

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

CALIMANN



DELPHINE



Delphine

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“**N**o one wants me in Silver Springs,” I said, climbing out of the truck cab and looking toward the one-story bungalow. The siding had definitely seen better days. It was a pale blue that flaked off with the light breeze. The wind carried the smell of fallen leaves that had settled on the ground around it. A bright orange pumpkin sat on the steps up to the porch, a splash of red across its face. “And I don’t want to be here.”

“Yeah, so you’ve told me over and over again,” my sister Phoebe muttered, coming around to the sidewalk. Like me, she wore an old pair of jeans and a blue fleece jacket with her logo on it—two paint brushes leaning against one another. The painting coveralls were in the bed with the cans and brushes and other supplies. “But, Delphy, Peppermint asked for our help.”

I pouted, though I felt like a child—but what else did one do around older sisters?—and kicked a pile of leaves with the toe of my boot, scattering them. Still, even I couldn’t say no to one of our oldest friends. “House painting really isn’t my gig.”

Not that I had a gig, really, as I wasn't good at anything, except sitting on the couch with a tub of popcorn watching nature documentaries. I was really good at that. "Did you know humpback whales don't eat for most of the year?"

Phoebe rolled her eyes at me. "Painting isn't that hard, and you know I can't do this by myself while Ocean is out."

I gave a half-hearted smile. Our sister Ocean was usually the other half of The Two Woman Crew, my sisters' painting company, but she'd gotten an offer she couldn't refuse—a month-long cruise through the Mediterranean. Now that I wouldn't complain about, even with the cooler temperatures and rougher waters of November.

"And you need to pay rent," Phoebe reminded me.

I groaned and pulled the jacket tighter around me. I'd moved to the human city of Atlanta in a bid to escape my overly loving and overly magical family, but I'd been struggling to find work. My last job had downsized, and my barely capable secretary skills had been the first to go. That's what I got for majoring in liberal arts. The bills were piling up, and I'd lose my apartment soon, and I wouldn't get anywhere sitting on my butt watching nature documentaries.

Phoebe grabbed my arm and dragged me up the walkway.

"But there are just so many supernaturals here." I had seen the lines of magic as soon as we crossed into town. I fingered my suppression medallion. "And I'm dangerous to other magic people."

Just another reason why I'd moved to the human city. I wasn't safe to be around, even with the medallion controlling my power. And despite its size, Silver Springs had a small town feel. I'd been here barely a minute, and everyone in town probably knew about my problem. The ever helpful

residents had already roped me into trying to uncurse Minnie. It hadn't worked of course.

Ignoring my continued muttering, Phoebe knocked on the white door.

Peppermint flung it open, looking flustered. Her dark hair was cut short, and there was a yellow glow around her that my magic seemed to associate with shifters. Of course, I already knew she was a bird shifter. We'd met Pepper when she was briefly enrolled in the same elementary school as we were, and the teacher decided to sit Pepper and Phoebe right next to each other. They became instant friends, and she brought Pepper home to hang out with the family. Once the Norwood girls adopted you, there was no escape.

"Am I glad to see you two," Peppermint said, pulling us into a hug as if we hadn't already seen each other a few times over the last couple of days.

Despite my misgivings about being in Silver Springs, I couldn't help hugging her back. We didn't get to see much of each other now that we'd all grown up and gotten on with our lives. We'd come into town on Wednesday night, and Phoebe had dragged us off to some party at a club as soon as we'd gotten here. But we'd had a chance to grab coffee with Peppermint at Jewel's Cafe and explore the town a bit. I'd been particularly impressed by the Magical Rooster and its collection of sex toys, but I doubted they'd work as intended with my affliction.

Once Pepper let us go, Phoebe lifted a foot to step inside.

Peppermint held out her hands in a stop motion. "I'm sorry," she said, gesturing behind her to the enormous pile of luggage that filled the hallway. "The guys think they need to bring everything and the kitchen sink to the beach. There's not really a walkway."

My lip quirked. There really was more luggage there than I'd ever seen in one place. You'd think they were fashionistas and not Vikings from a time

when all they wore was the clothing they could make. We hadn't actually met Peppermint's guys, but I hoped we would before we left Silver Springs. Not often one gets to meet real live Vikings.

A flash of skin appeared behind her. I leaned over to see what looked like Thor from the movies walking by, naked. My mouth dropped open and I think I started to drool.

Phoebe scooted next to me and peered inside. "Oh my," she said. "Is that Thor?"

Peppermint sighed and rubbed her face. "Birger, put some clothes on!"

"What, sota?" he asked, pausing and giving us the full frontal show.

Phoebe fanned herself, and I knew my eyes must have been the size of . . . well, he was certainly the size of . . . I swallowed.

"Get dressed," Peppermint yelled, shooing him away.

"Well, um," Phoebe said, trying to get herself under control. "What a large man you have there."

Peppermint grinned despite herself. "Yes, it's true. Three, in fact."

I smiled back at her. What would it be like to have three lovers? I wasn't a virgin, but I had been so hesitant to get involved with any guys for more than short-term flings. Once they got to know me, magical ones would hate my power as much as I did, and humans, well, they just wouldn't understand. It just seemed better to keep things casual.

"But"—she gestured toward the house and the trees which were covered in strange markings done in red and blue paint—"they aren't good at some things."

Phoebe nodded. "It's a mess."

"I know," Peppermint said. "I'm so glad you were able to come at such short notice."

“Not a problem,” Phoebe said, giving me a meaningful look.

I know. I did need the money. This needed to happen now, not in a month when Ocean got back from her cruise.

“We’re off to Bear Island for three weeks,” Peppermint said. “Do you think that’s enough time?”

“Three weeks?” I couldn’t help my squeak. I looked over the house again and realized that my plan to knock it out in a couple of days was probably unrealistic. The house had needed a makeover before the Vikings had had their way with it.

“Of course,” Phoebe said. “It’ll be all done by the time you get back.”

“You can stay here . . .” Pepper started.

Phoebe smiled. “No worries. We have a hotel already booked.” She pulled out a contract and they started negotiating the details.

I stepped down from the porch and looked up at the bungalow. It wasn’t that big, but it was still a lot in a few weeks, and there were all the trees to clean up as well—was that part of the deal? House painting wasn’t really my thing, but I couldn’t help picking up a few things hanging out with Phoebe and Ocean. I knew the basics and Phoebe would help me with the rest.

The corner lot was wooded and separated a bit from the neighbors which was nice. I expect Pepper’s Vikings were rather loud. I stumbled over an exposed tree root—that had been helpfully painted red—and was caught by strong, muscular arms. I looked up into warm sea-green eyes and a wide smile.

“Sorry, thank you,” I mumbled, feeling like an idiot. I wasn’t usually this clumsy, but I’d been so focused on examining the house and grounds that I hadn’t even seen it.

“No problem,” the man said, setting me on my feet. He held a scraper in

one hand and looked like he was working on one of the red striped trees.

“Are you one of Pepper’s Vikings?” I asked.

“No,” he said, scratching his scruffy chin.

I totally pretended that’s what I was looking at and not the expanse of muscled chest. Though he wore a heavy flannel jacket over a long sleeve t-shirt, the jacket was open and the t-shirt didn’t leave much to the imagination. Nor did the low slung jeans that hugged his hips, and the outline of . . . well, wasn’t my mind in the gutter today? I felt hot just looking at him.

“I’m Hudson.”

I shook myself and raised my eyes to meet his gaze. “Delphine.”

“Nice to meet you,” he said, offering a million watt smile. That thing was dangerously charming. I just wanted to fall into his arms and let him have his way with me. I wondered how any woman ever resisted it.

“I’m with my sister . . .” I said, gesturing back toward the house but not taking my eyes from Hudson. That smile of his was making warmth curl in my core. “We’re here to repaint the house.”

He nodded and held up his scraper. “I’m just trying to help Pepper with the painted trees.”

“Yeah, that looks awful,” I said, way too honest for my own good.

“Well, it’s your lucky day,” Phoebe said from behind me. “Here’s your very own scraper.”

I spun around and looked at her blankly. “What? We’re starting now?”

She laughed. “We might as well. We’ve only got a few weeks.”

“But I thought we were just doing the house . . . Hudson . . .” I stammered. I was an idiot. “Didn’t Pepper hire Hudson to do the trees?”

“We’re painters,” Phoebe said, shoving the scraper into my hand. “Where the paint goes, so do we.”

“The more the merrier,” Hudson said. “That’s what Pepper said when I offered to help.”

Phoebe grinned at Hudson. “I like the way you think. I’m Phoebe.”

He gave her an equally charming smile, and I was starting to feel stupid again. He turned that wattage on for everyone. But hadn’t I just been thinking I only wanted casual relationships? What harm would there be for me to flirt with a playboy?

Phoebe turned and looked around for her own trees.

“Hey,” I said. “Do you know why they painted the trees? I mean the house kinda makes sense, but red stripes on trees?”

“They’re Vikings,” Hudson said with a shrug. “Maybe they were marking territory or something?”

“Maybe . . .”

“Here,” Hudson said amiably. “I’ll show you what has been working for me.”

Unable to resist his smile, I grinned back. Then I finally noticed the warm yellow glow of a shifter around him and I hesitated. One of the few benefits of my magic was that it let me see others' powers, so I knew exactly who I was harming. I grasped the medallion on my neck, reassuring myself it was there. Without the amulet, my magic would short out everything magical around me—spells, enchantments, shifters, vampires. I sighed. I’d been distracted by his smile and the glow hadn’t registered.

Hudson demonstrated his technique of removing the paint without damaging the tree too much by using the scraper and some sandpaper. Then he got behind me and took my hand in his so we were both holding the scraper. I’d been cold crossing the lawn as I was used to the warmer temperatures of the South, but his body radiated heat. I wanted to lean into

him and let him rub the cold from my limbs. I nibbled on my lip and tried to focus on the task at hand as he guided my hand through the motions.

“There,” he said huskily in my ear, “just like that.”

“Thanks.” I turned to look at him. Despite the interest showing in his warm green eyes, I should be moving away. He’d never be interested in me after he found out what my magic was, and it was unlikely to stay a secret in Silver Springs for long. “How’d you get roped into this?”

He grinned again. “I do odd jobs wherever I happen to land. I came to town for the aquarium opening, and Pepper said she needed an extra hand.”

“Oh,” I said. “You don’t live here?”

“Home is wherever the waves take me,” he quipped.

I started work on my tree as he moved back toward his. I glanced around the yard again. Even with the three of us, this was going to take all day. I sighed. I’d wanted work but not this kind of work. Though if it meant getting to look at Hudson, how bad could it be? Not that I could ever ask him out. What would I say? I’m your worst nightmare and can steal all your magic?

I was exhausted after scraping trees for a couple of hours. I wasn’t sure my arms were even going to recover enough to paint. I could barely lift them. So when Phoebe suggested a coffee break, I eagerly said yes. To my disappointment, Hudson declined, saying he had to get to his other job at the aquarium.

But I got to watch his nice ass walk away so it wasn’t all bad.

Phoebe and I had been to Jewel’s Cafe a couple times, and we knew how amazing the coffee was, so that’s where we headed. I couldn’t help gaping at the people walking by with their magic bright around them. What I saw wasn’t exactly auras, as we knew witches who saw those, but magic. Witches and shifters and vampires and fae wandered among the humans on the

sidewalk. I'd been living in a human city so long that my senses felt like they were on fire with all this magic.

We headed inside, and the bell tinkled as we entered. After getting our drinks from Minnie, we settled at a table near the window. I took a sip of my drink, more milkshake than coffee. I'd been tempted by the pumpkin spice latte which was on sale, but I'd gone with a mocha cookie crumble confection instead. It was ridiculous and delicious, and I almost moaned as the flavor hit my tongue.

My sister sat across from me, leaning forward over our wooden table, her eyes eager. "It's your birthday, isn't it?"

I scowled. "You know it is." I'd always hated my birthday. When our parents tried to do some magical extravaganza like they did for my sisters, my null magic would destroy it. And my sisters didn't much want me at their events either.

"I got you a present," Phoebe said, passing me a plain white envelope.

Taking it with trepidation, I asked, "Are you sure it won't explode on me?"

Phoebe giggled.

That was never a good sign. Growing up in a household with three sisters, I'd earned my suspicious nature. The youngest, Clio, was usually the trickster, but Phoebe had been known to pull her own share of pranks.

I turned the envelope over in my hand. Should I take off my amulet and take all the magic out of it? Would that help or hurt? Of course, it wouldn't be good for the rest of the patrons, even though it was slower this afternoon. I remembered what I'd done to Amber's baby cribs and sighed. "When did you have time to get it? We've been together all day."

Phoebe grinned. "A friend gave it to me."

"Gave or sold it to you?" I asked, fishing for more information. Had

Peppermint handed her something when I was off stumbling over tree roots into a handsome shifter's arms? I took another sip of my drink, the whipped cream coating my upper lip.

Phoebe scowled at my drink as she sipped her coffee with cream and no sugar. She was the oldest of us, and the most practical. Which had been great when we were young and our parents took off for digs in Egypt or Peru or wherever, and we were left on our own with the nanny of the hour. Phoebe was the steadying influence for all of us.

But she'd also given me this highly suspicious envelope. I bit my lip.

"The envelope won't bite," Phoebe said, her lip quirking into a smile again.

I raised an eyebrow. Out of all our sisters, Phoebe and I looked the most alike. Both tall with straight blonde hair, long Grecian noses, and blue eyes. We took after our mother, though we got our coloring from Dad.

Phoebe sighed. "I promise."

I slid a nail under the flap and pulled open the envelope. Then I pulled the card out. On it was a picture of a dolphin and text that read: Congrats! You are now the proud parent of Dolly the dolphin. Come and see your new pet at the newly opened Silver Springs aquarium.

My jaw dropped open. "You bought me a dolphin?"

Phoebe shook her head. "Adopted. Not bought. It's a fundraiser they are doing for the new aquarium."

I spied the fine print at the bottom of the card: No creatures may be removed from the aquarium. This is a symbolic adoption only. I couldn't help the grin that spread across my face. I looked up and met my sister's eyes. "This is awesome."

Phoebe grinned. "A Dolphin for Delphine."

I rolled my eyes. "What am I supposed to get you? The sun?" Our parents

had named us all Greek names, and Phoebe's meant the sun.

My sister laughed. "Now I wouldn't mind a good-looking sun god . . ."

I snorted. This really was great. I'd just spent the last week watching a documentary on whales and dolphins. This was the perfect gift. "Did you know dolphins like to blow bubbles?"

Phoebe laughed. "You and your random facts. You should have gone to school for zoology or something instead of majoring in English."

I twisted my lips. "Yeah, I should have." Was it too late to go back? Not that zoology would really be a more useful degree. I bet it was just as hard getting a job working with animals as it was finding secretarial work.

Behind Phoebe, Amber, the owner of Jewel's Cafe who was heavily pregnant with triplets, smiled. "Happy birthday, Delphine," she said. "I definitely can't compete with dolphins and gods, but how about a free drink on the house? Anything you want from the menu. You too, Phoebe."

"Thanks, Amber," I said. Looking at my card again, I smiled. I guess there were some good things about spending some time in Silver Springs. I did always especially love dolphins, and not just because they were my namesake.

Tripp



“Dammit, Levi,” I said, glaring at the vampire. “Why are there dolphins in the shark tank?” We stood at the top of the ramp that showed visitors a bird’s eye view of the tank. Below us, the main room buzzed with excited aquarium visitors.

Levi shrugged, but he couldn’t hold off the smile that quirked at his lip. “Dunno, boss, it’s your magic.”

I sighed and turned my glare on the dancing dolphins. The sharks had fled back through the portal to their regular habitat as soon as the dolphins appeared. The smell of salty water rolled over me, along with a helping of spray, as a dolphin jumped. Wiping the drops from my forehead, I spun on my heel and headed down the ramp toward the main floor. We needed to get them back into their own tanks before the visitors noticed.

Levi trailed after me. “It seems like the incidents”—he shook his head—“. . . attacks, whatever . . . well, they are getting more frequent, aren’t they?”

I growled. Why had I ever thought that a magic aquarium was a good idea? Sure I wanted to do good after escaping my evil mentor, but I’d bitten off

more than I could chew. Ever since we had our “grand opening,” the aquarium had been plagued by mishaps. I honestly didn’t know if I could handle another one. My magic had been working overtime, and my temper was frayed. Over the last week, I’d been closing up misfiring portals all over Silver Springs. I’d thought that was what was causing our problem, but the portal mess had been cleaned up and it still kept happening.

A woman screamed. My head whipped around and I stared at the strawberry-blonde woman with her hands on her hips, yelling at the unkindness of ravens attacking her. She’d been standing near the tide pool of stingrays, which was now empty. Dammit.

Levi and I both ran over to see if we could help. The birds seemed oddly focused on the crazy woman, and she, in turn, acted like she knew them, or at least one of them. Were they shifters or really birds? What was I thinking? Two minutes ago they’d been stingrays. When a suddenly silent raven perched on the woman’s shoulder, she scowled at it suspiciously. Maybe she’d brought that one with her?

But I didn’t have time to make sense of it now, so I shoved my hands into the mass of birds, forcing my magic to turn them back into stingrays. Sweat broke out on my brow as I pushed and pulled the unfamiliar spell, but finally, the stingrays tumbled back into the tank. They promptly disappeared through the portal taking them back to the ocean. I couldn’t blame them, but I hoped they’d come back before the bus from Silver Springs Elementary came or the children would be disappointed.

I wiped my hand across my sweaty brow and wished I’d tied my long hair back today. Levi was seeing to the woman who’d been attacked, and she seemed to be all in one piece. I looked around, hoping that we were safe for

the moment. My eyes scanned the lower level then up the ramp to the shark—now dolphin—tank then back down.

Another blonde woman strolled toward the exhibit where the dolphins swam. Her long hair fell straight down her back and light blue jeans cupped a perfect ass. I could just imagine how it would feel in my hands. I shook myself. I had more to worry about right now than checking out random women. I shot another gaze around the main room. The attacks hadn't been coming so quickly before, and I didn't know what had changed. We might need to shut down the aquarium until I could figure out what was going on.

But I returned to the woman, giving her another glance. She looked oddly familiar. Hadn't I seen her somewhere recently? Maybe at a party? She took the ramp up to the top of the tank then leaned over the edge, peering in. A dolphin with a strange collar—were those gem stones on the collar?—met her at the top and she reached out her hand to pet it.

I headed up the ramp, because that just seemed strange. Dolphins were friendly but it almost looked like they were talking. Of course, we were in Silver Springs . . . I froze as strange orange lines erupted from the blonde woman and raced toward me, and I felt the magic hit like a ton of bricks. I stumbled and barely kept my feet. I narrowed my eyes at the woman and noticed more orange magic linking her to Levi and his brother Roman, my vampire coworkers. A fourth orange line surged toward someone else, who I couldn't see in the crowded main floor. More strange magic. What crisis would it cause now?

Something stirred in me, some kind of emotion. I shoved it back down as fast as I could and scowled. Was this some new incident? Was that woman behind the other attacks on the aquarium? My gaze was darting between the

woman and this strange magic, trying to make sense of it, when all hell broke loose.

The blonde woman screamed, reaching into the tank for something, and her feet lifted off the ramp. The dolphins chittered.

Levi took off up the ramp but his movements seemed slower than usual. Roman and I headed up as well, and something gold colored slid down through the tank. The dolphins nudged at it as if they wanted to play, or maybe they were trying to retrieve it for her.

I stumbled to a stop, grabbing the handrail, as all of the portals I was supporting—that let the animals roam between the aquarium and the sea—suddenly stopped working. I pushed out with my magic and . . . nothing. I'd been completely cut off. I frowned at my fingertips, looking for the magic that had been with me my whole life, but it was gone. What the hell?

I took a breath, not knowing what to do or what to think. Was it just me? Was this another attack? Had she caused it? Or was she a victim as much as I was? I kept climbing the ramp. I needed to get to the bottom of this and fast. The animals wouldn't be happy to be trapped here, and even if I got the portals working again, they might not return. I'd have to call on that loafer, Hudson, to help. As a sea turtle shifter, he claimed he spoke "the language of the sea" or some such nonsense.

Levi and Roman had reached the blonde woman. Roman dropped on one knee and attempted to comfort her, pushing up his glasses nervously. The spectacles were just for show, of course, as his vampire sight was perfect, but Roman felt all academics needed them to look professional. It was also the only difference between him and his twin, so I'd been grateful for the reminder of who was who.

Levi kicked off his shoes and dived into the tank.

I had just reached the top of the ramp. “What happened?” I asked Roman as the woman seemed too upset. I wasn’t going to get any sense out of her.

“My necklace,” she said just to prove me wrong. She pointed toward the tank.

There were grumblings from the floor of the aquarium, and I peered down but I couldn’t see anything happening, but maybe this attack was affecting more than just me and the portals. Had magic been shut down throughout the aquarium? Many of our visitors were witches, so that would be sure to cause some complaint.

I looked over at Levi, who was swimming toward the glinting object. Only, he did the strangest thing—he froze, gulping as if he was trying to breathe, then rushed for the top of the tank.

“What’s going on?” I muttered. “Is it another attack?” We really were going to have to find out who was sabotaging the aquarium.

“My necklace . . .” the woman said. “My magic . . .”

Levi pulled himself over the edge of the tank, gasping for air. He felt his mouth and then looked at me with wide eyes. “I’m human.”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you,” the woman said.

We all turned to her.

“My magic nulls out yours, unless . . .”—she looked forlornly toward the tank—“I have my medallion.”

“That’s not possible,” Roman said, scratching his chin where hairs seemed to have miraculously sprouted. I expected the brothers hadn’t had beards since they were turned, over two thousand years ago.

Levi glowered at the tank. “I assure you. I am completely human . . . again.”

I couldn’t help a smirk at his annoyed tone. Even my adrenaline-rush-

loving employee definitely didn't like this turn of events. "I suppose we should have invested in some human scuba diving gear after all."

Levi was not amused by my tone. "You've never encountered something like this?" I asked the brothers. Surely, in all their years, they must have.

They shook their heads.

I hadn't either. I frowned at the woman. She bit her lip nervously, and I found myself focusing in on the pale pink of her mouth. I wanted to grab her and kiss her and carry her away from everything. No, that wasn't right. That magic, whatever it was, was messing with my thinking when I most needed to think clearly.

"What do we do?" I asked, more to myself than to any of them.

"If I get some distance away, you'll be back to"—she looked us over—"your normal selves."

"Then we can dive for the necklace," Levi said, scratching his neck.

Roman stood and offered a hand up to the woman. "I'm Roman," he said and then, "I'll take you on a walk, if that's alright?"

The woman nodded and took his offered hand.

"I'm Tripp and that's Levi," I said awkwardly, as if I'd just remembered manners existed, which wasn't far from the truth. I hadn't grown up around a lot of people.

"Delphine." She gave a small smile.

I remembered where I'd seen her before, a party at Vee's, where they'd been celebrating the end of the portal mess. I should have recognized her. I'd thought she was pretty then, and my libido—despite the current mess—agreed now. But I had a firm no dating rule. I'd done so many bad things when I'd been with my mentor, and there was no making up for that. No woman—magical or otherwise—would want anything to do with me.

I shook myself again. When did I start drifting off like this? There was an emergency to handle. Besides, I still couldn't be sure that she hadn't caused this whole mess on purpose.

Delphine headed down the ramp with Roman.

I scanned the crowd as they went, seeing the magical types jump as her circle of influence reached them, and sighed. I hoped this didn't put people off coming to the aquarium. The other mishaps had been explained away as entertainment, but there was nothing fun about being cut off from one's magic.

Roman



I led Delphine down the service corridor and out the back door of the aquarium. There were fewer people here on the street, and there was a park just across the way, so I steered her in that direction. We crossed the street and strolled down the sidewalk.

Her energy was tense, rolled up in a ball inside her, and her gaze darted around us. I rubbed her arm through her thin sweater as we walked. She must have left her coat in the aquarium, but the day was warm for November, so I thought she'd be okay. I enjoyed the feel of warm sun on my skin, in a way I hadn't for two thousand years. Vampires might not burst into flame in the sun, especially ones as old as my brother and me, but it didn't feel like this. This was amazing.

A man wearing dark glasses walked toward us, a cane in his hand. Just a dozen steps away he stumbled, and we watched, pausing. After righting himself, he took a couple more steps then murmured something to himself. He froze and, reaching up, patted his head frantically. His words were coming faster now, but I didn't have my vampire hearing to make them out.

Delphine glanced at him and then down at her feet, her shoulders slumping. “I’m sorry,” she said softly. “I’m sorry.”

“Hey, hey,” I said. “It’s okay. It’s only temporary.” I didn’t know what kind of magic the man had, but her power had taken it, just like she’d taken my vampirism.

“But . . .” She eyed the blind man again.

“He’ll be fine,” I insisted. I had no idea if that was true, but she’d said it was a range thing. Once the man got out of our vicinity, he should be okay. And Delphine looked so upset, I found myself wanting to do almost anything to help her. There was a pull in my chest that hadn’t gone away, even though I was human. I didn’t know what it was, but I didn’t want to leave her side.

We stepped through the entrance of the park and by the three statues of the Fates that topped the fountains. The Maiden, the Matron, and the Crone seemed to watch us from their respective posts as we passed. In fact, I could have sworn I saw the old one smile, but if there wasn’t any magic, how could she? Beyond the fountains was the playground and the sound of laughing children and families. We should avoid them in case any were magic. I guided her into the trees instead that clustered along the south and toward the walking paths. The ground was covered in brightly colored fall leaves, reds, oranges, browns, and yellow. Some of them had been raked into piles, and we weaved among them toward the more worn trail.

Delphine gasped when a nearly naked boy popped up out of one of the leaf piles.

He looked down at himself in surprise and then around. “What happened?”

Another boy ran over to him, laughing. “Why’d you shift, you doofus!” Then he glanced our way and froze, tensing.

“No worries,” Roman said. “We’re in the know.”

The boy relaxed and tossed his friend sweatpants. “Come on, let’s go find the rest of your clothes.”

“Last time I listen to you,” the nearly naked boy muttered, yanking the sweats over his cartoon underpants. “I didn’t feel any lighter without my clothes.”

The other boy snorted with laughter.

Delphine’s gaze followed the boys as they ran off, her look pensive.

“Let’s go this way,” I said, trying to distract her. The walking path was clear of other people as far as I could see, but I missed my vampire senses. I wasn’t used to being limited. “I like to come here when I need to think.”

“I just don’t want to be near any supernaturals,” she said, moving ahead of me.

“Except me.” Though she didn’t answer me, I wasn’t letting her go anytime soon. I studied her. She had a classic beauty like a Renaissance sculpture, just the right amount of luscious curves and fine features. The blue sweater and faded blue jeans she wore were tight fitting and didn’t leave much to the imagination. My all-too-human hormones were awake and alive for sure, and I found myself adjusting myself as I watched her ass sway in front of me.

I hurried to catch up before I dragged her down into the brush and had my way with her. I frowned. That wasn’t like me at all. Besides, Delphine was still so skittish. Me jumping her bones, as my brother would say, wouldn’t have been helpful at this juncture. Instead, I looked around for anything to divert her attention—well, both of our attentions. Wildflowers bloomed along the edges of the path despite being so late in the season. “Asters.”

“What?” she asked, looking around a bit frantically, but calming when she saw that we were alone.

“These flowers,” I said, pointing to the white and yellow blooms along the

path, “are white wood asters.”

“They’re pretty,” she said, pausing and leaning down to smell them. “They smell kind of minty.”

I nodded. “Butterflies like them.” Now that we’d gotten away from the people, the connection between us felt stronger than ever. I’d thought it was magic and it would disappear under her power, but it was strong and steady, like a heartbeat. Did some magic not react to her power? Like the Fates?

Delphine was beautiful, with pale blonde hair and blue eyes, and her figure was almost buxom, reminding me of the beautiful women of my youth. She wasn’t heavy, and she wasn’t a beanpole either. I’d seen lots of pretty women in my time, still there was something different about her—about my reaction to her. I usually preferred my books and my work to associating with other people, but I could walk with her forever.

“Are you okay?” she asked, placing her hand on my arm. “I know being human can be disconcerting.”

I guessed I had been lost in my thoughts. I gave her a smile. “No, it’s lovely actually. I haven’t felt the warmth of the sun in too long.”

She smiled back at me. “Thank you for being kind.”

I laid my hand on hers. She was a bit cold, but her skin was soft and I wrapped my hand around hers. This was probably the only time I’d ever be able to lend a woman my warmth.

“So you work at the aquarium?” she asked, looking away from me, but she didn’t pull away from my grip.

“I’m a conservation biologist,” I said. “I help with keeping the animals and their habitats consistent and happy.”

“That’s cool,” she said. “I always feel sorry for animals cooped up in places like that.”

I shake my head. “They aren’t cooped up.” I winced. “Well, normally. Tripp—he’s our boss—is a magician and he keeps the portals open so the animals can come and go as they please.”

“Really? Wow. That’s kind of amazing.”

You’re kind of amazing. Where did that thought come from? I’d known her all of five minutes and it didn’t make sense to my logical brain, but this was something beyond logic. “Just before you lost your necklace, you were checking out the dolphins.”

She nodded and pulled a card from her jean pocket. “My sister adopted Dolly for me,” she said, handing me the card. “She was the one with the collar on, wasn’t she?”

“She was.” I looked at the card, but there was nothing weird about it. “And yes, she agreed to be ‘adopted.’ She’s one of our regulars.”

“I’ve never seen a collar on a dolphin,” Delphine mused. “Were you monitoring something?”

I shook my head. “No, I didn’t put the collar there. In fact, I’m not sure where it came from.”

“That’s strange,” she said. “I’d thought it was some new way of keeping track of their movements. Like they tag animals in nature documentaries.”

“I agree.” I eyed her, oddly more fascinated by the red plumpness of her lips than her words. “Did you feel the magic, just before you touched her?”

“I did,” she said. “It connected me to you and your brother and Tripp . . . and someone else.”

I was surprised it had affected more than just me. This connection we felt was special, but maybe it was just another way of attacking the aquarium. “Was it a spell?”

“Maybe.” She shrugged. “I didn’t cast it. I can’t cast spells, only negate

them.”

“I still feel it,” I said, moving closer to her.

She lifted her chin to look up at me. “I do too.”

“It makes me want to take you in my arms,” I said, watching her face for a reaction.

She nibbled on her lip. “Then why don’t you?”

That was all the invitation I needed. I pulled her into my arms. My lips met hers, tenderly. She tasted like strawberries, sweet with a little bit of tartness.

Her hands glided down my shoulders, caressing them.

I slid my hands down her back, cupping her ass through her jeans. My hardness was obvious between us.

Delphine didn’t stop though. She kissed me deeper and slid her hands around my waist. She clung there as if she would never let go, and I wasn’t sure I wanted her to.

Delphine



It had been a long time—if ever—since I’d been kissed quite so thoroughly, and I couldn’t say I wanted to stop. I sank into it, forgetting where we were and what was around us. Until Roman’s soaking wet twin bounded up with my medallion in his hand, and we broke apart.

Nobody said anything. We just looked at each other.

I tried to catch my breath. The brothers looked alike with their deep brown skin and their short curly black hair. They were both of similar heights and builds. In fact, without Roman’s glasses—which I was pretty sure were just for looks—they were mirror images of each other.

“Do you have any identifying marks?” I asked, cutting the silence. Although Levi’s wet t-shirt outlined his muscled chest and arms almost perfectly, and his sweatpants clung to his legs and his . . . I swallowed.

Roman grinned. “Can’t tell us apart?”

“Without your glasses, it’d be hard,” I admitted, forcing my gaze away from the bulge in Levi’s pants. Weren’t they cold? Sure, it was warmer than

normal today, but I was wishing I hadn't left my coat at the aquarium's concierge.

"He's got a chipped tooth," Roman said, gesturing to his brother. "Too much waterfall jumping."

"And he's got a scar on his shoulder," Levi said, tapping his brother's shoulder blade. It was covered by a blue button-up shirt with "Silver Springs Aquarium" on the pocket, although the sleeves were rolled up exposing his forearms. He was dressed more business casual than his brother, especially with the black wire framed glasses.

I realized in my inspection, I'd forgotten my medallion was just dangling there in Levi's hands. "I'm sorry," I said, reaching for it.

Levi grinned, not letting go of my medallion. "You were a little distracted when I first arrived."

My cheeks heated, and I knew they were bright red. The pale complexion of my family was so not forgiving.

"I think I might need a payment for its retrieval." Levi's gaze drifted down to my lips.

"Oh?" I breathed the words more than said them, warmth curling in my stomach. I'd felt the magic in the aquarium, just before I'd lost my necklace. It had streaked out, connecting me to the guys, and it had felt right. But it couldn't be, could it? All I'd have to do was take off my necklace for the magical connection to fade, except I wasn't wearing it now and I still felt drawn to these men.

"A kiss, Cinderella?" he asked.

"Y-yes," I answered, leaning toward him.

Levi swept me into his arms, and I gasped at the cold feel of his wet clothes. I was going to be as soaked as he was.

“He’s just as cold as a human, isn’t he?” Roman murmured.

“No,” I said, flustered, “it’s just the wet clothes, I think.”

Then Levi pressed his lips to mine and I was no longer thinking. Instead, I sank into sensation; he skimmed across my lips and I opened for him. One hand cupped my ass, squeezing and massaging, and the other curled around my neck. He was strong, even as a temporary human. A buzz started under my skin, and just like Roman, I wanted only to keep kissing him for the rest of the day.

It seemed like forever, but Roman coughed behind us, and Levi and I finally broke apart.

“Well, well,” Levi said. “Not so bad being a human.”

Roman took the medallion from his brother and dropped it over my head. The two brothers instantly became predators. Not that they seemed mean or anything, but the air around them tingled with magic and they seemed sharper and ready for anything. And the connection we’d had before was stronger than ever.

“Do you feel that?” Levi asked, rubbing his thumb across my lip.

I swallowed.

Roman stroked my shoulders with his hands. “We were meant for each other,” he said softly.

Levi’s thumb traveled across my cheek and down my neck, and I trembled under his touch. I hadn’t ever felt like this around anyone before, and I knew I couldn’t. No matter what the magic said, or I felt, supernaturals would never be happy dating me. Sooner or later, they’d come to hate me and my magic.

“I have to go,” I said, and I fled. I careened up the path towards the aquarium, and the vampires didn’t follow me. They stood silent and still in

the woods behind me. What had I been thinking? I was a null witch. No supernatural would ever want to be around me for more than a few moments. They'd just kissed me because they'd been curious. Vampires probably got bored, living for so long, and I was a new thing. That's all it could be, and the strange magic that connected us, well that had to be Silver Springs reacting to my null magic. I'd just messed something up, as usual.

Lost in my thoughts, I wasn't looking where I was going and I found myself barreling into Hudson for the second time that day. I was going so fast I knocked us both over and into one of the fountains. As if I wasn't soaked enough from touching Levi, I was now drenched, head to toe.

Hudson sat up, laughing as the water fell around us. His dark hair was plastered to his head, and his shirt stuck to his skin. I was seeing a whole lot of wet man today, and I couldn't say it was a bad thing. Like a constant wet t-shirt contest.

"I do like the water, babe, but this seems like a bit much." Then he stopped, peering at me.

I looked down. My thin sweater had become so soaked that my lacey bra was clearly visible. "Oh," I muttered. Dammit, now I am the wet t-shirt contest.

"Beautiful," he said with his charming smile.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, trying to push my way out of the fountain, while not removing my arms from my chest, and failing miserably. I just stumbled and fell in the water again. The cold seeped into my muscles and I started to shiver.

He gestured toward the large building beside the park. "I work in the aquarium too," he said. "One of my odd jobs."

"Oh," I said. I was turning into quite the conversationalist. The spray from

the nozzles jetted over us, like an overly enthusiastic hose. I glanced up at the sculpture of the maiden Fate, and I could have sworn she winked at me.

Hudson stood and offered me a hand. I took it gratefully and he helped me to my feet. Then he released me and stumbled back, dropping to sit in the water again. He stared up at me, eyes wide. “Mate.”

I blinked at him. “Are you okay?”

“You didn’t feel that?” he asked.

I blinked again then looked closer. I hadn’t felt anything, but wrapped around his yellow shifter hue was the same orange magic that I had seen before. The magic that had linked Tripp, Levi, Roman, and me. Was there some kind of weird spell going on here?

“Feel what?” I asked, feeling way more defensive than I should.

“Witch,” he muttered. “Never mind.”

I’d only just met him, but I believed this was the first time I’d seen him without his oh-so-charming smile. “Were you in the aquarium earlier?”

“When?”

“When the magic was going haywire?” I tried to act innocent.

I hadn’t seen him, but I had seen the orange magic going off in a fourth direction. I felt inexplicably drawn to these four men—four men? What in the world was going on in Silver Springs? I knew my friend Pepper had three mates, but she was a shifter, they were drawn to their fated ones. I swallowed . . . Wasn't that what Hudson had just said? Mate. No way. I’m not mate material.

Hudson must have answered but I didn’t hear him. I couldn’t seem to focus as I climbed out of the fountain. I was mated? Was that even possible? I wasn’t a shifter. I ignored my soaked through state and walked away from the fountains. He didn’t move behind me, just sat there in the water.

I crossed my arms over my chest as I walked. I didn't want to give the whole park a show, and I shivered in the cool autumn air. When I reached the road, I tried to figure out which way to go. Maybe I should just call a rideshare? Phoebe had dropped me off this morning, but she had other things to do today. Oh, and my phone and wallet were in my coat at the aquarium desk.

"Hey." A woman approached me. Her brown eyes looked concerned. "Can I help?" She gestured toward my soaked clothes and shivering body.

"Help?" I asked, confused. My head was foggy, and I wasn't sure what to do. I just knew I couldn't be around those guys right now. My feelings were too confusing.

She smiled, and it lit up her face. "I can dry you off," she said. "Least I can do for a fellow witch."

I sniffled. "Yes, please."

She waved her hands and the magic flowed over me, heating and drying my clothes. When she was done, I stretched. I felt like I'd just pulled this outfit from the dryer. "Thank you," I said.

"I'm Natalie," she said. "But my friends call me Nat." Her hair was a rich brown that I'd always envied.

"Delphine, or Delphy if you prefer."

"Do I even want to ask how you ended up all wet?" She arched an eyebrow.

"Had a run-in with a fountain." I pointed back toward the park and the trio of fountains that stood there at the entrance.

"Ah, the three sisters," Nat said. "They often think they know what's best for us."

I blinked. "What do you mean?"

"Those statues on the fountains are the three sisters of fate, and it's said—"

and being Silver Springs, it's probably true—that the real Fates peer through their eyes from time to time and affect the mortal realm.”

“Oh,” I said, not sure what to make of this revelation. The fates had been trying to steer me into Hudson? Or just cool me off from my kisses with the vampire brothers? I shook myself. I'd have plenty of time to overthink later.

“I was on my way to grab coffee,” Nat said. “You want to join me?”

I found myself nodding. I'd have time to get my coat and things later. I needed to get away from here for now.

Hudson



I stared after Delphine. The word “mate” circled around in my head like a seagull that didn’t know where to land. It seemed so permanent, so solid, and I didn’t know what to make of that. To be honest, I never thought I’d have a mate. Sea turtles procreated, but I didn’t think we mated like other shifters.

Not that I had any examples. My parents had left me on the doorstep of a fire station weeks after I was born. After a few horrible years in the human foster system, I’d wandered wherever the water took me, taking odd jobs among the humans and enjoying floating along in the ocean. I’d heard other shifters talk about mates, especially here in Silver Springs where every woman seemed to have at least three, but I didn’t think that was even possible for sea turtles like me.

I climbed out of the fountain and dragged off my t-shirt, then shook and squeezed out the water. Delphine had run away so fast, I hadn’t even had a chance to think about what had happened, let alone explain it to her. That wasn’t fair.

Looping toward the aquarium, I tried to figure out what I was going to do next. Could I just refuse the mate bond? It didn't sound like Delphine even knew it existed. Of course she was a witch. Sea turtles might not have the nose of other shifters, like wolves, but even I could sense the magic on her. Witches didn't have mates, did they? Well, I knew they did in Silver Springs because I'd met a few of them during my odd jobs, or at least the closest witch equivalent.

I slipped into the aquarium through the back door and followed the dark hallway to the main floor. The place was bustling again, with a crowd of Silver Springs school children oohing and ahing over the stingray tank. They'd returned, then. That was good. I was worried they'd disappear for a while. I didn't know who was trying to sabotage the aquarium, but I really hoped they didn't end up accidentally hurting the wildlife.

The vampire brothers, Roman and Levi, were talking with Tripp near the information booth, and I went over to see what was going on. Had another attack happened? I glanced up at the shark tank, and everything seemed back to normal there too. The dolphins had returned to their own tank. I smiled at their happy dance. I loved the aquarium because it felt like home. It was really the only way a sea turtle shifter like me could live comfortably inland.

"You felt it too?" Tripp asked the brothers.

Roman nodded. "We're linked to her somehow. All three of us . . ."

A cold shiver ran down my spine that had nothing to do with the weather. "Linked to whom?" I asked, edging into their group.

"Hey, Hudson," Tripp said almost amiably.

I'd been lurking around the aquarium since it opened, but the grumpy Tripp hadn't even acknowledged me at first. It wasn't until after I came up with the

“Adopt a Sea Creature” fundraising campaign that he started to pay attention to what I said.

“Hi,” I answered, trying to match his casual tone. “Who's she?”

“Delphine of the oh-so-lovely kisses,” Levi said.

A pang ran through my heart. They'd kissed her? My mate?

Roman grinned. I didn't think I'd ever seen him so much as smile before, and this was a full-on grin.

Tripp had his usual scowl so I expected he didn't get a kiss.

If Delphine was mated to them—well, at least Roman and Levi—then she couldn't be my mate too, could she? I swallowed. I guessed it wouldn't be so bad sharing Delphine with these guys because we all lived and worked around the aquarium. At least we didn't live on opposite sides of the world or anything. But how was I supposed to figure out my own feelings when I had so much competition?

I sighed. It was going to take me some time to come to terms with all this. I didn't even really understand it. Realizing they'd stopped their conversation, I changed the subject. “Did you figure out what caused the magic outage?”

“She did,” Levi said.

I blinked. “Delphine?” I'd known she was a witch, but why would she have been attacking the aquarium? Didn't she and her sister just get to town?

“She's a null witch,” Tripp said. “Any time she takes off her medallion everyone in range loses their magic.”

“Including shifters and vampires,” Roman said.

That had been the weird feeling I'd had earlier. I'd been human for a short while and hadn't even realized it. I'd just felt strange. “What an odd power.”

“But it doesn't mean she's not responsible for the other magical mishaps,” Tripp said. “She could have other powers or she could be working with

someone else. Hell, for all we know, this weird binding magic might be some kind of trick.”

Trick? Could someone fake a mating with a spell? It hardly seemed possible. But these feelings and desires didn't feel fake. How was I to know? I'd never had parents to tell me about being a shifter, let alone how to know my true mate. I'd have to figure it out on my own.

Delphine



After coffee and a light lunch with the friendly witch Natalie, I picked up my coat from the aquarium and headed back over to Peppermint's. I was careful not to see any of the guys. My feelings for them were confusing enough without one of them trying to kiss me again.

My sister had only really given me the morning to go check on my dolphin. We'd barely gotten started on the job, but at least we'd finished scraping the paint off the trees. Phoebe had finished pressure washing this morning and now was checking to see if the siding needed any repairs. I'd been tasked with taping up areas like the windows that we weren't going to paint.

Of course, even as I picked up a tape and started taping off doors and windows, I couldn't stop thinking about those two heart-stopping kisses and the strange magic. I'd felt some pull toward the guys that I didn't understand—Roman, Levi, Hudson, even the long-haired owner, Tripp, though I'd barely said two words to him. Was this some kind of weird Silver Springs magic? I knew a lot of the folks I'd met in town—Amber, Pepper, etc.—had more than one boyfriend or husband, but that was just them, wasn't it?

And I knew better. Getting involved with supernaturals was off the table for me. No super could tolerate my magic full-on, and no matter how much my parents had researched it—and as archaeologists, they were experts in research—they'd found nothing about any other null witches. There were objects that worked or could be adapted to work like my magic, but no witch had powers like mine. We'd tried to figure out ways to control it, but the only thing that had ever worked was the medallion.

And if I was around supernaturals, I could never take it off.

“Are you okay, Delphy?” Phoebe asked next to me, and I jumped, ripping the tape up that I'd been applying.

I blinked. “Yeah, what's up?”

“You're applying the tape to the siding instead of the window.” She pointed to my work so far. “I'm pretty sure Pepper doesn't want a striped house.”

“Oh,” I muttered, and then set about removing the tape I'd just applied. “Sorry, Phoebe.”

She smiled. “No worries. Just wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“Just tired,” I said, though I'd just had lunch and coffee so I should have been fine.

“Yeah, those motel beds are a bit lumpy.” She grimaced. “I'm thinking we should have taken Pepper up on the chance to stay here.”

I shook my head. “No, once we really get painting, the fumes will be awful.”

“True.” She returned to surveying the house for any needed repairs.

I sighed. I needed to pay more attention.

“So this is how you paint a house,” a deep male voice drawled behind me.

I spun around and stared at the man behind me. My heart beat rapidly, and I raised a hand to my chest. Tall with long dark hair, he wore jeans and a t-shirt

with a leather jacket over top. He was like a giant walking sign: Bad boy! Girls beware. And I wanted to jump right in.

“Hi,” I said, taking a breath and trying to focus. “Tripp, wasn’t it?” His name didn’t fit him at all. It sounded like a country club man’s name, and this guy screamed dark alleys and tattoos. I wondered if he had any? I ran my gaze over his form again, and my fingers itched to inspect him. I loved a good tattoo.

He inclined his head. “And you’re Delphine.”

“You remembered . . .” I halted, rubbing my chest. Of course he remembered. I had caused a pretty big scene in his aquarium.

A lazy smile crossed his lips, and I felt it all the way down to my toes. There was definitely still some odd connection there. Was it that orange magic? Or was it real?

“I came to talk to you about this morning,” he said. His eyes were a gorgeous blue that seemed to peer right into my soul.

“Oh?” I barely resisted fanning myself. Who would believe I was hot on a cool November day? The sun had gone behind the clouds, and as soon as it had, the temperature had dropped, but I was warm.

He nodded. “I have some questions. Maybe we could go for a walk?”

“Yes!” Phoebe exclaimed behind me, pushing me toward him. “She’d love to.”

I stumbled on the rocky ground, nearly pitching forward but catching myself at the last minute. “Phoebe,” I growled. “I didn’t even know you were there.”

I looked back at my sister and she grinned. She probably thought he’d asked me on a date. I hadn’t told her about this morning. I sighed and glanced at Tripp.

“Shall we?” he asked, offering an arm.

Holding myself back from the eye roll—this wasn’t a date, he wanted to see how much trouble I was going to be—I forced myself to nod and walk next to him.

He pursed his lips but then dropped the arm. “I won’t keep her too long,” he said to Phoebe.

“As long as you like,” she said cheerfully.

This time, I cast my gaze back at her and rolled my eyes.

She waved.

“Sisters,” I muttered.

“Wouldn’t know,” Tripp said. “I am an only child.”

“Oh, you aren’t missing much, believe me,” I continued as if I wasn’t just nervously blabbering for no reason. Maybe he did miss having siblings. Maybe he’d have had nice siblings and not pushy older sisters that dragged . . . um . . . him off to magical towns.

He chuckled.

We reached the sidewalk and turned left, heading down the quiet residential street. It was a Saturday so there should have been a few children out to play, but not on this street I guessed. I was alone with this scary and attractive man. I rubbed my arms through my coat. Suddenly I wondered if it had been such a good idea to agree to a walk.

“I’m not about to hurt you,” he said quietly. His eyes were resigned, as if he expected everyone to fear him. “I don’t do that anymore.”

Anymore. I swallowed. As if that didn’t sound menacing. I could see the magic rolling around him, and unlike the shifters’ sunny yellow and the vampires’ red, it was a dark purple with streaks of light.

“Are you a witch?” I asked, even though I knew it was rude to ask about

people's magic.

He scowled. "Yes, of a sort. I'm descended from Viking magicians."

"Oh, do you know Pepper's Vikings?"

He shook his head. "Real Vikings disappeared from the world a long time ago."

"That's her house." I jerked my finger back the way we'd come. "She rescued her Vikings from the underworld. Something about them being cursed by Loki."

"Actual Vikings?" He looked at me suspiciously.

"Yup."

"That's incredible." He didn't seem like he quite believed me.

"This is Silver Springs," I said.

He chuckled, low and deep, and I swallowed. I was regretting not taking his arm now, because everything in me called out for me to touch him. I barely knew him, but I wanted to jump his bones right there on the sidewalk. I eyed the houses around us and restrained myself. Was this what being mated was like? Pepper had told me once that she'd been unable to restrain herself around her Vikings, that the mate bond came with "a horniness like you wouldn't believe." Was this what she meant? A warmth rose in my cheeks.

"So why'd you open the aquarium?" I forced myself to ask. I stumbled over the words, but I hoped he wouldn't notice. He had me all off balance.

He frowned. "I came here to ask you questions, not to be interrogated myself."

"You're here to interrogate me?" My mouth dropped open in surprise. "I told you how my magic works at the aquarium."

"Well, there have been a lot of strange happenings lately."

"And you think I might be involved?" I couldn't even wrap my head around

what he was trying to say. My magic only did one thing: stop other magic from working around me. I tried to remember anything else happening when I was at the aquarium. Oh, there had been that thing with the stingray tank. “Like the ravens?”

“Yes, like the stingrays turning into ravens, and the dolphins ending up in the shark tank.”

“That wasn’t Polly’s tank?” I gasped. “Will she be alright? The sharks didn’t hurt her, did they?”

“Sharks don’t attack dolphins,” he said.

I think I vaguely remembered that from one of my nature shows. “Why?”

He scratched his head. “Well, I don’t know, really. You’d have to ask Roman. He’s the creature expert.”

“Okay.”

He grabbed my arm and pulled us to a stop. “Wait a minute. I had questions for you.”

“Well, I couldn’t have done those other things,” I said with a shrug. “That’s not how my magic works.” No matter how aggressive he got, that was the truth.

“How do you know?”

I smirked. “I’ve lived with it my whole life. My family is all witches, and they tried everything to figure out my magic, so they would have known if it did anything but null magic.”

“And how can I trust you?”

My mouth fell open for the second time. I’d never done anything to make him think he couldn’t trust me. I’d been honest with them right from the start. I could have just walked out of the aquarium and ignored the mess, but I’d

stayed. I'd taken responsibility and told them how to fix it. And now he didn't trust me? I was speechless.

"When did you arrive in town? Before the Vee party, right?"

"Yeah, but that was less than a week ago." Phoebe and I had gotten to town a few days early, before Pepper was ready for us to start, and Phoebe had insisted on taking me to that party. Who knows how she even heard about it.

He scowled. "The incidents at the aquarium have been going on for at least a week before the Vee party."

"We got into town that same day," I said, putting my hands on my hips. "You can check our motel reservations."

"I will."

I was very near to stomping my feet, but I didn't want him to see how much he'd rattled me. I hadn't done anything wrong. Well, no more than my usual mishaps with my null power, but I didn't even know how the medallion had fallen off. One minute I was reaching out a hand to the dolphin with the sparkly collar, and the next minute, my necklace had fallen into the tank and sank.

Spinning on my heel, I marched back to Pepper's house. He didn't try to follow me, and when I couldn't resist a peek over my shoulder, he was gone. What an infuriating man!

Delphine



Phoebe and I headed over to O'Malley's for dinner. We'd gotten the bulk of the prep work done today, and tomorrow we'd be ready to start applying primer. We walked through the doors, and I was surprised that the pub was busy even on a weeknight. The tables were mostly full, but we could see the bar over the half-wall was less congested. I looked at Phoebe. "Which side do you want to sit on?"

"At the bar?" she asked.

I nodded, and we crossed the room together. Behind the bar, a big frosted mirror spelled out O'Malley's. One of the overhead TVs near us was playing a football game on silent, and across the way another showed baseball. I was lucky I could pick out the types of games as I wasn't really a sports person.

We grabbed a couple of barstools near the wall, and the bartender came over to take our order. A redhead, she wore a gray V-neck sweater and jeans. I could see the purple of her witch magic swirling around her.

"Two of the local beers, whatever's on tap," Phoebe said. "And menus too, please."

The bartender nodded.

“So,” Phoebe said, turning to me. “Who was your handsome visitor today?”

I scowled. “I don’t want to talk about him.”

She gave me a knowing smile. “He’s just your type—all tall, dark, and bad boy.”

“Maybe my type changed,” I said without much conviction.

She smirked at me.

That’s the other problem with sisters. They knew all your business. Who you had crushes on in high school, what you liked to drink, what your hopes and dreams were . . . even if you never even voiced them. And I had three of them, so plenty of room for causing trouble.

The bartender returned with our drinks and menus, and I took a long swallow before I looked at the choices. The malty smell of the beer came through in the taste along with a bit of citrus. It was one of the better brews I’d had.

I should have asked Phoebe about the weird spell and the connection to the four guys, but I wanted to keep it to myself for a while longer. She’d only tease me about having multiple mates like Amber or Peppermint, and I knew it would never work out for me. Sooner or later I was going to have to walk away from all of them. Did I dare have some fun before I did that, or would that only hurt them more?

“What do you want to eat?” Phoebe asked.

I’d been in my own world instead of looking at the menu so I scanned it quickly. “The potpie,” I said then drank some more beer.

“Oh, that sounds good.” Phoebe ordered for us.

I peered around the restaurant wondering if I’d see any of the guys from the aquarium. Two of them were vampires, so would they even come to a pub?

Hudson or Tripp might show up though.

“How was the visit to your dolphin?” Phoebe asked.

I grinned. “She’s adorable. Peeked her head out of the tank and greeted me.”

“I’m such a good sister,” Phoebe said, teasingly. She’d dropped her phone on the counter, and it beeped.

“Don’t you put that on silent?” I muttered, finishing off my beer and ordering another.

“I have to keep it on. It’s the work phone,” she said. “What if it’s a customer?”

I glanced at the clock on the wall. “At seven o’clock at night?”

“You never know,” Phoebe said.

Pulling over my second beer, I narrowed my eyes at my sister. “You wouldn’t have joined Screech’s dating app, did you?”

With our similar pale coloring, my sister’s cheeks could get as red as mine and they did.

“You did!”

Phoebe ducked her head. “Well, it’s not often that I’m around so many eligible supernaturals. I figured it’d be good to look around.”

“I bet.” I laughed, but it sounded a bit fake even to my own ears. Not that I wouldn’t be ecstatic if my sister found happiness. I was just jealous. Here I had four guys making flirty eyes and kissing me, but I knew that they weren’t endgame for me. No one was. I’d probably die a lonely old spinster.

Phoebe nudged me. “We aren’t in a Jane Austen novel, you know.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. My words slurred a bit. This local beer had quite a kick if it was affecting me after only a couple of glasses. I wonder if it was magical. Dammit. I should have asked.

“You’re not a lonely dried up spinster at twenty-seven. You have years to meet your soulmate.”

I sighed.

“And don’t give me that nonsense that there’s no one out there for you,” she said. “That guy this afternoon seemed pretty interested.”

“Not really,” I said. There was no way Tripp would be interested, no matter how much chemistry we had. I could steal his magic at any time. He’d hate that.

Our dinner came, and Phoebe and I plowed through it. The chicken and veggies were perfect on a cold fall night. Just as we finished and I downed my third beer—if I was going to get drunk, who better to do it with than my sister—Phoebe’s phone went off.

She grabbed it off the counter and looked intently at the screen. “Delphy,” she exclaimed, “I got a match!” She typed a quick response to whomever had messaged her.

I coughed up a smile. “Let me see?”

A handsome man with a head of red hair filled the screen, and I glanced at the movement tracker on the bottom. “He’s here.”

“What?” Phoebe squeaked, spinning around on her barstool.

I glanced down the bar, and sure enough, her match was sitting at the end of it. “He’s over there,” I said. “You should go say hi.”

“Do you think?” she asked, peering at herself in the frosty mirror behind the bar. She slid strands of her blonde hair behind her ear and licked her lips.

“Absolutely,” I said and ordered my fourth beer. “Go for it.”

Phoebe was up and headed down the bar before I even got the words out. I guess she really was looking for love. Good for her. I tried to watch without being too stalker-ish but they really seemed to hit it off.

The bartender returned with my drink, and I stared into it. I did want to see if anything was possible between me and the aquarium guys. They'd all been so handsome and I . . . There had been that strange connection, strange magical connection. Didn't I owe it to myself to check it out?

A one-night stand with each of them wouldn't be bad. I took a swallow of my drink. Maybe with all of them? Heat roasted my cheeks and I drank more. When did I get so wanton? Now I was even starting to sound like an Austen heroine. Wanton. I snorted. What a silly word.

I shook my head and wobbled a little on my stool. I pushed the glass of beer away, it was mostly empty anyway, and stood unsteadily. I should just go home and sleep off my insanity. Down at the end of the bar, Phoebe laughed, her head bent close to the redhead.

She wouldn't want to go any time soon. But I could hit the restroom and grab a rideshare back to the motel. I dropped my money on the counter and pulled my phone from my pocket. I messaged Phoebe that I was going to go. When her phone beeped, she picked it up and looked back at me.

"Are you sure?" she mouthed.

I nodded and smiled. "All good."

She gave me a thumbs up and turned back to her admirer.

Then I stumbled back toward the restroom sign. The walls seemed to sway a bit, and I groaned. I really had drunk more than I expected. Passing by some of the restaurant tables, I pulled up short when an older man stood in front of me, blocking my path.

"Excuse me, young lady," he said as if he were a million years old. His hair was graying, but not yet totally white, and he stood tall and straight. He couldn't have been that ancient. He adjusted his wire rim glasses and peered at me intently. "Don't I know you?"

I shook my head. “I don’t think so.”

“I thought I saw you at the aquarium the other day.”

Oh no. That was never a good sign. I leaned a hand on the wall next to me and peered at him. Did I know him? No. But he did have the purple glow of a witch around him. I swallowed. I really hoped he wasn’t about to yell at me for losing his magic. “I was there,” I admitted. “I adopted a dolphin.”

He smiled, but for some reason it made me shiver. “You participated in that Adopt a Creature fundraiser. How nice.”

“Well, my sister did,” I said, gesturing toward the bar. “She bought it for me for my birthday.” There was something about him that felt wrong, bad. But I guess it could have just been my paranoia. I had had a lot to drink. I hiccuped.

“So good of you both to support the venture,” he said, and he reached out as if he wanted to pat my arm.

I jerked my arm away. I couldn’t help myself. I did not want this man to touch me. I didn’t know what was wrong with him, but something was—I was sure of that. “Well,” I said, glancing around the restaurant for help. “I should be going . . .”

He too looked around to make sure no one noticed us and leaned in closer. “Did you feel when the magic disappeared? It was so strange.”

I didn’t want to know how he knew I was a witch, but I wasn’t admitting anything to him. Putting my best clueless bimbo face on, I asked, “What do you mean?”

The man lunged forward and grabbed my forearm, his fingers digging into my flesh. “Tell me how you did it.”

“Let go,” I said, jerking my arm back, and I fell backward, slamming into another man behind me. I turned around, but he had his hands up and a

friendly smile. He was wearing a Silver Springs Fire House 26 shirt, which instantly put me at ease. There were only two fire stations, so I didn't understand why they named it number 26 but whatever. He looked safe and that's what I needed right now.

"Are you okay?" the fireman asked, his dark eyes going back and forth between me and the old guy.

I shook my head. I was trembling and I didn't know why.

The fireman stepped around me and glared at the old guy. "I think she'd like to be left alone."

"We were just having a conversation," he said, drawing up to his full height. There was nothing stooped and elderly about this man. "Nothing to concern you."

"Just the same," the fireman murmured.

I swayed and leaned against the wall. I was a bit ashamed of myself. I should have fought my own battles, but I was in no condition to fight any battles right now. So I hid behind the guy. When the old guy finally slid back into his seat, grumbling, the fireman turned to me.

"Were you headed to the bathroom?" he asked with a wink. His chin was rough with a scruffy beard, and his dark hair was shaved up the sides, leaving it longer on top. "Because I just happened to be headed that way too. Let me escort you."

"Thanks." I smiled and ruined it by hiccupping. I followed him to the bathroom, but before I went in, I glanced back at the old man's table. It was empty. I shivered. I hoped that didn't mean he was waiting for me somewhere else. "Thanks again," I said to the fireman.

He nodded and walked away.

As I went into the bathroom, I realized I'd had no reaction to the fireman.

Even though he'd been a handsome guy. Was it that magic at work? I might have to ask Amber how her mate spell worked, since Pepper was out of town. Was there some way I'd been mated to the aquarium guys? Was there some weird magic at work here in Silver Springs? Who was I kidding—there was always weird magic at work in this town.

Maybe I should take advantage of whatever it was? What's the worst that could happen? I might have some fun before the spell wore off. These kinds of things did that, right? Wore off? I rubbed my head. It wasn't like I was a shifter who mated for life, although wasn't Hudson a shifter? I was asking too many questions for my sloshy brain.

I called the Mystic Transit app from inside and lingered near the front door in case my stalker was still around. I didn't go out until the car was right in front, then I ran across the sidewalk and dived in.

“Where to, hun?” the older lady behind the wheel asked.

I smiled, glad she was a she and not a creepy old man. Then I happened to glance across the street and saw the very man standing under a street light. His silvery hair shone even though his clothes were dark, and his eyes met mine intently.

“Home?” the driver asked.

I nodded but then knew I didn't want to take him back to the motel. I didn't want this creeper to know where I lived. “The aquarium.”

Levi



I was checking the aquarium after closing, looking for stragglers, when a loud banging came from the front door. Opening it, ready to tell whomever it was that we were closed, Delphine fell into my arms instead.

“Levi,” she said, peering into my eyes, “you’re the best kisser.”

“Am I really?” I asked, nearly drowning in her gaze. I was two thousand years old, I shouldn’t have been this affected by a woman, but all my senses came alive whenever she was near. I mentally shook myself. I should have sent her right back home, but instead, I found myself waving the Mystic Transit driver on. I had her. “Better than Roman?”

“He’s good too,” she said, pushing away from me and stumbling again against the door. She looked around the empty entryway. “Oh no, you’re closed. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” I said, offering her my arm. She curled her fingers around it, and fire raced up my limbs. I felt the same rush I got from a jump out of a plane—excited, nervous, exhilarated even though I knew I wouldn’t really die. I’d never reacted to a woman like this.

“I didn’t know where to go with that man following me, and I didn’t want to go home, so the aquarium seemed the safest,” she said, barely taking a breath.

“Who was following you?” I asked as I guided her over to one of the cushioned benches. Was she really being followed? Or was she paranoid because she’d had too much to drink? The beer smell was overwhelming her usual strawberry scent.

She rubbed her head. “He was an old guy, but not an old guy.”

“Very clear.” I couldn’t help my grin. The beer might have been magic. “Were you drinking at O’Malley’s?”

She nodded.

I’d have to sober her up before I could get any sense out of her. “How about I get you some coffee?”

“Okay.”

When I got up, she lay right down on the bench. Her blonde hair spread around her head, obscuring her face. “I’m just going to rest my head for a minute,” she murmured.

“Go right ahead.” I pulled off my aquarium jacket and laid it over her back. I headed for the cafe to brew some strong coffee.

Ever since she’d arrived at the shark . . . er . . . dolphin tank the other day, all I could think about was this woman. And I didn’t even know her that well. Hopefully, I could get to know her, once she sobered up. Even an old vampire like me had scruples.

I had pulled out the coffee pot and had started brewing a strong batch when I heard a scream. I rushed back into the atrium, but Delphine wasn’t on her bench. Where had she gone? Had someone sneaked in after I locked the

doors? I spun around. I hadn't locked the front door. I'd been too busy taking care of drunk Delphine.

Just when I was about to dart out the door and search for her, I heard her cry again, from behind me. I spun around and scanned the tanks and hallways. Then I ran up the ramp to the top of the shark tank, and there she was floating face down. Red liquid slipped down through the tank and the sharks were gathering. No, not red liquid, blood. I jumped into the tank and swam to her.

"Delphine," I cried, but she didn't answer, just lay oh so still. I scooped her into my arms and shook her. "Delphine, wake up."

I didn't have any air to give her if she'd swallowed water. I pulled her to the edge of the tank and pushed her up on the platform. I was supposed to push on her stomach to pump the water out, right? How could I work in an aquarium and not know how to help someone who's drowning? We'd never had humans working here. Not like I needed to worry about Roman, Hudson, or Tripp. They were supernaturals and could take care of themselves.

I rolled her onto her side and hit her back.

She sputtered, but there didn't seem to be much water coming out.

"Delphine?" I tried to look her over and see if there was anything else I could do.

"Whaa . . .?" she asked, opening her eyes at last. "Levi?"

"Are you drowned?" I asked, then felt like an idiot. If she could talk, she couldn't have swallowed that much water.

"No." She squinted and rubbed her head with her hand. It came away covered in blood. "Someone hit me . . ." She looked from her bloodied hands to me and back again.

My fangs popped out and I reared back. She smelled divine; somehow her

own berry scent had mixed with that of the blood. But she was hurt, and I needed to take care of her. This wasn't the time for bloodlust.

"Your fangs," she said, reaching a hand out toward me.

I shook myself. "Not a problem. I'm no spring chicken."

She blinked. "Spring chicken?" And then she laughed. She held her stomach and wheezed.

I frowned. Was she in shock or something? Where was Roman when I needed him? He was a scientist. He'd know these kinds of things. "Are you okay?"

Delphine shook herself and then winced. "I think so." She held up her hand. "Do you have a towel?"

"Yes." That was something I could do. I started to go and fetch one and changed my mind. I pulled off my t-shirt and handed her that instead. "Here. I'll get a clean one, but let's get the bleeding stopped now."

Her gaze scanned over my bare chest, and heat flooded me again. More than my fangs were going to start popping out if she kept looking at me like that. She took the shirt and pressed it to her head. She winced, but she seemed okay.

"You said someone hit you?" I asked, looking down over the main room. I hadn't seen an intruder, but I'd been focused on Delphine. I should probably go and look, but I didn't want to leave her alone.

"I think so." She frowned. "I was coming up the ramp, looking for Dolly, and there was someone behind me."

"Dolly?"

"The dolphin I adopted," she said.

"Oh, this is the shark tank."

"I forgot." Her cheeks reddened and I could see the smattering of freckles

across her nose.

“Did you see anything about them? Were they a man? A woman?”

“No.” She bit her lip. “I didn’t see.”

A grunt came from behind me, and I spun around, ready to attack.

“It’s only me, vampire,” Tripp said, his hand raised and a swirl of purple magic in his palm.

I’d been so distracted by Delphine, I’d let him sneak up behind me. I backed down. I’d been on the receiving end of one of Tripps magical grenades once and I had no desire to face it again. Those things stung.

“What’s going on here?” he asked, taking in our wet clothes and Delphine’s makeshift bandage. “Was there some kind of accident?”

“She came here for . . .” I trailed off. I didn’t even know how to begin to explain it. “Someone followed and attacked her.”

“Attacked her?” Tripp frowned and came closer. “Let me see your head.”

Delphine glared at him, but she lifted the bandage. Her blonde hair was matted down with blood, and there was a growing bump with a jagged slash across it.

“Looks bad,” I said, squeezing my hands into fists. “Does she need a hospital?”

Tripp scowled. “That’s the last thing we need—for someone to get sent to the hospital from here. Then they really will start thinking these strange happenings are our fault.” He stood still, closing his eyes and mouthing some words I didn’t know. Then his hands filled with a yellow glow that he used to make symbols in the air. I did know that shape, the Norse Uruz rune for healing.

The magic settled over Delphine and her skin knit itself back together and the swelling disappeared. She was still covered in blood, but she was healed.

Even after all my years walking the earth, sometimes Tripp's magic still amazed me. He was incredibly strong for a witch.

She touched her head in surprise and blinked her eyes. "I don't really feel drunk anymore either."

Tripp grunted. "Clean her up and get her home, Levi."

"Okay," I said.

"But who attacked me?" she asked. "And how did they follow me in here?"

"You were probably drunk and hit your own head on something in the tank," Tripp shot back as he walked away.

Delphine shot to her feet. "I wasn't. And there was the old man—"

Tripp paused and turned back to face us. "What old man?"

"In O'Malley's, this man stopped me and demanded to know what magic I'd done in the aquarium. I got away, but he followed me out to the street and watched when I rode away in the rideshare." She was still rubbing her head as if she didn't quite believe she'd been healed.

"You were drunk though," Tripp said.

"Yeah, but I remember him," she said. "Do you think he hit me?"

"What did he look like?"

"His hair was graying, and he appeared old. But when he stood up, he was tall and not frail. He was a witch, but there was something creepy about him."

Tripp frowned. "How did you know he was a witch?"

"Purple around him," she said. "Like you, but more"—she grimaced—"yucky."

The corner of his lip lifted at the childish word, but Tripp looked thoughtful.

"Someone from your past?" I asked, trying to sound casual. Tripp didn't much like to talk about his personal history. He'd done some things he wasn't

proud of, but hell, live long enough and all of us had done bad stuff. Roman and I . . . well, I didn't like to talk about it either.

"Maybe." Tripp shrugged, then he turned and headed down to the main floor again.

Delphine watched him with narrowed eyes, but when I leaned closer and offered her a hand up, she took it. I led her back down the ramp and into the offices and service area in the back of the main room. From there we took the stairs down to Roman and my apartment. With just the three, or with Hudson the four of us as primary workers for the aquarium, we all found it easier to just stay on site. Tripp lived upstairs in what we called "the Penthouse," but his apartment had too many windows for Roman and I. We'd claimed the basement instead and had it redone to suit our needs.

"You live down here?" she asked as I took her through the door into our living room.

I tried to see it through her eyes, but I didn't know what she'd make of our lair. In the middle of the room was an oversized and very comfy couch, and on either side were tables with large gold lamps. The couch faced the big screen, and in front of the screen I'd lined up several different game consoles. The walls were lined with bookcases with all the different things Roman had studied over the years. We had a small kitchen off one side, though we primarily used the fridge for blood stock. But since Hudson crashed on our couch fairly often, we'd taken to having a few human foods available.

"Yes, I have that bedroom, and my brother's is over there." I flicked the switch on the wall and the ceiling opened up, revealing the tank above us.

Delphine lifted her chin and gazed at the fish that passed by. "It's beautiful."

Delphine



The ceiling was amazing with the tank giving everything a blue glow. The furniture seemed to be black, gold, or dark wood. Everything was sleek and expensive, but what else would I expect in a vampire's lair?

I crossed over to the large and very comfortable looking couch. It was black, of course, in this bachelor pad, but it had two chaise sides and a large ottoman in the middle. I reached out to stroke the cushion, wondering just how soft the leather was, and pain sliced through me. With a scream, I clutched my arm to me. A bleeding gash ran down the side of my wrist.

Levi rushed over, his fangs protruding. "Are you okay?"

I blinked at him, unsure what had happened, then stared at the couch.

A creature rose from between the cushions. With oversized ears, intelligent green eyes, and a long dark-brown-colored body, it took me a moment to recognize a cat. A very self-satisfied looking feline who licked her bloodied claw and scowled at me.

"Cinbad," Levi scolded. "Bad girl."

“Sinbad?” I asked, still in shock. “Isn’t that a boy’s name?” I didn’t know why my brain went there, but I winced at the pain as Levi examined my arm.

“Her name was Cinnamon when we got her,” he bit out, “but she’s so bad that we ended up calling her Cinbad.”

Cinbad swayed down the couch and settled with her back toward us. Her tail swished madly in annoyance.

“I don’t think she likes me very much,” I said.

Levi grumbled something unintelligible. Then he turned my arm back and forth. Leaning forward, he licked along the cut and I squirmed. I’d forgotten I was down here, alone, with a vampire, and now I had an open wound again.

“Hold still,” he muttered.

“What are you doing?” I asked. “I’m not food.”

Levi scowled. “Vampire spit can seal up wounds.”

I frowned. “Then why didn’t you do it upstairs? Before?”

“It was too big, and there were other symptoms. The human doctors would have asked questions if I had to take you to the hospital.”

He continued licking my arm, and I felt warmth spreading through my core. There was something about these guys that seemed to instantly turn me on, even when one was licking a cat’s scratch.

“Okay, I think it’s good now,” I said, trying to push him away. “Where’s the bathroom?”

His tongue trailed up my arm, and I gazed at him. He was beautiful with his topaz eyes, glittering with brown and hint of gold, and his black curls clung close to his head. His rich brown skin looked almost blue in the light from the water tank above, and his muscles were sleek and sculpted.

“Let’s get you cleaned up.”

When he scooped me up into his arms, I barely registered a protest. He

carried me through a bedroom, decorated with pictures of extreme sports and lined with trophy cases, and into a huge bathroom. He set me down on the edge of a white sunken tub. The outside was lined with a shelf of pretty mosaic tiles and the gold faucet gleamed brightly. Across from me was a walk-in shower with three different jets, and a vanity with two sinks.

Levi was removing my clothing and he paused. "I'm going to kiss you now."

"Okay." I touched my lips.

"No," he said. "Not there. Here and here and here."

Suddenly I couldn't think about cataloging the room. He was everywhere, kissing and touching as he took off my shirt and my bra. I must have lost my coat somewhere. I hadn't even noticed.

He reached around me and turned on the facet, letting the water warm up. Then he traced his fingers over my chest, exploring the dip of my collarbone and the curve of my breasts. He flicked each nipple to a peak with his finger, all the while watching my face. My breath sped up as I watched him.

"You're beautiful, you know," he said softly as he pushed my hair back away from my face.

My cheeks warmed and I knew my freckles were standing out against the red, but I couldn't seem to care. "So are you."

Levi grinned cheekily at me. He hadn't replaced his t-shirt, and I reached out and stroked him from shoulders to waist. I leaned forward to kiss him, and he pulled me against him, deepening our kiss. His fingers trailed over my shoulders and down my back, and heat pooled in my core. There were suddenly too many clothes between us, but when I reached for the band of his sweatpants, he stopped me.

"Clean first," he said and stood up. He pulled me to my feet and removed

my pants and underwear. He kissed his way down my legs as he did so, and I murmured, “No fair.”

He chuckled, low and deep, and slid a finger along my clit. I groaned and arched toward him. He kissed my core and then whispered, “Soon.”

I grabbed his shoulder as he lifted one foot and then the other, taking off my socks and shoes. I was glad I’d painted my toenails last night as they gleamed a pretty pink against the tile floor.

Then he stood again, lifting me and setting me into the huge tub. The water came up to my shoulders and I gave a moan as the jets hit my back and legs. He grabbed a fluffy white washcloth and wet it. “I hope this doesn’t hurt,” he said as he scrubbed my head.

“Is there still a lot of blood?”

“Not too much, but it's dried, so I’ll have to scrub.”

I tensed, ready for whatever came, but it didn’t really hurt. He scrubbed and rinsed my hair, and I relaxed. The warm water and his gentle hands were perfect, and I could have let him do that forever.

“The swelling is gone, and the wound is healed,” he said near my ear, “so really it was just washing it off.” He came around the tub and dropped his sweatpants to the floor.

My eyes widened and heat flushed over me as I regarded his manly length. He wasn’t even hard, and I wasn’t sure he’d fit. I licked my lips.

He turned off the water and helped me out of the tub.

I squeaked at how cold the floor was but let him lead me into the shower. There he started at the top again and worked his way down, washing and rinsing every part of me. When his hands trailed over my breasts, I moaned, arching toward him. Then he continued over my belly and his fingers slid into my core, stroking in slow, long movements.

Reaching out, I ran my hands down his chest to the V and wrapped them around his cock. It hardened in my hands and I gasped.

“You’ve been so very good to me,” I said as I sank to my knees. The water sprayed down over us.

Levi watched me with hooded eyes. “Not nearly as good as I’m going to be,” he said huskily.

I took his tip in my mouth and swirled my tongue around it. He groaned and slammed his hand against the wall. I slid my mouth along his length, licking and sucking, then I pulled him in as deep as I could. His thigh muscles were tight under my hands as he strained to hold himself still. I took him in and let him go, over and over again, eagerly watching the emotions play across his face.

Until he groaned and dragged me to my feet. He traced my face with his finger. “I can’t go slow anymore.”

I grinned. “I don’t want you to.”

Levi lifted me and pressed me against the wall. His hand curled around my neck, keeping me safe from banging my head. His cock slid inside me in one long thrust. He moved fast, hard and deep, each time. His hand slid down between us and his thumb tapped my clit. I swallowed as the pleasure radiated over my body.

“Oh, god,” I moaned.

I didn’t think it was possible, but he began to move faster, keeping time with his touches of my clit, until I couldn’t think. All I could do was take one breath in and one breath out, as pleasure shocked my body over and over again. The pressure built, higher and higher, until I came, crying out my bliss.

He followed after me, holding me steady even as his pleasure overrode him. He leaned his head against the wall near my head. “You are incredible, luv.”

I'd barely caught my breath, but with that vaguely accented endearment, I was breathless again. The magic had called us together, but there was something amazing here. I had never been pleased so well, and I was just starting to get to know him. After seeing his size, I hadn't even thought he would fit, but he had, and I'd felt full and complete in a way I never had before.

Levi turned off the water and dried us both off with another of the large fluffy towels. Then he swung me up in his arms and carried me to his bed. The sheets were black silk and were so soft against my skin, I'd never felt better. He held me in his arms as I drifted off to sleep.

When I woke, there were several people at the end of the bed screaming at me, including my sister Phoebe.

Tripp



I crossed my arms over my chest and scowled at the woman on the bed. Of course, I knew her name now, but I still thought of her as “that woman.” I was determined to ignore the string of orange magic that connected us. Until she proved herself trustworthy, I couldn’t be sure that she wasn’t behind the attacks on the aquarium. And if it was Lambert? a little voice asked inside of me. My old mentor had done me dirty in so many ways. I wouldn’t put it past him to have followed me to Silver Springs and decided to muck up my plans.

Well, I huffed to myself, maybe she was working for my old mentor, and that whole running from him thing had been a sham. Maybe the magical connection was something he concocted too, the manipulative old bastard.

Now Levi had gone and slept with her. That couldn’t be good.

I’d opened my mouth to say something, but her sister was already shouting.

“Delphy, how could you not text me or call me or anything? I was worried sick!” She waved her finger at Delphine threateningly. “I could kill you.”

Delphine clutched the comforter around herself—although I glimpsed pale pink shoulders—and glared at her sister. “You were busy. I didn’t think

you'd notice."

I had to smirk. Her tone was petulant, like a child caught doing wrong. I was so glad I'd never had any siblings. Delphine might have been right about them being a pain in the ass. Since her sister had the nagging well in hand, I spent my time eyeing her tousled hair and the soft curve of her neck. I wondered what it had been like to kiss those sweet pink lips, and run fingers over her shoulders and stroke her breastbone. I had to shift my stance, adjusting myself, and I was grateful all of Delphine's attention was on her sister. This spell was incredibly strong.

But I did meet Levi's eyes as he appeared in the doorway to the bathroom. He smirked at me then surveyed the two sisters. He wore only his gray sweatpants and lounged against the door. He looked like nothing more than a satisfied cat.

"How'd you find her?" he asked, giving me a pointed look.

The magic had connected him too after all. I'd heard about the Silver Springs women and their multiple mates, but I'd never thought it would happen to me. Oddly, I didn't feel jealous so much as I only wanted in on the action. Could it have been as simple as that? A fated mate spell that brought lovers together, and not the same work as the aquarium mishaps? I shook myself. I wasn't worthy of a soulmate. I'd done too many awful things in my life, mostly because of Lambert, but still I had done them.

"Well?" Levi asked again.

"Cinbad has been stalking outside the door all night," I muttered. "She doesn't seem very happy about your guest." I expected the sister to keep on ranting at Delphine, but she'd frozen at Levi's appearance and was apparently drooling. I poked her with my finger.

"Delphy," she said slowly. "You know I don't care who you sleep with"—

she eyed Levi again and licked her lips—“but just let me know where you are so I don’t worry.”

“I know, Phoebe, I’m sorry.” She looked genuinely contrite. The sisters’ bond was stronger than I thought.

“Okay,” Phoebe said, accepting the apology. “I’m heading to Peppers to get to work. I guess I’ll see you there?”

Delphine nodded.

Phoebe turned and marched out of the room. I scowled after her. I’d thought she was going to take Delphine—when did I stop calling her “that woman”?—with her.

Levi crossed to the bed and sat down on the edge. He kissed her deeply, and she responded, curling her arms around his back. The comforter dipped, revealing the pink rose of her nipples, and I nearly groaned. I’d been able to keep my distance before because she’d been clothed.

Breaking off their kiss, Levi eyed me. “Are you going to join us?”

Delphine’s mouth opened in a little “o” but she looked at me.

Her gaze scanned me from head to toe, and my cock hardened. I wanted her, that was the truth, but I didn’t want to. What if she was a spy? A betrayer? Even worse, what if she wasn’t? The magic tugged at me, but I forced myself to scowl.

“Take care of your damn cat,” I muttered, and turned on my heel and left.

Delphine



I could feel my cheeks heating at Tripp's departure. I'd really wanted him to join us. Why would he? Why would anyone want a defective witch like me, even if it was just for my body?

Levi stroked the side of my face. "Don't worry about him," he said with a smile. "He'll come around."

I blinked. "I don't need him," I murmured. "I have you."

"But he wants you almost as much as I do," he said. "And I don't mind sharing."

All sorts of racing images rolled through my head at the idea of being shared. My cheeks warmed more, and I dipped my head, staring at the floor, and found Cinbad glaring at us.

"I don't think she likes the idea," I said, pointing.

"What?" Levi turned and gazed down at the cat. "Hey, Cin, this is Delphine. She's going to be hanging around more, so don't be a jerk."

I thought about offering her my hand, but she didn't look at all happy and I didn't want another scratch. I looked around the room, now that the light was

on. There were posters on every wall of different extreme sports: skydiving, snowboarding, surfing, rock climbing, and even more I didn't know the name of. "So you like sports?"

Levi grinned. "I like challenges. When you've been around as long as I have, it's necessary."

"Does your brother share your interest?"

He shook his head. "No, Roman has always been a scientist. He wants to know how everything works and why. I just want to experience it."

"Both sound like fun," I said. "I used to snowboard in high school." I'd enjoyed getting out on the slopes and the fresh air. It'd been peaceful at a time when my house was overrun by siblings.

His eyes lit up. "Did you do any gnarly runs?"

"No, not really." I couldn't help smiling back at his excitement. I didn't think Levi snowboarded for the "peaceful" aspect.

"I'll have to take you on some. There's nothing like the exhilaration of a freeride." He leaned back on the bed, hands behind his head, and gazed at the ceiling. "It's awesome."

I laid my head on his chest and snuggled against him. I didn't even mind the coolness of his skin. "Thank you," I said softly. "For last night."

"Oh, luv," he said. "It was my pleasure, and yours too I hope." He stroked my hair.

"Why do you get a British accent sometimes?" I asked.

He chuckled. "Too much time at Oxford, I suppose. Roman must have gotten every degree they had at one time or another, and I tend to stick close to him."

"You're close with your brother?"

"How could I not be?" he asked. "We've been through too much over the

years not to be.”

“When were you made into a vampire?” I didn’t know if it was impolite to ask, but I somehow wanted to know everything about this man. Now that our passion had been sated, for the moment, I was just interested in him. Pepper said the mate bond was more than just lust, but . . . was that really what this was?

“Over two thousand years ago,” he said with a grin. “I was born during the reign of Cleopatra.”

I gasped. “Such a long life!”

“Yeah,” he said. “That’s why Roman and I developed such deep interests. We’ve tried almost everything, so whenever something new comes along, we can’t wait to give it a spin. We were there for so many firsts in human history . . .”

I swallowed. Was that what I was? Something new for him to try? “Have you ever encountered a null witch like me?”

“I haven’t,” he said with a shake of his head. “We might ask Roman though. He knows everything.”

As I sat up, I worried at my lip. I’d been cuddling like we were a couple and not just a fling. I was sure I was just something new for him to try out, and I shouldn’t read too much into this. “I should get going. Phoebe needs help with the painting.”

“What painting?” he asked, sitting up as well and sliding his legs over the side of the bed.

“That’s why I’m in Silver Springs,” I said. “We’re painting a house for an old friend.”

“Sounds like fun,” he said. “Can I help?”

“But it’s daytime.” I looked around for a clock. “Won’t the sun hurt you?”

“I am old enough to tolerate it.”

“I think Phoebe and I can handle it,” I said. “It’s what we’re paid for anyway.”

He frowned.

“Where are my clothes?” I asked, trying to switch the topic. Phoebe would be waiting for me, and here I was flirting with someone who thought I was a curiosity.

Levi went into the bathroom and came back with my clothes, clean and folded.

I blinked. “When did you . . .?”

He shrugged. “Vampires don’t need to sleep.”

“Thanks,” I said and set about getting dressed. Levi disappeared again and I thought I was going to be able to sneak out. Then I could put this behind me as just another one-night stand. He wouldn’t really want anything long term with me, no matter what magic was involved.

I crossed the silent living room, and Cinbad glared at me from her perch on the couch. “I’m going, I’m going.”

Levi appeared at my side. “We can get you some breakfast at the cafe.”

“No worries,” I said. “I’ll grab something on my way.”

He grabbed my arms and stopped me, peering into my eyes. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

That uncertain frown crossed his face again. “Are you mad at me?”

“No,” I said. “I just need to get to work, and I’m sure you have work to do here.” I opened the door and made my way up the stairs into the aquarium. Levi didn’t follow, and I breathed a sigh of relief. I just needed to have some time to think about what had happened.

I hurried through the aquarium. It was still early. I reached into my coat pocket and pulled out my cell phone. I didn't know why I hadn't even thought to look at it before. It was just nine-thirty in the morning. The aquarium didn't open for another thirty minutes. I didn't pass anyone and just hurried out the front doors and into the fall sunshine.

The weather had turned again, and I pulled my coat tighter around myself. I called Mystic Transit and took it over to Jewel's Cafe first. I was going to need a pick-me-up. I also wanted to ask Amber about the mate thing. Jewel's Cafe was busy when I got there, and there was a line stretching out the door. Every time the door opened, it jingled. I impatiently hopped from foot to foot until it was my turn to enter. The band Not a Vampire was playing but the voices of all the customers nearly drowned it out. Minnie was at the counter looking harassed and two guys were helping her, but Amber was nowhere in sight. Dammit. I wasn't getting any answers today. I'd have to stop back later when it was quieter. When I finally got to the counter, I ordered a hot mocha and a pumpkin spice muffin to go then recalled my ride share.

Phoebe was up on the ladder applying primer when I arrived. The house was looking good. I was honestly surprised that we'd gotten so much done in just a few days.

"Hello," I shouted, but she didn't hear me. I tried again.

Phoebe turned and squinted at me. Then she pulled out her ear bud and said, "Hey, sis."

"I'm going to eat, then I'll get to work."

She gave me a thumbs up and put her ear bud back in. She was in the zone.

I settled down on the front porch to eat. The wood planks were cold under my bottom, but I had the coffee to keep my hands warm. I'd get the painter gear out of Phoebe's truck when I was ready to get started.

The muffin was still warm. I held it in my hands and breathed the spicy scent in. I pulled the edges of the wrapper down. I had just taken my first bite of the amazing muffin when a male voice said, “Hello.”

He wore painter’s coveralls over his clothes. Even with its oversized goofiness—Phoebe always said we looked like giant marshmallows—he was still as good-looking as sin. I could get swept away by his beach-tanned skin and his sea-green eyes. His brown hair fell forward over one eye, and he flipped it back.

“Hi, Hudson,” I said, trying not to be rude and swallowing the bite of muffin. “I thought you were done after the tree scraping?”

“Phoebes said you could use some help, so I thought I’d stick around.” He gave me one of his million watt smiles.

Phoebes? When did he get so close to my sister? An unfamiliar feeling rumbled to life in my chest and I rubbed my breastbone.

I studied him. The magic had—well, still did honestly—connected him to me as well as the others. And he’d called me “mate.” Maybe he knew something about it. I patted the spot next to me on the wooden porch.

“Can I talk to you for a minute?” I offered part of my muffin. “I’m happy to share.”

He perched on the step a bit uneasily. I wondered what he thought I wanted to talk about.

“Do you know anything about this mate magic in Silver Springs?”

“Mate magic?” he asked, raising an eyebrow at me.

I shifted in my seat a bit nervous. “Well, a lot of people seem to have multiple mates.” I waved a hand. “Like Amber, she has three.”

He nodded. “I did notice that.”

“And Peppermint, she has three Vikings.”

“Well, Pepper is a shifter.” He popped a bit of muffin in his mouth.

“But isn’t that odd, even among shifters?”

“Yeah, I guess so. Unless you’re a bear,” he said. “They always mate in groups.”

“And in Silver Springs, they have been known to have spells go awry and start mating people. I think Pepper said something about a pair of skates?”

He shrugged. “I haven’t been here long enough to hear about anything like that.”

“But when we fell in the fountain the other day . . . you called me a mate.”

“I did?” He rubbed his ear as if checking what he’d heard.

I didn’t think he was really confused, but he wanted me to think he was unsure. Didn’t shifters know their mates immediately? Was he just teasing me?

“And I saw magic, orange magic, connecting me to four guys,” I said. “You were one of them.”

He ran a hand through his hair. “I don’t know about that . . .”

I crossed my arms over my chest. If he didn’t want to admit it, it must have been because he didn’t really want a mate . . . or, probably, me. I was trouble for any supernatural. He’d probably hated being unable to shift when I lost my necklace. “I think it must have been some kind of mistake.”

His gaze jumped to mine. “You do?”

“My magic is all wonky anyway, and things have been going wrong at the aquarium for a while now,” I said. “At least, that’s what Tripp says.”

“He does?”

“Yeah, it’s not like anyone wants to get saddled with a messed-up witch like me.”

Hudson scowled, and I realized I hadn’t really seen him without his ever

present smile. He crossed and uncrossed his arms and turned away from me to look into the distance.

I swallowed. I'd been right. Even if we were mated, he was going to reject me. I took a swallow of my coffee. I should have known this was how it would turn out. Levi thought I was only a curiosity, Tripp hated me, and I hadn't even seen Roman since we kissed.

Hudson turned back to me, and he reached out and set aside my coffee and my muffin. Then he took my hands in his.

"You're a very powerful witch," he said. "Anyone would be proud to have you for a mate."

My lips twisted. I wasn't sure what he was trying to say here, and my heart was already feeling bruised. It was stupid of me. I knew better.

"Including me," he said, kissing my knuckles.

"What?"

Hudson smiled. "You have to understand. I'm a sea turtle shifter."

I blinked. I had no idea what that meant. Except maybe they were rare, because I'd never heard of one before. "What does that mean? I mean, I know what a sea turtle is, but what does that have to do with being my mate?"

Hudson pursed his lips and looked up at the branches of the trees. "A sea turtle mother lays her eggs on shore and she leaves them . . ."

I squeezed his hands to encourage him to go on, not sure what to do.

"My shifter mother treated me the same way." He sighed. "I was left abandoned at a fire station in a beach town."

"Abandoned?"

He nodded. "So I thought, well, I just figured, sea turtles must be different. That we must never mate for real . . . but somehow I have."

“It’s just a spell,” I said, “it will fade.”

“No,” he said. “I haven’t been around Silver Springs long, but I’ve learned that even if a spell jump starts it, the mate bond is forever.”

“But—”

He leaned forward and pressed his lips to mine. They were warm and soft, and for a moment, I forgot everything else. I forgot that my sister was applying primer nearby, and I had just slept with Levi, and that we barely knew each other. All that mattered was the way his tongue slid against mine, and the connection that thrummed between us.

Roman



Levi and I rolled up to the bungalow in Tripp's old pickup truck. After Levi had told me about his adventures last night, I was furious that I'd locked myself up in my lab and missed the whole thing. She was mine too.

I pushed my sunglasses farther up my nose. The lot was shady, which would be good. Just because we could tolerate sunshine, didn't mean I was hanging out at the beach anytime soon.

When we parked, I looked over the structure and noticed they seemed to have gotten fairly far already. There was a blonde up a tall ladder applying primer to the siding. She must have been the sister, because Delphine was on the porch kissing Hudson. Jealousy uncurled in my gut like a serpent from its lair. I knew I'd have to share her, and as much as I didn't like that Levi had gotten there first, I was used to sharing with my brother.

But the turtle shifter? He was a lazy loafer. Just because he'd had one good marketing idea, didn't mean he did anything around the aquarium. Spots crossed my vision as I jumped out of the vehicle and charged across the yard.

Before anyone else could react, I had my hands around Hudson's throat and was choking the life out of him.

"She's mine," I growled, not even recognizing my own voice.

"Brother," Levi said behind me, but I ignored him.

Hudson glared at me as he pulled on my hands. He kicked out and tried to move me, but he couldn't. I had more centuries on him than he could probably count. No good. Upstart. Shifter.

A female hand reached out and rested on my arm as Delphine said, "Roman, let him go."

I glanced at her, and she looked nervous but determined. Her pink lips were set in a firm line.

"You're mine," I said. But my grip eased. She was my mate. There wasn't anything I wouldn't do for her.

She stroked my arm. "Let him go. Now."

With a curse, I let the shifter go. As soon as I released him, he darted across the yard and bent over, gasping. My lip curled.

"Roman," Delphine said in that oh-so-calm voice you used with mental patients.

I knew I was acting crazy but I couldn't seem to stop. All my knowledge, and I was helpless against my baser instincts. I grabbed her, zooming us both up the porch and against the door.

"Oh!" she gasped.

I stroked the sides of her face and ran my hand down over her shoulders. Opening her coat, I kissed my way down her neck and her chest. Her heart beat wildly, but she didn't tell me to stop. I lifted up her t-shirt and sucked her nipples through her bra. She moaned.

"I need you now," I said.

“Yes,” Delphine said, glancing around. “The door’s unlocked.”

I pushed it open and pulled her inside the house, then I kicked it closed behind me. I scanned the rooms: living room, kitchen, bathroom, and stairs going up.

“I don’t care where,” I muttered, undoing her jeans and sliding my hand into her wetness. She was already wet and ready for me. I couldn’t help a pleased smile. “Do you?”

“No.” She gasped as I flicked a finger over her clit.

“You’re wearing too much clothing.” I removed her coat and shirt, and then yanked down on her pants, ridding her of her clothing. I moved vampire fast, not caring about subtlety. I needed to be inside her. Now.

She shivered in her underwear and watched me with wide eyes.

“You’re beautiful.” Part of me wanted to stand there and look at her, and the other part—the hungry part—insisted on moving. Before I even thought about it, I surged forward and pulled her against me. I was kissing her as though I wanted to devour her right then, and I did. My hands moved over her skin, caressing her breasts, her stomach, her hips.

“Rowan,” she moaned. “I need you.”

That was all it took. I flipped her around and bent her over the sofa. I ripped away her underwear and pressed my cock to her opening. Grasping her hips, I thrust in all the way and she cried out.

“I didn’t hurt you,” I ground out, forcing myself to be still. She was warm and pulsing around me, and I just wanted to make her mine. The monstrous part of me didn’t want to hold back.

“No,” she said with a little laugh. “Just surprised.”

“I can’t go slow,” I said.

“Fuck me, Roman. Fuck me hard.”

The monster inside me roared in triumph with every thrust, and I felt a deep primal satisfaction as Delphine tightened around me. She was moaning and panting, begging for more, and I complied eagerly.

I slammed into her over and over, faster than she could even take a breath. But no matter how hard I thrust, she met me. She opened for me and took me all the way into her depths. She squeezed around me, encouraging me, and moaned when I hit the end of her.

Holding and stroking the globes of her ass, I increased my speed, pushing her beyond her limit, and she cried out in pleasure. Her body trembled beneath me as her orgasm built up until it took over. She screamed out in ecstasy, and I followed her quickly with an explosive climax of my own.

She was mine.

Afterwards, I helped her up, and she went into the bathroom to get cleaned up. I picked our clothes up off the floor and folded hers, placing them on the side table. I dressed and then I went into the kitchen to get Delphine a glass of water.

A door creaked open and I shot back into the living room, fangs out.

“Is everyone okay?” Levi asked, leaning around the door.

I grinned. I couldn’t help myself. “We’re fine.”

“It’s been a long time since your monster side got the better of you, brother.” Levi came inside.

“That’s true.” I didn’t apologize for it. Delphine was mine.

“You know that the magic connected all four of us, right?” Levi said evenly.

I scowled at him. I was used to sharing with my brother, but a magician and . . . “Wait, four?”

“The shifter claims her as a mate.”

I hissed.

“You know that Tripp said it was that way. That there were four lines of magic,” Levi said. “You’ve never had a problem with sharing before.”

I sighed and pushed up my glasses, that I couldn’t believe I was still wearing. “I’ve never felt like this about anyone before,” I said. “Besides, sharing with you doesn’t count.”

He chuckled.

Delphine stepped out of the bathroom, still in her bra and nothing else.

Levi’s laugh stopped mid-chuckle and his fangs lengthened. He leaned against the back of the couch as if he was holding himself back.

She smiled at him and reached around to unhook her bra.

Delphine



I couldn't believe I was ready to go again. Roman had just had me against the couch, but the look in the brothers' eyes when I left the bathroom was totally doing it for me. I was basically naked anyway, so I just unhooked my bra.

The guys were salivating, if vampires could salivate. I had never been the focus of this kind of attention and I found I liked it—a lot.

I crossed the room and placed my hand on the stack of clothes on the couch. "I guess I could get dressed."

"No," they both said.

"I mean," I said, "this is Peppermint's house . . ." Oh shit, that's right. I had just had sex on the back of Pepper's couch. I didn't think she'd be mad exactly, but it didn't feel right. And Roman had been strangling Hudson before we came in here.

I turned to Levi. "Is Hudson okay?"

"Wha . . .?" he said and then shook himself. "The shifter's fine."

I put my bra back on and searched around for my underwear. It was in a shredded pile on the floor. I guessed it was commando for me. I grabbed my jeans and Roman stopped me, his hand on top of mine.

“I don’t want you to get dressed yet,” he said.

His voice was smooth and sexy and it made my heart thump against my chest. But I couldn’t get distracted. I had some very good reasons for getting dressed. “I need to make sure Hudson is okay, and my sister is waiting for me to help with the house, and it’s Pepper’s house . . .”

Roman made puppy-dog eyes at me which was kind of hysterical on a vampire. I strangled the laugh in my throat though, and just gave him a smile.

“After I get off work,” I said, “then I’ll come over to your place and we can . . .” I gestured. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to after all. Just not here, and not now.

“Well, brother,” Levi said, “guess we better get to work, then.”

Roman smiled and removed his hand from my clothes. “Right. I’m sure if we all work together, we can finish the day in a couple hours at most.”

I blinked. “What do you mean?”

“That’s why we came over here today,” Levi said. “To help you finish your work faster so we could take you out.”

I swallowed.

“You can even bring your pet turtle if you want,” Levi said.

Roman scowled at him, but didn’t argue.

I looked back and forth between them. Three guys and me? I swallowed again, already feeling the wetness returning between my legs. “Okay,” I said slowly. “Let’s get to work.”

We dressed and came back outside. My coffee had spilled and my muffin had gone flying when Roman rushed Hudson. I frowned at the mess.

“I’ll go and fetch you more,” Roman said.

“Yes, do that,” Levi said. “She’ll need her energy later. Can’t be skipping breakfast.”

He picked up the cup and sniffed it. “You had a mocha?”

“Yes, she did,” Hudson said, and he came up with a tray holding fresh coffees and a bag from Jewel’s Cafe.

Roman spun around, glaring.

Hudson held up his free hand. “I come in peace, man.”

“I am not a man,” Roman muttered.

“Play nice,” I said. “I like Hudson too, you know.”

Roman gave an exaggerated sigh. “I will . . . play nice.”

Phoebe came over and Hudson offered her a coffee and a muffin. She eyed all these guys and their attention on me, and she raised an eyebrow. “Do I even want to ask what’s going on?”

I forced a smile. “This is Levi and his brother Roman. They came to help us with the house.” I realized I knew exactly which of the twins was who, and I didn’t need to look for a chipped tooth or scars or anything like that. I just knew. Their personalities were really different.

“You’re recruiting for The Two Woman Crew now?” Phoebe asked, sipping her coffee. The look in her eye told me she knew exactly who Levi was, from this morning.

I took a coffee and a muffin from Hudson and went back to sit on the step. I didn’t know how I could possibly explain what had happened here. I wasn’t sure I even knew exactly.

Phoebe sat beside me and whispered, “Did you fuck them inside Pepper’s house?”

My mouth gaped. “You had your music on!”

She laughed. “And you cum very loudly.”

I felt blood rushing to my cheeks. “It was just one of them.”

“But tonight it will be all of them?” she whispered.

I looked away from her, not willing to answer. Phoebe and I had talked about Pepper’s mate situation before, and we both thought it was amazing. But that was different than admitting I was going to have an orgy to my older sister.

“She’s our mate,” Hudson said, sitting down on the grass with the last of the coffees and a couple of muffins. He very clearly hadn’t gotten anything for the vampires.

I hadn’t known many vampires so I didn’t actually know if they could eat human food.

“Mate?” Phoebe asked, turning to me. Her look very clearly said that I was going to have to tell her everything as soon as we were alone.

I just stuffed half a muffin in my mouth so I wouldn’t have to say anything.

The guys were very motivated to get the work done. With two speedy vampires and a strong shifter, we had the primer applied and were ready to start the first coat before noon.

“We could start the first coat,” Phoebe mused, and then she laughed at the expression on the guys’ faces. “Go on your date, then. But Delphy, you owe me.”

We headed out. Levi and Roman wanted me in the truck with them, but when Hudson offered me a ride on the back of his motorcycle, I couldn’t say no.

I thought I’d be cold—so much so that I’d considered asking Phoebe to give me a warming spell—but as soon as I touched him I knew that would

not be my problem. I wrapped my arms around Hudson's waist and pressed myself against his back, leaning my cheek against it. "You're so warm."

He chuckled, but didn't complain about my closeness. "We're going to stop and grab some lunch from the food truck."

"Sounds good," I said, sitting up. "Did you let Levi and Roman know?"

"Naw," he said. "Let them sweat it." He adjusted my helmet and then put on his own.

Then I wrapped my arms around him again. The motorcycle vibrated against my thighs. We took off, the motor roaring. The world felt closer riding this way, the trees, the pavement, even the passersby. Without the separation of a vehicle around us, we were more at one with the world. The wind that hadn't been strong when we were standing still rolled over us, and I was absurdly thankful for the helmet holding my hair down. It was exhilarating.

I was also insanely aware of Hudson's body tucked close to mine. My arms wrapped around his solid torso, and breathed in his outdoorsy scent, woodsy with a hint of citrus. He'd tossed a windbreaker over his flannel jacket, and the material was smooth against my cheek.

We pulled to a stop in front of Shanna's Food Truck, which was parked just on the corner of Main Street. We ordered two Silver Springs Specials, which were just three items off the menu and mixed up in a to-go box, and I thought it sounded a bit disgusting. But the orders were ready, they smelled amazing. I took a few bites before Hudson tucked them into the motorcycle's saddlebag.

"Are you okay, Hudson?" I asked, rubbing my neck. "Roman didn't . . .?"

"Shifters are tougher than we look."

"I won't stand for him treating you badly," I insisted. When did I go from

not sure I even wanted a relationship with these guys to defending them? I didn't know, but I was sure I wanted some ground rules.

He took my hands and squeezed them. "I'm glad I have you to defend me, my mate."

My cheeks heated again. "I'm sorry. I know you can take care of yourself."

"I can," he said, stroking my palms. "But it's nice all the same."

"Really?"

"I told you I never really had any family, and now I do."

"But you don't know me . . . not that much anyway."

"You're my mate. I'll get to know you." He grinned. "In fact, we can start right now." He wrapped his arms around my waist and pulled me to him. Then he tipped up my chin and met my gaze.

The heat in his green eyes promised all sorts of amazing things. "Your eyes are the most amazing color," I whispered.

"And your lips just beg to be kissed."

Licking my lips, I asked, "Do they?" I was already feeling warmth growing in my core. I wanted this man.

He smiled, and leaned down, his lips hovering over mine.

My heart fluttered in my chest. I was grateful for his firm hold as my knees felt like jelly.

"You're beautiful, Delphine," he said and pressed his lips to mine.

I opened for him. It didn't matter that we were in broad daylight, on Main Street. All that mattered was his lips on mine, our tongues dancing with each other.

My heart fluttered in my chest.

"I wish I had a place," he said, "that I wasn't just couch surfing. Because I'd take you there right now. Vampires be damned."

I chuckled.

“If it weren’t so damn cold, I’d take you right over to the park,” he whispered against my ear and I trembled. His fingers slid along the waistband of my jeans, dipping underneath it to caress the top of my ass.

He backed up, not letting me go, and leaned against his parked bike, still warm from our ride. Lifting me, he settled me on his leg. He kissed my face and neck, and pulled down the collar of my shirt to kiss the tops of my breasts.

I glanced around, but it was quiet and even the vendor seemed to have taken a break. But we were still in public, on Main Street though. I tried to wiggle away and he caught me with a wicked smile.

“You don’t want me to touch you?”

“No. Yes, of course, but—”

“No one can see,” he said, “Eyes here, Delphine.”

I swallowed and met his gaze.

One by one, he flicked open the buttons on my jeans. Then he slid his fingers down into my folds, and I gasped. He leaned forward, kissing my neck, as he explored me.

My breath sped up, as his strokes became more insistent. Sensation radiating from my clit, and my whole body trembling against him. He held me firmly, and his eyes watched my face as waves of pleasure rolled over me.

When I reached the peak, I leaned forward, muffling the sound of my climax in his shoulder. Bliss rolled over me, hitting every nerve and leaving me shellshocked.

He stroked my hair with his other hand as I caught my breath.

“I love seeing that look of passion in your eyes, mate.” He chuckled at my

breathless response and redid up the buttons on my jeans. “I hope I’ll get to see it a lot.”

I couldn’t help my grin.

“We’d better get to the aquarium,” he said with a sigh.

“The vampires will be going nuts,” I agreed. They’d be wondering where we were since we hadn’t even told them we were stopping for food, let alone other things.

I didn’t know how right I was, but I was wrong about the reason. When we walked into the aquarium, there were sharks floating around in midair, and patrons screaming and running, except this one green guy, who leaned against one of the dividers and tossed popcorn in his mouth. He was watching the sharks wide-eyed and saying, “Dude, whoa . . .”

I was surprised I could hear him over the shouting. “Is he the Jolly Green Giant?” I asked Hudson, pointing at the popcorn man.

“No,” Hudson said distractedly, “that’s just JJ. He’s probably stoned.”

“He’s got cool dreads.” I could have smacked myself. I wasn’t being very helpful. I didn’t know what I could do.

Ravens were flying around, landing on people’s heads and pecking at them.

“The stingrays are gone . . .” Hudson said. “Oh shit, they’ve turned into ravens again.” He stepped forward, looking determined.

“Do we need to find Tripp?”

“Yeah,” he said and froze. A penguin marched up to him and started barking orders like a drill sergeant. We gaped at the creature.

Looking around, I saw all the penguins were out of their enclosure and marching around yelling at everyone.

“This has to be some kind of spell gone wrong,” I said, reaching for my medallion. “If I take off my necklace, will it all go back to normal?”

Hudson turned to me. “Or it might make it worse with sea life still stuck outside their tanks, but without the magic keeping them from suffocating in the air.”

My hand flew to my chest. “Oh, you’re right. I’m sorry.”

“Stay here,” he said, pointing to the wall next to the Jolly Green Giant. “I’m going to find the others.”

“Okay,” I said. I felt useless, as usual. I wondered if I should call Phoebe and ask her to come help. This seemed like a lot for one witch, even a powerful one like Tripp, and I didn’t know how much help the other guys would be. I pulled my phone out, ready to dial Phoebe, when two large guys grabbed my arms and started dragging me back toward the door. The phone slipped from my fingers.

“Let me go,” I yelled, but in the current chaos, I was sure no one noticed or cared. I tried to drop into dead weight as we’d learned in self-defense class. It didn’t even slow them down. They carried me out through the aquarium doors, pushing aside the fleeing patrons, and to a van waiting on the curb. They dumped me inside and slammed the door.

I jumped up and looked around for escape, but there weren’t any windows in this van, and the driver’s section was divided from my compartment by a cage.

“Help,” I yelled and banged on the door.

Hudson



It took us a while to get the aquarium back to normal. Even after Tripp dispersed the malignant spells, the animals had to be calmed down. That's what I did best because I spoke the language of the sea. I swam through the main tanks in my sea turtle form, sending peaceful vibes. Many of the animals had fled, but if the ones who remained said it was safe to return, they would come back.

As I did my thing, the two vampires worked to clear out all the patrons and shut the aquarium down for the day. Tripp had been able to dispel the smaller incidences and stay open but this was too massive. There were at least three different spells: the stingrays into ravens, the sharks able to swim through air, and the drill sergeant penguins. If it weren't so dangerous for the animals and against all the rules of our magical town, it would have been funny.

It took us longer than I hoped, and then I redressed and headed over to where I'd left Delphine. She wasn't there, but I hardly expected her to be. One of the others must have taken her to the cafe or even to their apartment. I knew Levi and Roman were all in on this mate thing, like I was, but I didn't

know about Tripp. He was a hard nut to crack. He'd barely even acknowledged my presence at the aquarium until I'd come up with the Adopt a Creature campaign.

Delphine wasn't in the cafe, and the whole building seemed quiet and still without patrons. I picked up the discarded cups, napkins, and food as I went along. We'd have to do a thorough cleaning before we opened tomorrow . . . if we opened tomorrow. Was this just a sign that whomever our attacker was had escalated his attacks? Would this happen every day until we closed permanently?

I hoped not. Surely even a witch like this needed to rest. Tripp would need to rest after dispelling the resulting spells too. I tossed the last of the abandoned snacks in the trash and started wiping down the tables.

Levi ran up to me. "Where is she?"

I frowned. "Isn't she with you? Or Roman?"

He shook his head.

"I left her over by the wall there," I said pointing. "I'd come over here to look for her, but I figured one of you had taken her downstairs. Maybe she made her way on her own?"

"Roman's checking downstairs," he said. "And Tripp's gone to his apartments. I'm sure he'll let us know if she's there."

"Did you check all the corridors?"

"Yes, that's why I was sure she'd be with you."

Roman came jogging up to us. "Is she here?"

"Not here," Levi said heavily.

"Do you think she left?" I asked. "Just went back home?"

"What did you say to her?" Roman growled.

I lifted my hands, protesting my innocence. "Nothing. We stopped for food

on the way here, and then we came inside . . . the aquarium was a mess. I asked her to wait by JJ . . .” I tried to remember if I’d said anything specific. “She did ask if she should use her magic.”

“And?” Roman demanded.

I eyed him. He had always been a quiet academic type. I’d barely even thought of him as a vampire, until Delphine. Now he was a real predator and apparently most of his rage was directed at me. Lucky turtle that I was.

“I told her no, because it would leave the animals stranded and suffocating in the air,” I said. “But I wasn’t mean about it or anything.”

Roman scowled. “You hurt her feelings. Of course she left.”

“I don’t think I did.” I scratched my neck. It had been chaotic. I didn’t think I’d snapped at Delphine but maybe I had. Had I chased her off? Just when we were getting to know her?

“Well, she’s not here anymore,” Levi said. “Maybe she went back to her hotel or to get some food, and we’ll just have to catch up with her later.”

“I guess.” I was looking forward to spending the afternoon with my mate. We’d cleared her schedule and everything. “Do you guys have her number?”

They shook their heads. I guessed in the excitement of first meetings they hadn’t really had a chance. I couldn’t blame them. I hadn’t gotten it either.

“I guess she’ll come back when she’s ready,” Levi said. “In the meantime, we have a whole aquarium to clean.”

Roman didn’t look any happier about this idea than I was but it seemed like the best plan. She was my mate and connected to me as much as I was to her. Surely she wouldn’t be able to just walk away? I just had to be patient. I’d been waiting years to find out I had a mate, that I even could have a mate. I could wait a little longer.

Delphine



I tried yelling and beating the walls, but no one heard me. I wondered if a spell was involved or if the van was just that airtight. The two thugs who'd grabbed me sat up front, but no matter what noise I made, they didn't turn around.

I reached for my medallion. If it was a spell, I could just take it off and I'd be heard. I yanked it off. The thugs in the front seat gave a shout, and then the van swerved. I slid across the floor. I reached out for something to hold on to but there was nothing.

"What the hell?" I shouted.

A loud boom echoed in my ears. The van jerked to a sudden halt. I was thrown into the divider. Pain exploded in my head, and my vision got foggy. I fell back down onto the floor. Darkness swept over me.

I didn't know how much later it was, but the back door opened and a light cut across me. I opened my eyes, but they were still bleary and my head rang like a church bell.

The old man from O'Malley's leaned over me.

“Who are you?” I gasped.

“Sleep now,” he said, waving a hand over my face.

Nothing happened.

He scowled and repeated his words.

Still nothing happened.

“What are you?” he asked, his head tilting to the side. “I can’t feel my power at all.”

I forced myself to move my head, looking for my medallion. I caught sight of it stuck in the cage divider.

The old man followed my gaze, and he grabbed the medallion. He inspected it. “Runes,” he said. “How fascinating.”

I swung my hand at the chain, grasping it between my fingers. There was no way I was letting it go. “Mine.”

“You’re some kind of magic negator,” he mused. “And this medallion does what exactly? Keep your power under control?”

Sirens erupted in the street, and I clutched my head.

The old man tensed and turned toward the sound. Turning back, he frowned down at me. “I’ll return for you.”

He tried to take the medallion but I wouldn’t let it go. Because the sirens were so close, he turned and fled. After he left, I forced the medallion over my head and curled up into a ball.

The sirens were very close now and I forced my eyes back open a crack. Two people in uniforms had climbed into the van.

“Are you alright?” the man asked.

“I’m okay,” I said, “but my head hurts.”

“Do you know what happened?” he asked while the woman checked me over for injuries.

“I was taken from the aquarium,” I said. “But then we crashed . . .”

“Okay,” he said calmly. “We’re going to get you into the ambulance. Careful now.”

I tried to shake my head and winced. “I don’t need a hospital.”

“Yes, you do,” the woman said. “We need to make sure that head injury isn’t any worse than it looks.”

They helped me out of the van and over to the ambulance. The area was crowded with a police car and a fire truck as well. The two thugs who had been driving the van had disappeared.

I frowned. “What happened to the two guys?”

The paramedics shrugged. “We didn’t find any driver.”

“Just a couple of scared little mice,” a fireman with a hazy yellow glow whispered to another firefighter near me. “Like, real mice, not shifters.”

I blinked. The thugs hadn’t been real? That’s why my magic had crashed the van, because it had broken their spell.

“Mice driving vehicles. Silver Springs gets crazier every day,” the fireman said, and I realized that I recognized him. He was the guy who’d saved me the other day in O’Malley’s from the old man.

The paramedics bundled me onto the ambulance and I was soon on my way to Silver Springs Memorial. I’d never actually been to a human hospital. I’d grown up in a witch family; we’d always had a healer on call for injuries or sickness.

The female paramedic leaned closer to me. “Is there someone you’d like us to call?”

I wondered where my phone was. Was it still on the floor of the aquarium? I didn’t even know anyone’s number without it, not even Phoebe’s or our

home number. “I don’t have anyone’s number.” I bit my lip. “Maybe you could call the aquarium. Ask for Levi or Roman or Hudson?”

“Okay.”

As soon as they got me settled in the emergency room, the paramedic said she’d call. Hopefully one of the guys would come, and they could get ahold of Phoebe. Maybe they’d even bring my phone.

I closed my eyes and leaned back on the cot.

Levi



I dropped the aquarium phone and took off in a dead sprint. I didn't even know where the others had gone off to, but all I could think was, "Delphine is in the hospital!" I rushed out the front doors and grabbed the first taxi that I saw. We wound our way across town to Silver Springs Memorial, and I tapped impatiently on the back of the cabby's seat.

The burly driver snarled at me, showing a bit of wolfish teeth.

I hissed right back. Then I forced myself to say, "My mate is in the hospital."

He blinked. "Why didn't you say so, man? I'll get you there yesterday." After pushing back his cap, the driver hit the gas and started weaving in and out of traffic. We ran three red lights but didn't crash, so I gave him a hundred dollar bill.

I was out of the cab and through the glass doors in seconds. I paused at the front desk and asked where to find Delphine.

"Last name?" the receptionist asked, and when I didn't immediately answer, she scowled up at me. "Delphine who?"

“I don’t know,” I said. “But she’s my girlfriend. I need to see her immediately.”

The receptionist sighed. “Always in a rush.”

“Please,” I said, trying to turn on my most winning smile.

She rolled her eyes. “Go have a seat, and I’ll see if I can figure out who you’re here to see.”

I scanned the papers on her desk then pointed. “That one. There’s her name.”

“Now young man, patient files are confidential—”

“You’re Levi?” a nurse asked, leaning over the desk. “Come with me. Delphine has been asking for you.”

“Thank you,” I said and ignored the receptionist.

The nurse led me back into the emergency floor and through a curtained alcove to where they’d put Delphine.

As soon as I saw her, I rushed forward and drew her into my arms. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Delphine said. “I just had a headache. They gave me some Tylenol.”

The nurse chuckled behind us and picked up Delphine’s chart. “I’m Debbie, the head nurse.”

“Nice to meet you,” Delphine said.

“Debbie,” I said. “What’s her chart say?”

“Looks like she was in a vehicular accident and just got bounced around. Doctor P checked her over.” She tapped the chart with a long nail. “Says here she’s free to go as long as she doesn’t drive and you keep an eye on her for signs of concussion.”

“Will do,” I said. I wanted to pick her up and carry her home but I expected

Delphine would object. “Do you want to go?” I asked her.

She nodded and winced.

I backed up so she could get up.

Then she stood and wobbled, leaning against me. I wrapped my arms around her and just breathed in her scent from her hair. She always smelled like strawberries, even here where the whole place stank of antiseptic.

“I can carry you,” I whispered.

She smiled. “I’m fine. I just need a minute.”

The nurse handed her a couple of papers to sign for discharge. “Remember to observe her for signs of concussion,” she said, handing me the list of symptoms to watch out for.

I nodded. Delphine leaned on my arm as we made our way out of the emergency wing and through the glass doors. I remembered that I’d taken a cab and reached for my phone to call for another one, but the same guy was waiting out front.

“Hey,” the driver said, tapping his cap. “Is this your girl?”

“Yes,” I said with a grin. “Can we get a ride back to the aquarium?”

“Of course.”

I opened the back door and helped Delphine in. She seemed really spacey, but I assumed that was normal. We took a more leisurely route back to the aquarium. I had a lot of questions for Delphine about what had happened, but I didn’t want to bombard her with them.

“Why didn’t the police ask me any questions?” she asked, leaning her head against the cool glass.

“I’m not sure,” I answered. “Maybe they thought it was just an accident? Or they were worried about your injury more than what happened?”

“He probably spelled them,” she said.

“Who?”

She turned toward me. “The old man. He’s been, well, I don’t know for sure, but I think he’s the one attacking the aquarium and he wanted”—she chewed on her lip—”to know what my power was.”

“He’s attacking the aquarium?”

“I think so.” She frowned. “Maybe the chaos today was just to get me away. That seems crazy. Why would I be important?”

“You’re important to me,” I said, drawing her into my arms.

The cab stopped at the front of the aquarium. We climbed out and thanked the driver.

“You just take care of your mate, man,” he said.

I nodded and waved as he drove away. I intended to.

The glass doors swung open as we approached, and Tripp came striding out.

“What the hell is going on here?” he shouted.

My fangs dropped instantly at his tone.

He reached for Delphine, and I shoved him back, getting in his face. “Leave her alone. She’s hurt.”

“What do you know about it?” Tripp growled. “She’s the one sabotaging my aquarium.”

“She’s not,” I said. “Her magic doesn’t even work like that.”

“How do you know?” he asked. “She’s got you wrapped so far around her little finger that you can’t see straight.”

“Take that back!”

Delphine



I watched Levi and Tripp get in each other's faces, and I didn't know what to do. My head was clearer in the cool air, but I was still a bit woozy. Why had they released me from the hospital so soon?

I supposed I should do something to stop them. Grabbing my medallion, I pulled it over my head. I hoped we were far enough from the tanks that it wouldn't affect them too seriously.

Levi and Tripp both swung around to stare at me.

"That was faster than last time," I said with my hands on my hips. "Now that I have your attention, I am not causing whatever is going on at the aquarium, but I think I might know who is."

"For all we know, you're working with Lambert," Tripp muttered.

Levi and I swung towards him. "Lambert? Who's that?"

"My old mentor . . ."

"Old guy with gray hair, about so tall?" I asked. "Changes mice into henchmen?"

"You've met him," Tripp said, suspicion dripping from his words.

“Yes, he caused my accident.”

“What?” Levi said, grabbing my arm as if he would check me all over for injury again.

“While you were distracted with the chaos at the aquarium, this guy, Lambert, had his henchmen grab me and put me in a van.”

Levi frowned.

“He didn’t know about my medallion though. I took it off and his thugs turned back into mice, and the van crashed.”

“There’s no way he just let you walk away,” Tripp muttered.

“No, he was there looming over me and asking me questions about my magic. He tried to take my medallion, but the emergency vehicles showed up and he had to run off.” I rubbed my head. “I do have to say that Silver Springs has an amazing response time.”

Tripp glared at me, but I could see he was at least thinking it through.

“I’m going to take Delphine downstairs so she can rest,” Levi said, tugging on my arm.

“No,” Tripp said. “I don’t want her anywhere near the aquarium until we figure this out.”

“Delphine hasn’t done anything,” Levi said. “Besides, she’s my guest not yours.”

Tripp grabbed my other arm. “I’m taking her upstairs with me. I’ll put her in the circle and get some real answers out of her.”

“She’s just been in a car accident.” Levi waved the paper that the nurse had given him. “She’s got to rest.”

I looked back and forth between the two of them and sighed. If Tripp didn’t get the information he needed, he’d never start to trust me. I didn’t think he’d hurt me. “I’ll go with Tripp.”

“What?” Levi asked. “Are you crazy?”

I smiled. “He won’t hurt me and it will ease his mind.”

Levi studied my face, then he said, “I’ll come too and make sure you’re safe.”

I patted his arm. “It’s okay, Levi. I’m sure you have work to do.”

Tripp frowned at our interaction as if he didn’t quite understand it. I knew he could see the orange lines of magic stretching between us as well as I could. Whatever this spell was, it was determined to keep us linked.

“Tripp won’t hurt me.” I realized as soon as I said it that it was true. I’d been nervous before but I knew that Tripp was just trying to ferret out the real culprit. He didn’t want it to be me any more than Levi did. He just didn’t trust me yet. “Go, and I’ll come find you when we’re done.”

“You’re sure?” Levi asked, not quite willing to let go of my arm.

“I’m sure.”

He looked us both over, but then he shrugged and headed into the darkened aquarium. The mess earlier must have been bad if it was still closed.

“How long are you going to stay closed?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Tripp said, running a hand through his long dark hair. He wore a t-shirt that had seen better days and a pair of ripped jeans. He must have just come from cleaning up. He released my arm and said, “Follow me.”

With a nod, I did. We entered the front of the aquarium and passed the ticket booth into the main room. The tanks loomed over us, dark and quiet as well. It seemed that a lot of the animals had gone back through their portals to their real habitats.

We passed where I’d been grabbed, and I looked around for my phone. I knew I’d dropped it when the thugs grabbed me. Had one of the guys picked

it up? Nope. There it was, pushed behind one of the potted plants. I reached down and snagged it, flipping it over and scrolling through the messages.

“Humph,” Tripp said.

I looked up.

He stood with his arms crossed over his chest. His eyes narrowed. “Is that how you kept it going when you weren’t here?”

I blinked, confused. “Kept what . . . No, just a regular old cell phone. I need to tell my sister where I am,” I said, glancing at the time. “It’s already five o’clock.”

He held out his hand.

I rolled my eyes. “Are you sure you’re not a big brother? You’re annoying enough to be one.” I tapped out a quick message to Phoebe. I told her I was with the guys and I’d be home late. No need to worry her with the rest of it.

Then I closed the phone and happily handed it to Tripp. He ran a hand over it as if he was looking for magical booby traps but he came up empty. Big surprise there.

“Told ya,” I said. I couldn’t help it.

“Come on,” he muttered, sliding the phone into his jeans pocket and grabbing my arm again.

His fingers dug into the skin of my elbow, but I didn’t complain. I had agreed to come, and I didn’t really want to make trouble. He led me to the service area and up the stairs at the back. Levi and Roman lived downstairs, but Levi had said that Tripp was the penthouse. We climbed three flights of stairs before we came to a door, and by then I was breathing hard. I guessed I should have gone to the gym a little more regularly.

Tripp swung it open and stepped inside.

I gasped at the view. His living room was a half circle and the outside wall

was all windows. They looked out over Silver Springs, the buildings and the neighborhoods and the parks. I crossed to the window and gazed out. The sun was starting to sink, and colors were striped in ribbons across the clouds.

“This is amazing!” I glanced back at Tripp and he had a small grin on his face. He was proud of this apartment. “You are so lucky to live here.”

He nodded. “It really is something, isn’t it?”

I turned back, trying to find places that I remembered. Was that Main Street, just over there? I saw the castle of course, because it was the tallest thing in Silver Springs. I thought I could make out the forest just on the edge of town. I could feel Tripp’s eyes on me as I surveyed, and I felt warm in places I had no business being warm. I’d just gotten out of the hospital and already I was feeling horny? What was wrong with me? Of course, I could still see the orange magic connecting us. If it really was a mate bond, the first sign was lust, right?

Looking back at Tripp in his grungy clothes, I couldn’t help licking my lips.

He met my gaze for a moment, and I could have sworn his held equal heat. As though suddenly remembering I was a suspect, he scowled and muttered, “This way.”

Then, as he set off into the next room, I followed him. The space was set up as a study. The windows curved around with us, and the dark masculine furniture was offset by the setting sun. Bookshelves lined the walls filled with books new and old. Some looked magical, and others might have been modern spy novels. I glanced at Tripp. I guessed he looked like the type to read thrillers.

To one side was a heavy desk, like a lawyer’s or a professor’s, and it was stacked with various papers. To the other side was a curved black sofa with simple minimalist lines. On the wooden side table was a reading lamp and a

glass partly filled with an amber liquid. I leaned over and smelled it—scotch. I'd never been a fan.

He lifted the rug in the middle of the room, between the desk and the small sofa, and revealed a circle that had been etched into the floor. He hadn't gone through any pains to conceal it, other than tossing the rug over it, but I guessed this was his house so he could do as he liked.

Returning to my side, he pulled on the edges of my coat and I let him take it off me. He made a face.

“What?”

“You smell like a hospital.” When I looked confused, he continued. “Antiseptic.”

“Well, I was just there,” I said.

“You'll have to shower and change,” he said. “Follow me.”

I bit my lip. This might get a lot more interesting. He led me quickly through a masculinely decorated bedroom and into the bathroom.

“Strip and get in the shower. You can use the soap in there, and I'll get you a shirt to wear when you come out.” Then he was gone, back into the other room, and I was alone.

I sighed and turned on the shower as hot as I could stand it. Although I probably should take a cold shower instead, the way I was feeling, I'd rather get clean. I didn't take long, and when I came out of the shower, there was an oversized t-shirt and a pair of shorts on the counter. Had he seen me in the shower? Or had he used some spell to zap them here?

I sniffed my bra and realized I didn't have any underwear. I'd gone commando after my tryst with Roman. I didn't bother with the bra. The shorts, while smaller than I was sure Tripp wore, were still too big for me, so I left them on the counter and contented myself with my t-shirt dress. I dried

off and ran my fingers through my hair. I looked a bit like a drowned rat, but he hadn't left me a brush or anything.

Then I headed back through the bedroom to the study.

Delphine



He looked me over when I returned, his gaze lingering on my bare thighs.

I swallowed, but I didn't say anything. I didn't think I was the only one affected by our bond, even if he didn't want to admit it.

Shaking himself, he turned back to the circle. "Sit in the middle," Tripp commanded, "on the star."

I did so, criss-crossing my legs so that I was completely inside the circle. There was a certain tone in his voice that I wasn't sure I minded. Heat swirled in my core, and I swallowed. Okay, Delphine, calm down. This is an interrogation not a seduction.

Tripp bent down and pushed me this way and that, making sure I was directly centered over the star. I could smell his musky aftershave. I swayed toward him and then jerked myself upright.

He frowned but didn't say anything.

"You know, if you keep scowling," I murmured, "your face is going to freeze like that."

He snorted and backed away.

I thought he needed more teasing in his life. Tripp was way too serious for such a young guy. He couldn't have been older than thirty. He'd already taken on such responsibility, running the aquarium and keeping vampires and shifters in check. At twenty-seven, I could barely keep a job.

Backing away, he raised his hands and cast using a symbol that I didn't know. A few breaths later, the circle came to life around me. Blue flames danced along the edge, but I didn't feel like I was in danger. They gave off a warm cozy heat.

"Pretty blue," I said, stroking my hands near but not touching them.

"You can see that?" he asked gruffly.

"I can see the magic of others," I said, pulling my hands back and folding them in my lap. "I just can't touch it or cast any of my own."

"Interesting." He went around the back of the desk and opened a drawer, then drew out a large black book. The outside looked like it was made of dark vines that crossed over and over each other. It looked dark and forbidding, and I wondered what secrets it held. He flipped through a few pages.

"Any time now," I teased, crossing and uncrossing my legs. "I'm bored."

"Don't move." He glanced at me, his blue eyes fierce. "I mean it."

I kept my eyes on his as I lifted my knee and leaned against it. His gaze traveled down my body to the spot where the t-shirt lifted, and I was sure he could see between my legs. I wasn't wearing any underwear. His body stiffened, and his hand opened and closed on the edge of the book. I licked my lips.

When did I become so brazen? I didn't know. I just knew that the more time I spent with these men, the more I knew that we were meant to be

together. It didn't matter what Tripp's attitude was now, he'd come around. We were fated—fated mates.

Again he looked away and focused his attention on the page.

I let my leg slide back down into a criss-cross.

After a few moments, he set the book down. Then he moved in front of the circle and started chanting.

I didn't know the language he spoke, but I could feel the pressure building with the magic. Tripp had said that he came from a Viking lineage when we talked before. I wondered if the language was Norwegian or Danish or if it was a special magical language. My parents had passed down their curiosity to all of my siblings, and I had nothing to do but try to figure it out as he cast.

The spell rolled over me. It was gentle, like a wind, but had intent on its purpose. It slid over my neck and shoulders and I pressed my lips together. It dived into my cleavage and ran over my breasts, and I gasped. The errant wind glided over my stomach and between my legs. I moaned, and my eyes met Tripp's again.

He watched, open-mouthed, as the spell inspected me, head to toe. His fingers thrummed on the edge of the desk. Tap, tap, tap, tap.

I tried to focus on him and not the invasive spell. The wind flowed over my ass and up my back, seeking whatever it was that it was seeking. Then it ran over my head and dissipated. The particles of it floated away like sparkles through the air. I reached my hand up as if I could almost touch them.

“Well,” I said. “That was interesting. What was it looking for?”

“Malicious intent,” he said, turning back toward the desk and the black book.

“And I have none.”

“No,” he said, that same note of gruffness in his voice. “I wonder . . .”

He paged through his book and stopped on a specific page. His eyes lit up and he turned back toward me.

I tried to steel myself against whatever was next. Well, steel my hormones, anyway. This was not supposed to be turning me on.

Tripp started another cast. This one involved writing symbols in the air.

I didn't recognize any of them, but I leaned forward a bit, watching intently. "Are those runes?"

He finished the spell, then he said, "Yes, but if you're working with Lambert, you'd know that."

"I'm not working with Lambert."

He studied the air in front of me, and I could just make out the faint images there. They were a bit like hieroglyphics, some kind of message.

"You have his trace on you, but I don't see any connection." His brows knit together. "It could be from your encounter after the accident."

"What about a truth spell?" I asked.

His head jerked back. "You'd submit to that?"

I shrugged. "Sure. I told you. I don't have anything to hide."

Tripp flipped a few pages in his book. "This spell will bind you," he said, peering at me over the top of the page. "If you lie, it will tighten the bindings. Are you still okay with that?"

I nodded.

He cast it, a flicker of colored symbols in the air, and I felt a chain blanket fall over me. It laid gently across my skin and I fingered it, watching the golden chain sparkle.

"So pretty," I murmured.

He made a sound of surprise.

"What?" I asked.

“I don’t think I’ve ever heard my spells called pretty before,” he said, his eyes shying away from mine. “Vile, deadly, painful . . . yes, but pretty?” He shook his head.

“Well,” I said. “Let’s see if I’m lying.”

He coughed and straightened. “What is your name?”

“Delphine Norwood.”

“Now I’m going to ask something and I want you to respond falsely, so we can have a baseline.”

“Okay.” I stroked the chain that lay across my arm. It was like a pretty piece of jewelry. “It won’t hurt me too badly?”

“Not at first,” he answered. “It’s cumulative.”

I nodded.

“How old are you?”

“Five years old,” I said and the chain squeezed me, making my breath catch in my throat. It ran over my chest and arms like chainmail. Then it wrapped me so tightly that even with the t-shirt on it outlined my breasts. They thrust up and away from my chest, like some kind of overzealous push-up bra.

Tripp made a sound in his throat. He was staring at my breasts, and my nipples hardened under his gaze. He lifted a hand as if he would reach out and then shook himself, dropping it again.

In a few breaths, the chain loosened. “That hurt,” I gasped, rubbing my skin where the spell had held me. It hadn’t exactly hurt, but I didn’t know how else to explain it.

Tripp actually looked apologetic. “I’m afraid it’s the only truth spell I know. My mentor, Lambert, didn’t exactly teach me the nice spells.”

I sat up straighter. “It’s okay. Let’s get this done.”

“Have you been sabotaging the aquarium?”

“No.” The chain tightened over me again. This time it slithered over my chest and down between my legs and clutched my vulva. I gasped, my eyes going wide. The cords cut into my sensitive skin, and I should have been shouting in pain, but somehow I was wetter than I’d ever been.

Tripp glowered. “You did!”

“Only with my null magic and that wasn’t on purpose,” I said in a rush. The chain loosened, and I took a deep breath.

His gaze ran over me, and then his hand tapped on the desk again. There was something hot and intense in his blue eyes that told me he somehow knew what I was feeling. That he too was feeling a bit hot and bothered by this whole exercise. That we both wanted for me to keep on lying and see what would happen.

“I’ll have to be more specific,” he said. “Did you know Lambert before you came to Silver Springs?”

“No, I’d never met him before.” The chain stayed still. I swallowed back the bit of disappointment. First, I had to prove my innocence to Tripp, then we could play with the chain.

“Can you cast spells?”

“No.” No reaction from the golden chain.

“You didn’t cast the mate spell that connected you to Levi, Roman, Hudson, and I?”

“No.” The same.

“How did it happen?” Tripp asked.

“I have no idea.” I smiled. “I just came to see Dolly, the dolphin, and when . . .” I tried to remember exactly. “When I touched her collar, the orange connections appeared.”

He rubbed his chin. “Are you helping Lambert?”

“No.”

“You really are a null witch? With no active powers?” he asked.

“Yes.” The chain didn’t move or burn.

“Did Lambert really kidnap you?”

I frowned at the chain. How did I answer this? He had kidnapped me, but technically his thugs had done the job. “I was kidnapped by two thugs who put me in a van. When the van crashed, I learned that the thugs had been spelled mice. After the crash, Lambert confronted me and demanded to know how my magic worked.”

Tripp observed me carefully, but the chain didn’t move or squeeze. “You really are telling the truth.”

I grinned. “Yup.”

He lifted his hand to deconstruct the spell but stopped. An evil-looking grin crossed his face, and he stepped closer so he was just outside the flames' reach. “Do you want me?”

My grin widened, and as innocently as I could, I said, “No.”

The chains tightened over me again, sliding across my breasts, down between my legs, and up over my ass and back. I moaned at the feel of being held so tightly, and knowing that my body was exposed to him if only in outline.

He leaned closer, inspecting the curve of my breasts and the lift of my ass. “Is that chain really holding you everywhere?”

“Yes,” I said, and the chain squeezed across my upper back, sliding up over my neck and the back of my head. I gasped, “I guess not.”

“You are very beautiful,” he said softly.

The chains loosened and I was free again. My breath came in short little pants.

He murmured under his breath and the blue flames around the circle disappeared.

I watched him, wondering what he would do. I licked my lips.

Lifting the hem of the t-shirt, he pulled it over my head. He studied me, naked in the lamplight.

“Do you want me to fuck you?” he asked, leaning forward and kissing along my neck.

“No,” I whispered, and the chains squeezed.

His fingers played over my bound breasts, teasing the sensitive nipples. They hardened into peaks and he rubbed them more with the flat of his palm.

“You are such a liar.”

I bit my lip. “I never lie.”

The chains tightened even more, sliding between the lips of my vulva and lifting my ass. I moaned.

His gaze was dark and hooded as he watched me.

The chains loosened, and I breathed out in a rush.

His hand slid between my legs, stroking through my folds. Pressing his hand to me, he tapped his fingers against my clit. Each tap sent a wave of pleasure through me, and I gasped.

“Lie back,” he said, that air of command in his voice, and I did.

He pushed my legs apart and kneeled down between them.

I watched him, wide-eyed and waiting.

He leaned over and kissed my clit.

I moaned.

“You’re so tender here,” he said. He continued to stroke and suck as he explored my sex. He pressed his thumb against my clit and rubbed it back and forth.

Pleasure surged through me and I circled my hips. “Oh, god,” I murmured, and I’d completely forgotten the chain spell. It tightened around me, pulling my body into a bow, breasts out, back arched. I moaned.

Tripp chuckled. “Not a god yet.” He backed up, watching me as I wriggled against the spell. “But you certainly are a pretty little present for me, all wrapped up.”

Leaning down, he scooped me up then carried me across the room. He kicked the door open and marched us into the bedroom. He dropped me on the bed and with a murmured word, a soft glow came from the lamps on either side of the bed.

Tripp waved a hand, releasing the binding spell, and the golden chains dissipated into the air.

The bed was old-fashioned and large, the headboard lined with posts. Tripp rummaged in a drawer and came back to the bed with a cord in his hands. He wrapped it around my wrist and then threaded it through the headboard. Then he wrapped it around my other wrist.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

He just smiled, tugging the cord tight, and my arms raised above my head. After checking that I was secure, he stood and stripped and tossed his clothes against the wall. He stood tall and straight before me. I traced the outline of his muscled chest, his washboard abs, and down to the V of his pelvis. His cock was long and hard in front of him, and I wiggled my hips in anticipation.

He climbed into the bed with me, lying alongside. Running his fingers over my skin, he examined me from head to toe. He kissed everywhere that he found an indentation caused by the chain—across my shoulders, over my breasts, my stomach, my thighs, my sex.

While he did so, he kept his skin inches from mine. I tried to move over closer to him and he swatted my thigh with the palm of his hand.

“Be still,” he murmured, rolling me over and inspecting my back and my ass. My arms strained against the cording but he didn’t release me.

“Tripp,” I gasped as his fingers parted my ass and kissed my apex. “I’m fine, really.”

“Oh, is that what you thought I was doing?” he asked as he stroked his fingers between my legs. “Seeing if the spell injured you?”

“Yes,” I said.

“I wasn’t,” he said, running his fingers over my ass. “I was wondering if next time we should make it tighter.”

I groaned into the mattress.

He turned me back over, and I sighed at the release of the pressure on my arms. He stroked his fingers down my chest, starting at the collarbone and working his way along the sides of my breasts and across the nipples. He pulled each nipple into his mouth, sucking gently then harder. Then he moved away, watching me.

I arched toward him, lifting my chest and pleading with my eyes.

“Patience,” he said, then he kissed down my belly and lightly over my sex.

“Tripp,” I said, shifting my hips, trying to get closer to him. He’d shown me that tantalizing glimpse of his body, and now all I wanted was his flesh on me, and he was giving me teasing little kisses. “I need you.”

He pushed apart my legs and I could feel the length of him against my thigh. “Is this what you want?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me what you want.” He circled his fingers along my legs, drawing patterns on my skin. He circled close to my core, then away again, then

closer.

“I want you to fuck me,” I said, straining against the cords. I wanted my hands free so I could touch him.

He pressed the pad of his thumb against my clit and flicked it back and forth. I moaned as streaks of pleasure radiated through me. “Is this what you want?”

“Yes. No.”

“Which is it?” he asked, leaning forward, dragging his cock along my leg until it was nestled against the apex of my legs.

“I want you inside me.”

“Me?” he asked, then slid a finger inside of me. “Or maybe you want two.” He flicked his fingers upward, finding that perfect spot.

My breath escaped me as the pleasure thrummed. I squeezed around his fingers, but they weren't enough, they weren't what I wanted. “No,” I said, moving my head back and forth. “More.”

“Oh?” He drew away. “What is it that you want, then?”

“I want your cock. I want it inside of me. I want to be filled up by you.”

And in a flash, he thrust into me. I arched to meet him. Then he pulled all the way out again. I squirmed against the mattress, needing him, wanting him.

“Tripp,” I cried out.

He dove into me again, filling me, and I clutched around him. I didn't want to let him go. Then he pulled all the way out again.

Tripp



I positioned myself at her entrance, pressing softly. Then I leaned down as close as I could and asked, “Is this what you want, Delphine?”

“Please,” she begged.

I thrust into her, feeling her squeeze around me. She was perfect. I didn’t deserve any of this.

“Fuck me, Tripp.”

Groaning, I moved in and out of her, watching as her body responded. Her muscles tightened and her breath came in little gasps. Her fingers dug into the cording around her wrists, and she moaned.

I pulled out again, my own breathing heavy with effort. Reaching up I untied the cording, releasing her arms. There was something I wanted more than her bound. I wanted to see her take what she wanted.

She protested, “Don’t stop.”

I only grinned. Lying down next to her, I gathered her in my arms and pulled her on top of me. She sat up, her core nestled against me, and gazed down at me.

“Whenever you’re ready,” I said.

She took a breath, and her back arched, displaying her chest. I reached up and stroked her breasts, flicking back and forth over her nipples. She pushed her hair back from her face, sweat making it slick back, and she lifted her body. After lining us up, she pressed down and took my cock inside her.

I moved one of my hands down between her legs, stroking her clit.

Delphine began to move up and down, taking up the rhythm. She was like some glorious goddess, passionate and glowing in the lamplight. As the pressure built and we both rushed toward our orgasm, I felt like the luckiest man alive. She shook when she came, her head thrown back. She shouted her pleasure, and I joined her, ecstatic with our bliss.

Afterwards, we lay curled together on the bed, half covered in the sheets, and she fell asleep. I murmured the word to turn down the lamps, but left them on just enough to see her face. Her eyes were closed and her lashes rested on her cheeks.

I had thought she was a fraud. I could have kicked myself. She’d been honest from the moment I’d met her at that party in Club Vee. I’d been the fraud, pretending I wasn’t attracted to her, that she meant nothing to me. But she was so perfect. How could an evil man like me ever hope to be worthy of her? She was better off with the vampires. At least they were as nature made them, and even they did less harm these days.

I had chosen my path. Apprenticing to Lambert had been a dream. He’d paid attention to a lonely boy who had no one else, and he’d known how to mold and shape my magic. I was powerful now, far more than I ever would have been without his help. And yet, all I could do was regret the things I had done. All the people I’d hurt. All the evil I’d caused.

I sighed. I didn’t chase power anymore. Instead, I just tried to do some

good. The aquarium had been my way to do that, quietly, behind the scenes. And Lambert had to ruin even that.

Because I was sure now that he was behind all of the weirdness and the strange happenings, and that he'd kidnapped Delphine and tried to hurt her—all because of me. He'd been so furious when I'd told him I couldn't do it anymore. I was walking away from that life.

I'd been sure that he wouldn't come here. Silver Springs was full of too many supernaturals and witches. He'd be recognized here for the evil that rotted his soul. I'd been wrong and he'd hurt Delphine. I ran my hand over head, allowing my magic to search for any lingering effects from the crash. She seemed fine. She didn't have a concussion and there was nothing to heal.

I couldn't believe it. I pulled her into my arms and pressed my lips to her hair.

She murmured in her sleep.

“Yes,” I whispered. “You're safe now. I won't let him hurt you.”

A few hours later there was a knock on my door, and I opened it to find two vampires and a worried shifter.

“Is she alive?” Hudson asked.

I nodded, keeping my expression bland.

Levi asked, “You didn't hurt her?”

“Now, I wouldn't say that,” I murmured, remembering the tiny little imprints that the golden chain had left.

Roman jumped forward, his fangs out, and I lazily raised a hand with magic curling in my palm.

“I didn't do anything to her she didn't ask for.”

“Oh,” he said, dropping back again. Then his eyes narrowed. “You acknowledge she's your mate?”

I shook my head. “No, no woman deserves to be stuck with me.”

He frowned. “That’s not a choice you get to make.”

“More importantly, was it your old mentor that attacked her?” Levi asked.

“Yes, I’m sure of it,” I said. “We need to find him, but we can’t leave her alone. He knows my spells and wards too well.”

“Then we’ll leave one of us here,” Roman said, looking at all of us. “I’ll stay, and you three go.”

“No,” Hudson said. “I can stay.”

Roman shook his head. “I have a better chance against a dark magician than you do.”

“You think he doesn’t know vampire tricks?” Hudson asked with a lazy roll of his shoulders. “I will be a surprise.”

“But one easily quelled,” I said. “I’m sorry, Hudson, but Roman’s right. He should stay with Delphine. In fact, I wonder if you shouldn’t take her somewhere away from here.”

“Somewhere public,” Levi said, “with lots of people around.”

“Done,” Roman said.

“And we’ll hunt down Lambert,” I said.

Delphine



When I woke up, the bed was empty. Where had Tripp gone? I slid my feet over the edge and looked around.

A figure sat in the dark corner watching me.

I pulled the sheet up. “Who is it?”

“It’s just me,” Roman said softly. “I was waiting for you to wake.”

“Oh,” I said, breathing out in relief. “What time is it?”

“Almost eight o’clock,” he said. Then he stood and came over next to me.

He lifted my chin and leaned down to press a kiss to my lips.

I reached for him, wrapping my hands around his shoulders. “Come to bed,” I said, ignoring the fact that we were in Tripp’s room and Tripp’s bed.

He stroked his hand down the side of my cheek. “I’d love to, but we have things to do today.”

I pouted.

“I’ve been to see your sister, and I brought a change of clothes.” He gestured toward the bathroom. “Shower and we’ll go get some breakfast.”

“You spoke to Phoebe?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said. “I explained the accident and that we were going to take care of you for a bit.”

I reached for my head. “But I’m fine. I don’t even have a concussion.”

“Hudson is going to go over and help her with the painting today,” he said. “And I’m going to take you out to eat. So go and shower.”

A smile pulled at my lips. It wasn’t like I’d rather be painting than hanging out with Roman. I headed for the bathroom and the shower.

Roman watched me cross the room.

I stopped at the doorway and looked back. “Do you want to join?”

“With all that I am,” he said, then sighed. “But not now. Just shower quickly and let’s go.”

“Okay.” I frowned. What was going on? Roman was taking me for breakfast, and Hudson was working with Phoebe. Where were Levi and Tripp? Still fixing the aquarium? And what was with the rush?

I turned on the spray full blast and stepped in. The warmth rolled over my body, easing away all my aches and pains. I reached for the soap and swore.

Tripp and Levi had gone after Lambert. Dammit.

I turned off the water and grabbed the towel, and turned to step out of the shower only to run into Roman.

“You can’t stop them,” he said. “It needs to be done.”

“But he’s dangerous, and they could use my null power to . . .”

“No. Tripp needs to do this. He needs to know he can keep his mate safe.”

I worried at my lip. “I could help . . .”

“You’ll help by staying safe,” Roman said reasonably. “Now finish your shower and let’s go.”

I stepped back into the shower and took up the soap. Roman stood just outside the glass door, waiting and watching, and I couldn’t help giving him a

little show.

“Damn you,” he muttered and left the bathroom.

I smiled to myself. I hadn't thought this was ever going to be possible for me. But they all knew about my power, and none of them had run away. They seemed more determined than ever to stay by my side. Could I really make a place for myself here? It wasn't like I had anything to go back to in Atlanta.

The men were all so different, but I was starting to care for all of them. Grumpy Tripp who just needed some cheer and a little bondage, and wild Levi who was ready for the next adventure. Hudson whose charming smile hid the pain of his lonesome life, and Roman who was so smart but couldn't hide the passion inside him. I'd never thought I'd find one man, let alone four, who'd make my life complete. Yet, here they were, and despite all the trouble and the danger, this was the only place in the world I wanted to be.

After my shower, I rummaged through my travel bag for some clothes and quickly dressed. I found my brush and deodorant, and all those little things that you didn't realize you needed until they were missing. I even applied some simple makeup and pulled my hair back in a ponytail.

“Ready?” Roman asked. He was suddenly standing over me again.

I nodded. “My coat?” I'd taken to carrying my phone and my wallet in my coat pocket instead of a purse. An extra bag was just too much trouble when I was mostly just going to paint. Except I wasn't . . . not today.

Roman handed me a coat that wasn't mine. It was a gorgeous leather aviator jacket. It was black with zipper pockets, and a lining made of soft fleece.

“What's this?”

“It's better for you not to look like yourself today,” he murmured.

I blinked. “So you bought me a new coat?” I stroked the incredibly soft inner lining.

“It’s nothing,” he said, pushing up his glasses.

“It’s gorgeous,” I said, giving him a hug and a kiss. “Thank you.”

He actually looked sheepish. “I want you to know that I value you, Delphine.”

I grinned at him. “Are presents your love language?”

“Love language?” he asked, handing me my phone and wallet and my sneakers.

“I’ll tell you all about it over breakfast,” I said and filled my new pockets with my stuff. I glanced in the mirror. “Do I need a wig or anything else?”

He shook his head. “Keep it simple.”

Roman took my arm, and we headed out. We slipped out the back door of the aquarium and walked across the park before Roman called for a cab. His glasses had tinted in the sunshine, turning dark.

The cabbie who drove up looked familiar. He was burly with a big beard and he wore a gray newsboy cap. “Hey there,” he said, touching the brim of his hat. “Are you feeling better, miss?”

I smiled. “I’m fine. Are you the cabbie that brought me back from the hospital?”

“Sure am,” he said.

“Thank you.” We climbed in.

“Told this one he needed to take better care of his mate,” he said.

Roman just smiled. I expected the twins were used to getting mistaken for one another. Levi had been the one to bring me home from the hospital.

“Are we going to Jewel’s Cafe?” I asked Roman.

“Nope. Yes Now, Bob’s Diner.” He looked at the driver. “You know the

place?”

“Sure do,” he said, turning back to the wheel. “Best waffles in town.”

“I’ve never been there,” I said, watching the town pass by.

“It’s on the edge of town near the forest,” Roman said. “By the ferris wheel.”

“There’s a ferris wheel?” I asked. “But it’s November!”

Roman chuckled and pulled me closer to him. I snuggled against him. We were soon pulling up in front of the diner. There was a large sign across the front that read, “Yes Now, Bob’s Diner.” We paid the cabbie and hurried inside. The smell of waffles and coffee hit my nose as soon as I entered.

The waitress guided us to a booth and Roman stopped.

“How about the back patio?” he asked.

“Won’t it be cold?”

“No,” the waitress assured me, already moving. “We have warmers out there to keep it comfortable.”

We followed her through the booths to the back door and outside, and it was indeed warm enough to be comfortable. Around us was forest, and off to the right, there was indeed a ferris wheel. We took a seat at one of the tables that was half in shadow, so Roman would be comfortable. There were a few other people at tables nearby including a pretty blonde woman that I recognized. I’d met her briefly at a party at Vee. I couldn’t believe that was literally just a few days ago.

“Hi, Alyssa,” I said with a wave but that faltered. She gave off such a don’t fuck with me vibe.

Still, she waved back half-heartedly.

The waitress handed us menus and said she’d be back with coffee.

I leaned toward Roman. “Do you eat food?”

He chuckled again. "Yes, and I enjoy it too."

"Oh?"

"I don't have to eat it as I get my nourishment from blood."

"Good to know," I said, settling back against the chair. There was so much I didn't know about vampires and questions I wanted to ask. But I didn't know if this was the right place to ask.

"You have questions?"

"I just haven't been around that many vampires," I said. "But mostly I have questions about you."

"Oh?" he asked with a smile. "Ask me anything."

I didn't even know where to begin. What did you ask a two-thousand-year-old vampire when he said anything? "What's the most interesting fact you've learned lately?"

He chuckled. "That sea turtle shifters exist. I've met a lot of different kinds of shifters in my life, especially since coming to Silver Springs, but for some reason that one was surprising."

"Really? I guess I never really expected you to get surprised."

"Just because I'm old doesn't mean I'm completely tired and jaded," he said. "You surprised me too."

I chewed on my lip. "My null magic. You haven't seen it before."

"No." He reached across the table and took my hands in his. "Because you're so honest and thoughtful. You took responsibility right away for the incident at the aquarium."

"Well," I said with a shrug, "it was my fault."

"You worry about your sister and Hudson and Tripp and all of us. You're incredibly caring."

"Those aren't surprising things," I said. "They're just normal."

He chuckled. "When you've been around as long as I have, genuine human kindness is more unusual and surprising than one would think."

"Oh." I thought that sounded sad. "How did you and Levi get turned?"

"We were orphans in a time when there were no services or help," he said. "Our parents were killed when our house burned down."

"Burned? Aren't you from Egypt?" I asked. "I thought the houses were made of clay."

He looked surprised. "Yes, most were built of mud brick, or adobe, but palm logs were used to support the roof and ceilings and palm burns like anything else."

I nodded.

"How did you know this?" he asked.

"My parents are archaeologists. I grew up surrounded by books and history."

"I see," he said. "And you were interested."

"Just random facts. I'm no archaeologist," I said. "Just like watching nature documentaries doesn't make me a zoologist."

"What is a degree," he asked, "but a collection of facts?"

I didn't think I'd ever had anyone respect me for my knowledge, and here was this vampire with who knows how many degrees, doing just that. My cheeks heated but I couldn't help a pleased smile.

The waitress brought our coffee, and he released my hands. I added sugar and milk to mine. I was amused to see Roman also added several sugar packets.

"Like it sweet, do you?"

"Only way I can stand coffee. I prefer tea."

"Then why didn't you order it?"

He grinned. "Because I was distracted looking at you."

Okay, then. My cheeks were going to get even redder. "So you were saying how you got turned?"

"Yes," he said. "We lived on the streets for some time, but when we were teens we ran into a nobleman. Amen took us in because he thought twins were lucky."

"Oh, well, that was lucky."

"Not so much," Roman said, his lips twisting at the memory. "He didn't exactly adopt us to do housework."

I reached out a hand and squeezed his. "I'm sorry."

He shook his head. "It's far in the past."

"If it's too painful," I said, "you don't have to tell me."

"Our sire hated the nobleman and schemed to take everything away from him, including us," Roman said. "He turned us to make Amen pay."

"Then did you live with the vampire?"

"For a time, we traveled with him and then we struck out on our own. I haven't seen our sire in a long time. It could be that he's gone now."

I nodded. It sounded horrible, but I hoped things were better for Roman now. He seemed happy working at the aquarium and doing his work. That reminded me. "Is the aquarium alright? Was there a lot of damage from the attacks yesterday?"

"Yes," he said. "But we were able to put it to rights."

"The animals?"

"It will be some time before they are willing to come back, I'm afraid." He sighed. "Hudson did what he could to calm them, but it was traumatic."

"How does Hudson calm them?"

Roman chuckled. "He says he speaks the language of the sea."

I smiled. “You don’t really hate him, do you?”

“Hudson?”

“Yes.”

Roman looked thoughtful. “I was jealous more than anything. He has an easy smile and the women flock to him. I thought . . . I worried . . . that I’d be boring in comparison.”

“You could never be boring.”

He met my eyes. “It’s been a long time since I felt that side of me. The monster took over, and all I could think was that I had to have you. I’m sorry.”

“I didn’t mind.”

The waitress returned with our waffles and we dug in. Roman added butter and poured maple syrup over his and I giggled again. He really did have a sweet tooth. I didn’t think I’d ever considered a vampire with a sweet tooth.

I stood. “I’m going to go to the bathroom. I’ll be right back.”

Roman nodded.

As I walked in the building, my phone vibrated in my pocket. I pulled it out and Phoebe’s name flashed across the screen. “Hey, sis, I’m going to have to call you righ—”

A male chuckle halted my words. “Hello, Delphine.”

My eyes darted to the patio door, but Roman was out of sight. “What are you doing with my sister’s phone?”

“She’s my insurance.”

I swallowed. “Insurance?”

“That you’ll do exactly as I tell you to, and you won’t involve any of your boyfriends.”

I closed my eyes and sighed. “What do you want?”

“Come to this address,” he said, rattling off an address. “Tell no one and your sister will be fine.”

I noticed he didn't say I would be fine. “Yes.”

“I'll see you soon.”

Hudson



I was jealous of Roman getting to hang out with Delphine, but I knew it was best for keeping her safe. And Phoebe had needed help with the house, so it was good that I was here. I'd put in my earbuds, turned up the music, and tried to lose myself in the painting.

Tripp would find his mentor and he would deal with him. That was all there was to it. I was just a simple turtle shifter. What did I know about fighting evil magicians? All I was good for was calming ocean animals and coming up with marketing campaigns and odd jobs. I sighed. What would Delphine want with a loafer like me anyway? I'd never even held down a job for more than a few months, let alone accomplished something with my life.

I sprayed the paint over the siding, working from top to bottom in a smooth, controlled manner. The blue was similar enough to the original color that they probably hadn't needed to apply primer, but Phoebe had insisted. I came right up to the corner with the sprayer. Glancing around, I didn't see Phoebe. I could have sworn she was right there. She'd probably just gone for a bathroom break, and I was being paranoid.

I turned back to the wall, but doubt lingered. Setting down the paint sprayer, I pulled out an earbud. “Phoebes!” I called out.

There was no answer.

I walked around the house, but I didn’t see her working or resting on the porch with a coffee. Jogging up to the front door, I opened it and shouted inside, “Phoebe, are you in there?”

No answer.

There was definitely something wrong.

I reached inside my smock, grabbing my phone and pulling it out. I punched dial on Phoebe’s number and there was no answer. I didn’t hear anything nearby. She really was gone. There’s no way Phoebe would walk off the job, or even go get lunch without telling me. She seemed to be pretty responsible.

Ending the call, I scrolled for Tripp’s number and hit dial.

“What?” his gruff voice said.

“Phoebe is gone.”

“Who?” he asked distractedly.

“Delphine’s sister is gone; she’s missing,” I said, staring down at my phone. “Does that sound like something your mentor would do?”

“Fuck,” he growled. “Exactly like Lambert. Levi, call your brother. He needs to get Delphine’s phone.”

I heard Levi’s voice in the background. “What do you mean she’s gone?”

“Who’s gone?” I asked, already knowing the answer and not wanting to.

“Delphine went to the bathroom a little while ago and she never returned,” Tripp said.

I swore. “Where are you? Are you any closer to finding him?”

“We have traced his signature all over town, but we haven’t found him.”

Running my hand through my hair, I looked toward the street. When had they taken her? Had they put her into a van or other vehicle? My eyes landed on Phoebe's truck. "How's Delphine getting around?"

"What?" Tripp asked.

"You guys have your truck, right? So how did Delphine and Roman get to the diner?"

He reasked the question to Levi. "They took a cab."

Think, Hudson, think. "I think when she's alone, Delphine always uses a rideshare. Do you know which one?"

"Levi says it was Mystic Transit."

"We can call and ask if either of those places picked her back up and where her final destination was."

"Okay, we'll call the cab company since Levi knows a driver," Tripp said. "You try Mystic Transit."

"On it," I said. "We'll find her."

Delphine



The rideshare pulled up to an ordinary house with a white picket fence. I didn't think I'd ever seen a house that had a real white picket fence but this one did. The neighborhood was residential and didn't seem to have many people around. They were probably at work or school. I climbed out and thanked the driver.

Then I headed for the gate. There wasn't anyone on the lawn or peering at me from the windows, so I was starting to wonder if I had gotten the wrong place. As soon as I stepped through the gate, I knew I hadn't.

The nice family house disappeared from view. In its place was a castle with a drawbridge and a moat and everything. Somehow it shimmered to life in the space of a small lot.

"Bigger on the inside," I murmured, thinking I was a long way from watching Dr. Who episodes with my sister Clio. I walked up the worn path toward the castle. The grass around me was longer than the yards on either side. The castle's stone facade and towering turrets cast an ominous shadow

over the surrounding landscape. Gargoyles perched on the walls, their stony eyes glaring down at me. “What is this place?”

Suddenly, magic wove around me, clamping my arms to my sides and dragging me toward the castle.

“I was coming,” I muttered, blinking to clear my vision.

“Well, I couldn’t be sure,” a man’s voice said, and Lambert appeared in front of me. “And besides, I can’t have you taking off your medallion and causing trouble.”

He turned toward the castle and started walking, and his magic dragged me along behind him.

“Is Phoebe okay?”

“I told you your sister is fine,” he said. “You and I have some unfinished business.”

He stopped a few paces from the front of the castle and signaled to someone inside. The drawbridge rolled down with a heavy clanking noise. The gargoyles didn’t move. The magic pulled me across the bridge and through the doorway after the magician.

The temperature dropped as we crossed in, going from brisk fall day to deep Antarctica cold. I wanted to wrap my arms around myself but I could only shiver.

“Wouldn’t kill you to turn the heat on,” I said to the old man. He had stopped before me and was talking to a thin gentleman in an old-fashioned suit. The thin guy gave me an imperious scowl. A butler, really? Was he really a mouse too, like the thugs who’d grabbed me before had been? Lambert was freaking Cinderella. That thought made me laugh.

Both men glared at me before returning to their conversation.

I felt like I’d crossed through some portal to another world. I swallowed.

Maybe that's why the castle was invisible from the outside. A portal like the ones the aquarium used took us away from Silver Springs to wherever this was.

"Now, my dear," the old man said, turning to me. He wore a thick coat and a top hat like some cartoon wizard. "I have a short time to answer five of your questions, but then we must get to work. So what do you want to know?"

I couldn't believe he was actually going to answer a few questions. Guess he didn't just look like a cartoon villain. Still, I didn't know how many I had, so I tried to think of the most important ones. His comment about "getting to work" really worried me, but I couldn't let myself get distracted. "Your name is Lambert, right?"

"Yes, my name is Lambert, and I come from an ancient line of magicians," he said.

"So you're a witch?" I bit my lip. Kind of a waste of a question.

"No," he growled. "I'm a magician. We also work with magical forces, but we are much more powerful."

I tried to think of what to ask next. He'd said that Phoebe was alright, so I knew there was no use asking things like where she was and if he'd let her go. "What do you want with the aquarium?"

He rubbed his chin. "Interesting that you went there and not to what do I want with you. They must have really affected you."

I kept silent. I could hold my tongue when I needed to.

"Tripp owes me."

"Owes you what?" I blurted and then smacked myself. I really should be worried about the trouble I was in, not the aquarium.

Lambert scowled. "He was my pupil, and I taught him and shared my

resources with him for years. Then he suddenly grows a conscience and leaves me?”

I opened my mouth to ask something else and Lambert cut me off.

“That’s all the questions. Into the lab with you now.”

“But you said five . . .”

The magic dragged me down the hallway after Lambert.

Lambert spun back to me and lifted a bushy eyebrow. “And what part of this meeting told you I was a good guy?”

Nothing. The dark hallway led to even darker stairs that went round and round into a basement room. The room was a rectangle with cages clustered at one end. In the center of the room was a carved circle with various runes along its edges, and there were several tables around stacked with a mixture of books and scientific equipment—beakers, test tubes, and bunsen burners.

Phoebe was lying in one of the cages, her eyes closed. “Phoebe!”

She moaned but didn’t lift her head.

“See?” Lambert said. “Perfectly fine.”

“What did you do to her?”

Lambert didn’t answer but started thumbing through a large, dark book on the table. The outside was decorated with black vines, just as Tripp’s had been.

The magic dumped me in the middle of the runic circle. I looked around, hoping to have a brilliant idea for escape, but I didn’t see one. If the magic released me, then I could take off my medallion and get Phoebe and me out the door. But the magic didn’t let go.

Instead, Lambert snapped his fingers and a blue flame rose, trapping me inside the circle.

“What do you want from me?” I asked.

“Your magic,” Lambert said.

“Well, hell, you could have just asked,” I muttered. “I never wanted it.”

He looked at me in disbelief. “No one would turn down power like yours.” Moving across from me, he drew a second circle on the floor, the flames rising, sharp and blue. He stood inside that one and he began to chant.

Nothing happened for a while. I called out to Phoebe a few times, but she didn’t rise. Lambert continued to chant.

Then I felt little pulls on my skin, like the spell was peeling away some old sunburn. I crossed my arms, suddenly colder. “What is that?”

The chanting grew louder, and the spell started to pull harder, reaching into me. It felt like it was trying to yank out my organs.

“Stop,” I cried. But I couldn’t stop it. I couldn’t even move, still wrapped in the holding spell. Tears pricked at my eyelids and a heavy sadness draped over me. I felt like I was losing something, and I wasn’t even sure what it was.

He’d said he was taking my magic, and I’d told him to go ahead. But as he ripped it out of me piece by piece, I realized how my magic was tied into every part of me, part of my very soul. “Stop!”

Tripp



We bounded through the gate and the castle appeared before us. Levi swore behind me. It wasn't a surprise to me, but I knew Lambert. I knew his tricks and his games, and I knew his weaknesses. The path we walked on was surrounded with overly long grass, and I could feel the magic seething through it. "Be careful," I muttered.

A blade of grass tried to curl around my foot and I hit it with a flame spell.

"Dammit. Get off me," Roman muttered behind me.

I turned to see the grass was gathering around both the vampires. They were clawing and biting at it, but it just wound tighter. I looked for Hudson, but he'd shifted and the grass let the turtle through.

"Fire's the best way to deter it," I said. "But I don't want to hurt you."

"Just do it," Levi muttered. "We'll survive."

Once Hudson reached the edge by the moat, I turned and called a fireball. I blasted the grass at Levi and Roman's feet. It blackened and fell to the ground. The fire tried to catch on the vampires too, so I sent a spray of water

over them. Fire meeting water caused a thick mist, but after a few moments the vampires came striding out.

“We’re fine,” Roman muttered at my appraising glance. “Anything to save Delphine.”

I turned and approached the moat. The drawbridge was up, and I was sure it wouldn’t be lowered willingly. I thought over my arsenal of spells, but I didn’t want to use too much and be weak when it came to facing Lambert.

The vampires raced by me and crossed the moat with speed. Then they climbed the walls, finding purchase on the rocks. In minutes, they were over the top of the turrets and lowering the drawbridge to the ground.

Hudson shifted and stood next to me.

Once the drawbridge dropped, we ran over it and into the castle.

“Master Tripp,” the old butler said, blocking the door.

“Alfred.” I inclined my head.

“You know I cannot allow you entrance. You have betrayed our master.”

I raised a hand, the spell ready. “And you know I can turn you back into the delightful rodent you’re meant to be.”

His beady-eyed stare narrowed. “You wouldn’t.”

“I would do anything to save my mate.”

Hudson had worked his way around behind Alfred. He raised a large stick and bashed the butler over the head. The man fell to the ground, completely out.

“Save your magic,” Hudson said, meeting my eyes.

“Where’d you find the stick?” Levi asked, clapping him on the shoulder.

“That grass held a lot of junk,” Hudson said. “I think we could have put together a car from the parts out there.”

Levi glanced over his shoulder. “Really?”

A scream echoed through the castle, and I ran. The others followed on my heels knowing I knew this castle better than they did. As soon as I reached Lambert's lab, I threw open the door.

Two circles had been erected. Lambert stood in one and Delphine in the other. Between them stretched magic, pulling from her and into him. I'd known it'd be something like this.

The vampires rushed toward her but fell back at the circle. Hudson had already gone around to the cages and was trying to wake Phoebe. This one was up to me. My mentor had done so much evil in the world. I wasn't going to let him take Delphine's magic from her. I'd promised her I wouldn't let him hurt her, and I wouldn't.

She cried out again.

"You've got this," Roman said, his hand on my shoulder.

"Draw on us if you need to," Levi said on my other side.

I blinked. "But . . ." That they even knew it was possible, and that I'd done it before, I couldn't believe. I hadn't wanted to. Lambert had made me, but still. "No. The last time . . . he died."

"Whatever it takes," they said, their faces serious.

"We've lived a long time," Roman said.

"And we'd give it all up for Delphine," Levi continued. "We know you and Hudson would take care of her."

I took a deep breath. "I'm not going to hurt you."

"For Delphine," Roman said.

Looking at the lines of magic, I could see the spells wound around them. A holding spell so Delphine couldn't get to her magic, and a transferring spell that allowed Lambert to take it. He'd wanted to do the same to me.

After I'd told him I was leaving, that I just couldn't do what he wanted me

to do, he'd threatened and tried to hold me, just like this. I focused on the trail of magic over their heads. The circles contained them, and crossing another witch's circle was impossible, but the magic wasn't contained in the circle. It still needed a path.

I focused on the connecting magic. I could feel the slime of Lambert's power in it, his greasy feel. I never knew if his magic was really that dark, or if the way he'd used it over the years had twisted it. I could also feel Delphine's light. Her null power wasn't used maliciously, it was a gift, like any other kind of magic. Wrapping my mind around the magic, I drew up my own power within me and I pushed on theirs, trying to twist it, bend it to my will. The magic resisted, fighting back.

Glancing at Lambert, I saw his smirk. He didn't say anything, continuing his chant, but I could almost hear the words he would have spoken. "I've always been more powerful than you, boy. Don't even bother."

I closed my eyes.

Levi and Roman squeezed my shoulders.

I didn't want to, but Lambert would break Delphine, and then he'd be stronger than ever. What was I supposed to do? I opened my eyes.

"You're stronger than you think," Hudson said. He stood just a couple of feet away. "You can do it without hurting either of them. If you just trust yourself."

"What would a shifter know?" I snarled, already angry with myself for what I was about to do.

Hudson glanced toward Delphine. "She trusts you. She wouldn't want you to hurt anyone to save her."

I scowled.

"Let your intention be for good and none will be harmed."

“I don’t know how,” I said softly.

“You do.” He grinned.

How could he believe in me? I glanced at Delphine. How could she? How could I be this new person they wanted, they needed? I sighed. That’s what I’d wanted to do. Why I’d opened the aquarium and made a deal with the twins.

“And I trust you,” he said, moving around us and placing his hand on my back. “Use our magic. Save our mate.”

I nodded. Then I opened my magic, gathering streams from Levi, from Roman, from Hudson. I pulled it all together and then I reached out for the magic that surged between Lambert and Delphine. I poked it, prodded it, looking for the weakness. When I found it, a grunt escaped me.

“I knew it,” Hudson said excitedly behind me.

I started weaving my magic through the stream, turning the magic to my purpose.

Delphine whimpered and I knew she was in pain. I tried to move faster, but one of the vampires stumbled, and I reeled back.

“No,” I gasped. “It’s too much.”

“Keep going,” Roman said, his voice calm and steady.

I pushed into the magic again, just as I had in the aquarium when I turned ravens back into stingrays. I turned every bolt’s purpose back on itself, until they ran away from Lambert and not to.

The chanting stopped as he realized what I was doing, but it was too late.

I twisted the magic so that it could power itself, and I pushed some back into the vampires and the shifter beside me.

Lambert shouted, “No! Stop it!”

“What are you doing?” Roman asked.

“I turned the stream back on itself.” I watched as the magic lifted Lambert, arching his body as it stole from him.

Levi stood. “How does that help Delphine?”

“Wait and see, brother,” Roman said with a satisfied smile.

After some time the magic extinguished itself, the flamed circles going out on their own. Lambert sagged to the ground, his head on his chest.

The vampires started to move toward him, and I said, “Leave him. He can’t hurt anyone anymore.”

We all rushed over to Delphine. She was on her knees, her eyes closed, but the air around her hummed.

“Delphine,” Hudson said, dropping down next to her. “Are you okay?”

Her eyes opened. They were white with power. “What have you done?”

“I took away something that didn’t belong to him,” I said.

She turned toward Lambert. “You broke him.”

“He deserved it,” I said fiercely. “He’s stolen powers from others for years and all he’s ever used them for was to hurt others.”

“I don’t deserve them,” she said.

“You do,” Roman said, taking her hands and pulling her to her feet. “You are a good human being, and you’ll do good.”

Her eyes flickered. “But I don’t know how to use magic. I’ve never cast a spell.”

“Tripp will teach you how,” Levi said. “And we’ll be here to support you every step of the way.”

Tears glimmered in her eyes. “I don’t . . . I . . .”

Hudson leaned closer. “We love you, Delphine. You aren’t alone anymore. We are here and we will take care of you.”

I reached out for her, the magic buzzing over my skin as I drew her into my

arms. "I won't let you hurt anyone."

"It's too much," she whispered.

I picked up her amulet and I whispered a spell over it, then I let it fall to her chest.

The magic calmed, leaving her eyes their normal brilliant blue. "What happened?"

"I used the amulet's magic to contain your powers."

She looked hopeful. "So I won't have to control them."

"It's not forever. Just so we can learn to use them, one step at a time," I said. "You are strong enough to control them, to use them with intention. You just need to learn how."

Phoebe approached us, looking tired and hurt, but with a smile on her face. "I always thought that it was wrong locking your null magic away like that. It is a gift, as much as any other magic, and you should have tried harder to learn about it."

"But—" Delphine said.

"Magic is a gift," Roman said. "No matter the form, as long as the intention is good."

The others nodded their agreements.

"Let's get out of here," Hudson said, and we all marched back down the dark hallway and across the lawn and into the light. Levi dragged a half-conscious Lambert along with us.

At the street, Roman looked back. "Why didn't the castle disappear with the rest of Lambert's magical conjurings?"

"It knows me," I said, then I waved my arms and the castle disappeared.

Delphine



Lambert was dragged off to jail, and the guys carried me home. After I rinsed off, I crawled into Tripp's bed and slept for three days. I barely remember waking up and having someone feed me and falling back to sleep again.

"Delphine," Hudson said. "I've brought your lunch."

"Is it soup again?" I asked from my deep burrow under the covers.

"Yes," he said helpfully.

I threw the covers off and sat up. "I'm not sick. I don't want soup. In fact, I don't think I ever want to see soup again for the rest of my life."

He grinned. "You got it, gorgeous."

I tossed a pillow at him. "I'm getting out of bed now." I hadn't felt good for few days, like I had the flu. Tripp had said something about my body adapting to my new powers. But I must have adapted, because now I felt great.

"Okay, and what would you like for lunch?"

"General Tso's Chicken," I said.

Hudson bowed. "Your wish is my command."

He hurried out to order, and I headed for the bathroom. I was wearing one of Tripp's oversized t-shirts again and nothing else. I smirked. I'm sure they wouldn't take advantage while I was under the weather, but it still amused me. After pulling off the t-shirt, I climbed into a hot shower and scrubbed myself down. My brand of shampoo and soap had been laid out for me, and I used them, enjoying the familiar scents. I brushed out my hair, polished my medallion, and wrapped myself in a big fluffy towel. I felt tremendously better.

When I strolled back into the bedroom, four sets of eyes were watching me. "Hello, guys."

Hudson sat on the bed. Tripp and Levi leaned against the wall, and Roman was settled on the armchair that sat in the corner. My men. Only a couple of weeks ago, I'd been lamenting my permanently single state, and now I had four boyfriends who'd all confessed their love to me.

But I hadn't said it back, not yet.

Tripp opened his mouth to ask something about how I was, and I wasn't here for it. I dropped my towel instead and enjoyed the heat of desire that flared through the room. I was naked except for the medallion between my breasts. I didn't dare remove that.

"I just realized," I said, strolling across the room and running my hand along Roman's leg, "that I haven't told you, shown you, how much I care for you all."

Roman's fangs popped out in a sign of his appreciation.

I grinned. Then I crossed over to the bed, and I climbed up on it next to Hudson. I played with his hair. "But you do have me at a disadvantage."

"We do?" he asked.

“Since you’re all wearing so many clothes . . .” I leaned back and watched four gorgeous men strip down as fast as they could. “And I don’t think I can look at this bed another moment.”

Levi yanked me off the bed. Then he flung me over his shoulder and carried me into the living room.

I was laughing when he dropped me on the couch.

They all waited, despite their obvious erections, for me to call the show.

“Hum,” I said, putting a finger to my lip. “I think Hudson first, since I haven’t tried him yet.” I motioned for Hudson to sit down, and I lifted my legs and sat astride him. I kissed him, and his hands began to trail over my body.

He broke off our kiss and took my nipple in his mouth, biting it lightly and watching my face. I arched toward him encouragingly, and he cupped my breasts with his hands. He sucked one, and then the other, and tendrils of electricity ran through me. I ran my hands through his hair and he looked up, grinning.

I pressed my sex against him, grinding my clit against his cock. Wetness had already started to seep from my core as soon as I’d seen all those eyes watching me. I was ready for him to be inside me, and we’d barely begun.

In fact, I had a wicked idea. I stood up and turned around, sliding my already wet sex onto Hudson’s cock. I pushed back, letting him settle inside me. His hands reached around stroking my tits, and I surveyed the other guys’ expressions. Their hands rested on their own cocks, absentmindedly stroking themselves as they watched.

I lifted myself and pushed down, and Hudson moaned under me. His hands gripped the sides of my hips, helping me lift and fall. I licked my lips and ran

my eyes over the others. Their eyes were all hooded with desire. I was the focus of all of their attention.

“Roman,” I said, and he was instantly in front of me. I took his hand and pushed into my folds.

He stroked my clit as I rode Hudson, circling. I moaned. The feel of his fingers across my skin was like fire, sending jolts to all my nerve endings. I pulled Roman up to kiss me, his tongue darting inside my mouth as his fingers drove me mad. We broke apart, and I groaned.

“Faster,” I murmured, and both men accommodated me. Hudson squeezed my hips, helping me to move up and down, and Roman sped up his strokes. Suddenly I felt a band sliding under my arms and helping me raise myself higher. I looked up and met Tripp’s eyes across the room, knowing it came from him.

I clenched Hudson as my orgasm rippled over me, and he cried out his own. The shockwaves had barely subsided when I was being pulled up and pressed over the arm of the couch. I glanced behind me and Roman smiled as he thrust himself inside me. I gasped, and Levi was on the couch in front of me, his cock bobbing at my mouth.

The band that had held me up slithered over my skin, turning into a thin chainmail. It held my breasts, pulling them out and up, and moved between my legs, running along both sides of my already swollen clit. I moaned. Whatever the spell was, it required no lies from me and it didn’t impede Roman as he thrust all the way to the end of me.

He was hard and thick and filled me to the very brim. When I gasped, Levi pressed his cock down my throat and I took him in eagerly, wanting more. Every time Roman thrust, Levi thrust farther down my throat. I couldn’t think, all I could do was feel. Pinned between the two of them, I was a being

of pure pleasure. Sensations rolled over me in cascading waves and I was lost and found all at once. I was glad I was on the couch arm, because my legs shook as the pressure built up inside of me.

The chainmail spell was the tipping point that pushed me even further, pressing me just when I'd been released. It rubbed against my folds and squeezed my nipples, as if Tripp was next to me, around me, with us.

Roman ran his hands over my ass, and Levi held the back of my head. We moved as one being, merging together in an ancient dance, and I was swept away toward another orgasm. They came, shouting, and I shattered into a million pieces, shaking and crying with joy.

Afterward, the twins helped me sit up. Levi gave me a glass of water, while Roman wiped down my swollen sex with a cool cloth.

"I love you both," I said, sweaty and exhausted. "I love you all."

Then Tripp was in front of me. His dark hair long around his shoulders and his gaze piercing me to the core. The bands that had slithered over me before wrapped me up again, and I swallowed. I'd been in charge when this had started, but I wasn't in charge now. He strummed the cord covering my clit and I moaned.

"I've been waiting," he said.

"I know," I said. "How do you want me?"

He leaned forward and stroked my breasts, pinching the nipples into hard peaks. "Now I don't know," he said. "There are so many ways."

I grinned, knowing I was going to enjoy whatever it was.

Roman



We reopened the aquarium the next Saturday with a fancy dress ball. It had been Hudson's idea, of course, but it was a good one. We wanted to give the people of Silver Springs something good to remember.

While Delphine was laid up with magic poisoning, we'd all helped her sister out with the painting. As a result, Peppermint's house was sporting a great new look and Phoebe had been able to take a well-deserved vacation. For some reason, she'd chosen to spend it here in Silver Springs. She said she liked being surrounded by all the magic; it felt like home.

I walked Delphine through the doors to the main room. She looked lovely in a glittering, navy blue ball gown with stars on the skirt. There were no sleeves and the sweetheart neckline plunged between her breasts, and her waist was cinched with a silver belt. I couldn't wait to take it off her later.

Levi and I wore tailored suits, in blue and black, because we were gentlemen. Tripp had gone all out and wore his leather jacket over a dress shirt, and Hudson wore a patchwork coat of green and gold.

Over the main hall, candle lit chandeliers gave off a warm glow. Delphine and Tripp had been practicing to get the spell right. A quartet played music and the guests danced and laughed. There were refreshments near the cafe, and tall tables scattered near it for guests to mingle.

“It’s amazing,” Delphine said.

Tripp nodded. “We did a good job with the chandeliers.”

Delphine swatted him. “Not just the lights, but the music and the refreshments and the costumes. It’s perfect.”

“It is,” I said with a grin. “Would you like to dance with me?”

She grinned. “Yes.”

The other guys looked disgruntled, and I shot them a triumphant grin. I swirled Delphine into the dance. It wasn’t as fancy as a waltz, because we couldn’t be sure everyone knew the steps, but a simplified version that the guests picked up very quickly. I had never seen Delphine so happy.

“You look so beautiful tonight,” I said.

“And you look so handsome.”

“Thank you for coming into our life, Delphine,” I said. “I never realized how bereft we were without you before.”

“I love you too, Roman.”

Then she fanned herself, and my brother was at her elbow. “Can I get you a drink?”

“Yes, Levi, that’d be wonderful.” She followed him off the floor to the refreshment tables.

“You know each of us is going to try to get her alone tonight,” Hudson said, coming up next to me. “Just so we can hear her say those words again to us.”

“She will,” I said, “because she really does love us all.”

“And we love her,” Tripp said gruffly beside me. “She truly has changed

our lives for the better. It almost makes me grateful to Lambert.”

Hudson laughed. “Nope, give your thanks to Dolly and her magic collar. Better yet, give your thanks to me for coming up with the Adopt a Creature campaign.”

“Thank you, Hudson,” I said seriously.

Tripp rolled his eyes at me. “Don’t encourage him.”

“You’re very welcome,” Hudson said, bowing.

I watched Delphine at the refreshments table as she was talking to a strawberry blonde woman in a pretty emerald gown.

Delphine



“Oh my god,” I said, biting into a cinnamon roll.

“Yes?” Tripp whispered near my ear. “You called?”

I went to lean back into him, but he was across the room. He’d just thrown his voice. Brat.

I surveyed my next pick from the refreshments table. The set up was gorgeous, set up with snacks from all the best restaurants in town, and not just the usual fancy dress ball finger food. In my focus, I nearly bumped into a strawberry blonde woman who was staring toward the penguin enclosure.

Frowning, I looked but I didn’t see anything.

“Excuse me,” I said with a smile. “I’m Delphine and I work here at the aquarium.” Damn, it felt good saying that. “Is there something the matter?”

She turned toward me. “I’m Raven,” she said, with another glance toward the penguins. “I’m afraid my ..er.. former familiar is harassing your penguins. He doesn’t seem to like them very much.”

“No worries,” I said. “If it bothers them, they’ll just disappear back through their portal. You know about how the aquarium is set up?”

She nodded and tapped her brochure. “Magic user only script is a nice touch.”

I shrugged. “Yeah, well, that’s my boyfriend Tripp. He runs the place.”

“Pretty awesome.”

“That’s a gorgeous gown,” I said, and it was a beautiful emerald backless gown. .

“Thanks. Yours too.”

“My guys got it for me. Isn’t it gorgeous?” I spun around. “I feel like Cinderella.”

She grinned back at me.

Looking around, I asked, “So did you bring a date?” Then at the look on her face I tried to backtrack. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to...it’s okay if you’re unattached...”

“No,” she said, “I’m permanently single, I’m afraid.”

“Oh,” I said, but I wondered. I’d thought I was permanently single myself, before I met the guys. My gaze trailed over to where Tripp, Levi, Roman, and Hudson were mingling with the guests. They really had changed my life for the better. “You never know.”

She gave a wry grin. “I see you’re happy with your mate, or is it mates?”

“Four,” I whispered.

Her eyebrows shot up. “I know it's Silver Springs and all, but ...” She fanned herself.

I laughed. Just a few weeks ago, I’d felt the same. Now I was like a whole new person. I had partners who loved me, and who I loved in return, and I had these crazy new powers. Tripp was slowly teaching me to use them, but it was rough going. I’d never been able to do anything but cancel out other magic. But, I wouldn’t give it up for anything.

Thank you for reading Delphine! I hope you enjoyed her steamy adventures.

Check out the next book in the Silver Springs Pets series: Raven by Tabitha Barret. Read now.

According to my friends, love is in the air in Silver Springs. I know Cupid isn't responsible for helping my friends find their soul mates. It's magic. The very thing I have sworn off since my academy days. I understand too well the trouble magic can cause.

And if you'd like to try another of Cali Mann's Silver Springs books check out, Peppermint.

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About the Author

Cali Mann is the USA Today bestselling author of the Thornbriar Academy series. She writes paranormal romance, the sexy kind with hunky shifters, sexy vampires, and women who stand up for themselves. She learned romance by reading through her mother's entire romance collection in her teens, so she and romance go way back. When she's not writing, she spends her time streaming shows, playing video games, and pestering her two tuxedo cats. Sign up for Cali's newsletter for exclusive content and sneak peeks: <https://calimann.substack.com/>

Say hello to Cali online on her website at www.calimann.com, [Facebook](#), or [Instagram](#).

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