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"THE NEXT TIME I TASTE YOU,  
YOU'RE MINE."



# SEVEN DEVILS

BLOOD FALLS WORLD: ELEMENTS OF EVIL

# INDIA AMARE

# SEVEN DEVILS

Blood Falls World

ELEMENTS OF EVIL

BOOK I



# INDIA AMARE

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Seven Devils

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# CHAPTER I



THE PAST IS PROLOGUE...



Seamus

The Cottage

Nicknames were fun. I loved giving them out. Fucking loved when someone took it as the compliment it was. I didn't usually give them much thought. Something in the back of my brain was in charge of that information. I spit out whatever it served, and it was usually something perfect.

But Florence Figueroa didn't appreciate my brilliance.

And the more I teased her, the worse the nicknames got. And for some reason—fuck if I knew why—the more upset she got, the more I pushed the envelope.

She stood there in a strange house, cute little jeans and tiny sexy sweater covering what I was sure was most likely a spectacular body underneath. Not that she'd ever let me anywhere near it.

“Stop calling me that!”

“Why, sweetheart?” Fuck, I just had to push, didn't I?

Fire blazed in her eyes. “Do you even remember my name?”

Florence. Fig for short, not that I liked that very much. It made me think of Fig Newtons. Maybe that's why I kept pushing for a nickname. Well, one that wasn't a fruit. “Princess, I know exactly what your name is, what day you were born on, and which kind of flower you prefer in a bouquet.” *Shit*. Why did I say that?

She blinked. “What?”

I pointed at myself. “Bodyguard, remember?”

“Why do you need to know my...birth date?”

I shrugged pretending to look bored when really I was anything but. I knew that Rain was in the shower and Kris was checking the wards on the perimeter of the property. There were four squirrels in the first tree past the front door, twelve deer on the slope near the river, and a small bear just on the other side of the river.

And no, not a bear *shifter*. Just a regular old, damned bear.

I also knew Fig’s heart rate was ten beats faster than normal, her pupils were dilated, and she couldn’t stop fidgeting.

“I like to know everything possible.”

Her eyes narrowed, another challenge on the tip of her sharp tongue. “Well? What’s my birth date?”

“March 11th.”

Her nostrils flared. I was right. She hated that I was right. Probably because she hated me. For a few minutes she liked me. While her best friend Wils was hurt we became friends. She trusted me. Confided in me. Then I fucked up.

And now she hated me and didn’t believe anything I said unless I backed it up with three forms of proof. Fucking exhausting. And it made keeping her safe a nightmare. Mostly because she refused to listen to reason. Refused to listen to me. Nothing I said mattered. It didn’t matter that it was a mistake. A stupid, silly mistake.

One strike and you’re out with Florence.

“Am I right or not, slugger?” I figured the baseball reference was worth a try, all things considered.

“You’re right.” She crossed her arms and finally looked around Kris and Rain’s cottage. This would be her sanctuary while Wils and Vic figured out how to stop Samantha from... doing whatever Samantha wanted to do.

I felt bad for Wils. Her family was shit. I knew the feeling well.

But then again, my good-for-nothing brother never came back from the dead. He just walked off into the sunset, never to be seen again. Didn't matter that he was all I had left. Didn't matter that I had no one to raise me. I wasn't even at the Age of Maturity.

Whatever. I didn't need to think about that shit. I had a job to do. One job only: keep Florence safe.

“You want to see your room?”

She nodded once.

Good enough. I started for the stairs. I didn't live here but I helped with some of the renovations. And when I came by to ask about bunking here, they showed me where we'd stay. The cottage was pretty simple. A nice living space downstairs, kitchen, and dining room. There was a small room that had served as their bedroom while we remodeled upstairs. Now Kris and Rain had a nice suite upstairs. Fig would get the guest room while I took the old bedroom downstairs.

“This is nice,” she said, looking around. I dropped the last of her bags by the dresser.

“You should have everything you need. Extra blankets and pillows in the closet, towels are laid out in the bathroom.” I liked these moments. The soft moments when Fig wasn't mad at me.

She nodded, ran a hand over the blanket, and sighed. “Thank you for bringing me here. I'm sorry I get so...”

“Mad?”

She shot me a look. “Cross.”

Same difference, but semantics mattered to Florence. “I don't mind. Your life has been tossed out on the lawn.”

She groaned. “It really has, hasn't it?”

“It has. So if you need to lash out, I don't know if you've noticed, but I've got plenty to lash.” I hadn't meant it as

anything other than a way of suggesting I could take it.

But her eyes flared as they traveled over my body.

*Interesting.*

“Well, I appreciate your understanding.”

Polite was my least favorite Fig. “We were friends there for a while. Remember?”

Her eyes snapped to mine. “We weren’t friends. We were stuck caring for the people we cared about and shared some... emotions.”

*Liar.* She let me hold her while she cried. Wiped away her tears when she confessed her fears. Sat up late at night with me eating ice cream and laughing over old stories. She told me about her life and I told her about mine.

And then I fucked up.

One strike, baby.

I wanted to box her out. Put that raw feeling she gave me when she was like this away where I didn’t have to feel it. But if there was a chance to fix this...

I stepped closer, lowering my head and my voice. “I don’t have a built-in lie detector, so I can’t call you out like Wils can, but you’re fucking lying.”

Her eyes flew to mine. But she didn’t pull out a new insult. In fact, she looked ashamed. “No, I’m not.”

“Yes you are.” I stepped closer, bringing our bodies within touching distance. “I know you are, because I was there too. You opened up to me. Trusted me.”

“And look where that got me,” she bit out.

“I didn’t do anything wrong, Florence.”

Her jaw thrust forward and she crossed her arms, but she didn’t deny it.

“I make one simple mistake. Something I didn’t even know was wrong, and you punish me for the rest of time?”

She simply stared. I had a feeling that Fig wasn't used to getting pushback.

*Interesting.* "I'm sorry. I said it before and I'll say it however many times you need to hear it. I'm sorry for violating your trust. I didn't know it was a secret. You tell Wils everything. I will never share anything you tell me in confidence ever again."

She looked away. "I appreciate that."

"But I'm still an asshole?" *Unbelievable.* "I shared things with you too. Trusted you. Still do."

"Your secrets are safe with me," she whispered, her voice wavering.

"Are they? Your anger won't make you punish me? Tit for tat?" I knew she wouldn't, but I couldn't help myself. I had to keep pushing.

She glared up at me. The fire back and burning. "I'm not like that! Not like..." She snapped her jaw shut.

I stepped back wishing I could hide how much that hurt, but I knew it was already written all over my face. "Like me? Got it. Noted. Have a good night, angel face. Sweet dreams and all that. If you need me I'll be downstairs."

Her hand shot out, grabbing my bicep. I stared at her hand, shocked and excited she was touching me. "I'm sorry. I'm..." She ripped her hand away, ran it through her hair, and paced in a circle. "I'm not myself. I can't seem to pull it together."

And I was the closest and easiest punching bag. I gently placed my hands on her shoulders and turned her to face me. "And I told you I can take it." I shrugged for emphasis. "But I do wish you'd lay off the sharper knives. Those suckers hurt."

"I'm sorry." She looked away.

That was enough for now. "I mean it. Sleep well. I hope you don't dream. And if you need anything, I'm just downstairs."

"Thank you, Seamus."

Hey, at least she didn't call me Asshole.

I worked it out with Kris. I'd take midnight to dawn so he could sleep beside Rain each night. He'd take a morning shift so I could get some shuteye. We'd split the rest.

Truth was I liked the night. People were quiet but animals were not. They were kind of my thing. It took me a few years to realize not everyone was constantly aware of the location of every animal within a mile or so. It was comforting to track their movements, their needs and desires. They were simpler than humans and samhain. It was easier to know where I stood.

Nothing like the confusing part-human-part-samhain pixie upstairs. Fuck she annoyed the shit out of me, but damn was it fun to get under her skin. Maybe it was the stress of the last couple of years—fuck, the last ten years—but being around Fig got me excited. I never knew which version of her I would get. And even when she lashed out at me, it was with cute, adorable frustration, not the angry, self-loathing hatred I knew all too well.

I meant it when I told her I could take it. All she was doing was letting her frustrations boil over. Totally understandable frustrations. She didn't mean to hurt me. Well, not detrimentally. I was pretty sure her sharper barbs were meant to match my over-the-top teasing. So really, I was asking for it. Least I could do was take the blows and let them glance off me.

Especially if it helped her deal with the fact that her life wasn't her own right now. Fuck, that would piss me off to no end. If I were her, I'd be burning down the mountainside.

I preferred being outside, so I set up on the porch, sinking into one of the deep Adirondack chairs and putting my boots up on the railing. The moon hung high in the sky but because of the layers of protection around this place, it had a different shimmer than I was used to. Stars blanketed the sky between the wisps of clouds that sped between the mountains. The crickets didn't mind the wards. They chirped away like it was their job to provide my night with a soundtrack. An owl settled

into the tree to my right, carefully watching me with his night vision.

All was well. I closed my eyes and let my senses take over. Rain and Kris were asleep. Good for them. So was Fig. Princess. Sweetheart. *Firecracker*.

What to call her? Fig simply wasn't going to make the cut. Not for me. Wils took to Small Fry like a duck to water. And the way she smiled every time I called it out did things to my heart. Vic was my brother. Didn't matter that we didn't have the same parents. We were technically cousins, but life had made us brothers. And now Wils was the closest thing I had to a sister.

And that felt...good.

Why couldn't I find a nickname for Florence?

My mind filled with muffled whimpers—and not the sexy kind. The *miserable* kind. I shot to my feet. And then her scream filled the air. My heart turned to ice. *Florence*. I blinked straight up to her room, fuck the stairs or doors or anything else between us.

I found her sitting in the middle of her bed shaking. “Hey, what’s wrong?” I scanned the room for the problem, but it was empty. No ghosts, no monsters, no Samantha.

Her big eyes reflected the moonlight, her pupils blown with fear. I didn't hesitate. I went to her side and pulled her against me. Fuck her anger. She needed to be held. Thankfully she melted into me. She wore an oversized t-shirt that was completely soaked through, so were the sheets and pillows.

She was fucking *terrified*. And that killed me. Fucking broke my heart. No one deserved to be haunted this way. “Dream?”

She nodded furiously, tears still streaming down her face. “They’re always so awful. They never stop.” She started trembling. “But this was...”

I needed to get her out of this bed. I blinked us downstairs to my room, leaving her only long enough to grab one of my

shirts. “Here. It’s dry.” Then I turned around to give her privacy.

“Thank you.” When I turned back she had her knees pulled up to her chest, arms wrapped around them, head resting on her knees.

“No worries.” I wanted to hold her again. Make sure she felt safe. But I also wanted her to recover however she needed to. “Want to talk about it?”

She squeezed her eyes shut. So hard I thought she might hurt herself. “Not really.”

“What can I do?”

“Get me really drunk?” she joked. Mostly.

“Firecracker, I would in a heartbeat if I thought it would actually help. I bet you’re a lot of fun when you’re partying.”

Her head came up, resting her chin on her knees, eyes open. “Firecracker?”

I shrugged. It just might work.

“I don’t hate that one. But...why?”

I took a chance and sat on the corner of the bed. She didn’t kick me off. “Why a nickname or why firecracker?”

“Both?”

I loved that I had her quiet attention, that she was speaking to me again. Fuck, how I missed those nights in the Shadow. They had felt more real than anything ever had. I wasn’t alone, fending for myself, or playing a part to keep in the good graces of someone else. When we sat up those nights I was just...me.

“It’s just something I’ve always done.”

“Why?”

Normally I’d walk away from someone asking these sorts of questions because it forced me to examine things about my past I’d rather not. But for Florence... “I don’t really know. I think maybe...” *Shit*. Was I really doing this? “Maybe it helps



me see where I stand with people. Wils is Small Fry because \_\_\_”

“She’s short and like a sister.”

I held very still. “Yeah.”

“And you call me all these condescending nicknames because I’m so awful to you.”

*No.* “Maybe?”

“What does Firecracker say about us?” she asked, her voice barely more than a sexy little whisper.

The words slipped out before I could stop them. “That you’re a gorgeous, explosive, pain in my ass that I love watching to see what you do next.” *Fuck.*

Her eyes widened, shining with something I really hoped was excitement. “Oh.”

Fucking hell she was beautiful when she let down the walls. Would I ever convince her to leave them down? Doubtful. “We’re stuck here together. I sure would appreciate it if you’d at least try to not hate me.”

She looked away, staring at the wall. “Why are you here?”

That...wasn’t what I was expecting her next question to be. “I’m your bodyguard.”

She glared at me. The fire back and the walls up. “Is it because Vic asked you? Because of your great sense of duty? Do you have a hero complex? *Why are you here, Seamus?*”

I shot off the bed. Fuck, she could piss me off faster than anyone I’d ever met. I was here, protecting her, holding her after nightmares, and she thought I had a damned *hero complex*? I spun around. “Listen here, pixie. Listen good, since you seem to have a hard time hearing things that don’t match your perfect little narrative.” The insult landed just the way I wanted it to. “I’m here because I’m the best person to protect you. *Period.* Not Vic. Not Kris. Not fucking Draygus Wren. *Me.* And not just because I’m a damn good fighter or an excellent shadow dealer. I’m the best because I fucking care what happens to you!” *Shit.* It was all out there now.

I tugged my fingers through my hair in frustration, suddenly aware that I was out of breath and that Florence was staring at me like she was surprised.

How could she still not know? Did she hate me so much she couldn't see the obvious?

She looked away. "I'm sorry. I'm...I'm not very trusting."

"You and Wils are a matched fucking pair."

She smiled. "Is fuck your favorite word?"

And fuck, she got me smiling, too. "When I'm upset? Yeah, it fucking is." And she got me more upset than anyone.

Her smile faded and her eyes dimmed. "I saw cities burn. Whole families come down sick. It was," she shuddered, "I feel it. I'm *there*. I can't escape it."

I froze for a moment. Did she just let me in? Fuck yeah she did. I went straight back to the bed, sitting close to her this time. "I'm so sorry."

"I'm afraid I'll never sleep again. When I close my eyes... it's not sleep. It's going somewhere else. I'm so tired, Seamus."

And this was just the beginning. If she was tired now, she'd be exhausted by the time Vic and Wils tracked down Samantha. "I can help you rest. If you'll let me try."

For a moment I thought she'd deny me. I watched her debate the pros and cons as she hesitated. But then she sucked in a ragged little breath. "I'd like that."

"Done deal." I moved to the headboard, propping the pillows up so I was comfortable. Clothes on, on top of the comforter. Then I pulled the blanket aside. "Get in, Florence."

Her eyes jumped to mine, surprised but also...pleased?

"No one calls me Florence. Not even my mother."

"That's a damn shame because it's beautiful." *Just like you*. Fuck, I was so screwed.

Then a thought occurred to me. Maybe I couldn't settle on a nickname for her because she was *only* a nickname to everyone else. She needed her real name from me if I ever wanted the real her to forgive me and let me in.

A warm feeling filled my chest as she crawled under the covers and snuggled in beside me. She trusted me, even if she couldn't admit it to herself. She fought me every step of the way, but here she was, pressing against me, letting me protect her from the world.

I didn't understand why she needed to fight me when I wasn't the enemy, but I didn't need to know that. All I needed was what I just got—a glimmer of hope that underneath it all, there was something there worth fighting for.

## CHAPTER 2



Seamus

The Underground

Three Years Later

“I hate this fucking place.” From my spot in the shadows I had a front row seat to the darker parts of the world. Deals were made, drugs were passed, bodies were sold. And I was here to make sure no one went too far.

What was too far?

Fuck if I knew anymore. I had to stop taking these shifts. I’d rather be anywhere else. I’d much rather be in my cabin on a quiet mountain, far from humans. Instead I was stuck here because Kirk, my mentor, thought it was a good idea to do very dumb things.

Humans had no business in the Underground.

It had been forbidden for the last two hundred years. The exchanges were all shut down. But since the Convergence that brought another reality into ours, things were murky. Humans knew we existed. Most shied away from us, a few were curious, but a select few wanted to play with fire.

Humans, in general, liked to stick their heads in the sand, though. If we just stayed away from them for a while they’d let us go back to being fiction. Stories they told at night or in movies. Not real.

But fucking Kirk had to go and invite some here. Their fixation on us made my stomach churn. They weren’t here to

learn or build a relationship. They were here to take. To consume. To ruin. That's what humans did.

As soon as they left I was done. And Kirk could shove another shift up his ass. He could groom some other lost kid to be his next shadow dealer. I wasn't a lost kid anymore. My time here was up.

It had been for a long time.

I swept my gaze over the human delegation one more time then froze. Just past them a familiar head of dark brown hair ducked into a bar. *What the fuck?* The swish and bounce of those locks was all too familiar.

But she didn't belong here. Human or samhain, Florence Figueroa shouldn't be anywhere near the Underground. I stormed out of the shadows, shocking the hell out of the humans and a few samhain, and crossed the dirt street. The bar was a typical Underground dive. It smelled of beer and blood. It was dark—perfect for hiding secrets. I scanned the tables but came up empty. So I pushed into the hallway that led to smaller rooms. Private rooms.

Florence sure as hell better not be in one of them.

The first room was empty. So was the second. The third had a small blood party. They barely even noticed me. The fourth room held only one person.

Florence.

She spun, ready for something. Not me. Her gorgeous dark eyes flared like they always did. "What are you doing here, Seamus? Get out! I'm meeting someone."

"Like hell you are." It was always like this with us. No matter how hard I tried to steer us down a different path, we always exploded.

Her hands balled into fists at her sides. "You are not my bodyguard anymore. I go where I want, when I want."

"Not here you don't." I leaned closer so she couldn't miss how pissed I was. "This is my territory, remember, princess?" The fucking nickname slipped out.

And like it always did, it skyrocketed her temper to the stratosphere. Not exactly useful, even if it was satisfying.

When she spoke, her voice was calm and even. *Terrifying*. “I can take care of myself just fine. Get out.”

“Who are you meeting?” Why couldn’t I unglue my feet? If it were anyone else, I’d let them stew with their terrible ideas. I’d let them suffer the consequences. But not Florence.

She threw her shoulders back. “I’m not telling you a damn thing. It’s none of your business.”

“Everything in the Underground is my business, angel face.” *Damnit*. Another nickname. I had to stop, or she was going to use those long, red fingernails to rip me to shreds.

“You are such an egotistical asshat.”

“I’m damn good at what I do.” Which was why I was here at all. Kirk might think a few humans wouldn’t cause trouble, but I knew they would. And one bad day in the Underground could unravel the whole damn thing.

And maybe that wasn’t such a bad idea. Not that I had time to ponder that when the love of my damn life was standing in one of the most dangerous places on Earth, more mad at me than aware of her surroundings.

Fucking hell.

I stabbed my fingers through my hair. It was too long. Again. I kept forgetting to cut it, then tugged on my beard. “Why can’t you do this somewhere else?”

Her eyes flicked over my shoulder. “It’s time for you to leave, Seamus.”

I pulled myself back up to my full height and turned around. *Not what I was expecting*. “Rever?” The Gatlin Guardsman glared at me from the doorway. He’d made a home for himself in the Underground after the Convergence, so I wasn’t surprised to see him, just surprised that he was meeting Florence.

Why was he meeting Florence?

“This is a private meeting,” he said, attempting to dismiss me.

Which was weird. We both operated in the Underground. We respected each other. He knew damn well I wouldn’t be *dismissed*. “What’s going on?” Revenge and Florence were both members of the House of Gatlin, but they’d never been close. As far as I knew they barely knew each other. Rever lived at Midnight Manor and worked in the Underground, while Florence lived at the House of Gatlin...keeping as far away from me as possible.

“It’s none of your business,” Florence hissed. “Get out.”

I wanted to make her tell me. No, I wanted to make her *leave*. But Florence was more stubborn than anyone I’d ever met, which meant she wasn’t going anywhere. If it were anyone but Revenge I’d grab her and make her leave, consequences be damned. Hell, I was already living the consequences. How much worse could it get if I manhandled her to safety?

Honestly, it would actually probably get worse. Plus, that’s how I got my ass handed to me in the first place. I wouldn’t exactly win any brownie points by forcing her to leave. Besides, she was almost as safe with Rever as she was with me.

Almost.

I could give them five minutes if it bought me some grace. I glared at him as I passed. “I’ll wait outside. If one hair on her head is out of place—”

Rever put up a hand. “I’ve given this speech a few times. She’s safe with me.”

My stomach churned as I forced myself to move into the hallway. *Two years*. Two years ago I should have ended this. Forced her to stop hating me. If I had, maybe she wouldn’t be here right now. Maybe I’d know why she was meeting Rever.

I’d know if she still had nightmares.

Rever closed the door as I leaned against the hallway wall. My gaze locked with Fig’s through the shrinking slit. For a

split second she was mine again. Soft, needy, curious, *wary*. It was the wary that doomed us. I wanted to conquer it, she wouldn't let me.

The door clicked shut, breaking our connection. Why was Florence here? And how fast could I get her out? I'd let her have her meeting, but once it was over, whether she liked it or not, *I* was taking her home.



## CHAPTER 3



Fig

The Shadow

Three years ago...

“I think we should, uh, start over.” Seamus of the House of Wren—I still couldn’t believe I was thinking those words with a straight face—stabbed his fingers through his longish hair, then tugged on his beard. He was so uncomfortable it was adorable.

And sexy.

Then he thrust out his giant paw of a hand like we were meeting for the first time. “I’m Seamus.”

I slid my much smaller hand into his, playing along. Rough against smooth. “Fig.”

A look flashed behind his eyes. What it was, I couldn’t name. We’d had maybe two actual interactions before this and I found him more confounding by the minute. The things I’d learned about him in those brief encounters were like an avalanche of information. Tons of data, no time to interpret it all. Seamus and his cousin Vic were both capable fighters, scary enough to be terrifying should all that aggression ever be pointed my way. But they were also incredibly kind and generous. Seamus, however, was also loud, gruff, and more than a little broody. Which set me off like a firecracker both because it aggravated the hell out of me and because it seemed, oddly, to turn me on.

We ended up fighting both times. Thus, the whole starting over scenario. Which, to be honest, I didn't mind. I was more than a little ashamed I lost my temper so fast.

"Nice to meet you," he murmured, all growly and sweet at the same time.

It was incredibly confusing. My insides didn't know whether to riot or settle. "I look forward to getting to know you better."

Seamus was tall. *Tall*, tall. Like six foot ten or something. I wasn't good with heights above six feet. All I knew was I had to look *up* when I looked at him. He had a sandy color to his long hair and his enormous beard was even darker. It was well groomed, though. Impressive really. And piercing brown eyes. The shade varied with his surroundings. Sometimes they were more of a honey brown. Other times so dark they seemed to veer towards black, making his pupils disappear.

But one thing they were always—*always*—was piercing. He watched me like a hawk, always seeing, always aware of me. Which made me very aware of him.

And I wasn't sure how I felt about that. Part of me got a thrill out of the attention. But the rest of me knew that men were only good for a little fun. Nothing more.

"I'm sorry all of this happened to you. It was a hell of a way to have your life change." He kept stealing glances at me, but mostly kept his attention on the floor.

Had the last year been a rollercoaster? An *unimaginable* rollercoaster? Yeah. Sure had. I went from being a young college grad, hard at work on her first real job, making friends, and living with my best friend in the whole world, to learning I was actually one-quarter samhain. A vampire. And my best friend was actually my cousin. And she was also part samhain. Then something they called the Convergence took place. Our reality merged with another. Demons and monsters overran the world all while Wils and I got shoved into the mountain prison we were currently standing in for safekeeping. Months alone here with Wils, contemplating that everything we thought we knew was a load of horse crap.

The world really was full of all the things that go bump in the night. Vampires, werewolves, bear shifters, magic, witches, and now, thanks to the Convergence, demons and monsters, too.

We were supposed to be safe here in the Shadow—that's what Wils and I dubbed our mountain prison—but some of those creepy monsters figured out where we were and attacked, taking out the side of the mountain in the process. Seamus, Vic, and Kirk came to our rescue, but it was Wils who saved my life.

My best friend dove out of a wall and fell a couple of stories on top of a monster to keep me safe. And now she was in some sort of a coma. Kirk wasn't doing so hot either.

“As long as Wils recovers, I can handle anything.” Human, samhain, vampire, psychic. I could fight it or hate it, but it didn't change the facts. We were part of the samhain world now. No going back.

“I know you can,” Seamus said quietly. It was strange to hear something so soft and kind from such a large man. Wils nicknamed him Tall Beard the first time she saw him. And she called Vic Mr. Clean Shaven. I was pretty sure she was attracted to Mr. Clean Shaven. When she recovered she was welcome to him. I always preferred a more rugged guy.

Like the one in front of me. I also liked how he teased me. How he always seemed up for...well, anything. And it was nice to have someone to talk to so I didn't lose my mind worrying about Wils.

“Kirk will pull through.” I honestly didn't know if that was true or not, but Seamus looked like he needed to hear it, so I said it, because I had a strong urge to soothe him.

Which was weird, but then again, everything was weird these days.

And maybe—fingers crossed!—samhain men were different than human men. Just because my mom and I managed to always find the worst of the worst didn't mean that track record would continue in this new life.

“I should check on him.” Seamus nodded over my shoulder in the direction of Kirk’s room.

The Shadow was the weirdest place I’d ever been. Part cavern, part home, all dark and cold. It was built inside the mountain behind Shadow Lodge, Wils’ family mansion, as some sort of secret hideaway for our samhain grandfather. The whole thing was nuts. Secret passages and hallways. The whole weird haunted house nine yards. When the monsters attacked, they blasted out the mountainside, so we were living in the section that Wils and I occupied for most of the Convergence. Quirky rooms at odd angles, hallways that weren’t straight, or level. My room was just beyond Kirk’s, and Wils’ was just beyond mine.

“I’ll walk with you.” There was something comforting about being around Seamus. He was giant, or course. I was pretty sure he wouldn’t let anything past him, not that I expected another demon to jump out of nowhere, but there was something else about him. A vibration. It calmed me.

So I walked with him, wondering what it was about him that got me so riled up. The first time we actually interacted he’d been wounded and was *not* a fan of the medical attention I gave him. Not that I blamed him. Having a magic potion squirted into your eyes and making them burn couldn’t be pleasant, whether you were a normal human or a god-like samhain. Our closeness had made my skin tingle and my heart beat faster, but when he started swearing up a storm and making up nicknames for me, that heated blood of mine had combusted. In anger.

But the second time we were close was when Wils got hurt. All that bluster evaporated and he took extra care with me, made sure I was with Wils, protected me.

I felt just as hot and bothered, but with none of the urge to strangle him.

And now here we were “starting over” and all I wanted was to stay near him so this calming vibration would continue.

I watched as he hovered over the bed, checking that Kirk was breathing and healing. Kirk was my grandfather, but I'd only just met him. He meant a lot more to Seamus. He was the father figure in Seamus's life. What happened to his biological father, I didn't know. Not yet. I didn't normally crave that kind of information, but with Seamus I found myself wondering all kinds of things, wanting to ask questions, needing to know why I was drawn to him when men never did me any good.

I forced myself to break free, crossing my room and the bathroom, into the claustrophobic bedroom Wils loved so much. The ceiling was low and I felt the urge to duck even though I didn't need to.

Wils was right where I left her. Asleep on her back, covers pulled up to her chin, breathing steadily. We were mirror images. Same dark hair and eyes. Similar builds. The only difference was that I was a little taller and had a few more curves. We always thought it was a funny coincidence that we looked so much alike. The last year had taught me there were no such things as coincidences. Everything happened for a reason.

Whether I liked it or not.

"No change," Vic rasped. He had a rough voice that only seemed to get rougher by the day. His connection to Wils was unmistakable and he rarely left her room. He sat in a chair, feet up, reading a book.

"I feel useless." I sat on the corner of the bed. Should I touch her? Talk to her? Cuddle her? What was the right thing to do?

"You're not useless."

"She shouldn't have attacked that beast." If she hadn't gone over the edge she might be fine right now. Sitting up and talking to me.

Vic cocked his head, setting the book aside. "If she didn't, you might be the one in the bed. Or, more likely, in the ground."

My stomach flipped. "I'd rather be the one in the bed."

“But you’re not. And right now you’re doing exactly what she needs. You’re here.” He stood up and stretched. “I’m going to grab some food. I’ll take the night shift.”

He always took the night shift. And the day shift. Any time he possibly could. I swear if Vic could sweep Wils away to a castle in the sky to keep her safe, he would. I envied his certainty. It was like when looked at Wils he saw forever. They barely knew each other, but it didn’t matter.

It was that certainty that helped me know that Vic was a good guy. He was evidence they existed. Maybe they were rare, but I couldn’t deny that at least a few qualified.

I sat with Wils for an hour, reading her a book from the bookshelf. When Vic returned, hair wet and in fresh clothes, I said goodnight.

“Seamus is cooking a feast,” Vic warned. “I hope you like fajitas.”

My stomach growled. “I love fajitas.” I watched as Vic checked over Wils, giving her hand a squeeze. He was gentle. Kind.

Was Seamus? “Hey Vic?”

“Yeah?”

“Seamus. What’s he like?”

Vic’s gaze snapped to mine and he frowned. “He’s my best friend. He always has my back. I trust him more than I trust anyone. Why?”

I shrugged. “I need to make new friends.”

Vic’s gaze softened. “I don’t mind sharing him. He’s a good friend. We could all use good friends right now.”

Wasn’t that the truth? “Good night, Vic.”

“Night, Fig.”

I heard the sizzling at the same time a delicious aroma hit my nose. My mouth instantly watered and my stomach growled again. I was prepared for the food. What I wasn’t prepared for was how good Seamus looked commanding a

kitchen. He had a towel slung over one shoulder, a sharp knife in his hands, and fierce concentration as he sliced peppers and onions. Jazz played in the background.

His head popped up and he smiled. “Hungry?”

“Starving.” For the man and the food, apparently. I hadn’t been this attracted to a guy in...maybe ever? Terrifying.

“Margarita?” He pointed to a pitcher on my side of the counter.

“Perfect!” I poured a glass and gulped down half of it. What was wrong with me? I didn’t lust after guys. Flirt? Of course. Feel attraction. Absolutely. But that wasn’t what was happening. This was an all-consuming, head-to-toe need. My body hummed. It wanted his eyes, his hands, his mouth.

I shook my head, trying to get it working again.

“You all right?”

I slid onto a stool and kept sipping, but slower. “No nicknames?”

His eyebrow popped up. “You don’t like my nicknames. We’re starting over, remember?”

“I liked some of them.” My cheeks felt hot. Oh god. Was I blushing?

He set the knife aside and leaned forward. “Which ones?”

Definitely blushing. This was so embarrassing. “Uh, the nice ones?” I’d give anything for a cold pack for my cheeks.

He grinned, his eyes even sparkled. “They were all nice, sweetheart. You just took them the wrong way.”

“Not sweetheart. Sounds weird.”

That only made him grin more. “Okay, angel face. Whatever you want.”

“I do not have the face of an angel.”

His gaze swept over me, then he turned with the cutting board and dumped the vegetables into the sizzling skillet while he hummed something that didn’t go with the music.

Interesting.

He didn't argue with me. He also didn't agree. What did that mean? Or was I confusing him because I said I liked the nicknames and then immediately shot down the first two out of his mouth?

*Gah!* I *was* confusing! He probably didn't even like me. I was just so attracted to him that I was making something out of nothing. I needed to change the subject. "Do you cook a lot?"

"Sometimes. When we're here, Vic and I will split the cooking." He pointed the tongs at me. "Do not ever eat anything Kirk cooks. It's not worth it."

I laughed. "Got it. No Kirk cooking. Where else do you go that you don't cook?"

"Blood Falls—House of Wren. My cousins love to cook. There's just no room. Besides, it's all amazing. Might as well enjoy their hard work and relax."

"How often are you at House of Wren?" The words still tangled on my tongue. All these Houses and the weird samhain terms tripped me up. It sounded like I was in a Harry Potter movie.

He moved the vegetables around and added another pat of butter. "Not often. But with the Shadow torn up, probably a lot more."

After Kirk and Wils healed up. "What is the House of Wren like?"

"It's just up the mountains that way." He waved, but the direction meant nothing to me in this windowless monstrosity. "It's quiet. There's always a breeze. The view is phenomenal. The falls are incredible."

"Falls? Like waterfalls?"

"Yep. Blood Falls. You'll never see anything else like it. My cabin catches a bit of a view of the top where it turns blood red."

"What?" Blood red water?



He chuckled. “It’s a trick of the light and the stone of the mountain. Makes the falls look red most of the day, but at a particular time in the morning and the evening, they’re blood red.”

“Incredible.”

“The House is made of wood. It’s pretty big. No one’s really living in it full time right now, except maybe Bo. He’s the new Head of House. Dray lives up the mountain with Rhysa.”

I knew these names because Vic left us Rhysa’s journal to study while we were alone with nothing but questions. Dray used to be the Head of the House of Wren. Rhysa was his partner. She thought she was human until a few months before the Convergence. Like us. Except she was full-blooded samhain. Wils and I were only a quarter.

Her journal was pretty much our only insight into our new lives until now. With the Convergence at an end we could finally come out of the Shadow.

Where would we live? We couldn’t go back to our old lives.

“What’s wrong?” He leaned on the counter again, a frown pulling his whole face down. Seamus looked like he was ready to punch whoever upset me.

Only there was no one to punch. “It’s nothing. It just sank in that Wils and I are homeless.”

The frown vanished. “You have a home. You just don’t know where it is yet.”

“I guess we’ll stay here for a while.”

“No you won’t. As soon as Wils is up and running we’ll head back to Blood Falls. You can stay there as long as you like. Or go to House of Gatlin. Meet your samhain family.” By the look on his face, Seamus didn’t like the second option. “You have a home, Fig. I promise.” Then he pushed away, stirred the skillet and declared dinner ready.

He set the skillet on the coffee table. We arranged a little picnic around it, trading tortillas, guacamole, and toppings. It was easy to laugh with Seamus. He didn't guard his thoughts or feelings. Maybe that was what threw me so much at first. His bald honesty was a lot to handle.

But I was starting to see the benefits of it. Was it raw? Yeah. Could some of it be delivered better? For sure. But he said what he thought. He didn't lie or try to say what he thought I wanted to hear. What he said was what he felt.

We were good and drunk—or at least I was—and oh, so full of delicious food. I lazed against the couch. “What do you want, Seamus?”

“That's a broad question. What do I want right now? Tomorrow? For breakfast?”

I giggled. The sound was bizarre but definitely mine. “Everybody has a dream,” I sighed. “Something that they want, but think maybe it's not in the cards. What's yours?”

“That's a pretty personal question, Ms. Figueroa. Can I trust you?” He nudged me with his giant foot.

There was that look again. “You don't like my name.”

He blinked, his head slowly dropping to one side. “No. I like your name.”

“Everytime you say Fig you get this look. Just now you used my last name and you still got that look.”

His eyes unfocused. “I like your name just fine. I just...I don't think it fits you.” His gaze cleared, boring into me.

I gulped. “What fits me?”

“I don't know.” His gaze lingered, held, swept inside me like a fire. Then he blinked and shook his head. “We should probably clean up dinner.”

Seamus liked me. I was sure of it. That look was too intense, too heated to be anything else. And that made my heart skip several beats.

The room tilted a little as I brought dishes to the sink.

Then two big hands grabbed my waist and set me on the counter. “Why don’t you let me do the cleaning, princess? Can’t have you getting hurt next.”

He lifted me like I was nothing, moving with unusual grace for such a large man. But he seemed quite comfortable in his body, knew exactly how it worked. He wasn’t clumsy or bulky. If ballerinas came in six-foot-giant size Seamus would be in the running.

The dishes were cleaned, the skillet left to soak, and then he turned to me. “A family.”

My head was still buzzing. Maybe I misheard him. “Excuse me?”

He crossed his arms, leaning against the counter. “You asked me what I want. It’s a family.”

Where were his parents? What happened to them? Why did Seamus end up with Kirk in this bizarre mountain home?

His chin rose, almost defiantly, but more like armor. “My family is shit, Fig. But I know families can be great. I’ve seen it. I want that. Life didn’t give it to me, so I’ll make it for myself.”

I pictured Seamus with a miniature version of himself and almost swooned. He would be such a hot dad. “Then I know you’ll get it.”

His shoulders relaxed, like my support mattered to him. “What’s yours?”

There were some obvious, big ones. I wanted to matter, to make a difference. “That’s a very personal question, Mr. Tall Beard.” I teased instead.

That brought out the slightest of smiles. Could we do this? Tease without drawing blood. Joke without being cruel. I hoped we could because this was nice. Better than nice. It felt real. Special.

Could I tell this virtual stranger something I hadn’t even told my best friend? My mouth opened, ready to confess, and then froze as a different voice echoed down the hallway.

“Help!” The strangled cry came from Kirk.

Seamus’ eyes bulged and then he sprang into action, my answer left hanging unspoken in the air. I slid off the counter and hurried after him. If Kirk needed help then Seamus would need another set of hands.

## CHAPTER 4



Seamus

The Underground

Now

The door opened and Rever walked out. “Seamus.” He nodded once.

“Rever.” I nodded back, my gaze searching the room behind him. Florence was there, thank fuck. It would be just like her to vanish, to put as much space between us as possible. But she hadn’t. It was a lifeline.

And that scared the fuck out of me. Something was very, very wrong if she was playing nice.

She shot me a glare. “You’re still here.” She shoved her hands into her pockets.

“Of course I’m still here. You’re in the *Underground*.” Like I would leave her alone in this place.

“Yes, I’m in the Underground.” She yanked her hands out of her pockets and waved them through the air. “And no one has tried to murder me.”

“Yet.”

Another glare. “I’m serious, Florence. This place is hell. You are in danger just being here.”

“I’m in danger everywhere,” she snapped.

I jerked back, “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing for you to worry your pretty little head about.” She tried to dart around me. Which was laughable. I was over a foot taller than her and at least twice as wide. There was no getting around me.

“Move Seamus!”

“Nope. Tell me what’s going on.”

“Look, I did you the courtesy of not sliding home before Rever opened the door. I hate you but I’m not cruel. You can see that I’m alive and well. Now let me go home.”

I jerked back like she slapped me. *I hate you*. For fucks sake. When did we go from frustration to *hate*? She wouldn’t like it, but I put my hands on her shoulders, holding her in place, mostly to keep me from hitting the damn floor.

*I hate you*. Once upon a time I thought we’d be together forever. Her kisses were burned permanently into my memory. The way her body fit against mine still fueled my fantasies. I knew from the first time she set her jaw and glared at me that she was the one.

No one bothered to fight me. They let me have my way or they avoided me.

Not Florence. She always stood toe-to-toe with me, all fire and passion. It was sexy as hell.

But now she *hated* me?

“Are you all right?” Her glare softened to concern as she stared up at me.

“You hate me?”

Her eyes widened in shock. “Did I say that?”

“*I hate you but I’m not cruel*. That’s what you said.”

Her cheeks pinkened a little. “I want to strangle you. I don’t want to see you. But I don’t hate you. Not really.”

The red began to clear, and I took a full breath. It wasn’t too late. We could still fix this. Fix *us*. “Why are you here, Florence?”

Her lips pinched.

“You could meet Rever anywhere. You arrived separately, but so you were seen, who do you want to know you’re meeting with Rever?” It certainly wasn’t me.

She didn’t shrink out of my grasp or push me away. Instead she chewed on her lower lip while she debated something. I fucking hated that. No matter what she thought of me as a partner, she should always know I was trustworthy. Especially with her safety. I’d been her goddamned bodyguard for fuck’s sake. “Florence, you’re killing me.” She sighed and glanced past me at the open door. I kicked it closed without looking back. “Talk.”

Her eyes flared with that all too familiar frustration. “You are such an ass.”

“And you’re the most stubborn person alive.” We were fire and more fire. Some people might think that was a terrible combination, but I knew for a fact that it was perfect. Maybe couples should balance each other out. Maybe relationships should be calm and smooth.

That sounded fucking boring to me. I wanted—no, *needed*—passion. Florence had it in spades.

“Your hero complex leaves little room for me to be anything but stubborn.”

As usual, we fed off each other. One insult led to another until we were both lashing out. *Fine*. I let her go and paced to the corner of the room, running my hand through my hair so I didn’t let another insult fly. “One last time, pixie. I do *not* have a hero complex. And I swear to the Plane itself if you say it one more time—”

She put up a hand, stopping me mid-sentence. “Fine. You don’t have a hero complex. You have an inability to let me do anything without you.”

On that, she was finally correct. No one else could be trusted. Not even Rever. Fuck, not even Vic, but he was the only acceptable second. As much as everyone desperately

wanted the world to be a safe place, it wasn't. Not even close. "What the hell is going on?"

Taking my cue, she paced to the other side of the room, arms crossed, still chewing on that delicate lip of hers. If she wasn't careful she'd draw blood.

And then we'd both be fucked.

Her dark hair swished down her back, her jeans clung to her hips like they'd been molded there, and her shirt wasn't much different. I was hanging by a thread as it was. I could rip that shirt in two and then slide my hands...

She turned and faced me, looking me straight in the eye. "We have a problem." That was all she said. No details.

The word *problem* was all I needed to bring my focus back. If there was a problem, I would fix it. But I needed details. "Okay..."

She blanched, then whispered so quietly I barely heard her. "The House of Gatlin has a problem."

Her House. The one she'd moved to after our epic fight two years ago. The one that should have ended in bed but instead blew us so far apart we hadn't spoken in two years. Not without a lot of witnesses.

She could have stayed at the House of Wren. It was where her best friend and cousin lived. Wils missed her as much as I did. The guilt I felt for driving her away when all I'd wanted was to close the gap was immense. "I don't follow."

Her eyes darted to the door then back to me. "We have a problem at the House of Gatlin," she repeated like she couldn't believe it. Like saying more would somehow change it.

I hadn't heard shit about trouble at House of Gatlin, not that the Houses aired their dirty laundry for the other Houses to see, but I hadn't heard a whisper of a problem, let alone at any other House. I took a tentative step closer. When she didn't scream I took another and another until I was within touching distance. Florence responded to touch more than words. "What kind of problem?"



She blinked a dozen times, the muscles of her neck twitching as she tried to hold back a wall of emotions. I had purposely blocked her off because knowing what she was feeling usually led to me crossing a line Florence found unforgivable, but since she was struggling to explain, I let the block down.

Her emotions slammed into me.

*Fuck me.* She was terrified. Jumpy wasn't half of it. She was on full alert, expecting danger from every damned corner. I wanted to fold my body around hers, hold her tight and tell her I wouldn't let anything or anyone hurt her, but she wouldn't let me. Hell, she'd run the minute she realized I knew what she was feeling.

So I played dumb. "Florence? If something is happening, you need to tell me. House politics be damned. They don't belong in the Underground." Hell, the only thing that belonged in the Underground was desire. There were no House boundaries, no political affiliations, no rules, really.

Her lower lip trembled. "Don't I know it. Seamus, this is so fucked up." She rubbed a hand over her forehead, trying—and failing—to get a grip on herself. Then her hand dropped, and she looked up into my eyes, giving me her trust again.

Which meant this was bad. *Bad*, bad.

Her mouth opened, but no words came out. She snapped it shut and tried again.

Dammit all. If she was this upset, this flustered, whatever was happening was worse than my already overactive imagination conjured up. I took her upper arms in my hands, but gently, jarring her with physical contact. "Florence, whatever it is you think about me, you know I'm here for you. I'm here to help. What's going on?"

She took a shaky breath. "I know that. I do. Even if we don't make sense, you've always been ready to fight for your House. Fuck, *every* House."

*Even if we don't make sense.* But we did. She was just too scared to try. And in a way I understood. We were fire. No, we

were fireworks next to a fire, next to a gasoline depot. That level of passion scared her while it thrilled the fuck out of me.

“No one can know that I told you.”

“I hate to break it to you, but Rever probably assumes you’re telling me everything.”

She shook her head. “Rever won’t have time to think about you.”

“He’s hunting?” I guessed.

She nodded. Rever was an excellent hunter and an even better Gatlin Guardsman. But he wasn’t me. “If you need information, you know who you need to ask.” Maybe that’s why she hadn’t sent me away yet. Why she didn’t disappear after she met with Rever. Nothing stopped her from sliding out of here. And yeah, it could have been out of politeness that she stayed, but seeing her like this, I was more than willing to bet it was because she hoped I would drag it out of her.

She wanted my help, my comfort, even if she couldn’t admit it.

She stared up at me with those hypnotic dark eyes. The same ones I fell into over and over again when I held her through her nightmares. The ones that looked up at me like I was everything.

Fuck, maybe I did have a hero complex when it came to her. I wanted to save her, protect her, and make myself her whole world so no one would ever be good enough for her but me.

Yeah, I had a hero complex. A big fucking hero complex. But only for her.

“I’m getting tired of repeating myself, Florence.”

More staring. Then a look of determination set her delicate features like granite. “If I tell you, you have to take me with you.”

“Fuck no.” I didn’t even hesitate. It was my built-in response to anything that put her in danger. Maybe if I’d thought for a second I could have phrased it differently.

The fire was back, blazing as hot as ever. “Then get out of my way, Seamus.”

But I didn’t let her go. In fact, I squeezed harder. “That’s not what I meant.” Fuck, could I say anything without pissing her off? “I meant I can’t guarantee something when I don’t know what I’m guaranteeing.” Especially when it came to her safety. Why couldn’t she understand that?

“Then I can’t tell you.”

I looked up at the ceiling while I controlled my temper. “You’re killing me.”

She shook me off. “It’s quite simple, Seamus. You either trust me or you don’t.”

Was she insane? “What does trust have to do with safety?” I trusted her with my damned life! My dick hadn’t touched another woman since her lips touched mine. Of course I trusted her! But she was talking about something else entirely and conflating the two.

“Everything,” she whispered. Then she threw back her shoulders, her voice clear. “You can’t change what I have to do. If you want to help me, then you’ll trust me and you’ll work *with* me. Otherwise, take all your claims and promises and leave me alone once and for all.”

My eyebrows hit my hairline. “Claims and promises?”

She batted her eyes, her voice a mocking falsetto. “*I love you. We’re so good together.*” Then her voice hardened, taking on an edge that made my blood run cold. “*Trust me.*”

Fucking hell. Yes, she was throwing our history back at me, but if I wasn’t mistaken, she was also throwing me one last line. A final chance to prove to her we should be together. If I could give her this, maybe she’d give us a chance.

But it came with a cost I wasn’t sure I was prepared to pay. I trusted Florence. She was a strong, capable woman. Smart and sure. But I couldn’t put her in danger. She was my Achilles. If anything ever happened to her, I wouldn’t be able to live with myself.

But then again, I would never have her at all if I didn't take this chance. I scratched my beard then stuck out my hand. "On my honor," the magical words that would bind me to this promise, "we will work as a team." I felt the magic twist in the air. I'd given my word. It would be a bitch to break it.

She was betting I wouldn't. I was still breathing because I could.

She stared at my hand, then slid hers into mine. Small and delicate inside large and rough. "Thank you, Seamus." *Fuck*. She looked at me like I'd just given her the best present of her life.

I was a goner. "You know all you ever have to do is ask."

To my great satisfaction, she blushed.

I reached out and brushed a hair that tangled with her dark brow out of the way before letting myself have one moment of weakness, cupping her face in my big paw of a hand. "Tell me what's wrong, darlin'."

She leaned into my touch. "It's bad."

Sneaking around, trying to catch someone's attention, fuck, coming to *me*. No shit it was bad. "Are these Shoshanna's orders?" Shoshanna was a fair and decent Head of House. She'd led House of Gatlin most of my life. If this was her plan, I had no doubt it was solid.

Not solid enough for me to risk Florence's life, but enough that I would entertain it before doing whatever the hell I knew was best.

Fig turned as pale as a ghost and tears pricked her eyes.

"Shit. What's wrong?" I pulled her into my chest, finally holding her the way she needed to be held. The way I'd held her after her nightmares. Wrapping myself around her was the only way to calm her down. Her whole body trembled against mine and the depth of her fears multiplied, short circuiting my senses.

This wasn't bad. This was catastrophic.

She took two deep breaths, then pulled back, looking me straight in the eyes with her tear-filled ones. “Shoshanna is dead. I dreamt it, no one believed me, and now she’s dead.”

## CHAPTER 5



Fig

The minute the words left my mouth I collapsed back into his arms. One thing I couldn't deny Seamus, he was good at holding me.

Damn good.

It was so frustrating.

His whole body was tense. Rigid with shock. One hand stroked my hair while the other held me firm. A rock. Just like he always was. *Damn it!* I'd pull away if I didn't need him so damn much.

"I'm going to need you to say that again," he croaked.

I swallowed down the bile that rose in my throat every time I let the truth in. "Shoshanna is dead." The Head of the House of Gatlin had been murdered. Brutally. Intentionally. Something unthinkable in the samhain world.

Seamus eased down into the large wooden chair, taking me with him, sitting me on his large lap. Then he cupped my face with both giant hands, claiming my gaze. "Shoshanna is dead?"

I nodded. "She's dead. And I dreamt it, Seamus. Weeks ago."

His brow furrowed in confusion. "They didn't believe you? How is that possible?"

I laughed out of frustration. “I’m *merely* one-quarter samhain. And the Council is, shall we say, made up of assholes.”

“They didn’t believe you.” He whispered, understanding. “How is that possible after all you’ve done? All you’ve seen?”

I huffed. “You’d be surprised how snobby the House of Gatlin can be. The Council always dismisses me.” I had never felt so meaningless in my life. And that was saying something considering I didn’t know who my father was.

I should have left years ago. But I was stubborn. Too stubborn.

“Fuck them!” he growled.

His complete conviction stole my breath. It had been a long time since anyone simply...trusted me. Everyone at the House of Gatlin second guessed me. They treated me like an errant child. Too young and inexperienced to know anything, too human to understand the samhain world, too dumb to comprehend my own gifts. At best I was coddled, at worst I was ignored.

It’s why I had to go to Rever. He operated outside the House, outside of a lot of lines these days. But he’d once been a highly regarded member of the House and the Gatlin Guard. He knew both worlds, knew how odd it was that a dream that strong and clear was simply ignored.

I hadn’t had dreams that vivid and gruesome since Samantha. Back then everyone trusted me. No one dismissed my visions.

But somewhere in the last three years things had changed. It was slow, but steady. At first I was tentatively welcomed. Then I was left off a guest list. Asked to skip an event or two. They said they needed to test my gifts to understand them and help me grow.

That was when things really started changing, but I was so far in over my head and turned around that I didn’t notice the signs. Not until it was too late.

There was more going on at the House of Gatlin than we knew. And not knowing how much we didn't know was a crippling position to be in.

Seamus might be the perfect person to help me unravel it all. His work as a shadow dealer in the Underground meant he knew how people with less than noble intentions operated. He'd seen the darkest parts of the samhain. The ones the Houses liked to sweep under rugs and stuff into closets pretending they didn't exist.

It was the hardest part of my transition to a samhain life. At first it was presented as an almost fairytale-like existence. Magic was real. Superpowers, for lack of a better word, existed. Samhain didn't have human diseases, lived much longer, and weren't driven by the same human instincts that brought about wars, jealousy, murder, crime, or greed.

At least that's what they liked to think. The reality was somewhat different. The Underground was proof of that. It was the samhain equivalent of a black market, a criminal underworld, with locations all over the world. No location was permanent. It was where samhain went to do or get anything that might be looked down upon by the Houses.

Seamus might think it was dangerous for me here for that reason, but what he didn't understand was that it might actually be the safest place I could be.

"I appreciate your confidence in me." Why was I still in his lap? Why hadn't I shaken out of his hands?

*Because you don't want to be anywhere else.*

"Fuck, Florence. I've seen with my own eyes how powerful your dreams are, not that I needed to. You shouldn't have to prove yourself to anyone."

"Unfortunately that's not how the world works." Not in my experience. Didn't matter if it was humans or samhain.

"It's the way it works for full blooded samhain." He brushed his thumbs over my cheeks then let them glide down my shoulders. It felt so good to be touched. "Why did you stay somewhere that treated you so poorly?"



I looked away from his eyes. It was too intense. Too close for this kind of raw truth. “They are my family now.” My shitty, egotistical, elitist family.

His jaw locked and I swear he didn’t take another breath. I wanted to shrink away but he held me firm. There was no escaping this conversation. It was two years in the making. If I wanted his help and for him to trust me, then I had to face what happened.

“What do you want me to say?”

“That you love them. That they love you. That you’ve found a good home and good friends. That’s what I want you to say.”

Not a single swear word or nickname. It didn’t get more real with Seamus. I didn’t respond because I couldn’t say any of that. It wasn’t a good home. I didn’t have any friends. I pushed the only people who loved me so far away I barely saw them.

He cocked his head, trying to catch my gaze. “Well?”

“Well what?”

“Are you going to say it?”

I swallowed. “It’s my home, Seamus. My House.” Rain was Gatlin, and other than Wils, probably the closest person I had to family now that I’d left my human family behind. It was far from perfect, but no family was.

His eyes flared wide. “You can claim them, but have they truly claimed you? Why do they *deserve* you?”

I gulped down the regrets. Maybe my decision to move to the House was made out of reaction instead of a careful decision, but it was the choice I made. I had no deep feelings for the House of Gatlin. At best they’d been complacent about my arrival. But on the plus side, now that things had gone haywire, I wasn’t blinded by love for them. I could see clear as day that something was very, very wrong.

And Shoshanna had paid the price for it.

I pushed up off his lap and, to my surprise, he let me go. “I’m not here to discuss my living arrangements.”

“Fuck that. You and I both know what we’re really talking about.” He didn’t move, didn’t raise his voice. Just laid the truth out clearly and calmly.

It was infuriating how calm he could be. He was a giant. He could be scary. He should yell and use all that raw strength to get what he wanted. But he didn’t. Not with me.

I set my jaw and tried to find one useful thing to say that wouldn’t rip me to shreds, but there wasn’t a lot that had gone my way in the last two years. “Wils and Vic had this whole new life that I wasn’t part of. It felt easier to give them space, to try and find my own way.” It hurt to be around their happiness, so it was easier to avoid them.

Easier to avoid Seamus and all the feelings he always made me feel. Having him this close again was hard. Minute by minute my walls eroded. The desire began to build, the longing took root.

Especially when he looked at me with those eyes. “I’m part of their life. We haven’t had any problems.”

Of course they hadn’t. They were a perfect triangle. Wils and Vic, hopelessly in love, and their best friend, always there to support them. It left me...nowhere. I didn’t fit with Wils anymore. Seamus and I made as much sense as a bird and a turtle. “Good for you. This transition hasn’t been easy for me. Wils had her own problems and believe me I don’t envy anything she went through to get where she is now, but I’m adrift. All I’ve done is search for my new normal. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

His jaw ticked. “We’re really not going to talk about it?”

He could easily say it, drop the bomb, but he wanted—maybe even needed—me to be the one to explain why I ran.

Maybe he even deserved it. “What is there to say?”

“That the fight was a mistake. We were both upset and said things we shouldn’t have.”

“Or maybe we were finally being honest with each other.”

I flinched as he roared. “You are such a fucking liar, Florence. We’re honest with each other all the damn time. *That’s* the problem!”

So honest it destroyed us. I came to him that day with so much hope. Too much. After a year of fighting our attraction, I was ready to give in. To be his. Yeah, he’d hurt me. And I’d hurt him back. Over and over again. No matter how many times he apologized for spilling my secret to Wils, I couldn’t forgive him. Too many men had hurt me over the years. All I saw was another overbearing man who wanted to control my life.

It took me months to understand that Seamus wasn’t like that. We kissed like we were starved. His hands burned into my skin. I could still smell his mint and soap scent.

And then we exploded in spectacular fashion. We burned so bright there was nothing left of Seamus and Florence but ashes.

“Our problem is that you’re a jerk and I’m a pain in the ass. We will never work.”

He looked like he wanted to kiss me senseless. And dammit all, I *wanted* to be kissed. Why couldn’t I be attracted to someone else?

*Anyone* else?

Seamus shook his head then dropped his face into his hands, growling. He stabbed his fingers through his hair and then looked up, pinning me with his eyes. They were full of pain.

Fuck. Me.

I couldn’t keep running. Couldn’t keep fighting. Not when he looked at me like that. “No,” I confessed, “the House of Gatlin doesn’t deserve me.”

More pain flashed behind his eyes. “Then why do you stay?”

“Where would I go?”

His gaze turned furious. “How about *anywhere* else? You have choices, Florence. You’re not a prisoner in that House.”

“It didn’t feel that way.”

He frowned, his eyes unfocusing for a moment, then he shot up out of his chair. “What the hell?”

I took a step back, trying to keep some distance between us. “It’s me, Seamus. I...I can’t back down from a challenge. Them not wanting me? Not believing in me? It was an insult, yeah, but it was also a massive challenge. I thought I could prove myself.” I was wrong.

“You don’t prove yourself to family. That’s one thing I know all too well,” he replied with a bit of growl to his voice.

My heart broke for him. “Seamus...”

“Nope. We’re not going there now. Later. Not now. We’re staying focused on you and what the fuck led to...how did it happen?”

I swallowed down the bile. It had been one thing to dream it and quite another to see her dismembered body with my own eyes.

“If it happened as it did in my dream, she had her heart ripped out of her chest first.”

“She was *murdered*?”

I nodded once. “Then her body was put on a spike. Her head was removed.” I slammed my eyes shut but the images were in my head. There was no escaping them. “They took her arms and legs.” It was horrific. Ritualistic. Meant to send a message.

Seamus ran a hand down his face. “Where did it happen?”

“Beside the mist lakes of Midnight Manor.”

“What the fuck?” He jerked back. “It would have taken weeks, maybe months to find her. How long has she been dead?”

Midnight Manor was protected. It could only be reached through a portal. The way in constantly changed, and the mist

lakes were rarely visited. “Two days. I dreamt it. So I knew where to find her when she went missing.” The trembling came back. I hated dreaming about death. Hated seeing it even more.

“How are you?” He leaned forward on the wooden table, almost as if he were using it to keep us apart.

Wise man. He hated seeing me upset. It was probably taking everything he had to stay over there.

At least I could lie a little and give him some relief. “I’m holding up.”

The way he stared at me with his jaw set and arms locked told me he didn’t believe my lie. He always did know me better than anyone else. “Whoever killed her wanted her to stay dead. Taking her heart and head should have done the trick, but leaving her in a remote location means no necromancer could revive her, no matter how powerful they were.”

“Exactly.”

“The kill is symbolic. But why?”

That was the billion-dollar question. “I have no idea.”

He kept on studying me with those all-seeing eyes of his. I swear he could hear my thoughts sometimes. If he stared long enough and concentrated hard enough, it was like he could put my pieces together and solve my puzzle. “How did they get access to Midnight Manor? How did Shoshanna get there? Was she a guest?”

Midnight Manor was the exclusive pleasure resort of the House of Argo. It was invitation only.

But there was a dark secret to Midnight Manor that I’d only just learned. I cleared my throat, ready for the fireworks. “I went to Rever for obvious reasons. He came with me to find her body. He studied the scene with me.”

I didn’t need special powers to know Seamus was nuclear levels of jealous right now. He seethed but didn’t say a word. “And how did *you* get in to Midnight Manor?”

“The Underground.”

He blinked, as confused as I was when Rever escorted me through. “The Underground?”

I nodded. “There is a secret Underground location beneath Midnight Manor.” So secret even Seamus didn’t know about it.

“And Rever knows how to get there?”

“He works there.”

“What the fuck?” His eyes shot to the closed door, probably calculating if it was possible to track Rever down and strangle him. “This is twenty-five levels of fucked up! Midnight Manor is supposed to be secure.” His finger stabbed at the air. “Guests are supposed to be safe.”

If word got out the Underground was operating under Midnight Manor it would ruin the House of Argo. “It’s mostly sealed off. Movement between the Underground and the resort is heavily restricted. It took Rever most of a day to get us onto the grounds, and only because he has family connections. I could have let him go alone but...but I had to see her for myself.”

Seamus resumed pacing. His large body covered the short space in three strides, so the pacing was furious and pointless, but he did it anyway. It gave me a chance to take him in. He didn’t look all that different from the last time I saw him. His hair was a little longer and shaggier, as was his beard, but it was something that suited his rugged look. He wore his usual uniform of boots, jeans, Henley, and jacket. He wore the softest jackets. Well-worn and useful. He seemed to be in good shape. Maybe even better shape. His shoulders seemed wider and the muscles that flexed beneath his collar were more prominent. I ate up the details. I had always been stupidly attracted to the man, and for good reason. He was an impeccable specimen of masculinity.

I always had a thing for tall, but over the years I learned it wasn’t height that ultimately attracted me to a man. It was their confidence. Their strength. It was what usually led me to

make terrible mistakes because a lot of confident guys were also assholes.

And then there was Seamus. He was giant, strong, and had confidence for days. It was an easy, patient confidence. The sexiest kind. I'd fallen hard and fast for it.

But like most fires, we burned hot and bright, consuming everything in the process. So while I might have to squeeze my legs a little when he was near, I couldn't let the physical get in the way of reality. Seamus and I were no good together.

He stopped and turned, so I looked down at the floor.

"There is an Underground beneath Midnight Manor?"

"Yes," I confirmed.

"And you got through to the grounds?"

"Yes."

"So, theoretically, *anyone* could get through. If they knew the right things."

I nodded. "That's what Rever and I just went over." We poured over the names of everyone who'd been in and out of the Underground over the last month. "He's having his family investigate whether there's been any odd events on the grounds."

"Is Ivy there?"

Rever, along with his seven partners, were mated to Ivy of the House of Volci. They lived at Midnight Manor, all of them working for the estate in one capacity or another. "She is." There was no one better suited. Not just because she was a wolf shifter, but because she was brilliant.

"And Bridge? She hasn't been home in a few weeks."

Bridge was one of the youngest Wrens and Seamus' cousin. She also lived at Midnight Manor as a samhain companion to a house full of monsters abandoned in our realm after the Convergence. "She's investigating whether water demons have noticed anything unusual with the mist lakes."

"Are we sure it isn't the water demons who did this?"

“I know what I saw,” I whispered, feeling hurt even though Seamus wasn’t questioning my vision, just asking questions.

He blinked and came around the table so swiftly I didn’t have time to move. Suddenly I was back in his strong arms, hauled up against his wall of a chest. “Don’t. You know I don’t think of you that way. Whatever you say, I trust it. What did the murderer look like?”

And that was the problem. As much as the Plane forced me to see Shoshanna’s death, it never gave me a clear picture of the killer. “I don’t know. I never see them. They’re definitely samhain, but that’s all I can tell you.” No human could pull this off. That was so out of the realm of possibility it was almost laughable, but Rever and I covered that option just in case.

Seamus gave me another reassuring squeeze, his lips tantalizingly close to mine. “Where is Rever now?” His breath whispered across my skin, causing it to tingle.

“Back at Midnight Manor.”

“Who else knows?” His eyes drifted to my lips.

One kiss would be fine, wouldn’t it? Kisses were harmless. And it would soothe some of this pain. “Just you, me, and Rever.”

“Not Wils?”

“I haven’t had time to do much more than contact Rever, find Shoshanna, and go home to change.” Seamus being here was just an added bonus.

A perfect bonus, if I could convince him to kiss me and not ask for more.

“Anything else I need to know?”

The tone of his voice caught me off guard and I looked up. His gaze was no longer on me. It was unfocused. Calculating. This was Seamus the shadow dealer, not *my* Seamus, the man who vowed to work with me.

“Don’t you dare.” I pushed out of his warm, delightful arms.



Stupid arms! Stupid me.

He laughed, all cold and distant, like he could piss me off enough to let him go. “What? Take you into an even more dangerous situation? Where someone is murdering women for no goddamn reason?” Of course he was going to break his promise. He probably never intended to keep it in the first place.

I was just desperate for an ally. Someone I could trust. And while Seamus might be an ally, I had somehow forgotten I couldn’t trust the asshole. “I’ve already been there, Seamus. I’m still alive and kicking.” And this was exactly why we didn’t work. He made one promise and was already breaking it.

The bastard.

I knew I shouldn’t trust him. I *knew* it. And yet I hoped.

Stupid, stupid hope.

“Go to Wils. Tell her and Vic what’s happening and *stay there*.” He stabbed the table with his index finger.

I folded my arms over my chest, reveling in the flare of his eyes as they darted from my breasts to my face. “You promised. You’re bound by it.”

“I’ll deal with the consequences. I can take it.”

*I can take it.* How many times had he said that to me? Usually it made me fall a little for him. Not today. Not like this. “You’d put yourself through pain and suffering rather than accept that I can make my own choices?” Why did he have to be like every other asshole? *He* knew what was better for me, that I needed protection, that I couldn’t take care of myself. Well fuck him. “If you break your promise, I will never speak to you again. Never. This is it for us.”

His soft brown eyes turned almost black. “Are you fucking kidding me right now? Don’t go making threats to get your way.”

Didn’t he know I wasn’t like that? Maybe he didn’t know me as much as I wanted to think he did. “This isn’t a threat,

Seamus. It's a promise." I held up my hand, binding my words. "If you break your promise to me, you will be banished from my life."

Banishment was extreme, but necessary. I couldn't have this man keep stumbling back into my life every few years, making me think things could be different, hoping for more, only to be reminded that he was every bit as much of an asshole as the next guy.

He went white as a sheet as he stared at my hand. "Don't do this." His jaw ticked. "Don't make me choose you over your safety."

"I'm not making you choose anything. It's *my* choice. Mine, Seamus. I get to decide what's too dangerous and what's worth the risk. Me. Not you." We were right back where we started. Three years ago he'd broken his first promise to me by spilling it to Wils, and now he was about to break his last.

Because this would most definitely be the last.

He shook his head. "If something happens to you..."

And there was that glimmer again. That stupid hope. He cared about me. "Then something happens to me. Deal with it."

His eyes darted up, locking with mine and making my head spin. "You are an infuriating woman."

It could go either way. He could accept banishment and be done with me or he could trust me. I decided to poke the bear. "I'm three-quarters human. I'll be out of your hair in a few decades one way or another." I never did the drinking ritual to unlock the rest of my samhain gifts, including a longer lifespan. Maybe that was why my Gatlin family looked down on me. They didn't understand that I might want to live to eighty-five, be an old lady, and move on from this shitty world.

"You're killing me, Florence," he rasped, his face twisting in pain.

"And I can't take the pain anymore." I held out my hand. "We either do this together, or we don't do this at all."

## CHAPTER 6



Seamus

Florence Figueroa was the most infuriating woman in the world. I wavered between wanting to kiss some sense into her and wanting to lock her up. Only she would risk everything like this. Either I let her walk right into danger or I gave her up forever.

What the fucking hell? Every muscle in my body ached to be used, to let my anger out on every face, every wall, every surface that crossed my path. But instead I was stuck in a room in the Underground with *her*.

“Who else knows?”

She leaned against the wall, arms crossed, a small bit of satisfaction on her lips. “You, Rever, and me.”

“No one else? Where is her,” I gulped, “her body?” How was this happening?

She blanched. “Kris and Rain know now, too. Rever just told me. I’m not trying to keep secrets from you. This is just happening faster than I can keep up.”

Exactly why she shouldn’t be part of this.

But she was part of it. The Plane made it so. “What does that have to do with Shoshanna?”

“Rever put her there.”

I tried to follow. “Kris and Rain’s cottage?” The same cottage where we’d hidden out for weeks while they tracked

down Samantha. The same cottage where she spent nights tangled in nightmares while I had no choice but to watch helplessly.

She nodded.

“We should go there. I should see her.”

“How will seeing a mangled body help us figure out who did this? Or why?”

I didn't know. Just that it felt like the next logical thing to do. But then again, I was flying blind here. Something I wasn't used to. I had far more questions than answers. Who was the killer? Was it a lone act or part of a group? A conspiracy? What was the fucking point of it all?

We had absolute shit to go on other than Florence's dreams. And the scene of the crime. “Do you think Rever could get me into Midnight Manor?”

She chewed on her lower lip and shook her head. “Too risky to do it again so soon.”

“What about the Underground? Can you show me the way?” I wanted to see this secret Underground with my own damned eyes. What the fuck? I had been out of it these last two years, trying to untangle my life from Kirk's and find a new way forward, but this was something I should have known. And I missed it.

She hesitated, then nodded.

Study the body or the possible point of entry? I had to admit, my curiosity was right up there with my irritation that there was an entire Underground location I knew jack and shit about. “Are Kris and Rain looping in Vic and Wils?” I trusted Vic. He worked right by my side all these years. If there was a clue we'd notice, he'd find it just as I would.

“We're trying to keep this quiet,” she whispered, shrinking in on herself.

“How long do you think it takes before someone notices the Head of the House Gatlin is missing? We're working against the clock. And then the shit hits the fan, even if it's just

search parties getting in our way.” Not to mention how it will look when it’s discovered her body is being housed by the House of Wren.

Shit in the samhain world was about to get real weird.

“Okay. We can ask for their help.” She nodded once but didn’t look particularly convinced.

I wanted to reach out and touch her. But, given the way the last few minutes had gone, if I tried that right now, she’d rip my arm off. “Hey, I trust Vic to keep this quiet and examine the body.”

She nodded again. “I trust them more than anyone else.”

“Then what’s the problem?” I felt myself moving closer to her even though I hadn’t decided to. She was a damn magnet.

She looked up at me with those big eyes of hers. “I just don’t want them to get hurt. We don’t know what we’re dealing with. What if asking them to help means we bring them right into the line of fire?”

Fuck. There she went again, caring about everyone but herself. Florence would be the death of me. “Did you hesitate when Wils needed your help? No. You didn’t. You were there, even when you didn’t want to be, because that’s what family does.” I knew more than anyone how hard that day was for her. Florence had been terrified, but she didn’t let it stop her. She stood by Wils’ side while she faced her sister.

Wils only wanted to return the favor. I knew this because Wils was still my best friend, other than Vic, of course. But Florence had held herself away from us these last two years. Maybe she needed reminding how much she mattered. Even if she didn’t want to matter to me, she did. There was no force on earth, no amount of time that could ever change that.

She sniffed. “Maybe I don’t want her to. Maybe I want to keep her safe so I still have someone when this is over.”

“Fuck, Fig. You’re killing me here.” I hung my head and put my hands on my hips so I wouldn’t reach for her.

“You called me Fig.”

“Yeah well, when you frustrate the hell out of me, I want to call you princess or sweetheart or sugar lips, but I don’t want to make you mad, so I called you by your name.” Even if it wasn’t the one I preferred.

I always wondered what names would escape my lips when I eventually got her under me. When she drove me to madness in a much better, much more pleasurable way.

Silence stretched between us until I looked up and found her staring at me. The air was thick with three different kinds of tension. There was the obvious uneasiness from Shoshanna’s death, and Fig’s anxiety over Wils, but there was also the push and pull that was us. Inevitably, always us. “Wils will be there for you when this is over. So will Vic, and Kris, and Rain. And whether you like it or not, I will be there too. You’re not alone. You never have been.”

Her chin thrust forward but she didn’t say it, didn’t restart the eternal argument between us. “If Wils and Vic are seeing to the autopsy, then we’re headed to the secret Underground?”

“That’s my plan.” We needed something to go on. Knowing how to get in was as good a start as any. I just needed a direction. Something to do. Anything was better than standing here helpless and unable to touch Florence.

“And you’re not going to fight me anymore?”

Not on this. I bit back the urge to call her *sweetheart*. “You made me choose. I choose you.” I’d always choose her, if only she’d get that through her thick, stubborn skull. “But I get something in return.” I grabbed her hand and placed it on my hip. “Same rules as last time.”

Her eyes flared and she tried to pull her hand away, but I didn’t let her. I clamped down hard. She stomped her foot. “I am perfectly capable of moving around the Underground without touching you.”

Maybe that was true, but Rever didn’t love Florence. I did. And if she was going with me, it was by my rules. “You made me choose,” I repeated, letting every bit of my frustration out,

“and I chose you. So you give me this in return. As long as we’re in the Underground, your hand is on me. Got it?”

“This is ridiculous!” She tried to tug away. Again.

I laced my fingers between hers. “Ridiculous or not, it’s what’s going to happen. I gave you what you wanted, now give me this.” I wasn’t above begging. I’d already lost one round, I wasn’t about to lose this one, too.

She stood there, eyes wide and staring at our hands. Her breaths became deeper and faster as her heart rate kicked up a notch. Was it too much to hope it was because I made her feel the same things she made me feel? Or was she just that mad? It was hard to wade through all the things she was feeling and come up with a clear answer.

“Florence?” I begged. If that didn’t do it, nothing would.

Her gaze jumped from our hands to my eyes. “I’ll keep my hand on you,” she whispered.

“Good.” A little of the tension around my throat loosened. I didn’t want her to do this, but at least she agreed to play by my rules. Plus it got her touching me again. So it wasn’t all horrible. “Lead the way.”

## CHAPTER 7



Seamus

With a glare Florence closed her eyes, rolled her shoulders, and gave herself a shake. Then she took my hand and we were off, moving through the Plane using the psychic channels that came naturally to her but not to me. We entered a portal and passed into a different space before crossing back into our world and into a protected underground fortress. “Welcome the Underground,” she muttered.

How many times had I said that to someone? It was strange to be on the receiving end. “That was not hard to get through. If you know where you’re going.” It was about as secure as a kid’s tree fort.

Who the fuck thought this was a good idea? My uneasiness grew. This wasn’t just lazy or opportunistic. It was... calculated. It took a lot to be both secretive and convenient.

“It’s a lot harder to get onto the grounds.” She wiggled her fingers out of mine and looped them through my jeans instead. It wasn’t the same, but at least she was touching me.

“But not impossible. I don’t like this. Who authorized this location?” Things had been getting stranger and stranger over the last couple of years, but this took the cake.

“Rever said it opened four years ago and that the House of Argo is aware it is here, but turn a blind eye.”

“They fucking what?” I worked in the shadows. Keeping an eye on the less savory aspects of samhain life was nothing new. But there were certain things that were sacred, and it



seemed we were throwing them out the window one thing at a time. It was like I didn't even know who we were anymore.

Florence let out a tired sigh, her shoulders deflating. She was tired. Really tired. Her eyes didn't have their usual shine and the dark circles under her eyes were more obvious now that I wasn't fighting her. "Rever isn't sure who started it, but he knows for a fact House of Argo knows it's here, underneath Midnight Manor." But she wasn't done. I knew that pause. She was debating how to say the next thing. Sure enough she took another breath and continued. "It's why he's been gone so much. When he took it to House of Gatlin, Shoshanna said it wasn't a House problem. That if House of Argo wanted to play with fire we should let them burn. He was so upset that he stormed out and hasn't set foot in the House since."

I ran a hand down my face and tugged on my beard. "Fucking hell." That added a new wrinkle to things. The woman who was murdered *knew* there was a secret Underground. Knew and didn't do a thing. And then was murdered just above it? Yeah... "So this is the only way in?"

"Yep. And it changes every week, so there's that."

It changed fuck all. Once someone knew what the process was it could be hacked. "Let's stick to the shadows." I trusted nothing, not that ever did in the Underground, but that was when I knew the terrain and the players.

But the shadows? Those never let me down. In the Underground they were magically enhanced. Deeper, darker, and intentionally made to cloak and deflect magic of any kind. The more observant you were, the more the shadows could give you. Florence didn't need that, though. She just needed to stay hidden. I would do all the watching.

It was a different location, but all Underground locations operated in essentially the same way. Like stepping into a grocery store in a strange city. It might be set up a little differently, but you knew how to find your way around.

Feeling the tug of her fingers on my jeans sent the only pleasure through my body I was capable of comprehending at the moment. And even that little bit was like a slow, steady

drip of fresh blood. I forgot how intoxicating she was. All it took was a few moments and everything in me tuned to her. I tracked her breath, her heart, every hesitation, every jolt.

Did she feel it, too? The pull? Or was she immune to me? Was that why she was able to stay so far away for so long? Maybe she really did hate me.

That thought settled into the pit of my stomach as I blinked us into the shadows near a food stall. The vendor was selling baskets of fried fish and potato wedges. I scanned the crowd and listened to the various conversations.

Someone was bartering for group sex.

Another was paying for demon blood with potions.

Three others were betting on the afternoon fights.

“Anything interesting?” Florence asked.

“Just the usual.” Which was both reassuring and problematic as fuck. A secret location like this should be different. There should be fewer people. The players should be the higher-level rollers. The good offered should be exclusive.

This was...ordinary. The same thing I'd see in any location.

A couple walked quickly while discussing forbidden magic. A man burst into laughter when his companion suggested he go fuck himself. My gaze caught on a side entrance to a bar and the shadowed passageway behind it. I reached back and pressed Florence's hand to my hip before blinking us to that set of shadows.

“It's cooler here,” she murmured almost too softly to hear, just like I'd taught her.

“I think this goes deeper.” The general rule was that the deeper and darker, the more insidious the activity. Without knowing the layout I wouldn't take us down. But we could sit in the shadows and observe. “We'll wait here. See who comes and goes.”

“All right.” She settled into the deepest part of the shadows, on a stone that jutted out from the wall.

I crouched beside her, moving her hand to my shoulder. It looked good there, all small and feminine. Everyone had their thing. That little something that always got their motor running. Mine was Florence. But more specifically? I got off on how dainty she was. Fuck if I knew why. Something about knowing without a doubt I could protect her. But also knowing she was special. I had to be careful with her. Take care of her.

And yeah, seeing how small she was in my arms got my dick jumping every damn time. I was a man and she was my woman. It was as clear as day. “We are more than two people who fight.”

Her pretty gaze snapped to mine. “We don’t fight, Seamus. We combust. We’re too much. We feel everything and it hurts as much as it doesn’t. When we get mad, we get *mad*.”

“And when we love, we *love*.” I reached out and threaded my fingers into her hair as I cupped her face. All it would take was a tug and her lips would be on mine. Then I could prove to her just how good combusting could be. Right here in the damn shadows.

“I can’t feel that much.” Tears glistened in her eyes. “It’s destructive and terrifying. If fighting with you tears me up this much, losing you would destroy me.” I barely heard the last words, but I felt every ounce of her pain.

“What makes you think you’d ever lose me?” If she just gave us a chance she’d see that I was hers. Hers and only hers. It would take an act of the Plane to separate us, and even then, I wasn’t so sure it would work.

She paused, her eyes darting between mine, as she debated whether to say what was on her mind. I wanted it. Even if it hurt. “Nothing lasts forever.”

“I do.” And I meant it. I would live forever because I was just that stubborn. If she challenged me, I’d outlive her by exactly one second, just to prove her wrong.

She brushed her knuckles down my cheek. “If anyone could defy death, it would be you.”

“I promise being mad at me is the only pain you’ll feel. I won’t hurt you. Fuck, if you ever say yes you’re going to have to get an army behind you if you ever want me to leave.”

For a split second her eyes softened. That shy, hopeful woman I first saw in the Shadow, the woman who told me her secrets and kissed me like there was no tomorrow, peeked out.

Then she slammed the shutters. “Stop being nice to me.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m not nice to you.” A tear slipped out and over the back of my hand.

Not tears. I could handle just about anything but her tears. “I have offered more than once to be your personal punching bag.” Maybe it wasn’t how conventional couples worked, but they didn’t operate at the same level of emotional extremes that we did. She needed someone she could vent to, focus her anger on, and I offered myself up on a platter.

For a while she took me up on it. And as strange as it might sound, I loved it. Getting Florence’s raw thoughts was a gift that no one else got. Sure it came with a side of screaming and occasional punching, but it was pure, unfiltered honesty. And fuck was it special. Just as special as when she let me hold her through the nightmares. No one else saw her that vulnerable, but she’d trusted me to keep her safe and to never share it with anyone.

If we could just find a way to that place and trust that the other would stay through thick and thin...

She reached up and cupped my face, too. “You can take it, but I can’t. The moment you get upset I—” Her eyes skipped past me and narrowed on something behind me.

As much as I wanted to stop time so we could finish our conversation, that was Wils’ gift, not mine. I dropped my hand from her face and turned to face the threat. Her hand fell back to my shoulder, holding on tighter than before. Like she knew what was coming.

The sounds of shuffling feet came first, followed by the deep pitch of male voices.

“Are we hidden?” she whispered.

I reached up and squeezed her hand. “We are.” Someone would have to get down on our level and look right at us to see we were here. Hiding in the shadows of the Underground was an art and I was a master.

Her fingers dug into my shirt as the footsteps drew closer, but she wasn’t scared. It was almost as if she were debating sliding me out of there before I saw who was coming. The waves of anxiety and doubt coming from her were impossible to ignore.

What did she know that I didn’t?

The voices were so close I could hear them clearly now. “We can sell at least four tickets a night,” one man said.

“Which brings in a fortune in human money,” another said.

Tickets and fortunes. Whatever was going on down there wasn’t good. I wasn’t sure I even wanted to know what it was. Enough things in the Underground made me sick, I didn’t need a new level of debauchery haunting my nights.

Unless it was humans they were selling these tickets to. Then we had problems. Problems that would have to be fixed.

I froze on that thought as the men came into sight. One was a stranger but the other wasn’t. I knew his face because it was nearly identical to my own.

Tristan. My deadbeat brother.

He was older, obviously. His body filled out and strong. Not nearly as tall or strong as me, but we definitely came from the same bloodline. His eyes were colder than I remembered. I simply stared, taking in every detail, feeling no need to make my presence known.

When he passed I turned to Florence and glared. “You knew. How?”

She looked away, and in the dark that meant I couldn’t see anything but her outline. “I dreamt it.”

## CHAPTER 8



Fig

I swear all we ever did together was fight, apologize, and then fight some more. Ever since the night he accidentally let it slip that I was looking for my father. Wils knowing shouldn't have been that big of a deal. It was an honest mistake on Seamus's part.

But I saw red. I went nuclear. I *panicked*. And we'd been fighting ever since. Partially because I was scared that I was so in love with someone who could squash me like a bug, and partially because I couldn't forgive him, even though in my big old brain, I knew I needed to.

Especially now that he was standing there, pale as a ghost, staring at me like I betrayed him.

It sucked to be on the other side.

Had I kept this secret from him on purpose? No. Not at all. But it's what happened all the same. And Seamus couldn't see the difference.

For thirty minutes I held on as he followed his brother through the Underground. Then he found a place he deemed safe, in a corner, and paced lines into the stone floor.

"Start at the beginning," he demanded.

He had every right to be angry. I didn't fault him one bit.

But I did surprise him by going back further than he expected. Tonight's apologies needed to go back to the very

beginning. “I’m sorry for how badly I reacted when you told Wils I was looking for my father.”

He blinked.

“I should have apologized the next morning. I have a tendency to panic.”

He put up a hand. “I know how you handle panic attacks, Florence. You don’t need to apologize.”

“Yes I do.” I stayed plastered to the wall, my hands clasped in front like a shield. “I panicked hard. Probably the worst I’ve ever panicked.” It probably had a lot to do with how much I felt towards Seamus. Major feelings equaled major... *feelings*. “It’s what I was trying to tell you before. You can handle things. I can’t. The moment you get upset,” I took a fortifying breath, “the moment you get upset I lose it. Every time.” I hated this part of myself. It made me feel so damn weak.

He ran a hand down his face, looking at the ceiling with a groan. “And I came right at you the next morning because I was pissed. Fuck me. We are an endless cycle.”

Then he took me to Blood Falls. Away from Wils. It scared the crap out of me. It worked out for the best in the end, but at the time, having my choice taken from me, being forced to talk to him, it only made things worse. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said the things I said. You are not like other men.”

His whole face softened and set my heart galloping again. Would I ever stop reacting to this man? Every expression, every touch had a corresponding one in me. “I accept your apology if you accept mine.”

“Done. Except for what happened today. That’s a separate apology.”

His jaw flexed. “You knew.”

“I dreamt it.” Always with the stupid dreams. They were endless. It was exhausting. “Two years ago.”

He went white as a sheet. “You’ve known for *two years* this was going to happen?”

I shook my head. “It’s not that simple. I dream a lot of things. Sometimes I know exactly what they are and when they’ll happen. Others come in jumbles of mixed-up information. Two years ago I had a very strange dream about shadows and being chased. I knew I was in danger. I was being hunted.” Just repeating the memories brought it all right back as if I’d dreamt it yesterday. Seamus moved closer, his eyes studying every inch of me with concern.

That was real, right? His feelings? I didn’t imagine them. He cared about me. Why else would he spend two years accepting verbal insults from me? Why he kept coming back, ready to fight me? Because fighting was better than the silence. The man baffled me, but I needed to start believing what I saw with my own two eyes.

Seamus cared about me. A lot.

“I wound up in these impossibly dark shadows with you.” I didn’t tell him how he kissed me in that dream. How we were in love and had been together. How smokin’ hot it was when he inched down my jeans and took me from behind. But that wasn’t real. It was an echo on the timeline of things that hadn’t happened. “And then just like what happened, your brother came up from somewhere and caught you by surprise. That’s it. I woke up right after you saw him.”

I wondered all this time why the Plane wanted me to know this was coming. And now that it had happened, I was as lost as ever. I rubbed my chest.

Seamus’s gaze snapped to my hand. “What’s wrong?”

“I just ache.”

He rubbed his own chest in a slightly different spot—over his heart. “You get the feeling there’s a lot more shit happening than we know?”

“Yes I do.”

“I don’t like that you felt hunted in your dream.” His hands reached out to touch me but stopped. “Did you feel any of that today?”



I shook my head. “No. Not once.” It was just Seamus and me and our own demons. “You think it has something to do with Shoshanna?”

“It must.”

But...how? How could I dream about Tristan years before we actually saw him? When we were only here to gather clues about Shoshanna? They weren't related.

Unless they were. *Damn.*

“Two years is a long time. Why send the dream so far in advance? Was I supposed to do something to stop it from happening?” I felt more helpless by the second.

“What if whoever was chasing you ended up chasing Shoshanna instead?”

I shivered and this time Seamus didn't hold back. He slid his big hands up my arms and rubbed. “You're exhausted.”

“I'm not leaving.” There were answers here and time was running out.

“I'm not suggesting we leave. We should find a quiet spot to bed down and get a few hours shuteye.”

“Sleep in the Underground?” That sounded dangerous, something Seamus was typically allergic to.

At least when it came to me.

“I sleep in the Underground all the time. You just have to find the right spot.”

“And you're going to close your eyes and sleep?” I was willing to bet this was all a lie to get me to rest while he stayed up and watched over me.

He shrugged. “I need to rest too. If I find the right spot, I don't see a problem with it.”

Did seeing his brother scramble his brain? I touched his forehead with the back of my hand. “No fever. What's wrong with you?”

He grinned. “I think confessions are good for the soul.”

I blushed again. “I really am sorry.”

“So am I.” He cocked his head again. “Maybe now we can find a way to stop the vicious cycle.”

I wouldn’t hold my breath. “At least as long as we’re working together.” I held out my hand.

Seamus smiled in bemusement before shaking it.

Thirty minutes later he deemed a passageway between two walls the perfect location.

“How did you know this was here?”

“Every Underground is similar. Remember all the secret rooms in the Shadow?”

“Don’t remind me,” I grumbled.

“Yeah well, if someone tries to come in here, we’ll have plenty of advance warning.” He dropped the sack of hay he’d stolen from an animal pen on the ground and yanked off his jacket. “This is the best blanket option for the night, unfortunately. We’re going to have to be cozy.”

At least it was a dirt floor and not stone. “That’ll do.”

He sat down. “I’m assuming cuddling is out?”

“Seamus.”

“It doesn’t hurt to ask.” After all these years, all these fights, he still looked like he wanted to kiss me senseless.

Madness.

“Let’s get some sleep.” I joined him on the ground and turned away, facing the wall while he faced the door.

My mind wouldn’t stop racing. I was in the Underground. But not just any Underground. A secret one. I was with Seamus and we hadn’t killed each other. And now we were going to nap?

My mind wasn’t the only thing racing. My heart was far from its normal rhythm. At first I tried to keep some space between us, but it was cold and as big as his jacket was, it wasn’t big enough for both of us to sleep with two inches

between us, so I gave up the struggle and pressed my back to his.

His wide, warm, muscular back.

Even through the layers of fabric his heat practically scalded my skin. I snuggled into the cuff of his sleeve, using it as a cushion against the rough sack and the straw that stuck out from the weaves. He couldn't tell that I was aroused, right? I didn't put out some sort of signal that told Seamus that I might hate him, but I also wanted to jump his bones. Did I?

I really hoped not. Because as far as I could tell, Seamus always seemed to know what I was thinking, no matter how hard I tried to block him out.

The room was quiet, but the muffled crowds could still be heard. Someone wanted a beer, another bet on a bear shifter to win a fight, and yet another was looking for a card game to join.

Really not all that different from humans.

"Normally I drift right off," Seamus huffed.

"Yeah, it's hard to tune them out."

"It's hard to tune *you* out, Florence. Your body is pressed up against mine and I can't do a damn thing about it."

My heart skipped a reckless beat. "How can you possibly want me after everything I've done and said to you?"

He sighed. "Because I can still remember the way my lips burn when I kiss you."

*Burn.* That was the exact right word. Every kiss was a brand. He'd marked me with the first one. No matter how hard I fought it, tried to deny it, he'd ruined me for any other man. With a single kiss. That's how good it was.

I closed my eyes and sank into the same memories. "Why did you stop fighting me about coming here?" I felt his back muscles as he adjusted. They were long and wide. Powerful.

I gulped. How would they feel under my hands as he moved over me? Like this? Reminding me with every flex,

every movement that he was mine?

“Because that’s what got me into trouble in the first place. Yeah I pissed you off with the secret that I didn’t realize was a secret from Wils, but the cherry on top was wanting to protect you. For whatever reason, my need to keep you safe pisses you off. If I’m ever going to have a shot with you, I’ve got to shut down my most basic instinct.”

*Sweet Jesus.* I screwed my eyes shut to try and stem the longing a few words created. *If I’m ever going to have a shot with you.* So he did still want me. This attraction wasn’t one sided. Was that a good thing or a bad thing?

My body voted good. My heart, not so much.

“You made your decision?” he asked in the silence.

“What decision?”

“You never joined the community? Never drank?”

*Never chose to fully live as a samhain.* There were a lot of ways to answer this question. I was glad he couldn’t see me, glad I couldn’t fall into his eyes and forget everything but him. “I haven’t decided on anything long term. All I can say is that it didn’t feel right. I’ve been in limbo for so long. Not human. Not samhain. No home, no future, no goals.” How could I sign up for an extra hundred years or so in a life I didn’t want? The only thing holding me here was Wils.

I could go home. Pretend my dreams were just dreams. I could grow old with my brother and sister, spend more time with my mom. Maybe one day a human life would finally make sense to me. My samhain life certainly didn’t. I wasn’t really Gatlin, despite Kirk’s DNA. I wasn’t Wren, even though they treated me like family. I couldn’t spend my life as the third wheel in Wils and Vic’s relationship. Or Kris and Rain’s.

Every time I pondered my life choices and whether I should change course, the math didn’t add up. I couldn’t see myself anywhere. The cold feeling of deep loneliness crept back in, and I felt tired all the way down to my bones. An exhaustion so deep that even lying next to this confounding, sexy giant couldn’t keep me awake, “Good night, Seamus.”

“Good night, Florence.”

I drifted off into a gloriously dreamless sleep, but it didn't last. Good sleep never did. At least there weren't nightmares. I simply couldn't stay out.

Three years ago I fell asleep next to Seamus at least once a night. He was big and strong and promised to fight off the demons so I could rest. His loyalty frightened me. So many men had promised my mother forever. Promised me and my brother and sister. But the moment things got hard, they left.

They *always* left.

And yet, there was Seamus, right in the middle of everything being hard, steadfast at my side. It had to be temporary. He had a hero complex the others lacked. That was why he stayed. He got off on saving me.

But then Samantha died. Life returned to normal. And Seamus was still there, wanting to be with me. I regretted the things I said. I was selfish. So very selfish. And no matter how many times I reminded myself I was in a fight-or-flight response, I couldn't justify my actions.

Especially because when I got some space and had a chance to see Seamus, really see him, I realized how hurt he was. My words did their job. They inflicted maximum pain.

And if I'd taken a moment to realize why, I wouldn't have kept fighting.

I was perfectly still when Seamus started twitching. Small movements. His hips, his shoulders, probably his biceps, then a leg. He was dreaming. I felt every flex. The shake of his head.

Then he muttered. “No.” His shoulder banged into mine and his whole body went tense. “Fuck off, Tristan.”

He was dreaming about his brother.

What was Tristan doing here anyway? Seamus had told me several times that he kept an eye out for his family but had never seen them. He was certainly shocked yesterday.

Why did the Plane think it was important for me to know about it? The Plane never made sense to me, but especially when the warning seemed to do no good. We were in the right place at the right time, and Seamus now knew his brother was here, but that was it. Whatever I'd been running from in the dream hadn't materialized.

Or had it?

The thought sent a shiver down my spine just as Seamus gasped, rolled over, and threw his arm over me, hauling me tight against him.

We were snuggling.

Then he rubbed his nose along my throat and took in a long, deep breath. "Babe." His whole body relaxed, and then he started lightly snoring again.

Holy shit. Seamus was wrapped around me, holding me tight, and he called me *babe*. I had no doubt in my mind he knew it was me. I *felt* his awareness. I always did when we were close. It was almost as if I could feel what he felt. It was never that way with anyone else. Just him.

So I knew he knew I was in his arms, even if he thought it was a dream. He was happy. Content to hold me. Whatever he thought was happening in his unconscious state, it made him happy.

*I made him happy.*

My gut twisted with regret and confusion.

His arm tightened around me. "Sleep, babe. Sleep." He kept snoring.

It felt wrong to listen to him talking in his sleep. Like I was eavesdropping. These were confessions I shouldn't know.

But I did know.

All this time I'd been fighting Seamus, but really, I'd been fighting myself. He wanted me. He *obviously* wanted me, if the thing digging into my back was any indication. He wasn't some cold asshole who wanted a prize.

He wanted *me*. Like this. In his bed. Loving him the way  
Tristan and his parents never could.

Unconditionally.

I was such an asshole.

## CHAPTER 9



Seamus

I stared at the back of her head for ten solid minutes, too afraid to move and discover this was a nightmare instead of a dream. Sometime in my sleep I'd taken what I really wanted.

I was wrapped around Florence.

She was asleep in my arms. Her soft pants of breath danced along my forearm. Her hair spilled against my chest. My legs were molded to the backs of hers. Then there was the very hard, very present problem throbbing between us. I needed to move and tame the damn beast, but the last thing I wanted to do was let this end.

We could have this. All the time. Every night and every morning.

It was my new goal. Not that it hadn't been for the last three years, but the goal posts shifted depending on whether she was speaking to me. Sometimes that was the only goal—sentences without anger.

But this? This was the ultimate goal.

My dick saluted this idea, so I carefully peeled myself away before she felt how much I wanted her and started World War Three. After a few adjustments and deep breaths, I slipped out the door, stopping to pet the head of the dog who'd followed us home last night. The shaggy scamp agreed to stand watch and I told him to keep it up until I got back.



There were dozens of dogs, cats, ferrets, and other various small vermin living down here. Most kept to the shadows like I did. I was aware of them all, and pulled on that resource as I moved about the Underground. To the samhain here they were mostly just animals. Something to ignore. A few were pets. Others were entertainment. Some just tagged along for the ride as animals had always done since the beginning of time.

But for me it was an advantage. I felt when they were wary, when they were excited, when they ran for their lives. Dogs, in particular, were useful since they were quite intelligent, understood emotions, and had a strong sense of loyalty. The scamp by the door would let me know if anything went wrong.

It only took me ten minutes to track down coffee and blood souffles. A *real* blood souffle. Ever since they started letting humans sniff around, they'd been adding more human friendly fare to the offerings. The human-safe version was disgusting and didn't contain any fresh samhain blood.

Gross.

So I had a real one for me and a human one for Florence, since she was still on a blood-free diet. That irked me. No, it pissed me off. The only reason she hadn't jumped into her samhain life with both feet was because of me. She could blame it on a lot of reasons, but at the end of the day, this endless feud between us was the reason she lived with one foot out in the human world.

Shoshanna's death was a waste of a life, but I would get some good out of it. One way or another, this time I spent with my Firecracker would end with her happiness.

I broke off a piece of my breakfast and offered it up to Scamp. He rewarded me by staying put outside the door.

Florence was still asleep, so I was quiet as I found a spot against the wall and started eating. She hadn't changed much since the day we met. Her hair was longer, which I strangely realized I liked. It was strange because I couldn't remember ever having an opinion on a woman's hair length before. But

with Florence, that was more to move my fingers through, more to wrap around my fist.

Not helping.

I ignored her hair and studied her face. Asleep I could see just how tired she was. The dark circles under her eyes looked permanent. And the way she frowned in her sleep? Unacceptable.

And then chocolate brown eyes were staring back at me, blinking with surprise. My heart skipped a beat at the same time my dick twitched back to life.

“Mornin’.” I held up my coffee.

She shivered even though I had my jacket tucked all around her. A momentary feeling of cold and loneliness hit me before she banked it down and sat up.

Was it too much to hope that meant she missed having me wrapped around her?

I was an asshole. “Coffee?”

“Thanks.”

I handed over her half of the breakfast, then retreated to my spot, giving her space.

“How long have you been up?” She glanced at me as she unwrapped the food.

“Just long enough to get us this.” I took a huge bite of my souffle to keep from saying more.

“Anything different out there?”

Were there squads of samhain on the hunt for a missing Head of House? “Not that I can tell. But today we explore the rest of the Underground and you’re going to show me where you got topside.”

She nodded, absentmindedly running her fingers through her hair, combing the straw from it, then began braiding it down one side. “I didn’t dream. At all.”

“Isn’t that good?”

She shrugged. “I guess I was hoping for a sign.” She stood, dangling my jacket in front of me.

“Keep it.”

“But it’s yours.’

I shrugged. “And you’re cold. Drink your coffee and warm up.”

She hesitated.

“Put it on, Florence. You’re not any good to me if you’re cold and uncomfortable.”

Besides, I got more than a little satisfaction seeing it draped around her. She hummed as she ate the food and quickly sucked down the coffee while it was hot. I tried not to stare or appear too pleased when I caught her looking at me.

“You’re different,” she said suddenly. Her eyes were unfocused. Distant. Like her thoughts were far from here.

That’s when I realized the wall she usually kept up between us was gone. That was a good sign. A damn good sign.

“I am?” I finished off the souffle, feeling the extra energy from the blood flood my veins. Yeah, I wouldn’t be needing my jacket any time soon. “How?” I certainly didn’t feel different. Something shifted yesterday and the constant energy that flowed between us had mellowed, thank fuck, but that was all I’d noticed.

Her gaze was steady and assessing as it moved over me before meeting mine, hitting me like a punch to the gut. “You’re comfortable here.”

“And that’s different?” I’d spent a lot of time in the Underground. Sure the locations changed and my jobs varied, but the Underground was the Underground. I was the same here as I was anywhere else.

She nodded ever so slightly. “Yeah. It is.” She seemed sad about that, which confused the hell out of me.

I tried a different tactic. “Where am I *not* comfortable?” I glanced around at our decidedly *not* comfortable surroundings. “Other than sitting on this cold ground.”

“Everywhere else,” she whispered. Then she swallowed and her voice came out stronger. “The moment we stepped foot here, it’s like you switched into a different gear. You’re confident, focused, sure.”

And I wasn’t those things all the time? That...hurt.

“Shit, that came out wrong.” She crumpled the wrapper in her hand and looked around for somewhere to toss it before she dropped it in her empty coffee cup. She seemed frustrated that she couldn’t say what she meant to say. “You’re always confident and focused. Always strong. But here...it’s on another level.”

I appreciated the clarification, but it wasn’t what she meant. “Spit it out, Florence. You can’t hurt me.”

Her lips twisted. “I shouldn’t have said anything. The coffee hasn’t kicked in yet. I rambled. Forget about it.”

“Nope. I want to know what you see.” *Because you’ve always seen me in a way no one else has.*

She chewed that lower lip, shook her head, and sighed, her gaze meeting mine, making my whole world come to a standstill. “At the House of Wren you act like a guest, even though you’re part of the family. At the Shadow you defer to Kirk or Vic. Like you aren’t an equal part of the equation. But here you’re comfortable.”

“Because I belong here.” Trash always flowed to the same place. Of course I was comfortable in the Underground. It’s where people like me were supposed to disappear to. That hurt a hell of a lot more than I expected. Not because I didn’t think it myself sometimes, but because it was Florence.

“No,” she said firmly. Almost angrily. “You *don’t* belong here. But here you don’t assume you’re second best. You don’t feel like a charity case.”

*Fuck.* She might as well have blown a hole in my chest. It hurt that much and pretty much destroyed me in the process.

Normally I would have gotten angry. Eviscerated whichever asshole came at me with shit like that.

But this was Florence and she came with the truth.

“You’re not second,” she whispered again, hugging my coat around her. “You’re not second anywhere, but you’re so convinced you are that you refuse to see reality. I wish the version of you I’m seeing right now was the version you took with you everywhere.”

I blinked. Then I blinked some more. She wasn’t wrong. I would always feel indebted to my Wren cousins for stepping in and giving me a home when my parents rode off without me. It was hard to feel an equal part of a family when you came to them with your hat in your hand and nothing to your name.

But Kirk and Vic? Did I think I was second or third in that relationship?

Maybe what she saw was my disdain for authority. Leadership wasn’t something I wanted or craved. When I was alone it was just me to take care of. My decisions, my rules. I was good with that. Preferred it most of the time. It was my default when I was here.

“I’m not like them. Vic and Kirk, I mean.”

“I know.” She shot me a half smile.

What did that mean? “Do you wish I was more like them?” Fuck, I hoped not. I could never be as conniving as Kirk or as altruistic as Vic.

“I like you just the way you are. Brutally honest, rough around the edges, and full of swear words.”

Wait...what was happening? Those were compliments if I wasn’t mistaken. “Florence?”

She opened her mouth to say something else when Scamp let out a warning bark. Florence shot to her feet. “What was that?” Her surprise hit me in the chest right along with the burst of adrenaline that flooded her system.

I held out my hand. “My security system. We need to move.” Whatever was coming our way put the dog on alert, which meant I didn’t want us anywhere near it.

Her eyes went wide and she scrambled to her feet, taking my hand without question, letting me blink us somewhere safer. I chose the shadows near one of the main fighting octagons. There wouldn’t be any fights for a few more hours, so it was relatively quiet.

For the first time in forever she didn’t pull her hand out of mine. “There are dogs down here?”

“You’d be surprised.” I wanted to squeeze my fingers, stroke my thumb over the back of her hand, but I settled for contact until I knew what had changed.

“Why don’t you have a dog? You know, as a pet?”

I finished scanning the area. “Who says I don’t?”

“You don’t though.” She puzzled through the data. Data I purposely avoided sharing with anyone. “But you always have an animal or two following you around. You always know when one is coming near.”

I turned back to her curious eyes. “There a question in there?” Maybe if we’d spent more time together she would have figured this out years ago. Maybe I would have told her instead of hoping she never noticed.

My secret was about to come out and I wasn’t sure what she was going to think about it. Especially as it pertained to her.

“Are you the real Doctor Doolittle?” she teased. Her eyes *danced*.

Fucking hell, she was *teasing* me? Whatever happened last night while we were sleeping was a damn miracle.

I fought back a smile. “Doctor Who?” I played on the word, making a joke.

She scowled. “No, that’s an entirely different doctor.”

I broke the first rule of hiding in the shadows: I busted out laughing. “I forgot how dry your humor can be.”

“And I forgot how you like to play dumb for laughs.” She smiled wide.

It lit me up and knocked down my defenses enough to share something I never shared with anyone. “No, I’m not Doctor Doolittle. But I have my own special connection to most animals. I can sense them, feel what they feel, like my own little spy network.”

She blew right past my secret and got into the weeds. “Then why don’t you have a dog? That seems...natural?”

I blinked. I just told her something only about four people on the planet knew—if my parents were still alive anyway—and she didn’t even pause. It was like it was no big deal at all.

Seamus talks to animals. Totally normal.

Except it wasn’t. It was a rare gift. So rare that my parents saw it as an ideal way to exploit me.

Which was why I never voluntarily told anyone what I could do.

But Florence didn’t give a fuck. Why would she? She wasn’t here because of what she could get from me. Well, not like *that*. Needing my help was an entirely different ballgame. My being here was voluntary and welcomed.

“I don’t have a dog because I won’t own an animal. They want to hang with me? Cool. They can stay as long as they want. An hour, a day, a year. Whatever. But that’s their choice.” Scamp found me. He’d find me again. I could feel him sniffing around, trying to figure out where we went. He was the kind of dog who’d stick around for a long while.

“Oh. I didn’t realize.”

“It’s okay. It’s not something a lot of people think about.” I wanted to hold her so I did. And, even bigger shocker, she let me. “I should explain some things.”

She moved to look up at me, but I kept her firmly against me. I didn’t want her looking at me when I told her I could

feel her emotions. There was a very good chance she'd hate me all over again, and if that was the case, I'd rather not have the memory of her face crumpling.

“About how you can talk to animals?” she joked.

Joking was good. “I can't talk to them. I feel them.” I gulped, ready to lay it out there.

But then she went rigid as stone and her fight or flight instincts turned on full blast. I banded my arms around her out of instinct and looked up, searching for whatever had just scared her.

Standing just a few feet away was my brother. And he was staring right at us.



## CHAPTER 10



Fig

My arms tightened around Seamus instinctively. Like I could somehow protect him from Tristan. Not that he needed protecting. Physically Seamus could take care of himself and a small army.

It was his heart that needed shielding.

He kissed the top of my head and placed his hands on my arms. “Firecracker? I’ve got this.”

I very reluctantly released him, but never once looked away from his brother. I was afraid if I did, the nonexistent shield I was holding up would disappear. Silly, but true.

Luckily Seamus had no intention of letting me go. He simply turned us to face Tristan, my body flush against his side, and his arm protectively around my shoulders. It felt natural to stand tucked into his side. Like I belonged there.

Normally a thought like that would send me running. But I couldn’t do that with Tristan a few feet away. For once, I had a reason to stay, and I was fascinated to find out what that felt like.

Tristan might be Seamus’ brother, but the two men were cut from very different cloths. Seamus was warm and honest. Brutally, annoyingly honest. Tristan was smooth. He hadn’t said a word and I already knew he would say pretty things to go along with his pretty smiles. I could feel it.

“It’s been a long time.” Seamus’s voice was cold. A far cry from the warmth of his arm around me.

“It’s really you?” Tristan looked a lot like Seamus. They had the same sandy hair and giant size, but where Seamus had long hair, Tristan had it cut short. Finger-length. And no beard. Just scruff. Like yesterday he wore a longer black coat, black button-down, and black pants. He had the whole evil villain vibe going, which didn’t match with the hopeful expression on his face.

I didn’t trust my eyes. Not one bit.

“It’s really me. You haven’t changed a whole lot.” Seamus vibrated beside me. I kept my arm around his waist, looped into his jeans, hoping it helped anchor him here with me and not in the past.

“You’ve changed,” Tristan shook his head in disbelief. “Fuck, you’ve grown up!” He held out his arms like he wanted to close the distance and give his long-lost brother a hug.

Seamus didn’t return the gesture.

So Tristan dropped his arms and cut a glance to me. “I’m sorry for being so rude.” He touched his right hand to his heart and bowed. “Forgive me. Allow me to introduce myself. I am Tristan of the House of Wren, brother of Seamus.”

I nodded, not returning the House identification. I could blame it on my humanness or my lack of manners, but really, I just wanted to be as blunt and rude as possible. “I’ve heard a lot about you.” *Yeah, buddy. I know who you are. You can’t play pretend here.*

Tristan’s gaze dimmed and he looked down. “I take it you’re close to my brother?”

“Don’t talk to her,” Seamus cut in. “You haven’t earned that right.” His arm tightened around me and his hips angled ever so slightly. A protective move, ready to put his body in front of mine.

My stupid little heart soared.

Tristan's shoulders slumped even more. "You're right. You're absolutely right." I almost believed he felt some remorse for leaving Seamus alone. Almost. But there was a twitch of the shoulders that masked the same twitch on his face. *Liar*: "Can we go somewhere? Talk?"

Seamus barely contained his rage. "Talk here. Talk now. Why don't you start with what the fuck you're doing here."

He shot Seamus a wry smile. "I could ask you the same thing." He glanced around the still empty fighting rings before stepping into the shadows with us.

Seamus didn't take the bait. Instead of responding, he stared. And not just any stare. The cold, deadly stare of an experienced shadow dealer. I sent up a prayer of thanks that this look would never be sent my way because it was terrifying.

Tristan hesitated, a dozen questions crossing unasked across his face. It was weird how much he looked like Seamus but how little I found him attractive. Finally he sighed, giving in. "I've been hired to set up an experience for humans. You?"

"Are you *fucking* kidding me?" Seamus snarled. "Bringing humans down here will only lead to one thing: disaster."

Tristan shrugged like it was no big deal. "It's not my call. I could quit, but someone else would do it instead of me." He stole another glance my way. His curiosity was slowly getting the better of him.

Seamus ignored his glances entirely. "Where have you been?"

Another easy shrug. Too easy. Too casual. "Everywhere. Nowhere. For a while I was in the Black Forest. Then I went south. I've been a nomad since..."

"Since Mom and Dad split and you left me behind?" And there it was.

Tristan stood still as a statue, then nodded once.

"Fuck you."

Tristan visibly flinched. “I deserve that. I was the big brother. I should have been there for you, but it wasn’t exactly easy to become the de facto parent when I was barely of Age.” He shrugged. “I was young and stupid. I followed a guy I thought would make my life better. When that didn’t work out, I followed whatever woman would have me in her bed for a time.”

“And you never bothered to wonder what happened to me?” His voice sounded the same, but there was an undercurrent to it. I didn’t think Tristan would notice the difference because it was subtle, but I did.

I put my free hand on his stomach, trying to stem the anger that was boiling up inside him. Tristan’s gaze dropped to it and widened. “How long have you been together?”

“Not your business,” Seamus snapped at the same time I—for reasons I didn’t understand—said, “Three years.”

Seamus’s gaze whipped to mine, wide and confused. I shrugged. “It’s true.” It felt important to present a united front to Tristan. I wasn’t sure what I wanted from Seamus as we picked our way forward, but I knew his brother needed to believe Seamus was loved and protected. Tristan was saying all the right things but I didn’t believe for one second that his words were genuine. He was simply saying what he knew he needed to say to get the response he desired.

But I suspected there was one problem with Tristan’s plan: Seamus didn’t need him. Tristan was banking on Seamus being at least a little grateful to see his big brother after all these years. He was hoping to use the emotional tie to manipulate him.

Seamus was not one to be manipulated. Or tricked. But he was upset, so it was my job to help him keep that under control until we knew what Tristan was really up to. I would protect Seamus at all costs, even if it meant acknowledging our three years were a little more emotionally entangled than I’d like to admit. It didn’t matter what it cost me.

*Just like it didn’t matter what it cost Seamus to protect me.* The realization hit me like lightning from the sky. I would

have smacked my forehead if we weren't in the middle of a standoff worthy of a soap opera. Three years ago I couldn't understand that when you care about someone, you protect them. Not because they can't take care of themselves, but because they deserve to be safe and loved. That the very thought of them being hurt causes pain. I pushed Seamus away because I refused to be controlled. Now I understood the difference. I was *living* the difference.

Seamus and I were a textbook example of right idea, wrong time and place. It took three years for him to understand the pain he caused me, and three years for me to trust his need to protect me.

Three years too late? Maybe. We'd done a lot of damage over the years.

"Right," Tristan murmured, glancing between us. "Maybe we could have dinner sometime?"

Seamus stared some more before nodding. "Next time."

"I'll hold you to it." He held out his hand.

Seamus kissed the top of my head again, then unwound his arm from my shoulders. "Give me a second, Firecracker." He moved me behind him.

Seamus hadn't said my name once. Like he didn't want Tristan to know it. It gave me a small sense of relief. My relief multiplied when Seamus shook his brother's hand and said goodbye without ripping his head off or laying him out flat. He watched his brother leave until he was completely out of sight, and then still didn't move until I gently placed my hand on the small of his back. It was solid and warm and my fingers itched to slide under his shirt to feel his skin.

The things this man did to me, even in the strangest of circumstances. It baffled me.

Always had.

He turned, his eyes softening now that his brother was gone. "Three years, huh? Seems we have something to talk about."

*“That’s the first thing out of your mouth?”*

He half-smiled and shrugged the same shoulder. “Clarifying our non-relationship status feels safer than processing whatever the hell just happened.”

Safer for him, maybe. My usual flight response kicked in, but I banked it down. I couldn’t run from this. Not when we had so much to deal with that was a lot more important than whether our attraction to each other was something that could be tamed. “I didn’t like the vibe I got from him.” It was safe to start with that because it was true.

I was glad that his eyes continued to soften back to that honey color he usually reserved for me, even though his jaw flexed a few times with frustration. “Yeah, something doesn’t add up there.” He picked up the end of my braid and twirled it between his fingers. “I’d love to hear your impression.”

“Why?” It always caught me off guard how easily he trusted my gifts when no one else ever did.

His gaze remained focused on my hair in his fingers. “Because you have good instincts, Florence. Now out with it.”

Normally I’d let an insult fly. Any verbal assault that put distance between us would do. I bit my tongue before replying. “Almost nothing he said was genuine. It was all crafted to get a response from you.”

“Why?” He flipped my hair in the opposite direction.

“I think he was hoping you’d be grateful to see him again. To have him back. Maybe he’s just an asshole who likes the attention, but I don’t think so.”

A smile barely ghosted his lips as his gaze drifted up to meet mine. “Guess asshole is a family trait.”

“That’s a very different kind of asshole.”

“Oh really?” The smile reached his eyes.

“He’s an asshole to get what he wants. You’re an asshole to piss me off.”

“Same difference.” His smile widened and his eyes glinted just a little.

I melted, but only on the inside where he couldn't see me swooning over the implication he wanted me. “I don't trust him.”

The smile disappeared. “Neither do I.” He twirled my braid one more time before he let it drop. “Why did you tell him we were together?”

“I don't know.” I didn't. Not fully. “It was just a gut reaction.”

That earned me a cocked eyebrow. “I'm going to need more, princess. You've kicked and screamed your way away from me for three years. Completely avoiding me for the last two, then my brother shows up and all of a sudden we're a couple?”

Did it make sense? Nope. But nothing about us ever had. My panic led me to fight, and all we'd done since was argue, insult, and ignore. And yet here we were, still vibrating off each other.

“We're not nothing,” I said softly, carefully. “And when I looked at your brother, I saw a man I didn't trust.” Could he hear all the things I didn't say? It was the closest I'd ever come to admitting I cared about him—cared enough that I dropped my armor.

His gaze flared and his hand came up, ghosting my cheek. When I didn't jerk away he tentatively caressed it, his thumb gliding along my cheek. “We're not nothing?” His eyebrows rose in question. “Care to elaborate?”

I felt his hope and wished didn't mirror my own, but it did. I hoped. He hoped. Men didn't wait around three years hoping. At least not the kind I was used to. I took a shaky breath. “Who have you been these last two years?” I'd seen him, of course. At parties and gatherings. There was no avoiding him when the Houses celebrated. He always hung with Kirk, Vic, and Wils. He would drink with Atsila and the bear shifters or play cards with Ender and the wolf shifters, but I never saw

him with a romantic partner of any kind. Not a kiss, not a hand in his, and no slipping off when the blood started flowing.

His thumb grazed my lower lip. "I've been a miserable bastard, haven't you noticed?" He smiled. "You seem to bring out the worst in me, which only makes you madder."

"And the madder I get the more horrible you are." My lips burned in the wake of his touch.

"Vicious cycle."

It should be our mantra.

"But, to answer your real question, Florence," he cupped my cheek, his fingers threading in my hair, and tilting my face to his, "It's fucking impossible to look at another woman when I've already tasted what I want."

I gulped and my heart took off like it was being chased by monsters. "Seamus."

"Florence." His eyes narrowed on my lips. "I'm not going to kiss you."

Wait...what? Then why was he so close? Staring at my lips? I was pretty damn sure I could feel his arousal. "Why not?" He wanted it. I wanted it.

Didn't I?

"No, I'm not," he whispered, but coming from Seamus it was still a growly, vibrating shout. "Not until you kiss me. Because Florence, you have to be sure. The next time I taste you, you're mine. I won't let you walk away like last time. I *will* fight for you."

And a fighting Seamus was something to behold. I knew the version I'd gotten so far was the tame version. The one that was confused by my refusal, the one that decided to give me the space I demanded.

That version hung by a thread. I could see the desperation in his eyes. He was at his limit. Ready to snap.

I took his warning as seriously as he meant it. When I kissed him, I had to be sure. But even more importantly, I had



to be *ready*.

## CHAPTER 11



Fig

“This place is enormous,” Seamus muttered. We resumed exploring the Underground, moving from place to place as Seamus deemed necessary.

“Is that a good thing or a bad thing?”

“It’s a confusing thing. It’s one thing for the Argo to allow this place to exist, but it’s another thing to sanction something of this scale, right below one of their most valuable assets. I’m honestly baffled.”

“Rever is too. When Shoshanna looked the other way, he got pissed. Do you think that’s connected somehow? Shoshanna knew about this place, and then she’s murdered topside?” Goosebumps raced over my skin and a shiver raced down my spine.

Seamus turned. “You just felt something.”

“It was just a shiver.” I got them all the time.

His gaze swept over me as his body loomed closer than was strictly necessary. “No, darlin’. It wasn’t. It was your body warning you.”

I ran my hands over the bumps, trying to warm them away, but they were persistent suckers. “Warning me of what?” Why wouldn’t they go away? Maybe I was standing in a draft. I took a step closer to Seamus hoping his giant size would block it.

“Warning you that you’re close to danger.”

My heart skipped a beat. If he meant physical danger then he'd be all fists and growls, ready to defend me, but instead he just gazed down at me with those honey-brown eyes that made me melt. "What does that mean?" I asked, softer, somehow knowing I wasn't going to like what he said next.

And to seal the deal, he wrapped those big hands of his around my biceps, lowering his forehead to mine. It was so tender, so gentle, that it made my insides flip. His voice vibrated over me as he spoke. "Danger can be something close by, or it can be a thought in that brilliant mind of yours."

*Brilliant?* I was starting to wish I could see myself from his perspective, because he sure as hell saw a different version of me than anyone else.

If the warning wasn't for something close by then it must have been something I thought. I was talking about Shoshanna's murder when the shivers started. "So there is a connection. Between Shoshanna and this place." More goosebumps.

*Bingo.* But why was that dangerous?

Seamus ran his hands up and down my arms, trying to soothe me. "Seems so."

"Or maybe I'm just cold."

"If I thought you were cold I would have wrapped you back up in my jacket by now."

Could he be right? "I dream, Seamus. That's it. That's my gift." I was reminded frequently that training me was pointless. There was nothing to train. I was barely samhain.

He shook his head, moving mine along with it. "You are so much more than a dreamer."

My stomach sank. He was wrong. Seamus wanted me, and to truly matchup to a male of his size and power would require a lot more than I would ever have. He had to be looking for gifts in everything, hoping I would somehow magically become samhain enough to keep up with him.

That's why he had faith in me. It was blind faith that wouldn't be rewarded. It all made so much sense now.

I looked up, my eyes unfocused because he was too close. "Trust me. I don't have any other gifts." I was a mostly human samhain wannabe with a mild talent for dreaming.

If I didn't know better, I'd think Seamus had a gift for controlling the weather because I swear the room dropped twenty degrees as he brought himself up to his full height, hands still wrapped around my arms, a storm of fury brewing in his eyes. "If you hadn't hidden yourself away with those elitist assholes you'd realize that you have several gifts *and* you'd know how to use them."

He was so wrong. "Those elitist assholes tested me. I'm very sure that my gifts are relegated to unconscious revelations from the Plane." And goosebumps were just goosebumps.

"Fucking unbelievable." His hands dropped away. "What happened in your life that makes you so happy to believe shitty things and not good things?"

"I do believe I have already answered that question." My temper shot up just like it always did with Seamus.

"We're not doing this here," he growled, putting a hand on my shoulder and blinking us away to a dark corner I didn't recognize. A hallway stretched to the left and an empty room to the right.

"Stop taking me places without my permission!" I jerked out of his grasp and glared. The man was sexy, but he was a brute through and through, always taking me places or deciding things for me.

Wishing I had gifts I didn't have.

"Listen to me, then!" He threw his hands in the air. "You like to do nice things for people, right?"

I nodded, completely confused.

"And you just so happen to have this uncanny ability to know exactly when you're needed?"

I nodded even slower as I followed his train of thought.

“Wils says you have a knack for bringing people cookies when they’re sad, or showing up to help out when they’re having a bad day. Shit like that.”

“So?” I felt way too exposed for some reason. How much did Wils talk about me when I wasn’t around?

“So that’s a gift, Florence! You don’t have uncanny timing. You *know*.”

Wait...The world around me closed in as his words hit home. I thought back over the years. The times I had an overwhelming urge to bake cookies and give them to someone who just so happened to be having a terrible time. Or when I asked—out of the blue—if I could help and it turned out that person had just had a babysitter cancel or a dog walker bail. Even in the last three years living with the samhain, I happened to have been out picking flowers and accidentally collected the exact herb Navia needed. Or that time I found Lou crying over the stress of raising Tymothy.

“I know?”

He sighed. “You know. And it’s not your only gift. Those goosebumps? That was your body reacting to what your subconscious already knows.”

Another shiver raced down my spine, this time because of Seamus. “How can you possibly know all this? We’ve barely even seen each other in two years.”

“Because I know *you!*” He shouted, raking his hands through his hair in frustration. “Fuck, Florence. I knew more about you in a week than I know about Vic right now. I know you because I was *there*. I saw it all when you were too overwhelmed to see it for yourself. So yeah, I trust those shivers down your spine. I trust them a hell of a lot more than I trust that House you’ve been living in. You know, the one that looked the other way when Rever told them this place existed? The one pushing you away from your gifts at the same time Shoshanna was walking down the path to her death. What makes more sense to you?” He threw out his hands. “That you have no gifts? Awfully convenient, right? Considering you’re the only one who knew what was about to happen?”

More shivers raced over my skin, down my arms and legs, feeding back up my spine until my whole body shook. I tried to wrap myself up and stop it, but it was too much.

“Fuck,” Seamus swore, crossing the distance in two strides, folding me up in his arms. He rubbed my back, but it was the wall of heat that was him that finally seeped into my shaking bones. “I’m sorry. I just wanted to get through to you.”

“You really think they’ve been brainwashing me?” His scent invaded my nose. Mint and soap mixed with hay. I wanted to lay my head against his chest and burrow closer.

“I don’t know if it was brainwashing, but they sure as shit weren’t in your corner. I don’t like the way this is adding up.”

Neither did I. I let my fingers tangle in the soft cotton of his shirt. Just like those nights at the cottage. When I’d wake up from yet another nightmare and he’d be there.

That niggling feeling I’d had was right—I wasn’t safe anywhere. I was a loose end. A problem. Thank goodness I’d followed my instincts and gotten the hell out of that House when I did. “I’m really glad you didn’t use my name earlier.”

His hands stilled. That’s when I realized how hard he was breathing. I looked up and sucked in a breath. His face was granite, etched with hard lines of worry, his eyes darkening by the second. “He didn’t deserve your name. The less people who know where you are, the better.”

If my own House thought I might be a liability...

He took my face in his hands. “I’ll never put you in danger if I can help it. I hate that you’re here but I’m starting to think you were right. You’re not safe anywhere.”

“What do we do?” We had no clues, no direction.

“We’re going to catch the killer. That’s what we’re going to do.”

“We haven’t learned anything.” His lips were so close. Was it really a terrible thing to be wanted so desperately by a

man that he was willing to fight like hell for you? All I had to do was press up on my toes...

“We’ve learned a lot, actually. If we can’t go topside, then we’ll go home. We’ll figure it out from there.”

*Home?* I didn’t have a home. “Why are you so calm right now?”

“Because you’re letting me hold you. I’m always calmer when you’re in my arms, Florence.”

Why did I have to like the way he said my name so much? Could things really be like this between us all the time? No names, no tempers. Just...chemistry. I didn’t kiss him earlier because I refused to let my body make decisions, but I was starting to think my body was a lot smarter than my head.

What had my head done for me lately? Gotten me stuck in a House that hated me or, possibly, wanted me dead. No friends, no family, no home. Missed my best friends and I was most definitely tired of managing my feelings for the man who only wanted to protect me.

It was time to put my head on the bench and let a different part of me lead the way. I licked my lips. “Seamus.”

He swallowed hard, cocking an eyebrow. “Last warning, Firecracker.”

“I don’t need any more warnings.” I tightened my grip on his shirt, feeling his muscles flex and bunch at the contact—

My hair blew back as light burst to my left. A portal opened and a dark figure stepped through.

“About fucking time you two got your shit together,” Rever growled.

Seamus’s arms banded around me as we turned towards the sudden interruption. “Revenge,” he growled. I felt his disappointment rolling off him in waves. If Rever had just waited another minute...

The former Gatlin Guardsman glanced back and forth between us, rolling his eyes. “You want to go top side, now is

your chance. We have about thirty seconds before I have to close this.”

A chance to show Seamus the scene of the crime and possibly get some answers? “We should go.”

Seamus gave me a squeeze, his eyes locked with mine. “You want this?”

Did he mean the kiss or the opportunity? It didn’t matter. My answer was the same, for better or worse. “Yes.”

He nodded once, his eyes dropping to my lips. “Then let’s go.”



## CHAPTER 12



Fig

The Cottage

Three Years Ago

Rhiannon of the House of Gatlin, aka Rain, was really, really nice. So was Kris. My current misery didn't have anything to do with their personalities or their kindness. I was just sick of being locked up. No, it was more than that. Spending all those months in the Shadow and now being asked to stay inside this lovely cottage were inconveniences. I was restless because ever since Wils and I climbed through that secret entrance everything that had been my life was gone. I didn't know who I was anymore. I was untethered. I couldn't call my mom, couldn't help her pick up after yet another husband didn't last. I didn't have a bed that was my own, let alone a place to call home.

I felt like I was living on a sandbar, my head just above water, at the mercy of the tides, one wave after another threatening to drown me.

It, quite frankly, sucked.

I sat at the dining room table snapping the ends off green beans. Rain danced around the kitchen as she assembled dinner. Kris was checking the perimeter to make sure we were safe. Seamus was in bed, getting some sleep before he took the night shift. It had only been twenty-four hours.

"You sure there's nothing else we can do to make you more comfortable?" Rain asked again.

My first night had been marked with the most vivid dream yet, which hadn't made for a great night, but it wasn't the bed's fault. "Nope. The mattress is lovely. I have plenty of pillows and blankets. I don't need a thing."

Rain chuckled. "Except freedom, your best friend safe, and a plan for the future?"

I laughed too. "Yeah, I could use all of that."

"You don't have to pretend with us. We're familiar with the push and pull of wanting what you can't have and the call of Destiny."

"But now you're on the other side. How is it?" Rain's life had been upended by the Convergence. Well, more than most. I grabbed another handful of beans and took some enjoyment in the sound of a good *snap*.

"I have a feeling we're not quite out of the woods yet." She shot me a meaningful look. "But it's better. I never thought I'd have a home." She smiled lovingly at the quaint cottage. "Or a mate. And yet here I am, happy as can be. Well, except for the new potential threat of world-ending disaster that seems to follow us everywhere."

"It's not fair." I snapped the last bean and took them to the sink for a final rinse.

"The universe isn't about fairness. It seeks balance, but usually fails at that too. Actually it's more about destruction and creation. Fairness isn't part of that."

"Then what's the point of anything? Why try to be good or bad? Why wake up in the morning and put one foot in front of the other?"

Rain began pulling down a completely different set of ingredients. Flour, sugar, eggs, vanilla, chocolate chips. "Cookies are the point. Hand me that bowl." She pointed to a glass bowl on the shelf beside me.

"Are you pausing dinner to make cookies?" There was something beautifully absurd about this.

"Absolutely."

Mom would never. “Why?”

She smiled like she knew the secret of the universe, like it was right in front of me, but I was too blind to see it. “Because life is beautiful. It’s easy to get trapped under the weight of bad things because I swear to the Plane that bad things weigh ten times as much as good things. So when they happen, they bury you hard and fast if you don’t see it coming and get out of the way. When I see something bad coming, I make cookies.”

“I’m the bad?”

“No. Just your dread. So we’ll head it off now with cookies. But there are plenty of other wonderful, beautiful things in this world worth living for. A kiss.” Her smile turned blissful. “The laugh of a baby. Sunshine on a perfect day. The thrill of falling in love. The first bloom of spring.”

“Snow under a full moon.”

“You’re a winter.” She nodded. “Cookies were definitely the right call then.”

“A winter?” I swear even the most normal things sounded foreign these days.

I watched as she dumped ingredients into the bowl and started mixing. “Your psychic gifts are still new to you, but with some practice you’ll start to see the world a little differently. The psychic channels will seem much more obvious to you. Everyone vibrates on a different frequency. That frequency matches certain things. A color, a sound, or even a season. It’s the specific things that match or harmonize with you, creating perfection. You’re a winter.”

“That makes a surprising amount of sense.”

“I think this will all come to you rather quickly. You’re a natural, Fig.”

I wasn’t so sure about that. But I was open to it all.

“You and Seamus harmonize.”

I froze with my finger in the batter, stealing a taste. “Excuse me?”

“You harmonize. He’s a perfect match for you.”

The sugar dissolved on my tongue and turned sour. “I’m not looking for anything like that. I don’t think I ever will.” Men were just too much trouble. Not worth it. I didn’t know what I was thinking kissing him.

Rain frowned as she began forming balls, placing them on the parchment paper and flattening them. She didn’t say another word.

“What?” I knew she could hear my thoughts if she wanted to. She made it very clear that she never, ever tried to do that, but sometimes it would happen if I had a particularly strong thought.

And, yeah, I had strong thoughts about Seamus.

“I’m just concentrating.” She focused harder than ever on the cookies.

“So you don’t hear my thoughts?”

“Yep. I—I heard that part about men. And kissing.” She blushed crimson. “I’m really sorry.”

It was super weird, but in an equally weird way, understandable. My whole life was so weird. “You warned me.”

She cringed. “Still.”

“Well, you heard it, might as well say whatever it is you want. We can’t pretend you *didn’t* hear it.” And it wasn’t like I’d be talking these confusing thoughts and feelings out with Wils any time soon.

“Your experiences are your own, Fig. If you don’t trust people, it’s because they haven’t been worthy of your trust. I just find it hard to believe Seamus is one of those people.”

“Yeah, well, you and me both. I told him something in confidence and he didn’t treat it with the same level of importance.” I shrugged. “But I’m stuck with him, so I’ll play nice until this is over.”

She nodded once before sliding the cookies into the oven and resuming dinner prep. We silently ate the warm cookies before Kris and Seamus joined us for dinner. I didn't say much as we ate. It felt like someone had opened a faucet and drained all my energy. It didn't help that I felt like I made Rain upset. She faked smiles and barely spoke. When we cleaned up the dirty dishes it looked like she had tears in her eyes.

I wasn't surprised when she begged off to bed early. And because I didn't want to spend time alone with Seamus, I did the same.

All I knew about the cottage was that it belonged to Kris and Rain, that it looked like it belonged in a fairytale, and that I was safe here because of the magic that surrounded it. I was allowed outside all the way to the tree line or the creek. Everything was green and shadowy and perfect. The cottage itself was newly renovated and cute as a button. All the wood was thick with deep grooves and grains. It was all stained dark and mixed with stonework. Downstairs was the living room, kitchen, and Seamus's bedroom. Upstairs were Kris and Rain's room at the end of the hall to the left and mine to the right. I had my own bathroom, which was nice.

I took a long, hot shower, dried my hair, and then, when my eyelids refused to stay up any longer, slid into bed and crossed my fingers that tonight's dreams would be a lot easier to handle than the night before.



I RAN TO A STONE MONUMENT. OR WAS IT A STATUE? Whatever it was, it was definitely made of stone. Hard and cold. It had been hidden under vines before I ripped them free. But the urgent need coursing through my veins didn't slow. My heart pounded in my ears and my feet began moving again. Through the forest, over fallen logs and across a stream, to another stone. This one was tall and smooth but made of the same material. I found five more, each one different than the others, and only then did the panic subside. I'd found them. All of them.

Now what?

Blood poured from my hands creating a river that flowed to each stone, connecting them. It was beautiful, horrific, and macabre.

It was death.

I sat up in my bed gasping for air. It wasn't real. It was a dream. My window was open so I should be freezing, but instead I was soaked in sweat. I ripped off my night clothes and stepped right back into the shower, taking a nice cold one this time. It took ten minutes for my body to stop sweating.

After I got dressed in fresh clothes my stomach growled.

Of course it did.

Maybe Seamus was outside. He preferred nature to the house. If I was quick, I could probably miss him. I crept silently down the stairs, found leftover bread on the counter and smoothed butter over it before wrapping it all up in a napkin.

No sign of my bodyguard.

Now all I had to do was make it up the stairs and I was home free. I tiptoed out of the kitchen and was halfway to the stairs when he called out. "Nightmare?"

*So close.* I gulped down my disappointment and turned towards the living room where Seamus dwarfed a rocking chair with his hulking frame. He wore his usual flannel, jeans, and boots, and held a book in his hands. A soft light glowed beside him.

He looked good.

Too bad I couldn't trust him.

"Nothing to worry about. I think it was really an actual dream, not a vision." It had to be, right? All my other dreams were about Wils and her toxic sister. About things happening now or soon. The stones and the forest meant nothing to me. Just a dream.

"Hungry?"

I held up my snacks. “I should have eaten more dinner.”

“I noticed you barely ate.”

Of course he noticed. He noticed *everything*. “Yeah, well, the events of the last few days haven’t agreed with my appetite.”

“Sweet dreams, Florence.”

I startled at the use of my full name. He’d done it last night but I thought it was a fluke. It sounded so different coming from Seamus. I always thought of my name as old fashioned. Or maybe even that it belonged to an old lady, not a twenty-three-year-old woman.

Until Seamus said it. Then it sounded...well, it sounded almost sexy. He said it softly, the L rolling on his tongue, his deep timbre doing something magical to it.

“What are you reading?”

He glanced down at his book and smiled. “It’s called *The Churn*.”

For some reason I wanted to know why it made him smile. “I’ve never heard of it. What’s it about?”

He pushed against the floor, rocking his chair. “It’s a short story in a science fiction series I enjoy. *The Expanse*. It’s about a lot of things. Dark things. But my favorite part is the concept that life isn’t one smooth line. There is always chaos. No matter how hard you try, something will come along and upend everything, and you have to find a new way forward.”

“The churn,” I repeated the title, but this time as a concept. “That’s where I am right now, isn’t it?”

He nodded. There was no need for words. We both knew we were in this chaos deep. Maybe that was why I couldn’t let him in. There was too much happening, too much of that chaos. Maybe Seamus was a good guy. Maybe he made a mistake. Or maybe he was chaos too. I couldn’t take the chance. If he was chaos, he would drown me. There would be nothing left when he walked away. I hung by the tiniest thread as it was. One wave was all it would take.

I needed this wall between us. It was all that stood between me and oblivion.

“Have a good night, Seamus.”

“You too, Firecracker.”

The new nickname warmed me a little. I wandered around my room as I ate, peeking out the window at the night sky. Seamus stepped off the porch, his gaze on the trees. He moved to the middle of the clearing just as an animal darted out of the forest. A dog maybe? No, a wolf? But it wasn't big enough to be a wolf. Maybe it was a coyote. Did they have those in the mountains?

Whatever it was, Seamus crouched down and ruffled its fur. They played for a few minutes before he stood up and turned back to the house, his head lifting up to find my window. He stood very still, like he could see me, but he couldn't, could he? It was too dark and I didn't have any lights on. Then his shoulders slumped and he shuffled back to the house while I slipped back into bed.

For the briefest of moments, I let myself wonder what it was like to fall asleep beside someone. My sister and I shared a room for a few years, but that wasn't the same as having a man, a lover, beside you each night. Would the snoring bother me? The movements of another person? Or would I find it comforting?

I pushed the thoughts aside. Why bother wondering? No one would ever share my bed. I would always have this space to myself.

But I couldn't deny that my bed felt colder and lonelier now that I knew what it was like to have Seamus dwarf it. Last night when the nightmares woke me up screaming, he was there. He held me, called me Florence and Firecracker, and banished the dreams with his strong arms and soothing voice.

And hell, I liked it. This bed felt empty with only me in it. Well, me and my endless dreams. They were big enough to fill this room. Knowing more were coming was what kept me



staring at the window. If I didn't sleep, I didn't dream. Simple as that.

I like that I could leave a window open here. Not just because we were hidden under layers of magical protection, but because the weather was so lovely. A breeze picked up the gauzy white curtain and sent it fluttering. The moon began to rise in the sky, bathing the tops of trees in white light. I was Rapunzel trapped in the tower, but at least I had a great view, right?

I didn't notice when sleep took me. Not until the dreams started. Cities burned. My mother screamed. Wils cried out. I saw a tree house, a mountain, a burning cabin. I felt pain so real, so deep, that I thought I would die. It brought me to my knees, crushing my bones under the invisible stress surrounding me, choking me. It was the future, but it was also the past. I didn't understand any of it.

Seven stars blinked down at me from the sky, brighter than all the rest.

I floated and the crushing transformed into something softer. Something warmer. Something rough moved over my cheek and I reached up to brush it away, my fingers tangling in it.

"I've got you," Seamus murmured, yanking me out of the vision.

My eyes flew open, landing first on the open window, the moon now high in the sky, then to my fingers wrapped in his beard. He sat on my bed, holding me in his lap.

A sob escaped me, and I realized my face was wet from crying. Again. I let my head thunk against his solid chest. When would this end? I couldn't cry this much every night, could I? I'd run out of water. I'd dry up and shrivel away like a raisin.

"Doing better?" His voice rumbled through my body even though he barely spoke above a whisper.

"You're really good at this." I wanted to sink into the safety of his chest and hide there until the dreams stopped

coming.

“Full service bodyguard.”

*Full service.* “We protect your body *and* your mind. One stop shop!”

His arms tightened around me. “Florence.”

I gulped. There was my name again. Sex on his tongue. “Yes?”

“How are you really?”

He made me feel like *me*. Not Wils’ best friend. Not one of hundreds of employees at work or students at school. Not the third wheel in this samhain adventure. Just me. *Florence*. “Terrified, exhausted, worried, frustrated. Yeah, that about covers it.” I let the truth spill out. Why not? It wasn’t like the three other people in this house didn’t know it.

His big hand stroked over my hair, down my spine, and then under my hair to my neck, squeezing the tight muscles. “Do you want to talk about it?”

*Yes.* “No.”

He held his breath, then, when I didn’t change my mind, let it out as his whole body slumped in defeat. “I’m still looking for your father.”

And there went my heart, spilling out of my chest. “It was a stupid idea. Finding him won’t help me.” Hell, it would probably just add to the mountain of shit I already had in front of me. Why did I think it was a good idea again?

Oh right. I had a *feeling*.

Seamus growled low in his chest. “It’s not just a feeling, Florence. It’s your gifts telling you what you need to do.”

Had I spoken aloud? “It doesn’t make any sense. Nothing makes any sense any more.”

He tilted me back so we were nose to nose, his dark eyes glinting in the moonlight. “You make sense to me. Now that I know you, I can’t imagine a world without your smart mouth.”

Ah, distraction was the name of the game. If he couldn't comfort me through this, he'd rile me up. I was grateful for his perception. "Are you part giant, Seamus?"

He barked a laugh. "No."

"Bear? Wolf? I saw those guys at Blood Falls. They were all enormous, like you."

"They're all much bigger than me." He shook his head, keeping us close.

"Hardly. They might have an inch on you. *Might.*" Seamus looked good in moonlight. "Is that why Vic designated you as my bodyguard?" For some reason I held my breath, like his answer might be different tonight than it had been the other times I asked him.

"My size is useful," he answered slowly. "And my skills are definitely better suited to guarding you than the fighting skills the others have. But no, that's not why I'm here. You know that."

Why did I need to hear it? Because it was more than duty and responsibility. If Vic were my bodyguard, he wouldn't be sitting in my bed holding me the way Seamus was. It was about trust.

It always came back to trust for me, didn't it?

"Why are you in my room?"

"Because hearing you scream scares the fuck out of me," he said as easily as he took his next breath. "Because I want to be the one that holds you until you stop trembling. But mostly, because I will take every chance you give me to prove to you that I'm not going to hurt you, Florence. There are real dangers in the world. I'm not one of them."

## CHAPTER 13



Seamus

Midnight Manor (Topside)

Now

Florence twitched on my lap. Her body jerked and spasmed as another dream ripped through her. Maybe I shouldn't have insisted we take turns napping. After we followed Rever topside we shifted into the woods near where Shoshanna was murdered. It was late though, and with no moon it made it impossible to do anything but sit our asses down and rest.

Rever was curled up a few trees over, getting his three hours. I sat against a tree, her head on my thigh with her body curled up under my coat, listening to the night.

Midnight Manor was a whole different ball game. It was literally a different dimension. You had to access a portal to get here. There wasn't any normal wildlife. Not unless they wanted it that way. Nature was controlled by magic. And according to Bridge, was now also helped out by nymphs.

My cousin wasn't far from here, living her life in a house of demons that were relocated here after the Convergence left them behind. She was happy. Did she know Shoshanna had been murdered so nearby? Or was the whole world clueless that such a bright light had been snuffed out?

Why did Fig dream it? What connected it all?

I was on high alert, worried out of my mind, ready for the sun to come up so we could see this hell hole with fresh eyes,

and then get the fuck out of here. Maybe with Vic, Kris, and Rain around I'd feel better.

She twitched again and a soft moan vibrated her chest, creating a corresponding ache in mine. I wished like hell I could take her pain. I wished her dreams brought her joy instead of heartache. Why did the future have to be so grim? It had been that way my whole life. It all seemed to go sideways the day Graygore and Lorelei died, leaving Vic and all his brothers and sisters orphans. Years of the Plane reorganizing lives, realigning the world, to prepare for the Convergence. My parents split. Tristan not too long after. I spent years working in the shadows, watching the most depraved shit go down, intervening when it finally went too far, slipping secrets to the right people at the right times.

Then the Convergence ripped our world apart. The prophecies came true. Destiny was fulfilled. It was all supposed to be better now.

But it wasn't. The Convergence flayed open the samhain world and exposed the ugly underbelly that had been festering for decades. Over a hundred years of making things look pretty, wishing we were as civilized and noble as we pretended to be, didn't change the fact that there was evil lurking, waiting for its chance to shine again.

We survived the Convergence, but would we survive the aftermath?

Fig let out a huff and snuggled into my jeans, pulling my jacket tighter around her shoulders. *Mine*. I wanted to cover her in everything that was me. But I kept that shit locked down. She didn't want my mark or my protection even though she always had it. If she ever needed me, I was there. If she ever let me in, I was hers.

But she wouldn't. I saw that look in her eyes the first time I offered. The horror was burned into my brain. It was the same look every time she realized she'd reached for me. I gave up the dream that one day she'd reach for me, and the look wouldn't appear. But having her here like this? Yeah, I wanted it. This. Whatever she'd give me.

We'd had a breakthrough, right? We were so close to kissing. If Rever hadn't shown up we would have. What would have happened next? Would she freak out like usual? Or was our timing finally fucking right?

I laughed to myself. Of course our timing would align in the middle of a shitstorm. That was us. Fire and gasoline. A thunderstorm in a hurricane.

I brushed a stray hair that was caught in her eyelashes. Why was she so fucking beautiful? That was why I was stuck on her right? That dark hair and smooth skin. Those eyes that are always so full of fire. Those kissable lips. Not to mention her ass. I would worship it if she let me. It made me forget my own name. Just thinking about it made my blood flow in the wrong direction. *Now is not the time, buddy.*

Yeah, she was sexy as fuck, but I was lying if I thought that was why my life had ceased to be my own the day I first saw her. Everyone in my life either left or was gentle with me.

Not Florence. She fought me. She challenged me. She faced Samantha to save Wils'. She was life.

I needed her.

But she didn't need me. And that was the problem. You couldn't have an uneven relationship and expect it to last. If I wanted a chance with her I needed to find a way to be as integral to her as she was to me.

She began twitching again. Harder this time. Her emotions jumped out at me. She was scared. Running. No, being *chased*. I knew that instinct well. Pain. She felt pain. *Fuck, this dream again?* I couldn't handle this dream. I didn't know how she did. I brushed my hand over her cheek. "I'm here. I've got you." I said the same thing every time.

Her eyes flew open and locked with mine. "Again." Her whole body went limp and she squeezed her eyes shut as I brushed my thumb over her cheek and massaged my fingers into her hair, hoping to calm her.

"I'm sorry." I was so fucking sorry. I didn't understand why the Plane tortured her so much.

Her hand went to her forehead, massaging. “I haven’t had this one in a while. Not since...”

Was I her bad luck charm? “Since?”

“It’s been two years.”

Yep. I was the bad luck. She dreamt it at the cottage and several times after that. And now. “Is it related?”

“It must be,” she groaned. “There’s always something I have to find. This time it was symbols. When I find them all something happens. This time they hunted me down.”

“I won’t let anyone catch you, Florence.”

“I know,” she whispered.

“Anything else?” I didn’t want to push her too far, but if this dream was related to what we were doing here...

“If you see something that looks like a duck with a sun coming out of its head, run for the fucking hills.” Her hand moved wildly through the air as she spoke.

I laughed. “Is that one of the symbols you just saw?”

“Yeah,” she groaned. “They were all really weird. I swear the Plane forgets I don’t know what anything means.”

“Well, I’ve lived as a samhain my whole life and I can’t remember ever seeing a duck with a sun coming out of its head.”

She shot me a look and then sat up, leaving me cold and yearning to yank her back. “How long until dawn?”

I shrugged. “My gifts don’t really work here. But it’s been a while, so soon?” It was weird to not feel the owls ending their night or the wolves heading home. I couldn’t feel the pull of the sun or the yank of the moon. None of it was the same here. Is this how Florence felt? Blind and lost?

“Aren’t you cold?” She held my jacket close while she eyed me.

“Not really.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You’re lying.”

“No I’m not.”

“Yes, you are. I always know when you lie.” She scooched closer, pressing into my side, resting her head on my chest because she was too short to reach my shoulder.

It was definitely warmer with her beside me. I adjusted the coat so it covered both of us. Mostly so I could feel her. “How do you know I’m lying?” She didn’t, did she?

She was silent for several heartbeats. “You hold your breath. You try so hard to not betray yourself. You always keep your gaze deadly steady. Not a twitch of a hand. But your breath? You hold it.”

*Fucking hell.* She was right. I thought about lying to her right now, just to see if she was right, and the first thing I did was slowly take in a deep breath, ready to hold it. “Damn.” I liked that she knew that. *Really* liked it.

“Fall is here.” She shivered. This time from cold. Not like earlier when it was the Plane giving her signals.

Signals she refused to believe came from the Plane. “I’d be enjoying the cooler weather more if I wasn’t stuck outside in it.”

She looked up. “But you like the outside.”

“Not when you’re shivering I don’t.”

She grew very still. “Why do you care about me? Why haven’t you run for the hills? Any sane man would.” She muttered the last sentence.

I laughed. “Clearly I’m not a sane man, Florence. I care about you because I do. There’s nothing rational about who we decide to care about. We just do. And I picked you a long time ago.”

“You picked me before you really knew me. You should take it back.”

I laughed some more. “I picked you harder the more I knew you. No take backs.”

“You’re insane.”



“I am definitely crazy about you.” I pulled her into me like it was the most natural thing in the world. Like she belonged there.

She looked up again, her cheek still pressed against my chest. “But how? We barely knew each other, and you were already *there*. And after all these years, after pushing you away again and again, you’re still *here*.”

“I liked your fire,” I said softly, “even after you proved how easily we could burn.” I kissed the tip of her cold nose. “I liked your loyalty. To Wils. To your mom.” I pressed my lips to her forehead for a long kiss that just barely took the edge off. “But what I think you’re really asking is how could I trust my gut feelings about you?”

She nodded slowly; those big eyes locked on mine.

I smiled because there was one thing that I never questioned about myself, and it was what my heart felt. It knew when someone was a jerk or a sweetheart. It knew when someone was true to their word and when they were a liar. And it sure as shit knew right away that Florence was mine.

But none of that came naturally to her. Her heart was too open. It wanted to love unconditionally, and it didn’t know how to guard itself against the people who wanted to take advantage of that. So she’d done the only logical thing. Her heart was one hundred percent open to the people she knew she could trust. Wils. Vic. Her family.

And it was locked up tight to anyone else. No entry. No matter what.

To her I was a mystery.

I cupped her gorgeous face and tried really hard not to stare at her lips. Instead I fell into her eyes. So often they were hardened against the world. An impenetrable fortress guarding her heart. But when she made herself vulnerable? They were fathomless like they were now. It damn near took my breath away to be allowed to see her like this. I knew how rare and precious it was.

So I treated her that way, running my thumb over her cheek, then those full lips of hers. “Because you make me feel alive, Florence. For years I was a shell. I worked, I hung with Vic, I did the bare minimum with the family so I could stay off the radar. And then you blew in like a storm. I didn’t want to blend in anymore. I wanted to fight, to stick out, to match your fire.”

“But I hurt you. Doesn’t that...ruin it?”

The only thing she ruined was my ego. “Oh, Firecracker. You can’t have one without the other. If you love hard there is always the chance that it will hurt hard, too. I’d rather feel the pain of your rejection than go back to feeling nothing at all.” I pressed my thumb where I wished my lips were, then traced down her chin to her jaw.

“And that’s all I try to do,” she whispered. “Drown my feelings because they’re too much.”

“Have you ever thought that maybe they’re too much because you refuse to feel them?” If she’d just stop fighting... *everything*.

Her eyes went wide with surprise. “I’m hanging by a thread, Seamus.”

“Then let me throw you a rope.” She kept trying to make that thread last. Or maybe she kept hoping it would magically transform into a staircase. I wasn’t sure. But she was so focused on what she had left that she couldn’t see what else was possible.

“Please don’t hurt me,” she whispered, shrinking in on herself.

I hated how she felt the need to protect herself from me. *I* was the protector. The only thing she should ever feel around me was safe. “I will never hurt you.”

“You can’t promise that.” Her eyes were wild, on the verge of panic.

I took her chin in my fingers so she had no choice but to look right into my eyes. “Yes I can.”

Her chin wobbled and I lost it. I couldn't let her feel this way a moment longer. Fuck my earlier warning. I crashed my lips down on hers, my fingers stabbing into her hair as I drew her as close to me as I could at this angle. She whimpered against my lips, kissing me back as her fingers curled around my wrists, holding on for dear life.

Two years. Two fucking years without this. How had we survived? Her kiss was life. It was my favorite thing in the whole fucking universe. Her lips were soft and insistent. Sucking my lip and tracing it with her tongue, then opening for me, letting me kiss her as deep as I needed. It was as good as it had ever been. Better. The years were hard, but I also knew her now in ways I didn't back then. It gave me experience to know what she needed.

It wasn't until her tears hit my hands that I pulled away, scared and breathless. I batted the drops away, refusing to let her go. "The only thing in this world I can't handle is your pain. Hurting you hurts me, so I mean it when I say I'd rather die than hurt you, Florence. I have never intentionally hurt you and I never will." Then I cringed. "I take that back. There were a few times I lashed out at you. I wish I hadn't."

"I deserved it. I knew I hurt you, too, and I was actually glad to take the pain."

"That's fucked up, but I understand."

"We're a little fucked up," she whispered.

"No." I refused to believe that. "We're mixed up. That's different."

"Seamus," she sighed.

"Florence," I sighed right back. "Trust me. Please?"

She gave out a sweet little whimper then threaded her fingers through my hair and pulled me in for another kiss. But I stopped her just before our lips met...because I was also apparently a sadist. "Why are you kissing me?"

She blinked and a little of her color drained away as she cupped my cheek. "Because I *need* to. Because I've been

selfish for too long.” Then she smiled shyly. “Because I want to.”

I studied that smile, the thrum of her pulse. No, it wasn't just anyone she wanted to kiss. It was me. Only me. I knew that the same way I knew when a wolf made a kill, or a hawk spotted its prey.

So I took her mouth and hoped it was all true. That for once, someone chose me because I was the only one they wanted. I hauled her against me because I needed her body against mine. She wrapped her arms around my neck, her fingers plunging into my hair as she angled her mouth and took me deeper.

She kissed me like she needed me. Like if she didn't, she might die. And I kissed her right back with as much intensity. Florence Figueroa was heaven on Earth. We were a fire that had been waiting too long to be lit. The dry tinder caught and went up in an instant, burning us both in the process. We set off fireworks and set my whole world ablaze.

It was the greatest kiss of my life and I worked hard to make sure it obliterated any kiss that had come before in hers. She would remember no one but me. Want no one but me.

For the rest of her life. However long it might be.

“There will be time for this monogamous shit when we're done,” Rever growled as he stomped past us. “Say whatever sweet nothings you need and get your shit together. First light is coming fast.”

“Monogamous shit?” Fig laughed. “Oh man. Rever is one of a kind.”

Fuck, it was nice to see her smile. Smile and laugh in my arms.

She was *in my arms*.

“What?” she breathed. Her eyes darting between mine.

“I've waited so long for this. Is this real? Or is this portal dimension fucking with my head?” We had temporarily switched places. Now that she'd let me in, *I* was the one

freaking out. What if she changed her mind? What if I did some other asinine thing and she ran again?

“Seamus,” she whispered, the softness calming me right back down. “Hiding from you is exhausting. And I’ve failed at it. So I’m going to do the one thing you’ve asked from the beginning. I’m going to put my heart in your hands and trust you. I might still get mad, but I promise I won’t run away.”

I kissed her again and then pulled her into my lap so I could hold her as hard as I needed. “That’s all I want.” A chance. I just need a fucking chance to show her this would work.

“I’m scared. But I’m scared of everything right now. I know you care about me, and I know there’s more here. For a long time it scared me more than anything. But now I think it’s the one thing I can hold on to.” She kissed the underside of my jaw. “*You’re* the one thing I can hold on to. So I’m going to.”

“I’m here. I’m not going anywhere.” I echoed the promises I made to her each time she came out of a dream. Maybe now she’d finally believe me.

“Good. Because we’re about to deal with some serious shit.” She unfolded and stood up, holding out her hand to me like she could help me up.

Cute.

I took it anyway because it was a gesture and a damn fine excuse to touch her some more. I towered over her and sighed as I cupped her face in my hands, then ran them down her body, pulling her up off her feet and against me. “Kiss me, princess.”

This time she smiled at my nickname and did exactly as I asked.

## CHAPTER 14



Fig

Everything was the same. Everything was different. The grass was still green, but Shoshanna's blood stains had turned black or washed away. The carnage was gone because Rever had taken her body to the cottage.

It was probably better that way. No one else to stumble on her or disturb the scene.

Seamus looked down at me with a frown, his hand holding mine in a death grip like he thought once he let me go I'd never let him touch me again.

I couldn't really blame the man.

But we'd crossed the line. The only way was forward. Whether it was to the most epic bonfire in history or something better, I didn't know.

"This is it," Rever rasped, moving past us. "Her body was here. Her head there." He pointed out the landmarks that were already burned into my brain.

"Fucking hell," Seamus murmured.

"It's beautiful, right?" I looked out over the mist lakes. "It doesn't make sense to have something so horrible happen somewhere like this." Fog clung to the lake and ground, refusing to let the sun in. It was like something out of a fairytale.

Or a horror movie.

There was a surprisingly fine line between the two.

“Where is the spear?” Seamus asked. When neither of us answered he pressed. “You said her body was on display?”

I couldn’t make my feet move any closer. But Rever did. He pointed to a hole in the ground. Because the earth was so moist and rich here it was almost invisible from this angle. But it was there.

My stomach flipped and churned.

Seamus squeezed my hand and ran his other over my cheek. “I’ll be right back.”

I gave him a nod. I’d seen it in all its glory. He hadn’t.

Body, head, two arms, two legs...

“Any tracks?” Seamus asked.

Rever shook his head. “You getting anything?”

“I’m fucking useless here. Like someone slipped a blindfold on me.” He crouched down to observe the hole, the blood, any sign of struggle. But there was none. It was as if she were dropped here from the sky. But she died here. I knew it because I could *feel* it. I dreamt it.

I squeezed my eyes shut against the images that would come anyway.

Head. Body. Arm. Leg. Arm. Leg.

I was missing something. I was always missing something, wasn’t I? Always a step behind. Always unaware of something obvious. Something everyone else knew.

“Why was she here at all?”

Their gazes both jerked my way, and I realized I said it out loud. Rever shook his head. “I’ve tried to be as subtle as possible, but I haven’t come up with an answer. No one in the Underground remembers seeing her. And no, I didn’t ask if anyone had seen the Head of the House of Gatlin looking around for a good time.”

“I didn’t think you would.”

“No one on the grounds either. It’s like she appeared out of thin air.” Rever shrugged.

“How? Why? Was her position enough to gain her entry?”

Rever stood while Seamus remained crouched, studying. “I think it has more to do with why she looked the other way. Was she part of it? She sure as shit knew the Underground was here. What did she get out of ignoring it?”

There were too many questions and not enough answers. Which was why I wasn’t surprised when Ivy and Knuckles appeared.

Seamus was though. He jumped to his feet, his eyes blazing. “What the hell are they doing here?”

“I asked them to come,” Rever said calmly.

“There’s too many fucking people involved already!” Seamus growled, his eyes jerking to mine, and I knew he wasn’t upset that two more people were here to help. He was afraid for *me*. Two more people meant two more possibilities the killer could get to me. The only witness to the crime.

“You think I would invite anyone I didn’t trust completely?” Rever threw him a glare as he crossed the distance, placing a kiss on Ivy’s cheek. Knuckles nodded once, his arm protectively around Ivy. “They’re both trackers. Both live here. And I love them both. We good?” He shot Seamus another glare.

Ivy looked tiny beside the men, but she was a powerful wolf shifter. And Knuckles wasn’t just any bear shifter. He was a good friend of the House of Wren.

“We’re good,” I called out when Seamus couldn’t shake himself out of his loner investigator mode. He wasn’t used to having anyone’s help but Vic. This would be an adjustment for him. But then again, none of us had tackled anything of this magnitude before.

A Head of House had been murdered. We needed to keep that in perspective.



My feet remained glued to the ground. Seamus frowned again and came to me. “Why are you standing here?”

“Because I can’t get any closer. I don’t want to see it again.” Even though there was nothing there to see, *I* could see it. In my mind.

“But why *here*?”

And this was why he needed to be part of this. Why I had trusted my instincts when he forced his way into this. He was the only one who understood how my dreams worked because he’d been there for so many of them.

“You are a very smart man, Seamus.”

He shot me a half-smile. It was hard to really smile at the scene of a murder. He crooked a finger, sliding it under my chin, and tilted my face up to his. “Why here, Florence?”

“This is where I see it from.” I wasn’t part of the scene. I was an observer. Almost always an observer. It was one of the ways I could tell the difference between a dream and a vision.

He moved behind me, his head over my shoulder and his hands lightly touching my hips. “Tell me what you saw.”

Rever gave us one last glance, then turned back to Ivy and Knuckles. The group split up, doing their own investigation of the area. It also meant they weren’t around to distract me.

“I don’t want to,” I whispered.

“I know, babe. I’m here. I’ve got you.”

So I let him. Have me, that is. I let him be my support, my rock, while I described the most gruesome scene I’d ever seen with my own eyes. Sure there were plenty of horrific scenes I dreamt over the years, but almost none of those visions happened in front of me in real life. This one did.

I recounted the horrors that had haunted my nights for the last month.

“It’s always so dark. No moon. Barely any stars. It makes it hard to see anything. A lot of what I get from the dreams are feelings.”

“So tell me what you feel. Describe it all.”

My heart began to thud harder and faster. I didn't want to do this. Fuck, how I did *not* want to do this. But then Seamus squeezed my hips and placed a soft kiss on my shoulder, and I let it all back in. “It's all over.” I put my palms up, indicating the general area. “This...*presence*. Shoshanna is standing on the edge of the water. Her hair is blowing in the wind.” She looked so young. The shadows must have erased some of her lines, softened her hair. “And then the darkness comes closer and closer. In some dreams there's dancing. In others they build a fire. She wears different things in each dream. A dress, a gown, hiking clothes. All different. But always at night with no moon.” There was a detail there that nagged at me. Why were they so different? My dreams changed as the circumstances changed. Like seeing Seamus and I together in the dream about his brother when obviously we were not.

The clothes bothered me for some reason. It was an oddly specific detail that didn't often stick out at me.

“And you're always seeing it from here?”

I nodded slowly, double checking my memories. “Yes, always here.”

“Interesting. How often do you dream the same dream?”

“Often enough.”

“What happens after Shoshanna and the darkness hang out?”

I suppose that's what they were doing. That was puzzling as well. I swallowed down and pushed forward. “Then she's alone and the darkness closes in.”

“Is the darkness different? I'm not sure I understand. You said she's surrounded by it, but then she interacts with it? And now it's surrounding her again?”

I wished I could broadcast the images from my mind to his. It was so hard to describe everything I saw and felt. I shook my head and tried again. “When it starts, the darkness surrounds us. And...I guess it's not the same energy. It's

separate. Whoever or whatever comes to meet Shoshanna is not the same as the darkness surrounding this area.”

“That never goes away?”

I shook my head slowly. “No.”

“And the darkness is aware of Shoshanna?”

Cold slid down my spine. “It’s watching her. It *wants* her.”

“It waits for her.” Seamus said.

“I think so. When she’s alone it surrounds her, pins her in. Tortures her.” My voice broke. “It doesn’t follow our rules.”

“It takes what it wants.” Seamus understood.

“And then it pulls her heart from her chest. She’s still alive,” I whispered, “Then another part of the darkness takes an arm, a leg, the other arm, the other leg, and finally her head. They left her on display there.”

“And does the darkness leave immediately or linger?”

How was his voice so steady? I just described a murder. A horrific murder. “It moves around the area and then leaves.” The clothes changing still bothered me. Plus there was something about Shoshanna’s murder that bugged me, but I wasn’t sure what. Seamus gave my hips a squeeze and took a few steps closer to the scene. “Good job, babe. It helps me understand better.”

“Why do you think I always see it from here?” My feet were still glued to the ground. I couldn’t move forward and I couldn’t look away.

Head, body, two arms, and two legs.

When I looked up Seamus was on my right instead of my left. How had he moved that quickly? “Seamus?”

“Hmmm?”

“Did you hear me?”

“I’m sorry. What was the question?”

It was almost as if I’d zoned out for a few minutes and only asked the question in my head. Weird. “Why do you think

I always see things from right here?"

He immediately looked away. *Shit*. That wasn't good at all.

"Seamus?"

He sighed. "I think you were seeing everything through the eyes of the darkness."

I touched my own lips to keep from gasping. "No." I didn't want to be that close to anything that evil. Didn't want my mind touching anything it touched.

A head, a body, two arms, two legs...and her heart. I kept forgetting her heart. Relief that I figured it out washed over me, calming me just a little, not that calm was really a state I could be in right now.

"What do you keep murmuring?"

"Hmmm?"

Seamus dipped down, examining my eyes with a frown. "You keep mumbling...something about twos?"

He really was tuned into me. "Oh, I just seem to be stuck on the way she was murdered. We found her in pieces. A head, a body, two legs, two arms, and her heart." There was something to that. I thought the killing was a ritual, but since I was barely samhain I didn't know what that ritual might be.

"Seven," Seamus said softly.

"What?" My skin pricked and another shiver raced down my spine. *Uh oh*.

"She was broken into seven parts."

A head, a body, two legs, two arms, and a heart. Seven parts. "Does that mean something?"

"Seven means a lot of things." He glanced out at the mist lakes to avoid looking at me.

"Okay, but you think it means something in particular, don't you?" The shivers grew worse.

Like the Plane was warning me I didn't want to know this.

“The spear...the heart. You were right, Florence. It’s a ritualistic murder, but who the fuck would want this?” He yanked on his beard and growled low. “Are you sure it’s one murderer?”

I only ever felt a presence. The one that loomed did the killing. But was it one or many? I didn’t know. “Why does it matter?”

“Because if it was one then I’m wrong.”

I gulped down a steaming pile of dread. “And if it was more than one?”

He looked away. “The Seven Devils haven’t been free in three hundred years.”

*Seven.* Another shiver. “What are the Seven Devils?” Seven body parts. Seven sacrifices.

“The beginning and the end of the Underground.”

I staggered backwards, the world spinning just a little. Everything came back to the Underground. Whatever happened, whatever we were missing, that was the piece we needed to find.

Seamus gave me a sad smile but instead of coming closer to comfort me, he stayed away. Ivy and Knuckles came back into the clearing and I jerked my gaze to them, hoping for answers that would distract me from the hell in my mind.

“Anything?” I called out.

“How are you doing?” Seamus asked beside me.

I jerked in surprise. Why was he moving so fast this morning? It wasn’t like him to jump from place to place. And when I looked into his eyes, that soft, loving look was back and the wary one from a moment ago was gone.

Going back into my dreams must have me losing it because I could have sworn Seamus just whipped between two personalities in the space of a moment, not to mention locations. “I’ll be okay. I’m more interested in what Ivy and Knuckles have found.”

Seamus frowned. “Yeah. Hopefully they find something.”

“They’re right...” I turned and pointed to where they’d just stood, but they were gone.

“Babe, you okay?” He put a hand on my shoulder.

“They were just there. Didn’t you see them?”

“Not since they left.”

Great. I was definitely losing it. I rubbed my forehead trying to stop the headache forming. I was seeing things, there was something called Seven Devils, and Shoshanna had been murdered. It was no wonder my head wanted to explode.

Seamus wrapped his arms around me. “It’s a lot.”

Understatement. Especially combined with the fact that I had his arms around me. Talk about emotional overload. Twenty-four hours ago I would have punched him in the face for touching me. Now I was here, and he was him, and I was...overwhelmed.

I kept rubbing that spot between my eyebrows because the throb just wouldn’t quit. “Nothing makes sense. Normally my dreams at least make sense! I’m dreaming about this and symbols and now I’m seeing things.”

“You’re just tired, babe.”

I half-smiled up at him. “I don’t hate it. The nickname.”

“It’s not a nickname,” he grinned right back. “Princess is a nickname. Firecracker. Fig.” He made the same sour face he usually made when he used the name everyone else used. “But *babe* is who you are to me. Darlin’. *Florence*.” He kissed the top of my head. “I’m glad you like it. I certainly like saying it.”

I should be scared. I should be throwing insults and making him mad. But I just couldn’t do it anymore. I had to know. Either Seamus really was the guy who was going to prove there were good guys out there, or he was going to show himself. I couldn’t keep up the act any longer. In three years he hadn’t stepped out of line except that once.

And I should have forgiven him a long time ago.

I heard movement behind me but didn't turn my head because if it was real, Seamus would let me know. Plus I'd rather rest against his chest as long as I could.

"Anything?" Rever asked.

"They're good," Knuckles replied. "But not good enough. Or just too confident."

"There's not a trace for half a mile at least," Ivy said.

"And then?" Seamus asked.

"Tracks. Guess they figured by the time someone found Shoshanna they would have disappeared."

"How many?" Seamus asked.

I tensed, waiting for the answer. Ivy probably shook her head. "At least one. Possibly more. We'll have to study the tracks more before we know."

"Whoever did this has to know Midnight Manor," Rever said. "How to get in, how to get out, and how to avoid detection."

"They picked this spot because it was remote." Ivy locked eyes with me as I turned around. "I believe it was their hope no one would discover her for weeks, if not months."

"Maybe never," Rever muttered.

But I threw a kink in that. My stomach churned.

"How many people did you approach about your dreams?" Seamus asked. He'd gone rigid beside me. Another mood swing.

I thought of all my failed attempts at warning the House of Gatlin. Instead of feeling useless and dismissed, now I felt watched, cornered. Every single one of them could be hunting me now. "Bernard. But he dismissed me outright. When I dreamt it again I tried talking to Lorraine. When she ignored me I went to Rain who suggested I take it straight to Shoshanna." Her rejection was the most confusing.

“Wait, Shoshanna knew?” Seamus spun me to face him. “You told her? And she sent you away?”

“Yes. She listened carefully, told me she’d look into it, and then dismissed me. When I dreamt it again, her assistant told me that Shoshanna wasn’t concerned with the dreams of a mostly-human. I tried both Bernard and Lorraine again. Rain tried as well.” All of them cast me aside like trash.

“Who did Rain talk to?”

“The same people, as far as I know, but I can’t be sure.”

“Did anyone see you when you came here?” He asked Rever.

“I’m not a shadow dealer but I am Gatlin Guard. I know what the fuck I’m doing.”

“So that’s a no?” Seamus demanded.

Rever rolled his eyes. “Yes, asshole. That’s a no. We’ve got bigger problems than you doubting my abilities. At least three people know Fig had a vision. If this shit gets out, or whoever did this realizes the body is gone, the first person they come looking for is her.”

I wanted to shrink into Seamus, but I held perfectly still.

“We need to talk to Rain and then we need to disappear,” Seamus said.

“No.”

Seamus froze. “Florence.”

“No. I’m not being locked up again! Not happening!” Everyone always decided what was best for me and I was done with it. “No one is telling me where to go or what to do anymore. Especially you.”

His face crumpled. “Florence.”

“I’m not mad. I’m just stating facts. We will go to Rain. I’m on board with that. But we’re not disappearing.”

“Florence,” he tried again. It was a really good strategy. My name on his lips twisted me up like nothing else.



But on this, I was firm. “First Rain. We go from there.”

His gaze flew between my eyes looking for any way to change my mind. When he saw I wouldn't, he nodded once.

Then my headache came roaring back, throbbing between my eyebrows. Only this time it grew much, much worse. My head began to ring and my vision shook. I grabbed my head in my hands and sank to my knees while Seamus split into two, then three, then four. So did Rever, Ivy, and Knuckles. The sky was night and day depending on where I looked and the loudest sound I'd ever heard pierced the air.

And then it was all gone. I still stood in front of a very upset Seamus and knew that no one but me had just experienced whatever the hell I just did. I gulped. “Seamus. You need to get me out of here.” The sense of inevitability seized me. “Now.”

He lifted my chin. “Babe?”

“Now,” I whispered, feeling the tingling sensation that signaled another event. “Now!”

“Follow me,” Rever stormed past, “if we shift over these woods we can slip down the mountain to a portal that's currently out of rotation. Ivy, I'll be back.”

“We'll miss you,” she called, taking Knuckles' hand.

My vision began to blur and the ringing returned. Whatever was happening was far beyond my control. “Now, Seamus.”

His eyes widened a split second before he swept me into his arms and everything went black.

## CHAPTER 15



Fig

Somewhere

Now

**M**y head *pounded*. Worse than any hangover, any illness I'd ever had in my life. It felt like my skull was cracking open. My mouth was dry, my eyelids heavier than rocks, and my body hurt. Everywhere.

Great.

I wanted to sink back into the darkness and hide from it all, but something nagged at me. There was something I was supposed to be doing. Something with...

*Seamus.*

I'd been with him. Somewhere. Green. Water. *Midnight Manor*. I'd let him kiss me. And we were looking for clues to...something. My head pounded some more and I remembered my vision blurring and splitting. It felt like I was being pulled in four directions at once. He grabbed me just before I passed out.

I sat up in bed—not a great idea—and looked around at the unfamiliar surroundings. *Shoshanna*. The room was gorgeous. White and dark wood. The bed was enormous and covered in soft white blankets. The windows were open and a cool fall breeze blew through the air.

“Hello?”

Seamus immediately appeared in the doorway. “Fucking finally!” He was as tall and giant as ever, but there was something different about him. He covered the distance in two strides and had me in his arms again, nuzzling me like we did it all the time.

“Where are we?”

He drew back, frowning. “Home. How are you feeling?”

“Like death. My head is killing me.”

His hands immediately went to my scalp and began massaging. I let out a moan because damn that felt good. He leaned me into him and got to work banishing the pain from my body like a magician. “Rain and Kris learned a lot from the body. Wils and Vic are on the way over.”

*Home.* But which home? I knew all the rooms in the House of Wren and this definitely wasn’t one of them. We weren’t at the cottage either. And we were definitely not at Wils and Vic’s house.

“Did you have any more dreams?”

“Since I blacked out?”

He nodded, his eyes so hopeful, his fingers so damn magical. I thought back through the pain and realized there were memories in there. Jumbled and hard to reach. “I think so but right now all I remember is passing out.”

“What happened?” His voice was so tender. So full of love.

It made my heart swell. This is what I could have had all this time. If I’d just had some courage. It made my eyes sting and I sniffed back a cry fest. We did not have time for a cry fest. “Everything split. You. The sky. Everything. And then it was like nothing happened. Like I imagined it. I moved while things were splitting, but when it all went back to normal, I was standing in front of you.”

“Split?”

“Like there were three of you.” And now that I had time to analyze it, each version of Seamus was different. Different

hair lengths, different beards, different shirts. “The sky was day in one version and night in another.”

“No wonder your head hurts.” His hands lovingly massaged my temples, my forehead, my jaw. The pain began to dissipate.

“And I knew it would keep happening as long as I stood there. I felt it coming.”

“That’s why you said we needed to leave.”

“Yeah. You caught me.”

His thumb ran lightly over my lips. “I’ll always catch you, darlin’.”

He said it with such conviction. Like it was the simplest thing in the world. Maybe it was.

The tears came back, but this time I couldn’t stop them. His eyes widened with surprise, and he slid down beside me so we were nose to nose, brushing my tears away. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing! Well, not nothing, but nothing to worry about,” I said between sobs.

“Florence?”

“I’m just...sorry.”

“For what?” His gaze darted between my eyes, his body flush against mine. I’d been alone too long because that was all it took to light me up.

“For all the wasted time.”

He frowned just as a door opened and Wils voice filled the house. “We’re back!”

I shook off the tears and centered myself.

Seamus kissed my forehead. “We’ll get back to this.”

I gave him a nod. I had a feeling I wouldn’t be able to wiggle my way out of any more conversations now that I’d let him in.

“You feeling up to walking or would you like everyone to come in here? I can drag in some chairs from the dining room.”

Whose house were we jumbling up? “I can walk.”

The sound of a child echoed off the walls. Who had a child? Maybe I knocked my head on the way down. Nothing was making any sense. Seamus helped me to my feet and wrapped one arm around my waist while holding my hand with the other.

“I’m not going to faint again.”

“Indulge me.”

I supposed this was better than being carried out into the most gorgeous living room I’d ever seen. There were windows *everywhere*. The house was made of dark wood with black windows and an unparalleled view of Blood Falls. There was only one place with this view.

“We’re at your cabin,” I breathed. I had never actually been inside, stubborn woman that I was, but I knew that view. Beneath us was another floor with a deck and the exact same gorgeous view.

Seamus’ frown deepened as he helped me sink into the plush couch. “Are you sure you’re up for this?”

“Of course. Why?”

Wils came up the stairs with a baby in her arms and a beaming smile on her face.

So I wasn’t crazy. I had heard a child. A very small child.

“So glad to see you up and moving!” My best friend gushed. She was my mirror in so many ways. Same dark hair and eyes. Shockingly similar facial features. Only she must have cut her hair since the last time I saw her. That was my fault again. No avoiding my best friend anymore. “Seamus scared the crap out of me when he came to check on Ava.”

I watched with shock as Seamus slipped the sleeping infant into his arms, grinning like a lovesick fool at the tiny bundle.

What. The. Fuck?

“You missed your momma, didn’t you, baby girl?” He cooed as he bounced her, walking towards me.

What was happening? Why were we at the cabin when we were supposed to be meeting at the cottage? Why was Seamus holding a *baby*? Why did I feel like I’d just walked into someone else’s life?

He eased his big frame down onto the couch next to me, wrapping his other arm around my shoulder and leaning the baby towards me. “See? Safe and sound, just like I promised.” He kissed my temple.

Wils grinned down at us. “Ava will always be spoiled when she’s with us. I know it was hard leaving her for the first time, but she was an angel and now you’ve done it. Maybe next time will be easier.”

“Especially since it will be sooner than later.” Seamus gazed down at the sweet baby. She had dark hair like me and Wils, pink cheeks and lips, and baby soft skin. “I hate this.”

“Rain says the energy around the body is dark. Very dark,” Wils said. “Rever is on the scent, though. You probably have an hour or two with Ava before you have to go. Do you want us to leave you alone?” She looked expectantly at me like I had the faintest clue what was happening.

I must have hit my head when I fainted because none of this made any sense. “Whose baby is this?” She was cute as hell, but this was beyond weird.

Wils jaw fell open and Seamus stiffened beside me. “Florence? What’s wrong?”

Were they nuts? I threw my hands out at the cabin. “Everything! Everything is wrong! Why are we in your cabin? Why is there a baby here? What the hell is going on?” I shot up off the couch and paced to the windows.

“Why do you keep saying *my* cabin?” He held the baby close while shooting worried glances at Wils.

“Because it is your cabin. Isn’t it? I don’t know. I’ve only seen it from the outside, but that view,” I threw my hand at the window.

“Shit.” Seamus shot to his feet giving the baby to a shell-shocked Wils. The blood had completely drained from her face.

He came straight for me, grabbing me by the shoulders. “Do you have amnesia?”

Did I? I didn’t think I did but the evidence around me said otherwise. “No. I remember everything just fine. Whose baby is that?” I tried again.

“What’s the last thing you remember?” He got right in my face. Fear, worry, and terror warred for domination in his eyes.

I gulped, my heart racing, my mind flying through the possibilities. “We were at Midnight Manor reexamining the scene.”

He nodded. So at least we were aligned on that.

“And then all the stuff I just told you happened before I passed out.”

“Okay, before that then. How did we get to Midnight Manor?”

I glanced over his shoulder at Wils clutching the baby. It couldn’t be...could it? No. Just *no*.

That wasn’t possible.

“I took you to the secret Underground beneath Midnight Manor. We saw Tristan. And then we made up just before Rever got us topside. We slept in the woods before going to the scene with Rever. We...kissed.”

His frown got deeper and deeper. “We went to the Underground and saw Tristan, but I don’t know what you mean about making up.”

My heart plummeted into my stomach. What the hell was happening? “We finally,” I waved my hands between us, “got over the whole fighting thing and forgave each other.”

“Babe,” he gasped like I’d punched him in the gut. “How can you remember some things but not others? What the hell is this?”

I wiggled the ring on my finger as I searched for something that made sense.

Then I froze. I didn’t wear rings. I held up my hand. On my left ring finger was a simple gold band. “What the hell is this?” It was a *wedding* ring.

I thought Seamus might faint. He was too white, his hands gripped me too tightly. “It’s your wedding band. *Our* wedding band.” He let go of my shoulder and held up his hand, showing off the matching band on his ring finger.

“No. No, I would remember getting married.” Where was that couch? My knees were about to give out.

“Two years. We’ve been married for two years.”

*Two years?* I started shaking my head and couldn’t stop. “No, two years ago we had an epic fight and haven’t spoken since. Not until I saw you in the Underground when I went to meet Rever.”

He covered his eyes, then let his hand slide to his chin. “Two years ago we got married on the deck,” he pointed down, “and three months ago Ava was born. Our baby girl. Don’t you remember?”

*Our baby girl.*

We had a baby girl? And were married? It was like the last two years had been erased and replaced with an alternate version of my life. The one I might have had if I’d forgiven him.

What the hell was happening?

**To be continued...**

***Seven Sins***

***01/23/2024***



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# QUEENS AND MONSTERS



## Book 1 of The Blood Falls Series

Silence fell between us for so long I finally looked up from my feet to find Dray staring at the floor too, his body very tense and his jaw ticking. “I keep thinking about myself,” he finally said. “How you affect me, my family, how you might ruin me.” He pulled his gaze up from the floor. “The Universe keeps shoving us together and I keep ignoring it. I keep denying it. Even when it’s screaming at me to stop, I use protecting my family as an excuse to keep away from you.”

I felt smaller and smaller with every word out of his mouth. It was impossible to focus on anything but the words *affect, ruin, deny, stop, screaming* and not see that Dray didn’t want me in his life. Sure he felt an obligation to make sure I was safe, but the last thing he wanted was to be attached to me in any way. Maybe the earth could open up and swallow me whole? Or a big random bolt of lightning could hit me from above? Anything to make this stop.

“I never let myself think about you,” his voice dropped to a whisper. “What you’ve been through and what is still in front of you. That you’re alone.”

That was the final straw. I started toward him with all my fury. “I am *not* alone. People care about me. Olivia for one and, even if you hate it, Gigi too.” I stabbed his chest with my finger.

He grabbed it up in his larger hand and yanked me against his solid wall of muscle, knocking the air out of me. “You

misunderstand me,” he growled.

I slowly drew my gaze up to meet his and lost my breath all over again at the storm brewing in them. “Then what do you mean?” I barely got the words out.

His other arm wrapped around my waist, holding me to him. “I’m not drunk or high, Rhysa. I’m completely fucking sober.” He paused, his eyes darting between mine as he took in a slow deep breath. “Tonight when you drink from me, I want all of you.”

I froze, tried to pull back, but he held me firm. “I’m not a pity fuck.” God, did he really think I’d swoon in his arms because he deemed me worthy after realizing I hid knives and money to protect myself? Hell no.

He growled again, displeased with my protest. “You know *exactly* how badly I want you.”

“Do I? No. I know how much you *don’t* want me. Sure you get hard around me but arousal isn’t the same as wanting someone.”

He released me and stepped back. “Only you would block out all the times I’ve *begged* for you.”

*I need you.* The memory flashed through my mind. The pain and desperation on his face as fresh as the last time it happened.

“Again, you weren’t exactly in your right mind at the time.” I paced as far away from him as I could get in the small space.

“Why do you think I avoid you at all times? Stay as far away, even in a crowded room? All I want is you, Rhysa. All the time.” He held his long arms out wide. “I’m not fighting it anymore. I want you. I want to be inside you when you drink from me.”

*Oh god.* My entire body shivered at the idea. “And tomorrow?”

“You leave. I have no idea what happens next but I do know I’m not going to pretend I don’t want you.” He took a

tentative step toward me. “You need to drink from me tonight. Give yourself the power to make your own choices at House of Axl. Whether we do anything else is your choice.”

I felt the effects of a week without blood. Gigi offered but I waved her off thinking I’d be fine, but now that Dray was asking me to think into the future, to a home I didn’t know and family that were strangers, my thirst magnified. I could deny him, but at what cost?

If I said no, I’d be at the mercy of whatever situation I was walking into.

If I said yes, I might lose control.

Did I want to lose control? Would being with Dray be the good things the Universe seemed to promise? The first time was unforgettable, and every wild moment between was a heady rush that felt worth the price of admission.

“I’m willing to see what happens,” I squeaked out. He prowled closer and closer.

“You know what will happen. What happens every time we’re alone together.”

My chest flushed. “To be fair, I’ve only been alone with you.”

He came to a stop in front of me. I pressed my back into the wall. “I have *never* reacted to anyone the way I react to you. I lose my damn mind just being near you, Rhysa.”

Tomorrow I would walk into the wolves’ den on purpose. Tonight I could have ecstasy.

There really wasn’t a choice.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

INDIA  
*Amare*

**India Amare** is the paranormal pen name of romance author, Alexis Anne. While she's spent most of her career writing about couples set in the contemporary world, she finally unleashed the paranormal universe that's been trapped in her head ever since she snuck a copy of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* into the shopping cart when her mom wasn't looking. (And got in trouble for that!)

After a career in anthropology studying the long arc of human history she's often wondered *what if...*

*What if* vampires existed. *What if* magic was real. *What if* everything we dream about isn't imaginary after all...

Read The Blood Falls series to delve into this alternate world.

[TheBloodFalls.com](http://TheBloodFalls.com)

