

SOME KIND OF MONSTER: 1



WELCOME  
TO MY  
NIGHTMARE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHORS

KATIE MAY  
STEFFANIE HOLMES

WELCOME TO MY  
NIGHTMARE

SOME KIND OF MONSTER

BOOK ONE


KATIE MAY

STEFFANIE HOLMES

Copyright © 2024 by Katie May and Steffanie Holmes

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

 [Created with Vellum](#)

# CONTENTS

## [Prologue](#)

1. [One: Lily](#)
2. [Two: Jackson](#)
3. [Three: Lily](#)
4. [Four: Lily](#)
5. [Five: Brooks](#)
6. [Six: Lily](#)
7. [Seven: Orion](#)
8. [Eight: Lily](#)
9. [Nine: Lily](#)
10. [Ten: Brooks](#)
11. [Eleven: Lily](#)
12. [Twelve: Lily](#)
13. [Thirteen: Orion](#)
14. [Fourteen: Lily](#)
15. [Fifteen: Lily](#)
16. [Sixteen: Lily](#)
17. [Seventeen: Lily](#)
18. [Eighteen: Lily](#)
19. [Nineteen: Jackson](#)
20. [Twenty: Lily](#)
21. [Twenty-One: Lily](#)
22. [Twenty-Two: Brooks](#)
23. [Twenty-Three: Lily](#)
24. [Twenty-Four: Orion](#)
25. [Twenty-Five: Lily](#)
26. [Twenty-Six: Lily](#)
27. [Twenty-Seven: Jackson](#)
28. [Twenty-Eight: Lily](#)
29. [Twenty-Nine: Lily](#)
30. [Thirty: Jackson](#)
31. [Thirty-One: Brooks](#)
32. [Thirty-Two: Lily](#)
33. [Thirty-Three: Orion's Wolf](#)
34. [Thirty-Four: Lily](#)

35. [Thirty-Five: Lily.](#)

[Excerpt](#)

[Bad Moon Rising](#)

[About the Authors](#)

*For every Supernatural fan who yearned to be the filling in a  
Sam/Dean sandwich...this one's for you.*

# PROLOGUE

“You spent our entire honeymoon fund on this dusty old hotel room?” The bride sniffs disdainfully as she kicks off her ivory slingbacks.

One shoe slides underneath the honeymoon suite’s four-poster bed. The other bounces across the rug and comes to a stop in the gloomy corner behind the door, where I’m hiding.

Neither the bride nor the groom even turns in my direction, completely oblivious to my presence.

“Relax, baby. This place may be a little Addams Family chic, but the Bridgemont Hotel is the finest hotel in the state.” The groom walks over to the double-height window and throws open the curtains.

Pale light bathes the glamorous room in yellow stripes. Aside from the heart-shaped, king-sized bed dominating the center of the room, there really isn’t much else—just a night table, a dresser, and a surprisingly small TV. At least the bathroom has a tub big enough to fit more than one person.

“It was a complete dump for a decade or so, but rumor has it that the place got a new owner who has worked wonders on

this place. I spared no expense for my new girl. Just look at this view.”

“A view of a grubby old forest? No thanks.” The bride makes a face as she turns away from the trees drenched in gray mist. “You can hardly see a thing out there with all this fog. At least they left us a free bottle of champagne.”

“*Fancy* champagne. And look at these chocolates...” The groom moves across the room to where the bride has found the gifts I carefully chose for them.

Anticipation curls in my stomach as he fingers one of the heart-shaped brown pieces.

*Yesssss.*

“Pffft. Those chocolates don’t look gluten-free, and I bet they’re made from cheap cocoa instead of the fine-grade stuff. Ew, what’s up with the message on the card? ‘Your Soul to Take’—that’s kind of creepy, isn’t it? *And* it looks like someone’s eaten one already.” The bride jabs a red-painted nail at the empty space on the dish.

What a disrespectful bitch.

“That’s disgusting. You should complain.”

I can’t help but wonder what made the groom fall in love with this vile woman in the first place. She’s positively dreadful. But then she glances over her shoulder at him, all ivory skin and cascading blonde hair, and I can see the appeal. What I wouldn’t give to be the focus of that sultry gaze...

*Focus. You have work to do.*

“First thing in the morning, I promise to march down to the manager and demand extra chocolate for you, my darling. But now...” The groom wiggles his considerable eyebrows suggestively.

Despite the fact that the eyebrows are like two sentient caterpillars taking up residence on the man’s brow, the bride misses his invitation—she’s focused on trying to tug the cork from the bottle.



*Smart woman*, I think, shifting silently in the corner as my legs begin to cramp. *I'd want to be drunk for this too.*

While the woman is beautiful in an utterly human way—large tits, tapered waist, flowing hair—the man is completely and disgustingly ordinary. His wispy black hair just barely covers the bald spot at the top of his head, and a graying mustache embellishes the skin above his lips.

Perhaps he's rich.

Human women do prefer wealthy older men. We see a lot of them at this hotel, in this very suite, drawn to the Bridgemont's new reputation for luxury and discretion.

The bride makes an annoyed groan as she tries in vain to twist the corkscrew. "This blasted thing won't...budge..."

"Here, let me." The groom takes it from her hands, pops the cork, and pours them each a glass. "Here's to the happiest day of my life, and soon to be the hottest night of my life with my brand new wifey."

"I'll drink to that." The bride takes a long sip.

Her throat bobs, and lust shoots through me, cascading straight to my groin. My teeth ache to sink themselves into the smooth column of her neck.

"I can't wait to find out what sexy little thing you're wearing underneath that dress," the groom purrs suggestively as he tugs her close.

"Why don't you come here and find out." She wiggles away and moves toward the bed, tipping her head back to down the rest of her glass.

From my hiding place, I admire the exquisite curve of her breasts straining against the bodice of her dress.

The groom knocks back his own glass in one gulp and closes the gap between them, grabbing her hips and shoving her back on the bed.

I watch them as they roll over each other, their kisses deep and wild and lustful. I can feel myself growing stiff, excited by what's to come.

The bride fumbles with the groom's belt and manages to shove down his trousers. The groom's fingers dig into the lacing on the bride's dress, tugging the corset away to reveal a lacy ivory and gold bra. Her nipples are dark pink through the sheer fabric.

I long to bite them, to show the bride what will really make her scream.

"Ride me, baby," the groom huffs, lying down and tugging her on top of him.

The bride grabs the champagne bottle from the nightstand and chugs it back as she sinks down on the groom's stiffened member. She lets out a contented sigh as her hips clench, and she begins to ride him, her breasts bouncing. She tosses her head back and drinks champagne straight from the bottle, her exposed throat bobbing, calling to me, begging for my own tongue to ravage the gap formed in her clavicle.

Drawn by the grunts and groans of the newlyweds, by the slap of skin on skin and the scent of debauchery in the air, I float out from my hiding place and cross the room.

Silent and stealthy, I pause at the foot of the bed to admire the scene from all angles. My cock stirs in my trousers as lust dances through my veins.

*This will be fun.*

The bride calls out the groom's name and rakes her nails down his chest. I think she's faking her pleasure—her screams are a little too high-pitched and exaggerated—but the groom doesn't seem to mind. She's a gifted performer.

I float across the red and black carpeting and stop when I'm able to crouch on the bed behind the rutting couple. They don't notice as I undo my breeches and draw out my length and—

"Excuse me?" The bride slaps her husband's chest. "Did I say you could fondle me *back there*?"

The groom chuckles, though the sound is pained with his hard cock still balls deep in his bride. "Haha, very funny,

Cathleen. I'm wouldn't do that without asking very nicely first  
—”

“I'm *serious*, Kurt. Cut it out. I don't want to do anal tonight—”

The groom holds up both of his hands. “Um, baby, I don't know what you're talking about, but I'm not doing it.”

“Then who is—”

The bride whirls around, and her words cut off in a wild scowl as she sees my true face—the man with his finger buried inside her most intimate hole.

Only I'm not a man at all.

I'm a specter.

A horror.

*A monster.*

The bride screams. Her scream is like an electrical charge plugging straight into my cock. I fucking love this part most of all, the moment when they realize that everything they thought they knew about the world is a lie, and that they're about to die in the most painful way imaginable...

“*Here comes the bride...*” I whisper as I clasp the sides of her head in my hands.

Her scream unfurls around me like the petals of the first spring flowers, and just as beautiful too.

“*All dressed in white...*”

I twist.

Her scream cuts off as I wind her head around like the cap on a toothpaste tube until it pops off with a warm gush of blood.

“*Now she is dead,*” I whisper, the song dancing off my tongue, a sultry lullaby. “*She's all dressed in red. Time for her to sleep, with her lover in their bed...*”

“No.” The groom tries to scoot away, but his feet are caught in the end of his jeans. “You can't be real. You can't—”

A cold, malicious laugh escapes me as I scrape my fingernails along the groom's chest, like I saw the bride do. Only my fingers leave deep gashes that spill blood and...other parts. The groom tries to hold his body together, but his hands are slick, and his insides are spilling out of him at an alarming rate.

A few moments later, the groom is silent.

Just the way I like it.

Peace.

Peace and quiet.

I wipe my hands on my black trousers, knowing the stains won't stick. Then, I pick up the bride's leg and slide her lace garter from her thigh. It's stained red with blood.

I press it to my lips, inhaling the coppery scent of her blood intermingled with the tangy taste of her fear.

"Delicious," I whisper as I fade back into the Victorian wallpaper.

I love my job.

## ONE: LILY



The dorm is teeming with students.

I tense automatically as a rowdy, obnoxiously laughing frat boy unwittingly knocks into my arm. Every nerve in my body alights at the contact, and the “fight or flight” response I’ve honed over the years rises to the surface. I remember with a flicker of satisfaction that I’m packing an eighty-pound crossbow in my shoulder bag, so “fight” is gonna win today.

Electricity skitters across my skin as I glare at the man out of the corner of my eye, gauging whether or not he’s a threat.

But nope...unless you consider a horny, intoxicated twenty-year-old man a threat.

When he catches me looking at him, his smile broadens, revealing pearly white teeth. Dark hair flops forward into his eyes in a stereotypical, Disney prince, douchebag kind of way.

“Hey, gorgeous,” he begins in a voice he probably thinks is sexy.

But how can it possibly be “sexy” when the pungent stench of alcohol barrages my senses from his breath? Disgusting.

Ignoring him—and his similarly obnoxious friends all hollering at him to get my number—I skirt around the corner of the hall until I come to my destination.

The door is already propped open with a brick.

I don't bother knocking as I push the door open the rest of the way and head inside the small, unkempt room of my best friend. I toss my bag on the floor, on top of a pile of clothing and open spell books.

Becka sits in front of a mirror, applying mascara. Only a tiny circle in the middle of the mirror is still usable, as the outer rim is crowded with Polaroid photographs of the two of us, tarot cards, glittery skull stickers, and scribbled spells.

“You definitely don't look like you're ready to head out and train,” I say conversationally as I throw myself against the wall and cross my arms over my chest.

Becka doesn't even bat an eye as she recaps her mascara and swivels on her chair to face me. When I first met Becka, she had a pixie cut that made her look elfin and delicate. It framed a face of sharp angles and hard lines. Over the years, her hair has grown until it now reaches her shoulders in delicate blonde and pink curls. She still has the same cherubic features from high school, but they're accentuated by smokey eyeliner, dark eye shadow, and bright-red lipstick.

And, of course, the skin-tight red dress that clings to her curves.

A dress that will most definitely *not* be practical when we head to the archery range.

I quirk an eyebrow at her as she casts me an innocent look, blinking coquettishly, and then turns back to the mirror. She grabs her favorite lipstick off the desk—Evil Queen Red—and puckers her lips as she applies it.

“You know...” I kick my leg back so I can place it against the wall. “I thought it was suspicious when you called me and begged to train.”

“Oh, really?” she says in that same demure voice. However, with her lips pursed like a duck, it sounds like, “Oh,

wully?”

“You hate archery,” I continue, not buying her innocent act for one second. “And guns. And knives. And swords. And—”

She once again turns away from the mirror to flash me a frosty glare. “Not everyone can know how to kill a man one thousand different ways.” She sniffs in feigned haughtiness. “Besides, you know I have...alternative methods.”

I snort as I survey her room once more—almost as familiar to me as my own shitty apartment on the opposite side of town.

One half of Becka’s dorm room is fastidiously clean, not a piece of clothing or paper out of place, the blankets on the bed devoid of wrinkles, the tiny bookshelf on the wall organized alphabetically.

But the other half...

I’m honestly surprised Becka’s roommate hasn’t killed her yet.

It looks as if *Hocus Pocus* has thrown up on every available surface.

Witch protection bells dangle overtop of the window, the bronze siding chipped and flaking. According to Becka, they’re supposed to ring whenever an evil entity crosses beneath them.

Colorful candles sit on the top of Becka’s vanity, intermingled with her scattered makeup. Orange, red, yellow, blue, and green. They’re currently unlit, but a healthy collection of wax has hardened down the sides.

Gemstones are placed everywhere—on the desk, the bedside table, underneath her pillow, on her own bookshelf, beneath her bed. I see moonstone, copper, amazonite, and labradorite. They’re all supposed to do something different, but I’ve forgotten what. I think one is supposed to help with healing...maybe?

I’m not so keen on the magical side of our business. But the killing monsters side...I get an A+ for that.

Ignoring Becka's quip, I ask, "So...why did you call me if you didn't want to train?"

I don't know why I even bother to ask; I know exactly why she called me. The same reason she always calls me on a Friday night.

She just got sneaky about how she went about doing it this time.

"Well," she begins carefully, not meeting my eyes. "There's a party—"

"Becks!" I reach for the nearest object—one of her purple crystals—and toss it at her head.

She ducks before it can make contact and casts me a withering glare, though the effect is slightly dampened by the lipstick that has accidentally smeared her cheek. It's a shock of dark red against her naturally pale skin.

"You're an evil bitch, you know that?" She reaches for a makeup remover wipe and begins to rub at her face. "You're lucky I love your sadistic ass."

"You *tolerate* my sadistic ass," I counter. "There's a difference."

"Girl, would I have come with you to that abandoned camp to kill a bunch of wendigos if I didn't love you?" She throws the makeup wipe over her shoulder, very purposefully aiming for my head.

Unfortunately for her, it flutters to the ground only a few inches away from her, joining the clutter of discarded clothes already there.

"You got wendigo guts on my favorite jacket. Do you know how hard it is to clean bright-red wendigo goo off of leather? Really fucking hard."

"I told you to just throw the thing away," I singsong.

The glare she throws me could curdle milk.

"That jacket was *Gucci*, and you're a heathen," she snipes.



“I’m a lot of things, but I can’t say I’ve ever been called a heathen before.” I move towards the open window, where the October breeze blows my red hair back.

Ribbons of ambient moonlight tease the ground at my feet in white stripes, somehow adding to the ominous feel of Becka’s witchy room.

What did she once say about the full moon?

Something about the possibilities being infinite? Of heightened potential and danger?

I should probably remember this stuff.

“You need to come to this party with me.” Becka, apparently, refuses to drop this topic of conversation. “You haven’t gotten laid in... How long has it been? Since the ‘ex-boyfriend?’” She emphasizes the last word with exaggerated finger movements.

“Why are you putting shit in weird-ass air quotes?” I demand. “Travis *is* my ex. Our breakup is in no way ambiguous.”

Becka scoffs derisively and refocuses on her reflection in the mirror. “That explains why he texts you one hundred times a day begging you to take him back. Oh! And the time he drunk dialed you and said,”—she lowers her voice in a piss-poor impersonation of my ex—“*I still love you. I need you, baby. Please. Please. Please. I’ll kiss your feet.*”

“Your impression of him is shit,” I say as I flop down on her bed. My phone slides out of my pocket to rest on the rumpled, star-covered duvet. “And he never offered to kiss my feet.”

“But he would if you asked him to.” She sounds smug.

It’s at that exact moment my phone begins to ring. I don’t even have to look to know the caller will be Travis Lyle...my ex-boyfriend, with bright-blue eyes, sun-streaked blond hair, and a body to die for.

And the personality of a freaking toad.

Why, oh why, does Travis have to call *now*? I'll never hear the end of it.

The universe seems to be cheeky tonight...and a total bitch. That asshole is clearly winking at me. I wish it could hear me retort with a big, loud, "Fuck you."

Becka's grin is positively devious as she flicks her gaze between me, my phone, and then me again. One of her perfectly manicured eyebrows raises.

"You gonna get that?"

"Nope." I make sure to pop the P obnoxiously. She hates when I do that—claims it makes me sound uncouth and uneducated. Of course, that only makes me want to do it more, just to annoy her.

"Afraid he's going to offer to kiss your feet?" She waggles her eyebrows suggestively. "Or maybe lick them all over?"

"I hate you, you suck, and I'm disowning you as my best friend," I deadpan.

"You love me, I suck lots of dick, and you can never disown me," she retorts without pause.

The smile on her face instantly dissipates, a deep furrow materializing between her brows. Immediately, my hackles raise because I know that expression. It's her "shit's about to get serious, so you better listen to me" face.

"Becks..."

"Lily, I know the last few years have been... God, I don't want to say tough, because that word doesn't even begin to describe what you've been through." She shakes her head and squeezes her eyelids shut. "But that doesn't mean you can just press pause on your life. You can slay monsters *and* have a social life. Your parents would want you to *live*. They would want—"

"Don't," I snap with more venom than I intended.

Pain daggers through me, and a rod of pure electricity spirals through my body. Hot wax seems to slither across my skin. All I want to do is collapse to the ground, curl in on

myself, and place my hands over my ears to drown out her words.

My eyelids squeeze shut of their own accord, but that only makes everything worse. Because my parents' faces are etched onto the skin there—the way they looked when I found their bodies.

My father's eyes wide and unseeing, glazed over in death.

Blood seeping through his blue bathrobe while in the armchair next to his wheelchair.

My mother's decapitated head in the center of the bloody pentagram, the remaining five points holding a different body part of hers.

Her arms.

Her legs.

Her heart.

And then I see the figure...

The figure in all black...

The figure who vanished before my very eyes...

“Lily! Lily! Breathe! You need to breathe!” Warm arms circle around me, and a deep, shuddering breath reverberates through my body as I inhale Becka's familiar, rose-scented perfume.

A shard of glass seems to be lodged in my throat.

God, how can just the memory of them make me fall apart like that?

It feels as if my soul has been put up for sale and was bought by the devil himself.

Gravel rolls around in my stomach as I squeeze Becka hard, willing myself to do as she instructs.

Deep breath in. Deep breath out. Deep breath in. Deep breath out.

I once read that farmers scorch their lands to ensure new crops will grow in the future. And though I've tried time and

time again to light my past on fire, the taste of it still remains in my mouth, the bitter combination of ash and burnt embers. There's no escaping it. No running from it. No incinerating it.

“Shit, I'm sorry!” Becka scrubs her fingers through my hair comfortingly, almost desperately. “I shouldn't have brought it up. Shit. Shit. Shit.”

Coherent thoughts steadily return to me, little kernels that pop to life one at a time. Even so, my heart continues to slam against my ribs, and my breath comes out in choppy pants.

I pat her shoulder once to indicate I'm fine, that she doesn't need to hold me anymore, that I've gotten myself together.

She's dealt with these episodes more times than I care to admit.

“I thought... I thought I wouldn't fall apart again,” I whisper. At some point, I must've sunk to the ground. My knees are all the way up to my chest with my arms wrapped around them. “I thought...”

“PTSD doesn't have a fucking time limit,” Becka reminds me vehemently. “Don't allow anyone to tell you differently.”

“Thinking of my parents always makes me think of... *them*.” My upper lip pulls away from my teeth at just the thought of the brothers who shall not be named.

In one day, I lost the five people I loved the most. My parents may be dead, but the other three... They're lost to me.

Of their own volition.

“You know we don't talk about Dick Face, Jizz Cock, and Wank Stain,” Becka says gently, but with an undercurrent of unfettered rage.

“Let's talk about something less...depressing,” I suggest.

Becka's eyes immediately gleam as she moves to sit down beside me, seemingly unconcerned that her dress may get dirty. That's one thing I love about my best friend—her willingness to do just about anything for me.

“Like...a party?” She gives me the largest puppy-dog eyes she’s physically capable of.

“How about a job?” This time, *I’m* the one smiling—a wide, genuine smile that feels almost unnatural on my face, as if my muscles have forgotten how to twitch that way.

Since I lost my parents, there’s been a darkness inside of me, a bloodlust that can’t be satiated through school and classes and part-time jobs. It can only be fed when I’m hunting.

When I’m killing monsters.

“A job?” Becka’s eyebrows knit together. “I told you I can’t go on any jobs in the next couple weeks. I have exams —”

“I’m going to do this one solo,” I tell her.

At that, pure fury seeps into her eyes. “No way in hell. You know I hate when you do jobs without me. You get all scorched earth without my sobering influence.”

“This one should be pretty straightforward.” I reach into my pocket and pull out my phone.

The most recent newspaper article is already pulled up—a newlywed couple was found mysteriously murdered at a luxury hotel only a few hours away from here. I’ve taken enough of these cases to know that this is a simple haunting. All I’ll need to do is perform an exorcism. Even with the magical skills of a drunken otter, that should be easy-peasy.

“Lily...” Becka bites down on her lower lip hard enough to draw blood.

“I’ve gone on solo missions before,” I remind her.

“Yes. That’s why I don’t want you to go.” She blows out a breath, stirring a strand of blonde and pink hair. “You’re always...” She hesitates, seemingly deciding on the right word, before blurting out, “Reckless.”

“Reckless?” I quirk an eyebrow.

“You don’t see it, Lil, but I do. You seem to have a death wish or something—”

I snort before I can stop myself. “I can promise you that I most definitely do *not* have a death wish.”

There’s too much I need to do...like find the demon who murdered my parents and destroy him once and for all. And also, figure out how to actually destroy a demon once and for all, because so far, all monster-hunters know about demons is that they come from the realm of Chaos, and they are impossible to kill with human weapons. Becka has made me some bolts spiked with angel blood to see if they might work, but we haven’t found a demon so far to test them on.

I live and breathe for my chance at vengeance. It’s the only thing that gets me out of bed in the morning. There’s no way I’m going to throw away years and years of work. I refuse to leave this world until the monster who destroyed my life does first.

“I can talk to my professors and see if I can take my exams early...” Becka begins hesitantly.

“Becks.” I wrap my arm around her shoulders and pull her close. “I’ll be fine. Promise. This is an easy case. A quick in-and-out. Would it make you feel better if I checked in with you every day?”

She sniffs and turns away from me. “Every hour, bitch.”

“Every five hours?” I relent.

“Three.”

“What about when I’m sleeping?”

“That’s what alarm clocks are for,” Becka retorts. She snuffles again and then blows out a heavy, ragged breath. “I know you’re capable of doing this on your own, Lil, but I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if anything happened to you.”

“I’ll be fine.” I give her a quick squeeze. “We’ve handled hundreds and hundreds of ghosts.”

Becka straightens almost imperceptibly, seeming to come to some sort of mental resolution. “I’ll give you one week. If you’re not back by then, I’ll drive all the way down to the middle of freaking nowhere and drag your sorry ass back myself. And then, I’ll find a way to hex the shit out of you. Is that understood?”

Her tone brooks no room for argument.

I gape at her in disbelief. “Damn. You can be pretty scary sometimes.”

“Shut up and tell me about the case,” she demands, twisting on the floor so that she’s facing me.

“What about the party and getting laid?” I tease.

She narrows her eyes at me and scrubs her hand through her tangle of curls. “We can party when you get back. After all, you *sooo* owe me for giving me all these gray hairs.” She points to a blonde strand and wrinkles her nose. “Now...I guess we’d better go over how to perform an exorcism *again*. First, you need a vessel to trap the ghost...”

## TWO: JACKSON



“I ’m hungry,” I moan from the bench seat in the back of the Mustang, throwing out my arms dramatically.

“We’re not stopping.” Brooks grits his teeth as he weaves around a slow-moving RV on the interstate.

“I need to go to the bathroom.”

“You should have gone back in Oakland.”

“I have a cramp in my foot. I think it’s haunted.”

“You think your *foot* is haunted?” My brother’s lips wobble. Anyone else would take one look at Brooks in his faded duster, close-cropped golden hair, and the scar running across the top of his eyebrow and run away in terror.

But I know better.

I can tell Brooks is on the verge of cracking.

And all I need to do is give him an itty-bitty, *teeny-weeny* push over the edge.

At breakfast, I bet my twin brother, Orion, ten bucks that I could make Brooks smile today. Not a laugh or even a giggle—a proper smile, which for Brooks is as rare as a meteorite slashing apart the velvety black sky and hurling towards earth.

I’m not losing that bet.



Knowing I've got Brooks right where I want him, I prop my foot up on the back of my twin's seat, wiggle my toes in his ear, and whisper, "I want to suck your blood."

Brooks's dark eyes twinkle as his face breaks into a wide, rare smile, something I see through the rearview mirror.

*Got you, bro.*

*I'm ten dollars richer.*

"Get off me." Orion shoves my foot away with a scoff of distaste, then his black-painted nails immediately return to his knee, where he taps out an unfamiliar beat. "And sucking blood is for vampires, not ghosts. Didn't you pay any attention during Monster Hunting School?"

"Monster Hunting School" is what we call our childhood growing up as the offspring of Mark and Rebecca Bellua, two of the most notorious monster hunters in America. When our parents weren't off hunting vampires or bashing boggarts, they drilled us on every aspect of arcane magic and monster lore. Mom taught us how to swing a sword and drive a stake, and Dad taught us how to use magical symbols and runes to cast simple spells to bind monsters and protect ourselves.

Not that their knowledge and experience could save them when the time came. We still don't really know what happened to them—they left for a routine fairy-slaying job when we were fourteen, and they never came back.

Brooks, who's five years older than us, took over as our guardian until we were sixteen, and then he skipped town too. He had this misguided idea that he had to carry on the family business so we could go off to college and have normal lives.

But the monsters had other ideas.

And now the Belluas are back together again, the three of us hunting monsters on the road for an organization called the Vault.

"So what's this job?" I ask, wiggling my toes in Orion's face yet again. I removed my socks and shoes almost as soon as I entered the car hours earlier. If there's one thing I've learned from our extensive travels across the United States, it's

that you need to find comfort in whatever way possible. And that includes forgoing shoes whenever you get the chance. And pants—but I don't think my brothers would be fans of me sitting in the car in only my boxers. "I wasn't listening in the diner."

"Of course you weren't," Brooks snaps.

"It appears to be a standard haunting." Orion has his tablet in his lap, and he's scrolling through news stories and paranormal investigation forums, hunting for intel. "Two weeks ago, two newlyweds were found murdered in the honeymoon suite of the Bridgemont Hotel. Their bodies were sliced up, limbs severed, organs relocated to places they absolutely should not be. Pretty gruesome stuff. The number six was scrawled on the wall above the bed in their blood. The staff came running when they heard the screams, and when they entered, the room was completely empty apart from the bodies. There was no sign of anyone else having been there at all."

"Jealous ex-lover escaped out the window?" I arch an eyebrow.

"Nope." Orion shakes his head, his dark hair—slightly longer than mine—brushing his cheeks. "The windows were all locked from the inside. And they're not the first couple to die in the room, either. A little less than two months ago, an older couple, the Gilmores, were celebrating their silver wedding anniversary. They were found by the maid the next morning, drowned in the bathtub. The number six was written in the steam on the bathroom mirror.

"And six weeks before that, a couple from Arkansas were staying in the room. According to the crime scene photographs, the bodies had their bones broken and limbs contorted so that they formed—"

"Let me guess," Brooks pipes up. "A number six."

"So how do we know this is an actual haunting?" I stretch my legs across the seat, hoping like hell that Dictator Brooks will let us have a pit stop soon. My long, football player's legs weren't made for being cramped up in this hellhole of a car.

“This could be a serial killer with a mathematics fetish and a talent for picking locks—”

“The police have found no evidence. Not a single hair or fingerprint. Nothing on the security cameras in the hallway or on the property. Other couples have stayed in the room with nothing bad happening to them. But back in the sixties, a young couple booked the honeymoon suite for their wedding night. The wife poisoned her rich husband, took all his money, and ran off with the best man.

“The story on the hotel’s website is that the jilted groom still haunts the hotel, determined that no couple will have the happiness that he was denied. Up until recently, he’s been sticking to small stuff—cold spots, objects moving, strange things written on the mirror. Several guests have reported sightings of a man in an old-fashioned suit able to step through walls. But nothing grisly, until now.”

Orion flashes his tablet towards me, where a grainy photograph of a handsome man and a pretty woman stand side by side. The groom looks positively bewitched by the woman, but she seems either annoyed or uncomfortable—way more uncomfortable than a bride should look on her wedding day.

“Odd,” I say. What Orion’s describing isn’t normal behavior for ghosts. Usually, a ghost floats around, saying “woooo” and frightening women in nightgowns into falling downstairs, but they have to be hella pissed off to be able to affect the physical world. “I wonder what’s made it angry?”

“Exactly. It’s odd. Obviously, this ghost doesn’t like something that’s going on at the hotel. Their social media reveals that years ago, the hotel came under new management. The place has been slowly rotting for years, but this new guy brought in a ton of money and started doing up the place and inviting celebrities and influencers to stay there. Now, the hotel is popular and busier than ever. They’re doing a lot of renovation work to upgrade the rooms into luxury suites, so I suspect the ghost is trying to stop them from digging something up.” Orion flicks to a new tab and once again twists it for me to see.

This page shows a 3D rendering of a new addition to the hotel—modern and sleek, with a state-of-the-art swimming pool and even an arcade.

“So this isn’t unusual at all. It’s your garden variety haunting, and we’ll deal with it the way we always do...” Brooks bends over to punch the skip button on his Monster Hunting playlist.

The Creedence Clearwater Revival song “Bad Moon Rising” is replaced by a chipper Blue Oyster Cult riff. Orion’s face relaxes. He can’t listen to that CCR song anymore, not after—

*No.*

I shake off the memory. I don’t want to think about that night. There’s nothing we can do to change anything, and dwelling on it makes me...

It makes me feel useless. Like I failed my twin. Because I did. If I stuck with the training my parents laid out for me, instead of giving it all up when they died and Brooks left us, then I would have acted more quickly, and we could have saved—

*No. Stop thinking about it.*

“Do you think the Shadow will be there?” Orion asks in his soft voice, granting me the distraction my brain desperately seeks. His fingers continue to tap against his knee, the only outward sign of his distress.

“If he is, we’re going to fuck him up.” Brooks’s smile twists into something sinister. “That bastard is making us look bad.”

He certainly is. The Shadow is a fellow monster hunter who doesn’t seem to play by the rules.

Hunters in the Vault maintain a loose network—a private server on the dark web where we share information about monsters and coordinate major attacks. We keep a wiki of the different monsters we fought and what works and doesn’t work, and yeah—there’s an eBay-style marketplace for

weapons and magical talismans because that's how things roll on the dark web.

We're what happens when you tell a bunch of nerds who read far too many comic books as kids that monsters are real.

But the Shadow isn't part of our network. He's a rogue hunter. The network keeps tabs on all the lone rangers out there, but we have nothing on this guy. He's just that good. He beats us to our jobs, gets in, and gets out again without anyone having a memory of him being there. Then he takes his cash and disappears.

The only thing we know about him is that he uses charmed arrows to make his kills. It's sophisticated magic.

Thinking about those arrows sticking up out of wendigo corpses like porcupine quills makes me think of someone else who loved archery. I can see her long, fiery hair streaming behind her and the gold flecks in her dark eyes catching the light as she looses her arrows across the school field—

*Stop thinking about her.*

I'm all over the place today. It must have been that lumpy motel pillow I tried to sleep on last night. Or the three-cheese omelet I had for breakfast. I need to get my shit together. I need a clear head for work.

Easier said than done. No matter where I am or how much monster gore is splattered on my person, my thoughts always come back to Lily Dean.

We haven't seen her since prom night. And even though avoiding her is the right thing to do, it still tears me up inside.

Especially with the Shadow making us look bad, making me wonder if we even made the right decision to follow our parents into the slay trade. We've been showing up at hauntings and monster sightings only to find the problem sorted, and the only information people can tell us is that a mysterious stranger in a dark coat showed up a few days prior and took care of it.

But not this job. The Shadow seems to go for the flashier bait—demons and wendigos and vampires (oh my). Like

Brooks says, this is a by-the-books haunting, even if the ghost is now seriously powerful. The Shadow won't bother with the Bridgemont Hotel.

Which is *exactly* why we're going to take care of it.

We need a win. Or we're all going to go insane.



EVENTUALLY, my whining gets to Brooks, and he pulls the car over outside of Cambridge. While he fills up the tank and lovingly checks the spark plugs and caresses the windscreen wipers or whatever it is that car guys do, Orion and I run inside to piss and buy snacks.

“No maple bacon chips.” I shove the bag in his hands back on the shelf. “Last time you ate those, you let off maple-flavored farts all night, and I'm the one who has to share a bed with you.”

Orion makes a face, but he doesn't argue with me. He never does. He does kick me in the face as he climbs over me into the backseat, though. We have an unspoken rule that after every stop, we'll alternate who gets shotgun. I'm not sure that's the preferred seat in the car, though. Having to listen to Brooks's incessant whining and growling can make a man insane.

“Seat belts,” Brooks, the drill sergeant, snaps as he steers the car through the college town.

“Yes, sir!” I salute.

Orion cracks open his bag of non-maple chips.

We dodge cyclists and two student protests as we make our way—

All thought ceases as the stone gates of Harvard University loom ahead of us. A cold lump rises in my throat.

Orion's hand freezes, a handful of chips halfway to his mouth.

Brooks's hands on the wheel are bone white.

It's Harvard.

Beyond those gates is one of the most prestigious universities in the country and—

*Lily.*

*I know you're somewhere on this campus, Lily, wowing them with your brilliance. I hope that you're happy, and that you have tons of friends, and I hope you find someone who treats you better than we ever could.*

Orion's thinking about her, too. I can see the pain in my twin's eyes. It's impossible to read Brooks, but the scowl on his face is deeper than ever.

Orion turns to Brooks. "We've got time to go in and look for her. If you get me into the library, I could hack into their student directory and—"

"No."

"We wouldn't let her see us, I promise." His voice turns pleading. It cracks open my chest and squeezes my heart. "We'd just check up on her, make sure that she's safe—"

"She *is* safe," Brooks growls, jerking the wheel hard. The car bounces over the grass verge and around a corner. The university gates shrink and disappear from sight. "She's safe because we're nowhere near her. And we're going to keep it that way."

He's right. I know he's right. But why does it have to feel like utter shit?

I stare out the window at the red brick buildings as we leave Harvard University in our dust. The medieval-style towers, the tree-filled grounds, the ivy twisting through ancient stones.

Harvard was Lily's dream, and I know she would have made it. She was too clever not to.

Especially now that we're no longer in her life.

Even though it hurts. It hurts every day since the night of senior prom when we drove out of our small hometown of

Haddenwood and never looked back. It hurts to remember the last time I saw Lily's face. Her gold-flecked eyes were wide and terrified, and her soft skin was splattered with blood...

I turn to my brother, and I know he's thinking about it too. I don't bother to look at Brooks. He'll never give away how much she meant to him.

We drive on in stony silence.



SEVERAL HOURS LATER, we turn into the massive stone gates of the Bridgemont Hotel.

The Mustang's tires crunch on the grand gravel drive as we emerge onto an avenue of black ash trees, their branches almost bare, the piles of fallen leaves skittering and swelling in the breeze. The building looms in front of us—a towering edifice of stone rising from the woods like Dracula's castle, all turrets and balconies and rejuvenated 1920s grandeur.

The images Orion showed me told a different story—of a hotel in desperate need of a cash injection as it slowly crumbled away and was consumed by the mountains. The new owners have done a lot of work to make this place a must-visit destination.

“Fuuuuck,” Brooks breathes as he stares up at the building's façade. “We're arriving at Versailles.”

“Or The Overlook,” I mutter.

The Bridgemont Hotel is *wild*. Orion gave us a lecture about its history as we drove—it was built in the late nineteenth century as a luxury hotel and resort for the rich and famous. The mountains and forest offered skiing, hunting, fishing, and hiking, and the hotel attracted high-end guests with its spa using the thermal waters that run beneath it. Movie stars and railway tycoons used to stay for months at a time, taking part in lavish balls and all kinds of sordid shenanigans.

I've never seen anything like it.



Instinctively, I look to the tip of the north wing, to the enormous wraparound balcony on the twentieth floor that marks the honeymoon suite—the very suite we’ve come to study. Our childhood home could fit inside that balcony, and we haven’t even seen the room yet.

People like us don’t get to stay in places like this. Which reminds me...

I tap Brooks on the shoulder. “Do we even have the budget to stay here?”

As a kid, I never paid much attention to the logistics of what my parents did. I just knew that their job was to kill monsters, and somehow that put food on the table, not all of it healthy. But now that I’m in the business, I’ve had to learn how it all works, and it’s...interesting.

We talk about “jobs” and “clients” even though the clients don’t know they’ve hired us, and we don’t get paid for our work because that would involve having to reveal the existence of monsters to anyone reporting something odd, and that’s not how we roll.

Instead, hunters are supported by the Vault—a massive fund set up during the Victorian era by an insanely wealthy and eccentric benefactor who made it his life’s mission to rid the world of monsters. Today, the Vault is worth gazillions, but we have no idea who administers it.

Our monthly stipend keeps us fed on roadside diner fare, keeps the Mustang’s hungry tank full of gas, puts flat motel pillows beneath our weary skulls, and gives us all the ammunition and rare occult books we need. But even though Brooks is the one who deals with the finances, I know the budget doesn’t stretch to luxury hotels, even if they *are* haunted.

“Don’t worry.” Brooks pulls into guest parking. “We won’t be here long, and I’m counting on at least one of us being able to charm the concierge into giving us a good deal. It’s not as if the hotel is full—people aren’t that interested in spending their vacation at the site of several grisly, ghostly murders, even if the cops have vacated the premises.”

“Freaks,” Orion mutters as he steps out of the car, running his black fingernails through his wavy hair.

I don’t think he’s cut it since we took to the road two years ago, and it’s now down to his shoulders, which kind of works for him because it gives him a curtain to hide behind.

I smile at my brother. “Hey, if it means a night sleeping on 400-count Egyptian cotton sheets or a bathroom without mysterious stains, then I’m all in—”

But I don’t get to finish my sentence because out of the corner of my eye, I notice a figure in black emerge from the bushes beneath the honeymoon suite and grab hold of the railing on the first-floor balcony to hoist themselves up.

I don’t need to see their face to know who it is. Only another hunter would show up at this desolate place to sneak into a haunted hotel room that’s been the scene of a grisly murder.

And no one else on our official database would come here since we claimed this job.

It’s the Shadow.

Before Brooks can stop me, I take off across the parking lot, vault the low fence, and dart between the trees. My lungs burn, but I’m still in pretty good shape from my high school football days.

“Oh, no you don’t.” I leap on the Shadow just as they throw themselves into the air to vault over the first-floor balcony.

I slam into them and hold on. They’re lighter than I expect, and I tear their hands from the balcony railing with ease. The pair of us drop to the ground. Pain jolts through me as I land hard on my back, and the Shadow’s bony elbow punches me in the gut, driving the air from my lungs.

I gasp for air, but no way am I letting this fucker out of my sight. They’re wearing tight black leggings and a baggy black trench coat with occult symbols stitched down the sleeves. They try to get up, but I grab them around their narrow waist

and flip them onto their back, rolling on top so that I'm straddling them.

"Let's see who's been taking all our jobs," I growl.

The Shadow yelps and tries to grab my throat, but I duck underneath and tear their hood off.

The Shadow gasps and jerks away, hiding behind a curtain of fiery red hair. They slap at my face, their palm stinging my cheek. I grab their hands and pin them to the lawn, pressing my knees into their elbows so I can wipe their hair out of their face and—

*What?*

No.

It can't be.

I gasp. "Lily?"

## THREE: LILY



Jackson?  
Fuck. Fuck fuckabilly fuckaroo.  
I can't believe this.

But whether I believe it or not, it's happening. Jackson Bellua is straddling me, his knees pinning my arms and parts of him pressing against me that make my heart stutter in *very bad* ways, and he looks every bit as delectable as I remember from high school—same dark hair shaved close to his scalp, same arresting green stare, same chiseled jawline and high cheekbones.

Of all the fucking hunters to meet at the Bridgemont Hotel, it has to be Jackson fucking Bellua.

Jackson's eyes bore into mine, and I feel naked, my soul on display.

He leans over me, breathing hard, and his hair is all mussed, and he looks so fucking perfect that a homesick feeling wells up in my chest. All I want to do is reach up and wrap my arms around him and bury my face into his steady, dependable shoulders—

*Oh hell no.*

I won't let our history convince me that I have feelings for this guy.

Jackson Bellua is anything but dependable.

"What are you doing here?" I snap, twisting my head away. I can't bear to look into those verdant-green eyes anymore.

But Jackson's not having it. He grabs my chin with his free hand and jerks me back to face him. Jackson's eyes always had ripples at the edges, and they danced with mirth when he smiled, but I'll get no smile from him today. His eyes are brittle, guarded.

"What are *you* doing here? Shouldn't you be at college?"

"I'm exactly where I should be," I grit out.

And it's the truth. How could I just swan off to Harvard after what happened to my parents?

How can I stare into the face of pure evil and turn away?

How can I live knowing that this fucking bastard and his brothers lied to me my entire life and just brush it off to live a normal life? Normal died the night I came home and found my parents brutally murdered by demons. Normal died the night my prom date, Chase, attacked me with teeth and claws that were most definitely *not* human.

Normal was obliterated the night my three best friends betrayed me.

Sometimes, when I close my eyes, I can see Chase's face change and distort, his mouth elongating into a wolfish snout and fur growing on his arms and legs. And then I can see the Bellua brothers charging at him with their weapons raised, prepared to hurt him, kill him, *end* him. Because he was a monster.

But worse than any of that are the times I see my parents. Dad, sitting in his wheelchair, blood smearing the front of his bathrobe. And my mother, torn to pieces, her body used as a ritualistic sacrifice...and that dark figure standing in the center of my living room.

“Daisy, you can’t be here. It’s dangerous.” Jackson’s voice drags my attention back to the present.

“Damn right it is. Get off me,” I growl out. “Or I will cry for help and get you arrested faster than you can say, ‘my prom date turned into a werewolf.’”

Jackson’s expression drops, like he’s suddenly realized that he’s holding me down. He scrambles off me, and I get to my feet and retrieve my backpack from where I stashed it behind a bush, hoping Jackson didn’t break any of Becka’s vials when he was trying to pin me down. I brush dead leaves off my shoulders and wish I was holding my crossbow. That thing made me feel safe.

Jackson’s thwarted my plan to get into the crime scene from the balcony, but there are other ways to get a look at that room. I take off toward the entrance of the hotel, disobeying every bone in my body that wants me to turn around and go back to Jackson.

A dark shadow steps in front of me, blocking my path to the hotel doors.

Of course I should’ve known Jackson Bellua wouldn’t be alone. He has two shadows, after all.

“Lily fucking Dean,” Brooks’s dark, seductive voice booms. “You’re leaving. Now.”

*Fucking Brooks.*

I don’t step back. I don’t cower. I don’t back down. I won’t give Brooks Bellua the satisfaction of knowing what the sound of his voice does to me, the way it makes liquid heat pulse between my legs.

I’m not surprised Brooks is here. He wouldn’t let Jackson go out hunting on his own. Brooks always has to be in everyone’s business.

Once a bossy asshole, always a bossy asshole.

I sweep my gaze slowly over him, forcing my features to remain passive as I take in his close-cropped hair, the five-o’clock shadow on his sharp jawline, and those cheekbones

that poets write sonnets about. The heat inside me bubbles and pops.

Brooks's fathomless eyes are performing the same study of me. They're so deep and dark that I can get pulled under by them if I'm not careful. His mouth curls up a little in the corner, and a line appears between his eyebrows.

A smirk or a frown?

He plants his hand on my stomach and gives me a gentle nudge in the direction of the woods. It's not violent, but it is commanding—Brooks is used to getting exactly what he wants.

Sparks of fire shoot through my body where his fingers touch, like one of Becka's potions is sparking to life inside of me, igniting feelings that I've done my best to keep hidden.

"Get your hand off me, or I'll remove it myself." I reach into the pocket of my coat and slide out the silver-tipped, double-edged blade I keep there.

Quenched in holy water and dedicated to Sekmet, the Egyptian goddess of war, this weapon will stop most monsters in their tracks. Unlike my favorite crossbow, it's also portable. *And* it can ugly up Brooks's face—a crime against humanity, but one I'm willing to commit to prove my point.

I press my thighs together, but the fire inside me only burns brighter.

*Please don't let him see what he does to me.*

*Please don't let him know how much I've missed him.*

"This is a dangerous place. You shouldn't be here. You should be at school." His scowl is a dark slash on his stupidly handsome face.

"You're not the boss of me, Brooks Bellua. You don't tell me what to do."

"The hell I don't." His hand remains on my stomach. The tips of his fingers curl ever so slightly, acquiescing to the contours of my abs and rib cage, to the very edge of my tit.

His touch is so warm, so confident. His shoulders shudder with tension, and his lip curls again, but this time I get the distinct sense that it's involuntary, that he's holding himself back from...

From what? I don't know. But some savage, self-destructive part of me wants to find out.

Staring into those deep pools of inky darkness, I'm momentarily knocked about by a memory I've tried to push to the back of my mind, to another lifetime, when I confronted Brooks in an alley behind a dress shop, wearing my prom dress, and he...

And we...

The memory of his lips searing mine pummels me, loosening my grip just as Brooks goes for my knife.

He lunges at me, and I'm right back there again, yielding to him as he shoved me up against that wall and devoured me like he was a man lost in the desert, and I was his life-saving drink...

It was the week of my school prom, and Brooks made a surprise return to Haddenwood to enlist Jackson and Orion to help him catch a werewolf. Of course, I didn't know this because he didn't tell me a thing. All I knew was that the twins refused to go to prom with me, and the man who left me on my sixteenth birthday saw me in a shop window in my prom dress and dragged me into an alley to argue with me, and we ended up kissing.

My first kiss.

I've kissed other men since, most of them mistakes, but it's Brooks's lips I still feel on mine when I close my eyes at night. Not that I'll ever tell him that.

Through the years, I've told myself over and over what I would do if I ever ran into the Bellua brothers again. It's not like I didn't figure it was inevitable—when I started digging into the world of monsters, I learned that their family name carries a lot of weight in the Vault.



And I was not going to give them the satisfaction of treating me like poor, innocent Lily who doesn't have a clue. They will deal with me as an equal, or not at all.

So I rein in my battered heart, I stamp down the churning emotions, and I duck beneath Brooks's huge arm. I twist and come up beside him, the tip of my blade pressing into his Adam's apple.

I smirk up at Brooks like he's a bug I'm about to squash.

“Get. Your. Hand. Off. Me.”

Even with the knife digging into his skin, it takes Brooks a good seven seconds to remove his hand from me. I'm tempted to scratch him, just to see if the great Brooks Bellua bleeds red like the rest of us.

But the way I feel now, I need to put as much distance between us as possible. So I lower the knife, and he steps back.

When he does, I recognize a third figure standing behind him, his once gangly teenage arms now ripped AF and covered with beautiful tattoos, his face only just visible behind a curtain of dark, wavy hair.

“Lily?” Orion's rippled green eyes swim with pain.

A hard lump rises in my throat. Despite everything, it's hardest for me to hate him. I want to tell him that I like his hair long. It suits him.

But I don't.

“Great,” I grumble under my breath instead. “All the Merry Men are here.”

“You need to leave.” Brooks nods toward the parking lot.

I glance over and notice he's parked his beautiful '67 Mustang GT next to my beaten-up old Mazda. The lump in my throat expands.

“This is a dangerous place. Jackson will escort you back to campus—”

“Dude, didn’t you see her before?” Jackson says. “She was trying to climb the side of the hotel. *She’s* the Shadow.”

Brooks’s eyes widen, and his mouth opens and shuts a few times.

Pride surges through me that I managed to disarm him. I don’t know if I’ve ever seen him surprised before.

He manages to gain control of himself. “Don’t be ridiculous. She can’t be the Shadow. She’s *Lily*.”

But he doesn’t sound so sure. He may not have seen me trying to scale the balconies, but he did have my knife pressed against his throat. He’d have felt its magic.

“Is that what you guys call me?” I smirk, slipping the knife back into my pocket. “How cute. Well, I’ll be on my way—”

“Lily, are we even going to talk about this?” Jackson’s voice rises as he pleads with me. “Why aren’t you at school? Why are you chasing monsters? Why—”

“Are we going to talk about what happened on prom night?” I demand, glaring at each of them in turn.

I’m shaking all over, I’m so angry. How fucking *dare* they? They’re the ones who left me, and they think they have the right to stand here and demand I give them answers?

*Blood sticking to my hands as I race across the lawn...*

*Brooks’s eyes peering at me through the windshield of his car as I sob...*

*The ‘Stang pulling away, leaving me alone in the aftermath of my parents’ murder...*

Brooks and Jackson exchange a glance that’s heavy with meaning. Orion opens his mouth, but Brooks cuts him off. “Our business is our own. We did what we did to protect you —”

“You can protect two things, Brooks—jack and shit.”

A tiny noise, something akin to a growl, rattles his chest. Old Lily might’ve found it sexy. New Lily finds it sexy...but also irritating as fuck. Just who does he think he is?

“You have to leave,” he insists. “This hotel is dangerous. That’s the most powerful ghost we’ve ever—”

“I’m aware of that, shit-for-brains.” I dust off my hands. “That’s why I’m here. I have a job to do.”

Brooks reaches for me again, but I duck under his arm and race up the grand stone staircase to the hotel’s entrance. They yell behind me, but I don’t stop or turn around. I’m not going to let the Bellua brothers get in front of me, not even for a chance to scope out the gold-encrusted lobby.

The spirits are on my side because when I approach the towering main desk, there’s no line. The front desk supervisor is a tall, willowy man who could easily apply for a job as Lurch in *The Addams Family*. His name tag reads, “Hello, I’m Robert.”

I walk right up to the desk, trying to look like I belong in this crazy luxury hotel.

Robert beams, his papery skin crinkling. “Welcome to the newly refurbished and reopened Bridgemont Hotel. How may I help you—”

“Hello, Robert. I’d like to book a week’s stay in the honeymoon suite—”

Something hard digs into my side.

I yelp and twist, but Brooks has already shoved his way in front of me.

“We’re going to take the honeymoon suite,” he declares. “We’ll pay cash up front.”

“I’m afraid that we’re not currently booking that room.”

“I want to talk to the owners,” Brooks growls.

“I’m afraid that’s not possible. The owners are not at the hotel, and they’re not contactable at this time.” Robert steepled his fingers together and nods apologetically at both of us. “But for such a beautiful couple, I can offer you a range of other options, including our opulent Diamond Suite, with its view across the—”

“I’m not here with *her*,” Brooks snaps, his whole body shaking with rage.

*You don’t have to sound so offended*, I think bitterly.

“I *demand* the honeymoon suite.” I reach into my pocket and slam down the wad of cash I brought. “Only that room will do. It’s for...sentimental reasons. I’ll make it worth your while.”

Robert shifts uncomfortably. “Ma’am, you know there was a most unfortunate incident there just a couple of weeks ago? We’ve only just cleaned the carpets—”

“I don’t care. It’s that suite, or I turn around and go home.” I puff out my lower lip and run my fingertip over his knuckles.

I’ve learned a few tricks over the years to help me talk my way into and out of some crazy situations, and the “beguiling” charm Becka made for me helps a little, too.

“Whatever she’s paying.” Brooks opens his wallet and removes one of those fancy black credit cards. “My brothers and I will double it.”

Where the fuck did he get *that* card? Shit, I hadn’t planned on the Belluas being flush. I’m racking my brain for a trick I can pull or which one of Becka’s charms in my backpack will turn Brooks into a toad when dearest Robert shakes his head.

“I’m afraid that the honeymoon suite doesn’t have enough beds for your party of three, sir. It’s a little old-fashioned, I know, but that’s hotel policy.” He smiles sadly.

“We don’t mind sharing,” Jackson pipes up.

“I’m afraid it’s out of the question. We can only allow extra guests to sleep in a room if they pay for a rollout cot, but all the cots are in use at the moment. We do have a nice triple near the spa—”

“*Brooks*, we can’t afford two rooms,” Orion hisses.

“That works for me.” I grin. “They can take that triple room, and I’ll have the honeymoon suite all to myself.”

“No, *I’ll* take the honeymoon suite,” Brooks snaps. “The twins will sleep in the car.”

“Excuse *me?*” Jackson yelps. “It’s bad enough sitting in that rust bucket all day long! I’m not sleeping with the gearshift up my asshole. You take the car. Orion and I will have the honeymoon bed.”

“I’m taking the honeymoon suite.” Brooks’s voice is scarily low.

Jackson steps back, his features tense.

“No, you are not,” I snap.

“Yes, I am.”

Brooks glares at me. I glare right back. I know him better than he knows himself. He’s not going to budge, and neither am I. There’s no way out of this—

“Fine, my *husband* and I will take the room,” I say through gritted teeth. “Together.”

Brooks’s whole body jerks, his eyes flickering with surprise.

*Twice in one day I’ve surprised you. Take that, bitch.*

Robert looks nervous. “Are...are you sure? There’s only one bed in that room, and you two don’t seem...”

“We don’t seem *what?*” Brooks asks with a sneer, draping an arm around my shoulder. I tense automatically even as prickles of heat race across my skin. “We don’t seem like a couple who are madly in love?”

“No, no, I didn’t say that.” Robert plasters a smile on his wizened face that manages to look *mostly* sincere. “Of course, I’ll have your room keys prepared for you. If you could fill out this information, I’ll get you checked in. Welcome to the Bridgemont Hotel. I hope you have a pleasant stay.”

“Not likely,” I whisper under my breath.

Brooks reaches for the paper, but I grab it and start filling out my own information.

Besides, I take a twisted amount of satisfaction filling in our names as Lily and Brooks Dean. There's no way in hell I'm going to be Lily *Bellua*. Yuck.

Robert clears his throat. "There's a \$500 deposit, and the honeymoon suite and extra room come to \$1860 per night—"

"My husband will take care of the room charges." I smile sweetly.

Brooks scowls, but he puts down his black card. Good boy.

"I'll take your things." A man appears at my side. He's a little older than me, with a friendly smile and dark hair that falls over his eyes. "I'm Freddie, and I'll be your concierge. If there's anything I can do to make your stay a happy one, then don't hesitate to let me know."

"Can you slip a little cyanide into my husband's tea?" I ask, batting my eyelashes sweetly and jabbing a finger at the domineering male beside me. "That would be so sweet of you."

Brooks growls. Literally *growls*, like a wild animal protecting his territory. Jackson makes a choking noise, and Orion stares at his shoes. Freddie's smile remains plastered on his face, but his eyes betray his desperate desire to get the fuck away from here.

*Me too, Freddie. Me too.*

I hand Freddie my backpack, and he slings it over his shoulder alongside Brooks's duffel and nods to the elevator

"Shall we? I'll show you to your room while your brothers check in," Freddie offers.

"No, no, we'll come with you." Jackson practically skips forward. "We wouldn't want to miss the chance to make sure the happy couple have everything they could possibly need for an unforgettable weekend."

## FOUR: LILY



Stupid Bellua brothers.

Stupid Brooks.

And stupid Jackson.

And stupid Ori—

Well, he's the only brother I'm not overly mad at. There's something about the quiet man that prohibits me from being angry at him for longer than a few minutes.

But still...

Stupid, stalkerish, irritating, pain-in-my-ass Belluas.

I follow Freddie across the lobby as he attempts to engage the twins in conversation. Jackson, of course, smiles and laughs in all the right places, but Orion just nods contemplatively. I can feel his eyes on me like laser beams, despite my steadfast determination to not look over at him. At any of them.

How dare they come back into my life and act like everything's okay? Like they didn't abandon me the one day I needed them most of all? Like they weren't a part of the lowest period I've ever experienced, where I found myself swimming in a fathomless black hole I feared I'd never escape from?

I bite down on my lower lip hard enough to draw blood as Brooks once again slings an arm over my shoulder and pulls me close to his chest. It's not merely for show—there's a possessiveness in the movement that he directs at Freddie whenever the young man glances over at me.

It makes my hackles rise.

Fighting every instinct in my body not to flip the idiot to the ground, I survey the lobby instead.

According to my research, the Bridgemont was built in the late nineteenth century. Three-tiered chandeliers dangle from the ceiling like earrings, illuminating a spacious lobby furnished in shades of red and burnished yellow, the conflicting colors somehow elegant instead of trashy. Gold drips from the rococo-style moldings. A grand piano rests against the far wall, though no one is currently playing it. A fire burns brightly in the hearth directly across from a collection of circular mahogany tables.

Only one table is currently occupied, and I spot an older couple holding hands.

“So...which two of you are the happy couple?” Freddie offers me a cheeky smile over his shoulder, and I bite down on my lower lip.

This time, it's not because I'm annoyed with anyone. I've perfected a certain level of...seduction over the years, even without Becka's charms.

Sure, I never had to seduce someone for information with three overbearing assholes fluttering around me, but stranger things have been done before. I once stabbed six vampires without getting a single drop of blood on me. That shit isn't easy, let me tell you.

“That would be us,” I say in a sultry voice, squeezing Brooks's arm hard enough for him to grunt out in pain. Good. “But my idiotic husband doesn't believe in a traditional marriage.” I pout dramatically as I flutter my ringless finger in his direction. “We have more of an...open arrangement.”



I give the concierge a languid once-over as Brooks stiffens by my side.

“Oh.” Freddie’s eyebrows lift in surprise, and a slow grin unfurls on his face.

“Sometimes,” I continue in a conspiratorial whisper, “I take all three of them to bed with me. But we’re always looking for a fifth...”

“For fuck’s sake, Lily,” Brooks growls as I bite down on my chuckle.

“Oh, Toby,” a dramatic voice coos, cutting off my response. “Look at that couple over there. They are like us at their age, before you became so weak and diffident. Oh, to be young and in love!”

All five of us turn towards the couple I noted earlier, only they’ve moved away from the table and now stand directly beside us.

The woman is older, with graying hair coiled into tight ringlets that bounce around her shoulders. She wears a huge, drooping, Audrey Hepburn hat that shadows her aged face. A lace bathrobe sits open over a black satin tank top and matching pajama bottoms. Positioned between long fingers is a cigarette holder, despite the huge sign declaring NO SMOKING ALLOWED directly behind her.

The man appears to be her age, with pale, nearly translucent skin and wispy white hair combed in such a way that it covers an obvious bald spot on the top of his head. Unlike his wife, who looks as if she’s ready for bed, he wears a gray suit with cuff links and a stark-white collar pulled all the way up to the bottom of his cheeks.

“Do you remember when we first came to the Bridgemont for our honeymoon?” the woman asks with an exaggerated sigh, folding herself across the piano like a weeping damsel in a storybook. “Why don’t you ever do nice things for me anymore? Why don’t you ever put your arm around me? Claim me? Fight for me? Do you not love me anymore?”

“Helena...” The man heaves out a ragged breath as he watches his wife take a long drag of her cigarette.

Smoke wafts in the air in a dark-gray cloud.

Freddie’s eyebrows twitch at the blatant display of rule-breaking, but he doesn’t comment.

“Enjoy it while it lasts,” Helena tells us with another dramatic sigh. “Because once you get to our age, you’ll find that you can’t stand being in the same room with the one you chose to marry.”

This is punctuated with a pointed look at her husband, who has turned red in the face—though I can’t tell if it’s in embarrassment or anger.

Um...okay, then.

Never marry, and remain a black widow forever—duly noted.

“It was nice meeting you,” Jackson says cordially, lifting his hand in farewell.

Helena eyes him coyly from beneath the rim of her hat.

“You too, darling. We’ll be seeing you around.” She thrusts her hand out in her husband’s direction and snaps out, “Toby! Help me down!”

He scurries towards her with his metaphorical tail between his legs.

“Oh god,” I murmur to no one in particular as we move away from them. “Please don’t tell me all marriages end up like that. I would rather pluck my own eyes out.”

“I remember when you used to be a closeted romantic,” Jackson quips, filing into the tiny elevator and stepping so close I can feel the heat his body emits in palpable waves.

“And I remember when I was able to rely on you three to always be there for me,” I retort dryly. “My, my...how times have changed.”

Orion flinches nearly imperceptibly at my words, his black-painted nails coming down to tap against his thigh.

That's one thing that hasn't changed about Orion—even in high school, he always decorated his nails.

The memory conjures a smile to my face...but that smile immediately fades when all of the Bellua brothers crowd in around me.

Ugh. Why do they have to smell so good?

And why can't I resist the urge to sniff them?

*Dammit, Lily! Do better.*

Freddie moves to the front corner of the elevator and presses the button to the very top floor.

“The honeymoon suite is on the twentieth floor,” he says conversationally as the box begins to rise.

I try to focus on his words. I honestly do, but my entire attention is fixated on every single spot my skin connects with one of the Bellua brothers.

Brooks's arm caressing my own.

Orion's breath on the back of my neck, his hand lightly grazing my waist as if he means to keep himself steady.

Jackson's fingers brushing mine—so lightly I might believe it to be accidental if his eyes didn't repeatedly flick in my direction, sparking with liquid heat that shoots straight to my core.

Nope.

Not falling for their bullshit again.

Steeling my heart against these idiotic boys, I turn towards Freddie.

“So how long have you been working at the hotel?” I question curiously as the display at the top of the elevator showing us what floor we're on steadily increases.

Five.

Six.

Seven.

Eight.

“Oh.” Freddie seems surprised to be addressed directly, and a blush paints his cheeks. “I’m a new recruit. The new owner hired me when he took over the hotel. I have a background in high-end establishments, and they needed someone to improve guest services, make sure everyone got the five-star treatment.”

“You mean it’s your dream to work at a hotel in the middle of nowhere known for gruesome murders?” Brooks retorts.

I elbow him in the stomach.

Freddie seems nonplussed by Brooks’s asshole observation.

“No,” he admits, shrugging. “It’s all rather unfortunate. But apart from a few isolated incidents, the Bridgemont has been transformed. You should have seen how shabby this place used to be. It’s great work experience to be a part of making that happen. I eventually want to run my own hotel as a manager. But it’s all about leveling up, you know? Starting from the bottom and moving to the top.”

“I admire a man who puts in...hard work,” I purr, the sexual innuendo impossible to miss. I even bat my long lashes for good measure.

Surprisingly, it’s Orion who growls sharply, though when I glance at him in surprise, his lips are pressed together, and he’s staring pointedly at a spot over my shoulder.

Weird.

“Oh, yes. Um...” Freddie rakes his fingers through his dark hair just as the elevator comes to a stop with a beep.

When I glance up, however, I see that it’s not our floor—we’ve stopped at the fifteenth instead.

The silver doors slide open, and all five of us stare at the man standing on the other side.

“What the fuck?” Jackson barks in alarm as the man wiggles his way into the tight space.

He appears to be about sixty or seventy years old, give or take, and has dark-blond hair swept away from a smooth-shaven face.

But that's not why all five of us gape at him.

No, it's because the man is wearing a pair of jean shorts so tiny they leave very little to the imagination. When he turns, the material is so far up his ass crack, both of his cheeks are hanging out. A tool belt is wrapped snugly around his waist, various pieces of equipment poking from it. The white tank top he wears is cut in a steep V that travels directly to the waistband of his shorts, leaving a whole bunch of hairy chest on display.

He has a hammer slung lazily over his shoulder as he continues to move into the elevator, butt first.

"Beep. Beep. Beep," he singsongs in a piss-poor impersonation of a school bus backing up. He stops when he's directly in front of Brooks and wiggles his ass from side to side. "Excuse me, young sir. Just trying to get comfy in this tiny box. Heavy load incoming!"

"Jesus Christ." Brooks scowls with a look of disgust.

Abruptly, the strange man drops his hammer to the floor and then exaggeratedly bends over, shoving his ass against Brooks in the process.

"Well, would you look at that! I dropped my *strong* and *sturdy* and *long* hammer. Clean up on level sixty-nine!" He chuckles impishly at his own joke. "Would any of you strapping young men help me retrieve it?"

All of this is said with his ass still in the air, wiggling back and forth as his fingers continually graze the handle of the tool without ever grabbing onto it.

Jackson, bless his soul, looks as if he can't decide whether to burst out laughing or cringe in sympathy at his brother's predicament. He settles on saving Brooks by bending down, grabbing the hammer, and handing it to the old man.

"Why, thank you, kind sir," the stranger purrs, his fingers grazing Jackson's longer than appropriate.

The elevator dings to another stop, but this time on the nineteenth floor.

“Well, toodles, my new friends! I need to drill *nice* and *deep* into the walls on this floor. Have to finish constructing the *slippery, wet* pool. Please let me know if you ever require any assistance. I have a tool for *every* occasion. I’m quite *handy* when you need me to be.” He tosses a wink in my direction as I gape, momentarily at a loss for words.

It’s not often someone leaves me speechless, but holy crap.

Freddie winces in sympathy as the door slides shut, hiding Pervy McPervyson—who has once again dropped his hammer directly in front of the elevator door and is attempting to pick it up—from view.

“Sorry about him. Old Man Rodney has been the maintenance worker here as long as I can remember and has been known to be...a little...um...forward with the guests.” Freddie awkwardly scratches at the back of his neck. “Don’t worry. The man’s harmless. He just likes to make people uncomfortable however he sees fit.”

Brooks shudders dramatically.

“So. Much. Hair,” Jackson croaks. “Did you see the hair coming out of his—”

“I tried not to look,” Brooks cuts in.

Just as the elevator finally—fucking *finally*—comes to a stop at our floor, Orion pipes up for the first time, his voice caressing my skin like a cool spring wind.

But then his words register.

“Isn’t the pool for this hotel on the *first* floor?”

## FIVE: BROOKS



I'm in a grumpy-as-fuck mood as I practically push my way to the front of the group and stalk towards the damn honeymoon suite.

I know my ire isn't directed at any one person in particular, not even the creep from the elevator, but my emotions are all over the place at the moment. My brain is a goddamn war zone—guns firing, bombs detonating, screams echoing. And this entire battle started in the name of one woman and one woman alone.

Lily Dean.

Lily *fucking* Dean.

I can't stop my gaze from sliding towards her as she moves gracefully down the hall, her red lips set into a perfectly straight line. Has she always moved that felicitously, as if she's floating on air? She reminds me of a predator that isn't just out for the hunt...but for the kill. There's a sort of lethal intensity in her hazel eyes that quite literally steals the breath from my lungs. I'm nearly positive that darkness wasn't there when I saw her last.

Did we do that?

Did *I* do that?

Unwittingly, my mind chooses that moment to conjure up the memory of Lily the last time I saw her.

*Tears streaking down her cheeks...*

*Her orange and red hair disheveled...*

*That damn prom dress cascading around her ankles like silk...and covered in blood...*

She needed me that night, and I did what I always do—ran like my life depended on it. No...not my life. *Her* life. I turned the love of my life away without even a hint of remorse or regret, though inwardly, I felt as if my heart was cracking in two.

But I wanted—no, I *needed*—her away from the supernatural world and the dangers it entails.

I needed her away from Orion.

My teeth grit together with an audible snapping sound as I resist the urge to look over at her once again. I know she'll be standing between my two younger brothers as they vie for her attention. Well, Jackson will. Orion will just stare gloomily at the carpet in that emo-depressed way he does everything nowadays. He thinks his life is over after what happened to him on prom night...

I force that memory out of my head and finally reach the door at the end of the hall.

The honeymoon suite.

Gag me.

I'm not the romantic type, but even I can concede that the Bridgemont hotel is the perfect spot for a couple in love...if that couple were Gomez and Morticia Addams. It's beautiful in a gothic kind of way—grand and shaded in dark mahogany and gold filigree. The new owners have made the place look like a million bucks, which is about what our room is costing.

But despite appearances, everything about this building is...depressing. Perhaps even the hotel knows the horrors that have occurred within its walls and is attempting to reflect it.



I shake the macabre thought from my head as I extend my hand, waiting for Lily to give me the key.

The damn girl simply rolls her eyes, shoulders me out of the way, and then places the ornate brass monstrosity into the lock. Yes, an actual key. Apparently, this hotel doesn't believe in keycards or modern appliances. Rich people must find this backwardness *fun*.

“Well, this is the honeymoon suite,” the simpering fool, Freddie, says as he walks in after us, still holding our bags.

I completely forgot he was even here, my attention consumed by Lily Dean.

Always Lily Dean.

I mentally berate myself for not keeping my guard up as I move farther into the room, studying it with the keen eye only a seasoned hunter has. But that “keen” eye turns into a murder eye when I see Lily flash Freddie a beguiling smile, one that has a dimple making an appearance in her cheek.

A blush rises up his neck as he accepts the tip Lily offers him.

What the fuck does he think he's doing?

Doesn't he know that this is the fucking *honeymoon* suite? As in...for newlyweds? Who is he to hit on my girl while I'm in the room—

No.

I shake my head adamantly, though I swear my brain has become infested with wispy cotton balls.

Not my girl.

Never my girl.

A growl builds up from Orion's throat as he glares at the other man, and I know I need to get Freddie out of here. Soon. And not just for my sake.

“That'll be all,” I say briskly, placing a hand in the center of Freddie's back and all but shoving him out of the room.

Freddie's lips thin even farther. "Do you two need directions to your own room?"

This is directed at Jackson and Orion. The former simply broadens his smile, while the latter curls his hands into fists.

Orion never used to have a short temper, but that all changed after the...incident.

"We'll be fine. Thank you!" Jackson doesn't wait for Freddie to reply before slamming the door in the stunned man's face.

Only then does the growl reverberating through Orion's chest dissipate as he sags against an armchair.

"Good grief," my young brother murmurs, too low for Lily or even Jackson to hear.

I place a reassuring hand on his shoulder and give it a squeeze.

Lily doesn't even seem to notice or care about the commotion that just occurred. She's vigorously unpacking her suitcase, humming softly under her breath. My heart judders painfully in my chest at the sound.

How many times has Lily Dean walked around my kitchen, humming and smiling as if she hasn't a care in the world?

I miss that.

I miss *her*.

Fuck.

I scrub a hand down my face as I finally survey the room we've found ourselves in. I don't know what I expected. Blood stains on the walls? Chalk in a perfect outline of a dead body on the floor? Human flesh? Broken furniture?

Instead, the room seems perfectly normal, not a single thing out of place. Well, it's perfectly normal and also completely *bonkers*.

The huge, heart-shaped bed dominates the center of the room, and the dresser seems to be brand new, not a scratch or

indent on the mahogany surface. A molded loveseat faces a roaring fireplace with an enormous television mounted overhead. One glance confirms the bathroom is just as extravagant, with a golden tub capable of fitting six people, a walk-in shower, and a huge vanity.

“Is it just me, or is it a little morbid that they already opened this room so soon after the murders?” Jackson muses lazily, sprawling on the bed as if he owns the place. “I heard that they completely redecorated. Probably because of all the blood.” He shudders dramatically.

Lily doesn’t even spare him a glance as she pulls out an honest-to-God crossbow from the bag. She checks to make sure a bolt is loaded before moving to the bed and hiding it between the mattress and headboard.

I’m pretty sure I’m not the only one of us gaping. Lily used to be on the archery team at school, but that was because she was obsessed with the elves in *Lord of the Rings*. Now she has a *crossbow*?

Jackson’s jaw practically unhinges. “Um...”

Lily ignores him and begins strapping tiny blades onto her body—a dagger in the sleeve of her shirt, another in a thigh holster, a third in her boot. They look to be charmed with various runes and crystals. She does all of this mechanically, almost robotically, as if this is an everyday occurrence.

What the hell happened to turn my sweet, pink-loving, giggling Lily Dean into this...knife-wielding badass?

And why does the sight of her decked out in blades turn me on so much?

“Um, Daisy?” Jackson tries again, but she continues to ignore him as she pulls out a video camera and positions it on the fireplace mantel, facing the bed.

Jackson practically chokes on his own spit, and Orion’s face drains of color.

That finally elicits a reaction from Lily, and she rolls her eyes dramatically.

“It’s an infrared camera,” she explains, her tone suggesting we’re imbeciles for not understanding that sooner.

I have the irresistible urge to smack my hand down on her plump ass for acting like such a brat. It takes all of my ironclad self-control not to bend her over my knee and—

“What are those?” Orion asks softly, pulling me out of my lust-filled fantasies.

I shake my head once to clear it—cursing myself and my dick—before focusing back on Lily.

She holds two objects in her hands and passes one to Orion, who takes it gingerly. It’s a monitor, but instead of a screen, it’s inlaid with a bright-blue crystal and covered in more runes and magic notations.

“Have you never seen an EMP reader before?” One of her brows quirks in amusement, and a blush paints Orion’s cheeks.

“Of course we have,” he mumbles, lowering his head so his dark hair obscures his features from view. “Just not...any that look like these.”

“Oh, you hunters. So obsessed with the old ways.” She shakes her head in mock disappointment as I gape at her.

“What the fuck do you mean by that?” I demand, feeling slightly indignant, a little turned on, and a whole lot of pissed the fuck off.

She arches a brow. “What do you think I mean?”

The retort I want to make dies on my lips when Jackson finally moves off the bed to stand between us. He gives me an imploring look, one that has me physically biting my lower lip to keep the impending insult at bay, before turning towards Lily.

“Sorry about Brooks. You know how he can be.” He tries for a cheeky smile.

She scoffs. “A condescending asshole?”

Jackson doesn’t even blink. “Yup.”

“Jackass,” I mumble, but my temper has finally settled, and I’m able to relax against the wall, my arms crossed over my chest.

“Everybody calm?” Jackson glances between me and Lily before furtively shifting his gaze to Orion, who still looks dejectedly at the ground. Seeing that we’re not in danger of stabbing one another, Jackson heaves out a breath and says to me, “Good. What’s the plan now?”

I open my mouth to respond when Lily once a-fucking-gain talks over me.

“He’s not the boss of me.” She points an accusatory finger in my direction. “This is my hunt, not yours. You guys insist on being here, fine. But don’t get in my way.”

“And just how many years of experience do you have, baby?” I ask in the most condescending tone I can muster.

I know it hits the mark when her cheeks pinken with anger.

“You have no idea what the fuck I’ve been through, Brooks,” she snaps.

And something in her eyes gives me pause.

I can’t describe the emotion percolating in those hazel orbs, but it’s heady enough to smash my lips together.

Pain.

Horror.

Anguish.

Before I can take a closer look—before I can peel away the mask she seems to wear like armor—she takes a shuddering breath and says, “I’m going down to the lobby to set up more equipment. Call me if any of you get your dick bitten off by a poltergeist. I’ll try not to laugh.”

She stomps away before any of us can comment.

## SIX: LILY



I'm fuming as I get back into the elevator. Becka's crystals clang together in my bag when I literally punch the button for the lobby with my fist.

*Take that, stupid elevator with your stupid uppey-downyness.*

Brooks hasn't changed. Not one fucking bit.

No. That's a lie. Somehow—and I don't know how this is even physically possible—he's shoved that pointy stick even farther up his ass.

I'm surprised it's not tickling his tonsils by now.

Brooks and I have always had this verbal sparring thing going on. He's five years older than me and the twins, and he lords it over us. From the first day that I hopped over the fence into the Belluas' backyard in my daisy sundress and started playing "monster hunter" with them, Brooks has insisted on being in charge of every game. The twins just let him do it, but I'm always the one who pushes back.

Only, it turns out, none of it was a game at all. All those years we were friends, and they never bothered to tell me the truth—that all the monsters, demons, and ghouls of my nightmares are real, that their parents are infamous monster hunters, and that they're following in their footsteps.

If they'd told me, I would have known what to do on prom night when my date came for me and when I found my mom and dad. I would have been able to save my parents from... from...*that*.

But no. Brooks the Impossible decided I couldn't handle the truth, so my best friends kept their secret from me. I only found out when my prom date grew fangs and fur and attacked me. The last time I saw Jackson and Orion, they were battling the beast so I could run away.

And I knew from that moment on that things would never be the same.

But Brooks's face was the last thing I saw before I got the fuck out of Haddenwood. The last thing...after the broken and brutalized bodies of my parents, killed by some kind of demon while I was at prom.

It's all Brooks Bellua's fault.

And he has the *nerve* to step into my job and act like he's the one in charge? Has he forgotten that for months I've been swooping in ahead of him, stealing his monster-slaying glory out from under him? He can't believe his precious Lily Dean could beat him at his own game—

*I have to stop this. I have work to do. I can't get worked up over a second-rate monster hunter like Brooks. He doesn't even know about ectoplasm-enhanced infrared.*

*Becka and I are so far above his pay grade that he feels he has to throw his weight around like an overgrown toddler and...*

*Dammit, I'm still thinking about him.*

I whip out my phone and text Becka. After all her talk about how reckless I get on jobs, I know I need to check in on her before she hexes my ass.

**Lily: You won't believe it. The Bellua brothers are here, and I'm about to go "scorched earth" on THEIR ASSES.**

A second later, I get a text back.

**Becka: Sounds hot.**

I grind my teeth as the elevator jerks to a halt. Walking out into the lobby, I check my surroundings for rogue Bellua brothers and other trouble. I'm grateful to see that Robert is busy with other guests, and the boisterous couple from earlier has moved on. Freddie's nowhere to be seen. *Good*. I want to be able to do my work without being noticed.

I pretend to be admiring the decor as I move around the lobby, dropping crystals into the potted plants and sliding one beneath the cushions in the lounge area. I head to the restaurant and drop one beside the buffet tables, nudging it beneath the valance with my toe.

The Bellua brothers have all the tools of the Vault at their disposal for their hunts. But I'm freelance. I have to find my own ways of catching monsters.

And that's where Becka comes in. My friend's mom may have been an infamous fraud psychic, but Becka's magic is the real deal. These crystals act like a magical security network. They sense supernatural activity in the vicinity, and the large crystal I carry around with me will glow different colors if a threat moves within the stone's energy field.

The crystal network will alert me if our ghostly friend moves out of the room into other areas of the hotel, or if it's attracted any other kind of monster.

I'm assuming that the Bellua brothers have the same intel I have, since it's published on the hotel's website. A bride murdered her groom in the honeymoon suite in the sixties so she could run away with his money and best man. The groom has haunted the hotel ever since, although only in the last few months, since the grand reopening, has he become violent.

If the ghost is increasing the frequency and horror of his attacks, then he'd soon be able to move from the honeymoon suite to other areas of the hotel he visited while he was alive, causing chaos and mayhem in his wake.

If that happens, I'll know about it.

After I place as many stones as I think prudent in the lobby and restaurant area, I walk down the hallway to the spa and



wellness center. The groom and his wife would have spent time here, so it's another area I want to monitor.

The doors fly open, and my breath catches as the modern opulence slaps me across the face. While the rest of the hotel has retained its period features, the owners have spared no expense in upgrading the spa area to be over-the-top and worthy of the 'gram.

My boots clack across a marble floor so shiny I could lick it. Grand columns extend to the ceiling, twisted with carved vines and arching over rows of modern gym equipment. Hmm, I've always wanted to work out inside a palace, complete with wait staff moving between machines and offering orange energy shakes and perfumed towels on silver trays.

To my left, fruity, calming scents invite me to indulge in the array of spa treatments. Guests wander all around, dressed in workout gear, swimming togs, and fluffy robes. On the other side of the gym, through a glass partition, a steaming waterfall cascades over a wall of slate and tumbles into a series of hot tubs.

My heart pangs.

The thought slaps me across the face before I can shove it away.

*Jackson will love this place.*

Jackson was a football star in high school. All three of the Bellua brothers are fit, but he worked at it. Still does, by the looks of him. Sometimes I'd hang out with him at the gym after school, and he'd try to teach me how to lift weights. Every time his hands wrapped around my body to improve my form, I'd be attacked by a swarm of bees buzzing in my veins. I was always dropping weights on his toes or, once—totally by accident, I swear—on his crotch. He never complained, even when he walked funny for a week.

I can see the two of us splashing each other in the pools or me trying in vain to bench press more than he can...

*No. I can't. Those days are gone now.*

A young couple walks past, laughing as the woman tugs playfully at the strap on her boyfriend's robe. The pang in my chest turns into a full-blown ache. I *want* this. I want to be a normal couple and have a normal job and come to places like this on vacation with someone I love, not to chase ghosts and shapeshifters and things that go bump in the night...

I shake my head. That life isn't for me. My dreams of college and a career in science and a husband and two point five kids died after I saw what monsters did to my parents.

I step into the gym, sliding one of my crystals into the bottom of a heaped basket of fresh gym towels. I drop one into the mechanisms of a machine that looks more like a medieval torture device than something you use to get fit.

I pass Freddie, his face a little red with frustration as he explains to the older couple from earlier that the "relaxation rooms" aren't for rekindling their marital bliss.

"You can't do those sorts of things in areas that are shared with other guests, ma'am—"

I give him a wave as I stride past, ignoring his "please help me" look. I lie down on a weight bench on the far wall and look for a spot to discretely stash my stone when—

"Excuse me, ma'am. Don't mind me. I need to tighten some of these nuts. Ain't nothing worse in the world than loose nuts floating around. You could put someone's eye out."

I jump at the voice and whirl around. An unfortunate move, since I end up with a face full of Old Man Rodney's crotch. He stands over me, spanner in hand, as he wiggles his hips, letting me see a pair of rather loose nuts wagging around in his short shorts.

"Argh!" I scramble away.

"Pardon me, Rodney," a voice calls out in a posh British accent. "I need your help over here. I got my hand jammed."

Rodney skips over to help a guy sitting on another torture device, who's frowning at his hand, which is wedged in between the weight rack and the bar. Rodney practically straddles the guy to get to his hand.

I breathe a sigh of relief as I drop a crystal into a container of microfiber cloths.

Now that Rodney is occupied, this monster hunter is keen to check out the hot pools.

I can't help but smirk as I swing my leg over the bench and pass by my rescuer. He's quite hot, in a gym-bro kind of way, all strong jaw and fancy workout gear. His dark hair is short on the sides but longer on the top in an artfully disheveled kind of way. Bronze skin, darker than any of the Bellua brothers even when they attempt to tan, glimmers with a fine layer of sweat. The tight tank top he wears does very little to hide his defined muscles and the tattoos lining the length of his arms.

And he has that delicious British accent.

I'd be into that if I weren't here on a job and all flustered about the Bellua brothers.

Rodney has the guy's tattooed arm jammed between his thighs and is massaging it all over, whistling his approval. The guy looks up at me with an expression of utter helplessness.

*Now who's the one who needs rescuing?*

"It's my hand that got hurt, not my biceps," Hot British complains, trying to wiggle free.

"I think you need a Band-Aid, friend," Rodney says with awe as he wraps his hands around the guy's arm. "Because you are *cut*."

I can't help the snort of laughter that bursts out of me.

Old Man Rodney reluctantly releases his victim. He pats the guy on the shoulder as he stands to leave. "Keep up the good work, young sir," he tells the guy. "One day you'll be as *rock hard* as me."

With that, Rodney picks up his toolkit and saunters away, his ass jiggling jauntily in his tiny shorts.

Hot British looks up at me as he rubs his arm gingerly. "Thanks for rescuing me."

I can't help the corners of my mouth pulling into a grin. "It looked like you and Rodney were handling things just fine."

"Oh yes, we're old friends now." Hot British points to the basket of spray and microfiber cloths behind me. "Hand me that spray. I need to disinfect my arm."

"Just cut it off and start over." I shrug. "You can grow a new one, right?"

"Not this month," he says with a nod, running a hand over his close-cropped dark hair. "My radioactive spider went on strike. Something about hazard pay for rescuing beautiful women from crazy old men in hotel gyms."

I laugh again, and this time, his mouth tugs into an infectious grin. When he smiles, those pretty-boy smooth looks of his become something darker, more alluring. And that voice...as deep as the pits of hell, with that accent...

*Dangerous.*

I tell my legs that they need to keep moving, but they don't obey.

Instead, I bite my lip. "Spider or not, I do appreciate the save. I'll leave you to continue your medieval torture, or whatever it is you do on these machines—"

"I'm Levi." He raises himself to his feet, towering over me with a long, lean body that definitely knows what it's doing in a gym.

He's not bulky like some of the gym rats back home; he's the perfect combination of trim and defined, his stomach toned and his arms corded.

He extends his hand toward me—long fingers with perfect nails, an expensive gold watch around his wrist. "And you are?"

I look the guy over. He's not my type at all—skin too smooth, voice too princely, smile too perfect, line of stubble along his strong jaw a little *too* lickable.

No, scratch that. He's *exactly* my type, all clean and polished, and his last name isn't Bellua. I assume.

“I’m Lily.” My name leaves my lips before I can stop it.

I grasp his hand, intending to crush his pretty fingers with my handshake, but the lightning bolt that shoots up my arm when he touches me shocks me so much that all I can manage is a limp jiggle. I step back, swallowing hard.

*Get a grip, Lily. You hunt monsters for a living. You can handle talking to a cute guy.*

“You’re new here, Lily,” Levi says. “I haven’t seen you around the hotel before, and trust me when I say I would remember you.”

“It’s my first...er, gym session. I checked in this morning.”

“Then allow me to be the first male to bother you during your workout with an inane attempt to get you to notice me.” He gestures to the room. “As you can see, it’s a bit of a sausage fest, so I will not be the last, especially if you insist on walking around in those tight-as-fuck jeans.”

The way he says that in his posh voice, with that casual confidence that almost leads me to believe I misheard him, makes my insides all gooey. I meet his steel-gray eyes, and I’m not thinking about the Bellua boys anymore.

“I don’t plan on frequenting the gym, so it won’t be a problem. I like my exercise outdoors, away from sweaty people and loose nuts.”

“That’s fair. There’s an excellent running track through the woods. I run most mornings. Perhaps our paths will cross again during your stay.” He quirks an eyebrow at me. “May I ask what brought you to the Bridgemont Hotel? Business or pleasure?”

Mmmmm. The way his voice rumbles over the word *pleasure*.

“Business. You?”

“Business.” Levi’s gaze sweeps down my body, and his full, pouty lips curl back into an appreciative smirk that should have me calling the feminist police but instead makes my stomach twist into knots. “And pleasure.”

Okay, maybe this guy is *exactly* my type.

My fingers brush the remainder of the stones in my purse. I should finish laying them out and then get back to my room and use the spell Becka showed me to activate them.

I glance toward the hot pools. Steam curls off them, enticing me.

“Were you heading to the pools?” Levi asks. “After an encounter with Old Man Rodney, one feels the need to scrub one’s body clean, so I’m taking a dip. I’d be delighted with the company.”

A stab of something that may be guilt shoots through my gut. I ignore it. I owe nothing to those three dickweasels upstairs. I can take a little break from work...

“Sure. I’d love that.”

I follow Levi through the glass doors into the partially outdoor pool area. There are several small pools dotted around different levels with waterfalls cascading between them, all extending off a large central pool beneath the curving slate wall. Couples cuddle in the smaller pools, their heads bending together in private conversations. Wait staff move between, offering champagne and water.

Levi heads to an ornately carved wooden bench and peels off his shirt. I’m momentarily distracted by the tattoos that curl around his taut pecs—a startlingly beautiful rendition of Hieronymus Bosch’s *Garden of Earthly Delights*.

The line work is stunning. The tattoo looks like a painting, but it’s an interesting scene to have inked on your body. Naked men and women engage in various pleasures around a central, water-bound globe.

“I’m an art historian, of sorts,” Levi says when he catches me staring. “I work for someone who likes to collect beautiful things. The Dutch masters are of particular interest.”

“Of course,” I manage to choke out.

My mouth goes completely dry as Levi kicks off his gym shorts to reveal a pair of shiny boxers, a trim waist, and one of

those Adonis Vs. I'm mesmerized as he steps into the nearest pool, his fucking perfect body disappearing into the steam, and his hand beckons me.

“You coming?”

It's only then that I realize two things.

One—I don't have a bathing suit with me.

Two—my entire body is strapped with knives.

But I can't back down from the challenge in his eyes or that amused tilt of his mouth. His eyes devour me as I drop my hoodie onto the bench and tuck one of my knives inside it. I kick off my boots and shove them under the bench, managing to avoid stabbing myself in the foot with the knife in my boot.

Finally, I remove the strap from my waist and discard it, mentally thanking myself that at least I wore my nice black underwear without the holes in them.

The walk from the bench to the pool feels like a million miles with Levi's gray eyes watching me. I bring the third knife with me and rest it on the edge of the pool.

“Just in case you're a psycho stalker,” I say as I wade into the blistering hot water.

A lady can't be too careful.

Levi lowers himself into the water. Steam curls around his muscular arms. His leg brushes mine, and the water heats up another ten degrees. I look over my shoulder and see that we're alone in one of the tiny pools. Dangerous.

Intriguing.

He raises a perfectly sculpted eyebrow at me. “So, Lily, my love, what line of business are you in that requires so many blades?”

“Marketing,” I say.

Levi smirks. He knows I'm lying, and he doesn't care. I like that about him. I can be whoever the fuck I want around this guy.

“And what about you? What’s an art historian doing in a dusty old hotel in the middle of the mountains? This place isn’t exactly bursting at the seams with Picassos.”

“My work takes me to some interesting places. I’m here to make a deal on behalf of my most important client.” He sweeps his arm around, indicating the spa and gym and the grand old hotel. “It’s an arduous job, as you can see.”

“Oh, yes. Such appalling conditions. You should picket immediately.” I snake my hand behind my back and drop a crystal into the pool filter, where it lands with a *plink*. “Unionize with all the other hot British art historians of the world. Demand better conditions.”

“You can help me with the social media.” Levi swims closer until he’s directly in front of me.

I’m aware of his breath, hot against my skin. “Only if you \_\_\_”

My very disjointed thoughts are interrupted by a familiar voice calling my name.

“Lily?”

I jerk away from Levi and look toward the gym.

Jackson swerves through the room, and the sight of him closes my throat.

“Lily? I know you’re here. Freddie said he saw you here.” Jackson barrels into the pool area, his green eyes searching.

I sink down into the water, hoping against hope that he won’t see me.

“Daisy, you can’t run away from us all weekend.”

“Friend of yours?” Levi asks, one of his trimmed eyebrows arching again.

He even manages to make that look elegant. I probably resemble a drowned rat when compared to his sophisticated perfection.

“Not even remotely.” I glance around. “He’s a...business associate.”



“From marketing?” Levi’s eyebrow raises again.

“Obviously.”

Admittedly, Jackson, with his leather jacket and dark jeans and ruffled hair, looks absolutely nothing like a guy in marketing.

“He’s on my turf,” I try to explain. “And us marketing people don’t play nice.”

I nod my head seriously as if I’m not spewing complete bullshit.

“I can tell.” Levi’s gaze falls on my knife, which I palm out of instinct.

“Is there a back way out of here?”

“I know a place. I know all sorts of secrets about this hotel.” Levi’s fingers slip into mine.

We climb out of the pool. I shiver as my wet underwear clings to my body. We’re toward the back of the area, so Jackson hasn’t gotten to us yet. As we pass the bench, I pick up my purse and sling it over my shoulder. I leave my clothes and knives behind.

“Daisy? Where are you? I just want to talk.”

*Well, I have no interest in talking to you.*

Levi pulls me around a stone pillar and pushes on a rock. It swings inward, revealing a narrow, hidden space, packed with life jackets and other pool equipment. It’s perfectly disguised in the slate. He tugs me inside and shoves the door shut behind us.

“He won’t find you in here,” Levi says.

He certainly won’t. I relax my shoulders, trying to slow my pounding heart. I’m painfully aware that in the narrow space, Levi’s bare chest presses against mine. With every breath, I’m taking him in—his apricot and vanilla scent, that deep rumble of his voice that pulse through my body, from my ears right down to the growing ache between my legs. Every part of me is flush with warmth, except for my nipples, which

have utterly betrayed me and are two hard pebbles rubbing against him.

He has to feel them. *Fuck fuck.*

“I must say,” he says, his gravelly voice tickling my skin. “When I came for a workout today, I did not expect to have Old Man Rodney’s crotch in my face or to be stuck in a storage cupboard with a knife-wielding marketing executive.”

I try to laugh, but there’s no air in here that is not from him, so what comes out is kind of a strangled chortle. Levi laughs too, an impossibly low hum that turns my body to mush.

His chest tips forward half an inch, and his whole body presses against mine. His lips brush against my own, so soft that it could barely be called a kiss at all, and yet...and yet my whole body is fucking on *fire*.

I have to choke back a moan from escaping my lips.

I’m actually *shaking*. I want this so bad. What am I *doing*?

Seeing the Belluas again has turned me inside out.

I’m usually much more cautious around strangers and men in general. It took five months for me to agree to go out with the last boy I dated. And even then, it took three more months before I did anything with him besides awkwardly hold his hand. I’m not a prude by any means, but it’s difficult for me to trust people, especially with something that’s both as fragile and as deadly as my body.

“Lily Dean...” Levi says my name like an incantation.

“Um...” Whatever protest I have left dies on my lips, silenced like a flame deprived of oxygen, withering away into nothing.

“Let me...” Levi moves away.

My body screams with disappointment.

Light creeps into the gloom as Levi pushes the door open a crack and peers out. “I think the coast is clear. Your friend has gone.”

“Thank God for that.” I step out into the gray daylight, the spell between us broken.

Levi’s breathy kiss—if you can even call it that—still dances on my lips, infusing my blood with warmth.

“You’re welcome,” Levi says with a wink.

“You are many things, Levi the art historian. But you’re not a god.”

“I’d reserve judgment on that until you get to know me.”

I lean in close, standing on tiptoes to get up in his face, this time deliberately letting my hard nipples graze his chest. “Big words for a man who chickened out of kissing me in a tiny storage room.”

“I didn’t chicken out.” Those gray eyes strip me bare. “When I kiss you properly, I want to be able to see deep into those dark eyes when you come apart for me.”

*Well...um...*

I swallow, try to think of a good comeback. I fail. I tear myself away from him and hunt around for my clothes and knives. But they’re not here.

Did someone steal my clothes?

Did motherfucking *Jackson Bellua* steal my clothes?

Anger burns through my veins, white-hot and potent. I visibly shake where I stand.

“I think your business associate walked off with your things,” Levi says as he steps back into the water.

“Of course he did.” I grip the knife in my fist, wishing I could stab it into a Bellua brother.

A Bellua brother with a smoky voice, sinful lips, tousled black hair...

“Would you like to continue our swim?” There’s no missing the heated suggestion in that seemingly innocent question.

My nerves tingle, and my heart pounds like a distant army thundering down a mountain.

“Not now.” Right now, I have to find some Bellua boys and get it through their thick skulls that just because I’m here on the same job doesn’t mean they get to chase me around the hotel like I’m a wallet they misplaced. “But I hope to see you around again, art historian Levi.”

“It will be my pleasure, Lily Dean.”

I’m grinning like an idiot as I get back into the elevator in my sodden underwear, clutching my favorite knife. At least something about this job is proving interesting.

While the elevator clatters up the ancient shaft, I reach into my purse, pull out the large stone, and wave my hand over it, uttering the incantation to activate my security net. The stone grows hot in my palm. At first, the heat is lovely on my wet skin, but then it becomes burning. I yelp and drop it.

It’s not supposed to be that hot.

I stare down at the stone. It wasn’t just hot to the touch. It’s glowing with an eerie blue light.

That’s not supposed to happen, either. Becka said that if the poltergeist is in the area, it will glow orange. She never said what to do if it glows blue.

I think back to Levi, to those beautiful, creepy tattoos on his body. I think about that deep voice vibrating through my body, and something terrifying occurs to me.

*He called me Lily Dean.*

I never told him my last name. I’m *sure* I didn’t.

So how did he know it?

## SEVEN: ORION



While Jackson is off chasing down Lily, I get to work setting up our equipment around the honeymoon suite. I carefully set up our own infrared cameras and monitors. Brooks won't trust Lily's equipment, even though we now know she's the Shadow, which means that she knows what the fuck she's doing.

Instead, he rips one of her infrared devices from the wall and rubs at the symbols scrawled on it. His jaw works. With a yell, he hurls it at the wall.

I cringe as it dents the plaster and bounces on the floor. We'll have to pay to fix that hole, and we won't exactly have a lot left after we pay this insane hotel bill. I pick up the infrared.

"Cut that open," Brooks snaps. "Figure out what the fuck all those crystals and symbols do. I don't want any surprises."

I set the camera down on the desk with trembling fingers. "Well, too late, because this stock-standard job is turning out to be nothing but surprises. Brooks, this is Lily we're talking about. *Our* Lily. She's not going to do anything to hurt us—"

"Grow up, Orion. She's not our Lily anymore. She's hunting monsters, and she never bothered to tell us."

*We're not exactly easy to track down*, I want to say but wisely choose not to.

We very deliberately made sure that Lily couldn't find us after prom. We thought it was the right thing to do. We thought we were keeping her safe.

But then why is she here? Why isn't she at college?

I don't want to believe that Brooks is right, but perhaps his words hold some semblance of truth. After all, the striking bombshell we're working with now is completely different from the frightened teenager we left behind. I'm not sure who this new Lily Dean is, but I'm suddenly desperate to get to know her.

Ignoring Brooks's request for now, I busy myself scrawling protective symbols on the walls. If Lily's sleeping in this room tonight, I have to make sure that poltergeist can't hurt her. I'll rub them off in the morning, before housekeeping comes.

These symbols are completely different from the ones Lily uses. Ours have been passed down through generations of monster hunters. Supposedly, these particular symbols have been gifted to our ancestors hundreds of years ago by the angels or some shit. They're for people who aren't magical or supernatural to use.

But Lily's? They hold the distinct markings of the supernatural. Of...witchcraft. Magic.

Which is illegal for hunters to use, according to the Vault's bylaws. Using magic like that without knowing how to control it can accidentally blow up a building or turn an entire suburb into tree frogs.

Brooks regards me from the bed as I move around the room. "Go on, brother. Say what's on your mind."

"About what?" I feign nonchalance.

I know exactly what.

"About Lily fucking Dean."

I turn my back to him and keep drawing. My jaw is so tight that it hurts. A piece of chalk snaps in my fingers.

“You know the situation,” Brooks continues. “You can’t get close to her—”

“I know the situation,” I whisper and close my eyes.

We have to finish this job and get out of here. The full moon will arrive in five nights’ time, and I need to be far, far away from Lily Dean when it rises.

I’m the reason everything is fucked up. I’m the mess that Brooks and Jackson had to give up their whole lives to fix. I’m the danger we’re trying to protect Lily from. And now she’s found her way back to us, and I can’t bear the thought of having to run from her again.

I never even got to say goodbye.

I can’t stand being in the room with Brooks and his angry-dad energy a moment longer. He acts like he hates Lily, like this is all her fault. He should be angry with *me*.

I finish scrawling the final symbol and run out of there. Brooks yells after me, but I ignore him. He can brood in his own nonsense like a Byronic villain for all I care.

I make my way next door to the suite that Jackson and I are sharing. It’s a small, less Tunnel-of-Love version of their room. The beds, thankfully, are oblong-shaped.

I flop down in a chair beside the window, trying to get my hands to stop shaking. I need to stop thinking about her running around this hotel, so alive and perfect and *here*. I need to not believe there is hope...

I pull my laptop out of my bag and read over the research on the case one more time, even though I know the details by heart. I check the ingredients in our ghost-hunting kits. Ghosts are easy to deal with, although it’s been a while since we’ve dealt with one that had quite this much power.

Ghosts usually can’t hurt people directly. If they’re very, very powerful, they can move objects. What they do is terrify people until they hurt themselves. They scare the old woman

into falling down the stairs or haunt the guilty father until he throws himself out a window.

But this kind of ghost—a poltergeist—is different. It's a spirit that's so full of malevolent rage that it's crossed partway back through the veil between our world and the world of the dead. It can toss heavy objects around a room. It can hurt people. But in a way, that's good for us. It makes him easier to kill.

With a normal ghost, we can't reach it. It's on another plane of existence. Dad used to say they were "beyond the veil." With those kinds of ghosts, you have to help them complete whatever "unfinished business" keeps them tethered to this world, and then they just fade away.

But a poltergeist is in our world, which means they can be banished with some holy words and grave dirt.

I pull a jar of dirt from my bag. We stopped at a cemetery on the way, so we're sorted.

All we have to do is wait for the ghost to bite. Hopefully Lily and Brooks in the room tonight will be enough to tempt him.

Lily and Brooks.

*Together.*

The thought of the two of them sharing that heart-shaped bed makes my stomach twist. I love my brother, and I don't want to think ill of him, but ever since he came back into our lives five years ago, he's had it out for Lily, and I don't get why. I don't understand why he's so determined to drive her away when she's practically a sister to us.

*Fuck.*

*Not a sister.*

The thoughts I have whenever I'm around her are certainly not *brotherly*.

My phone rings. Jackson. I click it on.



“Did you find Lily?” A part of me wants to reprimand him for stalking her the way he is, but the rest of me is too curious to really be upset. I’m just as obsessed with Lily Dean as he is.

“I did.” Jackson’s voice wavers. “She isn’t alone. She was in a hot tub with another guy. She hid when I got close to her.”

My heart stills.

“That doesn’t mean anything.” Even to my own ears, that protest sounds weak.

“She was wearing her *underwear*.”

He sounds so hurt that I stomp down my own feelings to focus on him. Jackson’s never made any secret of how much he’s into Lily. The two of them were written in the stars—the cute bookworm and the football jock. They were practically a teen movie script. I could see them both on campus at Harvard, hosting all the fun parties and late-night study sessions, her on the sidelines of all his games, him kissing her passionately after she won some brainiac prize.

But then I had to go and ruin both their lives.

“I stole her clothes.” Jackson sounds like he may be sick.

“You *what*?” Surely I didn’t hear him right...

“She and the guy hid somewhere. I couldn’t see them, so I just... I found her clothes and two of her knives on a bench, and I took them. I’m a sicko.” He pauses. “They smell just like her.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. The way she always smelled. Like cotton candy and spring blossoms.”

*Fuck.*

“Why is she here?” Jackson’s voice breaks. “Why isn’t she in college?”

“I don’t know.”

“Can you find out?”

“Well...”

“Please, brother,” he pleads. “I’m going crazy here. Why does she have all these knives? What’s happened to her since we’ve been gone that has made her into the Shadow?”

I’m afraid that the answer to that question will break all of us, but I can’t say no to my brother, my twin. After all, I’m the reason they were separated in the first place. “I’ll see what I can find.”

“Thank you. And don’t let Brooks know you’re looking into her.”

“I won’t.” I click off the phone, toss it on the bed, and turn back to my computer.

I tap the keys nervously. We’ve avoided the temptation to look for Lily. All these years, every time I opened my computer, I itched to look her up on social media or follow her class schedule online. That way lies madness. Any chance that Lily and I had at happiness died on prom night.

And all this time, she’s been so close I could’ve reached out and touched her.

I still can’t believe that Lily Dean is the Shadow.

I lean over the computer, my fingers poised. Am I going to do this? Am I really going to break the promise we made to ourselves? Am I going to open Jackson up to the pain of what we may find?

I type in Lily’s name and start digging.

## EIGHT: LILY



I storm into the honeymoon suite in nothing but my bra and panties, practically foaming at the mouth. Anger runs rampant through me as I slam the door hard enough for the entire room to shake.

Brooks, who has been leaning over one of the computer monitors on the desk, glances up in alarm. I take a great amount of satisfaction in the way his eyes widen, and red creeps up his neck and settles in his cheeks.

He turns away quickly, but not before I catch a glimpse of the unbridled lust in his eyes.

So I'm not the only one who thinks about that kiss in the alley.

*Brooks's mouth hot on mine, his huge, strong hands tugging on my prom dress, pulling me closer—*

A muscle in his jaw twitches. I'm intimately familiar with that particular one. It seems to always flex whenever he's irritated or pissed—the constant for him.

“What the *fuck* are you wearing?” he grits out, keeping his gaze trained on the computer screen.

I move towards my duffel bag and grab out a long, black band T-shirt. Some vampire goth group called Blood Lust. I

think it once belonged to my ex-boyfriend, but it was too comfy for me to let go of even after the relationship ended.

Ignoring Brooks for the time being, I throw on the T-shirt and then make careful work of removing the wet bra and sopping panties. It's honestly a true skill to be able to do that without flashing the room at large.

I glance at Brooks out of my periphery and see that he's still staring intently at the screen. I think he was in the midst of checking out the quality of the infrared cameras scattered throughout the room, but just now, the screen is black. He doesn't even bother to pretend he's working.

That damn muscle in his jaw once again commandeers my attention.

I noticed that one of my cameras is lying on the floor above a large dent in the plaster, broken into three pieces. Good thing I brought extras.

Instead of answering Brooks with words, I hook the panties around my ankle and then fling them at the back of his head. He startles, jumping about a foot in the air, and I have to bite my lip to keep from laughing.

"What the fuck, Lily?" he bellows, jumping to his feet. The panties fall to the ground. "Why are they wet?"

"All of the hot, kinky sex I've been having," I deadpan, pushing past him to enter the bathroom.

But of course I should've known by now that there's no escaping Brooks Bellua. He's a damn bloodhound when he wants to be, and I'm the tasty morsel of meat he wants to devour whole.

Before I can even attempt to shut the door of the bathroom, he's there, his broad shoulders filling the frame, his eyes heated and glimmering with some indecipherable emotion.

"Why the fuck are you half naked and dripping wet, *wife*?" he seethes, lifting his arms so he can grip the top of the doorframe.

I hate that this move lifts the hem of his dark shirt, unveiling sculpted muscles that I once daydreamed about almost daily. Time has only made Brooks more defined and chiseled.

*Dammit.*

Why couldn't he have had a beer belly or something?

"People tend to get wet when they go into a hot tub, *husband*," I answer in my most patronizing tone.

If he can pretend our sleeping arrangement doesn't bother him, then so can I.

To add insult to injury, I flash him a saccharine sweet, shit-eating grin and attempt to slam the door in his face.

He stops me.

As always.

"In your underwear?" he hisses, his eyes flaring.

"That wasn't my intention originally," I drawl sarcastically. "But the orgy required me to remove most of my clothes."

That muscle in his jaw begins to flutter yet again. "Quit being a smartass, wife."

"Quit being a pain in my ass, husband," I counter, flicking my gaze towards the shower. I'm desperate to wash the chlorine out of my hair and off my body. Then and only then will I find Jackson Bellua...and beat him to death with the same clothes he stole. Death by shirt—what a way to go. "Now, can you get out of here so I can shower? Even a married woman deserves privacy. Or do you plan to creep on me like your brother did?"

His forehead creases. "My brother?"

"You didn't know Jackson was a shirt sniffer?" I arch a brow arrogantly. "I honestly always thought it would be panties, but eh." I shrug. "Whatever floats his boat."

The more I talk, the more confused Brooks becomes, that furrow between his brows deepening.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Ask your brother.” Finally, I’m able to slam the door in his stunned face. “And don’t talk to me again until you put a ring on it. I expect a diamond the size and color of a Butterfinger, *husband!*”

It takes me less than twenty minutes to scrub my body, wash my hair, and then place the T-shirt back on. I forgot a clean pair of panties in my anger, but for now, the shirt covers up all of the important bits.

I step out into the room, running a towel through my wet and snarled hair. Brooks once again sits at the desk typing on the computer. A wry smirk tugs at the edges of his lips, but he doesn’t look up from the screen.

“Where’s my diamond?” I wave my bare hand at him. “I can’t be your pretend wife without a ring, or didn’t you learn the first rule of monster hunting? Details matter.”

“I hope you’re feeling better,” he shoots back. “I heard showers and long baths do wonders for calming down the more...volatile females.”

“Nah.” I toss my towel at him, but he stealthily dodges it without even glancing in my direction. “Maybe for some girls, but sex does it for me.”

He tenses almost imperceptibly, his shoulders going rigid underneath his thin T-shirt, and I bite down on the smile that wants to emerge.

Lily—one.

Brooks—zero.

I grab a pair of fresh underwear out of my bag and quickly slip it on under my T-shirt.

“Is that shirt from one of the guys you screwed?” Brooks asks, his tone teeming with an emotion that sends my heart galloping.

Jealousy.

Is Brooks actually...jealous?

The mere thought is comical.

Brooks is the one who left *me*, not the other way around. He discarded me like a pile of trash that has been left out in the sun for weeks and started collecting flies and maggots.

What right does he have to be jealous?

“Do you *really* want to know the answer to that?” I bend down to grab my wet bra and drape it over the chair to dry.

I glance towards Brooks’s feet, searching for my panties, but don’t find them.

Where the hell are they?

Before I can demand answers, a heavy piece of fabric slaps me across the face. For a moment, I simply stand there, stunned, before I glance down at the shirt that has fallen into my arms.

A T-shirt.

*Brooks’s* T-shirt.

“If you’re going to be sharing my bed, *wife*,” Brooks begins in a mocking voice that does very little to hide the undercurrent of jealousy still prevalent, “then you’re going to be wearing my clothes.”

“I didn’t know you had such a possessive side, Bellua.” My heart thumps madly in my chest.

Some of my earlier anger can’t help but subside, little pieces sizzling and flaking away like flames burning through the fibers of an old blanket. It’s replaced by something infinitely softer—something that craves the attention of the three boys who once dominated my entire world. Old Lily would’ve killed to hear the possessive rumbling of Brooks’s voice.

*Focus, Lily!*

It’s all too easy for me to forget all of my hurt and anger and fall back into the Bellua brothers’ magnetic orb. They have a hold on me that transcends logic or reason. It’s as

infuriating as it is terrifying—I swear I can taste it in the depths of my lungs.

A part of me can't help but remember the way they were when we were children. Possessive. Protective. Caring.

A knot in my chest tightens.

No.

That was then; this is now.

Brooks is not the boy I knew when I was a child.

He's the man who held my heart in his fist and carved it up like a damn butcher.

The air between the two of us seems to sizzle like the seconds before an electrical storm. I feel charged and high-strung, and there's a sudden ache between my thighs that's impossible to deny.

Brooks stares at me as if...as if he plans to eat me for dinner. It's a heady, intoxicating sensation, one that has every hair on my arms standing at attention.

And then he says, in a voice like thunder, "There's a lot you don't know about me, Lily Dean."

His words are a bucket of ice water being dumped over my head.

It's the truth, though. There *is* a lot I don't know about this man standing before me—just as there's a ton he doesn't yet know about me. Our history is shrouded in pain, tainted in secrets, and obscured in mystery. We'll never be the Lily Dean and Brooks Bellua who kissed in the alley outside the dress store a few days before prom.

Our future will always be polluted by the memory of him saying goodbye to me mere minutes after I found my parents murdered.

That reminder exacerbates my previous anger.

"Come on, *husband*." I sneer at him. "How about we catch this ghosty and get out of each other's lives as soon as possible, okay?"



Something flickers in his eyes, there and gone too quickly for me to comprehend it.

“Yes, please.” Abruptly, he jumps to his feet and storms towards the bathroom. Just before he slams the door shut, he calls out, “Try not to get murdered in the meantime, okay?”

“Ye who have little faith.”

“That’s not how the saying goes!” His voice is muffled through the wood of the door.

Muttering under my breath, I move to pull back the covers on the bed. “Stupid, idiotic, irritatingly handsome, and possessive, panty-stealing, ass licker.”

I throw myself onto the surprisingly comfy mattress with a huff.

And then I freeze as something occurs to me—a startling revelation that locks my joints together and freezes my muscles.

One bed.

Two of us.

I gulp.

I’m going to have to share a bed with none other than Brooks Bellua.

The first man I ever loved...and also the first one to break my heart.

## NINE: LILY



My stomach ties itself into a dozen intricate knots when the door to the bathroom opens, and Brooks steps back into the room after his shower.

Shirtless.

Soaking wet.

I swallow.

Water drips down his defined planes, stopping at the waistband of his basketball shorts. They're so low I can see his Adonis belt and that damn V that drives most girls insane.

Is he purposely trying to torture me?

Is this revenge for arriving in the room in my underwear?

I shift uncomfortably beneath the covers of the bed, still dressed in the ratty old T-shirt from my ex. There's no way in hell I'm giving Brooks the satisfaction of wearing his clothes.

Even if a part of me desperately wants to inhale his sandalwood scent. And another part wants to know if he still tastes like hazelnuts...

*Bad, Lily! Bad!*

"I know you're not asleep," Brooks calls in a singsong voice as he steps closer to the bed. He drops the towel that has

been haphazardly slung around his shoulders onto the floor.

“I wasn’t pretending to be, ass hat.” I’m grateful when my voice doesn’t shake and betray my...conflicting emotions.

You know, that fine, precarious line balancing hatred and arousal.

Ugh.

Stupid Bellua brothers.

The bed dips as Brooks sits on his side of it, and I instinctively roll into the center. Frowning, I push myself up onto my elbows and turn my head, unsurprised to see Brooks’s fathomless eyes on me, a scowl marring his ridiculously handsome face.

“You’re still wearing that asshole’s shirt,” he growls, his voice rife with anger.

“Wowww.” I sit up completely and give him a slow, dramatic clap. “Good detective work, Sherlock.”

“Take it off.”

“Fuck no.”

“Lily, I’m not kidding.”

“Neither am I.” I fold my arms over my chest and glare at him.

He matches my glare with an incandescent one of his own. The air seems to thicken with the force of our shared animosity.

“Lily...” The growl he makes then has a chill skating down my spine.

The fine hairs on both of my arms turn to spikes.

“I’m not the same blushing virgin you left behind, Brooks.” I sneer at him. “And I’ve got a crossbow behind the bed that says you’d better back off.”

He agitatedly forks his fingers through his hair, causing the strands to stick out in every direction.

“I know that,” he huffs out.

“And you don’t have any say over what I wear. Or what I *don’t* wear,” I continue.

He appears even more irritated, his eyes darkening and his brows scrunching together. “I know that too.”

“I mean, first Jackson steals my clothes, and now you’re trying to get me out of my shirt.” I throw my hands up into the air in exasperation. “I can’t win. Do you guys just like seeing me naked? Is that it? I’m getting a lot of mixed signals here.”

Brooks opens his mouth to retort but instantly closes it. Confusion paves its way across his face.

“Wait...it was *Jackson* who stole your clothes?”

“Duh.” I roll my eyes. “We went over this already.”

“And why in the world would he do that?” He continues to stare at me in disbelief.

“Ask him! I was just chilling in the hot tub with Levi—”

Brooks cuts me off by placing a hand in the air, effectively swatting away my words like they’re nothing more than pesky mosquitoes buzzing around his head. “Wait. Wait. Wait. Who the fuck is Levi?”

I arch an eyebrow at him. “Really, Brooks? Really?”

He glares at me. “What?”

“I think your jealousy is showing.”

He scoffs and folds his corded arms over his chest, the muscles rippling in a way that draws my attention. “I’m not jealous. I just don’t want you to get distracted on our mission. Distractions can lead to mistakes, and mistakes can lead to—”

“Death. Yes, I’ve heard that before.”

“I was going to say dismemberment.” A smirk touches his lips. “I suppose that’s what you get for being such a know-it-all smartass.”

As abruptly as it appeared, his smile fades, his lips compressing into a grim line. It’s enough to make me tense and narrow my eyes at him.

“What now?”

“We need to talk, Lily Dean.” Brooks’s tone is the nonsense one I’m oh so familiar with.

A thousand goose pimples pebble on my skin, and a delicious wave of radioactive heat cascades through me.

Stupid, bossy, irritatingly gorgeous men.

I throw myself back onto the bed and twist my body so my back is now facing him. “Night, asshole. Try not to get murdered or possessed in your sleep.”

“I’m serious, Lily. We need to talk.”

I can hear the barely veiled irritation in Brooks’s voice, causing each word to be said sharply and succinctly, a keen blade slicing at skin.

I let out an exaggerated yawn. “Night, night.”

“Why did you begin hunting? Was it because of what happened on prom night?” Brooks presses, seemingly ignoring my very obvious dismissal.

Every muscle in my body locks together.

Prom night...

When my date turned into a werewolf and tried to eat me...

And then I arrived home to find my parents slaughtered in a sacrificial ritual.

When Brooks doesn’t continue, no doubt waiting for me to respond, I pretend to snore as loudly as I can.

“Here’s what I think happened,” Brooks continues like the cocky asshole he is. “You were curious after the werewolf attack and started doing research. Maybe you suspected what we were—hunters.”

“Shut up, Brooks.” My voice is muffled from where it’s pressed against the pillow.

Feelings bombard me from every direction, feelings I’ve tried so desperately to eradicate with time, therapy, and

meaningless flings.

“Perhaps you even wanted to find us.” Brooks’s arrogant voice has anger burning through me like magma. “The more you looked, the more intertwined you found yourself in the supernatural world. And then you thought to yourself—I can be the hero. I can save people.”

He pauses, allowing his words to flow over me, to permeate the air and my skin like an acrid kiss. “Is that what happened, Lily Dean? Was it some sort of hero complex? Did you want to save the day? Be the knight in shining armor?”

Images of my parents’ dead bodies flit across my closed eyelids.

Blood.

Limbs.

That damn pentagram.

I throw the covers off of me and race to the bathroom.

And then, to my utter embarrassment and humiliation, I empty the meager contents of my stomach into the toilet as tears burn the backs of my eyes like iron brands.

## TEN: BROOKS



I press my back against the closed bathroom door, listening to Lily puke her guts out, feeling like complete shit.

She's locked the door. She doesn't want me in there, and I don't blame her. Lily Dean never liked people to see her vulnerable—I suppose that's one of the few things that hasn't changed.

But now that only a flimsy board of wood separates us, every atom of my body itches to tear the door down, lift her off the tiles, and cradle her in my arms. When she or my brothers got a skinned knee or cut their finger, they'd come crying to me, and I'd patch them up.

That's my job. I'm the big brother.

But there ain't a Band-Aid big enough to patch what's broken between us.

It would be a mistake to go in there. That would mean acknowledging what Lily still means to me.

I caught a flash of her eyes as she ran for the bathroom. She looked like someone had stabbed her through the heart.

Did Jackson do this to her? Why is he sneaking around and stealing her clothes?

I'm going to *gut* him. I'm going to string him to the ceiling fan with piano wire around his nuts and set it to spin...

Did we do this to her?

From behind the door, Lily makes a choking sound that tears open my chest.

What's happened to her? Why isn't she in school? We left her in Haddenwood so she could have her perfect life. Her *normal* life. She's supposed to have everything we'll never have.

She's the reason we're still fighting. She's the reason we held her werewolf date down on prom night and took care of business. The family business. We were born to do this. We've been training our whole lives, but she...

She was never supposed to know about the world of monsters and magic. She was supposed to marry the lucky bastard who gave her that T-shirt, become a scientist, have three kids, and—

My blood boils.

I pound my fists against my thighs, desperate to quell the rising tide of rage surging inside me.

*No. Don't think about Lily having babies with some guy.*

Especially not when only a few minutes ago, she was stretched out across our nuptial bed, that godforsaken T-shirt riding up her thighs, giving me a peek of smooth, pale skin.

I am only fucking human.

And I am still rock-hard while thinking about her.

*Get down,* I yell silently at my dick. *I don't have time to deal with your shit right now. Lily needs me.*

*Lily isn't yours anymore,* he seems to shoot back at me as he strains against the waistband of my boxers. *She never was. But maybe, if she parades that cute little ass of hers around, you could change that...*

I need an ice bath.



And a dick amputation.

No, maybe not that.

The sounds of retching stop. My breath catches, and I lean my head against the wood. For a long time, I hear nothing, and then, the faintest sound escapes her. It may be a sob.

“Lily?” I bang my fist on the door. “You alive in there?”

No reply.

“If you dunked my toothbrush in the toilet bowl, I will give you the meanest lady-wedgie in your sleep,” I growl.

A faint snort. A laugh.

“Do you want me to call down to reception and order you a hot dog with extra hot mustard? That’s still your favorite, right? This place looks fancy as shit, so it’ll probably be sprinkled with foie gras or some shit, but I’m sure we can scrape it off.”

Silence.

“Okay, that’s cool. Listen, I’m going to bed. I promise that I won’t hassle you anymore. Just...have a shower and gargle and then come to bed when you’re ready.”

“I don’t have to do what you say,” comes the defiant voice from the other side of the door.

Sounds like someone is feeling more like herself again.

“I’ll sleep on the floor,” I offer.

“It’s fine, Brooks. Just...don’t look at me, okay?”

“Sure, Lily.”

The promise feels like a lead weight in my gut. My arms itch to wrap around her, and my dick jerks at the sound of her voice, excited for another glimpse of her ass. He’s not getting his wish tonight. I may be a complete fucking asshole, but I can be a gentleman for Lily when she needs me.

While the shower runs and steam curls under the door, I kick off my jeans and shirt and crawl into the side of the bed closest to the window. I face away from the bathroom door,

but that feels so completely wrong that I flip over so I'm facing her side. I close my eyes because I promised not to look.

But no fucking way am I sleeping. Not if I'm sharing a bed with Lily Dean.

The creak of the bathroom door has my eyes flying open. There she is, a silhouette in the doorway, her hair stringy from the shower, that fucking T-shirt clinging in all the right places.

How come even now she undoes me utterly?

She takes one tentative step toward the bed, then another. I remember I'm not supposed to look, so I close my eyes almost completely, peering at her through the tangle of my eyelashes.

Lily looks terrified and...something else. Something dark and haunted and intriguing that makes my dick fucking *dance*.

The bed creaks as Lily sits down on the edge. The markings on the wall behind her glow faintly, casting an otherworldly sheen across her fiery mane, like flames dancing in the moonlight.

Her eyes are puffy. Her limbs are trembling. She *has* been crying.

I did that. Those tears belong to me.

But it's for her own good.

Ever since the night of Lily's sixteenth birthday, when I kissed her, I've been trying to make her hate me. If she hates me, she won't want anything to do with me, and it's much easier to keep her away from our world when that's her choice. But now that she's here, in my bed, and she was the Shadow all along...

I don't know what to do with her now. Usually, I hate not knowing things, but Lily Dean makes me reckless. She makes me want to dive into the unknown, especially when the unknown lies between two shapely thighs that are dangerously close to me right now...

“Brooks, I can see you peeking.” Lily makes a face as she settles in, leaving at least a foot of bed empty between us. She makes a show of sliding her dagger beneath her pillow before thumping it into shape. I bet she’s imagining it’s my face. “If you ask me *one more question*, I will choke you with this heart-shaped pillow mint.”

“You have a mint?” My voice cracks a little. I can’t help it.

My parents used to bring back pillow mints and those tiny bottles of hotel shampoo for me and my brothers after their hunts. I always let the twins have the mints. The oldest brother goes without.

“I just found it in the sheets.” She holds up the foil-wrapped chocolate, her eyes dancing with delight as if she found some ancient treasure. “You probably have one, too. Maybe it slid off.”

I open my mouth to shoot back some witty retort, but my breath stills when I see what’s around her wrist.

A tiny knotwork flower charm on a leather thong. A witch’s mark for protection.

The gift I gave her on her sixteenth birthday.

She’s still wearing it?

Why is she wearing it when she hates me so much?

My throat closes over. I suddenly want to find that mint more than almost anything in the world. Except for pulling Lily on top of me and getting her to sit those long legs of hers on my face, but if I can’t have that, chocolate will do. Besides, I don’t particularly fancy waking up with melted chocolate all over me.

I start hunting through the sheets for it.

“Try under your T-shirt since I’m not wearing it.” Lily’s hand grazes the no-man’s land between us as she gets comfortable.

Her fingers accidentally brush my chest, and it’s like someone connected my nipples to a battery with jumper cables.

“Here it is.” I draw out the little chocolate from between the sheets.

Lily’s eyes widen.

I hold it out to her. “You have it.”

“No, Brooks. It’s yours. Remember when your parents used to come back with hotel pillow mints, and you always gave them to Jackson and Orion?” She blinks. She’s so fucking beautiful that it hurts. “Now you’re old enough and ugly enough to have your own chocolates. You don’t have to look out for everyone anymore.”

“Yes, I do,” I growl.

“Besides, you’re paying seven million dollars for this room. You might as well get a free chocolate out of it.”

Fair. I unwrap my chocolate. Lily does too. I can’t stop staring at the witch’s mark charm on her wrist. We pop them in our mouths at the same time, and my gaze is captured by her lips. The corner of her mouth tugs up ever so slightly, and for a moment, just for a moment, something warm flickers in my chest. A flame, lighting my way back to her.

I snuff that shit out and roll over, kicking off the blankets. But I can’t stop the heat that blazes through my body at the knowledge of her, right here, a foot away from me, practically naked except for some bastard’s T-shirt.

The chocolate turns to dust in my mouth.

It’s going to be a long night.

## ELEVEN: LILY



“Chase, why are we here? What’s wrong with you?”

*I’m in the nurse’s office with my prom date, Chase. He dragged me here, his fingers gripping my wrist so tight that I have a red welt there. I lean against the edge of the bed while he paces back and forth, raking his fingers through his hair and shaking his head erratically.*

*Is it just me, or are his hands hairier than usual?*

“Chase?”

*“Lily, I—” He pivots towards me, but as he turns, his body twists unnaturally, muscles bulging from his torn tux, his limbs snapping and changing, his face elongating as his nose becomes a snout.*

*He topples forward, landing on his hands, which have become furry paws with long, violent-looking claws. The collar and tie from his tux still cling around his neck.*

*Chase pulls back his lips to reveal rows of razor-sharp teeth and lets out a growl that chills my blood.*

*“Chase, I...I don’t know what’s happened to you. Did you eat the chicken at the buffet? You should never eat the chicken.” I back away as he leans on his hind legs, getting ready to pounce.*

*He looks...like a wolf, only he's a wolf with Chase's eyes, and he's so large he wouldn't fit through the doorway.*

*If I didn't know better, I'd say he was a werewolf. But that would mean that werewolves are real.*

*I'm not in a position to have an existential crisis about this right now. I just need to survive. All those years of playing "monster hunters" with the twins kick in.*

*Chase is between me and the door. I search for an object I can use as a weapon. There's a huge plunger leaning up with a bunch of janitor's tools in the corner. I lunge for it, just as Chase lunges for me.*

*I scream as his teeth gnash the air, right where my arm was a moment ago. He crashes into the shelves of medical supplies, sending thermometers and bandages skidding across the floor. I land hard on my side and roll toward the plunger. I grab it with one hand and swing it around just as Chase comes for me again. The plunger hits him in the side of the face.*

*He howls again, but my triumph is cut short. I've only made him angry. I back up, certain that any moment now, his teeth are going to sink into my skin, when I hear a familiar voice before me.*

*"Lily!"*

*It's Brooks. Of course it is. He's always here when I need him.*

*And Jackson and Orion are with him. Relief surges through me as they rush at the thing that was once my prom date. I make a run for the door, but as I do, I'm plunged into darkness...*

*A void so deep and fathomless that I'm afraid I'm lost forever...*

*I blink, and I can see again. But what I'm seeing makes my already racing heart pound even faster.*

*I'm standing behind the couch in my living room. It's dark, and I'm wearing the tattered remains of my prom dress.*

*And there is a figure kneeling in the center of the dark living room.*

*“Mom? Dad?” I ask in confusion, unable to see which one of my parents it is with the blinds drawn shut.*

*The figure freezes.*

*Trepidation uncoils inside of me, but I try to tamp down my growing unease as I reach for the light switch beside me. My heart bangs against my chest hard enough to crack a rib, and I can't get my breaths to come in anything other than shallow, choppy pants.*

*Light suffuses the tiny living room...*

*And the dead bodies in the center of it.*

*The dead, mutilated bodies.*

*A scream builds in my throat as horror like I've never felt before crashes through me.*

*The first thing I see is my father sitting on the armchair, his wheelchair resting beside it. But his eyes... His eyes are wide and unseeing, and there's blood—so much fucking blood—seeping through his navy-blue bathrobe. Both of his arms have been cut off, though I have no idea where those limbs went.*

*I stumble back a step in horror as my gaze flicks to the figure in the middle of my living room. With its back to me, I can't see its face—can't even tell the gender—but the mysterious stranger only captures my attention for half a second.*

*Because it's then I notice my mother's body.*

*“Mom!” I scream in anguish, staring at what remains of the woman I love.*

*Her decapitated head rests in the center of what appears to be a pentagram. The remaining five points each hold a different body part of hers—both of her arms, her legs, and... oh god... Is that her heart?*

*Tears trail down my cheeks as a strangled, desperate sob lodges in my throat.*

No. No. No. No.

*The figure rises, and I can't help but note it looks tall—taller than the average human. It's dressed entirely in black, the cloak swirling around its legs like mist.*

*Without a word, the stranger grabs something from its pocket, pours it on its head in a barrage of ashy flakes, and then disappears before my very eyes.*

*The black void closes in around me once more. I'm pulled down, down, down, into the murky depths of my own torment. An elephant sits on my chest. Not an actual elephant, but some dark, heavy, invisible force that shoves me lower and lower and lower...*

*I try to cry out, but my words are stolen from me by the darkness.*

*I'm sinking, the heavy weight on my chest pushing me deeper into the gloom, until my throat burns and my vision swims, and I'm lost forever—*

*It's only then that I begin to scream...*

My eyes fly open. All I see is red and gold and a terrible roaring fire, the same shade as my prom dress.

For a moment, I don't know where I am, but then it all comes back to me.

I'm in the honeymoon suite at the Bridgemont. I'm not in the living room with my murdered parents. I'm not at prom with a werewolf. I'm perfectly fine, and—

And the heavy, leaden weight bearing down on my chest, holding me underwater, is *still here*.

“Argh!” I yell.

This isn't right. I can't see anything. It must be the ghost. The ghost has me.

I try to reach for my knife, which is nonsense because knives are useless against ghosts, but I'm not exactly thinking straight. The ghost shoves me into the bed so hard that I can't twist my arms behind me anyway.



Instead, I grab the ghost and try to fling it off. It feels oddly warm and...corporeal. It won't budge. I look down in horror and see...

Brooks's arm draped across my chest.

*Fuck.*

I turn to the side, and there, right up in my face, is a very serene, sleeping Brooks, his arm casually draped over me, tugging me against his body as he spoons me.

The fuck?

“Argh!” I yell again.

“Fuck!” Brooks's eyes fly open. “Lily, what's wrong?”

“You asshole.” I whomp him in the face with a pillow. “What did you do? Why are we snuggling? You were supposed to stay on your side of the bed.”

“Me? You were the one who inched over here in the middle of the night. I had to hold you like this so you'd stop drooling on my shoulder.”

“Hah, now I know you're bullshitting. I don't drool—”

*BANG.*

Brooks and I fly apart as the door bursts open. Jackson rushes in, his green eyes dark with fright. Orion is right on his heels, his long hair stuck to his face. He doesn't look like he's had much sleep, either.

“Are you okay?” Jackson races toward me.

I hold up a hand, but it's then that I remember that I'm hanging out the side of this ridiculous bed, and the action of raising my arm lifts the hem of my T-shirt farther up my leg.

Jackson's eyes bug out a little as he traces the line of my hip.

I yank the cover over myself. With my other foot, I kick Brooks, who's glaring at his brothers.

“You broke the lock,” he says with a sigh. “What is wrong with you?”

“Lily, we heard you screaming.” Orion’s voice trembles. “Did something come for you?”

“No, your brother just doesn’t know the meaning of personal space.”

“You crawled under *my* arm, princess,” Brooks drawls. “I kept moving away, but you chased me all around the bed.”

“That’s not how it went down.” My cheeks flare with heat.

“Oh, really?” Brooks’s mouth quirks into a sadistic smile as he raises his arm and taps the skin over one of his glorious tattoos. “I’ve got the dried drool right here to prove it.”

“That wouldn’t hold up in a court of law.”

The twins exchange a look. I forgot how annoying they can be when they do that—they have whole conversations without a word. I don’t know what they’re discussing now, but Jackson in particular looks gutted.

“So you didn’t see the ghost?” Jackson asks quietly.

“Nope, Mr. Splatterpants himself didn’t show. And it’s a shame, because Brooks and I made a very tempting package.”

The twins exchange another loaded look. Jackson slumps against the wall, looking very much unlike his usual chipper self.

Orion moves across the room and picks up some of the monitoring equipment. “I’ll get started on these. With all the paranormal activity in this hotel, we’ve got to have something.”

He throws me a final, desperate look before ducking past Jackson and fleeing the room.

Brooks swings out of bed, flies across the room, and grabs Jackson by the ear. “And you and I are stepping into the hallway for a little chat.”

“About what?” Jackson tries to claw the doorframe, but Brooks rips his hands off. “Ow, you’re hurting me.”

“About stealing clothes from women without their consent  
—”

Jackson looks frantically at me, his face ashen.

“She was with this guy, and I thought...” Jackson swallows. “I thought maybe he’d taken her somewhere, but—”

My poor, stupid heart flickers at the protective look he gives me. That was always the way he was in high school, making sure I was okay.

But then I remember that we’re not in high school any longer, that they left me, and I harden my heart.

“Chop his balls off for me, husband.” I wave sweetly to Brooks. “With a rusty guillotine.”

“Happily.” Brooks slams the door.

A moment later, I hear raised voices, mostly Brooks.

While the two of them are in the hallway, I check the crystal in my pocket. It’s still glowing blue. I grab my phone and call Becka.

“Okay, which Bellua’s bed did you wake up in?” she asks as soon as she clicks on the video chat.

“Brooks,” I answer smoothly. “But we’re married, so it’s okay.”

“*What?*” Becka screeches loud enough that if there were any sleeping ghosts left in the hotel, they’d be well and truly awake now. “Lily, tell me you didn’t—”

“Relax. Brooks muscled his way into the job, and he booked us in the honeymoon suite so we could monitor the room. So we’re Mr. and Mrs. Lily Dean.”

Becka laughs. “Very modern of you. I always thought you’d take your husband’s name since you’re such a sucker for tradition.”

I stick my tongue out at her. “You know me so well.”

“So, what activity have you recorded so far?”

“Straight to business, I see.” I fluff the pillows behind my head, finding the T-shirt Brooks wanted me to wear balled up

behind them. Despite myself, I lift it to my nose and sniff. *Mmmm*. “You’re not going to wine and dine a girl first?”

“I’m just trying to get my best friend out of a compromising situation with three hot monster hunters she should very definitely *not* fake marry. What’s the deal?”

I turn the phone around to show her the symbols I placed on the wall. “We’re all set up, but so far, nothing. No visitations during the night, unless we slept through them. Orion is checking the tapes now.”

“What about the crystals?”

I bend down and pull the larger crystal from my handbag and hold it up for her to see. It’s still glowing a faint blue color. “There’s definitely something in the hotel.”

Becka frowns. “Yeah, but blue isn’t for ghosts.”

“Fairy?” I guess. “Revenants? One of those Slavic vampire ghosts with the claws?”

“I don’t know. I’ll have to do some research. In the meantime, why not try a *séance*?”

“You’re joking, right? I want to bag this ghost, not chitchat with it.”

“The jilted groom is obviously in hiding. Probably, he smelled monster hunters a mile away. You can use the power of the *séance* to draw him out. You know how ghosts are drawn to objects that carry memories, right? If you think the ghost is killing off couples because he didn’t get his happily ever after, then find something that will remind him of the bride who left him, and put it on the table. He won’t be able to resist.”

“Right. I’ll just dig up the empty sixty-year-old poison bottle the bride left lying around.”

“You’ll figure something out, Lil. You always do. Unless you want to wait for me? I have an exam tomorrow, and then I could—”

“*No*.” This hotel is feeling cramped enough as it is. The last thing I need is Becka trying to shove me into the arms of a

Bellua, or onto a Bellua dick.

“Fine. Suit yourself. When the ghostie shows up, ask what it wants and force it to cross over. You’re not going to get answers by lying around in a heart-shaped bed, hoping to get attacked. Unless, of course, the answer you’re looking for is just how good is Bellua cock—”

“Fine,” I grumble as I reach for my backpack. “Remind me what magical mumbo jumbo do I need for a séance?”

## TWELVE: LILY



I t's amazing the things you can accomplish when you're a five-foot, curvy redhead with tits. I'm not saying men are pigs. But I'm also not *not* saying that, either.

Freddie, the concierge who helped carry our bags up to our rooms, is all too agreeable to my request.

"Why, of course!" His eyes gleam as he begins to rapidly type things into his computer. "I can definitely check the archives. Oh! This is so exciting. We don't usually get genuine academics interested in the history of the Bridgemont. Only horror writers and wannabe crime solvers." He rolls his eyes as if the prospect is ridiculous.

I toss a strand of my flame-colored hair over my shoulder with a lilting laugh. Freddie's gaze instinctively dips to the swell of my breasts, now visible, and he swallows heavily.

Hook. Line. And sinker.

"Well, my professor said we had to research a building for our final project of the semester. Because it's an architectural class, we not only need to look up the designs over the years, but also the history and why the designers chose what they did." I have no idea if I'm making any sense, but Freddie seems to be eagerly chomping down on my piss-poor excuse.

Is this even a project real architectural students have to do? Probably not. But it was the only thing I could come up with on such short notice.

“Let me see what I can find!” Freddie flashes me another agreeable smile, this time keeping his gaze fixated firmly on my face.

Shame. The push-up bra I wore today really makes the girls look great.

“Is there anything in particular you want me to look into?”

“Well, I’m really interested in the time period between 1960 and 1970. I heard there were a lot of interesting things occurring at the time. Newspaper clippings would be very helpful.” I bat my eyelashes innocently as Freddie’s lips fold into a frown.

Of course, he doesn’t confess the truth—that the reason for the renovations was a grizzly murder. But I can see the knowledge flicking behind his eyes.

Still, that perpetual smile of his bounces back as quickly as a swinging pendulum. I almost wonder if I imagined the frown in the first place.

“Of course, Mrs. Dean. Shall I have the information sent to your room?”

I almost say yes before I think of my unwanted and irritating roommate. I should be working *with* the Bellua brothers on this case, sharing our resources, but I have a feeling they’ll riot if they discover I’m going to attempt a séance. Monster hunters seem to be firmly “anti-magic” no matter the reasoning behind it.

These boy scouts probably hold crucifixes to their chests while watching the *Harry Potter* films.

*The world is changing, boys, and you need to either hang on for the ride or be left behind.*

If the hunters keep up their traditional methods of trapping ghosts and eradicating demons, then it won’t be long until the monsters win. Demons have no qualms about using whatever

tools they have in their arsenal in order to survive. This I've learned from grim experience.

Why shouldn't we have that same mentality?

I clear my throat in a futile attempt to banish the cotton balls from my head. "Why don't you just give me a call, and I'll come pick it up?"

A furrow manifests between Freddie's bushy brows. "Do you want me to call your room?"

"No." I force a giggle. "I can give you my cell number."

I reach across his desk for a piece of paper and pen, then quickly write down my number. Freddie watches my hand move, utterly transfixed, a muscle in his jaw twitching. I make sure to bend over just far enough for him to have an unobstructed view of my cleavage.

"Oh, well..." He swallows convulsively. "It's not really policy to—"

"Thank you again!" I wiggle my fingers in a wave before hurrying across the lobby.

Hopefully, Freddie will be able to compile enough information to help me perform this séance. All I need is one picture of the unhappy couple, then I can discover what's important to our little ghost friend. Perhaps I can replicate the bride's old wedding dress. I doubt he'll know the difference between one created in the twenty-first century and one from 1960.

I'm so lost in my thoughts that I don't even notice the man until I plow right into him. My head careens off his chest, and I stagger backwards a few steps, holding a hand to my nose.

"Well, I'm sorry, darling. I'm afraid I didn't see you there. All of the drilling I've been doing today must've messed with my mind. You just have to go so *deep* with your drills. So, so deep." Rough hands land on my shoulders to steady me.

Oh...no.

No. No. No.



I reluctantly peel my hand from my face and force my gaze up to meet Old Man Rodney's.

He's dressed similarly to the way he was the last time I saw him—jean shorts so tiny they could've been mistaken for a pair of briefs and a white tank top that emphasizes his gnarled gray hair poking through the shirt holes like weeds in a garden. He swings a hammer around lazily as he flashes me a toothy grin.

"Now, I need to go pound some things. Have to force those nails *deep* inside their holes."

"Err..." I wrinkle my nose in disgust as he begins to shimmy his hips.

"I once pounded a nail *so deep* into a hole that the wall—"

"Rodney!" a somewhat familiar voice exclaims. "Just the man I was looking to see."

None other than Levi saunters forward with his hands shoved into the pockets of his tailored pants. He looks particularly sexy today, but I don't know if that's just a product of my poor libido being forced to sleep next to Brooks all night without touching him or the honest-to-God truth.

His dark hair is mussed in a devilish "just fucked" look, and the tattoos coloring his lower arms are on full display because the gods have blessed me and he's wearing a shirt with the sleeves rolled up. His skin looks like it's still damp from a shower and he's pulled his clothes on before he's fully dry.

Good lord.

What I wouldn't do to study every inch of this man's skin...

With my tongue.

Levi's lips twitch upwards almost as if he feels my gaze like a physical caress, but he doesn't pull his attention off of Old Man Rodney.

"My shower seems to be leaking, my friend. I was wondering if you could take a look." Levi jabs his thumb over

his shoulder in the direction of the elevator. “Room three hundred and thirty-three.”

“Oh my! That is an issue!” Rodney’s eyes widen comically as he hikes up his skin-tight jean shorts. He must have the wedgie from hell at this point. “We can’t have a leaking faucet, can we? It’ll make everything *wet* and *slippery*.”

God, how can something as innocent as that sound so perverted leaving his lips?

Levi seems to be on the same wavelength as me. His own easygoing smile distorts into a grimace.

“Yeah...it’s, um, certainly wet up there.”

“How wet are we talking about? Is it gushing? Or is it merely moist?” Rodney blinks guilelessly up at Levi.

I break in before Levi can. “It’s a waterfall up there. I would hurry, Rodney, before the entire hotel becomes wet.”

Levi nods eagerly. “Yes. Hurry, Rodney. Only you are capable of making it...um...dry.”

“Right. Right.” Rodney glances down at his tool belt, grabs a wrench, and then licks his lips. “I’m an expert at plugging wet holes.”

“Errr...”

Rodney charges towards the elevator with an imperious set to his chin and his shoulders pushed back. He reminds me of a knight charging into battle...

If the battle involved leaking faucets and the knight was an unironic pervert.

Only when the elevator’s doors close on his determined face do I break into giggles and turn towards a beaming Levi.

“You’re seriously my hero,” I singsong.

He smirks. “You owe me, Ms. Lily Dean. I’m not going to be able to enter my room for at least two hours now. Last time Old Man Rodney was working on one of his projects, he decided to take his shirt off to, and I quote, ‘free the contained nips.’” He shudders. “I still have nightmares to this day.”

“So you’ve been at the hotel a while?” I question, moving towards the elevator that Rodney didn’t take. Levi easily keeps pace with me. “I thought you were here to meet a client?”

“That’s true, but I may have skipped over a detail. I actually live here,” he confesses. “My mom used to work as a maid until she passed away. We didn’t have a house, so I decided to stay where I was comfortable. I know every inch of this hotel, every secret, every piece of gossip.”

Interesting...

That probably explains how he knew my last name. He would’ve heard about the weird new guests sharing the honeymoon suite.

I debate my next question, nibbling on my lower lip.

“So does that mean you were here when that young couple got murdered a couple of weeks ago, and the couple a few months back?” I try to keep my voice soft and sympathetic, hiding any and all ulterior motives behind false platitudes.

Levi’s face turns grave. “Yeah. That shit is messed up. I don’t know who would do such a thing.”

“And the police don’t have any leads?” I hedge innocently.

Well, as innocently as a person can be when talking about horrible, gruesome murders.

“Everyone in the hotel had been interviewed, but no arrests as far as I know.” Levi snorts derisively. “It just doesn’t make any sense. How could the murderer get in and out of the room without being seen? How could they not have left any DNA or footprints?”

*Because the murderer isn’t actually a human, I think but don’t say out loud.*

“It’s horrible,” I agree. “I hope they find the murderer soon.”

“Yeah. I met the couple a few times during their stay here, and they seemed really nice. Happy and in love and all that cheesy shit.” He distractedly scratches at the nape of his neck.

“I don’t know how anyone could be so cruel. It’s almost *demonic*.”

I want to press him for more information, but the elevator doors have already opened. It will be suspicious if I ask another question when the conversation is seemingly over. I’ll just have to bide my time.

Levi watches me enter the elevator, his amused grin morphing into a confused one as I press the button for my floor.

“And just where are you going, Lily Dean? Are you trying to ditch your savior after I so kindly slayed your perverted monster?”

“And how would you propose I thank you?” I allow a finger to drift suggestively down my cleavage.

His eyes turn hooded, molten, burning with unfettered desire.

Just before the doors can slide shut, Levi stalks inside, his huge body crowding me against the wall. He reminds me of a predator in the wild. He moves with a lethal grace reserved for animals, not human beings.

But my body reacts not like a hunted thing, but like a fellow predator, alive with the thrill of the chase. Yes, this is what I denied myself yesterday in that secret cupboard.

But I’m done denying myself.

“What are you offering, Lily Dean?”

The way he says my name has heat fluttering through my body and building in my core. I can’t remember the last time I had sex, but if my reaction’s anything to go by, it’s been way too long.

A tiny voice in the back of my head says one word and one word alone—Bellua.

But then I think about how they left me, and any guilt I might’ve harbored over what I’m about to do dissipates. They don’t deserve my guilt, only my disdain.

And why shouldn't I take things further with Levi? He's sexy, charming, and British, for fuck's sake. It doesn't have to mean anything besides sex.

I lick my lower lip, and Levi's gaze homes in on the minuscule movement. The flames in his eyes reach an inferno as he takes another step closer, until his toes are touching my own and each exhale has my chest brushing his.

Behind him, the doors to the elevator finally slide shut with a soft ding. The elevator begins to ascend.

"Tell me to stop, Lily Dean," Levi whispers as his gaze volleys between my eyes and my lips. "Tell me that this is a terrible idea because you're sharing the honeymoon suite with a man who could kill me."

"No." The word is practically a moan, and it seems to be the only confirmation Levi needs. "I don't want you to stop."

"Good." He presses his lips to mine in a bruising, possessive kiss that has my body flushing hot with intense arousal.

I wrap my arms around his neck...then my legs around his waist, the heels of my feet digging into his ass. I need him closer still.

He scrambles backwards—me still clinging to him like a damn monkey—and then fumbles to press the Emergency Stop button on the wall panel. The elevator jerks to a halt, and the lights flicker to their emergency setting, enveloping the metal box in a warm red glow.

"Are we going to get in trouble?" I ask between kisses.

His chuckle rumbles through me, and I suddenly feel as if I'm the epicenter of an earthquake. My entire body tingles.

"Don't worry, Your Highness. I'll take the blame."

"Your Highness?" I pull away from him and arch an eyebrow.

His puffy, swollen lips stretch into a rictus grin. "I'm the knight in shining armor who saved the dashing princess from the evil dragon pervert. Obviously."

“Obviously.” I roll my eyes and then tug his lips back to mine, kissing him just as fiercely as he previously kissed me.

Our tongues tangle together in a seductive dance—the tango, if I have to put a name to it. There’s nothing slow or languid about this kiss. It’s fast and brutal and punishing.

He pushes my back against the far wall of the elevator, and this time, I have the bar to hold the majority of my weight. Which is good because Levi releases me to unbutton his shirt.

Drool quite literally forms in my mouth when I take in his dark, toned stomach covered in colorful tattoos. A part of me yearns to study the intricate patchwork of art on his skin, but the rest of me...

It just wants to get fucked.

Hard and fast.

Levi moves his hands to the waistband of his trousers but pauses there, indecision warring with need on his face. “Lily, are you sure—?”

“Are you going to fuck me, Levi, or just stand there with your hand in your pants?” As I speak, I remove my own shirt and throw it to the side. Then, I unclasp my bra and tug it down my arms before tossing it away as well.

“Well...fuck.” Levi hurries to remove his pants, and soon, he’s standing in nothing but tight black boxer briefs that leave very little to the imagination. They cling to his toned thighs and...ahem...other body parts. “You’re one beautiful creature, Lily.”

“You’re not too shabby yourself.” I smirk at him, but that smile quickly fades when he cups one of my breasts and runs his finger across my peaked nipple. A breathy mewl rips from my throat. “Oh fuck.”

“Not too shabby? Is that really the best you can do?” A teasing glint materializes in his eyes.

“Not too...ugly?”

He pinches my nipple in retaliation, and a flood of heat migrates from my breast to my core.

“Try again, princess.”

“Fuck, Levi.” I dig my fingernails into his broad shoulders, but I don’t know if I mean to push him away or pull him closer. “You know you’re gorgeous. Quit teasing me.”

He cocks an eyebrow arrogantly as he continues to palm my tit and flick my nipple. “Is that what I’m doing?”

“Yeeesss.” That one word is an embarrassing moan.

He takes a step away from me, and I want to cry out and beg him to come back. But his no-nonsense stare keeps the words at bay.

“Jump down and turn around. Place your hand on the bar.”

His domineering tone should make me annoyed. I hate when guys boss me around in the bedroom.

But fuck me.

Right then and there, if Levi told me to call him Daddy, I’d do so in a heartbeat.

I eagerly move to do as instructed, bending slightly so he has a better view of my ass in my jeans.

He runs a hand down the length of my naked spine, leaving a trail of tremors in his wake.

“Do you know you’re the most gorgeous woman I’ve ever laid eyes on before?” His hand stops at the waistband of my jeans, directly above my ass, before he slowly trails it around my waist to reach the clasp of my pants. “I’m supposed to be focused on my work, but I saw you and knew I had to have you.”

He pops open the button.

“I’m sure you say that to every girl,” I tease in a breathy voice dripping with need.

His hot breath tickles my earlobe and elicits a fresh round of goose bumps all across my skin. “If every girl had an ass like this, Lily Dean, I would.”

“Lily Dean now, huh? What happened to ‘princess’?”

“You’re only ‘princess’ when you’re a good girl.” He yanks my jeans and panties down, leaving me bare for his perusal. He then bends and helps me remove the clothing—along with my socks and shoes—until I’m entirely naked.

This is wrong.

So wrong.

I’m here with my so-called “husband”...otherwise known as one of the three men I loved with all my heart back when I was a child.

I’m on a hunt, and I *never*, ever have relations when I’m on the job—it’s too big of a risk, both for me and for them.

I don’t even know Levi.

Hell, there could be cameras in the elevator. Old Man Rodney could be jerking off right this second to the show we’re putting on.

But for all the reasons I think to myself that “this is a bad idea,” I counter them with a thousand ones that say this is the best idea of my life.

The tip of Levi’s cock presses into me—he must’ve removed his boxers—and I feel something cold and hard rubbing against my pussy lips.

Ohmygawd.

He has a piercing.

A fucking piercing.

“You’re so wet for me, aren’t you, princess?” He eases himself in another inch.

“Princess, huh? So I’m a good girl now?”

He chuckles darkly but doesn’t respond. Instead, he reaches around my body to play with my clit.

Then, without warning or fanfare, he thrusts all the way inside of me.

“Holy fuck!” I scream as I struggle to adjust to the intrusion.



He's big. Really, really big. Bigger than any guy I've been with so far.

And the way that piercing rubs deliciously against my most inner walls...

I need him to move, now, before I explode. Or implode. I'm certain some type of "ploding" will be going on if he doesn't start fucking me.

Levi pounds into me the same way he kissed me—like he wants to own me, mind, body, and soul. Lust moves in rictus swirls in my chest as I grip the bar as hard as I can and match him thrust for thrust. My breasts bounce, a visual I can vaguely make out in the black chromatic elevator wall. The sight only heightens my arousal.

Abruptly, Levi reaches for my throat with his free hand and drags me upright, my back flush against his sweat-soaked chest.

"Fuck, Levi!"

"Are you going to be a good girl for me and come when I tell you to, princess?" His talented fingers flick at my clit.

"Yes, oh god. Yes."

"Then come for me." He pinches my clit at the same time he thrusts into me even deeper, his piercing dragging against my sensitive skin.

My orgasm comes in long, shuddering waves with no immediate end in sight. Streaks of red and black dance across my vision as I cry out and convulse. My pussy clenches around Levi's length, squeezing his dick like a vise.

"Oh...sweet princess." He pulls out of me before the aftershocks even fully stop and then spins me around.

Before I can get my bearings, he grabs me underneath the ass and hauls me against the wall once more. His hips jerk forward, his cock entering me yet again, and I throw my head back with a loud moan. This new position has him destroying my pussy in an entirely different way, his piercing dragging against fresh skin.

He catches one of my bouncing breasts in his mouth as he fucks me hard and fast. Sweat trickles down his face, and his features are set in grim determination.

He releases my nipple to growl out, “You’re going to come again.”

“I’m so close,” I cry out as I capture his lips with mine.

Once again, his fingers find my clit.

Once again, my orgasm barrels into me like a freight train.

Once again, I explode around him, screaming my release.

But this time, Levi comes too, spilling his seed inside me with a possessive, primal roar.

Holy. Fuck.

Holy fuck.

My breathing is embarrassingly uneven as I drop my forehead to his shoulder. The only saving grace is the fact that his own breathing is just as unsteady.

Holy fuck.

I can’t believe I just did that.

Had sex with a virtual stranger...

In an elevator...

Without a condom.

*Without a freaking condom.*

Holy fuck.

Terror engulfs me almost instantly, drowning out the lust from before.

I have the implant, and I know I’m clean, but what about Levi’s history? A man as sexy as him surely has had his fair share of females over the years...

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck—

“We just did fuck. Twice, actually. But I’m down for a third time.” Levi chuckles dryly as his cock begins to stiffen

inside of me once more.

I blurt, “We didn’t use a condom.”

That mischievous smile fades from his face almost instantly, and he slowly pulls out of me. Taut lines appear between his brows.

“I-I have the implant,” I stammer out as he gives me a deer-in-headlights sort of look. “And I’m clean. Are you...?”

“I’m clean too,” he quickly says, forking his fingers through his short black hair. “I’m sorry, Lily. Fuck. I should’ve remembered. I was just so...”

He heaves a helpless sigh as he moves to grab the clothing off the ground. He tosses mine to me, and I hurry to get dressed as I speak.

“We both should’ve remembered.”

*How could you have been so stupid, Lily?*

Levi’s smile turns almost sly as he finishes buttoning his pants. “That was the first time I ever went bare before.”

A strange fluttering sensation erupts in my chest, despite the severity of the situation.

“Me too.” I tug my shirt over my head and then attempt to peer at my reflection in the black wall. I can’t see myself too clearly, but I know my hair is a disheveled, tangled mess.

And I can feel how swollen my lips are.

I pray to all that is holy I don’t run into any of the Belluas on the way back to my room. I don’t owe them jack shit—certainly not an explanation or fidelity, especially since we’re not dating—but I would feel shitty rubbing their faces in my most recent hookup.

Levi doesn’t put his shirt back on. Instead, he slings it over his broad shoulder, leaving his dark, inked chest on display.

Am I drooling?

Please tell me I’m not drooling.

I attempt to inconspicuously rub at the corners of my mouth.

With his smirk still firmly in place, Levi presses the button that will start the elevator once more. It slowly begins to ascend to my floor.

“You don’t think there are any cameras in here, do you?” I ask conversationally, smoothing my mussed hair as best I can.

There’s not much I can do about my messy makeup though.

“A place this old? I doubt it. Why? You want a copy to watch at a later time?” He tosses a wink at me over his shoulder.

“I want to make sure Rodney isn’t touching his tiny dick to our porn tape.” I shudder at just the thought. “I would never have sex again if I discovered he did that.”

“You like my cock too much to give it up.”

“Are you saying this won’t be a onetime thing?”

“I’m not saying anything...except that you like my cock too much to give it up.”

I snort before I can stop myself. “You’re ridiculous.”

And not entirely wrong.

The elevator pings, signaling we’ve reached my floor, and I move to step into the hallway.

Levi stops me.

“You know, you can always come back to my room for an encore performance...” He waggles his eyebrows suggestively.

I smirk and step out of the elevator, just as the doors begin to slide shut.

“This princess needs to get her beauty rest,” I tease.

Though what I actually need to do is get this séance set up.

“You don’t need any beauty rest, princess.” Levi flashes me a bright smile just as the doors slide shut the rest of the

way with an audible ping. Still, his voice carries, even with the steel-reinforced doors separating us. “You’re beautiful just the way you are.”

“And you’re a cheesy smooth talker with a huge dick,” I murmur under my breath, but I’m grinning.

And I’m still grinning when I enter the honeymoon suite a few minutes later...only to have my smile immediately dissipate from my face.

“Motherfucker,” I growl as my gaze lands on the tattered remains of my T-shirt lying on the bed.

Beside it, carefully folded, is Brooks’s shirt. There’s only one thing I can say in a situation like this...

“Damn Bellua brothers!”

## THIRTEEN: ORION



I feel sick to my stomach.

Whenever I blink, I swear I see their faces.

Etched on the skin of my eyelids.

Tattooed on my flesh.

Blink.

I see them.

Blink.

I hear their screams—though this is just a construct of my overactive imagination, not reality.

Blink.

I see Lily the way she looked on prom night out of my bedroom window, dressed in orange, when everything was good in my life and my world wasn't falling to pieces.

Blink. Blink. Blink.

I did what Jackson asked, what I've resisted doing for five long years—I dug into Lily's past. I didn't have to go far to find the horror. Right at the top of the search results was a newspaper article from our hometown of Haddenwood. My brain refused to shut off until I found every last piece of information.

When I read the police report...

Blink. Blink. Blink.

I know I should tell Brooks. When he finds out, he'll go fucking *feral*. But Brooks is the last person on my mind right now.

I move blindly through the hallway, not aware of where I'm going until my feet stop me in front of Lily's hotel room. I run my fingers through my hair, snarl, and then tug at a dark strand. The brief stab of pain momentarily erases those grotesque images from my brain.

But then I blink, and I see them all over again.

I pound my fist against the door, restless energy skittering directly underneath my skin like currents of electricity.

It only takes a few seconds for the door to swing open and Lily Dean to blink owlishly up at me. Her hair is all messed up, she's wearing her shirt inside out, and her lips are curled back into a self-satisfied smirk. She looks... Well, she looks like she just had sex.

Want and jealousy gnaw at my gut, warring with the gruesome images flooding my mind.

*I hope it wasn't Brooks. Please don't let it be Brooks. He doesn't deserve her. None of us do.*

A scowl quickly distorts her perfect features as she recognizes me. She cocks her hip out.

"Brooks isn't here," she bites out. "I think he's walking the floors with his ghost radio—"

"Why didn't you tell us about your parents?" I blurt, never one for tactfulness or subtlety.

Lily's face goes carefully blank. One second, she's hurling daggers at me with her eyes. The next, she's the shell of the woman I know and love. Still love, even after all this time. Her features are utterly impassive, and her brilliant hazel eyes have dulled to a muddy brown.

She doesn't answer, so I forge ahead, unable to stop myself, a verbal freight train intent on self-destruction.

"I found the articles. And I read the police report—"

"You read the police report?" Her voice is cold, almost neutral. However, I know her well enough to sense an undercurrent of anger beneath her carefully constructed words. "That's such an invasion of privacy—"

"Your parents were murdered by demons, weren't they?" I can't speak above a whisper. "On prom night?"

God, we *left* her that same day.

For her own protection.

To save her from this life.

From *me*.

And all along, she needed us more than ever.

A fissure opens up down the center of my chest, and I swear nothing will be able to fill it in. Guilt and pain—both so visceral I can feel them in my bloodstream—swamp me.

"Lily," I plead desperately when it's apparent she's not going to say anything. Either she's too angry to speak or too numb to compute my words. "Why didn't you—"

She slams the door in my face.

For a moment, I'm stunned, my gaze glued to the wooden door as if it holds all the answers to the universe's most evasive questions.

The old Orion might've turned around and trudged back to his room with his tail between his legs, but old Orion died the second he got bit by that werewolf. I can't leave when I can sense Lily's pain like a physical knife in the chest. It's so potent that it practically permeates the hallway—melancholic grief woven with rage.

Hesitating only briefly, I quickly open the door, grateful—and maybe even a little concerned—that Lily hasn't bothered to fix the lock since we destroyed it the night before.



Lily sits crisscross on the bed, her eyes glazed, her hands lying limply in her lap. She doesn't even look in my direction as she says, "Shut the door."

And I do.

Tentatively, I venture closer to where she sits, suddenly unsure of how to start this conversation despite knowing I need to.

I hate the forlorn look on Lily's face. It destroys something vital inside of me, a piece as crucial to my survival as my lungs and heart are.

"I promise you, I haven't been stalking you. I never once tried to find you after we left, but I had to look into you once I realized you were the Shadow." I find that I can't speak above a whisper. There's something so breakable about the silence, so fragile. Anything louder threatens to tear everything into finite pieces. "I found the articles about your parents' murder, but they didn't give a lot of information. So I hacked into the police records and—"

"Did they tell you that I found the bodies?" Her voice is hollow—a decaying carcass collecting maggots, abandoned on the side of the road. The noise is like a needle being plunged directly into my lungs. "Did the police records tell you that?"

"I don't—"

"They weren't just killed," she continues in that deadened, emotionless voice. "They were *tortured*. Ripped apart. Slaughtered. Used for some fucked-up sacrificial ritual I still know nothing about."

"You—"

"And you guys left me that same night." A single tear paves its way down her cheek.

Grief claws at me, sinking its talons in deeply and leaving behind jagged, bloody scratches that I fear will never heal. I want to cry with her and share in her pain, but I don't know if I'm allowed to. Not after what I did.

Not after I abandoned her.

“We didn’t know—”

“I was all alone.” Another tear joins the first, but she still doesn’t look my way, keeping her gaze fixed on the wall in front of her.

My stomach spasms, threatening to empty itself on the floor. I swear her pain pries apart a piece of my soul.

Why did we leave her?

Why didn’t we stay and make sure she was okay?

Why?

Why?

Why?

“Lily, I’m so damn sorry—” My chest constricts painfully.

“And by your own admission, you haven’t spared a single thought for me in all these years. And then you come back, look into my past, dig up the worst moment of my life...” Anger infuses each and every word, and that familiar fire I’ve come to associate with Lily Dean flares to life in her eyes.

She has one of Brooks’s T-shirts balled in her hands. Her fury stabs at my brain like a flaming blade.

“I’m sorry...” The whole world seems to fade, and my breathing is nothing but a ragged sound, distant through the thrumming of blood in my ears.

I didn’t know what I expected when I looked into Lily’s past, but it wasn’t supposed to be... It wasn’t supposed to be *this*.

It wasn’t supposed to be images so gruesome that they’ll haunt me until the day I die. It wasn’t supposed to be the knowledge that the girl I love with all of my heart was the one to find the bodies of her own damn parents. It wasn’t supposed to be a pain so visceral it’s on the verge of slashing me to ribbons.

I wondered what could’ve happened in Lily’s past to make her so angry and jaded, all rough edges and sharp knives. I

wrongly assumed it was because we left her shortly after she discovered the supernatural world existed.

Maybe that had a part to play in it, but it wasn't everything.

God, I wish it was, though.

Lily Dean would've been able to survive our departure. She's a fighter through and through. What she can't come back from, however, is the death of her two beloved parents.

We left her to save her from this world. Instead, we forced her to endure the worst of it alone.

"You all left me when I needed you most." Fury pounds off of Lily in an almost palpable wave. It's a dark and caustic type of emotion that makes me want to both cower and pull her into my arms at the same time. "*You abandoned me.*"

I want to explain the reasoning for our decision. I want to express my condolences, but words seem superficial at the moment.

It isn't what Lily needs.

*I'm not what she needs.*

Fuck.

"You should leave, Orion." The anger seems to have dissipated just as quickly as it arrived.

She drops the T-shirt. Her shoulder sag forward as if the weight of the world is pushing down on her, suffocating her under its immense burden. Tears hang suspended on her lashes, but they don't fall again.

"Lily, please..."

I have to fix this. *Need* to fix this.

*I'm so, so sorry, Lily.*

*We screwed up.*

*I screwed up.*

*I understand if you'll never be able to forgive us.*

*I'm sorry.*

“You need to leave. Now.” She doesn’t raise her voice, but she doesn’t have to. Her desperation to escape me is written into every line of her perfect visage.

“I’m sorry.” It’s all I can think to say.

How inconsequential.

What can my words do to mend this hurt?

Absolutely nothing.

I finally understand the reason for Lily’s hatred and anger toward us...and it’s worse than I could’ve ever imagined. We deserve every ounce of her rage.

Maybe we can’t bring the dead back to life, but we *can* help her find the murderer. She may not want our help, but she has it.

I debate telling my brothers about what I discovered before deciding I’ve meddled enough in Lily’s life for the time being. It’s apparent she doesn’t want us to know the truth, and I respect that.

Now, I just need to prove to Lily that I’m sorry for leaving her. Maybe then this gaping hole in my chest will close over.

Or maybe it’ll always remain, a physical reminder of my biggest mistake and the one nightmare I can’t kill.

## FOURTEEN: LILY



*F*uck.

Orion didn't know about my parents.

He wouldn't have been able to fake the pain in his voice. He's not capable of it. He didn't know. I'm certain of that. Which means that Jackson can't know, either, because Orion wouldn't have been able to keep that secret from his brother.

But that doesn't make sense.

I remember that night like it happened yesterday. I remember the blood, the gore, the horror. I remember running outside to throw up on my front lawn as Brooks drove around the corner in that stupid Mustang of his.

I remember his eyes meeting mine, the way they hardened at the edges.

I remember the cold, blank expression on his face as he drove past our house, as he sped away from me even as I ran after him in my prom dress that was drenched in my parents' blood.

So, either he deliberately hid the truth from the twins so they wouldn't find out and viciously cut me off for some reason that he won't divulge, or...

Or... I refuse to contemplate the alternative.

No.

I won't.

Brooks *knew*. He had to know. He saw the blood all over me, the horror in my eyes. He saw, and he didn't stop, didn't even roll down the window as he drove past.

He would have seen reports about their violent murders on the news. One look at the crime scene photographs, and he would've understood that my parents were attacked by demons. Anyone with a little knowledge of the supernatural would know that. Hell, Becca and I were new to all this, and even we figured it out.

Brooks *knew*, and he left me all the same.

He *left* me.

And he took his brothers far away where they couldn't find me.

The righteous anger of the knowledge is all that has kept me going these long years as Becca and I hunted down every monster we could find and made their kind pay.

All this time, I could have had Jackson and Orion at my side. But Brooks took them away from me. I'll never be able to forgive him for that.

I stare down at Brooks's T-shirt in my hands. With a cry, I hurl it at the wall. I think about that moment last night, when our fingers touched, and I felt...something. Something that woke in me those same intense feelings Brooks stirred five years ago when he pushed me against an alley wall in my prom dress and kissed me like he needed me to breathe.

"Fuck you, Brooks Bellua!" I yell at the wall.

The crumpled T-shirt doesn't answer me.

Even now, he's trying to manipulate me. Barging his way into this room, trying to take over the investigation, and last night when...

*Maybe he didn't know, my foolish heart whispers. Maybe he actually didn't see you that night. Maybe something else...*

Nope.

I'm not going there.

I clamber off the bed and hunt around for my knives, which I jam into their sheaths. I cast one last look at Brooks's rumpled side of the bed before I head toward the door.

I'm not moping around and falling apart over a guy who doesn't even want me.

I am banishing this ghost fucking *tonight* so I can get the fuck away from the Bellua brothers once and for all.

To do that, I need some ghost bait.



I FIND the concierge in the lounge at the rear of the hotel. Luckily, no Bellua brothers are nearby. I wait until Freddie's finished helping an elderly couple identify some nice walking paths on a fold-out map before approaching him.

"Hi, Freddie. I wondered if you could help me with something?"

"Certainly, Mrs. Dean." Freddie gives a short bow. "That's what I'm here for. What can I do for you? Is everything satisfactory with your room? Would you and Mr. Dean like to reserve a romantic table for two in our award-winning restaurant?"

I resist the urge to make a face at the idea of trying to have a romantic dinner with my fake husband. "I'm really keen to get started on my project. Did you ever end up finding information about the hotel? Maybe a scrapbook of newspaper clippings...?"

Freddie appears resigned. "Unfortunately not. I'm sorry. We have a few photographs on the wall in the billiards room, but honestly, the guests aren't interested in the hotel's history, so we don't highlight it beyond a few mentions on the website. There are things in the past I think the owners would like to forget."

*You mean the murders, I think but don't say.*

“What about the staff?” I ask, thinking that I may get lucky, and someone could still be working. “Or the owners? I could talk to them?”

Freddie chuckles. “Good luck with that. The only two staff members who’ve been here since the sixties are Robert and maybe even Old Man Rodney, though no one knows for sure how old he is. I think you’d have to cut him open and count the rings. You won’t squeeze a word out of Robert about anything, and the problem with Rodney is—”

“Oh, yes, Old Man Rodney and I are well acquainted.” I shudder, remembering the old man’s hairy crotch gyrating in my face.

“Exactly. And the owners are unfortunately not on site at present. We aren’t able to contact them, which is a real shame, as we could use their assistance with everything going on,” Freddie continues. “We have boxes of stuff in the back office—old restaurant menus and photographs and brochures, but it’s all jumbled up. I can ask Robert if you’d be able to look through them, but he doesn’t even allow journalists or historians back there. It’s his private domain. We had a bunch sniffing around after some unfortunate incidents this year, but he won’t let them see anything. You’d think that guy had something to hide. I’m sorry, Mrs. Dean. I thought I would find more information for you.”

My heart sinks. Even if I could get in to look at that stuff, it’ll be weeks of work to pore through it, and I don’t even know what I’m looking for. Something that will have meaning to a dead ghost.

“That would be great, thanks. And actually...” I tap my chin as an evil thought occurs to me. “I *will* book that table for tonight. My husband’s credit card is still connected to our room, right?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Good. And what’s your fanciest, most expensive dish on the menu?”



“That would be the fifty-five-day aged beef all the way from New Zealand, served with a squid ink reduction, mushroom beignet, and beef cheek roulade.”

“Excellent. I’ll have that with a bottle of Dom Perignon.” I need something to drown my sorrows, and if Brooks is picking up the tab...

“Certainly. I’ll arrange it for you, Mrs. Dean.”

As Freddie hurries away to make my booking, I feel a tap on my shoulder. I whirl around, my fingers itching to reach for my blade, but it’s only the strange old woman, Helena, who we met on our first day.

“Pardon me, dear.” She sucks on her cigarette holder, smearing her lipstick beyond her lip line. “I couldn’t help but overhear that you’re interested in the hotel’s history. You know that Toby and I have been holidaying at this hotel for decades. We first came here in the sixties, and although it got a bit run down and depressing for a few years there, the new owners have made it even more opulent than ever. I keep a scrapbook of all our photos. Would you like to see it?”

The sixties? She was here at the same time as the bridegroom? There’s a chance... “I would.”

“Toby!” She snaps her fingers, and her husband pops up from one of the nearby sofas, his features stricken with fear at what she might ask him to do. “Go up to our room and fetch my scrapbook for this young woman.”

“Of course, my sugarplum.” Toby immediately puts down his book.

A pang of something hits my heart. I remember how Jackson and Orion used to leap to attention like that to carry my books everywhere at school.

I wish they were here now.

They’d love this. Orion would get such a kick out of playing detective, hunting through this lady’s photographs. And Jackson would charm her completely onto our side—

Helena seems to sense a shift in my mood. “So where’s that brooding, handsome husband of yours today?”

*Hopefully drowned in the pool.* I bite my tongue so I don’t say that out loud. I don’t know where Brooks has gone, and I don’t give a shit.

“I hope he’s not off gallivanting with another woman,” Helena says with a kind of delicious relish, and I’m horrified at the streak of possessive jealousy that rocks through my body at the idea of Brooks being with another girl, even though I also desire to stick his head on a pike and dance a jig.

*Why you gotta betray me like this, body?*

“It would be rude of him to find a new mistress on your honeymoon, but not unheard of. Men. They’re all the same. At least it took Toby a few years to become insufferable.”

“My husband is a nature lover,” I tell her, not wanting her to think I’m so easily fooled by the ways of men. “He’s out watching birds, but I wanted to enjoy the hotel spa.”

“I couldn’t agree more. Why go outside and get all muddy for nothing when we can pay hundreds of dollars to soak in a mud bath with a glass of prosecco?” She winks at me. “The two of you remind me of me and Toby on our wedding day. So young and full of spirit. I bet the sex is incredible.”

My cheeks heat. “Um...”

“You know, Toby and I have stayed in the honeymoon suite several times ourselves. Did you know that you can use the cast-iron feet on the bed to attach a spreader bar? But whatever you do, don’t tie a sex swing from the chandelier. It’s not structurally sound. Poor Toby found that out the hard way. Ah.” She waves at her husband as he huffs across the lounge, saving me from further tales of their exploits. “Here he is with the book.”

Toby returns and places a large leather-bound book into her wrinkled hands.

Why does she cart that thing around? It’s so much easier to keep all your photos on your phone.

Old people and their strange ways.

Helena collapses onto an overstuffed sofa and pats the cushion beside her. Reluctantly, I settle in. I wouldn't dare say no to Helena—she looks like she could eat me alive.

Helena pauses to light another cigarette. She takes a deep drag, then opens the first page.

I gasp.

The entire two-page spread is a full-color photograph of her and Toby, wrapped in a loving embrace.

They are butt naked.

There are wrinkles in places I didn't know could *get* wrinkles.

“Oh, this old thing.” Helena clicks her tongue as she turns the page. “I forgot that was in there. That was my ruby anniversary present from Toby—a boudoir shoot in my favorite place—right here in the Bridgemont. Robert from the front desk took that photograph. He's quite talented with a camera.”

That's something I never needed to know about Robert.

I swallow as Helena turns the page to reveal some holiday snaps where, thankfully, everyone is wearing clothes. A young Toby and Helena stroll on the grounds, play tennis with another couple, swim in a mountain stream with the Bridgemont in the background.

In another shot, Helena leans over the balcony in one of the upper rooms, wearing one of her 60s day dresses, her hair coming loose from its pins and that cigarette holder dangling from her thin fingers. In another, Toby holds a bottle of whisky with his other arm around his beautiful wife and a smile like he's just won the lottery. For all of Helena's barking, they look as if they've had a lot of fun here over the years.

That pang in my chest returns tenfold. These photographs—they remind me of my parents. They were academics who were always traveling to some far-flung locale for a conference or lecture series, where they'd tear up the dance

floor and dare each other to drink strange cocktails...until my Dad's accident put him in a wheelchair, and now... Now the only gyrating they're doing is the danse macabre...

"Were you here when the couple got murdered a couple of weeks ago?" I dive into the real reason I'm here so I don't have to think about my parents. "Did you meet them?"

"We did. We saw them arriving in their fancy Mercedes, didn't we, Toby?"

"Yes, honeybunch."

"She was a right little madam, and she didn't look too happy about staying here. Mind you, with her cheap wedding dress slipping down her arms, flashing her tits to all and sundry, she looked as if she'd make the best of things. Poor Toby nearly had a heart attack." Helena frowns at her cigarette. "Some women have no class."

"No," I agree, crossing my legs and turning the page quickly so Helena doesn't have a chance to pick apart my decidedly un-classy outfit. "They don't."

I used to love pretty, girly dresses, like the one with daisies on it that was the origin of my nickname. But these days, all dresses remind me of the time before my parents, so I stick with baggy men's cargo pants, leggings, hoodies, and old flannel shirts in various shades of black.

"The husband wasn't much better." Helena turns the page to reveal a spread of shots beside the hotel pool. "I caught him flirting most unashamedly with the waitress in the bar, offering her all manner of bribes and drugs to invite him back into the staffroom, all while his wife was in the lobby waiting for him."

"They sound...interesting." I choose my words carefully. "But they weren't from around here, were they? No one at the hotel knew them personally?"

"Not that I'm aware of. The police were here for a couple of days interviewing all the guests." Helena sniffs. "I told them it could have been a murder/suicide—she knocked him off because he was a cheating scoundrel but then offed herself

because of the guilt. They didn't seem much interested in my observations. They haven't arrested anyone yet, as far as I know.

“And Robert always keeps me in the loop with hotel gossip. There was another couple who died in the same suite some months ago. I hope I'm not frightening you.”

“No, not at all.”

“That's good. We women should always have a great stomach for violence. I suppose some murderer could still be wandering these halls, but I won't let it spoil my holiday. It's bad enough that I have to be here with Toby.”

Oof. And they say true love is dead.

But I press on, heedless to Toby's stricken face. “And have you experienced anything else strange at the hotel? Cold spots, gray figures, that sort of thing?”

Helena tosses back her scrawny neck and cackles. “If you're referring to that ridiculous story of a Bridgemont ghost, then you can take that superstitious nonsense elsewhere. It's just a tale the new owners made up to scare the tourists. Sid was a lovely, upstanding gentleman. He'd never dream of lingering about, bothering people, let alone committing horrific murders. Look, I'll show you.”

She turns the page. This spread is all shots of Helena and Toby with other couples in the hotel ballroom, dressed in glittering ballgowns and dancing to a swing band.

“The hotel used to have a ball every Friday and Saturday night. It was quite the affair. Here are Sid and Eleanor—we met them on their honeymoon night, twirling around the dance floor like a pair of whirling dervishes. Now, Sid—there was a man truly in love, truly devoted to his woman.

“But that Eleanor couldn't see what a good thing she had. She poisoned Sid in his sleep, so the stories go, emptied the safe, and ran off with the best man. They were never brought to justice. Apparently, they were last seen on the beach in the Cayman Islands. They'd be long gone now, I imagine.”

The couple beam out at me from the photograph. It's not one of the many that have been shared online, but a candid shot taken in the hotel's ballroom. The groom is spinning the bride under his arm, and he looks at her with such violent intensity that it makes my stomach churn. She smiles angelically as she sashays around, her dress a blur around her legs.

I stare at the photograph and realize that this is what I need to conduct the séance. The love in Sid's face is so evident—it would attract his ghost.

I point at the image. “Can I take this? I promise I'll bring it back to you. I'd like to show my...ah...*husband* when he gets back from his walk.”

“I suppose.” Helena looks at me oddly, but she slips the photograph from its protective slip and hands it to me. “Mind you be careful not to crease it.”

“I'll be careful. I promise.”

I shove the photograph into my pocket, my heart racing. We have everything we need to conduct the séance and banish the ghost, so I can get the fuck away from this creepy hotel and the Bellua brothers.



I ENDURE another hour of Helena flipping through her scrapbook and telling me the dirty secrets of all her so-called friends over the years. By the time I extract myself, I'm certain that Helena herself is going to get her ass haunted if she's not careful.

I hope Brooks isn't in our room. I could use some time to talk to Becca and prep for the séance, and I prefer to do that without his hot but annoying ass looming over me.

As the doors to the elevator close behind me, I reach into my pocket and feel the edges of the photograph. I'm about to pull it out when a thick arm thrusts between the doors, holding them open.

Jackson and Orion step on.

## FIFTEEN: LILY



My heart leaps into my throat. I try to speak, but I find it impossible when I'm confronted by the two of them in the elevator where I slept with Levi only a few hours before.

Their handsome faces have consumed my dreams for the past five years. Hell, longer than that, though you'll have to pluck my teeth out to get me to admit it.

And now, confronted by the knowledge that they didn't know the truth about me...

*Ding.* The elevator doors slide shut.

No escape.

All the air I breathe belongs to them.

The metal box begins its slow ascent.

Jackson punches the emergency stop. The lights flicker, and an alarm buzzes.

"Daisy," Jackson growls, his eyes feral.

His whole body is rigid, those strong shoulders he developed playing football tense beneath his tight black T-shirt. I swallow again, not sure if this churning in my gut is terror or desire. Is it possible to feel both?

Damaged is my middle name, apparently.

Jackson's hands ball into fists. He looks like he's going to rip the walls apart with his bare hands.

He *knows*.

Unexpected warmth pools inside me. This...this is what I always wanted. All my life, the Bellua brothers have sprung to my rescue, until that night. If I had been able to fall into Orion's arms and see Jackson go all protective caveman on me, then maybe...

Maybe things wouldn't have turned out the way they did.

But I can't change the past any more than they can. I had to survive what happened to my parents on my own. Now they have to survive the fallout of that.

I turn to Orion and take in his guilty expression, the protective hand on his brother's shoulder. "You told him?"

Orion nods.

I hold up my hand and take a step toward them, not certain what I'm doing, but unable to stop myself. We're two opposing magnets, drawn together by forces greater than ourselves.

"Your brother knew," I say. "He knew, and he didn't tell you."

The pain of that knowledge sits like a lead weight in my gut. Brooks's betrayal cuts deeper than any blade I own, somehow nicking every artery and causing me to bleed freely.

"I'm going to kill him," Jackson rasps.

Orion shakes his head. "Brooks doesn't know. I'm certain of it. He—"

"He drove past my house. He looked right at me, covered in my parents' blood. He kept on driving." I ball my hands into fists as the memory of that night threatens to drag me under, kicking and screaming. "He's made sure that the two of you didn't contact me all these years."

Orion and Jackson exchange one of their annoying twin glances.



“There’s some stuff you don’t know,” Orion mumbles at his shoes. “We have to tell you something, but it’s hard to—”

His words cut off with a gasp. At first I don’t realize why, but then a pair of strong arms encircles me, and my back slams against the elevator wall.

*Jackson.*

Jackson’s hands tangle in my hair, tilting my head and bringing my lips to his.

He kisses me hungrily, viciously, as if his plan is to tear my pain away through the sheer force of his mouth. He’s doing a damn good job.

My brain screams at me that this is a bad idea, but my pussy has locked that bitch away because one taste of Jackson Bellua, and I am addicted.

His hand on the back of my neck squeezes, and he makes this low, growling noise in his throat as his tongue slates over mine. I’m not usually all in for possessive men, but when Jackson is doing things to my insides...

Okay, that’s a lie. I simp for growly, possessive guys, especially when they’re my childhood crushes all grown up, and they’re kissing me in an elevator like they need me to breathe.

He tastes like elderflower and sin. He tastes like childhood memories and dark, wanton desires that have been locked away for far too long. My body hums with a buzzing energy, like I’ve been plugged into an electric socket and lit up like a Christmas parade.

Jackson Bellua is kissing me.

Not just kissing. He’s devouring me. He’s dismantling all the walls I’ve carefully built up since the day they left me.

And I am letting him because he tastes so fucking good—

“Jackson.” Orion’s voice cuts through, laced with pain.

Immediately, Jackson pulls away. He can’t help the cheeky smile playing across his lips, but it’s wiped away when he

turns to his brother and sees the torment in his eyes.

I sink into the corner, as far away as it's possible to get from the two of them in this tin cube.

“Why did you do that?” Orion whispers, staring at the floor.

“Look at her.” Jackson gestures to me. “How can you not? How can you and Brooks stand to be around her without telling her what she means to us? To all of us? Well, I'm not going to pretend that I don't care about her, that I haven't thought about her every moment of every day, that I don't wish the two of us could tear that hot little outfit off her right now and show her how much we've missed her.”

*Well...fuck.*

Orion makes a strangled noise.

Now, *I'm* the one staring at my shoes so they can't see the heat pooling in my cheeks.

I need something to...to diffuse the bomb that Jackson's just set off.

I rub my fingers along my tingling lips and reluctantly draw Helena's image from my pocket. “While you two have been busy discussing my private business, I found this photograph. You can see the groom's love in his expression. This should have the emotional resonance I need to bring out the ghost.”

“Lily—”

“No.” I punch the emergency button again, and the elevator jerks to life. “This is how I want to do it. Now that I know this is a simple haunting, I need to banish this ghost and get out of here. I need to get back on the road to find my parents' killers. This is how I want to do it. Alone. If you don't want to participate in a séance—”

“Fine, Daisy.” Jackson runs a hand through his ruffled hair. Even though he's all the way on the other side of the elevator, my body still hums from his touch. “We do this your

way. We'll help you get rid of the ghost first, but don't think that means we're done with you."

I can't help the way my pulse races at those words. "What exactly do you mean?"

"I mean that you and me and Orion are going to get the truth out of Brooks once and for all," Jackson growls. "And then you and I are going to finish what we started."

## SIXTEEN: LILY



When I get back to the hotel room, thankfully, Brooks isn't anywhere to be found. I don't think I can face him knowing that his brother just kissed me in the elevator.

Jackson kissed me.

And I kissed him back.

In front of Orion, who I also want to kiss.

What is wrong with me?

I swallow down the taste of elderflower and scrawl a note to Brooks, informing him that he needs to be present tonight after dinner for the *séance*. I leave it on his pillow.

My stomach rumbles.

Hmmm, dinner. I remember that I had Freddie book that table for two tonight, and Brooks will be picking up the tab. Grinning at my petty revenge, I throw open my rucksack, rummage around, and pull out a skintight red dress.

This is exactly what I need to take my mind off of Jackson and Orion and that *kiss*...

I still have a couple of hours to kill before my reservation, so I head down to the gym and get a heavenly massage—also charged onto Brooks's card. Then, I lock myself in the

bathroom in case Brooks returns and take a long soak in the tub while listening to a true crime podcast about all the grisly murders that have happened at the Bridgemont.

I take my time curling my hair and doing my makeup, and finally pull on the dress, add a pair of high heels (with only a couple of scratches on them), and a pretty necklace my parents gave me on my sixteenth birthday. I stare down at the witch's mark pendant hanging around my wrist. It doesn't exactly go with my outfit, but I don't want to take it off.

Satisfied that I'm going to break hearts tonight, I fling open the door to the bathroom and step out—straight into the broad chest of a scowling Brooks Bellua.

“Where are you going dressed like that?” Brooks demands, placing his arm on the doorframe to hem me in.

This close, his scent invades my nostrils. While Jackson smells like a cheeky mix of sweet and spicy and Orion is all woody, earthy tones, Brooks is just a wall of rich, dark sandalwood.

“I'm going out.” I smirk and duck under his arm, throwing my hair over my shoulder and blowing him a kiss. “See you tonight at the séance, darling. Eleven o'clock p.m. Don't be late.”

“You're not going out dressed like that.” Brooks's face becomes a storm cloud.

He lunges toward me, but I dart outside and slam the door in his face. He doesn't follow me, but I can hear him cursing me out all the way from the elevator.

I take the elevator up to the intimate restaurant—one of many in the hotel—on the top floor. I'm seated at a table for two right in front of the panoramic windows overlooking the mountains as they sweep away into a deep valley obscured with clouds. We're so high up that my head spins. Or maybe that's all the conflicting feelings about the Bellua boys rolling around in my skull.

“Will your husband be along shortly, ma'am?” the waiter asks as he uncorks my Dom Perignon and fills my glass.

“I’m positive he will,” I say. “In the meantime, I’ll start without him. Please bring me...” I try to remember what Freddie said was the most expensive entrée. “The beef thingy. No, make it two.”

“Very good, ma’am.” The waiter turns to leave.

“Actually,” a deep, British voice says. “Make that three.”

“What are you doing?” I hiss as Levi slides into the chair opposite me, looking right at home in a sharp black pinstripe suit that makes me want to fan myself. Good lord. No man should look that good.

“I saw a table set for two and a beautiful woman who’s clearly been stood up.” Levi unfolds the menu. “I couldn’t resist the opportunity to indulge myself in your company.”

The waiter looks at me for confirmation. I flash a broad smile.

“Levi will also be dining with me tonight,” I say. “Please put our meal on my husband’s room card. And we’ll have a second bottle of our friend Dom here.” I tap the ice bucket with my nail.

“As you wish, ma’am.”

The waiter leaves, and I busy myself perusing the menu. Levi’s presence unnerves me, especially thinking about what we did in that elevator earlier today.

I’m suddenly a ball of nervous energy. I tap my foot on the ground. I can’t think of anything to say to him because I’m so busy thinking about Jackson and Orion and Brooks and that fucking kiss. It’s a good thing that I’ll be able to leave as soon as we release this ghost. A little distance from the Bellua brothers will make a world of difference.

Right away, Levi notices I’m distracted. “Is everything okay with you?”

“Fine, fine.”

“Is that so?” He lifts an eyebrow. “Because when I see a girl like you eating alone on her honeymoon and looking a little spooked, after her husband spent most of the day in the

gym beating the shit out of a punching bag instead of between your legs, making you scream his name multiple times, I can't help but think something's wrong."

The menu falls from my fingers. My cheeks flush with heat at the image Levi's words conjures up...me lying down on that enormous, ridiculous heart-shaped bed, the sheets tangled around me as strong hands force my knees apart, and a hot, probing tongue dances over me...but who is in that vision? Jackson? Orion? Brooks? Or all three of them...

*Fuck, I'm sick.*

Levi bends down and picks my menu up off the ground. As he hands it to me, his fingers brush mine, and this hot, trembling sensation in my body blows out into a full-body blush. My gaze falls on Levi's lips, and my stupid heart does the flipping thing it's started doing around him.

Now I'm imagining *him* on the heart-shaped bed, that silky British voice of his whispering all kinds of filthy things...

If I brought Levi back to our room and fucked him on our bed, that would really put a twist in Brooks's panties.

Would it make me stop thinking about Jackson's lips on mine?

It's tempting.

I snap the menu from his grasp and straighten up.

"I don't want to talk about Brooks." I sip my wine, trying to stop my hand from shaking. "Hey, if you live in the hotel, did you happen to know the couple who was murdered?"

"Which couple?"

"Any of them. It appears premium quality pillow mints aren't the only experiences guaranteed at the newly renovated Bridgemont—a grisly death is included free of charge."

"What makes you ask about the...incidents?" Levi sounds amused.

"Morbid curiosity. They stayed in my room, you know."

The meals arrive then, and we both tuck in.

“I met the groom from a few days ago,” Levi says as he slides a piece of meat into his mouth, chews, and swallows. “Honestly, he seemed like kind of a dick. Or a wanker, as they say in my native tongue. They came to the bar for a drink while they waited for their room to be ready, and he downed three martinis in quick succession and made our lovely Chrissy feel very uncomfortable while she worked the bar. His new wife wasn’t happy. She practically had to drag him up to their room.”

I wonder why the ghost targeted them, out of all the couples who’ve stayed in that room? I assumed he went for the couples who were most in love out of a jealous rage, but they don’t sound like a match made in heaven.

I think about the number six scrawled on the wall in their blood. It was on the walls of the other two recently murdered couples, but not in the original bridegroom murder, unless the police missed something. That has to be important, but how?

*Stop thinking about it, Lily.*

The ghost’s motive or how he chooses his victims doesn’t matter. Tonight we’re going to get rid of the ghost once and for all. No more dead newlyweds. And I can get the fuck out of here before I make a Bellua-flavored mistake I’ll later regret.

“I’ve heard some rumors about the honeymoon suite,” I say.

“Oh yeah? Like that it’s haunted by a malevolent ghost?” Levi lowers his voice. “I don’t believe it.”

“You don’t believe in ghosts?”

Levi smirks. “Oh, I believe in all sorts of things, princess. But no, I don’t believe that Sid would hurt anyone. I’ve seen him around the building over the years. He hangs around because he misses her, his love, even after everything she did to him. Love can make you do crazy things, Lily Dean. Reckless and wild things. And the kind of tortured, forbidden love that keeps Sid here against all the laws of nature...well... that’s the wildest of them all.”



“But I don’t...” I lose my train of thought as something warm presses against my leg.

At first, I think I’m going to have to castrate Levi. I mean, playing footsie in a fancy restaurant? I’m not twelve.

But I realize it’s not Levi. It’s my purse. Or, rather, the crystal in my purse.

“Hang on.” I turn away from Levi and open my purse. A cry lodges in my throat.

The crystal is no longer faintly blue—it’s glowing a bright, vibrant cobalt. It’s also pulsing, giving off so much heat that I can’t even touch it.

Shit. This isn’t the color for ghosts, but something in this room is a powerful supernatural force...

And then I remember the other day, the crystal glowing after I met Levi for the first time.

My stomach sinks.

No...

I whirl around, but Levi’s gone.

It’s as if he was never even sitting here. Fear creeps along my spine.

Where did he go?

I glance at the door, but he’s not there. How could he have run away so fast?

The lights flicker. The other guests put down their forks and murmur to each other.

The hairs on the back of my neck prickle.

Where is Levi?

Some strange, unforeseen force draws my eyes to the windows. I look down at the hotel’s manicured grounds. There on the path in front of the hotel, beside the fountain where the winged angel statue spreads her wings, is a figure in a dark suit. A dark *pinstripe* suit.

Levi.

He raises a hand, and the fog swirls around him, as if he is calling it in.

The lights in the room go out.

A woman screams.

“Don’t worry, ma’am. It’s just a blown fuse. It happens sometimes with the mountain weather,” the waiter calls across the room. “Everybody, remain in your seats. We’ll have the lights on in a moment.”

I tear my gaze back to the window, but the figure is gone.

## SEVENTEEN: LILY



“Lily, it’s us.”

I’m still dressed in my red dress, although I’ve kicked off my heels, when the twins knock on the suite door. I thought about changing, but I’m too freaked out by what happened in the dining room.

How did Levi get outside so quickly? What was with the glowing crystals?

I know the answer to those questions, even if I don’t want to admit it. I’m texting an update to Becca now, in case she’s found out anything more about the blue glow.

*Eh, who cares if Levi isn’t entirely human. He won’t be my problem after tonight.*

I get up to open the suite door to reveal Jackson and Orion. When he sees my dress, Jackson’s eyes pop out of his head.

“I had dinner with Levi,” I say by way of explanation. “He’s this hot art historian I met in the hotel pool.”

Darkness clouds Jackson’s eyes, but Orion gives him a shove, and the pair of them move into the room without another word about it.

“Oh, goody, the whole gang is here,” Brooks drawls as he emerges from the bathroom.

He's been locked in there ever since I returned, which is fine by me. I'd rather not have to look at him and—

Oh. *Oh.*

I make the mistake of turning around just as Brooks steps into the room, wearing only a white towel wrapped around his waist. I can't help the way my eyes greedily roam over his torso, taking in his rib cage and all those beautiful tattoos and the way his pouty lips are pressed together in that hard line. Why do the most toxic guys have to be so damn delicious?

Jackson balls his hands into fists. "Brooks—"

I clamp my hand on Jackson's shoulder and shove him back down into his seat. He's keeping his promise to me, no matter what. First, we get rid of the ghost. Then he can have it out with his brother. I don't even care. By the time the ectoplasm has dried on this séance, I'm going to be twenty miles out of town.

"Now that Lothario over there has graced us with his presence, we can get started. Gentlemen, if you'd take your seats." I gesture to the setup. "The sooner we trap this ghost, the sooner we can go our separate ways."

"A-fucking-men," Brooks mutters, tucking his thumb into his towel, pulling it down an inch as he strides across the room toward me.

My mouth dries, and I have to force myself to look anywhere but at the extra inch of skin he reveals...

I've pulled the desk into the center of the room and covered it with a purple scarf I nicked from the back of Helena's chair. Candles flicker on every surface, little tendrils of smoke curling through the air. I had to take the batteries out of the room's smoke alarm to avoid a disaster.

On the table, I've laid out the travel spirit board I carry for just such occasions and the photograph of the dancing couple and my ghost trap—the empty bottle of Dom Perignon with a hematite cork, surrounded by a circle of Becka's crystals, which flicker between a pale orange and a bright-blue glow.

Brooks folds his body into the chair beside me. Orion watches me. I won't show weakness in front of Brooks.

"We don't usually use a spirit board." Jackson swallows hard. He sits on the edge of the bed next to his brother.

"You Vault hunters are so anti-magic. If we want to chat to this ghost about his shenanigans, not just trap him, then I'm not about to volunteer to have him play puppet master with my body," I say. "But by all means, you can volunteer to be possessed by a murderous spirit who's just killed people."

Jackson shakes his head.

"Good. Then we can start by linking hands."

Brooks grabs my hand and practically crushes it in his fingers. I grit my teeth, but I won't make the asshole happy by crying out. Orion takes my other hand gently, reverently. Across the table, Jackson's gaze burns into mine. I try not to think about the way his lips felt against mine in the elevator.

I fail.

Jackson sees me looking at him. The corner of his mouth curls up into a smirk. "Lily—"

"Shhhh," I hiss. "We're concentrating."

"Sorry. It's hard to think about summoning ghosts when all I can see is how beautiful you look in that dress."

Orion sucks in a breath.

Something sizzles in the air that has nothing to do with the spirit world. Goose bumps rush up my arms, even though we have the heat on full blast.

"Lily..." Orion whispers.

Nope, I can't do this now. Not when Brooks is about to crush my fingers. I tear my gaze from Jackson and settle on the photograph on the table in front of me.

"Spirit of Sid, the poisoned groom, we wish to speak to you," I moan, focusing on the image. "Spirit of Sid, come to this place where a wrong was done to you, and reveal yourself to us."

Becka taught me that you don't need any special magical powers to talk to ghosts. Ghosts exist because they *want* to talk. They're usually people who loved being the center of attention in life, and want to hog the limelight in death, too.

Or maybe they're like Sid, and they were wronged so badly that they cannot rest until someone helps them to right that wrong. All we should have to do is focus our intent and call to Sid and then trap him in the bottle—

The temperature drops ten degrees.

Yikes. That was fast.

I lift my gaze from the table just as a gray shape materializes in the corner of the room. I gulp back a scream forming in my throat. No matter how many evil, monstrous things I've seen over the years, I still get a fright when confronted with evidence that the supernatural truly exists.

I have to work on that. I have to become immune, because when I finally chase down and confront the demon who killed my parents, I can't hesitate. I'm going to cut that bastard down and dance on his entrails...as soon as Becka and I can figure out how to kill a demon.

I've never encountered a demon before. All the intel we have on the world of monsters tells me that they're the biggest, baddest, and most difficult to kill. No hunter has faced down a demon and survived.

Unlike ghosts and bad witches and werewolves who are at least in some part human, demons are ripped from the bowels of the underworld itself, from a land called Chaos. There's one called Abaddon who tormented an old folks' home in Toledo, and these little old ladies were literally stabbing their eyes with knitting needles so they didn't have to look at him.

The only way hunters have been able to stop demons is by bargaining with them—giving them something they want so that they go away.

But I'm going to change that.

I'm going to find the demon who butchered my parents and make sure he never, ever hurts another family again. And

if Brooks Bellua stands in my way, he'll wish for knitting needles after what I do to him—

Ahem, yes, back to the ghostly apparition that's materializing before us.

At first, all I can make out is a few gray shapes floating in the air, but they grow and merge and become the visage of a man wearing a beautiful vintage suit—the same suit as the man in the picture on the table in front of me. His mouth hangs open, and a trail of blood drips from the corner, marring his pristine clothing.

Sid. The poisoned groom.

“Okay,” I breathe. “He's here.”

Brooks and Jackson turn toward the ghost, but Orion's watching me.

He must sense my unease because he gives my hand a little squeeze. “Lily, it's okay. He can't hurt you.”

“She's done this before,” Jackson reminds him.

“And he *can* hurt me,” I whisper. “That's what we've come to ask him. How was he able to kill that couple when he's a ghost, and—”

At my words, the ghost shakes his head so violently that I jerk away in fright. Brooks squeezes my fingers to keep me from breaking the circle.

“He's shaking his head,” Jackson says.

“Yes, thanks for that excellent deduction, Watson. I can see him,” Brooks snaps.

“*Why* is he shaking his head?”

“What are you saying?” I say to the ghost. “Did you hurt those honeymooners a couple of weeks ago?”

Again, Sid shakes his head. The air in the room drops another ten degrees.

“What about the couple six weeks before them? Did you do that?”

He opens his mouth, but no words come out. Only very powerful ghosts have the ability to speak, and this guy doesn't seem that angry. With his slumped shoulders and sad eyes, he's kind of...pathetic. I don't think he's angry about his wife poisoning him. I think he's heartbroken.

An idea occurs to me. "Did you see who *did* murder that couple?"

At this, the ghost floats away, nodding slowly. He looks terrified, which is a strange expression to see on a specter.

I incline my head toward the table, where I have a special crystal Becca uses to help ghosts move on. "We're here to help you cross over, if you want to. But before you go, can you tell us what you saw? Who has been killing people at this hotel and framing you?"

The ghost flickers and disappears. The lights begin to buzz. A moment later, the planchette springs to life, leaping across the spirit board even though none of us are touching it.

"Woah," Jackson breathes.

"It's moving too fast," Brooks says. "I can't read it."

"Jesus Christmas, must I do everything for you Belluas?" I squint at the board as the planchette flies across the letters. He says, "NOT GHOST."

"What does that mean?"

"Obviously that a ghost isn't responsible for the murders." Brooks sighs. "This is just a regular old human murder. I knew this job was a waste of our time."

But Sid isn't done. The planchette spins wildly. We all lean forward as he spells a single word.

DEMON.



## EIGHTEEN: LILY



*Demon. Demon.*

THE WORD BLINKS in my mind like a neon sign. All I can see are the walls dripping with blood, that foul demonic sigil scrawled across our living room, my dad's organs spread across the floor.

*DEMON.*

BILE RISES IN MY THROAT, and I can't hold it back. I jerk my hands from Orion and Brooks and clamp them over my mouth. Sid's ghost flickers out of view. My stomach churns, and I pitch forward, spilling my guts across the spirit board.

"LILY?"

HIS VOICE SOUNDS MUFFLED, like he's calling to me from underwater. I drop to my knees on the floor. I think someone has their arms around me, but I don't feel their touch. I am cold all over, sinking into a pit of despair.

*DEMON.*

THE DARKNESS SWALLOWS ME.

## NINETEEN: JACKSON



I can't rip my eyes from Daisy. I'm pretty sure a demon would have to claw its way out of the earth and drag me down to hell to get me to leave her side.

She looks...small in sleep. It's a word I always used to associate with the girl who once was my best friend, but I can't say that descriptor ever crossed my mind as I've come to know the woman she has transformed into. Without that ornery, combative glint in her eyes, she looks like an entirely different person.

Beautiful.

Serene.

Peaceful.

And yes, she has always been beautiful, but years of hunting have hardened Lily in ways I still can't quite understand. And the way she reacted when we found out that a demon was responsible for the hotel murders... Orion says it's probably PTSD from her parents, and it only makes me hate myself more.

We should have been there for her. She shouldn't have to have PTSD.

I ball my hands into fists to keep from doing something stupid—like brushing her hair away from her face or kissing her forehead just because—and watch the steady rise and fall of her chest.

When she fainted, Brooks nearly lost his shit, but Orion was quick to calm our more volatile brother while I brought Lily to the bed and tucked her in. My girl—and yes, I’m thinking of Lily as my girl, even though I know I shouldn’t—needs her rest, especially after the bombshell Sid just dropped on us.

A demon.

A damn fucking asshole bitch of a demon is behind the attacks on the hotel.

A part of me wants to scoop Lily up and get far away from this hellhole—pun intended—as quickly as possible, but I know that won’t work. Besides, I’m not Brooks. I’ll always give her a choice in everything she does, even if I don’t like it.

This new Lily Dean will want to stay here and fight.

But fuck...what are we even fighting?

I try to think through everything I know of demons, but even I can admit my knowledge is abysmal. Our parents tried to teach us everything they could on all of the creatures that go bump in the night, but I’m more of a hands-on type of learner. School is a better fit for Orion or even Brooks. I dozed off more than once during those lessons, daydreaming about the next-door neighbor with the kind smile, glimmering eyes, and red, cascading hair...

“What the fuck was that about?” Brooks snaps for the one billionth time in the last second.

I would like to say I’m exaggerating...but I’m not. I’m pretty sure my older brother is broken, and those are the only words he’s now capable of saying.

I grit my teeth together to keep from shouting anything I’ll come to regret, like—*why the fuck do you care, you ass-licking, cunt-sucking, dick-kissing dildo turd?*

I don't want to believe that my brother would betray Lily like that—betray Orion and me like that—but I can't turn a blind eye to the facts.

Fact one...Lily's parents were murdered the same day we left town. Brooks refused to allow us to return to the house to pack our stuff. Instead, he did it for us. When we asked if he ran into Lily, he told us he hadn't.

Fact two...Lily was covered in blood. How did Brooks not notice? I find that hard to believe. Brooks is more observant than anyone I know, coming second only to Orion. If Lily so much as had a *hangnail* when we were kids, he would notice.

Fact three...Brooks refused to allow Orion and me to check up on Lily, even online. The few times we tried to, he discovered it, and we were forced to be on centaur duty for an entire week. And if you don't know what centaur duty is, I can promise you, you're not missing out on anything.

Centaurs are invisible creatures that can only be seen with a witch's eye, which is immensely hard to come by. They're relatively peaceful, but their shits...well... Let's just say that a lot of acid barrels are stock full of centaur shit.

As hunters, our job is to clean up all of the shit piles before humans take notice. Normally, hunters in training will be assigned such a task, but that week—

Fuck, I don't even want to think about it. I still have nightmares of centaur crap burning my hands.

“So it seems as if we're dealing with a demon.” I'm not surprised that it's Orion who gets the conversation back on track. He's always been the most level-headed of the three of us.

Brooks is the domineering asshole of the group, I'm the one with a nasty temper, and Orion is...Orion. Calm, collected, and gentle.

Sid's ghost watches from the corner of the room, a sad expression on his face. I wish we could help him cross over, but that's not really our job, unless he's hurting people.

“Am I the only one worried about Lily?” Brooks snarls, gesturing towards where Lily lies on the bed.

“She’ll be fine.” My tone comes out sharper than I intend it to be. “She just needs to rest.”

“She’s too young to be dealing with a demon,” Brooks insists. “We need to call this in and get more experienced hunters on the case. Perhaps a negotiator—”

“Do you really believe Lily will leave knowing what we do?” Orion taps his black-painted nails restlessly against his knee. “*Really?* You obviously don’t know this new version of her as well as you think you do. She’s the fucking Shadow, Brooks, not some defenseless little girl in need of rescuing.”

Brooks’s eyes flare at the accusation in Orion’s voice. This time, I’m the one hurrying to say something to stop the impending argument. It’s not because I care if Orion smashes Brooks’s face in. I just want Lily to rest while the three of us are here to look after her, and I know that if she wakes up, she’ll kick us out of the room so fast I won’t even be able to say her name.

“The first thing we need to do is figure out what type of demon it is,” I say. “If it’s a lesser demon, we may be able to send him back to hell. But if it’s a mid-grade demon or higher, we’re in trouble.”

We know it’s not a top-level demon, at least. I can’t see any of the Princes of Hell setting foot in this dank hotel to murder a few random guests.

“It could be a telekinetic demon.” Orion scratches absently at his wrist. “Maybe that’s how he’s getting in and out of the rooms without anyone knowing. He could use his powers to unlock doors and then lock them up behind him.”

“But would he go through all of that trouble?” Brooks questions. His tone is still slightly growly, and I know he doesn’t agree with our decision not to go to the higher-ups with this case.

But I know Lily. At least, I think I do.

And after what I learned about her parents...

There's no way she'll leave this case, not when a demon's involved.

"It could be a shape-shifting demon," Orion suggests. He continues to scratch at that one spot on his arm, and when he moves his hand away, the skin there is red and blotchy.

My brows furrow as something occurs to me. "How many more days do we have until the full moon, Or?"

Normally, I have a countdown on my phone reminding me of it, but with everything going on, I haven't even bothered to check the damn thing.

Orion shrugs a single shoulder, his gaze slightly distant. "I'm fine."

"You're not fine if you're already beginning to scratch your damn skin off," Brooks snaps, though concern intermingles with the anger in his voice.

One of the first symptoms of Orion's transition is itchy skin—like it's too tight on his body. He's never been able to describe this particular sensation with words, which is strange because Orion is the most eloquent man I know, constantly spouting poetics and shit.

He once said it's like there's something inside of him trying to break free, clawing at his skin, threatening to tear out of his chest...

I grab my phone out of my back pocket and am immediately bombarded by a notification.

TWO DAYS UNTIL FULL MOON

Shit. Shit. Shit.

"Why the fuck didn't you tell us it was getting so close?" Brooks barks.

"Because I'm fine," Orion insists, straightening slightly.

Both Brooks and I drop our gazes to his red wrist.

Step one—itchy skin.

Step two—volatile temper and constant irritation.

Step three—fits of violence.

Step four—wolf. Or werewolf, to be specific.

Fuck.

## TWENTY: LILY



I dream of dead things—of corpses and wilted flowers and brown grass and a sky that seems more red than blue, painted with fire.

When I wake up, my heart hammering and my palms slick with sweat, there's a silent scream on my lips, one I refuse to release.

Fragments of my dream barrage me, but as I orient myself with my new reality, they slip away, leaving me confused and slightly dazed.

Moonlight trickles through the window, illuminating the dark suite. It also highlights the three men surrounding me.

Jackson is sitting in the armchair, though it has been dragged to my bedside. His neck is twisted at an odd angle as soft snores leave his parted lips.

Orion is on the floor, having stolen a spare blanket and pillow from the closet. His long lashes flutter against his cheeks as he twists uncomfortably, obviously plagued by a bad dream.

And then there's Brooks.

Fucking Brooks.



He's sitting on the ground with his back against the wall, as if he meant to keep an eye on everything while his brothers slept. But sleep has claimed him as well. His head lolls against his chest, his blond hair—slightly longer than usual—falling forward to obscure his eyes from view, and his steady breathing echoes through the still air.

I sit up quietly—making sure not to disturb the three Sleeping Beauties—and swing my legs over the edge of the bed. I'm still wearing the skintight red dress from before, so I make a beeline towards my suitcase first and foremost and grab out a pair of sweats and a comfy sweatshirt.

Satisfied that the three assholes are still asleep, I move towards the bathroom and quietly shut the door. Only when the lock clicks into place—and there's not a risk of Brooks, Orion, or Jackson seeing me—do I allow tremors to rock my body as the full truth of what I learned washes over me.

Demon.

There's a demon here.

I place a hand over my mouth to smother the sound that wants to escape. I have no idea what it even is—a gasp maybe, or even a sob.

Demon.

Here.

In the hotel.

Since my parents died, I've been wandering aimlessly, hunting monsters and desperate to find the bastard who stole them from me. But demons are immensely rare, and no matter how many vampires, werewolves, ghouls, succubus, wendigo, and more I killed...I was never able to get in contact with one. Even crossroad demons stayed clear of me, as if they heard my name whispered through the monster network and knew that vengeance tainted my blood.

And even if I find a demon...how will I face it? I can't even say the word without breaking down.

I understand the chances of this demon being the same one who murdered my family are slim to none, but a part of me can't help but wonder...

What if it *is* the same monster?

What if the creature I've been hunting for all of these years is a hallway away from me?

My heart ricochets off my rib cage, the noise almost deafening, and I quickly place my free hand over my chest as if that can somehow stop the incessant beating of the organ.

I need to call Becka.

Now.



MY BEST FRIEND picks up on the second ring, her voice drowsy with sleep.

“Lil? What—?”

“It’s a demon,” I blurt, casting furtive glances in both directions to ensure I’m still alone in the lobby. Not that I expect anyone to even be here this late at night—or is it morning already? “The creature who murdered that couple... I think it’s a demon.”

“I know.”

“What?”

“I just figured it out. The crystals glowing blue means that a demon is nearby. I tried to call you, but—”

But I was out of it. Because there’s a demon in the hotel.

I can hear the sound of shuffling as Becka moves around in bed, and then her voice comes back clearer.

“Tell me what’s going on.”

So I do, starting with what I found out about Sid and then ending with what he told us. I even mention my strange encounter with Levi.

“You think the sexy British man is the demon? You think that you might have *slept* with a demon?”

“Maybe? I don’t know, Becks.” The idea of it makes me throw up a little in my mouth. “There’s something about Levi that isn’t quite right.”

I distractedly run my fingers through my red hair as I think of the handsome man who has captured my attention.

I don’t want to believe that Levi murdered those people... but I don’t know him. Not really. And the way he disappeared at dinner last night...

If he is a demon, then I’ll do what I need to do, regardless of my feelings.

Somehow.

It would be just my luck that the one guy I found myself connecting to since the Bellua brothers left me is a murdering demon.

“Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. This isn’t good. You know that, right?” she asks.

I hear the rustle of fabric, and I know Becca is getting dressed.

“Demons are...well... You can’t go toe-to-toe with a demon,” she continues.

“What do you suggest I do? Allow this monster to kill more innocent people?”

“Of course not. But...” Becca blows out a heavy breath as she struggles to find her next words. After a prolonged moment of silence, she gets straight to the point. “Do you know what type of demon you’re dealing with?”

“No idea,” I confess.

When I first started learning about the monster world, I ran into an older hunter who gave me the lay of the land. He taught me a lot about demons and their power structure. The way he explained it, there are three types of demons.

The first is what he referred to as the grunt workers—the people who work on the line in a factory, clocking in and fulfilling the orders of the powers that be. Then there's the middle management, like the line supervisor or the manager. And finally, there's the head honcho, the demon who runs the show, the creature with the most power.

My hunter friend referred to these types of demons as the CEO of the company. They won't bother getting their hands dirty with shit they can send their lackeys to do.

From the rustle of paper, Becka must be flipping through one of the books we've collected over the years.

“Okay, so what do we know about our little demon friend?” she questions.

“He murdered a bride and a groom who weren't necessarily happy together,” I respond, closing my eyes as I recite the facts. Facts. I can handle facts. Emotions are what muddle my senses and make things difficult for me. “There were no signs of forced entry.”

“No burn marks, either, so that rules out a fire demon,” Becka murmurs, more to herself than to me. “The no-forced entry is odd. Demons in our world have to take human or animal form. They can't just walk through walls.”

“Could the demon have used compulsion to get into and out of the room?” I question.

“Like an incubus?” Becka asks.

An incubus is the love child of a sex demon and a human. They're not nearly as powerful as their demon parent, but they still have a few gifts—compulsion being one of them.

“Fuck. I don't know.”

“Could that be what Levi is? A sex demon or an incubus?” Becka presses. “I mean, any guy who is able to capture your attention—”

“He didn't capture my attention,” I interrupt.

Becka ignores me. “—must have a magic dick.”

“Levi doesn’t have a magic dick,” I growl into the phone, squeezing my eyelids shut and pinching the bridge of my nose.

And then a masculine voice, rife with amusement, says, “I think some women may disagree with that assessment.”

I peel my eyelids open just as Levi steps forward from the shadows, now dressed in a pair of designer jeans and a skintight black T-shirt. He shoves his hands into his pockets as he stares at me, his eyes glimmering and his lips curved into a tiny, mischievous smile.

“Hello, Lily.” He takes another step closer. “I think it’s time we talk.”

## TWENTY-ONE: LILY



I'm instantly on alert.

“Becks, I have to go.”

“What? Don't you dare hang up on me, Lily Dean! Don't you dare. If you hang up on me, I am taking the next flight down and—”

Her words are cut off as I end the call and drop my phone onto my lap.

Levi watches me with no small amount of amusement, his posture deceptively casual, his smirk on in full force.

“You're talking about me to your friends, I see,” he teases.

“What can I say? You're a pretty intriguing guy.” As I speak, I reach for the silver blade I always keep in a secret sheath on my arm whenever I go into public.

I'm just grateful I remembered to put it on when I changed out of my red dress into sweats.

I don't know what good the blade will do against Levi if he's a demon, but it's the best I have. I refuse to go down without a fight.

“I have a feeling there's something you want to ask me, Lily Dean.” His trademark smirk remains in place, even as he

takes a single step closer.

I can't help but inhale his unique apricot and vanilla scent. I was always told demons smelled like sulfur—rotten eggs—but Levi's scent is...decadent. Mouthwatering. Addictive.

"No questions." I flash him a smile as I inconspicuously glance in both directions, ensuring we're still alone.

A hotel this old doesn't have a lot of video cameras, hence why we struggled to get coverage of the dead couple. The few that the hotel does have are nowhere in sight.

Good.

If I need to stab a sexy British man, the last thing I want is to get captured on camera and then arrested.

"I know what you're thinking," Levi continues, rocking back on his heels. "And what you're thinking is wrong."

"Is it?" I cock an eyebrow at him. "You know what I'm thinking? You have clairvoyance as well as an annoying kink for murdering moderately happy couples?"

I move quickly, swinging the dagger at his face. He captures my wrist before it can connect with his skin and twists it just enough to cause me to lose the blade. It clatters on the floor with an audible ding.

I gasp, but the pain I expected never comes, despite the fact I know Levi could break my wrist if he so desired to. His strength is otherworldly.

Monsterly.

Demonic.

Fuck.

I lift my knee up and hit Levi between his legs, causing him to both release me and keel forward at the same time. I stealthily spin out of the way and dive for the dagger, but he grabs the waistband of my pants before I can take more than a few steps.

His voice is a harsh pant as he drags me against the solid planes of his chest. "Tsk, ts, princess. That's. Not. Nice."

His hot breath wafts against my ear, and God help me, goose bumps ripple up and down my arms. I don't know if they're from fear...or lust.

I throw my head back and grin when I hear the satisfying crunch of my skull connecting with his nose. Still, he doesn't release me, even as he curses loudly.

"Lily, stop it."

"Let me go." I struggle in his embrace, but he merely tightens his arms around me.

"If you keep wiggling like that..." Levi allows his threat to dangle in the air like a guillotine blade, and it's only then I become aware of the hard bulge pressing against my ass cheeks.

I freeze, every muscle in my body locking together, and Levi chuckles darkly.

"Good girl."

He spins me around to face him but still keeps his hands on my waist. To anyone looking, they'll see two lovers in a passionate embrace.

Not a monster and the hunter who wants to kill him.

"You're the demon," I hiss as betrayal, caustic and bitter, flows through me.

God, how could I have been so stupid?

How could I have allowed this man to *touch* me?

One of Levi's dark brows lifts as amusement dances across his face. "I'm *a* demon. Although, I've been called a lot more imaginative things by women over the years. My favorite is when they refer to me as a god. As in, 'oh god, oh god, I'm going to come—'"

I slap my hand over his mouth to stop his incessant chattering.

"You killed those three couples," I continue, anger cresting inside of me. "Why? What did they ever do to you? What do you *want*?"



I don't know if I'm expecting Levi to actually answer me.

But I *do* know that I'm not expecting him to break into raucous laughter.

I blink at him in surprise as Levi throws his head back, his hands momentarily leaving my waist. Before I can even think of reaching for the fallen dagger, he's gripping me once more, grim amusement sparkling in his eyes.

"I've done many grisly and delightful jobs in my line of work, but I can't claim responsibility for those couples." He shakes his head. "I'm disappointed, Lily Dean. I thought you'd have this all figured out by now."

"You're a *demon*," I point out, feeling the truth of that statement in the hollow of my bones. "You're not exactly reliable."

Levi doesn't even try to deny it. He wanted me to know, after all. There's a reason he did his disappearing act at dinner the night before. Or is it still tonight? Fuck, I can't keep track of time anymore.

"Maybe. Maybe not." His smirk broadens before he rearranges his features, turning solemn. "I didn't murder that couple. I'm here at the hotel on a completely different job."

"And what job is that?" I snap, not believing his bullshit for even a second. "You're an art dealer, right? You making an avant-garde sculpture out of their bones?"

Levi shrugs his broad shoulders, adopting a perfectly innocent mask.

"Maybe I'm here for you, Lily Dean." He takes another step closer and reaches for a strand of red hair that has fallen down my cheek.

He curls it around his finger as I stand there, unable to move. Unable to even breathe.

"Who are you?" I whisper tersely as fear coils in my stomach.

"You're going to try to kill me in the days to come. Of that I have no doubt, but just know..." He leans in until his

metallic-gray eyes consume my vision. This close, I can see a tiny scar slicing through his eyebrow, the one imperfection somehow making him even more handsome. “I will never, ever hurt you, Lily Dean. Never.”

The intensity in his eyes takes my breath away.

His lips press against my forehead, and I go perfectly still. Fear and confusion war for dominance in my chest, and all I can do is gape at him in stunned disbelief.

What the fuck?

“Your husband is looking for you,” Levi murmurs, staring at something over my shoulder.

“What?” I follow the direction of his gaze to see Brooks stepping out of the elevator, his head swiveling from side to side as he searches for me.

I turn back towards Levi, ready to demand answers...

But he’s already gone.

## TWENTY-TWO: BROOKS



The elevator doors open, and there's Lily standing in the middle of the lobby, trembling as if there's an earthquake localized beneath her feet.

Before I even know what I'm doing, I run to her and sweep her into my arms.

I expect her to fight me, but instead, she sinks against me. All the color has gone out of her cheeks. I swipe a strand of flame hair from her face.

*Where has my Lily gone? Where's that fighter who's been making my life hell and brightening my days since we were kids?*

"What happened?" I demand.

"It's Levi," she chokes out. "Levi's the demon."

Levi? That huge fucker she's been hanging out with?

She shudders. Her leg slides out from beneath her, and I catch her before she topples over.

"How do you know?"

"I just...figured it out. There's so much that didn't add up about him. And I confronted him, and he confirmed it." She

blinks, her eyes shimmering with unshed tears. “I let him get away. I’m an idiot. I don’t know where he is now.”

“I *knew* it. I knew that smarmy English asshole couldn’t be for real.” And not just because he was putting the moves on my girl. I ball my hand into a fist, but I don’t let her go. “We’re ending this. Now.”

I fold her into me, wrapping one arm protectively around her. With the other, I pull out my mobile and tap out a message. A few moments later, the elevator dings, and Jackson and Orion appear in the hallway beside us.

“Daisy?”

The moment she hears his voice, Lily shoves me away and falls into Jackson’s arms. That stings more than I’d like to admit. I tell myself that it’s a good thing. She needs the twins now. They’re much better at this comforting thing than I’ll ever be.

I only have one purpose in our monster-hunting partnership. I’m the muscle. I’m the one who gets the job done no matter how grisly the task. No matter the cost. I’m the one who has to do the unspeakable, *unthinkable* things so that the twins stay safe.

So that the world doesn’t have to know the horrors that lurk in the shadows.

And right now, we need to stain this fucking hotel red with demon blood.

I jab a finger at Orion. “Find him. Now.”

“I can’t just—”

“You *can* just. You have that suitcase full of weird tech. If you can find a banshee at a Bauhaus concert, you can find Prince fucking Charming so I can put a silver bullet in his head.”

“You’re not thinking straight. You can’t confront a demon.” Orion’s eyes bug out of his head, and he begins to tap his black-painted nails even faster against his thighs. “Not

even with a silver bullet. All you're going to do is piss him off."

"And when you piss British people off, they tend to invade countries," Jackson pipes up.

I shove my brother aside. He means well, and if I were thinking clearly, I'd agree with him, but no one is getting between me and *eviscerating* this guy.

I'm the only one who is allowed to make Lily Dean cry.

The elevator dings again. I whirl around, fists raised. I'll wring his neck if I have to. This guy is not getting his hands on Lily.

But it's not Levi. It's Freddie, with an armload of towels and a basket of pillow mints.

"Oh, hello, honored guests!" Freddie says, either oblivious or ignoring the tension saturating the air. His cheery, professional smile never falters. "I'm just doing my rounds. Can I help you with anything? Only it's quite late, and you're in the middle of the lobby yelling, and it might disturb the other guests—"

"The other guests can go to hell," I growl.

"Hey, Freddie," Jackson pipes up quickly, flashing the concierge his usual winning smile. "You know that English guest, Levi—"

"Who?"

"Levi? I don't know his last name, but he has dark hair, and he's about our age. He's one of the hotel's permanent guests. It's very important that we find him, so can you point us toward his room—"

"I'm sorry," Freddie interrupts as he swats Jackson's hand away from his basket of pillow mints. His face flashes with something that almost looks like anger, but it's gone in a moment. "I think you're mistaken. There's no one by that name staying here, and we have no permanent hotel guests."



AFTER FREDDIE DROPS THAT BOMBSHELL, Lily's face turns green.

My brothers and I exchange looks. Whatever happens next, she's in no state to hunt a demon right now.

As far as we know, the rest of the guests aren't in immediate danger. Lily and I are the ones staying in the honeymoon suite. Lily is the one who Levi has his beady demon eyes on. She's our first priority.

She's always first for us.

I hold the elevator while Jackson and Orion bundle Lily inside. She falls asleep in Jackson's arms, her head resting on his shoulder. He looks up at me with such an expression of hopelessness that it makes my heart stutter.

"What did he do to her?" I growl, my fingers brushing her limp wrist.

A small moan escapes from her lips.

"Why is she so faint?"

"You know why," Jackson growls.

"I don't think it's that. I've read about this. It's a reaction people get sometimes after being in close contact with a demon," Orion says. "Demons who have an emotional connection to a human can energetically feed off them—fear, love, desire. All those emotions are like fine wine and caviar to a demon, and if they have a physical connection too, he can..."

Orion breaks off as he realizes what he's saying. But it's too late.

I see fucking *red*.

If he fucked our Lily—*my* Lily—I am going to eviscerate him and use his demon intestines as a skipping rope.

*SMASH.*

I'm vaguely aware of someone yelling and the sound of glass breaking. But it doesn't register as something I need to bother with until my back slams against a wall.

“You have to calm down. *Now*. The last thing we need is to be kicked out of the hotel because you’re breaking the elevators.”

Jackson.

No, *Orion*. He pushes lightly against my chest, his eyes burning with pain. He’s never stood up to me like this before. I wrestle against my desire to punch him, to punch everything, to fucking go berserk because that monster *touched* her. He touched her, and he hurt her, and there’s not a thing I can do.

The rest of the elevator swirls into view, and I see bits of the elevator’s light fitting smashed on the floor, and a hole punched in the wall, and Jackson looking very, very afraid.

And Lily, sound asleep in Jackson’s arms, her red hair cascading over his shoulder like a waterfall of fire.

“She just needs to rest,” Orion says gently. “She should be okay in an hour or two, as long as he hasn’t done anything more to her we don’t know about.”

The elevator dings, and we rush out. I unlock the door to our suite, and Orion pulls back the sheets on the huge bed. Lily flops in Jackson’s arms, the sweatshirt she wears dwarfing her tiny body.

I swallow hard. *She’s beautiful.*

“Should we put her in her pajamas?” Orion asks.

“She’ll kill us if she knows we undressed her while she’s asleep,” Jackson says.

“Besides, she sleeps naked,” I add.

Orion drops the sheet. Jackson looks like he wants to kill me. I don’t volunteer any more information, like how she drools on her pillow, and how she cries out sometimes in her sleep because she’s plagued by nightmares.

We tuck Lily in, propping her on her side. And then we get in a huddle in the corner of the room.

“What do we do?” Jackson’s eyes flash. “We’re not equipped to fight a demon. Who the fuck even is?”

“What did our parents say about demons?” I ask Orion.

We need information. We need a plan. The two of them are looking to me, but I’m just as lost as they are.

Orion thumbs through a notebook. “Mom wrote that if we encounter a demon, we run as fast as we can in the opposite direction.”

“Well, that’s not an option, so what do we know?”

“Demons are tied to their tasks, right?” Jackson says. “These murders are ritualistic. There’s a pattern to them that we haven’t figured out. This demon is here on a mission—to complete this ritual.”

“Yeah. So?”

Orion closes the book. “So, we don’t have to kill Levi. We figure out what he’s trying to achieve. We force him to complete the task without hurting anyone else, and then he goes away.”

That’s kind of...genius. I’m personally from the “stab it several times with silver-tipped stakes until it doesn’t get up again” school of monster slaying, but silver won’t work on demons.

“That’s our only option? *Reasoning* with it? Him? Whatever the fuck it is?” Jackson looks incredulous.

Fucking hell. Maybe stabbing it several times with a silver-tipped stake would be easier.

Orion nods.

I know he’s right. The Vault’s official stance on what you do when you encounter a demon is “run.”

“So how do we figure out his task?”

Orion speaks quickly, glancing over at Lily sleeping soundly. He often assumes he’s the weakest link of our little trio, but it’s times like this when he’s the best of us. “There are different types of demons. Think of them like factory workers, each with a different job on the assembly line of soul torture. Each job has very specific rules and parameters, so all we have



to do is figure out which job Levi is here to do. I have some books on demon lore in my suitcase. You two can read them while I pull up the Vault's archives online and see if we can match any demon types to what's gone on at this hotel."

"Okay. Let's get on it." Jackson tosses Orion the keys to their room.

Then he moves to the bed and lies down beside Lily, stroking her hair while she sleeps. He whispers in her ear, but his voice is too low for me to hear. Either way, the sound of it causes the furrow between Lily's brow to straighten out and her tiny whimpers to abate.

The sight of him with her makes my heart clench.

But this is right. This is the way things should be. He and Orion will be here for her after I'm gone.

This is the way it has to be.

I know how demons work. Orion's right—one way to send Levi back to hell is to force him to complete his task. But it's not as if he's here to retrieve a lost cell phone or something. He will demand blood. A sacrificial lamb.

And I'm not going to allow Lily or one of my brothers to be that sacrifice.

Even if it means I become the lamb.

## TWENTY-THREE: LILY



I wake up screaming, although I can't remember why. It takes me a few moments to realize that I'm alone in the honeymoon suite at the Bridgemont.

I can hear the Bellua brothers moving around in the room next to mine. They've obviously gone in there to strategize about killing Levi so I wouldn't wake up and hear them.

I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror as I sit up. My eyes are rimmed in red, and my skin is all splotchy. I look like I've gone five rounds with a basilisk. Instead, all that happened was that I got dumped by a demon.

A demon.

Fuck.

And I slept with him.

That's not good. Well, the sex itself was good. Amazing, in fact. Ten out of ten for Levi and his remarkable demon dick. I'm probably the only person in the world who has shagged a demon and lived to tell the tale.

And that piercing...

Speaking of demon dick, I know I need to call Becca and update her. Just the thought of it makes my stomach churn.

Levi must have drained me when I confronted him, and I'm still struggling to get a hold of my emotions.

My whole body aches, and my head is pounding like there are a thousand monkeys inside slamming typewriters against my skull. All I want to do is go back to bed.

First, sustenance. Then, call Becca and figure out how to slay this bitch.

I order room service, and twenty minutes later, Frankie brings up a cheeseburger and french fries. If he notices how shitty I look, he doesn't say anything, so I hand him a generous tip.

I crawl back under the covers to eat. The burger is filled with fancy gourmet lettuce, which I pull out. Just give me meat and cheese and pickles. Comfort food.

"I told you, sugar is the key."

I look up. Brooks is standing in the doorway, looking more unsure of himself than I've ever seen in my life. He's holding an enormous chocolate gateau.

"I swiped this from the kitchen," he says as he walks over to the edge of the bed. "Helena and Toby will have to do without an anniversary cake."

"Knowing Helena, she'll be eating him for dessert, anyway," I say as he sets it down on the bedside table. "Thanks."

"Anything for you, Lily."

The intensity of his words startles me. I look at him. *Really* look at him. Behind his smoldering eyes, he looks even worse than me, if that's possible.

"I haven't left your side since we brought you up here," he says gruffly as he passes me the enormous cake. "Jackson and Orion are just next door. Orion has a plan to banish Levi. At least, the start of a plan. I'm next to useless at the book stuff, so I've just been..."

*You've been looking after me.*

*The way you always have.*

My chest tightens. I stare down at the cake, swiping my finger through the chocolate swirls and tasting it.

Mmmm, that does help.

I lick off all the frosting, glancing up as Brooks makes a strangled noise.

My heart hammers against my chest.

“How are you feeling?” he asks as he shoves off his shirt.

I try not to look at the chiseled lines of his chest.

I fail.

“I’ve been better.”

“Is there anything you need? You sure that Levi hasn’t harmed you? We’re going to lay a trap for him, and when we’ve got him, we’re going to—”

“What *are* we going to do? We don’t have any way of fighting a demon.”

“This isn’t a ‘we’ situation. You’re in no state to go after him, after what he’s done to you.” Brooks’s jaw ticks. “We can’t risk it. You’re staying here, and that’s an order.”

Irritation flares white-hot in my chest. “You can’t order me around! I’m not one of your brothers. I’m not even part of the Vault.”

“If you think this is about us taking this job away from you, then you don’t know me at all.”

“You’re impossible!” I hurl a pillow at him. “Of course you have to be Brooks the Macho Man, storming in to save the day because you have such a hero complex, not even considering that if you go after him, it’s a suicide mission!”

“Don’t you think I know that?” he yells, punching the remaining pillow so hard that feathers fly everywhere. “Don’t you think I know that British dick could wipe us out with a snap of his fingers? Why do you think I don’t want you anywhere near him?”

He whirls around and slams his fist through the wall, right next to another fist-sized hole that wasn't there this morning. Some shit has gone *down* since Levi wiped me out.

Sid's ghost looks on from the corner and shakes his head sadly.

Brooks pants, his shoulder muscles rippling as his body trembles with...rage? Or something else?

"There goes the security deposit," I sigh. "Brooks, can you forget all the bullshit and just talk to me like we don't hate each other? Can you just tell me the fucking truth?"

He fixes me with those devastating eyes.

"You want the truth, Lily Dean? The truth is that I've been in love with you since you were sixteen years old."

I burst out laughing.

He makes a face. "I'm not joking."

My heart stutters against my chest, and my amusement dries up.

"Explain yourself. Because you've been a dick to me ever since the night of my sixteenth birthday. That is, when you weren't abandoning me and the twins, or kissing me in an alley, or ignoring me when I needed you."

His full lips press together. "I can't tell you everything, but you have to know I did all of it to protect you."

"So that's it? You drop that bombshell, and then you don't trust me enough to give me the full truth?" I huff. "That's great, Brooks. You really seem like you're in love with me."

"Are you doubting me?" He steps towards the bed, and the look in his eyes is so dangerous, it brings me straight back to that day in the alley, when he saw me in my prom dress and kissed me like he needed me to breathe.

And damn if my whole body isn't on fire right now.

Because ever since I was sixteen, I've been dreaming of hearing those words come out of his mouth. Hell, any of their

mouths. I've been wishing for things that Brooks made clear he would never give me, and now...

...and now...

I pinch the inside of my arm. Hard. I can't let myself get sucked into his bullshit. "And what about the night my parents died? You saw me covered in blood, and you left me. That's not what you do to someone you love."

His face drains of all color. "W-what? What the fuck are you talking about?"

I curl my hands into fists, relishing the sting of my nails embedding themselves into my palms. "Prom night. You know, when my date tried to kill me and then I returned home to see my parents had been killed by demons. Ring any bells?"

He begins to shake his head from side to side, his entire body trembling. "I didn't know. I didn't... Fuck, Lily." His throat bobs as he swallows. "I didn't know. I had no fucking idea your parents died. FUCK!" The roar seems to be pulled from deep within his chest, and he begins to pace. I can't help but compare him to a caged animal. There's something predatory about each of his movements, something savage and lethal. Abruptly, he stops walking and turns to face him. His broad chest heaves with his ragged breaths.

"I was covered in blood, Brooks." My voice is embarrassingly weak. There's no fight left in me. I just feel... hollow and empty, a vessel that has been picked apart by vultures. The pain of my parents' death is a wound that hasn't yet scabbed over. It's not fresh by any means, but the slightest provocation can cause it to bleed anew.

"Lily, I swear to you, I thought the blood belonged to Chase. I thought—" He swallows and squeezes his eyelids shut. His entire body shudders before he forces his eyes open and focuses on me. "Fuck, if you knew how much I wanted to stop the car and pull you into my arms, how much I wanted to drag you onto the backseat and push up that sexy-as-fuck prom dress and make you come all over my face until you forgot about the boy who hurt you...but I *couldn't*."

My cheeks flare with heat. “Why not? Why couldn’t you stop the car? You have to tell me that much.”

“Because...” He whirls around and slams his fist into the wall again.

Only this time, it makes the air between us crackle with tension.

He spins back to face me, and the look in his eyes is all *hunger*. “Because I had to do a terrible thing to save my brothers. A bad thing. A thing that I will never regret but has cost me everything. And to make that choice, I had to give you up. I didn’t know about your parents. I swear. If I’d known, I would have stopped, and I would have pulled you into my arms, and I would have torn those demons to pieces with my own hands.

“If I’d known, I never would have let you endure that on your own, even if it cost me *more* than everything. I love you, Lily Dean, and that’s the only truth you’ll get from me tonight, but it’s the only one that matters. I love you, and if you say the words, I will crawl between your legs right now and make you scream my name.”

*Well...fuck.*

“Beg me,” I hear myself say.

“What?”

“You heard me, Bellua. You want to end this grudge between us? You want to stop pretending that we hate each other? You want...” I can’t even say it.

But my cheeks flush even hotter, and Brooks chuckles. In a lot of ways, I’m an experienced woman who knows exactly how to make a man cry out in pleasure and beg for me. But in other ways, I’m just a scared, innocent sixteen-year-old all over again, in love with three guys who will never love her back.

“You started this, and the only way to end it is to get on your knees and beg me to forgive you.”

Brooks's jaw clenches. I expect him to turn around and storm out. Because this is a game to him. We're playing chicken, and I just made the winning move. He can't beat me. He *won't*—

I gasp as he sinks to his knees in front of me.

Brooks Bellua is on his knees for *me*.

“Lily Dean, from the moment you climbed over our fence in your daisy sundress, I knew that my one job on this planet was to protect you. You and Jackson and Orion. The three of you matter more to me than myself. Sometimes, it's easier to protect people if they hate you, if they want nothing to do with you.

“You wanted a kiss on your sixteenth birthday, and instead, I left you. Because I thought it was for the best. I came back to Haddenwood at prom because I couldn't bear the thought of that werewolf anywhere near you. I thought that I was no good for you, that I would bring down evil on you, when you deserve only happiness and light.

“You want to know how often I've thought of you all these years? The answer is every second of every day. I tried to drown it in the work and in booze and in nameless, faceless women, but the truth is that when I close my eyes at night, it's you I see.

“It's our one perfect kiss that lingers on my lips—a kiss that I stole from a girl who was too young and too naïve to know that the real monster was right in front of her. I think about you so much that when you showed up here, it almost wasn't a surprise because I'm so used to seeing you everywhere I go.

“I did everything wrong. I'm the one who messed up. I never should have left you. I should have held on to you so tight that you couldn't breathe. You're so much braver and stronger than I ever gave you credit for, but I wish you didn't have to be so brave and strong. I wish you didn't have to suffer any of this. I *wish*—” His voice cracks.



“But I can’t change any of it. I fucked up. I’d give up my Mustang if I could change that, but no one will take it. And if you never forgive me, I will still be here, loving you imperfectly, watching over you, and beating the shit out of any monsters who try to mess with you.

“And if you’ll let me, I’ll remain by your side. I’ll fight for you, over and over, until every last monster is gone from this earth. If I have to, I’ll fall on my sword for you. Only for you.”

“Brooks...” Tears pool in the corners of my eyes.

“I mean every word.” He throws his hands up in the air. “Is that sufficient?”

“Nearly.” I grab my phone from the nightstand and snap a couple of pictures. Mmmm, these will make the perfect screensaver. “Now we’re good, Bellua.”

“That’s interesting.” A slow smile spreads across his face. “Because I still have a lot of groveling to do.”

Before I know what’s happening, Brooks has crawled to the edge of the bed and lifted up the corner of the duvet. I yelp as his warm hand closes around my ankle.

He pushes my legs apart. One hand sweeps up the bunched hem of my baggy sweatshirt. The other tugs down my leggings and then tosses them aside.

Brooks breathes hard as he takes in the sight of my lacy thong.

“Little Lily Dean,” he murmurs. “Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine the woman you’ve become.”

“Tell me about these dreams,” I murmur as he trails his fingers over the backs of my knees and my thigh before he cups one hand under the curve of my ass.

This is really happening.

“Another time.” His voice is dark as he lays a trail of kisses down my leg that draws a whimper from my lips. “But I’ll give you a hint—in my next one, you’re going to be naked for me.”

Brooks grabs the lace between his fingers and tears them—*literally* tears them—off me, exposing my aching pussy.

“Hey, that was very expensive lace!”

“Maybe so, but right here is the real treasure.”

I start to tell him that is a fucking ridiculous line, but he buries his face between my legs.

The pleasure slams into me from the moment he drags his tongue from my slick entrance to my clit. I am on fire for this man. My heart may remember all the shit he’s put me through, but my body is a traitorous bitch because she is ready to prostrate herself before Brooks Bellua and his magical tongue.

He pins my thigh in place with one hand, while the other lifts my ass, angling me so that he has me exactly where he wants me. All the while that wicked tongue of his attacks my clit like he’s waging war against it, and I am ready and willing to be conquered.

A warm heat grows inside me, gnawing at my belly, as I writhe and curse and moan beneath his punishing touch.

“Brooks.” My fingers curl in his hair, and I can’t help it—my back arches as I push my hips toward him, begging for more of that incredible mouth on me.

And I have to admit, he’s so much better like this when he’s too preoccupied to be a pain in my ass.

“This is what I dream about, sweet Lily Dean,” Brooks murmurs as his tongue works me in slow circles. He inserts a finger inside me and curls it until I moan. “I dream about touching you, tasting you. And you’re even sweeter than I could imagine.”

I’m right on the edge, desperate for release but not wanting this to end. I’ve imagined this too, but I’ll never admit it to him. And I never imagined how intense it would be, how this deep, warm sensation would well up inside me and threaten to drag me under his spell.

Brooks alternates between long, languid strokes of his tongue and this intense battering that leaves my body like jelly,

building the wave of pleasure inside me.

“Come for me, Lily Dean. Let me taste all of your sweetness.”

He curls a second finger inside of me, and I am *gone*. My hips rock and my thighs close around his face as I ride the wave of my orgasm until it crests and ebbs away. I collapse back against the sheets, and he stares down at me with those heavy-lidded eyes and a self-satisfied smirk that I’d like to slap right off if he weren’t so...

...if he weren’t so precious to me.

“That was...” I’m afraid to finish that sentence, afraid to give him more than he has already taken from me tonight.

He raises one eyebrow. “May I kiss you now, Lily Dean?”

I don’t have any words left, so I nod.

He comes at me with a powerful lunge, though he doesn’t kiss me. Not yet. His hands go to my sides, tugging the sweatshirt up and over my shoulders, his thumbs grazing my hard nipples until I cry out. He nudges me back against the pillows, laying his body over mine so I can feel every place where his corded muscles touch my skin.

My heart hammers against my chest. I’m afraid of this, of the connection we have, of what this will mean for the four of us.

But more than I’m afraid, I am desperate for him. I’ve been alone for so long and...and he knows me better than I know myself.

He rests his weight on his elbows and stares down at me. Moonlight streams from the curtains, dancing pale flecks in his fathomless eyes.

“Sweet Lily Dean, I never wanted you to get mixed up with us. We’re bad news.”

“Shut up and kiss me again,” I say.

And he does.

Oh, does he kiss me. He kisses me while he tears off his own clothes. He kisses me until I'm breathless, his hands tangling in my hair, fingers brushing my nipples. He kisses me until I no longer know what day of the week it is, or where I am, or what my last name is.

I exist only as the breathless "Lily," he lets out as he enters me.

The sound I let out as Brooks seats himself inside me can only be described as *primal*. I've had a few guys since I left Haddenwood, but sex has always been something to do on a lonely night, a trick to chase the nightmares away.

Not like this. Never like this.

It's not just that he's huge and that he stretches me in all the right places. It's not just the way our bodies seem in perfect sync as we start to move together. It's the way he gazes down at me—his eyes softening into a look that I've never seen on Brooks before. A look that can only be described as adoration.

Turns out, I like being adored.

Especially by hot AF, muscled, possessive monster hunters with magical cocks that string my body like a bow before letting loose. I'm flying beneath him, my body on fire as I soar through another orgasm.

Brooks holds me, and kisses me, and breaks me apart with his haunted, hungry gaze until he too comes in a shudder on top of me.

I gasp. "Fuck."

"Fuck," he growls as he rolls off me.

"Did we just..."

"We did." His face breaks out into one of those impossibly rare Brooks smiles.

As the glow of my orgasm fades, fear creeps in. What are we doing? This is Brooks, the guy who's ripped my heart out more times than I'd like to admit, and I'm about to give it to him on a platter again?

I start to slide out of bed, but Brooks wraps his arm around my torso and tugs me back down.

“What are you doing?” I pant out as he flips me over, laying his body on top of me, his hand reaching around to cup my breast.

“I have a lot of dreams, Lily Dean,” he murmurs as he lays a trail of kisses along my neck. “And tonight, I’m going to make every one of them come true.”

## TWENTY-FOUR: ORION



“So I guess Lily and Brooks made up,” Jackson says dryly.

We’re both wide awake, lying on our beds, listening to the sounds from the honeymoon suite.

And what sounds they are.

I know our brother is experienced. We’ve spent years on the road with him. He’d often leave the two of us in a cheap hotel room while he picked up some new conquest at a local pub. Hotel walls are thin—we’re used to hearing the way they worship him after he makes them come multiple times. None of those women meant a thing to him. He can’t remember their names.

But Lily... Lily...

Hearing those cries of pleasure tearing from her throat as Brooks does...whatever he does...makes my chest hurt. I’ll never be able to give Lily that. Why would she choose me when she has Brooks? When she has Jackson?

I itch at the skin on my arms. It’s getting worse. I’m two nights away from changing, and we still haven’t figured out what we’re going to do. I think I’ve found some things that will help with the demon, but Brooks is too distracted with Lily to consider the fact that I have to get away from here.

“Oh, Brooks! Oh, oh!”

I *hate* his name on her lips after the way he’s treated her, after he left her on prom night...

“I can’t take this.” Jackson throws the covers off. “If I have to listen to this one more minute, I’m going to break down their door and join them. Let’s go for a walk.”

I pray to any god that will listen that it could be an option. But it’s not, so a walk will help.

“Where?” I grab my pants.

“Outside. Far away from this stupid hotel.”

I nod. I may be the brains of our operation, but Jackson does occasionally have a good idea.

We toss on clothes and flee the room. Lily’s screams carry down the hallway. Stupid old hotels and their terrible insulation.

Outside, the crisp air takes the edge off my physical need, although it does nothing to stop the painful wanting that squeezes my chest. After that kiss Jackson gave her, I thought for sure Lily would fall for him. That, at least, I can understand. I can be happy for my twin. But Brooks treats Lily like shit.

I don’t think he means to. I think he’s as lost and broken as we are. But it doesn’t change the fact that he left her and made her believe she wasn’t worth the world to us.

I glance over at my brother and see my own misery reflected back at me. Jackson has never made any secret of how much he likes Lily. To be honest, I always thought the two of them were endgame. Brooks has to know what this is doing to him.

But maybe he’s a little too distracted to care.

Jackson’s sneakers and my boots crush fallen leaves and hard, cold earth. My throat tightens and my lungs heave. I don’t even notice the miles have fallen away until Jackson stops dead in his tracks in front of me. I skid to a stop so I

don't hit him, and I end up falling over my feet and landing hard on a twisted tree root.

“Ow.” I rub my tailbone.

The wolf stirring inside me growls. He knows that he needs that tail in a few days.

“That was a very Daisy-esque move.” Jackson thrusts out a hand to help me to my feet. “At least, an old Daisy-esque move. This new Daisy...”

“Yeah.” I don't want him to say any more.

She's even more perfect than the girl we left behind.

But she's different. Broken, too, just like us.

I rub my ass and glance around, finally noticing what caused Jackson to stop in his tracks. We're standing in the middle of a clearing in the trees, with a view back across the valley. The gabled roof and majestic towers of the Bridgemont appear so much smaller. Dollhouse sized.

A circle of rotting wooden benches stretch around the perimeter of the clearing, with a rusted fire pit in the center. Behind them, tucked away in the trees, is a log cabin. It looks like this might have once been a cookout spot, where hikers came to roast marshmallows and tell stories while enjoying the view down the valley. But I'm guessing that as the hotel's clientele changed, no one has been here for quite some time.

Jackson runs up onto the rotting porch and flings open the cabin door. “Check this place out, Orion.”

“Be careful. There might be bears. Or snakes. Or cannibals \_\_\_”

“Just get in here.”

I scratch behind my neck as the wolf inside me claws against my skin. I follow Jackson's path across the porch and duck inside the cabin.

The porch is in bad shape, but the cabin itself is actually decent. The walls are made from thick wooden logs, and there are metal bars in some of the larger windows to protect against



avalanches in the dead of winter. There's even artwork still on the walls.

Jackson raps the wall. "It's pretty solid, and there's plenty of other logs outside. If we boarded up the windows for extra security, then..."

"Then what?"

"Then you could stay here," Jackson says.

He doesn't have to explain what he means.

I *could* stay here.

We could make this cabin secure enough to hold me during my shift. Jackson's right—there are only a couple of windows facing the valley, and they'll be easy enough to board up with the wood outside. I'd probably destroy most of the furniture in the place, but it's not exactly being used as is.

And I'd rather destroy furniture than someone's face.

This means I wouldn't have to go away. We could all stay here, near Lily.

It's a risk, but we could manage it. We could set up a camera, and if I did escape the building, it would alert Jackson, and he and Brooks could get Lily and the hotel guests to safety.

I sit down. "I've definitely stayed in worse places. I'm down for wolfing out with a view."

"That's the spirit."

I itch my neck again. The old fear creeps in, as it does every full moon. That this is the month when things will go wrong. That I will somehow break free of the cage we set and hurt someone. That my brothers will be forced to put me down.

Only this time, I won't just lose them, but I'll lose Lily as well.

"Jackson?"

He's busy inspecting the contents of the cupboards. "Hey, there are s'mores ingredients in here! And hot cocoa powder."

He plonks down in the chair opposite, sending up a cloud of dust. He opens a bag of marshmallows and pops one into his mouth. He chews, winces, then chews some more. "It tastes like sugar and sadness. Do you want one?"

I shake my head. "Jackson, I've been thinking...about Levi."

"What about him?"

"About how we can trap him."

"That's not going to be your concern, little brother. And just how do you trap a demon? I imagine it's even more difficult than imprisoning a werewolf?"

I hate when he calls me "little brother" just because he was born two minutes before me.

I wonder how he'd like it if I refer to him as Grandpa...

"Okay, so, the number six in the room... It's some kind of timer, right? He did the first couple, then wrote a six on the wall, and six weeks later, he came back for the second couple. Then this last murder was six weeks after that."

"Yeah."

"So, the next one is going to be six weeks after that, unless the clock starts speeding up. Which means that he's going to be back for another victim. He's bound to this job now. Demons may be beasts of hell, but they always have a master. His master would have bound him to this task by the power of their name. If you know the demon's name, then you can control them."

"So we just walk up to Levi and say, 'Yo, I know we haven't exactly been on friendly terms before this, but can you reveal your demon name so that we can trap you?'"

I swallow. "You probably couldn't. But Lily could."

"No. Oh, hell no."

I nod. “I knew that’s what you’d say. But I’m just telling you in case...”

*...in case you have no other choice.*

I shudder. “I don’t want to leave you while you’re fighting a demon.”

“Yeah, well...” Jackson turns away.

We don’t have a choice.

I scratch at my wrist again. A tuft of coarse hair has appeared. I can hide it with a long shirtsleeve, for now. But I don’t have long before I need to be locked up here.

“Why did she choose him?” Jackson asks.

I shrug. I’m not used to questions like that coming from Jackson. He’s never been the type to pine after a woman, but then again, none of the women he’s been with have been Lily Dean.

Over the years, I’ve watched him and Brooks bed an equal number of gorgeous women. Jackson, at least, enjoyed their company. He loves to laugh and flirt. He may not have been in love with them or anything, but he *liked* them, which is more than I can say for my older brother. Brooks used them as vessels to pour his hatred, and still, they came begging for more.

“Do you want to go back to the hotel?”

I shake my head. There’s no way in hell I’m going back to our room while there’s a chance that Lily and Brooks are still...doing what they’re doing. “Let’s get started on the windows.”

## TWENTY-FIVE: LILY



I'm deliriously happy when I wake up a few hours later, muted moonlight trickling in through the open window and casting strange shadows on the bed.

Brooks is still fast asleep beside me, his features slack and his brown hair mussed. Without that angry glimmer in his eyes, he looks like an entirely different person. Softer, almost. Peaceful.

Two words I would never usually associate with the grump of a hunter.

I ache to rub the back of my hand across the stubble on his jawline, but I resist.

Mainly because I feel a pair of eyes on me.

My neck prickles, and the fine hairs on both of my arms stand at attention. I imagine that this is what woke me in the first place.

And now that I know it's not Brooks creepily watching me sleep...

I palm the hilt of the dagger I always keep under my pillow and then jerk upright in bed. A naïve part of me still hopes that I'll see Orion and Jackson, the former peering down at me with a pensive smile and the latter grinning goofily.

But of course, the universe has never been that kind.

I'm throwing the dagger at Levi's face before I can even think better of it. He chuckles darkly—the noise reminding me distinctly of what we did in the elevator—and stealthily sidesteps my blade.

That's okay, though. *That* blade was just a distraction.

I grab two more daggers from where they've been shoved underneath the mattress—the hilt sticking out, making them easily accessible.

Silently, I lunge at Levi, slicing at him with the dagger in my right hand. He moves to twirl out of the way, but my other blade is right there, in his chest, before he can take more than a few steps.

It won't kill him—hunters still haven't figured out a way to permanently kill a demon—but it *will* hurt like a bitch.

He chuckles yet again and, with a long, whipping tail that sticks out of his designer jeans, reaches for the dagger embedded in his chest.

A freaking *tail*.

Where the hell did that come from?

His tail wraps around my hand, which is still clutching the hilt, and then he pulls. Blood surges from his wound and wets both of our skin.

I spin away, still clutching the blood-tipped dagger, and begin to circle him. Levi watches me with amused eyes, his tail flicking, one of his hands on top of the wound that is already beginning to heal.

“Is that any way to treat your lover, princess?” he asks in a teasing, singsong voice as he strokes the tip of his tail between his fingers. “You haven't even seen what I can do with this.”

“What did you do to Brooks?” I growl, my eyes instinctively flicking towards the sleeping hunter for a fraction of a second.

He should've woken up as soon as he heard the sound of fighting. Hell, he should've woken up as soon as the bed dipped when I rolled off of it. The only thing that pacifies the rage inside of me is the steady rise and fall of his chest.

He's breathing, at least for now.

Levi waves away my concerns as if they're nothing but pesky flies.

"I didn't hurt your lover boy, if that's what you're worried about." He pushes out his lips in an exaggerated pout. "Just what do you take me for?"

"A demon."

He considers that answer for a moment and then nods seriously, as if acknowledging the truth of those two words.

"That I am. But you should know me better than that. I don't mindlessly hurt people if I can help it. That's not my job." He pauses, cants his head to the side, and then amends his previous statement. "For the most part, I don't mindlessly hurt people."

"What about the men and women you've slaughtered in this hotel?" Pure venom weaves itself into my tone.

I *hate* this man...demon...whatever the fuck he is. I hate him for luring me in the way a hunter would a defenseless, fluffy bunny. And just like the bunny, I feel like his goddamn dinner.

"I told you before. I may be a monster, but I'm not the monster you're looking for." He begins to tap his fingers against his thighs in irritation. "And to answer your previous question, your husband is sleeping. He'll wake up as soon as I leave, good as new." He flashes me a smile that I once would've thought was charming but now makes the snakes inside my stomach hiss and slither erratically. "So how was it?"

I choke on my own spit. "Please tell me you're not asking about my sex life."

He shrugs. “Color me curious.” His dark eyebrows nudge upwards suggestively. “Was it everything you’ve imagined? I know you’ve been pining over that bellend almost as long as he’s been pining over you.”

“If you’re going to try to kill me, can you just cut to the chase? I’m tired of hearing you speak.”

He throws his head back in braying laughter. “I’m not here to kill you, princess. I’m here to help you.” He gives a dramatic bow, his tail pretending to dip an imaginary top hat in the process. “Knight in shining armor extraordinaire, at your service.”

“Why are you doing this? What ritual are you trying to complete?” I hold my dagger at the ready as I continue to circle him, searching for an opening.

I don’t know what I hope to do once I stab him—he won’t die—but I’m determined to fight for my life.

“How many times do I have to repeat myself? I. Didn’t. Kill. Those. People.” With an exasperated huff, he stalks towards me and stops when he’s only an inch away.

The blood-soaked tip of my dagger presses into his neck, but he doesn’t seem to notice or care. His eyes are intent on my face.

“You’re looking at this all wrong, Lily. I can’t tell you directly because of the code that binds demons. I can’t give away the secrets of another demon’s job. But I can tell you that you need to stop thinking about who is at the hotel and more *where* the hotel is located.”

“I swear to God, I’m going to find a way to stop you before you can kill anyone else—”

“Figure out the *where*, you’ll determine the *why*, and that will lead you to the *who*.”

A splitting headache begins to form behind my eyes. But what he says burrows in deeply, sinking its claws into me.

“I don’t understand,” I confess at last, my voice embarrassingly shaky.

Levi licks his lower lip, his eyes ensnaring my own. “Not yet, but you will.”

Then, before I can even gather my discarded wits, he swats away the dagger as if it’s nothing but a toothpick and looms over me. The heat his body emits is almost palpable and seeps through the T-shirt I’m wearing—Brooks’s T-shirt.

“I won’t hurt you, Lily. I’m doing all I can to help you. But demons have rules, and I’m not allowed to interfere in matters that don’t concern me.”

“I don’t—”

“You’re going to wake up now.” His husky voice curls around me like smoke. “And you’re going to do what I told you—look into the *where* instead of the *who*.”

“Levi, what the fuck—”

“Wake up.” The two words seem to emanate unexplainable, effortless power. They cut into me like the sharpened tip of an arrow.

*“WAKE UP!”*

I jerk upright in bed, my heart racing and my palms slick with sweat. Fear tunnels into my throat and forms a stiff ball of tension that’s impossible to swallow around.

What the fuck was that?

“Lily?” Brooks’s voice is tight with concern, and his dark eyes are guarded as he sits upright in bed. The quilt pools around his waist, leaving his naked chest on display. “Are you okay?”

He pulls me against him, his arms enveloping me in warmth.

“I...I want to look at a map,” I blurt, ignoring his arched eyebrow and wary stare.

“A map of the hotel?”

“A map of supernatural hotspots.”



## TWENTY-SIX: LILY



“Motherfucker,” I hiss beneath my breath as I check the map once, twice, three times, half expecting to see something I missed the first time around.

But nope. I receive the same results no matter which angle I look at it.

The hotel is located smack dab between two roads.

Crossroads.

*Motherfucker.*

“How could we have missed this?” Brooks forks his fingers through his hair in agitation as he begins to pace.

“Because the hotel and land surrounding it have been altered over fifteen times in the last one hundred years.” I scrub a hand down my face as a burst of weariness hits me, making my legs feel unsteady. “There’s no way we could’ve known.”

“Could’ve known what?” Jackson pushes the door of the honeymoon suite open the rest of the way and then steps inside, Orion a few paces behind him.

The former tosses a bag of chips from the vending machine at my face before turning to perch on the bed. Just

before he sits, however, he hesitates, glances towards me and Brooks, and then claims the desk chair instead.

Heat floods my cheeks instantly, despite the gravity of the situation.

Oh my god.

Jackson *knows*.

There's no doubt in my mind he's aware of what, exactly, Brooks and I got up to a few hours earlier. I don't know how. It isn't as if the room reeks of sex. And both of us are dressed.

Unless...

I remember how easily I could hear their conversations in the room next door, and the heat in my cheeks transforms into a raging inferno. I hide my embarrassment by opening up the bag, grabbing a chip, and then taking a huge bite of it.

"Thanks," I murmur around a mouthful.

"Don't mention it, Daisy."

I keep my attention pinned on my food as Brooks clears his throat, drawing attention back to what's important. I gratefully direct my attention towards the oldest Bellua brother as he jabs a finger at the map spread out on the table.

"What are we looking at? Ley lines? Fae?" Jackson ventures closer, but Orion remains where he's at against the wall, his arms folded over his chest and his black hair falling forward to obscure his features from view.

"Look again." Brooks touches the paper a little more aggressively, and Jackson leans forward...and then abruptly releases a string of curses that would make my mom blush if she were still alive.

"Crossroads. Are you fucking kidding me? We're dealing with a crossroads demon?" Jackson volleys his gaze between me and Brooks, as if waiting for one of us to tell him we're joking.

We remain silent.

“You guys think Levi is a crossroads demon?” Orion interjects softly from the far corner of the room.

His voice sounds a little...strange, and I wonder if it's because Brooks and I had sex.

Brooks nods in confirmation, but I hesitate.

I haven't told anyone about the strange dream I had and what Levi told me in it. After all, it could be just that—a dream. Perhaps my subconscious knew more than my brain was letting on and wanted to make me aware.

And yet...

Yet I can't help but think that something isn't adding up. I'm holding two pieces of a puzzle, but no matter how many times I shove them together, they don't seem to fit. I'm missing the piece that connects them.

I don't bother voicing my thoughts out loud, though.

For one, I have no proof.

For two, if I'm wrong, my guys could get hurt by putting their faith in me.

For three, they would probably claim I'm dick-notized or something just as demeaning.

No, for now, I'll keep my suspicions to myself.

“This doesn't make any sense!” Jackson throws his hands up into the air and then begins to pace. “Crossroads demons make deals for souls. They don't just go around murdering people.”

“Unless the deal was for the demon to murder people,” Brooks points out.

“Why would someone do that? These murders have been occurring for months now. And the victims have nothing in common with each other.” Jackson agitatedly runs a shaky hand through his hair.

“The sixes on the wall are a timer,” I say. “It's an ultimatum. Pay up, or he'll keep murdering. He'll take away what was given.”

“What do you mean?”

“Two or so years ago, this hotel was in disrepair, right? It was going to crumble away to nothing until the new owners took over and injected a whole bunch of money. But no one asked where that money came from. And everything the new owners did had the golden touch. It was like a dream come true—the design, the construction, the grand re-opening, the influencer campaign... It all went off without a hitch. The new Bridgemont Hotel is a complete success.”

“A deal with a crossroads demon,” Jackson breathes, understanding dawning on his features.

“Exactly. And remember what Robert told me—the new owners have disappeared. They disappeared because our demon has come back for his due—their souls. And if he doesn’t get them, he kills guests and then leaves the number to say when he will come back again. And when they don’t pay up on the new date...”

“The next killing would be six weeks after the last. Unless he’s upping the ante, so to speak, and then it would be six days,” Brooks finishes. “That’s tonight.”

“Exactly. The demon is coming to collect.”

“We need to figure out how to stop him, how to break the deal. Orion?”

“If Lily’s right about all this, I have the demon’s name.” Orion jabs his thumbs into his phone. “It’s...”

He trails off, his words turning into a growl.

“Orion—” Brooks cuts off abruptly, his face draining of color, his attention fixed on his younger brother. “Orion?”

“Lily, step back,” Jackson whispers harshly.

He moves to stand in front of me and guides me until I’m flush against the wall. Tension lines his rigid shoulders and taut neck.

“Jacks? Brooks? What’s going on?” I ask, flicking my gaze between the two of them before focusing on the object of their attention.

Orion.

His head is lowered, lank hair falling across his face, and he seems to be breathing heavily. A dark flush erupts on his neck, the color shockingly pronounced against his alabaster skin. His hands curl and uncurl into fists by his sides.

“What’s wrong with him?” I demand, confused and a little annoyed by their reactions. “Is he sick?”

Orion twitches at the sound of my voice. His head tilts to the side like a predator who just caught a particularly enticing scent on the breeze.

Ice freezes my joints in place, and all of the air seems to be sucked from my lungs.

Because Orion doesn’t just look feverish... He looks animalistic.

Deranged.

His eyes glow a bright, luminescent yellow, and fur sprouts on his cheeks and forehead. I’ve seen this once before, the night of my prom just moments before my entire world went to shit.

When my date turned into a werewolf and tried to kill me.

Orion’s mouth parts, revealing razor-sharp canines, and one gurgled growl escapes him, holding a single word.

*“Run.”*

## TWENTY-SEVEN: JACKSON



I plaster my body over Lily's as Orion lunges. His jaw snaps midair, right where Lily's arm was a moment before.

*Fuck, we left it too late. We should've locked Orion up the second he started scratching at his skin like his life depended on it.*

Lily screams. I grab her arm and dive for the door. I know it's hopeless when Orion rolls back onto his feet and snarls at us, circling around to cut off our escape.

He's mid-shift, and although I've seen this every month for the last five years, the sight of my brother's wiry body all mangled with wolf genes makes bile rise in my throat. The tufts of hair poking through his skin, the way his spine cracks and shapes itself, and his limbs bending and twisting as muscle and bone remake themselves.

It should be impossible, but unfortunately for us, werewolves are real.

And we're about to be eaten by one.

No. Not if I can help it. I narrow my eyes at my twin as Orion leans back on his feet, long claws growing from his toes, which poke through his favorite pair of boots.

“When he attacks, you run for the door.” I remove the Mustang’s spare keys from my pocket and press them into her hand. “You take the car, and you don’t look back. Got it?”

“Jackson—”

Her words collapse into a scream as Orion leaps at us.

Time slows. All I can see is my brother—his face twisted into a monstrous form—as he bears down on us.

His eyes are wide and terrified, but he’s never been able to control the wolf inside of him. The wolf that hungers for freedom, for blood—

And suddenly, he’s not here.

*What?*

Lily screams again as something heavy slams into the floor next to us. Brooks has landed on Orion’s back, knocking him to the ground. Orion snarls, his still-shifting limbs turning on our brother. He rolls over and pins Brooks with two fur-covered paws and leans in, his teeth sinking closer and closer to Brooks’s face, ready to take a bite...

...but not before Brooks jams a syringe into his neck.

Orion lets out a desolate howl, then slumps over.

He doesn’t move.

“Fuck,” Lily whispers. I can feel her heart racing in her chest. She clings to me as if I’m the only thing holding her upright. “Fuck. He’s a...”

“Yup.” I struggle to get my own racing heart in check. “He’s a werewolf.”

“A little help would be appreciated,” Brooks mumbles from beneath my twin’s dead weight.

All I can see poking out from Orion’s fur-covered, half-wolf form are Brooks’s flailing limbs.

But I don’t let go of Lily. She peers up at me with those huge eyes, and suddenly, she looks sixteen again, in need of protecting.

“Is Orion okay?” Her lower lip wobbles.

I don’t know how to answer that.

“I need to help Brooks,” I say, guiding her over to the heart-shaped bed and getting her to sit down. “Can I let go of you for a moment? Just wait here. You’re safe. I promise I’ll be back.”

“Jackson, you bastard, get him off me,” Brooks snaps, his legs scissoring as he tries to buck Orion off him. “I can’t breathe under here.”

Lily nods slowly. She looks dazed. I don’t want to leave her, but I also know that we need to deal with Orion before that serum wears off.

Reluctantly, I let go of her and walk over to where Brooks is wrestling with Orion’s dead weight. I grab my twin under the shoulders, and with me dragging and Brooks pushing, we manage to get him off.

“Well, fuck.” Brooks runs his fingers through his hair. “Why has he changed so early? We should have at least another day.”

“He let his control slip. He didn’t sleep well, and…” I look over at Lily.

Brooks nods, understanding. With Lily here, Orion’s tenuous control over his monthly change would have been worse than ever. And once he goes wolf, he can’t come back until the full moon is over.

“Fuck. We do not have time for this.” Brooks paces, his hands tearing at his hair. “We have to get him back to the safe house. But we can’t leave Lily—”

“I meant to tell you. Orion and I went for a walk last night, and we found a cabin up in the woods. We’ve been up all night reinforcing it… *Shit.*” I indicate Orion’s prone body. “He’s hardly slept. I didn’t even think. I wish he’d said something. He must’ve known he was losing control.”

Brooks grunts. “You’re his twin. What do you think?”

*Shit, shit, shit.*



He must have felt himself slipping. But he wouldn't have said anything because he doesn't want to be a burden. Orion hates what he is. He's always believed himself to be the weakest of us. Just last month, while we were waiting with him at our safe house, he tried to make us leave him behind.

"I'm a noose around your necks," he said. "How long until we make a mistake and I attack one of you? I can't bear living, knowing that I could hurt you. You should leave me here and go on without me."

It drives me crazy when he talks like that. Orion doesn't seem to understand that he's the best of us. He may not have Brooks's brawn or my charm, but he is our heart. I'm not leaving him behind.

I collapse on the couch, staring down at my twin. His chest rises and falls evenly. "We're lucky you had the serum on you. He could have torn this entire hotel apart."

"After that incident in Baltimore, I'm never without the stuff."

The Vault's orders on werewolves are absolute—if you find one, kill it on sight. But Brooks and I stole a secret serum they developed, which can put a werewolf to sleep for a few hours.

"We need to get him down to this cabin you found right now. You'd better do it. I'm not leaving Lily."

"It's six miles down a steep mountain trail," I say. "The 'Stang won't make it, and I'm not strong enough to carry him all that way on my own."

"And Lily is not some damsel in distress." Daisy pipes up. The color has come back to her cheeks, but she can't tear her eyes away from Orion's half-shifted form. "I'm coming with you."

"Fucking hell," Brooks sighs as he starts pulling on his jacket. "I guess we're all going."



“OKAY, you two, we’re walking now,” Daisy snaps as she follows Brooks and me up the winding, snow-dusted path. The two of us have Orion’s monstrous front paws slung over our shoulders, and even though we’re both tall, his hind legs and tail drag behind us. “There’s not a single soul in these woods apart from us. You’d better start explaining to me what the fuck is going on because I’ve had enough of Bellua secrets.”

“Orion’s a werewolf,” Brooks mutters as he trips over a loose stone. He manages to right himself before he drags all of us over.

“Duh. Thank you, Captain Obvious. I figured that out. What I need to know is *how*? Did he get bitten on one of your jobs? This can’t be from prom night, because otherwise, he’d be dead by now.”

She’s not stupid. She’s already figured out most of our secret, and she knows enough about the Vault and their rules to understand that if they knew about Orion, they’d have him euthanized.

Brooks opens his mouth to speak, then slams it shut. We’ve gone too long not talking about it to start now. As much as I love Daisy, I don’t know the new her that well. I don’t believe she’ll ever turn on Orion, no matter how pissed she is at us, but doubt creeps in regardless—a product, I’m sure, of keeping this a secret for so damn long. I don’t trust anybody.

Behind us, Daisy’s eyes bore into me.

“Well, well, well,” she says with a grin in her voice. “So the Bellua brothers—the pride and joy of the Vault—have gone rogue. Welcome to the club.”

“We haven’t gone rogue,” Brooks growls.

“Riiiiiiight. Working with the Shadow, harboring a secret werewolf... I’d say those are roguish activities, wouldn’t you? And what would happen if the Vault were to find out about Orion’s moonlit activities?”

“You know exactly what would happen. They’d kill him, and us too, for not killing him first. And if you know what’s good for you, you’ll keep your mouth shut about it, or else.”

“Oooh, Brooks, are you going to spank me?” Lily’s laugh startles me. It’s so unexpected, and so lovely. “Be careful. I might just enjoy it.”

Brooks trips again. This time he does fall, his knees landing in a snowdrift, sending Orion and me pitching over.

“Sorry,” Brooks mumbles. He shoves Orion’s paw back around my shoulder, forcing me to bear all the weight while he rounds back on Lily. “I knew it was a bad idea to bring you up here.”

“Everything about me is a bad idea, so you keep saying, but that didn’t stop you from—”

“Could you two maybe try not to jump each other’s bones until we get up the hill?” I growl. “Because Orion is heavy, and if Brooks doesn’t take his half of the weight right now, I am kicking him off this mountain.”

Their bickering cuts like a knife, because I can see through the charade they’re both putting on. The way Brooks’s gaze keeps falling to her, the way Daisy licks her lips.

I squeeze my eyes shut, but that’s a bit dangerous on the trail, so I open them again. Anyway, it’s not the sight of the two of them trying not to throw down and fuck in front of me, but the memory of Lily’s moans from last night.

Those sounds Brooks drew from her...

I wish it were me.

Brooks shoots me a look as he takes up the slack. It’s his usual, “Why did the gods curse me with younger brothers” look, but it’s tinged with something else. Something that kinda looks like guilt.

As we start moving again, I take a deep breath to bring the conversation back to Orion. My limbs scream as I haul his body up a steep slope. “We have Orion’s condition under control. Mostly.”

“I can see that.”

“I swear, it’s not normally like this. We’ve built a couple of safe houses—one on each coast. When the full moon

approaches, we leave whatever job we're on and go back to the closest one. We lock Orion inside with some food and water and wait it out. And Brooks has that serum, just in case..."

...in case what happened today happens...

"But how long before you lose control of him?" Daisy asks. "How long until you can't get him to a safe house on time? He's only a baby werewolf. He'll get stronger and harder to control every year. If Brooks hadn't stopped him, everyone in the hotel would've been dead meat. I love Orion as much as you both, but you get that this is crazy, right?"

She's asking the same questions that play over and over in my head every month, when I'm standing guard over my twin while he rages and snarls and turns monstrous on the other side of a thick steel wall.

Beside me, tension rolls off Brooks in waves.

"We have it under control," Brooks snaps. "We're dropping this subject."

We trudge along in stony silence. Brooks stops when he sees an animal trap on the side of the path. A tiny rabbit has his foot caught. He's alive, but only just, and his little rabbit eyes swim with pain. Brooks frees the rabbit's foot, uses a handful of ice to staunch the bleeding, and nestles the little guy into the pocket of his hoodie, before we keep going.

Lily coos over his floppy ears, and it makes my heart hurt because that's what she would have done five years ago.

But Lily doesn't understand yet why we need the rabbit.

"Is that the cabin up ahead?" Brooks grunts out, his body sagging under Orion's weight.

I don't have the strength left to reply, but it's obvious as we approach the clearing that it's where we're taking Orion. The work we did last night has made the place into a fortress. All the windows have been boarded up, and thick wooden logs wait in a stack beside the door, ready to bar it once we have Orion safely inside.

Brooks and I half lift, half drag Orion up the steps and set him down on the sofa. Without another word, Brooks drops the rabbit on the floor near Orion, whirls on his heel, and stalks off into the woods. Lily moves beside me as I stare down at my sleeping brother, his clothes torn around his wolfish limbs and his face nearly completely transformed.

Her fingers seek mine. She squeezes my hand, sending a bolt of fire up my arm.

“He’ll come back to us, Jackson. He’s not lost forever.”

“I know.” My voice chokes as I pull her away. We don’t know how much longer we have before the serum wears off. “Sleep well, brother. I’ll catch you on the flip side.”

As Lily holds the logs over the door frame and I screw them into place, my body jerks back as a great howl shakes the whole cabin. Moments later, my brother flings his bulk at the door, barking and clawing for release.

“Orion!” Lily cries as she listens to his horrible growls. “The rabbit...”

I just pray that tiny animal will be the only thing on the menu tonight.

## TWENTY-EIGHT: LILY



The sounds from the cabin rend my soul. That's Orion in there—sweet, soulful Orion, snarling and howling and tearing the place apart.

Jackson and I lean against the porch, our fingers laced together, waiting out this horror while Brooks stalks around in the woods doing fuck knows what.

I wince as something heavy hits the wall behind our backs. The entire cabin shakes.

“I hope you and Brooks didn't want to use those cozy bunks,” Jackson says flatly. “Because I think Orion just destroyed them.”

My cheeks flare with heat at the hurt dripping from Jackson's voice. The last thing I ever want to do is hurt Jackson, but I'm also not going to apologize for sleeping with Brooks. It was exactly what I needed, and something I'd definitely do again if we get out of this alive. Which is a big if.

Instead, I change the subject. I meet Jackson's eyes, taking in the fear there as his brother slams his body into the wall behind us. “Does one of you always wait with Orion?”

“Always.” Brooks emerges from the trees, his grim expression matching Jackson's.

He draws a flask from a pocket of his duster and takes a deep swig. He stares into the distance, at the hotel lit up on the horizon, and I know that he's thinking about Levi.

Levi, Orion, the crossroads... We have so many problems bearing down on us at once, I feel like a tiny bug being ground into the dirt by some large boot.

We have to find a way out of this. We *have* to.

I think back to that dream I had about Levi. Something about it nagged at me. Levi said that he wasn't the demon, and I know enough about demon lore to know that demons love to take credit for their work. And from the way he spoke to me, he sounded almost...caring.

Thinking about Levi makes a hard lump form in my throat. I liked him, more than I care to admit. He made me feel like I was a normal twenty-three-year-old girl, like I could be fun and flirty and attractive. He was supposed to be my no-strings fuck to get me over the Bellua boys, and now it turns out he doesn't just have strings—he's an entire ball of demon yarn.

Brooks must be thinking along the same lines because he says. "We have to do something about Lily's boyfriend."

"Do I detect a hint of insecurity, Brooks?" I shoot back, but there's no bite to it. We have bigger things to worry about than Brooks's ego. "Levi's not my boyfriend, and now that we know about the crossroads, his pattern makes sense. He's here to collect his debt, but someone hasn't paid. That's why he's been taking people in the honeymoon suite. That's why he writes the number six on the wall. The timer is for every six weeks until his debt is paid."

"We have to stop him."

"Exactly."

"But how? We can't kill him. We don't know how to trap him, and we don't have his name."

"Orion said that he thought he'd figured it out, but..." Brooks glares at the cabin.

But obviously he's in no state to tell us.

I turn to Brooks. “Did you keep Orion’s phone?”

Brooks fishes around in his pocket and hands it over. “We can’t let him take things like this into isolation with him. We learned that lesson the first month when he destroyed his laptop and months of research on our case.”

I peer at the screen. It flashes, asking for a four-digit pin. “What’s his password?”

Jackson won’t meet my eyes. “Your birthdate.”

My heart stutters. I key in the date, and the phone opens up. I pause, my fingers hovering over the main menu. Orion has a picture as his background. It’s a picture of me.

Or rather, a picture of the four of us. I remember the day we took it—we hiked down to the little stream that ran behind our homes with a picnic lunch. I brought my bow and a quiver of arrows, and we made a target on an old fallen log and took turns shooting.

I remember how Brooks devoured four of the brownies I made, the crumbs sticking to the stubble on his chin. I remember Jackson spinning me around so fast that my daisy-covered sundress flared out like a parachute. I remember laughing until my sides hurt, and I remember Orion leaning his phone up against a tree and taking this photo of all of us together, on probably the last happy day we shared before Brooks left on my sixteenth birthday.

Tears prick the corners of my eyes, but I owe it to Orion not to fall apart. I pull up the last thing that Orion was looking at on his phone—it’s part of the Vault’s hidden database. Orion had been hunting through a catalog of demons.

Even though the demon catalog isn’t as complete as some of the other Vault resources—they simply don’t know enough about demons—I’d give my right arm for a couple of hours to riffle through it in case it has anything about the demon who took my parents.

I scroll past some pretty hellish-looking beasts—Leviathan, Ba’al, Mannon, Asmodeus, Lilith—and stop on the demon Orion highlighted.



“Mephistopheles,” I whisper.

Levi’s real name is Mephistopheles. According to the notes, he is the demon of the crossroads in this part of the world, a being who can be called upon to make a bargain, but he cannot be swindled out of collecting his due.

There is a note about how Mephistopheles has come to earth once before at the behest of a famous musician who sold his soul for fame, but when the musician refused to pay up, Mephistopheles took an innocent soul, and then another every six weeks until it became six days, six hours, and when it got down to seconds, the musician’s hometown was nearly completely wiped out.

The only way the Vault could get rid of the demon was to hunt down the musician who made the deal and hand him over.

Just like what’s happening here at the Bridgemont Hotel.

And right next to the name is the demon’s sigil—his name written out in demon-tongue.

Orion found it. He found the demon’s name!

I grin at Jackson. “Your brother is a literal genius. I can’t believe he found this. This is exactly what we need.”

“What do we do with it?” Jackson frowns over my shoulder.

“We set a trap. We can trap Mephistopheles until we can find the person who made the deal and get them to pay up. That’s the only way to get rid of him. Look.” I flip to another page Orion has bookmarked. “This tells us how to use a demon’s name to set a trap. Orion did everything for us. And we still have nearly four weeks until the clock runs down again. I think we can actually do this before anyone else gets hurt.”

Brooks frowns. “What do you mean, you think?”

I turn the phone around so he can see. “You know what any of these symbols mean? Because to me, this is a black metal album cover.”

Brooks just looks at me like I've grown two heads.

"Black metal, you know—Satanic gibberish."

Brooks doesn't need to know that I spent three months fucking a metal drummer. It wasn't exactly the highlight of my life.

I toss the phone to Jackson. "You know how to interpret all that? If we get this ritual wrong, we're demon food."

"No clue." Jackson pinches between his eyes. "What are we going to—"

"You Bellua boys never come prepared." I dig out my phone and start texting. "I've got it covered."

## TWENTY-NINE: LILY



“I hope you’re happy, bitch. I had to cancel my date tonight to drive here in time,” Becka complains as she steps out of the car. “He was a *doctor*, with a really *tight* ass. I’ve never had an ass that nice before.”

“I’m very happy that you’re here instead of with Dr. Nice Ass.” I can’t help myself. I wrap my arms around my best friend.

I’ve only been at the Bridgemont a few days, but it feels like a lifetime since I’ve seen her.

Becka holds me, the feathery ends of her shoulder-length haircut tickling my cheek. I breathe in her familiar Becka scent, and I feel steady. Becka is here now. Everything is going to be okay.

“So where are Dick Face, Jizz Cock, and Wank Stain?” Becka asks.

I crack up at her nicknames for them and pull back from our hug just as Becka’s eyes rake over Brooks and Jackson, who are standing awkwardly behind one of the pillars holding up the hotel’s grand entrance.

“That’s Jackson Bellua?” She gasps. “He was hot in high school, but now...raaawr. And I presume the tall, brooding one is Brooks?”

“Yeah, the old sourpuss himself.”

“The grumpy ones are always the best in the sack.” She elbows me in the ribs. “Right?”

“Er, so, about that...”

“Eeee! You did!” Becka squeals and hugs me again. “You fucked his brains out. I knew you would. And what about the two younger Belluas?”

“Well, Jackson and I—”

“I knew it! I hope that you’ve kept extensive notes on all three performances, because as your best friend, I am here to help you decide which one to choose. Or maybe you could just have them all, and the demon, too. Imagine all that feisty brotherly competition over your body. Forget running a train; that’s all about the orgasm caboose—”

“Becka!” My cheeks flush with heat. “I don’t even know what you’re saying. You’re here to help us trap a demon. And I’m not sleeping with any Bellua brothers until this mess is sorted out, so drop it.”

“Okay, okay, fine.” Becka reaches into the backseat and grabs her suitcase. It’s shiny black and decorated all over with little silver stars.

Freddie comes rushing over, his face beet red with exertion. Robert must’ve been running him ragged today.

“Hi, Freddie, can you take this up to the honeymoon suite?” I indicate the bag. “And later, bring me up a cot for Becka, if you have one available now. Add the extra fee to our room.”

“Certainly, Mrs. Dean. We’ll have your friend’s bags and a cot sent up as soon as we can.” Freddie looks a little panicked as he glances toward the front desk, where Robert is glowering at him over the heads of a large bus tour group trying to check in.

“Mrs.?” Becka’s eyes shoot *way* up.

“He calls everyone that.” Now my whole face is flushed.

“Oh, Mrs. Dean and her husband are our honored guests.” Freddie beams. “If there’s anything else we can do for you and your friend, perhaps a champagne service to the room—”

“Actually, Freddie, was it?” Becka interrupts. “I’d prefer to bring my own bag, if it’s not too much trouble.”

“Not a problem. Have a lovely day with Mrs. Dean, ma’am.”

I hurry Becka into the elevator before she can cause any more mayhem. Jackson and Brooks jump in just before the doors shut. Jackson is staring at his phone screen—he and Orion set up a couple of webcams inside the cabin in case they couldn’t wait out there with him for the duration of the full moon, and Jackson is now glued to the live feed. But Brooks looks Becka over in his abrasive, appraising way.

But his glare doesn’t faze her. She sticks her hand under Brooks’s nose.

“It’s nice to meet you, finally,” Becka says.

Brooks looks shaken by her confidence, but he takes her hand and gives it a businesslike jerk.

“I assume Orion is still waiting out his condition at the cabin?” she asks.

Brooks shoots me a betrayed look. “You told her?”

I fold my arms and glare back at him. “Unlike you, I don’t keep secrets from the people I care about.”

“Relax, I’m not going to spill the beans about wolf-boy. Provided you look after my girl Lily here.”

“I always look after Lily.”

“Uh-huh, and nearly getting her killed by a demon and mauled by a werewolf is totally ‘looking after her.’”

The elevator doors open with a *ding*. Becka wheels her bag outside and hurries towards the room.

“This is the honeymoon suite? I can feel the demonic energy from here, or maybe that’s just what my girl Lily is like between the sheets, right, Brooks?”

Brooks looks like he wants to murder Becka, which honestly makes me even happier that she's here.

He hisses at me, "Why is she here again?"

"Becka is one insanely powerful witch, and she's going to save our asses with this demon-trapping ritual, so you bite your tongue, Brooks Bellua."

"I'd like you to do it for me," he growls low, and my stomach plunges into my pussy.

Damn, I wish that we got just a little more time to explore this thing between us, but monster slaying calls.

Brooks opens the suite—we still haven't gotten the lock fixed—and we all crowd inside.

"Let's get down to business." Becka opens her suitcase to reveal a treasure trove of crystals, candles with runes carved in them, and occult whatsits. "Step aside, boys. This requires the work of a powerful witch. One demon trap, coming up."

She ushers Jackson and Brooks off the bed before arranging a group of candles and crystals around it. Then she uncorks a bottle of sweet-smelling oil.

"Don't worry, snookums, I'm not here to give you a massage." She waves the bottle under Brooks's nose before dribbling it around the room and over the duvet. "I'm spelling out the demon's name using this oil. It will be invisible to him until he crosses into the circle. When Levi comes for you, all Lily has to do is lure him onto the bed. Once he's inside, the trap will hold him indefinitely, until you decide to break it, or until the demon's bargain is fulfilled. Got it?"

"Hang on." Jackson looks up from his phone for a moment. "Lily's not going to be demon bait."

"It has to be me," I say. "It's not as if he's going to come when you call him. But I know how to reach Levi. He appears in my dreams, so I can speak to him there."

"You didn't tell us this!" Brooks booms.

I shrug. "I'm telling you now. You're not exactly Mr. Calm and Sensible when Levi is involved."

“That’s because he’s a demon, and he’s after you—”

“And right now, that’s your biggest asset.” Becka lights the candles. “Lily’s an enterprising woman. She’ll find a way to bring Levi into our trap. Once a guy leaves a print of his hand on your ass, he’s going to do anything to get back to that ass —”

Brooks’s eyebrows shoot *way* up, and I glare at Becka. I do not need more possessive male bullshit in my life right now.

Becka indicates that I should climb into bed. I peel off my jeans and T-shirt, leaving on only my bra and panties, and try to ignore Jackson and Brooks as their eyes sear my near-naked flesh. I climb under the duvet and pull the covers up to my chin.

While Becka finishes laying down the candles, Jackson checks the livestream on his phone for the millionth time.

“He’s eaten,” he says to Brooks.

“May I see?” I tentatively ask.

Jackson and Brooks exchange a look.

I roll my eyes at them. “I’m not an innocent teenager anymore. I brought down monsters you could only dream of. I can handle it.”

“It’s not that, Lily. It’s just...” Jackson’s face screws up. “It’s awful seeing him like this.”

I snatch the phone from his hand. Jackson has set up a camera high in the beams of the cabin, probably because there’s less chance of Orion smashing it. At first, I don’t see anything except for a room filled with broken furniture and a smear of blood along the wall. My heart stutters before I remember the rabbit Brooks threw in there before we shut the door.

Then Orion appears in the frame. At least, what was once Orion. He stalks on all fours, his body a horrific, mangled hybrid of wolf and man. Blood is caked to his chin, and for a moment, he looks up at the camera, and the light falls across

his face and his eyes. They're not Orion's eyes any longer. They're cruel and gold and full of *hunger*.

I shudder. Jackson reaches for his phone, but then I notice something.

I tap Orion's face on the screen. "With all the windows boarded up, he should be entirely in shadow. Where's this light coming from?"

Jackson frowns as he peers at where I'm pointing. "Shit. It's coming from above. There must've been a small skylight or something that we missed."

"If it's high up, Orion shouldn't be able to reach it. Right?"

Jackson nods, but he grabs back his phone and collapses into the chair, his hands trembling as he peers at the tiny screen.

I tug the covers up. I don't know how I'm going to sleep when my mind is racing a mile a minute and we have to fight a demon and Brooks and Jackson are both staring at me.

"This is hopeless," I say after ten minutes. "I'm wide awake."

"Here." Becca takes out a dropper and drops something into my eyes. "This will help. But don't drive any heavy machinery."

A moment later, I'm being dragged into sleep, heading toward the darkness where Levi is lurking, when...

*KNOCK, KNOCK, KNOCK.*

I peel one eye open. Brooks and Jackson move like the wind—Jackson dives into the bathroom, his silver-tipped stake gripped in his hand. And Brooks slides in behind the suite's double doors, his own stake poised and ready. Becca crawls behind the TV cabinet and mouths "answer it" to me.

But I can't answer the door. My limbs are like liquid honey. I'm melting into the bed, and with every moment, sleep is threatening to pull me under.

"Who's there?" I manage to call out.



“It’s Freddie, Mrs. Dean. I just wanted to see if you and your husband and your new friend wanted a cheese platter, compliments of the owners. Here at the Bridgemont, we treat our honeymooners like the royalty they are.”

I flick my gaze to Brooks. “What do we do?” I mouth.

He slides his stake down the legs of his trousers and steps out from behind the door. “We get rid of him, quick.”

“And hand me that cheese platter,” Becka pipes up from behind the TV. “I’m starving.”

I swear under my breath as Brooks turns the handle and opens the door. “Hey, Freddie, thanks for the cheese platter, but we—”

SLAM.

A moment later, Freddie has Brooks pinned against the wall, his hands around his throat. Brooks’s eyes bug out as he struggles for air.

What’s going on?

Freddie meets my gaze, and his usually kind eyes are glowing bright red. *Demon* red.

“Lily Dean,” he rasps. “Just the nosy little busybody I’ve been waiting for.”

## THIRTY: JACKSON



Lily peers at the unassuming concierge as he holds my older brother against the wall like he's a bug that needs to be squashed. Her eyes swim, and her face crumples. Her arms are shaking as she tries to hold herself upright in the bed.

The drops Becka gave her must be working. Only now, she doesn't need to go to her dream to pull Levi out because the demon is already here.

We were wrong this entire time.

Levi isn't the demon we're looking for.

It's Freddie.

As Freddie's grip tightens around my brother's neck, I *see* him for the first time. People never stop to look at the help. If they did, they would have seen Freddie's true nature. The evil that crawls beneath the surface of his skin, the inhuman glint of his eyes.

Demons take on human form when they come to earth, but they can never quite get the eyes right. Eyes are the windows to the soul, and demons don't have souls.

We should have seen it in Levi, too, but we were too busy hating on him for other reasons.

“I recognized the famous Bellua brother the moment you guys walked into the lobby,” Freddie hisses as Brooks claws at his throat, trying to get enough air.

His face is turning red, and his feet kick frantically in midair.

“The golden boys of the Vault. And I quickly figured out you were with the Shadow. You weren’t exactly subtle, Lily Dean, sprinkling your magic stones all over the hotel. Did you find more than you bargained for at the dear Bridgemont Hotel?”

Freddie throws this last line over his shoulder at Lily, who whimpers as her arms finally collapse. She falls back against the pillow, her red hair fanning around her like a halo of fire.

I know it’s hopeless to fight Freddie, but I have only one thought—protect Lily. I meet Brooks’s eyes and can see the same grim determination there.

I fling myself at Freddie. At least, I try. All I achieve is a little twitch. My limbs have frozen. I’m stuck in place like a fly in a spider’s web.

“I was called to this hotel when it was on the brink of ruin. The new owner was desperate for the hotel to succeed, so he bargained his soul if I would make the money flow, the construction easy, and bring in the tourists. I kept up my end of the bargain, but when I came to collect, he’d disappeared and hired a high-powered supernatural to hide him from me. Isn’t that rude?” Freddie asks Brooks, jiggling my brother by the neck so it appears as if he’s nodding in response.

Fear churns in my gut. Freddie could break Brooks’s neck at any moment, although right now, he seems content to tell his tale. Demons are known for being loquacious bastards.

“That’s right, Brooks, it *was* rude. But I’m nothing if not reasonable. I gave him fair terms—I take my first soul from his guests, and I will return every six weeks for another, until he shows his face and gives up his soul to me. And if he continues to defy me, the timeline will move to six days, six

hours, six minutes, six seconds, and this hotel will be nothing but a ruin atop a pile of dead bodies.

“I knew it would only be a matter of time before the Vault sent someone to the Bridgemont,” Freddie continues in a conversational tone, as if he’s discussing the hotel’s amenities. “I’ve been so careful to cover my tracks, to make my prizes look like a run-of-the-mill haunting, to be a shadow—like our Lily here. But it’s an honor to know that I’m worthy of the great Bellua brothers and their little plaything.”

“I’m not...their plaything...” Lily spits out, her eyes falling shut as she attempts to ward off whatever serum Becka gave her.

“That’s not what it sounded like when you let this one fuck you every way imaginable.” Freddie grins. “Oh, yes, I remember what you told me on the first day you arrived, that you let all three of them have you. You seemed to believe that batting your eyelashes and implying I might become your ‘fifth’ would get you anything you wanted. I played along because it amused me.

“But now that I see you lying here, I wonder if maybe I should take you up on the offer. Maybe I should fuck you while the others watch, make your little boyfriends squeal like pigs? Would you like that, Lily Dean? It makes my little demon heart all aflutter. What about yours, younger Bellua? Did you jerk off listening to your brother make Lily Dean scream? Or did you run away because you can’t bear to tell her how you really feel?”

The way Freddie says those words twists a knife in my gut. I knew about Brooks and Lily, of course. We heard them. The whole hotel probably heard them. But somehow, knowing Freddie heard them too and is using it to torture me is too much.

Freddie lets go of Brooks’s neck, but he doesn’t drop to the floor. He remains pinned to the wall, his body frozen.

Brooks’s eyes swim with pain. Somehow, I know my brother didn’t realize until that moment just what Lily means to me, and to him.

And we're stuck in this room with a demon, and we can't move to save her.

Inside the prison of my body, I thrash wildly, but all that happens is that my pinkie finger moves a fraction of an inch.

"No answer?" Freddie clucks as he moves gingerly around the bed toward me. "I must admit, I expected to meet more of a fight. Where is Bellua number three? The strange one? Never mind. I shall enjoy hunting him down like a dog."

I almost laugh, but my vocal cords don't work.

I remember that Becka is still hiding behind the TV cabinet. Has she been put under this spell, too? My gaze locks with Brooks, but neither of us can move. I frantically hunt around in my mind for a plan and—

Lily raises her hand. She blinks, and it takes everything she has to stay this side of wakefulness.

She reaches out to Freddie. "The Bellua brothers are nothing to the Vault anymore. They're expendable. I'm the rogue monster hunter with the ax to grind with demons. I've been wanting a piece of demon ass for my trophy wall for some time. Come here and show me what you've got."

"And disrupt that pretty little demon trap that you've set for me? I don't think so, witch." Freddie scuffs his foot at the edge of where Becka placed the circle. Then he grabs my shoulder. "Here's what's going to happen. You're going to unlock this circle for me like a good girl, or I will eat your friend in front of you. Slowly. With lots of chewing."

*Lily, please, don't break the circle. I don't care what he does to me, but don't let him have your life. You're far too precious. To me. To Orion. To Brooks. To this world.*

"If you want to play it that way..." Lily lies back on the pillows.

Her hands clench into fists at her sides. She's terrified, but she's trying not to let Freddie see it.

She closes her eyes.

Freddie smiles down at Lily as her chest rises and falls slowly.

She's asleep.

“She is quite fetching. I'll give you that. And I like the way she abandoned all of you to have a nap. That feels almost...demonic. I think I'll enjoy eating her soul. But first, I'll have the two of you for appetizers.”

He turns to me, a slow, evil grin spreading across his face. He leans forward and presses his lips to my forehead.

Pain *slams* into me. I can't move, can't react, but every atom of my body burns with agony. I scream in silence as pieces of me are torn away—my soul, my being, my essence—and sucked out through my forehead into Freddie's puckered lips.

He slurps and sucks with abandon, and I can feel him taking everything good and wonderful—memories of Lily, my love for my brothers, my dumb sense of humor. Freddie is taking it all—

“Hey, demon,” Becka yells. “Think fast.”

I can't see what she does, but a moment later, Freddie yells and staggers back, clutching his cheek. Smoke curls through his fingers, and the scent of burning flesh scars the air.

*CRASH.*

Brooks drops to the floor. He rolls over, holding his throat and gasping for breath. Freddie howls as he lunges at Becka, but she dodges him and throws something else at him that makes him scream.

Freddie's hold on me wavers, and I hurl myself toward Lily. But I only get two steps toward the bed before I'm frozen once more.

“You cannot fight me, hunters!” Freddie screams.

Fire rises from his fingers. The room's smoke alarm starts buzzing as he springs for me, the flames aimed at my face. I brace myself for the pain that's to come.

*Daisy, I'm so sorry. I tried to save you. I love—*

“Lily, now!” Becka screams.

Lily lets out a noise that's half screech, half yawn. She throws herself forward, dragging an object from behind the bed. A crossbow.

She draws the crossbow to her shoulder. It must work on magic or something because it is already loaded.

Lily fires.

“Ow, fuck!” Freddie slams against the wall, right next to where he was holding Brooks. The fire in his palms dies as he squirms, trying to free his body from the bolt that's pinned him through the shoulder to the wall. “You shot me? How were you able to shoot me?”

“Bolts tipped with angel's blood,” Becka says smugly. “Not standard-issue Vault weaponry, but this rogue knows a few tricks.”

Freddie's hold on me drops once more. I race across the room toward Lily, stepping over the circle and reaching her bed.

“Fuck,” Lily breathes, and then she throws herself back onto the sheets, her eyes fluttering shut once more.

I touch her forehead. *She's okay. She's alive.*

“That bolt won't hold him forever.” Brooks appears at my side. He clasps one of Lily's hands and shakes her roughly. “Wake up, Lily. We have to get out of here.”

“Please, Daisy.”

“No, don't wake her.” Becka tries to pull Brooks off, but he just shrugs her aside. “She's—”

*CRASH.*

The door to the suite splinters into pieces, and the pieces catch fire as a figure strides through them.

A figure wearing a familiar designer suit and a smug expression.

Levi tilts one of his perfect eyebrows. “You rang for me, princess?”



## THIRTY-ONE: BROOKS



“*You.*” Freddie glares at Levi as he struggles harder to free himself from Lily’s bolt. “Leviathan. I don’t know what you’re doing here, but this is my turf. Get your own souls. These ones are mine.”

So Levi truly is a demon. And his name is Leviathan? It doesn’t sound as if he’s working with Freddie.

That’s potentially useful to know, if we aren’t all about to die.

“Looks like you got more than you bargained for, Mephistopheles.” Levi smirks, folding his arms.

A thin, whipping tail sneaks around his body from the back of his designer jeans, curling through the air like a snake. I still hate the guy, but in that moment, I kind of admire Levi, the way he’s surveying the room as if nothing is amiss, as if Lily isn’t passed out in bed and Freddie isn’t pinned to the wall by a bolt.

So now we have two demons. So we’re twice as dead. Goody.

But then Levi lunges at Freddie just as Freddie tears himself off the wall, and they crash together.

Fire blazes around them as they swing at each other. Levi draws a sword out of thin fucking air and flings himself at Freddie, who manages to dodge the blow at lightning speed.

Fuck. It looks like our two demons have an ax to grind with each other.

And now Freddie is literally holding an ax. He swings it at Levi, who ducks and grabs Freddie behind the shoulders.

Becka races out of the way as the pair of them crash into the TV. Jackson and I throw ourselves over Lily as glass sprays across the room.

Quick as I can, I gather Lily's limp body into my arms. I eye the door, but I have to get between the two demons to make it.

Jackson sees what I'm thinking. He grabs the crossbow that Lily has dropped on the bed and loads another bolt. "I'll put another one in Freddie, and you make a run for it. I'll cover you. Go to the Vault. They'll know what to do."

"Unlikely," Levi grunts out as he blocks an ax blow with his sword.

Jackson raises the crossbow. He wasn't on the archery team like Lily, and I doubt he's ever shot one before, but we're close quarters. It's pretty tough to miss. The only problem is that Levi and Freddie are locked together. He can't get a good shot without risking hitting Levi.

Not that I wouldn't mind if the prick took an angel blood-tipped bolt between the eyes, but right now, he is providing us with a chance to escape.

In my arms, Lily whimpers. Her eyes flutter open briefly. "Don't..." she whispers, but as I lean closer, she slips off again.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," Levi says to the other demon, his voice almost singsong.

I look up from Lily. Things have gotten bad. Freddie has disarmed Levi and holds the ax up to his neck.

He grins as he drags the tip over Levi's bare skin, raising a trail of blood that burns a fiery red. "Oh yes? And why not?"

Levi lifts his arm, rolling up the sleeve of his designer shirt to reveal a tattoo of a serpent coiling around his arm. The serpent glows red briefly before fading back into Levi's skin.

Freddie's eyes bug out of his head. "You're not."

"I am." Levi nods toward Lily in my arms. "She is."

Freddie lets out a stream of words in a language I don't understand that can only be curses. To my surprise, he steps back and drops the ax.

"The other three don't belong to *her*," Freddie spits out. "You know the rules. I can collect as many souls as I see fit until I am paid. If you and your princess want to walk out of here, they're my price."

"Deal," Levi says instantly. "Eldest Bellua, give her to me. You and your brothers' lives are forfeit."

Jackson looks at me, his eyes wide with panic. He has no idea what the fuck to do now. He wants me to come up with the plan, the way I always do.

Well, I have no plan to get out of this. That demon is going to take our souls and then keep taking souls from this hotel until the owner comes back to clear his debt—

"I know you'll appreciate the chance to die on the job, as your parents did," Levi finishes, with a meaningful look.

Wait a minute. Back up the fucking demon train. What did he just say?

"Give her up to my friend here, Bellua." Freddie snaps his fingers. "Chop, chop. I'm a busy demon. Places to go, souls to take. You're a little early for my next ultimatum, but that's fine. I can work with that. After you, I count down to six days, then six hours, and then six minutes, and this hotel will turn into a bloodbath."

"Brooks." Jackson's voice wavers.

And suddenly, I know exactly what I have to do.

I place the still-sleeping Lily on the bed, though the second her back hits the mattress, she begins to rouse.

Then I step out of the demon circle.

“You take souls in exchange for the hotel owner’s debt not being paid? Well, I hereby take on the owner’s debt.” I lock eyes with the demon so I don’t have to look at anyone else. Especially not Lily. “The others go free, and you can have my soul, and the debt is cleared.”

## THIRTY-TWO: LILY



“Brooks, no!”

I don't know if I say the words or only think them. Becca's drugs have done a number on me. All the commotion in the room is keeping me conscious (barely), but my body and my lips don't work. All I can do is lie here, immobile, and watch as Brooks moves toward Freddie to make a bargain for his soul.

He can't do this.

But I can see on his face that he's determined. He's the same Brooks I've loved my whole life, the big brother, the protector. I've always known that he'd give up everything to look after his brothers and me. But I never thought he'd have to give up his soul.

“Do we have a deal?” Brooks offers Freddie his hand.

“Don't be a fool, Brooks!” Jackson cries. “We'll find another way. We always do.”

“Not this time.” Brooks won't turn around. He extends his hand, palm facing Freddie.

The demon's face twists into a brilliant smile.

“Do something!” Jackson yells at Levi.

He shrugs. “It’s his soul to give.”

I don’t accept this. I try to lunge for Brooks, but my body won’t work properly. I manage to roll off the bed and flop on the floor like a dead fish.

Brooks doesn’t even look at me as his fingers brush Freddie’s. Freddie opens his mouth wide, his lips stretching toward Brooks’s forehead to take his soul and leave him a hollowed husk—

“Wait,” I yell.

I manage to actually yell it.

Everyone in the room looks at me. Freddie freezes a mere inch from Brooks. His face flashes with curiosity and... Is that fear?

Why is he afraid of me?

I think about the conversation between Levi and Freddie. The way Freddie looked at me after Levi stopped him with his tattoo. I don’t know what’s going on, but Freddie doesn’t know that.

I take a deep breath. Time to bluff with a demon.

“You don’t want Brooks,” I say. “He’s a righteous, argumentative prick. His soul won’t taste as sweet as the one you really want—the one who made the bargain. So I offer you something different. We are the best monster hunters in the fucking world. We will find the owner, and we will bring him to you so he can face justice. While we find him, the killing stops.”

Freddie twists his head, considering.

“You know that a bargain with me is valuable. More valuable than Brooks’s soul,” I say.

It’s a guess, but I’m right because Freddie smiles.

“Well played, princess. You have six months, six days, and six hours to find the owner and bring him back to me, or I will take Brooks’s soul as payment.” Freddie waves his hand.

Flames appear in the air, writing a date. “Do you accept these terms?”

No, I don’t fucking accept. But it’s the best we can do. Brooks will be alive. We will figure the rest out later.

I drag myself over the circle, then I reach up with a shaking hand. Freddie grasps it and shakes vigorously. I cry out as my palm burns. When Freddie finally lets go, I stare at my palm and see he has left a little mark there—a cross. The mark of a crossroads demon.

“Until we meet again, Lily.” Freddie disappears in a circle of flame.

I blink up at Brooks, who rushes over to me and gathers me in his arms.

“I’d do it a hundred times over,” he whispers, holding me close. “A thousand times. I’d give everything I am to see you safe, Lily Dean.”

“All’s well that ends well. I guess I’ll be going.” Levi starts for the door, but Jackson flings himself between him and freedom.

“Yeah, you’re not going anywhere until you explain what the fuck is going on.”

Levi yawns. “I’m a demon. I thought it was obvious.”

“Yes, but how did you get Freddie to not kill you? And why are you here in the first place? And what was that about Lily—”

He’s cut off by a loud scream from outside. It’s followed by several more, and the sound of something dark and wild howling.

“What’s going on?” Brooks whirls around.

“It’s Orion.” Becca places her hand over her mouth in horror. “He’s escaped. He’s in the hotel.”

THIRTY-THREE: ORION'S WOLF



Hungry.

Blood.

Need more.

More.

More.

Run faster. Faster.

“Orion, no!”

Orion? No. No Orion.

Just me.

Blood.

Hungry.

Men.

Threat?

Not threat.

Pack?

So hungry.

“Orion, please! Come back to us. Come back to me.”



Female.

*Mine.*

Must protect.

Must kill.

Hungry.

So hungry.

Threat.

Kill threat.

Attack.

“ORION, STOP!”

Can't move.

Must obey.

Must.

Obey.

## THIRTY-FOUR: LILY



Terror fizzles in my bloodstream as a humongous dark wolf bowls down the door to the hotel suite. Wood splinters, but the monster merely shakes his fur to dislodge wayward shards and then advances, his yellow eyes glowing.

It's hard to think of this creature as Orion. Orion—my Orion—is kind and soft-spoken. The peacekeeper. He isn't as quick to smile as Jackson, but when his lips do quirk upwards, the entire world fades away. All you want to do is stare at him.

The wolf's large, distorted head swivels from side to side, assessing the room and everyone in it, before it stops on Levi. A low growl rumbles through his throat.

*No.*

Orion's strong and fast in this form, but he's no match for a demon. If Levi and Orion were to go head-to-head, I have no doubt who'd win.

And it wouldn't be my gentle artist.

“Orion, no!” I scream before I can stop myself.

My cry draws the wolf's head in my direction. Blood is smeared across his muzzle, a stain of red on coarse black fur.

“Lily, step away. Slowly.” Brooks’s voice is soft, and he positions himself so he’s standing directly in front of me. His gaze never strays from his younger brother. “Jackson, see if you can move around him. I have a vial of serum in my jacket. Toss it to me.”

Orion bares his teeth, saliva dripping onto the floor. Levi’s apparently been forgotten, replaced by this new threat.

The wolf begins to advance on the oldest Bellua brother. The fur on his back stands at attention.

Jackson tries to move along the wall to where Brooks tossed his jacket on the loveseat. But the moment he makes a move, Orion’s gaze flicks around, and he snarls at his twin. The sound makes my knees shake.

I’m wide awake now.

Jackson tries to go for the serum again, but Orion’s claws swipe the air in front of him, sending him reeling. He’s not going to let his brother get to that jacket.

Brooks shakes his head at Jackson, and I can see him frantically searching for another way out of this.

“Lily,” Brooks hisses out of the corner of his mouth. “When he goes for me, you need to run for the door. Don’t look back. You got that?”

“Nope.” I grip his arm as hard as I can with my weary limbs. “You’re not sacrificing yourself twice in one day.”

I reach for my crossbow. I don’t want to hurt Orion, but maybe if I can get him in the leg, he’ll be trapped long enough for us to escape. But Orion will move faster than I can raise the bow to fire. If I can have a distraction...

As my fingers graze the weapon’s stock, I flick my gaze to Levi instinctively. I don’t know why. Logically, I know the demon won’t help us, but I’m also keenly aware that he’s the only one who *can*.

But Levi only looks amused as he volleys his gaze between the wolf and the hunter, as if he’s witnessing an exciting tennis match. His strong arms are crossed over his

chest, and he's leaning against the wall with an almost indolent aura that makes me want to punch him.

Later.

I'll punch him later. If we make it out of this alive.

"Orion, please! Come back to us. Come back to *me*." I don't care that I'm begging an animal. I don't care that it's been proven not a hint of the human remains when the werewolf takes over.

I don't care, because if Orion doesn't back away, then it'll turn into a bloodbath. Brooks would never lift a hand against his brother, even in this form, and I'm not sure I'll be able to either, even if I can pull the crossbow up in time.

My fingers tighten around the stock.

I can't watch Brooks get ripped apart by his younger brother. I *can't*.

Orion pounces.

Just as I swing the bow up, a foreign sensation explodes inside of me. I've never felt anything like it before, but it's bright and airy and all-consuming. It feels like a ball of pure, unfettered light, and it's growing and growing inside of my chest like a snowball rolling down a hill. My fingers begin to tingle, and static rushes across my skin.

"ORION, STOP!"

The scream is ripped from deep within my chest, where that strange ball of light resides.

And Orion...stops.

Freezes.

One of his paws is halfway extended, and his lips are pulled away from his razor-sharp canines. His eyes remain fixed on Brooks's face, unblinking. Vacant.

What the hell?

"Orion?" I whimper, terror plundering my defenses.

The wolf begins to shake—desperate rattles that have the floor vibrating underneath me. Jackson and Brooks both rush towards their brother at the same time the wolf falls to the ground. His fur gradually begins to recede, shrinking into his pale skin, and his limbs twist and contort until they're arms and legs.

Soon, a naked, pale, sweaty, unconscious Orion is lying on the ground at our feet.

What the fuck?

What the *fuck*?!

“How is this possible?” Jackson breathes as he falls to his brother's side. His fingers tremble as he holds them against Orion's neck, checking for a pulse.

But I can see the rise and fall of Orion's chest. He's alive.

And human.

How the hell is he human?

Brooks whirls towards me, and I can't quite read the expression on his face. “Lily, what did you do?”

“I...I don't know.”

“Isn't it obvious?” Levi tilts his head to the side, studying me with a keen intensity that steals the breath from my lungs. “She forced Orion to shift back into a human before the night was even over.”

“That's impossible,” Jackson snaps, still kneeling beside his sleeping brother.

“I didn't do anything,” I insist, but my mind can't help but drift to the strange ball of light in my chest.

It's no longer there, but I swear I can feel phantom tingles of it.

What the hell even was that?

“It's impossible,” Levi agrees with a shrug, before adding, “for a human.”

“What are you implying, demon?” Brooks lunges at Levi with a roar of rage, but Levi simply laughs and phases away.

One second, he’s leaning against the wall, and the next, he’s standing directly in front of me.

His fingers brush my chin, the touch feather-light, and I hate the goose bumps that reflexively pop up on my skin. I’ve never been more conscious before of how little clothing I have on. My body remembers how good he made me feel, even as my brain reminds me of all the shit he put me through.

I hate him and want him in equal measure, and that infuriates me.

“I have to return to my employer now, but I’m here to talk whenever you’re ready, my lovely Lily Dean,” Levi tells me softly.

His eyes never leave my face. There’s a vow in his eyes. A promise. But what that promise is, I can’t decipher.

With what appears like great reluctance, Levi drops his hand back to his side. He turns to face Brooks. “And if I were you, I’d begin searching for the hotel owner, pronto. Freddie isn’t known for his patience.”

“What the fuck—” Brooks never gets to finish speaking.

In a flash of fire, Levi disappears.

Though I swear I still feel the weight of his fingers on my chin long after he leaves.

## THIRTY-FIVE: LILY



“That was fucking insane!” Becca forks her fingers through her short blonde hair.

The four of us sit in the second bedroom, having left Orion behind in the honeymoon suite to sleep.

Brooks and Jackson both have tried to meet my eyes more than once since we arrived here, but I can’t look at either of them.

What the hell happened back in the suite?

Somehow, I was able to...force Orion back into his human form. Even saying that in my head makes me scoff.

That’s impossible.

*It’s impossible...for a human.*

Levi’s words echo around and around in my head. My heart hammers against my breastbone.

What was Levi implying?

And who is his employer?

*He’s just trying to get into your head, Lily. You can’t trust a word that lying bastard says.*

There’s a strange ringing sensation between my ears. It almost sounds like the high-pitched whistle of a train. I begin

to fiddle with the oversized T-shirt I threw over my head. I think it belongs to Brooks. His scent surrounds me.

“I did some quick research, and it appears as if the owner of the hotel is some old dude named Joel Clemmon.” Becca’s voice drags my attention back to the conversation at hand.

She has flipped her iPad to show us a picture of an older gentleman with receding brown hair, a pudgy face, and glassy eyes.

I can think about Levi and everything he implied *after* I find this Joel Clemmon and force him to hand over his soul. I refuse to allow Brooks to pay the price for another man’s sins.

Fear for Brooks strangles my airways.

What if we can’t find Joel in time?

What if Freddie steals Brooks’s soul?

What if Freddie doesn’t hold up his end of the deal and starts killing people again?

What if...

What if...

What if...

“I was able to access the police database, and according to this, a man matching Joel’s description by the name of Pedro Murphy received a parking ticket a few days ago in the town of Rosemont, Connecticut.” Jackson types something into his laptop, his eyes scanning the screen quickly.

He’s not as skilled as Orion with computers, but I imagine any member of the Vault would know how to look up police reports, track faces, and create fake identifications.

“Rosemont?” Brooks’s lips tighten. “Why does that name sound so familiar?”

“Maybe because over fifty witches were burned at the stake there in the 1600s,” Becca supplies. “It’s rumored that their ghosts haunt the town to this day.”



“Couldn’t Joel have hidden out in Hawaii or something?” Jackson grumbles, and I can’t help but agree with him.

Of course Joel would choose one of the most haunted towns in the United States as his hideout.

Of fucking course.

But we don’t have a choice. We need to find Joel before the deadline expires, or Brooks will pay the price.

So we’ll travel to this Rosemont, deal with the angry witch ghosts, find the hotel owner, and then send him kicking and screaming back to Freddie.

And maybe, just maybe, while I’m there, I’ll find answers about my parents. About what I did to Orion. About Levi.

Rosemont, Connecticut, here we come.

TO BE CONTINUED.

Go back to the fateful prom night that changed Lily and the boys forever in the prequel, *Bad Moon Rising*.

<http://books2read.com/badmoonrising>

## EXCERPT

### BAD MOON RISING

Blood and leather seats do *not* go together.

I grit my teeth as I turn my 67 Mustang GT off the highway. With every mile I cover, I can practically *feel* the blood working its way into the fibers of my beloved car. I don't have time to stop at a garage and attempt to salvage the leather. I haven't even changed my bloody clothes. I don't have time to stop, not even for a few minutes.

At least the wanton defilement of my precious car gives me something to think about that's not where I'm going and what I have to do when I get there.

I swore when I left Haddenwood that I wouldn't come back, I wouldn't drag them into this world. And yet, here I am, passing that dented WELCOME TO HADDENWOOD sign, tearing along Main Street with its quaint tourist shops and artisanal distilleries, turning left at the giant turkey sign that points to Jackson's Farm, and skirting around the corner into Elm Tree Lane.

The tall trees that line both sides of the wide street loom over me, their branches knotted together in an intimate embrace. I swipe my hand over my face to shove my blonde hair out of my eyes, but all that succeeds in doing is smearing blood across my face.

I pass the bent elm on the corner where my mom and I once built a hollow to trap boggarts and the path down to the creek where my brothers pretended to slay sirens, and there it

is—a rambling, white house with roses climbing all over it. It stands in shadow under the pale light of the waning moon. No one's home. Good.

It's not my house. Mine's the one next door with the peeling paint and the broken porch swing and the basement stocked with weapons and occult books. But the rose house is more my home than my own house ever was.

I turn into our drive and yank on the handbrake. The Mustang shudders to a stop, groaning her displeasure at the tough drive I put her through. I wish I could put her in the garage, out of the weather, but I'm guessing my brothers wouldn't have cleared out my parents' junk, so I don't want my precious baby anywhere near that disaster zone.

I must've broken several speed limits getting here, but even I'm not as fast as a werewolf.

She's already in Haddenwood, biding her time until the next full moon. This means that I'll need every second if I hope to lay a trap for her.

I slam the car door, wincing as I catch a glimpse of the stained seat through the window. There are very few things in this world I care about. My brothers fall firmly into that category, as does the occupant of the rose house next door. But near the top of that list? My precious Mustang—it took me an age to save the money for her when I was sixteen, but from the moment I saw that classic profile in Highland Green, like Steve McQueen's car in the movie *Bullitt* (although his was a 68) at the local car yard, I knew she was mine. I swear if I could, I'd marry this rustbucket and run away into the night with her. And now she's hurt.

Fuck werewolves—such animals.

The porch is crowded with old bike parts, a rusting pram that once contained a seriously haunted doll, and some leftover steel piping from when my mom needed a cage to trap a black shuck. I kick my way through all the crap and hammer my fist on the door. "It's me. Open up!"

Please be home. *Please.*

The door flies open. One of the twins stands on the rug in a basketball jersey, his blue eyes twinkling with barely suppressed mirth.

“Well, if it isn’t old Grumpyface Mc-Cellphone-Doesn’t-Work.”

It’s Jackson. That much is obvious from his smirk and his stupid nickname for me. But he’s nothing like the scrappy sixteen-year-old I left behind. There’s a line of dark stubble on his chin, and his shoulders have filled out. I thought the twins would be skinny, gangly kids forever, but even though I’m five years older, Jackson’s getting almost as broad as I am. He’d make an excellent hunter.

*But he’s not going to be a hunter, I remind myself. I left so that he can be whoever he wants to be.*

Jackson’s usual smart-ass expression wavers when he sees the blood all over me.

“What the fuck happened to your face?”

“Werewolf.”

Jackson steps aside and holds the door open. I stagger into the living room, beyond caring about the bloodstains I’m tracking on the carpet. I collapse into the nearest chair. Dad’s old chair.

“Orion, get your loser ass down here,” Jackson yells. I can hear goth music playing upstairs. It shuts off and an identical, dark-haired teen appears in the shadows of the staircase.

Orion lifts his head, but I can barely meet his gaze from beneath a curtain of dark hair. The twins got that dark, wavy hair from Mom. Dad and I are the blonds with the pretty-boy good looks. It might explain why I always have chicks hanging off me but last time I saw them, the twins barely talked to girls.

Well, that...and Orion’s sparkling personality.

Jackson returns from the kitchen with a glass of water. I knock it from his hand and reach for the bottle of chocolate syrup Dad kept in the hidden drawer in the side table. When a

human has a close encounter with a monster or spirit, drinking or eating something sweet helps to counteract the effects of their magic. I'm not sure if this is scientifically accurate or just one of Dad's insane remedies, but it seems to work for us. And considering the fact I'm about to head back out to hunt this werewolf son-of-a-bitch and that I refuse to drink and drive, a sugar rush it is.

"A wolf didn't bite you?" Jackson peers at me skeptically. "Why are you here?"

"This blood's not mine." I squeeze my eyes shut. I want to keep them out of this as long as possible. That's why I left them in Haddenwood. But if I'm right, I'm going to need their help if we have any hope of stopping this thing. "We have a problem."

"Damn right we have a problem," Jackson snaps. "You leave without saying goodbye, and we don't hear from you for *two years*, then you show up at the door covered in blood."

Orion doesn't say a word. He stares at his shoes.

"I had to leave," I growl. "This is my *job*. There are too few hunters out there for all the monsters and demons that roam this earth. If I don't do this, innocent people get killed."

*And I don't want you to be two of them.*

The twins exchange one of their looks. They can have an entire conversation without uttering a word.

"Don't fucking say it." My gut twists.

"We haven't said anything," they protest together. Orion moves into the room and throws himself down on the farthest chair from Dad's. He wears Mom's amulet on a leather strap around his neck, and he nervously fiddles with it.

"No, but you're *thinking* it."

Jackson and Orion exchange another one of their *twin looks*. A thousand words are spoken between them without a single sound actually leaving their lips. It used to drive me insane when they did that—and to be completely honest, made

me a little jealous—but now, I’m happy they have that bond with one another, especially given Orion’s anxiety.

Orion licks his upper lip and immediately diverts his attention to his black-painted nails while Jackson sits upright, a determined expression etched across his face.

“You should have taken us with you,” he says, his tone scathing. “We’re just as good at hunting as you are. You weren’t the only one who trained for this life.”

“I told you not to say it. One hunter in this family is more than enough. I’ve already had to bury Mom and Dad. I’m not burying you, too. You’re finishing high school and going to college. That’s what they would have wanted for you. End of discussion.”

I don’t want to leave them. I don’t want to do this alone. But what I do out there—the things I have to do—it’s all because of them. Because I want them to live in a world where they don’t have to be afraid of the monsters under their beds. Because I don’t want them to have to grow up too fast, like me.

I did tell a lie, though. Our parents would roll in their graves if they knew I was stopping Orion and Jackson from hunting. They would...if I hadn’t doused their bones in holy water and salt before burning everything to ash. It’s the only true way to put spirits who’ve seen so much evil at rest.

Jackson picks up the bottle of syrup and doodles a pentagram on the back of his hand. He licks it off, smacking his lips. Orion continues to stare at his shoes, that curtain of hair hiding him from my gaze. He’s always been like this around me, not wanting to reveal himself. I think that after Mom and Dad died, he didn’t trust me not to leave him, too.

*And I went and proved him right.*

“Why don’t you start by telling us about the blood,” Jackson says. He drops a bottle of whisky on the table next to the syrup.

“I’ve been in Oakland Heights, chasing down a werewolf that’s been doing some serious damage along the east coast.” I

shove the bottle away. Jackson grins as he grabs it and takes a deep swig. Yup, my kid brother is all grown up now. “I had a couple of false starts, but I was finally certain of his identity.”

The annoying thing about werewolves is that you can’t tell one just by looking at it. Demons, revenants, ghosts, vampires—they all have subtle tells that an experienced hunter can identify. Demons usually have some sort of indication they’re a part of the primordial realm, whether that be horns sprouting from their head, pitch-black eyes, or ghastly pale skin. There’s just something otherworldly about them. Revenants barely ever actually resemble a human. Instead, they’re a mess of sinewy limbs, billowing cloaks, and pure red eyes that rest in a face constructed out of nothing but swirling, gray smoke. Ghosts are see-through and go “wooooo”, but they’re mostly harmless. Vampires are the closest things to a human you can find in the supernatural world while still holding monstrous qualities, but even they have subtle tells. Abnormally pale skin. Slightly angular bone structure and square jaws to hold their razor-sharp fangs. And red flecks in their pupils from all that blood they drink.

But most of the time, a werewolf is an ordinary human—albeit with serious strength and an uncanny ability to land on their feet if dropped from a great height. But nothing that means you can look at someone and say, “Yup, he’s a werewolf.” The only way to get a positive ID for your hunt is to wait for a werewolf to go all growly at the full moon.

So that’s what I’d done in Oakland Heights. The problem with this technique is that at the full moon, a werewolf is fucking difficult to kill. A silver bullet will do the trick, but have you ever tried to shoot an eight-foot wolf while it’s charging toward you? Nigh on impossible to get a hit straight to the heart, and if you hit a kidney, all you do is enrage the bastard. That’s why Dad taught us to fight with his all-purpose slayer weapon of choice—silver-tipped stakes.

“He’s just your garden variety fanged pup. I managed to lure him to this abandoned youth hostel on the outskirts of the town, lock him in a bathroom, and stake him through the heart. But not before he bit someone.”

“Who?” Jackson’s eyes widen.

“I don’t know. Some idiot kid who thought hanging around an abandoned youth hostel was a fun way to spend a Saturday night. They ran away as soon as they saw me coming. I think it was a girl, but I can’t even be sure of that. It was dark, and I had blood in my eyes. Anyway, she dropped this.”

I throw a small, rectangular object down on the table.

It’s a Haddenwood community library card.

“Shhhiiiiit.” Jackson picks up the card. “So not only did you let a fresh werewolf get away, but they’re likely in our town right now.”

“I didn’t let her get away,” I growl, feeling slightly indignant. My parents’ motto is that if you didn’t make the kill the second you came face-to-face with the threat, you failed. You can’t hesitate. You can’t let the monster get away. Before you can track it down again, more innocents will be slaughtered. “I was a little preoccupied with maneuvering a stake through her alpha’s ribcage.”

Jackson dares a smirk. “This never would have happened if you had us with you.”

“It’s not under discussion. I’m home because the next full moon is twenty-seven days away. I need to figure out who owns this library card, make sure they’re the wolf, and stake them before they hurt—”

Movement out of the corner of my eye catches my attention. I stare out the window just as the porch light next door clicks on.

There she is. She must’ve been at the library, because she’s juggling a giant stack of books as she fumbles for her keys.

Lily Dean. The scrappy red-haired girl who played the damsel in distress in every one of our childhood games. Not that she was any good at it. My brothers and I would be neck-deep in imaginary demons to protect her, and at the very last minute, she’d break her bonds and wade in to help us bring down the baddies.



And, then, when we were older and our parents put us into training, she insisted on learning things, too. Lily doesn't know that monsters are real, but she saw us doing cool stuff with weapons and grappling, and so of course we had to show her. Kids at school were mean to her sometimes because she was smart and hung out with the weird Bellua boys, and I wanted her to be able to protect herself when we could no longer watch out for her.

Lily Dean. She's all grown up, too.

And damn, she grew up *good*.

That red hair of hers reaches nearly to her ass, and it's the kind of ass men write poetry about. The moonlight catches the flecks of gold on the edges of her dark eyes, and her lips curl up into a secretive smile as she remembers something amusing. Maybe she's thinking about a book she read, or remembering the time we replaced my Dad's herbal tea blend with grass clippings.

As she roots around in her pocket for her keys, I catch a glimpse of something metallic glinting on her wrist.

*She's still wearing my charm.*

I tear my gaze from Lily and turn back to the twins. They see her, too. Jackson's gone stiff, his shit-eating grin frozen on his face. And Orion's hair is out of his eyes now, those green orbs trained on Lily.

"You can't leave us out of this." Jackson doesn't take his gaze off Lily as if she's the only thing who truly matters. "This is our town, too."

I know what he's not saying. If a werewolf is in Haddenwood, then Lily is in danger.

And we won't have that.

Even if it means that every moment I'm here, I risk breaking her heart all over again. I ran away from Haddenwood two years ago because of her. Because the only thing I wanted to do when I stared into those gold-flecked eyes was throw away the life I'm destined for and hold her forever.

She was sixteen then, and she'd just stopped looking like a scrappy kid and started to grow into the kind of girl who gives men like me dark, depraved dreams.

So I left. I tell myself I left to give Jackson and Orion a real life, but the truth is that I see the way they look at her, and I know that one of them will give her what I never can—a chance at a normal life.

Lily deserves that. She deserves *everything*.

And now Jackson and Orion are trying to ruin the plan.

I don't like it. Everything I've done is to keep my brothers out of this world. But I only have twenty-seven days to find my target, and as long as I do the actual staking, the twins will be useful. Jackson can sweet-talk his way into any secret, and Orion's hacking skills will crack the library card's owner in ten seconds flat. With these two helping me, I can have this job done and be out of here before Lily even knows I'm back.

“Fine.” I hold out the bottle to Jackson, trying to ignore the sizzle running down my spine at the thought of seeing Lily Dean again. “You're in. We'll find this wolf and put it down before it hurts anyone we love.”

Want to find out what happens next? Read now: <http://books2read.com/badmoonrising>

Want to find out what happens next? Read now: <http://books2read.com/somekindofmonster2>

# BAD MOON RISING

I'm Lily Dean, and all I want is a normal life.

Prom night is approaching, and I'm trying to build up the courage to ask my two best friends—Jackson and Orion, the dark and mysterious Bellua twins. We grew up next door to each other, and even though the rest of the town thinks they're freaks because their parents were killed during some spooky occult ritual, I love hanging out with them.

But when their older brother Brooks shows up in town with his leather jacket, old Mustang, grumpy attitude, and a trunk full of monster-hunting supplies, my life goes from normal to terrifying in ten seconds flat.

It turns out, monsters are real. And they're coming for me.

Prom night is about to get bloody.

**Bad Moon Rising was originally published in the *Beasts and Beauties* anthology and serves as a prequel to the series.**

***Supernatural* fans will love book 1 in the Some Kind of Monster series—a dark and spicy monster-hunting reverse**

**harem series by bestselling authors Katie May and  
Steffanie Holmes.**

Read now:

<http://books2read.com/badmoonrising>

# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Katie May is a *USA Today* bestselling author of reverse harem romance with strong females and the possessive, devoted men who love them. Join Katie's Facebook group for sneak peeks, giveaways, and bookish shenanigans: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/346631319241776>

Steffanie Holmes is the *USA Today* author of kooky, spooky romance. Join Steffanie's weekly newsletter for your dose of spooky shenanigans, giveaways, sneak peeks, and more: <http://www.steffanieholmes.com/newsletter>