

DEAD OF NIGHT  
BOOK ONE IN THE THORNE HILL SERIES



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Dead of Night

Book One in the Thorne Hill Series

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 Created with Vellum

*To Felicia.*

*All I have to do is say the word  
and you'll get the shovel ready.*

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## CHAPTER 1



“You know,” I say as I turn my dagger over in my hands, looking out into the dark woods in front of me. “I’m starting to take this personally.” I wait, closing my eyes to get a better read on the energy around me. Something dark and demonic is lurking about, but they haven’t made their move yet.

“It’s not like I smell.” I pick up a strand of my wavy brown hair. “I showered and everything. My socks even match.” The clouds that were covering the moon roll away, bathing the earth in pale silver light. I cast my eyes up, feeling the power of the full moon. “Come on, I just want to talk.” I stand, needing to stretch my legs. I’ve been sitting on the cold stone steps of this historical farmhouse for an hour, waiting to make a kill. Shadows move across the porch and my heart skips a beat. There’s more than one demon and I’m out here by myself.

*Hell yes.*

A small smile plays across my lips. Closing my eyes, I inhale and pull in energy from all around me. I’ve been tracking this demon for weeks, following several cases of people going missing on hikes at this national park. With no signs of foul play, the police have come to the conclusion that

the hikers continued their journey through the park, going to the lake where they fell in and got swept away by the undertow. The lake has been searched, of course, but it's not like you can drag all of Lake Michigan for their bodies.

But me? I know better. There are no signs of foul play because every last part of the bodies has been consumed. More hikers will go missing if I don't stop the demons. They're at their full power under the light of the full moon, manifesting from non-corporeal beings into those with physical bodies, which might be bad news for me if I didn't know that tonight was also the only night they could be destroyed.

For good.

Well, if I can get to the spell I have written down on a piece of paper and folded in my pocket in time because very specific words need to be spoken in order to send these guys into the earth for a final dirt nap. I hold the dagger up in one hand, reaching around with the other for the spell.

The air around me cools, and I know at least one is approaching. Dammit. So much for getting out the spell. Yeah, I know I should have memorized it, but Latin has always been difficult for me, and I was banking on being able to look at the paper and read instead of recall. I almost roll my eyes imagining Tabatha's narrowing gaze as she crosses her arms in her tale-tell *I told you so* look.

I hurry down the rest of the stone steps and move around to the side of the house, keeping my eyes trained on the dark woods closest to me. One of the demons lurches forward with a roar, teeth bared and taloned hands outstretched. The other stays behind, and if I couldn't sense the darkness surrounding it, I wouldn't know it was there.

“Silly demon. You should know better than to trust a witch when she says she just wants to talk.”

It lunges for me and I dart out of the way, knowing there’s no way I can stop and get to the spell now. I can’t kill it...not yet. I hold up the dagger, blade glinting in the moonlight.

“Hit him hard and hit him deep. Strike the heart and make him weep,” I whisper and feel magic pulse through my hand and into the blade. Without a second thought, I spring up and turn, throwing the dagger into the night. It hits one of the demons, sinking into its chest and sizzling with red-hot magic.

The other demon who’s humanlike in appearance but is covered in coarse gray skin, hisses and jumps away, rounding on me with talons splayed in my direction. I pull the spell from my pocket and unfold the paper. Right as I look down at my messy letters scrawled across the page, something grabs my hair and yanks me back.

The paper falls from my hand, fluttering to the ground. I jerk my head back, headbutting whoever is behind me. A demon growls and lashes out from the pain, moving its hands from my hair to my waist. It pulls me close and something warm and wet drips along my neck.

“Sick,” I say, bringing my elbow back in a swift movement. I hit it hard in the ribs, twisting and breaking out of its hold. I don’t have time to grimace from the demon blood that is rolling down my skin. The demon without a dagger in its chest barrels forward. I jump out of the way, diving to the ground and rolling back onto my feet in a well-practiced move. The wind picks up, blowing the piece of paper with the spell written on it away from the house and into the woods.

“Son of a bitch,” I mutter and throw out my hand, sending a ball of magical energy at the demon. It staggers back,



knocked to its ass by the force of my power. I use the small distraction to my advantage and turn toward the paper. The other demon pulls the dagger from its chest and hurls it at me.

I dive forward, narrowly avoiding being hit right in the boob with the dagger. It clips my shoulder, tearing open my flesh. I fall to the ground, grunting in pain. Muddy grass squishes beneath me, smearing across my already-ruined shirt. I push off the ground, grabbing the paper and springing back to my feet.

*“Mater et luna voco,”* I start to read, and the demons let out a shriek. They know what’s coming and I enjoy the hell out of this each and every time. *“Redde unde exierunt,”* I go on, voice growing louder. *“Cinis cinerem. Pulvis sunt pariter!”*

I yank a crystal from around my neck and throw it down at the demons’ feet right as I finish reciting the spell. It sparks, sending a wave of magic into the air, and incinerating the demons into nothing more than a pile of ash.



“MORNING,” KRISTY SAYS CHEERFULLY, COMING INTO NOVEL Grounds with two coffees in her hand. It’s an unspoken rule that the person who doesn’t open the bookstore we own together stops by Curlew Café for coffee in the morning. She sets my black coffee on the counter and waves her hand at the blinds, making them magically roll up.

“What happened to your shoulder?” She comes around the counter and stashes her purse in the cabinet under the register.

I’m wearing an off-the-shoulder black sweater and leggings, and I didn’t even realize the cut was showing.

“Stupid warbler demon threw my own dagger at me. After I’d stabbed him with it.”

“Gross.” Kristy wrinkles her nose. “I hope you disinfected it.”

“I did, and I used up the rest of my healing balm this morning.”

“I’ll make you more.” She walks across the store, running her fingers over the spines of books and turns on the *open* sign.

“Thanks.”

“How was the hunt, though? Did you get them?”

“Don’t I always?” I grab my coffee and pop the lid off the paper to-go cup, letting it cool down.

“Don’t get cocky now,” Kristy teases, and it’s only funny because I’m not. I’ve spent years training, and most importantly, I know my limits.

“I’ll try my hardest not to,” I shoot back. “And really, these lower-level demons don’t put up much of a fight. I didn’t even have to summon my familiars for help.”

“That’s good.” Kristy shudders and flips the lock, opening up the store to the general public. Two customers come in by the time she gets back to the counter. Kristy and I met years ago, and while we both have magical powers, we’re quite different. Which is why we make such good friends.

Kristy is a pacifist. She likes making love potions, healing balms, and good luck charms. She spends her spare time gardening and watches nothing but HGTV. But cross her, hurt someone she loves, and the toy poodle turns into Cerberus.

“I’m going shopping later today,” she says, coming back behind the counter and pulling a notebook out of the drawer under the register so she can start making a list. “Shopping” is

code for she's traveling to another coven to purchase magical supplies. "Do you need anything?"

"Black salt and mandrake root," I tell her quietly, eyeing the couple who went right to the romance section. We're the only independent bookstore in the area, and after the last big chain retailer went out of business, things really picked up for us.

"What about vervain and garlic?"

"Yeah. Better safe than sorry, right?"

"That's what I'm thinking. Though so far the vamps in town have been pretty polite."

"It's always the quiet ones who turn out to be cold-blooded killers."

"Kind of like you," she pokes, though it's true. Killing demons is more of a public service I don't get paid for, than murder, but it's still killing.

Overall, the vampires have assimilated into the general population better than anyone expected once they revealed themselves to the world several years ago. But witches aren't the general population. We have a bit of a jaded history and letting the world know vampires exist puts the rest of us magical folk at risk of being exposed. Which we don't want. At all. Witches were persecuted once, and we don't want to be in the public eye again.

With animal blood being sold by the bottle, vampires claim they have no reason to feed on humans anymore. And if they just happen to be craving the fresh blood of the living, they can pay top dollar for "privately and ethically harvested" human blood. The whole thing is still a hot debate, with some people saying it should be illegal to sell human blood like that

when the Red Cross goes through shortages every year. Others say we should be able to do what we want with our blood, and if selling it to be filtered and poured into fancy black bottles is what some want to do, then we should let them.

“That’s all you need?” she asks, jotting down a few more things on her list.

“Yeah, I did an inventory a few days ago and I’m good. Though if you’re able to stop by the Redwood Mortuary, I could use some more Dead Man’s Blood. Preferably something fresh and not from anyone with heart disease.”

“I can stop by and see what they have. Want me to bring everything over tonight?”

“Nah, you can bring it in next time you see me.” Kristy lives downtown, within walking distance from the store, and I live on the outskirts of Thorne Hill in an old house I renovated myself.

The rest of the morning goes on like any other. I recommend my favorite indie author to a group of college-age girls, hook up an older couple with a romance series that’s sure to put the spark back into their love life, and find the perfect self-help book for a shy teenager who I’m pretty sure is skipping school right now, but hey—who am I to judge?

Kristy leaves when the lunchtime slump hits, and I sneak into the back room really fast to use the bathroom and grab my lunch. I turn on music, dancing in place as I open a Tupperware container of last night’s leftovers. I hold my hand over the spaghetti, using magic to heat it up. I sit on the chair behind the register, thinking I’ll get a minute or two at least before someone else comes in. But then the bell dings as the door opens.

I blink a few times and look up, eyes focusing on the dark-haired girl who just walked into the store. She looks around, wringing her hands, unsure of herself. It's her first time here because, trust me, I'd know if this woman had set foot in my store before.

Because she's my sister.

"Abby?" Her name rolls off my lips and I feel just as surprised as she looks. It's been over a year since we've seen each other, and the moment she turns and looks right into my eyes, something tugs on my heart.

I miss her.

"Hey, Callista," she breathes, eyes wide.

"Callie," I correct and then feel bad. Maybe she forgot I don't go by my full name anymore. "What...what are you doing here? I mean...it's nice to see you. Wait, is something wrong?" I jump out of the chair behind the counter and smooth my hair back again. I slept on it wet and it dried all wavy. It's pointless to try and tame it.

"I wanted to see you." She moves into the store far enough to get out of the way of anyone else coming in but doesn't take a step further. Clutching the strap of her Gucci purse, she looks around before turning her gaze on me. "Penny turns one soon. We're having a party."

"One year already," I echo, feeling a pang in my heart. "That went by fast."

"Tell me about it," my sister says, still not moving into the store. She steals another glance around the place, not quite sure if the books are going to stay put or not.

"It's a regular bookstore," I assure her. "You're safe."

“I...I...I’m not...it’s...” She shakes her head, stumbling over her words. Clearing her throat, she reaches into her purse and pulls out a cream-colored envelope. “I’d love to have you at Penny’s party.”

I come around from behind the counter and take the invitation from her. I swallow hard, refusing to let myself feel.

“It’s at our house,” she goes on. “We’re updating our kitchen, so all the food is being catered and brought in from *Luciano’s*. You still like that place, right?”

“Yeah,” I say, though I haven’t been in years.

“Good, because there’s going to be a ton of food. And their famous red wine.” She meets my eyes and gives me a small smile.

“I do like wine,” I say, not agreeing or disagreeing to go to my only niece’s birthday party. “I thought your house was new. You’re doing a renovation already?”

“Oh, right. You don’t know. We, uh, we bought a place in Lincoln Park.”

“Really?” I say, not meaning to sound so surprised. “I thought that penthouse was your dream house and it was so close to the hospital you work at.”

Abby casts her eyes down and her cheeks grow red. “We just thought a change would be, uh, nice. For Penny. The new place is close to the lake and a park.”

She’s not telling the whole truth, but I’m not going to press. As long as she’s got a roof over her head and a safe place to sleep, I don’t care where she lives.

I look down at the invitation, not knowing what to say. She’s my older sister. I’ve known her my whole life. But

this...this is awkward and suddenly I forget how normal people act. I turn my gaze back up, finding her looking around the store.

The bell over the door chimes behind her and she moves forward, making sure she's not in the way of the customers who pour in, going right to a display of new indie books.

"This place is nice," she says with a smile. "You always were a big reader."

"Yeah. Books were my safe place."

"I'd really like it if you came to the party." Her eyes go to the cut on my shoulder. She inhales as she looks me over. "You look good, Callie."

I wave my hand in the air. "You don't have to lie, Abby. I had a late, rough night last night."

"With a guy?" She offers a small smile.

"A few guys, actually." I wiggle my eyebrows.

"Sounds fun."

Is that a real smile I see on my sister's face?

"It's not what you think. I'm just ridding the world of evil."

"Callie, I'm sorry for the things that happened before," Abby starts and reaches for my hand. Her fingers sweep over my skin and my heart swells in my chest. I close my eyes and shove all the feelings aside.

"I know you are, and I don't blame you." I give her hand a squeeze. "It's good to see you again."

"You too. Maybe we can make this a semi-regular thing."

“Maybe,” I say with a smile, but I’m lying through my teeth. There’s a reason I left home and never went back.



## CHAPTER 2



I drum my fingers on the kitchen counter, staring at the invitation to my niece's birthday party as if it's a cursed object about ready to spring to life and attack me. In a way, I'd rather that be the case. Because then I could attack back.

"I don't know what to do." I bite my lip and shift my gaze to a sleek black cat who's standing patiently at my feet. Exhaling heavily, I grab the invitation and sink down onto the floor. Binx rubs his head against me and extends a paw, batting at the invitation.

"I know," I say, agreeing with his thoughts. "I've worked this hard to move on and build my own life, and life has been pretty good." I start to open the envelope and stop. "I'm pathetic, aren't I? I'm just going to open it."

Binx steps into my lap, purring. I open the invitation and let out a snort of laughter. "You'd think this was an invite to the Royal Wedding. I bet the food will be good at least."

Binx nuzzles his head against my face. "No, I don't think you should go, though I'd love to take you."

I read over the info once more and let it all sink in. I'd love to see my niece. I've never met her, and I feel all sorts of guilty over that. No one else in our family has powers, but if I

do, there's a chance this sweet little girl might too. And if she does, you bet your ass I'll be there for her.

I pull out my phone and enter the return address on the envelope into a Google search and find the Zillow listing.

"Damn," I whisper, seeing the price tag. The place is gorgeous, though I can see why Abby would want the kitchen renovated. I can handle the party. I'll force Kristy to come with me as my date, and we'll mingle near the buffet and avoid direct human contact. But seeing my father...I don't know if I can handle that.

"I'll just drive by it and see how I feel," I tell Binx. "Baby steps, right? Because I know my sister and I need to RSVP sooner rather than later. She'll be obsessing over it until she hears back from me."

I stand and Binx weaves around my ankles, letting out a soft "meow."

"Of course I'll feed you first." At the mention of food, two other cats appear in the kitchen. I open the fridge, taking out pieces of venison. It's cooked rare, seasoned ever-so-slightly to appease each cat's personal tastes.

"All right," I tell them once their dishes are filled. "I'll be back in a few hours."



THE BARTENDER HANDS ME MY DRINK. IT'S PINK, SMELLS LIKE cucumbers, and is being served in a dainty little wine glass. The drink had some sort of stupid, trying-too-hard-to-be-hip name, but it's made with vodka and that's all I care about.

I bring it to my lips and take a big sip, feeling instant relief when the alcohol slides down my throat. I couldn't do it. I couldn't face my family. I drove all the way up here, parked

my Jeep on Abby's street, and got out. I was going to walk by, get a read on the energy of the place.

But as I was crossing the street, my brother, Scott, came out of the house, talking and laughing with Abby's husband, Phillip. And then I did something that hasn't happened to me since my third year at Grim Gate Academy.

I panicked.

My heart dropped to the bottom of my chest and I spun around, walking as quickly as I could, not stopping until I stepped foot in this stupid, hipster bar. I'm going to have one drink, find something to eat, and then walk around the city, enjoying how easy it is to blend in until I'm good to drive home.

My mind slips and I get a flash of stark white walls, and pain prickles along the inside of my left arm from an infiltrated IV. I close my eyes, trying to force the memory away. I bring the drink to my lips again and suck it all down.

What the hell was I thinking?

I'm not going to that party. Yeah, I feel bad for my niece and even for Abby, but *hell* to the *no*. There's no need to put myself in that situation.

"Excuse me," a man says, sliding up onto the barstool next to me the moment it's free. I turn, more than aware that my resting bitch face is on in full force right now.

"Uh, hi."

The guy scoots his stool in a little and laughs. He's decent looking, a little overweight, and has put way too much cologne on. "My buddies bet me fifty bucks that I'd be too scared to come up and talk to the most beautiful girl in the bar. So... should I buy you a drink with their money?"

I laugh. That line was so lame it might just work. On someone else, that is. Because this guy screams *I watch horror movies with the lights on*. There's no way he could handle me.

"You know what?" I start. "I've had a rough night. So sure, but I don't want to give you the wrong impression. I'm leaving alone tonight."

He raises an eyebrow. "Maybe I can change your mind." The words leave his mouth and then he realizes how forward he just was. A flush covers his cheeks and it's more than a little cute. "Sorry you had a rough night."

"Thanks."

He waves the bartender down and orders me another one of these silly pink drinks.

"I'm Gavin."

"Callie."

"So, want to talk about what happened tonight?"

"I'd rather just forget." I offer a smile. "So, Gavin, what do you do for a living?"

He tells me all about his job in IT, and my mind wanders, half paying attention to what he's saying and half contemplating which potion I should mix up when I get home. It's always good to have a banishing potion on hand, and the one in my cabinet is getting a little stale, losing its potency. The bartender brings the drink, and I down this one just as fast as the first.

After a bit more conversation, he gets me to come out to the dance floor with him, promising to keep things friendly. Kristy and I used to go out dancing at least once a month years ago, but we haven't in a while, and I miss it.

Three songs later, and my bad mood has lifted. Gavin and I join his friends at a table at the back of the bar, and we order another round of drinks. I sip on another pink cucumber vodka whatever, realizing now that these things are rather strong.

And I haven't eaten since lunch.

I leave Gavin and his little group of friends to use the bathroom. After I pee, I wobble my way through the crowd, wanting to order a water. And then I feel it.

A different energy coming from the opposite corner of the room. Different, but I know exactly what it is.

*Vampire.*

Stopping dead in my tracks, I whirl around and look around the bar. Everything spins a little, but I spot him easily. He's bent over, looking into the eyes of a young woman. She stands, transfixed, and my jaw almost drops.

Drunk Callie's poker face is not on point.

Only the really old ones have the power to hold their victims spellbound. And most of the old vampires died off years ago. The resurgence of the vampires is part of what led to them coming out. The originals would never have allowed it.

Reaching into my purse, I feel around for a weapon. I have the usual: a silver dagger, a vial full of vanquishing potion, a few crystals, and a little baggie of black salt. A silver-tipped wooden stake is the go-to weapon of choice for killing vampires, but it's not a requirement for me...assuming I can conjure up enough energy to burn one from the inside out.

By the looks of it, this vampire is about to lead that pretty little blonde out of the bar and then feast on her blood. The

poor girl nods at whatever the vampire said to her and she moves forward, following him.

I push through a group of bachelorettes doing a conga line, almost losing the vamp in the crowd. Then I see him right before he disappears with the girl through a set of swinging black doors.

Breaking into a run, I wrap my fingers around the dagger, ready to pull it out and throw it at the vamp. The door gives way to a dark hall and then a set of stairs going down into the basement. I go down the stone steps as fast as I can and pull out the dagger.

“Hey!” I shout, narrowing my eyes to see in the dark. The vampire already has his fangs sunk into the girl’s neck. She’s pinned up against a wall, and he has one hand covering her mouth to muffle her screams.

The vampire jerks away, mouth open and fangs showing. Blood drips down his chin.

“Let her go,” I warn and the vamp steps away.

“Are you volunteering to take her place?” he sneers.

“Sure,” I say and throw the dagger. It hits him square in the chest, and while the silver blade won’t kill him, it’ll hurt like hell. Especially since it’s enchanted. I extend my hand, fueling the blade with magic, sending pulses of energy through him. The pain brings him to his knees, making him twitch as the magic continually ripples through his body.

“Go,” I tell the girl who’s blinking and trying to figure out what’s going on. She clamps her hand over her neck to stop the bleeding. “Get someone to call 911.” She pushes off the wall and staggers past me.

“That won’t be necessary,” a deep voice comes from the stairwell behind me.

Oh shit.

More vampires.

Keeping one hand extended to fuel the dagger, I turn and lock eyes with a tall and intimidating man.

Only, he’s not a man.

He’s a vampire.

I can tell just by the sight of him. He sucks all the air out of the room, and it’s not because he needs it. He hasn’t taken a breath in years. In centuries. The energy coming off of him is unlike anything I’ve felt before.

He makes the vampire on his knees in front of me seem like a newborn, and for some reason, I can’t stop staring at him. He’s tall and muscular, with a sharp jawline covered in the perfect five o’clock shadow.

Another vampire is behind him, with her arms crossed, looking more bored and annoyed than anything else.

“What is going on here?” the tall, dark, and *old* vampire asks. He also seems bored, like he thinks he can swoop down here with his fancy vampire speed and take me out. Well, I’ve got a surprise for—my stomach gurgles. Dammit. I suck in a breath, swallow the lump in my throat and regret that last drink.

“Vampires feeding on unwilling humans,” I say through gritted teeth. I’m drunk and surrounded by three vampires. I’ve had worse odds...I think. Okay, maybe not. I think I can handle myself, but I’d rather not take my chances. I throw my

hand in the old vamp's direction, sending the enchanted dagger flying into his chest.

Only, he catches it.

*Son of a bitch.*

“Interesting,” he says, holding the dagger between two fingers.

“She's...she's a...a...witch,” the other male vampire says, slumping to the ground.

“You're just now figuring that out?” the old vampire retorts. He's dressed in all black, and his dark hair is effortlessly swept back. I'd be blind not to see the beauty of this lifeless man standing in front of me. “And a powerful one at that. You're lucky, Adam. She could have killed you.”

“Kill her!” Adam says and gets to his feet. He tries to come at me, but I send a jolt of energy through him, coming raw off my hand. It hits him in the chest and sizzles through his body. He slumps down, convulsing as the energy blast ripples through him.

I conjure up another ball of energy and narrow my eyes, looking at the vampires on the stairs. The female sidesteps behind the old vamp, eyes wide.

“I suggest you let the human go and get medical attention.” I bring my hand up a bit more, trying to look threatening. Really, though, I'm hoping I don't puke all over my shoes.

“You...you've got to get her...Lucas,” Adam pants, trying to get to his feet again.

Lucas, seemingly pissed that I now know his name, zooms down the rest of the stairs and over to Adam. My heart skips a



beat, but I hold steady, impressed with myself for how well I'm holding onto this energy ball.

"Is what she's saying true?" Lucas demands, grabbing the collar of Adam's shirt. He picks him up as if he weighs nothing. "Did you feed off a human without consent?"

"I...I...she wouldn't have said anything. I had her spellbound."

Lucas shoves Adam against the wall and then plunges the dagger into his chest. He tips his head, almost as if he's confused.

"This didn't kill him."

"No shit, Sherlock," I spit. "It won't. But it will do this." I redirect my focus on it and waves of energy start rippling through Adam's body again.

"I like it," Lucas says dryly. He steps back, looking me up and down. There's something intimate in his gaze, like he's mentally stripping me down in front of everyone, wondering what each and every curve of my body looks like without clothes on.

I might be curious about him too. Just maybe. A little. Because he's all hardness and muscle with a face the gods themselves would be jealous of. And then our eyes meet and something indiscernible passes through me.

Lucas stiffens, making me think he felt it too.

Then he moves with vamp speed, scooping up the blonde girl and handing her to the female vampire.

"Take care of her," he tells the other vamp. "Discreetly."

"What the hell does that mean?" I snap.

“It means, take her into the office and patch her up. I have a reputation to maintain and do not want to lose business over a vampire attack at my bar.”

I let out a snort of laughter. “You own this hipster place?”

Lucas raises one eyebrow and it’s all I can do but quiver with lust. “Yes. Halliwell’s Taproom and Grill is one of the many establishments I own.” He avoids my gaze and looks at Adam. “Do what you want with him. Or leave him for me to deal with.”

Something tells me whatever Lucas is going to do will be way worse than death.

I twist my wrist, and the dagger turns inside Adam’s chest. I send the energy ball I was holding into him, and the blast knocks Adam unconscious. He’ll be out for a few hours at least.

“Hey,” I start, looking at Lucas. But he moves by in a blur, going back up the stairs. “Immortal asshole,” I mutter, going over to Adam’s body. I pull my dagger from his chest, wipe off the blood, and put it back in my purse.

I go upstairs and into the bar, needing to check on the girl to make sure she’s really okay. It takes me a minute of stumbling around this crowded place to find the office. The door is locked, but that’s not an issue for me.

Only it is, because I’m wobbling a bit. It takes three attempts to magically unlock the door. But hey, I got it open, right?

“What the fuck?” The female vampire looks up from the girl she’s attending to. A first aid kit is open on a desk and she’s very carefully wiped up the blood dripping from the blonde girl’s neck. A blood-stained rag is in the trash, and I

wonder how she's able to resist the scent of blood. How she's able to control herself.

"You should go," the female vampire says. She has a faint British accent. "If you know what's good for you."

"The funny thing is, I have a bad habit of doing the exact opposite of what's good for me."

"I'm beginning to sense that," Lucas says, appearing behind me. The hair on the back of my neck stands up, but not from fear. There's something about him that's different, alluring even. I run my eyes over him, telling myself I'm sizing him up in case of a fight, not checking him out.

And that second sweep I do where my eyes just happen to pause for a millisecond on the bulge in his pants...yeah... that's for my own safety too.

But then my eyes meet his and I see that he's looking at me the same way, only he really is sizing me up.

"Never seen a witch before?" I retort, putting a hand on my hip.

"Oh, I have." He towers over me, standing several inches past six feet tall. He has pounds of muscle beneath his t-shirt, making me wonder what he did before he was turned into a vampire. "Drank from one too. But you," he steps in and inhales. "You don't smell like the other witches I've come across."

I roll my eyes. "If this is the part where you tell me my blood is special and you can't resist the scent, save it. I'm not a teen girl from a romance novel. I'll kill you before you can get your fangs out."

Lucas pulls his lips back in a snarl, revealing two very long and very pointy fangs. The blonde girl whimpers. "Oh,

really?”

I sway on my feet. “I can still kill you.”

Lucas looks over my shoulder at the female vampire. “Are you done?”

“Just about,” she tells him, standing and closing the first aid box. “What should we do about her memory?”

“I’ll take care of it,” Lucas says.

“Like hell you will,” I spit, magic sparking around my fingers. The female vampire stills and slinks back against the wall.

Lucas rounds on me, moving so fast it’s like he just appears in front of me, looming overhead. He brings his head down and I swallow hard, forcing myself to take a slow, deep breath.

I can handle him. I think. Maybe. On another day when I’m better prepared...and not drunk. The energy coming off him is ancient, and I want to run away from it as much as I want to hold my hand out and try to get a better read.

“I can’t very well have her go around telling people she was attacked in my bar. And she knows you’re a witch. Don’t you witches want to stick to the shadows, cowering from humans?”

He’s right, and the vampires coming out puts every single coven on edge. “I can handle her memory.”

Lucas raises an eyebrow skeptically. “I’ll be the judge of that.”

I narrow my eyes ever so slightly and give him a tight smile. “Watch and maybe you can learn a thing or two.”

Lucas lets out a snort of laughter, generally amused. “Yes, the twenty-something-year-old witch can teach *me* something.”

“What’s your name?” I ask the blonde girl who’s on the verge of tears.

“St-Stephanie,” she mumbles.

“Hi, Stephanie.” I offer a small smile. “I’m Callie.”

“You...you saved me.”

I crouch down in front of the chair she’s sitting in and take her hand. “Yeah. I did.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” I tighten my fingers around her wrist, feeling her pulse under my index finger. *One...two...three.* “Were you having fun before that undead dick attacked you?”

“Yeah. I was. I’m here with my friends. We’re celebrating Tiff’s birthday.”

“You can keep having fun with them,” I say, working my magic into her mind. “And you will. You fell and got hurt. You’re lucky the cut wasn’t very deep. Disinfect it in the morning and you’ll be fine.”

She nods, eyes glossing over. “Yeah...I’ll be fine. It doesn’t even hurt.”

“Right. It doesn’t hurt at all.” I break contact and stand, offering Stephanie a hand to help her to her feet. “Have fun.” Her head bobs up and down again and she starts for the door. Lucas stops her, looking at me like I’m crazy.

Which I probably am.

“All you did was have a conversation with her.” He holds out his arm, barring Stephanie from leaving.

“See for yourself,” I say, head spinning. Getting into someone’s memory is complicated magic, and I’m not exactly sober right now.

Lucas leans in, gently cupping Stephanie’s chin. She shudders, and I’m guessing he gets that sort of reaction from a lot of his victims. A few seconds pass as he stares into her eyes, holding her spellbound.

“Where are you going?” he asks her.

“Back to my friends,” she says, voice void of any emotion.

“How did you hurt your neck?”

“My neck?” She blinks and brings her hand up, feeling the bandage. “Oh, right. Someone dropped their drink and I slipped and fell on the glass. I’m lucky the cut wasn’t very deep. I’ll disinfect it in the morning.”

Lucas holds her under his command for another moment before letting her go. She walks out of his office looking a little dazed.

“How did you do that?” he demands.

I cross my arms, smirking. “So, the twenty-something-year-old witch did teach the big, bad vampire a thing or two?”

Anger flashes across his face and he moves with inhuman speed over to where I’m standing. His fingers wrap around my throat, thumb pressing hard against my jugular. The sudden movement makes me teeter on my feet, and I start to stumble back. My heart speeds up, but I’ll be damned before I let him know he’s scaring me.

Bringing my arm up, I thrust my hand against his chest and sent a jolt of raw energy through him. He jerks back, hand slipping from my throat. My move pisses off the female vamp, and now she's circling me with her fangs out.

"Eliza," Lucas growls, not taking his eyes off me. The female vamp, apparently named Eliza, backs off, crossing her arms and looking pissed and annoyed again. Lucas rushes forward again, and when I step back and slip, he doesn't push me down faster or let me fall.

He catches me.

"Thanks," I say and then shake my head and push him away. "Listen." I rub my forehead, feeling a headache coming on. This vampire drama is the last thing I need right now. "Don't let your vamps feed on unwilling people on your property anymore and I won't report you to the authorities."

"How kind of you," Lucas says with a fake smile that still looks charming on his handsome face. "And I won't show the security footage of you acting like a human taser."

I press my lips together, imagining my father's reaction if that footage got leaked. "Maybe you should." I tip my head, watching it all play out, laughing.

"Something is seriously wrong with her," Eliza whisper-talks, shaking her head.

"You know what." I wave my hand in the air. "I'm already a bit of a black sheep in my family and that's saying something. I'm just going to go home."

"You're not driving." Lucas's eyes meet mine.

"No, *Mom*, I'm not. I'll call an Uber."

"I'll take you," he offers, and I freeze.

“Why...why would you do that?”

He advances, looking me right in the eye. He can't hold me spellbound, but he can mess with my mind in other ways. Slowly, his tongue darts out and wets his lips. He tips his head over so slightly and looks me up and down again.

I blink, breaking the trance only a man with this much sex appeal can put me in and shake my head. “I don't live nearby.”

“I don't mind a drive. And more importantly, I don't want to be indebted to a witch. You did me a favor stopping Adam from draining that girl. Now let me take you home.”



## CHAPTER 3



I pull my arms in close to my body, chilled from the breeze blowing in from the lake. It's late May, but we're still far from the balmy nights of summer. I fall in step with Lucas on the way to his car. Part of my brain is screaming that this is a terrible idea while another just wants to get this over with and let him feel like he's paid me back and we're even-steven.

Mostly, I'm just so damn curious. He's ancient, how old exactly I can't tell. I know just a few drops of his blood could seriously enhance some of my spells. Though I dare not ask—not yet, at least—because I know he'll ask me for some in exchange. And I'd be lying if I didn't say that there's something alluring about him. Maybe it's the danger. He could rip my throat out with his teeth in seconds. He could eviscerate the man walking several yards ahead of us before he even knew what was happening.

Getting in the car with him is a bad idea. I have faith in my powers, but I've had several drinks tonight. He's dangerous, and I hate that I like it. Still...I can hold my own and it's just one car ride. Then we can put this behind us, and I'll never have to see his face again.

"I used to live here," I muse, looking up at the tall buildings that line the surrounding street. "In Chicago,

I mean.”

“You don’t anymore?”

“No, I live in Indiana now. Only about an hour and a half away, but far enough to be away from the city.”

He nods, not caring about anything I have to say. We walk a few more paces before he flicks his intense gaze to me again. “Why’d you come tonight? It wasn’t just to visit some *hipster bar*,” he says, throwing my words back at me.

“No, it wasn’t.” I leave it at that, and we wait at a crosswalk. “Have you been in the city long?”

“I suppose long for you.” He fishes keys out of his jacket pocket. “Eliza and I have been here since 1962.”

“Did you, uh, turn her?” I ask, taking a guess since she obeyed orders from him.

“Yes.”

“So are you two together?” I took a class on vampires back at the Academy, and I know the relationship between vampire sires and “offspring” are often sexual in nature.

“Not in the sense you’re thinking.”

“Interesting.”

“Strange how you’re so willing to kill vampires when you find us interesting,” he says as we cross the street.

“I didn’t kill that vampire back at the bar.” He was still alive—well, undead—when we left. Lucas told Eliza to do something with him on our way out, but I didn’t catch what she was to do.

He turns his head down, eyes piercing right into me. “You would have.”

“If necessary, yes. I would have.”

His lips pull up into a smirk and his eyes narrow, making him look devilish. “Now that I find interesting.”

“Do you kill interesting people too?” I spit and then wish I could take it back. I already know the answer, but I don’t want to hear it out loud. Not when I’m about to go on a car ride with this guy.

“If necessary, yes,” he says, again using my own words against me. We reach the other side of the street and turn down the sidewalk. Lucas is so tall that one of his strides is practically two of mine.

We keep walking and cross another street, not stopping until we’re two blocks away from my sister’s new house.

“Do you live here?” I ask, sweeping my eyes over the row of brick houses.

“Yes.” He opens the passenger side door of a classic Chevelle for me.

“If you so much as look at my neck, I’ll turn you into a frog,” I say, pulling the seatbelt across my lap.

Lucas slides into the driver’s seat and raises an eyebrow. “I’d like to see you try.” He flashes a cocky grin and turns the key. The loud engine of the car roars to life.

“Don’t test me. Because now I’m thinking frogs are too good and you’d make a really nice hairless rat.”

He laughs and presses his foot down on the gas, revving the engine.

“This thing is pretty cool,” I admit.

“Yes, it is.” He pulls out of his parking spot and immediately after, another car zooms in to take it. “I’ve been its only owner.”

“Perks to eternal living, right?”

He laughs, but unlike before, this laugh is genuine. His face takes on a different light, and the spark in his eyes makes him all the more handsome. I bite my lip and look out the window, watching the city pass us by. He makes a right-hand turn, and we pass by the street my sister now lives on. I close my eyes, finding it harder to repress childhood hauntings after the amount of alcohol I’ve had.

“My car is parked on this street,” I tell him. “It’s the white Jeep Grand Cherokee with Indiana plates.”

He nods, having already told me that he would have someone bring it to me in the morning. Neither of us speaks until we’re on the freeway, speeding toward the state line.

“I guess you don’t really need a seatbelt, do you?” I twist the strap of my purse through my fingers.

“Nope.”

Another mile passes and the silence is getting awkward. So I do what I do best and make it even more awkward. “So, you own a lot of property in Chicago?”

“Not just Chicago.”

“Oh, cool, cool. You’re like an undead investor?”

“Something like that.”

“What was your stance on vampires coming out?”

“I didn’t care either way. I’ve always done what I’ve wanted regardless.”

I drum my fingers on my thigh. “Oh, and me?” I go on since the conversation is one-sided anyway. He takes his eyes off the road for way too long as he studies me, yet still keeps us in the lane, all while going twenty miles over the speed limit.

“What did I think about vampires coming out? It didn’t really change anything for us witches. We’ve always known, which made it kind of funny to watch the nons freak out about having a vampire in the neighborhood. But it’s like, hello, they’ve been there all along. At least you know about it now.”

“Nons?”

“Non-magical people.”

He gives me a look like he’s trying to figure me out. And failing. My phone vibrates with a text from Kristy, asking about a potion we made from scratch a few months ago. The ingredients are written down in my Book of Shadows. I tell her I’m not home and she responds by saying it’s not urgent and she’ll look next time she’s over.

I put my phone back in my purse and put my hands in my lap, fingers pointed toward Lucas. If he tries any funny business, I’ll hit him with a spell and send him flying out of the car so fast he won’t see it coming.

I rest my head back against the seat. My eyelids start to feel heavy, and I let them fall shut for just a moment. Only, that moment lasted a lot longer than a few seconds. I wake up to Lucas reaching over, slipping his hand into my purse.

“What the hell?” I snatch my purse back. “You’re trying to rob me?” He’ll be sadly disappointed.

“No, I’m trying to get your driver’s license for your address so I can take you home.”

“Oh. I, uh, guess that makes sense. Where are we?” The car isn’t moving, and bright light pours in the windows. Blinking, I look around, realizing we’re at a gas station. “Never mind. I recognize this place. We’re about twenty minutes from my house.” I unbuckle my seatbelt.

“Where are you going?”

“I have to pee.”

He purses his lips. “Humans are so needy.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I dismiss him and get out of the car, blinking and trying to find my bearing. I dozed off for a while, but I’m still drunk. Yawning, I go into the gas station and go straight to the bathroom. I half expect Lucas to be long gone by the time I get back, but he’s still there, casually leaning against the car and looking all mysterious.

I grab a bottle of water and head to the counter. The door opens, causing the motion sensor to beep, and a man walks into the gas station. Immediately, something feels off and I turn, taking a look at the guy. He’s stocky, wearing dirty boots, faded jeans, and a t-shirt that used to be white at one point. We’re in a small farming town, and he fits right in and doesn’t look out of place. He heads to the back of the little store to pour himself some coffee.

I turn back to the cashier and a sharp, stabbing pain hits me right between the eyes. I wince and pitch forward. Everything echoes and my vision starts to go black. Blinking rapidly, I grip the edge of the counter and inhale, but as soon as I get a lungful of air, I start coughing.

Because I’m inhaling smoke. I whirl around, pain in my head increasing, and I’m not standing in the gas station

anymore. I'm in a field, and a small crowd is gathered around a pyre. I can't see the woman tied up, but I know.

She's a witch and they're burning her at the stake.

Then through the smoke, a man draws near. He twitches as he walks, and my heart races faster and faster as he appears. He's wearing dark robes and has eyes as dark as ink.

"Like those before you, you'll be next, half-breed," he says and reaches for me. Long fingers clutch my wrist and he yanks me forward, toward the fire.

Then as suddenly as the vision came on, everything disappears. My purse is on the ground in front of me, and the man with the dirty boots is holding my hand.

"Ma'am, are you okay?" he asks.

"I'm not a half breed," I say out loud to myself. "That doesn't make any sense."

The guy looks behind me at the cashier and gives me a gentle tug. "Maybe you should sit down."

"No, no, I'm fine."

"You don't look fine," he insists.

I meet his eyes, and his face flashes back to the man in the vision. There was something about the way he looked at me, like he knew me. Like he'd been searching for me. Like it'd only be a matter of time before he got to me, and when he did, he would be prepared because they'd waited a long time to finally get me, to get revenge on...on someone.

Suddenly, the gas station door flies open and Lucas moves in at vamp speed. He extends his hand, shoving the guy in the dirty boots away from me, causing him to go flying back.

“The fuck?” I round on Lucas, eyes wide. “Why’d you do that?”

“I could hear your heart racing. You’re scared.”

“Not of him.” I sweep my hand out at the guy who’s pushing himself up off the floor. I get another flash of the man in the robes. His skin is burned and blistered, oozing thick, red blood. He’s wearing a pendant, with some symbol I’ve never seen before etched into the brass.

“Then what the hell is—”

“Wait,” I say, holding up my hand to silence Lucas. I tip my head to the side, narrowing my eyes as I think back, remembering the man walking toward me. The pendant was smeared with blood and something else...something more substantial. Flesh, maybe?

Letting out a breath, I pick up my purse and pull out a five-dollar bill, setting it on the counter.

“Keep the change,” I tell the cashier who’s thoroughly freaked out. Grabbing the water, I look up at Lucas. “Let’s go.”



“SHALL I WALK YOU IN?” WE’RE PARKED IN FRONT OF MY house. Lucas opened the car door for me and is holding out his hand for me to take, which I ignore. I might be drunk, confused as hell on that vision, but I don’t need his help.

“In?” I raise my eyebrows. “Don’t you mean to my door?”

He shoots me a cocky grin. “Ah, so you’re not as drunk as I thought.”

“Pathetic,” I shoot. “Trying to take advantage of a drunk girl.”



“Trust me,” he says slowly, teeth flashing in the moonlight. “I never have to take advantage of anyone. They give in to me willingly. More than once...if they’re lucky.”

“Please.” I stumble getting out of the car and start towards my porch.

“Lovely little house you have.” Lucas watches me stagger and amusement shines in his dark eyes.

“Thanks.” I cast my eyes toward my century-old Italianate brick house. “I mean, what do you care?”

“I don’t, not really, but you’ve piqued my interest.” He zooms forward, and I throw out my hand, hitting him with a jolt of electricity.

“Will you stop it with the super speed? It’s annoying.”

He chuckles, looking down at his shoulder where I hit him with magic. “That hurts. I like it.”

“You’re messed up.” I shake my head, narrowing my eyes.

“I’ve been told.” He licks his lips and runs his eyes up and down my body again, pausing at my breasts. I’m wearing a low-cut top and a tight-as-fuck pushup bra. I cross my arms over my chest.

“And stop looking at me like that. Like you’re thinking about what I’d taste like.”

He drops his gaze lower, to right between my legs. “I was thinking about how your nipple would feel against my tongue, but now...now I do wonder what you’d taste like. And I’m not talking about your blood.”

“You’re disgusting.”

“Am I?” He takes a step closer. “Don’t tell me you don’t think about it.”

I inhale, purposely making my breasts rise, and hold my breath for a few seconds. “I just so happen to know what I taste like. I’m not talking about my blood either.”

Lucas’s mouth opens only to close again. Then he smiles, and it’s a real smile again, though lust burns in his eyes. A vampire his age has had years—hundreds of them—to perfect sex. I’d expect him to be good, very, very fucking good at—

Stop it. Get it together, Callie.

My phone buzzes again, and assuming it’s Kristy again, I reach into my purse. But it’s not Kristy. It’s my brother.

“You have got to be fucking kidding me,” I say, letting out a snort of laughter. I drop my phone back into my purse, and then grab it again, starting to seethe with anger. I don’t want to know what he said as much as I do.

But really, I don’t.

Dammit. I do.

“Do I want to ask?” Lucas shuffles closer, looking down at my phone. “Scott? Is he an ex-lover?”

“Gross. No.” I unlock my phone and let my finger hover over my texts. I open his text and read it.

**Scott: Abigail said she saw you today and invited you to Penny’s party. You and I both know it’d be for the best if you mailed your gift. Penny doesn’t know you yet and it’s best we keep it that way.**

“Fucking asswipe.” I grit my teeth.

“So, I’m guessing now’s not a good time for you to invite me in.”

I look up at Lucas, heart hammering. “You know what? Why the hell not?”

## CHAPTER 4



“**Y**ou’re sure about that?” Lucas raises an eyebrow as I move onto the porch.

“Yeah, so...I invite you—wait. I need to establish a few ground rules.”

“Certainly, my lady.”

I wave my hand over the lock, using magic to open the door. I’m teetering on my heels, not sure if I’m regretting that last drink I had back at the stupid hipster bar or thankful for the extra alcohol flooding my veins. I push open the door and step inside, turning around and looking at Lucas. He can’t come in, not until I officially say the words.

“Don’t attack me,” I start, putting one hand on the doorframe for support. “I don’t feel like cleaning up the ashy mess of your remains if you do.”

“You think you could stop me?”

“I know I could stop you.”

His full lips pull into a grin. “Fair enough. I can control myself.”

I roll my eyes at him. “And the most important rule. Do. Not. Fuck. With. My. Cats.”

“You don’t want me to fuck with your pussy?” he retorts, somehow managing to keep a straight face.

“Pussies,” I snap, raising my eyebrows. “I have three cats. Do not touch them. Hell, don’t even look at them. They probably won’t like you.”

He laughs. “I wouldn’t have taken you for a crazy cat lady. At least you’re hot.”

Shaking my head, I step back. “Then, Lucas, I invite you into my home.” My heart flutters as soon as I say the words. There’s no going back now. He’s been invited. He can come in whether I like it or not.

Stepping in behind me, he closes the door and looks around the foyer. I take off my heels and walk right into the kitchen. I open the fridge and pull out a bottle of wine.

“Haven’t you had enough?” Lucas asks, moving at vamp speed, making it seem like he appeared out of nowhere. He takes the bottle from my hands. “I admit it’s been a millennium or two since I’ve had anything other than blood to drink, but judging by your size, you’ve had more than enough tonight.”

“Oh please.” I snatch the bottle back. “I can drink as much as I like. Why, are you worried I’ll overdo it and die or something?”

“Not worried, though I do think you’ve already overdone it.”

I make a face and try to twist the cap off the wine and then realize there’s a cork in it. Shit. Maybe I have had enough. There’s just something about a homecoming to bring out the alcoholic in me. Forgoing a corkscrew, I set the bottle on the

counter and look at the cork. It rises out of the bottle and hovers in the air. I grab it and put it on the counter.

“Why are you set on drinking yourself to death?” Lucas takes the bottle from me again.

“I’m not.”

“Really? You have enough alcohol in you to make me feel drunk if I were to drink your blood.”

I bring my arms in, fighting a shiver. “I didn’t realize it worked like that.”

“It doesn’t affect me as much as it affects you, but what you eat or drink does make its way to your bloodstream.”

“Hmm. Good to know.”

“Really, Callie,” he says, rounding on me. The intensity in his eyes is suffocating. I want him to look away as much as I want to stare into his eyes forever. “What are you running from?”

I close my eyes in a long blink, and the words burn in my throat. I haven’t said them out loud to anyone. Not even myself.

“There’s an emptiness inside me, and no matter what I do or how hard I try to ignore it, it never goes away. The emptiness will always be there, slowly eating away, seeping deeper and deeper into my bones until it becomes a part of me.” I exhale and shake myself. The source of the emptiness is yet another issue to be explored, but at least I know where it’s coming from.

Though it’s so deeply rooted into my soul, I don’t know how I’ll ever escape it.

“And I’m mentally preparing myself for possibly considering going to my niece’s birthday party in like a week.”

Lucas tips his head, looking at me curiously. He leans against the kitchen counter and shifts his gaze, taking in the rest of the house. I’ve lived here for five years, and I’ve done upgrades over the years. It was in bad condition when I bought it and haunted as fuck.

Which is part of what drew me to this place.

After the ghosts were banished, the black mold cleaned out, and the water pumped out of the basement, I started the slow process of remodeling. This kitchen was the first thing I redid, and not to toot my own horn, but I freaking love it. It’s light and bright and I was able to reconfigure everything to fit in a very small island counter.

“You’re drinking now for a party that’s a week away?”

“It’s a long story, and no, I don’t want to talk about it.”

“I believe you,” he says, voice soft. He looks deep into my eyes and neither of us speaks. A moment passes between us, and in those few seconds I know he feels the emptiness inside of him too. My lips part and I want to cave and give in to my body, kissing him and letting him have me, making me feel—even briefly—nothing but pleasure.

Then Binx comes running, meowing as he jumps onto the counter next to me. He starts purring as soon as I run my hand over his sleek black fur.

“He’s hungry.” I turn away and open a cabinet, pulling out a wine glass. “And I need a drink.” I pour pink Moscato into the glass, filling it to the brim. I take a long drink and turn back to Lucas. “You must think I’m a basket case of a witch.”

He chuckles again but shakes his head. “No. That’s now how I see you.”

Taking another small sip, I set the wine down and cross my arms tightly over my chest. I hold out a hand in front of me, conjuring a string of magic. Lucas leans in, inhaling deep. I don’t know if the raw energy I’m holding in my hand has a specific smell to him or not, but I do know he can feel the pull from the magic.

“How do you see me?”

“I see the only human whose power rivals mine.” His brow furrows and the pain he’s feeling deep inside manifests into his expression. But the moment is fleeting, and he jerks back, giving me a cocky grin. Pulling his lips back into a snarl, he shows his long, sharp fangs. “That, and lunch.”

“Isn’t it a little late for lunch?” I shoot back, not missing a beat.

A guttural growl escapes from deep inside him, and the ancientness that surrounds him becomes palpable. “You’re not afraid of me, are you?”

Holding his gaze, I bend my fingers into my palm and absorb the bit of magic I was toying with. “No.”

“You should be.”

“I could say the same for you.”

He inches closer, shifting his gaze from my eyes to my lips. “I suppose. But I’m well over a thousand years older than you. And you’re drunk.”

“Not drunk enough.” Binx meows again and rubs against me. “I know,” I tell him. “I’ll feed you. What do you want? Chicken or fish tonight?”



“You really are a crazy cat lady, aren’t you?”

I pick up Binx, not wanting Lucas to get too close. “There’s no point in denying it.” I go to the fridge and get out the fish, dishing it up and using magic to heat it to the exact temp each of my felines likes. I set the bowls down, smiling as I watch all three cats dig into their dinner, and grab my wine, taking a long drink. Lucas isn’t in the kitchen anymore.

“Marco,” I call, letting out a sigh, and walk through the kitchen into the dining room. “You’re supposed to say ‘Polo’ and I know you can hear me.”

Closing my eyes, I hold out a hand and scan the energy in the house. Lucas is upstairs. In my bedroom.

My. Fucking. Bedroom.

“What the hell?”

He’s standing over my weapons chest with the lid open. He holds up a razor-sharp scythe with a handle made from human bone. “You’re not like a regular witch, are you?”

I put my hand on my hip and give him a big wink. “I’m not a regular witch. I’m a cool witch.”

He looks at me incredulously.

“Seriously? You’ve never seen *Mean Girls?*” Shaking my head, I wave my hand, using magic to close the wooden chest. “And stop going through my things.”

He sets the scythe down and comes over, stopping only when his body is a mere inch from mine. If he were alive, I’d feel his body heat coming off in waves. But nothing about him is hot, well, except for the way he’s making me feel right now. I swallow hard, allowing myself a few seconds to admire everything about him.

He's tall. Muscular. He has the darkest blue eyes I've ever seen. Rough stubble covers his strong jaw, and his brown hair is perfectly messy. I conjure up another string of magic, a thin strand of blindingly bright white light. It would burn Lucas if I touched it to him, and he knows it.

Instead of backing away, he cups his hand around mine, fingers dangerously close to the string of magic. I splay my fingers, letting the little piece of magic go into the air. Then I turn, angling my body toward Lucas. He closes his hand around mine, sliding his thumb down to the pulse point in my wrist. A deep growl comes from within his chest, and his fangs slide down.

"You don't scare me," I whisper, reaching forward and gently cupping his cheek. His skin is soft but cold as if he was a human who spent too much time outside in the winter. He doesn't feel dead, and he certainly doesn't look like it. "But do I scare you?"

With another snarl, his fangs retract. "Humans don't scare me."

I take a deep breath, aware of how close we've become. "I'm not quite human, though, am I?"

"No," he says. "You're not. And I find that very appealing."

And then I remember him saying he thought about his tongue against my nipple, and that visual sends a shiver through me. I break away, not wanting him to sense what I'm feeling. I turn, feeling those few mouthfuls of wine take hold of me.

"I'm going to, uh, change," I blurt, needing to put more distance between us. I usher Lucas out of my room, change,

and find him downstairs. I'm getting annoyed with him just walking around my house like he owns the place.

The house isn't big, with the downstairs consisting of a living room, kitchen, small formal dining room, and even a den that I have set up like an office. Upstairs, I have my bedroom, the only bathroom in the house, and another small bedroom. He's in the living room, looking at photos I have displayed on the wall.

A smirk plays on his face as he takes in my gray PJs. "Most women come back with less clothes on when I'm around."

"I'm not like most women."

"I see, and something tells me you rather enjoy being different. I'm right, aren't I?"

I swallow hard, wrapping my robe tight around my body. What a loaded question. "Yeah. I do. Being normal is overrated." I sink down on the couch, and Binx jumps up in my lap. Freya, a gray tabby, circles the couch, giving Lucas the stink eye, and Pandora, an orange-white-and-black calico sits on the bottom stair, growling.

Lucas looks at each of them, and for a second, I think he can sense them for what they really are.

"It's late," I blurt. "For me at least. And I've had a long, trying day. Thank you again for taking me home. We have no debt."

"We never did," he says, cocky grin taking over his face once again.

"What?"

“You think I don’t know when blood is spilled in my own place of business? I could smell it the second he sank his teeth into her neck.”

And now Binx is growling. “You lied to me?”

“Of course I did. I told you, you’re a curious thing to me. I wanted to see more. And now that I have...” He licks his lips.

“Get out.”

He holds up his hands. “Leaving, my lady.”

“Don’t fucking call me that.”

He edges toward the door. “For a witch, I’d think you’d know to rescind my invitation.”

“Oh, I do know all about that. Just like I know the only way to kill you is with a silver-tipped wooden stake. And I’ve got a dozen stakes upstairs. Though, really, I have enough protection spells put on this place I’d love to see you try to come in here again once my circle is cast. We’ll see how cocky you are when your flesh has been burned down to the bone.”

His smile wavers, but only a bit. “Well, then, *my lady*, I bid you goodnight.”

“You better fucking bring me my car!” I yell as he goes out the door. I wave my hand, magically closing and locking it. Pandora jumps off the bottom stair.

“Not tonight,” I tell her, knowing she’s ready to give me an *I told you so* speech. “I know. I fucking know. Never trust a vampire.”

## CHAPTER 5



“Tell them to go away,” I groan when someone knocks on the front door. I pull the sheet up over my head. Muted sunlight filters through my open window and the cheerful chirping of birds fills the room. Normally, I love this sound and the feeling of waking up to a fresh day.

But right now, I’m still tired and still angry at Lucas. Pandora jumps from the bed to the window, looking down at the porch. She lets out a low growl, but it’s one of annoyance, not one to threaten.

“I’m right there with you, Dors,” I grumble. Pandora is perpetually grumpy and doesn’t trust humans. Not that I blame her. Her last witch was killed in cold blood by a human she thought she could trust.

A dark shadow moves through my open bedroom door, lunging at me. Freya lands softly on the bed, purring. She nuzzles her head against me for a few seconds before nipping at my chin.

“I know, I know. You guys want food anyway.”

Throwing the blankets back, I get out of bed and grimace at my reflection in the mirror. It’s not the messy hair or the smeared eyeliner that’s off-putting. It’s the very sight of me, of my green eyes. Those green eyes that looked at an old-as-fuck

vampire and decided it was a good idea to let him take me home, to repay a made-up debt.

*Undead prick.*

I'm not sure what I'm more pissed about: the fact that he lied to me or the fact that he knew another vampire was feeding off a human in his bar and did nothing about it. Though he did straight out tell me he does what he wants when he wants. I'm sure it's been that way for a while given that he's at least a thousand years old.

Running my hand through my hair, I go down the stairs, finding each creak of the old hardwood comforting. Binx is already by the door, waiting patiently. I pick him up and wave my hand over the lock, unsealing the magic that bars the door shut at night. I mutter an incantation, breaking the circle, and pull open the door.

"Hey!" a woman says cheerfully. Too cheerfully. She's pretty, with wavy strawberry blonde hair and perfectly applied makeup. She's not quite as tall as I am but is lean with impressive muscle definition in her arms. "You're Callie, right?"

Looking past her, I see my Jeep in the driveway. Another car waits behind it, with someone in the driver's seat.

"Yeah, I am. I'm guessing Lucas sent you."

"Right." She gives me another bright, white smile. "I'm Monica." She holds out her hand.

"Nice to meet you," I say and shake her hand. I set Binx down, and he circles Monica's feet. Smiling again, she bends down and pets him. He rubs against her, taking a few seconds to sniff her. He turns back to me, meets my eyes, and moves

his head in a curt nod. Yep. This girl is one-hundred percent human. “So, are you a friend of Lucas or something?”

“Or something,” she laughs and hands me my keys. “My boyfriend is a vampire and he and Lucas are friends, I guess. Well, as friends as anyone can be with that guy, right?”

“Sure. Have you known him long?”

“I met Dominic two years ago and it was love at first sight.” She lets out a breath, getting a dreamy look in her eyes. “He was the first vampire I’d ever met, you know, but as I got to know him, I realized that not all vampires are terrible, bloodsucking creatures like the way the media portrays them.”

“Right,” I say, not wanting to get into it. For one of my final projects back at the Academy, I had to take part in a debate on the morality of other magical creatures. Not all vampires are evil, no, and many were turned against their will.

But they’re still dead, and part of their humanity died with them.

“Do you work for Lucas then?”

She adjusts her purse up on her shoulder and glances into the house, curious to see inside. “I suppose you could call it that. I run errands for him and Dom during the day. I love my Dom, of course, but Lucas, as grumpy as he may be, sometimes feels like a big brother to me. Other times I dream about staking him. Repeatedly.”

“I’m kind of with you on that.”

Her eyebrows go up. “Really? I’ve never heard anyone say that after a night with—”

“We didn’t sleep together,” I interrupt. “He brought me home because I’d had a little too much to drink.” And the

bloodsucker manipulated me.

“Did you drink his blood?”

“Gross. No.”

“Did he drink your blood?” she asks.

“It’ll take more than one date for anyone to get a taste of my blood. Even though I don’t even consider last night a date.” I rub my forehead. “Thanks again for bringing my Jeep back. It’s a long drive from Chicago.”

“I don’t mind,” she says cheerfully, and I believe her. I wonder how much her mind has been altered by her vampire lover. Being held spellbound over and over can mess with your memory and your overall brain processing. Once memories have been altered too many times...the damage is permanent.

“I’d invite you in for coffee or something, but it looks like you have a ride waiting.” I motion to the car in the driveway.

“Yeah, I’ve got to get back to the city. Maybe I’ll see you again.”

“Yeah, maybe.” I watch her jog down the sidewalk and get into the car. It backs out of the gravel driveway onto the country road that runs by my house. Once they’re out of sight, I go inside and close the door, locking it with magic again. It’s daytime, but a witch can never be too careful.



“YOU KNOW YOU’RE OFF TONIGHT, RIGHT?” KRISTY SAYS, looking up from her Kindle when I walk into the bookshop.

“I know. I have gossip for you.” I set two coffees on the counter and carry the third to Betty, one of the other employees we have working here at the shop. She’s in the back, unboxing a new shipment of indie books.



“Ohhh,” I coo, sitting down on the floor next to Betty and looking into the box of books. “I’ve been dying to read this one.” I pick up a paperback with a beautiful cover of a couple kissing in front of a mountain.

“It looks so good in person. I read the e-book as soon as it came out. Kristen Mayer is one of my favorite authors now.” She runs her finger down the spine, looking at the book lovingly. She’s a non but loves books just as much as Kristy and I do. I’m sure she suspects something unusual is up with us, but she hasn’t said anything, and I don’t think she will. She’s a typical bookworm and would rather deal with fictional issues than real ones, and this job is perfect for her.

“I might have to take it for myself,” I only half joke. I set it down and take another book from the box. “I know I did the ordering, but it’s like Christmas morning every time we get a new shipment in.”

“I know!” she agrees, and I spend another few minutes looking through the books before I go back to the front of the store. I need to talk to Kristy while Betty is distracted anyway.

“Thanks for the coffee,” Kristy tells me. “And the gossip is about yourself, isn’t it?”

“Your intuition has always been impressive.” I go behind the counter and lean against the wall, sipping my black coffee. “And yeah, I was hoping to talk to you about something.”

“Anything. Wait.” She takes another drink of coffee and raises her eyebrows. “Do you need help burying a body again? Because I did not wear the right shoes for that today.”

“No, not this time.”

“Good.”

“I...I kind of took a vampire home from a bar with me last night.”

Kristy almost chokes on her coffee. “What? You slept with a...a...vampire?” she whispers the word “vampire” just in case anyone is listening. Humans and vampires are free to date each other, and vamp-human marriage is legal in seven states so far, but it’s still very much taboo.

“No, I didn’t sleep with him. It’s a weird story, and trust me, the next time I see this asshole, I’m staking him.” I motion to my purse. “I brought my favorite stake.”

Kristy looks at me for a good few seconds, unblinking. “The fact that you have a favorite stake is a whole other issue, you know.”

“It’s the sharpest and has that cool blood stain that looks like a star and—okay, yeah, it’s weird.” I let out a breath, grab my coffee, and tell Kristy what happened. I love having a best friend like her. Someone I trust with everything, someone who does her best not to judge anything I do unless I need her judgment and someone who won’t bullshit me.

“Wait, Abby came *here*?” she asks when I finish telling her the story. “When? How is she? Still married to that penis doctor?”

“The urologist,” I laugh. “And yes. And I’m pretty sure he still hates me.”

Kristy reaches out and punches my arm.

“Ow,” I say, rubbing where she hit me.

“You should have called me the second she walked in!”

I give her a guilty smile. “You were shopping, and I didn’t want to upset you or make you turn around. I really needed

that Dead Man's Blood.”

She purses her lips and shakes her head. “I could have talked to you. Kept you from doing something impulsive like stalking your sister, getting into a fight, and taking a vampire home.”

“I know.” I pick at the label on my coffee cup. “I just wanted to see where she lived, ya know? See how everyone else is getting along. But I shouldn't have. I've moved on. I'm happy here. I have the store, you, the coven...I have a life and I like it.”

“They're your family. Even with all the shit they put you through...that doesn't change who they are.”

“It makes it worse.”

Kristy sets her coffee down and gives me a hug. “Okay, so let's revisit this vision. You don't think it was a premonition or something, do you?”

“No, I don't have the powers of foresight. It was more like a message.”

“But a half-breed? That doesn't make sense.”

“Maybe because my parents aren't magical?”

“How would that make you a half-breed, though? Half-breed is usually reserved for someone who has two different magical parents, like a witch and a shifter. Your parents are neither.”

“Yeah, I have no idea.” I pop the lid off my coffee and move my finger in a slow circle over it, magically stirring the hot liquid. “And who knows? Maybe it was something tapping into a subconscious fear. I was kind of intoxicated.”

“Kind of?” She rolls her eyes and moves to the register to ring up a customer. The store gets pretty busy as the evening goes on, and I stay, helping manage the lines and just talking with Kristy and Betty.

The store is still pretty crowded when the sun starts to set. We’re open for another couple hours, so I offer to go pick up takeout for the three of us to eat. On nights when the store is packed, we stay open an extra half-hour or so, not wanting to miss sales.

Our store is on the main street in the quiet town of Thorne Hill. It’s far from a big city, but not quite small-town territory. It’s more of the latter, but being close to Lake Michigan has made it an ideal place to lay down roots.

Plus, a Ley line runs through here, which contributes to how the town got its name. Twisted thorn bushes grew all over, spreading like weeds, in a natural attempt to keep the living away from the power buried deep underground. But humans are relentless beings, and not long after the first settlers moved into the area, covens of witches moved in as well, making sure the Ley line was protected.

And now I belong to one of those covens, and the Coven of Thorne Hill is at the first line of defense when it comes to protecting the Ley line.

Non-magical people are drawn to this place and they don’t even know why. The Ley line does that, pulsing addictive energy into the air. So far, it’s worked out in our favor, keeping people generally happy. But if tainted, if demons ever got their hands on the line, it could cause mass chaos.

Our downtown has several blocks of stores and restaurants, and the sense of community is big here. We have festivals and celebrations year-round. There are three vampires who live

here, and so far, they've kept to themselves and have been model citizens. They're on the younger side, having only been vampires for about ten years, which is just enough time to move out of the impulsive murdering state—well, for some vampires, that is.

I get noodles and sushi from my favorite Japanese place just a block away and head back to the bookshop.

“Good evening, Callie,” another store owner says as she sweeps off the welcome mat leading into her antique store.

“Hi, Mrs. Bishop. How are you?”

“I'm good, honey. Working late again?”

“Nah, it's not too late.”

She casts her eyes to the setting sun. A few business owners shut down right around sunset to avoid vampires. Mrs. Bishop is one of them, though it's not like the antique store is a happening place after hours. She's about half an hour too late to completely avoid vampires, but I can't exactly explain to her that the older, more powerful vampires are able to come out at dusk on cloudy nights like this.

“Take care, honey,” she says and sweeps the last bit of dust off her welcome mat. I hurry back to the bookstore, stomach grumbling. Binx is sitting outside the door and lets out a loud meow as soon as I draw near.

“Hey, Mr. Prickle Paws,” I tell him. “Whatcha doing here?”

He lifts his head, sniffing the bag of takeout, more interested in snagging a bite to eat than the reason he came all the way into town.

“Yes,” I tell him before he has a chance to ask. “I’ll share with you.” I push open the door, letting him in first. I only get one foot in the store before I know why Binx showed up.

Lucas is here.

## CHAPTER 6



**H**e's standing at the back of the store, holding one of the new indie romance novels in his hand. There's a half-naked man on the cover, with his jeans unzipped, and abs shaded to stand out against the dark and grainy background. Lifting his eyes from the book, Lucas looks up right in my direction. He can sense me, and it's creepy.

"What the hell?" I whisper. We're yards away, but I know he can hear my voice. Binx winds around my feet, moving in perfect stride with me. I've never once tripped over him.

"Why, hello to you too." Lucas looks back down at the book. "Have you read this one? I find this passage very exhilarating." His voice is slow and breathy, and if I didn't like books so much, I'd pull it from his cold, dead hands and hit him over the top of the head with it.

"I haven't yet, but if you're going to crack the spine, you better be buying it."

"Yet? Then I will buy it and will think of you when I finish this sex scene." He flips the page. "You know, I've heard women complain that sex in real life is never as good as it is in books. Obviously, they've never been fucked by a vampire."

"Keep your voice down," I hiss.

“You’re rather prudish for someone who half-owns a store full of erotic romance.”

“I am far from a prude. But unfortunately for you, you’ll never find out just how much of one I’m not.” Okay, that wasn’t my best retort, but he gets the point. “What are you doing here?”

“I came to see you.”

“Why?”

He snaps the book closed. “I told you. I’m curious about you.”

“Well, I’m not an animal at a zoo. Go get your jollies elsewhere and watch somebody else.” I push my shoulders back, half expecting him to feed me a “but I don’t want anyone but you” line.

Instead, he slowly licks his lips and looks around the store. “I didn’t mean it like that. I feel an apology is in order for me misleading you last night. You’re not the type of witch I thought you were, and if you’d grant me permission, I’d like to take you out tonight.”

“What?”

“I’m asking you on a date, Callie.”

I open my mouth to ask him why, but Binx lets out a growl. Lucas crouches down, inspecting the black cat. He doesn’t reach out, doesn’t make that silly kissing noise almost everyone else does when they see him.

“Your cat isn’t really a cat, is he?”

I look around, making sure no one else is in earshot. “No, he’s a familiar. You’re just now figuring it out? Nice job with the shielding,” I tell Binx.



“He’s an old one.” Lucas’s eyes narrow. “Isn’t he?”

“He is. And powerful.”

“A black cat, though? Isn’t that a little cliché?”

I smile, adjusting the strap of the plastic takeout bag on my wrist. “Maybe that’s why he picked this form.”

“You called him Mr. Prickle Paws.” He raises an eyebrow, trying not to laugh over the fact a thousand-year-old dark spirit has a pet-name.

“He has very sharp claws.” I look down at Binx endearingly. “And he likes it. Just like he likes the soft pink blanket at the foot of my bed, don’t you Mr. Prickle Paws?” Binx purrs in response and rubs against my ankles.

“You have two others?”

“Yes. Pandora and Freya.”

Lucas watches Binx circle me but still doesn’t make a move to touch him. In fact, he hasn’t moved at all, making me think Binx dropped his shield a bit and is letting Lucas get a sense of his power.

Because it’s just as Lucas said: Binx isn’t really a cat. He’s a spirit who came from another dimension, and when he’s in his true form...he’s terrifying. To everyone who’s not me, that is, of course. His real name is one no one should dare speak, and he wandered from dimension to dimension looking for the right master to serve for centuries. Over that time, he grew to command other spirits, and together we are all bound.

“Witches only have one familiar,” Lucas says, but I can hear the question in his voice. I don’t think he knows as much about witches as he’s trying to get me to believe. Is that why he’s asking me out? Trying to wine and dine info out of me?

“Their witches were killed,” I whisper, leaning in as a few customers walk down this aisle. Two girls blush and giggle, stealing glances at Lucas. I don’t need super hearing to know they’re gushing over him, because the vampire is basically walking sex on a stick. “And once I handled the you know what...”

“They pledged to you,” he finishes.

“Yes.”

“Now I’m even more curious.”

I take the bag from my wrist and switch it to the other hand. “Look, I’m going to be frank here.” Turning, I head toward the register to find Kristy. “If you’re trying to get super-secret witch info out of me, don’t waste your time. I’m not like the other witches.”

“I know,” he says softly, and that rare moment of honesty comes out again. I turn, looking into his stormy blue eyes, and see the same pain I saw yesterday. He blinks and turns away.

“Do you have to do that?” I ask.

“Do what?”

“Blink?”

“Oh.” He seems almost surprised by the question. “I suppose not. My eyes won’t dry out like humans, but if dirt or dust gets in them, it’s still irritating. And it’s like breathing. Many of us don’t let those habits go. It’s something you don’t even think about.”

“So weird.”

He playfully nudges me. “I thought it was interesting yesterday.”

“Interesting...weird...they’re both cool, I guess.” I stop at the edge of the aisle. Betty is watching me, mouth hanging slightly open. Binx trots over, and she breaks her stare, dropping down to her knees to pet him. He’s a bit of a celebrity around here, actually. Everyone assumes he’s a regular cat, of course, and thinks I spent a lot of time training him. To hold up the pretense of being a house cat, he does cat-like stuff, like knocking shit off the counters and carrying around hair-ties while meowing loudly.

He’ll never admit it, but I know he has fun doing it.

Kristy is ringing up a customer, and there are two in line behind that. She does her best not to gape like Betty, but unlike Betty, she knows what Lucas is right away.

“Meet me after the store closes tonight?” he asks, and there’s something oddly gentle about him right now.

I set the bag of food down and slowly shake my head. “I’m not sure I want to. Not after last night.”

“Talk like that and people are going to assume we hooked up. Don’t damage my reputation now. I never disappoint. In fact,” he starts, and looks me over again, “I dreamed about you today.” He reaches forward, slowly pushing my hair over my shoulder. I hate that his touch is getting a physical response out of me. And I hate even more than he can sense it.

“Did you dream about me?”

“I dreamed I shoved a stake through your heart and then set fire to what was left of your remains.”

“Such a lady,” he shoots right back. “And at least we both had dreams about penetrating the other in one way or another.”

“You’re such a pig.”

“You keep saying that, but your body says otherwise.”

I step back, hoping no one heard us talking, and open the bag of takeout. “I do find you attractive,” I admit, not seeing the point in lying. He already knows it and saying it out loud takes the little advantage he has on me away.

“I thought I disgusted you.”

“Oh, you do.” I pick up a California roll. “So yeah...I, uh, I have issues.”

“Don’t we all?” He smiles, and it’s genuine again. I think. Fuck. “Shall I meet you at your place later? I assume you’d like to change into something that shows more skin.”

I shove the roll into my mouth, buying myself a bit of time. Kristy rings up the last customer. I expect her to come over, introduce herself and be the overprotective best friend she usually is.

When she doesn’t, I turn to see what’s going on. Every once in a while, we get an asshole customer. Those are fun to deal with. The Law of Return is my go-to spell for them, and all it takes is a little encouragement to act fast. The rest of the day, everyone will treat the asshole the way they treated one of us.

Instead of blankly staring down a woman enraged that Amazon has a copy of *Fifty Shades* cheaper than we’re selling it, Kristy is holding a large piece of yellowed paper.

“What is it?” I ask, knowing exactly who that paper is from.

“The coven,” she says a little breathless, shocked by whatever she’s reading. “They’ve called an emergency gathering.”

The coven only calls gatherings like this when something big is going down. A chill runs down my spine. The full moon yesterday. The vision. There had to be a third sign that I missed.

I look at Lucas. “If—and I mean a big fat *if*—I decide to let you take me out on a date, it’s going to have to wait.”



“ARE YOU REALLY NOT GOING TO ELABORATE?” KRISTY adjusts the black cloak around her shoulders. We’re walking into the woods on our way to find the magical doorway that leads us to the Covenstead.

“About what?”

“Uh, maybe how that tall, dark, and handsome vampire showed up wanting to take you on a date.”

“Oh, you heard?”

She shoots me a look. “Of course I heard. And I totally agree with you on how attractive he is, but can you trust him?”

“No, though if I were to have a type, it’s men who want to kill me.”

Kristy laughs and links her arm through mine. “I’m sorry. It’s not funny. But it is since it’s true.”

“Go ahead, laugh at my misery and how I’ll be alone forever.”

“Oh, shut up. You’re a totally hot witch and you just need to put yourself out there more.”

It’s too dark for her to see me roll my eyes. We pick our way through the forest, black cloaks flowing behind us. I lean in, pulling Kristy closer to me.

“Do you feel like we’re being watched?” I whisper.

“I was just going to ask you.”

We come to a stop, turning around.

“Hello,” I call out. “Show yourself.”

The wind picks up, and something rattles through the full leaves on the tree above us.

“Cloaks up?” Kristy whispers, and I nod, flipping the hood of my cloak up to cover my head.

“Light of the moon, dark of the night, cloak us from all, hide us from sight,” we say the incantation at the same time. Kristy exhales, and I take another second to look around. Something is following us. We can’t see it, but now it can’t see us. Two can play this game.

We trek another mile into the forest, following the Ley line. It leads to a large oak tree, taller than every other tree around it. Dead branches hang low, swaying slightly in the breeze. Kristy and I join hands, holding up our free hands and pointing them at the tree.

“*Invoco elementum terrae,*” Kristy starts.

“*Invoco elemuntum aeris.*” I feel the power rush through me.

“*Invoco elemuntum aqua.*”

“*Invoco elemuntum ignis.*”

A door starts to appear in the old tree. I let go of Kristy’s hand to retrieve an athame from my belt. We each need to shed a drop of blood, so the door knows who is trying to open it. I’ve watched too many witches cut their hands or their fingers doing this and all I can think is *rookie*.

Cuts on your hands and fingers are the worst. You know how long those suckers take to heal? You're always using your hands. Instead, I press the dagger to my forearm, slicing open my skin. I press the flat side of the blade against the cut, collecting a few drops of blood. Then I plunge the dagger into the earth before the door. Kristy does the same, and the door opens, shining bright blue and white. It's protected with magic, and if anyone who wasn't supposed to be here tried to get through, they'd get a nasty burn.

We pick up our athames, wiping the blood and dirt off before putting them away, and then step through the door. Going through the door is a bit like going home. Once you step through, you enter a courtyard leading to a large, brick building. The main meeting hall of the coven is right inside, and beyond that is Grim Gate Academy. Every single person in the Covenstead is a witch. We're all able to do magic to varying degrees. I have nothing to hide here.

Though, even here I never quite fit in. I came too late, had too much power for a witch brought up in a non-magical home. And the headmaster of the school—who's now the High Priestess of our coven—was a little too fond of me. The others claimed it was unfair. But without Tabatha, I'd be dead. I know it.

And she knows it too.

The Witching Hour hasn't yet begun, but the meeting hall is almost full. Kristy and I take the first seats we can find, slipping into a row near the back. White candles are lit in all four corners of the room, and the sacred eternal black candle burns at the center of the altar. The eldest of the coven sit behind it at the back of the altar, all wearing traditional robes or cloaks.

“Everyone seems nervous,” Kristy whispers, keeping her hood up so she can look around. “And do you smell that?”

“Sage.”

“What are they trying to keep away?”

Shaking my head, I get a flash of the man in the dark robes staggering to me. The smell of charred human flesh fills my nose, making me sick. I grab my hair and pull it over my face, breathing in the floral scent of my conditioner.

A single clap of thunder echoes throughout the entire Covenstead, letting us know it’s officially midnight. Double doors to the side of the altar open and the High Priestess enters the meeting hall. All of the witches bow their heads as a sign of respect. To everyone else, she’s High Priestess Greystone, but to me, she’s Tabatha, the woman who saved me from hell.

Though even Evander, Tabatha’s son, has his head bowed down. Usually, coven gatherings start with a prayer to the Goddess, a blessing from the elements, or some sort of chant or spell.

But today, High Priestess Greystone goes to the altar, face tight, and cuts right to the chase.

“I’ve gathered you all here to be the bearer of bad news,” she starts. “But it’s imperative we all know, and we all prepare.” She pauses, looking out at the faces before her. It seems dramatic to take a few seconds after unloading that on us all, but I know Tabatha, and I know she’s looking out at her coven, madly trying to come up with a spell or a charm to keep us all safe.

“I’m afraid,” she starts again, planting her hands on the old wooden platform in front of her. “I’m afraid there might be a witch hunter in our area.”



## CHAPTER 7



**W**itch hunter.

A collective uproar works its way through the coven, with witches shouting out questions. Witch hunters are problematic in the obvious way of wanting to kill us, but also in the way they're typically humans. Humans who've had some sort of run-in with witches before and know how we operate. They know the basics of spellcasting and, more often than not, have amulets that block a witch's power.

Only a few other witches in the room have powers like mine, and all are twice my age at least. Manipulating energy came naturally for me, which is part of the reason I had a hard time fitting in back in my school days. Some witches study energy manipulation and conjuring for years and still can't do it half as well I was able when I was just a teen. Those who can't conjure and hold raw energy in their hands...who can't telekinetically push attackers away...they'll be the most vulnerable to a witch hunter's attack.

"I assure you," High Priestess Greystone goes on after she addressed some of the coven's concerns. "We will find who is responsible and then we shall burn him at the stake and feast on his flesh!"

The coven breaks out in a cheer and Kristy turns to me, blue eyes wide with fear.

“If we stick together, we shall prevail.” High Priestess Greystone steps away from the podium, coming down off the altar to speak one-on-one with the members of the coven. I catch Evander’s eye and wave him over.

“Cal,” he says, opening his arms for a hug. “I swear, sister, you age a year backwards every time I see you.”

“I’ve perfected an anti-aging elixir,” I say so seriously even I almost believe me. “I’ll sell you a bottle for a low-low price of five hundred bucks.”

He claps my back and laughs before releasing me from his bear hug. “I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you, too.” Evander is very much like an older brother to me, and we got into the habit of referring to each other as “brother” and “sister” back in our Academy days. It was easier to explain the nature of our relationship that way, since, after all, I lived with his family my first year at school. “Why do I feel there’s more to this than we’ve been told?”

“Because there is.” His black robe is lined with silky crimson material, matching the tie he has on over his black button-up shirt. Evander’s always had a need to be flashy and find a way to add color and style to the plain black attire we’re supposed to wear to coven gatherings.

He nervously shifts his gaze to his mother, knowing he shouldn’t be sharing what he’s about to tell me. “I overheard Mother speaking to the High Priest of the Circle of the Crescent Moon. These killings—”

“There’s been more than one?”

“Two women have been found with their throats ripped out and then their bodies burned. Both murders have happened under the cover of dark.”

“Killed at night and throats ripped out?” My chest tightens. “Sounds like a vampire.”

Evander shakes his head. “If the bodies hadn’t been burned, we would have assumed so. But vampires don’t typically burn their victims.”

“Right. That’s more the style of a witch hunter.”

“Whoever this is...they’re leaving a blood bath in their wake.” Evander’s jaw tenses.

“Almost as if they want to be caught.”

Evander grabs my hand. “Yes. To be brought to trial inside the Covenstead. It’s the only way to get inside.”

“And once they’re in...” I don’t have to finish my sentence. We both know what would happen if a witch hunter got loose inside the Covenstead. We’d stop them, I’m sure, but not before blood is spilled.



KRISTY AND I STEP OUT OF THE COVENSTEAD, ENTERING THE woods in our hometown again. Clouds cover the moon, darkening the already black forest.

“Evander told me something.” I flip the hood of my cloak up, not to conceal myself but because the air has taken a chill to it. “He overheard his mother talking with another High Priest. They think the witch hunter wants to be caught.”

“And brought to trial.”

“Exactly.”

“But why?” Kristy tightens her cloak around her body. “They’d be surrounded by witches.”

“That’s what I thought, but that could mean—” I cut off when something rustles through the woods mere feet from us. I reach out and take Kristy’s hand.

“Cloaking spell,” I whisper. “Now.”

“That won’t keep you from me,” a raspy voice echoes through the trees.

“Who are you?” I ask the dark.

“Who are you talking to?” Kristy asks, squeezing my hand.

“That voice,” I tell her. “Someone is here.”

“I didn’t hear anything.”

I hold out my right hand and conjure a ball of white light. I toss it up and it illuminates the dark trees, casting shadows on the forest floor.

“Half-breed,” the voice rasps. “We’ve been looking for you.”

“I’m not a half-breed,” I shout.

“Callie, what’s going on?” Kristy reaches into her pocket and pulls out a satchel of black salt. “Who are you talking to?”

I take my hand from hers and move a few paces forward. My heart is hammering in my ears.

“I don’t have time for this.” I splay my fingers, and the ball of light grows bigger, brightening the forest. “Are you the witch hunter?”

“He’s not looking for a witch. He’s looking for the half-breed. I’ll be rewarded when I take you to him.”

“If you’re going to take me, then you better come out of the shadows, coward!” I shout.

The sounds of the night come to a stop. The gentle breeze intensifies, blowing dry dirt and dust into the air. It swirls around me, getting into my eyes. It burns, but it’s much more than the normal pain you feel when something gets into your eyes. It’s like my eyes are on fire. I cry out, falling back and tripping over my own cloak.

I squeeze my eyes shut and feel hands gripping my ankles, fingers digging into my flesh. I have to open my eyes. I have to see what’s attacking me. But when I do, all I can see is fire.

Embers rain down from the trees above me. The underbrush goes up in flames. Everything is so bright. So red. So hot.

“Callie!” Kristy screams. I can sense her running over. She takes my hand and pulls me to my feet.

“I can’t see,” I tell her, bringing my free hand up and rubbing my eyes. “Where is it? It’s here, I can feel it.” I hold out my hand, fingers crackling with magical energy. My heart races.

Then Kristy is knocked backward, falling down hard. Her hand slips from mine. I whirl around, still blinded by the fire, and try to feel for her.

“Watch out!” she warns right as something grabs my shoulders. Heavy energy comes off of it in waves, and I can feel it trying to get inside my head. It’s searching for something, and I’ll be damned if I let it in and find what it came looking for.

But then something else comes rushing into the woods, knocking whatever is on top of me off. The fire stops and I

blink my eyes open. My vision is still fuzzy, but my head is now clear.

Lucas stands before me, fangs bared, arms out to the side, ready for a fight. He lets out a growl, staring down the thing that just attacked me. I run over to Kristy, pulling her to her feet. She whacked her head on a tree stump as she fell and is bleeding.

The ball of white light still floats above us, and little tendrils of magic rain down. They burn Lucas's flesh when they touch him, just like sunlight would. Yet he ignores it, sidestepping so he puts himself between whatever the hell is after me and myself.

"I'm okay," Kristy says, voice shaking. "What the hell is that?"

"I...I...I think it's a man." I inch over, needing to move in order to see around Lucas's large frame. "And he's possessed."

The man is ragged—physically, that is. His clothes are soiled, and he smells like urine. His jeans are ripped, his nose looks like it's been broken, and dried, crusted blood covers his face and chest. One of his arms is twisted at an unnatural angle. And his eyes are bloodshot.

"Speak, demon," I say through gritted teeth.

Suddenly, the man drops to the ground, shaking in fear. "What's happening? Where am I?"

"You don't fool me." I move next to Lucas, who shifts his gaze from the possessed man to me and back again. "What is your name?"

"Please, help me!"

“I know you’re possessing that body,” I go on. “Tell me your name.”

Lucas zooms forward, picking up the man by the collar. “I suggest you listen to the lady.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!” the man whimpers.

“Maybe the demon left,” Kristy suggests quietly.

“Maybe,” Lucas agrees. “I know a way to find out.”

Before I can say anything, before I can stop him, he sinks his fangs into the man’s neck. My heart skips a beat and my eyes widen. As fast as he bit him, Lucas pulls away, blood dripping down his face. He drops the man to the ground and turns, spitting out the blood that’s in his mouth.

“He’s possessed,” he tells us, wiping his mouth with his hand. “His blood is rancid.”

“You can taste the difference?”

“Yes.” Lucas spits out more blood. “When a human is possessed, their blood tastes rotten.”

“Sulfur,” I muse.

“Yes.” Lucas tips his head, looking down at the man possessed. “Want me to kill him for you?”

“Not yet,” I say and Kristy tenses. Even if I had the power to exorcise this demon, I’m not sure the human will survive it. He looks like he’s been hit by a car, and, judging by the stench of human waste coming from his body, the demon’s had a hold of him for a week at least. Most humans won’t survive a full-body possession like this for more than two or three days.

I pull the ball of light down from above us and bring it close to the demon's chest. White light like this burns demons. Enough of it will kill one...and the body they've possessed.

But there are always casualties in warfare.

"Tell me your name, demon," I demand.

"You are not worthy to speak my name, unclean witch!" the demon growls back. White foam starts to drip from its mouth. It's not the man I saw in the vision, I'm sure of it. I press the energy ball into his chest. It sizzles, burning up the demonic powers that have taken possession of the body.

"What do you want with me?" I don't give him time to answer before pushing the light in farther. He cries out in pain, writhing on the ground before us. Lucas draws closer, a low growl coming from deep inside his throat. The demon is moments away from death.

I wait a beat, and then pull the light back. The body the demon is possessing will give out soon. The man inside should be dead already but instead is stuck watching from the inside out, feeling the physical pain and living through every single horrible thing the demon has forced his body to do.

"Can you hold him spellbound?" I ask Lucas. "Try to get into his mind and make him talk?"

"I can try. There might not be much of his mind left." Lucas kneels down, leaning dangerously close to the ball of pure magical energy. He looks deep into the man's eyes, compelling him to obey whatever he says. A moment passes and I think it's not working. Then Lucas asks, "What is your name?"

The man opens his mouth, more frothy saliva dripping down his jaw.



“Why did you attack Callie?”

A gargled noise comes from the man’s throat. He twitches, trying to break the hold Lucas has on him. “Gate...gate...”

“Gate?” I repeat, looking at Kristy. She shakes her head, not knowing what that means either.

“Keep talking,” Lucas commands.

“Gate...gate...keep...gatekeeper,” he finally spits out. Then he closes his eyes, and Lucas loses his hold on the man. Instead of attacking or trying to get away, the man lurches forward, pushing the energy ball into his chest. His entire body sizzles, and the smell of charred flesh fills the air. Light glows from his eyes, and then his body goes limp. The light slowly fades, and we’re all left standing around his body, more than a little stunned.

“Motherfucker,” I grumble. “What the hell does that mean? Gatekeeper? Gatekeeper of what? For all I know he’s here looking for the Key Master.”

Lucas turns, swiping his thumb over his lips, wiping away more of the demon blood. “Now that reference I did get.” He flashes a smirk, and dammit, it’s not right how he can look so hot right now. We’re standing around a rotten dead body and he has drying demon blood on his face. Crouching back down, he rolls the body over, checking for ID. There’s none.

“What should we do with him?” Kristy asks. “He’s somebody, you know?”

I nod. “Yeah, but we can’t exactly leave him. The last thing we need is a bunch of nons walking through here. These woods aren’t the safest.” The Ley line running through attracts all walks of life...and leads right to our Covenstead.

“I’m still not wearing the right shoes for burying a body.”  
Kristy lets out a sigh. “These boots are new.”

Lucas watches us, entertained. “Excuse me, ladies,” he starts. “But if disposing of the body is what you want, perhaps I can further lend my assistance. I’m probably better at it than you anyway.”

Right, I’m sure he is. He’s been getting rid of bodies for centuries.

“You know what?” I say before my better judgment takes control. “That would be really helpful.”

I take Kristy’s hand. “Let’s go. You’re still bleeding, and I need to search my book for anything and everything on Gatekeepers.”



I BRING MY CUP OF TEA TO MY LIPS, LOOKING OUT INTO THE dark. I’m sitting on the back covered porch, waiting for Lucas to come back. Because somehow, I know he will.

And I want him to.

A blanket is over my lap and my Book of Shadows is on the table in front of me. All three of my familiars are around me, and they won’t be leaving any time soon. Kristy is back at her place, searching through her own books for anything about Gatekeepers.

“It just seems so...so vague,” I tell my familiars. “And almost hokey.”

I flip through another few pages and then come to the last quarter of my book. It’s all blank pages. I feel a little pang when I see the emptiness. Since I don’t come from a long line of witches, I don’t have a book that’s been passed down

through the generations. The book I have is old, and about half of the spells and information in it was already there when I acquired it.

Kristy's book is much more impressive, and if there's nothing in hers about Gatekeepers, we could always go to the school and search through the books in the Academy's massive two-story library full of magical tomes.

Pandora growls, fur standing on end. I look out into the night, heart racing.

Lucas.

I close my book and Pandora jumps on top, protectively lying on it.

Lucas moves like a blur in the night, stopping right in front of the steps to the back porch.

"You changed." I run my eyes over Lucas. He has on a black t-shirt and dark jeans. There's no more blood on his face, and even his hair looks a little neater.

"You didn't. Though I have to admit I like the whole dark-Amish look on you. It leaves a lot to the imagination, and trust me, I've been imagining what you look like under those clothes since the moment I laid eyes on you."

"It's the traditional dress code for gatherings."

"You witches haven't modernized much, have you? Criticize the vampires all you want, but at least we don't make our women wear high-collared dresses," he says, eyes glinting. He likes pushing my buttons, almost as if it's a game for him.

"Most covens stopped the whole human sacrifice thing at least." I pull the blanket off my lap and stand. "I happen to like black, and not every black dress I own is this high-collared.

This one just happened to have the least amount of cat fur on it.”

Lucas nods. “Very well.”

“So, the body...it’s taken care of? No one will find it?”

“You act as if I’ve been drinking animal blood my whole afterlife.”

“Fine. I get it. You’ve done this before and know what you’re doing.” I inhale, trying to take slow, steady breaths to keep my heart from racing. I know Lucas was a killer. He’s a vampire, after all. And I know he very well still could be a killer. “And thank you.”

“You can thank me by letting me take you out to dinner.”

I move to the edge of the porch, hesitating before going down the stairs. “I think I’d like to go, but it’s just, uh, it’s been a long night.”

“I suppose being attacked by a demon is tiring.”

“Nah, that’s more annoying than anything else. Mostly because he killed himself before I could kill him.”

Lucas tips his head up to me. On the porch, I’m a few feet taller than him, but he still looks intimidating down at the base of the stairs. Binx follows me when I move onto the top step.

“Want to walk with me?” I ask, scanning the woods behind my house. “It’s the last day of the full moon phase and something about the moonlight always calms me.” I go down the rest of the stairs, stopping right beside Lucas. I look into his eyes, heart hammering away in my chest. This time, I don’t care if he hears it.

We don’t speak as we walk through the yard and head into the woods. Binx runs ahead, chasing a mouse.

“What else happened to make this a long night?” Lucas asks.

The wind picks up and I tip my head up to it, letting it rustle my long hair. “Somebody is hunting witches.”

“That’s a pity. Can’t imagine why someone would want to do that,” he says sarcastically.

I glare at him. “How do I know it’s not you?”

“You don’t. But I have no reason to kill witches.”

“Really? An old vampire like you has no reason to kill witches?”

He darts forward so fast he’s just a blur, pinning me up against a tree. “How old do you think I am?”

“Twelve hundred,” I guess, and push him away. Physically, there’s no way I’ll ever overpower him.

“I’m older than that.”

“Thirteen hundred?”

“Older.”

I swallow, aware that my heart is speeding up and a flush is covering my cheeks. I try to shove Lucas away again, and he responds with pressing his hips into mine.

“Keep squirming, I like it.”

Dammit. I do too. He feels surprisingly human against me like this, and he’s making me have a very human response. He parts his lips, tipping his head down toward mine, and grabs both of my wrists in one of his big hands, bringing them up over my head.

“Sixteen hundred,” I pant as heat rushes between my legs.

“Bingo.”

My mouth opens, but no sound comes out. Sixteen hundred years old. Damn. No wonder he’s so strong. I close my eyes in a long blink, and when I open them again, his face is right there in front of mine.

I see it again, the emptiness reflected in that brilliant blue. Sixteen hundred years on this earth. That’s a long time to live...especially when you’re not really alive.

“You,” I start, voice coming out all breathy. I twist my wrists and he releases his grasp. “You lived through the War of Light and Dark.”

“I did, but I was not part of it.” He brings his head in again, studying my eyes. He holds me against him for another moment, and everything inside of me wants to cave and give in to him.

I want to close my eyes and tip my chin up toward his. I want to run my fingers through his thick hair and pull his face to mine. I want him to put his lips against my lips, to kiss me like I’ve never been kissed before.

“I am sorry about your fellow witches,” he says softly.

“Thanks. I didn’t know any of them, but a witch hunter is never a good thing.”

“No,” he agrees. “It is not.” He breaks away. “I imagine this news makes you sad.” He looks at me almost as if he’s afraid I’m going to burst into tears.

“Of course, but it pisses me off more than anything. I’d love to find this motherfucker and burn him at the stake.”

“You have had a long day. Are you sure you don’t want to get something to eat? I hear humans raving about

comfort food.”

My lips curve up into a smile. “I’m never one to turn down comfort food.”

## CHAPTER 8



“You can choose where we go,” Lucas says as we head back to my house. “Obviously.”

“If we stay in Thorne Hill, we have exactly two choices: Taco Bell or Steak and Shake. A burger and fries sounds good right now. And a milkshake.” I loosen the ties of the cloak around my neck. “Are you, uh, hungry?”

“I already ate,” he says and leaves it at that.

I nod, not sure how to respond. I’m curious, but I don’t want to be weird. Though he just buried a body for me. I think we might have skipped right past the weird phase.

“You can come in,” I tell him when we get onto the porch. I grab my Book of Shadows and the cats follow me inside. “I’m going to change.”

Rushing upstairs, I use magic to curl my hair. I take my dress off, trading it for another black one that’s too modern to wear to a gathering. It’s low cut, showing off my cleavage, and is tight around the waist with long, flowy sleeves. It ends right above my knees, and I add a long silver necklace, put on dark lipstick, and grab my favorite black boots.

It’s my go-to look, and yes, I know how cliché it is. That’s part of why I like it. I brush out my curls into loose waves and



go back downstairs. Lucas is in the living room, talking on the phone. He's speaking a language I don't know and flicks his eyes to me when I come into the room.

There's no denying the hunger in his gaze.

Whether it's for my blood or my body, I don't know.

He says something to whoever he's speaking to and hangs up. Obviously checking me out, he parts his lips and flashes that cocky grin I'm starting to love as much as I hate.

"Black is your color, Callie."

"It goes with everything." I shrug. "Ready?"

"Always." He stands and moves over to me with vamp-speed. I grab my purse and lead the way out the door. Binx follows us out, running toward the front porch stairs. He jumps into the night, not making a sound when he lands. He's in his true form now, appearing as nothing more than a shadow in the night.

"You got a new car?" I ask, looking at the black Range Rover parked at the end of my driveway.

"I've had that one for about a year now." Lucas unlocks it. "I almost forgot I had it. I've acquired a great deal of material items over the years."

"Makes sense. Sixteen hundred years is a long time to have to, uh, collect and save." I get in the car and Lucas zooms around, only taking half a second to get in and fire up the engine. He drives straight to the restaurant, not needing any direction from me.

A few other tables are taken, mostly by a younger crowd thinking it's cool to still be out this late at night. We go to a table, and only a moment later a waitress comes over to take

our order. I already know what I want. Given that there are only two places open twenty-four seven around here, I've become familiar with the greasy cuisine. After I put in my order, she looks at Lucas, and her cheeks flush just a little.

He seems to have that effect on women.

"Nothing for me," he says, flashing her a brilliant smile. I half expect him to show some fang. "I've already eaten tonight."

"Okay," she says, voice a little breathy. She smiles back and turns, takes a few steps before slowing and throwing another look back.

"And now she's wondering if you're a vampire," I say, leaning in.

Lucas gives me a half smile and reaches across the table, taking my hand in his. He flips it over and traces the vein that runs down my wrist.

"Do I smell different?" I ask, feeling my pulse bound underneath his thumb. "Because I'm a witch."

"No. You smell different for another reason."

"Well, as long as it's not bad, I'm fine with it."

He drags his thumb up from my wrist and over my palm. It takes everything I have not to shudder.

"Why were you at my bar last night?" he asks, letting go of my hand.

"I was in the area."

"But why?"

I pull my hands into my lap. Now that the moment is over and so much else has happened between then and now,

everything seems stupid. But when I think of my sister's face, when I read the words of my brother's text...it becomes too much again. I grit my teeth, fighting against my emotions.

"I wanted to see what it would feel like to go back," I admit. "I told you, I hadn't been there in years."

"You did tell me, but you never said why you left."

"I did." I look into his intense eyes. "I needed to get away."

"You said you wanted a change."

"Yeah, and that's, uh, that's what I meant." I stare intently at the chipped laminate surface of the table in front of me. I bend my toes, pushing them down into the soles of my shoes. I have to focus on things here and now, to what's actually real. I don't want to get sucked into a memory.

I don't want to go back to the white walls and cold floors. To the lonely days that turned into nights. To the pain, the judgment.

To being terrified.

Helpless.

*Used.*

"So this movie, *Mean Girls*," Lucas says, sensing my discomfort. "Is it good?"

My blood pressure levels out and I relax. "Yeah. It is. You should watch it."



"AND HUMANS FEAR VAMPIRES," LUCAS SAYS, NOT TAKING HIS eyes off the TV. *Mean Girls* is almost over, and it held his

interest the whole time. “When really, teenage girls seem to be much more cruel.”

I laugh and set the almost-empty popcorn bowl onto the coffee table. We’re at my house, both sitting on the couch. Binx is next to me, and my other familiars are sitting on the arms of the couch.

“Teenage girls can be vicious.”

“Were you vicious?”

I tuck my legs up under myself, angling my body toward his. We’re close, and I know we’re walking a thin line right now. One touch, one glance that lingers a little too long...I don’t know if I’ll be able to resist.

Because I’m starting to like Lucas. I’m starting to see him as a man, not a monster.

But that’s what he is.

A vampire. A monster. A killer.

“I was, but not like that. I cared more about finding demons to vanquish than being popular.”

“Are there still schools for witches?” he asks.

“Yes. I’m surprised you don’t much about witches. I took a whole class about vampires, you know.”

“I’ve made it a point to avoid witches. Your kind always seems to have a flair for drama.”

“Flair for drama?” I raise an eyebrow. “Is that a low-key way of saying you don’t want to get your ass handed to you again?”

The humor leaves Lucas’s eyes and suddenly the room feels cold. “It means I don’t want to get caught in a witch’s

affairs.”

“Right.” I bite the inside of my cheek and lean back, yawning. It’s nearing two AM and, while I’m used to staying up late every now and then I’m still tired from my late night yesterday. Shit, I must be getting old.

Almost as if he can read my mind, he looks at the clock and stands up. He stretches his long arms out in front of him and then spins around. Suddenly, he advances and knocks me down on the couch. He holds himself over me, fangs out. He brings his face down to mine, inhaling deep.

“You’re really not scared of me, are you?”

I shake my head. “Is that weird for you?”

“Yes,” he confesses. “When someone isn’t scared of me, they either have a death wish or are stupid. You’re not stupid and you certainly don’t want to die.” He brings his head in, lips going to my neck. His fangs scrape against my skin, not cutting into it, but showing me how sharp they are. How easy it would be for him to bite down and suck me dry.

I shudder, feeling an intense urge to reach up, take a tangle of his hair and push his face to me before slowly guiding him down between my legs.

“I don’t think you’ll hurt me,” I breathe, widening my legs. He welcomes himself in between. His cock is getting hard against me, and Lord have mercy, that thing is big.

“What makes you so sure?” he growls, tongue lashing out against my skin.

“If you wanted to hurt me, you would have already.”

“Maybe I have fun taking my time.” He puts his mouth to me, fangs pressing into my skin but still not popping through

the surface. He was right when he said he can control himself. It's impressive, really, and if my body weren't so overcome with the desire to have him penetrate me in other ways, I'd acknowledge it.

"Maybe I do too," I whisper, unable to help myself. I bring my hand up, lightly tracing my finger along his spine. "Because even if you bite me, I'll bite back. You're stronger than me, but you're outnumbered."

He looks me dead in the eye and my pulse bounds. He's going to kiss me, and fuck, I want him to. I inhale deeply, causing my breasts to rise and press against his firm chest. I bend my knees up and widen my legs. My dress is bunching up around my waist, and I know he can feel the heat of my core through his pants. Vampires are sensitive like that, and one as old as Lucas is no exception.

He can sense and feel things others can't. He's had years of practice. Years of perfecting his every move. I grab the hem of his black t-shirt and start pulling it up. His eyes flutter shut when I run my palm over his cool skin. Letting out a soft groan, I buck my hips, feeling his cock against me again.

I want this.

I need this.

He needs it too. There's hunger in his eyes and I know this time it's not for my blood but for my body. But it's more than physical. I don't know how I know it, but I do. And I know he's hurting inside just like I am, one step away from being pulled back and swallowed into a big, black void.

Then, without warning, he kisses me. His lips, soft, yet cool, crash against mine. His tongue darts into my mouth and his hands explore my body. I can't get enough of him.

Everything inside me burns red hot, and if I don't strip my clothes off and feel his cold skin against me, I'm going to burn up.

His fangs retract and he deepens the kiss, moving one hand up to caress my face. I reach down, fumbling with the zipper on his jeans. Magic sizzles at my fingertips, and I bring my hand up, accidentally zapping him in the chest.

"Getting excited?" he croons, glancing down at the smoldering section of flesh on his chest. It begins to heal almost instantly.

"I'm sorry."

He moves back, scooping me up with him. "Don't be. Don't hold back, Callie."

I move out of his arms and push onto my knees. I put both hands on his chest and shove him onto the couch. "I won't." Climbing on top, I straddle his lap, rolling my hips and feeling that big dick rub against me. It's going to hurt so good when he pushes it inside of me...which is going to happen soon.

My familiars have left the room. Or maybe the house. I don't even know. And right now, I don't care. Because all I can think about, all I want, is Lucas.

And then my phone rings.

"Dammit," I moan, knowing nothing good comes from a phone call at two AM. "I'll silence that." I extend my hand, bringing my phone to me. I go to silence the call, but then I see who's calling.

"What's wrong?" Lucas asks, hands landing on my hips.

I flip the phone around to show him. "It's the hospital."

## CHAPTER 9



“Hi,” I say as soon I’m through the ER doors. “I’m here to see Betty Jones.” I blink and shake my head. “Elizabeth. Betty’s just a nickname.”

The attendant types something into her computer. “And you are?”

*The only emergency contact you could fucking find.* “Callie Martin.”

“Are you family?”

“No, I’m—”

“I’m sorry,” the attendant says, not sounding sorry at all. She pushes her glasses down on her nose and peers over top. “Only family is allowed back into the ER.”

“Yeah, but someone—”

“Callie,” Lucas says, cutting me off. He steps in front of me, looking the attendant right in the eye. “You will let us back to see Elizabeth Jones. We are her family.”

“Yes,” the attendant says, slowly nodding her head. Her eyes are completely glossed over. She turns back to her computer, types something, and then turns back to us. “She’s in room seven. You can go through that door.”



Lucas blinks and takes my hand, leading me through the doors and back into the ER. I swallow my pounding heart and look at the numbers above each door. The ER at Thorne Hill Memorial isn't that large, and it looks like it's been a slow night. Nurses are gathered around the central nurses' station, talking about their weekend plans, not paying much attention to us as we rush past and into room seven.

"Shit," I say when I see Betty lying on the bed. She's hooked up to a heart monitor and an IV. Lucas gives my hand a squeeze before letting go. "Betty?" I ask quietly as I go to her bedside. "It's Callie. Can you hear me?"

Her eyes flutter open and closed.

"She's been drugged," Lucas says. "I can smell it in her blood. I've seen this before." He strides over, looking down at Betty. Her lip is split, and while she's been cleaned up, there's still blood on her face. It doesn't seem to bother Lucas, though. "And it's not from vampires."

"What are you trying to say?" I ask, but before he can answer a nurse comes in.

"Oh," she exclaims, not expecting to see anyone. "I didn't know Ms. Jones had visitors. And you are?"

"Callie," I say. "I was called as her emergency contact."

"Yes." The nurse sets her clipboard down and rubs hand sanitizer on her hands. "I was the one that spoke to you. She's lucky someone found her and called an ambulance."

"Is she okay?" I ask.

"She's stable," the nurse replies. "Once her blood screen comes back, we'll know more."

"She was drugged," I say. "I mean, look at her."

“It’s one possibility,” the nurse says as she puts on rubber gloves.

“Does the blood screen look for Rohypnol?” Lucas asks, looking down at Betty.

“It looks for a wide variety of things. It’s one we’re looking for,” the nurse says.

“Was she assaulted?” I ask as a wave of nausea goes over me.

“You were the only contact we were able to get off her,” the nurse starts, “but that doesn’t mean I can disclose all information with you.”

“Hey,” I say, and the lights flicker. I stride over and grab the nurse’s wrist. She pulls back, but as soon as I feel her pulse point, I gain control. She stills and looks up into my eyes. “What happened to her?”

“She was found in an alley behind Bob’s Bar and Grill. Unconscious but fully clothed. The cops think someone might have intended to harm her but got scared of getting caught and left. The people who found her thought they saw someone running away as they approached.”

I release her wrist and shift my gaze to Lucas. “Distract her, please.”

He smiles, showing his fangs. The nurse screams, but in just a second, Lucas has her spellbound, silencing her while I go to Betty. I don’t want to prick her finger or slice her arm, but I need some of her blood. Hoping this doesn’t hurt her, I take the tape off the IV in her arm. Very carefully, I slide the needle back just a little and press on the vein. A tiny bit of blood pools around the needle, I run my finger over it and then

push the needle back into her skin, sticking the tape down into place again.

I smear her blood onto my forehead and pick up Betty's hand.

*"Ostende mihi faciem praeterita,"* I whisper. *"Revelare faciem reus."* I close my eyes and see into Betty's mind.

She's at the store, closing up with us. Then she walks to her car...and someone comes and talks to her. I grip her hand tighter, feeling her blood growing hot on my forehead, and I strengthen the connection.

He takes her hand. I hear his voice echoing in my head. She's walking into a coffee house with him, the one two blocks over from the bookstore. Finally, I get a view of his face, and I know exactly who he is. Mike Miller. He lives the floor above Betty in her downtown apartment and has been interested in her for a while. She's too nice to tell him she only wants to be friends.

I wrap my other hand around Betty's, seeing everything unfold. Mike asks her to go out for a drink. She tells him it's too late and she wants to go home. He insists. He's meeting friends there anyway.

She agrees, saying she'll only stay for a bit and then head home. Things start to blur from there, and Mike gives her some sort of purple drink. And then everything starts to fade, and the last thing I see is Mike leading her to the back of the bar.

And then everything goes black.

I let go of Betty's hand. "I know what happened." I run my hand over her hair. "Don't worry. He won't get away with it."

Stepping back, I look at Lucas. "Let's go."

“We were never here. You never saw us. No one came into this room,” he tells the nurse, who slowly nods. She blinks rapidly, and goes to Betty’s bedside, doing an assessment. I storm out of the ER room, and the lights in the hall flicker as I pass underneath them.

“I have to take care of something,” I tell Lucas once we’re outside in the parking lot. “If you don’t want to come, that’s fine. You can go.”

“The sun doesn’t rise until five-thirty. I have time.” He gets a devilish look in his eyes, and it’s mirroring the way I feel.

“Good. Then let’s go.”



I STAND BACK, LOOKING UP AT THE DOOR WITH DOE EYES. There are two people right inside, shuffling about, and one doesn’t want the other to answer the door. He thinks it might be the cops.

The other looks out the peephole, and seeing me, undoes the chain on the door. Before he can open the door, I twist my wrist and open it for him. Shoving it open telekinetically, it hits the guy in the face.

“Mike Miller,” I say, stepping inside.

He’s sitting on the couch, looking guilty as fuck. And drunk. He reeks like a distillery. Two other guys are in the living room, holding PlayStation controllers. Some sort of shooting game is on the TV, and one of the guys flicks his eyes back and forth from the game to me.

“Sorry to interrupt the sausage fest, boys,” I say. “But I need to have a work with your boy Mike here.”

“Who the fuck are you?” he asks, springing up.

“I’m here on behalf of Betty Jones, and what you did is not okay.”

“Are you like a lawyer or something?”

I smile. “Or something.”

“Listen, lady,” Mike’s roommate says, rubbing his nose. “You better get the fuck out or I’m calling the cops.”

“Go ahead,” I reply sweetly. “Call the cops. And then Mikey here can confess what he did.”

“That’s it,” the guy I hit with the door says. He’s drunk too and comes at me. I hold out two fingers and flick my wrist. The guy flies back against the wall. I hold him there and look at Mike. The other guys jump up, all going on the defense.

One of them, bloodshot eyes wide, takes a tentative step toward me.

“Ah-ah-ah,” I say, wagging a finger from my free hand at him. “I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

“What do you want?” Mike asks, sounding on the verge of tears.

“First,” I start, stepping closer, “I want you to invite my friend in.”

“No fucking way,” one of the other guys cries out. “It’s a fucking vampire.”

I move my wrist, sliding Mike’s roommate up on the wall. He feverishly kicks his legs. Mike makes the mistake of looking at Lucas, who’s able to hold him spellbound just from that millisecond their eyes meet.

“I’d really like it if you’d invite me in,” Lucas says. Mike’s friends protest, and one makes a move to push Mike and break the hold. Using magic, I shove him back down onto the couch.

“You boys really need to learn to listen,” I tell them.

Mike’s head bobs up and down in response to Lucas’s words. “Come in,” he says to Lucas, who steps inside and comes up behind me. I inhale and release Mike’s roommate. He falls with a thud to the ground, panting for breath.

“This...this isn’t going to hold up in court,” Mike rambles. “I’ll tell my lawyer and he’ll get it thrown out.”

“Spoken like a true entitled white asshole,” I say with a cluck of my tongue. “But the thing is, I’m not a lawyer. You messed with one of my friends. So now I’m here to mess with you.” I step closer. “So, tell me. What exactly were you trying to accomplish when you slipped Betty Jones date-rape drugs? I want to hear you say it. To admit how pathetic you are.”

“I...I...I didn’t...” He holds out his hands. “Whatever you think happened. It...it didn’t. We’ve been here all night. And you...you’re trespassing. And assault. Yeah, you’re assaulting us!”

“Mm-hm.” I raise my eyebrows and look at Lucas. “Bite him. Tell me if he tastes like bullshit. Because that’s what he smells like.”

Lucas jerks forward, fangs bared. He doesn’t actually take a step, but it’s enough to scare the shit out of the guys. Mike lets out a yell and steps back, tripping over an empty pizza box.

“Fuck!” one of his friends screams.

“Get up,” I tell him. Mike scrambles to his feet.

“You can’t do this. My dad...my dad’s a lawyer...he’ll have you arrested.”

“No, he won’t,” I say simply and hold out my hand, palm up facing the ceiling. Slowly, I bring my fingers in, as if I was squeezing a stress ball. In a way, it’s like I am. Because this is some good therapy right here. Mike’s nose twitches and a strangled whimper of pain escapes his lips. He looks down at his crotch, not understanding what’s going on. I tighten the magical clamp a little more by bringing my fingers in closer to my palm.

“Now, give me one good reason I shouldn’t castrate you right here and right now.” I squeeze a little harder.

“I...I...I didn’t mean to hurt her.”

“Really? You didn’t mean to hurt her, but you drugged her and left her in an alley. She’s in the hospital right now with blood on her face. But that’s okay because you *didn’t mean* to hurt her?”

“That’s not what happened!”

“Bullshit.”

Lucas flinches forward, making the guys jump and scream again.

“I just wanted her to loosen up so I could get a little action.”

I’m seething, heart hammering in my chest. I wish I could get vengeance on every asshole with this mentality. Mike’s roommate makes a desperate run for the hall, but Lucas stops him, appearing at his side in just a second.

“She was all for it at first,” Mike goes on. He thinks he’s rationalizing his behavior, but really he’s digging himself

deeper into the hole. “She wanted to go home with me. And then she just kind of passed out. I didn’t touch her after. But then a car pulled around back. I didn’t touch her, I swear! We left.”

“No shit, you left. You left her in an alley.” I tighten the clamp, bringing Mike to his knees with pain. “Now here’s what’s going to happen.” I drop my hand to my side, and he gasps for air. I crouch down next to him, grabbing his chin and turning his head up so I can look into his eyes. I move my fingers down on his neck until I can feel his pulse. I count out three beats.

“You’re going to call the police and tell them what you did. Do not spare a single detail. Tell them how your friends encouraged you to *get a little action* from an unconscious woman. Didn’t make any attempt to stop you. Helped you buy the drugs in the first place. Go ahead and turn in your stash of weed too.”

Mike moves his head up and down.

“And most importantly, you have no memory of me coming here tonight.” I let go and stand up, looking at Lucas. “Wipe their memories.”

“With pleasure.” He gives me a smile, purposely showing off his sharp fangs. I meant for him to only remove the memory of us coming in here, and I know he understands what I want. But it’s fun watching the other assholes squirm.

“Let this be a lesson for you boys,” I say, stepping over Mike. “In how to be a fucking decent human being. Treat everyone with respect. Or else I’ll be back, and I might not be in as cheerful of a mood as I’m in right now.”



Once Lucas is done with the roommate's memory, he goes to the other two friends and is able to hold both spellbound at the same time. He's the strongest vampire I've ever encountered, but he might be stronger than any I've read about as well. Because I didn't know vampires could hold two people spellbound at the same time.

We leave the apartment, and I telekinetically shut the door behind me. I let out a breath, heart settling back into my chest, and walk back to Lucas's Range Rover. As soon as we get to it, Lucas grabs me and kisses me, picking me up and pinning me against the door of his SUV. I wrap my legs around him, holding him as tight as I can.

"Come back," I say between kisses. "To my." More kisses. "My place. We still have like...like..." He moves his mouth to my neck, kissing and sucking my skin. Tingles shoot through me, awakening every nerve in my body. "A while until sunrise."

Suddenly he breaks away and looks into my eyes. "When I do make love to you, Callie—and trust me, I will—I'm going to take my time." He puts his mouth to my neck again, grazing his fangs over my flesh. "I'll make it well worth your wait."

He sets me down and gathers my hair into his hand, moving it over my shoulder. "You are unlike anyone I've ever met before."

"You've met a lot of people."

"Yes, I have. But you...you are exquisite."

"No one has ever described me like that before."

"Then they are fools," he says, cupping my face with his large hands. And then it hits me, that for the first time I can be

myself, powers and all, because my true self is exactly what Lucas wants.

## CHAPTER 10



**Y**awning, I reach for my coffee only to remember it's empty. Blinking to try to focus my hazy vision, I stand, pacing back and forth behind the counter in order to keep myself awake. Betty was on the schedule to open this morning, with Kristy coming in a bit later. I haven't filled Kristy in on what happened last night, not wanting to wake her up and worry her. One of us needed to get a decent amount of sleep last night.

I sit back down, mind drifting to Lucas. He was in my dreams, however fleeting they were with the two hours of sleep I'm running on. And in my dreams, he fulfilled his promise of making it worth the wait. Multiple times, actually.

Thunder crackles from the clouds above, adding to the pittering of rain that's been hitting the window all morning. I really wish I was back in my bed right now. Thunderstorms lull me to sleep like a baby.

And will make the next hour or two go by slower than usual. I ring up two customers, and then the store is empty. The storm picks up in intensity, and I go to the window, watching the clouds swirl above.

Going back to the counter, I get out a map of northwest Indiana, spreading it out on the counter. I fill a black bowl

with water and hold up a quartz crystal, invoking the powers before dropping it in the water.

I suck at any sort of divination, but if I can get even the smallest bit of insight to this Gatekeeper thing, I'll give it a try. Clearing my mind, I look into the bowl, knowing the next person to come through the door will break my concentration.

“Where are you, motherfucker?” I mutter, looking into the water. My vision gets fuzzy, but it's from being tired, not from channeling something. With a sigh, I sit up, stretching out the muscles in my back. Kristy comes through the front door, shaking off her umbrella and holding two coffees, thank the stars.

“Are you scrying at work?” she asks, coming over to the counter.

“More like falling asleep at work.”

She sets the coffees down and starts to head to the back to take off her raincoat. “Wait, you're not supposed to be here today. Is Betty sick?”

“In a sense. She was drugged last night at a bar.”

“What?” Kristy's blue eyes widen. “Is she okay? Oh my God.”

“She'll be fine. And I tracked down the asshole who drugged her, taught him a little lesson, and then had him turn himself in to the police.”

Kristy gapes at me for a moment. “Why didn't you call me?”

“One of us needs to be well-rested. You know...in case Zuul shows up in my fridge or something.”

“Good point. You're sure Betty's going to be okay?”

“Yeah. I checked on her at the hospital after we took care of—”

“We?” She raises her eyebrows.

I make a face. “Lucas was with me.”

I didn’t think it was possible, but her eyebrows go up even higher. “Hold that thought.” She hurries into the back to take off her coat and put her purse away. I’m saved by a customer who needs help picking out a book for her sister’s birthday, but I can’t avoid this conversation all together.

“Lucas?” Kristy says the second the woman walks out the door. “Did you guys hook up?”

“Almost. We were interrupted by the hospital calling. He came with me to check on Betty, and then to Mike’s house.”

“Mike? That guy from her apartment complex who’s been asking her out?”

I nod. “Yep. Him. Such a fucking maggot.” I shake my head, feeling angry all over again. “But back to your question. I went back after Lucas left and she was alert and awake. Her parents were there with her, and she was happy to hear Mike confessed.”

“Shit.” Kristy looks at me, mouth slightly open. “Just... shit.” She lets out a heavy breath. “You’ve been up all night?”

“I crashed when I got home and slept for maybe two hours.”

“Go home. Get some sleep.”

“I don’t want to leave you.”

She purses her lips and thinks for a moment. “You know we really should hire another person or two to help with this

place. If Betty can't cover for us and we're both otherwise occupied, we'll lose business."

"True. It would be nice to have a few others to call on."

She pulls out a notebook and starts writing down everything she wants in an employee, and then prints off a "help wanted" sign to hang in the window. I watch her hang it, muttering an incantation as she tapes it to the window.

"I got this for Betty," she says and slides the coffee over to me. "I know you like yours black, but it looks like you could use the caffeine."

"I need an IV of it." I yawn again and take a sip of the sugary coffee. The storm starts to wind down, and more customers come in. A middle-aged woman who I recognize as a regular grabs a few books and comes up to the counter.

"You're hiring?" she asks.

"We are," Kristy tells her. "Part-time with flexible hours."

"Can I have an application please?"

"Of course!" Kristy hands her one, and the woman takes it to the end of the counter to fill it out. Kristy looks it over when she hands it back. "What's your availability?"

"Pretty much any day," the woman says. "I was a caretaker for my great aunt, but she recently passed."

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Kristy tells her.

"Thanks. We weren't close," she adds, letting us know she's not torn up over the death. "I thought I'd like being a housewife again, but I'm going stir crazy sitting at home."

Kristy beams and I smile too. Her spell worked. "When can you start?"



I ROLL OVER, PULLING THE BLANKETS UP TO MY CHIN. IT'S going on noon, and I just woke up from a two-hour nap. I could roll back over and sleep for the rest of the day, but I need to do more research on Gatekeepers. Binx is stretched out next to me, half tucked under the blankets. I swear he likes being a cat better than being a spirit sometimes.

Not that I can blame him, of course. I might spoil all my familiars...just a bit. Wrapping my arm around him, I close my eyes and fall back asleep. An hour and a half later, I wake up, feeling much better. I get out of bed, shower, and then go downstairs to get something to eat.

I make myself teriyaki chicken and rice, with steamed veggies and a side salad. I cook up lightly seasoned chicken for my familiars and we all go out onto the covered front porch. It's still raining with thunder rumbling in the distance.

"I should probably exercise," I tell the cats, finishing off my last bit of rice. "But I kind of want to take a nap too." Staying in shape is important, since I never know what a night of demon hunting will bring.

"Maybe I'll run a few miles and then nap. But I already showered."

As I'm coming up with the most legitimate excuses I can not to work out, a car pulls into my driveway. I set my empty bowl down and stand, watching the car. I'm not a trusting person, and the very real fact that nons once openly hunted us down, hung us, and burned us at the stake makes me a little paranoid.

But then I see the driver and relax. It's Monica, the girl who came over before to bring my Jeep home. She puts the

little Toyota in park and gets out, running through the rain.

“Hey, Callie,” she calls cheerfully and dodges up onto the porch.

“Hi.” She’s holding a large leather-bound book. “How are you?”

“Pretty good. And you?”

“Same.” I motion toward the door. The wind is picking up and blowing misty rain in at us. “Come in and dry off.”

“Thanks.”

I open the door, letting my familiars in first. “What brings you out to Indiana again?” I close the door, eyeing the book again.

“This.” She holds it out and I take it. The book is heavy, and judging by the cracking leather, it’s old and valuable as well. “I hope you can read Greek.”

“No,” I say with a laugh. “I can’t.”

“Lucas wanted me to give it to you. I have no idea why. Someone dropped it off this morning with a note from him saying to bring it here. Oh, and he won’t be back until tomorrow night.”

“Tomorrow?” I repeat even though I heard her correctly. I’m more disappointed than I want to admit. I was looking forward to seeing him tonight...and having him make good on his promise to take his time.

Maybe a little distance is a good thing.

“Yeah. I got the feeling he’s out of state or something.”

“Huh. Interesting.”



She meets my eyes, smiling. “So, are you still gonna deny that you’re hooking up with a vampire?” In a deliberate move, she sweeps her hair back, showing off fang marks in her neck. Right. She’s dating a vampire.

“If there was something to deny, I might. But there’s nothing.” I set the book down on the coffee table. “Do you want anything to drink? Coffee? Tea?”

“Coffee would be great, actually. I have a long drive back to Chicago.”

“Follow me,” I say and go into the kitchen.

Monica takes off her shoes and looks around as she walks. “Your house is really pretty.”

“Thanks.” I plug in the coffee pot. “It took years to do the restorations.”

“I love old houses. But the upkeep is too much for me.”

“Yeah,” I agree. “There’s a big white house a few miles from here that goes up for sale every few years and I’m low-key obsessed with it. But the renovations alone for something that big will easily cost a million bucks or more. It has foundation issues.”

“That’s a shame.” She sits at the kitchen table and takes off her jacket. She has bruises on her bicep as if someone grabbed her hard. “And then it’s a matter of time before they get knocked down.”

“Right. I might cry if that happens.”

I add water to the coffee pot and grab two mugs. “How do you like your coffee?”

“Cream and sugar, if you have it.”

“I have sugar. I don’t add cream to mine.”

“Then just sugar is fine.” She smiles.

“I don’t mean to be nosey,” I start, even though I very much do mean to be nosey. “But what is the nature of the relationship between your boyfriend and Lucas to have you doing these errands all the time?”

“I wouldn’t really say they’re friend-friends, more like... like working acquaintances who’ve known and tolerated each other for a hundred or so years.”

“Oddly, I could describe some of my *friends* in the same way. Well, other than the hundred years part.”

She laughs. “I suppose I can too.”

“Do you know Lucas well?”

She shakes her head, and her hair falls into her face. “Not really. He’s pretty mysterious. I was scared of him for a long time if I’m being honest. I still am a bit. I can’t decide if he’s protective about people close to him because he cares about them or because it’s easier to keep us alive than to replace us and have to start over fresh, ya know?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“I know he’s well-respected among vampires. Because of his age. You do know how old he is, right?”

I nod. “He told me. Sixteen hundred years. Give or take, I’m assuming.”

“Give. Dom told me Lucas is like sixteen hundred and thirty years old or something crazy like that. I can’t even imagine.”

“And what about Eliza?”

“Oh, this I do know a bit about!” She leans forward, eyes lighting up. “Lucas turned her around the Revolutionary War. She was the daughter of a British general who killed a bunch of vampires, and I guess he made her a vampire to get back at the general for something. She’s the only vampire he’s ever turned, and he didn’t want anything to do with her after he turned her, but there’s a whole weird thing with sires and offspring. I know he loves her. Not like *in* love, but loves her like a daughter. Or a sister. Or both.” She wrinkles her nose and shrugs. “It sounds so weird when I say it out loud.”

“It does. But hey, vampires are weird enough, right?”

“Right.” She looks at Pandora. “Your calico is really pretty.” Upon hearing herself get complimented, Pandora jumps up into Monica’s lap, purring. Monica smiles and runs her hand over Pandora’s fur. “Eliza’s kind of stuck up, if you ask me. She thinks she’s special to have such an old sire and will be the first to tell anyone who listens about her powerful maker. But don’t tell her I said that.”

“Your secret is safe with me.” I give her a smile and then turn around to attend to the coffee, pouring two cups. “Did a vampire do that to you?” I look at the bruises on her arm.

“Oh.” Her cheeks flush. “Yeah, but it wasn’t Dom.”

“Are you in any sort of trouble?” I ask softly.

“No, no, I’m not,” she says quickly. “Dom was dealing with some vampire drama last night and I just happened to get in the way. I think sometimes the other vamps forget how fragile we humans are, ya know?”

“I guess.” I sip my coffee, feeling uneasy. I grab the book Lucas had Monica deliver. “He didn’t say anything about it?” I ask as I carefully lift the cover.

“No. All I was told was to give it to you. I think it’s about mythology. Or maybe it’s that one Greek novel. The famous one with Homer and the dog that remembered him years later.”

“The Odyssey.”

“Yeah, that one. I read it in school, though I don’t remember it being that long.” She takes another drink of coffee. “I thought maybe you were Greek or something.”

“Nope. I’ve never even been to Greece.”

“That’s weird then.” She shrugs, finishes her coffee, and uses the bathroom before she takes off. “See ya later,” she says.

“Thanks for bringing the book by.”

“No problem. I’m sure I’ll see you again. Bye!”

I see her out the door and then go back to the book. “I have no idea what he’s trying to tell me. If anything,” I say to Binx. “For all I know this is random and meant to distract me while he comes up with a master plan to massacre my family.”

Binx doesn’t believe me.

“Okay, fine. I don’t think that he is, but isn’t that an issue? I shouldn’t trust him, should I? He’s a vampire.”

All three of my familiars look at me at the same time.  
*Never trust a vampire.*

I open the book, carefully flipping through page after page for some sort of clue. I’m getting bored and I’m probably only fifty pages into the book. I’m about to stop when I get the feeling to keep going but to skip a few pages. I hold my hand over the book, close my eyes, and use magic to flip through it. The pages fall and I find a piece of paper stuck inside.

It's a translated section about Charon, the son of Erebus and Nyx, who ferried souls into the underworld.

“I don't get it. Why would Lucas—” I cut off as the realization hits me. “He was like a Gatekeeper to the underworld.”

## CHAPTER 11



**M**y house has never been cleaner. Funny, how hard it is to get back to your normal routine after almost sleeping with a sixteen-hundred-year-old vampire and there's a chance a Gatekeeper of the underworld is walking around the Midwest.

Yesterday, after visiting Betty at her parents' house, I deep cleaned my kitchen. And I mean *deep*. I took expired food out of my pantry and reorganized my herb cabinet. I even vacuumed under the stove. Then I moved onto my bedroom. Dusted everything, changed the sheets, and changed out all my protective crystals for freshly charged ones. I tackled the bathroom next and then crashed on the couch with a bottle of sweet red wine while watching 80s movies.

And today is the day for errands. The sun is out in full force, a drastic change from yesterday and the air is warm and humid. I'm wearing a sleeveless black dress, heeled black boots, and a black floppy hat. My nails are painted bright red, and my lipstick matches.

"Coming with?" I ask Binx as I grab my reusable shopping bags. "We need to pay a visit to the Delvaux twins before I go to the grocery store."

He meows and follows me outside and shadows his way into my Jeep before I get there.

“Showoff,” I tell him, trying not to smile. He sits in the passenger seat, putting his paws up on the door to look out the window as we drive. The Delvaux twins live in the next town over, with a beach view of Lake Michigan. They come from a long line of money, and an even longer line of magic. We met at the Academy, and while we butted heads at first, we became friends.

They follow some of the more old-school rules of witchcraft and are exactly the witches I need to talk to. I turn up the music, singing along to my playlist the whole way there. The Delvauxs own an impressive amount of land with lakefront property. It’s been in their family for years, bought back when the poor people lived along the lake, not the other way around.

I park and get out, breathing in the cool air coming in from the lake. The Ley line that runs through my little town continues this way, ending in the lake. A hundred years ago, there were multiple covens in the area. Now we’re down to two.

Binx walks in step next to me as we head toward the big brick house. I walk up stone steps and raise my hand to knock on the door, but it opens before I get the chance.

“Callie!” Nicole exclaims pulling the door open wide. She turns, talking to someone in the house. “I told you my tarot reading was right.”

“What brings you to this neck of the woods?” Naomi asks, appearing behind her sister. They’re twins, but not identical. Though, with their long, red hair and pale blue eyes, they do look alike.

“We have a problem,” I say.

Naomi waves her hand and turns, going into the house. “Always with the dramatics, that one. Well, what are you waiting for? Come in and tell us the bad news.”

Nicole purses her lips, shaking her head at her sister. “Ahh, Binx. I’ve missed this handsome devil.” She bends over and scoops him up, baby-talking to him. I come in and shut the door. Their house is big and classic, with an overly ostentatious curved staircase, shiny marble floors, and a large chandelier hanging above us that probably cost as much as my Jeep parked out front.

It’s too familiar. But now is not the time for painful childhood memories.

“What’s the problem?” Naomi asks, leading the way into a front sitting room. Nicole sets Binx down on the couch next to her, continuing to pet and love on him. He’s eating it up.

“The other night, I was attacked by a demon in the woods,” I start.

“Isn’t that your thing, though?” Naomi goes to a bar cart and pours herself a splash of expensive whiskey. “You tend to attract them, though I’ll admit I’ve always wondered if you secretly summoned them.”

“Why would I summon demons? They just find me. But I’m not talking lower-level demons here,” I go on, sinking down onto the couch opposite Nicole and Binx. “I’m talking full-on demonic possession.”

Both of the twins freeze and stare at me.

“What happened?” Nicole asks.



“He killed himself before I could question his future, but I got one piece of information out of him, and that’s why I’m here. I’m hoping you might know more about this.”

“What is it?” Naomi swirls the amber liquid around in the glass before taking a slow sip.

“A Gatekeeper. That’s all I know. A, uh, friend reminded me that a “gatekeeper” in Greek mythology leads souls to the underworld.”

“You know the Greeks overexaggerated everything,” Nicole says. “But it is a curious point.”

“Exactly,” I say.

“You say he offed himself?” Naomi raises her eyebrows and finishes her drink. “How?”

“I conjured white light to torture him with. I had it hovering above his chest, burning him when necessary, and he just pushed himself right into it. I’m pretty sure he did it so I couldn’t get more info from him...well, from the human he was possessing. I’d broken through.” Lucas did, not me, but I’ll leave that part out for now. “And I know it doesn’t make sense, but I have a feeling this has to do with the witches being hunted.”

“Why didn’t you go to the High Priestess with this information?” Naomi’s always been a little sour on Tabatha favoring me during our years at the Academy. “Why us?”

“She has enough to deal with right now. And you know the rules on demonic possession,” I add. “The council will want to look into it, and I fear we don’t have that time. Plus, by the time they’d get to the body, the traces of demon would be gone, and they’d rule it a human affair. And witches don’t deal in non-magical affairs.”

Nicole twists, turning to look at her sister. “Are you thinking,” she starts.

“What I’m thinking?” Naomi finishes. “It’s dangerous, sister. And forbidden.”

“When has that ever stopped us before?” I chime in, not knowing what they’re talking about.

“What did you do with the body?” Naomi asks.

“It’s buried in the woods.” I think it is at least.

Nicole claps her hands together. “I’ve always wanted to try this!”

“Try what?” I ask.

The twins look at each other, speaking at the same time. “A resurrection spell.”

## CHAPTER 12



“I was hoping you’d call.” Lucas’s voice through the phone makes me shudder. I can still feel his big cock pressed against me. Can still taste him on my lips. Tingles run through me, starting from the center of my chest and going right between my legs. I bite my lip, thinking I’m going to need to take a trip to my bedroom and handle business myself so I can proceed with a clear head. “Miss me?”

I do, actually, and I don’t just miss the way his body felt against mine. I like being around him, how he doesn’t judge me. How I can just be myself and not hide the fact I’m a witch.

How he’s not scared of me.

“Just a little. Do you miss me?” I ask.

“Yes. Can I see you tonight?”

“Maybe.”

“Don’t be coy with me now.”

I lean back against my couch, putting my feet up on the coffee table. “What did you do with that body you took care of for me? Please say you buried it.”

“Yes, I did bury it.”

“Would you be able to take me to it? And maybe help me dig it up.”

“That’s an interesting idea for a second date, Ms. Martin. I have to say, you keep me on my toes.”

I smile. “If only that’s what this is...trying to be spontaneous or something.”

“Or something. No one who’s asked me to dispose of a body has ever asked me to dig it back up.”

“Can you, though? I kind of need it.”

“If you’re into necrophilia, I’m good at playing dead.”

“Gross. And a world of no. I got the book today—thank you, by the way—and it got me thinking that maybe this Gatekeeper is guarding another realm or something similar. Something important enough to have demons guarding or... or...whatever that demon was doing the other night.”

“I still don’t see how the body is going to come into play.”

“It’s probably best you don’t know.”

“Now I’m really intrigued,” he says. “I will meet you at your house.”

“Great. And, Lucas? Thanks.” I hang up and then definitely don’t obsess over whether or not I should take my hair out of the messy bun it’s in and magically curl it or not. Or maybe have it down straight.

“Doesn’t matter,” I say out loud to no one in particular. “The dead guy won’t care. And actually, I should consider making one of those hair nets because I’m sure this body is going to be decomposing and oozy. I don’t want that in my hair.” I let out a breath, mentally telling myself I’m pathetic.

After a good five minutes freaking out about looking good for Lucas, I get back to business. This resurrection spell is complicated and full of dark, tricky magic. If we get one part wrong, it could end badly. Very badly.

Pulling the band out of my hair, I rake my fingers through it, untangling it enough for me to braid. I toss my hair over my shoulder and go into the kitchen, getting out the necessary herbs.

“Anyone feel like hunting?” I ask my familiars. “I need fresh bones.” All three perk up, wanting to go out and kill something. “Nothing too big,” I shout after them as they shadow out of the house. “A bird or rabbit will do.”

There’s a fine line between light and dark magic, and we’re definitely walking the tightrope with this spell tonight. The only thing making me feel better about tonight is knowing that we have no intention of keeping this guy resurrected. We need to talk to him, try to get into his head, and then send him back to the ground. No life for a life. No altering the natural order.

The problem with dark magic is sometimes when you cross into the darkness, it’s hard to come back. You take and take and take, and eventually the universe gets even with you.

I grab a jar of pink Himalayan salt and a satchel of herbs and go upstairs to fill up my bathtub with warm water. A cleansing bath before a ritual might be overkill, but I’m not taking any chances with this one.

Half an hour later, I get out of the tub feeling refreshed. I rinse off in the shower and then get dressed in my favorite black leggings and an off-the-shoulder black top. I re-braid my hair and go downstairs to get started on the resurrection spell.

I took a photo with my phone of the page in the twins' book. If we don't do this exactly like the book says, the spell won't work.

I pull jars of herbs from the cabinet along with my mortar and pestle, which I was lazy and didn't clean out the last time I used it. Giving it a quick wash, I hold my hand over it to heat up the stone and help it dry.

All three of my familiars caught something, and the mouse Freya is chewing is almost gone. Pandora has something that I think might have been a squirrel, and I have no idea what Binx has ripped apart.

Grimacing, I reach down and take two leg bones, looking away as the remaining tendons and muscles snap and break.

"Sick," I say with a shudder. "I should have worn gloves."

Trying hard to keep the lump in my throat down, I go back into the kitchen and take the bones to the sink. I have to clean them the best I can and then boil them in a potion for exactly thirteen minutes.

Once the bones are clean and the blood is scrubbed off my hands, I put them in a pot to boil. I warmed the water on the stove as I cleaned the bones, so it's already boiling. I add the herbs, get out my phone and open a stopwatch, hitting the start button as soon as I drop the bones into the water.

Then it's back to the herbs for another potion. I have everything poured out and ready to be mixed and ground in the mortar and pestle by the time the bones are done boiling. Using a pair of kitchen tongs, I take the bones out, quickly dry them, and almost burn my fingers trying to snap them in half. They're not at all brittle, and yet somehow, I'm supposed to grind them to a powder—without using magic.

“I’m starting to think this entire spell is a set up for failure,” I tell my familiars. “Just something a bored witch came up with thinking that someday she’d get willing victims to do some nasty things.”

Just then, there’s a knock at my door. I wrap the bones up in a towel and wipe my hands on my leggings as I walk through the kitchen to the front door. I can sense Lucas before I can see him, and my heart skips a beat.

But it’s not like I’m excited to see him or anything.

“That was fast,” I say when I open the door. “I talked to you like an hour ago.”

“I wasn’t in Chicago when we spoke,” he starts, not taking a step in until I invite him. He doesn’t need to be invited in to enter this time, no, but he’s doing it out of respect.

I move to the side, welcoming him in. “Well, good. I could use your help.” As soon as I close the door, he rushes at me, arms snaking around my waist. He pulls me to him, and my middle smashes against his. My heart jumps again, and blood rushes through me.

“Help with what?” He brings his head down, burying his face against my neck. I shudder from his touch. I want more. *Now.* My eyes flutter shut, and I bring my arms around him, slipping my hands under the black leather jacket he’s wearing.

He’s not as cold as before but is more or less room temperature. It’s weird, but not off-putting. Not in the least.

“Grinding up fresh bone into a powder.”

He pulls back, one eyebrow raised. “I’m guessing this has something to do with the body you want me to dig up.”

I nod. “It does.” Neither of us break apart. I slide one foot to the side, pulling him a little closer between my legs.

“And you’re still not going to tell me what this is about?”

“I’ll tell you.” I reach up, gently brushing his messy hair back away from his face. “But don’t try to talk me out of it.”

“There are very few things I’d talk you out of.”

“Good.” I close my eyes for a second. “Because I’m going to resurrect him.”

“Him? The demon?”

“No,” I say with a shake of my head. “The demon is long gone, but the man he possessed can be brought back. We’re going to try to see into his mind and get some information. If he was possessed by a Gatekeeper, we need to know why one came to the area and why he’s looking for witches.”

“He’s looking for witches?”

Shit, I said too much. More than I’ve said to anyone else, even Kristy. “Yeah, it’s a theory.” A theory I’m going off of based on a creepy vision I had. “Either way, it was rude to off himself before I got my questions in.”

Lucas suddenly picks me up and moves with vamp speed to the living room, setting me down on the couch. He holds himself over top of me and I quiver. Fuck, I want him.

“You’re something else, Callie. And I like it. I really like it.” He draws his fangs and I slowly bend my hand up, bringing my fingers to his mouth. Carefully, I touch one of his fangs, pressing my flesh against it. It wouldn’t take much pressure to cut myself, to let a little bead of blood form at the puncture.

To let him taste me.



“Have you done this before?” he asks, moving his head down to my breasts.

“No,” I say in a shaky voice. He’s asking about the spell, but so much else applies right now. “I have...very direct instructions to follow. I think we’ll pull it off. I hope so at least.”

“Who makes up the *we* you keep speaking of?”

“My friend Kristy, who you’ve met already, and two more friends. The spell is from their Book.”

“And you trust these other witches?”

“With my life,” I say and mean it. “We’ve been through some interesting times together in the past already.”

“Interesting is how I describe you,” he muses. “It’s been a long time since I met someone who continually surprises me.”

“I take it that’s a good thing?”

“It is. I like being around you, Callie.” He moves off me, rolling to the side and pulling me to his chest. A human would have dropped me doing the move he just did, but Lucas holds me steady with one arm as if I weigh nothing. To him, I suppose that’s probably how I feel.

Now I’m on top, but the tone has shifted, and his presence is more comforting than anything else. Though we both would still like to strip each other naked.

“So this bone,” he starts, gently running his fingers up and down my arm. I inhale, feeling a little nervous again, and lean forward, resting my body against his. “Why are you having issues with it?”

“It’s freshly boiled and I can’t use magic to grind it to a powder. But you’re a lot stronger than I am.”

“I am indeed. Much, much stronger.”

“Don’t rub it in,” I shoot back. “I need to grind it up so I can mix it with the herbs I’m supposed to burn after we invoke Hecate.”

“Hecate? This sounds like dark magic.”

“Oh, it’s dark alright.”

His cock starts to harden and it’s all I can do not to spread my legs and grind against him. Though I’m a little worried about how fast I’ll come and don’t want to be embarrassed. It’s been a while since I’ve been with anyone, and Lucas turns me on without even trying.

“When are your friends arriving?”

“What time is it?” I ask, a little breathy.

“Half past eleven.”

“Soon,” I tell him. “They’ll be here soon. We’re doing the spell at the Witching Hour, of course.”

He brushes a loose strand of my hair back. “Have I told you how beautiful you are?”

I shake my head.

“Shame on me, then. You are gorgeous.”

“You’re not so bad yourself.”

“I know.”

I raise an eyebrow. “You know? How about a *gee, thank you* after a compliment.”

“But I am attractive. Why act surprised? I was attractive sixteen hundred years ago, and I’m still attractive today.”

“What a curse you bear,” I say sarcastically.

Lucas laughs this time, and flips us over again, moving so fast I don't know what's happening until I'm buried between the couch cushions and his body.

"The worst, I know. You should feel sorry for me."

"Oh, you poor baby," I go on, in a monotone voice. "Should I put you out of your misery now? Spare you the pain of living another day thinking you might be a sex icon?"

Laughing, he puts his lips to my neck, sucking on my skin. His fangs aren't out. I'd feel them if they were, and the sensation causes heat to flood my veins.

"I should grind that bone for you now."

"Yeah. Grind the...the...bone."

He kisses my neck again and then gets up and goes into the kitchen. I sit up, letting out a breath, and push my hair back. He knows he's getting under my skin, making me want him. He's doing it on purpose. Yet I can't be mad at him for it because I *do* want him.

And not just physically.

When I get into the kitchen, he's snapped one of the bones in half and is grinding it into a fine powder in the mortar and pestle. I get out a copper bowl for him to dump it in, and silently watch him grind up the rest.

"Thanks." I cover the bowl and gather my herbs to invoke and add to the mixture. "That would have taken me like an hour."

"You don't have an hour."

"Trust me, I know." I push everything aside. "So, should we go get the body now?"

“I’ll get it. Where do you want me to put it once I retrieve it?”

“There’s a small clearing in the woods right behind my house.”

“I’ll be right back,” he says and speeds out of the house. While he’s digging up the body, I pack everything we’ll need into a wicker basket and use the bathroom. And then I pace around the house for a while until Binx tells me to chill. We go out onto the back porch together, waiting until Lucas comes back into view. He has dirt on his face, and his hands are blackened with earth.

I shouldn’t be so attracted to him right now. Or at all. He’s a vampire and I’m a witch. Together, we’re a disaster waiting to happen.

“Come, wash up,” I tell him and turn, going back into the house. I get a rag while he washes his hands. “Sit.”

He listens, taking a seat at the kitchen table. I stand over him, slowly wiping the dirt off his face.

“How long is this going to take?” he asks, bringing one hand up and cupping my ass. “Because I’m already thinking about what I want to do to you once this is over.”

“I’m bringing the dead back to life. It might take all night.”

He gets a smirk on his face, and I know he’s about to make a joke about something else taking all night. But he looks past me, out of the kitchen and in the direction of the front door. “Someone is here. Make that two people.”

“The Delvaux twins,” I tell him. “Stay here.” I swipe the rag over his face once more, removing the last bit of dirt before tossing it into the sink. Freya, knowing who is at the door, unlocks it, and lets the twins in.

“Hey, ladies.” I flick my hand and magically shut the door. “Thanks again for coming.”

Nicole smiles and picks up Freya. She loves cats, just like I do, but her family has had ravens as their familiars for years, and she was duty-bound to carry on the tradition. There’s some resentment there, directed at her family and not her familiar. She never fully bonded with her familiar because of it.

“You’re so lucky to have three familiars.”

“Lucky?” Naomi raises her eyebrows. “It’s unnatural. We’re meant to have one familiar.”

“These guys had nowhere else to go,” I say, looking lovingly at Freya.

“She should have died.” Naomi shakes her head, and as much as I’d like to argue with her, to tell her not to ever speak such things about my familiars—my babies—I know she’s right. Without their witch, familiars don’t last much more than a week. Yet for some reason, Pandora and Freya took to me. We bonded, and they changed their physical form to fit in with Binx and me.

Before, Freya was an owl. Pandora was a fox. Yeah...I know it’s weird they took to me. But I’m not one to question it. I love them. They’re part of the family.

“I have everything ready. Did you bring the wine?” I ask.

Naomi pulls a bottle of red wine from her satchel. “This was one of the oldest and most expensive bottles we had. You better do this spell right and not make this go to waste.”

“No pressure or anything, right?” I try to joke. Nicole laughs and Naomi just arches her eyebrows up even higher. “Kristy will be here soon. The body is out back and ready for resurrecting.”

“Do you have any chocolate?” Nicole asks. “I’m a little nervous and eating calms my nerves.”

“Uh, yeah, I think so.” I turn and lead them into the kitchen. Lucas is standing by the back door, looking out into the night. He turns when we come into the room. Naomi bites her lip and smiles.

“And who is this handsome...” She holds her hand out, reading his energy. Her eyebrows go up and a half-smile takes over her face. “...*Vampire?*”

“This is my friend, Lucas.”

“Look at you, breaking all the rules. Is he staying for the ritual? I don’t usually mind an audience, no matter what I’m doing, but this isn’t a spectator sport.”

“Yes, he’s staying.” I look at Lucas as the thought hits me. “He’ll watch over us and make sure no one attacks us while we’re busy raising the dead.”

“No one?” Naomi questions. “Including him?”

“He won’t.”

“Are you sure?” both twins ask at the same time.

I wrinkle my nose. “He’d have to be pretty stupid to attack four witches who are trying to raise and control the dead.”

“Valid point. Just know,” Naomi says and looks at Lucas, “you cannot stop us. No matter what happens or how dark things become.”

“Why would I do that?” Lucas asks. “I’ve always wanted to see a resurrection.”

Nicole looks from Lucas to me, coming to the same conclusion her twin did. That Lucas and I are an item. “Callie

is leading it, and it might not be easy.”

I don't expect the dark cloud of worry that takes over Lucas's face. He shifts his eyes from the twins to me.

“Can I speak to you in private, Callie?” he asks.

“Uh, sure.” I follow him onto the porch. The screen door slams shut behind me. Lucas grabs me and pins me against the house. “Put me down,” I protest.

“No.” He kisses me, hard and desperate, and then sets me back onto the porch. “I really want to fuck you, so don't die, okay?”

I smile. “Look at you, Mr. Ancient Vampire. Being all romantic and worried.”

“Not worried. I just...I don't want to be disappointed. I've thought about fucking you since the moment I saw you. It'd be a great annoyance to me if I never got the chance.”

“You are so worried,” I poke.

He narrows his eyes. “I don't worry about humans.”

“I'm a witch. That's different, remember?”

“Not different enough.” He doesn't look at me when he speaks, and it's all I can do not to get a stupid smile on my face. “Do us both a favor and wait until after we have sex to die, all right?”

“Us both a favor?”

“Yes.” He's right there against me again. “You've never had sex with a vampire before, have you?”

“No.”

“Just remember, I'm not any old vampire. I've been fucking for over a thousand years. I will make you come

harder than you ever have before.”

I swallow hard. “I know you will.”

His fangs pop down and he grazes them over the tender flesh of my neck. “Good girl. Now go back in and get ready for this spell. But know this, Callie. If I feel your life is in danger, I will stop you. I will not stand there and watch you die.”

Heart racing, I look into his eyes. “I know.”



## CHAPTER 13



“He can hear you,” I hiss to Kristy as we walk through my yard.

“I know vampires have excellent hearing,” she whispers back. “Are you sure having him here is a good idea?”

“You would have been digging up a body with me if he wasn’t.”

She scrunches up her nose. “Okay, I’ll give him that. You know how I feel about rotting bodies.”

I laugh and loop my arm through hers. The twins are ahead of us, and Lucas is following behind, keeping a respectful distance. “And really, it’ll be nice to have someone keeping watch for anything while we dive into this. Our attention is going to be tunneled on one thing, and one thing alone.”

“You trust him?” she asks.

“Yes. Maybe I shouldn’t, but I do.”

Kristy nods. “If you do, then I do.” She squeezes my hand and gives me a *we’ll talk about this later* look. The smell of the rotting body hits us well before we get to the clearing.

Nicole waves her hand in front of her face. “Oh, my God. That is awful. Can I spray Febreze on him? I’m going to throw up from the smell.”

Naomi rolls her eyes. “No, Nicole, you cannot Febreze the corpse before a dark ritual. That’s desecration.”

“Once we get started, you’ll forget about the smell,” I tell her, though I have no idea if it’s true or not. It’s wishful thinking on my part. Because this body is ripe.

“Are you sure he’s not too far gone?” Nicole gags as she looks at the body. “He’s missing fingers.”

“We don’t need his fingers,” I remind her. “Just a few answers and then it’s lights out for him again.”

“You’re doing it, right?” Nicole’s eyes widen.

“Of course she is, sister,” Naomi takes Nicole’s hand. “It’s her spell.”

“This was actually your idea,” I remind them and set my basket down. I glance up, seeing Lucas lean against a tree several yards back.

“You came to us,” they both say at the same time.

“If this affects witches,” Kristy says, being the voice of reason. “Then it’s on all of us. Got it?” She might claim to be a peaceful person, but damn, can she command a room. “Now let’s get serious, okay?”

I open the basket and get out the salt and pour a circle around the body. Nicole was right about him smelling. It’s all I can do not to gag, and the sight of him isn’t any better. *I’m sorry*, I think to him. *If we can get answers, then this will all have been worth it.*

Even I know that’s a bullshit line. None of this was worth it to him. I still don’t know who he is. Did he have a family? A job? What about pets? Maybe he had a cat who’s starving and lonely, waiting for his owner to come home.

Kristy places crystals along the salt, and Nicole lights the candles. I grab the bottle of wine and hold my hand over it, magically pulling out the cork. Naomi sets the bowl of herbs down right outside the circle.

“Ready, ladies?” I ask, heart beating a little faster.

“As ready as we’ll ever be,” Nicole answers, looking at her twin, who gives her an encouraging nod.

“Then let’s take our places.” I move to the north point. The herbs and wine are behind me.

“Sisters,” I start. “Descendants of Salem, daughters of night. I have brought you here to partake in this Dark Rite. Together, we shall call upon our Mother Hecate and ask her to lend her great power to breathe life back into the dead. We seek answers only the shadows can give, answers to protect our kind. For we are the chosen few who can walk in the light and the dark.”

“We are witches. Sisters within the circle. As we are, so mote it be,” we all say together, raising our hands to the dark sky above. Feeling a rush of power go through me, I grab an athame and the wine glass.

“And now we cast our circle, offering you, Dark Goddess, the gift of blood and wine.”

I press the sharp end of the athame into my skin, drawing another line in my arm right next to the cut I made to get into the Covenstead. A bead of blood forms on the surface of my skin, and I carefully pick it up with the athame, holding it over the wine glass. It drips in, and then I wipe the athame clean on my shirt and pass it to Kristy, who’s at my right-hand side.

She does the same thing, slicing open a small patch of skin on her arm and putting a drop of blood into the glass. Nicole

follows suit and presses the tip of the athame into her index finger. She squeezes it over the glass, letting one drop fall in before passing both the glass and the ceremonial dagger to her sister.

When the glass comes back to me, I raise it to the moon. “Blood to blood,” I start. “We call unto thee, Hecate. Hear us.”

Carefully, I set the glass down and grab the bottle of wine, filling the glass halfway to the top. I hold it up to the moonlight, feeling power rush through me once more. Then I bring the glass to my lips and take a tiny sip before passing it along the circle.

Once the glass of wine gets back to me, I hold it out in front of me and step forward, kneeling down beside the corpse. Tipping it ever so slightly, I let a small amount spill out onto the corpse’s mouth. It runs down his rotting cheeks, dripping to the ground. The air starts to vibrate around us. Putting the glass down, I move back to my spot in the circle and pick up the herbs.

Closing my eyes, I gather my composure. Taking a few deep breaths, I make sure I’m centered with the earth.

“Sisters!” I hold the bowl up over my head. “It is time!”

The others unfold a piece of paper, revealing the final chant we need to do in order to invoke the powerful goddess, Hecate. The wind picks up, bringing with it the pungent smell of death.

“Let us speak freely and as one,” I say, feeling the bowl start to warm beneath my fingertips. I hold it up to the moonlight until it starts to smoke. I set it down and put the lid on it, trapping the smoke inside.

The flames on the candles around us grow taller, holding steady despite the wind. I unfold my own piece of paper and flick my eyes up to the other witches. Giving a tiny nod to signal the start of the spell, we all begin chanting at the same time.

*“Invoco te Hecaten dea noctium. Offerimus tibi ipsi, et quod sanguis et vinum donum. Spiro vitam in mortuis. Eum cito pallium, ne transire copulare quodam vivos magis.”*

A high-pitched screech rings out above us. Kristy jumps and Naomi jerks forward.

“She’s here,” I whisper, and a tingle goes down my spine. “I can feel her. Sisters, step in.”

I let my paper drop to the ground and pick up the bowl of herbs. It’s warm, and if it weren’t heated by magic, it would burn my fingers. “Breathe in the smoke,” I tell them, holding the copper bowl over the corpse. We all lean in, and I take the lid off. Smoke wafts into our faces, and I inhale as deeply as I can.

Right away, the magic takes effect. The world around me starts to fade to black. Everything goes silent.

And then my ears start ringing.

The world comes back into view, only this time I’m seeing everything as though it’s bathed in red light. The sounds of the forest resonate through me, echoing at a high-pitched frequency.

I drop down to my knees, setting the bowl down at my side. I pitch forward, hands landing on the dead man’s head. I press my fingers into his rotting flesh, leaving little indentations from the pressure.

*“Redi a terra mortuorum.”*

I stand, and we all step back to our places on the circle. “Awaken,” we chant together. “Awaken. Awaken!”

I feel like I’m not quite on this plane of existence anymore. That I’m in the land between two worlds, stuck inside this blood-painted veil.

“Awaken,” I whisper, narrowing my eyes and holding out my hand. Nothing happens. I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to break out of this weird mental state. But the harder I try, the deeper I get sucked in until I feel drunk from it. That nothing else matters and the forest starts to fade from view.

“No!” I push my foot down against the damp soil, feeling the earth beneath me. I tip my head to the night, breathing in deep. I squeeze my eyes shut. I will not let this take me over.

“Sky above me,” I whisper. “Earth below me.”

I open my eyes and stare at the body.

“Fire within me.”

Something flashes through the forest and suddenly, the man sits up, gasping for air. Sucking in a startled breath, I freeze. Everything echoes around me, and it’s as if the others are moving in slow motion.

The rotting holes on the man’s face begin to close up. His dead, gray eyes regain their color, and he throws his head back as blood begins pumping through his body once more.

“Holy shit,” Kristy mumbles. “You did it, Callie. You brought him back.”

I inhale, fingers shaking. “Don’t be afraid,” I tell the man and move closer to him.

He looks around at us, hazel eyes wide with terror. Seeing the candles, the salt line, and the bowl of smoldering herbs, he

starts to freak out.

“What the hell did you do to me?” he yells and scrambles to his feet.

I hold out my hand and push him back to the ground. “I can’t have you doing that.”

“Who are you...where am I...fuck!” He brings his head down to his hands. “What is happening to me?”

“It’ll all be over soon,” I tell him. “Just answer a few questions for me.”

“What the fuck?” the guy yells, bending his knees up. He pulls at his hair and starts to rock back and forth. “Who are you? What are you doing to me?” His head jerks to the side and he looks down at himself. He’s dirty, clothes stained with mud and blood.

And though he’s looking more alive, he still smells like someone who’s been dead for days and buried deep within the earth.

“What is your name?” I ask, inching forward. The man screams and covers his head. “What. Is. Your. Name?” I repeat slowly, starting to feel for him.

“I don’t think he knows,” Kristy says quietly. “His energy is pure chaos.”

“Well, yeah, he’s been dead,” Naomi retorts.

“Dead?” He sucks in air but doesn’t take in any oxygen. I’m not sure if he needs it or not. “I’m...I’m dead?”

“Way to go,” Nicole hisses. “You weren’t supposed to tell him that he’s dead. Or was dead? Is he alive? He looks alive. But he doesn’t smell alive.”

“This is a fucking trip.” The guy pulls on his hair some more. “A fucking bad trip and I’m going to wake up and I swear to God I’m never touching that shit again.” He holds up his hand and sees his missing fingers. “Oh fuck. What... what...what did you do to me?”

“You need to calm down.” I hold up my hands, inching forward. “I can help you.”

The guy rounds on me, eyes wide. Then he tenses and jerks away. “Wait...I...I know you. You killed me!” He freaks out completely, thrashing and falling over. He gets up to make a run for it but hits a magical wall of energy, unable to leave the circle.

“No, I didn’t kill you. The demon inside of you did. I tried to help you.”

He tries again to leave the circle and fails. Giving up, he falls onto the ground and starts screaming for help.

“You need to *stop*,” I say through gritted teeth and hold out my hand. A surge of energy leaves my fingers, hitting the guy in the chest. It reverberates through the forest, shaking the trees around us. “Like I said, I’m here to help. But first, I need something from you.”

Striding forward, I put two fingers on his neck, feeling for a pulse. It’s weak and thready, but it’s there. I wait, counting the beats. *One...two...three.*

I push my way into his mind, getting a flash of him walking out of a building. The words *Anderson Consultants* is written in bold, white letters on the glass door behind him. Someone is watching him, I can feel it.

“Why you?” I ask. “Why did the demon pick you?”



The man gets into the back of a town car, and before it's even a mile away from his office, he's pulling out a bag of white powder from inside his jacket pocket. He needs it to function, needs it to make him feel anything but numb.

Demons prey on the emotionally vulnerable.

Then I feel it, the same emptiness and fear the man did. Tears run down his face. He's drunk now, and voices whisper so quietly behind him that he thinks they're coming from inside his own mind. The demon has been there for months, manipulating him. Breaking him down and making him convenient.

The demonic energy is oppressive and suffocating. It's heavy and is slithering through me, cutting me from the inside out. Each movement is like razor blades slicing my internal organs. I'm bleeding, but I'll never die.

I pull my hand back and look at the man again.

"Do you know his name?" I ask.

The man looks down, shaking his head as big, fat tears roll down his face. "I can't...I can't speak it. He'll come back if I do. He'll take me to...to *him*."

"Him? Someone worse than the demon who possessed you?"

"Yes."

A chill runs through me. "Do you know what he wanted?"

"He...he was looking for something. Someone, maybe. All I know is they were afraid of it." He closes his eyes. "They... they said it shouldn't be."

"Who?" I press, heart hammering away in my chest. "Who are they?"

The man opens his mouth to speak but then coughs up dark, sticky blood. He falls to his knees, gasping for air.

“I think that’s enough for now,” I tell him and extend my hand. “*Somnum.*” He gently falls to the ground, fast asleep. Blinking, I step back. The world is still red. Everything still echoes around me. I can’t see anything past the circle, and I’m not sure how to break out of this.

“Callie,” a deep voice calls out from somewhere in the night.

I jerk my head back, looking for whoever called my name.

“Callie,” he repeats, and I squeeze my eyes shut. When I open them, I feel some of the dark magic loosen its hold on me.

“Callie,” Lucas says again. His voice echoes in my head. I turn, and the world fades from view. All I can see is him. “We have a problem.”

Blinking hard, I stare up at his handsome face. The night has its color again, and the ringing in my ears stops.

“What?”

Lucas cautiously reaches past the salt line. There’s no wall of energy shielding us anymore. His fingers lace with mine, and he tugs me forward, trying to pull me out of the circle. “We need to go. Now.”

“No. The spell worked. Didn’t you see? He’s talking to us. We’re going to get answers.”

“Not if they get you first.”

“Who?”

Lucas shifts his eyes to the forest behind me. “The undead.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You resurrected him all right,” Lucas goes on, nervously flicking his eyes to the forest behind us. “As well as at least a dozen others.”

## CHAPTER 14



“That’s impossible,” Naomi states. “Bringing back one body from the dead is hard enough.”

“Tell that to the horde of zombies coming this way,” Lucas says dryly. He slips his arm around me, holding me against his body. “I can smell them. And now I can hear them.”

“There’s just no way,” I say. “She’s right. I don’t have that kind of power. To be honest, I wasn’t sure if this would work.” I sweep my hand out at the man lying on the ground.

“Believe me, Callie.” Lucas tightens his hold on me. “They’re coming. If I have to take you out of here myself, I will.”

I shake my head. “No. I’m not leaving my friends, and if I resurrected accidental zombies, I need to deal with it.”

Something crashes through the woods, and the pungent smell of death fills the air. I whirl around, eyes narrowing. Lucas steps back, pulling me with him. He can see in the dark and sees the zombie staggering forward before I do.

“Holy shit.”

“You need to go,” he presses. “Because I think I’m wrong.”

“Wrong about what?”

He risks a glance down and locks eyes with me for a millisecond. “There are more than twelve.”

My eyes go to the man sleeping on the forest floor. He has his wits together, well, kind of, but he’s more with it than I expected. If I can find his family, restore his mind a bit more, I can send him home.

I can save him.

“You have to take him back to my house.”

“I’m not leaving you.” Lucas puts his other hand on my shoulder.

“I can handle my own. Watch.” I step away, conjuring a bright ball of energy. It sizzles before us, crackling in the night. The light gets the zombie’s attention, and it picks up the pace, groaning as it moves through the uneven forest underbrush. I throw the energy ball and it hits the zombie smack in the chest.

And it doesn’t even faze him.

“Really? You can handle yourself?”

“I’ll figure it out,” I tell Lucas, pushing him away. “Take him! If he wakes up and sees zombies, I’ll never be able to fix him.”

“Callie, you can’t—” He cuts off when Nicole screams. All at once, a dozen or so zombies emerge from the woods, stepping into the clearing.

“Go!”

“I’ll be back.”

I nod. “Get him inside. Tell my familiars to watch over him.”

Lucas's eyes narrow with worry. He leans down, pressing his lips to mine. "Just in case you die, I need something to remember you by."

"You're an asshole," I say, trying hard to look mad. "Now go!"

He zooms forward, picking up the man, and runs at vamp speed back to the house.

"What the hell do we do?" Kristy asks, stepping into the circle. My concentration has been broken and the circle no longer holds its protective barrier, proven when Lucas set foot inside. Technically, he's dead. He wouldn't have been able to come inside the circle if I had still held its walls.

"Kill them." I take a few steps back and pick up the athame. "Gotta get them in the head, right?"

Kristy nods, fingers trembling. I bend my arm back and throw the dagger. Guiding it with magic, it hits one of the zombies right between the eyes. And the undead motherfucker keeps coming.

"Okay," I say, reaching for Kristy's hand. "Time for Plan B."

"And that is?" Naomi asks.

"Run!" I wave my free hand over the candles, magically putting them out. Kristy grips my fingers so tight it hurts, and we take off, running behind the twins. We're not far from my house and have about a hundred yards of woods to get through before we get into my backyard. My house is warded against the unwanted, and with the four of us, I have no doubt we'll be able to hold the line.

But we can't have an army of the undead wandering around Thorne Hill. The zombie apocalypse starts from some

sort of science experiment gone wrong, not from a resurrection spell. A zombie lumbers forward, practically falling on us. Naomi shrieks and throws out her hand, pushing the zombie backward and onto the ground with a wave of energy.

“There’s too many!” Nicole cries and I yank my hand out of Kristy’s.

“Keep going!” I shout, coming to a stop. I conjure an energy ball. It won’t kill them, but it’ll distract them. I toss it up into the air, holding my hands out underneath it, feeding it more energy so it glows brighter and brighter.

“Callie!” Kristy shouts, voice drowned out by the moans of the undead. “Come on!”

“Go,” I yell back to her. “I’ll catch up!”

“I don’t want to—”

She cuts off with a scream. I whirl around, seeing a large zombie tackle her to the ground. I don’t think. I just run toward my best friend. The energy ball crashes to the ground, sparking as it explodes against the dirt.

“Get off her!” I shout and throw my hand, telekinetically moving the zombie to the side. But instead of flying and crashing into a tree, he’s pushed aside maybe three feet.

What the fuck?

The energy ball didn’t kill them. Telekinesis hardly works on them. Are our powers useless? Then it hits me. It’s not actually the bodies of the zombies we’re fighting, but the dark magic reanimating them.

“Go!” I yell. Naomi and Nicole are several feet ahead. They slow, turning and seeing Kristy on the ground. Nicole breaks away from her sister and rushes back, going to Kristy.

More zombies barrel forward, mouths open. I come to a stop, planting my feet into the earth. I reach down, deep down, and summon up all the energy I can, and direct it toward my friends.

It shields them, and the zombies bump into an invisible force field. Nicole pulls Kristy to her feet. Naomi holds out her hand, reaching for her sister. Together, the three of them run toward the house. Sweat drips down my forehead as I try to hold the wall of energy. The zombies clamber after them before realizing I'm still out here.

I'm still alone.

"That's right, you undead dirtbags. Come and get it." I drop the shield, knowing my friends have put enough distance between the zombies and themselves. I intend to invoke the same power around myself and then...well, I'm not sure.

I'm a figure-it-out-as-I-go kind of girl.

But then a zombie rushes forward with more speed than he should possess. His face is half rotted off, and bones stick out of the decaying flesh of his fingertips. He makes a dive for me, and I hold out my hand, putting up a shield of energy.

He crashes into it, neck bending and snapping at an unnatural angle. It doesn't slow him down. I stagger back, heart racing, and bump right into another zombie, who grabs me around the waist and wrestles me to the ground. I fall hard, whacking my head on a jumble of debris. Pain radiates through me, and it's all I can do to keep the zombie from sinking its teeth into my flesh.

The other zombie gets up, moving on all fours, and stumbles over. Thick brown drool oozes from its face, and bits of torn flesh on his cheek hang down, swinging as he moves. I



conjure up another energy ball, hitting the zombie on top of me in the face.

It sizzles through him, but it's like he can't even feel the pain. More zombies sense my struggle and start to make their way over. They're immune to my powers. I don't know what to do, but I won't go down without a fight.

I madly reach out, feeling the ground for anything to use as a weapon. All I find are wet leaves and small fallen branches too brittle to do any sort of damage. I bring my leg up, trying to get my knee under the zombie so I can push him away with my legs.

It's too strong. Too heavy. I turn my head, narrowly avoiding getting my face chewed off. The other zombie is right here too, and a bead of nasty drool lands on my forehead. It grabs my hair and tries to pull me away from the other zombie.

And then a dark shadow moves through the woods, coming at me fast. It knocks the big zombie off me, sending the body flying several feet away. It rushes at me again, shoving the other zombie away.

"Binx," I pant as I roll over and push myself up. "What took you so long?" Feeling a little disoriented, I throw out my hands to gather my bearing. Binx yells at me to get out of the woods.

"Not without you," I tell him, and he shadows by me again, pushing another zombie to the ground. I lunge forward, grabbing a rock. It's buried in the ground and is too heavy for me to pick up. Pushing my hair out of my eyes, I hold out my hand and use my powers to dig it up from the earth. It rises from the ground, bits of dirt and moss falling from it.

Then I throw it hard into the big zombie's face, smashing its head in. If that doesn't kill it, it'll at least slow it down. Sucking in air, I turn, following Binx a few more feet through the forest. We're almost to the edge of the woods when Lucas comes back, protectively picking me up and cradling me to his chest. I don't protest. I hunker in and let him run us back to the house.

He sets me down on my sidewalk and the first thing I do is look for Binx. His shadow sweeps across the yard and he appears as a black cat again, standing in front of me, growling.

"What the hell is going on?" Nicole asks. She's standing on the porch, clutching the railing.

"Callie did the spell wrong, obviously," Naomi snaps.

"Not wrong," Kristy says. "Too right. We were supposed to bring back one dead body, not a whole graveyard full of them."

"Where did they come from?" Nicole asks.

"There's a house," I start, still trying to catch my breath. "Not far from here. It's been abandoned for years and has its own family plot on the property."

"You brought back an entire family?" Naomi says and I can't tell if she's pissed or impressed. Maybe both? Hell, I'm feeling both at the moment.

"I didn't mean to."

"No shit. But how do we kill them? My powers seem useless against them."

"Mine too," I admit. "And I stabbed one in the forehead and it did nothing."

“Try this.” Lucas speeds forward, yanking one of the zombies from the woods and bringing it into the yard. He twists its head all the way around, yanking it up until it snaps free from its body.

The zombie’s torso flops down, and Lucas tosses the head to the ground.

“That’s how you kill a zombie.”

I swallow my pounding heart. “Could have told me that earlier.”

He looks at me, fire burning behind his dark blue eyes. “I’m going on trial and error here. This might come as a shock to know I’ve never fought zombies before.”

“I can’t pull off a head,” Kristy says, wrapping her arms around herself. “I’m not strong enough.”

“No,” Lucas agrees. “But I am.”

The zombies start to pour out of the forest. Pale moonlight casts dark shadows on the lawn, and the smell of death creeps up on us.

“You can’t fight them all on your own.” I turn, looking at my friends. “Get inside and take him with you.” I point to the man we brought back from the dead. “He’s going to wake up soon.” Shifting my gaze to Kristy, I say, “Do something about his memory. And put a sheet down before he sits on my furniture.”

She nods and takes one of the man’s arms. Naomi grabs the other, and Nicole opens the door. They drag him inside, and the screen door snaps shut behind them.

“You can’t fight them with magic,” Lucas reminds me in case I forgot.

“I know.” I take a few steps to the side, not taking my eyes off the forest. Gulping in air, I run to a toolshed on the other side of my house. I wave my hand, throwing open the doors, and conjure an energy ball so I can see. This space houses my lawn-and-garden equipment...and a few weapons.

Because you never know when a resurrection spell will go terribly wrong and you have to fight off an army of the undead.

I grab a machete from a shelf and race back to Lucas, who’s starting into the woods with his fangs drawn. Zombies emerge from it, death groans echoing through the night air. One of the faster zombies outruns the others, and I race toward it, brandishing the machete. I swing and hit it hard in the neck. The blade hits the spinal cord, and I jerk my hands back, yanking the blade from its skin. I swing harder the next time, slicing through the zombie’s neck.

“Magic won’t kill them,” I say as Lucas zooms forward, twisting another neck of the nearest zombie. “But I made them. I have to finish them. I’ll put them back in the—oh for fuck’s sake. Not now.”

A car speeds down the road, headlights coming into view long before they get close to my house. If they keep going at that speed, they might not notice a horde of zombies slowly making their way toward my house.

But the car slows.

And then pulls into my driveway.

“Eliza,” Lucas comes to a dead stop, turning toward the car. He can sense her before he can see her. The car barrels toward my house, coming to a sudden halt, gravel crunching

under the tires. Lucas turns back with a growl, and runs into the woods, getting another zombie.

Eliza gets out of the car, along with Monica and another human. And then all hell breaks loose. Over a dozen zombies stagger forward, drawn to the scent of fresh meat. I swing the machete, hitting another in the neck. It falls, almost knocking me over. I jump back, and my fingers slip off the machete. The zombie drags itself forward, taking my weapon with it.

“Give that back, asshole,” I say. I hold out my hand to telekinetically bring it to me, when another zombie grabs me around the waist. Binx shadows through the yard, crushing the zombie against the ground.

“Thanks,” I pant and hold out my hand again. The machete flies into my grip. Someone screams, and I jerk my head around to see a fast-moving zombie coming at Eliza and the humans.

“Get in the house!” I shout and swing the machete. This time, I get it clean through the neck. Rancid blood splatters my face, but the zombie drops to the ground. “Eliza, I invite you in!”

Lucas tears through zombie after zombie, and I tighten my grip on the machete. Binx flies past me, going to the humans who are still too stunned to move. He tackles the zombie closest to them to the ground. The girls scream again.

“What the bloody hell is going on?” Eliza cries.

Lucas speeds forward, stopping next to me. He has blood on his face, and body parts in his hair.

“Do as she says, Eliza,” he demands. “Get the humans in the house. Protect them.”

“Lucas!” Eliza protests. “What the—”

“Now!” Lucas orders, and Eliza is forced to listen.

“There’s two of us,” I pant. “And about a dozen of them.”

Lucas tips his head down to me, raising his eyebrows as he smiles. “I like our odds.”

Inhaling deep, I run forward, swinging the machete down hard on a zombie whose back legs aren’t working right and is crawling through the yard. Binx works along with me, crushing the zombie against the ground. I follow him, slicing off heads. We get five more before I dare take a second to stop and look around the yard.

I’m covered in zombie blood. It’s thick, smells like day-old roadkill left to rot in a rancid puddle on the side of the road on a hot day. Lucas rips another head off and then stops, looking around.

“I think we got them all—wait, never mind.” He zooms into the forest, appearing a minute later with even more blood on his hands.

“Is that all?” I pant. My heart is racing so fast it hurts.

Lucas tips his head up and inhales. “I think so. I’ll send Eliza out to canvas the area.”

“Binx is on it,” I tell him, watching my familiar’s shadow disappear into the night. I let out a deep breath. “Fuck.”

Lucas chuckles. “You got that right.”

“I just...I mean...I don’t know what to say.” Dragging the machete on the ground, I start for the house and sink down on the first porch step. I really don’t know what to say. Or think.

Because not only did I successfully bring a body back from the dead, I brought back *every* body within a three-mile radius.

## CHAPTER 15



Lucas takes the machete from my hands and wipes the blade on the grass, getting rid of most of the solid parts and some of the blood. He comes back, setting it down on the wooden railing.

“You’re not injured, are you?” he asks as he sits next to me.

“I don’t think so.” I look down at myself, realizing just how disgusting I am. “Sick.” I find a clean spot on my leggings and wipe my hands. “These were my comfiest pair of leggings.”

Lucas brushes my hair back and picks a chunk of rotting flesh from my braid, tossing it to the ground. I let out another deep breath, feeling my heart start to beat at a normal rate again. There are bodies littering my yard. The smell alone is enough to alert the authorities, and if anyone were to drive by and see...I don’t even want to finish that thought.

Binx comes back to the house, red eyes flashing for a brief moment before he takes on the appearance of a cat again.

“Good boy,” I tell him, wiping my hands clean again before reaching out to scratch him under his chin. “Are they all gone?”

Binx meows back, telling me there are no more zombies wandering through the woods.

“You talk to him?” Lucas asks.

“Yes.”

“And he talks back. How does that work?”

“I hear his voice in my head. When he’s in shadow form, he can speak out loud.”

Slowly, Lucas reaches his hand out. Binx sniffs his fingers and then rubs his head against Lucas’s hand.

“He saved you out there.”

“I know.” I run my hand over Binx’s smooth, black fur. “Wasn’t the first time and I’m sure it won’t be the last time.” The blood on my skin starts to itch. “We should go in, make sure everyone else is okay, and take a shower.”

“Together?”

“No,” I say, though the thought of getting naked with Lucas makes me tingle. Even now. “Not together.”

“Are you sure? I can make sure you’ve thoroughly washed all the hard-to-reach places.”

I roll my eyes. “I’ve been washing myself for years now. I think I can handle it.”

“I like the thought of you handling it.”

“Is everything about sex to you vampires?”

He shrugs. “Not everything. But you already know I want to be inside of you.”

“You’re so vulgar.”

“You’re such a prude.”



“I told you I’m not.”

In the blink of an eye, Lucas is on his feet, extending a hand to help me up. I take it, finding his cool skin to be comforting against mine.

“You missed one,” Eliza says when we step into the house. She raises her eyebrow and motions to the man huddled in a corner of my living room. “Want me to rip his head off?”

“That won’t be necessary.” Lucas steps over the cream-colored rug I have in the foyer, not wanting to track blood on it. He’s so thoughtful.

I can hear Kristy and Nicole in the kitchen, no doubt making a potion to help the poor guy we brought back. Naomi is standing in the living room, staring down Eliza. She doesn’t trust her, and if it weren’t for the fact that Eliza is under Lucas’s command, I wouldn’t either. Monica and the other human I assume is her friend are sitting on the couch, looking terrified.

“Has he said anything?” I ask Naomi as I take my shoes off.

She shakes her head. “We were able to get chamomile tea into him, which seemed to calm him down, but then his fingers, well, missing fingers started bleeding. And that caused the freak-out.”

“Bleeding is good,” I say, looking at the man. “Bleeding means you’re alive. Well, kind of. Are the others—”

“Making a potion to soothe his nerves as well as erase the last hour from his memory? Yes.”

“Thank God.”

Eliza puts her hands on her hips. “Is anyone going to tell me what is going on?”

“I did a spell to bring him back from the dead,” I say, sweeping my hand to the guy on the floor. “And it sort of accidentally brought forth an entire graveyard.”

Eliza shifts her gaze to Lucas, obviously not believing me.

“It’s true,” he tells her. “I saw the whole thing. Why are *you* here?”

“I’ve been calling for you for hours.” She casts her eyes around the house. “I figured you’d be here, with *her*.”

“That doesn’t answer my question,” Lucas goes on.

Not wanting the rest of us to hear what she’s going to say, Eliza speaks in a different language. Lucas answers back, speaking so fast I can’t pick up on what language it is. Italian, maybe? Spanish?

Whatever Eliza says seems to make Lucas annoyed, though not with her. He goes to her side, and I watch, curious about their relationship. He touches her as she talks, but there’s nothing sexual about it. I know he cares for her. Would die to protect her.

And there’s nothing she wouldn’t do for him.

“Not to break up this fun little party,” Naomi says. “But you have a yard full of bodies.”

“Ugh, right.” I throw my head back, wanting nothing more than to collapse back onto the couch right now. But there’s no way I’m sitting down until I’ve taken my clothes off and showered. It’ll probably take an hour of scrubbing myself to feel clean. “I’ll, uh, put them in a pile, cloak it, and deal with them tomorrow.”

“So let me get this straight,” Monica’s friend says, slowly rising to her feet. She has pink streaks in her pale blonde hair. “You four are witches?”

“Right,” I tell her. “I’m Callie. Nice to meet you.”

“And he was dead,” she goes on, pointing to the guy on the floor.

“Yep.”

The friend turns back to Monica, who gives a shrug. “At least that explains the smell,” Monica whispers.

“Witches are real,” her friend repeats. “Witches who can do magic spells and bring dead folk back to life.” Shaking her head, she slowly sits back down on the couch. “And I thought vampires were all we had to deal with.”

Naomi smirks, raising one eyebrow. “You’re really not going to like it when you find out demons are real too.”

“Look,” I interject, holding up a hand. “I don’t want to overwhelm you, and I really don’t want to wipe your memories. So just don’t go around telling anyone we’re witches, okay? We don’t want to be exposed.”

“Wipe our memories?” Monica asks nervously. She looks over at Lucas and Eliza, who are still speaking in hushed voices in the foyer. “You can do that?”

Naomi laughs. “Honey, we just raised an army of the dead. There’s nothing we can’t do.”

The man in the corner starts rocking back and forth faster and faster and then turns and whacks his head against the wall over and over.

“Shit,” I swear and rush over. I grab him by the shoulders and try to pull him away from the wall. He claws at me, and of

course uses the one hand that still has all his fingers.

“Ladies,” Naomi calls over her shoulder. “We’re going to need that potion. Now.”

“Hey,” I say to the guy. “Calm down. It’s okay.” I push him back and my fingers slip as his skin smears right off his arm. “Crap.” I shake my hand, flicking the gooey flesh onto the floor. He’s deteriorating, dammit. My heart falls. I really thought I could save him.

I look up, meeting Naomi’s eyes. Her face softens and she comes over. “I’m sorry,” she whispers to me as she kneels down, putting her hand on my shoulder. “I’ll tell them to adjust the potion.”

The man continues to wrestle against me, and the more he protests, the more his skin sloughs off. Not wanting to have him melt apart in front of me, I conjure up a ball of energy and zap him with it. He stiffens and then slumps forward, unconscious. Gently, I roll him back on the floor.

“What the hell did you do to him?” Monica’s friend asks, jumping up. “Did you kill him?”

“No, I just knocked him out. But he’s...he’s...”

“He’s starting to rot.” Lucas speeds over and crouches down in front of the man.

“I thought I could save him,” I admit quietly. “I mean, I didn’t, and then I did...he came back better than I expected. His wounds healed. I was going to find his family.”

“That wasn’t your plan, though, was it?”

“No. But it’s not fair. A demon killed him, and he should have a second chance.”

“Callie,” Lucas says gently, standing and cupping my chin up to his. “Go shower. You don’t need to watch this. I’ll bury him. Again. Just don’t ask me to dig him up a second time.”

I smile, looking into his deep blue eyes. “Don’t worry. I don’t plan on doing that spell again anytime soon. Or ever. Besides almost starting the zombie apocalypse, I didn’t really get the answers I was looking for. His brain was all mush inside. He didn’t even know his name.”

“And the other bodies,” Lucas starts. “You want them out back?”

“Yeah, there’s a burn pile several yards from the back porch. Kristy and I were hoping to have a good old-fashioned bonfire, but it looks like I’ll be roasting corpses instead.”

Lucas laughs and plays with a section of my hair. Behind him, I see Monica’s jaw drop and Eliza cross her arms and look away. Is it that out of character for Lucas to get close to someone...or is it because I’m a witch?

“Do you need to go take care of vampire business?” I ask Lucas.

“Yes, but I don’t have to leave just yet. I’ll stay and help you first.”

“You don’t have to.”

He inches closer. “I know. Now go shower. You stink.”

“You do too,” I remind him, and he flashes a smirk.

“We still could shower together, you know.”

“Maybe another time.” I leave the family room, but don’t go upstairs yet. I go into the basement first, grabbing a Rubbermaid bin off a shelf. It’s full of extra blankets. Most of my storage is down here since the closets in this house are on

the small side. I sort through it, finding the oldest one, and bring it upstairs. I cover the unconscious man up and sacrifice a pillow off my couch. I have fifteen pillows on it, no joke, and have been wanting to switch the color scheme in here anyway. I have a hard time saying no to a good accent pillow.

Kristy comes back into the room with the potion. She says she'll sit with him until he wakes up so I can go upstairs and shower. I must really stink. Lucas and Eliza are leaving the house as I go up the stairs and into my bedroom. I peel off my clothes and decide to just throw them away. Padding down the hall holding my blood-and-gut-covered clothes rolled up in a ball, I open the small hall closet up here and take out a plastic shopping bag. I dump the clothes inside, tie it tight, and set it at the top of the stairs so I'll remember to take them down after I've showered.

When I go into the bathroom, I hear voices floating up from the yard. Not turning the light on yet, I slink forward, crouching down under the window. The bathroom gets hot and steamy and I usually leave this window cracked when I shower to help with the ventilation. I forgot to close it after the cleansing bath, and now I can hear Eliza talking to Lucas.

"I'm well aware of what she is," Lucas tells her.

"Then you should stay away," Eliza protests. "Witches kill vampires."

"She's not going to kill me."

"How can you be sure?"

"The same reason I'm not going to kill her."

A moment of silence passes between them before Eliza speaks again. "She conjured white light, Lucas. *White light*. That's Marie Lancaster-level shit! You and I both know

normal witches can't conjure UV light. That's how Marie killed all those vampires in the War of Light and Dark, and it's said that she had the power loaned to her from a god! A god, Lucas, and your little plaything in there just conjured it up like it was nothing! You'd have to be insane to keep hanging around her and you're not insane, Lucas. You're not!"

Marie Lancaster was a strong witch from a large coven, one who stood the front lines in the war the vampires and witches waged on each other over a thousand years ago. We learned about her in school, and she's hailed as a hero. The vampires doubled their army without the witches' knowledge and attacked at night.

Marie went to the highest hill on the battlefield and conjured the white light Eliza was talking about. It burned so bright it killed her in the process, but she "brought the light to the dark" as the history books put it, burning every single vampire in the army to a crisp.

That's why it's so rare to find vampires Lucas's age now. Most were killed years ago, and those that didn't perish in the war were hunted by the members of the covens who fought them. The witches knew there was no way to rid the world of vampires, but at least now they'd stop messing with us. For they were jealous of our powers of magic, and our ability to walk both in the day and the night.

But the part about her getting her powers from a god? That was never taught to us. I hold out my hand, looking at my fingers. I've always been good at conjuring. White light is energy in its rawest form and is the easiest for me to conjure. It's hot and will burn you, but so will a lightbulb if you touch it long enough. It's all energy and is just a matter of tapping into it.

“Though lately, I’m beginning to wonder,” Eliza goes on. “You haven’t been yourself.”

“Maybe this is exactly who I’m supposed to be,” Lucas says. “And I like being around her. She makes me feel, which is becoming harder to do. Sixteen hundred years, Eliza. I’ve been walking this earth for sixteen hundred years.”

“So what? You’re bored and need to have a little fun? There are plenty of young vamps for you to get off on. Hell, even humans.”

“I don’t want to just get off anymore. I’ve done that for too long. You say I haven’t been myself lately.”

“For the last fifteen years,” she spits, and the whole thing is still just so weird to me. Fifteen years is a long fucking time to be in a mood. But when you live forever, fifteen years is like a day, I suppose.

“Maybe it’s because I want more.”

“And you think the witch bitch can give it to you?”

I hold my breath, waiting for Lucas to answer. But he doesn’t, or just not loud enough for me to hear. I get up and get into the shower, thinking about everything I just overheard.

And now I know for certain he feels the same emptiness inside. Only...I can’t imagine having to live with it for all eternity.



## CHAPTER 16



Coughing, I wave my hand in front of my face to dissipate the smoke. My eyes burn, forcing me to turn away from the flames.

“I think we’re almost done,” I tell my familiars, who have all gathered around to watch the bodies burn.

“Thank freaking goodness.” I take a few steps back and slump onto the ground. The sun is hot today, warming the earth. I could easily close my eyes, pretend I’m on a beach somewhere and take a nap.

And then probably wake up with my house on fire.

Yawning, I push myself up and go onto the porch, taking cover in the shade. Freya rubs against my legs, and I reach down and scoop her up. “I see you finally forgave me for making you miss out on the action.”

Freya and Pandora were not happy to be babysitters while Binx got to come out and fight the undead.

“Next time,” I tell her. “You know there will be one. Hopefully not reanimated corpses, but demons or something less messy to kill.”

She curls up in my lap, purring. My eyelids fall shut, and I doze off for a few minutes, waking only when my phone rings.

It's Lucas, and I'm surprised he's awake at this hour.

"Hello?" I answer.

"Callie," he says. "How are you doing? Last night...last night was intense."

"You can say that again. And I'm okay," I yawn. "Tired, but okay. You?"

"I'm fine."

"Of course you are." I let my eyes fall shut again, and the image of Lucas flashes before me. He's taking his clothes off, and I can feel his big cock pressing against me again. "Thanks again for helping last night. You didn't have to."

"I know I didn't."

My heart lurches, remembering what I overheard. I make him feel despite the vast emptiness inside of him threatening to take over and swallow him whole.

I'm not ready to admit to him—or to myself—that he makes me feel too.

"Can I take you out tonight?" he asks. "On a date."

"I spent the morning chopping up and burning body parts. Excuse me for not feeling very romantic."

"Don't worry. It won't take me long to get you in the mood."

Dammit. I know he's right.

"I understand last night was a lot for you to handle," he says. "Forgive me for being selfish, but I want to see you, and I want to be the only thing you need to focus your attention on tonight."

"Let's just say you're forgiven."

“Then let me take you out tonight. We both know you need a night off.”

“I can’t argue with that.”

“I want to take you out on an old-fashioned date. Dinner. Maybe a show after. And then we’ll end the night back at my place.”

“You sound so sure you’ll get lucky.”

“I always do.”

“But you’ve never dated a witch before, have you?”

“No,” he admits with no shame at all. “You are the first witch I’ve wanted to have a romantic relationship with.”

I pause, squeezing my eyes shut when the wind shifts and smoke blows into my face. *A romantic relationship with.* He just told me he wants more than a one-night stand with me. It’s getting really hard to ignore *this* feeling. Because it kind of makes me giddy.

“I won’t ask again,” he promises. “If you tell me no, I won’t press. But something tells me you want to go out with me.”

“I do,” I admit. “I just don’t know if it’s a good idea.”

“Why wouldn’t it be?”

I open my mouth to tell him it’s a bad idea because he’s a vampire and I’m a human. I’m awake during the day and love the feeling of the sun on my face. He’ll live forever and I’ll get old and die within the next seventy or so years.

But it’s just one date.

“I don’t know,” I say instead. “So...so I guess. Yeah. Let’s go out tonight.”

“I will see you not long after sundown.”



“JUST ANSWER IT,” I GROAN, ROLLING OVER IN BED. AFTER agreeing to go out with Lucas tonight, I put out the fire and went upstairs to crash. I laid in bed, texting Kristy and the twins to make sure everyone was okay.

They all were. Freaked out, a little excited, but okay.

Then I passed out, not waking for three hours. Now, someone is at the front door, knocking. My familiars are snuggled in bed with me, and I slip my arm around Binx, taking comfort in his sleek fur against my face.

“Make them leave.”

Pandora gets up, shadowing down the stairs. I hear the front door open, and only a few seconds later, someone runs off the porch. A truck starts up and they peel out of the driveway. I smile, knowing Pandora must have opened the door and freaked the delivery guy out.

Then I roll over and fall back asleep.

Several hours later, I wake up again. This time I know it’s getting close to noon. I could sleep for another three hours, but if I do, I’ll have a hard time waking up. I feel foggy enough right now as it is.

But dammit, I’m so tired. The man I tried to save faded back to the dead within an hour after I got out of the shower and came back into the living room. Lucas buried him deep in the forest, and then he, Eliza, and the two humans who came with them left.

I still don’t know what kind of trouble Lucas had going on over on his end.

The twins left not long after the vampires and company did, and Kristy stayed a bit longer. She left, saying she wanted to go home to sleep and I should do the same, but I couldn't fall asleep. Everything kept replaying in my mind.

*“Him? Someone worse than the demon who possessed you?” I had asked.*

*“Yes,” the man answered.*

*“Do you know what he wanted?”*

*“He...he was looking for something. Someone, maybe. All I know is they were afraid of it. They...they said it shouldn't be.”*

It didn't make sense. The demon who possessed the man was a high-level demon and possibly a Gatekeeper of...of something. There are only a few who could be worse. The thought kept me awake until the sun shone bright in the sky, and instead of lying in bed agonizing over it, I got up and started burning the bodies.

Lucas thought ahead, and I'm not sure if I should be thankful or put off by it. The bodies were neatly stacked and evenly coated with gasoline for easy burning. With some magical help, they were reduced to nothing more than a pile of ash in only a few hours.

Once I put out the fire and made sure my house wouldn't succumb to the flames, I retreated upstairs, scrubbed the smell of smoke off me, and crashed into bed. And now I'm wishing for another few hours of sleep. In the back of my mind I know I'll feel better once I get up and walk around.

But my bed is comfy.

My blankets are warm.

And my pillow. It's never been softer.

This is why I'm not a morning person. Taking another fifteen minutes, I finally get my ass out of bed, dreaming about coffee. I check my phone for messages. There are none, thankfully. Still feeling groggy, I make it downstairs, plug in my coffee pot, and turn on the TV. I flip away from HGTV and to the local channel, which is nothing more than PowerPoint slides put together by Randy Davis, the local "survivalist." Most of the time, the slides give "Preparedness Awareness" advice, but Randy is fast to include any sort of local hearsay.

I listen to it the whole time I make my coffee, scramble eggs, and fry up half a pound of bacon. And there is no mention of zombies wandering the streets.

"You're welcome," I say dryly and sip my coffee. It feels like it's seven AM, not two PM. Did I mention I'm not a morning person?

After eating breakfast, feeding my familiars, and downing yet another cup of coffee, I check in with my friends once more. The twins are at their house, putting up a front that everything is peachy keen for their visiting grandmother. Kristy just went into the store. Betty is back today, and the new employees we hired are there for training.

They shouldn't have any issues. Kristy enchanted them to know what she does and put a few luck charms around the store to keep asshole customers away. They shouldn't have any issues at all.

I get dressed and head into town. It's warm today and the sun is still bright in the sky. I go with a dark purple dress. It's sleeveless and low-cut, which is how I like my tops. I've been

lucky in the breast department, and every now and then I like to show them off.

And I'm going through a *then* phase today. But it has nothing to do with seeing Lucas later tonight.

I use magic to curl my hair while I carefully apply my makeup. Not long after, I head out the door, keys in hand. I shake out my curls as I walk and see the package on the porch. Oh, right. I'd forgotten about it.

It's not my late-night Amazon order of books I've been waiting on. No, this box is white and tied with a shiny black ribbon. I have a feeling it's from Lucas, but I still cautiously pick it up and give it a little shake.

Nothing hisses, explodes, or starts bleeding. Tucking it under my arm, I take it with me and put it on the passenger seat of my Jeep Grand Cherokee, driving into town.

Kristy is behind the counter, talking to a customer when I step into the store. She looks up and smiles. Everything seems normal about her, but I can sense it: she's still recovering from last night.

I go behind the counter, dropping my purse to the floor. Turning away from the registers so people don't think I'm going to ring them up, I carefully untie the ribbon and slide the lid off the box.

"Wow." I hold up a dress, knowing I was right that Lucas sent this. It's black, tight, low-cut and just my style. And it's designer, costing several thousand dollars, I'm sure. A pair of black Lululemon leggings are in the same box, but I don't need to read the note to know these aren't for tonight...even though I know they'll be comfy as fuck.

*Callie—*

*Hopefully these will replace your ruined leggings from last night. Plus, I know your ass will look good in them. Wear the dress to dinner tonight if you like it. I look forward to seeing you.*

—*Lucas*

His handwriting is incredibly neat, looking like a font from a computer.

“What is that?” Kristy asks as she puts a customer’s books in a bag. “Looks fancy.”

“Very fancy,” the customer agrees. “And whoever sent that has good taste.”

“Yeah,” I agree, head spinning a bit. “He does.” I smooth the dress out and carefully fold it back up, switching it out for Lucas’s note. It’s simple with no hidden message, yet I still read it two times.

“You’re smiling.” Kristy wiggles her eyebrows. “Do I even want to know what that note says?”

“It’s nothing exciting. Don’t get your hopes up.”

She waits until the customer leaves before stepping over, looking over my shoulder. “You’re going out with Lucas tonight?”

“Yeah. I, uh, think so.”

“You better make up your mind,” she laughs. “Because it seems you’ve already told him yes.”

“Is it a bad idea?” I look at my best friend, twisting a strand of hair between my fingers.

“Do you like him?” she asks even though she already knows the answer. She has to get me to admit it to myself first.



“Yes. I find him very interesting, obviously very attractive, and he makes me feel...feel...*safe*. Like I can drop my guard around him and not be worried a demon will swoop in and kill us both.”

“Then I think you have your answer.”

“I need you to say it out loud,” I tell her, and she laughs. “You know I like verbal reassurance.”

“You raised—and then killed—an army of zombies last night, but you need me to say it out loud?”

“Yes. Please.”

Kristy shakes her head and laughs. “Fine. Then yes, Callie, go on the date with him.”

“You don’t think it’s a bad idea because he’s a vampire?”

“Usually, I’d say yeah, it is. But after last night...seeing him protect you...I think you’re right about him being able to keep you safe. But be careful, just like you should be on any date with any man. Dead or alive.”

“Thanks.”

“That’s what friends are for.”

“I thought they were for dark rituals and helping to bury bodies.”

She tips her head to the side. “Eh, yeah. That too.”

Another customer comes up to the counter, and I step away to find Betty. She’s going over inventory and looks up as soon as I come into the backroom.

“Hey,” I say, hoping I didn’t startle her. “How are you?”

“I’m...I’m okay,” she says after a few seconds of consideration. “Really.”

“Good. If you need time off or anything, don’t feel bad. Let us know.”

“I’m happy to be back,” she says quickly. “I’m still at my parents’ house until I find a new apartment and my mom is driving me crazy. Being here is a good distraction.”

“Okay. But really, don’t hesitate.”

She smiles. “I won’t. Hey, Callie?”

“Yeah?”

She looks down, peeling off a long piece of packing tape from the box in front of her. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

She looks up, meeting my eyes for only half a second. “For whatever you did. I don’t know what it was—and I don’t want to know—but I know you were there that night. I felt you hold my hand. And then you promised he wouldn’t get away with it, and then Mike went in and confessed every bad thing he’s ever done. And I mean everything.” She meets my eyes again. “So...for whatever it was...thank you.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Betty looks up and I wink. “Right. I must have been dreaming the whole time.”

“I’m sure you were. But know I have your back. And that asshole won’t touch anyone else ever again.”

Her smile widens. “I know.”



I TURN, LOOKING AT MYSELF IN THE MIRROR. I JUST TRIED ON the dress Lucas sent, and it fits perfectly. Taking it off, I carefully lay it out at the foot of my bed, picking out the

perfect shoes and jewelry to go with it. I have three and a half hours until sunset, and I sink back into bed, Lucas heavy on my mind.

I'm still tired, and I know I won't get much sleep tonight. But that's because Lucas is a vampire and is awake at night. Not because we'll be busy having sex or anything. Geez...my mind isn't in the gutter *all* the time.

Hah.

I snuggle into my bed, pulling the blankets around me, and end up dozing off for an hour. I wake up feeling foggy. After checking the time, I force myself up, go for a quick two-mile run, and rush back into the house to shower and do my makeup. I use magic for my hair, and end up dressed and looking pretty dang good if I do say so myself before Lucas gets here.

Tonight, he's driving a black Mercedes sedan.

"You look..." he starts as soon as I open the door. He sweeps his eyes over me. "Beautiful."

"Thank you." I step aside, letting him in. He's dressed up a bit as well, wearing black dress pants, a button-up shirt, and a tie.

"The dress fits?" he sweeps his eyes over me again.

"The leggings do too, and I was really tempted to wear them tonight." I shut the door and lean against the wall. Lucas closes the distance between us, and the next thing I know, his lips are brushing against mine.

"If I kiss you, I won't be able to stop myself," he whispers.

I rake my fingers through his hair. "Maybe I don't want you to stop."

He lets out a guttural growl and picks me up. But instead of pinning me between his large body and the wall, he turns and takes a few paces toward the door. “We should go. If we’re late, we’ll miss our reservation.”

“Reservation? Where are we going?”

“Chicago,” he says and leads me out the door. “You said you missed the city, so let me take you back there.”

If anyone else wanted to take me back to Chicago—my real hometown—I’d protest. Because my childhood isn’t filled with happy memories. But Lucas isn’t anyone.

“I’d like that.”

“Good. I have the night planned for us, but to get started, we need to leave.” He sets me down and takes my hand. We get into the car, and he speeds out of my driveway.

“You do realize that while you might not die in a crash, I still can,” I say once we’re on the freeway. He’s been speeding and weaving in and out of traffic this whole time. He flicks his eyes to mine and lets off the gas.

“Buzzkill.”

“What happened to wanting to keep me alive?”

“So I can fuck you?”

I shake my head. Lucas laughs and reaches over, taking my hand in his. His hands are warm, and I realize he has the heated steering wheel turned on. Did he do that on purpose?

“How are you holding up?” he asks, moving his thumb in small circles against my palm.

“I’m good,” I tell him, and he gives me a dubious look. “I’m bummed I couldn’t find out who that guy was. No one on

the Anderson Consultants website looked like him. I really thought maybe there was a small chance we'd all get what we want. But none of us did."

Lucas gives my hand a squeeze. "What about your friend? The one who was drugged."

"Betty," I say. "She's doing the best she can. I saw her today and it's kind of obvious she's burying herself in work so she doesn't have to deal. She was a shy girl before and now she's going to have an even harder time meeting people. All because some stupid asshole—I'll stop. Because if I don't, I'll start ranting."

"I agree with you." Lucas presses his thumb into my palm, massaging my hand. It's such an innocent gesture, yet it feels intimate for some reason. "Any man who has to resort to force or coercion to get a woman isn't a man at all."

He believes what he's saying, which sets him apart from other vampires. A large majority of vamps feel entitled and think they can make humans do whatever the fuck they want because they see humans as less than they are.

"Are you going to tell me what happened with Eliza?" I ask and feel him stiffen, ever so slightly, for a millisecond. Is he thinking of the conversation I overheard? I wasn't...but now I am. Heat washes over me, and I turn, watching the landscape pass by. "Why did she show up at my house?"

"Oh." He stops moving his thumb in a circle and pushes his foot down on the gas. The car lurches forward and I grip his hand tight. "Business issues," he explains stiffly. "Going into business with people who lived off the radar for years isn't always easy."

“I never really thought about that before. But it makes sense.”

“I set them straight. I won’t be having issues anymore.”

I curl my fingers in over Lucas’s hand. “I don’t want to ask, right?”

He laughs. “Vampire politics will bore you.”

“I try to avoid all politics at all cost,” I say, shaking my head. “It hits close to home, and it’s not something I want to revisit, at all.”

“Look at you, being all mysterious,” he teases. “It’s such a turn on. You’re making me want to pull this car over and have my way with you right now.”

“But what about our reservation?” I say, batting my eyes. “I can’t wait to see what kind of fancy restaurant you take me to. Though, really,” I say, getting serious, “if it’s some fancy French place, I don’t speak French.”

“I do,” he says and brings my hand up to his lips. He kisses the top of it and then drops his hand back down.

“You weren’t speaking French last night, were you?”

“No, we were speaking Italian.”

“I thought so! But you were speaking so fast it was hard to tell.”

“That’s good to know.”

I shift my weight, angling my body toward his. “You speak English, French, and Italian? Is that another undead perk? Unlimited time to learn as many languages as you want.”

Lucas falls silent for a moment, and I recognize the look in his eyes. He’s wrestling with the truth, trying to decide what to

say and what to keep locked away.

“I didn’t know how to read or write as a human,” he tells me. “And for nearly a century as a vampire I didn’t care to learn. But then I realized how oppressive it was for the humans of my time to limit who’s allowed to have an education. So I made it a point to read everything I could, in as many languages I could be taught.”

My lips part, but I don’t know what to say to that. It’s a strange thing to think about Lucas as a human nearly two thousand years ago. But he’s right...back then only the wealthy nobles were taught how to read and write.

“Do you like being a vampire?” I ask before I really think it through.

“I don’t have much of a choice, do I?” he answers.

“I suppose not.”

“But yes, I say with confidence I do like being a vampire. Just as I imagine you like being a witch.”

“I do. I wouldn’t trade it for anything.”

He lets go of my hand and turns on the radio to a local station, playing current, trendy music. The traffic isn’t terrible going into the city and we’re making good time. Mostly thanks to Lucas speeding.

“Where are we going?” I ask, heart beating just a little faster when I see the dark skyline dotted with yellow and orange lights.

“It’s a surprise.” He glances at me, and his eyes shine. Taking my hand again, he doesn’t let go until we park near Navy Pier. Hand in hand, Lucas leads me to wherever we’re going for dinner.

There are a handful of restaurants around the pier, but most are casual and we'd be overdressed.

"It's busy," I say out loud, looking at the people milling about.

"It's the weekend."

"Really? Shit. I've lost all sense of direction in my life at the moment."

"Maybe I can be your compass." He squeezes my hand.

"I'd very much like that." I squeeze his hand back, finding it hard not to smile right now. We weave through the crowded sidewalk and head toward a docking area for a dinner cruise. This particular line recently started offering a "late night" dinner for their "guests of the night." They carry premium bottled blood, both human and animal. I don't take Lucas to be a bottled blood drinker. He's never said anything, but I get the feeling he wouldn't touch that shit unless it was a matter of life or death.

But it's not like vampires can die.

"Really?" I ask, smile widening.

"I thought you'd like it."

"I do. I've always wanted to go on a dinner cruise."

He tips his head down, stealing a kiss. We look like a normal couple, getting on the ship for a fancy and romantic dinner. There are other vampires on this boat, I can sense them, but I'm positive I'm the only witch.

"This view is incredible," I say once we're seated at our table.

"Just wait until we leave the shore."



“Have you been on one of these before?” I ask, looking over the menu.

“No.”

“I wouldn’t have thought so. It doesn’t seem like your thing.”

He leans forward a bit, watching me. “What is my thing?”

Glancing up from the menu, I shake my head. “I’m not really sure. But fancy dinners on Lake Michigan and drinking bottled blood isn’t one of them.”

“You’re right about that.”

“And the other things...I’d like to know about them,” I say.

“Are you afraid you won’t like what you learn?”

“No,” I tell him honestly. “I know who you are. Besides, you’re not the only one who’s done things—bad things. I mean, I haven’t drunk the blood of my enemies, but I’ve messed up a lot. Done things I’m not proud of.”

“But in comparison,” he starts.

“In comparison isn’t fair. You’re like...like...” I pull out my phone, needing my calculator because math and my brain don’t jive. “You’re like sixty-five times my age. Fuck, you’re old,” I whisper, eyes widening. And then I laugh. Lucas laughs too and reaches across the table for my hand again. His index finger goes to the pulse point on my wrist.

“So, for a fair comparison, you need to take a twenty-five-year chunk of your life and use that for reference.”

“The first twenty-five years I was a vampire were filled with bloodshed and revenge. The last twenty-five has

been mild.”

I remember Eliza saying he hasn't seemed like himself for over fifteen years. “All I'm saying is...is...” I wrinkle my nose and start rambling. “I don't really know. I want to say I don't judge you for your past, but I do, and I will. Though what happened a few hundred years ago doesn't mean you're the same person—sorry, vampire—now. So I guess I'm saying I don't really know how to judge you so I'd rather not. I'm going off our interactions and so far...so far...”

“So far what?” he slides his finger down my wrist and it's all I can do not to shiver.

I let my eyes fall shut and stop trying to hold up a front. I don't want to anymore. It's tiring. “You make me feel.” The words leave my lips and my heart flutters.

“Feel? Feel what?” He traces the vein back down to my palm.

“A lot of things.” I flick my eyes to his, blushing slightly. “But mostly...normal.”

“I make you feel normal?”

I nod and bring my other hand up, cupping it around his. “You're not afraid of me or constantly reminding me how different I am. How much I don't fit in. When we're together, it's just...it's just us.”

I brave looking into his eyes, a little worried he thought what I just said was stupid. But I don't see that cocky, mocking grin on his lips. Instead, his eyes are full of unspoken emotion. The loneliness he's felt is right there on the surface. He wants to get rid of it, to push it away and never feel the cold grip on his heart ever again, but he knows whatever

relationship he starts is damned from the beginning. I will age and die. And he'll be forced to watch.

And then be alone again.

“That, and I know you won't die if demons attack,” I add.

He laughs, blinking and ridding the raw emotion he was baring on his face. “That's a plus, I suppose. You can hold your own against vampires. A level playing field does make this enjoyable.”

I pull my hands away from his and lean over the table, knowing my breasts are close to spilling out of this dress. He lowers his gaze, practically salivating at the sight.

“Who said it's level? We both know I would kick your ass.”

Now that cocky grin is back, looking so good on his handsome face. “We just might have to put that to the test.”

## CHAPTER 17



“It’s so pretty out here.” I sip my cocktail, looking at the water. We’re on the top deck, enjoying the night.

“My view isn’t so bad either.” Lucas is leaning against the railing and hasn’t taken his eyes off me all evening. Dinner was amazing. The food was great, and I ate most of the shared appetizer by myself, since, well, Lucas isn’t going to eat spinach-artichoke dip. Or anything, for that matter.

Talking to Lucas is easy and having him know and approve of my life as a witch is a game changer. But it’s more than just the convenience of going on a date with a guy I don’t have to lie to. There’s more to Lucas than he lets on. He’s a complicated man but I know one thing for certain: he might not care for many people, but he’s fierce when it comes to those he loves.

I finish my drink and set the empty glass down on a table and go back to the railing, looking out at the cityscape. Lucas steps in behind me, pressing my ass against his pelvis and resting his hands on my stomach. I’m right up against his cock, and while it’s not hard, I can still feel it through his pants.

My mouth goes dry and I have to remind myself how to breathe. We’re standing on the deck of a crowded boat, yet

somehow everyone else fades from view. Gently, he brushes my hair away from my shoulder, bringing it around my neck and smoothing the ends out against my breast. His fingers deliberately graze over my nipple, and dammit, he gets a physical response out of me. Chills run down my spine and I lean back, needing to feel more of him against me. He brings his hand down over my breast, along my stomach, and inches it down to my thigh. Slowly, he moves his fingers, gathering the hem of my dress in his hand.

My heart flutters and speeds up. He brings his other hand down, running his fingers over my exposed flesh, dangerously close to my core. His lips press against my neck, gently kissing me.

And then he draws his fangs. I can feel the razor-sharp tips on my skin. My pulse bounds, echoing in my head. If I can hear it, he can.

He can feel it, too.

Deft fingers sweep across my clit, just barely touching it through the thin fabric of my panties. Everything inside me heats up, and if he pressed his fingers to me again, he'd feel just how wet he's making me right now. I grip the railing, needing to hold onto it for support. Trailing kisses, he moves his lips down along my neck, fangs digging into but not breaking my skin with each and every kiss.

"Are you...are you hungry?" I ask, barely louder than a whisper. It doesn't matter. Lucas can hear me. His mouth goes to my neck again, and his tongue lashes out, running along a vein. He pauses for a moment, and I know what he's doing. He's reading my heartbeat, finding the best place to bite me.

"When I do drink you, it won't be like this," he growls, lips brushing against me as he speaks. "I want to feel you

squirring in my lap as I sink my fangs into your neck. Hear you moan as your blood pours into my mouth.”

I whimper, pressing my ass up against his cock, my entire body craving to feel it harden against me. Suddenly he pushes me away and spins me around so I’m facing him. I blink rapidly, trying to regain my composure. His hands land on my shoulders and he tips his head down, flashing his fangs.

“I’ll give you what you want, but not until I’ve gotten what I need.”

I nod, feeling very young, inexperienced, and desperate standing before him. Closing my eyes in a long blink, I suck in a breath and push my shoulders back, looking into Lucas’s deep blue eyes.

I want to say something equally domineering back, but all I can do is pant out, “Okay,” and then step back into his embrace. He runs his fingers through my hair before cradling me to his chest. I rest my head against him and standing here wrapped in his arms feels so right, so natural.

It should unnerve me. Should raise a red flag. Or at the very least make me feel a tad nervous. But it doesn’t, and everything about tonight is so oddly perfect, I never want it to end. I’ve been on a lot of crappy first dates. Shitty second ones, too. But this...this is the best first date I’ve ever experienced. Hell, it’s the best date I’ve had, period.

Obviously, I’m very attracted to Lucas, but it’s more than that. It’s freeing to be with him, not having to hide my secrets and lies.

I’m just me.

And this...being out here at night, watching my beloved city slowly drift by...it’s such a nice moment, one that will go

down in First Date History.

So of course, something has to ruin it.

During dinner, the couple at the table next to ours kept stealing glances our way. They'd look away if I turned in their direction, but it was pretty obvious they were trying to figure out if Lucas was a vampire or not. He didn't order a drink, but not everyone does. A lot of people stick to water.

But then he didn't eat any of the appetizer. Or order dinner. I could tell they're Vampire Exclusion Act supporters and were offended that a vampire was in their vicinity. Which, come on, assholes. You booked dinner on the only late-night cruise that caters to vampires. What were you expecting?

And now, the blonde girl who gave me the stink eye throughout dinner is shaking her head, eyes narrowing. It's crowded up here on the deck, and the only empty space is near us. Her boyfriend tries to get her to come over, to claim the empty table nearby as their own, but she shakes her head, loudly stating that she doesn't want to be near a vampire.

Finally, she relents and huffs as she walks toward the table. I watch her, not turning away when she casts another pointed stare at me. She wasn't expecting me to hold her gaze, and the act both startles and pisses her off.

"Fang-banging whore. You should be ashamed of yourself," she snits as she walks by. Lucas goes to turn, but I pull him back around and put my lips to his.

"I got this," I whisper and bring my hand down, flicking my wrist, making the glass of wine the woman was holding tip all down the front of her dress.

"Dammit, Jason!" she yells, blaming it on her boyfriend even though he's a good four feet ahead of her.

Lucas snickers. “Subtle.”

“I’ll admit it was petty and impulsive. But people like that really piss me off.”

“Petty and impulsive just happen to be two of my favorite qualities in a person,” he only half jokes.

“You’ll get a lot of that with me.”

He pulls me in close again. “I’m looking forward to it.”



“THE NIGHT IS YOUNG.” LUCAS ENTWINES HIS FINGERS through mine. We just got off the dinner cruise and are walking along the pier. “What do you want to do?”

I look around, eyes settling on the carousel. Lucas follows my line of sight and stops short.

“Seriously?”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s a carousel and we’re not children.”

“Where is your sense of adventure?” I laugh.

“I thought killing zombies in your yard was enough of an adventure for you.”

“That’s not what an adventure is.”

“I’m not sure I’m following your logic.”

“People think adventures mean going on quests or these big journeys to destroy a magical ring. But really, it’s about pushing out of your comfort zone and doing something you normally wouldn’t. It’s about taking a risk and having fun.”

“You’re drunk,” he insists.



“I’m not. Now come on.” I tug his hand forward. “The line isn’t crazy long right now.”

Lucas’s lips curve into a genuine smile again and he steps forward. “Fine. For you.”

We get our tickets and get in line. The current ride just let out, and half the line in front of us gets on. We’ll get on the next round.

“The city has changed a lot since I first moved here,” Lucas muses as he looks around.

“What drew you here?” I ask. “You could have gone anywhere.”

“I’d been everywhere,” he replies. “But I hadn’t yet been to Chicago. And with the Vampire Council originating here, there were rumors Chicago would be the first city to allow assimilation.”

“It was talked about way back then?” Lucas said he’s lived in Chicago for over fifty years, but vampires haven’t been out even half that time.

“It was talked about for centuries.”

“I had no idea.”

“No one but the vampires should have had an idea. The Council was very secretive.”

I adjust the strap of my purse on my shoulder. “How do you know about it?”

“I was asked to sit in on the Council,” he tells me, which actually isn’t surprising, given his age. “I did for a few years, but as I told you before, politics don’t interest me.”

“That’s one thing we have in common.”

“Your covens are organized in a similar fashion, though, aren’t they?”

“Some are. Mine is still rather old-fashioned, well, without the cannibalism.”

“Witches really partook in that?”

“Oh yeah. You’re not the only ones who drink blood.” I shudder. “But it’s rare to find a civilized coven who still practices regularly.”

I watch the carousel go around, looking at each of the horses. “You want to make sure you get one that goes up and down. The ones that don’t move are lame,” I tell Lucas, feeling like he needs some prep on this.

“The whole thing is lame.”

“Now you’re the buzz kill.”

When it’s our turn to get on the carousel, I hurry, though, finding two open horses next to each other. I swing up onto a dark horse with a colorful saddle. Lucas stands there begrudgingly.

“I’m sixteen hundred years old,” he reminds me. “I don’t do carnival rides.”

“You do now.” I pat the open seat next to me. “Now get on the zebra. You look stupid just standing there, you know.”

Grumbling, he gets on the zebra, which looks tiny under his large frame. I can’t help but laugh. The carousel starts moving, and the sights and sounds of the pier spin around us. I don’t remember the last time I was on any type of carousel.

“What?” I say, noticing that Lucas has been watching me for a while.

“Nothing,” he replies. “Only I realized I’d do pretty much anything to make you smile.”

When the ride ends and Lucas and I are walking along the pier again, he asks what else I’d like to do. I’ve never been on the Ferris wheel, but the line is long, and he’s done enough to appease me tonight.

“We could get a drink,” I suggest. “Well, I guess I can. Are you sure you’re not, uh, hungry?”

“I’m fine,” he tells me, leading me to believe he ate beforehand.

Walking silently for a few paces, I suddenly stop. Lucas halts too, whirling around.

“Is something wrong?” he asks, automatically going on the defense.

“No, nothing is wrong. I just...thank you.”

He raises an eyebrow, not sure what I’m talking about.

“For taking me out tonight. You were right. I really did need this.”

“I’m always right.” He playfully nudges me. “Remember that next time I advise you to do something.”

“Is that something going to involve a second date?”

“Do you need advising to agree to go out with me again?”

“No, not at all.” I reach for his hand.

“You like wine,” he starts.

“Is it that obvious?”

Chuckling, he takes his hand from mine and wraps it around my waist. “I’m asking because I’d like to get

you some.”

“Oh, well in that case, yes. I do. I’m not a picky wine drinker. If it’s sweet and has a cute label on the bottle, I’ll drink it.”

“Classy.”

“You know it.”

We leave the pier and find a swanky wine store. I pick out a bottle of White Zinfandel to take back to Lucas’s place in Lincoln Park.

“Where do you keep all your cars?” I ask as he parallel parks on the street.

“I have some garage space here, some are parked on the street, and the rest are kept elsewhere.”

“How many cars do you have?”

He has to stop and think for a second, mentally counting. “Twenty-seven.”

“Why so many?”

“I guess you could call it a hobby. Most are kept at my vineyard in California.”

“You have a vineyard too?”

“I’m old,” he reminds me with a smile. “I’ve invested wisely over the years. I have houses in Paris and Italy and other investments all over the country.”

He kills the engine and gets out, moving fast to open the door for me. We’re a ways from his house and have to walk a bit to get there. Other than my little stint the other night when I did a pathetic drive-by of my sister’s place, I haven’t been in this particular neighborhood in a while. But I remember

enough to know Lucas lives on North Orchard Street, one of the most expensive streets in Lincoln Park.

He wasn't kidding when he said he was wise with his investments over the years.

"Does Eliza live here too?" I ask, following him up the stone steps to an ostentatious brick house.

"Not currently." He unlocks the door. "She has a condo at the Waldorf Astoria."

That place is fancy too. "Oh. I wasn't sure how that worked with you two being...being...whatever it is you are."

The door opens and an alarm starts beeping. Not turning any lights on, Lucas walks through the house and disarms his alarm system. I take off my shoes, feeling instant relief on my feet, and hold out my hand, conjuring a ball of energy so I can see.

This place is big, stark, and modern. It's spotlessly clean and professionally decorated. It's gorgeous and impressive and not at all what I expected a sixteen-hundred-year-old vampire's house to look like.

A light comes on in the hall, and Lucas comes rushing back, moving so fast a draft of air blows my hair. He takes the wine from me and turns, waving for me to follow him into the kitchen. I'm no stranger to big, fancy houses, but I can't help but look around in awe.

"I don't have a corkscrew." Lucas gets a wine glass from the cabinet once we're in the kitchen. It's huge, of course, which is kind of funny considering Lucas doesn't eat real food.

"But you have wine glasses?" I raise an eyebrow.

“I don’t always drink directly from the source.” He sets the wine glass down in front of me. “Care to do your party trick and use magic to open the bottle?”

I slide the wine across the marble countertop and hold my hand over it. “If I had to pick the best thing about being a witch, it’s this.” The cork rises out of the bottle and falls onto the counter.

Lucas laughs and pours the wine for me, filling the glass halfway. My phone dings with a text, and I reach into my purse to see who sent it, make sure it’s not urgent, and then silence my phone.

But when I see my brother’s name on the screen, I let out a sigh.

“Is something wrong?”

“Nothing a little wine can’t fix,” I say and grab the glass. I take a big gulp.

“Easy, Jessica Jones,” Lucas says. “You can’t drink your problems away.”

“I can, actually. Well, for the time being at least.”

He moves at vamp speed and looks over my shoulder. “Who is Scott?”

“My brother.”

“And a text from your brother is upsetting? You haven’t read it yet.”

I swallow another mouthful of wine. “I know it will be.” I heavily exhale and unlock my phone. “See for yourself.” I open the text and hold the phone up so Lucas can see.

**Scott: I just saw Abigale and she's holding onto hope you're coming to the party. Callie, you really need to do the mature thing and tell Abigale you are NOT going to Penny's birthday party. You KNOW it's best to stay away. That innocent child hasn't met you yet and it's best to keep it that way. You're getting our sister's hopes up. Tell her soon before she says something to Mom. She doesn't need that kind of stress and, come on...we both know you cause a lot of stress.**

"I don't understand." Lucas looks from the text to me and back again. "Penny is the niece you were talking about."

"Yeah, she is. She just turned a year old and my sister invited me to the party."

"Why doesn't your brother want you to go?"

I set my phone down on the counter, afraid if I look down and read Scott's words again, I'll throw it.

"The rest of my family...they..." I close my eyes and shake my head. "They don't have powers." I open my eyes and look directly at Lucas. "I'm the first and only witch in my family." The emptiness swirls inside of me, pulling at my heart. "And they hate me for it."

I swallow the lump in my throat. "You asked why I left Chicago, well, that's why. My family is ashamed of who I am. They want to pretend like I don't exist, and my sister inviting me to her daughter's birthday party is putting her at risk for ex-communication, I'm sure. God forbid someone finds out I'm—gasp—a witch."

"Why would they be ashamed of you? Your powers are incredible. *You* are incredible."

“Tell that to them,” I mutter, and the truth burns inside of me, wanting to come out. Only Kristy, Evander, and our High Priestess know the whole truth. But I can’t bring myself to say it. I don’t want to even think about it. White walls and bright overhead lights flash before me, and the smell of bleach burns my nose. I take another gulp of wine, force my eyes open as wide as they can go, and look around the kitchen, reminding myself I’m not *there*. I’m here, in a fancy kitchen full of expensive appliances, in the house of a vampire who doesn’t eat food.

“My family has been into politics for years,” I go on. “My grandpa, my dad, and now my brother’s starting his career in it, and I’ll just say they are very conservative.”

“They’re against vampires assimilating?”

“Big time. And vampires are bad enough...can you imagine if it got out that there was a witch in the family?” I let out a heavy sigh. “I’m the shame of the family and was forced for years to hide who I really was. Trust me, leaving Chicago was the best thing for me. And now I have my coven, and they’ve become my new family.”

“I’m sorry,” Lucas says, and he means it. His brow furrows, face tightening almost as if he’s fighting against the emotions he’s feeling right now. They’re foreign to him, and I get the impression he’s not sure how to process everything.

“Thanks. And it’s okay now. Well, kind of. It obviously still upsets me, but I’m working on it.”

“Do you want to go to your niece’s birthday party?”

“Yes,” I say without hesitation. “I miss my sister, and it’d be great to meet my niece. If I have powers, there’s a chance



she could too. And I don't want her to go through everything I went through."

"What did you go through?" he asks slowly, knowing there's way more to my story than living with disapproving parents.

"That's a story for another time." I offer a small smile and take another sip of wine. "Now *I'm* the buzz kill. For real."

"No," he says and takes me in his arms. "You're not at all."

"I'm sorry, Lucas. Let's pretend this never happened and get back to our date. Because I'm having a really good time."

My heart is hammering away and blood rushes through me. So many raw emotions are flooding my system right now, yet somehow, Lucas knows exactly what to do. He just gets me.

Grabbing the bottle of wine, he tops off my glass. "Come with me," he says and leads me to a rooftop patio. I take another big drink before setting it down on a cast iron table.

"It's peaceful out here." I let out a breath. "More so than I thought."

"Yes," he agrees. "It is." Coming up behind me, he wraps his arms around my waist. "Do that thing you do with your magic."

"What thing?"

"Where you hold the light in your hand."

I rub my thumb over my fingers and conjure a pink string of magic. It twists between my fingers, glowing bright in the night.

“Anyone who is ashamed of you is a damn fool,” he whispers. “And anyone who thinks you need to hide who you are...I wouldn’t show them the mercy that you have.”

“They’re my family.”

“Family doesn’t treat each other like that. You could have anything you want. Make them cower. Make them bleed. You could rule over them.”

“I don’t want to rule.” I shake my head and look out at the night.

“What do you want?”

My breath leaves me, heart swelling in my chest. I spin around, facing Lucas. The emptiness is back, opening up wide. But this time I don’t feel like it’s going to suck me in and bring me down to the abyss. Because this time, I’m not alone. “I just want to be happy.”

“I do too,” he whispers. “I was starting to think it was impossible, you know.”

“Do you still?”

He pushes my hair back behind my ear and traces his finger along a vein in my neck. I inhale quickly, heat rushing through me.

“No,” he tells me. “I don’t.”

## CHAPTER 18



Lucas's gaze meets my eyes, and I swear if his heart could beat, it would hammer right along with mine. The night stands still around us, and the busy city fades. All I can see is Lucas standing in front of me, looking at me with so much lust in his eyes it's making me feel like I caught him in the act. Or rather...that he caught me in the act.

"Your heart is beating faster." His fingers are barely touching the flesh on my neck, in the slope where it meets my shoulder.

"Yeah, it does that sometimes."

He steps in, bringing his other hand to the hem of my dress. Slowly, he bunches it up and slides his hand along my thigh. My eyes fall shut and I rest my hands on his hips so he can't see them shaking.

Inhaling deep, he presses his fingers into the flesh on the back of my thigh. Moving his other hand back up my neck, he pushes it into my hair and brings my head back a bit, exposing my neck to him.

The wind picks up, blowing my hair around us. I open my eyes to see Lucas's lips pull back a bit as he draws his fangs.

“You,” he starts and puts his lips to my neck, gently kissing my skin. A shiver runs through me and my knees threaten to buckle. “Are.” He kisses me again. “Beautiful.” He pulls his lips back, letting his fangs graze along my skin. His hand is already in my hair. He could force me back and drink my blood, draining enough to weaken me in just seconds.

And enough to kill me in less than a minute.

He trails kisses down my neck and over my shoulder, pushing the thin strap of my dress out of the way. I tighten my hold on him, afraid of falling if I let go. My eyes flutter shut again, and he presses his fangs down, harder than before but not enough to break the skin. I gasp, thinking he’s going to bite me.

Because I’m going to let him.

I want him to.

To have me.

Taste me.

But he doesn’t bite me, and instead kisses and sucks the spot on my neck that sends an instant wave of heat through me. I whimper as he rakes his hand through my hair, bringing his other hand up my thigh and under my dress until it rests on the base of my ass.

“You didn’t agree with me,” he says and his deep voice rattles right through me.

“I didn’t...what?”

“You are exquisite. You’re powerful. You’re beautiful. You...you’ve surprised me more in the few days I’ve known you than others have in their entire lifetimes.”

I sink my teeth into my bottom lip, trying to keep it from quivering. I'm feeling everything right now. Turned on. Vulnerable. I want to break down and confess everything I've repressed. I want to cry about my past, curse everyone who's hurt me, and tell him about every single heartbreak. And at the same time, I don't want to say a word. I want him to lay me down on the lounge chair behind us and fuck me hard, making it impossible to feel anything other than the pleasure his big cock brings me.

"Lucas," I start, but never get to finish. He puts his lips to mine and the heat rushing through me explodes, sending tingles of desire to every nerve in my body. Opening my mouth, I deepen the kiss, wrapping my arms around him.

Bringing his hand down, he grips my ass and pulls me to him. He presses his fangs against my lip just hard enough to send a jolt through me. When he said he was able to control himself, he wasn't kidding. Though I suppose this is what sixteen hundred years of sex will do.

Holy shit.

Lucas has nearly two thousand years of experience. Of perfecting. Of knowing exactly what he likes. Of how to please others. He slides his hand around my leg, going between my thighs. "When I slip my fingers inside your panties, will I find your pussy wet for me?"

I open my mouth, but it takes me a second to gather a coherent thought. Because his words are making me wetter than I already am.

"Why don't you find out?" I pant.

A guttural growl comes from deep inside his throat and he turns me around so that my ass is pressed right up against his

cock, feeling it harden. He gathers my hair in one hand and pulls it to the side. I tip my head, arching my neck and offering it to him. He brings his mouth down, kissing and sucking at my skin. His fangs scrape me as he kisses me, and the bit of pain mixed in with the pleasure makes me even hotter. He's hardly touched me and I'm getting so wound up, so turned on I don't know how much longer I can stand it.

Gathering the hem of my dress in one hand, he brings his other hand down from my hair and between my thighs. Going slow to purposely tease me, he curls one of his long fingers up and sweeps it over my clit.

The small movement is enough to make me quiver. He grips the inside of my thigh, splaying his fingers, making me desperate for more of his touch. But instead of working his fingers against me, instead of giving me what I want, he releases me and I almost stumble in the dark.

His hands settle on my waist again, and the bunched-up fabric of my dress falls back around my thighs. I exhale, hyperaware of his every movement, his every touch. My pussy contracts, needing to feel him. His fingers. His lips. His *fangs*.

And that big cock, which I'm not entirely sure will fit in me, but I'm craving to feel it push inside, to fill me completely and fuck me into oblivion.

Kissing my neck, he unzips my dress and lets it fall with a whoosh to the ground around my feet.

"Turn around," he orders. "And don't cover yourself up."

Standing in only black panties before him, I swallow hard and turn. My breasts are bathed in overhead light from the houses around us. The breeze blows my hair again, sending a chill through me. Lucas licks his lips, eyes going to my pert

nipples, and I remember him saying he wondered how they'd feel against his tongue.

He's going to find out tonight.

His lips pull up, showing off his fangs again. He's not doing it to scare me, or to threaten me. He's doing it because he wants me, and he's having a hard time not throwing me down and having his way with me.

Because there's something magnetic between us. And even with all the experience he has, he's struggling with his self-control right now. It's not just a want. It's a need, and we're both feeling it. Sooner than later, we're going to cave and give in.

And it's either going to be spectacular or disastrous.

Lucas rushes forward, bringing me to him. My breasts crush against his firm chest. I widen my legs, feeling his cock through his pants. My breath leaves me as he takes a fistful of my hair, putting his mouth to my neck once more.

This time, I'm sure he's going to sink his fangs into my flesh and drink my blood. But he doesn't, and the anticipation of the first bite builds even more.

He trails kisses down my neck and over my collarbone. I let my head fall back, goosebumps breaking out along my flesh. His tongue lashes out, swirling around my nipple.

"Ohhh," I moan, tossing my head back. He circles my nipple again, giving it one hard suck before dropping to his knees. His hands go to my hips and he kisses his way down my stomach, stopping when he gets to my panties. I bring my hand up, sweeping my fingers over my breast, and steal a glance down at Lucas.

He tips his head up, and the look in his eyes almost does me in. It's full of lust and hunger, for both my body and my blood. But there's something else, something that's hard to explain, and something I don't want to stop and think about.

It's one of the reasons I'm so drawn to him, and it scares me that I recognize that look, that I know that feeling.

His mouth goes back to me, and he hooks a finger in each side of my panties, inching them down. I bring my hands to his head, burying my fingers in his hair. He pulls my panties down to my knees and then let's go, letting them drop to the ground with my dress.

Lucas moves his hands to my ass and brings me to him. He bends down, kissing my thigh. Hard. He bites down and it's only then I realize he's retracted his fangs. He's strong enough to bite right through me without his fangs if he wanted to. But right now, all he wants to do is drive me near the brink of madness by this teasing. If he's pushing me, seeing how far I'll go before I turn into a puddle on the floor...he's not very far off.

Turning his head up, his nose rubs against me as he opens his mouth. My lips part and a tiny moan comes out. I grip his hair tighter, glancing down with anticipation. He flicks his eyes up, smirking when he looks right at me.

Then he moves with vampire speed, picking me up and laying me down underneath him on the lounge chair.

"I want you, Callie," he growls.

"I know," I groan, running my hand along his thigh. My fingers sweep over his hard cock, begging to be released from the tight confines of his pants. "I want you too."



“You have to understand.” His voice is deep and gravely with need. “I don’t want to just fuck you. I want *you*, and fucking you is only the beginning. I. Want. You,” he says slowly. “I want you to be mine.”

“I...I understand,” I say as a chill runs through me. He wants to claim ownership over me, to make it so no other vampire can drink from me. It’s the vampire way of asking to go exclusive, but with much bigger repercussions. I didn’t know vampires still abided by that rule, as it was very problematic. A vampire as old as Lucas could compel many to become his, and if another vampire laid a fang on them—even unknowingly—he’d have the right by Vampire Law to kill them.

“I want to be yours.”

“Do you?” he asks, fangs coming back down. “You know what I am. What I’ve done. What I still do.”

“I know.” I bend my legs up, pushing my hips against his, and cup his face with my hand. “I know exactly who you are.”

With that, he kisses me hard, fangs scraping the soft skin inside my lips. He’s not as careful as before, and a tiny bit of blood is drawn. I can taste it, so I know Lucas can too. He groans, slipping his arms underneath me as he grinds his cock against me.

Suddenly, he flips me over and moves to my side, spooning his body around mine with one hand between my thighs. His finger goes right to my clit and he starts to move it in expert motions, reading my body like a book written just for him. After only a few seconds of touching me, he adjusts his hand, moving it to the perfect spot and hitting me at just the right angle.

Putting his mouth to my neck again, he gently bites at my skin, still not breaking the flesh, and sucks hard. The sensation drives me crazy, sending a wave of pleasure to my pussy. Lucas feels me getting wetter and speeds up his movements.

Need surges through me, and my mouth falls open as I feel the orgasm coming on fast and hard. No one has ever worked me up this much and gotten me off this fast.

But Lucas isn't anyone.

I widen my legs, breathing heavily. He slips one finger inside me, slowing his movements down. He pushes it in, finding my G-spot in just seconds. He rubs it with just enough pressure, bringing his thumb back to my swollen clit.

I'm aching for a release, heart hammering and breath catching. He can hear my heart beating, can tell when I'm right there before I do.

And he stops.

Stops stroking me.

Stops moving his fingers.

A few seconds tick by and I'm lying there, too stunned to move. And then he starts again, slowly rubbing my clit. The build-up comes on slower this time, and I realize what he's doing as he slides two fingers inside me, rubbing against my inner walls. He's drawing this out, giving me pleasure only to take it away just long enough to have it build back up even more until it intensely releases.

And by now I'm desperate. By now, I need to come or I'm going to explode. I writhe against him, bringing one hand down to his wrist, keeping it there. He circles his thumb over my clit faster and faster, not stopping this time until my body

shudders, coming so hard wetness spills from me, soaking his hand and the cushion beneath me.

My ears ring and the string of lights hanging above us flicker. I'm panting, unable to move. The few times I've come hard enough to leave wetness beneath me have all been from some serious one-on-one time with my vibrator. No one has ever made me do it.

Lucas scoops me up, holding me tight to his chest, and moves at vampire speed inside and to his bedroom. I'm still floating on pleasure, pussy still contracting wildly from the orgasm he just gave me as he lays me down on his bed.

He moves between my legs, holding himself up with his elbows. Feebly, I untuck his shirt and start undoing the buttons. He kisses me while I fumble with the buttons, sitting up when I get to the last one. He takes his shirt off, and even though it's nearly pitch black in this room, I can't help but admire him.

He's a gorgeous man with pounds of muscle and a small patch of dark hair on his abdomen leading down to his cock. I shift my eyes lower and lick my lips. Using magic, I undo his belt and pull it from his pants.

Lucas groans, watching me magically strip him bare, and then loses patience and removes his pants. He's back on top of me, with the gleaming tip of his hard cock hovering over my entrance. I buck my hips, rubbing it against me and moan, not caring how loud I am. Arching my back, I'm ready to welcome his big dick inside me, to feel it fill me completely.

I'm ready for him, but he pulls away.

"Patience, Callie. I don't have intentions on being done with you yet."

“I don’t know how much longer I can take it,” I confess. “I need to feel you inside me.”

“You will,” he promises. My breath leaves in a shaky huff and my ears still ring. We kiss again, and I drag my nails up and down his back while slowly circling my hips, getting off on the wet tip of his cock rubbing over me.

“I want all of you,” he growls and sits up, looking into my eyes. I know what he means. He wants my blood, and he wants it now.

“I want you to have it,” I breathe and bring my hand up, moving my hair away from my neck.

“Are you sure?” In a flash, he’s right there, lips brushing the flesh just below my ear as he talks.

“Yes.” I put my hand on the back of his head and press his face against my neck. “I want you to have me. All of me.”

He thrusts himself forward, rubbing his cock against me as his fangs graze against my flesh. A guttural growl comes from deep within, and he pushes his body down harder against mine. My pussy quivers, soaking wet for him.

Lucas slips one hand up along the back of my head, balling my hair in his fist, and yanks my head to the side. He puts his mouth to my neck, running his tongue along my flesh. He’s getting a read on where my best vein is. He doesn’t have to look to know where they run. He can feel the pulse and knows exactly where to sink his fangs in.

My eyes flutter shut and heat rushes through me. I’m so fucking turned on right now. So wound up.

For him, and him alone.

Slowly, he aligns his fangs with a vein in my neck and presses down.

But he doesn't break the skin. Doesn't drink from me. He moves away and my heart stops, thinking he's going to tell me my blood is bad or that he changed his mind and doesn't want me to be his anymore.

Then he moves down, parting my legs, and puts his mouth over my core. His tongue lashes out and, oh my fucking god, I've never felt anything better in my life. I moan, widening my legs. Lucas sucks my clit and then flicks his tongue against it, again and again.

I'm already so wound up from before. It's not going to take long for me to come again, and he knows it. He lifts my leg as if he's going to toss it over his shoulder, but he turns his head, opening his mouth wide.

And then he bites me, fangs sinking deep into my flesh. Pain radiates from the bite, spreading through me. It subsides fast, replaced by a strange sensation of him sucking my blood out of me. He groans with pleasure, sucking and licking my inner thigh, mere inches above my pussy.

He moves his head back, holding my leg up so blood drips down my thigh. I feel it slowly rolling down, and my heart hammers even faster. I know what he's waiting for, and the second the blood drips to my core, he dives back down, licking and sucking at me with fury.

I gasp, rocking my hips up and pushing myself to him. He eats me out, tongue like magic as it lashes my clit. He takes his mouth off me, turning his head and drinking more of my blood through the bite in my thigh.

He alternates licking my most sensitive parts and drinking my blood, sometimes letting it bleed down so he can lick it off me. Able to sense just how close I am yet again, Lucas slips a finger inside of me, going right to my sweet spot, and puts his mouth over my clit again. He flicks his tongue against it as he sucks, pushing me over the edge. He keeps his fingers inside me as I come, feeling my pussy spasm around them, but turns his head, sucking hard once more at the bite on my thigh.

The world spins around me, and if my life depended on it, I couldn't get up and move. My toes are tingling, and I can't feel the tips of my fingers. Lucas slides his hand from me and licks up the blood running down my thigh. He holds his tongue against the two puncture wounds, waiting for my heart to stop racing so the wounds will clot.

But I'm so high right now, I don't know when I'll come down.

My body is humming. I'm still reeling with pleasure. I gulp in air, blinking rapidly to try and focus my vision. Because I know what's going to happen next.

Lucas is going to fuck me.

He moves over the top of me, large body pinning me against the mattress. I bring my head up, kissing his neck. I graze my teeth against him, and he groans. I bend one leg up so the tip of his dick rubs against my clit.

"Callie," he whispers, and I can only groan in response. In one swift, fast movement, he flips us over so I'm lying on top of him with my head resting on his chest.

He traces his fingers up and down my spine, relaxing me and giving me a few minutes to recover. Because I need them before I can finally open my eyes.

He has a little bit of my blood on his face. I wipe it away, and he takes my finger in his mouth, licking the blood off. He kisses me and I taste myself on his lips. He takes a hold of my waist again and flips us back over. He reaches down, grabbing my thigh, and spreads my legs apart, aligning his cock with my entrance.

He steals once lingering look into my eyes before burying his head in my neck as he pushes his cock inside of me. I cry out as he enters me, bucking my hips and holding tightly onto him. Slowly, he pushes the full length in before pulling back until just the tip remains.

And then he thrusts forward again. And again. And again.

Each thrust is fluid, moving almost in a circular motion as he pushes in. My mouth falls open, eyes fluttering shut. He speeds up, fucking me hard for another moment before he sits back, grabbing my legs and hooking one over his shoulder. He's on his knees now, with one hand on my leg and another going down to my clit.

Another orgasm is winding inside of me, and he moves his fingers over my clit faster than any human can. His touch is light, and it feels like he's holding a vibrator to me. Holy. Shit. I slit my eyes open, watching him touch me as he drives his cock in and out of me.

I can't help it. As much as I want to keep going, to keep having him touch me and rub me, it's just too much. The pleasure is wound up so tight it releases all at once. I twist the blankets in my hand, pussy spasming hard around his cock. He lets out a groan and keeps rubbing me, holding his dick still inside of me and enjoying the tightening and release from my inner walls.

“Luc...Lucas...” I pant, trying to push his hand away. It’s too much. The pleasure can quickly become painful and there’s only so much my body can handle. But he doesn’t stop, easily ignoring my feeble attempt to push him away. He slows his movements and starts to slowly move his finger in a circle over my clit.

And then he starts to fuck me hard again, gripping my leg that’s up on his shoulder. Continuing to work my clit, he doesn’t let up until I come again, this time hardest of all. More wetness spills from me, drenching us both. Lucas sets my leg back down and moves back on top of me, thrusting in harder and faster than ever.

He nuzzles his head against my neck as he comes, groaning as he pushes in balls deep. My heart is racing, and I can’t catch my breath. Lucas heavily exhales, and I remember him saying that the act of breathing was a habit he never got rid of. He’s not out of breath the same way that I am, but his body is responding to what he’s feeling.

Slowly, he pulls out and lays down next to me, bringing me onto his chest. I shiver, body going crazy, not knowing how to process everything it just went through. Lucas reaches down and grabs a blanket that was folded up at the foot of the bed. He covers us both us, running his fingers up and down my arm. My eyes flutter shut, and I feel like I might pass out.

“Breathe,” he reminds me. “And move slowly. You might feel a little weak when you get up.”

At first, I think he’s referring to feeling weak because coming that many times in that short time frame is enough to make anyone light-headed. And then I remember he drank my blood.



“Okay,” I reply, voice all breathy. “I don’t plan on getting up just yet.”

“Good,” he says and tightens his hold on me. I wiggle closer, snuggling up against him. He kisses my forehead and I can’t keep my eyes open any longer.

## CHAPTER 19



I wake with a start, sitting up and gasping for air. My heart lurches in my chest and my eyes struggle to focus. But everything is dark.

Completely dark.

I can't see a thing.

“Callie.”

Lucas's voice rings out, echoing next to me. He sits up and snakes his arms around me, pulling me back to the mattress. Back to him.

“What's that noise?” I rasp.

“Automatic blinds,” he explains. “They go down at four AM every morning. They're light-tight and made out of metal. It's a little loud.”

Even though it's dark, even though I can't see a thing in front of me, I squeeze my eyes shut and exhale.

“Oh. Makes sense.”

His hands run over my body. We're both still naked, having fallen asleep after making love...and after Lucas drank my blood.

Or at least, I fell asleep.

“It’s four already?”

Lucas chuckles. “The sun will be up soon enough. Do you need anything?”

“Um,” I start, running my hand over the mounds of muscle on his chest. “Something to drink.”

“What would you like?”

“Water. Just water. And maybe a toothbrush, if you have a spare. You do brush your teeth, right?” I ask without thinking.

“I do. And I shower too in case you’re wondering.”

I feel my face flush, and for a split second, I’m thankful for the dark. But then I remember he can see in the night just as well as in the day.

“Then a washcloth too, to take off my makeup.”

“Of course, my lady,” he coos, kissing the nape of my neck. I push myself against him, craving his touch again though I had it not long ago. When I move, I still feel his big cock between my legs. I’m a little sore, and I reach down, sweeping my fingers over the puncture wounds in my thigh. They’ve scabbed over by now, but the flesh around them is tender.

His lips leave my skin, and he gets up. I slowly follow behind, aware as soon as I stand that I never cleaned myself up after sex. I went into vampire sex blind, knowing only that he couldn’t get me pregnant. But other than that, I was clueless.

But his hard cock dripped with precum, and he came inside of me, just like a human would. We learned about vampires at the Academy, but the sex-ed part was left out...probably on purpose. If I knew then what I know now, I probably would

have sought out a vampire or two to use as my own personal sex toys.

Because sleeping with Lucas transcended what I thought was possible. Though it was more than just the physical aspect, but my mind isn't ready to deal with that right now. Falling in love is dangerous territory.

I hold out my hands, feeling my way through the dark. I stumble for a few steps before conjuring a ball of light to show me the way. I'm in Lucas's bedroom, and the room is just as big and impressive as the rest of the house. There is a wall of windows next to the bed, now covered with metal blinds that block out any trace of the approaching dawn.

His bed is large, with soft white sheets. I turn, looking for splatters of blood, and am surprised to see none. Though, really, Lucas isn't the kind of vampire to waste a drop of precious blood.

The master bedroom, like the rest of the house, is modern, a bit stark for my liking, and professionally decorated. The attached bathroom is no exception, with double vanities, a large walk-in shower, and an even larger tub, free standing in the middle of the room. I walk past it to the little room that houses the toilet, and though it's clean, I know it's a room never used.

"Here you go," Lucas says, appearing behind me. He sets a new toothbrush on the counter, along with a glass of water and a white washcloth.

"Thanks. Do you, uh, have any toilet paper?" I make a face and the ball of light above me turns from white to pink. "I have to pee."

"I don't," he states matter-of-factly.

“What about a tissue? Or even a napkin?”

He thinks for a second and then speeds out of the room, returning only a few seconds later with a roll of paper towels.

“Will this do?”

“Yes, thank you.” I take the paper towels, go into the bathroom to pee, and then come out, washing my hands, my face, and then brushing my teeth. I down the water and stand in the threshold of the bathroom, looking at him lounging on the bed.

He’s still naked, long legs sprawled out in front of him. His cock rests against his thigh, and though it’s flaccid now, it’s still an impressive sight.

“If you want to go, be my guest,” he says. “But if you want to stay, I’d very much like that.”

“I want to stay,” I tell him honestly.

“Good.”

I close my fist, putting out the energy ball, and climb back into bed.

“Though I should warn you,” he groans, snaking his arms around me and pulling me on top of his body. “Getting back in bed with me means I get to fuck you again.”

I sit up and straddle him, grabbing his hand. Magic sizzles at my fingertips, and I make a move to jerk my hands away, not wanting to hurt Lucas. Then I remember him telling me not to hold back. I bring his hands over his head, blue waves of magic pulsing down his wrists.

“Now that is something I know I can handle.”



THE NEXT TIME I WAKE UP, THE ROOM IS STILL PITCH BLACK. I roll over, feeling Lucas's arms around me. He's literal dead weight, fast asleep and not moving. Not breathing.

He's dead to the world right now, and if I didn't know better, I'd think he was actually dead too. Vampires don't require much sleep, but I know when they do fall asleep like this, they tend to sleep deeply.

Waking them up from this dead sleep can be dangerous.

But I'm so thirsty and my stomach grumbles with hunger. Slowly, I peel myself out his embrace, conjuring the smallest amount of magic only so I can see where I'm going. Shuffling into the bathroom again, I close the door, use the toilet, and then move into Lucas's closet.

It's full of designer shoes and clothes, and freakishly-well organized. I grab a white button-up shirt, roll the sleeves, and pull it on before I venture out of the room and into the hall. The entire house is sealed shut for the day, and I silently close the master bedroom's double doors before turning on a hall light.

Lucas brought me here at vamp-speed, and this house is big enough to get lost in. I spend a second or two staring down the hall, trying to figure out which way to go. Finally, I find myself in the kitchen.

A box of donuts, coffee grounds, and a brand-new coffee maker are on the island counter, along with a note from Lucas.

*Callie-*

*I'm not sure what you eat for breakfast, but I know you like sweets and I remember you saying you prefer your coffee black. I hope this is satisfactory. It's been a while since I've consumed anything other than blood. There are keys to my car*

*on the counter as well, in case you need or want to leave. Use the code 666 to disarm the house. I want to see you—and fuck you—again at sunset tonight.*

—L

I smile as I read it, wondering when the hell did he run out and grab this stuff for me? I fell asleep fast after we had sex again, and he must have gone out right after. I plug in the coffee pot, smile still on my face as I rummage through his cabinets for a coffee mug.

Surprisingly, I find one. His kitchen is full of dishes, pots, and pans. It's just the basics, and I bet it came with the place. Having a staged house is the norm around here when something this expensive goes on the market. I'm sure Lucas paid extra to keep everything as it was, even though he had no intention of ever using it.

I find my purse and my phone as the coffee heats up. It's a little after nine AM. I don't have to work today, and I have nothing on my agenda. Eating a donut, drinking my coffee, and then getting back into bed with Lucas sounds heavenly right now.

After pouring myself coffee, I walk through the kitchen and into a formal dining room. If the house wasn't sealed off for the day, I bet these floor-to-ceiling windows would give one hell of a view of the courtyard...which reminds me of the rooftop patio. My clothes are still up there. I think.

I didn't bring them in, and I doubt Lucas did either. Not entirely sure how to get back onto the patio, I sip my coffee and walk through the house, turning on lights as I go. I go into a living room next and pause to look around, finding more personal items decorating this room.

There's a framed black-and-white photo of him with Eliza. She's smiling at the camera and Lucas just looks slightly amused. I can't tell where they are, but judging by their clothes, this photo looks like it was taken either at a Great Gatsby-themed party or this photo is really that old.

There's a library off the living room, and I spend a minute looking at the types of books Lucas likes to read. One is sitting out on his desk with the page he was on dog-eared. If sucking the blood out of the living doesn't make him a monster, this certainly does.

Most of his books aren't even in English, and I don't recognize any covers. Leaving the library, I go down another hall, up a spiral staircase that takes me into a loft-style game room. I can get to the patio from there. Retracing my steps, I go back downstairs into the kitchen, finish my coffee and have another donut.

Then I disarm the alarm system and go back into the patio to get my clothes. I hurry out the door, closing it as fast as I can. Lucas is a floor below me, so it's not like the sunlight can get to him, though.

It's a nice day out today, and I'm sure his neighbors are out enjoying it. I don't really care if anyone sees me, and I take my time gathering my clothes and admiring the view. We're really close to the neighbors, and a slight flush colors my cheeks when I realize they had to have heard us. Grabbing my clothes and the wine we left out here last night, I turn to go back inside.

But then a shadow crosses the door, and the energy shifts ever so slightly.

"Binx!" I exclaim, not expecting to see him here. I open the door and we both dash in. "Did you miss me that much?"



Smiling, I walk down the hall. This is the first time I've been away from my familiars at night in years.

Binx runs ahead, knowing I'm going to the kitchen. I set the wine glass and the coffee cup in the sink and turn to him as he jumps on the counter. He meows, and I know he's not here because he missed me. He's here because something bad happened.

"What's wrong?" I ask, holding out my hand. He rubs his head against my fingers and puts his thoughts into my mind.

Something was at the house last night. It triggered my magical security system. Whatever was there was old, ancient and dripping with demonic energy. It moved around the house as if it were looking for someone inside. It left, but not without a trace. I keep crystals at the north, east, south, and west points in my circle and one of the clear quartz stone is tinged red.

"I'll come right home. Stay with me." Padding back upstairs, I shut off the hall light and slowly open the master bedroom door. I conjure a small blue string of energy that twists and floats to the center of the room, lighting it enough for me to see.

Lucas has moved and kicked the covers off himself. Blue light bathes his naked body, and a rush of heat goes through me, right to my core. I bite my lip and shake my head.

Right.

Demons.

"Lucas?" I whisper, hoping that since he moved around a bit, he's not as dead asleep as he was before. I hold my hand out and sense Binx's presence at my side. There's still a chance Lucas will wake up on the defense, attacking anything in front of him.

“Callie,” he breathes, sitting up without flinching. “What’s wrong?” He lowers his gaze. “Is that your familiar?”

“Yeah. He came here to tell me something was at my house last night.”

Lucas moves to the foot of the bed, taking my hand and pulling me to him. “What kind of thing?”

“He’s not sure, but whatever it was turned one of my clear quartz crystals red. What could do that?”

He shakes his head. “I have no idea. Do you have to go?”

“Yes. I need to check it out. If something was around the house, there’s a chance it’s hiding out the daylight in the woods.”

“I don’t like the idea of you going after something like that alone.” He brings me into his lap, nuzzling his face between my breasts.

“I won’t be alone. I have my familiars. Besides, I’m good at what I do.”

“Yes...yes you are.” He draws his fangs, gently pressing them into my neck. “My shirt looks good on you, by the way.”

“But better off, right?”

“Of course. Everything about you is beautiful. Your powers...your body...all of you.”

My heart lurches and I bring my arms around his muscular shoulders. “I should go,” I whisper, knowing if I don’t leave now, we’re going to fall back into bed together. Having sex with Lucas is so much better than looking for a dark stalker in the woods.

“Thank you for the coffee and donuts. That was really thoughtful.”

“Anything for you.” He kisses my neck, fangs digging a little deeper into my skin. Should I offer him my blood before I go? Now that I’m his, he’s free to drink from me whenever he wants. It’s part of the whole deal.

But I don’t think it will be that way with Lucas. He said it himself: my powers rival his own. He could crush the life out of me in the blink of an eye, but I can burn him from the inside out just as fast.

“Are you hungry?” I ask, arching my back and bringing one hand up to the back of his head.

“I’m not. Your blood is...it’s very filling.”

“Is that weird?”

“I’m not sure. I’ve never experienced it before. Maybe it’s because you’re a witch.”

“Does it at least taste good?” I ask apprehensively.

“Yes,” he groans. “Very good. Good enough to make me want to taste you again even though I’m not hungry.”

“Okay,” I say, voice a little breathy.

“Nervous?”

“No.”

“Don’t lie to me. I can hear your heart beating and know it’s beating faster.”

“It is beating faster.” I close my eyes. “But it’s not from nerves. You’re turning me on.”

With that, Lucas picks me up and throws me down on the mattress, moving between my legs.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Of course,” he replies. “Anything.”

“How do you pick where to bite me?”

His lips go to my neck. “It depends on what I want.”

“What does that mean?” My eyes flutter shut.

“If I wanted to kill you, I’d go for an artery. If I bite you here,” he says and moves his mouth to the front of my neck, teeth on either side of my trachea.

“The carotid artery,” I breathe.

“Yes. The aorta is another option.”

“But that’s under the sternum.”

“They’re not so hard to crack.”

I feel my heart speed up again as I try not to think about Lucas basically pulling someone’s heart out and sucking their blood right out of it.

“Here’s another good place,” he says, moving his mouth to the side of my neck. “Your jugular vein.”

“Will a bite there kill me?”

“From me? No. From a younger vampire with less control? Yes.”

“So,” I start. “Veins are good, and arteries are bad? In terms of living and dying, I mean.”

“Yes.” He moves off me, sitting up and pulling me into his lap. He takes my wrist in his hand and puts two fingers against it, moving them right over the vein close to the surface. “If I were to bite you here, I’d be able to drink a lot of your blood rather quickly.” He slides his fingers up about half an inch.

“Here, you have plenty of capillaries that will still bleed nicely without losing too much blood. Though you have rather slender wrists and I don’t want to damage your tendons.” He moves his fingers up my arm another inch or so. “This is where I’m going to bite you.”

He brings my wrist to his mouth and sinks his fangs in without any warning. I let out a whimper, and Binx growls, reacting to my pain. Lucas takes his mouth off me, looking down at the bite wound. He waits until large beads of blood pool at the surface and then licks it off. He puts his mouth over the wounds, sucks hard, and pulls away, pressing his fingers over the bite marks.

“I think I need to take a human anatomy class,” I muse, and Lucas laughs.

“Don’t worry, Callie. I will not hurt you. I will not drain you.”

“So last night...you drank from my femoral artery?”

He shakes his head. “The femoral vein.”

“How...how can you tell the difference?”

He shrugs. “I just do. It took a while to learn. Centuries... and through a lot of trial and error.”

He’s again confessing how he’s killed people, but like I told him last night...I know who he is. I know what he is. He is a vampire.

“You should go.” He lifts his fingers, checking my wounds, and licks the blood from his fingertips.

“Come to my house tonight?”

“I’ll leave as soon as the sun starts to sink in the sky.”

“I’ll miss you,” I blurt, not thinking clearly.

“I’ll dream of you.” He sits us up, cocky grin taking over his face. “And I’ll be fucking you in my dreams, of course. So in between tracking and fighting demons, find time to rest. I don’t plan on letting you get much sleep tonight. I’m going to fuck you as soon as I see you tonight.”

How is it possible for someone to turn me on and infuriate me so much at the same time?

“I’ll do what I can.”

He kisses me, and this time I taste my own blood on his lips. He gets up with me, walking me downstairs and into the kitchen, where I left my clothes. Binx paces around, eager to get back to the house and kill something.

I unbutton Lucas’s shirt, letting it slip from my shoulders and onto the ground. Lucas watches, not even trying to hide the reaction I’m causing him. There’s something so freeing about the way he’s so unapologetic about his body...about the way he enjoys pleasuring it.

I pull my underwear on and then slip my dress over my head. Lucas speeds forward, zipping my dress up for me.

“Thanks.” I swallow hard, working hard on keeping my mind away from how good his body feels against mine. I bend over to pick up the white shirt, and my ass rubs over his cock.

Fuck, why is he still naked?

“Please, Callie,” he presses as I pull his shirt back on to keep my arms warm. “Be careful.”

“You do care about me, don’t you?” I arch my eyebrows.

“Only because I know how it feels to have my cock in your tight, wet, cunt.”

Rolling my eyes, I start toward the front door. I know he does care but is having a hard time admitting it. I know because I feel the same way. “I’ll do Kegels on the way home for you then.”

He races forward, getting to the door first. “Fine,” he admits. “I do seem to have an...an attachment to you. So please don’t die.”

I smile, heart rate starting to speed up again. “That’s always my plan. Like literally, that’s all I have planned. Kill bad guys and don’t die.”

He smiles, dark blue eyes glimmering. After one more kiss, he disappears into another room, leaving me to put my shoes on and step into the bright sunlight. Blinking, I pause on the front porch for a few seconds as my eyes adjust to the light. Then I double-check that the door properly closed behind me. Binx starts forward, trotting down the pathway.

We get to the public sidewalk when a group of moms come at us, talking and laughing while pushing designer strollers. I’m about to cast my eyes down and avoid them entirely, but then Binx growls. I look up and see my sister.

“Oh shit.” I turn so fast I smack into the gate I’d just closed, the one that takes me back to Lucas’s property. I pull on the handle, but the gate doesn’t open. I panic, thinking it must be locked from the inside, and wave my hand over it to unlock it with magic. I pull again, still unable to get in.

My sister and her mommy friends are coming closer and closer. Why aren’t my powers working? I hold up my hand again and then I remember I have to push, not pull, the gate. I twist the handle, push, and step forward.

And crash right into the door because I locked it with magic instead of *unlocking* it.

“Oh, ow!” one of the moms says, seeing me smack my forehead against the door. Is it too late to blindly run across the street? I cast my eyes down and hunch my shoulders up. Maybe she won’t recognize me. “Are you all right?”

“Fine. I’m fine.”

“Callie?”

*Shit. Shit. Shit.*

Putting on a fake smile, I turn and come face to face with my sister...who’s pushing my niece in a sleek gray stroller. I’ve never laid eyes on this baby before and my heart is suddenly all in knots and I don’t know what to do.

Part of me wants to throw on a glamour spell and pretend to be Natasha, the Russian call-girl leaving her boss’s house. Another wants to melt into a puddle on the sidewalk, dying on the inside.

But another part rules over the rest, and my damn heart wins every time.

“Abby. Hi.” I look from my sister to the stroller. The visor is up, and a white blanket has been draped over top, shielding Penny from the sun. She’s quiet, leaving me to believe she fell asleep.

“What are you doing here?” my sister asks, eyes wide.

“I know what she’s doing,” one of her mom-friends says with a laugh. “I know the look of the walk of shame. Granted, it’s been a while since I’ve executed it, but damn, girl. You just left that house?” She points to Lucas’s place and I nod. “Do you know what that place sold for three years ago? I do.”



She laughs again, slowly rocking her stroller back and forth. “My husband is the real estate agent who sold it!”

“I, um, I...” I close my eyes in a long blink. “It’s not a walk of shame. I have nothing to be ashamed of.”

“Yasss, girl!” another mom says, earning a glare from the conservative one in the group. “I’ve seen the guy who lives here a few times. He’s totally GQ material but so mysterious.” She shifts her gaze to Abby. “How do you guys know each other?”

“She’s my sister,” Abby and I say at the same time.

“I didn’t know you had a sister,” Mrs. Real Estate says, playfully nudging Abby in the shoulder. “What a small world! Well, welcome to the neighborhood! Will we be seeing more of you?”

“Um, probably,” I say, words coming up like vomit. I ramble when I’m nervous, and it gets worse when I’m nervous and trying to desperately act like I’m casually leaving my *human* boyfriend’s house to go home and watch reruns of *Friends*, not hunt the demon my familiar came and warned me about.

“It’s a great neighborhood! We just love having your sister here, and Abby loves it, right Abby?”

“Yeah.” Abby widens her fake smile. “I do. It is a great place to raise a family.”

“What she means is,” the uptight mom leans in. “There aren’t any vampires around. I mean, it’s not like they can afford one of these places.”

It’s all I can do to keep a straight face. “Well, you never know.” I shrug. “Maybe they saved up money over the years. Some have lived a long time.”

All the moms look at me with blank stares. And then Mrs. Real Estate laughs and the rest follow suit.

“You came to the right place,” she goes on, looking at Abby. “It was smart of you to move before she got any older. Growing up in that apartment...I don’t even want to think about it.”

“Wait,” I start and look at my sister. “You moved because of vampires?”

“Poor thing had two vampires living on the floor below.” Uptight Mom clucks her tongue and pats my sister on the back. “But you’re safe here.”

“Yeah,” I agree. “Totally safe. There are definitely no really old or powerful vampires on this street.” Binx meows and winds around my ankles. The other moms look at him curiously.

“Is that a stray?” the conservative mom asks.

“No, he’s mine.” I cross my arms, nonchalantly tugging at one of the sleeves on Lucas’s button-up shirt to cover the bite marks on my wrist. Binx sits right in front of me, flicking his tail back and forth.

“I’m Ricci.” Mrs. Real Estate offers her hand to shake.

“Callie.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Callie. So tell me, what does your boyfriend do? He paid for this place in cash and all the paperwork was handled by a third party. We’ve never met him.”

“He, uh, works in finance.” No one knows what that actually means, but it’s satisfactory enough for the other moms

to gush over, thinking I'm shacking up with some rich Wall Street asshole.

"You ladies keep going," Abby tells her friends. "I'll catch up." They smile and nod like perfect Stepford wives and tell me how nice it was to meet me as they pass by.

"Callie," Abby starts, shaking her head. "I went all the way to that weird little Thorne Hill town just to see you. You're in the city to see some boyfriend you didn't even mention, but you couldn't even take the time to call me back? I've been waiting to hear from you...and now you're...you're here. What the hell?"

"I'm sorry. It's just...it's just been a rough couple of day. I got distracted and, uh, didn't think to call." Also, our asshole brother keeps telling me to bail. But she's upset enough right now as it is, there's no need to bring it up. There's no changing Scott anyway. He'll just lie, delete his texts, and say I'm using magic to make him look bad or something.

"Right. Your other life is more important," she spits.

"Do you know how unfair that is to say? You have no idea what I've been dealing with. What I've stopped and prevented from happening. Maybe if you knew—"

"No. I don't want to know."

"You're just like Mom." I ball my fists, making sure I keep my powers in check.

"Now *that* is unfair."

"Really? How so? Because Mom is the same way. Never wanting to know. Never questioning anything, just blindly following Dad with her head up his ass. I had higher expectations for you at least. You're smart. You can think for

yourself. But no...no...you still don't want to know. You'd rather leave me alone to deal with everything."

"Callie...I don't want to fight."

"You say that like you think I do. Trust me, fighting is the last thing I want right now. You have no idea how much fighting I've done lately. Well, I'll clue you in. A lot."

Abby lets out a breath, concern flickering over her face. As an ER doctor, she knows how to take charge. She's not afraid of a challenge, and the gore and violence of life never gets to her. Yet she's still unable to accept me. "Who are you fighting with?"

"It changes daily. But most recently an army of the undead."

"Is that a figure of speech?" she asks slowly.

"No. If you want to know more, I'll gladly tell you, but I know you'd rather get back into your Porsche and drive to your fancy house and pretend like magic and demons don't exist."

"I'm not like Dad," she says, shaking her head. "I voted against the Vampire Exclusion Act, you know."

"I do know. Because you're not a monster."

"Neither is—"

"Don't even say it," I snarl, fists curling. "Don't you dare defend him." My anger causes the street light above us to start humming with electricity, which is something Abby is familiar with. It happened a lot growing up and was one of the first signs that showed I had powers. Sensing my anger, Binx comes paws at me, meowing.

"Oh my God." Abby's jaw drops. "That's...that's...Binx?"

“Yeah.” I exhale and feel the anger start to leave. I pick up Binx and calm down even more. “It is.”

“He looks exactly the same. That cat should be...he should be...”

“Dead?” I kiss the top of Binx’s head and set him down. “Yeah, he would be...if he were really a cat.”

“You said he’s a familiar, but I, um, I don’t know what that means.”

I swallow my pounding heart. “Maybe I can tell you someday.” Exhaling, I look into my sister’s eyes. “I’m sorry I haven’t RSVP’d yet. I want to come. I just don’t know if I can.”

“Because of all the...the fighting?”

“Partly. But also because I don’t know if I can face Dad or Scott.”

“It’s been so long, Callie.”

I squeeze my eyes shut. “I know. It’s been over ten years. But I still have nightmares, Abby. I still wake up screaming some nights.”

“Callie, you know I’m—”

“It’s okay.” I rapidly blink, refusing to let any tears run down my cheeks. “Can I see her? She’s sleeping, right? I’ll be quiet.”

“Of course.” Abby puts the brake on the stroller and comes around to the front, slowly removing the thin white blanket.

“She’s beautiful,” I whisper, knowing now I’m going to lose my battle with the tears for sure. Penny is precious, with a

thick head of curly light-brown hair and pouty, full lips. “She looks like you.”

Abby smiles down lovingly at her daughter. “You think so? People always say that, but I don’t see it.”

“By this time next year, she’s going to look like a mini version of you, just watch.”

Abby laughs. “I hope so. Do you think she...is she...?”

“Like me?” I supply and then shrug. “Who knows. If she’s lucky, she will be.”

Abby puts the blanket back over the visor of the stroller, keeping the sun off Penny’s pale skin. “I’d really like you to come to the party. You can bring your boyfriend if you’d like. Well, I mean if you’re at that stage in your relationship where you bring him to family functions. Have you been together long?”

“No, not long. But we are pretty serious.” Serious in the sense that he gets to feed off me and claim ownership amongst the other vampires.

“That’s good! And I think relationships that start out strong are really telling. Maybe this will turn into something more.” She smiles, hope glimmering in her eyes. My sister really does want me to be happy. But *she’d* be happy if I settled down with Wall Street Asshole because he’d fit right in with our family.

“Well, you know what they say. The couple that buries bodies together, and then digs them up, and then buries them again, stays together.”

Her lips part and her eyebrows go up. “No one says that.”

“Well, there’s a first for everything.”

“Are you...are you in some kind of trouble?”

“It’s nothing I can’t handle,” I say with a laugh, fully aware of how insane I sound. It’s funny...the more I try to come off as normal, the crazier I become.

“I’m worried, Callie.”

“Don’t worry. I’m fine. Really.”

“Did you kill someone?”

“Just because you bury a body doesn’t mean you killed them.”

Abby’s eyes widen even more. “So, you...you...”

“I’m joking.” I flash a smile. “And I’d like to bring my boyfriend to the party, but he works pretty much all day and won’t get home until about eight o’clock.”

“Come over for drinks and dessert after the party then? It’s going to be all kid stuff until about seven anyway.”

I smile. “I think I can do that.”

## CHAPTER 20



“**W**hat the hell could do this?” I pick up a broken piece of my crystal and hold it up to the sunlight. It’s tinged red all right, just like Binx told me. But it’s not stained on the outside, as if something stepped on it and got cut.

No, the red is on the *inside* of the crystal.

“You guys get anything?” I flick my eyes to my familiars. They sensed the creature, and Freya got a flash of something dark moving swiftly from the woods, but that’s it.

“Let’s go scry for this fucker,” I say, closing my fingers around the broken piece of crystal. I just got home and am wearing my fancy black dress, Lucas’s white shirt, and am barefoot. My familiars follow me inside, and the first thing I do is plug in my coffee maker.

Yawning, I set the crystal down, and head upstairs for a quick shower. I wave my hand over the front door as I pass by it, locking the house with magic. I strip out of my clothes as I walk and use magic again to open the window in my bathroom.

Exhaustion is hitting me, and I’m sure it has to do with the fact that Lucas drank a decent amount of my blood and I’ve had nothing but donuts to eat today. I shower as quick as I can



and fight the temptation to lie down for “just a few minutes” in my bed once I’m out.

I towel dry my hair, feeling too lazy to brush it, and end up twisting it into a messy bun at the top of my head. I get dressed in the leggings Lucas sent to the house yesterday, and a tight cami so I can forgo a bra.

Making a cup of coffee as soon as I get into the kitchen, I sink down into a chair at the table, needing to let the caffeine hit me before I can get to work.

“I know,” I tell Freya when she reminds me I need to eat. And feed her, of course. With a yawn, I stand and go to the fridge. I take out a carton of eggs and scramble up a few, splitting it between myself and my familiars. I feel a bit better after eating and downing a second cup of coffee.

Then it’s back to business.

I spread a map over the table, set a black ceramic bowl in the center of it and fill it with water. Holding the crystal in one hand, I lean over the bowl and concentrate. I suck at divination and that’s all I can think about.

*Stop thinking about it*, I mentally yell at myself. Thinking about how much I suck will only block any sort of connection from forming. I shake my head and try to concentrate again.

“Who are you?” I whisper. “And where did you go?” I think about what Binx told me, remember the image Freya put in my mind of the shadowy figure she saw in the yard.

And then my thoughts drift to Lucas. To his mouth on my neck. His fangs sinking into the flesh of my thigh.

To his tongue lashing out against my clit.

“Get it together,” I tell myself and squeeze the crystal harder in my hand. I splay my fingers over the map and stare into the bowl, trying to see past my reflection. I’ve done this before...with Kristy’s help.

She’s at the store right now and then has a date with Daniel, a warlock she’s been off-and-on seeing for the last year. I don’t want to bother her tonight. I’m a witch. A powerful one at that. I should be able to pull this off.

But my mind starts to drift again, going in the opposite direction that it needs to go. I enjoyed my time with Lucas last night. That was the best date I’ve ever been on, and I meant it when I said he makes me feel normal. I sit up, loosening my grip on the crystal, finally letting myself admit just what last night meant to me.

I was myself. I didn’t have to hide a damn thing. I didn’t have to pretend to be normal...and I didn’t have to pretend like I don’t possess all the powers that I do. Because even at the Academy I was the odd man out for having more than one active power.

Lucas sees me for what I am—for who I am—and I’m just me. I find myself flushing when I think back to last night. And then I’m shaking my head at myself. What was I thinking, so eagerly agreeing to become his?

Normally, a vampire could call upon a human they’ve claimed at any time. They’d be forced to do their bidding, from feeding to fucking. But Lucas can’t control me like that. It’s physically impossible for him to hold me spellbound.

And if he tried anything I wasn’t completely on board with, well...he’d find out just how powerful I am. Though I still don’t think it’s going to come to that.

Like I said, Lucas knows who I am. He knows what I can do.

“I think he might actually like me,” I tell my familiars. “And I think I actually like him.” Smiling, I set the crystal down and lean back in the chair. Sunset can’t get here fast enough.

I just hope I’m not getting in over my head. I’m a witch. He’s a vampire. We’re natural enemies and that alone has to be setting us up for catastrophe later, right?

“So,” I start, turning my attention back to my failed attempt at scrying for this demon. “Binx and Freya, canvas the woods. Pay special attention to the doorway to the Covenstead. Pandora, I need you to help me make a potion. Just in case.”

Binx and Freya take off, shadowing out of the house and into the woods. I stand, and reach for the crystal, intending on putting it away and trying again later. But as soon as my fingers close around the broken piece, pain shoots through my forehead.

I pitch forward, and the world fades around me. When my vision comes back, it’s like I’m floating above my house, watching a dark hooded figure rise from the ground in my back yard. It holds out a bone-thin hand, reading the protective circle I have on the house. It mutters something...something I can’t understand and pushes its hand through the circle. The crystals glow and a jolt of magical energy hits the creature, sending it back into the night.

Gasping, I stagger back, heart racing.

“The fuck,” I mutter, squeezing my eyes shut. Whatever that was hit me just like last time. It wasn’t as if I had a vision.

It was as if this vision was shoved into my head against my will. Pandora shifts into shadow form and surrounds me, guiding me into the living room. She lays me down onto the couch and then shifts back into the pretty calico cat the rest of the world sees her as.

Sitting on my chest, she rubs her head on my chin and starts to purr. I let my eyes flutter closed, recalling every detail of that vision.

“I don’t understand,” I tell her. “I don’t have premonitions. But I saw it. I think. Maybe?” I open my eyes and look around the room, needing to get a visual of where I actually am. “It was just like the last time I had a weird vision. It felt more like an out-of-body experience than a—” I look at Pandora. “That’s it. I think I’m intercepting something. I just don’t have any idea what or who...or why.”

Slowly, I get up and go back into the kitchen, picking up the crystal again. I wait for another vision to hit me, but nothing happens.

“I have an idea,” I tell Pandora as it comes to me. “I can’t scry for a location or see into the past, but I can conjure. And if part of this creature got absorbed by the crystal, I should be able to call it.”

“That’s a terrible idea,” Pandora tells me, shadowing through the room. “One that will get you killed.”

“You don’t know that for sure.”

Shifting back into cat form, she jumps up on the table and lays down on the map, swishing her tail. She wants me to try scrying again because she thinks this creature is near. That it’s watching and waiting for me to make a move.

“You’re right.” I spring up, going to the china cabinet in the dining room. The exposed shelves hold my fancy dishes, and the cabinets hold extra magical supplies. I get out white candles, a jar of black salt, and a large black tourmaline gemstone.

I go into the living room, move the coffee table, and roll back the rug in the middle of the floor. My other familiars come back while I’m pouring a circle of salt on the floor. They know what I’m doing and gather around to offer their protection while I astral project into the Academy.

I draw a pentagram with the black salt inside the circle, light white candles at all five points and lay down in the center, putting the black tourmaline on my chest, right over my heart.

Binx sits by my head and Frey and Pandora stay at my sides, watching and guarding me. I slowly inhale, letting my eyes fall shut as it feels natural, and spend a few minutes concentrating on my breathing, centering myself before whispering the incantation needed to project myself.

“Evander,” I whisper, thinking of his face. I need to talk to him, and I’m not exactly sure where he is at the moment, only that he’s somewhere at the Academy, teaching a class most likely. “Evander,” I whisper again, and my voice echoes into the air around me, carried along a magical frequency.

“Callie?” I hear him reply. Then I say the spell, and everything swirls around me, faster and faster until the sights and sounds of my living room have gone blank. Using my powers, I give myself the final push and I feel my astral self leave my body and set foot into a dark classroom. Evander is standing near a chalkboard, talking to a small group of teenagers about the dangers of hosting seances.

“Hope I’m not interrupting,” I say, stepping out of the shadows. Evander jumps, bumping into the podium next to the chalkboard.

“Seven devils, Callie!” His brown eyes widen, and he shoots daggers at me.

“Whoa!” one of the students says, looking up from a notebook. “Did she just teleport?”

“No,” I tell him. “I’m astral projecting.”

That gets a collective response of shock and awe from the rest of the class.

“Sorry,” I say quietly to Evander. “But it’s urgent.”

“And you couldn’t have called and left a message? Or come here and knocked on the door like most people do?”

I hike up an eyebrow. “Since when do I do things the way most people do them?”

“True, that’s not typically your style.” His eyes go to the fang marks on my wrist. “Are you in danger, sister?”

“I think we all are.” I inch forward, looking back at the class. “We need to talk. It’s urgent. Is this class almost over?”

“No, but I can always dismiss early if need be. What’s going on?”

I look at the students again, who can’t be much older than thirteen or fourteen. They’re so young, so innocent in their powers. Every single one of them is staring at us, waiting on bated breath to hear what I came here to say.

“I think that’s Callie Martin,” a girl whispers to her friend. “That girl High Priestess Greystone rescued from the prison.”

“I heard she has three familiars,” another adds.

“She wasn’t in prison,” a boy shoots back. “No wonder you almost flunked Magical Essentials. You didn’t pay attention.”

“You guys talk about me in class?” I bring my hand to my chest. “I’m so honored.”

“Your reputation still precedes you around these halls,” Evander goes on, trying not to smile. “The good and the bad.”

“Do you remind them you were with me during most of the bad?”

“Funny, I usually forget to mention that part.” He laughs and turns to the class, raising his hands. He says a quick incantation, drawing a circle around us in one sweeping motion. The class groans when they realize what he’s doing: making a sound-proof place for us to talk.

“Speak, sister,” he tells me, and I can see the worry in his eyes.

“Something was at my house last night. I wasn’t home, but my familiars sensed it, and whatever it was...they’d never come across it before. It couldn’t break through the protective circle I cast on the house, but when it tried, it turned one of my clear quartz crystals red.”

“Red?”

“Yes. And I don’t mean it bled on it or anything. The *inside* of the crystal is red. Like it absorbed a part of it.”

Evander’s jaw tenses.

“And that’s not all,” I go on. “I think it’s still out there, still in the woods...and I think it was waiting for me to come back here.”

“So it would know where the doorway to the Covenstead is.”

“Exactly. That’s why I astral projected here tonight.”

“Who else knows about this?”

I shake my head. “No one, not yet. I wanted to talk to you first. Do you have any idea what could do that? What could turn a crystal red?”

“No. But whatever it is, Callie, it has to be powerful.” He looks me right in the eye as he talks, knowing that I have some half-baked scheme up my sleeve.

“I know. That’s why I came here first.”

“First?” He gives me a telling look.

“Fine,” I cave, having a hard enough time keeping secrets from him. “I thought maybe I could conjure and question whatever was—”

The doors to the classroom open before I finish talking. Tabatha—High Priestess to everyone else—strides in, pretty face tight with worry. Two other witches on the council are behind her, mirroring her anxiety.

“Oh, good, Callie, you’re—why are you here?” her eyes narrow and she flits them from Evander to me and then to the class. Evander drops the sound-proof circle.

“High Priestess,” I say, bowing my head as a sign of respect.

“It’s your lucky day,” Tabatha tells the students, putting on a fake smile. “I’m afraid I need to borrow your professor. Please go back to your dormitories.”



Everyone knows something is up, and whatever it is can't be good. Class being dismissed early is one thing, but it's another when you're escorted back to your room by members of the council.

"Has something happened, Mother?" Evander asks once the last student has left the classroom.

"Yes." She wrings her hands and I notice a slight tremble to her fingers. "Another witch has been murdered."

## CHAPTER 21



“By a witch hunter?” I ask, already knowing the answer.  
“When? And where?”

“It appears so. And a few days ago in a coven just over the state line in Michigan. Another young woman, just about your age, Callie.” She looks at me, imagining it was me found dead and shakes her head.

“Was she killed the same way?” Evander takes his mother’s shaking hands.

“Yes. Throat ripped out, right down to the trachea. And then the body strung up and burned. We were able to tell from this poor girl that she was murdered first from losing so much blood. She was dead before she was burned.”

“That doesn’t sound like a witch hunter,” Evander says slowly, shifting his gaze to me. “Witch hunters typically get off from watching us burn.”

“Exactly,” Tabatha says, voice strained. “Which leads us to believe whoever we’re dealing with might not be as we thought.”

My stomach flip-flops. All signs are pointing to a vampire being the killer right now, and after hearing Lucas tell me that

the best way to kill a human is to go right for the throat...no. It can't be. Even if it were a vampire...it's not *him*.

Though he's old enough.

And powerful enough.

And has been asking me a lot of questions about covens and magic.

"What are we going to do?" Evander asks.

"First thing," Tabatha starts, "is issue a curfew. All the murders have been done at night."

Shit. Another reason to suspect a vampire. But then where do the creepy visions, the demon in the woods, and that thing lurking around my house fit into this? I'm certain they're connected to the witches' deaths...I just don't know how.

"Were the victims full witches?" I ask, knowing how weird my question is.

"They all came from established lines of magic," Tabatha tells me. She looks at me again, finally realizing that I'm astral projecting. "Who is watching over your body?"

"My familiars. All three of them. I'm safe."

"Leaving your physical body while a witch hunter is on the loose is not safe. As nice as it is to see you again, my dear, you should go. I couldn't handle it if something were to happen to you, to either of you."

She's right and being out of my body is dangerous not only because I'm laying defenseless on the floor and at risk for physical assault, but because any number of spirits or demons would love to come in, taking residence in my body. An empty body is extremely convenient.

“I think something is in the woods waiting for one of us to come in or out of the Covenstead door,” I say quickly. “That’s why I astral projected here.”

Tabatha’s eyes widen again. “I’ll have extra protection put on it.”

I open my mouth to tell them about the demon, but I hear meowing loud in my ears and the next thing I know, my familiars have pulled me back. I sit up, a little dizzy, and look around the living room.

“What is it?” I ask as Freya shadows around the circle, extinguishing the candles. “Oh, spirits.” I wave my hand in the air as if I’m waving away bugs. The spirits aren’t actually in front of me but are closing in around the house. They probably can’t break through all the protective charms we have in place on the house, but it’s not something to mess around with.

I put my magical supplies away and go into the kitchen, nervously drumming my fingers on the fridge as I look for something to eat, not wanting to think about everything just yet.

Because I just left his house, smiling pretty much the whole way home. I like being with him. I like *him*.

“Leave it to me to date a witch hunter,” I mumble and close the fridge. “Though I don’t know for sure.” Letting out a heavy sigh, I pace around the house. Lucas has been with me the last few nights. All night last night, and the night before we were killing zombies. He left before the sun rose but wouldn’t have had enough time to carry out a murder.

But a few days ago...a few days ago he was gone overnight with no explanation. I sink down onto the couch,

rubbing my forehead. I'm running on too little sleep to sort through all this right now.

Though I'd be stupid not to consider it.

Lucas could very well be killing witches. He's been around long enough to have fought in the War of Light and Dark; even though he told me he wasn't a part of it, he could be lying. He could be trying to get revenge on witches for nearly eliminating all vampires.

"Then what does the demon have to do with this?" I shake my head. "None of this makes sense yet I know it's connected somehow."

My phone rings, and I get up with a huff. But then I see Lucas's name and smile. *Dammit.*

"Hey."

"Callie." His deep voice rattles all the way through me. "I take it you're home safe."

"Yeah, I, uh, am."

"You don't sound too sure."

"Another witch was killed," I say and can almost feel Lucas tense. "In a coven not too far from here."

"The witch hunter?"

"We're assuming so." I close my eyes and a shudder makes its way through me. Lucas isn't the witch hunter. He can't be. If he were...wouldn't he have killed me by now?

Well, *tried* to kill me. Because I still don't think he can. Though I was sound asleep with him last night. He had his chance.

He brought me coffee and donuts instead of murdering me. While I can't say forgoing murder is the most romantic thing a guy has done for me, I still don't think Lucas could be the killer.

Even though it makes sense. Kind of. Maybe. Dammit. I don't know.

“Though the witches weren't killed the usual way witch hunters kill.”

“What do you mean?”

I swallow hard. Is he asking so he'll know how to kill them later? *No*. He wouldn't. I open my eyes and walk through the kitchen and onto the back porch. All three of my familiars come with. “Three witches have been killed thus far. And all three belonged to a coven. Usually, witch hunters seek out the loners, the witches without a circle of protection. If they do go after a coven, they go after the whole thing. Not kill one witch and move on to another state.”

“Maybe they didn't want to get caught. It's harder to follow a body trail when the pieces are scattered.”

He's speaking from experience, I know. He's a vampire, a vicious killer...and might be able to help me. Well, assuming he's not the one behind the murders, that is.

“So, you think more or less randomly choosing witches is a way to not get caught?”

“I doubt the witches are random. There has to be a reason, even if the reason is nothing more than they were the easiest. The murders have happened all within a week's time, correct?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Then he knows where he’s going. And he’s already chosen his next victim.”

“How can you be sure?” Is it because you already know? And it’s...me?

“That’s what I would do,” he states as casually as if we’re chatting about the weather. “Though I wouldn’t stay in the Midwest. Three bodies in that short time frame is sloppy. Makes it easy to draw a connection.”

I think about his words for a moment. We already think this hunter wants to get caught so he can infiltrate our coven. But if he wanted to get caught, surely he’d make it easy, right?

“Are you in danger?” he asks, and his concern seems genuine again.

“You could say we all are until the hunter is caught and killed. But I don’t think I am specifically. I have a lot more power than most witches. I can defend myself. But I am a little worried about my friends.”

“I’m worried about you.”

“I knew you cared.”

“I do, Callie,” he says seriously. “You are mine now and I am going to protect you.”

Heat creeps up my neck. I almost forgot about the silly ownership titles in our relationship. “I know you will.” There is no point in arguing, in telling him I don’t need protection.

He’s going to do it anyway.

“Would you like to stay here again tonight?” he asks. “Or would you like me to come to you?”

“Come here and we can go on a romantic moonlit walk while looking for murderous creatures in the woods.” And I can be sure you’re not the cold-blooded killer.

“A woman after my own heart. Should I bring spare clothes in anticipation of burying a body again?”

“It’s always best to be prepared,” I laugh and lean on the porch railing. “Your house is beautiful, by the way. I did my fair share of snooping while you slept. I wouldn’t have guessed you were into comics.”

“It’s something that’s entertained me over the years.”

“So, what you’re saying is you’ve been a closet geek for some time now.”

“Oh, the biggest geek. I saw *Star Wars* seven times the week it released. Eliza still brings up how annoyed she was with me for making her go.”

I laugh, and if it weren’t for the fact that the first *Star Wars* movie came out way before I was born, this seems like a normal conversation between a normal couple. He’s sharing little bits of personal info, letting me get to see the real him.

“Well, maybe I’ll have to dress up like I’ve been enslaved by a slug-like alien for you tonight.”

“Do not tease me with that, Callie.”

I laugh again. “You really are a nerd! And I like it.”

“I’m glad you do, because—”

Something moves through the woods behind the house. I jerk my head up and almost drop the phone.

“Lucas,” I breathe, cutting him off. “I’m going to have to call you back.”



“Callie, what’s—” That’s all I hear before ending the call. My heart thumps in my chest and my familiars are all on edge.

“Do you feel that?” I ask them, fear causing the hair on the back of my neck to stand up. I swallow hard, trying to hold myself steady. All I want to do is turn and run back into the house. The last time I felt like this, I was fifteen and standing in the middle of the most haunted building in the Midwest.

Then as quickly as it came, the feeling leaves. I stare at the woods, heart racing. The intense feeling of tucking my tail between my legs and running fades and I begin to think clearly again.

“The doorway.” I look down at my familiars. They take off the moment I do, jumping off the porch and racing toward the woods. Binx is the fastest, and shadows ahead of us all.

No birds are chirping. No bugs singing their afternoon songs. The air is thick and still, the way it is during a seance, in that half-second of calm before a spirit reaches through the veil and makes contact.

But this is no spirit.

Because spirits can’t kill part of the forest.

I come to a halt, standing in the center of a circle of dead trees. The smell of sulfur burns my nose, and I spin, heart beating faster and faster as I look around, taking in the sight of decaying trees. I have no idea what happened, or what the hell could even cause this kind of destruction.

All of my familiars want me to leave. Freya thinks I should go back to the house and warn the coven.

“Good idea,” I pant, nervously twirling a string of magic between my fingers. The feeling of being watched intensifies.

I whirl around and start back toward the house. And then I'm hit with a memory.

It starts out with white walls and bright, overhead lights, but then the soothing smell of sage whirls around me, and I'm taken back to my first year at the Academy.

*"What is the matter?" Tabatha asks, crouching down to my level. "Don't you want to go in and learn about magic?"*

*"I do," I say, voice hardly louder than a whisper. "But I'm scared."*

*Tabatha's brown eyes soften. "There is nothing to fear here, my darling girl. You are safe. You are home."*

*"What if they don't like me?" I look through the cracked door into the classroom.*

*"Then they don't like you," she states simply. She takes my hand in hers and looks me right in the eye. Her smile warms my heart, making me feel more loved in this moment than I have for the past few years. "You have to go to class. You have to go on with your life and start living again. You have so much ahead of you, sweet child. This is only the beginning. So be afraid. But do it anyway."*

I exhale heavily and ball my fists. If something is out there trying to get through the door...to hurt the witches and warlocks inside the Academy...I won't let it happen.

"What the hell do you want?" I yell to the forest. I find a small bit of anger inside me, quivering behind the fear. I grab onto it and bring it to the surface. Magic sizzles across my fingertips.

The entire forest holds its breath.

I push my shoulders back, waiting. Ready. Wanting the creature to come out and attack.

But nothing does.

“I have no idea what’s going on,” I admit to my familiars and shake my head. Staying rooted in the spot, I look around the forest for another few moments. The birds start chirping. Squirrels chase each other around a tree.

Nature is back to normal.

Whatever was here...it’s gone now. But I know it’ll come back.



THE BELL RINGS AS I PUSH OPEN THE BOOKSTORE DOOR. IT’S A bright and sunny day, and we’re busy today. Betty is at the register, smiling as she talks to a customer about a book. She seems to be doing really well considering what she went through, and I hope she’s not repressing her fears only to have them come out later. If the dark creature in the woods doesn’t kill me—or if my own boyfriend doesn’t turn out to be killing witches behind my back—I’ll make sure to talk to her about it.

Freya trots next to me, sensing Kristy in the back of the store. We head back there, and a few customers gush over my pretty tabby cat with bright green eyes. Freya eats up their attention, feeling a bit smug to be the center of attention for once instead of Binx, who usually comes with me to the store.

“Hey,” Kristy says with a smile when we step into the backroom. “What are you doing here? And why is Freya here?”

“Nice to see you too,” Freya sasses, shadowing past Kristy.

“Of course it’s nice to see you,” Kristy tells her, putting a hand on her hip. “But my question remains.” She shifts her gaze to me.

“I thought Freya could hang out with you for a while. You know...just make sure the mysteriously evil creature lurking around my house doesn’t decide to attack you.”

Kristy almost drops the box of books she’s holding. “What?”

I turn around, making sure the door to the backroom is closed. “Something was at my house last night.”

“Did it attack you? Why didn’t you call me?”

“It didn’t attack me because I wasn’t home. I spent the night with Lucas,” I add, knowing she’s going to ask.

“The night? So you two hooked up?”

“We did. Twice.” I bite my lip, having a hard time keeping the words inside. Kristy is my rock and makes everything better. She’s logic and reasoning and the yin to my yang. “And he asked me to become his, I agreed, and now I think he might be killing witches. Also, I saw my sister and finally met my niece.”

Kristy looks at me, blinking, for a few seconds. “Back up. Why do you think Lucas is killing witches?”

“Another witch was found dead this morning. Killed the same way as the others, but this time they were able to tell she died of exsanguination first and then was burned. That’s not the usual way witch hunters kill.”

“But why do you automatically suspect Lucas?”

“Because he’s really old and strong and has been asking questions about the coven and witchcraft.”

She raises an eyebrow. “And because you like him?”

“Huh?”

“Callie,” she says gently and sets the box down. “You have a habit of self-sabotaging relationships. If you really think Lucas is behind the killings, then we need to do something. Now. But if you’re not certain, accusing him of murdering witches is a death sentence. Both for him and your relationship.”

I look at Freya, who’s feeling just as confused as I am. Kristy isn’t the biggest fan of vampires. I know she’s trying hard not to judge me for my interest in Lucas, but to hear her almost defend him...it’s weird.

“But he’s a vampire. An old vampire who could have fought in the War of Light and Dark.”

“I think you’re right that the witch hunter isn’t typical.” Her shoulders tense. “But I don’t think it’s a vampire. I did a tarot reading last night that I wanted to dismiss...until now. Something big is out there, Callie. And it’s not something from our world.”

## CHAPTER 22



“I thought maybe the cards were wrong,” Kristy goes on, shaking her head.

“You’re rarely wrong with those things,” I tell her.

“I know. I think it was more me wanting it to be wrong. But the way we’re being killed...your visions...the demon... something big and something dark is here.” Her eyes fill with fear. “What was outside of your house?”

“We’re not sure.” I reach into my purse and pull out the crystal. It’s in a black velvet bag and I flip it over, carefully shaking it out into my hand. “Freya saw a dark figure moving fast, and all three sensed something dark and powerful, just like you saw in the cards. And then there’s this.” I hand her the crystal. “It was clear quartz.”

“What the fuck?” she whispers.

“I got another vision when I touched it. Whatever was outside the house was looking for something. I don’t know if it was necessarily me, but my warding kept it away.”

“We need to go to the Covenstead and warn the others.”

“I already did. And we can’t go through the door. I think whatever this thing was, came from the woods and is waiting for someone to use the door. It wants to know where the other

witches are so it can keep searching for...for whatever or whoever it wants.”

“Did you go through the door?”

I shake my head. “I astral projected and spoke with Evander. That’s how I know about the other witch...and the way she died.”

Kristy leans against the wall, clasping her hands on her elbows. The backroom door opens, startling the both of us. Vanessa, one of the new employees Kristy hired, comes in with a smile on her face.

“Hey, ladies!” She takes her purse off her shoulder and puts it in her locker.

“Hey,” I reply, forcing a smile.

“Cute cat! I heard about how you bring your cats in and think it’s so cool!” She kneels down as Freya prances over, purring and rubbing on her outstretched hand.

“Thanks.”

“How’s it been today?” Vanessa asks, looking up at Kristy. “It’s busy now!”

“It’s, um...um...yeah. Busy.” Kristy lets out a shaky breath, trying to force herself to act normal.

Vanessa looks from Kristy to me, realizes there’s more to the story than we’re letting on, and straightens up. “I’ll go see if Betty needs any help up front.”

“That’d be great,” Kristy tells her, finally regaining her pretty smile. “Thank you.”

“You’re still going out with Daniel tonight, right?” I ask her once Vanessa leaves.

“Yeah, but I’m thinking I should cancel.”

“No, don’t. I think there’s safety in numbers right now and he lives with his two warlock brothers. Stay the night if you can?”

She purses her lips and then caves. “I was already planning on it. It’s been a while since I’ve had sex and Daniel always gets the job done.”

“You harlot,” I tease. “And keep Freya with you. Olive too, and Freya will look out for her.”

Olive is Kristy’s familiar, but unlike mine who will rip you to shreds for looking at me wrong, Kristy’s helps her with potions and makes her herbs grow and blossom overnight. She’s a gorgeous albino rabbit with a disposition as sweet as Kristy’s.

“I will. Do you think Olive is okay at home by herself?”

“Yeah. So far there are no reports about the familiars being killed, though we know what happens when…” I trail off, not wanting to upset Freya. Her previous witch died, and though we’ve bonded and become bound, I know the wound will always run deep.

She misses her.

Weeps for her.

Blames herself for not being able to protect her.

Though, she leveled up on the badass scale when she bonded with me. Taking on the form of a cat helped her become more stealthy, and my ancient and dangerous Binx was able to teach both Freya and Pandora a few new tricks.

“What the plan?” Kristy asks, voice shaky.



“I’m not really sure. Lucas is coming over tonight and I thought we could search the woods.”

“Did you invite him to come hunt demons with you before or after you thought he might be a killer?”

“I already know he’s a killer,” I start. “But after I thought he could be the witch hunter. I’ll keep an eye on him and make sure he doesn’t kill anyone else.”

“I know you use humor as a defense mechanism, but I honestly can’t tell if you’re joking or not right now.”

I let out a breath. “I don’t either.” I perch on the edge of the table. “I had a really good time last night. He took me out to eat on one of those fancy dinner cruises along Lake Michigan, and then we walked around Navy Pier for a while before going back to his place.”

“You look all glowy talking about him.”

“I feel a little glowy. I like being around him. He knows exactly who I am, and he hasn’t directly said it, but I think me having powers is a turn-on for him. That’s a first.”

Kristy laughs and leans in. “How was the sex? Is vampire sex really as good as people say?”

I bite my lip and smile. “Hell yes.”

“I’m almost jealous.” She smiles, but it wavers, and I know she’s thinking about the darkness lurking. “Did he bite you?”

“Yeah. On my thigh during, uh, the action, and then again here.” I show her my wrist.

“Did it hurt?”

“Yes, but the pain subsided pretty fast. Though I get the impression he’s more or less perfected his technique over the sixteen hundred years he’s been dead.”

“He’s that old? Wow.” She smiles again, trying hard to gossip like normal, but we both know things are far from normal. “And your sister?”

“Oh, right. She was pushing Penny in a stroller with a group of moms when I walked out of Lucas’s house this morning. And get this. She moved out of her old penthouse because vampires moved in a few floors below. But she lives like a street away from Lucas.”

“That’s ironic.”

“Right? And she invited me and ‘my boyfriend’ to her house after Penny’s birthday party for drinks. And I said we’ll consider going.”

“Shut up! Are you really going to go?”

“I’d like to see my sister and Penny. And no one needs to know Lucas is a vampire. They already think he’s some rich businessman, which basically means they love him already.”

Kristy laughs again, and this time some of the tension leaves her. “As long as you’re okay going and seeing the rest of your family.”

“I’ll be okay with Lucas with me. Well, assuming he doesn’t burn me at the stake first.”

“That’s not funny.” Kristy pushes off the wall and loops her arm through mine. We start walking toward the front of the store.

“I’m hilarious. That’s why you love me, right?”

Kristy rolls her eyes. “You’re lucky I love you.”



I SPREAD THE CLEAN SHEET OVER MY BED AND USE MAGIC TO tuck the fitted corners around the mattress. Waving my hand at a pile of dirty clothes on the floor, I grab the top sheet as the clothes fill my empty laundry basket. Then I quickly smooth out my comforter, throw my pillows back into the bed, and take my laundry downstairs and put a load in the washing machine.

A car pulls into the driveway as I make my way up. Binx and Pandora are outside, patrolling the perimeter of the house, and let me know that Lucas is here, driving his black Mercedes again tonight.

Smoothing out my hair, I go to the front door, magically disarming it before opening the door.

“Hey,” I say when I see Lucas coming up to the porch. He’s wearing a light gray t-shirt tonight, and it’s tight in all the right places. Around his biceps. Over his pecs. I follow the fabric down to his waist. To the black leather belt looped through dark jeans. And that bulge that’s hard to see in the dark but I know is there. Because I had that monster cock inside of me last night.

“Good evening, Callie.” He strides onto the porch and moves into the house. His arms go around me as soon as he sets foot inside, picking me and turning around. He closes the door with his foot and then presses me up against it. He kisses me hard, fangs coming down and softly scraping over my lip. Pinning me between the door and his body, he holds me up with one hand and brings the other to my head, balling my hair in his fist, pulling it, making me hurt just a bit.

The detailed woodwork on the door bites into my back, but the pain is drowned from the sensation of Lucas’s mouth going

to my neck, fangs pressing into my skin. He bites down, breaking the skin.

I gasp, but this time the pain from his bite goes right through me, heating me from the inside out. I reach one arm around, sliding my hand up the back of his head, and press his face against my neck. He kisses and sucks, gently licking the pooling blood before it drips down.

My pussy contracts, desperately needing him inside of me, and my clit is begging to be touched. As if he can read my mind, he sets me down and plunges a hand inside my leggings, letting out a growl when he finds me already dripping wet for him.

Deft fingers sweep over my entrance, and then he pulls his hand back to push my leggings down. I scramble to undo his belt, which really was stupid of him to put on. It's taking way too long to take off.

Impatient, I flick my wrist and his belt falls to the ground.

"I like it when you use magic like this," he mewls, bringing his mouth off my neck. My blood is on his lips and watching him lick it off is almost enough to make me come right here, right now.

"Then you'll love this," I pant and drop to my knees. I put my hands on his hips and telekinetically pop the button on his jeans and then undo the zipper, freeing his cock. The tip sticks out over the top of his boxers, and I bring my hands down again, magically pulling his boxers and pants to the ground all at once.

"Fuck," he groans, widening his stance. One hand goes to my hair and he plants the other on the door in front of him. Licking my lips, I reach forward, wrapping one of my hands

around his big dick. I felt its sheer size last night, and again this morning, but I didn't admire it then like I am right now.

I don't know how he got all that inside of me, though it explains why I felt so sore after. But I know for certain I can't take him all in my mouth. He's just too big. Starting at the tip, I cup his balls with my other hand and circle my tongue around the tip of his cock. Then I move down, taking him in as far as possible, sucking hard as I pull back.

Lucas tightens his grip in my hair. I repeat the same movement, then go back to the tip of his cock, enjoying the reaction I'm getting out of him each time my tongue flicks over it.

I take my hand off his balls and bring it between my own legs, rubbing at myself, moaning as I suck Lucas's cock. Suddenly, he scoops me up and flips me over, laying me down on my entryway rug.

"Do you need to come?" he asks.

"Yes," I pant.

"Tell me how bad you need to."

I sweep my hand over my breasts, going between my legs again. "Really bad. I'm so hot for you right now. So wound up."

"You need a release?"

"Yes, please, yes."

He gets a devilish glint in his eyes. "Not yet." Grabbing my hand, he pulls it up over my head, holding it there as he kneels above me. He takes his other hand and runs his fingers over the wound on my neck, the wound I'd forgotten about because I was so taken over by pleasure.

He licks his fingers, eyes fluttering shut when he tastes my blood. “You taste like starlight,” he moans, going back for more. This time he brings his head down, licking and sucking at my skin.

I rub my thighs together, fighting against the hold he has on my wrists. He brings his free hand down over my stomach, pushing my legs open. His fingers inch up to my most sensitive parts, and the need to be touched intensifies.

And then he slips a finger inside of me, going right to my G-spot. He presses and rubs against it at the same time, and pleasure winds up inside like a tight coil needing to be released.

I buck my hips, getting so close to coming. And then he takes his hand away, bringing it up to my face and cupping my cheek.

“Please, Lucas,” I groan. “Touch me.”

“You need to learn patience.” Sitting up a bit more, he wraps his hand around his cock, slowly jerking it up and down. I was so close, right there on the verge of coming. I push against his hand again, though it’s pointless to get into a battle of strength with him. I’ll lose every time.

Instead, I conjure a string of magic and wrap it around his wrists. It sizzles when it makes contact with his skin, burning the surface layer of flesh around his wrist. He jerks his hand back and I yank my hands back down.

“Fighting dirty, I see.” He looks at the magic circling his wrist with a smirk on his face. And then he shifts his gaze to me. “You are so fucking sexy, Callie.”

Even though the magic is burning his skin, he dives onto me, going between my legs and aligning his cock with my

entrance.

“I’ll put it out,” I breathe, bending my legs up. My heart skips a beat with anticipation.

“Don’t you fucking dare,” he demands and thrusts inside of me. His mouth goes back to my neck and he fucks me hard and fast, rocking me into oblivion. The moment the orgasm ripples through me, Lucas drives his cock in deep and puts his mouth to my neck again, sucking my blood as he comes. The band of magic around his wrist glows bright before going out, sizzling his skin one last time.

We finish nearly at the same time, and I let my arms fall off of him. I’m panting, heart racing, and pussy still spasming.

“Holy shit,” I breathe. “It’s nice to see you too.”

“I told you I was going to fuck you as soon as I saw you.” He brushes my hair back and presses his fingers over the two bite wounds on my neck.

“A man who means exactly what he says? Stop being so complicated. Though I have no complaints. Also, I’ve never had sex in my foyer before.”

He carefully removes his fingers, checking the wounds. “I’m always happy to be your first. Where else haven’t you had sex? We can check a few more places off your list.”

I laugh and bring my arms up, slipping them under his shirt. We both still have our tops on, having removed only what was necessary. I run my fingers up and down his back and his eyes fall shut. Resting his forehead against mine, he relaxes and moves to my side, spooning his large body around mine.

“Your wrist healed already.” I run my finger over his smooth, cool skin where the burn marks should have been.

“Yours hasn’t.” He turns my hand over, exposing where he bit and drank from me earlier. “Though I have to say I like seeing my marks on your skin.”

“I like them too,” I confess, feeling another wave of heat rush through me. I don’t want to become one of *those girls* who make it a point to show off their vampire bites, but there’s something hot about the wounds.

“What is that smell?” he asks, moving his head back and sniffing the air.

“Lemongrass essential oil in a diffuser.”

“Does it offer protection?”

“No, it just smells happy to me.”

“It does.” He inhales again. “It’s what I imagine the sun smells like.”

“Do you miss it?” I ask softly, tracing a dark blue vein in his wrist. It’s still weird to think about the blood—my blood—coursing through his body when his own heart stopped beating years ago. Humans are powered by tiny electrical impulses, and for the most part, we understand the mechanics behind all of that. But vampires...vampires are powered by magic.

Dark magic.

“The sun? Sometimes.” He takes a strand of my hair and absentmindedly twists it between his fingers. “It’s been so long I’ve forgotten what it feels like. I remember liking the way it warmed my skin. I do miss the birds chirping, as odd as that may sound. I can hear them sometimes, but it’s not the same. Small price to pay for eternal living.”

He holds me closer, but something tells me he’s trying to comfort himself more than comfort me. I never thought I’d



pity a thousand-year-old vampire, but right now, I feel for him. I can't imagine only living in the dark.

He kisses my forehead and gets up, extending a hand to help me to my feet. I hurry upstairs and to the bathroom to clean myself up as he gets redressed. I grab clean underwear, slip them on, and then head back downstairs.

Lucas is on the back porch looking out at the woods. He turns when I step onto the porch with him, eyes sweeping up and down my body. I didn't put my pants back on, and I think the t-shirt and undies look is making him ready for round two already.

"Something smells...off." He turns his head back to the woods and inhales. "Like rotting vegetation."

"That's exactly what it is."

"Really?" His eyes widen. "The forest has rotted since we were last in it?"

"It's more like something came in and killed it."

He raises an eyebrow. "Show me."

"Let me put on my pants."

He moves at vamp speed, playfully slapping my ass. "You look good without them."

"Thanks, but I do not want mosquito bites all over my thighs. Or butt cheeks. And I need shoes."

"Needy human," he teases.

Rolling my eyes and trying not to smile, I dash back into the house, grab my leggings, socks, and put on a pair of combat boots. I throw on a light sweater on the way downstairs, wanting to keep my arms covered as well. Kristy

came up with the best potion for repelling bugs, but I'm fresh out and don't have what I need to whip up a new batch.

I pause before I go out onto the porch, and double back upstairs and into my room. Going to my weapons chest, I grab an enchanted dagger for myself and another for Lucas.

"Ready?" I ask when I step onto the porch.

"Nice knife."

"Thanks. And don't worry, I brought one for you too. Don't want to leave you without a weapon." I extend my hand, offering him the dagger. He takes it, shakes his head, and sets it down.

"I don't need a weapon. I already have these guns." He bends his arms up, working hard to keep a straight face. I burst out laughing.

"Oh my god, you did not just say that!"

He flexes his muscles once more and then grabs me around the waist. "I told you I'd do anything to see you smile. Hearing you laugh is even better."

My breath leaves me and my heart lurches. He can't be the witch hunter. He just can't.

"But really," he says, deep voice low. He draws his fangs. "I have all I need."

I swallow hard, fighting the urge to take him back inside and have sex in the dining room, another place I haven't yet done the deed in my house. "Very well then. Let's go hunt demons."

He straightens me up, sets the extra dagger on the porch railing, and takes my hand. I tip my head up to the sky, close my eyes, and call for my familiars. Lucas and I have only

made it a few steps away from the porch by the time Pandora and Binx shadow through the yard and circle us. Lucas slows, looking at my familiars in their spirit form.

“Stop showing off,” I tell them, and they shift back into cats. Binx trots up ahead and Pandora chases after him.

“When did you discover the dead plants in the woods?” Lucas asks.

“This afternoon when I was looking into whatever was around my house.”

“Did you find anything?”

I shake my head. “Nothing substantial. But I do think something big and bad is out there.”

“Don’t go into the woods alone,” he says, and his fingers tighten around my hand. “Let me come with you.”

“I’m never really alone,” I remind him, using the dagger in my other hand to point to my familiars.

“Where’s the other? The tabby cat?”

“With Kristy. Her familiar isn’t as vicious as mine. Given everything that’s going on, I wanted her to have the extra protection.”

“But it takes away from you.”

“Yeah, it does,” I agree. “But she’s my best friend.” We walk a few yards in silence, entering the dark woods. “How many dates have you been on that involve hunting demons?” I ask, looking up at Lucas with a smile.

“None, surprisingly.”

“That does surprise me, actually. I’d think in all the years you’ve been undead you’d have hunted a demon or two.”

“I have, but not like this. Not with someone. And it’s odd to say I hunt demons when I am one.”

“I don’t consider you a demon.”

“What makes you so sure?”

I fight the chill that wants to run down my back. “I kill demons. And you’re still alive, well, dead-ish. You’re still walking and talking.”

He chuckles. “Solid argument.”

“I know.” We take a few more paces in silence. “You’ve probably had a lot of girlfriends though, right?”

“No. I’ve committed to very few over my years, and there was a time when I didn’t think humans were worthy of anything more than being fucked and fed off of.”

“Such a gentleman.” I pull my hand from his.

He comes to a halt, grabs my arm, and spins me around so I’m facing him. “You told me you understood what I am.”

“I do.”

“Then you know the belief that humans are inferior is passed down from the maker. Waking up underground... realizing you’re dead yet still here...it’s confusing and it’s frightening. All you can do is trust your sire. I did. For five hundred years.”

“Then what happened?”

“He let his ego go to his head. Got himself killed by those very humans he deemed so inferior.”

“I’m, uh, sorry.”

“Don’t be. He turned me and countless others because he was paid by humans to do so. Once he was gone...I was free.”

Gently, I slip my hand into Lucas's again. He has so many layers. Though just when he starts to peel one back and expose his heart, he closes himself off again.

"Do you hear that?" he asks, coming to a stop.

I bob my head up and down. "Nothing. We're close."

I conjure up an energy ball, helping me see, and walk another few yards, not stopping until we're in the center of the circle of dead trees. It smells worse than it did this morning, like grass that's been under muddy water for too long.

Lucas steps away from me, carefully inspecting the trees. Then he crouches down and plunges his hand into the earth. Bringing up a handful of dirt, he smells it.

"We need to go," he says, suddenly back at my side. He wipes his hand on his pants and pulls me close to his body in a protective stance.

"Why?"

"I've seen this before."

"The dead plants?"

"Yes."

I tip my head up, seeing his brow furrow with worry. "Do you know what it means?"

He meets my eyes. "I do. It means something demonic has come to earth. We need to go, Callie. Now."

"Lucas, wait," I protest and try to push him away. "We haven't even—"

"Callie," he grows, taking my wrist. "Something demonic has come to earth," he repeats. "Straight from Hell."

## CHAPTER 23



“**W**hat?” I ask, even though I heard him clearly. My breath leaves me as the words sink in. “If something came from Hell that means...that means the Gates of Hell have been opened.”

“The Gatekeeper,” we say at the same time.

“You were right,” I gasp. “The Gatekeeper is literally keeping the Gates of Hell. They either open or close them and it seems like they opened them.”

“Yes. Now, let’s go.”

This time, he doesn’t have to tell me twice. Keeping my hand in his, Lucas rushes through the forest, not stopping or slowing down until we’re on the back porch. Binx and Pandora stay in the yard, protectively watching the house.

“How do you know?” I ask, trying to catch my breath. Though I’m winded from shock, not from running. “How do you know it’s a demon from Hell or whatever?”

Lucas looks over his shoulder at the woods, not trusting that we weren’t followed. I squeeze my eyes shut, find my grounding, and go to the steps of the porch. I hold up my hands and whisper an incantation.

The invisible lines of magic I've laid around the house glow a bright and brilliant blue for only a second before fading from view.

"It kept that thing out before," I tell him, though at this moment I can't recall if I explained the vision to him yet or not. "Tell me: where did you see this before?"

"Ireland," he starts. "Around six hundred AD. I was there with a few other vampires. We went to the shadows for the day and when we awoke that night, the entire town was dead. Humans and animals, ripped apart like they had been killed by wolves. We thought it may have been werewolves, so we spent the night looking for them. We came to a spot in the woods just like the one out there." He motions to the woods behind my house. "Dead and rotting vegetation. Soil smelling like sulfur. It wasn't a pack of weres that killed that village. It was a Hellhound. Just one."

"But how do you know that?" I press.

"We saw it. Right before the sun rose, it came from a field, finishing off the last of the villagers who tried to escape. It looked right at us but kept going. We weren't its mark. It didn't want anything from us." He casts his eyes down. "I thought then, as I still do now, it didn't kill us because we are just as demonic, just as evil, and as much of a killer as it was." There's pain in his words, and I can tell he's struggling with his past. It's almost strange to think about him as a human, and after hearing that his maker was paid to turn people into vampires, I'm sure he was ripped from his life against his will.

"You're sure it was a Hellhound?"

"Positive. If you see one...you just know. And several days later, when we sought out new feeding grounds, we heard rumors from the townsfolk that the people of that village had

made a deal with the Devil for prosperous crops. But deals run out eventually.”

“And he came to collect.”

“Yes.”

I bring my hand to my forehead, rubbing the spot between my eyes. “So, someone made a deal?”

“I’m not sure.” He steps forward, taking me in his arms. “But if there is a Hellhound—or anything else from Hell—on the loose, you shouldn’t be here. Come back to Chicago with me. You’ll be safe in my house and I can order vampires to stand guard and keep you safe.”

“I’m not running with my tail tucked between my legs.” I slip my hands under his shirt, needing to feel his cool skin against my hands. “This is my town and I’m going to protect it. If there is something demonic here and it gets to the Ley line...I can’t let that happen. It’ll destroy Thorne Hill.”

His lips curve into a smile. “I had a feeling you’d say something like that. Though I still insist you come to Chicago with me during the day at least. I’ll be here with you at night. Demons in their true form are dangerous.”

“I know.” I inch forward, wrapping my arms around him. He pulls me into an embrace, one hand going to my hair. “And I know you’re used to being the big man on top—and I like you on top, trust me—but I can hold my own.” I tip my head up and look into his dark blue eyes.

He doesn’t say anything but instead kisses me. A growl comes from deep within, and he picks me up, still kissing me, and carries me in through the back door. We step into the kitchen and he sets me on the island counter.



“I’ve never,” he moans between kisses. “Had someone.” More kisses. He moves his lips to my neck. “Turn me on.” He draws his fangs and scrapes them over my skin. “This much.”

“I didn’t even do anything,” I pant, wrapping my legs around him. I’m sitting up, breasts pressed against him. I have one hand in his hair, and the other is holding onto his shoulder.

“You don’t even realize it.” He takes a small step back, undoing his pants, and then closes the distance between us, pinning me against him once more. His cock presses against me, and even though we just had sex, seeing him so wound up, so turned on for me, gets me going again too.

He retracts his fangs and kisses my neck, sending a shiver through me. Arching my back, I press my core against him before lying back, narrowly avoiding the decorative vase of flowers I have on the center of the counter. Lucas strips me of my leggings and underwear in one swift movement.

Then he drops down, burying his head between my legs. I prop myself up on my elbows, watching him work. The cold counter beneath me is uncomfortable, but I don’t care. Lucas grips my thighs and scoots me toward the edge of the counter, moving my legs over his shoulders.

His tongue lashes out against my clit with fury. My eyes fall shut and all I can think about it how good it feels, how close he’s getting me...how much I need this release. My heart beats a little faster, and I feel the orgasm start to build. Letting out a moan, I feel the muscles in my thighs tense.

“Don’t stop,” I pant. I need to come now. Everything came on so suddenly and if he stops now, I am using magic to push him away so I can finish myself. Because I’m so damn wound up right now.

Lucas growls in response and puts his mouth over me, licking and sucking and doing something else with his tongue that feels so fucking good. Only a few seconds later, I'm coming against his face, writhing with pleasure. He holds me in place, not stopping as the orgasm rolls through me. My pussy is spasming, pleasure flooding my veins. It takes over my whole body, tingling my toes and causing my ears to ring.

But he doesn't stop there.

He keeps going, slipping a finger inside me and pressing against my G-spot. This time, he just holds it there, and the added pressure during this orgasm is enough to send me over the edge. His tongue lashes out against my clit again, and the world spins around me. I feel myself tighten around his finger, pussy contracting like mad, and then another, more intense orgasm hits me so hard wetness spills from me, drenching his face. If I wasn't floating on pleasure, I'd be embarrassed.

Though it seems to turn Lucas on. Moaning, he pulls his hand away, sliding it up my stomach, under my shirt, and over my breast. Then he straightens up and pulls me toward him, trying to get me to sit up so he can fuck me. But I'm still floating, still drowning in ecstasy. I attempt to sit up and falter. He slips one hand under my back and helps me up.

Hooking my arms around his neck, I widen my legs, welcoming him in. He thrusts inside, and my mouth falls open. I hold onto him as he rocks his hips against mine, driving that big cock in and out until he brings his head down, burying it against my neck as he comes.

With his cock still pulsing inside me, he steps away from the counter, holding me steady, and goes into the living room. He sinks on to the couch, with me still in his lap.

"That," I start, voice all breathy. "That was unexpected."

He smiles and brushes my hair back. “We’re good together.”

“Yeah,” I agree, resting my head against him. I take a deep breath, still not sure I can get up yet. Taking another minute to recover, I run my hand through his hair as he runs his fingertips up and down my back, hand under my shirt. “Want to take a shower?” I ask. “And this time I do mean together.”



“AS MUCH AS I LIKE HAVING SEX,” I START, FLIPPING MY HEAD over to twist a towel around my hair. Steam billows out of the open bathroom door. “I need to come up with some sort of plan on how to, uh, do something about this Hell creature.”

“Spare me the specifics,” Lucas says sarcastically.

“I know,” I agree, straightening up and tucking the towel into place. I’m naked, as is Lucas, and I pad out of the bathroom and into my bedroom, going to my dresser to get a bra and underwear. “If this creature from Hell killed the other witches, then there should be dead patches of earth near where they were killed, right?”

Nodding, Lucas strides into the room and sits on my bed, stretching his long legs out in front of him. He leans back against the pillows, and I don’t think he has any intention of getting dressed anytime soon.

My laptop is on the nightstand next to him, and he grabs it and opens it up. “What’s your password?”

“Binx.”

“Clever.”

“It’s not the most creative, but it works.” I hook my bra and go over by him, looking at the computer. He enters

something in a Google search, and the page takes a few seconds to load. The internet here can be slow here.

“Was the first witch killed in Michigan?” he asks, clicking on an article.

“Yeah, she was.” I sink down onto the bed, heart racing just from the headline of the article. Lucas scrolls down, and we only need to read the first paragraph to know the mysterious death of flowers in a botanical garden was caused by something demonic, not a rare strand of fungus.

“He’s in Thorne Hill to kill.”

“He is.” Lucas closes the computer and takes my hand. “Why would a demon from Hell kill witches? I thought you guys went way back with your old Master Satan.”

“Not so much anymore.” I make a face. “The belief that all witches get their powers from the Devil might have been true at one point, but we’ve realized over the centuries that’s not true. We don’t need him or any sort of darkness to power our magic. We’re born with it. Witches aren’t inherently evil.”

“I’d imagine then that this realization pissed the Devil off.”

“Oh, of course. And there are still some covens that practice in such a way, but like that town you saw destroyed... dark power like that always comes with a price. It’s not something I’ll ever mess around with.” I grab my hairbrush off my nightstand, pull off the towel off my head, and start brushing through my wet locks. “I can’t really explain it, but I just have a feeling the demon is the killer we’re looking for. Not a hunter. Not a vampire.” My voice drops off at my last word and I cast my eyes down, feeling almost guilty for thinking Lucas could be the killer.

Even though he still could be.

“Did you look for similarities between the victims?” he asks.

“Not yet.” I set the brush down. “Hang on.” I dash downstairs, grab my phone, and come back up. I quickly bring up Evander’s contact info and call him. He answers on the first ring, surprising me. Cell phones don’t work inside the Academy. Why isn’t he there?

“Callie, am I glad to hear from you,” he breathes, voice low.

“Why? What’s wrong?”

“Another body has been found.”

“Where?” I sit on the edge of my bed.

“A state park near the lake. The human police are involved.”

“Was it a witch?” I ask.

“We’re not sure, but it doesn’t seem like she belonged to a coven, though you and I both know that doesn’t mean she wasn’t a witch.”

“Shit,” I swear. “Where are you?”

“I’m at the crime scene, well, in proximity to it. There are too many police and news reporters involved to get closer, even with magic. And don’t worry, I’m not alone. Gregory is with me, as well as two council members. And we laid every protective charm we know on the door before leaving,” he adds.

“Are you going back to the Academy tonight?”

“Yes. I need to check on my students. You could come too. It’s safer here.”

“I’ll be fine here. I’m not alone either.” I lean over the bed and grab the remote, turning on the TV and flipping through the news channels until I find a live broadcast at the scene of the murder. “When you get back, can you send me all the info you have on the witches who’ve died?” I ask. “I have a hunch on something.”

“I will, but only if you promise me you won’t do something stupid.”

“When have I ever done something stupid?”

Evander laughs. “Do you really need me to remind you? Because I can.”

“That’s not necessary.”

“Remember that time you got drunk and summoned a demon?”

“That happened once. And we killed it.”

“Fine. What about the time you married a poltergeist?”

“That was all part of my plan to get rid of him. And it worked, didn’t it?”

“Yes,” Evander agrees, chuckling. “This time, sister, it’s serious. Promise me.”

“I promise.”

“I’ll send what I have once we get back. Is that why you called? To ask for information about the witches?”

“Partly. The other part is to tell you that I’m pretty sure the Gates of Hell have been opened.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes,” I say, and goosebumps break out along my arm. “There’s a patch in the woods of dead trees and plants. And there’s sulfur in the dirt. And a quick internet search tells me that a similar situation happened in the same area the first witch died.”

“I’ll have the Council alerted. Stay safe, Callie. Keep your familiars close.”

“You too.”

I end the call and turn the volume up on the TV.

“You married a poltergeist?” Lucas asks, raising an eyebrow. Right. Vampires have good hearing. He could hear our entire conversation.

“Not legally. I had him think we were getting married, so he’d release the women he kidnapped and locked in a basement.”

“Just when I think you can’t surprise me anymore.” He shakes his head and reaches for me, snagging my wrist with his long fingers. He tugs me back toward him, and I rest my head on his chest as we watch the news unfold.

A young woman whose name isn’t being released yet was found dead along the trails of the state park. The reporter describes the scene as “gruesome and bloody,” and that police initially thought her death might have been due to an animal attack, but after seeing defensive wounds on the girl’s hands and arms, the homicide team was brought in.

The attack must have just happened. There’s no way Lucas could have done it. I shouldn’t feel relief when a young, innocent woman was just killed.

But I do.

Lucas is far from innocent, but he's not the witch hunter.

"It seems the killer was interrupted by the hikers before he was able to burn the body," Lucas states, seemingly unfazed by the news. "Though I'm curious as to why he didn't kill them too."

"Maybe there were too many?"

"Perhaps."

"I should text Kristy. Make sure she knows. And the twins." Sighing, I open up the group text message we had going after the resurrection spell and tell them all to be extra careful. I set my phone down. "I don't know what to do."

"Just relax for now." Lucas turns the TV off.

"Are you hungry?"

"You don't have to keep asking me that, Callie." He brushes my wet hair back.

"I don't know the etiquette on it." I snuggle up a little closer. "Or how often you need to eat. Like, do you still eat breakfast, lunch, and dinner? Do you eat when you're bored? Emotional? Well, as emotional as you get, I suppose."

"Vampires don't eat on a fixed schedule like humans do. When I'm hungry, I'll feed. When I'm not, I won't."

"You can't gain weight, right?"

"No."

"That's almost not fair. Though all you eat is blood. Do you miss food at all?"

"Not at all. At first, just the smell of food makes your stomach churn. It doesn't bother me anymore, but I don't find it appetizing in the least."



“So, you were in this good of shape before you were turned?” I run my fingers along the grooves of his abs.

“I was.” He leaves it at that, not going into more detail about what he did or who he was sixteen hundred years ago. And I know better than to ask. Instead, I close my eyes and hook a leg over Lucas’s. My head is on his chest, yet there’s no heartbeat to listen to. It’s odd and a little unsettling.

“How do you kill a Hellhound?”

He tightens his hold on me. “You don’t.”

## CHAPTER 24



“There’s always some way to fight. I just have to figure it out.” I flatten my hand over his abdomen.

“What about your book? Is there anything in there that could help?”

“No,” I tell him. “Not in mine...but there might be something in one of the books at the Academy.” I shoot up. “Watch over my body while I astral project there?”

“You can do that?”

I smile. “Looks like I’m not done surprising you yet. And yes. I can. My familiars can sense for spirits and can pull me back. But I need you to make sure nothing else tries to come after me.”

Lucas’s jaw tenses. “Are you sure this is a good idea?”

“Yes. I’ve been wanting to go look through the books for a while, actually. The Academy has an extensive library. It’s two-stories tall and has the most wonderful smell of old paper and fresh ink.”

“It’s obvious why you own a bookstore.”

“I do like books, though our store is full of mostly fiction. I love a good romance novel.”

He runs his hand up and down my arm. “Why do you love romance novels so much?”

“Mostly because of the HEA.”

“HEA?”

“Happily ever after. I love when things work out. It doesn’t usually happen in real life. Getting lost in a good book, seeing the good guys win, and the guy always gets the girl...call me lame, but I love that.”

“It’s not lame.” He rolls us over so he’s on top of me, blue eyes locked with mine. My heart skips a beat and I’m all too aware that he’s still very much naked. He kisses me and then gets up, grabbing his pants from the floor. “So...astral projection. How does it work?”

“Let me show you.”

I go downstairs as he gets dressed and have the rug rolled back by the time he’s down. He silently watches as I pour the salt and light the candles. Holding the black tourmaline on my chest, I close my eyes and start chanting. Binx and Pandora shifted into shadow form and will stay that way until I’m back.

Good thing Lucas doesn’t mind, because they look like the thing that hides under the bed in any good horror film when they’re in their true form. We’re bonded so deeply I don’t think I could be scared of them if they tried, and vice versa.

The world starts to fade and spin around me, and the next thing I know, I’m standing inside the dark hall leading to the library. I pause before moving forward, partly because I can’t open the door and have no idea who’s on the other side. Walking right through it is a good way to freak someone out, and I think all the students here are already on high alert.

But I stop for another reason.

It's been a while since I've been back here, since I've walked these halls and stopped to appreciate everything the Academy is and all that it offered me. This was my safe place. My shelter from a world that looked at me as a freak. It's where I found my family, learned who I was, and how to be a witch.

Here, in this very place, I learned that no matter how many times I fell, I could get back up. It was here I was taught that rock bottom makes a damn good foundation. I came here beaten and defeated and left the strong woman I am today.

All thanks to this place, and to the witches and warlocks who run it.

I'll be damned before I let a demon or a witch hunter or anything else for that matter scare us into hiding.

I take a step forward, and while my bare feet make no sound on the cold stone floor, I hear the echoing of my heeled boots clicking on the stone as I hurried to and from classes. I close my eyes and can almost feel my cloak swirling around my ankles, feel the weight of books in my arms, and Kristy's laugh ringing out around us as we talked and gossiped about things we thought were important back then.

The Academy was built in the early 1800s, years before the first nonmagical settlers moved onto the land, and is rich with the Gothic Revival style popular at the time. Most the walls are made from stone, giving this place an almost castle-like feel, and was built with magic, of course.

No one knows for sure exactly how big this place is, as last year a whole new corridor was discovered when a group of second-year students mixed up a potion wrong and caused an explosion, knocking down a wall, and revealing a hidden passageway. To me, it's all part of the appeal. Here at the

Academy, magic runs deep and plenty, and no matter what, this place will always feel like home.

Stopping next to the door, I listen for anyone inside. Hearing no one moving about—and assuming the students are probably on lockdown for the night—I walk through the heavy wooden doors, projecting myself into the library instead of the hall leading to it.

And then I stop again, unable to keep the smile off my face.

“I’ve missed you,” I tell the library as if it can hear me. There’s a good chance it actually can. A book drops, hitting the floor with a heavy thud. It startles me, but not as much as I startled the poor girl who saw me walk right through the doors.

“Are y-you a g-ghost?” she stammers.

“No, and sorry,” I tell her, holding up my hands to try and show that I mean no harm. “I didn’t realize anyone was in here. I’m—”

“You’re Callie.”

“Yeah, I am,” I say, wondering just how much they talk about me in class.

“I saw you earlier,” she says quickly and then I place her face. She was in Evander’s class.

“Oh, right. Sorry again about startling you.”

“That’s okay. We’re all a little jumpy with everything going on.”

“I don’t blame you for that. What’s your name?”

“Alice.”

“Nice to meet you, Alice. Hey...want to help me with something?” I move closer. “I’m astral projecting again but can’t actually touch anything.” I swipe my hand through a book to prove my point. “I came here to look for a certain book.”

“Yeah,” she agrees eagerly. “What book?”

“I’m not too sure, but it’ll be up there.” I point to the shelves on the second story. “I think.”

“That’s the dark magic section.”

“Then I think it’s the right place to start.”

Alice’s eyes widen, but she nods enthusiastically. Picking up the book she dropped, she sets it back on the shelf and goes up a spiral staircase to the second level of the library.

“What are you looking for?” she asks when we reach the section on dark magic. These books can be looked at but not checked out. And technically, only students in their final year are supposed to be leafing through them. By that time, they’ve learned enough to know to stay away from black magic.

Well, we hope.

“Anything about Hellhounds or opening the Gates of Hell.”

She whirls around. “You want to open a gate to Hell?”

“*Hell* no,” I tell her with a smile. “But I need all the info on it I can find, and I think the whole *the less you know, the better* thing strongly applies right now.”

“Fair enough,” she says with a shrug. “Though what I imagine you’re doing with this information is probably worse than what you’re really doing.”

“That’s debatable.” I try not to smile at her sass. I shouldn’t encourage it. “Though you know what they say. The truth is often stranger than fiction.”

I scan a row of books, going over each title slowly. Most are in Latin, and I know I’m not going to get lucky enough to find a big, fat book conveniently titled *The Idiot’s Guide to Opening and then Closing the Gates of Hell*.

“Try this one.” I point to a large, leather-bound tome. Alice grabs it and we crouch down on the floor as she flips through it.

“I don’t know Latin very well yet,” she says apologetically.

“Don’t feel bad. I still don’t know it as well as I should. Though I do have a friend who’s fluent.” Lucas could read through this thing pretty fast too.

“What am I looking for?” Alice asks as she flips another page.

“When I find it, I’ll tell you.” I let out a breath, feeling a little frustrated by the messy cursive handwriting filling the pages. “Hang on a second.” Alice moves her hand away, letting me skim the page. From what I can gather, this book is talking about the history of a demonic dimension and how it came about.

“This isn’t the right one.”

“I’ll keep looking.” She puts the book away and moves down the bookshelf, running her fingers over each spine as she searches. I go the opposite way, painstakingly reading each and every title.

“Callie!” Alice exclaims excitedly. “I think I found something.”

I hurry over, seeing her pull a smaller black book off the shelf. There's no title on this book, only a gold Baphomet overlaid on the leather.

"The Book of the Beast," I whisper, eyes lighting up. "I think you did find something."

She cracks the spine and I lean over, heart racing. And then the library doors open and close with a boom, echoing throughout the entire room. Alice and I both jump, and she quickly shoves the book into her cloak.

"Give this book to Evanader—I mean professor Greystone—when you have a chance. Tonight, if possible."

Alice nods and sidesteps down the aisle of books. "I will."

"Go back to your room where it's safe. I got this," I whisper, and move to the balcony.

Ruby Dorrows, a witch from my years at the Academy, stands at the threshold with her arms crossed over her chest. She's tall and pretty, with long thick braids cascading down her back, fading from black to red and matching her long dress. Evander told me she started as a professor here three years ago, teaching first-years the basics of magic.

She's smart, coming from a long line of highly talented witches and warlocks. She's decent at conjuring and has the power of telekinesis. We scored almost evenly on every test, with me coming out usually only a point or two higher.

And she's always hated me.

"Hey, Ruby." I offer a small wave. "Long time no see."

"Well, well, well. Look what the cat dragged in." She clicks her tongue.



“You know that’s not actually an insult considering how badass my cats are?”

She rolls her eyes. “Whatever. What the hell are you doing?”

“Just a little bit of research.” I step through the balcony and re-project myself just a few feet in front of her. I don’t mean to show off, and it’s only when I see her sneer that I remember Ruby always struggled with astral projection. “I have a theory.”

“Of course you do. You always do.” She takes a step back and sweeps her arm out at the library. “This is a place for students and faculty only. But you never thought the rules applied to you, did you? Because as I recall, you broke them over and over again.”

“That was a long time ago,” I say, working hard on keeping my voice level. She needs to get fucking laid or something. Because our Academy days are long behind us.

“Apparently not,” she scoffs, eyes going to the bite marks on my neck. “Of course you’d be vampire chow.”

“It’s not like that, but I have no need to explain myself to you. I’m here because I think a demon came to earth straight from Hell,” I whisper, hoping Alice didn’t overhear. The last thing we need is for all the students to freak out even more than they already are.

“A demon? Really?” She shakes her head. “You always were quite the drama queen.”

“I’m not being dramatic, Ruby. There’s a spot in the forest near the door where everything is dead. The trees, the plants... there are no birds. No insects. And the soil smells like sulfur.”

Her snotty smile falters. “Are you sure about this?”

“Yes.” I inch forward. “I need your help.”

She pushes her shoulders back and will probably replay this moment in her mind forever and ever. The moment I asked for her help.

“If there really is a demon on the loose, then it is up the Council to decide how to proceed. I take it you’ve already taken this matter up with our High Priestess?”

“Yeah,” I lie, not wanting to get into it with her. I already told Evander, who’s second-in-command anyway. “This is serious, Ruby. I think the demon is what’s killing witches, not a human hunter. I had these weird visions—”

“You have visions now?” She brings her hand to her chest, faking shock. “You really are a Wonder-Witch, aren’t you?”

Her childhood name was meant to mock me, but I secretly liked it back in our school years. Binx calls my name, and it echoes in my ears. I turn my head, trying to get a listen. Lucas’s voice echoes along with it, but I can’t tell what he’s saying.

“I have to go,” I tell her. “Just please, be careful.”

Before she can get a word in, my familiars pull me back. I sit up with a start, blinking rapidly to adjust my eyes to the light coming down above me from the ceiling fan in my living room.

“Callie,” Lucas says, reaching over and taking my hand, He helps me sit up and step out of the circle. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Didn’t quite get what I was looking for due to an interruption.” I look at Binx, who shifts back into cat form. “Ruby Dorrows.” I roll my eyes and he hisses. “What’s going on here?”

“Vampires.”

“Huh?”

Lucas slips his arm around me, looking over my shoulder and out the window. “There are three vampires in your yard.”

## CHAPTER 25



“Do you know them?” I ask Lucas, not sure if I should be on the defense just yet or not.

“No, nor do I know why they are here. Stay inside and let me handle it.”

“But there’s three of them.” I grab the hem of his shirt, not wanting him to go outside with unfair odds.

“They are young,” he tells me, not needing to explain how he’s at the advantage. The older a vampire is, the stronger and more powerful they become.

“I’m still coming with you. There are vampires who live in Throne Hill. Maybe they came to me for magical help or something.”

Lucas frowns. “*Or something* sounds about right.” He puts his hands on my shoulders and takes a step back. “Stay in the house.”

I let out a breath as he speeds away, and turn to Binx and Pandora. “Shadow around them. I’m getting my favorite wooden stake.” I go to dash up the stairs and stop, hearing one of the vampires talking.

“Lucas King,” he snarls. “We’ve been looking for you.”

Shit. This doesn't sound good. I take two stairs at a time, running into my room and over to my weapons chest. I grab the first stake I find, even though it's not my favorite one with the cool bloodstain, and run back down, joining Lucas on the porch.

The three vampires are standing right outside the circle I've cast on the house, and I'm not entirely sure if they can sense it or not.

"That little British bitch you've got," another vampire starts and Lucas flashes forward, grabbing the vampire by the throat and lifting him into the air. Fangs drawn, he looks terrifying.

"If you laid a finger on her I will tear you apart limb from limb," Lucas growls, and I know it's not a threat. He really will do it.

Another vamp circles around, charging at Lucas. He's fast, but Binx is faster. He shadows right at him, shoving him into the wall of magic guarding the house against the unwanted. The vampire screams as magic sizzles through him, no different really than being pushed into an electric fence. Well, one with enough juice to stop an elephant.

"What the fuck?" the last vampire standing cries. His hair is slicked back and he's wearing a leather jacket, looking so cliché it annoys me. The vampire shoved into my magical defense system slumps to the ground, knocked out cold. Binx and Pandora shadow around the other vampire and he snarls, slashing his fangs through the air as he charges at Pandora. In spirit form, my familiars are only corporeal when they want to be. And right now, Pandora very much wants to be the shadow she's appearing as.

The vampire goes straight through her, and his hand collides with the wall of magic. He snatches it back, shaking his fingers from the pain. Lucas is still holding the other vampire up in the air as if he weighs nothing. It thrashes and claws at Lucas's hand, tearing open his skin only to have it heal in a matter of seconds.

“Where is she?” Lucas demands and shoves the vampire onto the ground. The other makes a move to run away. I throw out my hand, hitting him with a ball of blue energy. Holding my hand out, I keep the energy burning through him, enough to keep him pinned to the ground but not enough to kill him.

Lucas looks over his shoulder at me, eyes narrowed with rage. Then he turns back to the vampire, biting him hard in the throat. Blood pours from the vampire's neck and it reaches up, desperately trying to stop the bleeding.

Can vampires bleed to death? I don't think so, but he sure is acting panicked. Though even if he doesn't die, that still looks painful.

“Keep him still,” I tell my familiars, and lower my hand, letting the last of the magic fizzle out of the vampire in the leather jacket. Conjuring up another string of magic, I stand beside Lucas. The red magic in my hand illuminates his face, and it's only then I fully appreciate the beauty in his rage.

The vampires are talking about Eliza, and the mere suggestion that they harmed her has him ready to rip them apart.

“If you hurt her,” Lucas growls and the vampire under his grasp gags and chokes on his own blood. He presses a hand over his neck, trying to push his skin together so it will heal.

“Sh...sh...she...” the bleeding vampire gasps. Another few seconds pass before he’s healed enough to talk. “She’s alive.”

“She better fucking be,” Lucas growls.

“We...we just talked,” he pants out.

“Let’s call her and find out,” I say a little apprehensively, feeling a bit like I’m playing with fire getting in between Lucas and the other vampires. But this is my yard and he’s my boyfriend.

Besides, I could conjure up an energy ball bright enough to scorch these undead motherfuckers if I wanted to. And I’m pretty sure my familiars will enjoy ripping them apart just as much as Lucas will.

Moving fast, Lucas stands and pins the vampire to the ground with his foot. The vampire tries to get away but is no match for Lucas’s strength. He takes his phone from his pocket and calls Eliza. A few seconds pass and I can see the stress and fear in his eyes. He’s not in love with her, but he loves her. She’s his family...his daughter, in a sense.

And then she answers. Lucas talks to her in another language again, and his face relaxes. A minute later, he puts the phone on speaker and sets it on the ground.

“You weren’t very nice to her, were you?” he asks the vampire, pulling him up onto his feet. “You mess with my child and you mess with me.” Without warning, he punches his hand through the vampire’s chest and pulls out his heart. I gasp, hand going to my mouth as my own heart skips a beat.

Blood spurts out, spraying Lucas’s face. He squeezes the heart, crushing it with his bare hand. “And that, asshole, is unforgivable.” The vampire starts to sizzle, burning from the

inside out. That's the way vampires die, regardless of how you kill them. The insides ignite and the outside—their skin, some muscle and tendons, and whatever clothes they were wearing at the time—melt into a messy puddle of ash and body parts on the ground. It's startling every time to watch them be reduced to nothing but smoldering goo.

“Holy shit,” I wheeze. “I didn't know you could kill a vampire that way.”

Lucas drops the charred heart to the ground and steps on it. He turns to me, shrugging. “The more you know.”

I blink, still too startled to move. But then the vampire who was knocked unconscious starts to wake up. I conjure a ball of blue energy and throw it at him. It hits him square in the chest and he explodes.

“Oops,” I say, wincing. “I didn't mean to do that. I...I guess he was still too weakened by the other energy blast.”

“What didn't the witch-bitch mean to do?” Eliza's voice comes from Lucas's phone.

“Now, be nice,” Lucas tells her, picking up the phone with his non-bloody hand. “She just did what I was about to do.” He says something else to her in French before hanging up.

“But this one,” he starts, going over to the vampire in the leather jacket my familiars are keeping pinned to the ground. “This one we'll keep for questioning.”

Binx and Pandora back off when Lucas draws near. He picks up the vampire, hitting him hard in the temple and knocking him out.

“Sorry about this,” he tells me, wiping his bloody hand on the vampire's shirt.



“What is this?” I ask, shaking my head.

“Vampire business.”

“Oh, come on.” I cross my arms. “You pulled me away from astral projection for vampire business?”

Lucas sighs, tossing the unconscious vampire over his shoulder. “I told you not all vampires want to abide by the Vampire Council’s new rules and regulations. They make doing business difficult when we’re supposed to honor contracts and follow guidelines. And these vampires are working for another older vampire who’s been trying to make things difficult for any vampire who follows the VC’s rules. They’ve been going around causing a lot of trouble. No one’s been able to get close to their leader, but I think I have a way now.” He looks at me with a smile. “Do you have any chains?”

“Chains?”

“To hold him? I’m keeping him alive for questioning.”

“I can do you one better.” I wave my hand for him to follow me to the shed. I conjure up another energy ball so I can see, digging around past my lawn mower for a spool of nylon rope that’s next to an industrial roll of Duct Tape.

“Vampires can tear through this,” Lucas says, raising one eyebrow.

“Not after I enchant it.”

“Why do you have so much rope?”

I snip off a long piece with garden sheers and look up with a smirk. “You think you’re the only one who knocks out and ties up your enemies?”



I FOLD THE TARP IN HALF AND STAPLE IT OVER THE VENT ON the wall of the shed. “That’s as light-tight as this place will get,” I say, stepping back. “Should we test it?”

“Go in, shut the door, and conjure an energy ball,” Lucas tells me. “If I can see light from the outside, we’ll know it needs more work.”

Nodding, I pull the shed door shut, wait a beat, and then close my eyes, conjuring a ball of bright white energy. I hold it for a few seconds and then push the shed door open.

“Did we seal it up good enough?” I ask.

“Yeah. Good enough.” Lucas shrugs. “Throw a tarp over him to be safe.” He picks up the vampire who’s still unconscious and tosses him on the shed floor. His arms are bound behind his back, legs tied together, and Lucas gagged him so he won’t go causing a scene tomorrow during the day. The plan is to take him back to Chicago with Lucas at sunset tomorrow, after making him wait out his sentencing in my shed.

The vampires roughed up Eliza, but she’s healed and is more annoyed her hair got messed up than anything. She’s the one who told them where Lucas was, and I can tell he’s unhappy about it. Her life didn’t seem to actually be in danger, and I think Lucas knows as well as I do that she sent them here with the intention of interrupting us. We haven’t spoken much since we started getting the shed ready to hold a vampire prisoner during the day, and I get the feeling he doesn’t want to go into it anyway.

I shut the shed, hold up my hand and seal it with magic. “No one’s getting in or out without me,” I tell Lucas, stepping back and crossing my arms over my chest.

“Well, this was an eventful night,” I sigh. “You did bring extra clothes, right?”

“I did. I’ll get them.” He goes to his car as I walk up the steps of the back porch. Binx and Pandora are both there, sitting on the porch railing. Pandora is giving me the stink-eye, and she doesn’t have to shift into shadow form to tell me what she’s thinking.

“I know,” I agree with a sigh. “But I have my own magical baggage to deal with. I can’t hold this against him. And besides, we learned something new. If all else fails, reach inside a vampire’s chest cavity and pull out and crush their heart.”

“You’ll break your fingers trying,” Binx says, shadowing into the house. Shaking my head, I go in, toss the wooden stake onto the kitchen table and open the fridge. I’m not really hungry, but comfort food sounds good right about now. And at the thought of food, both Binx and Pandora act very cat-like and rub against my legs, meowing, until I give in and tell them I’ll cook up some meat.

“What do you want tonight?” I ask them. “Chicken? Beef?”

They want chicken, and I grab the butter from the fridge right as Lucas comes back inside, holding clean clothes.

“You have vampire blood on your face,” I tell him, closing the fridge. He goes past me and upstairs to the bathroom to clean himself up. I get the chicken in the frying pan and am seasoning it when he comes back down.

“Want to go see a movie?” he asks, and I stop what I’m doing to stare at him. Go out and see a movie? Like we didn’t

just find out a demon crawled out of Hell and three vampires didn't come all the way here from Chicago to try and start shit.

I blink. Why the hell not?

“Sure. It's late, though. I'm not sure what's playing around here. We'd have to go to the next town over. Or I could make popcorn and we can watch something on Netflix.”

“As long as I'm with you, I don't care what we're doing.” He smiles, and it's then I realize his fangs are still drawn. Have they been the whole time we were putting the vampire in the shed? I either didn't notice or I'm getting used to it.

“The idea of staying home does sound nice.” I flip the chicken over and add a bit more seasoning. My familiars can eat raw meat, obviously since they hunt for their food most nights, but they appreciate it when I cook. And if I'm being honest, I like spoiling them.

Turning down the burner, I grab my popcorn maker out and set it on the island counter...which reminds me I never wiped anything down after Lucas fucked me good and hard on it. Moving the popcorn maker to the small section of counter space I have between the fridge and the sink I get out a bottle of disinfectant and spray everything down.

“Would you like some help?” Lucas asks, coming up behind me. He grabs me around the waist with one hand and takes the spray bottle with the other.

“That'd be nice. Just, uh, spray everything down and then wipe it up.”

He kisses my neck, lips going to the two bite marks and sending a shiver down my spine. I start with the popcorn while Lucas cleans, and then dish up the chicken for my familiars.

Once the kitchen is clean-ish, we take the popcorn and go into the living room and I groan, seeing the salt and candles on the floor. I set the popcorn down and drop down to my knees, picking up the candles. Lucas sweeps up all the salt and moves the furniture back. We really do make a good team.

“Finally,” I say, sitting on the couch next to him. I grab the popcorn and shove a handful in my mouth. Lucas picks the movie and I cover us both with a blanket. “You can stay the night,” I tell him, then feel a little awkward. “I mean, if you want to. I know my house isn’t light-tight like yours, but I already thought of a spell to seal my window in my bedroom.”

“I want to stay with you.” He takes my hand in his and extends my arm. “You’re safer that way.”

“I do feel safe around you.” I take another bite of popcorn and set the bowl down. Lucas traces the veins on my arm, stopping at the one inside my elbow, right at the place doctors usually take blood from. “Are you—” I start and then stop myself.

“Yes,” Lucas tells me, mouth already going to my arm. I tense a bit and he stops, looking up and retracting his fangs. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m a little ticklish there. And I’m scared it will hurt.”

“I’ve fed off you before,” he says, not trying to convince me it won’t hurt. Because it will.

“Yeah, but those were, uh, all kind of erotic experiences.” My cheeks flush a tad at the thought of his head between my thighs the first time he sank his fangs into me.

“I could make this erotic.” He slides his hand along my thigh. “I did assume you were tired, though.”

“I am.”

Lucas slips both arms around me, brings me into his lap, and kisses me, soft and gentle. Then he brings my head down against his chest, stroking my hair until I'm relaxed. We lay down together, and I move, extending my arm for him.

"I want you to drink me," I say softly.

"As long as you're ready," he replies just as quiet.

I move my head up and down, and he sinks his fangs in only a second later. I feel my blood spill out into his mouth. He licks it up, fingers wrapping around my arm, keeping it tight against his face. Then he starts to drink my blood, and the sensation of my blood being sucked out is weird, and suddenly I'm afraid of passing out because I'm thinking about it leaving my veins.

I close my eyes and move one hand to the back of Lucas's head, raking my fingers through his messy hair. He groans from my touch and takes his mouth off me, licking around the wounds.

"Breathe," he tells me, clamping his hand over the bite marks. I exhale and lean against him. "You taste so fucking good, Callie."

Hearing his words sends a wave of heat through me, even though I'm exhausted. He keeps his hand over my arm, applying pressure so the puncture wounds clot and start to scab over. I'm going to have to make a healing balm to get rid of the vampire track marks all over my body.

I cuddle up with Lucas, feeling safe and comfortable in his embrace. It doesn't take long before I fall asleep...only to be woken about an hour later.

"Callie." Lucas's hand is on my shoulder, and he's sitting up, eyes wide. "Something just fell down your fireplace."

## CHAPTER 26



“About time,” I mutter and lay back down. “I was wondering what was taking Evander so long. But not really. I forgot I asked for info on the witches.”

“That’s what fell through your fireplace?” He gets up and goes to the hearth, pulling back the cast iron door. “It’s a file folder. And a book.”

“Oh, good. Alice got the Book of the Beast to him too.”

“This is a witch thing...teleporting objects.”

“Yeah. It has to be set up in advance, and it doesn’t always work. But Evander is powerful.”

“He called you sister.” Lucas comes back to the couch, setting the folder and the book on the coffee table. I’m too tired to go through everything right now. “But you are not related.”

“No, we’re not. His mother is the High Priestess of our coven and was the headmistress of Grim Gate Academy when I first started. You know my real family isn’t magical. Tabatha had me stay with them for a while to help me get acquainted.”

And because I wasn’t sure I’d survive if I went back home, but that’s a tale for another time.

“Let me take you to bed,” Lucas says, gently lifting me up. He means take me upstairs to bed to sleep...I think. Though having lazy, sleepy sex with him right now doesn't sound too bad either.

“Okay.” I hook my arms over his neck as he scoops me up, carrying me up the stairs. He lays me down on the bed, and I start to drift back to sleep when suddenly I remember that I can't just fall asleep and wake up in the morning.

I have to seal the windows first.

My eyes fly open and I sit up, moving out of Lucas's embrace.

“What are you doing?” he asks as I get out of bed.

“I need to seal the windows.”

“Right.” He sits up, moving his pillow against the headboard, and watches me. I pick up the bowl that I filled with herbs earlier and invoke them. Using magic, I set them on fire and waft the smoke around the window. “Smoke thick as clouds and black as night, keep this room safe from the harm of light.” The smoke fills the window frame, blocking out everything from sight.

“It worked,” I say with a smile. “You'll be safe from all light in here during the day tomorrow.” I set the bowl down and lean over the bed, kissing Lucas. “I'm going to use the bathroom,” I tell him before leaving the room, coming back a few minutes later. We get under the covers together, and Lucas wraps me up in his arms.

I fall asleep almost instantly.





“WANT SOME?” I ASK CLARK, ANOTHER NEW EMPLOYEE Kristy hired. I’m so glad she decided to hire another person along with Vanessa. I looked over the schedule as soon as I got into the store and I think I can switch things around so Kristy and I are off in the evenings...just to be safe.

“No thanks,” Clark says. “I’m trying to cut back on caffeine. I had a really bad addiction last year that resulting in headaches if I didn’t drink coffee as soon as I got up in the morning.”

“I think I’m getting to that point.” I fill my cup and walk with Clark to the front of the store. He started after Vanessa and hasn’t opened solo yet. We try not to have just one person here at a time for safety reasons, but with only having the three of us for so long we kind of got used to it.

I sit behind the register while Clark turns on the OPEN sign and unlocks the door. A few people who were waiting for us to open pour in, eager to get their books. I told Clark I’d let him have the run of the place this morning for training purposes, but really, I’m tired and want to look through the Book of the Beast.

I take a big gulp of coffee and set my mug down on the floor next to me. There are two stools behind the register, but the floor is safer. I’m less likely to be spotted by a customer when I’m down here. Great customer service, I know.

But finding a demonic killer is a little more important. And I really don’t feel like dealing with people right now. Sometimes I question why I went into retail in the first place.

I yawn, wish I was back in my bed with Lucas, and pick up the Book of the Beast. Lucas has the files about the witches who were murdered and is going to look through for any sort of connection. I kind of hate admitting that he can look at them

with a different perspective than I can, but I really need his input on this.

I slowly look through the book, using my phone to translate anything that seems promising. I should have left this with Lucas and taken the files for myself.

In school, we learned that there are several places on earth that are thought to be gates to Hell. A few have supernatural features to them and are guarded by the covens in the area. But they are no more than portals to hidden worlds, like our Covenstead. A gate to Hell wouldn't be anything but accessible, and opening one requires a hell of a lot of power.

Powers witches don't possess.

I find a chapter about demonic beings in their pure form and translate a page and a half before the store gets busy. Sighing, I stash the book in my purse and move to a register, ringing people up while Clark helps them find books.

Around noon, we slow down for a bit, and I have Clark go on his lunch break while I sit at the register. As soon as he's out of sight, I go back to the book, translating as fast as I can. I reread what's typed out on my phone, and then call Lucas.

I get his voicemail and assuming he's dead asleep, I leave him a message.

"Hey," I start, keeping my voice low since there are still a few people in the store. "I found something in the book that says demons in their true form are basically super strong and hard to kill but *can* be killed while on earth. So, if something did get out...I can kill it. I'm not sure how yet, but I knew there was a way to fight it." A lady starts to walk toward the front of the store with her purchases. "I gotta go, bye."

I end the call and ring up the woman, spending a few minutes chatting about books and how weird it is that no one writes about vampires anymore now that we know they are real. Then the store gets busy again and stays that way for the rest of the afternoon.

We hit a slump again around three-thirty, which is pretty typical. I'm re-shelving books when Freya trots in, making a beeline to me. I crouch down, petting her as she purrs and rubs against me.

"I missed you too," I tell her, scooping her up. "How did everything go last night?" She responds by pressing her head against my chin. It was uneventful with Kristy, as it should be, thank goodness. Holding her in my arms, we go to the front of the store, looking for Kristy.

She's behind the counter, putting her purse away and talking to Clark.

"Hey," she says smiling when she sees me. "We've been busy, huh?"

"Nonstop all day." I set Freya on the counter, and she goes right to the jar of pens we keep by the register and starts batting at it. "Which is good for business."

"Very good." Kristy accidentally knocks my purse down as she puts hers under the counter. The Book of the Beast falls out, and she looks at it and then at me before quickly stashing it back in my purse. "Can you go over the inventory lists with me?" she asks, and I know it's a cover. I have no idea what an "inventory list" even would be. We log everything in the computer.

"Sure. They're in the back." I grab Freya right before she knocks the pens over and walk briskly to the back, keeping my

eyes down so I don't get flagged by a customer.

"Why are you reading the Book of the Beast?" Kristy asks as soon as the door closes in the back behind her.

"I'm trying to figure out how to kill a demon in its true form."

"Have you gone crazy?"

"Not entirely." I make a face and then let out a breath. "I don't know exactly what I'm looking for." It's warm in the backroom, like it usually is. During the day, the sun heats this place up fast. I take off my sweater. "I'm skimming for information, basically. I don't know why something would come from Hell and start killing witches."

"I don't get it either." Kristy chews on her thumbnail. "I mean, if it was a revenge thing, you'd think it would be tearing through covens, right? I mean, I'm glad it's not but..."

"But you're right. Because that's what would happen. It wouldn't be picking witches off randomly. Though Lucas doesn't think it's random."

"So you're back to thinking he's not the killer?"

"He's not." I slowly let out a breath and tell her about the woman who was found dead near the beach last night. "He was with me all night. There's no way it could have been him."

"Was that woman a witch?"

"I'm not sure. She wasn't part of a coven but that doesn't mean she didn't have powers."

"She might not have even known she was a witch."

“Right. Evander sent over files on all the witches who’ve been murdered. Lucas has them right now and is going through trying to find a connection. He’s at my house, by the way.”

“Did you make it lightproof?”

I cock an eyebrow. “Yes, I remembered not to let the sun kill my boyfriend. We also made the shed lightproof to house the vampire we’re holding hostage.”

“What?” Kristy shakes her head. “Never mind. I don’t want to know. Okay, yes I do.”

“It’s pretty interesting, actually. And could be a disaster now that I’m thinking about it. Lucas told me there are a handful of vampires who don’t want to assimilate, and they go around trying to make things difficult for those who have. I’m not sure the specific details, but he made it sound like these vampires are going after the businesses he owns or something like that. Basically fucking shit up in order to get back at him for following the rules of the Vampire Council. Three vampires showed up at my house last night after they got my address from Eliza, Lucas’s vampire daughter or sister or whatever you’d call her, and he was not happy.”

“Oh, wow. That is interesting and you’re right. That could end terribly.”

“Right? One issue at a time, though, and I really don’t want to get in the middle of vampire politics.”

“Agreed. Where did you get the book?”

“I astral projected to the Academy library, befriended a wonderful student named Alice, and had her give the book to Evander.”

She looks at me, blinking for a moment. “Your night was so much more eventful than mine.”

“Things escalated quickly.”

Her eyes go to the bite marks on my arm. “I can tell.”

I purse my lips. “It’s a little weird, I know.”

“It is, and I’m trying hard not to be judgmental or anything. But I just can’t imagine.”

“I couldn’t have either, before. But Lucas is...” I trail off, smiling. “He makes me laugh. He’s actually really thoughtful and is easy to talk to.”

“You like him, and he seems to really care about you.”

“Yeah.” My smile grows. “I think he does.”

“Well, good.” Kristy smiles.

“And how was spending the night at Daniel’s?”

“Very nice. He wants me to come back tonight.”

“You should,” I tell her. “You’re safer there surrounded by others.”

“I know. And I told him I’d consider it, even though I already planned on it. I mean, it’s for my own safety, right?” She flips her head over, gathering her dark blonde hair into a messy bun. “Better safe than sorry.”

“Of course.”

We go back up front and I help Clark count down his register drawer. He’s getting along just fine, and eagerly writes his name on the schedule when I ask him if he wants any of Kristy or my evening shifts, telling me he’s saving up for a trip to Florida and will take all the extra shifts he can.

He takes my evening shift tomorrow, and then Kristy's the next day. Two days. A lot can happen in two days, yet I still feel like it's not enough time to find this demon and send it back to Hell.

I lock up the office and find Kristy in the mystery section, organizing books.

"I'm going to head home for a bit," I start, picking up a book someone left lying on a shelf. "But I'll be back with Lucas once the sun goes down. Just in case." I find the book's spot and slide it in between two others.

"You don't have to do that." Kristy looks over her shoulder. "Betty will be here in an hour, so I won't be alone."

"I know. But something is on the loose and it's only been attacking after dark."

"I'll call Daniel. He and his brothers got all riled up when I told them something dark was in the forest. Damon was mixing potions late into the night."

Damon is Daniel's younger brother, who went to the Academy the same year as us. "He was always good with potions, wasn't he?"

"Yeah, and he's come up with a few new ones I think he's all too eager to test out. I'll make sure he's here before I even think about locking up for the night. This thing only attacks when witches are alone, right?"

"I think so."

She shelves the last book and shakes her head. "What do you think it wants?"

"I have no freaking idea."

“I don’t like this.” She pulls the band out of her hair, raking her fingers through it. “I don’t like feeling scared to go out in my own town.”

“I don’t either.” I take her hand. “We’re going to figure this out. The council will be looking into it too.”

“I know. We just have to play it safe for a while and then it’ll be back to normal.”

“Right. Call me if you need anything. I’ll have Freya stay too. Just in case.”

“Thanks, Callie.” She gives my hand a squeeze. “You be careful too.”

“I will.” A customer comes up, asking Kristy if we had a certain book, and I take it as my cue to go. I get my stuff from the front and head outside. It’s bright and sunny today, and the air is warm. I get into my Jeep thinking about how nice it’ll be to open up all the windows in the house when I get home, well, all except my bedroom window since Lucas is hiding out the day in there.

I call him again on my way home and get his voicemail. I don’t leave a message. I’ll be there soon enough. Rolling down my windows, I turn up the radio, enjoying the sunshine now before I go into the dark.

Both Binx and Pandora are on the porch when I pull up to the house. They’re stretching out, sunbathing, and look just like ordinary cats.

“Hey, guys.” I give them both a pat as I pass by. “I might join you out here if Lucas is still sleeping. The sun feels good today, doesn’t it?” I magically open the front door, take off my shoes, and drop my purse near the bottom of the stairs.



“Lucas?” I call, knowing he can hear me. The stairs creak under my feet as I walk up. My bedroom door is still shut, of course. “Lucas?”

He doesn't respond, and my heart speeds up a bit. And then I realize sunlight is shining under my door. Oh my God. I run up the rest of the stairs and fly into my room.

The magical smoke isn't blocking out the light anymore.

## CHAPTER 27



I freeze, too horrified to look around the room. I don't want to see Lucas's remains charred and oozing all over the floor.

"Callie," It's his voice. He's not dead. But...but...how? I look in and see him standing by the window.

"Lucas?" I whisper. "What...what...."

He turns away from the window. "The smoke went away, but whatever you did...you made it so the sun doesn't hurt me." He turns back around, putting his hand on the glass. "I haven't felt the sun in centuries."

"Holy shit," I breathe, still rooted to the spot. The door swings open and light from the hall spills in. Lucas winces, dodging out of the way. Shaking myself, I go into the room and shut the door. "You're not dead?"

"Technically, I've been dead for a long time."

Suddenly, tears fill my eyes. "When I saw the sunlight, I thought...I thought..." I can't finish the sentence. I inhale and shake my head. Lucas rushes over, taking me in his arms.

"I'm fine. Better than fine." Holding me against his chest, he turns back to the window. "You gave me the sun."

"I didn't mean to," I admit.

He chuckles. “I didn’t think so. But you did. It’s beautiful. Everything is bright. And warm.”

“I enchanted the glass,” I say slowly. “I think. The way I worded the spell...I meant for it to just keep the light out, but that’s not how I said it.”

“You said it in a way that kept the light from harming me. And you did.”

“Holy shit,” I repeat.

“You are incredible.” He spins me around in his arms. “I want to make love to you in the sunlight.” A smile pulls up his lips. “And that’s something I’ve never done before.”



“WERE YOU ABLE TO LOOK AT THE FILES AT ALL?” I RUN MY finger along the ridges of muscle on Lucas’s abdomen. “Or were you too mesmerized by the sun?”

His hand is resting on my bare ass, and my heart is still racing since we just got done having sex. We started on the bed and finished in front of the window. Lucas wanted to see as much sunlight on me as possible.

The sex was mind-blowing, of course, but this time was more intimate than before. It was the way Lucas looked at me. He was seeing me, the real me, and even though he’s told me before that he thinks my powers are beautiful, I could see it in his eyes.

“I did.” He slides his hand down to the back of my thigh and pulls me onto him. “You were right about the witches seeming random.”

“So there’s no connection?”

“Oh, there is. Along with all being twenty-five, all had the same sign—Virgo. Even the girl who was found on the beach yesterday fit the bill.”

“I’m twenty-five and a Virgo.”

Lucas flips us over, moving on top of me. “Then you’re coming back to Chicago with me tonight. You could be next, Callie. It appeared in your town, only a few miles from your house.”

“Let the asshole come after me. I told you, I’m not running.” I’m working hard to stay calm, and to anyone else, I’d probably be pulling it off without a hitch. But Lucas can hear my heart beating, and he knows how precarious of a situation this is. I’m not stupid. This is no lower-level demon. This demon crawled right out of the pit of Hell. It’s strong. Smart. Cunning.

It came here for a reason, and that reason is to kill witches with exactly two similar qualities, and I happen to have both of them.

“And then what?” he asks seriously. “We have no idea what’s killing the witches. Believe me, Callie, I am the last person who will ever tell you to run from a fight, but until we know what we’re fighting, you need to be safe.”

“We?”

“You think I’m going to stand back and let you have all the fun?” He smiles, dark eyes shimmering in the sunlight. There are flecks of green amongst the dark blue, and I never noticed it until the sun reflected in his eyes. He’s such a gorgeous man it’s almost unfair.

Only it is, because he’s mine.

“Come to Chicago with me tonight. We’re not running. We’re regrouping.” He brushes my hair back and presses his lips to my forehead. “I can’t stand the thought of anything happening to you. There are few things in this world I cannot kill, and demons in their true form are one of them. I have confidence we will find a way to send the demon back to Hell, but until then, I will do whatever it takes to keep you safe.”

“I should tell the coven about this. Make sure any witches who are Virgos are somewhere safe,” I say.

Lucas nods in agreement and moves off me, going back to the window. He’s still confined to my room, unable to feel the fresh air blowing through the breeze. But he’s looking outside during the day. I can only imagine how that would feel after over a thousand years in the dark.

“I know Virgos can be stubborn dicks, but what does this demon have against us so bad he has to kill us?” I shake my head, grinding my back teeth together the way I do when I’m nervous. “The demon in the woods,” I start. “The one possessing that man...it said “they” were looking for something or someone, and he thought whoever *they* are were afraid of it.”

“They’re looking for a witch, a certain witch.” Lucas turns around, crossing his arms over his chest. “That’s why the demon is going from coven to coven. It’s picking out all the witches born within a certain time twenty-five years ago.”

A chill goes through me and goose bumps break out along my skin. I get under my covers, pulling them up to my chin. “But why?”

Lucas shakes his head. “I’m not sure. Maybe there was a prophecy? A certain witch would grow up to possess powers that could kill them?” He comes over, sitting on the bed next

to me. “Callie, it’s only a matter of time before it tries to kill you.” His nostrils flare and his eyes cloud with worry. “I will die before I let anything hurt you.”

I cup his face with my hand. “I know. But it won’t come to that.”

He kisses my forehead and gets under the blankets with me, holding me tight against his chest. I don’t know how he knew I needed to be held right now, but I’m glad he did. Because my hands won’t stop shaking and my mind is racing a million miles an hour.

There was something else the demon said to me... something that didn’t make sense.

Until now.

*They said it shouldn’t be.*

If I’m the witch the demon is looking for, does that mean I shouldn’t have been born? It takes everything I have to ignore the nagging feeling deep within that says it’s true.

“Are you going to astral project again?” Lucas asks, pulling me out of the darkness my thoughts had taken me to.

“No, I’m going to send a letter.”

“I’m assuming you’ll be using magic to do so.”

“Of course. I need to get a message to the High Priestess. I’m sure the coven already noted the connections, but they’re still looking for a human witch hunter, not a demon who’s seeking out witches based on their birthdays.”

I get out of bed and put my clothes back on. Forgetting for a moment that Lucas can’t follow me downstairs, I open the door only to shut it again.

“Sorry,” I say, seeing him dart away from the light.

“It’s okay. It’s not enough sunlight to do much damage.”

“Oh, well, good. Maybe when I’m not on a demonic serial killer’s hit list, I’ll see if I can enchant all the windows in the house.”

“I’d like that.”

I smile. “Me too.” Hurrying out of the room, I shut the door quickly behind me and go downstairs and into the kitchen. I pull a notebook out of my junk drawer, flip through it for a blank page, and write a letter to Tabatha, explaining everything that’s going on. Folding it up, I go to the fireplace and place the letter inside.

Holding up my hands, I whisper the incantation three times. The letter goes up in flames, disappearing with a puff of smoke. My two-way line of communication actually goes to Evander’s office, but Tabatha will still get the note.

“All right, guys,” I say, sitting on the couch. Binx and Pandora jump up next to me, both purring. “It seems this demon douchebag is after twenty-five-year-old Virgos.” Binx growls. “I know,” I agree. “It’s only a matter of time before it comes for me. And when it does, we have to be ready.”



“I’M TAKING YOU OFF THE SCHEDULE.” KRISTY GETS UP, JAW tense and shoulders hunched forward. Lucas and I are at the bookstore, and I just told Kristy what we discovered about the witches. “You need to go to the Academy and stay there.”

“I’m going to Chicago tonight,” I tell her, knowing there’s no reasoning with Kristy when she gets in a mood like this. She’s freaked out, and rightly so. “I’ll stay with Lucas until I can find a way to—”

“Don’t even think about it,” Kristy interrupts. “This is a demon in its true form,” she whispers. “One touch can kill you.”

“True, but from what I read in the Book of the Beast today, the longer the demon is on earth, the weaker it becomes.”

“And some demons walk the earth for hundreds of years and can still kill you without breaking a sweat,” she counters.

“Do demons sweat?”

“Callie,” she scolds. “This is serious.”

“I know.” I let out a shaky breath. “Trust me, I know. And I’m just as freaked out as you.” I look up, looking into her eyes. Her bottom lip quivers and she throws her arms around me. “I’ll be fine, though, I promise. I have a magical arsenal in the car and I’m going to lay all the protection spells I know on Lucas’s place as soon as I get there. Getting away from the coven will throw this thing off my trail.”

“Call me when you get there and then maybe again tonight or every hour on the hour, so I know you haven’t had your throat slit, okay?”

“I can do that.”

She lets me go and straightens up. “What does this demon have against Virgos?”

“I asked the same thing,” I say with a laugh. The bell above the door chimes as a small wave of customers comes in. We close in five minutes. I don’t know why it always annoys me to have people come in this close to closing, but it does. “Stop stressing. It’s going to be fine.”

Kristy forces a smile. “Promise me.”

I smile back. “I promise.”



Fuck. I hate lying to my best friend.

The bell chimes again, but this time it's Daniel. His brother Damon is with him, and Damon smiles and waves at me as soon as our eyes meet. I wave back, letting out a breath and trying to steady my nerves.

"Hey, Callie," he says and strides over. "Haven't seen you in a while. You look good."

Lucas, who was looking around the stores, comes back over to the counter, standing close to me. Vampires can be stupid possessive, though Lucas doesn't strike me as the type.

"Thanks, and yeah...it's been a while."

"You look like you haven't aged a day since the last time I saw you," Damon goes on.

I laugh. "Well, I feel like I have."

Lucas slips his arm around my waist. "This is my boyfriend, Lucas," I introduce.

Damon flicks his eyes over Lucas's large frame, able to sense he's a vampire right away. "Oh, uh, nice to meet you." He extends his hand for Lucas to shake. Lucas raises one eyebrow and I elbow him in the ribs. Making a face, he reaches out and shakes Damon's hand.

"Crazy what's been going on, isn't it?" Damon says.

"Yeah, it is. Are you guys headed home after this?" I motion to Kristy and Daniel.

"We're going to get something to eat before. Want to join us?" He looks at Lucas, and I know he's thinking about the fact that Lucas doesn't eat food. When he looks back at me, his eyes go to the bite marks on my neck. Thanks to Kristy's healing balm, they've almost healed. By tomorrow they'll be

gone, but right now it's still obvious Lucas sank his fangs into my skin and sucked the blood out of my body.

"Maybe another time," I tell him. "We have plans already. Be careful, okay? You all know how much Kristy means to me."

Daniel laughs. "We'll keep her safe."

"I know. Freya is going to stay with her again...just in case." Lucas stiffens a bit, not liking that I'm keeping one of my familiars away when we know I'm the demon's target audience. But having Freya stay with Kristy gives me peace of mind. "Well, I should start getting things ready to close." I take Lucas's hand in mine. "It was nice seeing you again."

"Yeah, you too."

Lucas helps me re-shelve books as we wait for the last of the customers to leave. Usually, Kristy and I make sure the store is in perfect shape before anyone leaves, but tonight we just want to get out of here.

She's freaked out.

And I know I should be too.

## CHAPTER 28



“**W**hat are you going to do with him?” I watch Lucas carry the vampire from my shed to the trunk of his car. The vampire, who’s still bound and gagged, struggles against Lucas to no avail.

“For now,” he starts and drops the vampire down, “I’ll let Eliza have some fun.”

The vampire protests, knowing that Eliza isn’t going to place nice after what he put her through.

“Oh, okay,” I say, well aware the only reason he’s not going to question that vampire is because he’s preoccupied with keeping me alive. “Want me to conjure an energy ball to knock him out?”

Lucas turns to me, grinning. “You know I love watching you inflict pain on my enemies.” He slips his fingers in the belt loops on my pants, pulling me toward him. “Go for it, babe.”

I hold out my hand, conjure a bright blue ball of energy and hit the vampire with it. He goes limp right away.

“That should hold him for an hour at least.”

Lucas closes the trunk. “Got everything you need?”

“Yeah. I’m ready.”

We're driving straight to the bar now, mostly so Lucas can drop off the vampire inside his trunk. Apparently, he has some sort of closet-turned-jail-cell that's strong enough to hold vampires. He knows because he's held them in there before.

And he thinks witches have too much drama.

He has a few business items to attend to as well, and I won't mind hanging around the bar for a while. I get free drinks now that I'm sleeping with the owner.

We get in the car, and Pandora cuddles up on top of my bag full of clothes and Binx sits in my lap, purring as I pet his sleek fur.

"Are all familiars that friendly?" Lucas asks, seeing Binx roll over for a belly rub.

"If it appeases the witch, then yes."

He smiles. "Crazy cat lady does suit you."

I laugh. "I can't disagree."



THE BAR IS JUST AS BUSY AS IT WAS THE FIRST TIME I WAS here. Leaving the vampire in his trunk, Lucas and I head inside. The crowd parts for Lucas, as just his presence is intimidating. As we make our way to the back, I watch as woman after woman eye fucks my vampire.

And he doesn't pay them any attention.

"It's about damn time," Eliza spits as soon as Lucas opens the office door. He steps in and pulls her into a one-armed hug, kissing the top of her head. I hang back, watching, still unsure of the actual dynamic of their relationship. All I know is it's not sexual, and right now I'm getting a weird brother-sister vibe going on.

“I am sorry I wasn’t here last night,” Lucas tells her, smoothing out her blonde hair.

“I handled it.” Eliza rests her head against his chest. “You taught me well.”

“Yes, I did,” Lucas agrees, tipping her chin up to look into his eyes. “I brought one back for you. He’s in the trunk of my car. Do what you wish with him, but make sure he can answer my questions later.”

“You spoil me.” Eliza’s eyes flutter closed for a few seconds as she brings one hand up, resting it over Lucas’s. Then she inhales, smelling me. “What is the witch-bitch doing here?”

“Don’t call her that.” Lucas drops his hand from her hair and steps back. Eliza’s eyes flash with anger. “She is with me now.”

Understanding exactly what that means, Eliza works hard not to huff. “Fine. But she better not get in my way.”

“I assure you, she won’t.” Lucas motions for me to come into the office. “I don’t think you two have had an official introduction. And seeing as you’re both important to me now, I’d like you to make each other’s acquaintance.”

“Hey,” I say with a small wave. “Nice to, uh, meet you again.”

Eliza cocks an eyebrow and puts one hand on her hip. Lucas gives her a glare, much like a parent scolding a child without having to say a single word. “Fine, I’ll play nice,” she snits and holds out her hand. “Eliza. Nice to meet you. Now what do you say I pour you a drink?” Her tone is level and she looks annoyed, but at least she’s trying, right?

“That’d be nice, thanks.”

Eliza walks past, giving Lucas a look that obviously says *I'm doing this for you*, and motions for me to follow her. Lucas stays in the office, taking care of whatever he needed to while Eliza and I go to the bar.

Gavin, the guy who bought me a drink the last time I was here, is back with his group of friends. He sees me and waves enthusiastically.

“Of course you have a fan club,” Eliza says dryly and rolls her eyes.

“I don't have a fan club. That guy must be a regular or something because he was here the last—and only other—time I've been here.”

“He is a regular.” She draws her fangs and looks out across the bar, exciting Gavin and his friends. “A lot of them are regulars.” She smirks and grabs a glass, not having to tell me that a lot of the men come here to ogle over her. She's very pretty, which is alluring enough on its own. But add in that she's a vampire and her appeal increases tenfold for some people.

“So they're *your* fan club,” I say with a smile.

“I suppose. It's entertaining. For now.” She adds ice to the glass. “But humans quickly get annoying.”

“Yeah,” I agree. “They do.”

“You're a human.”

“I'm well aware.”

Spinning around, she mixes up some sort of drink, pours it in the glass, and slides it in front of me.

“What is this?” I ask, looking at the dark red liquid in my glass.

“Try it and find out. It’s one of our specialties.” She leaves me to tend to a few other customers, and I take a sip of my drink. Whatever it is, it’s good. I lean against the bar as I continue to sip my drink, looking around this place. Another one of the bartenders, a pretty young redheaded girl, is a vampire, but the other employees I can see are human. This place has a nice vibe, and I can tell why it’s so popular, vampire employees aside.

More people filter in, and a live band starts playing. Feeling a bit in the way, I take my drink and wander around, finding myself at the basement steps. I look at them, letting out a breath as I shake my head, remembering the first night I met Lucas and how much I hated him. How much he irritated and infuriated me. How he lied and manipulated me into taking me home and then inviting him into my house.

And how now...now I’m very much at risk for falling in love with him.



“CALLIE.” LUCAS’S HAND LANDS FIRMLY ON MY SHOULDER, shaking me awake. “You’re having a nightmare.”

I sit up, clutching my chest. I’m coughing, still feeling the burn of hot smoke in my lungs. Gasping for air, I reach out, feeling him in front of me. I was tired when we got back from the bar and fell asleep pretty much as soon as I laid down in Lucas’s bed.

The room is pitch black and I can’t see anything in front of me. I can’t be sure they’re not here...that the dark hands holding me down against the pyre aren’t trying to grab me and bring me to the fire.

“Breathe,” Lucas says, reaching over and turning on one of the bedside lamps. I blink, adjusting my eyes to the light, and look around. I’m in his bed, naked with damp hair from the shower. The sheets are tangled around my feet, and my pillow is on the floor. Squeezing my eyes shut, I shake my head, but I can’t get rid of the fear brought on by the dream.

Or the voice.

Or the terrible feeling that everything is all my fault.

“They died because of me,” I gasp, not having yet caught my breath. I blink and every single one of the murdered witches’ faces flash before me. “It’s all my fault. He’s...he’s looking for me.”

“You’re not making any sense.” Lucas tries to comfort me, pushing my hair back over my shoulder.

“No!” I scramble away, getting out of bed. My stomach churns and I think I might puke up the remains of my dinner all over the polished hardwood floor. “It makes perfect sense. He was looking for me.” I jab my fingers into my chest. “Me!”

“Callie.” Lucas slowly gets out of bed, holding a hand out to me. “Who? Who is looking for you?”

“The demon!” Tears fill my eyes. His voice echoes in my ears, reverberating against every single bone in my body, sending chills throughout my entire being. I inhale but don’t take in any oxygen. “He’s been looking for me the whole time. But he couldn’t find me because...because...I don’t know. But he knew when I came into this world and has been searching and killing and searching and killing.”

I gulp in air again, hands shaking, and heart racing. I’ve never had a panic attack before to know what it feels like, but I



think I'm having one right now. I close my eyes and the tears spill out, rolling down my cheeks.

“So many innocent lives...and it's all my fault.”

Lucas rushes over, taking me in his arms. “Take a breath, Callie. You had a nightmare.”

“No, it wasn't just a nightmare,” I protest against him, trying to get out of his arms. Because right now I don't feel worthy of his comfort. Right now, I feel like the abomination the demon told me I am.

*Ashes fall around me like snow, sticking to my eyelashes. The harsh scent of burned hair and charred flesh fills my nose. I'm tied down, unable to get up or move.*

*“I've been looking for you, half-breed,” the demon says, and its voice echoes in my ears. “Now it's my turn to watch you burn.” It reaches forward, claws dripping with my own blood, and covers my face with its hand.*

“I saw everything. Each murder. I felt their fear. They were so afraid.” I break down crying, and Lucas lowers us to the floor, cradling me in his lap and stroking my hair.

“Tell me everything you saw in the dream.”

“It started like the first vision I had, watching a witch burn. I closed my eyes and when I opened them, I was the witch on the pyre. The demon was burning me, and I think...I think the Devil himself was watching. And he was happy.”

“Then what happened?” Lucas is so patient with me. I turn, pressing my face against his chest.

“The demon touched me as I burned. He wanted me to know every single one of the witches he killed didn't have to die. He was only looking for me. But the...the...” I close my

eyes, needing to see the dream replay before me. “Someone else...I don’t know who, but the demon did not like that person...they made things difficult. Kept me hidden or something. And that’s why he killed the others. He thought they might be me but couldn’t tell until they were dead. He called me a half-breed again.”

“I have tasted your blood.” Lucas runs his fingertips up my arm. “And you taste fucking delicious, Callie. You are a witch, not a half-breed.”

“He told me I was.”

“A demon in your dream told you so and you believe him?”

“Don’t patronize me.”

“I’m not,” he says firmly. “Think about what you’re saying, about what happened. You’re worn out, understandably, from being up with me at night and carrying on life as a human during the day. You’re emotionally spent from worrying about your coven and you’ve just discovered you are a target on the demon’s hit list.”

“It was more than a dream, Lucas. I know it.”

His eyes narrow slightly with concern, but he doesn’t argue with me, doesn’t tell me how crazy I sound, because even I know what I’m saying sounds fucking insane.

But I know it’s true. The demon is looking for a very specific person, and he won’t stop killing until he finds said person. And that person is me. I know it. I take a deep breath, hold it, and then slowly let it out.

“Do you think I’m crazy?”

“Anyone worth knowing is crazy.” Lucas’s lips brush against my lips as he talks. “But since that’s not what you’re really asking...yes, Callie. I believe you.”

“I don’t know why the demon wants me.”

“You’re a powerful witch,” he suggests. “A powerful witch who fights demons and wins every time. Really, it’s only a matter of time before you kill more than the lower-level demons you usually go after. Kill or be killed applies to anything that can be killed.”

“Yeah, I suppose, but why would that make me hard to find? I know for certain the other witches weren’t out killing demons. That girl on the news probably didn’t even know how to weave a simple spell.” I wrap my arms around his neck and shiver. I didn’t realize how cold I was before. I was too busy freaking out.

“I don’t know, either.”

My head is starting to throb. None of this makes sense, yet it all seems to add up at the same time. All the demon has to go on is that *someone* was born twenty-five years ago between August twenty-third and September twenty-second...which is a lot of fucking people.

But, narrowed down to *witches* born in that time, the numbers drastically go down. And they go down even more when you limit your search to the Midwest. It’s too much to think about. And not enough information. Fuck. This is infuriating.

“Is that bottle of wine still here?” I ask.

“Yes, it’s in the fridge.”

“Thank God.” I stay in Lucas’s arms for another few seconds before slowly untangling myself. My clothes are on

the bathroom floor, and the shirt Lucas was wearing before is at the foot of the bed. I grab it and pull it over my head. “I need a drink.”

I’m all jittery the entire way to the kitchen. Lucas comes with me, not bothering with clothes. I turn on the kitchen light and go to the fridge. Lucas gets me a wine glass and I fill that sucker to the brim.

“You know that’s not a healthy coping mechanism.” Lucas watches me take a large gulp of wine.

“Thanks, *Mom*,” I retort. “And I know.” I take another drink and set the glass down, letting out a sigh. “I enjoy wine, but I don’t overdo it unless I’m stressed.” I hold up my hand. “Yes, I know,” I press. “It’s not a good way to deal with my emotions.”

“Is there ever a good way to deal with them?” Lucas sits on a barstool.

“If you haven’t figured it out in over a thousand years then I’m going to say no, there’s not.” I wipe my eyes. “I can’t explain it. I just know this is the truth. That demon wants me and—” I cut off when I get another flash before me. “Do you have a pen and paper?”

Lucas speeds out of the room, coming back only a second later. I quickly scribble down the symbol that’s etched onto the demon’s pendant.

“It was wearing this.” I turn the paper around and show Lucas the demon’s sigil.

“You can find his name.”

“And if I can find his name, I can summon him.”

Lucas takes my hand. “Summon him and kill him.”

“I can, and I will.” I put my finger down on the paper. “I just need to, well, figure out who this demon is first before I can narrow down the *how* part of killing.” I bite my lip and look at the sigil. “There are hundreds of demonic sigils like this archived.” I rub my forehead. “It’s like one step forward two steps back.”

“Don’t get discouraged.” Lucas rests his hand on top of mine. “Look at it this way: we are one step closer to finding the identity of the killer.”

“I like your way of looking at things. I have his sigil. I can find his name.” I close my eyes and let out a shaky breath. “I need to end this before anyone else gets killed.”

“Do you know a demonologist?” he asks, and I’m once again so grateful he knows and accepts every single part of me.

“Oh my god, I do!” I open my eyes, jumping up to get my phone. The thought hadn’t occurred to me before. “Naomi and Nicole’s grandmother. She’s a nasty old woman, but she studied demons extensively in her university years. Thank you!” I shout behind me as I run back up the stairs. My phone battery is almost dead, and I dump out my bag on the floor looking for my charger. My hands shake as I plug it in. I call Nicole first and get her voicemail. I end the call without leaving a message and call Naomi next.

“You better have a good reason for calling at five in the morning,” Naomi growls when she answers.

“The best reason.” I lay my sketch of the sigil on the floor so I can take a picture and send it. “I have the sigil of the demon who’s killing the witches.”

“What?” she breathes. “A demon is killing witches? Are you sure?”

“Yes. I need you to show it to your grandmother and see if she knows the demon’s name. If I get a name—”

“—You can fight it,” she finishes.

“Exactly. I’m going to text you a photo of it. It might not be exact. I saw the sigil in a creepy vision dream and we both know art is not my strong suit.” I pull my phone away from my ear, take a picture and send it to Naomi.

“That looks oddly familiar,” she says once the photo goes through. “I think I’ve seen this in Gran’s books before.” I hear her get up and shut a door. “Mother and father have put the estate on lockdown, fearing Nicki and I might be next.”

“Shit, you’re stuck?”

“I’m never stuck. Give me until the end of the day, and I will pay my gran a visit.”

“Be careful,” I press.

“That goes without saying. We both have identifying information about this demon, making us at risk more than ever before. Doubly for you, Miss Virgo.”

“I’m more like my moon sign than I am an actual Virgo.”

“You sure about that?” she asks dryly, and I can just imagine her cocking an eyebrow and crossing her arms over her chest.

“You’re such a Scorpio. But Naomi...thank you. You’re a good friend.”

“I know I am.” We end the call and I set my phone on the floor, moving it against the wall so I don’t trip over it later.

After quickly gathering up the stuff I dumped all over the floor, I sit on the bench by the end of Lucas's bed.

"I take it the call went well?" Lucas appears in the doorway of his room, holding my glass of wine. I run my eyes over him, once again appreciating how he's so comfortable in his own skin. I bet it's liberating, actually. Maybe I'll start walking around naked more often. I'm sure Lucas will like it, at least.

"Yes. Naomi is going to run the sigil by her gran. She thinks she's seen it before, so we should be able to get a name by tonight."

"Once you have a name, will you know how to kill it?"

"Possibly." I don't know how to kill a demon that arose straight from Hell. I don't even know how to perform an exorcism on one possessed. "You can read Latin, right?"

"Right."

"There might be something in the Book of the Beast on how to kill demons."

"I will read through it." He hands me the wine and sits on the bench next to me.

"Thanks, babe." I take another big gulp and reach for Lucas's hand. "You don't have to help me with this."

"No," he says. "I don't *have* to at all. But I want to, because I care a great deal about you, Miss Callie Martin." He flips his hand over, fingers intertwining with mine. "In fact, I dare say I care more for you than I have for anyone in well over a hundred years. No, make that two hundred years." His eyes meet mine and he smiles. "Or five hundred."

“You’re so old,” I tease, leaning in to kiss him. “And I really care about you, too.” Enough to feel like I’m falling in love, but I won’t even let myself think about it. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

Because loving a vampire can only end in heartache. He’ll live forever, never aging a day. He’ll always look this young and healthy, this fit and muscular. And I, obviously, will age like any old human.

“I’m glad we’re on the same page.” Lucas’s lips pull into a smile. He kisses me, and I want nothing more than to surrender to him. “You’re making me hungry,” he growls.

“And you’re turning me on,” I whisper.

“Well, well...” He twirls a piece of my hair around his fingers. “What are we going to do about that?”

I bite my lip and part my legs. “Dinner and a show?”

“Fuck,” Lucas moans, pulling me to him. “You are everything I could ever ask for.”



## CHAPTER 29



I stretch my legs out in front of me and lean back, closing my eyes and tipping my head up to the sun. I'm on the rooftop patio, soaking up the warmth of the day. Pandora is walking along the railing and Binx is stretched out on the chair next to me, enjoying sunbathing as much as I am.

I'm waiting for my lunch to arrive, and then will probably go back inside and take a nap. Lucas looked through the Book of the Beast and didn't see anything about how to kill demons. There was, however, a chapter that alluded to sending a demon back to Hell. Which would be great if I were able to summon up enough power to crack open the earth and shove the fucker inside.

Pandora softly meows, letting me know the delivery guy is here. I go back inside, hurrying through the large house and meeting the delivery guy at the gate. Opening the front door and revealing that the house is blacked out is a dead giveaway that a vampire lives here. I take my food and go back to the rooftop, watching people walk up and down the sidewalk as I eat.

I've been texting Kristy all day, letting her know what's going on and that I'm still alive. Right now, sitting here in the warm sunshine, I'm not as scared as I was when I woke up in

the dark. I've never been afraid of the dark, and there are many times when I prefer it. But there's something about the sun, about the golden light pouring down on me from above that's comforting.

"Do you want some?" I ask my familiars, opening the pizza box. Usually, they turn up their noses at "people food," but even they can't resist a little slice of Chicago-style pizza. "We'll have to make sure to save a piece for Freya." I take a slice and go back to the lounge chair. I'm glad Freya is with Kristy, keeping her and everyone with her safe, but I miss her.

I take my time eating, trying to focus on people watching and not thinking about demons. I fail. If I do come face to face with this demon, I'll at least ask why it's singling Virgos out. Though I still have this weird feeling that it's been looking for me the whole time...that the visions I've had were shoved into my head by someone—something—as a warning, trying to get me prepared for what's to come.

"It makes no sense, I know," I say out loud to my familiars. "But what else could it be?"

I have another piece of pizza and then close the box, taking it inside and putting it in the fridge. Since the bottle of wine is now empty and sitting on the counter, the pizza is the only thing in the fridge.

I rinse out the wine bottle and look around for the garbage bins, finding them in a pull-out drawer next to the sink. There are two, one for garbage and one for recycling. Neither are very full, and I drop the wine bottle into the recycling bin. As I'm closing the drawer, I see the plastic packaging for a pack of batteries in the garbage. I reach in to take it out and move it into the other bin.

“Are you picking through my garbage?” Lucas asks, appearing in the threshold of the kitchen. He’s dressed this time, wearing dark jeans and a black t-shirt.

“Yes, but this isn’t garbage. This is plastic and should be in the recycling. You can literally live forever. You of all people should care about the well-being of our planet.” I drop the wrapper into the recycling bin and shut the drawer. “Don’t tell me you’re one of those people who refuses to believe in global warming.”

“I’m not technically a person,” he reminds me. “And I do believe in it. I’ve seen the damage humans have done over the years.” He crosses the kitchen and hands me my phone. “Someone named Abby sent you a text message.”

“My sister?” I take the phone and open her texts.

**Abby: I’m really looking forward to seeing you! I told Mom you might show up and she was so happy she started crying. She planned a whole other dinner for tonight when you and your mysterious boyfriend show up. We miss you, Callie. I know Mom might not show it, but she does. I’m sorry again it took me this long to reach out, but I’m excited to see you tonight.**

Her text is followed by a couple heart emojis and then a photo of Penny in her birthday dress.

“Fuck,” I mutter. That’s tonight? No, it can’t be. I saw Abby just a few days ago and...shit...she said she’ll see me in a few days. I close the texts and double-check today’s date. Yep. It’s today.

“What’s wrong?”

“My niece’s birthday party is tonight. I forgot about it. I mean, I didn’t completely forget. I just lost track of time.”

“That’s forgetting,” he teases.

“I know. I was just busy trying not to die.”

“Do you want to go?”

I bite my lip and think about it. “I want to see my sister again. And part of me wants to show up just because my asshole brother doesn’t want me to.”

Lucas grins. “There are the petty and impulsive traits coming out again.”

“Also, there’s kind of a good chance I might die trying to kill this demon.” I say it as a joke, but Lucas and I both know it’s true. His face tenses for a split second. “I want to give my niece her birthday present before that happens. But I kind of have to go shopping first to get her something.”

“There are plenty of stores around here.”

I nod. “Good thing, because I didn’t bring a dress to wear tonight.”

“Take my credit card and buy whatever you want,” he says.

“I can’t accept that,” I start.

“You can and you will. I want you to look good on my arm tonight.” He’s joking, trying to get me to agree to go out and have some fun shopping.

“You don’t mind going?”

“I’m curious about your family. They seem like undeserving assholes.”

I swallow hard. If only he knew the whole truth. “My sister isn’t bad. She’s not that much older than me and was the only one who stood up for me.”

“Doesn’t seem like she did enough.”

I shake my head. “We were kids. She was only like thirteen when I...when I started going to Grim Gate Academy.”

Lucas goes into his office again, returning with his wallet. I get a glimpse of his ID when he opens it to give me his credit card. I’ve never seen an Illinois issued vampire ID before. They’re supposed to look like driver’s licenses, practically indiscernible with the exception of having a date of *death* instead of date of birth. It catches me by surprise to see his looking much, much different, with the word “VAMPIRE” printed on the top in bold red letters.

“Is that a new ID?” I ask.

“It was new about three years ago. Lovely, isn’t it?” Lucas gives me his credit card.

“They’re supposed to look like driver’s licenses.”

“They did at first.” He closes his wallet. “But someone wanted to make sure it was obvious we aren’t human.”

“That seems a little unfair.” I flip his credit card over in my hands. “I mean, the whole point of making you all get IDs and register is so you can do things you couldn’t do without identification, like buy plane tickets and own houses.”

Lucas shrugs, trying not to let me know it bothers him. “I follow the rules that benefit me. Like I said before, I do what I want regardless.”

“Right. It’s worked well for you.”

“It has.” He moves my hair over my shoulder and kisses my neck. “Go shopping now while the sun is out.”

“I will.”

“Can you bring your familiars?”

I smile, feeling a little warm and fuzzy inside from his concern. “I can, but people may wonder why I’m carrying cats around.”

“Rich people are weird,” Lucas says with a smile. “As long as you’re carrying Binx around in a designer purse, no one will question you.”

“Binx is heavy to carry in a purse,” I laugh. Upon hearing his name, Binx trots into the room and rubs against my legs. He likes being carried around and likes the idea of me buying a fancy purse just for him. “They can sense when I’m in danger, though. But I will be fine if I stay in public places and am back here before the sun even starts to set.”

Lucas nods, kissing me once more before I leave.



“DO I LOOK ALL RIGHT?” I TURN, LOOKING AT MY REFLECTION in the floor-length mirror in the master bathroom. Lucas steps up behind me, looking very good himself in dress pants and a black button-up shirt. Vampires do have reflections, making me wonder who the hell started that silly rumor they don’t. My money is on vampires themselves, wanting to keep humans from figuring out who they were.

“You are beautiful.” His arms wrap around me and he kisses my neck. “You’re making me want you again.”

“You always want me.” I spin in his arms.

“I always will.”

Not wanting to mess up my hair—it took three spells to get this fancy updo just right—I stand on my toes to kiss him. The fact that I’m about to walk into Abby and Phillip’s house in

just a few minutes is starting to hit me, and I'm getting nervous.

"Maybe we should stay here and sharpen weapons or something."

Lucas tips his head. "You're already dressed and now you're having second thoughts?"

I turn back around, stealing another look at myself in the mirror. Instead of black, I went with a dark purple dress. It's tight around my waist and then loosens around my legs, ending with soft lace that swirls when I walk. I bought myself a new pair of shoes just to match, and Lucas called ahead and purchased an expensive necklace from Tiffany's for me. He had texted me while I was out shopping, encouraging me to stop and "just look around" at jewelry at the store.

The diamonds were waiting for me when I walked inside.

"Now that I'm thinking about it, it seems really stupid and reckless to take any time away from fighting this demon."

"You don't know the demon's name yet," Lucas reminds me. "Your friend wasn't able to see her grandmother until after dark." He looks past me, out the window above the tub. "And the sun just set."

"I know. I just...I just..." I can't stop my hands from shaking. I force my fear away and put on a smile. "I'm hungry. My mother always hires the best caterers, so at least dinner will be good." I reach up and run my finger over the diamonds decorating my neck. "We should go before we're later than we already are."

Not questioning my back-and-forth behavior, Lucas takes my hand. "Would you like to walk or drive?" he asks when we

get to the foyer. “We might not find a spot in front of her house.”

“We can drive.”

“Good. I haven’t driven my McLaren in a while, and I want to take it out tonight.”

“Your what?”

Lucas laughs. “You’ll see.”

The McLaren turns out to be a car, and a very expensive one at that. Lucas has two indoor garage spots along with this house, which is probably part of why this place cost so much. The Chevelle is next to the McLaren, and a motorcycle is squeezed in between the classic car and the garage wall. Like the rest of his house, the garage is neat and clean.

It takes only minutes to get to my sister’s street, and a car leaves a parking spot right in front of her house as we pull up.

“Did you have something to do with that?” Lucas takes the spot.

“Maybe. Witches have a way of getting what we want.”

“You do.” He kills the engine. “Ready?”

I look at the house, seeing the lights on, feeling the energies of the people inside. There’s a large window at the front, looking into a living room or parlor. People mill about, talking and laughing.

And then my father’s frame comes into view.

Suddenly, my hands start shaking and I can’t get them to stop. I press my back against the seat of the car and turn my head down, gulping in air.



“I can’t do it,” I pant. “I can’t go in there and see the rest of my family.”

“I’ve seen you face other vampires, a demon, and zombies with not even a quarter of the fear you have right now. What did they do to you?” Lucas asks slowly.

I blink and suddenly I’m back there, in the waiting room. It’s when I knew something was wrong but didn’t want to believe it. My dad told me he was taking me to a doctor who specialized in children with “my condition.” But the waiting room was all wrong. It was stark, empty.

There were no cheerful murals on the walls. No toys to entertain me while I waited for the doctor. Hell, there weren’t even any boring magazines for the adults to look through.

That’s when I knew something was wrong. But my dad... he was my *dad*. He wouldn’t hurt me, right? After all, I’m his daughter.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” I tell Lucas, blinking back tears. “I’ve spent a long time repressing everything and if I talk about it, I’ll think about it. And right now...”

He folds his large hand around mine. “Right now, let’s just get through dinner.”

“Thank you.” A tear falls from my eye and Lucas gently wipes it away. “Okay...I can do this. With you with me...I can.”

“If you need to leave, Callie, let me know and we will.” He squeezes my hand, kisses my cheek, and then gets out, coming around to open the door for me. Hand in hand, we walk up to my sister’s house. Before we get to the porch, the front door opens. Three teenage boys, who I think are Phillip’s nephews

if I remember them correctly from their wedding photos, come out and gush over Lucas's car.

"Is that a McLaren 600LT?" one of them asks.

"It is." Lucas holds up the keys.

"Shit, man, that's a sweet car," another boy says.

Phillip and his brother—Steven maybe? I'm bad with names—appear in the door, just as excited about the car as the boys. I'm not a car person so I don't get the hype, though it was obvious the 600-whatever cost more than my house when the doors opened up instead of out.

"Callie?" Phillip gasps, seeing me. "We...we weren't sure if you were going to show up."

"I said I would." I look my brother-in-law in the eyes, and he lowers his gaze. He's always been scared of me, afraid I'll hold him spellbound like a vampire. Should I feel bad that I've encouraged his fear? My pettiness is showing again, I know.

"You came in that?" Steven asks, eyes wide. "That thing is wicked fast. Have you taken it out and opened it up?"

"Not as often as I'd like," Lucas answers and the guys laugh.

"Boys," Steven calls, waving for his kids to come back inside. They're gathered around Lucas's car, taking selfies with it.

"What's going on out here?" My sister's voice comes from the house, and as soon as she sees me, she pushes past her husband. "Callie!"

My throat tightens a bit when I see the emotion in her eyes. Abby jogs down the stone steps and pulls me into a hug.

“I’m so glad you came. I know this is hard for you,” she whispers, squeezing me tight. “Thank you.”

“Of course, Abby.” I hug her back, and the large gift bag I’m holding crushes against her back. “This is for Penny.”

“You didn’t have to get her anything.”

“She’s my niece. And I had fun shopping for her. I might have gone a little overboard.”

“She is fun to shop for.” Abby takes the bag from me and wipes her eyes with the back of her hand. I didn’t realize just how much me showing up would mean to her.

“This is Lucas,” I say, taking his hand again. “And this is my sister, Abby, and her husband, Phillip.”

“Nice to meet you,” Lucas says with a smile and I swear my sister blushes just a little bit.

“Come in, come in,” she says to us, and that’s all the invitation Lucas needs. “Dinner will be served shortly. We have drinks and appetizers now. Penny just went down for the night,” she says almost apologetically. “The party really seemed to wear her out today.”

Keeping a steady hold on me, Lucas walks with me into the house. There are more people here than I thought. Phillip comes from a large family. He’s the youngest of six children, and I think most of his siblings are doctors as well.

Soft music is playing, and I can tell most of the adults have been drinking. My eyes dart around, looking for my father or brother. But they’re not here, and I wouldn’t be surprised if they avoided me most of the night.

Mrs. Real Estate agent—whose name is escaping me now as well—is here, along with one of the other moms I saw

walking with Abby. They all come over, acting as if they know me.

“Callie, you look amazing!” Mrs. Real Estate gushes.

“Thanks,” I say, feeling awkward.

“She’s always been in amazing shape,” Abby agrees. “And I’ve always been slightly jealous.”

“For real,” Mrs. Real Estate agrees. “I’d kill to have your figure! What is your secret?” She laughs, hand landing on my shoulder. It takes everything inside me not to shy away. I don’t like being touched like this.

“I don’t have a secret. It’s just part of my job to be in good shape,” I say without thinking.

“Oh, interesting! What do you do?” Mrs. Real Estate asks.

“I, uh, own a bookstore.”

Mrs. Real Estate opens her mouth but just nods instead. Then she looks at Lucas. She definitely blushes. “And you must be our mysterious neighbor.”

“Lucas King,” he introduces himself. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“I’m Ricci,” she says, voice all breathy as she takes Lucas’s hand. Then she blinks and pulls herself together. Abby introduces us to a few more of her friends and Phillip’s family members. I grab a glass of wine and find a spot on the couch, sitting as close to Lucas as I can without it looking obviously inappropriate.

A thin woman with short brown hair makes her way over, stopping to talk to every single person she passes by. Her dress is designer, and I’m sure she got her hair and makeup professionally done for tonight. For her, image is everything.

“You’re about to meet my mother,” I say, feeling all nervous again. I tip the wine into my mouth, downing half before Mommy Dearest looks my way. She knows I’m here, yet has waited this long to come over. I think she’s always worried I’m going to call her out for being such a shitty mom. I’ve dreamed of it, even planned out a speech, but haven’t been around her long enough since I moved out to actually deliver it.

She grabs a glass of wine on her way over and takes a sip. Looks like the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.

“Callie, my darling,” she coos. Her eyes flit between me and Lucas.

“Hello, Mother.” I don’t get up, don’t offer her a hug. And she makes no move to hug me either. She perches on the edge of the armchair next to us.

“You look beautiful as always, dear.”

I clench my jaw. This was a terrible idea. Terrible. Terrible. Terrib—

“Hi, I’m Lucas.” Lucas takes his hand out of the death clamp I have on him and offers it to my mother. “I’m Callie’s boyfriend. It’s nice to make your acquaintance.”

“It is very nice to meet you. Abby tells me you live just two streets over on Orchard? That’s quite an impressive street. And did I hear correctly you two pulled up in some sort of sports car the boys got excited about?”

“Why don’t you just ask him for his net worth,” I mutter, rolling my eyes. Lucas puts his arm around me.

“I’m just trying to make conversation,” Mom says quietly. Maybe she is. I automatically take anything she says or does personally.

“Yes, I do live just a few streets over. It’s a very nice neighborhood.”

Mom smiles. “It is. I was excited when Abigail moved in. Such a good place for raising children.” A few seconds of silence pass by. Mom apprehensively leans forward and pats my leg. “I’ve missed you, honey.”

I look into her eyes, surprised to see the tears she’s holding back. “You know where I live.”

“I do, but it’s...it’s far. And I’ve been so busy with campaigns.” Finding something to brag about, Mom puts on a smile and turns to Lucas. “Did Callie tell you her father and brother are in politics?”

“She’s never mentioned it,” Lucas says, even though I did. “Neither of us have much interest in the subject.” He rests his hand on my thigh.

“So, how did you two meet?” Mom asks.

Lucas meets my eye and gives me a small smile. “At a bar. One of the many I own.”

Mom laughs again, liking Lucas more and more. If only she knew...I finish my wine and set the glass on the coffee table in front of me. Abby and Phillip come over, sitting on the love seat next to the couch.

“Do you want anything to eat?” my sister asks. “The appetizers are to die for. I’ll go with you to get something.”

I am hungry. “Yeah, I’d like that.”

“What about you?” she asks Lucas. “Can I bring you anything?”

“No thanks.”

“Lucas is on a special no-carb, no-sugar, dairy-free, low-fiber diet,” I say seriously.

Phillip pats his stomach. “Maybe I should try it. Though with no dairy, sugar, carbs, and low fiber, all you eat is meat and some vegetables then, right? Like a super intense version of Keto?”

“Something like that,” Lucas tells him. He gives my hand a squeeze before I get up, going with my sister into the kitchen where a gorgeous spread of appetizers has been laid out.

“I’m so glad you came,” Abby goes on. I think she might be a little tipsy. “I plan to have another baby soon, and all I can think about is if I have another girl and Penny has a sister... I hope she can be a better sister than I am.”

“You’re not a bad sister,” I tell Abby.

“I should have done more. Once you left...I just let you leave. I didn’t try to reach out and I’m sorry, Callie. I really am. Part of me was just so ashamed and I didn’t think you’d want to talk to me, which I realize is me making an excuse again.”

“It’s okay.”

“But it’s not. We lost a lot of time. You’re my sister, and I want to be friends.”

“I think we can be,” I say with a smile. “I’m here now, and I’m having a nice time.” I pick up a plate and start filling it with food. I could feast on appetizers alone and be too full for dinner.

“Your boyfriend is so handsome,” she laughs. Yep, she’s definitely tipsy. “How did you meet him?”

“I stopped a vampire from draining a human dry in the basement of his bar.”

Abby whirls around, gripping my arm. “Are you serious? How did you not get killed in the process?”

“Vampires aren’t really threats for us,” I say with a shrug. “At least not for me.”

Abby swallows hard. I know she’s terrified of vampires due to our own father feeding her lies about how they want nothing more than to sneak into your house and drink the blood of your children while you sleep.

“How?”

I chew the inside of my cheek, not sure how much to tell her. If Abby wants to start a new relationship, then she has to be okay with me being myself.

“I can conjure energy and throw it. A strong enough energy ball will kill just about anything, really.”

Abby’s eyes are as wide as saucers. “Can I see?”

I look around, making sure we’re alone in the kitchen. I pick a piece of cheese off my plate, pop it in my mouth, and then hold out my right hand, I rub my thumb over my fingers, conjuring up a string of glowing pink magic. I twist my fingers, and the magic weaves around them. I release it into the air, where it breaks apart into a million little balls of light that get absorbed into the world around us.

“Oh my goodness,” Abby whispers.

“Think I’m a freak still?”

“I never did. And no. I think it’s beautiful.” She takes my hand and smiles. “I really do.”



Now tears are springing to my eyes. “I can also telekinetically pull a cork out of a bottle of wine.”

“That’s amazing.”

“It’s come in handy a time or two.” Shaking my head, I go back to the food, filling my plate and getting another glass of wine before going back to Lucas. He’s talking to Phillip and his brother about cars.

“Are you doing okay?” Lucas rests his hand on my thigh, inching his fingers up under the hem of my dress.

“Yeah, because you’re here with me.” I smile, feeling dangerously close to falling completely in love with him right now. He puts his arm around me and leans in for a kiss, not at all shy of showing a little PDA.

“Gotta love the beginning phases of a relationship,” Steven laughs. “Wait until you’ve been married half as long as I have. It feels like an eternity.”

“It’s not about the length of time,” Lucas says, bringing his hand up and cupping my cheek. “It’s about finding the right person.”

Steven says something else, but his words are lost when Lucas kisses me again. I settle back against him, finishing my plate of appetizers. I get up to use the bathroom, taking my purse with me so I can touch up my lipstick. As I’m standing at the sink, my phone buzzes with a text. I put the lid back on my lipstick and reach inside my purse. The text is from Naomi.

“Please have a name,” I whisper as I open her message.

**Naomi: Gran freaked out when I showed her the sigil. She wouldn’t tell me a name because she dares not say the**

**name of a demon in the Third Hierarchy. This is serious shit, Callie. Even for us.**

I close my eyes, on the verge of hyperventilating again. The hierarchy of demons was discussed briefly in school. There are lower-level demons, like the ones I hunt and kill. They live on earth, hiding in abandoned buildings and caves. They're dangerous, of course, but aren't much of a match for those of us with magic.

Then there are demons in the Fourth Hierarchy, similar to lower-level demons but have the power to possess victims, much like the one we dealt with in the woods. They are dangerous and rare to encounter and have the ability to move from earth to their demon dimensions and back.

And then there's the Third. These are the demons that possess people. The ones strong enough to kill you from the inside, the ones that require an exorcism to send them back to Hell. Who have the power to open the Gates of Hell. In its true form...I don't know how I'll fight it.

I drop my phone into my purse and grip the sink, leaning forward and taking in big, deep breaths. It's going to be okay. Somehow...someday...it'll be okay.

It has to be.

I spend another few minutes forcing myself to breathe and wait until my heart slows to normal before leaving the bathroom. On my way back to the living room, I spot my brother. My heart skyrockets back up, and all I want to do is turn and run away. I close my eyes, take a deep breath, and remind myself I'm about to face a demon—of the Third Hierarchy of bloody Hell at that—soon enough. My brother is nothing.

I smooth my hands over my dress to keep them from shaking. We're in the dining room, separated from the living room by the foyer.

"Hi, Scott."

My brother, who noticed me the second I walked into the room, looks up, pretending to have to look for the source of my voice.

"Callie." He tips his head. "I'm glad you took my advice on coming to the party." A pretty blonde woman is at his side, and she looks me over, a bit confused.

"I came for our sister. She invited me."

With his light brown hair and hazel eyes, he looks so much like our father it's unsettling. His eyes narrow for a second before he puts on his fake smile. "At least the birthday girl doesn't know who you are. You missed her, which is funny considering you came to her birthday party hours late."

"I've already met Penny," I say slowly, realizing his petty insults have no meaning in the grand scheme of things.

"She's your sister?" the blonde woman asks, looking at Scott. "You never said you had another sister."

"I'm Callie," I say, trying to be nice. Just the simple fact this woman is dating my brother makes me not like her.

"I'm Ella. Nice to meet you." She shakes her head. "Sorry. I'm just shocked. We've been dating for two years and I never knew about you." She trains her blue eyes on my brother.

"Callie was living abroad doing mission work." The lie rolls off my brother's tongue so smooth you'd never know it wasn't the truth. It's the same lie my father has told over and

over. I'm such a model citizen, such a *good girl*. There's nothing witchy about me at all.

"That's not true," I say with a sweet smile. "I live in Indiana, about an hour or two away depending on traffic. I own a bookstore and have lived in Thorne Hill for quite some time now."

Scott's jaw falls open and he flashes a *how dare you look* my way. I cross my arms and cock an eyebrow. Two can play this game, asshole. And I am. Not. In. The. Mood. He recovers fast, laughing and patting my shoulder.

"My sister has always been the humble one. Yes, she resides in the countryside but spends most of her time traveling and helping the less fortunate."

"Stop lying, Scott." I feel magic burning at my fingertips. Ella looks back and forth between my brother and me, not sure what's going on.

"Stop being so humble." He grips my shoulder so tight it hurts. "Tell her. Tell her, Callie, how much of an angel you are." I jerk out of his grasp and every light in the house flickers all at once. He looks up at the lights and back at me, nostrils flaring. "Tell her, Callie," he says through gritted teeth. "You don't want your halo slipping now, do you?"

"My halo?" I echo, and the dining room lights flicker again. He's trying to threaten me, trying to force me into submitting into the role of the good girl everyone has painted for me. As I stand there, heart racing and sweat breaking out along my brow, I realize I have two choices.

I can let my brother keep bullying me around. Using the past as a weapon, knowing just how deep the cuts run when he wields it.

Or I can put the past on like armor.

I'm tired of this. Of feeling ashamed. Of the fear and dread, just the sight of him brings up in me. I'm proud of who I am, and it's time I take a stand.

"Silly little boy." I take a step closer and the lights above us start to dim. "Don't you remember? I traded my halo for a motherfucking crown." I let out a breath, almost unable to believe that I finally stood up for myself.

"Watch your mouth," Scott snaps.

"I'm so confused," Ella says. "She's really your sister?"

"Yes," Scott says, putting on another act. "I should have told you about her, but we try to respect her privacy. Callie, my dear sister...she's been struggling."

"I have?" I ask, raising my eyebrows. "With what?"

Scott lets out a sigh, acting as if this pains him. He turns toward Ella, shaking his head. "She's always been mentally unstable. She's been institutionalized the last few years and we—"

"Don't you fucking dare," I snarl. Magic sizzles at my fingertips. Scott looks down, seeing the blue energy swirling around my fingers. I bring my hand up, trying to release the energy without hurting anyone.

And then Scott hits me hard across the face.

## CHAPTER 30



“**W**hat the hell do you think you’re doing?” Scott demands through gritted teeth. I stand there, stunned, as pain radiates through my head. Scott hit me right in the temple, and his fingers lashed the corner of my eye. If it swells up, I wouldn’t be surprised. Ella gasps and Scott turns on me, eyes full of rage.

“You’re nothing but the Devil’s whore,” he says, grabbing my wrist and twisting my arm up. The magic has left my fingers, and his grip on my wrist hurts.

“Scott!” Ella exclaims, jumping back. “What are you doing?”

And then Lucas appears, seemingly out of nowhere, and grabs Scott by the throat. He draws his fangs and lifts Scott into the air several feet off the ground. Ella screams and the others in the room scatter. “You’re lucky your sister has more mercy in her little finger than most do in their whole body. If my own flesh and blood treated me this way, I would not be so kind.” Lucas raises Scott a little higher in the air and looks at me. “What should I do with him, lover?”

I’m shaking, feeling like the little girl in the hospital room all over again. I’m alone in the bed, watching my family walk

away. Abby is crying, Mom has tears running down her face, but Scott...he's smiling.

"Let him go," I say, pushing my shoulders back. I bring my sore wrist in toward my body, holding it against my chest. "He's not worth it."

Lucas releases his grasp and Scott falls to the floor. He scrambles up, hands going to his neck, and then starts dramatically coughing. Lucas turns to me, putting one hand on the small of my back and bringing my body to his.

"Are you all right?"

"I am now." I let out a ragged breath, heart still going a million miles an hour. "He caught me off guard. Thank you... thank you for defending me." I close my eyes in a long blink and realize everyone is looking at us. "I just want to go."

"If that is your wish."

"It is." I flick my hand, causing my brother to fall to the floor again. Being petty and impulsive feels so good sometimes. "Start recording," Scott hisses to Ella, who's scrambling to get her phone from her purse. "You all saw that!" Scott shouts. "The vampire tried to kill me!"

Lucas slowly turns away from me, zeroing his gaze in on my brother. "If I wanted to kill you, you'd be bleeding into my mouth right now. I saw you hit a woman. Your own sister at that." He moves in Scott's direction, causing my brother to clamber away. "I've walked this earth for over sixteen hundred years, and you know the one thing I've never been able to stand throughout all that time? Weak men like you who hit women."

Scott cowers, eyes darting to the phone in Ella's hand, and starts coughing again. "You all saw that, right?" Scott says, not

coughing anymore. “The vampire attacked me.”

“You hit her,” a woman in the corner of the room behind us speaks out. “I-I saw you hit that girl.”

“He’s compelling you to say that!” Scott goes on. “Don’t make eye contact. Someone call the police and have this...this creature arrested!”

“Yes, call the police.” Lucas laughs, and his amusement at the situation just pisses Scott off more. “I’d love to watch you tell them how you hit a woman in the face.”

“They’ll never believe you,” Scott sneers. “I’m running for office in this city. They’ve already put their trust in me.”

Lucas points to a camera on the wall above us. “Have fun explaining the footage then.” He speeds forward, pushing my brother up against the wall. Scott tries to look away, but Lucas grabs his chin and makes him look right into his eyes. “Apologize to your sister,” he commands Scott. “She’s a goddess and you’re a lowly peasant. You’re not worthy to be in her presence. In fact, you should kiss her feet and beg for forgiveness.”

Scott’s eyes gloss over, and he nods. “I’m...I’m not worthy.” He turns his spellbound eyes on me as he crawls over, bending his head down and tries to kiss my toes. I step back before he actually makes contact. “Forgive me, goddess. Please, most gracious one, forgive me.”

“Tonight,” I start, crossing my arms over my chest, “I’ll show mercy. But cross me again and you won’t be so lucky.” I extend my hand for Lucas, and he takes it and brings it to his mouth.

“You are a goddess,” he says with a devilish smirk. “And you’re mine.” Hand in hand, we start toward the door. Scott is



still on his knees, calling for me to forgive him. People move out of the way, and even though there's music playing, you could hear a pin drop.

I hold my breath the entire way out, not exhaling until we're on the sidewalk.

"So, my family is great, aren't they?" I blink back tears, getting annoyed with myself for letting this get to me when there's so much more at stake. But I'm human and I can only take so much.

"They're awful," he agrees. "Save for your sister, that is."

"Yeah...and dear old dad didn't have the balls to even show his face."

"Are you adopted?"

I laugh and then realize Lucas is serious. "No. Why?"

"You smell different from your siblings and mother. Family members who share the same blood have a similar smell."

I angrily wipe away a renegade tear. "Do I smell better than they do at least?"

"Very much so."



LUCAS OPENS THE CAR DOOR FOR ME AND OFFERS A HAND TO help me out. I take it, silently rising to my feet. The drive from my sister's was short, but I didn't say a word the entire time.

We enter the house, and Binx and Pandora come running. I sit on a built-in hall tree to take off my heels, reaching down to pet them both.

“Turns out you were right,” I tell them. “I shouldn’t have gone to the party. Though watching Scott grovel at my feet did feel good.” I scoop up Binx and press my face against his soft fur, needing a few seconds to gather my composure. I still have to tell everyone about the demon and how I’m back to square one on how to kill it.

Leaving my purse on the hall tree, I walk through the mudroom and into the kitchen. Lucas is in there, and he wraps his strong arms around me.

“If I overstepped back there,” he starts and kisses my forehead. “Well, I’m not sorry. I held back from what I really wanted to do to him. No one lays a finger on you and gets away with it.”

“You didn’t overstep,” I say softly. “Thank you. No one’s ever defended me to them before.”

“They don’t deserve you.”

I swallow the lump in my throat. “I know.” Exhaling heavily, I lean on him for support. “Naomi texted me.”

“You have a name?”

“Not exactly.” I tip my head up. “She told me her gran didn’t think it was safe to say the name of a Third Hierarchy demon.”

“Fuck,” Lucas swears, knowing how bad the situation is.

“Right? I don’t know what to do. Or what could be so wrong with me that a demon who sits in Satan’s inner circle wants to kill me?”

“Nothing is wrong with you,” Lucas says fiercely. “You’re a threat to the Devil, Callie. If anything, that makes you even more appealing to me than you were before.”

His words make me smile. “I’m a dangerous woman.”

“Yes,” he groans, lips going to my neck. “You are.” He scoops me up and carries me upstairs, but instead of going to the bedroom, he takes me to the rooftop patio, offering a small reprieve from everything going on. “It’s not as quiet as Thorne Hill, but I’ve always found it rather peaceful up here.” Lucas sits on the lounge chair, keeping me tight in his grasp.

“It is. Being up above most of the traffic makes me feel removed from society in a way.”

“Do you miss living in Chicago?”

“Not really,” I say with a shake of my head. “I’m not much of a people person. The country life is much more my style. I like the privacy, the quiet nights, and the sense of community in Thorne Hill is like something straight out of a Hallmark movie.” I look above us, unable to see any stars despite the clear sky. “Too bad there isn’t a little hole-in-the-wall bar for sale you could buy there.”

“I don’t like the distance between us either.” Lucas slides his hand along my thigh. I stretch my legs out, resituating on Lucas’s lap. It would be nice to have him in Thorne Hill with me. Our time together is limited to the night and having to travel from Chicago to Indiana takes away an hour of that precious time.

My eyes fall shut when Lucas runs his fingers through my hair. Chaos spins around us, dark and dangerous. I want to disappear into this moment, hiding away from the world in my dead lover’s arms.

We stay like that for a while, finding solace in the quiet of night. There is so much I have to do and getting up is the first

step. I want to put it off as long as I can because as much as I don't want to admit it, I'm scared.

Lucas sits up, inhaling deep. "Your sister is here. Are you sure you're related? You smell nothing alike."

"I've seen the photos of my mom when she was pregnant with me and I'm pretty sure she still has my crusty umbilical cord in a shadowbox somewhere."

"Humans are weird."

"Tell me about it." I disentangle myself from Lucas and go to the railing, looking down at the street below. "Abby?"

My sister looks up, startled, and pushes the gate at the sidewalk open. "Can we talk?"

"Yeah...I'll be right down."

Lucas and I both go inside. He stays in while I go out, meeting Abby in the front.

"Want to come in?" I ask. Binx and Pandora slip out the open front door.

"Um, can we stay out here?" Abby pulls her sweater tighter around herself. She doesn't want to be in the house with a vampire.

"Sure." I close the front door behind me and sit on the bottom stone step leading to Lucas's grand house. Binx sits next to me, flicking his tail back and forth. Pandora stays at the top step, growling at my sister.

"I don't think they like me." Abby shuffles back.

"They don't trust you." I run my hand over Binx's head. "But don't worry, they won't hurt you."

"I mean, they're just cats, right?"

Binx tips his head, asking if he can shadow around Abby.

“Not now,” I tell him. “That goes for you too, Pandora.” I pat the spot next to me, but Abby stays rooted to her spot. “I’m sorry about your party. I really was having a nice time until... until...I’m just sorry, Abby.”

“It’s not your fault, Callie. We watched the security cameras and saw everything. Scott hit you. Hard.” Abby’s eyes fill with tears. “Dad’s freaking out you’re going to press charges and wants me to delete the footage.” She inches forward and sits on the step next to me, apprehensively looking at Binx. “Lucas was defending you, and while I can’t say I agree to his methods, I’d like to think Phil would do the same if it were me. I mean, he can’t pick someone up one-handed, but I’d hope he’d at least push Scott away or say some strongly chosen words.”

“I think he would defend you.”

“He’s kind of a wuss.” Abby sniffles as she laughs. “And he wouldn’t want to risk hurting his hands when he has surgery in the morning.” She plays with a button on her sweater. “That’s why I came here. I wanted to tell you I don’t blame you.”

“Thank you, Abby. That means a lot to me.”

“I should have told you sooner. And I don’t just mean about tonight. I meant it when I said I’ve been doing a lot of thinking. Being a mom has changed me in a good way, and I... I can’t imagine treating Penny the way you were treated. I’m so ashamed of our family and I’m so, so sorry.”

“I forgive you,” I say quickly, feeling a bit uncomfortable. I’m not really an emotional person, and the last thing I ever

want is pity. I reach out and take her hand. “Really, Abby. I never blamed you.”

“Well, I think you should. Just a bit at least.”

“Would that make you feel better?”

“Slightly.”

“Fine. Then I hold the smallest grudge against you and your perfect family.”

She squeezes my hand before letting go. “Thank you.” Binx stands and stretches. Purring, he rubs his head against me. Abby snatches her hand back, still scared of my black cat.

“Did you see the magic in my hand on the footage?” I ask, needing to be sure. The hand that held the magic was hidden from sight by my body, but the glow might have been picked up.

She shakes her head. “No, I didn’t.”

“Good.”

“So...Lucas...” She looks out at the street before meeting my eye again.

“He’s a vampire, yes, I know.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

“Why wouldn’t it be?” I pick Binx up and set him in my lap.

“Well, because he’s...he’s...”

“A vampire.”

She drops her gaze. “Yes.”

“And I’m a witch.”

“But you’re human,” she says quietly. “Vampires kill, Callie. You know that.”

“You do realize humans are responsible for all the wars, genocide, and terrorist attacks, right? I won’t deny that vampires have killed a lot of people, but if you were to compare the numbers, humans are far more dangerous. Who’s to say a human I’m dating wouldn’t turn on me?”

“I never thought about it like that.”

“You’ve been taught to fear them. Most humans fear what they don’t understand. That’s why witches were burned. We were feared. And come on.” I playfully nudge her. “I’m sure there are plenty more politicians with questionable moral compasses than there are vampires.”

Abby’s lips curve into a small smile. “Probably.”

The front door opens, and Abby jumps off the steps.

“I’m sorry to interrupt.” Lucas extends his hand, holding out my phone. “It’s been ringing nonstop and Evander has texted you a dozen times in the last few minutes.”

I spring up, taking my phone from Lucas. I unlock it and go to my texts, sucking in a breath.

“Oh my god.” My legs threaten to buckle. “The coven is under attack.”

## CHAPTER 31



“**W**hat does that mean?” Abby asks.

I blink and the world spins around me. “It means he’s coming for us. For me. It means I need to go back and fight.”

“Callie, no!” Lucas zooms down the stairs and puts his hands on my shoulders. “You know how powerful he is, and we don’t know how to stop him. If you go back, he’ll kill you.”

“He can try.” I slowly shake my head. “I’m not hiding. I’m not going to let him tear through every single one of my friends in an attempt to get to me.”

“What’s going on?” Abby’s voice breaks. “Who’s trying to kill you?”

“Go home,” I tell her. “I’ll call you later, well, if I’m alive.”

“You’re not going to die,” Lucas says, and his fingers press a little harder into my shoulder. “I’m not losing you.”

“Then come with me,” I whisper, looking into his eyes, and the fear I see reflected back at me sends a chill right through me. He’s just as scared as I am, but not of the demon. He’s scared of something happening to me. Because for some reason I fill the emptiness inside of him.



Just like he fills it for me.

“Help me fight.”

He brings one hand to the back of my head. “I will do whatever it takes.”

“Then let’s go.”

“Where are you going?” Abby grabs my arm. “Callie, what’s going on? You’re freaking me out.”

“It’s going to be fine,” I tell her, trying to sound sure of myself. “I have to go home and save my family.” Turning away from Lucas, I wrap my arms around Abby. “Thank you for everything.”

“Why does it feel like you’re saying goodbye?”

“Because I might be,” I whisper and release her. “Go home where it’s safe. Give Penny a kiss for me.” Then I turn and race into the house. We don’t have time to waste gathering any of my stuff. I grab a jacket and a pair of boots and get in the car. Binx and Pandora shadow in with me, shifting back into cat form and sitting on my lap. Lucas starts up the engine and peels out of the garage, going down the street as fast as he can.

I call Evander and get his voicemail. If he’s back in the Covenstead, I won’t be able to reach him. I call Kristy next, and she answers on the first ring.

“Callie,” she answers. “Please tell me you’re okay.”

“I am. Are you? You’re under attack?”

“Something tried to get through the door. High Priestess Greystone has summoned us all to the Covenstead and is sealing the door. You have to come home.”

“I’m on my way.” I look at the clock. “I’ll be there around eleven.”

“Or sooner,” Lucas says, blowing through a stop sign.

“Hurry. The Council is coming to those of us remaining, casting protection on us as we cross through the woods.”

“Where are you now?”

“At your house. You live closer to the door than Daniel. Freya let us in.”

“Good. Add extra protective circles and keep Freya with you.” I close my eyes. “I know what we’re dealing with, and it’s bad.”

“How bad?”

“Hell’s-royalty bad.”

Kristy lets out a shaky breath. “What does it want?”

It wants me and me alone, but I don’t tell her. Not now. I don’t want to scare her any more than she already is.

“I can’t be sure, but it will stop at nothing to get it.” I open my eyes and watch the landscape fly by. “Have you heard from Evander? I can’t get ahold of him.”

“He’s out with the Council, helping witches get through the door. I’m so scared, Callie.”

“You’re going to be fine. Hang tight until you can go to the Covenstead. Once you’re in, you’ll be safe. Everyone will be. I’ll see you soon, okay?”

“You better.”

I end the call and nervously flip my phone over in my hands. I hardly breathe until we’re on the freeway, gaining more and more speed. Lucas rests his hand on my thigh, doing

an impressive job of weaving in and out of traffic while driving one-handed.

“Once you get to Thorne Hill,” Lucas starts. “You need to go right to the door and get inside.”

I nod. “That’s probably the safest place for us. The Academy is basically apocalypse-proof.”

“I will take you there and I won’t let anything lay a finger on you.”

I put my hand on top of his, needing to feel his cool, smooth skin. He can’t come through the door with me. The spells that guard the Covenstead won’t allow it. He would be burned before he made it through.

Time passes slowly even though we’re speeding. I close my eyes and rest my head against the leather seat.

“Keep us out of the eyes of the law,” I whisper. “Let us get home without an interruption.”

“Was that a spell?”

“Yes.”

“It didn’t rhyme.” Lucas takes his eyes off the road to look at me.

“Spells don’t have to rhyme. Spellcasting is an art form, though, and I seem to channel the intentions better when they rhyme.”

He pats my thigh and zooms in front of a semi, driving on the shoulder to pass by another car. I close my eyes, not wanting to see how dangerously close we’re coming to getting in a fiery crash. I’ll say a spell to avoid that too.

We cross the state line in half the time it normally takes. Lucas's phone rings and the call shows up on the car's dash. It's Eliza, and he presses a button on the steering wheel to answer.

“Où es-tu, bon sang?” Eliza's voice comes through loud and clear. “Je suis chez toi.”

Lucas answers, talking so fast I can hardly make out the words. I'm able to pick out my name and *Thorne Hill*, but that's it.

“Is everything okay?” I ask after he ends the call.

“Yes. Eliza worries too much.”

“She cares about you,” I state even though it's more than obvious.

“She does.”

I look out the window again, keeping myself from watching the clock. We make good time, slowing only to pass under a toll reader. Then we speed to the exit to Thorne Hill. We're so close, yet I have a sinking feeling like I'm going to arrive and be a moment too late.



THE LIGHTS ARE ALL ON AT MY HOUSE WHEN WE PULL INTO the driveway. Binx can sense Freya and the others right away, and my speeding heart slows with relief. Kristy is okay. I get out before Lucas puts the car in park, running up the steps of my front porch. My familiars shadow past but Lucas stops.

I whirl around, seeing the faint glow of the extra circle Kristy cast that keeps him from entering the protected space. Holding up my hands, I quickly say an incantation, parting the

walls of magical energy, and let Lucas in. He takes my hand and ushers me into the house.

Kristy is sitting on the couch and springs up as soon as I open the front door.

“Thank goodness,” she says and rushes over, pulling me into a hug. “You got here really fast.”

“Lucas like to speed.”

“Thanks for getting her here so fast and in one piece,” Kristy tells him, stepping back. Daniel is in the living room, along with his brothers, another couple and their two young children. I’ve seen them at coven gatherings before and know they live downtown. A large black dog stands by the children and gives Binx a curt nod when he trots into the room.

“Have you been in contact with anyone else?” I ask Kristy. “The twins?”

“They’ve passed through the door with their parents and grandmother. We’re the last bunch waiting to be escorted.” She looks at the time on the cable box. “The Council should be here soon.”

“Okay...” I let out a breath and step into the living room. “The door is a good few miles away. My familiars will lead the way and I suggest carrying the children. There is no path and the woods are uneven. My friend, Lucas, can help if need be. He’s strong and won’t tire.”

Everyone shifts their gazes to Lucas, and I know exactly what they’re thinking. *Never trust a vampire.*

“I swear to you,” Lucas starts. “I will do everything I can to keep you all safe.”

“Thanks, babe.” I take his hand, comforted as soon as I feel his skin against mine. We sit together on the couch, and I grab the TV remote, turning on the Disney Channel in hopes of easing the kids’ nerves.

And my own.

“Is he a vampire?” the young girl loudly whispers to her mother, pointing a finger at Lucas.

“It’s not polite to point,” her mother scolds.

“I’ve never seen one before,” the girl goes on. “Can I say hi?”

“I don’t think he wants to be bothered. Go play with your brother, Brooke.” The mom is stressed to the max, hardly able to keep it together. I’m scared enough as it is. I can’t imagine how awful it would be to know your children are in real danger.

“It’s all right,” Lucas tells her. “Yes, I am a vampire.”

Brooke’s face lights up. “My friend from school said she saw a vampire at Pizza Hut, and I knew she was lying because vampires don’t eat pizza.”

Lucas laughs. “No, we don’t.”

“Man, I’d miss pizza if I were a vampire.” Brooke, who can’t be more than seven years old, shakes her head dramatically.

“You know, I’ve never had pizza.” Lucas leans over the arm of the couch as he talks to her.

“Never? Not even when you were a human?” The kid looks shook.

“It wasn’t invented yet back then.”

“Wow, you must be really old!”

“You could say so.”

“How old are you? You look younger than my daddy and he’s thirty-five.”

“Brooke,” her mother scolds. “It’s rude to ask people their age.”

“Sorry.” Brooke wrinkles her nose. “I’ve just never met a vampire before.” She’s so cute it makes me chuckle. “And what the heck? Why don’t you have fangs?”

“I do.” Lucas draws his fangs and smiles. I loop my arm through his, feeling so strongly for him right now.

“I like your dress.” Kristy perches on the arm of the couch. “Is it new?”

“Yeah. I bought it today.” I look down at the purple lace. “I kind of forgot I was wearing it. I should go change, actually.”

“I’ll come with you.”

Kristy and I dash up the stairs. I throw my jacket on my bed and unzip my dress, stepping out of it and laying it on my bed. I kick off my heeled boots and pull on a black Henley shirt, dark jeans and a pair of well-worn combat boots. I take off the expensive necklace Lucas surprised me with, carefully laying it on top of my dresser

Everyone takes turns using the bathroom, preparing for our trek into the woods. I pull Lucas into the kitchen and roll up a sleeve.

“What are you doing?” he asks, taking my outstretched arm.

“Drink. You might need the strength.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“Please,” I press. “I’ll feel better knowing you’ve fed because if it comes down to it...I’m going to need you.”

Lucas puts his mouth to my arm, kissing the tender skin on the inside of my elbow. He kisses his way down a bit and pierces my skin with his fangs, not wanting to break open a vein. He sucks hard, pulling my blood from my body. Gripping onto my arm tight with one hand, he places the other on my lower back, fingers inching down as he drinks. Moaning softly, he laps up the blood and brings my arm away from his face.

“Was that enough?” I ask, voice a little breathy.

“It’s plenty.” He puts his fingers over the puncture wounds, pressing against them for a minute before checking. “You’re still bleeding.” He licks his fingers and tears a paper towel off the roll for me.

“Thanks.” I hold it against my arm, waiting another few seconds before going to the pantry and getting out my little bin of first-aid supplies for a Band-Aid. Lucas puts two on my arm and pulls my sleeve back down. “Well, now you’re ready.”

He bobs his head up and down. “I am, are you?”

“Yeah. I’m more worried about getting those kids through the woods safely. I think...I think I should hang back until they’re through.”

“Why would you—” He cuts off, understanding my train of thought. “The demon is after you.”

“Right. And being with them...it puts them in danger once we’re out in the open.”



He doesn't say anything, and just when I think he's going to tell me it's a bad idea and I should most definitely insist to be at the front of the line, he pulls me in and kisses me.

"I don't know what happened, but I know you were treated like shit by those closest to you. Betrayed by your own family. And yet your heart is kind and pure, even with your petty, impulsive side."

"You make me sound too awesome." I cast my eyes down, but Lucas takes my chin in his hand and tips my head up to his.

"You are."

"I just don't want anyone else to die because of me."

"Very well. I'm staying with you."

"I knew you would, you big old softy," I tease, smiling up at him. He leans down to kiss me again but stops. "Someone is here."

"Witches or demons?"

"Witches."

"It's show time." Stepping out of his embrace, I go into the living room and wait by the front door, opening it as soon as Evander steps on the porch.

"You're a sight for sore eyes, sister." He claps me on the back. "It's time to take you home."

"The sooner, the better." I fake a smile and lead everyone to the back porch. "Freya, Pandora, lead the way. Pay special attention to the children. They know the way," I tell the little group. "And Kristy does too. Be safe and hurry."

“What are you doing?” Kristy rounds on me. “It sounds like you’re not coming with.”

“I’m not. Not yet at least.”

“What?” she and Evander exclaim at the same time.

“I’m...I’m what the demon is interested in. You guys go, get through the door and start the ritual to seal it. As soon as the last of you is through, I’ll come. But I can’t risk traveling with you.”

“No.” Kristy stomps her foot down, fists balled. “No, Callie...just no! Evander, do something! She can’t stay behind. She can’t go out on her own!”

“She won’t.” Lucas puts his hand on my shoulder. “I’ll bring her, and you know I can get to the door faster than any of you can. I don’t like this idea any more than you do, but we know she’s right and we know there’s no use trying to convince her otherwise.”

“We need to go,” one of the Council members hisses. “The witching hour approaches and we all need to be through the door before then.”

“Go,” I press. “I’ll be right behind you.” Freya and Pandora twist around my ankles, objecting to my plan as well. “You too,” I tell them. “Keep everyone safe.”

“I better see you, sister.” Evander holds my gaze for a second before turning, motioning for the others to follow. He starts chanting a protection spell along with the other members of the Council. Kristy looks back, tears rolling down her cheeks. Daniel takes her hand and pulls her along and everyone breaks into a run. I watch until they disappear into the woods.

“How much of a head start are you giving them?”

“I’m staying until they reach the door. Freya or Pandora will let me know once they’re all made it.” I sit on the top step of the porch. Lucas sits next to me, slipping his arm around my waist. I rest my head on his shoulder, and we sit there in silence, knowing how much danger could lie ahead of us.

“All those zombies you accidentally brought from the dead.” Lucas plays with my hair. “Where did they come from?”

“There’s this big fancy house a few miles that way.” I point down the street. “It’s been empty for years. I wanted to buy it instead of this place, actually.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“It was too expensive. I think it’s still for sale, but no one is going to pay that much for the place when it needs a huge renovation. Someone will buy it for the land soon enough, I’m sure.”

He asks me more about the house, and I know he’s just trying to distract me. It helps, actually, and we’re talking about different ways to restore the thing when Binx meows, letting me know Freya is on her way back. She shadows fast through the yard.

“Are they at the door?” I ask.

“Yes,” she says. “It’s time to get you there.”

Lucas stands and picks me up, running with vampire speed through the clearing and into the woods. We’re nearly there when he suddenly stops and sets me down.

“What is it?”

“Something’s coming.”

“The demon?”

“No.” He tips his head up, smelling the air. “Humans.”

## CHAPTER 32



“Humans?” I echo. “The woods are enchanted to keep them away. Of course, tonight of all nights they—”

I’m interrupted by a high-pitched scream. My blood runs cold and Lucas and I both take off, sprinting to the door. The group from my house is at the door, and it looks like they just performed the ritual to open it. But no one is going through. They’re huddled around it, hands raised as they cast a defensive circle.

The humans Lucas caught the scent of surround them, and I can tell by their inky eyes that they are possessed. The door is open, and if one of the demons get witch blood on their hands, they might be able to pass right through. They press in, testing the strength of the circle. Brooke and her brother are hiding behind the adults, kept safe by their familiar who’s barking and growling at the demons. They need to go through and seek shelter at the Covenstead.

“Hey!” I shout, conjuring an energy ball. Lucas speeds forward, sinking his fangs into the neck of one demon. He bites down and pulls back, ripping out its throat. He spits it on the ground and fresh, dark blood covers his face. He’s a terrifying and glorious sight. The body the demon had been possessing falls to the ground, blood pooling around it.

I don't know how to perform an exorcism, and chances are the poor humans possessed are already dead. But seeing the body on the ground makes my stomach churn. I blink, looking away. If I don't act fast, there are going to be more bodies on the ground.

I throw the energy ball, hitting another one of the demons in the back. It sizzles through him, light pouring out its black eyes.

“Get the kids through the door!” I shout and hold up both hands. My fingers glow with magic. “We'll hold them off.”

Lucas grabs another demon and two round on him. He brushes them off like they're nothing at all.

“Go!” I yell and rush forward, holding out my hands and zapping another demon with magic. Brooke's father turns and scoops her up with one arm and her brother in the other. The boy tugs on his mother's hand and the four of them step through the door along with their familiar. Lucas kills another demon, punching his fist right through its chest.

The demons turn away from the door, coming after me instead.

“That's right,” I say, holding up my hands and wiggling my fingers, twirling magic in the air. “Come and get me.”

Daniel turns, yanking Kristy through the door with him. His brother follows, and the two witches from the Council step through next.

“Callie!” Evander calls, holding out his hand.

There are still several demons left, but they don't offer much of a challenge to Lucas. I turn, watching him rip another's throat out with his teeth, spitting the rancid demon blood onto the ground.

“Go,” he tells me. “I’m having fun out here.” He flies to another demon, snapping its neck and letting the body slump to the ground.

“They’ve started the ritual to seal the door.” Evander puts one foot through the door. “We have to go, now!”

“Get in,” I order my familiars. Pandora and Freya listen, jumping gracefully through the door. Binx growls, not wanting to go in without me. “Now!” Hissing, he slips through the magical passage to the Covenstead.

I tear my eyes away from Lucas, reaching for Evander’s outstretched hand. His fingers close around my wrist and a loud bang echoes throughout the forest, followed by the sound of chains dragging over the earth.

The Gates have been opened.

“Callie, go!” Lucas growls. The edge of the door starts to fade. Once it’s sealed, I won’t be able to get in, not until a spell is done from within.

“Callie!” Evander pulls me toward him. The chains clang again, and it’s closer. Suddenly, the smell of brimstone fills the air, choking me and burning my nose. Something shimmers out of the shadows stealing all my breath and all the life from the forest around it.

The demon is here.

“Go!” Lucas yells and runs at the demon. The demon, standing tall and dressed in a brown, hooded robe, holds out his hand, summoning an onyx-blade sword. He plunges it through Lucas’s chest.

“No!” I scream and let go of Evander’s hand. I throw my hand out, pushing Evander back through the door. The passage

of glowing blue energy fades fast, and the door to the Covenstead snaps shut, completely sealed off.

“Fool,” the demon booms, dark eyes locking with mine. He holds out his hand and invisible pressure crashes down on me, pinning me against the cold ground.

“Lucas!” I scream, trying to get up. I’m trapped against the earth, held down by hundreds of demon hands, and it’s just like in my dream.

And in my dream, I’m about to die.

“Lucas!” I shout again, but my voice is weak. I gasp for air, unable to take a deep breath because I’m forced down so hard against the ground. Planting my hands in the dirt, energy buzzes around my fingers. I try again to push myself up, heart hammering. Not being able to breathe is causing my body to go into a panic, desperate for air.

I let out one final yell before collapsing onto the ground, and the energy leaves my fingers, traveling through the soil and going to the demon. It zaps his feet, and he steps back, eyes wide with curiosity. He didn’t know I could do that.

And neither did I.

It’s enough of a distraction to roll over, and I gasp in air, chest heaving. I scramble up, looking for Lucas. He’s on his knees right behind the demon, pulling the blade out of his chest. A wound like that won’t kill a vampire, but that isn’t any sword sticking through his chest.

“Luc—” I start, running toward him. The demon raises his hand, throwing me back against a tree. “Don’t hurt him,” I beg, eyes filling with tears. “I’m the one you want. Leave him and my coven alone. Just...just take me.”



“How kind of you to offer.” The demon steps from the shadows, brown robes swirling around his feet. He looks shockingly human, with silver-white hair and gray stubble over his strong jaw. But his eyes are glowing red as if I’m looking through them and right into Hell.

I push against the invisible hold, knowing it’s no use but refusing to give up, to go down without a fight. The demon moves closer, stopping just feet from me. The smell of brimstone coming from him is so strong it makes me sick. He tips his head, looking me up and down.

Suddenly he’s before me, with one hand grasping my face. He turns my head up to him and inhales. He holds up his other hand, showing off his long claw-like fingernails. Then he swipes one across my face, tearing open the flesh on my cheek.

He steps back, licking the blood off his finger. “I’ve been looking for you.”

“Why?” Tears well in my eyes. I can’t move, can’t use magic to fight him. I’ve dreamed about my death enough the last few days I should have known it was coming. “Why were you looking for me?”

Lucas rises from the dark, coming after the demon fast. He’s holding the sword he just pulled from his own chest and slashes it through the air in an attempt to cut off the demon’s head. But the blade just passes right through him, as if it’s made of smoke.

The demon turns, extending his hand toward Lucas, and closes his fist. Lucas’s hands go to his neck, trying to break the hold the demon has on him. Lucas drops to his knees, coughing, and blood pours from his lips.

But he doesn't stop. He staggers to his feet and comes at the demon again, fangs drawn.

"You just won't stop, will you?" the demon sneers.

"I'll...never...stop..." Lucas chokes out.

"Very well then." The demon throws both hands out, sending Lucas flying back into the forest.

"No!" I scream and yank one arm free from the demon's hold. He rounds on me again, extending both hands and lifting them into the air bringing roots of the tree out of the ground. They wrap around me, binding my arms to my sides and tying me to the tree. I struggle against it, feeling my flesh tear open from the rough bark on the tree.

The demon turns away from me, sweeping his arm out and bringing forth red fire from the forest floor. It circles around us, burning everything in its path. Even though it's feet away, the heat is almost too much to bear and the smoke fills my nostrils, causing me to cough.

"I'm going to enjoy watching you burn to death," the demon says. The fire moves closer, burning around him but not catching him on fire. No! This isn't ordinary fire. This is hellfire and is under the command of the demon. I yank my wrists, trying to free myself. "It'll be slow." The demon motions for the fire to crawl around the base of the tree. "I'll start with your feet."

I scream as the fire rises and pull against the tree roots.

"And then I'll move to your hands, making sure your flesh is good and burned before you start choking to death on the smoke." The underbrush goes up in flames, and the smoke is already wafting in my face. Coughing, I turn my head as tears

spring to my eyes. It could start pouring down rain and it wouldn't matter.

This fire is going to burn until it takes my life.

I conjure a ball of white light. I can't move my wrist to throw it at the demon, and my feeble attempt just makes the ball fall into the fire. But when the ball of light touches the hellfire, the flames retreat.

"Neat trick," the demon laughs, raising his hand and making the flames rise higher. "It's a wonder you went hidden for this long with that much power."

"Hidden? I'm not hiding," I say between coughs.

"You don't even know, do you?" The hellfire reflects in the demon's dark eyes.

"Know what?" I ask, fighting against the roots. But the more I struggle, the more they tighten around me, squeezing me so tight it hurts. The fire inches closer, flames licking my feet.

"It's almost a shame." Flames close around me. "You'll die without knowing the truth."

The truth? What is he talking about? But right now, it doesn't matter, because I can't breathe. The air is too hot and every breath hurts. There is no way out of this. Squeezing my eyes shut, I turn my head as far as I can to the side, desperate for fresh air.

This wasn't how I thought things would end. The bad guys aren't supposed to win. But there is no way out. Smoke fills my lungs, and I'm coughing so hard I feel like I'm going to puke.

The fire creeps up farther, and the heat is too much to take. I can only hope I pass out before my skin starts to burn. My eyes are watering like crazy, and the lack of fresh oxygen is making me nauseous.

This is it. The end. *My* end.

“Callie.”

A clear voice rings out from beyond the flames. I lift my head up, looking for Lucas. But instead of my vampire, a man with bright blue eyes stands before me.

“This is not how it ends.”

I open my mouth to question him, but the flames rise, and he disappears. My head falls back and I’m sure I’m hallucinating, seeing things since I’m on the brink of death. Everything is so hot. The air. The tree roots are on fire now, and the heat travels through them and burns my skin through my clothes.

I just want it to end now. I want to suck in my last breath and welcome the painlessness of death.

“This isn’t how it ends.”

I force my eyes open, looking for the source of the voice. And then I realize I’m the one talking. “This isn’t how it ends.”

I grit my teeth and squeeze my eyes closed. “I call upon the forces of light.” My voice is barely louder than a whisper. “Defend us in the battle with the darkness. Purge the wickedness.”

The flames start to retreat, traveling backward and circling around the demon. He throws out his hands and tries to command the fire, but it doesn’t obey.

“I call upon the forces of light,” I repeat, voice getting stronger. I suck in cool, fresh air. “Cast this demon in chains and send him down to the abyss!”

The flames start to turn blue, rising up around the demon. He steps back and his robes catch on fire. The blue fire climbs higher and the demon cries out in pain. Horrible screeches leave him as he burns, sounding like a hundred voices crying, a hundred voices begging for death.

And then he collapses into a pile of ash. The blue flames die down, moving into the earth. Everything is dark. The forest is silent, and I stare, wide-eyed at the smoldering ash.

“Callie.”

This time, there’s no mistaking Lucas’s voice. His shirt is covered in his own blood from being stabbed in the chest, but he already healed. He speeds over, yanking one of the roots back.

“Is he dead?” I pant, trying to break free. I just start coughing, lungs still burning.

“I don’t know.” Lucas pulls another root back and tears through a few more, freeing me. I fall into his arms. “But he’s gone.” His dark blue eyes widen as he looks from me to the pile of ash. “How did you do that?”

I shake my head and cough again. “I have no idea...or if that was even me.” The image of the blue-eyed man flashes before me. There’s something familiar about him, something almost comforting.

“It doesn’t matter.” Lucas lowers me to the ground and kisses the top of my head. “You’re alive.”

“So are you.”

“Not technically,” Lucas reminds me with a smile. He gently pushes up my sleeves and looks at the burns on my wrists. “You’re injured.”

“Yeah, though if this is the extent of my injuries, I shouldn’t complain, right?”

“Right.” He cradles me against his chest, kissing the top of my head. “I thought I lost you for a moment there. My heart hasn’t beat in over a thousand years but losing you would break it.” He puts his lips to mine, gently kissing me. “I love you, Callie.”

My heart flutters in my chest, and I let my eyes fall shut. Lucas King has done the impossible, something just as incredible as me commanding the hellfire.

He’s made me fall totally and completely in love with him.

I can’t deny it any longer, and admitting to him means admitting it to myself, which is absolutely terrifying.

I’m alive.

He’s dead.

I don’t know what kind of life we can have together, but I know I don’t want to live this one without him.

My eyes, already watery from the burn of the smoke, fill with tears. One spills over, rolling down my cheek. Lucas wipes it away and rests his forehead against mine.

I slide my hand along his chest, feeling the tear in his shirt, which is still wet from his own blood. He almost died protecting me and wouldn’t have stopped until he was nothing but ash on the forest floor.

“Lucas,” I start, tipping my head to his so my lips brush over his as I talk. “I love you, too.”

## CHAPTER 33



**L**ucas holds me tight against him and goes in for a kiss. I turn my head at the last second, coughing.

“Sorry,” I say between coughs.

“Don’t be. Are you...are you all right?” Lucas takes my hands in his and carefully pulls me to my feet. “You don’t sound very good.”

“I inhaled a lot of smoke.” I sway on my feet, grasping Lucas’s hands for support. He steps in and scoops me up. I don’t like to be coddled, but I’m not about to protest. Mostly because I’m not sure I can keep from falling to the ground.

I’m lightheaded and dizzy, both from inhaling so much smoke and because whatever the hell spell I just performed was the most draining magical act I’ve ever done.

Lucas makes sure I’m steady on my feet before moving away, going over the pile of ash. He nudges it with his foot, moving the remains of the demon’s robe.

“There’s hardly anything left. How did you put out the fire?”

Pressing my hand to my chest, I cough again before I can answer. “I don’t know. It was hellfire...maybe it just goes away once it burns up, uh, someone.”

“Maybe.” Lucas turns back to me, wrapping both of his strong arms around my waist. I hook my arms around his neck and rest my head against him. I’m completely depleted of energy and want nothing more than to let my eyes close and pass out.

“The demons.” I pick up my head and look around the forest. “There were other demons...people possessed.”

“I killed them on the way back to you.” He pushes my hair back and wipes ash off my face. “Why didn’t you go through the door?”

“I couldn’t leave you.” I take in a shaky breath.

“You almost died.”

“And I thought you were going to. That blade paired with the demon powers...” I trail off and shake my head. “Losing you would break my heart too.” My eyes fill with tears again. “There was no way I was leaving you.” I can’t bring myself to say it, because if I do, I’ll start crying for sure. After living for so long on the edge of the void, feeling the tug of the emptiness, I wasn’t sure if my heart was full enough to break.

Broken hearts can’t break again, can they?

But Lucas...he has no idea how much he means to me. How the way he looks at me—all of me—healed what I didn’t know was broken.

“Luckily I’m rather hard to kill.” He smiles and gently wipes ash off my face.

“I’m proving to be rather resilient myself.”

“Let’s not test that theory.”

“I’m with you there,” I say and smile too.



He cups both hands around my face, tipping my chin up and looking into my eyes.

“How anyone can look at you and not see how fucking incredible you are is beyond me.”

I lose my battle with not crying. My eyes fall shut and tears roll down my cheeks. A few spills over the cut on my cheek, burning my tender flesh.

“Let me take you home,” Lucas whispers. “Let me take care of you.”

I nod, eyes flitting to the space where the door had been. There’s no way to contact anyone inside, not until a reversal spell is done to unseal the door.

“I’d like that,” I exhale. Lucas picks me up again, and we make it only a few feet away before bright blue light comes from behind us. Lucas whirls around, fangs bared.

“The door,” I wheeze, trying not to cough again. “It’s opening.”

Lucas sets me down, slipping his arm around my waist for support. Three dark shadows emerge from the door before it’s all the way open. My familiars circle around me, automatically going on the defense.

Kristy, Naomi, and Nicole come out next, holding daggers in one hand and potion vials in the other.

“Callie!” Kristy exclaims when she sees me. Her eyes are wide and she’s breathing hard. “Where’s the demon?”

I suddenly can’t talk, realizing that my friends came back to fight along with me.

“He’s dead,” Lucas tells them. “Callie killed it.”

“Are you sure?” Naomi looks around, lips parted.

“That’s all that’s left of him.” Lucas points to the remains of the demon.

Nicole lowers her dagger and exhales heavily. “You’re safe.” Her statement is more of a question as if she can’t believe it. I’m still having a hard time believing it myself.

“You guy...you guys came back for me?” I finally find my voice.

“Of course.” Kristy slides her dagger back into its sheath. “You’re my best friend, Cal. Evander caused a distraction and is holding the door open.”

“And I wasn’t about to let you have all the fun.” Naomi raises one eyebrow and smiles. “Though it seems you stole the show as usual.”

“I’d have gladly let you in on the action.” I cough, turning away from Lucas.

“How did you survive?” Nicole blurts. She’s shaking, and I commend her even more for coming back to fight knowing how scared she is.

“I’m not really sure.” My eyes flutter and if it weren’t for Lucas’s arm around me, I think I would have fallen to the ground. Everything spins around me and I’m feeling a little nauseous.

“Are you okay?” Kristy rushes forward, hands going to my shoulders. “You smell like smoke.”

“She was almost burned to death,” Lucas informs my friends.

“I didn’t,” I state the obvious and flick my eyes to the door. “We should let them know the demon is gone.”

“I’ll go,” Nicole offers and gives me a hug before stepping back through the door.

Kristy pockets the potion she’s holding and shakes her head, pulling her arms in close to her body. “It’s really gone?”

“I think so.” I shift my weight, almost forgetting that Lucas can hold me one-handed and not be strained. Thank goodness for superhuman strength right now.

“She burned him with hellfire. He’s gone.” Lucas turns his head down to me, looking proud as he pushes my hair over my shoulder.

“Hellfire?” both Kristy and Naomi exclaim at the same time.

“The demon,” I start. “He summoned up hellfire to burn me.”

“Why you?” Naomi asks.

“I don’t know.” I shake my head and cough again, still feeling like I’m breathing in smoke. “I tried asking nicely, but he still wouldn’t tell me.”

Kristy laughs before her face breaks and she lets out a sob. “I was so scared.” She throws her arms around me. “And I felt like the most selfish person in the world going through the door before I made sure you were coming with.”

“I was going to go through,” I remind her. “But then...” I look at Lucas. “Then there was too much at stake here. I had to fight.”

“Back to the hellfire.” Naomi crosses her arms and leans against a tree near the door. “How did you get out alive? Not that I’m not grateful—I am—but hellfire...”

“I know,” I agree what she didn’t say. “It should have burned me until there was nothing left. And I really don’t know.” I close my eyes, feeling dizzy by the second. “I heard a voice and thought I saw this man with blue eyes standing in the fire. Obviously, I was hallucinating from smoke inhalation or something.”

“You said a spell,” Lucas says slowly, brows furrowing. “And it turned the hellfire blue.”

“There are no spells that work on hellfire.” Kristy looks at Naomi in question. “None that I know of at least.”

I shrug off their concern. “I just said things that came to me. Mostly out of desperation and anger.”

“What language were you speaking?” Lucas asks.

“English.” I cock an eyebrow. “Unlike you, I don’t know a bunch of fancy languages. This is the only one I can read or speak.”

“You weren’t speaking English. Trust me, I heard you, and whatever language you spoke was one I’ve never heard before.”

“I...I don’t know.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Kristy forces a smile. “You’re alive and the demon is dead.” She lets out a heavy sigh. “Come back to the coven and let the High Priestess make you a healing draft.”

“I think I’m going to stay here.” Lucas can’t go through the door, and I want to be with him.

Kristy knows my reasoning and nods. “Right. I’ll make you something then. If that cough doesn’t go away by the

morning, you need to be seen. Smoke inhalation is dangerous, Callie.”

“I’ll make sure she’s taken care of,” Lucas promises.

“Why is your shirt torn and bloody?” Naomi asks.

“The demon stabbed him,” I reply.

“It takes more than a sword through the heart to stop me fighting for you,” Lucas says to me, aware my friends can hear but doesn’t seem to care. He slides one hand down my arm, landing on my waist. The way he looks at me makes it obvious what’s on his mind, and it involves us both getting naked.

Maybe vampires don’t have a concept of PDA?

He tears his eyes away from me and looks at my friends. “You came back to fight a Third Hierarchy demon with daggers and Mason jars full of water?”

“Just a few drops of this potion will end you, bloodsucker,” Naomi warns. She looks at me and smiles. “And what can I say? I guess we’re just as crazy as she is.”

I smile, feeling all emotional again. And then I start coughing. Lucas takes me in his arms, looking a bit panicked.

“I’m...I’m okay,” I choke out, wincing. My throat feels like sandpaper.

“You sound sick.”

“I’m not sick,” I assure him, realizing that a bad sounding cough like this could mean death back in his human days. Was that the last time he dealt with human illness? “I need to cough up all the, uh, shit I inhaled.”

“You should get yourself checked out,” Naomi insists. “Kristy is right. Inhaling smoke is hard on your system, and

who knows what hellfire does to a mortal.”

“I’m taking you home,” Lucas tells me. “You can deal with the coven in the morning.”

I don’t have the strength to argue with anyone, and Binx is starting to sense how shitty I feel. He’ll force me into my bed and tuck me in if he has to.

“Yes,” Kristy agrees. “Go home. We’ll talk to the coven.”

“What will you tell them?” I ask.

“No one else knows the identity of the demon,” Naomi says softly. “Maybe it’s best we keep it that way. Fighting Third Hierarchy demons and turning hellfire blue...that’s not something a witch can do.” Her eyes land on mine. “This demon was after you for a reason, and I think we should be the ones to figure it out before we go blabbing to others how things really went down.”

“That makes sense.” Kristy’s head moves up and down. “Don’t worry about it, Callie. The four of us have talked our way out of compromising situations plenty of times.”

“So, you’re a trouble magnet,” Lucas starts and then looks at my friends. “And they are too.”

“What can I say?” Naomi grins. “Everyone wanted to join our badass girl gang back in our Academy days.” She strides over, taking my hand. “Now go home and rest. We didn’t risk everything coming back here to save your ass just to have you get sick and die.”

I roll my eyes, smiling back at her. “I’m going. Trust me, I want nothing more than a hot shower and crawling into my bed next to this guy.”

“Spare me the details.” Naomi winks. “Actually, don’t. If vampire sex is half as good as they say...”

“It’s even better,” I loudly whisper and then start coughing again. Lucas rubs my back, looking more and more concerned.

“I’m taking you home, now.” He goes to pick me up, but I hold up a hand.

“There are like a dozen bodies of the possessed scattered throughout the woods. They didn’t look like they’ve been dead all that long. They might have family looking for them.”

“We’ll take care of it,” Kristy assures me. “Go home and get in bed. You sound awful.”

“Are you sure you don’t mind trying to ID and/or dispose of bodies for me?”

Kristy’s hand lands on my shoulder. “What are friends for?”

## CHAPTER 34



I wake up coughing, having rolled over in my sleep and am facing the window. The sun is creeping up, casting a muted glow throughout my room. Lucas's hand lands on my back, startling me. I roll over, eyes locking with his. "You're still here."

"I didn't want to leave you."

"But it's almost dawn."

"I know."

"The spell from the other day might not work." I snuggle closer to him and he pulls the blanket up over my shoulder.

"That's okay." He slides his hand under the blanket and runs his fingertips up and down my arm.

"You'll burn."

"I'll leave before that happens. Your basement is dark. It's not the worst place I've waited out the sun." He kisses my forehead. "Go back to sleep. You need to rest."

"I need a drink first." I slowly sit up, coughing again, and reach for the glass of water on my nightstand.

"Do you feel any better?" Lucas pushes himself up, looking at me with concern. We're both naked, having gone



right into bed after taking a shower. Lucas brushed the tangles out of my hair and then rubbed my back until I fell asleep, which was pretty much instantly. Commanding the hellfire took a lot out of me.

All three of my familiars are in bed with us, acting like typical cats and hogging most of the bed.

“Yeah,” I tell him, setting the now-empty glass on my nightstand. “I’m still tired, though I’ve never been a morning person.”

Lucas smiles, but the concern is still obvious on his face. “I don’t like hearing you cough like that.”

“I’m human. I’m going to get sick every now and then. I don’t get sick very often at least. Actually, I don’t remember the last time I was sick.” Yawning, I lay back down, hoping I’ll fall asleep again with him still with me. “There are blankets downstairs. And extra pillows. So you can make yourself comfortable.”

“I will. And I plan to borrow a book or two from your interesting collection.” His eyes are on the bookshelf in my room, which is full of romance novels. “T.L. Smith seems to be one of your favorite authors.”

“She is. Her books are dark, sexy, and a little fucked-up. Kind of like you,” I tease, lazily rolling over in his arms.

“I am so fucking glad you are mine,” he whispers, holding me tight. “I love you, Callie.”

“I love you too.” I open my eyes again, looking at his handsome face. “I didn’t want to fall in love with you, you know. I tried hard not to.”

“I’m a bad influence.”

“The worst.”

“Go back to sleep.” His hand lands on the back of my head and he brings his head down, kissing my forehead. “You need to rest so I can fuck you tonight.”

“Such a romantic.” Smiling and cuddled up in Lucas’s arms, I close my eyes and drift back to sleep, not waking for several more hours.

“What?” I groan, pulling the blankets up over my head. Binx is meowing at me, standing on my pillow.

“I think he wants you to know someone is here,” Lucas says, and I open my eyes. It’s daylight, and my room is annoyingly bright right now.

“You’re here.” I blink a few times and look at the window. “The window is still enchanted?”

“Yes,” he chuckles. “The spell held.”

“Who’s here?” I push up, running my hands through my messy hair. Binx tells me it’s Tabatha, and she’s walking up to the front door now. “Let her in and tell her I’ll be right down,” I tell my familiar and then collapse back into Lucas’s arms.

“You seemed to have slept soundly.” His hand goes right to my thigh, fingers inching in toward my core.

“I did. I dreamed I bought that white house a few miles away. You were helping me renovate it and we found a hidden closet full of haunted items.”

“Is that a good dream?”

“The best. This house was haunted when I first moved in, you know. I find ghosts to be tragically compelling.”

“You are so fucking weird, and I can’t get enough of it,” Lucas flips us over, pinning me between his body and the mattress. “Never in all of my years did I think I’d find someone like you.”

“You must have been looking in the wrong places.” I bend my knees up, trying to be sexy, and then have to turn my head and cough.

Lucas slowly shakes his head back and forth. “I used to think fate was a fucking joke made up by people who couldn’t take control of their own lives. But maybe...maybe I walked alone for centuries because I was supposed to wait for you.”

“Dammit, Lucas,” I say when tears spring to my eyes. He kisses me hard, tongue pushing into my mouth. I moan as he grinds himself against me, forgetting everything else around us.

“Go,” he says, suddenly breaking away. “Talk to your High Priestess. And then come back and get naked again.”

Laughing, I get out of bed, quickly get dressed in sleeper shorts and an oversized t-shirt. I use the bathroom and then go downstairs, finding Tabatha in the living room. She wraps me in a hug as soon as I enter the room.

She smells like sage and lavender, and the smell is instantly comforting. She releases me from her embrace and holds me at arm’s length, looking me up and down. I smeared Kristy’s healing balm on my cheek before passing out, and the cut is almost healed by now. But I’m sure I still look ragged, because I feel ragged.

“My darling girl,” Tabatha starts, eyes full of emotion. She holds my gaze for a moment and then swallows what she’s

feeling, getting down to business. “You have a vampire upstairs.”

“Yes, he’s, uh, my boyfriend.”

Pursing her lips, she cocks one eyebrow. “You know I don’t like to be accused of playing favorites,” she starts. “But, if what I’ve been told is true, that vampire risked his afterlife for you last night. And for that, I will pretend as if I do not know about this arrangement, as will the lives you two saved last night. They know they wouldn’t have made it through the door if it wasn’t for you to.” Tabatha looks deep into my eyes, giving me a silent warning. “You know how the Grand Coven feels about witch-vampire relationships.”

“I do,” I tell her. “But Lucas isn’t like other vampires.”

She holds up her hand. “The less I know, the better. Because I do not know about your new boyfriend at all, and it needs to stay that way with the rest of the coven.”

I nod in understanding. “Is everyone in the coven okay? There was a couple here last night, with a little boy and girl. They seemed pretty freaked out.”

“As they should be.” Tabatha closes her eyes, looking away for a moment. She quickly flicks away a tear and then turns back to me. “What happened, my child?”

I take a deep breath and sit on the couch. Binx jumps up next to me, and I run my hand over his sleek fur. Tabatha takes a seat on the love seat next to me and I tell her everything, from the creepy visions, to being called a half-breed, and to somehow knowing a spell that turned the hellfire against the demon.

“Is there something wrong with me?” I ask, voice breaking. Tabatha’s gaze wavers, but she recovers fast.

“Of course not, Callie. You are one of the most extraordinary witches I’ve ever met.”

“Why would he call me a half-breed?”

She looks out the window, and I hate that I get the feeling she’s withholding a truth from me. “Demons lie, as you know. This particular one had a vendetta against us. Saying anything he could to get under your skin, to make you vulnerable, worked in his favor.”

“You don’t think I’m a half-breed?”

“You are a witch,” she says with certainty. “One I practically raised myself. If you were anything but, I’d know.” She pulls a potion vial from her robe pocket. “That cough hasn’t gotten any better, has it?”

“Kristy said something, didn’t she?”

“Of course. That’s one loyal friend you have there.”

“I know.” I smile, heart feeling all warm and fuzzy when I think about her. Tabatha hands me the vial. “What is this?”

“A health elixir I drafted myself. Take it and go back to sleep. You’ll wake feeling refreshed.”

“Thank you.”

“Of course, my dear girl.” She stands and takes my hand. “I must get back to the coven. I’m meeting with the High Priest from the Circle of the Crescent Moon. I’m ordering you, as your High Priestess, to take that elixir and sleep for another four hours at least.”

“I can handle that.” I give her hand a squeeze. Now that she’s High Priestess, Tabatha is busy attending to our coven. She was busy before as Headmistress of the Academy, but back in my younger years, I was able to go into her office at

night. It was strange, how homesick I became for those long nights I spent sitting on that green settee in her office, waiting to hear my punishment for breaking a school rule, once I returned to my non-magical family.

The pain was too much to bear, and I enjoyed my summer holidays at the Greystones, hanging out with Evander and learning everything I could about magic.

“You know I love you like my own daughter.” Tabatha gently smooths out my hair.

“I do. And I love you too.”

“Be careful, darling. If one demon went through all that to find you, I fear others might follow suit.”

I know her words to be true, and I knew it before she even said it. Still, hearing it out loud sends a shock through me.

“If another comes after me again, I’ll be ready.”

“We all will be.” She kisses my cheek and I see her out, watching her disappear through the yard. I go into the kitchen, groaning at my lack of groceries, and settle for a Pop-Tart and a glass of water. My milk is expired and there’s no point in making coffee if I’m going to go back to sleep. After eating, I go upstairs, brush my teeth, and refill my water glass.

“What’s that?” Lucas asks, seeing the potion vial in my hand.

“A health elixir. It should help with my cough, but it will probably make me pass out again.”

“If it makes you better, then take it,” he encourages. “I’ll be here with you until you wake. I’ll keep you safe.”

I pop the cork out of the vial. “I know you will.”



“DO YOU HAVE TO GO BACK TO CHICAGO?”

“Not tonight.” Lucas pulls the blanket up over my shoulder, keeping the slight breeze from chilling my skin. Insisting we check off another area of the house from my never-had-sex-there list, Lucas and I just made love on the back porch.

“Good,” I say, not caring if I’m being selfish. I don’t want him to leave even though I know he has his own troubles to deal with. I snuggle closer, heart fluttering. “I sleep better when you’re next to me.”

“Are you tired again, my love?”

“A little. But I don’t want to move.” The forest is alive with the sounds of night and even though we’re laying on top of a sleeping bag and covered only with a sheet, I’m comfortable. It has everything to do with laying here with Lucas, I know.

“Come to the city with me tomorrow.” He inches his fingers down between my thighs. I’m still wet, still revved up and sensitive from having sex not that long ago. “I’ll attend to my business during the day and will take you out again at night.”

“During the day?”

“You didn’t notice, did you?”

“Notice what?” I ask.

“The bar has few windows, and they have similar blinds as my house. It’s light-tight during the day. We have ways to travel during the day now, you know.”

“Right. I almost forgot Uber came out with a vampire service last year.” I rest my hand on the slight curve of his waist. “And going out for another date night sounds really nice.”

“Anything to show you off,” he says with a smile. “Though it’s almost a shame the world has no idea just how incredible you are.”

“You know. That’s enough for me.”

Lucas moves over the top of me, and I widen my legs, feeling his cock brush against my clit. Letting out a moan, I drag my nails down his back.

“Now that the demon is gone, what are you going to do?” Lucas asks, lips going to my neck.

“Go back to work and get ready for the next monster to attack.” I bring a hand up, raking my fingers through his hair.

“Do you like working?”

“Yeah, overall. I mean, I’d rather get paid to do nothing, but I love to read, and being my own boss is nice.”

“You don’t have to work. I have a lot of money. You’re mine, and that means I take care of you.”

“I can take care of myself.”

“I know you can. You’ve proven time and time again how you can.”

“I do like the idea of having an undead sugar daddy,” I laugh. “Though I think I’ll get bored not working.”

Lucas lifts his head, looking at me incredulously. “Really?”

“Fine, probably not. I’m a bit of a trouble magnet.”



“You are, which, if I’m being honest, is part of what makes me love you.”

“Well, good, because you’re in for a lot more trouble just by being around me.”

He kisses me, deep and passionate, and then takes me in his arms. We stay tangled together for a while longer before getting up and going into the house. Lucas drank from me during sex, and the loss of blood is making me feel a little lightheaded and a lot hungry.

“I’m in desperate need to go grocery shopping,” I say, holding the sheet around my body as I look through the fridge.

“Let’s go out.”

“Burgers and fries do sound good.” I close the fridge and go upstairs to get dressed. I smile at my reflection, heart feeling full. I still have a shitstorm of family drama to deal with, and a million unanswered questions about why I was singled out by a high-powered demon and who the blue-eyed man was...if he was even real at all.

But I’m so fucking happy and in love.

I run a brush through my messy hair and throw on a black dress, heels, and red lipstick. Lucas and I walk out to his car together, and I magically seal up my house after promising my familiars that I’ll bring them back something to eat.

We have to stop and get gas before making it to the restaurant. None of the pumps are accepting credit cards at the moment, so I go in with Lucas to pay the cashier, wanting to grab a bottle of water. Having Lucas drink my blood makes me constantly thirsty. We get up to the register to pay, and the doors open behind us. The cashier, who’s facing the door, looks up and screams.

Lucas and I whirl around, seeing two men in ski masks come in, guns raised. Lucas tips his head my way, raising one eyebrow in question. I give him a little nod and wiggle my fingers, conjuring a string of magic.

“Put your hands up!” one of the masked men shouts and points his gun at Lucas. The cashier screams again and drops to the floor.

“Ready to have some fun, babe?” Lucas asks, drawing his fangs.

I bring my hand up, holding a bright blue energy ball between my fingers. “Hell yes.”

My eyes meet one of the gunman’s and my lips twitch into a half smile. He tightens his grip on the gun, but his gaze flits to the ball of energy that’s floating half an inch from my palm.

And then the other guy notices Lucas’s fangs.

“He’s a fucking vampire!” he stammers and aims his rifle at Lucas’s chest. “Don’t move, fanger!”

Lucas laughs, deep and throaty, and takes a slow step forward. He can be fucking terrifying when he wants to be.

“Unless you have wooden bullets, that thing won’t stop me.”

The man’s hands tremble, and I fear he’s going to accidentally pull the trigger. Lucas is right in saying the bullets won’t stop him, but I’m sure it’ll still hurt like hell. And we won’t be able to go out to dinner with him all bloody and his shirt full of bullet holes.

“Besides,” Lucas goes on. “It’s her you should be afraid of.” He brings his hand up, not taking his eyes off the man holding a gun to his chest, and points at me with his thumb. “I

could rip your veins right out of your body before you knew what was happening, but what she can do will be much, much worse.”

The other man, who has some sort of fancy-looking pistol with an ivory grip, points his gun at me. In the blink of an eye, Lucas shoves the rifle back into the gunman’s face, breaking his nose, and jerks the weapon from his hands, dropping it to the floor.

He speeds over to the other guy, going around behind him, and snaps his wrist back. The bones break and the gun in his hand clatters to the ground.

“But threaten the woman I love and you’ll be begging for your death,” Lucas growls.

I toss up the energy ball, letting it hover in the air, and telekinetically move the gun. It slides over the gritty tile floor to the other side of the little mini-mart. My heart is hammering a million miles an hour in my chest. Compared to a high-ranking demon, hell fire, and some mysterious man with blue eyes who I’m not sure I should trust, yet I want to, two hill-billy robbers seem like child’s play.

Yet, I’m aware of how badly this could have ended.

Lucas is fast.

But so are bullets.

I have powers...but I’m not immortal. One shot to the heart. The head. The lungs. The gut.

And I’ll be dead before the EMTs can get here.

Lucas releases the man, who doubles over, cradling his wrist to his chest. I turn, looking at the stunned cashier, and recognize her as Josie Barron. She’s worked here for years,

and being the only gas station in Thorne Hill, most residents in the town know all the gas stations attendents by name, I'm sure.

Josie is the same age as me, and if I'd gone to Thorne Hill High School instead of the Academy, we would have graduated together. Her eyes meet mine and her lips part, wanting to say something but unable to form the words.

"Call the police," I say. "If you haven't alerted them already. Do you have a button-thingy?"

She slowly nods, and I'm not sure if she's trying to tell me she hit the oh-shit button or if she's going to call the cops. I whirl around when I hear the guy who had the rifle stagger to his feet, wiping blood off his face. He aims the gun at Lucas's head and this time I know he's not going to hesitate before pulling the trigger.

I throw out my hand, meaning to knock him on his ass. The energy ball explodes at the same time as I send a wave of energy at the guy. Instead of knocking him backwards, he's thrown several feet into the air and crashes into a display of junk food. Energy crackles through the air, and bright blue magic sizzles around my fingers.

Holy shit.

I didn't mean to do that. I didn't know I *could* do that. Just like I didn't know how to command the hell fire.

Or speak another language, which I'm still not convinced really happened. I don't know any other languages.

Twinkies and small bags of chips fall on the man, followed by the metal shelves.

"Oops." I bring my hand to my mouth, more shocked with the power boost than anything else. "I'm sorry," I say and look

over my shoulder at the cashier. "I'll help clean up the mess."

"I think that's the least of her worries," Lucas says, and punches the guy with the broken wrist on the side of the head, just hard enough to knock him out. He falls in slow motion to the floor, unmoving.

"Is he dead?" I ask Lucas, looking at the guy I threw halfway across the store.

"No. His heart is beating. I can kill him if you want."

"I, um, no, I don't want you to." I blink and look at Lucas. My heart speeds up again, but from how strongly I feel for him. Lucas speeds over and wraps his arm around me. Not caring that Josie is still staring at us as if we marched in here dressed like Superman and Wonder Woman, fighting crime like it's our destiny, he brings his lips to mine and kisses me.

"You are so fucking hot, Callie," he groans.

I let out a breath and everything hits me all over again. I grip Lucas tighter and rest my head against his chest for a second before straightening up. "We should go."

"Are the police on the way?" Lucas asks Josie.

"Y-y-es," she stammers.

"Let's get out of here," I repeat, not wanting to be involved with the law. The witches and warlocks of Thorne Hill have worked hard to keep our identities secret. I might already be in hot water with the Grand Coven for being with Lucas. The last thing I need is having to get them to bail me out and cast a mass memory-altering spell on all those involved. "The security cameras," I say, suddenly realizing that I'm not going to get out of here easily regardless. "We should get the footage of us."

“The cameras have been broken for a month. They don’t record anything,” Josie mumbles, whole body shaking.

“That’s fucking stupid,” Lucas spits out.

“I-I know,” she agrees.

“You should fix them,” I say and take my hands off Lucas to dig through my purse, finding a few dollars. I’m still thirsty and want my water. I set the money on the counter, trading it for the water bottle. Josie stares at the money for a second and then looks up at me.

“You...you guys saved me.”

“You’re welcome.” I give her a smile and hear sirens in the distance. Lucas takes my hand and we take a step forward together.

“Wait! You can’t go!” Josie calls. “What...what will I tell the police?”

Lucas looks her in the eyes and has her spellbound in a second. “You will tell the police two men came in to rob you. You ducked behind the counter and didn’t see anything.”

“I didn’t see anything,” she nods.

“Are the cameras really broken?”

“Yes. Mr. Malati is too cheap to replace them. He says Thorne Hill is a safe town.”

“Obviously it’s not impervious to out-of-town robbers,” Lucas scoffs. “Now duck back down and hide until the police get here.”

Josie’s head slowly moves up and down and she crouches back down. Lucas takes my hand and we hurry out of the gas station and into the car.

“That was fun,” he says, not phased at all, as he starts the engine.

“It kind of was,” I agree, smile coming to my face. “I’ll take robbers over demons any day.” I let out a breath.

“Are you okay?” Lucas asks, gently pushing my hair back behind my ear.

“Yeah. I should be more shaken than I am, right?”

He shrugs. “You should never assume any hunt it easy, but after facing what you have in the last few days, humans aren’t much of a challenge.”

“Right. And I almost think it was fate we were there,” I confess.

The smile is back on Lucas’s face. “A vampire and a witch just happen to be in the store you’re trying to rob...” He chuckles and speeds out of the gas station, making it far enough away by the time three police cars come tearing down the road. He slows, moving to the side of the road, and then speeds back up as soon as they’re past.

“You really are a trouble magnet.” He reaches over and takes my hand.

“Told you.”

“It turns me on.” I smile, feeling heat rush through me, and give his hand a squeeze. “We could always go back to your place so I can fuck you again.”

“I do like the sound of that.” I twist in my seat. “But I’m starving.”

“Eat first. You’ll need your strength.”

It only takes a few minutes to get into town. Lucas parks along the main road—the one that runs right over the Ley line—and we get out. There are only a few places to eat in downtown Thorne Hill, and tonight I feel like greasy diner food. Lucas speeds around the car, taking my hand as we cross the street.

Suzy's Cafe is busy tonight, and we wait for a hostess to seat us. Now that the adrenaline is wearing off, my heart is back to feeling full. I look around this small town cafe, filled with residents of Thorne Hill. It's funny how ninety-nine percent of the people in here are nons and have no idea what happened in the woods.

And what could easily happen again.

They have no idea of the monsters that lurk in the forest, the dangers the Ley line attracts. I'm sure more than a handful are curious about us, and there have long been rumors of witches that live in cabins in the thorn-filled woods. Of course, the witches in those rumors are the eat-your-children, evil kind, but a healthy dose of fear keeps the nons away.

*You're welcome for keeping your asses safe from demons.*

I look up and see Jerry behind the counter. He's a warlock, and a member of my coven. He looks at me with a friendly smile, and then his eyes go to my hand in Lucas's. Able to sense that Lucas is a vampire, the smile disappears on Jerry's face instantly.

But it's okay.

It has to be.

I stopped a demon. Saved my coven. Prevented a robbery.

Things need to be okay.



But I know they're not, and a terrible feeling starts to rise in the pit of my stomach. *Never trust a vampire.* And never lead one to the Covenstead door...

I broke a law that goes beyond dating a vampire.

"Just the two of you?" a peppy blonde teenager asks, coming up to the hostess booth.

"Yes, but only one menu is necessary," Lucas tells her, flashing his fangs as she goes to grab the menus from the little hostess booth.

"Oh, I, uh, sorry, I couldn't..." Her cheeks redden and Lucas retracts his fangs, giving her his signature crooked grin instead, flustering her even more. "This way," she says, waving for us to follow her. I suck in a breath, heart skipping a beat when I look up at Jerry again and see him turned away from the oven with his cell phone in his hand.

If he was following protocol, he'd be reporting me to the High Priestess, and Tabatha already knows about Lucas... which doesn't make this any better. I'm putting her in a precarious situation and it's not fair to do that to her.

But it's not fair to me either.

Because not only do I trust Lucas, but I love him. He trusts me too, and he's proven more than once that he'd risk his own life to save mine.

"What's wrong, my love?" Lucas asks after the hostess steps away. "I can hear your heart racing."

"Nothing," I say and let out a sigh and open my menu, even though I order the same thing every time I come here. I don't want this feeling of foreboding to ruin our evening. I'm going to eat, go home, snuggle up with Lucas on the couch,

and then take him upstairs and have my turn dominating him in the bedroom.

I don't want to worry about what could happen. Especially when it's fucking bullshit. No one should tell anyone who they can and can't love.

“Really?”

“No.” I flick my eyes up to his and get hit with butterflies all over again. “One of the cooks here is in my coven.”

A beat passes before Lucas speaks. “And he saw us together.”

“He did. It's against the rules.”

“Fuck the rules,” Lucas tells me.

“I'm trying,” I say honestly and put the menu down. Lucas takes my hand in both of his and rubs his thumb over the pulse point of my wrist. How such a little movement can turn me on is just one of the things I love about Lucas. “If we were just together, it would be one thing.”

“There's another thing?”

“You know where the door to our coven is.” I swallow hard, finally letting myself think about the consequences, about everything Tabatha *didn't* say, yet her words were screaming at me in a warning.

“And that's bad,” Lucas finishes for me.

“It is.” I let my eyes flutter shut, calmed by Lucas's gently touch. He slides his fingers up my arm and I shiver with desire.

“How bad?” Lucas asks.

“Bad.” I open my eyes and look at Lucas, getting lost in those gorgeous, deep-blue eyes all over again. I’m not letting anyone keep us apart, no matter the cost.

“We won’t let it get that bad.” Lucas gives my hand a squeeze. “I heard what your High Priestess said. Those that know the truth are grateful for us both.”

“Right.” I force a smile and bring my other hand up, cupping it over Lucas’s. “It’ll be okay. I love you, and I won’t let stupid, old rules keep us apart.”

“No one is taking you from me, or me from you,” Lucas promises and intertwines our fingers. Another shiver runs down my spine, but this time it chills me.

I could get in serious trouble with the Grand Coven.

And Lucas could as well with the Vampire Council.

It suddenly hits me how dangerous it is for us to be together. Not only could we face severe punishment, but our relationship could cause the witches and vampire to start a war.

*Again.*



Dark of Night, book two, is available now!

[Click here to download!](#)

Want to see Callie and Lucas on the big screen?

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## THANK YOU

Thank you so much for taking time out of your busy life to read Dead of Night! I hope Callie and Lucas held you spellbound! :-) I appreciate so much the time you took to read this book and would love if you would consider leaving a review. I LOVE connecting with readers and the best place to do so is my fan page. I'd love to have you!

[www.facebook.com/groups/emilygoodwinbooks](http://www.facebook.com/groups/emilygoodwinbooks)

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Emily Goodwin is the New York Times and USA Today Bestselling author of over a dozen of romantic titles. Emily writes the kind of books she likes to read, and is a sucker for a swoon-worthy bad boy and happily ever afters.

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