

MADELINE FREEMAN



DEATH
MARKED

BOOK 2 OF THE FATE BOUND TRILOGY

A close-up portrait of a woman with long brown hair and striking red eyes. She has a serious expression. The background is dark, and the lighting is soft, highlighting her face. At the bottom, there is a circular inset showing a full moon with a black silhouette of a wolf howling in front of it.

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Ava's lust for blood endangers the very humans she's supposed to protect. Being a werewolf-vampire hybrid is complicated enough, but when a bounty is placed on her head, she's forced into hiding.

When Jack—Ava's alpha and lover—is snatched by the witch who wants Ava dead, Ava has to form a new alliance with supernaturals she barely trusts. But when they uncover a sinister plot involving disappearing werewolves, Ava has to choose between saving Jack protecting hundreds of weres from a fate worse than death.

CHAPTER ONE

I SWALLOW around the lump in my throat. I hate that I'm so nervous, but at least the humans around me can't smell it.

I inhale and hold my breath for a beat before releasing it. I stride forward in time with the music coming from the live band. Despite it being a Thursday, the place is filled nearly to capacity with men in tight-fitting jeans and women in low-cut tops. The tables nearest the stage are loud and rowdy, but the sheer number of people back here by the bar makes me feel almost claustrophobic. I almost long for the little dive I used to frequent.

But that was another life.

There are no seats, so I choose two men to squeeze between. The blond on my right is in his early thirties. The one on the left is younger with too much product in his hair for my taste. But he's the one who smiles.

I lean forward and give a halfhearted wave of my hand, but the bartender pays me no mind. Taking a half step to the side, I brush against the man on my left. "Sorry." I offer a broad smile as I turn to him. "It's so crowded here tonight."

He looks me up and down in an openly eager way. I keep my lips upturned as he takes in every carefully selected piece of my appearance. My chestnut hair was painstakingly curled

into beachy waves by Lillie, and Maggie did the smoky shadow on my eyelids and chose a lipstick far darker than I would have picked on my own. The blue halter dress is too short and the cutout on the front shows more of my cleavage than I'm comfortable with. But the look is having the desired effect, so I disregard my insecurities.

The man's eyes linger a little longer than polite on the curve of my breasts before he makes eye contact again. "What are you drinking?"

"Long Island."

He leans forward and waves his hand with far more gusto than I did. Within thirty seconds, the bartender is in front of us. "A Long Island iced tea for the lady, and for me... Jack and Coke."

My stomach clenches and I'm sure the smile on my face falters. Of all the drinks he could've ordered, why did it have to be that?

As the bartender mixes our drinks, my companion begins talking. I catch his name—Tommy—but beyond that I can't make myself pay attention. I'm not doing anything wrong—not really. I'm not cheating. If I want to meet my objective, I need to do this. The familiar lines chase themselves through my mind, but they don't comfort me. They never do.

As Tommy finishes off his drink and slides his hand around my waist, I can't quite ignore the guilt swelling within me.

"You wanna get out of here?" I murmur in his ear.

I lead the way to the stairs. When we reach the ground floor, Tommy scoops up my hand and opens the main door. He tries to tug me toward the parking lot, but I don't follow.

“My apartment’s not far from here,” I say. “About three blocks.”

His grin is so wide it’s almost a leer. “Well, all right.”

My heart thuds harder with each step and my mouth goes dry. My hand is shaking, but Tommy is too distracted to notice.

I scan the street. Traffic is light and the bar is the only business open at this hour. The windows of the surrounding storefronts are all dark. A few voices echo against the buildings as people leave, but no one walks in this direction.

There’s a narrow alley between a barbershop and a used book store and I pull Tommy into it so fast he almost trips. He releases my hand, but my grip is enough to keep us connected.

When I round on him, a grin stretches his lips. “Couldn’t wait to get me alone, could you?” He slides his hands down my sides before digging his fingers into my hips and yanking me toward him. When I don’t budge, his face twists with confusion.

I shove him against the brick exterior of the barber shop and bar my arm across his chest. “Don’t move. Don’t make a sound.”

He wriggles against my arm. “What?”

I clench my teeth. Damn. Narrowing my eyes, I try again. “Stand still and don’t talk.”

Tommy continues to struggle. “What’s happening?”

Footsteps echo in the alleyway, but I don’t turn my head. I know who’s approaching. I can smell him.

“Poor guy.” Luke’s voice is as smooth as ever. “Probably thinks you’re some kind of dominatrix or something.”

“Wait—what’s happening?” Tommy shifts against my arms. “Who’s that? Are you... Are you gonna rob me?”

Luke continues his slow, easy pace until he’s standing right behind me. “Be silent. Stop moving.”

Instantly, Tommy’s body goes limp. He stands stock-still against the wall, his eyes darting back and forth. When I remove my forearm from across his chest, he remains where he is.

Luke clucks his tongue. “You’re not getting any better.”

“I’m trying.” I draw back my shoulders. No matter how hard I try to bend a person to my will, I haven’t been able to compel anyone to so much as blink. I suggested compulsion may be beyond my abilities because of what I am, but Luke won’t hear of it.

Luke opens his mouth but closes it almost immediately. He exhales noisily, his nostrils flaring. “It’s okay. We can try again tomorrow.” He sweeps a hand toward Tommy. “Go ahead. You managed to get him out here.”

Tommy’s eyes zoom around in their sockets as I take a step nearer to him. I can’t imagine what’s going on in his mind. Is he afraid I’ll steal his wallet? Stab him? Or does he have an inkling of what’s really about to happen?

I inhale the scent of his skin. Beneath the thick spice of his body spray is a hint of perspiration and a faint sweet aroma. Pain shoots through my gums as I focus on a spot on the side of his neck midway between his chin and his shoulder. My incisors lengthen as I detect the gentle pulse below the surface. The horror in his eyes should be enough to repel me, but it doesn’t, and in a flash my elongated teeth have pierced his flesh and his warm blood gushes over my parted lips.

The taste is intoxicating—complex like an expensive wine. It's something I wouldn't have noticed a few weeks ago, but now each flavor note explodes through my senses like a starburst. I gulp down mouthful after mouthful like it's my first meal in weeks.

An annoying hum like the droning of a fly buzzes at the edge of my awareness. Something tells me I should pay attention to it, but I don't care. All that matters right now is taste and sensation—all that matters is the blood.

A hand clamps on my shoulder and yanks me back with enough force to propel me into the opposite wall. My back and head smash into the cinder blocks so hard there's no doubt it would have knocked out a human. But the pain that flares through my body only serves to anger me.

Luke stands in front of Tommy, his back to me. Does he think it's his turn now or something? I lunge forward and spin him around to face me. "The hell?"

There's no hunger in Luke's eyes, just grim determination. "You were out of control. You know you don't need that much. Hell, even I don't need that much."

His accusation fuels my fury. A small voice in the back of my mind urges me to calm down, but something more powerful rules me. A rival interrupted me from a feed, and he's standing between me and what's mine. "Step away, Luke."

He shakes his head. "You're not thinking straight." He turns to Tommy. "Forget everything that happened from the moment you laid eyes on that girl. Get out of here. Go home."

Tommy begins moving and I make a grab for him, but Luke encircles me, pinning my arms to my sides. I struggle

against him as Tommy stumbles toward the street.

“Let go of me!” I twist, but his grip doesn’t lessen.

“Not until you calm down,” he spits through clenched teeth.

I lean forward, forcing Luke to bend with me. He adjusts his footing and I whirl and push backward, slamming him into the brick wall Tommy was just frozen against. Luke’s hold slips incrementally, but it’s enough. I force my arms away from my sides, breaking his grasp. He tries to grab me again, but I shake him off and run toward the road. Tommy can’t have gotten too far.

At the mouth of the alley, a searing pain tears through my body, making me stumble. Another wave sends me to my knees. It’s as if my body is burning from the inside out. I inspect my hands, but I’m not melting. I can still move, still breathe—but how can that be? I must be dying. How can I endure agony like this and not die?

“Ava? Ava?” Luke clutches my shoulders, shaking me. “What’s wrong?”

“I... I’m not sure.” I push his hands away and struggle to my feet. The initial shock of the pain ebbs, but it doesn’t evaporate completely. Something terrible is happening, but I don’t know what. All I know is I have to go.

I take off down the street. I’m not sure of my destination, but I’m positive each step brings me closer to someone who needs me. Luke calls my name, but I don’t stop.

CHAPTER TWO

I'M NOT sure how long I've been running. At some point I shifted, and now the paws of my wolf form propel me through the forest at a breakneck speed. This is faster than I've ever run before, but I can't shake the feeling I'm still not going fast enough.

Something nags at the back of my mind, but I can't devote my attention to figuring out what. First I need to get to my destination—wherever that is. I can deal with everything else after.

The sense of urgency overtaking me only increases, but my speed wanes. I'm not tired, despite the countless miles I've run, but the ache in my bones still hasn't subsided. It's not as bad as the initial agony I felt in the alley, but every time my paws hit the ground, pain ricochets through my body.

A starburst erupts in my vision, bringing with it a certainty. I know who's in trouble. Everything makes sense.

I try to run faster, but the discomfort ratchets up and I lose my footing. I tumble snout-first into the soft earth. I attempt to get back to my paws, but my limbs are too weak. Whines and whimpers escape me. I can't stop now—not when I'm so close. But my body won't cooperate. Every nerve feels like it's on fire.

Rapid thudding approaches, bringing with it a scent on the breeze. Luke. Has he been following me all this time?

I need to tell him what's happening, but I can't communicate with him while I'm in this form. After a few tries, I'm able to submerge my wolf and change back to a human. I open my mouth to call out, but all that emerges is a long, low moan.

The pounding slows, then stops. "Ava?" He crouches at my side, his brow furrowed. "I'm not mad, if that's what you're worried about."

I shake my head. "It's not—"

"You probably feel guilty, but don't. That guy's gonna be just fine. A little tired tomorrow, but he'll get over it."

I reach for him, managing to grab a fistful of his tee-shirt. "Luke."

He scoops me up in his arms effortlessly. "I have to get you back to wolf world. You're not safe out here."

"No!" I call, my voice the loudest it's been. The enclave is in the exact opposite direction. "We can't go—not yet."

His expression hardens. "I've had about enough of this. We're going."

He takes a step, but I press my hand to his cheek, forcing him to look at me. "Marisol."

Recognition flickers in his eyes. "Hybrid number two? What about her?"

"I need to get to her. She's... She's in danger."

A shadow crosses Luke's face and his electric blue eyes darken. "Okay." He turns around and starts off in the direction

we had been traveling—slowly at first, then faster.

I close my eyes as the scenery whips by and do my best not to cry out as the agony intensifies. I don't know what I'd do without Luke. There's no way I can run in this condition. Pinpricks of light explode against my eyelids and my conscious mind dips below the surface.

I jerk back to awareness abruptly. When I open my eyes, nothing makes sense. Luke isn't holding me—I'm flat on my back in the center of a dilapidated room. There are holes in the walls and ceiling and the whole place smells musty, like clothes left too long in the washing machine.

I try to roll over, to push myself to my feet, but my body doesn't respond. The agonizing burning is gone, but it's as if the sensation left me boneless, an empty shell.

Where's Luke? What happened while I was unconscious?

Xander must have found me. He's got me again, and he'll want me to do something even more horrible this time...

No. Xander is dead. By degrees, my senses sharpen and my muscles begin to respond. I sit and scan the room.

It's hard to tell in the dimness, but in addition to the moldering piles of leaves nestled in corners, I detect something else on the floor in the adjacent room. The shapes stick out because they're too symmetrical to occur in nature. They must be relatively new if the winds haven't pushed them against a wall yet.

I don't know what's going on. I should stay put and wait for Luke to return, but curiosity gets the better of me. I crawl toward the objects, eyes searching for a clue as to what they could be.

But it's my nose that provides the necessary information. Despite the rancid undertones indicating some of these things were discarded days ago, I pick up some fading top notes that make everything snap into place.

Blood. The objects on the floor are the bags used by hospitals to collect blood. But why are they here in this abandoned house in what I assume—based on the last trajectory I remember—is in the middle of nowhere? There are at least two dozen of them sucked dry.

Footsteps echo from the next room and my body tenses. I crouch, ready to leap into action—to fight, if necessary—but a familiar form comes into view.

“Luke? Where are we?” I spring to my feet and immediately wish I hadn't. My head swims and blackness encroaches on my periphery.

I reach out my hand for something to steady myself and find Luke, who's at my side in a flash. “It's okay—we're safe. They're all gone.”

His response makes no sense. Who is he talking about? I came here—wherever here is—for Marisol. “But...”

“I think they were all holed up here—the ones who escaped when we rescued you from Xander.” A shadow flickers over his face and he doesn't meet my eyes. “Marisol must've been here too.”

If she was here, it means she's gone now. Earlier, I was guided here by an instinct I couldn't ignore—but now there's nothing driving me onward, only an empty feeling in the pit of my stomach. “I have to find her.”

Luke shakes his head. “Trust me—you don't want to do that.”

I take a step away from him. Is this why he chased me out here—to keep me from finding Marisol? I don't care if she's with a couple of vampires. If I can sneak up on them, they'll be no match for me. Then I can bring Marisol back to the enclave and help her understand what's happening to her. "You don't get it," I say, starting for the room he entered through.

He loops his hand through the crook of my arm and pulls me to a stop. "No, you're not hearing me." A muscle in his jaw jumps and the electric blue of his irises darkens. "You feel it, don't you? Like you've been hollowed out. Like a part of you has been scooped away. Deep down, you know what it means."

The weight of his words presses down on me and I do my best to shake it off. "No. You're wrong."

"When a vampire turns someone, a connection is forged," he says, his voice even. "When they die, you can feel it."

I don't want to accept what he's saying, but I can't deny it. If I'm honest, I've known since I woke up in this house. He's right. A part of me is gone. "You've experienced this before, haven't you?"

He releases my arm and turns away. "Once."

The pain contained in that one syllable is nearly enough to break me. I want to take him in my arms, rub his back, promise everything will be okay, but my skin prickles and I know before I can see or smell anything that someone is coming. After another beat, I know who it is.

"Jack?" I call. "We're in here."

Nails click across the hardwood floors, but Jack shifts as he enters the room we're in.

Luke stiffens and eyes him. Such behavior isn't out of the ordinary between a vampire and a werewolf, but Luke and Jack are brothers. Despite the fact the two have a long and complicated past, I thought they might be moving beyond it. But I suppose it's foolish of me to think a couple of good weeks could undo whatever hurt has festered between them for the better part of a century.

Jack's eyes linger on Luke a beat too long before he crosses to me. "I didn't know what to think when I sensed you running away."

"What?" The heaviness from a moment ago has evaporated, leaving his voice taunting and playful. "Afraid she decided to run off with your much handsomer big brother?"

Jack ignores him. "I thought someone was chasing you—or you'd been kidnapped again. Why didn't you respond? I kept asking where you were going."

I have a vague recollection of feeling like I was forgetting something as I ran here, but that's it. "I... I didn't hear you."

Confusion knits Jack's brow, but Luke takes a step forward.

"Maybe the vampire part of her drowned out the wolf side. It's Marisol."

The sound of her name sends an icy dagger of regret through my chest.

"Marisol?" Jack repeats. "Is she..."

I squeeze my eyes closed and he pulls me flush against him. I relax into him, leaning on his strength. More than anything, I want to somehow release a measure of the emptiness inside me, but I don't know how. Tears won't come for a sadness this profound.

“I’m so sorry,” he murmurs, smoothing his hand over my hair. “I know what she meant to you.”

“Thank you.” It’s the only thing I can think to say, despite the fact that it’s all wrong. Although I’ve tried to explain, I don’t know if Jack really understands the connection I felt to Marisol—the responsibility. As alpha, he cares for each of the weres in our pack. Without a doubt, I can say he’d die for any one of them. But I can’t help feeling my link with Marisol is—was—something different.

He kisses my forehead as he releases me, and his eyes flick to Luke. “Have you found the body?”

“I’ll take you to it.” Luke leads the way out of the room, resolutely not looking at me.

Part of me wants to follow them, but I stay rooted to the spot. There’s nothing I can do for her now. Seeing her dead won’t change anything.

Warmth sweeps through my body and my eyes prickle. I suck in a shaky breath.

This isn’t my fault. I never wanted to hurt Marisol. I never wanted to turn her into what I am. Xander forced my hand.

The explanations—the excuses—rush through my mind, but nothing makes me feel any better. No matter how I look at it, this is my fault. If not for what I am, Xander never would have made me try to create more hybrids. Hell, if I’d never come to the enclave, Marisol wouldn’t have broken from the pack and been in a position to be taken in the first place.

I catch Luke’s scent and hastily blink away the moisture gathering in my eyes. By the time he enters the room, I’ve arranged my expression into what I hope passes for neutral.

The look that flits across Luke's face lets me know I've missed the mark. "Jack's making arrangements with the pack to come pick up Marisol's body. He says burying her in the enclave won't be a problem." He keeps his eyes down when he speaks, and his tone is quiet, somber—nothing like the cocky, silky-smooth way he usually talks.

Is what's happening with Marisol bringing up memories he'd rather forget? He's experienced this feeling before. "How long before it goes away?" I ask before I can stop myself. "The emptiness?"

He meets my eyes and the corner of his mouth twitches. "I'll let you know."

Something passes between us—a connection I can't put into words. Questions pop into my head about who he lost and how long it's been, but I don't need to ask them. Just knowing we share the experience is enough.

I cross to him in slow, measured steps. I want to touch him, to show him he's not alone, but before I reach him, my skin prickles.

Luke stiffens. "I suppose it's too much to hope your pack has already shown up."

The hair on the back of my neck stands up. "There are wolves coming—but they're not from my pack."

CHAPTER THREE

LUKE TIPS HIS HEAD BACK. “Don’t tell me we’re in the middle of some other dogs’ territory.”

I rattle at the slur but let it slide. “This is neutral land.”

He brow wrinkles, but I ignore it. I could explain how I know—the scent, the way the air feels—but I’m sure he wouldn’t care to hear it.

Jack is waiting at the bottom of the porch stairs, his taut posture enough to assure me he’s sensed the approaching wolves too.

Luke hangs by the door. “Should I stay inside? We don’t know why these guys are coming and seeing me might complicate things.”

Jack shakes his head. “They’d be able to smell you—even if you ran off now. It’s better to be upfront with them.”

Dread settles like a brick in my stomach. I’d love to give these werewolves the benefit of the doubt, but none of my experiences with packs outside my own have been positive.

They’re so close now I can hear the pounding of their paws. To our right is an open, if overgrown, field. But the wolves are approaching from the left, where thick forest

grows. I step off the porch, joining Jack just as the first shapes emerge through the trees.

A brown wolf appears first, followed by a black one. The two sniff the air and scan the vicinity before turning back to the trees. But it's not wolves who step into the clearing this time—these two women are in human form. Their eyes travel from Jack to Luke to me and back again. I do my best not to shift under their gaze.

It feels like forever before the taller of the two women takes a few steps forward. Her dark hair is cropped short and her face has an elfin quality. Under different circumstances, I would regard her as friendly based on her appearance, but there's a hard glint in her eye that unsettles me.

“We sensed a wolf run past our territory—moving incredibly fast. Being followed by a vampire.” Her eyes flick to Luke on the last word. “At first we thought there was some kind of attack in progress, but now... I'm not sure what to think.”

Jack smiles, but from my angle I can see it's forced. “I can understand your confusion.” He sweeps a hand toward Luke. “I've known him for a very long time. At the moment, he's useful to me, and the two of us have a truce. Not my pack and his brood—me and him.”

It's not lost on me that Jack isn't using Luke's name—or mentioning the two are brothers. Not for the first time, I wonder how unique their situation is.

The elfin woman's expression gives nothing away. She and her companion—a shorter woman whose dark blonde hair is tied up in a ponytail—take a few steps toward us. As they move, eight more wolves step out of the woods.

An icy sensation prickles the back of my neck. I take a deep breath in an attempt to calm my nerves, but my unease only grows.

The blonde pulls a wooden stake out from behind her back. It's about the length of her forearm and half as thick, ending in a cruel point. "What about her?" She raises her chin.

"What about her?" There's a hard edge to Jack's voice now. I want to tell him to calm down, not to get defensive—but I know that's easier said than done.

"What brought her here?" The blonde takes another step. "Don't lie and say it wasn't her running at such a tremendous speed. Her scent is all over the woods. And what an interesting scent it is."

She knows. I'm not sure how, but this woman has figured out what I am. Neither fully werewolf nor fully vampire, but a hybrid of both.

"Have we invaded your territory?" Jack asks. "Have we broken any laws?"

The elfin woman narrows her eyes. "Your association with the vampire—"

"Is uncommon," Jack interjects. "But it's not against any established law."

"It makes you untrustworthy," the dark-haired woman continues. "Clearly your hybrid half is clouding your judgment."

Jack sucks in a breath and my stomach clenches. It's one thing for this pack to have figured out I'm not entirely werewolf, but they shouldn't know about the two of us sharing the same soul.

Not unless someone told them.

The ten wolves inch forward, their teeth bared. An ominous chorus of growls ripples through the night air.

The wolf within me bubbles to the surface, sensing trouble. If this comes to a fight, she is ready.

“If I were you,” Luke says, his voice low, “I’d think long and hard about what you do next. I’ve got no beef with you, but if you try to hurt any of us, I have no problem killing every last one of you.”

“We don’t plan to hurt any of you,” the blonde says.

“Unless you get in our way,” says the elfin woman. “Ava is coming with us.”

Her use of my name sends me over the edge. Before I can consider the consequences, my wolf emerges. My body still transforming, I leap at the dark-haired woman. My front paws hit her square in the chest and she tumbles backward. I jump over her head and turn to continue the attack, but three of the wolves rush between us. Beyond them, Luke is surrounded by five wolves. Jack, still in human form, stands across from the blonde, who is flanked by the other two wolves. He holds up his hand the way one does when trying to calm an angry animal.

The elfin woman gets to her feet, her eyes never leaving mine. “It’s nothing personal, Ava.” She spits my name like a curse. “But there’s no place in the world for something like you.”

One of the wolves lunges for me, but I’m faster. I twist, avoiding his teeth, but another wolf swoops in and bites at my back. Although her teeth don’t sink too deep, I feel my skin tear as I pull away.

Snarls and barks fill the air as the opposing wolves jump and snap. One bites Luke's calf. In one swift move, he brings his hand down on the were's back and it crumples, its tongue lolling from its open mouth.

Howls sound. Although Luke didn't kill it, he's angered the rest of the pack.

A wolf bites at my throat, and when I shake him off, two more descend on me.

We have to get out of here.

I round on the wolf biting at my back leg and bite him around the neck. He snarls and attempts to pull away, but I shake him until he goes limp.

Teeth clamp on my back as I release the motionless wolf. I pull away, but her bite is too tight. Another set of jaws clenches my neck. No matter how I move, I can't get either wolf to release me. Blood seeps through my fur and my strength wanes. It's hard to breathe.

There's a yelp and a jerking sensation against my back. In the next moment, the pressure disappears, leaving only one set of teeth around my neck. With the weight of one assailant gone, I can move more freely. I pivot and twist, snapping at my attacker until I work my way free.

When his teeth slip from their grip, I retreat a few steps, but my footing is unsure. He sees my weakness and rushes forward to attack again, but Jack grabs him by the scruff and pulls him against his body long enough to snap his neck before dropping him to the ground.

"Let's go."

I can't agree more. A burning sensation radiates from my back and neck, as my wounds start to heal. I step tentatively

toward the forest, making sure I've got my balance, but before I reach the tree line, Jack gives a hoarse cry.

The blonde woman stands behind Jack, a satisfied grin on her face. The stake she held earlier protrudes through Jack's abdomen. His eyes are wide and blood trickles from the corner of his mouth.

In that moment, it doesn't matter that my footing is unsure or I'm still weak from blood loss. All I can see is the blonde woman's smug expression. I streak toward her, barely registering when her eyes go round. She pulls the stake from Jack's stomach and tries to position it between herself and me, but I'm too fast. My mouth closes around her neck and I shake her as she falls backward. She's limp by the time we hit the ground, but I don't stop. I rip at her flesh until her head is severed from her body and blood pools around my paws.

“Ava.”

Jack's voice pulls me back to the present. He lies on the ground, clutching his gaping wound.

Luke rushes to his brother's side and crouches down to help him to his feet. Jack grunts, but he starts running as soon as he's upright. I follow, keeping a few steps behind him, even though I could run much faster. A few of the wolves were still standing, and if they give chase, I want to be between them and Jack.

My chest tightens as we go, but the sensation has nothing to do with the physical exertion. Why did I have to kill that woman? Disabling her would have been enough.

I know the answer: She hurt Jack. When I saw the stake poking out of him, I had to exact revenge. Someone who attacked my half like that couldn't be allowed to live.

I inhale slow, measured breaths. We didn't ask for trouble. They came for me, and we were defending ourselves. I did what I had to do.

We've put several miles between us and the run-down house when Jack stumbles. He catches himself, but after a few more paces, he stumbles again, crashing to the forest floor. I skid to a stop and sniff the air to assure myself we're not being followed before shifting back to human form.

Luke is at Jack's side when I reach him. "He's unconscious," he murmurs, his brow knit. "What's going on? Shouldn't his wound be healing already?"

I nudge him out of the way to inspect the damage. Even in the darkness of the forest, I can tell the injury hasn't started to knit together. I lean forward and smell the area. "Wolfsbane."

CHAPTER FOUR

“I’LL CARRY HIM.” Luke leans forward to loop his arms under Jack’s body.

“Carry him where? How long did it take us to run here? Thirty minutes? An hour?” I can sense the enclave—I always can—but I can’t determine how far away from it we are with any certainty. All I know is it’s too far.

Luke nods, but he doesn’t remove his arms. “He won’t make it to the enclave. We have to go somewhere else.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Where? We can’t take him to a hospital. And after what just happened, I don’t think seeking help from another pack is an option.”

“What do we need to help him?”

I draw a blank. “Shouldn’t you know? You’ve got decades more supernatural experience than I have.”

“I’m not usually in the business of helping werewolves.” He pulls Jack to his chest and stands as if he’s carrying nothing heavier than a pillow. “But if wolfsbane is anything like silver or garlic, we’ll need to rinse the wound and bandage it. That’s a start.” He raises his chin and sniffs the air before heading off to the right of the direction we had been running.

I keep pace with his long, loping gait. “Where are you going?”

“To the first damn house I come to. There’s a small town maybe ten miles away.”

I take in a deep breath, trying to detect whatever scent is giving him his information. “I don’t smell anything.”

The corner of his mouth quirks. “What can I say? I’ve got decades more supernatural experience than you.”

Before I can respond, he takes off at a run. I’m surprised at how effortlessly he moves, even with Jack’s added weight.

Jack will be okay. He has to be. Although I only met him only a few weeks ago, I can’t imagine my life without him. And even though we haven’t merged, I can’t help thinking that if he dies, part of me will too.

I shake the thought from my head. Jack won’t die. I won’t allow it.

Before long, Luke slows. When we come to the edge of the forest, I peek around him. Several houses in varying states of dilapidation are spaced unevenly along a two-lane highway. One back porch light blazes through the blackness of the night—the only sign of life.

Luke points at a house with peeling white paint. “That one.”

I want to ask how he knows, but I feel exposed out here. This is still neutral territory, but what if more members from the pack that attacked us decide to give chase?

We make our way across the empty yard to the back door. Luke lifts his chin impatiently. Since he’s carrying Jack, there’s no way he can open it himself. I hesitate. Should I pull

the doorknob off? Will the door even open after that, or will it make our problem worse? Does he want me to kick the whole thing down? But all my questions evaporate when the knob twists in my hand. It isn't even locked.

Inside, the house is dark and quiet. There's a warm, heavy aroma that takes a moment to place. I round on Luke. "There are people here?"

"Of course," he grumbles, pushing past me. "A vacant place wouldn't be very helpful."

"You can't just barge into someone's house." I creep into the kitchen, where Luke lays Jack on the floor. "There are rules against this kind of thing."

"Human law doesn't really concern me." He opens the cupboard nearest the sink and pokes through it. "Do you want to help Jack or not?"

I assume his question is rhetorical. "I'll go check in the bathroom for bandages."

No matter how stealthy I try to be, floorboards groan under my feet. The half bath off the kitchen turns up nothing useful so I search for another. I tiptoe through the dining room, pausing only to peek into the adjoining living room. Finding nothing, I move into the foyer.

There has to be another bathroom upstairs, but that's also where the bedrooms are. It's risky, but Jack's injury needs to be bandaged. I suck in a breath and climb the stairs.

The first three are mercifully quiet, but my fourth step elicits a creak so loud I'm positive I've woken everyone in a five-mile radius. I freeze, waiting for the inevitable footfalls of people coming to investigate, but they don't come. After what feels like a solid minute, I continue upward.

I locate a bathroom at the top of the stairs and begin searching through the medicine cabinet. I can see well enough, even in the near blackness of the room. Not only are my eyes adjusted to the gloom, but I see better in darkness now than I did as a human. I can't read the words on the pill bottles, but I can identify the shapes.

The bandages in the cabinet won't be enough, so I crouch to check under the sink. I shove a package of toilet paper out of the way and find a plastic first aid box. I pop it open and almost cry out with relief when I see gauze and sterile pads.

I snap the lid closed and am about to stand when the bathroom light flicks on.

“Luke, what the...”

The question dies in my throat. The man standing in the doorway is at least fifty, but he has the muscled arms of a man used to physical labor. The lines around his eyes deepen as he narrows his gaze. He wears a white tee-shirt and striped boxers, but it's not his clothes that hold my attention—it's the barrel of the rifle aimed at my chest.

“Just what in the hell are you doing in my house?”

CHAPTER FIVE

“I DON’T WANT ANY TROUBLE.” My heartbeat pounds in my ears. I’m not sure what I’m afraid of. Besides hurting like hell, I doubt his bullets would have much effect on me.

“You looking for pills?” He eyes me shrewdly. “I’ve got plenty, but I doubt my blood thinners and cholesterol medication will give you the high you’re wanting.”

I open my mouth, but nothing comes out. Am I supposed to thank him and be on my way? I can’t imagine he won’t follow me downstairs to see me out—and what happens when he finds Luke and Jack in his kitchen?

“I think I’d better call the police. You look like you’re in a bad way.”

I shake my head, standing. He keeps the rifle level with my chest. I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror: hair wild, slinky dress ripped and bloody, eyes blackened by running mascara. “I’m okay. Really. You don’t need to call anyone.”

But I know as soon as the words are out of my mouth that he doesn’t believe me. Not that I can blame him. In his position, I wouldn’t believe me either.

A loud wooden groan sounds on the stairs, and by the time the man turns around, Luke stands only a few feet behind him.

A hoarse cry escapes the man's lips and a gunshot cracks through the air.

Luke stares down at his chest and wiggles a finger through the hole beneath his right pec. "Damn. I liked this shirt."

He takes a step closer and the man fires again. Luke doesn't flinch when the bullet impacts his left shoulder. He reaches forward with his right hand and squeezes the gun's barrel closed as if it were made of tin foil. "You're going to stop trying to hurt me." Luke's tone is even, soothing. "You're not afraid of us. In fact, you're going to help. Get some towels and bring them downstairs."

The man sets down his rifle and turns. As he opens a linen closet, a hinge creaks further down the hall.

"Go back to sleep," Luke says as soon as a woman's face appears from behind the door. "Nothing to see here."

The door closes again and Luke blows out a breath. "See, handy for more than just feeding. Let's go."

The first aid box still in my hand, I follow Luke back to the kitchen. The homeowner follows behind, his arms laden with so many towels I'm afraid he can't see over them.

Jack is unconscious in the middle of the kitchen, his shirt in a pile of ribbons beside him. Luke kneels by his side and holds a hand out to the man. "Towel." He rolls Jack onto his side and tucks the folded cloth beneath him.

I crouch on Jack's other side, not sure what to do to help. Luke relieves the man of a second towel and dips it in the bowl of water by Jack's head. When he wipes at the wound, Jack groans and his eyes flutter.

I brush the hair off his forehead. "It's okay, Jack. I'm here."

Luke takes his time cleaning the wound. Jack twitches and moans through most of it, but he doesn't regain consciousness.

"He's going to be okay, right?" I ask as Luke begins dressing the spot.

"I've never heard of a were dying from wolfsbane." He doesn't meet my eyes.

A knock echoes through the house. According to the clock above the stove, it's three in the morning. "Who could that be?"

"Almost done," Luke mutters, applying tape to hold the bandage in place. "That's going to have to be good enough. Ava, check the backyard."

I know better than to ask for what. As Luke lifts Jack off the floor, I peek out the lacy yellow curtain. I'm about to announce there's nothing to see when I detect shadows moving just inside the forest. "Someone's out there."

The front door bangs open and two broad-shouldered men rush in. My hope that they're police officers checking on a reported break-in is dashed when two wolves lope in after them.

The guy in front, whose black hair is close-cropped and whose biceps I couldn't wrap both hands around, surveys Luke coolly. "Taking a meal to go?"

The man beside him, whose dark blond hair is only a fraction of an inch longer than his companion's, shakes his head. "Not unless leech boy suddenly has a taste for wolf blood."

Confusion sweeps the first man's face and his nostrils flare. "What in the hell is going on here?"

His friend steps toward us. “Doesn’t matter. I’d give you the benefit of the doubt, leech, but you don’t smell new. My guess is you’ve been around more than long enough to know breaking into a human’s house for a late-night snack isn’t the kind of thing we let slide.”

As he strides closer, Luke remains stock-still. I do my best to follow suit, but I’m sure my hands are trembling. As pack alpha, Jack has the ability to speak into my mind—even when we’re in human form. For the first time, I wish I shared the same kind of link with Luke. Vampires tend to be more loosely affiliated than werewolves, but Luke holds a special sway over me because he’s responsible for my vampire side. If we could communicate telepathically, we might be able to figure a way out of this.

The blond man’s eyes narrow when he gets a closer look at Jack. When he inspects me, the corner of his mouth quirks in a humorless smile. “Well isn’t this our lucky night.”

A smile spreads across the dark-haired man’s face. “So you’re the one who tore Serena’s head off.” There’s a note of appreciation in his tone. “I’ve been wanting someone to do that for years. You know, it’ll almost be a shame turning you over, seeing as you did me such a big favor.”

“Wait—turn me over?” A knot of unease tightens in my stomach. “What are you talking about?”

The blond grins. “Don’t you know there’s a bounty on your head? They’ve even got a name for you. What is it again, Troy?”

“The hybrid abomination,” Troy says. “It’s got a nice ring to it, I think.”

“Who put the bounty out?” Luke asks.

“Does it matter?” Troy cracks his knuckles. “They’re not asking for you. And I think we both know you’re not going to live long enough to find out.”

Troy lunges for Luke. I don’t think—I give into my instincts. There’s no way Luke can fight while holding Jack, and putting him down only puts Jack in danger.

I have to protect them both.

I don’t shift, but I give control over to my wolf. Troy hasn’t quite changed his trajectory when I land in front of him. I punch him in the sternum—the way Sawyer has had me practice a hundred times in the gym. The force sends him sprawling backward. Time slows down as I watch him sailing through the air, arms flailing. The weres on either side of him leap at me, but a roundhouse kick knocks each of them in the muzzle and they crumple at my feet.

“How are we going to get out of here?” Luke asks.

Movement behind him distracts me. The blond runs at Luke. Something in his hand glints and it takes me a second to recognize what it is.

A silver spike. And he’s aiming it at Luke’s heart.

I weave around Luke, putting myself between him and the blond. I grab for the spike with my right hand and put out my left to stop it. The shaft is smooth and it slips against my palm, the tip digging into the center of my left hand. I bring my head hard against the guy’s, making him stumble backward. His grip on the spike loosens and I wrench it from him, taking hold of it by the rubber grip at the end.

I don’t have to turn to know Troy and the weres are getting to their feet. I need to act fast if I want to get out of here. I dart

forward and grab the blond around the neck. With my free hand, I aim the spike at his chest. “You’re coming with me.”

He lets out a choked sound. “That’s your plan? You really think they’ll let you through? Do you have any idea how much you’re worth?”

I swallow. “Better hope your life is worth more.” I raise my chin and Luke starts for the back door. I turn to Troy and the others. “If you follow, I’ll stab him through the heart—and then I’ll do the same to you.”

Troy holds his hands up and takes a step back. The weres at his sides snarl but don’t move.

Adrenaline courses through my system as I maneuver my hostage toward the back door. There are so many ways this could go wrong, but I can’t let myself dwell on them. I have to protect Jack at all costs.

“How far do you think you’ll get?” the blond asks as I push him onward.

I don’t answer. I can only consider the next few seconds. Anything beyond that is a distraction.

Luke nods and I edge past him. “Push open the door,” I instruct the blond. When he doesn’t obey, I poke the tip of the spike through the thin material of his tee-shirt. His skin hisses against the silver and he grunts, attempting to shift against my grip. I squeeze tighter around his neck until he chokes against the pressure and nudges the door open.

I count three, maybe four, shadows moving against the relative stillness of the forest. The air carries the distinct scent of werewolves, but I can’t determine if there are more hiding. “We’re leaving,” I call. “Unless you want your friend to die, you’ll let us go and you won’t follow.”

This prisoner is my only bargaining chip. As much as I don't want to bring him with me, I'd be foolish to leave him behind. I know what I have to do and don't allow myself to hesitate. In a flash, I've snapped his neck. I saw Jack do this once to Luke and it horrified me—but immortals are hardier than humans, and this man will heal. Before he falls to the ground, I hoist him up on my shoulder like a sack of potatoes. I can't risk him fighting.

I exit the house and cut right, running through several connected backyards before entering the forest. Luke's crashing footfalls sound behind me, assuring me he's following.

Everything in me demands I run faster, that I put more distance between myself and those weres, but I keep my pace reasonable. I'm not sure if Luke fed tonight. Even if he did, all this running and fighting has to be taking a toll on him. Dawn could break before we reach the enclave, and vampires aren't at full strength in daylight.

We run for what feels like forever. At this point, I can't remember what it feels like to sit. The enclave grows ever closer, but we're still miles out when a low moan adds itself to the monotony of feet crashing through underbrush.

The hair on the back of my neck rises. Is my prisoner awake? No—the voice is familiar.

I stop faster than I should and my captive slips from my shoulder and crashes to the forest floor. I round on Luke who only just manages not to topple over as he skids to a halt.

Jack's eyelids flutter for a moment before opening, but he smiles when he sees me.

I brush a few wild dark curls off his forehead. “How are you feeling?”

“Good enough to stand?” Luke’s tone is hopeful. “Because, I gotta say, your ass is getting heavy.”

Jack pats his arm. “You can put me down. The wound is healing finally. I don’t think I’m ready for any kind of long journey just yet, but I can stand for a while.”

Luke drops Jack’s legs, but he keeps his right arm behind Jack’s shoulders until Jack is steady on his feet.

Jack turns to his brother. “Thanks.”

Luke nods. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to find something to eat.”

Before anyone can respond, he runs in a path perpendicular to the one we’ve been traveling. I wonder how far he’ll have to go before he finds some wildlife. We weren’t bothering to be quiet, and the woods surrounding us are abnormally quiet and still.

Jack raises his chin. “Who’s that?”

I’d almost forgotten about my hostage. I explain the trouble we ran into when we stopped to bandage Jack’s wounds.

His brow furrows as I speak. “There’s a bounty out on you?”

I shrug. “I’m kind of surprised it’s taken this long.”

“Don’t talk like that.” He pulls me into his arms. “We’ll fix this. I promise.”

The reality of the situation presses down on me. If someone’s put out a bounty, people won’t stop looking for me.

I'm not sure how quickly news spreads through the supernatural community, but it's possible the werewolves aren't the only ones who know. How long before vampires and witches come for me? In the enclave, it's easy to pretend I'm safe, but I know it's not true. We've endured intrusions on our territory before. The weres of my pack will do their best to protect me, but at what cost? How many lives am I willing to sacrifice to save my own?

Jack releases me. "How long has he been out?"

I sniff and rub my nose to alleviate the burning sensation gathering there. "Not sure. Maybe an hour? I have no idea how long we were running." I stretch and my left hand catches my eye. I haven't inspected it since our unconscious guest stabbed me with his silver spike. It's healing nicely, with just a dime-sized blister where the entrance and exit wounds were.

A twig snaps behind me and my muscles tense, but when I catch a glimpse of Luke through the trees, I relax again. He wipes the back of his mouth as he slows to rejoin us.

"I don't know how you stand it." He glares at me with veiled disgust. "I feel like there's fur between my teeth." He pulls back his lips as if expecting me to inspect his mouth.

"Do you think you've got enough strength to keep going?" Jack asks, ignoring Luke's complaints.

Luke allows his lips to return to their natural position. "Depends. Carrying you or..."

"Carrying me still, yes."

Luke leans against a nearby tree trunk. "We're leaving him, I assume." He nods toward the blond.

I open my mouth to answer, but Jack is faster. "No. We're bringing him."

Luke and I exchange glances. “We’re bringing him?” I ask, sure I misheard.

“Yes,” Jack says. “And we’d better get moving. I’d like to think most weres wouldn’t turn against one of their own over a bounty, but I’m sure there are enough of them to make it unwise to stay here for too long.”

Luke shakes his head like he’s still not understanding. He points at the hostage. “You want to bring that dude back to wolf world with you? Brilliant. Now if the promise of money wasn’t enough for the rest of his pack, they’ll want to come after Ava to get their friend back.”

Jack meets his brother’s gaze. “We’re not going to the enclave.”

CHAPTER SIX

PINK AND GOLD fingers of color stretch across the ever-lightening sky when we stop again. This piece of forest looks remarkably similar to what we've been running through all night, but something in the air here is different. It's heavier somehow. It presses against my skin like a comforter and fills my lungs like smoke.

"You can feel it, can't you?" Jack asks as Luke sets him on the ground. "The magic?"

I settle our blond captive on the ground at my feet. "I'm still not sure where we're going. You said it's a sanctuary city—but what does that mean?"

Luke holds his hands up. "Don't look at me. I don't know much about them."

Jack glances at him out the corner of his eye. "There are sanctuary cities all over the world to keep supernatural beings safe—from humans and each other. Witches have been setting them up for centuries. I've heard stories of lone wolves finding homes there. If a witch is being hunted for mishandling magic, she can live in a sanctuary and be safe. If someone were to break pack law, he could go to one of these cities to avoid retribution from the convocation."

“Or say if a new vampire couldn’t control themselves around blood and they killed someone without meaning to.” Luke’s voice is detached. “Could someone like that come here?”

My stomach clenches at his description. I assume it’s aimed at me after I lost it on that guy from the bar last night. Could it have only been last night? But there’s something in the way Jack stiffens, how the color drains from his face, that makes me think I’m missing something.

I clear my throat. “So, we’re going to a city potentially filled with criminals? Like a supernatural prison?”

“Not at all. Some of the strongest magic imaginable protects the sanctuary cities. The fact that we’re still a mile out and we can already feel it should tip you off to that.” Jack reaches for my hand and squeezes it. “It’s called a sanctuary for a reason.”

“What are we waiting for?” Luke doesn’t bother hiding his irritation.

Jack hitches his thumb at the blond guy. “We can’t very well carry in our friend here. I’m guessing he’ll be waking up any time now.”

Luke snorts. “And what’s going to keep him from running off at the first opportunity? I’m still not sure why you want to keep him with us to begin with.”

“He’s still a bargaining chip,” I say, pleased when Jack nods.

“And he might be able to tell us who put out the bounty,” he adds. “And as for keeping him from running off...” Jack digs his hands into his pockets and pulls a dark brown leather cuff from each.

Luke tenses, glowering. “I can’t believe you. You go on and on about how Cassie needs rest, how she’s too weak to have me visit for more than five minutes a day, but you go and make her do magic for you?”

Jack rounds on him. “I wouldn’t even let her try. She gave me the name of a witch she’s known for decades. That’s who worked the spell for me.”

Luke crosses his arms over his chest. “You made that for me, didn’t you? Some things never change.”

“I’m not going to get into this with you right now,” Jack snaps.

“I don’t understand,” I say. “What’s so bad about bracelets?”

Luke snorts. “It’s not the object; it’s the intent. They form a link between the people wearing them.” He points at Jack, then himself. “Master. Slave.”

“Don’t be so dramatic.” Jack crouches beside the blond and slips one of the cuffs over his wrist. When he stands, I expect him to slide the other one on himself, but he puts it on me.

I lift my arm to study it. “Whoa—wait. Aren’t people going to be a little suspicious when the two of us roll up in magic handcuffs?”

“They’re not something you see every day,” Jack says. “If anyone asks, you two are friends and bought them at the same store.” He bends down to the blond again, tapping him on the cheeks and prying open his eyelids to check his pupils.

I press my lips together and glance at Luke. “If they’re not common, how did you know what they were?”

He exhales, nostrils flaring. “Why don’t you ask him?”

I turn to Jack, ready to do exactly that, but the hostage grunts and rolls at my feet.

Jack jumps up to give him room, and a few moments later, the guy is sitting, surveying us distrustfully. When his eyes land on me, his lip curls. “You know what? I had some misgivings when I first heard about you. But after what you did to me, I think you deserve what’s coming your way.”

I roll my eyes. “Like you and your friends gave me a choice.”

He stands, pressing in so close I fight not to back away. “You shouldn’t have broken into that guy’s house in the first place. It’s your own—”

“Shut up,” I snap.

His sentence dies in his throat. He opens and closes his mouth experimentally, but no sound comes out.

I glance at the bracelet. “Cool.”

“Well, at least we know it works,” Jack says. “Now that he’s awake, we should get to the city.”

I nod and turn back to the blond. “You’re coming with us. You’re not going to say anything about who or what I am, or about the bounty out on me. You’re going to act like the four of us are friends. And you’re not going to try to leave.”

A muscle in his jaw jumps as he listens, but he doesn’t respond.

“I’m going to assume that worked,” Luke says. “Shall we?”

Jack leads the way. He doesn't break into a run, and I'm thankful for small favors. The blood and adrenaline from last night have ebbed from my system, and I'm sure I'll fall asleep if given the slightest opportunity.

"What's your name?" I ask as we step through a final line of trees and out onto a dirt road.

"Brady."

"I'm Ava." My stomach twists as my name passes my lips, like I'm giving away too much information. "Did you know that already?"

His head jerks from side to side. "My alphas only referred to you as the hybrid abomination."

The news is mildly comforting. "That's Jack and Luke." I don't mention anything more. He knows one is a werewolf and the other a vampire, but he doesn't need to know they're brothers. Looking at them now, it's hard to believe I didn't figure it out before they told me. Although their coloring is different—Jack with his wild, dark hair and olive complexion and Luke with his carefully-styled blond hair and lighter skin—they share the same broad-shouldered frame.

We round a curve in the road and the city comes into view. Embarrassment bubbles within me. I was expecting some medieval fortress complete with stone walls and parapets, but what meets my eye is a plain-looking array of farmhouses surrounded by fields growing crops on all sides. I can't see much beyond the outer ring of buildings—no skyscrapers reach high above the surrounding roofs—and what I can see looks no more magical than an average rural town.

But as we draw nearer, the image shifts. The two-story farmhouses shrink into charming cabins about half the size of

the ones in the enclave. More buildings pop up with every step—some small houses, others square storefronts.

People are the last to materialize. They walk in pairs or trios—some gesticulating widely, others scurrying along with heads down.

Two men and a woman sit in sturdy wooden chairs across the dirt road. They chat amongst themselves and give no sign they notice us, but I can't shake the feeling their behavior is a show. The chairs are a few yards closer than the backs of the first houses. There's only one reason for them to be where they are.

They're guards.

Icy fear coils in my stomach. What are we going to say when they ask why we're seeking entry? What if they can sense what I am and turn me away? Or worse—what if they choose to turn me over for the bounty?

Jack doesn't glance back at me as he and Luke stop a few feet away from the men and woman.

The older man on the left continues talking, his brown eyes shifting between his two companions. "I don't know about that," he says, his voice deeper and more gravelly than I expect. "I know what I know—nothing more. And you both know my opinion on change."

Both the woman and younger man nod. A beat passes before all three of them swivel in our direction.

I attempt to swallow, but my throat is dry. The weight of their gazes presses on me unlike anything I've ever experienced. I used to think nothing was worse than the way people stared when they found out I was a foster kid, but this beats that without question.

“State your business,” the woman says. There’s a musical quality to her voice, and a measure of my unease evaporates. It’s foolish of me to make assumptions so quickly, but I can’t help feeling I can trust her.

Jack takes a half step forward. “We seek sanctuary.”

“No kidding,” Luke mutters under his breath. I fight the urge to kick his foot.

The man who was speaking when we approached leans forward in his chair. His face is nearly unlined, except for a few faint wrinkles around his eyes. But it’s his hands that give a hint to his age—the knuckles are large, and the fingers curl inward like it takes too much energy to straighten them out. Is he a witch? He has the same ageless quality as Cassandra. He could as easily be fifty as seventy—or older. I don’t know how long witches live.

“By entering in, you are bound by our laws,” he says. “Understand I don’t mean you’ll be subject to them—you will be compelled by them.”

Luke shifts, but he doesn’t look away from the man. It’s reassuring that I’m not the only one struck by these words. The laws will compel us? What could that mean?

Jack’s expression remains neutral, impassive. “If it’s your condition, we accept it.”

The man holds Jack’s gaze before nodding. “You may stay for three days. If you choose to remain beyond that, you will have to go through the initiation. There, the assembly will decide your fate.”

“Whoa, wait,” Luke says, holding up his hand. “Our fate?”

The man continues as if Luke hadn’t spoken. He gestures to the woman beside him. “Evelyn will be your steward. She

will show you to your temporary quarters. If you have any questions, she can answer them.”

Evelyn stands, brushing her wavy brown hair over her shoulders and offering a small smile. “You can follow me.”

Before any of us can say more, she’s walking up the road. Jack starts after her, cutting between her empty chair and the one occupied by the younger man. Luke follows him, but I give the men a wide berth, stepping off the road and onto the strip of grass between it and the first crop. Brady stays a pace behind me.

The nearer we draw to the outer buildings, the thicker the air becomes. While Evelyn’s movements are quick and light, mine become more labored. Sluggish motions replace the casual grace with which Jack and Luke usually move.

“What is this?” Luke’s voice sounds like it has to pass through a wall to reach me.

“You’re nearly through.” Evelyn’s voice is clear as she turns to face us.

I struggle to suck in a breath. It’s like breathing through a wet towel. What if Jack is wrong about these cities? A place anyone can go to be free from the consequences of their actions sounds too good to be true. Maybe these cities are the witches’ way of keeping the balance they’re so concerned with: When people come looking for a fresh start, they’re rewarded with suffocation and a slow death.

I drag my foot as I take another step toward Evelyn. Did I misjudge her? She hardly looks the part of a sadistic killer. I want to stop, to drop to my knees, but something drives me forward. Another step. And another. I push through something that presses against me like cobwebs and when I come out on

the other side, I can breathe normally again. The weight of the air evaporates and sounds are no longer muddled.

“Apologies,” Evelyn says as we come to a stop before her. “We’ve found that when we warn people entering will be a struggle, they hesitate. As if a minute of trouble isn’t a fair trade to avoid whatever the outside world holds. The upside is once you’ve entered, you don’t have to go through that again—even at a different sanctuary.”

Luke sucks in a breath. “But what just happened?”

“It’s magic.” Jack eyes Evelyn for confirmation.

She nods. “As you can imagine, it takes a number of spells to make this place what it is.”

A few groups walking along the main road slow, studying us as they pass by. Some offer shy smiles, but others eye us with distrust.

“Let’s get you to your quarters, shall we?” Evelyn spins on her heel and starts walking down the street to our left. The four of us exchange glances before following. “The accommodations are a little sparse, but I’m pretty sure you four will be the only ones in there. And, of course, you’ll only be there for three days.”

A woman walking alone stops in her tracks, staring at me. My skin crawls and I try to ignore her, but I can’t keep myself from peeking at her out of the corner of my eye. Her long blonde hair is parted down the middle, causing it to hang like two curtains obscuring the sides of her face. Her thin lips are pursed and her shrewd caramel eyes take me in from head to toe.

I hurry to catch up with Evelyn. “Why three days? What happens then?” The man in the road said something about our

fate being decided by an assembly, but I'm hoping she has more details.

“The three days are a courtesy,” she says. “Some who come to us need a chance to clear their name or make plans for safety elsewhere. Some choose to make peace before facing retribution for what they've done. Those who hope to stay are allowed the three days to decide if our way of life is for them.”

“And the whole ‘deciding our fate’ thing?” Luke asks.

Evelyn walks to the door of a squat cinderblock building with peeling yellow paint. She rests her hand on the handle as she turns to us. “I think it's best for the four of you to rest awhile. You look exhausted. There are fresh towels in the bathroom, and there's food in the kitchen. I'll come check on you later.”

Before any of us can respond, she edges past us back to the road.

Luke narrows his eyes as she goes. “Notice she didn't answer the question.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

WHEN I WAKE, it takes a moment to remember where I am. With the blinds shut, the room is almost black. By degrees, objects come into focus. On the single bed to my left is Jack, his eyes closed and mouth open. The mattress to my right is empty, but two on the opposite wall contain Luke and Brady.

Besides the six slender beds, there are two couches and a coffee table in the center of the room. Between the door to the bathroom and the opening to the kitchen along the back wall is a plastic table folded up alongside six metal chairs.

The mattress squeaks when I stand, but the sound doesn't cause my companions to stir. I creep across the room and slip into the kitchen. I can't hazard a guess as to what time of day it is. There's a small window above the sink, but the tree outside it obscures the sky. All I can tell is it's daytime. The gnawing sensation in the pit of my stomach suggests it's midday or later.

Evelyn said there was food here, so I check the cupboards. There are dozens of cans of soup, plus single-serve cups of macaroni and cheese and boxes of cereal.

I grab two small boxes and turn to the refrigerator to check for milk. There are several pints, plus a variety of fruits and vegetables. I poke through the shelves. Do they always have

these kinds of perishable items stocked? Do new people arrive here that often? Or did someone know we were coming?

My fingers brush glass on the bottom shelf. It looks like an old-fashioned milk bottle—except the contents aren't white, they're deep red.

Blood.

My gums burn as my incisors lengthen. I pull out the container and twist off the cap. When the liquid passes over my lips, I gulp greedily. A few mouthfuls are enough, but I don't want to stop. The blood isn't human, but there's a sweetness to it that leaves me wanting more.

“Oh. Sorry.”

The words startle me and I almost drop the bottle. Brady stands in the doorway, his face awash in discomfort. I tuck the bottle back into the refrigerator and wipe my mouth with the back of my hand.

Brady crosses the narrow kitchen, but he doesn't move any nearer to me. “So, that's just what you do, huh? Knock back blood like it's a beer? Do you even know who that came from? Do you care?” His lip curls as he surveys me.

His revulsion stings. I suppose I've grown so accustomed to the werewolves around me understanding my situation that I've forgotten how unnatural it is. “It's from an animal,” I offer, although I know it doesn't make things much better. “I didn't ask to be what I am. I'd much rather be a full wolf, but I'm not.”

He leans against the counter, his eyes not leaving me. “How much do you need?”

“Less than a vampire. I can go days without it—but after everything that happened last night, I needed more.”

He nods. “And is it safe to assume last night’s meal wasn’t so human-friendly? Or is there some woodland creature night club I don’t know about?”

Although it’s ripped and bloody in spots, I’m still wearing the short blue dress specifically chosen to attract men’s attention. “It’s not what you think,” I begin, even though I’m sure he understands more than I’d like him to. “I’m fine with drinking only animal blood. But weres are supposed to protect humans—and I can’t do that if I can’t control myself around them.”

He snorts. “If you can’t control yourself, you’re probably the last one who should be protecting them.”

“I can be around humans without attacking them,” I insist. “If I’ve got animal blood in my system, I don’t crave more.”

“And what happens if you burn through it? What if you’re stuck somewhere and you can’t sneak away to suck down some Bambi blood or whatever?”

That very situation has haunted my dreams since Jack rescued me from Xander. Until then, my experience with human blood was extremely limited. But since my first real taste, I haven’t been able to get it out of my mind. I’m afraid under the right circumstances, a paper cut could send me over the edge.

I do my best to keep my voice even. “That’s why learning control is so important.”

Brady opens his mouth, but I’m faster. “I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

His mouth snaps shut and he glares at me, rubbing the leather cuff on his wrist.

I tamp down the swelling guilt as I walk toward the doorway. “I’ll leave you to eat in peace.”

Jack opens the blinds as I enter the main room, and light spills across the floor.

“It burns,” Luke grumbles, rolling over and pulling his pillow over his head.

Jack catches my eye and grins. “Don’t be so dramatic, Luke.” He holds his hand toward me, and when I cross to him, he’s still smiling. “He was always like that,” he says, nodding toward Luke’s bed. “A pain in the ass to get out of bed in the morning.”

I hold my breath. Jack rarely mentions anything about his past, and he’s never spoken of what Luke was like before he was a vampire. I want nothing more than to ask him the dozens of questions I’ve stored up for such an occasion, but I know better than to voice them. A few days after he rescued me from Xander, I caught Jack watching Luke as he chatted with Cassandra. I thought I could take advantage of the soft glint in his eyes, but as soon as I tried to ask about his family, his expression darkened and he made up a reason to leave.

He stares in his brother’s direction for a moment longer before shaking his head and crossing to raise the next set of blinds.

Two short raps sound at the front door and I jog to it. I assume it’s Evelyn coming to check in on us, but although this place has welcomed us, there are still too many unknowns for me to take anything for granted. I peek through the blind on the window nearest the door. A few men pass on the street, but there’s no one near the building.

Jack glances up. “Who is it?”

“No idea.” I rest my hand on the doorknob and release a breath before twisting it.

The front stoop is empty but for a brown paper package tied with twine. I scan the area again before stepping out to retrieve it.

Jack’s eyebrows hike upward as I close the door. “A present?”

I shrug as I set it on the coffee table. “You think I should open it?” I lean down to sniff it. “Nothing smells off.”

He opens the blind nearest Luke’s bed and slaps the pillow as he walks by. “Do it.”

I’m already pulling on the twine to loosen the bow. The thick paper crinkles as I unfold it. “Clothes?” Folded with military-like precision are two shirts and a pair of jeans. I pick up the first shirt and shake it open before holding it to my shoulders. It’s too big for me, but it would be the perfect size for Jack. I hold it out to him, but his attention is on the bandages Luke applied. Blood has soaked through in spots, but it looks dry.

The corner of his mouth quirks as he peels back the tape. The skin beneath is scabbed over, like a wound several days old. It would be gone now if not for the wolfsbane, but I can’t help wondering how much worse it would be if Luke hadn’t cleaned and dressed it.

His bandages discarded, Jack pulls the gray tee-shirt over his head. “I bet the rest fits you.”

I’d like nothing more than to pull off the scraps of dress and change here, but I don’t know how Jack would react if Brady walked in or Luke decided to get out of bed. I’ve experienced for myself how possessive my wolf is of her half,

and I'm not interested in seeing how Jack might react to a perceived threat.

I pick up the clothes and excuse myself to the bathroom. It's a struggle to unzip it by myself, but I manage. Once free from the constricting garment, I feel more myself. Jeans and tee-shirts have always been more my speed, and as I pull the fresh clothes on, I'm struck by how well they fit.

I toss the dress in the trash as I exit the room. For the first time since this whole ordeal began, I feel light. Hopeful. Like we're going to work everything out.

Luke sits cross-legged in the center of his bed, his hair ruffled and his cheek bearing an imprint of the corner of a sheet. "How come I didn't get new clothes?"

"Because there's nothing wrong with yours," I offer, crossing to the couch to sit beside Jack.

"What are you talking about?" Luke asks, pointing to his chest. "I got shot, remember? There are holes in this thing. Plus Jack bled on it."

Jack groans. "I told you we'll ask Evelyn as soon as we see her."

"Yeah, yeah," Luke grumbles.

I don't bother hiding a smirk. "If it makes you feel any better, Brady didn't get new clothes either."

"Who?"

"Brady," I say, drawing out the name. "Our new werewolf friend."

"Oh. Him." Luke glances at the ruffled sheets of the bed one over from his as if realizing for the first time it's empty. "Where is ol' wolfy, anyway?"

“In the kitchen.” The unsettled feeling rises in me when I recall our earlier conversation. “There’s...” I glance at Jack, unsure how I want to word my comment. “There’s something in the fridge you might like.”

Luke perks up, eyebrows rising. He slides off his bed and glides to the doorway, but he pauses before he enters the kitchen. He pokes his head in before turning back to the main room.

“What’s wrong?” Jack asks.

Luke steps into the kitchen and looks around again before turning to us. “He’s not in here.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

I'M on my feet in a flash. "What do you mean?"

Luke tilts his head. "I think I was pretty clear."

I push past him into the kitchen. There's no mistake—Brady isn't in the room. The narrow galley provides no hiding places, which leaves one conclusion. "He snuck out the back door."

"Damn it," Luke groans, rounding on Jack. "Why weren't you watching him?"

Jack holds up his hands. "I could ask you the same thing."

"No way." Luke strides toward him, pointing his finger. "You can't play big alpha boss man and make decisions for everyone and then blame someone else when something goes wrong. Maybe that's how it works in your pack, but—"

"Hey!" I yell, stepping between them. The menacing glint in Jack's gunmetal blue eyes is all I need to know an intervention is necessary. The two of them fighting will only lead to one of them snapping the other's neck. How would I explain something like that to Evelyn should she return?

"I told him he couldn't leave," I say, holding up my wrist. The leather cuff is still firmly in place.

"Then he hasn't," Jack says firmly.

Luke snorts. “Evidence to the contrary,” he mutters, running a hand through his hair. “Could all the magic in the air here be interfering with it?”

“It worked earlier,” I say. “We were talking in the kitchen and... it worked.”

Jack crosses to his bed and starts pulling on his shoes. “I guarantee he can’t leave the city. You’re right, Ava. You told him he couldn’t leave, but you weren’t incredibly specific. You never said he couldn’t leave your presence or that he had to stay within a certain radius. But I’d put money down that he can’t leave this city.”

When he stands and crosses to the front door, I’m on his heels. “What if he takes the bracelet off?”

“He can’t,” Jack says, his voice low as he steps outside. “You’re the only one who can remove either of them. It’s part of the magic.”

At least we’ve got that going for us. I glance behind me, but Luke isn’t there. He’s standing in the middle of the room. “Aren’t you coming?”

He sighs. “Do I have to?”

I don’t bother answering.

Jack strides to the middle of the dirt road and scans the vicinity. I sniff the air, but there’s no trace of Brady’s scent.

“I’ll go this way,” Jack says, lifting his chin in the direction of the city’s main entrance.

“I’ll check further down this road,” Luke says, crossing the threshold with heavy, reluctant steps.

I bite my lower lip. I almost wish I hadn’t said anything to Luke because he’s taken the direction I was going to search.

“I’ll go that way,” I say, pointing toward the back of the house.

Jack’s brow furrows, but he shrugs. “We bring him back here when we find him.”

I start through the grass toward the back of the house, feeling a little like a burglar or a peeping tom. Although there is about fifty feet between our quarters and the next building—and nearly double that before the back door of the house behind it—I can’t help feeling I’m somewhere I shouldn’t be.

I should’ve shoved aside my desire to prove myself and tagged along with Jack or Luke.

I’m about to turn around when a scent tickles my nose. I recognize it. I should after all the time I spent carrying him around.

Brady.

I cut diagonally through the yards, grateful there are no fences between them. I lost my shoes at some point last night and have scaled enough chain-link in my life to know it’s not something I want to do barefoot.

I follow his smell to the next road over where it’s nearly lost among an influx of aromas—the savory scent of seasoned meats, bright notes of tomato, salty undercurrents of cheese. The low hum of voices and clinking of silverware on plates draws my attention up the road, further into the city. A handful of restaurants dot either side of the street, and people dine on outdoor patios. I take a few steps nearer. Maybe Brady was hungry for something more than was stocked in the kitchen. But his scent fades with each step and I turn around.

Relief washes over me when I catch a whiff of him as I start away from the restaurants. I don’t want to draw unnecessary attention to myself by interrupting people’s meals

to ask if they've seen Brady. I'm not sure how many people live here, but something tells me this is a place where a newcomer would stand out.

What could Brady be up to? He has to know he can't get far. He's experienced the magic of the cuff enough to know he's bound by it. Maybe he thinks the spell will lose its potency if he gets far enough away.

Would it be so bad if he were able to escape? For all intents and purposes, I kidnapped him. I've been on the other side of that equation, and it's not fun. And even though we haven't tied him up or done anything—well, much—to hurt him, he probably wants to be back with his pack.

But there are dangers in releasing him. As much as I'd like to trust we're safe here in this sanctuary, I can't fully believe it.

The road I'm on dead ends into the cross street, and I veer left. I've barely made it ten yards when Brady's form catches my eye. He stands on the far side of a long, low building. The hand-painted sign above the door reads "market."

I approach cautiously, afraid if he sees me he may bolt. Before I've covered half the distance, a woman's voice floats to my ears.

"Trust me, after you meet with the assembly, it'll all make more sense."

Brady's back straightens. "Who's to say I want to stay here?"

"It's not so bad," the woman continues.

Is it just the one person he's talking to? Or are there more individuals standing on the other side of the building? My mind spins with extraction scenarios and contingency plans.

“I don’t see how you can trust any of them,” Brady grumbles. “It’s not natural, living in such close quarters.”

“I felt the same way when I got here,” the woman says. “You get used to it.”

Brady crosses his arms over his chest. “I don’t want to get used to it.”

I jog the remaining distance to his side and rest my hand on his shoulder. I wasn’t very specific about things he could and couldn’t say, and I’m not eager to come up with an explanation when he reveals to his acquaintance he’s here against his will. “There you are.” I’m careful to keep my tone light and casual. “I was starting to think you got lost on your little expedition.”

Brady’s companion smiles, but I detect the subtle once-over she gives me. She’s sizing me up, cataloging everything from my features to the way I’m touching Brady. At least it’s safe to assume he hasn’t said anything about me—otherwise, she wouldn’t be so curious.

Her dark hair is slicked back into a high ponytail, and her short shorts and tight tank top leave little of her form to the imagination. Her casual stance hardens, but her expression remains neutral—pleasant, even. “Who’s your friend?”

Brady’s mouth twitches and a shadow flashes across his face. “This is Ava.” The smile that blossoms on his face when he says my name is so genuine I almost believe we really are friends.

The woman’s eyes flick down to our leather cuffs before she offers her hand. I step forward to take it, making sure to meet her eyes. She’s probably older than I am—in her mid- or late twenties. Even at this proximity, I can’t get a read on what

she is. She doesn't have a scent particular to weres, vampires, or witches. Is there something in the sanctuary's magic that eliminates a person's distinctive aromas after the initiation?

"I'm Maya," she says, squeezing my hand tighter than necessary.

I do my best to return pressure without inadvertently breaking her bones. "Nice to meet you." I release her and offer a smile. "We have to get back to our friends, but maybe Brady and I could catch up with you later."

Maya draws her shoulders back and her nostrils flare, but her lips curve upward. "I look forward to it. I usually eat dinner at the grill. I hope I'll see you there."

Her eyes linger on Brady for a beat longer before she walks past us to the road.

As soon as she's out of earshot, Brady rounds on me. "Can't a guy go for a walk without you chasing after him?"

"Can't a guy let someone know he's taking off? I get that your situation sucks, but I promise it's only temporary." My gaze dips to the ground. Part of me wants to apologize for putting him through all this, but my wolf won't let me. "You get that none of this would be happening if you hadn't tried to abduct me—if you hadn't tried to kill Luke—right?"

"Yeah, yeah," he mutters.

I fist my hand and fight the urge to punch his chin. "We're going back to our quarters, and we're going to stay there until Evelyn shows up."

Brady narrows his eyes, but he turns and starts up the road without comment.

I walk beside him, making a mental list of all the things I need to order him to do—or not to do—for the duration of our stay here to avoid another incident like this.

We bypass the street I took to get to this one. I don't want to have to cut through yards to get back to our quarters. But when we turn onto the next road, I wish I'd opted for trespassing.

The woman who was staring at me when we first arrived is walking toward us. Her long blonde hair sways side to side with each step she takes. Brady glances at me, and I wonder if he can sense my unease.

Just when I'm sure we're going to pass her without incident, she steps into our path and stops. I have half a mind to step around her, but when she lifts her chin and pins me with those caramel-colored eyes, it's as if I'm frozen.

Brady sneers. "Do you mind?"

Her gaze doesn't leave my face. "Why don't you tell him to run along? After all, if you tell him to go, he'll have to do what you say—won't he?"

I swallow. Does she know about the cuffs, or is she making a guess? Either way, she's creeping me out. "I think we'll both be going, if you don't mind."

I sidestep her, but she grabs the crook of my arm.

"I know who you are," she whispers. "They call you the hybrid abomination. But I'm sure you prefer your real name—don't you, Ava?"

CHAPTER NINE

I TUG MY ARM AWAY, not breaking eye contact. How could she know my name? We weren't asked to share them when we arrived, so it's not like she could have overheard or asked Evelyn or one of the other guards. Worse, how does she know what I am? Brady couldn't have told her—I told him he couldn't alert anyone to me being a hybrid or the bounty on my head.

She closes her eyes and exhales a long breath before opening them again. "Oh, hello. I'm Dagny."

She offers her hand, but I don't take it. What's her angle? I didn't react the way she wanted so now she's trying a different tack? Brady's brow furrows and he shifts on the balls of his feet like he's ready to take off should the need arise.

The corners of Dagny's mouth quirk, but she doesn't manage to smile. "I guess no one's warned you about me. I thought Evelyn might have."

"Why's that?" Brady asks. "Are you dangerous or something?"

Her lips twitch as she turns to him. "Depends on your definition of dangerous, I suppose."

The hair on the back of my neck stands up. “What does that mean?”

Her gaze dips. “I’m an oracle.”

Brady sucks in a breath and takes a huge step backward, his expression making it clear he thinks me crazy for not doing the same. “Didn’t you hear her? She’s cursed.”

“It feels that way, yes,” Dagny says, her voice small. “And since most others feel that way, too, the only safe place for me is a sanctuary.”

Now that Dagny’s not actively creeping me out, I take stock of her appearance. Her curtain of hair is mostly off her cheeks, revealing a young-looking face. I could be older than she is, which would put her in her teens. The caramel eyes that looked so calculating before now seem sad. “Why aren’t you safe anywhere else?”

She tilts her head. “Isn’t it obvious? From the look on your face, I must’ve already said something to you. I can’t control what I see—or when I see it, or who I see it about. Things pop out and I can’t stop them.”

Things begin clicking into place. “Are you saying you didn’t mean to say those things to me?”

“Exactly.” Dagny looks at Brady. “Don’t worry—after the three days—if you decide to stay—my power won’t work on you anymore. Your future will be as it’s meant to be—secret.”

My mind whirs with the new information. “You can see the future?”

Brady snorts. “What else do you think an oracle does?”

I pin him with a glare. “Considering I’ve never heard of one until now, I haven’t given it much thought.”

Except now I can't stop thinking about it. If Dagny really can see the future, maybe she can help me. She could tell me whether I get turned in for bounty or—better yet—who's behind the push to make more hybrids.

“Dagny,” I begin, my voice a bit sweeter than I intended, “would it be possible for you to—”

“No way.” Brady strides forward and uses his arm to sweep me away from her. “Are you insane?”

If Dagny is surprised or offended by Brady's behavior, her expression doesn't show it. “That's not the way it works. I don't control the visions. I don't even control *me* when the visions come.”

“Why would you want to know about the future anyway?” Brady rounds on me. “Don't you get how dangerous that can be? What if she tells you something terrible—like you die next week?”

I suppress a shiver. I've been kidnapped before. Now that there's a bounty out on me, that future could be a very real possibility. “If she told me that, I'd do everything in my power to make sure it didn't happen.”

“And what if trying to avoid your fate is what leads you to it? Haven't you ever heard of a self-fulfilling prophecy?”

“I'm afraid he's right. I've seen it happen too many times to count.” She shakes her head. “For your sake, you should probably avoid me until you meet with the assembly. I'd say I'll do my best to steer clear of you, too, but that's not always up to me.” She offers a small half smile before turning and continuing down the street.

I watch her until she turns the corner. There have been times when I've wished I were able to peek into the future.

When things got lonely in foster care, I longed to know when the time would come where I would feel welcomed and loved. But if Dagny is any indication, knowing such things can be more curse than blessing.

Brady starts up the street toward our quarters.

I jog to catch up with him. “Thanks, by the way.”

“For what?”

I shrug. “Trying to save me from myself back there. I didn’t really think through the dangers of knowing my destiny.”

He snorts. “I didn’t do it for you.”

“Who did you do it for?”

He stops in his tracks and glares. “Me. Whether I like it or not, right now, my future is pretty closely tied to yours. Since you took me hostage—”

“You shouldn’t have tried to turn me in.”

“—and brought me here with you and linked me to you, if something goes down, I’m going to be in the middle of it.”

I suppress a pang of guilt. Is he right about his fate being tied to mine now? Of course not. He’ll see. We’ll let him go soon, and he can get back to his life. He’ll never have to think about me again.

We’re almost to our quarters when a voice calls my name. Jack jogs to meet us from the same road Dagny turned down.

He glances at Brady only briefly when he reaches us. “Told you he couldn’t leave the city.”

“Not for lack of trying,” Brady says with false brightness.

Jack ignores him, turning his back in a way that makes it clear he's not invited into this conversation.

Brady huffs and stalks the remaining distance to our quarters.

Jack doesn't speak until Brady's inside. "Sawyer contacted me while I was out looking for Brady."

I nod, more than a little surprised the pack's beta male was able to reach Jack through the sanctuary's protections. "What did he say?"

A muscle in his jaw jumps as he tries to keep his expression neutral. "The convocation has called a summit. About you."

The news hits me like a punch in the gut. I shouldn't be surprised. The mystery is why it's taken the governing body of the werewolves this long to meet to discuss me.

"More specifically," he continues, "they want to talk about the bounty. It's not exactly against any law to put one out, but there needs to be a valid reason, and it's usually a last resort. They're going to rule whether it can stand."

I wait for him to go on. "Is this a good thing?"

"I think they'll side with us," he says after a beat, but I can detect a trace of unease curling around the edges of his words.

I touch his cheek and wait until he meets my eyes. "What do you really think?"

A muscle in his jaw jumps. "Sawyer says there have been at least two packs sniffing around our territory since last night. Not individual wolves—squads ready for battle, if necessary. I've seen bounties put out on wolves before, but I've never seen a reaction like this. Typically, the wolf in question is

trying to steal power from an alpha or has gone rogue and poses a threat to a pack—or threatens to expose us to the humans. Even then, the weres who go after the bounty wolf do their best to keep things civil and not interfere with other packs—even the pack that wolf came from.”

A shiver courses down my spine. “But it’s different with me,” I murmur. “Because of what I am.”

He takes my hand and squeezes it. “It’s natural to fear what you don’t understand. So we’ll make them understand. The convocation is fair. They’ll see the truth.”

I want to believe what he’s saying, and I can tell by the fierce flash in his gunmetal blue eyes that he does too. I don’t want to imagine what the alternative is. As pack leaders, it isn’t as if we can stay in hiding here at the sanctuary forever. I’m sure things at the enclave will be fine without us in the short term, but I don’t know how it will survive with Jack for long. He’s been the alpha for longer than I’ve been alive. And if other packs start pressing in on our territory, Sawyer, Dakota, and Cecily will need him.

“When’s the summit?” I ask, forcing what I hope is a light tone.

“Day after tomorrow. Sawyer’s going to get me more details as they come in.”

The corners of my mouth twitch. That’s the day we’re supposed to go before the assembly—the point after which Dagny’s oracle powers won’t affect me anymore. Either way—whether I stay or whether we leave this place—I’ll only have to avoid her until then. “I guess we won’t be here long after all, then, huh?”

“The plan was always to be here just until we could sort things out.” He laces his fingers through mine and leads the way to our quarters.

I wish I could express how much the simple action means to me. It’s difficult to put a precise label on what he is to me—what we are to each other. Soon after I turned, I learned each of us possesses one half of the same soul. We’re literally soul mates—which explains the intense pull I’ve felt toward him since we met. But it’s been hard for me to navigate our relationship. Part of me feels like we’ve known each other forever. Wanting to be near him, to touch him, to kiss him, is the most natural thing in the world. Except a large part of me is cautious. We didn’t know each other at all when these feelings began to manifest, so there was nothing to link them to. The more we’ve gotten to know one another, the more comfortable I’ve become, but something in me still holds out. I can only assume it’s because of all the years I spent in foster care. I put walls up and never allowed myself to get too attached because I never knew when I’d have to leave again.

But when Jack takes my hand, when he sides with me despite the bounty, when he promises me things will work out, he chips away at those walls. He shows me the unconditional love I haven’t known since my father died.

The word sends a pang through me. Love. I haven’t allowed myself to assign the word to Jack, but moments like this make me wonder if it isn’t just a matter of time.

Brady has set up the table and sits on one of the chairs. He leans over his plate, a sandwich in his hands, and glances in our direction when Jack and I enter. His eyes dip to our joined hands and his lip curls.

I'm caught between wanting to ignore him and wanting to confront him about his attitude, but before I can settle on either option, a shrill sound vibrates through the air. It's at once familiar and alien, and it takes a moment to realize where it's coming from.

Attached to the wall to the left of the kitchen door opening is an old corded telephone. As it begins a second ring, Jack and I start toward it, but Brady is on his feet and has the handset pressed to his ear before we make it past the couches.

"Hello?" Brady's tone conveys far less confusion than I'm feeling. He snorts as he listens to the caller. "Yeah. I'll let him know." He hangs up and turns until he locks eyes with Jack. "That was Evelyn. Apparently your vampire friend has already gotten himself into trouble."

CHAPTER TEN

JACK CURSES. “Ava, you stay here. I’ll go take care of it.”

“I’m coming with you,” I say.

He shakes his head. “If we both go, who’s going to stay to watch over him?”

“You know I can hear you, right?” Brady grumbles.

I point at him. “You can’t leave here while we’re gone.” I glance at Jack and smile. “See? Easy peasy.”

Jack doesn’t quite suppress a smirk.

We are outside before I realize Brady didn’t tell us where to go. I glance up and down the road for a hint, but Jack is walking in the opposite direction as the doors into the city. The wind shifts and I catch the scent that draws him. Evelyn is approaching.

We meet her on the corner. She doesn’t say anything, she just turns and leads us back the way she came.

As before, groups of people walk the streets in twos and threes. Their conversations quiet as they pass us, and I feel the weight of their glances. I can’t help wondering what they think of us. Will they spend the next couple of days conjecturing about what brought us here? Or can some of them sense why we came?

Evelyn stops in front of a large brick building. She sweeps a hand toward it. “He’s in there.”

I hesitate. Isn’t she coming in with us?

Jack strides to the wooden double doors and opens the one on the right. I follow him over the threshold.

The inside of the building is dim, and it takes my eyes a second to adjust. The room is open, with ceilings higher than those in a traditional building—maybe fifteen or twenty feet. Across the room, a lectern and a half-dozen chairs look down from a raised platform on rows and rows of wooden pews. The whole place reminds me of a church.

But there’s no sign of Luke.

Jack and I walk up the aisle. I strain my ears for any sounds that might give a hint as to where he is.

An open door on the right-hand wall catches my eye. I tug Jack’s arm and nod toward it.

We approach quietly. The hairs on the back of my neck stand up. Could this be some kind of trap? Maybe granting us entry into the sanctuary was a ruse. Perhaps they’ve been waiting for the right people to come to claim me and their bounty.

No. I push the fear from my mind. That’s not the way the sanctuary works—even for me. I have to believe that.

An authoritative voice floats through the door. “Please enter.”

Jack and I exchange glances and I allow him to step through the door before me. Sitting behind a simple dark wooden desk is the old man who was with Evelyn outside the city gate when we arrived. He motions toward the two chairs

in front of him. In a third sits Luke, who catches my eye and grins.

“Brady said you were in trouble,” I say, taking the seat nearest to him.

“Oh, I assure you he is,” says the man. He rests his elbows on the desktop and steeples his fingers.

Luke’s shoulders shrug ever so slightly. “Cedrick here was just giving me the rundown of how things work here in the sanctuary. Apparently they don’t take too kindly to people asking questions.”

“I assure you we have no problem with questions,” Cedrick says, surveying Luke coolly. “It’s petty crime we take issue with.”

Jack rubs his forehead. “What did you do?” he mutters. “We haven’t even been here twelve hours.”

Luke’s head bends forward, but his body doesn’t follow. For the first time, I wonder if he’s being held to the chair by some spell. “I was out doing what you asked,” Luke begins. “You know, making sure Brady didn’t get lost. But then I caught a smell. Blood, and lots of it.”

Cedrick lifts his chin. “I’ve told you. We have a large population of vampires living in the sanctuary. It isn’t safe for them to leave to feed, so we bring blood in for them.”

Luke nods. “I know. I found what your people left in the refrigerator for me. Now, I’ll be the first to admit animal blood isn’t my standard fare, but I’ve had to drink it on occasion through the years. All those snacks add up to an impressive list of critters I’ve tasted, but I still couldn’t identify what animal this blood came from.”

I do my best to keep my face neutral. I thought the same thing when I drank some earlier. Part of me wondered if it didn't taste so good because of the night I'd had, but now that I know Luke noticed something different too, I'm wondering again. I wonder where the blood came from, but I don't want to join the conversation. If Cedrick doesn't know what I am, I don't want to tell him.

“Did the blood satisfy your need?” Cedrick asks, his tone even.

Luke's eyebrows draw together. “Well, yeah, but—”

“Then I can't see why the matter concerns you.”

Luke's shoulders jerk again and a smile curves his lips. “What can I say? I'm curious.”

Jack leans forward. “Yeah? Curiosity killed the cat.”

Luke swivels his head, the corner of his mouth quirking upward. “But satisfaction brought it back. It's the part of the saying you always forgot.”

Jack stiffens. No one here knows the two of them are brothers, but here Luke is, speaking as though he's known Jack for ages. My eyes flick to Cedrick, but the man's expression hasn't changed. It's possible he hasn't noticed Jack's discomfort.

I'm not sure what the big deal is. Even when members of our pack questioned why Luke was being trusted enough to be allowed passage on our land, Jack deflected. He put the entire explanation on Luke's willingness to help me, not once mentioning their familial connection. I'm sure he has a reason for not wanting anyone to know, but I wish I knew what it was.

Cedrick squares his shoulders. “I don’t know how long you intend to stay here. If you choose to live out your lives among us, I have no doubt your curious impulses will be curbed. But in the meantime, be aware that we do have holding cells for those who can’t abide by our rules.”

Cedrick stands; we’ve been dismissed. Luke inhales sharply, and a moment later he springs to his feet. He shakes out his arms and legs before nodding to the door through which Jack and I entered. “Shall we?”

Jack narrows his eyes, but he stands and starts toward the door. I allow Luke to pass in front of me and bring up the rear. I don’t want his curiosity getting the better of him again.

Evelyn is no longer on the street when we exit, but Jack doesn’t speak until we’ve rounded the corner.

“What on earth were you thinking?” Jack growls.

Luke holds up his hands defensively. “I wasn’t going to take anything. I just wanted to poke around.”

Jack clenches his jaw and stares resolutely forward.

Luke turns to me. “Come on. Tell me I’m not alone here. There was something weird about that blood, right?”

Although Jack has done everything he can to support me whenever my vampire side is mentioned, I still feel awkward discussing it around him. “You’re not wrong.”

Luke turns back to Jack. “See? There’s something weird going on here.”

Jack narrows his eyes. “I’m sure a lot is going on here that we don’t understand. Sanctuary cities are ruled and guarded by magic. But I don’t anticipate staying around long enough for it to really impact any of us. Do me a favor. Just drink your

blood and be thankful they're thoughtful enough to provide it."

Luke huffs. We walk the remaining distance to our quarters in silence.

Brady has relocated from the table to the couch. He leans over the coffee table and studies the thousand or so puzzle pieces scattered there. I'm not sure where the puzzle came from, but I'm glad he found something to occupy himself. He doesn't look up when we enter.

No sooner has Jack closed the door behind us than Luke starts in again. "Cedrick said my curious impulses would be curbed if I stay here. Does that not creep anyone else out?"

Jack exhales noisily as he settles on the couch across from Brady. "I think you could stand to be a little less curious."

Luke ignores the comment. "And I know it isn't just criminals who come here, but there have to be some here, right? How come this place isn't run by gangs? There's got to be some pretty nasty people hiding out here."

"What's your point?" I ask, running my fingers along the back of the couch Jack sits on. "Or are you just lamenting the city's lack of criminal elements?"

Luke throws up his hands. "You know what? Never mind. I think this place is creepy and you don't. Whatever."

"No one's asking you to stay." There's an edge to Jack's voice I can't quite identify. He's not angry or even irritated. Still, I can't shake the feeling he means something more than he's saying.

"You want me to go?" Bitterness laces Luke's words. "Say the word and I'm out the door." He lifts his chin, glaring. "Oh,

that's right. Perfect Jack would never kick me out. At least not in front of Ava. It's bad manners."

"No one's asking anyone to go," I say, stepping toward him and holding up my hand. Would Jack really be so indifferent to Luke leaving? I thought the two had forged an alliance over the last couple of weeks because of their links to me. Luke is responsible for my vampire side and experiences the same kinds of protective impulses for me that I felt for Marisol. "We're not going to be here much longer. Do you think you can deal with this place for the next couple of days?"

He presses his lips together, but they twitch like he's trying not to say something. After a beat, his shoulders relax and he exhales through his nostrils. "Are you sure about it just being a couple more days?"

"Of course she is." Brady's eyes remain fixed on his puzzle. "That's when the summit meets to decide whether or not the bounty on her is legit."

Jack and I exchange glances. "How do you know that?"

Brady takes his time fitting two pieces together before looking up. "I got a message from my alpha. Don't worry—I can't respond. Something about this place fritzes communication on the way out for anyone lower than beta status. And after you go through the initiation, even alphas can't get through anymore."

Jack raises an eyebrow. "Where'd you hear that?"

"Maya," I say, recalling the scantily clad dark-haired girl he spoke to earlier.

Brady shrugs. "She was kind enough to let me know how things work around here. Didn't know if you guys would

bother.”

Jack clenches his jaw. “I get this isn’t exactly a vacation for you, but I have every intention of letting you go back to your pack after the summit.”

After the summit. I almost ask why not before, but the answer is obvious: he’s still a bargaining chip. I hate it, but I can’t deny it’s a necessity—at least for the time being. Whereas Jack could be seen as guilty by his association with me and Luke’s status as a vampire makes him expendable in the eyes of most weres, Brady is with us against his will. His presence might keep others from attacking us on our way to the summit.

Brady fingers a puzzle piece. “I appreciate that, man. But so you know, no matter what the convocation decides, you’ve made an enemy of my pack. In fact, I can’t think of a single pack that’s going to want anything to do with you.” He turns back to the table and fits the piece with another.

I catch Jack’s eye, but his expression is clouded, unreadable.

Is Brady right? Since Jack mentioned it, I had started to believe the summit would settle things, that afterward I’d be able to get back to the pack and my life. But what if things aren’t that simple? Even if no one is coming after me for a bounty, are there still things other weres could do to make our lives miserable? I’ve been so focused on how being a hybrid affects me that I haven’t given much thought to how it will impact the rest of the pack. How much will they have to sacrifice for me?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THERE'S a crack in the ceiling above my bed. Depending on how hard I squint, it can look like a gently twisting river or the outline of half a raven. I sit up with half a mind to find a marker to complete the image when I come to my senses.

“I have to get out of here.”

Jack looks up from the science magazine he's reading, his eyebrows raised. On the adjacent couch, Brady turns his attention from whatever new puzzle he's putting together. Even Luke pokes his head out of the kitchen, where he's wandered every hour or so since we woke up this morning.

“I'm going nuts,” I continue. “I can't stay shut up in here for the rest of today, and who knows how many hours tomorrow before we leave for the summit.”

Jack closes his magazine, but he leaves his index finger between the pages to mark his spot. “I thought we decided it would be best to keep a low profile.”

“You decided.” It comes out a little harsher than I mean it to. I take in a breath and release it before going on. “Aren't you starting to feel claustrophobic? What could it hurt to go out for a walk? Or maybe...”

“Maybe grab something to eat?” Brady stands before anyone has a chance to respond. “Maya said there were restaurants a couple blocks from here. I could go for something other than pasta and salad.”

I stand, ready to follow him outside, but I hesitate when Jack doesn’t move. It isn’t as if I need his permission to leave, but I also don’t necessarily want to go without him. Brady isn’t my idea of a fun companion. “You coming?”

His lips twitch. After a beat, he sets his magazine on the coffee table and stands. “Sounds great.” He glances at Luke, who still hovers in the kitchen doorway. “How about you?”

Luke shrugs. “Nah. I’ll hold down the fort.”

Jack’s eyes narrow for an instant before a smile spreads across his face. “You sure you don’t want to come with us?”

Luke snorts. “We both know you don’t want my company, so why don’t you say what you want to say?”

The smile slips from Jack’s mouth. “Fine. Don’t leave while we’re gone.”

Luke holds his hands up innocently. “It didn’t even cross my mind.”

Jack holds his brother’s gaze a moment longer before turning and starting for the door. Brady opens it and exits. I follow after, but Jack pauses and turns back into the house. “You promise?”

“And now you wish you’d saved that bracelet for me after all,” Luke mutters, an edge of bitterness creeping into the words.

Jack opens his mouth to respond, but Luke cuts him off. “Yeah. I promise.”

As Jack, Brady, and I walk up the street, a question that has nagged the back of my thoughts pushes into the forefront of my mind. “When you first pulled these bracelets out, Luke seemed to know what they were. Why is that? You said they weren’t very common.”

Jack glances at me out of the corner of his eye, but he doesn’t answer.

It’s the response I expected. No matter how hard I’ve tried, no matter how many nights we’ve stayed up late talking, there is still so much I don’t know about him. He’s particularly close-mouthed any time the topic of Luke or his past surfaces. Obviously I don’t know what it’s like to have as many years under my belt as Jack has, but I’d like to think that even if I were as old as he, I’d be willing to tell him about all the parts of my life. There are plenty of things in my nineteen years I wish I could forget, but I’ve shared many of them with him. It hurts to know he’s not comfortable enough to do the same.

“If you used them on him once, I’d understand,” I say, keeping my voice low. “I know your relationship must be complicated. I just wish you’d tell me about it.”

Jack clears his throat. “I don’t think this is the best time to discuss it.”

“Because I’m here,” Brady says, his usual note of forced brightness lacing his words.

I know Jack has a point, but I can’t let it go. I grab his wrist and tug him to a stop. “Promise you’ll tell me sometime.”

Jack’s lips twitch. “Sometime.”

It isn’t exactly a promise, but I’ll take it.

We reach the next block moments later. The same savory aromas that greeted me yesterday return, making my mouth water. I'm surprised to see so many people on the street, entering and exiting restaurants, but maybe I shouldn't be. It's got to be around lunch time by now.

The restaurant we choose is pretty full, but the hostess is able to seat us right away. As we follow her to our table, I can't help wondering how things function here in the sanctuary. Does this copper-haired woman work here? Does she get a paycheck? Do the people here have to pay rent or mortgages? I push the questions from my head. I don't need to understand how things work here because I don't intend on staying.

Except what if I have to? We haven't discussed the specifics of the summit, but I can't help wondering what happens if they don't find in my favor. Will they simply take me into custody then? Or will they allow me to return here to the sanctuary? At least here I could live out my life. But what about Jack? Him being here is only supposed to be temporary. He has the pack to think of. It can get along fine without me, but what about him?

As we take our seats, the hostess says our waitress will be with us shortly. Brady looks around the room with unveiled interest, but my eyes find Jack. Is he worried about what the convocation will decide? I tried to bring it up a couple of times last night, but his responses were mostly monosyllabic. Whether it was due to our close quarters or his concerns, I'm not sure. "Any news yet on where the summit's being held?" It's not the question I want to ask, but it's the one I'm confident will elicit a response.

“Sawyer says they’ll have a decision by this evening. It won’t be too far. They’ll need to ensure we can get there in time.”

I nod. Has Jack been to one of the summits before? If so, under what circumstances? It’s the kind of question he might answer, but before I can voice it, our waitress arrives.

She arches an eyebrow. “What can I bring you to drink?”

“Just waters should be fine,” Jack says.

The waitress nods, glancing at me and Brady for confirmation. “And will you need a pitcher of blood for the table?”

The way she says it, as if it’s the most normal thing in the world, startles me. My gums burn as my teeth threaten to lengthen. I rub my fingers over my lips, hoping the counter-pressure keeps them their normal size. I’m not sure why the word is eliciting such a reaction. It’s not like I haven’t had any. This morning, there was a knock at the door. By the time Jack opened it, no one was outside, but there were four glass pint jars of blood on the front stoop. Luke thought it was hilarious and compared it to milk deliveries back in the day. Although I drank some yesterday, when he brought the bottles back into the kitchen, I followed. I filled a mug halfway and gave the rest to Luke. He didn’t question why I wanted some, but I almost wish he had. I didn’t need it, just like I don’t need it now.

Jack glances at me before smiling at the waitress. “No, thank you.”

As the waitress bustles away, Brady leans forward. “Do you think she knows?”

An icy fist clenches in my stomach. “Knows what?”

“That we’re new here,” he says as if it’s the obvious conclusion. “I don’t know about you, but it’s not like I’ve got cash on me. If they even take cash.”

Jack nods. “You’re right. I’ll go check with the hostess about payments.” He stands and strides back toward the door.

It’s not until Jack has disappeared from view that Brady speaks again. “Doesn’t it get tiring?”

I’m surprised he’s addressing me. Since yesterday, he’s done his best to filter any of his comments and questions through Jack. I get the sense that while he doesn’t like any of us, he dislikes Jack the least on principle as they are both full werewolves. “What?”

He leans across the table toward me. “All the pretending to be something you’re not. I saw the look in your eye when the waitress offered you blood.”

I shush him, casting my eyes around to make sure no one is listening in. Fortunately, the restaurant is full of lunchtime chatter and the clattering of dishes, and no one spares a glance in our direction. “I don’t need to explain myself to you.”

He leans back in his chair, shrugging. “Maybe not. But did you ever think that’s why the other weres are so scared of you?” Something in his expression changes, softens almost. “I get that you have good intentions. It’s even admirable. But the longer you’re untrue to who you are, the harder it’s going to hit you when the truth finally catches up.”

I want to ask what truth about me he believes he’s uncovered, but before I can, Jack returns.

His expression is measured, but there’s some kind of calculation occurring behind his eyes.

“What’s up?” I ask. “Are we going to have to work off our meals because we don’t have sanctuary credits or something?”

Jack shakes his head. “No—the hostess says it’s not a problem,” he says with a dismissive wave of his hand as he sits. “I saw Evelyn walking down the street and I stopped her to ask if she could postpone the initiation for twenty-four hours. She said it’s not possible.”

“Why would we need it postponed?” I ask. “Was the summit pushed back a day?”

He doesn’t quite meet my eyes. “No. I was just thinking maybe... It might be a good idea if...”

Realization dawns on me and I blow out a breath. “You want me to stay here.”

Jack rubs his forehead. “I want you with me. Always. But you’re safe here, and the same can’t be said for the journey to the summit.” He covers my hand with his. “If I could, I’d order you to stay here. But I leave the decision to you.”

I know Jack is well-meaning. If I’m honest, remaining here until the summit reaches a decision is appealing. Jack would likely be more passionate about pleading my case than I am, and he’s a familiar face among many weres. If I go, who knows what kind of scrutiny I’ll be under, or what kinds of wary looks or snide remarks I’ll have to endure. But my gaze slides to Brady and I wonder if my instinct to hide won’t backfire. “I’d like to go. Maybe if I can explain myself—if they can hear it straight from me—they’ll realize they don’t have to be afraid of what I am.”

Jack squeezes my hand. “Then that’s what we’ll do.”

The rest of our time at the restaurant passes without any more discussion on the matter. Brady is mostly quiet, but from

the way his eyes scan the room every few minutes, I get the sense he's hoping Maya will show up. Jack scoffs when I take advantage of "breakfast anytime" and order French toast and sausage. He tells me about how his father—who immigrated to America from France—would have never let something like that on the breakfast table. When I press, he offers a few anecdotes about his father's food preferences and his reactions when Jack's mother—who was Native American—would prepare one of her own favorite dishes. Conspicuously absent from his stories is any mention of Luke—even a vague one. I can't help wondering if it's because of Brady's presence or whether there's another reason.

When we finish our meal, the waitress stops by to wish us a nice day, but she doesn't leave a bill. Jack stands up and I follow suit, half expecting someone to stop us, but no one does.

"Did that cure your cabin fever?" Jack slips his hand into mine as we step out onto the street.

"We'll see when we get back to our room." It's been nice being somewhere beyond those four walls, but who's to say the crazy feeling won't set in as soon as we're back? As much as I hope Luke kept his promise about staying put, part of me wants his curiosity to have gotten the better of him. I wouldn't mind an excuse to stay outside a bit longer.

Someone bumps into Jack from behind, the force of the impact jostling me. I spin, ready to tell Brady to watch where he's going, but it isn't Brady who nudged him.

"Dagny?" I smile, ready to introduce her to Jack, but the look in her eyes stops me cold. It's the same calculating, ominous look I've seen before. I gulp, steeling myself to hear whatever she's come to say.

Brady edges past me, pressing his hands against his ears as he puts as much distance as he can between himself and Dagny. He looks ridiculous, but a quick glance down the street reveals he's not the only one taking such precautions. The dozen or so people in our immediate proximity scurry away like insects from an upturned rock. Are these people really so afraid to hear whatever Dagny might say? According to her, she can't see the futures of anyone who's gone through the initiation. What could they have to fear now?

Jack turns to me, a question in his eyes. But before he can ask it, Dagny raises her arm.

I hold my breath, but she points at Jack.

"Part of you will always be missing," she says, her voice deeper and more monotone than usual. "In your moment of greatest triumph, you will suffer devastating loss."

Her eyes swivel to me and I squeeze Jack's hand, preparing for her words, but Dagny drops her arm and blinks. When her eyes focus on me again, a horrified look crosses her face.

"I'm so sorry," Dagny says, her hands flying to her face. "Whatever I said, I'm sorry."

"Could someone tell me what's going on?" Jack asks.

Dagny's still covering her mouth, so I answer. "Dagny is an oracle."

Jack sucks in a breath. "What were you trying to tell me?"

Dagny shakes her head slowly. "I... I don't know."

Jack drops my hand and takes a step closer to her. "Part of me will always be missing? I'll suffer devastating loss in my moment of triumph? What does that mean?"

“That’s not how it works,” Dagny says, clutching her hands together in front of her chest. “I don’t remember saying that. The last I knew, I was at my sewing machine. That could’ve been five minutes ago, or it could’ve been five hours. I’m so sorry.”

Before Jack or I can say anything more, Dagny rushes away. People give her a wide berth, parting like a stream around a boulder.

My stomach twists and I’m afraid my meal might try to make a reappearance. Even though Dagny’s words were directed at Jack, I can’t help feeling they were describing me.

CHAPTER TWELVE

JACK RECOVERS first and stalks up the street in the direction we came. Brady keeps his distance as if afraid Dagny's words of prophecy might be contagious.

I have to jog to catch up with Jack's long strides. "Want to talk about it?"

He snorts. "What could there possibly be to talk about?"

His harsh tone cuts through me, but I do my best to ignore it. "Is Dagny your first oracle? For someone who sees the future, she certainly doesn't give many helpful details. I mean, you'd think if someone were going to go through the trouble of seeking you out to give a message, they'd be a little more specific."

Jack doesn't look at me.

I abandon my attempt to lighten the mood. "Tell me what you're thinking."

He runs a hand through his hair, causing the waves and curls to stand up. "It's nothing. Just a little freaked out. I've never had an oracle seek me out before."

I shake my head. "No. It's more than that. Why won't you tell me?"

He raises his chin at Brady, who stands several yards away. He's still a few buildings from our quarters, but he's stopped moving. I'm not sure whether he's hesitant to be alone with Luke or if he's hoping to overhear something Jack and I say. I point at the door. "Go inside. Stay there."

Brady's back straightens and he grumbles under his breath as he starts toward the building. When he's inside, I turn back to Jack. "When are you going to start letting me in? I've tried to be patient and understanding. I know there are things about your life that you haven't told me—probably decades' worth of things. I've done my best to give you your space, to allow you to tell me things in your own time, but can't you see how hard it is for me when you're like this? I thought we were supposed to be partners. I thought that us being halves meant —"

Jack throws up his hands and takes several steps from me. "You're really going to pull that card? Now of all times?"

I study him. "I wasn't aware I was playing a card—I'm just being honest."

"Didn't you hear what she said? Part of me will always be missing. Devastating loss." He raises his eyebrows, indicating the conclusion should be obvious.

"You think she means me."

"You don't?"

I don't want to admit Dagny's words led me to the same conclusion. Since I became a hybrid, the promise of immortality associated with it has seemed out of reach, but I still like to pretend it's in the cards for me. "We're doing everything we can to sort things out. I don't plan on going anywhere anytime soon. I was promised immortality, and I

plan to take advantage of it.” I reach forward and brush my fingers down his arm, but he doesn’t look at me. His expression only darkens. “Jack. I talked to Dagny yesterday. She told me how prophecies sometimes aren’t what you think they are. She didn’t give any kind of timeframe. Who’s to say this won’t happen years from now—centuries?”

He finally meets my gaze. “You don’t get it, do you?” He cups my cheek in his palm. “It’s not the idea of loss that bothers me—it’s losing you. Because if I can feel your loss, it’s because I’m still around. It’s because...”

My eyes begin to prickle and I close them. The truth I’ve been attempting to avoid is impossible to ignore. “Because we never merge.”

When Cassandra first explained the concept to me, I didn’t understand why two halves would ever choose to join their life forces together. While it’s possible that they can develop abilities beyond what werewolves already possess, it comes at a price: when one dies, the other will too. Immortals can’t have whole souls, so when two halves become one, that’s the price.

The topic of the two of us merging has come up before. Jack was against it then because he didn’t want me to choose it out of a sense of necessity. He wanted me to choose him because I wanted to. He hasn’t brought it up since, and I’ve appreciated that. A lot has happened in the short time since I was turned, and I’ve needed time to find my footing. But now I wonder just how much it’s hurt him giving me that space.

I cover his hand with mine. “Do you want to outwit fate? Because I’m not sure merging now would do that. Dagny said —”

Jack pulls his hand away and turns his back. “I don’t care what Dagny said,” he snaps. “Yes. Yes, I want to merge. I’ve wanted to since I realized you’re my half. I didn’t have to get to know you. I didn’t even have to know your name to know I wanted to share that with you.”

His words slice through me. How could he have known he wanted to be with me before we ever spoke? How can he be willing to give up his immortality for me when it feels like we still barely know each other? “I can’t. I can’t when there’s still so much I don’t know about you—so much you keep from me. You have these walls up and you shut down when I get to close to them. It makes me feel like I’ve done something wrong when all I really want is to know you.”

“You do know me,” he says. “I’ve never hidden who I am from you. Are there things I don’t like talking about? Yes. But those things don’t make me who I am.”

I glare at him. “In my experience, those are exactly the kind of things that make you who you are.”

“You think you want to know,” Jack, says, his voice quiet, “but you can’t imagine everything I’ve seen—everything I’ve experienced.” In a blink, he shifts and starts running deeper into the city.

I watch his wolf’s retreating form until he turns a corner.

“That’s the problem.”

The prickling in my eyes returns and I rub at them. I can’t start crying—not here in the middle of the road. And I certainly can’t go into the quarters and do it with Luke and Brady looking on.

But it hurts. What could have happened in Jack’s life that’s so terrible he thinks he can’t tell me? I don’t know if there’s

anything I could learn that would change the way I feel about him. Even now, despite feeling angry and betrayed, something within me still longs for him in a way I've never experienced. It's why his being so closed off hurts. I yearn to know him as well as I know myself—a desire he doesn't share.

I take in a deep breath and blow it out slowly, blinking a few times to be sure no errant tears are preparing an escape.

When I open the door to our quarters, I arrange my face in what I hope is a neutral expression. Luke lounges on one of the couches, leafing through the magazine Jack was reading earlier. Brady has a new puzzle set up at the folding table, the one on the coffee table likely abandoned due to Luke's proximity to it. They both look up when I enter, and I detect a question in their eyes—one I don't want to answer. I don't think I can say anything about Jack without losing the tenuous grip on my composure.

I stride into the room, closing the door behind me with more force than necessary. I head straight for the kitchen, telling myself along the way it's so I can have a little privacy. But as soon as I enter the room, I can't deny the real reason I've come. I cross to the refrigerator, murmuring a prayer as I open it that I'll find what I'm looking for.

I locate it on the top shelf. Of the four bottles delivered this morning, only one remains. I pull it out and unscrew the top before bringing the glass to my lips.

My incisors burn as they lengthen. Just a couple of sips—that's all I need. Except I don't stop. I gulp down mouthful after mouthful until there's no blood left in the container.

As my teeth return to their normal state, I stare at the empty bottle. Why did I do that? I didn't need it—I had some this morning.

Shame bubbles in the pit of my stomach. Is this what I'm reduced to? Turning to blood when my feelings are overwhelming? What would've happened if I weren't here in the sanctuary with a pint of blood readily available? Would it have occurred to me to seek it out? What am I becoming?

I spin to the sink and turn on the tap. The water turns pale pink as it fills the bottle. I empty it only to fill it again, as if pumping it full of clean water can somehow cleanse me, too.

"Should I ask?" Luke pokes his head into the room, eyebrows raised.

I cut off the water and turn toward him. How easy things must be for him. I bet he's never felt guilty about drinking blood in his immortal life. Before we ended up here, he was teaching me how to control myself around humans—something that seems so natural for him. After all, the night we met he didn't go crazy and take too much blood from me. Maybe my problem is my mindset. I've convinced myself that if my werewolf side is good, my vampire side must be bad. But when I look at Luke, I don't see a bad person. On the contrary, since I've known him, he's gone out of his way to help me. Maybe both sides of me are good, and to control my vampire side, I need only to embrace it.

I hold the bottle up. "I drank the last of your stash. Sorry."

He shrugs. "I have a feeling they'll bring more tomorrow. Besides, even if they don't, we're taking off and I can grab a snack on the road if necessary."

I set the container in the sink. "Still, I feel bad. Who knows what we'll be up against tomorrow. I think we should go out and get you some more right now."

His eyebrows furrow. "You do?"

I nod.

He presses his lips together, indecision flickering across his features for an instant. Then his expression clears and he takes a step backward, sweeping his hand toward the front door. “After you.”

A small voice in the back of my mind urges me to be cautious. I may be leaving tomorrow, but that doesn't mean I want to go spreading around that I'm a hybrid tonight. But after the argument with Jack, I don't want to sit around here wringing my hands until he returns. I need to do something.

And if I can get my hands on some more blood for Luke and me, all the better.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“ANY IDEA WHERE TO START?” I ask as Luke and I start up the street. “I think you’ve seen more of this place than I have. I’ve really only been a couple blocks from here.”

“My vote is to not go where I got picked up yesterday,” Luke says. “I’m thinking that was a storage facility and they don’t seem to like people getting too close. If we want to find some blood approved for consumption, we should look for vampires.”

The idea is so simple I feel foolish for not having come up with it myself. “Okay then. Should be easy.”

“Should it?” He cocks an eyebrow. “How many vampires would you say you’ve seen in your time here?”

I open my mouth to answer when I realize I’m not sure. Something about this place is messing with my sense of smell, so it isn’t as if I’ve sniffed them out while on the street. “There were some at the restaurant.” I do my best to recall how many tables held decanters of blood, but I don’t think there were more than a few. Although the place was packed, if the amount of visible blood is any indication, most of the patrons were werewolves or witches. “You’re right. I don’t think I’ve seen more than a handful of vampires.”

“But there have to be some here, right?” Luke asks. “Judging by the size of this place, I’d guess hundreds.”

“Then where are they?”

He nudges my elbow with his. “That’s the question, isn’t it?”

We walk deeper into the city. There are dozens of people on the streets. Some walk with hurried steps, others stroll lazily while laughing with friends. We enter a business district filled with all kinds of shops. There are grocers, clothing stores, apothecaries, furniture stores. Some shopkeepers lounge by the front doors, chatting with nearby proprietors. On another street is a sandy-colored building with the word “school” chiseled into the stone above the door. This place really is its own society. Do people raise children here? They must—or else there would be no need for a school. Are there generations of families who reside here?

As we continue further into the city, the neatly kept houses become plainer. Some look deserted. Many have lawns with knee-high grass.

“Looks like we’ve found the dodgy side of town,” I murmur, offering Luke a smile.

He doesn’t return it. His eyes continuously scan the environment and his head remains on a swivel.

Maybe I was more right about this being a shady area than I realized.

We turn a corner and I catch a glimpse of a mud-colored building on the next street. It’s taller than any of the surrounding structures, and it appears to take up much of the block it’s on. “Is that some kind of warehouse?”

“I’m not sure,” Luke says. He picks up his pace as we draw nearer to it.

I can’t help feeling exposed out here. Minutes have passed since I’ve seen another pedestrian. Whatever this place is, it seems the locals avoid it.

As we close the remaining distance to the building, I detect a sound. Voices, maybe? But there must be tons of people inside if I can hear them through the cinder block wall.

There are no windows, and I don’t see any doors. What kind of building doesn’t have a way in?

“Stay here,” Luke says at the corner. “I’m going to go around to the other side to check it out.”

“Are you serious?” I hold my hands out and look around. “What am I supposed to do?”

“I don’t know—keep a lookout.”

“Lookout for who?”

He nods. “Exactly.”

Before I can argue more, he takes off at a run toward the other end of the building. I have half a mind to follow him, but before I can, movement out of the corner of my eye catches my attention. I turn my head, but I don’t see what drew my gaze. After a beat, a person emerges from behind a building a couple of blocks over. Even though I can’t see his features clearly, I know who it is. Jack. I’d recognize his movements anywhere.

He stops in his tracks and turns his head. I wonder if he can feel my gaze on him, or whether his alpha senses are telling him I’m nearby.

I stare at him, and he at me. I wonder where he's been. Why did he decide to walk through such a sketchy area? Does he think I've come to find him?

I want to talk to him. I don't like arguing with him, but I don't know how else to make him see how much his secrecy hurts me.

He shifts on the balls of his feet. I'm ready to take a step toward him when a hand catches the crook of my arm.

I release a startled yelp, but it's only Luke. His brow furrows quizzically. "You all right?"

I nod. "Yeah. I just..." I glance back down the street. Jack hasn't moved.

Luke doesn't notice my distraction. He tugs my arm. "Come on. You've gotta see this."

I hesitate. I want to go to Jack, but there's no guarantee he'll want to talk. And the guarded expression on Luke's usually carefree face has me curious.

No. I want to sort things out with Jack. But when I look back down the street, he's gone.

Luke's fingers slip down my arm until his palm presses against mine. He pulls me along behind him, and I follow.

When we turn the far corner, I remove my hand from his. Luke doesn't seem to notice. He sneaks toward a door in the center of the wall. It's propped open with a stack of bricks and music pours out onto the street. I recognize the song—a chart-topper from the nineties. It's got a catchy hook and is the kind of tune most people would stop their channel-surfing to sing along with. Not the kind of music one listens to when engaging in something nefarious.

We reach the door and Luke lifts his chin. I edge forward and peek inside.

The place is packed with people. Some lounge on saggy couches along the walls, but most line the dozens of long tables lined up in neat rows. With the music and the sparse lighting, the atmosphere is bar-like, but I can't find any waiters or waitresses—or a proper bar, for that matter. Instead, an elaborate network of pipes and tubes stretches across the ceiling, feeding into long rectangular metal structures suspended above each table. Nozzles poke out of either side of the rectangles at intervals.

“Are those taps?” I turn to Luke, waiting for him to correct me, but the look on his face tells me he came to the same conclusion.

A woman rises from her spot on a couch several yards into the building. She crosses to the nearest table and places her large metal mug beneath a tap. A thick stream of dark red liquid flows from it.

Blood.

“I guess we've figured out where all the vampires are,” Luke says.

I take a few steps away from the door and lean against the side of the building. “I don't get it. Do they just hang out in there all day?”

Luke shrugs. “Well, it's barely afternoon and they all seem pretty settled in there.”

“But don't they need to work or something?” We saw so many people engaged in mundane, real-life tasks on the way here, I started to believe that was just the way the sanctuary was set up. I figured that people were encouraged to hold

down day jobs both to make the sanctuary more like the outside world and to keep people from getting into trouble.

“Why would they need to? I don’t see anyone in there swiping a card for each blood-meal. It looks to me like it’s just there for the taking.” He presses his mouth into a tight line, keeping his gaze trained on me.

“But they don’t need that much, right?” When it first came to light what I am, we determined I need less blood than the average vampire, but even if I were like the rest of them, this would be extreme. “Why would they stay here drinking it all day?”

Luke’s eyes drift to the open door but he pulls them away. “Do you really have to ask? You’ve tasted the blood here.”

I bite my lower lip. “You’re right. There is something strange about it.”

He nods. “Something addictive, maybe? Some kind of magical witchy-woo to keep the vamps coming back for more?”

“No,” I say automatically. “This is a sanctuary.”

“Exactly. Who knows what the people here are running from? What if the powers that be decided the vampires needed to be kept in check? What better way than this? We’ve only been here a day, and it’s taking all my willpower not to go inside there and join them. Who knows what extended exposure to that stuff will do?”

“Let’s get you out of here,” I say, tugging his arm. “We’re leaving tomorrow, and after that, we’ll never have to think about this place again.”

“It’s really that easy for you?” Luke asks as we round the building’s corner. “You don’t care about whatever it is those

witches are doing to the blood? To those vampires?”

“How do you know they didn’t sign up for it? Maybe it’s something they discuss at the initiation.” Even though the idea is plausible, I have a hard time believing anyone would voluntarily sign up for a life of sitting around drinking blood all day. But I don’t know what brought any of these people here. Perhaps for some of them, this really is an improvement.

Luke rolls his shoulders. “Well, I for one am glad we’re taking off soon. The more I learn about this place, the less I like it.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

JACK DOESN'T RETURN until the evening, and even then he doesn't speak to anyone.

When he heads straight to the kitchen, Luke crosses to my spot on the couch. After leafing through every magazine in the place, I began working on one of the puzzles Brady already conquered.

“What happened?” he murmurs as he sits beside me. “I figured he was out preparing for us leaving tomorrow, but that? That's angry Jack. I've been on the receiving end of it too many times not to recognize it.”

“I don't want to talk about it,” I say, trying to fit together two pieces.

“I'm probably not the one you need to talk to.” He stands and gives an exaggerated stretch. “I think I might be ready to check out those restaurants. Brady, how about you show me where they are?”

“Make Ava take you,” he mutters from his spot at the folding table.

I appreciate what Luke's attempting, and I feel guilty for what I'm about to do to Brady, but I can apologize later. “No,

you take him. Grab something to eat. Keep Luke out of trouble.”

Brady stands, glaring at me as he crosses to the front door. “Your wish is my command, apparently.”

Luke follows after him, turning back only to wink before closing the door behind them.

“I suppose that was for my benefit.”

Jack leans against the kitchen doorjamb. He meets my eyes, but his expression is clouded.

“Or ours,” I say, standing. “Depending on how you look at it.” When he doesn’t step into the room, I move toward him. “We had our first fight. Our first real fight. Does that mean we’re like officially a couple now?”

He drops his gaze. “I’m not sure what we are.”

The words sting, but I continue toward him. “Two halves of the same whole.”

“It doesn’t feel that way.”

I stop when I’m still a few feet away. “I get that it was magic that created us, but magic has nothing to do with our relationship. That takes work. I’m willing to put the effort in if you are.”

He closes his eyes and exhales. When he opens them again, he meets my gaze and takes a step forward. “What now?”

I lift my hand, and when Jack takes it, I lead him to the couches. We sit facing each other, our knees brushing. I sift through the questions I’ve stored up for him, choosing the broadest and most innocuous to begin with. “Why don’t you like talking about your past?”

He shrugs. “Isn’t it obvious? Because it hurts. You’d think after all these years the pain would dull, but there are certain things that... that I can’t talk about—I can’t think about—or it brings all those feelings back like it’s happening all over again.”

My heart aches at his words. “I get what you mean. Most of the time, my dad being gone is just part of life, but every once in a while, it hits me all over again. It’s like I’m reliving the moment I found out.”

“Ava.” He breathes my name. “Your father died of cancer. You had warning. I don’t want to discount that losing him was a tragedy, but it’s not the same as...” He stops short, cupping his hands over his face. After he removes them, he rubs them together. His eyes drift to the coffee table.

I have no idea how his parents died. I never spent much time considering it. I guess I assumed they grew old and passed away, but now I’m thinking that couldn’t be more wrong. I want nothing more than to ask, but if his demeanor is any indication, this is one of the memories that still cause him pain. “Did you ever consider that these things hurt so much after all this time because you keep them in? Maybe if you talked about it—”

“No.” His expression closes off. He may as well draw a curtain closed between us—it wouldn’t be any less real than the barrier behind his eyes.

“Fine.” I stand. Maybe I can catch up with Luke and Brady. But before I can turn toward the door, Jack catches my hand and tugs it.

“You wanted to know about the cuffs. Why Luke knew what they were.”

I don't want to turn around, but something in Jack's voice makes me. He doesn't sound like the commanding alpha—more like a hopeful boy. The wall behind his eyes has dropped, leaving them clear and his expression more open than I've seen since the first night we spent getting to know each other.

"I do," I say, reclaiming my seat.

Jack doesn't release my hand. "I've kept tabs on Luke off and on since he turned. He may have been the older brother, but I always felt responsible for him. He was sick a lot as a kid, and when he wasn't, he'd make up for lost time by getting into as much trouble as possible. I got into the habit of watching out to make sure he didn't get into anything too serious. After he changed, I guess that habit carried over." The corners of his mouth quirk, but he doesn't manage to smile. "I once went a whole decade without checking in on him. When our paths finally crossed, it was by accident. He was running with a pretty bad brood. They were muscle for the mob, and they were involved in some dark deeds. He was in over his head—although, if you ask him, he was steps away from taking over the whole operation. I heard another pack was going to make a move against Luke's brood, and I thought he might get it in his head to try to take them on instead of leaving, so I had a witch make a set of cuffs like yours."

"But you couldn't get him to put his on?" I guess.

"He didn't know what they were, but he was suspicious when I gave it to him. I had this whole story about how they would connect us, and if he ever needed help, I could find him. He took it from me and told me he'd think about putting it on. The next time I saw him, he was wearing a leather cuff. What I didn't realize is it wasn't the one I gave him. I tried to order

him to leave town. As you can imagine, it didn't go over well."

I try to picture the scene. Luke was probably angry, but he must have realized Jack was only trying to help. Clearly he survived the ordeal. Did he leave because of the steps Jack was willing to take to make him go? And those steps, though drastic, lead me to only one conclusion. "You still care about him, don't you? After whatever's happened between you, after all these years."

His fingers twitch. "I feel responsible for him."

"Is it hard for you? Having him around?"

Jack takes his time answering. "Is it good for you, having him with us?"

The question hits me like a punch. When he showed up at the enclave and offered his help in the days after I turned, it was my call to let him stay. He's been an asset since then—both with helping locate me when I was kidnapped and with assisting me in learning to deal with human blood. But since our arrival at the sanctuary, I haven't given his presence much thought. There are no threats against me in here, so he hasn't had to protect me, and human blood isn't an issue. He's just here—part of the group. He's doing the same thing as Jack and me: waiting for what's next.

"I think it's good having him around," I say at length. "At least for now—until we figure out what's going on, why someone has a bounty out on me."

Jack squeezes my fingers. "Then I think it's good too."

I smile. "You mean more to him than I think you realize. He made a comment the night you saved me from Xander. He

said you looked at him in a way you hadn't for a long time—like he was your brother.”

Jack reaches forward with his free hand and tucks my hair behind my ear. “Let’s talk about him some other time.”

Sparks dance across my skin where he touches, and it takes a second to recall who we were talking about to begin with.

His fingers trace the line of my jaw. “I’m sorry about earlier. I let the oracle get to me, but you’re right—they’re notoriously vague. And I’m sorry I’ve been closed off. I’ve spent decades trying to forget my past—but you’re right. The things I’ve experienced have shaped me. In time, I’ll tell you everything. But I will need time.”

I want to respond, but I’m too distracted by the tingles shooting through my body at his feather-light touches. How long has it been since we’ve been alone together? It feels like forever. For the moment, we have the quarters to ourselves, and I don’t think anything has ever sounded better than making up after our first fight.

I lean forward, and Jack meets my lips with an urgent kiss. My body hums with the force of it. My fingers slide to the back of his neck and thread through the curls there. Jack eases me back until I lie on the couch and his lips find my neck. Heat radiates through me as his hands skate up my sides.

Being close to Jack is always electric, but nothing in our relationship so far compares to this. There’s a measure of desperation that makes me ache for him in a way I’ve never experienced. Tomorrow, we strike out for the summit, but who knows what will happen there. If they don’t find in my favor, this could be our last night together.

No. I refuse to let myself think that way.

Jack's mouth dips to my collar bone and I press myself closer to him. I wish I could melt into him—to connect our bodies and reunite our soul.

Merge, my wolf urges.

For the first time, the idea doesn't frighten me. It sounds natural—right. It's not too much, too soon or too crazy a concept to take in. Maybe the hole I've felt my entire life hasn't been due to never knowing my mom or my dad dying—maybe it's been there because, on some level, I've always known I wasn't quite complete.

Jack's lips crush mine again, pushing thoughts from my head. It's easy to get lost in the moment, but I can't—not with this revelation coursing through me. I press my palms into his shoulder, pushing him back until our kiss breaks.

His gunmetal blue eyes lock on mine, concern brimming within them. “What's wrong?”

“Nothing,” I whisper. “I just—”

Shouts and screams cut through the night air. Jack is on his feet in a flash. He stares out the window, eyes narrowed.

I sit up straight, tuning my ears to the sounds. Is there some kind of parade or party happening? I dismiss the idea immediately. These are not the noises of celebration. Something's wrong.

“It's close,” Jack says. “Maybe on the next street over.”

I stand. “Where the restaurants are.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

JACK IS OUTSIDE FIRST, but I'm faster. It's hard to believe it's been just more than a day since I've run full-out like this. My body craves to shift, to continue for miles, but I fight the urge. I remain in human form and arrive on restaurant row in seconds.

The scene is chaotic. Dozens of people line the street, with still more pouring out of three adjacent restaurants. I scan the faces, but Luke and Brady aren't among them. It's impossible to see what's going on inside through the throngs attempting to exit.

Shrieks sound from inside the center building, along with crashing and shattering.

Jack arrives at my side, his eyes trained on the middle restaurant's door. "How much you wanna bet that's the one they're in?"

I was thinking the same thing. "Want me to check the other two, just to be safe?" When he raises an eyebrow, I shrug. "I'm faster."

As he darts toward the center building, I race toward the one on the left. I've never attempted agility training at high speed, but that doesn't stop me from trying to weave through the bodies exiting the structure. As I pass between and behind

individuals, it feels as if they're all moving in slow motion and I'm the only one at a normal pace.

Once inside, I zip around tables and chairs, keeping a lookout for the familiar figures of Luke and Brady. When my search is fruitless, I make my way outside again. Before I make it two doors down, a nagging sense of dread settles in the pit of my stomach. Something's wrong in the middle restaurant. Even though I left that one for Jack to check out, I change course and veer into it.

If the scene in the street is chaotic, it's nothing compared to the havoc inside. Tables and chairs are broken and strewn around the room. Shattered glass glitters on the floor. The remaining patrons cower and shout as a blur ricochets from one wall to the other. It slams into the wall nearest me before spinning toward the back of the room. When it hits, it splits apart and half of it careens to the floor. The blurs slow enough for me to make out two people. The one on the floor is a burly black-haired man I don't recognize.

The other is Luke.

As he descends on the stranger for another assault, another figure streaks into the action, colliding with Luke and slamming him against the far wall.

"What do you think you're doing?" Jack presses his forearm against his brother's neck. "We're gone in less than twenty-four hours, and you can't keep a handle on yourself until then?"

Luke shoves him backward. "You know, that's typical—assuming this was on me. I was defending myself. Dude came in here with a chip on his shoulder."

“Where’s Brady?” He wasn’t outside and I don’t see him anywhere in the room.

“Back here.” The swinging double doors to the kitchen open and Brady’s face peeks out between them.

Luke snorts, gesturing to him. “Nice.”

Brady takes a step into the room. “Sorry, man. I’m not fighting your battles.”

The remaining patrons emerge from their hiding places behind upturned tables and scurry toward the front door.

Jack watches them before turning back to Luke. “So, what happened? If you were just out having dinner, why did you have to defend yourself?”

Hurt flickers across Luke’s face, but it’s covered over by irritation. “I have no idea. One minute, Brady’s ordering a burger, the next—”

The man on the floor springs to his feet and bolts in Luke’s direction. In his hand is the splintered leg of a chair.

I scream as I rush forward. The man is fast, but he’s no match for my speed. I overtake him and knock his arm down. As the makeshift stake clatters to the ground, I slide an arm around his throat, ready to take off his head.

A high-pitched whistle rends the air and I hesitate, though I don’t release the man.

Cedrick stands in the restaurant’s doorway, his posture commanding and almost regal. He levels his gaze at me. “Release him.”

I adjust my grip. “But he—”

“Now.”

He doesn't yell, but the force of his voice weighs down on me like something physical. My muscles relax, and as soon as the man is able, he puts space between the two of us.

Luke takes a tentative step forward. "You don't understand. I was minding my own business when this guy attacked me. When Ava grabbed him—"

Cedrick raises his hand. "I don't need to hear specifics." He steps into the room, gliding around broken bits littering the floor. "You arrived this morning, did you not?" he asks the guy on my left.

I look at him for the first time. He's got a youthful face and high cheek bones—much more boy than man. His black hair is short and full of gel and his dark eyes glare sullenly forward.

"Yeah, I did," he mutters, sounding like a teenager being reprimanded by the principal.

Cedrick nods. "Whether or not you choose to stay here beyond the grace period, you must understand this kind of behavior won't be tolerated."

The guy snorts. "You expect me to be okay with vampires walking around town, sucking down blood a table over from mine? You want me to pretend like it's no big thing?"

"It *is* 'no big thing' here." Cedrick pauses to let the words sink in. "In a few minutes, some of my associates will arrive. You'll stay here and clean up the mess you've made." He looks at Luke. "You and your friends may leave."

"Damn right, we can," Luke grumbles. He leads the way toward the door with Jack and me close behind. Brady keeps his distance, but he follows along.

Much of the earlier crowd has dispersed. The two restaurants on either side of the one we were in are full of

patrons once more, but several groups still line the streets, watching us warily as we pass.

“I can’t wait to get out of this place,” Luke says, not bothering to keep his voice down.

“We leave for the summit tomorrow,” Jack says.

Luke glances over his shoulder. “Not soon enough.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I SWEAR Luke must have asked if it's time to go yet at least a million times since we woke up this morning.

Around three o'clock in the afternoon, Jack announces it's finally time to leave.

I look around our quarters for anything I may have left behind, but there's no need. I didn't bring anything here worth taking with me.

Cedrick and Evelyn sit at the front gates as they did on the day of our arrival. They don't say anything as we pass by. I don't know what I was expecting. Relief, maybe? After all, in our three days here, Luke has been at the center of two issues. But neither says anything. They stare forward as if they can't see us at all.

"The summit starts at five," Jack says. "We've got plenty of time to get there, so we don't need to kill ourselves running."

Luke shrugs. "Or we could just borrow a vehicle and forget about the running thing altogether."

Jack sighs. "I already told you, we're not stealing a car."

Luke offers upturned palms. "We'll give it back."

“Can we get on with it?” Brady asks. “The sooner we get there, the sooner you guys can let me go.”

“That’s the plan,” Jack says.

I glance at the cuff on my wrist. I can’t blame him for wanting to be released from the spell between us. If it were up to me, I’d use it one last time to order him to run back to his pack and stay there. But I know the smarter move is to keep him in case we need a bargaining chip. I just don’t like reducing him to that.

Jack takes off, and Luke, Brady, and I follow after. After the running we did on the night that led us to the sanctuary, this pace is almost relaxing. As we fly over gnarled roots and between tree trunks, I keep my ears open for any sounds that don’t belong, but it doesn’t take long for me to get lost in the music of the forest. Birds chirp, squirrels and chipmunks skitter, the wind rustles through the trees. For a moment, I’m able to forget we’re on our way to a summit that may well decide my fate, and I let myself be lost in nature.

I don’t know how many miles have passed, but I’m sure we’re nowhere near the summit when Luke slows down. Jack runs ahead, but I match my pace with Luke’s. “What’s up? You’re not getting tired, are you?”

I expect him to laugh it off, to speed up and try to beat me, so I’m surprised when he stops in his tracks. I skid to a halt several yards away.

“Do you smell that?”

The only thing I can smell is the moist earth and the remnants of decomposing leaves, but I humor him and take in a deep breath. I detect nothing more, so I inhale again.

“Blood.”

Luke nods. “Human blood.” I glance in the direction Jack and Brady were running and catch a glimpse of them through the trees. They’re coming back this way, and I jog to meet them.

“We really shouldn’t stop.” Jack glances back at Luke, a puzzled expression on his face.

“I smell something,” Luke says. “Ava does too. I think we should take a slight detour.”

Jack doesn’t look convinced, but when I meet his eyes and nod, he sighs. “Lead the way.”

Our pace toward the scent of blood is slower. Although our movements are much quieter than they were only minutes ago, I can’t help feeling we’re making even more noise. The forest has gone silent. The animals here have either stopped moving or evacuated.

With each passing yard, the smell of blood grows thicker. From the set of Jack’s jaw, I assume he’s picked up on the aroma too.

We come to the edge of the forest, and Luke ducks down behind some bushes. I squeeze next to him and peek out at the unfolding scene. A dozen picnic tables are lined with vinyl tablecloths in red and blue. Most are laden with cups and plates, but no people sit on benches enjoying their food. Bodies lay strewn at intervals on the ground—mostly on their stomachs as if knocked down from behind. Intermittent screams pierce the air.

“What the hell’s happening here?” I survey the picnic scene for clues. “Is it a bear attack?”

“Are you serious?” Brady’s tone is acidic. “Are you telling me you don’t recognize a vampire’s handiwork?”

Luke shakes his head. “Not vampire. Vampires. I’m guessing at least three, but maybe more.”

“For real?” I look to Jack for affirmation. He nods, but I still can’t process the information. “Do vampires really do this? Attack people in broad daylight?”

Jack opens his mouth to respond, but Brady is faster. “When there’s no one around to stop them, yeah. Maybe this brood got wind the local pack would be off at the summit and decided to take this opportunity to enjoy a buffet. This is what happens when there’s no one around to stop these leeches.”

“Except there is someone around to stop them,” Luke says. “Us.”

Brady raises an eyebrow. “You’re counting yourself in that number? I figured you’d be high-fiving these dudes for having the balls to attack a party in the middle of the day.”

Luke stands, eyeing Brady like he’s something unsavory stuck to the bottom of his shoe. “Believe it or not, I do have a conscience. I can see what a dick move this is. I may need blood to survive—and, yeah, I prefer the human variety—but I’m not an asshole about it.”

“Where are they?” I scan the area. Beyond the immediate picnic area is a small pond. Off to the left is a pavilion attached to a nondescript brick building—probably the bathrooms. A quarter of a mile behind the pavilion is a red barn. But there isn’t any movement. If it weren’t for the screams, I’d assume the trouble had passed. “We should go check it out.”

Jack catches the crook of my arm. “You think this is a good idea? We need to get to the summit. What’ll they think if we’re late?”

Brady crosses his arms over his chest. “That you were doing what you’re made to do. What kind of werewolf are you, anyway?”

Jack lunges at him, growling, but I hold him back. “Now isn’t the time to fight with each other.” I move in front of Jack, forcing him to look at me. “You think I don’t get how important the summit is? But this is important too.”

He closes his eyes and exhales heavily. When he opens them again, he cups my cheek in his palm and nods. “My guess is they’re in the barn. When the attack started, the humans would’ve tried to get as far away as possible. Ava, you’re the fastest. You scout ahead to check things out, but don’t engage until Brady and I join you.”

“Hey, wait.” Luke steps forward. “What about me?”

“The bathrooms,” I say before Jack can get the words out. “Most people probably tried to put as much distance between them and the attack, but it’s possible some stopped at the first hiding place they came across.”

Jack offers a smile. “She’s right. Now let’s go.”

Without another word, I streak toward the barn. As I go, I swivel my head, taking in everything around me. It’s possible some picnic-goers ran for the woods, but I detect no indication of that. I circle the barn, looking for a way in. The doors on either side are pulled closed, but one is open a crack and I peer through it.

The scene is something out of a horror movie. Blood spatters the hay-strewn floor and the barn walls. Labored, terrified breathing fills the space. I count five vampires straddling victims and drinking deeply from their necks. A dozen bodies are piled up in the middle of the floor, and a

dozen men and women stand helplessly along the walls, compelled not to move.

A rush of wind ruffles my hair as Jack and Brady come to a stop beside me. “My count is five.”

Jack nods. “On three.”

Brady and I nod, and Jack begins counting off on his fingers. When he gets to three, I shove open the door and we rush in. The vampires look up and hiss. The two nearest us stand and leap in our direction. Jack and Brady engage them, but I follow the remaining three who rush to the side of the barn and grab for the people standing there. They each have slung one over their shoulders and are going for a second when I charge through them like a football player cutting through the other team’s defense. Two of them fall over, but the third manages to stay on her feet. She throws the forty-something man to the barn floor and turns to me, grinning.

She sneers. “You don’t want to do this. Admit it. Rather than taking us down, you’d like to join in, wouldn’t you, hybrid?”

Her words take me off guard, and she takes advantage of my momentary distraction to slam into me, sending me flying halfway across the barn. I land inches from the pile of bodies and spring to my feet, but the scent of human blood overwhelms me. So far, I’ve been able to stay detached, but now that I can see little pools glistening on the necks of those nearest to me, my incisors burn and lengthen. My eyes prickle, and I know if I could see them I would watch their jade green flash blood red.

I can’t. These people have already been attacked. I need to go after the ones who did this. Still, instead of going after the girl who knocked me over, I turn and crawl toward the nearest

body—that of a girl who must be around my age. Just a little. She won't even notice.

“Ava?”

I tear my gaze from the girl's neck and look toward the person who spoke. Jack stands several feet away, revulsion brimming in his eyes. It's a look I've seen before. Brady looks at me that way. My best friend Lillie does her best to hide it any time the topic of blood comes up. But this is the first time Jack has looked at me like this. Like I'm a monster.

My eyes prickle again and I feel my teeth return to their normal shape. I stand, keeping my eyes locked on Jack's. “I'm sorry. I—”

“They're getting away!” Brady yells before taking off out of the barn.

Without a word to me, Jack takes off after him. I look down at the girl, shame swimming in my stomach. Was I really about to feed on her? Who knows how much those other vampires took. Even a little bit might be enough to kill her—and I didn't care. Have I been kidding myself, thinking I could control a bloodlust like this? Or is the fact I've allowed myself to drink human blood at all made the whole situation worse?

What makes me any better than the vampires who did this?

I tamp down my doubt and follow Jack's trajectory out on the barn. But the scene that greets me is not what I expected. The vampires who fled haven't disappeared into the woods. They stand in the line, snapping and snarling at Jack and Brady. Behind them is a line of half a dozen wolves.

Werewolves.

When I emerge from the barn, one of the weres steps forward, shifting as she does. Her raven hair is thick and wild,

and her eyes are cool and calculating. “We’ve come for the hybrid. There’s a bounty on her head, and if you know what’s good for you, you’ll hand her over without a fight.”

My jaw drops. They set a trap for me. Not only that, but these werewolves decided to work alongside vampires to set it. We were so foolish. There just happened to be a broad daylight attack on dozens of people on our way to the summit? The fact that it was designed to lure us in seems so obvious now. I can’t believe we fell for it.

The woman takes another step forward, her companions growling low. “Give her to me.”

A gush of wind blows past me, and in the blink, Luke is standing behind the black haired woman. He slips his arms around her neck and snaps it.

“No way,” he says as she crumples to the ground in front of him.

“Run!” Jack yells. I don’t need to be told twice. As much as I want to rush right into the forest and not look back, I know that if I do, they’ll only give chase. I’m confident I could outrun any one of them, but I’m not sure how their speed compares to that of my companions. I sweep past the vampires, snapping each of their necks as I go before moving to the werewolves and doing the same. Jack, Luke, and Brady are in the woods when I join them. We’ve put a mile between us and the picnic before it’s clear no one has followed us. If the attackers had backup somewhere, they’re not giving chase.

“What was that?” Brady asks, his eyes wide. “What the hell was that?”

“I think it was pretty obvious,” Luke says dryly.

Brady shakes his head. “I knew they wanted you. I had no idea they wanted you that bad. Getting help from vampires? They might as well—”

“Be us?” Jack asks, daring Brady to challenge him. When Brady remains silent, Jack turns to Luke. “Thanks for the assist.”

Luke shrugs. “I live to serve.”

I swallow. “What now?”

“It’s not safe for you out here. You have to get back the sanctuary,” Jack says, although he doesn’t look at me as he speaks. His eyes are on Brady. “I need you to go with her.”

“No way,” Brady says. “I never signed up to be on guard duty. Never signed up for any of this.”

“I’ll go to the summit. The convocation needs to hear about this,” Jack says. “And Luke—I need you to clean up this mess. Wipe these people’s memories. Give them a plausible story to explain any deaths. We can’t have an attack like this getting out into the human community.”

Luke nods. “Understood.”

When Jack finally turns to me, I search his eyes, but it’s as if he’s got a wall up just behind them. “I’ll plead your case for you. As soon as they make a decision, I’ll get word to you.”

I reach for his face, but he catches my hand before it makes contact. “Jack.”

He leans forward and presses a chaste kiss to my forehead. “Get back to the sanctuary.”

Before I can say anything else, he turns and runs away.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“YOU KNOW, I’ve never put much stock into the idea that someone could literally wear a hole through the floor from pacing, but you’re making me reconsider my position.”

I pause only long enough to shoot Brady a withering look before continuing on my path to the back of the room.

We’re back in our quarters at the sanctuary. When we returned an hour ago, Evelyn and Cedrick were still at the front gate. Neither of them batted an eye when we asked if we could reenter the city. Evelyn smiled and said, “Of course,” and told us our quarters were as we left them. It was almost as if they expected us to return.

Since then, my brain hasn’t stopped spinning through scenarios. Did they somehow find out about the ambush? Did they know about it before we left? Did they receive some kind of prophetic information from Dagny?

If I really wanted to know the answers to these questions, the solution would be easy: I could walk back to the front gates and ask. But I allow these thoughts to consume my mind to keep other concerns from surfacing.

The summit should be starting any time now. I don’t want to think about whether Jack made it safely or what the charges levied against me might be. I don’t want to imagine the kinds

of things the werewolves will say about me. And I certainly don't want to consider that some of their concerns might be right.

Brady stands from his spot on the couch and intercepts me as I stride past him. "Seriously, will you sit down for even a minute?" The muscles in his jaws twitch like he's struggling with the next words he wants to say. "Will talking about it make it better?"

I raise an eyebrow. "You want to talk to me?"

"Not really." He returns to the couch and drops onto it. "But I'll do it if the alternative is going crazy watching you pace."

"Go for a walk, then. You don't have to stay here."

"Pass," he says, tipping his head back. "After last night's debacle, I don't want to take the chance of running into that guy again. He might try to beat my ass on principle, and I've met my fight quota for the day."

He's got a point. While I don't think he was the target of the fight in the restaurant, if the guy who went after Luke hates vampires so much he can't bear the idea of eating in the same room as one, he may go after Brady simply for having been with Luke.

I cross to an unoccupied couch and sit. My body relaxes into the cushions, and I realize how tense I've been since we parted ways with Jack.

Seconds tick by and the silence stretches between us. Brady shifts in his seat. He blows out a breath. "So, are you nervous about the summit?"

"I didn't ask for any of this, you know." It's not what I meant to say, but the thought that's plagued me since I realized

what I am bubbles to the surface. “I was minding my own business when a dude stabbed me and left me for dead for a couple of dollars. But I didn’t die. I woke up and I was this.”

Brady is quiet for a moment. “It was Luke, wasn’t it? The vampire who bit you?”

I nod. “I met him at a bar. He must have compelled me because I typically have a strict policy about guys at bars and Luke is *not* that charming.” My lips quirk, but I don’t quite smile. “I never asked him why he did it. Maybe because I told him about my premonition.”

His eyebrows draw together. “Premonition?”

I backpedal. “Don’t worry—I’m not an oracle or anything. But I got a bad feeling the day my dad died. And I had that same bad feeling all day the night I was stabbed. I mentioned it to Luke and... I don’t know. I guess he took pity on me?”

Brady leans forward, resting his forearms on his thighs. “So when the werewolf bit you, he had no idea you had vampire venom in your system?”

I shake my head. “Jack didn’t bite me. He would’ve, I’m sure, but he says before he could, I started turning.”

“What? How is that even possible?”

“It has something to do with him being my half.” I almost regret saying it, but he probably already knows. It seems that information is as readily available as my status as a hybrid. “I don’t know if it happened just because he was near me or if some kind of werewolf gene flipped on because I was dying, but either way...” I shrug.

He leans back. “I wouldn’t stress too much about the summit. I’m sure Jack will do everything he can for you. I

mean, he does have a vested interest in you staying alive, right?”

“We’re not merged.” I don’t know why it’s so important to announce it to Brady, but I can’t stop myself. “If I die, nothing happens to him. Well—nothing physically. He’s not doing this out of self-preservation, he’s doing it because...” I stop short. I almost said “because he loves me,” but the two of us have never exchanged those words. But now that they’re in my head, I can’t help wondering if they might be true. Does Jack feel that way about me? Do I feel that way about him?

“Wait—you know who your half is but you haven’t merged? How does that make any sense?”

“What do you mean?” My tone is more defensive than I intend. My fight with Jack after Dagny’s prophecy flashes through my mind.

“You’re two parts to the same whole. This isn’t like human marriage where you can pick the wrong person and end up miserable,” he says. “You’re designed to be together.”

His words sting like an accusation. “Have you found your half yet?”

“No,” he says shortly. “Not all of us are as lucky as you.”

I ignore the jab. “Then you really have no room to talk. You don’t know how you’ll feel when you finally find her. Maybe you’ll realize it’s smart to take a little time to get to know her before binding your life force with hers.”

Brady snorts. “If I’m lucky enough to find her, there’s not a power on this earth that would keep me from merging with her as soon as possible.”

I shake my head. “You can’t know that. You’ve never even met this person and you’re ready to commit? What if she’s

eighty and turns as she's dying of a heart attack? Or what if she's a three-year-old on a playground?"

He shrugs. "I have faith I'll meet her when the time's right for both of us. And when I do, I won't hesitate." He holds my gaze for a beat. "I get the feeling Jack sees things the way I do."

I open my mouth, but no response forms. I try to convince myself he only thinks he knows what he'd do in the situation, that he doesn't really understand what he's talking about, but nothing I've learned about him so far suggests a man who's unsure of himself.

A knock sounds at the door. We stare at each other for a moment before I jerk my chin toward the noise. He grunts, but he rises to his feet and crosses to the front of the house.

I stand too, unsure what might be waiting beyond. As much as I'd like to think we're safe in the sanctuary, the throwdown at the restaurant last night disproves that theory. Worst-case scenarios spring to mind. What if some of the vampires and werewolves from the picnic have woken up already? What if they've come for me here? I'd like to think that's not even a possibility, but at this point I can't rule it out.

As Brady opens the door, I position myself a few feet on the other side of it, rising onto the balls of my feet in case I need to spring into action. My stomach clenches when a confused expression crosses his face. "Um, hi."

"It's time," says the woman on the other side of the door. Some of the tension drains from my body. It's Evelyn.

I take a few steps to my right so that I'm standing about a yard behind Brady. "Time for what?"

She smiles in a benign way I always associate with grandmothers—although I never had one to compare it to. “To go before the assembly, of course. It’s time for your initiation.”

Brady glances back at me, his eyes wide. I’m sure the same panicked expression stretches across my face. “But... we left,” I say weakly.

“And then you returned. If you had been gone for a week—a year—it would still be time to meet with the assembly. Your grace period has ended.” She stretches a hand toward Brady, who stiffens. “I assure you, there’s nothing to fear. You’re not condemning yourselves to life here. You may still leave at any time.”

“We plan to,” Brady says. “Maybe even in a couple of hours. Can’t we just postpone—”

“I’m sorry—no,” she says, the slightest edge to her voice. “The magic governing the sanctuary is quite specific. You have two choices: Come with me to see the assembly, or leave this place now.”

I gulp. As unappealing as the whole initiation thing sounds, after what happened on the way to the summit, I know my best chance of staying safe is within these city limits. “You heard the lady. Let’s go.”

Brady narrows his eyes, but he’s powerless to resist my order. When Evelyn turns and starts up the street, he follows her. I take up the rear and close the door behind me.

As Evelyn leads us, *déjà vu* overwhelms me. We follow the same path we did our first day here, after Luke was caught snooping. But this time when I pass through the wooden double doors of the large brick building, the front row of pews is filled with people who turn to watch us as we enter. They’re

all dressed in emerald cloaks, despite the summer heat. On the raised stage, behind the lectern, stands Cedrick. He's dressed in the same green cloak as the rest of the assembly, except there's a large amethyst stone pinned like a brooch to his.

Cedrick indicates the two heavy wooden chairs to his right, and Brady and I take our seats. My heart hammers in my chest. I haven't given any thought as to what might occur in this situation since I didn't intend to be here for it. This feels like the time I had to give a memorized speech to my entire senior English class—except I don't know any of the words.

Dread settles into my stomach as Cedrick turns to us. It doesn't abate when he smiles.

“Welcome, newcomers,” he says in a voice that fills the whole room.

“Welcome,” the assembly intones back. Evelyn, who has donned a cloak, takes a spot at the end of the row on the right. By my quick count, there are twenty people in the pews—men and women of varying ages. The younger ones could be in their thirties, while some of the older ones look as if they could be in their seventies.

“The sanctuaries have existed for centuries,” Cedrick continues in the same booming voice. “They offer refuge to those who seek it. They offer safety to those who need it. But we can only ensure this protection through the magic that flows throughout the city. And to remain here—for your sake as well as ours—you will be bound to the sanctuary and its laws.”

Brady lifts his hand. “Wait—question.”

Cedrick ignores him. “Your responsibilities to the outside world do not apply here. We all share one common purpose:

To live in peace. There are no sides here, no factions. The werewolf, the witch, the vampire—we live in harmony.”

The promise of the sanctuary is appealing. But peace like that can't come without a price. I've glimpsed what that cost is for the vampires, but how are prejudices like the one displayed last night overcome by a simple initiation?

“Your life outside this city doesn't exist within it. Here, everyone begins with a clean slate.” Cedrick pauses and meets my eyes for a moment before glancing at Brady. “No one can enter with the purpose of harming a resident. And although some have tried to break through our defenses to remove a person by force, none have ever succeeded. We shall protect you for as long as you choose to stay.”

As one, the assembled witches rise to their feet. Chanting swells, reverberating through the space and into my body. Brady and I exchange glances, but that's all we can do. He opens and closes his mouth, but no sound comes out. I attempt to stand, but it's as if an invisible force pins me down.

The chanting continues. I try to make out the words, but I don't recognize them. I have no idea what language they're speaking.

A tingling sensation sweeps through my body, starting at my toes and working up to my head. Although my experience with magic is limited, I can't help thinking they're casting a spell on us.

The question is what spell is it.

The chanting stops abruptly and I draw in a deep breath. Brady wiggles his fingers experimentally.

I don't feel any different. I glance at Brady, who shrugs.

“We don’t keep secrets here,” Cedrick says as if his speech wasn’t just interrupted by chanting. “Whatever your reason for seeking refuge, speak it plainly now. No matter how dark, we will not cast you out. Put your old self to rest so you may move forward.”

I try to swallow, but my mouth has gone dry. It takes a few tries before I can force words out. “There’s a bounty on my head,” I say, followed by the words I intended to keep to myself: “because I’m a hybrid. I’m both a werewolf and a vampire.” I pause, waiting for a gasp, for some indication the assembly is surprised by the revelation, but they remain silent. “Ever since I turned, all I’ve wanted is to live as a werewolf with my pack, but people are afraid of me—or they want something from me. I came here to avoid being taken for bounty—or worse.”

Cedrick nods. “Thank you.” He glances past me to Brady.

I look at Brady, too. He opens his mouth but stops immediately, meeting my eyes, an expression there I can’t quite read. The cuff. Of course. I told him before we entered the city limits he couldn’t tell anyone the truth. “Go on,” I murmur, hoping it’s enough.

His lips twitch and he doesn’t break eye contact. I nod to encourage him, and he opens his mouth.

A boom thunders through the air. The serene expressions of those seated in the assembly are replaced by looks of surprise and fear.

“What was that?” I ask, leaping to my feet.

Another boom sounds and I know the answer before Cedrick speaks: “The sanctuary is under attack.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE WITCHES ARE much spryer than I would have given them credit for, and half of them make it outside before Brady and me.

The scene is chaos. People run through the streets, deeper into the city. Smoke rises ominously from near the perimeter.

Evelyn brushes past me and I snag her elbow and tug her to face me. “What the hell is going on here? I thought this place was a safe haven?”

“It is,” she says, her voice shaking. “In all its history, no force has ever prevailed against any sanctuary. The magic is too strong to allow harm to come to it.”

“Evidence to the contrary,” Brady says.

A hand presses down on my shoulder. “You two,” Cedrick says, his other hand on Brady’s shoulder, “get to safety.”

Before I can respond, he pushes between us and rushes toward the nearest plume of smoke.

“Didn’t he just get done telling us no one’s ever successfully attacked a sanctuary?” Brady asks. “What the hell kind of force is out there?”

“I’m less concerned about who and more concerned about why.”

Another explosion goes off so close it shakes the ground.

Brady places a hand on my shoulder for an instant. “There have got to be hundreds of people here with some pretty dark stuff in their past. Don’t start thinking this is all about you,” he says, but he doesn’t sound convinced.

“If those vampires and weres from earlier realized I came back here, why wouldn’t they come after me?” I ask. “Especially if they know Jack’s at the summit.”

“Do you really think a handful of weres and leeches have enough power to break through the enchantments surrounding this place?”

I shake my head. “Not unless they have help.”

“From who? Witches? Aren’t they all pacifists? Why would they blow up a sanctuary to get to you?”

I wish I could answer him. The truth is, witches belonging to the council once headed by Jack’s cousin Cassandra turned on her for supporting me before they tried to take me into custody. In the view of Kiara, the witch who claimed Cassandra’s leadership position, my existence poses a threat to both the supernatural community and humanity. And it isn’t just witches who have used magic against me. Xander and his gang used concealment spells to break into the enclave once. At the time, we assumed he’d compelled a weaker-minded witch to make charms for him, but what if that wasn’t the case?

“If you think they’re here for you, sticking around here isn’t a good idea,” Brady says.

I nod. Even if this attack has nothing to do with me, the sanctuary has been compromised. I’m not safe here anymore. “Agreed.”

I take a few steps into the street, not sure where to go. Dozens of people run screaming from the direction of the smoking buildings, but others run toward it.

Brady hooks my arm with his hand. “Shift.”

“What?”

His mouth twitches. “If they are here for you, they know what you look like. Word about the bounty came with your picture attached. But there wasn’t anything about how you look as a wolf.”

I stare at him for a moment, unsure how to respond. He hasn’t mentioned this until now—even though it could have been useful earlier. “Thank you.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he mutters before dropping to all fours and shifting.

I shift, too, and follow Brady’s light brown wolf up the street toward the commotion. We don’t belong to the same pack, so we can’t communicate in this form. I can only assume he’s heading in this direction because this is the one way we know we can get out.

I keep a lookout as we go. Several pairs and even groups are engaged in hand-to-hand combat. When I see Evelyn squaring off against two red-eyed vampires, my wolf’s first instinct is to assist her—but I fight it. I don’t want harm to come to her, but I know the smart thing now is to get away.

Brady and I aren’t the only wolves on the street. Others streak in from between two buildings about a quarter of a mile up the road. Half of them leap at the residents of the sanctuary who have come to fight off the intruders, while others press inward, heads swiveling left and right as they search for something.

Dread sinks in my stomach.

Brady barks for my attention and points his snout toward the tower of smoke up the road. I think I understand: if people are getting in that way, it's possible we can get out.

We pick up speed as we draw nearer. Once we're out, I don't know where we'll go. As much as I'd like to go back to the enclave—to see Lillie and Maggie, to talk with Cassandra—I know going there will only make my friends unsafe. Seeking refuge with Brady's pack is also off the table—seeing as some members, including Brady, have already displayed their desire to capture me and turn me over.

Brady turns the corner around a building and growls. I poke my head around to see what elicited the response. It's the guy who fought Luke last night. He stands several yards behind the outermost building, holding a pencil-thin metallic rod above his head. It stretches out for three or four feet on either side of him and all the air between it at the ground shimmers as if a thin waterfall flows from it. A steady stream of vampires and werewolves pass through the area on either side of him—all within the confines of the twinkling area.

He's letting them in.

Before I can rein in the impulse, I charge forward. I jump and snap my jaw shut around his left arm. He yells out in pain as I yank him away from the barrier. He swings the metal rod and it crashes against my spine, but I don't release him.

Brown fur streaks into view. Brady clamps his teeth around the guy's neck and rips at his flesh.

“Ava!”

The sound of my name draws my attention, but it's the aroma that drifts past my nose that makes me release the guy's

arm and turn. Sage.

Mel.

On my first day as a werewolf, I took Mel's spot in the pack, and she never forgave me for it. She went so far as to reach out to the witches' council and reveal my status as Jack's half. After losing a dominance fight for alpha status, she was cast out, taking a dozen weres with her.

A cruel smile curves her lips. "You thought no one would recognize you in that form, didn't you?"

Aside from Mel, Brady, and the guy from last night, the only other people in view are those on the other side of the barrier. But that crowd thins steadily as people run off to find another point of ingress.

I step toward her, shifting back to human form. "It shouldn't surprise me you're here," I growl, my wolf closer to the surface than usual. "I should've known you could be bought with the promise of a bounty."

She snorts. "You *would* think that. But I'm not here for the money. I'm just here for you."

She charges. I leap sideways, but I'm not fast enough to get out of her way entirely. She knocks into my shoulder, sending me careening backward.

Before I regain my balance, Mel knocks into me again, ramming her shoulder into my chest. I grab her around the waist and pull her down with me. She rolls when we hit the ground and springs up on her feet. She aims a kick at my face, but I'm too fast. I leap to the side and ram into her before her leg hits the ground again. She stumbles backward but keeps her footing.

I want to hurt her. More than that—I want to kill her. If it weren't for her selfishness, things might not be as bad as they are now. If she hadn't told Kiara I'm Jack's half, the witches might not have feared me as much as they did. If she wasn't so mad about me displacing her in the pack, she wouldn't have fought Jack—she wouldn't have left and taken other members with her. Marisol would have remained in the enclave and Xander never would have gotten his hands on her. He never would have made me turn her into a hybrid—and she would still be alive.

All the anger and rage that has simmered within me since Marisol died bubbles to the surface. A scream rips itself from my throat and I charge her. She tries to evade me, but I'm too fast. The force of the impact picks her up off the ground and we don't stop until her back slams into the wall of the building across the street.

“You think I'm the enemy,” she chokes, “but I'm not.”

“I'm not the enemy either, but that's how you've treated me since day one. This whole time, I've done nothing wrong—but you've done everything wrong.”

She pushes away from the building just far enough to allow her to evade my grip. I grab for her again, but she takes off at a run up the street.

I dart after her. I can't let her get away with all she's done.

She's fast, but I'm faster, and I overtake her before she gets more than a few buildings away. I wrap my arms around her and yank her to a stop. One of my arms wraps around her neck in a chokehold. She flails, but with one arm pinned, there's not much she can do.

The building in front of us explodes in a shower of fire and brick. The force of the blast knocks me off my feet and I slam headfirst into a cinderblock wall.

My ears ring. I open and close my eyes over and over again, but nothing makes sense. It seems the world is upside down. I try to push myself to my feet, but my arms are like jelly. I can't stay here, but I also can't get away.

Hands jostle me. I try to strike at them, but my arms won't cooperate. In the next moment I'm lifted up off the ground, and then I'm moving. My body is at a weird angle, and there's something hard beneath me. I bump along, the sky above me looking oddly like the ground.

I'm being carried. It's the only explanation. Someone who came for the bounty realized who I am and flung me over his shoulder.

We're moving again, and everything is a blur. I try to kick and thrash, but my movements don't disturb my captor. I try screaming, but my voice is hoarse.

This is it then. After everything, whoever wants me will have me soon.

The blurring scenery slowly comes into focus. Dirt. Fallen branches. Roots. Tree trunks. I'm in the forest. If I can get away, it's possible I can hide. Even disoriented as I am from the blast, I should be able to outrun just about any werewolf or vampire who would give chase.

I kick out with my legs, pleased when they obey me. I pound my fists on my captor's thighs.

In a flash, he flings me over his shoulder and onto the ground. My back slams down hard, knocking out my breath.

“Would you calm down?” Brady glares down at me. “Carrying on like that isn’t helping. I’m trying to figure out where we can go that’s safe.”

I stare at him, baffled. “You?”

“Yeah, me.”

My mind spins. “But you... You don’t like me. You think I’m unnatural.”

He nods. “I still do. But I respect the convocation, and I haven’t heard their ruling yet.” He crouches down beside me, his expression darkening. “Besides, you saw what happened. No one should’ve been able to break into the sanctuary, but they did. Weres and vampires were working together. And that guy was using something magic to let people in. I don’t know who wants you, but I don’t think they’re after you just to take you out of play. I’m betting they have something far worse planned, and I don’t want to find out what it is.”

I stare him for a moment, unsure how to respond. “Thank you.”

He shakes his head. “Don’t. If you think this is a sign of my friendship, it’s not. This has everything to do with self-preservation. Now, are you good to walk? Or do you need me to carry you some more?”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE FOREST IS quiet as we lope through it, our paws making no sound as they pad over the ground. Even the small woodland creatures seem to be creeping along, and the birds only call out in infrequent bursts.

The sun is sinking lower toward the horizon. Brady and I need to find somewhere to hunker down for the night. Traveling through unfamiliar woods in the dark is a recipe for disaster.

As we move along, I continually stretch out with my mind in a vain attempt to contact Jack. I don't know if it's the distance that keeps me from connecting or whether the blow to my head has done something to mess up that ability. I stop and shift back to human. After a moment, Brady does the same.

"I thought we agreed wolf form was better for now?" He crosses his arms over his chest.

"Have you been able to make contact with anyone from your pack?"

His arms drop to his sides. "No."

"Any idea why? Are we too far away, or—"

Brady shakes his head. "Distance shouldn't really come into play. When we were still in the sanctuary, magic was

blocking it. But Maya said after the third day, not even an alpha could contact a pack member through the sanctuary barrier. Maybe it doesn't have anything to do with the barrier itself. Maybe the witches did something to disconnect us from our pack."

"Why would they do that?"

He shrugs. "It kinda makes sense, doesn't it? If you're choosing to live in the sanctuary, you're not part of your pack anymore. Why keep that link open?"

Scenarios spin through my head, each as futile as the last. "So there's no way for us to contact our packs?" If anyone at the enclave has a cell phone number, I don't know it. And it isn't as if I can just go back there. "When I was kidnapped, Jack found me. I always assumed it had something to do with his alpha bond. How is he going to find me now?"

"Maybe that's a question best asked tomorrow. You got your bell rung pretty good. Maybe things will make more sense in the morning."

I want to argue, but it's useless. I don't have a solution for the problem, and standing here won't make one materialize.

I'm about to shift back when I hear something. It isn't a natural sound of the forest, and whatever it is, it's far off. But it makes my hair stand on end.

I take a few steps in the direction the sound is coming from. It's almost too weak to make out. I have no doubt my human ears wouldn't have detected it at all.

"Where you going?" Brady asks. "I smell water this way."

I hold my hand out to shush him as I take a few more steps forward. After several seconds of silence, the noise sounds again. This time, it's unmistakable.

Screaming.

“We have to go check it out,” I say, starting toward the noise.

Brady is at my side in a second. He grabs my shoulder and spins me back. “Are you insane? Don’t you remember the last time we went to go check out something that seemed shady? It was a trap. We’re still not very far from the sanctuary. What if someone realized you’d gotten away and they’re setting another trap for you?”

I bite my lower lip. He has a point. I’ve already escaped capture—or worse—multiple times today. Do I really want to test my luck?

Another scream. This one sends a chill down my spine. I recognize that voice. I don’t know how, but I do. Without thinking, I start toward the sound again, this time at a run.

Brady crashes through the brush behind me. He grabs at my arm, but I shake him off. “Are you insane?”

“It’s Dagny.”

“The oracle? Are you kidding me? Why do you care?”

I ignore his question. I understand that she makes him uneasy. After what she said to Jack, her abilities creep me out a little too. But she lived in the sanctuary in an attempt to keep her power from causing people trouble. If Brady’s attitude toward her is any indication, there are those in the supernatural community who think oracles cause nothing but pain. And if someone like that lays hands on her, there’s no telling what they’ll do.

I shift as I run, all the while keeping my ears tuned to the sound of Dagny’s screams. As I grew closer, I also detect raucous laughter. Some of the voices are low and gravelly,

while others are high and shrill. I estimate no less than six people with her.

The forest thins ahead. Through the branches, tongues of firelight flicker.

“Not much of an oracle, are you?” taunts a male voice. “Really, how could you not see this coming?”

Dagny screams, high and sharp, and it takes everything in me not to leap through to the other side at that moment. I still don’t know how many people are with her. I don’t know where she is or what they’re doing to her. I need to get closer.

“I heard oracles have blind spots where they’re concerned,” says a nasal female voice. “Is that true?”

Someone chuckles. “I think it’s perfect,” says a man. “You spend your life ruining people, telling them horrible things but not telling them how to prevent them. This here is justice.”

I edge as close to the clearing as I dare. Four men and three women sit on the ground surrounding a large bonfire. I catch their scent on the air. Werewolves. Dagny is bound to a fallen tree trunk about a foot from the flames.

One of the men stands and picks up a long branch as thick as my forearm. He jabs it into the flames while staring at Dagny. “How many prophecies do you think you’ve spoken? Ballpark figure?”

Dagny keeps her eyes on the ground in front of her. Angry red blisters bloom on her exposed arms and legs. These bastards are torturing her. They’re making her pay for something that isn’t her fault.

A twig crunches behind me. Brady’s brown wolf stands a few feet away. He nods his head, and I know he’s with me. I would give anything to be able to communicate with him right

now, but shifting and discussing the plan is out of the question. Instead, I do my best to indicate that I'll take the people on the left. He nods again, and I hope he understood.

The man is just removing the flaming branch from the fire when Brady and I break through the trees. The closest woman's eyes flash gold as I bear down on her, but she doesn't shift fast enough. I clamp my jaws around her throat and rip until her head severs from her body. Hands grab at me, but I'm too fast. I round on a short, stocky man and lunge for his throat.

When his head separates from his body, I look up, ready to take on the next person. But besides the man Brady is locked in battle with, no one remains in the clearing. Crashes and screams fading in the distance tell me some of Dagny's torturers have chosen flight to fight.

I circle around the fire to Dagny. When she looks at me, her eyes are filled with wonder, but not fear. I bite through the ropes binding her and she uses her hands to unwind them.

A choking gurgle emerges from the mouth of the man who held the flaming branch, but then he goes silent. Brady takes a step back before shifting into human form.

“Please don't make me regret this, oracle.”

With effort, Dagny stands, but she sways on her feet. “I wish I could make that promise.”

I shift back to human just in time to catch Dagny as she faints. I scoop her into my arms and nod to Brady. “Lead the way. Looks like wherever we hunker down for the night, we'll need room for three.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

WE SET up camp along the riverbank. By the time we reach it, it's almost dark and a familiar hunger gnaws at my stomach.

I could kick myself for only drinking a couple of mouthfuls of blood this morning. At the time, I figured the worst thing I'd have to endure today was sitting through the summit. But after all of the running and fighting, my body has used up its supplies and I'm weakening by the minute.

Brady crouches by the river, staring across it. Dagny lies on the grass a few yards behind him. She still hasn't regained consciousness.

"I, um, think I should go scout around. Check the perimeter. You know." I tried to keep my voice neutral, but I'm not sure I'm hitting the mark.

Brady doesn't turn. "If we sleep here, the river can give us some protection. It's deep and quick enough that someone would be foolish to attack from that way. On the other hand, a water source is attractive to anyone who could be passing by. Who knows where people from the sanctuary ended up—let alone the attackers."

I nod, the sensation in the pit of my stomach growing by the second. "I think staying here is probably our best bet. Someone can stay awake and keep watch. I'm just going to..."

I'm going to check around in the immediate area to make sure there's nothing that looks suspicious." I spin on my heel and walk back toward the forest.

"I know what you're doing," Brady says before I've taken more than a few steps. "I get it. I haven't hidden how I feel about your vampire side, but as long as we're together, you can't lie to me. I can't keep company with someone I don't trust, and I can't trust someone who won't trust me."

I swivel around slowly. "Okay. I'm going to go for a run. Hopefully there's a deer or something nearby. I'll try not to be gone long."

He nods and turns back to the river.

As I enter the woods, I try not to let Brady's words distract me. I should be grateful that he seems to be beginning to accept me, but I know that's not the truth of the matter. He's smart. He knows that, for the moment at least, he stands a better chance with me than alone. I would love to take his words about trust at face value, but how can I expect it from someone I've treated so poorly? I don't deserve his trust or his friendship. I can only hope he can return to his life unscathed.

As twilight falls, deer awake from their nests and begin searching for sustenance. It's one of the easiest times to hunt if I'm unfamiliar with an area because the animals are on the move. It's only a few minutes before I cross paths with a majestic buck. I'm downwind of him, and I'm almost upon him when he senses my approach. I leap on his back, and he begins to calm almost as soon as my fangs pierce his flesh.

As the warm liquid trickles into my mouth and down my throat, my nose wrinkles. Strange how something that used to taste moderately pleasant is now borderline revolting. It's almost as if I've lost my taste for it. But that doesn't matter.

Not only do I need this now, but I refuse to consider an alternative. Even if there were people around, I wouldn't allow myself the indulgence.

At least it's easy to tell myself that here, in the middle of the woods.

Dagny is sitting up when I return. Brady stands over her, his expression a mix of irritation and disgust. I can't help feeling little sorry for him. Of all the people he could be stuck with, he's here with the two who probably repel him most in the world. He doesn't like what I am, and he doesn't like what Dagny can do.

"I don't need to go far. I can smell it from here," Dagny says.

"It's not safe," Brady says. "I'm not going to have you tromping through the forest, alerting everyone to where we are."

"Everyone?" Dagny asks. "We're in the middle of the forest. I'm one person, and I just want to move a few yards into the trees."

"What's going on?" I ask.

Brady points at Dagny. "She wants to go find some plant."

"It's to treat my burns," she says. "The sooner, the better. Before infection sets in."

I roll my eyes. "I'll go with her. Make sure she's quiet. We'll be back in five minutes."

Before Brady can protest, I offer a hand to Dagny and help her to her feet. Her progress is slow, but her movements are sure.

“Thanks for that,” she says once we’ve moved a few yards away.

“No problem. He’s being ridiculous, anyway. Why is he getting so worked up? You said the plant should be right around here, right?” I scan the vegetation for some clue as to what she’s looking for. Unfortunately, no magical beam of light or glowing neon sign presents itself.

“It’s right here,” she murmurs, dropping to one knee. She begins picking off sprigs of a bushy plant with purple flowers at the tops.

I inhale and am surprised when I can identify the scent. “Lavender?”

She nods as she picks some more stems. “It’s obvious why Brady’s acting this way, though, isn’t it?”

I watch her hands as they collect the lavender, waiting for inspiration to strike. “No, actually. I have no idea.”

She smiles as she stands. “Werewolves have a strong need to belong to a group. During the initiation, those connections were broken. Some weres can handle being alone better—and longer—than others. My guess is you fall into that category. But I’ll bet Brady’s the kind of wolf who can’t handle the isolation. I don’t know what his relationship was with his old pack, or if he even wants to go back to them. Maybe that’s his goal—but in the meantime, he’s doing the only thing he can to fill that emptiness: He’s assembling a new pack.”

“He’s—what?” I try to wrap my mind around her words. “But he doesn’t like us.”

She chuckles. “Not exactly a prerequisite.”

I consider the way Brady has been behaving since the first explosion rocked the sanctuary. He got me out. He followed

my lead when I wanted to save Dagny. He was tolerant of my need for blood. “Wait—does that make him the alpha? Or—”

Dagny shakes her head. “I don’t think you need to worry about hierarchy here. Remember, I’m a witch, and that doesn’t matter to me.” She sighs. “He’s a good man. Honorable. But there’s a deep sorrow in him.”

I raise my eyebrow as we start back toward the river. “Oracles can pick up on that kind of thing?”

“No. I’m just perceptive. Tends to happen when you spend your life watching the world but not participating in it.”

When we get back, Brady is clearing loose twigs and rocks from an area just outside the forest. The ground is dry and covered with soft grass. It’ll make a good bed for us tonight.

Dagny sits on a low, smooth rock and begins sorting her lavender. I continue to the river’s edge and crouch beside it. Although my need for blood has been sated, I’m still hungry. The river is swift, but there are still fish in it. I don’t know the first thing about how to make a fishing pole from items found in the woods, but maybe catching some fish by hand would be possible. After all, bears do it. With my speed, the idea doesn’t seem outside the realm of possibility.

I slip off my shoes and roll up my pant legs before wading into the water. I look for a rhyme or rhythm to when the fish pass, but there doesn’t seem to be any.

I spot silvery scales a yard upstream and try to grab the animal as it passes, but I don’t even graze it. I try a few more times but am rewarded only with a soaking wet outfit.

“Ready to give up?” Brady watches from the shore, his lips curled in an amused smile.

“Have you got any better ideas?”

He kicks off his shoes. “Yes—letting me do it.” He rolls up his pants and splashes into the water beside me. “I’m assuming you’ve never done this before.”

“Didn’t do a lot of fish-grabbing as a human.”

He chuckles. “No, I don’t imagine you did.”

As he proceeds to describe and demonstrate the proper technique, my mind wanders back to what Dagny said earlier. Maybe she’s right. Our trio may not be a pack in the usual sense, but maybe something within Brady has started looking at us that way. Cut off from the people we care about, we’re doing our best to find something to hold on to.

Brady catches three fish, making each one look easier than the last. When he urges me to try again, I succeed only in grabbing water for several tries. If it were just me, I would have given up, but Brady coaches me gently, offering a critique after each attempt. When I finally catch a fish, he clasps my shoulder as I throw it up onto the bank.

“Good job,” he says, beaming. “Now if there are fish in a river, you’ll never go hungry.”

I can’t help returning his smile as we wade back to shore. I watch the freshest fish as it flops on the shore. “Are we going to eat them raw?”

“I can help with that.” Dagny stands and turns to face the rock she was sitting on. She kneels down and cups her hands over its surface before murmuring something under her breath. When she opens her hands, a ball of red-orange flame drops to the rock and covers the whole surface. The oddly undulating fire dances silently in the waning sunlight. She offers a small smile. “I figured it’d be better than a regular fire. No smoke.”

I grin. “That’s awesome.”

Brady stares at the flames for a few moments before clapping his hands together. “Okay. Let’s make a spit and get these fish cooked.”

We work on our meal and eat as darkness falls on the forest. We don’t talk much, but the silence is companionable rather than tense.

Dagny lets out a deep yawn as she finishes her meal.

“You should get some rest,” Brady says. “I’m not sure how many miles we’ll have to cover tomorrow.”

“Do you have any idea where we’re going?” Dagny’s tone isn’t accusatory, only inquisitive.

He shakes his head. “I’m not sure where it’s safe. I’d like to say my pack would take us in, but...”

I nod. “They’ll turn me over.”

“It all depends on what the summit finds,” Brady says.

My lips quirk. “I think if we’ve learned anything today, it’s that whoever’s after me isn’t going to give up easily. Even if the summit finds in my favor, that doesn’t mean every werewolf will suddenly be on my side. And that still leaves the vampires and witches to deal with.”

“We’ll face it tomorrow,” Dagny says, her voice soothing. She kneels in front of her fire and waves a hand through it. I almost scream out, but it disappears without harming her.

The night is infinitely darker without the flames. It takes my eyes a moment to adjust.

“We should get going first thing in the morning,” Brady says.

I nod. “I’ll take first watch.”

He opens his mouth like he intends to argue, but he seems to think better of it. “Okay. Just don’t fall asleep.”

Brady and Dagny stretch out on the area Brady cleared earlier. I move a few yards away to a clump of bushes and settle down beside them.

Every rustle of leaves, every crack of a branch, every hoot of an owl sends a jolt like electricity down my spine. As if I could fall asleep. I filter each sound through my mind, making sure there’s no way it could be the sound of a person—or even a wolf. While the three of us sat around the magic fire, the night seemed almost peaceful. But now, in the blackness, everything seems filled with malice.

I wish Jack were here. What if something bad happened at the summit? If the convocation decided the bounty was valid, might there have been people who decided to take Jack into custody because he’s sided with me? Or what if there was an attack like the one at the sanctuary? If they weren’t sure where I would be, it would make sense to hit both targets.

I shake my head, trying to displace the images from my mind. There’s no use imagining scenarios when no amount of worrying will bring me the answers I want.

I switch between surveying our surroundings and staring into the sky. I don’t know anything about constellations or planets, but the view here makes me wish I did.

When this is over, I’m going to learn everything I can about them.

Making a plan for something so mundane helps calm me. Instead of picturing scenarios of attack and destruction, I start imagining stargazing with Jack. I wonder if anyone in the enclave has a telescope. If not, maybe I could get one. And

Jack and I can spend our nights searching the sky for falling stars.

A branch cracks and I snap to face it. I peer through the darkness, but I can't see anything.

It's possible a decaying limb succumbed to gravity. Or that a deer stepped on one with its sharp hoof. But the prickling sensation down my neck tells me that's not the case.

Someone's coming.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

I SNIFF THE AIR. Vampire. And he's alone. Or maybe his companions are out of range.

My muscles tense. Should I wake Brady and Dagny and tell them to run? No—that would bring too much attention to them.

I rise silently to the balls of my feet, taking care to keep crouched behind the bush. I'll wait until he gets closer before taking him out.

Adrenaline pumps through my system, and my vision sharpens. I struggle to keep my breathing even and silent as the footsteps draw closer.

Time seems to slow. The intruder is ten yards away. Five yards. The person is still in the woods and hope bubbles inside me. Maybe they'll walk past and never know we were here.

The footsteps stop, and I freeze. A moment later, twigs snap and brush rustles as the interloper takes off at speed.

Right at me.

My leg muscles tighten and I lock my gaze on the edge of the trees. As soon as the branches shiver, I rise from my hiding spot and sprint toward the forest, ready to defend my makeshift pack with everything in me.

I leap at the vampire, aiming to knock him down. As I make contact, his arms go around me—but it’s not a defensive move.

His back slams into the mossy ground and I topple over with him. I straddle his chest and pin his arms with my knees.

“Ava.”

My hands freeze halfway to his throat. “Luke?”

In the near-complete darkness, I catch a flash of his teeth when he smiles. “Mind letting me up?”

I spring to my feet and hold out my hand. He takes it and pulls himself to standing. “What are you doing here?”

“You mean besides looking for you?”

I lead the way back to the river bank. “How did you find us?” My heart rate kicks up a notch. Did we unknowingly leave some trail? Is it only a matter of time before others come?

Brady and Dagny are sitting when we emerge from the trees. “What’s going on?” Brady asks.

I hitch my thumb over my shoulder. “It’s just Luke. Go back to sleep.”

Dagny lies down, but Brady remains propped up on his elbow as Luke and I settle on two of the seat-sized rocks along the riverbank.

“It took a while to deal with the picnic,” Luke says, keeping his voice low. “I had to make sure I tracked down everyone to compel away their true memories.”

I nod. “How did you deal with the bodies?”

“No one died,” he says, and I breathe a sigh of relief. “Plenty were drained nearly to the brink, but I think leaving them alive must’ve been one of the werewolves’ conditions. No matter the end game, weres tend to be pretty firm on that point.” He leans forward, resting his elbows on his thighs. “After I finished up, I headed back to the sanctuary. By the time I got there...”

I wince at my own memories. “How bad was it?”

“Not completely destroyed, but a bunch of spots all over the perimeter were in ruins. People were fleeing—it was chaos. I was about to run in to look for you when I realized I knew you weren’t there.”

The words jar me. “What do you mean?”

He shrugs, the corner of his mouth twitching. “I don’t know how to explain it. I assume it’s kind of like what happened to you when you sensed Marisol was in trouble. It was subtle, but it was there—and it pulled me to you.”

I open my mouth, but no words come out.

“It happened when you were with Xander, too. Jack’s not the only one with a connection to you.”

My gaze drops to the ground between us. He’s right, of course. Although vampires aren’t naturally as social as weres, a sire can choose to have a connection with vampires he’s made. And Luke chose that with me.

He shifts on his rock, straightening his back. “Why don’t you get some sleep? I’ll keep watch for a while.”

I shake my head. “You just got here—you’ve been traveling all day.”

He pats his stomach. "I'll be good for a while. I'm topped off on Bambi blood." He pulls a face. "I don't know how you do it."

Stretching out and sleeping is more than a little appealing. As the adrenaline ebbs from my body, it's replaced by a deep weariness. I stand and point at him. "Okay, but you have Brady take over as soon as you get even a little sleepy."

Luke salutes, and I don't bother suppressing a smile as I turn and stride toward the bed under the stars.

I WAKE TO BIRDS CHIRPING. I roll to my side and reach for Jack, but my fingers skim something cold and damp.

I sit up straight. I'm not back at the enclave, and Jack isn't here.

"She's up," Dagny calls from beside one of her magical fires. The spit from last night is once again heavy with fish.

Brady is farther down the river, crouched at its banks. His shirt lays crumpled behind him, and his head and torso glisten in the early morning light. He scoops one last handful of water over his head before shaking off and standing. He tucks the shirt into his back pocket and strides toward Dagny.

I join them around the fire. "Where's Luke?"

"Off getting his own breakfast," Dagny says.

Brady doesn't quite meet my eye. "Do you need...?"

I shake my head. I did my best to ration myself on the sanctuary blood after Luke and I found where most of the vampires hung out. I know how I react to deer blood, and I

allowed myself to take as much as I could without harming the animal. But Brady doesn't want the specifics.

“Good,” he murmurs, his eyes on the spit.

By the time Luke returns, the three of us are eating our fish. Luke joins us, sitting between Dagny and me and watching us eat.

“So, have we decided yet?” He picks up a slim twig about a foot long and pokes the end into the red-orange flames.

“What?” I ask.

He pulls the stick out and examines it, frowning when there is no sign of scorching. “Where we go from here?”

“I need to find Jack,” I say. “We need to know what the summit decided.”

Brady shakes his head. “I get why that's top on your priority list, but that's not what's important right now. It doesn't matter what the convocation decided—not if vampires and witches are after you too. They're not bound by pack law. We need to figure out who's hunting you.”

I'm struck by his assumption that the four of us will be continuing as a unit. Maybe Dagny was right about him adopting us as a pack.

“I think a good starting place would be to figure out who coordinated the attack on the sanctuary,” he says. “Were they from the same group of weres and vampires that ambushed us on the way to the summit? Did they find a bunch of witches they could compel to make spells for them?”

“Not a chance,” Dagny says. “The enchantments around the sanctuary are too strong for just any witch to break.

Whoever managed to figure out the spells to get through the defenses would need to be very powerful.”

“As powerful as the council?” I ask.

She nods. “Or the council itself. If any witches would be capable, it would be them. But the council oversees the sanctuaries. They were created by witches to protect people. I don’t know what could ever make the council try to destroy one of those cities.”

“I’ve met the council before,” I say. “They found out about me, and they wanted to meet me. They decided I was dangerous. They said if I made more hybrids, it could lead to unimaginable chaos.”

“They’re not exactly wrong,” Brady says. Before I can defend myself, he’s talking again. “Look—this is hard to admit, but I don’t think you’re a threat. I don’t see you wanting to go out and build your own hybrid army or anything. But what if somebody else uses you to make their own army?”

“What’s the solution then? Kill me?”

“We find out who wants to use you,” Dagny says, her tone patient.

Luke crosses his arms over his chest. “I thought we’d already done that. But we killed the guy who was after her. I don’t know who’s behind everything now.”

“I don’t think we knew who was behind it then either,” I say. “Think about it. We knew Xander had access to magic. We assumed he compelled someone, but what if that’s not the case? What if he was working with a group of witches?”

Dagny’s eyes go wide. “You mean the council?”

“Is it so far-fetched?” Brady asks. “Didn’t you just say they’re pretty much the only ones with the kind of power to take on the sanctuary?”

“Yes, but why would they want to make more hybrids?”

I spring to my feet. “I don’t know. But it looks like we’ve figured out our next move. We’ve got to find the witches’ council.”

Brady’s fingers close around my wrist and he tugs me down. “Are you suicidal? If they are the ones behind everything, you’ll be playing right into their hands.”

I wrench my arm away. “So what am I supposed to do? Spend the rest of my life hiding?”

“We can go to the convocation,” he says. “If they find out the council is trying to make more hybrids, they’ll have to stop them. Having you running around is one thing. Having dozens—hundreds—of hybrids is something else.”

“He’s right,” Luke says. “As much as I like a good fight, the four of us aren’t going to stand a chance against witches strong enough to take down a sanctuary.”

I sit down again and cross my arms over my chest. “Okay. The convocation it is.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

ACCORDING TO BRADY, the convocation should remain at the location of the summit for most of today.

“It’s customary,” he says as Dagny diffuses the magic flames. “They stay to hear any unsettled pack disputes—ones that might be causing trouble but aren’t big enough to hold a summit for themselves. Or sometimes weres will suggest changes to laws or regulations.”

Luke stands and throws his stick into the river. “And what if there’s, say, an attack on a sanctuary? Are they still going to stick around after something like that?”

Brady’s lips press into a tight line. “I’m assuming they’ll leave at least a couple of members behind.”

I sigh. “You mean you’re hoping.” He opens his mouth, but I hold up my hand to cut him off. “I get it. It’s still our best plan. And if they’re only going to be there until this evening, we’d better get going.”

Dagny springs to her feet. “We should stop off for some provisions first.”

Brady’s eyebrows draw together. “You mean like food? If we run, it won’t take us long to get to the summit. We can get more to eat there.”

She shakes her head. "I'm not thinking about my stomach, I'm thinking about Ava. What happens if we come across a group searching for her?"

Luke tilts his head. "Can't you do some kind of spell to disguise her?"

Her gaze drops. "Glamors are beyond me. I know basic spells, but after my first prophecy, my parents halted my magical training." She lifts her head, meeting each of our eyes briefly. "We'll need charms. Lots of witches sell them."

Brady nods. "There used to be an outpost near here. My pack worked with them about five years ago. With any luck, they'll still be there."

Having a plan should comfort me, but I can't shake the loneliness brewing in the pit of my stomach. I should be grateful that Brady, Dagny, and Luke are trying to help me, to keep me safe, but it's hard to dredge up the emotion when the nagging worry in the back of my mind is growing by the minute. I wish I knew where Jack was, but like Brady pointed out, his location isn't a top priority.

"It would be nice to know what the summit decided," Luke says as Brady leads the way into the woods. "If they put the kibosh on the bounty, that would make at least one supernatural community we wouldn't have to worry about."

"I wish there was a way to contact my pack," I say. "They'd know."

Dagny stops short and I bump into her. She turns, a grin spread across her face. "I can do that."

I take a step back, put off by her sudden optimism. "How would you be able to get through to them when I can't?"

She darts around me and bounds back to the riverbank. She whistles a rapid staccato and lifts her arm like a ballerina.

Luke leans toward me. “Is she having one of her oracle moments?”

I shrug, my eyes glued to her. Dagny continues to whistle until a dark shape swoops from the sky and alights on her outstretched hand. The crow looks enormous against her dainty frame.

She smiles as she returns to us. “We can send your pack a message.”

Brady pats his pockets. “Oh darn. I left my paper and twine in my other pants.”

Dagny’s smile doesn’t slip. “We don’t need to write it down.”

AFTER MULTIPLE ASSURANCES from Dagny that the crow will find us no matter where we are, we leave the riverbank. As we run through the woods, my heart is lighter than it’s been in days. Even though I’m not speaking with them directly, knowing that I’m not completely out of touch with my pack soothes me. Because no matter what happened in the sanctuary, I still consider the weres in the enclave to be my family.

We’ve been running for nearly an hour when Luke slows. By the time Brady and I realize he’s stopped running and return to his side, he’s swung Dagny onto her feet.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

Luke shrugs and hitches a thumb at Dagny. “She wanted to stop.”

Brady’s brow furrows. “We’re only about a mile away. Can’t this wait?”

An expression I can’t read flickers across her face. “I thought we should take a minute to discuss what the plan is.”

I exchange glances with Brady. “I thought we needed a spell to disguise me.”

She nods. “A glamor charm, yes. But depending on how strong it is, we may need more than one. A strong witch can make one that lasts maybe a day, but a spell cast by a weaker witch might only hold for a few hours.”

“Okay, so we should get a few.” I start walking toward the outpost.

Dagny catches my arm and tugs me to a stop. “If the council is behind the bounty, we should assume we might run into some witches who want to take you in.”

“But if she’s disguised, they won’t know it’s her,” Brady says.

Luke shakes his head. “Witches have this way of knowing when magic is being used. If we run into one, she might realize Ava’s got a spell on her.”

“Exactly,” Dagny says, unable to conceal a note of surprise. “And if we go up against witches, we’ll want some deflector spells, some diffusion spells—maybe some shield charms.”

“Okay, so we’ll get all those things,” Brady says.

“With what money?” Luke imitates Brady’s earlier pantomime of checking his pockets. “Seems I left my wallet in

my other pants.”

“I was under the impression vampires didn’t need money to get things,” Brady says.

Luke’s eyebrows hitch upward. “You’re saying you want me to compel them?”

Brady holds his hands up. “I don’t want you to, but it might be our only option.”

“It may not come to that,” Dagny says.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Luke asks.

Dagny squints through the trees ahead. “How long do you think it’d take to walk the rest of the way? Fifteen, twenty minutes?” She turns to Luke and smiles. “Not that I don’t appreciate you carrying me, but I need a break.”

I don’t like the idea of wasting time walking, but I do think Dagny could use a respite from zipping through the woods—especially since once we have the supplies, I don’t plan on stopping until we reach the convocation.

We all nod our agreement, and Dagny starts toward the outpost. Now that we’re not zooming along, I can’t help looking overhead, waiting for the crow’s return. I have no idea how fast crows fly, but whatever their speed, it’s not fast enough. I’ve lost my sense of where the enclave is in space, but my guess is we’re well over a hundred miles away at this point.

As we make our way the remaining distance, the only sounds are the calls of birds, the skittering of small animals over the forest floor, and the soft scuffle of our feet as they move purposefully forward.

About ten minutes pass before Brady slows, pointing directly ahead of us. “It’s about a quarter-mile ahead.”

I’m not sure how he can tell, because all I see is more trees. “Okay. Let’s go.”

Brady sucks his teeth. “Yeah, I don’t think that’s the best idea.”

I shake my head, not sure I heard him right. “I thought you agreed we need these things. Now that we’re this close you’re changing your mind?”

Luke places a hand on my shoulder. “I don’t think that’s what he’s saying.”

“But he just... Oh.” My cheeks heat. Of course we shouldn’t all go to the outpost. There’s no way of knowing who else might be there or whether these witches would recognize me on sight. “It’s fine. I’ll stay here.”

“You should stay here, too,” Brady says, looking at Dagny.

She shakes her head and takes a step forward. “What happens if Luke can’t compel the witches in there?”

He shifts. “I dunno. Plan B?”

“Which is?” She waits for him to answer. “Witches occasionally need blood for spells. Sometimes any kind will do, but others require more potent varieties. Do you have any idea how much a vial of oracle blood is worth?”

“I’m almost afraid to ask,” he says.

The corner of her mouth quirks upward. “If they’re not interested, Luke can be Plan B.”

Brady glances at me and shrugs as if to say, “It’s worth a shot,” before turning and leading the way through the

remaining forest.

I watch their backs until they disappear through the trees.

Luke doesn't speak until the sounds of their footsteps are little more than whispers against the forest floor. "What's wrong?"

His question puts me on the defensive. "Nothing. What do you mean?"

He points at the spot between my eyebrows. "You've got your worried crinkle."

I bat his hand away before rubbing the place he indicated. "I don't have a crinkle."

He attempts a teasing grin, but it doesn't reach his eyes. "You're worried about Jack."

It's not a question. "When we split up, I figured he'd go to the summit and come back to the sanctuary—that we'd be apart for a few hours tops. I hate that I can't contact him."

"He's fine," Luke says, but his tone isn't convincing.

The breeze shifts, bringing with it the subtle scent of clove. I crouch to hide behind a fallen branch.

Luke's eyebrows draw together, but he mimics my pose. "What's up?"

"Don't you smell it? There's a werewolf nearby."

He sniffs the air. "Are you sure it's not just Brady on his way back?"

"He smells more citrusy."

Luke tilts his head. "What are you talking about?"

“Whoever this is, they smell like clove. You know. Like how Jack smells like campfire and Lillie smells like vanilla and honeysuckle.”

He shakes his head. “You’re nuts. Weres all smell the same—like dogs. Present company excluded.”

I open my mouth to ask if he’s joking, but he stiffens and looks to the side.

“You’re right—someone is coming,” he whispers, his lips barely moving. “I don’t smell clove, but I do smell werewolf.”

The breeze has changed again. I can’t tell what direction the were is approaching from—if they’re even moving closer at all. I scan the vicinity, searching for any trace of movement. Branches sway and leaves rustle, but I don’t detect anything out of the ordinary.

Until it’s too late.

She comes speeding straight at us, skidding to a stop just yards away. I’m able to register the gray color of her coat before she shifts to human form. She’s petite, but with muscled arms and legs that make it clear she can handle herself in a fight. Her wavy dark blond hair is pulled into a haphazard half ponytail and her brown eyes narrow as she squints at our hiding place.

“Come out, vampire. I can smell you,” she says, her voice lower than I anticipated.

Luke rises to his full height and holds his hands out. “Have we got a problem here? I’m not on your pack’s lands, am I?”

“Why are you hiding?” She cranes her neck to peer at me. “Who’s that with you?”

Still crouching, I lift my hands in surrender, doing the best to shield my face. “We’re just waiting for our friends. They’re at the outpost.”

“Which doesn’t explain why you’re hiding.” She tilts her head. “Let me guess: you’ve got some other leeches in there helping themselves.” She pulls something out from behind her back. The foot-long cylinder is black, its texture suggesting leather. Glittering gray smoke swirls out from either end followed by matching silver spikes extending out two feet. “Are you part of the same group that ransacked the place last month?”

“Whoa there, wolfy—we’re not looking for a fight here,” Luke says, holding his hands out farther, like a shield.

My mind whirls with escape possibilities. If I grab Luke and take off now, I doubt she’ll be able to catch up with me. But that plan leaves Brady and Dagny vulnerable. If this woman thinks we’re stealing, she may not stop to listen to reason.

“I know your kind don’t really have friends,” she says, spinning the silver staff. The ends glitter in the sunlight reaching through the canopy of leaves. “But mine does. And the witches you’re stealing from are my friends.”

I’m frozen, marveling at the device. She twirls it and I feel like everything is in slow motion. The gleaming staff arcs through the air.

Hands clamp on my shoulders and Luke’s face appears before mine. “Are you nuts? We have to get out of here.”

Time catches up to itself as the glinting metal slams down on Luke’s shoulder. He hisses as it slips to the skin exposed at the collar of his shirt.

The singing of burnt flesh jars me to action. I clasp Luke's arms and spin him around, putting myself between him and the attacker. She pivots the staff, bringing the lower end toward my legs. I grab it before it makes contact, and she sucks in a surprised gasp when I don't release it.

I pull at the weapon, trying to get it away from her, but she detaches the top half and flips it in her hand so the tapered end faces me.

Before she can jab it into my chest, Luke slams into her, knocking her over. The two roll, fighting for dominance. One half of the staff goes flying. I run for it.

Luke ends up on top of the girl. Straddling her, he raises the silver spike over her like a dagger, preparing to plunge it into her chest. I reach into a bramble for the other half, but before my fingers close around it, it vanishes in a wisp of smoke.

Luke's half disappears, too. His face has barely registered the shock when both pieces materialize in the girl's hands. She punches him across the face with enough force to dislodge him and in a flash, she stands over him, both ends aimed at his chest.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“NO!” My outstretched hand is useless in stopping her. Everything in my body screams for me to run, but my feet remain rooted to the ground.

A violet flash lights up the forest as the girl’s hands slam toward Luke’s body. But the silver tips don’t pierce his flesh. The metal pieces of the staff have disappeared.

My body finally unfreezes. Before the girl can react, I’ve pinned her facedown to the ground. She thrashes beneath me but can’t get away.

“We’re gone for ten minutes and you guys manage to get into trouble?” Brady asks, emerging from behind a particularly wide tree. He holds an unassuming chunk of milky quartz in his hand.

“At least we know the diffusing charms work,” Dagny says, hopping into view behind him.

Luke blows out a long, shaky breath. He presses himself to sitting as Brady approaches. Brady pockets the quartz before offering his hand to Luke. The moment of hesitation that elapses is far shorter than I would have expected before Luke allows Brady to help him to his feet.

“Thanks, man,” Luke murmurs.

“Don’t mention it,” Brady says. “Seriously. Ever.”

The corners of Luke’s mouth twitch upward.

“What happened?” Dagny asks, approaching with careful, birdlike steps.

My mind spins as I sort through the details. “She showed up out of nowhere and thought we were robbing the outpost.”

“She figured since I’m a vampire I couldn’t have been here for a legitimate reason.” Luke sneers. “What do we do with her now?”

Dagny swings a pouch-like pack off her back and pulls open the drawstring closure. “Did we end up grabbing some sleeping spells or not?”

“What is this?” the girl asks, her voice muffled. “You’re not all vampires.”

“Nope. Werewolf and witch, too,” Luke says.

Brady shoots him a warning glance. “I don’t expect you to understand, but the four of us have an alliance and our goal is to keep something very bad from happening—something that could have negative consequences for all supernaturals—and humans.”

The girl flops beneath me as she twists her neck and turns her head toward Brady. “What could possibly...”

Her question is lost as the words die in her throat.

A change overtakes Brady’s face as he locks eyes with her. All the usual hard edges melt away, revealing an open vulnerability that is almost breathtaking. “Let her up.”

Luke and I exchange glances. “Let her up?” I repeat, sure I misheard him.

Brady tears his gaze from the girl's. "Yes. Please?"

Dagny inches forward. "Do it."

I still don't understand what's happening, but Dagny's quiet assurance is enough to make me climb off the girl's back.

As she sits up, Brady crouches to her level. He reaches toward her, but his fingers don't quite make contact. He looks at her as if he's seeing for the first time.

I step away, feeling like an intruder. Dagny, Luke, and I regroup by a tree trunk several feet away.

I nudge Dagny. "Do they know each other?" Is it possible these two were friends as humans and never expected to cross paths as werewolves?

"In a way." Dagny's brow furrows. "Wasn't it like this for you?"

"For me?"

Brady's fingertips brush against the girl's cheek, and she leans into his palm. When she opens her eyes, they glisten with tears.

Understanding crashes over me like a wave. I can't believe it took me this long to figure it out. I open my mouth, but it takes a couple of tries before I can speak. "No. It wasn't like this with Jack. At least not for me."

I can't look away from them. Is this what it's like when a were finds their half? I felt drawn to Jack immediately, but there was no innate knowledge of what we are to each other. But if the look on Brady's face is any indication, he has no doubt who he's found.

Luke claps his hands together, the sound ricocheting through the woods like a shot. “Yeah, this is great and all, but shouldn’t we be making a plan or something?”

Brady and the girl both blink and look up as if surprised to find us standing here. Brady springs to his feet and offers the girl his hand. She takes it, a shy smile curling her lips.

“First things first,” I say, training my gaze on the girl. “Where’s your pack? Is your territory near here?”

With great effort, she drags her eyes away from Brady and locks them with mine. “No—we’re dozens of miles from here. I was coming to the outpost to trade with the witches for some perimeter guarding spells. There have been more vampires in the woods near us lately, and my betas decided we needed them as an added precaution.”

Her answer is mildly comforting. At least I don’t have to worry that someone will be coming to look for her. At least not yet.

“Did you hear what the convocation decided at the summit?” Luke asks.

She levels an untrusting gaze on him.

He shrugs. “What? I know things.”

Brady brushes his hand down her arm. “He’s okay.”

Her expression softens, but not all of the doubt evaporates from her eyes. “I didn’t hear. There was an attack on the sanctuary city near here, and my pack has been a little distracted preparing for whatever is coming next.”

I draw in a shaky breath. If news about the attack traveled this far, it’s impossible Jack doesn’t know about it. I hope he’s not as worried about me as I am about him.

We all stand in silence for several moments. Absent conversation, Brady and the girl look to each other again. An ache forms in the pit of my stomach. Do I look at Jack that way? Is that how he looks at me?

A loud caw cuts through the silence, making me jump.

Dagny raises her arm, and moments later a crow lands on it.

My heart hammers in my chest.

Dagny looks to me. “Are you ready?”

I glance at the girl. “Should you be getting back to your pack?”

Brady glares like I just cussed her out, but she shakes her head and smiles. “Don’t be ridiculous. I’m not going back.”

She says it like it’s the obvious conclusion, like I’m silly for having assumed otherwise. “But that’s your pack. You can’t just leave it.”

“Yes, she can,” Dagny says. “The bond between halves is stronger than any pack bond. Under normal circumstances, halves from different packs would have to choose which one to remain in. But, as Brady said, these aren’t ordinary circumstances.”

My mind spins as I try to process. “So that’s just it then? You’re leaving your pack—your family?”

She shrugs, the smile not leaving her lips. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“I don’t know—maybe because you don’t even know each other’s names?” I can’t comprehend what’s going on in their minds. They met minutes ago when she was trying to kill Luke. Now... what? She’s on our side? She’s going to give up

her whole life to throw in with us and be with a man she knows nothing about?

If she's offended by my question, she doesn't show it. "It must seem crazy," she admits. "But when you find your half, you'll understand."

Anger bubbles up in me. I want to tell her I have found my half and it's no excuse for acting like this, but before I can form the argument, a voice in the back of my mind whispers one word: Why? The single syllable is enough to make the anger disappear, leaving a cold emptiness in its wake.

What if I'm looking at this from the wrong angle? At the sanctuary, Jack told me he didn't have to know my name to know he wanted to share his life with me. I assumed he was exaggerating to make a point, but the evidence in front of me suggests otherwise. And if that's the case, the question is why don't I feel the same way? Jack has always had an effect on me. I've been overwhelmingly attracted to him since the first time I saw him. But why have I needed more? This girl has made up her mind to leave her life behind. She doesn't need to know about Brady's past or his likes and dislikes. And although Brady has allied himself with Luke and me, the fact that this girl just tried to kill us both doesn't faze him. All of this points to one inescapable conclusion: There's not something wrong with them, there's something wrong with me.

"But you were just trying to kill us," I say at last.

Her gaze drops for a moment. "I'm sorry about that. When I saw you two hiding so close to the outpost, I assumed the worst." She offers Luke a shrug. "I have a history with vampires."

"Don't we all," he mutters.

The crow caws impatiently.

Dagny strokes its back. “We should listen to what he has to say.”

“Say?” the girl mouths.

I don’t blame her for the reaction. When Dagny first explained she could use a spell that would make the crow record our voices, I thought she was joking. But when she strokes her knuckle down its feathery throat, it opens its beak and Sawyer’s voice pours out.

“We know about the attack on the sanctuary, and we’re all glad you got out. The convocation did come to a decision and... Well, it could be worse.”

I suck in a breath to steel myself. Dagny slips her hand into mine and squeezes.

“They decided the bounty can’t stand. Any were who tries to hand you over for the reward will be punished.”

I exhale and return pressure on Dagny’s fingers. The knot of apprehension in my stomach begins to dissipate.

“Of course,” Sawyer’s voice continues, “since the bounty was put out to everyone, there are still going to be vampires looking for you. And although the convocation struck down the bounty, they did rule that if you ever pose a clear and present danger to humans or weres, you’re to be dealt with like a vampire.”

“You’re the hybrid,” murmurs Brady’s half. She turns to him. “You’re working with the hybrid?”

I shush her as Sawyer’s voice goes on. “There’s something else you should know—and you won’t like it. We were waiting for the convocation’s decision when we got news of

the sanctuary attack. Jack and Dakota left to make sure you were okay, but they ran into some trouble.”

Luke sucks in a breath. I meet his gaze. Every ounce of the fear and worry building within me is reflected in his eyes.

“Dakota got away, but Ava... They took Jack.”

My knees give out and I drop to the ground like a stone. They have him. My mind is a tornado of things I don’t know: Where is he? Is he okay? How can I get to him?

“We wanted to go after him, but we haven’t been able to catch his trail. We’re not sure where to begin looking.”

The crow gives a harsh caw and shifts on Dagny’s arm. I expect it to fly off, but it doesn’t. When its beak opens again, it’s not Sawyer’s voice that flows out.

“On the bird’s leg is a pouch.”

Cassandra’s voice snaps me back to the present moment. Brady offers his hand and I struggle to my feet.

“Jack and I have worn these talismans for decades. It will lead you to him.”

I scan the bird until I spy a small leather bag tied to its left foot. I reach forward with shaky fingers to undo the knot.

“I made them so they would only work for Jack and me. I have no reason to believe the spell is broken, but I haven’t been able to get a lock on his location. I’m too weak.”

Questions spin through my mind, but Cassandra’s message continues.

“Even though it was created for the two of us, I have no doubt it will also work for you. The bond between you is powerful—it only needs a focus. The pendant will lead you to

him. Stay safe, Ava. I wish I could be more help. And Luke...
Faites attention.”

The bird snaps its beak closed as the pouch falls into my outstretched hand.

“Ava.” Brady’s tone holds a hint of warning.

I ignore him and ease open the small bag. When I turn it over, a necklace falls into my upturned palm. The gold chain is thin but strong and the pendant is an unassuming polished stone—light peach with veins of red and blue. Jack used his half of the talisman to find Cassandra once, and now I’ll use it to find him.

“Remember the plan, Ava,” Brady says. “We need to tell the convocation about what the council is planning.”

I turn to Dagny. “Can this bird take another message?”

She nods. “Sure.”

“Good. We’ll send it back. Sawyer or Cecily—someone from my pack can tell the convocation what we suspect.” I slip the necklace over my head. “I’m going to find Jack.”

Brady’s half raises a hand like a student in class. “Who’s Jack?”

“Who are you?” Luke asks. “Am I the only one bothered by the fact we still don’t know her name?”

Dagny stifles a giggle.

The girl jams her hands onto her hips and straightens her back. “My name is Lola.”

Luke’s eyebrows hitch upward. “Really?”

Brady ignores him. “Think about this logically. We have no idea where Jack’s being held. Who knows what kind of

resistance we'll face?"

"He's my half, Brady." I hold his gaze. "Think about Lola. What wouldn't you do to get her back if someone took her away?"

He closes his eyes and takes in a deep breath. When he exhales, his face sets with a look of grim resolution. "Lead the way."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

THE SUN SLANTS through the trees, casting long shadows across the forest floor. The talisman is warm against my chest. At first I was afraid that despite Cassandra's assertion, it wouldn't work for me, but when I cupped the stone in my hand and thought about Jack, his location in space lit up in my mind. It blazes as brightly as my awareness of the enclave ever did. Somehow, just having a destination is calming.

We've been walking for hours. I wanted to run until we found Jack, but that idea was shot down by Lola. According to her, the farther north we go, the more densely populated the forests become. Neutral territories are smaller and more contested than they are near my enclave. If some of these packs sense weres speeding through the wrong areas, they'll come after us.

So, we walk.

A few feet behind me, Luke hums a jaunty tune. I stop dead and glare at him. "You're doing it again."

He holds up his hands. "I can't help it. The song is stuck in my head."

Brady and Lola, who have been walking hand-in-hand since we've been on the move, catch up with Luke.

He falls into step beside them and nudges Lola with his elbow. “I’ve got to know: Are you now or have you ever been a showgirl?”

“Keep it up and I will stab you,” she says, not sparing a glance in his direction.

The corners of Brady’s mouth quirk.

“Does your magic silver staff even work anymore?” I start walking again when they draw even with me.

“It should now,” Dagny calls from ahead. “The diffusion charm Brady set off only works for a few minutes.”

“You know,” Luke says, “now that you’re not trying to kill me with it, I have to say, that staff is pretty badass.”

Lola nods but says nothing.

Dagny comes to another fallen tree, but instead of hopping over it, she turns and sits down. “Okay, immortals. I’m calling it. No more walking today. Let’s set up camp and eat something.”

There’s still daylight left, and I would rather continue, but Dagny has a point. While I wouldn’t put witches in the same category as humans in terms of stamina, I don’t think it’s fair to compare her to werewolves and vampires either. And while everything in me wants to get to Jack as quickly as possible, we’ll be better prepared for a rescue operation after we rest. If we continue at our current pace, we still have at least a day’s journey ahead of us. “Sounds good.”

“Sounds bad,” Lola says. “If we’re going to stop, we should be closer to water.”

She has a point. I inhale deeply, breathing in all the forest smells. I filter through the sweet decay of plant matter, the

earthy scent of tree bark, and the potent aroma of animals until I pick up on the crisp note of water. I point toward the setting sun. “There’s a river a mile or two in that direction.”

Dagny groans and lies across the fallen trunk.

Brady tugs Lola’s hand. “You think we’d be safe for a short run? A slow one?”

Lola does her best to keep her expression neutral, but a smile spreads across her face when she looks at Brady. “Slow,” she agrees.

Without being asked, Luke crosses to Dagny and scoops her off her makeshift bed.

“My hero,” Dagny jokes, pressing the back of her hand to her forehead like some kind of Southern belle.

“No need to make a thing out of it,” Luke murmurs.

Is it hard for him, being thrust into our little makeshift pack? He’s been coping so well I haven’t given it much thought, but maybe I should.

We take off in the direction of the river. Although we’re not running much faster than a deer, it still beats walking. It only takes a few minutes before we’re beside the stream. It’s not as broad or fast as the one we camped by last night, so it won’t provide as much protection, but there are five of us now—plenty to keep watch.

I peer into the water. After fish for dinner last night and breakfast this morning, I’m not looking forward to having it again, but before I can wade in, a new smell distracts me.

The pack Dagny has been carrying since she and Brady returned from the outpost sits on the ground in front of her and she pulls out three large leather pouches tied with twine.

“What’s that?” I ask, edging nearer.

She glances up, grinning. “You think we’d go to the outpost and not pick up some food?” She sets the pouches beside her and reaches into the pack again, her arm disappearing to the shoulder.

“What the...” I crouch beside her and peer into the bag myself. Although it appears no larger than an average school backpack, the inside is cavernous. There are at least a dozen more food pouches, along with stacks of wooden boxes the size of Chihuahuas.

“We didn’t know what we’d need, so we got some of everything,” Dagny says, pulling out more pouches.

“Turns out oracle blood is worth a lot,” Brady says, swinging his pack off his back.

“Wait—you’re an oracle?” Lola asks, her eyes round as saucers.

Dagny shrugs her response.

“Why haven’t you been having any... episodes?” I ask as she unties the first pouch.

“Dunno,” she says, her eyes trained on the task. “Maybe because you and Brady were in the middle of the initiation when the attack started? I do have a blind spot when it comes to my own fate, so maybe because I’m with you, I can’t see anything surrounding us. Or maybe there’s just nothing to see. It comes and goes.” She meets my gaze and offers a small smile. “It’s been a while since I’ve been outside the sanctuary walls.”

Luke, Brady, and Lola join Dagny and me, completing a circle around the food.

Lola reaches for a piece of jerky. “What were you all in a sanctuary for? If you don’t mind me asking?”

This time, Dagny’s smile is more natural. “Obvious reasons for me.”

I reach for some dried fruit to stall. As much as I hope Luke or Brady will voice our reason, I know neither of them will. “I went to hide out. The bounty meant it wasn’t safe to go back to my territory. Luke was with me. And Brady...” I pop a dried cherry into my mouth and take my time chewing. How can I tell her I took him hostage? “Brady got dragged along.”

Lola chews on her jerky thoughtfully. “Is that always the case with you two?” When Brady and I offer confused looks, she points at our wrists. “I assume you two go way back. Or are the matching bracelets a coincidence?”

I look down at the leather cuff, guilt swooping in my stomach. With all that’s happened in the last couple of days, I forgot its existence. Is this the reason Brady hasn’t abandoned me yet? I try to remember if I ever told him he had to stay with me no matter what. All this time, I’ve been thinking he’s thrown his lot in with me because he wants to—but has it been because he’s had to?

My fingers trace the leather edges. I should take it off. But what happens when I do? I wouldn’t blame Brady one bit if he tried to hand me over to the council or whoever else is looking for me. I deserve it for what I’ve done to him.

“Yeah,” Brady says slowly, drawing out the word. “About that...”

Lola holds her hand up. “Shh. Do you guys hear something?”

My skin prickles as I listen.

Footsteps.

And the accompanying scent is unmistakable. Werewolves.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“THEY’RE GETTING CLOSER,” Brady mutters.

“But they might not be coming this way,” Lola whispers back. “We’re downwind.”

Dagny begins packing away our food. “Do you think they noticed when we ran?”

“No,” I say, giving her hand a quick squeeze.

“Why are we panicking?” Luke asks. “I thought the convocation shot down the bounty. These weres shouldn’t be an issue.”

“If they know,” I say. “It’s possible the news hasn’t filtered through to everyone. Lola didn’t know.”

“She’s right,” Lola agrees. “Plus there’s the... other issue.”

Luke tilts his head. “What other issue?”

She holds his gaze for a beat before gesturing to him. “You’re a vampire.”

“I’m well aware,” he says blandly.

“So, do we take off?” Brady asks.

Dagny digs into her bag for a moment before pulling out a glass jam jar filled with black stones. “Isn’t this what we

planned for?” She unscrews the top and plucks out two marble-sized rocks.

Luke and I exchange glances. “What are you thinking?”

She holds out her upturned palm, the two stones staring at us like eyes. “Take one and put it against your forehead.”

I do as directed immediately, but it takes my elbow to Luke’s ribs for him to follow suit.

As soon as the cool stone touches my skin, my body begins to tingle and hum. The skin on my arm undulates as if infested with millions of tiny bugs. Heat sweeps through my body from my toes to my head as the stone warms against my fingers for an instant before cooling again. The sensations assailing my body cease and I drop my hand to my side.

“Wow,” says an unfamiliar voice beside me.

I turn to where Luke sat moments before. In his place is a slender brunette guy of maybe twenty. His hazel eyes sweep my body.

“You look different,” he says.

“You, too.” I study my hands in the fading light. My fingers are shorter and broader, and a constellation of freckles dots my arms. I inhale, and for a moment I wonder if the glamor is messing with my senses. In addition to the citrus and clove scents of Brady and Lola, I detect a distinct note of chamomile.

“Did that spell turn him into a werewolf?” I ask Dagny as she replaces the jar in her bag.

Luke’s nose crinkles. “What?”

Dagny holds up a hand. “It’s a glamor. It’s only making you appear to be a werewolf. Let’s just hope no one demands

you shift. Then we'll be in trouble.”

The approaching weres are growing closer by the moment. If there was ever a hope they would pass by without noticing us, it's dashed now. Their trajectory seems to be bringing them straight to us.

I try to determine how many people are coming based on the number of voices I hear. My count is up to nine when a female voice calls out above the others.

“All right, all right, all right.” She sounds familiar, but I can't place why. “We need to eat. We need fire. We need a decent place to sleep. How are we going to figure out who's doing what?”

“Roshambo!” another one yells.

“Don't be an idiot,” says the girl. “We've got too many people for rock-paper-scissors.”

“I got it,” says a second guy. “You three are on fire duty. You guys can figure out the sleeping arrangements. The rest of us will get the food.”

“Who died and made you alpha?” snipes a girl.

“You could all use an alpha,” the second guy says. “What? Did you forget how to take an order?”

“Shoot, when's the last time you took one?” asks the roshambo guy. “There's even money you were born at the sanctuary.”

A chill runs down my spine. I recognize the girl's voice. She's Maya—the girl Brady spoke to our first day at the sanctuary. Did all these weres come from there?

Brady's wide eyes reveal he's identified the girl, too.

“Do you need a glamor?” Dagny asks, reaching back into her bag.

He shakes his head. “No. Give me one of the green ones.”

“Okay, if you say so,” Dagny says as the first members of the group spill out onto the stream’s shore.

A guy who is at least six and a half feet tall takes a few tentative steps toward us. His mop of brown hair sways around his shoulders when he comes to a stop. “Hey there.” He’s the one who wanted to play roshambo.

Brady palms the green pebble Dagny extracted from her bag before standing and taking a few steps forward. “Hey, brother. We were setting up camp here for the night, but you and your pack are welcome to join us.”

“Thanks, brother,” Roshambo says, a note of hesitation in his voice. “What brings you all the way out here?”

“Brady?” Maya edges past Roshambo and smiles broadly as she approaches us. She’s just as scantily clad as I remember, and Lola’s jaw clenches.

He grins. “Maya. I’m so glad to see you.” He steps forward and pulls her into a hug. She goes rigid at the unexpected touch and I don’t understand why Brady’s even doing it—until I see his thumb and forefinger slip into her front pocket.

He’s planting the green stone on her.

“I was afraid you might have gotten hurt when the sanctuary was attacked,” Brady says as he backs away.

Maya blinks, a wrinkle forming between her eyebrows. Her expression is dazed. “No—I got away.” She hitches her

thumb at her tall companion. “Regrouped with Rory and some others.”

“Oh, so you’re all from the sanctuary?” Brady asks, glancing past Maya and Rory to the nine others still standing by the tree line. He gestures for me and the others to get to our feet, and we do. “We were all there when the attack happened, too. In the middle of our initiation, if you can believe it. All except Dagny, of course.”

Maya’s gaze flicks to Dagny and her lip curls. “Oracle.”

“Werewolf,” Dagny returns.

Brady claps his hand on Maya’s shoulder. “I found her after the attack. I couldn’t leave her on her own. She’s like a little puppy.”

Dagny purses her lips, but Maya doesn’t seem to notice. Her eyes slide out of focus for another second. “Of course. Just like a puppy. Gotta look after her.”

Lola takes a step forward. “I’m Lola. That’s Luke. And this is... Angie,” she says, gesturing to me.

I offer a wave, but when my hand drops back to my side, Maya’s eyes follow its progress.

“That bracelet. I’ve seen it before.” She looks at the matching cuff on Brady’s wrist and her face twitches.

I could kick myself for still wearing these stupid bracelets. She met me in the sanctuary. What happens when she puts together that the girl standing before her isn’t the one she saw a few days ago?

Panic flickers across Brady’s face, but only for a moment. “Of course you have,” he says, stretching out his hand toward me. I follow his lead and step closer. “You met Ann... Angie

at the sanctuary, remember? You even asked why our cuffs match.”

Maya nods vaguely. “Yeah. Yeah, I did. Why was that again?”

“Because...” Brady’s eyes dart in their sockets. “Because...”

“They’re halves,” Dagny says, her voice a higher pitch than normal. Lola glares at her, but she ignores it. “They wear the bracelets so everyone knows they’re a couple.”

“Of course. I remember.” Maya blinks a couple of times before giving her head a little shake.

Dagny steps forward. “I can get some fires going, if you like.”

“And I can join the hunt for food,” Lola offers.

Rory glances over his shoulder. With a slight nod, the rest of his companions relax and continue down to the stream. “Are you guys heading to the sanctuary in Ontario?”

I open my mouth, but before I can answer, Dagny springs up from the red-orange fire she just created. “No, we’re out spreading the word.”

Luke, Brady, and I exchange glances.

“What word?” Maya asks.

“The witches’ council is calling for all werewolves to meet them for an important announcement,” Dagny says.

I watch her carefully. Where is she going with this?

Rory snorts. “Since when do the witches really care what the werewolves do? They’re too busy smelling flowers and mixing herbs, right?”

“That changed when the sanctuary was attacked,” Dagny says. “They say it was the vampires behind it, you know.”

Luke shifts beside me.

“Bull,” Rory says. “I saw weres running through the place, too.”

“All under compulsion, apparently,” Dagny says. “News doesn’t travel especially fast in the sanctuary, I know, but you may have heard whispers since you left.”

“Whispers? About what?” Maya asks.

“The hybrid, of course,” Dagny says. “Half werewolf, half vampire.”

Rory snorts. “No way. There’s no such thing. It’s impossible.”

“Everything’s impossible until it isn’t.”

It’s only when Maya and Rory swivel their gazes to me that I realize I’ve spoken aloud. “I know it sounds crazy, but it’s true. I... heard about her a couple weeks ago.”

Dagny nods encouragingly. “Reports say she’s faster and stronger than a regular werewolf or vampire. According to the council, the vampires want her to make them all hybrids so they’ll be unstoppable.”

It takes all my willpower to keep my face neutral. Nothing she’s saying is even close to true, and she knows it.

“The council wants to gather as many weres as possible at one of their safe houses up north so we can discuss what to do about it.”

Dagny’s voice is so full of authority, part of me is inclined to believe what she says. If the expressions on Rory’s and

Maya's faces are any indication, her words are having the same effect on them.

"You think they'll call for war?" Maya asks.

"Dunno. That's all the information I have," Dagny says.

"We should go tell the others," Rory says. Maya nods and the two of them jog over to where their companions amble by the water's edge.

As soon as they're out of earshot, my group closes ranks around Dagny.

"What was that?" Luke asks. "What kind of mess are you trying to stir up?"

"We're sure the council is behind the sanctuary attack, right?" she asks. "Positive they're the ones who want to make more hybrids?"

I nod. "It's the only thing that makes sense."

"Then it stands to reason they have Jack," she says. "And I bet they're banking on you coming for him."

"I'm still not seeing why you lied to Maya," Brady says.

"Distraction," Lola says. "If we can get a bunch of werewolves to show up at the council's front door, that might throw the witches off."

A grin spreads across my face. "And make it easier to rescue Jack." I grab Dagny's hand and squeeze it. "You're a genius."

She offers a tight-lipped smile. "Let's hope it works."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

OUR GROUP SITS APART from the other weres as we eat dinner. Rory and a couple of others brought back a few rabbits for the meal. Brady and I contributed some freshly caught fish, and Dagny offered some fruit and nuts from our provisions. We gathered together to cook and split the food, but when Maya and her companions settled downstream to sit and eat, we didn't follow.

I do my best to pretend that everything is fine, but I can't relax. I know that moving on the council now would be foolish and that Dagny's plan for distraction is solid, but sitting here—warm, safe, and fed—only serves to twist my stomach with guilt. I was able to ignore the feeling while we were traveling, taking comfort in the fact that we were on our way. But now that I'm sitting, not actively engaging in any effort to help Jack, all I can think about is him.

Brady isn't helping things. He sits too close to me, running a finger down my arm or touching my cheek at intervals. I'll give it to him: He's taking the role Dagny cast him in to heart. To the casual observer, I'm sure it appears the two of us really are halves.

I catch a flicker behind Lola's eyes that I can identify with. Her human side understands why we're lying and can accept

it, but her wolf doesn't understand shades of gray. I experienced something similar when my friend Lillie was tending Jack's wounds. The anger and jealousy at her nearness to him was such that I had to leave the room to get a handle on myself. All my wolf knew was another female was too close to my half. I don't know how Lola's keeping it together as well as she is.

Although I'm pretty sure vampires need only blood to survive, Luke strategically eats his way through the food he selected for himself. I'm worried about him. He needs blood more frequently than I do, and I can't tell if his pale pallor is a result of hunger or just an effect of the fading daylight.

The skin in the center of my chest tingles and I rub at it. As my fingers brush against the talisman tucked under my shirt, longing fills me, bringing with it an ache so acute it takes my breath away.

"You okay, A?" Brady asks, employing the nickname he gave me when he couldn't remember the alias Lola made up.

"I'm fine," I murmur. "My... necklace is bothering me."

Even though the other weres sit a few yards downstream, chatting amongst themselves, I don't want to take the chance one of them is listening to us. Maybe I'm being paranoid, but the situation warrants it. If this group figures out we're lying to them, there's no telling what they'll do to us.

Brady slips an arm around my shoulders and gives me a quick squeeze. "It'll be okay."

Lola drops her partially eaten rabbit leg onto the ground. "I have to go for a walk." She stands and turns toward the woods before any of us can react. A jerk of her head is all the

invitation Luke needs. He scrabbles to his feet and follows her into the trees.

Brady casts a glance at Maya and the other weres before leaning in closer to me. “I’m guessing that has something to do with this,” he says, gesturing between us.

“She’s taking it better than I would be,” I say.

Dagny leans in on my other side. “I could put together some herbs that might help. I’ve got everything I’ll need in the backpacks.”

When she pulled the food out of her pack earlier, she didn’t reveal the bag’s enhanced dimensions. Pulling out ingredients for spellwork now would only arouse suspicions. If Maya wanted to know why we needed the different charms and magical elements, I don’t know what kind of plausible explanation we could provide.

Before I can object to Dagny’s plan, Brady stands, affecting a loud sigh. “Fine, we can go make sure,” he says, his voice carrying along the river bank. “But I’m telling you, you’re letting your paranoia get the best of you. What do you think is out there that’s strong enough to take down two werewolves?”

Dagny springs to her feet. “Stop treating me like a child. Don’t dismiss my concerns because you’re trying to act like an alpha in front of your half.”

I fight to keep my lips from curving into a smile. Dagny hardly resembles the timid girl I met in the sanctuary only days ago. Her chin juts out stubbornly and she narrows her eyes.

“Is there a problem?” Maya asks, crossing to us.

I stand and intercept her. “No. Dagny was in the sanctuary for a long time. Since we’ve been out, she’s been terrified that something’s going to happen to us. She sees danger around every corner.”

Maya’s eyebrows hitch upward. “Is that something that should concern us? I mean, she is an oracle.”

I shake my head. “These aren’t oracle visions. She’s just skittish being outside the sanctuary walls. You know.”

Her lips twitch and she glances over at her companions. For the first time, I wonder what they were all in the sanctuary for to begin with. If any of them were seeking refuge after committing a crime, is it possible they’re worried someone might come after them, seeking retribution?

“Brady and I will take her into the woods so she can see there’s nothing dangerous out there,” I say.

She glances in the direction Luke and Lola disappeared. “Where’d they go, anyway?”

I dig my nails into my palms. I can’t tell her the truth—that Lola is upset about Brady and me being so close and Luke is feeding. But what are my alternatives? “They needed to stretch their legs.” The words tumble out before I think them through. “They like to take a run before going to sleep.”

To my relief, she nods. “I’ve known weres like that. Can’t get to sleep without logging a few miles. I can send a few from my group to keep an eye on things, if you like.” Maya’s tone is light, but there’s a look in her eye that makes me feel like she’s testing me.

Brady steps beside me, his arm slipping around my waist. “Thanks for the offer, but Dagny won’t shut up about it unless

she's able to see it with her own eyes. Don't want to piss off the oracle, you know?"

Maya's eyes slip out of focus for an instant as the confusion charm works its magic. "That would be bad," she agrees. "Whistle if you need help."

By the time Maya has turned back to her group, Brady is guiding me toward the forest. Dagny is a few steps ahead of us, navigating nimbly over sprawling roots and around prickly bushes.

Brady removes his hand from my waist. "This is hard for me, too, you know." He keeps pace with me, his eyes trained forward. "I've wanted to find Lola since I turned. I finally do and we get—what—a few hours together before I have to pretend she's just some were we're traveling with?"

"You know I'm not the one who needs to hear this, right?" I ask as Lola comes into view. She leans against a tree, her right foot propped against it. She stares into the darkness, twisting the white gold ring on her middle finger.

Dagny swings the pack off her back as she approaches. "Where's Luke?"

Lola raises her chin without looking at us. "I don't suppose it occurred to any of you that I wanted a little time to myself."

Brady and I are still several yards away. He stands, shoulder slumped, staring at his half. I tug at the strap of his backpack and he slips it off. His eyebrows draw together when I pull it from him. When I nod toward Lola, his furrow only deepens.

I roll my eyes. "Hey, Dagny, do you need some things from Brady's bag?"

Dropped to a knee and digging through her sack, Dagny pauses only long enough to hold out her free hand. I tilt my head and look from Brady to Lola. After a moment, Dagny's eyes widen and she pops up. "As a matter of fact, I do," she says, bouncing back to where I stand.

I give Brady a solid push in Lola's direction and realization spreads across his face. Poor guy. It's painfully obvious he's out of practice dealing with women on a romantically emotional level.

I rub at my pendant, longing hollowing out my stomach. I hate being away from Jack. Does he know I'm coming for him? Can he sense me through the talisman? The idea offers a measure of comfort.

"I get that this sucks." Brady's quiet voice carries to where I stand. I'd move to give them more privacy, but Dagny has several bundles of herbs lined up on the mossy ground. I can't help wondering just how much blood she gave for all these items.

"It's taking everything I have not to rip her throat out," Lola murmurs. Such a confession should unsettle me, except I understand. "I don't want to hurt her," she continues. "I know she's your friend and none of this is your fault, but this isn't fair to me."

Brady takes her hands up in his. I drop my gaze to the forest floor and try to watch what Dagny's doing, but my eyes are drawn back to Brady and Lola like a magnet.

"I know," he says, tucking some loose hair behind her ear. "But think—this is just for a moment. This time yesterday, we hadn't found each other. Who knows what will change by this time tomorrow? We have forever to be together."

She presses a hand against his chest. “I want that,” she whispers. “I want you. Forever.”

My heart twists at the longing in her voice. She loves him. How can she have fallen so fast? Based on the way she fought Luke and me earlier today, she’s a warrior—not the kind of girl I would imagine to confess devotion at the drop of a hat. But maybe those two types aren’t mutually exclusive—or at least not when it comes to halves.

Why is this so difficult for me to wrap my head around? I’ve found my half. I understand the unrelenting pull—the desire for closeness and intimacy. What I don’t understand is their ability to give into it so quickly. What inside me is so broken I can’t experience what they have?

Brady brushes his fingertips beneath Lola’s chin and she lifts her face to meet his. Their kiss seems to charge the night air with an electric hum that makes the hair on my forearms stand on end.

Pounding feet approach and the two of them break apart. I spin, searching my dim surroundings for the intruder, trying to come up with a plausible explanation for anything he may have seen, but I relax when my gaze finds Luke.

He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, eyebrows cinching when he sees the four of us standing around. “Something wrong?”

“Not at all,” Lola says brightly, her eyes not leaving Brady’s face.

Luke eyes her warily. “Did I miss something?”

“Brady and Lola just merged.” Dagny picks up the bundles of herbs and deposits them back into the backpacks.

“Wait—what?” I look from Brady to Lola and back again.
“What?”

Dagny stands, swinging her bag onto her back. “It was pretty obvious.”

Brady can’t stop grinning. He ambles toward Dagny and holds out his hand for his pack. “Did you mix up the herbs?”

“No.”

The syllable is so matter-of-fact it takes me off-guard.
“That was the whole reason we came out here.”

She shakes her head. “How else was I supposed to get Brady to follow Lola?”

“You made up the whole spell thing? Why?” I peek over my shoulders, expecting to find someone sneaking up on us with silver knives or a net or something.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Dagny gestures at the grinning werewolves. “Lola’s jealousy isn’t going to be an issue now that they’re merged.”

Brady’s smile slips for the first time and his brow creases.
“Wait—you knew that if I came out here, Lola and I would merge?”

She nods.

“You mean you can see the future?” I ask.

She points at herself. “Oracle, remember?”

“That’s not what I mean. I thought you put on your creepy face and couldn’t remember things you said when it happens.”

“That’s the prophecy thing,” she says, some of her earlier ease evaporating. “You’re right about that. And seeing the future—I can’t control that much either. But sometimes, in

certain moments, I get a glimpse at two or three different roads that stem from a moment.”

“It’s why you wanted us to walk the last couple miles to the outpost, isn’t it?” Luke asks. “Here I thought you just wanted to stretch your legs. But you knew Lola was coming.”

Dagny nods shyly. “I knew if we kept running, we’d get there too fast and miss her.”

Brady stares at her like he’s seeing her for the first time. His lips part and his face twitches as if it can’t decide on an emotion to express. He closes the distance between himself and Dagny and wraps his arms around her in a hug so tight I’m afraid he might break her ribs. “Thank you.”

When he releases her, she sways in her spot before offering a smile. “You’re welcome. Now, we should get back before Maya and the others come looking for us.”

Brady darts to Lola’s side and presses a hard kiss to her lips before falling into step beside me and lacing his fingers with mine.

Back in the sanctuary, Brady told me he would merge with his half as soon as possible were he ever to find her. I figured when the time came, he’d reconsider his stance. Tonight has proven me wrong.

My free hand finds the talisman under my shirt. Poor Jack. How much does my resistance to the idea hurt him? He’s told me before he doesn’t want to force me into merging—that he wants me to choose him. I bet he never anticipated my decision taking this long.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

“CAN YOU HEAR ME?”

Brady’s voice jars me from sleep, but I don’t open my eyes. No one from our group was asked to take a watch shift, but they may as well have scheduled me all night for all the sleep I got. I couldn’t shut off my mind. Thoughts swirled seamlessly from one issue to the next. How are we going to spread the word to other werewolves to help with our distraction? How long will that take? Will Jack be all right until we can reach him? Even if the witches are distracted, how will we get to wherever they’re keeping him? But battle plans aren’t the only things spinning through my head. I can’t stop thinking about how Brady and Lola have already merged. I can’t ignore the heaviness in the pit of my stomach when I try to figure out what makes them so different from me.

“Ava?”

The sound of my name snares my attention. My eyelids fly open and I turn over, ready to ask Brady if he’s lost his mind, calling my name so loudly amid our present company. But Brady isn’t beside me. It doesn’t make sense—I heard his voice in my ear as clearly as if he were next to me.

The morning is still new. A blanket of gray clouds fills the sky, but the eastern horizon glows as the sun’s light attempts to

break through. Rory and a few of the other weres stoke banked coals of last night's fire—the fire a few of them insisted on making despite Dagny's offer to provide them a magical one. Maya and the majority of the others are still asleep. Luke reclines against a tree a few yards away, brow furrowed and lips twitching. Lola sleeps several feet from me, but Dagny and Brady are upstream—she sitting on a fallen log and he crouched by the water's edge.

I prepare to stand and find out what Brady is playing at, but before I get my feet under me, I hear him again.

Can you hear me?

His voice isn't external—it's internal. He's in my head. When I turn my wide eyes on him, he flashes a grin.

I'll take that as a yes.

I suck in a breath. How is he doing this? I've experienced this kind of communication before within my pack. When in wolf form, any were could communicate with any other were. But only alphas possess the ability to speak into a human mind.

Oh, no. Is that it? We've been traveling together for days. Is there some werewolf rule I'm not aware of? Is our time together enough to have turned us into a pack? And is Brady somehow its de facto alpha?

Calm down.

It isn't Brady's voice that fills my mind this time—it's Dagny's. She stares out across the river as if lost in deep thought, but somehow she's speaking to me.

What's going on? None of this makes any sense, but if Dagny can speak into my mind, maybe I can do the same. *Why can I hear you both?*

Brady turns back to the water and plunges his hands into it. His voice comes to me as he scoops out handfuls and rubs them over his hair and face. *Pretty cool, right? Lola and I realized we could do it last night.*

Is this something you werewolves do regularly? Even in mindspeak, Luke's tone conveys his displeasure. *This is annoying.*

Wait—how can Luke do it? Mindspeak between werewolves is one thing. I know it exists. Hearing Dagny is a surprise, but I assume her being a witch allows her to join in. But Luke? As far as I know, this ability doesn't ever extend to vampires.

It's their gift, Dagny explains patiently. *Now that they've merged, Brady and Lola have unlocked a telepathic ability.*

I knew gaining an ability of some kind was part of the deal when a couple merged, but I never expected something like this. Their newfound gift is perfect. The five of us can talk without Maya or the others overhearing.

Can you contact Jack? I send the idea to Brady as it forms.

He brushes a hand against his hair, sending a shower of droplets scattering. *No. It's a distance thing. Dagny and I have been testing it this morning. You're at about the end of my range.*

For now, Dagny adds. *It'll increase as it develops. It's already gotten wider so far this morning.*

Although I only considered the idea for a split second, the fact that it can't happen hits me hard. I want to know that Jack is safe. I want him to be here with us. With me.

“Good, you're up.”

Maya's voice catches me off guard, making me jump. Her lips curve and her dark ponytail is as sleek as ever, despite her just having gotten up.

I press myself to my feet, not liking the idea of her hovering above me. "Barely." I offer a half smile which she doesn't return.

She hitches her thumb at her companions. "We talked about it last night, and although we want to get to the Ontario sanctuary as quickly as we can, we're willing to help you tell as many packs as possible about the meeting the witches are calling. If what they think about the vampires being after the hybrid is true, everyone and everything is in danger—including the sanctuaries. We have to stop them."

I send a quick plea for help to Brady before forcing a smile. "That's great. Thank you. We'll be able to reach so many more packs."

"That's what we figured. You were a little short on details last night. Where and when do they want us to meet?"

Brady steps into the spot beside me. He's standing too close, but I'm getting so used to it the lack of space barely registers. I catch him up on Maya's offer while sending a single thought: *When?*

I'm aware of the mental conversation that transpires between Brady, Dagny, and Luke as I explain to Maya how to get to the location where Jack is being held. It's difficult to concentrate on speaking while trying to ignore what the others are mindspeaking. It's like tuning out voices at a party, except these voices don't want to be silenced.

Maya squints. "Getting there shouldn't take more than an hour or two if we run it."

“If we run flat out, yes,” I agree. “We’ve been avoiding moving that fast because we haven’t wanted to disturb the local packs.”

She nods. “The same for us. I figure if we start telling packs as we go, we won’t have to worry about upsetting anyone by running near their territory. We can also ask pack alphas to spread the word to anyone they’re allied with. That should cut down on how many we have to get to on our own. What’s the timeframe?”

“They want to talk to us today—at sunset,” Brady says.

I do my best to pretend like his words don’t come as a surprise to me. Tonight? Does that give us enough time? On the other hand, sunset is hours away. What if we don’t get there soon enough? I’d like to think that the witches won’t hurt Jack, that they want to use him to get to me, but how can I be sure? When Xander kidnapped me, I knew without a doubt that Jack would come for me. Does he have the same assurance now? Is he confident I’ll come for him? I rub at the pendant under my shirt.

Maya’s lips press into a tight line. “That puts a severe limit on the number of packs we can reach.”

“We should get started as soon as possible,” Brady says. “Which way does your team want to move? We need to make sure we cover as much ground as possible.” He slings an arm across her shoulders and leads her toward the edge of the stream.

I make my way over to Lola, who’s awake. She offers a half smile. “How’d you sleep?”

“Fine.” I sit down beside her.

“Liar,” she accuses. Before I can defend myself, her voice sounds in my mind. *I’m guessing your restlessness had to do with Jack.*

I nod before glancing toward Luke and Dagny. *Can the others hear us?*

Her head jerks to the side ever so slightly. *You’re worried about him, aren’t you? I can’t imagine how I’d feel if someone took Brady.*

I am worried, but it’s more than that. A single question pops forward like it’s been waiting to be asked: *What’s it like—being merged?*

Lola’s eyebrows pull together and an inscrutable expression crosses her face. *I don’t know if I can describe it. In some ways, I’m no different. In others, I feel completely new. I’ve always been pretty content, but when I saw Brady, I knew the truth—there was always something missing. It was like this new dimension of reality opened up.* Her lips twitch and she rolls her eyes. *I know it sounds sappy and romantic, but that’s how it feels. And now that we’re merged, I’m at peace. I’m whole.*

My stomach twists at her words. Whole and at peace. I don’t know if I’ve ever felt those things. There have been moments, of course, but nothing that lasts. *Doesn’t it matter that you don’t know him?*

She meets my eyes. *I know me.*

Before I can respond, Brady squats down beside me. Luke and Dagny approach.

“Maya and her group will be heading south to tell as many packs as possible that they need to show up tonight.” He squeezes my hand before continuing. “We’re going north.”

The significance isn't lost on me.

I clutch the pendant. I'm coming for you, Jack.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

MY DESIRE TO run straight to Jack is overruled.

Despite agreeing with the logic, I can't help feeling like we're wasting time. I understand that not alerting the northern packs that—hopefully—dozens of weres will be running near their territory is dangerous. If they perceive some threat to their land, they could keep weres from passing by. That wouldn't do at all for our plan. And despite the fact that it would be difficult—if not impossible—to move on the witches without a distraction, I still want to get there as fast as I can. Simply being near Jack will make me feel better.

Our plan is simple, if inelegant: we'll run to the edge of the nearest pack's territory and try to get their attention.

I'm surprised by how well it works. We speak to three packs within our first hour out. The first two are curious enough they promise to send a delegation to hear out the witches. The third is almost jubilant with the prospect of a war against the vampires.

As we edge ever nearer to the place where Jack is, I grow increasingly confident that our plan will work. The witches are bound to be baffled when werewolves start showing up at twilight. As we run from pack to pack, we discuss rescue plans using mindspeak. The only time our minds aren't connected is

when we're talking with pack leaders. Dagny and I find it too difficult to concentrate on what's being said aloud when there's a separate conversation echoing through our heads, so Brady and Lola shut the link down during those discussions.

A bubble of happiness burgeons in my chest. This will work. Fate or destiny or whatever is on our side—finally.

Or at least I think so until we're with the fourth pack.

Two leaders agree to speak with us at the edge of their territory. Becca, the alpha female, is tall and willowy with wavy light brown hair. Dan, the beta male, is broad and burly with a long dark blond beard. They listen, nodding at intervals as we describe the sanctuary attack and the belief that the hybrid was the target.

When we finish our explanation, neither of the weres speak, but it's clear by Becca's expression that she's communicating with her beta. She glances at him and he gives the slightest nod before she turns back to us. "If what you're saying is true, the witches are right to step in. Vampires are already a plague. The last thing we need is them finding out a way to get stronger. There's no telling what they'll destroy."

A thrill like electricity surges up my back and my skin begins to warm, despite the day's chill. At first I ignore it, assuming the usual discomfort when someone lumps all vampires together and casts them as evil, but when Luke shifts beside me, I wonder if something else isn't happening.

That's when I smell it. Or rather I don't. The steady scent of chamomile that has emanated from Luke since we used the glamor pebbles ebbs. When his wide eyes meet mine, the irises are less hazel and more blue than they were before.

The spell is fading. I fight the urge to look at my hands to see if my glamor is slipping too. I try to use mindspeak to alert Brady of the situation, but he and Lola shut down the link on their end and my warning doesn't reach them.

“So, we can count on a delegation from your pack to be there?” Lola asks.

“Absolutely,” Becca says. “But if we get there and the witches start going on about nonviolence or some other nonsense, I won't be happy.” She turns to her companion, and I blow out a relieved breath.

But then they turn back, brows furrowed.

“Do you smell that?” Dan squints as he stares off into the distance.

Becca nods. “Vampire.”

Lola casts a glance back at Luke. “What would a vampire be doing out here?”

Dagny's fingers twitch and she rolls her shoulders. I get the sense she'd do anything to pull the backpack off and grab for more glamor pebbles, but she can't do it without looking suspicious. Not to mention Becca and Dan would probably notice if Luke and I cast the spells in front of them.

“Maybe they caught wind that the witches are finally going to stand up to them,” Becca says darkly.

My body begins to tingle and hum. At any moment, the glamor could drop. Luke's eyes have already changed back to their usual electric blue.

We have to get out of here—now.

“We need to move on to the next pack,” I say. “We can search the area for any vampires as we go.”

Becca swivels her gaze to me and I hold it, despite the overwhelming desire to hide away. “I appreciate the offer. I’ll have some of my pack come out and join you.”

It feels as if insects are crawling under my skin. I’m going to change right here in front of them. I can’t think of a single thing we could tell them to explain. If they find out Luke is a vampire, there’s no way they’ll believe he’s on our side. There’s no telling what relationships they have with nearby packs, but if they spread the word that we’re lying, no one will show up where the council is, and we might not be able to rescue Jack.

“Thank you,” Brady says. But the word that echoes in my head is different: *Go!*

I don’t need to be told twice. I take off, keeping pace with Luke. We just need to get far enough away that those weres can’t see us. My body burns and my muscles are weak. In front of me, Luke drops to the ground. In a few more paces, I’m on the forest floor, too.

I don’t know if we’re far enough away, but it doesn’t matter—I can’t move any more. The sensations that flooded me when the glamor was cast in no way prepared me for what the reverse feels like. My insides churn and it takes everything in me not to cry out.

“I found something!” an unfamiliar female voice calls a few moments later. She’s too near, but I can’t open my eyes to see where she is.

Footfalls crunch and swish through the brush. Each step is louder than the last. I want to yell for Luke to run, but the words won’t come.

“Found him,” the girl says. Her voice is quieter than before.

“What’s wrong with him?” asks a guy.

The girl snorts. “Nothing in a minute.”

Some twigs snap and Luke moans.

“Hey, don’t you think we should question him first?” the guy asks.

“About what? There’s no reason to be all the way out here except to spy.”

Luke moans again and I try to pry my eyes open, but my body isn’t responding. I need to get to him, but I can’t. I focus all my energy on moving toward the sound of his voice, but I only manage to make my limbs jerk.

“What was that?” asks the guy. Footsteps edge toward my location. “There’s another one over here.”

My eyelids flutter, but I can’t make anything out. Still, I can feel him standing over me.

“There’s something familiar about her...”

“Back away if you know what’s good for you.” Lola’s low, dangerous voice cuts through the air like a knife.

“This doesn’t concern you, outsider,” the girl says. “Why don’t you run along?”

“Sorry,” Lola says. “Can’t do that.”

Feet scuffle against the forest floor, and a series of thuds and grunts leads me to one conclusion: Lola is fighting these weres.

Everything in me wants to get up, to help her, but my body won’t cooperate. I fight to open my eyes, but I can’t.

Someone tumbles to the ground beside me, their body brushing up against mine before jumping back into the fray.

How long can Lola hold out in a two-against-one battle? How long before reinforcements arrive?

Lola grunts and growls and a heavy weight thuds to the ground. Before I can wonder what they've done to her, rapid footfalls approach. As the newcomers skid to a stop nearby, another weight drops to the forest floor.

"It's about time you guys showed up." Lola's tone is casual, if a little breathless.

"Did you just take down both of those weres by yourself?" Dagny asks, a distinct note of awe in her tone.

"That's my girl," Brady says.

A crack rends the air, followed by an ominous creaking. Dagny yelps.

"Can you cast a confusion charm?" Lola asks.

It takes a moment for Dagny to respond. "Um... Yeah. Yes, I can."

Hands touch my cheeks. "Are you okay?" Brady asks.

I finally force open my eyes, but my vision is blurry. "What happened?"

"You're safe," he says. "Luke, too."

"As soon as Dagny casts the confusion charm, we can get out of here." Lola is an indistinct blob behind Brady. "With any luck, these two won't remember what they saw and they'll think a tree fell and knocked them unconscious."

I try to sit, but my muscles are like jelly. "What's wrong with me?"

“It’s the charm,” Dagny says, her voice heavy with concern. She presses a hand to my forehead. “I didn’t think. The stone acts as a focus for the spell. You didn’t have it pressed to your forehead when the glamor started wearing off, so the magic kind of went everywhere instead of out through one spot.”

The world comes back into focus. My hands and arms are back to normal. Dagny crouches in front of me, face creased with concern. Lola stands beside a newly felled tree, casting watchful glances at the man and woman pinned under its trunk.

Luke groans as he sits up. Every bit of him is normal, from his dark blond hair to his broad shoulders to the irritated look on his face. “That sucked. Let’s not do it again.”

“Unfortunately, you’re gonna have to,” Brady says. “As these two just showed us, it’s dangerous for you to look like a vampire around here. And we’ve still got a lot of land to cover before we get to where the council is.”

Dagny presses a pebble into my hand and offers a second to Luke. “Next time the spell starts to wear off, put this to your head again.”

Luke hesitates before plucking the stone from her fingers. We press them to our foreheads at the same time. I brace for the agonizing burn I experienced moments before, but it doesn’t come. The sweeping warmth and tingling is a welcome change from the earlier assault.

I’m pocketing the charm when crashes sound through the nearby trees.

“We should get going,” Lola says.

“Couldn’t agree more.” Luke pops to his feet, back to looking like the slender brunette werewolf, and opens his arms to Dagny, who allows him to pick her up.

Brady helps me to my feet as a shout cuts through the air. The person is too far away for me to make out his words, but the fact I can hear him at all means he’s too close. They’ll be here soon, and I don’t want to be in the vicinity when they find their fallen friends.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

WE MEET with three more packs without incident.

Things change when we speak to the last one.

Arnold, the pack's alpha, crosses his thick arms over his broad chest and snorts when we explain our request. A jagged scar runs from his left temple to his jaw, and his dark eyes survey us with open distrust.

“Just like witches,” he mutters. “Always late to the party. Of course they're interested in doing something about the vampires now that someone attacked one of their precious sanctuaries. I bet now they'll want to take credit for the work we've begun.”

Brady and I exchange glances. “What work is that?”

“The resistance, of course,” Arnold says as if it should be obvious. “Got a coalition five packs strong now. Had to do something to stop those demon leeches.”

Luke draws his shoulders back as he takes a half step forward. “You can't have too much of a problem with vampires up here, can you? It's not exactly a metropolitan area. Vampires tend to congregate where there are—you know—people.”

“And that’s part of the reason my pack lives up here,” Arnold says. “We don’t want trouble. But now that trouble’s found us, we won’t hesitate to fight.”

“What trouble is that?” I ask.

“They’re picking us off!” Arnold spreads his arms wide, making him appear larger and more menacing than he already does. “It started a few weeks back. A group from my pack—including both my betas—went into town to shoot some pool. They never came back. I can’t contact them, can’t locate them. Few days later, a search party went missing. Only reason I know they’re still alive is I haven’t felt ’em die. We’ve been staying pretty close to home since then, but I heard from my buddy who’s the alpha of a pack east of here that he’s had some weres go missing too. That’s when we started the coalition. We gotta work together if we’re gonna stop those leeches.”

His story makes my stomach twist. “Have any weres gotten away? Evaded capture?”

He shakes his head.

I bite my lower lip. “Then how do you know it’s vampires taking them?”

His brow furrows and he looks at me like I must be crazy. “Who else would it be?”

Brady’s voice rings in my mind: *You think it’s the witches?*

Yes. Xander figured out the only way to create a hybrid was to start with a werewolf. They’re already searching for me; I suppose they want to have a good supply of weres for when they finally get their hands on me. The question remains why they would want to create hybrids in the first place.

This changes things. Lola glances at me out of the corner of her eyes. *If the witches are kidnapping werewolves, everyone we're sending their way is in danger.*

It's too late to do anything about that now. I don't like the idea of risking more weres, but now that the message is out there, we can't stop them from showing up if we tried.

"If you want to send a delegation, the meeting starts at sundown," Brady says. "If not, that's fine. But either way, know that a lot of weres will be coming through today."

Arnold nods. "I understand."

"And if you could pass on the information to your coalition, we'd appreciate it," Lola says.

Arnold scratches at his scar. "I do think they should know what's going on."

Without so much as a goodbye, he shifts into a jet black wolf and runs back toward the heart of his territory.

I rub the talisman. This is probably the last pack before we get to where Jack is. We're so close I ache to cover the remaining distance at top speed and rescue him now, but I submerge the desire. The smart thing to do is wait, even though nightfall feels a decade away.

We walk in silence for several minutes before Luke speaks. "Okay, is it seeming to anyone else like the witches council is trying to make a hybrid army?"

"The thought has crossed my mind," Brady says.

"But why?" I've been turning the situation over in my head and I can't get it to make sense. "If the council thinks one hybrid is dangerous, why on earth would they want to make more?"

“Beats me,” Lola says. The last thing we need is more hybrids. One is more than enough—no offense, Ava.”

“None taken.” I actually agree with her. I can’t begin to quantify how much trouble my existence has caused. When I first learned of the bounty, I assumed someone wanted to kill me, but now I’m worried a more sinister fate awaits me.

“There’s water not too far from here,” Brady says. “I vote we take a break to eat. We won’t be any use to Jack if we’re too weak to fight.”

“I thought the reason we were convincing all the weres to show up is so we won’t have to fight,” Dagny says.

“That’s the hope, but we have to be prepared.” Brady glances at me. “We can head to where they are right after. We should get a good look around the premises so we know what we’re dealing with.”

I nod mechanically. I know what he’s saying makes sense, but I’m getting antsy. We’re so close to Jack, but we may as well be hundreds of miles away.

But Brady’s right. We need to have a plan or else we’re liable to get captured ourselves. Then who would help Jack?

Still, I can’t shake the feeling there’s something we’re missing. I wish I knew what the witches were planning, and I hope I’m not walking into a trap.

CHAPTER THIRTY

WHEN I MET with the council before, they were in a small, quaint cabin—the kind a couple might rent for a romantic getaway. Since we first made the plan to come here, I’ve imagined something similar. I couldn’t have been more wrong.

The talisman leads us to a vast compound. An immense gray concrete block of a house looms in a forest clearing. The structure could almost be charming but for the dark curtains strung across each window.

And the wall.

Concrete blocks extend out behind the building in a massive circle. The walls are easily ten feet high, and Brady sneaks ahead to climb a tree and get a look beyond.

“Cages,” he reports when he returns to our location.

“What?” I ask, convinced I heard him wrong.

“It’s all they can be.” He rubs his hand down his face. “Rows and rows of them.” He swallows and meets my eyes. “Some were occupied.”

“Jack?” I stand, ready to climb the nearest tree myself.

Brady catches my wrist and tugs me back down. “We’re too far away to make anyone out. Getting closer now puts us

in danger of being discovered. We're no good to anyone if we're captured before we can even attempt a rescue mission."

Luke's eyebrow quirks. "No good to anyone? You mean no good to Jack, right?"

When Brady and Lola exchange glances, Luke runs his hands through his hair.

"You've got to be kidding me," he mutters. "You want to save them all, don't you?"

"Don't you?" Lola asks. "I get that you're only here because of your connection to Ava. You've probably got a million reasons to hate werewolves. But if the council wants them to make hybrids, we can't just leave them here."

"If they don't have Ava, they can't make hybrids," Luke says. "Going for Jack is a surgical mission. In, get him, out. No one needs to know we're there. But if we start breaking open dozens of cages, how long before someone notices us? They'll kill us and grab her, and then they'll have everything they need for whatever they're planning."

Brady sighs. "You don't have to help." His lips twitch and he takes in a deep breath. "Back after I was turned, I made friends with a vampire. Some stuff went down, and suffice it to say when it was over, I figured I could never trust someone like you again. You've shown me that's not the case. But this fight doesn't have to be yours. You can back out and none of us will think any less of you."

"Back out? Like hell." Luke glares at Brady like he'd enjoy nothing more than punching him in the face. "We came here for one reason, and that's what we're going to do. I'm not going to let your sissy werewolf feelings get in the way of

logic and screw up any chance we have at saving my little brother.”

The woods seem to fall silent as the words leave Luke’s mouth. Brady’s eyes are as round as the full moon and Lola’s jaw drops. The corners of Dagny’s lips twitch.

Brady recovers first. “Your...”

“Brother. Yeah.” Luke rubs his forehead. “Don’t tell Jack I let it slip. He’s pretty keen on keeping that little tidbit under wraps. For obvious reasons, right?”

Brady stares at Luke for a long moment before exhaling. “All right. We stick to the original plan. We’re here for Jack. We get in, get him, and get out. We’ll come for the other prisoners later. Bring reinforcements.”

“Hell, when the weres show up here, no way they don’t get curious about what’s behind that wall,” Lola says. “They might break everyone out themselves.”

“You’re right,” I murmur. “But that might not be a good thing. If they start attacking, the witches could go to lockdown mode or something.”

“Or it could provide us plenty of time to get Jack without anyone noticing because they’re too focused on the gang of werewolves at the front door,” Lola says.

Luke nudges Dagny with his elbow. “You’re not having one of your magic look-into-the-future moments, are you?”

She shakes her head. “I wish I could be more help.”

I lean across Luke and squeeze her hand. “Why don’t you walk us all through these charms you guys got? Once we’re inside, we may not have time to think before we have to act.”

She offers a smile. “That I can do.”

BY THE TIME the first weres arrive, we're ready.

Dagny takes care outfitting each of us with different spell-laden stones for the mission. Her blood purchased a large quantity, but there isn't much variety—and all have their limitations. Confusion charms are most potent when used on one individual—like the one Brady planted on Maya. If they're used to muddle the thoughts of more than one person, the effect will last exponentially shorter. Diffusion charms, like the one Brady used on Lola's silver staff, only disrupt magic for a matter of minutes. Using them against a witch throwing spells would be tricky at best.

From my back left pocket, I pull out a chunk of milky quartz the size of a quarter. On either side of me, my companions do the same. When I clutch it in my hand, an icy sensation seeps up my arm, into my chest, and throughout my body. I swivel my head from side to side and watch as Brady, Lola, Luke, and Dagny turn translucent and then transparent.

I guess that means the transparency charms work. Luke's relief permeates the thought he sends to us.

But they won't work forever, warns Dagny. *A spell like this is even harder to maintain than a glamor. If you start feeling any tingling at all, grab another stone immediately.*

It's not the first time she's warned us of this charm's limitations. She must be nervous—although possibly less so than if she were coming in with us.

It was Luke who suggested she stay and be our eyes and ears outside the compound. It makes sense not to bring her inside. I would never say it to her, but she would be a liability.

She's neither as fast nor as strong as the rest of us, and were she on the inside, we'd have to keep an eye out for her while we keep ourselves from being detected. Besides, it's smart to have someone watching out what's going on out here, and Brady and Lola's range has only expanded since their power manifested. We're pretty certain it will stretch as far as we need. If the werewolves do attempt to storm the building, we need to be able to get out before the fight comes to us.

I toss the used charm to the ground and rub my hands together. *Is everyone ready?*

You know me, Luke replies. *I was born ready.*

Let's do this, Lola agrees.

Walking while invisible is more difficult than I anticipated. I stumble over gnarled roots and almost fall on my face when I reach for a tree to steady myself and miss. The others have similar luck as we start our journey toward the compound.

By the time we make it to the clearing in which the building sits, I think I've gotten the hang of it. In any case, it's much easier to walk on the relatively level ground leading to the wall.

The only problem is the werewolves. The sun has barely dipped behind the treetops and already at least fifty weres stand in front of the concrete mansion. We circle them, but more arrive by the minute, some of their trajectories intersecting our own. The speeds they're coming in at make it difficult to avoid a collision. One wiry man who appears to be in his thirties must catch the back of Brady's foot because he goes sprawling behind me. He climbs back to his feet, bewildered, brushing his hands off on the thighs of his jeans, and mutters something about gophers before jogging the rest of the way to where the others are gathering.

Relief sweeps through me when we make it to the wall. One hurdle down.

A milky quartz appears in midair for a moment before it zooms up along the wall. It arcs gracefully for a moment before ricocheting off an invisible barrier and speeding in the opposite direction.

Barrier spell. Dagny was right. I fish into my back right pocket and pull out a dark blue stone. Folding it in my palm, I squeeze it twice in quick succession like Dagny told me.

A second milky quartz sails through the air. A soft scuffling echoes over the wall as it hits the ground inside.

Brady breathes a relieved sigh. *I'll go first and make sure the coast is clear.*

A muffled grunt is followed by the scrape of tennis shoes against concrete. I imagine the high walls are mostly to keep people from seeing inside because the distance isn't too great for a were to jump.

A soft thud lets us know Brady has touched down on the other side.

Clear. Come on over. One at a time—the hole isn't big.

I crouch and leap as high as I can. My fingers gain purchase on the top of the wall and I climb until I can swing my leg over.

I stumble when I hit the ground. Hands graze my back before finding my arms and pulling.

I yank away from the unexpected touch, preparing to fight whoever grabbed me. Of course things can't be this easy. I should have looked over the wall before jumping down here.

Hey, calm down. Just trying to help. Brady's words are soothing.

I breathe out and find his hand. He pulls me to my feet. *Sorry. I thought you were someone else.*

He doesn't release me. *Like who? Some guard? I told you it was clear.*

I find his other hand and squeeze it. *You wouldn't sell me out, right?*

He drops one of my hands and tries a couple of times before managing to squeeze my shoulder. *What do you think?*

I think too many things. Less than a week ago, Brady was a complete stranger. He's only part of this insanity now because I pulled him into it against his will. Although we've functioned like a pack since leaving the sanctuary, the only real bond he has is to Lola. I'd like to think he's here out of friendship, but although we can speak into each other's minds, I can't read his thoughts.

My fingers slip up onto his wrist and cover the leather cuff. *Don't betray me.*

A soft thud announces the arrival of someone else. *Does that fancy necklace give you any more specifics about where Jack is?* Luke asks.

I release Brady and my hand flies to my chest to cover the pendant. I'm about to say no when I feel a gentle pulse, like a heartbeat. I would typically believe I was imaging things, except for the fact that I'm currently camouflaged to look like someone else and invisible on top of that. Magic brought me this far. Maybe it will take me the rest of the way.

I take a few steps to my left and the pulse seems to slow. A few steps to my right and it throbs more quickly.

I think it'll lead us right to him.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

I LEAD the way toward the back of the house, my hand linked with Luke's. To our right is the wall; to the left is a series of cages. Their wire frames are stacked two high and end a few feet above my head. Each enclosure is no taller than about four feet and about the same wide. The ones we pass are empty, but I can smell weres nearby. According to Brady's reconnaissance, the prisoners are caged farther back—which is part of the reason we chose to enter here.

But as the talisman leads me away from those individuals, I can't help wondering why the witches wouldn't have Jack caged with them. It certainly would make this mission much faster and easier.

I approach the back door. *Dagny, what's the status outside?*

Even though she's at least a quarter of a mile away, Dagny's voice is clear in my head. *There are at least a hundred people out here, and more are arriving by the minute. The crowd is getting restless. I've seen some movement behind the curtain of one of the front windows.*

Good—our plan for distraction is working. I wish we could get a look beyond the door. Out of all the charms we have, not one allows us to see into the house. I reach for the

doorknob but hesitate. If someone is standing on the other side, there's no way they'll miss a door opening by itself.

Sound swells beyond the walls. The cadence is almost musical as it rises. After a few moments, it clarifies enough to understand it.

“Tell us now! Tell us now!” As the volume rises, each word of the chant hits like a punch. The weres are getting agitated now that the light is fading.

Dagny's voice fills my head: *The front door is opening.*

This is it. The distraction is working. My fingers curl around the doorknob, but before I can grip it, it twists against my palm.

I release it just before the door swings inward. I jump back, landing on someone's foot and knocking into at least two people. Our feet scuffle against the stone-strewn earth, but the sound is muffled by both the chants and the irritated voices of the men exiting the house.

“I thought they broke the connection between these dogs and their packs,” says the first guy out the door. His arms swing from his shoulders like limp noodles.

“I thought you knew better than to take witches at their word,” says the second guy. He's shorter than the first and passes a polished wooden stake from hand to hand. The two breeze past us, heading in the direction of the occupied cages.

Dammit, I know them. Luke's agitation laces his words. *They were part of my brood.*

Ice prickles down my back at the mention of the vampires he used to live with. *Like Xander?*

Yes. The tall one is Caleb, and Ronnie is the one with the stake. Someone stabbed him with it once, but they missed his heart. I've never seen him without it. Calls it his lucky stake.

Fascinating. But the door is still open—shouldn't we start moving?

Lola is right. I reach out and bump into an arm. I follow it down until I link my hand with his. Brady's. It's strange how I can tell despite not being able to see him. His hand is longer than Lola's and broader than Luke's. He squeezes my hand—our agreed signal to indicate we're all linked.

I creep forward and peek into the house, although such precautions aren't necessary. The hallway is clear, and I cross the threshold.

Although the floor is carpeted, there's no spring to it. It's as if someone just threw the material over the floorboards. The walls are dull grayish, marked with a horizontal white stripe down the center and vertical stripes at regular intervals. This drywall is new.

Realization dawns on me, as dazzling as bright lights in a dark room. This whole compound was built only recently. I'm not sure why it didn't come to me sooner. Why would the witches have a place like this ready? The one constant about witches everyone seems to agree on is that they keep to themselves. They don't interfere. They provide the sanctuaries, but they don't force anyone to live in them. Why then would they have a prison-like compound nestled here in the middle of the forest? Cassandra never mentioned anything about it, which leads me to believe it didn't exist while she headed the council. Ordinarily, I wouldn't think something like this could be built in a matter of weeks, but between magic and vampire laborers, I suppose anything is possible.

It seems foolish now that I didn't plan for running into vampires. I knew whoever wanted me was working with members of Luke's brood. Who knows how many more the council has convinced to align with them?

The steady pulse of the talisman guides me. My whole body is on alert—ears straining for voices or footsteps, eyes ceaselessly scanning for movement, muscles taut and ready to spring into action.

The hallway opens into a large room with vaulted ceilings. A massive circular table dominates the center, surrounded by high-backed wooden chairs. Stationed at intervals around the glistening table that seems hewn from the base of an ancient tree, the dozen seats look almost like thrones. While the hallway is unfinished, the walls of this room are painted a deep, rich red, and dark gray tile makes the floor look like the sky before a storm.

Two more halls connect to the room—one at the right and one straight ahead. There's a door on the left, and I'm leading the way toward it when the rushed slap of footsteps makes me freeze.

“What do you mean, you can't just send them away?”

The woman's voice makes the hair on my arms stand on end. Although I've only heard it once before, I would know it anywhere.

Kiara.

When Cassandra tried to convince the council I posed no threat to the world, Kiara staged a coup and took control of the group.

When she strides into the chamber, she looks exactly as I remember. Her dark red hair falls in a sleek sheet around her

shoulders. Of all the members of the council, she is clearly the youngest, appearing to be only in her twenties. Her steps are confident, if hurried, as she crosses the room, her head high and her shoulders back.

Scurrying several paces behind her is a man stooped not with age, but with the weight of Kiara's authority. I recognize him from the council, too—a man in his forties with salt-and-pepper hair. "I've already tried. They just shout louder. They're under the impression we want to address the sanctuary attack."

"I didn't expect news to travel so quickly," Kiara mutters as she enters the hall that leads to the front of the house. "Or anyone to care."

That's it, then. We were right—the council was behind the attack. That plus the bounty, kidnapping Jack, and the caged werewolves outside confirm they're the ones who want to make more hybrids. But why? When I met with the council, Kiara did everything she could to scare everyone into believing replicating myself was my end game. When did it turn into hers?

Brady squeezes my hand and I tear my gaze from where Kiara disappeared. There's no telling how long the distraction will last. I continue the remainder of the way through the chamber and edge toward the door. The pulse of the pendant quickens with every step. Jack is on the other side of this door—I know it.

I close my fingers around the knob and twist it slowly. I ease open the door just far enough that I can peek through the crack.

Brady tugs on my hand. *What is it? Are there guards?*

I almost wish there were guards on the other side. The sight would be far more welcome than the one that greets me. I swing open the door to reveal prison cells forming a corridor. Three six-by-six cubicles press in side to side and another set is stacked on top. Those six cells dead end into a wall of cells perpendicular to it. Dozens of small prisons fill this space.

Luke asks the question buzzing in my mind: *If they've got cages outside, what do they need cells for?*

I'm not sure I want to know. Brady squeezes my hand again. *Let's find Jack and get out of here.*

I can't agree more. The first six cells are empty. I drop Brady's hand and jog past them. The pendant pulses so frequently now I doubt I could pick up on any increase. Jack is in one of these cells—I just have to find him. I pad silently across the concrete floor, head swiveling as I search for any sign of Jack.

I've got at least a half dozen prisoners so far. There's an edge to Brady's voice. I know it doesn't sit well with him that we're not here to save them all, but I stand by my earlier assessment.

About halfway down the second corridor is a cell with a cot inside. I dart to it, but the figure lying on it is a woman with long, greasy brown hair. My curiosity regarding her identity is tempered by my longing to locate Jack.

I'm nearly to the end of the line when a voice stops me in my tracks.

“Ava.”

I look down at my hands, but I see nothing. I'm still completely invisible. Then how can someone know I'm here?

“Up here.”

A hand appears between two bars of the last upper cell on the left. He wiggles his fingers before retracting his arm.

“You can’t fool a witch as old as me.”

I want to ignore the man, to turn and search for Jack in the other direction, but there’s something familiar about his voice that draws me in.

There’s no way to see him from down here, so I do the only thing I can think. Gripping the bars of the cell below him, I climb up. I couldn’t have done this as a human. My muscles were never even strong enough to do chin-ups in gym class. But now I scale the cell as nimbly as if I were a squirrel climbing a tree.

“Can all witches see me?” I ask.

“I can’t see you. I can sense you. One of the few things I’m still able to do. And, no, I doubt others could feel your presence as I can.”

I gain a foothold on the floor of the man’s cell and pull myself up to eye level with him.

The last time I saw him, although he looked old, he still radiated vitality and strength. His black hair is longer now than it was three weeks ago, and his graying goatee is wiry and unkempt, but there’s no mistaking who’s in the cell.

“Stephen.” I almost jump down from my perch on principle. He’s the member of the council who kept Cassandra prisoner when she saved me from being taken into custody.

“I imagine your feelings for me are less than favorable, but there are things you need to know and time is short.” His voice is low and urgent. “A better soul than Cassandra has never walked the earth, and I’ll take to my grave the shame of

turning against her. My only hope for redemption is that you can use what I know to stop Kiara.”

I search his face. Is this some kind of trap?

“Kiara didn’t punish me when Cassandra escaped. It wasn’t until I dared question her that she decided I couldn’t be trusted. I can’t guess how many days have passed, but I’ve spent all my waking hours focused on you, on figuring out a way to use what I know to help you. Other witches can’t sense you because they’re not searching with a pure heart.”

I found him! Luke’s jubilant voice echoes in my head.

My heart lurches. I need to get to Jack—but first, I want to know what Stephen has to say. “I’m here now. What is Kiara planning?”

“Since she joined the council, she’s been a voice of dissent. Where Cassandra led with hope and encouraged us to seek it, Kiara thinks the world is overrun with humans who care too little about the world we all share. She’s lobbied for a culling since day one.”

“A culling?”

Stephen exhales and he looks ten years older. “In her opinion, we should set the vampires loose on the humans to bring their population down to a more sustainable level.”

My jaw drops as I wrestle with the image. “She wants to let vampires go around killing humans?”

He nods. “Millions of them.”

The complete absurdity of the proposal is too much for me to take in. “The werewolves will never let that happen. We protect humans.”

“Indeed. There has always been a delicate balance. If vampires could feed until they were sated, there would be no humans left at all. No matter how many times Kiara brought up the idea, we would remind her that regardless of what we decided, the werewolves have free will and will do everything in their power to stop such a devastating event. There are considerably more werewolves in the world than vampires—and I know most of their kind would be more than willing to wipe out vampires altogether. But if there were no vampires, the human population would increase faster than it does now.”

“What does this have to do with Kiara’s plan now?”

“I should think it would be obvious,” Stephen says. “If vampires can’t do the job she wants done, she needs something else. Something stronger.”

“Hybrids?” My stomach twists. I’d love to say that there’s no way her plan would work, that hybrids would side with werewolves, but I’m living proof it’s not as simple as that. As much as I want to live my life as a were, human blood is a powerful temptation. If Kiara were to give a hybrid army a taste, they could unwittingly become an unstoppable force.

Ava, where are you? We’ve got Jack. Let’s get out of here.

Brady’s voice pulls me from my thoughts. Jack is free. We’ve got to get out of here before anyone notices.

I’m about to jump down, but I can’t—not yet.

“I’m going to get you out of here,” I say, examining the locking mechanism on the door. If Luke and the others could break Jack out, I should be able to do the same.

Stephen shakes his head. “Leave me. I’ll only slow you down. I’m not long for the world anyway.”

I stop scrutinizing the lock and look at him. “What do you mean?”

A corner of his mouth quirks upward. “Just what it sounds like. I’m dying, Ava. Kiara has been siphoning off my magic since she locked me up. As it leaves me, I only grow weaker.”

“Is that what’s wrong with Cassandra?” If her message the other day is any indication, she hasn’t gotten any better since I’ve been away.

He gives a solemn nod. “Kiara insisted someone as powerful as Cassandra would have to be subdued or she could break through any enchantment binding her. With her magic diminished, time is catching up with her. But, knowing how strong she is, she’ll probably still outlive me.” He lifts his chin toward the far end of the room. “Go. Find a way to stop Kiara before it’s too late.”

I want to tell him I will, that he can count on me, but I’m not sure I believe the words myself. Instead, I jump to the ground and run back the way I came.

Where are you? I fight the urge to trust my eyes. If they’ve given Jack a transparency charm, I won’t be able to see any of them.

Ten feet in front of you.

Jack’s voice—even the echoey version in my head—is enough to electrify every cell in my body. I want to run straight into his arms, but there’s no way of knowing where he’s standing. I’m just as likely to bypass him completely, or to run into Luke or Brady or Lola.

Then the oddness of his words hits me. *How do you know where I am?*

You’re starting to shimmer.

I look down at my hands. Sure enough, I can make out a faint outline. I'll have to use another charm before we leave the room, but for the moment, maybe it's good I'm slightly visible. Our reunion will be so much easier if we don't have to fumble around to find each other.

But does Jack even want to kiss me? To hold me? Guilt claws at my insides when I remember what happened before we parted ways. I almost lost control. I almost fed on a wounded girl. I could have killed her. Our parting wasn't overly warm. It felt as if he closed himself off to me. What I wouldn't give to be able to search his eyes now to see if the wall he erected is still in place.

A hand slips into mine and I almost sigh with relief when I realize it doesn't belong to Jack.

Brady gives my fingers a quick squeeze. *You can have a real reunion when we're safe. Since you got a weak spell, you'd better use another stone so we can get out of here.*

My mind spins as I dig into my pocket for another milky quartz. Obviously getting out of here is important, but is there another reason for keeping me from Jack right now? Is Brady stepping in at Jack's request? Is Jack so repulsed by the monster he saw that he can't stand to touch me?

Brady tugs me forward and I have no choice but to follow along. I don't know who's leading us, and I don't care. It's like my mind only has room for one thing—whether Jack has forgiven me or not.

The quartz is heavy in my hand. As we exit back into the main chamber, I squeeze the stone and ice spreads up my arm and through my body as the spell activates.

We're almost to the hallway that leads to the back door when someone enters the chamber from the archway opposite it.

"Why is that door open?" Kiara asks.

"I don't know."

I don't have to glance over my shoulder to recognize the speaker. It's Caleb, Luke's old brood-mate. He must have finished his inspection of the cages.

"Well then go check," Kiara says slowly, like she's speaking to someone who has difficulty understanding English. Rapid footfalls indicate Caleb's departure. "Ronnie, go round up your friends. Once Magda and Ellis are done with our guests outside, you'll have your work cut out for you. We'll be full ahead of schedule, but that shouldn't be a problem."

My stomach twists. What have we done? All those weres are out there because of us—and now they're going to become Kiara's prisoners.

Dagny, can you hear me?

Yes. The crowd is getting antsy. A woman with red hair spoke to them for a few minutes, but I'm too far away to hear what she said. Two older witches are out there now.

Whatever spell they plan to cast to incapacitate the weres could activate at any moment. *Is there any way you can get the crowd to disperse?*

How?

I don't know, but if they don't get out of there fast, they're going to wind up in here.

There's a long pause before I hear Dagny again. *I'll figure something out.*

The path to the back door is clear, and I'm only a few feet away when Caleb's quick footsteps echo against the vaulted ceiling again.

“He's gone.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

“SEARCH EVERYWHERE!” Kiara screeches. “That door was closed when I left this room. They must still be close.”

Lola’s voice echoes in my mind. *We have to get out of here.*

Kiara is still standing directly opposite the hallway we’re in. She’s not facing us directly, but any movement would draw her attention. *You can’t open the door—she’ll see us.*

I’m open to suggestions, Lola returns. *Can we use a confusion charm? Or a sleeping spell?*

I drop Brady’s hand and dig into my front right pocket for a black pebble. If I get it close enough to Kiara and the others, it might muddle their minds just long enough for us to escape.

I pull my arm back, but before I can launch the charm, the front door bangs open. An older woman with salt-and-pepper hair bounds into the room and points behind her. “There’s a fire! The werewolves are scattering.”

At Kiara’s momentary distraction, the back door swings open and Brady pulls me forward as we scurry over the threshold. As soon as I’m outside, I release Brady and turn to close the door behind us. As the knob gives a gentle click, I

release a relieved sigh. We're out. And in a few moments, we'll be free.

I run to the wall where we entered and slam into Brady several feet from it. There's a quiet swish of gravel as someone leaps to clear the concrete barrier.

"Ah! Damn!" Luke cries as he crashes back to the ground.

"The diffusion spell must've worn off," Brady whispers.

"And we couldn't have checked that before I jumped?"

Night has fallen in earnest, cloaking the compound in darkness. But as a dark blue stone materializes in front of me, something else becomes visible, too.

"I think your transparency spells are wearing off," I say as the outlines of Brady, Luke, and Lola begin shimmering in front of me.

"Good thing we don't need them anymore," Brady says as he launches the charmed rock over the wall.

Luke lifts his hand and brings it down onto an invisible solid object beside him. "Up and over, brother." He bends down and holds out laced fingers. We all jumped over just fine on our own to get in. Why does Jack need a boost to get out?

Anger churns in me like a restless sea. What have they been doing to him? My wolf demands I turn around and make them pay for harming my half, but my human brain overrules her. We're so close to freedom; I can't jeopardize that.

Jack's invisible feet scabble against the wall, struggling to gain purchase. Luke reaches out to help and is thanked with a kick to the side of his face.

"We may want to hurry up here," Lola murmurs.

“I’ve got it,” Jack whispers. After a few more scrapes of his shoes against the concrete, there’s a solid thud and a soft “oof” as he lands on the other side of the barrier.

Luke, whose form is growing more solid by the moment, leaps upward, easily grabbing the top of the wall and pulling himself onto it. When Brady and Lola approach, they look a bit like movie ghosts—dark gray outlines of who they’re supposed to be.

The back door bangs open. “Look, over there!” yells Caleb.

I dart behind the nearest row of cages and crouch, despite the fact that I’m still invisible. Brady and Lola jump, arms outstretched to grip the top of the wall, but when they’re level with it, their hands don’t grab hold. Bodies frozen in the gentle arc of a leap, they plummet back to the ground and fall over.

Caleb chuckles darkly as he takes slow, purposeful strides toward them. “You’re not the only ones with a little magic on your side,” he says, shaking back the sleeve of his dark cotton shirt to reveal a thick hemp bracelet woven with chunks of stone in varying colors.

I attempt to lunge at him, but my own body is frozen in place. Whatever charm Caleb used affected me too.

“Who do we have here?”

I’ve been so focused on Caleb’s movements that I didn’t detect Kiara’s arrival. She glides from the back door, eyes tracing my friends’ outlines before skimming the vicinity.

She stops even with me. “I assume you used a similar charm on the hybrid’s half.” She holds her hand up and an eerie cerulean light emanates from her palm. As it shines on Brady and Lola, the remainder of their forms fills in, making

them entirely visible. As the light sweeps back and forth along the wall, they return to their semi-translucent state.

She fists her hand and the light disappears. “Of course you let the prisoner out before you.” She swivels her gaze to Caleb. “These two are useless to me. Kill them and join Ronnie and the others.”

I want to scream out, but my mouth won’t open. I’m helpless as Caleb starts toward my friends. They’ll be dead in moments. And what of me? I can’t move. How long before Kiara’s spell wears off? How long before the charms I’ve cast upon myself dissipate?

Have I come this far only to die now? What has the point even been? My becoming what I am only staved off my death by a couple of weeks—and now more lives will be taken because of me.

Poor Brady. When I took him hostage, I never intended to harm him. I was just trying to keep Jack safe.

Well, Jack is safe now, but at what cost?

Brady’s muffled voice hums through his closed mouth as Caleb draws nearer. His desperate chant speeds up with every fraction of an inch Caleb moves and the cadence becomes clear and almost familiar.

Kiara slows her progress toward the door and turns back. “Wait,” she says as Caleb draws back a clawed hand. He drops it to his side with an audible slap and casts a sullen look over his shoulder, which Kiara ignores. Her eyes are fixed on Brady. She points a finger at his prone body and his arms swing down from over his head to his sides and he propels himself into a sitting position. The momentum almost topples him and Kiara chuckles throatily. “Don’t bother—your legs

are still frozen. Tell me what you were trying to say or I'll let Caleb continue."

"The hybrid," Brady says. "I know where she is. I'll tell you on two conditions: my half and I can't be harmed by you or anyone working with you, and no matter what, we go free."

An icy fist of dread clenches in my stomach. He wouldn't. What's more—he can't. He must have a plan—I only wish I knew what it was. I don't know whether something in the charm Caleb used against him knocked out our mindspeak connection or if there's some other reason it's no longer working, but I can't contact him.

Caleb snorts. "He'll just lie and get away while we look."

Kiara silences him with a glance. She snaps her fingers and two lengths of red ribbon appear in her hand. Murmuring, she slips them both through her thumb and forefinger, as if speaking the spell through every inch of the material. She ties one around her left wrist and crosses to Brady with the other. "This ribbon binds my promise," she tells him as she crouches to his level. "If you tell me where she is, I'll release you and your half. If you lie, I'll let Caleb do what he's itching to."

"How do I know that's really what this little scrap is for?" Brady asks.

Kiara ties it in a simple bow around his wrist. "Try to remove it."

He tugs at the end, but the knot doesn't loosen. He attempts to slip it over his hand, but it doesn't budge.

"Now press your finger to it. You'll feel the spell's intent."

Brady does as she instructs. His body twitches when his finger pushes down on the ribbon. When he removes it, he nods.

“Now what assurance do I have that you won’t lie?” she asks, rising back to her full height.

“Besides the fact that if I do you’ll have me killed?” Brady asks.

Kiara tilts her head. “Don’t think I don’t recognize that cuff for what it is. If you’ve been ordered to lie at any cost, it doesn’t matter that I’ve bound my promise.”

Brady’s eyes drop to the leather bracelet, his shoulders sagging as he sighs. He loops his finger beneath it and pulls it off in an effortless motion.

My stomach drops. He shouldn’t be able to do that. Jack told me I was the only one who would be able to remove it.

Unless... Unless it’s not working anymore. If the initiation at the sanctuary cut off our pack bonds, why wouldn’t it also undo the magic making him obey me?

“I assume that’s enough to convince you,” he says, tossing the cuff at her feet.

She turns it over with the toe of her shoe. “Where is she?”

A muscle in Brady’s jaw jumps. “Here. She’s been here the whole time.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

“KILL THEM,” Kiara says, spinning on her heel.

A leer stretches across Caleb’s face as he descends on Brady. But before his clawed hand can make contact with Brady’s chest, he’s propelled backward as if by the force of a small explosion. The red ribbon on his wrist glows faintly.

“*Ostende te!*” Kiara shouts, turning her back to the house and outstretching her arms.

It’s as if a hot wind blows against my body—except my hair doesn’t move. A thick blanket of air envelops me before dissipating almost as quickly as it came.

A smile stretches Kiara’s lips and she strides slowly toward me. “There you are.”

As she approaches, everything in me recoils. I try to run, but my muscles are still locked.

“I’ve been looking for you.” She makes a shooing motion at Brady and Lola.

In the next instant, the two are on their feet. Lola turns to look at me, an apology in her eyes, but Brady cups her shoulder and turns her toward the wall. They both jump up—Lola a half second later than her half—and are over the barrier

in the space of a breath, leaving me alone with Kiara and Caleb.

With a snap of her fingers, my body goes limp. I crumple to the ground as if my bones have turned to jelly. Caleb hefts me onto his shoulder and my arms and legs dangle and flop uselessly as he carries me into the house.

When we enter the red-walled chamber, I expect us to go left toward the room with all the cells, but Caleb pads toward the hallway on the right.

“Put her in here with the other one,” Kiara says. “Then find Ronnie and bring him back here.”

Caleb crosses the threshold into a room with a concrete floor. A few strides in, he flings me over his shoulder and I slam flat on my back. Stars pop in front of my eyes as a door slams shut. Instinctively, I turn toward the sound of the noise, surprised when my body obeys. Pressing down a wave of dizziness, I spring to my feet and leap toward the door, only to be zapped by something like an electric current that makes my body hum a dangerous note.

I stumble backward, tripping over my feet and landing flat on my rear end. On the floor in a wide circle surrounding me are translucent orange stones, each about the size of my hand. Their jagged edges glint with the light from the one fluorescent fixture hanging in the center of the room. I reach for the nearest one.

“I wouldn’t do that.”

I jump. I thought I was alone in here. The room is long and painted shades of gray and reminds me of the unfinished basement at my aunt’s house—the one I lived in before she

and her boyfriend decided I took up too much space in their home and gave me over to foster care.

Sitting on the floor a few yards from me, surrounded by a matching set of orange crystals, is Mel. For a moment, I'm too shocked to react. Why would the council want her? Why is she here, not in a cell like Stephen? But the question that comes out is, "When did they capture you?"

Her lips twitch and she shakes her head. "Weeks ago."

I study her face, but there's no indication she's lying. "But I saw you."

"I told you I wasn't the enemy." She scoots closer to the stones penning her in. "After I left the enclave, my pack had to find somewhere to stay."

I rankle at her use of the words "my pack," but I don't fight her on it. I suppose when those weres chose to leave with her, that's what they became—although I can't imagine Mel as the alpha of anything.

"I know a handful of alphas in the area, and one of them agreed to let us stay with him until we could establish ourselves. One day, when I was out with a group to talk with some packs farther north of maybe annexing some of their territory for a season, we were attacked by vampires. Most of us got away, but they captured Marisol."

Her name hits me like a punch to the stomach. The ever-present ache of her absence throbs and I suck in a breath. "Was it Xander and his group?"

Mel nods. "We mounted a rescue mission, but they were expecting us." She grimaces. "I woke up in a cell. Kiara had a proposition for me: give her you and she'd let me and my pack go."

I snort. “I’m sure you jumped at the opportunity.”

“I didn’t, actually—but I don’t blame you for thinking I would.” She shakes her head. “I hated that you took my spot—I won’t lie about that. But when I found out what you are, it wasn’t about my hurt pride anymore—it was about legitimate fear of what you are. I never expected you wouldn’t be the dangerous one.”

I want to believe what Mel is saying, but I can’t shake the feeling she’s trying to play me. Is that the reason Kiara had Caleb drop me here? Is Mel only doing what they want her to? “None of this explains what you were doing at the sanctuary when it was attacked.”

“Marisol died.” Her russet eyes lock on mine. “I had no idea what an alpha feels when a pack member dies. I wasn’t prepared for the hole her life would leave behind. Kiara said she’d have her vampires kill every other member of my pack if I didn’t bring you to her.”

“You put out the bounty, didn’t you?”

She nods. “I just wanted to keep my pack safe.”

Can I fault her for her choice? If someone gave me the opportunity to save Marisol, is there anything I wouldn’t have done?

The door opens and Kiara strides in. She points at Mel and says, “Sleep.”

Mel sinks to the floor as if she fainted.

I stand, careful not to move too close to the perimeter stones. “You’ve got me. Now what? Force me to make a hybrid army so you can murder millions of innocent people?”

Kiara smirks as she begins to circle me. “I see you spoke to Stephen.”

“Too bad your master plan won’t work,” I say. “Or didn’t you realize your first hybrid soldier didn’t make it?”

“Marisol. Yes.”

“Get her name out of your mouth!” I lunge forward, but the charge from the invisible barrier knocks me back a half step.

Kiara continues around my enclosure as if she didn’t hear me. “It was the most curious thing. Her transformation seemed complete in a manner of a few hours. We supplied her with blood and she seemed fine—but only for a couple of days. We assumed she needed more blood, but no matter how much she drank, her condition worsened.” She stops and turns to face me. “After she died, I had a revelation. If it wasn’t the quantity of blood that was important to complete the transformation, there must be a quality that was lacking.”

I fight to keep my face neutral. I had a similar experience after I turned. I thought everything was fine until I started feeling sick and weak. Something inside me led me to Luke, and after he gave me some blood, I got better—but only for a time.

“A hybrid shouldn’t exist. Part of the magic that binds vampires and werewolves prohibits it—which is why the two can’t infect each other. It stands to reason that such an extraordinary creature would require something very precious and rare to become what it is.” She tilts her head and flashes her teeth. “The blood of their half.”

Panic floods me. I’ve suspected the same thing. After my first taste of blood, I grew weak again quickly. It wasn’t until after I bit Jack that I felt better. If Kiara has figured out the

final ingredient in creating a hybrid, the only thing standing in the way of her making more is me.

“I’m glad Mel came up with the idea about the bounty,” she continues. “Once she made sure every supernatural being in the state was looking for you, it freed up my vampires to locate some very special guests.”

On cue, Caleb and Ronnie enter the room, each frog-marching a person in front of them. Both individuals have a black cloth bag over their head. Kiara nods at Caleb, who pulls the fabric away.

“I believe you know Fiona,” Kiara says as a pale blonde is revealed.

My first instinct is to go to her, but I temper it, remembering the shock the barrier will produce. Fiona, Marisol’s best friend, left the enclave with Mel. Fiona blinks placidly, her pupils wider than they should be. “What have you done to her?”

Kiara shrugs. “Nothing—besides find her half.” She indicates the second prisoner, but Ronnie doesn’t remove the covering from his head. “Now that you’re here, I can test my hypothesis.”

I’ve been here before. When Xander captured me, he threatened to kill people if I wouldn’t meet his demands. Now that I know what Kiara’s plan is, I can’t condemn anyone to life as a hybrid—regardless of consequences. “No matter what you do, I’m not biting anyone.”

She smiles indulgently. “I had a feeling you’d say that.” As she turns and treads toward the far wall, Caleb and Ronnie push their charges farther into the room and shove them down on matching metal folding chairs. They don’t bind either of

them, but I doubt they'll run. They've either been drugged or Kiara has worked some spell on them to make them compliant.

When Kiara pads back, she holds a large syringe tipped with a long needle. I step backward and am rewarded by the reverberating buzz of the barrier. I rock forward to separate from it, but Kiara stills my progress with a wave of her hand. The same spell she used earlier pins me in place now. My body vibrates with the current of the invisible wall surrounding me, but with another wave of her hand, Kiara dislocates one of the orange stones and the angry hum stops.

“Did you know a vampire has to choose to inject venom into a human in order to turn him?” Kiara glides closer. “It doesn't transfer with every bite, but it's always there, ready to go.”

She stands so close now that I can see the flecks of evergreen in her otherwise emerald eyes. She smiles again as she pushes my upper lip back from my teeth. “I don't need you to bite anyone,” she says as she jams the needle into my gums.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

KIARA MUST HAVE KNOCKED me out after taking my venom, because when I wake up, Fiona is on the floor and Caleb and Ronnie are nowhere in sight. Kiara now sits in the seat Fiona once occupied, head tilted as she studies Fiona.

I press my hands to the cool concrete to help me into a sitting position.

“She should be waking any time now,” Kiara says without looking at me. “I’ve been developing a serum to speed the turning process. So far, Fiona hasn’t shown any adverse reactions.”

My muscles tense with the desire to hit her. In addition to turning Fiona into the first soldier in her human-culling army, she’s also using her as a lab rat? “I thought witches were supposed to be kind and try to protect people.”

Kiara snorts, swiveling her gaze to meet mine. “I’m sure Cassandra gives that impression, but you’re wrong. Witches are charged with protecting nature and the natural order of things. We strive to live in balance with the environment. Humans are hard-wired to destroy. Power, greed—these things override any protective sense they may have.”

“Not all humans are like that,” I say.

“Yet look at the world. There are over seven billion people on the planet. How long do you think we can sustain that? Their existence has an undeniable effect on the environment. So many things about the way they live cause harm—and yet they continue to do them because they can. Power and greed are seductive motivators.”

“So your solution is murder?”

She stands and strides toward me. “Even humans understand the concept of population control. When there are—say—too many whitetail deer in an area—too many for that space to sustain—more hunting permits are given out to bring the number back to a sustainable level. Vampires already kill humans—just not in any significant number. I’m simply giving out more permits.”

My stomach lurches and I press my hand to my mouth for fear of being sick. I can’t fathom her justification. People are more than animals. They can be reasoned with—shown errors, taught. But instead of trying to change behaviors, her solution is to create a hybrid army to slaughter them.

Fiona twitches and Kiara crosses to her. She smooths the blonde hair away from Fiona’s face with such tenderness. It’s difficult to reconcile such a caring move with someone whose motives are so horrifying.

She stands as Fiona continues to toss and turn. She walks back to the drawers where she acquired the syringe and returns with a long rubber band and a fresh syringe. She crouches before Fiona’s half and ties the band around his upper arm before gliding the needle into his vein. She draws three small vials before returning to her workstation.

Fiona sits up, peering around the room groggily. When her eyes land on me, her brow furrows. “Am I dreaming?”

I shake my head. “I’m so sorry.”

“Never mind her,” Kiara says, returning. She holds a small glass filled with the man’s blood. “I need you to drink this.”

Fiona’s face scrunches. “Why?”

“Just do it.” There’s a hard edge under Kiara’s sickly-sweet tone.

Fiona takes the glass with quivering hands, staring at it like it might bite her. She holds it close to her body and stares down into it. “Is this...”

Then she smells it.

Fiona’s eyes flash red and her lips part as her teeth lengthen.

The scent floats to me and my incisors burn. How long has it been since I fed? Too long. I do my best not to breathe for fear that I may charge the barrier surrounding me. Fiona’s half isn’t a werewolf—he’s still human. And I want nothing more than to sate my hunger with his blood.

The glass trembles as Fiona brings it to her lips. She tips it slowly, and the liquid creeps toward her lips. But once the first drops spill onto her tongue, she knocks the rest back like a shot and looks expectantly at Kiara. “Is there more?”

Kiara locks eyes on me before responding. “There’s plenty more.”

WHEN IT BECOMES clear Fiona has become interested in snacking on her half, Kiara has her relocated.

“Are you going to turn him next?” I ask when Kiara returns. “Force Mel to make him a werewolf and then inject him with my venom?”

Kiara tilts her head. “Why on earth would I do that?”

It’s my turn to be confused. “You’re the one who wants to build an army.”

“I want an army I can control,” she says. “The half is leverage. Although, given Fiona’s response to human blood, I don’t think she’ll need much persuading.”

“So, what? You’ll threaten to kill her half if she doesn’t do what you say?” Although I try to make it sound like a ridiculous idea, I’m not sure how convincing I am. What wouldn’t I do to keep Jack safe? I rub the pendant under my shirt, but it provides no comfort, no clue as to where Jack is now. “What about the merged pairs? You’ll just be offing your hybrids if you kill their halves.”

She sighs, smiling like I’m a child trying to explain something that’s conceptually beyond her. “They’re not merged.”

The door opens and Caleb and Ronnie enter. They stand off to the side as if awaiting orders.

“As you said, if they were merged, it would take the teeth out of most threats I could levy against the non-hybrid half. Besides, I’m not sure a merged were could be turned into a hybrid. There’s that messy business of having a whole soul that might make it impossible for them to change.” She shrugs as if the idea is of little consequence. She glances at the vampires and cranes her neck as if looking for something. “Ah, you’ve got it,” she says, a smile spreading across her face.

Ronnie reaches into his back pocket and pulls out his lucky stake. “Of course.”

“Good.” She points at me and offers a smile. “Kill her and take care of the body.”

“What?” I take a step back and hold up my hands. “You can’t kill me. What about your hybrid army?”

“I still have plenty of your venom left,” she says. “It doesn’t take much to turn someone. Besides, there’s no reason to believe Fiona’s venom won’t work to make more.” She pulls a small syringe out of her pocket. “In fact, Mel will be our first test subject.”

As she crosses the room, she uncaps the needle. With a wave of her hand, she moves one of the orange stones, breaking the barrier. Mel still lies slumped on her side and Kiara sweeps the hair away from her neck and plunges the needle into her artery.

When she stands, she casts an irritated look at Robbie. “I gave you an order. You don’t have to wait for me to break the barrier. Remember, you can use your beloved stick to knock a stone out of the way.”

Ronnie shifts from foot to foot. “I know, it’s just...”

“What?” Kiara snaps.

“You said hybrids are super fast and I don’t want her getting away.”

Kiara tips her head back and releases a groan. “Are you telling me that between the two of you, you don’t think you can get the job done?” She holds up her hand. “Don’t answer that. Here.”

With another wave of her hand, she locks me in place.

This is it. This is how I'll die. There's no getting out of it this time. I always assumed my life would be spared because Kiara wants more hybrids, but I realize now how ridiculous the assumption was. Like she said—any hybrid could potentially make more. And since she's figured out a new hybrid has to drink the blood of their half to complete the transition, there's nothing to stop her from carrying out her plan.

A cruel smile twists Ronnie's mouth as he approaches. As Kiara instructed, he uses his stake to push a crystal out of alignment.

His breath reeks—sickly sweet and somehow familiar. He stands a mere foot away, studying me in a way that makes me long for death. I'm not a mind reader, but if his expression is any indication, he's wishing the two of us were alone so he could take advantage of my frozen state before completing his task.

He draws back his arm and one thought envelops me: Jack. I see his face, smell his campfire scent, feel the warmth of his body pressed against mine—the pressure of his lips, the gliding of his fingers. I can't believe I'll never see him again, but in the moment, I'm glad for one thing: I don't regret not merging with him because I don't want him to die because of me.

Fiery pain shoots through my chest as Ronnie plunges the stake into my heart.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

A KALEIDOSCOPE of colors flashes through my mind. Images—memories—spin by, too fast to catch, yet I feel them all. Summer days blowing dandelion fluff with my dad at the park. Dad pushing me higher and higher on the swing until I believed I could touch the sky. Christmas mornings of hot cocoa and fuzzy pajamas and listening to carols on the radio. The intense look on Luke’s face the night we met when I told him I thought I would die and he bit me. And Jack, always Jack, with that look in those gunmetal blue eyes like I’m the most precious treasure he could ever imagine. How did I never realize he looked at me that way?

Sound presses against me—distorted and indistinct. A repetitive swishing and a harsh cry.

“You don’t understand, that’s all.”

Ronnie’s voice. But how is that possible?

“It’s superstition, you dumbass.”

Caleb.

And that harsh cry—it’s a bird. A crow.

A final swish—the sound of a shovel against earth.

“One of these days, I’m gonna switch it out for a different one, and I bet you a million dollars you don’t even notice,”

Caleb continues.

“No way,” says Ronnie. “Not in a million years. I’m telling you, as long as I have this baby, nothing can touch me. I’m invincible.”

Burning sears through my chest, but not like when Ronnie stabbed the stake through my heart. This one has a distinctly different feel. It’s the sensation of healing.

A stake through a heart kills a vampire, but not a werewolf.

I’m still alive.

Rough hands grab my ankles and another set digs under my armpits. They lift me off the ground and inch me sideways. I open my eyelids just the crack to get a sense of my surroundings. I’m in the forest. It must be nearly daybreak because the patches of sky visible through the trees are turning the rosy color of sunrise. To my right, where the vampires are taking me, is a freshly dug hole.

My mind scrambles for a plan, but before I can formulate one, Caleb and Ronnie swing me in preparation of throwing me into my grave. Ronnie releases my feet a split second before Caleb lets go of my torso, and my instincts take over.

Ignoring the discomfort of my muscles knitting back together, I twist my lower body until my feet hit the ground and use the momentum to yank Caleb off his feet and swing him over my head. As he crashes to the ground, Ronnie stares at me, bewildered, fumbling for the weapon in his back pocket.

“But—I stabbed you!” he cries, clutching the picket in his fist. “You were dead!”

I jolt forward and grab the end of the stick. When he tries to pull it away, I take advantage of his body weight and sweep his legs from under him. His grip slips when he topples to the ground and I bring the tapered end down on his chest.

Ronnie sputters and blood fills his mouth. His eyes glass over and his body goes limp.

“I guess it’s my lucky stake now,” I murmur, yanking it out of his chest.

Crashing through the underbrush alerts me to Caleb’s movements—but he’s not coming at me. He’s running back toward the compound.

I take off at a run, ignoring the fire blazing around my heart. All this activity can’t be good for the healing process, but I can’t worry about that now. I push myself harder than should be necessary to catch Caleb. I knock into him from behind and he pinwheels forward. Leaping onto his back, I drive the stake through his heart.

I wipe the wood off on his shirt before standing. The compound is just visible in the distance. The smart move would be to put as much distance between myself and that place as possible.

Yet that’s exactly the opposite of what I intend to do.

I can’t let Kiara get away with what she’s doing. I may be the only one who can stop her.

I’ve tried not to think about it, but I have no idea what Brady and Lola did after they escaped—after Brady sold me out. I thought he considered me part of his temporary pack—his friend. And maybe he did—for as long as it was convenient. His ultimate loyalty was with Lola, and I can’t fault him for that. But what did he tell Jack and Luke when he

met up with them? Or did they run off as far away from all of this as possible? Or what if they were all attacked by Kiara's vampires?

I shake my head to clear it. There's no use obsessing over the unknowable. All I can do is focus on what's in front of me.

I pat my pockets and breathe a sigh of relief: I still have charms left. I dig an invisibility pebble out and squeeze it in my palm to activate it—but the icy sensation doesn't sweep through me. A glance at my hands reveals I'm still visible.

Damn. Whatever spell Kiara used to make me visible must have disabled all the invisibility spells. I pull out a glamor stone. Maybe a disguise will be enough to get me through. But when I press it to my forehead, nothing happens.

All my charms have been neutralized.

I kick at the ground, accidentally catching Caleb's arm with my toe. Something on his wrist draws my eye: a hemp bracelet woven with various stones. It's the one he used to cast a charm against Brady and Lola when we were escaping.

I undo the knot and ball the whole thing up in my hand, praying as I go that Kiara's magic didn't undo spells of her own making.

I approach the compound from behind and scan for the best place to hop over the wall, figuring that if Caleb and Ronnie got me outside, the bracelet might have some enchantment to allow them to pass through the barrier. But as I approach, the seemingly solid concrete shimmers in one particular spot. From my location within the tree line, one section of barricade reflects the morning sunlight differently than the others.

I lift the hand holding the bracelet and the shimmering increases to a flicker through which I catch glimpses of the cages beyond.

It's a back door.

Besides the early morning rustlings of animals, there is no sound or movement in the woods. There's no sign of the weres who gathered last night. As I streak toward the opening in the wall, I murmur a prayer to whoever might be listening that they all got away safely.

The burning ache of my healing wound is slowly overtaken by another sensation: hunger. It's been a while since I've fed—plus healing always saps whatever reserves my body has stored. Part of me wants to veer back into the forest to search for a deer—a rabbit, anything—but I fight it. The way into the compound is clear now; who knows if it will be in five minutes.

The hole in the barrier becomes more defined the nearer I am to it, but I still slow down as I reach it. I stretch out my arm, half expecting to encounter resistance, but it passes through unhindered. I draw it back and poke my head in, checking in either direction for guards. But the only people I see are the ones in cages.

The morning breeze brings with it the stench of unwashed bodies and excrement. Most appear asleep—either balled upright in a corner or curled and lying on the wire floor—but a few perk up when they see me, eyebrows raised almost expectantly as if hoping I've brought something for them.

I scan each of the faces and forms, not knowing what I'm searching for until I don't find it: None of my old pack members are here. Is it possible Kiara decided to keep the

leverage against Mel somewhere more secure? Perhaps in the cages inside?

I scurry toward the nearest bank of cages. While the insides seem to be made of standard stainless steel, the outside is draped with a fine silver mesh. Even the closure mechanisms have been outfitted with silver. I expect to see locks of some kind, but there are none. The witches must have banked on the silver being enough of a deterrent.

“What’re you doing?”

I turn toward the source of the harsh whisper. A man with at least a week’s worth of scraggly beard growth eyes me cautiously. At the sound of his voice, several nearby weres shift in their cages and some eyes crack open to see what’s going on.

“Are you strong enough to get away from here?” I ask, darting across the aisle.

“I’m sure as hell strong enough to try,” he says.

A smile tugs at the corners of my mouth. “I was hoping you’d say that.” I reach for the latch and he stretches out his hand like he means to stop me, only to freeze when I open the door without incident.

“What the...” he murmurs as he eases out of his confinement. “How’d you do that? You ain’t no witch.”

I hesitate, not sure how I should explain. But one thought pushes to the forefront of my mind: If these people are here because someone wanted to use me, they should know who’s releasing them.

“I’m Ava, the hybrid.” I ignore the quiet gasps of those close enough to have heard me. “You need to get as far away from here as possible.”

The man nods. “If you open the cages, I’ll help people out.”

I want to argue—after all, there’s no telling how much time we’ll have before someone discovers us. But I have no idea the condition these people are in, whether they’ve had adequate food and water. Those in the upper cages might not be able to jump down on their own. Having someone help could speed things along.

I make short work of undoing the latches on the cages in the immediate vicinity. While those prisoners are climbing out, I creep along the back edge of each row to check for more prisoners elsewhere. After aisles and aisles of nothing, I almost turn around, but a quiet groan pulls me further.

The two rows farthest from where I began are filled to capacity. None of them were here last night, or else I would have seen them.

They’re all new prisoners—weres captured because they showed up here to be my distraction.

I’m halfway through opening doors in the first row when people begin climbing out. They stand around unsurely, looking at each other but not speaking.

With my speed, I’m able to undo all the latches in about a minute. I wave my arms at the end of the aisle to get people’s attention and point to my left toward the door, but a glance in that direction reveals dozens of the first wave of prisoners standing beside the wall, some with hands pressed against it.

The bracelet. It must allow passage through the doorway when the wearer is near to it. With me on the other side of the compound, the barrier returned.

I motion for the others to follow me and run back to the first group. By the time I'm within ten feet of where the opening should be, it materializes again and people spill through it. I stand at its mouth and guide people through it. As soon as they're outside the compound, the weres streak for the forest. Each one that disappears among the trees is like a weight lifted off my chest.

As the last of the weres exit, a woman with a blonde pixie cut stops and faces me. "Aren't you coming?"

I shake my head. "There are still people inside. I can't leave them." My desire to free them goes beyond wanting to thwart Kiara's plans by leaving her without weres to convert to hybrids. I shouldn't feel such a strong pull to the weres who compose Mel's pack since they chose to join her because of their distrust and fear of me, but I can't help it.

She holds her arm out to stop the two remaining weres from passing—a guy whose brown bangs swoop across his forehead and another whose bald pate reflects the morning sunlight. "We'll help."

"You don't have to do that," I say.

"And you didn't have to save us," she says. "I recognize you, and I have a feeling the bounty out on you connects to this place somehow, which makes this possibly the last spot in the world you should be. But you're here. And we're with you."

The two guys nod their agreement and I step away from the doorway. "Then let's go."

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

THE ONLY THINGS on our side are speed and surprise.

So far it doesn't seem anyone has noticed the werewolves escaping. I can't decide whether the lack of obvious security measures is an act of hubris or if something else is in play. After my group broke into the compound last night, Kiara knows her defenses can be compromised. Does she not care now that she's finally created a hybrid of her own?

There are far too many unknowns to make this mission a success. I still have no idea how many people are inside the house. Besides Kiara, I know of at least two more witches. And while Caleb and Ronnie were the only vampires I saw, I'd heard talk of others. My knowledge of the inside is the only thing we have going for us, and even that is limited.

Despite this, my new companions are firm in their commitment to help.

The back hallway is empty, and if anyone is in the main chamber, they're not visible when we enter. I lead the way down the hall, inching forward silently as I strain to hear anything that might be happening ahead.

The hunger in my stomach spreads up into my chest and down into my legs. The weakness hasn't set in yet, but I know it's only a matter of time. I'm regretting my choice not to feed

when I was still in the forest, but there's no way to change that now. I'll be fine for a little while longer.

I have to be.

I'm more than halfway down when footsteps echo against the high ceilings of the main room. I freeze and hold my hand out so the others know to do the same.

"Who knows?" asks an unfamiliar female voice. "Their lazy asses are probably just sitting around. I bet when they get back, they'll have this whole story about how the ground was hard as concrete—something stupid."

"I bet you're right," says a second female. "But they're gonna owe us for taking their shift."

The two pad from the hallway on the right to the one straight across from ours, never sparing a glance in our direction.

What could they be talking about? A shift doing what? It only takes a moment of wondering to work out the who—Caleb and Ronnie should definitely have been back from burying me by now. We have to move fast before someone gets curious and goes looking for them.

After checking to make sure the coast is clear, I streak across the chamber to the doorway on the left. By the time the others arrive, I've pulled open the door. I usher them inside before following and closing the door behind us.

When the first set of cages dead-ends into the next, I send the guys to the right. "There's at least one girl over there," I whisper. "There's a witch at the end of the row. If he's willing, bring him too. But don't force him if he chooses to stay."

They nod and head off while the girl and I turn left. When we were looking for Jack, Brady reported seeing a number of

were locked up down here.

It doesn't take long before we come across the first prisoners. The locking mechanisms are more complex than the ones outside, but at least they're not silver. It takes a minute for me to get the hang of the release, but once I do, I open three cells in a row.

I recognize all three were as ones who left with Mel. The only one who meets my eye is a burly man named Tanner. "Thank you," he mouths.

He shouldn't thank me until we're outside the compound, but I don't say that.

There are more cells full than I was anticipating. By the time the bald guy and the one with the swooping bangs rejoin me, more than a dozen were stand in the aisle—some holding hands with friends, others scanning the area like they're expecting someone to catch us.

In the last occupied cell, a man sits in the corner, his arms wrapped around his knees and his head down. When the click sounds to indicate the catch has released, he visibly shrinks back.

"No—I don't want to go again," he murmurs into his legs.

Everyone else has been perfectly willing to exit their cell, so this guy's response baffles me. I step inside. "It's okay."

He shakes his head. "Don't take more of my blood—please. I just want to go home. I don't know what you're doing, but I don't want any part of it."

It's then that his scent registers. He's not a were—he's human. Is this Fiona's half? It would make sense if whatever spell Kiara used on him made him docile but not unaware of his surroundings.

“I’m going to do everything I can to get you home,” I say, reaching toward him. “But you have to come with me now.”

He looks up for the first time and stares at my hand for a long moment before his gaze travels to my face. He releases his legs and presses himself to standing without touching me. “Okay.”

That word is all I need. We exit the cell and join the others. We need a plan. I can’t bank on it being as easy to get back outside now that there are nearly two dozen of us.

I move toward the front of the pack and lead us toward the door. As the fastest of any of us, I’m the best line of defense against anyone who may discover us. But I’m also the only one with the ability to get us out of here.

The woman with the pixie cut edges her way to the front of the group and I grab her hand and press Caleb’s bracelet into it. “This will get you out. You remember where the doorway is, right?”

She nods. A question forms behind her eyes, but she doesn’t voice it.

Fiona wasn’t in any of the cells, and I assume Mel is still in the room where Kiara held me earlier. If I don’t get them, then freeing the weres here won’t matter. Kiara will still have everything she needs to build an army of hybrids.

We’re still several yards from the door when the knob twists. I freeze, flinging my arms out like a crossing guard to keep the others from continuing. We’ve got less than a second before the door opens—far too little time to hide everyone.

The only option is fight.

The door swings on its hinges to reveal a barrel-chested vampire whose dull brown eyes widen when they land on us.

“What the...”

As the words leave his mouth, I leap into action. With no time for hesitation, I streak toward him.

He turns his head and yells, “Hey, we got—”

My hands find either side of his head and I twist it as hard as I can. As I do, a boom resonates so deeply I feel it in my bones.

I skid to a stop as the vampire crumples to the ground. I stare at him, trying to figure out what magic could have caused that reaction. But the weres filling the hallway are staring off in multiple directions.

“Was that a bomb?” someone asks.

As if in response, another boom thunders from somewhere outside the compound. Now that it doesn't accompany an unrelated motion, I can recognize it for what it is: an explosion just as powerful-sounding as the ones that rocked the sanctuary.

But if these witches were behind that attack, who is behind this one?

I already know the answer. It's Jack—it has to be.

“You guys, get out of here now.” I point at the blonde with the bracelet. “Follow her. Get as far away from here as you can.”

The blonde nods once before dashing toward the back door. The rest of the group follows. The lone human, predictably, lags behind them. The others have disappeared down the hall before he's crossed the threshold into the chamber.

Another explosion rends the air—this one so close it shakes the ground. The guy loses his footing and sprawls to the ground, his face banging against the gray tile floor.

I rush to his side to help him to his feet. As he stands, he pinches the bridge of his nose with one hand and wipes above his upper lip with the other.

The scent of his blood makes my skin prickle. Hunger blazes stronger than before and my incisors burn as they lengthen.

I can detect his pulse beneath the skin of his neck. Just a mouthful—maybe two. Just enough to take off the edge of this consuming hunger.

I tear my eyes from his neck and fix them on his face. No. I will not feed on him. He's already terrified, and if I open his vein to start drinking, I may never stop. Kiara will be able to count his death toward the millions of others she hopes my kind will take for her.

I run my tongue over my front teeth, feeling the incisors as they shrink to normal size. "You have to get out of here."

He nods, looking somewhat bewildered. Before he's to the back hallway, the guy with the swooping bangs skids to a stop in the chamber. Without explanation, he scoops the human up in his arms and takes off toward the back door.

I run to the other hallway. Since I was carried in—and out—I didn't get a good look at this area of the house. There are three doors on the left, but only one on the right and I'm grateful for the obvious choice.

I twist the knob on the right and push open the door to reveal the long, gray room Kiara held me in. The circle of

stones that penned me in are exactly the way I remember them. Still lying in the center of a second circle is Mel.

She hasn't woken from the transformation, and I can't decide if that's a good thing or a bad one. I pull Ronnie's lucky stake out of my back pocket as I jog to her and knock the closest crystal out of the way. Still outside the circle, I crouch beside Mel and heft her unconscious body into my arms.

“Not so fast.”

Kiara stands in the doorway, a smile playing about the corners of her mouth.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

ANOTHER EXPLOSION SHAKES the Earth and she hitches a thumb over her shoulder. “This kind of brings things full circle, don’t you think? I attacked the sanctuary to get to you; now your friends are attacking my refuge to get to you.”

“Refuge?” I scoff. “Your prison, more like.” Not taking my eyes off her, I lower Mel to the floor. Simply getting her out of here isn’t enough. I have to end this. As long as Kiara is alive, the world is in danger.

I launch myself at her, pulling the stake out of my pocket in mid-air, but before I’ve crossed half the distance between us, a green blast of magic sends me careening off course.

I scramble to my feet and lunge for her again, but a second blast knocks me backward and my head bashes against the opposite wall.

“You can’t beat me,” she says, cradling an undulating emerald ball of energy in her upturned palm. “And as much fun as this is, it’s time for me to go. My vampires can’t hold off the attack forever. But I’ll leave you with a friend to play with.”

She steps backward and Fiona replaces her in the doorway. The girl I remember was soft-spoken and kind, but the one who stares at me now is anything but. I wish her eyes were

vacant like they were when she was first brought into this room instead of filled with fiery hatred.

Kiara wiggles her fingers over Fiona's shoulder before disappearing down the hall. I dart forward, but Fiona steps further into the room and kicks the door closed behind her. She's fast—faster than any supernatural I've seen.

As fast as me.

"I don't know what Kiara's done to you, but let me help you," I say, holding out my hand.

Fiona tips back her head and laughs, her shoulders shaking. I spring toward the door, but she aims a kick at my stomach that sends me sprawling. The stake clatters to the floor.

"Don't you mean what you did to me?" she asks, striding toward me with deliberate steps.

I scrabble back to my feet. "I didn't do anything."

She snorts as she gestures to her body. "You turned me into this! I left my pack—my family—to get away from you, but you found me anyway. And now I'm this... monster."

"You're not a monster—that's what Kiara wants you to be." My stake is about a yard from where Mel lies. I take a slow step sideways to get closer to it and Fiona mirrors my move.

"Kiara gave me a purpose," she counters. "I can take this curse and use it to save the world."

I take another step to the right. Is there some brainwashing spell Kiara could have used on Fiona, or does she really believe this? If her reason for leaving the enclave was rooted in fear, could Kiara have twisted her mind into believing her

only route to salvation as a hybrid is through the murder of innocents?

I fake left and take advantage of Fiona's momentary momentum shift to leap for the stake. I roll as I hit the ground, my fingers closing around it as I jump back to my feet.

Fiona comes at me so fast I almost can't react. I try to aim the stake at her heart, but she knocks my hand out of the way. Our feet tangle and I crash to the ground, the force pushing the air from my lungs. Fiona wrenches the wood from my hand and straddles my torso. My arms flail uselessly as I struggle to draw breath.

She flips the weapon in her hand so the tapered end faces me. A satisfied smile curls the edges of her lips. "I've wanted to do this since I found out what you are."

Oxygen rushes into my body and my limbs respond to my commands once more. I swipe the stake away from my heart with my left arm and reach toward Fiona's chest with my right hand. Pain sears through me when the wood drives into my left shoulder, and I let the sensation power my right arm as it pushes upward. My fingers rip through her flesh as if it were nothing more than tissue paper and cut through her ribcage with the ease of a scalpel. My hand continues through her as her momentum propels her on top of me.

Fiona's body jerks and shudders before going still. I drop the muscled mass of her heart from my hand as if it's a hot coal. Sucking in a breath, I roll to my side, shoving her lifeless body off me, and press my left hand to her neck for leverage as I pull my right arm from her ribcage.

Her flat eyes stare up at me accusingly. Hers isn't the first life I've taken. She's not even the only death I can tally up for today. But my vision swims as I look down at her. Despite the

fact that she was trying to kill me, I can't help thinking there was another way to handle it. Maybe I could have done something to help her.

A gaping pit opens up inside me, adding to the void left by Marisol's death. With this chasm inside me, is there any way I can ever feel whole?

My gaze drifts to Mel. Maybe I couldn't help Marisol or Fiona, but I *will* help her.

My left arm doesn't want to cooperate when I try to pick her up, and it takes a glance to remember how the stake pierced me. Blood carves streams down my arm, but it's nothing compared to the gore my right one is caked in.

Shouts echo somewhere in the house. I need to get out of here before one of Kiara's vampires finds me. I attempt to pick Mel up again, but a thought strikes me. I didn't stop Kiara from leaving, but I can stop her from making more hybrids.

I cross the room to where she kept her syringes. I rifle through each drawer until I find what I'm looking for: a vial filled nearly to the top with clear, thick liquid. I smash it on the concrete floor grind the glittering flecks of glass with the toes of my shoes.

"There," I mutter. "Make your army now."

Heavy footfalls sound in the hallway and I rush to Mel's side. I need to get her out of here, but how can I do that while fighting whoever's outside?

The doorknob twists and I snatch the stake off the floor, preparing to take down anyone who threatens either of us. But the form that fills the doorway drives any thoughts of malice from my mind.

“Jack?” I spring to my feet and rush toward him before remembering our last encounters. I know he’s come for me, but what if it’s just to make sure I’m not being turned into some kind of hybrid-creating machine? When he looks at me, does he still see the monster who almost fed on a girl who had already been attacked by vampires?

But when he sighs, when the relief chases the tension from his face, those doubts evaporate. He strides toward me, arms open, his gunmetal blue eyes filled with a joy I’ve never seen before. He pulls me to him despite my bloodied state and his body relaxes into mine, fitting against me like a piece that’s been missing.

I want to stay that way forever, but after a few moments he steps back and studies me. “What happened?” His eyes linger on the rip in my shirt over my heart.

“I’ll tell you later. I’ve been so worried about you since you escaped.” I cup his cheek with my left hand. “Is Luke okay? And Dagny?”

He nods. “Brady and Lola, too.”

I drop my hand, my lip curling at the sound of their names. “He betrayed me. He turned me over to Kiara.”

“I had to.”

I spin toward the sound of Brady’s voice. He stands just inside the doorway, Lola visible over his shoulder. I take a step toward him, fist drawn, but Jack closes his arm around my waist and pulls me back to him. “Hear him out.”

“If Kiara took Lola and me in—or if she killed us, which is probably the more likely option—how long do you think it would’ve been before someone discovered you? The spells hiding you wouldn’t have lasted forever, and she would’ve had

you anyway.” Brady takes a half step forward. “I knew we needed help if we wanted to stop Kiara. The vampires seem to be on her side, so it wasn’t like Luke could go get help. Dagny’s too out of the loop to have any sane witch contacts. And even if we ignore the fact that Jack was so weak he could barely escape to begin with, there was the possibility that the other weres might not want to help him because he’s your half.” His eyes graze my body. “It was a risk, but it wasn’t a betrayal.” He holds up his naked wrist. “That thing stopped working during the initiation. I stayed with you on my own.”

I try to find something to say in response. I can’t thank him for what he did, even if it kind of makes sense. The fact that he’s here as part of the force that came to save me should mean something. But where I should feel even an inkling of gratitude is only blackness.

Jack releases me and takes a step to his left. “Fiona,” he murmurs.

I nod. “Kiara figured it out. She figured out the secret ingredient for creating hybrids.” When Jack turns questioning eyes on me, I reach for his hand and squeeze it. “Blood of the half.”

His eyebrows draw together for a fraction of an instant before he nods. “What happened to Mel?”

“She’s transitioning.”

“How many more did she make?” Lola asks, stepping into the room.

“Just these two,” I say. “And I smashed the vial of my venom, so she shouldn’t be able to make any more.”

A sharp clap makes me jump, but I relax when Luke pushes past Lola. “Finally, some good news,” he says. “All

evil vampires accounted for. Well, their bodies, anyway. Bad witches are in custody and they're on their way to where Dagny and the interim council are set up. Evelyn and Cedrick are overseeing the transfer."

A bubble of hope blossoms in my chest. "Kiara?"

He shakes his head. "Teams are searching for her, but she's in the wind."

Jack laces his fingers with mine. "But we have you."

My heart swells at the warmth in his words. How could I ever have doubted his love for me? My actions in one moment don't define who I am. Jack understands that, even if I'm still learning. Nothing can break our connection because, in a very real sense, we are one.

Lola leans against the wall. "So, we took down Kiara's operation and there's no way for her to make hybrids to cull the world's human population? Sounds like a win to me."

I catch Brady's eye. "Me, too."

Luke points at Mel. "Is she coming with us back to wolf world?"

Jack squeezes my fingers. "Yeah. Let's go home."

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

EMOTIONS PINWHEEL through me when I return to the enclave. I was beginning to believe I'd never see it again. I've been away so long, I started to forget some of the minute details—the way the air is sweetened by the flowerbeds hanging from the porch rails of many of the cabins, the constant gurgle of the nearby stream. And despite the fact that the sanctuary witches cut me off from my connection to the pack, the lines of people waiting to greet me assure me I'm back home.

Jack tries to urge everyone to give me space, but I overrule him. After everything I've been through, I'm exhausted—but I'm not too tired to rejoice with my family. Sawyer's bone-crushing hug isn't too hard. Maggie's happy tears aren't awkward or unwelcome. And it doesn't bother me in the least that Lillie refuses to let go of my hand.

Still, it's not lost on me that Mel isn't treated to the same warm welcome. Those who noticed her before Cecily spirited her away to an unoccupied cabin eyed her with open distrust. I can't exactly blame them. The last thing they knew, she was banished from ever setting foot on our territory again. There will be a time to explain everything to them, but now isn't it.

Lillie and the others lead me to the meeting house, which has been decorated with balloons and “welcome home” banners. I lose track of time as Sawyer presses plate after plate full of food into my free hand. When Jack appears at my side to insist it’s finally time for them to allow me to get some rest, the pack is disappointed, but no one fights him. I can’t help wondering if he used an alpha command on them.

Lillie is visibly disappointed when I inform her I won’t be staying at our house, but she nods with understanding.

Jack’s cabin looks and smells exactly as I remember. I run my fingers over one of my sweatshirts draped over the arm of the couch.

“You should probably get some sleep,” Jack murmurs.

I hold my hand out to him. “Not yet.” When he laces his fingers with mine, I lead him to the sofa and sit.

He watches me closely, but says nothing. His gunmetal blue eyes burn with the intensity of an unasked question, but he holds back, giving me space.

The words I want to say have been swimming in my mind for longer than I’ve let myself realize. The events of the last day have thrown the shadowy areas of my life into sharp relief, and I’m grateful I’ve been given this chance.

I bring his hand to my lips and brush a kiss across his knuckles. “When Kiara had me, I thought I was going to die.” I finger the hole in my shirt over my heart. “I kind of did for a while.” Jack flinches, but I continue. “I was scared, but I also had this... peace. Because even if they killed me, you’d still be alive.”

He squeezes my hand. “Ava.”

I press my fingers to his lips to silence him. I can't allow him to turn this into an argument. "Let me say this." I blow out a breath as I search for the right words. "Everything that's happened since we met has been crazy. It's like every time we think we can relax, some new threat shows up. Even now, we don't know where Kiara is or what she might be up to. But I can't let that fear rule my life. I can't really live if I'm cutting myself off from people—from you—because I'm afraid something might happen. No matter what, danger and tragedy are always possibilities."

Jack's brow furrows as I speak and his mouth twitches like he's chewing on my words.

"Something Lola said after she and Brady merged stuck with me." I ignore the flash of longing that streaks across Jack's face and press on. "I couldn't believe she'd jump into it so quickly because she knows nothing about Brady, but she said she didn't have to know him because she knows herself. And even though we've lived two different lives, I know you, Jack—I know you in a way I've never known anyone before. You said you'll need time to tell me all the things you've been through, and I promise to give you that. But I don't want to hold back anymore because of it. That was never really the reason to begin with—it was an excuse because I was scared. But after everything I've been through these last weeks, it's crazy to let something so wonderful scare me."

Jack shifts on his cushion, his eyes not leaving my face as he works through my words. "What are you saying?"

I swallow as the desire that's blossomed from a spark to a consuming fire urges me to voice it. Once I say it, there will be no going back. To speak the words without being prepared to follow through is unacceptable.

But I'm tired of running. I'm ready to be whole.

"I want to merge."

Jack sucks in a breath as if it's his first. His face lights with wonder and disbelief. "Are you sure?"

I nod. "I'm terrified. But I'm sure."

Jack's lips press against mine almost before the words are out. His strong arm snakes around my back and he pulls me flush with his body. My skin tingles and sings at the contact.

Why have I held back for so long? How could I ever have doubted that the two of us belong together? I've wasted so much time, convinced I needed some verification beyond the simple fact that we're meant to be together. But the truth is the only thing I need has been in front of me the whole time.

I surrender to Jack's kiss and delight in the feeling of him pressed against me. I love him. I love him with every part of me, and I want to share everything with him. But as his hands rub my back and tangle in my hair, a thought nags me.

Shouldn't something be happening?

When Brady and Lola merged, energy from their union radiated off them. Shouldn't I be feeling something now? Shouldn't something be different?

Jack pulls away, the look on his face indicating he's come to the same conclusion. "What's wrong?"

The accusation in his tone stings. "I don't know. I don't understand why nothing's happening. You said there weren't any special words or anything—that making the decision was enough."

"It is." His eyebrows draw together as he studies me. "Which means you must not be ready."

His words hit me like a physical blow. “What?”

He stands, running his hand through his hair. “I’ve been ready to merge with you since I realized we were halves. I can accept everything that goes with that.”

I spring to my feet. “And you think I can’t?”

“What other explanation is there?” He squeezes his eyes closed and releases a breath. “I don’t want to fight.”

“You think I do?”

He shakes his head. When he lifts his gaze, it takes a moment before he meets mine. “Are you sure there’s nothing holding you back?”

I close the distance between us and take up his hands in mine. “Of course there’s nothing. I’m entirely yours.”

His face tightens, and for a moment I’m convinced he’s going to argue. But what could he say? I *am* his. We share a soul. I’m not a member of the pack at the moment—but that issue is easily solved. Besides, as I learned with Brady and Lola, the half connection trumps everything else. Does he really think there’s something else that could keep me from him?

Before I can ask, he leans forward to kiss my forehead. “Let’s get to bed. We can figure it out in the morning.”

I want to argue, but he’s right. It’s late, and we’ve both been through a lot in the past several days.

We go through the motions of preparing for sleep in silence. Once we’re settled on the mattress, I snuggle close to Jack. When I lean in for a goodnight kiss, he presses his lips to mine for a brief moment before rolling onto his side, away from me.

I try not to read anything into the action, but it's hard not to. Is he upset? It's a silly question. Of course he is—and so am I.

What I told him is the truth. I want to merge with him. I'd be lying if I said the idea doesn't scare me a little, but that's not enough to keep me from wanting to experience a life connected with my soul mate. I want to be whole—and I want Jack to be whole, too.

We can figure everything out tomorrow.

As I drift off to the sound of Jack's even breaths, I can almost believe everything will be okay.

Almost.

###

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SOUL CURSED

CHAPTER ONE

With each passing day, the enclave feels more like a prison.

I pace back and forth in the meeting house, each step marking time before the next search party returns. What I wouldn't give to be out looking myself—to be doing *something*—but it's out of the question. Tamara and Edgar, my constant companions, make sure of that. The two of them sit in folding chairs along the wall, taking turns staring at me. I'm not sure how they know when to switch, since they don't speak.

It's Tamara's turn now. Her steely blue eyes follow my progress, her plain face a mask of indifference. Beside her, Edgar bends over his phone, attention fixed on the glowing screen. I know better than to attempt to start a conversation with either of them. I learned very early—on day one—that the two have no interest in talking to me.

This is day ten.

The meeting house door swings open, bringing with it a gust of balmy air. Angela casts a wary glance at my companions as she crosses to me. Her brown hair is tied back in a high ponytail, errant tendrils fanning out around her face. A sheen of sweat shines on her forehead.

“No luck.” She pours herself a glass of water from the pitcher I set out and gulps it down.

I'm prepared for her report, but it still hits me like a physical blow. “Did you cover the entire area?”

She cocks an eyebrow as she brings a second glass of water to her lips. Of course she did.

“Where could they be?” The question is more for me than her. I've had parties searching around the clock for the last

week, but we haven't been able to locate more than a handful of the people Kiara was holding prisoner. A few were cause for celebration—former members of the pack who had left and now wanted to return. But no matter where we look, we can't find the one person we need.

Angela sets the glass back on the table. "I know I'm not scheduled to go back out for twelve hours, but I figure after a solid eight for sleep, I'll be good to go again."

I shake my head. "You don't have to do that."

"I want to. Duncan, too. We talked about it on the way back." Angela's lips twitch. "The three of us were good friends for a long time. We'll do anything to help her."

I reach for her hand and squeeze it. "Nine hours," I say. "Spend one of them with Mel."

Angela nods before bounding toward the door. I watch her, wishing I possessed a measure of her exuberance. All I feel is empty.

Without a word to my guards, I head for the door. They're on my heels in an instant.

The day is bright. Birds sing, and there isn't a cloud in the sky. But it's as if I'm enveloped by some kind of bubble that's keeping the sunshine from reaching me.

I head down the meeting house hill. The next pair isn't scheduled to check in for a couple of hours, and the familiar pang of hunger gnaws at my insides. As much as I wish I could streak off into the woods and find something to sate me, I know better. Tamara and Edgar have made it very clear what I am and am not allowed to do, and running off without them is strictly prohibited.

"Ava!"

The voice calls my name when I'm halfway down the road to my destination. Drew jogs toward me, and Tamara and Edgar stop a polite distance away. They don't extend such courtesy to many people, but I've never had to ask why Drew is among them: he's the head of the convocation, and his high-ranking role in werewolf leadership affords him some perks.

He has an athlete's build, and I've caught more than one of the pack's females watching him with unveiled interest since his arrival. Although he appears to be in his late twenties, his dark brown eyes have a timelessness that makes his true age difficult to pinpoint.

"I was hoping to have a word with you," Drew says as he comes to a stop a few feet from me.

I offer a tight-lipped smile. "I'm not exactly difficult to find."

"Were you checking in with one of your search parties?"

I don't like the way he says it. Although his tone is light—pleasant, even—his subtle emphasis on the word *your* pricks my skin like a needle. "Yes."

His eyebrows twitch like he's waiting for me to go on, but when it's clear I'm not going to offer any more details, he takes a step closer. "How long are you going to pursue this?"

My response comes without hesitation. "As long as it takes."

He sighs. His face softens. He almost looks like a friend preparing to deliver disappointing news—except he's not my friend. "You need to call it off. You're wasting manpower that could be better used searching for Kiara."

I shake my head and take a step back. "You've got more than half of the pack working for you, plus the convocation

and members from a half dozen nearby packs. If it's manpower you need, use your connections to spread the word to more alphas. I'm not giving up until we find him."

Drew crosses his arms over his chest. "Why? Why is this so important to you?"

I glance down the dirt road that circles the enclave. In about five hundred feet, it forks off to the left. Down that much smaller path, nestled between two hulking pine trees, is the cabin where Mel has been languishing in the week and a half since her return. "If we don't find her half soon, she'll die."

Drew's shoes crunch against the gravel as he steps toward me. "She held a vendetta against you for taking her spot in the pack hierarchy. She stabbed you, outed you as Jack's half—not once, but twice. She tried to kill him to take over this pack. And she's the one who put the bounty on you."

None of this information is news to me, but each detail stings. I can't argue with him. Mel did all those things. But despite our history, and despite the fact that I'm not her direct sire, I still feel an overwhelming desire to save her. "So, what? I just give up?"

He presses his lips together and is silent for a long moment. "It's hard enough protecting one hybrid."

I level a glare at him. There it is—the truth I've suspected despite the fact that he hasn't voiced it. "She didn't ask to be a hybrid any more than I did. Letting her die because she's an inconvenience to you is unacceptable."

Drew mounts a defense, but his words don't reach me. Movement inside the tree line catches my eye and my breath

catches when a man steps out onto the road several yards ahead of us.

Jack.

Without so much as a glance in my direction, he streaks off toward his house. I sprint after Jack, leaving Drew mid-sentence. I haven't seen Jack in over a week—since my first night back at the enclave. When I woke up the next morning, his half of the bed was empty but for a note on the pillow explaining he'd be back in a few days and that I should stay within the territory and listen to Drew.

His front door is closed when I reach it. I enter without knocking. Jack stands at the kitchen sink, head tipped back as he drains a glass of water. My fingers ache with the desire to touch him—to skate over the taut muscles of his arms, to slide through the wild tangles of his curls.

He pulls the glass from his mouth, but his hand freezes halfway down as his gaze lands on me. I step forward, smiling, but his lips don't twitch. His gunmetal-blue eyes are darker than usual.

“Hey.” The word comes out like a breath. I want to run into his arms, but I get the sense he wouldn't embrace me if I did. In his absence, I've been trying to convince myself that things would somehow be okay between us, that we would figure out what went wrong and move forward. But if the hard lines of his jaw are any indication, it was wishful thinking at best.

“I've been awake the better part of the last twenty-four hours,” he says, his voice steady. “I'm sure Drew will want to debrief me as soon as Cecily and the others get back. I was going to try to grab a quick nap before then.” He edges around

the counter separating the kitchen from the living room before heading down the hall.

I follow him. “I’ve got a couple of hours to kill. I’ll lie down with you.”

Instead of cutting to the right at his bedroom door, he continues down and opens a door on the left. “Actually, I’ll take a shower first.”

“I could join you there, too.” The words tumble out of my mouth before I can stop them. My cheeks burn. Despite all the nights we’ve spent cuddled in the same bed, Jack and I haven’t pushed physical boundaries past heated kissing sessions. But I’m ready for more—I’m ready for everything.

Jack’s fingers curl around the doorknob and he squeezes his eyes closed. When he opens them again, he turns, his expression strained. “Can you not?”

I force a smile. “Not what?”

He waves his hand, encompassing all of me. “This. All this. Stop pretending like everything’s okay. Stop pretending *we’re* okay.”

His words hit me like a punch to the gut, and I recoil, sucking in a breath. “Jack.” The syllable is rough inside my throat. “I love you.”

It’s the first time I’ve spoken those words to him—the first time I’ve uttered them at all since my father died. But instead of frightening me, speaking them aloud fills me with an exhilaration I can’t describe. The wall that was holding me back from fully experiencing our relationship has crumbled, leaving me longing for a complete connection with Jack, my half.

Nothing in Jack's expression changes at my words. He swallows, his Adam's apple bobbing. "I want to believe that."

I cross to him and reach for his chest. "Then why don't you?"

He catches my hand in his before I make contact with the place above his heart. "Because if it were true, we'd be merged now."

There it is—the shadow that's plagued me since that night. I finally told Jack the thing he's wanted to hear since before we met, that I wanted to join together the two halves of our soul, to merge my life force with his. Having faced my own death twice now—first alone because of circumstances, and then alone due to my choices—the paltry fears that have kept me from moving forward are thrown into sharp relief. Life is a gift, and tomorrow isn't promised—even to immortals. I decided to stop allowing my fear of abandonment to keep me from experiencing a wholeness I've never known. But when Jack and I attempted to merge, nothing happened. I tried to convince myself we'd done something wrong, that we missed some key step in the process. But Jack has drawn a different conclusion entirely.

He drops my hand and twists open the bathroom door. He spares a glance at me once he's crossed the threshold. "You look pale. You should probably feed." A muscle in his jaw jumps. "I'm sure Luke would be more than willing to help you."

He closes the door before I can respond. The click of the lock is as loud as any death knell.

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Madeline Freeman lives in the metro-Detroit area with her husband, her daughter and son, her dog, and her cats. She loves anything to do with outer space, plate tectonics, and dinosaurs, and secretly hopes her kids will become astronomers or paleontologists. She always wants pizza. Her hobbies include filling notebooks with ideas for future books, pretending to be a unicorn for her daughter to ride, trying to figure out if her husband is joking or being serious, and making her son giggle.

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