

# COMPUL

*Compelled to seduce. designed to kill.*

#1 *New York Times* Bestselling Author

RACHEL VAN DYKEN

AND

Bestselling Author

PATTI STANGER

# COMPEL

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# Compel

by Rachel Van Dyken & Patti Stanger

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COMPEL

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STANGER

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## A NOTE ON CONTENT

I know that some of you like to know if there is anything in a book that may be difficult for you to read.

Some real-life issues are discussed/portrayed within these pages.

If you would like to see what they are, please click [HERE](#)

Or scan the QR Code



As always, thank you for reading!

Hugs, RVD

## PRAISE FOR COMPEL

“What do you get when you combine Age Of Adaline, and Beauty & The Beast? You get this amazing book that is unlike anything I’ve ever read!”

~ Carrie Youngcourt, Goodreads Reviewer

“The mastery of Van Dyken’s words know no bounds! Match her with Patti Stanger and it’s a match made in heaven...”

~ Patricia Rohrs, Words We Love By Blog

“True love and fate fight it out in a love story gone wrong. Romeo and Juliet have nothing on this Prince and his Princess.”

~Becky Rendon, @omg\_becky\_look\_at\_those\_books

“Compel was absolutely spellbinding.”

~ Crissy, Goodreads Reviewer

“Compel is an addictive supernatural romance, diving into the world of fae’s, star crossed lovers, magical curses, suspense and a whole lot of tension.”



~ Farah, Goodreads Reviewer

“Oh boy. I decided to take a walk in the fae world for the first time and fell in love. So much mystery and drama. Could not put this story down. “

~ Nicole Collins, Goodreads Reviewer

“OMG this book had me sucked in from the beginning. Fae, werewolves and sea witches, this book had everything a fairytale and supernatural book needed. I highly recommend it and I hope these 2 ladies continue with this series, because I would love to know the other characters stories.”

~ Anastasia, Goodreads Reviewer

“Just wow!!! This book exceeded my expectations by far... I felt like I was pulled into a movie.”

~Romance Me

# DEDICATION

To adventures in Matchmaking and Love

XOXO Patti, and RVD

## PROLOGUE

*New York, 1918*

*It was a close walk.*

That was what I repeated over and over while I sat by her bedside and tried to bring her fever down with cold rags to her forehead. It hit us overnight, or so it seemed.

I was immune.

She wasn't.

I'd stupidly made the mistake of waiting too long to ask forgiveness from my family, and now, I was here with my wife as she coughed and coughed until I was afraid she was going to either throw out her back or fracture a rib.

Death seemed to constantly follow every step I took. Regardless of how many years I'd avoided her, it still found me—us.

“Benjamin,” she rasped, raising her wrinkled hand to my strong jaw. “Maybe it's just time...”

“No!” My blood heated in outrage. Time was never supposed to be against me, and it sure as hell was never supposed to be against her.

I knew, though, didn't I? In the deepest recesses of my mind, I knew that I was cursed. And then I justified my desire for her and lied to myself, told myself love could cure all.

She was mine!

Mine to claim.

Mine to own.

Mine to save.

And now, I could see her breaths weaken, hear her cough worsen, I could fucking feel her blood slow its flow to each individual part of her body where it was needed most.

*But at least it was a close walk.*

To the small local hospital.

To the people who were already so overrun by the sickness that it would be impossible to even get seen.

My heart cracked a little more as her blue eyes twinkled with the same mischief that had attracted me to her the first time so many years ago.

Her playful spirit.

Her huge heart.

And her ability to make anything and everything seem amusing even when it wasn't.

I was powerful.

And even I couldn't save her.

Because I was cursed to watch everyone, everything I'd ever loved, die.

And I knew, when I made that short walk—neither could they.

“Addie.” I fought like hell to keep my emotions in check, but they’d always been hard to contain—after all, once you give your heart to someone—your soul—it’s nearly impossible to hold back everything, and for me, it was harder than most. Hadn’t I learned that fucking lesson years ago? Was I cursed to repeat the same mistake over and over again for eternity?

“You’re going to be fine, just let me—” I lifted my hand... she knew what it would mean.

It didn’t matter.

I just wanted more time with her.

Even if it was five more seconds versus five more years, I just needed more, and it was the one thing I didn’t have the power to give, but I would try even if it meant sacrificing everything I fought so hard to resist, to protect.

Visions of her blood on my hands had me rocking her back and forth, back and forth. Always the same ending—always.

“No.” A solitary tear ran down the paper-thin skin of her gaunt cheek. “No, love, not this time. You need—” She hesitated as another coughing fit took over. Her hand clenched mine. “You need to let me go.”

“I can’t.” What was this pain? This out-of-body experience that threatened to rip my heart from my chest? The fire in my throat was unbearable, the helplessness in my soul excruciating. “I can’t lose you.”

*I can't lose anyone else.*

I wouldn't be the same.

I would be undone.

“Ben...” Her smile spread across her face as I tucked pieces of gray hair from her cheeks. “We always knew.”

I ignored the truth of it.

I had for the last few years, hadn't I?

“It wasn't supposed to be like this,” I whispered. I had promised her this time would be different; this time I'd burn the world to make it right. “Not like this.”

“Then how?” She gripped my hand. “I think.” Another tear fell. “I think I'd like to take that walk now.”

“It's a close walk,” I reminded her... and myself.

I reminded the universe.

My ancestors who tormented me. Who had done this to me.

I reminded them all with my words because words, when said out loud, had the power to define, and I wanted them to see my wrath, to know my anger.

“Yes.” Her smile gave me strength.

Years ago, I would have laughed.

Not today.

Today, she was the most powerful woman in the world.

The most powerful person in the room.

So, for the first time in my life, I used her strength, the way she moved to her feet, and gave me a look of pure love.

Pure magic, wasn't it? The way love worked.

And I took her hand.

It wasn't long before we were walking down the street, hand in hand like we'd done for so many years, passing the new bookstore—her favorite place in the world.

I remembered the day we met, how angry I was that she'd so easily seen through me, and then the hunger I felt when she touched me, the way my soul felt like it had split in two, giving her one half and leaving me with the broken, bloody remnants.

The best and most painful day of my life had happened years before I met her, then forgotten, replaced by this very moment in time.

Counted by these steps.

One, two, three...

The hospital stood in clear view.

People rushed in and out, cloth masks covered faces and the crying... there was always someone crying, someone losing, someone living while another died.

And then we were there, at the entrance of the ER.

She was fading.

The walk had taken too much out of her.

I pulled Addie into my arms, kissed her on the forehead, and whispered against it as the first tear I'd ever shed over her before walking away slid painfully like acid down my face. "You are it for me, Addie. I love you, and I'll see you in the next life, I swear it."

She held me as tight as her small arms could and coughed against my chest. “Promise me you will at least try, Ben. Love, after all, is what you were born to be. How selfish of me to expect you to save all of it for me when so many could benefit from who you are?”

“I don’t want their love.” I bit down on my lower lip. “I just want you to live.”

“We don’t always...” She sucked in a heavy breath. “...get what we want. But—” She coughed. “At least we had each other for as long as we were gifted.”

“Gifted,” I repeated, venom dripping from the word.

Gifted would have meant I could have saved her.

Gifted would have meant forever.

This wasn’t a gift.

It was a curse.

It was my punishment.

Our forever punishment for choosing love.

And it was the cruelest thing that could have possibly happened—to both of us.

“Sir!” A nurse saw me, then saw Addie and came running, her mask firmly over her mouth as she called for a gurney. “Is she infected?”

“Yes.” I kissed her pale cheek one last time. “She’s fading.”

“Step back, sir.” The nurse’s eyes were petrified; I could almost smell her fear. “You don’t have a mask on, and you’re already most likely going to get just as sick. I need to get her



secure, don't move. We'll do everything we can for your—" She blinked over at Addy. "For your grandmother." She and another nurse helped Addy onto the gurney. "You're going to be okay, ma'am."

Another lie.

"Sir, we'll be right back. What's your name?"

I had too many variances of my name to count. "Benjamin."

"Okay, Benjamin, I need you to stay there. We'll be right back with a mask and an update on your grandmother."

No, they wouldn't.

I knew it just like I knew in less than sixty seconds, my Addy would take her last breath.

The minute they disappeared indoors, I turned around and ran.

I ran as hard as I could past the house we had shared for over seventy years. I ran deeper into the woods until I reached the old mansion.

The one I'd refused to inhabit, years after banishing myself.

And as I stepped foot over the threshold, I heard her last breath fill the darkness as the entirety of my property froze into ice.

Spring, it seemed, had been obliterated by winter as the roses in her favorite garden froze in time.

Snow crunched beneath my shoes as I made my way up the thirteen stairs into the mansion our family had once called home.

I turned the key, and the door creaked as I stepped inside.

A fire roared in the distance, and everything was just as I'd left it, except one thing.

Me.

I was different.

My soul was missing.

My heart was gone.

And when I turned and looked at myself in the entry mirror, I looked exactly the same as when I had left this place over a hundred years ago.

I glared at my reflection.

Dark hair, deep green eyes that kept flashing to purple, and a cruel smile I'd too often thrown at those who didn't deserve it.

I was back.

But I might as well be dead.

I gritted my teeth and spoke into the mirror. "One day, I'm going to come for you. I'm going to come for you all."

And just as the last memory of Addy was pulled from my consciousness like a sharp sting between my temples, I heard a woman's dark laugh, and then she rasped, "You're welcome to try."

# CHAPTER ONE

*Luna*

*Present Day*

*Oregon Coast*

Mom gripped the steering wheel hard, turning her knuckles nearly white as our Jeep rolled into Orca Cove. The trip was supposed to be my birthday gift, even though I still had a month before I turned nineteen. There was a reason we had to drive into the town early, a reason that my mom looked pale and sickly despite her futile attempts to add artificial color to her cheeks with blush.

She was dying.

And nobody, not even the doctors, knew why. It wasn't until she started having crazy dreams about soul-sucking demons, which had her waking up in a cold sweat, that I realized it was affecting not just her body but her mind.

Last week she started hearing voices.

And by the way she was driving—they were heckling her now. I was no shrink, but part of me wondered if she would

rather have her body fail than her mind with the way she reacted every single time she was taunted.

I cleared my throat and tried to think of something that would take her mind off of the darkness. “I think I’m going to have sex with my lab partner.”

Swear she hit the brakes so hard the seatbelt jerked against my body as the car swerved to the right. “I’m sorry, what?”

“You’re shrieking.” I pointed out with a smile.

“I am not.” She took a deep breath and hit the accelerator again. “Shrieking. I’m just surprised. Don’t you think you’re a little young to be having sex? And what’s with telling me about it? Now I’m going to be wondering every day if you’ve actually gone through with it, and the last thing we need is me picturing—” She made a face. “Rob’s really your first choice? Really?”

I burst out laughing. “Not at all. You know how I’m saving myself for Tom Holland.”

Her frown slowly melted into a smile. “So, you were kidding, right? Please God, tell me you were kidding. I can’t leave this earth knowing my daughter’s going to have her first sexual experience with a guy who talks to his lizard more than his parents.”

“His lizard has quite the TikTok following.” I yawned behind my hand and looked out the window at the ocean waves crashing against the rocky shore. “Besides, there are worse guys out there.”

Mom snorted. “Don’t I know it.”

We slowly pulled into the parking lot of the quaint inn I'd stayed at every year with my mom since I was twelve. The turnover rate at the place was super high, typically meaning I never saw the same person twice, which always seemed strange to me for such a small town, but it wasn't a normal small town by any means.

It was one of those towns that had had at least a dozen reality shows on ghost hunting filmed here. One camera crew got so spooked that a guy was institutionalized, and now that Mom was hearing voices... well, let's just say I'd been slowly going down the supernatural rabbit hole in a last-ditch effort to see if I could save the only family I had and my best friend.

Rain started peppering our windshield right as my mom killed the engine. "Mom, go inside, and I'll bring in the bags."

"Honey, you don't have to—"

"I know." I reached across the console and squeezed her hand. Her jet-black hair was pulled into a messy bun on top of her head, and her naturally blue eyes had lost their sparkle, just like her skin had lost its color.

I tried to keep my lips pressed into an excited smile when she suddenly turned around and cupped my chin with her right hand, her eyes searching mine. "Whatever you do—don't leave Orca Cove."

"Mom?" I whispered. "Is it the voices again?" A tear slid down her cheek as her lips parted. "Mom, you're scaring me."

Her chin wobbled. "It's okay, sweetheart, it's okay."

"Mom—"

“I’m just tired... it’s time, you know... it’s time...” She cleared her throat. “To sleep.”

A dark shadow slithered across her face as the lights in front of the inn started to flicker, and then she was smiling again. “Should I order some tea?”

“Um, yeah... sure.” I reached for her hand and squeezed. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I will be...” She kissed my cheek. “Soon.”

By that point, a torrential downfall had made itself known against the outside of our green Jeep. “Hurry inside before you get soaked!”

“I love you.”

“Love you too.” Chest tight, I watched her go up the wooden stairs of the Orca Victorian Inn with its white shutters and large flower boxes. The red door shut behind her, leaving me alone in the Jeep with my thoughts and a foreboding feeling that refused to go away.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” I grumbled to myself. I jumped out of the car and opened the back, grabbing my backpack, her overnight bag, and then mine before clicking it closed and locking the doors.

My favorite Yankees T-shirt was soaked completely through by the time I made it to the door at the inn. I managed to get it open and stumbled a bit as my backpack fell to the floor.

An elderly woman with clear blue eyes and snowy white hair stood on the other side of the only table in the lobby—it

said registration, and she looked less than thrilled that I was getting water all over her hardwood floors.

“May I help you?”

To the right was a roaring fireplace and empty dining room, and the left held the creaky old stairway with its wooden stairs. Mirrors lined the wall all the way up to the second floor, which always gave me a weird chill, so I refused to look into them, almost like something would happen if I did.

I dropped the bags onto the floor by my wet Nikes. “My mom came in a few minutes ago. Is she in our room already?”

The woman went still, and a deep crease appeared between her eyebrows. “Child, you’re the first visitor we’ve had tonight.”

I shivered. “No, no, maybe someone else helped her? My mom literally walked through that door a few minutes ago. I was just grabbing our bags and—”

“I’m the only one awake. The rest of my employees don’t get in until the morning. Now, if you’d like a room, I do have one left since my other reservation canceled.”

“I have reservations,” I whispered. “We have reservations. Can I check the bathroom? She’s sick; that’s probably what happened. She passed out or something,” I said more to myself.

“Name.” The elderly woman scribbled something and let out a heavy sigh as rain continued to drip off my body and onto the floor.

“Oh, it’s under Jones, either Mary Jones or Luna Jones.”

“I have one open-ended reservation for Luna Jones.” She grabbed a key, completely ignoring the nervous breakdown I was having in her lobby. “You’ll be on the second floor. Breakfast begins at six am and ends at ten.” She eyed me up and down like I was a criminal. “No drugs, no parties, and try to keep it down; we’re at capacity.”

I wanted to snort and ask how that was possible but kept it to myself. “May I leave my bags here while I search the downstairs bathroom?”

“It’s empty.” She shrugged. “But suit yourself.”

Panic rose in my chest as I calmly tried to drop the bags, Jeep key in my pocket, and my room key imprinting itself against my right palm.

I rounded the corner into the abandoned sitting room and jogged over to the one bathroom for guests downstairs.

Sure enough, it was dark and empty.

I searched the living room and then went back into the dining room, nothing.

The elderly lady was gone, so I hit the bell a few times again. A door opened and closed, then she appeared, this time looking even more pissed than before. “What is it?”

I couldn’t control the shaking or the numb feeling that refused to let me out of its grip. Breathe. I needed to breathe. “Are there any cameras in here?”

“Yes,” she said in a clipped voice. “Because we’re very technologically advanced for a hundred-year-old inn.”

Do not strangle the old lady, do not strangle the old lady.



“Okay,” I exhaled sharply. “Okay, then I need to go to the police station and file a report unless you have some sort of backroom you’re keeping her in.”

She froze and then said, “We don’t keep adults.”

Well, that was comforting! And not at all funny.

“Can you give me directions to the police station?” I was trying so damn hard to keep the tears in, to not panic; Mom always told me that a clear head was all you had in times of chaos. I needed to be calm, calm for her, calm for me, so I didn’t lose it.

Her chin jerked toward the door. “The county’s small, so we share the sheriff’s station with the town five miles over—called Rocky Pointe.”

I checked my watch. It was pitch black outside, and nearing eight at night would probably take me ten minutes max to get over there and file a missing person’s report.

“Okay, okay,” I sucked in a breath and grabbed my bags. “I’ll just drop these off in my room first.”

She shrugged as if to say whatever.

Why wasn’t she panicking?

Did she think I was a crazy person?

I ran up the stairs with both of our things, shoved the key in the lock, turned the knob then tossed all three bags onto the carpeted floor.

Something about the heaviness of Mom’s bag made me pause. I hadn’t really noticed how bulky it was when I put it in the SUV.

Frowning, I leaned over the black Nike duffel bag. With shaking hands, I gripped the still-wet zipper; the sound of it opening pierced the silence. When it was open enough to peek in, I did just that, then stumbled back and let out a hoarse cry.

She hadn't packed clothes.

But she'd somehow remembered to pack thousands of dollars in cash?

Her old black leather wallet was in there, along with her cell phone.

Tucked inside one of the stacks of hundreds was a little white paper. Still shaking, I pulled it out and unfolded it.

"It's yours," was all the note said in Mom's handwriting.

What the hell was going on here?

Did she abandon me?

Was she taken?

Was she in trouble?

And why, of all places, Orca Cove?

Shaking myself out of my stupor, I got to my feet, dusted off my jeans, made sure I had my purse, and ran back down the stairs and out into the pouring rain.

My fingers slipped off the Jeep's handle before I finally got it open and shoved my wet body inside. I didn't realize that I was crying until I was a half mile down the road.

"Mom!" I yelled. "Where are you?"

I pounded the steering wheel with my hand as I passed the Welcome Sign for Orca Cove.

I gripped the steering wheel with both hands as the Jeep swerved to the right and then the left like some invisible force was trying to pull me into the forest. I may as well be a chew toy.

Tears streamed down my face, and I tried to stay in control of the vehicle as I saw my mom's face.

A dark chuckle filled the night air. A woman's voice, hypnotic, evil to its very core, whispered. "Everyone you love... will die." A chuckle followed.

I was going crazy too, if I was hearing the voices.

Right?

Was it my imagination?

I let out a scream as the Jeep swerved again until it completely flipped around, facing the opposite direction, back into town.

The car turned off.

"No, nope, no, no, no." I turned the key and hit the accelerator as the wind picked up, pounding the rain against my car until I couldn't see despite my windshield wipers being on high.

The SUV finally jerked to life. I made the decision to head back into town and the creepy safety of the inn. The conditions were too dangerous, and my mind was clearly putting me in a dark place.

Maybe I was going crazy.

Maybe I was dead, and this was all just a dream.

My SUV swerved to the left again as I let out a blood-curdling scream.

Within minutes of the gruesome scene of a deer laying bloody behind me, I was on the road, the word *orca* pounding into my psyche with a mind-numbing force until I put two and two together. The place my mom used to take me every summer, the same place she'd somehow disappeared into thin air.

Orca Cove, just north and west of Vancouver, Washington.

Something told me if I could just make it back to the inn—everything would be okay. I'd be safe.

Like an invisible barrier would suck me in, wrap me in bubble wrap and hold tight.

A faded blue sign appeared.

Welcome to Orca Cove.

I hit the accelerator until it touched the floor and tried to keep the Jeep straight. A flash of light appeared in front of the road, blinding me and forcing me to slow down, followed by a sudden jolt. The SUV spun around until it connected with a loud crunch. The airbag met my face, and then there was nothing but pain.

And a cruel laugh that faded off into the darkness.

“H-help.” The word came out weak as I faded in and out of consciousness. I lifted a shaky hand to my head and winced as my vision cleared and my fingertips came back stained with sticky wet blood.

A tree branch was poking through the passenger side window. A few more inches and it would have impaled my neck and pinned me against my own car.

Alive.

At least I was alive.

My head throbbed as I searched my body for more injuries. Glass from the windshield covered my bare legs, and one large piece had embedded itself in my right thigh just below my black skirt.

A light flashed in front of me.

I tensed immediately as my heart pounded against my ribcage. Did I call out for help again?

Goosebumps erupted all over my skin as the sudden urge to throw up washed over me.

The closer the light got to the car, the more intense the feeling became, along with the sweet syrupy smell of candy, and not the kind that makes your mouth water but the kind that gives you the impression that one bite might rot every last tooth you possessed.

“Miss, are you all right?” The voice belonged to a man; it had a rough edge to it. Though cultured, that didn’t lessen the feeling of fear; if anything, I wanted to hide but had nowhere to go. “Miss?”

He pointed the flashlight at my face, making it impossible for me to see his features. If I could guess, I would say he was older, but I’d also just been in a car wreck, so he could say he was Chris Hemsworth, and I’d probably be just as dazed.

I opened my mouth to speak, but nothing came out; I tried again, only to wonder how in the hell a car crash could make it so that my voice wasn't working properly minutes after the word "help" had fallen from my lips.

"Poor thing's in shock," he muttered to himself. "Can't just leave her here; the mountain lions might smell the blood—" He stopped talking as if he was actually considering leaving me to the mountain lions. "Nah, can't do that... can't do that. Last time, well..."

Seriously?

I let out a guttural moan as my head lolled forward. If I didn't do something soon, I was going to puke all over the rude man who thought he was rescuing me.

On second thought...

He deserved it if he was tempted to leave me to the wild animals.

Where was my mom when I needed her?

"All right, all right." He bit back a curse like he was the one inconvenienced when my car was the one wrapped around a giant tree. "Hi, yes, there's been an accident..." He sighed. "I guess I can stay with her... How the hell am I supposed to know if she has a concussion? No, you know I don't get into other people's business... that's what I thought. Remember who pays you."

He stopped talking.

It felt like hours before I heard the sirens before I was pulled gently from the car by paramedics while they checked my injuries.

I blinked in confusion as I was lifted onto a stretcher. The last thing I saw was a black Bentley fleeing the scene, and the same smell of candy wafted past my nostrils as my eyes drifted shut.

## CHAPTER TWO

*Benjamin*

Three a.m. I should be used to it by now. Used to the sudden jolt from sleep that always woke me in a panic.

Used to the way the same feeling of despair clung to me, choked me until it was hard to take another breath.

Used to the helplessness that always came afterward when I realized the cycle would continue because, after so many years, how could it not?

Slowly, I walked down the stairs in nothing but my black silk pajama pants. After all, it wasn't like we had company.

My lips twitched at that.

Maybe I was finally going insane?

Wouldn't that be a fucking relief?

I made my way into the dimly lit kitchen and turned on the coffee. My hands throbbed like they always did, in perfect cadence to each painful beat of my heart.

It would be over soon, suddenly gone the same way it came.



I rubbed the scar over my ring finger, hating the way it mocked me.

Then again, curses weren't known for giving you cheerful good mornings, high fives, and bacon.

God, I missed bacon.

I missed everything that used to give pleasure, and now, just one thing remained.

Fucking sick, that's what it was.

That's what I was.

"Ah, you're up." Jasper gave me an irritated sigh as he tossed yesterday's paper onto the kitchen table and eyed me with suspicion. "Have you been down here long?"

I gritted my teeth. "You know you're like the babysitter I never asked for but can't seem to get rid of?"

The corners of his mouth tilted up in a smirk. "Good morning to you too. Oh yes, I had a lovely evening; thanks for asking."

I rolled my eyes. "Sarcasm, that's new."

He just shrugged. "You know the rules. I have to ask—"

I held up my hand. "Save yourself the words. Wouldn't want you to waste them on me since we both know you have a cap on how many you use in a day. God forbid you have to actually leave the house and socialize."

His dark eyebrows arched. "Yes, well, that's not my job, is it?"

I jerked out one of the brown leather barstools and sat. For being as old as he was—Jasper looked like the epitome of health.

Perfectly coiffed salt and pepper hair that was on the longer side. Strong jawline that was clenched tighter than his asshole on most occasions and thick, black-rimmed glasses that framed bright blue sinister-looking eyes, reminding me that I wasn't the only villain.

No, the villain had been given a keeper.

Yay me.

“To answer your question...” I raked both hands through my thick black hair. “I’m up for the rest of the day. I went from my room, down the stairs, and into your bedroom to move your pencils around because I know how long it takes to arrange them in that perfect pentagram form, and then I came into the kitchen to grab coffee.” I flipped him off with a grin and an imaginary tip of my hat while he scowled down at me like I was some petulant child.

I lived for his disapproval.

It was the only entertainment I truly had these days.

Cursed.

Cursed.

Cursed.

My body basically beat the word rather than my own sinful blood.

“For your information, it takes me seconds to make the pentagram.” There was no pentagram but points for his

participation. “And again, you know I have to ask. Now...” He pulled out his chair and crossed his arms across his perfectly tailored navy suit. Shit, even his polka dot bow tie annoyed me.

But he was untouchable.

Most of all to me, though at times, I wondered what could be worse than the hell I already existed in.

“Your plans, then, for the rest of the day?” He was baiting me like he always did because there was an hour a day that I kept to myself, where I was able to use what I had left to stay in the shadows and visit the cove to learn more secrets and hopefully gain more answers.

And if he knew, he would tell; after all, it was in his job description right next to pain in the ass.

“A little of this...” I pretended to flick a piece of lint from his suit and smirked. “...a little of that. You know me; I’m a free spirit.”

“Free spirit, my ass. You practically live in that library of yours these days.”

I steeled my expression. He didn’t need to know why, though I was sure he suspected. He was brilliant, a genius actually, also why he had been forced upon me after the initial incident so many years ago.

“Well, do attempt to stay out of trouble, and no wandering into the basement.”

“I wonder how that would go,” I mused with no curiosity whatsoever. “Someone who’s cursed walks into a haunted

basement, and what? Turns on the light? Discovers aliens? Finds the meaning of life? True love—”

The minute the words fell from my lips, my entire body revolted, sending a jolt of pain so severe to my chest that I collapsed falling off the barstool, my knees hitting the ground in one large crunch.

I gasped for air but only got short bursts as the pain spread from my chest to my limbs, pulsing into my fingertips like flames roaring to life.

With another notorious sigh, Jasper got off his chair and very gently touched my shoulder.

The pain left as if it was never there.

And Jasper looked a little bit more wrinkled around his eyes and mouth. Neither of us knew exactly why it worked that way—the point was, it never lasted. Within hours, he’d be back to his old self, yelling at me for talking too much and saying words I had no right to say—let alone feel ever again.

“Watch it,” he hissed in a short exhale before leaving me alone in the kitchen. The sound of the basement door shutting was my only clue as to where he went.

I shouldn’t be surprised. That was where he went every day.

There was an underground tunnel down there that I knew connected the house to the taffy factory—world renowned taffy factory.

I fucking hated taffy.

And yet, my family owned it—or I guess I had owned it—and with that wealth, had been able to make sure our tourist-filled cove always had visitors come summertime for our annual street fair.

We played nice, dressed up all the orphans from the local orphanage, gave them free candy, and strutted them around the fair like we'd actually done something good in our lives.

Smokescreens.

Everything about it felt painfully fake.

Like I was stuck in a constant state of repeat, unable to even take my own life because of the curse.

The one moment I'd tried to drown during a storm, I'd been saved. I tried the very next day and jumped off the rocky cliffs. It was the same result, always would be.

Life... a vicious cycle of disappointment and routine. Even the devil didn't want me.

I slowly got to my feet and walked through my empty house, up to my empty room, and stood in front of the covered mirror.

It was an eighteenth-century piece I'd picked up years and years ago because it reminded me of the past, reminded me what I had left, and did a damn good job of reminding me why I could never go back.

With shaking hands, I reached for the black velvet covering.

Every day it was the same.

I'd reach for it.

My fingertips would graze the velvet as I rubbed it between my fingertips, and then I'd drop the cover and walk away.

How long had it been...?

Since the very first day I got back?

I grabbed a few of the textbooks I'd been going through and went down to the library to do exactly what I'd been doing on a daily basis.

I studied.

And I searched for an end.



Hours later, I slammed the last book shut. Dust billowed in front of my face. At least today I had found something.

Something was better than nothing.

The grandfather clock chimed.

Just like clockwork, Jasper brought in a lunch tray with a crystal decanter of whiskey and enough food to feed an army.

His wrinkles were gone. His countenance once again strong. One day I'd ask him how he seemed to instantly heal; it had been that way for as long as I could remember. His family had always worked for mine.

They'd technically been in our service until my curse made it so that he had no choice but to serve me in life and death. I still let him have his freedom; the last thing I needed was for him to report to the Matchmaker. Besides, I couldn't stand his grumpy demeanor. I was already in hell; why add an oppressive demon to the suffering?

“Eat up,” he barked.

I was surprised he didn't throw the plate in front of me. With a grin, I handed him the knife. “Could you cut the steak into tinier pieces?”

“Do I get to stab you afterward?”

I laughed. “Please do.”

“Hilarious.”

“What? I thought it was funny.”

“I think you're starting to go insane,” he said with a grin of his own, like the idea brought him joy.

“Starting to?” I snorted. “I went insane ages ago.”

I walked over to the window and threw open the curtains while he cut the steak for me. I don't do it to be annoying but because he needed constant humbling reminders of who he worked for. And while he was like family to me despite his moods when he didn't spend enough time in that basement of his, I couldn't survive without him.

And he without me.

I frowned as a pretty girl stopped at the front gate and stared at it. She didn't knock or use the comm, just stared at the gate like it was alive or something. “Are you expecting company?”

“Now that's funny,” Jasper said from behind me. “When do we ever get—”

The comm buzzed.

“—company?” I finished for him. “Exactly.”

The girl frowned when the gate didn't open and then looked up like she could feel me, see me. My heartbeat slowed as I drank her in.

"I'll get rid of her." Jasper's footsteps pounded against the marble library floor while I sat stunned into a stupor.

She was stunning.

And I could hear each of her short pain-filled breaths.

My curiosity spiked.

Pain was just as much an aphrodisiac as pleasure, and I was too far away to decipher which had chosen her.

Dark hair fanned around her face as she moved through the now open gate. The lights flickered overhead with a warning I really didn't fucking need.

"So, it's happening... again."

I hated her instantly.

Hated the hope that was dangled in front of my face.

Because no matter how many times I tried and failed, I'd always believed the lie that this time was going to be the time I succeeded, even though in the back of my mind, I knew that was false. Hope was a painful lie—both the greatest gift and the curse of humanity.

And it was tempting me to try when I knew the truth—she would die.

How pathetic that my first reaction was jealousy.

I jerked the curtains back.



And nearly ran into the chair when the doorbell chimed throughout the massive house.

## CHAPTER THREE

*Luna*

*Six Hours Earlier*

My body was still sore from the accident, and since I refused any sort of pain meds, I was really struggling with sucking air in and pushing it out of my mouth—or just surviving in general as I stood there and waited for the gates to open.

“I’m sorry ma’am, there’s really nothing we can do.” The sheriff shifted his weight awkwardly from one foot to the next. He was most likely in his mid-twenties, which seemed young. Bright blond hair framed his face, and dependable, kind brown eyes regarded me. “Nobody in town has seen a trace of your mom, and you’ll need to stay here and be available while this is an ongoing investigation.”

“She’s alive,” I argued. “She has to be.”

“Are you sure you drove here with her?” he asked in a kind voice that just reminded me I was all alone. “You did hit your head very hard, and nobody at the inn saw her walk in. There are no footprints leaving the back of the inn. I have one of my

deputies searching the forest for a body just in case she made a run for it and got attacked by a cougar.”

I clapped a hand over my mouth. “You think she ran away and got hurt?”

“No,” he said softly, coming to stand closer to my hospital bed. “I think you’re very injured and might be having memory problems. The reservation at the inn is under your name, not your mother’s, as well as the registration of the Jeep you’re driving.”

I frowned. “But what about our apartment back in Portland?”

“From what I saw, it’s being used as an Air B n B for the next four months.”

The hell?

Why wouldn’t Mom tell me that?

Something was going on.

And I was going to figure out what it was.

My head pounded, and nothing made sense.

I didn’t want them to think I was crazy, but I needed answers, and I had no clue what to do. I knew I wasn’t crazy; I knew what I had seen, what I’d experienced.

My body shivered.

“Sorry to say you can’t leave town until we figure out what’s happening here. The lovely folks at the orphanage here have offered to take you in. They’re at capacity and recently started letting some of the older teens stay at the Inn since it’s next door, so you’re all set up for now.”

I was eighteen turning nineteen; they couldn't just keep me here! So no, I wasn't all set up, but until I figured out what happened to my mom, I was stuck. Could I possibly even leave?

"I'm an adult," I mumbled.

The sheriff raised an eyebrow.

"I'm almost nineteen."

He grunted but didn't amend the arrangements he'd made for me.

Tears threatened.

It was all wrong.

All of it.

The cop bowed his head and started to leave when I called out. "The man, the one who saved me, who was he?"

The sheriff froze and turned back to me, and I could have sworn a deep-rooted fear flashed across his face as he gulped and looked away. "His name's Jasper. He works for—well, he works for the orphanage as well. Those folks like to keep to themselves."

"I'd like to thank him," I whispered, even as his words had me wanting to roll my eyes. Was I in a bad horror movie? "If that's possible."

He was out that night. Maybe he saw something. Maybe my mom ran through the woods. But why would she do that in the first place?

The sheriff scratched the back of his head and continued to look away from me. "Probably best to just go back to the inn

once you're discharged from the hospital. Folks don't typically hang around the old mansion. Besides, they can be somewhat... superstitious. The library alone in that place rivals the one in DC. Never could understand people's fascination with it."

I froze.

Mom had talked about a magical library when I was little. Granted, I'd always assumed it was a fairy tale, but she'd always said it was her goal one day to unravel its secrets and find out why people always made such a big deal out of it when clearly the CIA wasn't crawling all over it.

"Do you, um..." I cleared my throat. "...think he needs help filing things? Maybe even with the local library? Since I'm stuck here—"

"Go back to the bed and breakfast," the sheriff said forcefully. "It's the best option at this point. You'll be given some food. The orphanage has the means to take care of you while we sort this all out. After all, it's only temporary, right?"

Temporary, yet why did it feel so final? Without Mom. Friends. Any sort of living family.

But sure, yeah, temporary.

In a strange town people feared.

In a town that my mom had disappeared in

Hours later, I was discharged from the hospital and back at the inn researching my ass off, looking through my old laptop for clues, and wondering how this had all happened in the first place.

My mom had left me enough cash, it seemed, but other than that, all I had was the time between our cryptic conversation and her disappearing, then my trying to leave the town.

I frowned and looked up the address to the mansion.

Screw it. I was going.

And now I had no parent to stop me.

I had no one.

Why did it always feel like that was the case?

As if I was doomed to be alone when all I ever wanted was to be a part of something I was never invited to?

I had missed calls from the Portland Police and missed calls from lawyers, all of them saying that if she was pronounced deceased, everything would go to me.

Our house.

Our memories.

And yet I felt like I couldn't leave.

She was here; she was still here. I could feel her in my soul. She had to be, and I wasn't going to give up.

My sadness brought me to a looming mansion with a broken, grieving heart and a need for answers after I found out the entire town was built around the damn thing through my Google search and that the library held superstitious tales that would make even the most famous ghost hunters want to quit their jobs.

It was my last choice since the police weren't any help.

And since I was stuck.

I went where I was told not to go.

And felt right for the first time since the accident.

I had a plan; it wasn't the best plan, but I figured it would at least buy me some time. According to my search, Benjamin Wells, the owner, had a private library with collections of books people hadn't seen in centuries.

My inner nerd was already giddy to get my hands on some of those books despite the weird circumstances I was in.

It was a known fact they weren't cataloged in any way; ergo, my plan.

I could maybe work for him, research at the same time, attempt to locate my mom while cooperating with law enforcement and then get the hell out of Orca Cove.

I'd already stopped at the local bookstore and asked to fill the part-time position so I could research some more and try to gain an in with the locals, so they didn't discover the crazy girl from Portland was out to get everyone and unravel all their secrets while trying to discover my mom's secrets and solve her disappearance. Small towns were either really great with accepting city people or horribly shut-mouthed, and since this one had more rumors and gossip surrounding it than TMZ, I figured it couldn't hurt to put down temporary roots—not that I had a choice.

I stared up at the massive house, almost gothic in appearance. Just how old was it? From the scant amount of research I was able to complete, it seemed nobody could really agree. Some websites said a hundred years, others said two

hundred, and the book at Mom's house had said more, but it had been forever since I'd read it...

Pain stabbed me in the chest.

Gone, she was gone, lost somewhere. Was she afraid? Panicking? A sense of abandonment washed over me again.

At least the voice had left, the familiar creepy voice that haunted my dreams now, that made me nearly crash myself into a tree.

It had completely disappeared as if it had never even existed.

Was it a coincidence that the one place I saw her last was the same place I had to stay? The same place that may have answers?

A shiver trickled down my spine.

No. Because after the life I'd had, I didn't believe in coincidences. Everything happened for a reason, and there were forces that were in constant battle with each other; good, evil, it didn't matter who you were, nobody was immune, least of all someone like me.

I steeled my expression as the gates cracked open wide. It was a start, right? I sucked in a breath when I noticed the rose gardens on the right. Gorgeous pink and white blooms stood witness to my arrival, despite the cool ocean temperatures. A soft semi-luminous mist seemed to hover above them, almost making them look frozen in time.

I shook my head. Probably a trick of the light.



Green ivy wrapped tight around the building in a way that was so ethereal that I wondered if this was the same house that inspired fairy tales. It was three stories tall, and despite its age, it wasn't crumbling at all. If anything, the gothic theme was a direct contrast to its almost youthful appearance.

Twelve steps led toward the massive iron doors. They were in excellent condition; the only damage I could see was on the twelfth step, which was broken nearly in half, not crumbling but with a split down the middle that seemed an almost impossible blemish for cement because once cement started to break, it continued to break. Maybe it was recent?

I stepped to the side of the crack and rang the doorbell, one of the only modern things near the entrance.

My eyes tried to avoid the demon-like appearance of the door knocker. Who the hell kept something like that on their house? It was a dark black with two horns protruding from the forehead, a forked lizard tongue, and red eyes. Not the most welcoming sight.

My vision blurred a bit, maybe from the pain, maybe from something else, as the door swung open, revealing what appeared to be the same cranky man who'd saved me.

"B-Benjamin Wells?" I held out my hand.

The man was staggeringly handsome and older than my eighteen years. He had glossy salt and pepper hair, looked extremely fit, towered over my five-foot-four frame easily, and was wearing black trousers with a blue button-down shirt that brought out his eyes.

Blue eyes lasered in on me, his mouth pulled into a tight line as those same eyes narrowed in inspection from top to bottom, then all over again. “Can I help you?”

I smiled, hoping it would lessen the intensity of his gaze, which after a few awkward seconds, I realized, was only making him appear more irritated. “I hope so.”

He clearly saw any sort of emotion other than anger as a waste of energy. Either that or he had a limit on smiles he was allowed to distribute on any given day and had reached that limit.

I ignored the hammering of my heart and said, “You saved me.”

Wow, could my voice sound any more breathy and needy? I was trying to go for the whole thankful heroine. Instead, I sounded like I was starring in my own porno. Good job girl, good job.

Plainly, grief was having a negative effect on me.

I reached into my bag and pulled out a bottle of Prisoner wine, the most expensive I could find in that small town, with my fake ID. God, Mom would be so mad at me, but it was the only idea I had, and obviously, news didn’t spread fast because the girl at checkout didn’t even blink an eye, granted she didn’t really look at me either, more over me, but that was beside the point. “I just wanted to say thank you and—”

He jerked the wine out of my hands, stared down at the label, and scowled like I’d chosen wrong, but in seconds he was already closing the door behind him.

“Wait!” I threw my foot out, and instantly my entire body seized with pain. I breathed through it. “I thought we could share a glass. Together.”

You’d think I had just announced I was one of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse with his suddenly shocked expression. Shock quickly shifted into confusion as his eyes squinted together like he wasn’t sure how to respond.

“It’s the least I can do,” I said cheerfully, then boldly took a step over the threshold despite the throbbing pain in my leg.

He shuffled back a few feet and gaped as my eyes greedily took in the entryway.

The place was absolutely beautiful, with high ceilings and green marble floors. A silver chandelier hung in the middle of the grand hall before a spiral staircase led to the second floor, and massive intricately framed pictures lined each wall as if to tell a story even more so than the books in that library.

A chill swept through me, the kind of chill that would send people searching for a fireplace or at least a blanket.

And yet it didn’t feel cold.

It felt... wrong.

Out of place.

He tilted his head at me, and then slowly, a grin spread across his handsome face. “Actually, I would love a glass of wine. We’ll share it in the salon. Let me just grab some glasses.” He slowly turned. “And will that be orange juice or milk for you?”

I glared. “Wine.”

“You think so?”

“I won’t tell if you won’t, plus don’t you think I deserve it after...” I cleared my throat.

He simply shook his head and muttered. “Interesting, at least this time.”

I beamed despite the sudden change in his attitude and choked out a “Thanks!” as his footsteps pounded against the marble floor, taking him away from me and toward wherever the glasses were kept.

Another chill wracked my pain-filled body.

Frowning, I turned around. It was almost like the cold was hitting me in short spurts from behind.

A set of closed double doors that obviously led somewhere confronted me. I took a step and then another, and the chill increased until I reached out and touched the antique black handle.

The minute my fingertips made contact, an electric jolt zapped my hand; it wasn’t painful enough for me to drop to my knees, but it didn’t exactly feel good.

My fingertips tingled as I held my hand out in front of my face. No marks from the zap; that was good, right?

Footsteps sounded again and then stopped.

I looked down as the light from under the double doors was completely sucked away; someone was standing on the other side.

I swear I could hear the steady breathing.

I reached up, pressed my palm against the door, and gasped when I felt a dizzying heat surge through where my hand touched the wood. My lips parted when that same heat traveled down my arm and spread like an erotic fire through my body.

Haunting images of legs tangled in sheets.

My legs.

A man's muscular back flexing as he moves over me.

My hands digging into his jet-black hair, pulling, tugging, teeth nipping at my lower lip.

And so much pleasure that my body was sick with it.

The air stilled.

There were only those images.

Only me and some mystery man burning the house down with each kiss, each sigh, each panting breath.

"Found the glasses," Benjamin said.

I jerked my hand back and turned, hoping that he didn't see the arousal on my face or the fact that I was having a hard time catching my breath and wanted nothing more than to plaster my entire body against that door and find out what or who was on the other side.

"Good. Great." With shaking hands, I tucked my hair behind my ears and flashed him a smile that felt anything but genuine.

"I see you've met the library." His eyebrows shot up to his forehead. "Always an interesting experience..."

*Did he say “met the library,” as in it is its own person?*

I gave a halfhearted laugh. “Well, I made it as far as the door.”

He snorted. “Count yourself lucky that you didn’t make it inside.”

My curiosity and need for whatever that damn library promised settled into me like a low hum, constant, annoying, and taunting. I swear my own body was betraying me by not moving toward Benjamin.

“Shall we?” One side of his mouth turned up into a slow mocking grin revealing perfect straight white teeth that looked more predatory than friendly.

I cleared my throat and nodded. “Yeah, of course.”

I begrudgingly followed him away from the door, hating that with each step I took, the heat dissipated, and in its place, a bitter cold settled in my stomach as the scent of sugar and candy yet again filled the stale hot air.

I was tempted to hold my breath as Benjamin led me into a large room with floor-to-ceiling windows that overlooked the rose gardens and a roaring fireplace on the opposite wall.

Two black leather wingback chairs faced the fire while a matching couch had been placed near the window.

A gold-plated telescope was pointed out toward the perfect ocean view making me insanely jealous of the almost castle they lived in. How amazing would it be to live right on the water? To have this view every day?

Benjamin set the tray down and nodded toward the telescope. “Have you ever whale watched?”

I smiled more to myself than him. “Every year with my mom.”

“Oh?” He seemed genuinely interested. “You’ve been here before then?”

Why did it feel like he was digging when it was just a simple question?

“Every year, but—” I answered with a sad smile and stopped myself from saying she had vanished. “It was just my mom and me, and since we didn’t have a lot of money, this was all we could afford, though I’d take orcas over Disneyland any day.”

“Orcas, you say?” His face was completely indifferent as he stared me down, arms crossed. “That’s interesting; most just call all whales... *whales*.”

“But they aren’t like other whales,” I blurted, earning a narrowed gaze yet again from his handsome features. “I mean, they’re giant dolphins, right?”

“Right,” he agreed, and then the conversation was dropped as he went over to the tray and poured two rather large measures of wine into the crystal glasses.

He handed me mine first and then reached for his.

“Thank you.” I lifted my glass in a toast. “For saving my life.”

“I wouldn’t.” He took a tentative sip of his wine.

Confusion washed over me, and that damn sweet smell wasn't helping the rolling in my stomach. "Wouldn't what?"

"Thank me." He downed another gulp and then looked over my head toward the door we just came through. "Remember, you were the one that stepped into this household. I was going to shut the door in your face."

I inwardly flinched at his rudeness. Smile tight, I responded. "How could I forget? It was less than an hour ago."

"Was it, though?" he said cryptically as he lifted his glass with the biggest smile I'd seen him give since meeting him. "And to think, I was projecting another extremely boring year."

And then he just left.

Left me alone next to the tray, which I then noticed had another glass placed on it. Alone in a house, I hadn't even been invited into, and alone with a giant roaring fireplace.

What the hell?

Was he coming back?

I weighed my options.

I could either leave and screw my one and only opportunity to do some digging, or I could sit there like the uninvited creepy guest I was and wait.

For what?

Him to come back?

Was this some sort of test rich people conducted for their own amusement because they were just that bored with their lives as they waited to lock you in their basement?



I squirmed in my seat, and my eyes searched the room for any sort of evidence related to the town, Mom's disappearance, and truly anything else I could get my hands on.

After a few minutes, my thoughts drifted back to the library.

Maybe one peek.

It couldn't hurt, right?

I stood and glanced over my shoulder.

He hadn't returned.

The scent of candy was lessening, so that was nice.

I took another large gulp of wine. My mom would be so disappointed that I was in this situation and gulping rather than sipping and enjoying, but my morning hadn't been normal. Therefore, if I wanted to gulp the entire bottle, that was my right as an almost nineteen-year-old weighing the disappearance of her only remaining relative in a strange town she'd visited since birth. God, this really was turning into a melodrama.

A few large family portraits littered the walls in the salon, and then above the fireplace was one that had at first escaped my notice.

I'm not sure how I didn't notice it.

In fact, now that I saw the portrait, it was all I could see. All I could focus on. I wanted to crawl inside it and just exist.

The man was hauntingly beautiful.

With longer, jet-black hair that teased broad shoulders and bright emerald green eyes that almost seemed to come alive the longer I stared. A square jaw paired with an aristocratic nose that should look arrogant and pompous but instead gave the idea of a swoon-worthy Duke from Regency London.

His long, elegant fingers gripped the leather chair, and his face was completely void of emotion except for the slight tug on the right corner of his mouth, implying that he was smirking.

My heart thudded harder against my chest as heat filled my veins, and more images played through my head like a movie on slow-mo.

“Are you here for the maid position?” A smooth voice asked from the door.

Slowly, almost too slow, I turned on my heel and stared.

It was the guy in the picture.

Live and in the flesh.

It took every ounce of strength I had to keep my jaw clenched. It wanted to drop it in awe. Blood pounded in my ears as I stared.

His eyes locked on mine, and that same smirk I’d just been admiring was suddenly directed at me.

“The maid position?” Was this my in? Possibly with the extremely hot and sexy son of Mr. Wells? I hadn’t even seen a maid position online! “Um, yes, yes I am.” I’d just tell Mr. Wells that he left before I could ask about the job. That was if he ever reappeared.

“Fantastic.” He flashed me a confident grin.

Holy God, that grin was a weapon, worse than a bomb going off in that room. It flustered me, it promised, and it made me want to beg. Was it a trick of the light, or was his hair... tinted black with a bit of dark green?

He held out his hand.

I was almost afraid of what would happen when I took it.

But I had no choice.

And frankly, I wanted to touch it, to touch him. He had to be close to my age, though he looked... more mature, like a god, with an easy yet predatory smile and a presence that had me wanting to sit in his presence all day.

Weird.

Creepy.

But my last few days had been hell, and I had good wine, and he was gorgeous, so I was at least attempting to cheer myself up and focus on the positive, right?

“I’m Luna.” I smiled, mouth dry, eyes still unsure of where to look, his mouth or his jaw, his perfect black brows, or his gorgeous hair.

His firm hand wrapped around mine, his grip hot, his fingers strong as he rasped out. “Nice to meet you, Luna. I’m Benjamin Wells.”

I gasped. “Are you sure?”

“Pretty sure.” He chuckled and released my hand. “But if you need proof...” He nodded toward the portrait.

And right underneath it, on a gold plate, it stated, “Benjamin Wells.”

“I swear I can read.” I crossed my arms to keep from reaching for him again. “I was just distracted.” By his hypnotic eyes, godlike beauty, and magnetism. “But isn’t that an older photo?” Of like your ancestors, maybe?

He peered around me. “This house and wine? Not the best combo if you want to focus.” He completely ignored my question.

I laughed uneasily.

His eyes fell to my mouth for a brief second. “Did you save any for me?”

“Do I have the job?” I countered.

“Never negotiate with a Wells, Luna. That’s your first lesson,” he said as he moved around to sit in the leather chair.

I followed and sat in the opposite one. Okay, arrogant son of the owner of this mansion. “And the second lesson?”

“Never lie.”

“Pardon?”

“There is no maid position, so maybe tell me why you’re really here first, and then I’ll let you know if you can stay or if I’ll eat you for a snack.”

I laughed.

He absolutely did not.

The clock chimed like impending doom was around the corner.

And I could have sworn in that moment, I heard dark laughter as he waited for my answer with a curious expression.

And the crazy old lady at the bookstore I'd passed earlier that morning and her warning, whatever her name was, about stepping foot into the old mansion down the street.

I suddenly wondered if I'd somehow sealed a fate I didn't know existed and would come to very much regret.

I wished then more than anything that I could have my mom with me, that she'd tell me what to do—but all she'd done was lead me to a town I felt I couldn't escape, to a mysterious good looking guy I could have never hoped to date back home, and an eerie feeling that I'd done this before, been here before, and that there would be no going back. Weeks before leaving, she was constantly reading old books on reincarnation. When I asked her, she said it was giving her hope after her diagnosis was terminal, but it still seemed extremely odd of her... then again, she'd always been a bit odd, but she was still my mom.

I shook away my thoughts, weighed my options then finally decided to settle for a half-truth. He stared me down, his full lips pressed together in an amused expression. "Well?"

"I used to come here as a child." My stomach rolled as I thought about my mom, about her disappearance, my accident, and the inn. "I um, recently lost my mother. She told me to visit my favorite place, so I took some time off, and here I am."

It wasn't the worst lie; it also wasn't the best, but I had this feeling I needed him, needed more information, information only his library and this stupid town had. And going back to

Portland wasn't an option, not without my mom, not without answers.

His green eyes narrowed. "Yes, here you are." He sucked in his bottom lip and leaned forward, the wine still in hand. "But why me? Why my house?"

Shit.

"Um," I couldn't look away from his gaze even if I tried. "Research for my, um, college. I'm investigating supernatural phenomena and, um, vampires. Yeah, huge Twilight fan." I held up my hand, and he just looked at it like I was going to start busting out the soundtrack and then fall to my knees screaming EDWARRRRRRD.

I waited for the doubt to creep into his eyes, the flinching, the possible irritation in his gaze. Instead, he simply grinned and leaned back in a relaxed position that seemed so sexual that I was having trouble focusing. "You're getting better at lying, though I assume the mom part is accurate."

"Thank you?" I tried to mimic his position on my chair, remembering that if you mirrored the person you were talking to, they felt more comfortable sharing information with you. Psych 101. The only problem is I probably looked like a sexless gerbil with the way I tried to twist into a comfortable position without passing out from pain.

"Well..." He let out a sigh. "I guess we could start the tour then."

"Tour?" I set my wine down on the tray. "What tour?"

"That is why you're here, right? We typically only do house tours during the Fall Taffy Festival, but I can make a

tiny exception as long as you can keep a secret.” He winked.

“Oh.” I licked my lips. “Sure.”

“So, can you?” He tilted his dark head.

“Can I what?” Between the wine, his presence, and the eerie pulsing of the house, it was hard to focus.

He took a step toward me, then another, until his chest was inches from mine; with an amused look, he bent over and whispered in my ear, “Keep a secret.”

I sucked in a sharp breath. “Yes.”

“Good.” He lingered there.

It could have been a thousand minutes or maybe ten seconds, but for some reason, time stood still. It was just us.

And it felt... frighteningly familiar, like I’d been there with him, not in this moment but in moments before.

A sense of déjà vu pulsed between our bodies like a living breathing thing, like a tether pulling us closer while at the same time making me feel like I needed to pull away, run in the opposite direction, and catch my breath.

“The house,” he said smoothly. “Some say it’s haunted, so just don’t be surprised if you have some strange dreams when you go back home today, little researcher. When something exists for so long, it’s impossible for it not to tell stories. In fact, it must.”

I frowned and shook my head. “Right, okay...”

“So, once I show you the house...” He swept past me with purposeful steps, his expensive shoes clicking against the

floor. "...you'll write your little piece about the haunted house and its equally haunted owner and leave town, I assume?"

I hurried after him. "No, actually that's not why I came. I was in an accident last night, and the guy who answered the door, who I thought was you but clearly wasn't, saved my life and—" I collided with his back as he stopped and bit back a curse.

Without turning around, he hissed. "Did he touch you?"

"I was kind of in the middle of being concussed after a near-death experience, so you'll excuse me if I don't recall if he did or didn't touch me. There was blood and—"

He turned around so fast I stumbled back, pain hitting my side and leg all at once. "How badly were you injured?"

"I'm still here, so..." I threw my arms up and shrugged. "I'm fine, I stopped by to thank him after the hospital let me know who my mystery savior was, thus the wine, and here I am."

His eyes narrowed. "Is that a no on the tour, then?"

"That's a yes on the tour and lead the way because the minute I saw the house, my curiosity was piqued. Even though I'm not writing a story on the haunting of Benjamin Wells, I absolutely am nerding out over rumors of your giant library."

His eyes flickered with something, and then after a long sigh. "All right, we'll start in the library."

I grinned. "That's my favorite part of Beauty and the Beast."



He let out a grunt. “Ah, a Disney lover. How refreshing.” Sarcasm dripped off every word.

I rolled my eyes behind his back. “All I’m saying is if a prince in disguise offered me an entire library, I’d probably dedicate my whole existence in servitude just to have access.”

His hands froze over the library doors. “I’d be careful what you say in this house... specifically in the library.”

“Oh?” I hadn’t read anything about the library being haunted, just the basement. “Why’s that?”

He turned the handles and whispered in a gruff voice. “You’ll see.”

With that cryptic message, the two doors that had minutes ago seemed to come alive stilled under his touch as he pushed them open.

I don’t know what I imagined would be on the other side. Monsters? Aliens? I was almost disappointed when it looked halfway normal.

The east wall had floor-to-ceiling books, most of them with spines that looked so old I wondered if the glue was even working to keep the pages together.

I tamped down my excitement as he went over to the window and flung open the long black curtains. Mom would have loved this.

The library overlooked another garden, but this one was completely dead like someone had taken poison to it on purpose. I frowned. “Was there a fire, or did someone just have a really bad day?”

The rose bushes were charred.

He swallowed and then gave his head a shake. “Bad century, I’d say.”

I frowned. “That happened a century ago?”

His emerald eyes narrowed. “You said you knew about the house. It’s over two hundred years old... some ghosts say older.”

“Ah, he has jokes.”

He shrugged. “Who says I was joking?”

“You’re trying to scare me away?”

He licked his full lips, and his eyes zeroed in on my mouth. “Is it working, Luna?”

My heart thudded against my chest as the heat from the fireplace seemed to burn my skin, or maybe it was him, and then that same pulsing, that same heartbeat seemed to pound against my ears, like I was inside something... or someone.

“No.” I found my voice. “I’d say I’m more intrigued.”

“You know what they say about people who ask too many questions.” He broke eye contact and pointed to a massive desk in the middle of the room. There was an uneaten sandwich on a plate next to a pen.

“Working?”

“Always,” he snapped the book shut so I couldn’t read what it said, but on the paper next to it had been written in dark, scrawled letters, “Hexed.”

“Spells?” I inquired.

“Sir?” The man from before was back; he swept into the room and gave me a chilling smile. “Your appointment.”

“Not now, Jasper.” His eyes narrowed. “Can’t you see we have a guest?”

“Oh, I see...” Jasper looked between us, his voice dripping with boredom. “But I’m afraid it’s urgent.”

“Three minutes.”

“I’ll let them know...” A chill filled the room, and then immediately left when he closed the doors.

I shivered. “I could always come back.”

Benjamin’s smirk returned. “Something tells me that even if I say no, you’ll find a way to get what you want.”

“Possibly.” I crossed my arms. “You know, I’m in town for a bit, and I do have questions. How about I organize the books over in that corner that look like they’re about a billion years old?” I rocked back on my heels. “Besides, I refuse to leave until I find out what happened to my mom.”

“Illness?” he asked.

“Disappearance,” I corrected. “She was here and then just... gone.”

“It’s very easy to disappear, Luna. You should remember that.” He touched some of the old books. “And I like my books a little... ruffled.” He licked his lips, his eyes darting down to my mouth and back up again.

I swallowed thickly, unable to get my heart rate under control. “Nobody who has a library like this likes chaos.”

He snorted out a laugh. “Why does it seem that you bring the chaos with you?”

I smiled. “Trust me, I’m boring. I’m asking to organize books with more dust on them than most farms.”

“Know a little about farms, do you?” His lips twitched.

“A little.” I shrugged, lying through my teeth. “Please?” I reached out and touched the edge of his shirt. “I really need the distraction. I promise I’m not a crazy stalker; I really want to know more about the house. It was my mom’s dying—” I gulped and pulled my hand away. “It was what she wanted.”

“Going for the sympathy angle. Have to admit I’m impressed.” He sighed and rubbed his chin. “I’ll tell you what, you can come back, do your research, but whatever you learn from here stays between us... No articles. No questions. Whatever you glean from the books is yours and yours alone. For a mother’s dying wish, am I right?”

It was closer to the truth than I’d ever admit. “Fine.”

“You lie so well,” he said after a few seconds. His fingers twitched at his sides like he wanted to grab something. He lifted one hand and then dropped it with a curse. “I’ll show you the way out.”

Why was I upset that he didn’t touch me? He was a complete stranger and a mysterious one at that.

When I turned, his hand grazed my lower back. A jolt of electricity pulsed through my body at the gentle touch, but he didn’t seem to notice anything as he led me back to the closed doors. A low rumbling sounded as we left, like the library

itself was grumbling at our absence, which was a bit ridiculous, but it was impossible not to hear it.

“Ignore the sound; it’s most likely construction from down the street.”

I hadn’t seen any construction down the street, but I nodded just the same.

I eyed the front door and willed my feet to walk toward it, even when something told me that stepping outside was a bad idea.

A strong sense of foreboding washed over me as Benjamin pressed a hand to my shoulder while opening the door with the other. Another electrical zap pulsed through my skin where he touched.

“Be careful, Luna; small towns can be deceiving.”

“I’ll be fine.” I shot him a bright smile.

Something in his eyes told me that I would, in fact, not be okay as I left his touch and walked toward the stairs, and when I stepped on that twelfth step, the crack looked like it had widened.

And I could have sworn the entire house... groaned.

## CHAPTER FOUR

*Benjamin*

“It’s happening,” Jasper said in a low voice behind me. I tucked my trembling hands into the pockets of my trousers. The last thing I needed was for him to see the effect she had on me. He’d use it like an emotional weapon that I had no shield against.

“Possibly.” I shrugged like I was bored with the conversation and turned around. “We have no proof other than the house responded to her and the library, horny thing that it is, wanted to strip her naked.” Angling my head, I contemplated it for a moment, then shrugged. “Or maybe that was just my thoughts? I get confused, you understand.” I flashed him an easy smile.

He did nothing but subject me to a stony glare and shove his glasses back up his pale face.

He was rarely pale.

Always at the peak of health.

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Weakening a bit?”

“If that’s not proof, I have more.” He turned and started ascending the spiral staircase.

With a grunt, I followed him up the creaky stairs, careful to stick to the middle as always. Strange when your house, more often than not, wanted you injured just so you could feel the pain but have the reminder that you couldn’t die.

Bastard.

“Should have set fire to you too,” I grumbled, and one of the stairs heaved as if I weighed a million pounds. “Try it; see what happens.”

“Talking to the stairs again, I see,” Jasper said in exasperation. “You know what happened last time.”

I grinned. “Best day of my life, hacking them with a chainsaw.”

“The stairs were not amused,” he reminded me. “Don’t fight something that can fight back, Benjamin. You know the rules.”

“Fuck the rules.”

The house shook.

“Sometimes it’s like working with a child, swear to the gods.” Jasper made it to the second level, and I followed, an eerie sensation washing over me as I noticed that every single one of my pictures were no longer covered.

The entire second floor looked pristine, as if we’d just had Merry Maids stop by. Lights flickered at the end of the hall.

The large floor-to-ceiling mirror shimmered from its spot near the guest room.

“Only one way to find out.” Jasper moved ahead of me as if to shield me from my own fate, but even as I walked, I knew what I would see: my future, and it always looked so damning.

So much the same.

A constant circle.

I was on a merry-go-round that never allowed me to hop off.

A reel that continuously played in a haunted theater.

I waited until I was at the end of the hall to finally lift my head, and I wondered why it always shocked me.

My expression stared back at me, and then right before my eyes, my reflection shifted. Gone was the dark hair, replaced by an emerald green that fell in braids nearly down to my waist. My amber eyes flickered from dark to near purple, and my skin looked effortlessly perfect. I looked like the day it happened—the same age. Which meant only one thing: it was happening again.

“Call the mayor.” I sighed. “Regardless of how I feel about her, she needs to protect the town—again.”

“Business as usual.” Jasper nodded. “For what it’s worth, I’m sorry.”

He wasn’t. Sorry that was. He would come out of this perfectly fine. Luna wouldn’t because why else would the house respond? Why else would she crash on her way to the town if she wasn’t being chased by one of them? Or being haunted by one of them?

Shit.



My reflection winked and then gave me a smug smile.

I flipped it off and turned around as the dark laughter filled the hall.

“Where are you going?” Jasper barked.

“Out.” I bit back another curse as I grabbed my cell phone and keys and, in a blur, made it to my Rover and drove.

I sped past my own house and down the old dirt road that led to the rocky shore, and of course, I knew what I would see when I got there.

The orcas.

Not just one.

But all seven.

A chill raced down my spine as I heard the jumble of thoughts coming from them.

“She’s here!”

“He’ll be free!”

“This is the one!”

I almost wished I couldn’t communicate with them or hear their thoughts. I needed someone to be just as negative as me right now.

Instead, they were swimming around in glee as if the town wasn’t in danger, as if I wasn’t a murderer.

“You’ll see!” One of them nearly shouted the thought at me as he rounded the corner. Of course, it would be the youngest, Megistiast.

I hiked to the farthest point and found the worn rock, sighing as I ran my hands over all the tally marks.

Twelve white marks stood out against the old rock, and I was suddenly transported back to the first time.

Bakis, the eldest of the orcas, swam ahead of the others, always the quietest, always sensing my feelings even when I didn't want him to.

"You're back," I whispered as the wind picked up, splashing more water against the rocks and against the large whale. "I'd say it's nice to see you again, but..."

His thoughts were quiet.

Maybe that was his one kindness.

He was waiting for the question I always asked before and the question I always asked after.

How many more times would I need to ask? And how many more times would the despair threaten to swallow me whole?

Finally, I opened my mouth and whispered, "What do you see?"

He was quiet for a moment, then he broadcast his thoughts like a low rumble in the wind. "Carnage."

I shuddered. "And the girl?"

"Dead," he answered, not for the first time. Then, "Alive." He grew quiet again. "I see many things this time."

"You see many things every time."

“Choices...” Delphi swam by and splashed the rocks. “Are ripples in time. This is your journey. You must travel it.”

“And if I decide I don’t want to participate this time?”

“We die,” they thought in unison.

What sort of cruel person had tied my fate to the ancient creatures’? To the last remaining oracles on earth?

With a heavy sigh, I stood up and held out my arms. “I guess I’m ready then.”

I peeled off my shirt, kicked off my shoes, dove into the icy water, and let the waves take over as I sank deeper and deeper. At the very bottom, twenty or so feet down, the box was glowing. I grabbed it as air squeezed out my lungs and shoved my body back up to the surface.

I was a soaking mess when I made it back to shore, and as expected, the orcas had gone out to sea.

Leaving me alone with my dark thoughts as I opened the centuries-old box and pulled out the ring the Matchmaker had spelled, aligning the families at Plymouth.

It was as black as death, but I knew soon it would change colors. I just didn’t know why because every time this happened, I remembered the beginning, I remembered talking to the orcas, I remembered the first touch, and then all I could remember was the end: the blood and the look on my love’s face as I failed her again.

I took notes every time she came back into my life, and every time, on that last day, with blood dripping from my fingertips, I would search the house and find nothing but my own paralyzing screams as they rained from the rooftops.

I pulled the ring out and squeezed my eyes shut as memories pounded into me.

*“How DARE YOU!” the witch screamed, her eyes flashing from emerald green to white. “You think you know better than me to choose who you love when it has been ordained before the gods?”*

*My mother took a step forward, her arm outstretched as if to pull me back. My father’s eyes were cold as stone. The jewels around his neck turned black and swirled with red as his anger pulsed.*

*For no son had ever disagreed.*

*No prince would dare, would he?*

*But love asks us to do many things that seem wrong yet feel right, down to our very existence.*

*On one side of the fire was my betrothed.*

*And by my side—the one who held my heart.*

*“You want this one?” The old Matchmaker shot me an evil smirk. “Then have her... For eternity.”*

*And just like that, my life changed.*

*Damned.*

I clutched the ring to my palm and slowly made my way back to the car, I wasn’t sure where I was driving. I wasn’t sure of anything other than I needed this time to be different. I needed to have faith.

*But how do you have faith when both heaven and hell refuse to take you? When you served endless purgatory on an*

earth you no longer wished to claim? Next to humanity that grew stupider with each passing year?

A dark cloud of frustration seemed to follow my car as rain pounded against the roof, around and around I drove.

Until I reached the end of town.

I parked and stared at the long winding road that led away from here.

The pain returned full force, so debilitating that it was hard to breathe as I slowly turned my car around and drove back toward the house, past the orphanage and the old taffy factory.

Damned.

Why the fuck did I even try?

And just like that, I tucked the ring into my pocket and slowly made my way up the cracked stairs, clothing soaked. I went into the library, and I did what I always did.

I searched for answers.

I conducted my research.

And I prayed to the gods who'd abandoned me before I could even ask for help—to take pity on a man so broken and bruised that he was hardly living.

Just a shell.

“Help,” I whispered into the void. “Just once.”

The room seemed to inhale and exhale slowly, and that was my answer, wasn't it? Keep breathing, keep existing.

Keep wishing I was dead.

I reached for the letter opener and held it to my neck, slicing across my artery so deep that blood spurt all over the floor.

I waited for my vision to fade, for my breathing to slow.

Nothing.

The next minute, I touched the skin, and it was completely healed.

The fire raged in front of me.

“Sir?” Jasper cleared his throat. “The blood? I would say don’t be so fucking wasteful, but I imagine that would just encourage you more. You know you’re lucky to be alive.”

“Lucky.” I snorted. “I wouldn’t go so far, Jasper.” I turned. “Shouldn’t you be doing whatever you do when you aren’t babysitting me?”

He rolled his eyes. “You mean take care of the orphanage, your several companies, and make sure you don’t turn into a walking ghost? Yes, but I find it tiresome when you act like a petulant child. I deal with enough brats. Don’t make me whip you too.”

I gritted my teeth. “Touch one hair on any of their heads, and I swear to the gods—”

He held up his hand. “A metaphor, I assure you.”

Metaphor my ass.

My eyes narrowed. “I think I’ll just go visit myself then. Maybe they’ll be in the mood for a scary story about a man who can’t die.”

“You forget...” Jasper’s grin was absolutely terrifying.  
“You’re no man.”

With that, he left, his footsteps annoying the hell out of me as I roared out a curse and threw half the books onto the floor in a fit of rage.

The innocence of children, yes, that was what I needed.

I needed a smile that was real.

A hug that didn’t steal.

And a reminder of what my money did—and who it saved, even if it couldn’t save me from myself.

## CHAPTER FIVE

*Jasper*

“Idiot.” He muttered it over and over again, even though it didn’t make him feel any better as he took the stairs two at a time down to the basement. “He’s getting more moody.”

“He always does,” Luis said from his spot in front of the monitors. “You know how it goes. He gets moodier and moodier until, you know...”

“How you can still blush after all of these centuries is almost offensive to me as a person.” Jasper shook his head. “I need to run an errand. Watch him. Make sure nothing out of the ordinary happens.” He paused and then looked over his shoulder. “The new batch of blood? Anything?”

Luis had the audacity to look down at his shoes rather than face Jasper head-on like a man. He adjusted his wire-rimmed glasses. “We’re trying, sir. You know how it goes. At least it’s helping her—”

“SHE’S DYING!” Jasper roared. “And I’ve given you everything as a trade. Don’t fail me or I’ll find another doctor who can do your job better, and you know what that means.”



Luis gulped and, probably without realizing it, touched his head, the same head that no longer had any silver flecks. “Y-yes.”

“Good talk.” Jasper sneered and stomped his way back up the stairs.

If he hurried, he could make it to the other side of town in a few brief minutes. He didn’t want to miss lunch.

No, if he missed lunch, she’d worry.

She always worried, didn’t she?

Or maybe he imagined it.

He grinned to himself as he walked past the orphanage. Idiot children were loud enough to wake up half the town. With a scowl, he kicked one of the balls back toward the fence, almost hoping it would hit one of them in the head, not enough to kill, though. No, that wouldn’t do. But at least hard enough to make him feel better.

He was in the black company Escalade in seconds.

Driving down the main highway as rain pelted his windshield.

And then, finally, taking the second street from the main road, down, down, deep into the forest.

Down to see his sleeping beauty.

He would not fail her.

He would kill every soul in this town and raise every grave.

Maybe he was losing his mind because for a minute there, when he’d seen all of Benjamin’s spilled blood, something had

told him that he should get down on his hands and knees and drink.

Such a fucking waste.

Such a fucking idiot.

He pulled the car to a stop in front of the small white house and quickly got out. Gravel crunched under his boots as he walked to the stairs. He climbed them, each step heavier than the last, then opened the screen door at the top. It let out a small squeal as he let himself in.

And there she was.

The same as before.

And there he was. Just as angry.

A cloud of rage had taken over the helplessness.

Never again.

“Any change?” he barked to the attending doctor.

A pause, and then, “No.”

“Leave us.” He took off his coat and hung it on the third hook, dropping his scarf on the next one over as always, and then he grabbed one of the nearby books, sat, and read.

“Once upon a time... in a land far, far away... there lived an evil prince...”

## CHAPTER SIX

*Luna*

The whole conversation with Benjamin had exhausted me, so much so that I went back to the inn and fell asleep even when I should have stopped by the local bookstore and asked about my hours for the week.

I knew that small-town people could be fickle, and I wanted to start off on the right foot, but after my encounter with Benjamin, I'd been so exhausted that it felt like I lost years off my life making it up the stairs of the inn and into my bed.

It didn't help that I had nightmares about the forest as if it had living, breathing monsters in it, just waiting to devour me whole. I dreamed of harsh whispers and a man who screamed his love for me until his voice was hoarse, until the feeling of flames overtook my body and nothingness replaced the pain. That love was more terrifying than the monsters. Because the last man who'd said that had died right in front of me.

With a jolt, I came awake, but a heavy sleep dragged me toward dark oblivion again even as I glanced at the blurry alarm clock and, this time, grazed it with my fingertips only to

feel a dull buzz pulse through my skin as the numbers started flying backward, from nine to one. Sleep overtook me as a heavy stillness kept me almost pinned to the bed and the world around me phased.

I woke with a gasp in the middle of a field, leaning against a tree. I brushed my hand over the rough fabric covering my thigh and glanced down at a creamy white skirt made of spun wool. Gray and pale blue threads had been spun into the garment, and I ran my palm over it once more. My clothes looked like I'd just taken a trip to the sixteen hundreds. I drew a labored breath and instinctively knew I owed the difficulty of fully expanding my lungs to a whalebone corset pressing into my sides.

“Found you,” a male voice growled before pulling me back against him.

He smelled like pine and cinnamon.

I found myself melting into him like I knew him. Whatever this dream was, it felt good, and it felt real, so real that I could almost taste him in the air with each passing second.

My breath came out in a rush, white puffs billowing right in front of me, the air so chilly that I wanted to sink back against the familiar man even more than I already was.

I didn't panic. I didn't freak out. I just felt... calm, like I really was waiting for him to put his arms around me, to pull me against his side and reveal all his secrets. For the first time in what felt like years, I exhaled, and I turned in his arms with expectation, something I'd always shied away from after seeing the ones closest to me die one by one.

“Benjamin?” I whispered in shock. Why the hell was he in my dream? And why was his hair dark green? His eyes a different color? Was it his twin? My imagination? “What are you—”

He cradled my cheeks and drew me toward him, covering his mouth with mine, our tongues becoming a tangled mass of need. “Sorry.” He pulled back, an arrogant smirk on his perfect lips. “I couldn’t help it.”

God, he was pretty, with his hair dancing long past his chin covered in braids and beads. His eyes locked onto mine.

“Hello,” I whispered because I didn’t know what else to say.

“So polite,” he teased with a wink. “Last time you said hello, I had you back against that tree for hours...”

Hours?

I gulped, feeling my cheeks heat. “Well, I just...” I had nothing. “Missed you.”

His gaze softened. “It’s going to be all right, I promise, Luna, one day you’ll look at me like we aren’t damned. One day you’ll look at this—” He gripped my hand in his and squeezed. “—and know that it’s forever. Know that I’ll fight every god in this forsaken world to call you mine.”

Tears filled my eyes as I whispered, “I know.” And oddly enough, I did. I felt it in my soul.

I would chase him to the depths of hell to call him mine.

Body broken and bloody, I would crawl toward him with his name on my lips as I drew my last breath.

He was mine.

Mine!

Suddenly I was overcome with the need to touch him to claim him, to prove that this was real, not a dream or fantasy brought on by the hectic day or my accident.

This was fate.

This was ours.

This moment.

These seconds.

I gripped the collar of his black jacket.

His eyes burned with intensity, never leaving mine. “I claim you... Luna, my Luna, my moon, my star, my world.”

I grinned up at him. “You’re good with words.”

“I’m good with words, my hands, my mouth...” He leaned in as his teeth grazed the side of my neck. “But I know how to be bad.”

I clenched my thighs together. “Oh?”

“Mmmm...” He kissed up my neck and then tugged my ear with his teeth. “And I’ll even be good to you, so good that you’ll forget what clan you come from.”

I almost froze.

Clan?

“I believe you,” I said instead.

And then his mouth collided with mine.

I twisted my arms around his neck, desperate to get closer as he tugged at my corset, then, in frustration, pulled back, grabbed a knife, and slid it between the thread, ripping it from the front so he could tug it down.

Warm hands cupped my breasts as I arched back against the tree.

“Mine,” he rasped and then devoured my moan with his lips.

Those same wicked hands found my skirt, bunching it into a fist as he lifted it past my hips, pinning me with his knee against the bark.

“Benjamin.” I leaned back, exposing my neck as he kissed, as the cool night air hit my thighs.

Everything felt so real—so perfect.

He moved, and then he was suddenly there.

His hot length pulsing against my entrance.

I opened my eyes.

He was staring at me in wonder, no longer moving.

“What?” I whispered. “What’s wrong?” My chest was heaving as he continued to stare, his gorgeous jawline firm like he was clenching his teeth.

“You.” He growled. “It will always be you, Luna. Always.”

“Promise?”

He thrust into me so hard that I could have sworn I saw stars explode around me. “Promise.”

“Make it so,” I begged.

“Already done,” he answered as he pumped into me.

And I was free.

Finally free.

The darkness gone.

Only light.

Only me and Benjamin Wells.

Only me... and my forever.

Only me and what I'd been missing for my entire existence.

My other half.

I jerked awake, my thighs aching, my body still coming down from one of the best orgasms I'd ever had—with a squeal, I tumbled out of the bed onto the floor, tangled in the sheets like I'd been in bed with him.

I brought my shaky hands to my mouth. It felt hot, swollen, and I could swear I could taste him there on my lips.

What the hell?

I looked down. My clothes were torn down the middle like the corset.

It had felt so real.

And with as much as I've researched, I knew that dreams were a way for your body to process your day, but Benjamin hadn't even touched me today; if anything, he'd tried to scare me or threaten me.

At best, he barely tolerated me.

And yet, I knew his touch like my own.



I knew his kisses.

I knew his taste.

And I knew if I closed my eyes, I would hear his voice and feel the deep timbre as he pressed kiss after kiss against my neck.

A solitary tear ran down my cheek.

I swiped it away.

Was my life always going to be like this?

As if I was crazy?

Would I always find someone I loved only to have them either run in the opposite direction or die?

The darkness was choking then as if mocking my dreams, and I couldn't get the feeling of his kiss out of my head, not even if I tried.

So, I got up.

And found a new set of clothes.

Because there was no other option.

I glanced at the stupid clock again. The last I'd looked, it was six, and now it was six-thirty. What? Had all of that happened in a half hour?

"It was just a dream," I whispered to myself.

A really good, mind-altering, sexy dream.

Benjamin Wells was still back in his mansion, in his library, drinking wine and grumbling about life and probably grumbling about the fact that he'd said yes to me.

And I was here, at a random inn, trying my best to keep my job, stay safe, and research what I could about this town and my mom's final words before she vanished from this world.

More tears threatened, but I'd shed enough for a lifetime, and after a while, the anger was preferred because sadness just gave a person hope, and I was done hoping that anything would ever be fully normal.

I slowly swayed on my feet with a grimace as the pain in my leg seemed to find its own separate heartbeat again.

On cue, my stomach rumbled. All I'd had was a glass of wine and a whole eyeful of Benjamin Wells.

It always came back to him, didn't it?

And I'd been there less than twenty-four hours.

Damn, that man was beautiful. It was a harsh beauty, though, brought out of something that I was almost afraid to research, which wasn't like me. I usually wanted answers, and this time I felt the need to stay far away from his house but close to him, not that it made any sense.

I decided to shove all thoughts of him and the dream away. Besides, I was starving, and I still had work to do.

I frowned and looked around my room. A small fireplace was pressed in the corner, a writing table next to it. The carpet was green, and a bit worn, but the king-sized bed had soft, white sheets and a fluffy duvet, so I wasn't complaining, especially with the sleep I'd had.

I went over to the bathroom. It wasn't very large, but it had a clawfoot tub, which I remembered from back when my mom and I had stayed here. I flicked on the light and stared at

myself in the mirror. I still had dark circles under my eyes which was rare even for someone who was a constant night owl and self-proclaimed insomniac, who pretty much Netflixed instead of slept.

Sleeping always led to bad memories.

Screams.

Darkness.

At least today the dreams had included great sex, right? There were worse things to dream about.

My dark hair was tangled past my shoulders, and my light blue eyes were still a little bloodshot.

With a shrug, I splashed my face, added some lip gloss for good measure, then looked around for one of my cardigans. A sudden chill had swept into the cove, making it nippy even with my fireplace on.

I shrugged into my black cardigan, added a small blue scarf, then grabbed my purse and headed out, my stomach practically leading the way as the smell of food beckoned from the quaint restaurant downstairs.

The narrow staircase gave way to the brightly lit lobby with its numerous candles and mirrors, and around the corner was the restaurant with seven wood-topped tables, each of them sporting a solitary candle, lending the room a more intimate ambiance.

The sign in front of the room read “seat yourself,” so I chose the table closest to the fire and pulled out the chair.

“I saw it, I swear!” a female voice shrieked from the kitchen. “I’m not losing my mind!”

“Day drinking again?” a male voice interrupted.

Complete silence followed.

Within seconds a tall, gorgeous woman with jet-black hair and dark brown eyes rounded the corner. Her brown skin was just as flawless as the rest of her as she offered me a wide smile and handed over a paper menu. “Dinner?”

“Yes, please.” I smiled and took the menu while she just stood there smiling. Finally, I cleared my throat. “And maybe some water?”

“Oh!” She put her hands together. “Sure, of course, we also have some great local wines, or you could do a sampler, or beer... but I don’t remember what kind of beer because I rarely waitress, for obvious reasons, but—” She just kept talking and talking and talking.

Finally, I interrupted. “Ginger ale.” As much as I wanted a glass of white wine, I didn’t think it was a good idea to produce my fake ID here.

She shut her mouth and seemed to bounce on her toes. “Fantastic, be right back. Oh, and the clam chowder’s my favorite.”

Her tall red heels clicked against the wood plank floor as she made her way back into the kitchen. Her designer jeans and expensive cream sweater looked extremely out of place in this small town; the woman could be a supermodel—a highly paid one.

What was she doing in Orca Cove?

The sudden strains of a violin playing filled the air as though they'd just turned on the music. So not necessary for just one customer, but it was relaxing all the same.

My brain was still having a hard time not thinking about Benjamin. It was almost like I couldn't *not* think about him, which was a bit alarming, all things considered.

I licked my lips, tasting him still, wondering how, and trying not to freak out.

A throat cleared.

I jerked my head up to find the black-haired woman at my table. "Sorry, daydreaming."

"Nothing wrong with a little dream." She winked and set my ginger ale on the table, then pulled out a chair and sat, her red fingernails tapping against the table. "Some might say dreams are prophetic—what do you see in yours?"

Abruptly, I couldn't look away from her.

So beautiful.

She was... everything.

I wanted to touch her.

Her grin widened. "Your dreams? I'm sorry, what's your name?"

"Luna," I answered without thinking. "My name's Luna."

Her eyes widened a fraction before she broke eye contact. It was like getting ice water thrown over my face.

I gave my head a shake and answered anyway. "My dreams lately have been... dark, let's just put it that way."

“Dark,” she repeated. “Maybe there’s a darkness in you?”

My head jerked up in surprise. Could she see it? Could someone finally see it? The constant pulsing around me, the dark cloud that never seemed to leave?

Then she burst out laughing. “I’m totally messing with you.”

I reached for my glass of ginger ale with a forced chuckle. “You do that often to your customers? Just sit down and scare the shit out of them?”

“Every day. My blessing. Their curse.” She winked again. “All right, what do you want to eat?”

“Everything?” I laughed. “The entire menu looks amazing, but I’m going to go with the clam chowder since you said it’s your favorite, and maybe some bread.”

“All the bread,” she corrected. “Because sometimes carbs are the only answer.”

I handed her the menu. “I think I like you.”

“Everyone does.” She said it so matter-of-factly that I wasn’t offended. “My name’s Hathor, and before you laugh, I’m fully aware that it’s the worst name ever, but my dad’s Egyptian, so people just call me Hath.”

I didn’t want to tell her that Hath seemed almost worse than Hathor, so I just nodded and guzzled fizzy soda down my throat.

With a grin, she was off, her hips sauntering the entire way back to the kitchen just as someone else shoved themselves through the double swinging doors.

Hath moved out of the way with the grace of a dancer while I would have probably ended up being somehow impaled by one of the nearby flower vases.

Women like that were almost impossible for me to understand. I preferred jeans and a T-shirt to designer dresses and oftentimes found that I looked almost funny in clothes like hers. Almost like I was meant to be a servant instead of a queen.

The man was taller than Hath, with similar dark features and jet-black hair to his huge shoulders. He had no easy smiles for me. Instead, he scowled in my direction, stomped through the restaurant, threw open the door, and stepped through, then slammed it closed.

I jolted in my seat and half expected a picture to crash to the floor, but instead, just a buzzing silence greeted me.

I grabbed my phone but realized the only person I wanted to really call was my mom.

I kept people at a distance for a reason, so it wasn't like I could call any friends, right?

It was always for their own protection.

Or maybe to protect my sanity—because if they knew, they'd probably institutionalize me, right?

Bitterness seeped in like it always did whenever I thought about the people around me and their easy laughs and complete disregard for the lives they'd been gifted with.

Whereas I'd been cursed with fear and a lurking darkness that never fully went away.

I frowned, at least for a few brief moments with Benjamin it had.

I drummed my fingers across the table and noticed the missing nail polish and jewelry.

Yup, I should be institutionalized because when had a guy like that ever gone for someone like me over Hath? And since when did the person I was researching turn into a chance to volunteer for a good one-night stand?

“Hey.” Hath hovered over me with a bowl in one hand. Of course, she had perfectly manicured nails with red polish. She set the bowl down next to a bread basket that I hadn’t even seen her carry in. “I’ve been trying to get your attention for like thirty seconds?”

“What?” I blinked. “Oh, sorry, I just... I think I’m more tired than I realized.”

She shrugged. “No problem, and I’m, um, sorry about Montu back there; he’s been having a rough... century.”

I laughed at her joke. “Sometimes it feels like it’s been that long, am I right?”

“Girl...” Her smile widened. “You have no idea.” She leaned back. “Now, I’ll let you eat in peace.”

“Actually—” I reached for her arm and frowned when my fingers wanted nothing more than to hold on forever and never let go. The hell? “I’d love some company if you... aren’t... busy?”

Her eyes flashed. “Sure, I’ll take my break.”



Within minutes, we'd fallen into easy conversation about the town and all the fun rumors surrounding it. She'd grabbed her glass of wine, and for the first time since my mom had disappeared, I almost felt like I'd come home.

It was a terrifying feeling of contentment that I was almost too afraid to hold on to because I knew it too, would get ripped from me.

One day.

But not tonight.

So, I drank, and I ate, and I listened.

“Oh, and don't even get me started on the rumors about human sacrifices in the woods.” She snorted. “Trust me, the local police are all over it. This town is locked down like you wouldn't believe. Nothing even remotely fun ever happens.”

I pointed my spoon at her. “Not true. You guys have the taffy festival every year.”

She scrunched up her nose. “People fly into the airport at Vancouver from all over the world for that stupid thing—it basically pays for an entire year's worth of this.” She threw her arms up.

“Ah, the current swarm of customers?” I guessed.

“Yup.” She popped the P. “When it's slow, it seems like life's on pause, but when the taffy festival happens, at least we get fresh meat.” Her eyes flashed. “Not that I eat meat. That one hundred percent came out wrong.”

I burst out laughing. “Well, something's very wrong with me if my first assumption is that my new friend's a cannibal.”

“Oh, we’ve got those too.” She winked. “But only during a full moon, and word on the street is it’s the fountain of youth.” She pouted. “If only.”

“Um, you look incredible. I would die for your skin.”

She leaned in. “Would you now?” Her hand reached out to touch mine, her fingertips just grazing me like she was fascinated with the way I felt.

I frowned.

“Hath!” An angry-looking elderly woman stomped out of the kitchen. I blinked in surprise when I recognized her as the woman from the bookstore who had gone out of her way, warning me to take care not to get too close to the mansion. Her white apron was stained with what I hoped wasn’t blood, even though it was red, and she had an honest-to-God machete in her hand.

Halloween apparently came early in the cove.

“Eris,” Hath said her name like a vicious curse. “I was just talking with—”

“Get up.” Eris wiped the machete across her apron and then dropped it into one of the larger front pockets like it was a pack of gum. “You know the rules.” Her angry red hair was tucked under a hairnet, and while extremely short, she seemed more powerful than Hath as she helped her to her feet and gave her a shove toward the kitchen doors. I half expected her to add a kick to the ass.

I quickly diverted my eyes to my soup, not sure what the hell was going on and obviously not wanting to be on the

receiving end of a machete still partially covered in mysterious blood.

“We work here.” Eris sniffed. Her dark eyes blinked slowly. “And I don’t let my employees flirt with the customers no matter how big of a tip they may want.”

“Oh no, no, no. I wasn’t flirting with her. I just wanted company, and she was so nice and—”

She snorted. “Course she was nice. She’s always nice to the pretty ones; it’s what she does, what they all do. If it’s pretty, it deserves kindness; if it’s ugly, you kick it to the street. All of you the same, stupid, can’t see the forest through the trees.” Obviously done with me, she continued mumbling until she was back in the kitchen, and I was once again alone, wondering what the hell sort of place I’d just been transported to.

So familiar and yet so eerie at the same time.

Well, it was said there was always a kernel of truth to rumors and stories.

Guess this was just another example?

I grabbed my purse and pulled out a twenty, but Hath rushed out and handed me the bill. “So sorry about that; she’s just... different.”

“No problem.” I flashed her a smile even though our easy conversation felt suddenly awkward. I quickly read the bill, dropped a twenty onto the table, and made a beeline for the front door.

Air. I suddenly needed air.

And I knew just the place to go; hopefully, they'd still be open.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

*Benjamin*

The orphanage had a way of cheering people up—all sorts of people—maybe that was why I liked to stop by when I was in a foul mood, which was more often than not.

I pulled into the dark parking lot and looked up at the Victorian-style building with its fresh white paint and chipper white picket fence.

That had always been the deal: make it look like utopia, so they forgot that they had no one.

It hadn't worked.

How could it?

Human beings were meant for connection; they were meant for love in its most basic form. Take that away, and it doesn't matter that you paint the house every year or that you have clean clothes and an education.

I could give them everything—and I tried—but it would never replace what they craved.

Money couldn't buy that.

With a sigh, I walked along the rock path and up to the red front door, turning the knob to the left at about the same time it jerked open.

I took a giant step back, giving her a wide berth as always, and as expected, she took one look at me, licked her lips, and moved closer. “Benjamin, you’re out of the house.”

“Have I ever complimented you on your keen insight, Pandora? No?” I crossed my arms, taking a protective stance against her.

Her green eyes briefly flashed as she gripped her white Prada clutch. Her black nails dug into the soft leather, her long red hair seemed to come alive.

“Bad mood?” I poked.

“You seem to bring it out in everyone, Ben. I wonder why,” she said through clenched teeth. “You don’t have to be an ass.”

“Actually, I do. It’s part of my charm. Thought you knew that by now.” I started to sweat as she eyed me up and down. The last thing I needed was Pandora on my bad side—again. Last time hadn’t ended well. “Do you ever find it odd that you kick puppies yet read to sad orphans every chance you get?”

She rolled her eyes. “Always so dramatic,” She leaned in and grazed my chin with one of her long black fingernails. “And I didn’t kick the puppy, Benjamin.” Her lips pressed against my right ear as she whispered, “I ate it.”

She smelled like salt water and bad decisions. “I hope to the gods you don’t tell the kids that story.”

She pulled away with a cruel smile on her face. “Of course not. As you know, children need a mother, and since the

universe refuses to give me a man who is actually worthy, I read them fairy tales.”

“Ah...” I nodded. “Do make sure to skip over the part where the villain almost wins. Wouldn’t want them to get any ideas about who you really are.”

Pandora clenched her teeth and jerked her head away, whipping her red hair through the air as she stomped off without saying another word.

“Why do you always give her shit?” Malcom, one of the older orphans at seventeen, grinned at me; his messy black hair fell over his forehead as he shoved a sucker into his mouth and twirled it around.

“Because she’s annoying.” I held up one finger, then a second. “And because she’s more likely to eat the children than help them.”

Malcom grinned over the sucker. “Who cares as long as she’s hot?”

I made a face. “Don’t be deceived by the good looks. Some of the most dangerous creatures on this planet are the most beautiful things you’ll ever see. Take the colorful tree frogs in the Amazon, for example—”

“I give, I give!” Malcom held up his hands. “Just stop, I beg you. I was studying all day, so I can get a good score on my ACT, and the last thing I need is another piece of useless information — which you’re full of, by the way, you’re like an old man trapped in a young man’s body.”

“Thank you?”

“Why are you here anyway? You haven’t visited in…” His face fell, and he shrugged. “It’s been a while.”

“It’s been a few years,” I answered guiltily. “But I had to take care of some things.”

“Right.” He swallowed and took the sucker out of his mouth, twirling it in his fingers. “Cool. Well, do you need to talk to Mother Brenda?”

“No.” I frowned. “Actually, I was stopping by to see you.”

“Me?” His face lit up.

God, I was such an ass.

He was my favorite—and that was why I hadn’t been back, because one day he would leave here, and everything in my life would be the same.

Always.

“Yeah.” I licked my lips. “Are you still into spying on people for no reason other than sheer boredom’s led you to stalking?”

He barked out a laugh. “All the time. Why? Do you need a rundown on the town gossip? By the way, Hath’s working as a waitress again and threatening to leave Montu, but we all know how that’s gonna end.”

I kept my expression neutral. It wasn’t like we were friends, but I knew why they were fighting—they always fought when the time was close.

Funny how they used to visit and offer their support, but the years hadn’t been kind—not to any of us—so they had given up.



Just like everyone else.

Just like me.

“Hey, you okay?” Malcom reached out.

I jerked away from his touch, uncertain of what it would do to him and unwilling to test my theory. “Yeah, yeah, sorry, just tired. Anyway, it’s nothing like that. There’s just a girl visiting for a while, and she said something about working part-time at the bookstore.”

Malcom’s eyes lit up. “Is she hot?”

“Teenagers,” I muttered. “No, she has a lazy eye, chin hair, and drooled at least twice, but I’m thinking the drooling had more to do with my looks, not hers, you know?”

Malcom grinned wider. “So, she’s hot then.”

I sighed. “She’s...” Visions of her jet-black hair and crystal blue eyes pounded through my blood so hard that I had trouble finding an adequate way to describe her.

She was everything.

But that would give too much away.

She was red in a world of dark and gray.

She was Aphrodite.

She was mine.

“She’s...” I shrugged. “Passable.”

“Suuuuure.” Malcom winked like we’d shared a secret. “And what’s in it for me?”

“Oh nothing, just an excuse for you to see Sarah without looking like a creepy stalker. You do know that people

typically go inside the store, right? They don't just sit outside with binoculars—”

“Hey! That was one time, and I was worried there was an intruder!”

“*You're* the intruder. Sorry to break it to you, and it was a deer.”

Malcom's cheeks turned pink. “Whatever, it was a big deer.”

I held out my hands. “Hey, let's just agree that we both win in this scenario and try to find out more about why this girl is here and who she really is. You know, useful details and try to listen more than you speak. Women typically like that.”

“Says the guy who's been single how long?” Malcom asked.

I grunted out a laugh even though it wasn't funny. I could still feel the blood on my hands, the despair in my soul, the darkness so deep that even a conversation with someone like Malcom didn't help.

“You okay?” Malcom took a step forward.

“Yeah.” I backed up. “I'm just hungry. Thanks for this, Malcom. I appreciate it.”

I turned my back on him, the gravel crunching beneath my shoes just as he shouted out.

“Promise to come by more?”

I froze, guilt building in my chest. “Yeah, Malcom.” I didn't turn around. “I promise.”

*That is, if I don't die soon.*

*Or kill someone.*

*Or end up having to leave for another few years, so I don't raise suspicion.*

“Cool!” Malcom shouted, then the door shut.

With a sigh, I got back into my car and drove straight home.

It was time to sleep.

It was time to dream.

Because time wasn't on my side—and I needed all the time I could get to find the papers in my office.

To find the cure.

To kill the curse before I killed her.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

*Luna*

The moon was bright, the stars even brighter as I walked down Main Street toward the tiny used bookstore.

I'd had so many good memories with my mom here, buying the local taffy, whale watching—and even renting bikes and riding along the coast.

But my favorite memory of all had been when she took me to the bookstore and let me pick out a book.

We hadn't had a lot of money when I was growing up, but every year that we visited, she'd stop at the door, usher me in and say, "Pick the one that speaks to you."

At the time, I thought she was kidding, and then one year, the whispers started—right along with the darkness—and the voices.

And for some reason, that bookstore had been the single place where the whispers seemed to come alive as if begging me to read their story or maybe to set the people inside the binding... free.

I passed the small grocery store and then the city hall. A sleek black Mercedes coup was parked in front, and a woman about my age with her brown hair pulled up into a bun was yelling into her phone and getting inside the car.

After another shriek into the phone, she peeled out of the parking lot and sped past me, only to park right at the bookstore as Sarah, the other part-timer, skipped toward the car.

“Wait!” I called out. “Sarah!”

I was still two blocks away.

The car peeled out again, and they were gone.

With a sigh, I looked around the deserted street. Did everyone close this early on a Monday?

Frowning, I was just about to walk back to the inn when something caught my eye in the woods behind the grocery store.

At first, it looked like a flash of light, but when I stared harder, it was almost like a flame. Panicking, I jogged toward it—the last thing that small town needed was a fire before their huge festival. But more than that, I was compelled to chase after it; my feet moved without me thinking, my brain telling me that we needed to make sure.

That there was something we needed to see.

I made it to the edge of the forest, out of breath. Where the hell had the flame gone? It had been bigger than both of my hands put together—or at least it had appeared to be.

The sweet smell of sugar was almost overpowering as I took another step into the forest.

Maybe the taffy factory was nearby?

A chill ran down my spine when I remembered that the taffy factory was on the other side of town, near Benjamin's haunted mansion. I wrapped my arms around myself as my teeth started to chatter.

The flame was gone, but still, I didn't turn back, and I had no explanation for why I felt the need to just stand there near a stupid tree and wait.

I blinked slowly.

Is that what I was doing?

Waiting for someone or something?

I gave my head a shake and started to turn when the tree to my right caught my eye.

It looked familiar. Then again, how did a tree look familiar? It wasn't like I was a huge hiker when my mom had brought me here. If anything, she always told me to steer clear of the trees. She was always paranoid about wolves and bears. The memory made me hesitate before I shook my head.

But this was too close to town for that, right?

I reached out and pressed my palm against the cool bark and hissed out a curse when my hand came back smoking like I'd just casually put it through a fire. What the hell? I waited for the agony, the burning sensation, and nothing came but a slicing throb that was completely unlike any burn I'd had before.

The acrid scent of burning wood filled the air.

I took a step back, and my hand stopped smoking, as did the tree, but when I looked at the spot where I'd touched on the tree, there was a small circle with what looked like dried blood inside it, and it matched the one currently seared onto my palm.

"Hasn't anyone ever told you not to venture out into the woods alone?" a grumpy male voice barked behind me.

I turned and grimaced. Jasper, the same man who seemed to perpetually smell like he'd taken a dive into a taffy container and forgot to shower. "Sorry, I thought I saw something, my mistake."

"The woods are lovely dark and deep..." He quoted Robert Frost with a half-smile. "You should probably get back to the inn. It's too easy to lose your way."

"What about you?" I asked.

"I know these woods." His face tightened as he exhaled an annoyed breath. "After all, Benjamin owns them."

I blinked in surprise. "All of them?"

Wait, wouldn't that mean he could help me search for my mom? Or give me more answers?

"Yes, all of them." He breezed past me. "It's about to rain again. I'd get a move on."

"But—"

He was still walking deeper into the woods.

"What about you?"

“I need the rain. I need the woods. And I’m not the one trespassing,” he called back and then disappeared behind a tree.

Sure enough, a big fat raindrop made its way onto my cheek, and weirdly enough, when I turned around, I noticed I’d ventured at least fifty feet from the parking lot, not the few steps I’d first thought.

I glanced at the tree one last time and finally made the trek back to the parking lot, getting soaked with each step as I walked back to the inn.

I was completely drenched by the time I made it into my room and yet again exhausted when I collapsed onto my bed.

The throbbing in my hand had stopped the minute I left the woods, but the circle was now burned onto the palm of my hand like a bad omen.

I told myself that it was a coincidence.

Just like I told myself that it wasn’t weird to touch a burning tree.

Just like I told myself my alarm clock didn’t cause sexy dreams about Benjamin.

I’d been around weirdness all my life.

I just hadn’t realized that it could get any weirder.

Welcome to Orca Cove.



## CHAPTER NINE

*Benjamin*

*Oregon Coast, 1664*

*“Benjamin!” Mother ran toward me as I held open my arms; her forest green hair hung down her back in a braid of flowers. I’d been fishing for the last two days, and she always worried I’d drown even though that would be impossible for a Wells. “You’re home!”*

*She collided with me in a hug and kissed my cheek, her amber eyes flashing gold before returning to normal.*

*“Missed you too.” I grinned, and then my smile fell when I realized what she was wearing, it was the ceremonial dress: a simple white with a matching coverlet for her head and large sleeves that almost covered her hands.*

*I felt my knees weaken. “Why are you dressed for a ceremony?”*

*Her eyes lit up with some might take as excitement when really it was trepidation. I knew her well. I was her favorite. The youngest. “Because she’s here! She’s finally returned, and*

*you know what that means! It's your turn, Benjamin. You'll finally meet your match."*

*It was on the tip of my tongue to say I already had, but mother was so excited and nervous that I knew saying that would just make things worse.*

*She reached into the pocket of her skirt, then grabbed my hand, placing the ruby ring against my palm.*

*"Moth—"*

*"It's yours." Tears filled her blue eyes. "And soon it will be your bride's. Now hurry and get dressed. It's a full moon, and the gods are smiling down on you!"*

*My stomach tied itself into continuous knots as she spoke, and when she returned to the house, I nearly sank to my knees and roared in anger.*

*The Matchmaker wasn't supposed to be back for another century.*

*Why now?*

*"I thought I had time," I whispered to myself.*

*I thought we had time.*

*I thought maybe I would be forgotten.*

*Skipped over.*

*But I wasn't a peasant—I was more prince than pauper, the soon-to-be ruler of my entire clan—and one day, the Spring Court would call my name, and I would gain a crown on my head. I would be protector of the orcas, protector of the lands we'd been given, guardian of it all.*

*And in order to unlock my family's centuries of power—I had to be matched.*

*I sucked in a sharp breath when I heard footsteps behind me.*

*I would know her footsteps anywhere.*

*Her breathing.*

*Her smell.*

*The very way she carried herself without having to look.*

*I knew because she was mine.*

*She would always be mine.*

*“You heard,” I whispered, hanging my head.*

*“I did.” Her voice was like a jolt to my heart.*

*I squeezed my eyes shut. “We’ve prayed to the gods, made the necessary sacrifices—go and say one more prayer, love.”*

*Her hand touched my back, and then I knew she was gone.*

*Another sacrifice would be made.*

*Another strangled prayer sent to the gods.*

*Because I could be matched to anyone—and I couldn’t stand the idea of eternity without her touch—without her kiss.*

*I pretended to smile at my family members as I made my way through the large homestead.*

*Once I was ready, I looked in the mirror—something I always despised because I knew my eyes gave too much away. Anyone could practically learn everything about my soul without ever even asking my name or my thoughts.*

*My mother said it was a gift.*

*I thought it more of a curse. Chronically wearing my emotions on my sleeve was so painfully vulnerable for me and uncomfortable for others. Some people refused to make eye contact with me, fearing they would somehow lose their soul to my darkness. Rumors ran rampant that I was a soul eater, which was ridiculous, but when someone came from power, people made up stories to explain why they needed a logical justification for what we had, and sometimes I thought it made the locals feel better.*

*My forest green hair was tied at the nape of my neck, my black boots polished up to my knees, and my black and red cape was tied around my black jacket on my shoulders.*

*I half expected a crown to sprout from my head.*

*I snapped my fingers, causing a blue flame to appear above my palm, the flame flickered in the mirror.*

*“Matchmaker, Matchmaker, your will be done but just this once...” The flame grew higher. “Make the daughter of Winter and me one.”*

*The flame burst from my palm, sending little pieces of blue out the window, the prayer said, the message sent. Now all I could do was hope.*

*Hours later, both mothers stood on either side of the fire while the Matchmaker danced between them, holding her hands toward the moon.*

*And then I saw her, my moon, my stars, my sky. Her black hair was plaited down her back, and since she was one of the maidens from the Damanta clan—daughter of the Winter*

*Court—she wore a simple white dress, her corset tight, a white hooded cloak covering most of her.*

*The other clans were also present, and of course, every representative from the High Court, my father included.*

*Summer, Spring, Autumn, and Winter.*

*They each stood, their white hair twisted ‘round their heads like crowns, each of them in gold cloaks while soldiers in black armor surrounded them.*

*One day I would stand there.*

*I just prayed to the gods it would be with my love by my side.*

*What was the point of having power if you didn’t have love?*

*My father would disagree since his match with my mother was with a lesser clan, but the Matchmaker had promised beautiful children beyond his wildest imagination.*

*My brother and I were proof of that promise. I had been five when one of the townsfolk got on his knees and prayed to me like a god.*

*And I was seven when I realized I could grant his wish.*

*The sound of a drum filled the silence.*

*We would begin now.*

*The Matchmaker closed her eyes. When she opened them, they were white as she stared into the fire, the flames licking higher and higher until one snaked out and wrapped around my hand, holding me in place.*

*The mating flame from my wrist pulsed and burned, sensing me, knowing me. It hissed before stretching out toward the maidens, toward her.*

*I went still.*

*Then watched in horror as it wrapped around one of the female's wrists, jerking her forward and causing her hood to fall back.*

*But it wasn't my love.*

*It was worse.*

*It was her sister, Morana.*

I jolted awake at exactly three a.m., sweat pouring off me in waves as I tossed the covers away from my shaky body.

I stripped off the silk pajama pants and stomped over to the window, and when I jerked the curtains open, the roses were once again in bloom.

But of course they were, because no matter how strong the curse, nature must acknowledge the birthright.

And the power.

And what better way to worship the Prince of Spring? Than to bloom during the end of summer?

The roses stretched toward my bedroom window in worship. I could feel their excitement, their love for me.

And I wanted to hate them.

But I couldn't.

Never.

If anything, I hated myself because they were just as trapped, just as cursed every single time this happened.

I nodded my head down at them and could feel their sigh of relief that I'd noticed.

They didn't see me slide powerless to the floor as my wrists burned with the same cursed fire from that night.

The gold lines twisted and burned around my wrists like a braided bracelet, one that would one day match the one on my head—except that had never happened, and I was beginning to think it never would.

Had I known then that my decisions would cost this—would I have still done what I had?

Would I still have taken her?

Rejected the Matchmaker?

Would I have still run, abandoning everything for love?

My heart said yes.

My head said nothing was worse than this prison.

A knock sounded on my door.

“Yes,” I rasped.

Jasper poked his head around the door and stared at my wrists with a sour expression. “It seems to be happening faster this time.”

“I wouldn't know,” I grumbled. I had no way to hide them from him anyway. “Since I never remember anything past this part.”

“That's what I'm for.” He shrugged.

“And yet every time you say that nothing changes, nothing’s different. I can’t believe that it’s always the same, always ending with death and blood.”

He sighed and stepped into the room. “The beginning and the end are all that matters, Benjamin. The middle may change depending on your choices, but you’ve made every choice there is to make, and the ending still drips in blood, so why does it matter that you kiss her under a tree first? Or that you meet her at a concert? Or that you fuck in the forest? One day this will end.”

I glared. “What makes you so confident after centuries?”

“It must,” he said simply. “Besides, you should be punished, and you know it. You pissed off the gods.”

“They piss me off on a daily basis. We should be even by now.”

“Mind your tongue,” he whispered, then gave me his hand to help me to my feet.

I took it and instantly felt better, greedily taking some of his energy because I would need it to get through the day—I would need it to fight any sort of attraction I had for her.

Or her death would be on my hands.

Again.

Fuck my life.



## CHAPTER TEN

*Jasper*

He was asking too many questions again.

Always with the questions.

Jasper paced back and forth in the basement as he grabbed the ancient text and opened it to the spell.

He cut along his palm and let three drops of blood spill over the water in the glass jar.

The smell of the sea filled the air instantly, making him want to gag, not because of the smell but because of what it represented: Death itself. “I was sleeping.”

“He’s fully awake.”

“Of course he is. I can smell his arousal for her from miles away. It is happening faster.”

“Yes. His wrists are already bound with those pretty little braid tattoos.”

“He will fight it.”

“He always does.” Jasper sighed and stared into the water. A flicker of red hair appeared in the dark depths of the glass as

he looked into the sea itself. “The problem is that he gets smarter every time, closer every damn time.”

She chuckled. “That’s your problem. We all have our jobs, Jasper. Your life is tied to mine. Ergo, make it work, and I’ll make it worth your while.”

Jasper nearly hit the glass jar in all his excitement. “You mean you’ll heal her? Finally?”

“I’ve kept her alive this long, haven’t I?”

“Yes, but—”

“Am I not a benevolent witch?”

She was such a bitch, but he needed her. “Yes, my lady.”

“Everyone wins the more time she spends with him—is she returning to the house?”

“Today, I believe.”

“Good. Make sure that all the windows are closed, no fresh air, and turn up the heat—the literal heat, you idiot. Her sweat will pump out enough pheromones to drive him mad with lust; they’ll be in bed together by tonight.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because I’m a beautiful woman, that’s how, and I know how sensual he is—he’ll never last.”

Jasper let out the breath he’d been holding in. “And this time, you’ll—”

“Let’s cross that bridge when we get there. We still have a few weeks ahead of us that will be tedious, but yes, you’ve served well.”

“Thank you.”

“This should be fun. Let the bloodshed begin.” She laughed again. She loved toying with people. She got off on watching others suffer, especially the one man she could never have, though Jasper had stopped reminding her since the last time he said something about her jealousy, she’d tried to impale him with an anchor.

The drops of blood disappeared completely from the water as if they were never there to begin with. And Jasper set about making sure they were ready for their guest. After all, it would be rude to be inhospitable to Luna with all she’d been through.

He grinned the entire trek back up the stairs.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

*Luna*

It was official—small-town coffee shops were better than any Starbucks back in the city. I had proof in my right hand. After leaving the inn at the crack of dawn, I decided to stop off at The Bean and grab a latte and muffin, both of which had me feeling about a million times better than I'd felt the day before.

I still couldn't figure out where all the exhaustion came from other than the insane thought that maybe I'd been more awake in my dream than I realized, meaning I hadn't actually gone into REM?

Orca Cove Books was next door, so it was an easy call to make as I slowly climbed the three blue stairs and opened the door. The little bell went off as I stepped inside, and the smell of books was like coming home, causing me to inhale a few times before relaxing and taking a real look around.

Books lined the walls from floor to ceiling with a few wood shelves in between, new books organized on the very top with cute pens and stationery for sale next to them.

The main desk was next to a reading nook and fireplace; it had a little bell and stickers to purchase, plus free homemade

cookies.

It was warm and inviting and everything a bookstore should be.

“Aghhhhh!” Sarah let out a shriek dropping the stack of books she’d been carrying as she rounded the corner and nearly ran into me. She took a moment and caught her breath. “I’m so sorry I didn’t hear the bell.”

“I’m the sorry one!” I bent down and started picking up old copies of *Twilight* and *Midnight Sun* by Stephanie Meyer, smiling. “I loved these.”

“Ugh, and it takes forever in small towns. I had to wait a week for *Midnight Sun*.” Her blond hair was pulled back into two tight braids, her nose scrunched up, bringing attention to the smatter of freckles on her nose. With her light blue eyes, she almost looked Nordic. “Thanks for helping with these.”

“No problem.” I set them on the counter by a sign that read “New Arrivals” and then reached for my coffee again. “I was just stopping by to see when you needed me to work.”

“Oh, duh!” She rolled her eyes. “Sorry, I probably should have texted you yesterday when I went over the schedule, but my mom got pissed about a boy I’ve been crushing on... something about him being from a bad family, which is ridiculous since he doesn’t even know who his parents are and really it’s not his fault he’s an orphan and—” She stopped and covered her mouth. “Sorry, I know I talk way too much. You don’t need to know about my family drama. Plus, my mom is a total witch.”

My heart clenched. “I know it’s hard but take it easy on her; she’s probably just being protective. One day you’ll appreciate that.”

She took a deep breath. “I know you’re probably right, but I’m still annoyed with her.”

“As is your right as a teenager.” I winked.

“Thank you.” She laughed and then reached behind the cash register pulling out a sheet of pink paper. “Okay, if you have a few hours now, I can show you the ropes, not that it’s rocket science, and then you can start tomorrow? We pay you for your training, and everything’s pretty easy, but some of the usuals tend to pop in just to chat, so I’ll need to give you a quick rundown since they don’t like strangers. There’s a way to each and every one of their hearts. It just takes the right subject.”

“I think I can handle it.” I noticed a small trash can and tossed my empty cup in. “Let’s get started then.”

“Sure thing!” She moved behind the cash register. “Let’s start with this old beast, and then we can move on to more fun things like where the vampire section is and why it’s my favorite in the store.”

“Ah, vampires, huh?” I smiled. “You like the idea of getting your blood sucked?”

“Um, no, I like the idea of Anne Rice’s Interview with a Vampire and Brad Pitt.”

“Huh, I had you pegged for more of a Zac Efron sort of girl.”

Her eyes widened. “I would die if he ever did a vampire movie. You would literally have to bury my body under the bookstore and put on my tombstone, ‘died from too much hotness.’ Oh, and ‘PS bitten by Zac Efron.’”

“Fucking Zac Efron,” a male voice sounded as the bell went off and the door opened.

Sarah’s eyes widened. “How much did you hear, Mal?”

“Enough to know I hate Zac Efron and Brad Pitt right now.” A good-looking guy about Sarah’s age ran his hands through his messy dark hair and winked.

Sarah’s cheeks went completely red.

“Hi.” I smiled. “I’ll just introduce myself while she gets over your hair flip.”

He burst out laughing. “It’s a gift, flustering my Sarah.” He held out his hand. “Malcom, close friends call me Mal, and when I say close, I mean only Sarah since she’s the lone person who puts up with me.”

“He knows he’s hot. It’s a problem.” Sarah finally snapped out of it.

“I own a mirror—” He shook my hand and then panned back to Sarah. “Speaking of, what’s with the braids? You know that just makes me want to pull them, right?”

Her blush was back.

“Damn, you’re dangerous to hormonal teens.” Something was vaguely familiar about him, but I couldn’t really figure out why.

He bowed. “Thank you, and what was your name again?”

“Oh, I’m sorry!” I moved to Sarah’s side. “I’m working here part-time while I do some research in town.”

It wasn’t a total lie, and the last thing I needed was more people thinking I was crazy for arriving with a mom who I now can’t locate.

“What kind of research?”

“Nosy much?” Sarah threw a pencil at him.

“What?” He held up his hands. “I’m curious by nature.”

“It’s okay.” I touched Sarah’s arm. “Locals tend to not trust newbies.” I turned to Malcom. “And for your information, I’m studying the haunted Wells mansion; it’s kind of like a project for college.”

“Ugh, place gives me the creeps.” Sarah shuddered, but Malcom said nothing, just stared at me a bit longer, and then shrugged like it wasn’t a big deal.

Maybe it wasn’t?

“Did you need something other than getting in your morning flirting?” Sarah changed the subject. “We were just training.”

“Can I watch?” he asked and pulled out a chair. “I swear I won’t say a word, and I won’t stare at Sarah’s ass—much—and I’ll read a book on feminism.”

I shook my head. “Does he realize he just contradicted himself?”

“He’s a straight-A student, so I think he does it on purpose.” Sarah pointed to one of the worn brown leather armchairs. “Go over there, and if you hide my signed



Midnight Sun copy again, I'm going to murder you in your sleep."

"Would your hands be around my neck? Or would you be straddling me? Holding a pillow?"

"Ignore him." Sarah waved him off. "All right, so the register..."

Malcom went and sat while she talked, and true to his word, he started reading, completely ignoring us as if we weren't even there.

"Hey," I whispered. "Is that the boy your mom doesn't like?"

Her shoulders slumped forward. "Yeah."

I elbowed her. "Well, not that it matters since I'm only a little bit older than you, but I approve."

Her eyes lit up. "Really?"

"There's arrogance that truly believes no one can compare, and there's arrogance that puts on a front just to see the girl he likes smile and shove him into oncoming traffic. He's the latter."

Her smile was huge. "I like him as much as I hate him."

"Love, what a complicated thing."

"Oh, I don't..." She bit down on her bottom lip. "Just don't tell my mom."

"Pinky swear." I winked and held out my hand.

"Pinky swear." She laughed, wrapped her pinky around mine, and then quickly withdrew her hand. "Okay, now back

to training.”

She didn't see my smile fall at the mention of her mom.

Just like nobody heard my heart break the minute, I lost mine to this small town.

It reminded me of how lonely I really was—and it made me think of one guy who could take it all away.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

*Benjamin*

I sensed her before I saw her.

I knew I would.

And for the first time in years, rather than write down every damn thing in my journal like I always did—I took voice notes on my phone: about how I felt, about the bindings on my wrists, about the roses, and then this afternoon about the way the stairs stopped creaking as I walked down them.

The house knew, and I wondered if Luna would notice that the dust was gone, replaced with a glossy sheen on every single windowsill.

That the stairs looked repaired despite their age.

That the entire house seemed to pull itself back to life, that rather than pretending to be dying a slow, cursed death—it had regenerated as it sensed the power inside it.

As it hoped that this would be the time.

Even though I knew it wouldn't be.

It never would.

She was near the gate; I could sense her rapid heartbeat, could hear her soft intake of breath like she was just seeing the mansion for the first time when I knew it did that to everyone, almost like they knew it was different, almost holy, but their human brains couldn't explain how or why just that it was.

I walked to the massive door, passing the library as the house almost exhaled in relief.

Because she was here.

She was home.

Too bad her home would soon be her grave.

I tugged on the collar of my black dress shirt as a bead of sweat ran down my back into my black trousers. Who the hell had turned the heat up?

I was just about to yell at that idiot Jasper when the doorbell rang.

"I've got it." I'd meant for my words to be loud; instead, they came out in a harsh, foreboding whisper as I reached for the doorknob and opened the door wide.

I'd prepared myself for this moment when I would see her again and have to pretend to hate her with every fiber of my being, but my fucking heart wasn't listening to my head as it pounded out of my chest at the sight of her.

Always. It was always like this when I saw her, every time, not just the first or even the last. It was *always* like this.

Our eyes locked.

She licked her bottom lip.

I let out a low growl. That lip was mine, damn it. How dare she lick it in front of me? MINE!

I gripped the doorframe, my fingers turning white. “You’re late.”

Her blue eyes widened. “I’m sorry, I wasn’t sure what time we actually decided on so—”

“It’s fine,” I said in a clipped voice.

When she didn’t move, I arched a brow in her direction.

She swallowed slowly, her eyes drinking me in, dilating as her heart most likely caught up with mine and introduced itself as mates.

With an irritated sigh, I gave her my back so I wouldn’t maul her and strip her naked against the door for all the world to see. “Come on.”

Her perfume floated in the air around me as my body tensed. I was prepared for this. I wasn’t even human. I could control my urges, just like I controlled my heart and my mind.

I was the epitome of control.

And then I opened the library door, and all hell broke loose as a wave of heat hit me square in the chest.

I turned to yell at her to run when she swept past me, the damage already done as sweat started to bead around her forehead, and she fanned her face. “Was your plan for me to get too hot to work?”

I gulped.

The plan... what was the plan?

She fanned herself again and smiled. “Maybe you should call someone to look at the AC?”

“Right,” I whispered hoarsely as I pulled out my cell and sent a quick text to Jasper.

Ben: AC broken call someone immediately or I’m killing you.

He wrote back right away.

Jasper: They can’t come until later this evening, stay hydrated and stop being so dramatic...

“Done.” I shoved the phone back into my pocket. “So, the section right over there has basically everything you’ll need when it comes to information on the house and the town. Most of it will bore you to tears, so I imagine when you’re done reading and organizing, you won’t be back.”

Luna’s face fell. I hated that I had to push her away almost as much as I hated that I couldn’t pull her close and stay that way forever. “Well, I figured I could probably organize all the books. I am working at a bookstore; you may as well alphabetically—”

I held up my hand. “I’m only helping you out of guilt, not because I want you in my house for the next three weeks while you uncover every dirty secret of the Wells family and publish it in your little college paper.”

“Little paper, huh?” She put her hands on her hips. Had she always looked this young? Then again, any sane person would think I was no more than twenty-five, so I really had no leg to stand on. “Huh, and here I thought Jasper was the rude one.”

“Jasper’s an ass.”

Her eyebrows shot up. “Just Jasper?”

I felt like shit being so short with her, but I couldn't even think straight with her standing so close. It was like breathing in waves and waves of sex on repeat until all I could think about was peeling her clothes off and fucking her against the wall until she screamed my name.

The need to have sex was... impossibly strong.

Blinding.

How would I survive this?

How had I ever survived this?

*That's why you end up killing her, idiot.*

A sobering truth.

I let out a grunt and gave her my back. "I have work to do."

And that was it.

I closed my mouth, tried to breathe through my nose in short, shallow inhalations, and went to the opposite end of the room to read through yet another book that would most likely give me zero information on how to break the Matchmakers curse.

With a small sigh, she went to her side of the room, toward the musty stack of books that I hadn't yet had a chance to look through. She pulled out her phone and set it on the ground next to her, stretched her arms high over her head, and started to hum.

Humming, she was humming.

Had she not gotten the message that I was annoyed by her?

That I needed her to stay far away before I loved her—and then hurt her?

My heart clenched at the word love, and a shooting pain ran from my temple down my arm.

The pain I always remembered.

Because that was what curses did, they left you with the remnants of darkness, then reminded you over and over again what the light was like—and what you would never fucking have.

With a grumble, I pulled open the first book on the Fae of Ireland that I could find and started to read as the room continued its descent into hell.

*“The Matchmaker was one of the most powerful Fae in existence. Some say she was from the Unseelie Court; others claim she was from the Winter Court because she fell in love with King Arian—but nobody knows how old she actually is. She was promoted to Matchmaker when one of the King’s eldest Matchmakers, Lucina, died—”*

“Hit me baby one more time,” Luna started to sing—badly—as she started dancing while she looked over books, her shoulders moving like she was listening to her own personal song.

“Save Britney,” I muttered under my breath, trying like hell not to be amused or aroused as she started shimmying and picking up her next book.

I stopped everything, nearly dropping what I was reading when she gasped, her mouth moving as her finger went across like she found something interesting.



Why the hell did I care?

But I did.

So, I stared.

And I waited.

“Hey...” She didn’t turn around. “This book says that this house has been in your family for centuries but that it’s...” She finally looked over her shoulder. “Alive?”

I snorted out a laugh that I hoped was believable. “Houses aren’t people.”

No, our houses were something else entirely...

An entity.

Part of me.

Part of her.

A prison fit for royalty.

She frowned, crossed her arms, and smiled what I assumed was supposed to be for seductive purposes. “I’m all for testing that theory if you are.”

More sweat found its way down my back. “I’ve lived here for a while. Don’t you think I would know? Trust me, the stories are interesting, but like I said, you won’t find any—”

She was already on her feet. “Look.” She pointed to the fireplace. “It’s the same as in the picture, and it says if you introduce yourself and it finds you worthy, a flame will reach out and touch you—without burning you.”

I sighed. “Witchcraft at its finest. Please, gods, tell me you aren’t one of those people.”

I kept my expression passive as she chewed her bottom lip.  
“What do you mean?”

*Stop staring at her lips, jackass.* “A person who believes in things that are unseen?”

Her expression fell, and even though I was burning up like I had a fever, a chill ran down my spine. What had she experienced? And why was she suddenly so pale?

“Let’s just say I’ve lived a short albeit interesting life where there are things I can’t explain,” she finally murmured, her eyes not quite meeting mine before she looked toward the fire. “And I’m curious by nature.”

“Curiosity often gets people killed,” I said in a low voice.

She snapped the book shut, stood, and marched over to the fire. “A little burn isn’t going to kill me, Benjamin.”

My name on her lips.

The library groaned on my behalf as I imagined what it would feel like to have her say it again and again while I held her naked against me while she begged me.

“You never know...” I swallowed against the thickness in my throat. “...what fire is capable of.”

I may not remember the details of every reoccurrence.

But I always remembered the first death.

Her first death.

*“Benjamin!” She screamed my name until her voice was hoarse. I’d begged the Matchmaker, along with the Kings of each court, to allow me to do it. If she was going to suffer, it would be at my hands.*

*Because it was my fault.*

*I wielded the fire over the palm of my hand; it flickered between blue and orange as it twisted over my fingertips.*

*Tears streamed down her face as she suddenly fell silent and watched with horror on her face.*

*Her jet-black hair was matted to her cheeks from the constant sobs—we'd gotten caught—we'd known the risks, but still, we had run.*

*Love... demands mighty things from those it afflicts.*

*And now, love was demanding her death.*

*"Wait for me." She leveled her chin.*

*My eyes burned amber as I flicked my wrist out; the fire stretched, lighting up the wood beneath her feet, then twisting around her body until, with one final look into her eyes, diving into her chest.*

*Burning her heart before she could take her next breath.*

*And because she was from the Winter Court, rather than turn to ash, ice replaced what had once been burned, and there she stayed, frozen, dead, and I was the one who had done it to her.*

"Benjamin?" Luna was right in front of me. "You've been staring into the flames for the last five minutes while I've been asking if you're okay."

"Apologies." The word came out gruffer than I wanted. And her proximity caused such a blood lust to erupt that I was having trouble keeping tamped down—trouble keeping the glamour that she was so used to in place.

Maybe that was what I needed to do—scare the shit out of her and show her what I really looked like—what she really was.

What we both were.

I'm sure I probably did it in the past, pissed and trying to find a way to be with her despite all the reasons I couldn't, despite the curse that bound our hearts and souls together.

“It's okay.” She reached for me.

I jerked away, not missing the way her face fell at my rejection.

It was necessary.

She should be on her knees thanking me for keeping my hands to myself. Hell, now I was imagining her on her knees. I was already painfully hard.

It was going to be a long day.

I winced and stared at the flames again as they licked higher and higher.

“I'm thirsty,” she whispered.

I frowned and turned around. “Do I look like your servant?”

“Please?” She licked those damn lips again, and I forgot what I was even supposed to be doing. Hell, I'd have trouble finding my way home at this point. “Just a bit of water? I promise I'll be prepared next time and try not to annoy you.”

I grunted out a stern, “I'll be right back.”

She beamed like I'd just bought her an island or something.

And in my muddled, lust-filled brain, I didn't think about the consequences of me leaving that room.

Or the possibilities.

I quickly grabbed a bottle of water from my study next door, and when I came back into the library, it was to see her reach into the flames.

"I'm Luna." She hesitated briefly.

I dropped the bottle of water and ran, wishing to the gods my powers were completely unlocked.

Always out of time.

Never able to save her.

Her life flashed before me.

We hadn't had enough time.

And now she would die.

I'd known this version of her for less than two days.

And I would be too late.

The fire licked higher and higher, its angry orange flames exploding in front of her face.

"Luna!" I screamed her name as the fire completely engulfed her and then swirled around her wrists thirteen times before going completely out.

Her face was covered in soot, her blue eyes wide as she shakily looked down at her hands.

And on her wrists, two bands of silver wrapped around her skin, creating a snowflake tattoo that linked like a bracelet around her wrist.

The claiming of the Winter Court.

The fire hadn't destroyed her.

The fire should have killed her—Spring fire always killed the Winter—turned it to ice.

So why the hell was she still standing there?

“What just happened?” She collapsed to her knees, her hands trembling, “What’s this on my skin?”

I tried to look impassive, but my heart was damn near thudding outside of my chest.

This felt different.

And just like that, hope started to bloom where it had been dead for centuries, hope that this wouldn't end with her blood on my hands.

Hope, what a dangerous thing to have.

A knock sounded on the library door before it opened. I shoved her behind me as Jasper walked in, eyes narrowing. “Did you hear that?”

“The knock? Yes, it was loud. Consider me annoyed.” I smirked. “Did you need something, Jasper, or can I seduce this woman without your prying eyes?”

One eyebrow shot up in surprise. “Seduce?”

“That was the idea, and then you came stomping in here with a sour look on your face, and gods, man, would it kill you to wear something other than black?”

He glared from behind his glasses. “Yes, it just might.”

“So, if I send you a red sweater...”

“I’ll burn it,” he said in an irritated voice.

“You’re in a good mood.” I held Luna behind me even though it was killing me to touch her, even though my fingertips pulsed with her energy, her life force, her love.

The usual pain that hit my temples at the very thought of love was gone; I almost sagged in relief but didn’t want Jasper asking questions, didn’t even want him looking at her, which also felt new.

He was my keeper. Why the hell was I suddenly suspicious of him?

His eyes narrowed in my direction. “Is she staying for dinner, then?”

I held his gaze. “Not tonight.”

I could tell he wanted to peer around me, wanted to ask questions he had no business asking. Already my control was barely hanging on by a thread. I was torn between wanting to ask him why the sweet smell he always had was getting stronger and stronger and wanting to lock her in a room and throw away the key so I didn’t hurt her.

So history didn’t repeat itself.

“All right, I’ll just leave you to your... books.” He snarled the last word and clicked the door shut.

“I don’t feel very good,” Luna said from behind me.

Shit.

I’d been touching her that whole time.

I quickly pulled away. Already her color was better, her blue eyes not as dull, her skin shinier.

Without laying a finger on her, I locked eyes and whispered, “You should rest—come back tomorrow.”

Her eyes dilated and then nearly closed as she swayed toward me. I was careful not to touch her; at this rate I was going to need to wear leather gloves to keep from siphoning anything from her.

“Yeah.” Her brow furrowed. “That’s— that’s a good idea. This was probably all just a really weird dream, right? The fire? The way your eyes just went so amber like that, the green hair—”

The hell?

I pressed my lips in a fine line. “You’re right, Luna, all a dream; you’ve probably been having a lot of them since visiting the house—I did warn you.”

Her shoulders slumped. “You did—but the darkness has been quiet since coming here. That’s nice.” She yawned.

I stiffened. “Darkness? What darkness?”

She waved me off. “The dark voice. It’s mean, it’s... a woman, I think?” She looked at me in confusion. “That’s all I can remember.”

Shit, if a shadow was following her... this was bad.

I don’t remember a shadow spell being part of the curse.

Then again, it could be multiple things.

The only deity that was powerful enough and still lived in this realm was the Sea Witch, but she was usually too busy staring at her damn mirrors all day to do anything productive like haunt someone.



I wanted to ask Jasper, but something about the way he had looked at both of us made me want to tuck her away from him.

Why?

Why was I doubting the man who worked for me? For my family? Why was I doubting his loyalty when he'd only ever been good?

Luna yawned again.

She was dead on her feet.

My fault.

If I kept touching her without actually having sex with her—she'd be in a coma in days.

And I'd be back to square one—again.

"I'll drive you back to the inn," I whispered. "Take the book with you."

Her eyes drooped even more. "Couldn't read if I wanted to."

"It's the house," I said lamely—when everyone but Luna knew... it was me, it was always me.

"Weird house," she agreed and then stumbled past me.

I didn't catch her like I wanted, just followed her out the door as she started walking toward downtown.

Apparently, I wasn't driving; I was just following, making sure no shadows or gods lurked.

She walked slowly for a mile until she reached the inn.

Hath was at registration when I opened the door for Luna. She took one look at us and glared.

That glare was all for me.

“She’s tired,” I explained.

“Wonder why,” she countered with a sneer.

“Hungry?” I snapped.

She bared her teeth, licking the sudden protruding fangs. “Actually, I could take a bite out of something that tastes like flowers; care to volunteer?”

I scoffed. “I do not taste like flowers.”

She just shrugged like she was already bored with the conversation. “You’re like your own rose garden, almost too sweet but salty enough.”

I growled.

She just laughed and reached for Luna at about the same time Luna tipped over into her arms.

“Take care of her,” I barked.

Hath’s eyes locked on mine. “I always take care of them. You shouldn’t even have to ask anymore.”

“I ask because I forget.”

“And you forget because you’re an idiot,” she snapped, lifting Luna into her arms, and leaving me abandoned in the lobby as she carried her up the stairs.

Pretty soon the entire town would be pissed at me.

Again.

I shoved my hands in my pockets as I went down the white steps of the inn. The streets weren’t very busy, people were just getting off work, and kids were already home from school.

A few teens drove by in a large truck swerving around a small red Honda.

Honking occurred.

It was so damn normal it was comedic.

Because Orca Cove? Anything but normal.

By the time I made it back to my own house I was just as exhausted as Luna. I wondered how long it would take me to snap.

How long it would take before I took her in my arms and stripped her naked, damning us both to Hell.

My only hope lay in the bands around her wrists.

And I clung to it like an idiot.

Because it was all I had.

I made it to the top of my stairs and instantly wished I had a laminated map of each curse so I knew what was new and what was old.

“It’s been a while.” Aengus smiled; his hair was green like mine used to be, his eyes a lighter amber. I snapped my fingers, letting the glamour fall between us.

We were standing back in the forest.

He was in leather pants and a tight shirt with combat boots, his forest green hair pulled away from his face, his amber eyes burning.

“Has it?” I inspected my fingernails, hating that he looked powerful. That should have been me.

Instead, I’d made my choice.

And I was still paying for it.

He let out a grunt and kicked the dirt with his boot. “I forgot. You don’t remember... anything in between.”

I clenched my teeth. “Then maybe you should help clarify if you’ve ever visited me during a reoccurrence?”

His eyes flashed. “I’ve never had a reason to.” He swallowed slowly. “Until now.”

I frowned. “What’s so different about now?”

“The forest shook...” He looked guilty. Why the hell did he look guilty? “The Matchmaker finally returned.”

Dread trickled down my spine. “And?”

“All bets are off.”

“What the hell does that mean?” I roared.

“All these years—and finally, this part of the curse is lifted, not by your own doing, but by hers.”

I was still confused. “The Matchmaker?”

“No, you idiot, Luna.” He crossed his bulky arms. “She touched the fire, and it accepted her, which means only one thing.”

“Get. There. Faster.” I took a menacing step toward him.

His smirk had me daydreaming about choking him to death. “You’re not the only one who wants to align the courts—and every single male, me included, now has a chance—the mist between the realms has lifted.”

“A chance?”

“To win the Winter Moon.” He shot me a cocky grin. “To seduce and marry Luna Damanta, to finally right the wrong and give the Damanta family our alliance.”

“No.” I shook my head. It was impossible. She was still cursed. “No. She’s mine!”

He barked out a laugh. “Not anymore.”

I charged him.

But he disappeared into the mist.

I narrowly missed a tree and then started punching it over and over again; bark flew all around me, and the tree cracked in half after my last punch.

Mine.

She was mine.

And I was going to claim her before anyone else could.

A small voice in the back of my head told me it was wrong—that it would kill her, but I would rather die than see her in my brother’s arms.

And just like that, I realized the curse was in full effect because tomorrow, I would kiss her.

I would touch her.

I would damn us both.

Just to keep her mine.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

*Luna*

I yawned as I turned on my side and stared at the red digits on the clock. It was three a.m.? I vaguely remembered the fire, Benjamin walking me back, Hath carrying me, and then sleep.

Glorious sleep without any nightmares.

A smile teased my lips. No, the nightmares weren't there, but the heat had been. The heat from Benjamin's stare.

The heat from that library.

I let out a deep moan thinking about the way his hands touched me, and as if he was there, I reached my hands over my head, stretching like a satisfied cat after a hot meal.

Mine.

Where did that word come from?

Did it even matter?

It's what he was?

My wrists burned as I twisted my hands over my head, then dropped them into my lap and looked at the clock again.

I had a few more hours to sleep.

But I should probably set my alarm, so I woke up on time for the bookstore; the minute my fingers touched the top of the clock, they stuck like glue.

And the same thing that had happened the night before happened again, but this time I paid more attention to the way the clock seemed to turn to a black mist as the room around me spun until I was lying on the forest ground staring up at the sky, my hands behind my head, a piece of grass in my mouth.

“Thought I’d find you here,” the deep voice said.

With a frown, I sat up. The man had his green hair pulled back into a low ponytail, the sides were shaved on his head, and he had amber eyes that seemed to glow more and more the bigger his perfect white smile got.

He reminded me of Benjamin.

“Do I know you?” I asked politely.

“You did. You do.” He shrugged and then pointed down beside me. “This seat taken?”

I patted the spot. “It is now.”

“I always did like you, Luna.”

“You have me at a disadvantage. You know my name, but I don’t know yours, nor do I remember you or this forest.”

“Memories are so fickle anyway.” He grinned. “It’s like wishing for rain when the sun beats down like hell—in the moment, all you can focus on is the pain, the need for water, later when you’re finally sated, the memory is always skewed; it’s never as bad as it really was. Our brain chooses to focus on whatever it wants; the point I’m making is, does it truly matter

if you remember me or my name? Can't we just exist right now, in this moment?"

I scooted closer to him. "It's more curiosity since I woke up in clothes I didn't recognize in a place I can barely remember with someone who seems to be familiar with me."

He just laughed. "I used to pull your hair. Often."

"Say what?" I frowned.

"You annoyed me," he said slowly. "Like the little sister I never wanted but was somehow gifted with—but Benjamin, he never saw you as a sister, and now I see why." His eyes raked over me in a way that said the last thing he saw was his sister; he was absolutely predatory. "One wish."

"What?" He knew Benjamin? What the hell was going on?

"I'll give you one wish if you grant me what I want, right here, in this forest."

"No," I said quickly as the hair on my arms stood up on end. "I think that's a bad idea."

And I couldn't explain why, except something told me that he'd trick me or manipulate me, and the last thing I wanted was to get trapped in this weird dream forever.

"It's not a dream," he said like he could read my mind. "It's a flash of what was, what could be again. It's frozen—just like you."

"I'm not frozen."

"You were very much frozen, my dear." His smile was sad. "But let's not talk about the past. It hardly matters now that



you've touched the fire, now that you have the ice around your wrists."

I stared down at the interconnected silver snowflakes, like a tattoo on my skin. "What are they?"

"Grant me one thing, and I'll tell you."

I sighed. "What's your one thing?"

The corners of his mouth tilted up. "Nervous?"

"No," I lied.

He leaned over until he was about an inch from my face. "I want one kiss."

"A kiss?"

"Just one, harmless."

"Is it, though?"

"Kisses are always harmless unless they turn into something more. That's what makes them so exciting, that's why humans get such a rush— will this turn into another and another, will I end up in his bed screaming his name, or will it just be one..." He leaned in closer. "Chaste..." He licked his lips. "Kiss."

Was it my imagination, or did he use the term humans? "Tell me what the tattoos are first?"

He jerked back and tugged at the grass near my legs, tossing it into the air, it fell and then twirled around itself, he gave it a tug and then spread the grass wide, creating an almost iPad-looking screen, like we were watching a movie.

“Every court has them, silver, black, green, gold.” He pointed as two people holding hands laughed. She had silver bands he had black, they looked familiar in the picture as they shared a kiss that made the world around them stand still, including the butterfly near the woman’s ear, the rain started, but it fell in slow succession as the butterflies’ wings flapped slowly.

“It’s like their kiss stopped time,” I whispered, wanting to reach out and touch them. Part of me felt like I was going insane, but the other part, deep down inside, recognized this as truth.

As the truth my mom often talked about.

About a darkness and a light.

About a world that co-existed with ours.

Then again, she’d been crazy.

Right?

All the doctors had said so in the end. And then she’d just disappeared like the mist surrounding us.

If I was going for logic at this moment—then I would say I was losing it, but what if a kiss could stop time? What if love was stronger than anything else?

What a wonderful way to describe something so intimate.

He dropped the grass to the ground and faced me, his amber eyes locking on mine. “Silver means Winter; the bands only appear when you’re ready to be with your mate when the Matchmaker’s finally able to match you to your destiny. That’s all I can say.”

“What a weird dream,” I muttered, clearing my throat and starting to get up from the grass.

He cleared his throat. “You’re forgetting my payment.”

Shit.

“I’m with someone.”

He stood and leaned in, his eyes flashing. “Don’t lie.”

“Just one kiss?”

The corners of his mouth twisted into an amused smile. “You’re not afraid of me, are you?”

*Yes.* “No.”

“Good.” He took a step forward, and then his hand was on my back as he pulled me against him and lowered his head. “One perfect kiss... just one taste...”

His mouth met mine softly. He tasted like flowers and sunshine. I clung to the front of his shirt as his tongue slid past my parted lips. I opened up to him like a flower in the spring, and he took full advantage as he lifted me into his arms and pressed me against the nearest tree, branches wrapped around my wrists, holding me there as he stood between my legs and deepened the kiss, careful never to pull his mouth away from mine.

It was still, after all, just one kiss.

He moaned and abruptly drew back. His eyes didn’t leave mine. “I will fight for you.”

“What?” I shook my head. “No need to fight.”

“And yet—” He suddenly looked dangerous as he stood to his full height. “I will. I don’t care that he wants to break your curse; there are more ways to do that, more ways to show you who you are—more ways to mate and love. And if the Matchmaker chooses me over him, it’s over.”

“Him? Who is him?”

He gently touched my cheek with the back of his fingertips. “The only other man who makes you heated with just one look, the only other man capable of dream walking—the only other man whose name has fallen from your lips—the one who killed you—the one who will do it again—be careful in that library, Luna. Not all secrets are safe to tell.”

And just like that he disappeared, leaving me tied to the tree.

The branches slowly released me, and I fell to my knees, my eyes suddenly heavy as I lay down against the mossy ground and went to sleep.

I jolted awake at the sound of a knock on my door.

I checked the clock. I’d been sleeping for four hours.

“C-come in.” I scrambled out of bed, put on a sweatshirt, and then pressed shaking fingertips to my swollen mouth.

The kiss had felt so real.

The grass.

The taste of him.

Winter?

My bands seemed to shimmer at the thought. I quickly tugged my sleeves over my wrists, just in case.

“Hey there.” Hath poked her head in. “You were pretty tired last night, so I brought you some breakfast and a strong cup of coffee.”

I exhaled in relief. “Yeah, that’s— Thank you. Sorry, it was just a really weird day.”

Hath walked in and set the tray on the lone table in the room. Her leather pants, crop top, and red heels looked completely out of place in that room with its flowery decor, but she didn’t seem to notice.

With a snort, she took a seat and examined her long fingernails. “When do things not get out of control and weird over at the manor?”

I gulped. “Right? Both times felt... strange and left me with crazy dreams.”

“Did you ask Benjamin why?” Hath leaned forward. “He may have answers...if he’s not being an asshole that day.” She offered a shrug. “Then again, it is Tuesday, so...”

I laughed. “He’s just... reserved.”

“Benjamin?” Her eyebrows shot up. “He’s more than reserved, he’s careful, and after years of isolation... well, let’s just say he’s turned into a complete psychopathic jackass, but a loving one that at least takes care of all those poor kids and shoves taffy down their throats.”

I pulled out a chair. “So, he owns the taffy shop and the orphanage next to it?”

What a strange combination?

“Yup, this year he’s working on some CBD shit with the taffy. With his luck, he’ll probably make another billion and still be grumpy about it.”

“Billion?” I nearly choked on my coffee. “How the hell does taffy bring in that much money?”

She averted her eyes. “There’s rumors…”

“Real ones or fake ones?”

She sighed. “Look, I’m not supposed to talk about it, but don’t you think it’s strange that a small-town taffy company, world-renowned or not, brings in that sort of money? And yet, they do; trust me, they’re richer than Croesus, and it’s not all family money.”

“And they have no other side hustles?”

“Not large enough to bring in that much money off a new taffy flavor, Luna.” She sighed and got up from her seat, reaching for the coffee and handing it to me. “I gotta go back and serve my penance in the kitchen. Enjoy breakfast!”

“Penance?” I called after her.

She just laughed. “I tried leaving Montu—again. He got pissed and went on a tirade out in the forest, it’s all fine now, but the boss downstairs got pissed because he scared a few customers away, and we need all we can get right now, so yeah… things have been tense. Then again, they always are near a full moon.”

“It’s a full moon?”

She just stared straight at me. “When you’re around, I’m sure it’s almost always a full moon.”

“Huh?”

“Luna? Your name?”

I rolled my eyes. “It has nothing to do with my name, but thanks for making me feel special. Now that I have a warning that it’s a full moon sort of day, I’ll be on the lookout for strange things.”

She barked out a laugh. “Man, I like you. Maybe you shouldn’t have come to Orca Cove if you wanted to avoid strange.”

“Maybe.” I took a small sip of coffee. “Oh, before I forget.” Her hand was on the door handle. “I think my alarm clock’s broken.”

Before I could explain.

She was leaving and saying over her shoulder. “Trust me, it’s not.”

The door shut quietly behind her.

I was almost afraid to look at the simple alarm clock.

It told the time and looked completely normal.

Maybe it had been a hallucination brought on by exhaustion?

Yeah, that was it.

I most definitely wasn’t somehow communicating with random strangers in my dreams or time traveling.

Hah.

I needed to get more sleep.

Immediately.

But first—work at the bookstore, more research, and definitely more coffee.



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

*Benjamin*

Three a.m. on the dot. But of course, it was three a.m. When wasn't I up pacing at three a.m.?

It was the exact time she had been born.

Her mother had told us all how she nearly woke up half the clan with her screams, announcing to the world that she was alive and waiting for mischief.

I put on a pair of black joggers and made my way down to the library. Her pile of books remained in the corner.

I wanted to hope she would find something that could help me. It wasn't like I wanted to be around her all afternoon—that did nothing but make me want to kiss her senseless and claim her as my mate.

But two heads were better than one.

So, if she wanted to do research, and ask her questions, then I was going to let her because I was at the end of my rope.

And to make matters worse, now I had competition. I almost laughed. My own brother? Really?

I shouldn't be surprised; he'd always been upset that she had fallen for me instead of him, not to mention he'd been passed over.

I had been the heir because of my power.

He was nothing compared to me.

And now I was nothing compared to him.

The tables had turned—I bet he was still smiling and toasting to it back home.

I couldn't see them even if I wanted to.

I didn't have enough power.

I used to hate it.

Now I was used to the trapped feeling my house gave me; flowers would still randomly bloom—some might even bow—but it wasn't the same as being responsible for bringing the world into Spring.

Centuries ago, we were taught how.

And then it became our job, our purpose; each of the courts had one.

The Beginning had been a trying time for everyone—then again, being told you were basically the waste of the universe was never surrounded with laughter and cheers.

I was about to sit in my usual wing-backed chair facing the fireplace when I heard the sound of rain.

I shot out of the chair.

The forecast was not rain.

The forecast was sunshine.

I pulled open the curtains.

Son of a bitch!

He was up to something.

It always rained when he was...

Storm clouds rolled out as soon as they rolled in, and then I felt his presence behind me.

Gods, I wanted to strangle him with my bare hands.

“Successful night?” I asked without turning around.

The sound of Aengus’s footsteps hit my every last nerve like he was purposefully finding them and pressing down with a twist of his combat boots.

“You could say that... I earned a favor from Luna.”

Slowly, I turned. “You did what?”

He shrugged. “She was curious. Someone needs to teach her not to be so open in those damn dreams. I barely strained a muscle entering one.”

I gritted my teeth. “That’s forbidden, and you know it.”

“Who’s gonna tell?” He grinned. “You? Mr. Rule Breaker?”

I snapped my teeth. “That was a long time ago!”

“And how’d that work out for you, Benjamin? Hmm?”

“Get out of my house!”

“Technically...” He held up a hand. “It’s our house, the family house.”

“So that’s it? You intend to stay?”

He grinned. “Yeah, you know, since I got a job and all.”

“Oh gods, this should be good. Did you decide to try your hand at modeling again? You know you got so bored you faked your own death, so that’s clearly out.”

He barked out a laugh. “I did get a lot of ass though, so that was nice.”

“Do you hear yourself?”

“All the time, I’m in love with the sound of my own voice; thought you knew that?” He frowned. “Anyway, I heard that the mayor needs a new assistant.” He pointed at himself. “It took her less than fifteen minutes to say yes.”

“Probably because you compelled her, and she had no choice but to nod her head while you caught the drool pooling from her mouth.”

Aengus shoved his hands into his pockets. “Actually, she asked for my resume, and I had to make up shit about working for the mayor over in Seattle.”

“And when she checks your references?”

He waved me off. “That’s when I compelled her. She thinks I’m a Harvard graduate with a master’s in Poli-Sci. I’m very accomplished, don’t you know?”

“You literally had trouble passing your first trials when you were seven.”

“Hey!” He jabbed a finger at me. “I was a late bloomer.”

I wiped my hands down my face. “I can’t deal with you right now.”

“And yet, you are.” He grinned. “When’s breakfast?”

“Ask Jasper. In fact, I’m sure he’d be more than happy to verbally spar with you at the ass crack of dawn. I have work to do.”

Aengus took a turn around the room. “You really think you’re going to find the answer to your curse in dusty old books from our ancestors?”

“I have no choice now,” I said through clenched teeth. “If this is the century and year it’s supposed to be broken, if she already has the mating bands, then all I need to do is figure out the whole transfer of power and youth, and everything will be fine.”

He winced. “The Matchmaker’s curse was strong, but sometimes I wonder if Luna’s sister’s curse made it worse.”

I looked away. “Luna mentioned a darkness.”

Aengus stilled. “Did she see it or feel it?”

“I didn’t ask.”

“Want me to...” He awkwardly waved his hand in between us. “Check?”

“Why help?” I crossed my arms.

“Because I want her,” he said simply. “And I want an even playing field. We can’t have her dying or being stolen away before I get a chance to seduce her away from you.”

I clenched my teeth. “Won’t happen.” We were fated mates, after all.

Fated for love.

Fated for death.

But fated all the same.

“We’ll see.” He winked. “I’m gonna go see a man about some pancakes and then run a few errands. If I find a shadow or anything strange lingering around town, I’ll let you know.”

“Thanks,” I grumbled.

“How hard was that? On a scale from one to ten?”

“Two hundred,” I growled. “Now get out.”

He laughed the entire way out of the library, shutting the door behind him as I went back to work.

Hours seemed to pass before her presence was back in the house, like a balm after a severe burn. I sighed along with the library as Jasper opened the door to the library and led her inside.

“Do you need anything else, sir?” Jasper’s face was unusually pale.

He always looked to be the epitome of health—our blood helped, I’m sure, along with our bond—it was never really explained to me because it wasn’t necessary for me to know such mundane details.

“Are you all right?” I asked.

“Fine,” he snapped. “Didn’t sleep well last night, was up working on a new... taffy flavor and lost track of time.”

“Taffy flavor?” I repeated. “Since when do you help research and development?”

“Since now.” He sniffed and then glared at Luna before giving us his back and shutting the door.

Luna gagged a bit and then sucked in a sharp breath. “Yeah, no kidding, he was at the taffy factory all night. He smells so sugary I wanted to hurl.”

My lips twitched. “It’s probably in his blood by now.”

“It’s disgusting.”

“Your nose,” I tilted my head, “might just be more sensitive than others.”

Her eyes narrowed in on me. “If I asked you for something true, would you tell me?”

Shit. “That depends on what you’re asking?”

“The books over there...” She took a few steps toward me. “They’re mostly on magic and spells. I counted maybe three that talked in detail about the house.”

“And your question?”

“Do you believe in all that stuff?”

“Do you?”

She let out a sigh. “Just answer the question, Benjamin. I had an exhausting night with a man who had green hair.”

“What!” I roared. “What did he look like? Did he touch you? Did he kiss you? Tell me every detail now!”

I was at her side in seconds, gripping her arm in my hand, my fingers digging into her flesh. My heart thudded in excitement as streams of energy pulsed from her body to mine.

Good. It felt so fucking good.

Like an orgasm without sex.

Her eyes grew hooded. “I f-forget.”

“You forget?”

“He had green hair. He asked for a favor. I asked what the rings around my wrists meant...” Her body swayed. “He kissed me.”

“Was it good?”

“What?”

“The kiss.”

“Yes, it was—”

I was kissing her before I could stop myself, my hands tangled in her hair as I jerked her against my body. She moaned into my mouth, her teeth clanging with mine as she whimpered for more.

The books on the table went flying as I shoved them off and tossed her on, pressing her back against the surface with one hand while holding her head with my right.

“This,” she said between kisses. “So much better.”

“Fucking right, it’s better,” I growled as my blood heated to near boiling.

She gave a start, and I knew she saw the change in my eyes. They were always the first to flash back. And then the bands on her wrists started to glow silver.

Meaning only one thing.

She wanted me to mate her.

We were already too late, weren’t we?

My chest heaved as she reached up and pulled my head down. Our kiss was angry at first, and then it turned into a



fiery passion I had trouble tamping down; even now, the tips of my fingers burned to mark her with my blue flame.

To tell everyone that saw—she was mine.

Never his, never.

I wasn't sure how it happened. One minute we were on the table, the next minute we were rolling off it.

The sound of something cracking jolted me out of my haze of lust.

Luna let out a scream as she held her arm at a funny angle.

“Luna!” I reached for her.

A bone protruded from her elbow. My fault. It was always my fault. The frail bones, the fact that her skin was pale like some demon had sucked the youth right out of her.

I inwardly roared at the injustice of it.

“I think I'm going to be sick.” She swayed on her knees.

“I need to get you to the hospital. Can you walk?” I tried to sound gentle, but all I wanted to do was kill—everyone and everything that made her hurt—myself included.

She gave me a weak nod, her eyes narrowing in confusion like she wasn't sure how we had gone from making out to broken bones. “How did that even happen?”

“It was an accident,” I whispered, my throat damn near closing as I quickly grabbed my keys and opened the library door. “Let's go.”

When I looked over my head, I sighed in frustration because how else was I supposed to feel when all the signs

were there? When it was always by my own hands? At my own lack of self-control that things happened?

The table was only three feet tall. A fall like that? Wouldn't even give a toddler a bruise on their knees, let alone an almost nineteen-year-old in her prime.

And yet it had.

A cruel universe existed in that library between each of those kisses, and each of them led down a path of darkness and destruction.

The library went suddenly cold and dark as the flame in the fireplace completely disappeared, replaced with a chill, reminding me that I wasn't all warmth and happiness.

But the darkness itself.

The reason for her pain.

The reason for her upcoming death.

I had nobody to blame but myself.

But to see her in Aengus's arms? I would damn her, wouldn't I? Because to me, losing her to another man was almost a fate worse than death.

Which was why I was the darkness in this scenario.

I was the devil himself.

Because I would risk it all just to make sure she was never his.

I still couldn't find the strength to let her go as I helped her in the car and drove her straight to the emergency room.

One day I would drive her here and drive home alone.

Blood covering my hands.

Tears streaming down my face.

I gripped the steering wheel.

I had to find a way to break this.

I *had* to.

The only other choice was filled with so much pain I had trouble breathing.

“You’re going to be okay,” I whispered.

“Benjamin.” She gave me a feeble smile. “It’s just a broken arm. I’ll be fine.”

How wrong she was.

How very wrong.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

*Luna*

After Benjamin paid for my ER visit despite my protests, he stopped at one of the local pubs, bought us food to go, and went with me to the bookstore.

Since I was tired from the drugs they gave me, I just wanted to grab a good book and go back to the inn.

The only problem? He didn't want me going anywhere without him and was constantly looking over his shoulder like the boogie man was going to pop out and yell boo. His mood had shifted. Then again, I shouldn't be surprised; he was a delicious puzzle of lust, anger, and sadness.

Sarah was still there when we pulled up later that evening, she would be closing in a few minutes, and of course, Malcom was there, reading in the corner, watching her when she didn't think he was.

"Oh no!" Sarah ran toward me once Benjamin opened the door, the bell giving us away. "What happened to you?"

"Got in a fight with a table. Lost." I laughed. "It's really not serious."

Benjamin growled next to me, his hands flexing into fists by my side as if he blamed himself, which was ridiculous. I mean, we both got lost in the moment; it wasn't his fault I was clumsy. Though in the back of my mind I wondered how perfect I had to have landed to have such a compound break when it hadn't even hurt any other part of my body.

"Behave," I teased. "It's not."

Sarah eyed Benjamin wearily, taking a step back before going behind the counter. "Well, I'm glad you're all right."

Benjamin was careful not to touch me, but it didn't matter, I could feel the heat from his body pulsing in the air around me like a living, breathing thing.

"I really am good." I smiled.

The bell made another sound.

"Sarah, why do you even have a cell phone if you refuse to answer it and— Oh hello, Benjamin." The woman was probably in her late twenties or early thirties, with dark hair and brown eyes; she was in a smart-looking black jumpsuit and had a nice full mouth that seemed to be sending invites Benjamin's way. "Nice to see you here. And you?" Her hateful eyes found mine and went blank. "Who are you?"

"Luna," I held out my good hand. "I'm just visiting for a while."

"Ah, I see. Fresh meat.

I grimaced. "Sort of, yeah, but Benjamin's already given me all the warnings."

"Oh..." Her smile was brittle. "I'm sure he has."

Benjamin cleared his throat like he was annoyed and trying to get her to go away. “Something you needed, Mayor?”

Mayor?

I shuddered. She seemed like the coldest person on the planet, especially when I could still feel Benjamin’s heat. If he noticed that I was leaning into him, he didn’t move... just let me stand there, soaking up what felt like sunshine coming off his body.

“Actually,” she said as she peered around us, “I just needed my daughter to answer her phone for once in her life and confirm the booth for the taffy festival.”

Sarah groaned. “Mommmyyyyyy, it’s so lame!”

The mayor’s eyes narrowed into tiny slits. “It brings in a lot of money, it’s not lame, and you’re still grounded after that boy climbed into your window and— For the love of gods, there he is.” She glared in his direction while Malcom pretended to ignore her as he slowly turned the page.

“He’s my friend.” Sarah stood her ground, crossing her arms. “And I’ll only do it if Malcom can do it with me.”

The mayor’s cold glare could douse an inferno.

Both mother and daughter were in a standoff until Benjamin smoothly stepped in. “It couldn’t hurt to have more volunteers, plus he can represent the orphanage.”

Her teeth clenched, and then she finally relented. “Fine. But no sneaking off; you’re there to work, this brings a lot of money into our town, and it’s only a week away. In fact—” Her smile was one hundred percent hateful as she turned it on

us. “—I need more volunteers. We’re down a few people, you know, flu season and all.”

Behind me, Benjamin stilled. “Oh? Is that so?”

“Yes.” Her smile widened. “I would love to have you and Lucy join us.”

“Luna,” I corrected.

“Same thing,” she dismissed with a regal wave of her hand.

I wanted to strangle her, but I only had one hand. Maybe I could sit on her? Shove her into oncoming traffic? Find a nice voodoo doll with a black pantsuit?

Clearly, my anger was making me insane because I found myself beaming at her and going. “We’d love to.”

“We would?” Benjamin’s voice cracked with annoyance.

“Yup!” I shrugged. “How hard could it be? I’ll be working tomorrow at the bookstore in the morning; you can stop by anytime and give me more details. I’ll be sure to let Benjamin know.”

“I’m sure.” She glared between us like her plan had backfired. “Well then, I’ll just be going. Sarah, don’t be late. I think I prefer pasta tonight; make sure that it’s gluten-free with sauce on the side.”

Sarah’s face fell briefly. “Yeah, sure, Mom.”

“What did I say about calling me that in public?”

“Sorry, Mayor.”

“Better.” She nodded her head, and then the sound of her heels filled the silence as she left the store, the bell going off

in celebration once she was gone.

I exhaled and shared a look with Sarah. “You cook for your mom?”

“She has a sensitive stomach.” Sarah looked away and then seemed to remember something. “Oh, you’re going to love the festival! I can’t wait; it’s my favorite time every year, and this year we’re supposed to have record numbers.”

Malcom sauntered up to the counter and rested his elbows on it, his lean body taking up space like he was trying to look bigger. “I’ll go with you to the grocery store if you want.”

Sarah relaxed a bit. “Thanks, it’s getting darker earlier, and I hate walking from the store to my car.”

His face softened. “I know. Let’s go.”

“I’ll lock up!” I offered, even though I was half-forgotten as they looked into each other’s eyes like they were soul mates. “I just wanted to grab a book for later.”

Sarah gave her head a shake and then looked between Benjamin and me. “Are you sure?”

“Of course.” I laughed. “It’s just Benjamin.”

Malcom hid a laugh behind his hand while Sarah paled and said, “If you say so!”

“Bye, Ben!” Malcom yelled.

Benjamin shot him an amused smile. “Stay out of trouble, Malcom.”

“Always!” He crossed his fingers.



“I like him.” The bell went off, blanketing us in silence. “I feel like he’s good for her.”

“He is,” Benjamin agreed, taking the seat Malcom had just occupied. “It’s not Malcom I worry about but Sarah.”

“Her mom always treat her that way?”

“Her mom’s jealous of her own daughter, so that would be a resounding yes.”

“Jealous?” My fingers paused on the paranormal novel I was about to pull out. “How so?”

“The mayor’s a vain woman. She wants youth and beauty and would do just about anything to obtain it. The minute Sarah turned sixteen, her mom started pulling away, putting distance between them. It’s a sad thing to watch when those who are supposed to love you fill you with so much insecurity that when you look in the mirror all you see are flaws.”

My heart ached in my chest. “I want to murder her for that.”

Benjamin’s grin lit up the room, a rare sort of smile that had me feeling hot all over. “That sounds a bit violent, even for you.”

“I’m protective. What can I say?”

His smile grew. “I know you are, but why don’t you let me handle the details when it comes to murder... you’re too pure to go through with it and would crack right away.”

“Probably.” I laughed. “And I’m not killing her. I just... it’s wrong.”

“It is wrong.” He stood. “Did you find your book?”

I grabbed the one I'd been touching and then closed my eyes as the whispers filled my ears. He probably thought I was thinking way too seriously about picking out a book, but reading was serious business.

Having someone else's words invade your psyche? The most powerful part of your body?

It wasn't something to be rushed.

"Lunaaaaaaaaa..." one called in a soft voice.  
"Silverrrrrrrr."

My eyes opened, locking into a silver book at the back of the store in the used book section.

I pulled it out.

The front was torn.

Some of the pages were stuck together, and it was at least fifty years old, if not more.

Scrawled across the front in bold black was the title, "Curses and Hexes of the Courts."

"Huh?" I frowned, and the book chilled my hand like ice.

*It spoke to me.*

So even though it didn't sound that interesting and was probably filled with fake spells, I grabbed it, left a twenty on the counter, and turned to Benjamin. Hadn't that guy that kissed me mentioned the courts? Was that why the book spoke to me? "Okay, now I'm ready."

"I don't think I've ever seen you concentrate so much," he mused in wonder, his eyes flickering down to the books in hand like he knew something I didn't.

“Like I said, books are serious business, Ben. If you learn nothing from me, learn this: words have power, and I refuse to let them enter into my brain unless I know they’re going to be used for good.”

“You’re very...” He stared as though trying to define his thought. “Captivating when you talk about books.”

“Told you I would marry the beast for the library or, at the very least, sleep with him.”

Benjamin frowned. “What if he was a monster? What then?”

“Then I’d just close my eyes and pretend he was my prince,” I teased. “Let’s go.”

He nodded like he was in deep thought and opened the door for us. The drive to the inn was short, and rather than pull up to the front gate, he parked in the lot and helped me get out.

“I’m really fine now,” I insisted. “I’m just going to read and have some dinner.”

“And I’m going to help you and make sure you don’t fall down the stairs,” Benjamin said, more to himself, voice low.

“Are you calling me clumsy?”

“Did you or did you not break your arm falling off a table?”

“Did you or did you not participate in said breaking?” I countered.

His lips twitched, and then a sour expression crossed his face. “Touché.”

My cheeks heated. “Worth it.”

He sucked in a breath, his eyes blazed amber as he leaned forward angrier than I'd ever seen him.

“That you, Luna?” Hath yelled from the front porch. “I made more clam chowder.” Her eyes fell to Benjamin. “Oh good,” she added in a bored tone. “Benjamin’s here.”

“Hi, Hath.”

The door slammed behind her.

I winced. “She’s sweet. I promise.”

He laughed. “No no, she appears to be sweet. She’s the bark and the bite—careful Luna before you become her next meal.”

“With that cryptic response...” I grumbled. “Shall we?”

“Yes.” His eyes flashed. “I’ll help you up the stairs, then bring up some of that clam chowder to go with our takeout.”

“Just make sure she knows it’s for me so she doesn’t poison it.” I patted him on the back with my left hand and then lingered in that same spot like it couldn’t help but want to touch again and again.

He moved away from me and opened the door, voice husky. “After you.”

“Perfect gentleman,” I said.

But the predatory look in his eyes said he was anything but.

And the shiver down my spine told me that maybe a man like Benjamin Wells was exactly what I needed.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

*Jasper*

“Things are progressing?” Her red hair danced in the ocean as she stared back up at him through the glass of water. “I noticed that he went to the inn.”

“He also went to the hospital,” Jasper mused. “Which means he must have done more than touch her; the more he siphons from her, the more he’ll give in, and the more he gives in, well... the shorter this time will be.”

“Good.” She snorted. “A lot of magic was used to get her here. The last thing we need is him finding out what you’re doing in your dark basement with all your tools and blood.”

Jasper ignored the way his skin crawled when she looked at him like that—like she owned him. Then again, in a way, she did.

He used her blood.

And he gave her serum to stay young and beautiful.

It was a win-win.

The only problem was her blood wasn’t strong enough to fully heal. Not that he’d ever breathed a word of that to her.

“Let’s talk business.” Eyes wild, she focused on him like she could kill him through her stare. “Where are you at with Adrina-X?”

He kept his expression impassive. “In some ways closer than ever, the human reaction to it has been strong. Though the aging process continues, we’ve at least added on some much-needed years. We go into production next week.”

“And the bids?”

He grinned. “In the billions, of course.”

Her smile was menacing. “Of course it is. And the other serum?”

She was pushing him. Didn’t she know what she was dealing with? “Stealing even a drop of blood from any creature, no matter how powerful, is wrong, punishable by death.”

The witch rolled her eyes. “As I’ve told you a million times, Benjamin’s too distracted by his little Luna to notice, which I should remind you was the whole point behind getting her here. Besides, the rest of the creatures you refer to are too pissed at him for being an idiot who can’t even break his own silly love curse that nobody will even notice they’re missing.”

Jasper’s palms began to sweat.

How to play this?

His daughter came first, always.

He needed the Sea Witch’s blood for the money to come in for more studies, but he also needed it to keep his daughter alive.

Even if she could only stay in a comatose state, she breathed on her own, and one day he'd cure her.

One day he'd cure the world.

Starting with breeding the weakness out of the humans and creating a race that could be controlled through their blood, through the serum.

Expression blank, he nodded at the witch. "The children have been helpful in donating their blood. One of them specifically offers some promise."

"Oh?" Her eyebrows arched. "Why is that?"

Good, she was interested. He still wasn't sure what court, but he should at least help with the results she wanted.

"A boy." He shrugged. "Fae, from a strong bloodline by the looks of it. When he's happy his blood turns silver."

"A possible Winter." She clapped her hands in the water. "How delicious!"

"You can't eat him," Jasper snapped. "I know you like your snacks, but I need his blood, so get that look off your face."

She pouted. "I only eat the weak ones with no purpose anymore, you know that, and they taste so good when you—"

"Stop." He held up his hand. "If you tell me, then I know exactly what you're doing, and I'm a terrible liar. I'll proceed with him during the taffy festival. Nobody will ever know he's missing."

"Perfect." She licked her lips like she couldn't wait and then reached for a book. "It seems it's time for me to read to the stupid children."

“It keeps them happy, and we need them happy to use their blood for the serums. They’re worthless if they’re afraid and loveless,” Jasper pointed out.

She preened. “That’s why I get dressed up every day and bring them treats. It’s why I share my hugs, my kisses, my fucking soul with those bastards because when the time comes for them to pay me back, they do it with full smiles on their faces as they march toward their eventual death.”

Jasper almost choked. “You’re a monster.”

Her eyes widened as she let out a cold chuckle. “Why thank you, I do try.”

The water rippled, and then she was gone, leaving the glass empty, and Jasper petrified that one day... she’d turn on him.

That was why he’d broken his oath to Benjamin.

It was why he continued something so illegal in both realms that he wouldn’t even be allowed to die for it—but instead would be cursed forever.

He would do anything for *her* though.

Anything.

Even go against everything he’d ever known and work with the one woman who had the power to destroy the world.

A monster?

She was much more.

She was Satan.

Hades.

Goddess of the underworld.



Death itself.

And one day—he would kill her.

And smile the entire time.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

*Benjamin*

She moved around the room effortlessly, shifting a stack of books from the chair to the floor so I could sit, shoving her suitcase to the side wall and thrusting some discarded clothes inside it, her cheeks heating like she was embarrassed that I had just seen a pair of dark lacy underwear.

I got up from my seat when I heard Hath stomping up the stairs, most likely trying to give me a warning before she burst into the room, guns blazing.

Her hatred was well-earned, but it wasn't like I did any of this on purpose. I had no control once I saw Luna.

None whatsoever.

Her broken arm was proof of that, wasn't it?

A hard knock sounded at the door.

I pulled it open, arching a brow at Hath, whose fangs had descended past her two blunt front teeth. Eyes wild, she stared at me, then gave her head a shake. "Old habits."

"I know old well," I said dryly. "She's safe, Hath."

“For now,” she spat in a low whisper. “Try not to break any more bones under my roof, Benjamin.”

“I’ll keep my hands to myself.”

She snorted. “Yes, because that’s always worked so well in the past. Self-control is not one of your gifts.”

I couldn’t argue that, but she didn’t know what it was like to smell Luna, to know that she was the one for me and always would be, but never being able to tell her I loved her. Feeling nothing but pain for even thinking about it. It was duller now that she was here, and I knew it would disappear altogether if I took her, claimed her.

But doing that would start a fire in my soul that ached every time we were apart. Being away from her would be physically painful, a horrible sort of torture that made sure we were constantly together.

And even though I couldn’t remember the middle...

The end showed me that no matter what, her blood was on my hands after all those stolen kisses.

And yet the thought of my brother even breathing near her had me ready to burn the world and damn us both.

It was a problem.

“Hey, Hath!” Luna shoved her free hand in her pocket and walked over with a huge grin on her face. “I can’t wait to try the soup.”

Hath shot me a warning glare, then smiled warmly at Luna. “Well, I brought extra just in case you had a big appetite. Left some bread and a bottle of wine too, just in case. You never

know with a Wells; drunkenness might be preferable to his company.”

I rolled my eyes and took the tray. “Thanks, Hath, have a good night—”

“Call me if you need me; I’m just downstairs!” Hath yelled before I shut the door in her face and carried the tray over to the small table.

Luna’s eyes lit up at the sight of the food.

And I was instantly jealous.

Of fucking clam chowder.

Perfect.

I set out her soup and a piece of bread, then opened the bottle of wine and poured two glasses while she dug in.

I didn’t eat.

Not because I wasn’t hungry but because her body actually needed as many calories as it could get; it would help her heal faster.

Which in turn would make me feel less guilty about the broken arm and the reason behind it.

I cleared my throat and took a sip of wine while she ate, enjoying the silence and the fact that she wasn’t one of those women who picked at her food but ate with a joy that made my chest hurt.

Her dark hair cascaded over one shoulder in waves that begged to be tugged, but I kept my hands pinned in my lap.

Her tongue peeked out with each bite, and my body responded in eagerness to the point that I was dizzy with lust.

She looked up. “Are you okay?”

*Hell no. I’m hard as a rock. Take off your shirt. Just kidding because you’ll be addicted to me while I slowly kill you. Next question. “Fine.”*

She set her spoon down. “I’m okay, you know. I’m sure you’re busy.”

“I’m right where I want to be.” *Where I need to be, where I can’t help but exist, just inside your personal space, breathing you in.*

Shit, I was turning into a romantic ass, and I was what, two days in? Three?

I was tempted between running out of that room screaming or pinning her to the bed.

There was no in-between.

So, I sat because my hands itched to touch her, my tongue still tasted her, and my body wanted to claim what was mine in such a violent way that I was afraid to even breathe.

She yawned. “Sorry, it was a long day.”

It had been a long few centuries. I knew all about long days. “Yes, it was.” I nodded to the books she’d moved. “Anything interesting?”

Her eyes lit up like I knew they would, but as she reached for the worn one, she closed her eyes and picked. I’d thought it strange the way the light flickered overhead and how she

didn't even notice that the store seemed to rumble before she chose the book.

I'd seen the phenomenon before in my own library. Never outside my own home, though, so while I was staying because I wanted to be by her side, I was undergoing all this temptation to take her in an effort to learn what sort of book had triggered the bookstore to act that way.

"You're going to think I'm crazy." She licked her lips and then bit down on the bottom one as she held out the book. "But it spoke to me."

I said nothing because confessing to her what she really was and who she really came from was a conversation for a different time when she didn't have a broken arm and when I wasn't trying to keep myself from mauling her with my mouth first, body second.

"It's not strange to feel drawn to something," I cleared my throat. "Or to feel things speak to you."

She averted her gaze to the book. "It's just a silly book on curses and hexes." She held it out to me.

My gaze froze on the title as an icy coldness swept through me. I pushed my lips into a smile. "Mind if I take a look?"

Shrugging, she handed it over.

The minute my fingertips touched the book, they burned from the inside out. I clenched my teeth, ignoring the pain—pain I was used to—and opened up to the first page... it was blank.

"What's that?" She smiled and then gasped and pulled the book from my hands. "What a cool spell!"

“You see something?” I pointed.

She laughed. “Um yeah, the entire page has a tree painted on it with a snow spell beneath it—it says that only those who wield the power of Winter can create snow.”

I wondered if she was aware the bands on her wrists were glowing as she read the spell out loud. It meant they were most likely all Winter spells or that I wasn’t fated to see any of the pages.

“Cloud coverage, a flick of the wrist and snap of your fingers, and snow? Really? That easy?” She closed her eyes. Panicked, I noticed the rain hadn’t let up and touched her.

My first mistake.

My second was the book falling out of her hands.

And my hands touching her, refusing to let go.

Her eyes heated as they fell to my mouth. “Wh-what’s wrong?”

I tried to breathe without inhaling her intoxicating scent. The pheromones were so strong coming off her that I was drowning in them, suffocating, dying a sweet lust-filled death that had me begging for more.

“Luna,” I rasped.

She leaned in.

I swayed toward her and then jerked back as one of the wine glasses tumbled to the floor.

I’d somehow made it from my side of the table to leaning over it, close enough to kiss down her neck.

“Sorry.” I picked up the glass and grabbed one of the napkins, then jumped to my feet. “I just forgot about something I need to do. Tomorrow, then? Same time?”

Her expression became crestfallen, filled with rejection as she looked away. “Yeah, that’s perfect.”

“Stay safe, Luna,” I whispered, wishing I had the power to do a protection spell over the room.

Wishing like hell I had any power whatsoever that wasn’t locked away or tied to the curse.

I jogged down the stairs, avoiding Hath like the plague and nearly colliding with the inn door as it burst open.

Aengus gave me a sloppy grin. “Hey there, just leaving?”

“The hell are you doing here?” I hissed.

He peered around me. “It said vacancy, and it’s a free country, so I thought I’d stay across the hall, fill her dreams with a few shirtless visions of me chopping wood, and you know—slide in for the kill.”

“You’re an idiot,” I snarled. “And that’s not how this works!”

“Does it look like I care?” He laughed. “You’re not the only Wells here, and I’m pretty sure that when the Matchmaker cursed you, she said that the Wells and Damanta line had to be aligned or the world would end, something about the apocalypse, and blah, blah, blah, here I am! Besides, this is the year we can all feel her, which means if you can’t break the curse, then...” He shrugged. “I’ll just wait until the witching hour and—”



I slammed him against the nearest wall causing a picture to crash to the hardwood floor. “You’ll leave her the hell alone!”

“Tsk, tsk, brother, that temper of yours...” He grinned and made eye contact with someone over my head. “Hath, still beautiful as always.”

She snorted. “The gods are punishing me—both Wells brothers.” She sighed and looked heavenward. “What do you want, Aengus?”

“A room.” He shot her a disarming grin.

She returned his smile. “All full.”

His smile fell. “The sign said—”

“Was just about to change that, so off you go!”

“But—”

“So sorry.”

Sorry, my ass; she hated him, probably because he’d seduced her and then left her in the forest back in the day—she was pissed for a century and then met Montu. If anything, she should thank him, but she was a woman scorned, so not going to happen anytime soon.

“Fine.” Aengus jerked away from me and then whipped his head back with a cruel smile. “Guess I’ll just be bunking with baby brother.”

“I hate you.” I sighed.

“Feeling’s mutual.” He slapped me on the back. “I hope you drove.”

“I’m driving us into a tree.”

“Chin up!” He opened the inn door. “At least you can keep an eye on me at the house—all bets are off in her dreams, though...”

Which meant I was officially getting no sleep tonight. I would need to get there first and try not to touch her in any way—because whatever happened in her dreams during this time happened in reality.

I gritted my teeth. “Let’s go.”

“That’s the spirit!” He patted me on the back. I flinched and tried to imagine a world where I wasn’t filled with lust, hate, confusion, and curses—a day where I was free.

Finally free.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

*Luna*

When Benjamin left, I popped a pain pill and tried not to think about the hot make-out session or the way he was looking at me before he left.

Like he wanted to stay but had to go.

The attraction between us was this living, breathing thing—it terrified me. Everyone I loved died—why would this eventually be any different? And yet I couldn't seem to pull away. My brain constantly justified why my body needed him, and I was tortured with images of us tangled in my sheets, sweaty mouths and bodies in sync.

Being marked by him would be the sweetest torture.

Which meant I needed a distraction that wasn't my broken arm.

I checked my cell and had only one call from the sheriff stating that they still had no leads but to stay close if they needed to interview me again in the next few days. I don't know why, but I kept it to myself that my mom had left all that money, almost like she knew what she was doing the whole

time, but she would never abandon me, so what had she been thinking? When my thoughts went morose, I often wondered if she dropped me off there because she'd finally lost it, knew her days were limited and wanted a familiar place that made me happy? I still had the house back home, but for now, I couldn't do anything with it until I knew where mom was or what was going on.

Sighing, I read more of the book and was so immersed in all the different spells that, as silly as it sounded, I wanted to try some. There was a protection spell, one that created ice out of thin air, and a love spell that involved someone's hair which kind of freaked me out. Then again, everything that was happening around me was freaky, including my new tattoos that clearly weren't part of some big prank. I kept telling myself if I ignored it, it didn't exist, but they were hard not to stare at. I hadn't had a nervous breakdown yet, and I wasn't about to. I was finally getting answers to all my questions growing up. So even though I was petrified, I was going to learn about the darkness that followed me and the reason my mom went crazy, only to disappear and leave me here, like this, in a strange town that felt like home, yet not.

My eyes were heavy by the time I got ready for bed, and this time instead of setting my alarm clock, I set my cell alarm and stared at the clock, wondering if I should try to touch it again as a semi-experiment or just get some sleep.

Hath said it wasn't broken.

And my dreams had been... interesting.

Two times I'd been with him, once with Aengus.

And my body burned.

My fingers shook with longing to touch Benjamin.

“Screw it.” I touched the alarm, expecting... well, I don’t know, some freakiness, for the numbers to start going crazy, for the room to spin, but nothing happened. I tapped it again with my fingertips. “Come on, do your thing!”

Shit, I really was going crazy, wasn’t I?

I frowned. “Alarm clock?” Great, I’m talking to alarm clocks now. “Pstt...”

With a sigh, I flopped back on my bed, then turned and narrowed my eyes at the stupid broken old alarm clock.

“Abracadabra!” I waved my fingers over it, and still nothing.

Eventually, sleep’s oblivion must have caught up with me. I opened my eyes, oddly not surprised that the clock was right in my line of vision, 2:59 on its readout.

The alarm clock seemed to glow when three a.m. hit, and for some reason, I touched it.

My hand froze against it as the numbers started counting backward like time itself was running backward, and then the entire room went black.

*I sucked in a breath and jolted awake.*

*I was wearing another corset, this one tighter than hell. My hair was loose around my shoulders, my lips felt bruised, and my body ached in all the right places.*

*The room I found myself in was small. When I looked to the left, I noticed hay. A horse neighed from a nearby stall, and a chicken strolled right past my feet.*

*I was in a cot close to the ground.*

*No alarm clock in sight.*

*And an amazing smelling man lay next to me.*

*Was this a dream?*

*I licked my lips and peered over at my bed partner just as he cracked his gorgeous amber eyes open. His hair was pulled in long braids down his back; its emerald color should look strange.*

*On him, it was devastating.*

*A silver rose earring was cuffed to his right ear. His eyes blazed. "Good night?"*

*"Why are we in the stables?" I asked with a yawn, noticing how much he looked like Benjamin, almost identical if you took away the long green hair. Maybe I was just dreaming about him because of that kiss?*

*"Because..." He leaned in and pressed a warm kiss to my neck. "...we couldn't wait last night." He moved to the other side of my neck. "And because I didn't want your mother to throw a dagger at me for bringing you home looking like you've just fucked your way through Spring."*

*I grinned. "And did I?"*

*"Did you what?"*

*"Fuck my way through Spring?"*

*"Well..." He pushed me down, his massive body hovering over me. "Spring definitely fucked you back to Winter."*

*I stopped laughing as I gripped the necklace that dangled from his chest and drew him closer until his mouth found mine.*

*He tasted like sunshine.*

*I was greedy for more as his lips molded and teased again and again, pulling me, captivating me with each wicked touch.*

*“And my eyes are bleeding...” A deep voice said, sounding amused. “Why are you two in the stables? You know you’re going to get caught.”*

*“Go away.” My guy kept kissing me.*

*“Benjamin,” the voice barked. “Seriously, both mothers were planning tea later; you should probably fix your hair and hers and...” An exasperated sigh showed his disgust. “Actually, you both look hopeless.”*

*“Thank you,” Benjamin—his name was Benjamin—said against my mouth. “I so wanted your approval this morning, Aengus.”*

*Slowly, Benjamin pulled away, and I stared. Maybe that was why he looked so much like my Benjamin; maybe this was like a flash from the past? An old life? Reincarnation? I believed in all of the above, but it didn’t explain the green hair and glowing amber eyes.*

*Or the fact that my fingers felt cold, but it was a comfort, not a chill.*

*I frowned up and barely held my gasp in.*

*The man who’d been in my dreams, the one who’d kissed me.*

*He winked like we shared a secret.*

*I ducked my head next to Benjamin.*

*He put his arm around me. “Let’s go see the family; it’s not like we’re keeping it from them anyway.”*

*Something told me that we had to keep something secret. I just didn’t know what. I pressed my hand to my abdomen and frowned.*

*Why did it feel like butterflies were dancing in my stomach? Was I that nervous?*

*When Aengus finally left, Benjamin helped me to my feet. “How’s the baby this morning?”*

*My jaw dropped.*

*His eyes widened. “Luna, tell me everything! What’s wrong?”*

*“N-nothing,” I lied as panic swept through me. “I just, sorry, I just—I’m not awake yet.”*

*He exhaled a curse. “Promise you’ll tell me if something’s wrong?”*

*“Of course.” I cupped his face.*

*He grabbed my fingertips and kissed them. “Good because we wouldn’t want the future prince of the Winter and Spring Courts to feel uncomfortable.”*

*“Prince,” I repeated.*

*“Well, not for a few centuries.” He shrugged. “Unless he kills me first, which, let’s be honest, it’s happened before to father and son—but he has you as a mother, so why would he ever inflict violence? He’ll have the warmest parts of Spring and the coldest parts of Winter to help him.”*



*“The seasons,” I said dumbly.*

*Benjamin threw his head back and laughed. “You’re funny when you’re still sleeping.”*

*I narrowed my eyes at him.*

*He put his hands up. “It’s all right, princess; I won’t tell your secret.”*

*“And what secret is that?”*

*“Hmmm...” He tugged me into his arms. “Just that the heir to the Winter Court of the Fae gets confused after spending so long in her soul mate’s arms.”*

*Fae. He said Fae.*

*It’s just a dream.*

*And yet I’ve been told that before.*

*I was reading that spell book, and it actually made sense.*

*And I had weird snowflake tattoos on each hand.*

*“Kiss me again,” I whispered.*

*He hesitated, his eyes flashing, and then his sexy grin was back. “Whatever my lady asks—I provide.”*

*“Luna!” That was the voice of a mother... my mother, I realized suddenly. “Luna, where are you?”*

*Without thinking, I ran out of the stables.*

*My mom sat astride a shiny dark horse, looking more regal than I’d ever seen her, pitch black hair running down her back in multiple braids and a gorgeous white dress with an icy cape covering it. She wasn’t sick and gaunt anymore!*

*“There you are!” Beaming, she hopped gracefully off the horse.*

*I ran and jerked her against me in a hug. “You’re alive, you’re alive!”*

*“Sweetheart?” She pulled away, her eyes searching mine. “What’s gotten into you? Of course, I’m alive!”*

*Tears streamed down my face.*

*I couldn’t help it.*

*The last time I had seen her there had been so much sadness and confusion. What the hell was going on in this dream?*

*“What the devil did you do to her, Ben?” she scolded him and held me close. “I always say those men from the Spring Court are the worst flirts, toying with girls’ emotions just because they’re rumored to have—” She sniffed. “Well, it’s not proper to say.”*

*“Very large stems?.” Benjamin crossed his arms. “Right, Luna?”*

*“You!” Mom glared at him. “Go fix your shirt before you see your mother, and for the love of the gods, try to be more discreet, the both of you! The Matchmaker’s rumored to be returning very soon.”*

*He shrugged. “I’ve heard soon, and I’ve heard a hundred years. What do they expect us to do in between? Stay celibate? We love each other; it shouldn’t matter.”*

*Mother’s expression went cold. “It shouldn’t matter, but it does, and you don’t say such things out loud lest she hear*

*you.”*

*Benjamin just grinned and bent down to kiss my cheek. “I’ll be back later. Try not to get in too much trouble without me.”*

*“Okay.” My smile was dopey. “Promise.”*

*“Bye.” He winked and then walked over to a waiting brown horse and jumped into the saddle, galloping back down the road.*

*“Luna,” Mother snapped. “Stop staring after him. He’ll be back, and I hope he’s right. I hope the Matchmaker doesn’t punish you two.”*

*I rolled my eyes. “Our families are destined; you knew as much when I was born. What could possibly go wrong?”*

*“What indeed?” A small smile played on her lips. “Don’t forget to spend some time with your sister today. She was complaining about not seeing you and Ben.”*

*“I will.” I hugged her again. “I missed you.”*

*“I missed you too.” She hugged me back with a chuckle.*

I jerked awake, sobbing, the clock back to normal, and my hands trembling. I’d just touched her; she was alive, she was the same, and she was real.

She’d smelled the same.

Like Christmas and cinnamon.

I was wearing my bedclothes, but something about the interactions felt right. My arm was throbbing, and I felt so weak it was hard to walk as I stumbled toward the bathroom and popped another pill.

The last thing I remembered before slumping to the tile floor was the look in Benjamin's eyes.

And the word—Fae.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

*Benjamin*

The clock said eight a.m.

And yet it felt like I had been up all night.

Probably because I had been.

Only instead of entering the dream with her—it was like I'd traveled back to a time where I had zero cares and expectations.

It was just us.

A child.

Soon to be family.

And I was happy.

Gods, I could still feel my chest burst with pride when she smiled at me as if it were yesterday. I rubbed the spot with my hand, annoyed that it had felt so real that for the first time in centuries, I felt content, exactly where I was supposed to be.

“Coffee?” Aengus swung into the room, looking like he'd had the best night's sleep in his life. He made his way over to

the coffee maker, grabbed a mug, and pulled out a barstool, his amber eyes flickering with amusement.

“Spit it out,” I growled.

“Whatever do you mean, dear brother?” He took one long hard sip of his coffee. “Ah, tastes good.”

“I mildly tolerate you on my best day...” I pointed out.

He nodded. “True, true...” He drummed his fingertips against the marble countertop. “Let’s just say I find it intriguing that in your dream, you became your old self, and I was curious. Did you feel the power lingering in your fingertips, did the flames of Spring fan beneath your skin—did you feel everything you no longer feel now—and do you now realize how important it is for you to get your head out of your ass and fix this?”

“Are you under the impression I’ve just been hiding out in my house, rocking in the corner and reading this entire time?” I ground my teeth. “I don’t remember the in-between, only the beginning when the curse starts again and when it ends. You know this, so if you’ll excuse me, I’ll just go over to the library and continue searching the texts for a way to fix one of the most powerful curses a Matchmaker can wield. Oh, and while I’m at it, I’ll try to discover what’s haunting Luna and how to not kill her during sex!” My chest was heaving when I finished.

Aengus’s brown brow arched. “So, you haven’t had sex yet?”

“That’s what you choose to focus on? My sex life?”

He shrugged. “I’ve never visited you—I’ve never been able to until your Luna broke that part of the curse and welcomed the very fire that killed her the first time.”

I sucked in a breath and looked away. Just thinking about it had me ready to scream in outrage.

“With that being said,” Aengus said as he stared into his coffee cup thoughtfully. “I wonder if she had sex with someone else...”

“Try it, and I’ll kill you,” I said through gritted teeth. “Cheerfully.”

“Oh wow, a cheerful death. Where do I sign up?” He grinned. “Have you asked the orcas?”

“Wonderful idea... which is why they were the first ones I visited, and they talk in riddles more than you do.”

“They taught me everything I know.” He seemed proud of that fact. “This place is crawling with the supernatural. There must be someone who can help you.”

I looked away. “There is one person who would do anything for me, but being in her vicinity makes me want to murder her a second time.”

His eyes lit up. “Ooo, are you talking about Luna’s sister?”

I glared. “If not for her, I wouldn’t have been in this situation in the first place. She counteracted the soul mate spell, confusing the Matchmaker’s decision and causing the fire to ignore Luna and the only way she could have done that was if she took some of Luna’s blood and ingested it.”

Aengus shuddered. “I always was terrified of Morana.”

“Well, you’re about to have your mind blown because she’s here.”

He tilted his head. “Here in this house or just here in this town?”

“Town.” I uncomfortably cleared my throat. “The Matchmaker was pissed at her too, you know—so she’s under the same curse, though it seems every reincarnation she’s still the same bitter person—and for this one—she just so happens to be the mayor.”

Aengus burst out laughing. “That’s too perfect.”

“It’s not.”

“Admit it, it kind of is. So, are you going to seduce her with your Spring power? Oh wait, you barely have any power, and what power you do have, you need to siphon from the love of your life. Whatever are you going to do?”

“I mean it when I say I hate you most of the time.”

“Understood.” His grin stayed. “Is this the part where you ask for help from...” He looked around the kitchen. “Your big brother?”

I stared him down.

The words were almost impossible to form on my lips.

With a sigh, I muttered, “Since you’re living here, that’s how you’ll earn your keep. Seduce the mayor and find out if there’s any way to break the curse. She still has all her past memories too; they’re just locked in her unconscious. It’s as simple as earning her trust and creeping into her dreams.”



“Oh, as simple as that, huh?” Aengus rolled his eyes. “Brother, I can do that blindfolded—what specifically do you need?”

“The curse.” Hope filled my chest. “I need to know the exact steps she took to counteract the Matchmaker’s magic, whether it was Luna’s blood or something more, something else. If we can solve that, then maybe it will help everything else.”

“And what do I get for helping?”

“I won’t kill you.” I smiled.

“Old age has turned you quite violent.”

“Compliments already? You’ve gone soft.”

His eyes flashed. “I just know how to appear like I have. Now I gotta go see the mayor. Fingers crossed she lets me get her naked.”

I shuddered. “She’d probably poison you in the process or eat you after sex, fair warning.”

“Kinky.” He winked. “I could be into it.”

“You disgust me.” I ran a hand through my hair as he left the kitchen whistling and was about to go upstairs to get ready for the day when I heard someone or something crying.

With a frown, I followed the sound.

Around the corner, the basement door had been left somewhat open.

I was about to shut it when I heard the sound again.

It was more of a whimper and then a quiet sob.

One of the rules of the house was that I let Jasper have whatever privacy he needed. Gods, the guy was basically cursed along with me since he worked for our family.

It was the least I could do.

The whimper got louder.

I looked down the hall, pulled open the door, and snuck down the stairs, careful to stay on the outside of them just in case they still squeaked like I remembered from so many years ago.

The basement was blanketed in darkness except for a small light at the end of the room where someone was lying on the table.

I didn't recognize him; he was maybe twelve years old, and the closer I got, the sicker I felt.

He was pale.

It looked like he was being bled dry.

And I knew without even touching him, there would be no saving him, not after all the blood loss.

He whimpered one last time.

And the heart monitor went straight-line.

Voices sounded; I ran back to the stairs and hid beneath them while a woman dressed in nurse's scrubs and Jasper walked into the room discussing something. I caught the word "serum" before they came close enough for me to hear everything.

"We had to try." Jasper sighed as he gathered up a tray with two syringes on it and shoved them into a drawer next to the

table. “Please write down that werewolf blood does the same as vampire blood—it sustains to a point but doesn’t create a frozen state of immortality in humans.”

“Yes, sir.” She scribbled something on her sheet of paper. “What’s next?”

He drew a deep breath. “Fae blood.” He sounded scared.

I was ready to rip his fucking head from his body.

Instead, I waited in the shadows and collected as much information as I could.

What I wouldn’t do to have all my power unleashed on him.

Testing anything on humans or supernatural beings was forbidden.

Punishable by death or the curse of living forever and constantly watching those you loved die.

Jasper seemed to hesitate a minute, then straightened his shoulders. “The Sea Witch is desperate for a way to stay on land longer than a few hours—if we can unlock this next serum for the humans, it should work for her as well as—” His voice caught. “It might be a miracle drug.”

“You’ll be world renowned.” The nurse beamed.

Yeah, because that was why he wanted to test on people and steal Fae blood? Everyone knew it was the strongest; it held our entire genetic code.

To even think to share that with anyone not part of our world...

To test it on a human...

To create abominations?

He would raise a world of monsters without souls—because everyone knew that a Fae or even half-Fae without a soul was a shadow, and if he messed up and killed a human who still had Fae blood in them—he would be creating an army of shadows without even realizing it.

Fuck.

“Dispose of the body.” Jasper sighed like he was bored.

“Any family?”

He snorted out a laugh. “No, that’s why we use the orphans or pick up kids off the street, so nobody will miss him.”

Rage filled my body until I felt the old power in my fingertips snap with electricity.

He was a dead man.

And I would smile while removing his head from his body.

It was only a matter of time.

And it was that much more important to break the curse because when I faced Jasper, I wanted to burn his world down.

And as I was... repressed... I could only do a few things without losing all my strength.

At least one thing made sense—if he was using any of this drug on himself, that was why he didn’t mind giving me his essence when I weakened; he just shoved more supernatural blood into his body and went on with his day.

Bastard!

I was irritated with myself for not noticing.

For feeling so fucking sorry for myself that I didn't even notice the missing children or the cryptic way in which Jasper seemed to be acting the past few hundred years.

Selfishly I'd ignored it all.

All in an effort to break a curse that he was supposedly helping me with—instead, he was playing God down in the basement, using my orphanage and my resources to do it.

*Hell* no.

I ran back up the stairs and shut the door, then stomped toward my library, needing some time to think.

I wished I had the same power Luna did—to just hear a book speak to me—

My eyes flashed open.

“That’s it.” I grinned, feeling like an idiot for not thinking about it sooner. If books really spoke to her on a spiritual or divine level...

Then if I touched her, just briefly, would they call out to me as well? Could I siphon some of that power?

There was only one way to try.

I just didn't know how to ask without giving myself away... fully revealing what I was didn't seem like the best logic. Then again, she'd been at my house enough to experience the fever dreams; she had to know that they were real.

She had to know they were visions of her past.

A past filled with so much promise.

And so much jealousy from her sister.

I scowled. All the things I should have seen first, I hadn't because love had blinded me back then, just as hate had blinded me now.

Maybe that was the lesson the Matchmaker wanted me to learn—to stop being blinded and consumed—to learn how to balance love and hate, life and death, and to learn to protect others at the cost of my own life.

I hung my head and took a deep breath—this day just got a hell of a lot more interesting.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

*Luna*

My brain was a complete black hole of questions that seemed to have zero answers. It didn't help that Hath gave me a knowing look in the morning as she handed me a coffee and asked how I slept.

Like she knew I was plagued with two gorgeous Fae brothers and an un-dead mother who I never wanted to leave.

I'd told her I was fine, even though that was a lie, and kept my head down as I walked toward the bookstore.

Suddenly things that seemed normal about this town... were off. Like the way that people said gods instead of God, for one.

Who said that?

Or the way that Benjamin spoke about his library, even his house.

The alarm clock?

The creepy forest?

And the things that seemed to chase me right into this cove right along with my mother's damning words, before she

disappeared.

Nothing added up.

Nothing made sense.

By the time I made it to the bookstore, I was a tight ball of nerves, all keyed up with too much coffee.

I jumped a foot when the lady who had warned me to take care, the rude cook at the inn, started rocking in the rocking chair on the porch. Back and forth, back and forth, the sound of the chair creaking had goosebumps erupting up and down my arms.

“Good morning.” I tried to sound happy.

“It could be. It could be bad too. Nobody knows.” She didn’t once look up from the book in her wrinkled hands.

A tingle of apprehension raised the hairs on the back of my neck as I recalled her warning on my first day here, about the house, about my dreams. She’d been just sitting here on the porch then, too, like she had been waiting for something, much like she was now.

Today, her gray hair was pulled into a bun high on her head, and she was wearing a simple black cardigan over her black dress with black boots and totally random pink socks that came up to her knobby knees.

“Uh, sure, I guess.” I swept past her in a hurry as the bell overhead clanged, announcing my arrival.

“Hey, Sarah.” I grinned as she handed me a muffin and winked. “Is there a reason we have a visitor outside again?” I lowered my voice.



She frowned, and then realization dawned on her pretty face. “You mean Mrs. Old Lady Eris?”

“Old Lady?” I repeated.

“It’s better than her other nickname,” Malcom said from his spot in front of the fire.

“Which is?” I asked.

“Crone,” they said in unison.

I let out a gasp. “Guys, that’s horrible!”

“What’s even worse...” Sarah smiled. “She responds to it and doesn’t seem to mind.”

“She’s older than the town itself.” Malcom stretched out his long legs, then thrust his arms overhead. “Says so herself.”

I glanced over my shoulder at the door; at this angle, I could see the rocking back and forth like she didn’t have a care in the world.

“She was kinda rude to me at the inn,” I said more to myself than anyone. And at the bookstore last time, but maybe she was just... lonely?

“Makes sense.” Sarah started stacking up some books on the counter next to me. “She takes her food very seriously; used to be a world-renowned chef or something like that.”

My interest piqued. “Is that why the food at the inn is so good?”

Malcom made his way over to join us and mindlessly started stacking books along with Sarah. “Actually, the rumor mill says she puts spells in her food to make it taste that good, but that’s just town folklore.”

“Spells,” I repeated, my curiosity getting the best of me, especially after looking at that spell book last night.

Benjamin couldn't see anything in the book.

I could.

And to make matters weirder, I remembered all the spells I'd read by heart, able to conjure them up with a simple snap of my fingers.

But how?

“Hey!” Sarah waved in front of my face. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” I worried my lower lip. “I just had a really weird dream last night. It felt real. Actually, since I got here, I've been having weird dreams.”

Sarah didn't look up. “Oh?”

My eyes narrowed. “You don't sound surprised.”

“Because...” Malcom handed me a stack of books and pointed to the table behind me. “She's not. None of us are. You've been hanging out at the mansion with Benjamin. Who wouldn't have nightmares?” He shuddered. “Place gives me the creeps. I'm telling you that library eats people.”

I burst out laughing. “The library is perfectly friendly.” I stopped laughing and frowned down at the stack of books in my hands. Why was I suddenly referring to it as a sentient being?

“Ah, she's realizing what she said.” Malcom laughed. “It happens to everyone who stays too long. Trust us, you'll get over it. Leave town once you find your mom or figure out

what happened, then you'll take all the wonderful memories of Orca Cove with you."

I froze. "Who told you all of that?"

His cheeks reddened. "I own a computer. I know how to read local news and how to do background searches, and I was bored; sue me."

"I'm not sure when I'm leaving. My mom's still missing." I had to figure out what was going on with my brain first, then try to solve a disappearance that even the local cops didn't seem to be interested in. I hated feeling like I was going crazy.

Malcom shrugged. "Even if you decided to attempt to become famous by writing an article on this town, you wouldn't be the first. Lots of reporters come during the festival hoping to see the..." He snapped his fingers twice. "What was it last year? Oh yes, the human sacrifices in the forest—"

"The blood-sucking," Sarah piped in, "was the year before \_\_\_"

"And let's not forget about the werewolf sightings two years ago. Those were my favorite. We had so many die-hard Twilight fans visiting after their trip to Forks that we had to temporarily close down some of the stores because of the fireside."

"Werewolves?" I tested the word. "I don't think I've heard that rumor." I kept it to myself that I hadn't actually heard of a lot of the things they were talking about. Chills ran up and down my spine as I listened.

"They're real," Sarah said with wide eyes. "I saw one once in the forest, scariest thing I've ever seen, walked right by me

and jogged into the woods like he wasn't bigger than a bear."

"I call bullshit." Malcom grinned. "Was that when you were dabbling in pot?"

"Shut up!" She smacked him with a book. "Mom doesn't know about that!"

"And I rest my case." He winked. "You saw a wolf or a dog or maybe even a bear. You did not, nor will you ever, see a werewolf. Sorry, princess."

She stuck out her tongue, earning a laugh from both Malcom and me.

"Have you, uh..." I tucked my hair behind my ear. "Heard anything about the Fae?"

Both of them froze.

Their eyes locked onto each other.

It was like a moment frozen in time.

And then, with shaking hands, Sarah grabbed me by the wrist, her eyes wide. "Don't say that word out loud... ever."

"But—"

"Promise me." Tears filled her eyes. "Promise!"

"Okay, okay!" I pulled her in for a hug. "I'm sorry. I was just curious about something—"

"Only those with a death wish talk about the Fae," came the old Crone's voice from her rocking chair. How the hell had she even heard us? "I'm old enough not to care if you'd like to hear a story."

Sarah shook her head no.

Even Malcom had paled, but something in his eyes flickered like he was angry I was asking questions like I should turn around, go home and forget all about this place and how it had stolen my life from me.

His nostrils flared, and something flickered in his fingertip.

“Leave her alone, son,” the Crone said in an authoritative voice. “No harm will come to your Sarah.”

He blew out a curse and continued stocking books while I pulled open the screen door, stepped outside, and sat on the first stair. “You said you had a story for me?”

The Crone’s blue eyes twinkled, making her look younger than she really was. “Oh, I have many stories, but in this instance, I think it’s time to tell you one of my favorites. It’s quite sad, but maybe it will help you...”

“I’d like to hear it.” I crossed my arms over my knees. “If you don’t mind?”

She beamed, her mood completely opposite of when I’d first seen her. “Well, I guess we best start at the beginning, and it starts as most stories typically do—with two people in love.”

I leaned in as she spoke.

“There was once a beautiful young woman. She was the favorite daughter of the Winter and of the Moon. Her beauty was known in all four kingdoms of the Fae.: Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Winter. Her father was one of the Winter Kings, and her mother was a lesser Fae who lived in the forests of the Spring. One day, this young woman was walking and stumbled across one of the high princes, the heir to the Spring Court. Rumor has it that all it took was one shared look, and they

both lost their hearts and souls to one another.” She frowned. “Their love was so strong, so all-consuming in its passion, that they ignored the warnings from their parents not to get too attached. You see, back then, there was a Royal Matchmaker who would unite the different clans and courts in order to keep the Fae bloodline strong. She could look into the future and see every possible outcome, and she knew what was best, and everyone listened. She was powerful, and to fall in love without her blessing was considered insulting—but that was exactly what they did. Days before the Matchmaker’s return, they made sacrifices of the elements to her in hopes that she’d hear their cry to be together—and she did, she heard their cry, and while insulted, she knew it would be what was best for the Kingdoms, to align the Spring and Winter Courts once and for all.”

Memories of Benjamin’s kiss, of fire, of ice, and sadness pounded into my consciousness so hard that my temples hurt.

“Are you okay, child?”

“Fine.” I frowned, my wrists pulsed like they remembered, and my heart pounded like it was finally free. “Please... keep going.”

She nodded her chin. “The day of the ceremony, the young princess stood next to her sister—her very jealous sister—and waited for the Matchmaker to choose. But at the last minute, the Matchmaker was blinded by a shadow, and rather than point at the princess, she pointed at the sister.” She hung her head. “She realized what happened right away, but the damage was already done. For he had already given his heart to the princess. And thus, the Matchmaker, in order to save face in

front of the clans, had to curse them for betraying her, and in return, she cursed the sister for blinding her to true love.”

“That’s horrible,” I whispered, my throat tight.

“His punishment,” the crone spoke sadly, “was to forever lose the love of his life. With their every reincarnation, she is destined to die, and her blood will be on his hands until he finds a way to break the curse. He can’t help but siphon her youth from her, and she can’t help but give everything she has, all that she is to him, even when she knows the outcome every time...”

Chills wracked my body as I held my casted arm in my free hand. “And the princess?”

“She will lose everyone she loves to true death. In every reincarnation she will lose her mother, never know her father, and never know true love with her soulmate.”

“That’s harsh,” I said under my breath as the familiarity of the princess’s situation washed over me.

“The world is harsh,” she snapped back at me. “But things always work out for the best, and one day, they will find each other again. One day it won’t be all pain and broken hearts but fulfilled dreams and prophecies.”

“And you know this how?” I wondered aloud.

She stared down at my wrists.

I quickly covered them with the gray Harvard sweatshirt I was wearing.

“Testing the fires, were you?”

“How do you know that?”

“You have questions.” She freaking read my mind. “I know a place where you can get answers.”

“Where?” I jumped to my feet.

“Orca Cove.”

“Wait, we’re in Orca Cove.”

She sighed like I was annoying her. “Use your brain Luna, at least once in your godforsaken life—Orca Cove, go to it, the cove.”

She meant the real cove.

“After work.” I nodded.

She just shrugged like it didn’t matter either way and went back to reading her book. But the story she told me stayed with me the rest of the day and when it was time to head over to Benjamin’s, I found myself veering away from his house and toward the cove.

Twenty minutes later, I was standing on the cliffs watching the water crash against the rock in majestic splendor.

Shivering, I crossed my arms and continued to watch, wishing that the answers would fall out of heaven or, at the very least, magically appear in front of me.

The story she told me felt real.

It felt like a memory.

And it terrified me to think it could be mine.

Was I crazy to assume so much? Part of me said no, especially since I now had tattoos on my wrists that glowed and a missing mom who apparently had never even arrived to



begin with. Any normal person would be losing her mind. Instead, I felt oddly at peace, albeit confused. Truth be told, I had not concerned myself much with searching for my mom, and I had no idea why her disappearance wasn't making me crazy desperate to find her. Almost like I was being compelled to just accept that my mom had vanished.

I felt like I was home.

The snowflake tattoo on my left wrist pulsed when I looked down at it. Though still silver, it seemed to come alive as an orca swam dangerously close to the cliff, spouting up air and water in greeting.

I smiled and waved, feeling dumb after the fact but realizing that I must be extremely lonely if I was trying to communicate with whales.

It swam back and sputtered a bit, then turned on its side, flapping its fin at me as if to say, *“hey back.”*

My jaw dropped. “Did you just—?” I gaped. “Did you just say hi?”

It circled again, joined by six others as they all danced around each other in the water, showing off like they had more than an audience of one.

“They like you,” Benjamin said from behind me.

I nearly fell into the water as I jerked around. “How’d you find me?”

His eyes heated. “I’d find you anywhere, I think.”

“Is that just a line, or are you serious?”

He hesitated and then sighed. “Maybe a bit of both.”

I looked down. “You know the Old Crone? Or Mrs. Eris?”

His smile grew. “Old and cranky one day, creepy and aloof the next? Yes. I know her.”

“She told me a story.” The wind whipped against my face. “And it just... I don’t know do you believe in déjà vu or reincarnation?”

“Déjà vu’s a proven phenomenon.” He moved to my side. “As far as reincarnation—what do you think?”

“I think I’m going crazy.” Tears filled my eyes.

He hesitated and then wrapped an arm around me, pulling me close. Immediately, I felt safe even as my body slumped, its energy suddenly gone. “We should go back to the house; it’s freezing.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” I stepped on the rock, and my foot slipped. I scrambled for him, but I had zero energy and strength as my body fell against the rock and then back into the tumultuous water, and all the while Benjamin screamed my name.

I gasped and sputtered as water filled my mouth.

My arms fought to keep me afloat, but I was exhausted, and each time I fought, I saw spots of black like I was suffocating.

And then he was down there with me, his mouth on mine, giving me air as he pulled me to the surface. Two of the orcas swam beside us, protecting us from the rocky shore.

Once we reached the rocks, I started to see double or maybe even triple. Benjamin held out his hands, something

blue seemed to dance along the edge of them, and then I was warm, so warm, that I closed my eyes and fell against him.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

*Jasper*

“How is she today?” He was in a foul mood after losing yet another patient, a young werewolf he’d found on the outskirts of town, a rather fortuitous occurrence. Then again, it was normal for the supernaturals to be attracted to Orca Cove—so much power radiated from that small town, and the orcas did nothing but multiply that by seven so anyone or anything that got close responded to the draw.

Anyone too damn curious for their own good.

“Nothing’s changed.” The nurse gave him a pitiful smile and left the room like she always did.

Her pale white hair hung glossy past her waist, never changing.

Her white skin was nearly translucent as she lay there, her breathing even, her eyes closed.

One day they would open.

One day.

He looked over his shoulder and grabbed a small vial of the serum, and shot it into her IV.

It glowed with faint yellows and silvers.

And just like before, it brought life to her skin, a rosy hue to her cheeks and lips.

One day he would inject her, and she would open her eyes and thank him for breaking all the rules.

After all, it wasn't his fault she was trapped in this state.

It was her fault.

For loving someone who didn't love her back.

And for being caught in the crossfire of magic.

Benjamin had no idea that his anger at killing his first love would spread through the forests, hitting random trees and people.

Hitting Jasper's daughter square in the chest while she spied on the man she loved, Aengus Wells, as he gave his body to someone else.

Jasper would never forgive the Wells family.

And he would never forgive himself for not being more protective of the sensual pull the Wells men had on women.

He would end this.

And the Wells family would pay dearly.

"Where were we, hmm?" He pulled up a chair. "Now, the evil prince knew what he was doing was wrong, but he was curious, you see, and he was determined to fight for his one true love..."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

*Benjamin*

Her breathing was labored as she lay on my bed, her skin pale. I hated that I was the cause of so much and that my blood still yearned for her, just like my heart and soul were in pieces at her feet. I would worship her everything—if she'd let me.

“Any changes?” Aengus poked his head in.

“Aren't you supposed to be seducing the good mayor?” I asked without looking at him.

“Right, well, I got an earful on how you're helping with the festival, and I think she sighed at least a dozen times before handing me a packet and asking if you were free for dinner.”

I smirked. “Your poor ego.”

“I feel quite offended.” He walked farther into the room and tossed a packet onto the bed. “Your assignments for the festival. She stopped off at the bookstore, but Luna was already gone, apparently ready to jump into the icy cold water for a swim.”

I cringed. “She didn't jump; she fell.”

“I know. I was just trying to make you feel better.” He stared at her in awe. “She’s one of the most beautiful things I’ve seen.”

“Mine,” I barked.

He held up his hands. “Yes, and look what your love does to her. Over and over again... By the way, the mayor’s very tight-lipped about anything supernatural. I asked her one small question about a possible curse on the town itself, and she told me to go fuck myself. I asked her to do the honors, and she slapped me—I think I’m making progress.”

I rolled my eyes. “Told you she’d be tough.”

“Yup, which means you’re up!”

“I don’t want to be up.”

“And yet... you are.” He grinned. “At the festival you can pick her brain. Oh, I had enough of her scent to get into that head of hers while she dreams. That is *if* she dreams. She could be all locked up.”

“For Luna’s sake, I hope not.” Her full lips were a pale pink; I wanted them to be red again, full of life. I wanted to stop being the one thing that both killed her and saved her with one touch.

I raked my hands through my hair.

With a jolt she sat straight up, nearly knocking our heads together. “Where am I?”

“Shhh...” I tucked the blanket around her. “You’re safe.”

Her eyes went from mine to Aengus’s. “YOU!”

“Uh-oh.” He grinned. “Hi there.”

“You kissed me!” She jabbed a finger toward him. “But I was dreaming and...” Her frown deepened. “I wasn’t dreaming, was I?”

“Oh, you were,” he practically purred. “Care to try it again?”

“Care to lose your head?” I snapped.

“So sensitive, my brother.”

“Brother?” she shrieked.

“Is this the part where I introduce myself?” Aengus asked.

“What’s this about?” Her eyes were zoned in his dark green hair. “It should look like a hot mess, but—”

“Instead, it looks like hotness itself. Yes, I’m aware.” Aengus grinned.

Luna turned her attention to me. “Do you have the same mom? Ugh!” She put a hand to her forehead. “I’m sorry that’s such a rude question.”

“We do,” Aengus answered for me. “We’ve just been separated a really long time, me and Benjamin, which means I should thank you.”

“For?” She was smiling at him.

Which meant I was killing him later.

And penciling it in right now.

“The fire.” His eyes glowed. “Had you not touched it, I wouldn’t have been able to be reunited with this gloomy son of a bitch.”

I growled.



“See?” He shrugged. “All gloom.”

“I’m not all gloom. I’m just... worried.” I reached for her hand but jerked away just in time before I did something stupid like touch her.

She reached for me, though.

I fell back and stood leaning against the bedpost in agony, wishing I could comfort her, knowing that it would always need to be from afar if I didn’t figure this curse out.

“Benjamin?” Her eyes filled with tears like I was hurting her like I was abandoning her when all I wanted was to hold her close and keep her there forever.

“I’m sorry.” I shook my head. “So damn sorry.”

Aengus looked between us and said softly, “He can’t touch you, Luna.”

“Why?” Her voice cracked. “He did before?”

“Yes, and you broke your arm,” he pointed out. “Almost drowned.”

Another mark against me.

“Because you didn’t have the strength to even swim—each touch makes you want him more, each touch makes it harder to stay away, each touch steals your strength unless...”

She gulped, tears in her eyes. “Unless what?”

He flickered his gaze to mine. “Well, if you have sex with the touching, then all it does is slowly kill you, but you’ll stop breaking bones. So, isn’t sprouting gray hairs and wrinkles better than a broken arm? Decisions, decisions.” He rubbed his

hands together. “On that note, I’m going to go see about some dinner.”

He left us in the room.

Alone.

Luna staring at me like she was waking up from a long dream, finally seeing me for me, finally understanding what this was, even though she couldn’t truly comprehend how crazy it was. Fear all but dripped from her features. Fear that she was right, or maybe fear that she was possibly going crazy.

And wrong.

“You’re not human.” She looked away when she said it like she was afraid to look into my eyes. “He isn’t either, is he? Your brother? Something feels... otherworldly about you.”

Of course, she could sense it; any true Fae could.

“No,” I whispered. “We’re not.”

“Are you...” She bit her lip, sucking it between her teeth. “Are you vampires?”

I burst out laughing. “Sorry to disappoint, but no.”

“I’m not disappointed!”

“Sure, okay,” I smirked.

“You’re not like some terrifying wizard either... you lack the power.”

“Thank you?”

She shrugged. “I have one guess left, only because of the story I heard today and the fact that it felt like I knew it like it

was somehow tied to you, tied to me, tied to the dreams at night...”

I held my breath.

“Are you Fae?” she barely whispered.

The room trembled around us. Inhaling. Exhaling.

All I could do was give her one single nod.

She gulped. “Am I?”

The room crackled with tension as silence descended between us. I flicked my wrist and snapped my fingers as a blue flame lit above them, and very slowly, the flame grew and snaked toward her good arm, wrapping around her skin like it was flirting with her.

The silver snowflakes around her wrist flared to life, creating tiny icicles that blocked the would-be burn from the flame.

She gasped as the icicles created the barrier, and when I pulled the flames back, her skin was as it had been.

Perfect.

“Ice,” she said in awe. “I created ice?”

“You did.”

“Why is this happening?” A solitary tear slid down her cheek. “I think you owe me answers now.”

I sighed. “I owe you more than that, but for starters, you need to know one thing...”

“What?”

“If we don’t figure out the curse together, you’re going to die—and soon.”

“Die?” Her eyes widened. “What the hell? Who kills me?”

I swallowed the thickness in my throat and whispered. “Me. I kill you. I’ve killed you over and over for centuries. This will be our thirteenth time, and I hope to the gods that this time it doesn’t end with your blood staining my hands. Again.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

*Luna*

You know that feeling of rightness you get in your chest when someone says something that completely resonates with your psyche? When your eyes tell you one thing but your soul screams for something else?

His words, even his terrifying truth—I felt it in my soul.

My heart beat a little bit faster.

My breaths came a bit quicker.

And when he continued to stare me down like I was a ghost he could never get rid of—the world suddenly righted itself.

For my entire life, I'd felt like something wasn't right in my world, in my mom's world. While everyone around me was content to just exist, get a job, buy a house—all I wanted to do was search for the truth.

I'd told myself I was curious.

But maybe I was searching—because I was trying to find him, hoping that in the process I would finally find myself.

“My mom.” My voice cracked. “She said I was born with a darkness hanging over me. I thought she was kinda crazy...” I looked up into his amber eyes. “But she wasn’t, was she?”

Benjamin slowly shook his head. “I have Aengus looking into it. When a Fae is reincarnated, it’s almost like part of their soul is missing. It turns into a shadow that haunts the very human the Fae’s reincarnated into—driving them toward madness, toward the place where they’ll hopefully be reunited again, but I’m not sure if it’s that or something more sinister.” His eyes flickered like he had more to say but didn’t want to overwhelm me.

“So, I’m haunting myself. Awesome.” I frowned down at my clasped hands.

“Possibly.” He licked his full lips.

I leaned toward him without even realizing what I was doing like he had a rope tied around me and continued to give tiny little pulls. He was like a drug I couldn’t stop taking, smoke I couldn’t stop inhaling.

“Now that you know, I understand if you want to leave and —”

“Leave?” I shrieked. “Why would I leave? So what, you might kill me? As terrifying as that sounds, you said you owed me the story. I want the truth, and it’s not like you’re touching me, so you can’t do that weird siphoning thing, right?”

He clamped his jaw. “Right.”

“So, I’m safe?”

“You’ll never be safe as long as we’re in the same room, the same house, fuck even on the same planet. I would find

you and risk your life for just one taste. That is what you mean to me. Don't you get it? I'm a selfish asshole who's lost all ability to think about others. All I want is you. All I need is you. And soon, that need will trump everything else in my world—even if you run. I'll find you.”

My breath quickened in my chest.

His eyes were blazing with fury.

With lust.

With something that I never wanted to look away from.

And that look was all for me as he gripped the bedpost with his hand, his fingers digging into the wood, his nails making a permanent mark.

“St-start at the beginning.”

“Well.” He gritted his teeth. “The beginning always starts with words. Meet me in the library...” I started to throw off the covers. “And Luna?”

“Yes?”

“No matter what happens, do not touch me.”

“Fine.”

“Good,” he snapped, slamming the door behind him.

The logical part of me said he was frustrated because he couldn't touch me and wanted to, but the irrational part said he wasn't attracted or hated that he couldn't help himself.

With a sigh, I stood and took the very slow trek toward the door and down the gorgeous hallway.

The pictures lining the hall seemed to come alive as I took the stairs one at a time, careful not to fall and injure myself further since I was already ridiculously weak.

Both library doors were open when I got there, and I stepped inside.

And both closed with finality once I was fully in.

I gulped as Benjamin snapped his head up, his face expressionless. “Have a seat.”

“Please,” I corrected. “It’s have a seat... *please*.”

His jaw ticked.

Okay, wrong day to piss him off.

“Fine.” I walked over to the chair that was farthest away from him. How long would this puny wobbly feeling continue? My body still felt like all my energy had been zapped out of me.

“We fell in love.” He stared into the fire. “You were cursed to forget while I was cursed to remember that day like it was yesterday.”

Chills wracked my body as he continued to speak.

“You were from the Winter Court, so fucking beautiful on the outside, like a perfect ice sculpture—but warm on the inside.” He smiled like he remembered something and then sobered. “We didn’t even sneak around. Everyone knew you and I were together, and I was convinced that we had more time. But days after you found out you were pregnant, the Matchmaker returned, and our time was up.”



A shiver raced through me. This story would not end well, would it?

A memory hit me then of the smell of smoke, choking.

So the story the Crone told me was about us. It was our love story and our end.

I swallowed against the thick lump in my throat, almost tempted to ask for water.

“She sensed our love, but there’s something that’s just as powerful.” His eyes flashed. “Hate. Hate and jealousy go hand in hand. Your older sister was mad that you had gained the heir’s attention—my attention. She knew that one day I’d rule the Spring Court, and she knew you’d be at my side. Aengus had already rejected her choosing to become the leader of the Spring Courts army, so she had no way to marry into the courts, she’d forever have to bow to you, and that burned her from the inside out. She became a different person that day, using all her magic to wield a spell that would act like a beacon to the Matchmaker—not only did her dark magic work, binding me to your sister instead of you—but once bound, the Matchmaker couldn’t unbind us—I rejected your sister in front of the Matchmaker, earning her hatred. She was torn between being livid that she was tricked—and hateful because I refused her match.”

“My sister?” I whispered, confusion drawing my forehead into a frown. I’d always wanted a sister, and now I find out that my sister from back in the day was basically a jealous bitch with a mean streak? “I was always envious of people with large families.” My frown deepened. “Now, not so much. What happened after all of that?”

Benjamin turned toward me this time. The angles of his face looked like someone had sculpted him to appear perfect to the naked eye, from his jaw to his aristocratic nose, his full tempting mouth.

“Don’t look at me like that,” he snapped.

I jerked my head down. “Sorry, I can’t help it.”

“Try,” he seethed.

“You could at least be nice!” I snapped.

He gritted his teeth. “I really can’t because then I’ll take you against the table. Is that what you want? To break another arm?”

“Aengus said sex—”

“Aengus should keep his mouth shut.” He glared. “If we have sex once, we’ll have it twice. We’ll have it a third time because you won’t be content; that’s the whole point of the curse. We screw until you die.”

“I guess there are worse ways to go,” I muttered under my breath.

“Trust me, there aren’t. You don’t know what it’s like to experience the love of your life die, to see your blood on my hands over and over again. I’m sick with it; I can’t—don’t ask me to.”

Tears filled my eyes. I quickly swiped a stray one that fell across my cheek. “Sorry, back to the story...”

The Matchmaker cursed the three of us. Your sister, for intervening, was stripped of all her magic. As for us—you were to be put to death, to reincarnate a hundred years later.

The Matchmaker warned me that everyone you love will always die, most likely horrific deaths, and you'll always be searching until you find me, only to lose me as well unless we break the curse. As for my end of it, well, you already know... every time we touch, I accidentally strip a little more of your life away from you, making your bones brittle and your brain weak. The only way to touch you without doing that is to have sex. It's a cruel curse that makes it so that, eventually, we have no choice. You always end up dead."

I was almost afraid to ask, even though I thought he'd already told me. "How many times did you say we've gone through this?"

His voice was heavy with sadness. "This will be the thirteenth time." His face lit with a touch of hope. "But it's different this time. First, because fire accepted you, and then Aengus was released from the forest realm for the first time in centuries... By the way, he plans to claim you if I can't break the curse."

I choked on a laugh. "Yeah, that's not happening. You can't just pass me off to your brother, asshole."

"You think I want to? You think it doesn't kill me inside? Fill me with rage? The idea that he can touch you and I can't? The fact that he can kiss you? Bring you to a perfect orgasm only to have *his* name fall from your lips, not mine? You have no idea the hell I live with every single time I see you and how many times I fight with myself to just kill you in order for the torture to end."

I angled my head and studied him. "You'd kill me before letting him have me, wouldn't you?"

He hesitated, emotions waging war in his expression, and then, “The thought has crossed my mind.”

I sighed. “After she cursed us, what happened?”

A shadow crossed his face. “She was going to put you to death, but I couldn’t... I couldn’t bear it, so I asked her to let me.” His voice caught. “I used my fire. It swirled around you, choked you, held you close, and then the ice around your body just exploded, and you were gone. I screamed until my voice was hoarse, and within seconds most of my magic was stripped. That’s why Aengus looks different.”

“So, it is you in my dreams?” I whispered.

“Yes.” He licked his full lips. “That’s me, without the curse.”

I shoved away from my chair and stood. I needed to think. “Okay, so if this time is different, then maybe I’m the one who solves the curse? Maybe it’s something as simple as true love’s kiss...” A sad laugh slipped out. “Just kidding, we already did that...” I frowned. “Are there any spells you can think of that can undo a Matchmaker’s magic?”

All the spells I’d seen in the book were simple, nothing that could break a centuries-old curse.

His annoyed expression said he’d already thought that and failed.

I took a deep breath. “Okay, moving on, do you remember how I die each time?”

“No.” He shook his head. “Only that I’m always too late, your blood is always coating my hands, and I’m always screaming that I failed to protect you again.”

“At the risk of knowing the timeline of my own death...” I put my hands on my hips. “Do we have to figure the curse out before we run out of time, or is it more of a case of we have to figure it out before we lose our minds to sex and you eventually stop my heart?”

“The latter,” he grumbled.

“So, we just stay apart until we can figure it out.”

He snorted out a laugh. “She’s got jokes.”

I glared. “What? Did you have a better idea?”

“Fae from the Spring Court are the most seductive of our kind. They need sex the way you need air. They feed off people’s emotions the same way you feed off clam chowder at the inn. Trust me when I say it’s only a matter of time before your need for me is so all-consuming that you’d rather die than stay away.”

“I have self-control.” My voice was small, even to my own ears, as his powerful legs propelled him toward me. He was menacing and sexy, every wicked fantasy come to life, and without even opening his mouth, he made promises I knew he was good for.

Promises for pleasure.

Wrapped up in the painful truth of my own death.

Of a repeated history I knew nothing about yet felt down to my core was true.

He continued his stalk in my direction and finally stopped inches away from my face, his breathing labored, mine

embarrassingly matching his as my heart pounded against my chest.

“Tell me, Luna...” His voice was like silk. “What do you want most in the world?”

I couldn't look away from his ember eyes as they seemed to see into the depths of my soul, uncovering every secret, every fantasy, every hidden moment.

“You,” I rasped, shocking myself. I leaned in for his kiss. My brain told me it was a bad idea. My heart felt like it was stretching between us, covering the chasm of space separating our bodies in an effort to join with its mate.

He leaned down, his lips grazing my ear. “Exactly my point.”

I sucked in a sharp breath when he pulled away and gave me his back. “You should return to the inn.”

“I'm staying.” I lifted my chin. “If you need help breaking the curse, then that's what I'll focus on. You can even draw a line down the middle of the library so I don't cross it—but I'm staying.”

“Fine.” He didn't sound fine. “But do me a favor and take a shower before you come back down here.”

“Are you saying I smell—”

“Intoxicating...” His eyes flashed again. “I can smell your arousal just now, and all I can think about is licking you from head to toe. Go shower, and when you get back, I'll attempt not to seduce you into my bed.”

I let out a snort. “Fine, which bathroom?”

He sighed like I was annoying him. “Any bathroom, pick one, just go.”

Eyes wild, his chest heaved as he stared me down.

I didn’t move.

“Go!” He shouted it louder this time.

I nearly tripped in an effort to make it to the library door. I was halfway up the stairs when the sound of glass breaking filled the air, right along with the agonizing shout from Benjamin downstairs.

He didn’t see the tear of rejection that slid down my cheek.

Or the second tear of sadness for the life he’d lived.

And the third and final tear? That was for me, for my mom, for my bloody future—I would break the curse to free Benjamin, but I would also break the curse to atone for our lives.

I had to.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

*Benjamin*

She didn't see my hands shaking.

She didn't hear the painful beats of my heart as I stared.

All she saw was the anger on my face. All she felt was the sexual tension and the pulsating need that drove me—to have her, to make her mine.

I wondered how long I'd lasted in the past.

Minutes? Days?

At this point I was ready to fuck her against every hard surface of my house—twice. And some of the soft ones too. My lips quirked.

How had I survived this so many times?

No idea.

Aengus strolled into the library and made a face. “It smells like—”

“I know what it smells like,” I growled. “Back off.”

His grin turned sinister. “My turn to seduce her yet?”



“Never.” I tried not to look like they affected me, his words because all bets were off. What the hell did that even mean for this time around?

Hope sprang to life. If it was different this time, we could find a way to break it.

“Speaking of which... where did our little moon go?”

“Shower,” I snarled, and she was *mine*, not ours. “She smelled delicious, and I nearly took several bites off her neck and then begged her to straddle my face.”

“Graphic.” Aengus grinned. “I approve.”

I slammed one of the books down; dust went flying. “It’s all the same stories of the Fae and the Matchmaker. Nothing new, nothing that can break her magic or any sort of spell.”

“Why would you need to counteract the spell when you could just break the curse itself?” He shrugged. “Have you ever thought—”

“No offense.” I held up my hand. “But it’s been hundreds of years, and I’m still clearly cursed.”

He made a face. “True...” His frown turned into a smile. “You’ve never had my help before, though, and now that the mist barrier in the forest is lifted—you could always go to Mother and ask. Or even Father. Maybe one of them knows how.”

Pain hit me square in the chest. “You know I’m not allowed back until the curse is broken. They may as well have turned their backs on me too.”

“They had no choice... *we* had no choice, and you know it, Ben, so stop feeling sorry for yourself. Use your head and figure out a way to look like a tall, handsome Spring Fae again.”

I snorted. “You’re hair’s green. Literally.”

“It’s also extremely shiny, and weirdly enough, no humans seem to even blink at the color.”

“You returned during the right century, that’s for sure.”

“Right?” He grinned, shoved his hands in his pockets, and started to whistle as he kicked a few books near the pile I’d left for Luna. “Any of these helpful?”

I gritted my teeth. “I’m sure they could be. Luna was going to organize them as a trade of sorts. I tell her all the haunting stories about the house, and she organizes the books while she listens—for free.”

He lifted his head with a smirk. “You do realize that was just her excuse to get close to you?”

“I wasn’t born yesterday.” My lips twitched. “At the time, I thought she was just going to do some research, realize she’ll probably never find her mom, freak herself out, and leave. Within seconds of meeting her, however, I knew... leaving wouldn’t be possible, so why not keep her at my side? Why not keep her as safe as possible and then send her away when I can no longer stand to be in the same room as her?”

Aengus bent over and picked up a large tome, dusting it off with his hand. “Romance is dead with you, brother. You don’t just explain to a woman that she’s your soul mate, oh and by

the way she dies in your arms, and then let her go. You fight for her even if it means fighting yourself.”

I frowned. “I’m almost insulted at how wise that sounded.”

“I have many such moments. I just refuse to share them with you.” He winked. “Care to read a book about mermaids?”

I shuddered. “That book is more of a warning not to go into the ocean when the Sea Witch is hungry.”

He made a face. “That old broad’s still alive?”

“Unfortunately.” I reached for another book. “Though I don’t understand how. She’s technically immortal or has been, but the orcas rule the seas and long ago decided to limit a sea immortal’s life span. It’s strange, isn’t it?” I fought with the desire to tell him more about what I’d seen in my own basement, about Jasper. Either way, the truth would come out. There was something we were missing, something that was connected, and something that all went back to the curse, to us, to this damned town.

A chair screeched across the floor as Aengus pulled it out and sat, plopping his feet up on the table and crossing his boots as he turned the page. “Well, it’s a simple math problem, brother. She either enspelled herself, or she’s feeding on immortals.” He flashed me a grin. “My vote’s the latter. Otherwise, she’d need an almost constant food supply of happy humans willing to trot to their death. Why are you looking at me like that? Is there something in my teeth?”

I could barely get my breathing under control as my vision tunneled. The immortal downstairs, the one Jasper had killed — My heart raced and stuttered behind my ribs as though

ready to explode. The Sea Witch only ever visited the orphanage... she'd said it was a penance.

But what if they—she and Jasper—really were working together? What if he wasn't just trying to appease her for power but was aligned with her for more than that? What if she wasn't using him—but he was using her?

I sat, my eyes narrowing slowly. “I saw something in the basement.”

He grinned and dropped his feet to the ground. “You have monsters under the stairs?”

“We're the monsters,” I pointed out. “And it wasn't that. It's part of Jasper's office. I give him a wide berth for obvious reasons, but he's been acting stranger than usual. Anyway, I heard a noise and went downstairs. A werewolf was strapped to the table. It looked like they'd been draining his blood. I heard Jasper talking to an assistant about the boy's blood not being strong enough, no better than a vampire's. I didn't recognize him, but I wondered if he was from the orphanage because they said there was no family to contact.”

“And you're just now telling me this?” Aengus roared. “Do you know the penalty for taking blood from an immortal?”

“Torture, death.” I nodded. “I'm aware, so why would Jasper risk it?”

“Why would Jasper risk what?” Luna strolled into the room, very much smelling like sex, even though I could tell she'd taken a shower and used soap. It was impossible for her pheromones not to seep through her pores and float toward me with an intensity that nearly knocked me off my feet.

“Deep breaths,” Aengus said in an undertone as my nails dug into the arms of the chair, piercing the leather. “Ben and I were just discussing the monsters in the basement. Apparently, Jasper’s been a very bad boy, and I’m truly curious why he would risk his life and his immortality...”

Luna’s eyes bugged out of her head. I almost laughed out loud, only because I knew that look. It never changed; she was trying to process, and the only reason she was probably able to even manage the load of crazy information was because of how strong she was—how strong she’d always been. “Phew, um, okay, I’ll just try to ignore all the elephants in the room and channel my inner book genius to figure his motive out. You just need to think about the man himself. What means the most to him? What does he want? What drives him? As a reader, that’s what intrigues me, the why, that’s how you get the story. We’re all driven by something—lust, money, power... love.” Her eyes filled with excitement as they flickered away from mine. I loved her like this. Alive. “So, what does Jasper want?”

Aengus held up his hands. “He has money. As for power, he has plenty of that, considering he’s worked with our family for centuries. So that leaves us with lust and love.”

“Two very different emotions.” Luna frowned and started to pace. “What exactly did you find in the basement?”

I opened my mouth and shut it again.

It wasn’t that I didn’t trust her.

I just didn’t want her to see the bad sides of our kind, the negative, the bloodthirsty monsters who stopped at nothing to get what we want. I knew that she would eventually regain all

her memories, but for now, I figured any more shock would cause more damage than good.

Maybe Jasper had been bitten and was trying to find a way to revoke the werewolf curse?

“You’re thinking awfully hard,” Aengus muttered.

“Sorry.” I stood and started to pace, just like Luna, and then an idea formed. “Aengus, can you still do a sleeping spell?”

He rolled his eyes. “Blindfolded, why?”

I grinned, ready to pull him in for a hug. “Jasper should be here in the next twenty minutes. His schedule’s like clockwork. Can you—”

“Already on it.” He rubbed his hands together as little flickers of blue flame lit up like he was making his own electricity.

Luna’s eyes locked on the sparks. “Can I do that? Or, I mean, original me? Old me? Sorry, it’s weird referring to myself like—” She waved her trembling hands. “That.”

I pressed my lips together in an effort not to smile at how adorable she got when she was uncomfortable. I wanted to kiss the red on her cheeks, then bury my hands in her hair and make promises I had no way of keeping.

For having only repressed memories and a few hours to process, she was doing lovely—but that was Luna. Lovely to her very core.

“Actually...” I cleared my throat. “You liked to make ice and were extremely good at snowball fights.”

She laughed. Gods, I could spend a lifetime hearing her laugh and the way it filled a room with its warmth. “Sounds about right...”

I wanted to tell her that I would do anything to see her throw her head back and laugh while she formed snowballs and chased me.

Back when things were easy.

Back when our love hadn't started a war.

Back when our love wasn't cursed.

I shook my head. “Luna, you'll go with me down into the basement. Two heads are better than one. Aengus, you join us once you've enspelled him.”

“Done.”

The sound of the front door closing at least ten minutes later had us all looking up from our books, and Luna gave me a curt nod and pretended to fall asleep in her chair.

I was immersed in my book, or so it appeared, while Aengus hid behind the door waiting for Jasper to come in.

Two knocks sounded, and then Jasper was poking his head in. “Did you need anything before I—”

The sparks exploded in front of his face, and then he was slumping over. Aengus caught him before he hit the floor and chipped a tooth. “I'll take him to his room and see you guys in a few minutes.”

“Great.” I tossed the book down. “How long do we have?”

“Thirty minutes. I just guessed you guys didn't need all night.”

“Let’s go.” Luna reached for my hand and then jerked away; her small frown killed me inside as we made our way past a snoring Jasper in Aengus’s arms and down the hall toward the kitchen.

The door was closed but unlocked again.

I pulled it open and very slowly led the way down the stairs. As before, the lights were all off except for the overhead spot that hovered near the long metal table.

A new body was there, this time a young girl who looked to be maybe eight or nine years old.

“No,” I whispered as I reached for her wrist. “No pulse.”

“Do something,” Luna hissed, tears in her eyes. “She’s just a little girl!”

“I—” My voice cracked. “I don’t have the same power, Luna. Even if I did, we aren’t supposed to meddle in mortal affairs. If death came for her, even a Fae can’t stop it.”

“I refuse to take that as an answer,” Luna said through clenched teeth. “Oh, honey,” She grabbed the little girl’s bruised hand and held it in hers. “You’re so frail. What did they do to you?” Her white-blond hair was tucked back in a braid, and her skin was almost translucent, like someone had taken all her blood—even vampires wouldn’t dare do that.

Luna sniffled as one of her tears dropped onto the little girl’s arm. Where it landed, the skin instantly started to heal.

“Wait.” I held out my hands and closed my eyes as a blue flame lit up over her face, and then a blue tattoo behind her right ear lit up. “She’s Winter Fae.”



“Jasper stole a Fae? But why?”

“No idea, and it’s not typical for Fae children to even be on this side of the mist unless he’s—” I frowned. “Going in and kidnapping them?”

“I’m going to murder him when I see him!”

“We shouldn’t jump to conclusions.” I searched around the metal drawers for the drug that I’d seen earlier and came up short. Whatever he’d been doing, he’d cleaned up really well, covering his tracks, the bastard.

Did he know I’d been down there?

Whispers sounded and were getting louder; I grabbed Luna’s arm without thinking and jerked her back to the closet under the stairs.

She was whimpering when I closed the doors, blanketing us in darkness.

“Shit.” My eyesight was perfect, even with the inky blackness surrounding us, and I’d left two huge bruises on her wrist. “I’m sorry I wasn’t thinking.”

“It’s okay.” Voice small, she lifted her left arm. “Cast on one arm and bruises on the other. You sure you don’t want to just get me naked, so you stop breaking me?”

I let out a string of curses. “Please don’t tease me when I’m inches from your face, when I can smell your arousal, when I have no choice but to stay right next to you...”

“I’m either irresistible, or you resent me; I can’t decide which it is?”

“Both.” I hung my head. “It’s always a little bit of both mixed in with a heavy dose of self-loathing.”

“Ah, can’t forget the self-loathing part.”

I smirked. “Exactly, it’s the best one.”

The voices grew louder, drawing our attention.

Two attendants—Nurses? Technicians? Scientists?—in blue scrubs stopped in front of the girl. One pulled out a syringe while the other started an IV.

“Why would they start an IV if she’s dead?” Luna whispered, her breath fanning my neck, sending chills down my spine, and making me almost forget my own name. “Wait, if she’s immortal, how can she be dead?”

“Good question. Immortals can still die; they need blood, food, and water just like any human. And I didn’t feel her heart beating.”

Another tear slid down Luna’s cheek.

I wanted to kiss it away to tell her that it was going to be fine, but for the first time in my existence, I was in the dark. I had no idea if I could solve our curse, let alone help the innocent children who were somehow getting stolen by one of my most trusted advisors to be tested on.

“Batch two of Adrina-X,” the female attendant said while the other checked his watch. “Ready?”

“Now.”

They injected the IV with the Adrina-X, whatever that was. And I watched in absolute horror as the little girl jolted awake,

her eyes wild with fear, her body convulsing like they'd just possessed her.

"Shhhh, calm down," the woman said. "Just one minute..." She injected something else into the IV. The girl started to calm down, her eyes heavy with sleep.

"Jasper will be thrilled that the blood worked," the man closest to us said. "This is going to save a lot of people."

"Yeah, but at the cost of what?" Luna murmured from next to me.

"Agreed," I whispered.

"We'll, of course, need to consistently use the blood from the orphans, and we're short on inventory right now—let's discuss busing in some children from other orphanages at our next meeting. If a few go missing or run away, nobody will miss them anyway."

"Good idea." The male attendant beamed like it wasn't kidnapping. "Let's go dump the other body in the water. She's hateful today, which means she's hungry."

"When is she not hungry?"

They both laughed at their shared joke and flipped off the light, leaving the room even darker than before.

"D-did they just say... *she's* hungry? As in, there's something in the water that eats people?"

Dread trickled down my spine. "That's how he's doing it."

"Doing what?"

"Jasper," I said through clenched teeth. "He's feeding the bodies to the Sea Witch."

“Whoa, back up. We have a Sea Witch?”

“I tell you that you’re Fae and dream walk with you, and you’re weirded out by the Sea Witch?”

“Ursula, or whatever she’s called, literally lives in the cove. How is that not creepier than your blue flame?”

“Valid point, brother,” Aengus’s hushed voice sounded. “Also, you’re not going to believe what I found after some recon in Jasper’s room.”

I opened the door, letting Luna out first. I was almost ashamed that I had to hold my breath when she walked by so I didn’t press her against the wall and take what I yearned for so badly.

“Well, if it’s as creepy as what we found down here…” Luna moved past the staircase and started unstrapping the girl from the table.

“Luna, what are you doing?” I hissed.

“Saving her life, you asshole, now help me.”

With a sigh, I undid the ankle straps and picked the small, frail body in my arms, smelling the life pounding through her body. Her heart had a heavy cadence that screamed alive.

“Aengus, grab the serum.” I jerked my head back.

Aengus grabbed what he could and then helped Luna up the stairs while I followed. My own heart continued breaking in my chest.

I’d been back at the cove for hundreds of years.

I’d owned that orphanage for almost as long.

Had Jasper been using these children the whole time?

Or just recently?

Guilt ate away until it felt like my heart was missing. I'd helped the children because I knew what it was like to be alone—but through my helping, I hadn't saved anyone.

I'd damned them to an even worse fate.

And the person I trusted most in the world—had done it.

I laid the girl down on the couch in front of the fire in the library and pulled a blanket over her. She didn't stir, though her chest continued to rise and fall with her breaths. "They must have given her a sedative."

Luna grabbed her hand and sat next to her. "It's going to be okay."

She would have been an incredible mother.

Will be.

Damn it.

I looked away. It was too painful to see what I thought would be my future, knowing that our baby was dead and that I had killed them both.

"Did you know Jasper has a daughter?" Aengus put his feet back up on my coffee table like an absolute savage.

My head jerked up. "A daughter? Are you sure? He's never mentioned her before."

"Oh yeah, found her picture. Her age was written on the back. And then I found several more hidden pictures with them together smiling."

I shook my head. “Why keep that from me? We’re practically family.”

“Why indeed?” Aengus shrugged. “If you have a daughter, why would you take children? Why would you test on them?”

Luna gasped. “I saw him in the forest last week, he was acting... strange, but he was clearly going somewhere. Are there any houses on the other side of the cove?”

“No.” I frowned. “Well, unless you count the old doctor’s office, but that was turned into a long-term care hospital years ago—”

“Shit.” Aengus got there at about the time we did. “His daughter’s sick, I guarantee it.”

“He’s trying to find a cure.” Luna’s voice shook. “It’s the only thing that makes sense. And he’s using the orphanage as his own little science experiment.”

A sudden pain hit me in the chest as the ring in my pocket seemed to burn through the fabric of my jeans.

I clenched my teeth. “No.”

“Benjamin?” Luna jumped to her feet. “Are you okay?”

Aengus held out his hand to keep her from moving toward me. Shaking, I reached into my pocket and pulled out the ring. It had finally turned red.

I was too late.

I’d been around her too much.

Or maybe I’d just been shit at controlling myself.

“Oh hell, horrible timing, I mean really... horrible,” Aengus muttered just as Luna locked onto the red ruby in my hands.

Her ruby.

The one that held all her power, all her memories—all her pain.

The final part of our curse—she would feel it all, and then she would die.

She could no sooner refuse the ring than I could refuse the orcas as they watched me dig it up.

I was compelled to find the ring.

She was compelled to wear it.

We were compelled to die knowing nothing but the sheer pain of never getting a happy ending, never having a family, knowing true love for days, and getting it ripped away.

“That’s mine.” Luna was transfixed, her eyes wild as she moved past Aengus; even if he held her down, it was inevitable.

The ring—just like our shared pain—was hers.

I held it out as the red glowed and pulsed like a living, breathing thing; the library moaned around us like it was tortured—and a small part of it was. How many times had the library experienced this, only to have heartache in the end?

I wasn’t the only thing cursed in this town.

No, the whole fucking town shared part of my burden.

But my house? My house wasn't just my prison or a dark fortress—the house itself had lived numerous lives and experienced numerous deaths, and always hoped for the day it could finally be laid to rest—a final rest. Even though it had grown and changed over the years, the very heart of it, the spirit of it, was the same.

I waited until Luna was in front of me. I wasn't sure if I did this every time, but it felt right like I needed to fall to my knees and hold it up, showing her that I was hers in this life and in the next, no matter how many times, even if it meant only seconds or minutes, we still had each other.

And always would.

Our blessing.

Or maybe our blessing within our curse.

“I'll always love you,” I whispered as I held out the ring, and for one brief moment, we were in the forest again, she in her long, flowing ice-blue gown and me in my black robes, dancing under the stairs while the smaller fairies sang from the trees.

It had seemed as though the world rejoiced when I asked her to be mine.

How was I to know that weeks later, the world would mourn with me the lives lost?

Her smile was brilliant, her icy eyes filled with unshed tears. “I love you too.”

The minute her fingertips grazed the ruby, her eyes rolled in the back of her head.



I caught her as she fell forward; somehow, the ring was already on her finger.

Heart in my throat, I moved away from her so I wouldn't siphon anything else and watched in jealousy as my brother lifted her into his arms and held her close.

I saw nothing but murder.

Felt nothing but rage.

And yet, his eyes were full of compassion, not lust.

She made a noise and lifted her hand to cup his face; a look of pure joy crossed her lips and then a frown. "You're not Benjamin."

"No," he rasped. "I would be a sad replacement."

"Aengus." She tested the name. "It's good to see you again."

He held her tighter like he was afraid to let go; the room was tense with a choking sadness that descended like a poisonous fog.

She would know my shame now.

She would remember the first time and then only the end of every other time she saw her own blood on my hands.

I used to want to be the last thing she saw on this earth.

Now? I couldn't imagine a worse wish for someone I loved.

He slowly set her to her feet.

I hung my head, afraid to even look at her, knowing what she did.

“Ben?” Her voice quivered. “Did you know that would happen? That this ring would unlock past lives?”

“Yes,” I whispered. “It always does, Luna, but you can’t force it. Once it starts glowing, you have no choice, and neither do I.”

“Does this mean we don’t have a lot of time?” she asked, looking between both of us.

I licked my lips, sharing a look with my brother before answering. “I don’t actually know. I only remember the blood on my hands and yelling that I couldn’t save you... but I imagine it’s not a great omen that it’s been less than a week, and the ring was already glowing.”

She nodded and looked over her shoulder. “I think I’m going to need some time to process what’s in my head right now... is it okay with you guys if I come back tomorrow?”

“It’s been a long day for all of us,” Aengus agreed. “I’m just going to go enspell Jasper again now that we know he’s been keeping things from us. With our luck, we can solve all of this before I have to start making it a daily thing.” He walked over to Luna and kissed her on the forehead. “Go easy on him.”

“Never.” She winked, earning a cackle from my brother, who wagged his eyebrows at me while walking past.

I scowled after him and looked anywhere but at Luna. “Let me walk you back to the inn?”

“What about the little girl?”

“I’ll keep her safe.” I flicked both wrists and waved my hand as a blue flame grew into a bubble surrounding her and

then disappeared altogether. “Only you, Aengus, and I will know she’s here. For now, she will sleep.”

“Good.” Luna exhaled. “Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it. It’s your power I siphoned to even do it,” I grumbled, irritated and embarrassed all at once.

“Then I’m thankful.” She eyed my mouth and then looked away, sighing in what I hoped was disappointment. “We should go.”

We were always leaving when I wanted to stay.

Always saying goodbye when I would burn the world for a longer hello.

Passing ships going in circles until one burned to the ground.

One day, I would hold her and not wake up covered in her blood.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

*Luna*

I remembered fevered kisses, late nights, and early mornings with hay in my hair and marks from his mouth lining my neck.

If I'd wanted him before...

That had been a flicker of the raging inferno I had inside me right now. A burning desire that didn't just want but needed to be consumed by him in a way that was almost painful with each breath.

We walked in silence, which was almost worse than if we were in lame conversation about the weather—only because the silence was filled with all the words I couldn't say, words he couldn't respond to.

With each step, it became harder and harder to think outside of *how do I get this man naked?*

I tripped over my own foot, nearly face-planting against the ground. Benjamin lightly touched me and quickly jerked away, wincing and hissing through his teeth when he must have seen yet another bruise on my body.

And it pissed me off.

It made me livid that he couldn't even catch me if I fell, that he couldn't wipe my tears away, kiss my forehead the way he used to. He couldn't even hold my hand as we walked by the forest.

I stopped when I saw a flicker of something white. "Did you see that? In the tree line?"

He cleared his throat. "The forest isn't the safest place for mortals—" He gave a quick shrug. "Or immortals so close to a full moon, Luna."

"If we walk through there, will we see that care center?"

He glared. "We aren't walking through the forest the week of a full moon when it's just starting to get dark."

"Maybe you aren't." I put my hands on my hips. "But I am —"

"Luna," He was seething, and I liked it. I liked the rage and passion burning beneath his heated gaze, was almost sick for it. "So help me gods, I will tie you to a tree before I let you go into the forest by yourself!"

"But you can't," I teased as I continued walking toward the tree line. Adrenaline pumped through my system as I called over my head, "Because you can't touch me."

Okay, maybe I took it a little too far when I made a face.

He sprinted toward me, his expression one I would never forget.

I imagined it was like being hunted.

And I was almost embarrassed at how much I liked becoming his prey.

“Take one more step.” His voice was low, almost a purr, as he stood behind me, breathing with exertion. “I dare you.”

“You dare me?” I taunted, and then I took a step.

It happened fast.

One minute I was moving, and the next, I was pressed against the nearest tree as Ben ripped my shirt completely from my body.

Eyes wide and feral, he jerked open my jeans, and then his mouth was on mine, punishing it, bruising me, marking me over and over again as I wrapped my arms around his neck and gave in to the odd mixture of pleasure—of pain as the bark dug into my sensitive skin.

“You’re mine,” he growled against my mouth.

“Yours,” I agreed, reaching for the front of his trousers, pulling him closer, my fingers grazing his hot length, and then grabbing.

He let out a guttural moan, his teeth biting down on my lower lip. My jeans were suddenly shoved down, along with my thong. There was no warning, no foreplay, nothing but Benjamin Wells, a fairy god thrusting into me, filling me so deep that I swear I saw shooting stars fall from the sky.

“Keep going.” I clutched his shirt, trying to get closer even though we were as close as two people could be—it would never be enough. With each deep thrust, I lost more of myself, more of my soul to this man, remembering all the times he’d loved me, all the times he sacrificed for me, all the times he swore he’d die for me.

And all the times he made love to me.

Tears filled my eyes as he pulled almost completely out, only to slam into me again, the tree bark scratched against my back, but it was nothing compared to the solid feeling of him between my thighs.

He was pinning me against the tree, his mouth claiming mine, his hands tangled in my hair like he was afraid I was going to slip away—tears filled my eyes as my body exploded with pleasure—reminding me what it was always like with Ben.

The first time.

The last.

A tear escaped, rolling down my cheek, dripping off my chin in slow motion as his amber eyes glowed down at me.

For one brief second, he looked like himself with heated amber eyes and dark emerald hair, teeth clenched like he was trying to hold on when he knew it was time to let go.

It was always time to let go, after all, wasn't it?

His rock-hard body shuddered as he followed me into oblivion, and then he rested his forehead against mine and breathed me in, breathed us in as the forest came alive around us.

I wondered if I had ever told him that this was my favorite part? Lightning bugs glowed around us as I lifted a hand in the air to feel the warm spring breeze against my skin.

The smell of flowers permeated the distance between us. And when I looked down, there were daisies sprouting out from the thick forest floor.

“Beautiful,” I whispered.

“They’re for you,” he rasped, still inside me, still holding me prisoner.

I wanted to stay in his arms forever.

I didn’t want him to pull out or away.

“Stay.” I felt more tears than as if they would solve this. “Just for one more minute, I want to pretend.”

He kissed me again. This was the kiss that all kisses should be measured against, with just the right amount of pressure as his tongue slid past my lower lip and mated with mine.

I clung to him as he continued to deepen the kiss. He tasted like springtime, fresh and sweet, like flowers and newness, like the earth itself.

Too soon, he pulled away, eyes no longer glowing but filled with so much sadness I wanted to sob against his chest.

His fingers twirled around a piece of my hair, no longer black but gray, like I’d just gotten one solid nineties-style chunky highlight or was impersonating a comic superhero.

He dropped the piece of hair. “How do you feel?”

“Like you just hate fucked me against a tree, then changed your mind and made me want to live with you in the forest forever.”

His smirk was enough to drive me insane. “Is that so?”

“Yup.”

“How do I even manage to exist without you, Luna?”



“Because...” I swallowed the thick well of tears building up in my throat. “You know that one day I’ll come back—because I always come back for you.”

“You shouldn’t.”

“And yet here I am.” I clung to his biceps. “We should probably get dressed.”

He growled. “I prefer you naked.”

“I mean, if we’re taking votes, I prefer you naked too, but you did do this whole ‘stomping around the forest is dangerous’ macho talk about ten minutes ago, so—”

“It was at least twenty.”

I winked. “Sure, okay.”

“Must you be so provoking?”

“Must you be so easy?” I countered.

“Only when it comes to you...” He cupped my head. “My moon...”

I sighed with happiness. At least we had this moment when so many people never got a sliver of the love I have from him. I can at least count on small moments like this sprinkled across the darkness of my life. “Why does it always sound more romantic when you say I’m your moon but not your stars?”

“Because the moon’s the only reason the massive oceans have tides. It centers the earth and makes living here possible. The moon is so much more powerful than the stars. If you ask me, the moon is the goddess that the stars wake up to worship.”

“For pretending to hate me, you can be pretty romantic.” I licked my lips, earning his gaze yet again before he shook his head and slowly started to untangle our bodies.

I shivered when he started to help me dress, his fingers so warm against my cold skin.

“I don’t hate you,” he finally said. “I could never hate you. I hate what I’ve become; I hate that I want to push you away as much as I want to pull you close and never let go. My mind and my heart are at war with each other when it comes to your safety, but one thing I can guarantee—both are in agreement with how much I love you.”

“See?” I kept the tears in just barely. “Romantic.”

My body hummed with awareness as he smirked down at me, his lips swollen from kissing.

“We should get back to the inn...”

“Or...” I grinned. “We could go check out the care center, *then* go back to the inn and do that again?”

“Do what again?” He frowned.

I glared. “You know what.”

“So, you can do it but can’t say it?” he teased.

I gave him a light shove, even though I felt a bit weak. At least my arm wasn’t re-broken.

Another blur of white caught my attention. “Ben, did you see that?”

“Yeah.” He shoved me behind him. “It’s probably a wolf.”

“As in a real wolf or one that talks?” I whispered.

He chuckled. “You’re cute when you’re scared.”

“I’m not scared. I just want to be prepared. My memory’s a bit fuzzy, but didn’t I get attacked by one when we were walking... to the village?”

Oddly enough, I remembered the walk, the village, and holding Benjamin’s hand, but nothing about the wolf except I screamed so loud Ben thought I was getting murdered.

“You scared him, poor guy. I think he almost pissed himself when he saw you conjure up ice from your bare hands, your eyes going nearly white with terror. You were magnificent, by the way.” He pulled me to his side.

“Thank you.” I beamed. “Lead the way.”

“For the record, this is a bad idea,” he muttered. “But I know you’ll just find a way to come back when I’m sleeping—just stay close.”

Of course, I would stay close.

I wanted to live my life by this man’s side.

We walked hand in hand, and I wondered if Ben even noticed that with each step, a flower grew up out of the forest floor. I remembered him being embarrassed about it the first time we met, but I’d thought it was so sweet that even the earth couldn’t help but respond to his magnetism.

Even though he didn’t have all his magic, he still had some of the things that made him who he was, who he’d been when I’d fallen in love with him all those years ago.

It was strange, combining the life I had now with the past. It was nearly seamless like I’d existed and then been in a

coma, only to wake up in the future with him by my side.

We walked in silence, and then we came upon a small path that led toward a clearing. We picked up our pace as the path led down into a sort of valley near a cliff that overlooked the ocean.

“It’s beautiful,” I whispered.

“It’s clearly not abandoned,” he answered.

Another blur of white appeared to my left, and I turned just in time to see the large werewolf morph back into a man—a very angry-looking man with brown hair, a sharp jawline, and nearly black eyes.

He sniffed the air as a growl purred past his full lips. “Fae.”

“We aren’t here to cause any trouble,” Benjamin said smoothly. “We just got lost in the forest... it happens.”

The man was standing in front of us fully naked and didn’t seem to be in the mood to shift back or move anytime soon; I was careful to keep my eyes locked on his. “Do you ever see a man in his mid-forties coming through the forest and visiting the center?”

“Who’s asking?” His biceps flexed while his nostrils flared.

“Me.” I smiled. “I’m asking. My name’s Luna—”

“Damanta,” he finished with a look of pure agony twisting his face. “I saw you die over two hundred years ago. You were in the woods. He was with you.” He sneered. “I’ve served this area of the forest for years. I didn’t take your death well.” He bit down on his bottom lip. “I thought he killed you.”

“Oh, he did.” I shrugged toward Ben. “But that’s kind of our thing, Romeo and Juliet and the poison, and we have a curse.”

“A curse?” His brow furrowed even more. “What kind of curse?”

“A horrible one,” Benjamin said in a bored tone behind me. “Can you answer the question, please? The woods aren’t exactly safe for us during the week of a full moon.”

“Aw, too many werewolves?” His eyes narrowed. “And you go first. What sort of curse?”

I sighed; what was the point of keeping a secret? “It’s a Matchmaker’s curse.”

“And have you found a cure?”

“No.” I wanted to kick something or, at the very least, scream.

“Maybe the curse isn’t so much about finding a way to cure it but overcoming it...” He jerked his head toward the center. “All those years ago, you were here searching for something. You’re probably still searching for the same thing. While I can’t give you straight answers, I’ll tell you what I did then. There’s a man he visits every week. And every week, he reads to one of the patients in the private part of the house. She has her own room. She’s beautiful, like a fairy princess with shimmering hair. I imagine her eyes are a deep green or maybe a light blue. My family was paid very well to protect this section of the forest and to kill anyone who may come asking questions. But in the last few hundred years, the man who visits has gotten—more erratic. He killed one of my brothers

the day you died, Luna. He said you were too close to breaking the curse. It didn't take long to deduce that you're the cursed Spring Fae Prince and you—" He nodded to me. "—the missing Winter Princess."

I couldn't breathe.

Everything he was telling us felt right, even though I couldn't remember meeting him in the past lifetime. That meant we'd gotten close more than once. That gave me more hope than it should.

Ben's excitement became tangible; I could feel it growing. "How much is he paying you?"

"What?"

"How much?"

The man scratched his head. "He pays my pack thirty grand a month."

My eyes nearly bugged out of my skull. Thirty grand? Jasper? Is that what happened when you lived so long? You just acquired tons of money and paid werewolves to guard the forest?

"I'll double it," Ben said from beside me. "If you promise to text any information you get to my number. I want to know how often he visits this week; I want one of your pack members to follow him back home and let me know if he's going into the orphanage. Lastly, I want your pack at the festival in two days. If you see any children wandering off with him, find us, we'll be there."

"Children," he spat. "Last time he was capturing vamps, now he's capturing kids?"

“Vampires?” I frowned. “Why would he be capturing Vampires then?”

“Their blood regenerates?” He shrugged. “Maybe he’s trying to help the woman wake up?”

“Maybe.” Ben stiffened as his tension heightened. “So, do we have a deal?”

“Deal.” He jerked his head down. “Toss me your phone, and I’ll plug my number in. The name’s Shane.”

Rather than toss his phone, Benjamin walked around me and approached, holding it out, handing it over, and talking in hushed tones.

Twice, Shane’s gaze flickered to mine, and he shook his head no.

Why was I disappointed when I didn’t even know what they were talking about? Maybe because I knew Ben would ask more about me, and I had a feeling that if Shane knew anything, he would tell us as much as he could, so shaking his head wasn’t exactly hopeful.

They talked a few more minutes, and then Shane was gone, and it was just me and Ben and a forest bed full of flowers I wanted to drag him down to.

“You can’t look at me like that and expect me not to touch you.” Ben groaned, pulling me into his arms and fusing his lips against mine.

We broke apart, and I caught my breath. “Now that we’ve had sex, you can touch me without snapping body parts, right?”

“Okay, first, I didn’t snap body parts. You were just frail and fell. Second, while it’s true I can control the siphoning—the more we have sex, the more we’ll want sex, and from there, it’s all gonna go to hell. So, we focus on breaking the curse, catching Jasper red-handed, and making sure he doesn’t snatch any more children at the festival.”

“Ugh, the festival.” I took his hand in mine as we started walking back toward town. “You’re going to be paired up with that horrible woman and—” A vision of her flashed in my mind’s eye; her face was eerily similar to my sister’s.

I stopped walking.

“Something wrong?” Ben frowned. “You’re not hurt, are you?”

I rubbed the middle of my chest. “No, nothing like that. It’s just now that I have my memories back; I recognized someone.”

He sighed. “You’ll start to recognize a lot of people around town. Just try not to panic if your memory of them is bad. Everyone has lived here, lived with my curse, for a long time.”

I swayed a bit on my feet. “They’re trapped here too, aren’t they?”

“The supernaturals?” He wouldn’t meet my gaze.

“Yes,” I whispered.

“Most of them are trapped here until the curse is lifted. None of us truly knows why. Once the curse starts again, none of us can leave, but people can come in. That’s why we started the Taffy Festival in the first place.”



“A FEEDING FRENZY?” I clapped a hand over my own mouth.

Ben glared. “Look, I’m not proud of the reason, all right? And nobody gets hurt, the vampires are careful, the werewolves just want to fuck—”

“And the Fae?” I crossed my arms. “What could any of the courts possibly want with...” My brain worked faster than my mouth. “Spells.”

“Spells.” Ben took my hand again, tugging me. “The Fae that are still here aren’t here by choice. They can’t go beyond the mist, and their power is only as strong as the humans who owe them favors. So, they do a little fortune telling, promise true love in order to gain a small favor in return—never asking for money but, you know, an hour of time, five minutes, a second, and in return, they gain a little bit of their power back.”

“And what about you?” I didn’t look at him as we finally reached the street. “Do you use the festival, or I guess I’m asking, have you ever used it to power up?”

“It would make sense for me, but only because I would want to be my strongest so I could protect you. And I refuse to feel guilty about that.”

I dropped his hand. “That has to be the third time today you’ve said you need to protect me, but from my memories, all I ever see is us protecting each other. I see us as equals, so why are you treating me like I’m this weak woman who can’t stand on her own two feet?”

“Look at you!” He threw his hands in the air, eyes flashing. “You have a broken arm, I have sex with you, and suddenly you have gray hair. Do you even know that with one fuck against the tree, I just took five years off your life? Five years, Luna!”

“That’s my choice, Ben.” Hands shaking, I jabbed a finger at him. “Not yours.” I wanted to shake him! “In all these cursed years, you’re still an idiot when it comes to love! How is that even possible?”

He gritted his teeth. “If wanting to keep you safe makes me an idiot, then yeah, I’m the biggest idiot on the planet. You are everything to me!”

“Then stop treating me like you’re five seconds away from wrapping me in bubble tape and locking me in a dungeon!”

The guilty look on his face was like an admission that he’d already thought about that, the jackass.

“You know what?” I started power walking toward the inn. “I’m tired, and I don’t want to keep going in circles about what you think is best for me when I can make that decision all by myself.”

“Luna.” He jogged after me. “Wait—”

“No.” I jerked away. “At least you were honest. Maybe instead of relying on you to break the curse—I need to become my own hero. I never asked for the prince to storm the castle, Ben. Sometimes all a girl wants is for the prince to show up. That’s enough.”

“Luna...” His voice cracked. “I’m sorry. I can’t think outside of this insane need to keep you safe.” He frowned

down at the ground. “I have to go.”

“What?” Talk about whiplash. “We can’t even have a normal argument now where I yell, you leave, then come back with flowers groveling? Now you’re just leaving?”

His lips spread into an amused smile. “You’re angry, I get it. I’m angry too, but I think I just...” His eyes narrowed. “I’ll see you tomorrow?”

And then he turned around and walked away.

Stunned, I watched in disbelief as he jogged in the opposite direction like he couldn’t get away fast enough.

“Men.” I kicked the sidewalk. It didn’t matter if they were super-hot Fae hellbent on seducing a girl against a tree or a fireman who offered to show off his hose—they were all jackasses.

“Preach...” Hath said from the stairs as she threw back a glass of red wine.

“Did I say that out loud?” I frowned, crossing my arms.

“No, you just think super loud. Imagine a toddler screaming for cake twenty-four seven,” She pointed her wine glass at me. “That’s you.”

“Fantastic.” I sat down next to her and reached for the wine bottle.

“Yeah, that’s not wine.” She took another long sip out of her glass. It sludged and stuck to the sides, and oh shit, she was drinking blood.

I made a gagging sound at about the same time I realized it didn’t freak me out because I knew her.

I remembered her.

We'd grown up together.

She'd only tried to kill me twice, but to be fair, it was a full moon, and she'd had crazy blood lust from taking blood from drunk townsmen—it made her a tad crazy.

“Good to have you back,” she said after a few seconds of silence. “You think you guys are gonna crack the case this time?”

I sighed. “Who knows? He's so argumentative, and... what's the word I'm looking for... bossy?”

“He's a man.” She shrugged. “No matter the species, they still think with their tiny dicks at least half the time. And the other half the time? They're thinking *about* their tiny dicks. It's really a lose-lose.”

I burst out laughing. “Is that why you're out here drinking?”

“I may have possibly... drank from a really hot guy who felt me up, and I may have not remembered to wipe his memory, so if we become the new Forks, you know why... obviously, Montu was less than pleased but what pissed me off is he was more angry I forgot to wipe the memory than the fact that I got felt up, so then I told him I was going to do it more often because he wasn't satisfying me and you can imagine how that conversation ended.”

“Bloodshed?” I guessed.

“That and angry sex, but I'm still pissed, so here I sit.”

“Angry sex is the best sex.” I grinned to myself.

“Ooh la, la, you and Benjamin get down and dirty in that mansion of his?”

“Nope.” I licked my lips at the memory. “In the forest.”

“Even better.”

“Against a tree.”

“Up top girl, up top.” She held out her hand.

I hit it and finished. “Beneath the moonlight.”

She sighed. “The Spring Fae do have good sex.”

My jealousy must have shown because she quickly added, “Not that I would know since I’ve never— with Ben, ever, but with other Fae.”

“It was incredible.”

“That explains the white streak.”

“I almost forgot I had it.” I yawned. “I should probably go to bed. Busy day tomorrow saving the world from evil’s clutches and all.”

“Oh wow, make sure to carb up, and you know where to find me when you need a sidekick.”

“Yes ma’am.” I stood on wobbly legs and walked into the inn, my brain exhausted from all the subterfuge, the sex, and the worry.

It would work out.

It had to.

I stumbled onto the bed without taking my shoes off and accidentally hit the alarm clock. The numbers began to rip backward.

“Not again,” was the last thing I said before succumbing to the darkness.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

*Benjamin*

I woke up in the forest, completely disoriented until I looked down. My long green hair was in braids with silver beads worked into several strands. I was wearing my black ceremonial clothes.

What day was this supposed to be?

My head ached as I slowly got to my feet, only to be nearly taken out by a white horse. Its rider pulled back on the reins just in time.

“Christmas!” She swore.

What kind of swear word was Christmas?

“Christmas, stop it now!” The horse neighed and then tapped its hooves against the forest floor. “Sorry, he’s temperamental when he meets new people. Are you headed to the festival too?”

“Festival?” I repeated, genuinely confused until I looked up into her gorgeous blue eyes.

It was Luna.

Damn, she was gorgeous with her long white dress and fur. An icy crown sat on her head, her dark hair braided intricately around and through it, holding it in place.

“Yes.” I looked behind me. “Though it seems I’ve lost my horse.”

This day.

The day we first met.

Was she dreaming this, or was she really here with me? Did she remember past and present?

“You can ride with me if you want, though I can’t promise my horse won’t try to buck you off.”

I smiled. “Then why don’t you lead, and I’ll sit behind you? That way your oddly named horse won’t be tempted.”

She beamed. “Good idea.” She held out her arm. I grabbed it and slid into the saddle right behind her.

I remembered this moment like it was yesterday.

The first time I held her in my arms.

The first time my heart beat *her, her, her*.

The first time my brain screamed *nobody else*.

She touched her heels to the horse’s sides, and we trotted the entire way to the village where the annual festival was being held.

Each of the courts brought foods, spices, and spells from their own kingdoms, and this year my clan was hosting for the Spring Court.



Flowers were sewn together in banners of color, creating a near tent as the horse moved toward the entrance.

“It’s beautiful,” Luna whispered.

“What’s your favorite flower?” I asked.

“Daisies.” No hesitation. I loved it.

I flicked my wrist, creating the flower, then reached around her. “My thank you for not allowing your horse to kill me and for providing transportation.”

“You’re not getting rid of me that easily.” She took the flower anyway and glanced over her shoulder. “This is my first time in the Spring Court. I’m a bit nervous.”

“Don’t be. The King is a complete ass; the young princes are so full of themselves they preen like the very flowers they create.”

“Really?” Her eyes widened.

“No.” I winked. “Though I’d like to think my brother preens, I just... prowl.”

“Y-you?” She pulled the horse to a stop. “You’re one of the spring princes?”

“Don’t I look like a prince?” I faked indignation.

“Well, yes.” Her eyes narrowed. “How do I trust you?”

“Taste my lips. If they’re bitter, my words are lies,” I whispered. “And if they taste like sunshine, like flowers, the earth itself—you’ll know I’m true.”

Beneath the banner of flowers, Luna Damanta, princess of the Winter Court, leaned in and kissed me.

Her lips tasted like sugar.

And her tongue felt like velvet as it ran along my lower lip. With a sigh, her teeth tugged at that same lip, and she gently sucked.

I could have sworn that the entire world rejoiced with us in that one kiss.

I was lost to her forever.

She pulled back, her eyes unfocused. “You’re mine.”

I’d never been claimed before.

Especially by a woman I barely knew.

But I tasted her lips again, and the sweetness was still there. No matter what happened in this life or the next, she was mine too.

And unbeknownst to the Matchmaker—I had indeed met my match, my equal, my love.

And my soon-to-be curse.

I jolted awake in a cold sweat and saw Aengus peering over me like I’d lost my mind. “You were moaning in your sleep.”

“So, you were just hovering over here watching me moan?” I pressed my fingers into my temples. “Creepy, even for you.”

“No, I was making sure Jasper was still asleep and heard you moaning, so I stopped to make sure I didn’t need to slap you or, at the very least, tell you to stop jerking off and just find Luna already.”

I scowled. “We got in a fight, and then I remembered something but was too exhausted to look into it, which left me

here moaning in bed, apparently.”

He sniffed the air. “You smell like sex, though.”

“Thank you.” I gritted my teeth. “Let me guess. It’s three a.m.?”

“On the dot.”

I sighed and threw over the covers. “May as well get up and try to solve all of this... how’s the girl?”

“Better.” Aengus frowned. “Any idea where we can hide her while this blows over?”

“Yeah, actually.” I grabbed my phone from its spot on the nightstand. “I’m sending you a werewolf’s number. He’s on the Wells payroll and used to be on Jasper’s. Long story short, we discovered Jasper’s been visiting a girl at the care center.”

“Wait, you did all of that in the last few hours?”

I cringed. “Oh, you’d be surprised what we were able to accomplish.”

“Stop that.” He made a face. “I can smell your arousal, and it’s creeping me out since Luna isn’t here. Look, I know I’m sexy; I get told—”

“We had sex,” I blurted like a pre-teen girl at a slumber party.

Picking up on the vibe, Aengus hopped onto the bed. “OMG, tell me everything!”

“I loathe you.”

“Wait! I need to get the nail polish—”

“Why do I even put up with you?”

“I have thoughts on this...” He tapped his chin. “I’ve come up with boredom. It’s sheer boredom, and I bring a little pep and light into your dark cursed world...” He winked. “So... was it good for you?”

I fell back against the mattress again. “It was incredible, and it’s all I could think about. Then we got in a fight that I’m pretty sure made her feel like feminism was dead in my soul and that I thought she should stay home, knit socks, and bake bread.”

“That’s bad.”

“No shit, that’s bad,” I agreed in a waspish tone. Then I released a sigh. “But maybe it’s for the best. The longer we stay apart, the easier it is for us to fight this... need.”

“Right, but she’s trying to help us solve this whole thing with Jasper,” Aengus pointed out reasonably. “It’s literally what she does for a living while she’s awake in this world, dealing in secrets and information and then revealing them for all the world to see, so maybe stop pissing her off and attempt to keep it in your pants in public?”

“Solid advice.”

“I thought so.” He shot me a cheeky grin. “I practiced the speech in my head.”

I threw a pillow at his face, unfortunately missing and hitting a nearby chair.

“Old age has changed you,” he said solemnly. “Not only are you boring now, but your aim is shit.”

“Call Shane, our new werewolf friend, and see if you can place the little girl with one of the packs. Their scent will ward

off anyone coming near, Jasper included.” I paused, my stomach in knots at the thought of the man. “And go make sure he’s still asleep.”

“And what are you going to do?”

“What I always do,” I snapped. “I’m going to go to my library, and I’m going to research, and then I’m going to go to the South Cove and make a visit to Hell.”

He shuddered. “You sure that’s safe?”

“I can’t be killed. The curse, remember?”

“No, but she could easily torture you for a millennium, especially now that we know she’s somehow found a way to live longer.” Aengus paled. “She eats her young—literally.”

“She’s a monster, but the thing about monsters is their loyalty is frail at best and nonexistent at worse. We just have to offer her something Jasper can’t.”

“And what’s that?”

“I haven’t gotten that far yet.” I frowned. “She wants to be on land for longer periods of time, but that’s like allowing Satan free reign. Nobody would be safe.”

Aengus sighed. “Well then, have fun being eaten alive!”

“That’s not encouraging,” I grumbled. “And check in on Luna if I’m not back in a few hours?”

“No problem.” He waved me off and stomped down the hall toward Jasper’s room, leaving me in mine, wondering how the hell I was going to get the Sea Witch to talk and shuddering when thinking of all the ways she’d tried to seduce me in the past.

I could do this.

For Luna, I *would* do this. Besides, we were evenly matched, and I had the orcas on my side. She wouldn't dare hurt me in their ocean.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

*Luna*

The bookstore was slow, just like every morning. The Old Crone was back in her rocking chair, reading from that same book, and I'd decided to bring my spell book to see if she could read it like I could or if the pages were blank like with Benjamin.

The book did feel familiar, but even in my past life with him, I didn't recognize it. Then again, it could be pure exhaustion.

I hadn't slept.

I'd dreamed of a festival.

Of our first kiss.

Of my favorite horse.

And then it had all gone to hell. People were screaming and running around as the ocean water crashed against all the flowers.

The Sea Witch was angry she hadn't been invited since it was in her cove the Spring Court was celebrating.

So, she'd done the only thing she could do—she had destroyed everything and left a mess in her wake.

I still remembered the look of envy on her face when Ben had grabbed my hand and pulled me next to him.

The memory was strong because he didn't shield me. No, he had stood on equal ground with me, equal footing.

For some reason, the memory wouldn't leave even long after the dream was over. Did it mean something? The fact that I was beside him, not behind him?

Or was it just remnants of our fight last night?

“Hey, you okay?” Sarah bumped me with her hip. “You've been super quiet, and you seem to have gone through a midlife crisis last night and added a white tiger stripe to your hair.”

Malcom leaned over the counter and winked at me. “I think it looks cool.”

“See? I'm cool.” I stuck out my tongue at her, earning a laugh just as the little bell went off above the door.

“Mom.” Sarah backed up a few steps like she was afraid of her mom, and I was irrationally protective and irritated that I recognized her this time.

In another life, this bitter woman was my older sister. I'd been a gift from the gods, according to my mother, born ten years after my sister, born with grace, beauty, and the one girl able to take the attention of the prince who would inherit the kingdom.

Some things, I guessed, never changed regardless of the century... unfortunately.



How powerful bitterness and jealousy must be—to have the traits born and reborn over and over again?

“Sarah.” Her penciled brow arched at her daughter, and then her icy gaze was back on me as if Sarah didn’t even exist. “Give us a minute, please, honey?”

Why did “honey” sound like a curse word coming from her lips?

Once Sarah was out of earshot, I pasted a fake smile on my face. “What can I do for you, mayor? Is this about the festival? Benjamin has the packets at his house. I’m sure it’s going to be \_\_\_”

“Stay the hell away from him,” she said in a low voice that had me ready to strangle her. “He’s mine.”

“Is he aware of that?” I didn’t mean for it to sound bitchy. Then again, how else could someone fight bitchiness? With a hug?

Her blue eyes narrowed into slits as she placed her hands on her hips with a lame attempt at intimidation. “Look, I can make your life a living hell in this small town. I know everything about everyone, and Benjamin and I have more in common than you could possibly imagine.”

I wanted to say, “*try me*,” but held my tongue. Fighting with her would get me nowhere. “Well, I will gladly step aside, then. He’s all yours.”

Her anger dissipated just barely; her brows lifted a good inch. “Are you being sarcastic?”

“Do you want me to be?” I frowned. “If you think I’m an obstruction, I’ll gladly get out of the way. I’ll just let him

know tonight when I pick up my things—from his house—and his room—that you want in. Considering all you have in common, I bet he’s been expecting you to make your move and all.”

She gaped, her mouth opening and closing twice before she clenched her hands into tight fists. Damn, even I was impressed with those talons she called fingernails as they dug into her skin. “How dare you!”

I held up my hands in innocence. “I’m just doing what you asked.”

“No! You’re twisting my words! And you’re a liar. There’s no way he’d sleep with you, knowing that I’m interested. I mean, have you looked in a mirror lately? Why the hell do you have a white streak in your hair? Aging before our eyes, are you?”

She had no way of knowing how true her mark had hit.

Because if we didn’t solve this.

I *would* eventually age right in front of him.

And I would eventually die in his arms, an old broken lady.

And he would blame his lack of self-control.

She lifted her chin in defiance. “He’ll get tired of you, and when he does, he knows exactly who can keep his bed warm.”

It was on the tip of my tongue to say he’d prefer a cold dead corpse, but I refrained and instead smiled and watched her stomp out of the bookstore.

Mrs. Smith said something that must have pissed her off more because she let out a shriek of rage and practically

sprinted, in heels, mind you, back to her car.

Curious, I poked my head out the door and watched her speed off. “What did you say to her?”

“Oh, a bit of this...” The chair squeaked as it rocked back and forth. “A bit of that—I also told her that he’s bound to you, and no tight skirt or amount of cleavage will change when you have a fated mate.”

“Fated mate,” I repeated and stared down at her. I loved the way it rolled off the lips like we were meant to be together despite the universe keeping us apart. “That reminds me...” I cleared my throat. “That story yesterday... do you know how to break the Matchmaker’s Curse?”

She threw her head back and laughed. “I’m amused you would ask. Who do you think I am? A witch?”

“Maybe.” I concentrated on her face. The deep lines around her mouth, the almond shape of her brown eyes, nothing looked familiar. “I don’t recognize you, past or present.” I shook my head. “And I feel like I should.”

“When your eyes are open, you will. Right now, you see with fragments of your past attempting to fuse with your reality at present. One truth I will share.” Her eyes twinkled. “You already know how to break the curse, Luna. You are a fierce, strong warrior, not just up here.” She pointed to her head. “But here as well.” She pounded a fist to her chest. “You’re the hero in your own story—don’t give the position to someone else out of love—that’s not love. And everyone knows true love breaks the curse, often times unforgiveness clouds the ability to love—especially ourselves.”

Tears welled in my eyes. “Are you saying I need to forgive the past? Or the darkness that stole my mother away? That’s like asking me to forgive the universe for wronging me when I did nothing but love someone with my entire soul.”

“You are missing the point, and you always have.” She stopped rocking. “You will never break the curse if your heart is full of darkness.”

My jaw dropped, and I stared in shock at her direct assault.

“And darkness will never stop following you until you send it back to the hellhole it came out of. You are no victim, so stop acting like one. Something I’m sure your mother would agree with.”

I snapped my mouth shut. My mother? Did she know my mother? It was a small town, word spread fast. Could she be right? This whole time was I just feeling sorry for myself?

I didn’t know how to forgive without wanting my revenge. My mom’s screamed for it. She had been innocent in all of this. How could I not blame myself, knowing someone took her?

How could I become the hero when my entire present was clouded with pain, choking with sadness? How could I stand up when I’d been wrapped up in chains for so long?

I might as well be at the bottom of the sea, clawing my way to the surface while anchored to the ocean floor.

I exhaled out a breath. “Thanks, I needed that talk—”

“Who are you talking to?” Sarah asked. “And why does it look like you’re crying?”

“Huh?” I swiped under my eyes and stared back at the chair as it continued to rock back and forth back and forth. “I was talking to Mrs.—the Crone, but then she left.”

Sarah’s innocent eyes revealed nothing; she just shrugged. “Sometimes she does that.”

“And it’s not strange?”

She barked out a laugh. “This entire town is strange, remember? We’re haunted.”

“Are you?” I pointed at her and then thought better about it. After all, how did a person ask if another person’s not human? “Never mind.”

“No.” A ghost of a smile formed across her lips. “I’m not a vampire or a cannibal, a werewolf or a witch.” She winked. “Malcom, on the other hand...”

“I’d eat you.” He licked his lips, causing her entire face to flame red. “Was it something I said or something I did?”

“Ah, teenagers.” I laughed. “Always thinking about sex.”

“Literally always,” Malcom joked. “Not like you’re that much older anyway, but thanks for the pep talk. It’s nice when it’s with your best friend... The sex”

Sarah’s wide-eyed gaze met mine.

I held up my hands. “I’m not your mom.”

“Thank God for that,” Malcom muttered.

Sarah swiped at a stray tear as it slid down her cheek. “I barely know you, and I still wish you were.”

My heart squeezed as I pulled her into my arms. “You have me for now, and you have Malcom.”

“Group hug.” Malcom’s arms were suddenly around both of us.

“Can’t breathe, can’t breathe!” Sarah and I said in unison.

Malcom pulled back. “Women, so touchy.”

“You—” I gave him a light shove. “—go sit.”

“Fine, fine. Wait, are you guys gonna talk about my sexual prowess? Because I feel the need to be present just in case Sarah remembers things wrong—”

“Go.” I pointed.

“You guys suck,” he grumbled over and over, all the way back to his chair, where he grabbed his book and sat.

“So...” I turned to Sarah, very awkwardly, as if I was, in fact, acting like his mother even though he was two years younger than me at best. “You’re being safe, right?”

“I’m not stupid!” she whispered. “And he’s right there.”

“I know.” I put a hand on her arm. “I just want to make sure, you know, just in case your mom never had that talk.” Because she was an evil whore. Wait, did I say that out loud?

“She didn’t.”

“Figures.” I snorted.

“Malcom’s different, Luna. He’s... not like other high school boys. He’s sweet and gentle but dominant when he needs to be. He doesn’t look at me like a trophy he can line his wall with. He looks at me.” She released a dreamy sigh. “Like

he wants to pick me first for kickball, and as dumb as that sounds, it's all I've ever wanted." Her eyes lit up. "To be wanted on someone's team."

It was my turn to get emotional. "That sounds nice."

"He's nice."

"*He* can hear you," Malcom said loudly before looking up from his book. "And I'll always pick you first, Sarah. Always." His smile would have melted every female heart in the room, but it didn't matter, did it? He only had eyes for one.

Sarah grinned. "Ugh, you guys are ruining my makeup. I'll be right back."

Malcom's face grew serious when she walked out of the room. "I love her."

His eyes flashed ice blue as tiny icicles started crawling across the book he was holding.

His jaw clenched and unclenched as he let out an exhale that had his breath appearing right in front of his face.

"Winter Court," I breathed, then reached out to touch the icicles; they were so pretty, iridescent, and vibrant.

I was at his side in an instant, touching the book.

And then it tumbled to the floor as a dizzying amount of frost appeared on his face. His eyes widened in confusion. "How are you doing that?"

I shook my head. "Malcom, I'm not doing this. You are."

"The hell?" He jumped to his feet. "No, I was just thinking about proposing. You know, like after high school, during

Christmas because it's her favorite and—" He started pacing. "I'm not a freak!"

"I didn't say you were." I held out my hands. "First, calm down. Second, I think it's best if Benjamin explains everything."

"Benjamin?" he shrieked. "How is Benjamin going to fix this?"

"Yes, how is Benjamin going to fix this?" Aengus's voice came from the door. "Sorry, I was eavesdropping, and it looks like you've found him. Good, we've been searching ever since your death." He waved his hand. "You know, your first one."

I clenched my teeth. "Sarah's going to be out here any minute! Fix this."

"Fix what? It's a bit of frost, hardly noticeable." He winced. "I mean, his lashes are coated with the stuff, but that's normal when—ohhhhhh!" He snapped his fingers. "You had sex for the first time, and you're in love..." He nodded. "Happens every time with a youngling Fae." He snapped his fingers. "Kind of reminds me of my first time." He smiled to himself while I threw my hands up in frustration.

"Fae." Malcom clenched his teeth. "I'm a fucking fairy!"

"Not helping, Aengus," I said under my breath. "Just do something before he has a nervous breakdown at seventeen!"

"He's probably not really seventeen—and by that look on your face, I'm going to get a swift kick to the balls, so I'm just going to fix this."

"Thank you."



He snapped his fingers, and immediately the ice disappeared, both off the book and off Malcom's face. "You know I expected more tears."

"Huh?" Malcom and I said in unison.

"Not you." He rolled his eyes at Malcom. "Well, I mean, maybe one or two tiny frozen ones. But you, Luna, I'm shocked!"

"Why would I cry?" I shook my head. Aengus was mentally exhausting, poor Ben.

Aengus looked between us, frowning. "You can't sense it?"

"Sense what?" I was ready to strangle him if he didn't get there faster.

"Luna..." Aengus's expression sobered completely, which, to be honest, was a bit more terrifying than I would have expected. "Malcom's your son."

"No more tears!" Sarah announced. "What'd I miss— Oh, hello there. Luna, what's going on?"

And right on cue, as expected. I burst into gut-wrenching sobs.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

*Benjamin*

Something was wrong.

I no sooner thought it than the door to the library burst open, revealing a crying Luna, a shocked Malcom, and a tense-appearing Aengus.

“What the hell?” I was at Luna’s side in an instant, thankful we’d slept together because all I wanted to do was pull her into my arms.

She sobbed against my chest while I held her tight, looking over her head at Aengus and waiting for an explanation.

I was ready to yell when I felt it.

The tiny flicker in my chest.

Like someone had lit a match and fanned the small flame until it demanded to be recognized by someone familiar.

Frowning, I slowly looked from Aengus to Malcom, and on his left thumb, a tiny blue flame flared to life.

“Gods,” I whispered. “He’s—”

“Yours.” Aengus crossed his arms. “I’m aware. I just didn’t know neither of *you* were aware. We’ve been searching for him for... well, a very long time. The only question is, who the hell suppressed his power and brought him here?”

Luna finally pulled away. “I don’t understand. I was pregnant and died. We both died.”

Guilt slammed into me, along with an agony so dark that it was hard to hold in the scream building in my lungs.

For vengeance.

For an ending.

For everything.

Aengus stepped forward. “Before Luna’s death at your hand, Mother went to the Matchmaker and begged her to save the baby. The curse wouldn’t just take away your life, it was to take away your son’s, and she couldn’t bear it.”

“None of us could,” I rasped as I felt the waves of love pulsating from Luna to Malcom, it was impossible not to feel for him, and I hadn’t visited him in two years. “What happened next?”

Aengus smiled. “The Matchmaker promised that your son would survive, and she put a protection spell on the baby. Once Luna breathed her last breath and turned to ice, the Matchmaker sent the baby back into the healing realm to grow. When he was supposed to be full term, we threw a party. Everyone celebrated, and then...” He looked away. “He was gone. Stolen. We’ve been searching ever since.”

“I think I need to sit.” Malcom stumbled toward the couch and face-planted onto it, not moving or speaking.

“Did he pass out?” Aengus pointed.

A moan came from Malcom, and then a garbled, “It’s all just a really bad dream, or maybe I smoked too much pot? Yup, that’s it, too much pot, and I’m hallucinating and being told I’m a fairy that was stolen from the ground. Totally normal. I’ve always had an overactive imagination. This is just a figment of—ouch!”

“Sorry.” Aengus blew out the flame on his finger, the same flame that just hit Malcom in the ass. “Did that feel like a hallucination? I’m genuinely curious.”

Malcom turned to his side and glared, his eyes glowing blue.

“Neat trick.” Aengus grinned, his amber eyes flashing.

Malcom’s eyebrows shot up to his forehead. “What are you?”

“Sexy,” Aengus deadpanned.

I pinched the bridge of my nose. “How did he end up here?”

“How did any of us end up here, really?” Aengus spun the globe next to the chair and then stopped it with a finger. “Everything has a plan, a purpose, a reason, so the fact that Malcom’s here? I suspect the Matchmaker knows all but finding her is like finding a Tic Tac in the ocean.”

“A Tic Tac?” Luna repeated.

He just shrugged. “I like Tic Tacs.”

Malcom let out another groan. “I think I’m going to be sick. What do I tell Sarah? That I’m a freak? That I’m not

human?”

Luna moved to sit next to him, then grabbed his hand. “You’re still human.” She gave me a look that said, “*help.*”

“She’s right.” I cleared my throat, just as freaked out as her. I mean, our son was basically seventeen, close to Luna’s age, close to my mid-twenties. Whoever brought him to this realm had magic. “You are human. You’re just better.”

Aengus looked between us. “You guys really have this whole parenting thing down to an art, don’t you?”

“Shut up, Aengus!” we snapped in unison.

He barked out a laugh. “I’ll just be standing here ready to jump in at any point, but I do draw the line with the puberty talk.”

“I hit puberty,” Malcom said in an annoyed tone. “I’m seventeen. I’ve had sex, and you have the subtlety of a nuclear bomb, so I highly doubt any sort of sexual education chat’s going to end up with me too traumatized to even have sex again. Thanks, though. Really.”

Aengus snapped his fingers. “Message received.”

Tears filled Luna’s eyes as she scooted closer to Malcom. “I’m sure you have questions...”

He let out a snort. “Look, no offense, but just because you somehow magically gave birth to me—doesn’t mean you all of a sudden get to parent and do ‘the talk.’” He made air quotes.

It was on the tip of my tongue to admonish, “*don’t speak to your mother that way,*” but I knew it would only make things

worse. He was confused. Abandoned since childhood by both of us. Orphaned.

My gut twisted into so many knots. It would take a millennium to straighten out. All we could do was offer our protection and love and answer his questions.

No sooner had I thought it when a sharp pain stabbed me in the chest.

I was getting too careless with the word.

Especially now that I had both of them in my house, mere feet from my hands.

I'd lost everything that day.

And now it seemed like I'd been given both of them back.

I was terrified to feel even a little content or happy, afraid that evil was just lurking around the corner, waiting to snap its fingers and rip everything I held dear away.

The thought was fucking debilitating.

Malcom pushed to his feet, running both hands through his thick dark hair. "This is such bullshit! I finally get the girl and feel like I'm normal, and now I make things freeze?" He stomped over to me. "Did you know? Is that why you gave me so much attention a few years ago?"

I shook my head before he even got the last sentence out. "All I know is that I felt drawn to you; I thought maybe it was the fact that you seemed lonely like I was. Either way, I felt compelled to protect you. Look, I know this sounds crazy, but is it really? When you search the cobwebbed, unused attic of your brain..."

He rolled his eyes.

I suppressed a sigh. “And search every empty drawer where you store useless information—you know it’s right. You know you’ve always felt different, which is why you’re pissed now. You’ve been waiting your entire life to be told you were something because you’ve always had a hunger inside that never leaves. That hunger is what drives the Fae. It’s what makes them the best warriors, lovers, talkers...”

Aengus raised his hand as if all three applied to him.

Pointedly ignoring my brother, I went on. “The sooner you accept who you are, the sooner you can start living a life of purpose beyond this small town.”

Malcom averted his eyes. “What about Sarah?”

I knew he was worried about the girl more than he wanted to admit. “Sarah doesn’t need to know anything until you’re ready, and even then, we do try to keep a low profile.”

Aengus cleared his throat.

I let out a helpless sigh. “Most of us, that is, don’t go stomping around town with our green hair and hypnotic eyes.”

“Why’s my hair black?” He frowned. “I like the green color.”

“Aw...” Aengus winked. “Just got my braids done, thanks man.”

Luna merely shook her head like she was too exhausted to deal with him, and I had to agree. Aengus was fucking exhausting at times, some might say all times.

I put a hand on Malcom's shoulder, testing the pressure to make sure he didn't jerk away from me and hurt himself. "I'm from the Spring Court, just like Aengus—"

"Brothers." Aengus pointed at himself and then at me.

"I think he gets it." Luna groaned.

"Your mother—" It was almost hard to say the word because then it made it true, and then it made it possible to lose even more. "She's from the Winter Court, dark hair, light eyes just like you—they control water."

"Wh-what do you control?" Malcom half whispered.

Sadness radiated off me. I couldn't help it but knew Luna felt it because her eyes locked onto mine with such intensity that I chose to look away; I couldn't bear her pity, not now.

"Life," Aengus said softly. "Your dad controls life, AKA he makes things grow and can more often than not bring people back from the dead, though currently his powers are suppressed, all part of the curse."

"WE'RE CURSED NOW?" Malcom jerked away with a shout.

"Just them." Aengus nodded. "And the way I see it, you've probably got half your mom's powers and half your dad's."

A small smile played on Malcom's lips. I expected him to say something badass. Instead, he seemed to be thinking. Maybe he was more introspective than I originally thought?

He quickly pulled out his cell phone. "Shit, I'm supposed to help Sarah set up for the book booth at the festival. I'm gonna be late!"



“I’ll take you.” Aengus shrugged. “Just don’t puke. I don’t like pukers, and I won’t tolerate it.”

“Why would I p—”

Aengus was at Malcom’s side in a second, and then they were gone.

I let out a small laugh at Luna’s shocked expression. “Did he just—?”

“Disappear? Yes, he does that, appears when you want him gone, and disappears mid-conversation.”

“Hmmm.”

It was tense.

Silent.

“I didn’t know,” I confessed.

Her footsteps clicked on the marble as she walked across the floor and stood in front of me, expression sad. “At least now we do.”

“Yes.” I swayed on my feet a bit at the love I felt from her soul slamming into me without a conversation even needed, her eyes dilated, lips parted.

I mimicked her reaction and reached out to touch that perfect mouth with my fingertips. I thumbed her bottom lip, and before I could stop myself, I leaned down and kissed her.

She wrapped her arms around my neck and rested her mouth against my pulse.

And I hated that one day soon, I wouldn’t remember this precious moment or the love of my life in my arms, only the

blood covering my own hands.



*Luna*

“Take me to bed,” I whispered against his neck.

He said nothing, just carried me through the library, then up the stairs and down the hall. I didn’t want to let go. I was afraid that I would start to keep track of all the times I had to let go and guess how many times I would have until it was the last.

“I love you,” he whispered into the night air as he laid me down on the bed hovering over me with a look of complete awe on his face. His eyes seemed to glow as I hooked my foot behind him and pulled him forward. “I will always find you, Luna. Always.”

“I’ll always be waiting.” Tears filled my eyes. “Even if I don’t know you in that moment, my heart will always recognize the way yours beats perfectly for me.”

We entwined our hands together as he leaned down and kissed me, his tongue sliding into my mouth. I always loved the taste of him, like the earth itself.

I tugged his shirt.

He smiled against my mouth.

“You smell like the ocean.” I grinned, getting that final button free and shoving his shirt over his shoulders.

“I was at the cove for a while, the orcas weren’t helpful, big shock there, and I was going to question the Sea Witch, but she seems to be MIA.”

“That’s good, right?”

He frowned. “Maybe, maybe not? She’s unpredictable. Maybe she’s looking for Jasper.”

“As long as they aren’t together, we’ll be okay. Right?” I cupped his cheek with my right hand loving the smoothness of his skin.

He pressed his hand against mine as I held it there. “Eventually, yes, we’ll be okay, as long as we’re together.”

His mouth met mine again; we broke apart only long enough for him to peel my shirt over my head and toss it to the ground. Mouths collided again as an explosion of electricity erupted between us. He nipped at my neck as he shoved me back against the pillows. My shoes and jeans joined the rest of the crumpled clothes on the floor. I watched in anticipation as he moved away from me, stripping completely naked.

“Like the show?” he teased.

I let out a sigh and reached for him. “Why are you so perfect?”

“Oh, I have a reason for that.” He winked and then joined me on the bed, pinning me there with his heavy body, straddling me so intimately I could feel his arousal pressing against me.

Hot.

Ready.

And so ridiculously hard that I couldn't help but rub against him. "Oh yeah? What's that?"

"Spring Fae." He grinned. "I think that pretty much sums it up."

I laughed. "Yeah well, I do seem to remember that you and Aengus used to have girls chasing you on horseback."

He shuddered. "Don't remind me."

"It's okay now you have me," I whispered, reaching for him.

Eyes sad, he leaned down and pressed a kiss to my neck, whispering, "I do. I have you. Right now, I have you."

"Yes." I cupped his face and pulled him toward me, his mouth to mine, sucking on his lower lip as he moved over me, his fingers moved between my thighs, and I suddenly remembered all those moments under the stars. "You used to pleasure me for hours."

"It was my favorite hobby." He laughed. "Gods, your body's so responsive."

"It's you." I moaned and gripped the sheets with my hands and twisted as his mouth abruptly moved from mine. He peppered kisses down my stomach and then cupped my ass with his hands, locking his eyes on me as his tongue swiped across the inside of one thigh and then the other, building the anticipation so much that my legs were shaking.

The minute his mouth locked onto my core, I nearly came off the bed.

He chuckled. "You taste like Winter."

“What’s Winter taste like again?” I shook my head as waves of pleasure crashed over me.

“You.” He kissed back up my stomach and then slowly thrust into me.

The feel of him pulsing inside me was almost too much.

Slowly his hips moved.

My body clamped down tight like it knew we weren’t going to get a lot of these moments.

A tear slid down my cheek as he slowly started to move, deepening his thrusts while wiping the tear from my cheek and tasting it.

“Ben!” My vision blurred. “It’s so good, feels...” I shook my head. “So intense.”

He snapped his fingers, creating a blue flame to my right, and then he waved that same blue flame over my body. I couldn’t hold on any longer as I wrapped my legs around him, wanting to keep him there forever.

He smiled as my orgasm hit me.

And then another.

And another.

The blue flame continued to flicker over me like a mist.

“One more, Luna...” he whispered, and I was lost again to him, completely drained as I threw back my head and screamed. “Who says magic isn’t fun?”

I caught my breath. “Was that magic or you?”

“You will never know,” he panted as an expression of pure ecstasy came over him. And for just one brief second, blue flames appeared in his eyes, only to leave as he collapsed next to me in the bed.

I was almost afraid to look at myself in the mirror. More white hair? Wrinkles?

Benjamin cursed and then held up another piece of white hair, this one larger than the last.

I pushed his hand away and turned to my side. “Let’s just enjoy the time we have, all right?”

His jaw clenched as he slowly pulled me into his arms and kissed the top of my head. “All right.”

He didn’t see the tears that streamed down my face as I lay in his arms, wishing that our futures weren’t different, wishing that The Matchmaker would take pity and just end the curse and knowing—it was all in vain.

Think, Luna. Think.

I fell asleep dreaming of spring in Ben’s arms with Malcom by our side.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

*Luna*

The festival was in full swing, though we were on the mayor's bad side since we'd lost our packet and needed a new one for the two booths we were supposed to be running.

I blamed all the sex in Benjamin's bedroom.

A small smile spread across my face as I twirled my hair around my fingers, only to notice three more white streaks like a running tally mark of how many times we'd slept together for the world to see.

"Hey," Sarah extended a cup of coffee to me. "Looks like you were up all night."

Her grin was shameless.

"Aren't you too young to ask about my sex life?"

"Very funny, and you know I'm not." She grinned. "Sooooo... you and Benjamin Wells?"

"Me and Benjamin Wells." I chewed my lower lip, my smile gone. We'd talked all night, talked through every scenario, and still weren't any closer to trying to figure out what the cure was for the curse.

To make matters worse, I hadn't seen the Old Crone since that last time, so I couldn't ask for more hints, not that she was extremely helpful in the first place. All I kept wondering was if it somehow tied back to my mom's disappearance? The cursed town? Was she shoved out of it? Did she disappear because time was repeating?

A cold wind swept up. I shivered and forced a smile for Sarah. "Have you seen Malcom?"

It was her turn to blush. "Yeah, he helped me set up, and then we went back to the orphanage and—"

"Spare me the details." I was suddenly very uncomfortable knowing that my son was the one shacking up with my sister's daughter. Oh, hell!

They were related.

They would be cousins.

Oh, God.

Sarah must have sensed my panic. "Hey, you're super pale. Are you okay?"

"Yeah, yeah." Voice strained, I frantically looked around for Ben. "I just forgot something in the booth. I'll be right back!"

I power-walked back toward the booth and then circled around it. Aengus was hovering near the mayor, smiling like he was minutes away from seducing her out of that tight white pantsuit she was wearing.

"Ah, Luna." He strutted over, leaving my sister in the dust. It was impossible not to think of her that way even though this



wasn't her, at least not really. "Lady of the hour and..." He sniffed the air. "Well, well, someone was mighty satisfied last night. Or is that scent from this morning?"

I gritted my teeth as he snapped his fingers, grin widening. "So, this morning, then... lovely."

"I need to find Ben."

He didn't move.

"It's important."

"And why do you always need Ben?" He sobered, taking another large step toward me. I'd never realized how massive he was until this moment, and I wondered how many people he'd threatened or killed simply by disarming them with his endless charm and talking. Huh, enemies probably didn't even think him capable of it.

But now? With him glowering at me, I knew he was, and I knew he had been a very long time ago.

The Spring Court was filled with seducers and lovers, not fighters, but there had been a time when they'd had no choice but to rise up.

And both brothers had helped lead the charge.

I shivered, wondering why that specific memory decided to pop into my head. I let out a heavy sigh. "Look, if Malcom's my and Ben's son, he can't be sleeping with his cousin!"

I didn't mean to shriek out that last part, but I felt horrible for them and hadn't thought about it last night, even after the shock wore off. I had been too distracted by a wicked mouth, fingers, and toes—damn, that man knew what he was doing.

“Hey, up here.” Aengus snapped his fingers. “I know it’s hard, but could you at least attempt not to think about my brother naked when you’re standing a foot away from me?”

I gulped. “Sorry. Won’t happen again.”

“Good.” He threw an arm around me, leading me away from that tent and toward another where I could see Ben getting an earful, yet again, from my sister. He looked ready to decapitate her.

I wondered if, in her twisted mind, hate meant love...

“It’s not a concern,” Aengus said softly. “Because Sarah isn’t your sister’s...”

I did a double-take. “I’m sorry, what?”

“Shhh, keep your voice down.” He looked slightly guilty. “I may have gotten the good mayor drunk last night and found out she adopted Sarah when she was starting her political career, thought it might help her get voted in. Sarah was at the orphanage for the first eight years of her life.”

“That’s horrible!” I snapped. “She’s the worst mom ever! I could strangle her with my bare hands. How dare she use a child to further her career.”

“Sadly...” He squeezed me tighter. I could smell the earth on him, a heady scent of smoke, bark, and grass that made me lean in a bit closer than I normally would have. It relaxed me in ways I couldn’t define. “Even with a reincarnation like hers, it’s rare for a tiger to change its stripes, or in her case, the piranha to lose her teeth and every other jagged edge she keeps under lock and key.”

I made a face. “Please tell me you didn’t—”

“Bite your tongue! That woman would eat me alive, and I mean that with zero sexual innuendo. She’s... evil.”

She stomped her foot and pointed up at the banner across the taffy booth, scrunching her face. Then she shook her head and stalked off.

“So, that looked fun,” Aengus chirped.

Ben took one look at us, at the fact that Aengus was touching me, and let out a growl that sounded like a wild animal had taken control of his senses.

Aengus straightened and pulled his arm away. “She was distressed. I was comforting her, not trying to get her naked. Besides, you should give it a rest or at least feed her more so she doesn’t die by way of fucking too much.”

Ben opened his mouth, then snapped his closed, took a few seconds, and said, “Can you be anywhere but here right now?”

“Can I?” He shrugged. “Sure. Do I want to?”

“Aengus.” I groaned. “Benjamin’s stressed. I’m stressed.” I circled my hand through the air. “We’re all stressed. Why don’t you go spell Jasper again, and I’ll finish helping Benjamin set up. People are going to start arriving in the next hour.”

“Fine, fine.” He gave us his back and jogged toward the parking lot while I turned and pulled Benjamin into my arms, pressing a sound kiss against his mouth before pulling away with a knowing smile.

He bit out a curse. “I don’t like him touching you.”

“I don’t like him touching me either.” Small lie because Aengus *was* comforting, but it wasn’t sexual at all. “But he is your brother.”

“Don’t remind me. I purposely forget that tidbit every night in order to fall asleep without having nightmares.”

I laughed. “Well, at least now you have me to help you sleep, not that we did any of *that* last night.”

His face softened. God, he was so gorgeous it was hard to look away as he beamed down at me, his eyes locking onto mine, seeing into my soul, holding my heart in the palm of his hand with such gentleness that I wanted to cry. He had always been this solid rock.

Sexy with just enough arrogance that made a person want to know more.

But the centuries had changed him some.

He didn’t laugh as much.

I would never admit it to him, but it was almost like he and Aengus had swapped personalities. Aengus had always been more serious, whereas Ben always had a smile for everyone.

“Why are you frowning?” Ben lifted me up into his arms and pressed another kiss to my nose and then my mouth, his smile dazzling. “There she is...”

“I’m here,” I whispered.

“In my arms.” He answered with another kiss, and I hated that with each kiss, I wondered how many more we would enjoy before we were naked—before more white hair made itself known.

Before liver spots showed up on my hands and Botox failed my face.

“We’ll get through this,” he vowed. “I swear it.”

I stood up on my tiptoes. “I know, I just—”

“Benjamin!” Aengus suddenly appeared next to us.

“Be more careful!” Ben snapped.

“No, no!” Aengus was pale. “Jasper’s gone, I don’t know how he broke through the spell, but he’s fucking gone!”

And with the worst timing in the world, the first cars of volunteers started trickling in right along with the busload of kids from the orphanage who would work the taffy stand.

“What do we do?” My voice sounded hollow like I wasn’t myself. I didn’t have the power to protect the kids. I could barely protect us. My power was bound with Benjamin’s.

Within the curse.

Shaking, I gripped his hand. “Ben!”

He snapped out of it. “I’m thinking.”

“Think faster.” Aengus’s teeth clenched as he threw his arms up in outrage. “We have a maniac on the loose that can apparently break through Fae magic.” He frowned. “No human guardian has ever been able to do that. Ever.”

Benjamin’s face paled. “That’s because he’s not human.”

“What?” Ben and I yelled in unison.

“I should have seen it.” Benjamin squeezed his eyes shut. “Fuck! I just thought it was part of the curse because it’s always happened!”

“What has?” Aengus grabbed him by the arms. “What happens?”

“When I’m in pain from the curse, or when I can’t sleep, he touches me, and it goes away. It ages him a bit, but he always recovers within a few hours.”

“THAT would have been helpful two days ago!” Aengus roared. “I can guarantee you he’s been using that serum on himself, probably why he smells so sweet, the immortal blood he keeps pumping into his damn veins.”

“Luna!” Sarah was sobbing as she ran toward me, nearly stumbling to her knees. “Luna! He took him! He took Malcom!”

My entire world went dark as I swayed on my feet.

“Be strong, Luna,” Benjamin whispered gruffly in my ear.

I gave him a weak nod. “What did he look like?”

“It was Jasper, the guy Malcom hates. He—he tried to protect me!” She sobbed harder. “And something freaky happened: like, everything went cold, and then he set Jasper on fire, but Jasper just laughed and grabbed him. I screamed after them, but everyone knows Jasper’s the head of the orphanage, so everyone just assumed Malcom was in trouble again! But he wasn’t! He’s been with me!”

“Shit!!” Benjamin roared, doing a small circle. “Do you have Find a Friend on your phone? Did you add him?”

Sarah’s eyes lit up despite the tears as she fumbled with her purse and pulled her phone out. “Malcom had us add each other because of my late nights and fights with my mom.” She hiccupped.

Ben snatched the phone out of her hand after she put in the code and clicked the app.

It kept thinking.

“Could human technology be any slower?” Aengus roared.

“It’s trying to find a signal,” Ben snapped. We all hovered over the phone as it pinged his location.

In the middle of the forest.

At the care center.

“That’s bad,” Aengus whispered.

But I was already there in my head. It made sense. He wanted some strong blood. He was going to use a full Fae. “He’s going to use Malcom.”

“Yawwnnnnnn...” a feminine voice said behind us.

Both Aengus and Benjamin froze as a gorgeous woman in a black cocktail dress with bright red hair waved her fingers at them. “Mmmm, do you ever do threesomes?”

“Not unless you mind me killing you,” Ben shot back. “Why are you here?”

“Can’t a woman enjoy a provincial festival? By the way, I heard you stopped by. So sorry to have missed you, but here I am.” She did a little shimmy. “I got all dressed up.” She pouted for a minute and then beamed. “So, I see your detective work deserves an A-plus, and here I was so looking forward to keeping you boys in detention...”

Aengus made a gagging noise and then shrugged. “Sorry, not into fish, Pandora, or should I just call you witch? Bitch? Huh, it rhymes...”

Pandora glared.

I tried to place her, but I'd never seen her before.

Sarah reached for my hand, held it tight, and slowly started backing us away.

“Not so fast.” Pandora whipped her head in our direction. “You see, I’m under strict orders to keep you guys at the festival. We wouldn’t want anything bad to happen to Malcom, would we?”

“If Jasper has him, he’s as good as dead,” Benjamin spat. “You’re using his blood.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’m bored, but I have always wanted to do an evil manifesto speech, so here you go. Jasper’s daughter is sick. Cry me a fucking river, am I right? I gave him my blood; it was enough to keep her alive. Yay me, I’m almost a hero at this point.” She examined her long green fingernails and let out a bored sigh. “Anyway, I never give something for nothing... besides, it was nearing my birthday, and those fucking orcas refused to extend my existence past this year; something about putting a cap on immortality, you know how it goes. So, I did what any sane woman would do. I made a trade. I would continue to give him my blood if he promised to create a batch of serum for me that could act as an immortality potion. Remember the day I accidentally stumbled upon your little orphanage? To be honest, I was starving, and he was just so scrumptious. I read to him first and realized later that when the child is relaxed, the blood is more potent—tried the other way soon after, and he tasted like shit.” She sighed. “Where was I?” A frown. “Oh yes, so I told Jasper we should go into business together. After all, you have that



farm... or orphanage, whatever it's called. Lucky us, we stumbled upon a few immortals who had their magic bound for whatever reason." She sighed. "I'm assuming it has to do with you two." She pointed between Benjamin and me. "So, I think that about sums it up. He's going to use Malcom for the final serum. I mean, duh, drain him dry, give it to his daughter, and poof! A science experiment gone completely right!"

"Wrong." Benjamin got up in her face. "His power's tied to our curse too. You'll just kill him!"

"Oh, but Benji..." She traced his chest with her finger. "I already saw his magic, and so did that sad excuse for a girl right there. He used it to protect her. After all, he loves her, and he'll do anything to keep her safe. Isn't that right, Sarah?"

Benjamin reeled back and punched Pandora in the face.

Blood oozed down her chin as she bent over and laughed. "Oh, I've missed you, Ben..."

Ben shook his hand and winced.

Aengus snapped his fingers, and a green and blue flame erupted from his palm. He slammed the flame into her chest, and she stumbled backward, eyes losing focus.

"Okay, I was being nice. Now I'm pissed!" she roared.

She held out both hands at her sides, storm clouds started forming overhead.

"This is bad." Next to me, Sarah whimpered. "What is she?"

"Dead," Benjamin snapped. "She's going to be dead!"

"What about Malcom?" cried Sarah in terror.

Aengus threw another flame at Pandora. She let out a shriek as kids and tourists started running toward the parking lot.

“We have to get Malcom!” I screamed above the wind as it whipped my hair across my face.

“Split up!” Aengus roared. “We’ll stay and fight the evil bitch. You guys go get Malcom! Hurry!”

A shriek erupted from the witch as lightning struck the field right in front of us, one of the tents erupted in flame.

“Ben!” Tears streamed down my cheeks.

Indecision washed over his face as he pulled me in for a quick kiss. “Use what magic you have, and I’ll be right there. I swear it!”

“But what about you?” My teeth chattered.

His smile was sad. “I’m still a Fae.”

He squeezed his eyes shut and reached for Aengus, who placed a hand on his back, and then he was back to my Benjamin.

Emerald hair and amber eyes glowing. “Thanks, brother.”

“Anytime.” He grinned. “You ready to battle?”

“Yes.” He looked back at me one last time. “Go!”

“I LOVE YOU!” I shouted. The wind seemed to dampen the roar of my own voice.

“I love you too!” He blew me a kiss, and then both Spring Fae raised a human-sized blue flame between them and lit the witch on fire, despite the rain pouring from her hands.

One hand fell to her side, the other still lifted high in the air.

Sarah and I started to run, and I nearly collided with Hath.

She winked. “They’ve got this. And they have Montu.”

The huge stalking figure started stomping toward the group of them. One minute he was human; the next, he shook his body and turned into a fucking werewolf, one of the biggest I’d ever seen.

She sighed. “That’s my baby. Go get ’em, Montu!” She sighed. “Full moon week. He’s strong. Plus, the witch hates dogs, more of a cat person, clearly.” She snorted. “All right, let’s go save Malcom.”

“It’s almost like you knew this was going to happen,” I said through clenched teeth as we ran down the street and into the clearing of the forest. Thankfully, we weren’t at Benjamin’s house, which meant we were closer to the care center.

Hath said nothing, just gave me a knowing smile. “Remember who you are, Luna.”

I had no idea what to say to that.

I knew who I was.

I was a mother.

I was a friend.

I was a lover.

I was a Fae.

And I was cursed.

“I’m freaking out. And I think I’m going to puke.” Sarah’s voice shook over the pounding of our running footsteps as we continued racing through the forest. “I always knew this town was weird, but not that weird, I’m going to focus on Malcom now, but when this is over, I’m going to have a nervous breakdown.”

“Always time for one of those,” Hath called breezily.

We ducked behind a fallen tree.

The care center didn’t have anyone guarding it.

But there was a blue and white sort of magic encircling the small building.

I recognized that magic.

It was mine.

And Benjamin’s.

“Hath, what happens if I siphon some of that magic?”

A shadow crossed her face. “Trust me. Don’t.”

“This has happened before, hasn’t it?” I nearly choked on my next breath. “Don’t lie to me.”

“Yes,” she whispered. “Details change each time, but you always end up here.”

I took a deep breath and stared at the building. I would have used magic before. I frowned.

I always had my memories back at this point.

So, I would have used magic every time.

I needed to think like myself, like the woman who fled darkness and stumbled into her own dark fairy tale of doom.

I *was* cursed, after all. Maybe there wasn't a happy ending.

Only a happy for now.

Sacrifices, after all, always needed to be made.

"You have to hurry," Hath whispered. "I'll stay with Sarah."

"You aren't coming with me?"

"It's not my battle, nor is it hers." She wrapped an arm around Sarah. "Be well, Luna... and remember who you are."

I stood then, like the Fae princess I was, unafraid of the darkness of night or the heat of the day.

Unafraid of any enemy that might take me down.

Hadn't I survived the brutal murders of everyone I loved?

For centuries, hadn't I fought? Broken and bloody, I'd fought to find my soul mate in each life, followed by the next.

Each step took me closer, and a sense of peace washed over me as I slowly went up the steps and opened the door, letting myself in.

"You're too late," Jasper sneered. "He's dying, so my daughter can finally live."

"Is it worth it, Jasper? Taking my son for your daughter?" I gently laid a hand on the beautiful girl, frozen in a coma, frozen in time.

And my beautiful boy, pale as his blood transfused, mixed with hers.

I moved to touch Malcom, but the cold barrel of a gun pressed against my back froze me in place.

“Don’t. Move.”

I held up my hands. “I’m just going to check his pulse.”

“What’s the point! He’s dying! LET HIM DIE! You didn’t even know he was your son until a few days ago! You think that I forget what happens like Benjamin? EVERY single time we get closer and closer, and now finally, we’ve figured out the serum! I’m going to save the world. Let him be the ultimate sacrifice!”

His eyes were crazed; sweat poured down his face.

“You’ve been taking it?”

“Does it matter?”

“It’s forbidden,” I whispered, slowly turning around to face him. “One day, maybe not today, but one day you’ll be punished, and you’ll beg for death.”

“You’re right,” he scoffed. “That day isn’t today, Luna.” The gun pressed against my chest as he shoved me back against the other side of the room. “Today, you get to watch your son die just like I’ve been watching my daughter die every day!”

Aengus chose that unfortunate moment to kick the door open; his hands looked fried with smoke as he flicked his wrists and glared, blood and sweat poured down his face.

Where was Benjamin?

Aengus winked like I shouldn’t be worried.

But I was.

Because this seemed typical of Aengus and Ben.

Bursting in the door.

Saving the day.

Asking questions later.

Movement caught my eye from the open window in the hall. It was angled away from Jasper, and slowly, Benjamin made his way into the hall, looking every inch a pissed-off Fae prince as he moved down into the room right behind Jasper.

He always was such a sneak, wasn't he?

The floor creaked.

And it happened much like I imagined, in slow motion, as Benjamin lunged to protect me from the gun.

But instead of letting him...

I snapped my fingers and prayed. I prayed that this would work. Even though it didn't make sense.

Love you, Ben.

And my son.

My precious son.

A wall of ice hit Benjamin in the chest, sending him backward. The bullet hit through the first wall of ice in front of me, but I kept shielding and shielding, and when my fingers burned from the sudden frozen exposure, I did it again.

Because I was Luna Damanta, Princess of the Winter Court.

And sometimes... you needed to save yourself to protect those you love.

The ice shattered in front of me as a surge of power flowed through my veins. I was home.

I sucked in a sharp breath at Jasper's shocked expression. "My turn."

Like riding a bike or remembering how to play the piano, I rubbed both hands together and pulled them back, creating a bow and arrow made of ice. A slow smile tugged at my lips as I drew back the string... and released the shot.

Jasper flew backward against the wall and stayed there, pinned by my icy arrow.

I collapsed onto Malcom and quickly started undoing the blood transfusion equipment.

Benjamin jumped to his feet, his expression one of complete shock as he ran over and helped me pull out all the different tubes that were sucking blood from our son's body. Jasper's daughter still hadn't woken up, but her skin had color to it—probably from the magic.

"Why isn't he waking up?" My ice-cold hands shook. "Ben? What's wrong?"

Ben, very slowly, gave me a kiss on the forehead. "You broke the curse, and I love you more than you will ever know."

A tear slid down his cheek.

"Ben?" I clung to him. "What are you doing?"

"Take care of her," Ben whispered to his brother and then smiled at me. "Wait for me, princess."

"Ben!" I clawed at him. "Ben, you can't leave me!"



“He’s life itself,” Aengus whispered. “You broke the curse; now let him save your son.”

My son or my soul mate?

Why was there always a choice?

Why couldn’t it be everything?

My heart burned in my chest as I stood there and sobbed.

Benjamin was fully restored.

All his power.

But I’d imagined he was weak.

Too weak to do this if he was saying goodbye.

Because that was what he was doing, saying goodbye to me.

“Ben,” I hiccupped.

“Love you from this life to the next, forever, my soul mate, my true moon.” He looked back to Malcom and pressed both of his palms to his chest. A golden glow started to spread down Ben’s arms.

Ben swayed on his feet. “Malcom, live!”

Malcom let out a moan, and his eyes flickered open briefly. “D-Dad?”

“You have no idea how long I’ve waited to hear that word,” Benjamin rasped, cupping Malcom’s face with both hands. “Take care of your mom while I’m gone.”

“Dad!” Malcom jerked up and grabbed Ben’s hand. “You can’t leave! We just—we’re a family now. You can’t go!”

The glow was completely gone from Benjamin's eyes, and with one last haunted look at us, he collapsed into Aengus's arms.

The smell of the ocean filled the room, and then he was just gone.

Gone.

No blood.

No body.

Gone.

"Benjamin!" I screamed. "BEN!"

Aengus fell to his knees and roared.

And my son, my precious alive son, grabbed my hand and pulled me in for a hug, sobbing that it was his fault.

We all wanted someone to blame, most likely ourselves, but this had nothing to do with us.

This was the end of the curse and the beginning of something else entirely. I just prayed I had the strength for what was to come as I wiped my boy's tears away and tried to keep mine in.

"I'll wait another lifetime and then another... and another..." I whispered my promise into the air.

And I could have sworn I heard a warm chuckle say, "Good."

## CHAPTER THIRTY

*Luna*

*Three months later*

I paced the house back and forth, back and forth; everything looked normal in our small town—the one I currently lived in, permanently waiting for the love of my life to magically come back right along with my mother. The police had nothing but loose ends; it was as if she had disappeared into thin air. Aengus and Malcom both moved into the house permanently along with Sarah—which just pissed my sister off more. She hated me even more now that the spell was broken, remembering more than she would care to, though it was pretty comical when it was the old Crone that told her she'd ruin her career if she didn't allow Sarah to live with us.

Whatever worked, right? Aengus was convinced that Ben had been transported back to the Spring Court to heal. It was a complicated case of him going back to the earth that he came from, with the dirt and flowers, but to me? It sounded like a burial.

“Hey,” Aengus approached, wearing his typical leather pants, tank top, and boots. He still looked as otherworldly as ever though he was toying with the idea of adding black nail polish. “You look like you’re thinking way too hard.”

I scowled. I was finally nineteen. I never realized how much older I would feel or what sort of adjustment it would be to be frozen looking the way I looked for centuries. Apparently, Fae aged at a ridiculously slow rate meaning Malcom would mature and then look a similar age for centuries—that is, if we were ever welcomed back to the Courts.

Every month Aeugnus traveled through the mist and made a petition, and every single time because of politics or whatever, he was told to come back.

“Pack your shit.” He winked.

“Noooo, I don’t want to go camping again.” I groaned and pulled the book closer to my face. I was in Ben’s library researching ways to bring him back and came up with nothing every time, but if he tried all those years to break the curse, to save me, then I was going to do the same to him. “Last time, I almost got eaten by a werewolf.”

“He would never eat you; Hath would kill him.” Aengus pointed out. “Plus, now that the curse is broken, it seems like people feel weird leaving where the place they’ve been protecting all this time.

I snorted. “A lot of good that does them.”

“They’re worried about you.”

I looked away; I didn't want to cry—again. “I'm worried about me too sometimes.”

Aengus grabs the book from my hands and tosses it onto the table. “We aren't going camping.”

“Thank the gods.” I rolled my eyes.

“We're going to court.” He smiled like it was a totally normal thing to tell a person. Court? Court? Everything I wanted but was too terrified to even dream of because they always turned him down. Why now, is what I want to ask, but again, fear takes over. My memories are fragmented at best—my dreams, however, show me a beautiful world of ice and snow and a high court of all of the Fae that brings everything together, The Seelie and the Unseelie where shadow and light combine, where life and death survive in unity.

I nearly fell out of my chair in an effort to jump to my feet in a sudden rush at the thought of all of us showing up... outcasts in front of everyone. “We? All of us?”

“You. Me. Malcom, and Jasper's daughter, she has to convince the courts about what happened.” He paused. “It's time for judgment.”

The breath I took didn't help, especially after that announcement. “And if we're found guilty of something wrong?”

Aengus didn't miss a beat. “Well, if saving someone you love is wrong, I don't want to be right.”

My eyes nearly rolled to the back of my head. “Stop watching TV.”

“But I find the drama fascinating!”

I ignored him. “When do we leave?”

“Ten minutes.” He smiled grimly. “They don’t like it when people are late.”

“A warning would have been nice,” I grumbled.

He shrugged. “Had I warned you, you would have questioned everything and then sat in anxiety, which for the record, I can feel miles away, which also makes me anxious. Really, it was pure selfishness on my part, you understand.”

He may be a lot of things, but Aengus wasn’t selfish, not even a little bit. Something passes between us, and I know had I not loved his brother, I could have easily loved him.

“All right,” I said. “Let’s do this.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

*Luna*

It didn't take long, and it bothered me that while we traveled across the mist with Aengus, that the fairy realm was so close, so within help, yet they didn't.

Was that my heritage? Selfish people that did nothing but listen to myths and then curse their very own? My nerves had already been shattered the minute the mist went from searing hot to cold, only to darken like the night sky, then shine like the summer.

It was thick, like a fog.

Lexis was holding onto Malcom, terrified since she'd been in a freakin coma that entire time, and my son looked ready to throw up.

Get in line.

Meanwhile, Aengus was, of course, whistling, like it was a walk in the park to go through creepy fog for close to fifteen minutes,

“Are we there yet?” Malcom asked.

“Spoken like a true teenager.” Aengus laughed. “I forget how young you all truly are.”

I frowned. “Are you calling me old?”

“Nah.” He kept walking ahead of us like a light in the darkness. “You’re sort of new. Your memories and powers are old, just like your soul; your body, however, is very, very young.”

“Gross.” Malcom joked.

I rolled my eyes at him. “Still your mom.”

“So, shouldn’t you be doing my homework since you’re in college and I graduate next year?”

I stuck out my tongue.

He burst out laughing. “Oh yeah, old soul, soooo mature.”

“Shhh.” Aengus holds up his hand.

Lexis let out a little whimper, clinging to Malcom even harder.

“Here we are.” Aengus closed his eyes and then opened them, the green burned brighter somehow, and then the entire mist lifted, and I’d never seen anything so beautiful in my entire life.

Six waterfalls joined together in one river of colors that pooled around a silver castle. Storm clouds sat on one side of the castle, and summer was on the other, almost like dark and light met in the middle, like the center of the universe. On the top of the castle was a small cloud producing snow next to one producing rain. It was like every season existed.



Several guards were in silver and gold armor; in unison, they all turned our way and did a slight bow, then the horses moved back, creating a path all the way to the castle.

Aengus laughed. “Welcome home, kids.”

Massive helmets with demon-like spikes on either side made it impossible to see faces, but I saw cut jawlines and beauty. Every shield had something on it, a tree, a snowflake, a drop of rain, or the moon. I assumed this was the army of the different courts.

I was silent as we walked, afraid to talk. By the time we made it down the winding path of tall trees and grass, I was terrified.

The castle gate was open, and more guards, taller ones with black armor, stood guard. Their swords were at least five feet long. They didn’t so much as flinch as we walked by.

“Oh.” Aengus stopped and turned toward us. “Yeah, you’re about to be presented to the high King and Queen. It would be best if you changed.”

I could strangle him. “Where?”

“Here.” His grin was infuriating. Eyes ablaze, he flicked his wrists. When I looked down, I was wearing a white gown that seemed to be made out of crystals and snow. I was officially in my own movie, of Frozen. I had a blue fur cape that ran down my back like a train. The front of my gown was strapless except where the cape was attached by something red, a clasp? A button? I turned to see Malcom in similar attire as Aengus, black leather pants, black boots, and a green jacket

with a white shirt made out of snow, the crest of my family on the front.

He was, after all, a combo of spring and winter.

And Lexis was in a beautiful black dress with a high neck, long sleeves, and a train engraved with ice; in the middle of her gown was a snowflake.

“Now you’re ready.” Aengus turned. “Come along,”

The castle was huge and magical, one minute it was sunny, and the next, darkness descended. The moon fell behind a giant throne made of ice with flowers surrounding it. Hundreds of FAE of all different shapes, sizes, and beauty stood on either side of the room. Snow fell softly from the ceiling, only to vanish into thin air as flowers swayed in the light wind surrounding the throne.

“King Alvo.” Aengus took a knee.

“Prince Aengus.” The king had silver-white hair, both his eyes were a crystal blue covered in white, and a gold and silver crown weaved around his head with a black gemstone holding both pieces together. “I trust you’ve brought everyone for this judgment?”

Someone stepped out next to him; she was regal in standing, beautiful, with long flowing dark hair that fell to her waist and a similar crown. She turned, and I couldn’t stop the tears.

“Mom!” I yelled. “MOM! Is that you?”

“Clever girl.” Mom winked. “You did well.”

I started to move.

The King held up his elegant hand. “Wait.”

I stopped in my tracks, chest heaving while my mom stared at me, eyes beaming with joy and love, plus what felt like regret.

“Would you do it again, my prince?” The King asked.

Frowning, I turned to Aengus. But he said nothing.

A quiet voice whispered. “Every time.”

“Are you apologetic, young prince?” The King asked again.

“Only that I had to wait for this moment and hurt the people that I love, my King.”

The king was quiet, his face impassive. “You will have a long road ahead of you despite the curse that was broken in order to become heir to the throne.”

“I’m aware.”

“Then come, Prince of the Spring, and meet your bride.”

My ability to breathe was completely shot when someone walked out from behind the throne in black leather pants, a black shirt, dark green hair, amber eyes, and braids hidden within that gorgeous hair.

“BEN!” I yelled.

His smile could have cleared the room as we ran toward each other. He picked me up and kissed me so hard that I lost my breath.

“How?” I said between heated kisses. “How?”

“Your mom.” Our foreheads touched. “I came back to heal, and she was the first person there to help me. She said, while cursed, destiny still existed.”

Tears poured down my face. “Now what?”

“We take our son and newly adopted daughter and teach them the ways... and try not to get cursed again.”

Aengus snorted by my side. “Sureee, like you guys can stay out of trouble.”

“Oh...” I laughed. “There will be trouble, so much,” I kissed Ben harder. “Trouble.”

He pulled me in for a hug, giving me a chance to look up at my mom. I mouthed. “Thank you.”

And my mom, my no longer sick-looking, very regal mom, bowed her head, winked, then whispered. “I loved this version of you too much to have you fail.”

I had so many questions that needed to be answered, but first, I needed my prince; I wanted to see what I’d been missing all of this time.

Mom nodded to me. “Later, we can talk later.”

After all, we were magic, weren’t we?

“Promise?”

“I won’t be going anywhere this time.” Her answer was enough that when I turned into Ben’s arms, I knew it was true, that this was true, and the curse that had compelled us for so long was gone.

“Let me show you around.” His smile was as addicting as ever. I didn’t care that people were staring or that this may not

be protocol to the royal court. I let him tug me out of the room, leaving everyone to Aengus, trusting him the way I knew I could trust Ben.

We went through a series of different hallways, pieces of green ivy intertwined over the ceiling meeting to create beautiful flowers with each door we passed. Everything was alive, enchanted, like the castle from *Beauty and The Beast*. I'd never been to this part; at least, my memories told me I hadn't. My cape flew behind me as he rushed me down the hallway laughing.

I was suddenly back in that forest with him, back in the barn, staring up at him and wondering how I could possibly ever live without him—willing to die for our love for thousands of years.

Benjamin's long green hair was braided on the sides and lay down his back; he was wearing his court apparel, that of the Spring Court, and his tall brown boots slammed against the marble floor. He looked over his shoulder again, winked, and suddenly stopped catching me in his arms.

I could probably stay there forever.

He whispered in my ear, his lips nipping the edge. He waved his hand in front of me, flicked his fingers, then snapped a flame and sent it to the door in front of us.

It creaked open to a huge room that looked like it belonged in a tree house; branches crawled up the walls only to meet in the middle of the ceiling, descend down and create a gorgeous chandelier. Flowers were growing out of every corner, and actual soft grass was beneath my feet. I almost felt bad walking on it. And in the very middle of the room was a King

sized bed, facing a head-to-toe-sized window at least seven feet wide that faced the Kingdoms.

“It’s beautiful.”

I couldn’t help but walk toward the window opening and look out. There was a small terrace on the outside that led down to a path near the bathing pools and a place to eat that smelled delicious.

“Food later.” Benjamin hugged me from behind, whispering against my neck. “Us now.”

“Now, now?” My cheeks burned.

“Oh yeah, now, now.” He flipped me around and pressed me against the railing, his lips were unforgiving in their search for mine, and I was unable to stop my response. After years and years, we were here... we were together.

It was too good to be true.

But I embraced it with everything I had because the future would always be uncertain with a match between our courts, a match that never should have happened to begin with but because of two stupid people in love.

Did.

I couldn’t stop the tears sliding down my cheeks as we kissed, they too, felt like magic, and his lips caught every single one. Suddenly my cape was tossed aside, and then he seemed to get too anxious.

One minute we were standing there, the next, he was naked, hovering over me, and I was completely naked beneath him on the bed.

His smirk was typical Benjamin, and it gave me so much relief because the Benjamins I knew were one, and yet, totally different. I would have missed the grumpy old Benjamin.

I reached up and twisted his nipple.

“What the hell, Luna!” He laughed. “That hurt!”

“Just checking.” I shrugged. “To make sure you were real.”

“Should I check too by slapping you on the ass to remind you who you belong to? Who you are?”

I shook my head. “No. I know. I know who I am.”

“A princess?” He smirked.

“That too.” I wrapped my arms around his neck and pulled him down, so we were face to face. “Silly prince—I’m yours.”

“Always.” His voice cracked. He reached above my head and grabbed something. I heard a snapping sound. He held a small rose in his hand; it was reddish-purple and beautiful. He broke apart the petals slowly and then dropped them all over my body in worship.

“Now.” He nodded. “Now they will surely know who you belong with. My flower will follow you forever, and so will I.”

The roses sank through my skin, giving off a hypnotic smell, and disappeared.

He linked hands with me. “Only in the moonlight will anyone be able to see them dancing with joy beneath your skin, Luna Damanta.”

Daughter of the moon.

I lifted a finger to his mouth and pressed down on his lower lip, causing it to slightly freeze before life came back to it. “And now everyone will know this mouth is mine and the heart that belongs to it.”

“And every woman within the entire Kingdom.” He laughed.

I knew how to get him to stop laughing. I rolled my hips beneath him and flipped him easily onto his back. “Kiss me now with that mouth I own.”

“Serve me now with that body I own.”

I laughed. “Touche.”

“Love me, now, with that heart I love.”

“Love me too.”

“Oh, I plan to.”

He attacked with precision, jolting up and grabbing me by the shoulders, our mouths meeting in a frenzy of hot and cold lips, Spring and Winter. His tongue invaded, and he tasted so sweet; he massaged my mouth softly and then deepened the kiss to the point that I could only breathe his air. My hands gripped him while he grabbed me by the hips and tugged me onto his lap, sinking me onto him.

I cried out against his mouth as he fluidly moved beneath me, holding me in place. Our mouths broke apart briefly. I sucked in a sharp breath and bit against his neck, then returned my mouth to his. My emotions were all over the place. The scents of the room, the feel of him deep inside of me, the eagerness of the moment, the importance, the secrets, past, present, future. All were present in that moment.



I leaned back, allowing him to kiss down my chest. Then I gripped him by his braids and pulled myself back against him. Our mouths joined as he gripped my ass and pumped into me, keeping me from moving. The sensation was too deep, too emotional; I felt him inside of me, all around me. I panted against his mouth.

“I’m so glad you chose me, Luna.”

Those words are what sent me; what had my release so intense wasn’t just the sex—it was the promise, it was the love, everything about us and our journey.

“Fuck!” His hips thrust one last time, and all we had left between us was naked, sweaty skin and a lot of satisfaction.

I laid my head against his shoulder. “How long do we get this room?”

He frowned down at me. “Luna, it’s ours. I’m heir to The Spring Throne; we’ll always have a room at the castle.”

“And Mom?”

“Can we not discuss her in bed?”

I glared.

“She’ll always have a place by our side.” He kissed my nose. “Promise.”

“Thank you. I love you.” I kissed his forehead.

“I love you too.”

A knock sounded at the door.

Frowning, I grabbed part of the blanket and covered myself while Ben just got up and strolled toward the door. “What?”

He opened the door a crack. “Sorry to disturb...” Aengus looked around Ben. “...what I’m sure was an extremely vigorous workout... but it’s time she gets to talk with her mom, really talk with her.”

Ben lowered his head. “You know I hate sharing.”

“You always stole my apples. Admit it just this once.” Aengus thrust a finger at his chest.

Ben crossed his arms. “And your oranges.”

“You bastard!” Aengus ran into the room while Ben snapped his fingers at me. Suddenly my clothes were back on, and so were his, which just meant he now had weapons.

Perfect.

They continued bickering when another soft knock came.

Mom walked in calmly, looked at them, shook her head, and said, “You sure you want one of the tempers from the Spring Court?”

I laughed. “Yeah Mom, I’m sure.”

“Walk with me.”

It was a command, not a question.

I got up and joined arms with her as we walked down the halls. “Can you tell me why?”

She stopped walking and squeezed my hand. “Sometimes, the only way to save someone is to give yourself. I stayed with you as long as I was allowed; the rest, you had to figure out on your own. It’s one of the rules that I had to abide by in order to be by your side.”

I nod. "I'm glad I had you as long as I did and glad I have you now."

She pulled me in and kissed me on the top of my head as Aengus and Ben brought their little chasing out into the hall.

She leaned in and chuckled. "You're sure you're sure?"

"It's just a fruit!" Ben yelled.

I burst out laughing. "Yeah, I'm sure."

She smiled. "I figured, since love compelled you from the beginning, it would never abandon you in the end."

"Never." I agreed.

She pat me on the hand. "We can talk more, but right now, your prince needs you to calm him down."

"Consider it done." I kissed her cheek and walked in between them. They stopped fighting immediately.

"Ben, care to show me more of... the room."

He grabbed my hand and jerked me down the hall. "I owe you oranges and apples, hundreds of them! Promise!"

Aengus yelled back. "You better!"

Ben and I laughed all the way to the door of the room again, then stopped.

"I like this walk the best." He whispered under his breath. "This is my favorite."

*The End*

# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

*Rachel Van Dyken*

Rachel Van Dyken is the #1 *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today* bestselling author of over 110 books ranging from new adult romance to mafia romance to paranormal & fantasy romance. With over four million copies sold, she's been featured in *Forbes*, *US Weekly*, and *USA Today*. Her books have been translated into more than 15 countries. She was one of the first romance authors to have a Kindle in Motion book through Amazon publishing and continues to strive to be on the cutting edge of the reader experience. She keeps her home in the Pacific Northwest with her husband, adorable sons, a naked cat, and two dogs. For more information about her books and upcoming events, visit [www.RachelVanDykenAuthor.com](http://www.RachelVanDykenAuthor.com).

**Did you enjoy *Compel*? Then don't miss *The Dark Ones*  
Saga by RVD!**

**Check out all of Rachel Van Dyken's books!**

*Patti Stanger*

Patti Stanger is a third-generation matchmaker, owner, and CEO of MillionairesClub123.com, and is the leading relationship expert in the world. Patti is the former Vice President of Marketing at Great Expectations, one of the largest names in the dating industry. She is the executive producer and star of the hit BravoTV show *The Millionaire Matchmaker*, which airs in over 200 countries and is the highest repeated show on Comcast networks. In 2014, *The Millionaire Matchmaker* won a RealScreen award for Outstanding Achievement in Reality/Docuformat. She is the best-selling author of *Become Your Own Matchmaker* released by Simon & Schuster. Her other titles include *Raise Your Desirability Factor*, *Seal the Deal* and *Find Your Match*, she has also been a featured columnist in *People* and *Star Magazine*. She has been the face of the *Sensa Diet*, *1-800 Flowers* and is the owner of *TYKU Sake* and *PS Match Wines*. Stanger has also successfully branched out into television acting with feature roles on “*Drop Dead Diva*” and “*Days of Our Lives*”. Patti has made appearances on *Dr. Phil*, *The Real*, *The View*, *The Doctor Oz Show*, *Steve Harvey*, *Fashion Police*, *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* and *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. Most recently, she has been Executive Producing scripted television projects with the Hallmark channel’s hit series, *Matchmaker Mysteries*, starring Danica McKellar and Victor Webster, and most recently, the rom-com, *Advice to Love By*. Patti is also in development with the talented

Andrew Cole-Bulgin, the Executive Producer of the hit Netflix movie, 'The Kissing Booth', and Allan Scott, the Executive Producer and Writer of Netflix's 'The Queen's Gambit', where they are developing an autobiographical series based on Patti's early childhood in 1970s New Jersey and her family of matchmakers. She is the owner and creator of the new Matchmaker Pheromone Fragrance with Eye Of Love. Patti has also created a new course, Manifesting Love with Agness Vivarelli.

You can find out more info on Patti through her website

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Links:

Follow her across all social media platforms @pattistanger

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