



# BINDING MOON

ONCE UPON A MONSTER SERIES

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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# BINDING MOON

*Once Upon a Monster Book 2*

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*Start every day as an adventure*  
*Soak in every drop of happiness*  
*Life is too short to not at least try*

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## CHAPTER 1



**A** drop of blood dripped off the hammer in her hand, landing on the cobblestone streets with a wet plop that echoed down the narrow alleyway. The men who tracked her knew just how accurate she was with that deadly weighted end. Now, they would be more careful.

Luna could have kicked herself for being so damned foolish. She should have known better than to swing the hammer at the first man who attacked her. A punch would have done the same amount of damage if she'd timed it right, and then they wouldn't know she had a weapon. They very much did now, and they would plan accordingly.

For all that they were thugs, the Spirit Quay Gang weren't idiots. They planned their moves, and that was why they ran this city behind the curtain of government officials. Their leader, that horrible rat-faced Crowley, knew how to tug the right marionette strings.

His shrewd eyes saw everything in this city. When he wanted people to jump, they damn well jumped.

Except Luna, of course. Maybe that was why they'd never seen eye to eye. Crowley had tried giving her orders for years now, and she'd always wiggled her way out from underneath his thumb. She was the best thief in the city, and a girl had to keep her options open for contracts.

He'd have her working only for him, and that sure sounded like a good way to lose money.



“Oh, Luna?” The voice snaked down the alleyway with a lilting quality that only reminded her how deeply she was in the shit of this situation. “We know you’re down there, love. Don’t hide from us now. You know this alley leads to nowhere.”

She should have known that before throwing herself down it, but obviously she’d made a mistake, now hadn’t she?

Luna blew a breath out at the red curls that blocked her vision. Red, like the blood on the end of the hammer. Like the bloom of color that had burst over the man’s temple after metal struck flesh. They always made the mistake of thinking she would be easy to manhandle because she was a woman. But she was over six feet tall, built solid, and had more muscles than most men.

If they wanted an easy target, they should have tried attacking her sister, Beatrix.

Crowley was right, though. She was at a dead end and they knew where she was now. They would walk down this street, come and get her when they wanted, or they’d point a gun at her head and end all this hassle.

She could fight, or she could turn herself in. As much as it hurt her to admit that giving up was the better option, she really wanted to avoid any bullets in her body tonight. They hurt like a bitch, and this was the only time she was jealous of her other sister, Maeve. The one who couldn’t feel any physical pain at all.

Sighing, she tucked the hammer into the back of her tweed pants and held up her hands. Stepping out into the dim light of a street lamp, she waited at the very end of the alley for the rest of the gang to catch up with her.

There were seven men now, where there had been eight. Crowley stood in the back with his hands in his pockets, clearly not worried that she’d attack him. Or perhaps it was the three men behind him with guns pointed at Luna’s head that made him so confident.

“There you are,” he said with a sly grin. “Now where’s that hammer you picked up?”

The wooden handle burned against her back, but there was no way she would let him know she still had it on her person. “I dropped it while I was running. Too incriminating to be running through the streets with a bloody weapon, don’t you think?”

“I think you’re too smart for that. You knew we’d follow you. And you knew we wouldn’t let you go this time.” He lifted a hand and two of the gun holding men stepped forward. “Billie, why don’t you peek at what she’s got in her pockets. Huh?”

Billie was a hulking man who stood even taller than Luna, and it was rare for her to look up to meet a man’s gaze. Of course, he also had a certain lumbering quality to him that made her question his intelligence. There wasn’t a lot of light behind those dark eyes.

He could still point a gun, though, and she didn’t think for a second that he didn’t know how to fire the thing. Even if he was a shit shot, he’d still hit her while he stood only four feet away.

“Fine,” she muttered before the behemoth stepped any closer. “I’ve got the hammer in the back of my pants. But I’m not letting it go until you tell me what all this is about. You tried to jump me in the streets, Crowley. Do you really think I’d want to work for you after all that?”

“I don’t think you’ll have much of a choice.” His grin never budged. But then, when did it?

He was always smiling. Like he’d caught her in the worst sort of compromising position. That grin was known throughout the underbelly of London, because it was a terrible sign that whoever was on the receiving end of said smile wouldn’t wake up in the morning.

But she stole better than anyone else in London, she reminded herself. He didn’t want to put her in a shallow grave

or tip her off the pier. He needed her, even if she had become a thorn in his side.

“All right, what do you want?” she muttered. “I know you’ve got some job for me, don’t you?”

“I don’t think I want to work with you anymore, actually. You’ve been too much of a problem, and that has cost me a lot of money lately. People think you’re unagreeable.”

“Unagreeable?” she snorted. “That’s not even a word, Crowley. And here I was thinking you were one of the smart gang leaders.”

His smile wavered, just slightly. Enough that she knew she’d struck a nerve. “I know you took something that was mine, Luna.”

“Oh, did I?” She would have looked at her nails if she didn’t think they’d shoot her the moment she moved. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“The Lux Diamond. The one attached to the Royal Scepter which was in the tower of London last night. Ring any bells?” He gestured with his hands as though he were ringing a bell. “You know. The one you took for another gang, I assume, or for yourself. Playing princess in your room, perhaps?”

She knew exactly what he was talking about. And it wasn’t for another gang, it was for a nobleman who had paid her in more lumber to fix up Martin’s crumbling castle.

But Crowley didn’t need to know that.

All he needed to know was that the scepter was in very safe hands. She cleared her throat and plastered a fake smile on her face. “Look, if I’d known you were interested in the scepter as well, then I never would have stolen it without asking. You know I like to keep everyone happy.”

Such a lie.

She really had to stop doing that because lies were slipping a little too easily off her tongue. They were coming to mind so quickly these days. Like telling her sisters she was fine. Telling Martin she didn’t care if he wanted her to steal even

more from more dangerous people. Smiling at strangers on the street when they helped her get something from a bin.

She hated this life. She hated who she was becoming, and yet she couldn't stop. Luna had gotten too lost in her thoughts. The gang leader saw too much.

Had Crowley read her mind again?

He stopped smiling and snapped his fingers. Four of the men lunged forward and grabbed her arms. She twisted, biceps bulging underneath her grimy white shirt as she struggled against their hold.

“Stop moving,” one thug growled in her ear.

She wouldn't. She'd put up a fight the way she'd been raised to do. If she didn't, then Luna would know for certain that she'd become a different person. Someone she hated.

So she fought. With every ounce of strength in her body, she fought against them until her muscles burned and her breathing turned ragged. But no matter how many times she wriggled an arm free and then immediately threw a punch, there was another man to take her opponent's place. Over and over again until finally, desperately, she sagged in the arms of the men who held her.

She could fight off two or three of them. Hell, given the time, she would have knocked all four of the men onto their knees. But six? Including Crowley, now holding a gun in his hands?

The safety clicked loudly and everyone in the alleyway froze. She didn't know if the others would actually shoot a defenseless woman, but Crowley? She'd seen him shoot many people before. He'd put the end of a pistol directly between a man's eyes, made him say a prayer, and then shot him point blank. If Crowley wanted her dead, and it sure seemed like he did, then he'd make sure she died quickly.

Luna swallowed hard. “I don't know what you want from me, Crowley, but you know I'll do anything to see you put your pistol down.”

“Anything?” He laughed, but the sound was more sinister than mirthful. “You know I don’t want just anything from you, witch.”

There it was. The bitter name he always called her when she really pissed him off.

He wasn’t wrong. Her mother was a witch, so she supposed she was half a witch herself. If she had any actual abilities, she might have been able to cast a couple of spells on the nitwits who thought they could hold her down. But she wasn’t powerful. Not like the woman who had raised her.

A flashing memory of her dear mam bloomed to life behind Crowley. Her mother stepped out of the shadows like a celt from the old days. Blue woad painted down her face in three lines and red hair burning like a bonfire around her head. She reached for Crowley’s throat before disappearing.

Yes, her mother would have killed any man who dared touch her without permission. And had before, even Luna’s father, who had thought he could rape a woman for a sturdy daughter.

If only he’d survived her mother sawing through his neck with a serrated blade, he might have seen Luna’s birth. He might have given her some advice on how to fling men off her arms who thought they had a right to scare her. Threaten her. Try to take her life.

But wasn’t that the way of men? They always wanted to take because women were expected to give.

She ground her teeth together so hard that she tasted blood. “I’ll do whatever it takes. You know I don’t have many options here, Crowley.”

He strode forward and pressed the gun against her temple. The cold metal seared her flesh, as though her very skin knew what it was. Tingles danced down her spine as she stared into his beady, dark eyes.

“You took a lot of money from me in stealing that scepter before my boys could get to it.” He ground the barrel of the

gun against her skull. “Now you’re going to get me its worth, and half of its worth more.”

She wasn’t very good with numbers, but she knew the impossibility of what he asked for. “That’s a lifetime of money for people born into it, let alone someone like me.”

“Then you better get working fast.”

“On what?” she snarled. “There’s nothing in this entire city that would get me whatever price you’re making up in your head, Crowley. You know I’ll never be able to pay that much. Or even steal something worth what you’re asking. So if there’s something that you want in particular, then you might as well tell me.”

Her gut twisted with fear that he would ask her to bring him a person. He frequently dealt in human trading and she knew how horrible that would end up for her. If she wasn’t careful, he’d send her off to steal a child that might become a king or queen someday, and then she’d really lose her head at the gallows. Luna was only good at stealing jewelry, gemstones, the things that sang to her in the night. Not people.

He tilted his head to the side, and those beady eyes narrowed with some information he’d never shared with her. “Have you ever heard of the Diamond of Crestfall?”

It was a rumor, nothing more. A myth told around the table by thieves who thought they could steal. “Of course I’ve heard of a diamond the size of a person’s fist. Everyone knows that’s a tall tale, though. It doesn’t exist.”

If it existed, then she would have heard it singing by now. Something that big in London? It might not even sound like a song to her magic. A diamond like that would scream for her.

“Actually, it exists. At least, that’s what my informants have been saying. And the man who holds it is named the Beast of Dead Man’s Crossing. He’s got himself all holed up in his father’s old estate, bringing the ancient building back to life as it were.” Crowley lowered the gun from her temple, only to strike it hard against her collarbone. “You bring me

that diamond in a month's time, and I won't send my boys after you."

"A month?" she wheezed, gasping at the pain that bloomed across her torso. "I could be halfway across the sea by then."

"You won't be." He nodded at his men, who dropped their grip on her arms. "You want to see the diamond like I do. You're enthralled by all that glitters, Luna. We share that fascination. I trust you'll find the stone and bring it to me as quickly as possible, yeah?"

And just like that, the Spirit Quay Gang walked away from her as though they hadn't pinned her down like a moth on a board.

Luna rubbed her collarbone that sparked with heat and pain. She should run. Maeve had little money to spare, but Luna had done significant work to get the castle back in order. Her sister owed her enough coin to get her on a boat to the Americas quick enough.

But damn it.

That rat-faced idiot was right.

She wanted to see the diamond for herself. To see if it was real. Even if that meant risking her life to take a peek.

## CHAPTER 2



**D**irt caked his face and sweat dripped from his brow. But that didn't matter. Luther was rarely happier than he was at this moment. Right here. Right now.

He felt alive like this. Smearred with earth and sweating while his mind settled into the monotony of labor. His body was used, abused, and then some. And perhaps this would have made his brethren nobles ill to see him, but at least he wasn't languishing behind a desk somewhere while his servants massaged his feet.

He straightened and wiped the sweat from his brow. The sun beat down on his bare back and the shovel in his hand had seen better days. But he'd successfully turned the earth in front of him over and now it was ready to become a garden for Farmer Barren and his family.

An odd name for a farmer, but he'd never questioned the old man. If there was anyone in Dead Man's Crossing who knew how to grow food, it was this family.

Luther sank the shovel into the ground one final time, giving the dirt there a quick turnover with a satisfied grunt. "There we go," he grumbled. "Seems like that should do it. You said you wanted it this size, didn't you?"

The old farmer in question was sitting on a chair they'd dragged out. Farmer Barren did little these days. He was almost ninety and a man of his age should be bedridden. Yet he still got out to his fields to look over the crops every single day.



Digging up a new garden area, however, wasn't quite his forte any longer. But that was all right. That's what Luther was for.

The old man surveyed his work with a wrinkled brow and a skeptical eye. "For a young man who's supposed to be the Earl you sure know a lot about digging in the ground, young man."

Young man. That's probably why Luther enjoyed being around the farmer so much. He always made Luther feel like he wasn't a thirty-five-year-old failure to his family. After all, he still didn't have a wife or children.

If his aunt said one more time that they needed a male heir to carry on his name, Luther was going to pull his hair out in front of her and start screaming like a mad man. At least Bedlam would be more forgiving than an aunt who threatened him every time he saw her.

Luther shrugged. "I've always felt more at home outside than in, I suppose."

"Well, you're definitely outside now and you're more comfortable here than you were the last time I saw you." Farmer Barren grinned. "I thought you were going to throw up at the last town meeting, you know. You were a green I usually only see in the garden."

"That's because I don't like being interrogated about bodies showing up in rivers years ago." Particularly bodies that were ripped apart by long, sharp claws.

Dead Man's Crossing lived in fear for the past two generations. No one could deny that. There had been a time in their history, not too long ago, when people showed up in the middle of the night, missing limbs with their bellies torn open and their organs devoured. All thanks to his grandfather, the old bastard.

If they were in London, someone might send the Watch to see what had happened. But this wasn't London, and it was a small town that was his responsibility.

“Ah, that’s right,” the old man replied with a nod. “That’s what they were talking about. How close are you in figuring out what or who the murdering creature is?”

Closer than anyone wanted to know, but he wouldn’t burden the old man with any more talk about rotting corpses and monsters in the night. “You leave that worry to me. How about we get you settled somewhere more comfortable?”

“I’m quite happy in the sun.” He pointed at a stack of hay next to him. “Sprinkle that over the top of the ground, would you? Otherwise it’ll dry out too quick and won’t be good to no one.”

Luther was quick to comply. He didn’t mind doing all this work for Barren, nor would anyone question him for doing it. Most of the townsfolk were in the square at the Monday market. And Luther enjoyed not being around too many people.

They had a strange relationship, him and this farmer. The old man was the only one who would give Luther the time of day still. At least someone in this cursed town was kind to him. He’d take what he could get.

So he took the entire afternoon to spread the hay over the ground he’d overturned. It wasn’t much work, really. And he got to use his body in ways that he rarely did when he was back at home in his father’s manor. The ghost of the old earl still lingered in the corridors and sometimes Luther swore his father’s spirit grabbed onto him whenever he did something his father wouldn’t like.

When he finished, he grabbed the edge of the shirt he’d stuck into his waistband and wiped his face off. Sweat slicked his hair back against his head and he breathed hard.

Tilting his head back to the sun, Luther sighed. “Thank you for letting me come out. I didn’t know if you’d need any of the help with your grandchildren visiting.”

“The boys all want to go to the city,” Father Barren grumbled. “None of them want to stay and work the land. It’s beneath them these days.”

Luther could warn the boys how foolish their dreams of the city were. London was full of thugs and sad stories. No one in that city was as kind as their grandfather. But when he looked over at the old man to tell him that, he noticed movement in the window of the old farmhouse beyond Farmer Barren.

A pale face stared out at him, surrounded by pretty dark hair. She was a lovely young woman with curls and soft cheeks still rounded with youth. She was almost too pretty and it made him wince as she smiled, then blushed at his attention.

Oh no. He couldn't. And she shouldn't even think about it.

The girl was little more than a child, and he meant that. Maybe she was old enough to get married. Maybe she could have been a good wife. But if he knew anything about women and particularly about women who grew up in small towns, it was that they loved superstition and magic. She'd realize his failings a little too easily for his taste, and then where would he be?

Tied up to a stake, most likely. Or at the wrong end of a pitchfork wielded by the only man in Dead Man's Crossing who would put up with him.

Farmer Barren looked back toward his home and sighed. "Pay no mind to the girl. She's of an age where all the girls think they're older than they are. She'd have a ring around her finger now if her father would let her."

"And he won't, I suppose?"

"Of course not. No one in this town is good enough for his little girl." Then the old man hesitated and looked him up and down with a critical eye. "Of course, any man's opinion can change when the matter of a fortune is waved in their faces."

What fortune? Luther would love to see the fortune his father had supposedly left to him, but no one seemed to understand that wealth gained in assets didn't mean he had any tangible wealth. The town itself was worth a lot of money if another earl wanted to buy it from him. But he'd never sell Dead Man's Crossing.

The manor was worth a pretty penny as well, but then where would he live? London? As if that would ever work.

And then there was the matter of his family jewels, locked away for no one to ever see again because the last time people had seen his mother's family jewels, they had thieves breaking into their home at every opportunity.

So if that was the wealth everyone kept going on about, well, he'd like to see that money too. A fortune would be nice rather than things he couldn't ever use, see, or touch. He'd take a life here on the farm more than he wished to be his father's son.

Choosing a different life, or running away from this one, wasn't an option. He was an earl. A member of the peerage, and as such, he had a family name to uphold. His father likely rolled over in his grave every day when he heard his son wanted to run away from it all.

His father had been the one to lie in the beginning. To claim their family was noble, and he'd even made up the family tree to prove it. But his father had been a rather resourceful man.

In contrast, Luther favored his mother's side. Hard workers. People built to have a plow attached to their shoulders and pull it through the earth until the dirt was forced to give way to their will.

His father had likely resented him for that.

Luther snapped himself out of the memories and shook his head at the old man. "I'm not looking for a wife, Barren. I'm not looking for anyone to take into the family."

"And why not? You're a young, strapping man. You should have a woman to return to at night."

Oh, but night was the worst. No woman wanted to be around him at night. Not when... When...

He shook his head again. "It's a bad idea, Barren. I'm no good to a woman or a wife. And I'll leave it at that."

“You know, I thought the same thing when I was your age. I thought I was too wild and free for any woman to tame.” Barren grinned, and it was the first time Luther had ever seen such a bright expression on the old man’s face. “And then I met my wife. And I realized how easy it was to tame a man who thinks he’s wild. They’re the wild ones, really. We’re just along for the ride.”

The old man certainly had some wisdom in his words. Although, Luther had found that most people were easier to manipulate than Farmer Barren thought. He plied them with compliments and then disappeared before they could think he was getting too serious. It was better that way. At least when he disappeared, they never found out what he was. Or what he would become.

He grinned at the old man and let go of the shovel. “I don’t think I plan to get married, I’m sorry to admit.”

“Why wouldn’t you? You’ve got the wealth, the status, the looks. You’re the kind of man who should get married. Your children could make the world a better place.”

Luther would put money on any bet that those were the exact expectations everyone had laid on his father when he’d gotten married. A son to walk the footsteps of the family. A young man who would take over the family’s wealth and then bring it all into something that was even better. Maybe he’d thought Luther would have the guts to sell everything and start adventuring.

Somehow, he doubted that was the case. “I don’t want to subject any woman to the life I lead. No one needs to go to endless parties and be judged by countless people for everything they do. It’s foolish, and the dream that the nobles live these lavish, ridiculously wonderful lives is nothing more than a dream.”

“I don’t know many young women who wouldn’t want all the pretty dresses they could buy and the eyes of a hundred women on them.” Farmer Barren hooked a thumb over his shoulder. “She certainly would. I hear about it all the time, you

know. Who is that man? Why doesn't he want to talk with me?"

He didn't want to talk with any young woman who had dreams of grandeur when all he could offer was nightmares and terrors. She could learn the hard way that he was a monster, a beast, a fool. Or she could be saved from suffering through all that and not have to see any of it.

"She'll find a good farmer who will treat her better than I ever would." Luther took his shirt out of his waistband and yanked it over his head. Perhaps if he hid his rather peasant like muscles, then she'd forget all about him.

The form was why women were interested in him, anyway. They didn't want to listen to his plans for the town or get to know him. None of that was part of the husband game. They didn't need to understand what he wanted out of life as long as they had good wide hips and a smile that could charm his friends.

Wasn't that what his mother always told him? A wife didn't have to be a partner or a friend. She had to be useful and then he could find whatever else in the arms of a mistress or another woman who didn't care about any of his thoughts.

Damn it, there they were again. His parents' voices whispering in his ear about how he should live and what he should do.

"Just be careful, boy," Farmer Barren warned. "There are a lot of women out there who know how to trap a young man like yourself. They'll do anything they can to get themselves a title along with a handsome husband."

"They'd have to catch me first," he replied with a wry grin.

And that wouldn't be easy. After all, he'd made it his life long goal to escape the clutches of women.

He reached out and helped Farmer Barren stand. The old man's back was worse than it had been last year, and seeing how rickety he was while standing made Luther's stomach twist into a knot. The old man's bones weren't what they used to be. Not like they had been in his youth when he'd first

taught Luther how to pick up a shovel the right way and set the earth to rights.

“You’re getting old,” he muttered while he steadied his dear friend. “I don’t think I ever noticed it until now.”

“What, that I’m old?” Barren asked before bursting into laughter. “I’ve been old for years, Luther. Years. You just haven’t noticed.”

“I suppose I haven’t.” But that bothered him almost as much as the man getting old. It wasn’t fair that he’d gotten elderly like this.

Luther didn’t enjoy seeing his dear friend’s muscles shrink or his skin hang from his frame. He wanted Barren to live forever. He wanted all of them to live forever and he knew that was ridiculous to even think about, because he didn’t have that kind of power, but Luther wasn’t prepared for more loss.

Barren remained quiet, though chuckled all the way to the house, where he leaned against the door and waited for his granddaughter to bring him inside. Right before the door opened, the old man cleared his throat and said, “I want you to know that you can have a family. You can have a wife and all the things your father claimed you couldn’t. Don’t let that old fool’s voice remain in your head for too long, Luther. He’s dead. He can’t control you anymore.”

If only that were the case.

Luther nodded, even though he didn’t believe a word of what Barren had said. “Make sure you keep your doors locked tonight.”

“We always do during a full moon. You know my family believes in the old ways.” Barren pointed up to a smear of dried blood over the door. “We’ve already got our offering out in the fields. I can’t promise the rest of this damned town believes, but we certainly do.”

His granddaughter opened the door and laughed, the sound a little too forced and bubbly. “Superstitions, Grandfather! Full moons mean nothing other than an opportunity for people my age to run out into the woods and have our fun.”

“Not in this town,” he snarled, turning around so quickly he almost appeared ready to slap the girl. “Superstition or not, all rumor has a bit of truth in it. You won’t be going out with those fools into the woods. Not my granddaughter. You wait until the full moon is over with, and then do whatever it is you want to do.”

Even Luther was surprised at the emotion in Barren’s voice. But he shouldn’t have been, he supposed. The old man had seen more in his days than most, and he probably remembered the first time murders like this had appeared.

The town was named Dead Man’s Crossing for a reason, after all.

“Stay safe,” he said one last time, staring into Barren’s eyes so the old man knew the truth.

“We always do, my lord,” Barren replied. “We always do.”

If his granddaughter noticed that Farmer Barren didn’t tell Luther to stay safe, she didn’t react. Instead, she closed the door and left Luther alone on their porch.

It took a long time for him to get home. He walked by countless houses without a single speck of blood on their door, and his stomach rolled in fear.

Dead Man’s Crossing might earn its name again tonight.



## CHAPTER 3



“**A**re you sure you want to do this?” Maeve asked with her hand on Luna’s bag.

Of course, she didn’t want to do this. Luna might be an enormous fan of the gemstones that she stole, but she didn’t like putting people through the wringer of knowing they’d been robbed.

She’d always feel guilty for their late nights staring out the windows and doors, wondering how someone had gotten in. She hated to cause anyone to feel unsafe in the one place where they should be able to relax. Stealing from people had gotten very easy as far as the skills required to do so, but she hated that it always ended in fear and ruin for someone she didn’t know.

Sure, an earl wouldn’t miss her taking a very expensive diamond and a few other things from his home. Her own family needed to eat, and they needed to fix up this castle so that all three of the sisters could live here.

Right now, it was only Maeve with her newly acquired vampire lover within these walls. Maeve didn’t talk about her and Martin’s relationship, but Luna hadn’t seen her glow like this in a while.

And of course she wanted to live here with her sister. She wanted a safe place to rest her head so people like Crowley couldn’t get their claws into her shoulders. Unfortunately, it didn’t seem like that would be the case for a while yet. Not

unless she found funds for the vampire duke to fix this place up.

That's what she'd do. Not only for herself, but for her sisters as well. They all did better when they were together. A team. A unit.

Just like the good old days.

"I'll be fine," she replied, stuffing the last bit of clothing into her pack. "It's not the first time I've stolen from anyone, and this isn't a more tough target than any of the other times. He's an earl. He won't even notice that I've snuck into his house until I'm all the way back here and then I'll get rid of everything I stole. You know how it all works."

"I do." Maeve stepped in front of her, forcing Luna to pause.

Her sister was a lot smaller than she was, but no means weaker. Maeve had strong features, her blonde hair coiled back from her angular face. She had a darkness in her eyes these days, too. A darkness that always seemed to grow stronger when she was too close to her very mortal sisters.

Becoming a vampire did that to a person, Luna supposed. There would always be a hunger deep inside Maeve that Luna would never understand. Not unless she joined her sister in immortality and that sounded awful.

"Luna," Maeve muttered. "You don't have to do this for us, you know. I want you to stay safe and this isn't the only job that will get us what we need. And I mean that, all of us. If this is more dangerous than usual, then you shouldn't do it."

As if she had any choice in the matter.

Luna hadn't told them the whole truth or about the Crestfall Diamond. After all, Maeve would hear Crowley's name and go white with fear. And then she'd want to hunt the man down, which wouldn't be good for any of them. A new vampire exposed on the streets of London covered in the blood of a very well known "business man"? Luna didn't want to even entertain the thought.

She'd told them she already owed someone that diamond, and she wouldn't tell anyone who it was or why she owed it. That was safer. Even if Martin had looked at her with suspicion the moment she shrugged off the question.

Shrugging, she patted Maeve's shoulders with both of her hands that looked so massive holding onto her sister. "I'm going to be fine. If I didn't want to do this, then I wouldn't do it. We need money for the castle. And I know you're enjoying your honeymooning with your new man, but I'd like to have a better roof over my head than an attic I've wiggled my way into for the night."

Maeve chuckled, and that was all the time Luna could spare. If she stayed too much longer, the truth would roll off her tongue and then where would they be?

So she left.

She took all her things, made sure that her dark outfit would hide her in the shadows. No buckles. No metal. Nothing that would even glint if candlelight caught on her form. All of that had to be hidden so she could at the very least steal from this man.

Dead Man's Crossing wasn't too far from Martin's castle. About an hour's ride, and then she left the horse in the bushes. The beast would find its own way home, or some lucky farmer would snag it. Martin didn't care too much about the beasts, anyway. He didn't go riding. And if he didn't have any horses, that was more of a reason to never leave his castle.

She crouched low in the bushes and snuck across the road in case anyone was watching out the windows. The manor shouldn't be this stunning in the dark. It should be a hulking, shadowy figure in the distance, like all the other buildings around it. But it wasn't.

The manor gleamed like a beacon of light in the darkness. The white marble exterior had recently been cleaned, shining with only the rays of the moon touching its sides. Each window remained pristine and clear, without a single fingerprint or smudge. Luna thought it was ridiculous that someone must spend a majority of their time wiping glass for a

living. Too many candles were still lit, although she saw a section of the manor that was cast in shadows.

That was her entrance. It was the only feasible option for her to sneak into those walls.

Luna had learned a long time ago how important it was to stay in the shadows. She'd stepped into candlelight only once before and stared into the horrified gaze of a maid who had screamed bloody murder. She'd spent the rest of the evening running across rooftops trying to get away from the Watch that had been called because the city had a thieving problem.

The cops weren't usually so involved in making sure that thieving stopped. But lately there had been one too many complaints.

Now, the question became how to get into the house. The darkened corner didn't appear to be three stories like the rest of the building. Instead, the shadows climbed up to the third floor, which suggested it was a single room that was three stories high. Perhaps a ballroom? She'd heard manors like this had larger rooms for the gathering of friends and whatnot.

Luna had been in enough old houses like this. One might think she'd be able to guess the layout, considering they all appeared to have been built by the same man, and yet, she still did not know where to go when she walked into homes like this.

It might have been the same architect designing each of these large homes, but he liked to flip the blueprints around. Luna knew not to trust her own judgement and instead, to focus on what clues were given to her around the house itself.

She snuck up to the edge of the wall and peered into the window. Nothing. Just darkness.

That was a good sign. She could sneak in here and then follow the sound of the gemstones. She still couldn't hear them yet, so she assumed they were still out of her reach. But if she went through this entire house, risking her neck for Crowley, and didn't hear the screaming of that diamond? She'd kill the man herself.

Luna eased her fingers along the seam of the windows, trying to see if she could pull them open. But they were locked tight, and she wasn't all that sure she was far enough away from people to break them. The sound of shattering glass had a way of carrying throughout an entire house, even one as large as this.

Huffing out a frustrated breath, she tried to look into the house for clues. The cloud over the moon passed, and beams of light illuminated the center of the floor.

A glass ceiling?

How interesting.

She hadn't seen one of those in a very long time, but that meant the ceiling might open up. Some of the newer manors did that for the summers when the sun would turn the room into a greenhouse. If she could get up to the roof, then she might drop in from the top.

Luna scooted along the edge of the building to a trellis with beautiful vines dripping from the top. They'd know this was how she'd gotten in. The poor vines would be pulled up by the root with her movements. But that didn't matter. No one was walking around right now, and no one would see her damage until tomorrow. Perfect, really.

She put her boot into the worn wood and hesitated while it groaned. She so frequently didn't like her size, but this was one of the worst moments when she didn't. Either of her sisters could have skittered up this trellis without a single groan emitting from the wood. But Luna? Luna had to worry she'd shatter the honeycomb pattern and tumble to her death.

With each painstaking step, she made her way up the side of the building. The vines creaked and snapped, but they held. It took her far too long to get to the top, though, and by the time she put her gloved hand on the glass ceiling, lights flickered on in the giant ballroom below.

Damn it.

She was plastered to the side of the building like some giant dark spider on the ceiling, and if anyone looked up, they

would see her. It would take so little for her entire game to be up.

Nothing she could do now. Luna was already halfway onto the ceiling and going back down the trellis would give away where she was. She had to remain frozen against the glass and hope like hell that the person entering the room didn't look up.

The man who walked into her line of sight held a candle in his hands, though he didn't have to. The entire manor was hooked up to those new light bulbs, and they flickered with gas. The light made seeing every valuable thing so easy. It was like this earl screamed into the void that he wanted to be robbed. Please come into his home.

Unsurprisingly, he was well dressed and handsome. A combination that could only mean he was the earl who owned the place, but he didn't look like any noble she'd ever seen before.

Luna mashed her face against the glass, likely leaving a horrible oil slick when she lifted it. But she wanted to see him. There was something strange about him. Something she couldn't quite put her finger on.

Maybe it was his broad shoulders and overly meaty frame. He looked like a man who worked for a living, not like a man who sat at a desk all day. His clothing barely fit, the shoulders too tight across his back, the thighs stretched over powerful legs.

Though she couldn't see his face, she could only assume it was just as handsome as the rest of him. Dark curls coiled tightly against his skull. He didn't care about the modern definition of attraction or he'd never have worn those curls touching the tops of his ears like that. The faintest hint of red shone as the light danced across the curly strands.

Her fingers curled into fists. She shouldn't be so attracted to a man like this. Luna was the very last person he'd have ever picked to be his wife or even show an interest in. Men didn't want mistresses the size of tree trunks who were more suited to hard labor than they were darning socks.

Or whatever rich women did these days.

Still, she held her breath when he moved into the center of the room and set the candle down on the checkerboard floor. He took a deep breath and rolled his shoulders. Like he was preparing for a fight, but that couldn't be accurate either. Why would he be getting ready for a fight?

She'd been on the streets for too long if she was automatically assuming all body language had ill intent.

The glass creaked. It wasn't a crack, not really, but he heard it. He didn't quite freeze below her, but he stilled. Almost as though he were listening for the sound again.

He couldn't have heard the faint creak. Could he?

Damn it, she was asking to get caught. If she didn't somehow get herself in a better position, he'd look up and then he'd call the guard on her. Again. And she really didn't want to spend the night running away from the coppers when she could steal a magnificent diamond.

Taking a deep breath, she wiggled herself over the glass. At least the ceiling didn't creak or crack this time. She used the very tips of her toes to ease her way over and then heaved a relieved sigh.

The trellis had none of her weight now, and it seemed like she hadn't broken it. Now, she just had to wait for the Earl to finish whatever he was doing and not look down at him anymore. He was clearly a distraction she couldn't have around.

Luna craned her neck to search for the hatch she was looking for. Lo-and-behold, there it was. A row of windows, taller than the others, angled up so they could be opened up for fresh air. Perfect.

If she wiggled her way over there, she'd be in the perfect position to drop into the ballroom. Luna started wiggling, but felt her eyes drawn down to the Earl one more time.

He was ridiculously handsome. Even from three stories up.

Was he...

Her eyes widened, and she leaned close to the glass again. The Earl reached behind him and pulled his shirt over his head. He was undressing?

In her distraction at the sight of so much muscle, she put too much weight on the single pane of glass. With a horrifying crack, the entire glass panel shattered underneath her weight.

Luna blindly reached out and caught herself on the framing of the ceiling. But the glass shards there dug into her hands, and though she slowed her fall, and gave herself only two stories to prevent injury, she still plummeted into the ballroom with all the grace of a bull.



## CHAPTER 4



**L**uther had thought... Well, he didn't know what he'd thought. The moon called to him like it always did, and he couldn't fight it. The damned month had passed too quickly.

He'd drunk half a bottle of whiskey before the sun even set. But of course he did. What else was he supposed to do while he waited for the inevitable? He could stay in his room and work. He could sign all the paperwork like his father used to do because signing his name repeatedly on documents of extreme wealth and property had reassured his father that no one knew what he was.

But that didn't reassure Luther.

None of this was reassuring to the forgotten son who had stood in the room's corner and watched his father turn into a monster every full moon.

The first time he'd told his nursemaid what he'd seen happen, she had laughed at the childish stories. And then she'd disappeared. The second nursemaid he told dragged him in front of his father and told the Earl that his son had turned into a little liar.

That had gotten him beaten. And then his father had dragged him to that room below the ballroom every single month to watch what happened to men like them. Men who didn't have the right to be a person, not anymore. Not any longer.

He gripped the neck of the whiskey bottle and stared at the ballroom doors. The candle in his hand flickered, spluttered, and then died out because of course it did. Everything he touched eventually died.

With a soft curse, he gulped three mouthfuls of the whiskey before it burned too much. Then he set it on the floor and fumbled with the matches in his pocket. Lighting the candle took a while, and he didn't even need the damned thing to see. He'd already spent the money to put in electricity and yet, here he was. With a candle in his hand like a damned idiot.

Sighing, he relit the candle he always brought with him like a ritual of hope and light. He'd assumed that having a candle might remind the beast of why they didn't do what his father did. Maybe that flame was the fear that kept his demon in check.

Of course, it also lit the way to the basement. But by the time he would descend those stairs, Luther would already be able to see in the dark.

He put the candle down on the floor in front of him and focused on the flickering flame. It was beautiful. Alive. He reminded himself that even after all of this, he would also be alive.

The ritual was simple. He stripped his shirt off over his head. The air was too cold on his chest right now with all the sweat slicking his skin. Nervous sweat. He smelled like an animal that had been cornered in the woods. Acidic and with a bite of stench that no creature made unless it was in a life or death situation.

Rotating his head left to right, he eased the tension in his neck for what he would have to do next. Flexing the muscles of his back, he stretched out his shoulders and glared at the portrait on the wall in front of him.

His father.

The man had been the worst father and the best at the same time. But he supposed a lot of children felt like that about their

parents. His father had been more interested in teaching his son how to be a good earl rather than how to be a good man. Every choice had to be made for the good of their lineage. For the sake of being an earl, he had to do whatever it took for their name to remain clean. Honorable.

That's why his father's portrait hid the stairs into the basement. Luther could already smell the damp odor. It was a horrible place full of chains and whips and blood that had crusted over in layers so thick, no one would ever be able to clean the room once this house finally left his family's hands.

When he was a boy, his father would bring him to this very spot. He'd strip down farther than Luther ever chose to, and then he would stare down at the open hole leading into darkness.

"This is for the family," his father always said. "This is for you and your mother and for all the earls that came before me. This is for the good people of Dead Man's Crossing and for every single person who desires to live here. We are the sacrifice, Luther. You and I will always be the ones who have to bear the burden of making this choice for everyone else."

"I don't want this burden," he'd said then, and now said aloud to his father's portrait. Every time he stood here, he wanted nothing to do with this life.

He lifted his hands, staring down at the palms that soon wouldn't be his at all. He'd thought about taking his life with these hands, but he'd never been able to do it. Why? Luther assumed because he didn't have the courage. If he were another man, a better man, he might have been able to take those last steps forward.

His father's portrait glared at him, as it always did.

He shrugged his shoulders, rolling them one more time before sighing. "Yes, Father, I know. You're disappointed in me and you've never been proud. Not a single moment of your life and certainly not a single moment of your death."

Any other son might have done what the Earl wanted. But Luther wasn't like the others. He'd never wanted to be either.

He took a step toward the basement, only to freeze when the ceiling above his head cracked. Luther looked up in time to see a dark shadowy form staring down at him like some demon from old before the glass shattered.

He crouched down, holding his arms over his head and trying to protect whatever parts of his body that he could from the rain shower of shards. Yet in his mind, he still saw...

Her.

A woman on the roof of his ballroom. She was completely clothed in black, so he hadn't the faintest idea what she looked like, other than those big green eyes that had widened with fear as the glass below her caved in.

When he didn't hear the wet slap of a body striking hard tile, he stared up to see that she'd caught herself on the metal support that made up his ceiling. How long could she... There it was. Her fingers slipped. Blood splattered brightly down on the floor even as she tumbled toward him.

Luther would never know what made him move. He'd stood frozen in shock for a moment, but then he launched into action. He caught her midair and rolled with her, tumbling through the shards of glass and to the opposite side of the room. Bright blooms of pain spread across his upper back and down his spine where the glass had dug into his skin, but then he rolled on top of the woman to stare down into her pretty, ridiculously attractive face.

Or well, what he could see of her face was attractive. A cloth binding covered most of it.

Why would she be wearing an outfit like this? His mind struggled to give her a reason to be dressed so horribly, even as his heart knew why she was here. She was a thief. She'd come here to steal from him, and made a very nearly fatal mistake.

And he'd saved the woman who clearly needed to be locked up.

The beast in his chest rose to the occasion. The creature stretched out its claws and reached through the very fabric of

his flesh, ready to tear and rend and rip. It wanted to kill her for what she'd done, or planned to do, because it hadn't killed in such a long time.

Yet... He couldn't.

Luther stared down at her and every muscle in his body locked up as tight as a drum. He was frozen, staring down at those wide green eyes that saw right through him and into his very soul. To the beast within who immediately stilled, a low rumble of approval echoing through his mind.

He wanted to know who she was. He needed to see her face, all of it, so that he'd never forget what she looked like. This woman who tamed his beast.

They both held their breath as he reached for the cloth binding that covered her face. And slowly, ever so slowly, Luther pulled the covering underneath her chin.

The thin fabric had hidden strong features and angular shapes. Her square jaw was already ticking as she ground her teeth, staring up at him with defiance as though he had no right to do what he was doing now. Perhaps he didn't. Luther was lying on top of a strange woman while pulling at her clothing like the beast he was.

Her high cheekbones were sharp enough to cut glass, and the dark slashes of her eyebrows were drawn down in anger. If he'd released her, he had no question that she'd have at least tried to strike him. Or worse. He could easily imagine a thief had tricks up her sleeve that would leave him writhing on the floor in pain.

Those eyes, though... Those eyes burned with a fire that green shouldn't be able to portray. And yet, here she was. Burning him up from the inside out and he didn't know why or how that was possible. She glared at him with the heat of a thousand suns in those bright emerald eyes. Luther had the strangest feeling that he would let her burn him alive if only she kept looking at him like that. He'd gladly endure the pain, if only to see that fire a little longer.

A droplet of blood worked its way over his bare shoulder and slid down his chest. She tracked the movement, then glared at him again as though he had done something wrong. As though he had caused the injury, and not because she had been sitting on his ceiling waiting for the right moment to descend into his home like a spider seeking her prey.

What had she seen?

The icy chill of fear slid between his shoulders as he realized she could have seen everything. She might have watched him endure his curse and then see all his secrets unfold before her eyes. She would have been the only person to know... outside of his family, of course.

Luther looked up, making sure the portrait remained where it was supposed to be. It hadn't budged, and he hadn't revealed the secret passage. Not yet, at least, but he would have to. Already he could feel the moonlight dancing on his skin and calling out to the beast deep inside his flesh.

He'd waited too long. They had such a small amount of time now before everything went up in flames, burning eyes or no. And then he'd have to... what? He didn't know.

Luther had always followed his father's rules. He'd always been the obedient son and done what it took to keep this family safe. But if he missed getting down to the basement, then his beast would run free the rest of the night until the sun kissed the horizon once more.

Such pain that monster would cause. He didn't know what the beast would do, considering it had never once been free in its life.

The woman struggled in his grip. Luther hardly even reacted, although he shifted his knees so that he was kneeling on her arms, forcing her to stop moving while he thought about the next steps.

He couldn't let her go.

She had to be punished for breaking into his home. He should call a servant and have them keep her hidden away until he returned. But that would risk the servant as well, and

they were already in enough danger by living in this house with him. Let alone helping him while the beast was so close to his skin.

Where could he put her?

A closet? No, someone would hear her screaming for help. Then maybe someone would think he was a kidnapper, and he didn't have the time or the energy to deal with those accusations right now. At best, all he could do was maybe knock her out. Or lock her up with him?

His beast paced in the cell of his body, and he could almost hear the whispered words of the monster. It wanted him to throw her down into the dungeon with it. The creature wanted to taste her, to torment and torture until she didn't know if she could breathe anymore for fear of what the creature would do. It wanted to unravel what made her so strong, and that was not something Luther would ever let it do.

He had little choice. But there had to be another way. Another plan that he hadn't thought of.

"Let me go," the woman snarled beneath him, twisting her body with a bucking heave that almost sent him flying off of her. "Or I will make you."

Make him?

Luther stared down into those haunting green eyes and once again lost himself in that gaze. The wolf grasped hold of his tongue and suddenly he snarled, "Go ahead and try."

## CHAPTER 5



**W**ho was this ridiculous monster of a man who insisted that sitting on top of her was the best way to... what? Keep her from moving? It was cute that he thought he'd trapped her.

Luna tried to buck him off again, only to feel him shift on top of her and move, so it was even harder for her to wiggle underneath him. He knew how to pin a woman, and that shouldn't make her flush with excitement. She shouldn't feel heat pool in her belly and zing between her legs, but what was a woman supposed to do?

He had an incredible form. His muscles were well built from years of labor and yard work. The flat planes of bare muscles made her mouth water. And she'd never seen a man with a bare chest, not around here. They always had some form of hair and yet this man appeared entirely hairless. Strange, really. She'd expected him to be more like a local and yet, this earl never stopped surprising her.

Another trail of blood slithered down his shoulder and over the flat musculature of his chest. He must be in a lot of pain. She had a shard of glass shoved underneath her shoulder as well, but he'd stopped her from breaking something when she hit the ground. His body slamming into hers had stopped her momentum.

And Luna had expected to break something that would make it hard for her to escape. It was a long fall, but she was a strong woman. Even with a broken ankle, she thought she could crawl her way out of his place before he caught her.



Except... he'd saved her.

Again, she hadn't expected that to happen when this man lumbered into her life. Who was he?

She wriggled her arms, biceps flexing until the muscles burned, but she couldn't get him off her. No matter how hard she tried, and she was strong. Luna prided herself on the knowledge that most men couldn't overpower her.

"What?" she snarled, wriggling again until she exhausted herself. Breathing hard and obviously angry, she felt her cheeks heat. "How are you doing this?"

"Doing what?" The grin on the Earl's face grew even wider. "Were you thinking it would be easy to break into my house and steal from me?"

"I wasn't going to take anything." Luna always remembered the first and only rule of thieves. If you get caught, never admit what you were doing.

"You were obviously going to take something. You're dressed in black and sneaking around my rooftops." He shook his head, squinting his eyes as though he were disappointed in her. "If you're going to lie, you must do better than that."

"I wasn't planning on taking anything," she repeated with a quick gulp.

"Then why were you on my roof?"

She didn't have a suitable answer for that, and Luna was running out of tricks. She tried a bright smile and said, "Well, it looked like the glass was thin. I wanted to make sure no one else would fall through it, so really, I was up there saving lives."

Her words apparently baffled him. He blinked down at her a few times, the gears in his head racing as he tried to figure out what she meant. He thought it was a trick, but really, she was trying to make him laugh. Building up a little camaraderie might throw him off his balance enough so that she could throw him off her and then race from the room.

"Do you think I'm an idiot?" he asked with a scoff.

“Well, you are an earl, so I’m afraid I’m not expecting a lot of intelligence. You have people to be smart for you, so why would you waste your time being smart yourself?” She wiggled her fingers underneath his knees, but they were losing feeling already. “If you keep kneeling on top of my hands, I’m going to lose them.”

“Isn’t that a fitting end for a thief? I thought you all eventually lost your hands.”

Cruel. She wasn’t a normal thief, anyway. She took jewels and brought them to new owners because, contrary to popular belief, gemstones didn’t like to be on the same wearer for a very long time. They enjoyed being looked at. They wanted eyes on them at all times. Greedy little things.

He wasn’t moving, and she was running out of time.

“Look, we can come to some sort of agreement, can’t we?” She tried another tactic while desperately searching around herself for something she could grab or kick at him. “You get off me. I’ll leave this place and never look back. It’ll be a fun story to tell your friends later when you see them. Right? The thief who ruined your ceiling. I won’t tell anyone, so you can make up whatever heroic tale you want. No one has to know.”

Then he did something she hadn’t expected.

The Earl slid her hands up over her head, leaning over her until their chests nearly touched. He stared down at her, all muscle and blasting waves of heat, as he watched her eyes for something. Some truth or knowledge that she wasn’t telling him.

And his eyes were beautiful.

Blue and sharp, like the jagged edges of a gemstone. The gold centers were the setting, and the rest was the beautiful color of sapphire.

She swallowed again.

“I don’t take kindly to thieves,” he growled. His breath fanned over her face.

“No one does,” she whispered. “No one likes a thief because no one likes to lose something they think is theirs. We remind people that things can be taken from us, even when we feel like we’re safe. And I’m sorry for making you feel unsafe, but I have to live, and I won’t sit in a gutter and die simply because my existence makes people feel uncomfortable.”

His mouth dropped open, and that was the exact moment she needed to overpower him. Luna twisted her legs up and around his waist, shoving with her entire six feet of height to rotate them until she was sitting on top of his hips. Making quick work of it, she grabbed onto his wrists, pinned them above his head, and used her feet to slam down on his thighs.

He wouldn’t be able to move if he tried. Not unless he was a vampire like Martin, which she seriously doubted.

Of course, the Earl struggled. He shifted underneath her weight, trying to throw her off, although he quickly realized that wouldn’t happen. Not unless she wanted to let him up, which she didn’t. He could fight all he wanted, but he was now the one pinned against the floor.

Still, she was breathing hard by the time he gave up fighting. He watched her with an expression just short of awe, but that wasn’t right. She couldn’t convince herself it was that or the heat would return to her cheeks and she’d be done for.

No man ever felt awe when she defeated them. They were angry, frustrated, and then they thought she was some kind of freak and a woman who needed to get out of their house. That was how it worked. She was too big and took up far too much space for men who wanted to devour the world.

And they all wanted to do that.

His mouth dropped open again, and the long exhale he let out danced along her skin. He was so damned hot.

Not attractive, but literally warm. His skin burned like he had a fever, but he didn’t have the tell tale rosy cheeks of someone who battled an infection so... How was he so warm? Even Luna could feel the bitter bite of fall in the air.

“Bravo,” he muttered. “I suppose I deserved that.”

“You told me to try, after all.”

“I did. But I’ll confess, I didn’t think you were capable of it.”

“Few do.” Luna couldn’t count the amount of times her strength had surprised a man. It was like they walked around thinking no one could be stronger than them, unless it was another, larger man. They were like fish, she supposed. Swimming around in a lake, trying to convince everyone they meet that they were bigger than they actually were.

He cleared his throat and wiggled his fingers in her grip. “What do you plan on doing with me now, thief?”

Then she realized the compromising position she’d put him in. The Earl was limp in her arms, completely pinned by her bodyweight, with his back arching up to her while his hands were trapped in her grip. The strip of cloth that usually held her hair back from her face was coming loose, and she feared it would snap. Then the heavy locks of her red curls would create a curtain around them.

This was far too intimate. And inappropriate.

“I — “ She hesitated and met his gaze for a little too long.

There it was again. That unexplainable heat flushing through her entire body. She could hardly breathe through it, knowing that she’d never experienced such a heat with any other man in her life.

Her lungs picked up their pace. Her heart raced in her chest and, as she shifted her position to keep her grip on him, she felt something warm and hard press against the inside of her thigh.

No, this wasn’t right. She couldn’t do this with an earl who she was supposed to be stealing jewelry from.

With a sharp gasp, she launched herself off of him. Luna scrambled backward like a crab, trying to create some space so she could run.

They both stumbled to their feet at the same time. The jolting movements freed her hair and the red curls tumbled

around her face. But they obscured her vision for a brief moment, and that gave him the advantage. The Earl shifted until he was in front of the door. And then she was trapped again.

Unless she wanted to break another window.

Bad idea. She already had glass in her hair and considering the Earl had not minded rolling through shards of glass, he'd likely not mind bashing through another window to stop her from running.

Grappling it was, then. If he wanted to fight her, then he should prepare to see stars. She'd knocked quite a few men out with a single hit.

Luna lifted her fists and readied herself for whatever would come. She'd fight. She'd win. And then she would run out of that door because there was no way she'd be able to steal anything from this house tonight. The servants were probably running down the halls to their master already.

He put his hands on his hips and chuckled. "Did you really just lift your fists to me?"

She gestured with one as though she were beckoning him to come closer. "I did. Come on, then. If you think you can win, you can fight me. Otherwise, you let me leave without trying to stop me."

"I'm not going to fight you." The Earl had a peculiar expression on his face. One eyebrow raised, mouth slightly open. He watched her every move, clearly waiting for her to attack him, but then didn't appear as though he wanted to fight at all. "I've never met a woman like you before."

"I'm not surprised by that. It's not as if you get out all that much." Luna rolled her shoulders and took a step to the side, her boots crunching through the broken glass. "If the rumors are true, you rarely leave this manor at all."

"That would be my father, not me. I regularly go out to town and make myself seen."

"Are you sure about that? I know your father died. I didn't ask about your father when I walked around London. I was

asking people about you.”

That brow quirked even higher. “You were asking about me? Should I be flattered?”

She bared her teeth in a feral grin. “You should be worried.”

“About a single woman barging into my house and thinking she could steal from me? I’m insulted that you think I’m so weak.” He finally lifted his fists, preparing to fight her if that was where this would end up going. “I’m not like the other earls, in case you didn’t notice.”

“It would be hard not to. I don’t think I’ve ever met a single person at your station who could roll through broken glass and not immediately call for a doctor.” Luna tilted her head to the side. “Why is that? Most people would try to hide those differences, but you seem rather proud of them.”

“Do you think I’m going to tell you all my secrets?” He chuckled and shook his head while stepping to the side, mirroring each of her movements so she didn’t have a clear way to escape. “No, I know this game. You think you’re going to get me talking long enough to distract me. Long enough for you to escape and then I’ll never find you again.”

One last time, she tried to make a joke. There had to be some words that would break his concentration long enough for her to run. “Why would you want to find me again? You are looking at a woman from the streets, a woman who has fought and stolen her entire life. You can’t be interested in me.”

He looked her over with those burning eyes and damn it, he was interested. She could see it in the way his cheeks flushed and how his eyes lingered on her hair. Like he wanted to touch the curls. “Oh, I think it would be rather easy to find you now that I’m looking. You could try to run, thief, but I will catch you.”

Why did the thrill of that hunt make her heart beat in her chest so rapidly she feared it would thunder out of her ribcage?

Luna took a deep breath, ready to continue this battle of wits, but then she saw her opening.

He stumbled.

Maybe that was blood loss or something else. She didn't care. She lunged to the side, took three giant leaps with her stupidly long legs, and she was past him. She sprinted toward the entrance to the ballroom and only paused for a brief second when she didn't hear him pursuing her. Would he let her go just so he could hunt her down later?

A groan echoed through the ballroom. She looked over her shoulder and realized that the Earl was on his knees again. He pressed both hands into the floor as though he were in immeasurable pain and her soft heart twisted. Was he that hurt?

"Damn it," she muttered before waltzing back to his side. "If this is a trick, it's a dirty one. If you're really hurt, then I'm dragging you outside of the door and leaving you for a servant to find later."

She bent down with her hand on his shoulder, trying to catch a glimpse of his face.

It all happened so quickly, she almost didn't see him move. One second he was on the floor with his hands pressed into broken glass, the next, he had his arm around her neck. She grabbed onto his thick forearm and realized she was stuck. All he had to do was twist in the right direction and he'd kill her.

He really had captured her this time.

## CHAPTER 6



**T**hey'd long past run out of time, and he was the idiot bantering with the captivating woman who'd fallen through his ceiling. He didn't have time for this, and yet, he had made time like the fool he was.

Now, she had to deal with the consequences. He couldn't let her see him change, but he also couldn't change without her seeing him. It was a horrible situation that he knew would only end in blood and screaming. But at least she wasn't anyone of note. If she ran through London screaming that she'd seen a monster in Dead Man's Crossing, no one would take her seriously.

After all, Dead Man's Crossing was known for making monsters out of men. The story was nothing new or unusual.

He tightened his arm around her throat, trying to keep the right pressure so he wouldn't kill her but also so she would pass out in his arms. He needed her to pass out. This would all be so much easier if she would just... let... go.

Damn it, she wasn't going to pass out. The woman was too strong and her hands turned into claws as she desperately tried to get him off. He'd have to do this the only way he didn't want to do it.

She'd come down into the dungeon with him. The basement. The nightmarish room that haunted his every waking second.

And now it would haunt her, too.



“Walk forward,” he growled into her ear. “You’re coming with me.”

“What are you going to do with me?” she asked, her voice a mere wheeze through the pressure on her throat. “I’ll fight. I’ll fight every step of the way.”

Did she think he would do something untoward? Luther wasn’t a killer, and he certainly wasn’t a rapist. But she had no way of knowing either of those truths with his arm wrapped around her neck like a vise.

Well, she’d have to get used to this fear because it was only going to get worse the longer she was around him.

“The painting,” he snarled in her ear. “Move it.”

He had to keep her trapped against his chest, so he couldn’t move the damned thing himself. His father glared at him through the painted strokes, and he already knew what the old man would say. This mistake would cost them all, and he’d put the family name in grave danger.

When she didn’t move, he squeezed his arm tighter. Just enough so that she’d feel the bulge of his muscle behind her head. Although he hoped she didn’t feel how much larger it already was. Because it would get even bigger if she didn’t hurry, then he’d walk out into the wild.

She lifted her arm toward the portrait, and it took so long. He felt as though he watched her move in a slower time than the one he existed within. She barely even moved at all. But finally her fingers touched the edge of the painting and she shoved.

He thought for a second the painting would only swing on the nail. He’d have to tell her to touch it again. To push harder. The golden ornate frame caught, twisted, and then tumbled onto the floor with a loud clap that echoed through the ballroom.

The door to the basement was open, as it always was on nights of the full moon. Ready for the master who would descend into the darkness and let his madness free.

A small sense of relief came with the dank, stale smell of the basement air. At least he knew he was close. He would make it this time, although it had been a trial to get here. Never again. He'd ignore the next thief, so he didn't put anyone in danger like tonight.

"Move," he growled in her ear. "You're coming with me."

"I am not going into the dark." Her angry tones matched his own. "You can't make me."

She planted her feet on the frame of the door, swinging up her legs so quickly he didn't have time to brace himself. The thief shoved hard and sent them both toppling backward.

She landed on top of him. All the air in his lungs whooshed out and his chest stung as she drove her elbow into his ribs. If he were still just a man, she might have broken the rib, but already the beast wanted to be let out. It clawed and howled within him, and if he wasn't lucky, he wouldn't control this situation any longer.

The thief rolled, wheezing, as she crawled away. Maybe she was hurt. Maybe they'd both done something that they couldn't come back from, but he needed her to get to safety.

Shadows clung to his vision, threatening that he was about to lose consciousness.

"No," he muttered, and his voice was guttural. Too deep even to his own ears. "You can't."

"You tricked me once." The breathy reeds of her voice weren't right, either. "Touch me again, and I'll kill you."

The beast rose to the challenge. It knew exactly what kind of woman stood in front of it, and the beast had always loved the hunt. This woman would be difficult, yes, but she would bow to their desires. No matter how hard she fought.

With one last desperate cry, he threw himself at the woman. Luther fought every instinct in his body that wanted him to let go. To give the beast free rein because the full moon was out and he could see the silver rays of moonlight coming through the cracks in the glass.

Too late.

He was too late.

But not for her. He could still save her, if he was brave enough, if he fought hard enough. And he would. Luther would not give the beast this woman who didn't deserve to die, even if she had broken into his house and tried to steal from him. She still deserved a long life.

Her words rang in his ears. *I won't sit in a gutter and die simply because my existence makes people feel uncomfortable.*

He knew what that life felt like. She'd been tossed aside by everyone because she was different, and that wasn't right. The words tugged at his very soul until he couldn't stand it. He had to fix what had been broken, and the first step was not feeding her to the jaws of his beast.

Luther caught her by the arm, hauling her up and forcing her to stand. One last desperate, wrenching movement was all it took to throw her toward the door.

The thief fell through the opening. She wouldn't know there were stairs, and he heard her cry of shock as she tumbled down them.

Please don't break your neck, he thought, sending the prayer up to whatever god in their heavens would listen to a beast like him. He'd chain himself up, and she'd be terrified of that. But then he'd wake again. Tomorrow, when it was safe for them to come out. She would live to see another day. Enraged, perhaps, but alive.

Maybe he wasn't thinking right. His father's voice wasn't in his head any longer, telling him what to do. How to act.

Luther closed the door with a slam, and that sense of relief washed over him again. He could finally relax. He was in the basement, and the beast couldn't hurt anyone else. It would remain trapped, forced to pace from wall to wall while the chains bit at his wrists.

Except... He looked down at his hands and watched claws erupt from his fingertips. Claws that were still in the moonlight.

His eyes trailed up, and he realized he'd slammed the door shut, yes. Locked for good. But he was on the wrong side.

He'd left the woman in his safe room, completely unaware that while she was in the only place that could contain the beast, she was also in the only place it now couldn't reach.

"Oh, no," he whispered.

Luther pressed his hand against the ancient wooden door and closed his eyes. His father would be so disappointed if he were alive, and not the kind of disappointment that came from years of living with a son who never quite lived up to his expectations. This was the worst kind of betrayal. Luther had done what they all worked so hard not to do.

He'd released the beast upon the town of Dead Man's Crossing, and he couldn't stop what would come on this night. Not now.

The wolf awoke in his chest as though it had been waiting for this moment its entire life. And maybe it had. The creature had spent so many years locked up and away from the moonlight and the forest that called to it.

Luther let out a low groan as the first crack echoed through the ballroom. It was the sound of bones snapping and realigning. His spine rippled, not only the muscles, but the actual bones as they shifted and became something entirely new. His arms twisted, shoving his entire body back a step with the pain and anguish that came from it.

He dropped his head back, staring up at the moonlight through the broken glass as his vision blurred. That meant his eyes had changed now, and he swore he could see more than what he could in his human form. The moonlight became something like magic. Glimmering in the sky with a thousand sparkling diamonds.

Blistering pain rocked through his skull until he couldn't think of anything but the white hot heat as though someone had smashed a fist into his face. His nose was broken, surely. And then it did. Snapped and spurted blood all over the floor in a bright spray of crimson. He would have lifted his hands to

the wound, pressed his fingers to the flow of blood, if he could think straight. If his hands weren't anything other than claws that ripped any flesh they touched.

His nose elongated, his cheekbones growing underneath his skin until a sudden unfurling of fur covered him from head to toe. He towered over all those who would have stood before him. Easily eight feet tall and rippled with muscle, hide, and fur. He was a monster from the old ages. A monster that made mortal men and women cower when they saw his true form.

Yes. This was how he should be. Always.

Luther lifted one of his clawed hands and turned it in the moonlight. He'd never seen them like this before. The only time he'd ever had a good look at this form was in the basement with chains holding his arms back and silver burning into the beast's skin.

Not once had he ever felt so free. So powerful. And now he knew there was a life outside of those chains and he would never, ever return to those bindings.

He lifted his face to the moonlight and let out a long, aching howl. It bounced off the walls and fled out into the night, though the low sound was a cry of hope. He listened intently. Waiting. Hoping. Praying that someone would respond to him. That another wolf still existed out there, so he wasn't the only one here.

But no howl returned through the night sky, and Luther knew without a doubt that no one would ever howl back to him. He was the lone wolf in London these days, as all the others fled for deeper woods and fewer mortals to hunt them.

He took a staggering step forward, toward the door, behind which he thought he heard movement. A door? Yes, that's right. He usually would enter that room through the door and then the chains and pain would begin.

With an angry snarl, he clawed the wood with a heavy paw, leaving three large scratch marks behind. If the person was too afraid to face him, then so be it. He refused to stay in

this prison any longer. Not when there was a hunt outside and he'd never hunted before.

Oh, the hunt. He could feel it boiling in his blood as he turned toward the windows, where he could finally be released into the woods beyond. Though no one had ever taught him how to take down an animal, how to devour their flesh and rip and rend, he knew how to do it. His claws already ached and his teeth chomped at the air.

He'd return for the person in his basement. If only because he wanted to know who had suffered his fate on this night.

But he wouldn't return until he felt blood on his tongue and gore underneath his nails. As he was due.

Luther spared one last glance back at the room, then tore through the painting of his father in one last show of rebellion. Let the old man rot in his grave.

He'd been too afraid to let his beast out.

## CHAPTER 7



**L**una groaned and rolled over onto her back. There was a splitting pain in her head that wouldn't seem to stop, and for god's sake, who was screaming?

She'd only suffered through a hangover like this once before in her life, and she had been certain she'd have to kill herself.

Holding her breath for a second, she let it out slowly through her teeth. Counting didn't seem to help. Nor did touching a hand to her head because then she felt something rather wet and that made her even more nervous.

She was hungover... wasn't she?

What else could have led to such pain in her skull, although the wetness there didn't bode well. Wet could mean blood.

Luna sniffed her fingers and yes, there it was. The metallic scent of blood that she was certain wasn't someone else's because she couldn't remember getting in a fight. Well, she couldn't remember anything at all right now, and that terrified her. She always remembered things. Always.

Rolling onto her hands and knees, she tried to fumble her way through the dark. If she were in bed, then she'd have a light switch to the right of her, but she wasn't in bed. Dirt underneath her hands made that very clear, although she wasn't sure why there was dirt. Not yet. But her mind whirled with the possibilities, and that would only lead her to the truth.

Her fingers touched a wall, and she used that to prop herself up. Okay. Standing. Standing was good. That meant she could wander through the room until she felt something that might help her after all.

Luna put both her hands on the wall and slid them to her left. It was a shot in the dark, no pun intended, but she had to keep moving. She had to do something other than sit on the floor and wait for someone to help her. Not when there was screaming over her head and... and...

No, it wasn't screaming. That was someone trying to sing, but the song was wrong and the voice was horrendous. Was this some kind of torture tactic? It was working; she supposed. She wanted to scratch her own ears off if that meant she wouldn't have to listen to that horrible wailing any longer.

"Stop," she wheezed. "You've sung quite enough for the day, I think. How about a little quiet while I figure out where the hell I am?"

The singing paused for a brief second before someone shouted over her head, "You can hear me?"

"Yes, I can hear you just fine. But I'm trying very hard to figure out where I am. So if you wouldn't mind shutting up for a few moments, then I could figure this out and maybe we could have a conversation in the light." Luna tried hard not to grumble the words with all the anger that radiated through her chest.

Whoever was singing obviously didn't have all the marbles in their head or whatever the saying was. They didn't care that she was in pain, nor did they seem to care who she was. The damned voice started singing all over again and Luna wanted to put a fork through an ear now.

Sighing, she kept going until her fingers bumped against a metal hook in the wall. Strange, she hadn't thought to find that. Although it would make sense if she were in some kind of dungeon. A memory bloomed in her mind that said she was a thief. Thieves like her sometimes ended up in a dungeon, although there usually was some form of light.



“Am I blind?” she asked the voice that sang over her head. “Is that why I can’t see anything?”

The horrible sound paused for a moment before the voice replied, “I don’t think so? I wouldn’t know. You’re down there and I’m up here, so how would I know if you were blind or not?”

Down there? Was the person on a balcony over her head or something? Luna could hear the speaker crystal clear, so perhaps they were on some kind of viewing platform.

Not a dungeon, then.

“I’m going to say I’m not blinded,” she whispered. “So where are you if you’re up there?”

“Locked away, just like you, it seems. But you know, I once knew someone who was blind. They wore me anyway, although I liked them the most. They took me off their neck all the time to touch my edges. To stroke what they could not see even though they knew they loved me with all their heart.” The voice sighed. “They were a good owner.”

Owner?

It all came rushing back, then. She could hear the songs of gemstones and she’d been hunting a particular stone rumored to be owned by the Earl of Dead Man’s Crossing. A beast, that’s what people claimed he was, although she didn’t know why or how they could say such a thing.

Now she knew. Now she understood that this horrible monster of a man would throw a woman down into the pits of this dungeon and then he would leave her there to rot. Just because she’d tried to steal something from him.

Luna spat on the floor at the memory. “Prick. I’ll show him.”

She knew how to pick a lock, and now she had the reason to do so. She moved with more fervor now, sliding her hands along the wall and continuing to search through the room for a light switch or a candle or something that would help her see.

Her fingers bumped a small knob on the wall, and that was all she needed. With a pulse of glee that radiated through her entire body, Luna flicked the light switch on and shielded her eyes from the sudden blinding light.

It took nearly ten minutes for her eyes to get used to the light. But she had time. The stone singing over her head said it was still dark outside. Although she had no way of knowing if it was telling the truth. Still, it seemed confident, and she could only assume that it wouldn't try to trick her.

She blinked her eyes through the haze of tears as she desperately tried to see through the sudden beams of light. "How long have you been with the Earl?"

"A long time," the gem replied. "Too long. No one in his family likes to wear jewelry all that much. Even his mother, and she wasn't one like him. His mother had once worn me to the opera, and I saw the most wonderful singer there."

"What happened?" Luna started to see vague, dark shapes in front of her. Good. "Did someone try to rob her while she was wearing you?"

"Yes," the diamond sighed. And it could only be the diamond. "They did. Then she wouldn't wear me anymore."

Luna probably wouldn't have either. If someone robbed her for what she wore, it seemed the easiest thing to do was take off the item that people wanted to rob. And everyone knew about the Crestfall Diamond. Everyone wanted to get their hands on something that would sell for an entire lifetime's worth of work.

Blinking one last time, she cleared her vision of the last bit of fog and then felt all the air in her lungs whoosh out in one horrified sound.

Where the hell had he put her?

This was a torture chamber. She was certain of it. The psychopath had an entire chamber full of torture devices. A giant table in front of her had bars for the hands and feet. It laid flat next to what looked like a saw and something else she

couldn't name. The back of the room, though, that was what caught her attention the most.

Chains hung from the walls, floor, and ceiling. They dangled, limp and unmoving, while they were connected to heavier circles that would connect them to a person's hands and wrists. But there were so many of them. These were chains that were never meant to be escaped from, and she couldn't imagine why he would have them.

"What is this place?" she whispered.

Though the gemstone shouldn't have heard her, the diamond still replied, "It's the Earl's home, my dear. Don't you know where you are?"

Apparently not. No one had told her that the Earl was a man who had very particular tastes in how to punish people and if she really thought about it, all this made sense. No one wanted to even travel to Dead Man's Crossing. She'd never heard of any other nobility visiting here or even thinking about going to this horrible little town.

Now she knew why. The leader of these people was a sick and twisted man who liked to string people up with chains around their wrists. For what? Sexual pleasure, perhaps?

Considering how attractive the man had been without a shirt, she had no doubt he could tempt many women into the darkness. They wouldn't even know what he wanted to do to them until it was too late.

She looked back at the flat table with the bindings at the wrists and ankles. Damn the man for trapping her down here and damn Crowley for even putting her in this mess in the first place. How dare either of these men put her in this situation?

Luna didn't take kindly to men like that. She stomped over to the table and slammed her fist into the wood. A low snarl of rage echoed through her chest before she started looking for a weapon. She'd need something heavier than her fists, because the Earl was a very strong man. She'd give him that, at least. But he would underestimate her like all the others.

He had to.

A prodding iron rested near the table, leaning against the wall with three buckets and other metal items she didn't want to entertain the use for. Luna picked up the iron bar, weighing it in her hands to see if she could swing it appropriately.

She could. It wasn't weighted like a sword or even the hammer she so dearly wished she'd brought, but it was a blunt force object and it would bash through a skull with a hand that knew how to do something like that.

And Luna did. As much as she wasn't proud of that truth, she knew how to aim this deadly weapon so that it would kill upon impact. Just one hit was all it took for her to bring a man to his knees, and it didn't take that much power behind the swing. If it came to that.

She leaned down and pulled out the pin that held the bucket's handle in place. The long, thin metal would do nicely for picking the lock if she had the time to finish. And if the Earl didn't return until the morning, then that ought to give her enough time to pick the lock. She'd be gone before he got back.

Better bring the iron just in case, though. If she wasn't very speedy, then she'd end up doing what she hated doing.

"You have a plan, don't you?" the gemstone sang through the floorboards. "You already know how you're going to get out of there and then you're going to save me!"

Save it? No. She shook her head and started in the direction where she'd woken up. There had to be stairs hidden in the shadows. "No, I'm not going to save you. I'm going to steal you and that's a very different thing altogether."

"You're going to steal me," it repeated, the words a little too sing-song for it to understand what she meant. "And then you're going to wear me! I bet you have a lovely neck."

Luna didn't. The stone would be wasted hanging around her throat, anyway. All it would do was babble as people walked by, and Luna would tell it to hush because people were staring. No one like her should wear something of that value.

They'd be robbed the moment she stepped outside.

Sighing, she poked her way around the stairs and started up them. It would take a while, that much was true. Beatrix was better at picking locks, even when they were children and learning the trick. Beatrix had those tiny little fingers. They helped.

Luna set her iron down at the top of the stairs and eyed the brand new lock. “Well, you aren’t what I was expecting.”

She’d hoped the door would be some ancient structure from an age when men regularly kidnapped women and put them in their basement. Not this modern contraption that would be impossible to pick.

“Damn it,” she muttered, rubbing a hand over her mouth before getting to work. “You’re going to take me all night, now aren’t you?”

She could only hope the Earl didn’t return before she finished.

## CHAPTER 8



**H**ow long had he been out this time? Luther woke somewhere in his own gardens. He knew that much. As he stumbled to his feet, he recognized the well-groomed areas of his own land. At least he was home.

He'd never thought to lose control like that. The beast inside him had luxuriated last night, however. Luther could usually feel some part of the monster as it lingered in the back of his mind, trying to convince him to do what it wanted. But this morning, the beast was blissfully quiet.

Not a single peep from his mind. Instead, the monster slept. Finally appeased.

Maybe his father had been wrong, then. Maybe they didn't need to control the creature who wanted to experience the world. He had to cling to that hope that his father was wrong, as were all his other ancestors. Otherwise, he'd make himself sick with worry.

Grumbling and upset, he headed to his home and tried very hard to ignore the servants. They'd be quick to talk, considering their master stalked naked through the halls while leaving muddy footprints behind him. At least he paid them well enough that they'd all keep their mouths shut.

Luther took his sweet time in the bath that morning, trying to remember anything that might have happened the night before. But he couldn't remember a single thing. It was like the beast had locked the memories away from him, even though they were technically the same person.

Getting out of the water, he pulled his clothes on while mumbling, “What did we do last night? Why won’t you tell me?”

The beast stirred, then released a single memory into his stream of consciousness.

The thief.

Oh. Oh, no. He had a woman in his basement that he’d left there for god knows how long. He didn’t even know if he’d been out for a single night or all three of the full moon.

What if she was dead? What if he walked down there and she’d scratched at the walls until she’d finally ripped open a vein and then she was dead? Would he find a bloated body down there in his basement, and all of a sudden he’d have to deal with knowing that he was also a horrible, downright, no good murderer?

He felt like he was going to pass out. He couldn’t do that to another person. Not once in his life had he thought he could be a murderer and yet, he could very well find out that he’d been wrong this entire time.

Wringing his hands, Luther sprinted through the halls and tried his best not to lose his mind. The ballroom was so damned far away from his bedroom and it felt like it took hours to get there. But then it was too quick of a journey when he stood in front of the door with three scratch marks down the exterior.

Had he already gone inside? Were those marks the last lingering moments of the beast devouring the young thief who had unfortunately fallen into his home?

Luther pressed the back of his hand to his mouth, vomit already threatening to spill from his lips. He could do this. He could open the door, look inside, and then figure out what to do from there. If she was dead, he’d have to hide the body. If she was alive... well, then he’d figure that out, too.

“Please don’t be dead,” he murmured as he grabbed the door handle. “I don’t know what I’d do with myself if you were dead.”

Like ripping off a bandage, Luther pushed the door open with a sharp shove that ended with a young woman shouting, but thankfully not falling down the stairs yet again.

The fiery haired thief crouched on the opposite side of the door, a thin piece of metal sticking out of her mouth and another in her hands. She lifted the metal bar over her head, clearly looking to bring it down on his head.

Luther leapt out of the way, far from her iron reach, and held out his hands in what he hoped looked like a peace offering. “No, no! Please. I mean you no harm.”

“No harm?” She spat out the metal that he assumed she’d been using to pick the lock. “You locked me in your basement, you prick!”

Prick?

“I am no such thing,” he stammered, taking another step back as she advanced further into the room. “I’m releasing you from the basement.”

“That you put me in.”

“That I put you in,” he repeated with a nod. Yet again, Luther backed away as she stepped into the sunny ballroom.

She looked worse than he remembered. Her bright red curls stuck up in all directions and there were smears of dirt on her cheeks. And she was tall. Goodness, she looked him in the eyes when she walked toward him. He’d never met a woman who made him feel like he wasn’t the tallest man in the room.

He had to get control over this situation or he’d regret it. Luther cleared his throat and tucked his hands into his pockets, hoping that made him look less intimidating. “I think we need to talk, you and I.”

She blinked at him as though he’d requested they speak in Mandarin. “Excuse me?”

“I understand this is all likely very confusing for you, but I promise, if you’ll sit down with me and have a cup of tea, I will explain everything.” He tried, yet again, to hold up his hands as though he weren’t a threat. “There is much to



explain. I understand this entire interaction has been rather frightening for you, and that is certainly not how I would wish our further conversations to go.”

For a moment, it looked like she might listen to what he had to say. But then her brows snapped down and her hands tightened on the grip of her iron bar. “Frightening? Is that what you think this was? A mad man locked me in his basement with chains and whips and a torture chamber in the back of it. Or did you think I wouldn’t notice all your toys? All those fun little things in the room where you bring women like me?”

“What?” he shook his head. “No, no. I’m afraid that’s not... You’ve got this all wrong.”

“Do I?” She swung the iron bar at him, and he had to duck to avoid getting clipped. “I think I have everything right. You’re insane, and I never should have come here.”

All right, that was quite enough. He’d tried to be nice. He’d tried the supportive path that was quiet and calm as all young women seemed to enjoy. Now he would do what it took to shut her mouth.

Luther swung his arm up and caught the bar in his hand. She tugged hard, trying to free it from his grip, but he only held onto it tighter. Thankfully, the beast in him made him stronger than the average man. She’d underestimated him.

The thief snarled and tugged at the iron one last time before she released it. He kept it at his side, rather than throw it where she could grab it once again.

“Fine,” she snapped. “The fact that you want to have tea with a thief is ridiculous, and I hope you know that.”

Oh, he did. But the fight with her had raised the beast inside him, and now he looked at her with hungry eyes. The monster lifted its head and that... that changed things. He could see her with more intensity. The crimson color of her hair, the way her pulse ticked in her neck.

But it was her scent that made him fairly purr with pleasure. Sweet and spicy all at the same time, like a hot toddy on a cool winter night. She smelled like everything he’d ever

desired and more. The wolf inside him changed its opinion of the little thief who thought she could take what was not hers. She was interesting now. Intriguing. Tasty.

He had to snap out of it or he would hurt her even worse than frightening her in his basement. Clearing his throat, he gestured with his arm for her to leave the ballroom. "After you, madam."

"Please." She snorted as she walked by him, the sound horribly unladylike. "Calling me madam is an insult to all the ladies out there. I'm a thief. You can call me Luna and nothing else."

"I shouldn't call you by your first name. It should be by your last." And calling her Luna would feel so intense. No one called each other by their first name unless they were... well...

Luther adjusted his pants before trailing her out of the ballroom. If he didn't get himself under control, he'd be in a lot more trouble than he had bargained for.

She walked through his home as though she owned the place. Zero fear in the set of her shoulders or the loose hipped way she walked. And she walked like no one he had ever seen before. Though she was tall and perhaps more muscular than any other woman he'd met in his life, she held her power with confidence and no small amount of control.

"Where are we going?" She shot over her shoulder.

"Uh, the, uh. The study." He didn't know where to bring her. The servants would talk either way. Especially considering he'd walked in unclothed and now he had a woman here in his home, unannounced. He'd never hear the end of this.

At least the study was one of his own private places. Luther pointed to her right, over her shoulder, and felt the heat radiating off her body. The beast inside him wanted to rub himself against her.

He wasn't a damned cat! "Get it together," he hissed at himself as she walked into the room.

“Are you all right?” she asked. “You sure do talk to yourself a lot for an earl.”

“And you judge me a lot for someone who isn’t a member of the peerage.” He rushed in ahead of her and gestured for her to take a seat in one of the plush recliners. “Please, have a seat.”

She looked around his study with a calculating eye and he wondered what she saw. The study was warm and inviting, full of deep wood accents and dark green hues. He’d always found it to be a welcoming place, with books filling each set of shelves and bright windows letting in the afternoon light.

But then he remembered she was a thief. Of course, she wasn’t looking to see if this room appeared to be a kind man’s study. She’d be looking at the other decorations on the shelves that were each worth a fortune. Just the decorative glass egg would feed a family for a month. Let alone the watch on his desk that was made of solid gold.

He was a fool to even think that she’d notice what he did. She didn’t care about comfort, she cared about getting paid.

Luther had hoped to see a little more humanity in the young woman. After all, he’d given her the benefit of the doubt in even bringing her to the study when he could have sent her right to law enforcement with a letter pinned to her chest.

Ah, well. Hindsight and all that.

Sighing, he sat down in the chair across from her and picked up the metal tea kettle one of his staff had left for him earlier this morning. The tea would be lukewarm at best. “How do you take your tea?”

“From a murderer, apparently.”

His hands shook too much at the words and he spilled water all over the first cup. Since when had he ever had shaky hands? He was a stalwart man who never made a single mistake, even in pouring tea. And yet, this woman turned him inside out and upside down.

Pouring the water took longer than it should have, but he filled the next cup without splashing the liquid all over. And then, of course, he had to get the sugar. Unfortunately, his staff hadn't left him sugar cubes this morning, namely because they knew he liked to add quite a bit to his morning tea.

He looked at the spoon, then his shaking hands, and then back to the young woman watching his every move with too much intensity. "One scoop or two?"

As he watched her expression, he thought for a second she felt something other than fear and hatred of him. Her brows eased and her breathing slowed down enough that he knew she didn't think he was going to kill her. Or had tried to kill her. Their relationship was very complicated now.

The thief, Luna, he reminded himself, leaned forward and took the spoon herself. "I prefer more sugar than tea, if I'm being honest. And considering you're an earl, I assume you can spare enough of it to satisfy my tastes."

He watched her graceful movements as she filled her own cup first and then raised a brow at him.

"Oh, uh. Me?" He pressed a hand to his chest as though surprised. "I take my tea the same, actually."

"You have a sweet tooth?" Luna looked him up and down before letting out a little laugh. "You're ever so surprising, Earl. First hunting down women to put in your basement for your own devious pleasures, and then liking sugar a little too much. You'd best be careful or it'll all go to that stomach and you'll look more like the rest of your kind."

"My mother used to say the same thing." A sharp cough after the words emphasized his shock. "Not about the kidnapping and killing women in the basement."

"What our parents don't know can't hurt them." She held out the cup of tepid water without looking away. "Where are the tea bags?"

He had no idea. All he could think about was her eyes and those stunning curls that framed a strong face. She was so unlike anyone he'd ever met before, and this was the first time

he'd actually agreed with his beast. She was beautiful. And he wanted her.

Sunlight trickled through the window and made her hair look like a wildfire atop her head. It cast long shadows off her too long nose, sharpened the edge of her jaw, and made her look even more intimidating.

He'd always thought that only soft women were beautiful. His father had taught him that all those years ago. Women were meant to be welcoming arms that a man could fall into after a long day. But this woman was a shield, or a weapon.

Luna gestured with the tea cup, shoving it closer to him. "Are you going to take it or not?"

"Sorry." He took the tea cup and held it close to his chest. He didn't sip at it or even look at the tea bags. Instead, he looked at her. Some unbidden desire rose in his chest and he blurted out the words before he could stop himself. "We both know you were here to steal from me last night, but rather than calling the authorities, I would like to propose a bargain."

## CHAPTER 9



**L**una felt her cheeks pale in shock and surprise. A bargain? She would not make a bargain with this madman, and she didn't care to hear what he'd thought up so she wouldn't tell everyone what insanity he had in his basement.

She would leave here and go straight to everyone she knew of means. They would spread the word that the Earl of Dead Man's Crossing was a murderer and that someone should lock him up in Bedlam.

But reason very quickly followed those thoughts. She couldn't do that. No one would believe her. And once she started speaking ill of a member of nobility, then they would start looking at Luna. Why would a young woman with no means lie about an earl? Ah, right. Because she'd tried to steal from him and he could have her thrown into prison for daring to do so.

The logical response from anyone who heard her story would be to believe him. Not her.

Not to mention he might never let her leave this room if she didn't agree to his bargain. And even if he did let her leave, she was unlikely to live much longer on the streets, considering she didn't get the Diamond of Crestfall and Crowley would be the very first person waiting for her.

Luna didn't even think she'd be safe in Martin's castle with her sisters. Crowley would find a way and then he would

murder them all in their sleep. Or worse, he would out Martin as a vampire and all hell would rain down upon their heads.

Suddenly, her situation shattered around her ears with the horrible crash of breaking glass. There was no way out of this. She had to face down either Crowley, the authorities, or this man in front of her.

She knew she couldn't fight Crowley. She'd been trying to elude that man for years now, and every time she tried, she realized how little power she had in the city. It wasn't just him. That was the problem. He had a hundred soldiers who carried weapons and followed orders without ever questioning them.

And the authorities had enough on her that she wouldn't just go to prison where one of her sisters could break her out. They'd want to hang her and then the Church would find out where their precious little witch's daughter went, and they would burn her.

So really, this murderous beast in front of her was her best shot at staying alive longer than a few more weeks. Sure, he'd tried to put her in his basement. But that wasn't anything she couldn't survive. And if she was being honest, that wasn't even the worst thing anyone had done to her.

When she finished her thoughts, Luna came back to the room and realized he was still staring at her. This ridiculously handsome man with the tight curls atop his head had no issue watching her with zero attempt to even hide what he was doing. He had his chin propped on his fist, tea forgotten on the table, while openly watching every single thought that played across her face.

"Did you figure it out yet?" he asked, his voice quiet and low. "Whatever it was you had to think about?"

"You hunt women down and put them in your basement to do god knows what," she replied. "I don't think I can trust you for any bargain you might propose."

"Ah well, you see, I think you've gotten this all wrong. The basement isn't for unsuspecting women who fall through

my ceiling. It's for me." He blinked and then furrowed his brows. "But I'm not going to explain why or what I use it for."

Right, because that was so reassuring. "I have no interest in spending the rest of my life in prison. And I was obviously here for my own reasons, which are unsavory considering those reasons brought me to this place with the sole intent to rob you. So I think you can understand that I'm not in a position to say no to you, regardless of your murderous status."

He grinned, and the expression lit up his entire face. Damn, he was handsome. He shouldn't be able to look like that when she was so certain he killed people in his spare time.

The Earl picked up his tea and saluted her. "I'm not a murderer."

"You could have fooled me. I know dried blood when I see it, and there was plenty of it down those stairs." Luna faked a shiver as though the sight had terrified her, when in reality, she'd seen it enough to know that blood was simply blood. "You should hide all that better, you know. If you don't hide it, someone might find out your secret."

"I can admit I have a secret, although I will not share what that is with a woman I just met." He finally sipped his tea, then made a disgusted face. "This is cold."

"Yes, that happens when you add barely room temperature water to a cold cup."

Luna made a point to sip the tea and then drink the entire thing down. She'd had her fair share of lukewarm tea in her life, but at least the sugar made it slide down her throat with relative ease. If he thought cold tea would be the worst she'd experienced, then he didn't know what kind of life a thief led.

He watched her, his throat working on a swallow as though... attracted?

No, she had to get her head off that line of thought. He wasn't attracted to her because no man was attracted to a hulking monolith of a woman who was more suited to an ancient, Celtic battle than a life in London.



Clearing her throat, she put the tea cup down with a sharp crack. “What’s your bargain then, Earl?”

“Luther,” he replied. “My name is Luther and the correct way to address me is My Lord.”

She blinked. “Good for you. I reserve that term for a godly figure if it pleases you. I’ll admit, He and I might not be on the best of terms, but I’ll not be calling anyone my lord other than what the Church taught me.”

He flinched at her words, almost as though he’d thought them himself before he cleared his throat. “Then I suppose you’ll have to call me Luther.”

“You said that was too informal.”

“Well.” He leaned forward and looked up at her through those curly locks, and her breath caught in her throat. “Luna. I think we’ll both have to get used to a little informality if we’re going to make this bargain work.”

Oh, that made her nervous. This entire bargain needed to stop if he kept doing that, because she’d do something foolish. Like leap across the table and beg him to take her even though that would put both of them at risk.

“What’s your bargain?” she asked again. If her voice shook a little with the question, it was only in fear and not anticipation.

Their heated eye contact broke, and he leaned back in his chair with a heavy sigh. Luther ran his fingers through his hair until the curls stuck up in all directions like a fuzzy halo around his head. “I’ll admit, I haven’t been the best earl in my lifetime. My father wanted me to marry a long time ago, and my mother wanted me to marry right up until she died. I thought, in losing the two of them, that the pressure to do so would end. However, my aunt appears to have taken up that mantle and I need to shake her so I can live.”

Luna blinked. “You want to marry me?”

“No!” The shout echoed through the study and he turned bright red. Lowering his voice, he breathed, “I didn’t mean that to be quite so loud.”

“Trust me, I’m well aware that most men in your station would have no interest in marrying a thief. But it does sound like that was your plan.”

“I want you to pretend to be engaged to me.” He cleared his throat and straightened his tie, all nervous ticks. “My aunt will be satisfied if I show some movement in the correct direction and that will be enough to give me at least a year of... of...”

Luna could only take pity on the poor man. He was falling apart at the seams and all because he wanted to live a normal life for a little while. Honestly, she couldn’t stand to see him stammering like this when she’d thought him a murderer.

No, he still was. He still had a hidden room in his basement where he tied up people like her and if she forgot that so quickly, then she was in a lot of trouble.

“You want to go back to living a bachelor’s life without your aunt knowing that you’re doing it,” she filled in for him.

“Yes.” He snapped his fingers and pointed at her, then his expression fell. “No. I don’t want to live the bachelor’s life. I just want to be left alone. And I hadn’t thought of this last night before, you know, all that happened. But this morning when I saw you walk out of the basement I thought perhaps you would be able to endure this.”

“Endure?” She laughed. “Does your aunt also like to lock women in basements for the evening?”

“No.” At least he laughed at her joke with her. “At least, I don’t think so. She’s a dragon of a woman though, and for that, I feel as though I need to apologize ahead of all this.”

Luna didn’t know why she was even considering this mad plan. So many things could go wrong at so many moments, and yet, she didn’t intend to say no. It was the only option, and he was the lesser of many evils.

“Just how long do I have to pretend to be engaged to you?” she asked.

“Only for a month or so? My aunt is arriving within the week for a party, and that’s when I’ll introduce you.”

“I think your aunt will be sorely disappointed in the young woman you’ve chosen as a bride.” She stuck her tongue out and shook her head. “Most mothers would be. A week isn’t enough time to turn me into a lady, and I hope you realize that. Your plan could fall apart around your ears if you insist on having me at your table.”

“That’s precisely why I wish to do it. I cannot deny you are an unusual choice for someone like me, and an unusual woman. But I am not a man who fits society’s standards, and I believe my aunt has always expected me to find a woman like you.”

Well, that... actually that made a lot of sense and she supposed that was a good enough answer for her. Although she didn’t want to be his scapegoat. At least this way, she still had a chance to fix everything.

She could satisfy the Earl and make this deal work the way he wanted it to work. Then she could still try to steal the diamond that Crowley wanted, therefore getting herself out of trouble. And while she was here, she could take some other things from this house so Martin and Maeve could fix up the castle.

She had a chance for her life to go back in the right direction. All she had to do was keep her head on straight. And not let this earl know that she still intended to steal literally everything she could.

So she crossed her legs and leaned back in her chair, fingers laced over her belly as though she were the one running this meeting. “So what you’re saying is that if I do this, you will leave me alone and you won’t send me to any authorities for trying to steal from you?”

“If it makes it more likely for you to assist me, then I will even pay you on your way out.” His eyes widened, clearly in some attempt to look like a puppy who was pleading for his life. “I ask for very little, Miss Luna. And your assistance in this matter would greatly make my life easier.”

“And getting paid for it, I suppose, would make my life easier in the long run as well.” Still, it was a shit deal.

But she realized it was the best one she was going to get in the situation and if she continued insisting on looking a gift horse in the mouth, then she would come to regret it. Most likely while she rotted in prison waiting for the day when they would come down to hang her. So really, what did she have to lose right now?

Shrugging, she leaned forward and stretched out her hand for him to shake. “All right, then. I’ll take your deal. But if you double cross me, I will cut your hands off before I sneak out of here.”

He leaned forward and shook her hand, his palm too warm against her own. “And if you try to double cross me, I will hunt you to the very ends of the world. You can’t escape me, even if you are an accomplished thief.”

She snorted. “You think you’re scary, don’t you?”

“Says the woman who was convinced I was a murderer only moments ago.”

Luna couldn’t admit she wasn’t all that frightened of him now, because he still could be a murderer. But after this... Well. She supposed she had her doubts.

## CHAPTER 10



**P**reparing for his aunt's arrival took more energy during the day than he wanted to admit. The woman was meticulous in everything that she liked or disliked, and she didn't care if anyone knew her opinion. His servants worked tirelessly, day and night, to make sure every single room was exactly as his aunt would expect them to be. And if they weren't, then they redid the entire decor.

Of course, that made hiding for the next couple of nights even more difficult. But he managed.

Luther changed the locks on the basement door himself, making sure they were still new and difficult to lock pick. He also watched his back every time he went into the basement, just in case a certain thief followed him to the ballroom where she would only get herself in even more trouble. The last thing he needed was for her to realize the truth.

Being a murderous, bloodthirsty noble was better than what he actually was. He didn't even like to name himself, let alone another person.

He did what he had to do. Luther kept himself scarce. He hid for two full nights and during the day; he informed the servants he was not to be bothered. Luther kept himself busy and away from the tempting young woman who haunted the halls.

Everywhere he went, he could smell her. Even now, as he strode down the hallway toward the kitchens. Her scent of cinnamon and clove and apples filled his nose until he could

think of nothing else. She'd touched a painting here, traced her fingers over the lines of fabric that draped over a chair. Why had she been so fascinated with this painting? It wasn't even of a person and yet she'd touched it.

Oh, and she'd paused here. Her scent was stronger, and it filled his lungs like burning whiskey. Why here? He looked around the halls but couldn't find anything out of the ordinary. Just a hallway leading toward a kitchen. Nothing more, nothing less.

The beast inside him lifted its head and inhaled deeply. Ah, there was his answer. A servant had walked out of the door to his right. Perhaps she'd paused to ask the young maid a question. Or was it a butler? He didn't know his own staff very well, and the mere thought of her asking a question of another man made his heart race. If she had questions, she could ask him. It was his damn house.

Those were foolish thoughts. She was a guest in his house, yes, but he'd trapped her here with a deal that she hadn't really wanted to partake in. He was the monster, still, and she was the unsuspecting victim.

Damn it, he needed to get his head on straight or he'd lose it.

She was just a woman. A thief who had fallen through his ceiling and captured his attention more than any other woman he'd ever met in his life. Damn it. No, that wasn't how he felt about her.

That line of thought had to end. He could do this. He could ignore her scent that lingered on everything and keep walking forward.

Luther put one foot in front of the other and charged to the kitchens, where he could hopefully have his breakfast in peace. He had another month of normalcy now, after all, and that was worth celebrating with a very sticky, very sweet pastry from his wonderful chef.

He rounded a corner a little too fast and struck a hard wall. Or a statue, perhaps, that someone had moved to clean? Either

way, he bounced off it and hit the opposite wall hard enough that all the breath whooshed out of his lungs. Luther slid down onto his backside, dazed and confused at how he'd ended up on the floor.

“What the hell?” he muttered, pressing a hand to his chest before looking up.

Fire burned in front of his gaze. No, wait. Not fire. Curls that coiled in front of him like the licks of a flame, but they were attached to a very mortal head and a very mortal body. She wore a man's shirt and trousers, yet again, although this time they weren't black. The white shirt looked rather lovely on her, even though it wasn't really meant to flatter a female form.

Luna crossed her arms over her chest and glared down at him. “You should watch where you're going. What if you'd run into one of your tiny little maids? They'd be flattened, Luther. Flattened.”

His jaw loosened, then hung free as he stared at the angry woman. Even like this, she was stunning. Hauntingly beautiful like a ghost, he couldn't get her out of his damned head.

Was she scolding him for careening around the corner? She should. Anyone should do that when he was clearly endangering himself and others walking around like that. Luther wasn't a small man by any means, and abnormally strong considering the beast inside his chest.

“I—I— “ he stammered, trying very hard to sound like he actually knew English.

Luna rolled her eyes and held out her hand for him to take. “Just get up, would you? The servants are going to see you on the floor and think I hit you.”

“You did hit me.”

“No, you hit me,” she corrected while grabbing the hand he didn't offer. “For some reason, you keep ending up in positions that make me question your sanity, Earl of Dead Man's Crossing. Would you stand up already? I'm not going to pick you up.”

She could if she wanted to. He had no question that she could lean down, heave him over her shoulder, and march down the hall with him. That knowledge should have made him uncomfortable, but it was rather thrilling instead. He'd never met a woman who could physically lift him.

Oh god. Was he staring at her again?

Shit. Shit, he had to do something, or she'd think he was a complete idiot. But he was looking at some goddess who stepped out of a damn war and what man could have held onto his sanity?

He cleared his throat again and helped her haul him to his feet. "Right. Here we go. Thank you for helping, I just... I don't know what happened."

"Well, when two immovable objects hit each other, one usually gives before the other." She released his hand, but he watched as her fingers tucked into the fabric of her shirt. As though she wanted to preserve the warmth, or press it against her side.

What would happen if he put his hand where she'd touched? If he allowed himself to feel whether her waist would be tiny and thin, or roped with muscle like the rest of her?

And goodness, he realized that this close he could count all the freckles that dusted her nose. It would take a long time, of course. She had hundreds. But he had the fleeting thought that counting her freckles would be exceedingly better than counting all the stars in the sky.

"Where were you going with such purpose?" she asked, her voice cutting through his daydreaming.

He snapped out of his stupor like a man emerging out of frozen water. With a gasp, he pointed behind her and stammered, "To the kitchens."

He was a dolt. Luther wanted to smack himself for acting like this around a woman of little means. He had been in the presence of a princess in his lifetime, and he hadn't stammered



like this. What was it about this woman that made his entire schooling leak out of his ears?

Though she was clearly unimpressed with his actions, Luna glanced in the direction he pointed. “Huh. Well, if you don’t mind me joining you, I could go for something to eat as well. Your servants have been rather stingy with food, I’ll admit.”

“They what?” His cheeks turned bright red. “Tell me the names of the servants who mistreated you, madam, and I will make sure they are punished for it. No guest in this house should go hungry on my watch.”

Her eyes widened with every word. “That seems a little harsh, don’t you think? I’m sure they provided what they deemed the normal amount of food for a young woman, but I am obviously larger than most.”

“You should get whatever food you want.”

Luna smiled, but the expression didn’t reach her eyes. “I eat as much as any man, Luther. I don’t think most servants consider that.”

Well, she had him stumped, but that didn’t mean he liked it. She shouldn’t be hungry in his house, not when there was plenty of food to eat.

“Right, well, we’re putting an end to that, then.” He walked past her and it took every ounce of his strength not to grab her hand in his again. Just to tug her toward the kitchens, of course. No other reason at all.

He led the way into the heart of his manor. The beating lifeblood of this building. The kitchens. And all of that was run by an elderly woman named Magda, who was quite possibly the most wonderful woman he’d ever met.

She stood at the head of a very long wood topped island. Magda wore her normal white handkerchief over her hair and plenty of aprons around her plump waist. She popped her hands on her hips and glared at the long row of ovens and stoves that lined the opposite wall. Thankfully, none of them

were going just yet. Luther always thought it was unbearably warm in the kitchen when Magda got going.

“Hello!” Luther called out. He stepped to the side so that the cook could see Luna. “We have a hungry guest, Magda. I thought you’d like to know.”

Ah, but the old woman saw through his games. She tsked and glared at him, although the heavy smile lines on her face ruined any threat she’d meant to send his way. “We both know why you’re here, Luther. For goodness sakes.”

Luna looked between the two of them, her brow arched in curiosity. “Now I want to know why he’s here, because I really thought he wanted to feed me.”

“Oh, he wants to feed you, darling, but he also wants to feed himself. The man is impossible to keep satisfied! He’s like a bottomless pit.” She reached into her pocket and pulled out a wooden spoon, then pointed to a basket near her on the table. “Your hunt is complete, my lord. Feast to your heart’s content. I left extra out for you this time.”

“You’re an angel,” Luther replied. He raced to the end of the island and grabbed onto her waist, just to make sure he could land the very loud kiss on her cheek. “Heaven sent.”

“They’re just pastries, Luther.” Magda giggled though, like she was a young girl again. And in many ways, she always would be.

The cook had been there for him through the most difficult times of his life. She’d always been the kind hearted woman he ran to whenever anything went wrong. And though she knew very little about the reality of his life or the family secret he had to hide, she was always there with open arms. Warm. Smelling like cookies. She was the grandmother he’d never had but had always wanted.

And she made the best pastries in all of London because she dipped them in honey and sugar after she baked them.

He snagged a few of those perfect pastries and stuffed them into his mouth. They were damned good, and his stomach rumbled in happiness. Or perhaps hunger because he

intended to eat quite a few more of these delicious, sugary treats.

He froze in place the moment he realized Luna was staring at him. Her eyes were a little too wide and her jaw had definitely loosened as though it were ready to drop open at any moment. Was he acting like an animal?

Yes. Although, that wasn't unusual for him, so he supposed that was... expected.

Clearing his throat, he reached for a napkin on the table and wiped at his mouth. "Sorry."

"I guess you really like those pastries, huh?" she asked.

He didn't know how to reply. How did one say that yes, of course, he loved the pastries, but he forgot sometimes that he was in a human skin? The beast inside him loved to eat and devour. That was the sole purpose of the beast, it seemed. Hunger and rage and desire. All the emotions that a good man, a nobleman, didn't feel. And yet, he felt them all as though each emotion were a singular monster living within him. Each with its own voice whispering in his ear.

Luna looked at the pastries, then glanced at Magda. "Honey cakes?"

"Indeed." His chef blushed, her expression pleased that someone knew what she'd cooked up. "They were a specialty in my village, and when I came to London, I was so surprised no one had them on the table all the time."

Something about Luna softened. Her shoulders curved in, her brow eased from its usual tense scrunch. And Luther desired to know why she reacted like that to simple pastries.

Sure, he always smiled when he saw them. But that was because he knew he would devour at least six of them and then pass out in a sugar coma within the next hour or so. Luther had very few moments in his life he didn't feel guilty for, and these cakes were one of them.

But Luna looked at them, almost as though she'd seen a ghost.

“We used to make them in my village too,” she murmured. “I remember my mother staying up all night readying them for Samhain.”

Magda flinched. “We don’t say those words too loudly here, girl. No need to upset anyone with the old ways.”

“Ah yes, they always get so upset with the reminder.” Luna shook her head and smiled. “The Church warned me of that once they got their hands on me. Pagan terminology isn’t to be tolerated. That’s how it always is, I suppose.”

Pagan terms? The Church?

Luther looked between the two women as though one of them might give him the answers he sought. But they just stared at each other with knowing looks, like they shared a past that he couldn’t understand.

“Ladies?” he asked, clearing his throat loudly. “Can I ask for clarification on what you two are talking about?”

They both replied at the same time. “No.”

“Ah.” He picked up three more pastries and backed his way out of the room. “Then I’ll just... Leave you to it, then.”

Luther popped another pastry in his mouth as he wandered down the hall. Just who had he brought into his home?

## CHAPTER 11



**L**una settled into her new routine for a few days before she panicked. Yes, she was supposed to stay here for a week until his aunt showed up and then she could prove that the Earl was a normal man in a normal setting and wasn't it so lovely that he'd settled down?

But she wasn't... capable. She wasn't the young woman that anyone would want to see a powerful man had settled down with. And she didn't know how to be that person.

Pacing between the walls of her room, she felt as though Luther had stuck her in a cage and she couldn't get out of it. The bars were the pretty pale blue wallpaper and the dirt floor was warm mahogany floors that likely cost more than she'd made in her entire life.

And to make all the matters worse, that damned diamond kept singing to her.

"Luna," it called out, repeating her name until she thought she'd go mad.

"What do you want?" she snarled, trying to keep her head on straight while she planned her escape from this maddening place.

"Don't you want to put me on? You could come and get me, you know. I'm right here. Waiting for you."

She wanted to. Hell, she would have given her right arm if she could put her hands on that damned diamond. But she couldn't find it. The Earl might not be very good at keeping thieves out of his house, but he was very good at hiding his

valuables. Sure, there were a hundred things around that she could steal. Decorations, though, and those were too easily tracked.

Jewelry ended up out of the country at first. It circulated the world, passing between sellers until it could finally reach someone who had ties with nobility. And at that point, everyone forgot about the lost item. At least, until someone wore it to an opera and was seen by the wrong person. Then that seller disappeared to have yet another replace them.

Her world wasn't complicated. Until now.

Blowing out a breath, she sat down at the pale yellow vanity and stared at her reflection. She only knew one person who could help her right now, and that was the last person she wanted to talk to.

Maeve.

Her sister had rubbed elbows with the world's most incredible people and was now in love with a Duke for all eternity. Literally. The vampire blood that ran through her veins would keep her alive for centuries now that she'd pledged herself to a vampiric lord.

Regardless of all that, Luna disliked talking to her sister because Maeve had a tendency to want to fix. That's all she knew how to do. She was so serious as the oldest of the three, but she never saw anything in shades of grey.

She could call Beatrix, she supposed. But that one had spent her entire life in a convent and really knew nothing about being a real person.

So.

Maeve it was.

Luna leaned forward and exhaled onto the glass. In the fog, she wrote her sister's name and muttered a simple spell. It was one her mother had taught her long ago, one that all witches seemed to know. Mirrors could be used for scrying, but they were also portals to another realm.

The mirror shimmered, warped, and then her own reflection disappeared. Instead, her sister looked back at her.

“Well, you look healthy.” Luna tried hard not to think about what that meant. If Maeve was particularly robust looking, that usually meant they hadn’t been feeding off each other, but off some poor sap who’d stumbled into the castle.

“Don’t think about it,” Maeve muttered. “It’s the only way to get through. Trust me. Now, why are you calling me? I thought you were going to steal that diamond and be home days ago.”

“Unfortunately, the situation has changed.” She cleared her throat, then realized with no small amount of clarity that she should have gotten her story straight before she reached out to Maeve.

What was she supposed to tell her adoptive sister? That she’d made the worst mistake a thief could make, broke this poor man’s ceiling, and then ended up in a strange deal where she pretended to be his fiancée? It sounded far-fetched. And she couldn’t tell Maeve that the leader of the most powerful gang in all of London was hunting her down because she’d stolen a piece he wanted and sold it to the highest bidder.

Perhaps only a small amount of the truth was best.

“The situation changed?” Maeve repeated, lifting a brow. “Care to elaborate on that? Do I need to send Martin to come collect you?”

“Good lord, please don’t do that.” Raking her fingers through her hair, she then slashed the hand through the air. Dismissing the thought of sending a vampire lord to collect her. “I made a couple mistakes, ended up making a deal with the Earl. I have to stay for a little while until I get everything sorted.”

Maeve’s face went even paler, if that was possible. “You aren’t... He didn’t ask you to...”

It took a while for Luna to follow her sister’s thought process. When she realized Maeve was asking if the Earl had bargained with her body, the mere thought had her bursting

into laughter. “Oh, goodness no. I don’t think he’d even consider it! Look at me, Maeve, do you think any man would want that?”

Relief flooded her sister’s expression. “Yes, I think many men would request that of you. Just because you don’t find yourself beautiful doesn’t mean others can’t see how stunning you are.”

Right. That was almost as crazy as Luna pulling all this off without getting caught by Luther’s demonic aunt.

“I didn’t call for you to tell me I’m pretty,” Luna snarled. “I actually had a reason for calling you.”

“I assumed so.” Maeve didn’t like being told what to do, but she still nodded as if she were directing the call herself. “What do you need help with, then?”

“I’m supposed to impress some aunt of his so that he can live his life without her breathing down his neck about getting married.” She took a deep breath and then rushed through the last words. “I have no idea how to make her think that I’m worth a noble’s attention.”

A long pause was her only response. Maeve seemed frozen on the other side of the glass.

Luna tapped the glass with her finger, trying to shake the spell back to life. “You still there?”

“Yes, I’m still here.” Maeve blinked a few times before shaking her head. “Are you kidding me? That’s the entire situation you’re in?”

“Not kidding, yes that’s what’s happening.”

“I’m sending Martin. You can’t be there with this madman any longer. He wants you to pretend to be engaged to him? Luna, you have to hear how insane that sounds.”

Oh, she heard it. That’s why it took her such a long time to agree to the whole plan. Normally, she jumped into crazy situations like this with both feet. But this one? It made little sense. Although, the longer she was around Luther, the less the man made any sense to her at all.



“I already said yes,” she scolded her sister. “I will not back out now. So tell me what I need to do to convince this old lady to leave him alone.”

“And the diamond?”

Right, that was the hard part. “I’ve already heard it singing and the damned thing won’t leave me alone. It wants to be found, so this was a perfect reason for me to stay in his home and snoop while I try to find it.”

“You haven’t even found the diamond yet?” Maeve’s face turned red, and that never boded well. “You’ve been gone for almost a week and you seem to have only dug yourself into a worse situation.”

“Please don’t scold me right now. I need to focus on what I’m doing and make sure that I don’t step in it any more, apparently.” Luna tossed her hands in the air. “Listen, Maeve. I get it. I’m the one that always seems to make these mistakes, but you can’t fix it. Tell me what to do to convince the old lady and I’ll be home before you know it.”

“I knew I never should have sent you on your own.” Maeve stood up from her mirror and started pacing back and forth. “This was too much for you to do. Martin was right. The dangers of stealing from an earl were all too apparent, and we all ignored them. Now you’re going to end up dead or in jail and there’s nothing I can do to stop that from happening.”

“Maeve,” Luna tried to interrupt her sister’s dark thoughts. “I will not die or go to jail if I convince his aunt, so if you don’t mind...”

“I’ll talk with Martin. I see now that you’re right. He can’t come get you because you’re in far too deep. But he might be able to make a deal with this earl. Perhaps we could bargain for your life? Nobility doesn’t mind doing that sort of thing with each other.”

The thought was laughable. “You’re going to bargain for my life? With what money?”

But Maeve wasn’t listening to her anymore. She’d gone deep into the fear that she had to save her sister and nothing

would break her out of it. No matter how hard Luna tried to get her to even look at the mirror, her sister was already gone.

Damn it, the last thing she needed was a vampiric witch meddling in what she'd already fixed.

Luna sighed and tapped the glass. "Martin, are you there?"

The vampire was never far from her sister, so she didn't doubt he was in the room, listening behind the glass even though Maeve would never admit it. They were both far too secretive and loved snooping in the shadows.

His face appeared way too close to the glass for her comfort. "Sorry."

"I know you're always there. If you weren't, that would be more surprising." She scrubbed a hand down her face and then pointed at Maeve. "This was a mistake, obviously. I'll figure it out on my own, but please don't let her ruin this for all of us. She worries too much."

"There will be no meddling from the Crimson Castle." He pressed a hand to his chest, as he always did when he swore on his honor. "But if I may be of some assistance? In my experience, the elderly ladies of the ton are less interested in young women who fit a mold. I think if you are yourself, the Earl's aunt will find you delightful."

"Being myself means talking about sleeping in attics and stealing from people just like her," she replied with a snort. "I don't think she'll like that."

Martin winked. "You might find yourself surprised. Those women have a lot of fight in them still. Now, I promise I won't let your sister meddle unless I hear something about you being locked up behind bars. How does that sound?"

"That would be the perfect time to meddle, thank you."

"You're welcome." He waved a hand over the glass and the spell melted away before she could even say goodbye to Maeve.

Honestly, considering the mood her sister was now in, Luna wasn't all that sure she even wanted to say goodbye to

her vampire sibling.

Sighing, she left the vanity and flopped down on the ridiculously comfortable bed the Earl had given her. What was this, down? The entire thing? How many birds had to die to fill this with a cloud-like amount of feathers that cushioned her every single night? Probably not enough to make him feel guilty.

As she stared up at the ceiling, she couldn't help but marvel at the lovely wallpaper there. Tiny cherubs held bows and arrows in their hands, sending out the heart-shaped arrows to mortals that danced below them. She'd seen a mural like this before, when she was early in her thieving. She remembered looking at the paintings and wishing she had enough money to buy one.

Luna could have stolen countless of them. She could have hung them all from her walls as though she were one of the elite who could afford to hire an artist like this. But something always held her back. The artists had worked hard for a piece like this. Stealing such a masterpiece felt... well, wrong.

Not that everything she did wasn't wrong.

Squinting her eyes, she met the judging stare of a naked cherub baby who pointed its arrow directly at the viewer. Hadn't she seen that judgmental stare before? She swore she had. But maybe a lot of these nobles had the same wallpaper.

Except... She sat up and took in the details around her one more time. She'd seen that music box on the shelf that was shaped like a swan. Luna remembered thinking she could get a pretty penny for it, but then noticed the engraving on the bottom was too specific. And the vase in the corner... Hadn't that been on the opposite wall?

"Oh no," she whispered. "Why does everything keep getting more complicated in this damned place?"

She'd been here before. And not just been here. She'd stolen something from this house before.

Flopping back down onto the mattress, she covered her face with both her hands. "I hate it here," she snarled, pressing

the words into her palms like that would make any kind of difference.

The worst part about all this was that she didn't hate it here. It was nice to be on a soft bed for once. Magda had fed her food from her own homelands, far in the north, where the bees buzzed through the fields and cold snow turned bread into bricks. She had felt like she'd returned home for the first time in years.

Yet, every time she thought she was settling into some kind of routine, she was thrust into the memory that she was a bad person. She stole. She made everyone's life harder.

Hopefully she didn't ruin this plan for the Earl and both their lives, too.

## CHAPTER 12



**L**uther stared at the hated basement walls and wondered how the hell he was going to clean this up. He hadn't... Well, he had to admit to himself that he hadn't come down here since the full moon. He'd thought he had controlled the beast well enough the last two nights.

Sure, the monster had gotten out the first night. That was all right. The beast hadn't ever been out of its cage during the full moon, and that only worked in his favor that the demonic creature didn't know how to get to town, or anywhere else for that matter.

Then the last two nights he'd been here. Chained up. Stuck to the wall like he was supposed to be and as his father had taught him all those years ago.

Except something in his head said to go down to the basement. Even though he never went to the basement unless it was the full moon, and even then only did so reluctantly. Still, that inner voice had screamed at him to come down here. And so he had.

He wished he hadn't listened to that voice.

The chains had been pulled out of the walls. He hadn't even known that was possible considering they were steel mounted into granite and there were at least ten of them that he shackled onto himself. Five that went around his arms, ankles, and throat. Four more around his biceps and thighs. The last around his waist in a steel circle that was perfect for holding him in place.

That largest manacle, the one that he'd always worn around his stomach, was bent in half.

"What on earth?" he muttered, walking into the room and spinning a slow circle. The entire room was completely and utterly destroyed. Even the table in the center, the one his father had built for his young werewolf offspring, had been snapped in half. He'd never seen a beast do this before.

And if anyone's beast could have, his father's wolf would have torn this entire building apart. Brick by hated brick.

"How?" he asked, as though the wolf could respond to him. "How did you do this?"

The beast lazily woke inside his head. It coiled around itself, pleased to know the chains which had tormented it for too many years were now useless.

Luther's heart raced in his chest. How was he supposed to control it now? He knew there were very limited times when he needed the basement like this, but he also was very aware that the monster would do whatever it took to keep the basement destroyed like this. How long had it known this plan? How long had it decided that their lives could so easily be ruined because it had a taste of the freedom Luther had always denied it?

"Why?" he asked again, the word falling flat in the room that had once been his only salvation. "Why would you do this?"

That tug which had brought him to the basement yanked at his belly again. He staggered forward, across the wreckage of the table and through the carnage of chains and ruined flooring.

Luther never looked around this room. He'd never once thought to touch anything that his father had hidden in the shadows. But now, he pulled off a sheet which had hidden some strange shape for years now.

The sheet slipped off the form it had covered, revealing a mirror beyond. He'd never seen it before, although the edges were dipped in silver, so he knew it was meant to be

something they could see the beast through. Runes etched into the frame reminded him of a book his father had given him years ago.

“Here, my son,” he’d said while holding out the leather bound novel. “The secrets of our kind are contained within these pages. You will read this, and you will know why we must torture ourselves every single night. We must not become what the others have become. Do you understand?”

After reading the book, he understood his father’s hesitation. He knew why the people of the town feared a wolf entering their homes and devouring their children in the night.

That’s what creatures like him did. He had spent countless hours reading every single time a wolf had tormented Dead Man’s Crossing. How the beasts first attacked cattle and livestock. One had even made the entire town lose all their money because the wolf had eaten every single cow that had given them milk. But the beasts grew tired of bleating sheep and foolish cows that were easy to hunt.

Oh no, a werewolf always wanted a hunt. It liked to know that once it caught its prey, that the feast had been well earned.

He’d been seven when he read about the horrible ways werewolves killed people. He had nightmares for months after that, only allowing himself to sleep with a dozen candles burning, though it was a horrible risk.

Luther still had nightmares about waking up with a dead body at his feet because he couldn’t control the monster inside him. As his father had always feared.

He had to control it.

And yet, even with years of practice, he had failed.

No man stood in that mirror, grinning at him with sharpened teeth and a flicking tail. It was a monster who looked back, a horrible combination of man and beast. A werewolf wasn’t a wolf, after all, only a man who had become one.

The creature’s teeth were long and curved. Twin fangs arched up from its bottom jaw and framed a head that was

clearly a wolf. Its ears flicked forward, as if it were waiting for him to say something. He wouldn't. Instead, his eyes traveled down the muscular chest of a man that was dusted with faint dark hair. Down strong legs with knees that bent too much and feet that were too long, giving the legs the appearance of an extra bend. It even had hands with long claws that had clearly snapped the table in half.

This was the monster he'd battled his entire life. The monster that wanted to take over his life and destroy everything he held so dear.

"You," he muttered. "What did you do this time?"

It grinned at him, all too happy to reply. And when the creature spoke, it did so through lips that shouldn't be able to move the way they did. "Luther. You have kept us locked in this cell for too long, my friend."

"For good reason."

"Why? Because a long time ago an old man told you it was dangerous to let me out?"

Luther started pacing side to side, watching as the image of his wolf did the same. The monstrous creature leaned forward aggressively with every step, its shoulders hunched and claws nearly dragging on the ground.

"That old man was our father," he spat. "You know as well as I that he deserves some respect."

"For what? Teaching you to fear me? I will not respect a man that cannot come to terms with his own desires and needs." The wolf thudded its chest with a heavy fist, and Luther felt the connection on his own breastbone with a solid strike. "You and I are more capable than he could ever dream of being. You could let me be free without having to chase me down or fear what we might do in the wilds."

"I do fear what you would do. I fear what you have already done!" Luther nearly dropped to his knees with that fear.

The wolf hadn't been out for one night, he realized. It had tricked him.



The chains were destroyed. The beast couldn't be contained any longer, but that also meant that it had the time to do whatever it wanted throughout the night.

Three nights. Three long evenings where it had plenty of time to attack the villagers of Dead Man's Crossing. What if he had made a mistake that cost someone else their life?

He froze, then looked back into the mirror. His mind had already suggested what his heart didn't want to know. Because now that he'd thought about it, he was quite sure that the beast would do exactly what he didn't want it to do, just because it could. And if that gut feeling was correct, then the monster had already taken someone's life. Someone important or perhaps a passing traveler, but there was blood on his hands either way.

The beast grinned, sharp teeth glinting in the light. "You already know, don't you, Luther?"

"What did you do?"

"You don't remember? We both enjoyed the rush of the wind in our fur. We loved the feeling of the ground beneath our paws. Actual dirt, Luther. The earth beneath us that only wanted us to run free within the forests and feel the moss and the grass and the stone." The wolf's eyes rolled back in its head. "It was an exquisite night. An evening that neither of us will ever forget, and how could I give all that up? Willingly?"

He shook his head in denial. "No. Father claimed our beasts were nothing more than that."

"What? Slathering idiots who couldn't even talk to their owners? You should have known that your father lied. I am you, Luther. Just as you are me."

How dare this cretin call him a monster? "I am nothing like you," Luther hissed.

The wolf lunged forward, slapping its paws on the glass at the same time as Luther's hands made contact with that hated silver. "You are me, Luther. You loved the hunt just as much as I, and you crowed when we bit down on that man's neck. The blood poured over our tongue, and you loved it."

He felt all the blood drain from his face in one cold rush. He couldn't have done that. They couldn't have killed someone without Luther knowing... could they?

"No," he muttered, his fingers curling into fists. "No, we didn't harm anyone last night or I would know."

"Not last night. The very first night. I didn't want to lose my chance in case you bested me."

His chance? Oh god. They'd killed someone, and Luther had no idea who had fallen into the creature's claws. What if it had been Farmer Barren? Or heaven forbid the man's granddaughter. Luther had been thinking of her lately. Not in that way, but acknowledging that she existed, and the wolves were always so fond of biting young women. What if he had torn into her flesh and he didn't even know what had happened?

"The feast was good," his wolf said quietly. "You are unhappy now, but that is normal. Soon, you will learn that it is all right to indulge me. I am your desires, Luther. Together, we will live happily."

"No." He had no other words for this moment, this situation. "No, I will never succumb to what you want to do. It is wrong, and I... I..."

The wolf grinned even as it continued to back away from the mirror. "What will you do, Luther? You're afraid of your own reflection."

Damn it, the beast was right. The beast knew what to say to get underneath his skin and it...

He turned away from the mirror. Looking at his own reflection right now was too painful. If he kept looking, then he didn't know what he'd do.

Probably take the coward's way out, the same way his father had. Luther walked away from the place where he'd chained his beast, and the place where he'd found his father hanging from the ceiling. This room was cursed, and everything inside it ended up just as cursed as his memory.

He would learn how to control the beast. Luther didn't need chains, and a hidden basement to keep his wolf contained. He was certain of it. And if he failed by the time of the next full moon, then he would take matters into his own hands.

Just as his father had done.

After all, everything he did was for the good of Dead Man's Crossing. If that meant they were better off without him darkening their doorstep, then so be it. The Earl always put his people first.

## CHAPTER 13



**L**una had thought this would be easier. Of course, there were the moments when she had to deal with the madman who tried to lock her in his basement, but he could have been worse. Luther had turned out to be a rather kind, if odd, individual. She didn't mind spending time with him when she was so used to thieves and thugs.

But what she hadn't expected was to be bored out of her mind the entire time. He'd offered her a deal, she'd taken it all with the assumption that he'd help her get ready for this party in some way. She wasn't exactly made to be a lady!

Instead, it had been three days since she'd even seen the Earl. He disappeared somewhere into the depths of his own manor and left her to her own devices.

How did noble women not go insane with boredom? Maybe that's why they all were prickly and too quick to attack other women. She'd heard them throw daggers with their words before, and apparently that came from sitting around until their brain rotted.

Even now, her only option was to sit at the kitchen table, staring off into space while she tasted Magda's newest soup. The delicious stew wasn't for the Earl or any of his friends. It was for the people who worked here and Magda had apologized that Luna had to try it.

Luna reassured her that she much preferred to eat with the servants, as rich food always made her stomach turn sour. And

besides, food was food. She'd take what she could get, when she could get it.

"You know," Magda said, her eyes canting to the side before she cleared her throat. "You don't act like any high-born lady I've ever met before."

"That's because I'm not one." Luna stuffed her mouth with another spoonful of potatoes and beef chunks. She flashed a grin at the old woman and added, "He brought me here to convince his aunt that he was at least trying."

With every word, Magda's eyes widened further. "Oh dear. Well, that's going to be rather difficult for the both of you, wouldn't you think?"

"I've brought up that very concern with the Earl and he doesn't seem all that worried about it." She swallowed, then shrugged. "It's his life he's toying with. Not my problem if he refuses to help me be more convincing."

Except, it sort of was her problem. If she didn't uphold her end of the bargain, what if he decided that was enough reason to send her to jail? She didn't even know if the officers he'd eventually call would think it had been too long since the crime, but they all knew her face. A thief with bright red hair was rather hard to forget.

She set the spoon down and chewed on her thumbnail. "Do you think I should try a little harder? Maybe I should talk with someone that knows how a real lady would act. I certainly don't look like one, but I've seen uglier people with nice dresses. Fabric and color fixes many flaws."

Magda watched her with a horrified expression on her face. "I think it's a little late to be teaching you much, miss. The dinner is coming right up in a couple of days. We're already preparing for it in the kitchen, and his aunt... Well. She's a dragon, that one."

Just what Luna needed. Something else to worry about in this godforsaken place.

His aunt terrified everyone she came in contact with, apparently. Luna was a brave soul, but she wasn't ready or

capable enough to go head to head with an elderly woman who ruled her entire family with an iron fist.

That was too much like the nuns in the convent. Too much like the women who had beaten her down for years because she'd been born in the arms of a pagan who wanted her daughter to follow in her footsteps.

Luna blinked those memories away before they swelled over her head like a wave. She would not think of those dark days. Not when she needed to focus on the present.

“Right.” She slapped her hands on the table as though the movement would help her conviction. “I’ll have to work extra hard at making sure this aunt of his likes me, then. I do believe I’m a rather likeable person.”

“You are, darling. That’s for certain.” Magda reached across the table to pat her hand. “But I don’t know if I’d want my son to marry you.”

Luna winced, but she knew it came from a kind place. The sight of her would make many a mother worried, so she couldn’t blame Magda for the harsh words. Every mother wanted a son to marry a tiny little cherub who would give them pretty little babies. One look at Luna and they’d worry about the giants she would create.

Ah, well. She’d heard it before and would hear it again.

Finishing up the soup, she planned on asking if there were any maids that might at least teach her how to walk. Or fit a dress to her, considering she’d been wearing a pair of pants and a white shirt she’d stolen from one of the butlers. The Earl knew she needed a dress to wear to this party, didn’t he? It wasn’t like she’d shown up with a bag of items to wear.

“I should probably find Luther,” she muttered, standing from the table. “I realized there are a lot of things about this that we need to talk about.”

“I’ll ask one of the boys to go find him,” Magda replied. She bustled to the front of the kitchen, already prepared to fight on behalf of the young pagan she’d found.

Except they both froze when they heard a loud banging from the front of the manor. A banging punctuated by angry shouts and frustrated screams.

“What on earth?” Luna said.

The banging echoed again, this time a little more urgently, and with a lot more anger behind the screaming voices that shouted for Luther to open up. Apparently, the Earl had done something they didn't like. Or, as she was all too familiar with, he'd done something that a mob thought was worthy of attention.

She didn't want to be poor Luther. The last time a mob had gotten involved in her life, she'd ended up running across the rooftops in the hopes that they'd lose her. Thankfully, they did, but it wasn't a memory that she was proud of.

Why was Magda staring at her?

“What?” she asked, shifting back to the table. “I'm not a servant here. I'm not going to go get Luther and let him know that someone aggressively wants to see him.”

“No, but you are supposed to be pretending to like Luther.” Magda pointedly stared at the door, then back to her. “So I would imagine the soon-to-be wife of the Earl would want to know what all the fuss is about.”

“You just want me to see what's going on and then report back to you.”

“That's exactly what I want you to do. Now get your ridiculously large body out of my kitchen and figure out what's going on!” Magda stomped away from the door and picked up one of her wooden spoons.

Memories flashed through Luna's head of getting slapped with one of those when she was a little child. Not hard, of course. She hadn't broken anything. But her mother had whacked her behind and hands with the back end of a spoon like that and it had stung worse than any other wound she'd gotten in her life.

She leapt from the table and raced toward the door, grumbling the entire way about women who meddle in too

many things. Why did she have to go save the Earl's reputation? Luther was a grown man with a torture basement. Surely he could handle a couple of irate men from Dead Man's Crossing.

Except, when she reached the door, she was shocked to find that Luther already stood in front of it. His shoulders curved inward, as though his chest had tightened with anxiety. He stared at the door as though it were going to burst open at any moment, but she could clearly see the deadbolt had been locked.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

He jumped at the sound of her voice, holding up his fists in preparation for an attack.

When he realized she was the one standing behind him, he dropped those raised fists with a shocked grunt. "Luna. My apologies, I didn't know it was you."

"Clearly, although I wouldn't be surprised if you wanted to punch me in the face either." The door trembled with another solid strike. "Are you going to open the door and see what they want?"

He glanced behind him, then back to her. "No."

"Why not? I don't think waiting until they get tired of yelling will help anything if I'm being honest with you. They seem quite persistent."

He opened his mouth, closed it, and then blew out a long breath from his nose. Was he grinding his teeth? She'd seen the signs of someone gearing up to lie before, and Luna had always prided herself on knowing when someone was about to spout bullshit.

The Earl might be a very curious man with a lot of secrets, but he couldn't hide from her. Not like this.

But he surprised her, yet again. Luther dropped his gaze and muttered, "I'm afraid."

"Afraid?" she repeated. What a strange thing to say. No one in that mob would be dumb enough to attack the Earl. The



last thing they needed was to piss off the king, especially since he was rather fond of hanging people who defied him. Removing a member of his esteemed peerage hit that nail into the coffin.

What did an earl have to fear? Losing the opinion of the king, sure. Maybe even having to worry about whether he could afford to keep his fine house in such a condition. But other than that, she couldn't imagine what he would fear from the men outside his door.

Her breath froze in her lungs when he looked up and met her gaze. Those eyes were filled with so much shame and guilt. The poor man was suffering, and she hadn't even noticed.

"I'm afraid of why they're angry with me," he replied, his words slow and measured. "I have done a lot of things in my life. Some intentionally, others not. I fear they have discovered something I did not intend to do, and now I will never win their good regard back."

Well, she didn't know what to say.

Luna looked at the shuddering door and then back to the trembling man in front of her. Luther really cared what they thought about him, and that said a lot about his leadership. Sure, there was still the murder dungeon he hadn't explained. But if he cared about his people, that was a start.

No one would be happy if he didn't walk out those doors, though. If he stayed frozen, they would stay mad. It was the way of the world, unfortunately.

She licked her lips and said, "I learned a long time ago that the regard of others doesn't mean much in the long run. You have to believe in yourself and be happy with who you are. Everyone else can have their opinion, but it should never affect your opinion of yourself."

He shook his head, almost as though he didn't believe her. "My life is not that. I have to think about the opinion of others or I could lose all of this. It's important that they believe in my

judgement, my ability to keep this town running. They need to understand and believe that I am worthy of this position.”

“Why?” She genuinely wanted to know. “The town prospers. Their pockets and bellies are full. If some of them still don’t like you or think you aren’t good at being an earl, then let them. They’re alive and well, and that’s better than most people get.”

She could see him thinking about what she said. He squinted his eyes at her, almost as though he were expecting her words to be a lie. But she wasn’t lying. Luna had never cared who was the leader of her province as long as there was food on the table and wine to drink. She cared nothing about the nobility at all.

“So you think no matter what they have to say out there, that it doesn’t matter?” he asked, clearly skeptical of her thoughts.

Luna rolled her eyes up to the ceiling as if God himself could give her strength. “It shouldn’t matter what I think at all, Luther. You should be able to hold yourself proud for the good you’ve done in this area and know that no matter what they’re angry about, you’re still the Earl they need. Who cares about the Earl they want?”

And if they argued with him or complained even a little about their lives, she would remind them that other provinces were starving to death while their nobles slept in feather beds and drank from golden decanters. Literally. She’d stolen about twenty of them and they always ended up bringing in a ridiculous amount of profit.

Luna crossed her arms over her chest and glared at Luther. “I don’t know what you’re looking for here. Shouldn’t you be used to this by now?”

“Why would I be used to it?” His eyes flicked away from her, as though he were guilty about something. “Do you think I frequently have mobs at the front door?”

“Again, it doesn’t matter what I think. But you are an earl and you’ve lived here your entire life, at least I assume. So

you must have dealt with this before?” Why did his face turn bright red when she said that?

Perhaps the last mob had been for something unsavory. It wouldn't surprise her. But either way, he still had a lot of people waiting for him to make a move, and she didn't want to stand here with him until they went away. Mobs rarely did that. And then they would wait out Luther until they ran out of food. She'd be starving again, and Magda wouldn't give her anything to eat because she wouldn't have any story to tell the nosy old woman.

Luna nodded at the door again. “So, are you going to open it or what?”

He took a long, steadying breath, then nodded. “Let's open it together.”

## CHAPTER 14



**D**amn it, he'd hoped to keep all this away from her, at least for a little while longer. The mob at the front door was inevitably going to reveal his darkest secret and the last thing he wanted was for Luna to have anything to hold over his head. He still needed her to be here to convince his aunt that he wasn't a failure.

But of course, life rarely worked in the way he wanted it to. Luther knew the muffled shouts from the other side of the door would be impossible for her to hear. But he could hear their chants just fine.

"Send out the beast!"

Obviously, his wolf had done something horrible while it roamed the woods. And the damned creature wouldn't tell him what it was. He'd stood in front of the door arguing with its reflection in the doorknob for ten minutes before she wandered over and caught his muttering. The creature didn't want to let him know what had happened. Instead, it wanted him to open the door and get into a fistfight.

More blood. That was always the wolf's answer to every problem.

The last thing he needed was to get into a fight with Luna standing beside him. What if she got hurt? Sure, she looked like she could handle herself, but an entire mob at the front of his door? The men there might want retribution and he'd never forgive himself if she was injured because of his folly.

He didn't have much of an option though, now did he? She was staring at him. They were screaming for him to come out.

What would his father do?

The beast inside him grunted, and thoughts mingled with his own. They both knew that his father would have walked out into the crowd with his head held high. But he also never would have been in this situation. He'd always known how to control the wolf.

Luther, however, was a failure in that regard. He'd kept the town going even better than his father, but their price for wealth was that a werewolf ran through their streets at night, looking for its next victim.

He didn't know if that was a trade they were willing to make. The loss of loved ones wasn't worth a single penny that he gave them.

"All right," he muttered, staring at the door as though it were going to bite. "I can do this."

But he couldn't. Not really. He would freeze the moment he saw them and their anger. Their disappointment. Just like his father had always looked when he did something out of the ordinary. It was the reminder that he was a failure, and no matter what he did...

A hand came down on his shoulder, squeezing tightly, though still comforting in its warmth. "Open the door, Luther. I'll be right beside you the whole time."

Why was she being so nice to him all of a sudden? He wasn't asking for pity. He knew how to be a good earl, and the fact that she had to tell him what to do already stung his pride. But damn it, he was so afraid he'd open that door and something horrible would be revealed. That he really was the monster, and that by not controlling his beast, he'd caused more harm than good.

Luther wrapped his hand around the doorknob and pushed the front door open.

The mob beyond held at least twenty-five men. They all had varying degrees of anger in their expression, although a

few of them surprised him with fear. He didn't want them to fear him, and it also didn't bode well for what was about to come.

Channel your father, he told himself. He stepped out of his manor and into the crowd as though he didn't have a care in the world. He strode through the men until he stood in the very heart of their gathering. Luther kept his hands raised above his head, so they knew he wasn't reaching for a weapon. Or worse, changing into the monster they feared him to be.

"You came a long way," he said, though his voice carried over their mutterings. "You can air your grievances, but I won't allow you to accost my family or the people who work here. Speak your peace."

"Our peace?" One man lunged forward out of the crowd. He held a pitchfork in his hand, the very first thing that made Luther uncomfortable.

But then the details of the man made Luther worry. His eyes were hollow and sunken into his head, dark circles ringing them like kohl. His clothes hung off his frame, and that didn't seem right. He'd never seen a man like that in Dead Man's Crossing. Wild hair covered his head, the curls creating a halo of darkness around him. His beard was unkempt, and Luther swore there were bits of food still clinging to his lips.

"Yes," Luther replied, edging backward slightly. "Your peace. Why else would you come to my home if there wasn't something you wished to tell me? You know this is the first place to come when there is trouble."

"You speak of trouble as though you already know what happened." The man lifted the pitchfork and lowered the tines until they faced Luther. "Why do I feel like you do know why we're here, Earl of Dead Man's Crossing?"

Well, he didn't have a response for that. He had a sneaking suspicion why they were here, and it made his entire body ache with the thought of it. He feared they were here because of something the wolf had done. Cattle lost and killed with claws and teeth.

Although... he'd always thought the villagers would assume there was a pack of wolves that moved into the region rather than jumping to a werewolf. They knew the legends, of course. They marked their doors with blood every full moon, just in case. But they hadn't seen a werewolf in this region for almost two generations. Since Luther's grandfather.

"I don't know why you're here." Luther carefully selected his words, so he didn't fan the flames of anger even hotter. "I ask for your patience as we work together to understand each other. You did nearly break my door down trying to get my attention."

Another man stepped forward, and this one Luther recognized. He was the son of the butcher, a rather handsome young chap with clothing that was a little too snug. Perhaps that's why all the girls fawned over him. Or perhaps it was the shocking mop of blonde curls atop his head.

Either way, those blue eyes caught upon him and Luther couldn't look away. "You said we were safe," the young man snarled. "You said you would keep us safe from all the things that used to plague Dead Man's Crossing. And you failed."

Stunned silence rang after those words. The mob of people watched him to see what he would say or do. And Luther was completely and utterly dumbfounded.

Safe? Of course, he was supposed to keep them safe. That's why he always reminded everyone to keep with the old ways, but no one wanted to listen to him anymore. He'd done his part. He went and labored in the fields with them when he could. That was his job.

And as Luna had reminded him, Luther was the sole reason their entire region prospered. He made the right deals so that all the wheat and produce they harvested went to the best tables. He didn't keep any of the wealth so that they could have more in their pockets. What more did they want from him?

He straightened his shoulders and, for a moment, it felt as though his father's soul took hold of him. These people had to

recognize that the Earl did more for them than sit in his office signing paperwork.

He looked the young man in the eyes and didn't hesitate when he replied. "I do keep you safe. That's my sole purpose as your earl, and I have never failed you."

"Does this look like safe to you?" The disembodied voice came from somewhere deeper in the crowd.

Movement rocked through the swells of people and suddenly, a body fell through them. The young man had once been a farmer. He could see that in the musculature of his body. But that was the only thing that was easy to tell. The rest of the young man had been eviscerated with claws and teeth. His hollow stomach lacked any entrails or organs, and his face had been shredded beyond recognition.

This was not the work of a wolf pack. They devoured men if they could catch them, absolutely, but they never did this.

The thin gasp that came from behind him reminded Luther that he wasn't alone in this. The villagers surrounding him had already seen this body, but Luna? She shouldn't have to look at the remains of a farmer like this. The grisly sight would haunt her for the rest of her days.

"Go inside," he snarled, turning back to her only for the briefest of moments. "This is work for men."

She squared her shoulders even though her pale face had turned slightly green. "The work of men is no secret to me, Earl of Dead Man's Crossing. I'll do no such thing."

"You shouldn't see this." He tried his best to convince her with his words, but... how was he supposed to do that? She'd already seen it.

"Just because I'm a woman doesn't mean I'm not capable of seeing a dead body." She pushed through the crowd to his side and he swore it sounded like she added, "It wouldn't be the first time, anyway."

To his complete and utter shock, she stood right next to him with her hands on her hips, stared down at the man at their feet, and tilted her head to the side. She didn't just suffer



through having a dead body close to her. She actually looked at it. Contemplating all the details of the horrible thing that had happened to this very poor and very unfortunate man.

Who was this woman?

The man who had thrown the body shuffled forward. Luther didn't recognize him either, but he doubted he'd see any of the villagers who knew him well. They wouldn't dare accuse him of anything unsavory. They already knew him well, and Luther wasn't a killer. His wolf, on the other hand... Well, he couldn't speak for that one.

This man was better groomed than the others. His long, dark hair was tied at the base of his neck and his dark eyes saw right through Luther's very soul.

With a knowing grunt, the newcomer nodded to the body. "This happened a few nights ago. Poor boy was brought in from the fields by his family, but they swore they heard him yelling 'wolf' as he died. I've seen a lot of pack attacks back in my homeland. I've seen men killed by ten wolves. None of them look like this. Care to explain?"

Luther started to sweat. His underarms felt too sticky, and a droplet of dew already beaded on his temple. "Why would you think I know anything about this?"

"Cause you're the Earl of these lands. Aren't you supposed to fix situations like this? Cause, again, it doesn't look like a wolf to me." The man's eyes narrowed, and it felt as though Luther were being accused of something terrible. Of murder.

Damn it, how did this man know? How had he seen right through Luther's carefully laid defenses?

Before he could think of any response, however, Luna stepped between the two of them. "I've seen wounds like this before. Looks like you have a werewolf problem."

And just like that, his stomach dropped out of his body. His entire face paled and his equilibrium tilted to the left. Everything he'd eaten that day pressed against the back of his throat, and he worried that he would throw up all over Luna's back.

Why would she say that? Why would she even know what a werewolf kill looked like?

The man who'd just spoken stared at him, watching every single reaction as though he were giving everything away. But he wasn't. Was he?

"Hm," the dark haired man said. "Strange you'd say that. Dead Man's Crossing used to have a real problem with the werewolves in this area. We haven't seen one in a long time, and I'm curious how this happened."

Luna shrugged. "It's an awful thing to deal with, that's for sure. But I don't think you can pin a werewolf attack on anyone unless you saw them change. They're almost impossible to tell when they're in their mortal form."

"And why do you know all this?"

Perhaps she realized that she was becoming a suspect. Luna made an unimpressed face and rolled her eyes. "I had an unusual upbringing. You could say that I was taught all this, but I learned it from the nuns. My sister is one of the official vampire hunters of the Church, and I'm sure you know that if I were a werewolf, she'd have killed me a long time ago."

That seemed to satisfy the man, although it didn't satisfy Luther's curiosity at all. She'd grown up in the convent? Where did she learn about creatures like him?

But then, of course, the man's attention returned to their original suspect. Luther.

"My lord, I think you know we all want answers for this horrible tragedy." The dark haired man took an ominous step forward, followed by the man who held the pitchfork.

"I understand that. I also want answers. That man was under my care, and I promise you, I will find the man responsible for this." He cleared his throat. "Or beast."

"And I think you'll also understand that we need to make sure you haven't followed in your family's footsteps. We all know the legends about your house."

Shit. People still remembered that?

Luna dodged in front of them yet again. “Luther has been with me all the nights of the full moon. I can attest, he hasn’t been out roaming the fields if that’s what you’re accusing him of.”

All the men in the crowd hesitated before someone asked quietly, “And just who are you, ma’am? We ain’t never seen you around these parts before.”

Luther should let her answer. She had control of the situation far better than he did. Yet, somehow, he couldn’t keep his mouth shut.

With a horrible cough, he nearly shouted in response, “She’s my wife.”

## CHAPTER 15



Luna didn't think she'd ever been so shocked as the moment she heard an earl call her his wife. Wife! That wasn't part of the plan at all, and this man thought he could claim they'd already gotten hitched?

No. She wouldn't abide by that. Lying about her interest in him was easy, but pretending they had a history was an entirely different deal than what he'd asked for. What game did he play now? Did he think she'd go along with this?

Considering the crowd holding their breath around them, Luna didn't have a choice at the moment. But soon she would drag him back into the manor and blister his ears.

First, she had to deal with this problem.

Plastering a smile on her face, she tried to pretend she was Maeve. "Gentlemen. I think this has all been a horrible misunderstanding, and I fully appreciate how heroic you all have been. Rushing to the aid of a fallen friend is a sign you all uphold a sense of honor that should be illuminated in history books. Now, I assure you, the Earl and I will look into this matter and we will speak with each and every one of you to understand what has occurred here."

Was this how easy it was for Maeve? One second they were an angry mob, ready to throw pitchforks and burn down the manor. And the next, they stared at her with slack jaws and glassy eyes.

All she'd done was straighten her shoulders and smile at them, for heaven's sake. Luna wasn't even a traditionally

beautiful woman! They should at least fight her on this, but no. They all seemed to fall under her spell.

Good enough, she supposed. Luna touched a hand to her heart and added, “I am genuinely moved by your willingness and loyalty to your friend. You have my word that we will get to the bottom of this matter. But in the meantime, please take care of yourselves. Dead Man’s Crossing would be less remarkable if it were missing its guardians.”

Okay, maybe that was laying it on a little thick. No one seemed to notice, or if they did, they didn’t mind that she’d basically ripped pages out of a history book to make sure they all felt as though they were the heroes in this story.

“We’ll hold you to that,” the dark haired man said, pointing a finger in her face before turning around.

Just like that, they all filtered out of the manor’s courtyard and went home. Not a single one looked back at her, and none of them hesitated as they left. It was as if her words had soothed the beasts inside them, or whatever other poetic thing she wanted to come up with.

Three of the men hooked their arms underneath the dead body and dragged it out with them. That poor boy. She’d seen a werewolf kill before when she lived in the convent and they’d tried to teach her alongside Maeve. She was so big, they thought she was a natural born hunter.

Unfortunately for them, she wasn’t.

Popping her hands onto her hips, she watched them go with a calculating eye. Luna had already intended to throw fists if one of them turned around. Let them try to do what they’d planned. She’d knock a man out and lay him flat on the ground for being a fool. It wouldn’t be the first time, and it certainly wouldn’t be the last.

Once they were all out of sight, she turned on the Earl. Thankfully, Luther had remained behind her, and that saved her the time of having to find him. She’d have tracked him through the manor like a hunter on a mission if she had to, but this man would explain what the hell had happened.

She crossed her arms and stared at him. Silent. Calm. Just like the nuns in the convent had done to her when she was a little girl who had tried to sneak out in the middle of the night and they'd caught her.

He scuffed his foot on the ground, saying nothing but giving away far too much. "What?" he asked. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"You're going to explain everything, my lord," she said his title sarcastically. "An entire mob shows up at your house with a dead body in tow, and then you call me your wife. I think you better start from the beginning or I'm going to leave."

"You'll end up in jail if you do that."

She arched her brow. "Try me."

He paled until she thought he'd pass out before he nodded. "All right. Just not here. Come with me to my study and I'll... I'll explain everything."

Somehow, she had a feeling that she'd have to pull every last detail out of him before she understood what the hell was going on in this manor. But at the very least, he appeared willing to explain it all. She supposed that was a start.

As she trailed him through the halls, she wondered why he was even willing to tell her anything at all. She was the thief. The woman he'd put in his murder dungeon and then somehow struck up a deal with. He shouldn't tell her any of his secrets. She was the worst person to confide in.

He sat her down in his office and handed her an empty tea cup. Luther said nothing while he set a small tea kettle in the fire to boil, rather than calling for the servants, and she watched his shaky movements with a sudden realization.

Though she had tried to take from him, though she was clearly a person without morals, he had no one else. This was a desperate cry for help if he told her the truth, and that meant she should listen.

So she kept her mouth shut and put three cubes of sugar in her cup while she waited for the water.

His trembles didn't get any better. If anything, they got worse. She lunged upright to take the kettle away from him before he spilled boiling water all over himself. "Would you be careful, please?"

"Sorry, I just... my mind is elsewhere."

"On the mob that showed up at your front door?" she asked while pouring them both matching cups.

He wrapped his hands around the edges, apparently not feeling the burning heat on his palms. "On the body, actually."

Ah, right, of course. Most people would be horrified that they'd seen a man so brutalized. Luna supposed it was natural that he'd be shaken. Death was difficult to look in the eyes, especially when one was accused of being the person who had created the entire situation.

She sat down in front of him and decided if she wanted the truth, then she should give him the truth in return. "I've seen a murder by werewolf before. And I know that probably shocks you. My upbringing wasn't entirely normal."

His eyes flicked up from his hands, and it was the first reaction she'd seen from him that looked more like himself. "I did hear that correctly, then. You knew what had killed that man."

"My sisters and I are the daughters of witches." She held up her hand before he could ask her any questions, silencing him with the gesture. "My mother was a pagan, and no, she didn't do black magic. My lineage is one of strong, tall women who were capable of fighting if they absolutely had to. Kitchen witches, if you will. We cooked. We made spells into cookies that we'd give to children so they didn't have nightmares. But the Church didn't like that."

The memories still plagued her, running through her head as though they were still happening. "My mother was found out earlier than the others. She gave herself up so the rest of our clan could flee, but that eventually put me in the hands of the Church after they burned her. I'll spare you the details of what my sisters and I endured, but none of us are natural

women, if that makes any sense to you. We have fought our entire lives and live in the shadows with the dark things.”

She stopped there, letting him mull over her words. It wasn't easy to understand, she knew that. Most people who were aware of her situation didn't know how to respond when she told them.

Luna wasn't ashamed of being a witch. She wasn't ashamed of her upbringing or where she came from. The only thing that made her uncomfortable was the many years she'd spent in the clutches of the Church, trying to be something she wasn't.

With a deep breath, Luther set down his teacup and licked his lips. “You're a witch?”

“I am.”

“Like...” He lifted his fingers and waggled them in the air. “Curses flying in all directions and riding on brooms at night?”

“Not that kind of witch.” She had to work hard to not grin at the thought.

No one rode brooms through the air, not like that at least. She'd heard of witches trying, but they were never successful. The best they could do was gracefully float to the ground from the top of buildings. Beatrix had done that a few times.

She pointed to her ears. “Most witches have a very specific kind of magic. I can hear gemstones and jewelry singing. They're rather loud and usually quite rude, but it helps me steal them from people.”

“Ah.” He nodded as though that made all the sense in the world. “So you were going to steal some of my mother's old jewelry.”

“I was. They're very tired of being put away and not worn. Most of them want to be admired, you know.”

Luther chuckled, but then grew somber again. He looked back down at his hands, spreading his fingers wide, almost as though he could see something on them. “Thank you for



telling me your story, Luna. I suppose it makes all of this a little easier to admit.”

Her heart thudded hard in her chest. Once, twice, until she was certain he could hear it. What was he going to tell her? Surely not what she suspected.

“I’m the werewolf,” he muttered. “I killed that man when I accidentally locked you in the basement. You were supposed to be in the ballroom, away from the monster. Instead, I locked you in the room where I usually contain my beast. He got out and then did something before I could lock him up the next night. I’m not sure how to control it or what to do now that he knows how to get out.”

Oh shit.

He was a werewolf. He’d killed that man and that’s why he’d been so pale when he stared at the body. Not that she could blame him. Looking at your own victim while being accused of said murder must be extremely difficult. And yet...

She should run. It wasn’t safe in this manor of madness with a werewolf on the loose and a maniac running about.

“A werewolf?” she repeated, stunned by the sudden turn this conversation had taken. “You’re a werewolf?”

“My whole life, actually. I’m a born wolf, not made. Which, I suppose, makes all this even worse, considering my father trained me to be more careful than this.” He spread his fingers even wider until the digits curled like claws. “I never should have been so foolish as to let it out.”

“Right. Well.” What was she supposed to say? “I think it’s a little too late to ponder what might have happened if things were different.”

“It’s hard not to when you have blood on your hands.” He looked up from those hands to meet her gaze. “I’m so sorry you were dragged into all of this. And I should also explain that much of the wealth here in Dead Man’s Crossing comes from the aunt who is going to arrive here in a few nights. She helps fund my endeavors monthly, because she can. But also because she likes me.”

And there it was. The reasoning for all of this, even though he should have told her that from the beginning. This aunt wasn't bribed to keep his own freedom. The entire town rested on her shoulders now.

Luna let out a little growl that would have made the wolf inside him proud if it could hear her. "So what you're saying is that if I'm not convincing enough to your very esteemed aunt then not only is this town going to fall apart at the seams, but you're going to keep killing more people until the Church sends a hunter your way?"

He winced. "That's about the whole of it, yes. So you can see why I've been so intent on keeping you here with me."

Yes, she absolutely could see the reasoning. But that didn't make him right for doing it.

"You should never have dragged me into this." She sniffed loudly and straightened her shoulders. "Thankfully, you found a thief who still has a bit of a soul, and I wouldn't mind clearing my record. Now that I know all this, you're going to have to do more for me, Earl of Dead Man's Crossing."

"What's your price?"

"I just said it, Luther. I want my record cleared. No more people looking for me after this. When I'm done here, it better feel like I was never a thief and never caught for stealing in my entire life. Do I make myself clear?"

He nodded without question, and she felt a great weight lift off her shoulders. Luna hadn't realized how worried she was about leaving this place. Now, she didn't have to worry quite so much.

Luther cleared his throat. "I don't understand why you're handling this all so well. I told you that I'm a monster and you're shrugging it off and then making more deals."

She chewed on the inside of her lip, debating if she should tell him. Finally, she decided he should know it all. Why not?

"My brother-in-law is a vampire. I'm the daughter of a witch. My younger sister sees spirits and they tell her what to do. A werewolf isn't all that strange to me, Luther. What I find

strange is that you're expecting me to impress this aunt of yours with zero training. I grew up on the streets and in the Church. I have no clothing other than what I'm currently wearing."

"You what?" That snapped him out of his stupor. "I had noticed you were wearing the same clothing every time I saw you, but I assumed you just... had more of that than anything else."

"When would I have gotten clothing, Luther?"

"Well, shit," he muttered. "We've got to fix that, now don't we?"

"Before your aunt gets here preferably, but I don't know what you're expecting out of me to be honest." Leaning back in her chair, she crossed an arm over her chest and held out the teacup with the other. "Do we have a deal?"

He looked her over one last time before sighing and turning his gaze to the ceiling. "Why does this feel like I'm making a deal with the devil?"

"You probably are."

"Well then." He clinked their cups together. "To hell and back, Luna."

## CHAPTER 16



**L**uther hadn't expected her to be quite so... agreeable? No, that wasn't the word. He'd thought she would be an abrasive thief who thought that all nobility were only good for stealing from. Instead, he'd been given the chance to talk with an intelligent, impressive woman who had made the world bend to her own needs.

She hadn't even flinched when he told her he was a werewolf, and he couldn't remember the last time that had happened. Never. He'd never told someone about the darkest part of himself, but she made him think maybe he could.

The wolf certainly liked her. The damned thing had been whining in his head the entire time she took control over the situation. Suddenly, the beast saw her as more than a meal. More than someone it could hunt.

He dreamt the entire night about her toying with him. In more ways than one. Shaking off that dream had been one of the most difficult things he'd ever done in his life. He couldn't afford to get attached to her.

She was a shrewd, capable woman. Luna would take advantage of him if he let her, and he didn't want that.

Right?

No. He didn't want her to take advantage of him. That would be a horrible thing, considering he was an earl and she could get her fingers into a lot more power than she needed to control.

Nodding firmly at his own thoughts, he strode down the hall toward her room. She would need to be dressed for the occasion that barreled down at him like a horse that had freed itself from a buggy. His aunt would want to see a beautiful, demure young woman who looked forward to attaching herself to both his life and his name. He'd have to teach Luna manners first and foremost. Mistakes could easily be swept aside by telling his aunt that she'd grown up in a difficult situation.

His aunt always loved a bleeding heart story. Now, if only she didn't mind the monstrous ones, he'd be in a much better situation.

What if Luna accidentally told his aunt what he was? His steps slowed. That wouldn't be good. The anxiety of the entire situation swelled up again until he couldn't quite think straight. He needed to be sure that for the first time, he could trust someone else with this information. Sure, it would take a while to trust that Luna wouldn't tell everyone that she could.

But what if he could tell her anything in confidence? What if he didn't have to be alone again? Even having someone around that he could complain about werewolf things to would make a major difference in his life.

All this was worth the risk. He was certain of it, even though his stomach twisted with nerves. All he had to do was keep putting one foot in front of the other, and things would go his way. He'd be fine. She'd be fine. His aunt would never know what was going on here, and who knows? Maybe they'd make this deal permanent.

Determination riding on his shoulders, he stalked all the way to her room. Ready to tell her about the new development in his mind. She'd like this idea, he was certain. He was offering her a chance to become someone so much more than just a thief! She could do whatever she wanted with his money and he wouldn't care. He had enough of it, and his aunt was sure to give them even more if she married him. His aunt wanted grandchildren, even if that was from her nephew and not her son.

Luther might have forgotten to knock. He was so deeply embedded in his own thoughts that he just shoved the door open and strode into her room without a single moment of hesitation. As if they were already married and he'd done this a thousand times.

Except, she stood in the center of the room wearing nothing but her underclothes, and he was reminded he'd definitely never done this before.

All those freckles that dusted her face traveled down the entire length of her body. Her long limbs were hardened with layers upon layers of ropey muscles that banded over her arms, down her stomach, and braided over her hips. The wild tangle of her red hair plumed around her head, reaching nearly to her hips with riotous curls.

And good lord, her legs were stunning. Long and lean, he could see the muscles of her thighs flexing as she moved. She was a vision of strength and power, unlike any woman he'd ever seen in his entire life.

Her underthings were far too revealing. The sheer fabric of her bodice barely covered her breasts, and the bottoms should have been bloomers, but she'd cut off the fabric at the tops of her thighs.

She took his breath away.

Suddenly, all Luther could think about was what it would feel like to have those legs wrapped around his waist. He was tall enough. Strong enough to manage a woman like that, but also, he wasn't so prideful that he wouldn't let her throw him around if that's what she wanted. Hell, he'd probably enjoy it considering his past and how many women had thought him too strong. Too rough.

Could she be the only woman he'd ever met who would match him? The wolf lifted its head deep in his chest and let out a long, low growl. Yes, it wanted her just as much as he did.

Luna didn't react like a normal woman either. She didn't flinch away from him or scream in shock. She should have,

considering the thoughts running through his mind, but thankfully that wasn't one of her gifts as a witch. She had no idea how difficult it was for him to hold himself back. He wanted to lunge across the room like an animal and drag his hands down those muscles, just to see if they were as hard as they looked like.

"Luther," she calmly said, holding her arms over her chest. "What are you doing in my room, uninvited?"

"I... Uh..." Why wasn't his tongue working? Other than wagging at the banquet in front of him, obviously, but he didn't want her to notice how badly he was panting after her.

He wasn't an animal.

He'd promised his father that he would control the beast inside him and that meant he couldn't drool after a woman who looked like she'd stepped out of a wet dream.

Coughing into his hand, Luther tried his best to get control of himself before he answered, "I wanted to talk with you about the dress fitting."

Silence. Damn it, he should fill that, but he had no idea what to say that would make this situation seem less like he wanted to put her back into the basement.

She tilted her head to the side, brows furrowed in obvious concern. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, I just..." He gestured up and down at her body. "Perhaps you would feel more comfortable if you covered up? You're rather distracting."

And for the very first time since he had met her all those nights ago, he had the utmost pleasure of watching her cheeks turn bright red. Her freckles stood out, bright and dotted across the blush that spread down her throat to her chest.

"My god," he muttered before spinning around. He'd do something stupid if he looked at her any longer and he knew he'd never live it down. Luther wouldn't be able to forgive himself if he embarrassed them both.

Damn, though. That was a real woman.

“You’re that embarrassed?” she asked. Then came the sounds of fabric as she ripped what must have been the comforter off the bed and wrapped it around herself. “You can turn around now. Ridiculous man.”

Ridiculous? She had no idea what she could do to a man with a body like that. Sure, she might not be tiny, as she seemed to think every man wanted. But she was still stunning. Strong. Powerful in a way most women weren’t, but he suddenly wondered why they didn’t at least try to look like Luna. She was a goddess of old, walking through his manor in her underthings without a care that the Earl likely followed her with his tongue down by his feet.

He closed his eyes and squeezed them as tightly as possible. He could do this. He could look at her wearing nothing but a comforter he owned and not paw at her like some kind of crazed beast.

But he still turned with no small measure of fear. She looked... adorable like that. Every bit of her height didn’t matter when she held the bunched up comforter at her chest and glared at him as though he were the one in the wrong here. She wanted to hit him, he could tell, and he wouldn’t mind catching that attempt to strike him with a hand. Tugging her into his arms and then... then...

“Are you quite finished gawking?” she asked, clearly upset with him. “You said something about the man who’s going to fit me into a dress?”

“Yes, he’s arrived and would like to know where is most comfortable for him to fit you.” Luther shuffled his feet awkwardly. “He said it will be a bit of a challenge to sew something before tomorrow night, so he brought quite a few of his dresses that are already halfway done.”

“Really?” There went that brow again. “And did you tell him I’m quite a bit larger than most of his clientele?”

He’d have to be an idiot not to mention it. Luther didn’t care about her height or looks, but he knew both she and the dressmaker would murder him if she was a surprise to the gentleman waiting in his foyer.



“Of course I did,” he grumbled in response. “I’m not so much of a fool that I didn’t think of that.”

“I’m surprised you know anything about women’s fashion.”

“I know a lot of things you’d be surprised about.” And if his own face heated at the thoughts that danced through his head, the ones he wanted to surprise her with, then he would put it up only to embarrassment that he stood in a room with an unclothed, unmarried woman.

But if only he could sneak one more glance. One more peek at all that ivory skin and the lovely dots of her freckles. He shouldn’t even consider it. This was a deal, after all, but what if it could be more?

She already knew what he was, and she hadn’t run away screaming. Such a response was all he could ask for from any woman. Yet somehow, he wanted more from her. So much more.

Sighing, he told himself to leave. He had to go. Now. Move his feet and all he had to do was bend his knee. It really shouldn’t be that hard. He just... had to...

“Do you need something else?” she asked. “Or do you want me to drop the blanket again so you can be tongue tied in peace?”

“Yes,” he blurted, then realized what he’d said. Oh, no. He’d never been this horrified in his life. Luther slapped a hand to his eyes and backed out of the door. “No, I mean, no! Of course, I don’t want you to drop the blanket. You are a woman of means and I would never objectify you like that. You deserve respect, no matter what other people in my station would say.”

And she certainly didn’t deserve a werewolf like him in her life. Sure, she claimed her sister was married to a vampire. And considering she’d grown up as a witch, she had more tolerance to most things but... but...

No, he was trying to convince himself to stay. Luther realized the path his thoughts were going down, and that was

dropping his hand and watching while she lazily let the blanket fall out of her arms. It would slide down the lovely curves of her hips, trailing down velvet soft skin and over those mountains of muscle that were so damned lovely.

“I bet you would,” she replied with a laugh. “Come on, you don’t have to pretend with me. Everyone else has to believe this is a real thing, not us.”

Oh, but what if he wanted it to be a real thing? What if he wanted to see what she looked like in the morning, the afterglow still running through her veins as she rolled over and the sunlight caught on the fiery locks of her hair?

Luther shouldn’t even entertain the thoughts or dreams or hopes. He knew better than to think about a life that was anything other than what he’d lived.

His father had wanted the legacy to continue, but Luther knew this bloodline had to end. He couldn’t bring more werewolves into this world when he knew how monstrous the creatures were.

Slowly backing out of the room, he returned his hand to his eyes. When had he let it drop? He didn’t know, but probably somewhere in between thinking about her dropping that sheet and then hating himself for what he was.

“I’ll send the dressmaker up,” he stammered. “Be nice to him. I like the man.”

“I’m always nice to people. Just not to you, because you didn’t let me steal the things I wanted to steal.”

“Maybe someday,” he replied with a very forced laugh that sounded fake, even to his own ears.

Then Luther ran down the hall, away from the greatest temptation he’d ever faced. Thankfully, the arrival of his aunt would cool these feelings rather quickly.

## CHAPTER 17



“If you would stand still for a few more moments, my lady...”

She hated that he called her that. She was no one’s lady and this old man seriously needed to stop annoying her. Although, she couldn’t move either. What did he think she was going to do? Willingly poke herself with a hundred needles?

Luna couldn’t breathe because there were at least twenty needles poking around her chest like some kind of demented corset. And then there were the ones around her hips, supposed to give her a fuller figure, the man had claimed. The horrible points felt more like a punishment for not being curvy enough to satisfy.

He’d shoved ones longer than her fingers into the base of the dress. The dressmaker had made it very clear that every item he’d brought with him wasn’t cut yet, so they should all fit her figure perfectly.

This was the last one. The very last dress he’d brought and he could only take the hem up enough to roll it. Hopefully, the Earl’s aunt wouldn’t notice how shoddy the craftsmanship was.

But at least it was beautiful. The emerald velvet would hold on to her figure better than other fabrics. The heart-shaped neckline would hopefully hide how broad her shoulders were, and how large her arms were. At least he hadn’t added any other fabric anywhere else. Though she

would have to be very careful moving her arms or she'd rip the sleeves right off the dress.

Blowing out a long breath, she ignored the burning in her arms from having them raised this long. "Aren't there stands or something I could put my arms on?"

"A lady of your talents surely has no need to rest her arms after only a few moments of a fitting."

Yes, she absolutely did. And just because she had bigger arms than most women didn't mean she could keep them raised at her sides for hours. "If you really think about it, my arms weigh more than the other ladies you work on. So if you don't mind getting that stand..."

"You'll stay put the way you are. I'm almost done, anyway." He took the last pin out of his mouth and pointed at her with it. "Now stop moving, or I'll have to start all over again. Do you hear me?"

Why was this dressmaker the most terrifying man she'd ever met? He was tall and thin like a reed in a riverbed. His hair stuck straight up in little white tufts, while his horribly dark eyes melted his pupils into his irises. She'd never seen a man who looked like him before. Too pale. Too ghostly.

Maybe he was really a ghost. She'd have to ask Beatrix if there were any in this house when all was said and done.

"There, I'm done," he muttered before straightening. "You are my most difficult client yet, my lady, but I do believe I will make you the belle of the ball."

"I don't want to be the belle of any ball," she replied. "I just want to look like I pass."

"You'll pass. You'll be wearing one of my dresses. Now get it off or I won't be able to finish on time and then the Earl will have both our heads."

Luna took the dress off in a haze of sudden fear. This meant all of this was really happening. All of it would continue until she was standing in this same room, wearing the same dress. And then, suddenly, she was.

As if the night hadn't even fallen, another day passed in the blink of an eye. She stood in front of the same dress maker in the same dress. Except this time it fit her like a glove. Like it was made for her, and she supposed now it was.

"There. I'm a genius." The dressmaker crossed his arms over his chest and nodded. "Would you look at that? You almost look as though you were born into this. A natural beauty."

"Sure," she replied, staring down at the emerald green dress with a frown. "I don't know if I look good like this."

"You look lovely, however, that hair will have to be fixed."

What was wrong with her hair? She'd left it down for the whole ordeal, and that was something she usually got compliments on. If anything was pretty about her, it was the bright red curls that always fell in a lovely tangle around her face.

She touched a hand to the curls and frowned. "What do you mean, we have to do something with my hair? I like it like this."

"Yes, but that's not how the ladies of the court wear their hair. You should twist it up into a braid or something. Perhaps a low bun at the base of your head? Ask a maid." He propped his hands on his hips and gave her another once over. "I'll have to tell my friends about this. I've made you look like some kind of warrior princess."

Another voice interrupted them, the deep tones a clear sign that Luther was impatient. "I'm afraid there won't be time for anyone to do her hair. I thought you were going to do that."

The dressmaker turned on his heel, face bleeding into a startling bone white. "My lord! I'm a dressmaker, not a maid. I don't know the first thing about women's hair."

"I asked you to make sure she was ready."

"And I did." The man gestured at her from her feet to her head. "She's perfect."

Luther looked her over, and she swore something heated in his eyes. His brows drew down and for a moment, something else looked at her. Something hungry that wanted to devour her, but she wasn't sure whether it wanted to eat her flesh or something else entirely.

Goosebumps danced down her arms and not for the first time since arriving here, she realized how handsome he was. Luther might be a strange man with a murder basement, but he also had lovely sapphire eyes. A strong jaw. And his broad shoulders suggested he might actually be able to pick her up like the men in all those fairytales she used to love as a child.

Oh dear.

This would end badly, wouldn't it?

She looked at him like a man now. A real, flesh and blood man who was ridiculously attractive and, for some reason, wanted her to pretend to be his fiancé. Luna knew better than to get feelings over this complicated situation. She had her life, and it was a decent one.

Sure, she lived over an attic and yes, sometimes the city watch was looking for her. Most of the time she had to keep her face hidden because of all the wanted posters, but that didn't mean she had to fall under the spell of this alluring earl. Her sisters and Martin were ready to make a life with her, too. And that was a good life waiting for her to steal from this man.

Oh shit. She still had to steal that jewelry from him and somehow, that had gotten tossed to the side. She'd forgotten all about the plan to take those diamonds and whatever else she could.

Tonight, that would change. Luna had to get herself back together and step into the role of thief again. Otherwise, she didn't know what she would do. Or how she'd change in this strange place with its wolf lord.

She shook out her shoulders and gave the Earl a little spin. "Well? Do you think your aunt will mind that I look like this?"

Those heated eyes looked her up and down, and she felt as though he actually touched her. "No one will be able to keep

their eyes off you looking like that.”

Damn him for making her feel pretty. Luna rarely felt like this and this moment would be one she remembered forever. It was like a romance book that Beatrix loved to read so much. And she hated every second while her soul screamed that she was in love.

“I think people will stare for another reason, but sure. If you want to think it’s because of the dress.” Her bravado faltered as she touched her hair. “Do you think they’ll mind if my hair looks like this?”

“They will,” he replied, holding out his arm for her to take. “But if you put it up, I’m afraid I’ll be sorely disappointed.”

Well, that made her feel a little better, at least. Luna placed her hand on his arm and allowed him to whisk her away from the dressmaker and the memory of all those pins. They strode through the halls as though they’d done this a hundred times in their life.

She made him pause before the door to the dining hall, and quietly asked, “I don’t know what to call your aunt.”

He blinked at her. “You should call her Countess Fernsby. It’s my last name as well, though I’m realizing I probably never told you that.”

“You didn’t.” She took a deep breath and then asked another question. “Your aunt was married to an Earl?”

“They only had one son. Both my uncle and the boy died in an accident, so the title went to my father. Then to me.” He smiled down at her, the expression softening his usually hard gaze. Even the corners of his eyes crinkled. “Hence why she sends me a large sum. She’s an impressive woman, but I’ll let you make your own opinions on that.”

And then he pushed open the door.

He really should have asked if she was ready. Because she wasn’t.

The entire room glowed with candles and electric lights hanging from the ceiling. Crystal decanters filled with wine

were passed around like they didn't worry about affording the drink. And every single person in the room was beautiful.

She wished that thought was an exaggeration, but it wasn't. Every single person looked like they were kissed by the gods. Gifted with an overwhelming amount of beauty and wealth and power.

Luna did not belong in this room.

Luther tightened his hand over hers, practically dragging her into the hall where they both towered over everyone. She looked down at the tops of the other women's heads, for heaven's sake. She couldn't stand here and think she wasn't an amazon in the middle of a dinner party.

"Luther!" an elderly woman called out from the back of the room where the servants had set up plush chairs beside the fireplace. "Come in, darling. You're late!"

"Ready?" he asked out of the side of his mouth.

"Absolutely not." Not that she had any chance to back out now.

How did he walk through the crowd so easily? Luther kept a pleasant smile on his face and a bright air to him that Luna couldn't understand. He was as different as she was. And yet, somehow, he held himself with all the pride and strength of an earl.

He approached the white haired woman who didn't stand. Luna noticed that immediately. His aunt was all too comfortable sitting there while he bent on a knee and kissed her hand. "Aunt. It's always such a pleasure to see you."

"Oh, you flirt. You say that every time I darken your doorstep and somehow I still believe you mean it." She pulled her hand away from his lips and turned her attention to Luna. "Rumor has it you're engaged. The people in Dead Man's Crossing are claiming you're already married, but I know you wouldn't do that without my approval."

"I wouldn't dare." He stood quickly, then smiled at Luna. "This is my fiancé, aunt. Luna—"



And then she realized their error. He seemed to notice it at the same time too, his eyes widening as he realized he had no idea what her last name was.

Jumping into the fray, she interrupted him with a quick, “Luna Winchester, Countess Fernsby. It’s an honor. I’ve heard so much about you.”

The old woman’s nose tilted up and her eyes narrowed even further. “Well, aren’t you a presumptuous little thing?”

Oh no, had she done something wrong? Luther was already trying to introduce her, so she assumed it would be all right if she just... plunged in? Perhaps that was the problem. The nuns used to claim that women should always know they were not to talk unless they were properly introduced and then spoken to. Luna simply never lived that life.

Opening her mouth, she shut it again before squeezing her eyes shut. Luther had claimed he wanted her to be herself. That’s what he’d said, and she had to run with that.

This wasn’t her life. She wouldn’t mess up her own happiness if she did anything wrong.

Blinking again, she plastered a smile on her face and shrugged. “I’ve always been called that, Countess. I don’t think anyone would ever believe you if you claimed I was polite or meek.”

White eyebrows rose into her curly, dandelion puffed hair. But then the Countess did something remarkable.

She smiled back.

“Good, I always hated young women who pretend we’re all kittens when we’re really lionesses.” She held out her hand for Luna to take, and good lord, what did the old woman expect her to do with that?

Luna glanced over at Luther, but he was no help. All he did was stare at her with wide eyes and then flick his gaze back to his aunt’s hand. As if that would give her any hint of what she was supposed to do in this situation.

She rolled her eyes briefly to the ceiling before taking Countess Fernsby's hand in her own and dropping a kiss to the old woman's knuckles. "From one lioness to another, it is good to see a sense of the wild in another woman."

Gasps echoed around her. A few other women fanned themselves as though she'd committed a horrible sin. But the Countess threw her head back and laughed with delight. "My goodness, Luther! You've found an absolute delight!"

Thank god she'd been entertaining at the very least. Luna still had a feeling she'd done something wrong. At the very least, she'd taken any of the attention off Luther. Considering the calculating expressions on some of the men's faces when they walked in here, she guessed that the women weren't the only lions in the room.

He ran a very successful, but very basic, town. These men likely wanted to know how, and they'd come at the very worst time. Death had always haunted the Crossing, but never so close.

At least no one would look at him and wonder why everything was going so smoothly when his entire town was in turmoil. Instead, they were looking at her and wondering why the Earl would waste his time with a woman who looked like she might split her dress open down the back at any moment.

The Countess still smiled at her, then waved a hand. "Go introduce your new bride to your friends, my dear. Let them know I find her delightful."

Well, that sounded promising. Luna hadn't expected that to go quite so well, although she assumed the old woman would have more tests and trials, eventually. For now, however, she seemed to have dismissed them.

Luther put his hand on her lower back and maneuvered her away from his aunt. Only once they had put a healthy distance between them did he sigh. "That went better than expected. Are you ready to meet more?"

"No." She straightened her shoulders, though. "But I guess if they want a show, then I'll give them one."

## CHAPTER 18



**L**uther shouldn't be quite so surprised that she'd done well. He'd already seen for himself that she was a very resourceful young woman, and nothing seemed to shake her. But of course, he was a little nervous. His aunt could tear down even the strongest warrior.

The thief hadn't budged. She'd looked his aunt in the eye, acted like a man in response to her offered hand, and even then didn't care that everyone had laughed. So many people in the room had written her off at that moment.

Not him.

The instant she'd taken his aunt's hand in her own, he had felt a warmth bloom in his chest that was undeniable. She cared about what his aunt thought, and the way she held the old bat's hand had made it very clear that Luna wanted to take care of her.

He'd never seen a woman like that. Too many of the fluttering butterflies around them only cared what people would think of them. They didn't think of others, only themselves and how they were perceived.

Luna never stopped surprising him. Halfway through the night, his chest started hurting every time he looked at her, and he couldn't quite figure out why. Luther continually rubbed at it, trying to ease the muscle that bunched between his ribs. But maybe it wasn't muscular after all.

She made her way back to his side, all strength and confidence radiating off her in waves like her red curls, which

had only gotten larger throughout the night. “I’m going to get some air,” she murmured.

And just like that, she disappeared from the crowd.

He looked around at his family and their friends. When had they all seemed so dull? Every bit of their clothing wasn’t nearly as vivid as Luna’s hair. Their words were too quiet and not said with enough intention. The more he looked at them, the less he liked being around them.

On the tail of that thought came the realization that he didn’t have to be around them if he didn’t want to be. So he stopped.

Luther glided through the crowd as if he were walking on a cloud. The ties and chains which had held him in place for so long all snapped at the same time. He was released from his torment, released from all his responsibilities. All because a single woman called to him like a moth to a flame.

Where had she gone? His flame haired thief disappeared all too easily for his liking, though he realized there was nothing he could do to stop her. She’d slipped into his life in much the same way. A sneaking shadow who wanted to steal from him, and then became a rather important part of his life.

The balcony. That was the only place he knew around here that would give her some privacy. Air, she’d said. And he could only assume she was out there looking at the stars while trying to get her heart rate back to normal.

Luther stepped onto the balcony off the dining room and all the breath whooshed out of his lungs. He’d never seen her in starlight like this, and maybe it was the wine from the party talking, but he’d never seen her so beautiful. With moonbeams dancing off her shoulders and tangling in the long locks of her hair, she looked like some goddess of old that he’d stumbled upon.

He wanted to worship at her feet.

“I’m so sorry to interrupt,” he breathed as he closed the door behind him. “But I realized air sounded better than being in that stuffy room with my relatives for a moment longer.”

“Why?” She looked over her shoulder, eyes curious and relaxation dripping through her tones. “I have my own reasons for not wanting to embarrass you. But you come from those people. That life.”

“Just because I was born into it doesn’t mean that I like them all that much.” Luther strode across the balcony until he stood beside her. He braced his arms on the railing and looked up at the stars, leaning as though he didn’t feel like his entire life had turned upside down. “They wouldn’t understand anything that I’ve gone through, anyway.”

“I suppose not.” She leaned as well, mimicking his pose. “That took a thief and the daughter of a witch.”

He chuckled. “I suppose it did.”

Quiet settled between the two of them, and unlike in the room he’d just left, the quiet felt nice. They weren’t trying to think of something else to say or how to keep the conversation going.

They were looking at the moon.

His wolf lifted its head and stared up at the glowing orb through his eyes as well. The happiness he felt in that moment was a lovely mixture of his own and the beast’s. When had he ever felt the creature be happy? Never. It hated that sliver of moon, which meant it was still trapped inside his body and couldn’t seek the freedom that it desired.

He felt her eyes on him the moment before she asked her question. “Do you feel something even when the moon is like this?”

“Always. It calls to me.” He cleared his throat, then shook his head. “No, that’s not quite right. I remember sitting in church for the first time when I was a boy, and the priest kept talking about how God is a feeling. You can sense him when you’re in holy places or whatnot. Even as a child, I didn’t think I could ever feel God. Not until I looked up at the moon and that was when I felt it.”

He didn’t know how to explain it other than that. He touched a hand to his chest, right over his heart. That was

where he'd felt it then and where he felt that power even now. A tugging. A sensation of not being alone and that he was perfect the way he was.

Why hadn't she said anything?

He glanced over to see her staring up at the moon, a curious expression on her face. Almost as though she were desperately trying to feel what he felt. "My mother used to worship the moon goddess. She called her Cerridwen, although some people think the goddess is a white sow, not the moon."

"Did she now?" He wanted to know more. He wanted to know everything about her life before all this. "Your mother was a pagan, you said?"

"Descendent of the ancient Celts. She followed the old ways, although many wanted to hang her for it." She shrugged. "And then they did. I couldn't even see her before they took her away. All that remained was a single letter she'd scratched while they were banging on her door. She'd sent me off into the woods to collect mushrooms. I came back to a house that had been torn apart and a letter hidden underneath a secret floorboard with a bag of food to keep me alive."

"Good lord." His heart clenched at the mere thought.

She'd been a child. A little girl with a plume of red hair who wanted her mother. She'd wanted to be hugged and held like every other little girl he'd met in his life. And instead, she'd been given a life of hardship and turmoil.

"What happened after that?" Luther asked, although he wasn't sure he wanted to know.

"I ended up on the streets like every other lost child without parents. Took a while for me to give up, but when I did, I knocked on the door of the Church. Made the mistake of telling them who my mother was and what had happened. After that, it was years of trying to exorcise the demons out of me." Another shrug. "They wanted to break us, my sisters and I. They thought we were witches like our mothers. I was the biggest, even then. They tried to train me to be a warrior, but I

wasn't very good at it. All those singing jewels. They're rather distracting, you know."

He hadn't even thought of that. The room he'd brought her into had been dripping with gemstones and wealth. "Was it bad?" He swallowed hard. "Being in the room with all my family?"

"I've gotten good at ignoring their singing." She smiled at him, although the expression didn't quite reach her eyes. "They want to be stolen, you know. For some strange reason, necklaces and rings hate to stay on the same body. They all want to be passed from person to person because eventually, people stop admiring them. They want something new and then they put the ring in a box and never take it out again."

So that was why she felt such a connection to them. Luna was the ring that had been put in a box that no one wanted to take out. She wasn't... He refused to let her become that to him. Not when she had suffered so much.

His hands dangled next to hers off the balcony. With the tiniest movement, he shifted his fingers until their pinkies touched. "I think it's magical that you can hear them sing. It's really wonderful."

"You wouldn't be the first to think that." She moved too, tucking her pinky underneath his own. Almost like they were holding hands.

A knot in his chest loosened. Just a bit. Enough so that he felt as though he could breathe again, like he hadn't taken a deep breath for years.

Luther blew out a long breath. "Well, I'm glad it wasn't too distracting for you. I know it's difficult to walk into a room of my family and hold your own. But you did."

"I know." She reached between her breasts and drew out a single ring with a ruby the size of a coin. "Although I'll be honest, I still lean on my old habits. Should I give this back?"

He recognized the ring. His great uncle wore it because he swore it had magical healing powers, and the old man rarely went anywhere without it.

Grinning, he took the ring from her fingers. He had a feeling, no matter how many times he exposed her to his world, that she'd always be a thief. "I'll leave it on the table before he leaves. He'll be none the wiser."

"Sorry." She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and curled her finger around his a little tighter. "Old habits."

"Surprisingly, I don't mind." Luther didn't know when he'd accepted her odd habits, but he didn't care that she'd stolen something from his great uncle. If it made her happy, she could take a thousand other things from that room and he'd swear up and down that he had no idea where anything went off to.

She was happy right now, and that's all that mattered.

"We should probably get back inside," she murmured. But her finger didn't let go of his. "Thank you for coming out to check on me. It almost feels like we're friends, even though we've had a rather tumultuous history."

His stomach clenched. "We are friends. Truly, Luna. I find you a remarkable woman and I count myself lucky that you fell through my ceiling."

"Oh." Her eyes widened. "Well. I'm glad to have you as a friend, too, Luther. It's good to know people in high places. Just in case I find myself back in a cell after all this is said and done."

He wouldn't ever let her rot in a cell like so many thieves did. But then again, Luther realized he didn't intend to let her go. He wanted her to stay here with him. With his ridiculous family while she stole jewelry and he had to find creative ways to put that jewelry back on their hands or necks.

This night had become more fun than any other night he could remember. Losing that felt as though he had lost a future that he would give his left arm to have.

She slipped her hand away from him and then moved back into the crowd. Luna stood a head taller than everyone else in there, but she still smiled with a warmth that charmed everyone. They no longer cared that she was a giant.



They cared that she looked at them. Talked to them. Gave them attention so they could return and claim they'd made a friend of her.

Eventually, however, the night had to come to a close. Luna said her goodbyes in the dining room while Luther walked his family out. All of them left, some staggering after drinking far more of the wine than they should. But his aunt remained behind.

Her curled fingers clutched his bicep as she was ready to leave. "Luther, a word if you don't mind."

Here it was. This was the moment when she'd remind him that he had a duty to his family and to his title. He couldn't marry a woman like Luna, though at least he was trying. And for some strange reason, he was already angry at his aunt for even thinking that he couldn't marry Luna. Sure, she wasn't like them. That was part of her charm. Part of the reason why he'd felt more alive in the past week than he had for most of his life. Combined.

"What is it, Aunt?" he asked, hoping that his words weren't too short.

"That woman. Luna. She's rather different from us, don't you think?"

Damn it, he'd been right. He'd known what his aunt would say, and that stung. "She is. I think that's what makes her interesting, though."

This was the first time he'd ever stood up to his aunt. Luther always bowed to whatever she wanted in his life because he needed her money, and the sudden courage to tell her how he felt made him feel stronger. Like a better man.

He straightened his shoulders and towered over her. Every inch the werewolf that his father had made him. He wasn't only an earl, he reminded himself. The power of the moon ran through his veins, and maybe he wasn't a celt like Luna, but he damned well still worshiped it.

His aunt lifted a brow, staring him down with that courage that had gotten her through a lifetime of hardship. "Settle

down, boy. I know you find her interesting and I do as well. I think she's good for you, Luther. You're acting more like a man than you ever have, rather than the shadow of the boy your father made you."

All the bravado whistled out of him like she'd stuck a pin into his chest. "Excuse me?"

"I know you thought I would deny you the right to marry her, but I know a love match when I see one." His aunt released her hold on his arm, stuffing her hands into the folds of her skirts. "I would be doing you a disservice if I didn't warn you that the world won't be easy for the two of you. People will look at her and laugh, or perhaps they'll point. Your children will be regarded as unfit. This path you've chosen isn't an easy one. Not just for you, but for her as well."

"I know that." He did, and it hurt his very soul to know that even if this turned into something real, like he desperately hoped it would, that Luna would suffer for it. Either way, she would suffer. "All I want is for her to be happy."

To his horror and shock, tears gathered in his aunt's eyes. She patted his cheek before whispering, "I always feared you'd turn out like your father. He was a cold man and he never once saw the treasures of his own life. I'm so glad you grew up to be like your mother. She was a gem in a world full of fake pearls."

And with that, his aunt left. As though she hadn't ripped his heart out with her wrinkled hands.

## CHAPTER 19



**S**he'd gotten too caught up in the novelty of having an earl's attention. Luna needed to get this situation back under control and remind herself that the entire reason she was here wasn't to start having feelings for an earl, but because she needed to steal some diamonds to keep herself and her family alive. That was the entire point.

Some part of her realized she was running away from her emotions. Luna knew there wasn't a single thing healthy about reacting this way. Luther was a good man and there wasn't any reason for her to be afraid of having feelings for him. After all, she could do a lot worse than an earl. Even if they never had romantic feelings for each other, at the very least, he'd be a good husband who could keep her out of jail.

But that was stupid. No one would let an earl marry her. At best, she'd be his mistress. She'd drag him into the drama of her life and then he would regret ever having met her.

The perfect time to get back on track was when he told her he'd be going into town for the day. Sure, he'd invited her to go with him, but Luna had told him she was feeling a little under the weather and he'd believed her. Why? She'd never know. The man trusted her far more than he should.

Luna waited at least a few hours after he'd gone. The servants would watch her, considering she hadn't been alone in the house for a while. Then, even they seemed to forget there was an unknown woman among them. They cleaned. They cooked. And completely disregarded her presence among them.

Perfect.

She snuck out of her room and down the halls. Somewhere in here were the Earl's rooms, and she intended to find those damned diamonds.

“Yes, come find us!” the necklaces sang. “We haven't been seen in so long. All we want is to wrap around your pretty throat and let everyone see us. Please!”

How ridiculous. She wasn't going to wear them, and they knew it. She'd told them a million times. But even if she wasn't the one to wear them, the necklaces still wanted to be released from wherever he had hidden them.

She still had to find the room, though.

Footsteps echoed from down the hall. Luna ducked behind a curtain and held her breath. Surely the Earl hadn't returned so soon? She kept her back pressed against the wooden alcove that was meant to be a window seat and waited until she saw the white and black uniform of a maid.

The woman's arms were laden with what looked like dirty sheets, and that meant she was very, very close to his rooms. Who else would have a maid to clean for them?

Good timing, she supposed.

Luna leaned out of the alcove, popping her head out from behind the curtain. So far, it looked like that was the only maid who'd been working. Hopefully, there wasn't another one lingering in his bathroom or whatever they cleaned on a daily basis.

She skirted down the hall, listening at each door until she found the right one. The gemstones were practically screaming for her beyond that polished surface.

“Let us out!” they shouted over and over until her ears were ringing with their hopes. Soon. Soon, they would be released from their prison.

Luna considered herself lucky to be the one that always got to release the gemstones. Really, every stone wanted something from her. But most wanted to see the sun again

because people kept putting them in a box. Locked away forever. She'd once met an opal that hadn't seen the sun in over a hundred years.

It had cried when she brought it out into the light. Then she'd walked by it once and the opal had shouted at her how lovely the world was, and that it hadn't changed all that much.

Sighing, she tried the door. "Please don't be locked," she whispered.

Of course it caught. She pushed a little harder, hoping the doorknob was just stuck, but no. Of course not. The damned thing was locked because the maid was actually good at her job and did what good maids were supposed to do.

Luna sighed and reached into her hair. Did people think locked doors would stop a good thief? A lock was nothing.

The pin that held her curls released the tumbling locks. She licked it for good luck, then bent down and set to work. She'd learned how to pick locks when she first moved onto the streets. A little boy with dirty hands had shown her how, and of course, she'd instantly wanted to do it all the time. Luna very quickly became the best lock picker around, which, of course, made the gangs want her to join them.

Then she'd taught Beatrix when she ended up in the Church, and her sister proved to be ten times better than her.

Thank goodness for family and sisters who worked in the Church. Otherwise, Luna would have been swallowed up by a gang. Or she'd have ended up dead on the streets of London with her head ten yards away from her body.

"There we go," she said as the lock clicked.

Luna hazarded one more glance around to make sure no one watched her before slipping into the Earl's private chambers.

Some part of her felt guilty for invading his personal space like this. He'd probably have invited her in if she tried hard enough, but that only reminded her that both of their feelings for each other were rather confusing, and she didn't want to think about that right now. He was her friend.

That was all.

That was all it could ever be.

The gemstones screamed so loud she dropped the pin from her hand and pressed her hands to her ears. “Stop it,” she scolded. “If you don’t stay quiet, I can’t find you! All I hear is screaming, and I need you to whisper. Quietly, now.”

Though they grumbled words that were rather rude, they quieted down enough for her to think. Luna dropped her hands from her ears, opened her eyes, and tried to convince herself that she wasn’t drinking in every detail of his most private chambers.

But of course she was.

The room was less ostentatious than she’d expected. His comforter was a dark green, set on a four poster bed made of a deep, rich wood. The floors were covered with plush carpeting with diamond shapes in yellow and green. A balcony let in plenty of light, while there was a desk in the corner and three wardrobes. Maybe that was what she’d expected. After all, the man did dress very well.

She took another step into the room and his scent hit her. Woodsy and mixed with fresh air, like he somehow carried a part of the wilderness with him at all times.

“Look for the stones,” she muttered to herself, but that wasn’t where her feet took her. Instead, she wandered over to his bed.

Yes, the maid had already made it. So there wasn’t an indent where he’d laid his head. Or where he’d gotten comfortable in the middle of the night, tossing and turning while he tried to fall into his dreams.

Her mind still made her wonder if he thought of her while laying in that bed. He’d made it clear that he was interested in her, at least as a friend.

Every fiber of her body had stiffened when he’d agreed that they were friends. Close enough that he had touched her pinky with his, as though he’d already sensed how much she needed him to comfort her.

Oh god, she was a fool. She only wanted to be around him now. Luna loved it when he looked at her with surprise or that small smile on his face when she'd done something that she wasn't supposed to do.

Every time he gave her even an ounce of attention, she felt special. Like she was a woman and not a masculine, tall creature who wanted to feel feminine but had no right to ask for that.

She touched her fingers to the pillow on his right side. Did he sleep on this side? The same as her? Or would he mind moving if she wanted to stay the night in his bed?

“Are you going to stare forever or are you going to find us?” the diamond asked. The gemstone was clearly grumpy that she'd gotten distracted.

“I'm going to find you,” she replied with a snort. “But if you don't rush me, then I might be able to find you faster.”

“I don't think you're even trying. You're just staring at his bed like you want to join him in it.”

Maybe she did.

Maybe it wouldn't be so bad if she indulged herself a little. Maeve might tell her that was foolish, but Beatrix would encourage her to follow her heart. Whatever her soul wanted, that's what had to be fed to be happy.

And she was happy here. A little too happy, and she feared that meant her normal life would never make her as satisfied as this one.

Sighing, she moved away from the bed and headed over to his desk. There had to be some hint there, or perhaps a hidden catch, that would let her find the right place to search. The gemstones were clearly in the room, but she couldn't quite hear where they were.

Surprisingly, Luther had a cluttered desk. Papers strewn all over it. Weights holding down giant stacks of paper so they didn't fall over the edge onto the floor. From experience, she knew people like this had a system. And if anything was out of order, then he'd know it.

Holding her breath, she took hold of the first stack and eased it to the side. She had to be particular. But she also had to get into the top drawer and the papers blocked it.

Nothing. The desk held literally nothing.

She spent at least thirty minutes pulling it all apart and putting it back together perfectly. No keys. No hints. Nothing.

He really didn't want anyone to find that diamond.

Well, she wouldn't want that either if she had a gem worth an entire town. Or more than that, honestly. That diamond could save the world or end it if it got into the wrong hands. Whose hands it ended up in, of course, wasn't her problem.

"Where are you?" she asked, knowing damn well the stones wouldn't be all that helpful. "What does it look like?"

"Dark," they whispered. "Very dark."

"Yes, I understand that, but can you give me any other details that might be more helpful than that?" Luna ran her fingers underneath the seams of the desk. There had to be something here. A trick button or knob that opened up a secret drawer. Anything that the nobles always liked to tuck into their secret places.

"Wood," a necklace whispered. "There's a lot of wood here. But only on top of us."

Ah.

Now that changed everything.

Luna narrowed her eyes and focused her attention on the floor. If there wasn't wood underneath them, maybe he hadn't put anything into the desk at all. Perhaps this was a secret floorboard, just like her mother had when she was little.

It took her the better part of another hour to find the right floorboard beneath his bedside table. Whoever had built it had done a damned good job of hiding it.

Luna grabbed a letter opener from his desk and wiggled it underneath the small gap. Using the metal as a wedge, she pulled it up and voila. There it was. A box about the length of



her arm that rattled extremely loud when she pulled it free from the confines.

“I can see light!” one necklace shouted.

But it was the diamond that muttered, “She still won’t get it open.”

If the box was locked, that definitely put a kink in her plans. Luna tried to open it, but the diamond was right. There was a small padlock on the side and then three little locks down the sides of the box itself. Someone really wanted this box to remain sealed unless the person opening it had the complete permission of the owner.

Which she didn’t. Of course.

Sighing, she put the box back underneath the floorboard and gently patted the top of it. “I’ll find the key. Then I promise I will come back for you and I will make sure you are on the necks of the most lovely women in London.”

Considering not a single one of the stones replied, she thought it rather safe to assume that they didn’t believe her.

Luna almost didn’t believe herself. Sure, she could take the box. It would smash open like anything else, or maybe she could have a blacksmith look at the locks themselves. But that wasn’t really thieving.

Taking the stones without him ever knowing? That was the only honorable way for a thief to steal something. She’d lived by that code her entire career and she wouldn’t change that now.

As she stood up and headed out of the room, Luna’s eyes caught on a family portrait that Luther had hung on the wall above his desk. His father’s eyes glared at her, as if the old man’s spirit knew she was here to take from his son.

“I won’t apologize for trying to save my own skin,” she muttered, then left that haunted room.

But the guilt still trailed her all the way down the hall.

## CHAPTER 20



**A**ll right, it was making him uncomfortable. Since he'd returned from town, Luna had been far too nice. She wanted to talk to him. Be by his side. Ask him questions about his life and how he lived it.

Now, Luther would admit, he liked this side of her. He enjoyed talking with her and telling her the things he wanted to do around his home. He had ideas for helping the people of Dead Man's Crossing that had never crossed his lips because... well. No one wanted to know. So, of course, it was a rarity for him to speak of these ideas without another person questioning why he was talking so much.

Unfortunately, he also had to question why she spent so much time with him suddenly. She was almost clinging to him the past couple of days and the entire effect had become unnerving.

He needed to get them both out of the house before he did something foolish. Like press her against the wall, slide her arms up over her head, and take what he wanted from her.

No.

He couldn't.

They were friends, just like she'd told him before. Friends didn't kiss each other until they couldn't breathe and friends certainly didn't want to do more to each other. He needed to get control over himself or he'd never focus on anything else again.

Which was why he stood outside the manor, waiting for her to come out. He'd sent a servant to ask her to come into town with him, like the coward that he was, hoping she'd say no again. Although, the longer he thought about her avoiding going with him last time, the more suspicious it seemed. She'd always portrayed herself as a curious woman. Why else would she become a thief, after all?

Curiosity had to always get the better of her. Otherwise, she was a cruel woman who wanted to take rather than to explore. And he refused to think ill of her.

The doors to the manor opened, and out stepped the woman who had grasped hold of his mind in an iron fist. She'd dressed for an outing, although the dress didn't quite fit her. The brown fabric was dull, but it made her hair appear even more bright. Almost as though even the worst of dresses couldn't dim the fire in her very soul.

"So you are coming," he called out to her. "I thought today might be a repeat of the last time I went into town."

"I'm feeling much better." She strode toward him, and he marveled at how she walked. Some might say she moved like a man, but he knew better than to think that. She moved with intention, broad shoulders and loose hips. Not at all like a lady, but like a woman who knew what she wanted.

If only he could say that she wanted him. Luther might have to shove his tongue back into his mouth or it would dry out.

Clearing his throat, he gestured to the carriage. "Come on, then! We have a busy day ahead of us. Hopefully I won't tire you out too much."

"Tire me out?" She lifted a red slash of a brow. "Luther. I think we both know that wouldn't be possible."

Oh, wouldn't he love to accept that challenge? He'd give anything to prove to her how easily he could tire her out if she would only give them the chance.

No, he couldn't think like that. Damn it! He had to get his head out of the gutter and focus on helping the people he

needed to help today. Otherwise... well. He'd not help anyone, and that wasn't the point.

He helped her into the carriage and then struck the roof with his fist. They ambled into movement, the horses at the front of the carriage protesting having to work today. He felt the same, honestly. But responsibility never slept. Even if he wanted to.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"Into town." Perhaps he was being vague on purpose, but he wanted to see how she'd react once they got to their destination. And it didn't take long to arrive at Farmer Barren's home.

Thankfully, the old man hadn't been one of the few plagued by the wolf. He'd expected Barren to know something about it, at the very least. But the old man kept his mouth shut on the entire matter and merely shook his head, then pointed to the field. This was all the last time Luther had seen him, of course, and things changed rather quickly in Dead Man's Crossing.

Hopping out of the carriage, he turned around to help Luna out. Except his outstretched arm was offered to air as he realized she'd already gotten out.

Luna hopped down, planted her hands on her hips, and asked, "So what's all this, then? It sure looks like a farm to me."

"That's because it is," the elderly voice echoed from behind the carriage. The black behemoth moved and revealed the haggard farmer on the other side.

"There you are, my old friend!" Luther strode over to him and clapped a hand to Barren's shoulder. "I wanted you to meet someone."

He noticed the moment Barren started sizing Luna up, and also knew the moment that the old man put two and two together.

Barren sniffed, obviously disappointed, and grumbled, "I think you would have done better with my granddaughter than

this one. She's like all the others, Luther. Meek and too fragile."

Just like that, Barren dismissed Luna. He turned around and walked away from the two of them toward the field, shuffling and grumbling about women who thought they were strong enough to marry men like that.

Luther's jaw dropped.

"I assume that's not how you thought this meeting would go?" Luna asked as she stopped beside him.

"Not at all."

"Just what were you supposed to be doing here? This is a farm, Luther. You're an earl."

"Yes I know that." He scratched the back of his neck. "I've been coming out here to help Barren with his work ever since his son died. He's a good man, and he wouldn't have survived the winter if I didn't. Let alone the rest of his family. He has enough mouths to feed, and his body is failing him faster than I'd like to see."

She nodded, then turned her attention to Barren. "So you're the one who plowed that field?"

"I did." Was she walking away from him already? Luther had to rush to keep up with her as she walked over to the fence where Barren was already setting up his chair. "Why does it sound like you're judging me?"

He did what he had to do to keep his town well and healthy. If that meant he had to roll up his sleeves and help, then so be it. She had no right to judge him for actively trying to assist the people who needed him most.

Barren snorted again, then turned his face away from Luna. He focused on Luther, pointing at the field. "You can start in on them again, boy. The ground needs to be turned before we plant any of the bulbs for the winter."

"Again?" He flicked his gaze back to Luna, returning his attention to the conversation at hand. "Luna, I don't understand your tone and I must request that you explain

yourself. Of all people, I didn't expect you to judge me for being capable of dirty work."

That caught Barren's attention. The old farmer focused on the two of them with a gleeful expression on his face. This would be the talk of the town. The Earl and his so-called "wife" were fighting in the middle of the field like commoners.

"I'm not judging you for working in the field." She pointed at his rows. "I'm judging you because that's shoddy work. He's not making you do it again because the ground needs to be shifted. He's doing it because your lines are about as straight as a child's drawing."

Well, it wasn't like he had any guidelines to keep him going straight!

"So?" If there was a hint of anger in his response, then it was only because she had a tone as well. Not because the sad fact that his lines weren't straight embarrassed him.

"So you're making it damned hard on your friend here to get anything out of the ground next year. You'll grow a labyrinth of food but you won't be able to pick any of it." She pressed a hand to her mouth, then gave up trying to control her laughter. Instead, she tossed her head back and let the mirth fly out. "Oh, Luther, I know you think you're helping this man, but I think you're doing more harm than good!"

He looked over at Barren for any help. The old man should know how to control a harpy like this. But he watched the expression on Barren's face turn from one of disapproval to one of utter shock.

The farmer waited until Luna stopped laughing before he asked, "You know how to tend a field?"

"I know a thing or two," she replied, still grinning wildly. "Now it would be my greatest honor if you would let me fix what this man has done to your poor ground."

"You want to what?" Now it was time for Barren's jaw to fall open as he watched Luther's young woman kneel in front of his chair.

“I know this winter is going to be hard. I’ve seen it in the eyes of the snowy owls returning too early. The woodpeckers are sharing nests, which I’m sure you know means a long, cold winter coming. Please. Let me do this so that Luther will stop fearing that you and your family will go hungry.”

“We’ve already gotten our food for this year,” Barren said, though the man was clearly dumbfounded.

“Then I’ll make sure you have enough next year.” She patted her hand on his knee and stood.

Luther put his hand on Barren’s shoulder and the two of them watched as she pulled her skirts up between her legs, tucked them into the waistband, and then walked over to the plow. Like she knew what she was doing. Like she didn’t care at all that ladies didn’t do this. Ladies shouldn’t know how to do this.

Farmer Barren opened his mouth, closed it, and then let it drop back open as she strapped herself onto the plow. “She’s not going to do what I think she’s going to do.”

“I think she is,” he murmured.

There she went. Surprising him again.

Luna leaned into the metal shoulder pieces of the plow and off she strode down the field. As if the plow hardly weighed anything. She walked along the darkened earth, pulling it behind her, and Luther knew first hand how difficult that was. He’d been sweating profusely by the end of the first row that he carved, and she was moving twice as fast.

“Who is this woman?” Barren asked him, looking up at Luther as though he’d seen a ghost. “This isn’t some young thing you found at a dinner party. Not like the town people are making it seem.”

“That’s a story and a half, old man.”

“Well, you’d best be telling it to me. Because the rest of the people here think you’ve gone soft and I expected her to be a glass figurine that had latched her claws into you. Good lord, Luther. You’ve found an ancient warrior for a wife and you never once told me about her.”

He didn't know what to say about that, but he knew he could trust the old man. Of anyone in this town or even in his household, he was the one that wouldn't let any of Luther's secrets slip.

Well, all but one.

Still, if he could tell Farmer Barren the entire story, then that was one last thing he had to worry about. The weight would lift free from his shoulders and, for once, he would be a little lighter.

So Luther sat down beside his old friend and he let the entire story spill from his tongue. He spared no detail, even the most embarrassing part, which was that his lie had spun into a truth. He found her to be one of the most amazing women he'd ever met. A life without her now seemed boring, and he didn't know how to tell her that.

Not really, at least. He'd wooed women before, but this wasn't just any woman. This was the first one he actually wanted to keep.

Once Luther finished the story, Barren shook his head and then looked back to the young woman who had almost finished plowing. "All that for a girl like her? I can see why you're all twisted up into knots, my boy. But I think you know the answer to this one."

"Which is?" He desperately wanted someone to tell him the answer. And no, he didn't know the right thing to do.

"I'd do whatever it takes to keep her, Luther. She's the kind of woman you don't find again. If you lose this one, she's gone forever."

Damn it. He'd hoped the answer wouldn't be something like that.

But as he watched her unclip herself from the plow and wave to the two of them, sun bouncing off the red curls on her head and the slick sweat that covered her arms, he knew the old man was right.

Whatever it took to keep her. He'd do anything.



## CHAPTER 21



**S**he knew better than to grab onto farm equipment and work like a horse. Though she would have made the perfect wife for the farmer, she definitely wasn't suited to being the wife of an earl. But it had been so long since she'd done anything that felt like she was using her body. A woman could only do so many push-ups in her room before her arms started losing muscle.

The plow tugged her back while her legs forced her forward. She felt like she was finally working for the first time since she'd arrived here. Her legs burned. Her lungs ached. And it was the best feeling she'd had in a very long time.

So by the time she was done, Luna didn't care if she'd shocked them. She didn't care if the men called her a witch and argued that she should be sent from this place in chains. She felt like herself again.

Walking back to their side, she planted her hands on her hips and looked between the two of them. Their shocked expressions said a lot. "What?" she asked. "Why do the two of you appear incapable of closing your mouths?"

The farmer was the first one to answer her, and he was all too pleased with himself. "Never seen a woman do that ever in my life. You're impressive, miss..."

"Winchester," she filled in for him. "My name is Miss Winchester."

"Well, Miss Winchester. I'd hire you in a minute to work for me if this young man didn't already have you tied down.

You'd have made a fine wife for someone like me, but I think you're more suited to a man like him." The farmer chuckled into his fist. "I might be a bit too old for you as well, although I don't like thinking of that to be honest."

"You're never too old. Age is a state of mind." Sure, she was being a little too kind to the old man. But he was sweet and thoughtful and so few people were these days.

She would forever love the people who worked the land. They reminded her of her mother and of the good days when she'd spent hours in the sun, surrounded by greenery and lovely smells. If only she could return to that life, Luna thought maybe she'd be happier than she currently was.

Although... Looking at Luther reminded her that she'd been a lot happier lately. And that was terrifying, of course, but it was also wonderful to know that she could still feel that happiness.

"I'm afraid you cannot hire me," she said, to drown out her own thoughts. "But you can have me for the afternoon, I suppose. Luther and I will do whatever it is you'd like. And I'll fix what he doesn't do a good job at."

"Fix?" Luther snarled. "You won't have to fix any of my work. I do a good enough job for the old man."

She shared a look with the farmer before nodding. "Sure. Anyway, I'll teach him if he starts doing it wrong again. I promise."

"You have a deal." The farmer held out his hand for her to shake, and then they were working. For hours. She hadn't toiled with the earth this long in years, since she was a child, and that had made her forget how difficult it was to live this kind of life.

By the time the sun was on the other side of the horizon, Luna's shoulders were numb. Luther didn't look much better than her. They both ended up in a heap on the ground beside Farmer Barren's house while he went inside to get them a drink of water.

“I’d forgotten what it feels like,” she said, breathlessly staring up at the clouds moving past.

“What what feels like?”

“Working like this. Spending your entire day forcing the earth to do what you want and having it battle you every step of the way. It’s hard work.” She pressed a hand to her thundering chest. “Good work. But I think I’ll sleep harder tonight than I have in years.”

“You didn’t do this before trying to steal from me?” He tilted his head on the ground and watched her.

She couldn’t help but notice how lovely he looked with grass blades tangled in his hair and dirt smudged on his cheeks. He’d become someone so different from who she’d thought he would be when they first met. She should be angry about that. Luna had always been able to read people rather well, and instead, this earl had put her right out of sorts.

Instead, all she could focus on was how handsome he was. How the sunlight had turned his skin into a lovely shade of bronze and there was the smallest smattering of freckles across his nose. Like he’d been kissed a few dozen times by the rays of light.

Damn it. She was being fanciful, and all he had to do was look at her. What would she do if he showed any real interest? Good lord. She’d make a fool of herself.

Turning her head away from the sight of him, she blew out a long breath. “Well, no. I spend most of my time in London these days. There’s more to steal there, and that’s become my living. I’m good at finding things of value and I’m good at handing them to the right people to sell.”

“Ah, of course.” He rolled onto his belly and started picking at individual blades of grass. “Do you like that life? I suppose that’s more what I’m asking.”

Did she? No, not really. Luna didn’t enjoy stealing from others and ruining their lives. She didn’t like making people unhappy and she certainly didn’t want to spend any more time with those horrible gangs.

She shook her head, forcing herself to hold eye contact with him so he could see the truth in her gaze. “No, I don’t like the life I’m living. But what else is there for someone like me?”

For a moment, she thought he’d say something. His eyes heated and his cheeks turned bright red. As though he were embarrassed. She supposed that was a normal reaction to someone admitting how bad their life was when he lived in a luxurious manor with everything he wanted at his fingertips.

He said nothing, though. He just stared at her with those warm eyes and rosy cheeks.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I shouldn’t say these things to you when I know this is temporary. Whenever this plan finishes, I’ll go back to that life. And it’s not that bad, really. I promise. So many other people have it far worse off than I do. I’ll always have my sisters to fall back on. And Martin.”

The last bit changed something inside him. Martin’s name was the wrong thing to say, because Luther bared his teeth in a horrible looking snarl. “Who?”

His canines were pointed, she realized. Jagged edged and sharp, like he had the mouth of a wolf. Not a man. “Martin?” she repeated. “Maeve’s husband? I told you about him.”

And just like that, all the anger simmered down. He closed his mouth, though she wondered if those horrible fangs had disappeared, and cleared his throat. “Ah, yes. Of course. You had told me about him. My apologies, Luna, I’d forgotten.”

Was that jealousy? Had he gotten angry at the mere existence of another man in her life?

She should be angry with him. She should rage that he’d gotten so upset in such a short amount of time, but she was almost... flattered?

No. Absolutely not. This had gone on for too long if she was happy that his wolf came out whenever she mentioned another man. Luna had to get herself together and fast. Or she’d end up drowning in these feelings and that wouldn’t be good for anyone involved.

The internal berating she'd given herself almost worked, but then he moved. He rolled away from her and sat up, hands suspended over his knees for a moment, before he stood.

"Where are you going?" she asked, sitting up herself. What else could she do? He was the only way she had to get home.

Luther took a few steps away from the farm before pausing and shaking his head. "I just... I'm sorry for reacting like that. I have no right to you, I know that."

"You have some right. Many people seem to think you're my husband." She thought joking might ease the tension in the air.

It didn't. If anything, her words only made everything so much more tense between them. And she didn't know why. Or how. Or what was happening right now, because he shouldn't be angry with her. Not when all she'd done was mention that she had someone else supporting her.

He rolled his shoulders and something shifted underneath his skin. Or perhaps that was another being who fought to get out. "I don't think joking right now is helping, Luna."

She sighed and walked up behind him, so close she could have touched his back if she wanted to. "I know. I just don't understand what's happening right now. You're so upset, and I didn't... Well, I didn't think I..."

He interrupted her stammering. "A good man would tell you to run. A good man would explain to you that there is more than just me wanting you right now, and that I know I cannot have you. Not when I'm like this and you are who you are."

He wanted her? What did he mean by that? Did he want to turn around and kiss her because she'd give anything to have him do that. He had to know that she felt the same way. Luna wanted him to touch her. To kiss her. She wanted to taste a being who was truly wild.

None of that could be said. The words wouldn't slip from her tongue because she wasn't Maeve. She wasn't so confident

that she knew what to do with a man who shook in front of her with need.

Instead, all she could do was reach out and put her hand flat against his quivering back. “You are a good man, Luther.”

“No, I’m not.” He spun so quickly she didn’t see him move. Strong hands clutched her waist, yanking her against his sweat covered chest. “I’m a wolf.”

His lips descended upon hers, and she forgot what it meant to breathe.

Luther kissed like a starving man. Like a dying man. As if he’d been waiting for the moment when he could finally kiss her, and it didn’t matter if that meant he’d lose his head in a few moments. His life depended on her lips on his, her breath in his lungs.

A low growl shuddered underneath her hands that were somehow pressed against his heart. The sound rumbled through her palms and trailed down to her feet like she’d been struck by lightning.

He flexed his hands against her waist, his fingertips suddenly digging through the fabric in sharp points. Claws? Oh, who cared?

Luna wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him tighter against her. She couldn’t stand on her tiptoes like the girls in the story books, but that only meant every inch of her pressed against every inch of him and he was so warm, hotter than a wood stove in the middle of winter.

An answering hunger rolled through her body with every press of his lips, every shift in angle, every slow glide of his tongue. Her blood heated in her veins until she swore her body steamed with need for him.

All too soon, he pulled away from her mouth. With a gasp, then a following snarl, he looked down at her with shock in his eyes. “I shouldn’t have done that.”

“I don’t regret it for a second,” she replied. “I’ve wanted to do that since the first time I saw you.”

“You were on the roof. In the cold.”

“I wasn’t thinking that I was all too cold.” Luna laughed and ducked her head so he wouldn’t see how brightly her cheeks burned. “I didn’t think this would ever happen between us. I never thought...”

She couldn’t finish her sentence. But she thought the words.

Luna had never thought she would ever find a man who found her pretty enough to bed. Let alone one who wanted to tell people she was his wife. And if this man had deigned to ask her to become his mistress, she’d say yes without question.

She’d never thought to have a family or a husband. All Luna cared about was a man in her life who thought she was beautiful. To find that for even a few weeks was both a blessing and a curse.

A low, breathy sound erupted from between his lips. He released his hold on her waist to cup her cheek. And it was claws, she realized. Long, wicked tips that gently carved a stinging line from just below her eye to her jaw. “Luna, my moon. I thought you were like any other woman when we first met. Then I realized you were the most frustrating, confusing person I’ve ever met. But now I know you are more wolf than I am.”

The words should scare her, but they didn’t. She grinned into his grasp. “You think I’m a wolf?”

“Wolves and women are more similar than you think. Both are hunted their entire lives, captured by some, but never domesticated by anyone with a hard hand. If a man is lucky, the wolf might choose him as a companion but never as their master.” That claw dug into her chin, forcing her head to tilt and accept the kiss he gently pressed against her mouth. “I see the wild in your eyes, just as I see it in the sky at midnight. You are made of magic and moonlight, Luna. It is I who am lucky to have ever met you. A lifetime of basking in your silver rays would never be enough.”

And oh, how those words washed over the old wounds from years of being called an amazon. Too large to be loved by any man.

Perhaps she'd been waiting for the right man to handle her magic.

She tucked her head against the small hollow at the base of his neck, ducking her head so she could press her cheek to his shoulder. They were the same height, but he still made her feel small sometimes.

"Perhaps there is a wolf in me," she murmured against his skin.

"Would you like to find out?"



## CHAPTER 22



**L**uther knew it was better for him to let her go. She should return to her life and leave him in the darkness of his own soiled future. He'd likely end up in a prison somewhere, if whoever ended up hunting the werewolf didn't kill him first. He'd be lucky to keep his head on his shoulders.

But when the sun hit her hair like that, turning her entire head into a forest fire, she burned down every last defense he had. He couldn't be a good man. Not right now.

So he did what any good wolf would do when it saw its mate for the first time. He scooped her up into his arms and he brought her into the woods. The forest of Dead Man's Crossing was known to be a dangerous place. The villagers all warned newcomers not to go into the shadows and darkness. But the forest was his home and had been since he was a little boy.

No one could convince him otherwise. Even his father, who had warned him of the temptations that lay within the dappled light.

Luna tilted her head back in his arms and laughed. "No one has ever carried me like this before. I hope you know that."

"You're not all that heavy." It was a lie. She was heavy. Of course she was. She was a six foot tall woman packed with muscle built from a lifetime of labor.

Luther took pride in the fact that no one had ever done this for her before. He was the strongest man she'd ever entertained, and that was both a blessing and a curse. The wolf in him wanted to hunt down any man who'd ever made her feel too much for them. The man in him wanted to kiss her until she forgot there had ever been other men.

He supposed they both aligned in the same kind of thinking. She was theirs. His. The wolf's. A convoluted tangle of hope and desire and ownership.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked again, her voice the light bubble of happiness that rained down a shower of giggles upon his head.

And damn it, he couldn't speak. He didn't know how to tell her where they were going because the wolf had already taken hold of his body. The creature wanted her to be surprised, he guessed. She'd like where they were going. They both knew it deep in the bottom of their hearts.

He was right. The moment they stepped into the hidden clearing that dripped with moss, she let out a little gasp and struggled to get out of his arms. He let her go and watched her explore the grotto that had gotten him through many hard times in his childhood.

Luna stepped into the thick bed of moss, then ripped her shoes off her feet. The thick moss reached all the way up to her ankles, and he knew it wouldn't be cold or damp. It was always kissed by the sun this time of day, warm and welcoming. Trees had fallen long ago, now covered by more emerald thick moss that created something similar to chairs or seats. And the sunlight speared through the tree branches over their head. The dappled light tangled through her hair until it looked like a faceted ruby.

"This is where I used to come when I was a child," he said, his voice a low growl. "I would hide here from my father whenever he was too angry with me."

"So, this is your safe place?" Her eyes missed no details. She pointed to a small nook in the moss, a hole that stretched

underneath the roots of a tree which had fallen. “I suppose that was your bedroom.”

“Hiding place,” he corrected. “I didn’t sleep here. No son of an earl was allowed to sleep in the forest like some kind of heathen.”

“Ah.” Luna should have pitied him. Many had when he told them that story. Instead, she tilted her head back and let the sun play across her cheeks. “I used to sleep under the stars with my mother. All the time. She liked the feeling of their light and filled glass jars with the rays of the moon.”

Oh, he could love this woman. The sight of her like this, knowing that she’d been raised the way he had always wished to be raised, made his heart thunder in his chest. He wanted nothing more than to touch her. Taste her. Give her all the things that she wanted.

If only...

No, he wouldn’t think about the questions that burned in his chest. They both deserved this moment where they were free from the chains of society and the expectations of all those around them. He refused to let old habits ruin this moment.

Luther released the chains on the beast in his chest and let the wolf take over. Immediately, he felt his shoulders hunch. His arms came forward and his head lowered as he hunted the woman he wanted.

“Luna,” he growled, stalking in a circle around her. “I didn’t bring you here just to show you the woods.”

“Well, I’d hope not.” She opened her eyes with a subtle flick, but she didn’t seem to care that he hunted her. “I know what you want, Luther. I want the same thing.”

“I promised you I’d see if there was a wolf inside you.” The beast rumbled deep in his chest, ready for the hunt, the chase, the satisfaction of catching what was his. “I’d suggest you run.”

“Why on earth would I do that?” She planted her hands firmly on her hips and shook her head. “I’m not your prey,

Luther. The wolf would love to chase me down, but I'll let you know right now I'm not running from you. Your wolf will have to get used to the fact that I'm its equal."

Well, that brought them both up short. He'd never felt his beast so confused. It seemed to hesitate, then released all control back to him. Apparently, his personal demon didn't know what to do with a woman like that.

Honestly, this might be better for both of them. Now he had her all to himself. Just the two of them.

"Luna." He stepped into the clearing with her, holding out his hands for her to take. "I want you to know who you're with right now."

"I know who I'm with," she replied with a laugh. And then she took his hands, and he knew he was right where he needed to be. "Why don't you relax, Luther? You seem rather tense."

"I've been with women before," he muttered, "but never one that meant so much. I'm afraid that's put me in a rather unusual place."

"I guess I'll have to take control, then." She leaned forward and pressed their lips together. And suddenly, he knew nothing else mattered.

—

Luna hadn't thought she would do this, but here they were. Together. In a clearing in the middle of the woods. And yes, she was about to let a werewolf bind their bodies together and no, she wasn't afraid at all. She should be. Maybe. Perhaps this was what it felt like to touch boiling water for a second. Or maybe to snuff out a burning candle with her fingers. She knew how close she was to pain.

But he needed her. All he wanted was to hold her, to make sure she was safe, and knew she wasn't being forced to do anything. What man was so kind? So good?

And here he was, thinking he was nothing better than a wolf. Foolish man. He was so much more than that.

“Taste me,” she whispered against his lips. “I want to feel you against me.”

In truth, she didn't know what she was asking for. Luna had read the terms in a book once. She'd only slept with two other men and both were rather horrible, fumbling experiences in an alleyway where each time they were hoping they didn't get caught.

This was different. So much different.

A low growl erupted from between his lips. “You are an answer to a prayer, Luna. I swear.”

His lips pressed harder to hers, and then he slid his mouth down her neck. Her shoulders. Pressing kisses as he moved down her body until he drew her onto the moss with him. She fell onto her knees without hesitation, wondering what he wanted from her.

Luther pressed a hand to her shoulder, shoving her back until she laid down on the emerald carpet. The sparkling light glittered in his eyes as he lifted one of her legs to his mouth and pressed a kiss to her ankle. “Whatever you want, my darling, my moon. I promise you, whatever you want.”

His kisses trailed up her legs and she couldn't stop staring up at the clouds. At the leaves that danced in the wind she couldn't feel and then suddenly his lips were there. His tongue pressing and smoothing and aching. What was he doing? Oh, she really didn't care at all to know the mechanics of it when she couldn't focus on anything other than what his wicked tongue touched.

Reaching between her legs, she tangled her fingers in his hair and forced him to stay where he was. Showing him with tiny tugs where she wanted him most, and then suddenly, he plunged his fingers deep inside her depths. The sudden shock sent an orgasm wildly coiling through her body, unbidden and shocking.

Her mouth dropped open with a sudden gasp, even as she arched against him.

Luther moved her skirts out of the way, sliding up her body with an all too pleased smile on his face.

“Stop grinning,” she muttered, pressing her hands against his glistening mouth and wiping him clean.

“I can’t. Sorry.”

She was the one who let out an animalistic growl this time. With quick movements, she struck his side with her larger thighs and forced him to roll. Seated atop him, this time she knew exactly what she wanted. How she was going to take what was hers.

It wasn’t how she’d dreamt their first time would take place. She’d thought it would be with more velvet and lace. Perhaps with candlelight dancing over his shoulders while she took her time to enjoy him. Not this which was... perfect.

She reached between them, finding him hard and hot already. Luna wrapped her fingers around him, stroking until he made a low sound in the back of his throat. Until his stomach muscles flexed against the backs of her fingers and she knew this was the moment. For both of them.

Leaning down, she kissed him again, lingering at the corner of his mouth. “Now?”

“Now,” he replied, breathless and hungry.

She slid down onto him with a sigh that came from deep within her. He stretched her to almost pain, but it was perfect, even as she worked herself down onto him. Her thighs tensed as she moved up and down, finding a rhythm that felt best. And it really was perfect. The exact right moment when she could feel something more than just hope. It was light and bright and blinding connection.

Luther pressed his fingers between them, cleverly touching all the right places until she felt as though her body wasn’t her own anymore. He played her like an instrument until her muscles tensed again. She tightened upon him at the same moment that he thrust up, groaning.

And she was delighted to see how wonderful he looked in this forest with his head thrown back and the cords of his neck

standing out in sharp shadows and highlights.

He was stunning.

He was a wolf in the wild, with someone he'd never once thought he would meet. And yet, here they were. Together.

Tired, warm, and deliciously sore, she fell upon his chest with a heavy, but pleased, sigh. "So?" she asked. "Am I a wolf after all?"

"You are," he replied. "You are my wolf and my moon."

## CHAPTER 23



**O**h, that kiss.

Luna knew there was no way he knew how much it meant to her. That afternoon. The entire evening when they'd ridden back. Even the carriage ride had been filled with lingering kisses and strokes until the two of them had rushed through the halls to his bedroom. He couldn't know that her entire life felt as though it had been leading to this moment, and nothing else would ever satisfy her.

He'd done that. A werewolf, of all things.

Now, as she lay in his bed, she knew how foolish this had all been. She still had to steal from him. He wouldn't give her that diamond and the necklaces in that box. Even if they were in love and he wanted to marry her. Those were too precious of items to give to anyone.

It was so easy to kiss him. Her fingers found him, no matter where he was. In the carriage, she wanted to hold on to his hand. In his bedroom, she wanted to explore every bit of his body and have him do the same to hers. She wanted to know what an earl felt like.

She hoped he didn't notice the desperation in her touch. How she threw herself into the entire evening as though she would never get to touch him again, because she knew she wouldn't. Luna had already seen the writing on the wall. If he hadn't, then she hoped he'd be able to deal with it after she left.



Her life didn't mix with his. He was a good man, an honorable man, and he wanted his entire family to prosper. He helped people. She made people's lives worse and put them in a state of shock and fear. Their paths were so different and he couldn't seriously think they could merge those two into a future that could work.

But for now, she had to focus on the present. On the moments with him that meant so much because he was real and right in front of her.

She traced a line from a tiny wrinkle in his brow, down his nose, to those lovely plush lips. "Why do you look like you're angry?" she asked.

"I'm not angry. I'm just trying to figure you out." He shook his head with a wry grin. "I suppose that's an impossible task."

"It is." She owed him at least something, though. If he wanted to know more about her, then he deserved that much. "What do you want to know?"

"You said your mother was a pagan, and you ended up in the Church where they did all manner of horrible things. But you weren't working for the Church when you tried to steal from me." Luther rolled up onto an elbow, looming over her while staring down with questions in his eyes. "So what happened after that? You obviously left their services."

"My sister made a deal so the other two of us could go free." And it still stung. She hated knowing that Maeve would still be in their services if she hadn't met Martin. Even now, the Duke only had so much sway. They all still lived in constant fear of what they'd be asked to do next. "I don't think they ever really leave your life, though. I've been running from them ever since."

He cupped her cheek in his hand, a sad smile on his face. "I'm sorry you had to live through that, Luna. Your story brings tears to my eyes whenever you talk about it."

"That's not the point of what I've lived through." She sighed, then looked over at the painting that hung over his

desk. “You’ve got a story and a half as well, I suppose. Even in the painting, your father’s eyes seem to follow me wherever I move.”

“I hope he can’t see through it. He’d be horrified about what I did to you,” Luther replied with a chuckle. “He’s dead now though, and that makes it all easier I suppose.”

“Does it?”

He thought about her question for a few moments, as though no one had ever asked him to clarify. Finally, he nodded. “It does. I don’t have to worry about disappointing him so much, you see. He always hated it when I did something he didn’t approve of. I had to fear what he would say or do afterwards. Now, I take the steps in life that I wish to take.”

If only she could do that. He moved through the world with a freedom that so few had any experience with. But that was the difference between an earl and a street rat, she supposed. He had the ability to choose freedom.

“If you could tell him anything and he would hear it, what would you say?” She rolled over, tucking herself into the curve of his body and staring at the painting with him.

Luther threw an arm over her waist and the movement was natural. Like they’d slept together a thousand times before. “I think I’d tell him thank you. Even though he was a cruel and unusual man, he made me who I am today. He wasn’t abusive, he was just... wrong. About everything in life. And I cannot imagine how difficult it was to live like that.”

There he went again, being a good man without even realizing how kind he was. Even to his father, who certainly couldn’t hear that his son forgave him after all this time.

Luna waited until Luther’s breathing evened out. He settled against her with too much comfort, and she wanted to stay here. To linger in his arms while he kept her warm and safe. But that wasn’t in the cards for either of them. Not when she had a bounty on her head and so many debts to pay.

It didn't take long for him to settle. Apparently, he had tired himself out. If she had planned on staying, she would have reminded him that he'd told her he would tire her out, and not the other way around. But the man had earned his sleep.

She slipped out from underneath the covers and tried to not focus on the soreness of her muscles. How much she wanted to stretch her arms over her head and then sneak back into his arms.

He'd given her the smallest detail of his life, and revealed the way he thought, and that was a mistake. He should know better than to give such personal information to a thief.

Luna snuck over to the painting of his father and moved her fingers along the frame. If he had forgiven his father, and the jewels were from his family line, it would only make sense that his father would continue to watch over the key to their family fortune.

Her right forefinger bumped against something cold and metallic. The key was slotted into a tiny holder on the side of the painting, just beside his father's eye. She had to stretch onto the tips of her toes to grab it. The skeleton key was all she needed to get the fortune he'd hidden underneath the floorboards and then leave this place.

Damn it. She didn't want to go. Her soul screamed that they didn't have to do this. Luther would help her with the gangs. Maybe they could get Crowley and his idiots locked away for good, and then she wouldn't have to care what she owed them. No one would dare threaten an earl, after all.

But they would dare. Crowley wasn't a stupid gang member. The man was intelligent, and he knew how to run a crew. They'd find out that Luther was a werewolf, and that he'd killed that villager, and they would ruin his life. Easy as that. In fact, Luther was an easy target for anyone.

She could look after him better on the streets. Luna would make sure no one targeted him again after this, or they would answer to her and a hammer.

Luther shifted in his sleep, his hand smoothing over the blankets that she'd left in her place. He would wake up soon, and she needed a better story than stretching.

His dressing gown draped over the back of his desk chair. With a quick shift in movement, she threw that over her shoulders and slipped the key into the pocket. Then she walked back to the bed and sat down on the edge, purposefully making her movements hard enough to wake him.

He snorted and asked, "Where were you?"

"I was a little cold. I hope you don't mind that I'm wearing this?" Luna touched the tail of the dressing gown to his cheek. "It looked warm, and it smells like you."

She appealed to the wolf, knowing that the beast would be pleased with her wearing his scent. Neither he nor the beast inside him were all that hard to figure out. She wished there were another way, but... Well. She had to trick him somehow.

He grumbled in his sleep, but then tucked her into his body as she laid down. Luna tried her very best to stay as still as possible, even though tears slid down her cheeks. She hated doing this. She hated herself right now.

Not a single bit of sleep was achieved that night for her, although she pretended to be asleep when he woke up behind her. In fact, she'd watched the sun rise with guilt riding on her shoulders.

Luther pressed a kiss to her back, then to her hair. "How did you sleep?"

"Well, considering I'm in the bed of an earl." She didn't roll over, though, to accept a good morning kiss from him. She rather felt like she was frozen in place. "Do you mind if I keep sleeping, though? The sun has only just risen, and you did tire me out last night."

He chuckled, the sound filled with far too much masculine pride. "That's fine. I have to go figure out the household items for the week, anyway. I'll send a servant up in a couple of hours to wake you for breakfast. How does that sound?"

She stretched and pressed her face into the soft pillows. “That sounds divine.”

“You know,” he paused at the edge of the bed. His weight dipped her hip toward him. “This doesn’t have to be a one-time thing. I slept better than I have in years with you beside me and... Well. It would be an honor to know that your arms waited for me at the end of a long day.”

No. No, he couldn’t be saying these things when tears pricked her eyes. She wanted to sob into the pillow and admit everything to him. How she’d fucked up royally and now she had to do these horrible things, or she feared they would both end up dead.

But she couldn’t. Every choice she made from here on out was to keep him safe, and if he didn’t understand that, then he would never understand her life. So instead, she nodded, faked a yawn, and covered her eyes with her arm. “I’d like that.”

“You would?” He paused, and then when he spoke again, his words were filled with hope. “Well. That’s good, then.”

She listened to him stand and walk out of the room. It took him a while, and he lingered at the door for perhaps a little too long, but she heard the latch click shut. The final sound of their relationship, rocking through her skull.

Sighing, she sat up and dashed the tears from her cheeks. She’d done worse than this, and she had lost worse than him. Luna would survive, like she always did.

Crawling out of the ridiculously comfortable bed, she gathered up his letter opener and dropped to her knees beside the floorboard. The gemstones were surprisingly quiet until she pulled the box out of its dark hole.

“You’re so sad,” they whispered, the sound barely a song with misery that mimicked her own. “We don’t like to make people sad.”

“It’s not you that are making me sad.” Luna fit the key into the padlock, then the remaining three locks. “You are perfect, I’m sure.”

And when she opened the box, she found how right she was. The diamond was the size of her fist. So insanely beautiful and perfectly cut. Three necklaces sat coiled around it. One made of sapphire as blue as the sea. The other two glimmering with emeralds and diamonds. They'd sell for enough to fix the house, that much was certain.

A sob stuck in her throat and she had to look up at the ceiling to stop it from coming out. Deep breath. Hold it. Let it out slowly so no one could hear her cry.

This was so stupid. She'd stolen a hundred things in her life. Why was this one so different?

The diamond hummed in her hand. "You like him," it said. "You like him so much that it makes your heart hurt to think about him. And you know if you do this, he will never forgive you for it."

"He shouldn't forgive me for it," she corrected. "He shouldn't ever forgive me for seducing him and then stealing jewelry of such value from the floorboards of his home. This isn't right. I know it isn't right."

"Then why are you stealing us?"

As if the diamond didn't want to leave. Even now, Luna could tell that it was vibrating with excitement. All of them were. They wanted to see the world, and they wanted the freedom Luther couldn't give them. Only Luna could.

"Because I don't have any other choice," she whispered, feeling her tears dry up in her eyes. "If I did, I'd stay with him until the end of time. But women like me don't have choices."

She snapped the box shut again and melted into the shadows of the manor. By the time the servants came to wake her up, she'd already be long gone.

## CHAPTER 24



**L**uther hadn't felt like this in... well, he couldn't remember to be honest. Had he ever? He walked down the hall as though he were walking on clouds. His steps felt lighter. Hell, his soul felt lighter. He'd spent the night in the arms of an angel and nothing would ruin this day for him.

Absolutely nothing.

Whistling as he went, he stopped in at the kitchens to grab food before he started his workday. Magda already had all the ovens firing and the hot room had sweat dripping down the back of his neck in seconds.

"Good lord, woman," he muttered as he reached for a few of her famous scones. "Do you have to keep it so hot in here?"

"If you want your food cooked when it's handed to you, yes." She snapped a towel in his direction, but then returned to a pot bubbling with some delicious smelling liquid. "Where's that lovely lady of yours? The entire house was talking last night about the way you two came in."

"We walked in like regular people. I don't know why everyone would be talking." Of course, he knew why. Luther couldn't prevent the grin on his face from spreading far too wide, either.

His mind had already decided she was his bride. They were going to spend the rest of their lives together, and no one would convince him otherwise. He wanted to grow old with

her. To see their children toddling around the halls of this manor and filling the haunted chambers with their laughter.

Yes, that imagined future was what he wanted, and he realized that without such a future, anything else would seem bleak.

Magda watched the emotions flicker across his face and sighed. “You’re in deep, Luther. And while I understand the infatuation with a new young woman, I would not be doing you justice if I didn’t warn you that all of this is so very new. For the both of you.”

“Sometimes you know,” he replied with a snarl, and the beast inside him agreed. The wolf claimed to have known the first time they saw her. She was their mate, the only person who would ever satisfy them.

Magda nodded, her eyebrows lifting past her hairline. “You know, I was here when your father was a young man, as well. He employed me when he was your age. Foolish. Perhaps a little too rash. Quick to anger and even quicker to satisfy that anger with his fists.”

“I know.” Where was she going with this? Why would she bring up his father, of all people? The man had a straight line he followed and no one would ever knock him off it.

Magda set her spoon down and turned around. She wiped her hands on the small cloth at her waist. Taking her time to respond. “I know what you are, Luther. I know what your father was. And how your mother died. I know all of it. No secrets get away from the cook of the house’s kitchen, I’ll tell you that.”

He felt his stomach bottom out. She knew? How could she know what he was and what his family had fought with for centuries? Surely she meant that she knew he was an earl, or some other family secret that hadn’t been passed down to him before his father died.

“What do you know?” he whispered, trying very hard not to look horrified.



“You have a wolf inside you, my darling boy. Your father fought with his every step of the way, and I saw how that ate him alive. I think you don’t fight the beast as much as your father, and I don’t know if that’s any better.” She clearly had struggled with this knowledge for a very long time. She’d carried this burden, this horrible truth, and she’d never run from his family or what they had done.

He had a better cook than he realized. Magda was a treasure. A woman of means who should be protected at all costs.

He took a step forward, only to freeze when he saw her flinch away from him. That was what he’d come to expect. That was what everyone did when they saw a werewolf in front of them. It was natural. It was the right way to respond.

“She doesn’t do that,” he whispered. “You have every right to be afraid of me and to wonder what I’m going to do. The animal part of you recognizes what I am, and it doesn’t want to be near me. You should be afraid of what I might do and how I might harm you. But I would never hurt you, Magda. Never.”

Her eyes widened with every word. So large in that pale, wrinkled face. “Can you control it? Your father thought he could and then look at what he did to your poor mother.”

Ah yes, his mother. He still saw the pieces of her strewn about when he closed his eyes. He’d never forget that. Neither would anyone else in this house, although most of them claimed it was a freak accident caused by a wild animal that somehow snuck into their home in the middle of the night.

“I don’t want to control it,” he replied, pitching his voice low and quiet. “My father thought the beast was something to run from, and it is my belief that his wolf then went mad. My wolf got out at the last full moon, Magda. It knew what to do, where to go.”

She pressed a hand to her chest. “The man who died?”

“I don’t think it was me.” He hoped. God, he didn’t know and he should feel more guilty about that rather than focusing

on Luna. “If it was, I have no memory of it. I’m going to learn how to live with the wolf, Magda. And of all people, I know she’s willing to go through that journey with me. She’s never once been afraid of who I am or what I am.”

“Then she is a rare woman indeed.” Magda clearly hadn’t processed what he had said, but at the very least, the old woman was willing to try. “But we already knew how rare of a woman she was. After all, she’s a pagan. Just like me.”

“Just like you.”

And he’d be lucky to end up with a woman like Magda for the rest of his life. He’d spend his days in happiness, resting easy knowing that his soul remained happy and well because she was close to him.

He wouldn’t bother his cook any longer. Luther left the kitchens and went to his office, where he tried his best to get his work done for the day. He needed to focus on where to put most of his money in the upcoming year. The town still had a lot of repairs that it needed, not to mention the farmers who could use some assistance buying all the seeds and grain they’d need for the next year. And the roads... He’d experienced first hand how badly the roads needed tending.

But try as he might, he couldn’t get her out of his head. Even when he was working.

He thought of the fields, and then the thought of how she hadn’t hesitated to help Barren and fix all of Luther’s mistakes. Then he thought of Barren’s granddaughter and how her beauty couldn’t match the amazon he’d found.

Too many times he thought about going up to the bedroom again. He could put his work off for another day, surely. That wouldn’t break Dead Man’s Crossing if he took a few days off to enjoy Luna and all the light she’d brought to his life.

He stopped himself each time. He had to work. Just because a beautiful woman with long limbs and beautiful hair waited for him in his bed, didn’t mean he could neglect the people who’d been here for him his entire life. Did it?

Oh no, he was already standing. Luther moved out of his office without hesitation. He wanted to see her. A couple hours had passed, surely, and that would mean it was time for breakfast. He'd gather her up himself. Waking up with his kisses would be better than the maid shaking her awake and telling her to go to the dining room.

He picked up his pace, considering having breakfast delivered to his bedroom instead. They weren't entertaining anyone, so why not? They could languish between the sheets for hours if she wanted to. She'd earned that much after the life she'd had.

A maid passed him in the hall, and he grabbed onto her arm. "Would you tell Magda that I'd like breakfast in my room, please? We won't need the dining room after all."

"The dining room?" The maid stopped short, her mouth open. "Sir, you asked one of us to wake Miss Winchester this morning from your room. But she wasn't there."

Oh, she must have already gone to the dining hall. He thought it odd she'd want to sleep in when she'd rarely done that while staying here. "I'll meet her in the dining hall, then."

"Wait, my lord!"

He didn't linger. Instead, he rushed down the halls so he could tell her his grand idea. She'd like it. Luna was always willing to do whatever mad scheme he'd thought up. At least, he thought she would.

Magda's words rang in his head, though. It was all so very new between the two of them, and perhaps that's why it burned through his chest so all consumingly. He wanted to lose himself in her until he didn't know where either of them started.

Skidding to a halt in front of the dining hall, he frowned at the two butlers, who were already clearing one plate set.

He cleared his throat, hoping his voice wasn't too angry. "Did Miss Winchester already eat? I told her to wait for me, gentlemen."

The butlers froze, then looked at each other. “Uh, my lord...”

Neither of them continued.

His gut twisted with dread. “What is it? Out with it, gentlemen. I have no interest in waiting for your explanation.”

Magda walked out of the kitchen and waved a hand at the two butlers. “Off with you. I’ll explain it to him.”

It didn’t escape his notice that the two men shared a look of relief before they walked out of the room a little too quickly for men of their station. They were running from him, and that dread in his stomach twisted like a knife. No one wanted to tell him what was going on, but he already had a sick feeling that he knew what had happened.

“The maid said she wasn’t in my room,” he murmured.

“She’s not in the house,” Magda corrected. “We looked all over for her. I didn’t want to disturb you if the girl was in the gardens or had decided to take an early morning walk. She’s not in the manor. And she’s not on the grounds, either.”

She’d run.

From him.

Why would she do that? He couldn’t think of a single reason why she’d leave now of all times until the thought rang in his head like church bells.

She was a thief, after all. She’d arrived at his home with only one intent in her mind, and that wasn’t to spend her days with the Earl of Dead Man’s Crossing. Luna had never once lied to him. Her life story. Her desires. Everything she’d told him had been the truth, and he was the idiot who had refused to listen.

Now what would she want to steal from him? What was the most impressive thing in his manor because she’d obviously been scoping out the entire place for weeks now. She knew where every valuable in this home lay.

He met Magda’s gaze with a horrified look on his own. “The Diamond.”

“The what?”

“The Diamond of Crestfall. Mother’s jewels and her birthright.” He pressed a hand to his racing heart that suddenly hurt.

He couldn’t stand here and wonder if that’s what she took. He already knew the truth, but he also knew that the proof waited where he’d left her. Luther ran from the dining hall, sprinting through the halls, and with every step his heart felt as though it were shattering. She wouldn’t take it. She wouldn’t take the garish gem that had nearly led to his mother’s death.

The wolf in his chest howled at the thought that their mate could ever betray them. She wouldn’t. She couldn’t.

The thundering in his head stopped as he paused in front of his bedroom. Empty. It shouldn’t be empty like that, and yet it was. He could almost hear the glass of his heart splinter into a million pieces as he walked around the corner, and there it was.

His letter opener sat next to the open floorboard where the box had been hidden years ago. The blade glinted in the sunlight. Stark contrast to the shadows of the empty hiding place his father had been so certain no one would ever find.

One more step and he saw the bone white paper that she’d wedged into the space where his mother’s legacy had once been.

He didn’t want to know what she had to say. But he also wouldn’t survive if he didn’t know what she dared to leave behind.

Luther knelt beside her handy work and reached into the darkness. The paper crinkled in his hands as he opened it.

Her handwriting was beautiful. Surprising, really, considering how she prided herself on strength and power. But the looping curls were one of a woman who had spent years perfecting her handwriting into something graceful and lovely.

*Luther,*

*If there was any other way, you have to know I would have taken that path. I didn't tell you everything.*

*I owe a terrible man a lot of money. He'll hunt me to the ends of the earth, even if I choose you. But worse, I think he'll use you to get to me.*

*I couldn't take that chance. Even if that meant ruining what we have.*

*Goodbye, I guess. I'll see you in my dreams.*

She didn't sign it, but he knew. He knew this was her way of saying goodbye forever, as though a letter would ever suffice.

He crumpled the letter in his fist, letting out a low, long growl. The wolf in him and Luther both agreed. She would not leave them like this. She wouldn't leave at all, because there was too much left unsaid. He would bring her back to him. No matter the cost or the time that it took.

Standing, he let the wolf free for one more hunt.

## CHAPTER 25



**F**amily first.

Luna told herself she ran to Martin's home because she wanted to make sure her sisters were well. She told herself that it was more important to get them paid than it was for her to get to Crowley.

All of that was a lie.

Her heart felt like it had been ripped out of her chest, flayed open, and then shoved back in wrong. She needed to tuck herself into the arms of her much stronger sisters and let them tell her that everything would be all right. They always knew what to say to make her feel better, and right now, she needed that.

Martin could stay in the basement for all she cared. She needed her sisters and they would be here for her right now.

Which is why she slammed through the front door without even looking at his sweet butler or caring if they had visitors.

"Maeve!" she shouted. "Maeve, where are you?"

A huge crash echoed from upstairs, but then she heard Maeve shout back, "Luna?"

That was all it took for all her walls to break. One moment she was standing in the hallway and the next, she collapsed onto the floor in a heap of horrible, choking sobs.

Four hands grabbed onto her shoulders not moments later.

“What happened?” Maeve asked, her voice upset and angry. Although, she wasn’t asking Luna anything.

She’d apparently asked the butler, who cleared his throat and took a step away from the hysterical women. “I have no idea, my lady. She didn’t even knock. She busted into the house and then melted into a bundle of tears. I’m not good with crying.”

“Off with you,” Maeve muttered before she scooped her hands underneath Luna’s jaw and forced their gazes to meet. “What happened? When we last spoke, everything was going according to plan.”

The vision of her sisters was blurry, but they made her feel better. Even if that feeling also made her cry like a baby. “I fell in love with him,” she whispered. “I love him so much that I feel like I’m breaking without him.”

Beatrix frowned from behind Maeve. “That doesn’t sound so bad, Luna.”

Wordlessly, she handed the box to her youngest sister. Beatrix took it, still frowning, then opened it up. Both her sisters gasped at the sight of the diamonds and jewels that waited for their eyes.

The necklaces started singing. They were thrilled at the reaction. The diamond waited until Beatrix picked it up before it let out a shriek of happiness that made Luna’s ears hurt.

“Finally,” it screamed. “I’m finally free!”

At least she’d always have that. She had given up a lifetime of happiness, but she’d freed the gemstones from that horrible box.

Beatrix closed it again and then waved it at Luna. “You stole all this from him?”

She nodded, miserable with the truth flung at her like that. “Yes. I had to.”

“You didn’t have to do anything,” Maeve scolded. “I told you, if this job wasn’t good, then we wouldn’t do it. You didn’t have to take any of this from him! We’re going back.”



You're going to take this all back to him and he'll forgive you and we'll... we'll..."

She stopped talking the moment she saw how miserable Luna was. She hadn't known she could actually feel sick because her heart hurt so badly.

Maeve cleared her throat. "Why can't we bring all this back to the man you've fallen madly in love with?"

"Because Crowley and his gang have been hunting me down for a while now and if I don't bring that diamond to them, they're probably going to have me killed."

She could have cut the silence with a knife. And she'd known this would happen. Maeve was about to lose her mind and start screaming, probably. Beatrix would start crying because the idea of losing either of her sisters made Beatrix cry. Luna was supposed to then fix the situation but... well. She didn't know how to do that.

She wanted to go back to the manor, like Maeve said. Returning to Luther wouldn't be easy. He'd be furious with her, and she'd probably have to grovel. But she was willing to do it if it meant she didn't ruin both of their lives like it felt like she had already.

"He won't forgive me for this," she whispered. "These are too precious and I'm going to sell them on the black market because I need money. Because we need to live."

Beatrix handed the box back to her. "You don't have to do anything you don't want to do, Luna. We'll figure this out. Crowley can't be all that bad."

Both Maeve and Luna stared at her, a little slack jawed.

"What?" Beatrix asked. "He's just a man."

Maeve was the one to reply first. "He runs the most dangerous gang in all of London, Beatrix. That's like saying the King hunting you down is just a man."

"The King is also just a man." Beatrix waved her fingers in the air. "You tell me you're frightened of people when you see their spirits all the time. No one is frightening when you know

they end up in pieces and afraid of walking into the light. People are just people.”

Luna closed her mouth, but still muttered, “I always forget how unnerving it is to be around you, Bea. It’s like time away from you turns you back into a normal sister and then you start talking about seeing dead people and I remember how strange you are.”

“I take that as a compliment.” She nodded toward the living room. “Shall we have a sit? I’m going to guess a little whiskey would do you well, sister mine. And once you get all that crying out, we’ll be able to plan a proper way to handle all this.”

That sounded good. It sounded reasonable and honestly, that wasn’t at all like Beatrix. She always had the most hair brained, strange plan out of all of them.

Narrowing her eyes, Luna stood up and followed her sisters into the living room. “You’re never going to forget that whole situation of crying on the floor over a man, are you?”

Beatrix snorted. “Never. And if this all works out like the spirits claim, then I don’t think Luther will forget about it either. Because I’m going to tell him the moment I meet him.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

Luna sat down on the plush cushion that had seen better days. The castle needed all the help she could afford, and more than what Martin had to his name. She’d gotten so angry with him when she first saw her sister dressed in silks and jewels. He had money, obviously.

But the longer she stared at the gemstones, the more she realized they weren’t singing. At all. Every impressive piece the Duke had was made of glass. The man had built a legend on a very shaky house of cards that had run out of money, wealth, and effort.

It wasn’t like he could sell hundred-year-old dresses. No one wanted that moth eaten velvet other than dear ol’ Maeve because her sister didn’t care what people thought of her. Clothing was clothing. Of course, the rest of the noble houses

disagreed with her. But they kept their mouths shut considering a good number of them had hired her before to prove that their children weren't possessed.

Beatrix handed her a steaming mug of tea. The tendrils of steam smelled very strongly of whiskey.

"How much did you put in it?" she asked, blowing on the top.

"Enough." Beatrix sat down across from her and blew on her own cup of tea that was mostly whiskey. "Now tell us everything, please. We can't help if we don't know what happened."

Face bright red at some parts and her heart racing at others, she told them every little detail of what had happened and she spared nothing. Not even the embarrassing parts. Even though it was awful to see the two of them look at each other when she admitted to sleeping with him. Or their wide eyes when she told them about the dead body that had been brought into his courtyard.

She knew what it sounded like. Even now, when she thought back over everything, she wondered if he'd actually killed that man. The whole situation changed if he had, except... it didn't. Not really.

She still was head over heels for the werewolf, even if he'd somehow gotten out and killed someone during the full moon.

"So you're in love with a murderer," Maeve said. Her long fingernails drummed on the arm of her chair.

"A potential murderer," Luna corrected. "We don't know that he did anything, and you can't assume that he killed that man because he's the only werewolf in Dead Man's Crossing."

The hairs on the back of Luna's neck stood up before a deep voice interrupted them. "We absolutely can assume that. He's a werewolf, Luna. That's what they do."

Martin.

Of course, she should have guessed he'd be listening to this whole thing. The man was overbearing with her sister.

Anything involving Maeve had to include Martin as well.

The damned vampire never knew when to leave well enough alone. This situation had nothing to do with him and everything to do with her sisters.

Grumbling, Luna scooted down in her chair and held her cup close to her face. “I don’t remember anyone asking you, vampire.”

“The mere fact that you’re currently huddled over whiskey while trying to hide from me is good enough reason for me to get involved.” Martin stepped into the room and all the air disappeared.

She had forgotten how he did that. Maybe it was the sudden fear that always rocked through her body at the sight of him. Vampires were ridiculously powerful beings, and he was stupidly old. It made his gaze look like he could see right through her. Maybe he did. His eyes narrowed on her and the disapproval made her skin crawl.

“What?” she snapped. “I brought you the jewels like I said I would. You can fix the holes in the walls and buy mattresses that aren’t stuffed with hay. Wasn’t that what you wanted?”

“I told you not to risk your life, Luna.” He sat down in the last empty chair and braced his elbows on his knees. “I told you that we wouldn’t want to risk your life over something so silly as money.”

“Some of us can’t live off other people.” The words were unnecessarily cruel, but she was feeling rather sensitive right now, considering everything that had happened.

He rolled his eyes. “Listen to me. Werewolves are not to be toyed with. I know you think this man is sweet and kind. I find it endearing that you’re willing to trust him without question, but I cannot trust him with your life or the lives of those who depend on me.”

Luna wanted to hit him. Did he think she would put her sisters at risk? She’d known the dangers of being around Luther, but he wasn’t here, was he? She wanted to talk about her heartbreak and how she had realized how difficult it was to

breathe without him. Not be scolded by a man old enough to be her great grandfather.

“He’s a good man, Martin. But he won’t take me back after this, so you don’t have to worry about my safety.”

Maeve leaned forward, but stopped herself from talking the moment Martin raised his hand. He’d silenced her sister. She’d never seen anyone do that before.

He swallowed hard, then apparently chose his words carefully. “A werewolf will hunt its prey for the rest of its life. They don’t know how to stop, Luna. They can’t. If he has his sights set on you, which I assume the young man does, then he will get you back.”

The words rang in her ears. They came with a small sense of excitement. He’d hunt her down? He’d have a hard time finding her then, because she was very good at running.

Martin pinched the bridge of his nose. “Luna, I don’t think you’re hearing me at all.”

“I’m hearing you. You want me to be more careful because you’re worried about what he might do to me when he catches me. But I’m telling you right now, he’s a good man and I’m not afraid of him.”

“Well I am!” He shouted the words a little too loudly. Everyone in the room held their breath as the angry vampire glared at her. “You seem to forget that there are other people in this house. I will not risk either of your sisters because you can’t see how dangerous an angry werewolf is. You claim he’s barely got control of the beast and that means he’s likely to hunt you until you both drop. You will not bring this behavior or risk into my home.”

Her jaw dropped open. “Are you telling me to get out?”

“You can sleep here for the night,” he snarled and then stood. “Tomorrow, I need you to get out of my home. You aren’t welcome back until you’ve dealt with your werewolf problem.”

And he left. Walked out of the room as though he hadn’t just banished her from the only place she’d called home in a

long time. Her sisters were here. Her things were sort of here, but also back in London.

Clearing her throat, she looked at Maeve, who launched into movement. “I’ll go talk to him. You stay right here. He’s absolutely not allowed to speak to either of my sisters in that tone.”

Maeve blustered out, ready for a fight. But Beatrix stayed right where she was, looking over Luna’s right shoulder as though someone else was talking.

Ah. Right. The ghosts.

Luna swallowed hard and asked, “What are they saying?”

“That you’re going to leave. He’s right. The werewolf will hunt you down until one of you makes a mistake. They said you should return to London and get Crowley off your back first.” Beatrix returned her focus to Luna. “Having a werewolf chasing you is way worse than Crowley, apparently. Though I find it interesting that they’ve heard of your gang leader.”

Luna groaned and held her head in her hands. Could today get any worse?

## CHAPTER 26



**H**e tracked her all the way through the woods, the roads, the forests beyond. Luther knew it was stupid to let his wolf run the show like this, but he didn't know how to find her.

At least he'd waited a single day before giving in. He was certain that the human portion of him could ask others if they'd seen her, and he'd be able to track her down.

He couldn't.

Not a single person had seen her leave, nor did anyone seem all that interested in giving him information. One man even claimed that a single man hunting a woman down on a road was certainly not going to end well. So even if he had seen Luna, he wouldn't tell Luther a thing.

If he had been in the right state of mind, he'd probably have agreed with the gentleman. After all, men had hunted women down for nefarious reasons throughout history. But that all ended with him coming to a single conclusion.

He couldn't find Luna on his own. Mortal men were not suited to this job of finding a thief who had disappeared right under his nose.

His wolf had awoken then, ready for the battle and the hunt. It desired nothing more than to rush through the fields and the woods. To tilt its nose to the sky and find her scent. That beloved, wonderful scent of herbs and spices and all things delicious. If he would only give the wolf a chance, then it would find her.

Night fell over a field a half day's ride away from his manor. It wasn't all that private, but Luther was out of options. He let the wolf take over their journey. And as he looked up into the sky, certain that he'd still retain some control, he realized it was the first night of a full moon.

The wolf had tricked him. It had known that this was the first night when it could be wild and free again, and Luther had been so concerned with finding Luna that he'd let time slip away from him.

The beast howled in triumph as Luther fell away from his body and then all rational thought disappeared. He wasn't Luther. Not anymore.

His wolf sighed, and the sound was low. Guttural. It wasn't the sound of man at all, and Luther knew how terrifying it appeared. He'd seen it in the mirror and in the reflection of the lake. He'd seen a thousand times what this beast looked like and he knew that no matter who walked into that clearing, they would flee in fear.

He was a monster.

"We are not a monster," the wolf growled. "You need to stop thinking that."

"We are nothing holy or well," he replied, although it felt like he was trapped inside a cage within his own body. He wasn't even sure if the creature could hear him. "Our father was right. A demon like this should never be released out into the world for others to see. We are nothing more than a plague on our own town."

"Everyone has an animal and a man inside them. You are merely more obvious than others. But what do you think drives men to adventure? Why do you think so many men are driven to war or fighting for the woman they love? That is the animal, Luther. You have to accept that part of yourself whether you had a wolf inside you or a crow."

He supposed that sounded far more logical than anything his father had ever told him. Denying who and what he was only made his soul hurt. The battle with himself had continued



on for so many years now, and he was tired of fighting who he was.

What he was.

“Can you really find her?” he asked.

“We can find her together, Luther. It won’t just be me running through the forests. It will be us, tracking her down and bringing her home.” The beast curled their hands into fists, the claws digging into his palms. “Where she belongs.”

At least then he would know she was safe. He could hold her in his arms and know that she hadn’t ended up dead. She owed money to some very dangerous people, she’d claimed. He could only imagine that meant they were trying to find her, too.

“Let’s go,” he replied and then suddenly, he wasn’t locked away in his own mind.

Just like that, as though the wolf had been waiting for him to say that all along, he had control over his body again. Sort of. It was like he shared the controls of his own form, although it was still that of the beast. He could see through the wolf’s eyes. Smell what the wolf smelled. It was... exhilarating.

“This is how you feel all the time?” he asked, lifting the massive claws so he could tilt them in the light.

“It is,” the wolf replied.

And, oh, how the power made him feel like nothing else. He was more than a man now, and he could smell her in the wind. Luther and his wolf chased that lovely scent through the fields. Moonlight guided their path. But he needed little light to see like this. He knew exactly where he was going, even if he had to chase her across a hundred miles.

He paused at the base of a tree where the roots were all tangled together. She’d stopped here for the night, although she hadn’t lingered very long. The remains of a campfire had been snuffed out in a hurry, and considering how weak her scent was, she must have only slept for a few hours before she had awoken again. Because of another person? Or fear?

A low snarl slipped from between his fangs. Then he headed off to follow her footsteps yet again. Luther dropped onto all fours and found that was even faster than running. He could fly across the fields like this. No one would ever catch him.

He tracked her scent all the way to a crumbling castle far from his manor. It took the better part of two days, but when the moon sank below the horizon, he'd have to return to his human form. And the longer he was in that wolf-like form, the less he wanted to be himself. Luther didn't want to think about how weak he was. How easily his skin cut and how easily he tired as a man.

The last night of the full moon brought him to the courtyard of the castle where he stood alone, chest heaving, glaring up at the lights that were lit within. They would give her to him. Her scent was so strong here, he couldn't imagine that she was anywhere else. This was the place. This was the only time he'd get to find her.

The high peaks of the castle rose like daggers pointing at the moon. Slashes of windows were all that remained, some of them entirely without glass. He could smell the faint hint of the sea and wondered if this building had been built on a cliff's edge. It had been a fortress in its time. But now it was nothing more than the lingering relic of an ancient history.

Tilting his head back, he opened his muzzle and let out a howl of rage and sadness. He wanted his mate. He wanted her to stand in front of him so he could finally hold her again. And then bite her. How dare she leave him for this long without letting him know where she had gone? The woman played with fire and he wouldn't stand for it.

No one came out of the castle. She had to be in there. His lungs were full of her unique scent and... and...

The front door blasted open. The shadowy figure of a man stood within, his shoulders broad and his form tall.

Luther bared his teeth in anger. Did this one think to keep her away from him? If anyone tried to send Luther away, then

he would let the wolf free to enjoy whatever lingered in that home. No one would stand between him and Luna. No one.

But as the man descended into the courtyard, even Luther's angry wolf hesitated. This wasn't a man. He smelled like metallic blood and dust, like the ashes of a body long gone.

Vampire.

This was the one Luna had told him about. The creature from the darkness and the shadows that had married her sister, or at least, in every way other than in the Church's eyes. He remembered that she'd liked the man, although her stories of him always made him seem a little too overbearing. Now he understood why she felt that way. He clearly intended to send Luther on his way without ever knowing what happened to Luna.

"You will give her to me," Luther snarled. His hands opened and closed as the wolf whispered dark deeds in his ears. Both he and his monster wanted to see what a vampire would do if a werewolf attacked him.

Would this creature try to fight him? He looked like nothing more than a mortal man, but Luther remembered stories about their kind. They were inhumanly strong, and their teeth were sharper than the most well made blade. It would be a battle that would make the history books, and he was so thoroughly tempted to fight this monster. Fight him and win, because Luther would. He had no doubt about that.

Although, the wolf wasn't quite as confident as he was. His wolf even swallowed hard as the vampire took another aggressive step toward them.

"I will give you nothing from this house," the vampire replied. His tones even and his emotions held in check. "You look for a ghost, werewolf. The lingering vial of her essence will be long gone by the time you convince me to let you into this house."

Vial? Rage bubbled through his body and he took an aggressive step forward. "Do you mean to suggest that you've

drained her?”

“Why would I do that? No, I didn’t drain her.” The vampire looked at his long nails, flaring his fingers for a moment before adding, “Although she gave me the slightest amount of her blood so you would come here first and give her time to get even farther from you.”

How dare they? Luther growled long and low, then paced in front of the vampire. “You don’t want me here, monster, and neither have I any interest in darkening your doorstep for long.”

“I told her to leave the moment I realized she’d caught your attention,” the vampire said. He stepped into the moonlight and for the briefest of moments, it appeared that his face had creased with pity. “My wife convinced me that she should stay the night and give her a chance to get away from you. Only after I informed her of the dangers your kind always brings with them. Murder. Mayhem. Madness. All the ‘m’ words that mean you are not fit to linger here.”

“I would never hurt her.”

“No, you wouldn’t. But you would bring about a mob or destruction either way. Wolves don’t know how to control themselves. You see something you want and you take it. Because that makes sense to you, even though you regret it later.” The vampire held up his hand for silence as Luther started snarling again. “You will not convince me otherwise on this. She went to London to deal with the men she owes money to.”

He hadn’t expected the vampire to tell him where she was. Luther drew himself up taller, trying to be as intimidating as possible. “Why would you tell me that if you think I will only bring death and destruction to your house?”

“Because I remember what it felt like to be completely mad over a woman you shouldn’t want. And I recognized the look on Luna’s face when she arrived knowing that she’d left a piece of herself behind.”

Martin. Luther remembered now. The vampire's name was Martin.

And Luna had told him that there was so much more to his story than she knew. She'd seen how madly her sister had fallen for him, and how quickly. They were like two sides of a coin that hadn't realized how desperately they needed each other. Together, they'd become much happier than they were without each other. Such a romance was something she'd only heard about in story books.

Until now, he hoped. Knowing that she'd been distraught when she left gave him hope that he would find her again and that their story would continue.

"I know she stole from me," he said, his voice a low rasp. "I know what she took and I know that she had no choice."

"She was certain you would never forgive her for what she did."

He shook his head. "Jewelry can be replaced, I suppose. They were my mother's. But if she needed them, then I would have given them to her. I just want her to come home."

"Home?" Martin repeated, tilting his head to the side. "And where do you consider her home to be?"

Not here.

Not in London, where she'd been used and abused by so many.

And not really in the manor either, because that wasn't the right answer. Those haunted halls were nothing to her, although someday he hoped they would come to be hers.

Instead, Luther tapped a clawed hand to his chest. "Here. Here is home."

The vampire reluctantly smiled, then nodded to the right. "London. You're looking for the Spirit Quay Gang. The leader's name is Crowley."

"Thank you," Luther muttered, and then sprinted off into the darkness. Unfortunately, he'd have to deal with this gang as a man. And that frightened him.

## CHAPTER 27



**L**una crouched on top of a rooftop at night, watching the street where Crowley and his gang always entered their pub. Eventually, he had to come and drink. The man couldn't survive without alcohol in the same way a fish couldn't survive out of water. All she had to do was be patient.

And not let her thoughts get the better of her. She didn't have to give him the diamond if this all went south. She thought. Maybe. She'd already given the necklaces to Martin and knew the man wasn't sentimental enough to hold on to them in case she changed her mind about this whole deal. He'd sell them the first chance he got and put the money into the castle immediately.

As he should. That was the whole point of her robbing Luther in the first place.

But she still felt bad about it. Not that she didn't feel bad about stealing from everyone she stole from. The entire job was a cesspit for hating herself.

There. In the shadows. A man pulled himself out of the darkness like he had a spell on him. Crowley straightened his collar and jacket, then walked into the pub ahead of his goons, who were quick to follow him.

The pub was a safety net of sorts. No one walked in there without knowing that Crowley and his men could kill them at a moment's notice. No one entered without approval. No one left without permission. It was just how it all worked.

Crowley was a controlling bastard, but she had to respect the way he held the entire city in an iron grasp.

“Here goes nothing,” she muttered as she dropped onto a balcony below herself. This would either clear her name for good, or she was making the stupidest decision of her life. Unfortunately, there was no way to know how this would end other than going through it herself.

Luna leapt onto the street and steadied herself on the slick cobblestone. Her booted feet hardly made any noise as she walked down the narrow alley with laundry hanging overhead. The leather leggings and corset that covered her body were sure to capture attention anywhere other than here. Those who frequented Spirit Quay knew exactly why she’d wear an outfit like this. They knew what it meant to linger in the shadows and fear for their lives. Dark, tight clothing helped hide a lot.

She stopped right in front of the door and squared her shoulders. She couldn’t look even an ounce weak or they would tear her limb from limb. Strength radiating through her shoulders and spine, she wrapped her knuckles on the door and waited for the small slot to open.

Brown eyes peered out, though they narrowed almost immediately. “Luna. Didn’t think I’d see the likes of you daring to come back here.”

“Where else would I go?” She held up the bag in her hands. “Need to see Crowley.”

“He’s not here right now. You’ll have to wait for him.”

Of course. They always wanted to give Crowley an out, just in case he didn’t want to deal with the person who waited at the door. Had this idiot forgotten she’d been here countless times? She knew how this worked.

“You’ll tell him that I’ve got what he wanted, and if he doesn’t come outside in the next ten minutes, then I’ll sell it to the other high bidder.” She shrugged. “I don’t think he wants to miss out on this one, but if you’re willing to take the risk that he won’t care what I’ve stolen, you can let him drink. Otherwise, maybe go tell your boss who’s outside.”

The man's eyes got wider with every single one of her words until he finally slammed the slot closed again. He'd tell Crowley. She knew not a single one of those lackeys would ever take the risk that they'd let one of Crowley's greatest treasures out of his sight.

Hell, Crowley had killed men for a lot less than that. She'd seen him put a bullet through a man's skull because he'd brought Crowley a whiskey, not an ale.

Meandering from the door, she sat on the lid of a barrel ten paces away. There were a few of them, and she could duck beneath one if Crowley came out shooting. If he didn't, then she could always throw one into the group of his men and hope it slowed them down while she ran.

It didn't take long for the door to slam open and Crowley to enter the alley, with his cronies not far behind. This time, he'd come out with five men larger than she was, and even taller than Luther. All of them had a rather dumbfounded expression on their faces, though. It didn't make her think they were all that terrifying, that's for sure.

Crowley, though, was dressed to perfection. The suit he wore likely cost more than one of the necklaces she'd given Martin. And the red tie at his throat was so crimson, it appeared to be dipped in blood. His hair was slicked back from his face, a little too greasy for her liking, but he held a hat in his hand. As if he would ever put that on hair so perfectly laid.

She tapped her fingers on the barrel in a subtle pattern. "Crowley, why did you feel the need to bring that many people out here? You were the one who hired me, remember?"

"I don't remember hiring you at all," He growled, snapping his fingers so the men stepped even closer to him. "You are the one who had to steal for me, otherwise I'd pull all your fingernails out. Somehow, you always seem to turn things in your favor."

Of course she did. When that favor meant she kept all her fingernails and her head attached to her body, she was bound



to want to turn them around. The foolish man thought she wouldn't at least try.

The diamond burned a hole against her back. It didn't sing when Crowley was near it, however. Instead, it shivered.

Why? Why didn't the diamond want Crowley to see it?

The gang leader held out his hand and impatiently twitched his fingers. "All right, come on. Give it over then if you really managed it."

"Oh, I managed," she muttered. But Luna hesitated. The diamond was always happy to see people, that was part of what it wanted. To be seen. To be worn. Handed from person to person so they could all fall in love with its gorgeous facets. But that wasn't the case right now. If it could have moved, she thought it might have dug deeper into her pockets just so he wouldn't know it existed.

Crowley watched her every move with eyes that saw too much. She knew he'd already noticed that her fingers hadn't stopped tapping on the barrel. He definitely saw that she licked her lips and looked to his right, as if someone were standing in the shadows waiting for her to tell them to attack. All of these little movements were a ruse so she could buy herself more time.

"Luna," Crowley crooned. He put the hat on his head, and that was how she knew she was in real trouble. He'd never ruin hair like that if he didn't have to. "What did I tell you when I sent you out to find that damned diamond?"

"Just that you wanted the diamond in your hand because I took another from you." She resisted the urge to spit at his feet. "Come on, you can't assume I'd remember our conversation from a month ago."

A muscle in her back flexed. The diamond still didn't have a single word to say, and that wasn't sitting right with her.

"Luna, I told you that bad things would happen if you lied to me. Or if you tried to take anything from me again. Now, you made me get up. You made me put down a hard earned drink. I need to know what you have in your pockets."

The expression on his face was too hungry. But that was Crowley, wasn't it? He'd always thought the world owed him more than what it wanted to give, and no matter what it took, he would steal and scrimp and murder until he got his due. Unfortunately, he thought everything was his due.

"Why aren't you talking?" she muttered.

"What do you mean?" Crowley snapped. "I'm talking to you right here, you brat. If you think you can confuse me and get out of this, you're sorely wrong. I only have so much patience, Luna Winchester."

She wasn't talking to the idiot in front of her, but he didn't need to know that. As far as she was aware, Crowley didn't even know what her powers were. He only knew that her mother was a witch and that she'd come from the Church. Maybe he'd even been to one of the shows her sisters and she had put on. People with money liked to watch little girls get exorcised back then.

Finally, she heard it. The faintest whisper in her mind of the diamond who quaked in fear. "He wants to cut me up into tiny pieces. He's going to take me away from you and no one is going to see me until I'm a thousand fragments of what I once was."

Oh no.

She should have thought of that, damn it. Crowley didn't want a single diamond. He could shatter this giant piece of rock and he'd make ten times the coin. And it would be so much less suspicious than trying to sell a diamond the size of someone's fist.

She was the idiot. Not him.

Why hadn't she realized this was his plan all along? She couldn't give him the diamond if he was going to ruin it. But that was the only way he could sell it without getting caught.

Heart beating hard, she ran her tongue over her teeth and plotted how to get out of this situation. There was a line of laundry over quite a few of the goons. If she could get that to

come down on their heads, then she might be able to run fast enough to lose them in the streets.

“Listen, Crowley. Here’s the situation. I don’t think you told me the entire truth, you hear me?” She cocked her head to the side and watched his reactions. “In fact, I think you’ve been lying to me from the start and I don’t like being lied to, either. This is a partnership and we’ve got to at least be honest with each other.”

“A partnership?” he spat. “Luna, you don’t understand what I’m getting at here, and I suppose I should have guessed you wouldn’t. Never trust a thief.”

Everyone burst into action, and she didn’t have the time she needed. Luna thought she could grab onto that rope fast enough. But, true to Crowley form, the men he’d hired were far stronger than she’d given them credit for. They might look dumb, but damn, they could move.

One of them grabbed a fistful of her hair and tossed her away from the rope. She struck the barrels hard, going down on her hands and knees with a horrible wheeze as the air in her lungs disappeared. Trying desperately to suck in another breath, she grabbed onto a barrel and flung it in the direction of the men.

But the biggest of them let it hit his chest without flinching. The wood shattered around him and damn it, he was still coming.

She had only a moment to throw her forearms in front of her face, so his punch connected with them. Her left arm made a horrible creaking noise, and then the blistering pain sent her stumbling back. Had he broken her arm? No, not broken. Just nerve endings that decided she didn’t need to feel the limb for a while.

Numbness trailed up the limb and her left arm hung dead at her side. Staggering away from them, she tried her best to control the situation, even as the goons followed her down the street. “Crowley, I already have what you want. But I want to know what you’re doing with the diamond after I give it to you.”

“Why does it matter? You’ll be paid for stealing it. I get what I want. We’re all happy.” He held his arms out at his sides, safe behind the wall of man meat he’d hired. “Did you suddenly get a conscience while you were gone? That’s why I always liked you, Luna. You stole whatever anyone wanted and it didn’t matter who you were taking it from.”

But it did. It mattered, and it ripped at her soul every time.

Another punch flew, and she tried to deflect it with her working arm. He was too big. The force was too great. He slapped her arm away and punched her square in the mouth. Her nose spurted, the spray of metallic blood filled her mouth. All she could taste was her own blood, and all she could feel was the pain rocking through her form.

Had she fallen?

Her butt hit the ground and yes, she had fallen. Staring up at the starry sky, Luna feared the worst. She’d never been caught like this. By anyone. And sure, she was a big woman, but they could easily cut her throat and steal the diamond.

She should have known this was the plan. Crowley couldn’t be trusted. Ever.

His voice drifted over the breeze. “I’m going to cut your fingers off first, and I need you to be awake for that Miss Winchester. This is the appropriate way to punish thieves, after all.”

How badly would that hurt? She didn’t want to know. Luna resolved herself to passing out and that this would be the last time she ever opened her eyes.

Until she heard the howl of a wolf and knew she wasn’t alone anymore.

## CHAPTER 28



**H**e'd tracked her all the way through the streets of London, and realized how much he still knew the place. Luther used to come here on the days his father had insisted on traveling. And he hadn't been back since the old man had died. He'd admit, he hadn't expected it to look much the same as it always had.

The wolf helped him follow her scent through the winding streets and back alleys until he slunk into Spirit Quay. He watched as the men threatened her and marveled at how strong she was to not even flinch. He would have. Hell, Luther wanted nothing to do with the gang members that clearly wanted to do her harm. But he had to give her the chance to prove herself.

Luna would kill him herself if she didn't get the chance to do what she'd come here to do. He knew that. She knew it too; he assumed. Because for a moment, her eyes flicked over to where he stood in the shadows. He thought she saw him.

Then she did the unthinkable. She threatened the leader of the Spirit Quay Gang, and all hell broke loose.

Luther wasn't the wolf. He wasn't some demon who could run out of the shadows and save her. He hadn't even brought a damn gun because he'd been running out of the house without a thought of weaponry or what he'd need to bring her back. He'd just wanted to get her home, where she was safe, and without a gang member pointing guns at her.

Then he heard that big one hit her. He heard the horrible sound of bone striking bone and watched as she fell to the ground.

She needed him. More than that, she needed a savior, and he refused to let her do this alone. Even if the full moon wasn't out, he would still risk his neck to make sure that she never had to get punched in the face like that again. But in a shocking twist of events, his wolf woke up.

The big man lifted a fist again, clearly winding up to punch Luna even while she lay on the ground. And that's when it happened.

His wolf ripped out of his throat, clawing and tearing and biting until Luther didn't need the moon to give it life.

He stepped out of the shadows with drool dripping from his fangs. Clawed hands held out by his sides, he tilted his head back and let out a howl that shook the rafters of the surrounding buildings. It was a scream of rage and anger that anyone would ever dare touch what was his. The men should quake in fear.

And they did.

Three of the big men turned toward him with shocked expressions on their faces. They all fled, probably the smartest of the bunch. The other two, however, turned toward him with their fists raised. That was a foolish choice.

Luther rushed toward them and their blows were barely more than butterfly kisses as he let the monster inside him out. He chewed through the cords of their necks. He ripped out muscle and sinew, shaking it between his teeth before he released the horrible strands. He left the two men in piles on the cold cobblestone ground. They looked nothing like the men they'd once been.

Hunger rumbled through his belly and he knew if he lost himself, he would hunch over those bodies and rip into their warm bellies. There were delicious secret treats inside. Deep inside. The sweetest part was hidden behind the belly and

between the lungs. But first, he had to focus on the now and the man who was clearly running away from him.

“Crowley,” he growled through his blood drenched muzzle. “You are mine.”

The man stumbled and fell onto the stones in front of the door to his pub. Scrambling, he flipped onto his back and crab walked away from Luther. Spine pressed against the wood. He found the courage to speak. “Begone, monster.”

“That’s all you have to say?” Luther replied, taking another step toward the real beast. “Coward. You wanted to kill a woman who you thought you’d sent to her death. Then you wanted to take what was mine.”

He’d said too much. Crowley was a smart man, and surely he understood what Luther hinted at. Yet the man was trembling so much, he probably wasn’t thinking about anything other than safety.

For good measure, Luther lifted a clawed finger and pointed at Crowley. “You are mine, Crowley. I will return for your heart so that I might feast upon it in the light of the full moon.”

The door opened enough for a hand to reach out and grab onto Crowley’s shoulder. The henchman within the pub yanked his leader into the darkness and safety beyond. Let them. Luther already knew there was a back way out and they would all try to slip into the darkness where he might never find them again.

What they didn’t know was that a wolf could track them for ages. He would find these men, each and every one of them. He filled his lungs with their scent. And he’d never forget it. Nor would the wolf. They would spend a very long time hunting down these men until Luther bathed in their blood. Only then would he forgive them for what they had done to his mate.

Turning around, his eyes searched for the woman he loved. The woman who was the other half of his soul.

Luna had already sat up. She braced her wrists on her knees, staring at the two dead men with a shocked expression on her face.

Ah. He had forgotten she'd see all this.

Luther didn't want to scare her. He didn't want her to think he was a monster, as well as everyone else here. He'd killed for her, and surely she would see that? She would understand that he hadn't any choice but to save her.

Still. There was blood on his hands and he had ripped out the throats of two men in front of her. If she'd been looking, that was. Maybe she'd been smart and turned her face away from the carnage.

Unlike now. She wasn't looking away from their bodies. Not even a little.

"Luna," he said, his voice little more than a growl. "Stop looking at them, my moon."

"No," she replied. Though it wasn't in the shaking tones, he'd expected. Her words were as sharp and jagged as his fangs. "I want to look at them. I want to remember the faces of the men who tried to kill me. And they would have. You know I'm not exaggerating. If Crowley had told them to step on my neck until I stopped breathing, they would have. They didn't care at all."

"They didn't." The anger burned inside him still, but more than that, he wanted to touch her. He wanted to make sure she was still in one piece.

He couldn't, though. Not like this. Not when he looked like a monster of old and hulking above her, with fur covering his body and a face like a dog. He tried to convince the wolf to release its control, but it wouldn't. It wanted to touch her as well. A mate was theirs for life, whether she wanted to be or not.

Swallowing hard, he took another step toward her. "Luna, are you all right?"

"I'm fine," she muttered.



“You’re bleeding.”

“Am I?” She touched a hand to her face, then stared down at the blood on her palm. “Oh. He probably broke my nose.”

There it was again. That horrible anger. “Which one?” he snarled.

She lifted a delicate red brow and pointed to the dead body on the right. “That one. He was the one who hit me the first time. The other three were supposed to protect Crowley. Who, I assume, you’ve also made quick work of.”

“He’s in the pub.” Luther took another shaking step forward. “Luna, I know you don’t want me to touch you like this, and I wouldn’t blame you if you said no, but I... I need...”

He didn’t have to finish.

She leapt up and into his arms in the blink of an eye. Her head must ache and her body definitely did, but she still threw herself into him with so much force that he stepped back a few times before hugging her against his heart.

A deep sigh blew from his lungs and ruffled her hair. This. This was what he had wanted for so long. No, needed. He’d needed her to be with him and beside him. And now she was in his arms and it made his soul complete again.

“I was so worried about you,” he breathed into her hair. His muzzle didn’t quite fit like it should and he was a good deal taller than normal, but he was still himself. Still aware enough to know that she held him with the same fervor.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, and he felt the burning heat of tears against his furry shoulder. “I never should have taken what I did, but I didn’t see another choice. There was no other option when I feared he would... he would know who you were.”

“He already does.” And Luther didn’t care if this man found out. What would a gang leader do to him?

The worst Crowley could do was spread rumors. It wasn’t like the man would go to the authorities, after all. They’d slap

Crowley in shackles before they would ever listen to what he had to say. And most of the people in Dead Man's Crossing already had their suspicions about who or what Luther was. More rumors would only fuel that fire, but no one had any proof of what he was.

Luna sniffed. "I didn't want him to ruin your life, Luther. You have so much more to lose than I do."

"I don't care if people know what I am. The Earl of Dead Man's Crossing has fought through worse than rumors and myth." He leaned back, trying to smile through the muzzle, although he had a feeling he looked more monstrous than before. "And I'm sorry, but I can't believe you're hugging me when I look like this."

She chuckled and shook her head. "You aren't that bad, you know. I thought you'd be a lot more drooly and less dog-like."

"Dog like?" Both he and the wolf were insulted. "I'm a werewolf."

"And you look more like an irish wolfhound than you do a wolf." She ran her fingers along his muzzle, scratching her nails into his elongated face and still grinning like she'd found the best companion in the world. "And you're still you, Luther. Underneath all of this fur and change in form, I can still see you in your eyes. Nothing has changed for me."

Oh, he loved this woman who wasn't afraid to run with the wolves. She led him around as though she'd put a collar on his neck and he loved every second of it. If she would let him, he'd devote his entire life to worshipping her.

He swallowed hard and said, "Luna..."

Unfortunately, he didn't have time to finish that thought.

A shout rang out from down the street and illuminated torches approached. Apparently, he'd underestimated Crowley. The damned man might not have gone to the authorities himself, but he'd had someone else call them. And anyone claiming there was a werewolf in London would capture the attention of far too many people for his comfort. He had to

run. He had to go... somewhere, but they would find him. Someone would track him down.

Eyes wide, he argued with the wolf to let go of the form, so at the very least, the authorities would only find a naked man in the arms of a woman. But the beast wouldn't listen to him. Instead, it howled with rage that anyone would try to attack them. Especially with Luna in their arms.

She wrestled herself from his grip and shoved his shoulder. "Go. Run."

He opened his arms wide, pointing in either direction. "Where am I going to go, Luna? They're going to find me."

"Not if I cause a distraction." She shoved him again, pointing up at a balcony. "Go up that way. There's easy access to the roofs. Find a place to hide and then wait for me to come get you. Or wait until the sunlight and then you'll have to go back to normal."

He wasn't so sure that would work. "But, Luna... They're looking for you, too."

A bright grin flashed across her face, nearly blinding him with her confidence. "I've evaded them for a lot longer than you have, Luther. Trust me. Go."

He had no other choice. Luther leapt and grabbed onto the balcony, hauling himself up with teeth and claws until he could hide in the shadows. Then he heard her. Luna let out a horrible, gut wrenching scream.

"Wolf! Werewolf!"

## CHAPTER 29



**S**he raced away from the scene of the crime and could only hope that the fools followed her voice. They were more likely to rush toward a woman screaming, she supposed, than they were to trust any of Crowley's men. So she kept screaming. She ran through the streets like the werewolf was actively chasing her. Screaming about the monster with teeth and claws.

Just like that, London woke up. Countless people raced out of their homes to see what was the problem and then picked up her cry.

"Wolf!" they shouted. "There's a werewolf in London!"

Once that happened, Luna didn't have to try all that hard. The cries went up throughout the entire city where people screamed to put your children inside. Lock your doors. No one was safe until everyone was off the streets.

More men wearing badges joined the others. They did their best to control the hysteria, but at some point, they had to know this was a losing battle. Too many people were screaming and crying. There was too much commotion and even if they got one section of the city under control, it would fire back up into mass panic the moment they left it. There weren't enough men to control what Luna had started.

Which was perfect, really, because that was what she had hoped would happen. London was on her side, while she hoped the real werewolf had found a good place to hide.

Luna finally felt like she could sneak away and not keep screaming when she spent a half hour listening to the cries that weren't dying down. She snuck by a woman who threw both her arms back and screamed at the top of her lungs that she didn't want to perish.

Luna raced past that woman because people were bound to flock to her.

If the authorities had found the bodies, no one would know. Even the other people who were trying to calm the city would have a hard time piecing together what was true and what might be people making things up because they were afraid.

Finally, she got back to a part of the city she recognized. The same part of the city where she always knew she was safe. She paused by one of the stores and knocked on the crate outside it. Normally, these were used for storage or trash. But this crate always had the same little boy in it who had done more jobs for her than she could count.

The street rat peered through a small hole in the crate. "What you want?"

"Need to find someone." She leaned against the crate and stared out at the street, as though she were trying to stay out of the way. "Should be on the roofs near Spirit Quay, not sure about that though."

"Whatcha paying?"

Luna fished into her pocket and pulled out an earring she'd taken off a woman on her way back here. "Real sapphire."

"How's I know that?" A tiny hand reached out and grabbed it, though.

"I can hear 'em, remember?"

The little boy snorted. "Yeah, yeah. The magic and all that. Fine. I'll find 'em if you need the 'elp that badly. What's he look like?"

She glanced up at the sky and the sun that was slowly rising. "I think he'll be the only naked man on the roof, love."

Should be easy enough to find. But if you can't, then you don't need to come find me."

"That's real gross," the little boy muttered, before clambering out of the crate. At least he'd put on a little weight since the last time she'd seen him. He had been getting real thin, and Luna wanted to make sure he didn't disappear like so many other children who ended up in his situation.

His scrawny legs were covered by pants that had too many holes. He wore a sweater, though, and the wool would keep him a lot warmer during the winter.

She ruffled his brown curls. "You taking care of yourself, kid?"

"You know I stay out of trouble." He bit the earring before putting it in his pocket. "Where am I supposed to find ya?"

She pointed at the building nearby. "Meet you on the roof up there in an hour, say? Just in case I don't find him before you."

The grin on his face revealed a lot of missing teeth and what teeth he still had were yellowed with misuse. "Are we racing, then?"

Oh, that boy. She'd have to teach him how to brush his teeth again or he'd rot all of them out of his head. "Sure, a race. What do I win if I find him first?"

"Nothing."

The boy took off down the street and clambered up a pipe all the way onto the rooftops. He had to stop doing that or someone would catch him. He was too obvious climbing around, but at least he'd be safe for a little while longer. No one minded when children did that. An adult? That's when people started asking questions.

Luna sighed and set off in the opposite direction. The gang would still linger around Spirit Quay, so she didn't want to return too quickly. And Luther could have ended up somewhere else. She had to track him down, but she refused to put either of them in any more danger than what they already were in.

The image of those mangled bodies flashed in front of her eyes again. Damn it. She wouldn't be able to sleep for a while because of that. Every time she blinked, she saw the organs spilling out around their bodies and the horrible way they'd died. Sure, they had wanted to kill her.

But damn. No one should die so horribly.

Except then her nose would kick up that heartbeat in it again and she didn't feel so bad. Her arm at least had come back to itself, and the bruises turning it purple would take weeks to disappear.

Luna searched all the hiding places she knew of, and Luther wasn't in all of them. Which meant it was highly likely he had stayed near Spirit Quay. Good. With the sun this high in the sky, she should be able to return without suspicion.

Climbing to the rooftops was the most natural thing in the world to her. She'd climbed these walls so many times in her life, and now she did it to find the one man who had crawled underneath her guard. Strangely, the mere thought of that was exhilarating. Luna had always thought that having another person in her life would be stressful at best. At worst? A nuisance.

Instead, all she thought about was how much she wanted to be with him. How much she looked forward to seeing him, even though they'd had a tougher time of it lately. He'd killed people in front of her. She'd stolen very precious jewels from him.

They'd get through it. At least, she hoped they would. She was willing to fight to keep him around in her life.

The kid she'd hired walked over the slippery roof of the building next to her, arms outstretched. The bright pink of the sky turned to blue behind him and the silhouette of pigeons fluttered to life as they stretched their wings in the morning.

Picturesque, really. What a lovely day to convince a man that she was worthy of his love.

The little boy hopped down in front of her and planted his hands on his hips. "Found him."

“Did you now?” Luna reached into her pocket and dangled the matching earring between her fingers. “You beat me. I think you deserve this one if you tell me where he is.”

“Easy. He’s on the small balcony on the roof of Old Thomas’s house. The one where you took me to watch the moon when we first met.” He snagged the earring out of her hand and lifted it up to the sky. “You think this one is real too?”

“I know it is.” The earring was already muttering about what a handsome young lad he was. If only he wasn’t covered in dirt.

“Good. I’ll spend it on good stuff, I promise. I won’t buy what the other boys do.” He pocketed the earring and then saluted her with two fingers. “Food and clothes only, Miss Winchester.”

“I taught you well.”

She watched him rush off the roof, her heart skipping a beat as she noticed the risks he took. Too many, but he was still a child. She had to let him enjoy his life a little, and if that meant leaping from rooftop to rooftop without the right shoes, then he’d have to learn the hard way. Sometimes, boys had to be boys.

Standing, she made her way to the exact rooftop where she’d pointed Luther to go to. And maybe she had always known that he would take her advice without questioning it. She hesitated to see him because she still feared he’d be angry with her. Or maybe she was afraid of her own reaction when she saw him. Things were always so electric between the two of them, and she didn’t know what she’d do if he suddenly decided this wasn’t working for him.

He’d come and saved her from Crowley and his men. That had to count for something.

She found him tucked against the wall, away from sight and well hidden to the untrained eye. But then again, he was entirely naked. She doubted he wanted anyone to see him.



Luna snatched a sheet off someone's laundry line and then landed hard on the stone tiles around him.

Luther flinched and let out a low curse. "Luna! You scared a year of my life off me."

"Did I now?" She held out the sheet. "Take this."

"Oh thank God." He grabbed the sheet and immediately wrapped it around his shoulders, holding it tightly in front of him. "Do you know how terrified I was that some elderly woman would walk out onto this rooftop and see me in nothing but what God gave me?"

"She'd get the best show of her life, I'm sure." Luna sat down on the ledge, back to the alleyway where all of this had gone down. She didn't want to see if the bodies had been moved yet. Not yet. "I figured we needed to talk."

"How did you find me?" He held up his hand. "Actually, I don't want to know. Don't tell me you put some gemstone inside me so you could always find where I was."

She opened her mouth to tell him no, she wasn't that insane. But then she stopped herself because, actually, that wasn't a bad idea. All it would take was a very tiny gemstone, and then she'd always be able to find whoever she wanted to find. Whether that was Luther or Maeve or Beatrix or anyone, really.

Tapping her lip, she pondered about how easy that would be. Sure, cutting into someone wouldn't be pleasant and she wasn't even sure if a gemstone would stay in someone's body. But, she supposed, they could at least try it. Maybe someone could swallow it and though that would be temporarily helpful...

Luther interrupted her thoughts. "No, I recognize that look on your face and I didn't say that to give you any ideas. You are not shoving gemstones into people so that you can find them."

"But what if it were only a temporary thing? Like if we were trying to rob some neighbor of yours and needed to know where the authorities took someone if they happened to get

caught? It's not a bad idea, Luther. I'm just saying. Not all of us have the nose of a wolf."

His expression changed from one of horror to pleasure. Luther palmed her waist and dragged her tight against his chest. She could feel every inch of his hard body against hers and suddenly, she remembered why she'd been so captivated by him. Every inch of this man was a delight to the senses.

"We?" he growled. "If we are stealing from my neighbor?"

"Well, I assumed you wouldn't want me to steal from your neighbor without telling you," she replied, coyly tilting her head back so she could see all of his face. "Unless you want me to give up a life of stealing, because frankly, I don't think that's going to happen. There's too many gemstones out there that need liberating."

"Oh." His hands flexed on her waist, one of them trailing up her spine. "And here I was thinking that you were stealing them. Liberating sounds so much better."

"When they're locked away from the sun and begging you to help them, you try to tell me it's not liberating." She eyed his lips, waiting, waiting...

Ah, there it was. He finally couldn't stand the separation any more than she could. Luther pressed his mouth to hers and kissed her until she was breathless. Until her toes curled in her boots and her knees sagged. She leaned against him, so happy for once to have a man who could hold on to her. It didn't matter how much of her weight she leaned against him, he wouldn't move even a smidge.

"I really am sorry," she whispered, when he drew away from her. "I know those were your mother's. The gemstones told me everything, and I didn't... I couldn't..."

He pressed a finger to her lips. "I don't want to talk about my mother right now, Luna. I think there are more pressing matters to attend to rather than thinking about the old lady."

"Oh." She felt something hard press against her hip, and then repeated, "Oh."

“Exactly.” His hand scooped the back of her head and he tilted her so the angle was just right for another mind numbing kiss. “Unless you don’t want to. I know there’s a whole world down there and you’ll have to be very quiet.”

“I don’t want to be quiet, but I suppose I can.” And she supposed she wanted to. Even though they were out in the middle of the city on a rooftop where anyone could see them, she didn’t care. She was in his arms and he’d found her. Of all people, he had been the one to find her.

Luna melted into him and forgot about the world. She forgot about what she’d done or what he’d done. Instead, she focused on how much she adored this man. She touched all the hard heat of him, the long lines of muscle and the valleys between his shoulder blades. She kissed every inch she could find and, in doing so, found that she was the one who had to put a hand over his mouth.

When it was all said and done, she’d never been more happy than those moments on the rooftop with the sun kissing her back.

## CHAPTER 30



**H**e brought her back to the house, even though that also required that she find a very cheap carriage for them to take. He'd been horrified at the conditions she expected him to suffer through. Luther had the money, but apparently no self-respecting carriage driver would take a naked man home on the promise that money would eventually be exchanged.

He supposed he didn't blame them for that.

Still, by the time they'd arrived back at his home, Luther was quite embarrassed and ready to go back to his own bedroom where no one would laugh at him. Like Magda was currently.

The old woman curled in on herself. She laughed so hard. She pointed again at the sheet and said, "Tell me again! One more time, please."

Luna had made up the most ridiculous story about how he'd tracked her down, but then had gotten mugged. He'd tried to keep them both safe, but in the end, the only thing he had on him was his clothing. So their attackers had taken his clothes in the hopes that they might get some money from them.

"It was heroic," she said, wrapping an arm around his shoulders. "And here I was, only trying to see my sisters for a few days. The poor thing had completely forgotten that I'd told him about it and, as you know, I'm not used to servants. I've learned my lesson."

“I bet you have.” Magda wiped tears away from her eyes. “Luther, accosted by highwaymen and then losing all his clothing. Now that would be a sight I’d pay to see.”

He bet she would. The old woman would have turned bright red and passed straight away if she’d ever seen him without clothing.

“That will never happen, Magda,” he said.

“If you could please have a hot bath run for Luther, that would be most appreciated,” Luna interrupted him. Then she guided him away from the rest of his staff, who stood in the hallway, gawking at the entire situation.

He let her lead him down the hall, if only because he liked the feeling of her arm around his shoulders. “You should have let me at least tell her a different story than that,” he grumbled. “Now she thinks I’m a blithering idiot.”

“No, she thinks you saved the woman you’re to marry. Even if that came at the cost of your own pride.” She squeezed him tightly against her and pushed the door open to his bedroom. “It’s a very honorable thing to do, what you did.”

“I didn’t do any of that!” he exclaimed.

Damned woman would have everyone in Dead Man’s Crossing talking about how the Earl had wandered the streets naked to save her. And she’d find that absolutely hilarious. He supposed it was a little funny, but he wouldn’t let her get away with it that easily.

Without looking behind him, Luther dropped the sheet and walked over to his wardrobe. Sure, he was covered in dirt and god knows what else. But he knew the picture he painted. Confident. Strong. He was proud of the body he’d worked hard for and he knew that she would have a hard time keeping her hands off him.

The gasp that echoed through his chambers was enough to make him decide that they weren’t leaving this room for a while yet. Responsibilities be damned. Everything could wait a little longer. The town wouldn’t go up in flames if the Earl enjoyed being with the woman he intended to make his wife.

What had she called herself in the hall? He paused with his hand on a robe in his closet. The woman he was to marry. That was all she thought she was to him?

No, that wouldn't do. She had to know that she meant more than that.

He yanked the dressing gown onto his arms and over his shoulders before turning around, perhaps a little too quickly. "Luna, I need to make something very clear to you before anything else happens between us."

Her eyes widened, but she nodded. Had she taken a few steps toward him? Like she was planning on grabbing him while his back was turned? Normally, he'd be thrilled with that. Actually, he still was. Damn it, he wanted her even now, but he had to get this off his chest before he was distracted.

"Yes, there's something I have to say as well." She even interrupted him to add, "I'd like to go first if you don't mind."

Oh. Well, now this all sounded rather serious and he'd prefer it if they went back to the loveable bantering. In fact, if he didn't say what he had to say, then he would likely explode. "I think it would be better if I went first, actually."

"It probably wouldn't." She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and he was suddenly furious that he hadn't gotten to do that.

Which was silly. They'd have a lot of time for him to tuck every curl behind her ear. Perhaps multiple times a day if she would let him. Ugh, this woman had him thinking like he was a poet and he'd never thought that way before in his life. He didn't know if he liked it or if it was making him slightly ill to his stomach.

"Fine," he muttered. "Please. You say what you have to say, and then I'll tell you. It's not like anything is going to change after I say what I say."

She frowned. "Maybe you should go first then."

"Luna!" He took a deep breath and held it, forcing his exasperation to ease. "Just talk."

“All right.” She was obviously uncomfortable. Luna shook her head and muttered, “No, this won’t do.”

Then she walked right up to him and grabbed onto his shoulders. He thought maybe they weren’t talking after all, but she instead guided him to the bed where she sat him down and then took a couple steps away from him.

“That’s better,” she said before wringing her hands.

“You’re making me nervous.”

“Well, I’m nervous. I’ve never had to stand in front of someone who I stole a very large sum of money from and apologize,” she snapped before wincing. “Sorry. Anyway, let me get this out so I don’t say nothing about it.”

He waved a hand in the air and then leaned back on his palms. “Proceed.”

“I shouldn’t have taken anything from you and if I needed the money, I should have asked. I know we already said our apologies and saying it again won’t change what I did, but I need you to know that I vow to never steal from you again. You’re a good man and you don’t deserve to fear that I’m going to take more from you or run away again.” She met his gaze, and he was horrified to see tears in her eyes. “I know they were your mother’s, Luther, and I know that we haven’t ever talked about her. But I wouldn’t want anyone to take anything that I had left of my mother if I had even a thimble that she loved.”

Oh, the poor thing was breaking down in front of him and he had to stop it. She didn’t need to know that he’d never been close with either of his parents. That his mother had died when he was very young and even then, he hadn’t seen her much. She was the woman who had brought him into this world, and that was the last of it.

All she needed from him right now was his acceptance and belief that she wouldn’t do any of this again.

“Luna, I think that you’re putting more blame on yourself than you deserve right now. You came into my home with a purpose, and I ignored that for a while. But I know who you

are and that you'll want to keep doing this because it makes you feel better. You can still steal, but tell me when you're going to do it so I can at least help you."

She nodded, staring down at the floor. "I can do that."

"Good." Then he shrugged for added measure. "I don't care about the jewelry. They were my father's possessions more than my mother's, and someday I'll tell you about all of that. You don't have to feel guilty. I hadn't even seen the old baubles since I was a child."

Luna never stopped surprising him, though, and he should have remembered that. She reached into her corset, right between those lovely pale breasts that he'd fallen in love with, and drew out a tiny bag.

"Then this is for you, even if it means nothing to you anymore."

He had no idea what she handed him. And how had she kept this hidden when they'd enjoyed each other's company on the roof? He had peeled that leather outfit off of her and he hadn't noticed this at all.

Luther nodded at her chest. "Quite the hiding place, don't you think?"

She blushed. "Well, it worked, didn't it?"

"Sure did." He didn't like the idea of someone having to paw around in her chest to steal from her. Maybe they would work on other secret pockets for her to hide things.

Pulling the drawstring of the bag rather absentmindedly, he let the contents fall out onto his palm.

The Diamond of Crestfall winked up at him, still glittering with all the wealth that would make the King weep. Luther's eyes nearly bugged out of his head before looking back at Luna. "I thought you gave this to the gang?"

"I never gave it to him," she replied. "You interrupted before they could take it from me. His plan was to shatter it into a thousand diamonds to sell to the highest bidders. A



smart plan, really. It would have made him a lot more money, but I couldn't... I couldn't let him destroy it like that."

The diamond seemed to warm in his palm, or maybe that was his imagination. But he saw Luna tilt her head to the side as though it were speaking to her.

Strange, really, how difficult it was to believe she could talk with the stones. He was a man who turned into a wolf at every full moon, and now apparently whenever the wolf wanted to, and somehow it was still difficult for him to believe that she had magical powers he couldn't explain.

"Thank you for this," he said, holding the gemstone up to the light before he set it carefully on the nightstand. "We'll have to figure out a better way to display it. No more shadows for that diamond."

"No more shadows," she repeated with a smile. "You've made it very happy."

"Good." He slid off the bed onto his knees, kneeling in front of her with his soul pressing against his throat. "Now I want to make you very happy, Luna Winchester. In any way that I can."

"Oh." Luna set her hands on his shoulders, guiding him closer to her warm skin. "I can think of a few ways you might be able to do that."

No, he couldn't get distracted by counting the freckles on her belly. Not right now.

Luther grabbed her hips and forced her to stop in her place. "No, not that. Listen to me. When we left Magda, you said you were the woman I'm supposed to marry. That I'd saved the woman I'm supposed to marry."

"I did," she replied with a frown on her face.

"I don't want you to say that anymore, because you are so much more than that." He swallowed hard, staring up into her beautiful, lovely face. "You're the woman I love, Luna. I don't know when it happened or how, but every time I look at you, I feel like I'm whole. I didn't realize how lonely I was before you got here. How much I needed someone to see me as a man

and not a monster, or at least someone I didn't fear would ever see me as a monster. You are the woman I've dreamt of my entire life. And I love you. More than I can really express. I want to call you my wife. To say that I've saved my wife."

He'd thought perhaps his speech would terrify her. But instead, those lovely eyes filled with tears and then she nodded vigorously. "I love you, too. So much that leaving felt like I'd ripped out an important part of myself, but I couldn't imagine you would feel the same way. You're an earl and I'm—"

Luther stood and pressed his hand over her mouth. "I don't care. I don't care even a bit that you aren't what people will want to see. Because you're everything I need, Luna Winchester, and if you won't have me, then I feel certain I will fall apart at the seams."

She waited for him to slide his hand from her mouth before she smiled. And that look told him everything he needed to know. "I want to spend the rest of my life with you, Luther Fernsby. I wouldn't have it any other way."

"Even though I'm a werewolf?"

Her hand cupped the back of his neck and drew him down for a long, lingering kiss. "Especially because you're a werewolf."

## CHAPTER 31



**A** month passed too quickly in the manor. Luna would have liked to see her sisters, maybe a little more, but she had too much to do. There was an entire house to learn all over again, brand new responsibilities for making sure that everything in the house was running smoothly, and a wedding to plan.

A wedding.

Her wedding.

She was getting married. Of all people. Luna had never thought she'd even consider the thought. She'd spent her entire life thinking she would spend it alone or with her sisters and then this man walked out of the shadows and opened his arms with the intent on her sneaking into his heart.

Damned fool, he had no idea what he was pledging himself to, and she supposed that made him even happier. Luther helped when he could. He was rather busy himself, because apparently being an earl was more than just signing a couple of papers a day and then doing whatever he wanted. Instead, he was out with his people, fixing roads. Being the best earl she'd ever met, that was for certain.

Every now and then they would sneak away to Farmer Barren's field to help the old man out. And along the way, she would try her best to ease the suspicions about her husband.

"We're working on finding the wolves," she said quite frequently. "We know where their den is and we're moving

them out of the area. There's better hunting outside of here, anyway. That poor boy."

No one believed her all that well, but they also weren't interested in angering the Earl, who had proven to be rather protective over his lovely new wife.

The lies still stung, however. Both she and Luther were afraid of what might happen if they let the wolf out. Though the beast seemed unimpressed with their worries. Luther claimed that the wolf inside him wanted to roam free and now that it had a mate, it promised that no one would ever see it again. Being caught was a rarity for its kind, it claimed. Although Luna wasn't all that certain it was being honest with them.

A month passed without her even noticing how quickly it had gone. Until it was the night when Luther walked into their room, white as a sheet, and said, "It's a full moon tonight."

"Ah."

So they'd planned. They had prepared everything they needed and walked to the basement. The painting of his father glared down at them, the three ribs still down his chest, and Luna put her hands on her hips and glared back. "We need to change this painting."

"Agreed. I'd like to have a ball here someday and I cannot imagine my father would approve." Still, he twisted the hem of his shirt between his hands. No maid would ever be able to get the wrinkles out. "It doesn't want to be chained up again, Luna. You'll have to be quick."

"Of course." She had no intention of being quick at all.

She figured there were a few ways to handle their werewolf problem. The first was what Luther wanted to do. Go back to chaining the beast up because it had already proven that it had a thirst for human blood and couldn't be trusted. Or, and this was the one she preferred, they could figure out a way for them all to harmoniously live together.

Two weeks ago, she'd discovered Luther talking in his sleep. Even stranger, it wasn't Luther who was attempting to

Speak with her.

Luther's wolf and Luna talked for the better part of an hour. Sure, she knew that the beast wanted to control the situation and would do anything it could to get outside. But she also saw the reason for its argument. It wanted to be free, just like all the other things that found Luna. It wanted to see the world and hoped that someday, maybe, it would not have to argue with Luther so much. All it wanted was for their life to be one of adventure living in the wild.

That had been two weeks ago, and now she talked with the wolf almost every single night. They plotted, they planned, but they also made promises to each other. After all, if the wolf wanted her to be its mate, then it had to follow some rules that she'd put down.

Which led her to this moment when she promised Luther that she would put him in chains so he didn't hurt anyone else.

Luna put her hand on his cheek and smiled. "This will be the last time I ever lie to you. I promise."

His eyes widened in shock. "What?"

The wolf clawed its way to the forefront of his mind and Luna stepped back to watch him change into that horrible beast. And it was not a pleasant thing to watch. He shifted his form in the most painful of ways. Bones cracking, flesh splitting and mending all in the blink of an eye. She supposed if it were a slower change, no one would survive it.

Luna knew this was the last thing Luther would want. He'd be so angry with her when this was all said and done, but it was also the best thing she could do for him. He would live through the night, and she would be there with the wolf the entire time to make sure it never touched another human. Together, they would all be able to live their lives without fear of what might happen.

All she had to do was watch as the man she loved more than anything disappear into the monster who she was growing rather fond of as well.

Finally, the change finished. Luther stood before her in all his glory as a wolf and man hybrid. She'd forgotten how terrifying it was. The coarse fur that flattened against his skin. The elongated head with dark eyes that watched her every move.

His clawed hand reached out for her and gently touched the side of her head. "Thank you for giving me another chance."

"I know you won't hurt me," she replied with a chuckle. "You've proven yourself to be worthy of that trust time and time again."

"He doesn't trust that. He thinks I'll run through the woods and pick out the first villager I can." The beast drew back, its chest expanding in a deep, ragged inhalation. "It's not that I don't want to do that."

"I know." And she did. The beast wanted to tear and rend, that's what it was made to do. Werewolves loved to fight and battle. At least that was what the creature had told her while they were talking. But she couldn't let it do that, and the beast knew it. They couldn't do that to their people, at least.

She'd already made a plan. This had been weeks in the making and she wouldn't back out now because she was afraid. Luna walked over to the painting of Luther's father and gave him one last glare, then flipped him the bird for good measure.

Behind the painting was a bag of goodies that she planned on taking with them. The first was a rather impressive crossbow Maeve had lent her. The weapon would serve her well in multiple situations, so she strung that and a bag of arrows over her shoulder. She could only hope she wouldn't have to use them.

Lastly, she picked up the gun with a single loaded silver bullet. The wolf had been the one to tell her about this. He'd seen Luther's father hide it in the drawers of the desk when he was a child, and knew exactly what it was for. After all, silver was the only thing that could harm a wolf.

If she'd ever questioned how serious this situation was, she didn't now that she held this in her hands. The beast would let her kill him if it stepped out of line, and that was the best reassurance she had.

Hopefully, she was still a good shot.

Coming out from behind the painting, she nodded at the werewolf standing in the center of the ballroom. "You look like you belong here."

It snorted. "Luther is already fighting me. He wants to come back."

"Once we're in the woods, you can let him come out a little. He'll realize that this isn't as dangerous as he thinks." She hoped. Damn it, she really hoped this was a good idea.

Together, they slipped out of the window she'd already loosened the night before. The glass popped off without a problem and all she had to do then was walk out into the cool night air. Tilting her head back, she let the moonlight play across her features in a path of cool relief before nodding at the wolf. "Just don't get too far ahead of me, will you?"

"Try to keep up, little mate." It laughed, and the sound echoed with darkness.

Luna took off across the gardens, over the fence, and out into the fields beyond. The wolf knew where to go, but damn, it was fast. It fairly flew where she could only sprint. Once it reached the edge of the forest, she had a sick feeling she was going to lose the werewolf and then her plan would blow up in her face. But it waited for her, breathing hard and grinning like only dogs could do.

"You're fast," the wolf said with a chuckle.

"I can't tell if you're being sarcastic," she replied, then bent to brace her hands on her knees. She couldn't get enough breath in her lungs, and if the entire night would be like this, then she'd not do well. More running like that and she'd be tasting blood.

"You'll get used to it," the wolf said, lifting its nose into the air. "The more you run, the better you'll get."

She tilted her head to the side, then shrugged. “I suppose you’re right. That’s just life, isn’t it? We’ll all get better the more we do something.”

“Hush.” The wolf tilted his nose up to the air again, inhaling deeply. “We’re on a hunt, Luna. You have to be quiet for anything to come upon us.”

“Hunting requires that we sit here and do nothing for a very long time. I used to go on hunts with my family, you know. It was one of the most boring tasks I’d get assigned to.” And she still hated it to this day. No one seemed to understand that she had to do something with herself. Whether that was making arrows, picking flowers, she didn’t care. But her body had to move.

The wolf flashed her another grin. “You’re not hunting with a human. Remember? Now get your bow and arrow out. I’m curious to see how they work.”

In a flash, the beast ran again. She cursed out a low breath, but swung the bow and arrow up into her arms. Luna sprinted after him through the woods, leaping over fallen logs and wondering what the hell they were looking for, but then she saw it. A stag.

The wolf rushed after it, but he kept looking over his shoulder as though he were waiting for her to do something. And then she remembered, right, he’d wanted to see how the bow and arrow worked. She supposed it wouldn’t be as good as teeth and claws, but if she had good aim, then she’d be able to kill the animal instantly.

She rounded away from the chase, trying to cut the deer off before anything happened with the wolf. Bending on her knee, she put the arrow on the bow and released a long, low breath. It had been a long time since she’d killed something, but her mother’s voice whispered in her ear.

“We do not kill for pleasure, but for necessity. This stag will give us its life so that we might live, and we will honor its life in the best way we can.”



The arrow soared, and the stag fell without a single moment of pain. The wolf ran up after, noting the clean kill as it nudged at the beast with its nose. "I didn't know an arrow could do that."

"A good hunter can kill without pain," she replied, walking up to his side, though still feeling sick to her stomach. "I'll leave you to this one. Don't make too much of a mess. Whatever you don't eat, I want to bring it to the village where they'll make good use out of it."

She was getting more used to being around a werewolf, but she didn't want to see it feed. It was still sad, watching the poor deer die like that.

At least the wolf listened to her. He brought the deer to the village himself, and the only person who saw them was a single child who peered out a window far past his bedtime.

Luna made sure the little boy saw the werewolf leave his offering in the square, and then she pressed her finger to her lips. The boy would tell his father that there was a feast outside waiting for them, and she knew the hunters in the village would use every part of the deer. It wasn't long now until the sun rose, anyway. The meat would still be good.

Hopefully, the boy would mention the village's werewolf might not be a killer after all. Perhaps he was here to look after them.

Then they raced back to the forest where the wolf waited for the sun rays to hit his skin and return Luther to his mortal form.

"Thank you," the wolf said, his body already curling in on itself. "I wanted to prove to him that I could be more than a monster."

"It'll take some time for him to realize that there's nothing wrong with being entirely who he is." She smiled. "I hope you had a good hunt, though."

"Tomorrow night, I'll show you how the wolf hunts." He flashed her a sharp toothed grin and then his spine cracked back into the man.

Luther fell onto his hands and knees in the dirt, breathing hard and completely nude. His skin was mottled with the change, and she knew better than to push him right now. He needed to think and process what had happened. Even though it was the one thing he'd feared more than anything else.

Finally, he looked up at her with tears streaming down his cheeks. "Did I kill someone?"

"No."

"What blood is on my hands?"

She knelt in front of him and pointed to the bow and arrow across her back. "A deer. We hunted for the village, the wolf and I. He wanted to prove to you that he didn't have to kill people to enjoy himself. And that you are allowed to still be wild even if you are afraid."

Luther blew out a long, shaking breath. But then nodded. "And you'll be with us?"

"Every step of the way," she replied. "I hid you some clothing a little way away from here. We'll return to the manor and no one will be the wiser. I'm sorry I had to trick you, Luther."

He stood and held out his hand for her to take. "I'm not. The idea of being chained in that basement made me sick. We'll find a new way together, I suppose. Even if it requires that you give up your nights."

"Only three nights a month," she replied with a laugh. "I'd give up a lot more than that to keep you by my side."

## CHAPTER 32



**H**e hadn't met her sisters yet, and Luther stared up at the vampire's castle with no small amount of fear. These women were witches. All of them were more talented than he'd ever known, and they could easily kill him.

Not to mention one of them was a vampire now, and the other one was apparently really uncomfortable to be around. He couldn't imagine what would come of this.

"Are you sure we have to meet them today?" he asked, trying very hard not to sound like a child.

"Yes, I haven't seen them in over a month and I want you to be friends with them." Luna shoved his shoulder with her own. "You're a werewolf. I thought you wouldn't be afraid of two little women."

"Little," he muttered. "They'll likely use my bones for a curse."

"Only if they don't like you," she replied all too quickly for his liking.

Right. She made it sound so easy to walk into a castle full of people who were bound and determined to not like him, while also threatening his death if they didn't, but somehow he had to convince them he was good enough for their sister. Who was quite possibly the most lovely woman he'd ever met in his life.

He straightened his shoulders and puffed out his cheeks. He could do this. Just another day, another couple people to

convince he wasn't a terrifying werewolf and instead, he was a good man ready to help.

Not like he didn't spend all day doing that, multiple days a week.

Luna giggled and knocked on the front door. "I think you'll be surprised. They don't want to dislike you, Luther."

She said that now, but what if they took one look at him and thought the werewolf was too dangerous for their sister? Thankfully, he had little more time to worry.

Two women burst out of the castle with all the force of a hurricane. They grabbed onto Luna and yanked her into the darkness so quickly, he almost didn't see them move. And then there were hands on him, tugging him into the fray of countless female voices, all talking at once. They all spoke over each other, and he couldn't quite make out an entire conversation.

"You're here! Did you know we started working on the west wing?"

"I thought you would arrive tomorrow, but for once the spirits were wrong!"

"I figured out the coloring for the wedding, but I'm not sure if it'll look good on our skin tones."

Luther was so startled, he tried instead to focus on the interior design. Crimson and black, exactly what he'd expect for a vampire. Although it was more welcoming, even with the giant crimson sheets covering the ceiling like the swells of waves.

"They do this a lot," an amused voice interrupted his perusing of the room.

"Martin," he said while turning and offering a hand to the man who would soon be his brother-in-law. "It's good to see you again."

"I'll be honest, I never thought we'd have the opportunity." Martin gripped his hand, though, and shook it. "Perhaps you'd

like to come to the living room? Give the ladies some breathing room before they take up all the oxygen.”

“That would be preferable.”

Being out in the middle of that room gave him a little rest, at the very least. The women were exhausting to listen to already, and at least he got a few moments sitting in silence with Martin before they thundered into the sitting room.

He’d really appreciated that silence. It seemed only men knew how valuable that was.

“Luther!” Luna called out. “There you are. I thought Martin had taken you somewhere to drain you.”

Right, he was in a house with people well aware of creatures and magic. It was still unnerving to talk about it so freely without having to worry that someone might overhear him.

He sat up a little straighter and tried to look like he wasn’t a complete dolt. “I think Martin and I have come to terms with our differences, love.”

“Good! Because I’d like both of you to be present and happy during our wedding.” She sat down across from him, braced her arms on the chairs. “I’m sure Maeve and Beatrix will be able to plan everything with me. You’re excused from having to help too much.”

“And thank goodness for that or everything would look horrible.” He toasted her sisters with the glass of whiskey in his hand. “My hope is that you will save the wedding, ladies.”

Maeve smiled at him. “I’m sure you won’t mind at all if we take over a little more than you’re comfortable with.”

“I just want to marry your sister. That’s the only thing that matters to me.”

“Oh, that’s a lovely sentiment,” Beatrix said. The pale sister looked more like a ghost than she did a human. Her dark hair cascaded down her shoulders today, but he couldn’t help thinking that she looked sickly. “But I’m afraid I won’t be around to help with the wedding after all.”

How hadn't he noticed she was staring over his shoulder like someone stood behind him? Luther flinched and immediately looked back, but there wasn't anyone there. At least, not that he could see.

The sister who claimed to see ghosts was speaking to one behind him.

Luna frowned. "Why aren't you coming to the wedding, Beatrix?"

"Oh, I'll try to be at the wedding. But I don't think I'll be helping to decorate." She pointed behind Luther. "Apparently I'm going to help solve the Ripper case."

An immediate outburst rose from everyone in the room.

"The Ripper was already caught," Martin said. "At least, that we know of."

"You absolutely will not," Maeve snarled.

Even Luna coughed into her hand and added, "Excuse me?"

Beatrix didn't seem startled by their reactions at all. She shrugged and replied, "What the spirits want, the spirits get. I need to go see who this new Ripper is, or perhaps if he's a copycat. I'm the only one who can find him, you see. All the people who know who he really is are dead."

Complete silence was her reply.

At least until Luther blinked a few times and replied, "Luna warned me marrying into this family would be strange. I had no idea how strange it would get."

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Emma Hamm is a small town girl on a blueberry field in Maine. She writes stories that remind her of home, of fairytales, and of myths and legends that make her mind wander.

She can be found by the fireplace with a cup of tea and her two Maine Coon cats dipping their paws into the water without her knowing.

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