

Zodiac Cove
BOOK FIVE

A
TOUCH
Dazzled

SONIA HARTL

A Touch Dazzled

ZODIAC COVE: BOOK FIVE

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A Short Recap

A Touch Magic: Zodiac Cove Book 1

Audrey and Wes grew up in Zodiac Cove with a legend that stated their island had been formed from the sea by the gods and goddesses of the constellations as a gift for their human lovers. The children born on the island, descendants of the zodiac, were gifted with magic. Until a curse that would sink the island into the sea was unleashed. The descendants trapped the curse within a cave at the center of the island, but they used all their magic to carry out the binding, held within twelve birthstones that framed the cave's entrance. Most of the original descendants left Zodiac Cove after losing their magic. Three hundred years later, an earthquake hit the island, releasing the magic that had trapped the curse. Audrey had been with Wes in the woods after he caught her skinny dipping in his hot spring when the earthquake struck. Wes pushed her out of the way of a falling tree, and their touch ended up activating their magic. Audrey's was water-based weather

manipulation, and Wes's was lightning. Their magic also came with the unexpected side effect of making them super horny.

The curse was also freed from the cave. According to the legend, it had four phases of destruction before it would sink the island. First, it would attack the minds of magic users, then physically attack, then trap them all on the island, then block out the sun, before finally sinking the island. Audrey and Wes were mentally attacked by the curse's smoke and had to learn how to use their magic to combat it. Which wasn't easy. Although Wes was in love with Audrey for over a decade, she used to date his brother. Audrey hated Wes because she overheard him talking shit about her to his brother. Wes thought she hated him because he told his brother to leave the island without her. But they couldn't get the side effects of their magic under control until they learned to trust each other. Slowly, they began to let each other in until they had more control over their magic. Through working together, they figured out there were twelve descendants of the zodiac on the island for the first time since the originals left, which was what triggered the earthquake and the magic being released to their human hosts. They also figured out opposite signs, like themselves (Scorpio and Taurus) had to touch to activate the magic because they worked like a battery, with a positive and negative end jump-starting each other.

When they got to a point of trust with each other that they could reveal everything, Audrey finally understood why Wes had said those things about her to his brother and understood that his brother only asked Audrey out to stick it to Wes

because he knew Wes was crazy about her. They spent the night together and their bond grew more. After they discovered the original descendants had also given up their memories to stop the curse, they began to understand that they weren't meant to trap the curse in the cave again. They were meant to use their magic to destroy it. So they battled the mental attacks. They went up to the cave looking for clues on how to defeat the curse, and through a mental attack, the curse almost convinced Wes to give up his magic, which would've cost them the island. Audrey pulled him back from the mental attack due to the strong bond they now shared and they declared their love for each other. When that happened, their powers combined.

The curse attacked harder and tried to burn down the forest and sent Audrey's grandma's house tumbling into the sea off the cliffs, but Wes and Audrey ended up defeating the curse's attempt to burn down the island. Wes asked Audrey to move in with him and the curse made an appearance on the beach, suggesting it would be targeting Finn (Libra) and Thora (Aries) next.

A Touch Charmed: Zodiac Cove Book 2

Finn went to Thora's parents' house where she'd been staying to tell her they needed to work together to defeat the curse. Thora surprised Finn when he was on a ladder, tapping on her window. He fell and broke his leg. Thora placed her hand over the wound to stop the bleeding and ended up healing his leg with the magic she didn't know she had. She

freaked out and ran from Finn, but he caught up to her easily because he had speed power. It was the first time they'd touched in over seven years. Finn began kissing her when the side effects overwhelmed them both, but pulled back because he knew it was only the magic making her act.

Thora didn't want to accept that she had magic at first, but she grew up with the legend and knew it was true. She was walking through the woods when she was attacked by the curse's snake. Finn found her and they touched, activating their magic. She healed and healed Finn as well. Finn asked her to move in with him for both their protections since the curse was targeting them with physical attacks. She refused. Later that night, her father, the mayor, wanted her to fire Finn from the festival's construction projects. She refused and he kicked her out. She turned up on Finn's door and he was happy for her to move in with him.

They began to test their magic, which fired arrows and wasps at them, but they were easily able to heal. Deciding to try a different tactic, the curse hit them with a mental attack. It made them relive their break up. That's when the truth came out, Thora's father set Finn up to make it look like he ended things with Thora and made it look to Thora like Finn never wanted to contact her again. He also set it up to look like Finn had moved on right away. With the truth out, they got back together. But when they confronted Thora's mom about what her father had done to break them up, it was revealed that Finn's dad had an affair with Thora's mom when Thora was young and that's why Thora's dad hated Finn so much. And

they also discovered that Thora's father wasn't the mayor, but actually the daughter of Dante Everett, who died before she was born.

Thora then knew that Kenna Everett, the owner of the Leo's Den bar, was the Leo and talked to her, learning more about her father and the cousin she never knew she had. The curse continued to attack Finn and Thora with physical attacks, with a big battle taking place on the beach. The curse took on a human-like form named Nirah, a man who had smoke swirling in his eyes and a forked tongue. He morphed into a winged beast that attacked Audrey and nearly killed her, but Thora healed her and Finn ripped its wings off. Wes wanted Finn and Thora to move in with them so they'd be closer to town.

They went back to Finn's house to pack up their stuff and the curse lured Thora into the woods. Nirah revealed himself to her and she discovered he was Ophiuchus's son, a thirteenth descendant, and he was the one who actually cursed the island originally because he was furious with the other descendants. Nirah dragged Thora to the cave and tried to force her to give up her magic, but Finn followed. They battled the beast with the help of golden threads that flowed out of the cave with that and their magic, they nullified the poison the curse had been using to attack, making its deadly power lesser. The cave exploded with the power unleashed from it and the place that had previously been nothing but dead grass grew with life again.

Finn proposed to Thora on the beach and the curse washed a ton of dead fish onto the shore, making it clear that it would be

targeting Donovan and Violet next since Violet could breathe underwater and her magic was connected there.

A Touch Enchanted: Zodiac Cove Book 3

Donovan showed up at Violet's apartment after Finn made it clear to him in Book 2 that he and Violet would be the next targets. She forgave him, but didn't necessarily forget that he'd been avoiding her for weeks. When they touched, the side effects were overwhelming and they pounced on each other. But before they could take it too far, Finn and Thora showed up at Violet's apartment to show them the dead fish that had washed up onshore.

Violet and Donovan agreed that they needed to practice their magic. The curse attacked them multiple times, making it clear that it wanted them to stay out of the ocean. Which made them both think the curse was guarding something in there. It became especially agitated when they got near a cave in the cliff wall. As they continued to practice, they grew closer and Violet began to let go of her inhibitions as she trust Donovan with more of herself. He confessed the reason why he left Zodiac Cove and rejected her eight years previously, because his family needed him to handle business in Europe and he knew she couldn't go with him because her family depended on her. He didn't want to hold her back waiting for him.

They eventually declared their love for each other and combined their powers, being connected body, mind, and spirit. The group that now had magic went into the forest to

check out the cave, battling the curse along the way. That's when they discovered the grave of Ceti, Nirah's other half, and understood there were fourteen descendants. Violet had a dream about her and knew she had died from a fall and Nirah lost his soulmate. She'd also dreamed about the two gates in the cave, one black iron and one golden that matched the threads that had helped Finn and Thora in Book 2. The black gate was lowered, but the golden one remained open, letting water flow through an underground river.

The group deduced that if the golden gate fell, it would cut off the water flowing through the island and they'd be trapped. When the group tried to leave the cave though, they found the exit blocked. The only way out was for Violet and Donovan to attempt to take the river out, since they were the only ones who could breathe underwater, and hope it spit them out somewhere they could get help. The river took them to a cave, the same cave the curse had been trying to keep them away from. On one side of a golden and black grate there was a pool of gold-flecked water, on the other side a giant stone basin that appeared to be trapping the fear and pain of every resident on this island. Nirah was there and told them it was the Well of Rebirth. It was a mix of black and gold, but every time the fear and pain outweighed joy and laughter, more of the gold flickered out. They learned that when the well turned fully black, the island would sink. They also learned that Nirah had to willingly walk into the gold-flecked pool on the other side of the well in order to die and take the curse with him.

They fought Nirah and tried to push him into the water, but he had to go willingly and the curse would never let him. They eventually escaped the cave when Nirah turned to the beast and fought off the sharks and eels populating the water. In order to get back to the cave, they needed a pair with offensive magic to help them battle their way through the forest again. Violet convinced Kenna to work with Galen to save everyone else. They freed everyone from the cave, but weren't able to stop the golden gate from lowering all the way, trapping everyone on the island. In the end, Violet had another dream and woke up telling Donovan that an invisible fire could stop the curse from blocking out the sun, suggesting Kenna and Galen would be the next targets.

A Touch Bewitched: Zodiac Cove Book 4

Kenna is walking down the empty streets of Zodiac Cove when she runs into Galen. Even though she knows she has to work with him, they bicker, but when they overwhelming feeling of being trapped on the island hits her, she has a panic attack. Galen is calm and helpful and she ends up going back to his cottage so they can practice. There they accidentally bump into each other, which sets off the side effects. Galen gets them outside while kissing and grinding against her and pushes her wrists to the ground so her fire won't burn his house down. Embarrassed by the whole incident, Kenna leaves.

A riot breaks out at the grocery store, as people in town turn on each other under Nirah's influence. Galen saves Kenna and

this surprises her. Galen knows he needs to work with Kenna, even though he really doesn't like or trust her, thinking she encouraged her boyfriend to jump after he saw her naked in the library back when they were in high school. Kenna clears up the truth with him and they form a tentative truce. Galen has PTSD and trust issues from watching his abusive father die, and is reluctant to open up to Kenna about it, which makes practicing their magic difficult.

The curse attacks Kenna multiple times when she's with Galen, whenever it appears they are getting closer to trusting each other and getting a grip on their powers. On one attack, Kenna accidentally hits Galen with her fire while he's invisible, but instead of burning him, his body absorbs the fire and he becomes a burning man. The curse backs away from him in fear. Kenna and Galen begin testing what Galen can do when he's filled with Kenna's fire, and it turns out he can suck in the curse's smoke and burn it to ash. They clear the forest of smoke.

In town, a riot breaks out at the grocery store as the curse once again tries to possess people in town. But by this time, Kenna and Galen have fully opened up to each other and admitted their love, combining their powers. They stop the curse from possessing people, but still haven't figured out what to do to save the sun that is coming out less and less every day. They make the trip up to the cave with everyone and find that Ceti's half of the gate is turning black. They try to stop it using everyone's powers pushed into theirs, but it's too late. The sun goes out. They discover they have a month

left at most before the island sinks. Worried for everyone's safety now that the curse has picked up steam, Wes suggests moving everyone into the hotel. The book ends with the curse knocking out a lamp, suggesting it will be blocking out all the light on the island next.

Content Warnings

Violence

Body horror

Near death by wasp stings

Nonconsensual filming during sex, told in flashbacks, not
shown

Dedication

For all the grumps who would crawl for their sunshines

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CHAPTER 1

Brooke

I needed sunshine like I needed air. It had only been two days, but I already felt like I was suffocating. The walls of my hotel room pressed in on me, so different from my light and airy cottage with tons of acreage, bright flowers spilling out of every available pot, and the heady scent of earth and rainwater.

The Zodiac Hotel was fine for tourists. Fine for a night or two.

Not fine for someone who spent most of their time outdoors.

I tried making my room feel a little more like home by tacking colorful scarves and long silver necklaces to the walls, but nothing could remove that feeling of temporary from the space. As if it wasn't meant to be occupied for longer than a week at most. And as someone who had spent the majority of my life desperate to find and set down roots, it was the temporary that pressed in on me more than anything else.

I needed to get outside. To breathe in the ocean air. To remember what we were fighting for.

Or what everyone else was fighting for, since I was paired with the most stubborn ass on the island, who hadn't done a damned thing to stop this curse.

We'd been stuck at this hotel for two days—a safety measure Wes had insisted on that I didn't entirely disagree with—and I'd seen Cole once. He made it a point to get down to the dining room before everyone else and take his lunch and dinner to his room.

The one time we ran into each other in the hall, he took great pains to walk around me without letting a stitch of our clothing touch, lest his dick get hard for an actual woman instead of spreadsheets and bank statements.

At least he knew what his powers were. He never even gave me the chance to figure out mine. Because he was a Capital A Asshole.

I paced in my room, becoming more and more restless with each passing minute. Wes didn't want any of us to go outside without a partner. Well, too damn bad. I'd had about enough of doing everything on the Lathams' schedule.

With my decision made, I tiptoed down the hall, feeling like a teenager sneaking out of my mom's apartment, and not a grown adult who could go wherever she wanted, whenever she wanted.

The hinges on the French doors leading out to the beach creaked as I pushed them open. I cringed at the sound as it ping-ponged against the silent walls. It was just after two in the morning, but time was meaningless now. Without the sun, everything had become one long, endless night. I couldn't stand it.

A thick, dark fog surrounded the hotel and covered most of the streets. Ever since we'd lost the sun, people from all over the island had moved in closer to town. Families crowded together in rental cottages or moved into the hotel. A small group still loyal to the mayor camped out on his estate, but his numbers had dwindled significantly since the last incident at Constellations. There was only so much ignoring of the truth people could do when the curse was infecting their loved ones and we were the only ones capable of stopping it.

I used the term "we" loosely, since I hadn't done much beyond mope about what I wasn't doing. I was a Cancer. Discovery, growth, helping people, and being a part of something larger than myself were all in my nature. I couldn't keep denying this part of myself.

My magic was restless.

I couldn't feel it, not without touching Cole, but my intuition told me that something huge, something explosive, was building within me, and if I didn't let it out soon, it would begin to devour me from the inside out.

I shuddered and rubbed my arms against the chilly, sunless air that drifted in from the quiet beach. Closing my eyes, I

took a deep breath and let the damp, earthy scent of night fill my lungs. I missed my home, my plants, and my bees. But when I stood out here and let the gentle lapping of the water against the shore soothe me, I felt a little less alone.

A little more connected to the island where I planted my roots six years ago.

Ditching my sandals on the wide, white oak veranda, I let my toes sink into the sand, the cool grains grounding me in a way the thin carpet in my room never could. A dark, swirling mist hovered around my ankles and I kicked it away. Not today, Satan.

I rarely got to be outside by myself anymore. If the curse wanted to take a swing at me, it would have to try again some other time. This moment belonged to me.

The mist continued to circle as I walked toward the water, hovering near the ground and leaving the sky wide open. Inky tendrils of the blackest smoke curled toward me, but backed away just shy of touching. It was testing me. Seeing if I would give in to the fear it fed on. But the scent of salt and brine, the light breeze that tickled my honey-colored curls, and the endless number of stars had a stronger hold on me. Fear had no room to compete.

I raised my hands over my head, laughing as I twirled in a circle, taking joy in the simple beauty of nature and all she provided.

The moon was full and bright, bathing the beach in a silvery glow. Not as nourishing to my soul as the sun, but light was

light. I'd take what I could get right now.

A soft melody stirred in the air. "Help him."

The voice was faint, like a breathless whisper. Moonlight rippled along the sand, sending the inky tendrils scattering. Whatever that voice was, the curse didn't like it.

Which meant I immediately trusted it.

"Help who?" I didn't dare raise my voice, in case I scared away the melody that offered me a sense of comfort I hadn't felt since I'd last slept in my own bed.

"Help him." The voice was fainter this time, as if it was fading, taking the hauntingly beautiful melody with it. Panic set in as I scrambled to figure out what she wanted me to do.

"Please." I spun around, looking for any signs of life, but I was completely alone. "I don't know who you mean. Who am I supposed to help?"

The moonlight rippled again, sending a thick wall of the curse's smoke scattering. Near the water, a lone figure stood with his head tipped back and his hands in his pockets. His broad shoulders stretched the material of his dress shirt nearly to the breaking point.

I only knew of one guy pompous enough to wear business attire to the beach.

I rolled my eyes and prepared to turn around. I'd rather help one of the eels that used to populate the waters than lift a finger for Cole Latham.

The gorgeous melody came to a screeching halt, like the sharp end of a violin bow being dragged across out-of-tune strings. A bright burst of white light blinded me as the once-soft voice now screamed in my ears. “Help him.”

“Okay, okay. Geez.” I rubbed my eyes and blinked away the stars that dotted my vision. “I doubt he’ll want anything from me, so don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

The voice, the melody, the bright light all disappeared. Even the lingering wisps from the curse’s smoke went underground. Leaving just me and Cole on the beach. Alone.

I gulped and slowly approached him, dragging the pads of my feet along the rough sand, which made my toes tingle. The moonlight provided enough light to give me a clear view of his profile. Strong jaw, clean-shaven, piercing chocolate brown eyes, and a straight nose. The kind of face fit for dark gray, broody cologne ads in glossy magazines.

The tallest of the Latham brothers, he came in at just over six four, with hard biceps straining against the light blue material of his shirt. His rolled-up sleeves gave me an eyeful of forearm porn. And he had a tight, round ass perfectly outlined in charcoal gray suit pants. Cole Latham was a goddamned work of art.

It was a real shame about his personality.

This must’ve been how Hansel and Gretel felt when they found a house made of candy, only to discover a cannibalistic witch inside.

“You stalking me, sunshine?” The deep rumble of his voice made me jump. Like a large freight train coming down the tracks, I should’ve felt the vibration under my feet before he opened his mouth. “I can hear you jangling from a hundred yards away. Not exactly stealth.”

I crossed my arms and huffed out a reluctant laugh when my silver bracelets clinked together. The tiny charms on my anklet tinkled with every step forward I took. Maybe he had a point, even if he had a gruff way of expressing it.

“Sunshine?” I stepped up beside him and mimicked his pose with my legs spread, hands on my hips, and a stern expression on my face that felt more like cosplay than anything else. “Are we on nickname terms now, Latham?”

This was the closest I’d stood to him without him running away since the night he agreed to touch me for the first time at the town hall meeting. Under the sea-scented air, I caught a light whiff of cedar and leather. It reminded me of bare-knuckle fighting and drinking expensive whiskey in wood-paneled rooms. Man-cave type stuff that I usually found boorish, but that suited Cole.

The top of his full lip curled as he stared down at me. “Don’t take it as a compliment. It’s what I call all the women whose names I can’t bother to remember.”

Ooh. Score one for this dickface.

While any other night this would’ve been the point where I’d called it quits, it was long past time for me to push back. If he intended to drive me away so he could keep being his

cranky loner self, he had another thing coming. I was done operating on his terms.

I faced him and tipped my chin up, unintimidated by his stony gaze. “I don’t think that’s true at all. Not only do I think you know my name, I think you say it. Often. Especially when you’re alone at night, stroking yourself to completion.”

A muscle ticked in his jaw, and I gave him a satisfied smirk. Maybe I wasn’t that far off after all. The thought sent an unexpected flood of heat to my core. I hadn’t forgotten what it felt like to hold his hand at the last town hall meeting, and from the burning intensity in his gaze, he hadn’t forgotten either.

“You kiss your mother with that mouth?” His gaze dropped to my lips.

I wet them with the tip of my tongue and his pupils flared. “I don’t kiss my mother at all. She lives in Arizona.”

He grunted and turned his gaze back to the water. Cutting off the tension that hummed between us like a live wire. I pressed a hand to my stomach. This was too much. Cole was too much. I was a nice person with a simple life and I liked it that way.

I didn’t need... complications. Hot, intense, grumpy complications.

I turned my gaze downward and a smirk touched my lips. Cole was barefoot. It shouldn’t have made a laugh want to bubble up in my throat. Going barefoot on the beach was a

perfectly normal thing, but I really had expected him to be down here in the shiny shoes that cost more than my house. Yet, here he was. Looking like a normal guy for once.

And it didn't suit him at all.

The laugh got caught in my nose and I snorted, which only made my cheeks shake harder. He turned his gaze back on me, his expression bored. "What's so funny?"

"You're..." I held a fist to my mouth, trying to keep back the laugh. "You're barefoot."

He quirked an eyebrow. "Did you smoke something before you came down here?"

"No. It's just..." I gestured at his feet, not bothering to hide the laughter I could no longer conceal if I tried. "You look approachable. Normal even. It's so weird, like seeing a horse walking around on its hind legs."

He shook his head. "I think you might be a touch deranged, sunshine."

"Come on. You have to see the humor in this from my perspective." I laid a casual hand on his arm, and suddenly, neither of us were laughing anymore.

My palm sparked with a cherry-red glow, while a darker, blood-red light poured from his palm. Our breathing intensified as we held each other's gaze, daring the other to make the first move. My magic surged within me, bouncing around with the ferocity of a summer storm, warm and hard

with just an edge of brutality. The cost of keeping it cooped up for so long.

Before either of us could do more than stare, though, a thick length of seaweed whipped out of the water and wrapped around Cole's ankle. I let out a scream as it went taut, knocking him to the ground and dragging him toward the water.

Without thinking, I flung myself on top of him. Like that would do anything. A second rope of seaweed launched out of the water and wrapped us together as it pulled us through the sand with the force of a crane.

My nails dug into the wet sand, cutting grooves into the mostly undisturbed beach. A trail leading toward certain death. I struggled against the seaweed, twisting from side to side as the ropelike stems burned against my arms.

Cole shoved his heels harder into the sand, gritting his teeth. "I can't stop."

No amount of resistance could stop us. The curse wanted us dead, and since neither of us knew how to use our magic, we were at its mercy.

The cool ocean water touched the pads of my feet. Panic clawed at my throat as Cole and I continued to fight against the seaweed that had us bound tight. My long teal skirt stuck to my bare calves. Waves lapped at the half of Cole's body that was submerged beneath me. We had a minute, at most, before we both went under. And neither of us had Violet and Donovan's power.

Cole's hands continued to flare with that dark red light. It pulsed under the water. Why wasn't he using his power? Now was *not* the time to pretend like magic didn't exist.

"Break it," I screamed. "Use your super strength."

"I don't have super strength." His jaw clenched as the seaweed bound us closer together, digging painfully into our skin. We struggled against the black makeshift rope, using what precious breath we had left. Our palms continued to blaze with different shades of red.

"Bullshit." We were so close, I practically spat in his face. "I saw what you did to that chair at the town hall meeting. Quit denying your magic."

"I only have power over metal. That's it."

It was the last thing he said before his face went under. Mine would be next. Briny water kissed my lips. I had a second or two and still no clue what my powers could do. Helplessly, desperately, I pointed my tied palms at the sea floor. I didn't know if it would matter or work or do anything at all, but I had to try. My mystery magic was the only hope we had left.

A burst of something strong and angry surged through me, just as my face went under and I took in a mouthful of salt water. Something was happening, but Cole and I kicked up so much muck from the sea floor, I couldn't see a damned thing. I could feel it, though. The urge to push harder. To grow. To pull something up from the ground and tend to it until it flourished.

A part of me that had always been now mixed with a power I didn't fully understand.

Thick vines, stronger than the black seaweed that dragged us to our imminent death, wrapped around me and Cole. But instead of taking us further out to sea, they dragged us backward. Toward the shore. They were bright green, hearty, and full of life. And they'd grown right out of the sea floor. Right where I'd been directing my magic.

And I knew, as much as nature and plants were a part of me, so were those vines. So was that magic. I had the power to grow things.

I should've known all along.

The seaweed fought against my vines, but the curse was no match for the things I grew with love. It couldn't touch the care and nurture I put into every one of my plants. Even the magic ones.

The ends of the seaweed snapped away. My vines dragged us the rest of the way to shore, but stayed just below the surface, forming a protective barrier against whatever out there wished us harm. The strips of seaweed turned to smoke, blowing away in the soft night air.

Cole coughed a few times, but otherwise looked unharmed. I pressed his cheeks between my hands, my gaze roaming over his perfect face, turning his head from side to side to make sure he didn't have any injuries. He looked okay, but I wasn't a doctor. Finn and Thora would know what to do. I moved to stand up and go get them.

And he clutched my wrists to stop me.

“I’m fine, sunshine.” He cleared his throat, and his faint blush disarmed me. Left me speechless. “Thank you.”

My eyes practically fell out of my head. “You’re? Thanking? Me?”

Did I hit my head on a rock? Was this a hallucination?

His light chuckle rumbled against my chest, and my jaw dropped open. Cole Latham was laughing. Sort of. Not fully. But still. This was so much weirder than seeing his bare feet.

“You did just save my life,” he said. “Do you really think I’m that big of an asshole that I wouldn’t thank you for it?”

“Yes.” Zero hesitation on my part.

“Okay.” He rubbed his hands over his face. “I suppose I deserved that.”

“Are you...?” I brushed back a lock of wet hair from his forehead. “Are you sure you’re okay? You’re acting really strange.”

He groaned. “I’d be better if you’d get your dead weight off me.”

Ah. There was the asshole I’d been looking for. I was so happy to see him acting like himself that I sat up without argument then froze with my hands on his chest. The hard length of him pressed against my center. It felt exactly like what I needed. I didn’t want to move.

“Fuck.” He let out a shaky breath.

“I...” I rubbed myself against him, the thin material of my soaking wet skirt sliding between my folds. The friction felt amazing. “So good.”

“Fucking fuck.” Cole flexed his hips, pushing himself harder against me. “You’ve got two seconds to get off me before I show you just how good I am.”

I leaned down and nipped his bottom lip with my teeth. “I fucking dare you.”

He growled and flipped me over, pressing my back into the wet sand. His lips crashed against mine as he ground his hips against me. I threw my hands around his neck, kissing him with just as much abandon. His tongue pushed into my mouth, demanding, just like the man who controlled it, and a thrill skated up my spine.

I didn’t like him, but I wanted him, and that was good enough for me. For this moment. It had been so long since I’d let anyone touch me like this, and I had a feeling that one well-placed swipe of his finger would set me off.

He gripped my thigh, digging his fingers into my skin possessively. Like I belonged to him and he wanted to make damn sure I knew it. “Fuck. Your skin is so soft.”

His hand trailed higher and stopped when he cupped the bare globe of my ass. I didn’t wear underwear all that often, I found it constricting, but from the way Cole was reacting, I had to guess this was a first for him.

He sat back on his heels. “You came out here bare?” Before I could answer him, he flipped up my skirt and sucked his breath in between his teeth. “Look at this gorgeous pussy.” He rubbed his hands between my thighs and I moaned. “Begging for my mouth.”

“Yes. Please.” I squirmed against the sand, wanting his mouth on me so bad, I ached for it. How did we get here? What was even happening with us?

“Hey.” At the sound of Wes’s voice, our heads snapped up.

Cole flipped my skirt back down, jumping up and pulling me to my feet. He took a careful step away from me and the light from our palms died. Reality came crashing over us. And with it, the realization that I’d almost let Cole Latham eat me out on a public beach.

And the bigger problem? Even when he wasn’t touching me, when I couldn’t blame my magic or the adrenaline rush of fighting for our lives, I still wanted it. Wanted him.

This was a problem.

“What the fuck is going on out here?” Wes stood in front of us with his hands on his hips, taking in our wet clothes and the sand plastered to our bodies.

“None of your fucking business.” Cole pushed past Wes without so much as a backward glance at me and stalked back up the beach to the hotel.

Wes let out a deep sigh, then turned his stern expression on me. “You know it’s not safe out here. Especially without

anyone else. What were you thinking?”

“Shut the fuck up, Wes. You’re not my boss.”

He raised his eyebrows, and with good reason. I sounded a lot more like Cole than myself. But he’d just screwed me out of a perfectly good orgasm, and the closest I’d gotten to making headway with my stubborn partner. I wasn’t in the mood to be charitable.

Pushing past him, I followed Cole up to the hotel.

We weren’t done yet. Not by a long shot.

CHAPTER 2

Cole

I'm a jackass. That had never been up for debate, but I went too far this time. I'd been avoiding the sunshine beekeeper for a reason, but she just kept showing back up. With those big eyes and hope radiating from her...

I let out a shaky breath and thumped my head against my hotel room door. My cock twitched at the memory of her bare pussy, slick and glistening for me. I wanted to taste her so bad, my tongue felt heavy in my mouth.

Too fucking far.

I understood we needed to work together. More so now that the curse had taken a swing at us. I'd walked that beach every day since we moved into the hotel with no issue until she disturbed my peace.

The woman who plagued too many of my thoughts, for far longer than I'd admit to anyone. And I was the only person on this whole fucking island who could dim her smile.

Staying away would've been best for both of us. After we'd gotten trapped on the island, though, I had no choice but to give the magic thing a chance. Wes had been on my last damn nerve, and business had ground to a halt. I didn't have any excuses left.

So I agreed to touch the beekeeper.

And that decision had been depriving me of sleep ever since. Night after night, I'd dream of her soft gray eyes and her mess of dark blonde curls wrapped around my wrist. I'd wake up to the lingering scent of honey and the feel of her creamy thighs wrapped around my neck.

After another fitful attempt at shutting out the dreams that made my dick harder than the oak headboard in my room, I'd done the same thing I'd been doing every night. Taken a walk on the beach to clear my head. Only this time, she'd ended up out there with me.

Which solidified the truth I'd been running from for months. I couldn't keep avoiding the beekeeper. Even if I was the most practical person in my family, I'd grown up with the legend the same as everyone else. It was the entire foundation of my family's business, and what had driven Zodiac Cove's tourism for decades.

According to our history, passed down orally through twelve generations, the gods and goddesses of the constellations created our island as a gift for their human lovers, and they had blessed their descendants with magic. Until Ophiuchus unleashed a curse, which attacked the

original descendants, mentally and physically, before trapping them here and blocking out the sun. Eventually, the curse would've sunk the island into the sea, but the first set of descendants gave up their magic to stop it.

Most of the original descendants left the island after that. We only recently learned it was because they gave up their memories as well as their magic to trap the curse within a cave at the center of the island. They left because they couldn't remember any reasons to stay.

Once the original descendants had given up their powers, the generations who came after them couldn't use magic either—until the night Thora Chase returned to Zodiac Cove, placing twelve direct descendants on the island once again, twelve generations later. The power the twelve of us created just by existing at the same place and time broke the birthstones that had bound the curse to the cave for three hundred years.

But the legend we'd grown up with got a lot of things wrong. Ophiuchus hadn't cast the curse at all, it had been the work of his son, Nirah. There had been fourteen descendants—not twelve, like we'd originally thought—Nirah and Ceti were the other two. Ceti had died tragically before there ever was a curse. And Nirah was being kept alive by the curse he created. Though we still didn't know how or why he'd done it. The only truth to the legend ended up being the order of the attacks.

I could dismiss the smoke lining the streets and the angry outbursts from otherwise calm residents. I could even ignore the still waters of the ocean. But I couldn't deny it had been two straight days of pure night. Or what the legend told us would come next.

I had no idea what I was supposed to do with any of this. Being a rescuer or hero of some sort wasn't in the cards for me. I was never going to be a giver. That's what Evelyn had told me, and for all the things she'd been wrong about, on that count, she'd been dead right. I had a good head for business, but I didn't know shit about how to take care of people. How the fuck was I supposed to save an entire island full of them?

A light tapping on my door had my head shooting straight up. The beekeeper. She didn't even need to say anything. I could feel her. My first clue that I needed to stay the fuck away.

"Cole? Are you still up?" The sweet notes in her voice did something to my insides. Made them coil up tight. Like a snake about to strike.

I didn't want her here. I needed a full day to prepare myself. A day to get my shit together and quit acting like goddamned horny teenager. "What do you want?"

She paused. "Do you want to back that question up and try again? Might I suggest talking to me like a guy who nearly had his face between my legs down at the beach?"

Christ. I thumped my head again. So much for keeping my cock under control. I flung open the door and ushered her

inside before she could reveal anything else at the top of her lungs for this entire wing to hear. “There are kids staying at this hotel, you know.”

“Not my kids.” She waltzed in with her wet teal skirt clinging to her shapely legs. The cool air in the room turned her nipples to hard little peaks poking out from her black tank top. “And it’s after three in the morning, they should be in bed.”

“Time has no meaning anymore.”

She quirked an eyebrow at me. “How metaphysical of you.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose, where I could already feel a pressure headache throbbing against my eyelids. “Why are you here, Brooke?”

That was nicer than “what do you want,” right?

“Ooh, looks like you know my name, after all. I like the way you say it.” She sauntered around my room like she had every right to be there. Running her finger over my dresser, pushing her hand into my pillow, getting a feel for the space in the most literal sense. “Some people might think you sound all gruff and commanding, but I don’t mind a little power play.”

I ground my teeth together. “I think you’re just trying to get a rise out of me.”

“I think I already have.” She gave my cock a pointed look.

I rubbed my hands over my face. Of all the people I could’ve gotten partnered with in this bullshit game of fate, it had to be this woman. The one who drove me out of my

fucking mind with just a handful of words. “Allow me to apologize for my gross behavior on the beach. That’s not like me. I’m an asshole, but I’m not *that* asshole.”

She snorted. It should’ve been disgusting, but somehow it made her even more adorable. And those were the type of intrusive thoughts I’d been having lately that made me want to kick my own ass.

“Relax, Cole. I was there, a fully willing participant.”

“Be that as it may, you have my word that I’ll control myself better in the future.”

“I certainly hope not.” She gave me a bright smile that nearly knocked me back a step. Too bright for someone like me, who’d become accustomed to cold looks from nearly everyone, including my family. “But that’s actually what I came to talk to you about. The future.”

“Okay.” I leaned against the wall with my arms crossed over my chest. The quicker she got on with her reason for being here, the quicker I could get rid of her.

“We need to start working together for real. Food is running low, but I bet I can grow more on command.” She tapped a finger to her lips. “I think I should move into your room.”

“Excuse me?” I choked and beat on my chest to clear my airway. Of all the things I thought she was going to say, that hadn’t even crossed my mind. “I only have one bed.”

“That’s actually perfect.” When I opened my mouth to protest, she held up a hand. “We need to get accustomed to

touching each other without losing control of certain urges, don't you agree? Sharing a bed is the perfect way to do that."

It sounded like pure hell to me. I had a hard enough time keeping my hands to myself around her in public. It was why I spent all my time in my room. Where the fuck was I supposed to escape to now?

"I can see the gears in your head turning, but we'll put a line of pillows between us the first few nights. Build up to it. It'll be fine." She gave me a cheeky grin. "Unless you're scared."

I wasn't scared. I was fucking terrified. But I didn't so much as blink as her gaze roamed my face, as if she was trying to decode me. "I can behave myself if you can, sunshine."

"Great. I'll give you one more night to get me out of your system." She gave me a knowing grin. "Then I'll move my stuff in tomorrow."

She left with the wet fabric of her skirt slapping against her calves. Like she didn't have a care in the world. The things she did to me without even trying...

As soon as the door shut and locked, I pulled out my cock. I almost didn't, only because she practically called me out on it, but the more I thought about her knowing little smirk, her pretty little pussy spread out for me like a feast, and those big gray eyes, I gave in to the throbbing ache and fucked my hand to completion.

But it wouldn't be that easy to get her out of my system.

She had no idea how far under my skin she'd gotten. And I had no idea how much longer I could continue to hide it when we were sharing a bed.

How the fuck had I let her talk me into this arrangement?



It had been two days since I'd seen Brooke. Two days of me waking up alone in my room, hard as fuck. She made a big show about moving in with me, then didn't bother to follow through. Not that I could blame her. I offered her no encouragement whatsoever, continuing to take my meals in my room and avoid the general public. But if hiding from a tiny terror with a brilliant smile and great tits was going to be my life, maybe it wouldn't have been such a bad thing to let the curse swallow me into the ocean.

At least I'd be saving the feisty beekeeper from being stuck with me. She was the type of woman who felt everything, and I was a walking brick wall. And I was comfortable in that role. It distanced me from people who were complicated and wanted things I didn't know how to give.

I'd tried giving once before, and it ended badly.

But while it was better for all involved that she appeared to have given up the ridiculous notion of sharing a room, for some reason, it bothered me that she hadn't tried harder. Even

if I'd give her a week before she was begging my brother to put her up in her own room again.

Which only made me want to seek her out and ask her to stay. It would be exactly what she deserved. Then everyone would finally leave me the fuck alone about my unwillingness to work with my partner. I cleared out a few drawers for her in the dresser and bathroom in preparation, then stood at the center of the room with my hands on my hips.

My hotel room was nice. I had a king-sized bed that had a midnight-blue comforter with constellations sewn into it with silver threads. A Jacuzzi tub, a small alcove with a black glass desk and overhead light for working, and a long, white oak dresser with a flatscreen on top. The midnight-blue leather chair with a constellation accent pillow was more for decoration than comfort. No couch, of course. That would be too easy.

Was there anything else I needed to do to prep for Brooke? I hadn't lived with anyone since I graduated from college ten years ago. I didn't know a damned thing about sharing space.

A knock saved me from overthinking it anymore. I flung open the door, and my nostrils flared at the sight of Brooke wheeling her daisy-printed suitcase into my room with a bright, encouraging smile. What timing.

Instead of telling her that I'd planned to seek her out myself if she hadn't shown up, like an adult, I decided to play it cool. By acting as if I didn't want her here. Like a child.

“I was hoping you’d changed your mind about moving in,” I said.

“I don’t believe that for a second.” She had two potted plants in one arm, both of them having seen better days. “But I’m glad to see you’re finally embracing the idea.”

I crossed my arms and leaned against the wall. “I’d rather live with the eels that used to populate the beach.”

“You’re a dreadful liar.” She slumped her suitcase against the wall and set the browning plants on the dresser. “I hope you don’t mind if Betsy and Charles move in as well.”

“Who are they?” If she had dogs, or God forbid, cats, that would be the end of this arrangement. I didn’t hate animals, but I didn’t want to share a bathroom with them either.

“Betsy.” She gestured to one of the keeled-over plants. “And Charles.” She gestured to the other one. I didn’t know if she was fucking with me or not.

I blinked at her. Slowly. “You named your plants.”

“Why wouldn’t I? They’re living things too.”

A muscle in my jaw twitched, but I refused to show any amusement. It would ruin the bastard image I’d worked so hard to perfect. “They’re dying.”

“Yes. Plants tend to do that without sunlight.” She held out her hand. “Which I think is perfect for our first practice session.”

I ran my teeth over my bottom lip. She wanted me to touch her. While we were alone. In a hotel room. With only one bed. That had Bad Idea written all over it. “I’ll pass.”

“Cole.” She looked up at me with those eyes. The ones that haunted me nightly. How the fuck was I supposed to do this? “You promised you’d try.”

“I think you invented a whole conversation in your head, sunshine. Because I don’t make promises.” The last woman I’d made promises to had broken all the ones she’d already made to someone else. I didn’t do promises anymore.

Her full bottom lip puffed out, and I wanted to take it between my teeth and bite down until she gave me that same breathy moan she had on the beach the other night. “What reason would I have for staying here, if not to try practicing our magic?”

I shook my head to clear my thoughts. She was a nuisance. A pain in the ass. Not at all the type of woman I typically went for. And the only one who’d ever made me feel like I was chasing my own damn ass in a circle. “You’re the one who railroaded your way in.”

“Hmm.” She pulled open one of the drawers I’d cleared out for her and gave me a pointed look. Busted.

“Fine. I figured the sooner you moved in, the sooner you’d run crying to Wes about getting your own room back, and we could forget this whole thing.”

“I gave you an extra day to get over yourself. You should thank me instead of acting like I’m inconveniencing you. In case you forgot, the curse tried pretty damn hard to drown us both the other night. Aren’t you the least bit curious as to why? Don’t you want to figure out what piece we’re supposed to contribute to this puzzle?”

It wasn’t very often that people managed to shame me, but Brooke ended up doing so without even trying. Of course, I was curious, and I hadn’t forgotten that the curse tried to put a permanent end to whatever role we were meant to play.

She’d saved my life. I owed it to her to try.

“All right. But don’t say I didn’t warn you.” I took her hand with a little more force than I’d intended and bright red light burst between us. Mine, a deep burgundy color. Like the shade of fine wine. Hers, a cherry red. Like a child’s lollipop.

“Oh.” Her cheeks went pink as the magic threaded through us.

I had no idea what she was feeling, but this was no walk in the park for me. Flashes of heat and energy coiled inside of me. My cock throbbed so hard I thought I might burst through the seam of my pants. I pushed that magic into her, trying to get rid of it, get myself under some kind of control. She squeezed her thighs together and wet her lips. I almost blew my load in my pants right there. If she didn’t let go soon, it would be seconds before I threw her on the ground and rutted against her like a fucking zoo animal.

“Do what you need to do. Now.” I ground my teeth together as my heart beat wildly and my cock continued to throb in rhythm to the magic pulsing through me, flowing into her.

She reached out a trembling hand and touched the tip of her plant. It burst to life, green leaves unfurling and spilling over onto the floor. The pot tipped over and smashed, and still the plant stretched outward, curling its leaves around her ankles and winding its way up her leg.

“Stop that, Charles.” She let go of my hand and giggled as she pushed on the leaves that were now halfway up her thigh. I’d never been so jealous of a plant in my life. “You haven’t even taken me to dinner yet. This is so forward.”

“Is that what you want? Fancy dinners?” I bit the words out hard enough for her to turn her head and give me a funny look. I sounded like a complete lunatic.

“Usually, a date is customary before letting someone into my pants, yes. But not always.”

“Not always.” I let go of her hand and crossed my arms as I frowned. The light between us died, but the pulses of our mixed magic still slammed against my internals.

“Cole.” Her lips pinched together as she tried to hold back her laugh. “Are you jealous of Charles? Because you should know that we’re just friends.”

I threw my hands in the air. “This is stupid. I’m going outside.”

I grabbed the handle to the door, and it melted into soft mush under my grip. Like it was little more than Silly Putty. The light coming off my palm was completely extinguished, but it looked as though I still had some damage in me. I slammed the door shut, and the bright tinkling of her laughter trailed me down the hall.

I'd spent five minutes in her company and already needed an escape. And the worst part was, I didn't even want to walk away from her. I wanted to go back to that room and not just touch her hand, but take her in my arms and bury myself inside her while I made those gorgeous gray eyes go hazy with lust. But that would never happen.

I was either a joke or an asshole to her. I'd be fooling myself if I believed she could ever see me as anything else without her magic.

I pushed open the French doors that led out to the veranda and a thick black smoke immediately enveloped me. This had been the drill since I'd moved into this place. It stuck close to the hotel, feeding off of whatever emotions were going on inside. All the other times it had cleared up once I got a little further away, but after what had happened the other night with Brooke, I was hesitant to get close to the water again.

So, I stood there, in the dark, being swallowed by yet another layer of darkness that poked and probed at me as I tried to get my shit under control. For all the nights I'd walked out here alone, the curse hadn't yet attempted the mind manipulation.

Maybe because the inside of my head was already a scary enough place.

The door cracked open behind me, and once again, I didn't need to see her to feel her. This connection we had was unexplainable. It went beyond a normal attraction. Even before the earthquake that set off these powers.

If I was honest with myself, I'd have to admit that what I felt for her went all the way back to that day at the May Day parade. When she'd given me a flower and a bright smile and I'd crumpled both with a single squeeze of my hand.

It had been a bad day at the office. I'd just fired someone I thought was a family friend after I found out they'd been skimming off the top for years. My dad let me do it, because I was the bad guy. That was my role.

All I wanted to do was go home, have a cold beer, and stare at the ocean until the waves were the only thing that filled my head. But I had to get through that fucking parade first.

The worst part of living on a tourist island was never being left alone. Not in the summer at least. The island was crawling with people no matter what day of the week. I'd dodged a barrage of sticky-fingered kids and semi-drunk adults, only to get cornered by the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen.

I knew of Brooke, it was a small island, but I'd never been that close to her before. I wasn't the social type. I worked and went home. Occasionally, I'd have dinner in town. But I was struck dumb. I couldn't do anything other than stand there like

a complete idiot while she handed me that flower and smiled at me like I was the only person she could see.

And my own shortcomings pounded into my head. Only an hour before that, a guy who'd taught me how to throw a baseball properly had called me a cold, heartless son-of-a-bitch when he was escorted out of the office that had been his for over thirty years. And I stood there and let him, because he hadn't been lying.

I didn't deserve flowers from beautiful women. I didn't deserve a damned thing at all.

So I watched her face fall as I crumpled that flower right in front of her, until she gave me the same look everyone gives me and I no longer had to worry about wanting things I shouldn't have.

Some people just belonged in the light. I wasn't one of them.

She stepped up beside me and the dark smoke that had wrapped around me scattered. Like she was too bright for it to stand. "I'm sorry."

I peered down at her. So small, she barely came up to my chest, but so lovely. I'd break someone as sweet as this. "What are you sorry for?"

"I shouldn't have laughed. I know this situation isn't easy for you. I know you don't even like me all that much, but—"

"I like you."

Her lips popped open and her eyes widened in surprise. Her expression was comical enough to make my cheek twitch. Maybe I'd said too much, but the fact was, I *did* like Brooke. I liked her a lot. And I was nothing if not honest.

It was possibly one of my worst traits.

She closed her mouth and huffed out a breath. "You do not."

Why did she insist on arguing with me? What could possibly make her think I'd want to lie? "I figured you'd be happy about it. You strike me as a people pleaser."

"God, Cole." She gave me that smile again. The one that felt like it was just for me. And not for the first time, I wished I could go back to May Day and do things differently. "I'm not sure if you're the best or the worst, but I find your candidness refreshing."

"You'd be the only one," I grumbled.

She nudged my arm. "Are we good?"

"We're good."

"If you're open to it, I'd still like to practice."

"Not in the room. Those plants of yours are out of control." I was already shuddering at the dirt I'd have to clean out of the carpet from the first one.

"I agree. Until I learn how to get my powers under control, I fear I'm going to be overgrowing everything." She turned back toward the doors. "I'm just going to get Betsy and Charles and bring them outside. Then we'll get to work."

As soon as she went back inside, the curse's smoke reformed, blanketing me in its heavy darkness. The weight of all the fear and anger it had been able to collect pressed in on me. As if it knew I belonged in the shadows.

And had no business chasing the sun.

CHAPTER 3

Brooke

I brought Betsy and Charles outside and put them in one of the large terracotta pots on the veranda. The flowers I'd planted for the hotel at the beginning of the summer season had long since lost their bloom, but one touch from Cole, and I had them roaring back to life. My magic was so perfectly suited to me, already so entwined in the very core of who I was, I wondered how I'd managed to exist up to this point without it.

The cost though...

I had to admit that I didn't hate Cole's surliness. He was like a grouchy grizzly bear that was fun to poke at and wouldn't eat me. Not in a way I'd hate, anyway.

I didn't know where things stood on the other front. When we touched, he looked at me like he wanted me. I could see it in the tick of his jaw, the hazy heat in his eyes, the bulge in his pants—but as soon as we stopped touching, he froze over again and became all business. He told me he liked me, but I strongly suspected that was more to shock me into silence.

Still. For a moment, it almost felt like Cole wasn't as heartless as he pretended to be. Plus, there was that night we kissed. A man didn't run that hot unless he had a lot of passion locked deep within him. Whatever happened to make him shut down all that passion was a damn tragedy. And not just because he was easy on the eyes. He also had a pretty great sense of humor, even if it was unintentional and mostly at my expense.

If we were going to work together though, really work together and not just shoot off bits of wild magic while trying not to tear each other's clothes off, I'd have to get to the heart of what made Cole Latham tick. What made a man with such a boisterous, loveable family so cold?

What had wounded him so deeply?

I'd seen his face when I joked about him being jealous of a plant. He'd been hurt. He'd probably cut out his own tongue before admitting it, but I was a water sign. Reading people was in my blood. And I was certain Cole Latham had a beating heart beneath that black exterior.

If we were going to do our part in stopping this curse, digging it up had to be my first priority. Which started with practice. With letting the magic that flowed between us speak to each other, learn each other, as we did the same.

I took his hand, and light sparked between us. As soon as the urge to jump on him rose within me, I let go and quickly shut it down.

“Maybe we should get a little farther away from all these windows. The side effects can be...” When he raised an eyebrow, I rubbed my palm over my cotton shorts. “You’re the one who made a big deal about there being kids in this hotel.”

“You’re deeply weird when you’re nervous.”

“It stems from the trauma of forced public speaking in elementary school.”

“Understandable.”

I couldn’t tell if he was being sarcastic or not, so I ignored the possible jab and headed down to the beach. He followed, reluctantly, but his shoulders tensed as I got closer to the water. “Maybe we don’t need to go down this far.”

“It’ll be fine. See?” I pointed at the water.

The vines I’d grown had formed a tight net. Their thick green stalks crisscrossed over each other, with the looser ends swaying on top of the small incoming waves. I’d come down here earlier with Violet and Donovan to check it out before I went to Cole’s room. I wanted to see if whatever I grew would hold up, or if it was just temporary. A black rope of seaweed shot out of the depths of the ocean, but my vines cut it off before it could reach the shore. Making the beach safe for the first time in weeks.

It delighted me to no end that I could grow magical plants.

Now if I could just learn to grow things of my choosing, we’d have enough food on this island to get us through until we got the sun back.

And we would get the sun back.

We put up a better and stronger fight each time two of us paired up, bringing us closer to unlocking the secret to eliminating the curse while keeping our magic and memories intact. Wes and Audrey found the holes in the legend and were the first to figure out how to use their magic. Thora and Finn had nullified the curse's deadly poison and had been healing everyone since. Violet and Donovan found the Well of Rebirth and learned what needed to be done to kill Nirah—the half-man, half-demon who carried the curse. Kenna and Galen had found a way to kill the black smoke that seeped into people's minds.

They didn't bother with the dark fog that had surrounded the hotel since we'd moved in. The first time they eliminated it, it just came back thicker than before. So as long as it didn't mess with anyone, they let it be.

Everyone had contributed something. Now that I finally had a willing partner, it was time to see what the two of us would bring to the table. I hoped it would be more than a melted door handle and some tangled vines.

“Okay.” Cole's shoulders unclenched but didn't fully loosen. He carried around entirely too much stress. “How do you want to start?”

“You could start by relaxing.”

He gave me a derisive snort and turned his head to the water. “This is as relaxed as I get.”

“That’s so sad.” I meant that too. If he didn’t learn how to let go of some of that tension, he’d end up wearing out his heart quicker than his father had. “What do you do for fun?”

“Fun?” He looked at me like I’d just asked him for directions to the next shuttle to Mars.

“Yeah. You know?” I waved my hands around, fully out of my element. “Fun?” Was I in the Twilight Zone? Was I really going to have to explain the definition of fun to this man? “Do you play sports? Watch movies? Read?”

“No.”

My eyebrows pinched together. “Do you do anything just for the enjoyment of it?”

He frowned, as if he had to dig deep to come up with something. “I work out.”

“Oh my God. Pathetic.”

The corner of his mouth tipped up slightly. A half-smile. I had a feeling if he smiled for real, it would be so beautiful he’d almost hurt to look at. “What do you do for fun?”

“Lots of things. I garden and tend to my bees.”

“Fine. For fun, I crunch numbers and keep a fully staffed office in line.”

I rolled my eyes. “Touché. I also get drinks with Audrey and Violet, dance, paint, read, watch TV, do puzzles, flirt with pretty men.”

He gave me a bland stare. “You must be exhausted.”

“Not tired. Relaxed.” It was obvious I wasn’t getting through to him, so I’d have to try something more tactile. “Take off your shoes.”

“You sure you don’t want dinner first? Or is this one of those unusual times?” The spark in his dark chocolate eyes sent a series of flutters through my lower stomach. I could handle Grizzly Cole. But Playful Cole was downright dangerous.

“Don’t get smart with me. Just take off your shoes.”

He chuckled as he toed off his shoes and socks. I could get very used to that sound. “You’ve got me out here, barefoot. Now what are you going to do with me?”

“We’re going to dip our toes in the ocean.”

“What? Why?” He reared his head back, genuinely offended that I’d asked him to stick his toes in the water. I didn’t know whether to laugh or feel sorry for him.

“For fun.”

It was like pulling teeth to get him down to the water’s edge, but he eventually relented. Probably because he assumed that if he humored me, he could go back to standing in the dry sand, with his shiny loafers and his hands shoved in his pockets, with a grouchy look on his face. Little did he know, the fun was just beginning...

I sank my toes into the sand and wiggled them, right where the water lapped at the shore and filled in the holes my feet

made with more wet sand. Cole was next to me, looking like he'd been asked to swallow the sand rather than stand in it.

“What now?” he asked, clearly bored out of his mind.

“Now, I think we should kiss.”

He coughed as his eyes bulged out of his head. Man, did I love throwing him off his guard. “Why, exactly, should we do that?”

“Because kissing is fun and we're both really good at it.”

He put his eyes back in his head, but he still had an incredulous look on his face that absolutely delighted me. We were having so much fun already and he didn't even realize it. “It's just that simple for you, isn't it?”

I shrugged. “Of course. Why shouldn't it be?”

“All right, sunshine.” He turned toward me with a predatory gleam in his eye and gripped my waist, pulling me against him. “Let's have a little fun.”

His lips crashed against mine, and oh God. This was the most fun I'd had in ages. He kissed me in that same firm, commanding way that he had the other night, and I discovered that his brand of kissing was very much my thing. He didn't kiss me gently or show any sign of seeking permission, his mouth ravaged mine as he took what he wanted and gave back just as good. His tongue pushed into my mouth, claiming it, marking it as his.

Cole kissed like I was his last meal.

I could only imagine what he'd do between my legs. The thought had my knees going weak, and sensing me tremble, he hoisted one of my legs up, pressing himself at my center. My hands flared with a bright cherry-red light in the perpetual dark. I gripped the front of his shirt and rubbed myself against his impressive length.

He groaned into my mouth and I swallowed the sound, wanting to tuck it deep inside me where it would be mine and mine alone. Cupping my jaw with his glowing burgundy palm, he tilted my face and took the kiss deeper.

I flattened my palm against his chest, rubbing it a few times before I found the will to push him away. There was nothing fun about the ache in my core that Cole wouldn't do anything about. He might've been a prick, but he was an honorable one, and he wouldn't let this go beyond kissing while our magic was running the show.

He pulled back with a frown, and I burst out laughing. "Oh, come on. What do you have to be so grouchy about now?"

"I'm not grouchy." He crossed his arms over his chest.

Yeah, right. I wouldn't let that deter me, though. I was on a mission to make Cole loosen up and smile once in a while. "Should we kiss some more?"

"No." He cleared his throat. "I think that was enough kissing for one day."

"Okay, so how about we...?" I had no idea how to finish that sentence. I'd kind of hoped he'd fill it in for me, but no

such luck.

A muscle in his jaw ticked as he stared at me like he was just waiting for something insane thing to come out of my mouth. As much as I hated to prove him right, I refused to practice any kind of magic with him unless he gave me at least one smile. His current state of being was too volatile, and I didn't trust him to wield metal with any kind of care when he barreled through every situation like a bull with an ax to grind.

He desperately needed people skills.

Fortunately for him, I excelled at that. I came to this island with nothing and no one. I'd been moved around my whole life, never setting down roots anywhere, never connecting to anyone. Until I came to Zodiac Cove. I found a life here. A family. One of my choosing. I understood what it felt like to stand apart, to feel solitary and alone in a room full of people, but I also understood what it took to overcome that. To open myself to others.

Everyone thought Cole was an asshole. I'd thought the same thing myself on more than one occasion, especially during those times when I really wanted to use my magic and couldn't because of his stubbornness. But I'd seen flashes of humor in him. Flashes of hurt. I didn't believe Cole was unfeeling. Looking back on all our interactions, he just seemed deeply lonely.

I turned my gaze to the water, and an idea sparked, one I couldn't let go of. He must've come to the beach as a child. I

just needed to bring him back to the more carefree days of his youth. “Let’s have a sandcastle contest.”

His brows pinched together. “Are you twelve?”

“If I am, you’re in serious trouble.”

He shook his head, not finding me nearly as amusing as I found myself. “I thought we were supposed to be doing things that were fun.”

“This is fun.” I took his hand and pulled him down in the sand, in the space between wet and dry. “If you win, I’ll leave you alone for the rest of today.”

That got his attention. Sensing a challenge, he immediately perked up. I thought I’d finally found what made Cole tick. “What do you get if you win?”

“You have to skinny-dip with me in the ocean.”

His eyes widened a fraction, but he quickly swallowed his surprise and bared his teeth. This guy really liked to compete. “Who is the judge?”

“It’s a surprise.”

“I hate surprises.”

Of course, he hated surprises. He hated everything. Except for kissing me, apparently. Which should *not* have made a warm glow spread through my chest, but I had no control over what my body chose to do on its own. “Take it or leave it.”

He tapped a finger to his chin. “Fine. You’re on.”

We both dug into the sand, with nothing more at our disposal than our hands and a few broken shells. I hadn't built a sandcastle in... well, maybe ever. I didn't take trips to the beach as a kid. My mom was always chasing something she could never seem to find, and I got dragged along behind her. And there weren't a lot of beaches in Arizona.

Which explained why I was doing so abysmally at this challenge.

"I should warn you." Cole had his lower lip tucked into his teeth, the picture of utmost concentration. "I took a few architecture classes in college."

"You don't scare me, Cole Latham." If competitiveness wasn't part of his overall personality, I might've taken his determination to win—so I'd leave him alone—personally.

We continued to work in silence. And by work, I mean I continued to shovel sand on top of sand, patting it down until it resembled a lumpy mountain. While Cole was over there building a replica of the Empire State Building. Couldn't he be bad at something? Anything?

It didn't matter, though. I'd still win.

Feeling like I'd dumped about all the sand I could onto my shapeless lump, I put my fingers between my lips and whistled. "Time."

Cole stood and dusted off his hands, a smug smile on his face. The poor sap.

“And now, announcing the judge of the first annual Zodiac Cove sandcastle building contest...” I took a bow. “That will be me.”

“Hell no.” Cole’s smug expression immediately turned stony.

“And I’m declaring myself the winner, because my piece shows heart and finesse, while yours just shows skill, which isn’t nearly as interesting.”

“Cheater.” He didn’t quite smile, but his eyes twinkled. It was a start.

“I guess you’ll have to catch me to teach me a lesson.” I threw off my shorts and tank top, leaving me bare, thanks to my extreme dislike of constricting underwear.

I ran toward the water, a smile playing on my lips as I heard his belt buckle and his pants drop behind me. Goosebumps broke out over my skin as I hit the cold water and kept running, knowing Cole was right on my heels.

“Motherfucker. That’s cold.” The water splashed against the back of my calves, and I turned around to find Cole standing at the shallow shoreline. Completely naked.

My mouth went instantly dry. Even the cold water didn’t do anything to diminish the size of his assets. His chest was hard and defined, with a light dusting of hair. His abs were a work of art. Another trail of hair started at his belly button and continued down... I licked my lips. His cock twitched and began to swell. Fuck.

I turned around and bit the inside of my cheek. This was supposed to be all in good fun. I was not going to lose my shit over a naked man. I'd seen plenty, maybe not as fine as this, but fine enough, and with much better dispositions.

I'd absolutely played myself with this one.

The heat of his body seeped into my chest as he came up behind me. His cedar and leather scent teased my senses. Not close enough to touch, but almost. A whisper of his magic reached out to mine.

“Caught you.” His voice was cracked and ragged, not quite as full of the confidence he often projected. Was I affecting him as much as he did me? It didn't seem possible.

The only thing I could think to do to save myself from turning around and dropping to my knees was to deflect. “Not yet.”

I dove headfirst into the water and took off swimming. I wasn't nearly as good as Violet and hadn't grown up swimming in any oceans, but there were plenty of pools in Arizona and I'd given as many as I could a workout.

As a Cancer, I'd always been drawn to the water, and I slid through it with the ease of someone who was in her element. Literally. I thought I had an advantage over Cole, but I didn't take into account his powerful build, which he didn't get by sitting around all day pushing paper. He cut through the water like a shark.

I peered behind me, just as he wrapped his hand around my ankle and pulled. The momentum slammed me against him as I twisted around. My legs wrapped around his waist, bringing my center flush with his hard stomach. The tips of my nipples peeked out over the water, pebbling in a way that had nothing to do with the cold.

“Now I’ve definitely caught you.” Cole’s eyes were dilated to a near pitch black, his breathing rough and unsteady. There was no way that short swim had worn him out.

Our hands glowed bright red in the moonlit water. Ruby and dark garnet. The silver-shaded ocean gently lapped at our goosebump-dotted skin as we drank each other in, neither one of us daring to make the first move.

Slowly, his hand slid up my ribcage. A shuddering breath escaped me as his thumb grazed the underside of my breast. I pushed myself against him, egging him on, letting him know it was okay to touch me like that. Every bit of me needed his hands on me everywhere. In the distant recesses of my lizard brain, I knew the magic was responsible for setting me off so hard, but it still felt good, and I didn’t want him to stop.

The urge to grow something pinged and swirled inside of me, going off like a rocket as sparks of cherry-colored light flashed off my palms and exploded overhead. Something dragged along the bottom of my feet, and I choked down a scream as twisted shapes of metal rose out of the water. Broken motorboat railings, empty soda cans, and a rusted-out tuna can.

Every bit of scrap metal that had been buried under the sand rose and melded together like a ball of molten iron. A screeching sound that snapped my teeth together split the air as the metal molded together over our heads. Like a cannonball without the cannon. It continued to compress in on itself. I could only imagine the pressure at the center.

“Oh, shit.” Cole grabbed my shoulders and shoved me underwater, following behind me.

The cannonball hit the breaking point and a powerful boom sent shards of hot metal flying in all directions, the explosion strong enough to form ripples in the distant still waters.

All around us, iron and aluminum shrapnel fired at the water. The fragments hissed and smoked before cooling and turning black. None of the thick lances that speared into the ocean floor hit us. It was like we were in a protective bubble. Or our magic couldn't work against us.

Sensing the same, Cole pushed up from the bottom and brought us both above the surface. “That was...”

“Yeah.” I couldn't do anything but stare in wonder at the wreckage his magic had caused—without him even trying.

All along the beach, scattered bits of twisted metal piled up. More spears poked out of the sand. It looked like a junkyard had exploded. And on the other side of that mess, a good hundred yards away, Wes stood on the shoreline with his hands on his hips.

“What the fuck happened out here?” He kicked at the sand. While he wasn’t nearly as grouchy as Cole, he wasn’t quite as chill as Donovan either. “And whose clothes are these?”

Cole gave me a horrified look, and I couldn’t stop the laugh that bubbled up. I slapped my hands over my mouth, but it wouldn’t stop. Cole pushed my head into his shoulder to quiet me, but it was too late, Wes was already making his way down here.

He stopped at the shoreline right in front of us with a wry grin twisting his lips. Cole opened his mouth to say... I had no idea what he was going to say, but Wes held out his hands to stop him. “I don’t want to know. Just clean this shit up.”

With a wink, he turned around and walked back to the hotel.

CHAPTER 4

Cole

This was just fucking great. My idiot brother hooked up with our other idiot brother's ex a few months ago and thinks the whole fucking island should be getting married now. He's going to read so much more into this than he should.

Brooke thought the whole thing was hilarious. She found life endlessly amusing in a way that both intrigued and exhausted me. If she'd taken one of those hot pokers through the arm, she probably would've found a way to laugh about it.

I wouldn't admit this to a single living soul, but what my magic had done in that moment scared the shit out of me. I'd felt it build when Brooke had her bare pussy flush against my stomach. Like a clock ticking down right before a bomb goes off.

That's what I was. A walking bomb.

My magic was unpredictable and dangerous. Which just fucking figured. At least I could be clear on one thing. Practicing was out of the question. The rest of the pairs would

need to figure this thing out without us. There was no way I'd put her at risk like that again.

I trudged out of the water and picked my way across the beach. It was a fucking minefield of rusty metal with sharp edges. I'd be damn lucky if I made it to my clothes without getting tetanus. Brooke opted to swim back to the other side of the beach. Smart girl.

I would've done the same, but I needed to get out of the water and away from her as quickly as possible. Who knew what kind of damage I would've done if she'd so much as brushed a hand against my cock.

We got lucky nothing hit us.

As soon as I got back to the hotel side of the beach, I yanked my pants off the ground and shook the sand off of them. Brooke stepped out of the water, rolling drops sliding over puckered pink nipples. Fuck me. I wanted nothing more than to pick up where we left off, but not at the expense of her getting hurt.

She eyed me carefully as she picked up her own clothes and put them back on. "Do you want to try practicing now? Or should we try having more fun first?"

"No." The word tasted like acid on my tongue, but if I wasn't harsh with her, she would see that as an opening, and I was done with magic.

"No to practicing? Or no to fun?"

“No to both.” I shrugged my arm through the sleeve of my button-up shirt, leaving it open since I was just going back to my room, anyway. “No more practicing, no rooming together, no more magic, period. The others will be fine without us.”

Her mouth popped open and her eyes narrowed, but before she could fling a bunch of curses at me, I turned around and stormed back toward the hotel. I made it about ten steps before a thick cloud of smoke surrounded me. This one felt different from the heavy fog that hovered around the veranda and circled the hotel. This one had weight to it.

“You’ll kill her,” a voice I didn’t recognize—but one that still felt familiar and unsettling, like a bad case of déjà vu—hissed in my ear. *“Your magic is out of control. You’re out of control. You’ll hurt her and she’ll never forgive you.”*

“Try telling me something I don’t fucking know.” I looked around for the source of the voice, but everywhere I turned, I was met with more black smoke.

“She’ll never really want you. No one could. It’s only her magic reacting to yours.”

“Again, not telling me anything I don’t already know.” This was getting old. I’d already had a shit day; I did not need to get fucked with by a centuries-old curse on top of it.

I took a few steps forward, figuring I could just feel my way back to the hotel, when a man stepped out of the smoke. Though he wasn’t really a man at all. He walked in jerky starts and stops, like all his bones had been broken and magic was the only thing holding him together. The same smoke that

surrounded us swirled in his eyes. A frothy black sludge oozed from his open mouth, and he licked it away with a forked tongue.

I shuddered and stumbled backward, tripping on a rock that almost took me down. Somehow, I'd gotten completely turned around. For all I knew, I could've been back in the minefield of metal littering the beach. Nirah—we hadn't been formally introduced, but who else could it be?—took another jerky step toward me, smiling with the kind of madness reminiscent of troubled kids who burned crickets under a magnifying glass.

He opened his mouth wider than any man should be capable of, and out of that gaping hellhole, wasps the size of walnuts poured out of him. I flung my arms over my head and ducked to the ground, but before they could reach me, another man, made entirely of fire—who I had to assume was Galen Wilder—stepped between me and the wasps.

I tore my gaze away from Galen to study Nirah. He had no reaction to the ease with which Galen took down his weapon. As if he had a limitless supply. While I appreciated not getting the shit stung out of me, and what Galen and Kenna could do to combat mental attacks, they wouldn't be the key to killing this curse for good. At best, they could only hold it off.

With a final flick of his forked tongue, Nirah disappeared in a funnel of smoke. Galen sucked the wisps of the curse that lingered inside of himself and burned it away.

Once my vision cleared, a small rocket in cotton shorts and a thin tank top pummeled me out of nowhere and wrapped her

arms tight around my waist. All I could see was the spill of Brooke's wet honey-blond curls as she buried her face in my chest. "You scared the shit out of me."

Galen released the fire that had burned within him and dusted off the ash that clung to his clothes. "I knew it was only a matter of time before it hit you two. You all right?"

"Fine." I waved him off. "He was just getting started."

Galen gave me a short nod and headed back to the hotel. Kenna stood by the French doors, ready to jump in if needed. Her fire-red hair stuck out like a flare in the night. Galen wrapped his arms around her and kissed the top of her head as they waited for us to come inside.

Another one bites the dust.

Feeling pressure around my ribs, I glanced down to where Brooke still had her wet body pressed against mine like a tiny blonde sea monkey. I squeezed her shoulders and eased her away from my chest, not trusting what I'd do if I continued to let her cling. "I'm fine, sunshine."

The sand beneath our feet began to stir, pulling more long-buried metals from the ground to do who knew what kind of damage. I dropped my hands from her and strode away. Again. Everything about teaming up with Brooke screamed "bad idea," and I had just enough decency left to walk away before I really fucked shit up.

"This isn't over." The quiet confidence in her voice stopped me in my tracks. She didn't need to raise her voice, chase after

me, or shout angry words at my back. She was like a siren. It took next to no effort for her to pull me into her thrall. Dangerous woman.

“Good night, Brooke.”

As much as it pained me to walk away from her, one day she'd see I did us both a favor.



The next morning, if it could even be called that without the sun, I woke to the sound of singing. From my shower. Only one person would be brave enough to test me like this.

I groaned and rubbed my hands over my face before turning to the bedside alarm to check the time. Six in the goddamn morning. If it weren't for the AM indicator next to the neon green numbers, I wouldn't know if it was day or night. Either way. Too fucking early to be dealing with a chipper little ball of sunshine.

I'd spent most of the previous night tossing and turning. My arms itching to wrap themselves around a small body with creamy skin and puckered pink nipples. My chest cold from where I should've had Brooke's warmth curled around me. I took my dick in my hand three times last night, with her name on my lips each time I came, and I still didn't sleep easily.

She was getting under my skin in the most alarming ways, and now she was singing in my fucking shower like she didn't have my mind in knots.

That ended now.

I stood and yanked on my briefs, my dick already rock hard and pointing in her direction. Fucking traitor. I adjusted myself as well as I could, and when the shower shut off, I made my way to the bathroom door and stood in front of it with my hands on my hips.

She opened the door and startled when she found me waiting for her, but quickly smoothed it over. "Good morning." Her gaze dipped downward. "A really good morning, it seems."

"For fuck's sake." My cock twitched, and I turned away from her. She looked at me like she found me endlessly amusing. I didn't know what to do with that. "Why are you here?"

She finished toweling off, then dumped the towel on my bed and started rifling through her suitcase, completely nude, without a fucking care in the world. This woman would be the death of me. It took every ounce of my will not to palm my cock like a fucking pervert, even though she was in my room uninvited.

"You ditched me last night without letting me get my things." She glanced over her shoulder at me, her honey curls sticking to her smooth back. "Thanks for that, by the way. I ended up crashing with Wes and Audrey. Wes got me a

keycard for our room last night, but I figured you could use a night to cool off and get used to the idea of this arrangement. And now I'm going to do my morning yoga and get on with the rest of my day."

"No." I clenched my fists at my sides. Wes had been a fucking thorn in my side for months, but this was going too far. "Pack up your shit and take it back to your room."

"Poor baby." She patted my cheek, and I growled. "Even with that raging boner, you're so cranky. You'd feel better if you learned to start your day with positivity instead."

"I'd feel better if pushy women didn't invade my personal space."

"*Our* personal space."

"I think the fuck not."

She pulled on one of those long, flowing skirts she was so fond of, a light purple, with a white tank top that showed the outline of her pert nipples. No bra. Because why the fuck would she want to put me out of my misery for one second?

Her silver bracelets clinked together as she pushed them over her wrists. "Before you went and had your little pissy fit last night, I'd already told Wes we'd be rooming together. So he gave my room to another resident. I have no choice but to shack up with you."

I ground my teeth together. I'd be having a conversation with my meddling brother later. There was no doubt in my

mind he'd done this on purpose, and it was a line he should've known damn better than to cross. "We'll see about that."

"By all means, spend the morning stomping around like a toddler if you must. If you need me, I'll be on the other side of the black rocks doing yoga with Kenna and Galen."

She flounced out of the room, carrying the light scent of wildflowers and honey with her. Not wanting to waste any more time standing around with my dick in my hand, I yanked on a pair of pants and a T-shirt and stormed out of my room to go find my brother.

It didn't take long to locate Wes. He was in the dining room with Audrey, moving from table to table to check in with the residents who were staying in the hotel while the curse blanketed most of the island in a thick black fog. Most of it was shaking hands and kissing babies. This was why he and Donovan handled the schmoozing portion of our operation.

I grabbed a protein shake from the kitchen and waited for him to finish making his rounds. He caught me glaring and gave me a little beauty queen wave. Asshole. He knew exactly why I was here.

He approached, and I bared my teeth. "I thought Finn's woman was running for mayor. You looking to give her some competition?"

He rolled his eyes. "Don't be such a prick."

"That's who I am, right?" It didn't even sting anymore to say it. It was a role I'd been assigned so long ago, it fit like a

second skin.

Wes clapped a hand on my shoulder, leading me out to the hall as he lowered his voice. “People are feeling helpless and terrified, and they’re staying here because they hope we can offer them some protection. I’m just trying to ease their minds a bit.”

I had no idea what walking around the dining room like the king of hospitality had to do with easing minds, but I didn’t care enough to ask. I had other business to attend to. “You need to give Brooke her room back.”

“No can do.” Wes gave me the kind of grin that set my teeth on edge. “I thought you two were getting along now? It certainly looked that way last night.”

I huffed out an annoyed breath. “That was a mistake.”

He nodded solemnly. “I often find myself getting mistakenly naked with Audrey. Totally by accident. Don’t know how it keeps happening.”

I shook my head and breathed in through my nose. Knocking my brother on his ass in front of half the town probably wouldn’t help set minds at ease. “You gave Brooke a keycard to my room.”

“It’s her room now, too. She said you’d agreed.”

“Things change.”

“That’s too damn bad. I already gave her room to a family who was squeezed into a two-bedroom cottage with eight other people.”

“Fuck.” I ran both my hands through my hair, gripping it against my skull. “Why the hell can’t all these people stay in their own homes?”

Wes gave me a deadpan stare, not bothering to answer. Not that I needed him to. I understood why people centered themselves in town after the sun went out. They were scared shitless of what was coming next. Everyone in Zodiac Cove had grown up with the legend.

After two incidents at Constellations and the disastrous town hall meeting that inextricably linked me to Brooke, it had become common knowledge that the curse wasn’t above attacking magicless residents. The mayor still had a small group of crackpots camped out at his estate, but most everyone else wanted to stay either in the hotel or as close as they could get to it. Those of us with magic were the only things standing between them and the curse.

A little red-haired boy with chubby cheeks and peanut butter smudged across his nose tugged on Wes’s pant leg. Jackson Everett’s kid. Wes lifted him up and propped the kid on his hip. “This matters. These people, this town, matters. We need you. Quit running scared.”

The only person I was running scared from was myself. A light, tinkling laugh filtered down the hall and I caught sight of Brooke giving that sunshine smile to Kenna and Galen. She turned her head and caught my eye and my heart seized.

A slow smile spread across her soft, plump lips, like she knew exactly what effect she had on me. I’d had a brief taste

of those lips, finer than the best wine in our family cellar, and it wasn't nearly enough. I wanted to spread her out and sample her everywhere.

Whatever she saw in my expression had her cheeks heating, and she turned away. She was a mess of contradictions, tricking me into skinny-dipping one moment and then getting shy under just a look. I didn't know what she'd do next, but I wanted to find out and keep her at arm's length at the same time. Knots. That's what she had me in.

Maybe I was running scared from more than just myself.

There was a dining room full of people who had left their homes and moved in here because they didn't know where else to turn. My brothers were sacrificing everything to save them. And what the fuck was I doing? Nothing.

I'd always been dependable, stalwart. I wasn't nice about it, but I got shit done. Until a bright woman with a brighter smile came along... I glanced at Brooke walking away with Kenna and Galen and swallowed. Hard.

"Hungry bear." The melodic voice of the little boy in my brother's arms drew my attention. "He's silly." He poked a finger at my nose, and Wes had to bite the inside of his cheek.

"What an astute observer you are, little man. Mean old Cole is indeed a hungry bear."

I glared at Wes, which only caused him and the boy to burst out laughing. I couldn't win.

“I’m not hungry.” Lifting my protein shake, I took a drink to prove that I was indeed well-nourished.

“Who said anything about food?” He gave a pointed look to Brooke’s retreating back. “You’re welcome, by the way.”

I gave him an incredulous look. “For what, exactly?”

“I’m not going to tell you now because you don’t get it and aren’t prepared to thank me for it, but one day you will.” He hefted the child up higher on his side. “You ready to find your parents, little man? I bet they’re worried sick.”

We took the boy back into the dining room, leaving me alone in the empty hall with my emptier thoughts. I was a lot of things, but a coward wasn’t one of them.

Brooke was changing everything I thought I understood about myself. How much longer could I continue to resist her? Even if it was for her own good.

CHAPTER 5

Brooke

Getting naked in the moonlight might not have been the best idea after the way Cole looked at me. Just one angry, smoldering glare from him and I was complete mess. Galen wouldn't notice—he didn't notice anyone who wasn't Kenna—but it was still embarrassing.

Yoga time was not sexy time, damn it. It was how I centered myself, found balance when I was feeling anything but in control. Ever since the night the curse dragged me and Cole into the ocean, I'd been off balance. He scared me, but not for the reasons he scared everyone else.

There was depth to him, a hurt that hummed just below the surface. He hadn't shown it to me himself, but I could feel it through his magic. It spoke to the parts of me that yearned to soothe. A resistance I couldn't help but push against. A fire I wanted to stoke higher.

He was my opposite in every way. The exact kind of man my mom chased all over the southwest. Rich, intimidating, cold. All qualities I looked out for, so I'd know who to run

from. I'd seen their smooth promises and the hurt they left behind too many times. Apparently, the apple didn't fall that far from the tree after all.

The thought sobered me enough to allow me to get moving. It had been too long since I'd done yoga outdoors. The sterile, generic lines of my hotel room didn't do it for me. I needed fresh air. I also needed the sun, but the moon would have to do for now.

Taking a deep breath, I worked through all of my poses, stretching and twisting my limbs under the pale moonlight. I did my best to clear my head, but Cole was in there now. Burrowed deep. It made my muscles clench and my core tight.

Walking away with more tension than when I started was not the purpose of yoga.

With a heavy sigh, I got dressed. I'd have to try this another time. Maybe when I'd had a day or two away from him so I could breathe right again.

Because I sure as hell wouldn't keep chasing him. That was one thing I could do different from my mom. Maintain my self-respect. This morning had been the breaking point. When he stared at me like he wanted to eat me alive and then... nothing. He just continued to stand there with Wes, with his hands clenched at his sides.

I thought things might've changed after he used his magic. That he would've seen how important it was for us to work together to get it under control, especially with how volatile his metal manipulation appeared to be, but he shut it all down.

Without even asking me how I felt about it. He didn't even want to share a room with me anymore.

If he didn't want to budge on the subject, though, what could I do? While the idea of tying him down so I could grow as many gardens as I wanted was tempting, I didn't want to corrupt my magic that way. Consent mattered.

I guess I'd just have to accept that I'd have no hand in saving the island. The barrier of vines I'd set up in the sand to keep the curse's deadly seaweed ropes at bay would end up being my only contribution, and I'd have to learn how to let that be enough. My partner was too hard-headed. Fate really fucked up with that one.

Tears pricked the back of my eyes and I willed them away. I could be a grown-up about this. Even if it felt like I was cutting off a vital piece of myself before I'd been given the chance to see what it could really do.

Kenna eyed me warily. "Are you okay?"

I straightened my shoulders and planted a plastic-coated smile on my face. "Great. Better than great. It's been days since I've been able to stretch my limbs outside. Why?"

"Because you look like you've experienced about twelve different emotions in the space of five minutes. My neck is sore from the whiplash."

My feelings for Cole were complicated by what he showed everyone else, and what I felt through his magic. I couldn't even be sure if who he appeared to be on the surface wasn't

the whole of it. My magic was able to alter my hormones; maybe it could also alter my perception.

I didn't want to share any of that, though. It felt like a betrayal of Cole's extremely limited trust. What happened between the two of us was just for us.

So I shrugged, and Kenna took that as a reasonable answer. Everyone knew who I was partnered with. I was Sisyphus, and Cole was the boulder that just kept rolling back down the hill. Impossible. At some point, I'd have to let go before he crushed me.

"Cole will come around," Galen said.

"You can't know that," I said.

Galen was brilliant. Probably the smartest person I'd ever met, but he didn't fully understand social cues. When I'd first moved in next door to him, I thought he was trying to check me out when I did yoga in the mornings, but he paid zero attention to me. He just liked to drink his coffee on his back porch at sunrise.

He was the first person on the island who made Zodiac Cove feel like home. His social awkwardness was a refreshing change from the life I'd lived with my mom, where I always had to act a certain way to impress people who thrived on social manipulations. I quickly learned that when people were content, they had no use for such games.

We struck up an easy friendship where I'd make him dinner a few times a week, and in exchange, he'd occasionally use his

machines to test energy levels in my soil. It was an arrangement that had worked nicely for both of us. And once Kenna moved in, I had a yoga partner too. Albeit, an infrequent one.

Galen adjusted his wire-frame glasses. “The curse attacked the two of you, him much harder than you. It wouldn’t bother if it wasn’t worried.”

“The only reason the curse is worried is because—” I cut myself off before I mentioned the voice that sent me down to the water. It hadn’t belonged to the curse. In fact, it had actively worked against it, but no one else had mentioned something like that happening before. My magic hadn’t been activated. I didn’t really know what it was or where it had come from, but I already had a hard enough time being taken seriously by my partner, so I kept the information to myself. “Is because we used our magic.”

“Then why isn’t it attacking you harder? The one who actually wants to use magic and stands a chance of changing your partner’s mind?” Galen could be really smug when he was right, which was more often than not. “Unless Cole’s on the verge of breaking.”

I had no response. Not without once again sharing things that had begun to feel personal between me and Cole. Even when I was annoyed with him, he was still my partner. What he needed would always be a priority for me.

Cole had definitely been on the verge of breaking the night we went skinny-dipping. He’d actively used his power on

purpose. And while he hadn't specifically said he wanted me to move into his room, he'd cleared a drawer for me. That sent a message. But then he drew it all back at the first sign of trouble. He wasn't ready, no matter what Galen or the curse thought. I didn't know if he'd ever be ready to embrace his magic.

"We'll just agree to disagree." I picked up my water bottle and was taking a long swallow when the earth rumbled under my feet.

"What the hell?" Kenna grabbed Galen's hand and the two of them immediately disappeared, then burst to life as walking fire.

"Oh, God." I gripped the natural divots in the black rock as my feet tried to give out from beneath me. A chunk of sand pulled away from the shore, leaving a deep hole in the beach, like a cavern had opened out of nowhere. "Is this it? Are we too late?"

Kenna and Galen flanked me, linking their hands behind my back. Their fire didn't burn me; it was as if they had a clear, invisible barrier keeping it contained within them.

Kenna nudged me forward. "I don't think this is it yet. We should have three weeks, give or take a day." She glanced at Galen for confirmation.

He nodded in return. "Give or take. We should still get back to the hotel, though. Finn and Thora can do a quick check of the island's perimeter."

Since I was useless without my partner, they kept me between them. I hated that they had to do this. I should've been able to fight my own battles. Having my magic depend so wholly on another person—a Capricorn, of all signs—was beyond frustrating.

We rounded the jutting cliff that separated the hotel's waterfront from the rest of the public beach. The rest of the pairs—minus Rafe and Jocelyn—were already outside. Wes and Donovan were holding back Cole, who was taking them both on and nearly overpowering them. He stilled when he saw me, though. All the fight going out of him.

It surprised me that he was out here. That he even appeared to care.

I blinked and Finn stood in front of us. “What happened?”

“Let us get up to the veranda,” Galen said. “I only want to say this once.”

We continued to trudge through the sand until we made it to a flatter surface. Cole had shaken his brothers loose, his gaze never wavering from me as I stepped up to the back porch and took a seat on the wicker loveseat next to Audrey.

I left room for one more next to me, but Cole declined to take it. So much for thinking he cared. Instead, he chose to lean against the white wood railing opposite me, with his arms crossed over his chest, and his pouty lips tipped down in a frown.

Galen went on to explain the sinkhole that had opened up on the beach, but I couldn't seem to focus on anyone but Cole. He tilted his head to look up, and I glanced behind me. Every window on every floor had faces pressed against the glass. Aside from Audrey's grandma—who stared down at her granddaughter with pride—the residents' eyes were bright with fear as they eyed the ten of us like we were their salvation. I'd never felt more useless in my life.

Finn and Thora left to check the perimeter, to see if any other chunks of the island had gone missing, while the rest of us waited.

Audrey squeezed my hand and leaned over, keeping her voice low. “He was going out of his mind when we said you hadn't come back from yoga yet.”

I glanced at Cole, who immediately looked away. “Yeah. He looks real torn up.”

“If anyone can melt that icy exterior, it's you.” She turned her attention back to Wes, who was making plans for those who had control of their magic.

They were talking about another trip to the cave, which felt like a waste of time. I'd never been there myself, but I'd heard enough about it from everyone else. Once again, my mind was drawn to that voice that had warned me about Cole being in danger. The voice that seemed to have come from the moon and cast its light over the sand.

Whatever we needed to discover next wouldn't be found in the cave.

“I think what we need is here. On the beach,” I said.

Everyone stopped talking and turned their attention to me. That was awkward. At least none of them looked at me like I had no business speaking on the matter, since all I’d managed to do was grow a handful of vines in the ocean.

“What makes you think we need to focus our efforts here?” Violet asked. She didn’t hold any judgment in her voice, only curiosity.

With all eyes on me, I didn’t want to bring up the voice. I couldn’t explain it, but my connection to the lady in the moonlight felt as personal to me as my connection to Cole. She hadn’t revealed herself to anyone else. I needed to believe there was a reason for that.

“It’s just a gut feeling,” I said. Cole narrowed his eyes, as if he didn’t quite believe me. I lifted my chin, daring him to call me on it, but he said nothing. Surprise, surprise.

“We can’t just trust a gut feeling,” Wes said.

“Umm.” Audrey lifted a finger. “That’s pretty much what we’ve been doing this whole time. Brooke’s a Cancer, she’s got a water sign’s intuition. We need to trust it.”

Wes seemed to mull this over for a moment, then relented. He’d always concede to Audrey. “Okay. Fine. What do we need to do on the beach?”

That... I couldn’t answer. Not only had I not had the chance to work with my partner enough to discover exactly what we could do together, but I was putting all of my eggs into the

basket of a disembodied voice that no one else had ever mentioned. But if I said I didn't know, then Wes would try to rally another visit to the cave, pulling all of us further away from the place we actually needed to be, and leaving those in and around the hotel unprotected.

Fortunately, Finn and Thora showed up to save me from having to say anything. Finn bent over, hands at his knees, sucking in his breath while Thora rubbed his back, pressing a hand to her chest. Both of them looked windblown, like they'd run here. Run, while their speed was activated. My heart leaped to my throat. Something was seriously wrong.

“Dock,” Finn wheezed out. “Curse. Ferries. Go.”

We didn't need another word. The eight of us jumped to our feet and ran through the center of the hotel toward the lobby. Residents opened their doors and tried to get our attention, no doubt wanting answers to what was going on, but we couldn't afford to stop.

Finn and Thora didn't run. They didn't need to run. Just a casual stroll when their speed was turned up was a blink of time to everyone else. Whatever had happened down at the ferry docks had freaked them out. Badly.

Everyone else charged their magic, preparing to face the worst. I moved in next to Cole, but he drew his hand away from me. “Not right now.”

Was he serious? “If not now, when?”

“Don’t pout.” He frowned. Like he was one to talk. “You know as well as I do that our magic is erratic and could make the situation worse.”

“You don’t know what our magic will do because you haven’t had the balls to practice with me. The fact that it’s out of control is not my fault.” Before he could respond with something else disparaging, I pulled away from him and stayed close to Violet and Donovan, who shot his brother a dirty look.

Cole stopped in the middle of the street. “I’m not even sure what I’m doing here.”

“Then leave,” I said.

I didn’t really want him to leave, but everything with him the last handful of days had been one step forward, then two back. I was done doing this dance with him. If he came to his senses, he was free to seek me out, but I wouldn’t approach him again.

I would not be my mom. He didn’t want to work with me, that was a problem, but I damn well wouldn’t beg. I was better than that.

I glanced over my shoulder at Cole’s back. He’d left me here. For all the worrying Audrey claimed he’d done at the hotel, he’d left me alone and unprotected.

Those warm feelings I’d started to have for Cole iced over. It must’ve been the magic that made me think there was something more to him than a grouchy asshole who terrorized

half the town and most of his staff. If he couldn't give even a little of himself, we'd never get past the lust that clouded every reasonable effort we made to control our powers.

I was all for the power of positive thinking, but he made it really fucking hard on me.

We approached the docks. Now that my partner was gone, I'd officially become a liability. They'd have to look out for me as much as the curse. Damn Cole.

A black cloud hung over what had once been a bustling station carrying tourists to and from our island. I hung back with Violet and Donovan, letting those with offensive magic take the lead. It wasn't necessary though. As we approached, it became clear why Finn and Thora had run back to us. But even with their speed power, they weren't fast enough.

“Motherfucker.” Wes shot a bolt of lightning into the sky, sending the curse's smoke swirling backward. Like it was mocking us.

Every ferry that had been docked was now halfway underwater and sinking fast. The fishing boats in the neighboring marina were in worse condition. Their hulls were split open and sticking straight up in the air as they bobbed on the water and slowly began to go under. A few residents had private docks, but I had no doubt the curse had already gotten to them.

Every boat around the island. Gone. Sunk beneath the dark ocean waters. And with them, any hope we had of staying alive if we lost the land beneath our feet.

The sinkhole the curse opened up on the beach hadn't been the start of the final phase. It had been a distraction. And we'd fallen for it.



Chapter 5.5

Cole

I fucked up. I got scared and I fucked up.

Damn it. I'd have to apologize. I *hated* apologizing. But I was in the wrong, no doubt. When I thought she'd been hurt, I lost my damn mind. I couldn't think straight. Then when she turned out to be fine, I shut her out. What the fuck was wrong with me?

I paced my room with my hands fisted in my hair. All these fucking knots and I didn't know where to begin untangling them.

Voices passed by my room. I tried to shut them out, but then I heard *her*. Like a moth, I was drawn to the light of her melodic laugh and sweet cadence. She was... on her way out to the beach? After what she just went through *yesterday*? No. Absolutely not.

There was no fucking way that was happening.

CHAPTER 6

Brooke

I ended up spending the night with Kenna and Galen. Galen had a way of compartmentalizing situations in a way that offered a different perspective. We'd lost our boats, but Galen seemed to think the curse had done that in hopes of drowning us in fear and panic. Essentially, he believed it was all a distraction. Which meant we were getting close to something it didn't want us to discover.

He didn't have to say it revolved around me and Cole. I was already well aware. Hoped it wasn't that important though, because I was officially done trying.

I thought I'd be sad about it, but I didn't feel anything other than empty.

Thankfully, spending time with Kenna and Galen helped take my mind off things. Being with the two of them almost felt like being home again. Not to mention, Wes and Audrey needed a break from my bullshit.

Though it would've been better if Cole wasn't holding my suitcase hostage in his room. Again. This time, I was too pissed at him to use my keycard and deal with another confrontation. I'd just wait until he went down to the dining hall and sneak in to grab my stuff.

Until then, I saw no reason to sit around the room moping. Kenna and Galen wanted to get a closer look at the sinkhole, and I wanted to clear my mind. Yesterday's yoga session had been a bust, but my head was full of too much Cole. Today, I vowed to remove negativity from my life. Starting with the pain-in-the-ass boulder I was tired of trying to roll up a hill.

Galen had one of his smaller machines with him, which beeped and whirred around the open pit on the beach. It was close enough to the water that I wasn't in danger of accidentally falling in while doing yoga. and it didn't interest me much anyway. I'd seen big holes before. I used to live in Arizona, home to possibly the most famous of big holes. It's not like the answers to what we were supposed to do next would be hidden within a deep pit of sand.

Kenna apparently had the same idea as me, since she quickly grew bored with whatever invisible energy field had Galen in its thrall, and she sat down in the sand at the halfway point between me and Galen—close enough to reach me if I ran into trouble—with her knees tucked to her chest. A small smile played on her lips as she watched him work.

I'd just taken off my clothes and stretched my limbs when Cole came thundering through the sand with a near-murderous

scowl. Awesome. How did he even know I was out here? Didn't he have better things to do, like kicking puppies and stealing candy from children?

He stopped in front of me, and to his credit, he kept his eyes firmly on my face. Despite the fact that my nipples had pebbled up and pointed straight at him the moment he appeared. Not my fault. My body lacked common sense.

My stomach fluttered as he stared me down. Must've been my magic stirring. Because this growly wall of muscle before me didn't do it for me. At all. Not even a tiny bit.

I narrowed my eyes at Kenna with my lips pinched tight against my teeth. She was supposed to be keeping an eye out for any enemies. Which, as far as I was concerned, included my thick-headed partner who couldn't seem to stop hurting my feelings.

She pretended not to notice.

"What do you want, Cole?" I turned my back to him and touched my toes, glaring at him from between my legs. "As you can see, I'm busy. You're interrupting my peace."

His frown cut deep grooves at the sides of his lush mouth. "What the hell are you doing out here? Are you trying to put yourself in danger?"

"What I do isn't any of your damn business." My curls skimmed the sand. "Since you've made it painfully clear you have no interest in this partnership, we have nothing left to say to each other."

“I might’ve acted irrationally last night. I don’t know how to handle any of this, and I keep fucking it up.” He looked as though every one of those words cost him a great deal of effort. But in the end, it was wasted. I was over it.

I dropped down to a plank and ignored him.

He cleared his throat. “I do care about our partnership.”

Oh, now he cared? For how long? Until the next time he lost control of his magic and made it my problem? No, thank you.

I’d already accepted that I wasn’t meant to use my magic. Cole was too big a hurdle to overcome. But if I tried with him again? If I let myself feel that power, that sense of purpose and growth, flow through my veins, only to have it ripped away again? That just might be the thing that broke me. I couldn’t risk it.

Better to keep things as they were. It’s not like we were the only pair bowing out. The chances of Rafe and Jocelyn overcoming their issues were slim to none.

I continued to ignore Cole, letting negative energy go as I changed to a downward dog position. And paid almost zero attention to the strangled sound rumbling from Cole’s chest. Torturing him only added to the sense of calm that descended over me.

“Are you really not going to talk to me?” he asked.

I completely shut him out. His voice, his man-cave scent, his dominant presence. I blocked it all as my mind cleared and I became one with nature. This was why I did this naked. Not

to punish dumb guys with rock-hard heads—that was just a side benefit—but to really feel in tune with the world. I loved the land behind my cottage, with my greenhouses and my bees, but being this close to the water heightened all of my senses.

It was amazing the things one could feel just by letting go of inhibitions.

“What do you want me to say? That I’m sorry for being such an asshole?” Cole crossed his thick arms over his chest. “That I won’t do it again?”

I snorted. We both knew that wasn’t true. Being a negative ass was as much a part of his nature as positivity was of mine. We were two opposite ends of a magnet. No wonder we were drawn to each other, despite having every reason in the world not to be.

“Honestly, Cole, I have no use for empty apologies.”

“She speaks,” he muttered under his breath.

“Unless you plan on joining me, you might as well go back to your room. We tried. It didn’t work out. No hard feelings.” I lifted a hand off my rubber mat and waved him away. “Bye.”

“Is that what it’ll take?” He unbuttoned the cuffs of his crisp white shirt.

This was not him going back to his room. Why wasn’t he going back to his room? I sat up, tucking my legs beneath me as I sat on my heels. “What are you doing?”

“Joining you.”

He dumped his shirt in the sand, and my jaw dropped when his pants soon followed. Within seconds, he stood before me, fully naked. I couldn't look away. Despite all his flaws, Cole Latham was fucking stunning. That was the only word that aptly fit a man who looked as though he'd been carved from golden marble by the world's horniest sculptor.

I licked my lips and his cock twitched, but he was all business. "Tell me how to pose."

"You can't be serious." I jumped to my feet. How was I supposed to tell him how to pose when I still hadn't picked my jaw up out of the sand?

"Oh my God." Kenna's shrill voice startled me out of my shocked state, and it was only when I turned my gaze to her that I realized I'd totally been eye-fucking Cole's cock and he didn't even rub my nose in it. "Why don't I ever have a camera with me?"

Cole scowled at her, not bothering to cover himself. I mean, honestly, the man had nothing to be ashamed of and he damn well knew it.

"I think they're good out here now." Galen grabbed Kenna's arm and pulled her away. Since I had my partner with me, it was safe to assume we could handle things on our own if the curse decided to make an appearance again.

"Cole Latham is about to do naked yoga." Kenna flung her arm in our general direction. "I know you're you and I love you for it, but how isn't your head exploding? And more importantly, why aren't we filming?"

Galen gave her a sheepish grin and pulled her against him. Whatever he whispered in her ear had her cheeks turning pink and he was able to lead her away without any resistance. I softened as I watched them head back to their room. No one deserved happiness like Galen. He was too pure for this earth.

I turned back to Cole with my hand on my popped-out hip, the smile I had for Galen and Kenna still playing around my lips. “How do we always find ourselves here?”

“You’re the exhibitionist. I’m just following your lead.”

“I meant at odds. I know how we always end up naked.” He opened his mouth and I held up a hand to silence him. He clamped his jaw shut, a little tighter than necessary. I had a feeling he wasn’t in the habit of being interrupted. “You know what? This is perfect.”

His eyes narrowed. “What’s perfect?”

If anyone needed to relax and get in touch with his surroundings, it was Cole. He was so tense and agitated all the time. It was no wonder he couldn’t get a grip on his powers. Metals came from the earth, and Cole was a shiny glass office complex with a paved-over parking lot in human form. He was completely out of touch with his element.

I just needed him to dig deeper into himself. Getting him out of the suit was a start, but he needed to really feel his magic. Respect it, not fear what he’d do with it.

“We’re going to try something.” I kept my voice soft and light, the way one might approach an injured dog with a real

mean bite. “Hook your pinky with mine.”

“What kind of promises are you trying to get me to make, sunshine?” A wry grin tugged at his lips. Not a smile, not yet, but we’d get there.

“No promises. This is just a start. We’re going to let our powers speak to each other.”

Just like he followed my lead when it came to all things fun, I needed to follow his lead when it came to his difficulty with communication.

I didn’t miss the way his eyes tracked my body with a mix of hunger and trepidation. He wanted me, while also being worried about what touching me the way he wanted would do to his magic. But we could start with a pinky. A pinky never hurt anyone.

He let out a deep exhale and hooked his smallest finger around mine.

Light flared from our palms. Not the blinding sparks that pinwheeled around us when I mashed my body against his, but a softer glow. If these were different circumstances and we were different people, I’d even say it was a romantic glow. But there was nothing romantic about Cole. He was built for hard, fast, toe-curling fucking.

My magic came alive, swirling around inside me in enormous dips and turns. Like a rubber ball full of light and fresh flowers bouncing around inside me and leaving a trail of stardust in its wake. Like the giddy, heady freefall of a first

crush. That first kiss of sunlight after a long winter. Joy. That's what my magic was. Pure, unfiltered joy.

The urge to grow rose within me and I let it flow. A bed of bright red poppies rose from the sugary sand and bloomed under the silver glow of the moon. I let out a gasp of delighted surprise. I missed my garden and this felt like a gift. An offering. My magic's way of saying it understood me and it wanted what I wanted. We were one.

But my magic was soon threaded with something else. A different kind of power. An intense storm cloud of energy. It crackled on the edges and sent a zing of electricity up my arm, drawing out goosebumps and stealing the very air from my lungs.

It didn't take the joy from my magic, more like it became a guard dog for it. It wrapped around me and bared its teeth like it might tear out the throat of anyone who threatened it. It was fierce, protective, and sexually charged enough to make a slight moan escape from my lips.

At the sound, Cole narrowed his gaze on my mouth. All that crazed sexual energy radiating off him in waves. The power of it nearly sent me to my knees. And that was just from our pinkies touching. Good Lord. I was in over my head with this.

I turned my gaze back to my garden, where sharp shafts of iron popped up around it. Almost resembling a fence. Pulled right from the core of the earth to surround my flowers and keep them safe from any harm. The curse's dark fog had

scattered, beaten back by something as simple as some blooming flowers.

But as I watched my poppies sway in the gentle night breeze, I understood what Cole was, what his magic was, and what we could do together. I could grow beautiful things, nourishing things, life-giving things, and Cole would always, always be there to protect them. And me.

That's what he was at his core. A protector.

And he had no clue. He didn't see a gate protecting my flowers. He saw shards of metal that could hurt and wound. The realization of it nearly made me stumble. I'd been so wrong about him. Everyone had been so wrong about him. Hell, he'd been wrong about himself. He'd built up this wall, this persona of the consummate asshole, but that wasn't who he was at all.

That was just the shield he used to protect himself.

I let go of Cole and pressed a hand to my stomach. "That was..."

"Intense." Cole ground his teeth as he palmed his cock, which looked hard enough to split the world in half. "I'm sorry... I... need..."

He gave his cock a firm stroke and I felt the pull of it in my core. It was too much, that energy between us. He needed to come, but he wouldn't do it with me. Not when our magic was in control of our urges. I felt that through our connection. He

was moody, withdrawn, a dark cloud on a sunny day, but underneath it all, he was fiercely, unequivocally protective.

He'd turn the world into a molten pile of rubble before he'd let anyone hurt me. Including himself. And he'd never let anyone know. Never let anyone see that side of himself. All they saw was a gruff, surly asshole with a bad attitude.

They had no clue what bubbled beneath his surface.

When he gripped the base of his cock with a pained expression on his face, I wanted nothing more than to see him let go. I loved that he protected me, but I didn't need protection right now. What I needed was a connection. And because he wouldn't touch me while our magic was still going wild, I'd have to take matters into my own hand. Literally.

With my gaze on him, I licked my fingers and dipped them between my already soaking folds. His eyes widened. "What are you doing?"

His voice was strangled, guttural. I wanted more. I wanted his undoing. "Touch yourself. I know you won't touch me, but we need to come. Let me see."

The groan he let out vibrated through my core. I circled my clit as the air around us stilled. Even the waves quieted so all I could hear was the mingling of our heavy breathing and the wet sounds my pussy made as I fingered myself while he watched with a darkening gaze.

It was all the permission he needed. He shuttled his hand up and down the length of his cock and let out a shudder. This

was what he'd been craving. What we both deserved after the last few days. A release. The chance to let go and let our animalistic selves take over, even if just for a little while.

“Faster.” The words cracked and I licked my dry lips. “Jerk yourself faster for me. Let me see you lose control.”

He pulled hard on his cock, his eyes never leaving mine. “Try to keep up, sunshine.”

My inner walls clenched against my fingers as he jerked himself hard and fast, just like I knew he'd like it. I imagined him inside me, all around me. My fingers became his fingers. I pinched my nipples and they became the bite of his teeth. I was so close, I'd never gotten myself off this fast, but with his eyes on me, I couldn't hold it in anymore.

My toes dug into the sand, the bottoms of my feet cramped, almost knocking me to the ground, and I exploded.

“Cole.” His name was the only sound I could make as wave after wave of pleasure washed over me, drowned me, dragged me down to the depths of hell, and there was no place else I wanted to be. He wasn't even touching me, but he was everywhere.

“Fuck. Brooke. Fuck.” With one final tug, he spilled himself into the sand. With his head tipped back, his lips between his teeth, and the veins sticking out on his neck and forearms, it was the hottest thing I'd ever seen in my entire life.

Watching Cole Latham come undone was enough to set me off again. My nails dug into my palm as I fingered myself

through another round of bone-melting pleasure. I masturbated all the time, sometimes twice a day, and it had never been like that. Never that quick, never that powerful, never that... fulfilling.

As the high of what we'd just done began to wear off, a pink flush spread over Cole's cheeks. I'd wanted to jump his bones for a while now. I'd never once denied that I found Cole attractive, and I was comfortable enough with my sexuality that admitting that didn't shame me. But it had exclusively been about sex. About the things I knew our bodies could do to each other. This small show of vulnerability from him was different. It made my heart trip over itself, and I had no clue what to do about that.

Cole was the worst kind of guy to develop genuine feelings for.

Refusing to meet my eyes, he grabbed his pants off the ground and roughly put them back on, like he was mad about whatever emotions were rolling through him. It was almost enough to make me feel a little bit sorry for the poor guy.

He felt something real and didn't know what to do. And I couldn't even blame him. It freaked me out plenty, and I was actually in tune with my feelings.

"Hey." I laid a hand on his arm and quickly pulled it away when our magic sparked. "That was fun. It doesn't have to be more than that if you don't want."

He turned his gaze on me with so many of the things he kept caged swirling in his eyes, it made me wonder how I could

have ever thought he was unfeeling. “I don’t think what I want is up for consideration in any of this.”

I pinched my lips together. I could’ve taken that as an insult after what we just did with each other—and it did sting a little, I was still human—but in my heart, I knew that hadn’t been about me. It had been a slap at himself. There was so much he wanted, and none of it matched up with who he thought he was, or who he’d always been according to everyone else.

No wonder he was a mess.

Instead of giving him a hard time about it, though, I let him get dressed with an angry scowl etched on his beautiful face and didn’t say a word. We were making progress, but it was going to be baby steps with Cole. Good thing for him that I was a Cancer. Patience was one of my strongest attributes.

CHAPTER 7

Cole

“Put some goddamn clothes on already.” I was being a dick for no reason and I knew it, but I couldn’t seem to stop myself.

For the past two days, I’d spent more time naked than clothed with Brooke, and it didn’t do a damned thing to calm the inferno that raged inside of me. She was too soft, too delicate, and I was too... me.

She was the kind of woman who deserved to make love on a bed of rose petals. Who belonged in a field of flowers. Not with a monster who wanted to throw her down in the sand and fuck her until her legs gave out and she had to crawl to me if she wanted more.

Even that damned flower garden she’d grown out of nothing was marred by the iron spikes that came from my own magic. All we’d done was touch pinkies and I was shooting metal up from the ground and then jacking off in front of her like a fucking pervert.

The urge to shut down and walk away from her again overwhelmed me. I handled business, I kept people in line, I balanced numbers, but I didn't know shit about how to deal with the way Brooke had me tangled up. I couldn't do what my instinct demanded. And I was on thin ice with her as it was.

As much as she drove me out of my mind, I didn't want to drive her away. I needed her. I hated that. Hated admitting it to myself, but I did. That didn't mean I had to be happy-go-lucky about it, though.

She hesitated before grabbing her clothes off the ground, like she wanted to stay naked just to spite me. Which almost made me grin. I liked her attitude, even when she was flinging it at me with more might than someone that small should've been able to carry.

She gave me a saucy little smirk that had my cock stirring. "Are you always this crabby after you come?"

Christ. I rubbed a hand down the length of my face. "Depends. Are you always going to be this chipper?"

"After I come twice like that? Absolutely." Her smirk turned softer, flirtier. "Bet you can't make it three."

I groaned. "You're killing me. Can we stay focused on magic, please. Believe it or not, I care about doing more with you than just fucking."

She put a hand over her heart and fluttered her lashes. "That's the sweetest thing anyone's ever said to me."

“I find that hard to believe.”

Her expression changed to something more serious and unreadable, but she quickly shook it off. “Anyway. Let’s talk about what we did here.”

She gestured to the garden of bright red flowers surrounded by iron spikes, but before she could get another word out, the sound of crunching leaves crackled in the air. Like a large metal tube rolling over the underbrush in the forest.

I knew what that sound meant. Wes had been warning me for weeks.

Without a second thought, I grabbed Brooke and pushed her behind me. She stumbled and grabbed my waist for balance. My hands flared with a blood-red light as I shoved my palm outward. Shards of metal pulled from the deepest parts of the earth shot out of the sand.

Sweat dripped down my temple as I struggled to maintain control, to not lose it like I had that night on the beach. But Brooke’s hands on me felt too damn good. I couldn’t hold the thread of my magic and keep her at arm’s length at the same time. Something was going to give.

The metal expanded and reformed, spreading in front of me like a large shield. Blocking the view in front of me. I had no idea what was coming, but I was too fucking scared to move. Terrified I’d lose my tenuous hold and end up hurting Brooke.

A soft snicket cut toward us, and the metal wall in front of me curved over our heads. Just in time to stop a dozen black

arrows from running through us. Their sharp points poked through the near-liquid metal and stilled like flies on sticky paper.

The flexible shield continued to twist and mold around us, black irons, dull gray aluminums, patina-coated brass, all mixing and melding together. Being this close, the heat should've burned our skin off, but it was cool to the touch. Like water.

Brooke's large gray eyes widened with wonder as she touched a finger to the metal and it rippled. "Whoa. That's the coolest thing I've ever seen."

She didn't sound afraid of my power. She didn't approach it with trepidation. She looked at it like it was something special, and I couldn't help but absorb that feeling. Like maybe, just maybe, she felt the same way about me.

The crackling of dead leaves started up again, and I pulled her down to the sand and covered her body with mine, every one of my protective instincts kicking in. "Stay down."

The metal continued to twist and reshape itself until it formed a dome over us. The only thing I could see was Brooke's frightened face in the glow of our magic coming off our palms. We'd been sealed in so tight, I didn't know if even air could escape.

"Cole." Brooke's voice shook as she gripped my arm.

"Shh, it's going to be okay." My voice seemed to settle her nerves. She melted against me, and I held her close, willing to

give my life to keep this woman safe.

A scratching sound interrupted the quiet dark of our metal cocoon. A high-pitched screech that made my teeth hurt. I cringed as Brooke burrowed harder against me.

“Come out.” The disembodied voice sounded like a mix of what had burrowed into my head in the curse’s fog and something that lived in the dirt. Ancient and decaying. *“Come out and play. You’re so hard. So tough. Show her. Show her the man you really are.”*

Brooke paled beside me and I had a feeling the curse was whispering an entirely different set of instructions to her.

“Don’t listen to it,” I said.

“Kind of hard not to.” She gave me a humorless laugh. “What should we do? Stay here cowering under this dome?”

A loud bang against the shell made my brain rattle around inside my skull, followed by more scratching. *“You can’t keep me out forever. I’ll find a way in and feast on your entrails.”*

The curse lied, but in this, I believed it. If we stayed here, scared to use our magic, scared to fight back, we were just handing ourselves over. We had power. It was untested and messy, but it wasn’t nothing. I’d never in my life rolled over for anyone or anything, and I wasn’t about to start now.

“Here’s what we’re going to do.” I kept my voice low, not that it would stop the curse if it could hear my thoughts. “I’m going to sink this dome into the sand and you’re going to hit whatever’s out there with your vines.”

“You can do that?” She looked at me like she’d never seen me before. “We haven’t practiced. How do you know if you can control your magic? How do you know if I can?”

“I trust that, when it comes down to it, you’ll know what to do. Do you trust me?”

“No.” Damn. No hesitation on her part.

“Do you trust our magic?”

She bit her lips together and gave me a short nod. Gripping her chin, I pressed my lips against hers, so much softer and gentler than she’d been expecting from me. “Good. Then let’s give this thing hell.”

I took her hand and clasped it so tightly in my own, I could feel the tempo of her heartbeat through her palm. If anything happened to her, if I couldn’t control my magic, I’d never forgive myself. She didn’t trust me, but she was giving me a chance anyway. She had no idea what that meant to someone who didn’t have anyone.

With one hand pressed against the ceiling of the metal dome, I let instinct guide me on what to do next. The metal rippled under my touch. Brooke watched in wonder beside me as it flowed back into the ground, like a waterfall with no ledge.

I stood and helped her up as iron, aluminum, and brass glinted in the pale light of the moon as the last of it dripped into the sand, revealing a monster with waxy gray skin that hung in folds off its rotting carcass. The six-inch nails on its

hands must've been what it used to scratch at the dome. It was covered in inky-black spikes and had bloody stumps jutting out of its shoulders where it might've once had wings. The snakes that made up its legs snapped and hissed at us.

Brooke stumbled back a step, but her face screwed up with determination as she raised a hand and a length of flowering vine shot out of the sand and wrapped around the creature.

“Hit him again.” I remained calm and steady in an attempt to be an anchor in the chaos for her. She pushed more of her magic outward and another length of ropelike vines wrapped around the beast. “Good girl.”

“Oh, God. You can't call me that when our magic is activated. I'm barely hanging on as it is.” Her voice had gone husky and her pupils dilated.

She was fighting a monster and horny as fuck while doing it. I couldn't stop the laugh that rumbled in my chest. “Really? Now?”

“Yes, now, damn it.” She released my hand and rubbed her palms over her rosy cheeks. I'd never seen a prettier shade of pink than the one that dusted Brooke's delicate face when she was flustered. “I can't help the effect your magic has on mine.”

The beast let out a roar, the black spikes on its arms shredding through the vines, but at least she'd managed to slow it down a bit. Grabbing her hand again, this time taking more magic from her than I gave, I pulled fiery metals from deep below the beach.

A molten ball, similar to the one that had risen over our heads two nights ago, broke the surface of the sand, leaving a gaping hole in its wake. Instead of continuing to rise, though, a series of long iron spikes popped up from the core, each one sounding like the slash of a sword against hot metal.

Once again, instinct took over. My magic spoke to me, not in gentle whispers, but in hollered commands, like a general on a bloody battlefield. Fight. Push ahead. Hold nothing back. I slammed my palm outward, meeting a blast of hot air and dense fog from the beast. Whatever horrors it was trying to create were held off by me. By my magic.

I closed my fist and the spiked ball zoomed forward, arching through the air at a speed that stood the hair on my arms on end. It hit the beast with the force of a bomb, and exploded into a cloud of dust that shot through the sky on a mushroom cloud.

The air cleared and the usual fog of dark smoke that blanketed the beach slithered into the rocks. Brooke gripped my hand hard enough to grind my bones together. “Did you kill him?”

“Doubt it.” According to Wes, this disappearing act was common. The beast was one of Nirah’s most powerful forms, though. And it had just met its match with my metal.

I had to admit, splitting that thing wide open had felt good. Really good. The air on my skin made me shudder and I glanced down to where Brooke’s hand was still clutched around mine. That explained some things.

I let go and took a step back, letting the magic flow through me and out of me before I did something really stupid, like blubber about how bad I wanted to get naked with her again. We'd done enough of that in the last few days. Any more, and she might start getting ideas.

I wasn't going to sleep with Brooke.

I wanted to. Fuck. I'd never wanted anything more in my life. But it was clear she only wanted me because of the magic between us. She didn't know me, she flat-out admitted she didn't trust me, she found me attractive, but that was just surface bullshit. She was the sun and I was the dark cloud that would block out her light if she let me get too close.

So I had to be careful. I'd have no part in ruining someone who never asked to get saddled with me in the first place. I knew what I was. Difficult, temperamental, an asshole on my best days. It was better for all involved if we did what we needed to do with our magic, learned how to use it, contribute however we were meant to, then went our separate ways.

When she looked at me like *that*, though, as if I'd done something that mattered, it almost made me think I could be more. More than the town prick. More than the guy who worked too much and didn't know how to communicate in a way others found socially acceptable and made most people cross the street when they saw me coming.

But that fact was, I was all those things. And no amount of temporary heroics would change that.

Brooke touched my arm, tentatively, like she really didn't trust me. Like she expected me to say something shitty because that was par for the course. "You did good."

Good. I was anything but. I ran my hands through my hair, frustrated with myself. Turning away from her, I breathed through my nose as I tried to get whatever the hell was going on with me under control. I didn't care what people thought of me. So why did I care what she thought? Why did I think I could be with her one minute, knowing full well that couldn't happen the next? Why did it eat away at me like this?

"Are you okay?" Her voice was small and I hated that she thought she had to shrink any part of herself for me. She deserved so much better.

"I'm fine." I gave her a smile that tripped closer to a grimace, but it was the best I could do. "We should probably get back to work. Unless you're looking to expose me to more fun?"

"That was not my idea of fun." She pointed to the spot where Nirah's beast had exploded before disappearing. "But I agree on the work part. We're getting better, but I still don't have any control over what I grow, and I'm guessing you have no idea what you'll pull out of the ground either."

She straightened her shoulders, so tough in her own way. The monstrous beast Nirah took on in his demon form was enough to send most people screaming into the night. We weren't close to out of danger, yet she wanted to stay here with

me and continue to practice. She said she didn't trust me, but maybe she did a little. I'd take a little, or whatever I could get.

She held out her hand and I took it, not missing the way she shivered as my thumb brushed over her palm. I shouldn't have done that, but when her big gray eyes turned hazy, I couldn't remember all the reasons why I should've given a damn. Her lips parted and I had to look away before I did something monumentally stupid. Like kiss her again.

Our palms sparked with light, her cherry red against my darker tone. Sun and night. This time, I let her take the lead, pushing my magic into her and letting her take as much as she needed from me.

"You feel..." She pressed a hand to her stomach. "Strong. Solid." Her eyes fluttered shut. "So good."

She was killing me. Killing me dead. "Focus or I'm done here."

"Such a grump." She winked at me and I scowled. I couldn't help it. It was my go-to expression. "I forgot; you don't like fun." Sucking in a deep breath and wiggling her shoulders, she pushed her free palm outward. "Okay, let's give this a try."

From the sand, another tangle of those flowery vines burst through the surface, their pointed tips swaying as if scanning the immediate area for threats. Brooke huffed out a breath, which caused a loose curl to flutter over her forehead. She swept it up with the rest of her hair, twisting it into a knot at the top of her head.

“Another vine.” She crossed her arms, pushing her breasts higher, nearly spilling out of her thin tank top. I swallowed thickly and kept my gaze on her face. Like a fucking gentleman.

“What do you feel when using your power?” I asked.

“Like I can do more.” She dropped her gaze to her chest. “I feel it inside me. I know I can grow whatever I want, but something is blocking me.”

If I had to guess, I’d say that thing blocking her was... me. She should’ve been partnered with someone like her. They could’ve held hands and skipped their way into magical bliss. Even if the thought of her touching someone else—or touching herself like she had in front of me—had me grinding my molars to dust.

She shook off whatever dark thoughts clouded her mind and put on a sunny smile that was only half-fake. “We’ll figure it out. Let’s try again.”

A loud pop went off in the distance, followed by another, then another. Brooke and I glanced at each other, then up to the hotel, where the lights on the veranda went out one by one. Too purposeful to be a normal electrical shortage.

“Come on.” I took her hand, pushing and pulling our power between us, building a charge in case we needed to use it.

Running through the sand slowed us down. By the time we reached the back entrance to the hotel, Galen, Kenna, Wes, and Audrey had all gathered outside. Galen and Kenna brushed ash

and soot off their shoulders, but they were too late. The curse's fog had taken out all the hotel's outdoor lights and had made a play at a handful of streetlamps on Stardust Parkway.

"We caught it trying to slip in through the door." Galen adjusted his glasses, uncomfortable with the attention that was now on him. "It might go for the lights inside next."

"Why does it care about the lights?" I asked. "What purpose does that serve?"

"I think..." Audrey's face paled as she clutched Wes's arm. "There might've been more to the legend than we thought. Maybe it only blocked out the sun for the original descendants because that was their main source of light back then."

Fuck. I glanced at Brooke, who wore a grim expression as the same understanding dawned on her. The next step wasn't to sink the island into the sea. Not yet. First it had to finish blocking out the light. Which didn't just mean the sun.

Our power grid was now under attack.

While I should've been relieved we weren't at the end yet, when we were still so woefully unprepared, it didn't do anything to settle my nerves. Because this phase was on me and Brooke, and I had no clue what the fuck we were supposed to do with a bunch of twisted metal and a handful of vines.

Another street lamp further down the road blinked out.

Whatever it was we needed to do, we didn't have time to screw around. We had to figure it out, and fast, before we were

all plunged into total darkness for good.

CHAPTER 8

Brooke

After the final street lamp went out, the curse seemed to burn out its energy. Or it had sent the message it intended. Either way, we now fully understood the problem we had on our hands, and what we needed to do. Stop the curse from shutting down the power grid.

Being trapped here and not having the sun was taking its toll on the residents, who continued to crowd closer to the hotel, but losing all light would send people into a panic. With no electricity and nothing to distract them from the impending horrors the curse was still waiting to dole out, fear would drive them to do unthinkable things. We couldn't let that happen.

I wanted to get right back to practicing, but Cole had other ideas. He claimed he needed to talk to Wes and Donovan. Apparently, he was Mr. Proactive now.

I wanted to push back, but at the same time, I needed a breather too. Cole was insanely intense. And having all of that energy pushed into me and run through my veins did funny things to me. Things I was still figuring out.

And while it felt like he'd put up a firm wall between us, I let him. That was part of me being a good partner too. It had only recently occurred to me that Cole was deeply introverted and sometimes he just had to be alone to recharge. It wasn't a bad thing.

So I took the opportunity to grab Audrey and Violet for some much-needed girl time. They'd been so caught up in their new lives with their soulmates, we hadn't spent nearly as much time together as we used to. Which wasn't a big deal. We were all usually pressed for time in the summer for tourist reasons. But right now, I needed my friends and their blunt advice.

Violet grabbed an armful of wine bottles from the kitchen and brought them out to the now pitch-dark veranda. Audrey brought some candles from her room. It was downright cozy.

As water signs, the three of us would've much rather sat closer to the beach, but Wes, Donovan, and Cole threw an absolute fit. Especially after Cole told them about what happened behind the black rocks with Nirah's beast. Since I didn't want the menfolk hanging around and ruining girl time, we settled for keeping close to the hotel.

I was going to lose my mind if I was forced to stay here the whole time, though. I was used to the wide-open space of my property and wasn't meant to be confined to a small box. At least I hadn't been stopped from doing yoga every day. I would scream if that were the case.

I took a long pull from my bottle and pointed it at Audrey. “Tell me Wes doesn’t intend to keep us holed up here until the end. Because we’re not actually safe. We’re not doing anything at all but waiting for the curse to finish us off.”

She gave me a bland stare. “Believe it or not, sitting around and doing nothing isn’t our idea of a good time either, but we’re waiting on you and Cole to figure your shit out before we can do anything to move forward.”

“Welp.” I took another swallow. “That sucks.”

“You’re making progress, though. Right?” Violet’s big sky-colored eyes swarmed with a dozen questions she wouldn’t ask, preferring to prod me into revealing whatever I was comfortable with sharing. “I ran into Kenna on my way down to the kitchen and she told me that Cole did naked yoga with you.”

“Kenna has a big mouth,” I muttered.

“Hold on.” Audrey’s eyes bugged out as she held a hand up. “Cole. My soon-to-be brother-in-law? The grouchiest grump to ever walk this island did naked yoga? And no one got this on film? I need details.”

“We didn’t get around to the yoga.” I hid my face behind the bottle.

While I tended to tell Audrey and Violet everything, sometimes too much, what Cole and I did on the beach felt too personal. Like it was just meant for us. And I knew for a fact Cole wouldn’t appreciate it if I was out here gossiping about

him, and I wanted to respect his privacy as my partner and my... friend? Companion? Mutual masturbation buddy?

Whatever the hell we were, we were in this together, and he'd been mostly considerate of me, despite his less-than-glowing reputation.

Audrey gave me a sly smile. "Okay. Keep your secrets, dirty girl."

For some reason, Violet suddenly went red as well and was quick to change the subject. "Tell us more about your magic. What exactly can the two of you do together?"

I went on to explain everything that had happened recently, from my perspective, since Cole was just about the facts. They both knew about the seaweed incident that first night on the beach. And the skinny-dipping. The strange metal ball Cole had pulled out of the ocean, and the vines that still swayed just above the water's surface. They also knew, for the most part, what had happened with Nirah's beast.

I ended up telling them my suspicion about Cole's power being rooted in his deeper nature to protect, and the feeling that I was meant to do more than pull up vines from the earth. Keeping everything to myself had been weighing on me. I was someone who liked to hammer out details with other people. I thrived on human connection. And they both agreed there was something specific, a job that only Cole and I could tackle, that would change everything.

I just had to figure out what it was.

There was so much I didn't understand about my magic or Cole's, or what we could do together, but I could feel in my gut there was more. So far, we hadn't really worked together at all. We'd done what we needed to do as far as touching and using our individual powers went, but we weren't using them the way the others had before their lights combined.

We were basically treating each other like jumper cables. The spark we needed to get our own engines revving, when in reality, we were part of the same car.

"It's interesting." Audrey tapped a finger to her lips. "So far, all the pairs have had either offensive or defensive magic. But it looks like you and Cole have both. His metal is offensive and your vines play defense. That makes the two of you really powerful."

"Huh." I hadn't really thought of it that way. I'd wrapped my vines around Nirah's beast, but hadn't been able to do more than slow him down, while Cole had been able to obliterate him into dust. His magic was definitely offensive, and I truly expected nothing less from him, but I hadn't given the purpose of mine as much thought. "I feel like I'm supposed to grow food. Or something like that. Something nourishing."

It sounded silly to me when I said it out loud. We had an entire curse on the loose, threatening to sink our island into the sea and kill us all. Yet here I was, worried about playing *FarmVille* with my magic. It must've been the Cancer in me

that wanted to care and nurture. My power didn't surprise me, even if what I was supposed to do with it still mystified me.

Violet laid a gentle hand on my arm. "I don't think growing food is a bad idea at all."

"People will freak out once Constellations' shelves become completely bare, and we're not far off from that." Audrey pinched her lips between her teeth. Just the thought of running out of food while we were trapped here was a constant worry in the back of all our minds. "I think your magic will go a long way toward keeping panic at bay."

"Yeah, but then what?" I appreciated that Audrey and Violet were trying to make me feel useful, but there had to be more. There had to be a reason why I was given this power, and it wasn't for fruits and vegetables. "How does my magic help with the curse?"

"I don't know," Violet said.

"That's one of those things you have to figure out with your partner," Audrey said.

I slumped back in my chair. "Goody."

Getting Cole to do anything was like pulling teeth. He was open to practicing, but he was weirdly protective of me in a way that I would've normally found sweet, but which didn't help us test the limits of our magic. He didn't seem to trust or understand that I was capable in my own right. It felt like he'd pulled back more for my benefit than his own, when what we really needed to do was push forward.

Maybe we needed to aim our magic at each other, like Wes and Audrey had done, and see what kind of results we'd get. I chuckled to myself and shook my head. There was no way Cole would aim his metal at me. He'd nearly quit altogether when it had exploded outside his control the night we went skinny-dipping. Even though I hadn't gotten hurt at all.

I took another drink. "I'm not sure where to go from here."

"Have you considered sitting on his face?" Violet slurred that last word, but she had a mischievous glint in her eye that told me she was speaking directly from personal experience. "Those Latham boys like eating pussy almost as much as they like bossing people around."

"Okay, that's enough wine for you." Audrey took the bottle from Violet and took a long pull before wiping her mouth with the back of her arm. "But she's not lying."

I pointed my now empty wine bottle at the three of them—Violet, Audrey, and the fuzzy shape of the two of them blurred together in the middle. That should've been my cue that I'd had enough wine too, but I cracked open a second bottle. "I don't care if Cole has a doctorate in cunnilingus, face-sitting is not a feasible way to solve conflicts."

"Says who?" The warm humor in Donovan's voice had the blood draining from my face.

Violet let out a high-pitched giggle that bordered on hysterical, and Audrey had that dewy cow-eyed look that took over her expression whenever Wes was near. Which probably meant... Oh, God. I buried my face in my hands.

The strong, spicy scent of cedar and leather enveloped me as Cole whispered in my ear. “I’m more than happy to give it a try anyway.”

“I can’t hear you right now,” I hummed. “Too busy dying of humiliation, thanks.”

His chuckle caused all the hair on my arms to stand on end as a series of goosebumps quickly followed. And that was just from a low-level chuckle. If Cole actually laughed, like a real, full-on belly laugh, my poor ovaries would probably explode. RIP.

“I told you they were up to no good.” Wes picked up Audrey like she was no heavier than a gallon of milk, and plunked her on his lap. Guess the boys were staying for a while. “When I saw Violet sneaking out of the kitchen with the wine, I knew it was all over.”

“How much did you drink?” Donovan lifted Violet up until she was straddling his waist and gripped her ass tight enough to leave indents. The two of them had zero shame and a bit of an exhibitionist streak. “You know you’re a lightweight, Cricket.”

“Pssh. I’m fine.” Violet tried to swat him and almost fell out of his arms backward. She giggled and hiccupped while Donovan looked at her like she held the moon and stars.

Meanwhile, I finally had a partner willing to work with me. A partner who had gotten himself off in front of me while I did the same. A guy who was willing to do naked yoga with me to get me to talk. But who now stood like a stone statue erected

in honor of the god of grouchiness. Even when I had someone, I still felt like the fifth wheel.

I crossed my arms. “You two have ruined every single girls’ night since you pulled your heads out of your asses and I’m over it. Go find something else to do. We’re busy drinking and gossiping and don’t need any interjections from all of you.”

“Damn, you’re a mean drunk, Brooke.” Donovan shook his head.

“I think she’s just mean,” Wes said. “She told me to fuck off the other night.”

“And she used to be so sweet. Must be all that built-up tension.” Donovan rubbed a hand over his beard. “If only there was a way for you to relieve some of that.”

Wes and Donovan gave Cole a pointed look.

“For fuck’s sake.” I threw my hands in the air while everyone except Cole and me laughed.

When I peered up at him, I anticipated his signature scowl, which was present as expected, but there was also a twinkle of amusement in his eyes that I might’ve missed if I hadn’t spent the last few days in his close proximity, feeling his moods.

“Not you too,” I hissed under my breath.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” His voice was the same stern tone as always, but his lip twitched, and I clenched my thighs together in response.

Good Lord. Even an almost-smile did it for me these days. Maybe Wes and Donovan were right. Maybe I did need to relieve a little of that tension.

Wes pressed a soft kiss to Audrey's temple, then stood and deposited her back in her beach chair, trailing his fingers along her jaw like he still couldn't believe she was his. "We're not interrupting girls' night. We just stopped by on our way to clean up the beach."

Donovan gave Violet's ass another squeeze that was full of promise for later and set her on her feet. "Gotta make ourselves useful somehow. And Gabriella will be happy for all the scrap metal."

Gabriella was a metal artist who split her time, and her pieces, between the island and the mainland. She'd picked a bad month to be here, and now she couldn't leave again. The metal was a peace offering of sorts. She was starting to gain notoriety, which was good for tourism. But who even knew if she'd want to come back after this.

Who even knew if there would be an island for her to come back to.

"I think that's a lovely idea. She'll appreciate it." I gave Cole a tentative smile.

I hoped he'd get the chance to see what Gabriella could do with the metal he'd pulled out of the sandy ocean floor. I wished nothing more than for him to understand how much beauty there was to what he could do. His magic wasn't just a weapon. It was something he could celebrate and cherish and

make something with. His power scared him. I understood that. But I also wanted him to see, really see, that his power could do so much more.

It made me wonder, not for the first time, what our magic could do together. Everyone saw beauty in flowers and pretty things, but there was beauty in all the natural elements. Gabriella could see that. The people who flocked here from all over to buy her pieces could see that. If only Cole could see it too.

The guys walked away, the three of us staring after them as they headed further down the beach. The cloud-covered moonlight turned their broad-shouldered forms into distant shadows, and still, we watched them. All of us with varying shades of hunger in our gaze.

“So anyway.” Audrey gathered up the remaining wine bottles. “We’re totally going to go down there and catcall them while they get all sweaty hauling metal, yes?”

Violet jumped up. “Hell yeah.”

I stood on shaky legs and nodded dumbly. Just the thought of Cole sweaty and shirtless, especially now that I’d had a good look at what he was packing beneath that perpetually professional attire, had my knees going weak.

Why was I so insistent on girls’ night again?

Oh, right. Because we were strong, gifted, independent women who didn’t need men to have a good time. Most of the

time. But this was an opportunity that rarely presented itself, and it would be foolish not to take advantage of it.

So we followed the boys around the black rocks, opposite from where I did my yoga, down to the less-populated part of the beach where Cole and I had skinny-dipped not so long ago.

Seeing the sharp ends and twisted tumbleweeds of different types of metal spread all over the beach was jarring the second time around. The first time, I'd been so hopped up on finally getting to use my magic, and having my pussy pushed up hard against Cole's abs, that I didn't really take in what he'd done.

No wonder he'd been so freaked out. It looked like the leftovers of a gruesome battle that had no survivors. Sharp black prongs of iron speared out of the ground, some of them as long as six feet. Large balls of twisted metal that resembled a tangle of barbed-wire fencing had been dropped in a zigzag pattern in the sand. There were smaller, nail-like shards embedded in the black rock. All of it as furious and fascinating as the man who'd controlled those pieces and bent them to his will. Even if he didn't believe he had any control whatsoever.

"This must've been what Simba felt like when he stumbled into the elephant graveyard." Violet shivered and rubbed her arms.

"It's creepy, but kind of cool." Audrey touched her finger to the end of a four-foot metal spear made of dull copper. She found all magic interesting. Even the kind that would make most people uneasy. "I knew Cole's power would be something strong, but even after I saw what he'd done to that

chair at the last town hall meeting, I wouldn't have guessed this.”

They hadn't said anything disparaging, but I still bristled. I didn't like them eyeing his magic like it was a sideshow act in a circus. Especially when Audrey had the ability to zap anything in her path to dust. The last thing Cole needed was more people commenting on how scary or volatile he was.

“I don't see how this is any worse than electricity,” I said.

Audrey startled and gave me an understanding nod. “You're right. All offensive magic is a weapon. As it should be. It's just different seeing something so solid.”

I got that too. I blew out a breath. I didn't even know why I was being so defensive. They really hadn't said anything shitty about Cole's magic, and it was a lot to take in. Even for me, and I'd seen him in action several times now.

I piled my hair on top of my head and pinned it there. “Sorry. I'm not sure why I'm being so touchy about this.”

“Because you care about him.” Audrey gave me a soft smile. “It's good to see. I've long thought Cole could use a few more people in his life who'd stick up for him instead of antagonizing him just because he's not comfortable expressing his feelings.”

Audrey always knew the exact right thing to say to clear the air, and I released a long breath and put the bright smile I was known for back on my face. “Should we get on with the

business of catcalling? These boys aren't going to be this sweaty forever.”

The guys had already gotten a good jump on the work ahead. They'd started from the farthest corner and had a decent pile built up. And they were indeed shirtless. My mouth went dry as a bead of sweat rolled between the shoulder blades of Cole's strong back.

The other guys probably had a similar thing going on, none of the Lathams were hard on the eyes, but I could only see Cole. His quiet humor, his outwardly stoic manner, the comfort with his own body, the depths people rarely saw.

God, I needed him. Bad.

Violet skipped ahead of us and took a long pull from the bottle, then dropped it at her feet and cupped her mouth. “Woohoo, look at those sexy boys putting in work.”

“Yeah, baby.” Audrey stepped up next to her with just as much enthusiasm. “Work those muscles. Show that metal who's boss.”

I laughed so hard I nearly snorted wine out of my nose as Wes and Donovan strutted along the beach like they were on a catwalk. “Put that metal on its knees and tell it what a good girl it's being, sitting there all pretty like that.”

“Damn.” Audrey elbowed me. “Good one.”

“Jesus Christ.” Cole rubbed his hands over his face, and it pleased me to see a slight tinge of pink dusting his cheeks. “How the fuck are we supposed to get shit done like this.”

“Fuck getting work done.” Donovan threw his last bit of metal onto the pile and rushed Violet, throwing her over his shoulder and smacking her ass. “I’m out.”

“I’m out too.” Wes dropped his metal, not even bothering to aim for the pile.

He scooped up Audrey, wrapping her legs around his waist and kissing her deeply enough to have me blushing. Then he carried her off the same as Donovan had Violet, leaving me and Cole alone on the beach.

“You fucked up boys’ night,” he said, though he didn’t seem the least bit mad about it.

“Come up, grumpy. You don’t like spending time with people anyway.” I took his hand, and our lights, bright cherry against dark red, immediately sparked.

Magic, hotter and harder than anything I’d experienced before, rushed through me. It had me squeezing my thighs tightly together as wetness pooled between my legs. And once again, I wasn’t wearing underwear.

A muscle in Cole’s jaw ticked. I wasn’t the only one feeling that hard shot of arousal. It made me weightless and heavy all at once. My bones liquified as the rest of me turned to fire. I needed him now. Hard. Fast. Full. Now.

Cole pushed his magic at me at the same time I pushed mine at his. Accidentally, since I was too drunk to have the sense to hold any part of myself back from him, but the effects were immediate. The intensity of my arousal had my knees

buckling, and ten vines sprang out of the ground. Longer and thicker than anything I'd been able to produce to date.

But they didn't just sway helplessly in the breeze. They crawled across the sand and gathered up the remaining scraps of metal, dragging it all to the pile where the guys had been collecting it for Gabriella.

They weren't picking up for housekeeping reasons. They were clearing a circle.

Once the metal had been moved out of the way and the beach was once again clean, the ten vines held still around the perimeter of the circle they'd created. Too far apart for either of us to touch more than one at a time. Cole glanced at me with wide eyes.

This wasn't just the work of my magic. It was his magic too.

New metals sprang out of the ground, from deeper down than Cole had previously tapped into. Golden in color and humming a soft melody I didn't know, but recognized from a long-forgotten dream. It quieted as soon as the metal wrapped around the vines, burning with intense heat, then cooling so quickly, sparks of starlit ice flecked off the surface.

The vines stilled. Ten gold stalks that resembled wider, smoother bamboo shoots stood in a circle, towering twelve feet in the air.

CHAPTER 9

Cale

Brooke was piss-ass drunk. And fuck me for finding it cute. I didn't find anything cute. Not puppies, not bunnies, not babies. Nothing. Yet here I was. Using the word cute on a woman who was stumbling around with her hair in a twisted mess on top of her head and a little bit of drool sticking to the corner of her mouth. What the fuck was happening to me?

Not only was she a cute drunk, but she had to go and grab my hand when all her inhibitions were down, and that barrier that she kept between us became nonexistent. She might not have even realized how guarded she was with me, since she was so warm and open with everyone else. But I felt it.

Every time she touched me, I felt just how much she held back. I wasn't the only stubborn one in this partnership, despite what she wanted to believe.

What had happened as a result of her night of debauchery with my future sisters-in-law was a powerful kick of magic neither one of us saw coming. She still didn't trust me. And I

didn't really trust her either. If we were on the same page with each other, like we'd need to be in order to work together with any kind of success, then my dick wouldn't be harder than the metal poles our combined magic pulled out of the sand.

But it turned out that Brooke's drunk lizard brain didn't have any interest in keeping me at arm's length, and since we hadn't actually addressed any of our issues, the end result was a powerful punch of magic with an even more powerful punch of the side effects.

I couldn't even focus on what our magic had done when it worked together, because I was so goddamned turned on that a slight breeze would have me making a mess in my pants. Brooke took one look at my face and immediately dropped my hand. But it was too late. We were both caught up in the side effects, and I was so close to grabbing that messy twist of hair on top of her head and bringing her to her knees so I could fuck her mouth, it wasn't even funny. I wanted her, and knowing she wanted me made it all that much harder to resist.

"Cole." Her lips trembled as she said my name. She squeezed her thighs together and I could *hear* how wet she was for me. Fuck my entire fucking life. "I need to come."

"It's not happening with me." Not only was she in the throes of the worst side effects I'd ever seen, but she was drunk as shit. I didn't fuck women who couldn't consent.

"Cole, please." She whimpered and I had to palm myself as I grew impossibly more engorged. There was now enough blood pulsing through my cock to make me lightheaded.

“No, Brooke.” She had no idea what kind of effort those words cost me. Tears welled in her eyes, but she nodded. She knew I was right. Still, I felt like an asshole, so I tried a gentler approach. “Ride it out, sunshine. Your magic will let go of you soon.”

“Oh, God. Don’t say ride.” She clenched her fists. “Or use that stupid fucking nickname on me. Just... stop looking at me altogether.”

With a smirk, I turned around as she wished and pushed a hand against my cock, refusing to stroke myself and give in to the release my magic so desperately wanted from me. Because I wasn’t in control either. And it might feel good while I was doing it, but I knew I’d pay for it in the long run. Consent fucking mattered.

I took several deep breaths, each one coming out a little easier than the one before. My magic was letting go, flowing out of me. Brooke let out a relieved sigh, which told me that her magic had fully flowed out of her as well.

That one had been rough. I was exhausted down to my core. I swayed on my feet and pressed my fingers into my temples to get my head back on straight.

I turned around to where Brooke had sat down in the sand, her eyes glassy and unfocused. She was completely worn out. Giving myself another minute to check myself, I bent down beside her and scooped her up. Our lights flared again, but hers was much weaker. As if she’d already drained herself dry for the night.

Testing her weight against me to make sure I had a grip on the side effects while I held her, I headed back to the hotel. The metal vines we'd created loomed in the darkness behind us as I got further away, but I didn't have time to deal with them right then. Getting Brooke safely tucked into bed was my only priority.

The curse's smoke lingered, but it didn't try anything. Not when light flared from both our palms. Even in our weakened state, we scared it. Which was a damn good feeling.

I had no idea what kind of match my metal would be against vapor, but I was grateful I didn't have to deal with another mindfuck tonight. I already had enough going on with this small bundle of everything I'd ever wanted and couldn't have in my arms. She nuzzled her cheek against my chest, fully passed out, and my heart clenched.

And she had no idea what she did to me.

She also had no idea who I really was. If I told her everything, my full history, would she run screaming from me? Maybe. But I also couldn't forget the way she'd defended me tonight with Audrey and Violet. They were drunk and had no idea how loud they were talking, but I heard every word. No one stuck up for me like she did. No one.

But would she still if she knew what skeletons rested in my closet? Would the sunshine girl be able to stand the dark? Or would she let me go once she found out just how big of an asshole I really was? But I wasn't going to stand around all

night debating my merits as a person. I already knew I was a piece of shit, and so did everyone else.

Everyone, except Brooke.

She saw something in me. Something she deemed worthy, for whatever reason, and it killed me that I'd have to shatter this tentative illusion she had of me. I wasn't a hero or a decent guy. And it wasn't just my personality that dictated my flaws.

She continued to nuzzle my chest and make soft humming sounds like she had a mouthful of one of Gretchen's lemon poppy seed cupcakes. It was the most delicious kind of torture. No more than I deserved, really.

At the end of the hall, I stopped and thumped my head against my door. I'd forgotten that her room was taken and we hadn't worked out the details of where she'd be sleeping yet. I was still adamant that it wouldn't be with me, but she didn't have another place to go tonight.

Wes would punch me in the nuts if I tried to cockblock him again tonight, and Donovan would be no different. I could probably ask Kenna and Galen, but I didn't know them that well. Plus—and here was something I'd never admit to anyone but myself—I wanted Brooke in my bed. Period. There was no one I trusted to watch over her the way I would. She'd been drinking, and she'd just used a huge dose of magic that knocked her off her feet.

I got her into my room and glanced at the one bed. The hotel usually had spare rollaway cots, but all of them had been

taken by the families who had crowded into every available room, hoping proximity to us would keep them safe.

Not knowing that none of us had a clue what we were supposed to be doing.

I took off Brooke's sandals and hovered over her, my fingers reaching for and pulling back from her light pink skirt. She had pajamas; I'd seen them spilling out of the suitcase she'd tossed on the floor and rifled through without bothering to put anything away. But that didn't mean she wanted *me* to change her into them. When she was passed out no less. Even though I'd seen her naked, as did Kenna and Galen on a regular basis apparently, it still felt like a violation to undress her while she was sleeping.

It had been her choice to drink, anyway. If she got her legs tangled up in that ridiculously long skirt she insisted on wearing, that was not my fucking problem. With that settled, I pulled the covers up and tucked them under her chin. Taking a seat beside her on the bed, I laced my fingers behind my head and prepared to settle in for a long night of making sure she didn't choke on her own sickness, or sleepwalk, or get into any other trouble while she was still inebriated.

This would be fine. I wasn't exhausted from taking my magic to the brink. I could stay up all night. Just. Like. This.



The next morning, or afternoon, or evening, or who the hell even knew anymore because days and nights had stopped having meaning, I woke up to something warm and soft pushed up against my excruciating morning wood.

Sometime during the night, I'd fallen asleep, like a chump. Brooke had somehow rolled into my arms. And I'd spent the night spooning her against me, again, like a chump.

She wiggled her ass right against my throbbing cock and I groaned in her ear. Her eyes fluttered open. The hazy confusion eventually gave way to a sleepy smile. I didn't make any moves to release her from our current position.

"Hi." She swallowed and her entire face paled. She slapped a hand over her mouth. "Oh, God. The inside of my mouth tastes like bong water."

That effectively killed whatever morning magic we had going on.

She pushed off from the mattress and leaped out of bed. Immediately regretting the decision, she pushed her palms against her temples, her face turning a light shade of green. "I don't feel right. What the hell do you all put in your hotel's wine?"

"Alcohol."

She shot me a dirty look. "Very funny. If you need me for more jokes, I'll be over here trying to keep my head from falling off." She pressed her fingers between her eyes. "I'm never drinking again."

I smirked. “That’s what they all say.”

“Don’t look at me.” She backed away toward the bathroom.

“You said that last night too. Except that time you were—”

“Oh my God. Stop talking.” She slammed the bathroom door and I couldn’t fight the laugh that escaped my lips.

Grabbing a pillow, I lay back down and planted it over my face. I’d give her half an hour or so to pull herself together, then we needed to venture out past the hotel. I wanted to get a closer look at those metal poles we’d created, and wanted to see how much further the curse had gotten in its quest to knock out the lights in town.

We could go without a lot of things, but if we lost electricity, I had a feeling that would be the final straw for the residents. Keeping them calm was turning out to be more work than fighting the curse. Every day that went by with us just playing defense was another step closer to us losing our island for good.

Kenna and Galen had done a little offensive work recently, but the problem was that the smoke was getting to be too thick and too much for them to deal with. It was pointless for them to keep burning through their energy fighting something that would just be back tenfold a handful of hours later. That wasn’t really what we were supposed to be doing anyway.

None of knew exactly what we needed to do, but ever since the other pairs had found out their magic got a boost when everyone pushed their power together, it became obvious that

this wouldn't be a two-person job. There was nothing Brooke and I could do as an individual pair to stop this, but we could contribute. Add something to the end game.

And the sooner we could do that, the sooner we could get on with finding exactly what we were missing. What piece was holding us back from finishing this.

As soon as I heard the shower shut off, I clamped the pillow even tighter over my face. My morning wood still hadn't gone down, and seeing Brooke naked and dripping wet while she fumbled through her mishmash of clothes was not going to help matters there.

"If you're trying to smother yourself, there are more effective ways of doing it." She laughed, and the bell-like sound of it went straight to my cock.

"Just get dressed already," I bit out.

"I am dressed."

Slowly I pulled the pillow away from my face. She stood at the foot of the bed in a bright red romper with thin spaghetti straps and tiny shorts that stopped right at the bottom of her perfectly round ass cheeks. Her big gray eyes shone with delight and the promise of things to come. My mouth watered. I was worse than a fucking dog.

"Are you sure you don't want me to go back to smothering myself?" I gestured to her outfit. "Because I'm pretty sure you're trying to kill me right now."

“Such flattery.” She kissed my cheek, then swatted my arm. “Get up and get dressed. It’s a new day and we have a lot of work to get done.”

“What the hell do you have to be so chipper about?” I grumbled as I got out of bed and headed to the bathroom. “Weren’t you just certain your head was going to fall off?”

“That was before I took care of myself in the shower. Nothing like a quality orgasm to chase away the last dregs of a hangover.”

I paused with my hand on the door handle. “Stop talking.”

I slammed the door behind me and she laughed, the exact same laugh I imagined Hades let out as he welcomed new souls to the underworld. Why did I ever think she was the sweetest of the water signs?

Two could play at that game, though. I turned on the shower, the water still hot from when Brooke had used it. I glanced at the mirror, noticing the smiley face she’d drawn in the condensation and shook my head. That woman was going to drive me out of my mind by the time we got to the end of this.

Once I got in and the spray hit my back, I took my cock in my greedy palm. I wasn’t under the influence of magic right now and I had a hell of a lot of energy I needed to burn off. The hot wet spray pounded against my back as I shuttled my hand up and down my shaft.

Fuck me, that felt good. Closing my eyes, I slapped one hand against the wall as I worked myself harder. The memory of Brooke touching herself on the beach flooded my mind, only this time, I had her up against the cliff wall. The rough rock bit into her back as I slammed my aching cock into her tight wet heat. Unable to stop myself, I jerked my hips faster, fucking myself into my hand as I pictured Brooke the entire time.

Her smart mouth, that hazy look of arousal in her eyes, that slight whimper right before she'd come. "You like that, sunshine?"

I closed my eyes and there she was. A dream, a fantasy, and a memory all rolled into one. Her lips parted, her perfect pink nipples tight and begging for me to graze my teeth over them. I grunted and groaned like a fucking animal as I fucked myself into my hand so hard, stars gathered in my peripheral.

My lower back tightened, and I went off like a rocket. Hot ropes of cum hit the shower floor and went down the drain. And I kept coming and coming and coming. "Fuck me, sunshine. You're so tight, so fucking perfect for my cock."

My hips lost their rhythm as I regressed to the lowest form of existence, where the only thought pounding through my head was fuck, fuck, fuck. Finally, after what felt like hours later, I stopped coming and managed to finish my shower. My muscles were loose and relaxed, and I felt less stressed than I had in years.

And that was just from fantasizing about Brooke.

The real thing would probably end me.

I finished toweling off, shaved, and got dressed. When I stepped out of the bathroom, Brooke jumped off the bed, a guilty flush spreading across her cheeks. I had no doubt she'd heard me, and that was fine. If I was being honest, I'd admit that I wanted her to hear me. That if I really wanted to be quiet, I knew how.

But then I would've missed that flush. And the guilty look on her face that let me know she'd gone another round with herself too. And that made it all worth it.

Whistling, and feeling a thousand times better than I had in ages, I put my wallet in my back pocket and clipped my phone to my belt. "Ready, sunshine?"

Her eyes bugged out and she choked on her spit. Coughing and smacking her chest to unblock her airway, she looked up at me with wide eyes. "Excuse me?"

It took everything in me to hide my satisfied smile. "Ready to get to work? It's a new day and we have lots to do. Isn't that what you said to me?"

"Right." She cleared her throat. "New day."

And a dozen new possibilities. Most of which would start and end with me trying to figure out a way to get the side effects of our magic under control so I could do more than fuck Brooke in my shower fantasies.

CHAPTER 10

Brooke

Fucking Cole. He was so fucking happy. So fucking joyous. The more at ease and loveable he became, the more my mood soured. Why was he in such a good mood anyway? Surely that couldn't have been the first time he'd masturbated.

Of course not. He'd done it *in front of me* just the other day. But one little trip down fantasy lane in the shower and all of a sudden he was singing to birds and enchanting butterflies like he was Snow Fucking White.

“What did you think about in the shower?” While Cole wasn't quite the dick everyone made him out to be, I wasn't fully buying this happy bullshit. He might've had feelings and a heart, but he was still a sadist. “Was I dangling over a pit of sharks and my rope was fraying? Or tied to the railroad tracks as a train approached?”

He tsked. “Such a dark mind, sunshine.”

I stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, hands on my hips. “Tell me. I heard that ridiculous nickname and the grunts. I know what you were doing and who you were thinking about while you were doing it.”

“Do you really want to know?” He faced me, mirroring my pose. His cedar and leather scent surrounded me. Just one whiff of him and I was so turned on I could barely stand it.

I lifted my gaze to meet his. “Yes.”

He leaned in closer and gripped my chin, rubbing his thumb, slowly, purposefully over my bottom lip. “I was thinking about the day you got me to do naked yoga with you, but instead of keeping my hands to myself, I fucked you raw against the cliff wall.”

I tried to swallow, but my mouth had gone completely dry.

“Does that answer your question?” He pushed his thumb against my bottom teeth.

“Yes,” I breathed. I clamped my teeth over his thumb and gave him a light nip.

The corner of his mouth tilted up like he wanted to play, but instead of challenging me further, he withdrew his thumb and took a step back.

I pressed a brightly glowing hand to my fluttering stomach. Wow.

My magic bounced around inside me, but those butterflies were all my own. I’d been with plenty of men and handled

them all just fine, sending them on their way when I'd had enough, but I'd never handled a man quite like Cole.

I didn't know if a man like Cole could be handled.

It felt like he would be more of a "hold on and beg for sweet life" situation, and I wanted that in the worst way. I wanted to tangle with someone who could absolutely wreck me. And I had no doubt, Cole was made for wrecking.

As casual as could be, Cole put his hands in his pockets and strolled away. That incessant whistling he'd been doing this morning started up again. Sexually frustrated and not a little bit annoyed, I balled my hands into fists and followed behind him.

We were about an eighth of a mile from the hotel. Cole wanted to check out the streetlights, to see how far down the outages went. I wanted to go down to the beach first, but I decided to humor his rare good mood, much to my regret.

There wasn't much we could do if the curse was putting lights out all over town, but if the curse planned to plunge us into real, absolute darkness, we needed to know, I supposed. Though any action we might take needed to be decided as a group.

So far, every other light was out along the street. Almost like the curse didn't want to make it obvious what it was up to, but as we continued on our way, it was clear that it was indeed intending to take out the lights that kept the streets visible in this endless night.

The street lights didn't bother me so much. If the curse started seeping into homes and knocking out the power for residents, then we'd have a larger problem on our hands. Thus far, we hadn't heard of anything like that happening. Which made me think Galen was right.

This was all just a distraction.

"I think we should go down to the beach and examine those bamboo shoots we made last night," I said. We'd done something unique with our magic last night, and we'd been too worn out after the fact to give it a proper examination. Our time was better spent there, rather than wandering empty streets. "We can't do anything about the lights."

"We'll turn back soon," he murmured.

A thick dark fog swirled at our ankles, following us as we continued to walk down the quiet road, marking every light that had gone dark. Cole had brought along an extra bulb as a tester, and even though the existing ones hadn't been shattered, the new one didn't work either. The power supply to each streetlight had been knocked clean out.

"It's too quiet out here." I rubbed my arms, regretting wearing such a tiny outfit when I knew we'd be creeping through the dark, deserted streets that hadn't seen the sun for days, and that should've been overrun with tourists.

And while the cold front that had come through while the curse was draining the sun of its light had passed, I felt the chill anyway. There should've been laughter and light and the smell of fried food and the sound of bike bells ringing in the

air. The island had too much life, even in the off-season, to feel this desolate.

I missed that. I missed it so much it hurt. The energy of tourism season was what had drawn me to the island in the first place. And the legend and fate and whatnot. But the person that life had shaped me to be had found a home here, and watching this place get stripped away of everything that made it Zodiac Cove was a hard pill to swallow. Harder than the possibility of it sinking into the sea for good.

“Yeah.” Cole’s lips thinned. “It’s quiet.”

A man of many words.

He probably liked all the quiet. I rolled my eyes and kept walking. Some of the businesses had tried to stay open for a bit. The ones that serviced locals as well as tourists. But as we got closer to the other end of Stardust Parkway, we saw next to nothing open anymore. A few lights were on in the apartments over the shops. But otherwise, all was dark, and a heavy silence permeated the air, thicker than what the absence of people on its own could create.

I touched Cole’s arm and drew back when my palm flared with light. “Should we ask the owners that stayed in their places to let us know if they lose electricity?”

He shook his head. “I don’t want to scare them unnecessarily. There’s a big difference between a few streetlights going out and the curse invading their homes.”

“They have to know their walls won’t keep the curse out.”

“It’s still a security blanket I’m not willing to rip away from them yet.”

I stopped again, shock temporarily freezing me in place. How could I have not seen this before? I knew there were parts of Cole that were lonely, misunderstood, and moody, but I didn’t think he cared about the town like this. I always thought it was a chore he was fulfilling. A duty. Something Wes had bullied him into because he had magic.

But... “You care about them, don’t you?”

“Of course I care.” His expression was practically a snarl. “Why do you sound so surprised? I thought we were past this judgmental bullshit.”

“Why did you resist working with me for so long?” If we were going to do this, really be a partnership without our magic going haywire, we needed to get past that more than anything.

I had so much trouble letting go of my resentment of his unwillingness in the beginning. It was a barrier between us. He hung his head and opened his mouth, maybe preparing, at long last, to tell me something real, and a thick cloud of smoke rose up in front of me. It blocked Cole from my view, pulled him away from me.

No. Not now. Not when we were finally getting to the point where we could use our magic without the side effects getting in the way. I swatted at the smoke, refusing to let it drag me into one of its fucked-up mind games, and just as quickly as it had surrounded us, it cleared without warning.

That had been too easy. Maybe it realized it was pointless to get between us now. We'd come too far to turn back.

"Anyway." I rubbed my damp palms over the shorts on my romper. "You were going to say?" Cole just stood there, staring at me with a blank expression. Really? "Are you seriously not going to answer me now?"

He shook his head and kept walking.

"Oh, no you don't. You're not walking away from me, Cole Latham."

That turned out to be false, since he was, indeed, walking away from me.

"I thought we were going to talk," I yelled. He picked up his pace. "Damn it, Cole. Quit being a fucking baby. What about the 'I thought we were past this bullshit' lecture you just tried to give me?"

My impression of him had been dead-on. Peak Grump. But apparently, he didn't agree, since he didn't so much as have a hitch in his stride. I ran to keep up with him. Damn those long Latham legs.

By the time I'd caught up, we'd reached the completely deserted end of Stardust Parkway and the empty field where the Summer Solstice Festival and a dozen other events were held every year. The smoke around our ankles grew thicker, like the curse had us cornered.

It unnerved me.

That chill once again set in, and that was when he faced me. His brows were drawn tightly together and his face was pinched in rage. I shrank back from him.

This wasn't like Cole. He wasn't like this. Cranky? Yes. A grouch? Always. But he never looked at me like he wanted to hurt me. I'd never been afraid of him. Until now.

"Beekeeper." His voice was raspy and not at all his own, and the blood drained from my face as the skin melted right off him. "Such a stupid little girl."

Oh, God. It had been a trick. I'd been chasing the wrong Cole. And I didn't know at what point they'd separated or where I really was. Panic thrummed in my veins. I dug down into myself, looking for any shred of magic I could pull up and use, but I had nothing. I was completely drained and completely alone. And that thing that wore Cole's melted face was headed right for me with its arms outstretched.

I stumbled back and tripped, the wet grass squishing beneath my palms when I fell. The Not Cole loomed over me, staring at me with hollow eye sockets filled with wasps the size of walnuts. They crawled down its cheek and into its mouth, then up through the eye socket again. I opened my mouth to scream, but nothing came out. The air had left my lungs.

The skeletal Not Cole opened its mouth wide. The rest of the skin on its face melted, creating pools of waxy flesh at its feet. Its jaw dropped and the head continued to reel back,

back, back until its fully open mouth was pointed at the sky. It paused.

And then a tornado of wasps erupted into the sky. They didn't hesitate to swarm me, stinging me over and over again. And though they didn't have the deadly poison anymore, each prick felt like a roller full of needles running up and down my skin. Every place they poked puckered with irritation. The spots on my skin began to itch and swell more.

And still they kept coming. They crawled up my nose and into my mouth, stinging my tongue and trying to force their way down my throat. Just because they didn't have the poison anymore, didn't mean they still couldn't be deadly.

I spit them out as fast as I could, but they kept coming, more and more and more, and even when I got my breath back, I couldn't scream, because they'd suffocate me.

I wanted to run, but I couldn't move. Couldn't get up. And the fog was so thick, I was afraid it would lead me right into the water. I was already crawling on wet grass and it hadn't rained in weeks. Out of options and terrified out of my mind, I curled into a ball and did my best to protect my face.

Help me, help me, help me.

I played the words over and over in my mind as the wasps continued to sting my back and legs, inside my ears, and the top of my head.

Every part of my exposed skin was puffy and swollen. The pain was too much. My vision was clouding. If I blacked out,

they'd fill my throat and stop my breathing. My nails dug into the wet earth as I begged myself to remain here and aware.

In the distance, Cole shouted my name, but he sounded impossibly far away and I was so tired. Tired of hurting, tired of trying to hang on. Cotton balls filled my head as my eyelids drooped. A warm hand on my back. More panicked shouts.

It was too late. I was gone. Gone, gone, gone.

“Don't you dare fucking die on me, sunshine.” The pressure of Cole holding me against his chest made my bones hurt. I was beyond help. “Stay with me. I need you. I need your light. I'm fucking lost without you.”

I tried to mumble something. Even as I was dying, I yearned to reach out and offer him comfort. Soothe his rough edges. But my tongue was too swollen and nothing but choked air could pass my lips.

Cole was holding me and begging for me to hang on for what felt like forever. A blood-red light glowed from his palm. It was the only thing I could see through my swollen eyelids. My light didn't shine. I had nothing left. I was leaving.

Just as I took what I expected to be my last breath, a warm glow hit my chest and spread outward. Pure bright light the color of pearls and diamonds blinded me as the swelling on my eyelids began to recede and then disappear altogether. I blinked, and found Thora pushing my hair away from my sweaty face with a gentle hand.

“Close one there.” Her hand shook, betraying just how close I’d been.

“It’s about fucking time,” Cole growled at Finn, who stood behind Thora, pushing his magic into her. “I called you two minutes ago.”

“Sorry, dude.” Finn held his hands out. “Next time I’ll forgo pants.”

I sat up, expecting lingering pain or stiffness, but there was nothing. I was completely healed. It was as though I’d never been stung at all. Only the ghost of what I’d gone through lingered. I had a feeling it would be haunting me for a long time to come.

“Thank you,” I said to Finn and Thora. “I thought I was done for.”

“No problem. Island Ambulance is our calling.” Finn gave me a grin, the one that had melted the panties off half the women in Zodiac Cove. “Try to stay out of trouble so Meat Stick doesn’t try to murder me. I’m extremely valuable.”

I snorted and glanced at Cole, who did, in fact, look ready to murder Finn. “Thanks again. We’ll head back to the hotel soon.”

I blinked and Finn and Thora were gone. I’d seen their speed power multiple times, but still found it disorienting. I turned back to Cole. The real Cole, who looked angry, but not at me. Never at me. I should’ve known what the Not Cole was sooner.

“What the fuck were you thinking, wandering away from me like that?” he yelled.

Okay. Maybe he could be a little angry at me from time to time. “I thought I was following you. I was trying to talk to you, and you just kept walking and ignored me.”

“So you followed? And you weren’t suspicious at all?” He gave me an incredulous look, like he simply could not believe that I couldn’t see through an illusion that looked like him, walked like him, and was a silent, sullen prick like him.

And the part that stung nearly as bad as the wasps, was that he was right. I should’ve known better. If I’d been open to him like I needed to be, I would’ve felt it wasn’t him. But I’d been hurt, emotionally and physically, and that’s when my defenses went up the hardest, so I turned it back around on him. Who was the asshole now?

I threw my hands in the air, more frustrated with myself than anything. “Why would I be suspicious when you’re a giant man-baby who frequently ignores me when you”—I air-quoted—“need to sort out some shit in your head.”

“That is *not* what I sound like.”

I flopped back on the wet grass and laughed. Mud and sludge soaking my romper. We were close to the water. If I’d run in the direction I thought was safety, I definitely would’ve drowned. Wasn’t that a pleasant thought? Knowing my instincts were shit and still needing to trust the one person who had given me absolutely no reason to trust him at all. There

was a solid chance that I was going insane. At this point, I almost welcomed it.

“Stop laughing. This isn’t the least bit funny,” Cole grumbled.

“I’m sorry I scared you, but I’m fine now.” I sat up and patted his arm. That simple contact seemed to smooth out his pouty face some. “Can you please put on your big boy pants and tell me what happened and how you found me?”

“We were talking. You were asking a bunch of annoying questions, per usual.” He gave me the stink-eye, but there wasn’t much heat behind it. “I stopped to check the overhead lights on one of our shops, turned out it was a naturally burned-out bulb, and when I turned back around, you were gone.”

I grabbed his hand, threading his fingers with mine. It felt like something a girlfriend would do, and even though I was a far cry from any kind of title with Cole that didn’t include the acronym PITA, I wanted to be real with him and give him the chance to be real with me.

He glanced at me with a raised eyebrow, his expression stern and tense like always. For once, I didn’t make a quippy comment or goad him just to get a reaction. I kept my expression neutral. I wasn’t here for fun or playtime or anything other than support.

“I couldn’t see you or feel you, the curse had a thick wall of smoke between us, and I kept getting turned around.” His fingers were tense, like he wanted to ball his hand into a fist,

but he couldn't when he was holding onto me. "I charged the skeletal creature Nirah created. I had no magic, no metal, nothing but my bare hands. I was so fucking useless. But I swear to God, I would've ripped that thing apart. The illusion broke, turned to smoke before I could reach it, but the wasps kept coming until Finn and Thora got here."

Eventually, his fingers relaxed in mine. I squeezed his hand. "That must've been scary. I'm sorry you were worried."

"You think I was worried?" He stood and started pacing. The twitch in his jaw was back, and I kept racking my brain, trying to figure out what I'd said to annoy him this time.

"I'm sorry? Would you prefer if I was silent?"

"I would prefer if you were safe," he roared. He plunged his hands into his hair and gripped the back of his neck. "You know what worries me? Not filing my quarterly expense report on time. Accidentally leaving my front door unlocked. Forgetting to feed my cat."

"You have a cat?"

"Not anymore."

"Oh. Because you forgot to feed her?"

"She ran away. Probably because I'm impossible to love." His expression dared me to give him shit about it, but I'd never heard anything sadder in my life. "That's not the point."

"What is the point?" What were we even talking about? I got way sidetracked by the cat.

“The point is”—he crouched in front of me, his eyes tracing every contour of my face until I was locked in his gaze and ninety-nine percent sure I was having an out-of-body experience—“when I couldn’t find you, when I found you on the ground, covered in wasps and swollen beyond recognition, I wasn’t just worried.”

“You weren’t?” My words were so soft, a gentle breeze could carry them away as if I’d never spoken them at all. I swallowed. “What were you then?”

“I was lost. So terrified, my teeth hurt. Angry, ready to kill anything that hurt you.” He cupped my face with gentle hands, despite the torrential storm playing across his features. “You are everything to me, and I’m so fucked without you.”

“Cole.” Tears blurred my vision.

“I haven’t been a good partner. I’m not much of a good man, either. I resisted this connection between us because you’re everything I’m not and that scares the fuck out of me, but I swear this to you.” His thumbs pressed softly against my pulse points. “If you let me, I will spend every goddamn day trying to make myself worthy of you.”

My magic bounced around inside me, whipping from side to side and making my head light. My palms glowed bright cherry red, but I didn’t lose control. I wasn’t overly horny or shooting my magic off in whatever direction would best absorb it. Gripping Cole’s wrists, I tried to hang on as I processed what he’d told me.

I couldn’t make it make sense. “You don’t like me.”

His nose brushed mine, trailed my temple, and traced the line of my jaw. When his lips barely grazed my cheek, I let out an audible gasp, and I *felt* his smile against my skin. “I like you just fine. I think I might more than like you.”

“You don’t like anyone.”

“Do you care if I like anyone other than you?” His fingers trailed down my neck and across my collarbone, drawing out little shivers from me.

“Not really, no.” My mouth was forming words, and I was really glad there was a functioning part of my brain capable of doing so, since the rest of me was on fire and a hundred percent keyed into what Cole was doing with his mouth and fingers.

“So honest.” He tucked my hair behind my ear and traced the shell with his lips. “That’s what I like about you. How you just say whatever’s on your mind.”

“I have to confess, there isn’t a whole lot on my mind at the moment.” I was all tingling toes and ricocheting sensations. My lower stomach trembled as my core pulsed with need. My need. Not my magic’s, not the kitchen wine’s, but mine.

“I don’t think that’s true.” His fingers skimmed my bare shoulders, pushing the thin straps down. My nipples pebbled, and because I hadn’t worn a bra, he could see just how eager my body was to have more. So much more than this deliciously slow torture.

“Why don’t you think that’s true?” I was downright breathless now. I wanted him, all of him. On top of me, pushing me into the wet grass, taking me against a nearby tree. Inside me, on top of me, all around me.

“What are you thinking right now?” He nipped my earlobe, then licked it slowly. “Tell me, sunshine. What’s going on in that gorgeous head of yours?”

“I’m thinking...” Oh, God. His fingers grazed my sensitive nipples and I nearly blacked out. “I think I want you to kiss me like I’m the only person on this entire island that you like, and then I want you to fuck me senseless.”

He cupped the back of my neck, gripping my hair at the base and using it to tilt my head back. “I fucking love your honesty.”

His lips crashed against mine, and I was floating, no longer on solid ground, slamming into the sensation of him and me, and nothing else mattering except this. He kissed me like I was his lifeline, his world, like he was well and truly lost without me.

His lips were firm and in control, but that first sweep of his tongue was so soft, I melted into him. Cole Latham kissed me like I was the only person on the island he liked.

And what a damn lucky position to be in.

CHAPTER 11

Brooke

Cole sat back in the sludge and pulled me on top of him. And this, more than anything else, set the fire inside me to blazing. The fact that this perfectly pressed man, always neat, always professional and polished, was sitting in the mud because he wanted me that bad.

I broke our kiss and blinked at him. “You’re dirty.”

“I’ve barely started.” He trailed his lips up my neck, pressing them gently against my pulse point before nipping it with his teeth.

I sighed, temporarily losing my train of thought. “No, I mean...” He pinched my nipple and I ground my core against his insistent hard-on. Fuck. I was talking, right? Right. “I mean, you’re sitting in the mud. Doesn’t that bother you?”

He leaned back and gave me a look like I’d just suggested he give veganism a try. “I’ve got the woman I’ve been stroking myself to every night for the past three months in my arms. Do you think I give a fuck about the mud?”

He leaned in to start kissing my neck again, and I put a hand on his chest to stop him. “Um... three months? You’re joking, right?”

He pushed my mess of curls behind my ears and cupped my face. “I’ve been dreaming about you every night since you handed me that flower at the May Day parade.”

He couldn’t be serious. I shook my head. “The flower you crumpled in front of me before walking away without saying a word?”

“I was having a bad day.”

“You might need therapy. Has anyone ever told you that?”

“All the time. Should I call someone now or do you want me to get back to fucking you?”

I bit my lip. This man was impossible. “I’ll take door number two.”

“Excellent choice.”

He grinned, and oh, God. If I thought I was wet before, it was nothing compared to how soaked I was now. Cole was smiling, like full-on smiling, not smirking or chuckling or finding some kind of amusement at my expense, but actually smiling. And it was the most stunning thing I’d ever seen in my life. My tongue tripped over itself and my heart swooped into my stomach.

When Cole smiled, I didn’t miss the sun as much.

He frowned. “If you don’t stop giving me that deranged look, I’m going to change my mind about fucking you.”

I cleared the fog from my head. There was the grumpy asshole I’d come to lo—like. Like. Not any other L-word. “Just shut up and kiss me already.”

“Fucking finally.”

He dove back into my mouth, kissing me with the intensity of a thousand nuclear bombs. Who needed the sun? I had my own source of heat right here. And the energy we created was strong enough to power this entire island.

I ran my hands through the silky strands of his tousled brown hair, letting it flow between my fingers like water. There was magic in kissing like this. Not the kind that allowed me to grow plants and him to bend metal to his will, but the purer, simpler kind of magic that came from finding your person, your perfect match, in a world of billions.

His tongue stroked mine, lazily, sweetly, like we had all the time we wanted. Like we weren’t outside, at the scene of where I’d just been horrifically attacked by the curse’s wasps. But I didn’t think about them. I didn’t think about how I’d almost died. With every soft brush of his fingers, with every delicious sweep of his tongue, he was wiping it away. Taking that memory that should’ve hurt me, should’ve haunted me, and building something beautiful from it.

Because he knew me. He knew this was what I needed.

How could I have ever thought he was cold? How could I have ever thought he'd do anything other than protect me with his last dying breath? Some people didn't show their emotions outwardly, they didn't wear them on their sleeve, because sometimes what they felt ran so deep, it didn't stand a chance of breaking the surface.

Skimming his fingers up and down my back, he caressed my spine like it was the most precious collection of bones. Like I was steel and glass all at once. Delicate, but not fragile. The straps of my romper still hung off my shoulders, and every time I thought he might pull them down further, he'd skipped over them. It was like he was trying to drive me crazy on purpose. On his fourth time passing them by, I grabbed them and pulled them down myself.

Since I didn't wear a bra, my boobs were immediately exposed to the chilly night air, tightening my already painfully peaked nipples.

Brushing his lips behind my ear, he bit the skin there lightly, then licked over it again. "So impatient." He trailed his fingertips over my collarbone. "I was getting there, you know."

"Not fast enough." I unbuttoned his shirt, my fingers shaking with the need to get my hands on him, to feel his hard chest pressed against mine.

We'd been skin-to-skin the night we went skinny-dipping, but it was different then. We'd been playing. Testing each other. It hadn't been intimate. It hadn't been like this. When I

finally pushed his shirt free and deposited it in the mud behind him, I ran my hands up and down the hard-packed muscle. I seriously doubted I'd ever get enough of touching him like this.

He sat back on his hands, a satisfied smile gracing his gorgeous, full lips. Content to let me play and explore his body with free hands. "Take as much time as you want. I have all night, and I'm never going to be a guy you can rush."

"Who says I rush anyone?"

"Because I know the type you've dated. Safe, easy little tourist boys." He moved to my back and gathered my hair in his hand, pressing kisses along my bare shoulder. "You rushed them because you were just waiting for it to be over. But after what I'm about to do to you, you're going to be begging me to keep it going forever."

"So cocky."

He gripped my hair tight, pulling my head back so I'd meet his gaze. "Damn right I am. And you fucking love it."

I dug my nails into his chest until he released my hair, and then I dove at him. I didn't know if those wet sounds were the mud squelching beneath us or what was going on between my legs, but I didn't care. I was going to eat this man alive. He had no idea what he was in for, and cocky was my exact brand of catnip.

I should've seen Cole coming from a mile away, but I didn't. I had no idea what he was going to do to me. How he

was going to make me feel. A playful smile curved his lips, and I ground my pussy harder against his lap. Heat rushed through me, setting every one of my nerve endings on fire. I gripped his shoulders and rolled my hips, needing more friction, desperate to feel him against my clit, deep inside me, everywhere.

“I need more.” I rocked harder against him.

My core pulsed. I buried my face in his neck, and his cedar and leather scent threatened to overwhelm me. God, how could leather and wood and man smell this edible? I wanted to devour him, lick and suck and feed on him until this clawing hunger went away.

My hands flared with cherry-red light, but my magic wasn't spinning out of control. It was there, a part of me, present and quite pleased with itself, but it didn't try to force my hand. This was about me and Cole. Our magic flowed between us, entwining and swirling inside, content to let us build our own bridge that had nothing to do with metal or vines.

“Can you come like this?” He gripped my hips, grinding me harder against his cock while both of us were clothed from the waist down.

I nodded, already feeling that hum deep in my lower stomach, the one that would dip down and spread until everything was singing.

“Then do it. Now.” He jerked me harder against him. “Come all over my lap and ruin that little fucking romper with what I do to you.”

“Cole.” My tits bounced in his face as he moved my hips in a figure eight over the impossibly large bulge in his pants. He grabbed one of my breasts hard enough to leave a mark, and it pushed me even closer to the edge when he took my nipple in his mouth and bit down. Hard. I cried out, gripping his hair and pulling it. “I’m so close.”

“I told you to come for me. Be a good girl and do what daddy says.” He took my other nipple between his teeth and bit down even harder on that one.

I exploded. Shaking and sobbing and losing complete control of my rhythm as I jerked my hips sloppily against him. My fingers lost purchase on his hair and I held onto his shoulders as tears leaked from my eyes at all the extreme sensations that washed through me.

And that was with my romper still on.

“Fuck yes.” He kissed and licked my nipples gently, reverently, rewarding me for doing as he commanded. Digging his fingers into my hips, he helped me ride out the wave after wave of pleasure that crested over me. “You’re so fucking beautiful when you come. Just like I knew you’d be.” He kissed me softly. “You were so perfect. So gorgeous.”

I buried my face in his neck, both embarrassed and deeply moved by his praise. The more he murmured about how beautiful and perfect and good I was, the wetter I got. I’d just had an extreme orgasm. The best of my life, and already, I wanted more. But that would be greedy, wouldn’t it? It felt like too much, too soon.

I'd return the favor, of course. It was in my nature to be a giver. But no more orgasms for me. Any more and I might start getting attached. And then what?

I moved to stand up, but he grabbed me around the waist and flipped me onto my back. I hit the cold mud with a splat. "Hey."

Leaning over the top of me, humor lighting his eyes, he kissed the tip of my nose. "I'd say I'm sorry, but we both know I'd be lying. You look damn good on your back."

I grabbed a fist full of mud and hit him right in the face with it. His stunned eyes and dropped jaw was all it took. I lost it. Absolutely fucking lost it. I laughed so hard I had tears streaming down my face. He wiped a hand down his face, shaking off the mud he collected in his brightly glowing palm. His shock quickly morphed into annoyance, but that only made me laugh harder. I clutched my stomach, laughing at him, while he still hovered over me.

"You think you're so cute." He picked up a handful of mud and smashed it into my chest. When I didn't do anything other than look down at myself and laugh harder, he flashed me another panty-melting grin. "I think I finally figured out what I find fun."

"Oh, yeah?" I leaned up on my elbows and my nipples peaked as cold mud slid down my chest. "And what's that?"

"I really have fun getting you dirty."

A wicked smile curved his lips as he kissed all the spots on my chest not marked with mud, his face still filthy, nipping me with his teeth in that way that had me ready to go another round. Did I say no more orgasms for me? Clearly, that was bullshit.

He tried to work my romper off, pulling it around my hips as he continued to kiss his way down my stomach. The material got caught when he tried to slide it off though, since the top was bunched around the bottom. “This thing is fucking ridiculous. Why would you purposely wear a goddamn torture device?”

“It’s way more awkward when I have to go to the bathroom.”

He stopped messing around with my romper and glanced up at me with scrunched eyebrows. “Um. What?”

“This.” I gestured to the red cloth acting as a chastity belt around my fuller hips. “When I have to go to the bathroom, I’m just sitting there on the toilet with my knees together and my tits out. I hate it.”

“Jesus Christ.” His lips started twitching.

“Don’t you dare laugh at me, Cole Latham.”

“Why would you put that image into my head?” He swiped a hand over his face. “I’m never going to unsee that.”

And then Cole did something that surprised me more than the mind-blowing, clothes-on orgasm. He threw his head back and laughed. Oh. My. God. If I thought Cole was stunning

when he smiled, it had nothing on his laugh. It was unrestrained and full of so much joy and life and heart it made my chest ache.

“Well, that settles it.” He gripped one side of my romper with both hands. “This needs to go.”

He tore the material in half with no effort. It was like watching Chris Evans split logs with his bare hands, but better, because Chris Evans never gave me an orgasm with my pants on.

The material fell away from me, leaving me completely naked in the mud. I was so turned on, I nearly had another orgasm without him touching me at all. What the hell kind of sorcery did those Latham boys have in their blood?

Aside from the actual sorcery we all had running through us.

“You really just ripped my clothes off.”

He crossed his arms. “I did you a favor. That outfit was a menace.”

“I need you. Inside me. Now.” I reached up and grabbed his upper arms, bringing him crashing down on top of me. He’d been expecting an argument, but quickly recovered when I rubbed my wet folds against his pulsing cock.

“Not yet, sunshine.” He lifted himself over me, the veins in his strong arms visible in the moonlight. “You don’t get my cock until you come on my tongue.”

He worked his way down me much quicker this time. Something told me that the patience he bragged about so much was wearing pretty thin. Which was fine by me. There was nothing I wanted more than to see Cole's infamous control snap like my romper beneath his hands.

Once he reached my center, he grabbed my legs on either side and pushed them wide open. I loved how rough he was with me. How he kissed me and worshiped me and praised me, but didn't treat me like I was breakable. He relinquished some of his control by trusting me to tell him my limits, and that meant everything to me.

When he licked me up my center, my hips jerked against his face. He placed a hand over my stomach, holding me down while he fed on me like a starving man at an endless buffet. I'd had plenty of guys go down on me before, but not like this. Never like this. There was no hesitation or soft strokes with his tongue. He licked and sucked on my clit like it was his goddamned job to make me come.

"Cole." I gripped his head and smashed my pussy harder against him, fucking his face with unrestrained abandon. Within seconds, another orgasm swept through me so forcefully, my entire body trembled and wept. "I'm coming. Fuck, fuck, fuck, it's too much. I'm coming too hard. It's not stopping. Fuck."

Wave after wave of pure pleasure rolled through me. My toes curled hard enough to start cramping, my back arched so

much, I thought my spine might snap. And still, he kept fucking eating. Holy shit. He wasn't letting up. At all.

His fingers plunged into me, curling as he continued to suck on my clit. "I want another. I fucking deserve another. Give it to me."

"I can't." My body was wrung out, bone-tired. There was no way I had another.

"Are you talking back?" He glared at me with fire in his eyes and the evidence of my arousal glistening on his chin. He was savage, completely fucking feral, and the look in his eye was enough to convince me that I might've had another one after all. "Do what you're told and come on my face. Don't make me ask again."

"Yes, daddy."

He growled, literally growled, like a fucking animal, and then he dove in again. It wasn't long before I was sobbing his name and holding his head against me as another orgasm crested the surface and broke me. I was broken. Clearly, I was dead and by some miracle had made it to heaven. There was no need for me to move from this spot ever.

"Here lies Brooke. Death by too much fucking. She lived a good life."

Cole laughed, another full laugh, a sound I'd never get tired of hearing. "You were a real trooper. I suppose I could give you the rest of the night off."

He stood and reached his hand down to help me up. Hell no. Was he serious? I had three fuck-my-life orgasms in a row and he was ready to call it quits before he got off once? Not on my fucking watch. We weren't close to being done yet.

I ignored his hand and got up on my knees.

He gripped the back of my head. "What are you doing?"

"Don't ask me what I'm doing when I'm on my knees and you've already got your hands tangled in my hair. You're smarter than that."

He didn't give me any more grief. I undid his belt and pulled his pants down until that gorgeous cock of his sprang free. From this angle, he looked even bigger, and my eyes widened.

He chuckled. "You don't have to take it all."

"I feel like you're trying to challenge me."

I licked my lips and a bead of pre-cum dotted the head of his cock. I took him in my mouth, more determined than ever to take him all the way down to the hilt. If for no other reason than to be able to say, "I told you so."

The salty flavor of his cum sent a flood of heat to my core. I swirled my tongue over his tip, then took him deeper. Hollowing out my cheeks, I sucked him in as much as I could on my own. When he hit the back of my throat, I relaxed, letting him go further.

"Fuck, Brooke." He hissed in his breath between his clenched teeth. The veins on his neck popped, as if it took

everything in his power to hold himself back. “You’re so good at this. Fucking perfect. If only you could see how gorgeous you are with my cock between your lips, sucking me off like your mouth was made to take me like this. So beautiful. But that’s enough. You proved your point.”

He moved to slide out of me, but I dug my fingers into his thighs, letting him know I wanted him to fuck my mouth. He groaned, but he didn’t try to stop again. The feel of him against my tongue increased my own arousal. He thrust forward, and I opened my throat more, welcoming him into me. He thrust again, fast now, fucking my mouth and barely holding himself together. Because of me. Because of what I did to him.

I’d never felt more powerful, even when I wielded my magic.

His back tensed and he tried to pull out again, but I stopped him. I wanted all of him. Every drop. And I wasn’t letting go until he found his release. When I finished swallowing him, I licked my lips, loving the way his stomach muscles quivered.

He trailed his fingers under my jaw. “You’re incredible.”

His palm glowed with blood-red light, but his magic didn’t take over. Neither did mine. It was just the two of us and the power we created ourselves.

I patted the ground beside me. “Feeling a little lonely down here in the mud.”

“You don’t want to go back to the hotel?”

I shook my head. I still hadn't felt his cock inside me, and I didn't want to leave this place until I had all of him. I couldn't explain it. Not to him or myself. But something in me needed to make this place beautiful again if I was truly going to shake off the ghost of what almost happened to me here tonight.

Sensing everything I wasn't saying, his expression softened and he gently laid me back in the cool, muddy grass, settling himself between my legs. He was already hard again. He placed a sweet kiss on my lips. "Are you sure?"

"I've never been more sure of anything in my entire life." Taking his cock in my hand, I guided him to my entrance.

"Wait." He sat back on his heels and rubbed his face. "Fuck. I don't have a condom with me."

"I don't care." I grabbed his powerful forearms, guiding him back down on top of me, where my body needed his weight. "I don't have anything and I have an IUD."

"I've been tested, too. I don't have anything."

We stared at each other. Now that we'd settled the lack of condom conundrum, I was suddenly nervous. My hands wanted to flap around until I figured out what to do with them, so I tucked them under my ass before I could make a fool of myself.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Waiting for the jump scare," I whispered.

He snorted, and that was all it took to break the tension. "We can stop if you want."

“No, I’m good. Old habits die hard.” I pulled my glowing hands out from underneath me and gripped his shoulders, smearing mud across his hard muscles. “Let’s do this.”

“You sound like you’re about to dive headfirst out of a plane.” He laid me back down and refused to move until I gave him a nod, letting him know I was okay. He slid into me, so thick, filling me so completely, I gasped. He held still, giving me a moment to get accustomed to his size. His fingers brushed my cheek. “Breathe with me.”

“Okay.” My hips jerked and he sucked in a sharp breath.

My walls pulsed around him. I was so full, it felt amazing, but I needed to move. “What are you waiting for?”

He gritted his teeth. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“I’m fine. Fuck me already.”

“That fucking mouth of yours.” He kissed me, nipping my bottom lip. “Sassy.”

“You love it.”

He grinned and positioned his arms so he could cradle my head, keeping it safe from the hard ground. Then he thrust into me. Hard and good. So fucking good. My breath quickened as he continued to pound into me. Building me higher. Guiding me toward the peak.

“Cole.” I couldn’t form other words. Just his name. I chanted it over and over as he fucked so good. So fucking good. “I’m coming. How am I coming already? Ahhh. Oh, God. Not another one. I’m so fucking tired.”

My toes began to curl and my legs shook as I tightened them around his waist. He gripped my ass and tilted it so he could go deeper. My vision blurred and I stopped being able to speak at all as a fourth and fifth orgasm shattered me from the inside out. My body quaked. At one point, I was certain I'd left the ground.

I was ruined. Cole Latham had totally and irrevocably ruined me for all other men for the rest of my life. No one else could ever do what he'd done to me. I was wrecked. Didn't I say I wanted to be wrecked? What a terrible, wonderful thing to wish for.

A moment later, he shattered with me, shouting my name as he drove into me one last time and vibrated as he held me against him. Sweat-slicked and spent, I wrapped my arms around him. His breath was hot and heavy against my neck, like he'd just run around the perimeter of the island, and I had a feeling no one had ever brought him to that level before either. Only me.

A warm glow spread through me at the thought.

That was probably dangerous. Especially with a man as guarded as Cole could be. But right then, I couldn't find a reason to worry. Not when he continued to whisper praise in my ear and rub his hands over my body like he had to make sure I was real.

I'd panic about my feelings for Cole tomorrow.

CHAPTER 12

Cole

What the fuck was I going to do? This woman had me in a chokehold. I was laughing. Smiling. Wes kept asking where I'd buried the body, because he seemed to think killing someone was the only thing that would bring me this much obvious joy.

I was in over my head.

I didn't do fuzzy feelings and sugar-puff clouds. I was a goddamned Capricorn. I was the most grounded of the earth signs and I was fine with that. It was who I'd always been.

Brooke, who thought and acted purely on her emotions, had me all twisted up. I didn't have a fucking clue what to do. I understood emotions. Could feel them, contrary to popular belief, and I could sense when Brooke was troubled. But she was making me want to be a better person, to do the smiling and laughing thing that came so easily to others.

And it made me feel guilty. I didn't deserve this. I didn't deserve to be so fucking happy. I was a miserable bastard. I'd

done terrible things. Anyone in Zodiac Cove would've said the same. But Brooke was changing everything.

Not that we didn't have our share of issues to overcome.

Sometimes she just wanted to feel, and I didn't know what to do when I couldn't be a fixer. It was going to be a problem for us. I was trying to compromise. Patience was one of my better attributes. But sitting in this hotel while the curse was out there cutting off more electricity and plotting more unique ways to kill us had me twitchy.

I needed to do something. Anything. And I needed Brooke to be safe while I did it.

After I'd had the best sex of my life—hands down, no contest best fucking sex ever—I wrapped her up in my filthy shirt and we headed back to the hotel. The trauma of what she'd gone through began to set in. Feeling helpless and fully out of my element, I ran a hot bath in the big, jetted Jacuzzi tub, because I knew water centered her, then I sat her in front of me in the bath and took care of her. No kissing. No fooling around.

I couldn't keep my dick down because I was naked in a bathtub with Brooke and not fucking blind, but I didn't try to do anything about it. I just washed her hair and soaped the mud off her body and let her talk about what happened after she got separated from me.

The curse had hit her with the wasps on purpose. Because she was a grower and loved her bees. She made the island more beautiful just by doing what she loved best, and the curse

tried to take that from her. I wanted to kill it dead then bring it back just so I could kill it again for that alone. I wouldn't stop now until I saw its end.

Brooke shared every detail. She didn't keep anything from me anymore. Hearing about it so openly had me gripping the edge of the tub, trying not to leap out of the water so I could go hunt down Nirah and deal with him myself. That was the only body I had any interest in burying.

But she didn't want that. She laid her hand over my clenched one and firmly told me that it wasn't up to me alone to do anything. We were a partnership, and we'd fight together or not at all. Since I had no interest in letting the curse get near her again, we were at a standstill.

She didn't say so, but I could tell my desire to take action without her pissed her off. That wasn't how she was built. Once she'd processed and felt her feelings and had come to accept what we were truly up against, she was ready to go again. Just like that.

She still had some trauma lingering, but she could compartmentalize it and deal with it. I'd never met anyone like her. Someone who knew themselves so well, they could confront their demons and lay them to rest without the extreme amount of wrestling the rest of us had to do.

Though she'd been in shock the first night, what we did in that muddy field had been part of her healing. She claimed practicing and fighting the curse would be another part. A way for her to reclaim that fear and conquer it. But even as I

understood and respected that, I couldn't stop the terror that seized me whenever I thought of her back out there. I couldn't handle things the way she did. I soaked and stewed in my shit until it became unbearable.

She was so much stronger than me in so many ways.

But I still didn't want her near the curse, so I opted to keep her distracted. Because if I couldn't leave alone, couldn't fight on my own, and couldn't go back out there with her in tow, then I'd keep her busy.

I spent the next two days worshiping her body and making her scream my name. It was dirty, but I didn't give a damn. As long as she was safe, I was happy. And making love to her day in and day out wasn't a hardship for me by any means.

I should've been tired, but she energized me. She gave my life purpose beyond the work that had been slowly killing me. That would've eventually given me an early heart attack like my dad, but maybe, unlike him, I wouldn't survive.

On the third morning, or afternoon, or evening—we'd all stopped paying attention and just roamed around at whatever hours—she stepped out of the bathroom and announced that she was ready to start practicing again. For the record, she'd done that the past two mornings, and I'd found ways to talk her out of it.

I came up behind her as she brushed her hair in the full-length mirror and wrapped my arms around her waist. Rubbing my thumbs across her rib cage, I watched her eyes go hazy. And because my girl never wore a bra if she could help

it, my mouth watered as I watched her gorgeous nipples turned to pointed peaks beneath her thin tank top.

“Are you sure you want to go out there?” I plunged my hand down the front of her skirt and swiped my fingers against the hard bud between her folds. Thank God she didn’t care much for panties either. “I can think of something else we could do instead.”

“No.” She gripped my wrist, then moaned, making no move to withdraw my hand. “Not.” She bit her lip. “Again.”

“No?” I continued to lazily swipe my finger over her clit, feeling how soaked she was for me already. My tongue tingled with the anticipation of tasting her again. I’d never get enough of Brooke’s pussy. I wanted her on my mouth every minute of the day. “You sure?”

She took a step back from me, with hands held out. “You’ve got to stop this.”

I blinked at her, playing innocent, even though I was fairly certain she was on to me.

“Ugh. Don’t look at me like that.” She balled her hands into fists and stomped her foot. She looked about as threatening as a kitten who’d just been shoved out of the cat tree. “I’m not playing, Cole. I know what you’ve been doing these past few days.”

“I certainly hope so. I don’t sleep with women who aren’t aware of what they’re doing.”

“You’re being purposely obtuse. You know that I know you’ve been using your fingers and your tongue...” She gulped, her cheeks flushing with heat. “And your cock to keep me in here and not out there practicing our magic like we need to.”

I put my hands in my pockets. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

I absolutely knew what she was talking about, but my sense of self-preservation was kicking in hard. Brooke might’ve been as cute as a kitten, but she had claws and knew just how to use them on me. That was the problem with letting someone in. They knew exactly how to hurt you the most.

“I’m going outside. You can join me or stay in here with your hand like the sex-starved beast you’ve been pretending to be.” She stuck her nose in the air and prepared to march out of the room, but I caught her around the waist and hoisted her over my shoulder. “Put me down.” She pinched my back. Hard. There were those damn claws. “You can’t keep me in here. I’m still my own person and if I want to go outside, I damn well will.”

“Stop.” Fuck, she was mean. “Hold the hell on.”

I dumped her on the bed and then held her wrists so she wouldn’t take a swipe at my face. She kicked her leg out and barely missed my crotch. Absolutely on purpose. That yoga paid off in more than just flexibility.

She gnashed her teeth at me. “Let me go.”

“Let me talk first.”

“No, because then you’re going to sexy-talk me and tell me how perfect and beautiful I am, and the next thing I know, your head will be between my legs, and I won’t be leaving this room for the rest of the day. Again.”

“I mean, that had been the plan.” She snarled and I reared my head back. Wrong thing to say. This communication thing was shit. I’d rather just eat her pussy.

“Tell, right now, why you don’t want to practice with me.”

“I’m...” Fuck. How did I phrase this without looking like an idiot? I hung my head, unable to meet her gaze. “Terrified. You’re everything to me. Period. I can’t stand the thought of anyone hurting you, and me not being enough to protect you.”

“Cole.” Her voice softened and I figured it was safe to release my hold on her. She sat up and cupped my face. “I’m going to be safe.”

“You don’t know that.” My voice cracked and I winced. “When I saw you lying there, covered in those wasps, and I didn’t even know if you were still breathing...”

I didn’t need to go on. She’d been soothing my night terrors since it happened. Twice now, I’d woken up in the middle of the night, drenched in sweat. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw her lying there, but in my sleep, when I couldn’t control my thoughts, I was too late. Every fucking time, I was too late.

And every night she’d kiss me softly and climb on top of me, riding me slowly and sweetly to remind us both that she

was still here, that she didn't die. I couldn't live through that again. Maybe Brooke had processed it and was ready to go again, but I wasn't as familiar with my feelings. I didn't know how to deal. I just knew that I needed her to be safe.

“Do you know how I know I'll be okay?” She rubbed her hand along my jaw, pressing her lips lightly against me. “Because I'll be with you.”

I let out a shuddering breath and rested my forehead against hers. “Flattery will get you nowhere with me, sunshine.”

“It'll get me out that damn door.”

She had me there. “If anything happens... The first sign of danger—”

“The first sign of danger, we fight.” She gave my shoulders a light squeeze. “We're fighters. Both of us. I trust you to take care of me. Please trust me to take care of you.”

“I do trust you to take care of me.”

That wasn't the issue at all. Brooke was so much more than me in every way that counted. I'd never trusted anyone more. Fate had paired me with the perfect partner, the one who could test me and challenge me in ways I didn't think were possible anymore.

“Cole.” The soft way she said my name had me meeting her gorgeous gray eyes. “Being careful and looking out for myself *is* how I take care of you.”

Damn it. She was right again. I glanced down at the light that glowed between us. My blood-red against her bright

Popsicle-red. The light to my dark. The only reason we had our side effects under control was because we'd let each other in, begun to trust each other. I wasn't willing to lose that. I wasn't willing to go back.

So the only choice was to move forward. "Okay. Let's go outside."

She clapped her hands and squealed in delight, and I smiled in spite of myself. There was a solid chance I'd be willing to walk through the fires of hell to always see her that happy. I was turning into a goddamn sap and I didn't even have the good sense to hate it.

Who was I? Fucking Wes and Donovan?

With that sour thought in my head, I stood and grabbed her hands to help her up. She practically bounced off the mattress and out the door. I shook my head and followed her. As soon as I caught sight of the dopey look on my face in the full-length mirror, I smacked myself, hoping to snap out of it. But it was no use.

I was batshit, over the moon gone for Brooke Hudson.

The hippie girl who raised bees and planted all the flowers in town and had a serious aversion to wearing underwear. As far from my type as one could get. And the person who fit me so well, it actually made me believe in things like fate and *meant to be*.

Seriously, who the fuck was I?

Brooke glanced back and aimed her brighter-than-the-sun smile at me. “Are you coming, slowpoke? We’re so far behind, and there’s so much we need to try now that we have a handle on the side effects.”

Giving her a long-winded sigh, I followed behind. I’d never tell her this, but I found her enthusiasm infectious. It was part of how she breathed energy into me when all I wanted to do was stay in my room and pretend to do work and avoid people.

We stepped outside to near pitch black. The moon was full because it had stayed full ever since we lost the sun. Brooke seemed to think it was a gift from Ceti. To ensure that we’d still have light in the dark. Hope when all seemed hopeless.

My thoughts were a little less romantic. I assumed we were in some kind of time warp caused by the curse. Everything was paused until the island sank or we destroyed the curse and relinquished its hold on time. Because there was no way it could just block out the sun. There would be worldwide panic. Questions. People trying to get to us from outside the barrier.

The curse didn’t have that kind of power. But it did have the power to manipulate us. To make us think we were walking around, living and breathing and existing, on the same plane as the rest of the earth. It could have slowed down time on this island so much that the sun wouldn’t rise again until the island was gone. But to the rest of the world? To everyone outside Zodiac Cove? It was just a single evening.

I floated that idea past Wes and he seemed to agree. As did Galen, and I didn’t know anyone smarter than him. But I’d let

Brooke keep thinking her romantic thoughts because it made her feel better, and that was really all I gave a damn about anyway.

Brooke squinted her eyes as she looked around. “Is it darker than usual out here?”

“Yep.” I wasn’t going to lose my shit. I’d already promised Brooke we’d practice and I’d keep her safe, and she was trusting me on both counts. But I really didn’t like how thick the fog had gotten since we’d last been outside.

“Should we ask Kenna and Galen to clean some of this up before we head out?” Brooke wrapped her small hand around my bicep and squeezed. I knew she was only asking for my benefit. She’d probably go marching headfirst into another swarm of wasps if I let her.

“They’ve tried. It keeps coming back stronger.” We both jumped at the sound of Audrey’s voice as she stepped out of the shadows, her palm glowing golden-green as she held my brother’s hand. “They’re both resting now. They needed a break.”

“When did it start getting worse?” I asked.

Audrey glanced at Wes, like she was debating whether to tell me, but he nodded at her to go ahead. Glad everyone was in agreement that I was a big boy who could handle tough news. “Ever since you and Brooke got back from her attack.”

“What exactly are you saying?” I growled. It wasn’t necessarily at Audrey, but Wes pulled her closer and shot me a

warning glare anyway.

“We think the curse is picking up steam now that the two of you somewhat have your magic under control,” Wes said. “It’s feeling the threat. More than anything, it doesn’t want all twelve of us to come into full power. It’s going to up the stakes. Strike harder.”

My lips thinned, but I’d expected as much. The attack on Brooke was the worst one we’d seen since Finn and Thora nullified the poison that would’ve taken us all out. She nearly died. I’m not sure Brooke even fully understood just how close she’d come. I’d *felt* her last breath through our magic. It nearly destroyed me.

“Is that why you two are out here?” Brooke asked. “So Galen and Kenna can get some sleep?”

Audrey nodded. “We thought it would be best if there was someone with offensive magic on duty at all times. We made a trip through town. A few people have lost power, but so far, the curse is concentrating the bulk of its energy on the hotel.”

“Because we’re all here.” Of course the curse wanted to keep its focus here. We were the only threats to it. Why continue to waste energy on the residents? It had already tried, and Galen and Kenna put an end to that shit real quick. “We should send everyone who isn’t one of the twelve back to their homes. They’ll all be safer.”

Wes snorted. “Try telling them that.”

“I’d be happy to, but I’m not the people person in the family.”

“They think they’re safer here with us,” Wes said.

“Then be honest. Tell them they’re not and tell them why.” Brooke gently applied pressure on my arm to calm me as I raised my voice. I took a deep breath. It wasn’t Wes’s fault the people in this town were so damn stubborn. He tried getting them off this island before the barrier went up, and might’ve succeeded if the asshole mayor hadn’t thrown a wrench into every damn thing he tried to do. “Forget it. They won’t leave.”

Audrey opened her mouth to speak, but she was cut off when a wave of black, so thick, it blocked out everything around me, descended over us, and panic gripped my heart. I held on to Brooke, pulling her against me. Doing every damn thing in my power not to lose my shit, which wouldn’t help either of us.

The smoke swirled around us, faster and faster, raising our hair as if we were in a wind tunnel. Whispered voices began to break the silence. At first, I thought it was another mindfuck.

But then the pictures began to form. And my blood turned to ice.

CHAPTER 13

Brooke

“**B**reathe, Cole. I’m right here.” I couldn’t see him, but he had a viselike grip around my waist, and I clung to him like a lone rock in a stormy sea.

Nothing could drag me away from him. His absolute blinding terror ripped my heart out. He didn’t give a damn about himself, he was freaking the fuck out for me.

“Don’t let go.” He found my hand in the dark and his fingers held mine tight enough to crush my bones together, but he needed me here, breathing beside him, not giving up.

The black continued to swirl around us, until fractions of light and color broke through and spread outward, trapping the two of us in a funnel. But instead of the pitch-black void the others had described when they’d gone through a mental attack, this appeared to be made up of thousands of pixels that began to knit together to make pictures.

Pictures of Cole.

“No.” The fear flowing into me through his magic changed. It became icier, colder, a hardening of the warmth that I’d started to take for granted the last few days. He turned to me, already shutting down emotionally, but fighting it. “Let me explain. When it’s over, please, give me a chance to tell you the whole story.”

I had no idea what he was asking. How could he know what was coming? What did he need to explain? The anguish in his voice was killing me, but before I could give him any kind of assurance, the images froze on pictures of the Cole I’d known before he opened himself up to me. The stern professional who terrified most of the people in town.

And as hard as I tried, I couldn’t look away.

The pictures began to move. Voices filtered into the funnel. It was like watching a movie, but this was Cole’s life. He hadn’t given me permission to view this. It was dirty and invasive and I wanted nothing to do with it. I closed my eyes. But the pictures just filtered into my head. I had no way of shutting it out.

Everything went blurry as a floating sensation loosened my limbs and a slight tug from an invisible string below my breastbone yanked me forward. Out of Cole’s reach. To where I wasn’t just watching his life on the screen; I was in it. I was a participant. And whoever’s body I’d temporarily borrowed was not someone he was happy to see.

His beautiful face that had been so relaxed and happy the last few days had turned hard. The frown lines around his lush

mouth were severe and unforgiving. It aged him years before his time. This was the guy that half the island feared. The one who controlled the livelihood of half the residents and would crush them to dust without a second thought.

Even when he'd crumpled my flower in front of me at the May Day parade, he'd never looked at me like that. Like he hated me... and maybe hated himself a little, too.

I glanced at my reflection in the tinted windows that I recognized as the main office of Zodiac Enterprises, where Cole worked. If I had to guess, I'd say the man whose mind I currently occupied was in his mid-fifties, fit and tan, with laugh lines around his eyes and a distinguished dash of gray at his temples. He probably had a deep voice too. Like a bullfrog. I opened my mouth to speak, but words I didn't want to say came out.

So I was just hitching a ride, then. Okay. I still hated this with every fiber of my being.

"What will I do for work? Who will hire me?" asked the man.

There was a pleading in my voice—his voice—that didn't sound at all like a bullfrog. He sounded desperate and scared and the nurturer in me reacted viscerally to his obvious pain. How could Cole stare at this man with no emotion? Like he was less than nothing?

"That's not my problem." Oh, God. Cole was so hard. So deadly calm. This wasn't him, he wasn't this cruel. This had to be a trick.

“I have kids in college. Ever since Amanda died, I’ve been on my own.” The man got down on his knees, tears streaming down his face. I didn’t want to be here. I didn’t want to see this. “Please, Cole. You can’t that much of a cold, heartless son-of-a-bitch. I taught you how to throw a baseball. I treated you like one of my kids.”

“Get off the floor, Richard.” Cole sounded weary and annoyed, but there wasn’t a shred of pity in his voice. “If you leave now, I’ll see about severance.”

Richard stood, but kept his head bowed. “There’s severance?”

“I said I’d see. I’m not making promises. Now get the fuck out of here.”

There was a slight tug below my breastbone and the scene melted away like wax dripping down a candle. The man taught him how to play baseball? How could he be so awful to someone he’d known his whole life? I would’ve killed to have those kinds of roots and connections growing up, and here he was, treating someone who’d clearly been a family friend like he was little more than a trash bin he had to haul out to the curb.

Everyone thought Cole was a dick, sure, but I’d always assumed it was just because of his gruff attitude. An unfriendly ass, but not evil. Who fired a single dad who’d just lost his spouse? Nausea rolled through me, but there had to be an explanation.

I pressed a hand to my stomach and ordered myself to breathe. The curse played games. It wanted to tear me and Cole apart. It had everything to gain from making me believe its lies. But I knew Cole better than that. He'd opened himself to me beyond anything I'd dared to hope for and asked me to trust him. I couldn't fail him on this first test.

Another tug under my breastbone, and once again, I was in the body of someone else as a passenger, but this someone was *not* an older single dad.

There wasn't a mirror or reflective glass around, but I could look down. And this woman had boobs and legs for days. Like... wow. She was fucking hot. Not cute or perky like me, but a full on smokeshow with a body built for pinups.

A tear dripped onto her silky black teddy that she'd obviously worn for a once-again cold and dismissive Cole, who curled his lip as he stared down at this woman like she was dirt. A woman he'd clearly had a close and intimate relationship with. Not unlike the one we were currently in. I wanted to be in this body, witnessing this dismissal, even less than the last one.

"Please, Cole. I love you." Her hands shook and the tears in her voice clogged my own throat. She was wrecked. Completely and utterly destroyed.

And Cole didn't care. He wouldn't even look at her.

Would he do the same to me once the intensity of fighting the curse wore off?

“Stop it, Evelyn. For God’s sake, pull yourself together.” His voice was flat. Emotionless. A soulless machine that only pretended to be human.

The woman sniffled. “I’m trying. You were never going to be a giver, but how can you be so cruel, after everything we’ve gone through? How can you feel nothing?”

“You should’ve seen this coming.” He checked his watch, like her breakdown over this break-up was wasting his precious time. “Are you done? I have a ferry to catch.”

I clenched my fists. In my mind, since I had no control over this body whatsoever. This wasn’t Cole. There had to be more to the story. I couldn’t let the curse win this.

The same tugging under my breastbone happened again, yanking me out of the vision or the memory or whatever the hell I’d been stuck in. Instead of taking me somewhere else, it dropped me in a dark room with black walls and a black floor. I tried to look up, but a single overhead light blinded me.

Smoke leaked out of the corners of the room. “*He’ll shut you out and discard you. Just like he did to the rest of them. I showed you who he really is.*”

The voice was all around me, inside my head, echoing around the empty chamber. I spun in a circle, looking for a source, but all I managed to find was more black smoke. “You’re lying. I know what you’re trying to do, and it won’t work. You can’t make me turn against him. I know he’s not the man you want me to believe he is.”

“*Oh, no?*” The question was a hiss in my ear. I spun around again as the voice seemed to be coming from behind me this time. “*Why not ask him yourself?*”

Another tug, but I wasn't dropped into another vision-memory or a dark room. This time, I was right beside Cole. Still holding onto him for dear life. As if I'd been there the whole time. The smoke fell away and I glanced up at him. He was pale and shaking.

The curse must've done a similar number on him, and I couldn't wait to see what bullshit about my life he'd been tricked into believing was real. It didn't matter. At the end of the day, he knew me. And I knew him. We'd earned that trust the hard way, damn it.

Audrey let go of her rain. She probably hadn't thrown any lightning for fear of it hitting us. Wes wasn't with her, he must've charged Audrey's power enough to leave her for a minute to go grab help. What was it like to have a partner who trusted your strength? Wes was protective as hell of Audrey, but he still knew she was capable of handling herself. Wished I could say the same for another Latham.

“Are you two okay?” Audrey asked. “Wes went to grab Kenna and Galen, but it was over before it began.”

“We're fine.” I waved her off. “Why don't the four of you take a break? We're going to be out here practicing for a little while longer, and Cole has offensive magic too.”

“If you're sure?” Audrey's voice trailed off as she took in Cole standing beside me, a look of devastation stealing over

his features.

“It’s fine. Go. We’re good.” I shooed her away. I knew she and Wes were probably exhausted and could use a little downtime. Which made me feel even guiltier for all the time Cole and I had spent holed up in our room when we could’ve been out here helping.

As soon as she went inside to head off Wes, Kenna, and Galen, I whirled on Cole. “Okay, spill. What kind of ridiculousness did the curse show you? Because you wouldn’t believe what it tried to convince me about you.”

He didn’t say anything, but his lips formed that hard, tight line he’d get when he was biting back his words. “It didn’t show me anything about you.”

“Really? Huh. That’s lucky, I guess. So what did it show you?”

He took my hands and squeezed them. “I think we should sit down for this.”

The black fog swirled overhead, almost like it was mocking me. I could practically hear it singing “I told you” in my head. Ice ran through my veins. It couldn’t be... What it showed hadn’t been real. I refused to accept that.

He put his hand on the small of my back to guide me forward, but I resisted any forward movement. I wanted answers. Now. “Why do we need to sit? What did it show you?”

He didn’t answer me.

My heart dropped into my stomach. “Tell me. What did it show you?”

Pure misery etched his face as he held my gaze. “I was in those memories with you. I could feel you inside Richard and Evelyn. How upset you were with what you were seeing. I was reliving them myself in my own body.”

I dropped his arm and backed away. “What do you mean by memories?”

He didn’t say anything again, and I began to tremble. That wasn’t the curse trying to trick me? That really was Cole? Cold, merciless, and unforgiving. The type of person who would squish someone beneath his foot just because he could. It didn’t matter how much they suffered. He didn’t feel any of it.

Oh, God. How long would it be before he was giving me the same look? What would I do if he turned those flat eyes and vacant expression on me? Would I cry and tell him how much I loved him while he checked his watch?

“No. That wasn’t really you.” Tears began to pool in my eyes. “Tell me that wasn’t you.”

He hung his head. “I can’t.”

“How long ago was that?” I asked.

He swallowed. “Evelyn was this past spring. Richard, the day you gave me the flower during the May Day parade.”

I put my hands over my mouth to stifle my gasp. This year. It was just a handful of months ago that he was callously

breaking hearts and firing single dads who'd taught him how to play baseball. Maybe he wasn't that person anymore, but wasn't that the same lie my mom used to tell herself? That this time was different. That this man wouldn't do what was in his nature to do to. To use people and discard them, because he was alone by choice.

Cole had opened himself to me only when he had no empire to run, no lonely mansion on the cliffs that even cats getting regular meals ran away from. He was with me out of obligation. Because he had a duty to protect his assets, which were the businesses that populated the island. The people had always been secondary. If considered at all.

Once this was all over, how soon would it be before he reverted back to his old ways? How quickly would I go back to being the weird hippie girl who raised bees and planted flowers and made tourist boys blush at Leo's? Would he dump me like Evelyn? Or maybe he wouldn't even give me the courtesy of a goodbye.

"Brooke, please. Give me a chance to explain." He grabbed my hand and the jolt that went through me had my heart stuttering.

Our lights flared and my magic pulsed and pounded against me, squeezing at my core and making my thighs slick. The urge to jump on Cole and ride him hard and fast into oblivion nearly knocked me over. I was so horny, my core ached with a need that wasn't my own.

I yanked my hand out of his, while he stood there, staring dumbly at me, feeling the exact same thing I'd felt. That unnerving quick punch of painful lust, so consuming, it made everything inside us spin out of control. The side effects were back.

And I'd done that. I fucked us both over because I stopped trusting him.

I had to get away from here. Away from him. With my bottom lip quivering, I took one last look at his horrified face and turned around to run back inside the hotel.



The French doors slammed behind me, but I didn't turn around to see if Cole was following me. I just kept running until I was outside Wes and Audrey's room. She'd probably arrived only ten minutes ahead of me, but if Wes was anything like Cole, there was a solid chance she was already indisposed and not free for emergency drinks.

Hoping for the best, I knocked on the door. She answered with her hair mussed around her face and her lips slightly swollen, but at least she was still dressed. Her eyes immediately widened in concern and I rubbed my hands over my cheeks. I must've looked like shit, but I felt like shit, so that tracked.

Wes came up behind her and opened the door further. “What happened?”

“Your brother is a terrible person. He hurts people on purpose.” He wasn’t really like that though. Not when he was with me. But what I’d seen in those memories... I didn’t know that version of Cole. I didn’t want to know that version of Cole.

“No, shit.” Wes rolled his eyes. “Where the fuck have you been?”

Audrey waved a hand to shush him, then stepped out into the hall and shut the door on Wes, sensing that this was more than a typical argument. “What did he do?”

“Are you sure you have time for this?” I glanced at the door. She wasn’t technically indisposed yet, but she looked like she’d been well on her way.

“It’s fine.” She hooked her arm through mine. “We’ve already gone two rounds today.”

I shook my head. “Those Lathams.”

“Insatiable.” She directed me toward the dining hall. “It’s pretty packed in there at all hours, since most families are kind of using it as a community center, but I know about a secret staircase off the kitchens.”

I followed her through the noise and bustle of activity. She hadn’t been joking about the community center vibes; the place was crawling with scared and tired moms doing their best to keep their shit together in front of their kids. Some of

whom were playing board games or doing puzzles at the tables. Wes and Donovan had a cleared out the private dining halls and made them places for kids to play soccer or have dance parties. They'd tried to make it feel like camp, if only to give their frayed parents a little peace.

They were good people, Wes and Donovan. So what happened to Cole? Did he and Seth rot at their cores before they fell off the Latham tree?

Even thinking that made my insides curdle. Like I was being disloyal to the man who'd done nothing but take care of me and respect me and treat me like a queen. He wasn't cold to me. Hadn't he already proved he could be better?

But still. I couldn't reconcile those memories with the man I knew. I'd known cold men in my life, emotionless ones. My mom had dated plenty of them on her quest to find herself, following them across the desert, never settling down, never giving anyone who was good to her the time of day. She was attracted to the cold and merciless, the type of man Cole had been in those memories, and I swore up and down that I'd never be like that.

I'd never give my heart to a man that wouldn't be gentle with it.

From an early age, I felt too much. All of my emotions were so much larger than me, I had trouble managing them and keeping myself contained. Until I got old enough to realize that I didn't need to shrink myself or hide my feelings. They

were a part of me, and I liked myself just as I was. I didn't need to be less to win anyone's approval.

My mom had spent too much of her life trying to win the approval of men who would never give more of themselves than was convenient. They liked her because she was beautiful and she looked good on their arms at corporate events. Like a diamond cufflink. An accessory. And when she'd served her purpose, they'd discard her and she'd be off to a new city, with a new dazzling set of suits ready to wine and dine and use her again.

That would never be me. Until I went ahead and felt too much for Cole Latham. Because my core had been rotted long before I ever got a chance to fall from my tree.

Audrey led me into the pantry and opened up a secret panel behind a shelf full of jams and pickles. "Wes brought me back here one day to..." She gave me a satisfied grin. "Anyway, this used to be a staircase for the summer staff's quarters before the elevator was installed. It's kind of musty, but super private. No one can hear you scream."

I really didn't need to know how she knew that. "Perfect. I could use some scream time."

Her brows drew together in sympathy. "Cole is..." She pinched her lips together as she tried to come up with a word not too insulting. He was still my partner and her future brother-in-law. "Difficult. But I thought things were improving with you two? I saw him smile yesterday. Twice. That's two more times than I've ever seen him smile."

“They were getting better, but when we all got separated earlier, I saw some things.” I bit my lip, not wanting to give her any details. It had been difficult to watch, but it was still Cole’s memory, not mine, and it felt gross to share it without his permission.

Audrey laid her hand on top of my clenched ones in my lap. “The curse lies. You know that, right? Whatever it showed you was probably a trick to split you up.”

“He admitted it was real.” I went on to share with her everything that had happened after we came out of the memories without giving away anything that wasn’t mine to share.

“Hmm.” She tapped a finger to her lips.

“What’s that hmmm? Why are you making that noise you do whenever you’re talking to someone who you know is being hardheaded?”

“You didn’t stay to hear him out?”

I reared my head back. “Would you have stayed?”

“Yes. If it was Wes. Because he’s the other half of my soul, and I trust him enough to hear his side of a story that had been purposely fed to me by someone wishing to do me harm.”

I frowned. “I feel like you’re shaming me.”

She patted my hand. “That’s because I am, sweetie.”

I blew out a long, slow breath that sent a loose curl fluttering around my face. She was right. I hated that she was

right. But if I was going to be fully honest, I also had to admit that I came to Audrey instead of Galen or Violet because I knew she'd be straight with me and not just tell me what she thought I wanted to hear out of comfort. Audrey didn't give a damn about anyone's comfort. She preferred to be honest. Which was why I loved her so much.

I stood and dusted off the back of my skirt. "You're right."

"Of course I'm right." She stood and smacked my butt. "Now go find your man like a good girl and let him explain himself."

I cringed. "Yeah. Maybe don't call me that."

Her eyes narrowed before she burst out laughing. "Oh my God. Those Lathams."

"Insatiable."

CHAPTER 14

Cole

I didn't think it was possible for me to be any more of a fuck-up, but then I destroyed the best thing that had ever happened to me. Because I was a coward.

I knew the kind of impression I left on people. Cold. Heartless. Unfeeling. I didn't regret the way I'd acted in those memories—it was the only way I was able to get through the bullshit with both Evelyn and Richard—but I should've told Brooke more of my history.

I'd thought about it. Honesty had always been one of my worst, but indelible, traits. But at the end of the day, I liked the way she looked at me. With Brooke, I could pretend, even if just for a little while, that I was someone good and decent and worthy of her affection.

And because she was good and decent and gave her affection so freely, I should've shown her all my fucked-up parts and asked her to give me a chance anyway. She probably would've. But it was too late now. The curse that wanted her dead had given her more honesty than I had, and that tentative

trust we'd barely begun to build had crumbled with little more than a flick of its wrist.

I should've known it would only a be matter of time before the curse tried to weaponize my past against me. Brooke had told me about her mom, about the kind of life she had growing up, and I got scared. I didn't want her to look at me like someone who would dazzle her for the short term and discard her when she really needed me.

So I kept silent.

There had been plenty of opportunities over the last few days to tell her about the things that haunted me. While Brooke had been purging her feelings about almost dying, she also opened up to me. Completely opened up. I could feel her trust flowing into me through the magic we shared and it was like the sweetest honey flowing into my veins, taking me out of the dark.

She kept giving me expectant looks, like she was hoping I'd share more with her too. So I told her things that didn't matter. Like how my dad had groomed me to take over the company, while leaving out the enormous amount of pressure I'd felt at being handed the livelihood of so many people I'd known my entire life.

I told her about women I'd dated, without telling her about the one who broke my trust so thoroughly, I'd seriously contemplated never getting into a relationship again.

I didn't tell her how it made me feel to fire Richard. Or how I felt when my dad asked me to do it because everyone had

just become accustomed to handing the unpleasant interactions to me, since everyone already thought I was an asshole. Or how I stopped trying to be nice, because my short responses to small talk and questions automatically branded me as surly and rude. Or how I stopped caring about people before they could stop caring about me.

Or how deep-in-my-bones terrified I was of losing her, because she was the only person who'd made me feel anything real in longer than I could remember.

I'd had two full days to give her everything. And I gave her nothing.

Then I wanted to act surprised when she ran after finding out a few unpleasant truths about me from the fucking curse, of all things. It would've been nice if she'd given me a chance to explain myself, but would that have even mattered? She didn't owe me shit, and those had been my memories. I did those things.

After I finished packing up Brooke's suitcase with the clothes she'd flung all over the room and set it by the door—pretty much accepting that she'd want to move out—I paced the room and beat myself up for all the things I should've done differently.

My favorite pastime.

Fuck. I ran my hands through my hair and gripped the back of my neck. I'd made such a fucking mess of things, and had no idea how to fix it. I was a fixer. That was what I did. But I was so far out my depth with the tiny hippie beekeeper.

When the keycard beeped and the door opened, my heart dropped. Brooke stepped inside our—my—room with swollen eyes and a watery smile. I immediately hated myself even more than I had a minute ago, and I didn't think that was possible.

I'd done that to her. I'd made the brightest light that had ever walked into my life cry, because I was a piece of shit who broke everything I touched. How was I supposed to care for an entire island full of people when I couldn't even care for the one person who had opened her heart and handed me everything?

She eyed her suitcase by the door. "You want me to leave?"

Her voice was small and hesitant, and for the first time since she ran from me, a small glimmer of hope rose up and wrapped itself around my throat. "Of course not."

"Then why did you pack up my stuff and set it by the door?"

I swallowed. "I thought that was what you wanted."

"That depends." She took another step inside the room, and another thread of hope rose inside me. My fingers itched to touch her, but we weren't there yet, so I balled up my hands and shoved them in my pockets to keep myself in check.

"Depends on what?" My throat felt like I'd eaten razor blades for breakfast. So much of who I'd be, and where I went from here, hung on what she had to say.

She took a seat on the bed, the mattress dipping to accommodate her small frame. “Tell me about those memories. Not what happened. I already saw what happened. Tell me your side of the story. Why were you like that?”

I blew out a breath. She was giving me a chance. The chance she’d been giving me for the past two days, and this time, I wouldn’t fuck it up. “Is it okay if I sit?”

She nodded.

I took a seat next to her, still giving her plenty of room. The last thing I wanted was the side effects kicking in to remind me just how completely she didn’t trust me anymore. That all the work we’d done over the last week was wasted because I’d been a stupid, selfish prick. “Who do you want me to start with? Evelyn or Richard?”

She sighed. “I really don’t care.”

“Okay.” This was going well. “Richard had worked for our company for thirty years. He’d been a higher-up and close with my family. His wife died in a scuba diving accident on one of the lavish vacations they’d taken the year before. Vacations they could afford because Richard had stolen nearly twenty million from us over thirty years.”

She gasped, her eyes widening. “I’m so sorry. The memory made it look—”

“Don’t apologize.” I didn’t want her to say sorry to me for something she should’ve heard from me in the first place. “I know what it looked like and at what point you’d been

dropped in. I should've told you all this when you gave me your history.”

She knotted her hands together, her face scrunched in concentration. There were things she wanted to say, that much I could tell, but I didn't know if she struggled to find the words because they would hurt her, or me. And the fact that her words would likely do one or the other didn't sit well with me.

We didn't belong on opposite sides, despite all our many other opposites.

“Cole.” She took a deep breath and placed her hand over mine. The cracks inside me slowly began to knit themselves back together once it occurred to me that we touched without losing control of our magic or our hormones. “What we have is a relationship. It's not transactional. I'm not an associate. I'm your partner. I told you things about me because I wanted to. You don't owe me the same in return.”

I didn't? Was that normal? Surely, I owed her something.

I'd never had a relationship that didn't require a transaction of some sort. A give for a take. There had always been so many expectations put on me, an unspoken set of rules that told me if I did this, then I'd get that. It was how I moved through the world. And with just a handful of words, Brooke undid everything I thought I knew about how to interact with people.

She laughed. “I can tell by your expression that this is news to you.”

“I just thought that was how people had relationships. You’d do something for them, and in return, they’d do something for you.”

She gave me a pitying look. “That’s really sad.”

I grunted. The last thing I needed or wanted was for her to feel sorry for me. I just needed to get a handle on what she was saying, so I could properly understand it. I didn’t like feeling out of my element. “How is that not what we’ve been doing?”

She raised an eyebrow at me. “And what did you get when you made me come three times in a row last night?”

“I got to watch you come.”

She rolled her eyes and cupped my jaw, running her hands along the scruff that had begun to grow because I’d been more worried about pleasuring her than shaving the last two days. It settled the last bits of turmoil that had set my teeth on edge. “You’re such an odd duck.”

I snorted. “You’re one to talk.”

She gave me a playful shove. “Tell me more about what happened with Richard. If you want. How did you find out he was stealing?”

“We actually found out because Amanda died.”

God, her funeral was such a fucked-up day. If I ended up in hell, I was certain I’d just be forced to relive that day over and over again. I wished I hadn’t gone. I almost hadn’t.

Amanda had been like a second mother to me. After we got the news about her accident, I didn't sleep or eat for two days. But public displays of emotion were difficult for me, and I didn't want to overhear people whispering about what a heartless bastard I was because I wouldn't cry for their benefit.

If I'd stayed home, maybe none of it would've come to light. There hadn't been a day since where I hadn't questioned the choices I'd made to bring everything down. The grief mixed with betrayal was so sharp, it still had the power to cut right through me.

I clasped my hands together and hung my head. "There was a wake at his house. He was usually careful not to invite us over. But there was a lot that didn't make sense."

When I didn't keep going, lost in the memory of that day and the things I wish I hadn't heard or seen, Brooke gave me a gentle nudge. "What didn't make sense?"

"He had pictures of him and Amanda in Paris and London and Tokyo, when he'd said they went camping every year. There were expensive imported furnishings. Museum-quality art. We pay our employees well... but fuck."

That had been hard to see. The lies about his vacations were one thing, maybe he didn't want to brag; but the art was a giant red flag. I was familiar with a few of the pieces and knew what the price tags on them had been.

Brooke squeezed my upper arm. "What else did you see?"

I rubbed my hands over my face. “I overheard one of his kids talking on the phone to his girlfriend about their private boat and second home, and how he could just kick back for the summer because his tuition had been paid in full. He went to Harvard.”

“Damn. I didn’t know real people went to Harvard. I thought it was a make-believe school for elves and robots and other mythical creatures.”

And she called me the odd duck. “I went to Harvard.”

“Oh, God. Of course you did.”

I decided to bypass what was probably a thinly veiled insult. “Anyway, I told my dad, since he was still CEO at that point, and he said that we shouldn’t do anything about it for now because Amanda had just passed. I agreed with that.”

“That’s understandable,” Brooke said.

“He passed the job of investigating off to Donovan, since he had some experience with that over in Europe. That was the last I heard anything of it for almost a year. I’d begun to think maybe I’d read too much into it. He could’ve made some decent investments over the years. Those art pieces could’ve been high-quality knockoffs.”

“But they weren’t, were they?”

“Nope.” I laced my fingers together, resting my forearms on my thighs. “By the time Donovan finished whatever the hell he does, my dad had stepped down because of his heart attack, and everyone said it would be better if I fired Richard because

it wouldn't bother me as much. Because I didn't feel things like everyone else did."

"What the fuck?" There was the angry-kitten look again, but I liked it a lot better when it wasn't directed at me. "That's such bullshit."

"It probably was better coming from me, because he worked in my office, and I wouldn't give in to his pleas, but it still felt like shit. And I hated that my family just assumed I didn't feel things, so that made me their first choice when they needed someone to be an asshole."

"I'm sorry." She scooted in closer and wrapped her arms around me in a way that steadied us both. "I kind of hate your family now."

I laughed. "Don't bother. They don't mean any harm, it's just the way I am and the way they are. I know they love me, but it would be nice if they didn't see me just one way."

"You should tell them that."

I grunted. Communication was not one of my strengths. "Maybe."

She looked happy that I'd even conceded that much. Brooke was huge on talking about feelings, and I was... not. But if talking to my family made her happy, then I'd be willing to spill all my secrets and resentments, because at the end of the day, what they thought of me didn't matter nearly as much as what she thought of me.

She mattered. Like no one in my life had ever mattered before.

“Do you want to talk about the other memory, with the pinup, or is that enough for now?”

“The pinup?” Christ. I was not going to give Evelyn a cutesy nickname. Not when viper or succubus was right there for the taking.

“You know.” Brooke mimicked curves over her body with her hands. “She had enormous boobs. I didn’t know you were into that. I fear I might be lacking in that department.”

Oh, hell no. She was not going to put herself down in front of me. And she damn well wasn’t going to compare herself to the hellbeast known as my ex. I pushed Brooke down on the mattress and crawled over top of her. “You’re perfect. In every way. Exactly what I want.” I pushed my growing erection against her inner thigh. “You’re exactly what I need. I never want you to doubt yourself in front of me again, understand?”

She nodded at me with big innocent eyes. “Yes, daddy.”

Fuck me. This woman. Every word out of her mouth was like a shot of adrenaline straight to my dick. I wanted to fuck that smart mouth of hers so bad, but not yet. First, I needed to clear the air about Evelyn.

It killed me that Brooke had been dropped into the memory right at the point where Evelyn was putting on her best show yet, and my patience with her antics had long past run out. I sat up, taking Brooke’s hands to pull her up with me.

“Evelyn was married.” I ran a hand through my hair, agitated all over again just thinking about it. “I don’t date married women.”

That was the least concerning shit she’d pulled on me, but I thought it was worth mentioning because it still ate away at me. I hate that I slept with a married woman. Almost as much as I hated the way she blackmailed me.

“How did you meet?” Brooke asked.

“She’d rented a cabin on the island. One night, we were both eating alone in the same restaurant. She asked me to join her. I figured, why the hell not? She was the first non-family member who I’d shared a meal with in a long time.”

And I’d been lonely. So fucking lonely. I couldn’t even keep a goddamn cat for company. I should’ve done a better job of keeping my guard up, and in the rearview, I could see that it was her company I’d craved more than her as a person. Hindsight was such a bitch.

“You don’t strike me as the type to dine with strangers,” Brooke said. “What was different about this one?”

“She acted like she had no idea who I was, which I found refreshing.”

Brooke tapped her chin. “Let me guess? She knew the whole time.”

“Fuck yes she did. She’d honed in on me specifically because she’d stayed on the island long enough to hear about Wes being ass over feet in love with Audrey, and to know that

Donovan didn't go anywhere without Violet firmly attached to his hip. I was easy prey."

"Like a lion singling out the injured gazelle lagging behind the rest of the herd."

"Something like that," I muttered. "It was a game to her, to pretend to be everything she thought I wanted. Until the night she filmed us being intimate without my consent. Then she threatened to release the video online unless I paid her a large sum of money. Our tourism relies heavily on being family-friendly. It would've been a PR nightmare."

Brooke's face screwed up as she clenched her fists. "Where does live?"

"No need to know." I put my hands over hers. "We dealt with it. Donovan hacked her computer and erased her files, all of them, not just mine. There were several men and women both she and her husband were attempting to exploit."

"No, seriously. Where does she live?" I decided right then that I really loved the angry-kitten version of Brooke when it was directed at other people on my behalf.

"As far as I'm concerned, she no longer exists." I tipped Brooke's chin and gave her a soft kiss. "But thank you for your support. When I confronted Evelyn at her home, she was terrified I'd turn her in. Never mind that Donovan had used less than legal means to delete her files. That's why she tried to pull out the guilt trip and declarations of love, with big fake tears."

Brooke blew out a breath. “No wonder you were so distant with her.”

That thousand-pound weight that had been sitting on my chest lifted. I should’ve told Brooke all this sooner and trusted her to give me the benefit of the doubt. I hadn’t been an angel by any means. On paper, I had still gotten involved with a married woman, and fired an old family friend, but I was changing. Becoming better. Opening myself up in ways that scared the hell out of me, and still, I was willing to try. For Brooke. And for myself as well.

“Does this mean I’m forgiven?” I asked.

She climbed onto my lap, straddling me as she hooked her arms over my shoulders. “I forgave you before I even walked in the door.”

CHAPTER 15

Brooke

Cole gathered my hair at the back of my neck, tugging it so he could tilt my head back. He held my gaze, his eyes searching mine. “I want to kiss you, but not if you don’t trust me.”

Audrey had been so right. I never should’ve bailed on him. He was my person. My other half. I should’ve believed he’d have an explanation for the way he’d acted. And even if he didn’t, I should’ve trusted the person he was today. The person beneath the hard exterior.

But everything he told me made sense. It even made sense to me why he’d been so cold, and how he’d come to gain that reputation. I loved living in Zodiac Cove, the community and camaraderie were everything I’d craved growing up, but small towns weren’t without faults. The problem with knowing everyone for their entire lives was the inability to give people time and room to grow. No one could ever start over and walk a different path.

If I'd been forced to fit into the boxes I'd been placed in early in life, they would've suffocated me. And Cole had to spend all these years suffering under the weight of those boxed-in expectations with no one to lean on.

He needed someone to trust and believe in him more than anything, and I wanted to be that person for him. The rock in his stormy seas.

Letting go and learning to trust wasn't the same as giving up on myself. Just because my mom made a bunch of empty promises about never moving again, and then broke every one of them, didn't mean that everyone's word was garbage.

Cole had honor. He didn't date married women or sleep with drunk ones. He took his responsibilities seriously. He did things for his family that they weren't willing to do themselves, and took all the shit they gave him for not being Suzy Sunshine on top of it.

No one ever let him be anything other than what they thought he'd always been, but I wasn't everyone else, and I should've been on his side.

I rested my forehead against his. "There isn't anyone in this world who I trust more than you. And if you don't believe me, since I haven't done a lot to prove that to you lately, at least believe my magic. Because I'm not the least bit horny."

The glint in his eyes had me squirming in his lap, and he let out a deep groan that rumbled in his chest. "I think I can change that quick enough."

“Does this mean you’re going to kiss me now?”

He pressed his thumbs into my pulse points. “I think I will.”

“I think you should do it already.”

“I think I would’ve by now if you’d quit talking for a second.”

“I think you like it when I—”

He crashed his lips against mine, stealing my breath and whatever nonsensical argument I was about to throw down because bickering with Cole made me wet. Which probably said something not-too-flattering about me, but I didn’t really care when he was kissing me like *that*.

No one kissed like Cole. He kissed like he was trying to win something. Like he’d rather die than be handed a participation trophy in kissing. Like my mouth owed him something and he’d come to collect. His lips were bossy and demanding, but the stroke of his tongue, the way his fingers drifted over my body, was so soft and reverent. Salty and sweet. Heat and tenderness.

It was enough to make my head spin.

He broke away and I opened my heavy eyes, sloppily licking my lips. He smirked at the near punch-drunk state he’d put me into with just a little kissing. “You were saying?”

“I really think I’m going to need to start wearing underwear if you’re going to continue to make me this wet. It’s not that pleasant to walk around with slippery thighs.”

He threw back his head and laughed. My favorite song.

Our kissing quickly ignited the spark inside both of us. Through our magic, all the trust and awe he felt from having me in his arms flowed into me. For the first time, I could truly see myself the way he saw me, and it took my breath away.

I'd always been the cute one, the fun one, the sweet one. A passing fancy—and unsurprising, since I had to learn permanence. It hadn't come naturally to me. But for the first time, I didn't look at my life in slides of past and present. With Cole, I saw a future.

Both our palms glowed with red light, but our magic flowed between us without bursting outward. It connected us together without trying to take us over. When I trusted Cole, my magic was beautiful and melodic, like the wind tickling first spring leaves.

When the intensity of our connection reached a peak, he flipped me over onto the mattress and lifted my skirt, bunching the flowy material around my waist, and rubbed his chin. He looked so serious and professional. I could work with this.

A small shiver went through me as I leaned up on my elbows with my legs spread wide open, baring myself to him. “What seems to be the problem, Dr. Latham?”

His eyes flickered with surprise for a moment before a devious smile touched his lips. “It seems we have a very serious problem here indeed.”

I placed my hand over my forehead and threw my head back in dramatic fashion. “Oh, no. Tell me, doctor. Am I going to be okay?”

“You’re in need of some extended care, miss.” He placed his hands on my knees, pushing my legs further apart. “I’m afraid you are suffering from *incomitata cattus*.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

His frown was stern, but his eyes danced with amusement. “Unattended pussy, miss.”

“Is that Latin?” I lifted myself to a sitting position. “How do you just know Latin?”

“Don’t sass your doctor. Lay back and let him take care of you.” He pushed a finger into me. “I can tell that it’s been a long time since you’ve last been serviced. Too long.”

Getting into character once more, I threw my head back again, but I couldn’t quite stop the moan that escaped my lips as he pushed another finger in. “You’re right. It’s been hours. Doctor, tell me. What can I do? Who can I call on to service me the way I need?”

“I happen to be a specialist who graduated from the school of pussy with top honors. They taught us tricks your usual service providers don’t know.”

“Oh, thank God you didn’t graduate from someplace pretentious and stuffy, like Harvard.” He growled and I gave him a cheeky wink. “Can you help me, doctor? My pussy is in

desperate need of servicing, and I'm afraid I can't trust just any provider."

"Not a problem, miss. It's what I was put on this earth to do." He rubbed his free hand up and down my thigh as he continued to pump his fingers in and out of me. "I'm just going to need you to do something for me first."

"Anything, doctor. Anything at all."

"I need you to grip those sheets underneath you and hold the fuck on."

A thrill skated up my spine as I did what he asked. He continued to watch me like he was waiting for something. A sign from me to proceed. I began to squirm under his gaze, it felt as though he was stripping me down, seeing me beyond even the things I knew about myself.

I worked my bottom lip between my teeth, anticipation building to the point of making me scream. He waited a beat. Two beats. Then dove between my legs.

For all his watching and waiting, he wasted no time in going to town on my clit. My back arched off the bed and playtime was officially over. I couldn't stay in character if my life depended on it. Not with the way Cole played my pussy like it was his favorite instrument and only he knew how to make me sing.

I had no choice but to grip the sheet tighter as I tried to hang on.

Shoving a rough hand under my ass, he tilted me until he had me at his preferred angle, then continued to feast on me. The sounds I made couldn't possibly be human. As he continued to use his tongue and fingers to command my body and make it his as much as mine, I clutched the sheets hard enough to leave permanent wrinkles.

I was so close. Almost there. Grabbing a handful of his hair, I pushed his face harder into me while he continued to suck on my clit.

"I love how wet you get for me. Only me. And you know how I know that?" He held me down and swirled his tongue over the tight bud at my center. "Because if you were like this for anyone else, you would've started wearing underwear a long-ass time ago."

My stomach trembled as my orgasm hovered right on the edge. "Only you."

"That's what I like to hear, sunshine." He kissed the inside of my thigh as he pumped his fingers harder. "Now be a good girl and soak my face. Let me drown in this perfect pussy."

With just a handful of filthy words, I exploded. My legs shook as my inner walls hugged his fingers so tight, I was afraid I'd cut off his circulation. My toes curled hard against his shoulders, making my back arch. Before I could recover, a tingling sensation spread to the tips of my nerves, building to another wave that would surely drag me to heaven or hell.

My second orgasm slammed into me with just as much force as the first. I screamed his name as I dug my nails into

his head. Was I dying? I couldn't feel my fingers or toes, and part of my body basked in a nice warm glow, like I was no longer on this earth.

And he still wasn't done with me. "I never get tired of watching you come."

I thought that was the last of it. I was certain I couldn't go one more round, but every time I challenged him on this, he'd make me come twice more, so there really was no point in arguing. As the third orgasm turned my bones to pudding, I rolled over and buried my face in the mattress. "Thank you, Dr. Latham. That will be enough."

He rubbed his hand down my back, kissing me between my shoulder blades. "You were such a good patient." He kissed me lower. "You took your treatment so well." He kissed me at the base of my spine. "I expect you'll make a full recovery." He sunk his teeth into my ass. Not hard enough to hurt, but with just enough pressure to have me lifting my hips. He chuckled and kissed the place he'd bitten. "But I thought you were fully serviced?"

"Shut up and fuck me, Dr. Latham."

"As you wish." He kissed the base of my spine once more, then lifted my hips and slid into me with one quick thrust. His deep, satisfied groan had my pussy clenching hard against his cock. He squeezed my hips. "Keep doing that and this is going to be over before I can give you the proper treatment you deserve."

“Okay.” My quick accommodation to his request earned me another compliment on how well I was taking his cock. This was better than any gold stars I ever got in school.

Heat poured through me as he began to move. His quick, hard thrusts were exactly how I liked it and his cock was the perfect fit. It really was like we’d been molded from the stars for each other. Who knew? Maybe we had been. When he moved inside of me like this, loving my body, worshiping every inch of me, it wasn’t so hard to believe in fate, and stars aligning, and the idea of finding the only person on this earth who could complete me.

“You’re so beautiful on your knees like this.” He bent forward and kissed my spine as he rolled his hips. “So good. So perfect in every way.”

“Oh, no.” I clenched around him. “I can’t stop myself from... Oh, God.”

Sweat slicked my skin as he pumped his hips against me, our skin slapping together as he continued to fuck me through another orgasm. “It’s okay to clench. I’m right there with you.”

His hips began to jerk out of rhythm as he lost control and gave in to the release that rolled through him as mine continued to drag me under. Slowly, he pulled out of me. His arousal slid down the inside of my thigh. Usually, I’d get right up and clean myself, but I was fully spent. Unable to hold myself up anymore, I collapsed on the mattress, wheezing like I’d just run up thirty flights of stairs.

“Rest.” It was a command, not a suggestion. Cole rubbed his hand down my back once more, then got up and headed into the bathroom.

When he came back out, he cleaned me up, taking the utmost care with me as he rubbed the warm washcloth down my thighs. I rolled onto my back. “Thank you.”

“Stay here.” He put his pants on and buttoned them, a sweet smile touching his lips as he stared down at me sprawled out on the bed, completely loose and relaxed. “I’ll be back in a minute. Try not to get into any trouble in the meantime.”

“*Moi?*” How dare he? I was the picture of innocence.

He smirked and leaned down to kiss my nose. “Give me two minutes. We need food.”

He came back with two plates of pancakes. A smiley face had been drawn on them with strawberries, whipped cream, and chocolate chips. I loved smiley face pancakes. More adult menus needed to include them. Who didn’t like food that looked happy about being eaten?

Apparently, the grumpy grouch currently holding both plates, who scowled every time he looked down. “Donovan thought he was being cute. I didn’t ask for this.”

“I don’t care.” I sat up and pushed my hair out of my face, holding my hands up and wiggling my fingers. “Gimme. I love smiley face pancakes.”

He scoffed. “Of course you do.”

I nearly took his fingers off grabbing the fork he handed me, and dug in. As soon as the chocolatey, syrupy sweetness hit my tongue, I moaned. “You’re not going to ruin this for me. Eat smiley face pancakes with me naked. It’ll be fun.”

“You keep using the word fun. I don’t think it means what you think it means.” His voice was gruff, but he humored me anyway by taking his pants off again and sitting on the bed with me. He held his fork over his plate, giving his pancakes the stink-eye. “This is the most utterly ridiculous thing I’ve ever eaten.”

“That can’t be true.” Everyone needed to have smiley face pancakes at least once in their lives. “What did you order at restaurants when you were a kid?”

“An egg white omelet and black coffee.”

“You’re joking.” I clenched my fist against my chest. “Please tell me you’re joking.”

He didn’t respond.

I held up a hand. “No more childhood stories from you. They make me too sad.”

“Don’t cry for me, sunshine. I had a very happy childhood. I’ve just always taken life a little more seriously than most.”

“That’s not a good enough excuse for never eating smiley face pancakes.”

He pointed his fork at me. “Then it looks like you get to take credit for introducing me to this fine culinary treat.”

Technically, Donovan should've gotten the credit, but I was feeling smug enough to let it slide. We fell into a comfortable silence as we continued to eat. Having been properly fucked and fed, I set my empty plate on the nightstand, leaning back with my arms stretched over my head. It was still fairly early in the day, but I was ready for a nap.

My eyelids began to close, and Cole set his empty plate on top of mine and scooped me up against his chest. "Do you want to sleep, or do you want to go practice still?"

Ugh. Now he had to be all accommodating about going outside to practice. But as much as I was dying to spend another day alternating between sleeping, fucking, and eating, we did have a curse we needed to deal with, and our magic wasn't going to figure itself out.

I sat up and rubbed my hands over my face. "Let's go practice."

He leaned back on the pillows with his fingers laced behind his head. "If you're going to be that mad about it, maybe we should spend the day in bed."

That, more than anything else, finally got me moving. I jumped up and began grabbing clothes out of my suitcase. "Nope. You're the one who brought up practicing, not me. You're not backing out of it now."

He held his hands out. "Wouldn't dream of it."

"Good." I threw his pants at him. "Then get up and get dressed."

CHAPTER 16

Cole

I was an idiot. I could've spent another day between Brooke's legs, but I had to ask if she wanted to practice. I blamed my sex-brain and those damned smiley face pancakes. There was only so much I could take before I stopped making rational decisions.

Once she heard the word practice, it was all over. All that energy I'd fucked out of her came bouncing back. She moved around the room like a tiny tornado, throwing clothes at me, throwing clothes on herself.

She wouldn't meet my eyes while she got dressed, probably because she knew it wouldn't take much more than a look to have her on her back with my face buried in her sweet pussy again. I licked my lips, already missing the taste of her on them.

"Let's go." She grabbed my hand to pull me out the door. Our lights sparked, but we both had firm control over our magic and our hormones.

Something solid and right settled inside me. I had her trust. Knowing it, feeling it through the magic we shared, made the fragments of who I used to be click together in a new way. With Brooke, my past didn't haunt me; the future I saw with her was all that mattered.

She practically skipped through the French doors leading out to the veranda. So much joy and light radiated from her that the thick fog surrounding the hotel had no choice but to scatter as we passed through on our way to the beach.

We ended up rounding the black rocks, out of sight of the hotel windows. She wanted to go back to the place where we'd accidentally combined our magic. To see if those hardened vines that she said looked like gold bamboo shoots were still there.

I hadn't paid much attention when we'd briefly come outside earlier—too caught up in my fear of what would happen to Brooke outside the protective walls of the hotel, too lost in the memories the curse had conjured to break us—but it was significantly darker than it had been the last time we walked down this way.

All the lights along the rock wall that separated the town from the beach were out. The soft glow from town that usually rose above the trees and blocked out half the stars was missing. It was pitch black. Unsettling. Like a blanket of silence had covered the entire town, but you could still hear the muffled echo of long-gone screams.

“Are...?” Brooke paused to chew on her bottom lip, a worry line creasing her brow. “Why didn’t anyone tell us the lights were out?”

“Maybe they didn’t want to worry us.”

We still had electricity in the hotel, but for how long? What would happen to the food we needed to store in refrigerators and freezers without power? If the curse had managed to knock out every single outdoor light in a matter of days, how long would it be before it crept inside homes? How long could the residents keep it together before panic set in?

“There has to be something we can do.” Brooke peered up at me like I was Superman, capable of anything, but I wasn’t an electrician and I didn’t know a damned thing about cursed outages. “Each couple had a task, a thing they were supposed to prevent. What if this is ours? What if we’re supposed to keep the island from going dark?”

“That was Galen and Kenna’s job. As you can see, they fucked that up.”

She gave me a light shove. “Not their fault. They needed all of us to help them, and someone was being a stubborn ass about using his magic.”

“Rafe? I know. That guy’s got issues.” I grinned as she huffed out a frustrated breath. I loved getting her riled up almost as much as I loved getting her naked. Almost.

She pushed past me and kept walking along the empty beach until we reached the garden of stiff gold vines we’d

created, lightly swaying in a breeze that didn't exist. An energy hummed from them, drawing us closer.

These hadn't appeared by accident. Even if Brook and I had no idea what we were doing at the time, this was meant to be. We were meant to use these in some way. I felt it in my gut as sure as I knew that Brooke was the other half of my soul.

Brooke pursed her lips as she tilted her head to examine the tip of a golden vine that reached for the sky. "I think we should try to do something with our magic in town."

"No." When I bit the word out, she turned around and raised an eyebrow at me.

"Last time I checked, you weren't the boss of me."

I grabbed her around the waist and yanked her against me. "Are you sure about that, sunshine? I can be real bossy when I want to be."

She pushed out of my hold, even as she shivered and her cheeks flushed. "Later. Right now, I want to see what else these vines can do."

Sensing that we were approaching, they stopped swaying and stood at command for us. It was creepy, even when I knew they wouldn't harm us. They'd been born from whatever magic Brooke and I had created when we'd first combined our powers. Unintentional, but apparently, it got the job done.

She approached a vine—that I had to agree *did* look more like a bamboo shoot—and ran her hand down the shaft. It released a sound that reminded me of a melody. One that felt

familiar in a déjà vu sort of way. I'd never heard it before, not in this life anyway, but it pulled at my memory strings all the same.

“Wow,” Brooke breathed. “They aren't vines or bamboo. They're flutes.”

She stroked it again and it made that same sound. Moving to the left, she stroked another and it made a different sound. This one also tickled my memory bank. These weren't sounds I knew or could place in any way, but they were known to me.

How was just out of my reach.

I approached a different vine—or flute—and stroked it in the same way Brooke had done, and another sound erupted. A broken bit of melody that was beautiful and haunting on its own, but not quite whole. There were ten flutes in all, and we took turns walking through the garden we'd created, stroking them, and trying to put a song together.

We couldn't do it with just the two of us though. They needed to be played at the same time and they were too far apart for us to have our hands on more than one at a time.

“We need to bring everyone else down here,” Brooke said.

I nodded in agreement. I couldn't explain it, but these flutes meant something. This wasn't typical magic for us. It had been born from something deeper. Something more connected to the universe than either of us could understand in our limited human brains.

If I had to give it a name, I'd call it fate. But even that word felt too simple.

We spent a little more time poking around the flutes, but there really wasn't much we could do with them until we got everyone else down here. Still, it felt safe here. Like this ground was sacred. And as long as we stood within the shelter of the flutes, Brooke would be safe.

"Should we try a few things while we're here?" I asked. "Maybe we could grow a few more of these and see if they'll start taking requests."

"Ooh, I'd love it if they could play Janis Joplin. Or maybe some Phish." I snorted, and she nudged me. "Laugh all you want, I've got great taste in music. What would you request?"

"Something hard and fast that gets your heart racing."

"That doesn't surprise me at all. This is why God invented AirPods." She took my hand, pushing a strong stream of magic into me. "Let's see what you've got."

Our magic flowed between us, light and dark, soft corners and sharper edges. We were opposites in every sense of the word, the way pieces of a puzzle needed to be to fit together. Our power was in perfect balance. The flutes began to sway again, but they didn't give us any music. Music required touch. Just like everything else.

I pulled more metal out of the ground, but this time it didn't scare me. For the first time, it felt as if I truly could bend it to my will. It formed a hot ball over our heads, the same as it did

the night we went skinny-dipping. A lifetime ago. But instead of exploding, it continued to twist and move, waiting for me to control it, not the other way around.

“Amazing.” Brooke stared up at the molten metal sun that rose over our heads. “You really should’ve trusted me sooner.”

“You’re always one to talk, sunshine.” I pressed a kiss to her temple. “Get your power out and show me what trusting me looks like.”

Pride welled inside of me as I watched my girl spin her hands around each other while I held her arm and let her work. Rows and rows of tomatoes, corn, pumpkins, and strawberries popped up out of the ground. A full acre of the beach transformed into a garden with enough food to take care of every person staying at the hotel for the next week or two.

“Oh my God.” She released her magic and squealed with delight. “I knew I could grow food.” She punched the air and wiggled her ass in a way that made my pants uncomfortably tight. “Did you see that? I did that.”

“You damn well did, and it was incredible. So proud of you.” I couldn’t stop smiling from the pure, unfiltered joy that flowed from her and into me through her magic.

I closed my fist and waved my hand in a circle. The ball of metal in the air began to twist and contort, the sharp edges curling into something intricate and decorative. With my tongue tucked between my teeth, I continued to shape my design until it started to resemble what I’d pictured in my

mind. Though I wouldn't be winning any medals for artistry any time soon.

When I pushed my palm downward, the metal unfurled, spiking into the ground further than rabbits could dig, forming a perfect rectangle around Brooke's garden.

My gate was made of the strongest iron, with a swirled pattern between the bars and a latch to allow anyone who wanted to pass through.

I gave her a sheepish smile. "To keep the animals out."

She paused, staring at me with her mouth slightly ajar. I was just about to ask if she was okay when she launched herself at me, wrapping her legs tight around my waist, and knocking us both to the ground. I let out a soft "oof" as I hit the sand. She grabbed my face, planting kisses all over me while she circled her hips over me in a way that had me groaning into her mouth.

I gathered her thick curls at the back of her neck and tilted her head back. "What was that for? Not that you'll find me complaining."

"You built a fence for my garden. On purpose this time."

I gave her a bemused smile. "I have no idea what you're talking about, but it really didn't take that much effort from me. It's not like I built it from scratch with my bare hands."

"I don't care." She kissed me again. "You could've done anything with that metal. It was the first time you've had that

kind of control over it. You could've built a skyscraper or an airplane."

"I think you're giving me a little too much credit." I had a better chance of building a skyscraper out of sand than with my magic, but I loved her belief in me.

"You could. You can do anything. But you used it to protect my garden. Why?"

"Because it's important to you."

Her eyes filled with wonder for a moment, and then she was kissing me again, with more urgency. Her hips ground into my rock-hard cock. "I need to fuck you. Now."

I didn't see what the big deal was, but I really wasn't going to argue with her.

She fumbled with my belt in her desperation to get my pants off. I gripped her thighs under her long skirt, running my hands up the inside and already finding her soaked for me. My cock twitched, eager to get inside her again. Would it ever be enough? I couldn't imagine there ever being a point where I'd stop wanting to be inside this woman.

"Just like that." She pulled my cock out and stroked me hard. I groaned and ground my teeth together. "Put it where you need it."

She didn't sink on me slowly or take her time. She impaled herself on me and began riding me so hard and fast, I feared I'd blow before she could get off. Which was unacceptable. I hadn't come first since I was a teenager.

I clenched my jaw and gripped her hips, holding her still. “Take it easy on me.”

She pushed her hips down harder, swiveling them in a way that had my eyes crossing. “Stop being such a baby and let me fuck you the way we both like it.”

Goddamn it, she felt incredible and I was at her mercy. She squirmed against me, needing friction, and who the hell was I to deny her anything she wanted? I let go of her hips and ran my hands up her thighs, spreading her more, allowing me to get deeper. Her nails dug into my shoulders as she began to ride me, harder and faster than before. I tilted my neck and almost lost it again as I watched my cock move in and out of her pussy.

I wasn't going to last like this. Pressing my thumb against her clit, I rubbed her hard, working that tight bud. “You're so good, riding me like you were born to take my cock. I've never laid eyes on a prettier pussy. I wish you could see yourself from this angle.”

With just a small amount of praise, her inner walls were choking my cock. I didn't have any hope of holding out. My lower back tightened and my hips jerked sloppily, losing all control as I found my release inside of her.

She collapsed on my chest, breathing heavily. “We've got to stop meeting like this.”

I laughed, pulling her hair back to the nape of her neck and kissing her forehead. We stayed like that for a few minutes until she finally got up and washed herself off in the ocean.

Though the primal beast in me wouldn't have minded if she'd spent the rest of the day with the evidence of what she did to me sticking to her legs.

Once we had ourselves as put together as we could after an impromptu fuck on the beach, she spent a few minutes wandering through her garden, marveling at all the things she'd been able to grow in the sand. I had to hand it to her, she had a little bit of everything. Like she'd been carrying all that magic inside her and it was just bursting to get it out.

I stopped in front of a row about twenty feet from the entrance. "Why pumpkins?"

"I love Halloween." She spread her arms out wide and twirled in a circle. "Isn't this amazing? I tried a strawberry and it was the sweetest thing I'd ever eaten."

"That's because you've never had your pussy before."

"Yes, I have. I taste myself on you every time we kiss. Trust me, these are sweeter."

She continued to frolic, while I kept an eye outside the gate for any signs of danger, but I should've known it was unnecessary. We were safe here. Maybe not forever, but for now. And now was better than never.

I couldn't explain how I knew that, but I did. And I'd long ago learned to trust my gut. That was one thing me and my brothers had in common. We all had good instincts.

She came up to me with an armful of squash and peppers. "We should bring some stuff back to the hotel. It'll be good for

morale to have fresh fruits and vegetables.”

“We can have the others help us later.” I put my hand on the small of her back. “I’d still like to keep testing our magic. Growing food is good and necessary, but there has to be another reason why we were put together with these particular powers.”

“No, you’re right.” She set her pile of goods down by the entrance. “We can come back for all this later, and I’d rather practice now, while I’m feeling safe.”

“So you feel it too?” Even though I trusted my instincts and whatnot, it still relieved me to know Brooke sensed the same kind of safety here. It validated my gut feelings.

“Definitely. Let’s see if we can get close to the lights.”

Brooke still had it in her head that our powers were supposed to do something for the electricity, though I couldn’t see how. I had all the metal in the earth at my disposal, but just because I could make wires didn’t mean I could make them connect in a way that would do anything for the town. But if she wanted to try, I was willing to humor her.

We trudged our way through the sand, getting closer to the rock wall that separated the heart of town from the beach. The further away we got from those strange golden flutes and Brooke’s garden, the less safe I felt.

Black fog nipped at our heels and swirled around us as we walked along in silence. Both of us were lost in our own thoughts, and neither one of us wanted to draw attention to

ourselves. A buzzing noise zipped past my ear and I shot a hot rod of iron into the mist. The fog parted and hung back, but nothing crawled out of the smoky trail it left behind.

“Sorry,” I mumbled. “Jumpy.”

She took my hand and squeezed, pushing some of her magic into me. It wasn’t entirely calm either, but she was doing better than me. “Almost there.”

At the nearest light post we stopped and looked up. Just like the ones in town, the light bulb was intact. They were still fairly new. A spider the size of a baseball crawled out from under the hood and began to spin an inky web.

I flung my arm out to keep Brooke back, then crushed the spider inside the metal hood of the high light. It dripped black sludge into the sand that turned to smoke and drifted away. “Welp. That light is fucked.”

“We can try another.” Brooke moved toward the next one and stopped in her tracks when a set of figures approached us from the other side of the foggy veil.

Not taking any chances, we glanced at each other, then back at the approaching figures and raised our glowing red hands.

CHAPTER 17

Brooke

“**B**rooke? Is that you?”

I released the breath I'd been holding as I recognized Janet Castellano, owner of the Sagittarius Swirl, an ice cream shop at the edge of the tourist part of the beach. Her kids ran circles around her as her husband lagged behind the rest of them, smoking a cigar like he was out for a nice little evening stroll, and not parading through a curse-infested fog.

“What are you doing out here?” Cole growled.

“Easy, tiger,” I murmured. Snapping at people when he was worried was his love language, but not everyone—or anyone, really—understood how Cole operated.

Janet was deeply unfazed by Cole's attitude. She was raising two kids—three if you counted her husband, which most people did—and spent her summers dealing with unruly tourists who had strong feelings about ice cream on hot days. She had the patience of a saint.

“The lights went out in our unit,” she said. “There isn’t anyone available to get them back on, so we figured we’d head down to the hotel and see if there were any rooms left, or somewhere we could stay with power.”

“That’s a good idea.” I rubbed Cole’s arm, hoping he’d take the cue to stay silent. “I’m sorry you’re going to lose all your inventory.”

“It’ll be fine. We have insurance.”

She kept walking, barely batting an eye when one of her kids tackled the other and tried to push him off the rock wall separating the town from the beach. Cole watched her with a stink-eye the entire time. Anyone else might’ve cowered under that glare, but Janet just gave him that serene smile she was known for and continued on her way. I wanted to be her when I grew up. Handling Cole like a champ made her a hero in my eyes.

I swatted his arm. “Stop being such a grouch.”

“They shouldn’t be wandering around like that. The curse already proved it doesn’t give a shit about hurting anyone. Phones still work, they should’ve called someone who could protect them between here and the hotel.”

“They’re fine. The curse is too busy watching us to bother the residents who have no magic.” The only reason he was being so crabby was because he was genuinely concerned about their safety, which was nice, in a weird Cole way. “Let’s get back to these lights. You can yell at people in front of their kids some other time.”

He mumbled something about pains in his ass under his breath, but there wasn't any heat behind it. We approached the next light, which looked the same as the previous one. The bulb was intact, fairly new since they were replaced regularly in the summer, and no signs of damage. The curse just blinked the light out.

Another spider, as nasty as the one before, crawled out from under the hood. Cole shuddered and prepared to push me back a step, but I was ready for him. "How are we supposed to look at fixing any of these lights if you keep crushing them before we can try?"

"I don't like spiders." He shuddered again.

"Yes," I said, my voice flat. "I can see that. But has it occurred to you that maybe this is proof that you can do something about the lights after all?"

He pursed his lips. So much doubt on that beautiful face.

I gestured up at the light. "The curse has already had a peeksie inside your head. It knows your fears, what you'll react to most. Why have spiders guard the lights? Why not wasps or arrows or those razorback warthogs Violet told me about?"

His expression relaxed as it finally dawned on him. "Because the curse is trying to keep me, specifically, away from the lights, or at least it's trying to goad me into crushing all of them before I can attempt to fix them."

I booped him on the nose with my index finger. “You’re so smart. No wonder you got into Harvard. And here I thought it was just the nepotism.”

He rolled his eyes. “Maybe you should quit saying things that make me want to fuck your mouth so you’ll have something to do other than talk.”

That should *not* have gotten me hot. In fact, it should’ve pissed me off. Only assholes talked like that. But an image of Cole thrusting into my throat with his hands in my hair and his head thrown back had me squeezing my thighs together.

“Huh.” He trailed his fingers under my jaw. “And here I thought you only liked praise. Looks like we’re both learning some things today.”

Now it was my turn to roll my eyes. “Can we get back to dealing with the light situation now? No more distractions. If the Castellanos lost power, it’s only a matter of time before the rest of us lose it too. We need to focus.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I liked compliant Cole. I didn’t get to see enough of him. “Okay, let’s get a decent charge between us and see what happens.”

He took my hand, pushing his intense magic into mine, which pushed right back with a gentler hand. Working together in perfect rhythm. Our palms glowed with bright light as Cole pulled more metal out of the ground. He rubbed his fingers

together, twisting it into fine wires, but that was where he left off.

“Not sure where to go from here,” he said as a tangle of wires continued to twist and reshape over our heads. “Should I just shove them into the light?”

I shrugged. “I guess.”

That didn't feel right, but I didn't know what else to do. It would take more than a handful of wires to get the entire power grid back up and fully running.

He snaked one of the them through the air, piercing the body of the fat black spider that guarded the hood. It hissed before exploding and turning to smoke. “Okay. Now what?”

“I don't know. I'm just playing this whole thing by ear.”

“Why don't you throw some of your magic into the mix?” He pulled the wires out of the light, since they weren't doing a damn thing to get the electricity back on anyway.

“Sure. Why not?”

I couldn't possibly make things worse. And the last time we combined our magic, we made the golden flutes. Not that we knew what they did, other than release different notes when we stroked them, but it was still pretty cool.

Gripping his hand tight in mine, I pulled a length of vine out of the ground and shot it at his wires. They were so thin, they looked more like stems. And similar to what happened with the golden flutes, the wires wrapped around my vines,

encasing them. Turning them into something organic and biological, but with the consistency of copper.

“Whoa,” I breathed. “Should we stroke them and see what happens?”

“I think we should do whatever we feel like and see what happens. It’s not like the original descendants left us with any kind of useful instructions.”

Cole beckoned the plant and metal twine toward him in such a bossy, commanding way, it nearly made me want to jump him again. He look down at me and smirked. “Keep looking at me like that, sunshine, and I’m going to tie your wrists behind you with this twine and fuck you senseless.”

“That would be okay. I don’t have a lot of sense to begin with.”

“So greedy,” he murmured, a glint of humor shining in his eyes. “Alright, let’s pet these fuckers and make them sing. I’ll let you go first since you’re so good at... stroking.”

I blew him a kiss and then stepped up to the wire-vine combo, running it between my fingers. It was cool to the touch, and so light. Like water. But instead of singing, the wire began to shine. Bright, bold specks of shimmering gold that twinkled in the moonlight.

A soft warm glow pulsed from the wires. I closed my eyes and drank it in. It was as if I was standing in the sun. Not imitation sun, like the kind found in tanning beds, but actual

sunshine. It smelled fresh and clean, clearing out the wet, earthy scent of night.

“It’s the sun.” Cole’s awe-filled voice broke the trance that had come over me. “That’s not artificial light. That’s actual sunshine.”

“You feel it too? The difference?”

“Where is it coming from?” He glanced at the sky as if he expected the actual sun to rise any moment now, and my heart clenched. We’d started to become accustomed to the perpetual night, but I missed that light. I missed it so much.

“I think...” I looked at the place where the vine had shot out of the ground. “It’s in my plants.” Of course. It made perfect sense. “Plants survive on photosynthesis, they take in the sun’s light and turn it into nutrients. Your metal is like a conduit. It’s funneling those nutrients back into light. Light and energy we can use to replace the electricity.”

He booped me on the nose. “So smart.”

“Thank you.” I gave him a curtsy. “Just another day of being me.”

Cole flicked his wrist, sending the wires back into the light, but unlike last time, the bulb flickered, then burst back to life. Warm, unfiltered sunlight poured out of the lamp. Below it, a small bed of flowers sprang up, as if they too had been waiting for the sun.

“Oh my God.” I clapped my hands together and tucked them under my chin. “We did that. We made the power come

back on.”

A cloud of thick black smoke swirled around the light, as if anything other than pitch-black darkness offended it. But it couldn't do anything. It snaked into the bulb and immediately shot out again like it had been burned. It couldn't touch our magic.

I threw my arms around Cole and he lifted me up, spinning me around under the small amount of sunlight we'd been able to create. The two of us had so much power. So much more than we'd ever given ourselves credit for.

“I can't wait to tell everyone,” I said. “I'm going to make a whole row of sun lights and stretch out under them for hours.”

“Naked?”

“Obviously.”

Cole's smile fell as he continued to stare at me. He got that stern look that he'd always get when he was about to say something serious. His eyelid twitched and I suddenly became very concerned that he was having a stroke.

I waved a hand in front of his eyes. “Are you okay?”

He cleared his throat. “Fine. I'm fine. Everything is fine.”

Okay, maybe not a stroke. But something was definitely off. He had something big going on inside that head of his, and he wasn't sharing.

“You don't sound fine.” I poked him in the side. “What's going on with you?”

“I just...” He rubbed his hands over his face. “Fuck. I don’t want to tell you.”

“Why?”

My heart raced as a dozen scenarios played through my mind, each one worse than the last. Did I have strawberry seeds in my teeth? Was he going to end things? Did he hate the idea of me sunbathing naked even though that was the only way to avoid tan lines? Was something bad happening to him? Did he have a wife and kids in another state?

The more questions that ran through my mind, the more I worked myself up over what was probably nothing. The Cancer in me had a lead foot pressed firmly on the overdramatic gas, and I knew that about myself, but it didn’t stop me from worrying.

I gripped the front of his perfectly pressed shirt. “Spit it out already.”

“I don’t want to freak you out.”

“I’m already freaking out. Rip off the Band-Aid and get it over with. Are you ending things with me? Was naked sunbathing the last straw? Did I finally break you?”

He let out a nervous chuckle. “Nothing like that.”

“Then what is it?” I pulled the front of his shirt as I attempted to shake him, but he just stood there peering down at me like I was a chihuahua trying to bite at his ankles. The man was a mountain. “Tell me right now, or I’m going to—”

“I’m in love with you.”

My heart tripped over itself. Of all the things I expected him to say, that never even crossed my mind. “No, you’re not.”

I mean, really. What else was I supposed to say? Cole didn’t love me. A week ago he could hardly stand to be in the same room with me.

He gave me a wry smile. “Thanks for deciding that for me. So glad I told you. Good to see you’re not freaking out at all.”

“Be serious.”

“I am. I’m batshit, head over heels, over the moon in love with you, Brooke.”

I pressed a hand to my stomach. “Oh, God.”

“Are you going to throw up?”

“I’m not sure.”

He let out a long-winded sigh. “This is going about as well as I expected.”

How could he call what was going on between us love? Yes, I felt amazing when I was with him, but so what? And maybe it was more than just some tingling feeling in the pit of my stomach. He made me want to be better. He pushed my buttons like no one else. He made me angry and irrational and happier than I’ve been in my life. It drove me absolutely insane.

At the same time, he pushed me to reach my full potential, while also making my toes curl all in the same breath. He trusted me. Not just a little. I had all of him. All of his honesty, all of his flaws, all of his best parts. He trusted me with

everything. And I trusted him too. With all of me. There wasn't anyone who would ever fit me the way Cole fit me.

Oh, fuck.

I pushed out my palm and took a step back. "You did this to me."

He cracked a smile. "Did what?"

"You know what you did." I took another step back and stumbled as I tripped over my long skirt in the sand. "Don't be cute and dumb right now. Harvard taught you better than that."

"I only got in because of nepotism, so I'm afraid you're going to have to spell it out for me." He was full-on grinning now. The sadist. "Use small words if you can."

I clenched my fists at my sides. "You made me fall in love with you."

His fingers twitched as if he was aching to touch me. Unable to resist the urge a moment longer, he pulled me against him. "You're in love with me."

I planted my hands on his chest. "Stop bragging, it's not like you made it hard."

He choked on a laugh. "You're the only person in the history of Zodiac Cove who's ever said I'm easy to love. Not even my mom thinks I'm easy to love."

"Your mom is an idiot. Let's egg her house."

He chuckled and pushed my hair back behind my ear. Placing a soft kiss at my pulse point, he whispered. "I love

you, Brooke Hudson.”

“Damn it.” I trembled as I wrapped my arms around his neck. “I love you too, Cole Latham. Despite my better judgment.”

Light flared from our palms. Bright sparks of blood red burst around us, and my cherry-red light popped and sizzled in the air. My arm tingled as magic flowed through me and out my palm in giant waves of cascading stardust.

It swirled around both of us, dipping and diving under my arms and tickling me in sensitive places. Cole’s magic was much more reserved, but no less joyful. The dark red from his garnet light nipped at the heels of my playful ruby.

Sparks shot into the air and went off like fireworks, bathing the beach in a warm red glow. It was like standing in a darkroom for photo developing. Our lights danced around each other in the air, playing a cat-and-mouse game. His red light would pounce on mine, swallowing it before spitting out something new.

Something that wasn’t light or dark, but a blend of the two.

A perfectly primary shade of red.

The light continued to twirl around us, colliding together in brilliant bursts of primary red. It swirled higher and higher, then exploded, raining a shower of the softest rose petals down on us. I laughed as I held out my hands and tried to collect them like rainwater on my palms.

Cole watched me with amusement dancing in his eyes. “Do you know what’s happening here? Did falling in love short-circuit our magic?”

“Nope.” I continued to dance around under the falling petals. “It made it stronger.”

The light backtracked, like a jet stream of stars in reverse. It flowed back into us, our lights now a perfectly balanced shade of red. Just like the two of us balanced each other out. My stomach flipped over itself with the weight of my new power.

The whimsy of my magic was still there, the soft corners that were a part of me, but there was something else there too. Something stronger and more solid. An intensity that sat heavier than what I’d previously experienced, but fit me perfectly nonetheless.

Waving a hand over the sand at my feet, I pulled up metal from the ground, bending and shaping it to my will, thinning it out until it became another wire. I let go of Cole and used my other hand to pull up another stem-like vine. Sliding them together, I twisted them in the air and let the sunshine pour over us.

He used his hands to pull up a garden around us, blooming with a sweet scent, and I gasped when I realized it was filled with pink carnations. The same flower I’d handed him on May Day. The one he’d crushed because he’d just fired a family friend and he thought everyone hated him, and he didn’t know how to deal with his feelings, so he pushed everyone away.

And I thought a person couldn't change in a handful of months. I should've known Cole would set some kind of personal growth record. He didn't know how to be bad at anything.

More of the pink flowers sprang up around us, perfuming the air with their light, sweet scent. The blooms grew, dipping their heads toward the sand with their weight. He picked one and handed it to me. "Sorry about the last one."

I smiled as I buried my nose in the soft, unfurling petals. "What would you do if I crushed it right now?"

"You'd break my heart. But I'd probably deserve it."

I twirled the flower in front of me, taking in the heady scent that would forever remind me of this moment. "I think I'll keep it then. I like your heart just the way it is."

"I hope so, because it's yours now. Would be a pity if you got stuck with a busted heart."

I wrapped my arms around his waist and pressed my cheek into his chest. "I guess I better take good care of it, then."

CHAPTER 18

Cale

Brooke and I finished fixing the lights along the beach before we headed into town. Our magic normally wiped us out. I thought we'd be exhausted, especially because we had so much more of it at our disposal now, but Brooke was full of energy. Every time she stepped under a beam of sunlight from the lamps, she came alive.

“I have to admit...” I lifted her palm to my lips and kissed the center, then pulled a bed of roses from the ground, filled with metal thorns that could cut like razors. A little bit of me would always be attached to the things I could grow with her.

When I didn't continue, she faced me and placed a hand on my chest. The feel of her touch, so free and without restraint or side effects getting in the way, would always be the most impressive kind of magic to me. “You have to admit what?”

I plucked one of the roses and ran my fingers down the stem, retracting the thorns until it was smooth as silk. Then I tucked the rose behind her ear. “This is fun.”

Her big gray eyes went soft and dewy. Apparently, admitting that I was having fun with my magic meant more to her than any of my declarations of love, or any of the ways I'd shown her my feelings, night after night, in our hotel room.

She pushed herself up on her toes, and gave me a soft kiss. But because we were us, flammable in the best of ways, the kiss quickly turned heated. The curse hovered on the edges of the forest, leaking out of the trees, but not coming much closer. Still. This wasn't the place to lose ourselves in each other.

As much as it pained me, I placed my hands on her shoulders and pushed her back, her lips still moving as if she wasn't quite done kissing me yet. She gave me a confused look. It definitely wasn't like me to pull away.

I pointed toward the trees. "Not out here."

"Yeah, okay. You're right." When I smirked, she pushed her finger into my chest. "Don't get used to it."

The smoke curled a tendril, beckoning us to come closer. Brooke took my hand and shot a pumpkin at it. It scattered into the trees. The pumpkin hit a thick oak trunk and exploded, leaving a splatter of orange pulp and seeds.

I laughed as a memory tickled my mind. Of the night Wes talked me into sneaking out after hours on Halloween. I was thirteen and he was eleven. Our mom had let us eat our fill of candy and stay up late to watch *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, but then sent us to bed before it was over when we hid all of Donovan's Milk Duds and made him cry.

We were all hopped up on sugar and full of ourselves. Before I had any real responsibilities. Before anyone thought of me as anything other than just one of the Latham boys. One of the last times I could remember being free, until I fell in love with a beautiful, whimsical woman who hated underwear and smelled like honey and showed me what it meant to have fun again.

We ran through the neighborhoods, stealing pumpkins and smashing them in the streets. Hank Wilder caught us and dragged us back home by the backs of our shirts. We got grounded for a month and had to clean up all the pumpkins we'd smashed. Audrey and Violet made lemonade and told all the kids from school they could buy a glass and hurl one insult at us for a dollar.

That memory shouldn't have made me smile—we were punished, and humiliated on top of it—but it did anyway. And it made me appreciate my brother so much more than I had since we'd become adults and the weight of the company came down on our shoulders.

I probably owed him a beer and some decent company for once.

This falling in love shit was weird. It didn't just change my relationship with Brooke, it made me reevaluate everything around me. It made me want to be a good person for no other reason than it felt right. Loving Brooke made me a better man.

Overwhelmed with that realization and wanting to give her more of everything, I pulled a hot ball of copper from the earth

and wrapped it in vines until it pulsed and glowed over our heads. Brooke squealed and danced under the mini-sun with her arms spread wide and her face tilted toward the light, more stunning than the rarest of flowers.

She held out her hand with challenge in her gaze, and, unable to deny her anything, I swept her up in my arms and danced with her under the sun our magic made together. We didn't have music, but we didn't need it. We had each other.

Once we got rid of this damn curse, the first thing I'd do is take her off this island to somewhere warm and beautiful. Where she could spend all day frolicking in the sun.

After our impromptu street dance, we continued to head further down to the outskirts of the town center, fixing lights and filling the streets with a warm glow. The more we worked, the more I relaxed and leaned into the concept of having fun.

Various people poked their heads out of the windows of their above-shop apartments to watch us. I began smiling so much, a few people mistook me for Wes, and it startled them every time Brooke had to correct them with a laugh.

The curse had only gotten into a few of the homes and messed with their electrical. The Castellanos had gotten unlucky due to their shop being on the opposite side of the beach from the hotel. But if I had to guess, its main target wasn't the residents anyway. Knocking out the streetlights had burned some of the precious energy it was trying to conserve so it could sink this island for good. And taking power from

just a few people's homes would be enough to cause the kind of panic the curse fed on to make itself stronger.

Fortunately, Brooke and I got to those homes before it could get bad.

As we walked back to the hotel, she had a wire vine she'd fashioned into a Slinky and was doing a hand-to-hand transfer with it, the sound of the soft spring echoing in the cool night. Light shone from it, illuminating her face and turning her curls into ringlets of melted honey.

"Do you think the others will be surprised by what our powers can do?" she asked.

"I don't give a fuck about everyone else."

She nudged me with her elbow. "So direct."

I stopped in front of her and tilted her chin up with my fingers. "You're the most important person in the world to me. I'd give up my family's entire business just to see the light that touches your eyes when you smile."

Her lips parted and her eyes glazed over. I loved that dreamy look she got on her face whenever I hit just the right spot for her. "Such a sweet talker."

"But do you believe me?"

"Yes," she breathed. "I mean, you make me want to believe that."

"And why is that?" I rubbed the pad of my thumb over her plump lower lip.

“Because you always tell the truth.”

“Damn right I do.” I pressed my thumb into her lip before drawing it away and tracing the curve of her gorgeous face with my fingers. “So maybe I’m not being nice when I say I don’t give a fuck about anyone else, but it’s the truth. And when I tell you that you mean everything to me, that I love you with all that I am, you know that’s the truth too.”

“You’re ridiculous.” She pushed up on her toes and kissed my cheek. “I know you love me because of what you do, not what you say. One of these days I’m going to teach you the fine art of white lies and flattery.”

“That”—I cupped the back of her neck—“is not happening.”

I could be decent to my brothers and try to build a better relationship with them. I could even make an effort to be honest without being cruel, but I’d still always tell the truth, and I had no use for flattery. If I gave out a compliment, I wanted it to mean something.

“We’ll see.” She turned around and returned to messing with her Slinky.

I shot off a few blooms along the way just for the fun of it, and because it made my girl smile. A smile like that could bring any man to his knees, and she was mine. The surety of it beat fiercely in my chest. And using the magic I’d come to love as much as the woman I shared it with made me appreciate it all the more.

Once we got back to the hotel, she wanted to shower, and as much as I wanted to say fuck those flutes, and get in there with her, she'd asked me to talk to Wes and get everyone down to the beach while she cleaned herself up. And since I'd do anything she asked of me, it looked like I was going to spend the next ten minutes tracking down my brother.

I found him out back on the veranda with Audrey, back on guard duty.

“Look what the cat dragged in.” He slapped a hand on my shoulder. “Sorry. Too soon?”

I rolled my eyes. “Fluffernutter ran away a year ago. I'm over it.”

Audrey slapped a hand over her mouth, but she couldn't stop the laugh that escaped through her fingers. “Your cat's name was Fluffernutter?”

I narrowed my eyes. “Do you have a problem with that?”

“Nope.” Tears leaked from the corners of her eyes as she sucked her cheeks in and tried to hold back her laughter. “No problem at all. You totally seem like the type of guy who would have a cat named Fluffernutter.”

“That's why she ran away,” Wes interjected.

I pinched the bridge of my nose. “If you two yahoos are done having a laugh at my expense, can I tell you about what Brooke and I did down at the beach?”

“We know.” Wes gave me a sly grin. “We saw the light show from here. Those were some damn fine fireworks you

two set off. How did feel to tell a woman you loved her?”

“She almost threw up.”

“That tracks,” he said.

Audrey shoved Wes out of the way and threw her arms around me. I stared down at her in confusion. “What’s she doing?”

Wes shook his head. “It’s called a hug, brother. Please get out more.”

“I know what a hug is.” I awkwardly patted the top of Audrey’s head. “I’m just not sure why this one is hugging me. She doesn’t like me.”

Audrey peered up at me with wet eyes. “I like you just fine. And more importantly, you’re good to one of my best friends and I’m just so happy for both of you.”

“Um. Okay.” I cleared my throat. “Thank you.”

“That’s enough, baby.” Wes rubbed Audrey’s shoulders and drew her against his chest. “You can’t show Cole too much affection in one day. He’s on the verge of having an aneurism.”

Jesus Christ. This was like trying to have a conversation with two wind-up toys. “Will you two focus? I didn’t come out here to talk about falling in love with Brooke.”

“No?” Wes rubbed his jaw. “And here I was, ready to bust out the hot cocoa while we gossiped and braided each other’s hair.”

I tilted my head back and took several deep breaths. If there was a hell, there was no doubt I'd be stuck spending eternity trying to have a conversation with my idiot brother. "Will you just listen to me, damn it. Brooke and I figured out how to get the lights back on. Our power pulls nutrients from the sun back out of plants, like a reverse photosynthesis. And we can use that to harness the sun's light."

"What?" Audrey stopped joking around and looked at Wes. "You're using sunlight?"

I nodded. "Real sunlight. Not the fake, UV stuff. The wires we're both able to build act as a conduit for that energy. But there's something else, too."

I went on to explain the golden flutes to them. How they popped out of the ground the first time we combined our powers, and how they played some kind of melody. Those haunting chords still lingered at the back of my mind, but as hard as I tried to place them, I couldn't get anything to stick. Maybe the others would know, though.

"The ten of us should go down to the beach and see what we can make of it," I said. "The melody is familiar, but not. I can't explain it, you have to hear it to understand, but it means something. We're supposed to play its song."

"I don't know." Wes glanced up at the hotel. "I don't like leaving this place unprotected."

"You and I both know that no one left behind here is in any danger."

“What about Rafe and Jocelyn?” Audrey asked.

“They aren’t our responsibility. They’re not even speaking, let alone using their magic. There is no way the curse is going to give a damn about them when it’ll have all ten of its current threats in one place. It’s going to focus on us, and you both damn well know it.”

Leaving Rafe and Jocelyn fully unprotected didn’t exactly sit right with me either. Rafe was one of the few people on the island I considered a friend. But I understood why he didn’t want to work with Jocelyn, and even if he could be convinced otherwise, I wasn’t the one to do it. He had brothers of his own. That was on Finn and Galen.

“What do you think this song means?” Wes asked. “Why does it matter?”

“I’m not sure why it matters. I just know that it does.” I pressed my fist into my stomach. “I feel it in here. Brooke does too. This song will change things for us.”

Audrey squeezed Wes’s upper arm. “I’m with Cole on this. We can’t keep sitting around this hotel, swapping guard duty, and doing just enough to keep the curse at bay. We need to be fighting back. If there is even the slightest chance that Brooke and Cole created something that will help us, then we need to try.”

“I guess I’m in then, too.” Wes pressed a kiss to Audrey’s temple. “I go where you go.”

“Great. Glad I didn’t have to hog-tie you and drag your ass there.” Brooke was probably done with her shower, and I’d rather she did the talking with the next pair we approached. “Grab who you can and meet back here in ten.”

I split from Wes and Audrey and headed to my room, but Brooke met me halfway with Violet, Donovan, Kenna, and Galen in tow. Thank fuck. I’d already met my people quota for the day and had no desire to explain why we needed everyone on the other side of the black rocks that separated the hotel’s beach from the main tourist beach.

We went back outside, and shortly after, Wes and Audrey returned with Finn and Thora. All hands on deck. Or almost all hands. It was a good thing there hadn’t been twelve flutes, but maybe we’d been given that number on purpose. Maybe only magic users could call forth that melody, and Rafe and Jocelyn technically weren’t magic users yet since they hadn’t touched.

Either way, we had the correct number of hands we needed.

Anticipation churned in my gut as we headed down to the beach in pairs. A perfectly prime red glowed between my palm and Brooke’s, and it gave me the most primal sense of satisfaction, even as she held me tight enough to crush my bones together. The magic she pushed into me was nervous and jumpy.

I leaned closer to her and whispered, “Relax.”

“I am relaxed,” she said through gritted teeth.

“Think about sunbathing and doing yoga and hanging out in our room.”

“You just want me to picture myself naked.”

“Absolutely.” I grinned at her.

“Perv.”

“You love it.”

Finn whirled around and began walking backward. “I know you two just combined powers and it’s a special time in a young man’s life, but for the love of all that’s holy, can you keep the foreplay to a minimum when we’re about to walk into possible doom and gloom.”

I scowled at him. “Mind your own damn business.”

“Yeah.” Brooke flipped him off and I nearly choked on the laugh that threatened to bubble up. “Mind your own damn business, Finn.”

Finn shifted his gaze between us. “You used to be so nice.”

She smiled sweetly at him. “And you used to be so quiet.”

Thora stifled a chuckle behind her hand. Finn glanced at her with a look of mock betrayal. “Fine. I get it. I’m not wanted here. I’ll mind my own business now.”

Libras were so overdramatic. He turned back around and I leaned in closer to Brooke again, needing her nearness. “Just when I thought I couldn’t possibly love you more.”

“You’re a terrible influence on me.”

“Again, you love it.”

She rubbed her thumb along the inside of my palm, sending goosebumps down my spine. With just one touch, she had me ready to throw her down in the sand, but that really wouldn't be appropriate in front of everyone else. At least she wasn't as tense anymore.

As we made our way around the rock, Brooke's garden came into view. She let out a happy sigh and tipped her head against my bicep. "Look at the fence you made me."

"I can build you a bigger one, taller, thicker, whatever you want."

"I like the one I have. It's perfect."

"You're perfect." I kissed the top of her head and she sighed again.

Just like last time, the flutes swayed as if there was a strong breeze blowing through the beach, though the air was still. Their golden outer shells shimmered under the moonlight. We let everyone take their time feeling them out, running their hands over the stems.

"You know what these notes remind me of?" Thora asked.

Finn nodded solemnly, the most serious I'd ever seen him. "Ceti's song."

"But how?" Thora shook her head. "She's gone."

A chill spread over my skin. I had no fucking clue what Ceti's song sounded like. I hadn't been to the cave before the melody that leaked through the cracks in the stone was silenced with the last sunset. I wasn't there the day Finn and

Thora nullified Nirah's poison in the dead zone with the assistance of golden threads that bathed the clearing in a song.

I wasn't there, but I knew they were right. From somewhere deep inside me, where the blood that flowed through my veins was as old as the sky itself. The song we were about to play was going to change everything.

CHAPTER 19

Brooke

The shiver that passed through Cole at the mention of Ceti also transferred to me. That was what we needed to play. Ceti's song. Like Cole, I'd never heard the song either, but the memory of it lingered in my bones. From the parts of me that were made of stardust.

A more recent memory, one that I hadn't spoken of to anyone, not even Cole, tugged at the back of my mind. I would've told Cole. I didn't keep things from him anymore, but then everything happened with the wasps and his memories and combining our powers and I just forgot about it.

The night Cole and I first used our power, Ceti had spoken to me. I'd almost begun to convince myself that I'd imagined it. But it was her. It had to be. I just didn't know it at the time. She hadn't spoken to anyone else, and for reasons I couldn't explain, at the time I felt like I needed to keep what happened to myself.

But who else would've warned me like that? Who else could've known?

If I hadn't gone back, if I hadn't approached Cole on the beach that day, the curse would've dragged him under the water and that would've been the end. I wouldn't have been there to save him. And he wouldn't have been here to save me.

The thought of existing for even a second in a world without Cole made my stomach turn. "There's something I need to tell you all."

Everyone stopped messing with the flutes and turned to me with curiosity. I went on to explain what happened the night I first joined Cole on the beach. Through our magic, I pushed reassurance into him, letting him know that the only reason I hadn't told him before now was that, by the time I trusted him enough, we had other things going on and I forgot. Through our magic, he pushed his understanding back into me. That was that. It didn't have to be an argument or a thing. Amazing how well-balanced a relationship could be with proper communication.

Galen adjusted his glasses, the scientist in him already thinking through every angle, trying to find an explanation we could wrap our heads around. "As soon as we became aware of Ceti, I began to look into death magic a bit more. Then I got..." He glanced at Kenna and his cheeks pinkened. "Distracted."

"I'm not fucking with death magic," Cole said.

"I don't know what the hell that is, but I'm with Cole on this," Donovan said.

“You two literally sell death magic items in your shops.” Audrey rolled her eyes. “Not anything authentic, that’s for places like mine, but it’s nothing to be afraid of. Communicating with the dead can be cathartic and healing for those who’ve experienced a loss.”

“I don’t think we’re dealing with death magic at all.” I tapped a finger against my lips as I walked around the nearest golden flute, giving it a little stroke and releasing just a handful of notes that were only pieces of the whole.

Ceti wasn’t gone. Not fully. I’d spent some time studying death magic as a mild hobby during the six months I’d lived in Sedona with my mom, and what Ceti had done went beyond any kind of known spiritual communication. We hadn’t drawn her out or raised her from a place of rest, she’d come to us.

Maybe she couldn’t leave. Even when she’d been dead for over three hundred years, there was something keeping her soul tethered to this island...

Nirah.

Of course. My heart beat wildly against my chest, rattling my ribs. The thought of being without Cole more than made me nauseous. It was downright unthinkable. He was my other half. There was no me without him. It must’ve been the same for Ceti and Nirah. They must not have been able to move on while one of them was still alive and stuck on this earth.

My magic dipped and swirled, beating out a frantic rhythm inside me. Hammering home that I was right. And another piece of the puzzle we’d spent months trying to put together

clicked into place. We weren't just paired up because we liked each other or found each other attractive. Those were all nice bonuses, but it ran deeper than that.

While the choice was ours, always, to accept our partners or reject them, there was a reason why my magic only worked when I touched this one specific person. There was a reason why we had each other's powers once we'd fully connected and committed to each other through mind, body, and spirit. Fate didn't pair us together randomly. Who we were bent fate's hand. It was always meant to be us because of how we fit with each other.

Cole was my person. He was as much a part of me as I was of him. One of us simply could not exist without the other.

"Ceti isn't gone." I held my balled-up fists against my chest. "She can't leave."

Everyone looked at me like I'd grown a second head, so I backed up and explained my theory. It started with the golden threads Finn and Thora had pulled from the cave to nullify the curse's poison. We'd all kind of just accepted that some magic was unexplainable. Then, when we found out about Ceti, we assumed she'd left a residue of her magic behind.

But that wasn't correct. It couldn't be.

The warning she gave me in the moonlight wasn't residual magic. It was very much steeped in the here and now. And Ceti had shared magic with Nirah, which wasn't just the ability to share power. It intertwined their souls together.

They became two halves of a whole instead of individuals.

So long as Nirah was kept alive by the curse, Ceti's soul would linger too. Neither one of them could move on until both of them were gone. Till death do us part wasn't a concept that applied to soulmates. Death wasn't an end. It was just another state of being.

"Fuck me." Donovan pulled Violet closer to him. "Why the hell hadn't any of us thought of that before? It makes perfect sense."

The rest of the pairs nodded, knowing it was true down to the depths of their souls. None of them could function without their partners. Their soulmates. And not a single one of them would be capable of leaving this earth alone. Because they were only a half by themselves. Physically, we'd remain alive, but everything that gave us meaning would be gone. We'd be little more than empty shells of our former selves.

"Do you think these flutes can call to her spirit?" Galen circled the one he'd been drawn to, adjusting his glasses as he studied it. "History is full of examples of different cultures using music to communicate with the dead."

"It's not going to be like a Ouija board or a séance." I rubbed a hand down the flute again, feeling an even greater connection to the bit of melody it released with every touch. "Her body is dead, but her spirit is still alive. I think these function like Velcro. They'll pull her here, whether she wants it to happen or not."

“There really is only one way to find out.” Audrey placed her hand on the flute she’d chosen. “I think we need to play this song and see what happens.”

“Everyone be ready to grab your partners and activate your magic if this all goes to hell,” Wes said. Ever the optimist.

Cole took my hand, pushing his magic into me as I did the same with him, charging ourselves before we took opposite flutes, because they were the ones that called to us specifically. He traced the lines on my palm with his finger. “You ready for this?”

“No.” Even with the certainty that this was something we needed to do as a group, I couldn’t shake the sense of unease that had followed me down here.

“You’ve got this.” His unwavering belief was the boost I needed to separate from him and take position next to my chosen flute.

A heavy wind picked up out of nowhere. Wind that hadn’t been seen on the island since the barrier went up. Black clouds rolled in, spinning above our heads like the beginnings of a funnel. Galen still had a charge of magic from holding onto Kenna. He immediately turned invisible, and the clouds backed off, but hovered. Waiting to see what we would do.

I’d only suspected whatever the flutes would do would be important. I was certain of it now. “Thanks for the confirmation,” I yelled at the sky.

Cole winked at me from directly across the barren sandy circle. I looked around at the wheel we'd created. All of us positioned exactly where we'd be on the Zodiac chart, with two larger gaps that were so much more noticeable now that we'd spread out. Right where Sagittarius and Gemini should've been.

"Okay, we'll go on three," Audrey said. "No matter what happens, the ten of us are in this together. We have each other's backs and we're stronger when we fight as one."

The ten of us murmured together, "One. Two. Three."

I ran my hand down the cool golden flute. A power older than me, older than time itself, shimmered against my own magic. My notes combined with the others to make the most beautiful, heartbreaking song. The melody was from another era, but the pain was as fresh today as it had been hundreds of years before. It lingered in the sand and rock and trees that made up this island. It was threaded into the earth, hovered in the air, burned in every fire, and rolled in on the ocean waves. It was a song about letting go.

"I knew it." Finn punched the air with his free hand. "We're playing Ceti's song."

Tears tracked my cheeks and dropped to the sand from the end of my chin, but I kept playing. This was more than a song. There was magic in the music.

The black clouds overhead began to funnel again, but they were pushed back by a soft glowing light that pulsed in the sky from a net made of the finest golden threads. A net that burst

outward, like the light of fireworks trailing down until the sheer veil covered us. The curse poked and prodded at the surface, but couldn't find a way in to us or Ceti.

The veil glimmered like crystal, catching on the full moon's light. A mosquito net against a far more intrusive and dangerous enemy. The curse began to swell, gathering its strength, but it was no match for the power that vibrated within our protective cocoon. It began to rain tiny droplets of soft golden beads, each of them carrying a note from the flutes we continued to play.

But not all the droplets were hitting the ground. They hung suspended in the air, more and more of them gathering around each other until a picture began to emerge. A woman with soft golden eyes, golden hair, and skin that had been sun-kissed to golden perfection.

She looked directly at me and nodded.

Ceti. The descendant who had been gifted with the power of daylight.

She was as beautiful as the sunrise I'd centered myself with every morning. But there was a sadness that lingered in the tightness of her smile and hollows of her cheeks. Grief that still clung to her, hundreds of years later.

As a group, we held our collective breath, waiting to see what she would do next.

She raised her hands to the sky and those golden droplets began to fall faster, bringing up an entire scene before her. A

glimpse. A memory. A look into the past that was long ago dead and buried. And then she began to speak, and I recognized her voice from the night on the beach when she told me to save Cole.

“I am Ceti.” She looked at each of us, her eyes older than her slight figure, trapped in time, trapped on this island so long as her other half remained alive. “Daughter of Cetus, gifted with the clarity that comes from the dawn.”

Above us, the curse thrashed and pummeled the soft, gold, crystal net that kept our circle safe from harm. But our time was limited, we could all feel how precarious Ceti’s physical form was, how it bent the laws of both nature and magic to call her here.

“I can help you,” she said. “In order to drown Nirah, you must create an illusion strong enough to trick the curse into the waters from the River of Life. And it must allow Nirah to walk in willingly or all is lost. The curse is the master of illusion. So you must be strong and true. It will require every one of the elemental signs from the Zodiac. The twelve powers the curse tried to eliminate. You must not waiver in your faith in each other or the illusion will break. The island will be lost, and with it, your souls. And ours.”

Great. That was just fantastic. We needed all twelve of us. Which we’d sort of guessed at, but mostly hoped we could skate around. That hope had really taken hold once I’d understood the purpose of the flutes and the fact that there

were only ten of them. I'd thought we'd be able to finish this with ten, but I should've known better.

We had no choice. No out. We had to do this with this with Rafe and Jocelyn.

Fear as dark and cold as the curse's heart slid through my veins. It had taken so long for me and Cole to figure ourselves out. Almost too long. And our issues were minuscule compared to Rafe to Jocelyn. What happened between them...

More than trust was broken there. What happened to the two of them broke them as people. Neither one of them had recovered from what happened the day Kyle died. The town as a whole would never forgive Jocelyn, and if she bonded with Rafe, they would turn against him, too. It would be more than a typical scandal. It would be a betrayal of the deepest kind, and the vibrations of it would touch everyone.

We grimaced at each other, our gazes lingering on Finn, Galen, and Kenna. We'd mostly left the Rafe and Jocelyn situation to the three of them, considering it a family matter. But we were all family, in a way, now. And we could no longer walk on eggshells around those two.

"I know," Kenna said. "Believe me. I know."

She'd been trying to get through to Jocelyn for a while now, but Jocelyn wasn't actually the biggest hurdle. While she hadn't been at all receptive, Rafe wouldn't. He flat out would not.

I gave Cole a pointed look. He was friendly with Rafe. I didn't know him at all. Of course, I knew all the details of his most personal tragedy, but that was the small town equivalent of being Facebook friends.

Cole's lips thinned. He hated getting involved in other people's drama almost as much as he hated parties, spiders, and surprises. However, he was also Rafe's friend, and since Cole didn't have many—any—other friends, that probably meant he was closer to Rafe than anyone outside Galen or Finn. Cole didn't form relationships lightly.

Sensing that our time was running out, Audrey shook off the feeling of hopelessness that had descended on us all and pushed forward with trying to get answers for the limited time we had left with Ceti. "What is the curse? How is it keeping Nirah alive?"

Above us, the curse began to cover the crystal net. Instead of continuing to look for a way in, it blocked us from viewing anything that might come for us. Unease trickled down my spine, but I couldn't worry about what was out there. I couldn't let go of this flute or stop playing this song until we had all the answers we needed from Ceti.

"Nirah." Ceti's eyes filled with tears and her body shuddered. "He blamed himself for my death. It was an accident. But his father, Ophiuchus, fueled Nirah's self-hatred. His human lover had scorned him and escaped to the mainland. He wanted to punish everyone left on this island who had helped her leave without his notice."

Oh, wow. Did not see that one coming.

“So the legend was right,” I said. Once again, everything we’d believed to be true was turned upside down. “It was Ophiuchus. Sort of.”

Ceti nodded. “Time obscures facts, but there are always pieces of truth that remain. Ophiuchus told Nirah that if he used black magicks to sink the island held together by the elements, he would have the power of a god and the ability to bring me back from the dead.”

“Is that true?” Thora asked. “If the original descendants had failed to trap him in the cave, would he have brought you back?”

Ceti dipped her chin. “Yes. He would have brought me back as he is now. Cursed.”

All of us looked at our partners. The people we couldn’t live without. The other half of our souls. If one of us died, what choices would we make to change it?

I’d like to think I’d let Cole go and join him in the next adventure. Death wasn’t an end, and the sky had room for limitless stars. But that was easy for me to say now, when it wasn’t a choice I had to face. And I didn’t know if I’d still be as willing to let go if I didn’t know of Nirah and Ceti and curses, and if I had someone whispering a way to bring him back in my ear.

“There is something else that is the most important.” The urgency in her voice picked up as she darted nervous glances

at the thickening black fog around us. “You cannot call me back here. I cannot come here in physical form again, because if the curse—”

The last of her words were drowned out by the shattering of the golden crystal veil. With one last panicked look at me, Ceti whipped out her hands, and searing sunlight cut through the stems of the flutes, killing the song. Their tall lean stalks hit the sand with a soft thud. The remaining stumps shriveling to husks of corroded metal and rotting vines.

She flickered and disappeared.

Along with her net and the last of her protection from the growing dark.

CHAPTER 20

Cole

As soon as the flutes hit the sand and Ceti blinked out, the darkness enveloped us. My heart pounded in my throat as I fought the pull of the sand against my heavy feet. Brooke. The only thing I could think about was getting to her, protecting her, making sure she was safe.

All around me, the voices of the others echoed in the pitch black, calling to their partners, trying to ignite their magic. Finn and Thora's clear, pearlescent light was the first to cut through the dark. No surprise there. And not for the first time, I wished I'd been granted speed. Their light was shallow due to the curse's smoke being so thick, but having our healers up and running and near gave me a small bit of comfort.

"Cole." Brooke's small voice called to me, just a few feet ahead of me now. We met somewhere near the middle of the circle, bumping against Violet and Donovan in the process.

"I've got you, sunshine." My hands clamped over hers and relief poured through me as our primary red light sparked and

that joyful, heady magic flowed through my veins. “I’m not letting you go.”

She squeezed my hand, relief that matched mine pulsing into me from her magic. All around us, more bright lights glowed against the curse’s dark. Wes and Audrey’s chartreuse, Violet and Donovan’s aqua blue, Kenna and Galen’s neon green and purple braided ropes. We stood at the center of the circle, reassuring our partners, charging our magic, getting ready for whatever was about to hit us next.

Kenna and Galen lit each other up, twin flames that somewhat resembled them, but mostly looked like burning stick figures, one significantly taller than the other. They began to draw the smoke in. From the light of their fire, I could see the hazy look of horror clearing from Audrey’s face. The curse must’ve attacked her mind first.

As a Scorpio, the most secretive of the elemental signs, my soon-to-be sister-in-law kept her truest thoughts and feelings close to her chest. It made the curse’s mindfuck a particularly cruel form of torture for her more than anyone else. And it knew that. Wes held her tight against him, murmuring the words she needed to hear before the color returned to her face.

In the distance, the crunch of dead leaves rustled in the air, making the hair on my arms stand on end. Before any of us could fully gather our wits, a familiar snicket sounded from not too far away. Sensing what was coming, I flung my hand out, throwing up a shield from the metals imbedded deep in the beach’s sands.

The cursed arrows pinged off it before evaporating to smoke tendrils that joined the larger funnel still circling overhead.

“Ah, shit. Not these fuckers again,” Donovan said.

I swung my gaze around, still holding Brooke tight against me. Through the thick wall of smoke, a dozen warthogs, black as night, with sharp blades lining their armored backs, ran toward the ten of us. We scattered like bowling pins. Violet cried out and dropped to the sand when one of the hogs sliced through her leg, leaving it hanging on by little more than a few meaty tendrils and a shard of bone.

Nausea rolled through my gut. Donovan ripped the warthog’s black heart from its chest and crushed it beneath his hands, turning the entire beast to smoke. Violet threw up, and Thora darted over to her in a blink, patching her up and putting her leg back in place as if she’d experienced no trauma at all.

Thank fuck for our healers.

Donovan kept Violet behind him, even though she kept fighting to get back in. I couldn’t blame the wild, terrified look in his eyes. Just picturing Brooke in the same scenario had me shuddering.

Another dozen warthogs burst through the smoke wall, and Wes and Audrey took out six of them with their lightning immediately. The others spread. One headed for me, and before I could raise my hand, Brooke shot a length of copper wire at it, choking it tight before lopping off its head. The warthog’s body disintegrated and turned to smoke.

I gave her a wry smile. “Gruesome, sunshine.”

“Shut up.” She elbowed me. “It got the job done.”

“Never said I didn’t approve.”

Preparing for the next wave, Donovan called out to what felt like every seagull that had gotten trapped on this island when the barrier went up. They pecked and scratched at the remaining warthogs, plucking out their eyes and tearing at their soft underbellies. It was a bloodbath. The warthogs didn’t stand a chance against dozens of hungry birds that had become accustomed to feasting on the endless supply of popcorn and hotdogs they stole from tourists.

“Wow.” Brooke stared at the seagulls in wonder. “Look at them go.”

“They’re highly possessive birds.” Violet winked at her. “Donovan has a special affinity to them.”

“I take one toothbrush,” Donovan grumbled.

I had no idea what they were blithering about, and didn’t have time to ask, nor did I care all that much. Because another thick cloud of smoke was rolling in, and with it, the sound of buzzing that set my teeth on edge.

Visions of the night the wasps took Brooke down flashed through my mind like a horror movie, grainy, with dark lighting and ominous music. I couldn’t move. I could only blink. Terror squeezed at my lungs, snapped at my ribs, caged me into a memory where she was dying and I was late and useless and utterly fucking lost as she slipped away from me.

Light pressure on my cheeks had me looking down. Brooke's soft hands were on me, concern filling her big gray eyes. "I'm here. Right here. I'm not going anywhere."

I blew out a deep breath. "I'm sorry. This is..."

Hard. Terrifying. I can't stop freaking the fuck out and I don't know how I'm going to be able to watch you go back to your bees when this is all over and not lose my shit.

"You don't have to say it." She pressed a hand over my heart. "I know."

I closed my fingers over hers. "Thank you."

"If you two are done having a magic fucking moment, we could really use your help," Wes yelled as he shot a blast of ice at the funnel of wasps that had aimed for Audrey.

I shook my head, pulling myself out of that place where only Brooke and I existed, and paid attention to what was happening around me. Kenna and Galen were fully on fire, sucking up and killing the wisps of smoke that attempted to seep into everyone's minds. It kept the two of them completely occupied, since the curse was trying to take us out from multiple angles.

A hundred black arrows arched high in the sky, aiming downward, directly for Finn and Thora, who were patching up Donovan this time. His throat was swollen and his face had turned blue. Tears tracked Violet's cheeks as she wrung her hands while Finn held his glowing hand over Donovan and healed the wasps' stings.

I lifted my hand in the air, creating a metal ceiling out of aluminum, copper, and iron. The arrows pinged off of it. Waving my hand, I expanded the metal much farther than I'd been able to do that day I tucked Brooke under a dome with me. The day we faced the beast and I took him down with a cannonball made of molten metals.

Using that same energy, that same fear for Brooke's safety, I expanded the ceiling I'd created, sinking it into the sand and shutting out the curse. Locking us in a metal egg that probably didn't look all that different from the top of the cave that used to contain the curse at the center of the island.

I didn't know how much air we had or how long this would hold before the curse aimed something at us that could break through, but we needed a minute to rest. We all needed to recharge. Audrey looked dead on her feet. Finn and Thora were still recovering from the injuries they'd collected from others. We were a mess.

"Impressive." Wes knocked a fist against the metal dome, his face taking on an eerie look under Kenna and Galen's fire. "Now what? We can't just hang out here and wait."

Outside, scratches and pounding and earsplitting vibrations pummeled the dome. The curse had us on lock. It wanted each and every one of us dead and gone. It wouldn't just pick up its toys and go home because we didn't want to play anymore. Not to mention, I wasn't sure how much air we had to work with in here.

“We’re going to recover, then we’re going to go back out there,” Brooke said, sounding so much more confident than she felt, judging by the tremors in her magic.

“That’s a good idea. You’re all exhausted. Don’t forget, we can help each other.” Thora took Finn’s hand, who took Violet’s hand, and so on, until everyone was linked.

The power that flowed into me wasn’t just Brooke’s. It was a little bit of everyone’s. And while I couldn’t use any magic beyond what Brooke and I shared, the ache in my limbs began to recede. The grit and heaviness in my eyes disappeared. I felt as though I’d slept for twelve hours straight, refreshed and fully ready to go another round.

“It works better with you two,” Galen said with a certain amount of wonder and curiosity in his voice. “I feel stronger than when there were just eight of us.”

“We’ll be unstoppable once your brother pulls his head out of his ass,” Kenna said.

By the tightening in Galen’s jaw, I could see that he wanted to argue in Rafe’s favor, and I was fully on his side. If my mother hadn’t stepped in on Jocelyn’s behalf, I would’ve fired her as assistant manager the day after her wedding. But we had bigger problems at the moment than another pointless round of Rafe vs. Jocelyn. Their time was coming. Soon.

“Here’s what’s going to happen.” The sharp screech of nails on metal overhead interrupted my speech. I slammed my hands over my ears as my teeth snapped together.

“Give me the one who can raise the dead, and I’ll let the rest of you go.” The voice echoed off the walls of the dome and slithered through our minds. It was low and sinister, with a slight hiss at the end of its words.

“Dude. We wield elemental magic,” Finn said. “If you want necromancers, I’m afraid you’ll have to try a different island.”

“Give me the one who made the golden flutes. Give me your metal manipulator, and I’ll let your partners live. Try to protect him, and I’ll rip out your throats.”

Technically, we had two metal manipulators now, but just like the curse had underestimated the other water signs, it had also underestimated Brooke. To its downfall. It had no idea that between the two of us, she was always the stronger one.

Bored with the empty threats, I got back to where I’d been before I was interrupted. “As I was saying, I’m going to drop the dome, and—”

“No,” Wes said.

“No?” I bared my teeth. “Should we just wait here until the curse finds a way in, or we run out of air? Because we don’t have a lot of options here.”

“I’m not going to allow you to make a bullshit sacrifice.” Wes looked damn near ready to tackle me and hold me to the ground. I didn’t know whether to laugh or be touched.

I settled for a smirk. A compromise between the two. “I’m not about making sacrifices either. You must have me confused with a hero.”

His brow pinched with a questioning look. “Then why do you—?”

“We’re fighting.” I took Brooke’s hand, the woman who taught me that standing against what you feared most was the only way to beat back the dark. She had more guts in her pinky than I had in my whole being. The curse seriously fucked up when it honed in on me.

Audrey wrapped a firm hand around Wes’s upper arm. “I think we have to fight. It’s our only way out of this. The curse can’t take Cole’s magic unless he willingly gives it up.”

Wes shot me a suspicious look, and I couldn’t even blame him for that. Maybe two weeks ago, I would’ve gladly rid myself of what I’d thought of as another kind of curse. I didn’t want to be saddled with something that would make me vulnerable to another person. I’d been burned by too many people before. But that was before Brooke.

Before she opened my eyes to what I could do and who I could be with my magic.

“I’ll be fine.” I gave Wes a short nod, took Brooke’s hand, and dropped the dome.

Light shone between the hands of the other pairs, but otherwise, the beach was still and quiet. Too quiet. A fine black mist hung in the air like a sheer veil, offering perfect visibility to the waves that gently rolled to shore. The long stalks of the flutes remained on the sandy beach, though they’d lost their shine. They wouldn’t play music again.

No matter. Brooke and I could always grow new ones if we needed to speak to Ceti again. She'd been about to tell us something important before she was cut off, and I had every intention of figuring it out after we finished with whatever the curse had planned for us next.

"I don't like this." Brooke's voice trembled.

"Me either," Audrey said.

The ten of us stood in a tight circle with our backs to each other. The silence continued to press in on us. In the distance, the shadows that had hung on the outskirts began to twist and bend, forming humanoid shapes. A hissing sound, like a pit of angry snakes, split the air.

"Ah, shit. Here we fucking go," Finn said.

The fine mist veil parted, revealing ten of Nirah's beasts about a hundred yards away. Each of them had the black spikes along its head and arms, six-inch nails, rotting gray skin hanging from it in folds, and twin snakes where its legs should've been. The beasts flickered for a moment. All but one.

Only one of them was real. The rest were an illusion.

The ten of us moved as a unit, subtly angling our bodies toward the one that hadn't flickered, but then we blinked and the beasts had moved closer. Eighty yards away now. They flickered again. This time the real one was in a different place.

We fired a bolt of lightning at one of the illusions. Instead of breaking into a cloud of smoke that Galen and Kenna could

kill, they just flickered again, moving in closer. Sixty yards away. And once again, the real beast was in a different place.

I pulled a cannonball of molten metal from the ground, emboldened by the success I'd had with it before against the beast, and hurled it at the spot where the real one stood. They flickered again. Forty yards away. The real beast had changed positions once more.

"Maybe try something else." Kenna gritted her teeth. "Clearly, hitting it with offensive magic isn't working."

"I don't know what else to do." Panic gripped my throat as they flickered again.

Twenty yards away. One more turn and they'd be on us. One more, and we couldn't stop them from coming. Nothing we threw at them was working.

They flickered again.

And my heart stopped.

The illusions dissolved like hot wax on the sand, hissing and burning, as if this place scared them. But the real one remained. Twenty yards away again. With its hand around Brooke's throat.

I couldn't move, couldn't breathe. My entire world, everything that I was, everything that made my life worth anything at all, was in the hands of a monster. And once again, I had failed to protect her. Once again, I was too fucking late.

Brooke struggled against the beast, tying its snake legs together with copper wires to cut off their heads, but four grew

back in their place. If it figured out she was better than me at the metal, it would be all over. I ran toward them, the sand slowing me down, making every step so fucking slow. The beast licked Brooke's cheek with a forked tongue, blacker than the sky on the darkest nights, releasing a line of wasps that crawled toward her throat.

Not again. I would *not* fucking watch this again.

“Stop.” Still ten yards away, but gaining. “Take me instead. I’m the one you want.”

The beast paused. “You would give up your magic for her life?”

His voice rattled like the bones of a thousand skeletons. Death and decay leaked from every syllable. It didn't fool me for a second with its question. This was what it had been after the entire time. I just didn't give a damn.

“Yes. Give me Brooke and I'll give you my magic. Willingly.”

Horror filled Brooke's eyes. “No! You can't! You—”

The beast covered her mouth with its rotting hand, and a surge of anger rose within me. Just a little closer and I'd tear its limbs off with my bare hands. “Let her go.”

“You're not in a position to make demands,” the beast said.

“If you want my ability to bend metal to my will—and we both know you'll only get it if I'm willing—you'll make the trade.”

The beast considered for a moment, trying to find an angle. “Very well.”

Brooke struggled and fought against the beast, trying to stop me from making this exchange. She tore its hand from her mouth. “You can’t do this. You’re not just giving up your magic. You’ll lose your memories. You’ll forget me.”

Tears poured down her face, but nothing mattered more to me than her life. Nothing. “I’ll find my way back to you, sunshine.”

Covering her mouth once more, the beast transformed. His black spikes receded and his skin became firmer, younger. He was still terrifying. A man with a forked tongue who walked on broken bones. Darkness leaked from his hand like a black hole resting on his palm.

The absence of light. The source of his power.

I touched Brooke’s arm and she tried to shake me off, unwilling to participate in this unholy bargain, but Nirah had her in a tight grip. My palm flared with primary red light. “I walk away with Brooke. Safely. You don’t take aim at us the moment we turn our backs. You’ve made a deal to trade her life for my magic.”

His black eyes swirled with madness. The prospect of having my power in his grasp had him salivating. He stuck out his hand. “Deal.”

I slapped my palm against his and the effect was immediate. My magic clung to me like paste, sludging out of me, and

struggling, grappling, trying to hang on. This wasn't like when I shared magic with Brooke. This was a permanent removal. Once it was gone, there would be no going back. The veins in my neck bulged as the magic dug its nails in, but I wasn't going back on my deal. This was it. The end of magic for me.

Brooke fought and kicked and tried to scream, but Nirah wouldn't release her until the last of my power flowed into him. Black smoke swirled in his eyes as he licked his lips with his forked tongue. When the final bit of my magic snapped off, leaving me woozy and unsteady on my feet, I dropped to my knees.

But I remembered.

I remembered everything...

The part of my magic that still lived in Brooke must've been keeping my memories for me. I nearly wept in relief. I could live without magic, but I was nothing without Brooke. "I'm here, sunshine. I'm not leaving you."

Sobbing, Brooke flung herself against my chest. "You stupid, stupid man."

Her palms flared with bright red light, she still had her magic, and she still needed to touch me to access it, but mine was gone. No light sparked from me, no power swirled through my veins. I couldn't feel her emotions through that bond anymore. But I felt her where it mattered. I could read her expressions and pick up on the changes in her pulse. She was still mine in every way that mattered. Magic meant nothing without her.

“Not stupid.” Even the effort of speaking cost me. “Harvard, remember?”

The other eight joined us, surrounding me in a protective bubble, their faces various shades of ashen. For the first time, the gravity of what the original descendants had given up washed over all of us. I’d broken a vital piece of myself.

And I’d damn well do it again.

“We need to go,” I croaked, but the healing power Finn silently pushed into me revived some of my strength. “Not safe.”

Nirah began to pull metal and vines from the ground, already working them around each other. If he called Ceti, what would happen to her? What would the curse do? Did I just betray her? A part of me felt guilty for that—she’d tried to help us—but a larger part of me knew there was nothing else that could’ve been done.

Keeping Brooke close to me, and trying not to lose my shit as she softly sobbed against my side, the ten of us climbed the rocky sea wall that separated the beach from town. We maintained our distance, but still wanted to see what happened next. Nirah recreated the flutes, then cast illusions to play their song. Papery, translucent versions of us.

It made my skin crawl.

But even from here, I could see that the flutes were all wrong. They didn’t have the same golden glow and more closely resembled tarnished brass. I held my breath as the ten

cursed versions of us approached the flutes and ran their hands down the stems, and...

Nothing.

Absolute silence.

The ground rumbled as Nirah let out a roar. He turned those black pits on me and Brooke, but Wes and Audrey hit him with a bolt of lightning strong enough to tear him in half. The sand opened up, swallowing him into its depths as the ground continued to shake.

“Fuck. This is not good.” Wes covered Audrey’s body with his own as one of the tall streetlamps snapped in half and fell toward us.

I raised a hand to put a metal dome up before remembering that I had no magic left. A quick punch of emptiness hit me. The loss of something vital inside of me itched like a phantom limb. But Brooke took over immediately, and seeing her alive, well, using our magic like she’d come out of the womb wielding it soothed the ache of losing my magic. She was all that mattered in this world to me.

She had us all under cover before the lamp came crashing down. A copper dome that had hints of gold in it because she couldn’t help but draw up sunlight as well. The streetlamp hit the outside and the clanging of it shook our brains in our skulls.

“Damn.” Finn wiped his brow with the back of his arm. “I know Thora and I could’ve healed you all, but I really

appreciate not having to experience broken bones this evening.”

The ground outside continued to shake as I held Brooke’s hand, letting her magic flow and keep us safe. She turned those big gray eyes to me in the dim lighting. “I can’t believe you gave up your magic. What were you thinking? We could’ve found a way out of that.”

From where I stood, there was no other choice. I wasn’t willing to play “what if” with her life. Needing her to understand, I cupped her jaw and tilted her face until her gaze met mine. “Don’t you already know, sunshine? You’re all the magic I need.”

Epilogue

COLE

When the ground stopped rumbling, Brooke released us from the metal dome. A few streetlights were down. The rock wall had suffered some damage. The Castellanos' ice cream shop had a crack in the foundation.

And the beach was gone.

All of it, just... gone. Brooke's garden, the stalks from the flutes Ceti had cut down, the ones Nirah had tried to build in their place, the lifeguard stand, and the carts abandoned by vendors were buried beneath the ocean waves.

My brothers and I shared a grim look between us. This was it. The final phase of the curse had begun, and instead of having twelve of us in control of our magic and ready to fight for our island, we were down to nine. With our chances getting slimmer by the moment.

Wes turned to Finn and Thora. "Do a turn around the island, see if it's just the beach, or if we've lost land anywhere else. Meet us back at the hotel."

Finn and Thora nodded, both of them gravely serious, something I wasn't accustomed to with Finn in particular. In a blink, they'd taken off.

"Fuck me." Wes rubbed his hands over his face. "I don't want to go back to the hotel."

I didn't want to go back either. All those people looking to us—or *them*, now, I supposed, since I was officially out of the magic club—for answers. Scared out of their minds. And we'd have to admit that we failed. The final phase of the curse had begun and we hadn't stopped it.

We weren't too late. But pretty damn close.

"It won't sink the island overnight." Galen adjusted his wire-frame glasses. "We had to expect this would happen, but we've still got a week or two before we get into deep shit."

I didn't want to come close to deep shit. In fact, I would've preferred it if we could end this thing tonight, but that wasn't fucking happening. "Where are you at with Rafe?"

Galen's lips thinned. "Rafe is Rafe."

That ended tonight too. I almost felt like I didn't have room to bitch, since I'd also taken my sweet-ass time removing my head from my rear end, but I didn't have the issues with Brooke that Rafe had with Jocelyn. My holdup had simply been my own dumbassery.

"Mind if I take over on that?" I asked. "I know he's your brother—"

“Be my guest.” Galen looked more than a little relieved at the prospect of handing Rafe duty off to someone else. I got it. Geminis could dig their heels in just as hard as Capricorns when they wanted to.

As a group, we headed back to the hotel. Dragging our feet a little more than we would on a usual night, but we also wanted to be there when Finn and Thora got back. Refusing to let Brooke go, I slowly eased her over to Wes with me.

I nudged his elbow. “When we get back, grab me a keycard for Jocelyn’s apartment.”

Wes gave me a startled look. “Are you kidding? Mr. Rules wants to commit a serious HR violation and breach of trust?”

“Fuck off and get me the card or I’ll commit a serious beating of your ass.”

“Since you asked so nicely.” He cuffed me and I growled in response. Though there wasn’t much heat from either of us. We’d begun to move past that.

I filled him in on my plans, relieved when he agreed with me. Though I would’ve gone ahead with them whether he liked them or not.

The closer we got to the hotel, the more we could feel the first whispers of panic reaching us from the crowd gathered in the street. Everyone who’d been staying in the hotel stood outside. They swarmed us as soon as we approached, flinging dozens of questions at us.

What did the earthquake mean? Did we see what had happened to the beach? Did we know the ocean now reached the hotel's veranda? Did we stop the curse? Well, why not? What were you doing while we were left here unprotected?

They were starting to give me a headache. I pinched the bridge of my nose, and Brooke rubbed my back. "They just want answers."

"I just want you in our bed." Even though I had no regrets about giving up my magic, I still felt a hollow pang where it should've been. I needed to be with Brooke, to spend one night letting her softer edges soothe my rougher ones.

"Let's wait for Finn and Thora, then we can go."

Almost. I still had business to attend to with Rafe. He stood off to the side observing the chaos with his hands in his pockets. Watchful. But making no move to look for Jocelyn, who wasn't anywhere to be seen. Because even during emergencies, she stayed holed up in her apartment. Which happened to be a damned good convenience tonight.

I caught Wes's eye and gave him a jerk of my chin. He nodded in response and whispered to Audrey to take over the town leader position until Finn and Thora got back. He slipped away from the crowd, and returned moments later with the keycard.

"I hope you know what the hell you're doing," he said.

"Do you have a better idea?"

He shrugged. "Not really, no."

Finn and Thora appeared just then, which caused a perfect distraction. Wes had filled Donovan in, who was almost giddy at the prospect of assisting. I wanted to hear what Finn and Thora had found out, but I could also trust Brooke to fill me on the important details later.

While Wes got busy clearing space near Rafe, so we wouldn't cause a scene that would grab people's attention, Donovan and I closed in on our prey. Unfortunately, Rafe had an innate street sense neither one of us silver-spoon motherfuckers possessed, and was on to us before we could do anything close to sneaking.

He peeled away from the crowd, dodging between people and positioning himself away from the perfect pocket Wes had created. But he highly underestimated the strategic core of Virgos, and Donovan quickly backtracked until he had Rafe pinned to a corner with no escape.

I grabbed Rafe under the arm. I hated handling him like this, but it obviously didn't surprise him, even if it pissed him off.

"Get the fuck off me." He tried to shake us loose and draw attention to himself, but the crowd was too wrapped up in whatever Finn and Thora were sharing. "What the hell is wrong with you two?"

"Finn and Galen tried to be nice about this." I gave my old friend a smile that sent people scattering to the opposite side of the street when they saw me coming. "I'm not nice."

Wes joined us, his hands glowing chartreuse from the charge he just got from Audrey. He helped Donovan corral

Rafe, though it wasn't easy. The guy was lean, but had the strength of a tank. Just how much coin did he lift at the bank all day?

"You can't fucking do this to me." He dug his heels in harder, the closer we got to Jocelyn's room. Donovan gritted his teeth, saying nothing, using all his strength to keep Rafe moving forward. Wes wasn't fairing much better. And I stood by in case he managed to break free. "I won't work with her. I fucking won't. Find another Gemini."

"Sorry, buddy." I clapped him on the back as Wes and Donovan continued to fight to keep him from running. "You're all we've got."

Then I swiped the keycard to Jocelyn's room and shoved him inside. Jocelyn's surprised squeak was the last thing I heard as the door slammed shut behind him. Wes froze the frame, locking them behind a block of ice. Play time was over. They were going to figure their shit out whether they wanted to or not.

"Damn, dude." Donovan rubbed the back of his neck. "That was fucking vicious."

I glanced at the door, not feeling great about it. Consent mattered to me for a myriad of reasons, but we were in desperate times. "Yeah. Well. It's getting the job done."

Wes dusted his hands together. "Don't feel that bad. We're not forcing them to fuck. If they work out their issues, everyone will be better off, including them."

With that, Wes left to finish cleaning up the mess outside, which included settling nerves and getting everyone to move back inside. With Nirah thoroughly pissed off that he couldn't use the magic only Brooke and I could create, even when he had my power at his disposal, the outdoors wasn't the safest place for a bunch of magicless residents.

“Welp.” Donovan stretched his arms over his head. “You got first shift guard duty?”

I slapped a hand against his shoulder to stop him. “Not so fast.”

“Dude.” He was fully pouting. As the youngest, he was used to that shit working with Mom and Dad, but it only annoyed me. “This whole thing was your idea.”

“And I lost my magic tonight.” It was playing dirty, but I needed Brooke more than I needed to breathe right now, and I wasn't above using guilt to accomplish that.

“Fine.” Donovan blew out a breath and crossed his arms. “But you owe me. Send Violet up here to keep me company.”

“Hell no. I heard about you two. I don't need you traumatizing Rafe and Jocelyn with your antics. They've got enough going on.”

He flipped me off, and I laughed as I walked away.

To go find the woman who still made me believe in magic.

Afterword

Thank you so much for reading Brooke and Cole's story! I absolutely love a grumpy/sunshine pairing and these two were so much fun to write. I love exploring the ways opposites can fill something in each other they didn't know they were missing and I hope to write more of this trope in the future.

If you'd like to see the epilogue from Brooke's point of view, including what Finn and Thora discovered about the state of the rest of the island, click [HERE](#) for the bonus epilogue!

Normally, this is the part where I tell you to read on for a sneak peek of the next book, but I don't have a version beyond a *really* rough first draft. But! I will be sending it out in my newsletter once I get it into shape. Plus you can keep up with me, get early access to other content, and fun things like cover reveals, giveaways, and pictures of my cats.

Sign up [HERE](#) or on my website at soniahartl.com!

And you can still preorder a copy of *A Touch Spellbound* by following this link!

Character Key

Scorpio: Audrey Raynor

Element: Water

Power: Water-based weather manipulation

Birthstone: Topaz

Taurus: Wes Latham

Element: Earth

Power: Lightning

Birthstone: Emerald

Aries: Thora Chase

Element: Fire

Power: Healing

Birthstone: Diamond

Libra: Finn Wilder

Element: Air

Power: Speed

Birthstone: Opal

Pisces: Violet Fischer

Element: Water

Power: Breathe underwater

Birthstone: Aquamarine

Virgo: Donovan Latham

Element: Earth

Power: Communicate with animals

Birthstone: Sapphire

Leo: Kenna Everett

Element: Fire

Power: Fire

Birthstone: Peridot

Aquarius: Galen Wilder

Element: Air

Power: Invisibility

Birthstone: Amethyst

Cancer: Brooke Hudson

Element: Water

Power: Plant growth

Birthstone: Ruby

Capricorn: Cole Latham

Element: Earth

Power: Metal manipulation

Birthstone: Garnet

Sagittarius: Jocelyn Everett

Element: Fire

Power: ?

Birthstone: Tanzanite

Gemini: Rafe Wilder

Element: Air

Power: ?

Birthstone: Pearl

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About the Author

Sonia Hartl is the author of YA and adult romance. Her books have been featured in PopSugar, BuzzFeed, Vulture, Book Riot, and Life Savvy, among other publications, received a starred review from BookPage, and earned nominations for the Georgia Peach Book Award, YALSA's Quick Picks for Reluctant Readers, Bank Street College of Education's Best Children's Books of the Year, and ALA's Rise: A Feminist Book Project List, and was named an Amazon Editors' Pick for Best Young Adult. When she's not writing she enjoys board games with her family, attempting to keep her garden alive, or looking up craft projects she'll never get around to completing on Pinterest. She lives in Michigan with her spouse and two daughters.