



THE DIRE BEAR'S WITCH

IMMORTAL AFFINITY BOOK 1

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RENEE HEWETT

THE DIRE BEAR'S WITCH

IMMORTAL AFFINITY BOOK ONE

RENEE HEWETT

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Also by Renee Hewett

About the Author

THE DIRE BEAR'S WITCH

Dixie Reade is a newly immortal witch, looking for some excitement in her life. She's in for more than her fair share when she runs across famed matchmaker, Esme Baer, who drags Dixie to a party at Dire Bear Estate.

Slade Galath is content with life the way it is. He's spent centuries as an immortal dire bear, and despite Esme's regular teasing, he's not interested in finding a mate and settling down. That all changes when Slade meets Dixie, his fated mate.

Neither of them trusts love, but that's the least of their problems because the local wolf pack has targeted Dixie and set the immortal council on her. If she can't convince the local coven to sponsor her, the council will exterminate her, and Slade is not about to let that happen to his mate.

Can these two get over their stubbornness and figure out the best way for Dixie to get set up with the council, and accept the best way for each other?

Note to readers: This is an older heroine's journey to find love, and falls in the "clean and wholesome" romance category.

PROLOGUE

Dixie Reade died, cold and alone.

Just the way she'd always planned it.

To complete her task, she couldn't have an audience.

Death would never allow itself to be bested if others were there to witness it.

So when the reaper's cold shadow came to meet her, she finally had the chance to do what her ancestors hadn't—she grabbed Death by the wrist and uttered the words that she'd memorized years and years ago:

“One soul you seek, but the price is paid. Take thy treasures and never again set your aim in this direction.”

She couldn't see a face beneath Death's black robes, but the way it jerked back at her words betrayed its surprise.

Its hood turned to peer past her at the basket filled with various items collected over several lifetimes. She was the first of her ancestors to assemble them all, and the last of her line to try. The goods seemed meaningless to any human who might look at them—a chalice from a holy monument, a cracked foot from a legendary creature, a potion that she'd paid a fairy way too much for...

Those, and more, that might not even be considered significant enough to earn a spot in a museum, but things that—for one reason or another—the reaper desired.

Which meant that they were all invaluable to Dixie, as they equaled the ultimate trade: a basket of ostensible junk for immortality.

Death swept its arm over the items, and they vanished, causing fear to grip her for a moment. Surely she'd not failed her quest at the final juncture by letting Death have access to its prize before it upheld its part of the bargain!

But then Death turned away, and as it wandered out of her house, it took with it the coldness she'd felt moments ago. It siphoned the old age and mortality from her body, and she watched those human elements of impermanence flow after the dark figure like golden tendrils.

That was it.

It was done.

She'd finally done what her ancestors had started and failed to finish.

She'd paid off death in exchange for everlasting life.

There's one big problem with fulfilling your life's purpose.

You enter your new life without one.

For all the times Dixie thought, "Oh, I'll do that when I've beaten death," she failed to write them down and make some kind of second-life bucket list. A list of goals to work on once she achieved the big one.

Maybe she just hadn't really believed that she'd make it, and that was why she put no planning into what she'd do once she was immortal.

Either way, she entered her new phase with absolutely no idea what she was going to do with all her time on earth.

And so she just wandered.

She tried to find things to amuse herself. She bought things, traveled, visited all the places you're supposed to enjoy seeing...

Sure, the sites were pretty. The buildings and art exquisite. But she found it all empty and void of purpose, unlike before, when she'd experience such a rush while hunting down treasure after treasure that she needed for her offering. Now it was all so aimless.

It disheartened her. She'd worked so hard in her first life it was a shame that her eternal retirement had yet to prove it was worth all the effort. She'd looked forward to forever roaming the mortal coil as one of its most powerful beings, but now she was coming up empty as to what to do with herself.

She wasn't about to open a magic shop or some silly thing like that. Her days of serving others were over. She had no interest in the silly troubles of non-magic beings and feigning interest all so she could make a buck. Creating and selling potions and spell glyphs was how she'd made the money that funded her questing at first before she invested it. She'd had a reputation for being worth every penny since she was the last in a long line of strong witches. Her spells had been pure power, something not seen very often anymore, since most witches over the centuries had ended up blending into normal human society.

People used to travel far and wide to visit the mysterious witch who lived alone in the forested wilderness, and she'd saved and invested wisely, knowing that if she was prudent in that life, she could live lavishly in the next one.

And she'd succeeded on that front too. Her stocks were earning, and she could play with virtually unlimited money.

But she was coming up short on what to do with it.

Dixie was starting to think she might understand the villains in some superhero movies. Maybe wreaking havoc was the only way to entertain yourself once you had access to everything you could ever want.

Because, if she didn't go the villain route, she was starting to think that maybe living alone in the woods and making her potions and glyphs was the only purpose she'd ever find.

Surely she wasn't in for a cruel trick like that? She'd worked a hundred years for this! She wasn't going to live hundreds more in that same situation.

She wanted more.

She tapped a freshly manicured finger on the table at a hip coffee shop and sipped her fancy sugary drink, feeling melancholy and unsure of what she should do next.

She looked around at the people inside and outside of the restaurant, trying to see if any of them had something that she might want to work toward achieving. Lady driving past in a fancy red car, nah. Woman walking a fluffy little dog, nope. Lady with a small child tugging her arm and screaming. Nooope... no thank you.

She opened the internet app on her phone—pocket computer was what she called it, as she had no one to call on the phone part—and searched for the day's greatest achievers. People running for president—too much responsibility!—people winning big sports games—her body wasn't *that* refreshed!—and even someone planning on colonizing another planet—whoa boy, if this planet didn't have enough for her, she didn't think spending eternity on a dead rock was going to be much better!

She sighed and clicked her device into sleep mode just as a loud commotion erupted at the table across the room, where a group of young women were squealing and jumping up from their seats to hug one that was holding out her hand. Dixie squinted and made out a big shiny rock that they were admiring.

A pang hit—an ounce of desire that told Dixie that she'd spotted something she actually wanted.

Clearly, diamonds were the answer.

“Ah, to be young and so excitable again,” a woman walking by Dixie said. When Dixie looked up, she caught her eye and smiled.

“Mind if I join you?” the woman asked. “Table space is at a premium in here.” And Dixie was one person sitting at a four-person table.

“Of course,” Dixie said, gesturing to the empty chairs.

The woman was about Dixie’s age—her new human-appearing age, anyway. Dixie admired the woman’s Chanel tweed slacks and black silk blouse, both seemingly tailor-made to fit her, and the single silver watch on her arm. Though Dixie had thought her form-fitting red dress was fun and flirty when she dressed that morning, she suddenly felt like it was too much, compared to the sleek elegance of this stranger.

Something else, maybe in the woman’s aura or the general way she presented herself, gave Dixie the impression that the woman had something she lacked. Wisdom? Inner peace? Confidence? In any case, Dixie knew she was meeting a kindred spirit, someone she’d want to be friends with.

Dixie nodded toward the group of women. “Wait until they’re old enough to buy their own diamonds.”

The woman chuckled. “Ah, but it’s not about the shiny stone. It’s what it stands for.”

“And what’s that?” Dixie asked. “Locking herself in a legal commitment with another person? In a world with a fifty percent divorce rate?”

The woman clucked her tongue and shook her head. “Regardless of what you think about the institution of marriage, that young woman has dreamed of it, and her friends

are excited she's achieved her dream. The rock is a symbol of her love for the other, and this whole thing marks her entrance into a new journey, a new life."

"New lives are overrated. I think it's diamonds." Dixie shrugged it off. She was raised with only one dream, one goal. And she'd achieved it.

Her new friend raised one eyebrow. "It's never materialism. You can have all the expensive clothes, shoes, jewelry, or cars, but none of that makes you happy in the long run."

Dixie felt exposed. "Not even a tiara?" She held a finger up to point toward her head and gave the woman a joking pout.

The woman's eyes widened, and she shook her head vigorously. "Especially not a tiara! I don't envy the royals who have to put that responsibility on."

Dixie had meant the kind of tiara meant for fun, not for duty, but it didn't matter. The woman was right, and deep down, Dixie knew it. The sparkling stones were just a distraction. She sighed and plopped her chin in her hand, dejected to be back at square one.

The woman held out her hand. "Esme Baer, nice to meet you."

"Dixie Reade," she answered, though her tone was nowhere near as chipper as Esme's.

"What ails you, Dixie Reade?" Esme asked, taking a sip of her drink.

"How do you know something ails me?" Dixie asked, even though she knew the sigh, pout, and chin in hand were dead giveaways.

“I’m good at reading people.”

Dixie forced herself to smile widely, hoping it didn’t look as fake as it felt. “I’m fine. Everything’s great.”

Esme didn’t buy it. “You know, Dixie, I’ve been around a *lot* of supernaturals, and I’m a bit known for, well, *knowing* things.”

The fact that this woman was familiar with supernaturals was something of a surprise for Dixie. She rarely met other supernaturals, let alone someone who knew many. Even so, she didn’t know what Esme thought she knew about her. “What are you getting at?”

She leaned forward, keeping her voice low enough that those around them wouldn’t hear her. “You’re a witch, and a newly immortal one at that. What’s it been, six months?”

Dixie stiffened. “Yeah... how could you know that?”

“Like I said, I’ve been around a lot of supernaturals. Enough that I can recognize what I’m looking at when it’s in front of me.”

“Oh.” Dixie felt a bit silly. Of course there were others like her out there. Just because she hadn’t met them didn’t mean they didn’t exist.

“So I ask again, Dixie Reade, immortal witch, what’s making you so glum?”

The sigh slipped out of her before she could stop it. It was evidence that Esme was right, and Dixie had a feeling if she didn’t open up, Esme would keep pressing, so she decided to tell her. “I’m searching for meaning and coming up short.”

“Are you dating?”

The question came out of nowhere, and Dixie scowled in response. “No. I’m living for me, the way I always planned I would.”

Esme looked confused. “Meaningful connections with other people don’t take away from living for yourself. In fact, they add to it. Lives aren’t whole without others.”

A pang hit Dixie in the heart. She’d had people in her life before. Not romantic love, but family, and they were all gone now. There wasn’t a reason to try to fill their spots with new people. She’d decided, after grieving so much, that it was better to just move on and get used to living alone. “I’m really just more of a loner. I get annoyed if I’m around other people for too long.” Dixie offered a laugh, hoping it would help her to sound more convincing.

Esme pointed across the room. “Look back at that group over there and see what they have. A supportive group of friends who celebrate each other’s good news. And the diamond ring one, she has someone she loves enough she’s willing to commit the rest of her life to that person.”

Dixie tried to shrug it off. “Let me know how that group looks ten years from now. Or fifty.”

“Hmmm,” Esme replied, compassion appearing in her eyes. “So your bitterness is more about people moving on, or you moving on without them.”

“Sure, I guess. It’s also about the fact that even if I wanted to find a new group of friends or a lover, it’s not exactly easy. At this point, everyone has their stuff figured out. They don’t have room for a stranger in their life or a need for a new person for that matter.”

Esme shook her head and looked at Dixie sternly. “*That* is simply not true, Dixie. I’m telling you that now. You just haven’t looked in the right places for your people. Maybe you haven’t had anyone around to open the right doors, but I *promise* you that your people are out there.”

Her words poked at something raw inside of Dixie, something she couldn’t let herself explore. *My people are gone, and they can’t be replaced.* Her grandmother, mother, sister... she was the only one left. She tried to brush off Esme’s idea. “Good thing I have plenty of time to search for new people.”

Esme slapped her hand on the table, startling Dixie. “You don’t need to search. I’m here, and I know all the best doors. In fact, I’m here in town for a party, and you’re going to join me!”

As much as Dixie had liked Esme so far, she hesitated at her enthusiasm. She didn’t know how likely it was that she would fit in with a group of strangers, even if they were as nice as Esme had seemed so far. She’d never been one to like large groups of people or to do well in making casual conversation. “I don’t know. I’m not exactly good in social situations.” It was an understatement. You didn’t spend as much time alone in the woods as Dixie did and end up with a ton of social charisma.

“You’ll be fine!” Esme grabbed Dixie’s hand, a touch that sent reassurance. “Really, you can stick by my side if you want, but I promise you won’t have a hard time. Just stand around and listen to people, smile, and nod. As long as you don’t plan on getting drunk and dancing on the tables, you’ll be fine. No, scratch that, if you drunk danced on a table, then I’m sure my friend Taren would love you.”

“I would never!” Dixie gasped, horrified at the suggestion.

“You don’t know how fun it is until you try it.” Esme shrugged, a devious smile lighting up her face and making her eyes twinkle.

“You really think there are people there I’ll get on with?”

“Well, there will be immortals there,” she said, and at Dixie’s look of surprise, she added, “You didn’t think you were all that rare, did you?”

“I hadn’t given it much thought, really.” Maybe that’s what Dixie was missing. Maybe meeting another immortal was exactly what she needed. Hearing what they’d done with their lifespan and how they’d found meaning might inspire her to find her new path.

“Then you’re in for a great surprise. And, yes, I’m positive that you’ll find at least one person there you’ll like.”

Looking back at Esme’s outfit, Dixie hesitated. “I’m not sure I’m dressed for the same event as you, but I could change before we go.” Dixie’s suitcase was beside her, as she’d checked out of her hotel that morning and was planning on moving on to the next town that night.

“Hardly, you look stunning! Stay just as you are!” Esme reached for Dixie’s hand again, this time turning it to admire the collection of bracelets she wore. “I find these especially interesting.”

“Thanks,” Dixie said self-consciously, running her other hand over them. They weren’t just adornments. They were stones and jewels that she needed for certain spells, and something that never left her body.

“I promise you’ll have fun.”

Dixie took a deep breath, working up her nerve to agree to go with Esme. “Can I ask you just one thing, though?” Esme nodded, and Dixie continued, “How old do I look?” She needed to know what others would think when they saw her.

Esme peered at Dixie carefully before answering. “I’d say maybe forty-five, but with a good skincare routine?”

“Then why that age if my skin is so good?”

“The age and depth in your eyes gives it away.”

“You better not be talking about my crow’s feet!” Dixie warned, laughing because she knew what Esme really meant.

“Want to take a guess at my age?” Esme asked.

“Nope,” Dixie replied. “I know better than to speculate on a woman’s age!”

“Well, hello, Slade, darling.” Esme’s voice sent shivers of fear down his spine.

Esme Baer was known to bring a certain fate to individuals, and so far, Slade had been able to avoid it, but it was only a matter of time before the famed matchmaker ended life as he knew it, the life he’d spent centuries cultivating into one of perfection.

Let her be here for someone else. Please.

Slade didn’t hate love, per se. It was more that he didn’t like change.

Or other people.

Or being bothered in general.

It doubly didn’t help that his brother, Tad, had found love, only to then find heartbreak and now spending the rest of his life alone, away from his family in an unknown location.

Because the thing about having a mate was that you only got one.

And the thing about being immortal... was that you had a really long time to live without the love of your life.

After Slade's mother died, his father had fared better, compared to Tad's heartbreak, but that probably had more to do with the fact that he'd had kids to distract him, to care for and love. While Tad... he just kind of went off into the wilderness with nothing but his broken heart.

"Esme..." Slade plastered a smile on his face before turning to give her a hug. Despite what he feared she might bring with her, she was still an important family friend, and Slade's father wouldn't abide anyone showing her disrespect.

"Oh, is that all I get?" Sometimes Slade wondered if the devil himself sent Esme to mess with them. It would be a perfect form of revenge on the family who had annoyed Lucifer into giving them immortality.

"To what do I owe the pleasure?" Slade added, although he knew that she knew him better than that and could sense his reluctance to engage with her.

"Do you remember the last time we saw each other?" Her innocent little bitty act didn't fool Slade. The mischief in her eyes gave too much away.

"It's been so long." *Not long enough.*

"Hmmm... don't tell me your memory is going in your old age." Blasphemy. Slade was still plenty young and spry.

But the mention of age had him taking a long look at her. Had she always looked the same? How long had they known her? Slade didn't want to admit that he did remember what she'd told him last time they spoke, but on the other hand, he really and truly couldn't remember what year Esme had shown up on the scene. Yet she still looked fantastic.

"I make a practice of forgetting news I'm not fond of," Slade grumbled, hoping she'd tire of playing with him and

move on to her next victim.

“I tried to warn you that your time was coming. Did you do all you wanted to do before it was too late?” Anyone overhearing might think Esme was threatening Slade with death.

Being mated was just as final.

“I don’t buy into what you sell to all the others,” Slade said, turning to the bar for a much-needed drink refill. “But, I do recall telling you to keep the trouble you bring off my doorstep.”

“Famous last words,” she called after him. Slade glanced back to see her lifting her drink to him before she started in the other direction. “Now, where did that father of yours get off to?”

She better not be in cahoots with him. Slade’s father, the man who could annoy the devil out of Lucifer—and nearly did!—would make it worth Esme’s while to mess with his sons.

You’d think he would have learned from the problems that came to Tad... but Taren Galath swore that his middle son’s story wasn’t over yet, and that not all of his sons would meet the same fate. Slade didn’t share his optimism. He was sure that Lucifer’s immortality gift came with a cursed love life, no matter what his father said to the contrary.

Someone stepped behind Slade, a presence that felt overpowering. He knew instantly that Esme had delivered on her promise.

All at once, a shadow fell over his soul, like something grabbed his heart and squeezed until he had no breath left. He needed to reach out and brace himself against the bar, but he

resisted and stood firm, not willing to show a reaction, knowing that wherever Esme was, she was watching. His father too.

They did this.

Should he turn and look at the person causing him so much stress? Or simply turn and run out the door? He could track down Tad and live a bachelor's life, far away from Esme and their father and the plagues they brought with them.

“Excuse me.” The voice, a combination of soft and sultry, rang in his ears. He closed his eyes, trying to will the resonance of it away.

“I don't want any,” Slade barked, which didn't make any sense. She wasn't selling Girl Scout cookies.

“Fine, but can I get past you for a drink?” The voice had a little edge to it, a little sass that increased his urge to take a peek at the owner.

Instead, Slade grunted and scooted down, keeping his eyes averted and his body facing the wall even though he'd just trapped himself in a corner. He waited through the sound of ice clinking into a glass and liquid pouring after it, counting the seconds, just wanting her gone.

And then she did the worst thing he could think of... She touched his arm.

Slade jumped as though hit by lightning, his body reacting intensely to the stranger's touch.

“Are you okay?” she gasped but didn't let go of his arm.

In his fit, he'd turned toward her, and he couldn't unsee the beautiful blonde woman who stood there. She was of a mature age, and her blue eyes were wide as she searched his face to

try to figure out what was wrong with the deranged bear she'd touched.

She didn't smell like shifter, which meant she wasn't feeling the same thing he was. What she did smell like was magic, letting Slade know he was dealing with a witch. It was enough information. He didn't want any more.

He stepped away, extracting himself from her grasp while working to gain his composure. He glanced around the room to try to spot Taren or Esme. He spotted neither of them, but it didn't matter. He knew they'd be watching.

So he would make sure there was nothing to talk about.

It didn't matter that Esme was said to have a 100 percent success rate. Slade would play it off like nothing out of the ordinary was happening, to convince them both that Esme was wrong. Then, this woman could be on her way before Slade ended up like Tad.

"So sorry, my head was somewhere else," Slade said, straightening out his shirt and tie while trying to shake it all off. He rolled his shoulders and neck, trying to get his blood flowing, to put himself into game mode. *I can get through this.* He worked high-powered corporate executives regularly. What was one beautiful woman, one matchmaker, and one ornery old immortal dire bear? *They won't get the better of me tonight.*

"I can see that." After a pause, she held her hand out. "I'm Dixie Reade."

"Slade Galath." He only nodded at her hand, wanting to avoid physical contact with her again. "But I'm sure you know that."

“Full of yourself much?” she asked, her eyebrows raised. In this short interaction, he’d not done a good job of impressing her. Which was good. He didn’t want her to like him. She needed to dislike him and leave.

Slade shrugged. “Are you going to deny that Esme told you to track me down?”

“Oh,” she replied, looking confused. “She did, but she didn’t tell me that you...” She trailed off.

“What?”

“Sorry, I didn’t know you and Esme had some bad history,” she said, giving him a strange look before turning to leave. “Anyway, have a nice night.”

Perfect. Slade had succeeded in chasing her off. He forced his pride to accept that she’d think he was a weirdo. *Focus on the win... she’s backing off, yes!*

And then Taren and Esme appeared. *No!*

“You two found each other!” Esme beamed, looking from Dixie to Slade.

Slade relaxed his face into the most passive expression he could muster, trying to mask all of the anxiety inside. “Yes, Esme. I met your friend, Dixie, although I’m not sure why you told her to seek me out.”

Esme gave him a look that said she knew he was full of it. “Dixie has been trying to find common ground with regular humans. Poor thing, I had to bring her here so she could meet some immortals. You know, folks like herself.”

Esme locked eyes with Slade as she said it, and he felt his temperature drop. Dixie was *immortal*.

It was one thing to find a mate; it was another for the mate to have a matching lifespan. It meant they were already past the first obstacle that might have stopped them from spending eternity together.

“Well, you’ve come to the right place!” Taren shook Dixie’s hand, ignoring the weird staredown that Esme and Slade were locked in. “I’m Taren Galath, immortal dire bear, father to Slade, master of this home, at your service! I don’t know why Esme told you to find Slade. You’re much better off talking to me—”

“Back off, old man,” Slade snapped before he could stop himself. *Damn it.* Taren had purposely baited Slade, and he fell for it. Acting possessive was a prime way of showing everyone exactly how Slade truly felt about Dixie.

“Oh, ho!” Taren threw up his hands in mock surrender. “I had no idea that you had your eye on her. You seemed like you were acting quite prickly.”

“Pshhh.” Esme made a sound and waved her hand. “Slade, prickly? Who would have guessed it?” The sarcasm dripped off her tone.

“I call him my grumpy little bear,” Taren told Dixie to Slade’s horror. Slade was not little in size, nor was he little in age. He was well into his fifties before they became immortal, and now he had centuries on that.

Slade held back his growl, refusing to make more of a scene, which would just add to Taren’s and Esme’s amusement.

Esme paid him no attention. “Dixie’s been immortal now for about six months. Isn’t that exciting?”

“Really, now? A brand-new immortal? That is something!” Taren turned his focus back on Dixie while Esme’s words sank in for Slade.

All those times when Esme had teased him in the past about his mate... Had she been keeping tabs on Dixie, waiting to introduce them until Dixie became immortal?

It seemed like exactly the kind of thing Esme would do. Tease him for years while all along she knew exactly who his mate was and where she was, but she’d not tormented him by introducing them while Dixie was still mortal.

It was a lot to process, but Slade wouldn’t be finding any alone time to sort out his thoughts and feelings anytime soon. The group of them had managed to box him in, despite his side-stepping. He was away from the bar but against a wall. He would have to push through them to get away, but that wasn’t something he could do if he wanted them to think him unaffected by Dixie. Not that either Esme or Taren were buying his act, but it would at least please him to pretend.

Slade had tuned out of the conversation, but he made himself focus back on what was being said. They’d moved on from talking about Dixie’s immortality to talking about the Dire Estate. “Your house and grounds are spectacular!” Dixie’s words went straight to Taren’s ego.

“Thank you.” He preened, very proud of the place he’d established over his long immortal life, with all the endless amounts of money he’d built over that time too. “You should have Slade take you on a tour, visit the stables and the lake and, of course, the golf course. It’s my favorite.”

“I’d love to see all that, but I’m not sure I’ll be here long enough for that.”

“Aw, that’s too bad,” Slade said, sarcasm dripping strongly from the words. Strong enough that Taren’s head snapped toward him and the corner of Esme’s mouth quirked. They knew he was ruffled. Even on his worst days, he wasn’t rude to guests. “Sorry, I just mean, are your travels ending after your visit here? Will you be heading home?”

If Dixie had sensed any rudeness, she didn’t show it. “No, I’m a wanderer now. I haven’t been back to the place I once called home since my change.”

Slade wondered why that was. Did Dixie have something dark in her past she was running from? That wasn’t really an appropriate question to ask in casual conversation, though, so he left it alone. Their conversation was soon interrupted when a couple approached the group. Taren and Esme turned to greet them, giving Slade the perfect opportunity to conjure an excuse about someone waiting for him so he could squeeze his way out.

But he didn’t do that. He reasoned that it was better to stay put and show Esme and Dad that he wasn’t bothered, but the truth was that he didn’t *want* to walk away from Dixie yet.

Which is exactly what I should avoid!

The stronger his feelings toward her grew, the harder it would be to back away and forget he’d ever met her.

Slade sighed, sick of fighting with himself and deciding to take a leap. “Come on, I’ll give you a tour tonight then.” He held out his arm, but she hesitated, looking around the room.

“I don’t know, there are so many people here I’ve yet to meet.”

She was turning him down? That was good, right? It was what he’d wanted before Esme and Taren had besieged them.

But it disturbed him to be turned down, especially by someone he felt something for. Part of him wanted to try persuading her to accept his offer—an offer far more than anyone else had ever received from him—but his obstinance won out. “Fine. Enjoy the party. I’ll see you around, Miss Reade.”

Slade offered her a curt nod and then took large strides, getting as far from her as he could before he stopped to process how much of a fool he was being.

But that was just like him. Slade Galath, cantankerous prince of boorishness, with a special talent of messing things up.

Dixie watched Slade walk away, all six feet, broad as a board, chiseled jaw and all.

“They’re a little eccentric.” Esme appeared back at her side. “Give him time.”

Dixie wasn’t sure why she would want to give him time. Normally she didn’t chase people. If they were lost in their head and unable to make a meaningful connection, she didn’t stress over it. But Slade had piqued a little interest in her, and a part of her felt drawn to him.

“Should I have just accepted his tour?”

Esme raised her eyebrows. “He offered you a tour?”

“Yeah, but I turned him down. I thought I should stay and meet more people.”

Esme laughed. “Oh my, that’s rich. Slade offered an olive branch, and you refused it.”

“Oh, no. Did I really mess things up? I guess I shouldn’t have said no to the owner of this place. I’m his guest, but it just seemed weird.”

Esme was still chuckling. “You didn’t do anything wrong. Believe me, Slade needs a little shake-up. He’ll be back, I

guarantee you that. Just understand, when you're immortal, when you've spent so much time on this earth, things get awkward when you're thrown for a loop. He functions just fine in his normal circumstances, but you're something new and interesting, and he's gotta get a handle on that."

"I hope you're right." Because she didn't want this to be an indication of how she'd be received by all the immortals she'd meet.

"Do you want me to introduce you to more people?" Esme asked.

"No, I'll just make my way around. You don't need to babysit me."

"All right then, just call if you need anything!"

So Esme wouldn't worry about her, Dixie walked away first, looking around the room at the different party guests. She had no idea if every person in the room was paranormal, but it seemed likely. Esme had told her it would mostly be shifters and fae, but not likely any other witches, as they usually kept to themselves.

Dixie wished she could figure out an easy way to tell who was immortal or not. Taren and Slade were, that much Esme had prepped her on. She'd also mentioned that Slade had two younger brothers, but neither lived at home anymore.

"Who are you?" A dark-haired woman stepped in front of Dixie, examining her with her dark eyes.

"I'm Dixie," she answered, offering her hand.

The woman took it and lifted her mouth into what looked more like a snarl than a smile. "Maeve. My father's the wolf pack leader of the area."

Good for you, Dixie thought, not knowing why she should be impressed. It made no difference to her, as it seemed everyone there had some sort of importance. “Nice to meet you,” she finally replied.

“You’re a witch.” She let go of Dixie’s hand and circled around her.

So the she-wolf’s nose worked. “Yep.”

“What are you doing with Slade?” She stopped in front of Dixie, crossing her arms across her chest.

Dixie gestured around them. “Clearly, nothing.”

“I saw you with him earlier.” Maeve pointed back to the bar, where Dixie and Slade had talked earlier.

“I was introducing myself to the party hosts.”

“You came with Esme.”

Maeve’s interrogation was starting to annoy Dixie. “Sure, I came with Esme. What’s it to you?”

“Did she tell you to meet Slade?”

“Yeah, but why does it matter? Are you into him? Because you can have him—”

Maeve laughed, a sound that sounded more like a bark. “Me and Slade, not at all.”

“Okay,” Dixie said, getting the feeling this wasn’t someone she wanted to keep talking to. “Well, if you’ll excuse me...” She tried to step away, but Maeve blocked her.

“The rumors about you are circulating,” she hissed, putting her hand on Dixie’s arm. “I’ve heard that you’re not just any witch. You’re the one who cheated death less than a year ago.”

Seriously? The rumors were news to Dixie. “So?” She threw Maeve’s hand off her.

Maeve looked insulted at the slight. “Witch, you don’t seem to be very knowledgeable on certain things. Let me give you a hint. You want to make nice with those in power. If someone like me takes an interest, it’s in your best interest to play *nice*.”

“What exactly *is* your interest in me?”

“If it’s true you know how to attain immortality, then I want that knowledge.”

Dixie rolled her eyes. So this was how things were going to go. “Too bad. It’s an old family secret, and not something I’m going to share.” It also wasn’t like she had it memorized.

“I can make it worth your while.”

“Sorry.” *Not sorry.*

“You might want to rethink this.”

“I think you’re underestimating me. If I am who you’re suggesting I am, then you should consider the fact that I’m hiding more up my sleeve than you could even imagine.”

“Maeve, are you rolling out the red carpet for our new friend?” Slade’s voice cut through the tension, and he stepped between the two women.

“I was just leaving,” Maeve said, shooting daggers out of her eyes toward Dixie before she left.

“Everything all right?” Slade asked.

Dixie shrugged. She didn’t figure there was any reason to let him know his local wolf pack leader’s daughter wanted the secret to immortality. Who didn’t?

“Yep,” she replied. “I didn’t expect to see you again.”

“I thought you could use a save.”

“Thanks for that.” Dixie wondered if the relief she felt at his presence was just a reaction from how Maeve had rubbed her the wrong way, or was it representative of something deeper?

“You still have people to meet?” he asked.

“I think ending with Maeve is good enough for me. I’m about peopled out.” Dixie looked around for Esme, wondering if she could get her to leave soon, but didn’t see her anywhere.

“Peopled out of everyone, or do you think you could stand my company for a bit?”

Contrary to the awkward man he’d seemed like before, the Slade in front of her now seemed smooth. He’d handled Maeve like no problem, and he offered her a smile now with the confidence of the billionaire he was. Dixie didn’t know why the change had happened, but she thought it might be nice to get to know the real Slade Galath for a bit.

“Sure, I think I could stand it.” She took the arm he offered her and walked with him toward the back doors.

“It’s a bit late to tour the grounds, but I could at least show you around back.”

He escorted Dixie to the back terrace, where she admired the fantastic view of the garden on one side, the pool to the other, and, in the distance, the Dire Estate forest.

Then she looked up and felt almost dizzy at the number of stars she could see in the moonless night. *Wow.*

“Did you get what you came here for?” he asked as they settled into a set of chairs on the far end of the terrace, near the

pool side.

“I came here to meet people, and that I did, yes.”

“Anyone especially interesting?”

Dixie shrugged, smiling coyly at him. “Maybe one or two.”

For just a moment, they looked at each other, and Dixie felt her attraction for him building. Now that he’d stopped acting so peculiar, he was kind of charming.

Then he pulled back, as though the moment was too much, and changed his tone to a much more energetic, jovial tone. “So, tell me, what did Esme tell you about me?”

“Oh.” Dixie was caught off guard and fumbled to remember. “That you and your father and brothers are immortal dire bears?” She was vague about what they did for work, something more about investing and owning many companies, but that wasn’t what she’d been interested in.

“Did she tell you how we became immortal?”

“No,” Dixie replied.

“Ah, there’s a story we love to tell,” Slade said, a sly grin on his face. “You see, we’re dire bears, monsters so fierce the devil himself gave us immortality in exchange for a promise that our kind would never again enter his domain.”

Dixie laughed. “Have you really been able to convince people of that?”

Slade shrugged. “Go ask my dad if you don’t believe me.”

“You won’t tell me the truth?”

“It is, more or less.” He turned slightly more somber, which made me think his story might actually be based on

truth. “When my mother passed, my father could have found someone to settle down with, even if she weren’t a true mate. It would have made things easier on him, since he was raising three rambunctious boys alone.”

“I’m sorry you lost your mother young.” Dixie was an older adult when hers passed, and she still felt it keenly.

Slade waved the comment off. “It was a long time ago.”

Which meant he didn’t want to dredge up the memories, so Dixie turned the conversation back to his story. “So, where does the devil come into this?”

“Well, like I said, dire bear, right? A monster and, not surprisingly, Lucifer tends to make friends with monsters.”

“Huh.” Dixie hadn’t known that. She really didn’t know anything about dire bears, monsters, or the devil. Her expertise was in treasure hunting and magic, but that didn’t mean she wasn’t interested in learning more. “So, he befriended your father?”

“Yeah, the old man was kicking up trouble, drew the devil’s attention, and got himself an invite to hell. Once the door was open, dad and us boys just kind of moved in, and the rampaging began. Not just us boys, though. Dad was worse than any of us.”

Dixie was impressed. Getting an invite to Hell—when one was still alive—was very rare. “Rampaging, what do you mean? Like, destroying stuff? Partying?”

“Yep, both of those. Just getting into any trouble that could come about. He started getting popular, even rivaling Lucifer for friends, but he didn’t have all the responsibility and work that Lucifer did, so he got to have even more fun.” Slade laughed a little at the memory.

“And this went on for a long time, if you went there as boys and grew into men.”

“Yep, I think Lucifer expected my father to grow out of it, to move on, and he sort of did. He just switched from throwing huge parties to planning extremely elaborate practical jokes.”

“On the devil?” Dixie gasped.

“Yup.”

“So he couldn’t kick your father out without people getting mad because of your father’s popularity, so he had to make him a deal to get him to leave him alone?”

“Exactly. All four of us got immortality, and the devil got reassurance that we’d never bother him again.”

“That’s one way to do it!” Dixie laughed at the stark difference between the ways they’d each gotten their immortality.

Slade nodded. “Since then, I’ve seen so much. We amassed our fortune, and we’ve had a good life.”

“You say that like it’s over.”

He shrugged. “You never know what tomorrow brings.”

“But you’re immortal. What could you be afraid of?”

“I didn’t say afraid. I just mean that things can’t go on the same way forever. You never know who you might meet who will change it all.”

He brushed Dixie’s hand, and she threaded her fingers into his, letting the small bit of physical contact overwhelm her senses. She looked at her hand in his and wondered why she’d never felt this strongly for any of the men she’d been with casually in the past. What was different about Slade? His

immortality? She didn't know the answer to that. All she knew was that she itched to touch him more, to feel his arms around her, to touch her lips to his...

Dixie knew he might pull away, he might reject her kiss, but she had to take the chance. She leaned over and was rewarded when he did the same. Their lips connected, and Dixie melted into his arms.

Excitement coursed through her whole body as the kiss deepened. She was surrounded by him, lost in his scent, his warmth, driven by a sense of urgency until she finally had to pull back for air. "Do you use that line on all the people you want to seduce?" she joked, letting her well-kissed lips, already feeling puffy from the friction, have a break.

"No." Slade released her from his embrace, seeming to want to say more, but he remained silent.

"What is it?"

He shook his head and stood. "It's getting late. We should go in."

"Yeah," Dixie agreed, standing with him. She dug around in her purse to find her phone and saw she'd missed a text from Esme.

I had your suitcase sent up to a room. Just ask and they'll take you there. Hope you had fun!

"Esme says there is a room waiting for me," Dixie said.

Slade nodded. "We'll go inside and get one of the staff to show you there."

"Thank you." Dixie felt a pang of regret, not wanting to leave his side. If he hadn't stood, she likely would have spent all night on the terrace with him, hearing stories of his time in

hell or his time being immortal on earth. Or kissing him... which she definitely would have enjoyed more of.

Before they parted ways, Dixie told him, "I had a really nice time out there with you tonight."

A strange look hit his face, one she couldn't read. Finally, he leaned over, kissing her on the forehead and whispering, "So did I."

Dixie had barely taken any notice of her room once the staff member guided her there. She'd been exhausted and also floating on a cloud from her moment with Slade. Her feet hurt, and her body had finally felt all the effects of the alcohol and socializing. She walked right into the room, hit the bed, and fell asleep, fully dressed.

When she woke, she was better able to appreciate the space she'd been given for the night. Like the rest of the estate she'd seen, it was lavish, containing a king-sized bed, floor-to-ceiling windows that led out to a balcony with a glorious view of the grounds, a front sitting area, and a huge bathroom with Jacuzzi tub.

The best thing she laid eyes on, though, was the breakfast spread that had been left on the table in front of the fireplace. Pastries, bacon, and glorious coffee!

That was when she saw her suitcase and noticed the note left on it: *Hope you had a fun night! I have to leave early, but I'll be in touch. ~G*

Dixie was surprised that Esme would have left her like that. It wasn't a big deal. It wasn't like she was stranded. She could easily call a car, but it would have been preferable to

wake up early and leave with Esme than having to wander around, a stranger alone in a house the day after a party.

She decided to go for the shower before breakfast, needing fresh clothes more than she needed caffeine and sustenance. Her slight hangover headache tried to argue that fact, but she figured she would be quick about it.

As the water rained down, her thoughts turned to Slade, to the kiss they'd shared. Had he thought of her after they went their separate ways last night? She would have had she not instantly crashed. While he seemed caught off guard when they first met—which was strange, she guessed that he'd expected to know everyone at the party and was surprised when she'd crashed it—he seemed very gracious when he saved her from Maeve and very easy to talk to when they were away from everyone.

Dixie could see herself enjoying spending more time with him, but that was a warning sign. She'd dropped her guard a little the night before, but she had to be careful it didn't happen again, not with someone like Slade, a man who seemed like the whole package.

Dixie had promised herself that she wouldn't fall into some kind of trap like that. She wasn't going to be tied down to someone. She had a world to see. It would be nice to have Slade—and Taren—as casual friends, maybe folks she saw every year or so, but she couldn't let herself get attached to Slade.

Her heart had enough heartache for many lifetimes. No one new was allowed in.

Once she was dressed, and her bag repacked, she jumped into breakfast, the coffee especially. When she was finished, she left the room, delighted to find that she could remember

her way back to the main entrance. She just needed to find a housekeeper to let her know the address so she could call a car.

She was in luck, as a staff member was peering out the window by the front door as she approached. “Hi, can you—”

The woman blew straight past her in an agitated state. Not seeing anyone else she could ask for help, Dixie followed the woman down the hall. “Hey, I just need a minute of your time, so I can be on my way.”

The woman didn’t seem to hear Dixie at all but continued on, taking a swift turn into a large office. One that, as Dixie entered, she saw Slade occupied. He was seated at the desk, and she wasn’t prepared for the way her heart jumped in response to seeing him. Had the housekeeper been told to lead Dixie to him?

That didn’t seem to be the case, based on the words she spoke to him. “The council is here. I haven’t let them in yet. I figured you would all want to know and get ready before I brought them in.”

Slade looked up from his work, his eyes flicking to Dixie for just a moment before he replied to his staff member. “Page my father out on the golf course. He’ll need to be here for whatever this is about.”

Whoever the council was, it seemed they didn’t make drop-in visits very often.

The housekeeper rushed out, and Dixie hung back, figuring the woman had more important things to attend to than a lost guest. Besides, she could get help from Slade. “Good morning,” she greeted him.

“Hi, Dixie,” he replied. “Seems we have unexpected visitors this morning. You’ll have to excuse me. I need to see

to them.”

“I just need the address of this place so I can get a car to pick me up.”

“That’s not necessary. My driver can take you wherever you need to go.” He slid a blazer over his oxford shirt, pulling off the no-tie look while looking powerful and devilishly handsome, in Dixie’s opinion.

“Okay, great, where should I meet them?”

“If you wait in the kitchen—there’s a door to the garage there—I’ll page the driver.” He headed toward his office door.

“Okay, but how do I get to the kitchen?” Dixie felt slightly embarrassed to be so helpless and even more convinced that she should have been on the road with Esme. “I’m sorry.”

He took a look down the hallway, then back to her, then sighed. “Follow me.”

They didn’t make it to the kitchen. When they turned into the front to cross over to what Dixie assumed was the side of the mansion with the kitchen, they were stopped by three grim-looking new faces—Dixie assumed they were the council members—as well as the harried-looking housekeeper and Taren, who didn’t look at all concerned. In fact, he looked happy—excited even—like a man about to watch a very entertaining show.

“Dixie, Slade, I was about to send for you,” Taren said. “The council is here and wants to have a little chat. We’re headed to the sitting room, if you could join us.”

“I’m sorry, I was just about to leave.” Dixie gestured to the suitcase she was pulling behind her.

Taren took the handle out of her grip and sent it rolling across the foyer on its four all-direction wheels. She looked back at him, wondering why he would do that. "If I have to put off my golf game, then you can postpone your trip for a bit." He chuckled and waved his arm to direct them all into the sitting room. The council members went straight in, but the housekeeper went after the suitcase, giving Dixie a look that assured her she'd put it somewhere safe.

Dixie looked to Slade, who had an unreadable yet grim expression on his face. "I guess I don't have a choice here?" she asked.

He sighed and shook his head. "No, I'm afraid not." He touched the small of her back and gently led her forward. It was an intimate gesture that told Dixie more than his words did. Whatever was going to happen, he was ready to look out for her.

A different staff member brought in a tray of drinks and offered them to the council members, who were settled in seats around the room. Dixie stood awkwardly until Slade directed her to a vacant chair. He stood behind her, while Taren took the largest chair across from them.

“What can we do for you?” Taren asked once everyone was settled. “I’d much rather have a scheduled visit than have to leave an A-game.”

“Yes, we can relate.” The man with the slim build and slicked-back blond hair spoke. “It’s always nice to get some notice before trouble is dropped on you.” At that, he looked directly at Dixie.

She lifted her eyebrows, growing nervous at the situation now that she realized she was somehow involved, or to blame for the visit. “Why are you looking at me?” she asked, ready to defend herself, as she’d not done anything to cause trouble to anyone, but she held back from saying any more when Slade’s hand gently squeezed her shoulder. If she’d somehow caused offense, she needed to find out what it was and make sure she didn’t make it worse for her hosts.

The woman with the mousy brown hair and glasses responded. “We’ve been contacted by the local wolf pack to

intervene. Bringing in a new immortal to the area without permission is a violation of the area treaty.”

“What does that mean?” The words fell out of Dixie’s mouth before she could stop them. “Wait, the local pack? You mean Maeve?” The woman from the night before had warned Dixie to make nice and decided to report her to some council because she’d failed to suck up to her?

Taren tossed a scone at Dixie. She barely reacted in time to stop it from bouncing off her and falling to the floor. She looked at him, confused, and found him smiling, his cheeks a bit pink and his eyes twinkling as he held a finger up to his lips to shush her. “Don’t worry. We’re going to get this sorted out.”

Strangely, the weird gesture from Taren made Dixie feel more comfortable, like no matter what the council wanted from her, Taren would be with Slade in protecting her. It was a situation she hadn’t been in before, one where several people were ready to stand up for her, and she liked it. Now, if only she could keep her mouth shut.

The larger councilman, who had hair a shocking red hue, spoke next. “The council of immortals has a treaty with the local pack to not allow new immortals into the area without pre-approval. Since you don’t have that, we’re here to make sure you leave.”

“Wait, what? I can’t be here, just because I’m immortal?”
Oops, already failed at keeping my mouth shut.

“You can’t be anywhere, because you’re immortal,” the blond man added.

“Because you’re immortal without authorization,” the woman specified.

“What does that mean? I don’t need to ask permission from anyone. I earned my life fair and square.” If Slade’s hand wasn’t still on her shoulder, she would have risen to her feet with her objections.

“Your immortality bargain is between you and Death, but your presence on earth is governed by supernatural leadership.” The woman stared daggers out of her eyes at Dixie, as though she’d done something very wrong to her.

“How do you know anything about me?” Maeve had mentioned she’d heard rumors, but it seemed like plenty of details were out there somehow. Had Death itself gone to a bar to drown its sorrows and tell everyone about the witch who got one over on it?

“We have our ways. We wouldn’t be a good council network if we weren’t able to keep tabs on our population. This is how we ensure order is kept.” The red-haired man matched the woman’s angry look at Dixie.

“And what exactly are you going to do if I decide to stay?” Even though she’d been planning to leave, she wasn’t going to do it just because *they* told her to.

“You’ll be subject to ‘immortal abomination without status’ law and subject to immediate termination.” The woman delivered the news in the same tone you would deliver a weather report.

“That’s enough.” Slade’s voice seemed to boom in comparison to the others. “Threatening Dixie is equal to declaring war on this household.”

Dixie’s heart leaped in her chest. She’d been jumping to her own defense, and it felt so good to have someone else defend her against the three angry people.

Slade continued. “I don’t know how much you know about me, but if there’s one thing I hate, it’s a bunch of young pups pissing all over the place and acting like their rules supersede everything else. Maeve went behind our backs about this because she knew she wouldn’t be able to confront me to my face.”

“We have a treaty—” the red-haired man started.

Slade cut him off. “This isn’t about the treaty. This is about Maeve’s, well, whatever her problem is. Dixie being here one day isn’t enough for the council to get stirred up over. Maeve pushed you here, for whatever reason, and you’re letting her puppet you.”

“How dare you!” the red-haired man shot back. “We’re here because it’s our *job* to keep law and order in the supernatural community of our region, not because the wolf pack orders us around!”

The blond man added, “There are certain rules that must be enforced. It’s our duty and responsibility to see to that.”

That was news to Dixie. She’d never had any interactions with councils or packs when she lived alone in the woods with her family. They never discussed politics. Had they simply been left alone because they hadn’t been reported? It seemed likely.

“Look over that treaty again and see how it says that there are certain rules you follow, like not entering our house and trying to tell us what to do. We keep to ourselves. This move by you is just kicking the hornet’s nest.”

The councilwoman sighed. “This intruder latched right onto the rich, powerful, brooding sucker who can’t help himself from aiding those in *need*.”

Dixie held back from responding, not wanting to get herself in any deeper trouble, but the woman's accusation struck her as outright ridiculous. Dixie wasn't latching onto anyone. She'd just been there for one night, for a party so she could meet some people, and she'd been planning on leaving that morning!

The blond man spoke again. "It's simply the way we limit this kind of thing. We've had an understanding with you bears, we leave you alone, but this outsider isn't in the Dire Clan, and not subject to the agreement we have with you."

"You're wrong," Slade said in a measured voice. "She is a member of the Dire Clan. We're allowed to bring our mates to the region, mortal or immortal."

At that word, *mate*, all eyes snapped to Dixie and Slade.

Dixie wasn't an expert on shifters, but she knew enough to know that *mate* was a pretty intense concept. Why did he say that? Was he annoyed by them enough to try to pass her off as his mate?

"You can't just claim this random woman is your mate to protect her from us," the redhead said.

"Random?" Taren cleared his throat, finally joining the conversation. "Did your sources not tell you that Dixie was delivered here to Slade by Esme Baer herself?"

Taren's face beamed with pride, and the council members seemed taken aback at the mention of Esme. What power did Esme have that caused such reactions?

"And you plan on committing to this *mate*?" the woman asked. "The bond has to be put in legal form—human laws, marriage—for her to be considered one of your clan."

What was going on? Yesterday Dixie had met Esme Baer and attended a party with her, and today the word *marriage* was being thrown around? Why was everything feeling like it was getting turned upside-down? Before she could ask if she got a say in any of it, Slade spoke up. “We’re in our allotted grace period. We’ll be in touch with further information.”

The council looked at each other and murmured in low tones. Finally, the blond man said, “Fine, but we’ll be back if we don’t see the proper paperwork filed in time.”

Everyone stood, and as the council members passed Dixie, the woman reached her hand out. Not wanting to be rude, Dixie accepted the handshake. Too late, she realized that the woman was chanting a spell. Dixie tried to pull back, but it was too late. Whatever the woman had done, it was already sinking in.

“Dixie Reade, once you’re completely approved, you’ll be accepted into our ranks. But until then, this magic feedback curse will ensure you don’t go rogue.”

“What the hell did you do to her?” Slade pulled Dixie back from the woman, looking angry.

The blond man spoke. “It’s well within our rights. When she has approval, we’ll remove the curse. Until then, she’s advised to avoid using spells, or she’ll experience the magic surging back at her.”

Slade looked fuming mad, but also like he was trying to control himself. “It will hurt her?” he asked between gritted teeth.

“Only if she uses magic,” the woman answered. “We advise you all to get this sorted out quickly, and for Dixie to not use any spells until then.”



DIXIE SAT BACK DOWN on the chair as the others filtered out, all except Slade.

“What’s going on?” she asked him. “My mind is spinning. I don’t understand.”

Slade sighed and sat on the couch near her. “I didn’t know that you weren’t registered. I mean, even if I did, I couldn’t have known that Maeve would submit a complaint.”

“I guess I should have told you last night. I just didn’t want to stir things up, but I mean, I guess they’re stirred up now, and by Maeve’s own hand—”

“Dixie, what should you have told me?” Slade interrupted her rambling.

“Sorry, I mean about Maeve. She’d asked me for the immortality recipe.”

“*That’s* what this is about? We should have told the council! If they’re mad about you, a new immortal, they’ll be pissed to know Maeve wants to become one.”

“I’m guessing that’s a no-no?”

Slade ran a hand through his dark hair. “You guess right. No matter. Anything to do with Maeve is second to taking care of you.”

“Yeah... so... about that. The mate thing? The *marriage* thing? Do you want to explain any of that to me?”

He shifted in his seat, visibly uncomfortable. “Did Esme really not tell you why she brought you here?”

“She said I needed to meet other immortals.”

“She’s a matchmaker. Did she tell you that?”

“What? No! I didn’t know this. Why didn’t she tell me?”
Probably because if she had, it would be unlikely I would have gone with her.

“I don’t know why she does things the way she does, but she knew you were my mate. She brought you here for me.” Was there tenderness in his eyes when he looked at Dixie now? She started to feel overwhelmed. She hadn’t come there for love, and things were escalating very quickly.

She shook her head, not wanting to believe what he was saying. “That’s not possible. I met her in a café. It was random. She just spontaneously invited me to the party.”

“Nothing is random or spontaneous with Esme. She’s a wolf shifter, but she’s got some other stuff going on with her. No one knows how she does it, but she does. And with a 100 percent success rate. She’s never wrong with her matches.”

What have I gotten myself into? Dixie stood, needing to be alone and catch her breath. “Excuse me, I just need a moment.”

She fled the room, making her way to one of the guest bathrooms. She remembered where they were from the night before. There, she splashed water on her face and took a few deep breaths, steadying herself on the counter and looking at herself in the mirror while she tried to figure out what was going on.

Just a day ago, her biggest problem had been finding excitement and meaning in her life, and now she’d found much more drama than she’d wanted. She’d thought Esme’s idea of meeting other immortals would be fun, but it had

completely gone off the rails, changing everything completely, in ways Dixie couldn't have imagined!

She pulled out her phone and found Esme's number, forgoing a greeting when the call was answered. "Esme, what in the world have you gotten me into?"

"Hmmm?" Esme answered. "Is everything okay? You seemed like you were having a nice time with Slade last night."

"No, everything isn't okay. It's gone topsy-turvy! Some council showed up, saying I don't have permission to exist, and Slade is saying I'm his mate and that you knew about it."

"You're illegal? Oh, that's unfortunate. Lucky for you, Slade's there to help. He's not one to let laws tell him what to do, and he won't let them mess with his mate."

"Why didn't you tell me you were taking me here to hook me up with Slade?"

Esme chuckled. *Seriously?* "I was not hooking you up with anyone. People have free will."

"Esme, I'm not joking. I don't know what to do."

"Seems pretty clear to me. Marry Slade. Become Mrs. Dire Bear, and the council leaves you alone."

"I'm not going to tie myself for eternity to someone just because some lawmakers say I have to. If I didn't have to follow Death's plan, I don't have to follow theirs either."

"Would it really be just because lawmakers said so? I thought the two of you had a nice connection last night."

Dixie sighed. She'd hoped Esme would be more helpful. "Esme, I agreed to meet some people, to make some friends, but that's it. I'm not going to have a nice conversation and

then marry some guy because his shifter mate sense tells him he wants to be with me.”

“Well, there is another option,” she said, finally lifting Dixie’s hopes. “You can look to one of your kind, another immortal witch, and get them to sponsor you and protect you from the council.”

Her heart soared. “Yes, that’s what I need to do. How do I find another immortal witch? Did I meet any last night, or is there one you can introduce me to?”

“I’m sorry, dear, I’m on the road and don’t have all my contacts in my phone.” She laughed. “Can you imagine how much storage in my device that would take up? You have no idea how many people I know!”

Good for you, Esme, she wanted to say but held back from the sarcasm. “When will you be back in your office?”

“Don’t wait on me, Dixie! Slade can point you in the right direction. Tell him you want to look at the other sponsorship options. We more or less know all the same people. Oh, there’s my next client. I have to go!” Before Dixie could respond, Esme hung up.

“I can call someone in for tonight, get this marriage on the books.” Taren had followed Slade back to his office, clearly excited about the fact that the council had pushed them to this point.

“You know she gets a choice in this, right?” Slade asked him while growling and pacing. “No matter what you and Esme did to set all this up.”

“So I used the matchmaker for you. It’s not like it’s a surprise,” he replied. “You’ve known you were on Esme’s list for years. Now, her needing proper immortal registration, I didn’t know anything about that.”

Taren didn’t lie about things like that. If he stirred up trouble, he claimed it. “But you’re happy to use the situation to get me settled down with this woman I don’t know anything about?”

“You have forever to learn about her. First, you have to get her to agree to marry you tonight.”

“I don’t *have* to anything.”

“Sure you do. She’s your mate. You have to provide protection for her.”

“You say that like it’s all so simple.”

“Can’t it be?”

Slade stopped and looked at his father. Was he right? Slade did have a duty to provide for his mate, but that didn’t mean they had to have a relationship. He couldn’t deny how protective he felt about her or how much rage coursed through his body when they mentioned *extermination*. “They said we had to have it on paper, but they didn’t say we had to keep living together or anything. We marry, she earns legal standing and protection from the clan, and then she can keep on going about her merry way.”

Taren crossed his arms. “Why are you saying that? Why wouldn’t you want to have her stay?”

Slade threw up his hands. “I’m sick of explaining this to you. I *don’t* want to end up like Tad. Love *destroyed* him. He’s the living proof that the devil’s deal comes with a curse.”

“You won’t—”

“Stop.” This was a conversation they’d had too many times, and Slade wasn’t going to keep going over it. “You can’t offer me empty assurances. Just because Lucifer didn’t *tell* you that a love curse on your sons was the side effect of our immortality doesn’t mean it’s not true. I’m not going to fall for it, fall for a supposed mate, just for it to end in chaos and despair.”

“You can at least try.” Taren spoke softly. Slade knew the man’s thoughts had gone to his late wife, Slade’s mother. Taren wanted each of his sons to have a love like he had, and he just wouldn’t accept that they could have a life without love—a life without heartbreak.

“I don’t *want* to try,” Slade told him. “I want to forget all of this. I’ll give her the marriage license if she wants it, but I

don't want any more to do with any of this. I just want my life to get back to normal."

"Then why were you with her last night, out by the pool?"

"So I let my guard down for a bit. It was a mistake."

"Sometimes, mistakes are just a way to open a new door." Slade knew his jokester dad was about to turn sentimental and serious. "Give her a chance."

Slade glared at him. What did he know about what Slade was going through? Taren had been mated before he was immortal. "Is this just you trying to get rid of us all? Let us all fall apart like Tad, and then you're finally alone to live out your days as a miserable lonely..." Slade couldn't even finish his thought when he saw the anguish in his father's face. Taren's love for his sons was undeniable, and he hated what happened to Tad. He didn't want any of them to live in that kind of misery.

"You, my son, are a dire bear. Your mating call is stronger than it is in other shifters, and I promise you that even if you send her away today, you'll never forget a tiny little detail about her. You can fight me on this—fight yourself on this—but there's no turning back now. You may as well follow this path until you get to the end of it."

"No thanks to you and Esme." He might be right. Dixie would haunt Slade for the rest of his days. He would always feel the pull to her, like Tad did to his lost love, but in Slade's case, would he be able to stand by his convictions and stay away from her for all eternity?

He sighed, giving in a little. "How about we focus on one thing at a time and see if she's even going to agree to the marriage at all? It's the simplest way to deal with all this."

“It’s going to anger the local pack,” Taren pointed out.

“Good, tell them to bring it.”

Taren smiled and rubbed his hands together. “Sure. It’s been a while since we had a good fight.”

“And if the current leadership is like this, maybe they need new leadership.”

They looked at each other and laughed.

They hadn’t lived for centuries just to enter politics. When it interfered with their lives, sure, they would do what they had to. Same if they heard about unfair things happening to others, but dealing with it in an official capacity, having to sit through endless bureaucratic sessions and other black holes of time were *not* something they would do. Immortal might be forever, but they wouldn’t waste it on pointless meetings where the same thing is said over and over, year after year... decade after decade.

“No other woman turned your head this way before,” Taren said. “It’s nice to see you with your match.”

Slade only grunted in response. On one hand, he wished his dad would have minded his own business and had Esme stand down...

But another part of him lit up when he looked at Dixie, as it did when she appeared in the doorway that moment. “Hey.”

“I just spoke to Esme, and she said I should ask you for some contact info for some, um, immortal witches?”

“For a sponsor,” Taren replied.

“Huh?” Slade asked, not clueing in on what he and Esme had.

“She needs to go to Sommerville House.”

“Ah, the coven.” Understanding dawning on him. It was a second option he hadn’t thought of since he’d been so wrapped up in needing to offer Dixie his personal protection. “You sure? Did Esme explain it all to you? You’ll have to prove yourself worthy to convince a witch to offer sponsorship.”

“She didn’t really explain anything, but I’m up for the challenge.”

“But why do you need to do that?” Taren asked. “We can set up the marriage right here, and you’re set.”

She shook her head, reflecting a stubbornness that Slade could relate to. “I appreciate the kindness, and understand that the mate thing means a lot to your kind, but I’m very new to all this immortal stuff and in no way want to commit myself to someone based on their mating feeling. If I’m under a time crunch, I’d rather make it to the coven and make my own way. I’m sorry, I hope that doesn’t offend you.”

Let his mate go off to some coven and hope they’d be able to provide her with protection? *Over my dead body...*

But on the other hand, it would be getting her out of his hair while getting her the sponsorship the council required, making sure she was safe and allowing them to maintain a friendship so Slade could keep protecting her from afar, while not involving his heart. “It’s a brilliant idea.”

“It is?” Taren asked.

“Thank you,” Dixie said at the same time. “If I could just get you to point me in the right direction, I’ll be on my way.”

“No. I’m going with you,” Slade clarified.

“You don’t have to accompany me. I was just hoping for an introduction over the phone or something and then directions for where I need to go.”

Slade shook his head. “That’s not what we’re going to do. I’m going to stick by your side until we secure your place in the coven. Until then, you’re my responsibility.”

Dixie opened her mouth to protest, but Taren backed Slade up. “That seems reasonable.”

“I’ll call the coven and let them know what’s going on,” Slade added. “But I’m not letting you out of my sight until I’m sure you’re all set up there.”

“What about trouble from the council?” she asked. “Will they be expecting a wedding?”

“Don’t worry about that. I’ll handle them,” Taren replied.

“Are you sure about this?” Dixie asked. “Because if you have any doubts, just know I can do this on my own. It’s how I’ve always done things.”

The idea of Dixie continuing to fight for herself alone irked Slade. She didn’t need to do that anymore. She had *him*. At least, until Lucifer’s curse hit.

“I’m taking you there,” Slade said firmly. “That’s final.”

Dixie was a ball of nerves at the prospect of going to meet other immortal witches.

It was more exciting than just a party of immortal shifters, but it was also a bit daunting. Witches weren't always very welcoming to outsiders. Dixie didn't know what kind of agenda they might have, and she couldn't imagine why they would sponsor her. Certainly not just from the kindness of their hearts.

She also had an unsettling feeling of regret toward leaving the Dire Bear estate. She'd enjoyed meeting Taren, and even more, she felt a connection to Slade, to the point where the idea of separating from him caused a pang of dread that she couldn't ignore.

So it was with mixed emotions that she followed Slade into his garage.

Her jaw nearly hit the ground when he turned the lights on to reveal row upon row of fancy vehicles. "Your family has a thing for cars," was all she could think to say.

"When you live as long as us, you're able to amass quite a collection."

Dixie's own collection was the random treasures that appeared meaningless to the rest of the world. Unlike this room, where everyone could see the value of these cars, only a few would recognize the power and worth of the items in Dixie's hoard.

"You really don't have to come with me," Dixie told Slade again, feeling guilty for all the trouble she'd caused. "I have plenty of means to make it on my own, as long as you let them know they're expecting me."

"I know," he said, just as gruffly as before. It was clear he was not bending on this issue. "But I'm going."

He hit the pad on his set of keys, and the lights blinked on a charcoal-colored Audi sports car. Following him to it, Dixie gasped at how pretty the car was.

"What a beast." She sucked in a breath, admiring the sleek shape of the car, even though she wasn't any kind of expert or fan of automobiles.

Slade smiled. "See, you can understand why I don't pass up an opportunity for a road trip. They so seldom pop up in my life anymore."

"All right, I'll accept that excuse," Dixie told him, though she knew it was all about the *mate* thing. It was what had made him act so strangely the first time they met, and it was making him see her safely to the coven.

They tossed their bags into the trunk, then loaded into the car. Dixie admired the way the machine rumbled to life beneath her and couldn't help but think that Slade looked particularly sexy behind the wheel, especially when he started working the stick and steered them smoothly out of the garage.

The moment they were on the road he hit the gas and let the car pick up an amazing amount of speed. Dixie's heart raced with the car, letting excitement for the adventure bubble to the top.

"Should we be concerned about speed limits?" she asked once she peeked over at the speedometer and saw exactly how fast they were going. "Should I be concerned that we'll see cop-car lights popping up at some point?"

"Nope," he replied with confidence. "I know all the best roads to take. That means they're scenic, and they also have high or nonexistent speed limits."

"Nonexistent speed limits?" Dixie asked in disbelief.

"Yup." He grinned again and gave the car a little more gas to make his point.

He flicked on the radio, filling the car with slide guitar and deep female vocals, giving them some beautiful Delta Blues as the soundtrack for their road trip.

And then Dixie's habit of talking too much had to ruin it. "Isn't it weird, you driving me and then just dumping me off at the coven?"

"Huh?" Slade took his eyes off the road briefly and gave her a confused look.

"Ugh, that wasn't the way I meant it to sound. Sorry, I'm pretty awkward in social situations."

"You didn't seem so last night."

"I had a few drinks in me, and I was faking it, for the most part."

"With me?"

“No! I mean, just the whole ‘Dixie at a party’ thing in general. That’s not usually my scene. I’m more used to solitude. What I meant was, the mate thing, doesn’t that make shifters possessive? Why are you so ready to hand me over?”

“Everyone’s different.” It was clear to Dixie that Slade wasn’t interested in opening up more on the topic.

She decided that maybe she needed to open up first. “You know you’re the first immortal I’ve gotten a chance to talk to, and I can’t even think of where to start asking stuff.”

“Didn’t you have anyone to talk to before you became immortal?” His voice lost some of its edge with the new subject.

“Not anyone immortal, if that’s what you’re asking. It was just a family mission, and growing up, my grandmother and my mother talked to me about it, but they were both mortals. I don’t even know if they ever knew any immortals. They’d passed down the family legacy, the items, and the recipe, but no tips on what to do once the mission was complete.”

“The recipe... so it was some kind of witch thing.”

“Not really, I assembled an offering for Death. You wouldn’t have to be a witch to do it. We just happened to be witches.”

“Ah, I’ve heard of some working that one before. It’s a hell of an accomplishment. Congratulations, by the way.”

Dixie swelled a bit at that. It was the only congratulations she’d gotten for the feat. “Thank you.”

“So you had no mentor, and I’m guessing by your use of them in the past tense, your family is gone too?”

“Mmm-hmm,” Dixie answered, turning back to look out the window, wanting to avoid the sore subject.

“I’m sorry,” he said, another short statement that meant more to her than just a few words should.

She jumped to a new topic. “Do a lot of new immortals pop up?”

“No, immortality is more a myth than anything else these days. Not many people choose to chase it anymore. To sacrifice their entire mortal life going after something they might never attain.”

“Then, all your friends and family die, and you end up with nothing but empty time.” Dixie murmured the sad words before she could hide her thoughts. Clearly, the topic hadn’t changed enough.

“It’s certainly not for everyone.” Slade shrugged.

“Do you know what the coven is going to demand before they decide if they’ll sponsor me?”

“Nope. It’s all different for everyone. They might want a demonstration, a trial of sorts, or one of them might want a favor.”

“Will I have much time to do it?” she asked. “Not just time they’ll give me, but the time before the council tracks me down again.”

“The council will leave you alone as long as you’re in talks with the coven. *If* anyone in the coven decides to give you a chance, that is. And I have no idea how much time they’ll give you for your task.”

“I’ve done the impossible; I cheated Death,” Dixie said, frustration building inside of her. “I’m not going to let some

mortal council step in and extinguish what I've earned... my immortality."

He growled. "Neither am I." His reply was delivered with emotion, and Dixie felt the support that was behind it, something she hadn't had in her life before.

Especially from a man like Slade. It made her feel hopeful, supportive. Safe.

"The option for marriage is still open," he said, almost as a sidebar.

Dixie wanted to tell him how much she appreciated it, how much that meant to her, but she felt it was best to keep a distance between them. They touched on the fact that she'd lost so many, couldn't he understand that her heart wasn't in any condition to open up to people again? Instead, she said, "It's a very generous offer, but I can't rely on someone else for my life, my freedom."

He looked at Dixie out of the corner of his eye. "I would *never* revoke the marriage or put your life in peril."

It shook Dixie a little for him to say those words. "Oh."

"And even if you don't marry me, if you stay at the coven, know that you can always come to me for anything."

"Okay." She was at a loss for words.

They drove in silence, except for the music, for a while longer. Dixie was surprised at how quickly the time went by. Soon they were pulling into a truck stop for gas to refuel and shake off the road.

“You want anything from inside?” she asked.

“Nah. I’ll be behind you in a bit. I’ll pull the car over to the side when I’m done fueling up.”

Once she used the restroom, she enjoyed the leg-stretching time by walking around through the shop, looking at all the kitschy items, the different snacks, and the walls of drinks. It was so neat, all the things they kept that would provide entertainment and essentials for all the travelers. Dixie thought maybe, after all this, she might look into getting a car, or maybe even a camper van, and try living on the road, going from town to town, absorbing all that she could from wherever she could drive.

She purchased a drink, some road snacks, and an interesting-sounding audiobook CD, and was rounding the building to find the car when she saw Slade surrounded by three angry-looking men.

She quickened her stride, not sure what was going on, but wanting to be there in case Slade needed her.

She was halfway to them when things escalated.

One of the guys pulled out what looked like a pipe and took a swing.

Slade didn't let the impact hit him. He tackled the guy to the ground.

As he did, the two other guys piled on, pulling out weapons and going to town on Slade.

Before Dixie could do anything to help, Slade shifted into his dire bear form.

She wasn't prepared for the sight of the monstrous beast. He was huge, bigger than any bear should be, with huge claws and teeth and dark brown fur covering his body, but not hiding the extra pointed bones that protruded from his jaw and spine.

Slade's bear roared at the men, and they, too, shifted, turning into scrappy-looking wolves, who all dove at their foe.

They were small wolves though, at least compared to Slade's dire bear, but still, three on one wasn't odds Dixie liked.

But he wasn't alone against these enemies, because she had tricks to play.

She reached into her bag, paying little attention to which pouch she pulled out. Any item that ended up in her hand would help her cast something to help Slade.

The one that came out was red, with a small fossilized limb inside. Dixie waved her hand over it and chanted the corresponding spell, causing the ground to rumble beneath the wolves just a moment later.

They barely noticed, as they were so focused on attacking Slade, so when the tentacles sprouted up from the ground, they weren't prepared.

Neither was Slade, but the writhing tentacles were causing enough confusion that she knew he at least had a chance to gain the upper hand.

But Dixie wasn't prepared for the surge that came back and hit her like a ton of bricks, sending her to her knees.

She'd forgotten the curse the council had placed on her. Magic feedback.

She gasped for breath on the ground, struggling to collect herself, but knowing it had drained some of her strength. Even so, Slade still needed help, and she would give it to him.

The tentacles wouldn't be enough for him to get an edge. She dug into her bag with purpose, looking for the silver whistle, finding it, and giving it a sharp blast.

Her faithful phantom companion appeared, a dog of a comparable size to the wolves, yet much smaller than Slade.

This time she was prepared for the magic feedback's impact. She held her kneeling position and willed herself to ignore the pain so she could focus on the fight.

The shifter wolves were snapping at the squirming tentacles, her first spell having done what it was supposed to do in distracting and confusing them. The appendages entangled some wolf limbs, but they weren't strong enough to hold them back. Slade had moved away from them and was engaged with the wolf closest to him.

Dixie instructed her phantom dog companion toward the fray. It went straight to the wolf closest to her, attacking viciously and without mercy.

The third wolf, seeing what was happening to his brothers, hesitated long enough for a tentacle to wrap around his hind leg. He yipped, bit at the tentacle, then took one last look at his brothers before running off toward the woods a bit off in the distance.

The second, unable to get the upper hand on the phantom dog, followed. Dixie's companion was fast on his heels, and she let him go, knowing he would disappear when he was far enough from her, while hoping that would be long enough to keep the wolves away.

The first was under Slade, and Dixie knew the end was near if she didn't intervene. "Slade! Don't kill him!"

Slade's giant bear stilled at Dixie's voice, but he didn't back off the wolf. Dixie made her way closer to the two, struggling through the pain inside her and preparing for more as she started chanting a new spell, using one of her bracelets as a focus this time.

The spell took hold of the wolf, immobilizing him, while the feedback from it gripped Dixie as a sharp, piercing pain. Her body was going on pure adrenaline, but she had to hold it, to get through the situation so she could help her mate and make sure no one had to die in the fight.

When he realized Dixie had control of the wolf, Slade moved away from him.

Dixie held the spell, fighting against her pain while Slade shifted and went to the car for clothes. She loosened the spell only when he came back.

"Shift," she told the wolf. When he didn't, she added a warning. "I've heard that one of the worst feelings is being

forced to shift against one's will. Do you really want that experience?"

It didn't matter that she didn't actually have that spell. The threat was enough to convince him to shift back into his human form. She gave him just enough leeway on the immobilization spell to let him shift and put on the pair of shorts Slade tossed him but not enough to let him leave the area. Dixie kept a wary eye on the woods, but the other wolves seemed long gone.

"Did Maeve send you?" Slade asked.

The man tried to spit at him, but Dixie froze it in place and tightened the immobilization spell, starting to change it into a constriction spell, squeezing him. It increased the pain within her, but there was no turning back. She was doing this. "Why did she send you?" she demanded, letting the pain out a bit in the way she screamed at him.

"She wants the witch." The wolf shifter grunted.

"What does she think this is going to accomplish?" Slade growled.

"I don't know. You think she's going to tell me that? I'm just following orders to bring her the witch."

Slade looked over to Dixie, and he must have seen something in her face, because his expression changed from the stern angry look of a man who'd just been in an all-out brawl to one who was worried about someone he cared about.

"Dixie, let him go," he told her before looking back at the wolf. "Go back and tell your pack leader and his daughter that this better be her last move, or she's going to regret it."

Dixie released her spell and stayed awake long enough to watch him run into the woods after his friends.

And then blackness hit.



AT SLADE'S AGE, it was a rare occasion when he could get the blood flowing and really feel *alive*. Add to it the fact that Dixie walked into the situation, no hesitation or fear, and just started slinging spells... Slade felt unstoppable.

Until he looked at her and saw the beads of sweat on her head and the way her arm shook as she held her immobilization spell.

He didn't know what was wrong with her at first. It took a moment to remember the curse the council had put on her. He saw how much strength she had, as she withstood the pain she was in, but he was ready when she collapsed. He caught her before she hit the ground.

He looked around, not wanting the wolves to come back once they saw what had happened to her. He didn't know how Maeve thought having Dixie kidnapped would help her, just like he didn't know how reporting Dixie to the council would help her. But Maeve's rationale wasn't his biggest concern right then.

He had to help Dixie.

He brought her into the car, placing her gently in the passenger's side and then getting into his side, locking the door behind him and starting the car. If they came back, he'd run them over.

Then he turned all his attention to her. His heart raced. How hurt was she?

Slade couldn't tell, and he didn't know if it would work, but he knew mates could heal one another sometimes. He grabbed her hand and tried to think about what it felt like when he was injured, when he needed his body to heal, but nothing was happening.

Why? Why won't it work?

He had a feeling.

Despite promising to protect Dixie, he'd stayed at arm's length, not fully accepting her as his mate. He'd not wanted to risk the devil's curse, yet here they were. Is this how it would end? He hadn't opened up to her, and she'd die anyway?

Wouldn't it be better for Slade to be heartbroken but Dixie to be alive than for her to be dead and him forever haunted by what could have been? By his own dumb failing?

Slade leaned over the center console to gather her into his arms. She fell into him, her head resting on his shoulder, and he breathed in the scent of his mate. He let his feelings for her take over, the part of him that loved the woman without knowing her. His inner bear, his senses, the destiny that knew this woman was his match.

She smelled perfect. She felt perfect. She was *his*.

Heal, damn you. He spoke to his healing ability, willing it to pour through him, to ride his emotions and love for her, and bring her back from wherever she was.

Devil's curse be dammed. This wasn't how it was going to go. Dixie had an eternity to live. Slade was going to guarantee it.

He tried to picture her being happy and healthy, thought about her as he already knew her, and as he imagined she'd be in the future.

But he didn't see her alone in the future. He saw himself with her, right by her side. He saw more parties, travel, dinners, and nights with her in his arms.

And finally, she gasped, her blue eyes opening and looking up at him.

“What happened?” Her voice was soft, shaky.

“The council's curse, you passed out.” He didn't know a lot about magic stuff, but he knew one of the few ways an immortal could be killed was through a curse like that. Whatever magic she used bounced right back on her, and her body couldn't take it.

Dixie must have known as well because she looked surprised. “But how am I...”

“Mate's healing.”

“Oh.”

He didn't know what she knew about mates, but there was no way she could know how much emotional turmoil he'd just experienced.

All he was certain of, after all this, was that he needed to get her to the coven and make sure she was far away from him. Otherwise, the devil's curse was going to take advantage of the council's curse on her and take away his mate forever.

She would only be safe away from him.

It wasn't about a need to protect his own heart anymore. Now it was about needing to protect Dixie at all costs.

They continued on the road trip, with Dixie dozing off most of the way. He knew she was still healing from the ordeal but couldn't help but worry that she'd fade away from him again.

He was elated when the Sommerville House, a large castle-looking structure, finally came into view. As the sun had started to set, many shadows were cast on the building, making it appear more imposing than he knew it to be. Maybe it was more about what he wanted it to be.

This was where Dixie belonged, where she could be safe from Maeve and the devil's curse.

Slade parked in front of the house and shook Dixie gently awake. "We're here now."

"Oh." She groggily looked around. "I imagined a coven house would be, well, a house. This looks like a school or something."

"It is. Inside this place, you'll find the immortal witches as well as non-immortals, some who teach and some who are there to learn."

Dixie's eyes widened. "That's a lot of witches!"

"Yeah." Slade left the car and pulled their bags from the truck with Dixie right behind him.

“Do you think they’ll like me? I mean, are they friendly?”

Slade thought it was cute that she was nervous and wished he could offer some reassurance, but he really had no idea how they treated their own. “I’m not sure. The ones I met are cordial to my family and me because we’re allies.”

A young witch, a teenager with a halo of umber-colored curls and a solemn expression, appeared at the main entry. “Welcome to Sommerville House.” She opened the front door and waved them inside. “I’m Reyna Quinton, I’ll be your guide while you stay with us.”

“Thank you,” Dixie said. Slade followed behind her, carrying their bags.

“If you leave those here, I’ll give you a short tour. We’re about to sit down for dinner, but we have just a bit of time.”

Dixie looked down at herself, started brushing off imagined dirt. “I would have liked to have cleaned up. Do you think they’ll mind that we’re a bit ruffled?”

Reyna shook her head. “We’re used to travelers.”

Sommerville House was a place where many witches traveled for training and mentorship, but it was also a place where non-witches went to ask favors from the witches.

“Upstairs, where you’re staying, it’s the guest quarters, but there is a wing for the elders and professors and another wing for the students and apprentices.” Reyna took them through the halls, showing them to the different classrooms, libraries, and ending in the courtyard.

“Here, the outside courtyard has gardens, both for walking and for botany magic, as well as wide empty spaces for magic practice. You’d normally see witches practicing, but they’ve gone in for dinner.”

It wasn't gloomy. It had an academic, boarding-school feeling. For anyone who loved knowledge, pursuing it or passing it down, Slade assumed they'd love it here.

But he hadn't thought that seemed to be what Dixie was about. She'd talked about travel, treasure hunting, that sort of thing. Even so, maybe she could find a good niche for herself as a treasure teacher, magical artifacts, something like that.

Slade needed her to. He needed her to want to be here, to be somewhere safe where she could be protected and safely away from him.

"They've just sat down for dinner. I can escort you there."

They entered the dining room to dinner, to face one of the longest tables Slade had ever seen, full of witches of all ages.

The seats saved for them were at the head of the table, and all eyes were on them as they made their way to the front. When they sat, the staff was already setting down salads.

"Welcome, dear friend Slade." The witch at the head of the table, Paris Rhone, greeted them. "And this must be your mate, Dixie."

It was the first time anyone publicly announced Dixie as his mate, and for a moment, he was flustered. He quickly gained his composure, smiled, and returned the greeting. Dixie sat across from him as Paris went down the table, introducing the elder—immortal—witches. Some Slade knew, some he didn't. They were the ones Dixie would be meeting with the next day.

"I am beyond grateful that you've agreed to meet with me, and on such short notice," Dixie said before they were served their salads.

Paris waved off the thanks. "Please, enjoy your meal."

And they did.

Through dinner, Paris explained certain things.

“This location, our coven, serves as a permanent home to our immortal witches and a temporary home for our witches in training. Most of our young witches who live with us are youngsters with no other place to go, no others to train with. Witches are few and far between these days, and because of the regulations, as you’re encountering, it’s best we all stick together now.”

“I’ve never met other witches,” Dixie admitted. “Besides being raised by them. I always assumed we were more solitary creatures.”

“We all appreciate our alone time, and we’re not often very extroverted, which is why it’s important we all have our own rooms to retire to and the teachers have the opportunity to take leave when they need time to recharge.”

“Oh, that makes sense.”

One witch in particular, Adelle, seemed extra interested in Dixie, looking at her more carefully than the other witches seemed to care. Of course, Slade didn’t know what about Dixie interested Adelle, but he hoped it was a good sign. If any of the witches saw something in her, then she’d have a chance to earn her pass.

“We’re certainly always looking for new talent,” Adelle explained. “All witches have different talents, something new to offer.”

Dixie nodded but said nothing. She looked like a deer in the headlights, barely eating her food and nervously looking between the witches. Slade wondered if she was nervous and tried to help her engage in conversation.

“Have you ever thought about teaching before?” he asked her, wondering how much the coven might be appealing to her, though he couldn’t say if he was fully hoping it was or worried it was.

“No, not exactly,” Dixie replied. “Not that I am not open to the idea. I just always figured it would be just me, by myself.” She smiled a little.

Slade was surprised that it mattered so little to him about Dixie being dependent on him for her permit. He’d always thought it was an alpha thing to be controlling, but there he was, wanting her to have the best for her, for whatever she wanted. He was rooting for her, for one of the witches to take her on. It was more important to him for Dixie to get what she wanted, rather than what would serve him.

It was a novel feeling, and one he was kind of proud of.

When dinner was through, they let them know that they’d see them the next day, or Dixie, anyway, when she met with the elder coven members for her interview.

Reyna took them up to their room. Only after she’d left and closed the door behind her did Slade notice the room only had one bed.

“They think we’re together?” Dixie asked.

“Well, she did introduce you as my mate,” he said. “I could ask if they can find another room...”

“No!” Dixie cried. “I mean, if this is the hospitality they offered, I don’t want to ask for more.”

“When you’re already asking for so much, you mean? The sponsorship?”

She nodded. “Besides, I can take the floor.”

“That’s not going to happen.” Slade would sleep in the hall before he let her do that.

“Do you want to share? The bed is big enough.”

Slade’s body reacted to the idea of spending the night next to Dixie. He remembered kissing her the night before, and holding her in his arms just earlier that day. It would be a challenge to stay to his side of the mattress, but it was where he wanted to be. It was where he could both keep an eye on her and enjoy the proximity to her.

“If you’re comfortable with the idea.”

“Yeah, it’s fine,” she responded while focusing on digging through her suitcase.

He decided he needed to talk to her about what she brought up in the car and he’d avoided. “You asked me earlier how I can be willing to let you come to the coven.”

She looked up at that. “Yeah.”

“Do you know what a mate means?”

“I have an idea.”

“Shifters get one true love. It’s more than love the way humans feel it. It’s a deeper soul connection. It’s the one person who fits with us perfectly, sure, but it’s more than that. It’s not about wanting to possess the other person, but wanting them to be safe, no matter what. I would do anything for you because it’s coded in me. And if that means leaving you here, that’s what I’m meant to do.”

“Wow,” she said while taking a few steps back. She rested her hand on the windowsill and looked out. “I guess that means we’ll always be connected in some way, even if we’re not together?”

“Exactly.”

She nodded and looked back at him. “Thank you for telling me this.”

“I just wanted you to know that you can always come to me if you need anything, ever, from now until the end of time.”

Slade thought he saw her eyes shining, but she turned back to her suitcase and made herself busy again. When she went into the shower, Slade called his father to update him on their arrival at the coven and fill him in on the movement that Maeve made against them.

When Dixie was finished, Slade hopped into the shower. When he came out, she was already in the bed, sitting propped up and reading on her tablet.

Slade hesitated, and she made the first move, flipping back the covers for him and patting the mattress, her cute little T-shirt and cotton pants drawing his eyes before he crawled in next to her.

“I wanted to make sure I said thank you for helping me back then, you know, when I passed out,” she said once he was in bed.

“There’s no need to thank me. I couldn’t not help you. Besides, I should be the one thanking you. You were helping me and getting hurt because of it.”

She laughed. “Yes, but then I was only helping *you* because you were holding them off from getting to *me*.”

“I guess we could keep this going awhile.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “Maybe we just both say thanks, you’re welcome, etcetera.”

“Deal.” Without thinking, Slade offered his hand for her to shake, and she took it, smiling shyly.

He wanted to kiss her, to pull her into his arms and just feel her against him. There was plenty more he wanted to do, but she slid down into the bed, resting her head on the pillow. “I’m nervous about tomorrow.”

He slid down too, lying on his back but turning to look at her, captivated by her beauty and feeling lucky to be there in that moment. “I think they seemed to really like you. Everything’s going to work out.”

“I hope you’re right.” He knew she was still tired. It had been a long day, without even adding in her injury from the spells. “Goodnight, Dixie.”

“Goodnight, Slade.”

Dixie woke up snuggled against Slade, who had his arms around her.

It felt good, so right, so comfortable... that she quickly flew out of bed.

In one single day, everything had changed for her. Not just the realization that her continued existence was dependent on some immortal council but that she had some serious feelings for Slade.

It was all too much.

When she blacked out after the fight and woke in his arms, she saw the way he looked at her. There was more tenderness in his eyes than she'd ever seen directed to her.

It was terrifying.

Who cared if Esme had matched them or if he said she was his mate? She didn't know what that meant to her. All she was sure of was that she had promised herself she wouldn't rely on anyone else, that she wouldn't let herself get too close to others.

This coven was where she needed to be. She'd seen the other immortal witches. They weren't married to some mate and spending their long lives on a dream and a wish. They

were practical, and they were helping the next generations. That was what she needed to focus on.

Besides, for someone who said she was their mate, he sure seemed to want to get rid of her.

He opened his eyes. “Good morning.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to disturb you.”

“What time is it?”

“Almost eight.” Dixie gathered her clothes to change, knowing they’d said they would deliver their breakfast at eight. Slade followed her lead.

Promptly at eight, there was a knock at the door. Dixie opened it to find Reyna with a large tray. “Breakfast for you and Mr. Galath. I’ll be back in an hour to take you to the elder forum.”

“Thank you.” Dixie took the tray and returned to the room, busying herself with setting it up on the little table in the room.

“So, what do you think of it all?” Slade asked while he filled a little plate with food.

“It’s a lot to take in in such a short amount of time. I’m really not sure what to think of anything right now.” The coven was certainly neat, and she appreciated having so many witches in one space. It was a unique opportunity to be around so many of her kind.

But really, she’d felt more at home at the Dire Estate.

Sure, they both had land, greenery, opportunities for solitude.

And the coven had the opportunity for teaching, which she felt she likely owed to the world... but that was just it. She felt

a sense of duty and responsibility to do it, not a passion or a desire. Nothing that made her feel alive in the same way she did on a simple road trip with Slade.

Promptly at nine, Reyna knocked on the door again. “Miss Reade, the elders are ready for you.”

“Good luck,” Slade told her as she left the room.

Walking down the hallway was the first time she’d been without Slade in two days. She felt a bit incomplete without him. Not that she wasn’t whole without him, but just that she’d felt stronger... happier... by his side.

Dixie knew he was rooting for her, though, and that he’d be there waiting for her when she finished the meeting. He’d promised he would stand by her until she was secured in the coven. The thought gave her strength.

“This way.” Reyna opened a set of wide double doors and gestured Dixie to walk in.

Inside was a round room, and the elder forum members sat in large high-backed chairs, arranged in a semi-circle, facing a smaller chair in the center.

They each offered greetings, smiles, and friendly tones that helped Dixie to feel more at ease. At least they weren’t as angry and unfriendly as the council had been the previous morning.

“We don’t get many new immortals,” Paris explained. “We’re fortunate that Slade chose to bring you here.”

“Thank you. I’m fortunate to meet all of you as well.”

They started by asking Dixie to tell them a little about herself. So she told them about her life, her family, her magic talents, and her mission. She worried they might try to demand

from her the secret to the Death cheat, but that was worry for nothing.

“We never force our witches to reveal family secrets.”

That was a relief. “You say ‘our witches.’ Can you tell me what you mean?”

“Only that if you’re sponsored by one of us, you become one of us. There are other witches you could go to for sponsorship, some that belong to covens, some who are independent, but if you are sponsored by us, you are among us.”

“But the sponsorship is binding, is it not? What do I owe you... and is it forever?”

The looks went around between the members again.

“It’s a situation in that you’re either with us or against us,” Paris said. “You can live here, but there are others who aren’t living here right now. They’re expected to return if and when we call on them, though. If you don’t adhere to coven requests, you’re a person non-grata.”

Well, that was something to think about.

“Look, we don’t want you to get bogged down by all of that.” Another witch, Adelle, spoke up. “Your mate, Slade, you trust him, correct? He wouldn’t have brought you somewhere to people he didn’t trust.”

She was right. Slade had come to her defense against the council, and he’d healed her after the magic feedback curse took her down. He’d told her he would do anything for her, and she had no reason not to believe him.

“I agree,” Dixie said.

“Besides,” Adelle added, “you don’t have to make a choice now. You can agree to the task from your sponsor, and you can decide to officially join later.”

“Are all of the witches here, teachers and students, part of the official coven?” Dixie asked.

“Not in the way you’re looking to join,” Paris said. “Our elder forum here, the immortals, is completely different. We’re the core of the coven. It’s highly prestigious. Some of us have been here a *very* long time, and will likely be here longer than anyone who walks through the doors just to teach or learn.”

“Do you have any questions for us?” Adelle asked.

Dixie had tons of questions but didn’t even know where she could start. She felt like she needed a manual or something.

“Her head is spinning,” Adelle said. “With the forum’s permission, I’d like to speak to Dixie privately.”

“Very well,” Paris said, standing, and having the others—except Adelle—stand with her. “We look forward to seeing the outcome for you, Dixie,” she said, placing her hand on Dixie’s shoulder for a moment before they left the room.

“You want to be sponsored,” Adelle said.

“I mean, apparently, I *have* to be sponsored,” Dixie replied.

Adelle nodded. “It’s something we’ve all faced. This isn’t your only option, though.”

“You mean marriage to Slade?” Dixie asked, shaking her head. “He’s great, from what I’ve seen. I’ve known him less than three days! I don’t want to marry him for sponsorship, for

legal status. I think it's likely better for me to achieve this, this way."

"You don't have to choose now," she said. "But I am going to extend an offer to you. I'll sponsor you, into the coven and into the legal immortal status, in exchange for something."

This is it, Dixie thought. The contract of servitude. "How long do I have to decide?"

"I haven't told you what I want."

"Oh, I thought it was me working here, as a servant or teacher or something."

She shook her head. "The first step is getting one of us to agree to sponsor you. It's a more personal thing, something between you and the potential sponsor."

"So, in this case, you?"

"Maybe. In our meeting before you entered, I expressed my interest, and no one objected to allowing me to make the first sponsorship offer."

"And if you agree to sponsor me, then what?"

"I'll give you a task. If you pass the task and I offer you sponsorship, then you have the option to take it, but with it comes membership in the coven, which comes with its own set of duties."

"Oh, it couldn't just be simple, could it?"

"Joining a coven has many benefits, but you can't just expect to have them without giving back in return."

"And like Paris said, that's forever? So I don't have freedom?"

“It’s not that rigid. As we govern ourselves, we’d never unjustly enslave someone, but yes, there is a certain expectation, and it is forever. You serve the coven for as long as you want the coven’s protection from the council. If you were to be exiled from the coven, the council could put you back on the list for execution.”

Dixie remembered the way she felt when the magic curse took her down. She knew without a doubt that the council had the power to execute her if they wanted to.

Dixie nodded. “But I have time to think about it?”

“You can accept the task or reject it. You’re not tied to anything right now. You can also change your mind before we officially make you one of us.”

“I should mention, the council has a magic feedback curse on me, so I’m not sure if I can pass a trial.”

“Magic feedback, ugh, that’s terrible, but I’m not surprised. They want to make sure you do things their way. It’s okay, though. What I have in mind shouldn’t require magic. What’s piqued my interest in you is the fact that you were a treasure hunter, and I’m in need of a rare item. A glowing obsidian crystal, filled with violet phosphorescent light.”

She was requesting a rare item, one very unique and challenging to obtain. Phosphorous wasn’t an element naturally found in rocks and minerals. It was something found within living beings. So for it to be locked in an obsidian crystal, either something would have had to perish the right way within a lava spill... or, more likely, someone would have had to capture the living essence in the crystal.

She was asking for something that was said to be a devil’s crystal. Something that was very rare, not often used, and

when used, for something incredibly challenging, and likely dangerous.

What Adelle needed it for wasn't Dixie's problem, though.

"And you think I can get it?" Dixie asked, knowing full well she could. She knew exactly the network of people to go through, what questions to ask, how to track it down, and how to barter.

Not that she'd need to.

"I think you're my best bet."

"What if I refuse? If I can't do it?" Because Dixie wasn't sure she could return to treasure hunting. Not without forcing herself back to her hoard.

She shrugged. "Then you can see if one of the other witches is interested in sponsoring you. I'm sure they will be. It's rare for new immortals to come in, and getting a new one is an asset to the coven. Add in that you don't have hubris and attitude like some others who walk through that door, and you're desirable. So sure, turn me down if you'd like."

As nonchalant as she seemed, Dixie sensed some agitation. She wanted that crystal. "I'm just not sure I can get the item." She might not be able to do the thing she needed to do to get her the item, but what if the others had similar asks? She'd have to figure it out, and she might as well help Adelle.

It was very likely she had the item in her hoard. At her home. At the place she left behind and never intended to return. At the place where she left her humanity. Even the thought of the place made panic rise in her. All the memories that were tied there... the things that haunted her, not bad memories but good ones, all the life that she'd left behind.

They were waiting to overwhelm her once she dared go back there.

“I’m guessing I don’t get to hear another sponsorship test and decide between the two.”

Adelle had looked so friendly so far, and now her face turned stony. “No, you don’t get to sponsor shop. It’s against the rules. You get one offer, and if you refuse it, you can’t go back.”

“How long do I have to get it?”

“I won’t set a limit on you, but I’m guessing you’re eager to have the council’s feedback curse off, and word has it the local pack is after you too. The time you need is based on how long you want to deal with all that.”

“I’ll do it.” Adelle was right. Dixie had to get over her issues and follow through with this. Even if she wanted to barter for a new crystal, she’d need to get items for bartering from her house. There was no other way to do it. She needed to go home, see what she had as far as glowing crystals, and assemble a kit if she needed to go hunting and trading. Dixie didn’t have a complete memory of her inventory, but she had lots of stuff like that. She could luck out.

If she could stand to go there.

Adelle raised an eyebrow. “You think you can get it for me?”

“I’ll do my best.”

“All right.” The smile returned to her face, and Dixie sensed her relief. “Will you want to leave right away?”

“Yes, I would.” The sooner Dixie got this over with, the better.

Slade was alone with his thoughts, and he didn't like it.

Because, just as he'd feared, the longer he was with Dixie, the closer they became, like waking up with her in his arms that morning, the stronger his urge was to keep her with him.

Slade had to remember what she looked like, crumpled on the ground after her spells hurt her. *That* was what happened when the dire bears' mates stayed close to them. Slade had to remember, if he stayed with her, bad things would happen to her. It would hurt less to give her up willingly than to watch her be destroyed because of their curse.

The little voice in his head that tried to tell him that there was a difference between the devil's curse he believed in and the curse the council put on Dixie didn't matter. He wouldn't risk it. No one could convince him that Dixie would be safe with him. So he would make sure things worked out with her here.

He kept busy on his phone, reading news and looking over emails until Dixie returned.

"You're still here," she said, entering the room.

"Why wouldn't I be?"

She shrugged. "You never know."

“I’m not leaving you until I’m sure that you’re safe and secure. Speaking of which, how did the meeting go?”

“Good.” She nodded and went over to her suitcase to start packing. “I need to go home.”

“Home?” he asked, squinting at the word.

“My house. Hopefully, I can find what I need there.”

Ah. Slade nodded. She needed something for her task. “All right, let’s grab our stuff.”

She paused. “I didn’t mean you have to take me—”

He cut her off. “I didn’t think you did. I suppose I shouldn’t assume I’m taking you. I should ask. Would you like me to take you there?” On that note, he didn’t even know if it was somewhere within driving distance.

“I would enjoy your company, but I don’t want you to feel like I’m using you for the ride.”

“You’re not. I’m here for you.” He was there to help her with whatever she needed to help her get her spot in the council.

As they left, Paris and Adelle bid them farewell. Dixie and Slade thanked them for their hospitality, and they told them they’d see them soon.

And then they were off.

They headed back east, the way they came, but then turned north.

The farther they went, the more wound up Dixie seemed to get. She was sitting straight, hugging her hands to her chest, staring straight ahead.

“Are you okay?” Slade finally asked.

She touched her neck, as though checking her pulse. “Yeah, I’m sure I’m okay. It’s just been a long time since I’ve been back here.”

“Six months?” Slade asked, remembering she said it had been six months since her change.

“But it feels like a lifetime ago.” Out of the corner of his eye, he could see her wringing her hands and taking deep breaths. He reached over and took her hand.

“I’m here with you, okay?”

She squeezed his hand but didn’t say anything. Slade felt her hand shaking.

“Did bad things happen here? Are you worried about traumatic memories returning?”

“No, god no, not at all,” she said, finally turning to look at him. “It’s the opposite.”

He didn’t understand. “Good memories returning?”

She shrugged helplessly, a sad smile on her face. “I focused on my goal so much, got tunnel vision, so I didn’t have to look at what I was missing. When I got my goal, I left so I wouldn’t have to be reminded of what I lost.”

What she lost? Did she mean her family?

Slade had lost his mother when he was young, but he’d had his father for his whole immortality, and his brothers too. Even if his brothers didn’t live with them anymore, he knew they were both out in the world somewhere, no matter how long it had been since they’d last seen each other.

Was Dixie fleeing from home because she was homesick for a place in her past that had her family? A place she could

never return? Was he taking her to an empty shell of her life that was going to cause her an undue amount of pain?

“We don’t have to keep going,” he said.

“Yes, we do.”

“We can get whatever you need another way.”

“I can’t stay away from this forever. My hoard is there, my collection. I guess I should have moved it elsewhere... but I think a part of me knew I’d come back. It’s all I have left of them. I wouldn’t get rid of it. I think I just thought it would get easier over time.”

“Not a lot of time has passed. You can come back later. I’ll take you back to Dire Estate. You can stay there as long as you want until you’re ready for this.”

“No, that would be equal to being under house arrest for me. I couldn’t use magic, I couldn’t travel where I wanted. I can’t do that. I have to face this.”

“Okay.”

They continued on, into the woods, and onto a dirt road. Slade parked by a little beat-up cabin, a horrid little place that hardly looked like it should be standing. “This is where you lived?” He suddenly felt awful about parading her around Dire Estate and the Sommerville House. If this was where she came from, he was basically flaunting riches in front of her.

She made a little laugh. “It’s not like that, but I do have to use a little magic. I don’t think it’s going to hurt like yesterday, but just in case...” She reached her hand out to him.

“I got you.” He took her hand, sending her strength through his touch.

“It’s an illusion spell,” she told him, and she waved her hand, and then Slade could see her home for what it really was.

A beautiful log cabin, with an impressive display of floor-to-ceiling windows going up to the top of the gabled roof on the main section of the house with a stone fireplace beside it. From that, two wings extended, also with large windows, but not as tall. The wood shake shingles had a green tint to them, making the whole structure look perfectly at home in the middle of the trees.

Dixie sat there, unmoving. “You okay?” he asked, not sure how much removing the illusion spell had done to her.

“I feel okay, actually. I think this helped.” She squeezed his hand again. “Plus, it wasn’t a lot of magic.”

Which meant she wasn’t moving yet because she wasn’t ready. “Take as long as you need,” he told her.

She took a deep breath. “I can do this.” She let go of his hand and left the car.

He gave her a moment to herself while he gathered their suitcases and the groceries they’d picked up from the trunk. She took one of the bags of groceries and led the way to the front door.

She entered and then stepped to the side for Slade to go in. He took a moment to look around, to take in the space that Dixie had spent her whole life in. It was an open-concept floor plan with a large kitchen, dining area, and living space with the fireplace.

It looked homey, cozy. Likely everything had some sort of memory of the people she’d loved and lost. From the crocheted blanket on the back of the couch to the little

knickknacks on top of the fireplace mantel. There were also what he'd consider witchy elements, like the sage sticks and bottles of who-knows-what on the dining room table.

But all throughout it were photos, vintage-looking ones all the way to ones that looked not too old, perhaps ten years or so old.

He busied himself, putting the groceries away, though he noticed the tears escaping her eyes. He wanted to give her space and time to process her emotions how she needed to.

There wasn't a time limit for grief. There wasn't a standard way of processing it. He wasn't a psychologist, but he'd seen his share of it.

"I lost my grandmother almost forty years ago," she finally said, and Slade saw that she'd found a box of facial tissues and a photo next to it. "And then it was like, we got ten more years from each of them. Ten years, then my aunt was gone. Another ten, my mother, another ten, my sister."

She took a seat at the kitchen table, placing a framed photo on the table and turning it toward him. It was slightly discolored, and the five women had large hairstyles and bright clothing that suggested it was taken in the 1980s. Slade sat across from her, again taking her hands and hoping some healing and strength that helped against the magic feedback curse could help with her pain now. He hated seeing her like this, but he had to let her do what she needed to do.

"I thought I'd die too, like they did." She whispered the admission. "I kept going because it was all I knew."

"But you didn't make plans for this life because you thought you'd follow them to the afterlife."

She nodded.

And then she seemed to turn off the vulnerability, pulling her hands from his and shaking her shoulders.

“Well, here we are. I did it. Wasn’t so bad.”

Slade nodded. Was she going to grab whatever she needed and leave now? Had she really done enough to process this wound?

He didn’t think so, but he wasn’t going to push her.

“Come on, I’ll show you the treasure cave.”

“The what?” Slade had heard her mention her hoard enough times, but he didn’t know what to expect.

She didn’t answer but led him to a door, which was also spelled. She spoke some words under her breath and gestured at the door, making it shimmer before it cracked open. Slade watched her catch her breath, as though that one had come back to hit her a bit, but she sidestepped his attempt to touch her and offer healing. “This way,” she said, appearing all right, though he worried her strength was waning, observing the way she leaned heavily on the railing going down the stairs.

They descended the dimly lit stairs and turned a corner to enter a gigantic basement—more like a warehouse—full of shelving units and boxes. Rows and rows of them, as far as he could see in any direction.

“Holy cow.”

“Yep.”

The writing on the boxes was unreadable to Slade. “What language is this in?”

“It’s coded,” she responded, making her way down an aisle. “Careful what you touch,” she added when he peeked in

a box. “And try not to break anything. You never know what kind of evil spirit you might set free.”

She smiled after she said it, so he thought she must be joking... but also knowing the reputation of witches, and seeing the immense collection she had, he figured she might not be completely kidding.

He decided to play it safe and just follow her.

“How do you not have everyone coming after you for this stuff?”

“This place is a better kept secret and better secured than, I don’t know, whatever is really really safe.”

Right, but he still didn’t like it. Now that she was getting out and getting to know more people in the world, he felt she might want to look into other safety precautions.

But like where?

Dire Estate was the only thing he could think of. But was it really because it was more secretive and secure or because he wanted to keep her and all her things near him?

Slade followed her down the row and watched her reading the boxes until she stopped in front of one. “We’ll see if I have what Adelle wants.”

Slade helped her pull a box down, and she eagerly tore the lid off. As soon as she did, a low glow came out. Peering in, he saw items wrapped in bubble wrap and brown paper, each one slightly glowing a different color.

She shifted them around, muttering, “Purple... I need purple,” until finally making a determined grab and coming up with one. “Got it!”

As she unwrapped the item, Slade closed the box and carefully put it back on the shelf. When he turned back to her, she was holding a black stone in her hand, and it was weirdly emitting a purple glow.

“What is that?” Slade asked.

“It’s what I need for Adelle.”

“She asked you for something, and you just happened to have it lying around?”

“Happened to?” She gestured around the giant room. “This is generations of hoarding. I doubt you could think of anything I don’t have in here. And if you did think of something, I have enough to work with to trade for the item of your desire.”

“So really, she needed this crystal, and your arrival was like a gift she’d been waiting for.”

“Seems like it, and works for me.” She gestured to the door. “We can go.”

“What are you planning to do with all this?” Slade asked before they left.

She shrugged. “No idea, but hopefully I get to live long enough to figure it all out.” It was a grim reminder of the threat the council made, one Slade didn’t like thinking about.

They went back to the main level, and she spelled the door behind them. This time, he caught her when the feedback hit her. “That’s three times now. You’re kind of pushing it.”

“I’m fine,” she said, but he could feel how weak she was.

He picked her up and took her over to the couch. “Sit. Rest. I’ll cook dinner.”

“No, we should go...” She looked outside. It had become dark and was sprinkling rain.

“No, we should stay. The dirt road won’t be easy to go down, and we don’t want to get stuck. Besides, we have groceries. We have a place to stay and no reason to get on the road.”

As he said “no reason,” Dixie’s eyes darted around. She had all the reasons to want to leave. She didn’t want to be surrounded by all her memories. She wanted to flee.

“Dixie,” Slade said in a warning tone. “I know it doesn’t feel great to be here, but you can get through one night. I’m here with you.”

She pulled the blanket off the back of the couch and pulled it around her, not saying anything. As she curled up in it, he made his way to the kitchen and started to pull out food. Now that he saw how far away from everything her place was, he was glad she’d suggested swinging by the store. He figured she must have had a garden when she lived here, chickens even, a cow for milk... because she was certainly too far away to make regular trips to the store.

He cooked in silence, trying to bury the feeling of dread that was creeping up. Now that she had the crystal that Adelle wanted, she’d be able to bind herself to the coven, and that would permanently take her away from him. It was what was best.

But it wasn’t what he wanted.

What he wanted was to sit down on the couch with her, pull her into his arms, and let her cry, let her feel all of the emotions washing over her, and promise her that he would be with her forever.

But he couldn't do that. He had to remember that the devil's curse would do to him and Dixie what it had to Tad and... he couldn't remember his mate's name. Or anything about her. It had been so long ago...

It didn't matter. He'd never forget Dixie. Because of his mate sense, he was at a disadvantage in this situation. He was more in thrall with her than she was with him. She'd join the coven and leave him, probably barely thinking about him again.

But he'd be haunted by her for the rest of his days.

"Do you know what you're doing in here?" She appeared next to him, looking a little stronger. He'd stopped, holding the noodles for pasta in his hands.

He offered her a smile, refusing to let what might be their last night together be anything less than cheerful. "I just don't know where you keep the pots and pans."

She opened a cupboard and handed him a pot. "I just wondered, someone with servants and a cook, do you know what you're doing in here?"

Slade smiled. "We have a part-time cook. We cook for ourselves the rest of the time."

And so they prepared the meal and ate and didn't talk about the decision Dixie was making or any of the thoughts going on inside of her head. He didn't ask her about her life there or bring up anything that might upset her. He knew the wheels in her head were spinning, but it was up to her to share any of it she wanted to.

After they'd washed the dishes and put them all away, she went to a closet and pulled out a blanket and pillow, handing them to Slade. "Am I sleeping on the couch?"

“I would offer to take the couch, but I assumed you’d fight me on it anyway, and I’m much too tired to spar.”

Slade nodded. He didn’t ask about other rooms in the house. Maybe they were closed up, sealed for the memory of the person who once lived in them. Either way, the couch was big and would be fine for Slade to sleep on. “You were right.”

It was only then that she opened up again. “I was the last one, Slade. I didn’t know what else to do but work on the goal, and I was so focused on it that I didn’t stop to think if I actually *wanted* it, or if I did want it, why I wanted it, what I would do with it once I got it. The day after I became Immortal, I realized I probably would have been better off dead, because all that was left for me was grief.”

At that, Slade grabbed her by the shoulders. “Dixie, don’t say that. The grief you feel in this house for your family is a part of life, but it’s not all there is to life. You have so much ahead of you, and based on what you told me about your family going after this, they would be proud of you, happy for you. They would want you looking forward to all you have ahead of you.”

“No.” She shook her head, her face ashen. “When I woke, after my bargain with Death, I came out of my bedroom and looked around me. I can’t tell you why, but instead of feeling proud, happy at what I achieved, I felt crushed. I collapsed right here on the floor, sobbing because I had nothing anymore. I had no family, no friends, and no mission. I’ve been running, trying to find something, so I didn’t have to think about any of that.”

“I’m so sorry.” Slade tried to put his arms around her, but she pulled away.

“Please, Slade, I can’t do this. I can’t be near you. I can’t be in your arms. If I have to face this, then I have to deal with it alone.”

He wished he could tell her that she shouldn’t push him away. If she regretted losing the ones she loved before, then she shouldn’t push away her chance for love now.

But that wasn’t fair. He was going to dump her off at the coven because he knew there was a curse. He couldn’t promise her love and happiness and a forever with him.

So he nodded and let her go off to her bedroom, left alone with the pillow and blanket she’d thrown on the couch.

Dixie felt like she might forget to breathe. Like her heart was being constricted in her chest.

She wanted to leave, to give herself a break from being there, but Slade was right. The roads wouldn't be great in the rain, and it was dark. They should sleep and head out in the morning.

At least being in her own bedroom was a little easier than being in the main part of the house. At least this was mostly her stuff. The photos and items that besieged her with memories of her family weren't as dense in there.

The reminders of the people she desperately missed. Those she felt lost and completely incomplete without.

Was immortality really the best thing, when she had to live without the people who mattered?

She'd been so single-minded, so focused on the goal, it had gotten her through the hard times and made her have a drive and a focus and a reason for living that allowed her to live with the grief.

It had been a Band-Aid.

And now that it was achieved, she'd been out in the world, trying to find a new purpose.

Because she wasn't admitting that what really mattered was the people. The family she'd loved and lost.

And being here with Slade, it was overwhelming and confusing.

She felt a great deal for him. A scary amount. But was it something she could trust? Or was the part of her that missed having a family just jumping on the chance to be with him?

Or was it something true? Something Esme knew, something his mate sense knew?

She didn't know.

And she fell into a fitful sleep.



“DIXIE, WAKE UP!” A banging on her bedroom door startled her. She was confused for a moment, unsettled. Where was she? She looked around... *I'm... in my room?* Then who was at her door?

It all came back, the awful night, the way she left Slade on the couch, cold and alone after all he'd done to support her. That was selfish, self-absorbed. She made up her mind to apologize to him.

The banging continued. “I'm up,” she shouted, going to the door. “What's wrong?”

“Did you put the spells back up around your house last night? I don't know why I'm asking you that. You didn't. And someone has found us.”

“What!” Dixie took a few strides through the hallway and made it to the living room, where she looked out the front to

see a large truck was there, beside Slade's Audi. Four people were piling out of it, carrying guns on their hips.

She recognized the man from the other day, the one who'd attacked them.

And then she recognized the woman, Maeve.

"They followed us here?" Her heart sank. She'd been too concerned with the feedback curse that she'd taken the risk of not reapplying the house's illusion spell or the other little protections that went along with it. She hadn't any idea that they would have been followed.

Her eyes darted to the basement door. At least she'd re-spelled that. Maeve and her gang could bomb the whole house, but they'd never get to her treasure hoard.

Slade growled. "Stay here, I'll handle this."

"Four on one isn't good odds. I'm coming with you."

He spun, his presence in front of her massive and overpowering. "I will *not* see you go down again. Stay here. Do not use magic. I have it handled."

She didn't think he did have it handled, but maybe there was a chance this faceoff could end without violence. He was right that she shouldn't use magic. It was weakening her, despite his attempts at mate healing. If she got into spell-sliding now, she might not wake up from a collapse this time.

Slade opened the door.

"Hello, Slade, can we come in?" Maeve asked with a false sweetness to her voice.

"I'd rather we talk outside."

They ignored him and pushed past. “Search the place,” Maeve instructed.

“You are not going to toss my house looking for a recipe,” Dixie warned.

Before the words were out of her mouth, they’d already started opening cabinets, drawers, and doors. One of them opened the basement door, which revealed a normal-looking broom closet, complete with five witches’ brooms.

“You can either watch us toss the house or come out and give me the recipe.” Maeve let her three men do the searching. She stood next to Dixie. “Or you can fight us, but your house will be more damaged than that.”

It was too much when they moved toward the bedroom wing. “Stop!” Dixie shouted. Their rooms were the way they’d left them. There was no way she was letting anyone destroy them.

When they kept moving, she wasn’t going to just let them do it. She used her immobilization spell and prepared herself for the kickback.

“Dixie, no!” Slade shouted.

Despite being prepared for it, the feedback still knocked her down, but she wasn’t out. Slade rushed to her side and roared at Maeve. “Stop this right now, or so help me, you’ll all regret it.”

“What’s wrong with her?” There was a change in Maeve’s voice. “Hey, guys, hold off a second.”

Dixie looked up from her position on the floor in Slade’s arms. “A feedback curse from the council, but it won’t stop me. I’ll die before I watch you tear this place apart.”

Something passed over Maeve's eye. Was it fear for how angry Slade was at Dixie's collapse, or was it pity? "Just tell me where the items are, Dixie. The recipe and the items, and I'll leave you alone."

"Maeve, for goodness sake, if I had items to perform the immortality rite for another, don't you think I would have given it to my family? My sister?" She pointed to one of the photos on the wall.

She followed Dixie's gesture, and her expression further softened. It gave Dixie an idea. "Slade, can you and the guys leave us for a moment." Dixie used his shoulder to brace herself and stood, showing him she was okay.

"I don't think so."

"Please, I think Maeve and I need to talk."

His eyes searched hers, and finally, he relented. Once they were outside, Dixie sat on the couch and patted the cushion beside her. "Sit."

Though Maeve's face was stony, Dixie could tell there was something lost and helpless in her eyes. Maeve did as told.

"You've been coming after me since we met. You said you wanted my immortality recipe."

"And you refused."

"So why put the council on me?"

"Because I knew you came in with Esme. I knew you were Slade's mate. But I also knew Slade is a bonehead and would mess things up. So setting the council on you right away might get him to claim you and get you to stay, which would give me longer to work on getting the recipe from you."

“So then when that didn’t work, when I left for the Coven, you set your men on us?”

“They were supposed to retrieve you.”

“And then you followed us here?”

“It’s not like we attacked while you were sleeping.”

“You basically burst in the door and started ripping my house apart. I don’t see the difference in if you did it last night or first thing in the morning.”

“Ugh, I know.” She threw her head down into her hands. “I’m sorry, I thought giving you the night was being considerate. This is all messed up. I just needed to do something to try to convince you to help me.”

Help her? The statement piqued Dixie’s curiosity. “Maeve, why do you want the recipe?”

At that question, Maeve looked surprised. “You don’t assume it’s just the same reason everyone wants it? For power? For, I don’t know, because I don’t want to be dead?”

“No one ever asked me why I wanted it. If they had, I wouldn’t have had a good answer. I thought I’d see if you had one.”

“I do. At least, to me.” Maeve looked down at her hands, folded in her lap. She didn’t look like the stone-cold aggressive woman Dixie had first met. She looked small, scared even.

“What is it?”

She looked back up at Dixie. “I haven’t told anyone this. Not a soul.”

“I won’t repeat it.” Dixie was watching everything about her now. Was she about to feed her a lie?

“I was at a party years ago. I showed up late, as one does, fashionably late, but I was there later than I’d planned on. The party was mostly over, but I tried to play it off, chatting with the people who were still left. In wandering around, something inside of me stirred. I followed the feeling and found a man asleep. He didn’t stir, I assumed he had too many drinks, but I knew exactly what I’d come across.”

Dixie could guess. “Your mate?”

She nodded. “But there was a problem.”

She pieced it together. “The man is immortal.”

Tears welled in her eyes. If she were telling Dixie a false story, she was a really good storyteller. “I’ve spent years avoiding him while I search for a way to become immortal. I want to be with him, but I’m getting older and older. When you appeared, it was like this was it, my chance.”

“How did you know who I was? What I was?”

“I wasn’t lying when I said there were rumors. Having a wide-reaching network is one of the benefits of being the pack leader’s daughter. We’d just tracked you down when that meddlesome Esme swooped in and whisked you off to the Galaths’.”

“Oh.” Feeling a bit stronger, now that the magic feedback had faded a bit, Dixie stood from the couch.

“Dixie, please,” Maeve pleaded, following Dixie into the kitchen. “I don’t know what else I can do.”

“I think there might have been better ways to go about this, but what’s done is done.” She reached for the large family

photo that was propped up on the breakfast bar and started to take the back off. “I’ll give you this, but remember that it took my family generations to get all this stuff. I don’t have any of the items. You’re on your own for that.” She handed her the slip of paper that was hidden inside the frame.

She looked at it, her eyes wide and unbelieving. “This is it, for real?”

“Yep. And before you question it, it really is the full honest-to-goodness list.”

“You said you weren’t interested in sharing.”

“I wasn’t, but you’ve persuaded me.” Well, that, and her sort of change of heart from being home. “I don’t have anyone else to pass it down to, no other family. In a way, giving this to someone else feels like the right thing to do.”

“If you’re saying this makes us family...” Dixie expected her to say something snarky, but instead, she hugged her. “Thank you, Dixie. You don’t know how much this means to me.”

“Maeve, I don’t want to burst your bubble, but did you hear what I said about it being generations? I don’t know if you’ll be able to—”

“But at least now I can try.”

Dixie saw a determination in Maeve’s eyes. She had a goal, just as Dixie had. She might die before reaching that goal, but at least she had it. Just as Dixie had focused on that recipe so she didn’t have to despair over the loss of her loved ones, now Maeve could focus on it and ignore her heartache.

“Good luck.”

Dixie sealed the house back up, accepting the support Slade offered her, and then they were on their way. She was emotionally wiped from the visit and physically wiped from the magic feedback, so she slept for the first part of the ride. When she woke, feeling a bit better, she found herself gazing at him and wondering at how at-home she felt by his side.

“Why don’t you want to be with me?”

“What?”

“Mates want to be with each other, and you’ve been more than happy to pawn me off on the coven this whole time. Why? Why don’t you want to be with me?”

“You don’t want to be with me, either. You don’t have the mate sense. I’m not going to try and make you want to be with me.”

“No, I don’t believe that. If you wanted me to be with you, you could have done anything to try to get me to fall for you.”

“Do you want to be with me?”

“Maybe,” she answered.

“Well, see—wait, what?”

“I don’t want to be with you because I’m afraid.”

“What?”

“I’m afraid to let myself have a meaningful relationship with anyone. I’m raw from the hurt. I never properly grieved my loved ones. I focused on my work, and then I fled. I can admit that now, now that I’ve gone home and had to face it. Going to the coven was me doing the same, fleeing you before you became something I cared about and feared losing.”

“What are you saying?”

“I don’t know.”

“It doesn’t matter,” he said.

“Why?”

“Because my kind, the Dire Bears, we can’t have love. We’re cursed.”

“You are?”

“Yes. My dad, he lost his mate, my mom, before we were turned. But my brother Tad, he met his mate, and it was a cursed match. When he lost her, he lost it. It crushed him. I didn’t want a mate because I didn’t want that to happen, but then I saw what happened to you when you collapsed, and I realized it wasn’t about my fear for myself anymore; it’s my fear for you. I can’t let the curse happen to you.”

“The curse on me is because of the council, not because your family has some curse.”

“Semantics. I’m cursed, which means you’re in danger, if not from the council’s curse, then look at Maeve going after you. It will always be something else.”

“There’s always a way to break the curse. We could ask at the coven. I’m sure whatever we need I have back at the house —”

“No, it’s not like that.”

“There’s always a way to break a curse.”

“If there was, Tad would have figured it out.”

Dixie let the matter drop and dozed most of the rest of the ride. Getting up for rest stops and food.

She would be glad when the curse was off her. The moment that happened, she was going to cast every spell she could think of!



“ADELLE IS WAITING FOR YOU,” the young witch from before informed them when they got back to the coven. Adelle must be anxious to see if she’d finished the task. She was alone when she walked into the sitting room, leaving Slade behind.

“You’re back so soon!”

Her face lit up when Dixie handed her the crystal. “It’s perfect.”

Dixie didn’t ask for what. It wasn’t her business. If there was anything she’d learned from being a witch, it was that sometimes letting people keep things to themselves was best for everyone. Less trouble to get wrapped up in.

“So, you’re in then. There will be an official ceremony for you, and all that, but the first thing we’ll do is pen a letter to the council to let them know that you’re one of us now—”

She saw something in her face. “Dixie, what’s wrong? Why do I get the feeling that joining the coven isn’t what you really want to do?”

If Adelle was going to be Dixie's sponsor, Dixie had no reason not to tell her the whole truth. "Adelle, I think if I could be with Slade, I might want to be with him, over committing to the coven. I'm sorry to say that, but I figured you should know."

"What do you mean, if you could be with him? Why can't you?"

"He says there is a curse on his family. He believes I'm in danger as long as I'm around him."

"Why does he think that?"

"He has a brother, Tad, who had a cursed love, and Slade's, well, I guess he's afraid because of it. The council's curse worked on me a few times, and he thinks it's connected to his curse."

Adelle's face set hard. She stood. Dixie wasn't sure what she was thinking, but she heard her speak to Reyna, who was waiting outside the door. "Can you go retrieve Mr. Galath for me?"

She didn't return to her seat but went to a window, examine the glimmering glowing crystal in the natural sunlight. Only when the door opened again and Slade walked in did she return to Dixie's side. "Mr. Galath, please sit. We need to talk."

"Is everything all right?" he asked.

Dixie felt soothed to have him in the room with her. He looked so handsome in his suit, with that bit of stubble on his cheeks, his chiseled jaw, but the kind eyes looked at her with concern.

She shrugged and looked to Adelle.

“Dixie tells me that you believe there is a curse on your family, one that will harm her, and that is the reason you’re pushing for her to be in the coven.”

He looked taken aback, so Dixie said, “I’m sorry if I told your family business. I just wanted her to know what my thoughts were.”

“Your thoughts?”

“Yeah, that if I had the choice, I think I’d rather be with you than the coven, but I can’t because of the curse.”

A small smile formed on Slade’s face, as though she’d said something he’d wanted to hear. “It means a lot to me to know you feel that way, even if there’s nothing we can do about it.”

“You’re not cursed,” Adelle interrupted.

He looked back at her, scowling. “How do you think you can presume to know anything about me or my family?”

“First off, I’m a witch, and one of my areas of expertise happens to be curses. I can see the council’s feedback curse radiating off Dixie, but the only curse on you is your immortality. The devil didn’t do anything else to you. He thought living forever was enough torture.”

He shook his head, still refusing to believe.

“Fine, if you don’t trust my expertise, then tell me this. What was the name of Tad’s paramour?”

“I don’t remember.”

“You don’t remember because the curse on her erased her memory from you and your family. It didn’t work on Tad, though, because of the mate sense. Not only can the two of them not touch, but Tad couldn’t even turn to his family to talk

about her. She all but ceased to exist, if not for his longing for her.”

“So? Even if it was a curse on her, it happened because of the curse on my family. Just like this curse on Dixie.”

“You’re wrong, Slade. There’s no curse. No one has ever found one, even after you insisted there was one. Your father looked into it, didn’t he?”

“He claims they found no trace of another curse.”

“Just like I said.”

“I just don’t believe it.”

“You should. And I’ll tell you why. I know for a fact that the curse on Tad’s mate had nothing to do with him and everything to do with her, because...” She paused.

Dixie understood. “It’s you.”

Slade looked between the two of them in shock.

Dixie continued. “The crystal is going to help you break the curse.”

She looked down at it. “I’m not sure, but I’d like to try.”

Slade stood. “We have to find Tad, let him know!”

“No!” Adelle and Dixie spoke at the same time. Dixie continued. “You can’t tell Tad. You can’t get his hopes up.”

“I will find him, if and when the time is right.”

“The curse was on you, though, and you have every ounce of confidence that it did not originate from our family?”

She nodded. “I’m very sure. I know that you have fears about being with your mate, but you won’t suffer the same fate

as Tad and me. Besides...” She looked at the crystal again, turning it in her hand. “Our story isn’t over yet.”

“I’ve made a decision,” Dixie said, looking at Slade. “I’m going to decline Adelle’s offer.”

Slade said nothing. Dixie knew it was likely that he was so used to leaning on the curse as an excuse that now he didn’t know what to do or think.

“I can respect that,” Adelle said before holding the crystal out to Dixie. “Would you like this back?”

“Absolutely not,” Dixie said. “You use it for whatever you need it for. And if you need anything else, let me know.”

“And me,” Slade added, his voice cracking a little. “I would love for my brother to come home, to be reunited with his mate—with you.”

Her hand closed around it, and Dixie saw relief wash over her face. “Thank you. I owe you, for real. If you ever decide you need me, I’ll be here for you. Whatever you might need.”

Dixie smiled. It felt good knowing, in a short time, she had two new awesome girlfriends, Esme and Adelle.

Add in Slade, and things were really looking up for her.

“I appreciate it,” Dixie told her. “Life is long for us. I’m sure we’ll cross paths again.”

“I know we will,” she replied.

Slade still looked dazed as they stood, and Dixie took his arm, offering him physical contact, a symbol of support that he’d been doing for her the last few days. The three of them left the room and found Paris with the young witch in the hallway. She observed the way Dixie clung to Slade, and understanding crossed her face. “We wish you the best, Dixie,

and we look forward to being your ally through the Dire Bear clan.”

“Thank you.” They left the coven, going back to the car.

Slade moved as if he were on autopilot. “Are you sure you want to drive?” Dixie asked him.

When they were inside, and the doors closed, he turned to her. “Are you sure you want to be with me?”

“Today, I spoke to two women who would both go to great lengths to try and be with the one they love. I’m not going to be a fool and run from love just because I’m scared. I want to be with you, I want to explore this life together, and I won’t let fears, mine or yours, stop us from having the gift of a lifetime.”

He closed his hand around hers.

“I know it will take a long time, maybe forever, for you to not worry about a curse, no matter what people tell you, but can you just take this leap with me? Can you just, instead, think, what if it will be okay?”

“I can try.” His voice was hoarse.

Her heart warmed. “Forever is a long time for an immortal. Do you think we’ll get sick of each other?”

He shook his head. “That’s not going to happen.”

“How can you say that?”

“Because you’re my mate.” He brushed her bottom lip with his thumb. “There was a time, a long time ago, when I looked for my mate, for the one person who was supposed to complete me, to be mine forever, my perfect match.”

“Oh?”

“I stopped when I failed to find you, and I vowed to never look again when my brother got his heart broken by his mate, but if this whole time I’ve been wrong, been worried about a nonexistent curse, then I know we’ll work out. Don’t you feel something, some kind of magic, that tells you that we’re made for each other?”

She was afraid to admit it. “I’m not the kind of witch who can see the future. I don’t have precognition, or whatever, but my heart says yes, I’m meant to be here with you.”

Then he kissed her until she melted into his arms. “I’m not going to get sick of you, Dixie, not ever, because you’re a piece of me. We’re meant to be together. Whether you want to hang out at Dire Estate, or go back to your home and play with your hoard, or travel the world to see everything possible, I’ll do it with you.”

“For a witch who spent her whole life seeking immortality, and then found no meaning, I’ve finally found it.”

“And you’ve made this grumpy bear find his missing piece.”

EPILOGUE

Adelle watched Dixie and Slade drive away from the coven.

The other elder witches were likely feeling regret for the fact that they'd lost the first potential new elder member they'd had in a long time.

But Adelle wasn't.

She was truly glad Dixie chose to be with Slade. They had a good enough relationship with the Dire Bears that Dixie was considered an ally. She could come and teach if she wanted to, or she could take in an apprentice, should she want to.

It was altogether a good deal, better than nothing, and the others would get over it.

Adelle went to her desk, where the glowing crystal was laid out on a velvet satchel. She passed her hand over it.

This was it.

It was the final piece she'd need to break the curse.

She hadn't gotten her hopes up. It had been too long for that. But when Slade Galath had walked in, she wondered if the universe was trying to make things right.

And now Adelle had the crystal she needed.

She'd finally be able to break the curse that had kept her apart from her true love.

Her mate.

Tad Galath.

Adelle covered the crystal and closed her eyes. So much time had passed.

Maybe she was someone else now. Maybe she didn't even love him at all anymore. Maybe what she thought was love was only the memory of those emotions.

She knew she couldn't live without knowing the truth.

But could she find him? And if she did, would he want her back? Would he believe her about the curse?

Or had he built a new life for himself without her?

There was only one way to find out.

*Read Adelle and Tad's story in *The Dire Bear's Mate* (Immortal Affinity #2)! And you'll get to find out what happens to Maeve in *The Dire Bear's Wolf* (Immortal Affinity #3)!*

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