



# CRICKET

THE CRICKET KENDALL SERIES  
BOOK ONE

WILLOW HADLEY



# CRICKET

Book One of the Cricket Kendall Series



Willow Hadley

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*For all of my OG Cricketeers.*

*Thanks for sticking with me.*

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## Chapter One

### *Cricket*

“Oh, thank God.”

My brothers chuckle in amusement, and I half-heartedly kick the passenger seat in front of me. We’d just passed the sign officially welcoming us to Emery Ridge, Colorado, and I keep my face practically pressed up against the window as my eyes drink in the town I’d soon be calling home.

“Did you not have fun on our road trip, baby sis?” Killian turns around to ask me with a pout on his face.

Honestly, I’d had a ton of fun. It had taken us four days to drive here from Tampa, Florida. I’d never been on a trip like this without my parents before, and my older brothers were the most entertaining travel buddies in the entire freaking world.

I give Killian a sweet smile and admit, “I had fun.” I gently run my fingers through Stella’s soft beige fur, and she curls into an even tighter coil in my lap. “But Stella’s feeling a little cooped up in here.”

“Is that right, Stella?” Killian grins down at the sleepy Siamese cat.

Stella yawns and stretches her toes out before lazily opening her eyes to look up at him. She hisses and promptly curls back up to sleep.

Killian squints his eyes and smiles even wider. “Aww, I love you too!”

Emerson snickers from beside him, and I roll my eyes while I scratch behind her ears. Stella can be such an ass sometimes, but I love my little familiar.

My oldest brother reaches an arm behind him without looking and pats my knee affectionately. “Almost there, kiddo. I’m feeling pretty cooped up too.”

Killian snorts at his twin and wiggles his eyebrows. “Are you sure you’re not just missing your boyfriend?”

A giggle escapes my throat, and I share a conspiring smile with Killian when Em doesn’t immediately deny the accusation. It’s still the weirdest thing ever to think Emerson has a boyfriend! My brothers and I have never dated anyone seriously, and Em’s always been the biggest player between the three of us. At least, he was before he met Luca.

“Luca’s not working today,” Emerson grumbles. “We probably won’t even see him until

tomorrow.”

“Aww,” I whine. Despite our teasing, Killian and I are both thrilled for our older brother. I’ve seen tons of pictures of Luca, but I haven’t had the chance to meet him in person yet.

We turn onto a picturesque street with adorable shops and restaurants lining both sides. In the background, I can see mountains for miles. It’s so ridiculously gorgeous that it takes my breath away. I’m going to miss my parents, for sure, but I can’t help but feel a tiny thrill as my magic curls blissfully inside of me. I’m not sure how or why, but I suddenly have the strongest feeling that I’m meant to be here.

Emerson parks right in front of our Aunt Aurora’s place. I grin as I stare up at the gorgeous chateau-style four-story building.

The first floor is dedicated to an eclectic bookshop called Flora & Feathers Books, and Aurora renovated the upper apartments and offices into one large living space. Emerson’s boyfriend Luca works here with Aurora too, which is how he and Em met last year when the twins first started university.

On the second floor of the building, Aurora has her office and workshop, and a room she uses for tarot card and palm readings for customers on the side. The third floor is reserved for most of her living quarters—a living room, kitchen, her bedroom, and another guest room. The fourth floor and attic will be my room.

Since my parents agreed to let me move in with her, my aunt’s been sending me almost daily pictures and updates as she’s fixed the room up for me over the past few months. After waiting for what feels like forever, I’m finally going to see my new bedroom in person for the first time.

The moment the vehicle stops and I move to get out, Stella stretches out her legs and hops onto my shoulder. She digs her nails into my skin to steady herself, but I barely notice. Stella goes practically everywhere with me, perched on my shoulder like a fuzzy, demented little parrot.

Emerson walks around to the back of his black SUV, but Killian runs ahead of us into the bookshop. As excited as I am to get inside and see Aurora, I help Em with the luggage first. He yanks out one of my massive suitcases and sets it on the ground with a grunt. He gives me a look out of the corner of his eye, and I giggle for a second as I watch him struggle with the second even larger suitcase that’s still in the car. Eventually, I take pity on him, since he technically is carrying my bags for me. I quickly wave my left hand and use my magic to control the air surrounding both bags. They’re basically floating, that’s how light they should feel in Emerson’s hands. He shoots me a thankful smile and starts making his way into the shop. I grab two smaller bags and follow behind him.

Inside, Aurora is standing near the counter with her arms wrapped tightly around a grinning Killian. She looks up when she hears the bell over the door, and she beams when she sees me and Emerson. She pulls us both into a tight, warm hug.

She pulls back and pats Emerson lovingly on the cheek. It’s only been a few months since she’s seen the twins, as they both go to school in Denver a couple hours away from here. I haven’t seen my vivacious aunt in almost two years. Even though we talk on the phone and FaceTime frequently, it totally isn’t the same. I bump my hip into Emerson and push him away so I can have her all to myself.

Aurora laughs and places her hands on either side of my face. “Oh, my darling Cricket, look at how beautiful you are!”

A huge black crow flies over and lands gently on my vacant shoulder. I lift my hand to softly stroke Harold’s feathers, and he nips at my fingers affectionately. Stella growls lightly and swipes a paw at the other familiar in irritation.

“Oh, Stella.” Aurora laughs. “I see you haven’t changed a bit.”

She taps Stella playfully on her small brown nose. Stella growls even louder and turns so that, even though she’s still on my shoulder, she’s now facing away from Aurora. God, she’s *so* dramatic.

Aurora pulls me and Emerson further into the bookshop and asks about the trip. I look around the shop, admiring the smell of so many books. The bookshop is fairly large, with several shelves and



aisles of books leading all the way to the back of the building. The cash register sits atop a beautiful wooden counter near the front entrance, and on the opposite wall there's one long shelf of books with one of those sliding ladders. I already can't wait to play around on that thing.

Aurora continues talking as she walks toward the door that leads to the upstairs. Her silky, silver hair is swinging around her tall, willowy figure, reaching nearly to her waist. Before she guides me and my brothers upstairs, she calls out to a girl stacking books onto a shelf further back in the shop.

As the girl approaches, I notice that she looks close to my age. She's a little shorter than me, a bit heavysset, and she has a cute round face with curly brown hair and soft brown eyes. Her eyes quickly glance over me and my two brothers, and she thoroughly blushes when her eyes land on them.

"This is my niece, Cricket, and my nephews, Killian and Emerson," Aurora says. "Cricket's going to be living here until she finishes school. Actually, I believe you're in the same grade!"

I grin at Paisley, totally relieved. I'd been going to the same school with the same judgmental kids my entire life, and I'd never exactly fit in. As excited as I am to get a fresh start, it's nerve-racking to think of starting over completely.

Paisley gives me another considering look and frowns slightly when she takes in my outfit. I glance down, making sure I don't have a nipple hanging out. It's happened before. But nope, I'm perfectly decent. I'm wearing cut-off shorts with the pockets poking out from the bottom of the hem, a cropped tank top, and a flannel with the sleeves rolled up over top. I'm also barefoot, and I'm wearing my usual exorbitant amount of rings, bracelets, and necklaces. I want to tell Paisley this is a pretty conservative look for me. If I could get away with it, I'd probably go naked all the time.

She finally meets my eyes again and offers me a shy smile. "It's nice to meet you, Cricket."

"Yeah, same! It'll be nice starting off the school year knowing at least one person."

Emerson jumps into the conversation and says, "My brother and I go to school in Denver, so we're not too far from here either."

Killian gives her an appraising look but isn't unfriendly when he asks, "Did you just start working here? I don't remember seeing you around last year."

With the twins' attention on her, Paisley completely freezes up, and a vibrant blush forms on her cheeks. I'm not surprised. Girls *and* guys are always fawning over the twins. They're nearly identical with short, dark brown hair and blue eyes, and they've got muscles for days. Em's a little more muscular than Killian, but they're both six feet tall. It's totally not fair. They got all the tall genes, and I'm stuck at a whopping five-foot-three.

Since Paisley's speechless, Aurora answers for her. "Paisley started working here in June. My dear, can you mind the shop while I help them settle in upstairs?"

Paisley nods and waves at us before turning and heading toward the front of the shop. The twins start up the stairs, my bags still in Emerson's hands, and I slowly follow behind them.

By the time I make it to the third floor, my legs are killing me. Killian's already sprawled across the couch, flipping through channels on the television. He's such a lazy little shit, making himself right at home. I look at the final staircase that will lead to my new attic bedroom and groan. I slowly make it up the steps, silently motivating myself by imagining how amazingly toned my legs will be after living here after just a couple of months.

Emerson's already waiting for me, and he laughs when he realizes I'm panting. I flip him off and flop down onto the bed. Offended by the sudden movement, Stella hops down from my shoulder and starts exploring around the room.

I know I've seen pictures, but the room is seriously beautiful. The floors are hardwood, matching the rest of the house and bookshop downstairs. The walls are a pretty cream color, and there's a fluffy white rug centered on the floor of the room. There's a queen-sized wrought iron bed on the wall opposite the door, centered underneath a large window. At the end of the bed there's a small bench with some folded blankets on top of it, and a light green and cream-colored duvet covering the bed, and matching cream sheets and pillows. On the right side of the room, underneath another window, there's a white wooden desk and chair. On the left side of the room, there are two doors—one for a decently sized closet with a dresser inside, and the other leading into a small, updated

bathroom with a large walk-in shower. In the corner next to the desk, there's a beautiful full-length mirror outlined with fairy lights.

"Do you love it?" Aurora asks from the doorway at the top of the stairs.

Emerson mumbles that he's going to head downstairs to chill with Killian. Aurora squeezes his arm as he slips by her, promising to be down in a minute.

"Yes, it's totally perfect! Thank you so much for letting me stay here, Ror."

Aurora shows me where everything is in the bathroom and gives me a key to the shop. She has some protection spells up around the building to prevent break-ins, and she promises to show me how to check those later. After she goes downstairs to hang out with the twins, I open both the windows in my room and relish in the cool mountain breeze. From the window above the desk, I can see Aurora's garden behind the shop. It looks like Stella has already found her way there. I can see her tiny beige form darting through a bed of flowers. I'll have to remind her to be careful with Aurora's plants, as she uses a lot of them in her spells and potions.

Behind the garden, I can see a row of other buildings from the next street over and a beautiful mountainscape. It's stunning, and my magic is humming happily just from being here in this new place.

I can't wait to see what Emery Ridge has in store for me.



## Chapter Two

I'm coming inside from the back garden when I hear Aurora call my name. Over the past week I've been here, she's been teaching me more about the plants and herbs she most often uses in her spells and potions. Her workshop upstairs is insane, and she has different potions for practically anything imaginable. My affinity is air, but Aurora thinks it's important that I learn more about other types of magic too—especially since I'll be eighteen soon, which is when witches come fully into their power.

Aurora's affinity is Second Sight, which is tricky and constantly changing. Unlike an element-based affinity, Second Sight is almost impossible to master. Aurora's spent her life learning as much as she can about other forms of magic, and mastering different spells and potions, to make up for the unreliable nature of her affinity. I can't wait to see what sort of things I can learn from her while I'm here.

I've been in the garden with Stella most of the day, weeding and watering plants, and gathering up some herbs that Aurora was running low on upstairs. I'm covered in dirt and sweat, and I'm sure my hair is wilder than usual. I'm wearing cutoff jean shorts again, and a cropped lace bralette top. And I'm barefoot, of course. Whoever is up front with Aurora will probably think I look like a heathen, but whatever. She probably just wants me to watch the register while she does a tarot card reading upstairs.

As soon as I see her, I want to turn back around. Aurora is standing beside the counter talking to an extremely attractive guy. He's already checking me out, and he plasters a grin to his face. Ah, fuck it. I guess I'll have to play this one cool. I keep walking up to the counter and casually lean against it, smiling sweetly at the cute stranger.

"What's up, Ror?" I ask, totally cool and casual. Like I'm not covered in dirt.

The guy in front of me isn't even trying to hide the fact that he's still checking me out. I decide I'm not going to be subtle either as I let my eyes travel his entire body. He's really tall, definitely over six feet and practically towering over my short five-foot-four stature. His body is lean, but I can tell from his arms he's still very muscular. His hair is a gorgeous russet color, long enough to fall around his ears and curl adorably over his forehead. His eyes are a warm brown, and his mouth is still wearing a sexy and amused smirk. He's wearing a pair of tan shorts, a white tee shirt with a skate brand logo on it, and a pair of gray vans.

"Cricket, this is Theo. Theo, this is my niece, Cricket."

Theo grins even wider if possible and holds his hand out for me to shake. “Nice to meet you, *Cricket*,” he says my name teasingly.

I smirk back at him. I’m used to people commenting on my name. It *is* weird, and I still don’t know what my parents were on when they named me. When I place my hand in his, my magic flares up inside of me. I’ve never had this reaction from touching somebody before. Maybe I just really want to have sex with him. I realize I haven’t looked away from him since I walked into the room, so I quickly turn to look at my aunt. She has this smug-ass smile on her face, watching the two of us. Feeling suddenly embarrassed, I widen my eyes at her, hoping she’ll tell me what she called me in here for.

Way too casually, Aurora gestures at Theo and says, “Theo is a werewolf from the local pack.”

I raise my eyebrows in shock, but Aurora looks totally serious. I didn’t even know werewolves existed, and I *definitely* had no idea that Aurora knew any. When I turn my head to look at Theo, he’s staring at my aunt with his mouth open and his eyes crazy wide. Oh my god. Is Aurora messing with me right now? Theo is going to think we’re completely insane if that’s the case.

When Theo still doesn’t say anything, Aurora continues, “Werewolves can’t exactly go to the hospital when they get sick or injured, so Theo’s uncle comes to me when they need any medicines or potions. Which reminds me, I really need to show you some decent healing spells, Cricket. We’ll start tomorrow, okay?”

Theo continues staring at Aurora like she’s nuts, but he also appears a little curious. He tentatively asks, “Healing spells?”

Aurora tilts her head in confusion. “Of course. Didn’t your uncle tell you I’m a witch?”

Theo shrugs and stumbles over his words, “I mean, yeah, he did. But I didn’t realize he meant, like, I didn’t know you could actually do magic.”

Aurora beams. “So can Cricket. Witches come into their magic fully when they turn eighteen, but she’s pretty spectacular already.”

Theo seems intrigued when he looks back at me. I notice his nostrils flare ever so slightly, and he gives me a genuine smile. Aurora asks which supplies his uncle is asking for, and Theo hands her a piece of paper with a short list scrawled in messy handwriting.

Aurora gives us a scheming smile as she walks away. “I’ll be back in just a moment with these. Cricket, be a dear and watch the register?”

As soon as I hear the door click, signaling that she’s gone upstairs and out of the bookshop, I turn to meet Theo’s eyes again. I have no idea what to say after Aurora just dropped those lovely bombshells.

Theo breaks the silence first. He chuckles under his breath and asks, “Is she, uh, trying to set us up or something?”

I groan and close my eyes, and I can already feel my cheeks heating in embarrassment. “God, probably.”

Theo laughs for real, and I can’t help smiling up at him. He seems to hesitate before asking, “Are you really a witch?”

I grin and nod at him. It’s a little surprising that he didn’t know about Aurora, considering she’s friends with Theo’s family.

“Can you show me your magic?” He grins excitedly.

I raise an eyebrow at him flirtatiously. “I’ll show you mine, if you show me yours.”

He scrunches up his nose—which is the most adorable thing *ever*—and laughs again. But then he shuffles his feet awkwardly and says, “I, uh, I have to ask my uncle. I didn’t realize that your aunt, um, knew about us. I didn’t even know witches were *real*, to be honest.”

I can’t help giggling, even though I feel bad that Aurora put him on the spot like this. It’s silly that we’re both so shocked and clueless about each other, considering we both have supernatural backgrounds. I have so many questions I want to ask, but I hold my tongue for now. Since Theo’s being so sweet, and he seems genuinely interested, I decide to show him something small.

I dash to the door to check that nobody's about to walk in. When I turn back around, Theo is watching me curiously. I give him a wicked smile and dramatically wave my hand in the air. The motion is unnecessary, but sometimes I do it out of habit or for dramatic flair. Waving and gesturing with my hands was the easiest way for me to learn to control my magic when I was younger. A few books come gliding off the shelves and float in the air just above his head. I make them spin in a circle, and the breeze I've created makes his hair stir slightly. After a few moments, I move the books back into their original spots on the shelves.

Theo laughs in delight. "Holy fuck, that was incredible!"

I give him a dramatic bow and walk back over to lean against the counter beside him again. We stand there grinning at each other like crazy for a few moments without saying anything. I don't normally get to show off my power in front of people outside of my family, and honestly, that felt amazing.

Theo taps his fingers lightly on the countertop between us and asks, "So, are you just here visiting for the summer?"

"No, I'm staying with Aurora for a while. I'll be starting school here next week."

Theo's eyes light up. "What grade are you in?"

"I'll be a senior."

He taps his fingers again, sliding his hand closer to me. "Me too."

"We should hang out!" I blurt without thinking. I'm embarrassed at my enthusiasm. I don't want to scare him away.

Theo laughs, doing that adorable scrunchy thing with his nose again. "Okay. I'm going to talk to my uncle first, but I'll try to come back over here tomorrow. Are you cool with that?"

If he's going to talk to his uncle, maybe that means I might get to see him shift. But either way, I definitely want to hang out with him. He's so cute, and he seems like he'd be a lot of fun. I nod at him, giving him another smile.

His eyes scan over my face and body again, quickly this time, like he just can't help himself. It makes my skin tingle in excitement. But then his eyes twinkle mischievously, and he gives me a lopsided smile.

"By the way, you've got a little dirt..." He motions to a spot on my face.

I love that he's teasing me already. I make my eyes wide and innocent, and I lift a hand to my cheek. "Oh, where?"

He laughs and shrugs. "Well, everywhere."

I dramatically look down at my dirt streaked clothing and body, and I pick up one of my feet and wiggle my toes toward him. "Hmm, would you look at that? I didn't even notice!"

He's still laughing when Aurora finally makes an appearance again. She smiles at us innocently as she hands Theo a basket filled with different labeled pouches and containers. It didn't occur to me to ask before, but I wonder why Theo's uncle needs the supplies. Aurora said they use her potions when they get sick, since they can't go to a regular doctor.

"Just tell Hawthorne I put it on his tab." Aurora waves her hand dismissively when Theo pulls his wallet out.

He grins and thanks her, and turns back to me. "I have to go now, but I'll see you tomorrow?"

I grin and reassure him, "I'll be here."

He gives me one more smile before walking out the door of the bookshop, making the bell chime above him. I'm suddenly grateful to Aurora for introducing me to Theo, because even though I don't entirely understand it, my magic inside of me is singing, and I somehow know that he's going to be an important part of my life.



## Chapter Three

I'm standing behind the counter scrolling mindlessly through my Instagram feed. I keep glancing at the entrance of the shop and checking the time on the computer screen in front of me, which is stupid because Theo never specified what time he'd be coming by. For all I know, he changed his mind. It's not like I can ask him, since we'd never exchanged numbers. Even if I had his number, I wouldn't want to text him and look like an overzealous dolt.

The bell chimes over the door and I nearly break my neck from looking up so quickly. But it's just two middle-aged women holding a flyer between them. They look around the bookshop and finally spot me behind the counter.

"Hi, can I help you?" I give them a sweet smile.

They shuffle over to the counter with shy smiles on their faces. Stella had been curled up next to my elbow. When she sees them approaching, she quickly stands up and hisses threateningly at them.

One woman jumps back and makes a small noise of surprise.

I smile apologetically as Stella climbs up on my shoulder, licking her paw casually. "Sorry about that. She's a little temperamental sometimes."

The second lady, the one who didn't jump back, smiles and waves her hand dismissively. She leans forward and whispers, "Is this the right place for the tarot card readings?"

She pronounces it wrong, but I don't say anything. I love these types of women, who think it's so naughty and taboo to see a 'fortune teller.'

I grin and nod encouragingly. "Sure is! Let me grab my aunt for you."

Stella stays perched on my shoulder as I walk to the back of the store where Aurora is reorganizing a display. I let her know she has two customers waiting for a tarot card reading.

She looks down at her watch and says, "Paisley should be here in about fifteen minutes. Are you okay watching the register until then?"

I nod and walk back up front with her. Aurora greets the women, and the one I spoke to responds animatedly. While they discuss prices and what sort of reading they'd like, the woman Stella startled gives me disapproving side glances. I'm wearing an outfit similar to the one I had on yesterday—yet another pair of super short jean shorts with a frayed hem and another cropped bralette top that makes my boobs look totally amazing. I have a black and red flannel tied loosely around my waist,

and I actually brought shoes downstairs with me today. My sandals are sitting just behind the counter.

After receiving way too many frowns from the woman, I can't help myself. I slap a shit-eating grin on my face and put one hand on my hip, jutting my hip out to the side while bending my knee dramatically. She finally looks away, but she keeps that awful, judgmental frown on her face. I hear someone snickering to my left, and I look up to find Theo watching me.

I grin in surprise, my stomach fluttering in excitement. He's standing in front of the wall-length bookcase next to the sliding ladder. As I walk up to him, I notice his entire body shaking with uncontrollable laughter.

"What are you doing? I didn't even hear you come in." I know I'm smiling like an idiot, but I'm ridiculously excited to see him again.

He chuckles. "Sorry. I was just really enjoying watching you be a smartass to that lady."

Aurora is about to lead the ladies upstairs to one of her offices when she sees me standing with Theo. She smiles at him and reminds me, "Paisley should be here soon. You're free to go then!"

I smile and nod at her in acknowledgment, and I turn back around to face Theo. It's obvious he's been checking me out again, but at least I'm not covered in dirt this time. He looks even cuter than I remember. His outfit is similar to what he was wearing yesterday too. He's wearing gray shorts and a blue skating shirt with the same Vans as before. Blue looks good on him, making his hair look even more red and gorgeous.

His eyes land on Stella and he raises his eyebrows. "Who's this?"

I somehow forgot he hadn't met her yet. She'd been sleeping out in the garden when he came in yesterday. She's being good, just sitting quietly as she watches Theo curiously.

"This is Stella." I reach my hand up to scratch her head lovingly. "She's my familiar."

Theo gives me a curious glance. I know he doesn't know what a familiar is. Before I can explain or warn him about Stella's antisocial nature, he reaches a hand up and starts scratching her head the way I did. I go still and hold my breath.

Stella purrs and rubs her head against his hand. I'm completely dumbstruck, and I'm sure my jaw is nearly hitting the floor. Stella turns and gives me a smug look, and then she jumps onto Theo's chest where she continues purring and rubbing her face against his jaw.

He's chuckling and supporting her bottom with one hand while he strokes her soft fur with the other. "Hello, Stella. It's a pleasure to meet you."

I'm still completely stunned and afraid to interrupt. When Theo sees my expression, he winces. "Sorry, am I not supposed to touch her? I don't know what a familiar is."

He pries her off him like he's going to hand her back, but I hold my hands up and practically shout, "No!"

He goes totally still and stares at me in alarm, and I notice his nostrils flare a few times. Stella is still purring and kneading his shoulder with a satisfied smile on her tiny mouth.

I grimace and try to explain. "Sorry, it's not that. It's just, I've *never* seen her act like this. She hates literally everybody except for me. She's normally a huge asshole."

Theo grins down at the tiny demon. "This little thing? Nah, I don't believe it."

Stella gives him one last tender look before jumping down onto the ground. She rubs against my leg as she walks by and I shake my head exasperatedly.

I look up at Theo again excitedly. "I'm serious. Nobody in my family has ever been able to touch her, not even when she was a kitten."

Theo smirks down at me and shrugs. "Guess I'm just special."

I smile and feel my cheeks flush. I don't want to tell him I think he's right, but I have a feeling he *is* pretty special. When I see his eyes soften and I think about kissing him, I quickly change the subject.

“So, what are we doing today?”

His eyes light up. “Well, I figured if you were hungry, we could grab lunch. And if you still want to see me *change*, then we can go out and play in the forest for a bit.”

I grin and nod enthusiastically. Oh my god, he’s really going to shift into a wolf in front of me! I don’t even feel freaked out, just ecstatic at the idea. “Sounds fantastic. I just have to wait for Paisley to get here to watch the register.”

I pull my phone out to check the time. It’s almost noon, so I shouldn’t have to wait much longer. Before I can put my phone away, Theo pulls it out of my hand with a teasing smirk on his face.

“I forgot to get this yesterday. Don’t know what I was thinking.” He winks as he sends himself a text from my phone.

That was cute, and actually pretty smooth. Just when I think about kissing Theo again, the bell over the door chimes. I peer around Theo to see Paisley walk in a few minutes early for her shift.

“Hey, Paisley!” She looks up at my greeting and gives me a shy smile. I gesture to the attractive boy towering over me. “Do you know Theo?”

She glances at him and blushes. She’s usually quiet, but she’s been nice every time I’ve seen her here at the shop.

Theo smiles warmly and answers for her. “Yeah, we know each other from school.”

Paisley quickly busies herself behind the counter, putting her bag down and signing into the computer to clock in for her shift. She was mostly silent around my brothers too, so I figure Theo just makes her nervous. I walk over and quickly bend down so I can reach my sandals just behind the counter.

As I’m slipping them onto my feet and leaning against the counter, I quickly fill Paisley in. “Aurora’s upstairs doing a tarot card reading. She shouldn’t be too much longer.”

Paisley nods and quietly thanks me.

When I turn around to face Theo again, he whips his head up and gives me a guilty expression. I smirk when I realize he was staring at my butt, but I decide not to mention it. Instead, I walk to the door and offer him a smile. “Ready to go?”

He leans over to open the door for me and teasingly whispers, “Ready when you are, little witch.”

Theo’s car is parked a little way down the street, and I totally freak out when I see it. It’s a bright, cherry-red four-door Jeep Wrangler, and all the windows are down. It’s love at first sight. Theo opens the passenger door for me like a gentleman, but I’m still practically bouncing from excitement as I check out the interior.

Theo hops into the driver’s side, starts the vehicle, and gives me a shy smile. That he seems shy at all totally makes me melt. I have to remind myself not to make any moves. I can totally be just friends with a guy, even if he is a super-hot werewolf who knows I’m a witch and seems interested.

“I can roll the windows up. I know how girls can freak out about their hair.”

I snort in amusement and shake my head. “Are you kidding? Have you seen my hair?”

He blinks and looks at my crazy messy hair. It’s already tangled and flying around, and I haven’t done anything today except for stand behind the counter and play on my phone.

Theo smirks, his eyes gleaming mischievously. “Well, I didn’t want to say anything…”

I shake my hair out and run my fingers through a few strands. “It’s always like this, no matter what. I have no idea how Aurora keeps her hair looking so silky and smooth because I have way too much energy buzzing around me all the time from my magic.”

He grins and reaches his hand out to lightly tug on a strand of my witchy blonde hair. His voice carries a bit of a growl when he says, “I like it.”

The growling is weirdly, insanely hot. Before I can respond, he pulls out of his parking space and begins driving down the charming streets of downtown Emery Ridge. I let one of my hands dangle out of the window, loving the feel of the wind between my fingers.



“So, where are we eating?”

He glances at me sideways and hesitates. “I meant to ask before, but are you a vegetarian?”

I shake my head, smiling. “No, I’m not. But a lot of witches are, so thanks for checking.”

He seems pleased with himself over my approval. “Okay, then how do burgers and milkshakes sound?”

“Amazing!” I exclaim happily.

He scrunches his nose and laughs. “Okay, now tell me. What exactly is a familiar?”

I think about it for a second. I’ve never had to explain this to somebody who didn’t already know. “A familiar is a lesser demon that takes the form of an animal to bond to a witch’s magic. They help you keep your magic balanced and healthy. Or like, if you’re hurt or have used up all of your magical energy, they can help you heal and replenish your powers sooner than you would otherwise.”

I feel sort of nervous, watching Theo mull this over. But he only seems curious, rather than freaked out.

“This probably sounds stupid, but I don’t know how else to ask. Are you, like, born with one? God, never mind. That sounds stupider out loud than it did in my head.”

I can’t help laughing, only because he sounds so sweet and exasperated. “It’s not a stupid question. A witch gets her familiar on her sixteenth birthday. I don’t really know why or how it works exactly, but on the morning of my sixteenth birthday, Stella was sitting on the front porch waiting for me. As soon as I looked at her, our bond was formed.”

“You don’t get to pick what type of animal you get?”

“Nope, they pick you. I spent years dreaming about what kind of familiar I’d get. I wanted something badass, like an iguana or a bat. But then Stella showed up, looking fucking tiny and fluffy and adorable.”

Theo laughs heartily. “She is really fucking cute.”

I squint my eyes at him and smirk. “Just wait until you see the little bastard attack somebody. She won’t look so cute then.”



## Chapter Four

Theo pulls the jeep into the parking lot of a little retro looking restaurant called The Mountainside Diner. It's busy since we're here during the lunch rush, but once we're inside, we get a booth to ourselves. The waitress recognizes him, and after she glances over at me, she gives him an exaggerated wink that she doesn't try to hide at all. Theo's cheeks turn the faintest pink, and he gives me a goofy smile.

When I order a chocolate malt milkshake to go with my bacon cheeseburger, the waitress slyly asks, "You want two straws with that so you kids can share?"

I blink and furrow my eyebrows. "Hell no! I want my own milkshake."

Theo laughs so hard, I'm afraid he might actually explode. Between bouts of his sniggering, he asks the waitress for his own chocolate shake. She rolls her eyes at us before walking away.

"God, you are fucking spectacular. Why haven't I met you sooner?"

I know I'm probably blushing, but I try to play it cool and smile at his question. "I've only been in Emery Ridge for a few days."

Theo taps his fingers against the table and stares down at my hands, his face turning red. "Why did you move here, anyway?"

It's a normal question, so I don't understand why he seems nervous. I shrug and tell him, "My parents own a management consulting business. My mom mostly works from home, and my dad travels often. Since I'm about to be eighteen, they thought it would be good for me to stay with Aurora so I can learn a little more from her. That way, my mom can travel with my dad. My brothers go to school in Denver too, so having me move here is a win-win for everyone."

Theo asks me a little more about my parents and the twins. I think Emerson and Killian would like Theo, so I'm sad they didn't get to meet him before they headed back to Denver. Em was bummed too, since he only got to spend a few days with Luca. But Emerson is on the school's hockey team, and they start up practices pretty early in the year.

When the waitress comes back to the table carrying our food, she makes a big deal of setting down two separate milkshakes in front of us. I give her a crazy gigantic smile and say thank you, and she walks away grumbling.

Theo chuckles as soon as she turns away from us. I know he's only teasing me, but it's still embarrassing. I blow my hair out of my face and laugh. "Oh my god, shut up!"

He wolfs his burger down in record time and keeps his eyes on me as he sips on his milkshake. It makes me feel self-conscious, but I don't break eye contact. When he keeps staring at me without saying anything, I raise one eyebrow at him questioningly.

He smiles bashfully and clears his throat. "I know you've only been in town a couple of days, but have you met anyone else besides me and Paisley?"

"Not really." I shrug. "My brother's boyfriend Luca works at the bookshop, but he's a few years older than us. Paisley seems nice, but she's quiet. We haven't had much of a chance to talk yet."

Theo tilts his head thoughtfully. "Yeah, Paisley's always been like that."

"Do you know her pretty well?"

He shakes his head and slowly smiles with a mischievous glint in his eyes. "No, but she has a crush on my friend Hollis."

This is the first time Theo's mentioned any of his friends, and I can't help but perk up with interest. "How do you know?" If Paisley's too shy to even say a word in front of Theo or my brothers, I can't imagine her telling a guy she has a crush on them.

He hesitates and clears his throat like he's embarrassed. "Well, she writes him love notes and poems. I don't think she knows that we know it's her."

I quickly swallow a bite of my burger and ask, "What do you mean?"

He taps his fingers on the table between us. "We can smell her on the paper she uses."

I blink, taking a second to let that soak in. It hadn't even occurred to me he might have an enhanced sense of smell. I'm absolutely horrified, thinking about how I must have smelled to him when we met yesterday after I'd been working in the garden all freaking day. Oh my *god*.

Theo taps his fingers on the table more erratically. I think my silence is making him nervous because he rambles. "Hollis felt terrible when she started leaving them for him. He didn't tell me or Cas about it at first because he knew we'd make fun of her. But Cas found him hiding one, and we started giving him hell over it."

I'm only half paying attention, still thinking about how bad I probably smelled yesterday. But I furrow my eyebrows when I realize what he just said. "You make fun of her?"

Theo grimaces, and his cheeks redden in embarrassment. "Fuck, I didn't mean to tell you that. I sound like a huge asshole now. But we don't, I mean, we've never told anyone outside of the three of us, and we would never make fun of her to her face. And she's actually not a bad writer. It's just, you know, she really isn't Hollis's type?"

It kills me that he's freaking out. Even though I think he and his friends are jerks for making fun of Paisley's crush, I don't want Theo to be upset. I reach out and brush my hand over his furiously tapping fingers. He stops moving and meets my eyes, still looking embarrassed. My skin tingles from touching him, and I can feel my magic humming again. But my reaction isn't as intense as yesterday, which is a relief.

"It *is* kind of mean," I admit with a shrug. "Just because Paisley isn't Hollis's type, that shouldn't give you guys the right to make fun of her. But I'm not mad at you, and I don't think you're an asshole! My brothers are the same way when people do embarrassing things to get their attention."

Theo gives me a long, intense look and I watch his nostrils flare faintly. I blush again when I realize he's *sniffing me*. I focus on my milkshake, desperately trying to think of a way to change the subject. When it feels like I'm getting a brain freeze, I look up to find him still watching me and smiling.

"So." I cough awkwardly. "Hollis and Cas are part of your, um, family?" I don't know how else to word it while we're in public like this.

His smile tightens, and he lets out a sigh and smiles for real. "Yeah, they're practically my brothers. We've been best friends our entire lives. If you don't meet them in the next few days, you'll meet them when we start school. They're going to fucking love you."

I finish the last of my milkshake, and Theo grins down at my mostly empty plate. Ugh, does he really have to bring attention to the fact that I ate everything? I'm feeling like the most unattractive

girl ever. It only takes a couple of minutes for Theo to get the check.

When I offer to pay for my half, he gives me an offended look and says, “Don’t even think about it.”

When we go outside to the jeep, Theo opens the passenger door for me again. While driving, he tells me about this secluded area in the woods where he’s sure we’ll have some privacy. He seems super excited, and I am too. But I’m also getting a little nervous, and I cannot stop thinking about the freaking *smell* thing.

After a couple of minutes, he glances over at me. “Hey, what’s wrong?”

I shake my head and smile at him, but I can tell he’s not buying it. “Nothing!”

He taps his fingers on the steering wheel and looks at me again. “We don’t have to go to the woods if you don’t want. I don’t want you to be afraid of me.”

“I’m not afraid of you!”

He narrows his eyes like he’s not sure he should believe me, and it looks like his feelings might be hurt.

I rest my hand on his arm and tell him sincerely, “Theo, I swear I’m not afraid of you. Yes, I am a little nervous, but it’s just because I don’t really know anything about werewolves. You didn’t know anything about witches before yesterday, right?” When he nods hesitantly, I continue. “Well, I’m in the same boat. Before my aunt introduced us, it never even occurred to me that there might be other magical or supernatural creatures in the world, which is honestly really stupid and presumptuous of me.”

He glances sideways at me again. “You promise that’s all it is?”

I turn to look out the window and breathe out of my nose, annoyed. Dammit, why does he have to be so perceptive?

“Cricket?” His voice somehow sounds both uncertain and authoritative.

I groan and turn toward him again. “God, okay, *fine*. This is embarrassing, but ever since you mentioned being able to *smell* Paisley from just a piece of paper, I’ve been freaking out wondering what I smell like to you. Yesterday when we met, I had been working in the garden all fucking day and I stood there flirting with you, completely covered in dirt and sweat.”

It takes a lot of effort to look up at Theo after that mortifying confession. He doesn’t even *say* anything. He’s just grinning his ass off with his nose scrunched up, looking totally adorable. I want to punch him.

When he glances at me, still grinning like a lunatic, I slump down in the seat. “God, what!? Why are you smiling like that?”

He laughs. “You’ve seriously been stressing yourself out over what you smell like to me? It’s just so, I don’t know, so fucking cute.”

I continue glowering, slumping down even further into the seat. When he sees the look on my face, he laughs harder.

“First, little witch, you have no idea how satisfying it is to see you get so flustered and embarrassed. I’ve never met a girl that’s as cool and confident as you are before, and it’s pretty fucking nerve-racking.”

I consider this for a second. That’s not such a bad compliment. It actually feels pretty good to know that I was pulling it off when I was pretending to play it cool before. But I’m still glaring at him because he hasn’t addressed the dreaded *smell* issue.

He grins at me again. “Second, I’m just going to come right out and say that you smell fucking incredible.”

I sit up straight and squeak, “What!?”

“My wolf *really* likes the way you smell.”

Theo’s blushing now, but the way he says that with a bit of a growl in his voice makes my skin

tingle and causes my magic to zing like crazy. I can't think of anything to say, so I just smile over at him.

He smiles back, and we spend the next few minutes in a comfortable silence. Theo drives us up into the mountains, and at one point, it seems like he's gone completely off the marked road. When the forest becomes too dense to drive through anymore, he parks and turns the jeep off.



## Chapter Five

“Ready to play, little witch?” Theo smiles teasingly.

I nod enthusiastically, all of my excitement rushing back now that we’re here.

“We’ll have to hike a bit to get to the spot I want to show you.” Theo looks down at my feet and grimaces. “Fuck, I wasn’t thinking earlier. I should have told you to bring different shoes. I can carry you.”

I smile and shake my head, already sliding my sandals off. “No, thanks. I’m going barefoot anyway, so it doesn’t matter.”

Before he can respond, I hop out of the jeep and curl my toes in the dirt. I feel my magic connect to the energy around me, and I take a deep breath, inhaling the scent of the forest. My magic is buzzing inside of me, begging to be released. I shut the passenger door and take a few more steps into the woods, lightly threading the air through my fingers as I let a few of the surrounding leaves and twigs rustle around my feet. When I spin around, Theo is staring at me in wonder.

“Can you feel it? I’ve never felt so much natural energy in one place before.”

Theo shakes his head and smiles, still marveling at me. “I can smell it though.”

He leads me through the woods. At first, he’s concerned that I’m going to hurt my feet, but after I explain that being barefoot helps me feel more grounded to my magic, he seems excited. We walk for about ten minutes before coming to a large grassy clearing that leads up to a small, sparkling lake. It’s breathtaking, and I spend a few minutes looking around in amazement.

“Nobody comes here?” I ask in bewilderment.

Theo grins down at me. “Well, we do. But it’s not on any maps or trails.”

I feel so stupidly happy. I spin in a circle, laughing breathlessly as I let my magic gather around me. I can feel my hair blowing around wildly, and I slowly let the air lift me a few inches off the ground. It’s so much easier here than it was back home in Florida. My witch’s blood is positively singing, telling me I belong here. I let myself float until I’m only a couple of inches higher than Theo’s eye level. He takes a step toward me, giving me a dazzling smile as he reaches his hands up to gently grab my hips and pull me down against his chest. I let go of my magic, and he holds me tighter so I don’t fall.

He scrunches his nose, and his eyes dance in wicked delight. “Okay, little witch. It’s my turn to

show off.”

He sets me down on the ground and takes a step back. He gives me a crazy wide smile, and he changes. It happens so quickly I swear I must have blinked. Where Theo was standing just a second ago, there’s now a giant wolf in his place.

My breath catches, and my eyes widen in amazement. He’s so large that my head barely reaches his back when I’m standing beside him. His fur is a beautiful reddish-brown, similar to his hair color, and his eyes are slightly more vibrant than in his human form. He’s standing still, waiting for me to react first. When I smile and take a step closer to him, he wags his tail and flops his tongue out the side of his mouth, giving me a dopey grin. I reach my hand up to brush my fingers through his fur, which is incredibly soft.

I can’t believe this is happening right now. It’s unbelievable that I’ve somehow made friends with a *werewolf*! I’m so giddy, just ogling him in admiration. He sniffs me all over, wagging his tail like crazy. I giggle and press my forehead against his when he does that, and I scratch him behind his ears. He makes a cute little grunting noise, so I assume he likes it.

I pull back and look him in the eyes with a smirk. “I feel kind of cheated. In *Twilight*, they had to take their clothes off before they could shift.”

His eyes crinkle, and he snorts, nuzzling my side with his nose. It tickles, and I laugh. He leaps away from me and spins around. He’s only a few feet away, and he’s half-crouched with his front paws flat on the ground, wagging his tail wildly. He whines at me, looking like an adorable overgrown puppy.

Well, he said that he wanted to play. I put a hand on my hip and smirk sarcastically. “You want to play fetch, boy?”

He flattens his ears and snorts at me again. I guess that’s his wolf laugh? I look around and spot a large, fallen branch next to a tree about ten feet away. I give Theo a wicked grin and use my magic to make the branch float over until it’s hovering in front of me. Theo crouches and looks at me expectantly. I laugh once, wave my hand, and launch the branch across the entire clearing. I’ve never done something like that before, and I feel a rush of adrenaline as my magic hums in response.

Theo takes off running. I’ve never seen anything move so freaking fast in my life. Seconds later, he comes back and drops the branch at my feet. He sits back, wagging his tail and panting with his tongue hanging out of his mouth. I laugh so hard that my sides hurt, and I bend over to catch my breath. Theo nudges my side and sniffs me, and he licks me across my face. I squeal, half in delight, half in disgust.

I use my magic to throw the branch across the clearing several more times. Theo tries to outrun the branch, and he catches it in the air a couple of times.

The next time he brings the branch back, looking way too pleased with himself, I smirk and raise my eyebrows. I wave my hand and toss the branch out into the lake. Theo folds his ears back and yips at me, but he leaps straight into the water. Seeing him do that makes me giggle like crazy.

When he comes back out, he drops the branch beside me and stares at me with mischief flickering in his eyes. Without warning, he shakes his fur out, completely drenching me in water. I squeal and hold my hands up in front of me, but it’s futile.

He has a smug, wolfy grin on his face, but I just smirk at him again. Using my magic, it takes only seconds before I’m dry once more. Theo blinks at me and then huffs like he’s annoyed. He slaps one of his gigantic paws down in the water so it splashes me.

“Oh my god!” I laugh. “You are such a little punk!”

He wags his tail and splashes me again. I use my power to try to push a small wave at him, but the water barely even ripples at my attempt. I don’t know any water spells, and I glare down at the lake like I’ve been personally affronted. Theo seems to find the whole thing hilarious, and he splashes me again and again while he keeps on wagging his stupid, fluffy tail. I take a step onto the water. Technically, I’m just barely floating over the top of it, but it looks like I’m walking on the water. This is another trick I’ve never tried before, and I can’t stop grinning. I take a few more steps and turn to laugh at Theo in delight.

He crouches down, ready to pounce. I squeal and start running over the water away from him. He lunges and splashes into the water only a couple of feet away, completely soaking me again. I keep running and he follows behind me, crashing his enormous body through the water. The lake must not be deep, because he doesn't seem to have any trouble touching the bottom. Only in the very center does it seem like it's deep enough that he has to doggy-paddle, which I find ridiculously adorable.

I'm having so much fun that I completely lose track of time. I don't think I've ever felt so lighthearted, or so completely free to truly be myself and to test my power without limits.

Eventually, I feel myself slowing down. I think I might be getting close to using up my magical energy. I've never pushed it this far before. Before I can tell Theo I might need a break, he lunges up from the water and tackles me. I'm pulled down into the water so suddenly that I get water in my nose and mouth. When I break the surface, I spend several seconds coughing and spluttering. Theo instantly shifts back into his human form again, and he holds me up while treading water.

"Oh fuck, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you." He stares at me with wide, horror-stricken eyes.

Once I catch my breath, I give him a small smile. "It's okay, you didn't hurt me."

He presses his forehead against mine. "Cricket," he says, his voice sounding like he's physically in pain. "I just fucking body slammed you into the water."

I brush a lock of his hair out of his eyes. He looks terrified. I keep my eyes locked on his and say, "Theo, listen to me. I am not hurt. You just caught me by surprise, and I breathed water into my nose."

He bites his lip and shakes his head, eyes still locked on mine. "But I could have—"

"Yes," I cut him off. "You *could* have hurt me. We both need to be more careful next time, but I trust you. And I want you to trust me."

He looks like he wants to argue, but after a few moments, he breathes out deeply and says, "Okay. I trust you too."

I smile brightly, and it only takes a second for him to smile back. He's still holding me up in the water, and I realize how exhausted I really am.

"Can you swim back to shore?" he asks. We're nearly in the center of the lake. It's not that far, but I'm embarrassed to admit I'm not sure if I can make it or not.

Theo notices my grimace and chuckles. "It's okay. I'm going to shift again, and I can carry you on my back. Alright?"

Before I can respond or even nod in acknowledgment, Theo shifts back into a wolf. His feet can't touch the ground here, so he starts doggy-paddling in a circle around me and whines until I've pulled myself onto his back. He quickly swims up to the shore and leaps up onto the ground with me still clinging tightly to his fur.

He crouches low, so it's easier for me to get down. Once both my feet are on the ground again, he shifts back into his human form. We're both dripping wet, so I use the air to quickly dry myself and shake out my tangled hair.

Theo pouts. "Hey, what about me?"

I give him a small smile and shake my head. "I don't know what it will feel like for you."

Theo flips his wet hair out of his eyes and gives me a wild grin. "Like I said, I trust you."

I bite my lip since I've never really used my magic on somebody like this before, not even my brothers. But Theo is grinning like a maniac, so I quickly wave my hand and dry him using my magic too.

"Thanks! That's actually pretty fucking practical. And in case you were wondering, it feels warm and sort of tingly."

I laugh, and I automatically lean against him when he throws his arm around my shoulders. He smiles and asks if I'm ready to go home. I sigh sadly, but nod. I had so much fun today, and part of



me never wants to leave. Theo offers to give me a piggyback ride, and I'm tired enough that I don't object.

We slowly make our way back to the jeep, a comfortable silence between us. When I get into the vehicle and see the time on the dash, I clap a hand over my mouth. It's just after five, which means we were playing in the forest for nearly four hours.

"Holy crap, it didn't feel like we were out there for that long."

Theo grimaces down at his phone. "Sorry, I didn't realize. No wonder you're so worn out."

A few seconds later, he's still frowning at something on his phone. I tap my fingers lightly against his thigh. "What's wrong? Do you need to go home?"

He shakes his head and gives me a lopsided smile. "Nah, it's just Cas and Hollis. They've been blowing up my phone. I don't really want to tell them about you just yet."

I pick up my flannel that I'd left folded on the floor of the jeep with my sandals earlier and thread my arms through it. While I'm buttoning it up, I frown and ask, "Why's that?"

Theo suddenly seems extremely focused on my fingers, and his eyes follow all the way up my shirt until they stop on my chest.

I laugh and snap my fingers in front of his face. "Seriously?"

He grins and meets my eyes again, not looking ashamed in the slightest. "Sorry, what were you asking me?"

I roll my eyes playfully, but I bite my lip as I rephrase my question. "Why don't you want your friends to know about me? You don't think they'll like me?"

He shakes his head quickly. "No, that's the problem. They're going to fucking love you. And I know you're going to be crazy about them too. I just..." He gives me a shy smile and softens his voice. "I want to keep you all to myself for a little while."

I grin and lean over to rest my forehead against his shoulder. "Ugh, why do you have to be so adorable?"

He gives me his scrunchy-nose smile and laughs, nuzzling his face into my hair. It reminds me of him in his wolf form, and I can't help giggling.

He pulls back and raises his eyebrows at me with a goofy smile. "So, do you like my wolf?"

I widen my eyes and laugh in delight. "You're fucking huge! I really don't know what I expected, but seriously, you're magnificent."

"Cricket, *you* are fucking magnificent. I've never seen anything so amazing! When you made those books fly around the shop yesterday, I was so impressed. But today, holy shit, I can't even..." He grins excitedly and bounces around. "I had no idea you could do that."

My excitement mirrors his. "Honestly, neither did I. I've never done any of that before!"

"What! But you made it look so natural. Throwing a fucking tree across a field..." He laughs. "And you were flying so fast around that lake I couldn't even catch you."

"It was fucking nuts! I've never used my magic for so long before though. I've never really had the freedom to test it like that."

Theo ruffles my hair playfully. "Well, we can play with your magic any time you want. That was so much fucking fun." His smile softens, and he runs his eyes over me quickly before asking a little apprehensively, "I mean, you're okay, right? Do you feel like you overdid it?"

I spread my fingers out and look down at my hands. I can still feel my magic vibrating just beneath my skin. It's a little fainter than usual, but it's still there. I shake my head and smile up at him. "No, I think I'm mostly just tired."

He sighs in relief and starts the jeep. "Okay, good. Let's get you home."



## Chapter Six

The drive back to Aurora's place is peaceful. Theo has the radio playing quietly, and he's tapping his fingers on the steering wheel along to the music. Every couple of minutes, he glances over and smiles at me. My heart feels so full and happy. I've never felt so connected to somebody before. Not my family, and not even Aurora. I don't know why, and I can't really explain it. But my magic feels like it's somehow bonded to Theo.

When he parks outside the bookshop, he hesitates before getting out. He finally looks at me and opens his mouth, but his phone rings before he gets a word out.

He grunts in annoyance and answers the call with a bark. "What?"

The person on the other line is so loud that I can hear them clearly. "Where the fuck have you been all day? You haven't answered any of our texts!"

I lean forward, being nosy. Theo gives me an exasperated look, but then he smiles and puts the call on speakerphone.

"I've been busy," Theo answers vaguely and gives me a dopey smile, wagging his eyebrows suggestively.

I accidentally giggle and slap a hand over my mouth. It's quiet for a few seconds, and the guy on the phone blows up again.

"Are you shitting me right now? Hollis, this motherfucker is blowing us off for a fucking girl." There's some mumbling in the background that I can't make out, and the caller shouts, "I just heard a girl laugh. He's with her right fucking now."

Theo rolls his eyes. "Yes, I'm with a girl right now."

"She'd better be the best goddamn lay you've ever had if you can't even text your *best friends* back, asshole!"

I raise one eyebrow at Theo, silently shaking from giggling so much. He blushes and practically growls into the phone. "She can hear you, Cas, you fucking idiot."

Cas laughs. "That's not my fault! Send me a picture."

"I'm hanging up!" Theo growls.

Theo looks so adorably embarrassed. His blush makes his hair appear even redder than usual, and

for the first time, I notice that he has a few faint freckles under his eyes. I'd seriously love nothing more than to count every single freckle. My eyes slowly wander his body, and I wonder if he has freckles anywhere else...

When I realize he still looks embarrassed a few moments later, I feel bad. I should *definitely* stop checking him out too. I remember he was trying to tell me something before the phone rang, so I give him an apologetic smile and ask, "What were you going to say before he called?"

Theo taps his fingers mindlessly against the steering wheel and hesitantly says, "Well, um, I was going to ask if you still wanted to hang out. But I know you're still drained. Or, uh, did you have other plans?"

My heart flips over in my chest at how precious he's being, and I'm ecstatic that he wants to spend more time together. "You can stay. We can just, like, chill out and watch a movie or something? But if you need to go hang out with your friends, that's okay."

He immediately moves to get out of the jeep and grins. "No, let's watch a movie. I'll see those guys tomorrow."

I laugh and jump out of the passenger seat onto the street. My legs feel a little wobbly, and I realize I buttoned my flannel up crookedly. I let out a *very attractive* snort when I realize what a mess I probably look like right now. Oh, well.

Theo doesn't seem to care or notice my disheveled appearance as he walks beside me to the front door of the bookshop with a giant grin on his face and a skip in his step. I'm carrying my sandals in my right hand with Theo standing on my left. When we step into Flora & Feathers, Paisley is standing behind the counter talking and laughing with two girls who look close to our age.

When the bell chimes, they look over at Theo and me. Paisley's face drops and her cheeks turn bright red. The other two girls glance at Theo first before looking at me, and they look equally shocked.

I'm excited to see Paisley's friends, especially since I'll be going to school with them too. I grin and wave at the three of them and ask, "Hey guys, what's up?"

Paisley's friends share a look, and one of them asks Paisley, "Is she serious right now?" When Paisley rolls her eyes and nods, her friends snicker quietly.

My face warms slightly in embarrassment. Girls were always catty and judgmental toward me back home in Florida too, so I should be used to it. It still hurts my feelings, but I try to shrug it off and pretend like I'm not bothered in the slightest.

"Where's Aurora?" I smile casually, looping my arm through Theo's. He's slightly tensed up, but I pretend not to notice that either.

Paisley gives me a look of disgust and clears her throat. "She's in the garden."

"If she asks, let her know we're upstairs? Thanks!"

I pull Theo through the bookshop and shove him through the door that leads upstairs. We only make it a few steps up before Theo stops me. I'm a couple of steps higher than him, so we're almost eye-level, and he lifts his hand to gently brush a loose strand of hair behind my ear.

"Are you okay?"

It's sweet that he's worried about me, but the last thing I want is to put a damper on the amazing day we've had. Especially over something as silly as some girls being rude to me.

"I'm perfect." I smile genuinely while I stare into his pretty brown eyes. He smiles back.

When we make it to the third floor, Theo looks around curiously. His nostrils flare when he says, "You know, this isn't really what I expected a witch's apartment to look like."

I look around. Everything is white, cream, or tan, and there's a lot of natural light coming through the windows. I laugh. "What, did you expect a dungeon or something?"

He shrugs and offers me a lopsided smile. He doesn't deny it though. "Where's your room?"

I lead him up the final staircase to my attic bedroom. My legs are killing me now, and I practically collapse onto the bed. Stella is curled up on one pillow, and she yawns and stretches out when she

sees us.

I lie back, my legs still dangling off the side as I coo at her. “Hey girl, come here.”

She stares at me for a couple of seconds, and then she hops off the bed and wanders downstairs. I scoff out loud. She’s such an antisocial little brat.

I push myself up on my elbows so I can look at Theo. He’s standing in the doorway, tapping his fingers on his leg while he stares at me intently. His eyes are practically on fire, and I watch as he flares his nostrils yet again. The longer he watches me, the more tingly and aroused I feel. He looks so fucking good standing there, and I know without any doubt in my mind that sex with him would be amazing.

Theo makes a noise somewhere between a whine and a growl, and he clears his throat. “Where’s um, the um, bathroom?”

I sit straight up, startled back into reality. I point at the door that leads to the bathroom, and within seconds, he’s locked himself in there and has the sink running. I quickly walk over to stand in front of my full-length mirror and fix the buttons of my flannel shirt, buttoning it nearly all the way up. I run a brush through my hair too, which doesn’t make much of a difference.

I can’t have sex with Theo. I mean, I really want to. He’s sexy as hell, and he’s also a fucking *werewolf*, for crying out loud. But the bond I formed with him today is undeniable. It doesn’t matter that we only just met. I want him to be in my life permanently, and my track record with guys isn’t so great. If I sleep with him, that could ruin everything.

I’m suddenly interrupted from my thoughts by a knock at the door. “Cricket, dear, are you decent?” Aurora asks in a teasing, sing-song tone.

I roll my eyes. “Ror, the door’s not even closed.”

She walks in carrying a tray of tea and sandwiches and chuckles. “That never stopped me before.”

“Oh god, please stop.” I groan. That’s definitely *not* the image I need in my head right now. Of course, Theo chooses that moment to walk out of the bathroom.

“Hey, Aurora. What’s up?”

She smiles innocently. “Oh, I just brought up something for you two to snack on. I also wanted to remind Cricket to drink her tea.”

I have no clue what she’s talking about. Tea is great and everything, but I’m more of a coffee kind of girl. I give her a puzzled look and very eloquently ask, “Huh?”

She gives me a fake-confused look, tilting her head while she furrows her eyebrows. “Your contraceptive herbal tea? You know I want you to feel free to explore, and I’ve heard werewolves make excellent lovers. But still, safety first!”

Oh my fucking god. I’m going to kill her. I force myself to grab the tray from her hands and push her toward the door.

“Thank you *very much*, Aurora. I’ll let you know if I need anything else.”

She’s smiling like a maniac as I shut the door in her face. I quickly set the tray down on the desk and turn to give Theo an alarmed look. I know my face is probably bright fucking red. His face is flushed too, but he also has a stupidly amused grin on his face.

He laughs after a few seconds of awkward silence. “Wow. I thought my family was bad.”

“I’m so sorry.” I shake my head, at a loss. I’m cringing *so hard* right now.

He comes over and picks up a sandwich, and he nearly shoves the entire thing into his mouth. I look down at the tray with a sigh. If I don’t drink the stupid tea, she’ll probably give me a lecture about safe sex and do something even more embarrassing next time. Besides, even though I’ve decided *not* to have sex with Theo, better safe than sorry, right? As soon as I pour the tea into one of the cups she left for us, Theo starts coughing and choking.

“You’re going to drink it?” His eyes positively light up.

I glare at him and set the teapot down hard, making everything else on the tray tremble slightly.

“Listen to me. You’re really fucking cute, but I am *not* having sex with you. If I don’t drink this, who knows *what* she’ll do next time you come over.”

He deflates, but he’s still smiling, and it seems genuine when he laughs. “Okay.”

I finish pouring the stupid tea and tentatively take a sip. It tastes a little weird, but not too bad. Theo sniffs it curiously and asks if he can try it. I raise an eyebrow at him in warning, but I pour the other cup for him.

He smirks at me over the cup and drinks it quickly without ever letting his eyes leave mine. When he finishes, he licks his lips ridiculously and grins at me.

I can’t help laughing. “I’m serious.”

He blinks innocently. “I never said you weren’t.” He gives me a wolfish grin and adds, “But, you know, if you ever change your mind...”

I snort, but I really don’t find it all that funny. I bite my lip and avert my eyes from his self-consciously. Maybe I’m just crazy, and he *didn’t* feel the same connection between my magic and his.

“Hey, I’m sorry. I’m just teasing. I won’t do it again.” Theo moves to stand right in front of me. He bends down slightly and holds his hand close to my face, hesitating to touch me while he tries to get me to look at him.

I slowly raise my head to meet his eyes, but I’m still biting my lip, feeling embarrassed. “I just thought after today, in the woods and everything, I thought we could be friends.”

Theo laughs in surprise. “Are you kidding me? Didn’t you feel it earlier?” He doesn’t wait long enough for me to answer before continuing, “It was like our magic intertwined or something. I’ve never felt anything like that before. We’re not going to be *just friends*. We’re more than that already. I already consider you one of my best fucking friends in the world, and that’s after only one day!”

He sounds so genuine, and I instinctively trust every word out of his mouth. A huge, cheesy smile forms on my face, and I feel happy tears forming in the corners of my eyes. I’m afraid it might freak Theo out if I suddenly burst into tears, but he just smiles back at me warmly.

I stick my pinky out to hold it up between us and whisper, “Best friends, then?”

He scrunches his nose and grins, and he twines my pinkie with his. “Best friends.”



## Chapter Seven

“What are you laughing at?”

I look up from my phone to grin at Luca. “Just talking to the twins.”

Luca shakes his head and smiles in amusement before turning away to continue working on a display for some new releases. Aurora technically took the day off today, so Luca’s the only one working. When Theo texted me earlier letting me know he wouldn’t be able to hang out until later this afternoon, I spent a few hours with Aurora in her workshop this morning. She kept her promise and taught me some healing spells. I’m feeling drained from using so much energy while practicing, but I can’t wait to show Theo what I learned.

My phone vibrates with another text from Killian. *How the fuck is he holding Stella?*

I snicker and text back a bullshit response. I’d literally just posted a picture of me and Theo on Instagram a few minutes ago, and the twins started blowing up my phone. They’re so nosy.

“How’s Emerson doing, anyway?” Luca asks without looking up from his task.

“He’s in beast mode. I’m sure you know how he gets.” I shrug. Em is crazy about Luca, so I’m not about to tell him that Em’s texting me saying how hot Theo is and calling me an idiot for not sleeping with him yet. “Now that he’s training for hockey season, all he does is work out and talk about working out.”

“Tell me about it.” Luca laughs quietly.

I still haven’t spent much time with Luca, but I can already see why Em likes him so much. Luca is sweet and quiet, and he’s super fucking adorable. He’s shorter than the twins are by quite a few inches, and he has sandy blonde hair, glasses, and a full sleeve of tattoos on his right arm. He’s been working at the shop with Aurora for the past three years, since he graduated high school, and he knows all about us being witches.

*If you haven’t slept with him yet, there’s no way he’s straight.*

I roll my eyes at Em’s text and shove my phone in my pocket. Normally, I tell the twins everything. For some reason, though, I don’t want them to know about Theo being a werewolf yet. It’s not my secret to tell, and the bond I’ve formed with Theo feels special and sacred. It can’t hurt to keep this to myself for just a little while.

“So, are you hanging out with Theo again today?” Luca asks, his voice carrying a hint of teasing.

“Yeah.” I giggle. Theo and I have spent every day this week together. “He’s picking me up in an hour.”

He originally planned on coming over first thing this morning, like he’s done every day since we first hung out. But Hollis and Cas supposedly bullied him into hanging out with them instead. I told Theo I don’t mind, and I’m still dying to meet his friends. I don’t get why Theo’s still so hesitant to introduce us.

“You guys are cute,” Luca says. He turns his head to face me and opens his mouth like he’s going to say something else, but he furrows his eyebrows and pulls his phone out of his pocket. He sighs and gestures to his phone as he walks toward the back of the shop. “Give me a second, I need to take this.”

While I wait for Luca to return, I lean across the front counter and scratch Stella’s head. She’s been sleeping next to the cash register for the past couple of hours. She purrs and stretches out when I touch her.

“Lazy brat.” I snicker, brushing my fingers through her soft fur. She only purrs louder at my teasing.

Stella’s always been super particular about everything, and she gets annoyed easily. I love her to death, but I was really worried the move to Colorado would be hard on her. I’m so relieved that she feels relaxed and happy here, and I’m still amazed that she likes Theo as much as she does.

“Hey, Cricket?” Luca calls. I look up and raise my eyebrows as he walks into the front area of the shop. I frown at the guilty look on his face, and he asks, “I really hate to ask, but is there any way you could do me a favor?”

“Of course.” Whatever it is, it must be serious. Luca looks so concerned.

“My grandma’s car won’t start, and she’s worried she’s going to be late for her knitting club. I know it sounds ridiculous, but I need to go pick her up and drop her off at her friend’s house really quick.” He sighs and rubs his hand on the back of his neck. “Do you mind watching the store while I’m gone?”

I knew Luca lived with his grandmother, and that he helps her out when he can. It’s absolutely the sweetest thing ever, and I smile genuinely as I nod. “I don’t mind at all! Aurora showed me how to use the register.”

He breathes out a sigh of relief and smiles. “Thank you! I swear I won’t be long.”

The shop has been slow all afternoon anyway, so I’m really not worried. Even if Theo gets here before Luca’s back, I know he won’t mind waiting with me. Besides, Aurora should be back pretty soon too. After she and I finished my lessons this morning, she left to go pick up a few rare plants from a nursery about an hour away.

Luca thanks me again and hastily leaves through the front door of the shop.

As soon as Stella and I are alone in the shop, I lean back against the counter and sigh as I pull my phone out again. I have a couple of unread texts from the twins, and a few new comments on Instagram. I scroll through my feed, but I’m bored after just a few minutes.

I want to text Theo, but I don’t want to bother him while he’s with his friends. I seriously don’t want to come across as needy, and it’s embarrassing how much I miss him already. I’d like to meet more people around here and try to make more friends, just so I’m not constantly hounding Theo to hang out with me. Paisley’s the only other person I’ve met my age, and she doesn’t seem very interested in being friends.

Granted, I haven’t been around much this week to get to know her any better. Maybe I need to make more of an effort.

“I’m bored.” I shove my phone back into the pocket of my dress.

Stella stretches her toes out and yawns. Other than that minimal reaction to my whining, she doesn’t show me any more attention before she curls up to go back to sleep. My gaze wanders around the shop while I look for something to amuse myself with. Everything is clean and organized already, considering we haven’t had many customers today.

My eyes land on the sliding ladder against the long wall of books across from me, and I grin in delight as an idea occurs to me. This is the first time I've truly been alone in the shop, if you don't count Stella, and I've been dying to play on the ladder like Belle does in *Beauty and the Beast*. Stella blinks at me like I'm stupid, clearly unimpressed, but I ignore her and walk across the shop to step up on the ladder.

At first, I kick my foot against the ground to slide the ladder from one end of the wall to the other. It doesn't move very fast, so I use my magic to help push me back and forth.

I'm sliding back down the bookshelf toward the front end of the store, giggling like an idiot, when the bell above the door chimes. I'd been caught up in playing, and the sound surprises me so much that I startle as I come to a stop.

I look up to find one of the most attractive guys I've ever seen in my entire life standing in the bookshop's doorframe, watching me intently as his eyes scan my body from head to toe.

He's tall with broad shoulders, and the muscles in his arms and chest are very clearly defined beneath his plain white tee shirt. He has short, light brown hair, beautifully shaped eyebrows, and a short, neatly trimmed beard. He's absolutely delicious-looking, and my heart beats faster and faster the longer I look at him.

Several moments later, he's still gawking at me openly while he holds the door to the shop open. I realize I'm still standing a few steps up on the ladder, barefoot, with one of my feet dangling off. I hop down to the floor, and the many necklaces and bracelets I'm wearing make a pretty clinking sound.

My movements seem to jar him, and he lets go of the door so it closes behind him. He continues standing there, staring at me with an unreadable expression on his face. I notice that his eyes are the prettiest, sapphire-blue color, and I offer him a bright, flirty smile.

"Can I help you with something?" I ask in a silky voice.

He blinks and shakes his head, and without a word or another glance, he walks past me further into the bookshop. He disappears into the stacks where I can't see him anymore. I take a deep breath and quickly walk behind the counter and register. Stella flicks her tail, and I dart a glance at her. Through our bond, I can feel that she's amused.

"Shut up," I hiss at her, frantically attempting to flatten my hair. I lean over the counter and peek toward the stacks at the back of the shop, but the guy's still out of view.

He's obviously attracted to me. Why else would he stare at me for as long as he did? Clearly, that's not enough though, as he didn't even say a freaking word to me!

I adjust my boobs, thanking the gods I wore this dress today. It's short and white with tiny spaghetti straps, and it has a low neckline so that my boobs look fucking fantastic in it. Even though it's fruitless, I try to smooth down my hair again, and I open the closest book and attempt to appear nonchalant while I eagerly wait for him to come back up front.

It feels like I've been waiting an eternity, but it's probably only been a few minutes when he makes an appearance again. I watch him hesitate from the corner of my eye, and I pretend to be completely riveted by the book I have propped open.

He approaches the counter, but I don't look up until he stops right in front of me. I blink like I'm confused, and I smile like I'm surprised to see him. Like I wasn't totally waiting to get another chance to check him out. His arms look so strong, and I bet it would be so easy for him to lift me up against a wall and—

"Hello," he says quietly. But even from that one simple word, I can tell his voice is deep and sexy. He sets a book on the counter between us, never breaking eye contact with me.

"Did you find what you were looking for?" I ask in a low, husky voice.

He nods, his eyes darting down to my mouth. A thrill runs through my body, and I wet my lips to entice him even more. Seriously, how can one guy be so hot?

When he doesn't say anything else, I fight the urge to sigh in frustration. None of my usual moves are working. I tear my eyes away from him and pick up his book to scan it into the computer. I do a double take when I see the title and look back up at him with one of my eyebrows raised.



“Interesting choice,” I say teasingly.

He furrows his eyebrows in confusion, so I hold up the book in question. *She Comes First: The Thinking Man's Guide to Pleasuring a Woman*.

“Oh,” he mumbles. He looks positively mortified, and his entire face flushes as he stares at the book in horror.

Seeing such a sexy guy get so embarrassed is honestly one of the funniest things ever. It makes him seem so fucking adorable, on top of already being crazy-hot. I crack a grin at him, preparing to make a joke about the book to put him more at ease. Before I can get a word out, Stella stands up from her spot on the counter and leaps onto the guy's shoulder.

I stare at her, dumbfounded, as she purrs and rubs her head against his jaw.

“Stella!” I hiss through my teeth, reaching out to grab her. She hops to his other shoulder, and I meet his eyes with an apologetic grimace. “I'm so sorry. She's not normally like this.”

He stands completely still, looking more horrified with every passing second. Stella finally jumps down to the ground, gives me a smug look, and takes off running toward the back of the shop.

“I, uh,” the guy mutters, taking a step backwards. He refuses to meet my eyes. “I don't really need that book anymore.”

“What?” I ask stupidly, panicking as he takes another step away from me. “Are you sure? Seriously, I'm so sorry about that. I have no idea what got into her.”

Before I've even finished my sentence, the guy walks out the door, leaving me alone in the bookshop.

I inhale sharply and stare at the door, willing him to change his mind and come back. I'm so embarrassed and upset, and all I want more than anything in the world is a chance to talk to him. There's a good chance I'll never see him again.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, and I yelp in surprise. I quickly swallow the lump in my throat and pull my phone out with shaky fingers. Theo's name flashes on the screen.

“Hello?” I answer, hoping my voice sounds normal and not heartbroken or flustered.

“Hey, little witch. I'm on my way over now. You still wanna hang out, right?”

Butterflies flutter in my stomach, but at the same time, I feel guilty. I didn't think about Theo once while that guy with the beard was in here. And there's seriously no logical reason for me to feel as devastated as I do that things turned out the way they did with him.

It's stupid for me to feel guilty though. It's not like Theo and I are dating. We're friends, no matter how hot he is and much I love spending time with him. Catching feelings and thinking of Theo like he's my boyfriend is the stupidest thing I could do, considering the connection we've formed.

“Of course I do! Did you have fun with Hollis and Cas?”

Theo growls over the phone. “Yeah, but I missed you. I'll be there in a few minutes, okay?”

I grin, both loving and hating the way his words make me feel.

“Okay.”



## Chapter Eight

“Do you need to take a break?”

Theo pushes his hair off his forehead and gives me a sexy half-smile. He’s just shifted back into his human form, and he’s slightly sweaty. He looks so damn good, and I let my eyes run over his body for a moment before shaking my head.

“Nah, I’m fine! Unless *you* need a break?”

We’ve been playing in the forest for hours now, and my magic is still humming through my entire body. It’s such an addicting feeling, and I can’t get enough of it. Granted, I do have a bit of a headache and my legs are starting to feel like jelly after running around so much. I’m sure I’ll be fine after I get a drink of water. I’m having so much fun, and I’m so eager to continue pushing the limits of my gift.

Theo scrunches his nose up and steps closer so he can ruffle my hair. He leans down and sniffs at me until I giggle, and he steps back with a playful grin and shifts into his wolf form faster than I can blink.

He takes off running into the forest. Instead of following, I walk over to the blanket we laid out beside the shore of the lake. Our phones, my jacket, and two bottles of water are there. I take a quick drink, check our phones for any missed calls, and I run in the same direction Theo did.

Using my magic so I’m floating just above the ground as I weave in between pine trees, I laugh as I force myself to move faster and faster while I look for Theo. Without warning, he leaps in front of me and tackles me to the ground. He’s gentle enough that I’m not hurt, even though the wind is knocked out of me.

“Ew! Stop!” I giggle wildly and push him away when he licks my face.

He yips and jumps away, wagging his tail while he waits for me to get up. When I stand, I feel dizzy, but I quickly shake the feeling off and take off running through the forest again. Theo follows behind me at the same swift pace, barking happily all the time.

The dizzy feeling returns, and my vision turns fuzzy. I shake my head and stumble slightly, and I stop to lean against a large pine tree.

“Cricket?” Theo asks, appearing beside me in his human form. “What’s wrong, little witch?”

“I’m okay.” I rub my hand roughly over my forehead, willing the dizziness to go away. I dig my

feet into the dirt and leaves beneath me, hoping the gesture will help to ground my magic. “I think I’m just dehydrated or something.”

Theo rubs one of his hands over my messy hair as he tilts my chin up to look into my eyes. He looks concerned, so I give him a warm smile to let him know I’m alright.

Without a word, he picks me up and begins running through the trees. I wrap my arms around his neck and shut my eyes tightly. When he stops, I realize we’re standing beside the lake. Theo picks up one of the bottles of water from our blanket, still holding me securely in his arms.

After I finish the entire bottle, I wiggle for Theo to let me down. He hesitantly sets me down beside him, still keeping his hands on my shoulders. “Are you okay now? Do you need any more water before we head home?”

It’s seriously so sweet that he’s this worried about me, but I hate being treated like such a fragile baby. I make a face at him and shake my head. “I don’t want to go home yet. I swear, I’m fine!”

I take a few steps away from him, floating a few centimeters off the ground when I do so I don’t accidentally stumble again. I’m sure if I show even the slightest hint of being tired or hurt, Theo’s going to throw me over his shoulder like a caveman and march me back to the jeep.

My magic isn’t humming as noticeably as it was earlier, and my headache hasn’t gone away either. I know I’m being stubborn, and it’s probably best if we call it a day. But I’ve never had more fun in my life than I do when I’m playing with Theo in the forest. I’ve never felt stronger or more powerful, and I’m not ready for that feeling to end yet.

Theo jumps in front of me, his eyes wide and terrified. I raise my eyebrows in alarm, and he exclaims, “Your nose is bleeding! Fucking Christ, stop being so stubborn. You’re clearly not feeling okay.”

I wipe my nose and stare stupidly at the bright red blood smeared across the back of my hand.

“I’m fine!” I whine stubbornly when Theo picks me up again. I let myself snuggle against him though, resting my head in the crook of his neck. I hold my hand under my nose, careful that I don’t get any blood on his shirt.



“Aurora!” My eyes snap open at the harsh, growling sound of Theo’s voice. He frantically shouts again, “Where the fuck is Aurora?”

I groan and sit up in his arms, feeling confused and disoriented when I realize we’re at Flora & Feathers. I catch sight of Luca, who’s staring at me worriedly, and Theo looks down to meet my eyes.

“Holy shit, Cricket.” He squeezes me tightly. I frown at him, wondering when we got here and what I missed. His pupils are dilated and his nostrils are flaring like crazy. I’ve never seen him look so scared or worried before.

“What’s the matter?” My aunt rushes to our side and brushes my hair out of my face.

“We were playing in the woods, and uh…” Theo trails off to cast Luca a quick side glance before he continues, “Cricket said she felt dehydrated. She drank some water, and she said she was fine. But then her nose started bleeding, and she passed out. I couldn’t wake her up and I didn’t know what to do.”

His voice is laced with panic, and he squeezes me again like he’s afraid to let me go. I hug him back, hating that I made him feel this way.

Aurora quietly asks if there are any customers in the store, and Luca says there aren’t. Since he already knows we’re witches, she’s not worried about him overhearing. She gently strokes her fingers through my hair again and sighs. “You’re too headstrong for your own good sometimes. You used up all of your magical energy, didn’t you?”

I spread my fingers out in front of my face and stare at my hand, concentrating hard to find the familiar pulse of magic within me. There’s the barest hint of it, so minute I know I wouldn’t be able to do the simplest of spells right now.

“Maybe? I’ve never done that before.” I feel like an idiot, and I’m embarrassed that I let this happen to myself.

“Dammit, Cricket.” Theo growls. He kisses the side of my head while he sniffs at my hair. “I *knew* you were tired.”

He’s still frightened, and probably super pissed off at me. I bite my lip and mumble an apology, and Aurora chuckles quietly at us.

“She’ll be okay, Theo. Take her upstairs to lie down and make sure Stella stays with her. She could probably use something to eat too.”

Theo thanks her, and he carries me all the way upstairs to my bedroom. He sets me down carefully on the bed where Stella’s taking a nap, and he leaves to grab a snack from the kitchen. All I want to do is curl up under my covers, but I force myself to walk over to my closet and change into pajamas before he comes back.

When he returns, carrying a wet washcloth in one hand and a sandwich in the other, he gives me a sad smile. “I could have helped you change, little witch. You need to rest.”

I give him a seductive smile and wink. “You’d have liked that, wouldn’t you?”

Theo grins and lets his eyes wander over me quickly before he chuckles and sits down on the edge of my bed. “Even more reason you should have waited to let me help you.”

He hands me the sandwich, and I scoot over so there’s room for him to sit beside me. He kicks his shoes off and makes himself comfortable, wrapping his arm around my shoulders so I can easily snuggle against him.

I nibble at the sandwich for a minute, and then I whisper, “Are you mad at me?”

“Yes,” he grunts. “I’m way more pissed at myself though. I’m going to end up getting you killed.”

He sounds absolutely devastated, and I turn so I can face him. “This was *not* your fault. I was being stupid, not listening to my body or my intuition. I should have known I wouldn’t have as much energy after practicing healing spells this morning.”

“Healing spells, huh?” Theo asks gruffly. He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear as his eyes wander over every inch of my face.

“I meant to show you earlier, but I got distracted.” I give him an embarrassed smile. After that whole situation with the hot stranger in the bookshop, I’d been super nervous and flustered. As soon as Theo and I arrived at our special spot up in the mountains, running through the forest and using my magic helped to take my mind off of it.

“Maybe it’s not a good idea to take you up there anymore,” Theo mumbles, his eyebrows furrowing. “I’d never forgive myself if something happened to you.”

“No!” I set my sandwich on my bedside table and crawl into Theo’s lap. I rest my arms on his shoulders and pout, feeling secretly thrilled when he wraps his arms around my waist like it’s the most natural thing in the world. “You don’t understand. My magic feels so *alive* here, and even more so up in the mountains when we’re playing. After being here for a week, I’m so much stronger than I ever was back in Florida. And with my birthday only being a few weeks away, I want to see what I’m capable of.”

Theo’s face flushes, and he quirks a smile that almost seems shy. “I know your aunt mentioned something about your eighteenth birthday, but I didn’t realize it was so soon.”

“September third.” I nod. I smile back at him, my heart racing when he rubs his hands over my hips and lower back. “Seriously, I promise I’ll never scare you like that again. If I ever feel like I’m getting close to reaching my limit again, or if I’m even feeling tired, I’ll let you know.”

I stick my bottom lip out, pouting even harder when he doesn’t give in and agree with me. Eventually, he groans and says, “Alright, *fine*. I swear to fucking god though, if you ever do that again—”

“I won’t!” I cut him off, grinning brightly.

He snorts at me and shakes his head and grabs the washcloth he set on my bedside table.

Butterflies threaten to erupt from my belly when he begins gently wiping the dried blood from my face. It's so fucking sweet and distracting that I have to concentrate to listen to him speak.

“No more wolf or witch stuff over the next couple of days though, okay? We can hang out here, or go to the movies tomorrow instead or something.”

I agree, and I move back to my original spot beside him. Stella curls up on my lap, and Theo and I browse through Netflix for something to watch. We settle on *Mystery Science Theater 3000*, since Theo's never seen it. A fucking travesty, if you ask me.

After finishing the sandwich he made for me, I snuggle against his side. I don't even make it through an entire episode before falling asleep.



## Chapter Nine

Luca snickers when I yawn for what's probably the millionth time.

"You're going to put me to sleep if you keep doing that," he says.

Paisley called out, so it's just me and Luca in the bookshop again today. Aurora's upstairs in her office, and she has a few tarot readings scheduled later. There are a few customers browsing the shop, but it's still a very easy, relaxed environment.

I sleepily watch Luca tap on an iPad from where I'm sitting beside Stella on the front counter, letting my legs dangle over the side. He's doing something inventory-related, but everything aside from using the cash register still goes pretty much right over my head. Luca's amazing at his job, and I know he's a big reason the shop is as successful as it is. Earlier, he was telling me about a few of the book signings they'd hosted here over the summer.

When another yawn escapes me, I quickly try to cover my mouth. Luca smiles to himself and shakes his head as he pulls his wallet out of his pocket.

"Here," he says, handing me a ten-dollar bill. "Go next door and get us some coffees. Katy's working, and she knows my order by heart."

I grin and reach forward to take the money. "Are you sure?"

Coffee honestly sounds amazing right now. It's after one in the afternoon, but I still feel exhausted after using up my magical energy yesterday. Theo stayed over until late, and he didn't even mind that I napped most of the time. We have plans to meet up today too, but not until later this evening. Theo texted me this morning to tell me he'd be hanging out with Hollis again.

Luca tells me he's sure, and he shoos me out of the bookshop with a playful smile.

The coffee shop and bakery next door to Flora & Feathers is seriously freaking exceptional. No matter the time of day, it's almost always busy whenever I visit. I've only been there a few times since I moved in with Aurora, but Luca's best friend Katy is always working when I go in.

When I step through the door of The Little Owl Café, I smile as I inhale the delicious scent of coffee and chocolate. It's not as busy as I expected for a Saturday afternoon, but there are a few people sitting at tables and two women waiting for their drinks.

Katy looks up from behind the counter where she's steaming milk at the espresso machine, and she smiles when she sees me. "Hey, beautiful. I'll be with you in a second."

I grin in acknowledgement and move to stand in front of the register while I wait for her to finish her current orders. Even though I already know what I want, I still read over the menu for any new drinks or specials.

The bell chimes over the door of the café, and I hear a girl giggle. I consider turning around to see who just walked in, but Katy captures my attention instead when she comes to stand in front of me. She wipes the back of her hand over her brow and gives me a flirty grin.

“What can I get for you, gorgeous?”

Katy is extremely pretty, and she has the coolest style ever. She has dark brown skin, dyed-blue hair, and a ton of tattoos. It’s also super flattering that she flirts with me every time I come in here, though I’m sure she does that with everyone.

“I’ll get a cinnamon vanilla iced latte, and whatever Luca’s usual order is.”

She chuckles and taps my order into the screen at the register. “He’s sending you on his coffee runs now, is he? Can’t say I mind.”

I grin at her flirting, and we continue making small talk for a few seconds while she counts out my change. After I’ve paid, I step aside to wait at the other end of the counter. Katy greets the next customer, and I pull my phone out of my pocket to check my texts.

My heart flips when I see I have a message from Theo. *I miss you, little witch.*

Five words, and I’m a puddle of mush. I still think it would be the dumbest idea ever to hook up with Theo, or to think of seriously dating him. I just know that would ruin everything between us. But *god*, he’s too fucking cute for his own good.

I text him back. *I miss you too. Are you having fun with Hollis?*

*Yeah, but he’s acting mopey and won’t tell me what’s wrong.*

Poor Hollis. It’s honestly driving me nuts that I still haven’t met Theo’s best friends. He’s told me so much about Hollis and Cas that I feel like I know them, and I think it’s the most adorable thing ever that they’re so close.

*You know you can invite him to hang out with us tonight, right?*

The three dots signifying that Theo’s typing a reply hover at the bottom of my screen for several seconds. When his text finally comes through, all it says is: *You’ll meet him at school on Monday.*

I sigh and shove my phone back into the pocket of my skirt. I don’t understand. Theo keeps saying he feels this same intense connection between us as I do, and he obviously likes me and wants to keep hanging out. Why doesn’t he want to introduce me to his friends? Is he worried they won’t like me, or is he embarrassed of me?

“Here you go, beautiful.” I look up to find Katy smiling at me, holding out my and Luca’s drinks.

“Thank you!” I reach out to take the drinks, and I grin in surprise when she hands me a small paper bag.

“I know you love those chocolate blueberry scones, and I still had a couple left over from this morning.” She winks, brushing her fingers over the back of my hand when I take the bag from her. “They’re on me.”

I giggle, my cheeks flushing as I thank her again. I’m not really into girls, but her flirting has me flustered. Normally, I flirt back with people without even thinking about it. But Katy is Luca’s best friend, and I don’t want to accidentally lead her on. I don’t know whether she’s serious or not. With my latte in my right hand, and Luca’s drink and the scones in my left, I spin around and take a step without paying attention to my surroundings.

I crash into someone, hard enough that it makes me stumble back, and I accidentally spill my latte all over the front of his shirt. I gasp and widen my eyes in horror, luckily holding onto Luca’s drink and the scones.

Before I can apologize or say literally *anything*, the guy I bumped into flails his arms out and screams, “What the fuck!?”

I look up into the infuriated face of a boy close to my age. He’s fucking *beautiful*. He’s almost as

tall as Theo is, and maybe just slightly more muscular. He has this insanely gorgeous, raven black hair falling across his forehead and around his ears, and the most incredible green emerald green eyes I've ever seen. There's an adorable little beauty mark on his cheek under his left eye, and I have the bizarre urge to stand up on my tiptoes and kiss that exact spot.

When I realize he's scowling at me, literally shaking and trembling in anger, embarrassment washes over me. I just spilled my coffee all over him, and he's fucking pissed. Why am I just standing here checking him out!?

"Calm down. It's *coffee*. You're not going to die," I say defensively. I should just apologize and make a run for it, but it's like I can't control myself.

His eyes flash, and he practically snarls at me. "Are you serious right now? You're not even going to fucking apologize? I can't believe this is happening."

He's shaking even harder. I've never seen anyone look so angry before, and I'm becoming more and more embarrassed by the second. "Why were you standing so close to me, anyway? Have you never heard of personal space?"

He doesn't answer, but his cheeks flush until they're bright red. A pretty girl with dark hair grabs the guy's arm and gives me a dirty look, and she frowns up at him as she mumbles something under her breath.

"You okay?" Someone touches my shoulder, and I turn around to face Katy. She's smiling sympathetically as she hands me a brand new iced latte. "Try not to spill this one."

I bite my lip at her teasing and chuckle awkwardly. I won't be showing my face in here for at least a few days, that's for sure. I turn around to leave, moving much slower this time so I don't accidentally bump into somebody again, and I see the hot, angry guy and his girlfriend standing in the same spot.

The guy isn't even trying to hide the fact that he's checking me out. His eyes greedily run over my body. My stomach flutters and my toes curl, and I can't stop myself from standing up straighter. The maxi skirt I'm wearing is white and looks fucking amazing against my tanned skin, and it has a long slit running up the front. I'm also wearing a cropped, white, off-the-shoulder top that does an incredible job of showing off my stomach, boobs, and collarbone.

I mentally smack myself for getting the least bit excited at his attention. He's an asshole, and his girlfriend is *right here!*

"Oh my god! You're going to sit there and scream at me like a lunatic and then turn around and gawk at me like a pervert?" I screech and breeze past him to the door of the café. I cast him one last look over my shoulder and shout, "God, you're disgusting!"

The door slams behind me, and I don't waste any time in hurrying back to Flora & Feathers. I'm completely mortified. Not only at the way I spilled my coffee like a clumsy moron, but also because of the way I caused a scene by screaming at that guy. Honestly, he had every right to be pissed at me, and I made a fool of myself by escalating the situation.

I shut my eyes and take a deep, calming breath as soon as I'm safely back in the bookshop.

"What's wrong?" I open my eyes to find Luca frowning at me.

I grimace and hand him his coffee, and I dig the change out of my pocket as I shrug defensively. "Nothing."

His frown deepens, so I slap a smile across my face to convince him that everything is totally fine and normal. He doesn't *seem* very convinced, but he doesn't ask me any more questions when I thank him for a coffee and make an excuse about being too tired to hang out downstairs.

I slink upstairs to my room on the top floor and flop down onto my bed after setting my coffee and scones on my desk. I feel silly for wanting to hide out, but I don't think I'd survive if that guy from the coffee shop stumbled into the bookstore.

Still, I feel pitiful. I have several hours to kill before Theo comes over, and there's no way I'm going to bug him right now when I still feel defensive and prickly about him not introducing me to his friends.



I'm obviously a fucking disaster, but I wish I had other friends besides Theo. Relying on him makes me feel so needy, but I have to admit I feel way better about starting school now. Back in Florida, I spent most of my time alone or with my mom after the twins moved out, but Theo has totally spoiled me this week by spending nearly every second of his free time with me.

Stella meows from the window, which I've been leaving partially propped open so she can come and go as she pleases. I lift my hand and wave at her in acknowledgement. She ambles into the room, hops up on the bed, and curls up on my chest.

I run my fingers through her soft fur, and she purrs softly. Almost immediately, I can feel my bad energy and anxiety draining away.

"Thanks, girl," I mumble.

She sits with me for a few more minutes until I realize I still haven't touched my latte. I sit up with a groan, making Stella hop to the end of the bed, and I use my magic to float my scones and coffee into my hands from their spot on the desk. I know I promised Theo and Aurora I wouldn't use any magic for a couple of days, but it's something small and I'm way too lazy to get up again right now.

After sipping on my latte and nibbling at one of the scones in a comfortable silence with Stella for a short while, I look around my room to find something to entertain myself with. My eyes land on my journal I left sitting on top of my dresser.

I usually write every day. Aurora and my Grandma Marina have always told me it's important for witches to keep journals and grimoires. It's how we've passed down knowledge to other witches for generations. I've filled dozens upon dozens of them over the years. I left most of them behind at my parents' house in Florida, but I have a few here that have my favorite and most useful spells. I just started a brand new journal the day I moved here, and I've written so many pages about Theo, what I've learned about werewolves, and how it feels like my powers are growing stronger every day I spend in Colorado.

Since I skipped writing yesterday after draining my magic, I have a lot to catch up on. I cheat and use my magic again to make my journal and pen float to me on the bed, and I lie down on my stomach and start writing.



Someone shakes my shoulder, and I open my eyes to see Theo grinning at me just a few inches from my face. I sit up and cover a yawn. I must have fallen asleep while I was writing. I have no idea how I can still be so tired!

"Hello, little witch," Theo says with a soft growl.

He's still close enough that I can make out every freckle on his handsome face. I meet his pretty amber eyes and blurt out, "I missed you today."

I'm embarrassed as soon as the words leave my mouth, but it's true. Theo said the same thing to me earlier over a text, but it's still ridiculous. Our connection is so powerful, it's making me feel crazy. I bite my lip and turn my face away from his.

Theo crouches down beside the bed and gently brushes my hair back from my cheek. When I turn to meet his eyes, he smiles softly. "Don't be embarrassed. Not with me." He nuzzles his face in my hair and whispers tenderly, "I missed you too."

My body is begging me to kiss him. But I can't. I *can't* ruin things with him. Things are already too intense and moving too fast between us. I smile back at him and sit up on my elbows as I close my journal.

Theo's eyes slowly wander over me, and he jumps up and stretches his arms up over his head. The movement causes his tee shirt to ride up, and I have to force myself to tear my eyes from the tempting sliver of skin. I bet he looks so fucking good shirtless.

"Do you still want to go to the movies?" he asks. "Or did you want to stay here and rest more?"

"I want to go to the movies. I've been lazy all day, and I need to get out of here." I stand up and walk over to my mirror, carefully adjust my skirt and top, and grab a brush to run through my crazy-messy hair. It lies flat for all of two seconds before standing up again. I sigh in defeat and glance at

Theo in the mirror. He's watching me with his arms crossed, an amused grin on his face.

"You ready?" I nod at his question, and he exclaims, "Awesome! Let's go."

I wave goodbye to Stella and happily follow him down the stairs.



## Chapter Ten

“Thanks, Katy!”

The blue-haired barista laughs and calls back, “Any time, beautiful.”

I know I said I wasn’t going to show my face at The Little Owl Café for at least a few days, but I changed my mind this morning. I’m glad I did too, because Katy was super sweet and gave me a free muffin when I came in to apologize for that nonsense with that hot, angry guy.

Paisley called out at the bookstore *again* this morning, and Aurora begged me to cover her shift. From what I understand, Paisley’s been having some family issues at home. I really feel bad for her, and I don’t mind working at the shop at all. Besides, Theo’s busy doing werewolf-stuff with his uncle today, so we won’t have time to hang out, anyway. It sucks, considering we start school tomorrow.

*But* tomorrow I finally get to meet Hollis and Cas, and I’m excited about that.

I still have nearly an hour before I technically need to be at the shop to cover the shift. Weekends get fairly busy at Flora & Feathers, and Aurora has several groups booked for tarot card readings today. It’s not like I have anywhere else to be right now though, so I hurry to grab a straw and a few napkins.

Once I have everything together, I turn to leave the bustling café. I manage not to spill my coffee this time, and I smile to myself as I step through the door. I don’t even make it all the way outside, though, before my heart drops into my stomach.

I keep my hand on the door handle and stare in bewilderment as the hot guy with the beard *and* the hot guy from the café walk toward Flora & Feathers. They don’t see me, thank god, but they’re arguing and getting closer to me every second. I can’t even *move*, I’m so panicked. How do they even know each other? What kind of fucked up karma is this?

The guy with the beard shoves the one with the black hair, and they walk into the bookshop. I bite my lip, still standing in the same spot in the café’s doorway. Are they looking for me, or is this just a coincidence? If it was just the sexy, muscular, beard-guy I met a couple of days ago, I’d definitely go back to the shop. I really didn’t expect him to come back again after the incident with Stella and the sex book.

I’m totally not ready to face the guy I spilled my coffee on, though. Butterflies are fluttering like crazy in my stomach, and I know there’s no way I’d be able to get through a conversation with both

guys without embarrassing myself.

Someone clears their throat from behind me, and I jump in surprise. I glance over my shoulder to see a man holding several drink carriers filled with coffees. He's smiling at me awkwardly, politely waiting for me to get out of his way so he can leave.

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" I move out of the way and hold the door open. He thanks me quietly and hurries down the sidewalk until he disappears around the corner.

I stand outside for another minute while I contemplate what to do. I look pretty hot today, and I have been secretly hoping to see the guy with the beard again. The guy I fought with in the coffee shop yesterday is crazy hot too, and I don't trust myself not to do something stupid—like start another fight with him in the middle of the bookshop *or* maybe jump his bones. I hate myself for thinking like that because he obviously has a girlfriend, and he's *obviously* a jerk.

In the end, I end up being a total coward. I walk in the opposite direction from *Flora & Feathers* and turn the corner onto the next street. Biting my lip anxiously, I pull my phone out of my pocket and send a quick text to Luca. He'll understand.

*Two hot guys I'm trying to avoid just walked into the store. Please let me know when they leave!*

I just hope they leave before I have to show back up to work. Luca sends me a thumbs-up, along with, like, a million laughing-face emojis. There's no way he won't tell Emerson about this, so I know the twins will call me to make fun of me later. I shove my phone back into my pocket with a sigh.

It's actually a nice day out. It's sunny, and there's a light breeze in the air that makes my magic sing. I haven't explored much of the downtown area yet, even though I've been living here for over a week. So, I try to enjoy myself and *not* think about why I'm avoiding the book store.

There are plenty of other people walking about, and all the shops I pass look inviting. When I have more time, I seriously need to walk around here again so I can go inside these places. Across the street from where I am, I spot what looks like a candy store. It looks way too tempting, so I head toward it.

It's called The Sweet Spot, and it looks even better up close. It's bright and cheery, and there are so many scrumptious-looking treats displayed in the front window. A bell chimes when I walk in, and I inhale the sweet scent of chocolate and sugary goodness. There are two counters, each running along opposite walls from each other. One of them displays ice cream, and the other is filled with many treats like cupcakes, candies, truffles, and macaroons. There are a few tables spread out in the front area of the shop, and several shelves near the back with packaged treats and kitschy toys and trinkets.

"Hi, welcome to The Sweet Spot!" I look up to find a cute guy with curly brown hair grinning at me from behind the ice cream counter.

There's nobody else in line, so I practically skip over to him and sigh dramatically. "Is this heaven? Because I'm pretty sure this store just became my favorite place in the universe."

He laughs and asks, "Your first time visiting Emery Ridge?"

I quickly scan his uniform for a name tag. *Brennan*. He looks close to my age, so I smile in excitement at possibly making a new friend. "Actually, I just moved here."

"Holy crap, really?" He twitches his fingers as his eyes widen. He seems just as thrilled as I am. "How old are you?"

I tell him I'm seventeen, almost eighteen, and that I'll be a senior in high school. He's a senior too, and he excitedly tells me there haven't been any new kids in our year since he moved here in seventh grade.

"Seriously, I've been so nervous about starting school tomorrow. I'm *so* glad I've met at least one other person!" We don't even really know anything about each other, but Brennan has such a fun, happy vibe. Would it be weird to ask for his number?

A woman with two toddlers walks over and stands in line behind me, and Brennan curses under his breath. "Ugh, I wish I wasn't working right now. Is there any way you can stick around to talk?"

I shake my head sadly. “No, I wish. I have to get back to my aunt’s book shop to cover someone’s shift.”

Brennan pouts and waves his hands over the display case full of ice cream. “Well, did you want something before you go?”

Everything looks so good. I’d never be able to make up my mind. I probably don’t really need any ice cream, considering I’ve already had a latte and I still have the muffin Katy gave me.

“Surprise me!” I say.

Brennan chuckles and scoops some triple chocolate chip ice cream into a waffle cone. The lady with the kids is huffing and acting restless, so Brennan rings me up as quickly as possible at the register. After I pay, I thank him profusely and give the rest of the shop one last, longing glance. I’m totally coming back here to explore and check out more of the treats they sell.

“Wait!” he calls, and I spin around to raise my eyebrows at him. He twitches his fingers again and giggles nervously. “What’s your name? I feel so dumb for not asking.”

“It’s Cricket,” I say. Since the lady in line is literally glaring at him now, I wave as I leave the shop. “I’ll see you around at school!”

Outside on the sidewalk, I sigh in content as I take a few licks of my ice cream. It’s *amazing*. I’ll have to ask Theo if he’s familiar with this place, and if he knows Brennan from school or not. Theo told me it’s a small town, so I’d be surprised if they *didn’t* know each other.

My phone vibrates, and I pull it out of my pocket to find a new text from Luca. “*It’s safe to come back. They just left.*”

I ignore the laughing emojis following the message and put my phone back in my pocket. I feel both relieved and disappointed, which is ridiculous! I purposely avoided those guys for a reason. I decide to take the long way back to Flora & Feathers, all the way around the block, just in case the guys haven’t completely left yet. Plus, that will give me time to finish my ice cream.



## Theo

“Put your phone away and pay attention!”

The alpha order washes over me, and I bare my teeth angrily as I’m forced to shove my phone back in my pocket.

“You don’t need to use your alpha voice on me anymore,” I growl. “I’m not a fucking kid.”

Hawthorne glances at me sideways and shows his teeth. He doesn’t do it in anger, but more so to put me in my place. “You’re acting like a kid. You skipped your alpha lessons earlier this week, and now you’re glued to your phone like a typical human teenager.”

I force myself not to roll my eyes or lash out defensively. Calling them ‘alpha lessons’ makes them sound way more formal than they are. Ever since I turned sixteen, I spend one day a week with Hawthorne while he’s working, and we discuss any issues within the pack. I’m not saying it’s not important, because it definitely is, and I’ve learned so much from my uncle. I respect the hell out of him, and I can only hope I’ll be as strong of an alpha as he is someday.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I was checking on Cricket. Today’s the first day I won’t be able to see her since we met.”

Hawthorne grunts. I know that’s his way of saying he gets it, but I’m still frustrated. All I can think about is seeing Cricket again. It’s fucking killing me that I can’t even talk to her right now.

“Have you introduced her to Hollis and Cas yet?” he asks.

I tap my fingers against my leg and glance out the passenger window of his police cruiser. He’s driving around with no real destination, waiting for a call to come in.

“Not yet,” I answer, hoping my voice sounds casual.

They’re fucking pissed at me for it too. I haven’t told Hollis or Cas shit about Cricket. Not even

her name. All they know is that I've been ditching them all week to hang out with her. I'm pretty sure Cricket's mad at me too. Every time she asks about them or suggests hanging out with them, I'm filled with an overwhelming sense of anxiety.

"Theo," Hawthorne growls my name in warning. "We talked about this."

"I know," I groan. "It's just, I really like her." That's a fucking understatement.

Hawthorne shakes his head, breathing out of his nose like he's frustrated. "There's a chance Cricket could be Hollis or Cas's mate. Aurora has had visions of Cricket with all three of you."

The reminder makes me feel equal parts excited and terrified. Hawthorne told me about Aurora Kendall's visions, and about her complex friendship with our pack, the first day I met Cricket. Hawthorne grilled me the second I showed up at his house with the remedies Aurora gave me, and he was disappointed to discover that Cricket doesn't have a mate mark.

I'd been so fucking into Cricket from the very first second I laid eyes on her. She's the hottest, funniest, most amazing girl I've ever met. I've never been keen on meeting my mate, but I didn't waste any time checking Cricket's wrists that afternoon in the desperate hope that she and I belong together.

Hawthorne and Aurora think Cricket might get her mate mark on her eighteenth birthday, since that's when witches come of age. It's different for werewolves, and I'm eager to get through the next few weeks to see if they're right about Cricket.

If I'm wrong though, and Cricket ends up being mates with Hollis or Cas, I'll be devastated. I'm terrified for Cricket to meet them. What if they can tell right away, even without her having a mate mark? Even if they can't, and they have to wait along with me for her birthday, I know those fuckers are going to like her. Cas will probably try to fuck her within five minutes of meeting her, no matter how I feel.

"You haven't slept with her, have you?"

Hawthorne's question snaps me back to reality, and I snarl in annoyance. "No, I haven't. Not that it's any of your business."

My uncle glares at me like he doesn't believe a word out of my mouth. Honestly, I can't blame him. I'm notorious for sleeping around, and I normally only talk to girls for a few minutes before I try to make a move on them.

It's different with Cricket. I mean, she has a banging body and I absolutely want to sleep with her. But I'm worried I'm going to fuck things up between us. It's torture every time she touches me, and Cricket is *extremely* affectionate. I can't blame her though, because I can't exactly keep my hands off of her either.

"If you sleep with her, and she turns out to be mates with Hollis or Cas, that's going to cause drama and discontent in your pack." Before I can roll my eyes and tell him I'm fully aware of this already, he uses his alpha voice on me again. "For now, I think it's best if you remain *just friends* with Cricket. You can't have sex with her, and you can't kiss her."

The magic and authority in Hawthorne's words surges through me, and there's nothing I can do to stop it. I snarl angrily and ball my hand into a fist. Honestly, I'd probably shift and push Hawthorne into a fight if I didn't have so much control over myself. I can't believe he alpha-ordered me again, and about something so personal.

"What the fuck? *Stop* doing that shit to me!"

Hawthorne snorts and rolls his eyes like I'm being dramatic. "Until you're mated and fully break away with your own pack, you're still my responsibility, pup."

I barely catch myself from flinching. He only calls me a pup when he's angry or disappointed with me. I don't know whether to feel offended or guilty, even though I haven't done anything wrong.

Hawthorne's police radio interrupts us. He gets a call for a ten-sixteen, and he flips on his sirens as he makes the next turn to head to our destination. I stay quiet, but I can feel adrenaline rushing through my body.

We drive to a trailer park near one of the bigger ski resorts in town. Most of the trailers are well

kept with clean yards, but there are a few that need some serious landscaping and repairs. Outside of a trailer that falls into the latter category, there's a middle-aged couple screaming at each other. Another woman stands slightly off to the side, phone in hand, and she waves at the police cruiser as we approach.

Hawthorne reminds me not to get involved, and to stay by the car at all times. It's the same reminder he always gives me when I come with him like this. He speaks to someone over his radio for a moment, and gets out of the car to approach the woman on the phone. I hang out for a few minutes to make sure the situation isn't going to escalate before I get out and lean against the side of the cruiser with my hands in my pockets.

The couple is still screaming at each other, and Hawthorne calmly steps in to diffuse the fight. I'm not interested in following in Hawthorne's steps by becoming a police officer. My oldest cousin, Rylan, is a cop too, and he loves it. But I just don't think it's for me. Still, I love coming along with Hawthorne just to see how he handles certain things and how he keeps control over his wolf during stressful situations.

Just as things seem to settle down, a young kid runs out of the trailer and latches onto the middle-aged woman's leg. He can't be more than three or four years old. While it's not my business *or* my place to judge the people living here, I can't help but feel bad for the kid. Nobody should have to see their parents fight like that, especially at that age.

Paisley rushes outside, causing my eyes to widen in surprise. She says something to the kid and gently picks him up to take him back inside. I didn't realize Paisley lived here, and I feel guilty for having a peek into her private life with her family. I tap my fingers anxiously against my leg, hoping like crazy she doesn't notice me.

Her eyes meet mine as she stands up with the kid in her arms, and shame washes over her features. Fuck. It's not like we're close, and she and her friends at school can be a little judgmental, but I feel really fucking bad for seeing her here like this. My face flushes as I wave to her awkwardly, and I avert my gaze before she can.

Hawthorne will probably still be awhile, since I'm sure he'll have paperwork to fill out. I get back in the car, and I slyly pull out my phone to distract myself with messages from Cricket.



## Chapter Eleven

### *Cricket*

I rush around my room like crazy, trying to make sure I'm not forgetting anything. It's only the first day of school, but I still triple check that I have plenty of folders, notebooks, and pens in my floral-printed backpack. Stella is lying curled up on my bed, watching me with an annoyed expression. I stand in front of the mirror one last time to look over my outfit. I'm wearing boho, printed shorts with pom-poms on the hem, a plain white tee shirt, my usual amount of jewelry, and a pair of red converse. If I could get away with going barefoot, I totally would. My feet already feel claustrophobic.

Aurora's waiting for me in the kitchen, still in her morning robe. She gestures toward a plate of eggs and toast, which I gobble down quickly.

"Don't be nervous, sweetheart. You're going to have a great day."

"Thanks, Ror," I say with a grateful smile. My phone buzzes in my pocket, and I glance at it quickly. "Theo's outside."

My aunt gives me a cheeky smile. "He's such a sweet boy, isn't he?"

I roll my eyes, making her chuckle. She follows me downstairs so she can relock the door behind me. With one final encouraging remark, she waves as I step outside. Theo's leaning against his jeep while he stares down at his phone, and he looks up when he hears the chime over the door.

Even though we only went one day without seeing each other, it feels like it's been forever. I approach him with a shy smile and say, "Thanks for picking me up."

He grins at me in amusement, his eyes scanning over my body from head-to-toe. When I raise an eyebrow at him curiously, he scrunches his nose up and laughs. "I think that's the most clothing I've ever seen you wear."

I shove his arm playfully. "Oh my god, shut up."

He grins wider and looks down at my feet. "Uh, oh. Are your feet going to fall off if you cover them up like that?"

I flip him off, and he chuckles as he opens the passenger door for me. Once we're buckled in and pull out onto the street, he tells me, "I usually drive Hollis and Cas to school too, so we're picking Hollis up next."



My heart skips a beat, and it feels like my stomach is filled with butterflies. I've been dying to meet Theo's friends, but I'm so nervous. "Okay, cool. I'm excited to meet him!"

Theo taps his fingers on the steering wheel and gives me a guilty smile. "I didn't tell them you'd be riding with us this morning. Hollis is probably going to be pretty surprised."

"Are you serious?" I ask with more venom than I mean to. Theo glances at me quickly before returning his attention to the road. "Do they know *anything* about me?"

The expression on Theo's face makes the answer to that question obvious. I slump back in my seat and frown as I stare out my window. When Theo gently places his hand on my knee, I force myself not to look at him or react to his touch.

"I'm sorry," he whispers. "I know I've been an asshole about this. The guys have been grilling me about you all week, and they want to meet you as much as you want to meet them. I'm just..."

He trails off, and I turn to look at him. "You're just what?"

His fingers tap against my knee, which tickles, but he looks so somber and upset that I don't want to bring attention to it. He finally sighs and gives me the most pitiful puppy-dog eyes I've ever seen. "I'm worried you're going to like them better than me."

Oh my god. Why does he have to be so fucking cute all the time? I shake my head and grin at him. "That's ridiculous. There's no way I'm going to like them more than you. I only want to meet them so badly because they obviously mean a lot to you."

Theo smiles back, but he doesn't seem entirely convinced. "We'll see."

To change the subject, and to forget how anxious I feel, I ask, "What about Cas? Is he going to be as surprised as Hollis?"

Theo clears his throat. "He's dealing with something at home this morning, so he's going to be late. You'll meet him at lunch."

Well, maybe that will make it easier. Meeting them one at a time might not be so overwhelming. It takes about fifteen minutes for us to get to Hollis's house. Theo parks outside of a charming two-story, and he quickly pulls out his phone and types out a message.

Within seconds, a guy walks out the front door, yawning and shuffling toward the jeep sleepily. My heart stops when I recognize him as the bearded-guy from the bookshop. My cheeks flush and I dart a glance at Theo. I never told him what happened. I still feel weirdly guilty, and it was too fucking embarrassing. He gives me an odd look, and I jerk my head back toward the window as I watch Hollis approach.

Oh, god. If *this* is Hollis, does that mean the guy I spilled my coffee on is Cas? Holy shit. How is this even possible? How am I going to get through this?

It'll be fine. I just need to play this cool. I sit up a little straighter and slap a teasing grin on my face. When Hollis makes his way to the jeep, he surprises me by opening the passenger door. He must not realize the seat's already taken since he looks like he's still half-asleep. When he finally notices me, he jerks back and his eyes widen.

"Hello, Hollis," I say in a silky voice.

He stares at me in shock as his entire face flushes. He turns his gaze to Theo and murmurs, "Um..."

Theo's voice is a little deeper than usual when he says, "Hollis, this is Cricket."

Hollis keeps standing there, looking lost. I have no idea what's going through the guy's mind, but I take pity on him. I unbuckle my seatbelt, grab my backpack, and gracefully leap into the back seat. By graceful, I mean not very graceful at all.

Theo cracks up as I struggle to pull my foot free from the front seat. "What the fuck are you doing?"

Once I'm sitting upright again, I blow my hair out of my face and flip him off. "I'm letting him sit up front, duh."

Hollis winces and awkwardly slides into the passenger seat. He won't look at either of us.

Theo taps his fingers on the steering wheel and frowns at Hollis. “Dude, what the hell is wrong with you? You and Cas have been bugging me all week to meet her. And now you’re acting like, I don’t even fucking know! She’s going to think you’re a weirdo.”

Hollis clears his throat and chokes out, “I’m sorry. I don’t, it’s just...”

“We sort of met the other day!” I exclaim. I still feel super jittery, but I feel so much worse seeing Hollis uncomfortable. If I can play it off like it wasn’t a big deal, maybe he’ll relax and talk to me like a normal person.

Theo goes still and then spins around to look at me. “What? When?”

Hollis shuffles lower in his seat, and I grin at Theo. “Hollis came into the bookshop while I was covering for Luca.”

Theo’s nostrils flare, and he glances at my wrist. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

I tilt my head at him and frown. “I didn’t know he was your friend. We barely talked for two seconds before Stella scared him off.”

Hollis lowers himself even further in the seat, looking like he wants to disappear into the floor. Theo frowns at him in confusion and demands, “Hollis, tell me what happened.”

Hollis seriously looks like he’s going to die from embarrassment. I attempt to cover for him again. “I told you, he—”

“Cricket,” Theo cuts me off, using the same authoritative voice he used on Hollis. “I want Hollis to tell me.”

As he speaks, it feels like something tingles against my skin. It’s similar to how my magic feels sometimes, and now I can’t speak. I frown and sit back, glaring daggers at him. I don’t like this at all. He grins at me when he sees that I’m listening to him, turns to Hollis, and raises his eyebrows.

Hollis groans and rubs a hand over his face. “Goddamn it, Theo. On Friday, I went to Flora & Feathers Books to get something new to read. When I saw Cricket,” he pauses on my name and glances at me in the rearview mirror before turning back to Theo. “I-I thought she was really pretty. I walked around the store trying to think of something to say, and I was so distracted that I grabbed the first book I saw without paying attention before I went back to the register to talk to her.”

Theo taps his fingers against the steering wheel. We’re still idling in the driveway, and we’re going to be late for school if Hollis doesn’t hurry. I tap my foot in annoyance at Theo for making us do this, especially because I still can’t fucking speak.

Hollis sighs. “Cricket made a comment about the book, and when I realized what I’d picked up, I was so fucking embarrassed that I just wanted to get the hell out of there. But then her cat started rubbing itself all over me. I ran away as soon as it stopped.”

Theo’s eyes widen in delight, and he gets this dumbass grin on his face. “What book was it?”

Hollis groans. “God, please...”

I can’t take it anymore. He’s obviously way more embarrassed than I am. Plus, he called me pretty! I decide to save him from saying it out loud. I grin at Theo and cheerily tell him, “It was ‘*She Comes First: The Thinking Man’s Guide to Pleasuring a Woman*.’”

Theo laughs so hard, and poor Hollis covers his eyes with his hand, which is seriously adorable. I sit back and watch them. Eventually, I sigh dramatically. “You know we’re going to be late now. So, thank you, Theo.”

“Worth it, little witch.” He chuckles, wiping a tear from his eye.

“Oh my god, you’re *crying*? Jesus, it’s not that funny. Hollis will never be my friend now, you idiot.” I cross my arms over my chest and slump back in the seat, totally pouting.

Theo finally pulls the jeep out of the driveway and laughs. “Don’t be ridiculous. Of course he’s going to be your friend.”

Hollis is still blushing, but he’s not slumped down in the seat anymore. He looks back and forth between me and Theo curiously. When his eyes meet mine, I give him a warm smile. He gives me a shy smile in return.

Sounding slightly unsure, Hollis asks, “So, how did you guys meet?”

“Aurora introduced us. She’s Cricket’s aunt,” Theo says.

Hollis looks like he wants to ask us more questions, but we’ve just arrived at the school. I feel a pit of dread in my stomach. I bite my lip nervously when I see the crowds of students making their way into the large brick building. Theo pulls into a spot easily and jumps out to open my door. He holds one hand out to help me down and grabs my backpack in the other.

Once I’m standing beside him, he puts an arm around my shoulders and starts leading me to the front of the school. Hollis walks behind us. There are several people giving us strange looks as we make our way closer to the door.

I sigh quietly and admit, “I wish I had Stella with me.”

Theo stops and turns to face me. “Aww, don’t be nervous. It’ll be fine. Here, hand me your schedule. Hollis, let me see yours too.”

Theo holds my backpack up so I can dig through it to grab my schedule. I’d been able to register for classes earlier in the summer while I was still in Florida. I hold it out for Theo so he can compare it to his and Hollis’s.

“Okay, look!” he says. “You’ve got first period with Hollis, and second period with me. You’ll be with us at lunch too. Plus, you’ve got two classes with us tomorrow. You’re going to be fine!”

That makes me feel a little better. I pull a pen out of my bag and scribble their names next to the classes they share with me. It somehow calms me down, and I think it will reassure me if I see their names there every time I look at my schedule.

Theo blinks and gives me a weird look. “Are you left-handed?”

“Um, yes?”

He stares at my hand and narrows his eyes like he’s confused. Hollis chuckles quietly beside us. Theo snatches my schedule out of my hand and squints at my handwriting as he scrunches his nose up and laughs. “Are you sure?”

“Shut up.” I giggle, snatching it back. “It’s not that bad.”

“It’s fucking terrible! Hollis, look at that.” Theo points to my barely legible writing.

Hollis leans in and bites his lip to keep from smiling. I’m surprised when he meets my eyes and teases, “I’m kind of worried to see what your right-handed writing looks like now.”

I giggle again and shove the schedule into my pocket. “Whatever, screw you guys.”

Theo throws his arm around my shoulders once more and continues walking into the school. I lean against him and smile over at Hollis. I feel a lot better now and think maybe today won’t be so bad. We’ve barely taken a few steps inside when a bell rings overhead. Theo walks with me and Hollis all the way to our first class. A few people greet the guys as we walk by and give me curious glances.

When we’re standing outside the classroom door, Theo hands my backpack to Hollis. He uses that weird authority-sounding voice again and says, “Take care of her.”

Hollis frowns at him, almost like he’s offended. “Of course.”

Theo lifts his hand up and ruffles my hair. “I’ll see you next period. Hollis will walk you there.”



## Chapter Twelve

I watch Theo walk away before turning back to Hollis. He gives me a friendly smile and leads me into the classroom. The classroom is set up with nine tables lined up in three separate rows with two chairs at each table. There are some people sitting down already, and Hollis walks over to one of the empty tables closest to the windows. He sets my backpack on the table and pulls my chair out for me without saying anything.

“Thanks,” I mumble, feeling shy now that Theo isn’t here.

He smiles at me, and I realize all over again how attractive he is. His eyes roam over me quickly, and I feel butterflies stir in my stomach. Hollis looks back up and clears his throat. “So, um, you just moved here?”

I nod, happy for the distraction. “Yeah, from Florida. I’m staying with my aunt.”

He tilts his head and smiles. “I imagine it’s different here from what you’re used to.”

“Yeah, but I love it here already. Theo’s been showing me.”

Hollis nods and bites his lip. “I knew he was, uh, seeing someone, but he didn’t really tell me anything about you.”

Cue more butterflies. It’s like I feel relieved that I’m able to tell Hollis I’m single, but I’m also still totally crushing on Theo. What is wrong with me? I give Hollis a tight smile and say, “We’re not together like that.”

Hollis sits up straighter, and his pretty blue eyes light up. I’m totally not making this up! He smiles brightly and says, “Oh.”

The bell signaling the start of class rings, and a few more people quickly shuffle into the room. I notice Paisley walk in, looking slightly out of breath like she was rushing here. She glances around the room, and her eyes fall on Hollis. Her entire face lights up and she smiles in his direction.

I notice Hollis flare his nostrils as he avoids looking up front. I remember what Theo said about Paisley having a crush on Hollis. There’s still an empty seat behind Hollis, and Paisley makes her way toward it, never taking her eyes off of him. I wave as she gets closer, but she completely ignores me and gives Hollis a sweet smile.

“Hey, Hollis. How was your summer?” She is positively glowing as she smiles at him. I’ve never seen her look so happy before, and I feel a weird mix of pity and jealousy while I watch her.

Hollis hesitates briefly before he turns his chair so he can talk to her easily while still facing me. He politely says to her, "It was alright. How was yours?"

She giggles and flips her hair. "It was good, but I didn't see much of you at the bookshop."

Hollis raises his eyebrows and glances at me before asking her, "You're still working there?" She nods in confirmation, and he adds, "Then you know Cricket."

Paisley openly glares at me. I'm taken aback at her hostility. I know Paisley likes Hollis, but she doesn't need to be rude to me just because I'm sitting next to him. The teacher claps her hands to draw everybody's attention to the front. Hollis turns around, keeping his chair slightly angled toward me.

"Good morning, everybody! I'm Mrs. Whitley. Welcome to British Literature. I'm going to pass around our reading list for the year, along with a seating chart. Wherever you're sitting now, that is going to be your seat for the rest of the year."

Hollis and I grin at each other. It really seems like he wants to be my friend. While the syllabi and seating chart are being passed around, Mrs. Whitley tells the class a little about herself and how she spent her summer. When the person sitting in front of me turns around to hand me the seating chart, Hollis reaches over me and takes it instead.

"Hey!" I grumble quietly.

He glances at me and then writes both our names down in our spots. "What's your last name?"

"Kendall. And I can write my own name, thank you very much."

He smirks. "She needs to be able to read it, Cricket."

I scoff, but it makes me happy that he's teasing me. He holds the paper up for me to double check he spelled my name correctly, and hands it back to Paisley without looking at her.

Mrs. Whitley goes over the reading list and outlines her lesson plans over the course of the year. Since this is an honors class, it's more fast-paced than the regular grade-level classes. There are twelve books on our reading list, and I've already read a few of them. When the seating chart makes its way back up to the front of the room, Mrs. Whitley says she's going to read our names aloud so she can try to memorize our faces as she takes attendance.

She beams at Hollis when she gets to his name. "I had your brother in my class a couple of years ago. How's he doing now?"

Hollis shrugs. "Ezra's good. He's studying at University in Boulder, and he just got married last spring."

She smiles softly and asks, "Are you as much of a reader as he was?"

Hollis chuckles and nods, and she moves on to my name next.

"Cricket Kendall?" I smile and nod, expecting her to comment over how weird my name is. Instead, she surprises me by asking, "You're not related to Aurora Kendall, are you?"

"She's my aunt."

"Ah, I love her bookshop. I'm a regular customer there." It's nice to hear that Aurora's shop is well known, and that she has such a positive influence in the community of Emery Ridge.

The rest of the class period passes by quickly. Mrs. Whitley seems sweet, and she's very passionate about the subject she's teaching. I'm able to talk quietly with Hollis, and I can already tell I'm going to like him. I can feel Paisley glaring at the back of my head during the entire class, but I do my best to ignore her.

When the bell rings, Hollis picks my backpack up again.

I put my hands on my hips and frown at Hollis. "You know I can carry my bag, right?"

"No way. Theo will kill me if he thinks I'm not helping you." He chuckles when I don't budge and adds, "Besides, I want to."

We step out into the hallway, and it's much more crowded than it was earlier. When somebody accidentally bumps into me, Hollis immediately wraps his arm around my shoulders and pulls me in

close to him. It surprises me, and I feel a zing go through my body when he touches me. Hollis tenses up and looks down at me with a heated gaze. I feel myself shiver involuntarily and I bite my lip. I'm suddenly curious about what it would feel like to rub my cheek against his scruffy jaw.

Hollis snaps out of it and pulls his arm away. "Sorry."

Ugh, seriously, *what is wrong with me?* Why does Hollis have such a crazy effect on me? I give him a lighthearted smile, trying to play it off. "It's okay, I don't mind."

He smiles and hesitantly presses his hand against my lower back as he continues leading me through the hallway to my next class. Theo's already waiting outside of our Statistics classroom. He's talking and laughing with two other guys, but when he sees us, he grins and picks me up in a hug.

I laugh as he squeezes me, and he asks Hollis, "Well? Did she survive?"

Hollis smiles and hands Theo my backpack. "Yeah, she was fine. The teacher loved her."

"Of course she did." Theo ruffles my hair and keeps his hand on top of my head as he turns me toward the guys he was talking with before. "Hey guys, this is Cricket."

Their names are James and Xavier. They're both fairly tall and muscular, though not as much as Hollis and Cas are. James has blond hair and brown eyes, and Xavier has dark skin, light green eyes, and short hair.

Xavier gives me a friendly smile, and James smirks as he looks me up and down. He looks up at Theo when he's finished inspecting me and holds his hand out for a fist bump. "Nice, bro."

I make a choking noise and smack Theo's arm away from me in outrage. He shrugs and gives me a stupid ass grin. "What? You're hot. Right, Hollis?"

Hollis shuffles awkwardly and says, "Um, I've gotta get to class. See you guys at lunch!"

Theo laughs and pushes me into the classroom. The seating in here differs from my last class, with five rows of individual desks. Theo directs me to a seat somewhere in the middle of the room and gently sets my backpack on top of it. He sits in the seat behind me and gives me a lopsided smile.

I ignore him and pull out a new notebook and pen to set neatly on my desk. Theo leans over and tugs on a strand of my messy hair. "Aww, come on. Don't be mad at me. I was only teasing you!"

When I turn around to glower at him, he's pouting. It's so freaking cute that I can't help but lose my resolve and smile softly at him instead.

He grins and taps his fingers on the back of my chair. "So, tell me the truth. Was Hollis nice to you?"

"Yeah, I like him. He's quiet, but you *did* embarrass the crap out of him first thing this morning."

Theo snickers. "I can't wait to tell Cas about that."

"That's not very nice," I tell him indignantly.

"Don't you have older brothers, Cricket? Are you telling me they don't tease you like that?"

He's right. Killian and Emerson are just as bad. The bell rings and the teacher, Mr. Orzel, promptly introduces himself and begins taking attendance. He hands out textbooks and a class syllabus and jumps straight into a lesson. Throughout the lesson, Theo periodically tugs on my hair, brushes his hand against my neck or shoulders, or kicks his foot against mine under my desk. Every time he touches me, I automatically lean into it. We probably look like a couple, but it feels so natural to be touchy-feely with Theo.

Toward the end of class, we have a few minutes to talk amongst ourselves. I turn around to face Theo and groan dramatically. "God, the classes here are so freaking long."

My old school went by a traditional schedule, where we'd have seven classes per day that each lasted about fifty minutes. Emery Ridge High School goes by a block schedule instead. We have eight classes total, but they're split so we only have four classes per day. That also means the classes are ninety freaking minutes long!

Theo scrunches his nose up and chuckles. "You get used to it. Besides, we're pretty much halfway

through the day already.”

The girl sitting next to Theo leans in slightly and smiles at both of us. “I don’t mean to interrupt, but I just wanted to say that you guys are *adorable* together.”

It sounds like she’s being sarcastic or teasing us, but Theo grins at me and turns to look at her. “Thanks, Chloe. Cricket’s my best friend. She just moved here from Florida a few weeks ago.”

Chloe blinks in surprise at Theo’s genuine response. “Oh. Well, it’s nice to meet you, Cricket.”

“Nice to meet you too!” I smile at her. “So, how long have you known Theo?”

Chloe laughs. “Well, pretty much forever. We’ve been in the same classes together since we were in kindergarten.”

I smile wickedly at Theo and beg Chloe, “Tell me something embarrassing about him!”

Theo chuckles and shoves my head playfully. Chloe beams and says, “Hmm, let’s see. Oh! In sixth grade, he cried in the middle of class when the teacher was reading *Where the Red Fern Grows* out loud.”

“Aww, god. I don’t know if that’s the cutest thing I’ve ever heard, or the most pathetic.”

Theo puts his hand up to block my view of Chloe and grunts. “Okay, you’re not talking to Chloe anymore.”

I push his hand away and grin at her, and we both giggle. Chloe seems sweet, and she’s really pretty. She has thick, curly auburn hair, freckles, and black-framed cat-eye glasses. She talks with me and Theo for the next few minutes, and I find out she’s in my yoga class.

When class ends, Theo walks beside me to lunch, carrying my backpack again. It’s a sweet gesture, but it’s honestly starting to annoy me. We meet up with Hollis just outside of the cafeteria, and he grins when he sees us. We get there earlier than most people, so the lunch line isn’t very long. When Hollis grabs two lunch trays instead of one, I raise my eyebrows curiously.

“Our friend Cas is coming from the other end of the school, and he has to stay a few extra minutes to talk to the teacher,” he explains.

My heart drops into my stomach, but I keep my mouth shut. I’m, like, ninety percent sure Cas is the guy I spilled my coffee on at The Little Owl Café. Hopefully, he’ll find the situation funny once he realizes who I am. Everything turned out okay with Hollis, so why shouldn’t it be different with Cas? Still, I can’t help but feel nervous.

Every time I try to grab something to put on my tray as we go through the line, Theo grabs it before I can. I know he’s just trying to help, but this is getting ridiculous. I glare at him and say, “Ugh, stop it already!”

He blinks at me and furrows his eyebrows in confusion, his hand hovering over the carton of milk I’d started to reach for. “Stop what?”

I gesture to the lunch tray and my backpack. “You’re making me feel totally useless. I can carry my own shit and pick out my own food, for fuck’s sake.”

Theo’s face breaks out in a crazy grin, and his eyes dance in amusement. “How about this? I’ll let you carry your own tray all the way to the table.” He looks up at the lady running the lunch line’s register and points down the line to our trays. “All four of these together, please.”

I breathe angrily out of my nose, and then I notice Hollis shaking in silent laughter next to me. “What are you laughing at?” I snap at him.

He keeps laughing and raises his hands in surrender. “Nothing!”

I follow Theo to a lunch table near the corner of the room, and Hollis follows closely behind me. As soon as I set my tray down, Theo pulls me down beside him and against his side. Hollis sits down in front of Theo and leaves the tray for Cas in front of me.

“Will you stop getting mad at me already? You’re going to drive me crazy!” Theo whines, nuzzling my hair.

“*Me?* You’re the one driving me crazy!”

Theo gives me puppy dog eyes and pouts. “I’m just trying to help you. I don’t mean to make you feel useless. I’m just used to, well, I’m kind of the leader in our group.”

I glance between him and Hollis, and Hollis shrugs and smiles at me. “It’s true. He’s always like that.”

So, is it like a wolf thing? I guess I can’t fault him for that. Plus, he looks really fucking adorable pouting at me right now. I lean against him in defeat and sigh. “Alright. I’m sorry.”

Theo smiles, pleased with himself, and squeezes me tightly before scooting a couple of inches away. He picks up my slice of pizza and gives me a playful, wolfish grin. “Are you hungry, little witch?”

He brings the pizza closer to my mouth like he’s going to feed me. “I swear to God, Theo…”

His eyes gleam with mischief, and he moves the pizza closer to me. Is he seriously challenging me after I *just* forgave him? I use my magic to block his hand from coming any closer. When Theo realizes what I’m doing, he scrunches his nose and laughs in delight. He presses against my magic as hard enough that I can see the muscles in his arm bulging.

Hollis puts his pizza down and stares at us in bewilderment. I give him a sweet smile and bring my focus back to Theo. He’s still laughing, and now he’s using his entire body to press against the barrier I’ve made. I can’t believe he’s doing this here in front of people. I quickly glance around, thankful that nobody except for Hollis is paying close attention. If he hasn’t figured it out by now, he’ll find out soon enough anyway that I’m a witch. Besides, I know he’s a werewolf, so it’s only fair.

I smirk at Theo and push back against him with my magic so he’s forced to bring the pizza closer to his mouth. He’s still fighting against me, but I only feel a very slight resistance. Between his giggling, he chokes out, “Goddamn it, Cricket.”

I force the air to smash the pizza against his mouth. I’m careful not to hurt him, but it makes a huge mess.

He laughs and wipes his face with a napkin. “Okay, I deserved that.”

I take a bite of his slice of pizza, since mine is ruined now. Hollis stares at me with wide eyes and leans across the table to ask, “So, are you really a—”

He’s abruptly cut off by a familiar voice. “What the fuck are you doing with her?”





## Chapter Thirteen

I look up to meet the glittering green eyes of the guy from the coffee shop. I *knew* it was going to be him, but my mouth still drops in surprise. He's even more gorgeous than I remember with his raven black hair swooping across his forehead and around his ears perfectly, and his emerald eyes locked on mine intently.

Theo frowns. "What took you so long? Your pizza is getting cold."

Cas sits down across from me, his eyes never leaving my face. He doesn't even glance at Theo or Hollis when he says, "You didn't answer my question. What the fuck are you *doing* with her?"

Holy crap. He's *still* mad about the other day? My cheeks flush in embarrassment, but I don't break eye contact. I still can't believe that I somehow met both of Theo's best friends without realizing it, and in the most awkward situations imaginable.

Theo places his fingers under my chin and tilts my head up to meet his eyes. He barks out a laugh when he sees my expression. "No fucking way. When did you two meet!?"

Cas looks at Theo like he's from another planet. Hollis smiles and bites his lip, trying to hold back his laughter. Cas meets my eyes again, and even though he's scowling, it looks like his cheeks are turning as red as mine. I shove the rest of my pizza into my mouth so I don't have to answer any questions yet.

Theo sees what I'm doing and snorts. "Nice try, Cricket. Hurry and chew your food, and then tell me what happened." Underneath the amusement, I can feel that compelling, authoritative tone in his voice.

"Cricket? Is that your *name*?" Cas gives me a disgusted look.

I glare at him in return, swallowing the last of my pizza. Theo and Hollis are still staring at me, waiting for me to speak. I exaggeratedly clear my throat and say, "Well, the other day, I sort of bumped into Cas at that coffee shop next door to Flora & Feathers."

Cas growls. "You didn't just *bump* into me. You spilled your entire fucking coffee on me and then screamed at me like a psychopath!"

My jaw drops. I'm still super embarrassed about the whole incident, but it's not fair that he's trying to pin all the blame on me. "What? You started it, asshole!"

His nostrils flare and his eyes widen. "You didn't even apologize!"

“I would have if you hadn’t started yelling at me! And like I said before, it’s not my fault you don’t understand the concept of personal space!”

“I was only standing that close because I was walking over to ask for your number!”

“What?” I laugh in surprise. Was he seriously going to ask for my number while he was with another girl? I don’t know whether to be flattered, angry on that girl’s behalf, or impressed with the balls this guy has.

Cas grimaces, and his face entire turns red after he realizes what he’s said. He glances at Theo and Hollis, who are staring at us in shock. Cas suddenly seems very interested in the food sitting in front of him, and he shovels a handful of fries into his mouth.

Theo taps his fingers on the table, a dangerous expression taking over his features. “Let me get this straight. You went into the café, saw Cricket, thought she looked cute, and decided to ask her out. She accidentally spills her coffee on you, and you decide, for some unknown fucking reason, to yell at her? In public, in front of other people?”

He sounds *furios*. Even Hollis is glaring at Cas. I don’t understand it, but I’m torn between feeling relieved that they’re taking my side, and feeling bad that we’re ganging up on Cas.

“Um, well, I guess I might have overreacted.”

A giggle escapes my throat, and Cas looks at me like he’s physically in pain. “I’m sorry, okay?” He turns to Theo and says, “I didn’t realize she was the girl you’ve been fucking around with.”

Theo stares him down for several more seconds, and he turns to me with his eyebrows raised. “Do you forgive him?”

I blink in surprise. I feel like I don’t completely understand what’s happening. I don’t know if I should be embarrassed, angry, or what. I consider Theo’s question and look at Cas. He’s so stupidly beautiful, and he’s looking at me like his freaking life depends on my answer. I remind myself that this is Theo’s best friend, and Theo is my best friend now too. Cas can’t be *that* bad. Maybe he’d been having a really bad day when I bumped into him at the coffee shop. And even if he *had* yelled at me first, I definitely didn’t help the situation by escalating it the way I did.

I smile tentatively at him. “Yes, I forgive you. And I’m sorry too.”

Cas’s entire face lights up, and he beams at me. *Holy fucking shit*. His smile is blinding, and his eyes are even more gorgeous when he’s not glowering. *And he has a dimple!* A fucking dimple! Just one on his right cheek.

Theo and Hollis relax, and Theo ruffles my hair. “Okay! I know you’ve both been dying to officially meet each other over the past week. Cassian, this is Cricket. Cricket, this is Cassian.”

I snicker. “Cassian?”

He gives me a look. “Right, because Cricket is such a totally normal name.”

Theo chuckles. “All right, cut it out. All three of you have weird fucking names. It’s not a competition.”

I feel lighter and happier as I glance back and forth between the boys. I’m so relieved that Hollis and Cas have moved past our awkward, embarrassing meetings, and I can’t wait to get to know them better. I try to imagine them as wolves. Over the past week, I’ve gotten used to Theo in his wolf form, and I love that part of him so much. I wonder what Hollis and Cas look like, and if they’ll want to play with me in the forest like Theo does.

The boys are talking about their classes as we eat our lunches. I’m totally caught up in my thoughts, and because I’m also an idiot, I turn to Theo and blurt out, “Are you bigger than they are?”

Hollis coughs, and Cas stares at me in shock. Theo scrunches up his nose and grins down at me, even as his cheek turn red. I grimace when I realize how that sounded. “I didn’t mean…”

Theo laughs. His eyes gleam mischievously, and he smugly says, “I know what you meant. And yes, I am.”

Cas smirks at me and says, “Pretty sure that’s debatable. I think there’s enough time left before

next period if you'd like to go find a nice private spot with me so you can compare."

My brain seizes up for a split second, and a tiny, demented part of me wants to accept his offer. Theo and Hollis growl at Cas, and it brings me back to my senses.

"Ugh, god! That's not what I was talking about." I shouldn't leave the house anymore. Every time I open my mouth, I say something mortifying.

Theo possessively puts his arm around my shoulders and glares at Cas. "Don't talk to her like that. She was talking about the size of our wolves."

Cas and Hollis comically sputter in unison. "What!?"

Theo and I look at each other. I raise an eyebrow, and he grins. He taps his fingers on the tabletop and says, "I've been ditching you guys for the last week so I could play in the forest with Cricket. You guys should see her out there. She's fucking insane!"

Cas furrows his eyebrows and flares his nostrils a few times. "But she's not, I mean, you're not..."

I realize he's trying to sniff me. Even though Theo sniffs me constantly, and he's told me multiple times that I smell good, it still makes me feel self-conscious.

Hollis quietly asks Theo, "Does Hawthorne know?"

Theo stacks up our garbage and trays together, smiling like he doesn't have a care in the world. "Yeah. He wants to meet Cricket today. I figured we'd head over to his house after school." He looks at me. "Is that okay with you?"

His uncle wants to meet me? The thought makes me nervous. I know he's their alpha, and Theo had to ask his permission before shifting in front of me. Theo doesn't sound worried though, so I trust that everything will be fine. I nod at him in agreement.

"I'll be right back while I throw this away." He gives Cas a pointed look and growls, "Be nice to her."

As Theo casually walks away, Cas and Hollis stare at me. I smile sweetly, wondering if I should say something to break the awkward silence first. Luckily, Cas beats me to it when he glances down at his expensive-looking watch. "Jesus, there are only five minutes left before lunch is over. I have so many questions, I don't even know where to start!"

Hollis leans across the table and lowers his voice to say, "I was trying to ask this before Cas walked up and distracted us. You're a witch, right?"

I give him a lopsided smile and admit, "Yeah, I am."

Cas looks at me like he's horrified and runs his fingers through his gorgeous hair. "What!? I feel like I'm going insane right now. This entire lunch period has been totally fucked."

Not going to lie, my feelings are kind of hurt. I know we got off on the wrong foot, but I really hoped we could start over and be friends.

Theo slides into the seat next to me as Hollis curiously asks, "What's your affinity?"

I beam at him, but Theo grunts and answers his question before I can. "Air. How do you know what an affinity is?"

"Aurora told me."

Theo crosses his arms on the table and pouts. "That's not fair. I didn't know anything about witches before I met Cricket."

"How is that my fault?" Hollis laughs, his sapphire eyes lighting up in amusement. "We've known Aurora for years. Weren't you ever curious about the medicine she makes for the pack?"

Cas smacks his hands on the table. "What is going on right now? Why am I the only one freaking out?" The bell rings, signaling the end of lunch, and Cas looks at me in panic. "Cricket, what's your next class?"

I pull my slightly crumpled schedule from my back pocket and hand it to him. He snatches it away from me and looks over it hastily.

"Fuck, thank you." He hands it back with a relieved smile, revealing his dimple again. "We have

third period together. Plus, first and third together tomorrow too.”

The guys stand, and I stand up to join them, feeling totally awkward. My stomach flutters when I realize I’ll get to spend the next hour and a half with Cas. He sounds happy that we have classes together, but I have no idea how to act around him.

Theo hands Cas my backpack and levels a glare on him as he says, “Take care of her, and help her if she needs you to. Make sure you walk her to her fourth period class so she doesn’t get lost. And I swear to god, Cas, you’d better not be a dick to her.”

I put my hands on my hips and frown at them. I’m not a fucking baby. I don’t say anything because after what Hollis and Theo said earlier, I’m realizing this has something to do with their pack hierarchy. Standing here looking up at them together, I realize how tall they are. Theo is maybe an inch or two taller than Hollis and Cas, and I can barely tell any difference between the two of them height-wise.

Hollis glances down at me while Cas and Theo are still talking. He blinks and asks, “What’s wrong?”

“I’m so freaking short next to you guys,” I whine.

They smile at me, and Theo pats the top of my head. “It’s fucking adorable.”

Cas steps forward and grabs my hand. “Come on, we’re going to be late.”

The gesture surprises me, but I automatically thread my fingers through his. My skin tingles pleasantly at his touch, and I smile at Theo and Hollis as we walk away.



## Chapter Fourteen

When we head upstairs to our French class, Cas lets me walk in front of him since the stairwell is hectic and crowded. At first, I'm pleasantly surprised at his gesture and the way he seems concerned someone might knock into me. But when I reach the top of the stairs, I turn around to find him staring at my ass. He's not even trying to be subtle.

"Seriously?" I raise an eyebrow at him.

He gives me a flirty smile and grabs my hand. I'm tempted to snatch my hand away, but he's cute and I'm weak.

"So, you and Theo. Is it serious, or more of a casual thing?" he asks nonchalantly, *still* raking his eyes over me in a lascivious manner.

I snatch my hand away from his. Cute or not, he has to be the biggest asshole I've ever met. My feelings are hurt, but I don't want him to know how much his actions and words keep affecting me. I glare at him and ask, "What the fuck is your deal? Don't you have a girlfriend?"

Without giving him the chance to respond, I yank my backpack out of his hands and storm away from him. It can't be *that* hard to find the classroom without him. Even though I can feel his eyes practically burning a hole into the back of my head, I don't look back at him once. I find the classroom at the end of the hall, and make a beeline for an empty seat in the back of the room next to a guy with shaggy, blond hair.

The guy looks at me with raised eyebrows when I angrily pull a notebook and pencil out of my bag, but he leaves me to it and doesn't make conversation. A middle-aged woman with sleek, red hair is at the front of the room, writing in cursive on the whiteboard, and the other students in the class are mumbling as they find their seats.

To my dismay, Cas ignores all the empty seats and walks over to stand behind my desk-mate with a threatening scowl on his face. His voice almost sounds like a growl when he says, "Move."

The guy sighs and slowly puts his stuff back into his bag, and he moves to another desk without argument. Freaking traitor. I refuse to meet Cas's eyes when he sits down beside me, even when he scoots his chair as close to mine as possible.

"Cricket, please," he whispers. "I'm sorry."

"You're only saying that so Theo won't be mad at you." I roll my eyes. "And because he used that weird voice to make you be nice to me."

The bell rings, cutting Cas off from answering.

Our teacher introduces herself as Madame Jacquet. She passes out textbooks and our class syllabus while she takes attendance, and she emphasizes her number one rule that we're only allowed to speak French while we're in class.

While she speaks, I can feel Cas's eyes on me. I still refuse to acknowledge him. I'm so irritated with him, I'm past the point of caring that he's Theo's best friend. He was a jerk to me when I first met him, and he's still being a jerk now.

Madame Jacquet instructs us to speak to the person beside us about our summer vacations. She wants us to get back into the habit of speaking French, especially since most students will probably be rusty. The class quickly fills with chatter, half of it in English, to the chagrin of our teacher. I turn and glower at Cas.

He winces when he sees the look on my face. "Please, Cricket, let me apologize."

*"In French,"* I say sarcastically in French.

He smiles in relief and grants my request. *"I'm sorry, Cricket. I don't know what's wrong with me. You're so pretty, and I keep saying stupid things every time I see you. I felt terrible after I yelled at you at the coffee shop. I went back yesterday, hoping to run into you so I could apologize. When I saw you with Theo and Hollis..."*

He trails off, and I blink in surprise. I didn't expect him to be fluent. My Grandma Marina lives in France, and I can speak French fairly well. But Cas speaks like it might be his first language, and his accent is so perfectly swoon-worthy that I feel myself melt.

His apology sounds sincere, so I decide to give him another chance. I give him a shy smile and admit, *"I saw you with Hollis yesterday. When you walked into the bookstore, I panicked and hid until you left."*

*"Really?"* he laughs. *"I guess I can't blame you. Still, I hope you believe me when I say I am truly sorry. I know Theo is crazy about you. I'm not used to him being serious about a girl, but that doesn't give me the right to flirt with you or treat you like—"*

*"Theo and I aren't together."* I interrupt him.

He jerks back like I slapped him. "What? But, I thought—"

*"No, no, no! In French, please."* We look up to find Madame Jacquet standing over our table with her arms crossed and an amused expression on her face.

Feeling way too embarrassed at being caught having that particular conversation, I look at Cas and clear my throat. *"This summer, I moved here from Florida to live with my aunt. I drove here with my older brothers, Killian and Emerson. They go to school in Denver. A few days after I moved here, I made friends with a boy named Theo."*

Cas smiles and follows my cue. *"This summer, I went camping in the mountains with my friends and family. When we came home, my sister got married, which made my mom angry. I also spent a lot of time hiking with my friends, Theo and Hollis."*

*"Monsieur Seymour, you are wasting your time here. I must ask you again to consider switching to AP French. This class will be no challenge for you!"* When Cas shrugs at her, she turns her gaze to me. *"You're fluent as well?"*

*"My grandmother lives in France, so..."* I let my sentence trail off awkwardly.

Madame Jacquet sighs, shakes her head at us one last time, and walks away mumbling under her breath.

Cas snickers once she's out of hearing range. I grimace at him and whisper in English, "God, she's scary."

"Yeah, it really pisses her off that I won't take her stupid AP class. She was bugging the crap out of me about it all last year. My mom is French, and she speaks it at home."

"That's really cool!" I grin at him. I let my eyes slowly wander over his face. Are all werewolves this good-looking? I'm crazy attracted to Theo, Hollis, and Cas, and I've had intense reactions to

seeing and meeting all three of them. It's obvious they're all attracted to me too.

Cas's eyes soften. I don't miss the split second he glances down at my lips. He growls quietly and asks, "You're really not dating Theo?"

"No, but we're..." I shake my head, at a loss. I don't know how to describe how I feel about Theo.

Cas pulls away, keeping his voice at a whisper. "The girl you saw at the café with me is my ex, Sara. I might be a piece of shit for flirting with you while I thought you and Theo were a thing, but I promise I don't have a girlfriend."

My stomach flutters as relief washes over me. It's *so* messed up, because it's not like anything's going to happen between me and Cas. Certainly not anytime soon, anyway. He's Theo's best friend, and the way I feel about Theo, Cas, and Hollis is getting more complicated by the second.

"Oh." That's all I can think to say. I'm a freaking idiot.

His eyebrows furrow, a guarded expression taking over his face. "You've really seen Theo shift?"

I can't help the smile that crosses my face. "Yes."

He shakes his head in astonishment. "We're not supposed to be able to tell or show anyone."

Madame Jacquet is still walking around, listening and talking to other students. Nobody is paying attention to us, so I smile at Cas and whisper, "I think my aunt has known about your pack for a long time. She told me about you guys when she introduced me to Theo, and Theo had to ask his uncle's permission before he shifted in front of me the next day."

"Do you, um..." Cas stumbles over his question, nervously brushing his fingers through his hair. "Are you allowed to see us? Me and Hollis? I mean, do you even want to?"

"Are you serious?" I grin at him like a lunatic. "Of course I want to."

Cas gives me a blinding smile that makes the butterflies in my stomach multiple by, like, a million. Madame Jacquet brings attention to herself at the front of the room, and we continue with the lesson. She gives us homework too, which sucks. But at least I don't need to worry about it tonight, as I don't have this class again until Wednesday.

When the bell rings, Cas asks to see my schedule again. He looks it over with a frown. He's making me feel anxious, so I quietly tell him, "If your next class is too far away from mine, it's not a big deal. I'm sure I'll get there just fine on my own."

His eyes snap up to meet mine. "Actually, I have physics next, so it's pretty close to where you're going. I just wish one of us was in there with you. You've got two classes without any of us tomorrow too."

His concern gives me a warm feeling I didn't expect, and I laugh. "That's okay. It won't kill me to be by myself. Which classes did you say we have together again?"

He tells me, and I scribble his name down next to our three shared classes—French, US Government, and Art History. He automatically picks up my backpack and puts it over one of his shoulders with his bag. He doesn't take my hand this time, but he keeps his hand on my back as he leads me through the hallways and down the stairs to the science wing.

Once we're near the door of the classroom, Cas hands me my backpack and smiles down at me. "Wait for me here after class, okay?"

Before I can agree or say anything at all, a girl crashes into Cas and throws her arms around him tightly. I recognize her as the girl from the coffee shop, and I tense up as I watch them. Did Cas lie when he told me she's his ex?

"I haven't seen you all day," she whines, rubbing her cheek against his chest as she pouts up at him.

He holds his hands out, careful not to touch her, and gives me a panicked look. "Sara, I don't think..."

She pulls back and frowns at him. "Why haven't you called me?"

"We broke up, remember?" Cas grimaces, his nostrils flaring like crazy as he continues to dart

glances in my direction.

He looks so uncomfortable. I'm starting to feel bad for him. Sara is gorgeous with long, dark brown hair and a perfect creamy complexion. She's wearing an A-line skirt, a cute blouse, and tall wedge sandals. Her style is super girly, which seems to work for her.

"Oh Cas, don't be ridiculous. Every time you break up with me, I know you don't really mean it."

What? I furrow my eyebrows and meet Cas's eyes. His relationship with this girl is obviously more complicated than I realized, but he's making it obvious he wants nothing to do with her right now. Killian's had his fair share of crazy girlfriends, so I'm not totally unfamiliar with this type of scenario. The flare of jealousy I feel at seeing Sara stroke Cas's chest *is* something new to me, though.

I give Cas a wicked grin and shove Sara away without looking at her. I bring my hand up to softly caress his hair. I let my fingers slowly trail down his cheek and neck, and he looks at me with crazy bright eyes as his lips part.

"See you after school, cutie." I wink at him before I swiftly turn around and walk into my astronomy class.

"Is that the girl from the coffee shop!? You told me you didn't know her, you lying asshole!" Sara yells.





## Chapter Fifteen

“So, how was your first day of school here?” Cas grins at me.

“Fantastic, actually! I was super nervous this morning, and I’m not used to a block schedule. But I love my English and astronomy classes. It was nice having you and the guys with me for most of the day too. That made it easier.”

We’ve barely taken two steps out of the building when Theo runs and tackles me in a hug. He bends down and picks me up with one hand on my thigh and the other just under my butt.

“Fuck, I missed you,” he whines as he presses his cheek to mine.

Running my fingers through his russet hair, I laugh. “It’s only been a couple of hours.”

He sniffs and nuzzles against my hair and neck as he groans dramatically. “I don’t care.”

Cas and Hollis stand a few feet away. Hollis appears thoughtful, but Cas looks like he’s trying to decide whether to be furious or heartbroken. I widen my eyes at both of them as Theo carries me to the parking lot.

“Theo, you’re not carrying me to the fucking car. Come on, put me down.”

“Aww, please! I’ve barely been able to touch you all day. I’m having Cricket withdrawals.” I roll my eyes, and Theo tosses our backpacks to Hollis. “Here, just ride on my back.”

Sighing in defeat, I move to his back and wrap my arms loosely around his neck. He slides his hands underneath the backs of my thighs, his fingertips brushing the backs on my knees. It tickles so much that I kick my foot out and giggle. Theo gets a mischievous grin on his face and turns to raise his eyebrows at me.

“Stop it, I will fucking kill you,” I say. I try to sound threatening, but I’m still squirming and giggling wildly.

He scrunches his nose up and chuckles. “You’re ticklish! I’m totally saving that for later.”

When we get to the jeep, Hollis and Cas toss our bags into the back. Theo lifts my feet up one at a time, takes my shoes and socks off, and tosses those into the back too.

“What are you doing?” Hollis asks curiously.

“It’s easier for her to feel her magic when she’s barefoot.” Theo sets me down. Hollis holds the passenger door open for me, and I smile at him as we all get in.

From the back seat, Cas grumbles, “How do you even know she’s really a witch?”

I don’t get why he’s being all grumpy again. I can’t keep up with his mood swings. I’m about to retort with a smartass remark, but Hollis beats me to it.

“Can’t you smell it on her?” He furrows his eyebrows in confusion.

“What?” I squeak. I swear, this smelling debacle is going to be the death of me.

“I can only smell it when she’s using it,” Theo muses.

Hollis visibly flares his nostrils. “I didn’t know what it was exactly until you guys were fucking around with that pizza at lunch, but I was pretty sure you weren’t entirely...human? Okay, that does not sound like how I meant it. Um...”

He’s way too adorable, and I’m too curious to be offended over that not-human comment. “What does it smell like?”

Hollis and Theo share a look, and Theo answers, “You know how I told you it feels kind of warm and tingly? It smells like that too, and sort of wild? It’s hard to describe.”

Cas crosses his arms and pouts like a little fucking kid. “Well, I can’t smell it. I think you guys are all just fucking with me.”

“Just show him something, little witch.” Theo rolls his eyes and glares at Cas in the rearview mirror. “Apparently, he’s going to act like a fucking crybaby otherwise.”

I ignore the way Cas glares at Theo and look around the car for an idea. Theo’s only seen me use my affinity, so I want to do something different. I still haven’t had the chance to show Theo everything I learned from my lessons with Aurora. My eye catches on a pocketknife sitting in the cup holder, and a triumphant grin spreads across my face.

“Can I use that?” I ask Theo, pointing to the knife. He shrugs and smiles, probably assuming I’m going to make it fly around or something predictable like that.

I smile at him, pick up the knife, and flip open the blade. “I’ve been wanting to show you this, anyway.”

Theo blinks in confusion, and I quickly slice the blade across the palm of my hand. The guys freak out, shouting in complete shock and horror. The wound on my palm stings, but I can’t help grinning at them like a maniac. Theo’s gaping at me like I’m insane while he tugs at his hair. Hollis reaches for me, his fingers barely brushing my shoulder. Cas leans over the center console, his eyes never leaving the cut on my hand as he grimaces and flares his nostrils.

I mutter the words for the spell under my breath, lick my thumb, and slowly press my thumb down at one end of the cut I’ve just made. I slide my thumb across the entire cut, mumbling the words over and over until the cut is healed. There’s no scar or any sign of the cut at all.

“There, see?” I hold my hand up for the guys to inspect. Cas darts his hand out to grab mine. He pulls my hand closer to his face and lightly runs his finger along my palm. I try very hard not to shiver or show any outward reaction to his touch.

Theo glares harshly at me, his pupils dilating as he continues to flare his nostrils. He snatches the pocketknife from my grasp, and I widen my eyes at him. I’ve never seen him look so pissed before. Not even when I stubbornly used up my magical energy and passed out.

“You’re mad at me? Come on, I worked really hard to be able to do that.”

“Fuck, Cricket! I mean, yeah, that was fucking amazing and badass. But *please*, a little warning next time.”

“Surprising you was supposed to be part of the fun,” I mumble.

He narrows his eyes at me, flips the pocketknife open, and slashes the blade across the palm of *his* hand. I make an awful, choking sound and my heart fucking stops. But faster than I can blink, I watch in sheer incredulity as his skin heals itself. In a matter of seconds, just like with my magic, his palm is completely healed.

In a squeaky, high-pitched voice, he mockingly says, “*Surprising you was supposed to be part of the fun.*”

It's so insane, I burst out laughing. I nearly forget about Cas and Hollis until I turn around to see them staring at me and Theo like we're from another planet.

"Okay, you made your point. I'm sorry," I admit. "How does that work for you guys, anyway?"

Theo smiles at me, so I know he's not mad anymore. He finally pulls out of the parking lot and begins driving toward his uncle's house.

"Werewolves have enhanced immune systems, so if we ever get sick or hurt, the healing process is incredibly sped up," Hollis says. "That's why we rely on your aunt so greatly. If someone in the pack gets sick or hurt enough that their immune system shuts down, regular medicines don't work at all."

"Does that happen often? It looked like she gave Theo a lot of stuff the other day." I turn around in my seat enough to see Hollis. I'd asked Theo plenty of questions about werewolves whenever we hung out, but he'd never given me such detailed answers.

Hollis smiles, his eyes lighting up when he sees how interested I am. "Not very often, no. It's more common for pups to get sick or hurt. But Elsa, Theo's cousin's mate, is pregnant again. So, that's probably why Hawthorne asked Aurora for some extra supplies."

"Mate?" The word feels strange and tingly on my tongue.

Theo growls and gives Hollis a warning look in the rearview mirror. "His wife. That's what he means."

The word *mate* is ringing inside my head over and over, and something urges me to press the subject. The expression on Theo's face makes me hesitate, and Hollis clamps his mouth shut without another word. My eyes land on Cas. He's staring at me thoughtfully, biting the inside of his cheek while he rubs the underside of his wrist almost subconsciously.

"Why are you being so quiet?" I ask.

"Sorry." Cas chuckles. "I'm still wrapping my head around this witch thing, and it's weird to be talking about the pack to an outsider."

"She's not an outsider." Theo frowns and taps his fingers against his steering wheel.

Cas rolls his eyes. "Obviously not now."

God, he *really* doesn't like me. I just know it. He was fine with me being a normal girl, dating his friend or being someone he could flirt with. But it's obvious he doesn't want me to be close to their group. I glance over at Hollis again to find he's still giving me an open and friendly smile. He's such a cutie, and he's being an absolute sweetheart. At least *he* wants to talk to me.

I smile at Hollis. "Tell me about your wolves?"

His eyes light up. "Well, Theo wasn't wrong earlier when he said that he's bigger than we are. I'm not sure how noticeable it will be to you when you see us all together. Cas is the smallest of the three of us, but he's also the fastest."

Theo proudly adds, "Hollis is too modest to say, but he has the best hearing and the strongest sense of smell between us."

My heart races when Theo turns onto a narrow, dirt driveway. I understand why their alpha wants to meet me. I've been spending a lot of time with Theo, and I'm learning all of their pack secrets by being around them. So, yeah, I totally get it. But it's still nerve-racking. I don't even know the guy, but I want him to like me.

"Don't worry, you'll like Hawthorne. He's not so bad. Just picture an older, wiser Theo," Hollis says.

Theo gives me a cheesy grin, and I laugh. We park in front of a huge, two-story, cottage-style house. It's stunning, and the surrounding landscape is just as breathtaking. Hollis hops out and opens my door for me. Theo walks around the front of the vehicle and smiles warmly.

"Do I look okay?" I uselessly run a hand over my witchy hair, trying to smooth it down.

Theo and Hollis laugh and grin at each other. Cas stands a few feet away from the rest of us, and he glowers at me as he growls, "Don't be stupid."

My cheeks flush and my mouth parts. What the hell does that mean? Theo places his hand on my lower back and glares at Cas. “What Cas meant to say was, ‘Cricket, you look beautiful and there’s no reason to worry.’ Right, Cas?”

Cas winces and widens his eyes at me, but he doesn’t say anything. Theo sighs and leads me to the front door. Hollis stays close on my other side, and Cas trails behind us. I expect Theo to knock on the door, but he walks right in.

“Hello!” he shouts, his voice echoing through the house. A pretty, middle-aged brunette woman walks into the front entry and smiles at us.

“Hey! Everyone’s in the kitchen. I made some sandwiches if you’re hungry.”

Hollis thanks her and gives her a hug as he walks past her into what I’m assuming is the kitchen. Cas does the same.

Her eyes land on me, and her grin widens. “You must be Cricket! I’m Margot.”

She holds her out for me to shake, and I take it as I smile back and say that it’s a pleasure to meet her. She puts her arm around me, pulling me away from Theo, and leads me into the kitchen. It’s gigantic with a large island in the center. Hollis and Cas are standing around it, laughing and eating the sandwiches Margot mentioned. There are two other men and a girl a few years older than me there as well.

“Everyone, this is Cricket.” Margot squeezes my shoulders, and I wave awkwardly as the three strangers stare at me appraisingly. “This is my husband, Hawthorne, Theo’s father, Holden, and my son’s wife, Elsa.”

Hawthorne steps forward with a friendly smile and offers me his hand to shake. I smile back and try to appear confident as I shake his hand firmly in mine. “Lovely to finally meet you, Cricket. Aurora always speaks so highly of you.”

He and Holden share the same auburn-red hair as Theo, and they’re both covered in freckles. Hawthorne is broader and more muscular, and Holden has a full beard. Elsa is tall and lithe with smooth, dark brown skin, and an adorable pixie cut.

I’m too intimidated to say anything in response to Hawthorne’s comment. I still don’t know the full story of how Aurora became friends with their pack, and I don’t know if there are rules to follow when it comes to speaking with an alpha.

Theo scoots by me, lightly brushing his hand against my arm. He stands beside Hollis and frowns at the plate of sandwiches. “Jesus, you guys, leave something for Cricket.”

“Dude, there are still, like, ten fucking sandwiches here,” Cas grumbles.

“I’m not really hungry,” I mumble. I’m way too nervous to eat right now.

Theo turns to me, concern taking over his expression. He glances down at the sandwiches, and looks back up at me with a mischievous smile and a maddening glint in his eyes. With no further warning, he picks up the very-breakable-looking sandwich plate and launches it across the room at me.

I reflexively reach out with my magic and stop the plate in midair less than an inch from my face. The sandwiches float around the plate, and I hold my breath when I realize everyone is staring at me in shock. What the hell was that? Breathing angrily out of my nose, I use my magic to set the plate and sandwiches neatly back on the island countertop while I glare daggers at Theo.

“Nice catch, little witch.” Theo smirks.

Gritting my teeth, I barely keep myself from screaming at him. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

“Did you just use your full power to throw that?” Hollis laughs in delight.

When Theo nods, Cas growls at him. His eyes are bugging out of his skull when he shouts, “You could have hurt her!”

Theo scoffs and holds a sandwich out to me. I stomp toward him and snatch it out of his hands before taking a bite, still scowling at him. He chuckles, giving me an affectionate smile. “I knew

she'd catch it. What do you think we've been doing out in the woods all fucking week?"

Theo's dad clears his throat and asks in a puzzled voice, "You've been throwing things at her like that?"

Hawthorne, Margot, and Elsa stare at me and Theo with wide eyes. Ugh, if Theo's going to mess with me like this, fine. He deserves a taste of his own medicine.

"He tackles me too," I whimper. "While he's in his wolf form."

Cas snarls and shows his teeth, his hands trembling at his sides. Everyone else in the room continues to gape at my idiot best friend, and Margot quietly hisses, "Theo!"

Theo grunts in exasperation and turns to me. "You little brat! That happened one time, and it was an accident!"

I try to keep my face blank, but I can't hold back a grin any longer.

Elsa bursts into giggles. "Oh my god, I love her!"

"Wow! It's one thing to hear Aurora describe your gift, but seeing it is something else entirely!" Margot smiles.

"Why would you do that, though? What if she *hadn't* caught it?" Cas's eyes dart between me and Theo as he continues to shake in anger. I don't know whether I should be concerned at his reaction, or flattered that he's so worried about me.

Theo ruffles my hair affectionately when he answers Cas. "Did you see her face when she walked in here? She was terrified. I was trying to distract her."

"Can you do it again?" Elsa asks eagerly.

Before I can reply, Theo grabs my hand and brushes his thumb over my knuckles. The gesture causes butterflies to stir in my stomach, and I smile softly at him.

"Save your energy for now, little witch," Theo says, the slightest growl in his voice. "We're going to play with Hollis and Cas here soon."

"Can we? Shift in front of her, I mean?" Hollis asks hopefully.

Hawthorne rubs a hand over his chin and jaw thoughtfully. He seems to be assessing me, and I feel embarrassingly desperate for his approval. Finally, he gives me a kind smile and tells Hollis, "Yes, of course."

I beam at Hollis and Cas. I get to see their wolves today! Hollis grins back and reaches down to squeeze my hand. He pulls away almost immediately and bites his lip like he's embarrassed. Cas doesn't look excited. He looks like he's confused and worried, and he stays silent.

For the next half hour, we stand around in the kitchen together talking and laughing. The boys and I finish the rest of Margot's sandwiches. Margot and Elsa are the absolute sweetest, and they ask me a million questions about my family, school, and my magic. I learn that Elsa is twenty-three and that she's been married to Theo's cousin, Rylan, for almost four years now. Elsa, Rylan, and their daughter, Eva, are staying with Hawthorne and Margot while their house is being built. It should be ready in a few months, just in time for them to move in and get it ready before Elsa's new baby is due. Eva's taking a nap upstairs, and Rylan's at work. Which is a shame because he sounds like a lot of fun from all the stories everyone keeps telling me.

Eventually, Margot looks up at the clock on the oven and tells us all she'll be right back. Her daughter just got out of school, and the bus that drops her off at home should be here any minute.

After she walks out the front door, Theo taps his fingers on the countertop and gives me a cute smile. "After you meet Rory, we'll get out of here. Sound good?"

I nod and smile back up at him, leaning with my elbows on the island counter. I really want to hug him, but I don't want to do something weird in front of his family. A few minutes later, I hear the front door open, and a little girl runs into the kitchen.

She throws herself at Theo, and he hugs her back with a laugh. She's tall, and she has an adorable face with freckles sprinkled across her nose and beautiful red hair pulled back in a headband. She says hello to Cas and Hollis, and then she finally notices me.

Her eyes light up, and she smiles. “HI! Who are you?”

“Rory, this is Cricket. She’s a witch!” Theo says. I give him a look, and he just shrugs at me with a lopsided grin.

“Ooh, like Miss Aurora?” Rory asks, bouncing on her toes in excitement.

Theo chokes and scowls at his uncle. “What the hell? She knows?”

“Not everyone is as oblivious as you and Cas are,” Hollis says with an amused snort.

Rory laughs, and Hawthorne shrugs with no explanation. I smile at Rory and admit, “Yep, just like her! Aurora is my aunt.”

“Cool!” She grabs my hand and pulls me toward a staircase. “Want to see my room? I’ll help you brush your hair.”

I bite my lip to keep from laughing, and Theo snickers beside me. Margot gasps quietly, horrified at her daughter’s lack of subtlety. “Rory, *be nice!*”

“It’s okay,” I assure Margot and allow Rory to lead me upstairs.

Margot still looks embarrassed and turns to look at her husband. Theo glances at Hollis and Cas, and the three of them follow behind me and Rory. She leads us upstairs and down a long hallway to a bedroom on the right-hand side. The walls are painted a pretty lilac color, and everything is very clean and girly.

Rory tells me to sit on the floor, and she grabs a hairbrush off her dresser. The boys sit down on the floor in front of me, and Hollis asks Rory how her first day of school was. Rory chatters nonstop about her teacher and the kids in her class. She rakes her hairbrush through my hair, and *holy crap*, it freaking hurts. I wince a few times, and the boys grimace sympathetically. The fourth time I wince, I feel tears in the corners of my eyes. Cas stands up so fast he startles me, and he steps behind me to take the hairbrush from Rory.

“You’re hurting her,” he reprimands.

“Well, she has a lot of tangles!” Rory whines.

“Scoot over, let me do it.” Cas growls, sitting down on the floor behind me.

My eyes widen in surprise, and I turn my head to look at him. He’s still frowning, and he doesn’t meet my eyes, but he gently turns my head so I’m facing forward again. His fingers are gentle as he slowly runs the brush through my witchy hair. It’s so soft and relaxing, I feel like purring. Theo’s eyes are soft as they run over every inch of my face, and Hollis watches me with a shy smile that makes my heart flip.

When Cas finishes, I feel my hair lying smooth around my face. I turn to give him a sweet smile. He smiles back, showing that adorable dimple that I’m officially obsessed with. After only a few seconds, my magic buzzes beneath my skin, and I know without seeing it that my hair’s already sticking out like crazy again.

Cas snorts in amusement and Rory gasps, “What’s wrong with your hair?”

“My magic makes it do that. I’ve given up trying to make it behave.” I shrug.

Rory makes a face. “Aurora’s hair doesn’t do that. Her hair is pretty!”

“Cricket’s hair is pretty too.” Cas takes a strand of my hair between his fingers and gazes into my eyes. His mouth slowly quirks up on one side, and he chuckles. “Even if it is a crazy mess.”

“Alright guys, time to get out of here. I don’t want to get Cricket home too late.” Theo stands and stretches, and I totally don’t notice the way his shirt rides up to reveal some drool-worthy abs.

We make our way back downstairs and say goodbye to everyone. Hawthorne and Margot tell me they hope I’ll visit again soon. It surprises me, but their approval gives me a nice, warm feeling. Hawthorne pulls Theo aside as we walk out the door, whispering too quietly for me to hear. Theo nods somberly.

He quickly shakes the serious expression from his face. He raises his eyebrows at me and repeats the question he asked the first time I saw him shift. “Ready to play, little witch?”



## Chapter Sixteen

We've been driving for about ten minutes, and nothing around us looks familiar. I turn to look at Theo in confusion. "We're not going to our regular spot?"

He grins and reaches out to thread his fingers through mine, but he doesn't take his eyes off the road. "That's *our* spot, little witch. I don't want you playing with these guys out there."

My breath catches in my throat at the slightly possessive tone in his voice. Butterflies are going crazy in my stomach. I know if we were alone, I would give in and kiss the crap out of him like I've been dying to do since the moment I met him. I'm terrified what I'm feeling is going way beyond attraction, or even just a crush. My stupid crushes on Hollis and Cas make everything that much harder and more complicated too.

I squeeze Theo's hand and turn around in my seat to smile at Cas and Hollis. Hollis smiles back, but Cas is staring fixedly at mine and Theo's interlocked hands.

"Is Theo the only werewolf you've seen shift?" Hollis asks me curiously.

"Before I met Theo, I didn't even know werewolves existed!" I laugh.

That seems to surprise Hollis. He obviously knows a little about witches since Aurora's friends with the pack, but I've never met any other witches that mentioned werewolves or shifters. And judging by the shocked reactions of Theo and Cas when they found out about me, I don't think magic is common knowledge outside of the community of witches either.

"Did she freak out?" Hollis asks Theo.

"Dude, the first thing she said was that she felt cheated because in *Twilight* the fucking wolves have to get naked to shift."

Cas barks out a surprised laugh and smirks at me. I'm glad to see he's snapped out of his surly mood, even when he says, "Don't worry, Cricket. I won't disappoint you like that."

Hollis punches him in the arm. Cas snarls and punches him back even harder. Hollis growls ferociously, and Cas gets a crazy glint in his eyes.

"Jesus, you guys." Theo huffs. "Can it fucking wait until we're out of the car?"

Luckily, we arrive a few minutes later. We're deep in the forest, away from any trails or pathways. I figure we'll still probably hike further from here. After shutting the door and taking a few steps forward, I dig my toes into the soft ground and close my eyes as I breathe in the intoxicating

mountain air. When I open my eyes, there are a few leaves and twigs blowing gently around my feet, and the boys are staring at me in wonder.

“Let’s go!” I smile, waiting for them to lead the way.

Hollis holds his hand out to me first with an earnest smile, and I gladly take it. He hasn’t touched me much since this morning after our English class and sparks zing through my body as soon as I grab his hand. I think he feels it too, because he squeezes my hand lightly and his nostrils flare as I stare into his dazzling sapphire eyes. He pulls me along further into the forest with Cas and Theo following closely behind us.

After a short walk, we come to a small clearing on the edge of a steep, rocky bluff. I step up to the very edge and peer down. A few hundred feet below, there’s a beautiful valley with a small stream running straight through it. It looks like the valley is completely untouched. It’s surrounded on both sides by sheer slopes.

“We’re going down there?” I inquire eagerly.

Hollis and Theo nod, but Cas cringes and takes a tentative step closer to me. “Be careful, Cricket! One of us will carry you down.”

His concern is sweet, but I’m feeling mischievous. I raise one eyebrow at him and stick one foot out over the summit. He runs a hand roughly through his hair and looks at Theo. “Fucking stop her! She’s going to fall.”

Theo turns to me and scrunches up his nose. His eyes are full of mischief when he says, “Yeah! Be careful, Cricket.”

With a dramatic sigh, I turn and pretend to take a step in Cas’s direction. He looks so ridiculously relieved. At the last second, I pretend to trip over a rock and tumble over the edge with a shriek. I let myself hover a few inches below the edge. Before I can float back up to the guys, the head of a huge, midnight black wolf peers over the edge at me. When I see his emerald eyes, I burst into uncontrollable giggles. His ears flatten, and he stares at me in alarm.

I float up and hover above him. Theo is still standing in the same spot with his arms crossed and a shit-eating grin on his face. Hollis stands next to him with his jaw dropped, his entire body tense. I do a ballerina twirl in the air and curtsy for them.

“Stop showing off, little witch. You literally scared the wolf out of Cas.” Theo laughs.

Pfft, Cas has been up and down with me all day. I figure he deserves to be messed with a little. I settle back down on the ground in front of him and look him over. He looks just as enormous as Theo does in his wolf form, and his fur looks soft and shiny. He’s magnificent. I remember Hollis said Cas is the smallest of the three of them, which is hard to believe when I’m standing right in front of him.

I lightly scratch my fingers under his chin and coo, “Hey there, little guy. You’re so cute! You want a belly rub?”

Cas lowers his ears so they’re flat against his head, and he growls at me. Faster than I can blink, Theo shifts and shoves Cas away from me. He snarls and snaps his teeth until Cas submits and crouches low to the ground. Theo looks strong and ferocious standing over him, showing his teeth. It’s startling to see him this way, but I don’t feel afraid. I feel weirdly proud of his strength, and I know he thinks he’s just defending me.

“It’s okay, Theo. He won’t hurt me,” I say softly, running my fingers through his russet fur. I bend down and brush my fingers through Cas’s silky fur too. I know without a doubt what I said is true. I trust him implicitly, the same way I trust Theo.

Cas perks his ears up and hesitantly sniffs my side. He gently licks my hand and wags his tail as he stands up to his full height. I grin when I turn around to look for Hollis. He’s standing off to the side a bit, still in his human form.

“Well? Let’s see it!” I call happily.

He bites his lip and gives me a shy smile. “I just wanted to tell you how amazing that was. When you fell, you scared the shit out of me. The only reason I didn’t shift like Cas did was because Theo stopped me.”



“My affinity is air, remember?” I walk over and wrap my arms around him.

“Yeah, but experiencing it firsthand is something else. It’s remarkable.”

My cheeks are hurting from smiling so much, and I laugh. “Shift already before I start blushing!”

He chuckles and quickly shifts in front of me. He’s just as big as Theo and Cas. The top of my head barely reaches his back. His fur is a pure, snowy white, and his eyes look even brighter and more radiant.

“You’re totally the prettiest. You look like Jon Snow’s direwolf!” I run my fingers through his fur and laugh as he wags his tail and nuzzles my neck.

He snorts and wags his tail back and forth wildly. Theo yips from behind me and nudges my back. I scratch his head and look around at the three of them in awe.

“Okay, let’s go down!” I shout.

Theo wags his tails and nudges me toward the edge of the bluff. I’m not worried about the guys. I know they’ll all be able to get down just fine. I motion to Theo to get out of the way and take a few steps back to get a decent running start. I’ve never done this, but I’m confident in myself and my magic.

I pull the wind through my fingers, feeling the air all around me, and take off running toward the edge of the cliff. I leap out as far as I can, screaming and laughing as I let myself fall. When I’m close to hitting the ground, I use the wind to pull myself up and land gently on my toes. It doesn’t take long for the boys to join me at the bottom of the valley. They’re panting and wagging their tails happily.

Looking at them together like this, my magic feels stronger than it ever has before. My fingertips are tingling and all of my senses feel slightly enhanced. I don’t know what’s happening, but for just a second, I feel nearly invincible. Like my magic is capable of anything.

Faster than I can blink, Theo shifts and stands in front of me. He grabs me roughly with one hand on each side of my face as he brings his face closer to mine. I’m suddenly giddy and nervous. Is he about to kiss me?

“What’s wrong? Are you hurt? Did you use up all your magic again?” he asks hysterically, his eyes searching my face for any signs I’m not okay.

Breathlessly, I ask, “What? I’m fine.”

He squints and pulls back. “Your eyes are all crazy and wild. They’re changing colors. I mean, they’re usually a mix of colors, but this is different.”

It’s a little alarming to hear that my eyes are changing colors, but I feel way too amazing to worry about it right now. “My magic feels so much stronger than usual, being with the three of you together. It’s overwhelming, but it feels fantastic.”

Theo looks me over once more and breathes out in relief. “If you’re sure you’re okay, wanna race?” He grins at me before shifting again, and he takes off running alongside the stream.

I screech in laughter and take off running behind him. I use the wind to help push me faster until I’m running alongside him. Hollis and Cas join us, and Cas quickly pushes ahead of everybody. I push myself faster until I’m neck and neck with Cas, leaving the other two far behind.

We finally stop when we reach a line of trees where the stream narrows. He’s panting and giving me a wolfy smile. I laugh and jump in the stream, splashing him. He takes a drink of water and licks at my feet, which tickles. He pounces around adorably and chases my feet as I splash around in the water. When Theo and Hollis finally catch up to us, Theo sniffs me all over excitedly and lies down in the middle of the stream until I climb onto his back.

The rest of the afternoon passes by much too quickly. I have so much fun playing with them and watching them together. They all take turns play-fighting in front of me, and it looks crazy scary and ferocious. I practice my magic and try a few new tricks to the delight of the boys. I’m careful not to push my magic too far, but it’s obvious to me I’m no longer limited in the same ways I was just a few days ago.

A couple of hours later, I find myself sitting beside the stream with Hollis while we watch Cas and

Theo fight. Cas is quicker, but it's clear that Theo is stronger. They're pretty evenly matched, and I feel so much admiration for them. Hollis nuzzles my side while I scratch his ears and stroke his fur.

When I yawn, I bury my face in his neck to try to cover it up. But he catches it, promptly sitting up and yipping at Theo. Theo and Cas stop playing and stare at me worriedly. I groan and glare at Hollis. He licks my leg and wags his tail in response. I don't want to leave, but I know I should probably get home and rest. As unreal as it seems, we have school again tomorrow. This has been the longest, craziest day ever.

Without asking, I climb onto Hollis's back. He wags his tail and yips at me happily, sniffing at my feet dangling on either side of him. He runs with me on his back until we're back at the top of the bluff we'd originally come down from. Theo comes up behind us and quickly shifts so he's human again. Cas joins him, and they smile brightly at me.

I pout at them. "I don't want to leave."

Hollis shifts abruptly while I'm still on his back. It feels so weird, I yelp in surprise. When he's in his human form, he keeps carrying me on his back and holds his hands under my thighs. I instinctively tighten my arms around his neck, and he turns his head to smile brightly at me.

"It's getting late anyway, Cricket," he says softly.

"Fucking shit, it's already after seven!" Cas curses, staring down at his watch.

Hollis walks back to Theo's jeep without putting me down. I don't argue. I just lean my head lazily against his and sigh blissfully. Theo looks at me and Hollis, a strange expression on his face. He doesn't end up saying anything, just tenderly ruffles my hair and smiles at me as he walks beside us.

"Now I understand why you were hiding her from us all week," Hollis says to Theo.

"Yeah, you greedy asshole! We could have been doing this every day." Cas comes up on my other side, peering around Hollis to glare at Theo.

"Too bad, I found her first," Theo says smugly.

A warm, happy feeling swirls in my chest, and I laugh. "Thanks for playing with me, guys. That was so much fun! You're seriously fucking amazing!"

Cas beams at me, showing his dimple. "You're so fucking fast! Even I had a hard time keeping up with you!"

"I didn't think you'd be able to read us so well." Hollis shakes his head. "I was worried at first since we can't actually talk back to you as wolves, but you just..."

"Yeah, that really impressed me the first time too. She's a natural with us, right?" Theo lightly strokes the top of my foot, his voice full of pride.

Cas and Hollis murmur in agreement as we arrive back at the jeep. Hollis opens the passenger door for me. Before I get into the jeep, I smile around at them one last time. I know my magic has bonded to Hollis and Cas the same way it did to Theo. My connection to them isn't quite as strong as the one I share with Theo yet, but I'm sure it's only a matter of time.



## Chapter Seventeen

“Do you want to hang out at your place for a bit?” Theo asks me once we’re almost to the bookshop.

“Yeah, definitely!” I exclaim eagerly. To save myself some embarrassment and play my excitement off, I clear my throat and shrug. “I mean, if you guys want to.”

Theo raises his eyebrows at Cas and Hollis in the rearview mirror. “Do you want to hang out with Cricket a little longer, or would you both rather go home?”

“Don’t be stupid. Of course we want to hang out.” Cas rolls his eyes.

Hollis chuckles and gives me an awkward, grimacing smile. “Do you know if Paisley is working or not?”

Oof. I’d nearly forgotten about the way Paisley acted during English class earlier. I don’t want to be mad at her just for having a crush on Hollis, but it upsets me he’s so obviously uncomfortable around her.

“No, I don’t think so. She’s only supposed to work a few days a week, and she’s been calling out a lot lately.”

We pull up in front of Flora & Feathers, and for the millionth time that day, Hollis opens my door for me. Cas grabs my shoes and backpack from the back, which I’m grateful for. I totally would have forgotten them. The bell chimes as we all walk in, and I see Luca behind the register with a look of relief on his face.

“Oh, thank God. Cricket, please...” He points to the other end of the counter where Stella is sitting, flicking her tail back and forth in irritation.

“Have you been being mean?” I laugh and walk over to her, leaning down to rub my forehead against hers.

“She’s been sitting here growling at me for the past hour! She won’t leave, and I have to work the register. She’s been scaring the customers too.” Luca sounds totally exasperated.

Stella purrs in relief and jumps up onto my shoulder. She nuzzles my cheek and I whisper, “I’m sorry I was gone so long.”

“Hey girl, did you miss me too?” Theo walks up behind me and grins at Stella.

Stella purrs and rubs her head against his hand affectionately.

“What the—” Luca stammers, his eyes widening comically. “I didn’t think anyone aside from you could touch her.”

“Usually, yeah.” I shrug and gesture to the gorgeous guy beside me. “She loves Hollis too for some reason.”

Luca finally notices the other two boys that have come into the bookshop with me. He looks surprised for a split second and then gives me a conspiring grin and teases, “Not avoiding them anymore, huh?”

Hollis stares at Luca like a deer in headlights, and Cas snickers under his breath. Theo’s eyes light up mischievously as he scrunches his nose, and he turns to face me and asks, “What’s that?”

There’s no way Theo *or* Luca are letting the subject drop, and I already admitted it to Cas. With a roll of my eyes, I tell Theo, “It wasn’t a big deal. I just, yesterday I watched Hollis and Cas walk in here, and I walked around the neighborhood until they left. I didn’t know who they were, and I’d already embarrassed myself...”

“Wait.” Cas laughs incredulously. “You weren’t *just* hiding from me? You were avoiding Hollis too?”

I nod quickly, wanting to be finished with this conversation already. Theo snorts and wraps his arm around my waist, pulling me close so he can ruffle my hair. Stella digs her claws into my shoulder to brace herself, and she rubs her face against Theo’s arm while she purrs.

Theo updates Cas, telling him what happened between me and Hollis here in the bookshop a couple of days ago, and Hollis admits to coming back, hoping to see me again. Cas only assumed Hollis came here to look for books yesterday, and he slipped out to investigate the café next door while Hollis was busy browsing.

In retrospect, the whole situation is super funny. It’s still surreal I met Theo’s two best friends in the universe without any of us realizing it, and they both felt the need to track me down afterwards. I feel like we were all meant to meet, no matter the circumstances.

Luca tells us Aurora’s in the workshop, and the guys and I head upstairs to hang out in my room. When we reach the attic, Theo collapses back on my bed, kicks off his shoes, and gives me a wolfish grin. He looks really fucking good, sitting on my bed like that. I want to tell him to cut it out, but I know he can’t help himself.

Hollis and Cas are still standing in the doorway and are looking around the room warily. I laugh at the looks on their faces and teasingly ask, “Jesus, have you guys never been in a girl’s room before?”

Cas rolls his eyes and steps into my room, but Hollis doesn’t move an inch. I widen my eyes in disbelief. There’s no fucking way he hasn’t been in a girl’s room before. He’s way too hot. I squint my eyes at him and ask, “Really!?”

“What?” He blinks at me.

“You’ve never been in a girl’s room before!?”

He doesn’t answer, and a blush rises to his cheeks. Theo chuckles. “Hollis is much more of a gentleman than Cas and I are.”

I’m still not sure I entirely believe Hollis is *that* innocent. I grin at him and Cas, spreading my arms to gesture around the space of my bedroom. “Well, look around to your hearts’ desire. But first...” I step in front of them and scratch Stella’s head. “You guys need to meet my familiar.”

They look at her curiously. I quickly introduce Stella and explain what a familiar is. Hollis hesitantly reaches out a hand to pet her head, and she purrs happily. I turn my head to grin at her and then focus my eyes on Cas.

“Moment of truth, Cas. Stella hates literally everybody in the world except for me, Theo, and Hollis.”

His eyes are shining with determination as he reaches his hand toward Stella. She tenses up and sniffs him judgmentally. She turns to look at me for a moment, and I raise one eyebrow at her in

question.

She launches herself at him so he's forced to hold her against his chest. She purrs and kneads his shoulder. Cas grins like he just won a fucking medal.

He lightly strokes her fur and laughs. "Ouch, her claws really fucking hurt."

I slide my shirt and bra strap off of my shoulder to show them the tiny scars I have from Stella perching there all the time. Cas and Hollis get stupid lusty eyes when I expose my skin. Part of me wants to roll my eyes, but I also want to take my entire shirt off just to see how they would react. After they realize what I'm showing them, Cas lightly runs his finger over the scars with a soft expression on his face.

"Can you, um, talk to Stella?" Hollis asks. He looks like he wants to touch my shoulder too, but he curls his hand into a fist and refrains as he gazes intently at Cas's fingers against my skin.

Cas sets her down on the ground, and she jumps up on the bed to snuggle with Theo.

"Kind of." I shrug. "It's not so much talking as, like, I can feel what she feels, and vice versa."

"Are we really allowed to look through your shit?" Cas asks thoughtfully as he looks around my room.

"Yeah, I don't care."

Cas saunters over to my desk and touches everything on top of it. When he opens one of the drawers, I snort in amusement. He's so fucking nosy, but I can't deny I'd probably want to do the same thing if I was at his house. Hollis apprehensively watches Cas and bites his lip, and he keeps glancing back at me nervously. I smile at him reassuringly and turn to look at Theo. He's still lying on my bed with Stella on his chest. He's petting her softly with one hand and has the other behind his head. He's staring at me, letting his eyes wander up and down my body with a tiny smirk on his lips.

I want to sit down, but I don't think it's a good idea to sit on the bed with Theo while he's looking at me like that. So, I sit on the floor and lean back against the bed, smiling up at him. He smiles back and reaches down to gently play with my hair. I lean into his hand with a sigh.

"Can you read these like Aurora does?" Hollis asks quietly, and I look up at him inquisitively. He's holding one of my tarot decks.

"Yeah, of course!" I wave at him to sit beside me. "Come here. I'll show you."

Glancing at Cas, I see he's moved on from my desk and is now going through my closet. Hollis slides down onto the floor beside me, and I pull him closer until our legs are pressed together.

"Hey, let me see your phone," Theo says, tugging gently at my hair. I pull my phone out of my pocket and hand it to him without question. I guess he wants to be nosy too.

I take the tarot cards from Hollis and smile. "Technically, anyone can read tarot cards. Aurora's better at it because of her affinity, but there's not usually any magic involved." He listens attentively as I go through all the cards and explain their potential meanings.

"Why do all of your clothes look like they belong to either a stripper or a homeless person?"

Theo snorts at Cas's sudden outburst, but Hollis looks offended on my behalf. I give Cas a lopsided grin and raise an eyebrow. "Cas, you know, that's actually exactly what I was going for. Hobo-slut chic!"

The guys break out in surprised laughter, and I wave Cas over to sit down beside me. Theo turns to lie on his side, and he holds my phone down between me and Cas to show me a picture.

"Are these your brothers?" It's a picture from my Instagram account of me standing between Killian and Emerson. We took it earlier this summer when they first came home from college.

"Yep, Killian and Emerson." I point out which twin is which.

Hollis leans over so he can see the picture too. Theo laughs. "You didn't tell me they were twins. How the hell can you even tell them apart?"

"What are you doing, anyway?" I ask instead. I take my phone from him and frown at it curiously.

He places his hand back in my hair and gently rubs his fingers against my neck. “I made it so that now you’re following the three of us on Snapchat, Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook. All social media is covered now, little witch. Plus, I added Cas and Hollis’s numbers to your contacts.”

Cas grunts and glares at Theo. “You realize she’s going to see how much of a player you are now, right?”

“It would appear that Cricket and I have that in common.” Theo winks at me when I meet his eyes.

Yep, he was definitely being nosy. I tilt my head back and grin at him. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Hollis laughs and laces his fingers through mine. Our legs are still pressed together, and he grazes his thumb over my knuckles. Theo’s hand is still on my neck and hair. Cas is sitting a few inches away from me with his elbows resting on his bent knees. I feel the strongest urge to be touching all three of them at once, so I wrap my hand around his bicep and gently pull him closer to me. Once he scoots close enough, I rest my head against his shoulder. My magic hums blissfully at their contact. It’s an incredibly intense and addictive feeling.

I’m pretty sure the guys can feel my magic reacting to them because Hollis squeezes my hand and Theo’s hand presses a little harder against the back of my neck. But then Cas tenses up and leans away from me. In a harsh voice, he asks, “Why the fuck do you keep touching us like that?”

My heart drops into my stomach, and I pull away from them. I’m so embarrassed, and it feels like my face is on fire from blushing so hard. The first time I hung out with Theo, he said he could feel our magic intertwine and connect. I’d just assumed that Cas and Hollis felt that today too, but maybe I was wrong.

“I’m sorry, I just thought...”

A tapping at my bedroom door interrupts me. *Thank god.* I quickly jump up and open it to find Harold perched on the stair railing. I hold my arm out for him to hop onto my shoulder and tell the guys I’ll be right back. When I’m halfway down the stairs, I hear a loud thump from my bedroom. I’m not sure I even want to know what that was.

Aurora’s waiting in her workshop, and she smiles brightly when I walk in. “Hi, sweetie! Sorry to bug you, but do you mind helping me really quick?”

She explains that she’s working on a new potion. She’s using her magic to heat it up, but once it reaches a boil, the potion needs to be cooled instantly in order to set correctly. Aurora doesn’t think she’ll be able to switch over to a cooling spell quickly enough. I’m more than happy to help her, and it only takes a few minutes for us to finish. After Aurora makes sure everything is setting, she sets the potion aside and follows me upstairs to the kitchen for a break.

She washes her hands and asks me about my day. I tell her about my classes, meeting Hawthorne, and playing with the guys.

“They’re still upstairs?” She asks. When I nod, she picks up a covered plate that’s sitting on the counter and hands it to me. “Here, I made brownies for you earlier. I completely forgot until just now.”

“Thank you!” I take the plate. The brownies look and smell delicious. When I get upstairs to my bedroom, I find the guys exactly where I left them. Only, now Theo is sitting up on the bed and leaning back against the headboard. Stella is curled up asleep on my desk chair. Cas is glowering and...did someone punch him? He looks like he has a black eye, but it’s already mostly healed. I squint at him for a second, but I decide it’s probably best if I just don’t mention it.

“Hey, sorry I took so long.” I give the guys a charming smile and pretend like everything is fine. “Aurora needed my help in her workshop, but she made us brownies!”

I hold the plate up triumphantly and sit down on the other end of my bed against the footboard. Hollis glares menacingly at Cas, and Cas winces at me.

“Uh-uh, nope. You don’t get to pull away from us just because Cas is being a dick.” Theo grunts and reaches forward to grab my ankle. He pulls me to him until I’m practically in his lap.

Too afraid to say something and embarrass myself further, I bite my lip and avert my eyes. Theo

brushes my hair away from my face and wraps his other arm around my shoulders. Quietly he asks, “You want to snuggle with Hollis too?”

Hollis is sitting on the floor, staring up at me with hopeful eyes. I give him a small smile and nod. He beams at me and hops onto the bed. He presses his body against my other side so I’m sandwiched between him and Theo. My body relaxes, and I feel so warm and cherished having them cuddle me like this.

“It’s just…” I grip the brownie plate tightly in my lap. “The first time I saw Theo shift, I felt our magic bond together, and I felt so close to him afterwards. Today, I thought I felt that happening with you guys too.”

Hollis smiles and picks up my hand. He brings it to his face and gently rubs his stubbly cheek against my skin, which feels amazing. “Cricket, we feel that too. It’s nuts! I feel like I’ve known you forever, not just one day. And I get it now, why you and Theo are so affectionate with each other. My wolf is making me want to touch you constantly.”

He surprises me by nuzzling my neck the same way he did in his wolf form. It tickles, and I giggle. When he looks up, he grins at me happily. Theo brushes my hair back softly again and kisses my forehead.

Theo pulls back slightly and sighs. “I don’t know why Cas is acting like he doesn’t feel the same pull, but he does. So, please don’t feel embarrassed, little witch.”

My feelings are still hurt from Cas rejecting me, but I look down to meet his glittering green eyes. He looks so fucking sad that it’s breaking my heart.

“You can come up here too if you want,” I say to him.

Cas perks up, but he looks at Theo with uncertainty. Theo growls low in his throat and uses that weird, authoritative voice to say, “Sorry, but Cas is going to stay on the floor. He doesn’t get to hurt your feelings like that and then get rewarded for it.”

“Well, here, at least take a brownie.” I hold the plate down for Cas. “And please stop looking so sad.”

He takes a brownie and mumbles, “Thanks.”

I grab his wrist and force him to look at me. “I mean it. I’m not mad at you, okay? I’m sorry Theo is punishing you, or whatever weird wolf thing he’s doing, but I’m not upset anymore.”

Cas slowly smiles until his dimple is showing. He sounds relieved when he says, “Okay. I’m sorry.”

The mood feels much lighter now, and I snuggle closer to Hollis and Theo. We sit quietly and eat the brownies. Theo’s only taken a few bites when he looks down at his brownie in confusion.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, staring down at my brownie too. It tastes fine to me.

Theo scrunches up his nose and asks, “You said your aunt made these? Specifically, for you and the three of us?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Cricket.” He barks out a laugh. “They taste like your tea.”

“Oh my god…” I stare at my brownie in horror.

Theo laughs so hard now that he’s holding his stomach and leaning back away from me.

“What’s wrong with them?” Cas spits his out and scowls at the mess of chewed-brownie in his hand.

“Nothing. Just stop eating them.” As quickly as possible, I use my magic to pull the brownies out of his and Hollis’s hands and float the entire plate away to set on top of my desk.

Hollis and Cas whine and insist we tell them what’s going on. I cover my face with my hands and groan. “Please don’t, it’s too fucking embarrassing.”

Theo stops laughing long enough to tell them about the tea and sandwiches Aurora brought up to us the first time Theo came over. When he finishes the story, I punch his arm and glare at him. The

guys tease me relentlessly. After they've all calmed down, we sit around talking for a long while. The boys tell me stories about growing up together, and I tell them about my brothers. It's really nice, being with them like this.

At one point, Cas leans back against my bedside table, and the journal I'd hidden between the table and the bed falls into view. Cas picks it up and smirks at me. "Is this your *diary*?"

I shrug nonchalantly and smirk at him. Theo raises his eyebrows and holds his hand out to Cas. "Let me see that."

Before Cas can hand it to him, I use my magic to quickly pull it out of his hands. But Theo is faster than me. He leaps off the bed and fucking tackles my journal to the ground. Grinning triumphantly, he tells Hollis, "Hold her down."

Hollis pulls me all the way into his lap and wraps his arms around me with his head on my shoulder. "Seriously?" I snort at him, but he just grins in response. The guys are being *so* dumb, but I can't deny that it feels amazing to be held in Hollis's strong arms.

Theo opens the cover of my journal and dramatically flips ahead a few pages. He squints down at my writing and clears his throat. In a squeaky, girly voice, he says, "Dear Diary, Theo Ashbrooke is the sexiest, most handsome guy in the entire world. He makes me so wet, and I want to have sex with him so badly!" Theo chuckles and shakes his head. "Oh, Cricket, you should have told me. I'm sure we can work something out."

"God, you are so full of shit!" I giggle wildly when he winks at me.

Cas rips the journal out of Theo's hands and stares down at my writing. "What the fuck? You can't even read this."

Hollis snickers close to my ear. I can't help laughing along with them. I don't mind their teasing. Like Hollis said, it feels like I've known them for years.

Cas eventually gives up trying to read my messy handwriting and puts the journal on top of my bedside table. The guys stay over until about eight-thirty. Theo promises to pick me up for school again tomorrow. Theo and Hollis hug me tightly before they leave, and Cas only gives me a tight smile.

After they're gone, I eat dinner and talk to my parents on the phone. I tell them about my first day and my new friends, minus the werewolf stuff. I love my parents, and they've always been super lenient and open-minded, but I'm worried they'll make me move back to Florida if they find out what I've been up to the past week. I feel worse for keeping things from the twins, but I don't trust Em not to mention anything to our parents. For now, I just want to enjoy myself and get to know Theo, Hollis, and Cas better.





## Chapter Eighteen

On Tuesday, I wake up much earlier than usual. I'm so excited and restless to see the boys, so I want to wear something cuter than I did yesterday. I only have a few dresses that are appropriate for school, but one of them is a navy-blue lace sheath dress with cap sleeves and a ribbon tied at the waist. My brother, Emerson, always says blue is my best color because it makes my eyes pop. I also wear my gold sandals and an exuberant number of bracelets, rings, and necklaces. Even with my crazy, messy hair, I think I look pretty good. By the time I get downstairs to the bookshop, Theo texts me he'll be here in fifteen minutes.

Since I have some time, I decide to go next door for a coffee. When I walk into the Little Owl Café, Katy's filling the display case with fresh pastries.

"Good morning, pretty girl!" she says.

I grin at her. "Hey, what's up?"

"It's been a slow morning so far. You about to leave for school?"

"Yeah, my friend should be here in a few minutes to pick me up."

We talk while she makes me an iced mocha latte and puts some delicious-looking chocolate donut holes into a paper bag for me. She refuses to let me pay, so I shove a ten-dollar bill into her tip jar.

After I leave the café, I stand by the curb outside of Flora & Feathers. I'm sipping my drink when Theo pulls up in his jeep. Cas is sitting in the front seat. I move to get in the back seat behind Cas when Theo barks, "Cas, get the hell out."

Cas rolls his eyes and gets out, holding the door open for me. I take my backpack off and mumble, "You really don't have to do that."

He glares at my outfit and snatches my backpack out of my hands without a word. I stare at him, dumbfounded. What did I do now? I thought things were okay between us last night, that he wanted us to be friends. I slide into the front seat and smile at Theo, trying to pretend like everything is fine. He has a huge smile on his face as his eyes sweep over my body.

"You look really pretty today, Cricket," he says in the sweetest voice when he finally meets my eyes.

The comment makes my heart flutter, and I don't feel upset about Cas anymore. I grin back at Theo and raise one eyebrow. "So do you."

He scrunches his nose and laughs, pulling back onto the road to Hollis's house.

I set my drink in the cup holder and open up the bag of donut holes, popping one into my mouth. They taste so good, I almost moan in delight.

"Hey, you're not going to share?" Theo pouts.

With a teasing grin, I pick one up and hold it close to his mouth. He laughs and grabs my wrist gently as he bites down to put it in his mouth. He keeps hold of my wrist while he's chewing, and when he finishes, he lightly bites down on my fingers and sucks on them one at a time.

My face flushes in arousal, and I bite down on my lip to keep from moaning out loud. Theo's nostrils flare, and he turns to smirk at me. He knows exactly what he's doing to me.

When I hear Cas growl quietly from the backseat, I pull my hand away from Theo and turn to look at him in bewilderment. His face is blank at first until he gives me a cocky smirk.

"What about me?"

I smirk back and simply hold the bag out for him so he can take his own. Cas gives me this adorable pout, and I can't help laughing out loud.

Without asking permission, I turn the radio on and hook up my phone to the Bluetooth. I press shuffle on one of my Spotify playlists, turning to smile at Theo. I honestly don't even think anything of it because Theo always asks me to choose what we listen to whenever we hang out.

"You actually like this?" Cas asks in a condescending tone.

"Cigarette Daydreams" by Cage the Elephant is playing. I spin around in my seat to frown at Cas. He's being so rude to me, and I don't understand it. Feeling hurt and pissed off, I grumble, "I can change it if you don't like it."

He scoffs. "I didn't say I don't like it. I asked if *you* like it."

Shaking my head in exasperation, I say, "Obviously I like it if it's on my playlist!"

As we pull up in front of Hollis's house, Theo growls a warning at Cas to be nice. Hollis slides into the back seat beside Cas and glances between me and Theo. "What's going on?"

Ignoring his question and the fact that Cas is being a confusing asshole, I smile brightly at Hollis. "Good morning!"

He smiles back and tells me the same before repeating his earlier question.

Still sounding super condescending, Cas says, "Cricket has decent taste in music."

"You don't have to sound so surprised." I glare at him over my shoulder.

"It was a compliment," he says, like *I'm* the one being ridiculous.

"Hey, Cas. Your hair doesn't look as bad as it did yesterday," I say. He scowls and flares his nostrils, instantly running a hand through his perfect hair. I give him an innocent smile. "What? It was a compliment."

Hollis bites his lip to hide his smile, and Theo's nose is scrunched up in amusement. Theo reaches over to ruffle my hair. "Be nice, little witch. Cas is sensitive about his hair."

"I know. That's why I said it."

Theo and Hollis laugh, and Cas grumbles, "Shut the fuck up, you guys."

As I'm offering the bag of donut holes to Hollis, I roll my eyes at Cas. "Oh, calm down. You're so stupidly perfect looking, it makes me want to throw up. I honestly can't even imagine what would make your hair look bad."

The boys go quiet, and Cas's face slowly breaks out in a huge grin. "You think I'm attractive?"

Theo and Hollis stare at me blankly, and I let out a laugh in surprise. "Are you joking? Of course I think you're attractive. The three of you are the hottest fucking guys I've ever seen in my life."

They're blushing, and Theo turns to grin at me. "Really?"

"I just assumed it was, like, a wolf thing or something. I don't know why you all look so

surprised.”

“A wolf thing, huh?” Hollis chuckles. When I turn to look at him, he’s smiling brightly with a faint blush on his cheeks.

“Yeah, I don’t know.” I laugh, feeling slightly embarrassed. “You guys do a lot of weird things.”

“Like what?” Cas gives me a crooked smile.

“You’re all constantly sniffing me, for one.”

Cas and Hollis look at each other and blush again, and Theo snorts out a laugh. “I told you, you smell good!”

We arrive at school and park in the same spot we did yesterday. I ask Hollis about it, and he confirms that parking spots are assigned. He points a few spots over and tells me that one is his. I wonder what kind of cars Hollis and Cas drive. Do they ever take turns, or does Theo always drive everywhere?

As we get out of the jeep, Hollis pauses to take in my outfit. Theo walks around the car, takes my backpack from him, and throws his arm over my shoulders.

With a cheeky grin, he asks Hollis, “She looks pretty today, doesn’t she?”

I expect Hollis to blush or look away like he did yesterday, but instead, he meets my eyes and smiles. “She looks beautiful.”

Even as Theo pulls me along into the school, I don’t tear my eyes from Hollis’s gaze. He walks on my other side, and his fingers lightly brush against mine. I feel butterflies erupt inside my chest at them touching me and complimenting me like this. I quickly shove the feeling aside.

I’m not as nervous as I was yesterday, so I take in more of my surroundings as we walk into the building. It seems like literally every single person is looking at us, and a lot of people are whispering to each other as we pass by. A few girls even glare at me. When I glance up at the guys, they seem oblivious as they talk quietly amongst each other.

My first class is U.S. Government with Theo and Cas. When the bell rings, Hollis pulls me away from them and wraps me in a hug.

He lowers his head to whisper in my ear, “Will you sit next to me at lunch today?”

“Of course!”

“Don’t let them tease you too much.” He smiles and tucks a strand of my witchy hair behind my ear.

“Ah, she loves it.” Theo gives me an adorable, lopsided smile. “Come on, little witch.”

I follow Theo up the stairs with Cas just behind me. I worry that Cas is staring at my butt like yesterday, but when we get to the top of the stairs, he gives me a regular friendly smile. I half expect him to take my hand like he did yesterday too, but he walks by my side a couple of inches away.

Ugh, why is this bothering me so much? I feel so needy right now. Why am I upset that he’s not touching me? Theo and Hollis keep touching me, and it’s setting me on edge and making me feel totally sexually frustrated. I remind myself the reason I decided not to sleep with Theo in the first place was because it would ruin any blossoming friendship between us. Now that I’m also connected to Cas and Hollis, it would definitely make things weird if I slept with one of them. It should be a good thing that Cas doesn’t seem to want to be touchy-feely with me. It’s less of a temptation on my part.

The classroom is set up with individual desks, and Theo sits behind me like he did in our Statistics class. Cas sits down on my left side.

He smiles at me, showing his cute little dimple. “I’m sorry if I sounded like a dick in the car earlier. What other bands do you like?”

I bite my tongue to stop myself from saying something sarcastic like, ‘Are we going to start every conversation with you apologizing to me?’ He’s trying to be nice. I list off some of my favorites and tell him about some concerts I’ve been to with Emerson and Killian. Theo comments now and then on a specific band he likes, but he mostly stays quiet and softly plays with my hair. Cas likes a lot of

the same music I do, and he seems genuinely happy talking to me.

When the bell rings and the teacher, Mrs. Quinn, starts taking attendance, Theo keeps playing with my hair.

“Are you going to do this the entire time we’re in here?” I tilt my head back and smile at him.

“Yep. I love your hair. It feels so good,” he says, his voice carrying a bit of a growl.

“You’re probably just tangling it up even more.” I laugh.

He shrugs and smirks. Cas glances sideways at us, and I can see other people watching us too. Every time I look at someone sitting near us, they quickly look away. The class period passes relatively quickly. We get our textbooks and our first homework assignment, and it’s easy to whisper with the boys without getting caught or disrupting the teacher.

Mrs. Quinn lets us sit and talk quietly for the last five minutes of class. Cas reaches over and rummages through my backpack without asking. He pulls out my schedule and the smaller bag with my gym clothes for yoga class. I sit back and watch him in amusement. He’s acting so fucking adorable, like a nosy, overbearing mother.

He frowns at my schedule. “Why are you taking a second science class when you’re already in AP Chemistry?”

“I like science. Chemistry is similar to the stuff that Aurora does, so I’ve always liked it. And my old school didn’t offer Astronomy. I thought it would be cool.”

Cas neatly puts my schedule back in the front pocket of my backpack and smiles. “I like science too. But I’m in AP physics instead of chem.”

“What’s your favorite subject?” I ask Theo.

He gives me a lopsided smile and shrugs. “I like math alright, I guess, but school’s not really my thing. I’m not as smart as Cas and Hollis are.”

He doesn’t say it like he’s upset or holds it against his friends. He just says it matter-of-factly. “Hollis likes reading? He told me he’s already read all the books on our reading list for our English class.”

“Ha, that sounds like him.” Theo laughs. “Hollis is a really good writer, too. That’s why Paisley is so weirdly obsessed with him.”

“Jesus, you have huge fucking tits.”

Theo and I turn to stare at Cas, who has taken my sports bra out of my gym clothes bag and is glaring down at it like he’s personally offended. A few other students are gawking at him, too.

“Give me that.” Theo snatches the bag and bra off of his desk.

He proceeds to look at the size on the bra’s tag that shows 36D, and then he looks up at me with a sly grin before not-so-subtly looking at my chest.

“You guys are idiots.” I snort and shove the bra back into the small gym bag, zipping it up before cramming the entire thing into my backpack.

They’re laughing when the bell rings, and we make our way out of the classroom. Theo holds my backpack in one hand and threads his fingers through mine with the other. Cas’s next class is upstairs, and before we separate from him, he hesitates like he wants to say something. But he looks at Theo and glances down at our intertwined hands, and he grumbles that he’ll see us at lunch before walking away.

Theo walks me all the way to my next class in the science wing, and I can’t help thinking our hands feel like they fit perfectly together. When we get to my classroom, I’m surprised to see Hollis standing against the opposite wall with a strained smile. Paisley is beside him, talking animatedly. When Hollis sees us, he looks so fucking relieved, and he brushes past Paisley to pull me into a hug.

“What are you doing here?” I ask him happily, squeezing him back.

He smiles down at me. “Theo and I have Environmental Science together next, and it’s just down the hall from here. I was waiting for you guys.”

I can't help glancing behind him to see Paisley glaring at me. I ignore her and talk to the guys. When there's only a minute left before the bell, Theo hands my backpack to me.

"Behave yourself, little witch. We'll meet you after class."



## Chapter Nineteen

When I walk into the classroom, most of the seats are already full. The high-top tables fit four students with two on each side, facing each other. I feel a nervous tremble when I realize everyone is staring at me. At one table, I recognize the guys Theo introduced me to outside of our math class yesterday. I'm about to sit with them, but then I notice Brennan, the guy I met at the candy shop downtown. He's at a table with two other people, and there's an empty seat beside him.

"Oh my god, Cricket!" he exclaims when he recognizes me.

Feeling completely relieved, I practically skip to his table and point at the empty seat. "Hey, Brennan! Can I sit here?"

He waves his hands, animatedly gesturing at the seat. "Of course!"

I smile at the guy and girl sitting with him. I recognize the girl from my English and astronomy classes, and I think the guy is in my French class.

"Holy crap, guys, this is the girl I was telling you about. We met at the shop the other day!" Brennan tells his friends. He turns to me and says, "I'm so glad we have a class together. I worried we wouldn't run into each other at all."

"Me too!" I say sincerely. I pull out a new notebook and pencil, and I look across the table at Brennan's friends. "It's nice to meet you guys. I think we have a few classes together?"

Their names are Erin and Jack. Erin's a pretty Asian girl with long, silky black hair and hazel eyes, and Jack has shaggy, dirty blond hair and blue eyes.

"Yeah, we have English and astronomy together," Erin confirms. She grins and leans across the table to whisper, "You and Hollis are *so* cute together!"

Jack furrows his eyebrows at her and frowns at me. "I thought you were dating Cas Seymour?"

"What?" Brennan whips his head in my direction, a shocked expression on his face.

I'm saved from answering their questions right away when the teacher, Mr. Brody, walks in and sets his things up. While he's taking attendance, somebody taps me on my shoulder.

I turn around to see James, one of the guys Theo introduced me to outside of our statistics class yesterday.

"Hey, new girl." He hands me a scrap of paper with a phone number scrawled on it. "Whenever

Ashbrooke gets tired of you, call me.”

Two of the guys sitting with him chuckle, and he high fives one of them. Xavier, the other guy Theo introduced me to, looks embarrassed. He won't make eye contact with me. I glance down at the phone number in my hand and look back up at James with a flirty smile.

“It's James, right?” I ask in a silky voice.

He nods and smirks. I grin, and without breaking eye contact, I rip the paper into tiny pieces until it looks like confetti. He looks so shocked, it's comical. I gather the pieces of paper into the palm of my hand and blow them at him so they flutter in the air and land at his feet.

Still grinning, I say, “I'll tell Theo you said hi.”

When I turn back around, Brennan and his friends are staring at me in shock. I hear laughter behind me from James's friends. Erin giggles wildly and slaps a hand over her mouth.

“Oh my *god*. I knew I was going to like you.” Brennan grins at me. I snort at the look on his face, and he shakes his head. “Didn't you *just* move here?”

“Yeah, a couple of weeks ago.”

“And you're already dating Theo, Hollis, *and* Cas?” His eyes light up, and he looks so freaking impressed. I'd probably feel way more embarrassed or ashamed if his question didn't sound so genuine.

Still, I can't help blushing at the thought of dating all three of them! I laugh and shake my head. “We're just friends.”

“Sure.” He winks. Or tries to wink. He basically blinks both his eyes and flips his hair while giggling. “You must be the girl everyone's been talking about, which totally makes sense. I should have guessed it was you.”

Erin bristles and quietly hisses, “Brennan!”

Mr. Brody chooses that moment to bring everyone's attention to the front. He goes over his lesson plans and schedule for the year. Today, he's giving a refresher-lecture while we take notes. He promises we'll do a lab next class. Since our table is near the back of the class, it's easy to talk quietly while taking notes.

“Alright, what's 'everyone' saying about me?” I bump Brennan's chair with my foot and grin at him.

He blushes and hesitates briefly before excitedly whispering, “Okay, well, you know, Theo Ashbrooke is totally notorious for hooking up with girls but never really dating them. The guys at this school think he's practically a god because he's slept with more than half of the girls in our class, plus a ton of juniors and girls who have already graduated. He tells people he'll never settle down, that one girl will never be enough for him. But girls willingly sleep with him anyway. And then out of nowhere, he shows up on the first day of school with some hot new girl he's totally showing off and being all cute and coupley with. All these girls are pissed because they thought they would be the one to change him, and now he's not even showing interest in anyone else!”

Based on comments Theo's made in passing, along with some stuff I've seen on his social media profiles, I'm not surprised to hear he's a player. It doesn't make me like him any less, but it's super amusing to hear about him from someone I don't know. I raise one eyebrow in amusement. “Half the girls in our class, huh?”

Brennan flushes. “Well, um, that's just what I've heard...”

“Are you included in that half?” I wink at Erin.

“No! I'm not, I've never, I mean...” She glances at Jack and turns to face me with a panicked expression on her face. “I don't think Theo even knows who I am.”

“I wish you were dating him, just to prove all the petty girls at this school wrong.” Brennan pouts. “Sara's probably super pissed if there's already a rumor going around about you and Cas. That's going to be hilarious!”

Wow, I'm getting *so* much juicy information about my boys. “Sara is the girly girl with pretty,

dark brown hair? Cas told me she's his ex."

Brennan nods and sets off on another excited tangent. "Cas and Sara have been on and off for two years. She thinks she owns him, but she's only popular because of him. She's not even in our class. She's a junior. He breaks up with her whenever he wants to hook up with other girls, and he's so hot that most girls don't even mind. But then afterwards, he always goes back to Sara."

Jesus, what an asshole. That sounds like something Killian would do. I raise my eyebrows at Brennan. "Any stories about Hollis that I should know about?"

"Aww, Hollis is such a sweetheart. I don't think he knows how hot he is. There's only one girl I know he's dated, and it wasn't very serious. Girls offer to hook up with him all the time, and he always seems so surprised and apologetic. I secretly hope he's gay, because *oh my god*, he's freaking gorgeous."

"Sorry, I'm pretty sure he's just shy." I giggle.

Brennan sighs dramatically and rests his chin in his hands. "I was afraid of that."

The rest of class passes by super quickly. I'm able to keep track of my notes while still talking to Brennan and Erin pretty much nonstop. Jack stays quiet for most of the class period, but I catch him glancing at Erin when he thinks nobody is paying attention.

Erin is a total sweetheart. Brennan is freaking adorable too. I really like them, and I'm surprised I feel so comfortable with them already. When class is over, Brennan asks if I want to eat lunch with them.

"I'm sorry, but I'll be sitting with the guys."

Brennan smiles and waves me off. "I wouldn't pass that up either."

James glares at me as I pass by him in the hallway, but I ignore him and walk beside Brennan and Erin. Jack is on Erin's other side. We head toward Hollis and Theo's science class, so I figure I'll bump into them.

Brennan is still chattering away when I see Hollis and Theo up ahead. Hollis grins at me, and Theo roughly pushes him out of the way and runs up to me. He picks me up in a hug and spins around to grin at Hollis. "Ha-ha, I got her first!"

"She already promised she was sitting next to me at lunch." Hollis rolls his eyes with a tiny smile on his face.

"How could you do that, Cricket?" Theo sets me down and pouts.

"Oh my god, shut up. Hollis asked first." I snort and smack his arm. I glance to the side and see Brennan, Jack, and Erin watching us. I gesture at them and smile at Theo. "You know these guys, right?"

Theo notices them standing there and smiles. Hollis stands on my other side and puts an arm around my shoulders after taking my backpack from me.

"Yeah, of course. Brennan, Jack, and Erin, right? What's up guys?" Theo asks.

Hearing Erin assume Theo and the guys wouldn't know who she is just because they're popular made me feel bad. I'm so glad he proved her wrong.

"Hey!" Brennan squeaks. He quickly clears his throat and says, "Um, I guess we'll see you later. Bye Cricket!"

He pushes Erin and Jack down the hallway away from us as quickly as possible.

I walk to the cafeteria between Hollis and Theo. Hollis keeps me tucked into his shoulder, and Theo threads his fingers with mine on my other side. They tell me about their science class and gossip to each other about people I don't know. I stay quiet, thinking about everything Brennan told me during class. Cas meets up with us by the time we reach the lunch line, and he gives me a warm smile that turns my insides to jelly.

Today, Theo lets me put food on my lunch tray, but he keeps reaching his hand out awkwardly like he's fighting himself over it. I laugh and lean against him affectionately, and he ruffles my hair. He pays for all our lunches again and quietly asks if he can at least carry my tray for me. Hollis is still



holding my backpack. These boys are sweet, but they're so ridiculous. I sigh and nod my head. Theo literally looks like he won a fucking prize because I let him carry my stupid lunch tray to our table.

We sit at a different table than yesterday, closer to the middle of the cafeteria, and I see a lot more people watching us. Nobody else sits with us, but it's unnerving to have some much attention. Theo sits in front of me, and Hollis sits on my right-hand side.

Cas glances around at the three of us and scowls. "I get to sit next to her tomorrow then."

Butterflies erupt in my stomach. Cas was so weird this morning. I never know where I stand with him. I give him a surprised smile, and Theo scowls at him.

Hollis slides closer so I'm pressed against him. "How was your chemistry class?"

"It was enlightening. I learned a lot about the three of you." I grin at them mischievously.

They stop eating and go still. Cas is the first to speak. "Fucking great. Let's hear it then."

"Your ex, Sara?" I raise an eyebrow at him. "You've been dating her for two years, but break up with her whenever you want to hook up with other people?"

Cas visibly winces and runs his fingers through his hair. "Goddamn it, that makes it sound way fucking worse than it is. I really don't want you to think I'm a scumbag. We're broken up for good. I swear."

I really don't think badly of him. Yeah, it sounds terrible, but I know I don't have the full story. Besides, with my connection to them, I don't think there's anything that could make me dislike them.

"What about me?" Hollis asks quickly.

I get the feeling he's trying to distract me from the Sara thing, which is actually really sweet. Even if it is unnecessary. I swallow the bite I'd just taken and smile up at him. "Hopeful rumors that you might be gay. Girls offer to hook up with you *all the time*, and you politely turn them down."

Hollis chokes and stares at me in shock. Theo and Cas cackle and smirk at him. Poor Hollis's face turns bright red, and he mumbles, "I've slept with girls before. I just, I'm not like Cas or Theo. I never know what to say."

I think of how Hollis looks at me like I'm the most beautiful girl he's ever seen. And his touch completely sets me on fire. I smile at him softly and kick my foot against his playfully under the table. When he gives me a hesitant smile in return, I finally turn my gaze to Theo. He's giving me a challenging stare with a strained smile.

"Well? What did you hear about me?"

I realize he already knows what I've heard. And he's worried about what I'm going to think of him. He's trying to put on a face like he doesn't care, but I can see the apprehension in his eyes.

"Allegedly, you've slept with half the girls in our graduating class, plus countless others. But you've never had an actual girlfriend."

He still has that tense smile. He raises his eyebrows and asks in a deep voice, "Does that bother you?"

"No." I shake my head. It really doesn't. Not at all. I'm not worried that he's going to get tired of me like James said. I can't possibly judge him for his past behavior.

I lower my eyes to the table and bite my lip. Girls are always judged much more harshly for being sexually active than boys are. But if I'm going to fully accept these guys, I want them to fully accept me too. I slowly look back up at Theo and ask, "Would it bother you to hear I had a similar reputation at my old high school?"

His lips part in surprise, and his eyes soften, running over every inch of my face. Finally, he smiles and softly whispers, "No, Cricket. That wouldn't bother me at all."

Hearing him say that makes me feel so relieved and sappy. I smile at him brightly and reach forward to grab his hand. When I glance at Cas, he's staring at me like he's confused. I'm still snuggled against Hollis's side, and I smile up at him too.

“I know this sounds really fucking cheesy, but you guys are best friends with a girl now, so I guess you’ll just have to deal with it. Anyway, I swear to fucking god there is nothing anyone could tell me about you guys that would make me like you less or feel less close to you than I do.”

Cas breathes out a sigh of relief. Hollis pulls me even tighter against his side. Theo stares at me, his expression unreadable. He clears his throat. “Cricket, I—”

He’s abruptly cut off when someone walks up to the table. “Hey, Theo. What’s up, bro?”

Xavier, Theo’s friend from my chemistry class, smiles down at us from the end of the table. I slowly pull my hand from Theo’s and smile anxiously at Xavier. I’ve barely spoken to him, and his friends weren’t very nice to me in class. After the phone number incident, I heard James call me a psycho bitch to his friends.

“Sup, bro?” Theo gives him a cocky smile.

Xavier glances at me nervously, bouncing on the balls of his feet. Cas and Hollis sit up straighter and tense up. Theo glances at me and then looks at Xavier questioningly.

“I, uh, I just wanted to apologize to your girl here about James,” Xavier says. He looks at me with wide, apologetic eyes. “I’m sorry, Cricket. I hope you know I didn’t encourage him, and I would never disrespect you or Theo like that.”

“What the fuck happened?” Theo barks out a surprised laugh.

Xavier winces and stares at me in confusion. When I don’t say anything, he answers Theo. “James gave Cricket his number and told her to call him when you were tired of her. She fucking schooled him though, bro.”

“What did she do?” Theo scrunches his nose up and grins.

Xavier animatedly describes me ripping up the phone number and smiling like a psychopath before blowing the tiny pieces of paper out of my hand at him. “And then she just said, ‘I’ll tell Theo you said hi’ before turning away from him like a fucking badass! He was so pissed!”

Hollis, Cas, and Theo laugh. Cas smirks at me. “Yeah, that sounds like Cricket.”

“Why didn’t you tell us?” Theo asks me.

“I forgot about it already.” I shrug. It really didn’t seem like a big deal, to be honest.

Theo and Cas snort and look at each other before bursting out laughing. Hollis is shaking from silent laughter while he grins at me.

“I’m sure you can see why I won’t be ‘getting tired of her’ anytime soon,” Theo says to Xavier.

Xavier grins at me and nods at Theo. And then Theo gets this scary fucking look in his eyes. Even though he’s still smiling, his voice sounds nearly murderous when he says, “You can tell James I’ll talk to him later.”

Xavier’s face drops, and he nods before hurrying away.

“What the fuck was that?” I furrow my eyebrows. “What are you, the mafia?”

Cas and Hollis glance at each other, and Theo keeps his eyes on me. His gaze softens. “Just finish eating your lunch, little witch. And next time somebody messes with you, tell me about it.”

I roll my eyes and glare at him. “I can take care of myself.”

He smiles and reaches his hand forward to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. His voice has a bit of growl in it when he says, “I know you can.”

Hollis pulls away from me, and Cas scowls at the table while he brushes his fingers through his hair. I’m so fucking confused about what just happened. This feels like it might be another wolf thing, and I’m frustrated at not being in the loop. I feel impatient, but I know that the more time I spend with them, the more I’ll be able to understand. So, I take a deep breath and continue eating my lunch like nothing happened.

Eventually, we jump back into a normal conversation. I ask the boys if they have any plans after school and if we’ll be able to play in the forest again.

“Fuck, I really want to.” Cas groans. “But my mom was pissed at me for coming home so late last

night. I can only hang out for a little while after school. Sorry, Cricket.”

I smile at him so he knows I’m not mad. I know it’s not his fault.

Theo taps his fingers on the table, so I know he’s not going to tell me what I want to hear. “I have some stuff to do with my dad and Hawthorne today. Sorry, little witch.”

“Well, I don’t have any plans.” Hollis smiles triumphantly. “Want to hang out with me, Cricket?”

My heart beats faster at the thought of hanging out with Hollis alone, and I nod eagerly.

Theo taps his fingers on the table and frowns at Hollis. He quickly shakes it off and smiles. “Okay. We’ll go to the diner after school for a while, and then I’ll drive Cricket over to your house. You can drive her home later.”

The bell rings and I startle. Holy crap, lunch is over already? It went by so quickly. I take a few more bites of my food and finish my drink. Theo is quick to pick up everyone’s trays and take them to the garbage.

Cas appears in front of me before I can blink. He takes my backpack from Hollis and slides his arm around my shoulders, making my skin tingle. He’s barely touched me all day, but I’m definitely not complaining. He tells me our art history class is upstairs on the other side of the building, so we might have to hurry.

Before I walk away with him and Hollis, Theo pulls me to the side away from the crowds of students. He pulls me close to him and leans down to whisper in my ear, “I wish I still had you all to myself, little witch.”

I bite my lip. I loved hanging out with him, just the two of us, but...”It feels like everything is complete when I’m with all three of you.”

He smiles sadly. “I know. I’m just afraid you’ll start liking them more than me.”

“Don’t be silly!” I pull back so I can meet his gorgeous eyes and beam at him.

He grins and leans down close to my ear again. I assume he’s going to whisper something else, but instead, he bites down gently on my earlobe. I gasp in surprise and pleasure, and I feel goose bumps break out all over my body. He flicks his tongue over my earlobe and growls quietly, still grazing his teeth against my skin. I bite down on my lip, and my eyes roll to the back of my head. What the fuck. I’ve never been turned on so quickly or with so little effort. I’m kind of pissed off about it, but I’m also about to suggest we skip the next class and go hide out in his jeep. Very classy, I know.

Theo pulls back and laughs quietly. He looks way too proud of himself. I know he isn’t completely unaffected because his eyes are dilated and he’s flaring his nostrils like crazy.

“See you later, little witch.” He smirks and walks away.



## Chapter Twenty

I'm fucking *mortified*. I scowl when I look at Cas and Hollis. Their faces are blank at first, but Cas sighs in annoyance and puts his arm around me like he had before.

"Goddamn it," he grumbles. "We're going to be fucking late now. And fuck Theo. Now we have to walk next to you while we can smell that you're fucking aroused and not do shit about it."

My body tenses up and I flush in embarrassment. Hollis walks on my other side and looks at Cas over my head, growling low in his throat at him.

"Shut up." Cas rolls his eyes. "I'm thinking out loud. And don't fucking pretend like her scent isn't driving you insane right now."

We continue rushing through the hallways, despite how embarrassed I feel. I grimace and cover my eyes. "Can you please stop talking about the way I smell?"

"Don't be embarrassed. Theo just did that to fuck with us." Cas grins at me with his dimple showing.

"Too late." I scowl. "And what do you mean? Why would he do that?"

"Even though Theo is trying to appear possessive of you, he hasn't technically claimed you. Which makes you fair game for us. Theo is trying to...dissuade us, or prove that he could claim you if he really wanted to," Hollis says, appearing flustered.

I bristle and try to pull out of Cas's hold, but he tightens his arm around my shoulders. He sighs in frustration. "Cricket..."

"I'm not a fucking toy for you guys to play with."

Hollis jerks back like I slapped him, and Cas stares at me in astonishment. "Of course not. That's not what we're saying at all."

But I'm so fucking livid right now. I just want to get away from them. I breathe angrily through my nose and stare down at the floor. I hear the bell ring overhead, so we're officially late for class too.

Cas grunts and stops in the hallway, pulling us all off to the side in a small alcove. "Fuck it, we're already late. Cricket, look at me."

Hollis stands behind me so my back is practically pressed against him, and Cas stands right in

front of me and uses his fingers to tilt my chin up. He's close enough that I can make out tiny gold flecks in his spectacular green eyes, and I already feel myself softening. Ugh, why does he have to be so pretty? I'm so freaking angry right now, I don't want to be distracted by my fucking hormones.

Cas's voice is surprisingly sweet when he says, "I know you're not a toy or a possession. Hollis knows that, and Theo knows that too. You're one of us, part of our group. I don't understand why or how yet, but it's really fucking obvious that you're part of our pack now. Our number one instinct is to protect each other. But it's also instinct for us to compete with each other if more than one of us is interested in the same female. I know that sounds fucked up.

Hollis gently places his hands on my shoulders from behind me and sighs. "We all respect and admire you so much."

"Please, please ignore us when we're acting like fucking idiots," Cas whispers.

It's really hard to keep the scowl on my face. With Hollis's hands on my shoulders and Cas staring into my eyes like I'm the most beautiful girl he's ever seen, I can't stay mad. I feel like these guys are a part of my soul, and it's so overwhelming. I lean back against Hollis and smile up at Cas.

"You guys really suck. It's impossible to stay mad at you."

Hollis chuckles softly and pulls me closer, wrapping an arm around my waist. Cas beams down at me, and his fingers gently brush against my cheek.

Once we step out into the hallway, I turn to face them. My voice is practically a snarl when I say, "But I swear to god, you guys had better not fuck with me."

They widen their eyes and nod at me. We're super late for art history, so we hurry the rest of the way to class. When we reach the classroom, Hollis holds the door open for me to step through first, and Cas steps in behind me.

The teacher looks up in surprise at us. She's younger, maybe just under thirty years old. When she sees Cas and Hollis on either side of me, her mouth drops and a blush forms on her cheeks.

"Sorry we're late. We went to the wrong classroom by mistake." Cas gives her a flirty smile and runs a hand through his hair.

She clumsily picks up a clipboard and giggles. "That's okay. We just finished taking attendance and passing out books! What are your names?"

Cas points to each of us in turn. "Hollis Wakefield, Cricket Kendall, and Cassian Seymour."

The teacher blinks at him before checking our names off on her clipboard. "The three of you have very interesting names."

When Cas continues grinning flirtatiously and runs his fingers through his hair again, I glance at Hollis and raise an eyebrow. He presses his hand to the small of my back and bites his lip to hide a smile.

"Okay! Well, I'm Ms. Romano. Each of you go ahead and grab a textbook and take a seat."

Cas grabs three textbooks from the pile on her desk and heads to a table off to the side. All the tables are long enough to sit four people, and there are only a few sporadic empty seats left in the classroom. There are two guys sitting at the table where Cas sets our textbooks. He stares down at the guys without saying anything. They both sigh and get up to find other seats.

I bite my lip and shake my head at Cas, but he smiles innocently and pulls my chair out for me. I sit down between the guys and focus my attention up front. Ms. Romano stares at us in bewilderment. After a few seconds, she clears her throat and picks up her lesson where she left off before we walked in and disrupted everybody. She pulls up a slideshow on PowerPoint while we take notes.

During class, the guys continuously lean in to tease or joke around with me. I draw cute little cartoon wolves on their papers, which makes both of them chuckle. When class is over, Cas takes my gym clothes bag out of my backpack and puts my art history textbook in with my government and chemistry books. He gives Ms. Romano one final flirty grin before grabbing my hand and pulling me out of the classroom behind him.

“God, you’re shameless.” I smack his arm playfully.

“What?” He shrugs and smirks. “We didn’t get in trouble, did we?”

Hollis laughs and grabs my other hand. I giggle when I realize I’m holding hands with both of them at the same time. Supposedly, everyone at this school is already talking about me. I’m confident of my place in their group, so I’m not really all that worried about making other people like me. Still, I’m all too aware of people gawking at us and whispering my name as we pass by.

It only takes us a few minutes to get downstairs to the gym. Hollis points out a smaller room beside the gym where my class will be. Cas hands me my gym bag but keeps my backpack. When I try to grab it from him, he just says, “Don’t worry, I’ve got it.”

“We actually have gym together right now, so we’ll meet you here after school is over.” Hollis grins.

“Hey, guys!” I spin around to see Chloe. I haven’t seen her since talking to her in our statistics class yesterday. I nearly forgot she’d be in this class with me.

“Hey, Chloe!” I grin happily. Her hair is even bigger and wilder than it was yesterday, and she adjusts her glasses while she smiles around at me, Cas, and Hollis.

She grins teasingly at the boys and tells me, “I’ve known Cas and Hollis forever too. I’m sure I’ll be able to think of some good stories to tell you during class.”

We share a conspiring smile. Cas glares at Chloe and grunts. “What?”

“Yesterday, Chloe told me that Theo cried in the middle of class in sixth grade when your teacher was reading *Where the Red Fern Grows*.” I giggle.

The guys glance at each other, and Cas turns to Chloe with his signature flirty smile. “You know, I’ve always thought you and I should have been really good friends. You don’t really want to tell Cricket anything embarrassing about me, do you?”

“You should know better than to try that on me, Seymour.” Chloe snorts and pulls me into our yoga class.

The room reminds me of a ballet studio. It’s large and spacious, and one wall is completely covered in mirrors with a beam running along it. Chloe and I are greeted by an older woman with black hair pulled into a messy bun. She introduces herself as Mrs. Gallagher, asks our names, and assigns us lockers in the locker room. She checks us off on her attendance sheet, tells us to go and change, and then come back to grab a mat and find a spot on the floor.

Chloe and I make small talk as we head into the locker room. A few girls are already changing. I’m not the most modest person and I’m confident in my body, so I don’t have a problem changing in front of everyone. I don’t hesitate at all to slip my dress off while still casually talking to Chloe.

Her jaw drops and she blushes before laughing. “Jesus, Cricket. Now I get why those boys are all following you around like a pack of depraved puppies.”

“Thanks, I think.” I laugh. I’m totally calling them that later, it’s too good.

I finish changing into my yoga pants, sports bra, and a loose tank top. I slip on a pair of socks and carry my tennis shoes with me, hoping the teacher doesn’t have a weird rule about having to wear them. I used to take yoga classes with my mom twice a week in Florida, so I’m excited to take lessons for free at school every other day during the week.

As Chloe and I are leaving the locker room, I run into Paisley. She’s with two girls. I’m pretty sure they’re the girls I saw in the bookshop with her when I hung out with Theo for the first time. When they pass us, they stop and glare at me.

The short girl with a red pixie cut stage whispers to her friends, “Figures the slut would make friends with the lezzy.”

“Watch your fucking mouth,” I snarl in her face. She can say whatever she wants about me, but there’s no way I’m going to stand by and listen to her say shit about Chloe.

Paisley and her friends look terrified, and they quickly shuffle past us. Chloe turns to grin at me. “Damn, girl!”

We leave the locker room and make our way to the yoga studio, set up mats beside each other, and whisper quietly back and forth.

“Those snarky bitches shouldn’t get away with calling you that.” I tell her, still scowling.

“I’m used to it. But holy shit, dude, you were scary! You’re just like Theo.”

“What does that mean?” I give her a quizzical look and think of that weird little mafia thing I witnessed between Theo and Xavier at lunch.

“Well, you know, Theo and his friends are popular. They’re attractive, they’re charming, they’re fairly wealthy, straight girls love them. All the typical high school shit. But they also kind of control people? I don’t really know how to describe it to someone that hasn’t grown up around here. Even when we were little, whenever Theo heard about someone being messed with, he and his friends ‘took care of it.’”

When Chloe sees the look on my face, she laughs and pulls her curly hair into a ponytail. “I know it sounds insane, like something out of a movie or a comic book.”

Everything in my life is like something out of a movie or a comic book, so I’m really not surprised. And honestly, it makes me like the guys even more knowing that they somehow feel responsible for protecting the people around them. Chloe hands me an extra hair tie, and I gratefully take it and pull my hair up out of my face.

Everyone else quickly settles into the class. There are fourteen girls, including myself and Chloe. Luckily, Paisley and her friends stay on the opposite side of the room from us. Chloe tells me the other girls’ names. The girl with short hair is Nadia, and the tall girl with the afro is Sabrina.

Mrs. Gallagher talks about herself for a few minutes. She owns a yoga studio downtown and teaches at the high school part-time. Starting next class, she wants us to change in the locker room before coming into the class for roll call. She leads straight into a lesson for beginners, and I quickly find myself relaxing and focusing on her soothing voice as I go through the different poses.

I feel my magic humming happily just beneath my skin. Things have been so freaking insane since I moved here, and my gift has been changing and growing. I realize that this type of relaxation and meditation is exactly what I need, and I need to make more time for it. Toward the end of class, we’re all in the tree pose—Vrikshasana—when I hear the door open. I keep my eyes closed and try not to pay it any mind.

“Can I help you boys with something?” Mrs. Gallagher asks, sounding very annoyed at the disruption.

I shouldn’t be surprised when I hear Theo’s smiling voice. “Our class ended a few minutes early. We’re just waiting for Cricket.”

Oh my god, they’re idiots. I open my eyes and turn to glare at him. Theo, Cas, and Hollis are standing in the doorway, staring at me with stupid ass grins on their faces. I flip them off, staying in pose. Chloe giggles quietly beside me.

“You can wait outside for her, thank you,” Mrs. Gallagher says.

“Please, we’ll be quiet, I swear.” Theo literally fucking *pouts*.

I grit my teeth and growl at him. “She said get out.”

Cas and Hollis look at each other and walk out the door. Theo grins and crosses his arms challengingly. I don’t know what game he’s trying to play, and I’m still irritated about that move he pulled on me after lunch.

I breathe angrily out of my nose, set my foot back down on the ground and glare at him. “Theo Ashbrooke, get your dumb ass out of here right now.”

He sighs dramatically, drops his arms to his side, and walks out of the room. It’s quiet for a few seconds. Half the girls in class are smiling at me, and the other half are glaring. Chloe laughs so hard she actually snorts.

Mrs. Gallagher sighs and rubs her temples. “Cricket Kendall, please see me after class.”

Ugh, great. They’re not even in this class and they’re getting me into trouble. We spend the next

five minutes doing a few cool down poses, and Mrs. Gallagher lets everybody head off to the locker room so they can leave for the day. Chloe gives me an encouraging smile.

When everybody else is out of the room, Mrs. Gallagher stands in front of me with her hands on her hips and her eyebrows raised.

“I’m sorry about my friends. I’ll talk to them and make sure they don’t do that again.”

She chuckles and shakes her head. “Oh, don’t worry about them. I know boys at your age can be a handful. It seems like you keep them in line fairly well. That’s not what I wanted to talk to you about though.”

“Oh.” I raise an eyebrow.

“You’re not a beginner, are you?” she asks, smiling.

I shake my head and tell her about the yoga classes I took regularly with my mom when I lived in Florida.

“It shows! Your form is excellent. I’ve actually been looking for an assistant to help me out with some of my busier classes on Saturdays at my studio. Is that something you might possibly be interested in?”

“Yeah, absolutely!” I exclaim.

She gives me the address of her studio and asks if I can come by after school tomorrow so she can show me her typical routine for her classes. The studio is just around the corner from the bookshop. We talk for a few more minutes before I finally walk out of the classroom with a smile on my face.

Theo, Hollis, and Cas are standing right outside waiting for me with wide eyes. Cas is messing with his hair, and Hollis is nervously biting his lip.

“Did we get you in trouble?” Theo gives me a guilty smile.

“No, she actually offered me a job.”

Cas laughs in surprise, and I smile at him as I walk by to get to the locker room. I’ve only walked a few steps when I turn my head to tell them I’ll be right back. Instead, I find them staring at my ass with their mouths open and their eyes wide. It’s so fucking obnoxious and hilarious that I laugh.

Hollis is the only one that looks embarrassed, and he quickly pulls his eyes back up to my face. Theo and Cas are both still scanning my body completely unabashedly.

“Maybe we should switch classes,” Cas mumbles.

“Don’t you fucking dare! Yoga is supposed to be calming and relaxing. I don’t need you guys in there distracting me and panting at me like a bunch of horny dogs!”

“But you look really fucking sexy!” Theo says, never taking his eyes off of me for a second.

I sigh and pinch the bridge of my nose. “You’ve practically seen me naked. How is this any different?”

He shrugs and gives me a lopsided smile. “I don’t know, it just is.”

Cas glares at Theo and snaps, “When did you see her practically naked?”

“Haven’t you seen how she dresses outside of school? And you were just digging through her closet last night!” Theo laughs.

“Whatever, guys. I’m going to change.” I roll my eyes and walk into the locker room. Chloe is just about to leave. Paisley and her friends are still here too. I tell Chloe what Mrs. Gallagher asked me. I’m still changing when Chloe leaves, promising to see me tomorrow. I finish getting dressed, fold my gym clothes up and place them in my new locker, and shake my hair out before walking out to meet the boys again.

Paisley is talking to Hollis while her two friends stand by awkwardly. Cas and Theo look annoyed, and Hollis just looks uncomfortable.

“Ready to go?” I walk up and casually wrap an arm around Hollis’s waist, smiling sweetly at him. Normally, I wouldn’t do something so bitchy, but Paisley and her friends have been obnoxiously rude. Besides, I’m not going to forget about the comment Paisley’s friend made about Chloe



anytime soon.

Hollis crinkles his eyes in amusement. Paisley's friend Nadia steps closer to me and coughs, "Slut."

"Get the fuck out of here, you homophobic twat." I roll my eyes at her, keeping my arm around Hollis.

Cas, Theo, and Hollis look surprised, and Hollis chuckles and pulls me along with his arm around my shoulders. He doesn't even say bye to Paisley, and the look on her face is priceless.

Theo comes up on my other side and ruffles my hair affectionately. "Oh, little witch. You are absolutely fucking spectacular."

We make our way outside to Theo's jeep. Cas is still carrying my backpack and gives me the sweetest smile when I thank him for it. Hollis holds the passenger door open for me. On the way to the diner, I tell them what Nadia said to me and Chloe before class. They seem ticked off about it.

When we get to the diner, I slide into a booth across from Hollis. Cas and Theo stand at the end of the table, glaring at each other for several long moments. I roll my eyes at Hollis, thinking he'll joke around about it with me, but he watches the two of them uneasily. I don't know what happens or changes, but Theo sits down next to Hollis with a pissed off expression on his face. Cas has the biggest smile on his face as he slides in next to me, wraps an arm around my waist, and growls quietly in my ear.

I smile at him and use my magic to blow a small puff of air into his face as I whisper, "Idiot."

"You're right. Sorry." He wrinkles his nose at my magic and laughs. He takes his arm off of my waist and places his hand on my leg under the table, just above my knee.

We end up with the same waitress we had when I came here with Theo last week. She raises her eyebrows at me and asks, "Chocolate malt with one straw?"

"Yes, please." I grin

Theo laughs at me with his nose scrunched up. The waitress looks around at the guys and asks, "And the usual for you guys?"

They nod and thank her. When she walks away, I raise an eyebrow at Hollis. "So, I guess you guys come here a lot then, huh?"

"Yeah, a couple of times a week," Cas says. "What the fuck did you do to piss off Matilda? Didn't you just move here like a couple of weeks ago?"

Theo snickers. "I brought her here the first time we hung out. Matilda thought we were on a date, and I guess Cricket took offense to that."

"I didn't take offense to that." I frown and rest my chin in my hand. "I just didn't want to share my milkshake!"

"So, does that mean you would go on a date with me?" Theo smirks.

My face flushes, and Cas's hand tenses up on my knee. My heart beats wildly at his question, and I feel a million different feelings at once. Yes, I would love to go on a real date with him and kiss him and even call him my boyfriend, for real. He's amazing! I'm also terrified that I'm even feeling that way because I've never seriously dated anyone before, and I know I would fuck it up somehow. But then, what I told him after I'd seen him shift the first time was still true. His friendship is so important to me that I would never want to do something that could potentially ruin it. And lastly, I can already feel myself slowly forming real feelings for Hollis and Cas too, which is so fucked up, I can't even fully process it. Why did Theo have to put me on the spot like this, and why did he have to make it sound like such a joke to him?

After a few awkward seconds of silence, I bite my lip, look down at the table, and sigh quietly. "Theo..."

He gives a strangled laugh and taps his fingers on the table. "I'm only joking."

But when I look up and meet his eyes, I don't think he's joking at all. He looks heartbroken and like he's desperately trying to hide it. It makes me feel so fucking guilty that I have to look away

from him. Thank fucking God, Matilda chooses that moment to bring our food over. She sets down my milkshake with one straw, gives me a sassy smile, and passes the guys their drinks. Finally, she sets a huge plate of loaded nachos in the center of the table and walks away again.

My eyes light up when I see the nachos, and I take a gigantic bite and moan while my mouth is full.

They laugh. Even Theo, thankfully. Cas rubs his thumb lightly over my skin and gives me a cheeky smile. “God, it’s fucking refreshing that you actually eat real food. I’m so used to girls being dainty, only picking at a salad and drinking water.”

I roll my eyes *hard*. Cas is seriously lucky he’s so hot because there’s constantly dumb shit coming out of his mouth.

“Seriously, Cas?” Hollis snorts and shakes his head. “When’s the last time you spent more than five minutes in public with a girl other than Sara?”

Theo snickers and reaches out to scoop up a nacho. “Sara’s a very high maintenance girl, and she’s the type of person that’s very conscious of what she eats. Cas’s sisters are the same way, so it probably comes as a surprise to him that some girls don’t wear makeup or use hair products, and some of them even have black holes for stomachs.”

The condescending tone in his voice has me giggling like crazy. Poor Cas. We’re always ganging up on him, even if he deserves it most of the time.

Cas turns and looks down at my face critically, squints his eyes, and asks, “Really?”

“Really, what?” I ask, shoving another nacho into my mouth.

“Do you use your magic to make you look so, um...” He awkwardly gestures to my face and body.

“Don’t insult her!” Hollis growls when I burst out laughing.

Cas widens his eyes in alarm. “I’m not trying to insult her. I’m genuinely curious!”

I sip on my milkshake and watch them in amusement. Theo has a wolfish grin on his face and keeps glancing back and forth between his friends before letting his eyes land on me. I give him a small smile, and he returns it. With just a look, I know he’s not mad at me, and I feel like a huge weight has been lifted off my chest.

After checking to make sure nobody’s paying attention to us, I take my phone out and scroll through my photos. “I know you guys think I’m amazing at pretty much everything, but I really suck at beauty spells. If I didn’t, my hair wouldn’t be so out of control all the time. Aurora and my Grandma Marina are the other witches in my family. My mom doesn’t have any magic, and I look just like her.”

I show them a picture of me and my mom standing side by side with our arms around each other. She practically looks like my twin, just slightly older and with not-so-messy hair a few shades darker than mine.

After staring at the picture for almost an entire minute, Theo looks up at me with his eyebrows furrowed. “How old is she? She doesn’t look that much older than you.”

“I know, she’s crazy pretty. People always mistake us for sisters.”

Hollis gives me a puzzled look. “I thought witches had to be born from other witches.”

“Usually, yeah. Somehow, my dad passed the gift onto me. I’m an anomaly.”

“You said your grandmother lives in France?” Cas asks.

“Yeah, in Annecy.” I nod, finishing the last of my milkshake. “She moved there a few years ago. Right around the time Aurora moved here, I think. Her affinity is Earth, and she’s strongest at growing things. She’s the one who taught Aurora so much about plants and herbs.”

The boys look thoughtful while they finish eating the rest of the nachos. When our food and drinks are gone, Matilda brings the check over. Theo pays for everything, as usual, and we head outside. Theo grabs my hand and pulls me back. When Hollis and Cas see what he’s doing, they get into the jeep by themselves to wait for us.

Theo shuffles his feet slightly and looks down at me nervously. “Cricket, I’m sorry for embarrassing you in front of them.”

I take a deep breath and decide to be totally honest with him. “Theo, I really like you, and I’m crazy attracted to you, but...” I can’t help thinking of Cas and Hollis because I’m a terrible, selfish person. I take another deep breath and stare into his eyes, hoping he can see how torn I feel. “I’m terrified. I don’t want to fuck this up. God, I can’t lose you...”

“Hey, come here.” He pulls me into a hug, nuzzling his head against mine. “You’re not going to lose me. No matter what, I swear. I’m sorry. I just, I really like you too. But I know you’re right. We’re still best friends, aren’t we?”

I nod and press my head into his chest, wrapping my arms around him. Ugh, I feel like I’m going to cry. Theo ruffles my hair and gives me an adorable smile. “Come on, they’ll get pissy if we keep them waiting. And you’re going to have fun hanging out with Hollis!”

He sounds so genuine that I can’t help smiling up at him. He surprises me by sweeping me off the ground with one hand under my knees and the other around my ribs. I yelp and wrap my arms around his neck. He quickly runs over to the jeep, carrying me the entire way, and gallantly sets me down in the passenger seat.

While Theo runs around the front of the jeep, I turn and smile nervously at Hollis. “Are you still okay with me coming over to your house?”

His eyes light up. “Yeah, of course.”



## Chapter Twenty-One

### *Cas*

Theo doesn't back out of the driveway until Cricket and Hollis walk inside the house. When I can't see her anymore, I can't help but slump down in my seat. I grab my phone from my pocket and pull up Cricket's Instagram page. I scroll through her photos for the millionth time since last night. I wish I had a picture of her from today. She looked so beautiful in that stupid dress. When I saw her first thing this morning, I thought I was going to go crazy from sensory overload and from wanting her so badly it physically fucking hurt. I briefly consider texting Hollis and asking him to take a picture of her for me while she's at his house. But then I imagine her in his bedroom alone with him, and my vision goes red. My wolf trembles in anger.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Theo growls.

I try to hide my phone from him, but I'm not quick enough. I scowl at Theo as he rips the phone from my hands and peers down at it. He looks pissed, but I don't give a fuck.

I don't understand him. It's really fucking obvious he likes Cricket. He had an entire week alone with her, and he didn't sleep with her once! I guess I understand that he's trying to keep her around for good as a friend. She is fucking incredible, and our wolves are crazy attracted to her magic. But damn, I don't know how he found the self-control. I think about what she said at lunch, about sleeping around at her old school the same way Theo and I used to.

Used to? God, this girl is seriously fucking me up. I haven't looked at another girl since I first set eyes on her at that fucking coffee shop. I haven't even considered calling Sara, who is always more than willing to give me what I need. I always thought Sara was the hottest girl ever, but comparing her to Cricket, I feel like an idiot. Like I've never fully opened my eyes before. Next to Cricket, every other girl looks so plain.

When Hollis and I were walking Cricket to art history class after lunch, I could smell that she was turned on, and if I'd had a moment alone with her...Fuck, I can't believe Hollis has her alone right now. I feel panic and dread settle in my chest.

"How many people do you think she's slept with?"

Theo flares his nostrils and bares his teeth at me. Great, now he's really pissed off at me. "Does it really matter?"

I shrug. No, it doesn't really matter. I don't even know why I asked the question out loud, to be honest. I don't want Theo to know how hung up I am on this girl. Maybe if I make it seem like I'm

only interested in her physically...

“Do you think, I mean, I don’t think she’d mind a casual hookup. I think she’s into me.”

Theo taps his fingers against the steering wheel and bites out, “No.”

“I wouldn’t be an asshole about it. And I don’t think it would be weird. We can still be friends with her. She’s a really cool girl and—”

Theo cuts me off with a snarl. “I fucking said no.”

He just used his fucking alpha voice, and I feel the authority of it settle over me severely. My heart drops into my stomach. I feel like he’s taken her away from me when she wasn’t even mine yet.

I feel my nostrils flare and my hands tremble. “You can’t do that! You haven’t claimed her, and she’s not your fucking mate!”

“She fucking might be, okay!?” Theo yells. He grips the steering wheel so hard I think he might have put a dent in it.

I’m speechless as I stare at him. Theo pulls into the closest parking lot and parks the jeep. He stares at his hands on the steering wheel, looking completely defeated. I’ve never seen him so upset, and we’ve known each other our entire lives. I hold my breath and wait for him to say something.

“Cas, fuck,” he says quietly. “I don’t know what I’m going to do if she’s not my mate.”

My heart pounds. Part of me wants to change the subject because the thought of her being his mate hurts so fucking much. But I can’t stand seeing him upset like this either.

“She doesn’t have a mate mark. I’ve checked a million times.”

Theo glances at me and clears his throat. “Witches come of age when they turn eighteen. Hawthorne thinks that’s when the mate mark will show up.”

I perk up and swallow back the panic building up inside of me. “Hawthorne thinks she’s your mate too?”

His face lights up, and he looks so fucking hopeful. “He’s sure of it. I mean, you feel it already, right? How she’s part of our pack?”

That’s exactly what I told Cricket earlier today. She looked up at me with those gorgeous fucking eyes like I told her everything she’d ever wanted to hear. For one insane moment, I pictured pressing her against Hollis and kissing her while he watched us. And then I remember the surreal moment when she used an alpha voice on me and Hollis, telling us not to fuck with her.

When I don’t respond to him, he keeps talking, his voice full of nervous excitement. “She used an alpha voice on us earlier when she made us leave her yoga class. I know you guys felt that.”

My voice is quiet when I admit, “That was the second time she did that today.”

“What!? When was the first time?” Theo laughs in delight.

I can’t meet his eyes. “After lunch, on our way to art history. That stunt you pulled really pissed her off. She told me and Hollis she wasn’t a toy for us to play with, and that we’d better not fuck with her.”

Theo grimaces, panic evident in his voice. “I didn’t, I don’t...Fuck me, I’m such an idiot. I don’t think she’s a toy.”

I can’t help smiling. I had the same terrible reaction. I felt disgusted at myself for making her think we might see her that way for one fucking second.

“Dude, I know. Hollis and I felt like huge assholes. We told her it wasn’t like that. We explained that we’re fucking morons who can’t help competing with each other. Hollis told her we all respect and admire her.”

“Thank you.” Theo sighs in relief.

I brush my fingers through my hair, feeling upset and nervous. “Is that...is that the only reason you think she’s your mate?” I mean, even if she is an alpha female, that doesn’t necessarily mean her mate has to be an alpha too.

He smiles and gets this sappy fucking look in his eyes. I've dreaded seeing this look on his face for years, but now I'm dreading it for a totally different reason. If she really is his mate, that means she's not mine.

"No. From the very first second I saw her, I wanted her so badly. I only talked to her for ten minutes, and I felt excited that she might be my mate. I've always thought I might secretly be disappointed, you know, when the time finally came. But Cas, I haven't even looked at another girl since meeting Cricket. I can't imagine wanting anyone else. She's so strong and funny, and her power is unreal. When she gets her full power, she might be stronger than all of us combined. Fuck, she probably already is."

"I thought..." My voice is quiet and quivering, and I fucking hate myself for sounding weak. I quickly clear my throat and finish, "I thought it was just her magic making us feel this way."

"Well, I think that's part of it." Theo shrugs and looks away from me.

I feel like he's keeping something from me. I feel so torn up and confused. I've never wanted a mate. The entire idea has always sounded so unnatural and strained, and I don't want to be forced to change myself for somebody else. I've always been afraid that when Hollis and Theo find their mates, they won't have time for me anymore. Our friendship won't be the same. But the past few days, it has crossed my mind that having Cricket as a mate might not be so bad. Theo's right. She is funny and strong, and holy fucking hell, she's beautiful. She fits so easily into our group. I've been checking her wrists obsessively the last two days without even thinking about it. There's a tiny voice in the back of my head telling me she's mine, and I can't decide if I'm excited or terrified of that.

But Theo sounds so confident. I frown at him again, suddenly angry. "If you're so fucking sure she's your mate, then why haven't you claimed her? Why are you letting me and Hollis touch her at all?"

"Hawthorne told me I could only be friends with her until she gets her mark, and we're absolutely sure." He meets my eyes, looking faintly embarrassed. "And yes, I want her for myself, but it doesn't bother me that much. Seeing you guys touch her."

I stare at him in bewilderment. I don't understand how it doesn't fucking bother him. Even thinking of her with Hollis right now is making me feel crazy. Every time I see Theo or Hollis touching her, I want to fucking rip their throats out. It's so obvious Cricket prefers Theo and Hollis over me, and that hurts most of all. I can't exactly blame her.

"If it doesn't bother you, then why can't I—"

He snarls and uses his alpha voice again. "I still don't want you fucking her. If I can only be friends with her, then the same goes for you and Hollis."

I roll my eyes, trying to suppress the excessive rage I feel. When I don't say anything else, Theo pulls out of the parking lot. We don't speak again until he's parked outside of my house. I get out and walk around the jeep to grab my backpack. Before I walk away, I pause next to Theo's window.

He rolls the window down and raises his eyebrows at me.

"She doesn't know, does she? That you think she's your mate?" He slowly shakes his head. I nervously run my fingers through my hair and ask, "What if you're wrong? What if she's not?"

He frowns and shakes his head. "I can't, I don't even want to think that. Her birthday is September third, so hopefully we'll know then."

I turn away from him and walk inside. Her birthday is only a few weeks away.



## Chapter Twenty-Two

### *Cricket*

Hollis closes the door behind us. I look around the foyer, a nervous fluttering in my stomach. There's a staircase in front of me, a kitchen and dining room to my left, and what looks like the living room to my right. I spin around to find Hollis smiling down at me hesitantly, rubbing a hand on the back of his neck. He looks so freaking cute. I can't help grinning at him.

"So, what do you want to do?" I ask cheerfully.

"Whatever you want." He shrugs, biting his lip.

"Well, what do you normally do after school?"

He shuffles his feet. "If I'm not with Theo or Cas, I usually just hang out in my room. Reading or playing video games."

"Okay, then let's go hang out in your room. It's my turn to be nosy, anyway!"

He chuckles and lightly pushes me toward the staircase, still carrying both of our backpacks. I head up the stairs and look at some photographs on the walls. Most of them are of Hollis and a boy that looks a few years older.

"Your brother?" I remember Hollis mentioning him during our English class.

"Yeah, Ezra. He's a couple of years older than me. He goes to school in Boulder."

I study the picture of them, which only looks a few years old. Hollis doesn't have his beard yet. Ezra is cute. Not as cute as Hollis, but still. They have the same eyes and smile, but Ezra's hair is darker.

Hollis points to another picture. "That's Ezra with Cas's sister, Lettie. She goes to school with him."

Wow, she's gorgeous! She's got the same raven hair as Cas. I remember something Hollis and Cas said yesterday and ask, "They're together?"

"Yeah. They were best friends their entire lives, started dating in high school, and now they're married."

I can't imagine getting married so young, and to your high school sweetheart!?! But Hollis sounds so happy for them, and the look on his face totally gives me butterflies.

“Do your parents like her?”

Hollis looks surprised. “Of course. She’s always been like a daughter to them. Why?”

“Well, Cas mentioned something about his sister getting married this summer, and his mom not being very happy about it.”

Hollis leads me the rest of the way upstairs. He seems to debate telling me something.

“He was talking about his younger sister, Ellie. Everyone in our pack was thrilled about Ezra and Lettie getting together. But, um, Ellie’s only sixteen, and she surprised everybody and ran off with another wolf this summer.”

My mouth drops open. “Sixteen? How can she even do that?”

“Witches come of age at eighteen, right? Well, for werewolves, it’s sixteen. She’s already joined this other wolf’s pack. There’s really nothing Cas’s parents can do about it at this point. His mom’s pretty devastated.”

We’re standing in the hallway near the top of the stairs. I must look as troubled as I feel because Hollis gently brushes his fingers against my cheek. “Are you okay?”

“This probably sounds weird.” I give him a shy smile. “It’s like, I feel like I know you guys. Like my soul is connected to all of you. But at the same time, I *don’t* really know you guys yet.”

He grins. “I guess we need to change that.”

He steps over to a door on the right side of the hallway, but before he opens the door, I see him glance sideways at me and flare his nostrils.

“Let me guess, you’ve never had a girl in your room either,” I tease.

He laughs and shakes his head. “Guess you get to be the first. Let me just make sure it’s clean really quick.”

I grin and quickly slide in front of him so he can’t block me from the doorway. “Nope, part of being nosy is getting to see how messy you are.”

He laughs again and rolls his eyes, opening the door. His room really isn’t messy at all. His bed isn’t made, and there are some clothes on the floor. But otherwise, everything looks neat. The walls are a pretty shade of blue, and he has a double bed in the corner with blue sheets and a gray comforter. Next to his bed is a large desk underneath a window with a few books and a laptop on it. On the wall in front of the bed is a tall dresser with more books piled up on top of it. The entire left side of the room is dedicated to a large flat screen TV on one wall with a few different gaming consoles and two bean bag chairs on the floor in front of it.

Hollis sets our backpacks down and closes the door behind him. I grin at him before walking around slowly to get a closer look at everything. Most of the books he has are fantasy, but there are a few other different genres mixed in.

“This is one of my favorite books!” I pick up his worn copy of *Into the Wild* by Jon Krakauer.

Hollis smiles excitedly. “What are your other favorites?”

“Lord of the Rings. And I know it’s totally cheesy, but I’m a sucker for any books about witches. What about you?”

“You’re going to make fun of me.”

My eyes light up mischievously. “Why? What is it?”

He laughs at the look on my face, but then quietly admits, “It’s um, *The Call of the Wild*.”

“Really?” I can’t help bursting into giggles.

“Ugh, I know.” He groans and rubs his hand over his eyes. When he pulls his hand away, he smiles at me. “Want to play video games?”

Nodding, I walk over to the beanbag chairs and plop down in one of them. I watch as Hollis turns everything on in front of me. Damn, he has a nice ass, and his arms are so fucking sexy and muscular. God, I wonder what he looks like with his shirt off.



When he turns around to hand me a GameCube controller, he pauses and flares his nostrils. He chuckles, giving me an amused smirk.

“Stop that!” I whine, trying to wipe the lusty expression from my eyes.

“You’re the one that was just checking me out!” he laughs.

I shrug and give him a dopey smile. Just when I think he’s going to sit in the beanbag chair next to me, he effortlessly lifts me up with one arm under my knees and the other around my ribs just under my breasts. I make a sound of surprise, and he plops down where I was sitting and settles me in his lap. I lean back against his chest and turn to smile at him. He smiles back and rubs his prickly cheek against mine.

“That tickles.” I giggle. He’s so close to me I can’t help glancing down at his lips.

Hollis flares his nostrils and pulls me in closer against his chest. Then he focuses on the TV in front of us and turns on Super Smash Bros. We talk while we play. We go back and forth telling each other our favorite movies, music, and books. Hollis gets way more into the game when I win several times in a row, which is so cute and funny. When *he* starts winning every game, I feel competitive too. During a game that’s really close, I use my magic to push his controller out of his hands and take his character out.

“You little cheater!” he shouts in surprise.

I wiggle my eyebrows at him, and he tickles my sides. It makes me laugh, and I half-heartedly slap his hands away. I stand up and back away a few steps, still giggling wildly. Hollis stands with a crazy grin on his face and surprises the crap out of me by shifting into his wolf form. The next thing I know, he tackles me to the floor and pins me down, sniffing and licking all over my face. I’m laughing so freaking hard that tears are coming out of my eyes, and I can see his tail wagging like crazy.

We’re interrupted by the sound of his bedroom door opening. We both look up in surprise, and I see the shocked face of a pretty, middle-aged blonde woman.

Hollis instantly shifts back and crouches over me with my dress hiked pretty high on my thighs. He sits up, still half sitting on me with a guilty ass look on his face.

“Mom, uh, we were just...”

I pull my dress down and Hollis grimaces, realizing how fucking crazy this probably looks to his mom. He quickly jumps up and offers his hand to help me stand. His mom is still standing in his doorway, but now her arms are crossed and her eyebrows are raised.

Hollis clears his throat. “Mom, this is Cricket.”

Her eyes light up in recognition. “Oh, the witch girl? Hawthorne and Margot have told me so much about you! I’m Violetta.”

“It’s nice to meet you!” I smile and shake her hand.

“You know you’re not supposed to shift in the house,” she tells Hollis.

“We were just playing.” Hollis shrugs, looking embarrassed.

“He didn’t hurt you, did he?” She frowns and looks me over critically.

Hollis glares at her, clearly offended. “I would never hurt her!”

Violetta grins at him. “Okay, well, I’m going to get started on dinner here soon. I’ll call you down when it’s ready.” As she walks out of the room, she gives Hollis one last stern look. “And keep your door open, Hollis. Ezra and Lettie weren’t allowed to have the door closed either when he still lived at home.”

Hollis glares, his face turning red. “Okay, mom.”

He looks so freaking adorable and embarrassed, I can’t help giggling quietly. When his mom leaves, Hollis looks down at me. I flutter my eyelashes and give him a flirty smile.

“Okay, I’m not playing video games with you anymore.”

“Aw, I won’t do it again!” I pout.

He shakes his head and walks over to sit down in the beanbag chair. I sit in the other one just in case his mom walks in again.

“Do you have to be looking at something to move it with your magic?” he asks curiously.

“Honestly, I really don’t know. I’ve never tried doing it with my eyes closed.”

“Try now!”

I close my eyes tightly and try to focus my energy. I reach out with my magic. Surprisingly, I can vaguely feel the shapes of everything around me. Keeping my eyes closed, I try to move what I think is the game controller on the floor. When I open my eyes, I’m ecstatic to find the controller floating in the air right in front of me.

Hollis and I grin at each other. Over the next hour, Hollis helps me practice my new trick. We’ve progressed to where I have a scarf tied around my eyes while he throws random objects at me from the other side of the room, and I try to stop them in midair. I make a ton of Star Wars jokes about being a Jedi. Eventually, Hollis crawls over to sit in front of me and unties the scarf from around my eyes.

“Cricket, you’re amazing!” he whispers reverently. His sapphire eyes are sparkling, and his smile is so dazzling it takes my breath away.

I smile and shake my head. “I don’t know why, but my power has been getting so much stronger since I moved here. I don’t know if it’s you guys, this place, or that I’m getting closer to my eighteenth birthday. Back home, the coolest thing I could do was float a few inches off the ground. Mostly I used my gift to clean my room or help put groceries away. Stupid stuff like that. It’s kind of scary, honestly.”

“Don’t be afraid. We’ll help you figure it out,” he says soothingly.

I wrap my arms around his neck and pull him into a hug. “I know.”

He wraps one arm around my waist and cups the back of my head with his other hand. For a few moments, we don’t say anything. It feels really nice, being held by him like this.

When he pulls back, he gives me a bashful smile. “My mom’s calling us downstairs for dinner.”

“What? I didn’t hear anything.”

“She knows I can hear her, even if she’s just talking in a regular voice.” He glances at the door and tilts his head. “I think my dad’s home now too.”

A few seconds later, I hear the front door open and close. I smirk at Hollis. “You know, you’re pretty amazing too.”

He flashes me a grin and grabs my hand to help me up off the ground. He holds my hand all the way downstairs until right before we walk into the kitchen. His mom is standing over the stove, stirring something, and his dad hugs her from behind while he says something that makes her laugh.

His mom glances over at us and smiles. “Hollis, can you set the table?”

His dad turns his head and does a double take when he sees me. He looks like Hollis, just older and taller. His eyes are brown and he has a fuller beard. He grins at me and raises his eyebrows at Hollis. “Is she your mate?”

Hollis shakes his head, looking positively mortified. Violetta spins around and smacks her husband’s arm. “Don’t embarrass him! This is Cricket, Aurora Kendall’s niece.”

His dad furrows his eyebrows at me and pouts at his wife. “Well, how was I supposed to know? Hollis has never brought a girl home before.”

I laugh and grin up at Hollis, even though my heart is pounding at the sound of that word. Mate. That’s the second time I’ve heard it, and I want to ask questions. But Hollis looks so embarrassed that I don’t want to say anything about it in front of his parents.

His dad clears his throat and steps closer to me, holding his hand out. “Lovely to meet you, Cricket. I’m Sumner Wakefield.”

I shake his hand and return the sentiment before helping Hollis set the table. Violetta and Sumner

make small talk, asking each other about their days at work. Hollis tells me that his mom is a librarian at the local library, and his dad is an English professor at the community college.

I must have a weird look on my face because Hollis bumps my shoulder. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s just so normal.” I shrug.

“What, witches don’t have normal jobs?” Hollis chuckles.

Sumner joins in the conversation and excitedly asks, “Hawthorne says you can really do, um, magic?” He waves his hand around awkwardly when he says it.

Hollis snorts at his dad but animatedly describes some things he’s seen me do with my magic. When his mom sets dinner out on the table, Hollis doesn’t even pause or look at me before picking my plate up and serving me first. The gesture makes me blush, and I can’t help the huge smile that spreads across my face. When Hollis realizes what he just did in front of his parents, he blushes too, but he still gives me the cutest smile ever. His mom grins smugly and raises her eyebrows at Hollis. Hollis pretends not to notice.

Dinner is delicious, and we talk while we eat. Sumner is very interested in witches. He asks me dozens of questions. After a little while, I ask, “Haven’t you all known Aurora for, like, ten years now?”

Violetta nods, and Sumner happily quips, “Yes, and her bookshop has been an absolute godsend! We used to have to drive forty-five minutes to get to the nearest bookstore.”

“I’m just surprised that she never told you anything about witches. Theo had no idea about her at all, but she knows a lot about werewolves and your pack,” I say.

Sumner and Violetta glance at each other before Violetta says, “Well, for a long time, it was a secret between your aunt, Hawthorne, and Margot. I believe Theo’s parents knew, but the rest of us only found out about Aurora two years ago.”

Violetta changes the subject and asks me questions about my family and my home in Florida. She tells me stories about Hollis and Ezra when they were little, and I find myself laughing over and over. Hollis grumbles at his mom every time she says something he finds embarrassing, which makes it even funnier. When dinner is over and we’ve been talking for a long time, Hollis offers to drive me home.

While he runs upstairs to grab my backpack, I thank his parents for dinner. His mom surprises me by pulling me into a hug and telling me I’m welcome at their house anytime. Hollis puts his hand on the small of my back and leads me out the front door. He walks over to an old, light blue and white Ford Ranger. I’ve noticed it before, but this is the first time I’ve been able to give it a good look without being distracted by something else.

“Do you like my truck?” Hollis asks, opening the passenger door for me.

“I love it! What year is it? It looks practically brand new.”

He sets my backpack on the floor of the truck and gives me his hand to help me inside. “1969. Ezra helped me fix it up when I was sixteen.”

I’m impressed. Hollis is so sweet and bookish, but he’s also sexy as fuck, and imagining him being all super manly and working on this truck is definitely a turn on. I rub his bicep, wanting to feel his muscles. He instinctively flexes, and I make this tiny, embarrassing purring noise in the back of my throat. Hollis’s blazing eyes meet mine, and for a long moment, we don’t move or look away from one another.

Hollis slowly lets out a long breath. His voice is a low growl when he says, “Let’s get you home.”

After he shuts my door and walks around to the other side of the truck, I mentally slap myself. Self-control, Cricket! I dig in my backpack to check my phone. I have a couple of messages from Theo. I quickly text him back and tell him that Hollis is taking me home now. Hollis starts the truck and glances sideways at me.

“There’s no point in having a bench seat if I can’t do this,” he says as he pulls me across the seat and against his side.

I laugh and snuggle into him as he puts his arm over the seat and around my shoulders. “That was

cute.”

He nuzzles my hair and backs out of the driveway. We drive in a comfortable silence for a few minutes, but it doesn't take long for my thoughts to settle on the word mate. It's been bugging me so much. I can't ignore it any longer.

“Hollis?” I pull my head off of his shoulder and bite my lip nervously. “What exactly is a mate?”

He tenses up and doesn't answer me right away. “I don't think Theo wants me to tell you.”

“What? Why?”

“I don't know.” He shrugs uncomfortably. “I mean, he didn't really say anything, but, uh, he's our alpha, and I just got a feeling from him about it yesterday when we went to see Hawthorne.”

What? Now I'm even more confused. “I thought Hawthorne was your alpha.”

“He is, but Theo's an alpha too. After we graduate, or whenever he finds his mate, Theo, Cas, and I will branch off and form our own pack. Hawthorne's second eldest son, Elias, is an alpha too. He has his own pack with his Ezra, Lettie, and his younger brother, Rainer.

“So, that's what you guys are talking about when you say Theo is the leader of your group?” So many things are making sense now. Hollis nods. “But I don't get it. Why isn't Rylan an alpha? He's the oldest, isn't he?”

“It doesn't really have anything to do with age. Cas and I are older than Theo by a few months. It's just something they're born with. That's why we've always been so close. We've always known that the three of us would start our own pack together. Cas and I are Theo's betas, but I outrank Cas.”

I think about all the weird things I've picked up on the last couple of days between them, and I feel like my brain is about to explode. “So, when Theo uses that weird voice, like when he tells you guys to do something, he's being an alpha?”

Hollis grimaces. “I fucking hate when he does that. When he uses his alpha voice to issue a command, we're not able to go against it. Even if it's something stupid, like having to confess how much I embarrassed myself in front of a pretty girl.”

I smile at him, but I don't really know how I feel about that. It sounds so mean and controlling. And then I realize something else.

“He's fucking used it on me, hasn't he!?”

He winces but nods all the same. “That's how Cas and I knew you were a part of our pack. It shouldn't work on anyone outside of us.”

“I don't even know what to say to that right now. I think I'm pissed off, but I just don't...” I glance over at him and glare. “And you're totally getting off the subject. You still haven't told me what a mate is!”

“Cricket—”

“Tell me, please!” I beg him, feeling slightly frantic. I have a pretty good idea already, but *god*, I just need him to fucking say it.

He flares his nostrils once and widens his eyes, still watching the road. “A mate is a wolf's soul mate. Their equal in everything. Somebody that will make you stronger and better all around, that balances you perfectly. Back in the old days, it was more of an indicator of who would make the best partner to breed stronger wolves, but now it's not so sexist. It's more about strengthening your pack.”

My heart feels like it's beating a million miles a minute. “Your parents are mates? And Ezra and Lettie?”

“Yes. Same with Hawthorne and Margot, Rylan and Elsa, Theo's parents, and Cas's parents.” Hollis smiles warmly.

“How do you choose a mate?”

Hollis hesitates and takes his eyes off the road for a split second to glance at me. “You, um, you

don't. It's fate. Our magic chooses for us."

"What? How can you...? You don't even have a choice in who you spend your life with!?"

"It's not a bad thing," he says softly. "Our magic chooses our mate to be someone that is absolutely perfect for us. I've never met a wolf that wasn't over the moon about who their mate was, or a mated pair that weren't happy together."

I think about the way I feel so connected to Hollis, Theo, and Cas and how surreal being with them feels. I feel slightly breathless. "Does it have to be another wolf?"

"Usually, yeah. It's rare, but some wolves do mate with humans."

I absentmindedly rub my fingers over my lips. "How do you know? Who your mate is?"

"Well," he says, glancing sideways at me. "Most wolves just *feel* it, but we also get a mate mark that matches our mate's when we turn sixteen."

"Where's yours?" I furrow my eyebrows.

He holds his wrist up in front of me. Looking closely, I see a small mark on his skin that almost looks like a rune. It's faint, but now that I see it, I don't think I'll be able to miss it again.

I look down at my wrists and brush my fingers against my skin in the same areas where his mark is at. It feels like my heart is in my throat. In the most pathetic voice possible, I squeak, "I don't have one..."

Hollis's eyes widen in panic. "Cricket..."

I scoot away from him and stare out the window. We'll be pulling up outside of the bookshop any second. I need to get up to my room to be with Stella. I focus on her and try to ignore the ringing in my ears. When we finally pull up in front of the shop, Hollis puts his hand on my shoulder before I can get out of the truck.

"Cricket, please—"

I cut him off. "So, to form your own pack, you either need to wait until graduation or wait until Theo meets his mate? And then, you and Cas..."

Hollis looks like he's not sure what to say. I can't meet his eyes any longer. I quickly mumble, "See you later."

Before he can respond, I grab my backpack and jump out of the truck. I practically run into the bookshop. I barely acknowledge Paisley behind the register before I make my way upstairs to my bedroom. As soon as I see Stella sitting on my bed, I burst into tears. She jumps into my arms and snuggles against me as I collapse onto the bed.

I can barely form a complete and coherent thought. All I know for sure is that I'm going to lose them. Some other fucking female werewolves are going to swoop in and take them from me. And they'll be perfect for each other. I feel absolutely devastated. I stare and rub at my wrists over and over. I don't even know what I'm hoping to see. I can't possibly think I'm soul mates with one of them. I barely know them, but the way I feel when I'm with all three of them...

Stella stays with me, comforting me until I'm calm enough to sit quietly and do my homework. To keep myself distracted, I finish all of my homework from yesterday and today. Theo and Hollis text me, but I ignore their messages. I know I'll have to face them tomorrow, and I know I can't be mad at them. It's not their fault. I just need to be away from them tonight.



## Chapter Twenty-Three

### *Theo*

I've been running around with my dad and Hawthorne all afternoon. We got back to Hawthorne's house a little while ago, and we're finishing dinner. Cricket just texted me saying Hollis is taking her home. My phone rings in my pocket, and my heart speeds up, thinking it's her. God, I miss her so much already. I'm grinning my ass off as I go to answer it. She must have missed me too if she's calling me so soon after getting home.

But then I see Hollis's name instead of Cricket's. I'm annoyed and disappointed. I swear to fucking god, if he's calling to brag about his afternoon with Cricket, or if he's going to pull the same shit that Cas did earlier, trying to convince me to let him fuck her...

"What? What is it?" I know my voice sounds harsh, but I can't get the image of Cricket and Hollis together out of my head.

"Theo, I..." Hollis sounds choked up.

"What's wrong? Is Cricket okay? What happened?"

Hawthorne and my dad stop talking, and their focus turns to me.

"I think I fucked up..." Hollis mumbles.

I'm about to lose my fucking shit. I breathe angrily out of my nose, trying desperately to rein in my panic and anger. "Hollis, I swear to fucking god, if she's hurt..."

"She's fine! I mean, physically, but she's really...fuck."

"What did you do?" I snarl.

"She asked about mates, and I told her you're an alpha. She could barely fucking look at me when I dropped her off. I think she's really upset. I didn't mean to upset her."

Hawthorne grabs the phone out of my hand and tells Hollis to meet us here at his house. Without another word, he hangs up the phone and slips it into his pocket.

"Give me back my phone!" I snarl. "I need to talk to her."

He narrows his eyes at me. "Do you really think that's a good idea right now? You need to find out exactly what Hollis said and what upset her."

The next ten minutes are absolute torture as I stand by the window and wait for Hollis to pull up. I

tap my fingers nervously against my leg. Cricket knows I'm an alpha. That's okay. She would have found out eventually, anyway. She can't be upset about that, right? It has to be the mate thing.

Hollis arrives, and he takes his sweet fucking time getting out of his truck. Hawthorne puts his hand on my shoulder and commands me to stay right where I am. The rational part of my brain knows that's probably a good idea. I'm so rattled, I would probably shift and push Hollis into a fight the moment I stepped outside.

As soon as Hollis walks in, he winces. "Theo, I didn't mean—"

"Let's step into my office and talk about this," Hawthorne cuts him off.

Once we're in Hawthorne's office, he sits behind his desk and calmly waits for the rest of us. My dad brings in another chair to scoot in between me and Hollis. Hollis looks guilty as shit, and I'm trying not to panic and think the worst. Please, please let him be exaggerating. Maybe Cricket is fine. Maybe she just thought the idea of being mated with someone was weird.

"What exactly did you say to Cricket?" Hawthorne asks Hollis.

He clears his throat and bites his lip. "When I was driving her home, she asked me what a mate was. I said I didn't think Theo wanted me to tell her, and I explained that he's an alpha. That after graduation, me, Theo, and Cas will branch off to form our own pack."

"What did she think about that?" Hawthorne asks.

"Confused." Hollis shrugs. "Mostly she seemed pissed off about Theo using his alpha voice on her."

I blanch, and Hawthorne and my dad turn to glare at me. My dad makes me feel about two fucking feet tall when he asks, "Why would you use your alpha voice on a girl you think is your mate?"

"What?" Hollis jerks back.

I know I'm scowling, and I probably look like a petulant child. I look back and forth between Hollis and my dad before I focus on Hawthorne. "I didn't know it would work at first. And it was only when she was trying to cover up for Hollis and Cas acting like dumbasses."

My uncle shakes his head in disappointment. I feel like a fucking pup again, and it takes everything in me not to slouch down in my seat and submit to him. I stay upright and look him straight in the eyes.

He sighs and turns back to Hollis. "What happened then?"

"Well," Hollis says, fidgeting in his seat. "She used her alpha voice on me and demanded I tell her what a mate was."

My dad snorts, and Hawthorne jerks his head in my direction. I try to fight it, but I break out in a huge grin. "She started doing that today."

"Does she know she's doing it?" My dad asks in bewilderment.

Hollis and I glance at each other, and he shakes his head. "I don't think so, but earlier today, Cas told her she's part of our pack. He said he didn't know how or why, just that it was obvious."

Hawthorne growls and our eyes snap back to him. His gaze is fierce on Hollis. "So, you told her what it meant to be mated. What did she say?"

Hollis lowers his eyes. "She freaked out that we don't get a choice. Like it didn't seem fair. I told her it's not like that. I showed her my mate mark, and I don't know. She got really quiet and started looking at her wrists. She said she didn't have one, and she looked like she was about to fucking cry. Before she ran out of the truck, she made a comment about the three of us finding mates. I didn't know what to say to her."

We're quiet for a minute. My chest aches, knowing she's upset. But part of me feels relieved too. She wasn't upset at the idea of being mates with one of us. It sounds more like the exact opposite.

When I look at Hollis, he looks devastated. And my heart aches for him. He's my best friend, practically my brother. I know I've been so fucking selfish since I met Cricket, and I've been having this insane thought since yesterday afternoon.

“Did you think Cricket might be your mate?” I ask, trying to keep my voice even.

His eyes widen, and I try to convey that it’s fine to be honest.

“At first, yeah. I thought maybe she could be,” he says. “But then I saw you with her, and she doesn’t have a mate mark...”

I smile sadly, and it takes a lot of fucking effort to admit this insanity out loud. “I think she’s both our mate. *And Cas’s.*”

Hollis looks dumbfounded, but Hawthorne looks more troubled than surprised. My dad doesn’t seem very surprised either.

“Is that even possible?” Hollis asks.

A hysterical laugh escapes my throat, and I shrug. “I don’t fucking know. But I feel it. Before she even met you guys, I felt it. Every day I spent with her, I was completely torn over wanting to keep her to myself and wanting you guys to know her and like her so badly. I know she feels it too. She’s admitted that her power feels stronger when we’re all together, and that everything feels complete. And she’s only been around all of us for two fucking days!”

Hollis perks up and chews on his lip thoughtfully. “She told me she felt like her soul was connected to all of us, but she feels weird about it because she doesn’t really know us yet.”

I can’t explain the fluttering excitement I feel, but I find myself smiling. “And dude, Stella likes all three of us. Her familiar fucking hates everyone else.”

“Do you think Cas...? He keeps acting like he doesn’t feel it.”

“Yeah, he’s just being a stubborn bastard about it.” I roll my eyes and laugh. “He’s trying to pretend like he just wants to have sex with her, but it’s obvious it’s more than that.”

Hollis opens his mouth to say something else, but my dad interrupts, rubbing his temples and looking confused as shit. “Hold on, wait a second. You’re both *fine* sharing a mate?”

My face flushes, and Hollis looks just as embarrassed as I feel. But then we smile at each other, and he shrugs. I laugh. “I know it sounds fucking nuts, but if it’s Cricket we’re sharing, I don’t really...”

Hawthorne gets this crazy weird look on his face, and he turns to Hollis. “You’re okay with it too, if this is the case?”

Hollis slowly nods. “I think so. I mean, I don’t know how it would work. How do we know for sure? This is so...”

When he trails off, Hawthorne looks back and forth between us sternly and takes a deep breath. “After meeting her yesterday, and watching the three of you interact with her, I thought there might be something odd happening. It seemed immediately obvious that Cricket and Theo were mates, but I also thought Cas might be her mate too. I spoke with Aurora. We’ve been trying to track down any knowledge about this kind of thing happening before. There’s a pack in Alberta that might have a lead. We’re still waiting to hear back. As for Cricket’s mate mark, Aurora thinks it will show up on Cricket’s eighteenth birthday.”

“Did Aurora have a vision or something? Is that why Cricket moved here?” Hollis asks.

The thought hasn’t occurred to me before, and I glance at him in surprise. Hawthorne furrows his eyebrows. “Yes, actually. Cricket doesn’t know that. She’s still under the impression it’s because of her father’s job.”

“Cricket’s not stupid. She knows she wasn’t introduced to Theo by accident, and Aurora has been a little too encouraging of her relationship with us,” Hollis says.

I can’t help snorting, thinking of the tea and those fucking brownies.

I tap my fingers on the arm of the chair and look between Hollis, Hawthorne, and my father. The reason we’re having this discussion in the first place is because Cricket was upset after hearing about mates. “Should we just fucking tell her already? She’s going to figure it out, and it sounds like she was most upset at not having a mate mark to connect her to one of us.”

“That’s your decision, Theo.” Hawthorne shrugs. “But keep in mind this is all new to her. She’s



not a wolf. She's never considered the idea of having a mate before today. And if you're correct in assuming she has not one, but three mates, and we still can't be one hundred percent certain of that yet, do you think she'll be okay with that? You and Hollis seem content to share a mate, but do you think Cas or Cricket will feel the same way?"

He's right. Yes, Cricket said she feels a connection to all three of us, and she's definitely attracted to all three of us too. But thinking she might be okay actually being with all of us is a pretty big fucking leap to make. Like Hollis, I don't even know how that would work. Or how it would feel truly seeing her with Hollis or Cas. Not just snuggling or holding hands. And if I am wrong, if she's not my mate, I will be so fucking devastated. To be with her now and then to have that dream snatched away if she ends up not being my mate...

Hollis raises his eyebrows, waiting for my decision. I clear my throat. "I already told Cas we can only be friends with her until her mate mark shows up. So, we'll just, that's what we'll do."

Yeah, I sound fucking brilliant.

"When did you tell him that?" Hollis chuckles.

"After we dropped you and Cricket off earlier, he asked if I thought Cricket would be okay with a casual hookup."

Hollis's eyes turn murderous, and he growls low in his throat. My dad shakes his head. "How is that worse or any different from sharing her as a mate?"

Hollis blinks like he's confused by the question. "She deserves better than that."

I smile genuinely at him. Okay, we're on the same page.

Hollis smiles back, but then he bites his lip like he's unsure about something. "Maybe we should wait to tell Cas, too. You know how he feels about having a mate. If he gets it into his head that he's going to be competing with us over her, he's going to freak out and do something stupid."

Unfortunately, I agree. I hate to keep something like this from my best fucking friend, but he's already having a hard time processing his feelings for Cricket. Maybe when she has a mate mark and the mating bond is truly formed, he'll feel better about the whole thing.

Hawthorne gives me and Hollis a small smile, and I feel myself sit up straighter. He tells us, "I'll let you know when I hear from that pack in Alberta."

It's obvious we're being dismissed, and Hollis and I stand up. My dad stays seated. He's staring at me like he has no idea who I am. It stings, honestly, but I keep my head up and tell him I'll see him at home later. Hollis and I walk outside together and stand in between his truck and my jeep.

Leaning against my jeep, I stare at him with my arms crossed. He raises his eyebrows at me until I finally ask, "Do you really think we could? Both be her mates and share her?"

Away from my dad and Hawthorne, I feel a hell of a lot more comfortable admitting my fears and doubts.

"It makes sense, in a fucked-up way. I really like her. I always thought my mate would be kind of like me. Quiet and studious. But this is so much better. She's fun, and the fact that she gets along with my friends feels amazing. I see you and her being a good match too. She's basically the female version of you."

"And you like that, do you?" I grin and wiggle my eyebrows.

He laughs and punches my arm really fucking hard. "Shut the fuck up. I'm just saying, I think she balances us really well, but in different ways. Even Cas. Watching the two of them bicker is so fucking weird, but it's also kind of hilarious."

I laugh and pat my pockets. "Aw fuck, Hawthorne still has my phone. You heading home now?"

He nods and pulls out his phone. "Cricket still hasn't texted me back."

In the excitement of our discussion, I nearly forgot that Cricket's still upset. "I'll text her in a minute. Maybe she just needs some space to think. We have been kind of, uh, overbearing."

Hollis snorts. "I've spent two days with her. You've been overbearing."

I roll my eyes and tell him I'll see him in the morning before heading back inside. Before I even step foot in the hallway, I hear my dad's and Hawthorne's voices very clearly coming from the office.

"How can we go along with this? It's not natural, having more than one mate."

My dad's words cut through me, and I go still. I've always been closer to Hawthorne than my dad, but we've never had a bad relationship. He's never quite understood me, and I always feel like I'm disappointing him. I've always assumed it was because I'm an alpha and he's not, so I tried not to let it bother me much. But hearing the derision in his voice now catches me off guard.

Hawthorne grunts. "I agree that for me, the idea of anyone else touching Margot is unthinkable. But for Theo and Hollis, it seems like the most natural thing in the world to them. Theo sounds profoundly confident, and he came up with that idea without consulting with me or asking anyone else's opinion. It didn't seem to matter that they'd never heard of such a thing happening before."

"If another wolf even sniffed at Calla the wrong way, I'd want to murder him. How can they not feel that?" my dad says, sounding more disgusted with every word out of his mouth.

I tap my fingers against my leg and force myself not to move an inch. I need to hear this.

My uncle sighs. "I don't have all the answers. This is a strange situation. But if it works out the way Theo thinks it will, they're going to have to figure out their own boundaries. I don't think that means they care about Cricket any less."

At least he gets it. Or he's trying to, anyway.

"What if she doesn't want that? She might pick just one of them. Or none of them. She's not a wolf! She doesn't understand the importance of a mating bond."

"Holden, I don't know Cricket that well yet. But I think you're vastly underestimating her. If she is Theo's mate, you realize that most likely makes her a female alpha, right? The boys have already admitted she has an alpha voice. And again, your son already seems fairly confident that Cricket won't choose between them."

Doubt creeps in for a moment, and a quiet snarl escapes my throat. My dad has no right to fucking judge me *or* my pack. And I swear, if he says one more fucking thing about Cricket—

"He's my only son." My dad sighs. "Is it so wrong for me to want something better for him? He's an alpha, for fuck's sake. Why should he have to share a mate with two other wolves that are lower-ranking? And to a girl that's not even a wolf. She'll never fully understand him!"

Not only has he insulted Cricket, my future mate. He's insulted my entire fucking pack. I'm not *better* than Hollis or Cas just because I'm an alpha.

I'm fucking done. Done listening to this bullshit and done respecting my dad. If he can't see that I'm *happy* with Cricket and excited to have met my mate, I don't want anything to do with him. I rein in my anger as much as I can, and I step into Hawthorne's office.

Hawthorne and my dad look up, and dread fills my dad's eyes. He knows I've heard their entire conversation.

"I forgot my phone." I say to Hawthorne.

His face is blank as he carefully pulls my phone out of his pocket. He never breaks eye contact with me, so I know he's aware of how close I am to shifting and losing control. I slowly slip my phone into my pocket and turn to settle a murderous glare on my dad.

"I wouldn't care if Cricket had fifty fucking mates if they made her happy and showed her the respect and admiration she deserves. As long as she makes time for me, she's more than worth it. I'm in love with her."

The words feel strange on my tongue, but also fucking good. Good enough that I almost smile and forget why I'm angry in the first place.

"I swear to fucking god," I snarl. "If I ever hear you badmouth her again, I will challenge you. And you know I'll win."

My dad slouches lower in his chair and averts his eyes. Seeing him submit to me makes me feel a

weird mix of pride and shame, and I turn around to leave without another word. I slam the door behind me and pull my phone out to text Cricket.



## Chapter Twenty-Four

### *Cricket*

The next morning, I wake up feeling like absolute shit. I tossed and turned all night, waking up every couple of hours. Stella has been a complete angel, snuggling and comforting me since the moment I got home last night. She's still giving me worried looks, and I know I need to get my shit together. My reaction to not having a mate mark was honestly pretty embarrassing. I know the guys like me and are attracted to me, but, ugh, I just feel like a needy fucking loser even getting excited for one second when Hollis told me what a mate was.

I spend a long time getting ready, wanting to look as pretty and put together as possible. I don't want them to know how upset I am, or that I lost sleep over this. I put on a flowy, lilac bohemian style dress with slightly belled sleeves, a few extra bracelets and necklaces, and my gold sandals. I even manage to make my hair behave long enough to put on a boho-style headband that looks super cute with the outfit.

When Theo texts me, letting me know he's here to pick me up, I walk outside with my head held high and a confident smile on my face. Cas is already standing next to the jeep, holding the passenger door open. He looks at my outfit and gives me a gorgeous smile, showing me his dimple. My heart throbs, but I just smile back and slip into the front seat, ignoring his outstretched hand when he tries to take my backpack. I need to stop letting them do things like that before I get used to it.

I don't look at Theo until I've got my seatbelt on. He's smiling his usual adorable smile, but he's tapping his fingers against his steering wheel. I figure Hollis already told him what happened last night. I keep the smile on my face.

Before he drives away, he clears his throat. "You never texted me back last night."

"I was doing my homework." I say, raising an eyebrow.

He keeps his eyes on mine for several long seconds, and I don't look away. He can't force me to talk. Even if he tries that stupid fucking alpha shit again. I end up winning the staring contest because he sighs and pulls out onto the street.

Cas is quiet. When I turn my head to glance at him, he's watching Theo nervously. I wonder if Hollis told him too. Cas is a lot harder for me to read. When he catches me looking at him, he smiles warmly. I smile back, but I know it doesn't reach my eyes. I ask him about our French homework and what he ended up writing his essay on. He gives me a concerned look, but he

answers, anyway.

A few minutes later, Theo is still tapping furiously on the steering wheel. I'm surprised he lasts as long as he does before he says something. "Cricket, I know you're upset. Is there something you want to ask or talk about?"

"Like what?" I give him my best confused expression.

He gives me an exasperated look and breathes slowly out of his nose. "I know Hollis told you about mates yesterday."

Without meaning to, I wince. I want to freaking smack myself for showing weakness so quickly. I glare at Theo and growl, "I don't want to talk about it."

Theo's eyes widen, and he stares at me long enough that he veers off of the road. I use my magic to straighten the steering wheel.

"Keep your fucking eyes on the road, Theo."

He focuses on the road, but I keep my magic on the steering wheel. I know he can feel it because he keeps flaring his nostrils. He looks more and more pissed off by the second.

When he parks outside of Hollis's house, he scowls at me. "Just fucking let me know if you want to drive, Cricket."

I roll my eyes toward him disdainfully. "I can't drive stick."

As Hollis gets into the car, Theo snarls and punches the steering wheel so hard, I think he might have broken it. He glares at me, but his eyes look desperate. "Why the fuck are you so angry with me!?"

"Because you fucking lied to me!" I feel my eyes tearing up, so I quickly turn my head. God, the last thing I need right now is for them to see me cry.

"What? I didn't lie—"

"I already said I don't want to talk about it."

Theo reaches over and brushes his fingers against my cheek. "Cricket, look at me."

I feel that compulsion settle over me, and I'm fucking livid again. "Don't you dare fucking use that on me again."

He gapes at me, opening and closing his mouth, and his eyes look panicked and terrified. His voice cracks. "Okay, I swear. Never again. I mean that. I will never use it on you again. Please..."

My eyes soften, and I bite my lip to keep it from trembling. I swallow the lump in my throat. "Okay."

Theo chews on his bottom lip and glances back at Hollis and Cas. I turn my head to see them staring at us in shock. My heart stutters. Did I fuck up and make him appear weak in front of his pack? I know I'm still learning, but I feel guilty. I don't say another word to them, but I reach over and grab Theo's hand. He doesn't hesitate to thread his fingers through mine and squeeze back like he's afraid I'm going to disappear. I shove down my growing feelings, knowing now for sure that nothing will ever come of them, and squeeze his hand back. I know it's not his fault he has a mate out there somewhere waiting to meet him, and I know he didn't tell me because he was protecting my feelings. It hurts so fucking bad, but I know that I'll stay by his side until that awful day comes. Whether it's tomorrow or years from now.

Nobody speaks the entire remaining drive to school, and Theo only lets go of my hand long enough to shift gears. The guys walk me to first period, and none of them carry my backpack for me. I hold onto it tightly like my life fucking depends on it, so I guess they decide it's not worth the fight. Hollis settles down into the seat beside me in English and watches silently as I pull out my notebook and the first novel we're reading for class. I'm vaguely aware of Paisley attempting to get Hollis's attention, but his eyes never leave me.

Right before the bell rings, Hollis scoots in super close to me and leans in. "I'm so sorry. If I'd known how upset you'd be, I never would have told you."

"That's not fair! I'm glad you told me. I'm just, I'm so..." I sigh and look at him in despair. "I

know it's not your guys' fault and you don't get a choice. I know I'm being embarrassing about it. I'm sorry."

His mouth parts and his eyes narrow. "You're not embarrassing us. We're worried about you. We care about you so much."

I sigh softly and lean my forehead against his shoulder. He wraps his strong, muscular arm around me and pulls me into a side hug. My magic tingles underneath my skin, and I feel Hollis's strength and comfort rubbing off on me. After just a few seconds, I feel so much better and so much more relaxed. I feel him relax, and he kisses the top of my head.

When I sit up straight, several people in the class are staring at us. They turn away as soon as I look at them. Erin sits next to me, chewing on the end of her pen while she grins to herself. She raises her eyebrows at me and glances at Hollis. I roll my eyes and smile at her. We haven't spoken outside of our chemistry class, but she's really sweet. She also seems to be the only person in this classroom besides Hollis who's not judging me right now.

When class is over, Hollis holds my hand while he walks me to Statistics. Theo's waiting outside our classroom, talking with Xavier. His back is turned, but when I'm only a few feet away, he stands up straight and turns around so quickly it startles me. He wraps his arms around me. I lean heavily against him, feeling emotionally exhausted. Hollis and Theo seem to be having some sort of silent conversation because all I see is Hollis nod before he lightly strokes my hair and walks away.

From the corner of my eye, I see Xavier standing by, awkwardly shuffling his feet while he witnesses this exchange. Theo ignores him as he walks into our math class, still keeping his arms wrapped around me. We sit in the same seats we did on Monday, and we don't say anything to one another. I smile and wave at Chloe when she walks in, but she gets stuck sitting at a different desk on the other side of the room. I let Theo play with my hair. It feels like my heart is being stabbed over and over, but I honestly can't help it. I crave his touch. The same goes for Hollis and Cas.

During class, I try to focus on the lecture. I quietly take notes and work out any problems Mr. Orzel writes up on the board. Theo keeps his foot pressed against mine under my desk, but he stops touching my hair. About halfway through class, I'm surprised when he slyly passes me a folded-up note.

### **Things I Would Never Lie to You About:**

- 1. You're the funniest girl I've ever met**
- 2. I've never had more fun my whole life than in the short time I've known you**
- 3. You're the most beautiful, gorgeous, stunning, and absolutely perfect girl I've ever seen. Every time I look at you, you take my breath away**
- 4. You are my best friend in the entire world**
- 5. If I were ever given a choice, I would choose you**

Oh my god. I can't even—I'm definitely crying now. I bite my lip really freaking hard, but it's no use. I feel a few tears fall down my cheeks. I'm keeping this note forever! Nobody has ever said anything so fucking sweet to me in my life. If there wasn't this stupid mate thing between us now, I know without a doubt I could fall in love with Theo Ashbrooke.

"Miss Kendall, is everything alright?"

I look up to see Mr. Orzel staring at me in alarm. I clear my throat and quickly wipe my eyes. "I'm good. It's just, um, cramps."

Theo snorts, and his foot shakes against mine. Mr. Orzel turns red and grimaces. He doesn't look at me for the rest of class.

Theo leans forward and whispers in my ear. "And that, little witch, is a perfect example of why you are my best fucking friend in the entire world."

I tilt my head to grin at him. He grins back and holds his pinkie finger up. I don't hesitate to wrap my tiny pinkie around his.



Theo, Hollis, and I get to the cafeteria before Cas. Theo tries to fill up my lunch tray and carry it for me, but he gives up after I glare at him. I'm still carrying my backpack too, and if I wasn't still so emotional, seeing the tormented looks on Theo's and Hollis's faces would be pretty amusing.

When Theo goes to sit down beside me, I furrow my eyebrows at him. "Cas said he wanted to sit next to me today."

Theo and Hollis glance at each other, and Theo shuffles his feet beside the table awkwardly. Hollis sets Cas's tray next to mine. Theo sits down next to him, giving me puppy dog eyes. I feel like I keep fucking up. I want Theo to sit next to me, especially after our terrible fight in the car this morning and that note he just gave me in class. But I just have this weird feeling that I should sit next to Cas instead. They've been taking turns sitting with me so far.

Cas walks up. When he sees the empty seat and his lunch tray next to me, his eyes light up and he smiles so fucking big. When he sits down, he looks at me like I just made his entire freaking day. I feel some of the knots in my stomach loosen. I give him a small smile in return.

"Are you still pissed?" Cas whispers.

I shrug at his question instead of answering out loud, pretending to focus on my food.

Cas pokes my side, and I look up to see a mischievous glint in his eyes. He keeps his eyes on mine and tilts his head toward Hollis and Theo. "I thought of a way we can mess with them."

He's not apologizing or trying to baby me like Theo and Hollis have been so far. I know they mean well, but I seriously just want to forget about the whole thing and pretend like everything is normal. Well, whatever the hell normal has been since I moved to Colorado.

A smile slowly spreads across my face. "I'm listening."

Cas smirks at the guys and speaks in French. "*Speak French to me. They won't be able to understand a word. It will drive them insane!*"

I can't help giggling. I glance at Theo and Hollis and reply, "*Simple, but effective. I love it!*"

Theo's mouth drops in shock, and Hollis chuckles.

"*Just tell me a random story, but look at them while you're talking so it looks like we're talking about them,*" Cas says.

While we're eating, we swap funny stories back and forth. I tell him some stories about my parents and my brothers, and he mostly tells me stories about himself, Theo, and Hollis. We don't use their names, and we keep glancing at them whenever we laugh. Hollis watches us the whole time with a tiny smile on his face. Theo pouts like a fucking baby.

After a while, Theo finally speaks. He sounds so fucking crabby. "That's not fucking fair, Cas. I want to talk to Cricket too."

"Dude, chill out." Hollis shoves Theo. "He's making her laugh. Which is more than I can say for me or you."

I hate to say it like that, but he's right. I slide closer to Cas and rest my cheek against his arm. I try to give him a cute smile and whisper, "Merci, Cassian."

He looks surprised when I say his full name. He blushes and gives me a shy smile. "I don't mind being called Cassian if you're going to say it like that."

Theo growls and I snap my head up. I sigh when I see him glare at Cas. "Theo, what are you doing?"

"You're flirting with him." Theo furrows his eyebrows.

"Oh my god, so what? I flirt with all of you."

Theo looks embarrassed now. "You don't flirt with Hollis."

Hollis and I make eye contact. He bites his lip to hide his smile and I giggle. "Um..."

Cas snorts from beside me. "Theo, she's literally the girl version of you. She can't help herself."

"Told you so." Hollis looks at Theo and chuckles.

“You think I’m the girl version of Theo?” I grin at them.

Hollis and Cas nod enthusiastically, and Theo gives me a cocky smirk. “That’s why they like you so much.”

We spend the last few minutes of lunch laughing and joking around. When the bell rings, Cas grabs my backpack before I can. When I try to argue with him about it, he rolls his eyes.

“These guys might be afraid of pissing you off, but after the way we met, I’m not. I’m carrying your fucking bag.”

I put one hand on my hip and glare at him. He grins back at me and makes a show of hitching my backpack higher on his shoulder. He looks so cute, and like always, my eyes focus in on his dimple and the little beauty mark under his eye. I laugh, giving in, and push him into the hallway so we can get to third period.

When we get to class, we sit at the same table in the back where we sat on Monday. Jack sits at the table next to us. He gives me a tiny smile, but he doesn’t say anything. Cas spends nearly the entire class distracting me and making me laugh. We only talk in French, which is supposed to be the number one rule of this class. Madame Jacquet keeps shooting us irritated glances, but she never actually reprimands us.

Ninety minutes later, Cas is being all cute and smiley as he grabs my hand to walk me to my astronomy class.

“What are we doing after school? Do you want to play in the forest?”

“Well, I have to go to Mrs. Gallagher’s yoga studio pretty much right after school. I’m not sure about afterwards.”

Cas laughs. “I still can’t believe she offered you a job. We felt so shitty, thinking we got you into trouble.”

“I was surprised too, but I’m really excited about it!”

He smiles. “I’m happy for you. And seriously, I really want to hang out later. I’m sure the other guys will agree too. So, let me know, okay?”

When we’re outside my classroom, I smile up at him. “Okay.”

He’s standing close so that our bodies are almost pressed together, and I can see those stupid gold flecks in his eyes. He reaches his hand up and rubs his fingers over a strand of my hair.

“You know, I’m kind of digging this hippie bohemian look on you,” he says. He smirks and lets his eyes wander over me quickly.

I’m about to retort with a flirty joke, but then my eyes snag on his wrist and my gut instantly tightens. Cas has distracted me so well over the last couple of hours, but all the emotions I’ve been feeling about the mate thing are hitting me hard again. I grab his wrist and turn it over. It’s easy to find the mate mark now that I know what I’m looking for. His is similar to the one Hollis has. It vaguely looks like a small rune, but Cas’s is a more jagged shape.

I take a deep, shaky breath and meet his eyes. He gazes at me intently, and he looks like he wants to say something. But then he looks around at the crowded hallways and gives an annoyed sigh.

“I’ll see you after class.”

I expect him to walk away, but he stands there and smiles charmingly until I turn around and head into my classroom. I turn back once to see him smiling at me.

Erin’s already in class, pulling out her textbook. I sit down next to her with a grin. I need to distract myself. At lunch, I felt so at ease with the guys. I could completely put the issue out of my mind. The thing is, when the four of us are together, my intuition is screaming at me they’re mine. I know it doesn’t make sense, but it’s the truth. Hollis, Cas, and Theo belong to me somehow. I feel so strongly that I was always meant to meet them, and they’ve admitted to me that their magic feels the same pull as mine does. I can’t stand the thought of someone taking them from me. I don’t even think it’s jealousy, exactly. Just this crazy fear and wrongness that I’m going to lose them.

“Hey, Cricket.” Erin smiles warmly.



“Hey, how’s your day been? Sorry we didn’t really get a chance to talk in English this morning.”

She laughs and waves her hand at me. “That’s alright. You seemed upset. Everything okay?”

“Just kind of having a bad day.” I shrug and give her a lopsided smile.

She makes a sympathetic noise before she smirks. “It looked like Hollis was doing a good job of comforting you this morning. I saw you with Cas in the hallway just now, too.”

I laugh and feel my cheeks flush. “I know it probably looks, um…”

“Do you like one of them?” she asks quietly.

“All of them,” I say honestly.

Erin giggles, but when she sees how freaked out I am by my admission, she smiles kindly and makes a motion like she’s zipping her lips. Ms. Blanchard takes attendance and goes over our homework assignments before collecting them. During her lecture, when we’re supposed to be taking notes, Erin and I talk quietly back and forth. I tell her how messed up I feel, liking all three guys, knowing nothing will come of it if I want to stay friends with all of them.

Erin surprises me by blushing. “I know exactly how you feel.”

“Your friend Jack?”

She bites her lip and nods. “Since I moved here in fourth grade. He lives next door to me, and it was totally love at first sight!”

I grin and nod eagerly for her to continue. She bites her lip again but smiles when she keeps talking. “He’s so sweet and compassionate. When Brennan came out, Jack was so supportive. I know he seems really quiet, but when he opens up, he’s so funny! And oh my god, he’s so cute.”

She’s so adorable! I’ve never had a close girlfriend before, and I really like Erin.

“You’ve never considered telling him how you feel?”

She shakes her head. “I know I’m not very pretty. I’ve never had a boyfriend or even been kissed before. And he just, you know, sees me as one of the guys.”

“What? I think you’re pretty. And I may have just met you guys, but I definitely noticed Jack checking you out yesterday in chem.”

“No, he wasn’t!” She giggles, her face turning red.

“Girl, I’m not bragging, but I’m totally the queen of flirting. And that guy was definitely checking you out.”

Ms. Blanchard clears her throat and gives us a stern look. We’re mostly quiet for the rest of class, and we don’t get another chance to gossip. When the bell rings, signaling the end of the day, Erin and I walk out of the classroom together.

I pull her to the side of the hallway. “Hey, I hope you don’t think this is weird, but do you want to exchange numbers?”

“Sure!” She smiles. I’m super relieved. I wish I’d been brave enough to ask for Brennan’s number too, when I first met him. I really hope I can become friends with him and Erin.

I pull my phone out and text her when she reads off her number. We giggle, and I tell her to text me anytime she wants to talk about boys. I feel someone tug lightly on my hair and look up to see Cas’s amused grin.

“You know you can always text me if you want to talk about boys, Cricket.”

“Really, Cas?” I snort. “You want to tell me who you think the cutest guy in school is?”

“Me, obviously.” He smirks and runs his fingers through his hair.

I roll my eyes and smile at Erin. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

She laughs and waves before walking away in the opposite direction. Cas smoothly takes my backpack from me and wraps his arm around my shoulders. When I look back up at him, he’s pouting at me.

“What wrong?”

He looks embarrassed. “It’s just, you’ve never texted me. I know you’re better friends with Theo than with me, but…”

“Sometimes I can’t tell if you want to be friends with me or not.” I fidget with my phone in my hands.

He stops walking and looks down at me. We’re only a few steps from the door leading outside, but he looks so confident and genuine. “Of course I want to be friends with you.”

I smile and look down at my phone. I send him a text that says, “*Hi, Cas.*”

A second later, he pulls his phone out of his pocket and laughs. We continue walking outside where Theo and Hollis are already waiting for us. Theo looks like he’s going to pull me away, and Cas tightens his arm around me ever so slightly.

Theo pauses and looks at him, and I swear I see a quick flash of jealousy cross his features. But then he smiles down at me. “What took you guys so long?”

Cas laughs. “Cricket was asking for some chick’s number.”

Theo grins wildly and Hollis laughs. I roll my eyes and swat Cas playfully. “Shut up, you know it wasn’t like that.”

We quickly make our way to the jeep, and Cas holds the passenger door open for me. I ask Theo to drop me off at home first so I have enough time to get ready to meet up with Mrs. Gallagher. During the drive, the guys talk and joke around with one another, but I stay quiet and listen to them. I’m emotionally worn out. I know what I really need right now is to be with Stella, meditate, and just relax for the rest of the day.

When Theo pulls up outside of Flora & Feathers, he grabs my hand and smiles at me. “Do you want to hang out later? I can come back over when you’re finished with Mrs. Gallagher.”

I avoid his eyes. “I think I want some space today.”

When I glance up at him, he looks devastated. I watch his Adam’s apple bob as he swallows. His voice is gruff when he says, “Okay.”

My stomach tightens with guilt, and I sigh. “I’m sorry. I don’t…” I don’t know how to make him understand that I’m not mad at him. I’m just sad and embarrassed. I really think I’ll feel better once I clear my head. I offer him a small smile. “I’ll be back to normal tomorrow, okay? And after school, maybe we can play in the forest. It already feels like it’s been forever.”

“Sounds good to me.” Theo smiles, but it doesn’t reach his eyes.

I turn to smile at Hollis and Cas, and they say goodbye.

Hollis reaches behind him for my backpack and hands it to me as I step out of the jeep. I rummage inside for the keys to the bookshop, since it’s closed today. I offer the boys a final wave as I walk through the door. Stella is already pacing the floor of the shop, waiting for me, and she jumps into my arms when she sees me. I hug her closely and slowly make my way upstairs to Aurora’s apartment.



## Chapter Twenty-Five

### *Cas*

We're silent as we watch Cricket disappear behind the door of the bookshop. Anger has slowly been building up inside of me all day, but I've held it in until now.

"Okay, what the fuck did you guys do?" I growl, glaring pointedly at Hollis and Theo.

The dumb fucks look at each other, and Hollis bites his lip. He does that when he's nervous, and I feel myself getting even angrier. Theo clears his throat and pulls the jeep onto the road.

"Hollis told Cricket about mates and me being an alpha."

I roll my eyes and scoff. "No fucking shit. I'm asking why that girl has looked like she's about a second away from breaking down all day, you dumb motherfuckers."

Cricket looked so fucking pretty when we picked her up this morning, and I'd been so excited to see her. She looks gorgeous every day, but I don't think I'll ever get used to it. I haven't forgotten what Theo said yesterday about her possibly being his mate, but it doesn't change the way I feel around her. I've decided to just live in denial for as long as possible.

As soon as she walked up to the car this morning, I could tell something was wrong. Her smile was off, and she ignored me when I tried to take her backpack from her. Theo was nervous and fidgety.

Hollis sighs. "I didn't know she would be so distraught. I still can't tell if she's more upset that she doesn't have a mate mark, or if it's because she thinks it's wrong we don't get to choose who we mate with. And it really pissed her off when she realized Theo had been using his alpha voice on her."

My heart stutters. Does that mean she wants to be with one of us? It's probably Theo, but I feel this ridiculous pang of hope. I shove the stupid thoughts aside and glare at Theo.

"She should be pissed that you're using it on her. She's not me or Hollis. We're used to it. And what did she mean when she said you lied to her?"

Theo's voice is barely a croak. "I have no idea. I've been racking my brain all day trying to figure out what she was talking about."

Fuck. I want to be pissed off at him, but he looks so fucking pitiful. I know exactly how it feels to think Cricket hates you. Today was the first day I've been around her where I didn't say something

idiotic that set me into a panic that she would never speak to me again. Seeing her so sad today had been absolute torture, and I know Theo and Hollis are beating themselves up over it. Even though I still feel anxious after this whole fucking day, I know I need to reassure my friends.

“Chill out, dude. It’ll be okay.”

“How the fuck do you know? She doesn’t even want us around,” Theo snaps at me.

“She said she needs some space. She’s already said she can’t stay mad at us.” I roll my eyes. I don’t tell him I’m already thinking about ignoring her request by going over later to talk to her alone.

“How’d you know, anyway?” Hollis asks curiously.

What the fuck is he talking about? Even Theo gives him a confused look before focusing on the road again.

“Know what?” I ask.

Hollis smiles. “At lunch. Theo and I were freaking out and didn’t know what to say to her. It took you all of two seconds to make her laugh.”

I can’t help smiling, thinking about how it felt to walk up to the lunch table and see her saving a seat for me beside her. I shrug at Hollis. “It just seemed obvious she wanted a distraction. She said first thing this morning that she didn’t want to talk about it.”

“And when were you going to tell us she speaks fluent fucking French, huh?” Theo asks.

I burst out laughing and flip him off. “You’re just pissed because you don’t know every little thing about her. Besides, the looks on your faces were fucking priceless.”

“Did she say anything about us?” Hollis asks, biting his lip.

I’m about to roll my eyes and say we were just fucking with them, but then I do a double take when I see the same sappy look in his eyes I recognize in Theo whenever he talks about Cricket. Holy shit, Hollis likes her too. Like, really likes her. I’m hit with this crazy combination of jealousy, guilt, and sympathy. Theo probably told him the same thing he told me, about only being friends with her until her eighteenth birthday to see if she gets a mate mark. Jesus, Cricket seriously has no fucking clue what kind of trouble she’s stirring up.

I catch myself grumbling in response to him. “No, she just told me how her brothers used to break shit and then blame her magic on it when their parents got pissed.”

“Kind of makes me wish she’d been around to cover up for us when we were younger,” Hollis says.

Theo snickers, and I’m relieved to see that he’s not so worked up anymore. “I have a feeling she would have gotten us into even more trouble if she had been.”

Hollis laughs. “I didn’t tell you guys, but she actually got me into trouble yesterday when my mom caught me shifting with her in the house.”

Theo and I give him a weird look, and I ask, “Why the fuck were you shifting with her in your house?”

Hollis gives me a sheepish grin. “It’s easier to play with her as a wolf, and I think I would have kissed her if I didn’t shift when I did.”

I bite my tongue before I say something fucked up. I’m relieved when Theo parks in front of Hollis’s house. If I’d been Hollis yesterday, I would have kissed her. But now that Theo’s given the order that we can only be friends with her, I’ll never get the chance.

Before Hollis gets out of the jeep, he puts his hand on Theo’s shoulder. “Listen to Cas, alright? Cricket’s not going to stay mad. Stop needling her, and don’t go to her house to bug her later.”

I keep my face blank. I’m definitely going to her house to bug her later, but they don’t need to know that.

Theo turns around and chuckles. “That’s something I never thought I’d hear. *Listen to Cas.*”

“Fuck you, dude.” I snort and flip him off again.



## *Erin*

“I can’t believe she gave you her number. We totally need to figure out a way to become best friends with her!”

I giggle and roll my eyes at Brennan. I’m sitting up on the counter while he’s behind the register at his parents’ store. They own a shop downtown called The Sweet Spot that’s a sweet shop and ice cream parlor. They also sell kitschy little gifts and toys. It’s the kind of place that really only makes money in the summers and winters during tourist season, but his mom is in love with it. His dad is in the back office doing paperwork. I came by to bring them some leftovers from dinner and to hang out for a bit.

Brennan was doing his calculus homework when I walked in, but he’s abandoned it now that he has food and something new to gossip about.

I tuck my hair behind my ear and admit, “I’m kind of scared to text her though.”

“What, why? She seems nice! And she’s so cool and pretty!” Brennan says with his mouth full.

I make a face at him for being gross. But he’s right. Cricket Kendall is the coolest girl I’ve ever met. She’s so pretty, funny, and confident. When I noticed that she was friends with Theo, Hollis, and Cas—the most popular guys in school—I assumed me and my friends would be totally invisible to her. Which is fine. I mean, I’m used to it. And it’s not like those guys have ever been mean to us like other people have.

“Yeah, but I’m not cool or pretty,” I whine.

“Shut up. You’re pretty, and you’re totally cool!” Brennan rolls his eyes.

We look at each other and giggle.

“Okay.” He waves his hands dramatically. “You’re right. You’re not cool. But neither am I! And it seems like she wants to be friends, anyway.”

I can’t help blushing when I smile. “I told her about my crush on Jack. She said he was checking me out yesterday in AP Chemistry.”

“Oh my god, see?” Brennan squeals. “This is why we need to be friends with her. You and I suck at flirting and figuring out if guys like us or not.”

Brennan finishes eating the dinner I brought for him and sets the Tupperware container to the side. He gives me another conspiring smile. “Did she mention if she’s really dating one of those hotties or not?”

I’m about to dish out all the juicy details she gave me about liking all three of them, but I stop myself. Cricket looked overwhelmed when she admitted that to me, and she seemed so genuine.

“She says they’re just friends.” I shake my head. “I think they like her, though.”

He grins. “Theo’s in my English class, and some girls were asking him about her today. And oh my god, the look on his face! He’s totally in love with her! It’s the cutest thing ever. And you’ve seen them in the hallways, right? Like yesterday? Some guys are making fun of him saying he’s whipped, but he doesn’t even care.”

“It’s seriously the cutest. You should have seen her with Hollis in our English class this morning! She was upset about something, and he hugged her and kissed the top of her head. It was freaking adorable!”

“Holy freaking crap!” Brennan claps his hands, making me giggle. “She is so lucky. Don’t even tell me Cas has been caught being cute with her too.”

I give him a Cheshire cat grin. “Well, I saw them flirting outside of astronomy earlier. Sara was glaring at them from across the hall, and I don’t even think they noticed.”

We’re interrupted by the bell over the door. We look up in surprise. I don’t think there’s been a customer in here for hours now. When I see who walks through the door, my eyes widen. I feel

myself blushing, like I've just been caught doing something wrong.

Cas Seymour walks in, looking totally drop dead gorgeous like always. Except, he also seems kind of nervous, which is a look I've never on his face before. He slowly looks around the shop, and when his eyes land on me and Brennan, he pauses like he's surprised. I slowly slide down off the counter and exchange astonished glances with Brennan. We watch as Cas makes his way up to the counter and looks at all the candy and treats in the display case.

Brennan lets out a nervous giggle. "We were just talking about you."

Cas jerks his head up and scowls at Brennan. Brennan's eyes get wide. We've never talked to Cas or his friends before. It's terrifying.

But then Cas blinks and glances at me before clearing his throat. "I feel like a dick for having to ask, but what are your names again?"

Brennan lets out another nervous giggle, his face turning bright red. "I'm Brennan, and this is Erin."

He turns to focus all of his attention on me and smirks. "Cricket text you about any boys yet?"

I don't know where the insane courage comes from, but I actually laugh and talk in a normal voice. "Nope, not yet. Sorry."

He runs his fingers through his hair and sighs. "I didn't think I'd see anyone from school in here, but fuck it. I'm about to head over to Cricket's house, and I want to surprise her. I don't know what to get for a girl who's not my girlfriend. And she's been really fucking sad all day."

"Oh my god, aww!" Brennan gushes and puts his hand over his heart.

Cas grimaces at him. At first, I assume it's because Brennan is being so flamboyant. I feel myself start to get angry until Cas runs his hand through his hair again. "Please don't tell anyone about this."

Brennan and I grin at each other, and I point to a couple of treats in the display case. "You should get her these. They're super chocolaty and amazing."

"And you should get her a teddy bear!" Brennan bounces on his toes excitedly.

Cas looks annoyed and doesn't say anything before he groans and points to the treats I suggested. "Alright, give me all of those. And show me where the stupid teddy bears are."

Brennan hesitates. "Um, all of them?"

"Should I get something else too?" Cas asks, looking at everything in the display.

I slap my hand over my mouth to keep from laughing out loud. Holy crap. He totally loves Cricket.

Brennan grins like an idiot and puts the treats into a box. "No, these will be great! Give me a second."

After Brennan finishes boxing them up—there are a freaking ton of them so they barely fit—he ties a ribbon around the box and walks around the counter to the back of the store. Cas and I follow him to a wall filled with stuffed animals, toys, and games for kids.

Brennan picks up different teddy bears and chatters animatedly. I can tell he's still nervous. To be fair, Cas is extremely intimidating. He stands there, scowling at all the stuffed animals with his arms crossed. It's hard to tell, but I think he's just embarrassed that me and Brennan are here to witness him freaking out over a girl. He easily could have left without talking to us at all.

Cas steps forward, completely ignoring Brennan. Brennan's holding six different teddy bears. He stops talking mid-sentence to watch Cas grab a stuffed animal from one of the higher shelves. He gets this huge smile on his face, which he fixes on me and Brennan.

"I'll take this one." It's a black wolf with green eyes. There are a few other wolf stuffed animals that are supposed to represent some of the local wildlife here in the Rocky Mountains.

"Are you sure? There are some cuter ones." Brennan holds his arms up, showing off his teddy bear stock.

“Nope, this is perfect. Cricket loves wolves.”

Brennan shoves the teddy bears back on the shelves and practically skips back to the register. “Okay then! Let’s ring you up!”

Cas barely glances at the total before shoving a black American Express card at Brennan. My eyes are probably as wide as Brennan’s. Our families aren’t poor or anything. I even have my own car, but it’s not new or fancy like some kids at school. I’ve still never seen someone our age pull out a credit card like that.

Brennan gives Cas a glowing smile and hands him the bag with the treats and stuffed animal. “Good luck! I’m totally shipping you guys now.”

“What?” Cas looks at Brennan like he’s from another planet.

Brennan blushes and looks at me for help. But I’m trying really hard to keep myself from laughing. Brennan giggles. “Well, I was shipping Cricket with Theo, and Erin was trying to convince me she’s actually really cute with Hollis. But this is the most adorable thing I’ve ever seen. So, I’m shipping you with Cricket instead!”

Cas looks really pissed off as he glances outside. It’s just after seven, and the sun will set soon. I should probably go home, but there is absolutely no way I’m missing a second of this.

Just when I think Cas is going to storm out of the store without replying, he turns back to Brennan. “I’m kind of afraid to ask, but what the fuck is shipping?”

I lose it and release all the giggles that have been building up since he came in here. Brennan giggles too, staring between me and Cas nervously.

“Okay, never mind.” Cas blushes. He actually freaking *blushes*. He runs his hand through his hair again and turns to the door. He stops once with his hand on the knob and clears his throat.

“Thanks, guys.”

We stare at the door for a full minute after he leaves. Brennan reaches over the counter to squeeze my hand. “Holy crap, Erin. That was the greatest moment of my life!”



## Chapter Twenty-Six

### *Cricket*

By the time I get home from Mrs. Gallagher's studio, I'm exhausted. I feel a million times better, and way more relaxed. Her studio is huge, and she's crazy intense when she's in the zone. I kept up with her routine and perfected every yoga pose, so I officially have the job. She wants someone who can stay in the correct pose for people to compare to and someone who can help people get into the proper poses during classes. It's going to be a piece of cake. Plus, it's an added bonus that yoga helps me relax and rebalance my magic.

I consider texting Theo when I get home, but I remind myself that I need a break from the guys tonight. It sucks, and I already miss them so much. But no matter what I feel, I can't let myself get any closer to them. My heart's already going to be broken someday when they meet their mates.

Just when I'm about to give in and ask Theo to come over like he originally wanted to, I'm saved by a group text from Killian and Emerson. They want me to get on Xbox and play PUBG with them. We used to play together all the time when they were at school last year. They set up my Xbox for me when I first moved here, but I've been so busy with Theo and the other guys, I haven't turned it on once since I've been living here. The twins' pleading to play with them tonight is more than welcome.

An hour into playing, I'm distracted from all the craziness in my life. Luckily for me, Aurora doesn't mind me being loud. I'm sitting in the living room perched on the edge of the couch, screaming my ass off at the TV. Emerson and Killian are just as intense, but we always play really well together no matter what game we're playing.

There are only eight left alive in the current game, and we're so fucking close to winning. I have five personal kills so far, and I'm barely blinking at this point. And then, of fucking course, I get killed.

"God fucking dammit!" I scream and throw my controller into the couch cushion next to me. "Fuck. Sorry, guys."

I slump back into the couch and pout while I watch Killian play on the screen. He and Killian are killed a few seconds later.

Emerson is just as grumpy as I am. Killian laughs. "You guys take it way too seriously. We'll win the next game. You up for it, Cricket?"

I'm about to exclaim that fuck yes, of course I am until I see something move from the corner of



my eye. I look up to see Cas leaning against the wall between the living room and kitchen. He has his arms crossed and a sexy smirk on his face as he watches me.

My mouth drops, and I sit up so fast I fall halfway off the couch. Cas laughs, and I ask, “How long have you been here?”

“Who the fuck are you talking to, Cricket?” Emerson asks with a laugh.

I know my face is bright red when I mumble into the mic. “Cas is here. I’ve gotta go.”

Killian and Emerson laugh, and Emerson says, “Wait, which one is he? The pretty one or the hunky one?”

I know Cas can hear them because of his stupid wolf ears, and he grins even wider. I groan in embarrassment. “The pretty one.”

“What? I want to be the hunky one.” Cas whines.

“Text us if you decide to get back on later.” Killian cackles.

“But we’ll understand if you get too busy.” I can practically hear the smirk in Emerson’s voice.

“Shut the fuck up. I hate you guys.” I exit the party and rip my headset off.

I look up at Cas and try not to think about the fact that I’m in my pajamas and have a half-empty box of Oreos on the couch next to me. I clear my throat awkwardly and grin. “What’s up?”

He laughs and walks over to sit on the couch beside me. He picks up the Oreos and smirks at me before setting them on the coffee table in front of us.

“Huh, where did those come from?” I furrow my eyebrows.

He snickers. “Goddamn it, Cricket. I came in here with a whole speech prepared, expecting you to blow me off and tell me to leave.”

I raise my eyebrow and smirk. “I still want to hear the speech.”

“Uh-uh, not until you admit I’m the hunky one.” He shakes his head.

“Sorry, Cas. The title has already been awarded to Hollis.”

Cas glares and then smirks. “Yeah, well, you haven’t seen my abs. They might change your mind.”

The bastard lifts his shirt up and shows off his perfect fucking abs and chest, with a sexy little happy trail leading down from his belly button. I’m on the verge of drooling and running my fingers over the yumminess he’s presenting me with.

I force myself to avert my eyes and blink innocently. “Well, now I’ll have to see Hollis with his shirt off. To make a fair decision and everything. I’m sure you understand.”

Cas bursts out laughing and lightly shoves me. I grin at him. “Okay, seriously. What are you doing here? I’m assuming Aurora let you in.”

“Yeah, she was downstairs when I rang the bell outside. She said I could come up.” His eyes soften and he scoots closer. “I wanted to talk to you without Hollis or Theo butting in or trying to sugarcoat anything.”

My pulse quickens. I’m about to say no, that I still don’t want to talk about it. But I’m not sure if I can keep trying to pretend my fears away. I have a feeling Cas will be honest and not just tell me what he thinks I want to hear.

“Okay.” I bite my lip and nod.

He leans back and pulls my legs over his lap so we’re snuggled close together. I lean sideways into the couch and wait for him to say something else.

He lightly rubs his hand over my bare calf, his eyes following the movement intently. It’s somehow equally distracting and calming. “I don’t know what Hollis told you word for word or anything. All I know is he said he wasn’t sure if you were more upset that you don’t have a mate mark, or if you were upset that we don’t get to choose our mates.”

“Both, I guess.” I decide to be totally honest, even though I’m still really embarrassed.

He stops moving his hand to look into my eyes. He squeezes my leg lightly before continuing his previous movements. “Okay. Let’s talk about the latter first. I agree that it’s totally fucked up that we don’t get a choice.”

My lips part in surprise. “Hollis didn’t sound upset about it at all. He said it wasn’t a bad thing. He trusts that his mate will be perfect for him.”

Cas rolls his eyes. “Most wolves feel that way, but I’ve always thought it was bullshit. Yeah, my parents are mated, and they love each other. But the idea of being forced into something pisses me off so much. I’ve never wanted a mate. Everyone I’ve ever known who’s met their mate acts so fucking brainwashed. Like my sister and Hollis’s brother, for instance. Hollis will tell you they were best friends their entire lives and all this other bullshit. But they fucking hated each other. They were forced to spend time together because they were in the same pack with Hawthorne’s son, Elias. As soon as Lettie and Ezra got their mate marks, they became different people. Overnight, all they cared about was each other. Everything they’d been interested in before faded away. Now, I’ve never been in love or anything close to it, but that sounds so shitty to me. Shouldn’t you be with someone who encourages your interests and supports you? Not somebody who becomes your entire fucking universe so that nothing else matters.”

I’m taken aback by how passionate he sounds. My voice is barely a whisper. “What about your younger sister? Hollis told me she’s sixteen and ran off with another wolf to join his pack. Is that because he’s her mate?”

Cas bristles.

“Sorry, I shouldn’t have asked that. It’s not—”

“It’s okay. You can ask me anything. If we’re going to be friends, I want to be one hundred percent honest with you all the time.” Cas interrupts me and grabs my hand, threading our fingers together.

I rest my head on his shoulder and smile encouragingly at him. He adjusts my legs so I’m pulled even closer and his hand is higher on my thigh than it was before. I watch him flare his nostrils and run his eyes over my legs before he brings his gaze back to my face.

“Every summer, there are a bunch of meetups and reunions all over the country where different packs get together. This is partially so different elders and alphas can meet and exchange information and knowledge. But it’s also so that younger wolves can meet, and it gives us a better chance of finding our mate. I fucking hate going. I’ve gotten lucky the past two summers since I didn’t find my mate, obviously. Thankfully, neither have Hollis or Theo. Everyone else there is so gross and frantic about the whole thing. And you can’t even sleep with any of the girls there, because they’re all prudish and freaked out about saving themselves for their fucking mate they’ve never even fucking met.”

“Sounds like the summer camp from hell.” I giggle.

“It totally fucking is. Anyway, my sister Ellie turned sixteen, like, two weeks before the meetup this summer. My mom didn’t want her to go, and she and Ellie kept getting into these huge arguments about it. But Hawthorne said that she had the right to go, and my mom couldn’t argue against him. Of fucking course, we get there and Ellie immediately meets her mate. And the dude is way older than her. He’s fucking twenty-one years old! My mom’s rule for Lettie had been that she had to wait until she graduated high school before completing the mating bond. She wanted Ellie to wait too, but Ellie snuck off and did it behind my parents’ backs and joined her mate’s pack before anyone even realized what was happening.”

“What’s that mean? Completing the mating bond?”

Cas lets out a surprised laugh. “Figures Hollis would leave that out. Just because you find your mate and have matching mate marks, that doesn’t automatically seal the deal. Technically, you can still reject your mate. It rarely ever happens, but it’s still a possibility. You don’t become a mated pair until you complete a mating ceremony and ritual.”

“Seriously? A werewolf wedding?” I snort.

“Kind of. Except, you basically just have sex under the full moon and mark each other. Our power is strongest then. It’s the only time we’re able to solidify the bond.”

I'm tempted to ask more questions, especially about marking each other. But I can already feel myself getting turned on. I'm pretty sure he can tell, because his eyes are definitely more heated. I mentally smack myself and try to get back on track. "Okay, okay. So, Ellie went off and mated with this older guy..."

Cas's face sobers, and he nods. "Yeah, and this fucking guy, god I hate his name. It's Kit. What the fuck kind of name is that? Anyway, he didn't even have the decency to talk to my parents or Hawthorne about it. And he's from a traditional pack, which means the women don't work and basically sit at home cooking, cleaning, and popping out a bunch of fucking kids."

"What the fuck? That's awful." I can't hide the disgust on my face.

"It's pretty much my mom's worst nightmare. If a woman wants to stay at home and take care of her family as a choice, whatever, right? Like Rylan's mate, Elsa. She stays home, but she also helps Margot and Hawthorne out a lot with different errands and with Rory. And if she wanted to go back to school or work, Rylan wouldn't mind at all. In some packs, they don't give you a choice. My mom grew up in a pack like that in France. She was so miserable. She ran away when she was fifteen. She figured out a way to take care of herself and finish school, and then she moved to the States and worked her ass off to put herself through law school. She met my dad by chance. She didn't accept him as her mate until she finished her degree. They still ended up leaving his original pack. They didn't join up with Hawthorne and Margot's pack until after my older sister Lettie was born."

I rub my hand against his arm soothingly. "I think I love your mom. She sounds like a total badass."

"She is. And I think she'd like you too." He laughs. His eyes turn sad, and his voice sounds slightly choked up. "Ellie dropped out of school so she could go play housewife to this fucking asshole. It's so...she's still a baby. She deserves so much fucking better, but she just keeps saying we all don't understand, that she's in love, all this other bullshit. My mom's been a complete wreck all summer, and especially the last few days when she realized Ellie wouldn't even finish high school."

My eyes tear up at the emotion in his voice, and I squeeze him as tightly as I possibly can and whisper that I'm sorry. He holds me for a long time and softly strokes his fingers through my hair. I wish I knew what else to say to make him feel better.

He surprises me a few minutes later when he sighs. "Thank you."

"For what?" I pull my head back so I can look into his eyes.

He brushes his fingers over my cheek and under my chin. "For listening. I didn't realize how much I just needed to talk about it."

I lean into his hand and smile at him. He drops his gaze to my lips, and I want him to kiss me so fucking badly. It's mostly dark in here. The only light is coming from the TV screen and a light in the kitchen. His body feels so good pressed against me. I'm about to lift his shirt so I can get another peek at those delicious abs, but he grabs my wrist and forces me to look into his eyes.

His voice is a sexy growl. "Are you ready to talk about why you're upset you don't have a mate mark now?"

Ugh, that totally kills the mood. I make a face at him, and I'm sure he knows exactly what I'm thinking because he looks mildly amused.

"Alright, fine." I sigh, and I feel my face heating in embarrassment. "Even though I'm still kind of confused and irritated over the idea of not choosing a mate for yourself, I really like you guys. You, Theo, and Hollis. I'm attracted to all of you, and it's really confusing. And, like, I've already admitted I feel stronger when I'm with the three of you, and it's obvious we've all formed some kind of insane bond. When Hollis told me what a mate is, I thought for one crazy second that it suddenly made sense if that's what I was feeling with you guys. But then I realized I don't have a mate mark. I just have this terrible feeling of dread at the thought of you guys finding mates."

"You're jealous? At the idea of us having mates?" he asks, staring at me intently.

"No, not really jealous. Although, I think I would feel irritated if I saw you guys with other girls, which I know is totally fucked up and weird." I groan and cover my eyes so I don't have to see his

reaction. I know I'm fucking crazy. "If you find your mates, it's like you said before. They'll become the center of your universe. I don't want to lose you guys. I just have this crazy, witchy feeling that we belong together, and it's going to kill me when someone else takes you away from me. Theo looked me straight in my eyes yesterday and promised I wouldn't lose him. But that's not true, and I can't even be mad because it isn't his fault."

Cas pulls me completely into his lap and wraps his arms around me. I wrap my arms around his neck. I'm holding back tears when I look down at him.

"Baby, Theo didn't lie when he said that. You're not going to lose any of us. Ever. I swear to fucking god. We feel the same bond, and I think your magic is making us stronger too somehow. Weren't you listening yesterday when I told you you're part of the pack now?"

"I liked it when you said that, but I don't really know what that means."

"Honestly, I don't think any of us understand yet. But it's still true. Otherwise, Theo wouldn't be able to use his alpha voice on you. Which he never should have done in the first place, by the way. We feel compelled to take care of you the same way we take care of each other. We're family. Even if all three of us found our stupid mates tomorrow, that bond we share with you wouldn't just magically go away. You'll still be a part of our pack, part of our family. Hawthorne has already accepted you as one of us, and you're not even a wolf!"

His words make my heart feel so much lighter, and I know everything he just said is true. I lower my face until our foreheads are pressed together and stare into his gold-speckled emerald eyes.

I hear his breath hitch, but he doesn't move away from me. I'm practically purring when I whisper, "Do you promise?"

His voice is a growl again. "Yes, Cricket. I promise."

I can't hold myself back anymore. I want him so badly, and I feel closer to him than ever. I press my lips against his. My body and heart are in complete bliss, screaming that this is so right! I feel his arms tighten around me, and I'm about to deepen our kiss. But he pushes me away with this horrible grimace on his face.

My heart drops and I pull away further. I don't even try to hide the utter dismay I'm feeling. "I'm sorry, I thought..."

He pulls me tightly against his chest with one arm around my waist and his other hand holding the back of my head. "Fuck, Cricket. Please..."

He sounds freaked out and desperate. I'm completely mortified. I want to run upstairs to my room and hide. I guess I read him wrong. I laugh awkwardly and try to play it off. "It's okay. I've just, um, never been rejected before."

Cas groans and pulls me away from his chest so he can look at me fully. "Fuck, of course you haven't. Look at you. The last fucking thing I want to do right now is reject you, but stupid fucking Theo."

I bite my lip, still feeling super embarrassed. "I told you, we're not together."

His eyes run over every inch of my body as he scowls. "It's not that. I want you so badly I don't even think that would stop me if that were the case. Theo used his goddamn alpha voice to issue the order that me and Hollis aren't allowed to be anything more than friends with you. I was going to try to fight through it, but it hurt so fucking much. I couldn't even kiss you for more than two seconds."

"What!?" I let out a hysterical, half-laughing, half-choking noise.

"It's because we all like you and are really fucking attracted to you, but we also want you to stick around." He runs his hands down my sides to my hips and groans. "But Jesus, right now, it is absolute torture."

I laugh and grab his hands. "I'm sorry. I don't know if I should be more pissed off or flattered. I guess this makes things easier."

Cas sighs and pouts at me. He twists a strand of my hair in his fingers. "Now that I've officially killed the mood, do you feel any better after talking? I felt terrible earlier when you were so sad at

school.”

I nod and smile genuinely. “Cas, I feel a million times better. I’m so glad you came over. I thought I just needed space from you guys, but this is really what I needed. Thank you for being so honest and listening to me.”

His eyes light up, and he smiles. “Have I reached best friend status yet?”

I laugh and snuggle into him and let myself run my fingers through his gorgeous hair. It’s even softer than I thought it would be. I smirk at him and repeat his words from the other day. “Don’t be stupid.”

“So, that’s a yes, right?” He chuckles.

“Yes. We’re best friends.”

“I almost forgot,” he says. “I actually got you something. If my originally planned speech didn’t work, I was going to bribe you into letting me stay and talk.”

He reaches over the side of the couch and pulls up a paper shopping bag. I smile when I see the logo for The Sweet Spot on the bag. He pulls out a white box with a red ribbon tied around it. I open it to see the box is stuffed full of chocolate candies. My eyes light up, and I pop one into my mouth.

“Holy fuck, these are amazing. What are they?”

Cas laughs and eats one too. “I don’t know. The girl at the store said they were good. And I know you like chocolate.”

“Mmm, you definitely win. I totally would have been persuaded by that bribe.” I quickly eat two more before setting the box aside for later.

Cas laughs and reaches into the bag again. “I got you something else too.”

“More chocolate?”

“No, and it’s really fucking cheesy. You’re probably going to laugh.” He shakes his head and smiles shyly.

He pulls out a stuffed animal. It takes a second to register that it’s a black wolf with green eyes. His miniature. My lips part, and I grab the toy from him, totally speechless.

After several long seconds, I look up at him and feel my eyes getting watery. I can’t hold my tears back, and I bite my lip to keep it from quivering.

His eyes widen in alarm. “Cricket, it’s okay if you don’t like it. I know it’s stupid.”

I burst into tears and hug him and the stuffed animal tightly. “I love it. It’s my favorite thing anyone has ever given me.”

He laughs in relief and hugs me back. I pull back and wipe my eyes. Cas has the most gorgeous smile on his face, which makes me snifle more.

“Cricket, you don’t need to cry. I’m glad you like it.”

We sit quietly. I’m still sitting in his lap with his arms around me, and it feels so natural. I’m looking down at my little Baby Cas toy and stroking the fake fur while Cas watches me. Stella comes in to check on me. She sniffs around me and Cas before taking off again. Aurora comes up from the workshop too, smiling warmly at us. I don’t feel embarrassed to be caught snuggling, so I don’t move an inch while she talks to us. She tells me she’ll be in her room if I need anything, and to make sure I lock up the shop downstairs whenever Cas leaves.

When I hear her bedroom door close, I ask, “Do you need to leave soon?”

He looks down at his watch and frowns. It’s almost eight. He nuzzles the top of my head and sighs sadly. “Yeah, I probably do. I wish I could stay longer.”

“That’s okay. We’ll hang out tomorrow. Besides, I think Killian and Emerson want me to get back online. I haven’t played with them much since I moved here.”

Cas gets a wicked grin on his face. “Yeah, how the fuck did I forget to ask about this? You know we play PUBG too, right? It’s been a while, but Theo and Hollis are going to totally fucking flip out.”

“Here, add your gamertag.” I hand him my controller. “We can play together when you get home. Is it weird if I ask if you want to play with my brothers too?”

He types in his gamertag while he shakes his head. “Fuck no, it’s not weird. It’ll take me like ten minutes to get home.”

A few minutes later, I put my headset on and invite Killian and Emerson to a party. Cas seemed excited to get home so we can play, and it made it easier to say goodbye when we were hugging downstairs in the dark, empty bookshop. I feel totally elated after talking to him. He’s so sweet and passionate, and I don’t think I’d realized that before. I know tomorrow I’ll need to give Theo a little extra attention after the way I acted today, but I’m confident that we’ll be okay and that Cas was right about everything.

“Well, well, finished already Cricket?” Killian snickers.

“Don’t be gross. We’re just friends.”

Emerson laughs. “Calm down, we’re only teasing. You didn’t need to get back on here if you wanted to hang out with your friend, Cricket.”

“Actually, he’s going home because he wants to play with us. You guys had better be fucking nice!”

They laugh, and Killian exclaims, “Fuck yes! We’ve been dying to talk to these dudes you’re hanging out with.”

I bitch and groan, but I’m secretly excited for them to talk to Cas and get to know him. I want my brothers to meet all three of the guys. Killian and Emerson have always been my favorite people in the world, and I want them to like my new best friends.

It only takes a few more minutes before Cas gets online, and I invite him to the party.

“Wow, you got home fast.” I tell him.

“Cricket, I drive a fucking Dodge Challenger.”

“What!? Why haven’t I seen it?”

Cas laughs. “Because Theo always drives. I’ll take you out this weekend or something, okay?”

“Are you gonna introduce us, or what?” Emerson interrupts us.

I chuckle and tell Cas which of my brothers is which, according to their gamertags.

Once that’s out of the way, Killian cuts in. “Okay, whatever. I want to hear more about your car.”

He asks all kinds of questions about the Challenger, and Cas answers back excitedly. I don’t even understand half the things they’re saying, but it’s cute listening to them.

“Meh, boring! Let’s play a fucking game already!” Emerson whines, making the rest of us laugh.

While we play, my brothers seem to get along with Cas. They’re laughing and talking, and Cas gets super intense and into the game, just like Emerson and I do. We’ve been playing for about twenty minutes when somebody else unexpectedly joins the party without an invite.

“What the fuck, Cas?” Theo’s voice cuts in. “You bitch at me literally every fucking time I don’t immediately tell you I’m online. And now you’re playing in a party with a bunch of random fucking people?”

“Fuck off, I’m playing with Cricket,” Cas grumbles.

There’s a long pause, and then Theo asks, “Cricket?”

“Hey, Theo.” I giggle.

“What the fuck. Why are you playing video games with Cas? I thought you were my best friend.”

Cas answers before I can. “I went over to her house earlier and caught her playing with her brothers. She asked if I would play with them when I got home.”

Theo bursts out laughing, and I can imagine his nose all scrunched up adorably. “You are such a piece of shit, Cas! You told me I shouldn’t go by her house because she needed her space, and Hollis fucking agreed with you!”

Holy crap, that's hilarious. I freaking love Cas.

"Wait, did Cricket tell you guys she needed space?" Killian interrupts.

Emerson doesn't even wait for one of them to respond before snorting. "Don't listen to her when she pulls that shit. Cricket is the clingiest person ever."

Cas and Theo laugh, and I gasp. "Shut up, I am not!"

Killian snickers. "You called us crying every day for two fucking weeks when we first left for college."

"Oh, I'm sorry I missed you guys." I say. Cas and Theo continue to crack up.

After they calm down, Theo officially introduces himself to the twins.

"So, Cas. Is Cricket one of those super-hot gamer girls like the ones on those live-stream sites?" Theo asks in a teasing voice.

"No." Cas snorts. "It took her like ten minutes to even notice I was there. She was wearing this ugly hobo shirt that's way too big on her and screaming at the TV like a fucking maniac. She'd also just eaten an entire box of Oreos."

My brothers laugh so fucking hard, and Emerson chokes out, "Real classy, Cricket."

"No wonder you're not getting laid!" Killian laughs.

Theo and Cas make these choked, laughing sounds. I'm glad they're not here to see the mortified expression on my face. Seriously, I could fucking kill my brothers sometimes.

"Screw you guys. And Cas, you fucking liar. I didn't eat the entire box."

"Okay, fine. Maybe you ate half. But I'm pretty sure you made up for it with those chocolates I brought you." Cas chuckles.

The four of them continue teasing me. I'm just so fucking happy that my brothers seem to like the guys. Killian, Emerson, Cas, and I are still playing the game, and Theo stays in the party to talk to us. Everything would be absolutely perfect right now if Hollis were in the party, too. I consider texting him and asking what he's doing.

Like magic, Theo says, "Hold on, guys. Hollis is getting online. I'm gonna invite him to the party."

I'm already grinning like crazy when I hear Hollis's voice. "Hey, what's up?"

Theo sighs. "Guess what? Cricket's been sneaking behind our backs and playing PUBG with Cas."

"Oh my god, you are so dramatic!" I exclaim.

"Do you cheat at this game too, Cricket?" Hollis chuckles.

I giggle, and Killian snorts. "I'm not surprised. What game did she cheat on?"

Hollis doesn't question who he's talking to. "Super Smash Bros."

My brothers, Theo, and Cas laugh. We keep talking, not even playing the game anymore. Emerson says he needs to get off soon, anyway, since he has hockey practice in the morning. Killian says he'll get off too, but first he asks what kind of cars Hollis and Theo drive.

"Mine is the coolest." Cas says arrogantly after they answer.

"No fucking way! It's completely impractical." Theo barks out a laugh.

Cas growls. "I said cool, not practical, you dumb shit."

Theo huffs in annoyance. "Just wait until it snows."

"You guys should let Cricket decide which one is the coolest," Emerson says.

Hollis hums in agreement. "We really need to teach her to drive stick. She can't drive any of our vehicles."

"I'll teach her!" Cas exclaims.

Killian gasps in horror. “Don’t you fucking dare let her drive your Challenger. She’ll ruin it!” The other guys snicker and Killian adds, “I’m actually pretty fucking shocked that any of you guys would consider letting her drive your cars.”

I can tell Theo is smiling just by the sound of his voice. “Well, why not? You can learn in the jeep, Cricket. And we’ll all be there to teach you. It’ll be fun!”

A few minutes later, Killian and Emerson get off. Theo and Hollis join a game with me and Cas. While we’re talking and playing, I get a group text from my brothers.

Emerson: *We fucking love them! Definitely approve*

Killian: *yeah seriously, they’re really funny*

Emerson: *and also all totally in love with you, you slut*

I text back and forth with them and tell the guys that Killian and Emerson officially approve of them. Cas seems exceedingly pleased with himself. God, they’re all so cute and amazing. I care about them so much, and I’m so happy to have them in my life.





## Chapter Twenty-Seven

My phone rings, waking me up. I blindly reach toward my nightstand to grab it. It takes me a few tries, but I finally answer it.

“Hello?” Ugh, my voice is all gross and croaky. I didn’t even look to see who the hell is calling me.

“Good morning, little witch,” Theo says with an amused growl.

I sit up so fast I fall out the bed with a loud crash. “Ow, fuck. Am I late? I’m so sorry.”

“No, you’re not late. It’s actually pretty early still.” Theo laughs.

I’m sitting on my floor, half tangled up in my blankets. I pull my phone away from my ear to see that it’s not even six yet. I normally don’t wake up until around six-thirty.

“Please tell me there’s a reason you’re calling me this freaking early?”

He clears his throat. “Well, I was kind of wondering if, um, maybe you would want to get some breakfast with me? Just me. You know, before we pick up the guys.”

Oh my god, he sounds so cute and nervous! I feel myself smiling. I don’t even mean to do it, but my voice gets super flirty.

“I would love to! What time are you coming by?”

He clears his throat again. “I’m actually here now. But don’t freak out. I’m fine waiting for you to get ready. However long you need!”

“You’re here now? Outside?” My eyes widen, and I quickly straighten my sheets.

“Yeah.” Theo laughs over the phone, but he still sounds nervous.

I look around my room to make sure there’s nothing overly embarrassing sitting out. Stella is still pretending to be asleep at the end of the bed, but I can see her peeking at me with one eye. I pick up my little Baby Cas stuffed animal and hide it under my pillow. If only so Theo doesn’t feel jealous or make fun of it.

“Hang on one second!” I chirp excitedly into the phone before hanging up.

I rush down all three staircases until I’m in the bookshop and quickly unlock the door. Theo’s parked right out front, pacing back and forth in front of the jeep on the sidewalk. He looks up as

soon as I open the door and gives me the most heartwarming smile.

I'm totally grinning my ass off as I run up and jump into his arms. He seems surprised at first, but he laughs and hugs me tightly. I feel like I haven't seen him in ages, even though I saw him yesterday afternoon and talked to him until late on Xbox last night.

I wrap my legs around his waist and press my forehead against his. He hesitates for a second, but then he places one hand on my butt and the other on my lower back, pulling me even more tightly against him.

He growls low in his throat and buries his face in my neck. "I missed you so fucking much. I couldn't stay away from you for a second longer."

"I missed you too," I whisper, running my fingers through his hair. "I'm sorry I was so bratty yesterday."

He lifts his head to make eye contact with me. "Don't apologize. I'm the one who's sorry. I shouldn't have listened to Cas and Hollis. I should have come over here to talk to you last night."

I give him a sheepish grin. "I hope you're not mad when I say this, but I'm really glad Cas came over last night. He was such a sweetheart, and he made me feel so much better."

Theo scrunches his nose and up and snickers. "*Cas* was a sweetheart?"

"Yeah, I was kind of surprised by it too." I giggle.

"I still wish I'd been the one to make you feel better, but I'm glad he could be here for you." He nuzzles my hair and gives me an embarrassed smile. "And this probably sounds dumb, but, I mean, you know I'm his alpha now. I feel proud of him for it."

"That's not dumb. I'm glad you feel that way."

We smile at each other like idiots, and Theo sighs. "Okay, as much as I love standing here, holding you like this, I'd still like to take you out to breakfast."

I blush when I realize I've literally just rolled out of bed. "Okay. I still need to shower, but I promise it won't take me long to get ready."

Theo's hand tenses up, and he shuffles his feet. I have a feeling he'd be tapping his fingers on something if he wasn't holding me. "Do you want me to wait down here?"

"You can come upstairs if that's not weird for you."

"No way am I passing up being just on the other side of the door from you while you're in the shower." I laugh and roll my eyes. When I try to get down to walk inside, he grips me tighter and shakes his head. "Uh-uh, I'm holding onto you every second possible today. I can carry you upstairs."

Theo walks into the bookshop with me still wrapped around him, and he locks the door before running all the way up the stairs to my bedroom. He's not out of breath or anything, and I know it's because he has crazy werewolf strength. I still kind of hate him for it.

Theo sets me down, sits on my bed, and pets Stella while he watches me. I open the closet door and pick out a bra, underwear, a black camisole, and black shorts. I shoot Theo a cheeky smile before locking myself in the bathroom. I shower and brush my teeth as quickly as possible, and shimmy into my clothes. I leave my hair wet but use my magic to dry my body. I step out of the bathroom to see Theo, looking sexy as fuck, still lounging on my bed. Stella's nowhere to be seen. Theo is lying back on his elbows, and he's so tall that his feet are still touching the ground even while he's in that position. He's wearing his usual style choice of shorts, a skating shirt, and his vans. His shirt is riding up just a little, and I'm suddenly very curious to see if his abs are as yummy as Cas's are.

He's checking me out too, so I decide it's only fair to flirt back. I give him a sexy smirk. "You know, I've never seen you with your shirt off. I'm getting kind of curious over here."

He scrunches his nose up and laughs before smirking and pulling up the hem of his shirt. "All you have to do is ask, little witch."

I walk closer to the bed so I can get a better look. And boy, I am not disappointed. His chest and

abs are so sexy and defined, and he has a fucking six pack. He's totally ripped, and I imagine running my tongue over every inch of skin he's showing me. I want him so badly it hurts. I feel my nipples harden, and I'm getting wet just thinking about it right now. Since my eyes are all over him, I'm able to see that he's getting hard too. I subconsciously run my tongue along my bottom lip.

He lets his shirt drop back down and groans. "Fuck, Cricket. Stop looking at me like that. You're driving me crazy."

I wiggle my eyebrows at him and look away. I need to cut it out before I take it too far. I already kissed Cas last night. I walk over to my mirror and run a brush through my hair before using my magic to dry it. It looks soft and pretty for about thirty seconds before my magic makes it stick out. I sigh in annoyance and set my brush down a little harder than necessary.

Theo walks up behind me, and I meet his eyes in the mirror. He gently tugs on a lock of my hair.

"You know, I love your hair when it's all crazy and messy. I can't imagine it any other way."

I make a face at my hair in the mirror. "I just get frustrated. Sometimes I consider cutting it all off."

"No!" Theo pleads, widening his eyes in horror. "Please. I mean, if you did, you would still look gorgeous, but fuck. I love your hair so much."

"You are being extra fucking cute today, you know that?"

He smiles at me and leans forward to wrap me in a hug. He meets my eyes in the mirror. "Are you all ready to go?"

"Almost. Sorry, you're super distracting."

"Don't worry, little witch. We still have plenty of time. I thought it would take you a lot longer to get ready." He laughs.

I grab my backpack off the floor next to my desk and make sure I have the books and everything that I need. I hand it off to Theo, expecting he'll end up taking it from me at some point, and open the closet door again. I consider grabbing a flannel, but it's still warm outside. I opt for a sheer black kimono cardigan with metallic gold embellishments. It's a little longer than the shorts I'm wearing, but when I look in the mirror, I feel pretty and extra witchy. I pick out a few necklaces and bracelets. I slip on my favorite gold sandals and grin at Theo to let him know I'm ready.

But he's not looking at me. He's looking in my closet. I touch his arm. "What's wrong?"

He reaches his hand up and touches the note he wrote me yesterday that I'd stuck on the back of my closet door. "I didn't expect you to keep this. I thought you were still mad at me."

"No way. It made me so happy. I want to look at it every day and remember feeling like that." I raise an eyebrow at him playfully. "For the record, I wasn't mad. I was just scared of losing you, and it made me lash out. I really am sorry."

His eyes widen. "Cricket, I—"

"It's okay." I smile, interrupting him. "I'm still scared, I guess. And I still really hate the idea of any of you guys having mates. But Cas told me I have nothing to worry about. He said I'm a part of your pack forever because of our magic and our bond, and it won't just go away even if you find your mates."

He stares at me for a long moment and slowly brings his hands up to cup my face. His eyes are boring into mine, and he leans down to lightly press his lips against my forehead. A second later, he leans in again to kiss my nose. When he pulls back, I really think he's finally going to kiss me. Instead, he grins and picks me up to throw me over his shoulder. I laugh in surprise, and he smoothly picks my backpack up with the other hand.

"Come on, I'm starving!" He chirps happily.

Even though he only has one hand on the back of my thighs to hold me up, I'm not scared he'll drop me. Plus, I get to stare at his super cute butt. We run into Aurora in the kitchen where she's making coffee.

Theo says hello to her. She looks surprised for a split second and breaks into a grin. "Good

morning, dear. Did you sleep over? I thought I heard someone upstairs with Cricket, but I just assumed it was Cassian after last night.”

“Nobody slept over, Ror.” I groan in embarrassment.

Aurora sighs and rolls her eyes. “There’s no shame in having more than one lover at a time, and I imagine it only makes it better when they all genuinely like each other and get along.”

Theo shakes with laughter, which makes my entire body shake since he’s still holding me over his shoulder. “Oh, little witch. Are you holding out on me? Something happen with Cas last night?”

I smack his butt. “No, and it’s your fault, anyway! He told me you alpha’d him so he and Hollis can only be my friends.”

“Did you just say I *alpha’d* him?” Theo snorts. “I don’t even think that’s a word. And I can’t believe that bastard. I knew he’d try to make a move on you.”

“So, you admit it then, huh?”

He turns his head to meet my eyes and grins mischievously. “If I can’t have you, neither can they. And Hawthorne *alpha’d* me first.”

A hysterical giggle escapes my throat. It’s so fucking bizarre. Theo doesn’t sound upset or jealous at the idea of me and Cas, and I know with everything in my heart that he cares deeply about me too. It’s such a welcome relief because I’ve been feeling so mixed up and guilty about my emotions involving the guys.

“See you later, Ror. I’ll probably be home late again.”

She smiles and reaches out to stroke my hair. “Always trust your intuition. As a witch, that’s your strongest gift, even more so than your affinity.” She smiles at Theo sweetly and turns away like she’s dismissing us. “Have a wonderful day!”

Theo gives me a confused look, and I shrug. She’s never said that to me before, but Aurora is a little odd, even for a witch. He scrunches his nose up and continues down the stairs to the bookshop. Stella is lying sprawled across the counter by the register, and I tell her goodbye before Theo and I walk out the door. He holds me until he opens the passenger door and sets me gently in my seat.

When he’s in the driver’s seat, he grins at me. “I was going to suggest our regular diner. They seriously have amazing breakfast food. But if you’re getting sick of that place, let me know.”

“That sounds great to me!”

It’s just barely after six-thirty now, so we still have about an hour before we need to pick up Hollis and Cas before school. The morning air feels crisp, and there’s a slight breeze that my magic relishes. After a few minutes of driving in a comfortable silence, Theo taps his fingers on the steering wheel.

“What’s wrong?”

Theo blushes and clears his throat. “I probably shouldn’t ask this. I don’t want to embarrass you or piss you off. But it’s kind of driving me crazy wondering…”

My face warms, and I don’t even know what he’s going to ask me yet. “I’d rather you be honest with me. We are supposed to be best friends. I promise I won’t get mad.”

“Okay.” He gives me a nervous smile. “Are you, um, upset? About me ordering Cas and Hollis that they can’t be anything more than friends with you? If you are, I can undo it. If you like one of them or if you want to sleep with one of them. I know you told your brothers you’re not, uh, getting laid.”

He chuckles awkwardly. He’s blushing, and it’s making his hair look redder than ever.

Okay, he was right. I am totally embarrassed. But I can’t just blow off his question. I bite my lip and stare at him thoughtfully. I decide to ask him a question first.

“If I said yes, that it upset me and I asked you to undo it, wouldn’t you feel angry or jealous?”

He gives me a considering look before turning back to the road. He looks like he’s not sure how to answer either. “Honestly, it doesn’t really bother me to think of your liking either of them, or even

just wanting to have sex with them. As long as you feel the same way about me and want me the same way.”

“Really?” I laugh nervously.

“Yeah. I know it sounds...I don’t even know how it sounds. I like you so fucking much. I’ve never met a girl I liked this much or that could hold my interest for more than two seconds. But me and you? I know I can’t be the only one that feels something between us.” He turns his heated gaze to me. “If you told me you liked me back and felt the same way, but that you also have a crush on Hollis or Cas, I’d be fine with that. I love those guys too, so I get it.”

My heart is beating like crazy. This conversation is so not going how I expected it to a few minutes ago. I rub my thumb over my lip and will myself to be brave enough to say the truth out loud to him. It seems like he already understands how I feel, even if it is hard to make sense of.

“I really like you too, so much. Whenever I’m alone with you, I think about what it would be like to really be your girlfriend, and I want that. That’s why I’ve been trying so hard not to sleep with you, because I know it would mean something to me. That’s not something I’ve ever felt before.” I glance sideways at Theo, and he has this gorgeous smile on his face. I clear my throat and lower my voice. “But I *do* like Cas. And Hollis. Not just one of them. And last night, I tried to kiss Cas.”

Theo parks in front of the diner and looks at me. He’s still smiling, but he does a double take when he sees the look of guilt I can’t keep off of my face. He turns to me and pushes some of my hair back.

“Hey, I meant it when I said it wouldn’t bother me. I was already pretty sure you liked them without you having to say anything. I’m mostly just over the fucking moon excited to hear you say that you like me. It makes me feel like the luckiest guy in the world, I swear to god.”

“It’s not fair of me though! Because I don’t want to see you with another girl. I don’t care what you did before we met, but now, ugh, it would make me feel miserable.”

He grins. “I don’t want any other girls. Just you. And maybe it has something to do with our magic and shit, but if I saw any other guy besides Hollis or Cas touching you, I’d want to fucking kill him.”

“I sincerely doubt Hollis or Cas feel the same way.”

“Are you kidding?” Theo laughs. “They’re totally into you. I’ve never seen them so worked up over a girl before. And I can tell it’s been messing with them, trying to figure out their boundaries when it comes to me and you.”

I sigh in exasperation. “I know they like me. I meant about sharing. Or whatever the hell we’re talking about.” I cover my eyes with my hands and grumble, “Jesus fucking Christ, I can’t believe we’re actually talking about this.”

Theo pulls my hands away. He has this wicked smile on his face and a tiny glimmer of mischief in his eyes. “That is exactly what we’re talking about. Come here.”

He grazes his fingers over my cheek until his hand is on the back of my neck. He tilts my head toward his. His eyes stay on mine, and my breath becomes shallower. I feel my magic buzzing wildly beneath my skin. I can count the freckles across his nose and under his eyes, and his eyes slowly travel down to my lips. His smile softens and finally, fucking finally, he leans forward and presses his lips against mine.

I don’t move, expecting him to jerk back the way Cas did last night. When he doesn’t, I kiss him back. His lips are so soft, and I feel a moan building up in my throat. Theo pulls me closer and growls lightly. It turns me on so much that I gasp and open my mouth to feel his tongue against mine. He runs his tongue over my bottom lip, and then he goes completely still. Before I can fully register that he’s stopped kissing me, he pulls back forcefully and grimaces like he’s in pain.

He looks absolutely horrified, touching his mouth with his fingers. If the same thing hadn’t already happened with Cas, I would feel completely devastated and like something was wrong with me. But instead, I cover my mouth with my hand and giggle uncontrollably.

“Fuck, that really hurt.”

“So, Hawthorne really did alpha you, huh?”

His eyes widen. “Jesus, that’s what happened to Cas?”

“Yeah, but it only took two seconds. It took a little longer with you.”

“Man, I bet he was pissed.” Theo snickers.

I nod and confirm that he absolutely was. “Did Hawthorne tell you we could only be friends because of, you know, the mate thing?”

Theo blushes and shakes his head. “I don’t think so. I think he’s waiting for something else.”

I scrunch my eyebrows together in thought. “Him and Aurora wanted us to meet. For me to meet all three of you.”

Theo nods and looks unsure about something. He shakes it off and brushes his thumb over my bottom lip. He gives me a playful smirk. “Well, that was awesome while it lasted. I’ve only been thinking about doing that since the moment I first laid eyes on you. I’ll have to thank Hawthorne for making it especially memorable.”

I giggle again. I’m glad things are still easy and natural between us. I start to open my door so we can go inside and eat, but Theo stops me.

“If you really want me to undo the order I have on Cas and Hollis, I can. Hawthorne won’t undo mine, but...”

I shake my head. I know my cheeks are probably still flushed. “No, it’s probably easier this way. Especially since I don’t know how they feel. So, for now, we’ll all just be friends.” I lean over to kiss him on the cheek and grin. “But just know that I’m still totally crazy about your sexy ass.”

Theo scrunches his nose up and laughs. “You are fucking perfect, little witch. Let’s go eat.”



## Chapter Twenty-Eight

Theo holds my hand as we walk into the diner. It's not very busy. There are just a few elderly people eating breakfast, and some construction workers sitting at a booth together. There's only one waitress I can see, and she smiles when she sees Theo.

"Morning, sweetie. Sit wherever you like. Someone will be right with you."

Theo nods at her and pulls me over to a booth in the corner of the restaurant. I scoot in on one side, expecting him to sit across from me. Instead, he sits beside me and puts his arm around my shoulders.

I shake my head at him, but I'm smiling. "Matilda doesn't work this early, does she?"

He scrunches his nose and laughs. "I don't think so. The lady who just told us to sit down owns this place. If you keep coming here with me and the guys, they'll all end up loving you too."

Someone clears their throat. I look up to see Jack holding two menus. I grin in surprise. "Hey, I didn't know you worked here!"

He gives us a nervous smile. "My aunt and uncle own this place. I just fill in when they need extra help."

"No shit." Theo smiles. "We've been coming here for years. I didn't know Maggie was your aunt! Your parents own that sporting goods store just outside of town, right?"

Jack looks surprised, but he laughs. "Yeah, they do."

Theo grins at me. "We'll take you there soon. You're gonna need a snowboard if you want to keep up with us this winter."

I grin excitedly. I didn't know the guys snowboarded, but I guess I shouldn't be surprised since they grew up here in the mountains. I've never been before, but I have a feeling I'm going to love it.

"Cool," Jack says. "Let me know when you want to go. I'm sure I can get you guys a discount. Anyway, what can I get you guys to drink?"

He hands us the menus, and Theo raises his eyebrows teasingly at me. "Is it too early for your chocolate milkshake?"

"It's never too early for chocolate," I say.

He chuckles and looks back up at Jack. "Chocolate malt for her and a cherry coke for me, please."

I flip open the menu and look at all the breakfast options. Everything looks so good. When Jack comes back with our drinks, I order French toast with scrambled eggs and bacon. Theo orders a huge plate of bacon, sausage, eggs, and hash browns. As soon as Jack walks away after writing down our orders, his aunt walks over and leans against our table with a bright smile.

“I feel like I haven’t seen your handsome face here in ages! How’ve you and the boys been?”

“We’re good. We were in here the other day, but I guess we missed you,” Theo says.

She smiles and turns her gaze to me. “Is this your girlfriend?” She doesn’t give him time to answer before reaching her hand out for me to shake. “I’m Maggie.”

“I’m Cricket. It’s nice to meet you.”

Jack walks up behind Maggie, and she pulls him beside her with her arm around his waist. “You know my nephew, don’t you? I think you’re in the same grade at school.”

Jack nods and smiles nervously. “Yeah, I have a couple of classes with Theo and Cricket. By the way, what the heck are you guys doing up so early before school?”

Theo gives me a wolfish grin. “I’ve gotta squeeze in some alone time with Cricket before Hollis and Cas capture her attention later.”

I snort and roll my eyes at him. Jack laughs and promises that our food will be out soon. Maggie walks away to check on another customer. When Theo and I are alone again, he pulls me closer into his side and nuzzles his face in my hair. I lean against him contentedly, and we talk. I ask him about snowboarding, and he tells me about some of his and the other guys’ favorite slopes and ski lodges in the area. I’m excited. I’ve only seen snow twice in my life, and I’ve never had the chance to play in it.

Jack brings us our food, and we dig in. It’s so freaking delicious. We still have some time before we need to get Cas, so we don’t rush. After we finish, Theo pulls a few twenties out of his wallet and leaves them on the table. I don’t think our food costs that much, but he doesn’t even look at the bill.

As we walk past Jack, Theo grins and holds his hand out for a fist bump. “See you at school, bro.”

Theo walks around the jeep to open the door for me, and I wrap my arms around him in a hug. “Thanks for taking me to breakfast.”

“Little witch, I wish I could start every day like this with you.” He leans down and kisses my cheek. “Ready to pick up Cas? I normally pick him up first since he lives closest to me, so he’ll be surprised to see you.”

I nod and hop into the passenger seat. My stomach flips over excitedly at the thought of seeing Cas. It still makes me feel a little guilty, but not as much after admitting my feelings to Theo this morning. It takes us about ten minutes to get to Cas’s house, and my jaw drops to the fucking ground when Theo pulls into the driveway.

“This is Cas’s house!?” It’s a fucking mansion. Not even exaggerating. The house is a gorgeous three-story that looks like a super fancy mountain lodge with tons of windows. I squint my eyes toward the backyard. “What the fuck. Is that a lake?”

Theo cracks up at the look on my face. “Cas’s parents are lawyers. We usually use his house when we throw parties.”

I figured the guys’ families had money, as they all dress pretty well and have really nice vehicles. And Theo is always paying for everything, but this is crazy.

Theo tugs on my hair and grins. “Why don’t you go to the door to surprise him? I’ll text him to let him know I’m outside.”

I try to wipe the crazy, wide-eyed look off my face and pretend like I’m not intimidated as I walk up to the front door. I stand there awkwardly, not sure if I should knock since Theo said he was going to text Cas. I glance back at the jeep nervously, but Theo just grins at me like a jackass. I turn around to face the door, put my hand on my hip, and slap a flirty smile on my face.

A few seconds later, Cas opens the door. My heart is beating like crazy. He jerks back in surprise when he sees me, but then his eyes light up and he grins. “Cricket?”



“Good morning, gorgeous,” I tell him in my flirtiest voice.

He steps forward and surprises me by picking me up in a hug. I wrap my arms around him. He buries his face in my neck and makes a cute little growling noise that gives me goosebumps, and he pulls back to hit me with that amazing dimple-smile.

“What are you doing here?” He looks so freaking happy to see me.

“Theo picked me up early and took me to breakfast.”

Cas frowns and I feel a pang of guilt, thinking he’s going to be jealous. Instead, he says, “Damn, I should have thought of that. I’ll just have to come up with something better so I can spend some more time alone with you away from the guys.”

A beautiful woman walks up behind Cas and frowns at us. She’s tall and thin, with the same beautiful, raven black hair as Cas. She looks like she’s about to head to work too because she’s wearing a pencil skirt, a fashionable blouse, and super scary-high stilettos. I would totally not want to mess with this woman.

She speaks in French. “*Cassian, either step outside or bring her inside. Don’t just stand in the door like that.*”

Cas rolls his eyes and steps outside, still holding me. I wish he would put me down. She’s crazy intimidating.

I expect her to close the door, but she steps closer to us and looks me up and down. “*Well, she’s definitely prettier than that other one you used to bring around. Hopefully, this one actually has a brain.*”

Okay, yep. I officially love his mom. Cas sets me down and groans. “Mom, this is Cricket. And she speaks French, so thank you.”

She widens her eyes in surprise and gives me another appraising look. “This is the little witch girl?”

“*Yes, that’s me! It’s nice to meet you.*” I smile and hold out my hand.

Her eyes light up, and she shakes my hand enthusiastically. “I’ve been so curious to meet you! Where did you learn to speak French?”

“*My grandmother lives in Annecy, and she told me I wasn’t allowed to visit until I learned the language. That definitely gave me motivation.*” I hope my accent isn’t too far off.

She laughs and turns to Cas. “Why haven’t you brought her over to meet me before now? She is delightful!” Cas shrugs and gives her a scowl. She scoffs at him and smiles at me. “Would you like to come over for dinner one night?”

I want to agree right away, but I look at Cas to make sure he’s okay with that. When my focus is on him, he smiles. Neither of us answer because Theo sticks his head out of his window and shouts, “We’re going to be late if you don’t hurry! Sorry, Althea.”

She waves at him. “Good morning, Theo! Tell Cassian that he needs to bring Cricket over for dinner one night.”

“I’m sure that won’t be a problem. We’ll figure out when she’s free, and I’ll have Cas text you,” Theo says.

“What, are you guys controlling my schedule now?” I snort at Cas.

Cas chuckles and puts his arm around my shoulders so he can lead me to the jeep. He turns his head to look at his mom as we’re walking away. “Bye, mom! I’m gonna be home late. We’re taking Cricket out to the forest after school again.”

Still smiling, she waves goodbye to us. Cas focuses his smile and attention on me as we walk around to the other side of the jeep. He opens the passenger door and holds his hand out to help me get in. Once I’m seated, he reaches in and buckles my seatbelt for me, which makes me laugh because it’s so silly and cute.

He pauses with his hand still near my hip and his face close to mine. He smiles wolfishly and rubs his nose against my cheek. “I told you she’d love you, babe.”

His voice is all sexy and growly, and it's making my toes curl. He pulls away and turns his head just enough to smirk at Theo. Oh god. *Of course* they're going to do this stupid shit. I can't tell if it's worse than them acting jealous or not, but I feel my face flush as I turn to look at Theo. He's got this dumbass smirk on his face too, and he looks extremely fucking amused.

"Are you done now?" Theo asks.

Cas growls quietly and kisses me on the cheek before glaring at Theo and slamming the passenger door closed. Theo bursts out laughing and turns to grin at him when he hops into the back seat. I hold my breath, waiting for one of them to say something stupid. Thankfully, Theo just chuckles and pulls out of the driveway. I breathe out a quiet sigh of relief.

Thirty seconds later, Theo opens his mouth. "So, Cas. I heard Cricket tried to kiss you last night."

Yeah, I spoke too soon. Of course he was going to say something stupid.

"She thought I was rejecting her because of your fucking alpha shit. I've never wanted to punch you so bad in my life, dude." Cas chuckles.

Theo barks out a laugh. "I didn't know it would work like that. It actually really fucking hurt."

When Cas raises his eyebrows in confusion, I clear my throat and mumble, "Theo kissed me this morning and the same thing happened to him."

Cas is silent before he snickers. "Serves you fucking right, asshole."

I can't believe they're talking about this, like, I don't even know. I think back to what Theo said this morning, about them sharing me, and my heart feels like it's going to beat out of my chest. There's no way they all feel the same way. It's not normal. But my magic is vibrating inside of me ever so slightly, and I feel this insane sense of rightness when I think about it. I glance at them. They're still talking and ribbing each other, but neither of them looks upset or angry. They give me adorable smiles when they catch me looking.

No, no, no. I have to stop thinking about this. They have mate marks and I don't, and Hawthorne said Theo could only be friends with me. I bring my magic up and let a ripple of air thread through my fingers to distract myself.

Theo grabs my hand to get my attention. When our eyes meet, he gives me a mischievous grin.

"Oh god, what?"

Cas and Theo laugh, and Theo says, "You don't need to sound so terrified."

I narrow my eyes. "I just have a feeling I'm not going to like whatever you're about to say or ask."

"Actually, I think you'll like it a lot." Theo wiggles his eyebrows. "You should surprise Hollis with a kiss. See how long it takes for the alpha order to kick in."

"He'll totally freeze up. He wouldn't know what to do with her if he was really given the chance." Cas scoffs.

I turn to glare at Cas, and he widens his eyes at me in alarm. "I just meant he's never been with a girl as hot as you are."

"You want me to kiss Hollis in front of you guys? I'm not doing that."

"It's okay if you're too scared, little witch." Theo mocks, smirking sideways at me.

Why did he have to say that? Because I know I'm going to do it now. And he knows it too. I can tell by the mischievous glimmer in his eyes. It reminds me so much of my brothers. I'm still glaring at him when he pulls into Hollis's driveway. When he parks, he stares at me challengingly. I want to wipe that smirk off his face so fucking badly. I give him one last glare before whipping my seatbelt off and opening the passenger door. I hear him laughing as I walk up to the front door.

This will be easy. I *want* to kiss Hollis. I hope he doesn't mind. I lift my hand to knock on the door, willing my nerves to settle. Before I knock, Hollis opens the door. We stare at each other in surprise before he grins. My stomach flips, and I smile back.

"Good morning, Cricket." He looks fucking sexy, and I silently watch him as he closes the door behind him. When he turns his gaze back on me, he still looks so happy. I feel myself totally

melting.

I slide my hands up his chest and stand on my tiptoes as I look into his gorgeous sapphire eyes. “I missed you. Yesterday, I was so...I didn’t mean to make you feel bad.”

Theo’s stupid dare has been momentarily forgotten. Hollis is such a sweetheart, and I really hope he wasn’t beating himself up for telling me about the mate thing.

His eyes soften, and he grabs one of my hands. He brings his other hand up to cup the back of my head. “I missed you too.” His eyes wander over me slowly and he gives me this crazy heartwarming smile. “You look beautiful today.”

“You look really good too.” I give him a flirty smirk. “You always look really freaking good. I’ve been dying to see you with your shirt off.”

Hollis goes still and laughs. He gives me a flirty grin and lifts his shirt up. And holy fucking hallelujah. I was so right. He has the yummiest fucking abs I’ve ever seen. I hear myself make some weird purring noise, and my eyes glaze over with lust. I’m not in control of my hands anymore as I reach out to run my fingers over his ripped body. I feel him shiver under my touch, and I bring my eyes back up to meet his.

His eyes are heated, and his nostrils are flaring like crazy. I lay my palms flat against his stomach muscles and murmur, “I think you should kiss me.”

Hollis growls and picks me up so fast I don’t realize what’s happened until my back is pressed against his front door and my legs are wrapped around his waist. One of his hands is on my ass, and he’s using the other to brush my hair off of my shoulder. He kisses my neck, still making these wonderful growling noises. I squeeze my legs around him tightly and moan as I run my fingers through his short hair. He pulls away from my neck and crashes his lips against mine. I completely lose myself in him.

Hollis abruptly pulls away from me, and hisses like he’s in pain. He’s still holding me up, but his expression is a mix of horror and bewilderment. My brain hasn’t caught up yet, so I stare at him in shock. He slowly sets me back on the ground. He looks like he has no idea what just happened.

“Wow, that was the hottest fucking thing that’s ever happened to me.” I grin at him and grab his hand to thread our fingers together.

Hollis laughs in surprise, but he glances at the jeep nervously. He’s blushing, and I can’t even blame him. I’ve somehow forgotten that Cas and Theo are watching us.

I clear my throat and bounce awkwardly on my toes. “Okay, you’re probably going to be really mad. Let me start by saying, I meant everything I just said and I’ve totally been dying to kiss you since the first time you walked into Flora & Feathers.”

He gives me a nervous smile. “Okay.”

He doesn’t *look* mad, but what do I know? I can’t stop myself from rambling anxiously. “I kissed Cas last night. And Theo kissed me this morning. But because of the weird alpha thing Hawthorne and Theo did, they couldn’t kiss me for more than a few seconds. And on the way here, they were teasing me and talking crap about how I was too scared to kiss you in front of them, and how you wouldn’t know what to do with me, anyway.”

Hollis widens his eyes and bursts out laughing. He pulls me into a hug and gives me a teasing grin once his laughter settles down. “Trust me, it was definitely a welcome surprise. Especially if those guys were being dicks.”

I lean against him and smile in relief. He walks down the driveway with me, and I see him smirk at Theo and Cas. When we’re close enough that I can see Theo’s stupid grin through the window, I flip him off with two hands and give him a cheeky smile. Hollis opens the passenger door for me. Theo’s laughing so hard, he’s completely bent over the steering wheel.

“Holy fuck, Cricket.” He gasps for breath and wipes tears of laughter from his eyes. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen somebody take the expression ‘go big or go home’ so fucking seriously before.”

Hollis laughs, and I turn around to look in the back seat. He looks really fucking proud of himself, but Cas has his arms crossed while he scowls at Hollis. My heart drops, thinking I’ve finally fucked up. He looks so angry.

But then he turns to me and pouts. “You still think he’s the hunky one, don’t you?”

“What!? What the fuck are you talking about?” Theo screeches in laughter.

Cas keeps pouting, but it looks like he’s trying really hard not to laugh too. “When I caught Cricket on Xbox with her brothers last night, she told them she had to get off because I was there. They asked if I was the pretty one or the hunky one. Apparently, I’m the fucking pretty one. And Cricket said she wouldn’t consider changing our titles until she’d seen all of our fucking abs.”

Theo is bright fucking red from laughing so hard, and Hollis is holding his sides from laughing so much. When they finally calm down, Theo snorts at me. “Goddamn it, Cricket. You’re really fucking smooth. I didn’t even question it when you asked to see me with my shirt off earlier. And what’s my nickname, huh?”

Hollis barks out another laugh. “I didn’t question it either when she asked.”

“Whatever. You guys are all constantly checking me out. I’m not even embarrassed, and I found all of your abs very impressive.” I giggle. “And I think it’s fucking hilarious that you’re so hung up on this, Cas. I’m not even the one that started calling you guys hunky and pretty. That was Emerson. Theo’s the hot one since Em saw a picture of him first.”

The guys laugh, and Theo says, “Fuck me, we’re going to be late.”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine. It’s only the first week.” Hollis shrugs.

“It doesn’t fucking feel like it. It feels like Cricket’s been with us forever. I still can’t believe it’s only been a few days,” Cas says.

I smile at them. My best friends and my pack. “Neither can I.”



## Chapter Twenty-Nine

We're not late for school, but we still have to rush to first period. While Cas grabs my bag from the back, Hollis pulls me aside for a hug. Theo ruffles my hair and puts his arm around my shoulders. Cas walks on my other side with his fingers threaded through mine. I'm only half listening to them as they talk over my head to one another. I notice people in the hallways giving us double takes. It gives me an uneasy flutter in my stomach. I know what they're probably saying about me.

Theo squeezes my shoulder lightly. "Cricket, you should see the game room at Cas's house. It's fucking insane. If I knew you played video games, I would have suggested it before."

"You fucking liar. You would have just taken her to your house to play instead." Cas laughs and squeezes my hand.

"Okay, maybe." Theo shrugs.

"Why haven't you taken me over to your house before, anyway?" I've known Theo longer than Cas and Hollis. I've already had dinner with Hollis's parents, and Cas's mom invited me over.

"I'm an only child. My parents are usually busy, which is fine. But I'm always at someone else's house, whether it's one of the guys' or Hawthorne's," Theo says.

When we reach the staircase, Cas looks at his watch. "We have one fucking minute before the bell."

"Mrs. Quinn is a hardass. She won't care it's the first week." Theo groans.

I yelp in surprise as Theo picks me up and sprints up the stairs two at a time. He keeps running once we reach the top, and Cas laughs as he barrels past us to the classroom at the end of the hall.

Everyone else is already seated when we walk in. The seats we sat in last time are empty, and Cas pauses beside one of them. "You want to sit behind her or next to her?"

Still carrying me, Theo ignores the crazy stares we're getting from the teacher and the rest of the class. He grins at Cas and sets me down just as the bell rings. "Behind her, so I can play with her hair."

Cas sits down without another word, unzips my backpack, and pulls out everything I need for this class. He neatly sets everything on my desk and gives me a sweet smile as he slumps back in his seat.

I grin back and forth between him and Theo, who's already tugging lightly on my hair. I have the crazy urge to blurt 'I love you.' Instead, I say, "You guys are idiots."

While Mrs. Quinn speaks, the guy sitting in front of Cas swivels around in his seat and leers at me. He's not cute. Cas tenses up, and Theo's hands still in my hair, so I know they've definitely noticed.

I raise an eyebrow at the dude, and he smirks. "You must be fucking amazing in bed. You free later?"

Wow. I'm not surprised by the question, but I *am* definitely surprised this guy has the balls to ask in front of Cas and Theo.

"What the fuck did you just say to her?" Cas snarls and gets halfway out of his seat until he's practically in the guy's face.

I don't turn around to look at Theo, but his voice is cold and terrifying. "Later, Cas."

Cas sits back down, but he doesn't take his eyes off the guy in front of him. To his credit, the leering guy looks like he's about to shit his pants. Cas is positively fuming. I see his nostrils flaring, and his hands are trembling slightly. Mrs. Quinn is oblivious to everything that just happened, but it's obvious everyone else is paying attention to us.

I slide my foot over and lightly kick Cas's foot to get his attention. When he looks up at me, I smile and make a heart with my hands. I know it's totally cheesy, but it works. His eyes soften, and he smiles back. Luckily, the rest of class is mostly uneventful. Theo continues winding his hand through my hair and tickles the back of my neck. When I turn to look at him, he's wearing the strangest expression. I have no idea what he's thinking, but I smile at him too.



## Hollis

After first period, I take a detour so I can meet Cricket outside of her chemistry class. I know it will only take a minute for her and Theo to get here from their first class, but I'm just so fucking eager to see her. I keep replaying the moment I kissed her over and over in my head, and I keep hearing those sweet, breathy moans she made when I kissed her neck. God, I want to kiss her again. It only lasted thirty seconds because of the alpha order. I should have known it would happen, but I completely lost control as soon as she asked me to kiss her.

I lean against the lockers across the hall from Cricket's classroom. I see Paisley making her way toward me from the corner of my eye, but I ignore her. I'm really not in the mood to deal with her. In the past, whenever girls had crushes on me, I felt bad for turning them down. However, Paisley's getting on my last nerve. Last year, she left notes in my locker nearly every fucking day, yet she rarely ever talked to me in person. The guys and I stopped using our lockers, so I guess that's why she's being so weirdly persistent.

"Hi, Hollis!" She stops in front of me, and I pretend I don't hear her. I keep looking toward the end of the hall.

When she touches my arm, I'm forced to acknowledge her. I'm suddenly envious of the expression Cas gets on his face when he's telling someone to fuck off.

"Oh, hi. I didn't see you." I smile tightly.

She smiles up at me. I used to think she was cute. She always seemed so quiet and shy. Now, I find every single thing about her annoying. I don't think I'll ever be able to think of any other girl as even slightly attractive now that I have Cricket. Not that I have her. But a guy can dream, right?

Paisley asks me a question, but I'm not paying enough attention to catch it. I give her a blank look, and she frowns. "I asked if you've finished reading *Great Expectations* yet. Are you okay?"

I glance down the hallway again. Still no sign of them.

"Yeah." I blink at her in frustration. "Sorry, I'm just waiting for Cricket."

Paisley's face drops, and her eyes blaze. "What do you even like about her?"

Wow, this girl is fucking crazy. I feel my wolf tremble in anger at the slight against Cricket, and

I'm desperately trying not to lash out. I catch Cricket's scent and whip my head in her direction. She walks into the hallway with Theo's arm around her shoulders. He's grinning at her, making her laugh. I'm envious. Her laugh is adorable. Other people are watching them, and I don't blame them. Theo and Cricket look good together. A couple of days ago, it would have hurt to admit. After Theo's revelation that Cricket is most likely our mate, it feels okay to acknowledge that.

I've been thinking about it so much. The way she balances Theo and Cas. Their personalities are so different, but she somehow fits with both of them perfectly. I'd love to think the same for myself, and I wish I knew how she and I looked to other people. I like her so much. I'm pretty sure she likes me too, and not just because of our bond.

I'm still watching her and Theo walk down the hallway. Cricket tilts her head up slightly, and as soon as she sees me, her eyes light up. My heart fucking flips, and I smile broadly. I don't look away from her when I finally answer Paisley's question.

"Everything. I like everything about her."

Paisley says something else, but I'm not listening. I walk toward Cricket. She pulls away from Theo and wraps her arms around me in a hug. I think again about how it felt to pick her up and press her against my front door with her legs wrapped around me.

"Just couldn't wait til lunch to see me, huh?" She has the sexiest smirk on her face.

I laugh and shake my head at her. She's right.

Theo smiles softly at her. He leans in closer to me and whispers, "We need to talk."

I keep the smile on my face for Cricket's sake, but I can tell Theo is freaking out. He reaches out and ruffles her hair. "We'll meet you after class, little witch. You're sitting with me at lunch today."

He hands her backpack to her, and she smiles at us before walking into her classroom. As soon as she's out of view, I flare my nostrils and narrow my eyes at Theo. "What's wrong?"

Theo looks around the hallway wildly for a half second before his eyes land on somebody. I follow him down the hallway until he stops near a kid pulling books out of a locker. I think he's a junior.

"Hey, Thomas." Theo says, leaning against the lockers beside the kid.

The kid looks up and stares at Theo in shock. He glances at me, and I try to appear more open and friendly. He darts his gaze back to Theo. "Uh, yeah. What's up?"

"You're working as an office assistant this period?" When the kid nods, Theo grins triumphantly. "Awesome. Can you do us a huge favor, bro? I need you to call me and my boy here out of class. Can you do something like that?"

Thomas widens his eyes, "I—I think so. But—"

"We'll pay you back. What do you want?"

Thomas looks at me. I know he's going to give in. This isn't the first time Theo's done something like this. He's so fucking charismatic, and he has this insane memory where he can remember the name and face of every single person he meets, along with all kinds of crazy minor details.

"Well, there is this girl, but I don't think she even knows I exist," Thomas says.

"Done." Theo laughs. "Unless you're talking about Cricket."

"No, it's not her. I promise." Thomas shakes his head.

"Alright cool." Theo gives him a fist bump. "We're in room one-forty with Mr. Barnes. Get us out of class, and then find me at lunch later. We'll talk then."

Any other time, I'd be rolling my eyes. But I have a feeling this is about Cricket, so I don't say anything as I follow him to environmental science. Theo greets a few people as we sit down together, but I'm too keyed up. I barely pay attention when our teacher calls attendance and asks for our homework to be passed up front. Ten minutes later, my and Theo's names are called to the office. Thank fucking god.

Once we're out in the hallway, Theo chuckles. "Man, that kid was quick. I underestimated him."

“Okay, what the fuck is going on? Is Cricket okay?” I ask.

Theo continues walking down the hallway and stops outside of a classroom. He opens the door, double checks the room is empty, and holds the door open with a cocky grin. I can’t help laughing. I have no fucking idea how he knew this classroom would be empty. It’s only the fourth day of school. He locks it behind us and sits on the teacher’s desk.

“Yeah, she’s great. She’s perfect. We had an incident in first period, but Cas is going to take care of it.”

“What happened?” I sit on the desk in front of him and cross my arms.

His expression darkens. “Mike Wilson asked Cricket if she was free tonight because she ‘must be amazing in bed.’ And he fucking said it right in front of me and Cas.”

My vision goes red, and I feel the urge to shift so I can tear his throat out. “Why the fuck would he say that?”

He grimaces and taps his fingers on the desk. “Cas and I were being stupid. We weren’t even thinking. Everyone at school already thinks Cricket’s my girlfriend because I’ve been all over her, and I haven’t exactly been downplaying that. Anyway, I fucking carried her into class, and Cas set out all her books and shit on her desk for her. We were completely fucking fawning over her in front of everybody, not even trying to hide it. It just feels so natural.”

I bite my lip to hide my smile. I don’t blame them, but I’m sure it looked nuts to everyone else. I can just imagine the amused look on Cricket’s face.

“What did Cricket say?”

“She called us idiots.” Theo snorts and smiles despite himself.

“Yeah, that sounds like her.” I laugh.

“I really think I’m in love with her,” he says, his eyes turning glassy. “I’ve almost said it to her twice. And I’m surer than ever she’s my mate, and that Cas and you are her mates too. Cas is so fucking different with her. He’s always been such an asshole to girls. When I found out he went over to see her last night, I was pissed off about it at first. But Cricket said he was a sweetheart to her, and she was so glad he came to see her. When Mike pulled that shit in class, Cas flipped the fuck out. You know how angry he gets. Cricket was able to calm him down just by smiling.”

Theo seems so nervous and excited at the same time. I watch him thoughtfully. “When I see her with you and Cas, it seems so obvious. When I see her flirting with either of you, I think she might not like me as much as I like her, but then she’ll focus all her attention on me. Even if it’s for only a few seconds, it feels so fucking good. I just want to make her happy.”

“This is why I wanted to talk to you. Fuck, I can’t hold it in any longer. Hawthorne was concerned Cricket wouldn’t want to be with all three of us if we were all her mates, right? Well, when I picked her up for breakfast this morning, I kind of asked her how she felt about that.”

I furrow my eyebrows. I didn’t realize he took her out to breakfast. It’s not a bad idea. I wonder if I should ask her to do the same with me. Or is it weird if I steal Theo’s date ideas? I’m probably getting ahead of myself.

“You asked her how she’d feel about having all three of us as mates?”

“No! I didn’t use the word *mate*. I think she’s still a little freaked out by that. But Aurora made a joke about Cricket sleeping with me and Cas, and Cricket admitted she tried to kiss Cas last night. He’s the one who told her I put an alpha order on you guys so you can’t be more than friends with her. I told her I’d undo it if she asked.”

Without thinking, I perk up in excitement. Theo bursts out laughing. “Calm the fuck down. Obviously, I didn’t, or you probably would have had sex with her this morning on your goddamn front porch!”

I give him a sheepish smile and shrug. “I didn’t mean to. She’s just so…”

Theo growls, but it’s not threatening. “I know. I don’t blame you. It sucked seeing you kiss her, but it wasn’t as bad as I thought it would be. Even Cas didn’t seem all that pissy, which was surprising. I keep getting off track. Cricket straight up told me she has feelings for all three of us.



And I don't think she's against us sharing her at all."

"Really? Well, that's great. If it feels this natural to us, she must feel that way too."

"She seemed embarrassed when we were talking about it, but I think she was more concerned you and Cas wouldn't be okay with it."

I feel so fucking giddy. "This is really going to happen, isn't it? I never imagined this would be something I'd want, but..."

"Same. I think it's going to make our pack really fucking strong. She's bringing us closer together." Theo fidgets. "It's just, until the thing with Mike Wilson, I didn't stop to think about how hard it's going to be on her."

"What do you mean?"

He sighs. "You know. Her dealing with people talking shit about her, calling her a slut and stuff. For being with all three of us. When we grow up and have kids, assuming she wants to have kids, people will be even worse. My dad was already being an asshole about her. I don't give a fuck what anyone thinks of me, but it kills me to think of making her life harder."

Fuck. Honestly, I hadn't thought of that. All I've been focusing on is how it feels when I'm with her, and how it feels to see Cas and Theo make her happy. My parents love her too. They've been asking me to bring her over for dinner again.

"We'll have to be confident and show her how much we care about her. We can't act like we doubt her or each other. I think it's pretty safe to say we already practically worship the ground she walks on."

Theo nods. He looks much more confident and determined. "Yeah, you're right. I really fucking hope Cas can get on board."

"He will. Just be patient." I glance up at the clock and groan. "We still have more than half the class left. Do you want to go back or keep skipping?"

He hops off the desk and gets a mischievous look on his face. "We'll go back, but let's visit Cricket first."

"What's our excuse this time?"

"I don't know. I'll think of something." He shrugs.

I laugh and follow him out of the empty classroom.



## Chapter Thirty

### *Cricket*

When I walk into my AP chemistry class, Erin, Brennan, and Jack are already in their seats, talking quietly. Xavier greets me when I walk by. James won't even look in my direction.

As soon as I sit down, Brennan beams. "Cricket! Oh my god, hi!"

"Hey what's up?" I laugh and pull my stuff out of my bag.

"Not much." Erin smiles. "How about you? Did you do anything fun last night?"

"Mostly I played Xbox with the guys and my brothers." I turn to smile at Brennan and tap my pen on my lab book. "You're going to be my lab partner today, right?"

He nods enthusiastically. The bell rings, and Mr. Brody takes attendance, collects homework, gives a quick introduction to the lab, and tells us to get started. The lab we're doing is The Synthesis of a Complex Salt. We're going to do half the lab today and finish it on Monday once everything is crystallized. We collect our supplies, put on our goggles, and set everything up. Brennan seems nervous, so I ask him about movies, music, and books he likes. It doesn't take long for him to ramble excitedly, and Erin joins in. They like a lot of the same movies and books I do, so we're totally all nerding out together.

Jack glances at Erin more than a few times. When I catch him at it, I raise an eyebrow and smirk. He looks flustered. "So, um, you like snowboarding?"

I laugh, only because he hasn't said much since class started, and it's not really relevant to what Erin was just talking about. He blushes, and Erin gives him a weird look.

Brennan sighs dramatically. "Not everybody around here likes snowboarding, Jack."

"I'm only asking because Theo Ashbrooke was talking about getting her a snowboard, and I said I could probably get them a discount," Jack says.

Brennan and Erin stare at him wide-eyed, and Brennan asks, "When did you talk to Theo?"

"We went to The Mountainside Diner for breakfast this morning before school, and Jack was working." I finish writing a measurement in my lab book and look back up at Jack. "I've actually never been before, but I'm stoked to try it out. When does it start snowing around here, anyway?"

"Late October, early November, usually." Jack smiles.

“Hold on, wait a second.” Brennan glares at Jack. “You saw Cricket on a date with Theo and didn’t think to tell me and Erin about it!”

“Uh, why would I? They were just eating breakfast like normal people,” Jack says.

“Please ignore Brennan,” Erin pleads.

Brennan clamps his mouth shut, but he looks like he’s about to explode. I laugh and continue working on the lab.

Halfway through the class, Mr. Brody clears his throat from the front of the room. “Can I help you boys with something?”

I know before I even turn around that I’m going to see one of the guys. Theo and Hollis are standing together with dumbass grins on their faces.

Theo winks at me before turning to Mr. Brody. “Yes, sir. Ms. Lawrence asked us to come and get some graduated cylinders. We don’t have enough, and she said something about you taking hers?”

Mr. Brody turns bright red and sputters incoherently. He turns to the class and angrily announces, “I’ll be back. Keep working on your labs!”

He promptly storms out of the classroom.

Theo snickers and high fives Hollis, and they saunter across the room toward me.

“God, you guys are so full of shit.” I giggle.

“Aww, come on. We miss you.” Theo leans against the high-top table and ruffles my hair.

“You look cute.” Hollis grins and taps on my safety goggles.

I turn around and pretend to focus on the lab. Erin, Jack, and Brennan stare at us openly. I sigh like I’m annoyed. “You guys are going to get into trouble.”

“No, we won’t.” Theo scoffs. “Brody is totally in love with Ms. Lawrence. They pretend to hate each other. He won’t be back for a while.”

Hollis leans down to look in my lab book and sighs dramatically. “Cricket, how do you pass any of your classes? I’m going to end up rewriting all your assignments because your handwriting stresses me out so much.”

Brennan giggles wildly, and Erin slaps a hand over her mouth. Theo and Hollis look up, noticing them for the first time.

“You’re her lab partner?” Theo asks. Brennan nods, blushing like crazy. Theo scrunches his nose up and says, “Just make sure any assignments you share with her are in your writing. I mean, seriously. Look at this shit!”

He slaps my lab book down in front of Brennan. Brennan stares at my writing, scrunches up his eyebrows, and giggles hysterically again. “Oh my god, Cricket!”

“Are you really going to stay until Mr. Brody comes back?” Erin asks.

“Can we, please?” Theo whines while he and Hollis pout at me.

They look so cute I can’t stand it. I groan. “Fine. But I swear to god, if you guys make me fuck up on this lab…”

“We won’t! Promise!” Hollis beams.

I work on the lab with Brennan’s help. Theo ruffles my hair again and starts walking around the room to talk to some other people. Everyone in the classroom seems flustered, and I see people whispering behind their hands while glancing at me. I try to ignore it, but I can’t help feeling a little uneasy.

Hollis is still standing beside me, watching me with his kind sapphire eyes. “So, what were you guys talking about before we came in and disrupted class?”

“Well, Jack was talking about snowboarding. Before that, we were talking about how much we still love Harry Potter even though J. K. Rowling is literal garbage.”

“You’re a Slytherin, aren’t you?” Hollis chuckles.

Erin and Brennan laugh, and I snort. “Yeah, how’d you know?”

He gives me a teasing grin and shrugs. “I bet Theo could guess right, too.” He turns around and calls across the classroom. “Hey, Theo. What Hogwarts House do you think Cricket is?”

Theo’s standing with Xavier. He scrunches his nose up in amusement and laughs. “Slytherin, obviously.”

“I can’t believe you guys like Harry Potter.” Brennan stares at Hollis in wonder.

“Fuck yeah, we do.” Theo chuckles, walking back over to our table. “But we’re gonna have to step our game up. Cricket likes all kinds of weird, nerdy shit.”

I roll my eyes in response, and Hollis laughs. “Like what?”

“What was that really terrible science show you made me watch?” Theo asks me.

I choke on a laugh. “Mystery Science Theater 3000, and it’s supposed to be terrible. That’s why it’s so great!”

“Oh my god, I love that show!” Erin gasps.

“See? She likes it too.” I wave my hands at Erin like her opinion is all the proof I need.

Theo rolls his eyes at me teasingly. I try to focus on the next step of the lab we’re doing. We’re actually pretty close to finishing for the day. Theo’s attention wanders again, and he grins up at Jack. “Hey, Hollis. Did you know that Maggie is Jack’s aunt?”

Hollis glances at Jack. “Maggie from the diner?”

“I didn’t realize you guys knew her so well.” Jack laughs.

“Yeah, we usually go there at least three times a week,” Hollis says.

“And we’re turning Cricket into a regular too.” Theo grins and puts his hands on my shoulders. “Matilda already sighs in exasperation when she sees Cricket walk through the door.”

Jack bursts out laughing, and Erin turns to smile at him. Brennan bounces excitedly. “Wait, you guys eat at Jack’s family’s diner three times a freaking week!? Oh my god, that is so Riverdale! I love it!”

Hollis perks up. “Brody’s coming back.”

“We have to leave now.” Theo groans. He glances at the clock and grins down at me before quickly kissing me on the cheek. “See you in fifteen minutes, Cricket.”

The guys quickly slip out of the classroom. Mr. Brody walks in, still looking totally flustered. He apologizes and mumbles something about incompetent co-workers, and tells everybody to finish up their final steps on the lab. Once our test tubes are capped and put away on their shelf to settle over the weekend, he says we’re free to go.

“Oh my god, this was the greatest class ever. I knew Theo and Hollis were cool, obviously, but I didn’t know they were so funny!” Brennan laughs, putting the stoppers on our test tubes. “You are seriously the luckiest freaking girl in the world!”

“They totally love you!” Erin giggles as she finishes up her and Jack’s lab.

“They so do!” Brennan nods enthusiastically. “Holy crap, and I thought Cas was bad!”

“What do you mean?” I furrow my eyebrows.

Brennan’s mouth drops open comically, and his eyes widen. “Crap, I wasn’t supposed to tell you! Erin, help me!”

Erin leans over the table and lowers her voice. “Cas came into Brennan’s family’s shop last night, and he asked us what he should get for you because you were sad.”

I feel myself smiling like an idiot, and butterflies stir in my stomach. “Is that why you asked if I did anything fun last night?” Erin blushes and nods in embarrassment. I laugh. “Yeah, he came over and brought me these amazing chocolate things. It was really sweet. When he went home, he got online so we could play PUBG together.”

“Oh my god, that is so romantic!” Brennan sighs.

“So, your parents own The Sweet Shop?” I ask, and Brennan nods. “That’s so freaking cool! I need to visit again. I’m already almost out of chocolate!”

Since we’re all finished with our work, Mr. Brody lets us leave a few minutes early. I’m only a little surprised to find Theo and Hollis waiting for me in the hallway.

“Did you guys even go to your own class at all?” I ask, laughing.

“We went for the first ten minutes.” Hollis shrugs.

Theo wraps his arm around me and leads me down the hallway. I turn to glance at Erin, Brennan, and Jack. I really want to be friends with them. They’re so nice, and I get such a good vibe whenever I’m around them.

“Do you want to sit with us at lunch?”

“Are we allowed to?” Brennan asks hopefully.

“Of course, if that’s what Cricket wants,” Theo says, smiling at me softly.

Erin smiles at me. “Okay, we just have to get our lunches from our lockers. We can meet you guys in the cafeteria?”

Once we split up from them, I give Theo and Hollis a quizzical look. “I didn’t even think about this before, but why don’t you guys use lockers? I don’t even know if I have one.”

Hollis threads his fingers through mine and gives me a cute smile, “You have one. The number and combination are on your schedule. We don’t use them anymore because it doesn’t bother us to carry so many books around.”

He squeezes my hand, and I smile. The guys have been so sweet today. I keep thinking about the conversation I had with Theo this morning. He knows how I feel about them. I feel my magic pulsating under my skin, and I desperately need a distraction. I release a tiny bit of my magic and let a small gust of wind flutter around us. Hollis and Theo tense up and look at me in concern.

“Sorry,” I tell them. “It’s just been a few days since I’ve really used it, and it’s building up like crazy.”

For more than a week straight, I was using insane amounts of magic nearly every day. Now that I’ve been letting my gift rest for the past two days, and I’ve also been meditating, I’m feeling restless.

“Don’t worry, our wolves are getting jittery too. We’re going to have so much fun later!” Theo says.

“Where should we take her today?” Hollis asks.

Theo and Hollis discuss different places in the area where they go to shift. Cas meets up with us right before we walk into the cafeteria, and he pulls me away from the guys.

“She’s sitting next to me today. It’s my turn.” Theo growls.

Cas scowls at him and keeps walking with me to the lunch line. He asks me how second period was, and I tell him about Hollis and Theo crashing my class. He laughs and teases me. When we get to the table, he sits right across from me and gives me a flirty smile. Hollis sits beside him, and Theo sits next to me. We’ve only been sitting down for a couple of minutes when Brennan loudly crashes down into the seat next to me.

“Okay, I’ve been thinking about this really seriously. What’s your favorite ship in Harry Potter?” Brennan asks.

“Um, what are you doing?” Cas stops eating and gives him a weird look.

“Cricket said we could sit with her.” Brennan giggles nervously.

Erin sits down next to Cas, and he turns to give her the same weird look. She smiles nervously at him, and I notice her blush. Jack puts his food down in between Cas and Erin and awkwardly shoves himself into the seat. Erin is forced to scoot over, but Cas doesn’t move. He smirks at Jack and turns to me with an amused expression.

“Canon or non-canon?” I smile at Brennan.

“Either!” Erin says, joining the conversation. “My favorites are Snape and Lily, or Draco and Hermione.”

“I’m complete trash for Draco and Harry,” Brennan says, shoving food into his mouth.

When I giggle and open my mouth to answer, Cas interrupts me. “Cricket, what the fuck is shipping?”

“It’s when you’re rooting for a relationship between two characters in a book or TV show. A ship is a potential *relationship* between two fictional characters.”

Cas gets a wolfish grin on his face and looks at Brennan. “This kid said he’s shipping me and you together, Cricket. I didn’t know what the fuck he was talking about.”

Theo chokes on his food and stares at Brennan in shock. “What the hell, Brennan? Me and Cricket are way cuter together than her and Cas!”

“Obviously not.” Cas smirks, looking way too fucking proud of himself.

I roll my eyes and look at Brennan. He’s blushing like crazy and looks super nervous. “Just ignore them. They’re idiots. My favorite ships are Sirius and Remus, and Fred, George, and Hermione.”

“You want Hermione with both Fred and George?” Hollis laughs in surprise.

My cheeks flush in embarrassment, but I smile and raise my chin up in defiance. “So what?”

Hollis and Theo grin at each other. Oh my god, Theo told him what I said. I just know it. I try to ignore them, focusing on lunch and my conversation with Brennan and Erin. We talk about different fictional ships and other fandoms.

Hollis, Theo, Cas, and Jack watch us quietly. When I look at them, Theo scrunches his nose and tugs on a strand of my hair. “I’ve never seen you like this.”

“Blame Erin and Brennan.” Jack grunts. “They can go on like this for hours.”

“It’s still weird to see Cricket acting like such a girl.” Cas chuckles.

“What is that supposed to mean?” I narrow my eyes.

“Have you not noticed that she’s a girl, Cas?” Theo grins mischievously.

“Of course I’ve fucking noticed.” Cas scowls, his cheeks reddening. “I just meant she’s like us. She eats a shit ton of food and plays video games, and her feet are always dirty.”

“Thanks, Cas.” I snort.

Hollis glances at him sideways, and Brennan and Erin giggle. Cas stares at me wide-eyed. I kick his foot under the table and smile at him so he knows I’m not mad. Now that I know him better, I know he says things out loud without thinking. Sometimes things come across differently than how he really means them. Besides, after snuggling up with him on Aurora’s couch last night, I don’t doubt for a second he’s somehow unaware I’m a girl.

Cas visibly relaxes and smiles back at me. We continue eating and talking, and I’m happy to see the guys trying to include Brennan, Erin, and Jack in their conversations. About halfway through lunch, a skinny, dark-skinned boy with glasses walks over to our table and awkwardly clears his throat.

“Bro, you were fucking awesome!” Theo fist-bumps the guy. “Alright, point out the chick you’re into.”

I stare at them in confusion, and Hollis leans over to explain. “Thomas works in the front office second period. That’s how we got out of class so we could come and visit you.”

“Seriously? You guys made him help you cut class just so you could come and bug me?” I raise an eyebrow at them.

“We had something else we needed to take care of, but bugging you was a bonus!” Theo wraps his arm around my shoulders and grins.

Theo looks at Thomas expectantly, and Thomas subtly points out a girl a few tables over. I can only see her profile, but she’s pretty. She has dark, curly hair, light brown skin, and she’s laughing with a group of her friends.

“Dominique Rivera, huh? Nice.” Theo chuckles. He pulls his phone out and scrolls through his contacts. “Here, I’ll give you her number, and I’ll tell some people to start casually mentioning your name around her. Cool?”

Thomas beams and nods his head in excitement. Cas scoffs at Theo. “Of course you have her fucking number.”

Theo goes still, and his entire face turns red. He turns to me with wide eyes, looking guilty as fuck. I grin when I realize this is obviously a girl he’s slept with before. Theo clears his throat, gives Thomas the girl’s number, and thanks him again. He’s still blushing like crazy, and he won’t even look at me.

“Oh, come on.” Cas grunts. “You’ve slept with half the girls in this school. How long did you think it would take before Cricket noticed one of them?”

“Fuck you.” Theo snarls, a sullen expression on his face. “How are you going to feel when she comes face to face with one of the girls you’ve slept with?”

Cas waves him off. “Cricket’s already seen Sara with me twice. She even shoved her away from me on the first day of school. It was fucking awesome.”

As if he just summoned her, Sara appears and wraps her arms around Cas’s neck.

“Cas!” She drawls his name out and pouts. “You haven’t invited me to sit with you all week!”

She’s even prettier than I remember. I haven’t run into her since Monday outside of my astronomy class. She’s wearing super tight skinny jeans, a pretty lace blouse, and heels. Her hair is long and styled perfectly, and her makeup is flawless. I can’t help comparing myself to her. We’re so different.

“Why the fuck would I? I told you, we’re done.” Cas gets a disgusted look on his face and flares his nostrils before pushing her arms away from him.

She huffs at him, runs her fingers through his hair, and seductively murmurs, “Come on, I know you miss me. Didn’t you like the picture I sent you last night?”

I feel myself getting angry, and I kind of want to punch this girl. But I just watch Cas calmly. He meets my eyes, looking just as angry as I feel. I know his anger isn’t directed at me. “I fucking deleted it and blocked your number. Leave me alone.”

“Well, you know where to find me. Let me know when you’re done chasing after your best friend’s slutty girlfriend.” Sara puts her hands on her hips and glares at me. “Just so you know, he *always* comes back to me when he’s bored. He *just* fucked me a few days ago, and I can promise it won’t be long before he calls me again, too.”

I don’t *want* to hate her, but she’s making it really fucking hard. I can’t be mad at Cas for his past relationship, no matter how recent it was. Rationally, I understand that Sara is jealous, and she’s just trying to intimidate me. But *god*, she’s awful.

The guys tense up. They look seconds from exploding in anger. I feel Theo trembling next to me, and I worry that one of them is going to freak out and shift by accident. Before I open my mouth, Brennan stands up next to me in outrage.

“Don’t talk about Cricket that way! You’re the one sending slutty pictures of yourself to a guy that is clearly not interested!”

“No one asked your opinion, you spazzy little faggot.” Sara sneers.

Theo, Hollis, and Cas growl quietly, and Cas finally stands up to face his ex-girlfriend. He gets really close to her, a furious and terrifying expression on his face. “Don’t ever fucking talk about Cricket or her friends like that again. She means more to me than you ever did. You’re nothing to me.”

“We’re good together. I know you still want me.” She glares at him, but she doesn’t look nearly as confident anymore.

She scampers off, her high heels clicking against the floor of the cafeteria. Brennan slowly sits back down beside me. Cas remains standing beside the table. His hands are shaking, and he lets out a shaky breath. “Can I sit with her for a second?”

Theo raises his eyebrows at me, and I stand up and walk around the table. Hollis gets up to make room and sits next to Theo. Cas pulls me down in the seat beside him and wraps his arm around my waist. I lean into him and smile, and he seems to calm down. When I look back up, Hollis and Theo are watching us with strange expressions. Brennan's eyes are wide. I can't see Erin's or Jack's faces, but I'm sure they're equally shocked by my weird friendship with the guys.

"Okay." Theo takes a deep breath and puts his hand on top of Brennan's head. "He's under our protection now. If either of you see or hear of anyone fucking with him, let me know immediately. Clear?"

Hollis and Cas nod. Brennan's cheeks flush, and he lets out a nervous laugh. "What?"

"You defended Cricket," Hollis says, like it's obvious. "That means a lot to us."

"Holy shit. I've heard that you guys are intense, but seriously! You guys are insane." Jack laughs hysterically. When Cas turns to glare at him, he quickly adds, "In a good way!"

"Yeah, I guess we kind of are." Theo scrunches his nose and laughs. He gathers our garbage and lunch trays, and he asks Brennan, Erin, and Jack if they need anything thrown away too. Once he has everything together, he gets up to walk over to the trash cans.

Cas still has his arm around my waist, and he squeezes me lightly. "We should probably get ready to head to class now so we're not late again."





## Chapter Thirty-One

Friday after school, I'm walking out of my astronomy class with Erin when Cas comes running down the hallway and picks me up in a hug.

"Looks like you made it through your first week at Emery Ridge, babe." Cas gives me the cutest smile, holding his hands on the backs of my thighs so I'm looking down at him.

"Longest, craziest week ever." I turn to grin at Erin. "I'll see you later!"

She waves at us before heading in the opposite direction down the hallway. I press my forehead against Cas's and let my hair fall around our faces.

"Who knew that within one week, I'd become best friends with the guy that screamed at me over some spilled coffee."

Cas laughs and rubs his nose against mine. I pull my head back and give him a teasing smile. He walks toward the exit, still carrying me.

"I know, I'm so smooth. I thought you were the most beautiful girl I'd ever fucking seen, and I was so distracted. I was beating myself up so bad for being such a fucking idiot and starting a fight with you."

My heart flips, and I open my mouth to make a flirty remark in return. But my phone vibrates in my back pocket. Instead of putting me down, Cas smirks and pulls my phone out for me.

The caller ID shows Aurora's name. She rarely calls me. Since I've moved here, she's been extremely lenient about letting me do pretty much whatever I want. I answer the phone with just the slightest hesitation.

"Hey, Ror. What's up?"

"I'm so sorry to bother you. I know you probably have plans with the boys, but can you please come by the bookshop for a little while?"

I stick my bottom lip out and pout at Cas. "Sure, no problem. What's wrong?"

She sighs. "Luca had to run home for a family emergency, and I'm double-booked with two different groups for tarot card readings."

I'm a little irritated, and part of me wants to suggest she call Paisley instead. But Aurora has been totally amazing. She's barely asked me for anything in return for letting me live with her.

“Can the guys hang out at the shop with me?” Cas smiles when I ask Aurora the question. He’s still carrying me. We’re outside, and I see Hollis and Theo walking toward us from the corner of my eye.

“Of course! I really appreciate it.” Aurora sounds relieved.

I tell her we’ll be there in a few minutes and end the conversation. As soon as I hang up, Cas takes my phone and puts it in my back pocket for me. I raise an eyebrow at him. I’m pretty sure he just wants an excuse to touch my butt.

“Change of plans, guys. Cricket’s getting stuck working at Flora & Feathers tonight,” Cas tells Hollis and Theo.

Theo pouts, but Hollis smiles at me. “That’s okay. We’ll keep you company.”

Theo reaches out to take my bag off my back. I let him slide it off my shoulders, and Cas squeezes me lightly. I know he’s not putting me down anytime soon. I wrap my arms around his neck.

“We’ll be able to stay out later since it’s Friday. It’s not a big deal,” Cas says.

Yesterday, we stayed in the forest until after dark. We had so much freaking fun, and my magic feels even stronger than it did before.

Theo tickles the back of my knee and scrunches his nose up when it makes me giggle. “Are we heading over there now, little witch?”

“Yeah, if you don’t mind. Did any of you guys need to go home first for anything?”

They shake their heads, and Cas opens the passenger door for me. Once I’m sitting down, Hollis roughly shoves Cas out of the way and gives me a wicked grin. He leans into the car and buckles my seatbelt for me. Cas shoves him back and growls, which only makes Hollis grin even wider.

“You are such a fucking dick, Hollis.” Cas growls. He has the meanest scowl on his face.

Hollis growls back, but he’s still grinning like an idiot as he leans in close to my face. He quickly kisses me on the cheek. Cas makes a terrible snarling noise and shoves in front of Hollis, and he kisses me on the cheek too.

I’m completely horrified, and maybe just a little turned on. I turn my head to look at Theo, whose eyes are wild and bright. Hollis and Cas are still shoving each other and growling like fucking animals.

“Can we please just drive away without them?” I hiss at Theo.

He bursts out laughing and presses down on the horn until Hollis and Cas stop fighting. Theo uses his alpha voice, but he still sounds amused. “Get in the fucking car, idiots.”

They listen, thankfully, and we finally pull out of the school parking lot. I’m sure my face is still flushed. Theo reaches over to ruffle my hair. “Don’t worry. Hollis just likes to mess with Cas every now and then. It’s really easy to get him riled up.”

Hollis snickers, and Cas growls at him again. I whip around in my seat and glare at them. “Stop it! Jesus, you guys are like toddlers!”

“Okay, mom.” Cas rolls his eyes at me defiantly.

I glare at Cas and flip him off. Theo bursts out laughing, his nose scrunched adorably. Hollis laughs too, grinning back and forth between me and Cas. Cas looks pretty determined not to smile, but it only takes a few seconds for him to crack.

When we park in front of Flora & Feathers, I fling my car door open before any of the guys can. Aurora is with a customer at the register when we walk in. Theo sets my backpack behind the counter and stands with me and the guys beside the long bookshelf with the sliding ladder.

After the customer finishes making her purchase, she smiles at us and makes her way out the door of the shop. Aurora beams at us. “Listen, I really appreciate this. I really don’t think you’ll be held up too long.”

Her phone rings. She answers it and motions to me she’s going to step upstairs. I walk over to step up on the ladder, and I use my magic to push it back and forth.

“Sorry, guys.” I sigh. “I know this will be super boring for you.”

The guys smirk at each other, and Theo clears his throat. “I guess you haven’t realized this yet, but I don’t think it’s possible for us to get bored when you’re around.”

“Seriously, I have fun watching you take notes in class.” Cas grunts like he’s annoyed.

Hollis walks over and puts his hands on either side of the ladder so it stops moving. He chuckles. “Is this what you were doing the first time I came in here and saw you?”

“Yeah, I was seeing how fast I could get from one end to the other.” I laugh.

Theo and Cas snicker, and Hollis gives me a lopsided grin. “If I’d known that, I might not have been so nervous. I thought you were so cool and collected, and I felt like an idiot the whole time I was in here.”

“You guys should have seen her the first time I met her. She walked in here completely covered in dirt from head to toe, and she was so fucking confident. It really threw me off and freaked me out.” Theo laughs.

“Really?” I laugh in surprise. “You didn’t act like it. You made fun of me for being covered in dirt!”

“Why the hell were you covered in dirt in the first place?” Cas asks.

When I realize Hollis looks equally confused, I perk up. “Oh, Aurora has a garden out back. That’s where she grows all her herbs and stuff. Want to see it?”

I don’t think Theo has seen the garden either, now that I think about it. They follow me through the bookshop. The back door is down a little corridor where a small bathroom is located for customers, and there’s a little cat-door cut into the door so that Stella can come and go as she pleases.

When we step outside, the guys look surprised. The garden is pretty big, considering this property is located downtown. There’s a tall fence surrounding the yard, and rows of different flowers, plants, and herbs. There are two maple trees near the back of the garden and a path winding through the whole area. Stella is curled up on a covered bench-swing off to the side, but she perks up when she sees us.

“I can’t believe I never knew this was here. It’s beautiful!” Hollis says.

Stella stretches out on the swing and scampers over to us. I crouch down and hold my arms out to her. I always miss her when I’m away, and I wish there was a way I could take her to school with me. Stella gives me a look, completely ignores my outstretched arms, and climbs up Hollis’s leg. He winces at her claws digging into his skin, but he lets her crawl up until she’s perched on his shoulder like a demented little parrot.

I put my hands on my hips and glare at her. “God, you are such a little asshole.”

She closes her eyes and licks her paw, basically telling me to fuck off.

Theo and Cas laugh, and Cas asks, “Are all witches’ familiars like that?”

“Nope, Stella is one of a kind.” I shake my head and sigh.

“Hey, someone just walked in,” Hollis says, tilting his head toward the door.

I walk back into the shop with the guys following closely behind me. When I glance over my shoulder, I see Cas scratching Stella’s head while she’s still sitting on Hollis’s shoulder. She looks so pleased with herself, and I can hear her purring softly. Even though she can be a mean little demon, I love her so much. It makes me so incredibly happy she likes the guys too.

When I get up front, I’m extremely surprised to find Luca setting his stuff behind the register. I furrow my eyebrows at him. “What are you doing here?”

His head jerks up at my voice. His gaze lands on each of the guys before turning to me. “Um, coming back from my lunch break?”

“Aurora said you had a family emergency.”

“Not that I’m aware of.” Luca looks just as confused as I feel and shakes his head.

I turn around and exchange confused glances with Hollis, Theo, and Cas. What the hell is Aurora trying to pull now? I'm about to walk over to the door leading upstairs so I can ask her what's going on. But then the bell over the door chimes again, and I hear one of my favorite voices in the world.

"Aye, yo!"

I spin around and scream as I run and launch myself into Emerson's arms. He laughs and squeezes me tightly. "You miss us, baby sis?"

I nod enthusiastically and look him over. I squeeze his biceps. "Holy crap, look at your muscles!"

It's hard to believe he's bulked up so much in the last couple of weeks, but I know he's probably been working out like crazy for hockey.

"What am I, chopped liver?" Killian whines from behind me.

I stay in Emerson's arms and turn around to grin at Killian. He's muscular too, but nowhere near as much as Emerson is. I smirk, squeeze his bicep, and shrug. "Meh."

"Come here, you little punk." He snickers and pulls me into a hug.

I'm totally smiling like crazy when they finally put me down. I turn around to see Hollis, Cas, and Theo grinning at us.

"Hey, you." Emerson walks around the counter and hugs Luca. Luca's face flushes, and Em pulls him into a kiss. They're so freaking adorable. Now that I have the guys in my life, it's easy for me to understand how Em feels about Luca.

"Stop," Luca mumbles. He pushes Em away and glances at me and the guys nervously. "I'm at work. You can't act like that when I'm working."

"Who cares?" Emerson furrows his eyebrows. "It's just Keely, Cricket, and her boyfriends in here. It's not like they're customers."

"I care." Luca steps away from Em, his mouth set in a frown. He busies himself on the computer behind the counter. "This job is serious to me. *You* might not need to work and pay bills, but I do."

There's an awkward tension, and I turn my eyes away from Em and Luca. I'm sure Emerson's embarrassed at having us witness the exchange, and his feelings are probably hurt too. He hasn't seen Luca in nearly two weeks, and they only spent a few days together before the twins left for Denver.

"Alright," Em says. "I'll come talk to you later."

Luca doesn't respond, and Emerson walks over to us by the bookshelves. He and Killian exchange a look, and I quickly try to change the subject by officially introducing them to the guys. They all shake hands, and I tell the guys the easiest ways to tell the twins apart. Other than Em being more muscular, Killian also has a faint scar above his right eyebrow. We decide to go upstairs to the apartment where we can talk more openly.

When we get upstairs, Cas glares at Emerson. I know he's not homophobic, so I'm confused. I snap my fingers in front of his face. "Cas, what the fuck is your problem?"

"Listen, dude. It really pisses me off that you think I'm pretty and Hollis is hunky, because I'm clearly the more attractive one."

Everyone laughs, and I groan. "Jesus fucking Christ, Cas. Are you serious right now? You're still talking about that?"

"Sorry, kid. You are pretty. I bet Cricket is completely obsessed with your hair and that little mark under your eye." Em laughs and vaguely gestures to Cas's beauty mark. Which, yes, I am totally obsessed with.

"He has a dimple too, but you can't see it when he's being whiny like this." I give Cas a goofy smile.

Cas breaks out in a smile, and the dimple makes an appearance. Emerson chuckles and wiggles his eyebrows at me.

"What are you guys doing here, anyway? I'm assuming Aurora lied to get me over here so you

could surprise me?"

They nod, and Killian holds up a shopping bag. "We brought you an early birthday present."

I grin and reach for the bag, but he pulls it back.

"You'll need this first." Emerson chuckles and pulls his wallet out. He hands me a card, and I hold it up in front of my face.

"A fake ID? Really?" I giggle. "You guys are terrible influences!"

Theo snatches it away from me to get a closer look. He scrunches his nose up in amusement and admits, "This actually isn't bad. It looks pretty fucking legit."

"Huh, this is going to make things way fucking easier when we throw parties," Cas says.

"What's in the bag then?" I ask.

"We're gonna try it out and take you clubbing tonight. We got fake IDs too, and I wanna make sure we didn't waste our money." Killian smirks.

"I know you have plenty of slutty clothes already, but I figured you might want something new," Emerson says, digging in the bag. Theo and Cas snicker, and Hollis bites his lip to hold back his smile.

Emerson pulls out a pair of really freaking high heels. I make a face at them and groan. "Ugh, I hate them."

"You can go one fucking night without running around barefoot like a goddamn heathen." Killian snickers.

"Oh, yeah." I raise an eyebrow. "It's way better for me to look like a hooker." The guys laugh, and Emerson hands me the shoes. I hold them out for one of the guys to take from me. Hollis grabs them, and I smile at him in thanks.

Next, Emerson pulls out a super tiny red dress with spaghetti straps. I look at the tag and hold it against my body. I fix a glare on my brothers. "What the fuck? This isn't going to fit me."

"Aww, are you getting chunky from eating too many Oreos?" Killian snickers and pokes my stomach. I slap his hand away and flip him off.

"Actually, you're looking really fucking toned. What have you been doing the past couple of weeks? I know your idea of working out is walking up the fucking stairs to your room." Em furrows his eyebrows at me.

Theo chokes and laughs really fucking hard. When I turn to glare at him, he shrugs. "I'm sorry, your brothers are really fucking funny. Now I know where you get it from."

Killian grins and gives Theo a stupid fist bump. I roll my eyes and shrug at Emerson. "I don't know. I guess I've been hiking a lot."

My brothers still don't know the guys are werewolves, and I haven't mentioned anything about the way my magic's been changing. I *want* to tell them, but I'm worried about what they'll say and think. Plus, I'm not even sure if I'm allowed to tell them about the guys or not.

"Is that what the kids are calling it now?" Em raises his eyebrows.

Cas and Theo laugh again, and Hollis blushes and grins at me. Theo takes the slutty dress out of my hands and smirks. "I think you should try this on now."

The guys and I head up to my room while Killian and Emerson go to Aurora's office to talk to her. Cas sits down in my desk chair, Theo sits on the end of my bed, and Hollis leans against my closet. Stella's still perched on his shoulder, but she hops down to sit in Theo's lap. He smiles at her and scratches her head.

"Sorry our plans kind of got ruined tonight," I tell them. I'm really happy to see my brothers, but I'm also bummed I won't get to play in the forest with the guys.

"It's okay." Hollis grabs my hand and smiles. "We know you missed your brothers."

"It was really fucking cute watching you freak out when they came through the door." Cas chuckles.

“Yeah, it was. I hope they like us okay,” Theo says.

I lean against Hollis and grin at Theo. “Don’t worry, they do! They don’t know you guys know I’m a witch yet, but I’m gonna tell them this weekend.”

“Do you want to tell them about us?” Theo asks me.

“I didn’t think I could without Hawthorne’s permission.”

Theo gives me a lopsided smile. “I trust your judgment, little witch.”

Hollis and Cas look surprised and turn their heads to grin at me. I feel a flutter in my stomach, but I don’t entirely understand what happened. I feel like it’s going to take me so long to figure out this pack thing.

I bite my lip thoughtfully. “I want to tell them.”

Hollis leans down to nuzzle his face wolfishly in my hair. I love it so much when they do that to me. A few seconds later, I hear Emerson and Killian coming up the stairs. They grin at us when they walk in. Emerson takes the red dress from Theo and gestures for me to follow him into the bathroom.

Before I can take a step forward, Killian plops onto my bed and stares at my pillows. He looks up at me with a wicked grin. “What are you hiding, Cricket?”

My mouth pops open in surprise. What the fuck. How did he even know? Theo, Cas, and Hollis perk up to get a better look at Killian. I try to make sure my face is totally blank when Killian pulls Baby Cas out from under my pillow. He holds it up with a triumphant smile.

“Let me see that!” Theo barks out a surprised laugh.

Killian hands Theo the stuffed toy, and Theo stares at it with a crazy smile. He raises his eyes to me and slowly turns around to look at Cas. “What the fuck is this?”

Cas glares menacingly at Theo and shrugs his shoulders. Since I’m still leaning against Hollis, I feel him shaking. I look up to see him biting his lip to hold back his laughter.

I glare at him and stomp over to Theo, and I snatch the toy away from him. Theo scrunches his nose up and teasingly asks, “Well?”

“Screw you guys. Cas got it for me, and I love it!” I walk over to Cas and sit on his lap. He wraps his arms around me.

“Yeah, fuck off. You’re just pissed that you didn’t think of it first.” Cas smirks at Hollis and Theo.

Killian grins back and forth between the guys, but Emerson stares at us like we’re insane. He coughs. “Okay, whatever. Cricket, come and try on this dress, and then we’ll take you and your friends out to eat.”

I walk into the bathroom more willingly with the promise of food. Once the door is locked, I strip down to my underwear. It might seem weird, but Emerson has seen me naked and helped me try on clothes a ton of times. He hates to admit it, but he would make an amazing stylist. He has this way of looking at people and automatically knowing their size and what will look good on them.

I hold my hand out for the dress, and he scoffs. “You can’t wear underwear with this dress.”

I feel my cheeks flush in embarrassment. I slide off my panties and hiss, “Shut up, they can hear you.”

“What, do they have supersonic hearing or something?” he snorts.

I glare at him, and he hands me the dress with a dumbass grin. I’m barely able to slide it over my boobs, and it gets stuck on my hips. I give him a haughty look. “I fucking told you it wouldn’t fit.”

“Yes, it will.” He grunts exasperatedly and rolls his eyes. He crouches down and helps me pull it over my ass and hips. Once it’s all the way on and everything is straightened, I look down at myself. It’s so fucking tight and constricting.

“I hate it.” I grumble at him.

“Oh my god. You haven’t even looked in the mirror. Plus, I really want to see those guys’ reactions.”

“What, why?” I furrow my eyebrows.

“It’ll be funny. Plus, I want to make sure this works on straight guys. We’re hoping a bunch of dudes will offer to buy you and your friends, aka me and Killian, drinks tonight so we can drink for free.”

I laugh. I should have guessed my brothers had some dumbass plan like that. Emerson grins one more time before opening the door and shoving me into my bedroom. It looks like the guys were laughing a second ago, and they stare at me with their jaws dropped and their eyes super wide. I feel my cheeks flush, but I ignore them as I walk over to stand in front of my full-length mirror.

The dress is super short, but it looks like I’ll still be able to bend over without flashing people. I have to admit Emerson was right again. The dress hugs my curves perfectly, and I look pretty fucking amazing. I turn around to look at my butt before grinning up at Emerson. “I still fucking hate it.”

“Shut up.” He laughs and grabs the heels from Hollis, who’s still gaping at me. Em sits down on his knees and helps me slide my feet into the monstrosities. I swear to god, the heels are at least six fucking inches tall. I spin around to look at them in the mirror.

“Holy fucking shit, Cricket.” I turn my head to see Cas still staring at me. His cheeks are bright red, and his eyes are traveling over every inch of me. He gives Emerson a horrified look. “You guys can’t take her out in that. No fucking way.”

Emerson and Killian burst out laughing. Killian tells him, “Don’t worry, dude. We’ve taken Cricket clubbing before. We let some sleazy dudes flirt with her, they buy her a couple of drinks, and then we threaten to beat the shit out of them if they talk to her again.”

His statement seems to startle Theo out of his trance. He scrunches his nose up and laughs. “Holy fuck, that’s perfect.”

“We’re not going to be there.” Hollis rubs the back of his neck nervously.

Emerson gives him a weird look, but Killian laughs. “I think it would defeat the purpose if you guys came with us. No way is anyone going to buy her drinks if you’re standing over her all protectively and shit.”

“Cricket can take care of herself.” Theo says confidently to Hollis and Cas.

It’s really cute Cas and Hollis are so concerned, but it makes my magic hum happily to hear Theo admit that. I know he’s acknowledging my power and strength.

“Take this crap off. It’s ruining the outfit.” Emerson snorts, gesturing at my necklaces.

“No, please!” I gasp, holding my hand over my necklaces protectively.

“You can wear one necklace and one bracelet.” Em sighs.

I glare at him, but he raises his eyebrows at me until I take all my jewelry off. I pick through everything, trying to pick just one of each type, but it’s really freaking hard.

“Wow. I didn’t realize you were so fucking attached to that shit.” Cas chuckles.

Killian sits next to Theo and pokes Stella. She hisses at him and curls more tightly into Theo’s lap. Killian looks really amused about it. He replies to Cas even though he doesn’t seem to be paying attention to us. “Cricket is like a fucking dragon when it comes to hoarding jewelry.”

Emerson gets irritated enough with me that he picks out a necklace and bracelet himself and shoves them at me. “Alright, hurry and change back into your other clothes. I’m starving!”

Theo reaches out and grabs my wrist as I walk by him on my way to the bathroom. He’s wearing a teasing grin, but his eyes are soft as he looks me over. It gives me a tingly feeling. He slowly pulls his phone out of his pocket and holds it up to take a picture of me.

After he does, he grins at me, and I snort. “You’re such a dork.”

He shrugs and slides down off the bed so he’s kneeling in front of me. Stella gets offended and hops down so she can go sit with Cas instead. Theo lightly brushes his fingers over my ankles and unbuckles the straps of my heels. After I step out of them, he grins up at me again. He looks so fucking sexy. My magic hums, making me feel like my skin is on fire.

Emerson quickly pushes me the rest of the way into the bathroom and locks the door behind us.

“What the fuck is going on with those guys?” he whispers.

I know Hollis will still be able to hear him, and I blush. I shrug my shoulders lamely. “They’re my friends.”

“You’re not secretly dating all of them, are you? I thought you said you haven’t slept with any of them.”

“I haven’t!” I hiss.

He gives me a long, considering look before raising one eyebrow at me. “Are you going to tell me what’s going on with Stella?”

“She just likes them for some reason.” I shrug and glare at him. I should have known Killian and Emerson would pick up on the weird connection between me and the guys. I really, *really* want to tell them, especially now that Theo said it’s okay. But this is totally *not* the time or place for this conversation.

“Fine. Don’t tell me.” Emerson sighs in frustration.

He helps me out of the skin-tight dress, and I quickly slip on the shorts and tee shirt I was wearing earlier. I slide my sandals on and storm out of the bathroom.

“Stop throwing a fucking tantrum.” Em rolls his eyes.

I ignore him and raise an eyebrow at Killian and the guys. “Where are we eating?”

“Let’s go to that German place down the street,” Killian says. He glances at Theo. “Have you guys taken Cricket there yet?”

Theo shakes his head, and his eyes light up. “You’ll like it, Cricket. Their desserts are amazing.”





## Chapter Thirty-Two

We make our way downstairs to the first floor. The bookshop has gotten busier in the short time we were upstairs. Luca's at the register with a customer, and there are a few more people waiting in line. Aurora is talking to another customer further back in the shop. I wait until she's finished with her conversation before I walk up to give her a hug.

"You're so sneaky, Ror."

She grins and hugs me back. "The boys wanted to surprise you."

After we say goodbye to her, I walk outside with the guys and my brothers. We make our way down the street, and Killian and Emerson ask the guys questions about themselves. I'm walking beside Hollis, and I lace my fingers through his without thinking about it. Hollis gives me a surprised smile, and he squeezes my hand back. Killian notices, but he just smirks and keeps talking to the guys. Within minutes, Emerson engages Hollis, Cas, and Theo in a very enthusiastic conversation about football.

I make a face at them. "I didn't know you guys liked sports."

"Of course we do. We're men." Theo scrunches his nose up. I snort and raise an eyebrow at him, making him laugh. "We're more into winter sports, like snowboarding and hockey. But we can never pass up a good game of football."

Emerson grins and slaps him on the back good-naturedly. "Do any of you guys play anything?"

"We're not allowed to." Cas scowls.

Theo gives him a warning look. I shouldn't be surprised. It makes sense they're not allowed to play sports at school because of their supernatural strength and agility. They're also way too competitive to pull back enough so as not to garner extra attention and interest.

"Are your parents really strict or something?" Em glances between Theo and Cas quizzically.

"Something like that." Theo gives him an easygoing smile. He changes the subject. Emerson goes along with it, but I see him and Killian exchange a doubtful look.

We arrive at the restaurant. Theo holds the door open for us, and he ruffles my hair as I walk past him. The place is really cute. It's styled to look like a quaint German chateau, and the waitresses are wearing dirndls. Our waitress leads us to a large booth where I sit in between Killian and Emerson. Cas sits directly across from me, and I kick his foot under the table while giving him a flirty smile.

“Cut it out, Cricket.” Cas chuckles.

“God, I think you’ve gotten worse.” Killian snorts.

I shrug and give him a goofy smile, making Emerson and the other guys laugh. We order our food, and my brothers get to know Hollis, Theo, and Cas better. While we’re eating, they tell the guys embarrassing stories about me, but I just smile and roll my eyes. I’m totally freaking ecstatic they seem to be getting along.

“Do you have anything planned for your birthday yet?” Emerson asks me.

I shake my head, but Theo answers. “Hollis’s birthday is a few days before hers, so we’re planning on throwing a party at Cas’s house either that Friday or Saturday before Labor Day.”

“What!?” I choke on my food and stare back and forth between the guys.

“Smaller bites next time, Cricket.” Killian laughs and pats me on the back.

I glare at him. My brothers and the guys grin at me in amusement. I feel myself blushing, and my stomach churns with guilt. “Why didn’t you guys tell me? I feel terrible! I didn’t even know it was Hollis’s birthday too.”

God, they are so freaking sweet, planning me a secret birthday party.

“Well, my birthday doesn’t really matter.” Hollis gives me a sweet smile. “We want to do something for you.”

“It totally matters!” I know I’m pouting, but I don’t care.

Killian and Emerson snicker on either side of me, and the other guys look just as amused. I demand they tell me their birthdays. Hollis’s birthday is August thirtieth, which is only four days before mine.

When I continue raising an eyebrow at the other guys, Cas sighs and rolls his eyes. “December thirty-first.”

“Aww, a New Year’s baby!” I turn my head and look at Theo expectantly.

He scrunches his nose up and finally tells me, “April first.”

“Of course you’re an Aries.” I snort and shake my head. I’m glad the guys’ birthdays will be easy for me to remember.

“Well, we were planning on bringing Cricket up to Denver with us that weekend. If you throw your party on Friday, we can come down for that and take her back with us on Saturday. We’ll bring her home on Monday and hang out for a few days before we start classes. Sound good to everyone?” Killian looks around the table.

The guys nod in agreement, and I smile like a maniac. All my favorite people in the world are getting along and coming up with plans for my birthday together. I’m nervous about my birthday this year because I don’t know if something crazy is going to happen with my magic. Based on how it’s been growing the past couple of weeks, I have a feeling something is going to happen. It makes me feel so much better knowing the guys will be there with me, and so will my brothers.

When we finish our late lunch, Theo sneaks away to pay the bill, to my brothers’ chagrin. My brothers argue with him about it, but Theo just grins at them. I can tell they’re not actually mad.

We walk outside and meander down the street together. When I recognize The Sweet Spot across the street, I grab Cas’s hand and smile. “That’s where you got my chocolates, right?”

He grins and puts his arm around me. “Did you wanna stop in there really quick?”

I nod enthusiastically, and Cas lets everyone else know we’re heading there as he leads me to the shop. As soon as he opens the door, I’m immediately hit with the amazing smell of chocolate and sugary goodness. I seriously forgot how amazing this place is. I’m momentarily overwhelmed by all the treats and adorable décor, so I don’t realize Brennan is sitting at one of the tables. Cas’s arm is still around me when Brennan runs over and picks me up in a hug.

“Oh my god, Cricket! I can’t believe you’re here!”

I hug him back and laugh happily. He’s wearing black square-framed glasses, which I’ve never

seen before. I lightly tap the frames. “Aww, you look adorable!”

He takes a few steps further into the store and roughly sets me down. “Ugh, no offense, but I don’t know how those hotties carry you around at school all day.”

Killian shoves his way forward with a crazy fucking grin. “Who’s this? And did he just say these guys carry you around at school?”

Theo flexes his arm and wiggles his eyebrows at Killian. “Fucking right we do.”

I burst out laughing because he looks so ridiculous, and I wrap my arm around Brennan’s waist. “This is my friend Brennan. Brennan, these are my brothers, Killian and Emerson.”

Brennan finally notices them and his eyes widen as he looks them over from head to toe. His cheeks redden as he smiles. “Wow. I think I might totally hate you if I didn’t already love you so freaking much.”

Em grins at Brennan’s comment, and I watch as his eyes slowly wander over my new friend. Brennan is *totally* Em’s type. If he wasn’t already dating Luca, I might try to set them up. I raise an eyebrow at my brother, and Brennan giggles, finally snapping Emerson back to reality.

Running a hand through his hair, Em frowns, looks Brennan over quickly one last time, and turns to me. “Do you mind if I head back to Aurora’s to talk to Luca?”

“Of course not.” I shake my head. Luca was probably surprised and embarrassed when Em kissed him in front of us. I know Em misses him and wants to spend time with him. Just like I know it’s killing him he left things so weird between them before we went to lunch.

“Invite him out with us,” Killian offers.

“You guys wouldn’t mind?” Em looks between me and Killian.

I shake my head, and Killian grins. “Nah, man. It’ll be fun.”

“Alright,” Emerson says. He tells Brennan it was nice to meet him and promises to see the rest of us at the bookshop later.

After he leaves, Brennan squeals. “Holy crap. Your brother is hands down the hottest guy I’ve ever seen.”

Everyone chuckles, and Brennan jabbars on about his family’s shop. He tells me Erin dropped him off here a little while ago, and he was reading comic books at one of the tables. He’s not technically working right now, but it’s not unusual for his parents to ask him to help whenever he happens to be around.

When he points out some of his favorite treats in the display, I ask him which ones Cas bought for me. Cas walks over and slyly wraps an arm around my waist.

He leans down and whispers in my ear with a slight growl. “Do you want anything, babe?”

I tilt my head so I can gaze into his gorgeous emerald eyes, and I lose myself in those little golden specks. I stop myself from saying something totally cheesy and quickly turn back to the display case. “I want to try everything.”

“God, Cricket, you just ate!” Killian snorts.

“It’s for later, obviously.” I glare at him.

“Can you get her a couple of everything, please?” Cas asks Brennan.

Brennan nods in delight and starts boxing everything up. I didn’t realize how many there were, and I feel guilty. When Brennan rings up the total, I look at Cas in shock. He doesn’t even hesitate to pull his wallet out.

“Cas, that’s way too much money.” I’m about to apologize to Brennan profusely and ask him to put everything back.

“Baby, I would fucking buy you anything you asked for.” Cas chuckles. He grabs a chocolate candy and smirks. “Promise to share with me?”

I feel myself blushing at his words, and it feels like the rest of the world has entirely disappeared. When I nod at him, letting him know of course I’ll share with him, he gets a mischievous glint in his

eyes. He puts the candy into his mouth and holds it between his teeth. My heart stutters. Even with Brennan, Killian, Theo, and Hollis watching, I can't stop myself from standing on my tiptoes and biting off half the candy from his mouth. Our lips barely brush, and my entire body feels like it's been set on fire. When I step back down flat on my feet, I keep my eyes on his as I chew the candy. His eyes are crazy bright.

Hollis picks me up from behind and growls softly in my ear. It surprises me enough that I yelp. Theo wrestles with Cas and gets him in a headlock. Cas growls like a fucking animal, and Theo grins up at me with bright eyes. "Play fair now, Cricket."

Still holding me with both his arms around my waist, Hollis turns to Brennan with a lopsided smile. "Is this the store where Cas bought Cricket that stuffed animal?"

He perks up and nods his head. "Yeah, he told me Cricket really likes wolves!"

"She fucking loves them." Theo laughs. "Do you have any more toys like that?"

Brennan points at the back wall. Theo drops Cas on the floor and sprints toward the shelf with all the toys. Hollis snickers and sets me down before dashing after him.

Cas looks fucking livid when he stands up, and his hair is all messed up. His nostrils flare in anger. He quickly whips out a black credit card and shoves it at Brennan before following Theo and Hollis to the back of the store. Brennan beams at me and mouths 'oh my god' while he charges Cas's credit card.

"You really like wolves, huh?" Killian asks quietly, pulling me to the side. I know I'm still blushing like crazy, and I can't bring myself to say anything. He chuckles and shakes his head. "Holy shit. What the hell have you gotten yourself into?"

I shake my head back and forth. I can hear the guys laughing, and I whisper, "I don't know!"

Killian gives me a long look, and his eyes soften. "Baby sis, I know there's something you won't tell us. Just promise me you're okay."

The guys walk back up to the register. Theo and Hollis look smug as fuck, and Cas pouts behind them. I feel my heart flutter, and my face breaks out in a smile. I meet Killian's eyes again. "I'm definitely okay."

He wraps an arm around me in a hug and watches in amusement as Theo and Hollis make their purchases. Cas takes his credit card back from Brennan and grabs the bag with all the treats he bought for me. He's still brooding when he walks back over to me. I hug him around his waist and smile up at him.

"Thank you, Cas. You're such a sweetheart. And you can totally share all of that with me!"

He smiles back, but sighs in annoyance and runs his fingers through his hair. "Fucking Theo messed up my hair."

"Don't worry, it still looks good." I laugh.

Theo walks over and stands on my other side. He ruffles my hair. "Alright, stop flirting. Unless it's with me, of course."

I spin around to grin at him, and he grins back. He opens the bag Brennan gave him and pulls out a wolf stuffed animal with reddish brown fur. His miniature. I grab it from him with a huge freaking smile on my face and turn to Hollis expectantly. He chuckles and pulls out a white wolf plush toy with blue eyes. I've got a complete set now.

"I can't believe they sell these here!" I say.

"It's totally like fate, right? What's up with your obsession with wolves, anyway?" Brennan asks.

Theo smirks at me. "Cricket just really, really loves *Twilight*. She's Team Jacob."

Killian snorts and laughs so hard he bends over, holding his stomach. When he settles down, he asks if we're ready to go. I give Brennan another hug and promise to talk to him on Monday. Killian tells him it was nice to meet him, and we exit the sweet shop with Hollis, Cas, and Theo behind us.

When we get back to Flora & Feathers, it's still busy. We find Emerson upstairs in Aurora's living room, frowning as he scrolls through his phone.

“Well?” Killian asks. “What did Luca say? Is he coming with us?”

“No.” Emerson scoffs. “He got pissed at me again for talking to him while he’s working. I offered to take him out to lunch tomorrow, and he said that’s fine.”

I don’t get why Luca’s being like that. He and I talk about Emerson all the time, and I know he misses him. Part of me wants to march downstairs and demand Luca tell me what the problem is, but I know that would probably only make things more awkward.

We drop the subject. My brothers, the guys, and I hang out in the apartment for a few hours, talking and watching TV. When Emerson decides it’s time for us to get ready for the night, the guys leave. I hug them as I say goodbye, and they promise to come over again tomorrow.



The next morning, I feel like someone is literally stabbing me in the head when my alarm goes off. The light burns so fucking bad when I open my eyes. After a few seconds, I’m able to check the time on my phone. Why the fuck is my alarm set for seven-thirty on a Saturday? I’m about to groan and fall back asleep when I sit up in panic. Today is supposed to be my first day working at the yoga studio with Mrs. Gallagher! Oh god, why did I drink so much last night?

I agonizingly make my way out of bed and downstairs to the kitchen, praying Aurora will have something to help me. Thank fucking god, she’s already sitting at her kitchen counter, flipping through a magazine, with Harold perched on her shoulder.

“Good morning, dear. I was afraid I was going to have to come and wake you up myself.” She gives me a sweet smile and hands me a glass of something brown. It looks gross, but I don’t question it as I quickly chug it down.

Within seconds, I feel loads better. I’m still sleepy, but my headache is completely gone. I sigh in relief. “Thanks, Ror. You’re the best!”

I head back upstairs so I can shower and get dressed. I put on some super cute yoga pants and a matching sports bra. I throw on a loose tee shirt over that, grab my yoga mat, and head down the stairs. Before I head to the studio, I double check with Aurora that Emerson and Killian are okay. Stella’s already lounging in the back garden.

Once I’m outside, I pull my cell phone out. I still have plenty of time to get to the studio, which is just around the corner. I bring up Theo’s contact info and pray he’s already awake as I press the call button.

He answers on the third ring, and his voice is all cute and sleepy. “Good morning, little witch.”

“Good morning, Theo.” I feel myself smiling already. “Sorry if I woke you up.”

“Don’t worry about it.” He yawns. “Did you have fun last night?”

“So much fun! I just woke up with the worst hangover, though. Aurora had to give me some gross-tasting potion so I could function properly.”

He chuckles, his voice all sexy and gruff. “You called me last night. Around two-thirty.”

I stop walking and stare at my phone in horror. “Oh god, what did I say?”

“Not telling. But it was really fucking cute.” I can totally imagine his nose all scrunched up right now.

“Ugh, no. That’s so embarrassing.”

He laughs. “Are you on your way to Mrs. Gallagher’s yoga studio?”

“Yeah, I am. I was wondering if you could do me a huge favor.”

“Anything.” His voice is so genuine and endearing.

“Well, we took an Uber home last night, and I’m pretty sure my brothers don’t remember where they left their car. I have the address, but it’s like forty-five minutes from here.”

“Don’t worry.” I can hear the smile in his voice. “We’ll head over in a few hours to pick them up and help them go get their car. That’s not a big deal at all. What time are you working until?”

I exhale in relief and smile into the phone. “Between one and one-thirty, I think.”

“Text me the address, and we’ll see you then. And listen. It makes me feel so fucking giddy to have you ask for my help like this. I would do anything in the world for you, little witch.”

“Ugh, you’re totally making me blush now.”

“You’re fucking adorable when you blush.” He growls quietly.

I make a purring noise in the back of my throat and widen my eyes in horror at myself. “I’ve got to go now. But seriously, thank you so freaking much. You’re amazing!”

“Good luck, little witch!”

I hang up the phone and smile at it. I don’t think Emerson and Killian will mind. They said they like the guys. I wonder what I might have said to Theo when I called him last night, but it’s too embarrassing to consider. I walk into Mrs. Gallagher’s studio and try not to think about it.



## Chapter Thirty-Three

### *Killian*

I'm woken up by the sound of low voices, but I'm way too groggy to make out what they're saying. I stir and crack my eyes open. God, the light fucking hurts. It takes me more than a few seconds to recognize Cricket's guy friends standing above me.

I rub a hand over my eyes and groan. "Fuck, what time is it?"

The moody one crosses his arms. "Almost eleven."

I know their names, but I'm way too messed up right now to bother trying to remember them. The funny one hands me a glass of something. I figure it's probably one of Aurora's nasty concoctions, so I don't hesitate to take it from him and chug it down. After a few seconds, my headache is gone and my vision is no longer blurry.

"Thanks, bros. What's up?" I grin up at the guys.

Theo chuckles. I can remember their names again. "Cricket asked us to help you guys get your car since you took an Uber home."

Em stirs from the other side of the bed and looks up at the guys with a mean scowl. "If you guys want to sleep with our sister, you're trying way too fucking hard."

Their faces fall. Goddamn it, Em. I punch his arm and grumble, "Come on, dude. She's their friend."

Emerson sits all the way up and glares at me. He can be the meanest motherfucker when he's hungover like this. It doesn't help that shit is weird between him and Luca right now. Cricket and I tried to get him to talk to us about it last night, but he refused. I take the other glass Hollis is holding and shove it at my twin brother. He downs it and grimaces.

"Sorry." He blinks at the guys. "Where is Cricket, anyway?"

I feel weird sitting in bed while the other guys are standing around the guest room. So, I stand up and stretch. I'm still in my clothes from last night. Honestly, I barely remember getting home at all.

"She's at work. Today's her first day at that yoga studio around the corner from here," Hollis says.

Emerson snorts and rubs his eyes. "Cricket got a fucking job?"

Cas is still scowling, but I'm pretty sure that's his version of resting-bitch-face. He shrugs his

shoulders. “She says she needs to meditate more to help her keep her magic in check. She thinks working there will be good, and she seems excited about it.”

Emerson gapes at him now, but I feel myself grinning like a maniac. I knew it. I fucking knew she told them about being a witch.

“What the fuck? She told you guys? She’s only known you for a couple of weeks! Cricket has never told anyone outside of our family before,” Emerson says, rubbing a hand over his face.

I roll my eyes and wave my hands at him. He’s fucking daft if he doesn’t realize there’s something off about these guys in the same way there’s something off about Cricket and Aurora. They’re not witches, but I’d bet my life they’re something else. I have a few theories already.

“Come on, it was fucking obvious. She trusts them.” I narrow my eyes at the guys. “But what do you mean, keep her magic in check?”

Theo glares at Cas with his arms crossed. “Goddamn it, Cas. Cricket said she was going to tell them.”

“I figured she already did! And it’s not like we’ve been fucking subtle since they got here.” Cas holds his arms out and widens his eyes.

Hollis rolls his eyes at his friends and finally answers my question. “Cricket says her magic has been getting a lot stronger since she moved here. We’ve been helping her.”

Em and I look at each other. She didn’t tell us that either. Cricket used to tell us practically fucking everything. Emerson frowns slightly. “How much stronger?”

Theo, Hollis, and Cas get really excited smiles on their faces and describe some of the shit they’ve seen Cricket do. I’m pretty fucking dumbfounded. I’ve always been so proud of my little sister and her magic, but from what these guys are saying, her gift has completely surpassed what our family has always expected.

It doesn’t escape my notice these guys are totally in awe of Cricket. They’re not scared of her, and it sounds like they’ve each completely embraced Cricket with all of her quirks and witchiness head on. I knew they liked her, and I’d been honest with my baby sister when I said I thought they were pretty cool guys. But I feel my respect for them growing exponentially.

“Mom is going to flip the fuck out.” Emerson shakes his head at me as he gets up and gets his shit together for a shower.

“Dude, don’t fucking tell her yet. It’s fine. Cricket turns eighteen in a couple of weeks. We already suspected something like this was going to happen.” I grab my clothes so I can shower upstairs in Cricket’s room.

The guys offer to wait in the bookshop while we’re getting ready. I rush upstairs to Cricket’s room and get ready as fast as I can. I’m determined to figure out what’s going on with Cricket and these guys more than ever. The only way I’m going to figure it out is by hanging out with them. Cricket isn’t going to divulge anything to us.

When I get downstairs, I see a girl with curly brown hair behind the register. I can’t remember her name, but she’s glaring toward the back of the shop. Figuring the guys must be somewhere in the stacks, I head in that direction.

Before I even turn the corner around one of the shelves, I hear Theo’s voice. “Sorry, I can’t.”

“Aww, come on. You used to love playing with us. Especially together.”

I walk into the aisle quietly. Hollis is the only one who notices me. There are two girls—one blonde and one brunette—clinging to Theo’s waist and smiling up at him. Cas has this mean fucking glare on his face, and even I can admit it would scare the fuck out of me if I was his target.

Theo pushes the girls away until they’re at arm’s length. “You guys know I’m with Cricket.”

I raise one eyebrow as I slowly walk up behind them. Hollis smiles but doesn’t say anything.

The brunette girl pouts. She probably thinks it’s cuter than it is. “I don’t see Cricket here now.”

“She’s always here in my heart,” Theo says.



Cas snorts, but he doesn't stop glaring. Hollis bites his lip and glances sideways at me again. I feel myself grinning too. Man, that might be the cheesiest fucking thing I've ever heard.

The blonde girl puts her hands on her hips and scoffs. "You know, Cricket is telling people you aren't even together."

Theo turns his head and sees me. He looks surprised, but he just smiles at the girls and shrugs. "A guy can dream, right?"

The brunette keeps up the pout and turns to Cas. "Well, what about you? Are you too busy?"

"Fuck off." Cas snarls.

When the girls turn their eyes to Hollis, he coughs and looks up at the ceiling. I almost burst out laughing. You've got to love his approach.

I throw my arms around Theo's and Cas's shoulders, since they're closest to me. "Sup, bros?"

"What the fuck? I didn't even hear you, dude." Cas jerks back.

Hollis and Theo laugh. The blonde and brunette perk up and run their eyes over me. I can't help glancing back and forth between them. They're pretty hot, both wearing super short shorts and tee shirts tied off to show their midriffs.

The blonde puts her hand on my chest and gives me a flirty smile. "Who's your friend? Does he want to play with us?"

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't slightly tempted. But they're definitely still in high school. Besides, I prefer to chase girls. It always makes the sex so much better.

"No, thanks. I'm good." I grin at them.

"This is Cricket's brother, Killian, I think." Theo pats my shoulder, giving me a half-smile.

Damn, he got it right. People can almost never tell me and Emerson apart. I nod my head and hold my hand out for a fist bump. Emerson comes walking around the corner into the aisle. He barely glances at the girls before raising an eyebrow at me and the guys. Without another word, we make our way outside to Theo's jeep.

Not gonna lie, I'm pretty jealous of his jeep. It's fucking nice. I really want to see the other guys' cars too. Especially Cas's. I pray they've changed their minds about letting Cricket drive. Somehow, I end up sitting in the middle seat in the back between Cas and Hollis because I'm the smallest. Which is seriously a fucking joke, because I work out almost as much as Em does, and I'm pretty ripped.

After we've been driving for about five minutes, Emerson glances around at the guys. "Do you know where the fuck we're going? Because I don't."

"Yeah, Cricket texted me the address of where you guys parked." Theo laughs.

"Figures she wouldn't trust us to remember." I snort.

"Do you remember?" Hollis jokes, raising his eyebrows.

I shake my head, and the guys laugh. For the rest of the drive, we talk about school and sports. The guys ask us more questions about Cricket and our family, and what it was like for us to grow up having a witch as a sister. I can see why Cricket likes these guys. They're funny, and they're definitely the kind of guys we would have hung out with in high school. Emerson is acting a little weird, though. Like, he's being friendly, but he's not joking around as much as he normally would. When we pull up next to our SUV in some shady looking parking lot down the street from one of the clubs we went to, Emerson takes the keys from me so he can drive.

He looks at me like he's waiting for me to get out of the car first. I give him a grin. "Nah, bro. I wanna keep talking to these guys. Take one of them with you to keep you company."

Emerson rolls his eyes and glances back and forth between Cas and Hollis, since Theo's going to drive his jeep back. Em sighs resignedly. "I'll take the quiet one."

Neither of them move, so I nudge Hollis. He opens his door and Cas groans. "Goddamn it. If he's the quiet one now, then what are me and Theo?"

I grin and point at Theo. "He's the funny one. You're the moody one."

Hollis and Theo burst out laughing, and Cas scowls and runs a hand through his dark hair. Once Hollis and Emerson are out of the car, I get out and hop into the passenger seat. Emerson flips me off before he gets into the SUV, so I grin and blow him a kiss.

It's quiet as we drive back to Emery Ridge. Theo taps his fingers on the steering wheel, which is kind of driving me crazy. I'm trying to think of what I can ask them so I can figure out if my theory about them is right.

Theo clears his throat, interrupting my thoughts. "Does your brother...does he not like us? I didn't think it was that weird for us to drive you guys over here."

"Yeah, he likes you guys. We both do. I think he's just freaked out about you guys with Cricket."

"Because she told us she's a witch?" Cas grumbles.

"Maybe." I shrug. "I think it worries him because we've always been so protective of her. Like, you know, she was a really weird kid, and people picked on her a lot just because they could tell she was different."

The guys look completely horrified at this revelation. Fuck, I didn't mean to make them feel bad for her. I try to make my voice sound light and easygoing. "I think Emerson is more freaked out because Cricket's never really had any close friends, and she's never had a serious boyfriend."

"She didn't have friends in Florida?" Cas asks quietly.

Aw shit, Cricket is going to kill me. "Well, she mostly hung out with me, Em, and our group of friends. Last year when we left home to come out here for college, I think she had a tough time of it. She won't admit it, but I know she was ready to get the fuck out of that school. I think you guys are great for her. It's clear you really care about her, and I think it's fucking awesome she trusts you enough to share her magic with you."

They're quiet and seem to contemplate what I said. Cas chews on his lip and stares out the window, and Theo keeps tapping his fingers on the steering wheel. He turns the radio on so it's playing quietly. I need to get them talking again.

"So, you're telling people at your school you and Cricket are together, huh?" I give Theo a teasing grin.

Theo taps his fingers on the steering wheel again and coughs. "People started assuming she was my girlfriend, and I just sort of went along with it."

"You like her, don't you?" I smirk at him.

A smile slowly spreads across his face. He turns his head to glance at me. "Yeah, I like her a lot."

Cas makes this animal-like growling sound. I whip my head around to see him glaring at the back of Theo's head. "I like her too."

I raise my eyebrows. I can't keep the dumb grin off my face. I half-expected they wouldn't admit it to me.

Theo looks at Cas in the rear-view mirror. He looks irritated, but not surprised. "Glad to hear you finally fucking admit it out loud."

Cas still looks pissed as fuck. I smirk back and forth between them. "Why don't you both date her, then?"

I'm only sort of joking. I'm fully prepared for them to look at me like I'm fucking nuts. Theo smiles sideways at me and quickly turns his head to smirk at Cas.

"We can't do that." Cas sputters.

"Why not? Like I said, Cricket's never really had a boyfriend before. She'll hang out with a guy for a few weeks and then get bored. Em and I always figured when she found a dude she actually really liked, it would be all or nothing for her." I gesture between the two of them. "This isn't exactly what I expected, but I'm not surprised."

Theo laughs. He does this thing when he laughs where his nose kind of scrunches. Cricket

probably thinks it's cute. Cas looks completely fucking dumbfounded. I smirk and raise an eyebrow at him. Man, teasing these guys really is just as fun as teasing Cricket.

"People already talk shit about her at school because of us," Cas says, running a hand through his hair. "Besides, I don't even know if she likes us like that."

"She does. I asked her," Theo says with a dopey-ass smile on his face.

"What? You asked her if she likes us? Or just you?" Cas sits up, practically screeching at him.

Theo taps his fingers on the steering wheel again. Goddamn it, that's driving me nuts. "She said she likes all three of us."

"So, what's the problem, then?" I ask. "Who gives a fuck what other people think? If I thought you guys weren't serious, or Cricket didn't like you guys, I wouldn't be saying shit right now."

The guys look at each other, but they don't say anything. I fidget anxiously, trying to think of a subtle way to ask what they are. Fuck it. "Is it because she's a witch and you guys are whatever supernatural thing you are?"

They're quiet at first, and Theo tenses beside me. Cas lowers his voice, sounding more startled than anything. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Come on." I laugh. "I've been around magic my whole life. And the whole thing with Stella..." I shake my head and laugh at their faces. "She fucking hates us. And we love Cricket, so I know it doesn't have anything to do with the fact you guys are into her. Plus, it makes way more sense for Cricket to tell you about her magic if that's something you have in common with her."

The guys are speechless. After what feels like the longest fucking pause ever, Theo glances at me and shrugs. "*Technically*, we can't tell you, but Cricket can."

I groan and slump down in my seat. "Ugh, fuck Cricket! She knows this is going to drive me crazy."

"What? Why?" Theo laughs in surprise.

"Because this is right up my fucking alley. I'm a history major, but after I get my B.A., I want to specialize in the history of folklore and the supernatural. I know way more about witches, and our ancestry in particular, than Cricket does. Maybe even more than Aurora and our grandmother."

The rest of the drive passes quickly. They ask me questions about witches and their history. They don't bring up the idea of dating Cricket again, and I don't ask them any more about what they are. The fact they've even validated my suspicions is more than enough for now. As fucking weird as it sounds, I'm excited to get back to school where I can do some more research.

When we get back to Flora & Feathers, Theo texts Cricket to see if she's done with work yet. Emerson and Hollis laugh when they get out of the SUV, so that's a good sign. I can't fucking wait to tell Em what the guys said. I'll wait until later when we drive back to Denver.

Emerson walks over to me. He rocks back and forth on his heels anxiously. "You don't think Cricket will be pissed if I take off, right? Luca's at home, and he asked me to come over."

"She gets it." I wave him off. Em's frown deepens, and I raise an eyebrow. "You sure everything is okay? I'm sure we can stay an extra night if you need to spend more time with him. Hell, I'm sure Aurora would give him a few days off if he came back to Denver with us."

As much as I tease my brother for his relationship, I know he loves Luca. I don't like seeing Em upset. Hopefully, they can work shit out.

"Maybe." Emerson smiles, and it looks genuine. He waves at Theo, Cas, and Hollis. "I'll see you guys later."

The guys and I wave back at him as he hops back into our SUV and takes off down the street.



## Theo

As soon as Emerson drives away, my phone rings. When I see Cricket's name, I smile and hold

the phone up to my ear.

“Hello, little witch.”

“Hey, are you guys back yet? I’m about to leave here in a minute.”

I perk up and raise my eyebrows at Hollis and Cas. They follow me down the sidewalk toward Mrs. Gallagher’s studio without a word. Killian follows beside them with an easygoing smile on his face.

“We’ll come and meet you. Killian is with us, but Emerson just left to meet up with Luca.”

“Good. They definitely need some alone time.” She laughs, which is probably my favorite fucking sound in the world.

I grin at Killian. I’m still trying to wrap my head around everything he told us, but right now I mostly feel ecstatic and relieved. He approves of us dating his sister, which is totally fucking insane. I was getting worried yesterday when we acted like idiots with her around the twins. I think we honestly just lose our fucking minds when we’re with Cricket. But Killian seemed cool with it. And holy fuck, he guessed so easily about us being werewolves. I mean, he didn’t say that exactly, but he knows we’re not human. If everything works out the way I think it will with me, Cricket, Hollis, and Cas, Killian and Emerson will technically become my brothers too. I hadn’t considered that before.

“Theo? Are you there?”

“Yeah, sorry. I just got distracted for a second. Your brothers are fucking awesome.”

“Good, I’m glad. So, I guess I’ll see you in a few minutes?”

We turn around the corner, and I see the yoga studio a couple of stores down. I tell Cricket we’re outside and end the phone conversation. I can’t wait to see her. I missed her so fucking much last night and today. It feels like an eternity since I’ve seen her, even though it hasn’t even been twenty-four hours yet. I know Cas and Hollis are probably feeling just as antsy, but I’m determined to be the first one she sees when she walks outside. As soon as the door opens, I shove Cas aside and run over to greet her.

Cricket’s eyes light up. I pick her up, and she hooks her legs around my waist. Fuck, I love feeling her wrapped around me like this. I bury my face in her neck and inhale her amazing fucking scent. God, she smells even better than she usually does, and I feel my wolf stirring.

She laughs and pushes my head away. “Stop it, I’m all sweaty.”

“I like it.” That’s an understatement.

Cricket unhooks her legs and wiggles around. I know she wants me to put her down, but damn. Feeling her do that just makes me want her more. It takes all my self-control, but I let go of her. She walks over to Hollis and Cas, who have goofy smiles on their faces.

While she’s hugging them, I finally get a look at what she’s wearing. And good fucking lord. Her yoga pants hug every one of her curves, and her ass looks so big and tight and holy fucking amazing. Earlier, when Brittany and Lacey offered to hook up with me while we were waiting for Cricket’s brothers, all I kept thinking about was seeing Cricket in that red fucking dress yesterday.

I’ve hooked up with Brittany and Lacey tons of times before, and not that long ago either. Before I met Cricket, I didn’t think I’d ever be capable of turning away a threesome with two hot girls. I’d been foolish enough to believe even my mate wouldn’t be able to keep my eye from wandering. But Cricket is so perfect, and I’m one hundred percent confident that I will never, ever get tired of absolutely fucking worshipping her incredible body. Turning down Brittany and Lacey had taken no effort. They’re boring. I would much rather stare at Cricket’s ass in her yoga pants than consider hooking up with another girl.

Cricket asks me a question, and my eyes snap up to her face. Ah fuck, she totally caught me staring. I give her a guilty smile. “Sorry, what?”

She snorts, which is one of the cutest things ever. “I asked if you guys have eaten already.”

Hollis and Cas grin at her. She eats so much, nearly as much as we do. I don’t know how she keeps her body looking so fit, with that tiny fucking waist. I imagine running my hands down her

sides, along the curve of her waist where her hips jut out. Fuck, I can feel myself getting hard. I need to stop.

“No, we haven’t eaten yet.” Killian laughs and shoves her arm playfully.

Hollis reaches out and grabs Cricket’s hand. I feel a split second of jealousy, but I force myself to focus on Cricket’s face. She is positively beaming at him, with a few strands of hair coming loose from her messy bun and fluttering in the slight breeze. I relax and feel genuinely gratified that my beta can bring that look to her face.

“Do you want to go to the diner?” Hollis asks her. He looks so happy in a way I’ve never seen before. I wonder if that’s how I look when I’m looking at Cricket too.

She nods and turns to face her brother. “What time do you guys need to leave?”

“Not for a while. Maybe five or six, depending on how things go with Em and Luca, and if Em starts bitching about getting enough sleep tonight.”

We walk back to Aurora’s place so Cricket can get cleaned up. Cricket’s in front of me, between Hollis and Killian, and Cas walks beside me. I’m trying really, really fucking hard not to stare at her ass the entire way. I glance sideways to see if Cas is having the same problem I am. He’s scowling and chewing on the inside of his cheek.

I’m about to nudge him and ask what’s wrong until I realize his eyes are locked on Cricket’s and Hollis’s hands. I really thought he was getting better at seeing us touch her. Most of the time, he seems okay. For fuck’s sake. Killian just straight up told us we should both date Cricket, and Cas just seemed concerned about Cricket’s reputation. I really wish I knew what was going through his head. Ever since I told him I think she might be my mate, he refuses to talk about her with me. I’m really struggling with the decision to tell him about the three of us being her mates. Every day, I’m more and more positive I’m right, and I’m getting more confident that Cricket will choose to accept all of us. But Cas just, sometimes he can be so fucking unpredictable, and I don’t want to tell Cricket before her birthday. Because god, if there’s even the slightest chance I’m wrong, I will be so fucking devastated and heartbroken.

He’s moved on to glaring at Hollis. I nudge him and give him a smirking grin, hoping he’ll at least turn his glare on me for teasing him. It works, and he bares his teeth at me. It makes me laugh, and Hollis turns his head to look at us quizzically before he opens the door of Flora & Feathers.

Paisley is working behind the register, and her friends Sabrina and Nadia are standing by the counter with her. The girls go quiet and glare at Cricket. This is getting fucking ridiculous. I figure Hollis is still too chicken-shit to hurt Paisley’s feelings, but somebody’s going to need to say something to her soon. Hollis lets go of Cricket’s hand, and I’m about to flip the fuck out on him for it, but he puts his arm around her instead and pulls her in close.

I grin at Paisley and her friends. They look so pissed. It’s hilarious. Once we’re all in the stairwell on our way up to Cricket’s room, Killian turns to Cricket and raises an eyebrow. It’s so funny to see small similarities in their features and gestures like that, but also kind of weird when Killian or Emerson do something I find cute on Cricket.

“What’s that chick’s problem with you?”

“She has a crush on Hollis.” Cricket shrugs. “She and her friends have been dicks to me since they realized I’m friends with him.”

“Is she a crazy ex or something?” Killian asks Hollis.

“No! I’ve never shown her any sort of interest. She’s really starting to piss me off.” Hollis rolls his eyes.

Cricket walks in front of everyone else, with Hollis just behind her. I don’t know if Hollis thinks she’s going too slow, or if he just wants an excuse to touch her again. He grabs her around her waist and carries her the rest of the way up. He doesn’t set her down until we’re in her room, and she turns to give him a look like she’s annoyed. But I don’t think she is, and she looks so fucking sexy. I want her to look at me like that.

I walk over to her closet and throw it open. “Let’s choose what you’re going to wear today, little witch.”

Cas walks over and shoves me so he can get into her closet first. Fucking bastard. I shove him back, and he growls. I have a really strong urge to shift so I can put him in his fucking place. I wouldn't technically be breaking Hawthorne's alpha order by shifting in front of Killian. It's not like I *told* him anything about us. But I'm pretty sure we'd break something since this room is kind of small. So, I compromise and punch Cas as hard as I fucking can in his side. He snarls and punches me back, and we roll around on the floor beating the shit out of each other.

When a door slams, we stop moving and look up. Cricket is standing next to her now-closed closet door with one hand on her hip. In the other hand, she's holding a small pile of clothes.

She looks so pissed. And sexy. "You guys are fucking idiots."

I shove Cas's face roughly one more time and grin up at her. "Worth it, just to see that look on your face."

Killian bursts out laughing. He sits next to Hollis on Cricket's bed, watching me and Cas. Hollis holds Stella in his lap and gives us an amused shake of his head. Cricket groans in exasperation and stomps her cute little ass over to her bathroom, locking the door behind her.



## Chapter Thirty-Four

### *Cricket*

Sunday morning, I'm sleeping in to make up for the sleep I lost Friday night going out with Killian and Emerson. I have no idea what time it is, but I'm stirred from my sleep by the sound of footsteps coming up the stairs to my room. My vision is still blurry from just waking up. Before I can lift my head to see if Aurora needs something, somebody tackles me and pins me down under my covers.

"Wake up, little witch!" Theo's voice sounds way too fucking cheerful.

I open my eyes to glare at him, and I get a hand free so I can smack him. He seems to find this hilarious and grabs my wrist while he scrunches his nose up. I wiggle so I can get my other hand free, but he grabs that wrist too.

His eyes are full of heat and mischief now, and his voice is a sexy growl. "Cricket, you know I love foreplay, but not in front of the guys!"

That gets a laugh out of me, and I tilt my head to see Cas and Hollis standing in the doorway. "What the fuck are you guys doing?"

After eating lunch at the diner with Killian, Theo, Cas, and Hollis yesterday, I spent the rest of the afternoon home at Aurora's hanging out with my brothers. They finally confronted me about the guys, and the fact I told them about being a witch. Neither of them seemed mad, really, but they asked me a million freaking questions about how my magic has been changing. They made me promise to keep them updated.

Emerson and Killian also teased me relentlessly about the guys being my boyfriends. The more I denied it, the more they taunted me. I didn't tell them I secretly wished that were true. I'm just happy my brothers seem to like them. I came super close to telling them about the guys being werewolves, but I chickened out. I want to tell them, but I think I'll just wait until they come back to Emery Ridge for my birthday in a few weeks.

Cas has his signature scowl on his face, and his arms are crossed. His tee shirt is tight, and his arm muscles are all bulging and sexy. "We didn't know you'd still be sleeping."

Hollis bites his lip, looking super cute and nervous. "We can let you go back to sleep."

"No fucking way." Theo scoffs and bounces on top of me. "We're taking her over to Hawthorne's house to play in his pool. These are our last days of summer, boys!"

I don't want to tell Theo he's actually hurting me. I know the guys will freak out, and he'll feel terrible. So, I use my magic to push him completely off the bed.

He stares up at me in bewilderment from the floor while Cas and Hollis crack up. Cas walks over and sits on my bed next to me. He gives me a teasing smile. "Your hair looks even cuter and messier than usual."

"So, we're going swimming at Hawthorne's house?" I shake my hair out and grin.

When the guys nod and smile, I hop out of bed and pad over to my closet to grab a swimsuit from my dresser. I only get a few steps when Cas makes a weird choking noise. I turn and raise an eyebrow at him.

"You're not wearing any pants." His eyes are fucking huge, and his cheeks are turning red.

I snort and look at Theo and Hollis. I'm only wearing panties and an oversized tee shirt. They're eyeballing my bare skin with interest, but they don't seem as scandalized as Cas does. "Well, it's not like I invited you in here. I could have been naked, for all you knew! Besides, you'd better get used to it if I'm going to wear a bathing suit all day."

"When did you turn into such a prude, Cas?" Theo snickers, still sitting on the floor.

"It just surprised me, that's all." Cas scowls.

I dig through my dresser drawer to pick out a swimsuit. I have a ton of them since that's pretty much all I wear during the summer in Florida. From the corner of my eye, I see Hollis watching me. I give him a flirty smile and hold two different bikini tops against my body.

"Which one should I wear, hmm?"

His eyes light up, and a grin breaks out over his face. He studies the tops, and then he lets his eyes slowly wander up and down my body. He meets my eyes and smirks. "I think you should try them on for us first."

I laugh in delight. Hollis is usually so quiet, and I'm pretty sure he likes me. He's not as aggressive as Cas and Theo are when it comes to flirting with me, so I'm always pleasantly surprised when he says or does something like that.

"Not a bad idea." Theo laughs and waggles his eyebrows.

Hollis and I smile at each other, and he points to the blue and white seersucker bikini top in my hands. "I like this one."

I put the other top back and grab the matching bottoms to the one Hollis chose. I pick out a navy-blue dress with spaghetti straps and some embroidery around the bust.

While I'm walking to my bathroom, Theo pounces up from the floor and slaps my ass with a huge fucking grin on his face. I stare at him for a few long seconds, completely appalled. Hollis and Cas are absolutely still, waiting for my reaction.

"Oh my god." I furrow my eyebrows at him. "Do you want me to kill you this morning?"

Theo smirks at me and taps an invisible watch on his wrist. "It's after noon."

I keep my face blank, even though I want to laugh really badly. He's being so cute and playful, and I want to kiss the crap out of him. I can't keep it up, and a smile forms on my lips. I hear the guys laughing behind me as I lock myself in the bathroom. After I've showered and changed, I walk back into my room and quickly brush my hair out before drying it. I grab a small tote bag and toss in my phone, wallet, sandals, and the key to the bookshop.

"Okay, let's go!" I chirp excitedly. I make my way downstairs first, and they're quick to follow.

When I linger in the kitchen, Theo pushes me gently. "Don't worry, Margot will feed us."

I'm excited to see Margot and Hawthorne again. They were nice to me when we first met. I hope they actually like me. We run into Aurora as she's leading a group upstairs for a tarot card reading. I let her know we're going to Hawthorne's house, and she asks me to say hello for her. The shop is busy. Luca is behind the counter talking to a customer, and Paisley's putting some books on a shelf.

I want to see Stella before we go, so they follow me into the garden. Stella lets us pet her for a few



minutes. When we get back inside, I almost collide with Chloe.

Her eyes widen in surprise, and she smiles. "Hey! What are you guys doing here?"

I haven't talked to Chloe at all outside of our classes. And even there, we haven't been able to talk very much. She seems cool, and I wouldn't mind getting to know her better. "I live upstairs. My aunt owns the shop."

"What? I had no idea!" She glances at the guys behind me and grins again. "It's cute to see you guys together outside of school."

I pretend to make a face at the guys and raise an eyebrow at Chloe. "I guess they're kinda cute."

Theo and Hollis snicker. Cas steps forward and picks me up around my waist so my back is pressed against his chest. "Liar. You think we're all totally sexy as fuck."

Twirling my fingers by my ears, I widen my eyes and mouth 'crazy' at her. Chloe and the guys laugh. She walks up front with us and whispers, "I'm with my girlfriend. I just came back here to use the bathroom while she's up front talking to her friend."

"Aww, nice! I didn't know you had a girlfriend." I smile. Cas has set me down, but he doesn't let go of my hand. It's basically second nature to be constantly touching at least one of them at all times.

She nods, her cheeks turning pink. "Yeah, we haven't been together long."

Up front, Paisley is still organizing one of the bookshelves. Luca's still at the register, only now he's talking and laughing with Katy.

"Hey, gorgeous." Katy smiles at me. But the smile drops as she takes in the guys.

"You guys know each other?" Chloe asks me, her eyebrows raised.

It takes me another stupid second to put two and two together. "Oh! Katy's your girlfriend?"

Katy frowns at Chloe before she turns to me. Her eyes narrow on Cas. "You're seriously dating this asshole?"

Theo barks out a laugh and scrunches his nose up at Cas. Cas looks uncomfortable and runs a hand through his hair. I lean into him and put a hand on his chest. "Aww, he's secretly a little sweetheart."

Luca tilts his head, chuckling softly. "Are you officially dating now? Em didn't say anything."

Before I can shake my head or answer, Paisley scoffs loudly. "She's dating all three of them. It's disgusting."

Hearing her finally say something brings me an insane amount of pleasure. I can't make excuses for her anymore or give her the benefit of the doubt whenever she and her friends are jerks to me. I get a wicked smile on my face and flip her off.

Theo snickers and throws me over his shoulder, slapping his hand on my ass again. At least he's holding my dress down for me, the devious little bastard. "Let's get out of here before you cause some real trouble."

"Wait, I forgot my bag somewhere!"

"Don't worry, I've got it." Hollis grins and holds it up.

Cas holds the door open for us, and I'm facing the inside of the bookshop as Theo walks out holding me.

Within minutes, we're on the road and on our way to Hawthorne's house. I roll my window down and hold my hand out so I can feel the air run through my fingers. It's warm and sunny out. Totally perfect for a pool day.

The guys have been quiet since we got into the car. I break the silence and sigh. "I'm worried things are going to be awkward with Luca."

Theo glances sideways at me, and Hollis reaches forward to lightly rub my shoulder. He leans forward and whispers. "I'm sorry. It's our fault."

“Why didn’t you just deny what Paisley said?” Cas whines softly.

“What?” I furrow my eyebrows. “I meant because of Emerson. Things just seemed so off with them this weekend. I don’t really give a fuck about what Paisley said.”

Hollis and Cas look at each other, and Hollis blinks at me. “You don’t?”

“Seriously? It’s a waste of energy to respond to her at all, especially when everyone else at school is already saying the same thing.” I roll my eyes.

“We weren’t sure if you’d heard people talking or not,” Theo says.

I snort in amusement and rest my head on my elbow against the window, enjoying the feel of the sun on my skin. “I don’t need your stupid wolf ears to hear when people are calling me a slut.” When I peek my eyes open, all three guys are looking at me with sympathy and Theo is still tapping his fingers on the steering wheel. I give them all a genuine smile. “It’s okay! I swear, I really don’t give a shit!”

“It really fucking sucks to hear people talk shit about you though. Because you’re the coolest girl ever, and we have so much fun with you. Those people have no idea what the hell they’re talking about, and we’re just making it harder for you to make other friends.” Cas frowns.

I reach my hand back and grab his. “I don’t need other friends. I have you guys!” A tiny voice in the back of my head adds, *until you find your mates, at least*. But I push it away and smile wider. “Plus, I really like Brennan and Erin. I get such a good feeling from them. They want to be friends with me.”

Theo reaches over to ruffle my hair. My magic feels crazy and bubbly. I realize I’m touching all three of them at the same time. Hollis pulls his hand away first, and Cas and Theo slowly let their hands drop. They have crazy weird expressions on their faces.

“Um, what the fuck was that?” Cas asks.

I shrug, embarrassed because it felt really good, whatever it was. Hollis and Theo share a quick, sneaky glance. I turn my head to Hollis. “What?”

He stares at me blankly, but he’s such a terrible liar. All I have to do is raise an eyebrow, and he sighs in defeat. “When we were in your room, after the first time we all shifted in front of you. It happened then, too.”

I bite my lip and give Cas a teasing smile. “That’s right. When you guys punched Cas for hurting my feelings.”

“That was Hollis. I just yelled at him.” Theo laughs.

I want to try touching all three of them again, but they’re acting so weird. I fidget in my seat. “What did it feel like?”

None of them will meet my eyes, and they’re all blushing to some degree. So, either really good, or really bad. I’m assuming it’s the former, and they’re too embarrassed to say something in front of me or each other.

“Look, we’re here!” Theo coughs as he turns into Hawthorne’s driveway.

I giggle at his awful transition into changing the subject. But I let it go for now. After he parks, Hollis opens my door for me. When I walk around the other side of the car, Cas smiles at me.

His dimple is adorable as ever, and his eyes are both soft and teasing. He clears his throat. “You look beautiful, and you have nothing to worry about.”

I’m grinning like crazy. Theo laughs and shoves Cas’s shoulder. “Cheesy motherfucker.”

“Yesterday, you said ‘Cricket is always here in my heart.’ I don’t think it’s possible to be any cheesier than that.” Hollis chuckles.

I put a hand over my heart and flutter my eyelashes at them. “Good news. I love cheesy.”

They laugh and lead me inside. Theo walks in without knocking. He calls out a greeting, but I don’t hear anything in response. The guys obviously do because Theo grins at me. “Rylan’s out by the pool already. He’s excited to meet you.”

I feel a nervous flutter at the thought of meeting someone new, but I slap on a smile and follow Theo and Cas to the backyard. Hollis walks behind me with his hand on the small of my back. We walk through a set of beautiful, glass French doors onto a large, covered patio. The pool is fucking huge, too. There are several chairs under the covered area and tons of lounge chairs around the perimeter of the pool. Off to the side, it looks like there's also a big hot tub and a fancy-looking grill.

Theo grabs my hand and leads me closer to the pool. I notice a guy lying in one of the lounge chairs, reading a book. He jumps up when he sees us. He grins and looks me over, but it doesn't feel like he's checking me out in a gross way. He's kind of cute, maybe in his mid-twenties, with dark brown hair and light green eyes. He's a little leaner than the guys and just as tall.

He holds his hand out to me. "Hey! Nice to finally meet you. I'm Rylan."

Before I can reach my hand out to shake his, I'm pushed roughly into the pool. It surprises the crap out of me, and I get water in my nose. When I break the surface, I cough and stare angrily up at the guys. Hollis, Cas, and Rylan look shocked. But Theo is smiling like a little punk, so I fix my glare on him.

When I get to the edge of the pool, Hollis and Cas reach down and each grab one of my hands to pull me up. I'm fuming. I don't take my eyes off Theo while I wring water out of my hair and magically dry myself. I fling the few drops of water still on my hand at him and shake my hair out before smiling at Rylan.

I hold my hand out again and say, "Hey, I'm Cricket—"

Theo fucking pushes me into the pool again. When I break the surface, I scream. "What the fuck is wrong with you!?"

Theo cracks up. Hollis and Cas look like they want to punch him, and Rylan still looks completely baffled. I use my magic to pull Theo into the water with me. I'm able to do it fast enough he doesn't expect it. When he comes up out of the water, he coughs and brushes his hair out of his eyes before smiling at me.

I splash water at him and quickly swim to the edge where Hollis and Cas are waiting to pull me up for the second time. After I'm dry, I smile sweetly at Rylan. When Theo climbs out of the pool, I use my magic to push him back in. Cas and Hollis snicker. The next time, I let Theo get all the way out of the pool before pushing him in again.

Theo grins at me from the water and swims over to the opposite side of the pool. I snort and call over to him. "Oh yeah, I totally won't be able to get you over there!"

"Yeah! Get him, babe!" Cas puts his hands on my shoulders from behind me and snickers.

I push Theo back into the pool again. Hollis and Cas laugh, and I turn around to high five them.

This time when Theo breaks the surface, he laughs. "Alright, fuck! I'm sorry!" He swims back over to our side and pouts up at me. "Please let me get out now, little witch."

I giggle and nod at him. Once he finally climbs out, dripping water all over the place, he gives me a wolfish grin. Rylan bursts out laughing. I nearly forgot he was there.

When he calms down, he waves his hands at me excitedly. "Holy fuck, she's even better than I expected!" He throws his arms around me in a bear hug. "Welcome to the family, witchy girl!"

Um, what!? I feel my eyes get wide. Cas jerks his head at Theo, and Theo's face flushes bright red. He clears his throat. "Okay, put her down. You're freaking her out!"

Rylan sets me down, and I frown my eyebrows at Theo. "You're the one trying to get me riled up in front of your family. Again!"

"But it's so fun!" He gives me an adorable pout. "You got my shirt wet."

"Alright, give me your shirt then." I roll my eyes and hold my hand out.

He wiggles his eyebrows and takes his shirt off. Oh, holy god. His body is fucking incredible, and he's still all wet. His hair is sticking to his forehead, and he's got a smirk on his face like he knows exactly what I'm thinking.

“My eyes are up here, Cricket,” he says teasingly.

I snatch the shirt out of his hands, probably more dramatically than I really need to. I wave it in the air and use my magic, and then I hold it up to show the guys. It’s completely dry.

“Shit, dude...” Rylan stares at the shirt in shock. He gets a cheesy grin on his face. “You know, Elsa asked me to do some laundry before she got home. It would be amazing if you could maybe help me out really quick?”

The guys laugh. Cas puts his arm around me and growls playfully. “Fuck no! She’s our witch. Go find your own!”

“Speaking of Elsa, where is everybody?” Hollis runs his fingers through my hair as he looks at Rylan.

My stomach grumbles really freaking loudly just then. Hollis, Cas, and Theo snicker. But they promised me food, so we walk back inside with Rylan following us.

While Theo rummages in the fridge, and Cas looks through the pantry, Rylan leans against the counter. “Mom and Elsa are at the grocery store with the kids, and I’m pretty sure my dad’s at Theo’s house with Holden.”

Hollis leans against the island so he’s standing across from Rylan, and he pulls me back so I’m leaning against him. It makes me nervous that they’re already being so touchy with me in front of Rylan, but they obviously think it’s normal or okay. I guess I’ll just have to trust them.

Theo steps away from the fridge with a pile of food in his arms. Cas carries even more food over to me, if possible. They glare at each other as they set everything on the island behind me and Hollis. Hollis chuckles, shakes his head, and pushes me until we’re leaning against the opposite counter next to Rylan.

We watch Theo and Cas shove each other and bicker over all the fucking food they’ve laid out. I know better than to intervene when they’re being stupid and wolfy. I know Theo could easily make Cas stop with his alpha voice, so it’s obvious he wants to fight. Rylan keeps grinning back and forth between us.

Finally, Cas jumps toward me with a triumphant smile. “I made you this sandwich, Cricket!”

Theo shoves in front of him, waving his own sandwich around. “Eat my sandwich first, Cricket.”

I don’t know if I should be horrified or elated. I feel my face flush. “Are you guys for real right now?”

Their faces fall, and god, it makes me feel terrible! There’s no fucking way I’m choosing one of them first before the other. So, I reach out and grab both sandwiches. One looks like turkey with tomato and avocado, and the other is tuna salad with cucumbers. I stack them on top of each other and try to smooch them together before taking a huge bite of both of them at once.

Luckily, it’s not a bad combination. I don’t know what I would have done if one of them made me a peanut butter sandwich. It takes forever to chew, but I swallow and smile at them. “Thanks, guys.”

Theo and Cas smile so brightly, like I just made their fucking day. Hollis laughs and moves from behind me so he can pull a glass out of the cupboard. He walks over to the fridge, pours lemonade into the glass, and hands it to me. While I munch on my sandwiches contentedly, the guys devour everything else still sitting out on the island countertop.

Rylan’s eyes twinkle in amusement as he watches them. “You guys know my dad’s grilling burgers and hotdogs later, right? And my mom is probably buying a crap ton of other stuff for us to eat too.”

Theo shrugs, his mouth still full. “We’ll be hungry later.”

“What about her?” Rylan points at me. “Mom will be pissed if you ruin her appetite.”

“Cricket’s stomach is pretty much a bottomless pit. She’ll be fine.” Cas snorts.

I hastily scarf down the rest of my sandwiches and drink the lemonade Hollis poured for me. After setting the glass in the sink, I bounce on the balls of my feet and whine at the guys. “Okay, hurry up! I wanna go and play!”

Theo scrunches his nose up, and Cas snickers. They clean up the mess they made. When everything is put away, Hollis grabs my hand and walks toward the door to the backyard.

When Rylan follows us, Theo smirks at him. “Don’t you have some laundry to do, Ry?”

“Yeah, but I’d rather watch you guys. It’s entertaining.” Rylan pouts. He grudgingly turns around and heads to the laundry room.



## Chapter Thirty-Five

When we're outside, Theo, Cas, and Hollis stop and stare at me without saying anything. It makes me feel defensive, so I put my hands on my hips and glare at them. "What?"

Cas and Hollis look at each other, and Theo grins. "Just waiting for you to get undressed, little witch."

I feel myself blushing. Cas and Hollis seem embarrassed too. But I give them a teasing grin and raise an eyebrow. "You first."

Since Theo already has his shirt off, he turns to grin wolfishly at his friends. Cas and Hollis laugh and pull their shirts up over their heads, tossing them onto a pool chair. *Holy shit*. Seriously, they should walk around shirtless all the time. That would be amazing. I know I'm staring at them way too obviously and for way too long, but damn. The three of them lined up like that look really fucking good.

Theo gives me a lopsided smile and snickers. "Geez, stop drooling!"

When Hollis and Cas snicker along with him, I glower haughtily. I slowly and sensually slide the straps of my dress over my shoulders and let the dress fall around my feet. I bend down slowly to pick it up and walk over to the pool chair so I can lay it next to their tee shirts. When I turn around, I can't hide the smirk on my face. They stare at every inch of my body, their jaws dropped.

I put a hand on my hip and use the same high-pitched voice Theo uses whenever he's mocking me. "Geez, stop drooling, guys!"

Theo and Hollis snap out of it and meet my eyes with sheepish smiles. Cas scowls and runs a hand through his hair as he continues to stare at me. I remind myself they can't touch me the way I desperately want them to because of the alpha order thing. Even though the horny part of my brain is irritated, it definitely takes the pressure off this situation. I give them another flirty grin before walking over to the deep end and diving in.

It doesn't take the guys long to join me, and soon we're swimming and playing around. For the first few minutes, they seem hesitant to touch me. After I tell them they're being ridiculous, they don't hold back from grabbing me, dunking me, throwing me, and tackling me in the water.

I'm annoyed when I realize they're a lot faster than me in the water. I always thought I was a decent swimmer since I grew up near the beach. And it sucks, because when I'm using my magic, I can usually beat them in pretty much everything else.

After they beat me in a stupid race for the fourth time, Hollis gives me a concerned look. “What’s wrong? Is your magic okay?”

“She can’t use her affinity in the water.” Theo laughs when I pout.

Hollis and Cas smile in surprise. I give them a look and grumble, “Don’t look so smug about it.”

“Fucking hell, let us enjoy the fact we found something we’re better at than you are.” Cas grabs me so he’s holding me while we tread water. He swims to one end of the pool and grins at Theo. “Here, catch her!”

Theo smiles mischievously and quickly swims to the opposite end so Hollis is in the middle. God, they’re idiots. They seriously want to play monkey-in-the-middle with me? I have to admit, it is pretty freaking fun. Cas and Theo throw me so fucking hard I barely have to use my magic. I only use it to step in the air out of Hollis’s reach so he can’t grab me.

I’m laughing my ass off, and Hollis is getting pissed. He splashes at me and Theo. “Fuck you guys, you’re cheating!”

“Don’t blame me! Cricket’s the cheater!” Theo gives me an excited grin like he’s proud of that before throwing me across the pool.

When I’m above Hollis, I make a show of stepping around the air and dangling my feet just out of his reach. He smiles up at me with this crazy, playful gleam in his eyes. While I’m taunting him, he turns his head to look at the patio. Distracted, I turn to look too.

Elsa, Margot, and Rylan are watching us. Rory stands by the edge of the pool, bouncing up and down excitedly. Before I can say hello, Hollis leaps up out of the water and grabs my ankle. He pulls me down hard into the water, making me shriek with laughter.

When we break the surface, he grins like he just won a medal. He pulls me into a hug with his arms around me so my boobs are pressed against his chest. This definitely doesn’t escape his notice. He looks down at my chest and smirks at me before leaning in to quietly growl in my ear. Ugh, it freaking gives me goosebumps and makes me want him so badly. He knows it, too.

Luckily, before my thoughts can wander, Cas walks around the edge of the pool and tackles us so all three of us get dunked under the water. When we come up for air, Cas is holding me and giving me an adorable smile with his cute little dimple showing. We swim over to the edge where Rory is crouched down. Theo’s sitting next to her, letting his feet dangle in the water.

“Hi, Cricket!” Rory gives me a toothy smile.

“Hey, Rory!” I grin back.

“What, you don’t like me or Hollis anymore?” Cas fake-pouts.

She giggles and shakes her head. “Mom, can I play with them? Please?”

Margot comes over and gives me a friendly smile before giving Rory a stern look. “Did you finish your homework?”

“I promise I’ll do it after! I just want to show Cricket a flip!” Rory pleads.

She’s an adorable freaking kid, and I feel so honored. I can tell Margot’s about to say no to her. Theo gives me a teasing smirk and winks before pushing Rory into the pool, fully clothed. She breaks the surface and treads water next to us with a big, old grin on her face.

“Theodore Ashbrooke!” Margot shrieks angrily.

My eyes light up and I laugh. “No freaking way. *Theodore!*?”

Cas and Hollis snicker, and Theo gives me an embarrassed smile. “Do we really want to talk about who has the stupidest name here?”

“Yeah, that would be you,” I say. Hollis and Cas laugh even harder, and they fist-bump me.

Margot crosses her arms at Theo. He jumps up and pulls Rory out of the water. He gives his aunt a charming smile.

“Relax. We’ll let her show us her flip, and Cricket can dry her off really quick before she goes and does her homework.” Theo smiles at Rory. “Deal?”

Rory nods eagerly and gives her mom puppy dog eyes. Margot sighs in exasperation and nods. Cas and Hollis lift themselves out of the water, and Theo holds his hand out for me to pull me up too.

When I'm standing next to the pool, Margot gives me a softer smile. "Nice to see you again, Cricket."

I tell her the same and wave at Elsa in greeting before following Rory and the guys to the deep end. Rory is so excited, and she actually does a decent flip. When she comes up for air, the guys and I holler and whoop at her. Hollis pulls her out of the water, and we high-five her.

"Nice one, Ror!" Rylan calls out, holding two thumbs up.

She grins proudly, still dripping water all over the place. She turns to me. "Can you do a flip?"

"Without using your magic, cheater." Hollis teases, nudging me.

"Yeah, I can. Probably not as good as you, though." I laugh. Rory and the guys pressure me to do a flip. I wish they had a diving board here, but knowing how rough the guys are, they'd probably break it.

Getting a running start, I laugh and flip into the pool. Margot insists it's time for Rory to go inside for her homework. Rory pouts, but we walk her over to where her mom, Rylan, and Elsa are sitting.

"Don't worry, kid. Cricket's staying over here for a while. You'll still be able to play with us later." Theo chuckles when Rory continues to whine and pout. He crouches down so he can meet her eyes better. "Now, Cricket's going to use her magic to dry you. It kind of tickles, though, okay?"

Rory's eyes light up, and she gives me another toothy smile. I make my eyes wide and crazy before giving her a witch-cackle and waving my fingers at her. Within seconds, she's completely dry.

Cas, Theo, and Hollis laugh in surprise. Cas grabs my hands, threading our fingers together. "God, please. Don't do that again."

Margot stares at Rory in shock and reaches out to touch a strand of her wavy, red-gold hair. Rylan laughs at his mom's face. "Cool trick, huh?"

"Better watch your son over there. He already tried to rope Cricket into doing his laundry earlier," Theo says.

Elsa laughs loudly and smacks his arm. Rylan shrugs and animatedly describes how I dried Theo's shirt earlier by shaking it in the air. Margot sends Rory inside. The guys and I sit and talk with her, Rylan, and Elsa for a while. Elsa tells me Eva is upstairs taking a nap, but I'll get a chance to meet her later.

When the guys get antsy about getting back in the pool again, Margot and Elsa go inside to get stuff ready for dinner. Rylan goes back to his book. Cas, Theo, and Hollis take turns flipping over the side of the pool. All of them can do a double flip.

I tell the guys I could probably do more if I could get higher up. So, Theo and Cas decide it sounds like a spectacular idea to throw me into the air so I can do better flips into the pool. They stand facing each other and cup their hands together so I can step onto them, almost like in cheerleading. The first couple of times, they throw me high enough that I can get in two or three flips at a time. They get crazy competitive, and soon enough they're launching me high enough that I can see over the house. Every time I'm about to land in the water, Hollis leaps from the side of the pool and catches me before we hit the water.

I don't know how long we've been playing, but I am having so much freaking fun and laughing my ass off. When Hollis and I break the surface again, I call out to Cas and Theo. "How many was that?"

"Eight, I think." Cas grins.

"Okay, let's do it again." I wiggle in Hollis's arms.

"Sorry, little witch. Apparently, we're giving our moms heart attacks." Theo groans in annoyance.

I whip my head around to look over at the covered patio. Cas's mom, Hollis's mom, and a



beautiful woman with light blonde hair are staring at us in utter horror. I feel my face flush, and I swear, I nearly have a heart attack. I lean in to whisper in Hollis's ear. "You guys didn't tell me your families were coming over too."

"I'm sorry. We thought you might freak out, and we wanted you to act like yourself." Hollis bites his lip and shrugs.

He swims over to the side of the pool where Cas helps pull me out. I'm trying really hard to tramp down my nerves. Violetta and Althea have been incredibly sweet to me, but seeing them together is totally nerve-racking. Plus, I haven't met Theo's mom. I have no idea what she's going to think of me.

When we make it to the covered patio, I notice Hollis's dad watching us while he talks to Rylan. Theo tosses me my dress from the pool chair. I give him a grateful smile and pull it over my head as I dry off.

Violetta beams when I'm close enough and pulls me into an embrace. "Cricket, I'm so happy to see you again!"

Before I can respond, Cas's mom pulls me into a hug, too. "Darling! I didn't realize you'd be here! How lovely to see you!"

I'm surprised by the hugging and their enthusiasm, and it definitely helps settle my nerves. While Althea hugs me, she turns a glare on the boys. "What on earth were you doing? You could have seriously injured her!"

The blonde woman steps forward and frowns at Theo. "I've been waiting for weeks to finally meet this girl, and now I find out she's already met your friends' mothers?"

Theo rolls his eyes. I smile sweetly and hold my hand out to her. "I'm Cricket. It's nice to finally meet you!"

She gives me a dazzling smile. She is so pretty, it's insane! All three of them are, but Theo's mom seriously looks like she could be a model.

"The pleasure is all mine! I've heard so much about you! I'm Calla."

"How high do you think you guys were throwing her?" Sumner asks, sliding an arm around his wife's waist.

Cas, Hollis, and Theo raise their eyebrows at me, and I shrug. "I don't know, but I could see over the top of the house."

Rylan joins our circle and laughs. "I'm surprised you didn't throw up, witchy girl."

"Are you not at all concerned the boys could have broken her neck?" Violetta narrows her eyes at Sumner and Rylan.

"Mom, she's fine. Cricket can fly. If they threw her wrong, she'd still be okay." Hollis rolls his eyes.

The guys' parents widen their eyes at me in disbelief, and Rylan grins excitedly. "Yeah, I saw her do it earlier over the pool! Except it didn't really look like flying. It was like she was stepping on something in the air."

"Why do you do that, anyway? Instead of just floating?" Cas asks, crossing his arms.

It's weird to have so much attention on me regarding my magic, and I feel my cheeks flush.

"It's just easier," I say. Hollis asks me what I mean, and I decide it might be easier to demonstrate. "The air feels solid to me, like a real, tangible thing I can touch and move."

I take a couple of steps into the air like I'm climbing a ladder. "This takes way less energy, mentally." I drop back down to the ground, and I let myself float a few above the ground. "And this takes a little more focus."

Everyone stares at me in awe. Cas, Theo, and Hollis look really freaking proud. I feel awkward, like I'm not sure what to say next.

Margot walks outside. "Cricket, how many veggie burgers would you like? Hawthorne's about to

set everything out on the grill.”

“Um, veggie burgers?” I give her a confused look and shake my head.

She frowns and tilts her head. “Theo told me you’re a vegetarian.”

I turn my head to see Theo with his nose scrunched up, on the verge of laughter. Jesus, I want to punch him.

Thankfully, Cas barks out a laugh and punches Theo for me. “God, you are such a fucking dick!”

Hollis bites his lip to hide his smile. “Sorry, Margot. Cricket’s not a vegetarian. She’ll eat anything you put in front of her.”

“Yeah, and five or six burgers should about do it for her.” Cas gives me a teasing grin.

“Are you guys calling me fat?” I widen my eyes and let my bottom lip tremble.

“No!” Hollis and Cas shout, horrified.

Theo snickers and holds his hand up for me to high-five. I raise an eyebrow at him. “I don’t think so, *Theodore*.”

I realize the guys’ parents are watching us curiously with weird smiles on their faces. I feel nervous again. Hawthorne steps outside with Theo’s dad, Holden. Everyone seems excited to see them, and Sumner and Rylan follow them to the grill and talk about my magic and the stunts I was pulling with the guys in the pool.

Violetta pulls me over to a pool chair, and I’m surrounded by her, Althea, and Calla. They give me pretty smiles and ask me a million questions about my family, school, what I want to study in college, and what I think of the guys. It feels like I’m being interviewed, but they seem really sweet and genuine.

Theo, Cas, and Hollis hover nearby until Rory runs outside and convinces them to play in the pool with her. Just before Margot comes out to announce the food is ready, Violetta grabs my hand. “I would love it if you’d come and have dinner with us again sometime this week!”

“She’s already coming over to my house for dinner tomorrow night.” Althea says, tossing her hair over her shoulder with a haughty expression on her face.

This is news to me, but that sounds great! I’m about to tell her just that, but Cas swims over to the edge of the pool closest to us and smiles at me. “Oh yeah, I forgot to tell you. I’m picking you up in the morning, and I’m bringing you over to my house after school. I hope that’s okay.”

“Of course it’s okay!” I give him a bright, genuine smile. He beams at me in delight and swims back over to where Theo, Rory, and Hollis are laughing.

Violetta and Althea exchange an amused look, and Calla smiles softly. “I hope the boys haven’t been too overbearing.”

“A little, but I know they’re just trying to be sweet. It doesn’t bother me.” I giggle, glancing at the guys in the pool.

Everybody heads inside to the kitchen to get food. Hollis fills a plate for me before I can touch anything. Cas opens a soda can and hands it to me, and Theo ruffles my hair. Elsa finally brings Eva downstairs. She is the cutest toddler ever, with strawberry blonde hair and chubby cheeks. Everybody sits outside around the patio. I’m quiet while I watch everyone else. They’re all so comfortable and in sync with one another, and I can somewhat see how their hierarchy works with Hawthorne as their alpha, and Holden as his beta. The women seem to listen to Margot above everyone else, which is interesting. I make a mental note to ask the guys later about female alphas, and if that’s a thing. I wonder where and how I fit in, if I really am a part of the guys’ pack.

After everybody’s finished eating, we sit around and continue talking. Elsa comes to sit beside me, complaining she hasn’t gotten to talk to me as much as everybody else has. She’s carrying Eva, who wiggles free and climbs into my lap.

She seems content to sit still with me for the moment. Elsa tells me she’s hoping her next baby is a boy. She’s due in April. We’ve probably only been talking for a few minutes when Eva wiggles and shifts into a wolf puppy while still sitting in my arms.

It surprises the crap out of me, but holy shit. She's so cute! She's fluffy, with light reddish-brown fur, and some patches of white fur on her feet and chest. She wags her tail and nuzzles me. I hold her up under her arms and squeal at Theo, Cas, and Hollis.

"Oh my god, she's the cutest thing I've ever seen!" When they laugh, I grin at Elsa. "When do you guys start shifting? Or can you already do it when you're born?"

"When we're about a year old, usually. Eva's a little strange. She prefers to be in her wolf form. It's extremely stressful to take her out in public sometimes." Elsa laughs.

I sit down on the ground so I can play with her. The guys are watching me, and I give them a teasing grin. "She's even softer than you guys are."

Rylan walks over and sits beside Elsa, lightly resting a hand on her knee. "So, you really go running around with these guys when they've shifted?"

"I nearly had a panic attack when I came home from work last week to find her and Hollis in his room while he was in his wolf form." Violetta laughs softly.

Rylan gets a crazy grin on his face and wiggles his eyebrows at Hollis. "Well, well. Didn't know you were into such kinky stuff, Hollis."

I make a choking noise, and Hollis growls ferociously at Rylan. I don't think I've ever seen him get so mad. Theo and Cas look extremely irritated, Theo barks, "Shut the fuck up, Rylan."

"I'm joking! It's not a big deal. Pretty sure everyone here knows you guys want to bang her." Rylan shrugs, looking even more amused.

Everyone gets really quiet, and I want to fucking die. I can't even make eye contact with anyone, and I have no idea what I should do or say. Elsa hisses angrily. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

Rylan tries to speak again, but Hawthorne uses this crazy, scary voice on him. "Inside, now."

Theo slowly walks over to me and rests his hand gently on top of my head. He uses his alpha voice, his tone cold and furious. "We're leaving. Otherwise, I'm probably going to kill Rylan."

I look up and meet his eyes. I don't think I've ever been more embarrassed, and I don't know how I'm ever going to face their parents again. I really thought they all liked me, and I was starting to feel comfortable here.

I go to grab Eva so I can hand her back to Elsa, but I must startle her because she makes a small yipping noise and bites the side of my face. It hurts like a bitch, but I only make a small hissing sound, not wanting to scare her again. I'm about to apologize to Elsa, but Cas crouches beside me and growls threateningly at Eva.

She whimpers and trembles in my arms. I cradle her protectively against my chest and turn her away from Cas before glaring at him. "Back off, Cas! She's just a baby!"

Cas blinks at me in shock and jerks back. He swallows nervously. "But you're bleeding."

Elsa snatches Eva up by the scruff of her neck and gives me a horrified look of guilt. "I'm so sorry!"

If I wasn't so freaked out, I would find it hilarious to see her carry Eva like that.

My face throbs painfully, and I reach my hand up to brush my fingers over my cheek. I am bleeding. I need a mirror so I can see the wound to heal it. I open my mouth to tell one of the guys, but Hollis sits down heavily beside me and hands me my phone. He already has the camera open in selfie mode, and I give him a grateful smile.

The puncture wounds are pretty bad, but I take a few deep breaths and focus on my magic. When I'm calm enough, I whisper the healing spell Aurora taught me. I only need to say them once this time, and I run my thumb slowly over each mark. I'm able to heal everything so my skin is good as new. It still hurts, but I know the pain will fade after a little while.

"Are you okay?" Hollis asks quietly.

I nod and make the mistake of looking at everyone else. They're all fucking staring at me. Theo breathes angrily out of his nose and holds his hand out to help me up. "Let's go."

I follow him without question, Hollis and Cas right behind me. It feels nuts to leave like this without saying anything. At first, nobody stops us until Althea jumps up and grabs my hand.

She speaks to me in French. *“Please, sweetheart, don’t listen to what that stupid, immature male said. I hope you’ll still come over for dinner tomorrow night.”*

“Merci. I’ll be there.” I give her a small smile.

Theo doesn’t want us to walk through the house, so we walk around. I feel terrible I didn’t get a chance to thank Margot and Hawthorne for the food, and for letting us use their pool. All I can focus on is getting away and into Theo’s jeep.

I’ve barely finished buckling my seatbelt, and Theo hasn’t even turned the key in the ignition yet when I start crying. Fuck, it makes me feel worse and more humiliated for the guys to see me like this. Theo jerks his head up in alarm. When he realizes I’m crying, he trembles angrily and punches the steering wheel.

“I change my mind.” He growls viciously. “I am going to fucking kill him.”

He gets out of the jeep and roughly slams the door closed. I watch as he storms back up to Hawthorne’s house, heading straight to the backyard.

Hollis reaches forward to unbuckle my seatbelt. He gently grabs me under both arms to pull me into the back so I’m sitting squished between him and Cas. They hug and comfort me, but I can’t stop crying.

“Please don’t cry, baby,” Cas whispers. He kisses the top of my head and rests his head against mine.

“I just feel so humiliated. I really want your family to like me, and I thought they did. I don’t want them to look at me like how everyone else does.”

“Our families completely adore you. You might not have picked up on it, but our moms were fighting over you. Everyone knows Rylan is an idiot.” Hollis holds my hand and rubs his thumb over my knuckles soothingly.

I wipe the tears from my eyes, trying to focus on their consoling words. “I think I freaked them all out with my magic, too.”

“So, what?” Cas shrugs. “We fucking love your magic.”

“You make us so much stronger. We’re incredibly proud you’re a part of our pack. It might sound stupid, but we want to show you off to our families.” Hollis squeezes my hand reassuringly.

I smile shakily until I realize they’re still shirtless. I let my eyes wander over them, and I lean against Cas with a sigh. “I was having so much fun with you guys. I just can’t believe Rylan had to ruin everything.”

Hollis’s eyes are glued to my legs, and he lightly runs his fingers over my thigh, just under the hem of my dress. “Well, if Theo doesn’t beat the shit out of him, Hawthorne probably will.”

Cas nuzzles the top of my head and groans. “I can barely smell you underneath all the chlorine in your fucking hair now.”

I laugh in surprise. Hollis grins and leans forward so he can nuzzle my hair too. He snickers at Cas and smirks. “I can still smell her.”

Having them sniff me tickles. It makes me giggle, which only encourages them more. They sniff me all over my hair, face, and neck. I squeal at them. “You guys are so dumb!”

“You love it though.” Cas gives me a lopsided smile.

I can’t deny it. I’m smiling like crazy.



## Chapter Thirty-Six

### *Theo*

My wolf trembles in anger as I slam the jeep door closed. I grind my teeth, forcing myself to remain calm. As calm as fucking possible, anyway. Cricket cries all the time over dumb shit, like cheesy movies or the guys and me doing anything remotely cute with her. But I've never seen her cry because someone hurt her fucking feelings.

I'm going to fucking kill Rylan.

When I walk into the backyard, everyone seems on edge. Cas's mom stands face-to-face with Hawthorne as she snarls at him. "Tell us what you're hiding right now!"

Hawthorne looks irritated, but I don't give a shit. If he wants to keep information from the pack, that's *his* problem. My eyes scan the backyard until I spot Rylan hunched near the door on the patio. I bare my teeth and rush over to him using my wolf's speed.

He flinches the moment I appear in front of him, and I snarl viciously. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

He shakes his head, a pitiful whimper escaping his throat. I want to shift so fucking badly. Instead, I punch him in his stupid face, forcing him to stumble back.

"You made Cricket cry, you motherfucking piece of shit!"

"I'm sorry!" Rylan yelps, lowering his eyes and hunching his shoulders further. "I was only joking around."

His refusal to defend himself, to submit so easily to me, only makes me more furious. My vision is practically fucking red as I punch him again. My wolf is so close to the edge. If I shift, I know I'm going to tear him apart.

"She was already nervous. How would you feel if I humiliated your mate in front of a group of strangers?" I ask, my voice rough from growling.

Rylan winces and holds his hands up. He knows he's outmatched. "I wasn't thinking! She didn't seem nervous, and you guys were acting so fucking nuts with her! Besides, you don't really know for sure she's your mate, do you?"

God, why won't he *shift*? I can't put him in his place fully unless he does. And I can't shift first. He's weaker than I am, practically an omega. I punch him again.

“That’s enough.” Hawthorne growls at me, using his alpha voice.

“Make him shift!” I turn to glare at my uncle, using my alpha voice in return.

He walks over to me quickly, putting himself between me and Rylan as he bares his teeth. “Don’t forget your place here, pup. You’re not alpha of your own pack just yet.”

I breathe angrily through my nose, not backing down. “Please, make him fucking shift.”

“No. You know it’s not a fair fight,” he says. He looks at Rylan, taking stock of his injuries. He has a split lip, a black eye, and some bruises forming along his jaw. He deserves way fucking worse. Those injuries will heal within half an hour. Hawthorne must agree because he growls threateningly at him. “I’ll finish dealing with you later.”

Everyone else has been quiet since I returned to the backyard. There are a few tense seconds of silence until my mom speaks up. “So, it’s you? Cricket is your mate?”

Violetta stands up angrily. “We were told she was the mate of one of our sons. There’s no reason it can’t be Hollis. She’s perfect for him!”

“You can’t be serious.” Althea scoffs. “She obviously has the most chemistry with my Cassian. You all saw how protective he was of her!”

“And you also just heard her using an alpha voice on your precious Cassian! What does that tell you?” my mom says scornfully.

Are they fucking serious right now? Our moms are fighting over which of us is her mate? Do they not even *care* that our mate is in pain, crying because of the way she was treated here? I snarl, capturing everyone’s attention. They may not realize it yet, but I’m the strongest wolf in this fucking yard right now.

“Cricket is *our* mate. All three of us.” Let them fucking argue or say a word against her again.

While everyone gasps and stares at me in shock, I meet my dad’s eyes, challenging him. I haven’t spoken to him since I heard him talking disrespectfully about Cricket and my pack brothers. He lowers his gaze, submitting to me.

“Is that even possible?” Sumner asks Hawthorne.

“It’s not entirely unheard of,” Hawthorne says. He crosses his arms and stands taller to appear more confident. “I found a female elder from a pack in Jasper, Alberta who’s seen wolves with multiple mates before. She’s asked to visit us so she can meet Cricket and your sons for herself on the girl’s eighteenth birthday when it’s most likely for her mate marks to appear.”

Hope blossoms in my chest. This is great fucking news. I can’t wait to tell Hollis!

Hawthorne gives me a look that makes me second-guess myself, and I raise my eyebrows at him.

“She says Cricket will need to make a choice when the time comes.” Hawthorne sighs. “Aurora believes this is why her visions are becoming more unclear and sporadic concerning the four of you.”

No. No, no, no. That can’t be true. That *can’t* happen. Cricket loves all of us. I know she does.

“She’s going to choose all of us,” I say. Our moms start bickering again, saying it’s impossible and will never work. I growl until they’re silent. “You don’t get it. It’s so easy, so natural with her. I love Cricket, and I trust Cas and Hollis with her. Like right now, I know she’s upset. I left her in the fucking car, crying. But I know Hollis and Cas are better at comforting her than I am, and I trust them to do that.”

I glance at my dad again. He’s frowning, and I try not to show how much that hurts. I swallow the lump in my throat and continue, “When she’s away from me, I miss her. But if she’s with one of them, that makes it so much easier to bear. And sharing her between us? She doesn’t even have her mate marks yet, but already I feel my connection to Cas and Hollis getting stronger too.”

My dad clears his throat. “My son, Hollis, and Cas have always been closer than most pack-siblings. When they were growing up, we assumed it was because they were so close in age. But I think this might be the real reason.”

Does he really mean that? Has he changed his mind about accepting my mate and relationship

with the guys? Or does he just feel guilty for pissing me off?

“Do Hollis and Cassian feel the same?” Hollis’s mom asks. “They’re okay with this if this is true?”

“Hollis feels the same,” I say. I hesitate briefly and add, “Cas has been a little more reserved when it comes to his feelings for Cricket. We’re going to wait to tell him until Cricket’s birthday.”

Althea glowers, crossing her arms haughtily. “Even if Cassian goes along with this insanity, there’s no guarantee Cricket will choose to be mated with three different males.”

I don’t know how to make them understand. But also, there’s a tiny voice in the back of my head telling me maybe she’s right. Even Hawthorne, Aurora, and this mysterious elder female seem to think it’s a longshot Cricket will choose three mates.

Rylan clears his throat, surprising everyone. He’s been quiet since Hawthorne broke up our fight. “I know my opinion is worth shit, but I’ve just gotta say, I agree with the kid. I don’t think witchy girl *can* choose between them.”

“What makes you say that?” Hawthorne asks calmly.

“Well, before everyone got here, Cricket was hungry. Theo and Cas got into a scrap in the kitchen over which of them was going to feed her. They each made her a sandwich and fucking begged her to eat theirs first. And you know what witchy girl did?” Rylan smiles and claps his hands together dramatically. “She fucking smashed the sandwiches together and ate ‘em both at the same time.”

Sumner and my dad laugh in surprise. Violetta pats her hair down with a nervous gesture and asks, “Hollis didn’t make her a sandwich?”

Rylan shakes his head in amusement. “Nope, he sat back and enjoyed the show with witchy girl leaning against him. And he got her something to drink.”

I grin at him, and Rylan smiles back. He takes a few steps closer to me. “Seriously, I am sorry. I didn’t mean to humiliate her. Honestly, I was trying to embarrass you guys more than anything. She’s fucking cool, dude, and I meant it earlier when I welcomed her to the family!”

Hawthorne sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose. “You welcomed her to the family? Do you realize she still has no clue about any of this? She has no idea what it means yet to be a part of a pack.”

“Everybody here wants her in the family, right?” Rylan spreads his arms out in bewilderment.

I look around the yard. Judging by everyone’s faces, Rylan’s not wrong. They might not all be fully on board with us sharing a mate, but it’s obvious everyone likes Cricket and thinks she’ll be a good addition to our pack.

“I’m sorry for punching you,” I say to Rylan. Now that I’ve calmed down, I know I shouldn’t have pushed him. What he said about Cricket was out of line, but he obviously didn’t mean anything by it.

Rylan grins broadly. Everyone else continues staring at me, but I don’t have anything else to say to them. They’ll either support us or they won’t. I meet my dad’s eyes one more time, and he stands up straighter with a slight smile. I hesitate, wanting to say something.

But Cricket’s waiting for me. I’ll talk to him later.



## *Cricket*

While we’re waiting for Theo, Hollis and Cas keep trying to make me laugh. They ask if they can come over to Aurora’s to watch a movie before they go home for the night. Fifteen minutes later, we look up in surprise when Theo opens the driver’s side door.

He peers at us and chuckles. “Fuck, you guys look really cute together back there like that.” Theo doesn’t take his eyes off me, and he holds his hand out towards Hollis. “Give me her phone.”

Hollis hands my phone over, and I smile when Theo holds it up in front of us. Cas tickles my side

at the last second, so I'm laughing when Theo takes the picture. He hands me the phone with a soft smile on his face.

"I punched Rylan a couple of times before Hawthorne stopped me. Everyone was really pissed off at him. You'll still come back over here another time, right?"

"Of course," I tell him genuinely. "I really like everybody. I just, you know, I don't want them to think I'm some weird, slutty witch trying to corrupt you guys."

"Little witch, I promise nobody thinks that." Theo scrunches his nose at me while Hollis and Cas laugh. He starts the jeep and turns around to smile at us again. "Alright, where are we headed?"

"Let's get her some ice cream first," Hollis says. "She said we can go back to her place to watch a movie after."

Theo nods and backs out of the driveway. Downtown Emery Ridge looks busy with lots of people walking up and down the sidewalks. Theo parks across the street from Flora & Feathers. I pout when the guys pull their tee shirts on before getting out of the car. It's seriously a travesty. It should be illegal for them to cover up their abs like that. Hollis hands me my sandals out of my bag. I think it's the cutest thing ever that he's been keeping track of it all day. I definitely would have forgotten my stuff at Hawthorne's house.

Theo threads his fingers through mine and swings our hands back and forth as we make our way down the street to The Sweet Spot. On our way there, we pass a group of kids I vaguely recognize from school. A guy and two girls.

The guy grins in surprise when he sees us. He's tall with smooth, light brown skin, freckles, crazy long eyelashes, and wavy black hair. "Yo, what's good?"

"Not much. Just going to get our girl some ice cream!" Theo fist bumps him and holds my hand up between us while giving me the cutest smile.

Mr. Eyelashes gives me a radiant smile. "It's Cricket, right? I'm Ralph."

I can't help but smile back. He's cute. Nowhere near as attractive as Theo, Cas, and Hollis, obviously. Theo introduces me to the girls. Ariel, Ralph's sister, and Keira, Ralph's girlfriend. Ariel has similar features as Ralph with curly black hair, freckles, and the same rich skin tone. Keira has light blonde hair with pink and blue streaks throughout it, and pretty blue eyes.

"We've been wanting to introduce ourselves all week, but we weren't really sure how to approach you," Ariel says nervously.

Keira nods and glances at the guys behind me. "Your entourage can be kind of intimidating."

I laugh and glance at Theo, and turn to grin at Hollis and Cas behind me. "Who, these guys? Nah."

The girls giggle, and Ralph looks back and forth between me and the guys in amusement. Ralph turns to his girlfriend and sister. "Feel like getting some ice cream too?"

The girls agree, and their group walks down the sidewalk beside us. Theo tells me Ralph is a senior, and he's on our school's hockey team. The girls are in Theo's Yearbook Class, and they're in the grade below us.

When we step into the shop, I look around to see if Brennan is here. There are a few people in line at the ice cream counter and at some tables. I spot Brennan and Erin sitting at a table in the corner by the candy counter.

I run over to them and put my arms around their shoulders, lowering my head between theirs. "Fancy seeing you here!"

They seem surprised and extremely excited to see me. Brennan jumps up and pulls me into a hug. "Oh my god, we were just looking at the picture you posted on Instagram. So freaking adorable!"

Ariel and Keira come up behind us, and Ariel giggles. "Right? We were just talking about it before we ran into Cricket outside!"

Brennan gives the girls a weird look and pulls me protectively against his side. He motions to himself and Erin dramatically. "Back off. Cricket is our new best friend."

"Actually, Cricket is *our* best friend." Cas scowls darkly. Hollis nudges him and gives him a look.



Cas sighs and rolls his eyes. “But I guess you and Erin can be her number three and four.”

“Who are one and two if there are three of you?” Erin tilts her head and furrows her eyebrows in confusion.

Theo gets a goofy grin on his face and points to himself, Cas, and Hollis. “The three of us are her number one, and her brothers are both her number two!”

God, they’re so dumb. No wonder I freaking love them so much.

Erin, Brennan, Keira and Ariel giggle. I give the guys a tender smile and glance at Ralph, who’s standing next to Hollis. He’s *totally* checking out Brennan, letting his eyes wander over his body greedily. When he catches me watching him, he flinches. He turns away from me and wraps his arm around Keira’s shoulders. She smiles in surprise, and he pulls her into a passionate kiss.

Nobody else even seems to notice. I bite my lip and glance around at everyone. Hollis raises his eyebrows at me, silently asking me what’s wrong. I shake my head and let it go. If Ralph’s in the closet, or if he’s crushing on Brennan and doesn’t want his girlfriend to find out, that’s definitely not my business.

Brennan pulls his phone out and shows me the screen. I smile when I see a picture of me with Hollis and Cas in the back of Theo’s jeep. I look so incredibly happy, and the guys are smiling at me instead of at the camera. I raise my eyes to Brennan and chuckle. “I haven’t seen this yet. Theo took it on my phone. I didn’t realize he’d posted it already.”

“Told you that you guys looked cute.” Theo reaches forward to ruffle my hair. He glances over at the ice cream counter where the line is finally empty. “Ready to get some ice cream?”

Brennan and Erin follow us over, and Brennan enthusiastically introduces me to his mom behind the register. She’s really sweet, and she tells me Brennan has been talking about me nonstop the past week. Cas pays for our ice cream. Theo pushes two tables together so we can all sit together with Erin, Brennan, Ariel, Keira, and Ralph. Theo still pulls me down to sit in his lap instead of grabbing one extra chair.

Erin and Brennan talk nonstop, which I totally love about them. I can tell they’re more comfortable talking to the guys too. I try to get Ralph and the other girls involved in our conversation, but they mostly stay quiet and watch us.

When I’m finished with my ice cream, Theo gives me a wicked smile. “I think you’ve got some ice cream on your face.”

I raise my hand to wipe it off, but Cas slides really close to us and sloppily licks my cheek. He pulls away and gives me a lopsided grin. “Got it.”

I give him a look of disgust and Theo huffs. “Damn it, Cas. I was going to do that.”

Cas smirks and smashes his ice cream cone against my other cheek. “There you go, all yours.”

Theo snickers and licks it off me, just as sloppily as Cas did.

“Ugh, you guys are so fucking gross.” I make a face at Erin and Brennan, who are trying to hide their giggles.

Cas, Theo, and Hollis snicker. The guys finish their ice cream, and Cas smiles uncharacteristically at Erin and Brennan. “You guys are gonna sit with us at lunch again tomorrow, right?”

Erin, Brennan, and I grin excitedly at each other, and they agree right away. We sit talking for a little longer before we leave to go back to Aurora’s.

When we get back to the bookshop, it’s busy. Paisley’s with a customer, and Luca’s behind the register. I’m glad I have a reason not to talk to either of them right now. The guys follow me upstairs to the living room.

“The TV down here is bigger,” I say. Bigger is an understatement. I only have a laptop in my room to watch movies. Still, I would *totally* be down for snuggling between the three of them in my bed if they were up for it.

Cas sits down on the big couch first, smiling up at me with his dimple showing. “What do you want to watch?”

“And don’t give us any crap about not caring.” Theo wraps his arms around me and nuzzles the top of my head. “We want to watch something that makes you happy.”

They must not realize I’m happy already, just being with them. When the four of us are together like this, nothing else in the world matters. Not rumors at school, people judging our strange relationship, and not the mates the guys may or may not meet someday. I lean against Theo and hum in content.

“Have you guys seen *Moonrise Kingdom*?” I ask. It’s one of my absolute favorites, and I think it’s something they’ll like.

“Never heard of it,” Cas says, flipping on the TV and pulling up Amazon Prime. He types in the movie’s title, and I bite my lip to hide the giant, cheesy grin on my face. Hollis sits on the opposite end of the couch from him.

“You okay?” Theo whispers into my hair.

“Yeah.” I nod and lean back enough so I can look up at him. His amber eyes are soft, and his lips are curved up in the slightest smile. “Do you guys mind if I go shower really quick? I promise I won’t take long.”

Normally, I wouldn’t care about smelling like chlorine, but I know it probably messes with the guys’ noses. Besides, I really love when they sniff my hair. I’ll never admit it to them, and I still think it’s weird. But it’s also one of the cutest things ever. I love how affectionate they are with me.

“Take as long as you need, little witch.” Theo kisses the top of my head and slowly pulls away.

I head upstairs and hop in the shower. I know the guys will wait patiently as long as they need to, but I hate keeping them waiting. They’re being so sweet. I probably overreacted at the barbeque with their families. Next time I go over there, I’ll have to apologize for being such a drama queen. Still, the attention from the guys is something I can’t complain about.

After my shower, I change into a comfy pair of cotton shorts and a tee shirt. Basically, one step away from pajamas. When I get downstairs, another cheesy smile takes over my face. Theo’s sprawled across the loveseat with Stella lying on his chest. Hollis and Cas are in the same spots, and the title screen for *Moonrise Kingdom* is up on the TV screen. All the lights are off, and there’s a tray of snacks and drinks on the coffee table.

“In case you get hungry again.” Cas smirks playfully.

I giggle and hesitate before sitting down. There’s space between Cas and Hollis, but I don’t want to leave Theo out. How am I supposed to choose between them?

“Sit with Hollis and Cas, little witch.” Theo growls, the sound rough and sexy.

For once, I’m glad he’s making the decision for me. I grin at him, silently promising myself to snuggle with Theo the next chance I get, and I squeeze between Cas and Hollis. They press closer, twining their fingers through mine and leaning in to sniff all over my hair, neck, and face.

“So much fucking better.” Cas sighs, making me giggle.

Hollis places his free hand on my thigh, gently brushing his thumb over my skin as he growls softly. “Are you feeling better? We hated seeing you so upset earlier.”

I look up and meet Theo’s eyes, still smiling like an idiot. He’s smiling at me too, his soft gaze running over every inch of me. The longer he watches me with Hollis and Cas, the more he seems to relax. I flush when I think about the conversation we had, about him and the guys *sharing* me. Right now, I can’t deny how amazingly wonderful that sounds. If every moment could be this simple, if we could always be this happy, I’d never have anything to worry or complain about again.

If only they didn’t have mate marks...

Pushing the thought from my head, I snuggle closer to the guys and sigh in content.

“I definitely feel better. This is perfect.”

# Character Guide

## **Main Characters**

Cricket Kendall

Theo Ashbrooke

Hollis Wakefield

Cas Seymour

## **Hawthorne and Margot Ashbrooke's Pack**

Hawthorne Ashbrooke - *Alpha, Theo's Uncle*

Margot Ashbrooke - *Female Alpha, Hawthorne's Mate/Wife, Theo's Aunt*

Holden Ashbrooke - *Beta, Hawthorne's Brother, Theo's Dad*

Calla Ashbrooke - *Holden's Mate/Wife, Theo's Mom*

Sumner Wakefield - *Hollis's Dad*

Violetta Wakefield - *Hollis's Mom*

Atticus Seymour - *Cas's Dad*

Althea Seymour - *Cas's Mom*

Rylan Ashbrooke - *Hawthorne's Eldest Son, Theo's Cousin*

Elsa Ashbrooke - *Rylan's Mate/Wife*

Evangeline "Eva" Ashbrooke - *Rylan and Elsa's Daughter*

Rory Ashbrooke - *Hawthorne's Daughter, Theo's Cousin*

## **The Kendall Family.**

Emerson Kendall - *Cricket's Brother, (also the gay twin, for those who can't remember!)*

Killian Kendall - *Cricket's Brother, Emerson's Twin*

Aurora Kendall - *Cricket's Aunt*

Stella - *Cricket's Familiar*

## **Side Characters**

Brennan Sanders - *Cricket's Friend and Classmate*

Erin Holt - *Cricket's Friend and Classmate*

Jack Bailey - *Brennan and Erin's Best Friend*

Luca – *Emerson's boyfriend, works at Flora & Feathers*

Sara - *Cas's Ex-Girlfriend*

## **Other Minor Characters**

Ezra Wakefield - *Hollis's Brother*

Colette "Lettie" Wakefield (née Seymour) - *Ezra's Mate/Wife, Cas's Older Sister*

Eloise "Ellie" Seymour - *Cas's Younger Sister, lives with her Mate's Pack*

Kit Barringer - *Ellie's Mate*

Paisley - *mean girl, worked at Flora & Feathers, obsessed with Hollis*

Sabrina - *Paisley's Best Friend*

Nadia - *Paisley's Best Friend*

Chloe - *artsy girl, in some of Cricket's classes*

Katy - *works at the coffee shop near Flora & Feathers, dating Chloe, Luca's Best Friend*

Xavier - *Ralph's Best Friend, in Cricket's chemistry class*

Ralph - *Xavier's Best Friend*

Keira - *Ralph's Girlfriend*

Ariel - *Ralph's Sister*



## Acknowledgments

I am so ridiculously happy and humbled to see this book published. While *Cricket* may not be my first published book, it is the first book I ever wrote. I've always been a voracious reader, but I never seriously considered writing *anything* until I discovered the reverse harem genre. My best friend, Kelly, introduced me to *The Curse of the Gods*, and I was instantly freaking hooked. I spent about nine months secretly writing the first three books in Cricket's series, and I never planned on showing a soul. Because, who the hell would want to read something I wrote?

After finally admitting what I'd been spending all my free time doing, Kelly begged and begged to read it, and then she begged me to post it online for other people to enjoy. So, I made a Wattpad account, posted all 450K words of the first draft mess that was *Cricket*, and somehow found the most amazing readers in the universe.

*Cricket* has made me the writer I am now. I'm confident as fuck because of this book, I've made some of the best friends I've ever had because of it, and it even got me a spot in the Wattpad Stars program (which is very fancy and exclusive). It's surreal to see the first book of this series polished and edited and *published* for the whole world to finally see. These characters are basically my children at this point, and I'm not even mad that I'll probably be writing about them for the rest of my life.

So, thank you to every single Cricketeer out there. Whether you were one of my very first readers on Wattpad, whether you discovered *Cricket* after it hit a million views, or whether you're a brand new Cricketeer after stumbling across this book on Amazon. You're all amazing and special and I love the crap out of you.

Thank you to Kelly, obviously. Without you, Cricket and her boys would still be hiding in my brain and on my laptop.

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## **About the Author**

Willow Hadley is a self-published author who primarily writes reverse harem romance. She lives in North Carolina with her husband, David, their doggo Annabel, and two demon-familiars (aka cats), Stella and Elsa. She started writing in early 2018, and she joined the Wattpad Stars program in 2019. She loves character driven stories and fluffy books that give you a warm, fuzzy feeling. She's also obsessed with Disney movies, and her favorite candy is licorice.

*Cricket* is her second published book.

## **Follow Willow on Social Media!**

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## Other Books by Willow Hadley

### *Smile Like You Mean It*

After Charlotte's father died, her mother changed. She became cold and distant, and Charlotte slowly withdrew into herself. She spent years feeling lonely and insignificant, and rarely spoke more than a few words to anyone. One night, after a traumatic incident instigated by her mother, Charlotte is arrested and taken to juvie.

A year later, Charlotte's being released from juvie for the second time. Instead of an awful group home, her social worker brings a welcome surprise: Charlotte's long-forgotten uncle, Arthur, who is all too eager to help her after everything she's been through. When Charlotte learns that Arthur has a step-son her age, she's even more apprehensive. How could he not resent having a stranger thrust into his home and family?

To her surprise and relief, Sebastian is kind and friendly. He and his four best friends—Grayson, Remy, Liam, and Elliot—make Charlotte feel welcome. They never make Charlotte feel badly about her past or her anxiety. They make her feel seen. As she gets to know the boys, she realizes they each have their own issues and demons they're fighting, and she forms a unique bond with their group.

It doesn't help that they're ridiculously attractive. How could Charlotte not fall in love with all five of them?

[Available on Amazon and Kindle Unlimited.](#)