with his arms crossed. Multi-colored hair hung to his shoulders. His trimmed beard had the same color variations.

“Thanatos,” I muttered without having to recall the name.

“Brother.”

A wide grin split his face, and I knew it was mirrored on mine.

Closing the distance, we hugged, thumping each other’s back.

“It’s been too long,” he said gruffly.

“Centuries.”

Up until minutes before, I hadn’t known who I was—let alone who he was.



But I'd felt it.

I'd known my whole life I'd been missing something. *Someones*. As a kid, I'd chalked it up to being an only child.

But it hadn't been my desperation for hypothetical siblings. It'd been the absence of my real ones. Thanatos and—even if she was a pain in my ass—Juno. And...

I pulled away. "Dubhloach? Is he here?"

Thanatos shook his head. "We haven't found him yet."

Grief for a long-ago loss hit as if it'd just happened. I tried to wrap my head around it all. "How'd you find me?"

Juno pulled a paper out of her pocket and turned it so I could see a child's artwork. "I drew this when I was four."

Even in crayon with the shaky proportions of a four-year-old's doodle, it was easy to see who was who. Thanatos and his long hair were all alone with a wall behind him. Juno held a crystal and a wand. And I looked like a basic, expressionless stick figure, but with a stethoscope and the *very* misspelled name of my hospital on my shirt.

Juno tapped the paper. "Yeah, little me made it easy to find you. We just had to hunt around to figure out which stuffy dude you were."

Doodle Dubhloach was even more nondescript than me—a faceless figure with a few trees.

Deep pain shadowed Thanatos' eyes. "We don't even know if he's on the Earth."

A woman with hair so light, it was practically white peeked out from behind Thanatos before moving to stand next to him. "But we have three of you now. A few months ago, we didn't even have one." She leaned into him, her hand on his stomach. "We'll find him, too."

"What do you mean, you didn't have one?" I asked.

"I was—"

"There's—"

“Nate—”

The rest of Thanatos’, his mate’s, and Juno’s words overlapped. They cut off before they all tried talking again.

“Wait,” I interrupted. “Who’s Nate?”

Thanatos raised his hand and grinned proudly. “Denny named me.”

His mate gave a little wave. “I’m Denny.”

“Got it,” I muttered, though that was far from true. My eyes again moved to the window. The unknown insistence returned to prod at me. It made it impossible to focus on anything else. “I’ve been here before.”

“In Salem?” Stellan asked.

“No, exactly here.”

Nate’s eyes narrowed as he bit out, “*What?*”

I’d have rolled my eyes at his jump to jealousy, but since I was just as bad when it came to Lilith, I had no room to talk.

Instead, I gestured around us. “This is where your house was.”

“No, it...” He twisted to look outside.

As if the world looked anything like it had then.

Back when it was green and vibrant. Open and light.

“Gods, you’re right,” he marveled slowly. “Everything looks so different. I never put it together. How did you know?”

I shrugged.

Juno stepped forward to circle me like I was a test subject. “Interesting.”

“What?”

“You just knew this is where it was?”

“Yeah, I—”

“How?”

“My gut—”

“Are you always able to know things like that?”

“I have good instincts, but so do lots—”

Not letting me finish a damn sentence, she asked, “Did you know about Lilith or just that she’s a babe?”

I went alert, my body tensing. “How do you know about Lilith?”

“Because you think about her every two-point-five seconds. Even now that I can’t read them, I’m still picking up blips about her.”

“Is now really the time to gossip about his relationship?” Nate asked. “It’s the middle of the night. We’ve got limited time. In case you forgot, mindless bad guys are out there kamikazeing themselves to take us down. We don’t have time to knock over the tea.”

Denny patted his stomach. “*Spill* the tea.”

“Same thing, my little hellion.”

“There’s a reason,” Juno asserted, not taking her eyes from me.

I thought about meeting Lilith in the elevator. The way my brain yelled at me. Hell, even a decade before that. Nothing was romantic about my feelings when we were kids, but I’d known even then that she was important.

I’d assumed it was because mending her scrapes had steered me toward medicine, but it was more than that.

So much more.

“I knew,” I confirmed.

“Stellan has a helluva gut instinct. Superhuman style.” She grinned proudly at that. “You don’t have a gut instinct, you have intuition. Strong.” She gave jazz hands. “*Magicks*.”

I shook my head. “That wasn’t a skill I had before the curse.”

“That’s because we’re not talking about a relationship like Nate said. She’s your mate, right?”

I lifted my chin in acknowledgment.

“Which is just a small part of why you should go get her now. There’s a lot she needs to know—that you *both* need to.”

My gut clenched as I thought about telling Lilith the truth. I pictured her big blue eyes darkening with fear. Or going soft with pity as she backed away to call the mental health unit to report the stress of dealing with patients had made me lose my mind.

I’d lived through the truth, but even I struggled to believe the unbelievable. What hope did I have that Lilith would easily accept it? I couldn’t risk losing her when things were new.

When I’d finally fucking found her.

“I just found out I’m Pestilence,” I said. “I need time to wrap my own head around it before I get her involved.”

“Time isn’t an option. You need your mate,” Nate said as if I didn’t know that fact or feel it in every fiber of my damn being. “You’ll be stronger with her. And she *needs* to know the danger she’s in.”

“She will.”

*Eventually.*

The pounding in my head began to recede, leaving a dull ache and the feeling the world had been pulled out from under me. As badly as my exhausted body and mind wanted to get home, I needed to find my footing to get some semblance of mental peace. And that meant catching up on the missing hundreds of years.

“Tell me everything,” I said.

Juno put her hand to her back and stretched. “We better sit. This will take a while.”

I followed them out of the room and down a short hall to a living room. Juno took a seat at a massive desk, spinning the chair a few times before her mate pulled her to stand. He took her spot before settling her onto his lap.

Nate took a spot on the bench of a large bay window, tugging Denny to sit between his spread thighs.

My siblings had their mates. As happy as that made me for them, envy and uncertainty filled me.

*Maybe I should go to Lilith. Rip the Band-Aid off and hope for the best.*

*And maybe I should rip out my own heart and save her the time.*

“You’ve got it bad already,” Stellan said.

My gaze shot to his. I wondered if he could also read minds, but he just gestured to where I unconsciously rubbed my chest.

I forced my hand away, but the ache there grew.

“What do you remember of the night we were cursed?” Nate asked me.

I caught sight of a coin on the coffee table. I grabbed it, flipping it across my fingers as I thought back. It felt like trying to remember the plot to a movie I’d watched years ago. Like it was in my memories but not my life. “Going to the church and finding Joseph Martin. Attacking. Then nothing.”

“He was warded,” Juno explained. “His room—which we’d already assumed. But now we think it was on his person.”

“How did he have such a powerful ward?”

She shrugged. “Back when my job was to lounge on tropical islands while occasionally snuffing out evil, I’d begun experimenting with boomerang magicks. If a practitioner’s magicks was black, their spell would bounce back and affect them. But even to me, those spells were new and complex. I don’t know how Martin was able to utilize them. Especially since our magicks aren’t dark, and his death didn’t just bounce back to us. It unleashed *curses*.” Fury sparked in her eyes, her body practically shaking with it. Stellan’s arms around her waist weren’t enough to soothe the rage. “However he did it, it’s a method they’re still using.”

“How do you know?” I asked.

And they told me. All of it. Every insane detail. Every infuriating attack.

Shadows of torture settled in Nate’s tense features when he spoke about being stuck in Denny’s basement. Hundreds of years, staring at concrete and wishing for death—which was pretty damn ironic since *he* was Death.

After Denny moved in, he was able to go wherever she went. When she’d begun being able to hear and then communicate with him, she’d initially taken measures to evict her surprise *ghost* tenant. She’d unintentionally called a member of Absolve, Thomas Hale.

Or, as Stellan knew him, Corey Willard—human trafficker.  
Soul stealer.

Her next eviction attempt had led her to Juno, who hadn’t been much help—to her surprise and frustration.

When Nate’s body finally returned, his memories followed in time for them to go against Hale and some of the Absolve assholes.

Using Krav Maga, Denny insisted.

With his memories back, they’d visited Juno to tell her who she was and warn her about Absolve.

But they were too late.

Juno took over the story then, telling me about the years she’d spent living as a witch. After her adoptive parents had passed, she’d used her inheritance to open Novel Idea—interconnecting stores that sold candy, comics, books, and other novelties, plus a backroom she practiced magicks out of.

When Nate and Denny came to talk to her, Juno had just found her stores destroyed. Even though they’d been filled with valuables, nothing had been stolen. It’d been clear the real target had been her magicks room.

Absolve had failed to get in, and their mission had further backfired because it’d brought Stellan into Juno’s life as the

investigating detective. Their short dating history was filled with attempted attacks that they'd fended off—a fact that made Juno smile proudly while Stellan looked ready to throw the desk out the window.

Her smile faded and tears streamed when she told me about her actual ghost friend being murdered—or re-murdered—by an Absolve member. One who'd been warded to wipe out anyone in the vicinity at his time of death.

“And that's about it,” Juno finished, as if it hadn't been a saga.

Denny tilted her head. “Nate was in my basement, and Juno was in purgatory, but where were you during all that time?”

I told her what I'd told Juno and Stellan. “I don't know.”

Juno crossed her arms. “And I can't for the life of me get a read on him. I just see... TV reruns.”

“What's that mean?” I asked.

“Either I need to get caught up on my DVR or... I've got nothing.” She gestured around her head. “I might see things clearly, but I can't always interpret it.”

I stared at the coin as it flipped between my knuckles, my mind dealing with the sudden restock of memories. Centuries of them. When focusing on the deluge made my vision blur, I gave my attention to the present. My gaze caught my watch, and I stood. “I should get home.”

Nate's face was set in a hard stare. “There's more to discuss, brother.”

“And we will, but I can't just focus on the past right now. I have patients early.”

For whatever reason, that made his stony expression soften as he smiled.

Juno didn't have the same reaction. She eyed me with confusion, her brows furrowed and her mouth curved down. Like I was a puzzle she didn't know what to make of.

Even if she didn't seem to like what she saw, she stood and wiggled her fingers. "I'll poof you home."

"I need to go to the hospital for my stuff."

"You *need* to tell your mate," Nate emphasized like a broken record.

"I will."

"Tomorrow."

*Or the next day.*

*Or the next century.*



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

WHAT A MESS

LENNON

AS A KID, I'D ALWAYS wanted siblings. My parents had loved to tell the story of when seven-year-old me had used an extra poster board to make a presentation about why they should have another child.

I'd included scientific studies and had cited my sources.

Even though it was something I'd desperately wanted, I was beginning to regret that.

At least when it came to Juno.

The first time she'd talked to me in my own damn head, I'd been taking my morning leak. It'd startled me so bad that I'd nearly pissed on my own shoes. It hadn't even been for anything important. She'd wanted to test the line of communication, though I'd hoped it was one we never had to use.

How wrong I'd been.

The next time she'd done it—a whole five minutes later—was to ask if I'd talked to Lilith yet.

An invasion of my head *and* my privacy.

That'd been followed by another hundred rapid-fire communications in the short time since leaving Salem in the middle of the night. Some were important details they'd forgotten to mention in our lengthy conversation. Most were pestering as she'd asked again and again about Lilith.

And a few were odd, with her thoughts on some random superheroes.

Grudgingly, I had to admit getting to know my sister wasn't all bad. It was the timing that annoyed me. And that was the point. The onslaught of mundane messages was payback for refusing to answer about Lilith.

As I walked down to get a much-needed coffee after a sleepless night, my phone buzzed with a text. I expected it to be Juno since I hadn't responded to her inside my head.

I smiled when I saw who it was.

Lilith: You busy?

Me: Going for coffee. You here?

Lilith: Just finished visiting Dad. I'll meet you at the coffee stand.

I walked quicker, switching my path from my secluded route to a more direct one that took me through the crowds of patients and visitors. When I got to the main lobby, my steps froze.

Standing in a beam of sunlight coming through the windows, Lilith had on one of her long skirts. Her long-sleeved tee was tight and short enough to show her amazing body and that maddening hint of her tanned skin that drove me wild.

Primal possessiveness twisted in my gut, demanding I mark that skin. Leave my fingerprints. My bite marks. Hell, even hickeys along the smooth flesh.

*The last time I saw it, she wasn't mine to touch.*

*Things are different now.*

I watched as she lifted onto her toes, pushed her wild hair out of her face, and scanned the room.

Looking for someone.

Looking for *me*.

My cock, already hardening, thickened fully as if I had no control over my body.

When it came to her, I didn't.

My long strides ate up the distance between us. The ache in my chest disappeared when her eyes landed on me, and an unrestrained grin spread across her face.

I'd lived with that emptiness for so long. For my entire life and centuries before. I didn't know what it was like to live without it.

I slowed just enough to grab her wrist before continuing. Lilith didn't drag her feet or question me. Her only response to my unusual behavior was a laugh as carefree as her smile.

Leading her through the winding halls, we got to the elevator just as it emptied. I pulled her in, rapidly hitting the close button. The door began to slide, but at the last second, a hand shot in to open it again.

I flashed my ID badge at the man. "Medical emergency. Catch the next one."

His eyes shot back and forth between me and Lilith. He looked like he was going to risk it until she added a hacking cough. Grimacing, he quickly retreated.

The door barely closed before I backed her against the wall, and my mouth roughly took hers.

No headache. No tunneled vision. No buzzing as my mind worked to tell me what my body had known since our first elevator ride.

That she was mine.

The only pain came from being so hard and unable to take her right then the way I wanted to.

*Needed to.*

At the beep of the elevator, I tore myself away just as the doors opened. Grabbing her hand, we rushed out, Lilith's soft laughter no longer carefree. It was breathy as she ducked her flushed face away from knowing eyes.

After a few turns and locked doors, I stopped us at the corner of a rarely traveled short hallway. In all the times I'd walked it to the ED to visit Finn, I'd only crossed paths with someone else a handful of times—and they were either lost or searching for their own solitude.

Pressing her against the wall, I caged her in with my hands on either side of her. I lowered my head and nipped her bottom lip, peppering kisses across it. “I missed you.”

*For years. Decades. Centuries. I've missed you my whole damned existence.*

Not knowing what I knew, I expected Lilith to argue that it'd only been a couple days since we'd had dinner. Instead, she swayed into me. Her smile was sweet as she tipped her head to offer me her lips. “I missed you, too.”

“Got a few minutes?” I asked, something I probably should've checked before I dragged her to the far corner of the hospital.

“Yes. Do you?”

“I'm on a coffee break. This is better.”

“Wow, better than coffee? That's a high compliment.”

I was tempted to close the last hint of distance between us so she could feel how her kisses woke me. But if I did, I wouldn't be able to stop at just that.

Not wasting the limited time we had, I brushed my lips against hers. My hands dropped to span her hips and that damn band of skin. At the minimal contact, a powerful shudder went down my spine. My groan mixed with her moan, letting me know I wasn't the only one affected. The only one who felt it. The control I had over the subdued kisses snapped. My tongue pressed in to get more.

*Even if I have her for all eternity, it'll never be enough.*

Lost in her—in her taste, her feel, her *everything*—the rest of the world disappeared. It wasn't about The Four or magicks or predestined mates. It was just about her.

Us.

Moving my hand to her throat, I used my thumb to angle her face and deepen the kiss.

I felt each minuscule shift and tremor from her perfect body. I heard each wordless demand and silent plea, giving in to every last one—at least the ones I could in public. I memorized the beat of her pulse under my palm, hammering away in perfect time with my own. I might have been blind to everything else, but I was more in tune to Lilith than I was to myself.

Which was how I knew something was wrong.

Lilith's whole body tightened, and she ended the kiss just as the sound of a metal door closing echoed in the hallway. She tried to duck to the side, but I kept my body curved protectively around her. I glanced over my shoulder to see a man and woman at the far end of the long hallway. From the quick look I got, the woman was in scrubs and likely an employee.

*This will be all over the hospital by the end of the day.*

Surprisingly, the thought didn't bother me. Like my primal urge to mark her, I was pleased with the idea of everyone knowing I belonged to Lilith. I would carry around a neon sign spelling it out if it wasn't impractical and unprofessional.

But letting the gossip mill spread the news for me? That worked just as well.

I lifted my head to look at Lilith, but my smile died at the panic on her paled face. Her eyes were wide like she was trying to tell me something.

*She doesn't want anyone to know about us?*

Before I could ask what was wrong, she moved quickly to push me back. She dodged to the side to put some distance between us.

*What in the actual hell?*

“Smart girl,” an empty, almost hollow voice deadpanned from behind me. “Get away from him while you can.”

As I turned, I shifted to stand in front of Lilith, but she moved, too. And then we both froze.

The man who'd tried to enter the elevator with us stood with his arm wrapped around Abby Baker's chest.

And the ED nurse—who was also Finn's crush—had a gun pressed to her tidy blond hair.

"I can't believe it's you." The impassiveness fell from the man's tone as he scanned me. "It's really you."

The declaration was filled with awe—but not the good kind. It was heavy with morbid darkness. Hatred mixed with fear mixed with consternation.

The way someone would feel if they found themselves face-to-face with the devil.

Or one of The Four Horsemen of the apocalypse.

The hair on the back of my neck stood as I felt it. Something off that I hadn't experienced in centuries.

Darkness.

Evil.

Soullessness.

Absolve.

*I hope Juno can receive direct-to-brain calls as easily as she can make them.*

I picked up the metaphorical phone inside my own head. Pieces connected and wires vibrated as I forced out words stronger than thoughts.

*Juno, get to the hospital fast. Where I am fast. Absolve. Gun. Hostages.*

I dropped a mental pin in our exact location, but I had no clue if it worked. There was no response.

Shit.

Keeping my voice even, I tried to defuse the situation. "I don't know what you're talking—"

“We’ve been looking for you.” His own voice was just as even, as though we were discussing the weather. As though he wasn’t holding a gun to a nurse’s head. “You could’ve been anywhere. A needle in a haystack. But I knew. I’ve read the ancient texts so many times, I practically have them memorized. They should’ve listened to me. I knew you’d be a doctor. It was just a matter of finding which one.”

“Sir, how about we let the women go and talk?”

His lips curled, but it was hauntingly distorted. An uncanny valley smile, like the muscle memory didn’t quite remember how it was supposed to go. “Then she was able to get close enough. When she told me everything she learned, we knew we were right about who you are.”

*She?*

Other than Finn—who wasn’t a she—there was only one person who knew anything substantial about me.

My eyes darted to where she stood at a distance—one she’d put there when she’d pushed herself away from me.

*She wouldn’t work with them. She’s my mate.*

*Right?*

Slowly, she turned her head and glanced at me before doing a double take. Her green eyes flared, and that was the last sign of any emotion. Her expression went blank.

Completely—*scarily*—void with a mask slid into place.

Or maybe pulled off.

“Look at me!” the man barked.

I forced the same calm tone I used with patients while I held my hands up, palms out. “Relax.”

“They’re going to lose their minds,” he muttered more to himself than us, shifting restlessly. Abby let out a wince as he jabbed the gun harder against her temple. “We’ll move up.”

For the first time in my long life, I felt helpless. I thought about teleporting behind him, but there was no guarantee I could kill him before he shot Lilith. There was also no

guarantee I could even teleport. And if I could, I didn't know what kind of accuracy I had or how the idle magicks would drain me. For all I knew, I'd end up passed out in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

I couldn't risk it.

Which meant I was going at him from the front.

Inching slowly, I positioned my body to block Lilith's as best as I could. Then I moved.

Fast.

One second, I was against the wall. In the next, I was in front of the man with his wrist gripped tight. His fingers reflexively spasmed, and the gun clattered to the ground to skid to the side. He didn't even fight back as his wide eyes tried to catch up with my movements.

I lifted his arm, and it was somehow enough to throw him off balance. He toppled to the side and knocked Abby down. Her head made a painful *thud* as it slammed into the linoleum. Since I didn't release my hold, his arm twisted at a sickening angle until it audibly crunched as the bones snapped.

Yet he didn't make a sound. Neither did Abby, who wasn't moving.

*The fall must've knocked her unconscious.*

The creaking door at the end of the hall slammed open. Relief—for multiple reasons—flooded me when I saw it was only Juno and not someone I'd have to explain the scene too. Denny entered behind her, looking green as she held the wall for support.

*She must not be used to teleporting.*

Juno strolled over like she had all the time in the world. "Just a regular day at the office?"

I tightened my hold on the man's wrist and wrapped my hand around his throat, hauling him up.

And then I saw red.



Anger at the man. At Absolve. At the danger he'd put my mate in. At his actions forcing my hand because the already hurried timeline of my impending conversation with Lilith would need to be drastically moved up.

"Brother of mine," Juno whispered, "think of your mate. You don't want her here for this part."

Concern for Lilith overrode my anger. I transferred my hold on the gasping man to Juno. Despite her small frame, she held him just as securely as I had, despite the man's attempt to dislodge himself.

When I turned, I nearly knocked over Lilith, who'd moved closer at some point.

Her head was tilted back to meet my gaze, and her voice was calm. Nonchalant. As if batshit-crazy chaos hadn't just interrupted our hallway make-out session. "How can I help?"

*Numb.*

*She's terrified and numb, thanks to me.*

*Because of me.*

*Or just of me? Is she scared of me?*

I wrapped my hands around her waist and whispered, "I'm sorry." My magicks rolled like a gentle wave, flowing through my palms and ebbing into her body.

Her eyes widened, her voice a frantic rush. "Lennon, it's *her*. His partner, not his—"

I tried to rein my magicks back in. Undo what'd been done so she could finish her sentence. But it was too late. My hold tightened as her body slumped. Unconscious. I carefully lowered her to the ground against the wall where she'd be safe.

Daggers—figurative, though I wouldn't be surprised if literal followed—shot from Juno's glare as she snarled, "You stupid motherfucker. I'd kick your ass, but she's gonna do it worse. What the hell were you thinking?"

"Like you said, she can't see this."

“I meant for you two to leave, *not* for you to knock her out! She’s a person, not a rag doll.”

Guilt sat heavily on my chest—both because of my impulsivity and the danger I’d brought to Lilith’s life.

Would continue to bring to her life.

Because of me, because she was my mate, she was cursed to nothing but fighting. Pain. Violence.

Wars between good and whatever new evil developed.

At that moment, I felt like the myth I used to be. The one consumed by my need to keep humans safe while the supernatural battled in the shadows. I’d forgotten what it was like to care.

“I’ll deal with it,” I muttered. I was unsure how exactly, but I’d figure it out. There was no other choice.

“Oh, no, no, no, *nooooo*.” Juno pointed at Lilith before stabbing a finger at me. “She’ll deal with you.”

Denny gestured to the man. “Let’s focus on one dumpster fire at a time, shall we?”

Instinctively, I put my hand on the man’s chest.

“Wait!” Denny cried. “Is he warded?”

Juno closed her eyes, her face scrunching before she shook her head. “Nothing. He’s new. There are still thoughts of his own.” She grimaced. “But don’t worry, none of them are good. We’re doing the world a favor.”

I let the pent-up magicks within me loose. Blue smoke wafted from my hand and disappeared into the man’s skin. It expanded just below the surface, coloring his skin until it sank deeper. Even once I could no longer see it, I could still feel it.

Twisting.

Turning.

Infiltrating the man’s veins to be pumped from organ to organ until it consumed his insides.

It wrapped around his heart, tightening around the muscle until each beat was a labor. Coming farther and farther apart, the beats slowed.

Slowed.

Slowed.

Stopped.

Denny knew it as soon as I did. Grimacing, she lifted her hand. "I'll never get used to this."

Her palm touched his skin.

And then he was gone.

Gray powder fell to the ground, skimming the floor before settling into the corners like dust.

"That's gonna be a bitch for the environmental services people," Denny said with a sad shake of her head. "I still haven't gotten all the bits of Dave out of my living room."

"Brain wipe on Blondie here? I've never done one before, but with my mojo all souped-up, I know I can." Juno's lip gave an unexpected curl as she looked down at Abby. "That is, if the hit to the head didn't do it for us."

"Yeah, let me just ask her a few questions." I put my fingers on her pulse, finding it strong before tilting her head to check for any bleeding. "Abby, can you hear me?"

Slowly, she opened her eyes and blinked a few times before jolting. Her voice was panicked. "Did he shoot me?"

"No, you just got knocked out. Can you tell me your name?"

"Abby Baker."

"Do you know where you are?"

"Work. And you don't have to give me a neuro exam. I'm fine." She stretched and winced, contradicting her statement.

"What happened?"

"I was going to get a coffee when that man grabbed me and put a gun to my head."

“You’ve never seen him before?”

She shook her head quickly before stopping with another flinch. Her lower lip pushed out as she brought a hand to her forehead. “He didn’t say anything. Just dragged me in here.”

I stood and offered her my hand to help her up. Reaching out to Juno with my mind, I told her, *When you do your thing, have her go to Finn in the ED for an exam. She slipped on a wet floor.*

Juno gave me a small nod before positioning herself behind Abby. She rotated her wrist, tendrils of red smoke snaking out.

I was about to turn my focus to Lilith when the voice in my head grew to a thunderous scream. My gut clenched and coiled, echoing the voice.

*Her.*

*Her.*

*Herherher!*

“Wait!” I called, stepping forward.

Unlike when I’d tried, Juno was easily able to halt her magicks in an instant. The smoke dissipated as she lifted an expectant brow.

Wincing at the stabbing in my brain, I got close enough to Abby to study her.

It wasn’t a surprise Finn had a thing for her.

Even with my height, she was tall enough that I only had to look down a little to meet her eyes.

Her scrubs and emblemed fleece were pristine and weather-appropriate, with no patch of tanned skin showing.

Her blond hair was smooth and professionally styled, not wild and hanging free.

“Victim,” I muttered.

“I was, wasn’t I? I was just *so* scared.” Abby swayed forward, earnest eyes blinking up at me. “I don’t think I can go

back to work, and I don't think I should drive. Do you think you could maybe," she paused, her bottom lip quivering, "take me home?"

I gave her a small, sympathetic smile. "Of course."

She leaned closer as tears filled her eyes. "I think the adrenaline is wearing off. My legs are like Jell-O."

I wrapped my arm around her shoulders.

"Lennon?" Denny called in confusion as Juno bit out, "You dumb bastard."

Turning to face them, I slid my arm from Abby's shoulders to wrap around the top of her chest as I plastered her back to my front. Her head moved across my chest when she tilted her face to look at me. There was no surprise in her expression. No question.

Just excitement and calculation.

And evil.

*When the man said 'she,' he wasn't talking about Lilith. Of fucking course he wasn't.*

Lilith's words continued to bounce through my head at a roar, as if she were inside my brain, shouting them at the top of her lungs. She must have noticed something I'd missed.

*'Lennon, it's her. His partner, not his—'*

"Victim," I repeated, finishing Lilith's sentence out loud.

If looks could kill, the one Juno scowled my way would've made it slow and painful before sending me straight to Hell. "Yes, and that's very unfortunate for her. But that doesn't mean you've got to check her temp with your—"

"She's his partner, not his victim."

Juno and Denny's gaze shot to the woman in my arms who'd gone statue still. No one spoke. No one moved even a centimeter.

Hell, no one breathed for seconds that stretched like painfully long minutes.

And I had to hand it to her. When Abby broke the silence, it wasn't with lies. It wasn't with excuses. It wasn't with pleas for mercy.

It was with laughter.

A cackling, warped laughter that echoed in the hall.

“We were *so* close. I mean, my goodness, for such a smart man, you are slow on the uptake, huh? I told him we shouldn't waste our time with you. That you'd be your own worst enemy.” Her eyes went to Lilith's prone body before I blocked her view. “We read all the notes on you. All the info passed on for centuries.” She snorted. “You aren't the actor you used to be, heathen.”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

She smirked. “Oh no. This isn't that point in the movie where the *villain* delivers the bragging soliloquy that shares all the pertinent details to help the hero. I'm already caught. And even though you're the real villain, I know my destiny. I know Heaven awaits. Kill me now.”

“My pleasure.” Juno lifted her hands, the swirls of red smoke returning.

And Abby just stood there, her body practically slumped against me. Holding her upper arms, I spun her around, and she didn't even jolt. A small, peaceful smile had settled on her lips. Her eyes were closed, her muscles relaxed as she waited for death.

Not only had she accepted her fate, she welcomed it.

I gave Juno a quick shake of the head. In return, she gave me the middle finger and a disgruntled look, but her smoke disappeared.

Tiny waves, zig zags of buzzing power, traveled down my arms toward my hands. I fought to breathe through it, forgetting how powerful magicks felt—how powerful it made *me* feel.

Abby's eyes shot open, her peace replaced with terror.

*At least she's not a total idiot.*

“Tell me everything,” I ordered quiet but firm.

Her face tightened, and her mouth pressed into a tight line as she fought to keep her silence. But it was a stupid and futile effort. Her words, forced by my magicks, pushed out through her gritted teeth and barely moving lips. “Barry”—her hand gestured around us to the dust that used to be a man—“was convinced you were a doctor. But none of the Elders listened to him. They never listen to scribes—especially new ones.”

“There are likely a million doctors in the US alone, not including similar fields. How did you find him?” Juno asked.

Abby just glared.

“*How?*” I demanded, my magicks forcing her to speak again.

“Barry’s research. The Four’s deserved punishment stemmed from this area, so it was unlikely you went far. He’s spent all his time researching, following, and narrowing down his list.”

“How did you get involved?”

“He thought you were a psychiatrist Upstate, and the few Elders he got to listen haven’t let him forget he’d wasted their time. When he thought you were a pediatrician in Beverly, he wanted proof before he got the Elders involved. It was easy for me to get a job there.”

“Clearly, he was wrong again,” Denny said.

“No shit, bitch,” Abby bit out, dripping with hatred and nastiness.

Denny wiggled her fingers at her. “At least I’m not the one about to become a dust bunny.”

“How’d you know it wasn’t the pediatrician?” Juno asked.

Abby gave her the finger.

“I thought these crazy nutjobs were supposed to be super religious,” Denny said to Juno. “I doubt God would approve of her potty mouth.”

“They don’t even allow swearing in the corporate offices,” Juno stated.

Abby raised her chin with self-righteousness. “My lord doesn’t expect me to be gracious to demon fuckers and Satan worshippers.”

Lifting a shoulder, Juno muttered, “If we didn’t worship, how else would we get churros?”

I repeated Juno’s question to get us back on track before we were discovered. “How did you know it wasn’t the pediatrician?”

Abby’s face tightened, but the words still pushed out. “He got engaged and was sickeningly in love. Barry said that couldn’t happen unless it was his mate, so we waited, but nothing changed. And Barry said when one of you monsters meets your unfortunate whore, you become stronger.”

“How did he eventually find me?” I asked so I knew what trail someone else could follow.

“The medical journal article you wrote about EEGs and the accompanying interview. The way the interviewer described you caught Barry’s attention. He pretended to be a columnist from a different medical journal, but you shot down his interview request, so I quit the job in Beverly to come here.”

“But I didn’t hire you,” I pointed out. My instincts had known she wasn’t right for the job.

They just hadn’t known she wasn’t right, period.

“Oh, but I got all the information I needed,” she said. “Probably more than I would’ve gotten from you since you’re known to be a closed-off prick.”

My brows lowered before it hit me.

Finn.

And his big mouth.

She smirked. “Ever stop to think that the one person you trusted was the one person you shouldn’t have?”



Denny made a strangled sound of rage, and Juno had to quickly grab her arm to hold her back.

It didn't take any magicks to know she was thinking about her mate's taste of bitter betrayal at the hands of a *friend*.

The same one that had set our curse in motion.

Little things slammed back into my head.

How Finn had ignored the fact I was an asshole to shove his way into my life and force a friendship.

How he saw me with Lilith—and noted how differently I acted with her.

How he'd pushed me to accept a job elsewhere. To get me out of Massachusetts and across the country.

Away from my siblings and my mate.

*Did he know?*

*Is he one of them?*

“He couldn't wait to tell me everything,” Abby bragged. “God, we laughed and laughed. You were so easy to manipulate. You practically clung to him because he was the only one who put up with you—the cold bastard everyone hates. We weren't even worried about you finding your mate. He figured if you bothered to talk to a woman, you'd fuck it up within ten minutes.” She leaned to look around me at where Lilith still sat, slumped over.

Because of me.

Because I'd fucked up.

“It took you longer than ten minutes,” Abby said, “but he was right about the rest.”

Betrayal coated my tongue in acrid bitterness. Rage pumped through me, burning in my veins with spiking waves. I didn't even realize I'd released my magicks until Abby was snatched from my grip, blue smoke filling the space where she'd been.

“Now who’s impulsive? That’s supposed to be my personality trait,” Juno muttered, shaking her head as she held Abby’s arms. “Did his friend know who you were?”

Red shimmered over Abby’s fleece like a thin, gauzy net. And like a net, it held her still, completely frozen except for the barest movement of her mouth. “No.”

“Why’d you lie?”

“To fuck with him so he’d continue to ruin his own life.”

“Does anyone else work for Absolve here?”

“No. But the righteous are *everywhere*. And when Barry doesn’t show up, they’ll know he was right. They’ll follow his trail.”

Denny tilted her head. “It doesn’t sound like they’ll even notice either of you missing.”

There was the slightest raise of Abby’s brows as she was forced by magicks to admit, “Probably not.”

“Anything else you actually know?” Juno asked.

“No.”

“So you’re a worthless lemming. Got it.”

“I’m just new.” The truth—or at least her version—spewed from her mouth. “But the power of us is growing stronger. Coming together. Change is near. And with it, absolution for the righteous and death for the abominations. It’s our turn to get the attention we deserve. To receive what’s rightfully ours.”

“Yeah, I’m good with the doom and gloom sermon,” Denny said. Despite her flippant tone, pain haunted her eyes. “I heard it enough growing up.”

“She might as well be telling us to send her all our money in exchange for salvation,” Juno added with an eye roll. The red became dense, shimmering as it contracted and loosened.

Abby’s eyes held mine for a brief second, and I saw it.

Regret.

Doubt.

Terror.

Desire.

Not sexual desire, but the need for more. For power or money or whatever other thing Absolve had promised her in exchange for her loyalty and her soul.

Just as quickly, the look was gone.

And it wasn't the only thing.

Because as her heart thumped its last beat and her lungs expelled her last breath, Abby's body and face changed so suddenly, Juno jumped and dropped her.

"Holy shit," Juno wheezed, using the toe of her shoe to kick at the woman who was no longer a lithe, leggy blond.

"Me thinks I know what Absolve gave her in exchange for her soul." Denny crouched next to the woman who in no way resembled Abby Baker. Repeating what she'd done with Barry, she placed her hand on the woman's bare skin.

And just as before, dust replaced the body. Only Abby's was a deep black. Dense and heavy, it thumped rather than wafted.

"Evil," Juno said with a sigh.

"Who would trade their soul for good looks?" I wondered out loud.

Juno rolled her eyes. "Spoken like someone who has never had to deal with the barrage of reminders that you'll never be pretty enough, thin enough, or young enough."

Denny snorted. "And that your butt is too small but also too big. And you're too curvy but also too thin. And too short but too tall. And too exotic looking but also too plain."

"Right," I said before shutting my big mouth. Pulling my cell out, I texted my receptionist and Silas that I'd become severely ill and needed the rest of the day off.

"What's the plan?" Denny asked, elbowing Juno.

There was a little puff of red and then Juno handed her a small bottle of hand sanitizer. “Meeting at your house.” She looked pointedly at Lilith, then at me. “*All* of us.”

“No.” I picked Lilith up and cradled her in my arms, keeping my voice low. “I need to get her home and figure out how the hell to deal with—”

My words were cut off suddenly when everything went black.

*I’m gonna kill her.*

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

A DEVIL BY ANY OTHER  
NAME STILL SMELLS LIKE  
CINNAMON  
LENNON

WHEN THE WORLD RIGHTED A moment later, I scanned the room to see where we were.  
*Denny's house.*

*In fucking Salem.*

*How the hell am I supposed to explain this?*

After gently setting a sleeping Lilith onto the couch, I turned to glare at my sister. "You never change."

Juno glared right back. "Hey! I—"

"Hundreds of years, and you still haven't learned to think about the safety of others before you go in, smoke a-blazin'. Poofing us to Salem with no thought to how I'll explain it to my terrified mate."

Stellan moved, but he didn't put his body in front of Juno to shield his mate. He stood next to her as he spoke to me with cool composure. "You need to relax."

Juno didn't have the same calmness. "Yeah, before I kick your ass!"

"Not helping, pixie," he muttered, but fuck if he didn't look amused.

"I don't care. I—"

"One date," I interjected. "We've had one date, and now I'm supposed to explain..." I lifted a finger to count off. "What happened in the hospital. How we ended up in a strange house in Salem. That we're mates. That we're in danger. And

that I'm not clinically insane but actually one of The Four Horsemen. You've overstepped, sister of mine."

"Yeah, get used to that," she shot back. "But—"

The rest of her words were drowned out by a scream.

"Where am I?" Sitting up on the couch, Lilith looked around before her eyes landed on me. I thought seeing me would ease the fear on her face, but it just shifted it to anger. Accusation. "And what did you do to me in that hallway?"

"I didn't—"

"Don't insult me by lying." Her eyes narrowed into thin slits, but it didn't hide the hurt in them. "You thought I was involved with whoever they were."

"I didn't."

*Only for a foolish minute.*

"And then you knocked me out and kidnapped me."

"Seeing the violence must have made you—" I tried.

She stuck her finger up—but I was betting it wasn't the one she wanted to use. "I said do *not* lie to me."

"Just let me explain."

"That's a good idea." Standing, she inched toward the front door, but Nate moved behind her back to block it. "Because you have two seconds to tell me what the actual fuck is going on here. Otherwise... I don't know the otherwise, but it won't be good."

Denny gestured to the small hallway, offering more sympathy than my sister and brother were. "Why don't you guys go talk in private?"

I went for Lilith's hand, but she dodged me as she stormed down the hallway. Following, I almost knocked into her when she suddenly froze in the doorway to the library.

"Whoa," she whispered. Her eyes were bright as she looked over her shoulder at me. "Isn't it beautiful?"

“Yes,” I agreed, not talking about a damn thing other than her.

Catching that she'd let her guard down, her body went rigid. She turned back and continued in, though she couldn't seem to stop herself from reverently skimming her fingertips across a rung of the attached ladder as she went.

Dragging my gaze away from Lilith's ass before she caught me staring and threw something at my head, I stepped in and closed the door.

Lilith only stopped when she was as far across the room as she could get without actually being outside. “Tell me everything.”

I rubbed my palm down my face. “What do you know about The Four Horsemen?”

“Like, the bringers of the apocalypse?”

*How easily things get twisted.*

“Right,” I said, though it wasn't.

“Why're we talking about this?” Her eyes widened, and she held her hands up, palms out. “If this is some sort of religious cult, I have no extra income to buy higher enlightenment, and I ask too many questions to be brainwashed.”

“Just answer my question.”

She shrugged. “That's all I know. They ride in on horses and wipe out the world. What does this have to do with anything?”

“The Four don't bring the apocalypse.”

“Like I said, no interest in your cult. Thanks, but no thanks.”

*Just spit it out.*

*She needs to know the truth.*

Before I could speak, she asked, “Why do you keep doing that?”

“Doing what?”

She gestured to me, and I realize I was rubbing my sternum again.

Where half my soul was missing.

Where it felt like more than that was missing.

“You keep doing that.” Slowly approaching, her brows furrowed as she looked up at me with concern. The second she reached me, all that worry was gone in a blink. She lunged to the side and threw open the door.

*It was an act.*

*She just wanted to be near the door to make a speedy escape.*

I’d have found that amusing if the thought of her leaving didn’t shred my heart to pieces.

She barely cleared the doorway before I hooked an arm around her waist and yanked her to me. “Lilith, listen.”

“Let me go!” she screamed as she thrashed.

“I’m trying to tell you the truth. You’re in danger.”

She added kicking to her thrashing. “And so are your balls if you don’t let me go.”

Twisting her in my hold so I could look at her—so she could see the truth in my eyes—I ripped the Band-Aid off. “I’m Pestilence.”

“Right, and I’m Satan.”

“I’m serious.”

“So am I. Now let me go before I make you wish you were in Hell.” With a well-placed jab, she caught my side at the exact spot to make me reflexively release my hold. She spun fast, slamming one foot down on mine and using her other to nail me in the side of the knee, buckling it.

“Fucking hell,” I grunted as I caught myself on the doorjamb.



Lilith didn't hesitate to take off down the hallway, leaving me hobbling after her. She was nearly to the front door when someone said, "You've been busy, Lilith."

*I know that voice.*

*And that smell.*

*Fire.*

*Brimstone.*

*Cinnamon?*

"Who in the hell are you?" Her eyes darted over her shoulder to me as I approached.

"Accurate." The smartly dressed man moved into the entryway, offering her something. "Churro?"

"Not interested in your cyanide Kool-Aid, thanks." Opening the door, Lilith took a step before he spoke again.

"Got big plans tonight? The emergency room could use some excitement."

Assuming he was talking to me, I ignored him to stop my mate from leaving. Because my focus was on her, I watched as her face paled.

Her hands shook, as did her voice when she said, "I have no clue what you're talking about."

He arched a brow. "No?"

Shooting me a death glare, Lilith threw her arms out. "Have you been stalking me?" She scanned the room. "You're all batshit crazy."

"I'd think you of all people would be more understanding given your camera *trick*. Little Jude's father? The execs?" He took a bite of the churro. "And that's just recently. How is this any crazier than what you've already experienced?"

Lilith released the knob and moved, but not to leave. She inched closer to me until part of her body hid behind mine. "Wh-who are you?"

“How rude.” Extending the hand not holding the churro, he introduced himself. “Levi.”

Lilith didn't accept his hand since her own were too busy gripping my shirt.

It was a fucked time to take joy in that, but I did it anyway. Even furious at me, she trusted me to protect her.

“No, who *are* you?” she emphasized. “How do you know about...”

“Your nocturnal activities? Your *I-may-care* attitude about violence? Don't you know I love idle hands? Give me my due. Of course I'd know when someone's been doing my job for me. Not to play *me* advocate, but I am in the details.”

“The devil?” Lilith whispered.

“Levi.”

“No, that's impossible.”

“Says the badass with the magicks camera.”

Juno gasped. “You have a magicks camera? Inherently magicks items are super rare. Can I see it?”

Levi shook his head. “Technically, *she* has magicks, but she channels it through her camera. That's why I brought you all here. I knew she could handle the truth—and we don't have time to wait.”

*He's the one who teleported us? Looks like I owe Juno an apology.*

It would have to wait, though. I had more important things to focus on.

I looked down at Lilith, expecting panic, fear, or a vehement denial.

Instead, she looked...

Guilty.

I wrapped my hands around her waist in case she tried to run again. “You have magicks?”

“No, it's nothing that dramatic. Magic isn't even *real*.”

*It's as real as you and me.*

*As the us that's been destined since my creation.*

I didn't share that because we had other things to discuss first. "Explain it to me."

Putting her palms on my chest, she kept her eyes at that level to stubbornly avoid mine. "My parents are hippies who always told me stories of gifts from the universe, fate, and nature. I have a third eye kinda thing. Good instincts."

"Intuition," Juno corrected like she'd done to me the night before. Had it not even been a day?

"But it's only when I use my camera," Lilith insisted.

"A lot of people channel their magicks through comfort items that give them confidence." Juno paused and tilted her head, studying Lilith for a moment. "Or it's something you're so passionate about, you get lost in your photography and the magicks flows without you even knowing."

*Bingo.*

I brought my hand to Lilith's jaw, tilting her face so she'd meet my eyes. "What was Levi talking about with the emergency room?"

Lilith's gaze darted to the side at our audience.

"Trust me, nothing you say will surprise us," Juno said. "Just wait till you hear our doozies."

Lilith still hesitated, inhaling deeply and bracing. "When I take pictures, I can see... deeper. Sometimes it's good—a gift. I can capture the beauty that goes unnoticed. The perfect lighting or angle. The love between a couple or toward a baby. But sometimes it's bad. Like their aura or whatever is so dark."

"And then you kick their ass. Or their junk. Or staple papers to their dick after using a permanent marker to record the evidence of their malfeasance." Levi pulled a new churro out from behind his back. "An effective method I admire. I may steal it."

“You really do live up to your name,” Juno said to Lilith. Her grin was maniacal and loaded with approval. At everyone’s blank expressions, she gave a long-suffering sigh. “Must I explain everything? Lilith means night monster. She’s literally the monster in the night, just waiting to kick them in the junk.”

“And break their fingers,” Levi said around a mouthful of churro.

*Broken fingers.*

“That man in the ED with the shattered bones.” Releasing her, I rocked back on my heels. “That was you?”

The hippie goddess in front of me gave a half-assed shrug as though breaking a grown man’s hand bad enough to require surgery was no big deal. “He was *awful* to Jude. Berating him. Mentally torturing him. This sweet little boy was afraid to *laugh*. That prick had started squeezing his hand so hard, it hurt to move after. I just returned the favor.”

Remembering what Finn had told me, I shared, “Jude’s mom served him with divorce papers right after surgery.”

Lilith didn’t seem surprised. She did, however, look proud. “She is such a good mom and not the for-show kind. Her aura was the prettiest yellow.”

“You told her?”

“Of course. How do you think I found out where he’d be that night?”

“You just told her, and she believed you? That you saw his aura with your camera?” Denny asked. Nate grabbed her tightly, pressing his lips to her white hair until some of the tension eased from her body.

Even with his calming effect, her own abusive ghosts seemed to hover close to the surface.

Lilith gave a small laugh. “No, I’m aware how insane that is. I lied and told her that I’d overheard some concerning things. After we hung up, she asked Jude, and he broke down. Once she put him to bed, she called me back so she could have

her own breakdown since the only friends her husband allowed her were his. She's got a five-year-old, is super pregnant, and has no family nearby. She was trying to make it work, but Mama didn't mess around when it came to her baby." Her lips tipped up. "When we hung up the second time, she said she'd be using *his* bank card to hire herself an expensive shark of an attorney after calling the cops."

"I hope she takes him for everything he has." Juno tipped her head before adding, "And then I hope he steps on a million Lego bricks and has a perpetual case of jock itch."

Levi moved the churro like a pen. "I'll make a note for his afterlife."

"No need to wait that long," Juno said. "I'll find a way to make it happen now."

*Stapled papers.*

"The execs. Birgs," I muttered, stunned. "That was you, too, wasn't it?" At her hesitant nod, I tried to recall everything Finn had told me. "He was covered in private emails and reports. I figured one of his office assistants had gotten sick of his shit. How'd you get all that information?"

"I have a source."

"What's that mean?"

She twisted the hem of her shirt. "I email him the name of the person, and a little while later, he emails me the evidence I need."

"Do you know who he is? Have you ever met?"

She shook her head.

"And you never thought that was odd? Or dangerous?" I bit out harsher than I'd intended, but the thought of her putting herself in harm's way made me want to come out of my skin.

She death glared me for a beat before explaining. "Last year, I was doing headshots and PR photos for an investment firm. As soon as my lens landed on the CFO, I saw what the man did. Awful, unspeakable things. I knew I couldn't go to the cops because I had no proof, but I couldn't let him get

away with it. I followed him into a hallway and confronted him. He was such a prick that I lost my temper and got loud. We drew a crowd, and he threatened to call the cops and sue me. And since we'd gathered an audience of witnesses, he actually had the proof to do that. By the time I got home, I had an email on my work account with everything I needed. I assumed it was from someone who overheard our argument."

"But?"

"But then he said I could email him the name of anyone I needed info on." She shrugged. "I didn't ask how he got it, and he didn't ask what I did with it."

"I need to see those emails," Stellan said. "Because either we're talking a world-class hacker with scary surveillance access or..."

"Magicks," Juno finished, looking gleeful at the possibility.

I looked down at Lilith like I was seeing her for the first time.

Not a funny, artsy woman.

Not a hippie goddess.

Not a sweet, creative soul.

Not a broken woman with haunted eyes.

A night monster.

A Batman badass who cared about people enough to right wrongs.

*Fuck, she's perfect.*

*Does this make me Robin or Alfred?*

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

# POWER TO THE PENIS

## LILITH

**P**ESTILENCE, THE DEVIL, AND A vigilante stood in an entryway...

It sounded like the start of a bad joke.

I'd have laughed had I not been worried about getting on the devil's bad side.

Not to mention Lennon.

As it was, his jaw seemed to have permanently dropped as he stared at me with an unreadable expression. I was caught between my own anger and needing to assure him I was the same Lilith I'd always been.

"If you have experience with magicks, why didn't you believe me when I told you who I was?" Lennon asked. "Why were you so upset?"

"I was pissed because you"—I gestured around my head—"knocked me out. I'm not a rag doll you can control."

The pretty woman from the hospital with the pink and blue hair threw her arms out. "That's what I said!"

"And there's a massive difference between me having a sixth sense or whatever and you being the bringer of the damn apocalypse."

"Preventer," she corrected, butting in again.

Her man wrapped an arm around her waist. "I don't think you're helping, pixie."

“Maybe not, but we don’t have time to beat around the bush. She’s in danger—we all are. She needs to make like sushi and roll with it before something happens to her ass while her head is buried in the sand.”

The only thing I hated more than people talking about me in front of my face like I wasn’t there was them trying to dictate how I should feel.

However, my indignation could wait. Being in danger eclipsed everything else, so I focused on that. “What danger?”

“Absolve,” she stated, like that should mean something to me. At my blank expression, she expanded. “They’re a group of rat bastards who blame the supernatural for everything bad in the world. Lost your job? Magicks. Wife left you? Magicks. Miserable little sycophant with a tiny dick? Magicks. All the while, they use the dark kind to steal souls.”

“Why would they want to steal souls?”

“Souls harness a tremendous amount of power—on Earth and in Heaven and Hell.”

“Of course they do. Silly me,” I murmured. “And I’m in danger because...”

Everyone’s gaze went behind me expectantly.

“Because you’re my mate,” Lennon said like it was no big deal.

“That’s a bit of a stretch. I mean, don’t get me wrong, it was a good one, but they’re targeting me after one date?”

I looked over to see the others exchange glances before moving through the living room until they disappeared. I wanted to follow and demand more answers, but Lennon took my attention.

After shifting me into the hallway, he cupped my cheeks and stepped into my space until he was all I could see. “After an eternity. You were made for me. You hold the other half of my soul. The powers-that-be decided it before we were created, but I knew it as soon as you got makeup all over my shirt in the elevator.” He flashed a quick smile before turning



somber, his thumb moving under my chin to tilt my head back farther. “I’m sorry I knocked you out.”

“And tried to lie about it.”

“And that. It won’t happen again.” Dropping his hands, he didn’t move away, but he did give me time to process all he’d unloaded.

Maybe because I’d already experienced magic-lite with my photography *gift*.

Maybe because my parents had raised me on the natural magic of fate, the universe, Mother Earth, and all that hippie jazz.

Or maybe I was just in shock and totally numb.

Whatever the reason, I knew down to my bones that he told the truth. Denial would be a waste of time.

“Okay, so you’re one of The Four Horsemen,” I said. “Pestilence.”

He nodded.

“And I’m your mate.”

He nodded again.

“Why?”

“When dark magicks use became more prevalent and the occasional soul went missing, it was considered a crisis. We were created to counteract that. We were promised we’d eventually find our mates. The people who held the other halves of our souls.”

“Cool, cool, cool.” I looked over my shoulder at where the others had been. “Levi is the devil, and I’m guessing Juno is War.”

“Good guess.”

“She puts out a vibe. Who’re the rest?”

“Nate is Death,” he said, something that made even more sense than Juno being War. “Denny and Stellan are their mates.”

“Pestilence, War, Death... I’m drawing a blank on the last.”

“Famine. We haven’t found him yet.”

“What do you mean *found him*?”

“It’s a long story.”

*Why do I feel like that’s the understatement of the century?*

LENNON

“I HAVE TIME.” LILITH HAD no clue how accurate her words were.

*An eternity together.*

Doing my best, I summed up more of our history with Absolve before I told her about our curse.

I didn’t get the chance to share what my siblings had endured when Lilith grabbed my shirt and cut me off. “The woman in the hallway. Did you let her go?”

“No. You were right. She was his partner.” I’d assumed Lilith had caught some shared look or clue we’d missed, but after all the bombshells, I wasn’t so sure. “How did you know?”

“She had an aura. He did, too, but hers was different. Worse.”

*Intuition.*

It might not have been one of my gifts before, but it was definitely one of my mate’s.

*She’s already making me stronger.*

Before the curse, my life had been filled with pain, frustration, and loneliness as I’d moved through the endless years feeling incomplete. My siblings and I had clutched to the promise of our mates, using it as fuel to push on.

Our rewards.

Centuries might have passed, but I could remember the ache just as acutely as if it were yesterday. And because the

pain was so fresh, the profoundness of *finally* having my mate rocked me to my half-soul.

Whatever else came—whatever strength or power we shared—it was just a bonus. I couldn't ask for anything more than having her.

Well, her not looking two seconds from throttling me would be good, too.

I tilted my head toward the living room. "We have to tell them."

Surprisingly, she allowed me to grab her hand and lead her into the living room.

Denny was positioned on Nate's lap on the couch. Juno sat in the computer chair with Stellan positioned behind her like a guard.

At the lack of cinnamon, I asked, "Where's Levi?"

"Emergency." Denny handed Lilith a large cup. "He left this."

She took it but didn't make any moves to actually drink it. "What is it?"

"Boozy Dole Whip." At Lilith's confused expression, Denny shrugged. "He's got a Disney thing."

"The devil has a—" She shook her head. "Never mind." Scanning the room, she inched closer to me. "Why is everyone looking at me like... like..."

Juno spun the chair around in circles. "Like we're waiting for you to freak out and try to murder us with a fireplace poker?"

"Yes. That."

"You seem to be handling all this pretty well," Denny said.

"Too well," Juno added. "I've always known I had magicks, *and* I was high on special gummy bears when I got my memories back. But I still freaked."

“When I found out who Nate and I were, I got wasted and kept singing ‘Come Sail Away’ until my best friend wanted to murder me.”

“‘Come Sail Away’?” Lilith asked.

Denny smirked, sharing the connection I hadn’t even made yet. “Ya know, Death, Hades, and the river *Styx*.”

Lilith’s jaw dropped. “You’re Hades? I thought he was a, well, *he*.”

“People always love to give the power to the penis.” Juno rolled her eyes. “What else is new?”

Ignoring Juno, Lilith looked between Denny and Nate. “If you’re Hades, does that mean I’m something—er, someone?”

“No, Death and Hades are the only package deal.” Denny’s smile faded as she studied Lilith with a critical eye. “Seriously, though, are you about to have a meltdown? It’s totally fine if you are. Justified even. I could put on some *Styx*, Juno can grab you some weed gummies, and Nate can hide the breakables-slash-weapons.”

Lilith pulled her bottom lip between her teeth and squeezed my hand, unconsciously gathering strength from me. She inhaled before sharing something I got the feeling she’d never verbalized before. “I’ve always had a feeling something big would happen to me. Like... a sensation in the back of my head that there was some door I had to walk through. Some ceiling I had to break. Some *something*, and then my life would change in a huge way.”

“Surprise.” Juno did jazz hands. “You were right.”

“Granted, I thought it would be with my photography, not magic, evil, and the apocalypse.”

“Po-tay-to, po-tah-to. All that matters is that you were right, and you’re handling it like a badass.”

Chugging more than half the drink in one go, Lilith wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, not seeming to notice the cup had refilled. “I’m really not. I’ll fall apart later.”

*And I’ll be there to hold you together.*

Keeping my thoughts to myself so I didn't push her too far, I circled the conversation back to something that also ran the risk of sending her running in a panic. "We need to tell you more about Absolve in the current day."

Despite looking overwhelmed and skeptical, Lilith still waved her hand toward herself. "Hit me with it."

Like they'd done with me, Nate started first, giving a rundown of his and Denny's experiences with Absolve.

Standing statue still, Lilith remained silent throughout. Nothing in her expression indicated what she was thinking—or even whether she believed him.

Only when Juno was partway into her story did Lilith begin to fidget, her face paling.

"You're a detective?" she asked Stellan. At his nod, she grimaced and whispered, "I should've known. He totally has resting detective face." Juno burst out laughing, but Lilith's focus was on Stellan as she tilted her head toward the front door. "Uh, about what the devil was saying... I don't actually attack people or anything. He was talking symbolically."

Juno snorted. "You kick people's ass with symbolism? Didn't realize symbolism could break a man's fingers."

Stellan put up a hand and shook his head. "I still want to see the emails from your partner, but anything beyond that is between you and the assholes who have it coming." He glanced at me. "And your mate."

Lilith tilted her head, something working behind her guarded eyes. They widened before she set her drink down, moved closer, and placed her hands on my chest. "You're Pestilence, but you don't make people sick. You do the opposite. That means you can use your magic to cure my dad."

Fucking hell.

It killed me—physically hurt more than all of my skateboarding injuries combined—to snuff out the hope that lit her blue eyes. "I'm sorry, baby, that's not the way it works."

"Why not?"

Juno answered for me. “Magic is different from magicks. Magic is a card trick. An illusion. Magicks is real. It’s powerful. But it’s also complicated. It has limits.” She bent her arms with her palms up, lifting and tilting them like a scale. “Balances it has to keep. Unless black magicks is involved, we can’t interfere.”

“But why the hell not?” Lilith cried. “Cancer *is* black magic. It’s literally poison, spreading and killing all the healthy cells it touches. And I’m not asking him to cure everyone. Just this one time. Why can’t he interfere just once?”

“Because messing with free will and the natural order of the universe throws everything off balance.”

Lilith clutched my shirt, her eyes pleading with me. It tore at my heart. Shredded it. Guttled me. The anguish grew when she verbally begged, “It’s one person. Just one time. *Please.*”

*Natural order, the universe, Heaven, Hell, and motherfucking Absolve be damned. I’ll do anything she asks. Give her anything she wants.*

*I’ll do everything in my power and beyond if it means she never looks at me with such broken eyes.*

Likely knowing I’d put my mate first, Nate pinned me with a stare. His tone was low with warning. “It’d make us no better than those bastards.”

I didn’t give one single iota of a fuck, but at his words, Lilith winced and loosened her hold. Her face fell in resignation.

Opening my mouth to tell her I’d still try, Juno said the one thing that could stop me.

“The cancer wouldn’t disappear. That’s not how balance works. It could shift into something else—something more painful with no chance of a cure. Or it could be forced out of him only to transfer to her mom.” Juno’s eyes darted to Lilith, then back to me. “Or to her. And despite promises made, tampering with that kind of destiny could null the agreement.”

I'd happily risk whatever punishment the powers-that-be wanted to lash me with, including tarnishing my own soul. But I wouldn't risk her. Not ever.

Lilith withdrew—physically and emotionally. Her face went blank as she wrapped her arms around herself.

There but a million miles away.

Stellan reached down to play with a chunk of Juno's hair. "Juno and Denny told us what happened at the hospital. We need a plan. Ideas?"

Tilting her head into his touch, Juno gentled her voice. "As anxious as we all are, Lilith has a lot to process before she dives any farther into the deep end of batshit craziness. A couple of days won't hurt."

Denny laughed. "That's an oddly mature and responsible idea."

"I know. All Stellan's calmness is contagious." Juno shuddered. "Makes me feel dirty. I'm going to have to go do something immature and impulsive." She looked at Lilith. "Have any pending targets on your hit list? We could go rough 'em up."

"There's the shoot first, ask questions later attitude we know and love."

"No violence and mayhem," Stellan said, tacking on, "not tonight, at least."

Nate lifted Denny from his lap and stood, though he kept her body pressed tight to his.

*Hell, they've got it bad.*

I glanced over at Lilith to see I'd subconsciously moved closer after she'd withdrawn.

*Pot, meet kettle.*

"There's no time—" Nate started, his words cutting off abruptly when Denny touched his chest.

"They know there's danger to watch out for. I doubt they plan on strolling through dark alleys or telling strangers their

secrets. It's just a few days."

"Two," he shot back.

I glanced to where Lilith sat, overwhelmed into numbness.

Evil and the fate of the universe both be damned. My priority was her.

"We'll be in touch when we're ready," I said.

And then I took her hand and blinked before anyone could argue.



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

# DOES YOUR SOUL ACCEPT VENMO? LILITH

“DO THAT AGAIN, AND I’LL barf on your shoes,” I forced out while my stomach flipped like the world was a spatula and I was the pancake.

To be fair, the stomach upheaval had little to do with the magical, mystery ride since I hadn’t physically felt anything in the millisecond of travel.

But trying to wrap my brain around how far we’d gone in that millisecond was enough to make me queasy.

Not to mention everything else I’d learned since being accosted in the hallway.

The Four Horsemen were real... and not all men.

The Devil was real and not evil—even if he was kind of a snarky dick.

Souls were a real, almost tangible thing, not just a symbolic manifestation of faith, conscience, and integrity.

And there was a group of murderous assholes who stole said souls.

All of it was enough to rock me. Shatter the reality my entire life was built upon. Twist my stomach in knots that I didn’t think could ever be undone.

The copious amounts of sugar-laden and rum-heavy Dole Whip I’d chugged likely hadn’t helped, either.

Toeing off my shoes, I nearly toppled. “The refilling cup was a cool party trick. Think I can do it?”

“I’m not sure what you’re capable of,” Lennon said, and I knew he was talking about more than magicks.

“I could say the same about you.”

“Lilith, I’m sorry about earlier. I promise, I thought I was protecting you. I didn’t really believe you were working—”

“What does it mean, us being soulmates?” I interrupted, not wanting to think about how he’d looked at me with distrust and betrayal in his eyes. The whole situation was insane, so I was choosing to cut him some slack for being so very, *very* wrong. I wanted to let sleeping Cerberuses lie.

For then, at least.

Future me might choose to accidentally kick him in the shin.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“Like, I know the romance novel and chick flick version, but what does it actually mean for us?”

“We share a soul. The two halves will become one, and we’ll strengthen each other. We’re... bonded.”

I mulled over what he said. Hoping my tone was more curious than insecure, I asked, “Is that why we were so attracted to each other?”

*Is the only reason we have this insanely hot and intense connection because of the stupid universe? Would you even be into me if we didn’t share a soul?*

From one breath to the next, calm Lennon was gone. His expression was thunderous as he closed the distance between us, not stopping until my back was to the wall. His palms went to either side of my head, caging me in as he leaned down so his face was all I could see.

Lennon was usually so low-key and reserved, it was easy to forget how large and powerfully built he was. His body eclipsed mine.

It was not easy to forget how much that turned me on. My panties were soaked with the evidence.

“‘*Were*’?” he growled.

“What?” I breathed, lost. In him. In our position. In my desire.

But also with what he was even talking about.

“Past tense. You said we *were* attracted to each other. An attraction, I might add, that has fuck-all to do with anything other than you being you. And you also being the most gorgeous woman I’ve ever seen in my long damn life. If you even have to question that, I need to do a better job showing you.” He straightened to his full height and pushed in closer, his hard-on thick against my belly. “Because my attraction is very current.” Before I could respond—like by correcting my previous phrasing or using the wall to shimmy up his body—he speared his hand into my hair. Fisting it to tilt my face up, he moved the other to span my rib cage right under my breast. “But if yours is in the past, I’ll spend every day changing that.”

Chest rising and falling rapidly, I wanted him to kiss me. I wanted him to move closer again so I could feel his hardness pressed to my stomach and other, much better places. I wanted him to slide his hand up to touch my breast, his skilled fingers working my nipples. I wanted him...

Period.

I just wanted him.

“Is it past tense?” His body was tight, and his hazel eyes blazed as he waited for my answer.

I shook my head and choked back a moan at the delicious bite, thanks to his hold on my hair.

“Good.” His eyes dropped to my parted lips. “But I’ll still spend every damn day making sure that never. Fucking. Changes.” He’d barely bit out the last word when his mouth feasted on mine in a kiss that stole my breath.

I’d thought our previous kisses had been the best of my life, but they were chaste compared to that one. There was no holding back. No gentleness. No hesitancy.

It was frenzied and wild, leaving me no doubt as to how attracted he was to me. Not because of our shared soul. Or because of some greater plan. It was because, just as I wanted him, he wanted me.

Simple as that.

Before I could open my mouth wider to give him more access, he tore himself away, though he didn't go far. He dropped his forehead to mine, his breathing harsh and heavy. "Nothing but heaven."

"Just wait till we get to the good stuff," I rasped, filterless and brazen.

A low groan rumbled up from his chest as he took my mouth in another hard but fast kiss. When he ripped himself away that time, he stepped back to put more distance between us. "You need to eat."

My eyes darted to the window and the hazy wintery darkness. It wasn't that late, but the last of the adrenaline flowed out of me. I swayed on my feet. My brain was muddled, my thoughts fighting to race despite my exhaustion.

"I had a late lunch with Dad." I marveled that it'd only been a handful of hours since I'd sat with him in his hospital room, eating lukewarm cafeteria chicken tenders. It felt like a lifetime ago. "I'm just gonna crash. Are you doing that transporting thing to get home or calling a cab like a mere mortal?"

"I'm not leaving."

That was enough to wake me up a little. "Say what?"

"We may have a couple of days to adjust, but if Absolve finds out who you are, they won't wait until you're ready." His eyes flared as he stepped closer, stopping when our bodies were almost touching. Gently, he reached out and tucked my hair behind my ear. "More importantly, now that I have you, I have no interest in spending another night away from you."

I was surprised to realize I felt the same way. Just the thought of him leaving created a dull pain in my chest.

I wondered if he'd try to sleep in bed with me.

Wondered if I'd let him.

*Sleep deprivation is clearly messing with my brain.*

“Go to bed, Lilith,” he ordered.

I gave him a little nod, surprised by my disappointment when he stayed away. I was almost in the hallway when I looked back to see him flop onto my cute little couch.

His tall frame looked almost laughably ridiculous on it.

“How does our soul become one?” I asked.

“I don't know.”

I lifted my chin in a single nod, too tired to do more. “Maybe there's a soul PayPal. Or Venmo for souls. Ask the others.”

With his low chuckle filling my ears, a small smile pulled at my lips as I fell face down in bed.

A bed that felt far too empty.

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**I**T SEEMED LIKE MY EYES had just closed when something softly brushed against my cheek.

I swung at it.

Only it wasn't an errant hair or creepy bug.

And it had a potty mouth.

“Shit. Fucking hell.”

My eyes shot open to see Lennon leaning over me, his expression amused even as he rubbed his jaw.

“You've got a helluva left hook, little monster.”

“Sorry, I thought you were a spider or something.” I glanced at my alarm clock to see it wasn't even six.

“Am I *bugging* you already?” His smile was so damn charming, it woke me up despite the ungodly hour.

I met his smile with my own, my guard and my working brain cells still fast asleep. “No, I’m just not used to anyone else being here while I sleep. Well, except Hannah after a night out, but she doesn’t wake me up like this. Usually, it’s her snoring in the living room that does it. Or her trying to sneakily organize my stuff but then swearing out of frustration.”

Realizing I was both rambling and making myself out to be a loser spinster slob—which was only kind of true—I pressed my lips together to keep anything else from coming out.

But Lennon didn’t look like he was judging me. His smile had spread to a grin that paired sinfully with the heat in his eyes. “I like that I’m the only one waking you up like this,” he whispered. “Like it even better knowing I’ll be the only one doing it from now on.”

His mouth covered mine, his tongue pressing in to take... everything.

My breath.

My exhaustion.

My sanity.

And I took back.

His taste.

His heat.

And—after gripping his shirt to tug him down to me—his weight.

I spread my thighs, his pelvis falling between them. My gasp at the contact turned into a moan of pleasure as he thrust, grinding his hardness against where I wanted him.

Needed him.

I wrapped my legs around his thighs. That small, desperate action was enough to unhinge Lennon, snapping whatever reserve he’d used to hold himself back.

Roughly, he yanked my tee up, pulling away just long enough to get it over my head. His kiss turned wild, moving from my lips down my neck as his hand skimmed up my side. Both worked to torment me in their slow journey to my breast.

I barely moved. Barely even breathed. I worried one single twitch would end everything before he touched my painfully hard nipples.

*Beep! Beep! Beep!*

Just as his hand reached the underside of my breast and his lips skimmed the top, the beep sounded again, growing louder.

*Is this some kind of heavenly chastity alarm? Does my new soul-saving gig mean no more sex or unpure thoughts? Because if that's the case, I'm going to get fired.*

*Maybe literally.*

“Fuck,” Lennon gritted out. “I came in here to tell you I was leaving, but you distracted me with that damn mouth.”

“Sorry.”

He smirked. “No, you’re not.”

I really wasn’t.

“And I’m not sorry, either. But I’ve got to go.”

“Okay,” I said even though it wasn’t okay. Not by a long shot.

Pushing up onto one hand, he used the other to tug my sheet up to cover my exposed torso.

*Considerate and gentlemanly.*

*I wish he’d cut that out.*

As if reading my thoughts, his eyes were aimed at my covered chest as he explained, “If I see your pretty tits, I’m not leaving.”

“Okay,” I repeated because *that* was definitely okay with me.

“I want to keep a finger on your pulse today, and since I can’t physically do that, I need you to text me. Often. I don’t

care if it's just a few words. Got it?"

I nodded.

"Good. Do you have work today?"

"Just lots of editing. But my dad is supposed to be released this afternoon, so I'm going to help them get settled at home. I'll probably stay for dinner."

"You ready for them to meet me?"

My heart soared, clenched, and raced all at once. "My mom will try to pick your brain for every last detail you know about cancer."

"I'm okay with that."

"It'll feel like you're still at work," I pointed out.

"Not when I'm with you. The other doctor in my practice doesn't let me touch his ass when no one is looking." Fists to the bed, he leaned down close to my face and lowered his voice. "He damn sure doesn't let me do what I'm going to do to you when we get home."

"Well, no work partnership is perfect," I whispered back.

His lips tipped, and I was pretty sure he'd smiled more in the last however many hours than he had in years. The thought that I helped make that happen was enough to make me grin in return.

Gaze dropping to my mouth, Lennon closed his eyes, his expression almost pained. Just as quick, it was gone—leaving me to question if I'd imagined it. "Text me their address and what time, and I'll be there."

*Be there.*

*To meet my parents.*

*As my literal soulmate.*

I grabbed his shirt and sat up a little. "I'm not telling them about any of the stuff with us and Absolve and all that yet. They have enough to deal with."



I'd expected an argument, but Lennon just nodded. "I'll follow your lead." He leaned down to kiss me, quick but surprisingly hot in its casualness. "Text."

"I will."

And then he was gone. Literally there one moment and gone the next.

I jumped, nearly falling out of bed.

"I'll never get used to that," I wheezed when my heart slowed enough to speak.

I flopped back but couldn't close my eyes. Something was... off? No, not off. Just different. Glancing around to see what was amiss, I noticed my curtains were still closed and my light was off.

It was dark in my room.

Maybe not pitch black, but still far too dark for me to have been able to notice all the details in Lennon's expression. As I scanned the room, I saw everything the same way as I would if the lights were on.

*Night monster.*

I made a mental note to ask Lennon about it and wondered what else would change.

How else *I'd* change.

Already awake and having a full existential crisis, I decided to get out of bed to start working. I stood and stretched, taking a few steps toward the door.

And then I rounded my path, circled to the other side of the bed, and flopped back down.

*Mornings are for suckers.*

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

WHORE Q&A

LILITH

AS I WALKED INTO THE hospital lobby that afternoon, my phone chimed in my purse. I dug it out, already knowing who it'd be.

Lennon: Are you here?

Me: Yeah, how'd you know?

Lennon: Just did. Have time to come see me?

I wanted to. But much like the day we'd met, the parking garage had been a clusterfuck, and I was running behind.

Me: I wish I did.

Lennon: Me, too. Let me know if you need anything.

I was about to say thank you when another text came through.

Lennon: Miss you.

I liked that Lennon hadn't waited three days after our date to text, didn't shy away from the double text, and didn't hide the way he felt. It was likely partially thanks to the mate thing, but that wasn't all of it.

It was just Lennon.

My chest felt full enough to burst, and my smile was wide enough to hurt my cheeks.

Me: Miss you, too.

Shoving the phone back in before I changed my mind, I easily navigated the halls and elevators that I knew like the back of my hand. I reached my dad's room, already guessing what I'd find.

He would be in one of the recliner chairs with some old movie on the TV. A tray of food would be in front of him, and he'd bitch about it being gross but still eat every bite because he hated wasting things.

Sure enough, *Tombstone* was playing on the TV, something that vaguely resembled chicken and rice was on his plate, and Dad was sitting up.

Kind of.

Rather than his go-to chair, he was still in bed. Pale and exhausted, his eyes were barely open, and the smile he shot me was wobbly. "There's my best girl. How're you?"

It was just like him to ask about me when he was the one going through hell.

"I'm good, Dad. What's on the menu today?"

"Cardboard with a side of those shredded papers they use in packages. Want some?"

"As hard as it is to pass after hearing that glowing review, I'm still gonna say no."

"Damn." Dad tilted his head. "Sit. Want my spot?"

Sometimes I did stretch out on his bed while he lounged in the recliner, but not when he looked like... well, like a man with cancer.

"I'm good, Dad." I gave him a hug and felt *it*. I wasn't sure what the *it* was, but I felt it. "What happened today?"

"They decided to start radiation this morning."

“Already? I thought you weren’t starting until next week.”

He raised a shoulder. “Probably decided people already radiate toward my charm, so they might as well make me officially radiating.”

I glanced at my mom for the real answer, expecting to see her rolling her eyes. Instead, she stared at my dad with another small, sad smile.

It was one I saw more and more.

“Mom?” I whispered softly, my worry growing.

Like she’d been lost in thought, she gave a jolt before her stare became pointed. “Are you going to tell her what you asked the radiation oncologist?”

“I merely asked if I held a spider during radiation, would I get superpowers?”

“And they said?” I asked.

“He went over the actual side effects. No sense of humor.”

“Uh-oh.”

Dad firmly believed that a good sense of humor was a sign of intelligence. He didn’t like people who thought being mean was the same as being funny, and he never trusted those with no sense of humor.

“Don’t worry,” Mom put in, “that was just the attendant, so we’ll likely never see him again. The techs liked his jokes. Especially when he asked if his radiation tattoo could be a topless babe.”

I wanted to laugh, but worry ate at me. “Why did they bump the start date up?”

“You saying I don’t have a radiating charm?” Dad asked.

That got the eye roll from Mom. “The side effects can be rough. They wanted to see how he’d handle it while he was here.”

“Is he still getting released later?”

“Unless something comes up.” Her eyes darted to Dad. “They said he won’t have much appetite and will be wiped out like he just spent a week in the sun. We can reschedule if you don’t have time for dinner tonight.”

“I always have time. Even if you and Dad just want to rest, I can take care of anything you need around the house.”

Mom waved off my offer. “I’ve been sitting around here, working and napping and drinking so much coffee, the kiosk workers know my name and order. Trust me, I’m wide awake. I don’t want you missing out on other plans if he’ll be sleeping the whole time.”

*Might as well call that a door it’s such an opening.*

I felt remarkably like a nervous teenager about to ask if I could go out on a date.

Actually, that wasn’t quite true. As a teen, my parents hadn’t hovered so long as I’d been smart, safe, and home by curfew. I hadn’t been near as anxious to talk to them back then, but that was likely because no date or boyfriend had been as important as Lennon.

“Speaking of my plans...” I started, aiming for nonchalance and coming up miles short. “Is it cool if someone joins us for dinner?”

“And I’m guessing that someone is not Hannah,” Mom surmised. There was a knowing gleam in her eye and a badly hidden smile pulling at her mouth.

“It is not.”

“Are you going to tell us who?”

“I am not.”

“Lilith Kara Alexander...”

“Fine, I’ll tell you. Sheesh, no reason to bust out the full name.” I inhaled. “I’ve been seeing someone.”

*And he’s my soulmate, a mega hottie, and, oh yeah, we’re in grave danger from a nefarious group of soul stealers.*

*You know, that ol’ story.*

I'd expected my mom to be curious because that was her nature. What I hadn't expected was for her eyes to light, her smile to grow, and her voice to pitch with excitement as her rapid-fire questions began. "Who? For how long? What do they do for a living? Do they recycle?"

I looked at my dad for backup, but even he'd perked up.

*If hearing about my life helps him look better than he did when I walked in, I'll talk until I lose my voice and then switch to charades.*

*Maybe an interpretive dance.*

"His name is Lennon. For a couple of weeks. I'm not sure about recycling. He has a lot of single-use plastic in his huge diesel truck. I also saw a bag of uncut six-pack rings labeled 'dump in ocean'. And I think he only buys oranges and bananas that are on Styrofoam trays and wrapped in plastic." I shrugged. "But I bet he recycles."

"I know you're joking, but I'm going to send him home with a cup and metal straw anyway."

"Mom, no."

"Maybe you shouldn't have been so snarky." She paused for a moment before pointing out, "You didn't say what he does for a living."

"I think he's a bouncer or bartender. He's always talking about how much he enjoys this club—Club Baby Seal."

Mom's eyes widened before narrowing, her hand going to her heart. "Lilith Kara Alexander, you're an evil child."

"You got the full name twice in less than five minutes." Dad chuckled. "Must be a new record, pal."

Taking pity on my mother—and because the baby seal comment would result in Lennon being the new owner of a cup, straw, *and* an arm full of reusable shopping bags—I told her the truth. "He's a doctor."

My mom hadn't said one peep when I'd been with a struggling artist—at least not until he'd made me miserable. Same with the wannabe rockers and even more of a wannabe

influencer. She never cared who I was with, or even if I was alone.

She just wanted me to be happy.

But at finding out her only daughter was seeing a doctor, in a time when a doctor's knowledge was greatly needed, my mom's smile grew to a grin.

Mine did, too. Especially when I could ease her mind further by adding, "He's a pediatric neurologist, but he's smart and has connections. Whatever he doesn't know, he can find out. And he's already said he'll answer any and all questions you have."

It took some effort, but my mom suppressed her happiness. "We're doing okay with the help we've gotten here. The nurses have been good about breaking it down for us, and a social worker has been in a few times. You don't have to go out of your way to get more information."

*Did my mom just insinuate I'm whoring it out for medical opinions?*

I put my hands on my hips. "I think I'm insulted."

She waved me off, rolling her eyes. "I just don't want you to feel pressured to get involved with someone because it could be beneficial."

*Yup, definitely insinuating I'm a whore for info.*

"Definitely insulted."

"You're a doer, bud," Dad interjected. "Not an idle, passive watcher. And since you get that from your mom, she knows that if you had the chance to do something to help, you would."

That was true—up to a point, at least. And hookering myself for a private Q&A with a doctor was well past that point.

A comfortable hospital chair, reduced billing, and quicker lab results were a different story, but that was neither here nor there.

Lennon being a doctor was an inadvertent benefit, but it was the fact he was smart, witty, more caring than he let on, and interesting that did it for me.

And the way his eyes blazed.

Also, how his kiss was enough to make me lose my mind and turn me on more than I'd ever been before played a part, too.

That he was majorly tall, sexily built, and hot as hell didn't hurt, either.

And...

Everything.

*Everything* about Lennon did it for me.

I didn't share any of that with my parents, of course. But I did tell them honestly, "It's not like that."

"You like him?" My mom watched me for any sign of doubt, deception, or strain.

There wasn't any in my immediate answer. "A lot."

She watched me for a few beats before she allowed her unrestrained smile to spread. "Well, good. I'm excited to meet him." She stood and moved to a seat by the window, freeing up the one closest to my dad so I could sit and visit with him while she worked on her laptop.

"You sure you don't want my lunch, kiddo?" Dad nudged the tray over. If it wouldn't have created a mess that someone else would have to clean, he'd likely have kept going until it spilled because it looked that gross.

"I'm good. Promise."

"Damn."

We talked a little, but I kept my words brief since it looked like Dad was close to dozing off.

Mom was quiet for a bit before speaking again. "Are you sure he won't mind answering questions?"

"He said he's happy to."



*And that he's going to touch my ass and do something to me when we get home.*

“Maybe just one or two.” Mom pulled out her phone, likely to write down a long list of them.

Leaving her to it, I turned my attention to my dad. “How’re you feeling?”

“Like one of those hot dogs in a convenience store that’s been left under the heat lamp too long.”

“Have you ever thought of being a poet? You have a way with words.”

His smile was small, and his eyes drifted closed. I thought he was asleep when he asked, “So a pediatric neurologist, huh?”

“Yup.”

“Couldn’t have snagged an oncologist?”

“Henry!” Mom chided.

“What? Think of the discount we could’ve gotten on this whole overpriced racket.”

Mom muttered to herself, something about his newly gained superpower being lack of tact.

But I just covered his hand with my own and whispered, “I love you, Dad.”

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

# MEASUREMENTS OF FUCK LILITH

“YOU DOING OKAY?”

Sitting at my parents’ table with Lennon, his arm around me and his head dipped close to whisper in my ear, I was not okay.

Not by a long, tall, lean, handsome mile.

After leaving the hospital earlier, I’d gotten my dad settled while my mom worked her way through a million phone calls to schedule future appointments and arrange home nurse visits. When Dad had fallen asleep two seconds after his butt met the couch, I’d searched the kitchen for something to whip up for dinner. Being at the hospital for so long had left their fridge resembling a petri dish of expired food.

A trip to the store would’ve cut it close on time, especially if I wanted to clean the remnants out before a hazmat suit was required.

Which had been where my little-bit-freaky, more-than-a little-bit-awesome connection with Lennon had come into play.

Because just as I’d been sliding on shoes to rush to the store, Lennon texted to tell me to place a grocery order for him to pick up. Then he’d texted again to say he’d bring Indian for dinner, if we liked that.

We did.

A lot.

It was our go-to family dinner, something I hadn't shared, yet somehow he'd known.

Three hours later, our bellies were filled with our favorite Indian dishes.

My parents' fridge was stocked with the essentials I'd ordered and the extras he'd added—like electrolyte drinks and meal replacement shakes that he said my dad would need.

And, in a time when my entire universe was in major upheaval, I retained some semblance of security.

Despite the shitstorm swirling around us, I wasn't okay. I was *good*.

Nervous, intimidated, scared out of my damn mind for all the various reasons.

But good.

I tilted my head back to look at Lennon.

All evening, he'd been charming without being smarmy. Friendly without being fake. Understanding without being pitying when my dad had gone to rest, and patient without being condescending while he'd answered my mom's questions—of which there'd been a multitude.

And since she was in the kitchen brewing a pot of coffee, it was a good indication her list was far from over.

"I'm more concerned with you and your vocal cords," I told him. "Do you feel like you're back in med school with this pop quiz?"

"No... those weren't as extensive." Before I could say anything, he smiled and kissed my nose. "I'm kidding. I was actually expecting a lot more, but your mom has a good handle on everything."

"It's all the WebMD and Dr. Google."

He gave an exaggerated shudder just as my mom came back into the room carrying a pot of coffee, three mugs, and a plate covered in reusable beeswax wrap.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

Lennon stood to take the load from her before pouring coffee while he spoke. “Cancer can’t be cured with an apple cider vinegar cleanse or a magical herbal supplement made by monks and shipped from Arizona.”

“I know that.” She pulled back the wrap to reveal my favorite loaded chocolate chip brownies. “But lavender oil and cayenne will, right? I’ll just put it in all his food. But only green food from now on—I saw something about that. And I read something else about lying in the nude during the sunrise covered in a blend of turmeric, garlic, and coconut oil with a ginger root stuck up your... you know.”

*There goes my appetite for brownies.*

*Well, for more than one.*

*Okay, no more than three.*

Lennon tensed, his smile going forced as he made a strangled noise that I only heard because he had me pressed tight to his side. Seeming to gather every ounce of restraint he had, his tone was firm but kind. “Medical research—”

“I’m just messing with you,” Mom said, letting him off the hook much sooner than I would’ve.

“I told him about your frequent appointments with Dr. Google,” I explained, snagging a brownie and biting into the melty perfection.

“I figured.” Taking a sip of coffee, Mom looked at Lennon. “My research is taken with a grain of salt. I just like to make sure I understand what the doctors are saying since they breeze in for a whole thirty seconds before rushing out the door.”

It was barely perceptible, but Lennon grimaced. Guilt flashed across his expression.

*That’s what he does.*

No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t connect the thoughtful, caring man next to me with the doctor who was in it for the money.

Lennon raised his mug. “We are the worst.”

“I’m sure you’re lovely.” Mom smiled as she looked between us. “Though I agree that your handwriting is likely the worst. Is that a requirement to get your medical license?”

“You know how astronauts have to do that spinning test? We do a similar one but have to write during it. That decides how our handwriting will be for the rest of our career.”

“I know you’re joking, yet I wouldn’t be surprised if that was the case. Thank goodness everything is electronic now.”

Although I already sat close, Lennon’s arm around me tightened until my butt was half off my chair. “Do you have more questions for me, Mia?”

My mom waved her hand, shaking her head. “No, no. You’ve so graciously answered all of them. Try a brownie. They’re Lily’s favorite.”

He didn’t need to be told twice. I popped the last bite of mine into my mouth and contemplated going for another. Lennon made the decision for me, handing me the one he held before grabbing another for himself. I got the close-up view of his jaw clenching as he chewed.

*How can watching a man eat be so erotic? It must be his jaw.*

*Since when are jaws so sexy?*

“I can see why she loves them.” Lennon’s declaration startled me until I realized he was referring to the brownies and not my new-found adoration of chiseled jaws. “These are incredible.”

“The secret,” Mom started, leaning closer in a conspiratorial move before lowering her voice to whisper, “is a fuck load of good chocolate.”

Lennon practically choked on his brownie as I feigned outrage. “Language, Mother! I’m shocked. My innocent ears.”

She rolled her eyes.

“Is that an exact unit of measurement?” Lennon asked after clearing his throat.

“Yes. Double a shit-ton but less than a fuck-ton.”

“Oh goodness.” I wondered what Heaven’s opinion of swearing was.

*I think she’d get along better with Levi anyway.*

Again, even with my side pressed tight to his, it wasn’t enough for Lennon. He snagged a lock of my hair and twirled it absentmindedly. It was as if he couldn’t touch me enough. Couldn’t get close enough.

And since I leaned into him with one ass cheek off the chair, it was easy to tell I felt the same.

“Ask me the rest of your questions,” Lennon softly ordered Mom, likely guessing her earlier denial had been made out of politeness rather than an actual lack of questions. She opened her mouth, but he didn’t let her refuse. “It’s the least I can do to repay you for the brownies because I’m taking the rest of that plate with me.”

Mom beamed at the compliment before her eyes dropped to her cell, then returned to him. “Are you sure you don’t mind? You’re not going to want to come back.”

“You make these brownies again, I’ll write you an entire medical journal article.”

Not only did Mom’s smile grow, but her shoulders also relaxed. She picked up her phone and scrolled to find where she’d left off.

I snuck a peek at Lennon. There was no flash of impatience or irritation. No forced charm or try-hard geniality. He was casual and content, waiting patiently for whatever Mom threw at him.

I, on the other hand, was *not* feeling patient. Like promised, Lennon had taken every available opportunity to touch my ass.

I was anxious to get to the next part of his promise.

---

VER AN HOUR AND A half later, with a good dent in my mom's questions and a plate of brownies in Lennon's hands, we said goodbye to my mom by the front door.

"Come by any time," Mom insisted for the fiftieth time. "I'll cook. I make a mean Mexican spread."

"She really does," I agreed. My full stomach shifted just enough to make room in the exact shape of guacamole and chips—both of which she prepared from scratch.

"Count me in." Reaching into his pocket, Lennon pulled out a business card and handed it to my mom. "In the meantime, call or email with any questions. I don't care if I wake up to fifty messages, okay?"

Accepting it, she clutched it like it was a lifeline.

Just like I'd done.

I gave her a hug. "Please tell Dad I said goodbye. I don't think he woke up when I went in. And share your calendar with me so I can keep track of his appointments."

"Already done. Love you, sweet girl. Be safe driving home." Her eyes twinkled, a mischievous smile on her face. "Or wherever you're driving."

Before I could say anything—not that I knew what to say to *that*—she closed the door in my face.

"I like your mom," Lennon said with a soft chuckle. "She's sharp."

"Maybe too sharp," I muttered.

Careful not to drop his precious cargo, Lennon wrapped an arm around me and steered me down the steps. "How're you doing with everything? I know all that information coming at once can get overwhelming."

"My mom's not the only one with a standing appointment with Dr. Google. I've done my research, so nothing you said was a shock. It was helpful to have things clarified and broken down. And I'm... good? Okay, at least. It was rough seeing Dad so wiped, but at least he's home. And from what they said, this is all nor—" My words cut off suddenly, and I froze.

Immediately going alert, he scanned the area. “What is it?”

“Juno was here.”

I could almost feel the tension flow from his body. “After the scene at the hospital, she placed some wards around the property.” He jerked his head toward an electrical pole and a tree. “And Stellan installed surveillance cameras.” Shifting so he faced me, his hand spanned my hip. “You sensed her?”

I shook my head. “It smells like cotton candy.”

He inhaled and smirked. “Not exactly a stealth scent.”

“Maybe not, but it might be a powerful asset. I’m so full, I’m probably ninety-nine percent brownie, but I seriously want some cotton candy now. She could use it as a bribe to get all sorts of intel.” I glanced around, trying to see or even feel the warding, but I had no luck.

Or maybe I was staring right at it.

I had no clue because I didn’t know what warding looked like.

“So my parents have extra protection?” I asked.

He nodded. “Your place, mine, and the hospital, too.”

I knew my parents wouldn’t be completely safe. Not until we defeated Absolve. But the added security helped.

“That’s reassuring.” Unable to spot the wards, I checked out the cameras instead. They were both discreet, yet I could easily spot them despite the inky night sky. “I didn’t get the chance to ask you something. Can you see in the dark?”

His brows shot up. “I noticed this morning it was like having a constant dim light turned on.”

“Mine is more than that,” I shared. “I’ve always had pretty good vision, but this is...”

“Magicks,” he filled in.

“Seems it.”

“I’ll let Juno know, see what she says.”

“She is the expert,” I murmured.



*How is this my life?*

I took a step toward my car, but Lennon didn't follow. His hand on my hip tightened to halt my movement. I craned my neck to meet his intense stare and lost my breath at the heat.

The fire.

“Your place or mine?”

Much like my body's reaction to his loaded question, my answer was instantaneous. “Yours.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

DO CLAPPERS ACTIVATE  
DURING SEX?

LENNON

**Y**OURS.

Forcing myself to drive slowly so Lilith could follow, her answer ricocheted around my head. My cock hardened as I thought about the truth in that one word.

When we got to my house, I would finally—fucking *finally*—make her mine in a way she would still be feeling a week from now. In a way that would make us both forget what it was like without the other. In a way that would sear into our shared soul.

The next time she looked up at me with big blue eyes and wild goddess hair spread around her, she'd say *yours* again.

I wouldn't stop until she did. Until she felt it. Until she knew it like fact.

She was mine.

LILITH

**H**OLY SHIT.

*He's never allowed to come to my, um, quaint and cozy apartment again.*

Although he didn't live far from me, Lennon's place was worlds away. The street reeked of money and historic beauty. It was far from the touristy sights, but I would bet visitors still came through to take in the old charm.

From where I stood in the foyer, I could see his condo had the same effortlessly posh vibe as the rest of the street.

Lennon put his code into the alarm before turning to me. His eyes avoided mine as he spoke for the first time since we'd arrived. "I have to put the visitor's parking permit in your car."

I handed him my keys, and he went outside without another word.

*Ohhhhkay...*

For the entirety of the drive there, my thoughts had bounced between curiosity, lust, and lusty curiosity.

I'd wondered what his place would look like.

I'd wondered if he'd give me the tour or just take me right to bed.

I'd wondered if he'd take his time—slow and patient and intense—or if all the heat in his eyes would erupt into a wildfire.

Not once had second thoughts entered my mind. I'd been impatient because I knew what I wanted.

Him.

But at his cold front, it seemed doubtful he felt that same surety. We'd only been on one date. It'd been great, and our history was substantial, to say the least, but maybe he thought we were moving too fast. Maybe I'd misconstrued the offer to stay at his place. After all, he'd slept on my couch the night before.

That could be the plan again.

After toeing off my shoes, I moved into his living room and ran my palm across the back of his super lush couch.

*At least if I'm taking the couch, it'll be comfortable. Probably more so than my bed.*

The room itself was sparsely decorated. A few generic pieces looked like they'd been placed by a decorator or something. It reminded me of his office at the hospital—nice but cold.

A laptop sat closed on his coffee table. Heavy wooden bookshelves lined one wall. A quick scan showed they were stocked with medical books.

The only truly personal touch was a framed picture of young Lennon with his parents. I was surprised at the strong resemblance he shared with his dad.

I'd just assumed he'd been adopted like Juno, but there was no way.

*How did the curse or powers-that-be decide who was born and who was adopted? Was there a method to the madness or just the chaos of the universe?*

I knew I was born. I looked too much like my dad for there to be any doubt. Not to mention, I'd seen enough pictures of me as an alien-headed, gore-covered newborn. There was no staging that terror.

Still standing behind the couch, I turned toward the door when it swung open. Lennon locked the door behind him, hung my keys next to his on the hook—something that, although innocuous, sent a warm thrill to my heart—and kicked his shoes off. He turned to look at me.

And in that instant, I knew I'd been wrong.

*Very wrong.*

Because he hadn't been second-guessing or doubting. And he was far from cold.

He'd been clutching to his control while he put the parking permit in my car so it wouldn't get towed. I knew that for a fact.

Because as his gaze bore into mine, it was clear that control was gone.

And so was mine.

Moving at once, we closed the distance and collided. His mouth took mine. Mine opened eagerly, wanting more. Needing it. One of his hands went into my hair, fisting it as his other palmed my ass cheek. Mine clutched at his shoulders to lift myself and press closer.

But not close enough. Not for me, and clearly not for him. Because the next thing I knew, I was up in his arms. My legs automatically wrapped around his waist.

I knew we were going upstairs by the way my body bounced against him, each thump of his hard body against my pussy driving me wild. I heard a door slam into the wall as it was opened, and a light turned on, but I couldn't pull away to see anything. Even when he shifted us onto a soft mattress, his mouth stayed connected to mine.

Arching his back, Lennon pressed his hardness between my legs. His slacks and my thin leggings were barely a barrier yet still far too much. At the contact, his low growl mixed with my gasp. I used my hold on his shoulders to tug at his shirt, desperate to feel him. All of him. Just my fingertips grazing his back was electric.

He pulled away long enough for me to tear it over his head, mussing his hair in the process. When he dipped back down, it wasn't to kiss me. It was to tease his lips and tongue along my neck. Supporting his weight on one hand, he spanned my side with the other, trailing it up and taking my shirt with it. His mouth skimmed my collarbone, staying above the bunched fabric and above where I wanted him to taste. His thumb was just under my breast, adding to the torment.

I put my palms on his shoulders and pushed hard. I still barely shifted him, but he lifted himself to peer down at me with concern. Taking advantage of the leverage, I put my feet flat on the mattress and pushed off to flip us to straddle him. We hadn't even settled when I began yanking my shirt off. It was still bunched around my head when Lennon went to work on my bra. Both were tossed to the side before he gripped my hips and dragged me up his torso to take my nipple in his mouth.

Hard sucking.

Teeth nipping.

Tongue flicking.

I might have died and gone to Heaven.

Releasing one nipple with a pop, he repeated his actions on the other, though he did everything the opposite.

A gentle suck.

A light graze of his teeth.

A slow roll of his tongue.

It was still enough to make me think I'd died.

His mouth skimmed up my chest to my neck as his hold on my hips tightened. He rolled us again, ending with his back arched and his hard cock pressed firmly between my legs. He ground himself against me before going to his knees—and taking that vital pressure away. His hazel eyes blazed as he stared raptly at his large hands cupping my breasts. They slid down my stomach to my pants. When his fingers curled inside the waistband, my hips lifted as he tugged my leggings and panties down.

Shifting even farther away from where I needed him, Lennon pulled the bundled fabric free and tossed them with my other discarded clothes. His fingers wrapped around my ankles and caressed up my legs, moving slowly like he had all the time in the world.

Like he wasn't experiencing the same needy restlessness that had me squeezing my thighs together in search of relief.

When he finally reached my upper thighs, he spanned them with his large hands and spread them wide. I tried to close them again, but his fingers bit into my flesh as he forced them open.

Any attempt to hide myself was quickly forgotten at his sharp inhale. The way he looked at me with such raw and palpable desire was a high I'd chase for the rest of my life.

I loved his reaction, but I *craved* the delicious bite of pain from his fingertips. Just to get more, I tried to close my legs. That time, his grip was even rougher.

*Dr. Lennon Gywn is not as gentle or cold as I used to think.*

I didn't get the chance to provoke him a third time.

He leaned down to lick my slit from bottom to top. His groan vibrated against me, stealing my breath even before he used his thumbs to spread my lips and spear his tongue into me.

I gasped, my hand going into his hair.

That was all the encouragement he needed. He devoured me with an uninhibited desperation. Like I was his favorite treat, and he was a starved man. He sucked and bit and flicked and swirled like he couldn't get enough.

Bowing before me, he worshiped me like I was his goddess, and his mouth was his prayer.

The ferocity of his tongue built my need quickly and continued to stoke it to heights I'd never reached. Knowing right when I was almost there, he eased back just long enough to yank me away from the edge. I worked my hips to rock against him, but his hold on me stayed firm.

The pleasure-pain from his grip brought me even closer to the breaking point.

His maddening pattern kept it just out of reach.

It grew too much. Too powerful. I'd be left shattered.

Broken.

I'd come apart and never be put together the same again.

I couldn't wait.

My legs trembled, the electricity in my veins zapping through me. Air seized in my lungs as I held my breath and prepared to drown.

And then it was forced out in a disgruntled cry of outrage when Lennon tore his mouth away. His own anguish was clear on his face, as though stopping caused him physical pain.

*No. No.*

*No-no-no-no.*

I reached out, desperate to claw him back to finish what he'd started until I saw him undoing his slacks.

*Yes. Yes. Yes-yes-yes-yes.*

My eyes darted around his body, trying to take in everything all at once. His broad shoulders and chest. The way his lean muscles bunched, the cut lines and hard ridges of his abs becoming more defined with his movement. The deep V of his pelvis drew my focus downward as he unzipped his slacks to reveal he wore no underwear.

*I'll never be able to be around him without being acutely aware that the good doctor goes commando.*

Hurriedly, he shoved the fabric down, and I watched raptly as his hard cock bounced free. It was larger and thicker than I'd thought—and I'd already thought it was as impressive as the rest of him.

His pants were barely off when I lunged at him. We nearly ended up joining our clothes on the floor, but Lennon managed to catch me and keep us from toppling. I let him worry about preventing a fall.

My sole mission was to get a taste of him.

The very tip of my tongue barely grazed the thick vein that ran along his shaft when I was jerked away. I landed on my back with a bounce.

*Maybe he's not a fan of oral.*

Lennon's body tried to cover mine, but I dodged at the last second and rolled us again. Straddling his thighs, I reached for his cock, but he encircled my wrists and easily flipped us.

My chest heaving, he pinned my hands above my head. My legs wrapped around his with the heavy length of his dick pressed against where I needed him.

That didn't stop me from bucking, fighting to gain the upper hand. He barely rocked with my efforts. I lost the teasing contact with his dick when he lowered his body to mine. His stomach pressed between my thighs to keep them spread. His forearms covered mine and held them down, and his weight pinned me.



On the long list of things I would be willing to try, bondage was somewhere near the bottom. Not that I kink-shamed anyone who enjoyed it, but it just wasn't for me. I preferred to be on top so I could easily move and adjust. I needed space and freedom.

Or so I thought.

Because with my body unable to shift or inch in any direction, I'd never been more turned on. And there was no way he didn't feel my arousal—warm and slick and almost embarrassingly plentiful.

I wiggled my hips to test my limitations, but he pressed me into the mattress harder as he took my mouth with ardent force.

Still, I continued trying to break free.

He bit my bottom lip.

To shift.

He ground into me.

To rock.

His fingers encircling my wrists tightened.

To twist.

His teeth sank into my neck before he sucked the sensitive skin.

To lift my arms or my hands or my pelvis.

“Never letting you go,” he growled.

I didn't want him to. I didn't want to be on top. I didn't need space or freedom or control.

I craved the sting of pain his hold and teeth and weight gave me. The ache of my muscles fruitlessly pushing. The sensation of being surrounded so completely by Lennon.

The heady power I found in my powerlessness.

It didn't make any sense, but I didn't care. I was too riled up.

Wrapped up.

Built up.

Untangling my legs from his, I inched my hips to the side, gasping as my clit rubbed against him. I didn't have time to do it again when he transferred my wrists to one of his hands and used the other to grip my hip, keeping me still.

He sucked my bottom lip, his teeth dragging as he released it. Keeping his hold firm, he went onto his knees.

Looking down at me, his hair was mussed. His shoulders were taut. The etched lines and veins in his arms made my mouth water. Tension tightened his features, and I was certain his clenched jaw could cut diamonds.

And his eyes *blazed*.

They darted from my wrists held captive by his hand down to scan my face and lower, studying my body like he was enthralled.

The slow, deliberate way he consumed me with his eyes might have felt like a physical touch, but it was *not*. And I needed him to touch me.

Doing the only thing I could think of that would get his attention, I attempted to close my legs. His head snapped up, his legs spreading to force mine wide again.

His gaze locked with mine, and I worried he'd speak. That he'd ask questions requiring me to stop and think and formulate coherent answers when all I wanted was to feel.

But he didn't talk or question me.

Releasing my hip just long enough to line himself up, he caught hold of me before I could rock my hips. Eager to take more. To take him, inch by thick inch.

He paused with the head of his thick cock just barely inside me. Tormenting me.

Payback.

He held eye contact as he slammed in with a ferocity that stole my breath even as I cried out in a silent rasp. His pace

remained brutal. Unrelenting in the best way. There was a finesse to it that curled my toes and hit just so damn perfect.

The motion of his hips.

The way he stretched me.

His firm embrace that ensured I remained in place so he didn't fuck me up the bed.

All of it worked so damn well, rocketing me higher and higher.

But before I could explode, Lennon—the sadistic bastard—slowed. Each thrust in was hard, but he dragged his length out. He transferred his hold from my wrists to my other hip, angling my pelvis up.

The way he looked down at me... was as exhilarating as it was addicting. I'd never suffered from low self-esteem, but I couldn't deny that having someone like Lennon—the sexiest man I'd ever seen—stare at me with such desire was another powerful high I would chase.

He drove into me, a groan escaping his lips as he watched my breasts bounce. Easing out, he moved his gaze down to zero in on our connection.

For the rest of my life, I would never forget the unadulterated need that took over his expression as he watched where we were joined.

Lennon moved his hand so his fingers splayed on top of my pelvis. His thumb stretched down to rub my clit. Waves of charged bliss buzzed across my nerve endings with each flick. His speed increased, his harsh and low grunts swirling around us like the perfect soundtrack. Through it all, he watched me take him, losing more and more control until his movements were unrestrained and frenzied.

Like he was desperate to get deeper. Like he couldn't get close enough to me.

Like he couldn't get enough of me.

I fought to keep my lids open, but they closed, my neck arching. My thoughts were scattered fragments.

*More.*

*Harder.*

*Hold... tighter...*

Although I knew for a fact I hadn't spoken my thoughts—I was incapable of breathing, let alone forming words—Lennon did each one.

He gave me more as his thrusts went deeper.

The strength in them rocked my body up the bed.

His grasp controlled me, slamming me back to meet his next thrust.

*Connection.*

*Us.*

*This.*

*Inferno.*

And then it happened. I shattered. Exploded. Blinding pleasure pulsed through me so completely, I didn't think it'd ever fade. I hoped it wouldn't.

I wanted to remain in that bed with Lennon deep inside me. No responsibilities. No Absolve. No pain. No death. Just him and pure bliss until the day I died.

Lennon didn't give my orgasm a chance to fade. He eased back from my clit, giving it the briefest reprieve before using the pad of his thumb to gently rub small but frantic circles. His voice was as demanding as his touch. "Whose are you?"

"Yours," I rasped instantly.

His lids lowered, and his head dropped back. "Fuck. Yes."

Like a roller coaster, I'd plummeted just to find myself skyrocketing up another hill.

That time, my orgasm wasn't slow to grow, spiking higher and higher while I chased it. It came out of nowhere and washed over me in an all-consuming way that was no less powerful than the first time.

Especially when I heard Lennon's low grunts grow to a groan as he came, too.

Collapsing, he gave me his weight as we fought to catch our breath. Far too soon, he sat up. I mourned the end of the bubble we were in, but all he did was reach a hand out and use his magicks to flick off the light.

*Convenient.*

*Way better than a Clapper. No annoying jingle, either.*

I expected Lennon to throw an arm around me or maybe even pull me against him. What I hadn't expected was for him to wait until I'd rolled onto my stomach before covering most of my back with his front. His leg was thrown over mine, and his body pinned me, covering me like a blanket.

Given our size and weight difference, it shouldn't have been comfortable.

Given the shitstorm brewing around us, it shouldn't have been peaceful.

Given he'd fucked me so hard, I'd likely be feeling him inside me for a week, his still semi-hard cock pressed against my ass shouldn't have turned me on so much.

Yet there we were.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

# VIOLENT FOREPLAY

## LILITH

I COULDN'T STOP GRINNING.

It was borderline pathetic. My cheeks hurt from smiling, but I couldn't stop.

I had zero chill.

Spending the night having mind-blowing sex with a gorgeous man and then sleeping in the arms of said man would have that effect on anyone.

Doing my best to keep my thoughts G-rated as I pretended to be a professional, I walked the perimeter of the large, packed room. I snapped pictures as I moved, capturing the excitement, blessedness, and gratitude.

And, yes, even the air of self-congratulations and smugness some were surrounded by.

Usually, that would annoy the hell out of me. Not enough to earn my, uh, nocturnal wrath, but I would've included some unflattering photos of them.

Thanks to my good mood, I gave them a pass.

The presentation and luncheon to follow were in honor of the unprecedented amount of money Hannah's work had raised. The huge payroll company had spent the year doing intense fundraising for a local veterans' organization.

The seats at the front were filled with vets of various ages. Some wore their formal military uniforms. Others had their medals pinned to regular suits. It was heartbreakingly obvious

that some vets there were struggling—the ones the money would benefit most.

I moved closer and snapped picture after picture. There was no vibe of smugness or superiority.

There was just comradery so strong, it seemed like a physical sensation radiating through the air. Old and young talked to each other. Men and women. Different branches of service. Even those who actively tried to keep their distance were pulled into conversation.

And I attempted to capture it all. Not just the smiling faces, but also the ones overcome with emotion as they reminisced. The ones filled with pride. The ones who were failed by the same government they'd fought to serve.

My phone vibrated in my back pocket, and I pulled it out.

Hannah: Nice ass.

I scanned the room until I saw her sitting toward the back next to a woman around our age with a short black bob.

Only a handful of employees outside of the PR department had been invited to attend. As type-A office manager extraordinaire, Hannah had been instrumental in planning the day. She'd called in every favor, used every guilt trip, and stroked every ego for donations. The use of the event space had cost a fraction of its normal price. All the food had been donated by catering companies and restaurants.

Even my services were being offered free of charge, though she hadn't had to do more than tell me about it.

Her compliment on my ass was just a BFF bonus.

Me: Stalker.

I lifted my camera and adjusted, but before I could aim it at her, she quickly turned to face the woman next to her, the back of her head blocking them both.

She looked down, and my phone vibrated again.

Hannah: Now who's the stalker?

Before I could respond, another text came through.

Lennon: Thinking of you, little monster. Hope the shoot is going well.

To other people, his nickname for me might have come across as insulting or maybe even condescending. But I freaking loved it.

Another couple of texts from Hannah came through, but I responded to Lennon first.

Me: Thinking of you, too. And it's good. Powerful. How's work?

Lennon: In paperwork hell now. It's only bearable because I know I'll be seeing you in about 6 hours, 17 minutes, and 45 seconds.

Me: But who's counting?

Lennon: Me. Counting down until I can see you. Kiss you. Feel you.

Lennon: Your place or mine?

My heart fluttered and my stomach felt like it was filled with Diet Coke and Pop Rocks. It was bubbly and light and happy. Unfortunately, my long to-do list popped into my head like an anchor, stealing my lightness and keeping me grounded firmly in adulthood.

*Adulthood is by far the worst neighborhood I've ever been to.*

Me: I have a ton of work to do tonight, so mine.

I hesitated for a second before messaging again.



Me: But I'll be in my office, and I have a lot of sessions to get through. It'd be boring for you to just sit around while I work. If you'd rather get together tomorrow, I'll try to get through everything tonight.

Lennon: I already told you I have no interest in spending a night away from you. Even more so now.

Lennon: Unless this is your way of saying you need a night alone...

Me: No, I really do have a ton of work.

Lennon: Good because I wasn't going to give you one. I was just going to get creative about how I convinced you that nights alone were no longer a thing.

An inappropriate burst of arousal traveled to my core.

Me: Oh no. Actually, I think I do need some time alone.

Lennon: How important is being able to sit to you?

That time it wasn't a burst. It was an explosion.

Lennon: I'll bring dinner and my own stuff to work on. Take care of everything you need to. All I ask is that when your night ends, it ends with you crawling into bed with me.

*Put me in a small-town Hallmark movie because I'm swooning.*

Me: Okay.

Lennon: Okay. Go capture beauty and text if you have a taste for something specific.

I switched over to Hannah's messages.

Hannah: Who has you smiling?

Hannah: Never mind. A smile that huge, it has to be the goooood doctor.

Me: Shouldn't you be working?

Hannah: Nope, my part is done. I have nothing to do but sit back and watch you get all giddy over some text messages.

I rolled my eyes and slid my phone back into my pocket.

A hush went across the room as a woman walked onto the dais to the microphone. After introducing herself as a fellow vet and the head of the veteran organization, she launched into a moving speech about the sacrifices the brave men and women make only for society to turn their backs on them. Her talk of the hardships they faced was met with nods and murmurs of agreement. She didn't gloss over the hell many of them experienced, giving words to people who likely hadn't been able to find them.

By the end, it was near impossible to find a dry eye in the house. Even I was having to rapidly blink away tears so I could see what I was doing.

Wrapping up her speech, she cleared her clogged throat. "People who say money doesn't buy happiness have never been without money. The changes this generous gift will make—the upgrades we'll be able to afford and help we'll be able to offer—it'll buy happiness. No. It'll buy *hope*. And that's something so many of us have lived without for far too long."

The crowd began applauding, but the woman waved it away.

Once it died down, she continued. "And it's all thanks to the generosity of Hank Johnson. He didn't want to speak today, but I can't let his generosity go unrecognized. Not only

did PayEx raise an amazing amount of money, but Mr. Johnson has personally matched every last cent with his own money.”

The applause was instant and thunderous, mixing with the rumble of excited whispers and comments.

“Mr. Johnson, please come up here.” The woman at the mic gestured repeatedly until finally a man who’d been hiding out in a doorway stepped forward with an awkward wave.

*Humble philanthropist billionaire. If only he were about twenty years younger and single. He and Hannah could’ve had their own workplace romance novel.*

Realizing he wasn’t going to join the woman on the dais, I went for the bashful, modest shot instead, liking that angle better anyway.

*Okay, well, never fucking mind.*

I snapped a few pics before pulling out my phone. I brought up my email and typed quickly.

*TO: CONTACT@GAAE.ORG*

*FROM: LILYPAD PHOTOG*

*HANK JOHNSON*

*ASAP*

*~L*

I hit send.

*Now what the hell am I going to do?*

I did the only thing I could do.

I got back to work.

---

**I** *CAN DO THIS.*

*I’m stealth.*

*A ninja.*

*A secret agent.*

*I'm all my hair ties and bobby pins because those assholes are great at hiding.*

After working the event and luncheon earlier, I'd stopped to visit my dad and check on him after his radiation session. He'd only been able to talk for a few minutes before falling asleep. I'd gotten home with just enough time to put my plan into motion.

I'd taken a wild guess that I'd be going to bed naked and not alone. Since I was, at that very moment, naked and pinned under Lennon, they'd been accurate guesses. That was why I'd strategically stashed an outfit in my office so I wouldn't have to mess around in my room.

While we'd eaten—street tacos, total win—I'd *casually* mentioned how often I got inspired to work during the night. I'd emphasized how bad it was if I got interrupted since it would pull me out of the zone, and I could make mistakes.

That way, if he woke up while I was gone, he'd see the closed door, assume I was working, and not investigate.

Although, I hoped he didn't wake up while I was gone and the whole cockamamy plan was just a wasted precaution.

Amping myself up—for sneaking out, for the fight I was looking forward to, but mostly for the motivation to leave the comfy bed and the hot guy in it—I moved carefully but not suspiciously so. Lennon's hold on me tightened, but after a tense moment, it released.

*I get the feeling the responsible doctor is getting much less sleep these days.*

Heading for my office, I turned some music on low enough not to disturb Lennon or my neighbors but loud enough to be heard from right outside the door. I quickly changed and slipped on my shoes before gearing up.

*I've got this.*

*I don't even know why I'm so nervous. If none of my targets have gotten the jump on me, an overtired doctor isn't going to notice me gone for a little while.*

As I opened the front door, the back of my neck tingled. I paused to check the apartment, but everything was quiet. I walked backward into the hall, slowly closing the door as I moved.

*I'm good.*

I turned around.

And barely swallowed down a scream.

My muffled yelp was met with a smirk, but it wasn't a good one.

Not at all.

*Pride usually cometh before the fall, but in this case, the fall definitely happened after coming.*

LENNON

“**W**HEN YOU SNEAK OUT AFTER sex, it helps if you aren't already at your own place.”

Lilith clutched her chest and panted hard. “What're you doing out here?”

Leaning against the wall opposite her door, I crossed my arms and arched a brow. “I could ask you the same thing.”

Her eyes darted to the side, her expression tight before smoothing out when she found her lie. “I couldn't sleep, so I'm going for a jog.”

“At midnight?”

“You know what they say. Boston is the city that never sleeps.”

“That's New York City.”

“Oh? Well, it should be Boston.”

“And you're a shit liar. What're you really up to, Lilith?”

“I told you—”

“A lie.”

Her mouth opened and closed before she spoke again. “Did you sneak out while I was getting dressed?”

I shook my head. “I woke up as soon as your body wasn’t under mine. Had a feeling something was up, so I pulled on my pants and teleported out here to wait.”

And I hadn’t had to wait long before she’d tried to sneak out.

Tried to get away from me.

Unfamiliar fear and even more unfamiliar jealousy hit me in the gut, twisting it painfully. “Where are you going, Lilith?”

Her shoulders slumped, and she inhaled deeply. “There’s this man—”

“What man?” I bit out as I stood upright, though I forced myself to stay rooted where I was. If I touched her, we wouldn’t be talking.

Not until I’d done every last thing in my power to ensure she never left me.

Never *wanted* to leave me.

I didn’t have to move because Lilith did it for me, closing the distance between us to put her hand on my chest. “Not like that.” She grimaced before scowling. Her eyes narrowed with anger, but it seemed to be directed at whoever she was talking about. “*Never* like that.”

“Then what?”

She lowered her voice to an earnest whisper. “You heard Levi. You know what I do.”

Before I could stop myself, I opened my mouth and shoved my foot in it. “No.”

Lilith stepped away, taking her touch with her as she put her hands on her hips. When she glared that time, her anger was definitely aimed at me, and she looked as though she wanted to shove her foot somewhere, too—and it wasn’t my mouth. “*No?*”

I flicked my wrist, the door behind her swinging open. As I approached, she stood with her shoulders back and eyes locked on mine. I broke the stare down first when I bent and

put my shoulder to her belly. I lifted to carry her in—and then I intended to lock the door physically *and* with magicks.

Instead of being tossed over my shoulder, she put her weight into the momentum and rolled right off to land behind me. I didn't get the chance to turn around before she gripped my ankle and tugged hard enough to throw me off balance. I caught myself on the doorframe as her hand came up between my spread legs. She stopped just before she touched me.

If I were anyone else—or maybe just if I'd pissed her off worse—the damage she could've done would've sent me limping to an emergency appointment with Dr. Reglan, the urologist in the offices above mine.

Luckily, when Lilith did move her hand up, it was to tease her fingers along my dick. A dick that was already rock hard because apparently I was a sick fuck, and everything she did turned me on—including her ability to kick my ass.

I heard her small, surprised gasp when she felt my arousal. Her grip tightened, running along the length. I grabbed her hand and pressed it firmly against me before she pulled it away. I turned to find her still crouched.

My dick jerked as I stared down into her wide eyes. I nearly came when her pink tongue darted out to sweep across her bottom lip.

“Let's go inside, Lilith,” I whispered roughly.

*Let me inside you.*

*Let me come inside you.*

*Let me bury myself so deep in your tight, sweet pussy that the jealousy in my gut fades away, and the ache in my chest disappears.*

A small groan rumbled up my chest when she tilted her head, bit her bottom lip, and put her palms on my thighs. I wanted to grip her hair and slam down her throat.

And even though we were in a hallway where anyone could see us, I wasn't sure I had the self-control to stop myself.

Her fingers curled around my thighs before sliding down my legs. What little restraint I had snapped, and I reached for her.

But she got me first.

Gripping my ankles, she yanked hard enough to knock me on my back. The air was forced from my lungs, and I barely had enough time to get another lungful before she stood and found her footing.

With one of her feet on my throat.

She wasn't putting weight on it, but she could just as easily change that and crush something vital.

My eyes narrowed. "You *let* me pin you last night."

A playful smirk pulled at her full lips. "Not at all, and that's what made it so hot."

Moving fast, I grabbed her ankle and twisted gently, hoping to send her down—preferably on me.

Instead, she easily hopped like she was using her own leg as a jump rope. "I'd be careful before I land on a part of you that we're both fond of."

"And if I use this hold to push you over?"

"Try it." At my hesitation, her expression softened. "I'll be fine."

I pulled and then shoved her foot, knocking her onto her back. But she moved at just the right time. Rather than ending up on her ass like me, she easily rolled and landed in a crouched, defensive position.

Ready to fight.

"Where'd you learn this?" I asked, getting to my feet.

"I just know it. My instincts tell me how to move, and I listen." She stepped into my space with an earnest expression. "I think it's another of my gifts. One I'm supposed to use. That's why I have to go." She leaned to the side to glance behind me into the apartment. "And I have to go *now*."



“I’ll go with you.”

“No. I can’t focus if I’m worried about you.”

I cupped her cheek. “And I can’t sit here waiting for you. I’ll be coming out of my skin with worry for you.”

Leaning into my touch, she tried her best to reassure me. “I’ve been doing this a long time, and I’m always fine.”

“I can’t let you go out there alone like some kind of vigilante.”

What softness had infused her body was gone, replaced by steel and attitude. She crossed her arms between us. “First of all, you’re right. You can’t *let* me do anything. I’m a grown adult, I make my own decisions. Second, I’m more like *The Equalizer*, not Batman, but that’s neither here nor there. The point is, I know what I’m doing.”

“Absolve is hunting us, and now that we’re together, the target on our backs is even bigger.”

“You’re right, they’re hunting us. What do you think will happen when they find us? I’ll have to fight like in the hallway.”

“The hallway?”

“Who do you think knocked the guy over? You grabbed his wrist, and I swept his legs out from under him.”

I’d thought grabbing his wrist had knocked him off balance.

“Are you planning on locking me away like some defenseless damsel at the first sign of danger?” The challenge in her stare told me there was only one correct answer.

I didn’t agree. The thought of her in harm’s way cut deep, filling me with fury. “We have to be cautious. You can’t go into the night alone.”

“You wouldn’t tell Nate or Stellan not to go out alone.”

“Because they’re not my damn mate!”

“Yeah, well, if you think you can use magicks on me, manhandle me, and control me, maybe I don’t want to be your damn mate!”

Fuck.

That didn’t cut.

It tore me open.

Left me raw.

It eviscerated.

As soon as the words left her mouth, Lilith’s eyes widened before her lids closed. Pain crossed her face and was likely mirrored on my own because, *fuck*, that killed.

“I’m sorry.” Her words were soft. Tentative. “I just... It’s... You...” She exhaled. “I have to go.”

I was ready to follow, needing to know she was safe, but with one last anguished look, she disappeared.

Literally.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

# NEVER TRY TO CATCH A NIGHT MONSTER IN A JAR

## LENNON

**S**TUNNED, I STALKED INTO THE apartment to grab my cell off the bedside table. I brought up my texts.

Me: Can Stellan or Denny do magicks?

Juno: Stellan can move really freaking fast and slow things down in his mind. And as you saw, Denny can dust the dead.

Juno: Since it's after midnight, I'm guessing this is more than just a random question. What happened?

I scrubbed my palm down my face, knowing I was about to catch shit from my sister.

And also knowing I deserved it.

Me: Lilith just teleported.

Her reply was instantaneous—and just what I predicted.

Juno: What'd you do to piss her off? Tried to control her, huh? Dude, isn't there an old saying about trying to keep a butterfly but inadvertently smashing it instead?

Juno: Lilith is the quintessential butterfly, and if you keep trying to cage her in, she won't be the one who gets hurt.

I didn't need Juno to tell me what my bitter regret already did.

My sister might be a pain in the ass, but she was also a helpful one.

Juno: Need a hand finding her?

Me: Yes.

Juno: Grab something with her essence on it and poof your ass to my apartment.

I didn't waste any time asking questions. I backtracked through to lock the door and get dressed before scanning the apartment. Lilith's toothbrush and brush were both in the bathroom, but Juno had said essence, not DNA. I knew what I needed.

Getting it from her office, I teleported to Juno's living room.

"About time," she said even though it hadn't been two minutes. She snatched Lilith's camera from my hold, her eyes going saucer huge. "Whoa."

"What?" I asked.

"You don't feel that?"

"No, what?"

"Magicks. Holy shit, dude, I'm surprised our hair isn't standing up from being near it. It's so... staticky." She turned it over, studying it with a careful eye and a reverent touch. "Electric."

"I thought Levi said it wasn't magicks."

"It's not. But there's been so much repressed magicks channeled through it, it's laden with leftovers." She offered me a smile. "And her essence is clinging to it. We'll know where she is in no time. Come downstairs."

Opening the door, she gave a low whistle.

A black pug resembling a sausage tube with four stubby legs came scurrying, its tongue hanging out.

I followed them down the stairs and out to the main entrance. “Does the dog help?”

*If that’s supposed to be a scent-tracking dog, I’m screwed. I’d be better off going door-to-door to find Lilith.*

“Yeah, Tom helps make sure Stellan doesn’t lose his shit.” With a flick of her wrist, the door opened, and the lights to her comic book shop flared on. As we neared another door in the back, she flicked again, and it swung open.

“He doesn’t like you down here on your own?” I asked.

She laughed, but it was more mocking than humorous. “Don’t get me wrong, he worries about me. Seeing me survive getting shot may have eased that worry if it weren’t for, you know, the whole watching-me-get-shot part. If anything, I think Stellan worries more about *others* when I’m left to my own devices.” She leveled me with a glare. “But he knows better than to try to control me.” When she glanced down at the dog, her face smoothed out. “I just bring Tom down here because otherwise, he rolls on top of Stellan and snores... *loudly*. And then he farts... also loudly.” She tilted her head. “‘C’mon, let’s find your woman so you can grovel.”

Stepping over the threshold was like stepping into another world. The hair on the back of my neck and arms stood, as though the air was alive. Smells whirled in my nose and head, pulling at torn memories that hadn’t been pieced together in years.

Centuries.

In that room, I could feel the magicks inside me react. It stretched and spread as though it was waking up after a long sleep.

*I just wanted to protect Lilith, but I’ve been trying to control and suppress everything.*

*Myself.*

*My magicks.*

*And her.*

*I need to believe in what we were created to do.*

*More importantly, I need to trust her.*

“Ahh, now you’re getting it,” Juno said as though I’d spoken the words.

Maybe I had. The magicks in the room was that powerful.

Rather than the gloating I expected, her voice was full of commiseration. “When I got my memories back and met Stellan, I wasn’t the same suave witchy woman you see before you. In my genius, I thought it was best to take the entire universe on my shoulders and try to do it all myself. I pushed him away. I *hid* in my apartment. I don’t hide from anyone, but I was determined to ignore our connection. He wouldn’t allow it. He’s a stubborn man.”

*Yeah, the patient detective is the stubborn one in the relationship.*

She glared as if she again knew my thoughts. “Anyway, I may be brave and powerful and just the bee’s tiny little knees, but not when it came to him. Making myself truly vulnerable for the first time in my long life had me scared shitless. If he—my *mate*—knew the real me and rejected me?” It might have been hypothetical, but the pain in her eyes was very real. She blinked it away, but her tone stayed soft and warm—the voice of a sister grudgingly admitting she didn’t totally loathe her brother. “You’ve always been concerned with others’ safety. Some might say that’s noble. I say it’s what made you infuriatingly annoying to work with. But in this case, I *get* it. You fear Lilith getting hurt, kicking your protective streak up higher than me after I eat special gummy bears.”

My brows lowered. “What?”

“Never mind. The point is, I tried to shoulder the world because I was scared to get hurt. You’re trying to do it because you’re worried about Lilith.” Her blue and pink bun bobbed as she stepped forward and craned her neck to meet my eyes. There was none of her usual humor or cockiness. “But you’ll lose her if you keep trying to clip her wings.”

The thought of losing Lilith was enough to steal the breath from my lungs and cause the pain in my chest to increase.

“She’s not a fragile butterfly. She’s a night monster.”

“I know,” I said honestly. I’d fucked up in a myriad of different ways. I needed to make it right.

With the plan.

With my magicks.

But most importantly, with her.

“You’re lucky she didn’t kick your scholarly doctor ass,” Juno pointed out.

“She did.”

*And just thinking about it would be enough to make me hard if shit wasn’t a mess.*

“Good. You deserved it.” She gestured to a stool. “Sit, this will take a while.” Grabbing crystals, herbs, and jars from her stocked shelves, she set them on the intricately carved table. “What are you planning to do when we find her?”

“Apologize.”

“You could just do that tomorrow after you give her some time.”

“If she wants that, she’ll tell me.”

“Or tell you off.”

Or that.

“I don’t want her spending any longer than she has to thinking I’m an ass.” At her raised brow, I amended, “*Knowing* I’m an ass.”

“So you’re going to make her leave so you can apologize?”

I shook my head. “She teleported there, and I’m not sure she can do the return trip. I’ll wait until she’s finished, make sure she can get home, and then apologize.”

Studying me for a second, she seemed to reach some conclusion. She tossed down the leather satchel she held and gave a single nod. “Okay, I’ll help.”

“Don’t you need that stuff?”

“No, I was just stalling until Lilith had time to finish whatever she’s doing. Since you’re not planning on stopping her, I’ll make this quick.” Closing her eyes, she touched Lilith’s camera. Her lids snapped open, and fire burned in them.

Literally.

Flames flicked high, fury tightening her expression until her mouth was a thin slash.

“Try to stop her, and it won’t just be her you’ll deal with,” she whispered, low and lethal.

“What is it?”

“You should’ve asked her that, and maybe then you’d understand.” She blinked, the fire receding though the anger remained. “Meeting Stellan, fusing our souls, it grew my power. It grew his. We’re still testing and learning because this is new to us, too. But we’re doing it together. We’re better *together*.”

In the big plan, it was always supposed to be The Four *and* our mates. They weren’t our cheerleaders. They weren’t sidekicks or background characters.

They were our partners, as necessary as we were.

Our strength, our rewards, our everything.

We couldn’t survive without them.

And neither would the world.

The powers-that-be might be bastards for a lot of reasons, but they wouldn’t give us weak mates who couldn’t handle the war.

In Stellan’s case, that meant both the battle and Juno being War.



Juno scrawled something on a notebook, tearing it out. “Go to these coordinates and through the door. *Exactly* here, not a degree different. And mind the cameras.”

“Cameras?”

“Poof now.”

“Is something wrong with Lilith?” I rushed out, not wanting to waste time but also wanting to be prepared.

“No, the urgency is for your benefit. Now go.”

Repeating the coordinates in my head, I let my magicks buzz and tingle as it did another stretch.

And then I went.

## LILITH

I HAD A METHOD TO my madness, and its name was karma.

Coincidentally, that was also the name of Mr. Hank Johnson’s favorite stripper, but general douchbaggery didn’t get someone on my list. If I was going to kick the ass of every lying, cheating scumbag, I’d need a million clones and a thousand years.

My nocturnal activities were reserved for the truly deserving.

The abusers.

The predators.

The *extreme* swindlers and cheats.

The truly evils.

Karma meant the punishments fit the crime. Eye for an eye. Or, in recent cases, broken hand for hurting a little boy’s hand. Or left naked and vulnerable for leaving someone vulnerable after relentless sexual coercion.

Johnson’s misdeeds might have been vile and despicable, but they weren’t violent. Which meant I wouldn’t be, either.

Unless I had to.

I was really hoping I had to.

I had a lot of built-up anger. Not just at Johnson—though I definitely had that—but also at Lennon.

And, fine, also at myself.

Lennon went way over the line by trying to control me. But I was also in the wrong for pretending everything was business as usual.

In a very short period, my entire life had been flipped upside down. My dad's diagnosis. A hallway hostage situation. Learning about The Four and their mates. Me being one of said mates. Discovering the horror caused by soul stealers. Meeting Satan with his Disney obsession.

Not to mention everything to do with Lennon. Even without the magicks and mate part, we were working to find our footing in a very new, but very intense relationship.

Just one of those things would've been overwhelming. Dealing with all of it—and in such quick succession—was too much.

So I'd compartmentalized. Lennon had gotten us a few days' reprieve from his siblings, and I'd greedily taken it. I'd focused on my dad coming home. I'd roped Lennon into answering my mom's million questions because then I'd felt like I was doing something—*anything*. I'd worked gigs as if nothing was amiss, and then I'd tried to sneak out of my own apartment like a teenager. As if evil forces didn't lurk in the shadows.

I'd clung to the idea that my life had some semblance of normalcy—and my version of normal was already pretty weird.

But *nothing* was the same.

And I had to deal with that. There was too much to do, and I didn't have time to bury my head any longer. I wanted to meet with Lennon's siblings again to talk about what powers everyone had—myself included. We had to plan for the worst and somehow be prepared for something worse still. Because Absolve was capable of far more than everyday shittiness.

Hank Johnson needed to be stopped. There was no question about that. But after I handled him, I would take a break from my nocturnal activities. Not because I worried I was defenseless and at risk from my targets. I was more than confident in my fighting skills and my sharp instincts. But Absolve had been able to curse The Four. They'd shot Nate and Juno, which might have just been a nuisance to them but would likely kill me. They *had* killed Juno's ghost friend.

The two we'd met in the hallway had been low on the totem pole of evil. I didn't know how my abilities would stack against a higher-up, and I wasn't anxious to find out. Period, but especially when I was out alone.

Alone, with no reliable escape because I'd somehow been able to teleport there.

And with no one knowing my exact location, thanks to the aforementioned poof.

Shit.

I'd really mucked things up, and the sense of foreboding that weighed heavily in my stomach didn't help. I would have played it safe and turned back, but doing so would damn others for Hank Johnson's actions.

I couldn't live with that on *my* karma.

Following my contact's instructions, I took the path that was in the blind spot of security cameras—though I kept my hoodie up, just in case. It led to a nondescript door that seemed out of place against the grandeur of the rest of the house.

*Must be for the help.*

I expected to pick a lock—a tedious process that took much longer than the two-point-five seconds they showed in movies—but when I twisted the handle, the door swung open. I held my breath, anticipating the alarm blaring to life, but there was nothing.

*This is going smooth.*

*Too smooth.*

Moving silently, I made my way down a set of dank-smelling concrete stairs that led to another door. That opened into a pitch-black room that I shouldn't have been able to see but could thanks to my new night-vision skill.

*This will come in handy, and not just for avoiding stubbed toes during middle of the night bathroom trips.*

The whole place gave me major dungeon vibes, twisting my stomach and sending a skeeved-out tremor down my spine. I practically jogged through the space, glancing at the bed, storage units, and gym equipment as I went.

*In a house this size, there's no reason to have a bedroom so far out of the way unless my source is wrong about the live-in staff.*

*Shit.*

Pushing open an incredibly heavy door, I climbed another set of stairs that exited into a dark, mostly empty room. That one led into a dimly lit kitchen that I scanned before entering. Still not seeing anyone, I continued to a fussy dining room filled with tacky gold decor. I crept through room after ornate room until I reached the foyer.

And I did it just in time.

Hank Johnson walked down a grand staircase with a suitcase in each hand. He froze when his eyes landed on me, and the momentum of the heavy luggage nearly made him tumble.

*Damn, that would've done half my job for me.*

"I didn't order..." His eyes darted to where I came from, then back to me.

*Order? Does he think I'm delivering a pizza or something?*

"Where ya headed?" I asked.

"None of your business. Did Stephen send you? I told him I didn't need anyone tonight." His lip curled in disapproval. "And let him know that urban casual is *never* my style."

I did a slow blink, all the puzzle pieces clicking together to make a pervy picture.

I'd thought it was odd and a lucky-for-me oversight that there was a path that no security cameras could see. It was even more fortunate it led directly to a conveniently unlocked door. My contact had assured me there were no cameras inside the place. That wasn't unusual, per se, since no one wanted their private business recorded. But the ultra-rich tended to have them near safes or in the staff areas.

So no cameras.

A surveillance-free path to a nondescript side door.

One that led down to a completely out-of-the-way spare bedroom that had no business being furnished if he didn't employ live-in help. After all, he likely had a dozen or more guest rooms at his disposal that were better than that dungeon of a basement.

But it wasn't a guest room. And that wasn't gym equipment.

*Ew, he has a sex room!*

*And double ew, he thinks I'm a call girl here to use that room with him.*

"Are you sure, big daddy?" I drawled, fighting my queasy stomach as I approached.

And Johnson must have been a bigger idiot than I thought because he actually looked thoughtful for a moment as if he didn't have a hasty escape to attempt.

But darn, he ultimately decided against me, reluctantly shaking his head. "I have places to be. Get the hell out of my house and tell Stephen *he owes me* for this."

"Why don't I come with you?" I suggested. "I've always wanted to visit one of those tropical islands with delicious fruity drinks and no extradition laws."

Johnson's face paled, but that was the only hint of fear I saw. It was gone in a flash, replaced by the smugness that

came from years of unchecked power and buying his way out of consequences.

Plus, there was also rage.

Unconcealed, unrestrained, and unbelievable, his anger would've scared the hell out of me if I were a lesser woman. As it was, it only scared the *heck* out of me.

“Who the fuck are you?” he snarled. “And how do you know about that?”

“Little birdie told me.” My flippant answer earned a glare before his eyes darted to the security panel positioned on the other side of the foyer.

“I don't know what you *think* you know, and I don't care.” He only managed one step before I gripped his forearm.

Even with his shirt as a barrier, I fought a wave of darkness that crawled across my skin, like a tide of toxic sludge crashing on a shore of glass and garbage. It filled my nostrils, and my stomach churned and retched. It stabbed my ears as a sound worse than nails on the chalkboard, a chorus of air horns, and a million people open-mouth chewing combined. It coated my tongue. So acrid and bitter, I didn't think I would ever taste anything else again.

And I saw it.

All of it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

KARMA AND BABY  
CARROTS

LILITH

WHAT I'D SEEN THROUGH MY camera didn't seem as grievous anymore by comparison. And it'd already been appalling.

The greed.

The money.

The scams and cons and extortion, all in the name of charity.

He'd embezzled money from his own company. By the morning, every employee he had—including Hannah—would be out of a job. But that hadn't been enough for him. He'd also stolen the money raised for the veterans' organization. Every last cent. Somehow, he'd found a shovel to dig himself even lower because he'd also set it up to look like the head of the organization was involved.

With my fingers wrapped around him and only a thin layer separating us, I saw the extent of his evil. It was a fucked-up slideshow set to fast-forward as the images flipped through my brain. Ones I'd never be able to scrub from my mind's eye. And I didn't want to. Because even though they'd haunt my nightmares, at least I would be able to wake up.

Others weren't so lucky, and they deserved for someone to know what they'd faced.

Beautiful women walked in the same door I had before being used, abused, and starved until they hobbled out—broken and battered with no place to turn.

And those were the lucky ones.

Or maybe unlucky, depending. Because for them, the psychological torture and manipulation continued long after he was done with them.

For the ones who didn't walk back out, their pain was over.

*How did my source miss this?*

"You're a monster," I whispered.

"I've been called worse by better, sweetheart. Now, let go of me and leave before I sue you so extensively, your great-great-great-grandkids will be paying your debts."

"A *violent* monster."

"Again, not the worst I've—" His words cut off suddenly when he looked at my face. "Why're you smiling?"

"Karma."

Tightening my hold on his arm, I pulled him to the left while my leg hooked his ankle and swept it to the right. He began to fall but caught himself on his suitcase.

*Duck.*

I did as my instincts demanded, ducking and narrowly avoiding getting knocked in the head by his wildly swung suitcase.

*Right shoulder... Now.*

I caught his right shoulder just as his arm was extended to the side, adding to the momentum created by the heavy case. It toppled him and sent the case flying.

*Right hand. Move.*

Johnson rolled to sit on his ass as he reached inside his coat. By the time he pulled his gun out and aimed, it was at empty space.

Standing next to him, I took advantage of the element of surprise and kicked hard, connecting with his even harder head. His torso went to the side, his arm going up so I could grab his wrist without bending.



*This is too easy, even for me.*

I dug my thumb and middle finger in, his fingers involuntarily loosening so he dropped the gun. I put my foot on it, but before I could kick it to the side, Johnson grabbed my ankle.

*Now we're having fun.*

Using my hold on his wrist, I bent and twisted.

“Let go!” he screamed as I pushed against the resistance. Not by much. Certainly not as much as I could’ve. At the angle I had him, breaking his wrist would be as easy as snapping a wishbone. But I wanted to play. “You fucking crazy bitch, let go!”

He deserved to know what it felt like to be the prey.

Desperately, he pulled at my ankle, and after a few powerful tugs, I relaxed my leg. When he yanked again, there was no fight. All of his strength went into slamming my knee right into his nose.

It crunched, blood spurting as his head and torso flew back. The motion twisted his wrist far beyond the resistance I’d been toying with. I could feel the bones break under my hold.

*That’s twice this week alone that I’ve had a gun pulled on me, and twice I’ve utilized someone’s weight to break their wrist.*

*I could go without the gun part, but I’m a big fan of letting them kick their own ass. Here I’ve been, doing it myself like some sort of chump.*

“You fucking cunt,” he groaned. “I’ll kill you. I know powerful people. They’ll do worse.”

*Going for the gun.*

Sure enough, he lunged to the side, but not before I kicked the weapon far out of his reach. I hauled my foot back. Like a typical dude, his hands immediately moved to protect the wrinkly baby carrot in his pants. My foot connected with his

throat instead. His high-pitched wheeze of pain was music to my ears.

His hands shot up to clutch at his neck as he rolled onto his back.

And then I stomped his baby carrot.

Over and over and over.

For every woman he'd abused.

For every woman who gave their consent to play, only to have him turn it into torture.

For every woman he left battered and bruised—on the skin and beneath it.

Johnson screamed, trying to roll to the side. To curl in the fetal position. But he couldn't. He could barely turn his head before he vomited everywhere.

“Do you like this?” I asked harshly. “Does this get you off the same way it does when the tables are turned?”

His defiant glare lost some of the impact with tears and thick streams of snot trailing down his face. “They'll kill you for this. Torture you. Things you couldn't imagine to your body, spirit, and soul.” His vomit-soiled mouth curved into a sick smirk. “And *that's* what'll get me off.”

“You know *them*.”

I jumped at the unexpected voice from behind me, whirling around with my fists already up.

Lennon entered the foyer. “Just me, little monster.”

“How did you find me?” I asked as I fought to slow my racing heart.

Johnson used my distraction to scooch his body toward the wall with the security panel, but I kicked his kidney without tearing my gaze from Lennon.

*This is bad.*

*Is he here to try to drag me away?*

*Is he furious? Confused? Horrified?*

*Hurt?*

My belly twisted with unease as I waited for him to say something.

Like there wasn't a bleeding man on the ground, Lennon's eyes remained on me as he stepped closer. "I'll always find you."

Relief flowed through me, but I reeled it in, not wanting to get ahead of myself. We were mates. He was basically forced to be tied to me. That didn't mean he *liked* it. It didn't mean he would accept me and what I did.

Even though I was dying to know his thoughts, it wasn't time for a heart-to-heart. "Who does he know?"

"Absolve."

Johnson's eyes went wide as they darted between Lennon and me. "You're *them*. Satan's abominations."

I didn't bother to correct him. He could talk to Levi himself when he died and went straight to Hell.

Lennon didn't react, either, instead asking me, "What's your plan, and what do you need from me?"

*Storing that away to swoon over at a more appropriate time.*

"My original plan was to hog-tie him, then call the police as I left. But this changes everything."

By the time the cops came, his carefully timed escape would've crumbled around him. The drained accounts would've been discovered and traced back to him while he was still on US soil. I had hoped some of his victims would feel safe enough to come forward once his ass was behind bars. If no one did, I'd have found a way to get the cops that evidence, too.

But with his Absolve connection, that was no longer enough. I needed backup.

"Call Juno," I told Lennon.

He didn't take his phone out of his pocket, and I was about to ask him if he thought it was a bad idea when he said, "Done."

*Ooookay then. I'll ask about that little trick later.*

"Are you a member of Absolve?" I asked Johnson.

"Fuck off, cunt."

"What the fuck did you just say to her?" Lennon barked with fury in his voice while I just shrugged and chided, "Well, that's not nice."

Lennon stormed over, looking murderous, but I pressed my hand to his chest. "Trust me."

"But I can—" Screaming cut him off, and his eyes snapped down to Johnson.

And where I was stepping on his broken wrist.

"So, like I asked, are you a member of Absolve?"

"No!" he screamed, clawing at my ankle.

"How do you know them?"

"I help launder their money. Now get off!"

"What? Step harder? Okay, if you say so." I put more weight on the broken bones, watching for the telltale signs he was about to pass out from the pain so I would know when to ease back.

Unconsciousness was a gift he didn't deserve.

"Why did you help them?" I asked.

"They paid me."

"You have more money than you can spend in a lifetime." Lennon gestured to the grandeur around us. "Bullshit."

"I swear, I swear, fucking hell, I fucking swear."

"What do you know about them?" I asked.

"Not much—" He let out another violent scream followed by a retch as I put more pressure on his wrist. "It's the truth! They're some religious group fighting against wickedness."

Again, his vibe was less *menacing* and more *petulant child* when he glowered up at me with wet eyes and a boogery face. “Sinners like you.”

“Yeah, I’m the bad guy here,” I scoffed. “What else do you know?”

“You paged,” someone said from the entryway that everyone and their mother seemed to use.

Glancing over, I saw Juno, Stellan, Nate, and Denny had joined the party.

*Wow. All four of them, instead of just two like at the hospital. Breaking out the big guns.*

*Literally.*

Stellan had his out and aimed at Johnson. Even in our group of ragtag misfits, it was clear he was law enforcement.

A fact Johnson didn’t miss, though he did misread. “Thank God, Officer. This is my house. These miscreants just broke in and attacked me.”

“Wow, the name-calling.” I put my hand to my chest and twisted my foot a little, making him yelp. “And here I thought we were bonding over a nice conversation.”

One of the men—I didn’t see who and I didn’t know their voices well enough to guess—asked, “Does she know Lennon could just use his, uh, truth lassoing skill?”

*He has truth skills?*

Not that it mattered right then. I was enjoying myself as I shifted my foot to earn another groan from Johnson. “Where’s the fun in that?”

“Have I mentioned I adore her?” Juno’s grin and excitement starkly contrasted everyone else’s somber cautiousness.

“I do, too,” Lennon put in, though he still didn’t sound happy.

*Apparently, Juno and I have found something to bond over.*

*A love of earned violence.*

“Told you it was for your benefit,” Juno told him.

He seemed to understand her vague statement because he lifted his chin.

She flicked her wrist a few times, and a thin tendril of red smoke grew to form a large, gauzy net. It surrounded Johnson, though he didn’t so much as glance at it.

*He must not be able to see it.*

Juno gave me a small nod and tilted her head, letting me know it was safe to remove my foot and step away. Which I did.

But not before putting the entirety of my weight on his wrist.

His face turned red, but that was the only change. The rest of his body stayed statue still.

“Why are we here?” Nate’s brows were furrowed as he scanned the place. “This looks like the mansion in one of those awful dating shows with the D-list celebrity.”

Even trapped by Juno, Johnson still managed to look affronted by the insinuation that his house was so gaudy, it looked trashy.

Which it was, and it did.

Denny looked at her man and smiled. “My grandma used to watch those, too?”

They’d told me about how long he’d spent trapped in Denny’s house when it was still her grandmother’s. He’d been forced to watch whatever was left on TV, gathering all knowledge of the outside world from the little skewed glimpses he got.

“They were often on after *Jersey Shore*. She acted like she wasn’t entertained but never flipped the station.”

Denny’s smile grew to a grin that she tried to suppress. “Sorry, back to the important stuff.”

“I asked Lennon to page you because he,” I said, pointing down at Johnson, “knows Absolve.”

“He’s one of them?” Nate glanced around again. “A higher member.”

“No, he owns a payroll company and launders their money for them.”

Denny gasped. “That’s where I know him. I *knew* he looked familiar.”

“You’ve had a run-in with him?” I asked, ready to kick him in the baby carrot again.

“No, not like that. My best friend works at his company.”

I wondered if she knew Hannah and made a mental note to talk to her later. In the meantime, I shared, “Not after tomorrow.”

It was her turn to look violent on behalf of her friend. “Shit.”

Nate rubbed his mate’s back but kept his gaze on Johnson. “But he’s not a member?”

“Oh, he’s a member all right,” Juno muttered.

Ignoring her, Nate continued. “Is he aware of who they truly are?”

“He knows *their* version of who they are.” I tipped my head, recalling his threat. “But he said they’d torture me, so he must know they’re not holy saints.”

Lennon stepped closer to Johnson. I didn’t think he’d hurt him while he was incapacitated, but the wildness in his eyes said otherwise.

I reached out and touched Lennon’s chest, stopping him midstride. “We’ll kick his ass later.”

“I really do adore her,” Juno said.

“Hey!” Denny crossed her arms as her lips parted in an offended gape. “Replaced so soon. I see how it is.”

“Aw, baby, you know I have a soft spot for a set of brass knuckles and a massive pair of brass—”

“Pixie,” Stellan interrupted. He didn’t seem pleased by her calling someone else *baby*, even if it was a joke.

“Fine, fine, let’s stay on topic.” She said it like she was peeved, but she scooted closer to her man until her back was to his front.

“Why are you here to begin with?” Stellan asked me.

“Johnson’s company made a huge”—I lifted my hands and did finger quotes—“*donation* to a charity. I was there as a photographer and saw he was stealing all the money. He’d also embezzled from his own company.”

“Did you see the rest?” Juno asked.

My startled eyes turned to find fire—literal flickering flames—in hers. “Yes, when I touched him. How did you know?”

“Lennon brought me your camera.” She held up her hands. “It’s safely locked away, and you’ll have it back ASAP. I didn’t want to risk poofing it to your apartment ’cause that sucker is packed with residual magicks. I worried it’d end up on Mars. Or sixty years in the future.”

*Another thing to ask about later.*

“I didn’t see all that when I took the pictures,” I said.

She tapped the side of her head. “It’ll take a lot of training to get even a fraction of this power.”

Her words were boastful, yet I knew they weren’t a lie or an exaggeration.

“What’s the rest?” Nate asked. “What else did he do?”

Thinking of the vivid images of what he’d done, I was ready to bash his head in, but Lennon stopped me. I still kicked Johnson’s kidney once, though it wasn’t as satisfying with him held down. Only weak bastards beat on those who couldn’t defend themselves. Weak, tiny-dicked assholes like him. “The worst kind of what else.”



No one asked for more details, but the vibe in the room changed. No more laughter. No more teasing. No more lightness.

“I say we kill him.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

# SIGNED, DEAD, DELIVERED

## LILITH

**N**O ONE SEEMED SURPRISED BY Juno's nonchalant suggestion, though Lennon reminded, "We don't kill humans."

Juno huffed and rolled her eyes. "Killjoy, just like always."

Nate was the voice of reason. "We need to know what he knows before we decide how to proceed."

There was a beat as Lennon and Juno locked eyes. Then with an impressive synchrony, they moved at once. He grabbed Johnson's throat and hauled him up to sit. She flicked her wrist, and the shimmering red disappeared from around his mouth.

The red smoke around Lennon's grip changed to a beautiful violet. "Are you a member of Absolve?"

"No," Johnson gritted through clenched teeth.

"Why do you work with them?"

"They pay me to do as they say and not ask asinine questions."

"Why else?"

"Power."

"They give you power?" Juno asked. "Not unless you're one of them."

"They have it. Their organization has connections everywhere. The banks. The media. Huge corporations. The

government and the lobbyists. They put that power behind me. Helped me.”

“They helped you steal from veterans, and you still think *we’re* the baddies?” I was rocked by how deep and wide Absolve’s fuckery spread. Even though I knew they were powerful thanks to harnessed souls, I’d assumed their member count was small. Dwindling after centuries of existence.

But that was far from true.

While The Four were cursed, Absolve had used the time to carefully grow their unchecked power.

*Why didn’t they wipe out The Four and their mates before they had their memories?*

*Another question for another time.*

“It doesn’t make sense.” Denny pointed toward the rest of the sprawling house. “You don’t need money. There has to be another reason beyond that and power. Ask what he’s hiding.”

I envied her. I knew she’d been through hell with an emotionally abusive father, yet she was able to keep hold of a naivety I’d lost shortly after discovering my gift.

I hated to burst her bubble by sharing that people—including the wealthy—were willing to do shitty things for an extra ten bucks. There was no limit to what some would do for ten billion. I was about to tell her anyway when Johnson beat me to it.

“Do you think I got to be as rich as I am by being a *good person*?” he sneered, like that was some awful trait. His words weren’t forced through Lennon’s powers as they flowed freely. “Some of us are strong enough to make the best choices for ourselves. We’re willing to climb a ladder built with the bodies we create.”

Hearing his words and seeing his pride in them made something in me twist. Curdle. It filled my body, and the severity reached my mind’s eye without needing a camera to channel it.

Ignoring the warning in my head, I reached out and touched Hank Johnson's bare skin. The red swirled to magenta, and I was vaguely aware of a gasp behind me.

But it was miles away.

Snatching my hand away, I scurried back and nearly tripped. A tremor wracked through me as my body tried to escape itself. Escape the sensation that skimmed beneath the surface. It had been bad enough when I'd gripped his forearm and felt his vileness through his shirt. But skin-to-skin contact?

It was revolting times a million.

The wave of darkness inside me twisted and twirled like the tendrils of Juno's smoke, but it wasn't a shimmering red. It wasn't even black. It was... nothing. A blank void that crept along my bones. Squeezed them. It infiltrated my veins and stole the oxygen from my blood, pumping venom in its place.

"Little monster." The faraway words were barely audible as the sludge filled my ears. Covered my head. Clogged my lungs. I was drowning in it. I could feel my life draining away, taken over inch by inch by poison.

And then it was gone.

I was left gasping and barely able to stand.

Thankfully, I didn't have to because Lennon had me, and I knew he wouldn't let me fall.

"Talk to me," he ordered, scanning me with the clinical eye of a doctor and the scared-as shit-eye of a lover.

"I'm fine." My voice was soft and weak. I cleared my throat and tried again. "Really, I'm fine."

"Let's get you home. They can handle it."

"No!" Steel infused my spine, and I stood straight but didn't move away. I needed him close.

"What just happened?" Juno asked.

"He has to die," I said vehemently.

“No, no. Please, I can help,” Johnson bargained, though no one but me paid him any attention.

Juno nodded as she air-high-fived me.

Despite the murderous rage that tightened his own face, Lennon forced himself to reiterate, “We don’t kill humans. We will find a way to ensure he doesn’t get away with his crimes. Juno and Nate can even tinker with his memories so he doesn’t try to fight the charges.”

“Yes, that. Please do that,” Johnson pleaded, again ignored by everyone but me. “I’ll give the money back before anyone knows it’s missing, and then you can wipe my memories and put me on the plane. I’ll just leave.”

I turned and clutched Lennon’s shirt, my voice filled with urgency as I said words I’d never imagined I’d say. “There is no wiping his memories. Jail won’t stop him. And even if we were stupid enough to let him steal the money and flee, he would still send Absolve after us with no mercy.”

“Then we’ll fight. But we don’t kill humans,” Lennon said for a third time, though he didn’t sound as sure that time. The coin he pulled out to flip between his knuckles showed his uncertainty.

“But he’s *not* human. Not in the way that actually matters.” I shuddered so hard, he had to wrap both arms around my waist to keep me upright. “He has no soul.”

“So he did sell it to Absolve?” Nate’s brows lowered. “This is a bunchafuck.”

“Clusterfuck,” Denny corrected. “And, yes, it is.”

“No, he doesn’t have a soul to sell. Period.” I took a second to try to gather my thoughts so I could articulate what I’d seen. What I’d *felt*. “When I see people’s aura, it’s usually bright. Or bright with smudges. The people I go after are mostly smudgy with just a hint of bright. At the hospital, the man’s was gray, but hers was odd. It hadn’t started as the normal light, and whatever was left was a dark, *dark* gray.” I pointed at Johnson. “His is a void. It’s the blackest black with no trace of anything.”

Everyone's focus went to the man still held by magicks. We studied him like a science experiment but stayed wary like he was a wild animal about to attack.

The darkness crept over my flesh, penetrating to my bones as I watched his eyes fill with glee. A smirk curled his lips. "Not everyone is soulless because they sold it. Or because it was..." He paused for a beat. "*Stolen.*"

I inhaled sharply.

*He knows far more than what he claimed. He knows they don't buy the souls with empty promises, like a devil wanting to make a deal.*

*He knows.*

"I told you I'm not the only one helping them," he said, feeling chatty in the face of his impending death. "All those connections, they're just like me. Willing to do whatever for money. For power. Hell, for shits and giggles. When you're this rich and powerful, no one denies you. There's no chase. No fun. It's boring." His gaze seared into mine. "And if you think what I did to those whores was bad, you should hear what others do. How they make them cry. Make them bleed. Make them beg and plead for their worthless lives." Looking into the distance, he gave a small smile—like a man fondly remembering a lost love. "It's beautiful."

"Well, don't have to tell me to kill twice." Juno's perky voice was at odds with the fury in her expression. She stepped forward, rubbing her hands together in anticipation.

"Wait!" Lennon's internal war played out across his expression.

"Not this again, brother of mine," she huffed. "You heard him. This is the only option."

"I know." His eyes locked on mine. "I'd *never* risk my mate's safety. But we need to figure out what to do after."

"Oh, true." Denny held out her palms. "I don't think I can dust him if he's not Absolve."

Everyone seemed to understand that but me, so I said, “And by dust, you mean...”

“Literally turn him to dust.”

“Cool, cool, cool.”

*I wonder how many dust bunnies I’ve seen who used to be people.*

*‘There’s dusty ol’ Larry, now a dusty ol’ corner.’*

Since it would be inappropriate to laugh—and Lennon would definitely haul me away, worried I’d officially cracked—I studied Johnson. “I think you can dust him.”

“No, it only works after Nate or Juno kill an Absolve member. I can’t just dust anyone.” She gave a soft laugh. “I’d be like a morbid Elsa, always having to wear gloves. Think about the sex. It’d be *suuuper* awkward if everything I touched disintegrated.”

It was subtle, but Nate grimaced and shifted his legs.

“This is different,” I assured her. “His lack of soul is different.”

She glanced at Nate and then lifted a shoulder. “Doesn’t hurt to try.”

I held my breath as she reached out a tentative hand, placing it on Johnson’s neck.

Nothing.

He laughed, talking shit I wasn’t paying attention to.

Balance.

Mates.

“Nate.”

“Yes?” he answered, though he didn’t take his eyes off Denny. His imposing body was strung taut. The tension on his face accentuated a gauntness that was at odds with his size and bulk.

Menacing.

Sinister.

Her balance.

“Go cover her hand with yours.”

He was already moving before I finished speaking. Wrapping an arm around her waist protectively, he placed his hand over hers.

But Hank Johnson still didn't turn to dust.

He disappeared completely.

Denny snatched her hand away at the same time Nate rotated so she was behind him.

Everyone scanned the area, including glancing up like he'd be on the ceiling.

Even Juno looked freaked and worried—something I didn't think happened often. “Where did you poof him?”

“I didn't use any magicks,” Nate asserted. “I just put my hand down.”

*It worked.*

*It really worked.*

*How the hell did I know that would work?*

Stellan rubbed Juno's back, her shoulders visibly loosening at the contact. “I'll call some connections I have in the FBI, get ahead of the narrative for wherever he shows up.”

Finding my voice before they ratted us out for no reason, I said, “He's gone.”

Like a cheesy magician trying to prove her disappearing trick worked, Denny waved her hands through the space where Johnson used to be. “We know, but where?”

“No, he's dead.”

“What?”

“Deceased. Kicked the bucket. Bit the dust. Checked in to the Hotel California. Went to live on a beautiful farm down state. Levi's farm, but I doubt he's drinking a Dole Whip.”



“You’re sure?”

“Positive. Death and Hades.” I gestured back and forth between them. “Dead and delivered.”

“I need to talk to Levi,” Denny muttered, a shadow of a ghost crossing her expression. There and gone.

“We all do.” Juno tilted her head. “Message sent. We’ll see if he responds.” She looked at me. “Fair warning, take quick showers. And if your world starts to spin while you’re nakey, cover your bits.”

“Wait, what?” I asked, but no one answered as they argued what to do.

Nate wanted to get Denny home. I had a feeling he needed to reassure himself she was safe after seeing her so close to a monster.

Stellan also wanted to get Juno home—to do the same thing Nate and Denny were going to, but with a quick pit stop at her magicks room so she could confirm Johnson’s death.

Juno wanted to hunt down more people on my karma list. She literally bounced on her toes, her body filled with delight, adrenaline, and mayhem.

And Lennon wanted... Well, I had no clue what he wanted. His face was blank, and he was suspiciously quiet.

Juno walked the perimeter of the foyer with her palms out. “No cameras anywhere in here. We’re good.”

Stellan kneeled and rummaged through the luggage, finding only clothes and toiletries. “We’ve got to get rid of these.”

A quick wave from Juno, and they were gone.

Stellan crossed his arms over her chest. “There’s no evidence of foul play. He packed his bags. All evidence points to him running away.”

“What about the money?” I asked. “His whole company will shut down, and thousands will lose their jobs. The

veterans' group will have to close their doors. We can't just leave that money."

We fell silent, everyone lost in their own thoughts.

*Without a routing number, account info, or literally any hint as to what offshore bank he used, it'll be impossible for us to find the money, let alone transfer it back.*

*Not unless one of us has technology magicks we don't know about.*

*The kind capable of pulling proof and records out of nowhere...*

"My source," I whispered before holding my hand out to Lennon. "I need your phone." Once he gave it to me, I logged into my email.

*TO: CONTACT@GAAE.ORG*

*FROM: LILYPAD PHOTOG*

*CAN YOU FIND AND RETURN THE MONEY?*

*~L*

I didn't know how long it would be before he saw the email. Or if he'd even have any luck.

But it was the best shot we had.

Giving Lennon back his cell, I looked at the rest of my... associates? Friends? Family? Whatever they were, I looked at them. "I'll let you know if I hear anything. In the meantime, we should probably get some rest before the next The Four disaster strikes."

"Good plan," Nate agreed, his eyes already hooded as he pulled Denny closer. They were gone in a blink.

"Are you free soon?" Juno asked.

I didn't answer at first, assuming she was talking to Lennon. Only when the silence stretched did I look and see her eyes on me. "Me?"

"Yeah, you."

“I’d have to check my calendar, but probably this week. Why?”

“I’ve got a magicks room with your name on it.” Before I could ask what that meant, she wrapped her arms around Stellan’s waist, plastering her front to his side. She hovered her hand over his crotch. “Remember to cover the bits.”

And then they were gone, too.

“Ready?” Lennon asked.

*No.*

I still had no clue what Lennon was feeling. He’d said some stuff. I’d said some worse stuff—including the lie about not wanting to be his mate. He’d been right about the danger of going out alone. But if I’d listened, Johnson would’ve gotten away with *everything*, and we’d never have learned about Absolve’s powerful connections.

The whole thing was a clusterfuck—or bunchafuck, as Nate said.

And I had no clue where that left us.

So, no, I wasn’t ready to go home and fight.

Or have him try to say he told me so—even if he kinda had.

Or worse, go home and have him leave.

But I didn’t say any of that.

Instead, I nodded.

Lennon wrapped an arm around me, but before we could poof, his phone vibrated. He pulled it out and handed it to me. “Think this is for you.”

*TO: LILYPAD PHOTOG*

*FROM: CONTACT@GAAE.ORG*

*IT WOULD BE IMPOSSIBLE FOR ME TO RETURN THE MONEY.*

*HOWEVER, DUE TO AN UNFORTUNATE BANK ERROR, THE UNTRACEABLE TRANSFERS ARE NOW VERY, VERY TRACEABLE. IT’LL ALL BE DISCOVERED IN, OHHHH, FOUR HOURS OR SO. THE BANKS*

*SHOULD HAVE NO ISSUES RETURNING THE MONEY TO WHERE IT  
RIGHTFULLY BELONGS.*

*-RAFE*

“Can he transfer the money back?” Lennon asked.

“Even better.”

*The weight from my shoulders is gone.*

I glanced up at Lennon.

*Well, some of it, at least.*

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

RELEASE THE BEAST  
LILITH

WHEN THE WORLD RIGHTED A few seconds later, we weren't at my place. We were at Lennon's. More specifically, in his bedroom.

*I think this is a good sign... Unless he's planning on smothering me with his pillow out of frustration.*

When the silence stretched for thirty or forty hours—or seconds that felt like hours—I broke it. “About earlier—”

“You were...” he interrupted before trailing off.

*Insane?*

*Mean?*

*Evil?*

*Intimidating?*

*Unladylike?*

*Deranged?*

*What? Speak, man, speak!*

“Exquisite,” he finally finished. Awe mixed with pride mixed with a whole hell of a lot of raw hunger took over his face. Wrapping an arm around my waist, he pulled me to him. His other hand cupped my head, and his fingers speared into my hair. “The way you moved effortlessly, knowing what to do. Your strength. Your mind. Exquisite, little monster. Absolutely fucking exquisite.”

Of all the possible things I'd thought he'd say, that hadn't been one of them.

I had a few insecurities gifted by a dating history filled with dickheads. The kind of guys who would be threatened by my strength. Who would want to cut me down, put me in *my place* so they could be at the top. Guys who wouldn't look at me with pride in their eyes.

Not like Lennon.

"I love being your mate," I blurted. "I'm sorry I said—"

The rest of my words were lost in his kiss as he took my mouth with more lust, need, and fire than I'd ever experienced. He broke away long enough to yank my shirt over my head. Even then, his tongue teased my chest and neck, like he couldn't stand not to taste me.

My leggings and panties were shoved down next, and I'd barely kicked them off when I was lifted. Before I could wrap my legs around his hips, Lennon turned me in his hold and tossed me on the bed. His knees went to either side of me as he climbed behind me, his jean-covered hard-on pressing against my ass as he pulled my hips up, forcing me to arch my back.

I lifted onto my arms, but before I could reposition my legs so they were on the outside of his, I heard the telltale sound of his pants unzipping.

And then he was in me.

Plunging deep.

Filling me.

Stretching me.

He took me so hard that my arms gave out, and my cheek hit the mattress again.

Lennon's groan mixed with my sharp inhale at the angle change. With my ass tipped up and my legs squeezed between his, each inch felt longer. Thicker. Like he was tearing me apart in a beautiful destruction.

The coil of tension inside me tightened until it couldn't go any farther, yet Lennon forced it to. My impending orgasm built too high.

Too fast.

Too powerful.

I tried to spread my legs and push up onto my arms to ease the intensity of his onslaught, but it was impossible. Each time I found an inch of purchase, he thrust in, and I lost it again.

Lennon lowered his torso to my back, giving me enough of his weight that I couldn't shift. Even knowing he had me trapped, his fingers encircled my wrists and pinned them to the bed as he ground into me.

So damn deep.

"Love this pussy," he whispered into my ear, his voice raw and rough. "Love how strong you are. Love how incredible you are. So fucking lucky."

I couldn't take it.

Not the angle.

Not the savage way he pounded and ground into me.

Not the filthy yet affectionate words he whispered.

Not the way his harsh breathing weaved with my soft moans, swirling around us in the most erotically melodic sound I'd ever heard in my life.

Not the fact he'd been so desperate to be inside me, he hadn't wasted time removing his clothes.

And not the fact that I was just as desperate for him.

But, more than anything else, I couldn't take hearing him say the word *love*. It imprinted itself like magicks on my hammering heart before zipping down to my oversensitive clit.

Blinding pleasure burned through me as I came so hard, I forgot how to breathe. I forgot how to think. I forgot what it felt like not to be stuffed full, stretched to pleasure-pain, and fucked thoroughly.

At the intensity of my orgasm and the force of his relentless thrusts, my knees gave out.

Lennon had me. He held me where he wanted me. Took me how he wanted. Gave me what I needed, even when I thought I'd shatter into a million broken pieces if he kept going.

And he wasn't done.

Snaking his hand under me, he cupped my pussy with a shocking amount of possessiveness. His palm rubbed my clit with each brutal plunge. "So good. So fucking perfect."

I used what little leeway I had to grind against him, eager for another wave of pleasure. I was certain I would drown, but it would be worth it.

"That's *my* girl," he praised through a groan, the words causing a tremor to run through me as everything went hazy. "Love the way you feel around me. Love the way you come so beautifully. Need it. Need you. Give me what I need, baby."

I did. I *had* to.

I rubbed myself shamelessly against his hand and met his thrusts, just as greedy to give him what he demanded as he was to get it.

But it wasn't his talented hand or dirty mouth that pushed my orgasm to stratospheric levels.

It was his grunts in my ear. His frenzied movements.

His own cum shooting in me as mine covered his cock.

His pleasure fueled mine.

And my pleasure consumed him.

Spent and wrung raw, I could barely open my eyes, let alone speak. Everything from that night—the adrenaline, the excitement, the fight, the lust, the *danger*—all drained from my body. It took every last drop of energy I had.

*I'm so tired, I'll never move again.*



My knees slid from under me, and I ungracefully flopped to my belly. Lennon followed me down, his still semi-hard cock nestled between my thighs.

*Maybe I have enough energy to move a little.*

*Never mind. The mind is willing, but the body is made of boneless, exhausted gelatin.*

Once Lennon's breathing evened out, he moved off me long enough to undress and shift us up the bed. He pulled the blanket over us and repositioned so I was on my belly with his body covering most of mine.

A peace settled in me, making my eyes heavy and my thoughts fleeting. I clutched onto one, forcing the words out while I could. "I'm sorry I tried to sneak out tonight."

"I shouldn't have tried to tell you what to do. I'd say it won't happen again, but I can be a stubborn prick. But I'll work at it, little monster." Lennon nuzzled his face into my neck, his lips grazing as he spoke. "Not saying I'm not going to worry, but I have to trust you."

"And I have to remember this is bigger than just me now." I turned my head, and he leaned away so I didn't headbutt him. My words temporarily stuck on my tongue as I looked up at him.

Lennon was mussed, sated, and content.

He looked like a man who was exactly where he wanted to be.

And based on the way his expression softened further, I was betting he saw exactly the same thing mirrored on my face.

"I can't promise I'll never have to do this again. There are some evils I just can't turn a blind eye to. But I'll try to cut back. And when I can't"—I smirked—"I'll take Juno with me for backup."

"You say that like it's reassuring, but I know the kind of trouble my sister can get into." He grimaced. "But she'd love that."

“Bet you never guessed that violence would be the bonding activity between your sister and your mate, huh?”

From one brief millisecond to the next, Lennon changed. His expression tightened, and I would’ve thought he was angry had it not been for the inferno in his gaze. That and the way he suddenly kissed me so ruthlessly, I knew my lips would be swollen.

My body warmed and grew restless. Before I could roll—and hope he rolled me right back because our from behind sex had been a revelation—Lennon pulled away and settled with his body pinning mine.

*Fine, I’ll sleep.*

*I guess.*

*But only for ten hours or so.*

LENNON

I FELT THE MOMENT LILITH fell asleep even before her breathing changed. Her body relaxed, releasing the heavy tension I doubted she knew she carried.

Despite the long day and the longer ones I knew would follow, I couldn’t fall asleep.

Not just because I was worried about Lilith. I had the overwhelming need to hold her. To listen to her breathe. To feel her heart beat in perfect sync with mine.

To reassure myself she was safe and could handle whatever hell was thrown at us next.

And that was what kept me awake.

The heavy sense of foreboding. The anticipation for the fights to come. The feeling that things were going to continue to change rapidly.

But, most of all, the acceptance that *I* needed to change.

I couldn’t continue suppressing my power. Right then, with Lilith in my arms and everything calm, it stretched and pulsed inside me.

A beast pacing a too small cage.

I couldn't control Lilith. I didn't need to. Like Juno had claimed, seeing Lilith in action had been for my benefit. It'd shown me how capable she was. I needed to trust her, even if everything in me screamed to keep her safe.

I couldn't be Dr. Lennon Gwyn by day and Pestilence during my downtime. The showdown in the hallway had been proof of that. Absolve wouldn't wait until I'd clocked out for the evening before attacking. I couldn't risk my patients' safety or the safety of the other people at the hospital.

Which meant I had to quit.

I was surprised by how heavy that decision sat with me. Not long ago, the idea of quitting had held a lot of appeal. Being holed up alone in a lab, doing research where patients were numbers and not faces I had to interact with, had sounded like heaven.

But that was before I remembered what it felt like to genuinely care about people. To want to protect them. To be Pestilence.

That was before Lilith.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

B.E.E. AKA BIG EMPATHY  
ENERGY  
LILITH

“A<sup>GAIN.</sup>”

“No. I can’t. I can’t even move.”

“Just once more.”

“I literally can’t even bend. I’m dehydrated. I’m dying.”

“I’ll do all the work.”

“No, because then I’ll end up so bruised and sore, I won’t be able to walk for a week.”

“Just a quickie.”

“Use your imagination and quickie with yourself.”

“That’s boring. I’ll just find someone else to do it with.”

“By all means. Let Stellan deal with you.”

Sitting in a room at the back of a comic book shop, I listened to Juno and Denny bicker like an old married couple.

I’d have been amused had I not been so freaking bored.

“I could go a round or two with you if you’ll let me move,” I tried.

Juno looked thoughtful before shaking her head. “You need to focus on that. Plus, it would be no fun against you. You’d easily kick my ass. You’re, like, eight inches taller than me with a goddess wingspan.” She wiggled her arms. “I’ve got these. I might as well be a T-Rex by comparison.”

“You also have immense strength, magicks, and power,” I pointed out, going for flattery.

“Nice try. Still no.”

*Damn.*

I glared down at the crystal in my palm.

When I’d woken alone in Lennon’s bed, I’d worried I’d be stranded there for the day since I didn’t have my car and wasn’t confident in my poofing abilities. There were far worse places to spend time, but I’d be unreachable without my computer or cell.

A thought that’d jolted me fully awake and out of bed at the ungodly hour of seven o’clock.

I’d gone downstairs to find Lennon’s laptop left opened and unlocked on the kitchen island. A note sitting next to it let me know the coffee maker was prepped, and I could use his computer or take his car.

Because I’d desperately needed to shower and change my clothes, I’d headed home.

Once I got there, I’d been relieved the only text message waiting was from Juno. She’d invited me to visit her stores to pick up my camera.

But not until after noon because no one should wake up before then.

Violence wasn’t the only thing we agreed on.

I’d messaged Mom—who’d assured me all was well—and Lennon. Then I’d showered, changed, and squeezed some work in before heading to Novel Idea.

I hadn’t known what to expect, but Juno’s quirky stores weren’t just chaos and nonsense. They were well put together, organized, and a serious business—even if it was the business of fun.

Before I had the chance to browse, she’d dragged me into her magicks room while she talked with Denny about sparring. I’d been down for that, but nope. I got the riveting task of holding a crystal.

Yay me.

Juno wanted to extract some of my magicks to study.

Just a tiny bit, she'd said.

It'd be quick, she'd claimed.

Painless, she'd assured.

I couldn't produce anything, so I couldn't say whether it'd be only a tiny bit. It sure as hell hadn't been quick. And since I was a fidgeter, sitting still for more than an hour hadn't been painless, either.

Especially because Juno's plan to spar wasn't something they'd done before. She'd wanted me to teach them. Not an easy task when I was stuck on my butt, but I did the best I could to verbally instruct them.

Well, instruct Denny.

Juno was more of a *swing-first, listen-never* kind of fighter.

Neither of them had instincts as sharp as mine, but they weren't exactly slouches. They'd caught on quick, using the small space to their advantage as they followed my directions.

It was actually fun.

Or it would've been had I been able to demonstrate.

I skeptically eyed the crystal again. "Is it done now?"

*I'm beginning to think I'm being pranked. Maybe this is some sort of hazing ritual.*

Accepting that Denny was too tired to spar more, Juno's shoulders slumped as she bounded over to me. She hovered her hand over the crystal before snatching it back. "Holy shit, you have legit magicks."

Denny gave a little scoff. "And you learned that from a crystal and not, oh, I dunno, her knowing what douchebags need an ass kicking?"

"I knew she had magicks-lite, like your dusting or Stellan's time skills. But when she touched that prick yesterday, my red magicks turned pink. This confirms her magicks is much stronger than I'd guessed."

“I feel an inferiority complex developing.”

Juno rolled her eyes before focusing them on me. “Do your parents have abilities?”

“I sincerely doubt it,” I said. “Unless coffee consumption is superhuman.”

“This is all unexpected.” She grew silent for a moment. “You didn’t happen to have a weird dream about a beige office, did you?”

“No, why?”

“Just double-checking you weren’t summoned to Heaven’s main office but dismissed it as a fever dream.”

“Heaven?”

“Main office. Lot of beige. Boring AF. They don’t even allow swearing, though they must allow pot because Chamuel is one hundred percent stoned.”

“Chamuel?” I didn’t recognize the name, but with all the new people in my life, it was entirely possible he’d gotten lost in the shuffle.

“My guardian archangel.”

“Oh. Right. Of course.”

*Guardian. Freaking. Angel.*

*No, no. Archangel. Extra fancy.*

Carefully picking up the crystal, Juno studied it with a look of awe and wide-eyed excitement. “It was my understanding The Four’s mates would be more powerful than an average human, but this is incredible.” Juno shrugged, suddenly dismissing this life-changing revelation as no biggie. “Maybe Levi will have some insight.”

I was a little salty about having to sit there for nothing. “I thought you’d be able to tell me something more.”

“I did. I confirmed it’s magicks you were born with and not magic from the Earth.”

“There’s a difference?”

“Like regular coffee and decaf,” Denny said.

Putting her hand to her chest, Juno shot Denny a little smile. “You remember.”

“If I had magicks that strong, wouldn’t someone have been able to tell?” I asked.

“Magicks is weird. It’s not like freckles or glasses or hair color. You can’t tell who else has it. Unless there’s a shared bond, it’s untraceable. Unreadable.”

“But you can read it,” I stated because she just had.

She smirked, cockily flipping her pink and blue hair. “Of course, I’m incredibly powerful.”

“Nate can, too,” Denny put in.

“Fine, and Nate. Probably Lennon and Dubhloach, too. But if they’re out of practice, they might not even be aware of it.”

“Is that why I can see your red smoke?”

Juno almost dropped the crystal. “You saw it?”

“I saw it, too,” Denny stated. “Not as clearly as I see Nate’s gray magicks, but still.”

“Huh.” Juno lifted the crystal into the light, spinning it as she watched the prism it projected onto the wall. “Balance in beauty, balance in ugly.”

*Am I supposed to be insulted?*

“The universe revolves around it.” She spun the crystal faster and faster, staring into it as though she were being hypnotized. Her voice was soft. Distant. Far away, yet all around me. The tone was even more melodic than usual, like she was singing a soothing lullaby. “When there’s dark magicks, there’s light. When there’s good, there’s evil. Where beauty blooms, ugly threatens.”

Hope and love unexpectedly filled my chest. It warmed me. A hug made entirely from optimism.



“You and Lennon are beauty,” she continued. “You strengthen each other. You bring out the best in each other. You complete each other. Filling every crack and nook, your strengths fit his flaws and his do the same for you. Your caring nature has blended so seamlessly with his, your magicks has combined. You’re one. Not intuitive. Empaths.”

Goosebumps spread across my skin as a tremor ran down my spine. That feeling I’d had all my life—the one that’d screamed at me that I was destined for something incredible—settled over me.

She gave her head a quick shake, breaking the spell, though my chest still felt full to bursting. “You’re an empath.”

I nodded, not really surprised. “My parents weren’t strict with... anything, really. But they were sticklers for manners, respect, and empathy.”

“No, it’s different from just empathy. You can feel others’ emotions as keenly as your own. That’s how you read them. It’s not you seeing their aura so much as feeling it.”

I remembered the way Hank Johnson’s evil had felt as it sludged through my veins and filled my lungs. I’d seen the abhorrent crimes he’d committed to amuse himself as he amassed wealth beyond what was spendable.

But I’d also *felt* it.

I’d felt my hand aching while I’d photographed Jude.

I’d felt exposed and vulnerable while I’d photographed the investment firm. Dirty and guilty. Hurt.

And scared.

So damn scared, like a predator was always on my heels.

The tremor that’d run down my back came back as a rocking shudder.

“I need some air,” I muttered through my panic, already heading out the door.

“Lilith,” Juno called, but her voice barely registered.

I got outside into the frigid air, but it did nothing to help. My overheated skin was slicked with sweat. My heart hammered. Self-preservation kicked in, demanding I run away from memories that weren't mine.

Before the panic could take over or the imaginary sludge in my lungs could suffocate me, my phone rang.

With shaking hands, I pulled it from my pocket. Some of the pressure in my burning lungs eased when I saw Lennon's name. I pressed the screen to accept the call, but didn't have the chance to say hello when he rushed, "What's wrong?"

Like the sunrise at dawn, his voice cleared the darkness from my head. "I'm okay."

"No, you're not. Where are you? What's wrong?"

"I'm at Juno's. I just got—"

"I'll be right there."

The phone beeped as he hung up on me.

*Rude.*

Taking a shaking breath, I went back inside, only to hear arguing.

*Lennon.*

I rushed to the back room to see Lennon's face tight with fury. "What were you thinking?"

"It just..." Juno started before lifting her chin. "She needs to know these things."

"There's a time for it, and when her damn plate is already piled so high, it's a wonder she doesn't topple is not the fucking time. Whatever you said upset her so bad, it stole *my* damn breath."

*That's how he knew something was wrong.*

*Our connection.*

"She's fine now." But Juno didn't sound as confident. Worry coated her face and softened her voice as she looked at me for confirmation. "Right?"

As Lennon moved into my space, I gave Juno a weak smile that I hoped looked larger than it felt. “I’m good.”

Curling his hand possessively around my neck, he used his thumb to press my chin up before swiping it along my jaw. “What happened?”

“I got overwhelmed.” Before he could bicker with his sister more, I rushed on to explain. “Not because of Juno. She actually helped me understand.”

“See?” Juno snapped.

Lennon ignored her. “Helped you understand what?”

“I’m an empath. We’re empaths?” I glanced over at Juno, who shot me a thumbs-up. “*We’re* empaths. She said that’s how I can read people. I’m feeling them. I was thinking about how I’d felt Jude’s hand pain and Johnson’s evilness, and the memories were too much all at once.” I pressed my body closer, the last of the darkness leaching from me. “I’m good now. Promise.”

He studied me.

“And stop being a jerk to Juno. She didn’t do anything. I’m stronger than you think.”

“I know how damn strong you are, little monster. Never doubt that. We’ll work together on how to control the empathy so others’ emotions don’t affect you so extensively.”

“You can do that?”

“I used to be able to. Otherwise, my concern for others would’ve rendered me useless.”

“You were still annoyingly caring,” Juno muttered.

Lennon gave her the finger, startling a laugh out of me *and* her. “Did you drive here?”

“Your car.” My smile was sheepish. “I figured I’d be going to your place, so it made more sense to drive it here and bring it back to you.”

A different kind of tension infused his body at my words, his fingertips digging into the back of my head. “Good.”

“Are you returning to work?”

“Are you sure you’re fine?”

“Promise.”

“Then yes. I have a meeting that started...” He checked his watch. “Five minutes ago.”

“Go. I’ll stay out of trouble, I promise.”

He kissed me hard but too quick. And then he was gone.

“I don’t think I’ll ever get used to that,” I murmured.

“Imagine how he felt when *you* poofed,” Juno said.

“Wait, you were able to poof?” Denny crossed her arms over her chest, her white-blond hair gleaming like silk as she shook her head. “I was joking about the inferiority complex before, but now I’m not.”

“You can disintegrate people.”

“Wow, good for me. I create more dust to clean up. Super awesome ’cause everyone loves chores.” Her lip curled, and she sounded disgusted. “I’m the Hawkeye of this group. You guys with your Iron Man suit and magic hammer from the gods, and me with my arrows. Oh, how scary.”

“At the very least, you’re Black Widow.”

Denny tilted her head, then nodded. “I can live with that.”

Juno’s phone buzzed, and she pulled it out. Her flushed face and the little smile that pulled at her mouth left no doubt who it was. She quickly tapped out a message before it buzzed again. “Stellan needs the name of your mystery source. He’s highly suspicious, and his gut for this kinda thing is always right.”

I brought up my email and showed Juno the address I sent names to. “That’s all I know.”

“Eh, it’s probably enough. He’s really good at his job.”

Sparring, magicks extraction, and sibling bickering done, we left the room in search of coffee and cotton candy.

Juno still eyed me cautiously, making sure I didn't freak out again, but it was for nothing. I'd meant what I'd told Lennon—she'd helped. More of the disjointed pieces inside me clicked together. I finally made sense to myself, and that was the best gift to come out of any of it.

Okay, that and Lennon.

And his huge... amount of empathy.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

A LITTLE BIT OF  
ACCIDENTAL MURDER AS  
A TREAT  
LILITH

**W**<sup>ELL, HELL.</sup>

I'd promised Lennon I'd stay out of trouble. I'd been joking, but I'd still intended to.

After all, how much trouble could I get into when my only plans were to hang out with Juno and Denny and then go to his house?

Okay, probably a lot of trouble with Juno and Denny, but we'd just eaten too much cotton candy, and then I left. It should've been fine.

But *nooooo*. I switched things up. I just had to stop at the store to grab some ingredients so I could cook for Lennon.

My eyes darted to the unconscious man slumped in Lennon's entryway. I held my breath as I waited for him to move.

He didn't.

Not even to breathe.

*I'm a murderer.*

Grabbing my cell, I dialed Lennon and waited, hoping like hell he'd answer.

"How'd you know I was just thinking about you?" he asked by way of greeting. "I have big news."

"Not as big as my news."

He went alert. "What's wrong?"

“Okay, so you know how I promised I’d stay out of trouble? I did. I tried to. But when I stopped at the store, someone was following me. And when I got to your house, he was outside hiding.”

“Hit the red button on the alarm. I’ll be right—”

“I, uhh...” I lowered my voice as though the cops would walk by and hear me if I talked too loud. “I killed him. I think.” I stared, willing the man’s shoulders to move. I’d settle for a labored, shallow breath, but there was nothing. “I’m pretty sure.”

Lennon didn’t respond, and the call dropped.

Before I could call him back, he was there.

I choked back a scream, my already tense body on the verge of shattering. My nerves were frayed, and my heart was raw.

*I need a drink, a nap, and Lennon—and not in that order.*

“It’s just me,” he said as he moved my body behind his, putting himself between me and the man.

“I appreciate the protection, but it’s probably overkill since I overkilled him.” My small giggle grew to a hysterical and inappropriate belly laugh. “This is *not* funny. I’m sorry.”

“It was a little funny,” he admitted, surprising me.

*Oh no, I’m a bad influence.*

*He gave me the gift of strong magicks, and in return, I gave him my penchant for making jokes at the wrong time.*

Wrapping an arm around me, Lennon tipped his head toward my victim. “He’s a demon.”

“That may be, but I’ve never killed anyone before. Hurt. Scarred. Badly maimed for life. But never murder.”

“No—”

“I did explain to Denny and Nate how to kill Hank Johnson, so I guess I’ve half murdered,” I amended. “But I’ve never *full* murdered.”

“He hasn’t been murdered.”

“He’s not breathing! He’s definitely been murdered.”

“He hasn’t because he was never alive. You can’t murder the undead.”

“He’s a zombie?”

“Demon. Minion, technically.”

“I’m assuming you’re not talking about the yellow cartoon guys.”

Lennon chuckled.

Although I was panicked and standing next to a not-dead not-guy, I’d have to be the one who was dead not to notice how nice it sounded and felt.

“Levi’s minion. He may have sent him. Or it may be a rogue one. There’s unrest in Hell.”

“Isn’t that par for the underworld course?”

“Unrest within the ranks.”

I had a hard time imagining demons going on strike to picket the unfair work environment, but I also couldn’t picture Levi as the actual devil. Or Hell, in general, for that matter. Juno said Heaven had a beige main office, so maybe it was similar. Just a bureaucratic mess.

Sounded pretty hellish to me.

“I’m going to try to reach Levi. If I can’t, I’ll have Juno do it. They have a stronger bond. And if neither of us can, we’ll wake the minion.” His eyes went unfocused as he looked over my head. “Done.”

“So you can just telepathically communicate?”

“With my siblings, yes. I’m not sure about Levi.”

“With me?” I asked because, yikes, there were some thoughts I did *not* want him to hear.

Like how often I thought about him naked—all lean, muscular perfection.



“Did you hear that?” he asked.

I shook my head.

“Then no. Not yet, at least. But it’s only been a short time. The longer we’re together, the stronger we’ll bond. Maybe that skill will develop in the future.”

It was crazy to think we’d only been together for, like, five minutes.

But it was even crazier to think about how long we would be together—if all the prophecies were to be believed.

And if we didn’t end up murdered by Absolve or disgruntled minions first.

“What are we going to do with him if Levi can’t come?” I asked.

“Levi can *always* come. I just have some interesting predilections. I mean, could you imagine the devil doing missionary? The irony alone would kill the mood.”

My fists were up, and Lennon’s body was in front of mine before we saw who stood next to the body.

Levi.

Dressed in a tailored three-piece suit, he was a handsome devil—literally. His dark hair was clipped short on the sides and longer on the top, but the edges and part were precise like it was cut daily. His mesmerizing blue eyes were unreal in their coloring. He had a jawline that could kill, an intriguing intensity, and an effortlessly wicked charm.

*I wonder how Hannah would feel about dating the devil. They don’t even have to date. I bet one night with him would do her some good.*

*Or some very, very bad.*

Nudging the body with the toe of his expensive, shiny shoes, Levi gave a low whistle. “Impressive. I don’t think I’ve ever had someone get the jump on one of my minions. What clued you in?”

“His aura was blank. Not black or bright or gray—just blank. I could feel it following me.”

On the one hand, I felt better knowing it was one of Levi’s minions and not an Absolve douchebag. On the other hand, I was pretty sure it wasn’t a good thing that the devil sent a soulless lackey to stalk me.

Only one way to find out.

“Why was he following me?” I asked.

“Extra set of eyes and protection. His sole purpose was to keep you safe.” He tilted his head. “Pretty sure his single-cell brain is now goo with the conundrum of how to keep you safe while you kicked his ass.”

“Oh,” I muttered, suddenly feeling guilty.

“Don’t feel bad. They’re mindless creatures, one step above a kitchen sponge. And not a big step.”

That made me feel slightly better. Except... “Why do I need extra protection?”

“Good question.”

The world tilted, and my heart lurched like I was on a roller coaster going far faster than it was meant to. Just as quickly, everything righted, though my pulse didn’t slow.

I scanned our new surroundings in an opulent but cool as hell living room. A massive coffee table was covered in an impressive spread of finger sandwiches, pastries, and beverages. Churros were stacked like Lincoln Logs, making a delicious cabin.

I hadn’t been hungry a minute before, but something about the snacks called to me like magicks. I didn’t trust them.

*Must resist.*

In quick succession, Juno was there, followed by Nate and Denny.

A very naked Nate and Denny.

Shielding her with his own naked body, he cursed, ready to attack anyone who dared look at his mate.

Since Lennon's hand covered my eyes, it was safe to say the jealousy thing ran in the family.

"What is the meaning of this?" Nate asked.

"Oops," Levi said without an ounce of remorse the word usually called for. "Didn't realize I'd caught you two with your pants down... literally."

There was a rustle, and then Lennon removed his hand.

Although fully clothed, Nate kept his position in front of Denny while he aimed a scowl at Levi.

Holding up his hands palm out, Levi said, "In my defense, it is hard to find a time when none of you are going at it. I respect it, but I have a very limited window of time, so it needed to be now."

Juno's head whipped around, a surprising amount of panic on her normally chill face. She rubbed her chest. "Where's Stellan?"

"With humans investigating human crime. Boring, unimaginative stuff, but I didn't think the response would be good if he just disappeared in the middle of the crowded room." He offered her a genuinely kind smile that spoke to their bond. "He's safe, and as soon as he's available, I'll bring him here, too."

"Thanks." Reassured, she lifted her chin. "Now why the hell are we here? And where is here?"

"My place."

"We're in Hell?" I was partially freaked out because I never wanted to be sent to the fiery depths but also because it looked really freaking swanky. It was concerning.

*Maybe everyone has been aiming for the wrong afterlife location...*

"Is this like when kids think the teachers live at school?" Levi shot back. "I don't live in Hell. And I have multiple

houses on Earth where I like to stay at when the mood strikes me.”

“Where’s this one?” Juno asked.

“Around.”

“Why would you have houses? You hate Earth.”

“It has its perks. Like churros. Speaking of...” He gestured to the food. “Sit. Eat.”

None of us grabbed anything as we sat, earning an eye roll from Levi. “Suit yourself, more for me.” Once we were all seated, he took his own one—a high-backed, lush chair that looked like a La-Z-Boy throne. “Things are bad in Hell—and, yes, I understand the irony in saying that. There’ve been poorly thought-out attempts on my life, whispers of revolts, and secret plots to escape.” With a smug smirk, he grabbed a churro. “And Heaven is in worse condition.”

*I can understand Hell, but who’d want to leave Heaven?*

Levi arched a brow at me. “Don’t get it twisted, little badass. Heaven is dreadfully boring for the staff. Nothing but beige, no swearing, and definitely no long, hot... churros.”

*Did he just read my mind?*

“Yes. Special warding in my home.” His smirk grew to a wickedly lascivious smile as he glanced at Lennon. “You surprise me, Lenuson. I always thought you were as interesting as white toast and twice as dry. But when you think about your mate...” He gave a low whistle. “I never knew you had it in you.”

“Stay out of my head,” Lennon ordered, pulling a coin from his pocket to roll it between his knuckles.

It was *so* not the time, but Lennon’s reaction was basically a confirmation. I was dying to know what his thoughts were.

In vivid details.

Possibly while we reenacted it all.

“I don’t need the magicks to see it. But, fine, I’ll switch it off.” Levi gave me his attention again, making me guess he

was sharing info the others were already privy to. “The underlings serve the greatest power. Most of my following is loyal. They still believe me to be the strongest. But even one defector is too many. We’ve known a number of angels and demons have hedged their bets by working for both sides. What we didn’t know until recently is there are some who chose to serve this new power exclusively and have been actively undermining our efforts. They don’t care if they’ve picked the losing side. They want to switch up the status quo.”

*Office politics really go to a whole new level when evil and damnation are involved.*

“These changes aren’t just in Heaven and Hell.” Gesturing behind him, a long whiteboard with a timeline and photos appeared. Three new pictures suddenly appeared at the far end—Hank Johnson and the two Absolve members from the hospital hallway. “When Juno sent message of the attacks, I thought maybe they were demons masquerading as Absolve. As Juno knows from experience, it wouldn’t be the first time one of my demons stole a meat-suit to wreak havoc on Earth.”

“Meat-suit?” I whispered to Lennon, but it was Denny who answered.

“Human possession.”

“So they were demons.” Nate pushed his multicolored hair away from his face. “That makes more sense.”

“That’s what I thought. But they weren’t.” Speaking directly to me again, Levi explained, “Absolve, for all its many faults, are not stupid. They keep a low profile. They’ve always worked cautiously in the shadows, being discreet, smart, and thinking five moves ahead.”

“Like a fucked-up game of chess,” Juno added.

Levi touched his nose. “Exactly. Except the board is invisible, the pieces are invisible, and the pawns are soulless lemmings who could be anyone—making them, you guessed it, *invisible*. It makes it easier for them to recruit if people believe they are joining a righteous crusade and not selling their soul to the devil, so to speak.” His lip tipped. “Not that I

have to manipulate or lie to acquire souls. Humans do the work themselves.”

Oh, I knew that well. I’d seen it firsthand too often, ranging from the minor baddies to the Johnsons of the world.

“But the fact remains, these latest events are incredibly out of character. Absolve doesn’t want to risk the world discovering who they are until they have amassed the army they need to be successful.”

“Successful at what?” A sense of foreboding made me restless. “World domination?”

“You’re thinking too small. They want to rule Heaven, Hell, and everything in between.”

*Sooo.*

*No pressure on us to stop them.*

“Can’t you just snap your finger and kill them all?” I asked.

“Who am I, Thanos? Purple isn’t my color, and I’m not into jewelry, especially gaudy gauntlets.” Levi steepled his fingers. “But to answer your question, no, I can’t. Rules, balance, boring logistics, blah blah blah. After a little, teeny tiny, hardly documented flood, limits were placed on what anyone could do. Can’t have one of us getting pissed and wiping out an entire continent or two.”

I tapped my chin, trying to figure out a diplomatic way to ask my question.

But I didn’t have to because Levi read my thoughts—literally or by chance, I wasn’t sure. “I’m not the devil with the pitchfork and the cloven hooves.” He stretched out his legs, crossing them at the ankle as he put his hands behind his head. He wiggled his expensive shoes. “See? No hooves or goat legs.”

But despite his confident words, his pants disappeared, and his legs morphed into hairy, mangled goat ones.

“Juno,” he bit out.

“Sorry, I couldn’t help it,” she said through her laughter. “The timing was just too perfect.”

“I’m starting to regret telling you how strong your magicks has grown,” he muttered, though a hint of a smile tipped his lips as his legs returned to normal. “Back to the point. I’m not the enemy. I don’t particularly get along with my brothers, but what siblings do? They’ve always been jealous I’m our father’s favorite.”

“So you weren’t cast out?” Considering most of what I’d known about Levi—and, honestly, the entire heavenly system—was wrong, I shouldn’t have been surprised.

“No. I was created for a purpose, and I happily serve it. It brings me far more joy than sitting behind an overcompensatingly large desk. And without the fear of me, the balance to the promise of Heaven would be off. There needs to be one.” He looked at Lennon. “For there to be the other.” He returned his gaze to me.

*Lennon is a healer.*

*And I’m a night monster.*

*Juno is War, and Stellan is the law.*

*The only couple who doesn’t fit is Denny and Nate, but Juno said they were different.*

*Who knows what it’s like for the other brother, but I’m guessing it’s the same.*

*Balance.*

*Or, as Mom used to say, aligned chakras and motherfucking karma to do the rest.*

“Everything my parents taught me is true,” I muttered.

“I’d hope so,” Levi said. “Denny’s father didn’t guide her and look where he wound up. But your parents seemed more receptive. We knew they’d prepare you.”

My jaw dropped, and I gaped at him like a fish out of water. Finally finding my words, they rushed out in a breathless run-on. “My parents knew? They knew about this?”

I shook my head. “No way. They’d have told me long ago. They’d have acted differently. They don’t know.”

Lennon rubbed my back, and the contact allowed me to take a much-needed breath.

Levi snagged a soft pretzel that was shaped like Mickey Mouse. “We have limits and restrictions because some genius decided to give those hairless weasels out there free will. Like balance, free will is one of the binding forces of Earth, Heaven, Hell, and everything between. Without it, the system crumbles. And while I do enjoy the occasional dismantling of the establishment, I draw the line when *I’m* the establishment that would be dismantled. Before we messed with your free will by making this your destiny, we needed the go ahead from your parents.”

My brows lowered. “I thought the mates had been chosen forever ago. Did you guys forget, and we were an afterthought?”

*That feels a lot less special.*

“*Nothing* we do is an afterthought. We came from the past to an undetermined future hidden within layers of free will, fate, and balance. Your parents gave their vow that they’d protect you at all costs, and here you are.”

Surprisingly, my eyes burned with unshed tears because they had. They’d always been selfless in their unconditional love toward me and each other, giving me an amazing life.

*I should’ve just talked to them about this instead of trying to shoulder it all for nothing.*

Anxious to visit my parents for a little chat, I asked, “Is there more, or can we go?”

“Give it...” Levi tipped his head back and forth. “Thirty seconds or so.”

*Ohhhhkay.*

My gaze darted to Lennon, who just shrugged.

Exactly thirty seconds later, Stellan was suddenly standing in the room. His gun was already pulled by the time his form



was solidly there. He glared at Levi. “Don’t do that shit.”

Levi smirked. “At least you’re not naked this time.”

“Thank God for small miracles.”

“More like very large miracles,” Juno mumbled to Stellan as he closed the distance between them. He pulled her into a kiss that said they’d been separated for lifetimes rather than the hours it’d likely been.

*I don’t want to see this or hear about his miracle.*

*But the gods or angels or whoever put this whole thing together really were very generous.*

“What have you found on the mortal end of things?” Levi asked Stellan.

“The trafficking ring has disbanded. All of them, including Hale-slash-Willard, are in the wind.”

“They wouldn’t happen to be giving up, right?” Juno asked.

“No,” Stellan and Levi said in unison.

Anyone else would’ve viewed that as bad news, but Juno’s gleeful grin bordered on maniacal. “Perfect.”

Stellan lifted his chin in my direction. “I looked into your source but couldn’t find a thing.”

“That’s good, right? That means he doesn’t have a record.”

“No, it’s not good. When I say I couldn’t find anything, I mean I couldn’t find jack-shit on him. The email was untraceable because the IP address doesn’t exist.”

“A VPN?” I asked, assuming he used a program to encrypt his data and mask his IP address.

“No,” Stellan repeated. He ran a hand through his hair. “Usually, the issue is that it’s being routed and rerouted so many times and in so many locations, it’s impossible to pinpoint where the initial signal came from. In this case, we traced it. But the IP address literally traces to *nothing*.”

“Is that so?” Levi perked up and held out his hand. “Show me one of the emails.”

Loading one—and praying I hadn’t undermined saving the world by unintentionally working with an Absolve member—I handed my cell to Levi.

He scanned it before slowly shaking his head. “Oh, that son of a bitch.”

*Shit.*

*I messed up.*

*My source is Absolve, and now the whole universe is going to implode like I pushed the big red button.*

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

DIRTY DOG RERUNS

LILITH

“HEY, ASSHOLE,” LEVI CALLED, THOUGH he wasn’t looking at any of us.

Instead, he stared into a chrome-framed mirror.

*Ohhhkay, he’s gone unhinged.*

“Get your holy ass down here,” he continued before pausing. “You know why. Yes, I’m serious. Go fuck yourself, asshole, and get down here.”

I scanned everyone else, relieved to see I wasn’t the only confused one.

“Should we get a straitjacket or something?” Juno murmured out of the side of her mouth.

“I... don’t know,” Nate answered.

“You know why,” Levi repeated.

Like a physical wave crashing over me, an extreme sense of peace skimmed along my body. It warmed my skin and filled me with joy.

*A carefree day at the beach.*

I wanted to close my eyes and soak in the sun, but it wasn’t there.

Instead, a man was. He was dressed in gray slacks and a dark green shirt. His white blazer looked similar to a lab coat—just *way* more expensive.

His gaze was locked on me, filled with a fondness I didn't understand.

And a fondness Lennon clearly didn't like. He gripped my thigh tighter in one hand while the coin moved quicker along the other. "Who are you?"

Lounging back in his throne of a chair, Levi gestured to the mystery man. "Allow me to introduce you to your source."

*My source?*

*My source is magicks?*

*It makes sense.*

*Kinda.*

*Not really.*

*But yeah.*

My original theory—that he was a world-class hacker—made much more sense on a logical level. After all, the alternative was so insane, how could I have thought of it, let alone given credence to it?

As bizarre as it was to say, it *did* make more sense than an all-knowing hacker.

"Who are you really?" I asked the man... person... being?

He continued to watch me with the same tenderness despite Lennon's glare and all the tension radiating from him to fill the room. "Rafe."

"Raphael," Levi corrected. "My brother, and your very own pain in the ass archangel."

*It's an archangel.*

*A freaking archangel.*

I glanced at Lennon to see his reaction to having a guardian archangel, but nothing changed. He was still possessively ticked.

"Badass." Levi regained my attention. "He's not his. He's yours. Contact-at-GAAE.org. Guardian Archangel Enterprises."

“I have an archangel? But I’m not one of The Four.”

“No, but you’re the one who could reach Lenuson,” Rafe said. “Nothing I could do would have an effect. I’m here to support you because he needs you.”

Lennon squeezed my thigh, but whether it was reflexive or a confirmation, I wasn’t sure.

And while we were surrounded by the devil, an archangel, Death, Hades, War, and her mate, it wasn’t the time for an emotional heart-to-heart.

Rafe waved one of his hands over the other, and a large plate appeared. He filled it to overflowing with the mostly untouched food, but somehow his precarious mountain didn’t spill. “Earth has very little going for it, but the food is worth the hassle of preventing the apocalypse.”

“When is the last time you were here, brother?” Levi asked.

He tilted his head as he thought. “Over two thousand years, give or take a century.”

“There’s so much more seasoning and flavor. It’s much better now. Or worse, but in a sinfully delicious way.”

“I know. Every once in a while, an angel makes a run for some crazy Earth delicacy. Did you know they made a pizza with mini cheeseburgers as the crust? Or a burger with sugary glazed donuts as the buns? Those were the big hit.”

*Angel UberEats.*

*After everything, how could I still be surprised?*

Everyone watched silently as the brothers chatted about the unusual foods they’d sampled. Denny and I shared a look of awe in the face of an archangel.

Stellan seemed unimpressed, his focus on the whiteboard as his detective mind worked.

Lennon was still scowling and jealous, but he no longer seemed ready to throw down with Rafe.

Juno, though, eyed Rafe with a hefty amount of suspicion. I wasn't sure if she'd had a bad run-in with the angel or if she didn't buy who he said he was. I figured I'd get the scoop from her later, but fearlessly cocky, she unabashedly interrupted the brothers. "Why're you here? Archangels don't come to Earth. They merely summon us underlings up to the beige."

Strangely—or maybe not, I wasn't sure—Rafe's eyes darted to me, then back to Juno. "The situation at hand is not conducive to the time warps of heavenly travel."

"Wibbly wobbly timey wimey... stuff," Denny muttered to her, though Juno's expression didn't relax at the explanation.

"What situation?" she asked.

"I'm sorry, War, but did you imbibe in Chamuel's special salad greens? Or perhaps you inhaled his incense? You are aware of the fight over souls happening around you, yes?"

"Listen, asshole—" She stood like she would be the one throwing down with an angel.

Thankfully, her calm, cool, and collected mate snagged her around the waist. At his touch, her bunched shoulders relaxed.

"Spoilsport," Levi murmured, disappointed. He regarded Rafe again. "Although her pet name for you does bring up an interesting point. Why were you tapping into your inner *me* and helping our little badass dole out hellish justice all over town? You're the angel of science. Of healing. This hardly seems like healing."

"Maybe not for the targets," Rafe agreed, "but I'm sure their victims have found a sense of healing in their offender's pain."

"How did you even see enough to get her proof on her hit list?" Levi asked. "I'd been told the signal in Heaven is impaired."

"Dark magicks blocks our view, and there is far too much of it. But I can still catch the occasional glimpse or send my angels down to do my dirty work."

I pieced together the mystery that'd been driving me bonkers. "That's how you missed so much on Hank Johnson."

"I missed something?" His lips pressed into a tight line. "I never miss the details."

"He was an Absolve connection and a sadist."

"I had no idea. Did you make him pay?"

"Yes."

He smiled proudly. "Good."

"How the holy have fallen." Levi's smile was menacing. "I love it. Speaking of, have you talked to Michael lately?"

"That bastard."

*Okay. So angels have family drama.*

*Maybe I'm lucky to be an only child.*

"If that's all," Nate said, standing. "I have something to finish."

"More like *someone*," Juno joked before grimacing. "Ew."

"Wait." Still trying to work out how I'd ended up with a guardian archangel, I asked, "Why would nothing you do have an effect on Lennon—Lenuson?"

"The curse," he said absentmindedly as he added the entire churro square to his plate. And still it didn't topple.

*He could really get his money's worth at a buffet.*

"What about it?" Lennon's tone was even, and his expression was blank, but I could feel his mood. He wasn't as cold and withdrawn as he seemed.

He desperately wanted answers.

"After centuries of the same bullshit—oh that feels great to say. Shit, fuck, ass, bastard. After all of it, you'd lost your way. You didn't have your balance to drive you and remind you what's important."

Lennon's hand tightened again, his thumb stroking my inner thigh in a needed point of connection. "To make me

want to be better.”

“Exactly. Though, you lived through the cocaine-and-heroin-are-medicinal eras, so you held out longer than I would have.”

Lennon dropped his coin, and it rolled along the floor, but didn't fall. It remained on its side.

“Not this again,” Juno muttered, but everyone else's focus was on Rafe's declaration.

“I did what?” Lennon asked.

“He *lived*?” Nate followed up.

“The reruns!” Juno exclaimed, throwing her hands up in the air. “That's why I kept seeing reruns when I tried to read you.”

Rafe lowered his plate until it was vertical, though the food stayed on it. “Do you not know where you were all this time?” He turned to Levi. “Did you not tell him?”

Levi circled his hand around his head. “Heaven's views aren't the only ones obstructed. After the curse blocked The Four, no one could track them. Not me nor my minions nor angels. I'd still be blind had Nate's minion not developed enough brain cells to stay alive and get a message to me. Strangely enough, he also invested in crypto on my behalf, netting me millions.” He rubbed his chin. “Makes me wonder if they're good for something other than target practice.” He shook his head. “Nah.”

“I couldn't see Lenuson, either, but I can read him now. Can't you?” At Levi's headshake, Rafe turned to Juno. “Even you can't?”

If Rafe and Levi looked disgruntled at missing things, Juno was positively murderous. “I tried. I just get dead air.”

“Hmm. Maybe we're more bonded than I thought. Or maybe it's because I'm the angel of science, healing, and truth.” He raised a brow at Levi. “Speaking of which, it's not as big as you say.”



Levi glowered, his tone full of warning. “Take that back, brother.”

“It’s ten and a half, maybe.”

“It’s more than twelve, and I’ll prove it right now.”

“Ew, for the love of cotton candy, can we stay on the topic of Lenuson’s former life and not your dick size?” Juno shouted.

Rafe looked aghast. “*Dick size?*”

“He’s referring to the demon I took down a few days ago during a revolt. He was twelve stories.”

“Ten and a half, tops.” Rafe hid a smile before returning his focus to Lennon. His summary was spoken quickly. “You lived, you died, you lived again and died again. Over and over. And each time, you were a doctor because that’s who you are—a healer. But without your mate, you slowly forgot how to care. You lived alone, you died alone, and each time, it stole more and more of your soul’s essence. The curse stole your ability to care just as it stole Thanatos’ soul and tried to take Juno’s immortality. But their mates completed them. Lilith does the same for you. She is the night monster so you can be the healer. You need her to remind you why you care enough to deal with the bullshit. All the damn bullshit. The fucking-hell-damn-ass-dick-arse bullshit.” He grinned. “That really feels delightful on my tongue.”

“If you stick around a little while longer, brother, I’ll take you to a bar, and we can find you something else that’ll feel even better.” Levi raised his brows suggestively.

“Oh? Oh. *Ohhhhh.*” If angels could blush, Rafe definitely would have. “I could probably stay a little longer.”

“And that’s our cue to leave.” Juno grabbed Stellan’s arm and blinked. Then blinked again.

“Wards,” Levi reminded.

“Duh. Okay, well, hurry up and poof us out before you guys start swiping right on Tinder.”

“What do you know about Tinder, pixie?” Stellan bit out, looking as jealous as Lennon had earlier.

“How to fake. I know how to fake it when it comes to Tinder, but *never* when it comes to you.” She smirked. “Pun intended.”

Stellan was appeased—and maybe a little cocky like his mate.

“Social niceties and reminiscing aside,” Levi said as he stood, “stay vigilante. The turmoil and upheaval is widespread. As is the deceit and undermining. Do not believe anyone but me.”

Rafe cleared his throat.

“Fine, I guess you can trust your archangels. But not regular dickless angels. And especially not demons.” His expression was somber. “Be on guard. Expect anything since they’re totally off script. And for the love of me, no more nocturnal activities of the vigilante variety. The other kind is fine.” He smirked at Lennon. “Especially you, you dirty dog.”

“Hell,” Lennon muttered, shaking his head. “Can you teleport us home now?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

A LOVELY GIFT FROM  
SATAN  
LILITH

**A**ND JUST LIKE THAT, WE stood in Lennon's living room.  
Sans clothes.

Naked as the day we were born.

"He's not subtle." I moved my arms to shield myself before I saw Lennon's eyes.

Eyes that were not aimed at my own.

No, they roved, greedily taking in everything they could. It was as if I was going to disappear, and he wanted to make sure he memorized every inch of my body before I did. He took a step toward me.

And I took one away, hitting the back of the couch.

His gaze snapped up.

"We haven't been, uhh, *safe*," I said, something I'd meant to bring up numerous times but was always quickly distracted.

"You already said you weren't going out alone at night. I put in my notice at the hospital. We'll be more cautious."

He'd completely misunderstood me, but I switched my train of thought to his track because a freight train had just hit me.

"You put in your notice? Like, you *quit*?"

"Absolve already attacked us there. I couldn't put my patients at risk. Technically, it's filed under a sabbatical. I told

them I want to conduct a research study and write another book.”

“You wrote a book?”

“Ten. My first was in my early twenties.” His handsome smile was tinged with self-deprecation, making it even more charming. “I guess my schooling accomplishments lose a little something, considering I’ve done this a few times.”

“Since you didn’t have your memories, I think the achievements still stand.” I studied him, not sure what emotions to expect from him. He’d claimed to have gotten into the field for money, so maybe he was relieved he could quit. “How are you doing with the leave?”

“Surprisingly, it was hard. Emotional. I was just relearning to love what I do. Healing people, or at least helping them, is my purpose and that was lost to me for so long. Until you.” He took another step, and I stepped away. “Come here, Lilith.”

I wanted to. Seeing the desire in his eyes made me want to come anywhere and anytime. But the stupid voice still nagged me.

“When I said we haven’t been safe, I meant we haven’t used condoms. I’m on the pill and don’t have any diseases. Since you’re the most responsible person I know, I assume you’re okay, too. But I wanted to have the conversation because it’s important, and we’re mature, rational adults who can easily discuss such things, and literally any time you wanna jump in so I’ll shut up, that’d be great.”

“Why, when you’re so damn adorable?”

“So you could compliment me. That’s a great reason to interrupt.”

His smile faded as he approached, and I didn’t back away that time. He gripped my hip and speared his fingers into my hair to tilt my face up, and I leaned into his hold. But when I saw the shadows in his eyes and felt his struggle, I wished like hell I’d have kept my mouth shut—conversation and responsibility be damned.

“I can’t carry disease,” he said. “And I’m betting neither can you.”

“I’ve always been exceptionally healthy,” I babbled nervously, knowing there was more. That’d been good news, not something that called for the ginger tone he used.

“I also can’t have children,” he continued. “And I’m sorry, little monster, but neither can you.”

“Like, I can’t because you can’t, or I can’t, period?”

His eyes narrowed. “Who else would you be procreating with?”

I almost rolled my eyes, but the genuine concern in his expression stopped me. “No one. I just like to be aware of what’s up with my own body and life.”

“Period. The Four were created to fight. To battle evil. Our lifespan is undetermined but clearly longer than an average human. The prophecies are incredibly vague on how we’ll age. Or if we even do.”

There was a lot about the idea of an extended mortality that freaked me way the hell out. I would be forced to watch people grow and die, over and over again. It sounded like torture.

But at the same time, I would be able to help so many. That alone was worth the sacrifice.

Not to mention, I’d have a lot of years with Lennon.

Unless we were cursed.

Or separated by those Absolve bastards.

Or, I dunno, murdered somehow.

Pulling my mind away before panic could set in, I joked, “It’d be kind of tricky explaining to our grandkids why they’re in their nineties and we look like we’re in our thirties. I doubt they’ll believe it’s my steady diet of Indian food and coffee that keeps me young.”

“I love you.”

All at once, my heart squeezed, my stomach dipped and swirled, and my thoughts came to a crashing halt. “What?”

“Every damn time I drop another clusterfuck into your lap, you don’t just deal with it. You embrace it. You remind me why I’m here, and that I’m so damn lucky to have you. Beyond that selfish as hell reason, you’re also incredible, funny, smart, talented, and countless other things that make you perfect. I know it hasn’t been—”

“Stop talking.”

“But I love you, Lilith. From the first time you got makeup all over my shirt, I’ve loved you.”

“Please, stop talking,” I pleaded, my voice shaky as I pressed my fingers to his lips.

But his lips brushed against my fingertips as he spoke anyway. “Absolve stole a huge part of who I am, and you gave it back. I’ll never be able to thank you for that, but I’ll spend the rest of my life making sure you never regret being my mate.”

There was only so much tenderness a gal could stand before her tenuous hold on her tears was lost. Lennon pushed me far beyond that point. So rather than looking as thrilled and lovely as I’d wanted to, my eyes were red and my makeup was likely smearing when I said, “I love you, too.”

I must not have looked too blubbery because Lennon lowered his head and gave me a bruising, fiery, *loving* kiss. The warmth spread down to my toes, his talented tongue stoking it to a burning heat the longer we kept at it.

“Say it again,” he ordered against my mouth.

“I love you,” I whispered before issuing my own order. “Now take me upstairs.”

“Too far.” Spanning my hips, he lifted me onto the back of the couch. “Thank the gods—or devil—we’re already naked.”

“Just this once.”

“You only want us to be naked once?” he rumbled.

“Oh no, not that. I want you naked often. Maybe all the time. But I only want us to get magically naked this once. I like unwrapping you like a present.”

“Fuck, I love you.”

“Then fuck me.”

“Soon.” Lennon’s tongue licked and teased down my neck to my chest. He cupped my breast and lowered his head to skim one with the barest touch of his lips. Pinching the other nipple, he flicked it and rolled it between his deft fingers.

I arched my back and pressed against him in a silent plea for more. I nearly fell backward, but he caught me with a firm hand between my shoulders.

As much as I liked the protective hold, I wanted his hands in other places.

I gripped his shoulders to keep upright so he could drop his hold to my thighs and open my legs wider. As he kissed me, his palms skimmed up until his thumbs were at my core. When he spread me and the shaft of his cock pressed against me, I thought he was going to fuck me.

I hoped.

I would’ve begged had I been capable of words.

He didn’t fill me. The long length of his cock stretched up between us, grinding against my clit. His tongue swirled with mine, an erotic dance that sent zigzags of electricity through my veins.

I adjusted my hips, but his hold tightened to keep me in place as he continued driving me insane. I lowered my hands to his hips and tried to pull him closer, but he simply released one of my thighs to grip my wrist and carefully twist my arm behind my back.

I wasn’t deterred. I was far too stubborn and far too turned on to be patient.

Wrapping my legs around his, I forced him closer. The pressure against my clit felt so good, and I was so damn close, I trembled as I ground harder. He released my wrist and

stepped out of my hold, the head of his dick lining up with my pussy.

*Finally.*

Rather than slam into me, he kept his distance as he lowered his head to nip and lick my throat. I undulated my hips, working the thick head in, but just barely.

“Please,” I moaned, forfeiting my pride and stubbornness. I’d beg. I’d plead. I’d give up coffee and tuna melts and maybe even brownies if he’d just fuck me.

His groan rumbled against me, but he still didn’t give in. He gripped my hips and lifted before setting me on my feet next to the couch. With a hand between my shoulders, he bent me over the arm of the couch. The soft fabric felt like sandpaper against my oversensitive nipples.

And still, the teasing bastard didn’t fuck me.

Instead, his mouth covered me as he licked deep. Ate me. Devoured me like I was his favorite meal he’d been deprived of for years.

Centuries.

Many long lifetimes.

My head whipped around at the fierce onslaught. Through lust-filled eyes and a foggy head, I looked over my shoulder.

There was something profound, almost symbolic about seeing Lennon on his knees. Powerful and strong, yet he kneeled to his mate, putting her needs first.

I couldn’t see, but the movement of his arm made it easy to guess that he was stroking himself. Getting off on my taste. On my pleasure.

On me.

The pleasure, the teasing, the *power*.

It all worked together until I exploded. I pressed back into him, using his tongue to fuck myself shamelessly as he wrung me raw.



Before I could come back down to Earth, he was up and filling me.

His mouth was a gift from the gods.

But his cock—his thick, long, *talented* cock... That was definitely a gift from Levi.

He lifted me by my hips, and my feet were completely off the ground as Lennon held me where he wanted me. It was amazing, but there was something...

Reading my needs before I'd even figured them out, he shifted us closer to the couch and grunted, "Knees."

I put them on the arm of the couch and stretched my torso across the cushion. The position gave me the leverage to rock my hips and the height Lennon needed to put all his force into his thrusts.

And holy hell, it was a lot of force.

Quicker than last time, my body got restless as my orgasm built. I set my knees and gave back as good as I got. I was vaguely aware of Lennon's movements stopping, but it didn't matter. I fucked myself on him, his grunts and praise swirling around me like lyrics I wanted branded into my skin for all eternity. When the dam broke, and my orgasm crashed over me, he took control. He wrapped an arm around me to play with my clit and stretch my bliss.

I could tell Lennon was getting close when his pace changed. Rolling my hips, I looked over my shoulder and watched, entranced at the way his head fell back. At the bunched, corded muscles in his body. At how incredibly sexy he looked, lost in his pleasure after giving me my own.

All of Lennon's coldness was long gone. Barely a memory. Because I only got heat. Fire. A blaze that seared my nerve endings, scorched my veins, and stoked my own inferno.

He was strong and powerful and good.

And he was mine.

"I love you," I said on a moan.

My words triggered his orgasm. His harsh groan skittered across my skin as he came undone.

He was still hard and pressed in deep when his front covered my back. His lips skimmed my ear as he whispered, “And I am so wildly in love with you, little monster.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY

# AS THE WORLD'S STONED LILITH

“YOU’LL NEVER GUESS WHAT HAPPENED.”

*Your boss tried to embezzle from his own company, was a sexual predator, and has disappeared.*

I was tempted to take the opening and tell Hannah what I knew, easing us into the much bigger discussion of who I was. But I already had one talk planned. I didn’t think my nerves could handle adding another on the fly.

At least not sober.

“What?” I said instead, transferring my cell to my other ear as I locked my door.

“I’m on my lunch break and have to make this fast, so please hold all questions, commentary, and applause until the end.”

“I’ll even keep my hands and arms inside the vehicle at all times.”

“That’d be a good idea because this is twisty. So...” Only pausing long enough for me to connect my phone to my car’s Bluetooth, Hannah launched in. She told me everything I already knew about Hank Johnson while also adding the reassuring tidbit that people believed he’d fled of his own volition.

She also let me know that with him gone, women had come forward. A lot of them, including his assistant.

“So do you still have a job?” I asked, worried about my friend and her coworkers.

“For now, at least. There’s a lot of frantic behind-the-scenes stuff happening. I bet they’re getting all sorts of purchase offers. We do good work, are profitable, and it would be a steal for someone to poach the entirety of an already thriving company.”

*So long as they don’t actually steal.*

*I do not have the time to do this all again.*

“That’s so crazy.” Which was the truth. I might have known about it all, but that didn’t make it any less insane.

“I know. I still can’t believe it. I always thought Mr. Johnson was this old, modest grandpa businessman. You know I love my job. They’ve always been awesome and supportive way beyond any other business I’ve worked for. Great insurance, benefits, PTO, all the good things. I’d have never guessed this was happening up the ladder.”

“Who would’ve?”

“Right?” She exhaled a huge breath. “Anyway, on to what’s important. What’s new with you and the very good doctor? Any thorough physicals? And how’s Papa A?”

I cringed and scowled. “Do not ask about my dad right after asking about sex. Gross.”

“Fine, let’s start with the sex.”

“I’m on my way to see my parents, so let’s not.”

“As desperate as I am to hear about Dr. Feelgood, I get it. So how’s your dad? And how’s your mom holding up with all this? Has she saved every clinical study, cataloged them on a spreadsheet, and sent it to his doctors with references and a handy index?”

I laughed because that likely wasn’t far from the truth. “When you say it like that, her type-A really does sound more like she’s your mom than mine.”

“Yeah, you got your dad’s type-S personality.”

“S?”

“Type stoner.”

I laughed again. “To answer your multitudes of questions, Dad is good but wiped. The treatments seem worse than the disease sometimes. Mom said he’s sleeping almost the entire day and living off those chalky meal replacement drinks. But he’s still joking and making Mom roll her eyes.”

“I’d expect nothing different.” She paused for a moment. “Soooo, not asking about the hot loving you’ve clearly been getting, but just in general. How’s Lennon?”

*Perfect.*

“He’s good,” I said.

“You’ve gotta give your bestie more than that. I’m going through Lithy withdraws.”

I let out an annoyed growl, which just made her laugh.

“We need to booze and gossip and eat our weight in tuna melts soon,” she said. “But until then, give me more, woman.”

Taking pity on my best friend and needing the hint of normalcy from girl talk, I shared a little. “He’s the best. Sweet, considerate, smart. He’s got a dry wit but laughs at my stupid humor. When he met Mom and Dad, he brought Indian food *and* groceries. And then he answered all of Mom’s questions. And you know she had a forty-foot scroll of them.”

Silence stretched for long seconds, making me wonder if the call had dropped. But then Hannah broke it with one whispered word. “Wow.”

*If you think that’s good, wait till you hear the rest.*

“Definitely wow.”

“You love him.”

It wasn’t a question, but I answered. “Crazy in love.”

“So soon?”

*It feels like I’ve loved him my whole life.*

I didn’t have the chance to say anything before she rushed on. “I mean, don’t get me wrong. I’m happy. You need a good

man. Ohhh man, do you need a good man. But this is fast. I don't want to see you hurt."

"I won't be."

She must've heard the firm surety in my voice. I could picture her smile. "I'm glad. Now, when can I meet him?"

"What? Oh, the call is cutting out. I'm going through a tunnel."

"There's no tunnel on the way to your parents' house."

"I'm in the basement of a building. In the parking garage. I'm in the basement of a parking garage, couldn't hear that question."

She sighed the sigh of a long-suffering best friend. "Allow me to rephrase. So long as I promise not to share a single embarrassing story, when can I meet him?"

"Oh, what do you know, my phone is working now. Yes, we'll do dinner soon."

"Sooner than soon. Give your mom and dad my love."

"I will."

We said our goodbyes, and I turned my focus on the task ahead of me.

I always hoped Dad was having good days, but that feeling was especially strong right then. If he wasn't feeling well, I would have to abort the plan. And since I'd already psyched myself up, I really wanted to get it over with.

Pulling into their driveway, I got out and deep breathed as I let myself in without knocking.

"Your favorite child is here," I called—but not too loudly in case Dad was sleeping.

Mom came from the kitchen, wiping her hands on a towel like the picture of domesticity. Except instead of an A-line dress, apron, and fifties bouffant, she wore a paisley blouse and a long skirt that was almost the same shade of blue as the one I wore—although hers didn't have the midhigh slit that mine did. "You're our only child."

“Because why mess with perfection? You don’t birth the best and then try for runner-up.”

“You’re your father’s daughter,” she muttered, shaking her head even as she hugged me.

“Hannah just said the same thing.”

“How is Hannah? I heard about her work on the news. It must be chaos over there.”

“It is. She called on her lunch break to catch me up. She’s pretty sure her job is safe, but everything is in the air right now.”

“Well, thank gods. What an awful man.”

*That’s the understatement of the century.*

“How’s Dad?” I asked. “And how’re you? And almost as important, what were you baking in the kitchen because I’m pretty sure I smell brownies. Or I’m having a stroke.”

“Dad’s good. I think he’s dozing on the couch. We dropped off his resignation and all those forms at the district office this morning. I’m also good. I think I’m going to go back to the office next week, but only part time.”

“So he’s retiring for sure?”

She nodded. “Even when he’s better, the risk to him is too much. If he caught someone’s germs in that petri dish of a school, it’d be bad.”

I was worried about Dad being home alone while she was at work.

I was worried about them killing each other while she was home.

But I was most worried about her mindset. Despite knowing the odds, she talked as if he would be completely healed.

I kept all those thoughts to myself.

Mom was put in an awful situation and was staying optimistic. If that worked for her, who was I to tell her she was

wrong? I wouldn't burden her with my fears.

"That'll be good. I'll come over and work from here some days."

She cupped my cheek. "And that's why you're my favorite child."

*Now or never.*

I tilted my head toward the living room. "Your favorite child has something important to talk to you about."

Mom's eyes lit, and she worked to hide her excitement. "Are you pregnant?"

"What? No, Mom, sheesh," I dismissed, as though the impossible idea didn't send a zip to my heart and a punch to my stomach.

"Oh no. Did you and Lennon break up?"

"Mom! Why one extreme or the other?" I shook my head. "You really do need to get to work. You've been watching too many daytime soaps." Thinking on it, I amended, "Actually, never mind. They may help."

"So it's amnesia," she joked past her concern.

She wasn't far off.

Following her into the living room, I was happy to see Dad awake. Or waking up, at least.

He looked thin.

He looked old.

He looked like a man who'd been blasted with high doses of radiation to kill the malignancy growing inside him.

"Hi, pal," he said through a yawn. He sat and patted the couch next to him. "Sit."

"I'll let Mom sit."

"Uh-oh." They exchanged a look before Dad asked, "Is this like the time you sat us down to confess that you and Hannah broke Mrs. Jergon's window? Because I can't have that mean old bat on my back again."



“Dad, Mrs. Jergon died at least ten years ago.”

“Which is why I can’t have her on my back. I’ve already got cancer. I can’t be haunted, too.”

I wanted to laugh because, even sick and exhausted, my dad was funny. Unfortunately, my nerves had caught up, and I worried laughter would lead to vomiting.

Gingerly sitting on the coffee table opposite them, I clasped my shaking hands. “Before I was born, do you remember someone coming to talk to you about me?”

“Like when I was pregnant?” Mom asked. “Just the doctors and all the usual stuff.”

“No, I mean before you were even pregnant.”

“That doesn’t make any sense, sweetheart,” Dad said. “You know you were a happy surprise.”

After my parents had tried for years, they’d thrown in the towel and had accepted that they’d never have kids. A few years later, I was conceived. Mom thought she had food poisoning for three whole weeks because it hadn’t occurred to her she was finally pregnant.

“I know it doesn’t.” I sighed, trying to explain the unexplainable. “But before I was born, someone came to you. Or more than one person, maybe. They told you...”

I hesitated, not wanting my parents to think I was insane. They would assume the stress had broken me, and they’d be worried and guilty. It would add more to their plates that were already piled higher than Rafe’s the day before.

I nearly backed out of the conversation, but I couldn’t. Trusting them—and Levi—I pushed the words out. “They told you I was special and needed to be protected.”

I waited for them to question me and my mental health, but instead, they shared a *look*. A conspiratorial one that only a couple who’d been together for so long could exchange.

“They did,” I muttered, shocked. “You knew.”

Another shared look before Mom's skin flushed. "There was one time, but we didn't... I mean, how could we... It was \_\_\_"

"We were tripping," Dad interjected, putting her out of her misery.

"Yeah, I'd be freaked out, too," I agreed, "but it's the kind of thing you should've told me at some point."

"No, Lily, we were *tripping*. On LSD. We thought it was a shared hallucination. But it actually happened?" Dad leaned back, his mouth agape. "They said you were important because of... something."

"Because you were going to protect the world." Mom's expression was equally stunned, not that I blamed either of them.

"Mia and Henry Alexander," I said, busting out the full names. "Are you saying that heavenly beings came to ask if you were willing to birth and raise me, and"—my pitch steadily increased—"you were tripping balls when you agreed?"

Another shared look before Dad nodded. "Yes."

"We'd have agreed anyway if that helps," Mom said.

Strangely... it did.

"Who were they? What's happening? How did you find out?"

Leaving out my nocturnal activities and downplaying the amount of danger I was in, I filled them in as best as I could. I told them about Lennon, Nate, and Juno. Levi. Enough of Absolve to emphasize the need for caution and vigilance.

When I finished, I waited for something. Denial. Anger. Fear. A million questions.

I waited for them to start tripping—in the non-LSD way.

But my parents were supportive hippies to the bone.

"A true gift from the universe," Mom breathed.

And Dad, my best bud and constant cheerleader, grinned huge—huge than I'd seen in the previous handful of visits. "I always knew you were special, pal. I knew you were destined for great things."

It was my turn to be stunned silent. When I finally found the words, they came out weak and choked. "You believe me?"

"Of course, sweetheart." Mom blinked away her sudden tears. "And I knew there was something more between you and Lennon. You said you'd only recently started dating, but I could see how much he loves you—exactly as you are."

Dad gave a big sigh before coughing like crazy.

I jumped to get him water as Mom patted his back.

When he finally stopped, his face was red, and his teary eyes were bloodshot. He forced a chuckle, but it sounded raw. "That's what I get for being a smartass. I was trying to be dramatic while I said that I also like him. He beats the trust fund kid, and he's probably more loaded."

"Henry!" my mom chastised.

"Well, did you see the doc's car? Or that watch?" He shrugged at me. "You can settle down with a pauper so long as he treats you like a princess. But your old hippie Dad is pragmatic enough to appreciate his daughter's financial stability."

"I do fine," I said.

"You deserve better than fine." His smile was small but filled with love. "You deserve happiness, and it gives me a lot of peace knowing you've found someone who'd die to give that to you."

I returned his smile. "Love you."

"Love you, too, Lilypad." Despite the tiredness seemed to grow with every passing minute, Dad leaned back and closed eyes before ordering, "Now tell us what we need to watch out for."

I admired my parents for a lot of reasons, but their reaction in the face of adversity topped the list.

A beep sounded from the kitchen, and Mom stood. “Brownies are done.”

Okay, my mom’s brownies topped the list, but their resilience was a close second.

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**A**FTER A QUICK LUNCH FOLLOWED by brownies, my dad went to rest, leaving Mom and I to talk.

“So you have magic?” she asked slowly, like she couldn’t believe she was saying the words.

“A little. Not as much as Juno, but I can see people’s vibe.”

“You always were a good judge of character.” Tapping her mug, she seemed to measure her words carefully.

I knew what was coming.

I hoped like hell I was wrong because I hated the answer I’d be forced to give, but I knew what she was thinking.

It was the same thing I’d asked for.

She didn’t make me wait long. “If Lennon is Pestilence, could—”

“Mom, Lennon can’t... there’s a surprising amount of red tape and rules.”

“Leave it to bureaucrats to mess up Heaven,” she said with a sigh. She tried to hide her disappointment and the hint of hope as she forced casualness. “You asked?”

“I demanded. It’s not allowed.”

“Even the devil? What did you say his name was?”

“Levi. And even him. It’s a whole thing. I’m so sorry.”

She waved away my apology. “It was a long shot, but I figured it didn’t hurt. I mean, now that you have connections and all.” Standing, she began packing the brownies for me.

She pulled out another storage container. “I’m giving you more, so there’s no excuse for these ones not to make it to Lennon.”

*She’s giving him brownies again.*

*Wow, she really must like him.*

*Hey, wait! She’s giving him my brownies.*

“I think you’re underestimating how much I love your brownies. There’s literally always an excuse for me to take them all.”

“Be nice. He’s your soulmate.” Her whimsical, romantic smile turned teasing as she muttered, “He deserves brownies for having to put up with you.”

I’d have argued, but...

She had a point.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

AND AS THE WORLD  
STOPS  
LILITH

**S**OMETHING'S WRONG.

Jolting awake, I was already halfway out of bed before I even realized it.

“What is it?” Lennon asked, up and moving to me.

“I... I don't know,” I pushed out past the pain. Tears filled my eyes because I was being slowly ripped apart. Layers peeled back and tossed away. It stole my breath. It clenched my heart.

“Baby, talk to me.” Lennon didn't try to stop my pacing, but he lowered his face even with mine. “What do you feel?”

“Shattered. Raw.” My voice cracked. “*Broken.*”

*Go.*

*I need to go.*

*Go, go, go.*

*Gogogogogo!*

Closing my eyes, I hung my head and tried to visualize past my devastation. I shoved it aside. Boxed up the pain. Ignored the ache in my chest. Compartmentalized until a picture formed.

“The hospital.” My head whipped back, and I nearly headbutted Lennon with as close as he was. “Poof me to the hospital.”

He didn't question it. After taking half a second to use magicks so we weren't naked, Lennon took my arm.

"Hold on." I grabbed my cell from the nightstand as the voice in my head screamed at me. "Okay, now."

As soon as we materialized in his office, my cell began to ring.

I didn't answer.

I couldn't answer.

"Baby," Lennon prompted.

Something had felt off all day. After lunch with my parents, I'd planned to go home and work, but I hadn't been able to leave. Even once Lennon was off work, I hadn't wanted to go. Instead, he'd brought over dinner.

Last time, it'd been my mom who'd interrogated Lennon with a million medical questions. After finding out how long he'd been alive, Dad had peppered him with every imaginable question about the past.

It'd been the perfect night for a history buff like my dad.

Once my parents were nearly asleep, I'd let Lennon drag me home. I'd told myself I was being dramatic. A worrier.

They'd been fine. Dad had been more awake than I'd seen in a while. He'd given me the best, strong hug before I left. Everything seemed okay.

But like last time, I should've listened to my gut when it came to my dad.

"It's her." I handed my ringing cell to Lennon. "It's *him*."

Lennon connected the call. "Hello?" He was silent for a second. "Mia, it's Lennon. What's happening?" Another few beats passed before his eyes snapped to mine.

Sad eyes.

Filled with empathy and sympathy and distress.

"We're already in my office. Right. We'll be waiting when you get here." He clicked off and pocketed the phone. I didn't

have to rush him. He grabbed my hand and practically dragged me out of the room and through the winding corridors. “Your dad is having shortness of breath, lethargy, and seems out of it. They’re in an ambulance on the way here.”

“It’s his heart,” I told Lennon, wishing the elevator and ambulance both had the ability to teleport.

“Does he have a history of heart disease?”

“No.” I pressed a palm against my chest to try to ease the pain that radiated. “But I know it.”

He lifted his chin.

When we reached the emergency department, he used his magicks to make it look like he swiped his badge. His gaze scanned the room before he booked it double time through the half-circle.

Lennon’s friend from the coffee cart stepped out from behind the provider area when he spotted us. “Hey—” His greeting cut off suddenly. “What’s wrong?”

“Lilith’s dad is on his way in via ambulance. History of prostate cancer with mets to the spine and pelvis. Receiving radiation therapy. Check his heart.”

“History of heart disease?” the man asked.

“He mentioned some twinge earlier,” Lennon lied.

It was easier than explaining that my secret powers had told me.

The man—Finn—continued asking questions as he walked. We followed him out to the ambulance bay shortly before the siren cut through the night air. When it pulled in, I got the hell out of the way and let them coordinate with the EMTs.

Numbers and technical terms were exchanged in the rush. More medical personnel swooped in to assist, each falling into place with practiced ease. When I finally got a glimpse of my dad, my knees gave out.



Thankfully, Lennon had known. Felt it. He quickly closed the distance between us and caught me.

“No, this... *No.*” I looked up at my mate while tears spilled down my cheeks. “He was fine. You saw him earlier. He’s fine. He has to be fine.”

“I know, baby.” He palmed the back of my head and held my face to his chest. He didn’t offer reassurances, false promises, or even the reminder that things could turn on a dime. It was his presence, touch, and scent that gave me strength.

I soaked it in for a brief second before backing away. Not trusting myself to speak, I jerked my head toward the cluster of people.

Lennon got what I meant. He wiped my cheek before doing exactly what I needed.

Helping my dad.

My best friend.

The larger-than-life man who was pale and unconscious on a gurney.

One of the EMTs spoke to my mom as they moved from behind the back door of the ambulance. He eyed her like he was questioning whether he needed to get a second stretcher.

Not because she was a weak-kneed mess like me. But because she wasn’t. Her expression was blank as she answered the shouted questions that Lennon couldn’t.

The only signs of her distraught state of mind were a red face, a high-pitched tone, and the shaking hand she used to clutch mine as soon as she got within reach.

We followed the gurney to a nearby room but stayed in the hall so we weren’t in the way. Stone-faced, Mom told Lennon and Finn when she’d woken Dad for his medication, he’d been disoriented and sweaty. He’d launched into a coughing fit and hadn’t been able to catch his breath before passing out.

He hadn’t woken up since.

People rushed around to do things I couldn't see and yell shit I didn't understand. I waited for my dad to wake up to complain about the beeping from the monitor that tracked his vitals. To laugh off the fuss.

To crack a joke about making an entrance.

He didn't.

He didn't open his eyes. He didn't answer any attempts to get him to speak.

He didn't even flinch as people poked and prodded.

Unable to look at him any longer, I did the only thing I was capable of doing. The only way I could help. I channeled my focus to check auras. I wanted to make sure there were no Absolve infiltrators like the nurse from the hallway.

I scanned the room. A couple of people were a little more smudged than the others, but there was nothing evil. Not even Diet Evil.

My gaze froze on Finn.

*Huh.*

When I moved on, I found Lennon's eyes on me. His face was tight as he glanced at his friend and then back to me.

I gave a quick headshake.

"Heart," Lennon said to Finn.

"Or dehydration from radiation," someone else put in.

Finn issued orders to the others and moved some machine over Dad. Once he was done, nurses descended to add more of the little sticky things to his chest and place an IV.

I didn't get the chance to see what else happened before the entire room went nuts. People rushed to grab this. Set up that. Orders were barked.

And through it all, a high-pitched, continuous tone sounded above the chaos.

"Henry!" my mom cried.

The beeping returned, though it was far from steady. I was no expert, but even I knew it was too fast.

An employee rushed over to my mom and me. “Why don’t we go down the hall to let them work.”

“No.” Mom clutched the doorjamb to keep herself upright. “Absolutely not.”

“They’ll come get you—”

“If my husband... the love of my life,” she croaked, “is about to die, then I will be right here with him.”

The lady looked like she was about to argue, but her gaze went into the room before she gave a slow nod. She hovered close but didn’t speak.

I put her out of my mind and returned my attention where it belonged. My heart rate seemed to match the rapid beats from Dad’s machines.

Lennon raised his head from what he was doing and met my eyes. He inhaled deeply. A reminder for me to do the same.

I tried, but it was nearly impossible to get air into my tight lungs that were ten times too small. It was even harder to exhale through the pain in my chest.

Lennon’s lids lowered before something suddenly appeared in my pocket.

I reached in and pulled it out.

He inhaled again before tipping his head toward what I held.

Like my mate, I rolled the gold coin across my knuckles. Or tried to. It took more skill and dexterity than I had during the best of times.

And it was definitely *not* the best of times.

But the repetitive motion helped. It rerouted a small fraction of my anxiety. Enough to allow me to breathe.

A few minutes that stretched like hours went by before Lennon and Finn approached. Lennon didn't stop until I was in his arms.

That wasn't anything new, but that time was different.

I could feel it.

*No. Please no.*

Finn spoke with the firm yet compassionate voice of a good doctor. "Henry's chest x-ray shows a number of blood clots. The most likely cause of these pulmonary emboli is his metastatic tumors or the treatment. His heart is also swollen. It could be because it's having to work harder to pump blood due to the decreased oxygen from his lungs. But based on the severity, I suspect a clot has broken free to cause a blockage." He gave us a second before his tone softened. "The continuous alarm you heard was because his heart stopped. We were able to get it back, but it's beating much faster than it should."

"Clots are treatable, right?" I asked. "He just needs blood thinners."

"They can be, yes. But we don't know yet what kind of damage this has caused. And with his other preexisting complications... His body is fighting through a lot."

Mom's eyes closed, tears steadily streaming past the lowered lids. Always a doer, she asked, "What can we do?"

"We'd like to intubate him and put him on a ventilator to ease the strain on his lungs and heart. It will give the blood thinners a chance to work while we also test to see what kind of damage we're dealing with."

"And then he'll be okay?"

Finn looked at Lennon for a second.

Something scraped the floor, but I couldn't tear my focus away from Finn as I waited for him to answer the damn question.

"There is no guarantee," he said finally. "Once we put him on the ventilator, there is a significant chance he won't come off it."

Mom's legs gave out.

Thankfully, the scraping noise I'd heard was Lennon moving a chair.

It caught her, and she stared ahead.

Everyone gave her a minute.

Lennon soothingly rubbed my back while he whispered quietly to Finn. Even though it hurt, I watched what the nurses did to my dad. I checked his monitors like I understood them.

And I tapped in deep. Feeling for something. Anything. A cure. A Band-Aid. An answer.

There was nothing.

After a couple of minutes, Finn murmured, "I'll go prep the equipment."

"No."

My eyes shot to my mom. "What?"

Mia Alexander pushed her shoulders back and lifted her chin despite the weight of her crumbling world on her shoulders. "Henry wouldn't want that. He wouldn't want to be kept alive by a machine. It would be selfish of me to put him through more just because it's not... I can't..." She took a shuddering gasp. "I'm not ready to be without him."

I wanted to argue. To insist we do it temporarily. Do more testing. Try something.

*Anything.*

But Mom was right.

Finn gave Mom's shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "You know your husband's wishes best. It's incredibly selfless of you to set your own feelings aside to honor them."

"Does that mean I'm making the right decision?" Mom's gaze darted between Finn and Lennon before landing on me. "Because it doesn't feel like it."

I crouched in front of her chair and took her shaking hands in my own. "It's what Dad would want."

“We’ll continue testing and treating Henry, but if his heart stops again, do you want us to revive him?” Finn asked.

“I don’t know.” Mom deflated some before gathering that awe-inspiring strength. “I’ll let you know. I’ll feel it.”

I didn’t doubt that.

Mom and Dad might not have been paired together by destiny and the heavens, but they were soulmates, nonetheless.

Finn went into the room and spoke to his team. Lennon helped me to stand but didn’t speak as he followed my lead.

Silent, unwavering support.

It took a few minutes before Mom and I could bring ourselves to enter the room. By that time, most of the staff had cleared out. Giving us time. Privacy.

I pulled a chair over for Mom, but she didn’t sit in it. Instead, she climbed onto the bed next to Dad and bent to rest her head on his chest. It was covered in wires, stickers, and some goo, but she didn’t care. Love and devastation and gratefulness and fear warred on her face.

“Oh, my love,” she whispered. “My hilarious, charming, generous, frustratingly calm love. What am I going to do without you?”

A voyeur to their pain again, I choked down my sob so I didn’t interrupt their moment.

Mom leaned up to keep talking into his ear. I couldn’t hear what she said, but I could make out her own sobs. Her soft laughter. Her loving tone.

The beep tempo from the machine in the corner of the room slowed, and hope soared within me.

*Keep going. Keep talking.*

Mom flipped my silent demands onto me. “Talk to him, sweetheart.” She reached for my hand and pulled me to sit on the opposite side of the bed. Keeping hold of it, she pressed both of our palms to my dad’s chest.

Right above the spot where the pain stemmed from in my own.

The beeping slowed farther, and the same hope that'd soared crashed. It burned. It went up in flames and took me with it.

"Tell him you're okay," Mom whispered earnestly. "Please. Let him know we're okay."

"We're okay, Dad," I lied because we weren't. Not without him. "Remember when I was a kid, and we'd go run errands? You used to say that when I got older, I'd reach an age when I didn't want to hang out with my old dad. You were wrong. We're still best friends." I broke down but forced the important words out. "Right till the end. Lilypad and Frog Dad. I love you."

"We both love you," Mom said.

Her words were barely out before the tone turned continuous. Finn rushed in, but Mom lifted her head and shook it.

He gave a solemn nod before muting the machines that signified what my heart knew. What'd known since I'd jolted awake.

My dad was gone.

And the world would never be the same.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

# SOULS! NOW WITH 100% MORE SUGAR

LENNON

I CHECKED THE CLOCK AGAIN.

That time, three minutes had passed.

Running my palm down my face, I contemplated leaving anyway. It wouldn't do any good, but it would sure as shit make me feel better.

There was a soft knock before someone spoke. "Were you planning on telling me you quit?"

I looked up to see Finn in my office doorway. He held an energy drink in one hand and a coffee in the other.

I was so exhausted, I'd have chugged them both, but he only offered the coffee.

Lifting my chin, I accepted the cup. "Not quit. It's a sabbatical."

"Yeah, but I know you. You'll get away from patients and see it's all rainbows and sunshine and cupcakes. You won't want to come back."

That wasn't true. Not anymore, at least.

Distancing myself was for the best. I couldn't put an entire hospital at risk. I knew that, but it didn't make the reality any easier. It was yet another layer of resentment I had toward Absolve.

And even more reason to hurry up and take them out.

"Holy shit." Finn collapsed into the chair opposite my desk. "You're bummed."



“I am,” I said honestly.

“Then why are you doing it?”

*Because I’m Pestilence. The world is depending on me, my siblings, and our mates. An evil group is after us, and they’ve already proven they’re willing to bring the fight to the hospital. I need to protect everyone.*

*I need to find my missing brother.*

*More than that—more important than anything—I need to put my focus on my grieving mate, who has spent the last three days pulling away from me.*

The words were on the tip of my tongue. It was the perfect time to tell Finn who I was. If he didn’t accept it, I was leaving anyway. If it went that bad, I would have Juno wipe that small blip in his memories.

But I thought about Lilith and the way she’d stared at him while he’d worked on her dad. She hadn’t yelled that he was the enemy, but she also hadn’t looked at him like everything was normal.

So I kept my mouth shut about the truth and told him the same thing I’d told my bosses. “I have an idea for a book. Once those hit, it’s hard to think about anything else.”

“First Baker, now you.” He drank his energy drink. “It’s a popular time to quit.”

“What happened with Baker?” I already knew the actual story, but it would be weird not to ask.

“Couldn’t tell you. All I know is she moved home. Emailed her resignation and said she needed to go where she belonged.”

Since she’d been sent to Hell, it was accurate even if it wasn’t subtle.

*Fucking Juno.*

“You must be disappointed.”

He shrugged. “Not really.” At my arched brow, he explained. “She came on strong. Too strong. But then she kept

talking about you. I think she wanted a doctor Eiffel Tower.”

I scowled. The idea of anyone but Lilith did nothing for me. But the thought of a threesome with my best friend and an evil bitch made me nauseous.

Finn put a palm to his chest in mock offense. “Wow, you could at least try not to look literally ill. Way to kick a man when he’s down.” At my deadpan stare, he dropped the act. “I don’t know why she’d even want a threesome after her weird reaction when I kissed her.”

“You guys kissed?”

“No. *I* kissed *her*. She stood there. Didn’t move her mouth or touch me or anything. It was fucking weird, man. And when I quickly pulled away, she said it was the best kiss and wanted more. More what? Dead fish impressions? No fucking thanks.”

I had no clue what to make of that.

“I started calling her Baker to push the distance because she wasn’t getting the hint. Now she’s gone to be someone else’s problem.”

Yeah. Levi’s.

“Anyway”—he gestured around us—“when does your leave start?”

“I’m off this week for Lilith. But she’s helping her mom, so I came in to plan. Then I’m back for two weeks of seeing the patients who will need extra support with the transfers.”

“Some of those kids are going to be gutted.”

*They’re not the only ones.*

Checking the time, Finn stood. “I’ve gotta get downstairs. If we don’t get together for drinks every once in a while, I’m showing up at your place and dragging you to car shows.”

I scowled again.

He chuckled. “And give Lilith my thoughts. Get me the address, and I’ll send her mom flowers.”

“Make it Indian food.”

“I can do that.”

We didn't do a drawn-out goodbye since we would still see each other outside of the hospital.

So long as the world didn't end.

And Finn wasn't secretly evil.

After he left, I grabbed my phone.

Me: How's it going, baby?

I didn't need a reply to know her answer.

Worried. Overwhelmed. Heartbroken.

I felt Lilith's emotions as acutely as my own.

Lilith: I was about to message you. We're almost done here.

Me: I'll leave now.

Teleporting in public was too risky for everyday travel, so I packed my stuff and headed to the parking garage. I regretted doing the sensible thing when all I wanted was to get to Lilith.

I regretted it and my newly re-discovered empathy because rush hour drivers were enough to make me want to start the apocalypse myself.

Pulling up to Lilith's parents'—her mom's—house, the regrets piled up. Stacked high and heavy until I wanted to collapse under them.

*Look.*

*Her.*

I looked over as the door was thrown open. I barely had the chance to climb out before Lilith ran across the lawn to crash into me.

“What's wrong?” we asked at the same time.

“You first.” I clutched her to me.

“I felt you. Something is bothering you.”

“Just a long day, little monster.”

She swallowed hard and nodded. “I’m going to go say goodbye to Mom.”

“Do you want to stay again?”

Lilith and I had spent the last three nights in her childhood bedroom. The fact we were crammed into a twin-size bed did nothing to help the distance I felt between us every night.

“Sorry, my mom said no more sleepovers.” Lilith gave a soft laugh. “She’s ready for some alone time without me hovering.”

We went inside to say goodbye—and then get gently kicked out when Lilith offered again to stay.

Once we were in the car, she sank into a heavy silence. The same thing happened the previous three nights as soon as we were alone in her room.

I didn’t force a conversation. She’d talk to me when she was ready.

I just hoped like fuck I was ready to hear what she had to say.

When we got to my place, she kicked off her shoes and headed for the stairs.

“You need to eat, baby.”

“Maybe later,” she evaded without looking back at me.

I dropped my stuff on the couch and went to the kitchen to plan what I could cook—even if I had to feed her myself. Rather than opening the fridge, I stayed rooted to the spot. Numbness traveled through me.

Paralyzed me.

But it wasn’t my detachment.

*Fuck, little monster.*

Backtracking, I took the stairs two at a time and pushed open the door to find Lilith curled on the bed. She looked so small and despondent. I closed the distance between us, and she barely did more than open her eyes to watch.

I'd have crawled to her if I thought it would work.

"Yell at me," I ordered.

"What?"

"Scream at me. Call me every name you can think of and ones you make up. But don't pull away from me."

"I'm not—"

"I'll go to Levi."

"Why would you—"

"If that doesn't work, I'll contact Rafe. Time passes differently there, and I don't want to spend it away from you, but I'll do it."

Scrambling onto her knees, she moved to the edge of the mattress in front of where I stood. "This is what I felt when you picked me up earlier."

"I know you need time, baby. Time to grieve and process. I'm not trying to rush you. Swear to the fucking gods, it's not that. You—"

"I hermit myself. It's how I deal with shitty situations." Her shoulders slumped, and her eyes drifted closed. "And this is the shittiest I've been through."

Relief hit me that her reaction was typical for her, but I tamped it down until I confirmed. "You don't feel betrayed?"

Her lids snapped back open. "Why would I?"

"Because I didn't use my magicks to—"

She put her fingertips against my lips. "We already know that risk was too great. I'm glad you didn't offer. I would've had to live with the guilt of saying no." Tears brimmed her eyes. "It would've made this unbearable."

I cupped her cheek. "I'm still sorry, baby."

“And I’m sorry I made you feel like I was pushing you away.”

I opened my mouth to tell her I was a dickhead, and she didn’t need to apologize, but her whole hand covered my mouth before I could get the words out.

“I can feel your guilt,” she said with a small smile aimed at our connection. “You’re not rushing me or being self-centered. When I’m around my mom, I want to be strong. I try to be. When I’m with you, I’m safe to feel my feelings. I can fall apart or withdraw because you’ll take care of me. I wouldn’t be able to make it through this without you.”

“Yes, you would.” My statement was muffled until she moved her palm. “You’re the strongest person I know.”

“Maybe.” She wrapped her arms around me and pressed her cheek to my chest. “But I won’t have to find out.”

“Never, baby.”

We stayed like that for a few moments before she broke the silence that’d shifted from heavy to peaceful. “Speaking of Rafe, I think I figured something out.”

“What’s that?”

“He got all shifty when Juno asked why he didn’t summon me to Heaven. I think he knew my dad was going to die.”

I tried to think about something other than how much I fucking hated the way the bastard archangel looked at *my* mate. His phrasing had been odd during the interaction—though everything was off about those holy jackasses. “You’re probably right.”

“For that alone, you can’t kick his ass,” she teased.

“I can’t make any promises.” I took her down to the bed before covering her body with mine. “Especially if he looks at you like that again.”

“Fair enough.”

“Now I need your help solving a mystery.”

“Is it the mystery of the disappearing clothes?” Lilith scrunched her face before cracking one lid. “Damn, I hoped that would work. How perfect would that joke have been?”

It wasn't what I wanted to ask, but who was I to deny my mate a good joke? I did the magicks for her, leaving us both naked as I rushed to ask my question before she could distract me further. “What did you see when you looked at Finn?”

She tensed, which made me brace. “Shit, I'm sorry. I have a long list of things to talk to you about, but then everything...”

“So he's evil?” A cannonball of lead hit my gut.

Nate had been betrayed in Salem by a trusted friend who knew exactly who he was. Finn's deception wasn't as bad since I'd never shared my identity as Lenuson, but it still stung.

“No, the opposite,” Lilith assured. “He has one of the brightest auras I've ever seen. It's... sugary.”

“Huh.”

“That was my reaction, too.”

*We always joked that it took a saint to be friends with me.*

*Maybe we weren't far off...*

LILITH

I WAS FLOATING.

Soaring through the air.

*I must be an angel now.*

*Good for me.*

But I didn't feel like an angel.

No, the wicked heat that broke out across my flesh was far from angelic, even if it was heavenly.

*Angels don't have flesh.*

*I must've been sent down.*

Only, I didn't smell cinnamon and brimstone.

I smelled sex and something crisp. Something clean. Something that had fast become my favorite scent.

Lennon.

My eyes shot open, and I blinked a few times as I tried to orient myself.

After our conversation earlier, Lennon had been fine with giving me my space and taking things slow. I'd been the one to initiate sex.

It was partially because I needed the normalcy.

Partially because I needed the reminder about life and beauty and peace in the midst of chaos.

But it was mostly because I'd missed Lennon and his fiery touches.

A round of rough, desperate sex was just what we both needed.

After, Lennon had fixed us a quick dinner before I'd crashed.

It took me a moment to realize I was sitting upright. It was still pitch black out the window, though I was able to see with clarity.

As in, it was with a blessed amount of clarity that I saw I was sitting on Lennon with his hard, thick cock stretching up his stomach toward me.

And when I peeked over my shoulder, I saw my legs straddled his head.

*This is my kind of wake-up call.*

Slowly, teasingly, he skimmed the tip of his tongue along my slit. "Awake?" The vibration sent a shiver down my spine.

"Mm-hmm." That was all I could manage.

"Good." Before I could say more, Lennon's mouth covered me, his tongue spearing in. I didn't know what was sexier—my raspy pants, his gruff moans like he was the one in



immense bliss, or the erotically filthy noise his mouth against my wetness made.

I decided all three were hotter than any over-the-top porn sound effects.

My back arched when Lennon latched onto my clit. His tongue and teeth caused jolt after jolt of pleasure to buzz through me. I rocked my hips, riding his face as I silently demanded more.

A demand he happily obliged, groaning his pleasure. His cock jerked, drips of precum steadily beading at the tip.

*Holy shit, I didn't think it was possible, but he's enjoying this almost as much as I am.*

*Almost.*

I stretched forward, wanting to lick and taste him. I couldn't quite reach without removing myself from his mouth—and that was *not* going to happen. I wasn't selfish, I just happened to remember there was the possibility he wasn't into oral.

Fine, I was selfish.

I decided to use my hand instead, wrapping my fingers around him.

Lennon's pelvis lifted automatically, thrusting into my fist. Repositioning me farther down, he leaned up and resumed tasting me. It couldn't have been comfortable, but he wasn't complaining.

His mouth was too busy.

At the new placement, I was able to reach him, but I still wasn't sure he'd be receptive. Not coming up with a sexier way to phrase it, I blurted, "Can I suck you?"

"That is one question you never have to ask," he growled against me.

"Before you, uhh, didn't let me."

"Our first night?"

At my nod, Lennon gripped my hair and used the hold to force me to look back at him. His eyes were wild and lust-filled. “I’d been thinking, obsessing, *fantasizing* about finally feeling you. If you would’ve wrapped your full fucking lips around my dick, I wouldn’t have been able to stop myself. And our first time together, I wanted your cum all over me before I came deep inside you.”

My pussy clenched at his filthy but ridiculously hot words.

He released my hair and pushed between my shoulders so he could get back to work. He licked me from clit to ass and back again.

*That was... unexpectedly yet insanely hot.*

With all thoughts of conversation gone, I wrapped my fist around the base of his hardness and slowly swirled my tongue around the head. He grunted against me, trying to lift his pelvis, but I pulled away before he could go in deeper.

*Payback for all the times he’s teased me. I’m going to go so slow, he’ll beg for more.*

I knew I risked retribution, but seeing which of us broke first would be half the fun.

My money was on him giving in—especially since his ab-curved position was more strenuous.

Only he didn’t pull back to mirror my teasing.

No, Lennon licked, bit, and flicked with his earlier ferociousness. He didn’t seem to care if it wasn’t reciprocated. His focus was on me.

*To hell with payback.*

I took as much of him in my mouth as I could, fighting a gag that made him groan. What I lacked in grace, I made up for in enthusiasm.

At first, at least. But when he zeroed in on my clit, I lost my rhythm completely. My mouth still moved on his length, but only because he rocked my body back and forth while lifting his hips at the same time. My orgasm ripped through

me, tearing apart my body with aftershocks of intensity that hurt as much as they thrilled.

When I couldn't take any more, I shifted forward and tried to focus on him. But Lennon was relentlessly determined to orgasm me to death.

Awkwardly, I rolled and accidentally landed a sharp knee to his kidney.

Only then did he pause his single-minded pursuit of my pussy. "What's wrong?"

"If I come again, I'm going to die."

"Then thank goodness you're likely immortal." He grabbed my waist and pulled me to him. His lips tickled my belly as he peppered kisses across the sensitive skin.

*I hope it's always like this.*

*Please let it always be like this.*

*Let nothing else change.*

*Ever.*

Gripping his hair, I tugged his head away so he'd meet my eyes. "I'm serious, baby. If I come again, I'll need an IV for dehydration and won't be able to have sex again for a week." I did my best to hide my smile at his look of dismay. "Yeah, I don't want that, either."

"Okay," he relented. He wrapped his arm around me and flopped back, taking me with him.

When it became clear that he was settling us in to go back to sleep, I went up on my elbow. "Just because I can't come again doesn't mean you can't."

He smirked. "I can wait."

I glanced at his still hard cock and then at him, raising a brow.

"I know I'm acting like a sex fiend, but it's only because I can't get enough of you." He tightened his arm around me. "But I really can wait."

“I can’t. I want to taste you.”

He studied me for all of five seconds before shifting up the bed to lean against the headboard.

Taking that as an affirmative and encouragement, I kneeled between his spread thighs and bowed to lick his shaft, swirling my tongue around the head. His grunts and hip rises spurred me on, and when I took him in my mouth, I was just as eager for it as he was. I wrapped my hand around the base, stroking him as my mouth worked the inches I could take.

His hand held my hair from my face, and I looked up to meet his fervent gaze.

*Maybe I could come again.*

I had to close my eyes before I was tempted to risk death. I went faster, and Lennon rocked his hips in time with me. I could feel him getting harder in my mouth when he suddenly stopped, halting my movements. I released him, but before I could ask what was wrong, he flipped us so I was on my back as he knelt.

Fisting his dick, he fed it to me before cupping the back of my head. He thrust into my mouth, shallow but much quicker than I’d been able to go. I tried moving my head to match his thrusts, but I couldn’t keep up.

So I just took.

He gave and gave and gave, pushing me just enough to be thrilling and exciting but not enough to gag me. And I loved it. Every second. Every pulse. Every thrust. Every groan. It was savage and animalistic and so far beyond what I would’ve expected from the cold doctor in the elevator.

Pulling free, he fisted himself and stroked until he came. The thick spurts hit my breasts and stomach. His searing gaze stayed locked on the sticky mess.

When he raised his eyes to meet mine, a sinful smirk filled with male pride curved his lips. I only got the sexy view for a moment before his body covered mine. He didn’t seem concerned that his cum spread from my chest to his. He simply brushed my hair from my face and kissed me.

“Good?” I asked, shamelessly hinting for compliments.

His wicked smirk grew to a devastating grin.  
“Otherworldly.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

YOU WENT AND MADE IT  
WEIRD, DUDE  
LILITH

“YOU DOING OKAY, SWEET GIRL?”

I wasn't.

My dad was gone.

A spot in my heart would never be full again.

We'd never have lunch dates, movie marathons, or our amazing talks ever again.

But I scanned the house my parents had spent decades turning into a home. It was packed with people who also loved my dad. Neighbors. Friends he'd held onto over the years. Other teachers. Some students—former and current.

My new Four family.

Hannah.

And my mate.

Dad hadn't been a funeral home kind of guy. He certainly hadn't been a religious service one. He'd been a party guy. So that was how we wanted to honor him. Forgoing a casket burial, we would bury his ashes in a bio urn that would grow into a beautiful tree.

And instead of a stuffy funeral, we threw a casual, low-key celebration of his life.

At least, it was supposed to be low-key. Lennon, Hannah, Juno, and Denny had elevated the day.

Rather than the simple sandwiches and finger foods we'd planned, Hannah and Lennon had gotten catering of all of Dad's favorites. The Indian food spread was courtesy of Finn and his sugary soul.

Juno had brought a teeming tower of candy, along with music from all the concerts Dad had attended over the years. I wasn't sure how much of it was magicks and how much was hidden speakers, and I hadn't found time to ask.

Denny had put together the most gorgeous collages and memento cards to honor my dad's life.

I hadn't expected any of it. None of it was necessary since their presence was enough.

But that didn't mean it wasn't appreciated more than they could know.

It was the tribute my dad deserved.

Which was why I looked at my mom and answered her question with the truth. "I'm good. How're you holding up?"

"Are you kidding? If Dad could see the turnout to this shindig, he'd say he should've kicked the bucket years ago."

"Oh my God, Mother," I cried through laughter that garnered some strange looks from the neighbors.

"Am I lying?"

She wasn't. That was exactly the kind of morbid joke he would've made.

Mom tilted her head toward the other side of the room. "I'm glad your friends could come."

Denny chatted with Hannah.

Juno snacked.

Stellan stood guard between the door and his mate.

Lennon talked to multiple older folks from the neighborhood, likely about every ache and ailment they had. I grimaced for him, but he didn't look all that upset about it.

And Nate bizarrely fixed the curtain rod that'd been busted for years.

Mom recaptured my attention with a low whistle. "The universe was feeling mighty generous when it paired you all up."

"You can say that again."

"I think Dad would like that part the most."

My brows furrowed. "The hot people?"

"Not that." She paused. "Okay, also that. Have you noticed the way his friends, coworkers, and our boring old neighbors are looking at them? You just know they're wondering what kind of secret life your father led. He'd feel like a celebrity."

Again, she had a point. The Four definitely did not blend into that group, and Dad would love it.

"But he'd like seeing you so happy. With Lennon and also your other friends."

"That's always what he wanted," I said as tears filled my eyes.

Sensing it, Lennon snapped his head up to check in with me.

I waved him off and blinked away the sadness. It wasn't what the day was about. Not right then.

Needing the distraction before I lost the tenuous hold I had on my tears, I held up the camera. "I'm going to take some pictures."

"Make beauty, sweetheart."

As Mom walked away to mingle, I brought my camera to my eye. I snapped picture after picture. The food. The visitors. The Four. Lennon's passionate expression as he explained something while weirdly miming what looked like a growth.

Landing on Hannah, I smiled. Dad had always said if I liked them, they had to be good people.

And my best friend was the best.



I didn't really need to channel my magicks through a camera anymore, but the vibrancy of each aura was stronger when I did—especially in a large group. I could've seen Hannah's from space.

It was almost as light and bright as Finn's.

*Hmm. Maybe we need to have them both over for dinner.*

I climbed up a few steps to get a better view.

And that was when I saw him.

A man against the far wall near the back door. He wasn't doing anything nefarious. Hell, he wasn't doing anything at all. Like a statue, he stood with an untouched drink and watched.

But his aura was off—like the nurse in the hospital hallway.

I schooled my features so I didn't tip the man off. With the packed house, too many innocent lives were at risk. I wasn't sure how to alert Lennon without raising tensions.

Gripping my camera tightly, I didn't lower it as I channeled my magicks.

*"Lennon,"* I said into something grander than my own head.

His eyes went to me, and a smile began to form before he realized something was off.

*"What's wrong?"* His faded voice echoed in my skull.

*"The man by the back door. He's not human."*

*"Absolve?"*

*"I... don't know. Maybe?"*

Lennon lifted his chin and got a faraway look. Juno went alert, then Nate before they each whispered to their mates.

Juno's voice sounded in my head. *"Make a distraction."*

*I can do that.*

*“But don’t cry,” she tacked on. “We need Lennon’s focus and positive energy.”*

*Well, shit, there goes that plan.*

Clearing my throat, I spoke loudly. “Excuse me, everyone!”

All eyes landed on me, and I had traumatic flashbacks of my first art show in college.

*At least this time I won’t barf.*

*Hopefully.*

I pushed through. “My mom and I would like to thank you all for joining us today to celebrate my dad.”

A web of red smoke slowly spread over our target.

“My dad was the best,” I continued. “Kind and smart and, of course, so serious all the time.”

Those who knew him laughed because no one would ever describe Henry Alexander as serious.

“It would’ve meant a lot to him that so many came out to celebrate his life.” I smirked. “Or maybe you’re here to celebrate his death.”

A couple of gasps interspersed the laughter. Mom rolled her misty eyes, so that was a win.

While the gauzy red encompassed the man, Stellan moved toward him. It wasn’t teleportation, but it was still faster than should’ve been possible through the crowd.

“Dad loved life. He loved all the beauty it held.” I gestured toward the folding tables to distract from the movement of The Four on the opposite side of the room. “He really loved food. So in honor of him, eat. Laugh. Reminisce. Stay a while.”

The group reached the man, and everyone but Lennon hauled him out into the backyard.

“But not too long,” I added. “Don’t make it weird.”

Lennon reached me as I moved from the steps. With his help, I dodged the guests who wanted to chat or offer their

condolences as I made my way to my mom.

“What’s wrong?”

“Business has come calling,” I whispered.

An edge of concern tightened her expression. But mostly it was filled with pride. “Go save the world then.”

It wasn’t that serious—at least, I hoped not—but I admired her positive attitude.

Quickly kissing her cheek, I promised to check in later and followed Lennon outside.

“I don’t want to leave her unprotected.”

“Juno reached out to Levi. He’s sending trusted minions, and Rafe is following suit with his own angels.”

That helped. But for some reason, not as much as it should’ve.

As soon as I saw Juno, I asked, “Can you ask Levi to come here himself?”

Her eyes widened. “Why?”

“I... don’t know.”

She got the same faraway look Lennon had earlier. “He’s on his way.”

With Juno’s red smoke still in place, Lennon added his blue magicks. “Why are you here?”

“Lookout,” the man forced out. “My job is done.”

And then he was dead. Just like that.

Lennon turned an accusing eye toward Juno.

Actually, everyone did.

She held her hands up. “This wasn’t me. And now I have murder blue-balls. I was really looking forward to punishing him for interrupting Lilith’s day.”

That shouldn’t have been thoughtful, yet there we were.

I pressed my hand to my chest. “Thank you.”

“Any-fucking-time,” she said. “Literally.”

Denny voiced the questions we were all wondering. “Who was he being lookout for? And why?”

Stellan carefully searched the deceased. Coming up empty, he lowered the man to the ground.

Both Denny and Nate moved in and touched the man. Rather than disappearing, he transformed into a heavy pile of dark black powder.

My face contorted at the vibe that emanated from the dense mound. “That’s not the dust I pictured.”

“Because that’s not the typical dust,” Denny shared. “The only other time it looked like that was—”

“The nurse from the hallway ambush,” I interjected. “His aura was like hers. Weirdly dark.”

Juno used her magicks to hose the revolting mess out of my mom’s lawn. I hoped it wouldn’t seep into her soil to contaminate her garden.

*Something to keep an eye on.*

A ding cut through our contemplative silence, and Denny pulled her cell from her pocket. “I think I know why he was on lookout.”

“Why?” her mate asked with alarm.

She turned it around to show us camera footage in a living room. “Because someone’s broken into our house.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

# TOO LATE LENNON

COUPLE BY COUPLE, THE SIX of us teleported silently into Nate and Denny's dining room. The house was quiet but not empty.

Stellan stared at the hutch in the corner.

"What're you doing?" Juno asked him in her regular voice and volume. When everyone turned their alarmed gaze toward her, she waved a hand to show a shimmery dome surrounding the group. "They can't see or hear us if we stay still. I don't know if I can take the disappearing act on the road, though, so be careful."

"I know I need more dishes," Denny whispered anyway, gesturing to the paper plates, bowls, and plastic wine glasses that filled the hutch in place of the expected dinnerware. "But this is a really stupid time to make me feel bad about it."

Stellan's mouth curved. "I'm watching the reflection."

"Oh," Denny murmured. "And?"

"Two men."

Juno closed her lids, her face growing tight. "I don't feel anyone." When she opened her eyes, fire burned inside them. "How do these motherfuckers keep getting past my wards, dammit?"

That was a good question.

Juno wasn't as powerful as she bragged.

She was more so.

And after being with her mate, I had to imagine that strength continued to grow daily. Her wards and spells were powerful. The man shouldn't have been able to enter Henry's memorial, and the two in the other room should've been blasted miles away.

"Have you heard from Hank?" one of the men in the living room asked.

"No. That bastard started to say something, but then he shut the hell up. He probably wanted to brag about the food at the heathen's party but remembered I said I'd shove my foot up his ass sideways if he did it again."

"Doesn't sound like his lookout job was actually done before your magicks cut him off," I said to Juno.

"There's got to be a fucking key," the man continued.

Denny shrugged. "I have some random spares in my junk drawer, but they don't go to anything good."

"What about this one?" the other man asked.

Denny shrugged. "I don't have any keys in the living room."

"No, dumbass," the first man bit out angrily. "That's the same code as the books we have."

Nate, Juno, *and* Denny went alert at that.

"It looks completely different," the dumbass argued.

"Because the other notebooks are from over three-hundred damn years ago."

"The handwriting is different."

There was a long sigh. "This is why you'll never be more than a scribe. It's different because it was a different writer. But it's still the same damn code. We need the key to translate it."

Nate glowered. "They're searching my notes."

"*Our* notes," Denny corrected.

"Is there a cipher key somewhere?" I asked.

Nate tapped his head. “Only up here.”

“Maybe they’ll give up,” Lilith said, but her brows were pinched together as a frown curved her lips.

“What is it?” I asked.

“I don’t know. The dumb one is Absolve. The one who keeps swearing is different like the man earlier. But something else is off.”

I wanted to take a step back and talk about what to do. Letting them escape wouldn’t sit well with anyone, but if they gave up their search, it was the smart thing to do. If Lilith said something was off, that wasn’t the time to start blasting people.

Unfortunately, that option went out the window when the angry fucker ordered, “Just grab all of them, and let’s go.”

Juno flashed her crazy smile. “That’s our cue.”

She and Stellan moved right into the open doorway.

Nate and I teleported to the other side of the living room to end up near the fireplace.

Since Lilith’s and Denny’s immortality hadn’t been tested, they remained in the dining room.

Or they were supposed to.

Because in a millisecond, Lilith stood next to me and glared.

But not at our enemies.

Her ire was aimed at me briefly before she focused on the threat in front of us.

“Drop the notebooks,” Nate ordered.

“Or what?” the smaller of the two asked.

The other was almost twice the size, and his fear was evident on his face as he scanned that they were outnumbered five-to-two. He dropped what notebooks he held, earning an eye roll from the other.

My blue smoke moved up his body, but it was too late.

The big guy hit the ground before my smoke reached his knees. The smell of burnt almond filled the room.

“Cyanide,” Stellan bit out, shaking his head.

“Why does everyone insist on doing my job for me?” Juno threw her arms up in frustration. “I hoped to take care of two out of three, at least.”

“Two out of...” The smaller guy’s eyes narrowed. “Where’s Hank? Release him, you monsters.”

“You’re too late,” Juno taunted. “He’s already fertilizer.”

“First Abby and now Hank?” He gave a pitying shake of his head. “Z is *not* going to be happy. And he’s not going to go easy on you. For your sake, you better let A get to you first. Either way, I wish I could be around to see.”

Juno launched her magicks, trying to place the man in his own dome, but she was too late.

Another one dead.

Stellan approached and sniffed the air. “No almond. It might not be cyanide.”

“Then what?” I asked, but he only shrugged.

Juno hovered her hands over the man before shaking them out. “I don’t like this.”

“Is there a ward?”

She shook her head. “But it feels different. Gross.”

“How do you think I feel?” Denny entered the room and gave an exaggerated shudder. “I’ve got dead guys in my house. *Again*. And I still have to touch them.”

Stellan searched the little guy while I patted down the big one. Nothing. No phone or wallet. No sensation of magicks. Not even a worn and torn receipt.

“I guess that means we’re up,” Denny said with a sigh. Starting with the big guy, she and Nate touched him together.

He disappeared.

They moved to do the same with the other.



He did not disappear.

The same heavy filth that made up Hank and Abby Baker thumped to the floor.

“What the hell?” Nate said.

“Magicks is magicks.” Juno looked ready to kick the pile in frustration. “How’re they changing the rules like this?”

Nate and Stellan threw out possibilities and plans. Juno paced the body, hovering her hand as she tried to channel something.

I let them worry about it while I focused on something more important.

The daggers my mate glared my way.

“Little monster—” I started before she cut me off.

“Leave me out again,” she seethed, “and I’ll get creative with how I leave you out. Understood?”

The knowledge she’d been in danger made me want to come out of my skin. The threat of withholding her body from me after that danger made me want to put the motherfucker’s dust back together so I could rip him apart with my bare hands.

“I can’t promise that,” I said, and her frown deepened. “But I’ll try. So long as you try to be careful.”

That was enough compromise for her expression to morph into a smile. “Deal.”

“I’m going to get the broom. *Again*,” Denny said behind me. “And I’ll start coffee. Or maybe tequila shots.”

“I’m down for both.” Lilith closed the distance between us. At the last second, her steps stumbled. Her face paled.

I reached to steady her. “Baby, what’s—”

“Denny.” She dodged my hands and ran to the kitchen.

I followed.

But I was too late.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

NOT YOUR LUMBERJACK'S  
KEEPER  
LENNON

EVERYTHING SLOWED TO A CRAWL.  
The man in Denny's kitchen sneered.

Denny held her hands out in front of her as electricity crackled from her palms.

Lilith threw herself in front of her friend.

And the man shot.

Not a bullet.

Not an arrow.

Not an earthly weapon that she might have survived.

A ball of black fire hit my mate and erupted to quickly engulf her. In the next second, it was gone.

And so was she.

"Lilith," I roared like she could hear me. I spun to check around me, hoping against fucking hope that she'd poofed herself at the last second.

She wasn't there.

She was fucking *gone*.

I launched myself at the motherfucker who'd dared to hurt my mate. Who'd tried to take her from me.

Who'd succeeded?

I took him to the ground, and his head slammed against the tile with a sick *thud*, but all he did was laugh.

“Where is she?” I demanded.

“In Hell, where you all fucking belong. And you’ll never find her. The king of heathen bastards himself won’t be able to find her.”

I touched his skin, letting my magicks flow. “Tell me.”

“She’s gone. You dumbass fuckers. You’ll get the fate you damn heathens deserve. You’ll burn for an eternity.”

My wrath. Fear. Pain. It flowed from my broken soul into the bastard below me.

And I did the opposite of what I was created to do. Illness after gruesome illness infected him.

He began to sweat.

Gag.

Turn green.

His skin rotted to curdled chunks that fell from his muscles. The same muscles that turned black with necrosis as it died. He wasted away.

And then he was dead, too.

It’d been far faster than he deserved, but it hadn’t been painless. Far fucking from it.

“Brother of mine,” Juno called softly, her hands gentle on me as she pulled me from the decaying corpse. “Use your connection to reach her. Please. Focus on Lilith.”

At a time when I wanted to storm out the door and take the fight to Absolve on my own, that was the one thing that could get through to me.

I closed my eyes.

*“My soul, please. Tell me you’re okay!”* I demanded.

Silence.

*“Tell me how to get to you.”*

More silence.

“Her camera.” Juno paced. “Maybe if you hold it in my magicks room. Or outside. Lilith loves nature.”

Stellan tried to snag her and swipe at the tears that poured down her face, but she wouldn't let him.

“Maybe we can get the camera to Heaven with us,” she continued. “Or Hell. I'll ask Levi.”

“She's not dead,” I forced out, focusing on our connection.

The guilt on Denny's expression remained, but extreme relief traveled through her. She swayed with it, and I thought she would faint.

Nate must've suspected the same thing because he rushed to hold her.

“Did she answer?” Juno asked. “How do you know?”

“Because I'm not dead. If she was gone, the heart in my chest would no longer beat.”

Wherever she was, her heart rate was elevated but not racing.

The ache in my chest was there, but it was the same severity as anytime we were separated.

I tilted my head toward the festering dickhead on the floor. “Get rid of him, or I'll bring him back so I can kill him again.”

Denny rushed to touch the putrid body, only pausing at the last second to wait for her mate.

I barely noticed when the thick soot remained, darker than all the others.

“We need to plan.” Juno waved her hand. Lilith's camera, crystals, and small jars appeared on the counter. “I can't get through to Levi. I think because he's on Earth. He can search Hell. Rafe will have to take Heaven. I'm sure one of them can hunt through purgatory.”

“She protected my mate.” Nate clutched Denny to him the same way I wanted to do with Lilith. “I vow it, brother. I will not rest until we find her.”

“Find who?”

I didn't stop to look.

At the voice that would be embedded in my brain for our long eternity, I moved across the room and pulled my mate into my arms. “My love. My soul. My everything. I thought I lost you.”

“You can't get rid of me that easily,” Lilith joked, though her voice was thick with emotion.

I pulled back to look down at her, only to see she wasn't alone.

Standing behind her in the living room was a man even taller than Nate. A thick beard covered his face, and his jeans and flannel were caked with dirt.

I knew it.

I could feel it.

“Dubhloach.”

My brother.

He looked at me before his focus moved behind me.

“Yeah, we can explain this whole thing,” Juno said. “It'll come as a shock, but you need to trust us. You need to know who you—”

“I know who I am,” Dubhloach interrupted. His head tilted. “Who killed an angel?”

And then he was gone.

He poofed away.

Still holding her hips, I backed away just far enough to inspect my mate. “Are you okay? Hurt? What happened?”

“I'm fine. The blast was like I stepped too close to a campfire. It didn't hurt at all.” She pulled at the long skirt she wore despite the heavy snowfall. “I think it's because I always run warm. Anyway, I'm not sure where that bastard meant to send me, but you know that zeptosecond when you teleport? I caught an aura there and poofed to it.” A hint of sadness

moved across her face. “I thought maybe I’d been killed, and the aura was my dad’s. I didn’t want to be dead, of course. But if I was going to be, being with Dad would be the one silver lining. Obviously, that wasn’t the case, and I ended up next to your brother.”

I rocked on my heels. “You found my missing brother.”

“You’re missing the good part of the story, baby. He really does know who he is. And who you all are. I appeared while he was chopping wood in the forest.”

“Trees. Little me’s drawing was right again,” Juno interjected.

“After seeing that I was me and not a threat—”

“That he knows of, but he’d be wrong,” Juno interjected yet again.

“Can my returned mate please get through her fucking story so I can get her home and get to fucking her?”

Juno’s face contorted as she grimaced. “Gross. Fine. Yes.”

“Rude,” Lilith chided me, despite the desire in her pretty blue eyes. “Once he saw it was me, he asked which of you I belonged to. When I told him, he asked me to poof him here. Which I did.” She looked dismayed. “I kinda thought he’d stick around a little longer.”

“Do you know where he was?” Nate asked.

“No.”

“Maybe you can channel the location again,” Juno suggested before her gaze landed on my twitching eye. “Later, though. Because you have plans. We’ve waited this long.” She smirked and flipped me off. “We can wait the extra thirty seconds your sex will take.”

I ignored the jab to follow Lilith when she moved closer to the dust that used to be her attempted murderer. I wanted to snatch her away even though I knew he couldn’t hurt her again.

She turned to me. “Dubhloach said that guy was an angel. Do you think he’s right?”

“I don’t know, little monster.”

Juno’s head tilted. “I bet he is. Think about it. The one in the living room mentioned Hank and Abby, and all three were this weird dust. And *she’d* said Absolve would come looking when Barry didn’t return. Not her.”

“Are you sure?”

Juno spun her finger, and footage played on the microwave like there’d been a security camera in the hallway.

On the video, Abby Baker was forced to speak the truth. “*And when Barry doesn’t show up, they’ll know he was right.*”

“You’re right. Shit. Heaven is going to be pissed.”

“Heaven.” Lilith clutched my shirt. “The shorter guy in the living room wasn’t the angry one who’d been talking while they searched the notebooks. That was the guy who blasted me. Didn’t you say they weren’t allowed to swear in Heaven? That’s why he kept doing it. Like a little rebellion every sentence.”

We all looked at the pitch-black pile.

“It explains everything,” Denny said as she approached before stopping. Her guilt was still evident on her face as she held herself at a distance.

Bracing for me or Lilith to be pissed.

And while I sure as fuck was, it wasn’t aimed at her or my mate. The blame resided solely with evil angels.

*Evil fucking angels.*

*This becomes more of a clusterfuck with each passing day.*

Lilith didn’t wait for Denny to speak. She didn’t want to hear it. Instead, she pulled her friend into a tight hug. “I would do it again, and I know you’d have done the same. Shake off that unwarranted guilt. Otherwise, I’m going to feel it. Then we’ll both be a crying mess.”

Denny gave a wobbling nod, though she didn't follow the order.

Nate didn't touch my mate, but he did take hold of his. That contact eased the strain on both of them. "I'll never forget what you did. For the rest of my life, I will remember that you put yourself in the path of danger to spare my mate."

"You're immortal," I pointed out.

"Then I will remember for a very long time."

There was still a lot to talk about, but everything could wait. The day had been long and tense and emotional. My compassion for others might have been renewed, but my mate came first.

Always.

I barely waited long enough for her to say goodbye before teleporting us to my living room.

My beautiful Lilith gave me an innocent smile. The innocent part was forced. The love and happiness were not. "I know I had literally just promised that I'd be more careful—"

"I'm not mad at you, my soul," I reassured her. "Let's go upstairs so I can check you for injury."

Taking in the severity of my tone, Lilith leaned into me. "That's unnecessary. I told you, I'm fine. I don't need a doctor's note to clear me or anything. I'm ready and eager for the more strenuous activities you mentioned. You know, now that you've gotten me home."

"Didn't you hear? I left the hospital to become your private physician. Daily physicals." I gripped her hips. "Probably twice daily."

"Oh. Yeah, I do think that's a good career move."

"I'm going to start by inspecting every inch of your body for injury. Next, I'll reassure myself that you're safe by licking you until your taste embeds itself in my DNA. Then I'm going to fuck you until I know you can't be taken away from me again because you'll be too sore to even get out of bed. And because I'll be holding you down the whole time." A tremor



went through her, and I slid my hands from her hips to cup her ass. I squeezed the cheeks and yanked her closer so she could feel me.

How hard she made me.

How happy she made me.

How much I loved her.

Lilith felt it all. “I love you, too. Now take me to bed before I die.”

“What kind of doctor would I be if I let that happen, my soul?”

The End

For now...

# FROM THE PERVY MIND OF THE AUTHOR

Thank you, reader, for going on this journey with me. Thank you for allowing me the chance to put my soul on paper. Computer? You know what I mean.

Lennon and Lilith's meet cute came to me while I searched for parking in a hospital garage. It became clearer when I rode in the elevator. And I continued thinking about it all through my own dad's oncology appointment.

When I started writing *Broken*, I didn't intend to put so much of our real life into it. It was scary and nerve-racking and intimidating to open a vein and spill my sorrow onto the page.

What you read here is mostly how it went. The shock. The devastation. The helplessness.

And, yes, even the jokes and laughter. I know there are some readers who will say that it's unrealistic, and that's fine. Maybe for them it is. Everyone handles trauma in their own way, and there's nothing wrong with that. But those jokes were pulled from my real life. *Including* the morning wood one.

Although so much of my experience is mirrored in Lilith's, at the time of writing this, my dad is still alive. It's been a long road. A tough road. A dreadful road that is set to a slow and steady decline that I know will leave me broken in the end.

But for now, the road is still going. Dad is still going. And I'm grateful and in awe of his strength. I know one day he'll be done, and that'll be a different kind of strength. And I know I'll feel the same way Lilith does—devastatingly sad but with no regrets thanks to a million amazing memories.

Anyway, thank you for coming along on this journey with me. Thank you for giving me an outlet to be raw and vulnerable. Thank you for the constant love and support.

This book is dedicated to you, my reader.

To my Mister.

And to my dad, who is also my best friend.

PS If you'd like to musically know how I felt after the diagnosis, check out the Spotify playlist. I listened to All Who Remain by Beware of Darkness as I drove home that night. I sobbed the whole way. Sirens by Pearl Jam is 100% the song for my parents. I'm a little misty eyed just thinking about it. I need cotton candy.

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Growing up, Layla Frost used to hide under her blanket with a flashlight to read the Sweet Valley High books she pilfered from her older sister. It wasn't long before she was reading hidden Harlequins during class at school. This snowballed into pulling all-nighters after the promise of "just one more chapter".

Her love of reading, especially the romance genre, took root early and has grown immeasurably until it was time to write her own stories.

When she's not writing, Layla Frost is an insomniac with a deep love of iced coffee, tchotchkes, plants, and her hens. She's also the world's okayest mom, but her kids think she's cool... ish.