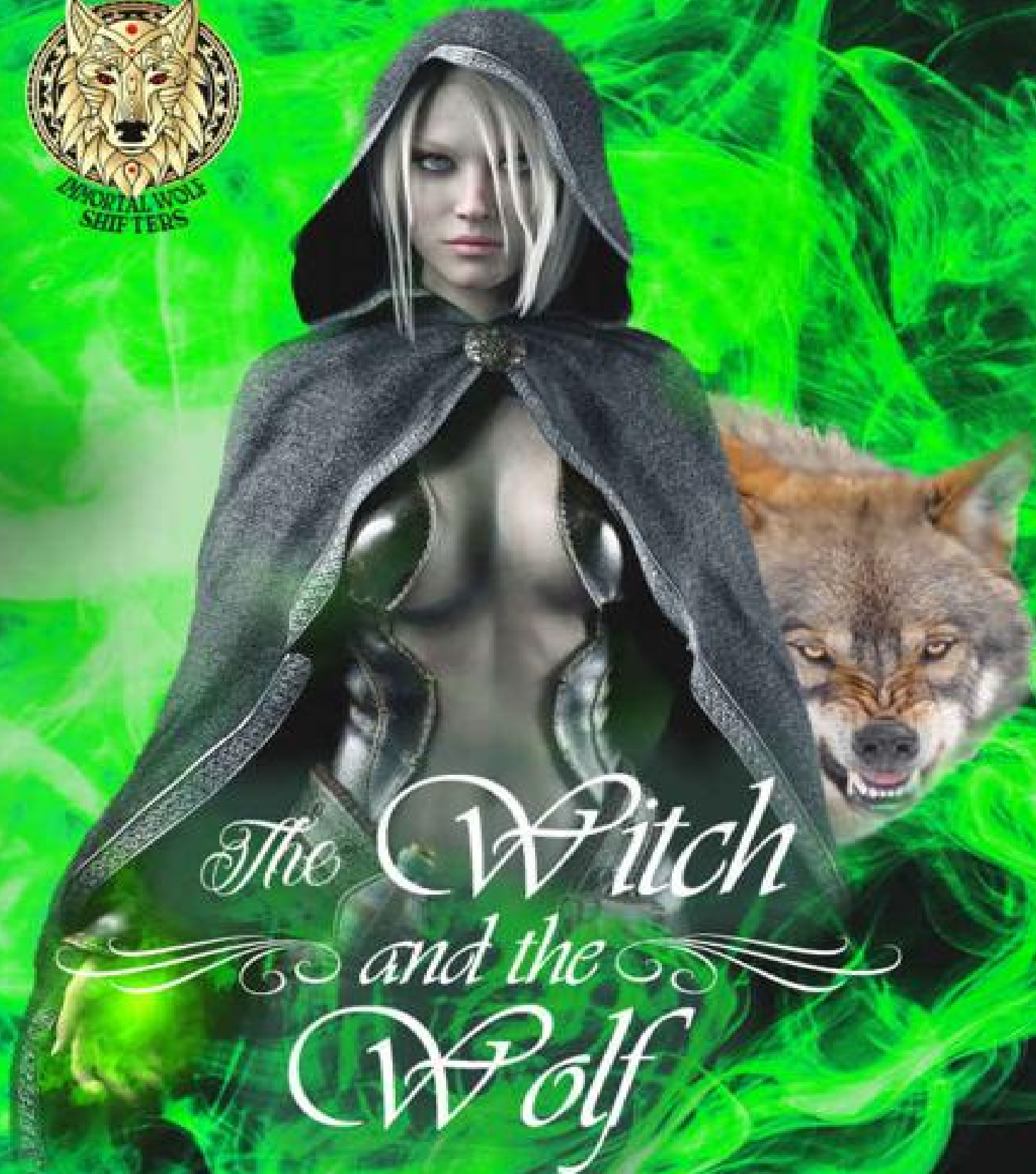


USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
NIKITA SLATER



The Witch

and the

Wolf

THE WITCH AND THE WOLF

IMMORTAL WOLF SHIFTERS BOOK 2

NIKITA SLATER



Copyright © 2023 Nikita Slater

This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places and incidents are products of the writer's imagination or have been used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, actual events, locales or organizations is entirely coincidental.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, scanned, or distributed in any manner whatsoever without written permission from the author except in the case of brief quotation embodied in critical articles and reviews.

CONTENTS

Author's Note

1. Birth of a Witch
2. Mags the Teenage Witch
3. Witch Hunt
4. To Die For
5. A Walk in the Woods
6. Kiss of Death
7. Unthinkable Mate
8. Mating 101
9. The Man, the Myth, the Legend
10. Charmed, I'm Sure
11. A Magical Binding
12. The Whole Package!
13. Another Day, Another Table
14. Eye of Newt
15. Lyra Good Witch
16. Summoned
17. Fairy Lights
18. Eat Me
19. Happily ever... oops!
20. Wolf Behaving Badly
21. Seven Pound Fury
22. Witch Hunt
23. All Out of Nice
24. Hound Dog Blues
25. Early Release
26. Rage
27. Exploding Humans
28. Cleaning the Pipes
29. Changed
30. You, Me, and Seventeen
31. Crimes Against Humanity

32. [Lost in Thought](#)
33. [The Lovebirds Have Landed](#)
34. [A Magical Intervention](#)
35. [Citadel](#)
36. [Law & Order](#)
37. [Busted Rush](#)
38. [Day Pass](#)
39. [Homecoming](#)
40. [What are the Odds?](#)

[Epilogue: Menagerie](#)

[Sneak Peek: Wolf's Eternal Bride](#)

[Bonus: Damaged Mate](#)

[Bonus: Sanctuary's Warlord](#)

[Nikita's Newsletter!](#)

[Also by Nikita Slater](#)

[About Nikita Slater](#)

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you so much for purchasing a copy of *The Witch and the Wolf*. Each novel in the Immortal Wolf Shifter series can be read as standalone, but for the best reader experience should be read in order.

This fantasy romance novel introduces witches to my world of Immortal shifters. A fiercely loyal, nature-loving matriarchal society who believe that there is no higher calling than keeping balance to the natural order.

I hope you enjoy the next instalment in my Immortal Wolf Shifter world. Watch for a sneak peek of book three at the back of the *The Witch and the Wolf*!

Sincerely,

Nikita

CHAPTER I

BIRTH OF A WITCH

RUSH

I wake with a start, perking my ears to figure out what interrupted my slumber. I sleep on high alert, so it could've been anything. Still, nothing seems out of the ordinary. No noises, no shuffling in the shadows, no brain patterns nearby beyond those of wild animals.

I push to my four paws and make my way out of the den, sniffing the air for intruders. Nothing. I sit and close my eyes, casting my senses into the surrounding woods, hoping to pick up on the disturbance. Then I feel it. Not something outside myself, but deep inside the recesses of my brain.

A stirring.

Only one thing can cause this. The birth of my mate.

Elation crashes through me, urging me to find the person I've been waiting to meet for over 700 years. My feet are moving before I give the conscious demand to run. I go with it though. As much as I hate being at the mercy of my instincts, this one is too good to pass up.

I have to know who she is. What she looks like. What she smells like.

I assume I'll be heading toward Wolf-Haven, the largest wolf shifter settlement on the planet, but my paws veer off in another direction, carrying me away from the dominant wolf packs.

My hackles rise across my back as I stop running, my paws on the edge of witch territory.

Witches.

I pace, letting out a soft whine that puffs like storm clouds into the surrounding mist. Witches are the evil that will one day destroy our planet. My mate has been born and now exists in the world. If she's trapped in the witch swamps, she'll need rescuing. I must continue moving forward and if I run into a stray witch, so much the better.

Nothing pleases me more than ridding the planet of witches and warlocks, so if I have to take a few out on the way to my mate, then so be it.

The journey is uneventful as I hurtle toward the place that calls to me like a star just under the horizon, teasing me, beckoning me with a brightness I can feel but not see. She'll be an infant and I won't be able to claim her, but I will follow the traditions of my people. I'll watch over her, keep her safe, until the day she's ready to become mine.

First, I must rescue her from the witch swamps and take her to a safe place. Then I'll find out what the witches wanted with her. They're a devious and secretive lot. They've likely stolen her for one of their sacrifices.

I'll destroy everyone involved in her abduction.

I've been hunting the creatures since a witch cast a spell that destroyed my family, biding my time until I can get my paws on the right witch, the one who'll break the curse. Once my mission is complete, I will dutifully wipe out the witch scourge from this world.

I slow as I approach what looks like a village. Pacing the edge of a treelined path, my eyes go straight to the place I know houses my future bride. A two-story wooden cottage painted white with blue trim. I can *feel* her, a glowing ball of beautiful energy in my chest, calling to me, luring me to her side.

I have no choice. I must find her.

My paws move forward, and I make my way slowly into the deserted village. I swing my head from side to side, my yellow gaze moving restlessly as I search for danger.

When I arrive at the correct house, I look up at the second story, at the open window with white curtains fluttering out. I could knock down the front door, but an open window is easier. I crouch low to the ground, then push off, springing towards it.

My entrance is less than graceful. I don't have time to plan my landing and hit a stack of books, my paws sliding beneath

me before I tumble to the floor, rolling and coming back up to my feet. I huff in annoyance and glance around. If anyone saw my clumsy entrance, they'll have to be destroyed. For the sake of my vanity.

My eyes land on a cradle and my heart beats uncontrollably as I realize I somehow lucked into finding my mate right away. I step toward it, drawn to the creature within.

As I lift my shaggy head to peek over the side, the baby lets out a tiny sigh. My eyes widen. She's... perfect.

She's the one.

Swaddled in a light blue blanket, she wiggles one of her fists out and waves it at me. I lift a paw and reach for her, my massive hairy toes touching her impossibly small fingers. As we connect, an explosion detonates in my head and a rush of images crashes through my brain.

A woman, wild blond hair, pink lips, startling blue eyes. She's reaching for me, her lips curving in a heart-stuttering smile. Then she's running, her bare feet nimble as she cuts a path through the swamps. She looks back at me and laughs. I see my hand, my human hand, stretching out to meet hers, but before we connect, her beautiful face twists in agony. I bellow and lunge for her, but as my fingers make contact, she turns to smoke and my hands close over nothing.

A piercing scream echoes through my head, and I instantly recognize the cry as my mate's. She's injured!

In the nightmare, I run as fast as I can, my body twisting and snapping in mid-air, muscle and sinew reshaping itself into the form of a big, shaggy, grey and orange wolf. I race toward the screams, frantic to get to her in time.

Finally, I spot her and rage rips through me. She's bound to a wooden stake, flames igniting the pile of sticks at her feet, black-robed figures surrounding her, chanting and jeering as the flames reach her delicate skin.

It doesn't seem to matter how fast I run, how hard my paws pound the dirt, I can't reach her. The flames engulf her

and an explosion ignites the surrounding air, throwing out a violent arc of fire that knocks the robed figures off their feet.

I'm about to roar my rage at my mate's future, but the image changes and she floats above the flames, her shrieks turning from pain to fury. Her blackened fingers curve as she lifts her arms, screaming an incantation. A shockwave goes through the area, killing everyone around her instantly.

I jerk back, breaking contact with my infant mate and stare down at her in shock.

Witch.

Of course she's a witch. Why else would she have been born in witch territory?

There must be a mistake. My mate can't be a witch. It's impossible. Well, not technically impossible for a wolf and a witch to mate, though rare. But it's impossible that *my* mate could be a witch.

"There's no mistake." A strained voice reaches to me from the shadows, followed by a woman as she steps toward me. I let out a low growl and press myself closer to the cradle, protecting my mate.

Wait. Not my mate. Just a baby witch.

Mother? I ask silently, not expecting an answer.

She nods. "I am her mother. You don't have to protect her. I've no intention of hurting my daughter."

I curl my lip, unnerved that she can guess my thoughts.

"I knew you would come."

How?

She doesn't answer my question but walks toward me with fearless grace, a sapphire blue robe over a pale blue nightgown flowing with her. She is small. Weak. I could easily kill her, but for some reason my desire to kill all witches isn't driving me to tear out this one's throat.

I push away the thought that it's because she's my mate's provider. It can't be true, because that would mean accepting

my mate is a witch, which isn't possible. I should kill them both and leave.

"But you won't," she says, spooking me with her eerie ability to read my mind.

I edge away as she approaches the cradle, reaching for the infant.

I watch in mesmerized fascination as she picks up the child, holding her against her chest. The mother's face, reflected in the moonlight coming through the window, is soft but exhausted as she gazes at her child.

She needs to sleep if she is to provide for the baby.

She smiles and nods. "I will sleep as soon as you're gone."

I'm not going anywhere.

She looks at me, her blue eyes shining. "I'm afraid you are. You must wait for your time to arrive, Rush Wolven-North." The air around us stirs before her hand rises, a ball of white energy in her palm. My hackles rise and I growl, pacing forward, determined to protect the baby if she does anything untoward with her magic.

Witches can't be trusted.

"A day will come when you not only trust us but embrace us."

Before I can scoff at her prediction, she hurtles the ball of energy at me. I leap toward her, regretful that I'll have to kill the mother. It doesn't matter. The child isn't my mate anyway.

Before I make contact, the ball hits me in the chest, exploding into a portal that I'm instantly sucked into. The sensation is like being squeezed through a tube. My back hits the ground hard and I roll, coming up onto my paws.

I shake the dizziness from my skull and swing my head around, looking back toward the portal. The woman is standing on the other side, watching me. Her eyes are sad, but a smile curves her lips, and her expression is one of gentle tolerance. A feeling of homesickness strikes me as she reminds me of my own deceased mother.

“When you claim her, you must love her as fiercely as she deserves or your vision will come true. If that happens, you will lose her, and you know what happens to a wolf who loses his mate...”

Before I can leap back through the portal, it closes.

Darkness settles around me and I turn in a circle, confused. I lift a paw and sand sprinkles down. I’m standing in a desert, the morning sun about to peek over the dunes.

I check in with my internal map, the one that tells me how to get to my birthplace, Wolf-Haven. Yep, she dropped me in the desert, some 4000 kilometres from home. Apparently, she wants me to take my time getting back.

Fucking witches.

CHAPTER 2

MAGS THE TEENAGE WITCH

MAGDALENE

“Hurry and light the candles, Mags.” Katey glances over her shoulder and peers into the shadowy woods surrounding us as if expecting a monster to leap out and attack. “My mom’s gonna kill me if she finds my bed empty.”

I roll my eyes. “You worry too much.” But I comply, lighting the candles for our midnight ceremony.

We hold our breath as crashing in the trees catches our attention. We release them in unison when we see who steps into the small clearing.

“You’re such a klutz, Lila, stomping through the trees like a cow with its tail on fire. You scared us half to death.” Katey shakes her head but takes the sting from her words by smiling warmly at our friend.

“Sorry I’m late,” Lila says breathlessly, dropping to the ground next to me and reaching her hands out to the fire, which is now surrounded by glowing candles. “Nana wouldn’t go to bed and I had to cast a slumber spell. Good thing Bea taught us that one.”

My Aunt Beatrice, who is closer to my age than my mother’s, pals around with us teenage witches, teaching us everything she knows. We kind of hero worship her. She knows all the best spells, and she’s not afraid to use them. She’s a Good Witch, same as me and Katey. Lila is a Guardian Witch, though she’s basically like a Good Witch until a mentor is selected for her.

My mom is also a Guardian Witch, which means her duties often take her away from me. I don’t mind though. Lilith, my mom, is super badass, and she leaves me with Aunt Bea, so I get the best of both worlds. I have a famous (among our kind, anyway) mother who’s out there protecting our natural world while I get to stay home and be spoiled by my favourite Aunt.

“Sit down, Katey.” I reach for her wrist, pulling her down onto the ground next to me. “Let’s get started.”

The three of us pull out our spell-casting pouches and move so that we’re sitting around the fire equal-distance from each other. We reach out and join hands as I murmur the incantation that will show us who our future mates will be.

Yesterday was my sixteenth birthday and the spell only works on witches and warlocks who are in their sixteenth year of life. The three of us, having been best friends since we were toddlers, will only all be sixteen together for one day as Lila’s seventeenth birthday is tomorrow. We could’ve done the spell separately, but it’s more potent with multiples.

After I finish the incantation, opening the natural and spiritual worlds to our inquires, I turn to look at Lila. “You go first since you’ve been waiting longest.”

Lila smiles her gratitude and reaches into her spell bag, pulling out a combination of ingredients that include herbs, spices, dried flowers, dead beetles, that sort of thing. Tossing them into the fire, she says in a clear voice, “Oh, creator of our universe, I thank you for allowing us to inhabit your world. I am your humble subject, Lila Latrice Good Witch. If it’s within your ability this fine evening, please show me the form of my future love.”

Nothing happens for a few seconds and we look at each other, wondering if Aunt Bea’s spell is a dud. It’s a simple spell, but most are. The power lies more within the witch’s desires and how they fit into the natural order.

Then the flames spark and grow higher, colours swirling in the depths of the fire before settling on a deep purple. A face appears, then a body, until a person is fully revealed, wisps of smoke winding around her body as she steps from the flames and into the clearing, presenting herself to Lila whose eyes are bugging out.

I hold my breath as the vision continues to float above the ground.

“A Rage Witch,” Lila whispers.

“She’s so beautiful,” I murmur.

“Powerful,” Katey chimes in. “Look at her hands.”

Our gazes drop to the witch’s hands. Sure enough, the fingertips are blackened. A side effect of the types of spells Rage Witches cast. They pull from the darker elements of our natural world to create powerful spells. Rage Witches are the only kind of witch that is created, not born. They evolve out of pain and misery. They are the most powerful of our kind because rage drives their spell casting and rage is one of the strongest emotions a being can have.

Then, she turns and steps back into the fire, her gaze still on Lila. Seconds later, she’s gone, the only remnant of her left behind is the rapidly evaporating purple smoke.

“Holy mother of trolls,” Lila whispers.

“I’m next!” Katey says, her excitement peaking now that she’s seen the spell work for her friend.

We resettle ourselves in a circle and Katey grabs her spell pouch, emptying its contents in the fire as she speaks the incantation. After several long seconds the flame grows brighter and higher, licking at the forest canopy above. I’m not worried, I know a good dousing spell if anything catches fire.

The flames turn a deep midnight blue, the sparks catching like a blanket of stars as the body of a man appears. He takes a step out of the fire, crosses his arms and stares into the distance. He looks regal, poised, tall and proud. His short hair is black, his chin pointed, his eyes a piercing lilac. In fact, he looks like the warlock version of...

“That’s my brother!” Lila says excitedly, cackling as she realizes who her friend will one day mate with.

Katey blushes furiously, but she doesn’t deny it. In fact, the way she’s looking up at the ghostly version of her future love, I’d say she’s not disappointed at all.

“Callum,” Katey says his name, her cheeks red from the heat of a blush stealing up her face, but a smile curves her lips.

Lila is still giggling as the wispy Callum steps back into the fire and disappears from view.

It's my turn.

I'm nervous and excited, butterflies swirling in my belly. My heart picks up as I lift my spell bag, the familiar leather pouch a comfort in my palm as I reach in and pull out the contents. I lift them, chanting the incantation as I fling the herbs into the fire.

Instantly, the flames burst higher than they had for either of my two friends, forcing all three of us to scramble backwards. Black mist pours from the flames, blanketing the clearing. I cry out as my palm scrapes across a sharp rock. I lift it up between me and the fire, looking at the long, jagged gash slowly dripping blood down my wrist.

"What's happening?" Katey asks fearfully from behind a tree.

"I don't know," I whisper, pushing up to my knees.

The fire has grown to enormous heights, and I worry it can be seen from the village. It's not a regular fire. The flames no longer snap and dance but seem to have formed one giant mass that sways around the campsite as if searching for something.

"What's wrong with it?" Lila crawls closer to me, reaching for my hand and inspecting the cut. "You'll need a healing spell."

I ignore her, my entire focus on the fire, which is now waving ominously in my direction. As if sensing my presence, it freezes, pointing straight at me. I stare at it, fascinated. I've never seen anything like it.

"Maybe we should call off the spell?" Lila whispers from beside me, my hand still in hers.

"How?"

"Let's run away," Katey squeaks from behind her tree.

Lila smirks and shakes her head. "You'll have to grow a backbone if you want Callum to notice you."

“Be nice,” I scold my friend, though she’s not wrong. Katey is the cautious one of the three of us. Never one to take unnecessary risks. Even coming out here tonight was a big deal for her, and she only agreed because we’ve all been dying to know who our future mates are.

Before Lila can respond, the fire sways once more and a giant paw emerges from the flames, followed by the massive body of a grey and rust-coloured wolf as he paces from the fire into our small clearing. Lila and I clutch each other while Katey’s head disappears back behind her tree.

We watch in fascinated horror as my future mate stalks across the clearing, looking at everything, searching for something. Then he stops in front of me, towering over my crouched body, staring at me with such malice that I shrink back against Lila, who clutches my hand so hard I cry out.

His gaze flicks from my face to my hand. He sticks a paw out and I flinch, though he can’t do anything to me. He’s not real, just an image I summoned to show me who my future mate will be.

My future mate is a... wolf shifter.

“Holy shit,” Lila breaths as he drops his great snout to our hands, sniffing.

On instinct, I tug my hand from Lila’s and turn it over, showing him the cut. Blood drips off my fingertips as he inspects it, his ghostly tongue flicking out to lap at the injury. Though he can’t touch me, I swear I feel the harsh rasp of his tongue as it scrapes my wound.

When he finishes, he looks up, his eyes piercing mine, holding me in place. As he paces the clearing, my gaze follows. He stops beside me and leans in, inhaling as he closes his eyes. Then something unexpected happens. Through the fog in the clearing, I hear his voice.

How are you doing this, witch? How have you summoned me here?

I look at Lila, but she’s still staring at the apparition, her breath locked in her throat.

“I don’t know,” I answer his question out loud, drawing Lila’s confused gaze.

You are a powerful witch if you have the ability to summon me from, he glances around, his eyes narrowing, *what would appear to be great distances.*

“No... I don’t know,” I say, shaking my head. “I’m not powerful, I’m just a Good Witch.”

“Who are you talking to?” Lila asks, looking around, fear wavering in her voice.

It seems so obvious to me that the ghost wolf is talking to me, but my friends can’t seem to hear him. The wolf paces away, circling the fire, before sitting and staring, his gaze fixed on my face.

You are the one, he announces.

I nod excitedly, a smile lifting my lips. He’s not what I expected, but a witch mating with a wolf shifter isn’t unheard of. We’ll make the best of it. “Yes, you’re my future mate.”

He laughs, the sound harsh as it rings through my head. *Don’t be absurd. I wouldn’t touch a dirty witch. You are no mate of mine, but you will be the one to break the spell. You have magic that I’ve never seen before.*

I ignore the hurt rushing through me at his words. He’s just a vision, not the real thing. My real mate won’t reject me. It’s in his DNA to find his mate and bind himself for eternity. He may not like that I’m a witch, but he’ll do as the natural order dictates.

“What spell?” I ask, but he looks over his shoulder at the fire, which has begun to swirl again, tugging at the wisps surrounding his furry body.

Summon me again, witch, he orders as the fire drags him backwards, sucking him into the flames. His dark, angry eyes meet mine. *We’re not finished.*

“I know,” I whisper as he disappears.

The fire settles once more and Katey cautiously crawls out from the surrounding woods. “You can’t mate with him,” she

says seriously, her eyes as large as creek stones. “Wolf shifters are way too dangerous.”

“Mags,” Lila says from next to me.

I follow her gaze down to my hand. I extend it, palm up. The blood is gone, and the cut is completely healed, but that’s not what she’s talking about. My fingertips are black, as though I’d shoved them into a sooty hearth. As the three of us watch, the black slowly fades and my skin returns to normal.

“Dark magic,” Lila breathes.

I lift my gaze to the now cheerfully snapping fire. “Let’s go home. It’s just a trick, he’s not real. Forget about him.”

Only, I know I’ll never forget. He won’t let me. He’s inside me now, watching me, whispering to me...

CHAPTER 3

WITCH HUNT

RUSH

I make my way through the swamp, moving steadily toward the witch's house. She thought she could outrun me, but I've proven to her repeatedly that I am the relentless scourge of her existence. It was her bad luck to be born into the family that I have vowed to hunt and exterminate. The witch progeny of Lyra the Terrible, the woman who took my brother's pride and wits and scattered them to the wind. The woman who threw Wolf-Haven into the dark ages and separated my brothers from each other and their mates.

There is much for the witch to answer to.

Her kind say they're protecting the natural order, but I see nothing natural in their sorcery. They twist the world to fit their own vision, perverting nature and treating the other creatures on our planet like bugs beneath their heels.

In the years since Lyra's curse shattered Wolf-Haven, I've made it my mission to take out every witch or warlock I encounter. The spell I used to save my eldest brother's life when he was challenged was taken from a warlock whose throat I tore out. Before I killed him, the warlock also gave me valuable information about a particular witch, the most powerful of Lyra's descendants.

My plan? To get my hands on the witch progeny and force her to reverse the spell that is keeping my brothers from their mates. Only Lock has achieved happiness with his fated mate, and I have my suspicions about how it was possible.

It's my belief that it was Lyra's spell that pushed my brother, Lock, into leaving Wolf-Haven two hundred years ago and drove the King's pack to kidnap Lock's mate, Sarina. Lock missed finding her by a matter of two years, and then she was nearly killed. All because of a witch's spell. I'm pleased that my brother seems to have broken the spell, but I still feel the agony of Lennox, Keenan, and Fallon, and I'm determined

to end their suffering. I'll do it by spilling the blood of Lyra's ancestors.

As I near the cabin the witch shares with her aunt, I pick up her scent. My paws carry me faster, pounding harder against the ground as I rush toward her, my instincts screaming at me to mate with her.

I try to silence them, but my wolf is nearly feral from years travelling in my wolf form. I've always been more comfortable in my wolf body than my human one. Fur feels like my true skin and if I could live this way forever, I would.

Unfortunately, my wolf knows something I've spent years trying to deny. When I first encountered the small, blond immortal witch, shortly after her birth, I sensed her power and with each year, it has only grown stronger. For seventy-two years, I've known that this woman will be the one to break Lyra's spell. She's too powerful not to.

She's also powerful enough to keep a lone wolf shifter at bay, which she has successfully done since the day I started stalking her. I slow my pace as I near the cottage in the swamp. The tantalizing scent of basil and roses, her particular scent, nearly overpowers my logic, driving me relentlessly toward her.

I crouch low and crawl through the reeds until I catch sight of her. She's truly breathtaking in a pair of tiny shorts that show off the twin half-moons of her lush backside as she bends to pick weeds, one hand squishing her straw hat on her head. She's wearing a sleeveless shirt that's cropped just beneath her breasts to show off her belly. There are no shoes on her feet and her toes sink into the muck of the swamp. Mosquitos and flies buzz all around her, but none lands on her body.

She freezes and slowly turns, her eyes scanning the surrounding swamp.

"I know you're out there!" she shouts, dropping the weeds into the basket next to her and holding a pair of sharp scissors aloft. "If you come near me, I'm going to cut your other ear off."

I snuffle and rub my snout on the ground, remembering how she caught me with a dagger some thirty years ago, slicing off the tip of my left ear as I leapt for her. We've been playing this game of cat and wolf for more than half a century. It's time to do what I've come to do.

I crouch low to the ground, then spring, leaping at her. As my body slices through the air like a bullet, her lips move in a blur. Before I can land, taking her down with my heavy body and sharp teeth, something hits me with a stunning force, throwing me back with a sizzling shock of electricity. I hit a tree and slump to the ground, groaning in pain, then quickly regain my feet, turning to launch myself at her again. Only she's surrounded herself with a protective barrier, the same force field Lyra used against Fallon all those years ago.

The reminder of my brother's plight has me growling in frustration and pacing the perimeter of her force field. It looks impenetrable, but the energy it takes to hold it in place is weakening the witch.

She falls to her knees, her hands up, trying to hold her spell, the scissors still clutched between her fingers.

We stare at each other, her gaze frightened but fiercely determined, mine angry and impatient. We've been doing this dance for decades and I've never gotten any closer to the witch.

"Why are you doing this?" she asks, anguish in her voice. "Why me?"

I shift to human, watching her blue eyes widen with wonder. "I need you," I tell her.

Strangely, though we've met before, this is the most communication we've managed. We're usually fighting each other, then she escapes my traps with the help of her cursed family.

"But I'm your mate," she says desperately. "Why would you keep trying to hurt your mate? I don't understand."

I snarl and turn a glare of such hatred on her she can't possibly fail to understand. "You are no mate of mine,

Magdalene the Scourge. You're simply the witch who's going to break a curse for me before I send you back to the demon that created you."

She blinks back tears, but they don't move me. She's a witch and a witch's tears are nothing but lies and manipulation.

"The natural order has given me to you as a mate. Why can't you accept that there's a reason you're drawn to stalk me above all other witches?"

I scrape my nail across the barrier of her force field and watch as it wiggles and wobbles. "It's you I need, Magdalene, and you I will take. You won't always be so prepared for my arrival, and when that day comes, I'll be ready for a witch hunt."

Her haunted gaze follows me from her swamp as I shift and pad back into the shadows of the forest.



AS SOON AS the wolf is gone, I throw off the force field and leap to my feet, dropping everything and racing for the cabin. I fling myself through the door and slam it shut again, leaning against it, my heart racing. A grin slowly spreads across my face and I step forward, twirling on the spot and laughing.

I finally got to see him up close in his human form! He's so handsome with his chiselled jaw and five o'clock shadow, his wild shoulder length grey hair with copper streaks, and gorgeous bronze eyes. His wolf has the same hair colour, but his eyes are different, glowing yellow.

"You're going to get yourself killed." A voice reaches out to me from the shadows and I glance over.

My Aunt Bea sits in her rocking chair among piles of coloured yarn, working diligently. I toss myself on the floor next to her and stretch out, tucking my hands under my head and crossing my legs.

“Don’t be a worrywart.” My gaze catches on the yarn as it moves through my aunt’s flying fingers, weaving it into a breastplate that will replace the one my mother uses, which was cracked in battle. As the material settles into fine loops, it hardens into unbreakable chain mail.

“It’s my job to worry,” Bea scolds, setting the breast plate aside and rolling her shoulders until they crack before turning to look at me, her gaze sliding down my length as she looks for injury. “It’s dangerous to summon the wolf. He’ll be furious when he finds out you’ve been calling him to your side.”

I shrug. “He thinks he’s hunting me for answers. I’m his mate; he won’t hurt me.”

Bea frowns. “His energy is violent, Mags. You mustn’t be so naïve. He can too easily hurt you and once he claims you, you’ll be even more vulnerable.”

Witches are immortal, the same as shifters, but our bodies are soft and human. Because of this, our lifespan is not usually as long as other immortal beings. “He won’t hurt me,” I repeat stubbornly, my faith in my mate unshaken.

“You’ll soon find out, I fear.” Bea stands and moves to the window, twitching aside the curtain. “He’s out there. I can sense him.”

I push myself to my feet, dusting off the backside of my jean shorts. “Then it’s time for you to go.” I pick up the suitcase we packed earlier and hand it to her.

Bea turns from the window and takes the suitcase, her worried gaze on my face. “Are you sure?” It’s difficult for Bea to leave me to my fate. My aunt has been my guardian since I was four, when my mother was summoned back into the Shadow Realm to stand guard over our world.

“I’ll be fine,” I say softly, wrapping my arms around her and squeezing. “It’s time for me to meet my destiny. Past time! I’m seventy-two!”

Bea steps back and frames my face with her hands, looking at me with loving sadness. Looking at Bea is like looking in a

mirror. Ice-blue eyes, blond hair falling to her shoulders in waves, short in stature with curves to spare, and an attitude that'll grill a swamp troll if it gets too close. She was born fifty-seven years before me, but doesn't look a single day older, thanks to her excellent magical genes.

We've been travelling together for decades, skipping from swamp to swamp and setting up house. Falling into a routine, waiting for the wolf to show. At first, I'd been inadvertently summoning him with my burgeoning, unskilled spells. Now, I call him deliberately, look him over and set him free.

Only this time is different. This time he'll finally do what he's been longing to do after all these years of chasing after me. He's going to catch me because I'm going to let him.

I kiss my aunt's cheek and watch tearfully as she stands before the mirror between our beds in the small cabin we've shared for almost six years. Waving her hand over the solid surface, she murmurs the incantation that will enable her to cross into the Shadow Realm. She won't be able to stay long. Like me, she's a Good Witch and only Guardian Witches and Oracles can live permanently in the Shadow Realm. Someone has to tell my mother that I'm about to fulfil my destiny, and that someone isn't going to be me.

I have a destiny to meet and a kidnapping to get on with.

"Goodbye, my sweet," she says, stepping through the glass and turning to give me one last look before disappearing.

"Goodbye, Aunt Bea," I say to the empty room.

CHAPTER 4

TO DIE FOR

MAGDALENE

I hurry around the room, tossing my necessities into a shoulder bag. I should have done what Aunt Bea had done and gotten packed earlier. I suppose I didn't want to jinx my future by assuming the time had finally come.

But it has! It's really time!

The entire seventy-two years I've lived has led me to this moment.

I feel him pacing the surrounding woods, trying to figure out how to trap me. Only he has no idea that I'm his for the picking.

After I finish packing my bag, I turn to the mirror.

I look myself over critically and decide I'll need a quick change. My straw hat is an unrecognizable mess on top of a rat's nest of crazy blond hair. Dirt streaks my legs from when I fell erecting my force field.

I speak the words of change, adding my own twist to the spell. "Give me a dress meant to impress, something irresistible to a wolf." I snap my fingers over my head and poof!

I'm wearing... I lift a hand to catch the blood dripping into my cleavage... a meat dress. As in a dress made of meat.

"Very funny, Earth Mother," I mutter, narrowing my eyes at the mirror. In a weird way, I look both pretty and disgusting. A hot mess. A hot, gross mess.

"Okay, how about something a little less likely to get my throat ripped out?" I think about how to define the spell and speak the incantation again, adding, "Give me an outfit to die for."

I snap my fingers and look at my mirrored image, gasping in delight as I run my hands down the bodice of the dress. It's utterly gorgeous. The leaves and flowers of *Atropa belladonna*, the nightshade plant, have woven themselves into a lilac and

green dress that flows over every generous curve like a lover's hands.

“Not quite that deadly.”

I snap my fingers again.

Poof! A pink wedding gown with layer after layer of cascading lace and silk that flow down my body. I look like an upside-down cupcake. My hair is now pink and styled in a gravity-defying updo.

I admire the look for a moment before shaking my head. “Not practical for a kidnapping.”

I snap my fingers again, squeezing my eyes shut and concentrating really hard. When I open them, a smile curves my lips and I nod decisively.

I'm wearing a short pink skirt with crinoline underneath and an adorable white poodle stitched into the satin, a faux leather jacket over a pale pink tank top and black knee-high boots complete the look. My hair is still in the wedding updo, but this time it's blond with hot pink streaks.

“Perfect.”

And perfectly timed, too, because just as I decide I'm ready, my entire house rattles and shakes with the force of a full-grown wolf landing on the roof. I place a hand over my heart and look up at the dust wafting down from the rafters. What on Earth Mother is he doing on the roof? Does he think he can get in that way? This rickety swamp shack is being held up through magic, hope and cobwebs.

No matter what he tries, he won't get in.

And he certainly does try, banging around on the roof, digging with his claws, howling in frustration. Apparently, my future husband is as eager to get on with our love story as I am.

“Well, let's not keep him waiting.” I lift my hands and murmur the incantation that'll bring down the remainder of the protection spell my aunt and I had erected when we first discovered the place.

Unfortunately, the spell was the glue holding everything together and without it, the house gives a mighty groaning creak before it begins to crumble. I run to the bed, slip my bag over my shoulders, and head through the front door. I step far enough out onto the porch that I can look up and see the wolf in a complete frenzy, tearing away at the roof, pieces of wood flying in every direction.

I cluck my tongue in disapproval and his sensitive ears pick up the sound.

His great head swings my way just as the house collapses.

“Oh dear.” I jump away as debris engulfs the area.

When the dust settles, I step toward the wreckage, coughing and shaking my head. He wasn't meant to be on the roof when it fell. Luckily, he landed on a pile of rotten wood and rusty nails. “Umm, Mister Wolf? Would you care to step out of there so we may have a discussion?”

A rumbling sound comes from the wreckage, growing louder until he bursts through, throwing house bits in every direction. I duck a jagged piece of wood as it flies past my face.

The wolf stands on all four paws, his massive body heaving with breathless rage.

I stiffen my spine as he lunges at me. Though I know he won't hurt me, I'm still frightened by the thundering of the ground beneath his paws, the massive furry body as it flies toward me, the lips pulled back in an impressive snarl that shows off many large and pointy teeth, and the deadly air of a bloodbath-soon-to-come.

He stops inches away from me and I swallow, looking into his wolf's face. In this form, his big shaggy head is on the same level as mine. I've had enough encounters with him to know that he is indeed an enormous wolf, but this is the first time we've been face-to-face without a force field between us. I must admit, my mate is quite an intimidating beast.

I see the realization dawning in his eyes as he reaches for my face, scraping his claw down my vulnerable cheek. As it

touches the edge of my lip, the claw turns into a fingernail, which is attached to the hand of a man. I look up at him as he towers above me, naked.

“At last,” he growls.

“Finally,” I mutter, reaching for him.

I wrap my arms around his neck and drag his head down to mine, pressing my lips to his. My first kiss. I’ve been thinking about it for decades, imagining what it would feel like, how he would react.

I frown.

It doesn’t feel like anything because he’s not doing anything but standing in frozen shock in my embrace.

I draw back just enough to look up at him. “This won’t work unless you help.”

His thick brows pull down into a frown and I note for the first time that the hair on his head is as grey as his wolf’s fur, with a couple of copper streaks through it. It gives him a rugged look that I quite enjoy. Or would if he was any good at kissing.

“What the fuck are you doing?” he asks in a low, deadly voice.

I thought it was obvious, but maybe he’s never kissed anyone before either. “I’m trying to kiss you.”

“I am aware.” He forces my arms away from his neck and shoves me. “But why?”

Confusing man. “If you wanted to know why, then why ask what I was doing?”

He looks surprised again, but shakes it off, stalking around me, the muscles and sinew of his naked body rippling as he moves. I watch him, indulging myself for the first time since he began this mating chase all those years ago.

“In answer to your question of why, I would think that’s obvious,” I say, to fill the ominous silence between us. “I’m greeting my mate.”

As the word leaves my lips, rage lights a flame in his eyes and he leaps for me, gripping me by the throat.

I grab hold of his wrist as he lifts me off the ground. He drags me into his body, the heat of his nakedness warming me. I close my eyes and inhale deeply, drawing in his scent of wild animal and pine trees. A smile curves my lips as he throws me away from him, hurling me with enough force that I have to use a spell to slow my descent toward the ground. I spin in the air and land gracefully on my feet with a smile.

“You smell just as I remember,” I say, turning to him.

“What game is this, witch?” he thunders, showing his frustration.

I shake my head. “No game. I’m yours for the taking.”

Once more, he stalks towards me, but stops himself before he gets too close, mistrust gleaming in his eyes. “I’ve been hunting you for seventy-two years, witch. Every time we meet, a force field is erected between us, and one of your rotting brethren whisks you off to safety before I’m able to lay a single claw on you. How is it that you suddenly stand before me with no defensive magic in sight and nary a relative to help you out?”

Somehow, I don’t think the truth, that I’ve been keeping watch on him for years, that I’ve always known where he was and what he was doing, that I chose when we would meet, not him and not my family, will appease him. I’ve learned that my future husband is a masterful wolf who hates all things witch, and I know he must be handled delicately if we’re to settle our future.

Still, I’m a Good Witch and Good Witches always tell the truth. “You’re my mate and I’ve decided it’s time we sort out our differences.”

He stares at me for a long moment, then his eyes drift down my body, momentary confusion lighting his gaze, before he lands on my feet, his lip curling in derision.

“You are *not* my mate.”

I step closer to him. “Yes, I am.”

He narrows his eyes and closes the distance between us, his chest brushing mine. “I refuse to accept a witch as my mate.”

I try not to let his words hurt me, reminding myself that I knew this was coming, that I’d planned this moment and orchestrated how it would go. “That’s too bad because I am a witch.”

“Then I reject you.” His words are final, hate glowing in his eyes. But I’m not a Good Witch for nothing.

I smile brightly at him. “Shall we go back to your lair to discuss this further?”

CHAPTER 5

A WALK IN THE WOODS

RUSH

As we face each other across the noxious swamp the witch has been living in, I realize two things; after seventy-two years of stalking Magdalene the Scourge, I know nothing about her, and, as much as it pains me to admit, I'm intrigued by the frail-looking woman.

We've been playing our game of cat and mouse for so many years, I'd assumed I knew her. She's almost always wearing some version of shorts and a T-shirt, feet bare, hair wild and frizzy. But today she looks different, cleaned up, pretty. And she smells nice, too. Like a juicy steak.

"You don't usually give me warning when you visit," she says unexpectedly, staring at me with her unnerving crystal blue gaze. Her long, darkly tinted lashes sweep her cheekbones in a slow blink that leaves me oddly breathless.

"What're you on about?" I ask gruffly.

"My outfit," she says, twirling on the spot, spinning several times until her skirt flares up and out, giving intriguing glimpses of bare thighs and pink silk panties. My mouth waters and my head grows dizzy.

"Stop that." I reach out, hesitate for a moment, then snap my hands over her arms, forcing her to stop spinning. I let go immediately, staring down at my hands, which ache and tingle from the contact with her skin. It must be a protection spell, meant to cause discomfort to anyone who touches her.

"You don't give me warning, so I never get a chance to prepare," she clarifies, smiling at me like we're love-struck suitors out for a Sunday stroll. "This time I knew you'd be back for me, and I had time to change into something more appropriate for the occasion."

"How did you know I'd come back?" I eye her fancy boots and skirt. How on earth did she land on this outfit as the 'appropriate' choice for a wolf attack? Right... because she

believes we're mates and I won't hurt her. Time to change her mind about that.

"Well, we're connected somehow," she explains as I grab her arm and pull her through the swamp and into the trees. She stumbles, then follows obediently, continuing her senseless chatter. "Ouch! Not so rough. So, anyway, I guess it's our wolfy mating connection. I generally know where you are and what you're up to, though I don't get a clear picture, like in a vision. The wolf connection is really cool, actually. It's like having a telepathic friend. Witches are different. We can connect through mirrors and crystal balls, or through spirit summoning, but if we want to stay connected beyond that, we need smartphones." She glances balefully back at the ruins of her home. "I guess I need a new one now."

Her words leave me with more questions than answers and my head spins. I haven't had this much conversation with another being in more months than I can remember.

A witch.

I must not forget that she has evil powers and isn't afraid to use them on me.

"Stop," I command.

She stops walking and looks at me curiously as I kneel and pull my rucksack out from the bushes. I take out a pair of jeans and a T-shirt, leaving them on the ground, then stand, a collar in my fist.

Her eyes find it immediately as I stalk toward her. She tries to back away, but my legs are longer and I'm on her in seconds. She makes a squeaking sound as I snap the collar around her neck, locking it in place. I ignore the sparks that run through my fingers after touching her silky warm skin.

Witch.

She stares at me through hurt eyes, her fingers exploring the smooth metal. "An anti-magic collar?"

I nod briefly and turn my back on her, no longer worried she might attack me now that her magic has been neutralized. I drag my jeans up my legs, not bothering with underwear.

Never understood the garment as anything other than bondage for the hairy twins.

“I’m not fighting you,” she says petulantly from behind me. “I plan on going with you willingly.”

I drag my shirt over my head. “Yeah, I noticed. Why?” Standing, I throw the sack over my shoulder. When I look at her, I notice she finally looks something other than pleased to see me. She’s disconcerted by the collar. Good, this isn’t a date we’re on and the sooner she realizes it, the better.

“Why am I coming willingly?” she asks and at my nod, continues. “I figured it was about time we air our differences. We’re mates after all.” She cuts me off when I try to interrupt her with another rejection. “Deny it all you want, but nature knows its shit. I know you have it out for witches, and that’s not a great way to start a relationship, so my plan is to go with you willingly and convince you that all witches aren’t bad. If that goes well and we follow nature’s path and dutifully fall in love, then we can get on with our mating.”

She’s back to smiling at me like a child who found her favourite cake. Then it dawns on me, there’s something fucked in the head about this witch. She’s not right, which is going to make getting her help more difficult.

Fuck.

Just my luck. Saddled with an insane witch.

“I’m not crazy,” she says, her smile slipping a little as she stares at me with those unnerving eyes.

How the fuck is she reading my mind? I don’t respond to her comment, because of course she’s crazy and what’s more, I think she knows it. “Let’s go.”

“Where’re we going?” she asks cheerfully, skipping along beside me.

Fucking skipping.

I stop and turn to her. “You are my captive.”

“Uh huh,” she says with the same level of cheerfulness.

“You should be afraid of me.” As the words leave my mouth, something nudges at my brain. My wolf. I’m surprised as he rarely makes his feelings known. He’s the silent brooding type, like me. I wonder why he’s reacting to my desire to scare this diminutive creature.

Her gaze becomes guarded. “Oh... I mean, if you think I should be afraid, I can probably manage a little... concern?”

Was that a question? Is she asking me if concern is a strong enough emotion? What the fuck is wrong with her?

“Come on,” I snap, stomping away from her.

If she wants to come with me so badly, she can try to keep up. Which she does... while skipping. Fuck.

After a few minutes, she asks, “Where’re we going?”

“My home.”

“Oh good! I’ve always wanted to go there!” Just as I decide that everything out of this witch’s mouth is going to be the opposite of what I expect, she says, “Actually, I *am* afraid of wolves.”

“Good,” I grunt, shoving branches out of my way as I stalk through the forest, the witch skipping alongside me while gracefully sidestepping trees and other hazards.

“Yeah, I once knew a wolf shifter who worked as a lumberjack, and he was terrifying. He lived near my aunt’s house. He could chop wood like nobody’s business, his sharp ax splitting those stumps with such force we feared what would happen if he was ever angered. You know what we called him?” She waits a beat and then says, “A timber wolf.”

I stop and stare at her as she giggles at her own joke, skipping ahead of me and then turning to walk backwards, easily stepping out of the way of a tree she can’t possibly see.

“Was that a joke?” I ask dangerously.

“Yes!” She claps her hands together excitedly. “Okay, okay... what do you call a wolf shifter with a fever?”

Motherfucker. I'm going to kill her before we even make it to my lair.

"A hot dog!" Her peals of laughter echo through the forest.

She's still laughing when I grip her by the neck and shove her against a tree, pinning her in place. Her eyes widen and the laughter falls away as she stares up at me, pain and confusion bright in her sapphire eyes.

Gentle.

Why the fuck is my wolf suddenly talking to me now, after years of silence? And why does he give a shit about the insane viper under my claws?

I bend until my face is on the same level as hers. "This is a kidnapping, witch. You understand?"

She nods and shifts her body, unable to get comfortable under my grip.

"What I say goes. What I want goes. Understand?"

Again, she nods. "I mean, that's pretty much what we're doing, right? You want me to go with you and I'm going with you."

Damn it, she has a point.

"No skipping, no smiling or laughing, and definitely no jokes," I growl at her.

"Or what?" she asks innocently.

"Or what... what?"

"Well, there has to be consequences, right?" she explains. "Aunt Bea used to say that a person must have consequences if the undesirable behaviour is to stop. Like... if I don't follow your kidnapping demands, you bury me alive in a coffin, or something else I'd hate."

"These aren't kidnapping demands... never mind. Just shut the fuck up and stay beside me where I can see you." I turn and resume walking.

We walk in blessed silence for all of thirty-seven seconds before her soft voice filters through the shadowy woods beside me. “I hate black licorice. It tastes like the despair you feel when a really great spell refuses to work and you’re left with a pile of oregano and no magical chest of gold in sight. You could force me to eat black licorice if I don’t do as you say.”

I grab her and force her to stop, flinging her around to face me. “Shut the fuck up!” My voice echoes through the surrounding woods, bouncing off the trees. I allow her to see the shadow of my wolf on my face. She gasps, taking a quick step back.

Satisfaction filters through me along with a slight sensation of disappointment from my fucking wolf who needs to get on the same page with me on this witch thing. I can’t pine after her while my entire plan hinges on destroying her and everyone she loves.

Then she does exactly the opposite of what I was expecting, she flings herself at me, wrapping her arms around my neck and dragging my head down to hers. Before I understand what’s happening, my wolf takes over, rushing to the forefront and forcing me to grip her by the waist. I’m lowering my head even before I realize his intent.

No, you don’t, you fucker! But I’m too late. He’s already captured her mouth and everything inside us is now focused on the sensations those gorgeous, pillowy lips are creating. I try to fight her intense lure, but she’s too strong. Her magic overpowers me and I have no choice but to return the kiss with as much gusto as she’s giving it.

She’s inexperienced, trying to kiss me passionately without opening her mouth. A frisson of possessiveness rushes through me. What if she’s never been kissed before? What if I’m her first? I could teach her so many things...

Doesn’t matter.

I have a mission, and I will do whatever it takes to restore sanity to my brother and my entire cursed family.

I force my wolf to retreat, slamming the lid on whatever hole he hides in when he refuses to surface. I grip the witch by both arms, pick her up and fling her away from me. She slams into a tree and falls to the ground in a heap, her body unmoving.

Fear surges through me. Did I kill her?

Then she moves, groaning as she pushes herself up onto shaking arms. Her crazy pile of blond hair is now tumbling down her shoulders and she's staring at me with accusation.

"You weren't supposed to hurt me," she whispers, tears swimming in her eyes, making them seem even more impossibly blue. She touches the collar of her jacket and the pulse in her neck flutters in response.

I ignore the guilt raging through me, imploring me to check her over, to apologize for my beastly behaviour. Instead, I stalk toward her, dropping to one knee and taking a fistful of her hair, forcing her head back until she's looking me full in the face.

"Good." I smile cruelly. "I won't just hurt you, Magdalene the Scourge. I intend to kill you." I gentle my grip, running my hand down the side of her head until I'm cupping her cheek. "How you die is up to you. If you listen, and do as I say, then it will be a quick and painless death. If you fuck with me, your death will be slow, painful and very final. Understand?"

It takes a moment, but I see the understanding in her eyes along with disillusionment and regret. Good. If there's one thing I can ensure, it's that she'll regret the day we met. The day she was born.

Ignoring my wolf, who has turned his tail on me and is refusing to take part in anything that will cause harm to the witch, I grip her arm and stand, dragging her up with me. Together, we continue our journey.

CHAPTER 6

KISS OF DEATH

MAGDALENE

I am afraid, very afraid, but I try not to let it show.

I remind myself that this is what I want. It's the only way for us to find a path into our immortal togetherness.

When he releases his grip on my neck, I stiffen my knees and refuse to collapse in a self-pitying heap. The pain from his tight hold radiates up through my head and down, spreading across my shoulders. I do a quick damage assessment. A scrape on my shoulder, a bump on the head, another cut on my knee. Nothing too bad.

It's not his fault. Well, it is, but he probably doesn't realize the damage he's causing. Witches are fragile and most immortals don't think to check their strength when confronting a witch. It's why we tend to be a reclusive, secretive lot. The less we bother the rest of the world, the less it bothers us back. Unfortunately, that kind of living has had the unintended side-effect of giving non-magical folk the impression that we're a bunch of swamp-dwelling hags. I mean, sure, we love a good swamp, but 'hag' is an unnecessary and hurtful slur.

"Come on, we're losing daylight." He sets off, stalking through the trees, assuming I'll follow.

I will, but only because he's my fated mate. If he was anyone else, I'd be running in the opposite direction, screaming for help.

I open my mouth to ask him where his lair is and what it's like, but he holds up a hand, heading me off.

"One more word and I'll tear out your tongue. Understand?"

I nod at his back, afraid to say 'yes' in case that counts as a word. I silently follow him, trying to calm my frantically beating heart. From the moment I found out I was going to one day marry a wolf shifter, I spent most of my time pouring through history books and manuals, informing myself about

my future mate. Through all of that reading, I came away with the assumption that my mate couldn't hurt me.

I was wrong.

I shudder as I think of what could have happened if I'd hit that tree any harder. He could have cracked my skull or broken my spine, and I would have died, never having truly known my mate. I realize now that those history books were wrong. They told me my wolf's mating instinct would make it impossible for him to hurt me, when in reality, he will and can.

I've been betrayed by the very thing that has kept me company through the lonely years of swamp-jumping with Bea. Books have no business being wrong. I'll have to contact the authors and let them know that it is entirely possible for a shifter to hurt his mate if he so desires. Or by accident too, I suppose.

I need to somehow make him realize how badly he can injure me before he goes too far.

I reach up to touch the marks on my throat where he grabbed me and my hand encounters the collar. It's like a necklace, but it's flush against my throat and there's no release latch. I wish I could see it in a mirror. Even though my mate despises me and placed the collar on me to stifle my magic, it's still a gift of jewellery from my mate.

Looking up, I realize he's getting ahead of me and scramble to catch up, watching him more closely so he doesn't accidentally lose me with his long strides. Wouldn't that be awful? Alone in the woods, my home destroyed, a magic-suppressing collar around my neck. I could be eaten by... things that eat witches in the woods. Huh, do things eat witches in the woods? I've never had to contend with such a scenario. My aunt and I have always cast protection spells to keep the nasties away.

"Hey, umm, Rush..." Before I can ask him what all might eat me, he swings around, fire in his eyes. I cringe back.

"How do you know my name?" His voice is like the rumble of an earthquake before all hell breaks loose.

I bite my lip, not really wanting to answer, but I have no choice. There should be only truth between mates. “When I found out you were my future mate...,” I pause as he lets out a hair-raising growl, “... I used a Ouija board to ask the spirits for your name. At first, I thought they were messing with me, but then I realized your name was... Rush.”

His body ripples as I say his name and he shakes his head as though trying to shake something away.

“Rush.” I say it again and he shivers.

“What?” He sounds annoyed.

“How long do we have to walk?”

“As long as it takes.”

I nod and hesitate, before finally admitting, “I understand, but I’m not like you. I can’t travel long distances in a single day. I have to take breaks.”

“You’re weak,” he grunts.

“No more than most witches,” I defend, frowning at him.

Physical weakness is a curse for our kind, made worse because we often cast spells to keep from having to do chores. Lying in bed and reading spell books while your room dusts, sweeps and polishes itself isn’t great for muscle building, but it is awesome for brain-building.

“You hide behind magic, allowing your body to grow wasted and weak. Witches disgust me.” His words are like venomous arrows, each one striking home.

I tell myself he doesn’t mean it, that he doesn’t really know me and is basing his opinion on one thing a distant ancestor did to him and his family. Still, I run my hands down my hips, smoothing out the poodle skirt so he can see my clearly defined curves. No wasting away here.

“My point is,” I continue, “I’m not as tough as a wolf shifter. If you want me to make it all the way to your home, you’re going to need to keep in mind that I have a human body that requires care.”

“I don’t give a shit what you *require*,” he growls, stepping closer to me, his eyes narrowing. “My only desire is to get your annoying ass to my lair so you can cast the spell that will release my kin from their eternal curse.”

Does he want only my ass, or my whole body? I try to look over my shoulder at my butt and decide it’s definitely worth this argument.

“Okay... that’s a bit hurtful.” Hands on hips, I step closer to him, showing him that he doesn’t intimidate me, even though I’m quaking inside. He’s a massive beast of a man with an I’ll-rip-your-throat-out-for-breathing-too-loud-in-my-general-direction attitude. “How exactly am I supposed to cast a spell for you with this thing on?” I point at the collar.

“I’ll take it off.”

“And I’ll turn you into a toad if you do.”

“I’ll...” He pauses and paces away from me before turning back with a glare. “You’ll do exactly as I say if you want to survive the night.”

So, his home is probably close by. I’m not surprised. Over our years of playing hide and seek, he’s always found me and stayed nearby for easy stalking access. It’s our darkly romantic dance that has culminated in this moment, his finally taking me for his own. Well, more like taking me to use for his purposes, but I’m okay with it as long as it gets us to the right place in the end; a happily-ever-after fated mate pairing.

Still, a girl has to have standards, and I’m not entirely happy with how this kidnapping is going. My feet are hurting and with the collar on, my bugs-off-the-babe spell is dissipating. I smack a mosquito as it lands on my shoulder.

“If I turn you into a toad, how do you plan on killing me?” I challenge him, picking at a hangnail that hadn’t been there yesterday. The wolf is starting to stress me out.

He lets out a growl of annoyance. “I’ll kill you before you can finish the spell.”

I frown at him. “Well, that’s not very economical, is it? You go to all the effort of stalking me these past several

decades, presumably to cast a spell that will free you and your brothers, then you kill me in a fit of anger?" I shake my head. "Rather than wasting all that time watching me harvest nightshade in the swamps, you maybe should've been working on a better kidnapping plan."

I'm needling him, attempting to get him to admit the true reason he's been watching me since I was an infant. He must know deep down inside that I *am* his forever mate. If his reason had been to break a spell, he would have found another witch or he would've taken me years ago, when I reached an age where I could control my magic.

Instead of catching onto my clearly flawless logic, he seems to grow bigger, his shoulders squaring, his chest puffing out as he stomps toward me. I back away but he follows, closing the distance between us. My back meets with the hard wall of a Cypress tree and before I can scramble away, he's in front of me, crowding me.

He hunches his shoulders, dropping his face to the same level as mine before letting out a deafening roar that leaves my ears ringing. Then he slams his fist into the tree next to my head, showering us both in bits of bark. I turn my head to the side and close my eyes, waiting for him to strike a blow.

Is this it? Did I gamble wrong? Am I about to die?

He doesn't move and neither do I, but gradually he straightens from his menacing stance. He doesn't move away, but when I open my eyes and peek up at him, he's glaring down at me with an expression of ferocious... confusion. It's really quite adorable. Or would be if he wasn't so frightening.

"Why aren't you afraid of me?"

I lick my lips and stare back at him, then answer truthfully. "I am."

He drops his face and presses his nose to my neck, between my ear and chin and inhales deeply. The sensation of his breath against my skin sends a cascade of sparks through my body, stealing my breath and turning my legs to slug slime.

“The smell of your fear is... intoxicating.” His deep, sensuous voice sends shivers through me.

“It’s my aunt’s homemade honey and oatmeal shampoo.”

He chuckles, his lips brushing the skin of my neck. There’s an answering throb in my lower belly. I’ve never heard him laugh before. In my years of gazing at this man in my crystal ball, summoning him on those cold, lonely nights when I wanted my mate, he was almost always in his wolf form. He was always serious. Searching, hunting, running, fishing. All the wolf things. But he never laughed, not once.

The sound is rusty, but beautiful to my ears.

I got him to laugh.

Then my thoughts scatter as he uses his lips to apply more pressure to my neck, kissing a path to the dip at the bottom of my neck where he presses his hot tongue.

“What are you doing?” I whisper. For a man who seems determined to hate me and disparage my existence, he’s throwing out mixed signals.

“I’m tasting you, seeing if you’re good enough to eat when it comes time to finish you.” His voice is like the smoothest of dark chocolates, my favourite treat, as his words flow over me.

I gasp and squirm against him. I can feel my panties growing slick and I’m helpless to stop it. How does this man manage to make a threat sound so yummy?

He sniffs, lifting his head and looking me in the eye, his pupils wide black disks. “You smell like desire.”

I feel a flush creep up my neck and the urge to hide my face is difficult to ignore, but if I’m to convince Rush that we’re meant to be together forever, this is the kind of moment I need to seize.

“For you,” I whisper, pressing myself against him.

He lets out an involuntary groan and then tries to shake off the fog of sexual desire enrapturing both of us. “You’re playing with a fire you can’t control.”

I nod seriously. “I know, but I have no choice.”

“You’ll come to regret it.”

No, I won’t, but there’s no convincing him while there’s so much hate in his heart. I decide to do the thing he told me never to do again, I go up on my toes and reach for his head, dragging him down for a kiss.

Our sizzling connection is undeniable. It speeds through both of us, igniting a spark that flares brightly behind my eyelids. I gasp against his mouth.

He stands frozen under my kiss for several agonizing seconds, seconds that have me questioning how far I’m willing to go to humiliate myself for a mate who’s rejected me, then he grabs hold of me, crushing me against his rock-hard body and taking over the kiss.

I realize quickly that he knows a lot more about kissing than I do, but then remind myself that he’s had several more centuries of practice. I content myself with the knowledge that I can’t be that bad since I finally got him to respond.

He grips my head in one massive hand and maneuvers me so he can deepen the kiss, thrusting his tongue past my lips and into my mouth. I choke, and he backs off, gentling the kiss. He sweeps my mouth with teasing exploration while his hands roam my body.

It’s exciting, exhilarating and overwhelming. I grip his shoulders, half pulling him toward me, half pushing him away. I want him to slow down but I can’t break the kiss to ask. Then I realize, I’m running out of air. His lips are covering mine, his tongue deep in my mouth, my nose smashed against his cheek.

I tentatively try to push his head away, but he’s immovable. Insensible of my quickly deteriorating predicament, his fingers find the edge of my skirt and soon his hands are roaming beneath, setting off a new series of sparks as his thick, blunt fingers caress the edge of my silk panties.

I gasp into his mouth, losing even more air. My head is swimming, but my body is on fire. I’ve never felt anything so exquisite. As my legs collapse, I decide that if I die like this, I

will die a happy woman. He continues to hold me up against the tree, his hands roaming my body like a hungry wolf faced with an all-you-can-eat buffet.

I feel his finger sneak past the barrier of my panties and graze the edge of my slick pussy. Black dots swarm my vision and my lungs spasm just as his finger slides along my folds and he groans into my mouth.

Consciousness slips away as the most delicious sensation carries me into sleep.

CHAPTER 7

UNTHINKABLE MATE

RUSH

She's heaven. Like a soft cloud of pleasure. Delicate, insubstantial, but earthy and juicy. Like fruit. No, not fruit, I hate fruit. She's like meat. Juicy, bloody (on the inside), wet, and she tastes like nothing I've eaten before.

I frown as I realize she's gone limp in my arms. I shake her a little, trying to get her to participate. As good as she tastes, it's better when her hands are on me, squeezing my shoulders and back, her tiny witch fingernails scratching at my skin.

I lift my head and look down at her. Her head lolls to the side, her eyes closed. I pull her away from the tree, trying to get her to stand but she remains collapsed in my arms.

Fear strikes me as I lay her on the ground, pressing my ear to her chest, frowning. What happened? Did I hurt her? Her heart is a steady beat in my ear, and I can hear her lungs working, somewhat laboured, but getting better with each breath she takes.

Then I realize that she passed out because I kissed her too hard, too long. I stole her breath and almost killed her.

Remorse slams into confusion as I try to sort out my emotions. My wolf is angry, no livid, pacing like a caged beast, wanting to burst out of my skin and take me to task for hurting our mate.

Not our fucking mate, I yell at him, but with more fear than anger. "What if she doesn't wake up?" I whisper out loud.

Is it possible to kiss a witch into a coma? During my single-minded vendetta, I never once thought about what it might take to preserve the life of a witch. I use the ones I come into contact with for information, then kill them. This one is different. I'm not sure I can kill her despite my original intent.

My wolf lets out a hair-raising howl and I start to shift until I'm able to force him back. "I won't kill her," I assure

him gruffly. “But I need my hands if I’m going to find out what’s wrong with her.”

A sound draws my attention and I breathe easier as her eyes flutter open and a frown wrinkles her brow.

“You suffocated me.” Her croaking voice is so soft I barely hear it.

I lean over to look at her face and notice her colour is coming back. She blinks rapidly, as if trying to fully wake up, then pushes herself onto unsteady arms. I reach for her, helping, but she pulls away from me, fear twisting her features before she can mask it.

Guilt sits heavily on my chest, not a feeling I’m used to.

“I shouldn’t have done that.” I don’t know why I’m apologizing. I guess I feel like an ass for crossing a line. It’s one thing to simply kill your mortal enemy, but I was seconds away from tearing off her panties and fucking her to death. The thought doesn’t sit well and I need her to know that even though we’re enemies, it’s not my intent to rape her. “I didn’t mean...”

“I know,” she whispers, her hand lifting to the spot on her neck that I’d kissed. She touches it and some of her fear drains away.

I can feel the emotion, the pull of the mating bond. Fuck. This isn’t what I wanted. But she’s injured, and before I can put distance between us, I need to make sure she’s going to recover.

“Can I... can I help?”

She looks surprised, then smiles, tentatively at first, but soon she’s beaming at me like I’m a puppy in obedience school who just did a flawless roll-over.

“I knew you weren’t all bad.” She pushes off the ground and wipes her hands down her pink skirt, leaving dirt streaks behind. She doesn’t notice as she turns around on the spot, looking in all directions. “Which way are we going? I can’t wait to get to your place. I’m starving.”

I'm still kneeling on the ground, staring up at her in incomprehension. How did she bounce back so quickly from near death?

"I may have a mostly human body, but I'm still immortal and capable of accelerated healing," she explains breezily. "You probably should've studied witches a little more closely while you were trying to wipe us from the planet."

My thoughts exactly.

I push off the ground and stand, towering over her once more, my preferred position with this tiny terror.

Then I realize what she said... she's starving. She needs food. I don't have food. Not beyond a fridge full of raw meat, which is meant for my brother, who has to stay inside. When I get hungry, I go hunting.

She watches me, curiosity bright in her eyes.

"I don't have food," I tell her gruffly. "There's a human town near my lair, but I try to stay out of their way." A flash of hope lights in her eyes and I crush it before it can become a full-fledged escape plan. "These humans are dangerous, not like other human settlements. They follow their own path and are deeply suspicious of immortals. They won't help you."

She presses her lips together and slams her hands down onto her hips, something she does when she's annoyed. "In case you haven't noticed, I'm not trying to escape."

"Because you can't," I point out.

She laughs and shakes her head. "That's cute, but no, I'm here because I want to be here."

"Even after I almost killed you with a kiss?"

She tips her head to the side, her swaying curls mesmerizing me. "Do you really think I'm so weak that I can be scared off by a kiss? That's just a great story to tell my friends, Lila and Katey. They're both romantics, they'll get it." She steps closer, determination clear in every line of her body. "You underestimate witches in general and me specifically, Rush. That will be your downfall if you're not careful."

I glare back at her. “Are you threatening me, little witch?”

She takes the last step, closing the distance. Sparks fly between us, lighting up the darkening woods. “I’m a Good Witch, not a little witch.” Her crystal blue eyes flash as she adds, “And one way or another, I *will* be your downfall. That’s a promise.”

My wolf leaps in excitement, begging me to grab her and kiss her again. Carefully this time. He agrees with every word out of her mouth. He wants this little... Good Witch to take us down.

“C’mon, it’s time to get moving.” I look past the canopy of trees toward the evening sky. It’ll be dark soon.

She follows me without fuss, falling silent for the first time since I captured her. We walk for several minutes before it occurs to me to wonder why she’s being so quiet. Is she too injured to carry a conversation and doesn’t want to show it? Or maybe she’s contemplating escape.

Both me and my wolf agree it won’t happen.

She’s ours. At least temporarily.

Forever, my wolf whispers stubbornly.

Damn it, he was a better roommate when he was dormant.

I’m about to do the thing I never do and break the silence first just to make the pussy move of checking on the witch when she finally pipes up. “So, when you say lair, do you mean some kind of underground den or something? Because that would be cool. I’ve learned to live under some pretty rustic conditions, as you saw in the swamp.”

That was a lot of words. Good, she’s not injured.

“It’s aboveground,” I answer gruffly, turning to take her arm and help her over a fallen tree. She beams at me and when I jump down the other side of the log, she slides forward into my arms.

I hold her against me for a breathless moment, absorbing the warmth of her body and the feel of her full breasts pressing

against my chest. So soft... I bet they'd be soft to the touch too...

Do not grab her tits! My wolf shouts at me, and I push her away to escape the temptation.

She stumbles, then rights herself, skipping forward and expectantly looking over her shoulder. She doesn't take my strange behaviour personally.

We hike for a few more hours, covering ground that I could easily run in fifteen minutes if I wasn't saddled with a frail witch. Still, she's keeping up admirably for such a useless creature.

"I'm not useless!" she says, offended.

"Get out of my head."

"Stop laser-beaming your thoughts into my head and I will," she counters.

I let out a growl of annoyance that sends a nearby flock of birds surging from the trees. She watches them with a half-smile tugging her lips. I've noticed her affinity to the forest and the creatures within. Even now, her palm lingers gently against the trunk of a tree and she caresses it as she moves forward.

It takes me a few seconds to realize I'm jealous of a tree. Fuck. This is bad. How am I supposed to get the witch to do my bidding when she's filling me with strange thoughts and feelings?

Another half hour of walking and I see a tower reaching toward the sky from out of the surrounding forest. It's the remains of a castle, long since abandoned.

"Holy Earth Mother! Is that where we're headed?" the witch asks excitedly.

Ignoring her, I push through the bushes, entering the clearing and stalking toward my lair.

"This is incredible!" she says excitedly from behind me.

I suppose from her perspective, it might be. She's seventy-two years old compared to my seven-hundred-twenty-four years. I've lived through many ages, including the rise and fall of structures like this one. I chose it for my lair as it was solidly built and easy to defend if necessary.

It was once a mid-sized castle, but has since crumbled from neglect, leaving behind a single tower, which houses a kitchen, common room and bedroom in the base, and a bedroom at the top.

She stares at the tower, noting the height. Good. Hopefully she realizes escape will be impossible.

"Over here." I lead her around the tower to the entrance where I go through the process of unlocking the door. Some of the locks are solid human-built locks, while others are enchanted. I try to shield the door with my body so she doesn't see.

"A locking spell," she murmurs, catching the movements of my hands as I unbind the door. She stares hard at me. "I hope the witch who created this spell was compensated for her effort."

We both know otherwise so I don't answer, but shame creeps through me as I thrust the door open and wave her into the tower. I step inside, narrowing my eyes as they adjust to the darkness. Dust filters through the air and a musty smell permeates the area. I don't mind it, but I wonder if the delicate witch will be bothered by my living situation.

"Amazing!" She rushes into the room, spinning on the spot and throwing her arms up. "This place is so cool, Rush!"

A shiver goes through me at the way she says my name and my cock twitches in my trousers as she continues to spin and rush around the room, examining the sparse contents. "Would you look at this hearth?" She turns to me, grinning. "Imagine the cauldron I could get in here."

I can't bring myself to crush the witch's hopes and dreams, but it's becoming abundantly clear that there are a few screws loose with this one. Before I can decide how to handle her,

since my usual strategy of intimidate-for-information-then-dismember-at-my-earliest-convenience won't work, the entire reason for her being here enters the room.

“What’s this?” Fallon asks curiously, his voice strained, his body weak and wasted from lack of food. I’ve only been away for two days and I left food for him, but he’s been refusing to eat more than a few bites for months. Since he was removed as King of Wolf-Haven.

The witch quickly turns to stare into the shadows, her heart hammering in fear. I can feel her heightened emotions from across the room and I stride toward her. She quickly moves behind me for protection and my wolf puffs up with pride.

I remind him that we are the lesser of two evils only because she’s spent the last several hours in our presence.

“M-mate...?” He reaches for her, trying to snatch her wrist as she scrambles backwards.

I should’ve seen this coming. My brother is obsessed with finding his mate and seems to be particularly attracted to the mates of his kin.

But she’s not your mate, is she? My wolf reminds me sarcastically.

What the fuck is up with my inner beast? He’s never acted like such a little bitch before.

“She’s not your mate, Fallon.” I use the calmest tone I can, though I’m tempted to follow up with a physical reminder just to make sure he thoroughly understands the situation. “She’s here to help.”

“The Lunatic King,” she whispers from behind me, awe in her voice.

“Don’t call him that,” I say sharply, turning so I can see both of them at once. The fear seems to melt away from her as she stares at Fallon with curiosity. “And yes, he was once the King of Wolf-Haven.”

She nods. “Toppled by his own brother.”

I frown at her. “How do you know so much about wolf politics? Have you been spying on us?”

She rolls her eyes. “You guys are pretty noisy. Do you think the rest of the world wouldn’t notice the shit that goes down in Wolf-Haven? And yes, I’ve definitely been spying on you, but no more than you spy on me.”

I narrow my eyes. Is she making fun of me?

I snatch her arm and pull her to the winding tower staircase. Over my shoulder, I say to Fallon, “I’ll be right back. Stay here.”

“But she’s...”

“Not your mate,” I finish with an annoyed growl, pulling her up the stairs.

She follows without a fight, her booted heels tapping against the stones as we climb. She falls behind and I tighten my grip. I frown at her, trying to get her to hurry, but her head is bowed and her steps aren’t as energetic as they had been when she was traipsing through the forest.

“What’s wrong?”

For the first time I see annoyance rather than excitement in her face. “I don’t have the stamina of a shifter, Rush. This is the most walking I’ve done since the time I got lost in the woods when I was five and walked in circles for two days before finding a village. My feet hurt and I need a nap.”

I open my mouth to demand she tell me why she didn’t reach out to her mate when she was lost in the woods. At five! She could’ve been killed by a hungry predator. Why didn’t I know? Why didn’t I sense her fear, her hunger, her need for me?

Because she didn’t need me, that’s why.

I stare at her, wondering what kind of a witch I kidnapped. Apparently, the kind who, as a child, wasn’t afraid of the deep, dark woods.

She’s strong and resourceful, excellent shifter qualities, my inner wolf endorses.

Instead of addressing that part of her little speech, I say gruffly, “You should’ve chosen better shoes.”

“I would’ve happily changed them, but somebody put a magic-suppressing collar on me.” Her hands go to her hips.

I frown. “You can make shoes? I might not know much about witches, but I know you can’t create something with nothing.”

“That’s why witches tend to be in tune with the natural world, so we can borrow resources whenever we need.”

I can’t believe I’m having this conversation with my captive witch, but curiosity compels me to ask... “Okay, that makes sense. But what about the leather for the shoes? Does that come from a living cow? Doesn’t that seem unethical?” Says the guy who’s definitely devoured cows when deer becomes scarce.

She looks horrified. “Gross! Who uses leather for their shoes?”

“Everyone?” I’m not sure why it comes out like a question, but how can she not know that most shoes are made of leather?

“Not everyone,” she says firmly. “I refuse to murder innocent animals so my life might become a bit more comfortable. No thank you very much, I will continue to use tree fibre for my walking needs.”

Oh, shit. “You aren’t... I mean, you can’t be a... a...” It’s unthinkable. Impossible. Absolutely preposterous. “Vegetarian?” I shudder as the blasphemous word leaves my mouth.

She lights up and my horror becomes real as she nods. “Yup, most witches are, though there are a few outliers.” She shakes her head at me. “Remarkable that you’ve been stalking us for so long and learned so little.”

Damn it, she’s right.

I snatch her arm and drag her to the top of the tower where I open the door. “Welcome home.” I thrust her through and

slam it shut, locking it behind me before making my way back downstairs.

I should feel relieved to be out of her presence, but something tugs at me, telling me to turn around and go back.

“Shut the fuck up before I punch us in the dick,” I snap at my wolf, stalking away from the witch.

CHAPTER 8

MATING IOI

MAGDALENE

“Oh thank Earth Mother,” I groan, rushing to pour a glass of water from a nearby pitcher. I really hope it’s not poisoned because I’m not waiting to find out. I gulp the delicious liquid greedily, ignoring it as it drips down my front and into my cleavage.

Once my thirst is quenched, I turn to inspect the room and am surprised to find a lovingly furnished bedroom with... I check the mystery door... a fully functioning washroom.

“For a man who refuses to acknowledge me as his mate, he’s sure going out of his way.”

The room is an interesting mix of masculine and feminine. A four-poster bed with a canopy of fake leaves and flowers dominates the room. A rose-coloured duvet and piles of pillows give it an inviting look. A large dresser sits against one wall while a chest, leather chair and footstool are in the opposite corner.

I sit on the edge of the bed and remove my boots, massaging my feet. Groaning in pleasure, I fall backwards onto the bed, my arms flung wide. “Heaven,” I whisper as I sink into the plush mattress.

Yeah, it doesn’t take much to make me happy.

“Magdalene Good Witch.”

I sit up quickly as my name is spoken in a serious tone I would recognize anywhere.

I swivel my gaze around the room until I spot the swirling light coming from a standup mirror. Yeah, if the wolf knew anything about witches, he wouldn’t have put a mirror in my room. He may as well have left a crystal ball. For a wolf who despises magical acts, he doesn’t do a lot to prevent them.

I scramble off the bed and run my hands down my grubby skirt to make myself presentable as one of the most respected witches of our time steps through the mirror. “Lila!”

Best friend number one. She steps aside and poses regally as a second witch steps through the mirror.

“Katey!” I say excitedly as she steps tentatively into the room, glancing around. Best friend number two. Her face creases into a smile as she spots me and rushes in for a hug. We saw each other a few days ago when she helped plan my kidnapping, but Katey’s a hugger. Lila’s awesome, but definitely not a hugger.

“Let me look at you.” Katey tips my face up so she can see it in the meager light of the setting sun that filters through the window. She clucks her tongue and shakes her head as she brushes her fingers against a scrape on my forehead. “I knew that wolf wouldn’t be careful enough with our girl.”

I grin at her. “He’s learning and I’m tough.”

Lila steps forward and says impatiently, “When I learned of your plan to lure the wolf, I insisted Katey bring me here.” She looks around the room and shakes her head. “Imagine! Magdalene Good Witch, daughter of the great and powerful Lilith Guardian Witch, a captive. Never thought I’d see the day. I hope you know what you’re doing.” Her piercing lilac eyes land on me and for a moment, I feel like a teenager again, caught releasing the frogs from my aunt’s spell cupboard. I’m not a child though, and I don’t need Lila’s protection.

“I know what I’m doing.” I step toward my oldest friend.

Lila is a stunning woman, but unlike Katey’s earthy beauty, Lila is fierce and ethereal. Her dark hair falls in loose curls down to her waist. She is tall and full-figured, her larger-than-life presence adding to her mystique. Like the other Guardian Witches, she is grace and dignity personified.

“Rush Wolven-North is my mate,” I continue, trying to convince her I’m making the right decision after decades of being protected and hidden from the very man who now holds me captive in his tower. “For years I’ve practiced my spells, grown stronger, worked to improve myself so I’m a match for him. I don’t need more practice; I need my mate. I’m ready to cement our bond and I think he is, too. Besides, you two have settled down with your mates. I want my turn.”

She nods, her face softening. “You’ve become a remarkable spellcaster and I agree, you’re ready to face your wolf.” Then her gaze drops down my body, a frown wrinkling her dark eyebrows. “Though I would suggest dusting yourself off if you want to make a good impression.”

I tug at my collar. “How am I supposed to do that? He’s bound my magic.”

Lila rolls her eyes. “Are you kidding? There’s barely a spark of magic in that thing, probably because the stupid wolf has no idea that killing the spellcaster weakens the magical binding. You can take it off anytime.”

“Don’t call him stupid! And yeah, obviously, but Rush doesn’t know it’s not working.”

Lila looks me over critically. “Alright, we’ll do what we can.”

Lila and Katey wander through the room, inspecting everything in an effort to make me look more presentable to a wolf. I giggle as I picture myself in the meat dress. Maybe a bacon bikini? Now *that* would grab his attention.

Katey kneels on the floor and searches through a chest, then shakes her head. “The wolf doesn’t carry much baggage, does he?”

I snort. “Depends on what you mean by that. Maybe he’s got so much personal baggage, he doesn’t have room for extra clothes.”

I realize that she’s found something belonging to him and hurry to her side, covering the chest protectively. “I’ll check out this one.” I share everything with my besties, but I can’t bring myself to share my wolf. Not even his stuff.

Katey smiles knowingly and moves away, opening and closing drawers in a nearby dresser. “Jackpot!” She tosses clothes over her shoulder. Before they can hit the ground, they magically float through the air, presenting themselves in a wardrobe lineup.

“Now we’re talking,” Lila says decisively, glancing over the rapidly shifting outfits as they rearrange themselves into

different styles. “This one, I think.”

An outfit stops, hovering in front of her as she circles it. A pair of women’s black dress trousers with a pale pink turtle-neck sweater. Definitely something my no-nonsense friend would wear. Trust Lila to find the least sexy choice available.

I swallow a laugh and shake my head. “Not that one.”

“Are you sure?” she asks with a frown. “It’ll keep you warm and protect you from injury if you’re forced to walk through the swamps again.”

Before I can come up with a diplomatic answer, Katey claps her hands and says, “Found it!”

I close my eyes and shake my head, preparing myself for what my colour-blind, utterly-lacking-in-fashion-sense friend might have come up with. When I open my eyes, I can’t contain my laughter. It looks like a box of melted crayons.

Tie-dyed is what I believe the humans call this atrocity of headache inducing colour straight out of my future nightmares. I don’t have to worry about hurting Katey’s feelings though, because she’s already scrambling out of her own clothes and into the tie-dyed sweaterdress.

I gently close the lid on Rush’s chest, caressing it. I promise myself I’ll come back to it, then stand in front of the wall of floating outfits, inspecting them for myself.

Witches are known as being very individualistic with style. I’ve seen Warrior Witches in prom dresses, Rage Witches in bathing suits, and Good Witches in nothing but a crown of ivy. We wear what we love and what speaks to our inner nature. Why would we do anything else?

I shuffle through, looking at various combinations before coming up with a lovely outfit of denim short-shorts and a red T-shirt with a baseball logo on it. I don’t know much about human sports, but I like the way it looks.

“Oh, I’ve seen this kind of thing before!” Katey exclaims. She’s waving a red baseball cap that she liberated from one of the drawers. She pulls it down over my blond curls and claps her hands. “Oh, it’s perfect! He won’t be able to resist!”

“Shoes,” Lila says with a snap of her fingers. The doors to a wardrobe fly open and several pairs of shoes march out, lining themselves up on the floor for inspection.

“I hate shoes,” I say, heaving a sigh and lifting my foot to point at a nasty blister I received from the pair I wore earlier.

Lila clucks her tongue and waves her hand at me. All my aches and pains instantly disappear, including the offending blister.

“Thanks!”

“If you insist on pretending your magic is bound, then you’ll have to wear shoes.” She leaves no room for argument as she chooses a pair of sturdy running shoes. Another snap of her fingers and two white ankle socks fly from the top drawer of the dresser and hover above the shoes.

Katey points at them and each sock is magically imprinted with a rainbow pattern.

I sit on the floor and pull them on.

Another few sweeps of magic and my face is scrubbed of dirt and glowing with health. A faint smell of lilacs comes from my armpits. I’m grateful as I haven’t seen any deodorant in the bedroom or washroom so far and nasty swamp BO is not the way to a wolf’s heart. Or is it? Hmm, not sure I know exactly what pleases a shifter’s olfactory senses.

“I think I’m ready,” I say, hugging Katey in appreciation and smiling at Lila, who gives me a slight lift of the lips.

“We should probably talk about what to expect when Wolven-North cements your mating bond,” Lila begins, looking as though she intends to settle in for a lengthy lecture.

“No!” I blurt.

“No!” Katey is quick to jump in.

Guardian Witches are like really cool moms. They worry about the rest of us and do whatever it takes to make our lives better. I was a proud bestie the day Lila was accepted as a member of the Guardian Guild. Even better? My mom requested to mentor Lila, keeping an eye on her for me.

“What I mean to say,” I assure a startled Lila, “is that Aunt Bea and I have spent the last fifty years studying Rush and his kind, preparing for this moment. I’m more than ready to be with my mate.” I soften my tone as I reach for her, taking her hands in mine. “I know you’re worried, but this is my destiny. You’re a Guardian Witch. You understand how vitally important it is that we witches follow the natural order and accept our destinies. I have accepted mine and you need to as well.”

She gives me a wobbly smile and pulls me into her arms for a quick hug.

Shocked, I hug her back. It’s probably the first time in decades we’ve hugged.

“I know you’re ready for this,” she murmurs. “You are the best of us, and if anyone can make an ornery dog fall in love, it’s you.” She steps away from me, waving her arm toward the mirror and creating a portal. “Goodbye, we’ll check on you again soon.”

“Darn it, I wasn’t ready!” Katey drops the fistful of jewellery she was mining from a box on top of the dresser and rushes toward the mirror, hugging me as she passes. “Don’t forget to call!”

In a blink, they’re gone and the smoke disappears, leaving me looking at my own reflection. I glance around expecting a disaster, but the room is cleaner than it was when I entered, all specks of dust have disappeared and the windows are now sparkling. Katey doesn’t like a dusty house.

I’m ready to collapse onto the bed for a quick nap before facing my next adventure, but before I can crawl beneath the inviting duvet, the locks rattle on the door as they’re removed one at a time.

I wait as a long pause follows the click of the last lock disengaging. Then a sharp knock, a pause, and a gruff, “It’s me,” then another pause, and then, “Ah, it’s Rush.” My lips twitch in amusement as the wolf tries to figure out whether to barge in. Finally, he pushes the door open after giving me more than enough time to make sure I’m decent.

His hulking figure fills the door, reminding me of how much bigger he is than me. His shoulder length hair has been brushed and tied back low on his neck. He's changed his clothes and is now wearing a pair of fresh jeans that ride low on his hips and a grey T-shirt that hugs his torso like a second skin.

I swallow the drool pooling in my mouth before saying, "Hi."

His eyes narrow on me, then crawl up and down my body, lingering on my bare legs. I try not to squirm self-consciously, but it's hard. My thighs are round and my plump ass fills the denim shorts with an almost indecent amount of flesh. The flames leaping to his eyes tell me he doesn't mind the extra curves.

"Dinner," he says gruffly, turning away. He stops, then glares back at the room. "Have you cleaned in here?"

CHAPTER 9

THE MAN, THE MYTH, THE LEGEND

MAGDALENE

“**T**here.” He points at a corner of the common room and when I squint, I can barely make out a dusty table with rickety looking wooden chairs.

“Fallon, dinner!” Rush shouts, his eyes on me as I slide onto a seat.

His gaze is less malevolent than it had been when we were tromping through the swamps. Now it’s more speculative and slightly confused. I wish he would look at me and see his mate, or even someone he likes.

“What’s for dinner?” I ask brightly as Fallon stomps into the room and drops obediently into the chair next to me.

This close, I get a better look at him and pity fills my heart. The once great King is a wasted version of himself. Too thin to be healthy, muscle and sinew rope his arms and neck. His hair falls in greasy tangles about his face and a scraggly black beard with grey streaks covers his jaw. His eyes are so dull and faded, I’m not sure what colour they once were. Perhaps a rich, warm bronze like Rush’s.

Instead of answering my question, Rush leaves the room, returning moments later with an armful of plates. I watch in astonishment as he drops one in front of Fallon, one in front of me, and one in front of the empty chair.

He looks proud of himself as he sits and announces, “Dinner is served.”

I swallow the vomit that rushes to my throat as I gaze down at the soupy grey sludge in front of me. “Are those twigs?” I ask faintly, eyeing the small bark covered stick floating in my ‘food’.

“Made it vegetarian for you,” he says gruffly and my heart warms, though I’m trying to figure out how to get rid of the muck without hurting his feelings.

I glance at Fallon who's glaring down at his plate of... is that raw meat?

"It's what he prefers," Rush defends, catching my skeptical look.

Clearly not, if his wasted appearance is anything to go by.

Rush adds in a tone of annoyance, "I didn't do that to him."

I glance at Rush's food and realize he's laid out a pile of potato chips on his own plate. My mouth waters and I swallow.

"You go into the nearby human town for groceries?" I ask curiously.

He nods. "Yeah, not often though. These humans are suspicious of outsiders, and I don't like to draw attention." His height and breadth would almost certainly draw stares. The average human male doesn't grow as large as a shifter.

I wish he'd thought to get me a bag of potato chips. As sweet as his offer of a vegetarian meal is, there's no way I'm eating it. And it turns out I don't have to, because I'm about to become acquainted with Fallon's volatile temperament.

Before I have a chance to pick up my spoon and pretend to eat, the table is picked up and flung across the room, shattering at it hits the stone hearth. I duck in my chair, covering my head in case flying debris comes in my direction.

He leaps to his feet with a roar and runs from the room, slamming the door behind him.

I stare open-mouthed as some of the fragmented pieces of the table fall into the fire, causing it to flare up and catch fire to the surrounding bits of wood. As the flames threaten to rage out of control, Rush leaps to his feet and grabs a nearby bucket, filling it with water from the kitchen and throwing it on the fire, then stomping on the embers that fall from the hearth.

Rush's chest heaves and his face twists in anguish as he gazes at the door his brother disappeared through.

I stand and walk toward him, his despair drawing me.

“Is he... usually like that?”

Rush transfers his attention to my face, looking concerned. “Did he hit you with the table?”

“I’m fine,” I assure him. “Not even a splinter.”

His expression clears and he nods, though he seems distracted.

I slide onto one of the cozy chairs next to the fire, which is making a spluttering effort to reach its former glory after being unceremoniously doused. Rush takes the chair opposite mine, leaning forward to place his elbows on his knees and dropping his head between his hunched shoulders.

My fingers itch to reach out and smooth the hair off his forehead, to find out what the thickness and texture feels like.

“I don’t know what to do,” he admits. “I’ve tried everything and he just keeps getting worse.”

I nod and ask tentatively, “This has been going on for a long time, hasn’t it?”

“Since the witch cursed my family.” His voice is rough, exhausted and my heart goes out to him. Then he adds with an accusing glare, “Your ancestor.”

“We don’t get to choose family,” I say with a shrug.

“But we’re responsible for them.” His gaze goes back to Fallon’s door.

“You took on the noble task of caring for your brother.”

His sharp gaze swings back to me. “Like your aunt took care of you when your mother left.”

I can hear the disapproval in his tone and I’m quick to defend my family. “My mother is a Guardian Witch. The purpose of her existence is to protect the natural order, which is a job that can only be done in the place between worlds. I’ve known since I was quite small that it was her duty to leave me and return to her job as a Guardian. Lucky for me, Aunt Bea is a Good Witch and was more than capable of taking over the

task of raising me on this plane of existence.” He looks baffled by my revelations and I feel frustrated. “Did you really never study witches in all those years you stalked me?”

His cheeks and forehead redden and his brow pulls down into a frown. “Never needed to study my prey before.”

His words are like arrows to my heart, each one striking the bullseye. I spent decades reconciling myself to this creature, the man who would one day become my husband. In that time, he has stalked and harassed many of my kind and thinks of me only as a temporary means to an end.

“Why did you bring me here?” I demand. “Why not just kill me like the others?”

“I need you,” he admits.

I nod, having already figured out his plan. “You want me to fix your brother.”

He nods emphatically. “Yes, you can bring back his mate and he can finally stop his 200-year hunt.”

“I can’t bring back the dead,” I say flatly, staring into the fire. “Believe me, we’ve tried.”

He stares at me in surprise. “You’ve tried to find Lyra?”

“Do you think her ancestors wouldn’t have tried if we could?” Frustration leaks through my tone. “You’re not the only person who loves their family. Each witch born into my family since Lyra has tried her hand at bringing our great ancestor back, but she’s beyond our reach.” I heave a sigh and close my eyes. “Which in our world means the person we’re trying to reach is probably dead.”

“I don’t believe it,” he snaps. “She has to be alive.”

My eyes fly open and I glare at him. “Why is it not possible that she’s dead?” I push myself from my chair and stand to my full height of 5’3”. “It was your kind who killed our beloved sister, aunt, and daughter. When your brother stole Lyra, he blasted a crater into our magical community that took two centuries to recover from. We’re finally at peace again. Your demand to raise the dead is unacceptable. Even if she is

alive, why do you think I'll succeed where others could not?" Then in my toughest voice, I add, "And why would I do such a thing for the shifters who abused her?"

He stands, glaring at me. "You refuse to bring her back."

I stand too, though I'm quaking in my running shoes. It's difficult to stay the course in the face of such a fierce foe, but no one has ever accused me of cowardice. "Even if I could, I wouldn't."

"You can." He towers over me, fists clenched.

"I won't."

He steps closer, his breath huffing across my face as he bends for maximum effect. "Then prepare yourself for a very long stay because you won't leave this tower until Fallon is back to his former glory."

Well, that suits me just fine since I'm in this relationship for the long haul. If he says I'm to stay forever, then that's one giant step toward securing my mate.

"You're not helping your brother by subjecting him to this." I wave my hand around the room.

"What do you mean?" he asks with a confused frown.

I point at the raw chicken surrounded by broken porcelain from the shattered plates. "You think this is good enough for a wolf shifter?" I shake my head at him. "He wants live prey, Rush, and he won't gain weight until you give it to him."

"How am I supposed to do that?" he asks, frustration in every syllable as he thrusts a hand through his hair, pulling the strands from his ponytail. "He takes off and terrorizes the locals when I let him out. I can't risk them getting hold of him."

"Then bring his prey back here and let him catch it," I say insistently. "You have this massive common room and you've filled it with a couple of chairs..." I glance around the room, "... a chest, a picture and whatever that is." I point at a dusty corner filled with cobwebs.

Rush clears his throat. “It’s primitive human armour for battle. Came with the place. So did the picture and the chest.”

I wander to the corner and brush a few webs from the metal monstrosity, wondering how on earth the humans fought in these things. Perhaps this is what landed them on the bottom of the food chain.

“Regardless,” I say, turning back to Rush. “Your brother needs live prey and if you can’t figure it out, he’ll waste away until there’s nothing left.”

“Why should I take advice from a witch?” His nose wrinkles in disgust as he adds, “And a vegetarian.”

I shrug. “Doesn’t matter to me if you take my advice, but it might matter to him.” I nod toward Fallon’s door.

Rush’s gaze follows mine and he heaves a sigh before mumbling, “Thanks for trying. I’ll keep what you said in mind.”

I grin at him, both pleased and surprised that he’s not dismissing me out of hand. Perhaps my charms are working on him after all. Not the magical kind, of course, but my personal ones.

Before I can cover it, a yawn catches me unawares.

Rush nods toward the staircase. “You’ve had a long day. I’ll escort you to your room.”

I’m disappointed because I was hoping he’d invite me outside for a moonlit walk where we might practice kissing some more, but without the part where I pass out and ruin the moment. Still, he’s not wrong. I’m exhausted after all that swamp tromping.

Together, we climb the stairs to the tower. My feet are slow as I walk and Rush takes my arm, helping me. I beam at him, enjoying the sizzle that arcs between us. His gaze remains steady on the top of my head as we walk, though I duck mine to conceal the blush staining my cheeks.

I’ve been planning every aspect of my future with this wolf shifter from the moment I found out he was my fated

mate, but imagination and fantasy are so much different from reality.

The man next to me is over 700 years old compared to my paltry seventy-two. He's larger than life, both physically and mythically. I've known of Rush and his brothers since I could walk, having grown up with stories of their valiant battles during the Human-Shifter war. Of their efforts to manage Wolf-Haven, the largest shifter-only settlement on the planet. Of the witch who cursed them and the subsequent spiral of Wolf-Haven into the dark ages.

It's the stuff of legend and I love a good story.

But Rush is real now. He's no longer a myth, a legend, or a fantasy. He's my future husband and as confident as I am in that knowledge, I still feel awed and overwhelmed by his presence.

As we reach the door, he hastily removes his hand from my arm and steps away from me. He looks as though he wants to say something, but shakes his head, jerks the door open and nods toward the interior.

I walk past him, careful to brush my shoulder against his chest as I pass. "Goodnight, Rush."

He grunts and slams the door shut.

CHAPTER 10

CHARMED, I'M SURE

MAGDALENE

Turn away, disappointed. I'd hoped to revisit our kiss in the swamp, but this wolf is determined to keep things between us professional.

I head for the dresser to choose a nightie I saw tucked in there when I went through my new wardrobe with Lila and Katey, but before I cross the room, the door is thrust open once more.

I gasp as he grabs me. "Rush?"

His fingers bite into my upper arms and the look on his face is one of fierce longing, as though he's thought of doing this for as long as I have.

He drops his head but doesn't kiss me. Instead, his lips hover over mine, his breath caressing me as he holds himself still. I reach tentatively into his thoughts, as much as I can through all the guards he's thrown up and discover the intensity of his lust, the longing that drove him back to me, but I can also feel his ambivalence. He's disgusted at himself for being so weak.

I'm hurt by his conflicting emotions, but I don't blame him. He's spent centuries feeling one way, but when faced with a reality that's different – a witch mate who has no desire to hurt him or his family – he doesn't know what to do, is paralyzed with indecision.

"Fuck it," he mutters and lays his lips across mine.

This kiss is much different from our last one and I feel his effort to hold back from hurting me. I wrap my arms around his neck and drag his head down for a deeper kiss. I slant my mouth against his and dart my tongue along the seam of his lips, drawing a deep groan from him. My heart soars in victory as something inside him snaps and his grip becomes fiercer, his tongue pushing mine back inside my mouth.

As he explores, we fall backwards onto the bed, landing hard and bouncing into each other's arms.

I do what I've spent decades longing to do and slide my hands up his biceps, sinking them into the steely muscles and shivering with lust as it races through my body and pools in my panties.

Rush's hands are everywhere, under my shirt, touching my braless breasts, the rough pads of his fingertips teasing my nipples. I arch against him, groaning into his mouth.

He responds by thrusting his denim-covered cock into the vee of my thighs, fitting his huge erection against me. Stars explode like rockets in my head as he thrusts the seam of my jean shorts into my clit over and over. I groan, flinging my head back and lifting my hips, silently begging for more.

He stares into my eyes, his gaze a blazing bronze fire of desire and shock. He drops his head against my neck and bites a path to the crook of my shoulder, where he bites hard enough to send a lightning bolt straight from that pressure point to my nipples and further down to my pussy.

"Fuck," he groans. "You really are a witch."

I stiffen beneath him. "What's that supposed to mean?"

He meets my eyes and for a moment I forget my annoyance as his hair flops into his face, giving him an extra boost on the sex appeal front. Then he speaks words again and I remember how terrible he can be. "You've enchanted me. There's no other explanation for why I would desire a witch."

The last word barely leaves his mouth before I shove him with all my strength, smashing my fists into his shoulders. Unfortunately, all of my strength is only a fraction of his. He grunts at the impact but doesn't otherwise move.

"You dare to say, while on top of me, that you couldn't possibly be attracted to me without being under some kind of enchantment?" My voice grows higher with every word. "Is that really what you think?"

"Uh..." He sits up, apparently reading the room enough to realize I'm no longer into our hot and heavy make-out session.

I kneel on the bed to give myself some extra height as I confront him. I stick my arm out ramrod straight and point at the door. “You may leave.”

“I...” He looks baffled, but his face is flushing with understanding. “I didn’t mean it exactly the way I said –”

“You didn’t mean to tell me the only way you’d touch me is if I were tricking you into it?” I cut him off, venom dripping from each word. “Because that’s exactly how it sounded.”

He runs his hands through his hair, a habit he seems to use when he doesn’t know how to deal with me. “Look, Mag...”

“GET OUT OF MY TOWER!” I shout at him, then remember myself. I am a Good Witch, and a Good Witch rarely raises her voice as she fulfills her life’s purpose of helping others. “Please.”

He moves off the bed and follows my pointing finger to the door, but before he leaves, he turns back and says, “We’re not done... whatever this was.”

I glare at him. “You’re not done taking advantage of me and then insulting me to my face? Perfect. I can’t wait for more.”

He slams the door so hard the tower shakes, but I’m satisfied I got the last word.

Gravity takes me backwards, and I sigh as my back contacts the plush fabric of the duvet beneath me. Damn it. I shouldn’t get so upset with the wolf. He went to the effort of decorating a bedroom for my exclusive use when he could’ve shoved me in a broom closet with a bucket for a toilet.

Was he insulting? Yes, he even displays speciesism. Does he know what he’s saying? Also probably yes, but he sees witches as the reason behind his suffering, so perhaps his vitriol is forgivable. Is it fair to his future mate? No, but he’s my mate too, and I’ll keep trying.

I cover my face with my hands. “You can’t choose your mate, Mags darling, but you can choose your path forward.”

Staring up at the canopy of tulle and flowers above me, I touch my useless anti-magic collar. Rush isn't here to see and using a tiny amount of magic will make me feel better about my situation. Reaching up, I poke my finger into one of the fake rosebuds. It unfurls petal by petal in a symphony of magic and nature.

I touch each rosebud, turning them into full-fledged flowers. I flick my hand again, lighting them up until a glowing garden floats above my head, the lovely fragrance of the flowers teasing my nostrils.

My stomach growls loudly, reminding me I didn't get even a single bite of my twig gruel.

"I'm going to starve at this rate." And that's no good. I'll need my strength if I'm going to seduce the wolf into giving up a centuries long vendetta to settle down and live happily ever after with me.

Wiggling to the end of the bed, I push myself to my feet and tug my shirt and shorts into place. I scoop up the ball cap from where Rush had knocked it onto the floor during our wild groping session and pull it down over my hair.

I unlatch the balcony doors and shove them open. A fall of dust showers me and I wave the particles away, coughing. It's clear the doors haven't been opened in a while. I step out onto the balcony and look around, grinning in delight.

The tower is higher than the treetops and I can see for some distance, or I would if it was daylight. At the moment, I can see the shadowy clearing beneath the tower. To the North, bathed in the glow of a half moon, the direction we came through the swamps earlier, I see distant mountains, which is where Wolf-Haven is located. To the South-East I see some twinkling lights which must belong to the nearby town Rush told me about.

I'm not great at estimating distances, as most witches use mirrors and hearths to travel. Mirrors are the cleaner choice if one wants to reach their destination without soot smeared clothing, but I don't think it would take me long to reach the town if I wanted to walk. Maybe an hour.

Rush hurt my feelings, but I'm not ready to give up on him. We're both navigating unfamiliar territory, and while witches are versatile by nature, wolves most definitely are not. Most of them adhere to tradition and move slowly on new concepts.

I have heard good things about the new King, Lock Wolven-North, Rush's older brother. According to rumour, he embraces the idea of modernizing his territory. I wonder what Rush thinks of the changes his brother is making.

Wait, I'm mad at Rush and don't care what he thinks about anything at the moment.

With a self-righteous sniff of disdain for stinky wolf shifters everywhere, I climb onto the rail of the balcony, mutter a quick anti-gravity spell and step off. I float easily to the ground where I adjust my cap and head into the surrounding trees, hunger driving my steps.

A flick of my wrist and tiny fireflies flare to life in front of me, assembling themselves into the shape of an arrow, lighting a path to the nearest bush bursting with edible berries.

"Oh, well done!" I drop to my knees in the foliage and reach for the bush, pulling handfuls of berries from the branches, shoving them into my mouth and moaning in ecstasy as bursts of flavour hit my tongue with each juicy bite. I slow down, reminding myself that berries alone won't suffice. Standing, I brush off the back of my shorts.

I try to remember the edible mushroom spell when I hear something snap behind me. Whirling around, I stare hard into the trees and lift my hands protectively in front of my body, preparing to cast a protection spell.

Two gleaming eyes appear, glowing malevolent yellow.

The hair on my body rises in response and I take a quick step back.

It's a shifter, but not my shifter. I don't know this one.

Rush, help me! I beg silently.

CHAPTER II

A MAGICAL BINDING

RUSH

R *ush, help me!*

The words screaming through my slumbering brain wake me from a dead sleep.

My paws hit the ground before I realize what's happening and I burst from the corner where I was napping, heading toward the front door. I don't pause to shift to human so I can open it, instead going straight through, fragmented wood exploding out behind me as I rush into the clearing.

The voice, I'd recognize it anywhere. Magdalene is in trouble!

I glance up toward the room she occupies and see that the doors leading onto the balcony are wide open. How did she get down without falling? The thought has me howling in worry as I leap through the brush, searching for my missing and possibly injured mate.

I should've bonded with her. If I had, then I'd be able to pinpoint her exact location. I'd hear her heart beating, hear her thoughts, even from a great distance. But my pride kept me from admitting she's my mate, let alone bonding with her.

Stupid, stupid, stupid, I mutter to myself. If anything happens to her, it'll be my fault.

I sniff around the area, picking up her scent and following it. As I race through the trees, I trace her path, hoping I make it in time.

What is she doing out here? She has a soft, almost human body, too easily hurt. A chill goes through me as I imagine everything that could happen to her. Though I'm the worst predator in this part of the woods, that doesn't mean there are no other predators. A few weeks ago, I made the mistake of trying to have a conversation with what I assumed was a bear shifter passing through the area. A few tense minutes later, I

discovered the truth as she attempted to maul me for getting too close. Not a shifter.

As I follow Magdalene's trail, I pick up on a second scent, one that confuses me with its familiarity.

I burst upon the scene to discover my mate pressed against a tree, her hands in front of her, a male wolf shifter sitting on his haunches a few feet away from her, his head cocked in curiosity as his glowing yellow eyes follow her every move.

Her hands and mouth are covered in red. Blood! My vision blurs and my heart races as I give in to the urge to protect my mate, turning on the male and snarling with enough heat to warn him off. If he takes a single step toward her, I'll tear out his throat.

He simply sits staring at me through... very familiar eyes. I glance back at Magdalene who's standing behind me, frozen, her pupils blown with fear. Focusing on her hands, I lean closer and sniff. Not blood, but berry juice smears my mate's delicate skin.

I shift to human and let out a sound of impatience. The wolf confronting my mate shifts and grows to his full human height of 6'5. "Keenan," I acknowledge my brother grimly. "The fuck are you doing here?"

"The King sent me," Keenan explains gruffly, crossing his arms over his broad chest. "We haven't heard from you since Lock's challenge with Fallon. We were concerned."

I snort my derision. "And you felt confronting my mate in the middle of the night was the best way to get my attention?"

Keenan shrugs unconcernedly. "She's fine."

"I was terrified!" Magdalene pipes up, fire in her voice, her eyes crawling up and down my brother's naked body. I tense, ready to ugly him up if she so much as shows a spark of interest. Her gaze remains suspicious and mildly annoyed. "Who exactly are you?" Then she gasps, her gaze shifting to me and her face lighting up with pleasure. "Did you just call me your mate?"

Ignoring her, I step between them, blocking her from view. As she tries to peek around me, I push her back. My brother won't hurt my mate, but he doesn't need to look at her either.

His gaze softens and he says, "My apologies for my bad manners. I caught Rush's scent on you and mistakenly thought you were him when I followed you here. I am Keenan Wolven-North, brother to your mate."

She claps her hands together and rushes around me before I can stop her. I grab hold of her, but she's already reaching for him, thrusting her hand out. "Oh, welcome to our part of the swamp! I'm so glad to finally meet more of Rush's family. I'm Magdalene Good Witch, granddaughter of Phylicient Guardian Witch, daughter of Lilith Guardian Witch, and niece of Beatrice Good Witch. You can call me Mags."

"Call her Ms. Good Witch," I snap. "Or better yet, don't talk to her."

Ignoring me, Keenan takes her hand in his, enveloping it and shaking it, a grin of approval stretching his mouth. "A witch." His gaze finds mine and I can see his glee at my predicament. "How do you like that?"

"Isn't it wonderful?" She beams at him, and I have a sudden desire to decapitate my brother.

"Gotta get back to the tower," I mutter.

"Don't suppose you have an extra bed in that bucket of stones over there? I've been travelling for days and I'm in desperate need of a hot meal and a place to rest."

"Go find a fucking cave to sleep in," I snarl, reaching out to grab my mate as she dances out of reach and links her arm with Keenan's.

"Of course!" She smiles up at him. "The food situation is a little bleak, but we're so happy you've come to visit us."

Keenan lets out a hearty laugh, casts a mischievous look my way and allows my mate to lead him through the trees and back to the tower like a puppy on a leash. Damn it, she belongs to me, but I've never seen her smile like that, all happy and flirty.

What do you care? My inside wolf asks disdainfully, *thought you didn't like the witch.*

“Shut the fuck up,” I mumble, drawing Magdalene’s gaze as I argue with my own damn wolf. As we approach the tower, I insert myself between them and capture her attention, pointing accusingly toward the balcony. “How did you get down?”

She shrugs, her gaze falling away. “I climbed.”

“You could’ve killed yourself!” I shout, gripping her arms and giving her a shake as fear for her safety beats at me.

“Hey, Rush, she’s not hurt.” Keenan tries to get between us, but I shove him away.

“Stay out of it.”

I pull her toward the tower, dragging her over the broken door and inside, Keenan following behind us. I leave him in the main room, snapping, “You stay here and wait for me.”

Stomping up the tower stairs, I drag my wayward witch behind me. We climb in silence and when we reach the top, I unlatch the door and shove her through. She turns to stare at me as I stalk to the balcony doors, slamming them shut and latching them. Then I turn to my mate, stalking toward her. Fear finally reflects in her blue eyes, and she stumbles back as I reach for her, crying out when my fingers bite into her arms.

“Why did you leave the tower?” I demand, anger at her recklessness still driving me.

“I was hungry,” she says quickly, her gaze pleading.

My gaze drops to her berry-stained lips and shame rushes through me as I recall how her meal spilled when Fallon flipped the table. I forgot and my mate has suffered because of my thoughtlessness.

Not your mate... my wolf whispers... yet.

Okay, okay, I get it. I'll make it right, I assure him.

I gentle my grip and say, “I’m sorry I didn’t provide for you. I should’ve done better.”

The worry melts from her face to be replaced by a wide smile. “You have Fallon to worry about. I understand.”

Fuck, she’s too understanding.

Witches are supposed to be selfish assholes. She should hate me for everything I’ve done to her and her family over the years. She should be screaming and shouting curses at me. *She* should be the one rejecting *me* as a mate, not the other way around. Instead, in less than a day, she’s thrown my entire life’s purpose spinning.

Why is she so different from everything I know a witch to be?

I’m not sure how to cope with the revelation that I not only don’t hate my mate, but I can’t. I debate what to do next, but I already know. Her expression is curious, and she shivers in response as I brush the hair from her cheeks and hold her face in my hands.

“We need to bond.” Her eyes grow wide and she nods emphatically, but I’m not sure she understands, so I continue, “I’m going to use telepathy to reach into your head and heart where I’ll coax your spirit into meeting mine.”

“Are we going to twine?” she whispers.

I shake my head, but I can feel my wolf leaping and shouting at me to do it. *No*, I tell him, *it’s too soon*. But this time, instead of denying my mate out of hatred, my desire is to protect her.

I almost killed her with a single kiss. What happens when it comes time to seal the mating bond? I don’t know how to be gentle. I’ll kill her for sure. We’ll have to navigate this without the twining.

“You won’t hurt me,” she denies, her pillowy lips drawing me despite my intention to leash my desire for her.

“You don’t know what you’re saying.” My hands span her waist as though it’s the most natural thing in the world, and she goes up on her toes, her palms sliding across my shoulders, her short nails tickling the skin of my neck. I shiver in ecstasy as a cascade of sensation shudders down my back.

“If you fuck as good as you kiss,” she says, her voice dropping into a sexy whisper, “It’ll be the best possible death a witch can ask for.”

I drag her into my chest, savouring her plush curves against my hard body. My fingers itch to explore and, like a wolf pup facing a smorgasbord of baby bunnies, I’m helpless to deny myself. One hand caresses the curve of her spine while I slip the other along her waist, sneaking beneath the edge of her shirt and testing the satiny skin beneath.

Her wide blue eyes sparkle with excitement as I lower my head, placing my lips against hers. At first, the kiss is light and exploratory, but it deepens as I allow my spirit to unfurl and reach toward hers. Like the sun meeting the dawn, they touch and an explosion of light bursts through my head and heart.

I’m unprepared for the intensity and my grip on her tightens, drawing a gasp from her lips. I don’t care though, I want more, I want everything. My claws dig into her waist, slicing through the fabric of her shorts and baring more of her delicious skin.

She cries out and I take advantage, deepening the kiss, thrusting my tongue against hers, losing myself in her.

Her body convulses against mine and I worry that I’m hurting her again. I lift my head to look down at her and what I see is so startling, I let go of her and take a quick step back.

Her head is still tipped back and she’s staring straight up, her eyes glowing with the same bright light I felt inside of me. Her body convulses again, then she lifts off the ground, floating for a moment as the light moves through her until her entire body is glowing.

I’ve never seen anything like it. Never *heard* of anything like it. Then again, I don’t know much about witch-shifter mating. Perhaps this is normal.

Part of me wants to tuck tail and run from this strange magic. But I also want to bask in the glow of her radiant beauty. My rational side tells me to drag her down from where she’s floating and demand an explanation.

She convulses once more and the light drains out of her.

Instinctively, I reach for her, snatching her against me before she can collapse to the ground. Her body is limp, but her eyes are blinking languidly.

“Magdalene?”

She takes a quick breath and the rise and fall of her chest reassures me that she’s well. Her lips move and I lower my head to listen. “Why don’t you call me Mags, like everyone else?”

The truth? Because it feels too familiar. Friends call each other by a shortened version of each other’s names and we were never supposed to become friends.

“Because everyone else calls you that,” I lie, though the lie is no longer a lie. “Magdalene is special.”

She smiles at me, the most beautiful smile I’ve ever seen.

“You think I’m special.”

I lay her down on the bed and smooth her hair off her forehead, studying her as she stares back at me. Why is it impossible to hate her?

Without another word, I leave, but her spirit stays with me, a glowing ball of light in my chest. We are now bonded.

CHAPTER 12

THE *W*HOLE PACKAGE!

RUSH

When I enter the common room, I discover another situation. Keenan is standing near the fireplace, his body stiff but not threatening. Facing him is Fallon in his wolf form, his back arched, his hair standing on end and his teeth bared. It would be an impressive sight, a full-grown male shifter threatening another being, except Fallon's current appearance is less than impressive.

His fur has been falling out in clumps and leaving behind bald patches. He hasn't hunted in years and doesn't feed himself properly, so he's lost most of his bulk and former muscle mass. He's a wasted version of the once powerful King he used to be.

"I didn't know," Keenan says, his pitying gaze still on Fallon.

I head toward the shattered table, picking the chairs out of the debris and righting them. "Very few know of his true condition." Glancing at the door I broke to get to Magdalene when I thought she was in trouble, I decide the repairs can wait until morning and head toward the kitchen where I pour two frothing mugs of beer.

Fallon continues to stare malevolently at Keenan, his head dropping low between his shoulders as growls issue from deep in his throat.

I shove a beer into Keenan's hands and jerk my head toward the chairs by the fire. We sit and Fallon lowers himself to the floor next to my chair, lets out a huff and closes his eyes. He's dismissed Keenan as a potential threat, trusting me to take care of the situation.

"How'd he get so bad," Keenan says.

Annoyance flares and I shove it back so I can have the conversation with my brother we probably should've had decades ago. Before I can speak though, something brushes against me. Startled, I look around, searching for the intruder.

Fallon is asleep on the floor next to my chair and Keenan is across from me. No one else is in the room.

I'm here.

I jerk and nearly leap to my feet before I realize what's happening.

I feel hands on me, running down my arms, tingles igniting in their wake. Yet no one is touching me.

It's the bond. My mate is speaking to me through our bond... touching me. I didn't think this was possible since she's not a shifter. I believed that, at most, our bond would allow me to locate her when we're not together. Apparently, she can do more than that.

So much more! I'm awesome at this bonding thing!

Go away, I order her. I don't have time for this.

Nope! she says gleefully. *You bonded with me and now I'm here to stay.*

I groan, drawing Keenan's attention. Clearing my throat, I try to shake my mate from my head.

"All those years ago, even before his witch mate cast her spell, Fallon struggled with the weight of responsibility placed on him," I say gruffly. "He's a pack shifter, always has been, but when he was made King, he had to lead an entire species. At first, he surrounded himself with pack leaders who would help inform his policies, but as pack alliances shifted, he became paranoid and feared someone would challenge his leadership. Slowly, the pack leaders were replaced with sycophants, wolves who had an agenda, who wanted something from our brother. He became more isolated and then he discovered his witch mate."

Keenan nods. "And she cast the spell that sent him even further along this path of destruction." Keenan's sharp gaze lifts to meet mine. "But how did you see all of this and the rest of us didn't?" He pauses, then amends his last statement, "Of course we saw the signs. It's the reason Lock left Wolf-Haven 200 years ago, but how did you stay in Fallon's inner circle when he pushed the rest of us away?"

I shrug and glance down at my slumbering older brother. Fallon's head is tucked between his paws, one of his ears perked up as though he's listening, even in sleep.

"He tried to push me away," I admit, then lift my stare to Keenan, allowing him to see some of my anger and frustration at my brothers' lack of help with Fallon. "But I persisted. When he threw things at me and shouted, I left. I searched for the witch who could locate Fallon's missing mate. A witch who could reverse the original spell."

Keena's gaze lifts to the ceiling above us. "You found her." Not a question, but a statement. "The witch."

I nod and continue, "After each search, I would return to Wolf-Haven, to our brother. Most times, his temper had cooled, and he welcomed me back with open arms."

Keenan shifts under my hard stare but meets my gaze with one of his own. He doesn't regret leaving the castle and his position as advisor to the King. "A lot of shifters suffered under his reign."

"He wasn't in his right mind," I defend.

Keenan nods. "I see that now, but I don't regret leaving to help the families, the packs, who declined under his stewardship. Perhaps my anger was misplaced, but it doesn't change the fact that he destroyed lives. I'm sorry it happened at all, that he declined and allowed everyone around him to sink."

It's so sad, Magdalene whispers in my head.

"There's no point in feeling sad about it," I say out loud to both of them. "Only action on our parts can improve the situation for everyone."

I'm not sad for him, or for the people of Wolf-Haven, I'm sad for you. For all the years you spent alone, trying to keep your family together as they continued to scatter, getting further and further apart until you couldn't reach them anymore. Couldn't feel them, no matter how hard you tried.

How the hell can she know all that?

I'm in your head, remember?

She can access my memories?

I can access your memories, she confirms.

I reach out, trying to do the same, pushing deep into her head.

Excitement trickles through me as I feel her, touching her thoughts and stretching my mental muscles. She's laying on her back up in the tower staring up at the canopy above her. Strange, I don't remember attaching lights to the bedframe.

I go back as far as I can into her memories until I come across a scene. Three girls sitting around a fire, laughing, and tossing handfuls of what looks like glitter into the flames. The flames grow high, so high I can almost feel the heat of it in her memory, then a figure steps out of the fire and –

A block slams down in her brain so hard it feels like I've run into a wall. I tentatively reach back into my mate's thoughts and she mentally slaps my hand hard enough that I feel the sting.

A girl's memories are private! And then she walks out of my brain like she's been doing it every day of her life.

God-fucking-dammit! Not only is my mate a witch, but apparently, she's also extremely good at telepathy. Better than most shifters, if I'm being honest.

My brother is looking at me with a combination of amusement and curiosity. I want to snap at him to mind his own business, but he hasn't said anything. "What are you doing here?" I demand instead.

"A couple of reasons," he answers as I lift my beer, drinking deeply. He follows suit and continues once he's downed half the mug. "When Lock was crowned King, he explained that you used an enchanted amulet to make it look like he killed the previous King, then you took Fallon away. The Queen told us you assured her Fallon would no longer pose a threat to Wolf-Haven." Everything Keenan is saying is the truth, so I nod for him to continue. "Lock wants to

reconnect with you, but his royal and diplomatic duties keep him busy. He sent me in his stead.”

“Why?” I demand.

“Why me or why does he want to reconnect?”

Good question. “Both.”

Keenan thinks about his answer, then says, “You were right to keep Fallon close. Lock left to protect Wolf-Haven, and I can’t blame him for that. But Lennox and I were blinded by anger and unwilling to clearly see the situation in the castle. If we’d paid more attention, or attempted to speak with you, we might have been able to keep our family together.” He pauses, gazing into the fire, his shoulders stiff with shame. “I’m sorry you were left to shoulder the burden for so long. I’m here because I asked to come to see for myself that both you and Fallon are well.” He twitches, his eyes shifting to Fallon’s slumbering form. “Or as well as you can be.”

Something inside me loosens and I realize it’s the resentment I’ve spent centuries holding on to. For the first time in a long time, I’m able to see my brother clearly. The man he’s become. The kind of man who admits that he may have taken the wrong path. An honourable man.

I clear my throat and say gruffly, “You did what you had to. There were packs out there fighting each other over scraps of food and land because our brother destroyed them with his single-minded search for his mate. You took care of the lost and hopeless. You and Lennox helped restore order to the packs, minimizing Fallon’s impact.”

In truth, Lennox and Keenan did far more than I. In all my centuries of searching for the one witch who could break the spell, what have I accomplished? I’ve been as single-mindedly obsessed as our sick brother.

As if reading my thoughts, Keenan says, “Perhaps we all could have taken different paths, but we made our choices, and this is where we’ve landed. The only thing to do is continue moving forward and learn from our failings. Today may seem

bleak, but tomorrow we'll take one more step toward restoring order to our people and our own lives."

I absorb his words and feel a sense of peace, though I wonder at his ability to feel such positivity after everything he's been through. "Does this philosophy apply to your mate, brother?" My words are gently spoken, so he knows I'm not challenging him but inquiring about a painful subject.

He nods, though his gaze grows distant, fatigue deepening the lines around his eyes and mouth. "Her most of all," he admits and when he lifts his eyes, I see the deep well of pain that resides there. "With each reincarnation of my mate, I relearn what it feels like to know joy and love again."

"Until she dies," I say grimly.

Of the five of us brothers, sometimes I wonder if the witch's curse affects Keenan the worst. I think I'd rather not meet or know my mate than to have to watch her die over and over. Or grow insane from the loss of my mate, like Fallon has.

Again, my brother can see my thoughts. "You won't know how you feel until you face the situation yourself. If you love strongly enough, you can traverse any barrier, even death."

I like this brother! Magdalene pipes up. *He's handsome and tragic. The whole package!*

You may not like my brother, I snap. *Go to sleep, mate.*

Call me that again and I will, she says cheekily.

Go to sleep, mate, I command, though the heat is gone from my tone, replaced by amusement. Satisfaction slips through me as I feel her drift to sleep, safe in my bed upstairs.

I glare at my brother, annoyed that he's making himself appear attractive to my mate. Pushing myself out of my chair and startling Fallon awake, I jerk my thumb toward the darkest corner with the most spiderwebs in it. "You sleep over there." Then I stalk from the room, Fallon on my heels.

As I settle into my bed, Fallon on the rug at the end of the bed, still in his wolf form, I reach out to my mate. She's

asleep, but when I try to slip through her memories, I find nothing but white fuzz. She's somehow blocking me, even in her sleep. What is my little witch hiding? And will I enjoy getting it out of her? Somehow, I know the answer is yes, I will very much enjoy spending time with her and discovering new facets of her character, which is what terrifies me so much.

I roll onto my side, match my breathing and heart rate to hers and allow myself to fall into slumber.

CHAPTER 13

ANOTHER DAY, ANOTHER TABLE

MAGDALENE

I stare at the door, chewing the inside of my cheek as I think about what to do. Use magic to open the locks and pretend I was able to bust through the door? My wolf captor doesn't seem to understand the varying levels of strength between humans, witches, and shifters. He might believe I could shatter a thick, reinforced wooden door. Of course, if he ever asks me to demonstrate, we'll have a problem.

I could float to the ground outside the tower and say I climbed down again, but he might get wise to my deception, especially if he starts watching the outside of the tower.

It might be easiest to just admit I have all my magic available at the flick of a fingertip, but I don't want him to feel bad that I duped him. This is the type of lie that keeps rolling along because you're well past the time to tell the truth. Being with Rush is even better than I'd hoped, and we're dutifully moving down the path of fated mates at a nice clip. I'd hate to throw a wrench into our courtship over something as insignificant as the truth.

I cringe at what Aunt Bea would think if she'd heard that last thought. Always the ultimate Good Witch, she would consider it the height of poor taste to lie by omission. Sending a silent apology her way, I reach for the door, settling on my first idea. Break the locks with magic and pretend I had a timely bout of strength that quickly evaporated once the door was open.

There's no help for it. It's almost noon and I haven't eaten anything but a handful of berries since Rush took me from my swamp.

Before I can put my plan into action, I hear steps approach and dash away, pretending to fix my appearance in the mirror as Rush unlocks and opens the door. I turn to look at him. He's wearing a pair of dark blue jeans that hug his trim waist and muscular thighs, probably his perfect ass, too. A grey T-shirt

stretches across his muscles, his hard nipples visible through the fabric.

The breath rushes from my lungs and my stomach swirls. I'm exhilarated by the sight of my mate and I want to embrace the feeling, keeping it close to my heart.

He jerks his head toward the open door. "Grub's on." Then he disappears.

I follow him out, my feet tapping a tattoo on the stone steps as I rush after him, my skirt floating around my legs. I'm wearing a pink dress with a rose-coloured ribbon at the waist, a matching ribbon in my hair. I chose running shoes for footwear as there seems to be a lot of hiking involved in hanging out with wolves.

When I reach the main floor, I spot a makeshift table consisting of a plywood board balanced on cinderblocks. My heart sinks as I approach and spot the food. In front of Fallon is another plate of raw chicken and by his expression, I would say he's deeply displeased by the offering. Next to him sits Keenan who has an empty plate in front of him with bits of chips on it.

I allow myself to look at the plate I know is mine and, yup, it's bad. "Is that... a possum?" I jump as its chest moves. It's alive! I look closer. It appears to be playing dead.

When I look at Rush, he looks pleased with himself. "You're going to learn how to eat meat so you can grow bigger and stronger."

I frown at him. I'm not big enough for him?

Before I can correct his assumption, Keenan jumps in. "Brother, I don't think a person can 'learn' how to eat meat. It's a personal choice."

"I like chips!" I say brightly, hoping he has another bag of greasy potatoey goodness hiding somewhere.

Ignoring me, he insists, "Surviving on shrubs alone isn't good enough. She'll die if she doesn't get the right nutrients."

Well, it's a bonus that he knows the concept of nutrition exists.

Again, I open my mouth to interject, and again, one of his brother's interrupts.

"Won't eat this garbage!" Fallon roars, banging his fists on the table and rattling all the dishes.

I take a quick step back in case the table goes the way of yesterday's setup. Out of the corner of my eye I see the possum's hand reaching for the edge of the plate. Apparently, the little guy is done playing possum.

"All I'm saying is maybe you should ask her what she eats. She's what?" Keenan eyes me. "A hundred years old or something? She's survived this long; she probably knows how to feed herself. And from the looks of her, I'd say she eats very well."

"I will have you know I'm a very youthful seventy-two!" I gasp as I realize what else he said. "Did you just call me fat?" I round on Rush. "I no longer like this brother. Can we throw him out of our tower now?"

Rush looks pleased with my idea, but before he can do as I ask, Fallon reaches his breaking point. Slamming his fists down into the makeshift table, he shatters the wood. Like yesterday, the plates fly everywhere. The possum hits the floor and scrambles to its feet, skittering away from the chaos as fast as its legs can carry it.

I reach for the critter, intent on rescuing it, but the movement catches Fallon's eye and he lets out a hungry roar, lunging for it. The room becomes a blur of motion as Rush picks me up and flings us both out of Fallon's path. Keenan, whose chair had been thrown backward picks himself off the floor, dusting debris from his shirt.

As I watch, Fallon morphs from man to wolf, his T-shirt splitting at the seams and flying in all directions as he chases the possum around the base of the tower.

"Look, he's hunting!" I grin as Fallon corners the possum, his ridged spine visible through his shrunken skin. "He can

finally eat.”

And he does. Within seconds the poor possum is no more. As Fallon settles into a corner, licking his paws, he seems calmer. Satisfied.

Rush looks at the broken table grimly and my heart sinks as I feel his despair. I climb into his head as though I’ve been doing it my whole life, searching for the source of his sadness. He’s happy for Fallon’s moment of normalcy, but he despairs that Fallon will ever be returned to his former glory. It’s been two hundred years of this.

As I look into his memories of his brother, I see him trying to help Fallon hunt. It goes so badly that a human ends up dead and for the safety of all shifters, Rush swears never to allow his brother the freedom to hunt again. I feel the toll of taking care of his brother, the stress of knowing he’s failing and not knowing how to fix it.

As my sadness at his memories grows, he realizes where I’m at and gently pushes me out of his head. “Don’t do that,” he says sternly, his eyes clinging to mine. “You can’t change it.”

I blink away the tears that spring to my eyes. “I can help.”

He shakes his head. “You can’t.”

I slide my hand into his and squeeze. “I can try to find Lyra.”

He freezes and I feel Keenan’s eyes on my back. Fallon lifts his head and watches me steadily.

“You said you’ve tried and failed.” Despite his words, there’s hope in his voice.

“I’ve tried a few things, but not everything,” I admit. “Lyra lived more than a hundred years before I was born. Though I know of her legacy, I didn’t know her. There was no incentive to put my all into searching for her. It was more like a fun lark when I was bored. Most witches in my family go through that phase. It’s a challenge to see if our magic is strong enough to locate her.” I shrug, spreading my hands wide. “So far, we’ve all failed, but if I put my mind to it, I might be able to do it.”

We stare at each other for a few minutes. I hope I'm not overselling my abilities. Yes, I come from a powerful witch family, but I'm a Good Witch. The least powerful of our kind. We don't study dark magic, or interdimensional magic, we improve the lives of others if we can.

"So... are we going to try to find Lyra?" I ask tentatively.

"You should leave the dead to their rest," Keenan says, shaking his head.

I turn and point my finger at him. "Nobody asked you."

Rush chuckles and Keenan holds his hands up. "Alright, do what you gotta do. I need to get back."

"Wolf-Haven?" Rush asks.

Keenan shakes his head. "Human settlement on the West Coast. Need to check on my mate."

I clap my hands. "Oh, isn't mating exciting? Congratulations!" I side-eye my mate for his reaction and the sadness on his face has me dropping my hands.

"Thanks," Keenan mumbles, then says to Rush. "You're always welcome in Wolf-Haven. Safe passage has been established for you, and Lock is expecting a visit." His eyes shift to me. "From both of you."

Rush snorts. "A royal summons?"

"Something like that."

"Oh, I want to see the castle!"

Rush gives me a look that says we're not going, but I know we will. I can feel it in my magical bones.

After Keenan leaves, I say to Rush, "I can't call Great Aunt Lyra yet. There are a few things I need first. You'll have to go without me so I can prepare the incantation." I list a few common items easily found in any swamp: eye of newt, grandfather's beard, nightshade, bark of cypress, and sphagnum. Along with the list, I give him instruction on their collection. "Because of course you can't peel the bark of cypress without speaking words of thanks to the tree, and

nightshade can only be harvested during the hours between midnight and two strokes past. Did you get all that?"

"I... don't..."

I go up on my toes and give him a smacking kiss. "Perfect! We'll be here waiting for you when you get back."

He frowns. "I should lock you up before I go."

I glance toward Fallon. "Does that mean you have to lock him up, too?"

Rush nods.

"Please don't," I say, touching his arm and gazing up at him. "Your brother has had enough to deal with, he shouldn't be locked away. I can handle him, I promise."

Rush shakes his head. "He's too violent. What if he throws another table and you can't get out of the way in time? He could kill you."

My lips twitch and I avoid the urge to remind him that there are no more tables to throw. "He won't hurt me," I assure him, waving my hand toward Fallon, who's taking a well-timed nap. "He's not hungry anymore and he likes me."

"How do you know he likes you?"

"What's not to like?"

Rush chuckles, then says, "Alright, but I'm locking you both in this tower." He pauses, then adds gruffly, "For your safety."

Yes! I'm not a prisoner anymore!

"You are," he insists.

Damn it, I forgot he can see into my head now. I'll have to be careful with those stray thoughts. "Maybe I can be your girlfriend instead of your prisoner."

I laugh as he stalks through the tower door, which he must've replaced this morning while I was sleeping, closing and locking it behind him.

Now that I got him out of the tower, I have work to do. I race up the tower steps to my room, flinging the door open and rushing to the mirror. Without hesitation, I summon the one witch I know can help me locate Lyra.

Lilith Guardian Witch, my mother.

CHAPTER 14

EYE OF NEWT

MAGDALENE

I pace the room as I wait for my mother to respond to my summons. She's a very important witch and not to be bothered by trivial matters, so I try to choose my moments.

I'm mid-pace when the mirror starts glowing and swirling with silver light. I watch in eager anticipation as my mother steps through. She's wearing a long dark purple robe gaping open over a smart business suit with a plunging neckline. Her long blond hair falls in glossy spirals around her shoulders.

When she spots me, a grin stretches her lips and she rushes toward me, her arms held out. Tears spark in my eyes as I fling myself into my mother's warm embrace.

She holds me for what feels like ages, but I don't want the hug to end. We haven't seen each other in eleven years and I've missed her. The tightness of her squeeze tells me she's missed me too.

She backs up enough to grasp my face between her perfectly manicured hands. "My beautiful girl, how are you?"

"I'm great, Mom." I invite her to sit with me on the bed. "I'm spending time with my mate."

"Beatrice told me you were here." She shakes her head, though her expression remains serene. "I must admit, having once met your shifter mate face-to-face, I felt some trepidation about your plan. But you look happy and healthy and you're doing what you were built to do; following the natural order."

I nod and fill her in on everything that has happened since Rush and I got together. I leave out the part where he nearly killed me with a kiss and a few of the sexier details of our time together.

"So, you need to figure out how to find Lyra?" Lilith asks, standing and walking to the window before pacing back to the

bed. “I’ll see what I can do to aid you. Luckily, my evening is free. You have my full attention for the next few hours.”

This is the thing I love most about my mom. She may be one of the most powerful witches alive, but she’s never acted like a Good Witch isn’t just as capable as a Guardian Witch. She could easily say ‘I couldn’t do it, so what makes you think you can?’. Instead, she sets herself on a course to do anything she can to help. And it’s not just because I’m her daughter; she’s this way with everyone.

She paces my room, muttering to herself, occasionally turning to ask a question. “Do you have access to a goat?” I shake my head, and she continues pacing, her forehead wrinkled in concentration as she journeys in circles about the room, me sitting cross-legged on the bed watching her. “If a summoning spell was going to work, we would’ve conjured her centuries ago. You’ll have to go deeper, cross the threshold into the lesser-known spells.”

I shiver in anticipation as I listen. She’s talking about the kind of magic that crosses dimensions. Dark magic, which is usually practiced by Rage Witches, but not exclusively. Good Witches are the least likely to use this kind of magic, but with my mother’s help, it shouldn’t be a problem.

Finally, she turns to me. “I’ll be back. While I’m gone, you can prepare your spell bag.” She lists off several ingredients and I mentally note all of them, nodding when she finishes. I smile to myself when she mentions the bark of cypress. So, my instructions to Rush aren’t entirely useless. “I’ll be back in an hour with the correct spell.”

“Thank you, Mom. I couldn’t do this without you.”

She hugs me briefly before stepping toward the mirror. “Of course you could. It would just take longer and you might accidentally summon a few demons in the process.”

I laugh as she disappears, then hop to my feet, reaching for my spell bag, which, like all witches, goes everywhere with me. Mine is a leather pouch with a magenta ribbon drawstring and a tiny orange and brown wolf stitched into the side. I put it

there the day after my 16th birthday, when I discovered who my future mate was.

Skipping down the steps of the tower, I discover that Fallon, still in his wolf form, has moved to the hearth in front of the fire. He's asleep, sprawled out on his back, his four paws flopping in the air, his tongue hanging out the side of his mouth. I resist the urge to pet his belly. At best, it'll wake him up and then I'll have to deal with him. At worst, I could lose an arm. Wolves are not cute when they're all teeth and rage.

I hum to myself as I flit about the tower, grabbing some of the common ingredients I'll need for my mother's spell. Spiderwebs, hearth soot, peppercorns, and hair of the dog. I creep toward a sleeping Fallon, snatching a couple of hairs from his tail. I leap back as he wakes up and jumps to his feet with a growl, sniffing at his tail.

When he settles back down, I place all the ingredients in my spell bag where they'll steep in magical vibes until my mother arrives back at the tower.

I settle into the chair next to the fire, Fallon at my feet and enjoy the warmth while I wait.

I can get used to hanging out with wolf shifters. Even Fallon is much less scary than the legends had led me to believe. I mean, I know he's probably capable of tearing out my throat if he puts his mind to it, but he seems so sad and lost.

I genuinely want to help him, and I think Rush is right, the best way to do that is to start at the beginning. Find out where Fallon's mate went after her spell rebounded.

Sadly, she's probably dead. Most of her ancestors believe she is, but there are still rumours that she might be out there somewhere. Maybe in a different realm or plane of existence. Who knows, but I'm going to try my best to find out. Once we solve Fallon's problem, Rush and I can get down to the business of falling in love.

My eyes grow heavy and I allow them to close, the warmth of the fire next to me and Fallon at my feet lulling me into

slumber. Before I know it, I'm being shaken awake. I look up blearily and straighten when I see my mother hovering over me. I glance down at Fallon but he's still sleeping.

"Did you find what you need?" I whisper.

She nods. "You?"

"Uh huh, it was all here in the tower." Most spells call for common ingredients that can be easily found.

We spend the next few minutes going over the incantations I'll need to try. Lilith travelled to the Shadow Realm and mined the Guardian Witch's network for information, calling in a few favours and creating a couple of designer spells for me to try. One is meant to raise the dead, so we can find out once and for all if my Great Aunt was killed by her own spell. The second incantation is supposed to work across time and space to create a portal where entities can speak and interact. It's a long shot, but other greater witches have tried most available spells. This is what's left.

Lilith stares at Fallon, crouching next to him, her hand hovering over his head, but not touching. "Is this the once great King of Wolf-Haven?" she whispers, awe in her voice. "He's over seven hundred years old."

I nod.

"Such a pity." She straightens and runs her hands down the length of her pantsuit, smoothing out the wrinkles. "Hopefully you can help him." She places her hand on my shoulder and squeezes. "You are a very Good Witch, my daughter. Doing your duty by helping others. I'm proud of you."

Technically, I'm helping myself by helping others in this instance, but I still bask in the glow of Lilith's rare praise. Spells and incantations come so easily to her that sometimes she forgets it's actual work for the rest of us.

"I'll do my best by him," I assure her and stand, adding regretfully, "You should leave before Rush comes back. He doesn't know his magic suppressing collar doesn't work."

Lilith snorts and shakes her head. "Whoever invented those disgraceful things should have to spend eternity cleaning

a swamp troll's toilet.”

I escort my mother to the top of the tower where she turns to look me over once more, pride and longing in her gaze. I sense she wants to tell me something, but I already know what it is because this is the way we feel every time we see each other. It's never enough, but the time that we do have is filled with love and happiness at seeing each other.

I hug her hard. “We'll see each other again soon.”

She squeezes me back and blinks away her tears. “Let's make it sooner next time. Eleven years is too long.”

I nod into her shoulder and then step away. She waves her arm at the mirror and the silver smoke swirls until it creates a path for her to step through. She smiles as she disappears from sight.

“I love you, Mom.” But she's gone.

I head back downstairs and find Rush in the common room, placing the supplies he gathered on top of a box, the only surface left unbroken in the room. “Hope I got everything you need,” he says gruffly.

I laugh as he digs a toad out of his pocket and drops it onto the box. It immediately tries to hop away. I grab it and hold it in the cage of my fingers, peeking at the terrified creature. “I don't remember asking for one of these.”

“Eye of newt,” Rush grunts.

I stare into the frog's eyes. It blinks hopefully. Nope. I refuse to remove its eyes. Good thing the eye of newt was just busy work to get Rush out of the tower so I could speak with my mother.

“Uh, we'll save the eye of newt for later.” I set the frog down and it immediately jumps off the box and heads in the opposite direction of its captors. Picking up the bark of cypress, I hold it to my nose, inhaling the fragrant tree scent before shoving it into my spell bag. My fingers tingle with the magic swirling within.

“So, uh, where do you want to do this?” Rush asks, hands in his pocket.

I sense his nervousness and I think I understand. He’s spent centuries hating witches and distrusting our magic. It must be uncomfortable for him to place his trust and the possible health and happiness of his favourite brother in a witch’s hands. But he’s seen into my head, he knows my intentions as well as he knows his own.

I touch his arm and smile up at him. “I got this.” Even though it’s bullshit, I use a reassuring tone. This magic is beyond anything I’ve tried before. I could end up totally screwing it up and transporting myself to an alternate dimension. Luckily, my mom is a Guardian Witch and her job is to restore the natural order if a witch accidentally messes up.

Glancing out the window, I say, “It’s still early, we’ll have to wait a few hours before I attempt to locate Lyra.”

He looks toward the window. “You can’t cast spells during daylight?”

I laugh. “Don’t be silly. I can cast spells whenever I like. What I can’t do is cast spells on a seriously empty stomach and if I don’t get something substantial to eat soon, I’m going to be useless. Less than useless. Dead.”

He looks alarmed for a moment, then I feel him do an internal scan of my body to reassure himself I am not in fact imminently about to die. “Don’t be dramatic,” he growls. I want to tell him that eating one small stick and a couple of berries every few days will eventually lead to death, and there’s nothing dramatic about that. But in my experience, this shifter does better with positive reinforcement.

I stroke my hand down his arm, setting his hair on end and sending a shudder of pleasure through his big body. “You’ve been doing such a good job of providing for me, but most witches have a very specific diet and we can get sick if we don’t eat properly.” Not entirely true, but now’s not the time to explain food groups to my mostly meat eating soon-to-be-fiancé.

He looks worried. “What do you need?”

“Things you probably won’t recognize.”

He nods. “We’ll go hunting then. You can search for your plants or whatever you eat.”

I glance toward Fallon. “Let’s take him. He could use the fresh air and exercise. A squirrel or two won’t hurt him either.”

“Absolutely not,” Rush says, with a shake of his head. “He’s too dangerous.”

Looking at the slumbering wolf, it’s hard to imagine he can do much damage, but I know better than to underestimate a potentially dangerous creature. If Rush would allow me my magic, I could easily keep Fallon in check, but I don’t want to push Rush too far.

“Okay, we’ll leave him here,” I agree. “We’ll need to hurry though.”

“Why?” Rush asks, shedding his shirt and tossing it aside.

I forget what we were talking about for a moment as he reaches for the buttons on his jeans. My mouth goes dry, then waters as my gaze traces the trail of hair disappearing into his unbuttoned jeans.

He catches my eye and lifts a brow at me, amusement in his gaze.

Heat suffuses my face and I glance away as he shucks the rest of the clothes, tossing them aside. “I told you,” I finally answer his question. “We need to hurry because I’m starving.”

He laughs as he transforms into a wolf and heads for the door, me trailing after him.

CHAPTER 15

LYRA GOOD WITCH

MAGDALENE

I watch Rush in amusement as he carefully dips his spoon into the bowl of cattail, water chestnut, watercress, and spinach soup, flavoured with basil, garlic and chives. A dead gopher sits next to his plate as his backup meal. After his first sip, his expression changes from suspicious to pleasantly surprised.

“It’s good,” he announces, scooping more of the liquid into his mouth and ignoring the carcass at his elbow.

Fallon, who sits on my other side, watches his brother’s reaction. When Rush doesn’t spit it out, Fallon lowers his head and sniffs the bowl before sticking his tongue in it. I giggle as he burns it and sits up straight in his seat with an angry hissing sound.

“It’s hot,” I explain to him, wondering when he last ate a hot meal. “You eat it like this.” I pick up my spoon and dip it into my bowl, lifting it to my lips and blowing before tipping it into my mouth. I moan in satisfaction because it really is delicious and I’m hoping if Fallon thinks I’m enjoying it, he’ll try again. Perhaps if he gets more nutritious foods into his body, he might regain some of his former glory.

I feel Rush’s bolt of jealousy as his brother stares at my mouth, then copies me, blowing on his soup and spraying droplets across the makeshift table, a door that Rush removed from the kitchen pantry and set on top of cinderblocks. Fallon shoves the spoon into his mouth and swallows. He pauses, as if deciding what to do next, then sets about devouring the rest of his bowl in messy snapping bites. Though he’s in his human form, he eats like a wolf.

We eat in silence until every drop in every bowl is gone.

“See,” I say to Rush with a grin. “Vegetarian isn’t so bad.”

He grunts his agreement, but adds, “Some deer meat would’ve made it better.”

I wrinkle my nose in disagreement, then realize where Fallon's gaze has landed. "Uh, Rush, you might want to..."

But before I can finish the sentence, Fallon is across the table and snatching up the dead gopher. He shifts to his wolf form and is devouring the rodent while standing on the table.

"Fuck," I hear Rush mutter through my laughter.

I gather up the bowls and spoons, which are remarkably unscathed from Fallon's antics and take them to the kitchen. I glance through the door to where Rush is trying to coax his brother off the table.

"Get your dirty paws off the furniture, you mongrel."

Deciding he's distracted enough, I cast a quick cleaning spell. The bowls scrub themselves clean, dry themselves off and put themselves away.

The room is empty when I re-enter it, but only for a moment. Rush comes out of Fallon's bedroom and collapses into a chair, running his hands over his tired face. "I convinced him to take a nap in his room."

I sit in the chair opposite him and offer a sympathetic look. "It's not easy taking care of him, is it?"

Rush's brown eyes glow with warmth. "Seems easier with you around."

"Is that a compliment, Sir Wolf?"

"Sir Wolf?" he raises an eyebrow and chuckles. "Formal, but I like it. And yes, it is. I appreciate your willingness to help Fallon after everything I've done to you." The sorrow in his words pierces my heart and I long to tell him he's done nothing to me I didn't want.

He's been stalking me for seven decades, but from the moment I realized who my mate was, I've been stalking him right back. Watching him through my crystal ball and mooning over the handsome lone wolf. Learning about him and his kind, preparing for our future mating.

His anger and despair led him to hunt witches, and maybe I should hate him for the lives he's taken, but I understand his

journey because I'm a part of him. I've known who he is and what drives him for so long now, that any anger I might have harboured at his actions against my kind has long since dissipated.

"Fallon made a mistake in the way he wooed my aunt, but I don't think he's bad," I say quietly, gazing at the fire.

"You don't know what he's done. He's terrorized so many people, allowed an entire nation of shifters to suffer."

"He's not in his right mind and hasn't been for a long time."

Rush shakes his head. "It's kind of you to say, but he was drifting into this before Lyra's spell was cast. He should never have taken the mantle of King after the war. It should've gone to Lock, who's more thoughtful and measured."

"That was seven hundred years ago," I protest. "None of you could have known what he would turn into."

Rush lifts his eyes to meet mine. "Can you predict the future, Magdalene?"

A shiver goes through me as his deep voice caresses the syllables of my name. My voice is breathless when I answer, "Only an Oracle can know the future."

"You're not an Oracle?"

I laugh, then remember how little he knows about witches and turn it into a cough. "Uh no, Oracles are some of the most powerful beings alive. They may have once been witches, or an early version of what we've become, but they're so ancient that they've moved beyond our understanding. They're solitary creatures who created the Shadow Realm as their home. Of course, many of our Guardian Witches now live in the Shadow Realm with them and the Warrior Witches come and go. It's sort of a home base for our kind."

He looks baffled, but nods. Then shakes his head and stares at me, his lip lifting in amusement. "There's a lot out there I don't know, isn't there?"

This is why I love my lone wolf. I've been watching him for decades, tracking his movements, spying on his interactions. Though he has the confidence of any other male shifter, he's more thoughtful than the average. More intelligent and introspective. He can admit that there are things going on in our world and beyond that he might not comprehend.

"Should we try to contact Aunt Lyra now?" I ask.

"Aunt Lyra?" he shakes his head. "Having met the lady in question, I have trouble seeing her as an aunt type."

I nod soberly. "She was angry at Fallon's handling of their mating."

"Yes, very," he agrees. "She despised everything about him and wasn't shy in saying so. She thought him uncouth, rude, demanding, misogynistic, and violent. She wasn't wrong, but there were other sides to my brother she didn't see. She could have brought out his softer side, helped him see the way he treated the people around him."

"Was it her job to soften him?" I ask pointedly, frowning at him.

"It was her job to follow the natural order and accept her fated mate. Instead, she rejected him in front of a castle full of his followers, then cast a spell that crippled my family for the next two centuries."

I cross my arms over my chest. "I'm not going to reach out to her if all you're going to do is yell at her for something that happened two hundred years ago."

"I'm not going to yell at her," he defends.

"But you're still holding onto all this anger and resentment!" I wave my hand around the room. "You blame her for bringing Fallon low and leaving you to pick up the pieces of a shattered family."

"I..." he starts angrily, then a thoughtful look crosses his features, and he collapses back into his chair. "I suppose I do," he admits, lifting pleading eyes to mine. "I've been angry for so long that I don't really know how to be any other way."

His desire for me to understand touches me and I reach across the space separating us, linking my fingers with his and easing into his head through our mating bond, calming the swirling emotion within. “We’ll figure it out together.” I squeeze his hand, then look toward the flames. “I’ll call her, but if she does show up, please be kind. She won’t help if you go on the attack.”

“You’re right,” he admits. “Go ahead, I’ll behave.”

I grin at him. “Because you’re a good boy.”

He raises an eyebrow at me. “I hope that’s out of your system, because if you dare to call me a good boy again, I’ll take my annoyance out on your bottom.”

A giggle slips past my lips before I can clamp them shut. Damn it, a seventy-two-year-old woman should not be giggling like a schoolgirl over a racy comment.

“Uh, I’ll need to lose the...” I point at the collar. My stomach somersaults as he pulls a small key from his pocket and reaches for my neck, his fingers brushing my skin as he unlocks the clasp. Pulling the collar from my neck, he tosses it aside.

I slip from my chair to kneel on the hearth next to the fire. Rolling my shoulders back, I tip my head from side to side, loosening the muscles as I prepare to cast a difficult spell. I reach for my spell bag, hefting it in my hand. It feels ready; the ingredients having steeped for long enough.

I reach in and pinch the contents between my thumb and forefinger, tossing them into the fire. When the blaze grows higher, throwing off enough heat to push me back a few inches, I speak the incantation used to summon the spirits of the dead:

“To find a spirit lost and stray,

We must summon it to come our way.

With candles and incantation spoke,

We call upon the ghostly folk.

*Lyra, spirit divine,
Come to us, make your presence shine.
Lyra, ethereal being,
Come to us, make your spirit seen.”*

As we wait, I glance at Rush out of the corner of my eye. His eyes are fixed on me and I can sense his conflicting emotions. He’s spent so long hating witches that it seems wrong for him to be in awe of his mate, but he is. I can feel his desire to shout to the world that his mate is the most beautiful, powerful witch on the planet. It’s not true but seeing myself as he sees me is an ego boost that has me dipping my head to hide my grin.

Suddenly, the heat of the fire flares out and I scramble backwards. Rush moves so fast he catches me before I can fall on my butt. He pulls me to my feet and we both watch eagerly as the flames spit and sizzle, then one foot emerges from out of the fire, then another.

Disappointment is uppermost as I inspect the ghostly woman floating in front of the hearth and looking around curiously.

“Did someone call me?” she asks, her eyes landing on us and lighting up. “Oh curious! Look at you!”

Look at us? Look at the ghost floating above us, clapping her hands as she takes in the tower, her face lighting up in excitement.

“Not her,” Rush mutters from behind me.

“Umm, no, not her,” I say, stepping closer to the apparition. “I’m terribly sorry, but we were trying to summon someone else. My aunt, Lyra Guardian Witch. Have you seen her?”

“Ah, I see what’s ‘appened,” the lady says knowingly. “I’m Lyra Good Witch. Of course, I know who your aunt is. Everyone who lived during her times did. Such a powerful

witch with a bright future ahead of her until that beastly wolf took her and ruined her.”

Rush growls and I elbow him in the chest, making him cough.

“You know her then? Is she living among the deceased? Would you mind summoning her for us?”

Lyra Good Witch shakes her head. “I’m sorry, young witch, but no, she don’t live among the spirits. I certainly would’ve heard if she was. She’s too infamous to go unnoticed.”

“Oh.” I can’t help but be disappointed.

“Aren’t you glad she’s not dead?” Rush asks.

Lyra gives him a look and shakes her head. “There’s much worse places to be than dead, young man.”

I snort laugh then cover my mouth. Rush is over seven hundred years old, not exactly a young man, but he’s looking at the new witch with a softer expression.

“Sorry I can’t be more ‘elp,” she says, then glances around. “Mind if I stay’s a bit? It’s been a while since I’ve spent time with the living.”

“Of course,” I say, waving her away from the hearth.

She gives her dress a shake, sending up puffs of smoke as she floats out of the fire and into the room. I grab Rush’s arm to draw his attention as he watches Lyra with astonishment.

“No time for it, you need to focus. The next spell takes a lot of energy and I’m not sure I’ll be able to remain conscious until the end. I need you to keep me upright with spell bag in my hand.”

His brows lower into a fierce frown. “No spell then. We’ll wait until we can find one that’s safe.”

I want to ask him what he thought would happen when he kidnapped a Good Witch, the least powerful of our kind, but bite my tongue. He really is trying to be a good boy.

A hand lands sharply on my butt, sending a stinging zing of pleasure through me. I gasp and jump as he leans in with a wink and says, “Next time will be harder, bad girl.”

Oh right, he can crawl inside my head any time he wants and listen to my thoughts.

My face lights up with the heat of a blush as I step away from the hand still caressing my ass and reach into my spell bag. This next spell is much harder than anything I’ve done before. It reaches through dimensions, across time and space, which is difficult enough as it is without the added complication of searching for a specific person. It will take all my concentration.

“I can handle it,” I assure Rush who looks skeptical.

“I don’t like that you could lose consciousness.”

I try not to sigh too loudly at his protectiveness. “Look Rush, you brought me here to find Lyra, and that’s what I’m trying to do.”

“The Guardian Witch, not the Good Witch,” our floating friend clarifies from the corner where she’s examining a lightbulb.

“Yes, the Guardian Witch,” I repeat.

Rush shakes his head, his gaze cloudy with indecision. “I know why I brought you here,” he says gruffly. “But...” he can’t bring himself to finish the sentence. Things have changed for him. His focus is moving away from helping Fallon and toward the inevitable pull of our mating bond, which makes him feel guilty for losing sight of his objective.

I reach up to touch his shoulder. “Do you trust me to help you?”

“Yes.”

Pleasure fills me at his quick answer. An answer that would have been much different two days ago. “Then trust me to find Lyra for you.”

We stare at each other, the ever-present heat between us snapping and sizzling, the room narrowing to a pinpoint. I can

see every thought as it flies through his head. He's making no effort to hide them from me. His greatest fear is that something will happen to me while I'm searching for Lyra, and it'll be his fault for bringing me here.

“Alright, let's do it,” he finally agrees, his voice grim.

CHAPTER 16

SUMMONED

RUSH

Trepidation slides through me as Magdalene reaches into her spell bag, her fingers slipping inside and staying. A sense of calm comes over her and her eyelids droop as her mouth moves. She's silently speaking the incantation meant to call up her aunt.

I should be anxiously watching the fire, desperate to set eyes on the woman who destroyed my family, the woman who might be able to restore our peace. But I'm not. Instead, I can't tear my gaze from my mate. Yes, I've accepted that Magdalene is my mate. It's the only way to explain the pull between us... unless... but no, I refuse to allow the thought. She's incapable of casting a spell that would befuddle me.

Or is she incapable? I've only known her for two days. Every word out of her mouth could be a lie.

My wolf is suspiciously silent as he listens to my musings. It's as though he's content to let me muddle through these tortured thoughts alone.

Regardless, if her intentions are evil, I'm helplessly drawn to protect her. I'm a shifter and every instinct is telling me this woman is my mate. My future. If there's one thing universal among wolf shifters, it's that we'll protect our mates at the expense of everything else.

I'm standing at her back. As the spell progresses, energy gradually picks up and swirls around her, encompassing and cocooning her body. This spell differs from the last one she used. This one is taking more time and far more energy. Her vitality drains from her, though she seems unaware, caught in the trance of her own spell.

Her lips continue to move, but her eyes are open, her crystal gaze on something I can't see, her body frozen in place.

I shuffle closer to her, sheltering her body with mine. I lift my hand but pause. Will I interrupt her spell, hurt her maybe, if I touch her? Her scent floats to me and I smell the stress her

body is under. I decide I don't care if I interrupt the spell, she needs my strength.

I grasp her shoulder, curving my hand around the fragile bones. Something envelops me, hitting me with the force of a hurricane wind. If I was human, it would've knocked me onto my ass. As it is, I have to dig my claws into her shoulder to hang on.

Magdalene immediately seizes the energy I'm offering, though not consciously. Like ropes whipping around my body, the energy encompassing the witch swirls outward to include me. I'm trapped in the spell with the witch, her voice getting louder as she repeats the words of her incantation:

*“Lyra, who is lost in shadows deep,
Where darkness and mystery doth creep,
Come forth, let the light guide your way,
And banish the darkness of night's dismay.
Lyra, oh where did you go?
The world misses your heart's glow.
Disappeared into the night,
But now it's time to reappear in sight.”*

The force of the magic astounds me. I'm using every ounce of strength I have to keep from being blown off my feet, but my mate seizes it, pushing it into her spell and reaching into the other dimensions, going further.

I desperately cling to her mind as it transforms. I've never experienced anything like it before. It's like a normal human brain suddenly lit up like a Christmas tree. New neural paths are being created and discarded at light speed.

Even with the extra strength I've given her, Magdalene begins to tire, her body leaning into mine, pulling more strength, which I willingly give until I'm driven to my knees with her in my arms.

My fear for my mate grows with each second that passes. Though I'm inside her head, her brain has moved beyond my ability to see her thoughts. Her body is weakening and about to become critical. I feel the rapid fluttering of her heart and her breaths are coming out in laboured gasps.

As I kneel on the ground, she collapses against me, half-conscious. I hold her in my arms, gazing down at her face. She stares through glassy eyes, her lips moving as she mumbles the same words over and over.

Panic grips me as I sense the life slipping from her. I hold her tighter, dipping my head to her chest to reassure myself that her heart is still beating.

Never again. I will never again allow her to cast a spell.

I've never seen anything like this and I never want to again.

Whatever storm she's whipped up, it's sapping her strength, killing her, and there's nothing I can do to stop it. The two of us are caught up in a freak hurricane.

Then everything stops. The world goes eerily silent and time seems to slow as the fire sputters, then sparks before exploding into white flames. The heat is so intense I lift my arm to protect Magdalene's face as it washes over us. Her lips move, and I dip my head to listen.

"Lyra."

I lift my gaze in time to watch a second woman step out from my fireplace. Though she's awash in white light, I would recognize her anywhere. Lyra Guardian Witch.

She looks around in confusion, moving slowly as if walking through water. The light around her body fractures, splitting her into shafts of vertical lines until she stops moving. Finally, her frowning gaze lands on me, then drops to the woman in my arms.

The light is like a broken mirror, fracturing her image. She drops to her knees and reaches for Magdalene. Her expression grows concerned and her lips move.

Seconds later, after she finishes speaking, her words reach my ears. “Magdalene Good Witch... my niece?”

I nod and open my mouth to speak, but nothing comes out. I’m... nervous. I’m not sure what I expected when I demanded Magdalene summon this witch, but this certainly isn’t it. Something’s not right. She’s not corporeal like me and Magdalene, yet she’s not ghostly either, like Lyra Good Witch, who hovers a safe distance from us.

Finally, I say, “She summoned you.”

A slight smile curves her lips and her gaze meets mine. “I didn’t think it was you who summoned me.” Then her gaze changes, first becoming more speculative, then frightened as recognition dawns. “I know you.”

I nod, shame trickling through me as I reassure her. “I am brother to your... to Fallon Wolven-North, but I promise, I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Then what do you want?” she demands, still tense, her gaze sweeping the room.

Words tangle in my throat. I wanted her summoned so I could demand she lift her spell. After two hundred years of living a cursed existence, I finally have what I need to end mine and my brothers’ suffering. Yet, I can’t speak the words.

Lyra’s original spell involves our mates. My brother Lock’s mate was hunted and injured because of the spell. Luckily, they’ve broken the spell and are now living a happy life together. But Keenan suffers as he watches his mate die and reincarnate over and over.

I’ve found my mate. I don’t know what I’m going to do about her, but I do know I have no desire to see her hurt. It would kill me if something happened to Magdalene.

“I want you to help her... if you can.” Looking down at Magdalene, I realize it’s the truth. I wanted her to summon Lyra, but now that the witch is here, all I want is for Magdalene to look up at me with her jewel-like eyes and grin at me mischievously as she plans new ways to baffle me. “Please,” I beg. “She’s weak.”

Lyra's suspicion melts and her gaze softens as she looks at her great-great niece. "You care about her, don't you?" Her voice echoes, as though travelling through a chamber.

"She's my mate," I admit.

"Yet... you treat her well?"

Shame fills me as I think of all the things I've done to Magdalene. I blew up her house, kidnapped her, forced her to march through a swamp, and nearly kissed her to death. I've shouted at her, handled her roughly and tried to force her to eat a possum.

"I want the chance to treat her well," I admit, trying to infuse my voice with sincerity. "Make her better and I'll treat her like a queen."

Lyra smiles and for the first time, I understand what my brother saw when he was driven mad by her resistance. Lyra is a plain woman, not beautiful. But when her eyes soften, when she smiles, it's like basking in the glow of an angel. I can see how Fallon would have done anything to get her to love him.

"Rest, water, and a good meal."

"What?"

"That's how you cure your witch." She winks at me. "Spells of the magnitude she cast are extremely difficult. She's simply taking a nap after her ordeal."

I look down at Magdalene's pale face. "She's sleeping?"

"Yes." Lyra moves to stand, her expression growing serious. "Now, tell me why my niece summoned me so we can get on with this business. I put my supper on to boil before you so abruptly brought me here."

"You're alive?" I ask incredulously, having assumed she was a spirit and I was talking to her apparition.

"Yes, though I couldn't tell you where or in what form I exist," she says, a wealth of loneliness leaking through her words. "After I... after I cursed your brother, something happened. I was taken by the magic and forced into another realm. I've been living there ever since."

“The curse.” I seize on her words. “That’s why we brought you back.”

She takes a quick step back, her face creasing in worry. “You want me to lift the curse?”

I nod. “Yes.”

“I can’t.”

Frustration wells up, but I promised Magdalene I wouldn’t yell at her ancestor, so I take a breath and ask, “Why not?”

She blinks and tears brighten eyes. “You don’t understand. I had to bind him. If I hadn’t, he would have... he would have...”

She doesn’t need to finish because I know already. I’ve seen forced matings. Centuries ago, they were considered an acceptable way to bring a reluctant mate under control. Though they’re less common now, they do still occur. Shifters respect the mating call more than a mate’s right to choose.

Still, Lyra didn’t deserve what Fallon did to her. “I’m sorry my brother was such a brute, but you didn’t just curse him. It hit all of us brothers and has caused great misery for some of our mates.”

Horror crosses her face. “Oh! I didn’t mean for that to happen. I’m so sorry.”

“That’s why I need you to reverse the spell.”

She shakes her head, her curtain of long, dark hair swaying through the fractured layers surrounding her. “Even if I could —”

Before she can finish her sentence, a roar rips through the room. Swinging my head around, I spot Fallon, still in his human form, his disbelieving eyes on Lyra. He’s bare-chested, wearing only a pair of low-riding leather trousers. His ribs show through his skin as his chest heaves and his breaths come out in harsh grunts.

“Oh god,” Lyra whispers, terror twisting her features. “I have to go. Tell Magdalene I said—”

But before she can finish, Fallon lets out another roar that echoes ferociously through the tower, then lunges for his lost mate, his body transforming in midair as he leaps toward her. Still holding Magdalene protectively in my arms, I push myself off the floor and step in front of Lyra, exposing my back to the rampaging wolf.

“I’m sorry,” Lyra whispers, a silvery teardrop shining a path down her face. “I wish I could help you.”

“Please, don’t go.”

She shakes her head and steps back into the fire, her gaze sad as she fades from our existence and back into her own.

Fallon slams into my back, nearly toppling me, but I’m the stronger wolf and I have good incentive not to fall over. If I do, I might crush Magdalene who still slumbers peacefully in my arms.

I set her gently in the chair next to the fire and turn a glare on my brother. “You hulking idiot.”

He shifts back into a human and takes a swing at me. “Where is she! Bring her back!”

I sidestep his fist, then let my frustration with him have its way. I pull my fist back and let it fly into his face. He crashes through my makeshift table, shattering yet another piece of furniture.

“Stay there!” I snarl, turning back to Magdalene who’s waking up.

“What’s going on?” she asks, blinking in astonishment at Fallon who’s on his back, staring up at the ceiling in incomprehension, his brain fog taking over and stripping him of the memory of his love having just been in the same room.

“Well, that was *very* dramatic.” We turn to look at Lyra Good Witch, who adjusts her cap, shakes out her skirt and steps toward the fire. “Call me anytime you want! The spirit world gets a wee bit boring after a few hundred years.”

As she disappears into the fire, waving goodbye, I scoop Magdalene up from her chair. Ignoring her squeak of surprise,

I stride toward the stairs, determined to show my witch how much she's come to mean to me.

CHAPTER 17

FAIRY LIGHTS

MAGDALENE

Rush is carrying me up the tower steps at a dizzying pace and I press my face against his chest to stop the walls from spinning around me. Inhaling, I take his scent in and it instantly relaxes me, like a security blanket as it settles over me.

The door to my room is open and Rush walks through, striding to the bed and lowering me.

“What happened?” I push myself up on my hands and look at him expectantly.

He kneels and gently pushes me back against the pillows. Bemused, I let him.

“You need to rest. We can talk later.”

“But I want to know now.” I try for an adorable pout, but either my adorable is off or he’s not biting.

“You’re exhausted. You need to sleep.” When he goes to stand, I reach for his hand, gripping it in mine and imploring him to stay on the bed. He hesitates, then sinks onto the mattress, facing me.

“I fainted, right?”

He nods.

“It wasn’t the first time, Rush, and it likely won’t be the last. It takes a lot of energy to cast the big spells and once the energy is gone, our bodies shut down until we’re restored enough to wake up.”

I’d hoped to reassure him, but instead his brows pull down into a frown so fierce I flinch back into the pillows. “When?” he demands with a growl. “When did you faint?”

“I...” I swallow, wishing I hadn’t opened my mouth about this subject. “It doesn’t matter, I’m fine now. Good as new!”

He leans closer, his annoyance clearly visible. “Either you tell me when you fainted, or I’ll reach into your head and find

out for myself.”

Damn it. I’m not sure I’m strong enough to block his attempt, and I don’t want him poking around in my head. Even if he’s my mate, I don’t trust him with the personal information of my brethren. He’s spent two centuries hunting and murdering our kind. The last thing I need is him getting his paws on Katey’s home address. She has children.

“Fine,” I agree. “When I was four, I found my mother’s Grimoire and attempted to summon a demon. The magic was too much for my small body and I fainted. Luckily, my mother heard the commotion before the three-horned demon could eat me.”

“Four years old!” he explodes, shoving off the bed and pacing away before coming back. “That was a reckless thing to do.”

“I was four,” I point out defensively. “My decision-making abilities weren’t exactly developed yet.”

A speculative gleam enters his eyes. “When else did you cast spells that were beyond your ability?”

“Hey!” I push myself off the bed and stand to my full height, hands on hips. “Fainting during a spell is not an indication of ability. I am a damn good witch,” I pause to appreciate my accidental double entendre, before continuing, “I come from a long line of powerful witches.”

“When else?” His voice is hard as he demands an answer.

I huff and give him the rest. “When I was twenty-two, I tried to summon Lyra for the first time and the spell backfired, throwing me off my feet and knocking me out.” I rush to give him the rest before he can interrupt with what looks like a volcanic exclamation if the vein throbbing in his forehead is anything to go by. “When I was forty-six, I got sick of moving to new houses every time you caught up with us, so I moved our entire house instead of just the belongings. The effort was too much for me and I fell into a two-day sleep once the house was resettled.” I pause, trying to remember if there were any other instances of unconsciousness. “Several years ago, I tried

an invisibility spell I bought off a warlock. It turned out to be a dud and there was an explosion. That was more of a coma than a fainting situation, though.” The look he gives me has me rushing to add, “I was only unconscious for a few weeks. Aunt Bea took excellent care of me and afterwards, I was right as rain.”

“I want the name and location of the warlock who sold you the spell.”

A thrill goes through me at his protectiveness, but I shake my head. “No need to bother with him. If he hasn’t seen the error of his ways yet, he certainly will in time.” Lots and lots of time. I’d turned him into a rock and left him in his swamp to contemplate an eternity of peaceful solitude.

“Is that all?” Rush grumbles.

I nod.

He closes the distance between us, reaching for me. I flinch, expecting him to grab me with hard hands. The vein in his head, the flush to his face, and the stiffness of his body tell me he’s angry, so I’m completely unprepared when he drops to his knees and wraps his arms around my waist.

I’m so surprised that I don’t move, my arms dangling by my sides.

“So many times you could’ve been killed.” He turns his face into my chest and shakes his head, mumbling. “I’ve been following you all this time and I didn’t know. I didn’t see what was happening. I could have helped you instead of driving you to cast spells beyond your ability.”

Damn it, they weren’t beyond my ability, just my physical being! But since he’s being so sweet, I don’t correct him. I wrap my arms around him and hold him against me, enjoying a physical closeness I’ve never experienced. This must be what it feels like to have a boyfriend. It’s kind of amazing.

“I’ve always been an independent witch, Rush. No matter what you did or didn’t do during my formative years, I would still have gotten myself into trouble. It’s normal. It’s how young witches and warlocks learn and grow.”

He shakes his head again. “No more. It’s too dangerous.”

I grip his head and force him to look up at me. “You do enough to protect your brother, you can’t shoulder the burden of more. I can take care of myself, just like I always have.”

He pushes to his feet, breaking my hold. “You don’t get to decide that.”

“Because I’m your prisoner?”

“No, because you’re my mate.” Though he’s already admitted I’m his mate, the way he says it now, so fierce and protective, feels real. Like he maybe *wants* me for a mate. “You must promise not to put yourself in danger like that again.”

Hmmm a lot more than just shoddy spell work can put me in danger, so I’m not exactly sure what I’m promising, but if the words he needs to hear will help him reconcile to our future as mates, then I’m willing to give them. “I won’t deliberately put myself in danger,” I say, reasonably certain I can keep the promise. It’s not like I go looking for trouble.

We stare at each other. I want to reach into his head, find the source of his frantic desire to protect me from my past. Does it come from his wolfy mating instinct, or does he truly regret not helping me over the years? I’ve had an amazing life, so I don’t blame him for any of my past woes, and I don’t need protection.

He clears his throat. “Guess I should go back down.”

I touch his arm. “Will you stay?”

His brow wrinkles in concern. “Are you injured? You should be laying down.”

Now that I know the depth of his desire to protect me, I’m tempted to tell him I’m not well and need him to stay, but he’s being so honest and sweet, I don’t have the heart to worry him. Instead, I say, “I feel fine, but it would be nice if you stayed.”

He looks surprised and takes a quick step back, breaking physical contact with me. I’m hurt for a second, but then he practically laser beams his thoughts into my head,

pornographic images of our naked bodies twisted in ecstasy as we fuck on the bed. A tide of red washes over my face as my panties grow wet.

“Shit.” He shares my blush. “Didn’t mean to do that.”

He tries to push me from his thoughts, but I easily sidestep his attempts and bury myself in his head, watching the film reels of us having sex. I’m pretty good at it if his imagination is anything to go by. I sense his embarrassment warring with his desire not to hurt me, which is also warring with his desire to throw me down on the bed and do his worst to me. Or best. I’m not sure, I’ve never done this before.

“Uh, we could snuggle?” I suggest.

“No!” Seeing the look on my face at his rejection, he quickly clarifies. “I mean, I don’t think I’ll be able to touch you without... I’ve never lost control before, but with you...? What I’m trying to say is that you make me feel... stuff... and I don’t want to ruin things by behaving badly.”

I glance at the bed, then back at him. “What if we lay next to each other and just hold hands? No snuggling. Can you manage that?” When it looks like he might reject my idea, I add, “Only until I fall asleep. I don’t want to be alone after...” I drop off, not wanting to outright lie. I’m completely fine to be left alone, but I want him to stay more than I’ve ever wanted anything. I always want him near, and since I’ve finally got to bask in his presence these past few days, I’m loath to part with him, even for a few minutes.

His shoulders relax and he nods. “Alright, until you fall asleep.”

I grin and climb onto the bed. I’d prefer to change into a nightshirt, but I don’t want to take my eyes off the skittish wolf long enough to do so.

I lay on my back, my head resting on the pillow.

Rush hesitates, then slides onto the bed. As he moves, I whisper the spell that turns on the lights in the canopy above us. He settles in next to me, his shoulder about five inches

from mine. He takes my hand in his and squeezes it. Together, we stare up at the flowers and twinkling lights.

My breath catches and I sink into the sensation of his hand on mine. Warm, firm, reassuring. His fingers are tight around mine, as though he never intends to let go. I roll my head to the side and look at him. I could stare at his beautiful face forever, but my eyelids are growing heavy.

Before I drift into sleep, I hear him say, “Don’t remember installing lights.”

A smile curves my lips as I fall into a deep sleep.

CHAPTER 18

EAT ME

RUSH

Something soft brushes me and my cock stands fully erect. I roll onto my side, gently casting my senses out to feel for whatever woke me up.

Magdalene.

Opening my eyes, I discover her face inches from mine, so close her sweet breath caresses my face as she sleeps. She looks young, even for an immortal of her tender years. Her cheeks are round and pink with health and her blond eyelashes sweep the delicate skin beneath. Her hair, the colour of rich, golden wheat before harvest, settles against her pillow in a halo of loose curls.

The urge to touch it is almost overwhelming, but I don't want to disturb her. After the long day she's had, she needs sleep. I hadn't meant to fall asleep with her, only to hold her hand until she was out. I have to remove myself from her bed before I do something we'll both regret. Her beauty is a lure, but her scent, an unholy combination of earth, basil and rose, has my wolf leaping around inside me, savagely attempting to thrust himself to the surface.

Not now, I tell him, easing away from Magdalene.

When? He demands, impatience beating at him.

Maybe never. She's too delicate and I won't risk hurting her. The physical side of mating is too intense for someone like her. I untangle her fingers from mine, tucking her limp arm next to her.

Tearing myself from her side feels like leaving a part of myself behind. It's as unnatural as forgetting to breathe.

I pick up a knit blanket from the bottom of the bed and spread it over her, then head for the door.

"Rush?"

Spinning around, I see her pushing herself up and blinking sleepily at me. "Nothing's wrong," I say gruffly. "Go back to

sleep.”

She pulls her arm out from the blanket and reaches for me, holding her hand out pleadingly. I sense her silent anguish at my leaving, her confusion and hurt. The emotions are stronger than they should be because of our mating bond.

Fuck. I didn't think of that when I bonded with her. She'll feel my absence keenly when I'm not with her and mourn me when we're apart for any extended length of time. The feelings will grow even stronger if we complete the twining.

“I can't...” But I take a step toward the bed.

“Please,” she whispers, sending a shiver down my spine.

How is a person to resist such temptation?

Still, I shake my head. “I won't be able to stop myself from touching you. I'll hurt you. After hours of lying next to you, breathing in your scent, my control is barely leashed.”

Rather than looking worried, as she should, she moans, her cheeks flushing to a cherry red. “I want that.”

“No, you don't.”

It's everything I can do to tether the beast clambering inside me, shouting at me to stop being such a little bitch and finally fuck our mate. Ah god, I'm sweating now. I pin her with a hard stare. I'll try one last time to convince her and if she still begs me to come to her, I'll give her what she wants, come what may.

“I won't be gentle, Magdalene. When a wolf shifter finds his mate, his instincts urge him to throw her in the dirt and fuck her so hard she'll never forget who she belongs to. It will go on and on as I do my best to imprint myself on you, and when I finally finish, I'll hook you with my barb and empty my seed. Do you understand what that means? A barb will emerge from the end of my dick and hook the tender tissues of your pussy. It will hurt, it will bleed, and you will feel every excruciating second of it.” She opens her mouth to say something, but I stop her, continuing, “As if that's not enough damage, the call to finish our twining will beat at me. If I give in to the urge, I'll sink my teeth deep into your flesh, marking

you with my bite. The mark will take weeks to heal and will never entirely fade. Women have died from a wolf shifter mating.” Not shifter females. They’re built to handle a mating, but I don’t say it out loud. Somehow, I know it’ll hurt her feelings to be compared to a female shifter and found lacking.

Several long seconds pass between us as we stare at each other. Then the scent of her arousal hits me and the reaction of my wolf is so strong, he comes off his leash.

Before I realize I’m moving, I’m on the bed with her, my arm wrapping around her waist, snatching her against me, her soft breasts pressing into my chest. Gripping her hair in my other hand, I force her head back until she’s looking up at me.

“Last chance to tell me to leave.”

I feel her heart beating frantically in her chest and my greatest fear is that she’ll actually tell me to leave, despite her arousal.

“Stay,” she whispers.

Unable to hold back, I slam my lips over hers, thrusting my tongue into the honied interior of her mouth. Fuck, she tastes even better than I remembered. She’s the forbidden fruit that I’ve finally allowed myself to reach for.

I feel her small hands sliding up my arms and a shudder rips through me. I didn’t know it would be like this. I’ve been with women before, though sporadically and never more than a handful of times with the same woman. It was never like this.

I haven’t touched a woman since the day my mate was born. I told myself it was because I needed to focus on capturing the witch and getting her to break my family curse. Now I know the truth. Every step we took in our unusual mating dance was leading to this.

For once, my wolf is in full agreement with every move I make, his encouragement pounding in my brain as I pull Magdalene so tight against me, I’m not sure where she ends and I begin.

I notch my cock between her thighs and thrust against her.

She responds by widening her legs and thrusting back, which nearly sends me over the edge.

My claws automatically extend and in seconds I've shredded her dress, leaving her in a pair of the tiniest, sexiest panties I've ever seen. Is this what modern women are wearing now? They're red and lacy and cover so little skin they may as well not exist.

"Holy fuck," I groan, dropping my head down her body and thrusting my nose into her crotch. She gasps and clutches my head as I'm helplessly drawn to her exquisite scent.

"Rush?" Her breathless whisper pulls a groan from deep in my chest, rumbling against her clitoris and drawing another gasp from her. A gush of fluid has me pressing my nose so deep I can feel her wetness against my face. I touch my tongue to her panties and nearly die as her taste explodes in my mouth.

"Oh god, oh Rush!"

I reach around her ass, intent on ripping the offensive garment from her body, but my fingers touch bare skin. Exploring, I discover that the globes of her butt are bare, but there's a strip of cloth between her ass cheeks.

This must be investigated. I'm forced to make the agonizing move of dragging my nose away from her tantalizing pussy. Flipping her over, I lay her down on her stomach and stare my fill at the best invention I've seen in centuries.

I run my claw lovingly down the red strip as she turns her head to the side on her pillow and watches me, her eyelids languid, her lips curved in a bemused smile.

She's always beautiful, but like this, vulnerable, spread naked on her belly on the bed, hair a wild tangle over her pillow, she's breathtaking.

I climb over her, straddling her legs as I place a razor-sharp claw against her hip and slice through the fabric. I give the other side the same treatment and then drag the mangled panties away. Holding them up to my nose, I breathe in her

essence while I stare at her plump, dimpled ass. Fucking perfect.

Now, now, now! My wolf howls at me as he tries to push me into separating those ass cheeks and licking her from bottom to top, then slamming our cock into her so deep that we'll never be separated.

Magdalene squirms beneath me, the scent of her pussy in the air as her arousal increases with each move I make. My mate is ready for me. The feeling soaring through my chest can only be described as pride. I've done this. I've made her wet for me.

I flip her over between my legs until she's laying on her back, her body gloriously naked before me. I'm crouched over her, but I should be at her feet, worshipping the bounty before me.

Her arms are thrown over her head, her fingers tangled in her hair. Her full breasts are tipped with peach-coloured nipples and slightly darker aureoles. A curved belly leads to rounded hips, a thatch of golden hair, the glistening lips of her pussy peeking out.

I move so my gaze can continue its worshipful path. Her thighs are as plump as her ass and her calves are strong from crouching in the swamps as she gathers ingredients for her spells. Her feet are small and pretty, though sturdy, capable of standing firm.

My gaze travels up her body but doesn't make it past the thing that entrances me most, her pool of desire. It lures me with its intoxicating fragrance and glistening lips.

"I want to eat you up." My voice is so deep, so strained, it sounds foreign to my ears.

"Okay." Her voice comes out in a squeak and her embarrassment drives her to cover her face with an arm, though she widens her legs in invitation.

I don't need to be asked twice.

Diving in, I thrust myself nose first into the nirvana of her wet little pussy. Oh god. Oh fuck. It's even better without the

barrier of her panties. I bathe in her juices as I thrust my tongue as deep as it'll go, my wolf's encouragement echoing in my head.

"Ahhhh!" A tiny scream issues from her throat as my tongue delves into her tight passage, drilling through the tissue.

She bucks against my face, her round thighs coming up to grip my ears.

Yes, she loves it!

I do it again and again until strangled cries are spilling from her lips and her thighs are shaking against me, her knee catching me in the side of the head. I grab her thighs and force them wide, spreading her beneath me like a sacrifice.

"Rush!"

My name echoes through the room as I use my fingers to part her, giving me better access. I thumb her clitoris and feast on her, then fuck her with my tongue.

She screams her orgasm so loud I'm certain my brother must hear it. Silently begging him not to bust down the door and break up our tryst, I crawl up her body.

I want to ask her again if she's sure she's ready for me, but the words won't leave my lips. I don't know if I can stop anyway. I was obsessed with this woman before I formally met her. Now? I am her willing slave.

I free myself from the confines of my jeans, thanking god that I don't wear underwear. My wolf howls his excitement, hurling himself against the invisible barrier of our psyche, snapping and growling with the desperate desire to fuck our little witch.

I don't need to be told twice. I press my cock against her entrance, marveling at the tightness of her passage as I thrust into her. A white-hot explosion rocks my brain as her pussy strangles me, gripping me so tight, I'm positive she'll never let go.

When I can pry my eyes open, her head is flung back and her mouth is shaped like an O in a silent scream. Her eyes are screwed up and the blood is draining from her face.

Oh god, I've killed her!

"Magdalene!" Still seated deep inside, I grip her head and force it up to mine. "Open your eyes. Look at me!"

Her crystal blue eyes pop open. I've never in my life been so happy to see them. I reach into her thoughts, trying to find out what's wrong. Pain, there's pain! But also... pleasure. She was enjoying herself, but my entry hurt her.

"Are you hurt?" I don't know how I'm forcing the words out considering my wolf is howling so loud in my head, I can barely hear my own thoughts.

She blinks as if to clear her vision so she can hear me better. She licks her lips and I follow the movement like a hungry dog. Finally, her lips move. I have to dip my head to hear her.

"Don't. Stop."

Fuck yeah, she's fine. She's more than fine. She's mine.

I pull almost all the way out before pushing myself home again, going slower this time. My wolf is desperate, begging me to tear into her and, I admit, it's everything I can do to hold back, but I'm determined to protect my mate from injury at my hands.

"I don't need protecting!" she's gasps into my neck where she's wrapped her arms around me and is clinging like a vine. "Fuck me like you mean it."

Her words break the dam holding me back. I thrust into her over and over, my arms snaking around her, holding her so tight I worry she'll snap, but we're in too deep now. I can't stop myself from fucking her like the animal I am.

I lose myself in her, insensible of how much time is passing. We lock eyes, hers glowing and fierce, her mouth open, her breath puffing out, her features twisted in agony and ecstasy.

It's better than anything I could have imagined and I never want it to end, but my mate is weakening. I feel her body growing limp and she's no longer lifting her hips to meet mine. It's time to finish.

I reach for my wolf, and he meets me halfway, ready to do our thing.

I turn my head away so I don't give into the urge to bite, then I thrust several more times, the pressure building with each stroke, my cock growing inside her, pressing against the silken walls of her glorious pussy. I reach for my orgasm just as it blasts through me in an explosion of light and intense pleasure. My barb hooks inside her and she bucks against me.

I stare at her, memorizing everything. Her expression, the colour of her eyes in this moment, the sound of her voice. Her head is thrown back and her scream is still echoing through the room. Her eyelids slide shut and she passes out in my arms.

CHAPTER 19

HAPPILY EVER... OOPS!

MAGDALENE

“Can you show me the one for keeping creepers out of the house?” Lyra Good Witch chastises me as she shakes her head. “You modern witches and your finicky pickiness. Imagine wanting the creepers outta the house. How’ll you get cobwebs for your spell bag?” Still, she nods toward the stick I’m holding and explains how to draw the symbol meant to keep creepy crawlies at bay.

“I see your point, Lyra. And I do like a good spider infestation. We’ll make it a temporary eviction.”

It’s been six days since I summoned the two Lyras and mated with Rush. Though I can’t call my great aunt back into our realm of existence, I’ve been spending time with Lyra Good Witch. She’s a good sport and doesn’t mind when I summon her for some entertainment. She sees me the same way, a welcome relief from the afterlife.

Lyra was born 402 years ago and died during the witch trials. She was one of the unlucky witches caught up in the human frenzy of witch killings. Very few witches were actually captured during that terrible time. It was mostly humans killing humans they suspected of witchcraft.

“That’ll do it,” she says as I complete the drawing.

We’re sitting on the floor in the corner. Well, I’m sitting. Lyra is floating cross-legged next to me. We watch in fascination as a tiny lineup of bugs and arachnids forms on the stone floor. One by one, they march to the nearest window and make their way outdoors.

“Awesome!” I exclaim, clapping my hands.

Pleasure floods through me and I look up, my gaze going to the stairs leading up the tower. It’s not the freshly evicted creepers making me happy, it’s my mate. I can feel the moment his brain wakes up and know that he’ll be reaching out, searching for me in bed.

He's spent every night with me since our first night together. He doesn't like when I leave the bed before he wakes up, but after the first morning, after I laid awake for hours waiting for him, I decided if he wants to sleep the day away, he can do it alone.

I feel him leap from the bed and head for the stairs. He doesn't stop to relieve his morning bladder, or even to put on pants. He just heads straight out the door in search of me.

Each step that brings him closer has my heart pounding a little faster.

Lyra gives me a knowing look and floats to her feet, heading for the hearth. "Your young man's coming, don't I know that look on your eager face. I remember those days meself, when a beau came a courting. I'll get outta your way. Summon me later?"

I grin and nod. "Of course, you're my ghost bestie now. I'll call you next time I need a second opinion on an outfit."

Lyra claps her hands joyously before disappearing. She loves going through my modern wardrobe and picking out clothes. It's too bad she can't try them on herself, but she insists its good enough to watch me do it.

I push myself to my feet as Rush reaches the bottom of the stairs and brace myself, despite knowing it's an unnecessary precaution. As he envelops me in his arms, he knocks me off my feet before smashing me into his chest in a frantic embrace.

This has been our morning ritual since I discovered the Wolven-North brothers are not morning canines and started leaving the bedroom early. Though he can reach out through our bond and ensure himself of my safety, he must set eyes and paws on me before he's okay to go about his day.

This mating stuff is a lot more intense than I'd ever imagined, but I'm thoroughly enjoying it. Rush has been an extremely attentive lover, if not gentle. He tries though.

It doesn't bother me. I love his fierce lovemaking and he hasn't hurt me much. A shiver runs down my spine as I

remember the care he took last night when he ran those razor-sharp claws over my curves, through my folds, drawing the nectar from me...

Rush groans in my ear, tightening his embrace. “Stop those thoughts, mate, or we’ll be going right back upstairs.”

I giggle. “And that’s a bad thing?”

“This tower’ll fall down around us if all we do is fuck all day every day.”

“Okay... but I’m not hearing a downside yet.” I grin at him to show I’m joking.

I’ve come to discover that Rush has an emotional attachment to his tower. He purchased the land it sits on around 100 years ago and it has been his home ever since. He was responsible for installing running water, electricity, and heating. He’s quite a handy wolf, as it turns out.

“Why don’t you go and put some pants on while I make us breakfast? Then we can fix that broken stonework you pointed out yesterday.” I run my hands down his bare back, catching him with my nails and drawing a shudder from him. “After, maybe we can talk about the fucking part.”

He grips my face, tilting my head back before laying a kiss on me that clearly speaks to his intentions when we do finally get to the fucking part. He thrusts his tongue into my mouth while shoving his now fully erect cock against me. I’m so much shorter than he is that he has to hunch over to kiss me.

Without a word, he breaks the kiss and stalks away, though I feel the satisfaction in his mind. He loves my idea.

These past few days have been the best I’ve ever had, and I know Rush feels the same. We’ve discovered the definition of contentment in our cozy nest. The only dim spot on the horizon of our mating is Fallon. Not that he’s difficult.

Now that he’s getting regular nutritious meals, we’ve been able to risk taking him out for walks. Rush won’t allow him to shift in case he catches the scent of a human and takes off, but Fallon doesn’t seem to mind. He’s pleased with the addition of exercise to his relatively unchanging routine.

No, the hard part of having Fallon around is the reason he's here — our inability to figure out how to break the spell cast by my ancestor. It breaks my heart to see my mate's sadness when he gazes upon his once great sibling. Perhaps if I can convince Rush to reconcile himself to Fallon as he is, we can live a happy life with the three of us in our tower together.

I hum to myself as I scramble eggs for my wolf pack. Rush was surprised when he found out I eat eggs and dairy, but I explained to him that I have no problem with animal byproducts as long as they're ethically gathered. Unfortunately, my explanation sent him down a spiraling path of worry over whether it's ethical to murder and devour woodland creatures. Or more accurately, he was less worried about the ethics and more concerned with my perception of his diet.

Cute wolf.

I'd let him stew for several minutes before putting him out of his misery. "We're two different species with different biological needs. I don't judge you for eating the things you do." After that conversation, his attitude toward my food preferences changed. Now, he's happy to help me search out the food I need, so long as he gets to go for a hunt after.

I finish scrambling the eggs, adding some wild onion and mushrooms I found, then dish it up. Balancing the three plates on my arms, I head back into the common room.

"Good morning," I say to Fallon, who's sitting at another door-turned-table, wearing his leather trousers, a yawn stretching his lips.

He grunts in response and reaches for the plate I set in front of him. Not waiting for a fork, he shoves egg into his mouth with his fingers. I look him over like a proud parent, pleased to note a healthy glow to his complexion and fewer ribs poking out from under his skin. He's a long way from being okay, but he's better than he was when I arrived.

Rush enters the room, zeroing in on me as he strides toward us. His focus is like a laser-beam to the brain,

wonderful and intense. He steals my breath and my senses when he's near me and I never want the feeling to end.

He drops into the chair next to mine, widening his knees until his thigh is pressed to mine.

"Looks delicious," he says in his low, sexy voice, his eyes on my face.

I blush and grin at him, reaching for my fork. We eat in silence until everyone is satisfied. Both Fallon and Rush eat a dozen eggs each in a single sitting. Rush barter with a nearby human farm for the eggs and a few other food items, like cream, milk, and honey. He added vegetables to the list when I arrived. I asked if I could go meet the farmers, but he said it's too dangerous.

I'm not sure why he's so worried about me meeting humans. I've met a few in my time but have never had more than a quick conversation. They don't seem to enjoy swamps, ghosts, spiderwebs or anything else vital to a witch's happiness.

When we finish eating, Rush picks up our plates and heads to the kitchen to wash up while Fallon shifts to his wolf form, walking out of his trousers as he makes his way to his favourite napping spot by the fire. I follow him in exasperation, picking up his discarded pants and folding them across the back of a chair.

I chew my lip as I glance toward the kitchen where Rush is whistling and banging dishes as he washes them. I could have those dishes washed, dried, and put away in thirty seconds, but that would mean admitting I have access to my magic.

We haven't discussed the collar since he put it back on me the morning after we summoned Lyra. I'd felt a shaft of hurt that he didn't trust me and he'd felt what I felt. Contrition had twisted his features and he'd lifted his hands to remove the collar, but I stopped him.

I could see everything in his mind. His desire to trust me, the massive leaps forward he's taken in his thinking toward witches in general and me in particular. He's trying and if it

makes him more comfortable to believe that he's leashing my spell casting abilities, then so be it. We're immortals. When we're past this bump in our relationship, we have endless years ahead in which I can make our lives easier with my magic.

"Ready?" he asks, striding from the kitchen while drying his hands on a cloth.

I could swoon over this man's sexiness, but we have work to do.

He grins at me, catching my stray thought, and grips me around the waist, dipping me in his arms until my hair brushes the floor.

I laugh as he lays a smacking kiss on me.

"Enough goofing," he says gruffly against my lips. "Time to work."

I pretend to pout, but skip after him as he heads for the tower door. We leave it open in case Fallon wants to come outside when he finishes his nap.

I settle on the grass with a broken mosaic Rush gave me to work on. My job is to piece together the colourful bits of glass in the correct order, then glue them to a stone slab, which will be placed as a decoration on our doorstep. Rush told me it was original to the keep and would be a shame to lose. I agree.

"What're you humming?" Rush asks, stepping past me toward the base of the tower where a ladder rests against its side.

"Oh, umm, just a song my mom used to sing when I was a child. It's about thanking the Earth Mother before we take her resources."

"Why don't you sing it?" He launches himself up the ladder and I watch with admiration for a few seconds as he quickly finds the section he was working on yesterday.

"My gifts do not include channeling the voices of angels."

"What's that mean?" Using a trowel, he dips it into the bucket of plaster balanced on the ladder and pushes it between

the stones before scraping it smooth.

“It means I can’t sing,” I call up to him, then demonstrate before his mating befuddled brain can insist that I must be an amazing singer because there can’t possibly be anything wrong with his mate.

A couple of bars into the song and he’s laughing so hard he has to grip the ladder to keep himself from falling off the tower.

For his continued amusement, I jump to my feet and show him my extremely uncoordinated dance moves as well. Unfortunately, I forget about the damage sharp rocks on bare feet can cause until one slices into the bottom of my foot.

I drop to the ground with a cry, twisting my leg like a pretzel to see the bottom. Sure enough, there’s a long bleeding gash along the heel. Automatically, I speak the words that will heal the gash.

The ground shakes as Rush leaps off the tower and lands next to me.

Oh shit.

I look up at him, but his eyes are on my foot as the skin mends itself and the blood disappears.

“Rush...”

When his eyes meet mine, my heart sinks. The heat in that bronze gaze is gone, now replaced by an icy anger that chills me to the bone.

CHAPTER 20

WOLF BEHAVING BADLY

MAGDALENE

“You lied to me.”

The second my foot finishes healing, I push myself off the ground and stand. “I know it seems that way, but if you let me....”

“How long have you had your magic?” Rush interrupts, his hands balling into fists to keep from grabbing me and injuring me while he’s in a rage. I know this because he’s not trying to keep his thoughts from me.

Sadness overwhelms my ability to speak. I was hoping our relationship could evolve to where he trusted me enough to take the collar off. Now it’s everything he can do not to attack me.

“Don’t put thoughts in my head,” he snarls, his chest puffing up with anger, making him look even bigger. “I’ve no intention of attacking you.”

“That’s not what your thoughts say,” I whisper, taking a step back.

“You are no longer welcome in my head,” he says coldly, stalking closer. “How long have you had your magic?”

I swallow and tell him the truth. “I’ve always had my magic.”

His eyes narrow to bronze slits. “You’ve been lying to me from the beginning?”

I bite my lip, wanting to argue, but I can’t. Any Good Witch worth her salt knows that lying by omission is still lying. “I’m sorry. I thought it would be easier if you thought the collar worked.”

His brows pull down in a terrifying frown that has me scrambling still further away. Unfortunately, my back meets the tower and there’s nowhere left to escape.

“When exactly did the collar stop working?” he demands. “That thing should be irreversible.”

I raise a brow, despite my fear. “Did the witch who gave it to you put her all into it, or did you coerce the magic out of her?” His expression tells me all I need to know and some of my guilt drains away. Was it any wonder I hid my magic from this man? A man who spent centuries attempting to extinguish my kind?

Trying to mitigate some of the damage my lie has caused, I say, “I barely used my magic while I’ve been with you because I knew you wouldn’t like it. I tried to respect your no-magic rule.”

He snorts. “You have a funny definition of respect. You’ve been using magic from the start, haven’t you? The clean windows in the tower room, the dishes, the lights over the bed, the suspiciously bug-free common room. You’ve been playing me for a fool.”

“I didn’t clean the windows, Katey did!” Clamping my lips shut, I realize what I accidentally revealed. I try to shut him out of my thoughts, but he’s there before I can stop him, seeing the images of Lila and Katey in our bedroom. His thunderous expression tells me I’m digging this hole deeper, but I can’t seem to stop. “I’m sorry, Rush. I didn’t invite them to our tower. They came to check on me.”

“Our tower?” he says in a chillingly quiet voice, his body so stiff it’s almost vibrating with tension. “My tower.” He stresses every syllable with a fist to the chest. “You brought *witches* into my tower without my permission, knowing how much I despise your species. You desecrated my home and you lied to me. What else have you done?”

A shot of anger surges through me. “Why don’t you take your own advice and stay out of my head?” I snap, hands going to my hips. “And for your information, *I’m* witches and you invited *me* into your precious tower. If you didn’t want more, you should’ve stolen a witch repelling charm while decimating my brethren.”

“I should’ve killed the entire lot of them!” His angry voice echoes through the trees. “Then my traitorous mate would have nowhere to turn when she needs help getting her hands on magic. You’re an addict who can’t even go a few days without casting a spell. I was an idiot for not seeing it.”

“I’m not an addict!” I shout, swiping at my tears. “My species doesn’t use magic like a drug. We are the magic.” I press my hand over my chest. “Every cell in our bodies is bound with magic. We can’t be separated. And I never once heard you complaining about your freshly scrubbed tower, your brother getting better, or the off the charts sex we’ve been having.”

“What’s sex got to do with magic?”

“You’re a beast in bed, Rush!” I exclaim. “Every night you tear into me, your barb ripping through my flesh. What do you think that does to a body? I have to heal myself every morning so I’m good to go again whenever you want.”

Instead of seeing that I was only doing what comes natural to me, he seems offended all over again. “You were healing yourself?” I can feel the imminent explosion building inside of him. “What if you were pregnant?”

I hadn’t thought of that, but it doesn’t matter. “I wasn’t healing my womb, which hasn’t been injured. Just the... just the...” I’m helpless to stop the blush I can feel surfacing. I stand up straighter. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Our children don’t matter to you?” His voice is so full of menace, I want to flee, but I refuse to back down to a wolf behaving badly.

“You’re deliberately misunderstanding me! We haven’t even discussed children yet. You’re just trying to find things to be mad about now.” I stomp my foot and glare at him. “Well, I won’t have it. Before you found out about the magic, we were doing great. Better than great. We were in love.”

He laughs, but not a nice laugh. One filled with bitterness and disillusionment. My heart sinks before he opens him

mouth and when he does, devastation spills out. “In love? What a fucking joke. How could I possibly love a witch?”

His face is so twisted by hate, I barely recognize the man who has spent six days showing me without words what love feels like. Or at least, that’s what I thought was happening. Apparently, I was wrong.

“Even if you hadn’t cast a spell over me, I would never allow myself to fall for someone like you. Not only are you my sworn enemy, but you’re a lying, deceitful witch who twists the desires of others for your disgusting pleasure.”

My heart shatters and the tears spill down my face. “Do you really believe that I cast a spell over you?”

He steps closer and says in a deadly voice, “You tell me.”

Unable to stand the force of his rage, the disgust in his voice, the hatred in his eyes, I nod. “If you think I did, then it must be true. How else could you have been so happy with a witch?” He’s so blinded by his hatred of witches, he’s not capable of seeing the truth; that everything I did was in pursuit of our mating. Maybe I made a mistake in keeping my ability to cast spells from him, but there was no ill intent.

At my capitulation, the leash holding back the tide of his rage snaps. He lets out a roar of anger and slams his fist into the wall of the tower, sending crumbling chips of stonework flying. One of them catches me on the cheek, cutting a path of fire. I turn my head to the side in time to save my eye. Gasping, I touch my cheek and look in disbelief at the blood on my fingers. Lifting my gaze to meet Rush’s, I find a shocked expression that matches my own.

Unfortunately for him, I recover first.

An impenetrable iron gate slams shut in my brain, ousting him from my thoughts. Good luck ever getting back in, mongrel.

He reaches for me. “Magda....”

Before he can finish, I snap my fingers, casting a metamorphosis spell over him. It’s difficult magic, but it’s one of my favourite spells and I’ve used it a lot over the years.

I crouch next to the small Pomeranian dog sitting in the grass, looking around in confusion. It lifts astonished beady eyes up to me and lets out a tiny squeak. Rage or contrition? I don't know because I can't hear what my mate feels or thinks anymore.

He still has the same grey fur with rust-coloured streaks. In fact, if I wasn't so upset that Rush essentially told me he couldn't possibly fall in love with me, I might even think he's cute. Instead, I narrow my eyes at him.

"Metamorphosis as punishment is frowned upon in Good Witch circles, but I think they'll make an exception for you." He barks, the sound so oddly high-pitched for my ultra-masculine mate, I can't help the laugh that bubbles up my throat. "The spell will wear off in a few hours. Until then, you can spend some time thinking about how small you can make a person feel with your cruel words. Maybe next time, you'll be more careful." I stand, tugging the hem of my jean shorts down my ass cheeks. "I'm going for a walk. When I'm back, we can discuss whether there's anything left of our relationship to salvage."

I turn on my heel and stomp away from him. The mating call tugs at me, begging me to go back to him and work it out. For a few seconds, I think about turning around, but then I stiffen my spine and continue walking, batting at tree branches and swamp weeds as I pass.

Rush will be fine. I think. While the spell is working, he won't be able to turn human. He's not a shifter at the moment, but a Pomeranian with Rush's brain. He can think and plan, but he can't get any bigger than the seven-pound body he's trapped in. The door to the tower was left open, so he can make his way back inside if anything threatens him.

He'll be fine.

I stomp my fury out in the swamps, muttering curses on every ancestor Rush has ever had, then hurriedly calling them back. It's not his mother's fault he's such a shit-eating swamp beetle. Pretty sure his terrible personality emerged well after her passing.

My foot sinks into a muddy patch next to a stagnant pond and I jump back in case it turns out to be quicksand. I've gotten into that unfortunate predicament before. Aunt Bea still laughs about it.

"Why am I walking?" I say out loud, hopping on one foot while trying to clean my foot with a squirting water spell. I hate walking.

With a snap of my fingers, a nearby branch snaps itself from a dead tree and floats over to me. I sit on it, trying to get comfortable before urging it to go up above the trees where I can get a good look at the surrounding countryside.

I spot the human settlement right away. I'll go there. Maybe find a mirror or a fire where I can summon one of my besties and pour out my grief on her shoulder while we drink ourselves stupid at the local pub.

Biting my lip, I glance toward the tower where it pokes regally through the treetops. Rush warned me to stay away from the town, but that was when he cared about me. He's made his feelings abundantly clear; he doesn't care whether I live or die, which means I can do whatever I want.

Hardening my heart, I set course for the town, eager for my first sight of this human settlement.

CHAPTER 21

SEVEN POUND FURY

RUSH

It takes several seconds after Magdalene stomps away to realize what happened. The world got smaller, and she got bigger, which means... she shrank me. I look down at my tiny paws and groan. They're fluffy!

Reaching around inside myself, I search for my wolf, begging him to come to the surface and help. Maybe if I shift, I can go into wolf mode, hunt my wayward mate and punish her, ensuring she never does anything so reckless as take away my ability to protect us again.

But I can't find my wolf. He's gone. Not just hiding, but fully and completely gone. After centuries of having him as a part of me, the silence of his absence is frightening.

I'm about to go into full panic mode, when I remember something Magdalene said.

Something about the spell wearing off in a few hours.

I glance toward the open door of the tower and decide it's probably the best place for me if I'm going to chill out until her spell wears off. I head toward the tower, a rather massive feat given how tiny my legs are. For every step my wolf would have taken, it takes my new body twenty.

I'm huffing and puffing from exertion by the time I reach the door. I imagine scenarios involving getting my hands on my witch mate, stripping her of her powers, and spending the next several decades taking my rage out on her gorgeous backside.

Though the heat of my anger is still high, a shaft of guilt goes through me as I think of Magdalene and the cruel words that passed between us. Well, if I'm being honest, the only one hurling insults was me. She was defending herself.

My rage dissipates before I even finish the thought.

I forced my mate to defend herself. Fuck. I didn't just yell at her, I sliced open her face. What was I thinking? Was my

pride so hurt by the thought that she might be tricking me into falling for her that I drove my mate away?

I'm a bastard and I need to find Magdalene immediately and apologize. Hell, I don't even care if she turns me back into a man... or a wolf... I just want to make sure she's okay. If she's wandering about the swamps in an angry huff, she won't be paying attention. She could get hurt.

I turn to leave but am confronted by an extraordinarily intimidating stretch of grass. The blades go up to my belly and the trees look so far away, I'm positive it'll take me hours to reach them. There's no point in going after her. I'll never catch up with the head start she has. I'll have to wait until she comes back or the spell wears off.

In the meantime, I'll find Fallon and try to convince him to turn human and go find my mate. He's not capable of much in his condition, but he's better than nothing for protection if Magdalene runs into trouble.

I turn and take a step forward, tripping over a huge hairy wolf paw. I look up. Way, way up, and discover my oldest brother staring down at me, curiosity in his glowing yellow eyes.

Curiosity... but no recognition.

Fallon slowly bares his teeth, pulling his canine lips back as he snarls. His nose wrinkled in anger, eyes fixed on me, saliva dripping from his canines, hair on the back of neck standing up. Shit! He's protecting our territory from a perceived threat. From me!

He lets out a roar of rage which gets my paws moving. I skitter backwards, smacking into the doorjamb before turning and racing out of the tower, Fallon hot on my heels, jaws snapping as he tries to grab my fluffy body and tear me to shreds.

I won't be able to outrun him, but I can outmaneuver him if I'm strategic. I zigzag in front of him, causing him to trip over his own feet as he attempts to keep up with my frantic changes in direction. When he gets too close, I dive under his

feet and race under his back legs. As he tries to follow, his giant head goes between his front legs while he's still running and he tumbles end over end, landing on his back on the grass.

I don't look back, but head straight into the trees.

Fallon recovers quicker than I'd hoped and soon I hear the pounding of paws smacking into the ground behind me. I dodge around trees, leaping over rocks and sticks. My heart hammers with the effort of running on such tiny feet.

Fuck. Magdalene could've picked a dog breed with more stamina. Pretty sure my heart's gonna burst before the spell wears off. And that's only if my brother doesn't get his teeth on me.

I feel the heat of his breath on my furry back just as the ground disappears out from under me and I tumble head over paws down a steep hill. I try to stop, knowing what's at the bottom, but there's no help for it. I've picked up too much speed.

Splash!

I break the surface of the stagnant pond with the force of a cannonball, sending waves over the reedy shore and splashing Fallon who followed me down the hill in a more dignified fashion.

I'm relieved to discover that, despite my legs being the size of pencils, I can still swim. I do exactly that, the heavy wet fur weighing me down, my beady eyes on Fallon who paces the shoreline, watching me hopefully, like I might swim over so he doesn't have to get his paws wet before disemboweling me.

I stay where I am, treading water and hoping there's nothing bigger and hungrier than me in this pond.

Eventually, Fallon loses interest and heads back in the general direction of the tower. I hope he goes back and stays out of trouble, but I can't worry about him right now. I have my paws full with my own predicament. Worry consumes me as I attempt to reach out to my mate through our connection only to discover it's not there. I'm not sure if this is a side

effect of the spell she cast over me, or if she's deliberately blocking me.

Regardless, I have to find her and make sure she's safe.

I swim to the edge of the pond and drag my body onto the shore, my paws sinking into the muck. A sharp reed rubs against my belly making me yelp as I carefully pick a path through, shaking the water droplets from my fur and making it stand on end.

I've never thought much about what life must be like for small dogs, but the creatures now have my sympathy. There's nothing fun about having to look up at a giant world and know that pretty much everything can crush you. Like that eagle up there in the sky, circling overhead.

I squint at it. Wait, that's no eagle. It's a... woman... and she's sitting on a tree branch. I would recognize the half-moons of my mate's ass anywhere. Relief pours through me as I realize she's not just safe but keeping herself well out of the way of any predators on the ground. Smart witch.

Then she sets her sights on something and shoots away, her dangling feet swaying with the movement of the branch. Shit. She's headed in the direction of Pendle, the last place my little witch mate should be. She'll have no idea what she's walking into if she attempts to find help in this town.

I should've told her the truth, but I'd hoped warning her away would be enough. I should've known better. I probably only intrigued her with my warnings of danger.

There's no help for it. I'll have to follow and hope against hope that she stays out of trouble until I'm a wolf again and able to whisk her back to the safety of the tower. After, I'll explain everything to her and apologize for my abominable behaviour.

As I race toward town, I catch glimpses of Magdalene flying low over the treetops, her hair a yellow banner in the wind.

She's magnificent and I'm a beast for trying to stamp out this part of my witch. I will grovel for as long as it takes if it

means she'll smile at me again and let me hold her as I've done every night for the past week. I can still feel her in my arms.

Why did I drive her away?

I can't bring myself to hate witches anymore. Not really. A couple of gentle touches from my mate, some toothy grins, and my centuries-long vendetta dissipated. The only thing I was angry about was that she hid her magic from me, and I can't blame her for that. What would I have done if I'd found out that first day that she could still practice her magic? It doesn't bear thinking about.

No wonder she hid it from me. I'm an asshole with more teeth than brains.

She starts to descend through the trees. Fuck, fuck, fuck. This is bad. Pendle is a haven for those who believe in the extermination of supernatural beings. I'd moved into the area so I could live in the most witch-free place on the planet, safe from the curse-wielding demons while I hunted their brethren. Of course, there's a risk to myself and Fallon if they find us, but we can protect ourselves if we must.

Then it became an ideal place to lure Magdalene. I cut her off from her brethren as I drew her further and further away from their protection. My plan had worked, but I didn't think I'd fall in love with my witch. I must get to her before the people of this town find out what she is.

I race as fast as I can, ignoring the burning cramps tearing through my sides and down my legs. I'll have a heart attack later, but now I have to save Magdalene.

Finally, after what feels like hours of running, I clear the tree line and hurtle into the village.

Pendle doesn't look much different from the towns and cities beyond the borders of this swamp. Vehicles line the streets in front of rows of neatly kept homes. Mailboxes dot the landscaped yards.

I rush forward, climbing up onto a sidewalk, barely making it past the barrier of the curb. Better to run on the

sidewalk so I don't get squished by a car. Looking up, I search for a glimpse of Magdalene, but she's gone.

Since I can't connect with her through our mating bond, there's not much I can do beyond wandering around looking for her. As I start forward, I find myself seized in a pair of hands and lifted off the ground. My stomach twists as the pavement drops out from under me. I'm turned around to face the creature holding me.

A human child.

Fuck. Can this day get any worse? One of the least powerful beings on the planet holds my life in her grubby hands and there's not a goddamned thing I can do about it.

Wait, there is something I can do.

I sink my teeth into the first finger stupid enough to get close to my mouth. Shrieking, the human drops me, then gives me a kick that sends me tumbling backwards off the sidewalk.

I groan as I lay in the gutter and contemplate just staying here until Magdalene's spell wears off. As much as I want to find her, it's time to admit I'm useless to her in this state.

If that demon child comes back after I'm full wolf again, I'll show her the difference between a small dog bite and a wolf mauling. By the time I'm done, she'll never think to kick a helpless creature again.

A car rolling down the street catches my attention. It's a white van with a logo on the side.

I drag myself out of the gutter, narrowly missing the big tires as the van rolls to a stop where I'd been sitting. Seconds later a human male rounds the van carrying a large stick with a loop on the end.

"That's him!" The child rushes out of her house, pointing at me and shrieking. "He bit me, and he probably has rabies! Look at him! He's all gross and dirty."

Before I can piece together what's happening, something drops over my head. I jerk back in surprise then yelp when the

thing tightens around my neck. Oh, fuck no, the human did not just trap me.

I snarl my fury as he drags me around the back of the truck. I bark and try to bite him, but he uses his stick to keep me out of his path. Fury and adrenaline rip through me as I'm lifted off the ground by the neck.

I'm choking, but I barely notice as I scream my anger at him.

I will kill everyone you know! I will eviscerate your children's children! I will find everyone you love and tear them into tiny pieces. By the time I'm done, there'll be nothing left of you or anyone with a trace of your blood. Die, human!

Yip, yip, yip!

He flings me into a cage, pulls the loop off my head and slams the door shut as I try to launch myself at him in an attack of such devastation, tiny dogs everywhere will speak my name with awe.

SLAM!

The door to the van closes and seconds later we're moving.

I have no choice but to go wherever this human is taking me. It shouldn't be long before Magdalene's spell wears off and when it does, I will rain chaos down on everyone. It's bad enough that they've caged a seven-hundred-year-old wolf shifter, a member of the royal family of Wolf-Haven, but if they so much as sneeze in Magdalene's direction, there won't be a town left once I've finished.

CHAPTER 22

WITCH HUNT

MAGDALENE

I bring my tree branch to a graceful stop just inside the tree line, next to the adorable little town I spied from the air. I've only visited a few human settlements and they're quite interesting. Some are huge, bustling places with fast moving traffic and wailing sirens, while others are smaller, more peaceful.

Looking down at myself, I wonder if I'm dressed to blend in. I'm wearing a pair of jean shorts and a cute periwinkle blue top that shows off my belly. I frown at my bare feet. Any humans I've had contact with have always had shoes on, so I summon a pair of running shoes and sit on the ground to pull them on.

I stand, brushing dirt off my ass before heading out of the trees toward a road leading into the town. A sign greets me, welcoming visitors to the town of Pendle. "Well, isn't that a friendly touch?"

I wander down what appears to be a street containing the homes of humans. The houses look orderly and neat, as though their occupants care enough to keep their homes in good order. It's not far off from what a witch settlement looks like, except witches are a bit more haphazard with the placement of their homes. We don't need to accommodate roads because we don't use vehicles to travel from place to place. Witches don't have to obey the laws of physics either when building attachments to homes that've become too small for a growing family. It's not unusual to see a witch home with floating levels that can only be reached via fireplace travel.

Looking around, I set off toward what I'm hoping is the town centre, where the buildings are taller. Perhaps I can find a market. I'll pick up a few trinkets to brighten up the tower. I don't have any human currency on me, but I can find out what they require and turn a few rocks into their preferred payment method.

I'll spend a few hours here, then go back to the tower once my spell wears off and Rush grows big again. I'm over my huff and if my mate is over his, then we'll talk. If not, then I'll go spend some time with Katey or Aunt Bea until he pulls his head out of his ass.

As I walk, I marvel at human ingenuity. It takes me several minutes of contemplation before I decide the thing being pushed around by a human in front of one of the houses is meant to cut the greenery. Very smart! That way they have all the fresh herbs they need for food and spell work in one bag.

It takes about twenty minutes to reach the middle of the town where there's a lovely green square with trees and cobblestone paths. Spying a bench, I sit to rest my feet. All this walking has given me a nasty blister. Not surprising given the new shoes. Even conjured shoes have a breaking-in process. I pull off my shoe and drag my foot into my lap, digging my fingers into the arch and massaging.

I note a woman pushing a baby carriage, her smiling gaze on the infant nestled within. I can't help the smile that curves my lips in response, nor the mini fantasy of a couple of tiny kids with my blond locks and Rush's beautiful brown eyes. Or Rush's rusty grey hair and my blue eyes. Whichever way they go, it gives me the warm fuzzies to think about their future existence.

I experience a longing so fierce it knocks the breath out of me. I automatically reach for Rush through our mating connection, but he's gone. Of course he is, I transformed him into a dog.

Oh dear. I may regret my decision to punish him the way I did. Not only can't I hear his thoughts, but it's pretty frowned upon in my world to turn one's mate into a Pomeranian, or well, anything really. Maybe, possibly, a little illegal too.

For the most part, witches police themselves, but there is a higher power that we're answerable to if we go down the path of darkness and commit unspeakable acts. Warrior Witches are responsible for the arrest of a witch suspected of using their powers egregiously. After their arrest, the offender is presented

to an Oracle. Only an Oracle can pass judgement and sentence a witch, as they are the only beings capable of knowing the future. They can look at all the consequences of a witch's actions, then look into the future at all the actions yet to come. If the offending witch is deemed too important to remove from society, they will be assigned a Warrior Witch whose job is to keep them on their natural path. If the witch's loss is deemed acceptable, then they're kept in a penal realm where they will no longer have access to Earth but can live their life without interference.

My offence might warrant a slap on the wrist, but probably not even that unless Rush demands justice. I doubt he will. If my mate wants justice, he'll take matters into his own hands.

A fountain in the middle of the square catches my attention and I pull my shoe on, then push myself off my bench. I wander toward the feature for a better look. A round stone basin filled with water sits at the bottom of a gigantic statue. A golden plaque set in the stone reads: Wallace Banbridge. Our guide, our hero, our saviour. 1653-1719.

That name is familiar. Why is that name familiar?

I lift my eyes up the statue and gasp in recognition, taking a quick step back. I know exactly who this is. He lives forever in infamy within the pages of magical history books everywhere.

Wallace Banbridge was one of history's most prolific witch hunters. He was responsible for the deaths of dozens of our brethren. He would render them helpless, stripping them of their powers, then tie them to a stake set upon a pyre and set fire to it. They died in horrible pain.

My mom once told me that the Guardians tried to understand how he was able to get away with it, but never figured it out. Some believed he was a self-hating warlock who couldn't stand the sight of his own species. Others believed he kidnapped a witch or warlock and threatened them with death if they didn't help him hunt and disarm other witches.

This town idolizes a witch hunter. Which means... I shouldn't be here.

Backing slowly away, the horror of where I am sinks in and tears spark in my eyes. Pendle is a haven for people who hate my kind and I have to assume Rush moved here knowing it. He warned me away from coming here because he knew they wouldn't want someone like me.

A prickle of awareness sends a wave of gooseflesh up my arms and I turn slowly on the spot. The woman with the baby carriage is looking at me like I'm about to eat her, but it's not the woman I'm worried about. It's the two uniformed men standing with her.

"That's her." The woman holds up her phone and I see an image flashing red on it. A picture of me flying over the forest.

Well shit. Fucking human ingenuity. How on Earth Mother's left tit do they capture images so easily and blast them out to each other with so much speed? Our side should probably pay more attention to what these creatures are doing. They're pretty smart and they don't always use their intelligence for good.

I lift my hands to explain that I don't mean them any harm and that I'm happy to leave their town in peace, but before I can say a word, one of the men pulls something from his belt and points it at me. Something hits me in the chest and pain slams through my system, driving me to the pavement.

Did they... electrocute me?

I lay on the ground twitching and staring helplessly up at the cloudless blue sky as they rush over and clamp something around my neck.

I summon my magic, determined to pool every ounce so I can show these people exactly what lightning bolts up the ass feels like, but nothing comes. Not even a spark.

Gasping, I reach for my neck, but one of the men grabs my arm and yanks me off the pavement. The second guy takes hold of my other arm and together they drag me through the

park. A group of onlookers stand watching, and as we pass, they clap and cheer.

“Kill the witch!” One of them screams while another throws something at me, catching me in the shoulder. I grunt in pain and as a rock falls to the pavement. Holy shit, they’re stoning me and I’m helpless to defend myself!

Fear slams into rage as I’m shoved unceremoniously into the back of a car with flashing lights on top. There’s a cage between me and the front seat, which is probably a good thing for the two guys climbing in, because even collared and cuffed, I’d bite their fucking ears off.

I’m still buzzing from the electrical jolt, barely able to catch my breath. The lack of magic running through my veins makes me feel vulnerable and off-balance. Empty. I’m frightened, but too pissed off and confused to succumb to the feeling.

We drive for a few minutes before the vehicle stops and I’m dragged from the back and hustled toward a building. The sign on the outside says it’s a jail and a courthouse. I unscramble my brain enough to realize this is a very bad turn of events. “Why are you bringing me here?”

They ignore me.

“What do we have here?” Another human speaks as we approach a massive desk.

“Witch,” says the one holding my arm tightly, a viciously gleeful expression twisting his features.

“Really? The same one from the bulletin?” At my captor’s nod, the other guy rounds his desk to look at me like I’m some kind of animal. Shaking his head, he says, “You’re a lucky guy, Phil. Been waiting my whole career to bag one of these, and you catch one in your first year on the force. Some officers have all the luck.”

The word officer catches my attention and I realize these men are human police officers. The humans rely on these people to keep order in their communities. Only they’ve made a mistake. I haven’t committed any crimes.

I try to tell them so. “I think you have the wrong person, I’m not – ” Before I can finish, a hand in the middle of my back shoves me forward. I trip and nearly go down, but his hold on my arm keeps me from a nasty tumble. Unfortunately, he wrenches my shoulder so hard I cry out in pain.

“Save it for the Magistrate,” he snarls, shoving me again, forcing me to walk down a corridor and into a cell. As I turn, he slams the door in my face. “Personally, I’m hoping he sentences you to death, though probably not. He likes to see ‘em suffer. The magistrate has a real hate-on for your kind.”

“What are the chances of my getting a fair trial?” I ask, despite already knowing the answer.

He grins in a sinister showing of teeth. “Magistrate Banbridge isn’t known for being lenient with freaks like you.”

Banbridge? It’s the name on the statue. It couldn’t be the same man, could it? No. It must be his offspring.

Freaks in my world are some of our favourite people, so I take his insult as a compliment and strut to the back of my cell, lowering myself gracefully onto the bench. Without looking at the officer, I say in my most regal tone of voice, “You may come collect me when the Magistrate is ready to see me.”

He snorts his derision. “You won’t be actin’ so tough when the Magistrate gets his hands on you.”

I stand, approach the bars and look him in the eye. “And you’ll be a weeping broken man by the time I finish with you, only I won’t stop there. I will make sure you whisper my name in fear as you stare down an eternity of fire and brimstone for your part in this farce. I will make what your town has done to my kind look like child’s play.”

His face drains of blood and he steps quickly away from the cell. His fear doesn’t last long though. “When the Magistrate sentences you to the asylum, I’ll make sure I’m there for your first treatment.”

I shake my head at him. “Your insults would land a lot better if you spoke in terms I understand. At least I was nice

enough to call up fire and brimstone, as I'm assuming you understand the punishment, given human religious tendencies. I don't have a clue what an asylum is and the last treatment I had was a homemade mud mask that did wonders for my pores. So bring it on, Phil. I can handle anything you people throw at me."

He stares at me in incomprehension, mutters, "Fucking insane," then leaves without another word.

Asshole.

I don't even know what brimstone is, but I know my insult landed and his didn't. I lay down on the bench and close my eyes. Maybe I can get a cat nap in before the Magistrate calls me up.

Whatever an asylum is, it doesn't sound so bad. Maybe I can convince whoever's in charge to take the collar off. Then I'll come back here for some play time with Phil and the others.

CHAPTER 23

ALL OUT OF NICE

MAGDALENE

Squeezing my eyes shut, I can almost imagine I'm somewhere else except for the pain running up and down my entire body. My heart is beating so fast I fear it'll explode long before my ordeal is over. As another jolt goes through me, I picture my revenge in meticulous detail, right down to the sharp instrument I'll use to peel the skin from these human bodies.

The Magistrate was not kind in his assessment of my situation. I explained to him that after an argument with my boyfriend I'd gone for a walk, but the walk had proved tiring, so I created a flying seat. That's when I saw the town and decided to have a visit. Had I known the humans in Pendle didn't like my species, I would have avoided the area. I assured the Magistrate that as soon as the cuffs and collar were removed, I'd happily disappear so none of them had to deal with me again.

Unfortunately, the Magistrate ignored my defence, pronounced me a witch and sentenced me to life in the Pendle asylum. I shouted and pleaded as he had Phil march me away. I screamed my anger at them, cursing the Magistrate's entire heritage before Phil could drag me out.

"Stop!" The Magistrate's booming voice echoed in the courtroom. He gestured that I should be brought back to him, then came around the bench and nodded at Phil, who forced me to my knees. I refused to look up at the Magistrate, instead staring at his shoes in festering rage.

He gripped my chin and forced my face up.

"Shame," he grunted. "Such a rotten mouth on such a pretty girl." His gaze moved to Phil. "Tame her for me and then bring her to my house later tonight. I'll have some fun with her."

The gleam in his eye almost made me puke, but I hoped we would meet again. That I would be taken the asylum where

I could figure out a way to render the collar useless, then present me to this man. I would happily show him just how much fun a witch can be.

Phil dragged me off the floor, out of the courtroom, and straight to the asylum. A massive stone structure surrounded by fencing topped with razor wire. Guard posts dotted the entire area.

Instead of being shown to a cell, I was taken directly into a sterile room and strapped to a medical bed for 'treatment', which turned out to be less of a mud mask situation and more needles and electro-shock therapy.

My eyes are still shut when Phil crouches in front of me, his face close to mine. "Scream for me, witch, and I'll stop." His rancid breath touches my face and it's everything I can do to swallow the gag working its way up my throat.

"You should've said something sooner, Phil," I grit through clenched teeth. "If I'd known that's what you were after, I'd have screamed like a banshee. But we're well past that point. It's a matter of principle now." I stare at him, hoping he can read the blazing hatred within. "When it's your turn under my treatment, I'll be sure to give you the same consideration."

Knowing I shouldn't, but deciding it's absolutely worth it, I slam my forehead into his nose. If the satisfying crunch didn't tell me I got the job done, the blood gushing from his now crooked nose does.

"You bitch!" he screams, grasping his face, blood dripping from between his fingers while an orderly rushes to grab a towel. Phil snatches it from him and presses it to his face. "You'll regret that. I'll make sure you never leave this place."

"I regret everything about you, Phil. And your threats just don't land."

It's been a long fucking day in hell and I'm all out of nice.

Unfortunately, my last comment sends Phil into a rage (touchy humans), and he reaches for the dial on the electro-shock machine, spinning it to maximum.

“Don’t!” the orderly yells before Phil slams his palm onto the green button.

I brace myself, but it’s not enough.

Pain slams through me like nothing I’ve ever experienced before. I bow against the restraints, which bite into my wrists and ankles as I jerk. As much as I try to hold it in, an involuntary scream is ripped from my throat. Tears gather in my eyes as the feeling of a million fire ants running up and down my body, setting fire to everything in their path, goes on and on until I’m sure I’ll die.

Logically, I know I’m weakening, that I can’t take much more of this so-called treatment. I lost a significant amount of blood when they took vial after vial for testing, and Phil and his orderly have been electrocuting me for hours. A body can only take so much before it collapses.

Help me, Rush! Please, please come for me! They’re going to kill me! I scream through our connection. I’m in too much pain to feel if he’s out there. All I can do is hope that he gets my message before these idiots take things too far. There isn’t a doubt in my mind that he’ll come if he hears me.

I don’t know him well yet, but I know enough to know that nothing will stop Rush from coming for me. We were just beginning to get along when we had our argument. It seems so stupid now. I kept my magic from him, knowing he would be angry when he found out. I should’ve apologized and if I ever see him again, I will. I’ll beg his forgiveness and tell him he can disarm my magic if he can’t live with it. Whatever it takes to make the pain stop.

Please... Rush... I don’t want to die.

Finally, the electrical torture ends and I collapse onto the bed. The lack of pain sends a bolt of relief through my body, but I’m too exhausted to care.

“Got you to scream, didn’t I?”

I turn my head and slit my eyes open. Tears leak out, but I don’t care. What matters is that the fucker is too stupid to learn a lesson. Gonna have to teach him again.

My lips move as I attempt to speak. They're bloody from biting into them during the electrocutions. Phil bends closer, turning his head so he can hear.

"Rush... will be here soon... and he's not gonna be happy." It's pretty weak for a threat, but I just needed him to move closer.

I jerk my head toward his face and sink my teeth into his ear. The thought of putting my tongue anywhere near this creature is disgusting, but his screams are worth the horrible taste.

From the corner of my eye, I see the orderly rush to help. I release the ear before they can force me to, gagging at the metallic taste of blood. Phil leaps away from the table, one hand clamped over his ear while the other one still holds a towel to his nose. I can't help myself; I start giggling. He looks so stupid!

He moves faster than I would've given him credit for, punching me in the side of the head. I want to mock him for hitting a woman strapped down to a bed, but the lights are dimming. No, not dimming, my vision is...



"HEY, WAKE UP." A whispered voice catches my attention. "You okay?"

I crack my eyes open, then immediately close them again when a super bright light penetrates my skull. Along with the light, a woman hovers above me. If I'm correct, I'm no longer in the treatment room.

Licking my lips, I ask in a hoarse voice, "Where am I?"

Apparently my speaking to her is enough of an invitation for her to sit, the bed dipping next to my hip. "You're in the Pendle asylum."

Her response prompts me to ask, "What is this place?" I squint against the light as I open my eyes to see a woman with straight dark hair, weary eyes and the same collar they put on

me around her neck, then attempt to push myself up so I'm sitting. I'm too weak though, my arms shaking with the effort.

"Let me help." The woman's tone is one of compassion and I nod, savouring her kind touch after the harsh treatment I received. I push myself up while she lends me her strength until I'm sitting with my back against the wall.

"Thanks." I give her a weak smile. "I'm Magdalene Good Witch, but you can call me Mags."

She smiles back. "Is that what your friends call you?"

I think of Rush and his refusal to use the shortened version of my name. "Most of them."

"Nice to meet you, Mags." She reaches out and takes my hand where it rests on the mattress, giving it a squeeze. "I'm Leeta Good Witch."

"How long have you been here?"

"Not long. A couple of months maybe." She catches my look of horror and adds, "Many of the residents have been here for years. Decades for some."

"All witches?"

She shakes her head, her curtain of shoulder-length chestnut hair swaying against her shoulders. "Only a handful are witches, the rest are humans they've mistaken for witches. Oh, and there's a nightwalker, but we stay away from him. He's kind of a loner."

I gape at her. "I don't know whether to laugh or cry."

"Yeah, they lock up anyone they think is a freak. A few of us have tried to convince them they're locking up their own kind, just to get those poor humans out of here, but they won't listen."

"Who else is in here?" I ask, wondering if I know anyone.

She starts to list off our brethren. "There's Catrina Good Witch, Alvetta Good Witch, Gareth Warlock, Brooke Warrior Witch—"

I gasp. “Brooke! She lived in the village where I was born. How did they capture her?”

“She was assigned by an Oracle to watch over Gareth after he tore a hole in the interdimensional fabric to the penal colony while trying to help his brother escape. The witch hunters got her when Gareth took down the safeguards around his swamp in another attempt to get to his brother.”

When it comes to Gareth, I can’t disapprove of the human’s use of electro-shock therapy. “They have no idea what they’ve done by capturing a witch of Brooke’s calibre. It’s lucky this place is still standing. When she finds her way out of her collar, this asylum, and probably the town too, is going to be turned into rubble.”

Leeta sits next to me, her back pressed to the wall. “Problem is, there’s a witch here of even more importance than Brooke.”

“Who?” I ask in a near whisper.

“Portence Guardian Witch.”

I frown, trying to figure out where I know the name.

Leeta fills in the blank. “The first witch captured and tortured by Banbridge.”

“Holy. Shit.” I mime the ‘mind-blown’ action. “We all assumed she was burned, like the rest of them.”

She shakes her head. “Nope. Banbridge founded this place way back when and locked her up. That’s why we’re here. Not for punishment, or whatever, but to study, so the humans can determine our weaknesses and use them against us in battle.”

“Weird how their studies feel a lot like torture.”

She snorts and nods her agreement. “You’d think after so many years they’d figure us out by now. Instead, they’re still capturing humans and congratulating themselves for a job well done.”

I laugh, then groan as my body disagrees with the movement. I’m going to be sore for days after all that ‘studying’ with Phil and the orderly. “So, if someone as

powerful as Portence Guardian Witch can't escape from here, how are a couple of Good Witches going to do it?"

Despite her upbeat personality, I see the depth of her despair. Her months spent here, without her magic or the support of our brethren, have taken a toll. The humans have much to answer for.

"You don't understand," she says, her gaze sad. "Portence isn't a prisoner. She runs this place. She's the reason we can't get out of these collars. They were made by one of the most powerful of our kind."

Oh god. A witch has done this? "Have you talked to her?"

Her eyes widen and she shakes her head. "Trust me, you don't want that."

Actually, a face-to-face with the head witch is exactly what I do want. "Why?"

"Because the people who meet with Portence either disappear or don't come back the same." A shudder goes through her.

CHAPTER 24

HOUND DOG BLUES

RUSH

Bowf, bowf, bowf!
Yip, yip, yip!
Arf, arf, arf!

The urge to join in the cacophony of cries is strong, but I swallow it. Instead I attempt to block out the barking so I can concentrate on what the humans are saying. It's tough as cages line the walls and at least half are filled with canines of every variety.

A poodle directly across from me is frantically spinning in her cage, barking like her tail is on fire. I try to calm her down and tell her that barking isn't helping our situation, but she doesn't understand. None of them do. Apparently dog language differs greatly from wolf shifter language. I don't understand them, and they don't understand me.

Straining, my ears, I pick up on a couple of human voices as they move closer. The door to our room opens and the man who captured me struts in alongside a female co-worker.

Her gaze drifts across the cages and stops in front of mine. "This is the one you picked up earlier, Duncan?"

"Yeah, don't get too close though, he's a biter."

I flash my impressive teeth at her and she makes a cooing sound before shaking her head. "Such a shame. He's a cute little guy."

Duncan snorts. "Looks like he's spent the past year scavenging a garbage dump. We're doing him a favour."

Offended, I growl my displeasure. I haven't looked in a mirror since my dip in the swamp, but I can't be that bad. The Shih Tzu in cage twenty-three with all the matted fur must look worse than me. And what did Duncan mean by 'doing me a favour'? What favour?

He makes his way around the room, gathering instruments and setting them on a metal tray next to a table. “Which ones are scheduled for destruction?”

The woman lifts a clipboard and runs her finger down. “Eight, seventeen, twenty-seven... and this little guy.” She gazes at me through the bars of my cage. “Are you sure? Maybe we should give him a bath and see what he looks like. If he’s cute enough, someone might adopt him.”

“Can’t do it.” Duncan fills a needle from a vial he takes from a small fridge. “He bit someone. Need to do an autopsy to see if he has any diseases.”

“You worried about rabies?”

“Naw, don’t think he has rabies,” Duncan says. “No symptoms, but he might have something else.”

Annoyance explodes into rage as I listen to their conversation. I don’t spend much time around humans, but I’m over 700 years old. I’ve been around, seen a few things. This place is some kind of animal shelter and these people are the minders. Unfortunately, their discussion has taken a dark turn.

My gaze goes to the dog in seventeen and a bolt of concern goes through me. He’s old and ugly, but there doesn’t seem to be anything else wrong with him. This isn’t right. Someone has to help these creatures.

I have to help them.

But how? I’m too small to be effective.

Then a tingle goes through me, kind of like when a limb goes to sleep and starts to wake up. Nothing big, but enough to catch my attention. With each passing second, it grows stronger, running all the way up and down my body.

Is this it? Is the spell wearing off?

I look around the interior of my cage. I don’t know if I’ll be human or wolf when I transform and either way, there’s not enough room to grow to my full size in here without damaging my body. I’m strong enough to bust the lock on the door, but I don’t know if I’ll be able to do it in time. Damn it, I wish

Magdalene had explained the parameters of her spell better before storming off. Next time she does this, I'm going to need a few more details.

"Which one goes first?" The woman asks in a bored voice, checking her clipboard.

"Let's go with seventeen. He's been here longest."

Awe, fuck no, not my buddy in seventeen.

I give him a piercing look, silently promising I'll get us both out of here. Obviously, he doesn't understand, but it doesn't matter. He'll get it when I bust him out.

Duncan reaches for the lock on seventeen, but I put up such a fuss he drops his hand and both he and the woman turn to look at me. I'm scream-barking and raging around my cage, snarling for all I'm worth. Despite my diminutive size, I'm impressed with the amount of vitriol coming out of me. Maybe Pomeranians aren't so bad.

"Would you look at him go," the woman says, levelling her face next to the cage.

I hurl myself into the bars with a howl of rage and she jumps back.

"Let's do him first," Duncan says grimly. "He's been a pain in my arse since I picked him up."

Yes!

Duncan grabs hold of his loop on a stick. I allow him to drop it around my neck when the woman opens my door.

The tingles racing through my body increase as Duncan lifts me by the neck and carries my struggling body to the exam table. He sets me on it and the woman approaches with a needle. "First, the sedative," she announces.

Fuck, I was counting on shifting back to normal before we got to this part. I fight for all I'm worth, but at seven pounds, I'm not able to do much more than nip in the woman's general direction and scream my anger at her. Duncan forces my head away from her as she jabs the first needle into my ass.

Within seconds, I feel woozy, an artificial calmness coming over me.

As my legs collapse and I hit the table, something inside of me snaps and moves, reshapes itself, then something else. Snap, snap, snap. My bones rapidly reform under my skin and I feel myself growing. The sedative dries up in my veins as adrenaline shoots through me.

“Now the kill shot,” Duncan says with a laugh.

The woman rolls her eyes at him. “You don’t have to be so dark about it.”

“This one gets no sympathy from me.”

She turns to me, needle aloft. Her jaw opens, then closes like a fish gasping for water. “Holy shit!”

Duncan immediately backs away. Probably for the best. My tiny Pomeranian legs are growing into huge, hairy man arms and legs. Within seconds I’m full human, my bare ass and balls pressed against the cold metal of the table.

I leap off, stalking my prey with deadly intent.

I manoeuvre myself between the humans and the door, cutting off their only avenue of escape. Duncan holds his stick aloft, the broken loop dangling from when my neck grew.

“Who... what...?” the woman asks, her eyes huge.

“Shifter,” I answer.

“Oh god.”

I leap toward Duncan, gripping him around the neck before he can escape. The woman shrieks and jumps away, her back slamming into the cage behind her. A chorus of barks goes up around us.

I lift Duncan off the floor, staring into his eyes as I do it. Fear reflects back at me and the smell of piss wafts in the air as his bladder lets loose. Turning my head, I pin the woman with a glare. “Open the cages.”

“But...”

“Do it, or you’re next.” I give Duncan a shake for effect, and she scrambles to comply. Her hands tremble as she approaches the first cage, unlocking it and yanking the door open. She moves down the row, letting each animal out of its cage. When she reaches seventeen, I snarl, “Help him onto the floor.”

With shaking arms, she reaches into the cage and pulls the old dog out, gently lowering him to the floor. When she finishes, she looks at me expectantly, her gaze going to her co-worker whose face is turning blue.

I lower Duncan to the floor and glare down at him. “I will allow you to live because I have no desire to break the Human-Shifter treaty, but if I hear tales of your cruelty toward animals again, I will make an exception. Nod if you understand.”

Duncan nods vigorously. For good measure, I pick up his stick and snap it in two, drawing a cry of fear from the woman. I point at her. “No more killing or I will be back.”

She shakes her head and whispers, “No more.”

Without another glance at the humans, I open the door and call to my new canine friends. Together, we traverse the corridors until we find the reception area.

As I round the corner, naked, a pack of dogs at my feet, the woman in reception stands, her eyes bugging as she stares at us. Wordlessly, I hold the door open until my dog friends are all out, then I walk away from the building.

Looking down at my hound dog friend from seventeen, I say, “You’re on your own from here. I have a mate to collect, some groveling to attend, then a good hunt, maybe even a fuck if I can get right with Magdalene.”

He seems to understand, dipping his head toward the pavement before turning and lumbering away. I’m relieved to see him wander toward the swamps rather than the town. The people here aren’t friendly.

I turn back to the town, wondering where I should start looking. The sky is dark and artificial lights are popping up

across the area. Perhaps Magdalene has found her way home by now.

Tentatively, I mentally reach for her, hoping she's forgiven me enough to lift whatever impenetrable block she created between us. Relief pours through me as I dip into her brain, the familiar pattern calling to me. Seconds later, a jolt of pain strong enough to knock me on my ass slams into me.

I'm unprepared, so I hit the pavement hard as a river of fire slams through me.

I grit my teeth holding the pain inside, not wanting to attract attention. The last thing I need is to be picked up naked in a parking lot and charged with indecent exposure.

Help me, Rush! Please, please come for me! They're going to kill me!

I'm paralyzed by whatever is happening to my mate, unable to help as her screams echo in my brain. I'm confused and terrified, but most of all I'm consumed by rage. Someone is hurting Magdalene.

I will destroy every human who has touched her.

The second the pain lifts, I slam a shutter down in my brain, severing our communication. I have no choice. It's the only way I can find her. If they hurt her again, I can't afford the precious seconds it'll take me to recover.

I didn't know our bond had progressed so quickly. I feel what she feels, every agonizing second. She's too frail to survive such torture. I have to get to her!

I start running, my shifter instinct unerringly locating my mate. I shift mid-run, my body twisting and reshaping into my massive grey-orange wolf. My strides lengthen and I eat up the ground with ease.

Ignoring the honk of a car and the screeching of tires, I swerve through the streets of the human town, making my way toward the one person who has the power to bring me to her side anytime, anywhere, anytime.

CHAPTER 25

EARLY RELEASE

MAGDALENE

I sit up, blinking at the sudden brightness as the harsh fluorescent lights are turned on and a key scrapes in the door.

“It’s well past mealtime,” Leeta whispers fearfully, her gaze seeking mine. “They only come for us after hours if the Magistrate or Portence wants us.”

I remember the Magistrate’s words to me in the courtroom and mutter, “Magistrate.”

Sure enough, two guards stomp through the door. One points at me. “He wants that one.”

The other shakes his head. “Phil did a number on her. Wasn’t supposed to mess up her face. Idiot’s no good at understanding orders.”

On that we agree.

“We’ll take the other one, then.” He reaches for Leeta, grabbing her arm and dragging her off the bed. “Magistrate likes this one. Too skinny for my taste, but gotta keep the big man happy if we want to keep our jobs.”

“She’s not skinny!” I defend, jumping to my feet. “Let her go.”

Leeta shakes her head frantically while the guard shoves me back onto my bed. They pull Leeta from the cell, but I leap to my feet and follow, shouting, “You let her go or I’ll... or I’ll... kick you.” It’s so much easier cursing a person when I have magic available.

“Get back in your room.”

“No!” I shout angrily. “Get your hands off her!”

Someone calls out from behind one of the doors, their voice questioning.

“You’re causing a commotion,” the guard snarls, reaching for me. “Get back in your damn room.”

“Come and get me.” I spin on my feet and start running.

It’s not a great plan since I haven’t actually planned beyond my next step, but I can’t let them take Leeta to the disgusting Magistrate.

“Taze her!”

I swerve to the right as electrodes shoot out behind me, narrowly missing my back. They follow, one of them dragging Leeta with him.

I run as fast as I can, turning down each corridor I come across in an attempt to lose my captors. At best, I’ve distracted them from their plans to take Leeta to the Magistrate, but I’m under no illusion that I’ll find a way out. There’s nowhere to go and I’m powerless to help Leeta without my magic.

As the guards close in behind me, I turn into a dead end, a stone wall blocking me. Sinking to the floor, I cower, bracing myself for the electrical jolt I know is coming.

One of the guards lifts his arm and I’m hit with the familiar pain of electrocution. I try not to cry out, but it’s difficult to control my actions while my body is jerking around involuntarily. After what feels like forever, the pain stops and I collapse, my head smacking against the concrete.

“Her mother is Lilith Guardian Witch!” Leeta shouts. I glare my betrayal at her while the guards look at each other in confusion. She pleads for forgiveness. “I can’t let them hurt you.” Then she turns and says to the guy holding her. “Portence will want to know who she is.”

The guards look at each other. “You know who she’s talking about?”

The other shakes his head and Leeta rushes to add, “Lilith Guardian Witch is one of the most important witches in existence. Portence will be extremely displeased if you injure Lilith’s only child.”

Another long pause as I question whether my new friend is terrible at this friend business or a genius. She’s right. If this Portence really is one of the original witches caught up in the witch trials, then she’ll know exactly who my mother is. Lilith

and many other Guardians joined forces with the Warrior Witches to eradicate witch killers. She was one of the most prolific hunters of the time and her name is in our history books.

“What about you?” I demand, as she advocates for my life. I shove myself up onto shaking arms. “The Magistrate will hurt you.”

Her eyes dim and she nods. “I’m used to it. Not my first time going to the Magistrate’s house.”

A gut-wrenching rage ignites in my veins, and I climb to my feet. If she can fight for me, then I’ll fight for her. I’ll render our collars useless in the only way I know how; kill the witch who created them.

“She’s right,” I tell the guards. “My mother will be livid when she finds out what’s happened to me and she’ll be headed straight here. You should probably let Portence know. She’ll want to prepare for Lilith’s arrival.”

Again, silence as they decide what to do. Finally, the one holding Leeta says, “You take her to Portence. I’ll take this one to the Magistrate.”

There’s nothing I can do as Leeta is dragged away, her eyes downcast, her shoulders slumped. My own situation is looking bleak. According to Leeta, terrible things happen to those who are taken to meet Portence. Though, I have to admit I’m curious to see the woman.

The guard drags me back down the corridor, heading in the opposite direction of my cell. My shaking legs barely hold me up, but his grip is enough to ensure I don’t fall. Eventually, the corridor leads to what looks like an older part of the asylum. Concrete becomes stone, and statues lurk in the shadows.

We stop in front of a heavy wooden door with ornate carvings on it. The guard knocks and we both wait. It takes a minute before the door opens and a woman with a displeased expression faces us. I gape at her. There’s no way this woman can be the infamous Portence, or a witch at all. She’s... aged.

“Mistress Portence, I’ve been instructed to bring this woman to you.” His gaze remains on the floor as he speaks. I want to tell him that eye contact has nothing to do with a witch’s ability to cast spells. Portence, if indeed this is Portence Guardian Witch, could curse him in a hot second, whether or not he’s looking at her.

The woman’s eyes move to me, her expression uninterested. Her hair is iron grey and thin, curling wildly about her head with no effort at taming it. Her dressing gown is black velvet with large silver buttons and she has slippers on her feet.

She looks like somebody’s lost great grandma. Elderly, tired, and in need of a good nap. The problem with this picture? Witches don’t age; at least not in the way humans do. Once we reach maturity, our immortality sets in, and the aging process slows down significantly. It takes hundreds of years for even incremental changes to show on our bodies. Yet this woman, supposedly a witch born roughly four hundred years ago, has stooped shoulders and a face full of lines.

“Why?” Her voice sounds like a rusty hinge as she speaks, her milky eyes lingering on me.

“Her mother is...” He looks at me expectantly.

I frown back. Seriously? Does he expect me to aid in my own abduction and torture by voluntarily giving information? How is this place still functioning with such idiots running it?

Portence’s gaze sharpens. “Yes, who is your mother, child?”

I weigh the pros and cons and decide it probably can’t hurt to tell them. Maybe it’ll save me another painful treatment with Phil or buy me some time to figure out how to kill Portence. “My mother is Lilith Guardian Witch.”

She lets out a gasp before clamping her lips shut and staring hard at me. “Bring her inside.”

As she moves aside, the guard shoves me through the door and follows close behind.

Portence's chamber looks as though it was once beautifully furnished, but is now old and dilapidated. A faded and worn forest green velvet couch sits next to a set of French doors that open onto the grassy back of the property. Grimy wall sconces dimly light up the room and shadows lurk in every corner. The only thing that feels lived in and warm is the cheerful fire snapping at Portence's back as she shuffles behind her desk.

Her eyes go to the guard. "You may leave."

"Don't think that's a good idea," he grunts, jerking his head my way. "She's a feisty one. Broke Phil's nose during treatment."

A quick flash of horror crosses her expression before she can school her features. Her voice is frosty as she demands, "This child was taken for treatment?"

What does she think happened to my face? I don't normally have a bruised cheek, black eye, and split lip.

The guard nods. "The Magistrate ordered it."

"If she is who she says she is, the Magistrate may have brought ruin down upon all of us. Leave us. You won't be needed again."

The second the door closes behind the retreating guard, I demand, "Who are you? And don't bother lying. I know you can't be Portence Guardian Witch."

The woman chuckles, the sound dry and grating. "I should ask you the same question. Are you really Lilith's daughter?" I nod and her expression becomes grimmer. "This isn't good news for you, child." She turns to look at the fire, crossing her arms.

My heart pounds as I frantically search for a weapon. Maybe if I can hit her over the head hard enough, I can make it out the French doors and get away before the guards grab me. Her voice stops me.

"I know you think I'm an elderly human masquerading as Portence, but you're wrong." She turns back to me and for a moment I see the face of a younger woman transposed over

the older face. “I was like you once, beautiful and unchanging.”

“What happened?” I whisper.

“I was made to see how unnatural our kind is and encouraged to let nature into my heart and soul.” She presses a hand to her chest as she speaks. “Aging is nature, child.”

“For humans it is, but not for witches,” I argue. “Nature runs through our veins. Who are you to say we’re unnatural for having a much slower aging process?”

“We’ve harnessed dark magic for such things, and that is a crime,” she snaps, narrowing her eyes at me.

The woman is a cauldron full of nuts and I’m not going to spend all day arguing with her about aging and dark magic. She used a spell to speed up her physical aging process while still preserving her internal organs. She’s four hundred years old. If she was aging naturally as a human, she’d be dead. This is dark magic, but I don’t think the crazy old bat is going to see the contradiction in her thinking.

“What you’re doing in this place is wrong,” I say instead, glaring at her. “You’re torturing your brothers and sisters. How can you call our aging process a crime when what you’re doing here in this place goes against every belief held by our kind?”

“My sisters and brothers,” she spits, wrinkling her nose in disgust. “The only people interred here are criminals who deserve the justice we hand out.”

Outraged, I argue, “What exactly have I done to deserve repeated electrocutions and a beating? What about the mortals you’ve trapped here? What’ve they done?”

She places her hands on her desk, clearly annoyed at my accusations. “What have you done? You’ve been running around the countryside casting spells without thought to how your actions damage the humans trying to survive in a world of immortals.” It hits me then. I know what she is. A human sympathizer. An immortal who becomes obsessed with humans and mortality to the point that they want to become

one. Her insistence on superficial ageing makes sense now. She wants to be like the people she idolizes. “As for the mortals in this place, all deserve to be here for crimes against their fellow humans.”

“But why keep them here with the immortals? Why not put them in human prisons?” Tingles race up my spine as I finally sense my mate. I glance out the window, watching for movement on the shadowy grounds.

Portence shrugs. “We need a non-magical control group for the study of magical blood. It helps to have a steady supply of human blood for our experiments.”

At first, I’m stunned by her admission. Humans are being brought to the Pendle asylum for experimentation. Then I laugh. “Okay, let me get this straight. You’re obsessed with humans and consider them far more natural than witches, but you’re okay with torturing and experimenting on the very creatures you venerate? You are one cracked cookie, lady.”

“Only the criminals!” she insists defensively.

“Yeah, criminals like me,” I say darkly, my eyes on the distant fence line. “It doesn’t matter what your reasons are for running such a terrible place. Your time here is finished.”

She cackles, the sound dry. “You and what army, little girl? No, you’re mine now, and I’ll use you to get to who I really want. The person responsible for murdering the man I love.”

The pieces fall into place and I gasp, returning my gaze to Portence, then to the massive painting of the famous witch hunter that hangs over the mantle. Wallace Banbridge. He’s the reason Portence turned her back on her magical brethren. Not just turned her back, but actively locked them up, tortured them, and more than likely, killed them, too.

“You loved Banbridge, didn’t you?”

She stares up at the painting, adoration momentarily softening her features. “He spared me because he knew I was special.”

“He tortured you and turned you against your own kind,” I argue.

Her eyes flash with malice as she turns back to me. “No one in the magical world ever cared about me the way he did.”

“He only cared about the information you could give him. He used you to get to other witches and you let him!” It’s a guess, but a good one. If Banbridge really loved Portence, he would’ve loved all of her, even the magical parts. The way Rush will learn to love the magical parts of me if he wants to continue being mates. I won’t give up what Portence gave up, no matter how much I love my wolf. If he loves me enough, he won’t ask me to do it.

“There’s only one witch I want now.”

“My mother.”

“Lilith Guardian Witch killed my lover,” she confirms, her tone hard. “And now I have the key to finding her. Somehow fate has brought you to my doorstep, the one person to draw Lilith from the Shadow Realm.” She turns feverish eyes up to Banbridge’s image. “Once I’ve avenged my love, I’ll be able to leave this life behind.”

“There’s a flaw in your plan, Portence.”

“What’s that?” she demands, glaring at me.

“It’s not my mother who’ll come for me. I’m a grown witch who can stand on her own two feet, and Lilith knows it. She’s never been one to step in when I get myself into a spot of trouble.”

“She’ll come if you ask her to.”

I don’t tell her that if she did somehow get me to send a message to Lilith, she’d be in a world of hurt when the powerful witch showed up. Better witches than Portence have tried to trap my mother and they’ve paid with their lives.

Instead, I say, “She won’t need to come to my rescue, I have somebody else for that.” I smile as I turn away from the French doors. “Not that I need anyone to save me, thank you very much for emancipated witches everywhere, but I’ll take the early release anyway.”

“What are you talking about?” Portence demands.

I smile, showing off my teeth. “My boyfriend is rather protective and right now he’s pissed at what’s happened to me here. In fact, he’s more than pissed because he would’ve felt every bolt of electricity going through me as if it were happening to him, too.”

“Shifter!” she gasps, her expression growing fearful. Her worried gaze goes past me to the darkness beyond. “Only a shifter can feel the pain of a mate.” She picks up the receiver of a telephone and holds it to her ear, presumably to call for help.

“It’s too late for that,” I say gleefully. “The judge and executioner for Portence Good Witch has arrived. A few centuries late, but better late than never.”

I drop to my knees on the dusty carpet and cover my head as Rush bursts through the French doors behind me, hurling glass across the office. He pauses next to me, his big, gleaming yellow eyes searching my face as I look up at him, then his gaze swings to Portence and with a roar of rage, he leaps for her.

CHAPTER 26

RAGE

MAGDALENE

Before I can call him back, Rush savages Portence, her screams a piercing testament to his brutality as the life blood pours out of her.

Later, I'll ponder whether I would have stopped him if I could. Sometimes I'm not as good of a Good Witch as I should be. Portence is responsible for the death and suffering of many witches and humans. Her end justifies what she's done, but it's still a horrible way to go.

I feel the moment she dies. Magic rushes through my veins as the collar around my neck is disabled. I lift my hands, snapping my fingers. Sparks shoot from my fingertips and I grin my relief.

Rush lifts his head from behind Portence's desk, pinning me with his intense stare, blood dripping from his muzzle. I run toward him as he leaps over the desk and nearly knocks me over in his excitement. He presses his big, warm body against me, then licks my arm, running his raspy tongue from my hand to my shoulder.

I giggle and drop to my knees, wrapping my arms around my wolf mate and burying my face in his neck. "I'm so happy to see you."

You were injured, he says through our connection. Where? How? Who did this to you? The woman was too weak to do all that herself. I demand vengeance for my mate.

Shouting outside the door draws our attention and I drag myself away from him. "Later, I'll tell you everything, but we have to go. By killing her, you just released scores of pissed off immortals. We probably shouldn't be here when they confront their captors."

Climb on my back.

I stand and look skeptically at him. His back is chest high on me.

As if sensing my hesitation, he drops to the floor. I climb on, sliding one leg over his spine. Before I can find a center of gravity, he stands and I nearly topple over. I grab a fistful of fur and he grunts.

“Oh, sorry!”

Hang on, we're getting the fuck out of here so I can stash you some place safe before I come back and decimate this place.

If Rush thinks he's coming back without me, he's dead wrong. But I do as he tells me, wrapping my arms around his neck. It makes sense to get somewhere safe, lick our wounds, then come back to eradicate the evil from this place.

Together, we fly through what's left of the French doors in one giant leap. The world around me blurs as my mate gives into the instinct to run.

Something explodes into the ground beside me, throwing up a clump of dirt. I turn my head to the side as it hits my shoulder. *What was that?*

The humans are shooting at us, he answers grimly, ducking and dodging bullets as they hurtle past us, hitting the ground and ping-pong off the fence just ahead.

Hang on! Rush's shout echoes in my head and I tighten my grip on his neck. Every muscle in his body bunches as we head straight for the fence, the razor wire gleaming in the spotlight.

I squeeze my eyes shut as his paws leave the ground.

Instead of sailing over though, Rush jerks and slams into the fence, bouncing off. Green grass and black sky merge as I'm spun around and thrown off his back, landing on the ground hard enough to knock the breath from me.

I lay staring blankly toward the asylum, the men shouting and jogging toward us, guns pointing.

“Rush!” I gasp, pushing myself up and frantically looking around.

Rush is laying in a heap on his side facing the chain-link fence. I crawl to him, reaching for his shoulder. My hand

comes away bloody. Gasping, I crawl around to his front where I can see the damage. There are blood stains on his chest and neck and his eyes are closed.

Tears gather in my eyes and I wrap my arms around him, pressing my face to his. “Wake up, Rush. Please! They’re coming! Oh god, they’re going to kill you. My magic isn’t a match for bullets.” My energy is still low from the torture. I have enough juice for a minor spell, but not enough for a force field that’ll encompass both of us.

No spells then. You need your energy to run.

Rush’s voice in my head is the sweetest thing I’ve ever heard, even if he sounds weak.

“They’re coming for us,” I sob, staring at the men as they line up, pointing their rifles at the unmoving wolf shifter and his witch mate. “We can’t get away.”

Wrong, mate. Rush grunts in pain as he drags himself off the ground. Knocking me backwards into the grass, he crouches over top of me. *You’ll have time to run.*

“No, no, no!” I beg, frantically shaking my head. “You have to leave with me.”

There’s no time, Magdalene! Shut up and listen! His imperious voice echoes in my head, demanding I heed him. I close my mouth, though I can’t stop the stream of tears leaking down my face. *When they finish shooting, you will curse them with the strongest curse you’re capable of.*

“But—”

You will not pass out! He interrupts my protest. *You are a strong and powerful witch. You will curse these humans, then you will crawl out from underneath my... me... and you will fucking run. Do you understand?*

“I can’t leave you!”

You will.

I nod in anguish. “Please don’t die, Rush. I love you and I want the chance to show you. We didn’t get enough time.”

He drops his head to mine, pressing his furry forehead to mine. *We didn't get enough time*, he agrees. *Magdalene, I—*

Before he can finish, he's struck by another bullet, his body jerking on top of mine. He grunts as bullet after bullet enters his body and blood pours from his wounds.

He stares at me, his gaze filled with the words he didn't have time to finish.

"I love you, Rush. I've always loved you! Do you hear me?" I say the words over and over to keep myself from screaming in agony as the bullets tear through flesh and bone. I don't feel the pain because Rush is blocking me from entering his head, but I can see his agony as his eyes dim.

He does his best to maintain eye contact, but soon the blood loss is too much. His body shuts down and his organs stop functioning. He takes his last breath and his body collapses on top of mine. Sobbing, I wrap my arms around him, hugging him tight.

"Wake up!" I whisper frantically, pressing my face against his. Energy sparks between us, flowing from my body into his. "Wake up, wake up, wake up. Please, you have to wake up for me, Rush. I can't lose you." Though I know he's gone, I keep shaking him. "I command you to wake up!"

Pain slices through my wrist as I'm struck by a bullet.

I throw my head back into the grass and scream, on and on, as I pour out my pain. Not at being shot, but the grief of losing my mate slices through me like the loss of a limb. My future disintegrates like a rainfall of ashes. Bleak, dark, empty.

My screams are loud enough to shatter eardrums and the men drop their weapons to clutch their heads. I don't care about their discomfort. I don't care about anything anymore. The man I have loved since my sixteenth birthday lays dead on top of me.

One week.

That's all the time we had together, but it was glorious and now it's all I'm ever going to get.

My blood boils with rage as I pull myself out from under Rush. Standing, I look down at myself. My bare legs and arms are covered in blood. HIS BLOOD. My clothes are soaked through and the ends of my blond hair are now stained crimson. The life of my mate drained out of him as he protected me.

Fury swamps me as the men who killed my mate recover their senses.

Rush commanded me to curse them and curse them I shall.

“You killed him.” The words come from deep inside me, from a dark place I didn’t know I had.

One man lifts his gun while another looks at me fearfully. I have no pity. I have nothing left inside me except rage.

I throw my hands up and call to the heavens, drawing on the elements to aid in my vengeance:

*“I call upon the skies above,
To strike down the ones I speak of,
With bolts of lightning and thunder’s roar,
May they forever be no more.”*

I yank my arms down and throw my hands wide, sending an arc of lightning at the men in front of me, striking them with the full force of a lightning storm. They drop like flies as they’re shocked senseless.

I give them no reprieve as I lift off the ground, floating toward them, power flowing through my veins. One of the men stares pleadingly back at me. “Electro-shock hurts,” I say in a voice I no longer recognize as my own. It’s a visceral sound, ripped from the depths of my despair. “Have you electrocuted any witches lately?” My gaze drifts to his name badge, then back to his face. “Robby? I bet you have.”

I snap my fingers, and he explodes in a puff of bone, blood, and skin. Cackling, I move on to the next, giving him

the same treatment. Then the next and the next until there's no one left alive, exploding them as they try to run away. Still, the thirst for vengeance flows through me, demanding more blood.

With each kill, the power raging through my body grows, demanding I feed the inferno of hate swirling inside me like a black hole.

An explosion coming from the direction of the asylum catches my attention. Flames pour through the windows of the east wing. Their magic no longer bound, the witches, warlocks and nightwalker are letting loose their fury.

There's more prey inside the asylum, but my brethren deserve to have those. Hopefully they free the humans too, but mortals are no longer my concern. My only thought now is to eradicate the witch killers and their sympathizers. Maybe after I will grieve my lost mate.

I turn toward the town of Pendle, lifting my arms to cast a transportation spell. Something catches my eye and I stare down at my hands in shock. My fingers... the tips are changing colour. Blackening. Dark magic now flows through my veins.

The happy life I once knew is no more. I'm transforming.

CHAPTER 27

EXPLODING HUMANS

RUSH

“**W**ake up, Rush Wolven-North.”

The sound of my name, spoken in a voice similar to my mate’s, wakes me from the dead. Literally. My eyes snap open and I gasp, the breath of life entering my body and re-energizing me on a cellular level.

I was dead.

Yet, here I am, alive and breathing.

My desperate gaze lands on the woman leaning over me. I reach out to touch her blond hair as it falls in my face, then wrap my hand around the back of her head and drag her to me, inhaling.

Not my mate... but close.

“I’m not your mate, Rush Wolven-North,” she says gently, extricating her hair from the tangle of my fingers. “I am mother to your mate. My name is Lilith. We’ve met once before.”

Things are coming back to me in pieces, including my death. I felt the life draining from me. My wolf frantically did everything he could to stop the inevitable, then lay down with a whine as we drifted into oblivion, our mate’s face the last thing we looked upon as our life expired.

Yet, here we are... surprisingly alive.

You brought me back? I push myself up onto my paws.

She smiles. “No, I’m not capable of that kind of magic. Very few are.”

Then how? I demand.

She looks sad, her gaze distant. “Only extreme emotion combined with great power can bring a life back from the dead.” She pauses, as if fearful of speaking the words. “Only a Rage Witch has the capability of casting such a spell.”

Who then?

“I’m afraid... I think... Magdalene did this.”

I stand, shaking off the last vestiges of a mortal death. *She’s a Good Witch though.* I state the obvious, then shake my head. *Wait, how can you hear me? I thought only mates can hear each other.*

“There’s a lot you don’t know about our world.” She stands next to me, her deep purple robe brushing my fur.

Magdalene said the same thing.

“My daughter is intelligent, resourceful, and quite powerful. Perhaps you should listen to her.” She looks toward the burning asylum before turning her worried gaze to the road leading into the town of Pendle where a loud bang and a flash of light cause us both to jump. She blinks rapidly before tuning to me. “Magdalene is losing her way. She needs you. Go to her and help her find her way back to us.”

Aren’t you coming with me? What if she needs you? You’re supposed to be all-powerful, aren’t you? Help her.

Lilith looks at me with a grim expression. “Magdalene has moved beyond my sphere of magical ability. She is now one of the most powerful among us, but if a Rage Witch can’t control her power, she cannot remain here. It’s up to you to help her. To show her the path back to her roots. Keep her safe and show her what love really feels like.”

Why did you come, if not to help your daughter? I ask in confusion and frustration.

She places her hand on my head and strokes my ears. “I came for you, of course, Rush Wolven-North.”

I don’t understand.

She goes to one knee in front of me and places her hands on my face as if holding me still for inspection. “My daughter refuses to survive without you, which makes you a priority in our world. Over two hundred years ago, an Oracle prophesied that a child would be born to Lilith Guardian Witch. The child would be of great significance to our world one day. I did my

duty and produced the child, fulfilling that part of my destiny. I have watched over her ever since, protecting her so she may go on to fulfil her destiny.”

And what is that?

She shakes her head. “The Oracle didn’t say.”

Your duty to the chosen witch isn't why you're here though, is it?

She presses her head against mine and whispers softly, “I didn’t count on loving her so much. She’s my daughter, not a commodity for the Shadow Realm to exploit when the time is right. You’re the only one who can save her. I can’t... I can’t survive without knowing she’s alive and well. She has become my purpose for existing.”

Lifting my head, I nuzzle her cheek before stepping back. *She’s my mate, not the chosen witch, and definitely not a commodity. The moment she was born, she became my purpose, too. I will not fail Magdalene.*

She smiles her gratitude as she stands. “I know. That’s why I’ve allowed you to pursue the most precious gem in our Queendom. Take care of her and protect her, Rush Wolven-North.”

Without another word, she opens a portal and quickly disappears.

I don’t wait to see it close as I turn and race toward the fence perimeter, sailing over with ease. My body is mending itself at a rapid rate, aided by the magic Magdalene must’ve inadvertently given me after my death. I set a path for the town of Pendle, heading straight into the path of destruction.

Tracking my mate isn’t difficult. I assume the burning turned over cars lining main street aren’t the result of a burst gas pipe. An explosion at the courthouse has me veering in that direction, my paws hitting the pavement hard enough to send up puffs of dust.

The night explodes into a ball of fire as the police station attached to the courthouse goes up in flames. Officers pour

from the building, weapons drawn. I follow their line of fire and finally set eyes on my mate.

Shocked by her transformation, I freeze for precious seconds. Her blond hair is streaked in blood, her fingers tipped in sooty blackness as she lifts them, throwing spells like weapons, aiming fireballs at the fleeing officers.

A lineup of officers take aim at her, one of them shouting, "Fire!"

I leap toward her, knowing I'll be too late to protect her from the bullets, but my fear that she'll be hit is unnecessary. She's erected a force field around herself and the bullets bounce harmlessly off.

"Come at me humans!" she screams in an unrecognizable voice. "I'll allow your projectiles through, but not until I've eradicated every trace of this evil town. Never again will you cause such harm to my kind."

Fuck. That sounds ominously suicidal, like she's planning on letting them kill her once she's finished avenging herself on Pendle. I have to let her know I'm alive. Stop her from sacrificing herself.

Lilith's words echo in my head, a reminder of the stakes. I want to save Magdalene for myself, but her mother made it clear she has a greater purpose to fulfil. I have to stop her at all costs. She must not be allowed to die.

Magdalene! I race toward her, but she either doesn't notice or is incapable of hearing me. I try to reach her through our connection, but she's drifted some place I can't follow. When I try to touch her thoughts, they shift and move like smoke.

Before I can reach her, she floats high in the air throwing out fireballs as she moves and destroying everything in her path.

The businesses lining the downtown core are closed so she's not really hurting anyone, but if she reaches the slumbering humans on the other end of Pendle, in her rage, she'll kill them.

I don't care. In fact, I'm pretty sure they all deserve the death my beloved is attempting to deal out to them. I worry about my mate. How she'll react when she snaps out of this and realizes that she's responsible for the deaths of so many mortals.

I race after her floating figure, attempting to keep up while dodging the path of destruction. The windows of a department store are blown out as one of her fireballs makes a direct hit and I'm forced to swerve sharply to avoid the flying glass and mannequin limbs.

I push myself faster until I'm ahead of her, racing through the streets into the residential section of town. I pause, turning around as I realize I've stopped in a quiet, dark cul-de-sac, where my mate is floating gracefully to the ground, her bare feet touching the pavement as she lands.

She looks... incredible.

Her hair, a wild blond halo, her shorts and T-shirt fluttering like she's caught in the middle of a freak storm. Ignoring me, she walks past, lifting her hands as balls of super-charged green energy glow in each one.

Any other time I've encountered Magdalene, the act of throwing up a shield exhausted her, let alone any more complicated spells. Instead of draining, though, she now seems to gain energy from the magic flowing through her.

She's more beautiful than I've ever seen her, rage giving her a surreal luminescence as she moves. She's more than a match for any wolf shifter. How did I never see her clearly? She's always had this potential in her, but now it's flowing free. If it wasn't for my fear that she'll eventually come to regret her actions today, I would do nothing. Simply watch as she does what nature urges her to do.

But I know my mate, she'll hate herself for this if she isn't stopped.

I pad toward her, shifting from wolf to human before stopping in front of her. I can't help the sound of surprise that leaves my lips as I look into her eyes. Every trace of blue is

gone, to be replaced by an inky black that absorbs her pupils until there's nothing left.

"Magdalene," I whisper, reaching for her face.

She gasps and jerks back, lifting her energy ball threateningly.

"It's me." I slap my hand against my chest. "Rush."

She shakes her head and says in a flat voice. "He's dead."

I grip her face, holding it between my hands and forcing her to look at me. "I'm here. You brought me back."

She shakes her head. "I was too weak and he died. Now they'll pay for our suffering. After, I'll rest. I'll lay down with him and close my eyes."

"No, I won't let you do that!" I snarl fiercely, shaking her. "Come back to me, Magdalene. I refuse to let it end this way. We've been given a second chance and we're fucking taking it."

"No!" she shrieks. "I won't let you stop me. They all deserve to die for what they did!"

She hits me in the chest with her ball of energy and I'm thrown backwards hard enough to slide along the pavement. Grimacing, I roll over. Ignoring the road rash, I push to my feet to attempt another intervention.

Before I can speak, she sends a ball of flame toward a house where it hits the detached garage, plowing through the door and setting the interior on fire.

"Magdalene!" I shout. "Stop it this instant!"

"No!" She throws fireball after fireball at me, indiscriminately taking out hedges, mailboxes, and cars. "I will never stop."

Fuck, there's no help for it. I don't want to hurt her, but she refuses to listen. I'll have to take her down and hope she understands when she snaps out of her Rage Witch death spiral, or whatever she's going through.

I run at her, shifting in midair and leaping at her, taking her down to the pavement. I'm allowed one satisfying second of believing I've subdued my mate before I'm thrown so hard, I sail through the air and land on top of a Range Rover two blocks over.

Motherfucker, that hurts.

Rolling off the vehicle and landing with a thump on the pavement, I force myself up as several broken ribs and a number of other cracked bones groan in protest.

I curse Lilith for leaving me to the dirty work after a beautiful, but ultimately useless pep talk. She couldn't have stayed and helped talk her daughter off this ledge? Fucking witches.

As I run toward the explosions, I reach out through our connection, hoping she might hear me, even if I can't understand her thought patterns now. *Magdalene, come back to me. Please allow me to help you. I'm alive, I'm here. Come with me and we'll leave this place together.*

Rush is dead. Rush is dead. Rush is dead. Rush is dead. Rush is dead. Rush is dead. Rush is dead. Rush is...

The heartbreak in her whispered thoughts guts me and almost freezes me in place. The words aren't coming from Magdalene Rage Witch, nor are they spoken by Magdalene Good Witch. They are the thoughts of a sixteen-year-old girl who pursued and fell in love with her wolf shifter mate despite his brutal rejection.

I'm here, I promise her. I will never leave you again. Not for a single second. Reach for me, Magdalene. Take hold of me and let me lead you away from here.

By the time I arrive, Magdalene has cornered a small family consisting of a young woman, a man, and a baby, bundled against its mother's chest. I step in front of them, facing my mate.

Do not do this, my beautiful witch mate.

She stares at me, tears of ebony falling from her blackened eyes, making sooty paths down her face. *Will you hate me if I*

kill them all? she asks in a desperate, silent plea. *They have to pay for the things they've done.*

I could never hate you, I assure her, stepping closer and shifting back to human. The couple behind me gasps, but I ignore them, taking another step toward my mate. “But killing these people won’t make anything better. There will always be hate in this world, whether or not you kill a few haters. Please, let me protect you from it.” I grip her face, rubbing the black tears with my thumbs, smearing them. “Come home with me.”

She blinks up at me as if seeing me for the first time. “Rush?”

“It’s me.”

She collapses against me, sobbing, and I gather her into my arms. Without a backward glance at the town, I walk into the swamplands, my mate held safely against my beating heart.

CHAPTER 28

CLEANING THE PIPES

LEETA

“Ouch!” I try to yank my arm from the guard’s pinching grip, but he maintains his hold as he opens the van door and shoves me inside. “Damn it, Dale, that hurts.” I turn to glare at him as I lower myself onto the bench seat. “You know Magistrate Banbridge doesn’t like bruised goods.”

Dale sneers at me. “That’s the only thing stopping me from giving you the beating you deserve, witch scum.”

I mime yawning as I roll my eyes. “Nice one, human scum. I’m shaking on my broomstick.”

He slams the door shut, cutting off further communication.

I try the handle, but it’s locked.

Slumping on the bench, I grip the edge of the seat as the van moves. It’s always the same. Bundled out to the van, a ten-minute drive to the Magistrate’s mansion, several hours of humiliation, sometimes a beating, then back in the van and back to the asylum.

The first few times I’d actually vied for the Magistrate’s attention, believing I could find a way to escape if I was off the asylum property, but I was quickly shown there would be no escape.

I’m supervised by at least one, if not two or three, male humans when away from the asylum and sadly, I’m no match for them without my magic. The Magistrate takes his safety seriously and as much as he enjoys his play time with us, he never leaves himself open to attack.

Sighing, I tip my head back until I’m leaning against the cool wall of the van’s interior. At least I managed to save Mags. Or at least I hope I did. She’s far too important to leave to the goons running the asylum. With a mouth like hers, they’d end up killing her without knowing who she was.

It's common knowledge that Lilith Guardian Witch will burn this world and the next to ashes if anything happens to her kin. She's both fierce and protective, and Magdalene... well, she's special. She's meant for bigger things. Even a small-fry witch like me knows it.

I just hope she doesn't hate me for telling them who she is.

I nearly tumble off the bench when the van jerks sharply to the left. The ground gets bumpier for a few seconds until Dale brings the vehicle back under control. I crane to see through the bars into the front seat. "Take it easy, human. I'd like to get there in one piece."

"Fucking dog in the road," Dale mutters.

I hope he didn't hit the poor creature.

I don't have time to think about it though as a few minutes later, we're pulling into the Magistrate's driveway.

I stand and wait, and when the back door is opened, I drop to the ground, not wanting Dale to grab me again. Of course, the wretch knows of my disgust toward him and takes every opportunity to touch me. He takes my arm in a bruising grip and drags me toward the front door, which opens to reveal a frowning Magistrate Banbridge.

"This isn't the one I asked for," he snaps, glaring at me and Dale as we approach. "I wanted the blond."

For the love of Earth Mother, is it too much for these assholes to learn our names?

"She's in a meeting with Portence," Dale mutters, shoving me toward the Magistrate for inspection.

Banbridge eyes me, an evil glow lighting in his gaze. "This one'll do, though you guys could fatten her up a little. Too bony for my tastes."

Stop feeding us soggy fish sticks and stale bread, and I might gain some weight, asshole.

"Bring her inside."

The Magistrate lumbers into the house, puffing with effort as he moves his portly body.

Dale shoves me through the door and follows. As we enter the magistrate's study, he pulls the doors to a cabinet open and tosses an outfit at me. I catch it and start changing. We've done this enough times that my outrage at having to get naked in front of these men has dissipated to mild annoyance.

Once I've finished changing, I fold my polyester asylum jumper and set it in the cabinet. Straightening, I face the two men.

The Magistrate approaches and hands me a bucket and a sponge and nods at me to begin.

I sink to my knees at his feet and dip the sponge into the soapy, hot water before dropping it on the floor and scrubbing. This will go on for hours and hours, until dawn breaks across the landscape and my hands are cracked and bloody, my knees bruised and my legs stiff and cramping.

Sometimes I wish it was sex he wanted. Instead, he's a weird cleaning pervert who gets his rocks off by watching his female captives on their hands and knees wearing skimpy maid uniforms, cleaning the dirt he trails throughout his mansion. It's not just floors either. I'll have to dust every surface, clean his bathrooms, do his laundry, and polish his shoes.

It's tedious, but not the worst thing that could happen in this mansion... I guess. It's hell on a witch who's never done a lick of cleaning in her life because, hello, magic. Why would I?

I haven't been cleaning long, maybe half an hour, when I feel a shift in the air. I sit back on my heels, tilting my head as I listen. Something is buzzing in my head, like an electrical current, but it doesn't feel aimed at me. More of a general burst of... magic, which should be impossible. As far as I know, Portence's anti-magic collars don't fail.

Unless...

“Back to work,” the Magistrate snarls, kicking at me from his place in a leather chair next to the fire.

I grunt as I take a boot to the thigh, falling onto my side before pushing myself up on my hands. I don't bother doing as he says though because another burst of magic sizzles through my veins.

It's real! I'm getting my magic back!

I jump to my feet, holding my hands out and staring at them.

I don't see anything, but I can feel the flow of magic as it goes from a trickle to a flood, magic pouring through every inch of me. I look toward the two men. Understanding dawns across the Magistrate's face, but Dale looks confused and annoyed. He takes a step toward me, then hesitates as I lift my hands, sending sparks across the room.

I laugh, giddy with happiness. My magic is back!

“Portence is dead,” I breathe, lifting my gaze to the men in front of me. “She's dead and now we're free.”

Dale attempts to pull his taser gun from a side holster, but I flick my wrist and the weapon turns into a daisy in his hand. I'm rather proud of myself for mastering that particular spell early in my spell casting education.

They step toward me and I wave my hands threateningly. “You sure you want to do that?”

The Magistrate lunges for me while Dale turns heel and runs. Laughing, I flick my fingers, throwing the Magistrate over his desk and landing him in his chair, which tumbles backwards. Another flick and the locks on all the doors engage, forcing Dale to remain in the mansion.

“You two have a lot to answer for.” I shout so a panicked Dale can hear me. “Lucky for you, I'm a Good Witch and we don't use our powers for evil, like you guys.”

“You'll let us go?” Dale's quavering voice floats toward me.

Laughing, I shake my head. “Silly human. There’s a lot I can do to you that isn’t evil. Want me to show you?”

“No!”

“Hmm... I think I will anyway.” I flick my wrist and two sets of extra-large French maid outfits, identical to the one I’m wearing, appear. “As Magistrate Banbridge is fond of saying, you’re not leaving until this place is spotless.” Power surges through me. “Now get back in here, Dale, and put your outfit on. You can’t scrub unless your ass cheeks are hanging out.”

“Please...” Banbridge pulls himself up using the edge of the desk. “I’ll give you money. Whatever you want! Just leave this place and never come back.”

I chew on my lip, pretending to think about his offer before slowly approaching the desk. “The problem with that, Franklin... you don’t mind if I call you Franklin? Now the problem with your offer is you picked the wrong damn species to fuck with. What need of money do witches have when we can conjure pretty much anything we want with a flick of the wrist?”

I demonstrate by flicking my wrist and conjuring a pile of human currency on his desk. His eyes widen as he realizes how much trouble he’s in. “I think you’re figuring it out, Frank. You see, I’m not the only witch you’ve fucked with, and while I may be a non-murderous Good Witch, you’ve locked up some pretty vengeful magical folk and essentially shoved lightning rods up their asses. What do you think they’ll do once they’ve finished levelling the asylum?”

Banbridge’s eyes widen. “They’ll come for me”

“You were kind enough to show some of us exactly where you live.” I tilt my head, pretending to think. “Well, only the females you deemed attractive enough for your disgusting maid’s outfit, but that won’t matter because in the world of witches, females tend to be more powerful than males.” I stare at both men, then flick my wrist, sending their respective outfits flying toward them. “Now, let’s get you boys changed. These chores aren’t going to do themselves. Maybe if you do a

good enough job, I'll let you try running before my asylum friends arrive.”

CHAPTER 29

CHANGED

MAGDALENE

Held in a comfortable cocoon, a gentle swaying moves me gradually toward wakefulness. I feel the steady but muted beat of a drum against my cheek while warmth seeps into my side where I lay against something solid.

Moaning, I reach out to touch the wall and my fingers encounter warm muscled flesh.

“I have you.” The words are softly spoken, but there’s an implacable steel to them. Something familiar, but also painful.

Something... lost.

Something I will never experience again because... my love is dead.

Images bombard me.

The town, the courthouse, the leering face of the Magistrate, Phil, electro-shock, tasers, Leeta, Portence...
Rush!

“I’m here, baby, nothing bad is going to happen to you ever again.” His voice cracks, telling me it’s real. It’s not something I made up because I can’t cope with the loss of my mate. He’s here, he’s really here.

“I’m here.” He acknowledges my thought. He stops moving, then I’m lifted and warm lips brush against my forehead. “I’ll never leave you.”

“But you died,” I sob, turning my face into his chest, refusing to look at him in case he’s not real.

“Open your eyes and look at me, love. I’m as real as you are. Come on, you can do it.”

I do as he commands, blinking against his hard chest before peeking up at him. It’s him! Reaching up, I curve my palm against his cheek and touch the bristled sandpapery skin. Feels like him, too. No matter how often Rush shaves, his wolf insists he always has a five-o’clock shadow.

But how did he survive?

He goes down to one knee with me still cradled in his arms and gently sets me on a bed of springy moss with the solid trunk of a tree at my back. He sits next to me and takes my hand. My eyes wander his bare flesh, mapping each muscle, each tendon and each vein, the lifeblood flowing through. He looks solid and real, perfect.

“I didn’t survive.”

My gaze flies back to his face as my heart twists.

“I died at the asylum, but you brought me back. You summoned the life back into my body and healed my wounds.” He grimaces and his hand slides across his lower ribcage. “Mostly.”

I press my hands against his side. Closing my eyes, I allow the flow of magic to move from my body to his, warming him and healing the last of his injuries. When I open my eyes, he’s looking down at me, his expression earnest and loving.

He’s never looked at me this way before. As though he cares.

I pull his head down and press my lips to his.

Sparks shoot between us, igniting in the cool night air. Desperation hits me as I realize how close I came to losing this man, to losing my mate. I’ve never felt anything like the crushing pain that came after he was killed. It was the worst moment of my life.

I deepen the kiss, pressing myself against him, delving into his head and wrapping myself around his essence, observing him, protecting him, loving him.

His wolf greets me, leaping excitedly around my mental essence while Rush’s arms creep tentatively around me, holding me tighter, but not tight enough. He’s treating me like I might break, but I’m not the one who died. I didn’t lose my life this night, he did. I need to feel him against me, inside of me.

“Fuck me, Rush,” I whisper against him.

Gripping him tightly, I thrust my tongue past the barrier of his lips and run my hands roughly down his arms and chest while wiggling on top of his growing erection.

He groans against my lips and tears his mouth away long enough to say, “Fuck, baby, I’ll take whatever you throw at me. Fuck me the way you want. I’m here for you.”

A dam breaks inside me and I fling myself against him, knocking him onto his back in the moss. Climbing on top of him, I smash my lips against his while fumbling to get my shorts off, an arduous task when I refuse to tear my lips from his.

Catching onto my problem, Rush grips the waistband and roughly yanks my shorts and panties down to my feet. I yelp against his mouth at the sting, but it’s soon replaced by the pleasure of having Rush’s fingers bite into my bare ass.

Reaching between us, I grip the base of his cock. It’s so big, I can’t wrap my hand all the way around and I have a moment’s hesitation over whether he’ll fit in this position, then decide I don’t care. I want all of him inside me right this instant.

“Fuck, you’re killing me with your thoughts,” he snarls against my lips, his fingers gripping my ass cheeks with enough force to bruise. “Take me, baby. Take all of me.”

He lifts me and guides me to his cock where I press the velvety crown, slick with pre-cum, to my entrance. Flinging my head back, I stare up at the shadowy canopy of trees and midnight sky as I slowly, inch by inch, take my mate’s cock into my body.

I’m panting from exertion by the time I’m seated on top of him.

“So fucking beautiful,” he groans.

I spread my fingers across his chest, feeling the softness of the springy greyish-red hairs over his steel pecs. Pressing my hands down, I lift my hips, gliding up his cock before impaling myself. Lust sparks between us, sending a bolt of pleasure right to my core.

“You feel that?” I whisper. “So good.”

“Don’t stop,” he groans, his face screwed up in concentration.

As I fuck him, lifting my hips and dropping, digging my nails into his chest, testing his resilience, something moves in my head. A shadow reaching for his essence, reaching for the heart of him, wrapping around him and his wolf, strangling them.

“No!” I gasp, jerking bolt upright.

Rush grabs my arms, anchoring me to him before I can climb off and back away from him. Sternly, he says, “Don’t you dare stop, Magdalene.”

“I have to!” I shout, panicked. “It’s her. She’s dangerous, she’ll hurt you!”

Using his grip on my arms, he jerks me down to him until our faces are inches apart. “She *is* you, baby, and you can’t hurt me. I promise.”

It’s not true and we both know it, but I trust him and I want him more than I want my next breath. Our lips meet in an explosive kiss that sends my lust sizzling higher than ever. His too, if the pornographic reel playing in his brain is anything to go by.

“Yes, yes, please!” I shout, catching one of his thoughts and tearing my lips from his. “Do that to me!”

Without pause, he flips me over onto my back and slams his hips into mine, entering me with enough force to pound me into the moss, each thrust more powerful than the last. Elation shoots through me and I dig my fingers into his back, wrap my legs around his waist and cling, using a magical current to lend me strength as I meet each thrust with one of my own.

Unable to reach the shining peak just over the horizon, I grip his shoulders and use another bolt of magic to shove him off me. With a grunt, he rolls onto his back and I take the position of supremacy, climbing on top and fucking him with everything I have in me.

He digs his hands into my hair and drags my head back before surging up against me and sinking his teeth into my breast.

A scream tears from the depths of my being and I shout hoarsely, “Do it! Finish the bond.”

The words barely leave my mouth and he lifts me off him, flinging me away. I hit the ground rolling and come up on my hands and knees, confused. Then he’s on top of me, his chest pressed against my back as he pins me in place and thrusts his cock into me from behind.

“Oh fuck!” I scream loud enough for every creature in the vicinity to hear.

Wrapping my hair around his hand, he yanks my head back so he can speak in my ear as he fucks me. “I want every part of you, mate, in every way I can get you. I want to fuck this ass, that mouth. I want to smear my seed all over your body, marking you to the world as mine. I want to sink my teeth into that tender flesh and wrap myself around every thought you have until you won’t know where you begin and I end. I want to claim you more than I’ve ever wanted anything.”

“Yes!” I scream, reaching back to grip his wrist where his fingers dig into my waist. “Please, Rush!”

“Not today, mate. Not yet.”

Shocked, I scan his thoughts to find out why he refuses to mark me and what I find sends a bolt of fury through me. I surge forward, breaking contact with him, pulling myself off his cock. I turn to face him, still on my hands and knees. “You think I’m too weak to handle a claiming?”

“That’s not what I said,” he growls, facing me, his cock shiny with my juices as it reaches toward his bellybutton.

“It’s what you thought,” I accuse.

He shakes his head. “You misunderstand, I meant – “

“I know what you meant!” I jump to my feet. “When I was a Good Witch, you thought I was too physically weak to

handle a claiming, but now that I'm... now that I'm... different," I can't bring myself to speak the words because it'll make my new reality too real, "You think I'm too unstable to claim. When am I going to finally be enough for you?"

He grimaces and I know my hit landed.

"You're purposely misunderstanding me, Magdalene." I can tell that he's trying to speak calmly, but his words come out in frustrated growls. "A claiming takes preparation, it's not easy on either person."

"You don't think I'm ready." Anger surges again, sending sparks flying into the air around us, lighting up the dark woods. I look down at my newly blackened fingers. The urge to curse Rush is strong, to punish him for daring to dictate how our mating will go. I know my anger is disproportionate to the argument, but the power flowing through my body feels so good, I want to let it have its way.

I look at Rush, bringing my hands up between us.

"Don't you fucking dare, Magdalene or I swear I'll – "

I snap my fingers before he can finish the sentence and the forest explodes into chaos as branches fly through the air in a storm of my creation. Lifting off the ground, I float toward the canopy, intent on leaving Rush to deal with his hard-on while dodging tree branches.

"Not a chance." He grips my ankle and yanks me back down to earth, forcing me to stand in front of him.

Narrowing my eyes, I snap my fingers and all the branches, sticks, rocks, and whatever else the wind is whipping around starts pelting him. A stick streaks across his forehead, leaving behind a bloody path.

Magdalene Good Witch would have been horrified, but not me. The sight of blood dripping into my enemy's eyes is scintillating. I want more!

He grabs my arms and pulls me up onto my toes. "We are not enemies, Magdalene. Stop this madness right now, or so help me – "

“What?” I shout in his face. “You’ll stalk me for seventy-two years? You’ll reject me again? You’ll lure me into a town full of witch-hating assholes?”

“No, I’ll lock you in my tower and keep you safe forever.” His words are romantic, but the violence behind them is enough to make me worried he’ll really try it.

I jerk against him. “You can try, but we both know I’ll get out.”

“And I will find you. Wherever you go, however far you go, I will always find you because you belong to me.” He drags me toward him until our noses almost touch. “I’m an animal, Magdalene. My instincts drive my actions. It’s what I’m trying to tell you. If I bite you, it’ll unleash my wolf and you could die.”

“I don’t care!” It’s a cry torn from the depths of my soul, but it’s the truth. I don’t care whether I live or die. I am no longer Magdalene... I’m someone else now.

“You won’t have a choice because I refuse to let you go. I will protect you, even from yourself.”

“Then prove it!” I shout at him.

He stares at me for several long seconds, then unleashes a storm even bigger than the one I created around us. He slams his mouth onto mine so hard his teeth cut into my lip.

Gripping his head, I kiss him back with equal fervour.

In seconds, the last of my clothing lay in shreds on the ground.

He lifts me up and pulls me down onto his cock, seating himself to the hilt, never breaking lip contact.

Leaves, sticks, everything whips around us as he fucks me, lifting me in his powerful arms and dropping me onto his cock, his face twisted in ecstasy as he reaches for his orgasm.

Placing a hand at my back to protect me, he pushes me against a tree and fucks me, his hips slamming into mine with bruising intensity.

Reaching up the tree, I grip the trunk and close my eyes, losing myself in the building orgasm. His silken cock punishing me, the bark of the tree abrading my skin in a delicious symphony of sensation. Then I'm tipping over the edge as pleasure streaks through me, coming in waves with each stroke of his cock.

I shriek my pleasure to the heavens as he seeks his own release. Gripping me so hard I can barely breathe, he wraps his arms around the tree and slams himself home, one, two, three more times before he throws his head back and shouts his orgasm. He stares into my eyes as his barb hooks me deep inside, and we stand that way, locked together physically and spiritually, until the barb recedes, releasing us both.

“I'm... I'm a...” Why can't I say it?

Rage Witch.

A shudder ripples down my spine.

He nods, his expression grim. “I know, baby, and I'm gonna do whatever it takes to make this okay for you. You're not alone.”

But I am alone.

Rush can't know what it's like to become a different person in a matter of seconds. Or maybe he can. My mate is a shifter, after all. If anyone can understand the concept of change, it's him. Maybe if I trust him, trust that he'll help me, I'll be okay.

“Take me home,” I whisper.

CHAPTER 30

**YOU, ME, AND
SEVENTEEN**

RUSH

When I try to pick her up, Magdalene struggles until I set her back on her feet.

“I can walk.”

She turns and heads into the woods.

“Mags, I just want...”

“Don’t call me that!” she says sharply.

Surprised, I ask, “What do you want me to call you?”

Her shoulders slump and she looks defeated. Her voice is almost inaudible when she speaks. “You were calling me Magdalene and I liked it because it felt special.”

Closing the distance between us, I brush my knuckles down her cheek, noting that it feels cold. I need to get her indoors, dressed and sitting in front of a warm fire. “Your name is Magdalene and it’s a beautiful name, but as you once told me, your friends and loved ones call you Mags. Do I not count as a friend?”

She blinks up at me, tears gathering in her eyes like jewels. “I’ve waited a long time to hear you say that.”

“Too long,” I admit. “I was a colossal ass and I’ll never be able to make up for the things I’ve said and done to you.”

Despite the sadness cloaking her, she manages a smile. “You more than made up for it by coming back from the dead.”

I take her cold hand. “So, what’s the verdict? Are you Mags or Magdalene?”

Her smile disappears and she stares absently into the darkness. “I don’t know who I am anymore, but you can call me by either name. Or baby. I liked it when you called me baby.”

Frowning, I cast my memory back, then remember that I did indeed call her baby when we were fucking on the forest floor. I've never called anyone that before. Never had the urge.

"Baby," I say the word, testing it. Something about it feels right. She's my baby. I want to care for her, protect her and give her everything she needs to be happy. Squeezing her hand, I urge her to walk next to me. "Let's get back to the tower. Who knows what Fallon's been up to since we've been gone. Last time I saw him, he was looking for a snack."

I glance at her as we walk. She can't hide the power that swirls around her. It's invisible to the naked eye, but I can feel it snapping and sizzling in the air, wrapping around her like a fancy new cloak. If we weren't mates, every instinct in my body would urge me to run away, but both me and my wolf think her magic, no matter how deadly, is about the cutest thing we've ever seen. Fuck, I've gone soft and can't even bring myself to regret it. I'm just so damn happy to have her back after a harrowing night.

She lifts her hand to tuck a lock of hair behind her ear and I notice the blackened fingertips. I want to examine them, lick them, sniff them, see what she can do with them, but I feel her confusion and fear. She despises this change. She found comfort and contentment in her life as a Good Witch. Now she has to leave that life behind for an uncertain future as a Rage Witch.

It's my fault. If I hadn't lured him to my swamp and pushed him to mate with me, none of this would ever have happened.

I catch her stray thought, though I don't let on. Her distress is so potent she's unable to block me, even though she can usually shield her thoughts like she's been doing it every day of her life. My heart breaks for her, but I can't let her think our future holds anything but our mating.

She's also wrong. If she hadn't pushed me into mating, I would have eventually figured it out myself. Once I had her under my power, it took me less than a week to fall for her. Even if I hadn't taken her, I would've eventually woken up to her considerable charms.

“Yeah, but it might’ve taken you another seventy-two years to figure it out,” she says with a sad smirk, reminding me she can slip into my thoughts with alarming ease.

“If it were to take that long it’s because my mate is a brat,” I say with a chuckle, pleased that she sounds less depressed.

I take her arm as we break through the trees and into the clearing at the base of the tower.

“The door’s wide open,” she notes, looking at me worriedly.

I nod, bracing myself for anything. With the freedom to leave the tower, Fallon might be long gone. Or he might’ve killed a deer and dragged it inside. Or best-case scenario, chasing me into a swamp tired him out and he laid down for a long nap in his favourite spot by the fire.

Only one way to find out.

We make our way to the tower, stepping through the door and into the brightly lit room. At least Fallon had enough faculties about him to turn on a light. We spot him right away, but he’s not alone. He’s sitting in the middle of the room in his shifter form, staring at a creature opposite him.

“Seventeen!” I say in surprise, then, in case Fallon plans on doing to him what he was trying to do to me when I was a Pomeranian, hurry to add, “Don’t hurt him. He’s a friend.”

“You’re friends with a dog?” Magdalene looks surprised.

Sighing, I rub a hand down my face. Long fucking day. “Yeah, we met in town and I helped him out of a bad spot. Didn’t think he’d make it all the way out here.”

Magdalene drops to her knees in front of the hound dog, reaching a hand out for him to sniff. Once he does, she runs her fingers over his head and scratches his ears.

Loving it, he nudges her to use her nails on a certain spot.

Not one to be left out, Fallon pushes against her on the other side and soon my mate is sitting on the floor draped in smelly, drooling canines.

A bolt of jealousy surges through me and I have to resist the urge to throw them both out of the tower for the night. Instead, I remind myself that she'll be going to bed with me, so I can share her for a few minutes.

Absolutely not! my wolf shouts, his hackles rising as he snarls at Fallon and Seventeen.

“Did you just growl at us?” Magdalene asks incredulously, her eyebrows going up.

Shit.

“Uh, no, it was my stomach.” Nice save. “I’ll go make us something. You must be starving.”

As I turn toward the kitchen, she jumps to her feet, knocking the others aside. “No!” Her sharp tone stops me in my tracks.

She blushes and gives me a crooked smile that sets my heart pounding. “Let me do it. I haven’t conjured a meal in ages and now that my magic is out in the open for everyone to see, I can start pulling my weight around here.”

I want to tell her she was pulling her weight just fine when she wasn’t using magic. She helped Fallon find his appetite again, she cleaned dishes, she helped me out around the tower. If that was her being unhelpful, it’ll be interesting to see what she can do with her magic.

“Everything!” she says excitedly, clapping her hands. Pointing at the corner with my makeshift door-table on cinderblocks, she snaps her fingers. The rest of us gape in appreciation as it transforms into a sturdy wooden table with four legs and six chairs.

Turning, she points at the rusty metal armour and says, “Scour and shine,” before snapping her fingers. Without pausing, she turns on the spot, snapping her fingers and muttering as she transforms the tower.

It’s the most magical thing I’ve ever seen, literally and figuratively. Lit candles fly overhead, lining themselves up in a candelabra that seems to fly out of nowhere before landing in the centre of the table. A plush rug appears at the base of the

fireplace, along with a poker set and bellows. Another snap and the windows are sparkly clean and sporting emerald damask drapes.

“What are we missing?” Magdalene asks rhetorically, looking this way and that. “Oh, yes!” One snap and a bowl filled with dead squirrels appears on the floor in front of Fallon. His eyes widen and he drops his snout, immediately devouring the delicious meal. A second snap and a bowl filled with kibbles appears in front of Seventeen, into which he gratefully dips his nose.

“One for you,” she says, sending me a look before snapping and pointing at the table.

A burger the size of my fist appears next to a pile of steaming pub style French fries. A bottle of ketchup stands next to the plate. Gaping at the spread, my mouth watering from the burger aroma, I say, “How did you know?”

“That this is your favourite meal? You aren’t the only stalker in this relationship. The day I got a crystal ball for my birthday was the greatest day of my life until you showed up in my swamp last week. I checked on you constantly, following you everywhere for months.”

I raise an eyebrow at her. “Must’ve been boring.”

She laughs. “Yeah. I stopped checking in so often when I realized you mostly stayed in your wolf form and spent virtually all your time searching for something.” Not something. Her. “But the few times you went into human settlements, you beelined for the places that serve beer, burgers, and fries. Oh, that reminds me!” A foaming mug of beer appears next to the ketchup.

“If this isn’t love, I don’t know what is,” I groan, reaching for the beer and downing it in one gulp before setting it on the table with a satisfied burp.

I look at Magdalene expectantly, hoping for a refill, but she’s looking at me as though I told her my parents were cats and I’m adopted.

“You... love me?”

I stare at her, then remember what I said. I open my mouth to respond, but she shakes her head. “Never mind. Not here, not like this.”

She tries to walk past me to sit in front of the most delicious salad I’ve ever seen, filled with greens, onions, cheese, nuts, and berries, and that’s saying a lot considering until now, I didn’t consider salads food. I catch her arm, forcing her to stop.

Her gaze is pained and vulnerable. My heart aches for the things going on in her head. She’s struggling with her new identity, attempting to deny it while embracing the rush of powerful magic. She wants my love, but she can’t bear to hear the words.

“Why not here?” I demand with a growl. “You have to know I love you, baby. I went to dog prison and killed an old lady for you. I haven’t punished you for turning me into a seven-pound razor-toothed hellhound, and, what’s more, I like your mother. Like I said, if this isn’t love, I don’t know what is.”

The corner of her lip lifts and I use my thumb to push it higher. She pulls her face away with a giggle. “I didn’t know you met my mom.”

I nod seriously. “Twice. She’s one intense witch, but I respect her.” Gripping Magdalene tightly, I pull her against me. “The thing I like best about her though, is her devotion to you.”

She places her hand against my chest. “Thank you, Rush. I needed to hear that. All of it.” She goes up to her toes and presses a kiss to my chin, murmuring, “I love you, too.”

Happiness grows inside me and I puff up in pride. I was never the guy who knew what the right thing to say was. My actions spoke for me because I rarely spoke for myself. Yet, with Magdalene, instinct drives me.

“Maybe we can invite my mother over for a meal sometime.” She glances around the tower. “Now that I’ve cleaned it up, she’ll be perfectly comfortable here.”

“Absolutely not,” I say quickly, my wolf leaping inside me in solidarity. I might respect my future mother-in-law, but I’m not ready to have her in my space. Especially since I intend to stash my brother somewhere safe, then spend eternity fucking Magdalene in every part of the tower, even the ceiling, if she can float us up there.

“I can,” she says, laughing. “But I refuse to allow you to kick Fallon out. Or our new buddy.” We both look toward the boys who are sprawled out on the rug next to a cheerfully snapping fire. “I don’t think I can bear to let either of them go.”

“Seriously?” I grumble. “You just met Seventeen. You can’t be attached already.”

She shrugs. “He’s part of the family now.”

Part of the family. I don’t hate the sound of that.

Before I can respond to assure her we’ll keep the family together, a feminine voice interrupts. “Magdalene Rage Witch.” I shove Magdalene behind me as we turn to face the open door, but not before she catches sight of the intruder.

“Lila!”

There’s no softening to the woman’s expression as she says, “Magdalene Rage Witch, you are in very big trouble.”

CHAPTER 31

CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY

RUSH

Magdalene gapes at the woman as I let out a ferocious growl. In seconds, I've transformed and stand between my mate and the intruder, my teeth bared and my hackles up. Fallon joins me, along with Seventeen, who crouches in front of us, his shoulders hunched, deep growls vibrating up his throat.

We launch a joint attack, determined to keep Magdalene from harm, but before we can lay a single tooth or claw on the stranger, a barrier goes up around her and we bounce harmlessly away.

I hate witch force fields more than I hate anything else about these creatures.

I swing my head toward my mate to find that she was the one to erect the barrier, the energy flowing from her palm holding it in place. The other witch looks unperplexed as her gaze narrows on Magdalene's blackened fingers.

"So, it's true, you have changed."

Tears leap to Magdalene's eyes and she drops her hand causing the barrier to fall. I tense, ready to protect my mate, but Fallon loses interest and wanders back to the fireplace, followed closely by Seventeen.

"I have." Magdalene's voice breaks and tears shimmer in her eyes as her shoulders slump in defeat. "I don't know what happened, Lila. I was so angry and sad, something just burst out of me."

So, she knows the witch. I sit on my haunches but decide to stay in my wolf form. Can't trust a witch. Except Magdalene... and maybe her mother.

This new one wears a deep blue cloak over a smart black business suit. On her feet, are sturdy boots and her dark hair is swept up into a severe ponytail.

Lila rushes past me without a single glance of fear in my direction and wraps Magdalene in her arms. “I’m so sorry. I came as soon as I could get away. When I heard that you’d become a... a...”

“Rage Witch,” Magdalene finishes, then smiles sadly at her friend. “That’s two hugs in one decade. You *must* be worried.”

“Cynthia can help you,” Lila says in a rush, seizing Magdalene’s shoulders. “We can hide you away somewhere in the Shadow Realm and she can teach you everything she knows. She would’ve come with me, but we decided she was best off pleading your case first and applying to mentor you. If that doesn’t work, we’ll stash you somewhere. She’s worried for you too and wants you to come back with me, but we have to hurry.”

Who is Cynthia? I demand suspiciously.

Lila’s wife.

Find out why you have to hurry, I demand of my mate.

She dutifully asks, “Why do we need to rush away?”

“You blew up a human settlement, Mags,” Lila says, as though it should be obvious. “The Oracles will demand answers and you may be punished for your actions.”

Magdalene looks fearful and I stiffen my posture, ready to snap back into attack mode if this new witch makes any false moves.

“Punished?” Magdalene whispers. “But the humans hurt me and so many of our kind over the years.”

“Maybe they did, but it’s not up to you to decide how the humans should be punished. The Oracle assigned to your case will determine if what you did is justified or if you need to be separated from the human population.”

“But you think I was justified, right?” The crack in Magdalene’s voice has me wanting to find my way to this so-called Shadow Realm so I can eviscerate anyone who thinks

my witch did wrong. She was a Good Witch before she changed and she'll always be a Good Witch to me.

She gives me a sad smile. *That doesn't make any sense, but it's sweet and I'll take it.*

“Are you kidding?!” Lila shakes Magdalene as she says fiercely, “No way did my best friend do wrong. I know damn well every action you took was justified and I'll have your back no matter what you decide to do, but I'm not an Oracle. They can be... harsh. That's why I'm here. I came to warn you that you're about to be charged with crimes against humanity. The Warrior Witches *will* come for you.”

Enough of this.

Growing to my full human height, I tower high above the head of the witch who dares to threaten my woman with arrest. I reach for her, but Magdalene snatches my hand. “Calm down, Rush. She's a Guardian Witch. It's not her job to arrest me and she's not threatening me. She's giving me time to plan.”

Lila stares at Magdalene, ignoring me. “Please, come with me. I must get you to the Shadow Realm. I can't protect you here.”

“You don't have to,” Magdalene says softly, running her hand up my arm. “I already have protection and he won't let anything happen to me.”

Lila looks at me as though I hold as much interest as a cockroach, her eyes flicking up and down insultingly. “He won't stand a chance against our Warriors.”

I snort and glare at the easily snappable woman. “I saw your so-called Warriors fight during the Human-Shifter war. They were about as useful as wet sponges compared to the shifter army.”

She rolls her eyes and dead-stares me.

Jesus, this woman would be terrifying with a pen and a clipboard.

“You think we risked our best witches in your puny war?” She laughs, but the sound isn’t amused. “We let your side borrow a few minor witches in exchange for some swampland. If the history books are to be believed, our kind gesture allowed you to win the war much sooner than you would have otherwise. You say wet sponges? Well, your own history texts say those witches were more than a match for anything the humans threw at them.”

“You weren’t around seven hundred years ago,” I snap, slapping a hand to my chest. “I was.”

“I know.” She steps up to me, giving me her uncomfortably hard stare. “You were in the history books, too. You ran errands for your wolfy friends, staying safely away from the action. If you weren’t on the battlefield, your knowledge of the war is about as good as mine.”

Ouch.

Lila’s wrong. I was on the battlefield more than I like to think about, and my role in the war was much more than that of an errand boy. I was to slip in and out of the enemy camps and report back to our side with any useful information. I wonder how sad Magdalene would be if I removed this pest from existence.

I look at my mate. “*This* is your best friend?”

I decide the witch’s unexpected visit is worthwhile when Magdalene gives me the first genuine smile I’ve seen since before the Pomeranian fiasco. “I have another bestie named Katey, but I doubt you’ll like her any better. She’s been warning me against getting involved with a shifter for decades.”

Fuck. Can’t she have any decent friends? “I need you to stop befriending wolf haters.”

“I don’t hate wolves,” Lila says coldly. “I don’t like you because you stalked and terrorized my friend for over seven decades.”

“That’s a bit harsh,” Magdalene defends.

“I was protecting her,” I add, stretching the truth. I *was* protecting her, I just didn’t know it.

Lila huffs and refocuses on Magdalene. “You’re not coming with me, are you?”

Thankfully, Magdalene shakes her head and tightens her grip on my arm. “No, I belong here with Rush.”

“I have to get back, but you can expect to hear from the Shadow Realm soon.” Lila grips Magdalene’s shoulder. “Please don’t resist when they come to arrest you. I couldn’t stand it if anything happened to you.”

Blinking back tears, Magdalene hugs her friend before the woman steps away, her blue robe flowing about her. Pointing at me, she says, “Do a better job of protecting her. She’s too special to lose in some petty dog fight.”

I growl at her, but she strides toward the fireplace, startling Fallon and Seventeen into jumping from her path. Without a backward glance, she says, “Shadow Realm,” and disappears into the flames.

I gape after her. “How...?”

Magdalene doesn’t answer, but stares absently after her friend.

I grip her arms and turn her to face me. “Don’t listen to her. You’re not going anywhere. I won’t let them take you away, I promise.”

She smiles sadly. “You won’t have a choice. She’s not wrong in her warning. There’s nothing a single wolf shifter can do to stop the Warrior Witches from completing their task. If they’re ordered to arrest me, then they won’t stop until they’ve done it.”

“What about your mother? Is there anything she can do?”

Staring toward the fire, she murmurs, “Lilith is likely the reason I haven’t been arrested yet. She probably went straight to the Oracles and requested an audience the moment I broke magical law.”

Thinking quickly, I say, “Then we’ll leave. If they can’t get to you, they can’t arrest you.”

She looks up at me with an expression that tells me she loves me, but she thinks I’m brain deficient. “They can find me anywhere on the planet. They use magic trackers to pinpoint the location of their prey. Every time I cast a spell, they’ll be able to track me. It’s why Lila was offering to take me to the Shadow Realm.”

Confused, I ask, “I don’t understand. They can’t track you there?”

She nods, adding, “Due to the sheer amount of magical energy in the Shadow Realm, the Warrior Witches have difficulty tracking individuals.”

“What if we hide in a witch heavy settlement?” I ask, desperate to find a solution. If these Warrior Witches come for my mate, I will gladly sacrifice myself to keep her safe. Except I can’t do that, because if I die, then Magdalene will either be killed or taken. Either way, our time together will come to an end and I can’t bear the thought.

She reaches up to touch my cheek, rubbing her thumb across the bristles. I close my eyes, enjoying the sensation. A moment of calm in the wake of our shitshow of a day.

“You’d be willing to live with dozens of other witches just to keep me safe?”

“I know I’ve given you reason to doubt me, but I will do anything to keep you safe. I’ll move in with a witch family and become their faithful pet if it means keeping you safe.”

She sighs, but the sound is contented. “If you’d said all this to me a day ago, we could’ve avoided what happened in that awful town.”

“I know.” I grip her face. “I have a lot to make up for and I want an eternity to do it.”

“Me too,” she whispers, going up to her toes and pressing her lips to mine. “But I can’t hide forever, and I won’t. I must face the consequences of my actions.”

I tighten my grip on her arms. “I won’t allow them to take you.”

“Wolf-Haven.” We turn to look at Fallon, who sits naked in the chair by the fire, having turned human at some point. “Take her to the pack-lands. Our brothers will keep her safe.”

I should have thought of it, but my logic is scattered by the thought of losing my mate. Fallon is right, Wolf-Haven is the best place to protect Magdalene. I’ve been running as a lone wolf for so long, I don’t consider it home, but it is. As a member of the royal family, and alpha to the packs, along with my brothers, I will always be welcome in Wolf-Haven. As will my mate.

“Are you feeling alright?” I haven’t seen my brother this lucid in months. His gaze seems sharper than before and he doesn’t appear confused.

He shrugs. “I feel... fine.”

Magdalene grins at him. “You’re more than fine, Fallon. You’re awesome.”

He returns her smile and I give her a push until she’s standing behind me. “If we go to Wolf-Haven, you can’t come,” I tell him. “Though our brothers wish you no ill-will, the packs might revolt if you show your face.”

He nods seriously. “I caused a lot of damage.”

“You didn’t know what you were doing.” I try to minimize his guilt, though he truly is responsible for some serious crimes against our kind.

He looks at me sadly. “Sometimes I knew what I was doing, but it doesn’t matter. I’m not going back.”

“You’ll stay here?”

He nods, his gaze growing distant once more.

My brain whirls with everything that’ll need to be done before we can leave. I’ll have to make sure Fallon has enough food to last for weeks, or even months. I’ll have to secure the area; set a few traps in case intruders attempt to break into the tower.

“You forget who your mate is.” Magdalene looks at Fallon and snaps her fingers. “You now have a larder filled with fruits, vegetables, meats, potato chips, and other goodies. You’ll find several Tupperware containers, too. Be careful with those. I rigged them so the creatures inside become animated. They’re not alive, but you can pretend to hunt them.”

He nods his understanding.

“We’ll set out in the morning.” I lead Magdalene toward the staircase. “Goodnight, Fallon.”

But he doesn’t answer, instead, stares into the fire, his gaze blank. I wonder if he’s going to fade again and watch him for a moment longer as the light of the fire plays across his haggard features.

“He’ll be okay.” Magdalene squeezes my arm. “We’ll leave Seventeen with him and I’ll summon Lyra Good Witch to watch over him.”

I gaze at the earnest expression on my mate’s face, the worry in her eyes. I don’t know how or when it happened, but I’ve fallen in love with this woman. In the words of Lilith Guardian Witch, she has become the purpose of my existence.

CHAPTER 32

LOST IN THOUGHT

MAGDALENE

I'm sitting on a sandy beach next to a lake, watching my mate leap around, splashing and lapping at the water as though he has the worries of a newborn wolf pup. I laugh as he sprays water at me after catching my stray thought.

He shifts to human in the lake and walks toward me, water pouring down his chiseled body. Though I try to play it cool, I can't stop myself from gaping at the plethora of naked, dripping wet male flesh walking toward me, enormous cock pointing my way.

"Enormous?" He chuckles, going to his knees in the sand and crawling up my body until he reaches my core, where he presses a kiss against the vee of my thighs over top of my skirt. The water dripping from his face and hair cools me. Then he buries his face in the fabric and inhales. Sitting up, he clutches his heart and falls backwards into the sand.

Giggling, I tickle his ribs until he rolls away.

We've been travelling for four days and Rush says we'll cross into wolf shifter territory tomorrow. We stopped at this lake to bathe and rest before continuing on. We've been skirting witch settlements as we make our way through the swamps, trying to mask my magical energy by surrounding ourselves with the magic of others. Unfortunately, my powers have grown to the point where even a basic spell will allow the Warrior Witches to pinpoint my location. Rush and I agreed that I shouldn't use magic until we reach Wolf-Haven, where I'll be protected.

I've spent most of our travels on Rush's back while he's in his wolf form. At first, I hated the feeling of trees rushing past me in a blur, the ground a short, hard fall away. What if I tumbled off and slammed into one of those trees? I could break bones! But the more we ran, the more I learned to enjoy the ride in every sense of the word.

I love seeing the world go past me at top speed, small animals and leaves scattering in our wake, Rush's paws pounding the earth causing miniscule tremors as he runs. Those same tremors run through my body, sending showers of tingles through me, pooling in my core. His back pressed to my crotch, the swaying of his body beneath mine...

I laugh as he leaps naked on top of me and tears at my clothes. I've also learned my wolf has almost no tolerance for my thoughts when I daydream about the things that make me feel good.

"Fuck, baby, keep doing that," he mumbles, tearing my panties away and thrusting his nose into my crotch, inhaling deeply.

"Not here, Rush," I moan, flinging my arm over my eyes and widening my legs to give him easier access. "I'll get sand in my butt crack."

He grins mischievously up at me. "I'll lick it out." To prove his point he licks me, swiping at the nectar with his deliciously rough tongue. "I want you to think about the things that make you happy so I can crawl into your head and watch while making you come in my mouth."

"Holy Earth Mother." I do as he says, staring up at the fluffy floating clouds in the blue sky and summoning a memory of utter happiness.

It's difficult to gather my scattered thoughts while he's lapping at my core, but I do it, not wanting him to stop.

My eyes drift shut as I picture myself sitting on the forest floor, sunshine filtering down through the tree branches and warming my head. My leather spell bag with its wolf emblem sits open in front of me, the scent of cloves, cinnamon and rosehip teasing my nostrils.

In my memory, I'm twenty-nine and using a spell I'd just learned from Aunt Bea. I earned it from her by organizing our spell cupboard and rewriting the old, faded spells from our grimoire. The spell is meant to call the creatures of the forest to me for learning and contemplation. I scatter the contents of

the pouch on the surrounding ground and speak the incantation:

*“Creatures of the forest, heed my call,
Come forth from your hiding, one and all.
Gather round, listen well,
In this clearing, I now compel.”*

I open my eyes and peek around, but nothing happens. Disappointed, I pick up my bag and prepare to leave, intending to ask my aunt where I went wrong. Perhaps, my ratio of spices was wrong, or maybe I mixed up the wording.

A rustling in the bushes catches my attention and small rabbit hops out.

“Oh, look at you!” I sink to my knees and offer my hand. Hopping over, the bunny sniffs me and rubs its head against my fingertips. A tickle on my leg has me looking down and gasping at the giant centipede crawling up my leg and resting against the edge of my jean shorts. “Oh my goodness, well hello, little guy. Is it hard work moving all those legs at once? Do you need a rest?”

Within minutes, I’m surrounded by a couple of deer, several more bunnies, hundreds of beetles, centipedes, slugs, and various other woodland creatures. I hurriedly drop an anti-bite spell in case anything is feeling peckish.

I spend the afternoon with my new friends, chatting and studying them as they step up for inspection. Animals come and go, joining our little party before wandering off. As I watch and learn, I realize the spell summons the creatures, but doesn’t force them to stay. It continues to summon for hours after the spell is cast, though it eventually wanes. As I prepare to leave, most of the forest creatures having wandered off, a tingle races up my spine and the hairs on my arms stand up. I gently move the creatures that were hanging out on top of me away and push to my feet.

He's coming!

There isn't enough time to get away before he arrives, so I scramble up the nearest tree and hide in the branches, muttering a quick obscurity charm before he arrives.

Seconds later, my wolf mate lopes straight to the spot where I'd been sitting. He growls suspiciously at a deer who doesn't move a muscle to run away from the massive wolf shifter.

He sniffs the air and looks this way and that before dropping his snout to the ground where he stares at the centipede that caught a ride on my shorts. Inhaling, he draws my scent from the creature, then delicately licks it, as if trying to find out why it smells like me. The centipede wiggles away before the wolf can do more than lick.

I giggle at his confusion, then smother the sound when he looks up. I hold my breath, hoping he loses interest and leaves quickly. As much as I love any sight of my mate, he's too dangerous for me. My spellcasting isn't where it needs to be to control a rampaging shifter.

"I don't rampage." Rush lifts his head from licking my dripping center to defend himself, pulling me from my memory. "Haven't thought about that in years. You were only feet away and I didn't know."

"You could've gobbled me up if you'd known," I say breathlessly, my gaze glued to his handsome face and the smear of my juices across his chin.

"Don't have to ask me twice." He licks me again, but this time in earnest, the vision of me only a few feet from him in that forest all those years ago driving him. The memory of my scent in the air, the lack of fear in the animals surrounding him. It was a unique moment for him as well. Special. And he didn't know it was me until now.

"More," he growls as I near the edge of my orgasm. "Another memory."

I gasp, lifting my hips off the sand to thrust myself against his mouth. Chuckling, he grips my thighs and stares at me

until I nod and close my eyes, sinking back into another memory.

This time I'm fifty-one. I'm wearing nothing but a cloak as I glide through the forest, the moon bathing me and everyone around me. I don't look at them as we walk, but many of my brethren are with me as we make our way to the stone circle where we'll usher in the winter solstice.

A spell protects my body from the snow and cold.

As we surround the stone circle, we drop our cloaks revealing our nudity. Each woman wears only a crown of ivy as she dances beneath the moonlight, hair swaying, body undulating, shadows gliding across the stone monoliths.

Closing my eyes, I thrust my arms into the air and dance, trusting my feet to know what they should do and hoping I don't dance face first into one of the stones.

I move to an internal rhythm, feeling my people move around me. The moon seeps into my skin through to my bones, energizing my magic for another year. There's nothing as exhilarating as a solstice dance... until I feel him. He's out there, somewhere, watching.

I spare a moment of fear that he may attack, but then remember that I'm surrounded by dozens of witches. He won't be able to hurt any of us. Knowing that tosses my inhibitions to the wind and I'm no longer dancing for the solstice, but for my future love.

I throw myself into the dance, imagining his eyes caressing my naked body as I sway and undulate, every move a feast for him alone. Cupping my breasts, I run my hands down my lush curves before lifting my hair off my neck and allowing it to flow down my back.

I alone can hear the low growls as they vibrate up his throat in a series of gentle purrs.

Something is building inside me. Something sweet and forbidden.

I can't stop it from ripping through me as I scream my release to the heavens, opening my eyes to the clear blue sky

overhead, the winter solstice fading away as my very real orgasm flows through me.

Rush crawls up my body, thrusting his cock deep into my heated center. He fills me and I widen my legs to relieve the nearly unbearable stretch.

He frames my face with his big hands and lowers his lips to mine, taking them in a gentle kiss that juxtaposes with the fierce thrust of his hips as he finds his own release. Tasting myself on his tongue drives my desire even higher.

Groaning, he drops his face to my neck and inhales, his cock growing huge inside me as it prepares to hook my flesh, ensuring his seed has the best possible chance of impregnating his mate.

As I come down from my high, I pick up his thoughts. We haven't discussed kids.

Want kids? He asks frantically in my head.

Yes. You?

Fuck, yeah.

I giggle as he ends the conversation by throwing his head back and howling his claim to the world, his seed spilling deep inside me.

As we rest together, sand everywhere (including my butt crack), he says, "I didn't know you saw me the night of the solstice."

I nod into his shoulder. "I always knew when you were close."

"I'm sorry I was such a dick back then. It's painful to see your fear in your memories. You were afraid I might attack you or your sisters."

I smile at him as I run my fingers through his hair, untangling the knotted mass. "I was only afraid for a second. What else did you feel when you were in my memories?"

"Happiness," he admits. "You were happy."

“I was almost always happy, Rush. And knowing you were nearby only added to my joy. I’m not a witch to be scared off easily.” He snorts his agreement. “Will you show me your memories now?”

A shutter falls in his eyes. He’s going to deny me. Does he not trust me yet? I shove the thought away. Of course he does. There must be another reason he doesn’t want to share.

“No, Magdalene, you’re wrong.” He eases his cock from my body and kneels between my legs, reaching for my hands and pulling me up. “You have my permission to look at my memories any time you want. It just... they aren’t...”

“They aren’t happy like mine,” I finish for him.

“I wasn’t happy before you.”

“I’ll make sure you have an entire future of happiness.”

He kisses me, then says, “Let’s get moving.”

Soon we’re traveling again, me on Rush’s back, him pounding the earth as we move closer to Wolf-Haven. Wrapping my arms around his neck, I lay across his back and close my eyes, letting my mind drift into his mind as I seek out his memories.

The images float lazily in my head, starting from his earliest memory of play-fighting with his four brothers as wolf pups, to his experiences in the war and later. For the first time since knowing he exists, I finally see my mate as he truly is and my love for him grows with each memory I see.

CHAPTER 33

THE LOVEBIRDS HAVE
LANDED

RUSH

As we cross the border into Wolf-Haven territory, I immediately notice differences. The area is entirely changed from what it had been under Fallon's stewardship. Crop after crop gleams golden in the sunlight while machinery that hadn't existed in this area until Lock became King works to harvest the grain. I'm filled with both hope and shame as we pass the equipment.

Magdalene's arms tighten around me and she leans up to speak in my ear. "You aren't to blame for what happened."

Despite her kind words, I know she's wrong. I could've done more. I held some sway over my brother. If I'd looked past my obsession with breaking the family curse, I might have cared enough to rein him in and limit the suffering of our people.

She doesn't speak again but I can feel her fingers sifting through my hair in a soothing manner.

I make my way directly to the seat of power, ignoring the curious shifters who watch us pass through the city streets, a royal wolf shifter with his witch mate clinging to his back. Word reaches the castle before we arrive, and we're greeted in the courtyard by Lock, Keenan, and Lennox. It's strange to be welcome among these brothers again but welcome us they do.

"Rush!" Lock reaches for me, but before he can touch me, Magdalene slides off my back and places herself in front of me, hands held out, blackened fingertips at the ready if anyone tries to make a move against me.

"What are your intentions toward my mate?" she snarls. "Good or bad?"

Lock looks stunned, then says with a frown. "Stand down, small human. I only wish to greet my brother."

"How dare you?" she gasps, holding her hands threateningly. "I am *not* human, and I'll prove it to you by

turning you and everyone here into rats!”

“You’ll have to go through me first!” An imperious voice cuts through the crowd as the Queen hurries toward her husband, throwing herself in front of him.

“I won’t have to go through you if you’re a rat!”

“You won’t be able to speak the incantation if I tear out your throat, human.”

“I’m not a damn – !”

“Sarina Wolven-North, we don’t threaten our guests,” Lock admonishes his wife while I watch with amusement.

“We aren’t expecting guests,” Sarina says, staring malevolently at Magdalene. I would take offense to anyone looking at my precious witch like that, except I know Magdalene is more than a match for every shifter here.

“It’s my brother and his mate,” Lock says, nodding toward me.

Sarina’s gaze lands on me and she gasps. “Rush!” Shoving Magdalene aside, she drops to her knees and hugs me. I hadn’t known I was on hugging terms with my sister-in-law, but it feels... nice. Yeah, it’s nice to be hugged by family.

“What do you think you’re doing, you little wolf b – ”

Thankfully, Magdalene is cut off from finishing her sentence when Lock grips his wife by the arm and jerks her to him. “No touching other wolves.”

“Come inside,” Sarina says, ignoring her gruff husband. “We have a lot to catch up on.”

Twenty minutes later, I’m sitting with Keenan, Lennox and Lock in the great hall, a cold, frothy beer in front of me. My eyes are on the two women a couple of tables over, laughing and chattering like they’ve known each other for centuries. How do two people go from threatening murder to friendship within such a short time?

“Women are the strangest creatures,” Keenan says, downing his beer in one gulp, his gaze following mine.

“Puzzles, the lot of them,” Lennox adds.

“Never understood ‘em.” Lock follows suit, swiping at the beer mustache left behind.

“Fucking mysteries is what they are,” I agree.

Lock turns to me, his expression serious. I give him a rundown of the past few weeks, omitting the details of my courtship with Magdalene. I’m grateful for his easy acceptance of our situation and his willingness to protect my mate.

Picking up on my last thought, he says, “Of course, you’re welcome in Wolf-Haven for as long as you want. You and your mate will be protected here.”

Sharing thoughts with my brothers is getting easier each time we see each other. It’s not like hearing the thoughts of a mate, which are crystal clear and come with images, feelings, and intentions. They’re more like words that float through the brain like a ghost train that fades after it passes.

“I don’t mean to bring trouble to your doorstep,” I say gruffly, hoping he hears the implied thank you.

Lock takes another tankard of beer from a passing servant before turning back to me. “I won’t court a war with the witches. If they come, I’ll use diplomacy and negotiate with them, but if it comes down to it, we will go to war before we hand your mate over.”

I lift my hand, hovering it over his shoulder for a second before squeezing it. I’m not great with words, but he catches my meaning.

Later, Sarina shows us to my old room.

“We had it redone in case you came home.”

I look around in consternation as my mate rushes through the door, exclaiming in delight and throwing herself into a pile of plush pillows, disappearing from view.

“The decorator believed an ancient Egyptian harem was the way to go for my room?” I ask incredulously.

Sarina flashes a mischievous smile. “Lock let me pick all the new castle decorations.”

Sarina spent two hundred years as a wolf. Not a great way to learn modern interior decorating skills. And of course, my besotted brother would give his Queen free rein to do her worst, which she very much did.

I eye the pile of gold and silver pillows a disheveled Magdalene crawls out of. “I think I’m going to love it here,” she exclaims, grinning at me.

“I’ll leave you two to get settled,” Sarina says, amusement in her voice. “Come find me if you need anything.”

When the door closes behind her, I stalk to the bed, dragging my clothes off as I walk, intent on making my mate come several times before fucking her. I climb on top of the bed, crawling toward her as she giggles, catching my intent in my thoughts.

Wrapping her arms around my neck, she sighs, “I wouldn’t mind being a harem girl if it was you who came to my room every night.” She frowns and adds, “But only if I was the only one in the harem.”

“I wouldn’t want anyone else,” I assure her.

“Right answer.” She drags my head down and kisses me, thrusting her tongue against mine.

Breaking the kiss, I murmur, “Let’s get these clothes out of the way.”

“I think I can manage that.” She snaps her fingers and every stitch of clothing between us disappears. “You did say I can use magic now that we’re in Wolf-Haven.”

“And I fucking endorse any magic that makes it easier to touch your beautiful naked skin.”

“Are you going to eat me all up, big, bad wolf?” Her husky voice sends a shiver racing down my spine and I snatch her naked body to mine.

“Fuck yeah, baby.” Groaning, I take her lips, slipping my hand down her body to test her readiness.

She lifts her hips, encouraging me to slide my fingers through her damp folds, to explore her secret flesh, only ever touched by me.

“Only you,” she breaths against my mouth.

Fuck, she always knows the right thing to say. I wish I was better with words, then I could tell her exactly what she’s coming to mean to me. I’d tell her how sexy she is. That she drives me nuts just by standing in the same room as me. I will never stop wanting the feast that is my future wife.

She grins, which feels weird while kissing. “Wife... I like that,” she murmurs against my mouth. “You don’t need to say the right thing because you think it and I can hear you loud and clear.”

There she goes again, knowing what to say to turn my heart to mush.

As much from sexual desire as from the need to get closer to my mate, I press the crown of my cock to her pussy, stretching her as she takes me inch by inch, lifting her hips to ease my way.

Nothing, and I mean nothing, in my seven-hundred-and-twenty-five years has felt as good as the clasp of my mate’s pussy. It’s like coming home. If the need to nut wasn’t so strong, I could happily live forever like this.

She laughs, “So romantic.”

“Only for you, baby.”

I pull back, then thrust into her, our words falling away as we allow ourselves to get swept up in sensation. Being with my mate is what I’d imagine fucking a rainbow feels like. She’s so happy all the time, smiling, laughing, forgiving of my idiocy.

It’s more than the mating instinct driving me to be with her. Deep down, I know I need this woman if I’m ever to find an ounce of contentment in my life. She is my everything. My purpose.

“Now that’s romantic,” she whispers, holding me close to her heart.

I can’t hold back my orgasm, so I reach between us and press my thumb to her clit, drawing a gasp from her.

“Come with me, baby.”

“I... wouldn’t... dream of doing... anything else.” Her words come out in breathless puffs as she meets my thrusts, her nails digging into my shoulders, her face screwed up in concentration.

Her slippery clit is swollen, ready to ignite as I stroke it.

Her head falls back, her wild tangle of hair flaring out around her. “I’m going to... going to...”

“Come.” At my command, she explodes, her pussy strangling my cock with unbearable pressure until I’m pushed helplessly over the edge of my own orgasm, shouting my pleasure to the entire castle.

She holds me clasped in her arms as we both float back to reality.

After a few minutes, Magdalene says, her voice lazy with contentment, “I can’t believe I’m in a real castle. I want to see every part of it.”

“Even the dungeons?”

“Oh my Earth Mother, especially the dungeons!” She pushes me off her and I flop onto my back, watching in amusement as she jumps off the bed and twirls around the room. “There are spiders and webs and creepy crawlies down there. If we’re going to be here for a while, I’ll have to build a spell cupboard and I’ll need to stock up on ingredients.”

“Whatever my baby wants.”

She returns to the bed, places a smacking kiss on my nose and leaps to her feet again. “We’re going to be okay here, Rush. I can feel it in my bones.”

Fallon’s image floats through my head and I realize I can’t quite agree with my mate while my brother’s future continues

to be uncertain.

Catching my thought, she says, “I’ll help him. Now that I’m a Rage Witch, I should be able to do something. Maybe I can summon Lyra again, see if she’ll be willing to help now that Fallon isn’t around to scare her.”

I sit up as I remember the last time she did so and vehemently say, “No. I don’t want you hurt.”

“I won’t get hurt this time,” she insists.

“Magdalene, I said no. We’ll find another way.”

She frowns her annoyance and continues to argue. “I don’t think you understand how powerful Rage Witches are, and I’m a Rage Witch born of one of the most skilled Guardian Witches.” She’s not bragging. I can tell because she’s allowing me into her head. She’s telling the truth as she sees it.

Snap. Sparklers go off all around us, igniting the room in glittery colour.

Snap. Chests of gold and jewels spill onto the floor.

Snap. A baby elephant wearing royal regalia stands at the base of the bed, looking around with an expression of concern.

I hurriedly sit up in the bed.

She snaps her fingers again and again and the room continues to fill. Fairies fly overhead, chattering and laughing as they sprinkle me with tiny glitter hearts. A bar appears in the corner of the room, kegs lining the wall behind it. Streamers fall from the ceiling. A row of lovebirds lines the footboard of the bed, shuffling for position and squawking at each other. As each new thing appears, the noise and craziness ratchets up until it reaches an unbearable volume.

I slide out of bed and try to grab hold of my twirling, chanting witch, intent on getting her to slow down and breathe. Her abilities are certainly spectacular, but she’s going to pass out if she keeps this up, and I absolutely won’t allow her to overdo it.

“But that’s the thing!” she says, turning to face me, a manic grin across her face. “I can do anything now and none

of it saps my energy. Just watch!”

“No, Magdalene, it’s time to...”

She slaps her hand against my chest. “I think you’ll look amazing in a full tuxedo with a top hat, don’t you?”

“I don’t need –”

As the incantation leaves her mouth, energy flows down her arm and slams into my chest, throwing me backwards with the force of a catapult. I hit the stone wall behind me, my head cracking as it smacks the wall with a sickening thud.

Magdalene screams and runs toward me. The last thing I see before unconsciousness claims me is her blurry, naked form bending over me, tears spilling from her eyes.

“Rush!”

CHAPTER 34

A MAGICAL INTERVENTION

RUSH

“**N**ever again. I was taught from birth to never cause harm and now I might have killed my mate. I’m a terrible witch. I refuse to use magic ever again. I’m a monster. Why isn’t he awake yet? You said he’d be okay. Did you lie to me? If I find out you lied to me, I’ll blast you into outer space as my last magical act.”

I recognize the voice of my mate, the fear and self-hatred I hear in it has me fighting my way to the surface, intent on reassuring her. My brother, Lennox, gets there first. Of all my brothers, he’s the gentle giant and I’m glad he’s here with her.

“He’ll be fine, Magdalene,” Lennox reassures her warmly. “You injured him, that’s all. His shifter physiology will have him right as rain in no time. Honestly, I’m sure he’s hurt himself worse than this. You barely scratched him.”

She broke damn near every bone in my body, but I’m glad he’s trying to make my mate feel better. She didn’t do it on purpose, and I would experience this pain a thousand times over if it meant reliving her delight at being able to conjure the unimaginable with the snap of her fingers.

Lennox is correct, I’ll feel better in a few hours and will be completely healed in a few days.

The bed dips as the scent of basil and roses wafts to me. “I’m so sorry, Rush. I thought I had my new magical abilities under control, but I was reckless. I could’ve killed you. I promise never to use my magic again.”

“Don’t say that.” My voice comes out in a croak, but I feel her heart leap in excitement when I speak. “Your magic is part of you. You can’t lose it.”

She caresses my cheek. “You’re all I need. As long as I have you, I don’t need magic. Rest now, I’ll be here.”

I want to argue with her, but she’s right, I need rest. Healing is faster when I’m unconscious. I reach for her and

she grasps my hand. Safe in the knowledge that my mate is close, I drift back into oblivion.

The next few days prove to me that my mate is determined to do as she promised and never use her magic again. Her stubborn insistence is no match for my gentle cajoling, and I begin to wonder if she'll stick to her promise. The thought has me nearly panicking.

After centuries of hating witches and their magical abilities, I find myself wishing with all my being that my mate would cast a spell, even a small one. Her magic is part of who she is. God knows, I tried and failed before realizing my colossal error. Removing her magic changes her.

She's depressed, less herself when she's not casting spells with carefree abandon, but her fear of hurting me or others trumps her love of magic. And there's not a damn thing I can do to help.

Every time I try to bring it up, she forces a smile and does her best to convince me she's fine without her pesky magic muddying things for us. Instead, she starts to plan our wedding, which I discovered was happening when I came out of my coma.

I would be one hundred percent fine with this, except her heart isn't in it. Without magic, she knows the wedding won't be as spectacular as she'd always planned. From her thoughts, I discover she's been planning our wedding since her sixteenth birthday. The things I see in her head from back then would've had the old Rush backing away like his tail was on fire, but not now. It pleases me beyond measure that even as a young witch, she was looking forward to our mating.

Except now everything is different from how she imagined it.

It's five days after the accident and I'm fully recovered, but my witch still refuses to use magic. Needing a break from the cloud of depression that follows her everywhere, I kiss the top of her head and leave her in the great hall with Sarina, making my way back to our room.

The trumpeting of an elephant reminds me there's now an elephant living in our bailey. It draws the young shifters to the castle, which pleases Sarina, so she's decided it will stay.

Pushing the door to my room open, I make my way to the bed, collapsing on top with a hand over my eyes. Fuck, what do I do about my mate? She's miserable but pretending everything is fine. She's planning a wedding while slowly dying inside and there's not a fucking thing I can do to change her mind.

“You can send her home.”

Leaping from the bed, I'm halfway to shifting when I catch sight of a pair of witches standing next to the wall mounted mirror. One is Lilith, Magdalene's mother, the other I recognize as her aunt, the woman she lived most of her life with. Jesus, these creatures are terrible at knocking first. What if I'd been naked?

“Then we would have enjoyed a show before conjuring clothes on you so we can have a proper talk,” the aunt says, sticking her hand out at me. “Beatrice Good Witch. Nice to finally meet you, Mr. Wolf.”

Unable to help myself, I smile as I take her small hand, pumping it in my fist. She beams up at me, her eyes sparkling blue. She's as stunning as her niece and sister, but in a homey, comfortable way.

“Call me Rush.”

She beams at me like I've given her the best gift she's ever received.

Turning my gaze to Lilith, I ask, “Are you here about the Oracle thing, or because Magdalene won't use her magic?”

“Both.” She glances toward the mirror, which is swirling with what looks like silver liquid smoke. “Ah, here we are. The others are arriving.” Stepping aside, she makes room for the army of witches that step through my bedroom mirror.

Astonished, I make space as Lila steps through, followed closely by a woman with long black hair wearing an emerald cloak over a pair of jeans and a black bustier. Noticing her

blackened fingers, I wonder if she's the Cynthia Lila mentioned when she came to take Magdalene away the first time.

Fuck. They're here for my mate.

Panic starts to set in as another woman steps through the mirror, this one has a heart-shaped face surrounded by brunette curls. She's wearing an orange summer dress with a pattern of flowers and an eye-offending yellow apron. Seconds later, she's followed by a male. He's tall and thin, a haughty expression on his face that's at odds with the pleasant smile stretching the woman's lips. In contrast to the woman's, his clothes are dark, severe, and somewhat old-fashioned.

The pair step aside as another witch joins the party, hopping energetically from the mirror and asking, "Where's my girl at? She needs to know what I did to that awful Magistrate." Magistrate? She must be the witch Magdalene met in the Pendle Asylum. "Wow, look at all this!"

She bends over a chest and scoops up a handful of jewels.

The Rage Witch reaches out and snaps the lid closed. "Not yours, Leeta."

Leeta pouts. "Mags was my roomie back in the asylum. Pretty sure we have an understanding now. What's hers is mine, blah, blah, blah."

"One more left," Lilith says, watching the mirror expectantly.

It takes another minute, then a ghostly leg steps through, followed by the body of the dearly departed Lyra Good Witch. She catches my frown and says, "Well don't you goes looking at me like that. Your brother is doin' jus' fine in that tower with his new buddy, Seventeen." She nods toward Lilith. "The young lady's mum says this was too important to miss. Anyone who cares about young Mags was to be here."

"Indeed." Lilith smiles kindly at the other woman. "And I'm so appreciative of you for making the time."

"What do you want?" I demand, crossing my arms over my chest and glaring at the menagerie in front of me.

Lilith steps away from the group. “I know this must be disconcerting, especially to a wolf shifter.”

What the fuck is that supposed to mean?

“Only that your kind is often suspicious of magic and now you’re surrounded by it.”

“Your magic isn’t close to as disconcerting as your mind-reading abilities are.”

She smiles and her face softens. “Your connection with my daughter allows those closest to her to sense what you’re feeling and occasionally hear a stray thought. I can hear you because my daughter can. You’re part of us now, like family.”

Her words affect me, though I don’t want them to. I’ve been a lone wolf for so long, parents dead, my brothers scattered, it feels strangely comforting to hear this woman call me family. “Now tell me what you want.” But I already know the answer.

Her face becomes serious and she takes another tentative step toward me. “We’re here for Magdalene.” She looks back at the other witches. “We are the ones who love her most. We’ll do whatever it takes to heal our daughter, niece, friend...”

“Breakout buddy,” Leeta chimes in.

“She’s special to all of us and we want the best for her. You must trust that we’ll keep her safe as she faces the Oracle.”

I sit on the bed, my legs collapsing out from under me, the breath leaving my lungs in a whoosh, as the whole truth sinks in. Not the truth of what they’re saying, I knew it as soon as I saw the bunch of them infesting my bedroom. Magdalene needs her people and I am not them. I can’t help her the way they can, which breaks my fucking heart.

“I’m sorry.” Lilith crouches in front of me. “We’re not here to fight you, but to convince you. If you want Magdalene to learn how to use and control her new abilities, to become a happy, fulfilled witch again, we have to take her. You understand, don’t you?”

“I do.” Lifting my head, I pin her mother with a hard look. “But it’s not up to me. I won’t stop Magdalene from going if she wants to go, but I won’t allow you to take her if she wishes to stay.”

Lilith’s gaze grows sad. “I fear what will happen to her if we can’t convince her to come.”

“What’ll happen?” I’m ashamed I hadn’t thought to ask the question days ago. I’d seized on my mate’s desire to be alone with me and forced her predicament out of my thoughts. I’ve been fucking her, basking in her presence, without giving thought to her future as a Rage Witch.

It’s not Lilith who answers my question, but Cynthia.

“She’ll feel fine at first because she’s convinced herself she doesn’t need magic, but gradually, over time, the magic will eat at her, pooling in every cell of her body, building until it becomes a dangerous concoction that will, eventually, explode out of her.” Her words are matter of fact, but a tremor goes through her body and Lila reaches for her hand, linking fingers with her Rage Witch wife. “Hopefully, when it happens, no one will be standing nearby, but if they are, they’ll be destroyed. When a Rage Witch loses it, she’s capable of tearing a hole in the fabric of space and time.”

“Like in Pendle,” I murmur.

“So much worse than that,” Cynthia says with a shake of her head. “What she did in that terrible town was foreplay. If she allows this magic to fester without release or direction, she could easily destroy this entire countryside and everyone in it.” The sadness in her voice, the way she casts her eyes to the floor as she talks, tells me she’s speaking from experience. “It might not happen for years, but it will happen. What if you marry and have children? Can you trust your wife not to accidentally hurt them?”

The words are like knives to the heart. How could I even begin to contemplate not trusting Magdalene? She’s perfect and she’s so bloody honest it scares me. But... she did hurt me without meaning to. I’m a full-grown male shifter with

excellent regenerative abilities, but if she did to our child what she did to me, she could kill them.

“You’re right, and we can’t let that happen,” a soft voice says from behind me. I twist on the bed as Madelene steps into the room, tears wet on her cheeks, an expression of deep distress on her face. It’s everything I can do to keep from leaping across the room and shoving her behind me. This is her family though, and they’re not here to hurt her.

She rushes sobbing toward us. I reach for her, but she runs past, flinging herself in her aunt’s arms. Beatrice holds her tight, murmuring in her ear as she cries.

I wish she’d run to me, but I understand why she needs the comfort of a mother figure, the woman who raised her in the witch world. Lilith caresses her daughter’s shoulder as she cries out her fear and misery. Her friends surround her, speaking words of comfort and encouragement.

I stand, waiting for them to finish.

Finally, Magdalene pulls herself away from her family’s embrace and turns to me, her face twisted in agony, tears streaming down her face. Her pain nearly sends me to my knees. Her tsunami of emotion slams into my despair at what’s about to happen.

She tries to speak, but only sobs spill out.

I reach for her, dragging her into my arms and holding her tight enough I’m just shy of cracking ribs. Rocking her in my arms, I speak in her ear, “I know, baby. I know you have to go.”

“I don’t know when... when... I’ll be back,” she manages to gasp out, her body shaking with the force of her tears.

“We’re immortals, my love. We have forever to do the mating thing. I’ll be here when you come back and we’ll build the most amazing life together.”

She nods and snuffles, looking up at me. “Will you mate with me properly when I come back? Bite me and twine with me?”

I give her the best lopsided grin I can manage. “If you come back stronger than me, then sure, I’ll bite you all over, baby.”

She flashes me her own wobbly smile. “All over?”

“You better believe it.”

“And you think you don’t know the right thing to say.”
Going up on her toes, she presses a kiss to my chin.

“Go, now, before I kill everyone you love and chain you to my side for eternity.”

“I love you, Rush,” she says, sobbing.

“I know.”

Stepping away from me, she is embraced by her family and the mirror glows silver, engulfing the group. “Goodbye, Rush.”

She’s gone before I can respond. Pressing my hand to the mirror, I dip my head so I don’t have to look at my own expression. “Goodbye, my love.”

CHAPTER 35

CITADEL

MAGDALENE

I watch as the portal closes behind me, wanting one last glimpse of Rush. Wordlessly, my mother waves her arm and a mirror appears, floating in the air. I can see Rush on the other side, but he can't see me.

Lilith touches my shoulder. "I'll give you a minute, but we must get going. I've been keeping the Oracle at bay since the incident; they're restless and growing more annoyed by the day."

Nodding, I stare at Rush as my family and friends step away, giving me a moment of privacy.

He's on the other side, his hand pressed against the glass, his expression grim. He closes his beautiful bronze eyes and his shoulders give a great heave. I press my hand to his on my side of the glass, allowing the tears to fall unchecked.

The pain I feel is almost unimaginable. Thank Earth Mother we didn't finish the mating bond when I begged him to. This would be a million times harder. In fact, it would've been impossible. Rush wouldn't have been able to let me go and I wouldn't have been able to leave him. Eventually our need for each other would've consumed us and my magic would have run wild.

My family is right, I need to be here.

Giving the man of my heart one last look, I turn away, hoping his family will come to realize what's happened and comfort him.

I grab the bottom of my T-shirt and lift it to swipe at my eyes.

"Oh Mags, everyone can see your bra." Aunt Bea tugs my shirt down and fusses with my hair. "Let's get you ready for the Oracle." She makes a clucking sound with her tongue as she tries to adjust my shorts to cover more of my ass. "I wish you would dress a little more appropriate."

“What’s wrong with this?” I frown down at my short jean shorts and purple and blue striped belly-baring T-shirt. “Do I need a hat?”

Lilith shakes her head. “She’s fine. The Oracle has seen much worse. Let’s go.”

Aunt Bea grasps my face and pinches my cheeks, then hugs me hard. “I can’t go with you.”

I nod sadly. “I know.” Good Witches don’t belong in the Shadow Realm unless they’re facing an Oracle. They belong to the natural world on Earth. After a long hug with my aunt, I turn to Callum and Katie. “You can’t stay either.”

“I wish we could.” Katie envelops me in her arms and squeezes me tight while Callum watches silently. I’m touched by his presence among my family and friends and don’t expect more, so I’m surprised when he squeezes my arm while Katie continues to hold me.

Callum is a male witch, otherwise known as a Warlock. Warlocks are different from their female brethren and rarely settle into relationships, which makes his and Katie’s pairing unique in our world. Males of our kind tend to become feral, preferring a solitary existence to the social societies our females cultivate, which is how our species evolved to become matriarchal.

I’ve never met my own father, though I know he’s still alive. My mother once told me he’s one of the most powerful of our kind, but that he’s also quite savage, incapable of even basic socializing without incident. Theirs wasn’t a love story, but an earthy mating of two powerful beings who set out to create a child prophesied by the Oracles.

“I gotta go, too,” Leeta says brightly, waving her wrist and conjuring a ballpoint pen. Gripping my arm, she writes down two sets of numbers on my skin. Pointing at the first, she says, “This is my hearth coordinates if you want to come for a visit.” She points at the second. “My cell number. Make sure to call when you’re back. Seriously, I have to tell you about the Magistrate’s pink frilly panties. That story alone will make all your suffering worthwhile.”

I gape at her. “I didn’t take him for a frills kinda guy.”

She grins and waves as she steps backwards through the same portal Aunt Bea, Callum and Katie disappeared through.

“I must be off, too!” Lyra Good Witch announces. “Fallon’ll be waking soon and wanting his supper. Better get to it afore he takes a bite out of Seventeen.” She waves and hops through the portal.

“Safe travels!” I call after her.

“Are you ready?” Lilith asks, stepping up to me. “We really do have to go. You don’t want to keep an Oracle waiting”

I nod and we set out, Lila and Cynthia at my side.

Though my heartbreak over saying goodbye to Rush is fresh and takes up most of the room in my mind, I can’t help but stare at everything around me. I’ve been wanting to come to the Shadow Realm since I was old enough to realize how special it is.

It’s a place that was created by witches as a haven for magical folk thousands of years ago and is only accessible by our kind. It’s sacred to our people, though most will never see it. Only Guardian Witches and Oracles are expected to live here though Rage Witches and Warrior Witches come and go. Good Witches can visit briefly, but Earth calls to them and if they spend too much time in the Shadow Realm, they risk growing sick or even dying. They need a physical connection to the natural world to survive.

“We’re in the Citadel,” Lila provides helpfully.

It’s stunning. I’ve never seen anything like it, and I know I never will again. Towers rise from nothing but smoke and shadows, connected by bridges that crisscross the entire region. Each tower is unique, reaching from the shadow bed to the sky, their tips touching the starry blanket of night above.

Daylight doesn’t come to the Shadow Realm, but the witches who live here don’t mind. They use the stars to light their paths.

As we cross one of the bridges, I grip the railing and stare into the abyss below. It seems crazy to me that there's no planet, no ground, nothing below the tower. It's held up through magic, the shadows surrounding the base making it feel endless.

"It's something, isn't it?" Lila says from beside me.

"You get used to the spectacle," Cynthia drawls, joining us to look over the bridge. "Once you've been here a few centuries."

I hadn't thought of that. "How long... I mean... do you think I might be here...?"

"I don't know," Lila says softly from beside me. "I think it's different for each witch who comes here. It took Cynthia decades to learn how to control her magic and even then, she chose to live here after so she wouldn't risk harming anyone."

Before panic sets in at the idea of being separated from Rush for such a lengthy period of time, my mother speaks up. "Let's keep moving. We're not far and I want to make a good impression on your assigned Oracle."

"This is me we're talking about," I point out, catching up with her. "I think that ship has sailed."

Lilith chuckles. "You underestimate your charm, daughter."

Lila falls in to step with us. "After all, you got a witch-hating wolf shifter to fall in love, so there must be something more than meets the eye."

Laughing, I punch her arm, though I do feel better about my chances with the Oracle.

In less time than I would've liked, we enter the Oracle's tower, a massive monolithic white stone structure that points high into the heavens. I hope I'll have time to check out more of the Citadel later. Each building is unique, created lovingly by a witch who followed his or her own sense of style. Some of the towers are shaped like castles, some like human apartment buildings, and some like mountains, capped in snow. The beauty and chaos perfectly embody witch society.

“Are you ready?” Lilith asks as we approach a massive set of doors.

“Mom, are you nervous for me?”

She struggles with the question, then nods, pulling me aside for a private conversation. Lila and Cynthia pretend they’re deep in discussion and can’t hear us.

“Of course I’m worried. You’re my daughter and you’re about to face an Oracle.”

“You’ve faced these guys plenty of times over the past few hundred years,” I remind her. “You taught me not to be afraid of them.”

“I know I did,” she says, her worried eyes flicking to the doors. “But I’ve seen them in action and they’re not pleasant. They don’t take into account your feelings or the feelings of others. They look at the facts and cast their judgement without bias.”

“Isn’t that a good thing?”

“Not when it’s my daughter facing a tribunal,” she says fiercely. “I’d rather they take my years of service into account and give my child the break she deserves.”

“But that wouldn’t be fair, and you know it. I can’t be judged by your accomplishments.” I take her hands in mine. “And my accomplishments will speak for themselves. I was a Good Witch. I cared about the lives of others and tried to help where I could.”

She blinks back tears. “You were a very Good Witch, Magdalene, and I’m so proud of you.”

I hug her and step back quickly, not wanting to start crying again. “Let’s do this.”

She nods decisively, running her fingers under her eyes. “Yes, let’s do this.” She turns to my friends. “Lila, you’ll have to stay behind since you have no place in the tribunal. Cynthia will come as she intends to petition the Oracle for a mentorship position.”

Lila hugs her wife hard, muttering in her ear. “Do what you gotta do, babe. I’ll be here, no matter how long it takes.”

Frowning, I ask, “What do you mean by that?” Why would Cynthia and Lila be separated? I’m the one on trial.

Ignoring me, Cynthia saying to Lila, “My days are brighter with you in them. I’ll count the minutes until we’re together again.” Then she lays a kiss on her wife that grows so heated I feel like I should turn away. I don’t though. A girl’s gotta live vicariously if her wolf penis play toy is occupying another dimension.

Once Lila and Cynthia finish their goodbyes, I’m flanked by the two witches who’ll accompany me for this next step: my potential mentor and my mother.

“I’m ready.”

With a snap of her fingers, my mother opens the great doors.

CHAPTER 36

LAW & ORDER

MAGDALENE

My jaw drops as we enter the Oracle's chambers and doesn't close again for several seconds. "Uh... why does this place look like...?"

"The set of a popular TV show?" Cynthia says drily. "This Oracle is a huge fan."

"Oracle's watch TV?"

"Why wouldn't they?" Lilith says, her heels snapping smartly against the worn linoleum. "The Oracle is a person, just like us. They enjoy entertainment too. They're just a bit older than the rest of us. In fact, I think their age makes their desire for popular entertainment more admirable. The lives of humans go by in a blink for them, and most immortals die long before ever meeting an Oracle."

"Lucky me," I breathe, staring around the replica of a human courtroom. There's an area meant for a jury, but no-one occupies the seats. In fact, there's no one in the room except us three. "Where's the Oracle?"

Before anyone can respond, a disembodied voice booms out through the chamber, "All rise for the honourable Judge Oracle."

We're already standing, so we stand a little straighter and face the front of the room. A door opens beside the judge's bench and a person strides through carrying an armload of files and loose papers. Making their way to the judge's seat, they dump the paperwork on the desk next to a gavel, then swipes an arm across their forehead and gives us a harried look.

"I've had quite a morning, so let's make this quick." Straightening their black robe and patting their grey hair, which is piled high atop their head, they sit and stare down at us. "Which one of you is Magdalene Rage Witch, formerly known as Magdalene Good Witch of Earth?"

“Uh... that would be me.” I step forward, hands twisted awkwardly in front of me. I try my best to meet the Oracle’s strange, colourless gaze.

“Good. You’re here on the charge of...” They pick up a file, flip it open and scan it before tossing it aside, “Wanton destruction of property and causing the deaths of five humans. What do you have to say for yourself, Ms. Rage Witch?”

I open my mouth, but freeze as the scene of my crime replays in my head like a reel from a horror movie. I killed five people. Five people who had parents and maybe spouses and children. Yes, they were shooting at me, but I could have protected myself with a force field and then used a binding spell to hold them in place until the danger had passed.

Instead, I allowed my emotion to take over, my grief over losing Rush to drive me into killing them. I was a Good Witch; it was my sacred duty to protect those who are weaker, whether they understand my ways or not.

“What I have to say for myself is... I’m sorry.” I blink away the tears and lift my chin, determined to face this moment with as much courage as I can muster. “I allowed my grief to take over and I lost control. Those around me suffered as a result. I don’t deserve your mercy, but I’m asking for it anyway. I want the chance to make this better, to do better in the future.”

The Oracle looks at me with surprise and I can hear my mother murmur something behind me.

“Well, that’s a better start to the tribunal than I usually get,” the Oracle says, shaking their head. Then they pick up their gavel and smack it, saying, “The defendant pleads guilty.”

My mouth falls open and I turn to stare at Lilith.

She gived me a thumbs up.

The Oracle continues speaking. “Young witches these days think it’s never their fault. That they can’t help losing control. Well, I’m here to tell you that you can and should help it, even

at the most dramatic of moments. It's how we deal with adversity that shows the world what we're made of."

Shame-faced I dip my head in a nod and stare at the floor, unable to meet the piercing gaze of the Oracle for another second. When they look at me, it feels like my soul is being exposed and studied.

"You're doing fine," Lilith whispers from behind me. "Maybe show a little more confidence. And stand up straighter."

Thanks for the pep talk, Mom.

But I do as she suggests, pulling my shoulders back and lifting my gaze, fixing it on the Oracle's brooch so I don't have to look directly at them.

"The court will now call witnesses."

"Witnesses?" I look at Lilith with a frown, but she nods toward the Oracle.

"The bench calls Portence Guardian Witch."

Like a well-oiled hinge, my jaw drops again. How can Portence possibly testify? I saw the woman's body. There's no coming back from a missing throat and that vacant stare.

An apparition appears in the witness's box. It's the ghostly body of Portence Guardian Witch.

I expect her to start shrieking the moment she sets eyes on me, to blame me for her death and demand reparations. Instead, she stares blankly and doesn't say a word.

"Portence Guardian Witch," the Oracle says, "please tell the court the details of your meeting with Magdalene Good Witch."

As though reciting from an oft repeated script, Portence speaks in monotone, her blank gaze never wavering. She gives a factual rundown of every part of our meeting, including the words that passed between us. She even lets out a gurgling scream as she repeats her own death for the court to hear.

"Gross," Cynthia hisses. "I could've done without that."

“Thank you, Portence Guardian Witch, that will be all.” Turning to us, the Oracle asks, “Does the defendant have any questions?”

“Yes.” Lilith steps past me, approaching the witness. “Portence Guardian Witch, you have replayed for us the moments prior to your death. Now, tell the court what you were doing at a human facility designed to imprison members of the magical community.”

Without missing a beat, Portence says, “It was my intention to study the creatures with the purpose of finding weaknesses in the witching world.”

“If found, what did you intend to do with the weaknesses you discovered?”

“We would have taken those weaknesses and given them to our network of humans, who would have used the information to damage the reputations of witches everywhere, exposing them for what they really are.”

“And what is that?”

“Spell-casting monsters with no regard for human life.”

I flinch as I remember the lives I took.

“You were involved with extremists, were you not?” Lilith pushes and when Portence doesn’t answer, she clarifies, “A group of people who hate all magical creatures and want to wipe them from the planet, allowing the humans to rise as the dominant species.”

Portence nods. “Yes.”

A wave of nausea hits me, and I look at Cynthia to see if she’s as surprised by the turn my tribunal is taking as I am. She looks grim, but not surprised. I’m starting to realize there’s an ulterior motive to my trial. We’re not just here to discuss my actions, but the deeper evil I uncovered when I wandered into the town of Pendle.

“Do you have any further questions?” the Oracle asks Lilith.

“Yes.” Lilith steps up to Portence and leans over the witness box until her nose is less than a foot from the ghostly face. “What was your intention with my daughter? What would you have done with her had her mate not come to her rescue?”

Portence speaks and her words send an icy chill down my spine. “I would have used her to lure Lilith Guardian Witch to my facility. Once the powerful witch was under my control, I would have sent her daughter for processing. She would have been killed and her brain removed for further study. Her corpse would have been cremated in the way of our people.”

“You are not *our* people!” Lilith snarls in a rare moment of emotion. “You targeted my daughter and for that I will make sure you pay for eternity, even if I have to summon you myself every damn day for the rest of my life to ensure your endless misery.” Smoothing her expression, Lilith looks at the Oracle. “No further questions, your honour.”

“That was badass,” Cynthia mutters.

I grin. “That was my mom.”

Lilith takes her place next to me and the Oracle dismisses Portence, who fades away. Next, the Oracle calls Magistrate Banbridge. I flinch as the flesh and blood human pops into existence in the witness box, his expression blank. After my initial shock at seeing another of my tormentors, I giggle. He’s wearing a French maid’s outfit and clutching a duster.

As the Oracle did with Portence, they order the Magistrate recount our meeting in detail. After, my mother questions him, once again touching on a network of extremists before having him discuss his intentions toward me. I’m relieved to hear that he had no intention of raping me but was going to order me to clean his house in a degrading outfit.

What a strange, strange man.

After the Magistrate disappears, Philip, the deeply disturbed cop, occupies the witness seat.

Cynthia paces, her blackened fingers clenching, as though she’s struggling to keep herself from cursing him while he

recites his story. My mother stares at him with the same loathing she showed Portence, then proceeds to threaten him in the same manner, only his future penance will be more gruesome. Something about snatching his spirit after his death and staking him out in the pits of Hades for eternity where he'll be eaten alive by whatever creatures happen upon him.

I'm impressed with my mom's finesse when it comes to cursing out the unworthy, and doing it in front of an Oracle, too. Bad-freaking-ass.

The things he did to me are exposed to the court and I feel an almost cathartic sense of calm by the time he finishes speaking. Knowing that, even though the humans likely won't bring him to justice, he has been seen by my brethren and judged by his actions, is enough for me.

After Philip's testimony, I'm feeling good about the direction of my trial, or I am until the next witness is called. Not witness, but witnesses, as in three of them. One an infant.

Guilt strikes me like a physical blow, stealing my breath as the Oracle calls, Andrea, Warren and Freddie Grunning, to the bench. The humans I'd cornered in their yard, intent on murdering them all. I terrorized these people and they weren't in any way involved in my abduction.

First Andrea recites her experience, then her husband, Warren. Unable to speak, the Oracle lifts images from the infant's brain, playing them on a screen that appears when the Oracle orders it. My stomach churns and I nearly throw up as I see a twisted monstrous version of myself screaming and throwing fireballs at everything in sight. The feeling of dread and fear in the child's mind is obvious to everyone watching and I blink back tears.

Silently I remind myself that I didn't know what I was doing. I didn't consciously make the choice to destroy this family. I chose to avenge my beloved. It's that choice that has led to this tribunal.

When the Oracle asks if my mother has any questions for the witnesses, she shakes her head. "Not at this time."

The family fades away and the Oracle announces that they have no more witnesses. When asked if Lilith has any, my mother calls Cynthia to the stand. “This woman was not a witness to the incident in question, but she has insight into the minds of freshly turned Rage Witches.”

“Counsel, please approach the bench.”

My mother complies, while Cynthia and I watch in bemusement as the Oracle says in a loud whisper, “Do you think I don’t know how Rage Witches are created? Need I remind you, I am one of the oldest beings in existence. I was around when the first Rage Witch popped into existence. Nothing this witness can say will alter the direction of this tribunal. I’m inclined to dismiss your witness.”

“Ah, I see the problem, your honour.” Lilith turns away and strides to the defense table where she picks up a file that hadn’t existed until now. Going back to the bench, she opens it and runs her fingernail down the interior, then points. “Is that your signature, Oracle?”

“It is.”

“Your signature is attached to this approved list of witnesses. Unfortunately, as per your declared timeframe, there isn’t enough time to conjure a new list with a new signature. This witness must be questioned.”

I bite my lip to keep from laughing as Lilith uses the Oracle’s bureaucracy against them.

“You may proceed.”

“Excellent.” Lilith turns to Cynthia, her expression growing compassionate. “You ready for this?”

Cynthia nods and takes the stand. After she enters the box, her face takes on a blank expression and she stares straight ahead, unblinking.

Catching my frown, Lilith explains, “It’s an impartiality spell. Anyone who enters the witness box falls into a trance and can speak only the truth as they know it. They won’t remember what occurred when they leave the box.” Turning

from me, Lilith approaches Cynthia. “Please tell the court what happened on the evening you became a Rage Witch.”

She tells her story in brief sentences, her voice monotone, no emotion leaking through the words. “I was enlisted as a Good Witch to help out in the Human-Shifter war, seven centuries ago. My mate at the time, Alara Good Witch, fought alongside me. Our small company of nine witches was attacked during a period of ceasefire between the factions. We weren’t able to escape, and the humans enlisted the help of a rogue Warlock to neutralize our powers. The entire company was tortured and executed. Everyone died that evening, including Alara Good Witch. Only I survived.”

“How did you escape?” My mother’s voice is compassionate, though Cynthia seems incapable of hearing it, her trance protecting her from reliving the horror of such an event.

“I was tortured, the same as everyone else, and later lost one of my legs as the damage was too significant to heal, even with magic. After they questioned us, they forced us to stand over a pit and stabbed each witch in the heart. When it was my turn, I twisted, taking the sword through my shoulder and falling backward into the pit. They covered us with a thin layer of dirt and left. When I crawled out of the pit, the camp was ablaze.”

My heart breaks as I listen to her story. I knew she lost a leg in the war, but I didn’t know she had a mate before Lila.

She continues, “I don’t remember much after that, but I was told that I transformed into a Rage Witch and hunted down our attackers, murdering each of them. When I reached the Warlock, I tried to kill him too, but was stopped when several Warrior Witches appeared and arrested me.”

“What happened to that Warlock?” Lilith asks, casting me a look from beneath her lashes.

“He resides in the Prison Realm.”

“What would you do if you could reach him?”

“I would kill him, too.” She doesn’t miss a beat as she speaks her truth and I look wide-eyed at the Oracle to find out if Cynthia’s words are going to get the Rage Witch in trouble.

Instead, the Oracle says, “You are dismissed, Cynthia Rage Witch.”

Cynthia stands and leaves the witness box, pausing to touch her head as reality crashes back in. Blinking away the fog, she rejoins us.

It hits me why my mother called Cynthia to the witness box. It’s not for the tribunal, or to ask for leniency from the Oracle. She did it for me. She wants me to understand that there was nothing I could’ve done to alter the events in Pendle, and that it’s okay to feel angry over what happened to me and my mate.

“What happens now?” I ask Lilith. “Will they want me to testify?”

But before she can answer, the Oracle interrupts. “Please step forward, Magdalene Rage Witch. I am ready to pronounce judgement.”

A trickle of cold fear goes through my body as I step tentatively forward, lifting my gaze to the Oracle’s.

“Magdalene Rage Witch, you are sentenced to mentorship with Cynthia Rage Witch, which will be completed in the Nether Realm and will last for a period of 5000 days, or until you can display the control that is required of any Rage Witch who requests a return to Earth.”

My heart sinks as I hear the number, but Cynthia grabs me. “This is great news.” A relieved smile stretches her lips.

“Thank you, Oracle,” Lilith says, relief in her voice too.

I understand why they’re relieved; I could’ve been deemed too much of a danger to allow around humans and sentenced to life in the Prison Realm, but it’s agony to think of being separated from Rush for more than a decade.

The Oracle stands, shaking the wrinkles from their robe, then turns their colorless gaze to my mother. “I will see you

for dinner at my place at eight, Lilith Guardian Witch.”

Lilith smiles brightly. “I look forward to it, Oracle.”

The Oracle leaves and Cynthia and I stare at my mother.

“Uh...” Cynthia starts.

“Are you and the Oracle, uh...” I didn’t even know Oracles could date, let alone that one might be into my mother.

Lilith sighs at us and says, “Immortality is a long time to be alone, ladies. Now, let’s get out of here. I want to spend some time with my daughter before you two catch the next portal to the Nether Realm.”

CHAPTER 37

BUSTED RUSH

KEENAN

“This is the third bar he’s busted up this month,” Lock grumbles as he counts out a stack of twenty notes into pub owner’s outstretched hand.

“He’s grieving,” I remind my older brother, shaking my head at the damage. “Fuck me, Rush knows how to throw a party.”

“Wasn’t no party,” the bar owner growls. “Downed a keg o’ beer on his own, then fought anyone who stepped up. When he started breaking my stuff, I insisted he leave. That’s when he did that.” He points to the broken shelves behind the bar and the dozens of broken liquor bottles on the floor, then points at himself. “With my body.”

Grimacing, Lock counts out several more notes for the shifter’s suffering. “Sorry ‘bout that, man. Rush is in a bad place.”

The bar owner rubs his brow, which sports a nasty cut and Lock adds another note to the pile. “I understand his mate left ‘im, but he can’t come in here and throw people around any time he likes. I’m tryin’ to run an honest business and it gets harder when a member of the royal family comes in and tears it all up.”

Lock nods his understanding. “There’s no excuse for this behaviour. I can promise it won’t happen again.”

“With all due respect, yer ‘ighness, he’s had ‘is chances.” The injured shifter says stubbornly. “There’s not a bar in this city that’ll have ‘im now.”

“We understand.” Lock turns to a pile of tables and chairs that’ve been turned to matchsticks and reaches for Rush’s arm, dragging him to his feet. Rush stumbles and starts to go down, but I grip him under the armpit on his other side. A wave of beer stench wafts over us and I turn my head away to keep from gagging. Jesus. When was the last time Rush bathed?

“You won’t see him again,” Lock assures the bar owner.

We head up to the castle, an inebriated, barely conscious Rush dragging his feet between us. This version of him is much easier to deal with than the violent, only half inebriated version. Alcohol goes through a shifter’s system quickly, but Rush has been drinking it like a man dying of thirst, non-stop from morning to night until he passes out in a heap. He doesn’t wake up until his headache urges him to find more booze.

“She’s been gone for two months,” I mutter. “Don’t know how much more of this he can take. Maybe we should find a way to get her back.”

“We can’t,” Lock says, with a shake of his head. “She’s with her kind now, healing. Even if we could reach her, Rush said it would be dangerous to her and everyone else around her if she doesn’t learn how to control her magic. It wouldn’t be fair to bring her back early.”

“There might not be a mate for her to come back to if it takes too long,” I say worriedly. “And then what? She turned Rage Witch when she thought he was killed. What happens if she finds out he really is dead?”

“God help us all,” Lock murmurs, pushing through the side entrance in the bailey and stumbling as he takes Rush’s weight. “Jesus, I don’t think I can carry his heavy ass any longer, let’s put him in a cell.”

I help Lock shove him in a prison cell and step back. “What do we do with him then? We can’t keep unleashing him on Wolf-Haven.”

Lock stares at Rush, an expression of regret on his face. “I think it’s time for him to go home. At least with Fallon, he has a purpose. Here, he does nothing but pine for his lost mate.”

I nod my agreement. “I’ll organize a party to get him home. Maybe if he goes on a pack run for a few days, he’ll feel better.” But we both know he won’t. It doesn’t matter if he’s in wolf form or human, he’ll still feel the absence of his missing mate like a gaping hole through his soul.

“Do it.” Lock turns and strides away, castle business calling him, while I remain behind, ready to be there for my brother when he wakes. He might be an asshole, but I failed to be there for him once, I won’t do it again.

Lowering myself onto a stool across from Rush’s slumbering form, great shuddering snores exploding from him, I lean against the stone wall and close my eyes.



RUSH

Sober fucking sucks.

Almost as much as missing my mate.

We've been running as a wolf pack for three days and will soon reach my tower. Keenan, along with several of Lock's castle guards, flank me. They say it's to make sure I get home safe, but I know it's to keep an eye on me in case I plan on doing what I did in Wolf-Haven to a human bar.

They aren't wrong.

The moment I can get away from these shifters, I'm heading for the nearest bar to drink myself stupid and fight as many humans as I can. After all, these mortal fuckers kidnapped my mate and caused her to go Rage Witch, which is why she had to leave me.

Not every mortal is to blame for what happened to your mate.

I growl at Keenan, who keeps infiltrating my thoughts. I fucking hate it. Only my mate should be allowed to jump into my head, filling it with light, happiness and blessed confusion with her crazy charm.

I snarl back at him, *My mate was injured and there was nothing I could do to stop it. The humans will pay for this.*

You can't go picking fights with humans, and you know it. Lock is leaving three of these shifters behind to keep an eye on you, so I don't recommend pursuing a vendetta with the humans.

Ignoring him, I slow my gait to a trot rather than a full run and the shifters surrounding me follow suit. Moments later, we step into the clearing around the tower. The grass has grown a few feet high with no one around to cut it, but I'm not worried about the landscaping.

For the first time in months, my thoughts shift from my mate to my brother, who was left alone for nine weeks with

only a dog and a ghost for company. Shifting to human, I stride through the grass, the shifters around me doing the same until my yard is filled with naked people.

Pushing the door to the tower open, I expect more of a mess than the bars I busted up over these past months in Wolf-Haven. Instead, I'm greeted by a room filled with flowers and herbs, bunches of them hanging from the walls to dry. A cheerful fire snaps in the hearth while one well-fed wolf shifter and a contented Seventeen nap at the feet of Lyra Good Witch while she reads a passage out loud from a book spread out on the table next to her chair. A chicken clucks nearby as it searches the room for food.

"Oh 'tis you!" Lyra jumps to her feet, alerting Seventeen and Fallon to the presence of people in the tower.

While Seventeen howls his signature hound dog howl, Fallon jumps around me like he's happy to see me, which is touching considering before I left, I questioned whether he knew who I was, let alone cared enough to be excited about my return.

"I'm doin' good," I tell him gruffly, setting a hand on his head. Though he's gained weight, his spinal ridge and ribcage less noticeable, his brain is still affected by the witch's curse. He acts more like an occasionally dangerous dog than an intelligent, thinking creature.

I turn to Keenan. "What now?"

"I go back to Wolf-Haven and you stay here with Fallon until your mate comes back."

"And if she doesn't?" I regret the question as soon as it comes out of my mouth. Keenan and the rest of them don't need to see my vulnerability hanging right out there on my sleeve. "I mean, how long will these guys stay?" I indicate the guards milling about my tower.

"For as long as you need them."

"Until I'm no longer a danger to humanity, you mean."

Keenan shrugs. "Sure, that too." He squeezes my shoulder. "I'm always around if you need me, brother. I know what it

feels like to lose a mate, but there's hope. Magdalene isn't gone. She'll come back and the last thing you want her to find is a drunken slob of a mate passed out on a barroom floor."

Fuck, he's right. My mate doesn't need to see that shit.

"Fine," I grumble. "Now get the fuck outta here, before I bust your ass instead of the barroom calling to me."

Keenan chuckles, then does as I suggest and leaves, taking four of the guards with him and leaving three behind. I kick them out of my tower, telling them if they intend to stay, they can do it in the surrounding swampland.

The moment I'm left alone, I head straight into the swamp, avoiding the scent of the King's guards. Their fear of pissing me off keeps them at enough of a distance that I slip easily past their perimeter. If I was in charge of these guys, they'd be put on toilet duty for a decade. I'm glad they're being lax in their duties because if they intervened I wouldn't be able to do what I've planned on doing for months.

I make my way to the town of Pendle, loping through the mostly deserted streets in my wolf form until I come across the scent I'm looking for. The dominant scent left on my mate after her time spent with the humans. The scent of the one who tortured her.

I make my way easily to his house, a small trash heap of a structure with overgrown grass growing through a pile of tires and a rusty Buick that takes up most of the yard, it's hood open, weeds spilling out.

I shift to human as I approach the front door and, without pausing, use the heel of my foot to kick it open. It crashes into the wall and I'm through before the startled man can pick up the gun on the table next to him.

Striding toward him, I grab him by the neck and dangle him over the floor as I reach for his wallet, shaking out the contents. As he gurgles and turns an interesting shade of blue, I hold his driver's license up to the light.

"Philip Anderson." I pin him with a look that tells him very clearly what the last few hours of his life will look like.

“You hurt my mate.”

CHAPTER 38

DAY PASS

MAGDALENE

“I’m nervous,” I admit, staring at the open portal of swirling silver smoke. “It’s been six months.”

“It has,” Cynthia agrees, giving me a light shove. “And I’d love to say something comforting, but the Oracle doesn’t give day passes to just anyone, so let’s get moving. I want to spend every minute I can with Lila.”

“Right, of course, I’m sorry.” I step into the mirror, turning to wave as I go. “Say hi for me.”

I don’t hear her reply because seconds later I step through the mirror in my tower bedroom, looking around expectantly. “Rush?”

The room looks mostly untouched except for a thick layer of dust over everything except the bed. The indent on the bedding tell me Rush has been sleeping here.

I leave through the open door, making my way downstairs, a frown pulling at my eyebrows. I’d assumed he would’ve made his way back here to check on Fallon, but maybe I’m wrong. Maybe he’s still in Wolf-Haven.

I’ll have a quick check around the tower then conjure another portal if I’m wrong. I hope I find him quickly though; I’ve only been given a day pass because I’ve been doing such a great job of my spell work.

Who am I kidding? Lilith influenced the Oracle to give me a day pass because I was a sad, whiny, pathetic heap of a witch when she last visited the Nether Realm to check on me.

“Rush?” I call as I step into the common room. “Are you here?”

“Miss Mags!” A gasp catches my attention and I laugh as Lyra Good Witch rushes toward me, flinging herself at me... and then through me because ghosts can’t hug the living. “I’m so very glad yer here!”

“Thank you,” I say cheerfully, pretending to embrace her insubstantial form. “Where’s Rush?”

“Oh, he’s been a right handful, he has. Even more than this one!” She jerks her thumb toward Fallon who’s snoozing next to the fire, Seventeen curled into his belly and... a chicken nestled against Seventeen. I’ll unpack that later.

“But where is he?” I ask urgently. “I only have a few hours before I have to go back. I want to spend that time with my mate.”

“I’m not exactly sure, but maybe in Pendle,” she says with a shrug. “He goes there often these days.”

I bite my lip, worried. “What can he possibly be doing in a town filled with immortal-hating humans?”

Shrugging again, she settles herself into the chair next to Fallon, Seventeen, and the chicken. “No idea, never thought to ask, but the guards don’t seem bothered by it, so I mind my own.”

“Right... uh, guards?” I ask faintly, making my way to the tower door and peeking out into the yard. “What guards?”

“The ones King Lock sent to keep an eye on that mate o’ yers. He was bustin’ up Wolf-Haven and was sent back here months ago. Since then, he’s been goin’ into Pendle often.”

Shit. Not good.

“Well, I better be off,” I say, edging out the door. “So good to see you again, Lyra. Thank you for spending so much time with the boys. I really appreciate it. I promise, when I come back for good, I’ll make your afterlife feel like heaven.”

A big smile stretches her lips and she says, “I love being here and bein’ helpful, like a Good Witch should. But not gonna say no to a heaven of me own.”

I wave at her and rush outside, snapping my fingers and breaking a branch from a nearby dead tree. It hurtles toward me and I grab it in one fist, hopping on and shooting up over the treetops. I could portal, but this way I might be able to spot Rush from the air and get to him quicker.

My gaze is fixated on the town just on the other side of the swaps and I make my way straight there, circling overhead before landing in a residential road. I thought nothing could induce me to step foot in Pendle again, but I'm so worried about my mate I'd hazard a troll's lair if it meant setting eyes on Rush again.

I smooth down my jean skirt, tug my T-shirt over my belly and pat my blond curls before setting off in search of Rush. After several minutes of fruitless searching, I do the thing I should've done in the first place. I reach out to him through our mating bond, pushing myself into his unsuspecting brain and looking at his surroundings.

He's holding a ... lamp? And he's talking to a group of shifters, but I don't know where they are. Damn it, I might be good at infiltrating his mind, but I've yet to figure out how wolfy GPS works.

Then he stiffens, sniffs the air and says out loud, "Magdalene?"

I'm here! I say excitedly through our connection. *I'm in Pendle.*

Smashing glass tells me he's dropped the lamp then the world turns into a blur as he sets off at a dead run, shifting to his wolf as he races toward my position. I start running, too, even though I don't need to. He's more than fast enough for both of us and soon I see him racing up the street toward me, his grey and orange wolf eating up the ground so fast he's on top of me before I can blink.

Shrieking, I brace myself as a massive hulking 300-pound wolf tackles me. He rolls with me, summersaulting and twisting so I'm on top when we hit the pavement, his furry body enveloping me.

I wrap my arms around him and bury my face in his neck, tears streaming down my face and soaking into him. "I missed you so much!"

Fur becomes flesh as he shifts to human, his arms enveloping me in a warm embrace, his lips in my hair as he

crushes me.

“I fucking missed you too, baby.”

We lay that way for several minutes, clutching each other, me crying while he rocks us both. After a moment, I calm down enough to say, “I was given a day pass. I have to go back, but I had to come see you.”

“I’ll take whatever I can get,” he says gruffly. “This is more than I dared hope for. Didn’t think I’d see you for another decade at least. Your mom showed up a few months ago to tell me about the tribunal.”

A sound catches my attention and I look over my shoulder, my eyes widening as I see the bumper of a car stopped in the road inches from where we lay. I glance around the car and see a few more lined up behind it.

Sitting up I say, “I had no idea humans could be so patient. The ones I met were always in a hurry to get where they were going.”

“These humans have been learning the values of patience, respect and tolerance toward the shifter community.”

What on earth has been going on around here? I’ll deal with it later. First, “Let’s get out of here. I want a bit more privacy so I can give you a proper greeting.”

“Fuck, yeah,” he says enthusiastically. “I’ll shift and you can climb on my back. We’ll be at the tower in no time.”

“No need,” I tell him with a grin. “Rage Witches can create portals without a mirror or a hearth.”

I snap my fingers and seconds later a portal opens over our bed in the tower and dumps us out. I laugh at Rush’s expression of panic as he hits the bed and bounces.

Before he can recover, I climb on top of him and cover his lips with mine.

A deep groan rumbles up his throat and his broad hands cover my back, forcing me to sprawl on top of him.

Soon he's tearing at my clothes. I try to extricate my hands so I can curse his clothes off. I'm learning the art of handless, sightless spell casting but it's a long, slow process and I'm not very good at it yet.

Finally, I tear my mouth from his in frustration. "Clothes off, now!"

"That's what I'm trying to do," he growls, tearing my T-shirt up the back.

Taking a breath, I say, "I think we need to separate for a few seconds to get this done quicker."

He stares at me, clearly wondering if we can just fuck through the barrier of clothes between us.

Laughing, I use his chest to shove myself off the bed, jumping to my feet and stripping in record time, my panties sailing across the room. "Now you, wolf mate."

"Fuck, just climb on, baby. You only need my cock." He unzips his jeans and drags his penis out, looking at me hopefully.

It's a beautiful sight. Thick and veined, pointing at the ceiling, a delicious drop of pre-cum pearling on top.

"Nope, lose the clothes. You wanna look at the girls in their full glory, I want to see the whole package, too."

"Fine," he grumbles, but I can tell he's pleased at how much his body turns me on. He rolls off the other side of the bed and divests himself of his clothes, sneaking peeks at me to see my reaction.

As soon as he's naked, I jump on the bed and bounce, launching myself at him and forcing him to catch me. I hit his chest, wrapping my legs around him as he grips me tightly, his lips meeting mine in a passionate kiss.

We cling to each other, kissing, touching, holding, wordlessly describing our months apart as images rush through our brains, a kaleidoscope of our time apart.

I show him the Nether Realm where Rage Witches go to learn to control their powers. A barren, rugged terrain meant to

withstand even the angriest of spells. I show him how much I've learned, images of myself conjuring, destroying, re-creating matter. I take him on a tour of the cute white cottage with blue trim that Cynthia and I conjured to make our time there more bearable. I show him my favorite mountaintop where I look across the mist filled valley and fantasize about my wolf mate.

A vision of me looking at my naked body in a mirror is more than he can take and soon he's thrusting the entire length of his cock inside me.

Arching back, his arm securing me, I rock on top of him, taking as much pleasure as I can.

I show him images of myself in my cozy little bed, my fingers playing through my slick folds as I think of my mate and the pleasure he gives me when he fucks me. As my orgasm builds, I show him images of me shattering, his name on my lips.

"Fuck, gonna come, baby," he groans, his face pressed between my breasts, my hands tangled in his hair as he fucks me standing up, the muscles of his arms rippling with the effort.

"Yes, come with me!" I gasp, leaping over the edge of my orgasm, hoping he'll join me.

He does, shouting his release as his cock barbs and hooks into my flesh. As we fall onto the bed together, I snap my fingers, mending the bruises from our fierce mating.

Rush links fingers with me and shows me images of what he's been doing over the past few months. I notice he carefully avoids the first several weeks but I sense his suffering during this time.

I see him working in the town of Pendle, keeping himself busy through physical labour as he helps the town rebuild the structures I destroyed in my fit of rage. I feel as much pride in my mate as I do shame for my actions.

Why is he helping the humans when I can still feel his blame toward them for what happened to me? Then I

understand when he shows me the shifter packs moving into Pendle, filling it with enough magical folk that anyone who was part of the town's former anti-immortal agenda will take pause.

"You're making it safe for us to live here, aren't you?" I whisper, sifting my hand through his hair as he lays sprawled on top of me, his face pillowed against my chest.

"Yeah," he admits. "We've driven most of the evil from town, but there are a few who wish to stay. The incoming shifters are willing to work on the townspeople's perception of us."

"Where did they come from?"

"Since Lock came into power in Wolf-Haven, there's been a period of good fortune, which has brought many new births to the area. Wolf-Haven will soon reach capacity, so we're spreading our shifter packs out."

"You're going to take over the world, aren't you?" My words are light-hearted though. I think he came up with a very good plan to take Pendle in a new direction.

"You know it, baby."

We fall asleep in each other's arms, but soon my internal clock wakes me, reminding me that my day pass is almost up. Gently, I remove Rush's arm from my waist and climb off the bed. I tug my clothes on and when I'm ready, I turn back to take one last look at my mate. It might be years before I see him again.

He's not asleep. He sits up, his gaze clear and knowing. "You were going to leave without saying goodbye."

I smile slightly. "You were going to try to stop me from leaving. I could see it in your head."

"Not try." He rises from the bed, stalking toward me.

I edge around the bed toward the mirror, intent on creating a portal, but he reaches out and snaps his hands over my wrists, stopping me.

"Don't leave."

“I have to.” I push the words past a throat constricting with tears. Why does he have to make this more difficult than it already is? “You know I do.”

“You don’t,” he insists. “Look at you, you’ve got everything under control. No more unhinged Rage Witch.”

I let out a watery giggle at his description. “We don’t know that I can control myself. That’s why it’s important I continue working with my mentor. You know this and I know you’re not going to stop me, as much as you might want to.” I go up on my toes and press a kiss to his lips. “Because you will always give me what I want and right now what I want is to return to the Nether Realm so I can finish my training. Every second that separates us is agony and the only way to get past it is to get through it.”

“Fuck,” he growls, then grips my head so hard I think my skull might crack and lays a kiss on me. Before I can properly participate, he flings me away from him. “Go now, Magdalene, before I do something we’ll both regret.”

I run to the mirror and conjure the portal, then turn back for one last look, but he’s turned away from me. With a lump in my throat, I step through, but as I leave, he turns around and rushes toward me. The sound of shattering glass follows me through the portal.

CHAPTER 39

HOME COMING

THREE YEARS AND SEVEN MONTHS LATER

MAGDALENE

The first thing I do when I enter the tower is inhale, drawing the scent of my mate into my lungs. Frowning, I sniff again, dropping my bags on the floor.

Weird, there's almost no trace of him. This time, as I step into our shared bedroom, there's a thick layer of dust on everything, including the bed. Am I too late? Has he moved? It doesn't seem possible, not when he promised he'd be here, waiting for me.

Something's wrong.

Rushing out of the room, I take the stairs to the first floor two at a time, my feet flying as panic threatens to strangle me. Automatically, I reach for him through our mental bond, but there's interference. He's out there somewhere, but I can't get a fix on him.

I hurry into the common room, expecting to find Fallon and Lyra Good Witch. What I find has me freezing to the spot, my mouth falling open in consternation.

"Katey?"

My best friend glances over her shoulder, then lets out a shout, drops the stack of napkins she was holding and hurls herself at me, arms open.

"Oomph!" I collect her in my embrace and hold her while she laughs and cries and grips my face to look at me.

"Your mom told us you'd be back soon, so we thought we'd be here to greet you." Looking over her shoulder I see Callum sitting in one of the chairs next to the fire, Fallon sitting across from him in his human form. The two are staring at each other without malice, but they don't seem to be conversing. Katie and Callum's children, Mercury Warlock and Belladonna Good Witch are sitting at the table playing cards. "I've been dropping in over the years to check on your

mate and his family, making sure they have everything they need.”

“Oh, Katie, you’re such a Good Witch.” I hug her hard, showing her my appreciation.

She beams and touches the ends of my hair. “I like your new style.”

I smile and run a hand down the blond length, which is now down to my ass, the tips dyed pink. “Thanks, I did it for Rush. Where is he?”

Her face drops. “We don’t know.” She looks to Lyra Good Witch who floats out of the kitchen toward us, a hound dog and a couple of chickens following her.

Dropping to my knees, I stretch a hand out. “Seventeen! It’s so good to see you.”

“I’m afraid not, young miss,” Lyra says with a sigh. “Seventeen is with the angels now. This is Eighteen.”

“Eighteen?” I say in surprise, stroking the dog’s ears.

“Yer man thought it was a good idea to have a companion around as it seems to calm Master Fallon.”

I push to my feet. “Where is Rush, Lyra?”

She shakes her head. “Don’t rightly know, Miss. He went full wolf a few years back and hasn’t come home since.”

Her words are a blow to the chest and I can’t breathe for a minute. Oh god, he’s... gone? What if I’m too late? What if I missed my chance to be with my mate?

Katey wraps her arm around me and glares at Lyra. “For the love of Earth Mother, tell her the rest. You are the worst at delivering news.”

Ignoring Katie’s sharp tone, Lyra dutifully speaks. “Though he hasn’t been around much, we suspect he’s staying close by. Master Fallon can feel him, and someone leaves deer carcasses and such on the doorstep for whoever’s staying here. The swamps remain clear of predators and the Pendle folk

says he wanders through occasionally, checking on his brethren that settled there.”

“Whoever stays here?” I ask faintly. “Who’s been staying here?”

“Oh, plenty o’ people!” Lyra says excitedly. “The wolf King himself, his wolf wife, and their baby wolf twins stayed for a few weeks in the spring.”

“Twins?” I say faintly.

Katey interjects, “Apparently they run in your new family so watch out.” She continues, “We know how much Rush and his brother mean to you, so we take turns staying with Fallon and stocking everything up.” Catching my confusion, she lists the names of the people who did their best to hold our lives together while I was gone. “Lila stays when she can get time away from her Guardian duties. Lennox and Keenan have both stayed for extended visits. But mostly it’s been my Belladonna. She loves Lyra, Fallon and Eighteen, and she enjoys practicing her magic without her overbearing mama breathing down her neck.”

Belladonna joins us, slipping an arm around her mother’s waist. “My mother, overbearing? Impossible.”

Chuckling, Katey squeezes her twenty-one-year-old daughter against her side, her gaze meeting mine. “Go find him. We’ll be here when you get back.”

Tears of gratitude well up, but I choke them back. There aren’t enough words for how much these people mean to me. I feel overwhelming gratitude for everyone who helped maintain sanity while I was away and Rush was struggling to cope. After I find my mate, I’ll do my best to find a way to show them how loved they are.

Without another word I race out of the tower door and into the yard, broadcasting my position to Rush as best I can. I’m rusty at mate telepathy, not having used it in almost four years, but I know he’ll hear me.

I reach out for him, trying to feel him. This time, instead of an insubstantial wisp, I catch the brain pattern of a wild

animal. Not just any wild animal, *my* wild animal.

I start running, hurtling through the trees, bypassing swamps as I sprint toward my mate. I've spent years practicing, strengthening myself, not just magically, but physically. I want to spend eternity with a wolf shifter, and I need to be on a level with him if I'm going to survive our mating runs, our wild sexual encounters, and bearing shifter-witch children.

Now I can see him in my head, see the world racing past him as he runs full tilt through the swamps, intent on getting to me, intent on seeing for himself that the voice he's hearing in his head really is mine.

He's been lonely for so long that he can't believe I'm back.

I hear the crashing of feet against the earth, of branches snapping, then he bursts between two trees, his body soaring as he pounces. I'm knocked backwards, but he uses his wolfy reflexes to make sure I'm on top when we land. We hit the ground, rolling over and over before coming to a stop with him on top.

He stares down at me, his massive wolf's body towering over me.

I grip his face, tears falling unchecked down my cheeks as I look him over. "I missed you so much."

He flings his head back and howls, a mournful sound that carries through the trees and echoes back at us.

I tip my head back into the crunchy leaves beneath me and howl with him, pouring out my own pain at our separation.

When we finish, we stare at each other. "Please let me see you. I know you've been this way for a few years, but I need my human mate now. Please let him come to the surface."

His wolf hears and I see images of him burying his grief by running, hunting, and swimming. He never goes far from the tower, but he pushes himself to his limits, punishing himself physically until his wolf takes over to protect him from going insane.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper. “I know it hurt and I know you did your best, but I’m back now and I’m here to stay. I promise, I won’t hurt you ever again. I’ll never leave you.”

As I stare up at him, his great furry face inches from my own as he shifts. The fur recedes, his muzzle flattens into a human nose, and his glowing yellow eyes change to a beautiful liquid bronze.

Frowning, I touch his matted beard. “You got hairier.”

“No reason to shave.” His voice is gruff and rusty from disuse.

“I missed you, Rush.”

He doesn’t say anything, but I feel the raw pain ripping through him at my words, feel the depth of his longing for his mate while I was gone. It almost matches mine, but his feels worse. Lonelier. The constant pull of a mating connection without a mate to answer back was driving him half-insane.

“I’m sorry I left.” I swipe at my tears as they continue to spill. “I’ll never do it again, no matter what an Oracle tells me. I’m here to stay.”

“Forever?” There’s hope in his voice, but wariness too.

“I’m forever yours.”

“Mine,” he breathes, dropping his face into my hair and inhaling noisily, his eyes rolling back in ecstasy. I wrinkle my nose as I catch a whiff of him. It’s possible it’s been years since his last bath.

Hearing my thought, he defends himself. “I swim.”

“Are you swimming in the swamps?” I ask skeptically. “C’mon, let’s get back to the tower. The others are preparing a feast for my homecoming and Katie makes some of the best vegetarian Shepard’s Pie you’ll ever eat.”

“She’s a good cook,” he rumbles. “Sometimes she puts food out for me.” He pulls me to my feet and dusts me off, his broad hands stroking down my body, igniting sparks that catch in the evening air like fireflies. Our chemistry hasn’t dimmed one bit.

Together, we make our way through the swamps back to the tower, which seems a lot further away now that I'm walking. We don't talk much. Rush's brain is closer to that of a wolf's, but I feel his thought patterns slowly falling back into the human range.

He's trying to figure out how long I've been gone and when I'll be leaving again. My heart breaks as I catch his last thought. He doesn't believe I'm staying, no matter how much I promise him. He's confused, unsure if I'm even real.

I knew my absence would impact my wolf shifter mate, but I didn't realize how much. Despair drove him from his home and he shifted to his wolf to cope with it as he waited out the years until my return.

"Not despair." I look at him and he clarifies. "It wasn't despair that drove me into the swamps. It was you. Thought if I went to the places where you gathered your weeds and stuff, I could feel you."

I swallow past the lump in my throat at his sweetness. "Did it work?"

He nods. "Sometimes I heard your voice whispering to me."

My heart breaks for him and swipes at the tear making a path down my cheek. "I spoke to you all the time when I was in the Nether Realm. Maybe you could hear me."

When we reach the tower, Rush holds back.

I look at him questioningly and he says, "I'm not fit for company."

I know it's not his nudity giving him pause, but his bushy face and the dirt he hasn't washed off in weeks.

"No problem," I say cheerfully, wrapping my arms around his waist. "Hold on tight."

Without hesitation, he crushes me in his arms.

I float us up to the balcony attached to our bedroom, half expecting him to freak out, but when we set down, he looks at me curiously. "That was... fun."

I grin at him. “Let’s get you cleaned up.”

While he showers, I go through his chest, placing a pair of blue jeans and a T-shirt on the bed for him to change into.

When he comes back in the room, I conjure a chair and point at it. Sitting, he watches me with a warm gaze as I conjure a small, round table with a porcelain bowl on top, filling it with warm water. His expression grows concerned when I add a bowl of shaving cream, a brush, and a straight razor.

“Do you trust me?”

His soul cringes at the question, but he smiles and says, “Fuck yeah, I trust you, baby.” An image of his slashed throat and a fountain of blood spraying out dominates his mind.

I straddle his lap, facing him, soaking in the warmth of his bare skin. First, I use scissors to trim his beard to a reasonable length, then I dip the brush into the shaving cream and goop it onto his face, rubbing until it lathers properly. I pick up the razor and get to work, biting my lip in concentration so I don’t cut him.

The experience is intensely sensual, his breath mingling with mine, his eyes following me as I work. The heat of sexual desire entwines us, but neither of us makes a move, enjoying this new kind of closeness. Finally, as I take the last swipe, scraping away the bristles, I lean back on his lap to have a look.

“There you are.” I rock forward and kiss him, smearing the leftover shaving cream on myself.

Using a towel, I wipe our faces and he stands to get dressed. When he’s ready, I admire him with the eyes of an adoring mate. He was good-looking as a scruffy wolf, but this version of Rush Wolven-North is breathtaking.

I hold my hand out to him. “Let’s go downstairs and start enjoying the rest of our immortal lives together.”

CHAPTER 40

WHAT ARE THE ODDS?

RUSH

“Are you ready, mate?” I demand, cracking my knuckles and rolling my shoulders until they crack, too.

“Are you?” she challenges, sitting on the balcony ledge and grinning at me.

“Baby, you don’t know what you’re in for.”

She laughs. “What were the odds? Three to one in my favour?”

“Those are pity bets,” he assures me. “The packs of Wolf-Haven would never choose a witch over a shifter to win.”

She narrows her eyes at me. “You’re the one turning our very important mating ritual into a sporting event. I would’ve objected but the packs clearly know a winner when they see one.”

“More like they’re afraid of crossing such a powerful and terrifying Rage Witch.”

“Oh, yes please, I like when you call me that.” She leans back, balancing on the ledge and lifting a leg to reveal the thigh high split in her satin wedding gown. “Keep talking like that and we’re not going to make it out of this room.”

I shrug out of my tuxedo jacket, tug off my bowtie and rip the shirt from my chest, leaving the tatters to fall to the floor. Her eyes dart down my front, following the trail of hair into my trousers before lingering on my growing erection. Her thoughts take a decidedly sexual turn and I stalk toward her, hands on my belt. “Not a chance. You promised me a mating run and a mating run I will have.”

She shivers and sits up straighter on the railing. “I love it when you talk all dominant like that. Do it some more.”

Placing my hands on either side of her hips, I lean in and speak to her, my lips inches from hers. “I’m going to chase you, I’m going to capture you, I’m going to fuck you, and then

I'm going to bite you until you scream to the world that you belong to me. Is that what you want to hear?"

"Holy Earth Mother, yes," she moans, her tongue darting out to lick her lips in a move that nearly has me spilling my seed in my pants. Fucking sexy witch. It's everything I can do to keep from dragging her off the ledge and fucking her right here in front of King and country. Literally. My brother, his wife and our wedding guests are still partying in the courtyard below our room.

Today was our wedding day and the spectacular event, put together by Magdalene, Sarena, Katey, and Beatrice, went off without a hitch. Lock brokered a safe-passage treaty with Lilith Guardian Witch to allow witches on wolf shifter territory during the wedding weekend, so Magdalene's friends and family could come. I don't think Lock was prepared for how popular my witch mate is among her brethren because the Witch side of the aisle almost overwhelmed the wolf side.

As it turns out, witches can really party. Colorful sparks shoot up into the star-filled night at regular intervals and wild laughter and free-flowing alcohol tells me this party likely won't wind down until morning.

"Are we going to do this?" Magdalene asks, raising a brow.

I unbuckle and unzip my trousers, dropping them on the balcony. "You want a head start?"

"If you insist," she says with a smirk and blows me a kiss. "Catch me if you can."

Gripping the railing, she allows gravity to drag her backwards off the balcony, twisting gracefully in the air and letting go. My heart pounds as she free falls for a few seconds before soaring over the crowd below and taking off into the night sky, the lace of her veil fluttering in the breeze behind her. A roar goes up from the crowd and she blows them a kiss as she flies past.

No matter how often I see her fly, it always fills me joy, though it took some time to get over the heart attack of

watching her fall towards an unforgiving ground. But Magdalene has spent the past few months since her return from the Nether Realm showing me what she's capable of. She's now one of the most powerful beings on the planet and I couldn't be prouder.

As she heads south toward the safety of the witch swamps, I grip the railing and sail over, shifting to my wolf as I fall. Wedding guests scatter when I hit the ground and then cheer, clap and wolf whistle as I take off after my mate.

The only rule I gave her was that she couldn't portal away. I'm faster on foot than she is in the air, but I'll never be able to reach her if she uses a portal. My paws eat up the distance between us, the powerful muscles of my body stretching and releasing as I narrow in on her.

Fuck my mate. Fuck my mate. Fuck my mate.

I'm not sure if it's me or my wolf thinking it. Maybe both. Doesn't matter, we're in complete agreement with the excellent plan of fucking our mate. The chase makes it so much sweeter as instinct kicks in, telling me exactly what I must do and driving me toward my ultimate goal. It's in my DNA.

I see her ahead of me, her white dress fluttering like a banner in the night, and I launch myself up the side of a Norway Spruce (my mate is acquainting me with the ins and outs of the natural world). Using the treetop as a springboard, I hurl myself toward her, snapping at her skirt.

Elation slams through me as I grab her dress with my powerful jaws and she jerks to a stop above me. We float for a few seconds, her looking down at me, and me in my wolf form, dangling twenty feet above the ground. I twist my body, using momentum to drag her down to the ground where I can finish our mating run.

She has other plans though. "You don't think it's going to be that easy, do you?" Seconds later a glowing fireball appears in her hand. "Let go or I'll blast your whiskers off."

You wouldn't dare.

“I definitely would and you know it.” Her eyes are twinkling with mischief as I weigh the pros and cons of taking a fireball to the face.

Fuck it, whiskers grow back.

Seconds later, the fireball smacks me in the muzzle and I’m hurtled back to earth, my bride streaking through the sky, cackling like a lunatic.

I pick my bruised arse up off the ground, shake the crispy whiskers away and tear off after her, doggy grinning from ear-to-ear. Best. Chase. Ever.

A direct assault won’t work because she can see me coming and neutralize me with any one of her deadly spells. Instead, I’ll have to outsmart her. I just need to get her on the ground.

Racing as fast as I can, I swerve away from her, running through the trees as she searches for me. Finally, she’s forced to stop and use a spell to light up the area. I race up the side of a tree behind her, but instead of leaping off it again, I shift to human, gripping the top of the tree and using my weight to drag it back before letting go.

The tree smacks her in the back and sends her hurtling toward the ground, where I rush to greet her, dropping through the branches faster than I probably should in my human form. I can’t shift yet; I need my human hands for this next part.

She’s picking herself up off the forest floor, shaking the fog from her head when I arrive.

“Nice hit,” she says, touching a spot on her ribcage with a glowing finger and healing herself.

At first, when she showed me how powerful she’d become, I was squeamish about hurting her, but she’s since shown me over and over how much damage she can take. It’s turned our sexy play times into a rough and tumble free-for-all. My gorgeous witch mate is more than capable of matching me.

Before she can fully shake off the fall, I reach into a tree trunk and pull out a chain I hid earlier, quickly winding it around her body while she kneels on the forest floor. She

gasps as I drag her up and over to a tree where I secure her bound body.

A smile curves her lips and her gaze falls to my rock-hard cock. “You know this won’t keep me for long.”

“Only need a few minutes,” I growl stalking toward her.

“It’s cute when you forget I can cast spells without my hands.”

I open my mouth to tell her I haven’t forgotten anything, but there’s no point. I’m already the size of a pop can. I lift a paw and let out a long-suffering sigh. A chihuahua? Why is it never a Pitbull or a Shepherd? Those are some badass dogs I can do some damage with.

But no, she has to go small every damn time.

I let out a ferocious yip and head through the trees, racing toward my secret stash before she can curse her way out of the chains. Unfortunately, it takes me longer than I’d planned to get to my rucksack, not having counted on being slowed down by tiny legs, and she blocks me.

“Ready to yield, mate?” She drops to her knees in front of me and holds her hand up, a fireball glowing in her palm.

I sit and lift my paw, giving her the most irresistibly adorable look I can manage. If she’s going to turn me into a tiny terror, I’m going to use every tool at my disposal.

“You know I can’t stand it when you look at me like that.” She reaches for me, picking me up and holding me to her face, rubbing her cheek against my fur. I lick her until she’s laughing, then I launch myself over her shoulder and tumble to the ground behind her.

As she turns to watch me, I shove my body into a hole at the base of a tree where I dig through my rucksack until I come up with the antidote her aunt prepared for me in case of this exact scenario. I take the flask between my teeth and run out of the tree before breaking the seal and lapping at it.

She watches me grow big, and laughs. “Those traitors! Which one of my witchy sisters helped you?”

I reach into the tree trunk and extract an anti-magic collar, snapping it over her neck before she can cast any more spells.

“All of them.” I drag her to me and tear her wedding dress from her. In seconds, I’m lifting her up and slamming her down onto my cock, crushing her in my embrace.

She digs her nails into my back and accepts the rough mating, lifting her hips to meet mine. I tip her back in my arms, baring her breasts for my hunger. My incisors lengthen and I do the thing instinct has been driving me to do from the moment I accepted that Magdalene was mine.

Sinking my teeth into her breast, I tear through her flesh until I taste blood. Her screams of pain are brutal to hear, but I don’t stop. I can’t. Because if I do, I’ll never find the guts to try again. I can bear hearing her agony only once; I will never put myself in a position to hear it again. This is the last time I will willingly harm my mate.

Even as I think it, I feel the wound mending around my bite. She’s fighting the anti-magic collar with her incredible magical strength.

I lift my head and grip her by the neck, holding her face up to mine. “You will not heal yourself, Magdalene. You will accept my bite and you will wear my mark for eternity.”

She shakes her head, her wide blue eyes staining with black as her rage surfaces. “I... can’t... it hurts...”

“You must.” I tighten my hand around her neck and shake her until I see a spark of anger in her gaze and she focuses on my face. “Take your pain and rage out on me.” I release the latch on her anti-magic collar and allow it to fall to the ground.

I see denial in her eyes right before I’m hit by a blast of magic so strong it nearly knocks me off my feet. Still buried inside her, I wrap one arm around her waist and one around her upper back, anchoring her while she curses me out, raining dark magic down upon me.

Her curses land like bullets and I grit my teeth, taking everything she throws at me. My guts feel like snakes, writhing around inside me. My flesh feels like its burning and

peeling away from my bones. The pain is more intense than anything I've felt before but knowing I'm taking it on so she doesn't have to gives me strength.

She will pour her rage out on me, I will heal, the mating bite will heal but remain and we can move on to the next chapter of our lives together.

Tree branches swirl around us, slamming into me while I protect my mate with my body, my cock locked inside her, my mark shining with blood and saliva.

Then something inside my mate shifts, an energy I've never felt before. I'm blasted away from her, my naked body hurtling through the trees before I hit the ground in a painful heap. I drag my flayed body off the forest floor and crawl back to my mate.

A golden aura surrounds her, lifting her off the ground and cocooning her while a private storm swirls around her, wind whipping through her hair. Her head is tilted back and her arms are floating at her side, her blackened fingers pointed at the earth as magic continues to flow out of her.

It's exactly what happened when we first initiated the mating bond, when I reached into her soul and allowed our spirits to meet. Maybe this is what happens when a witch and a wolf shifter bond.

Suddenly I'm lifted off the ground and floating toward her. She reaches for me as I reach for her. Though she looks as though she's still in a trance, she wraps her arms around my waist and presses her face to my chest. As we float to earth together, I feel a stirring deep inside.

Her spirit, a wispy black smoke, is searching for mine. A deep blue essence in the image of my wolf bounds toward the black smoke and hurls itself at her. In an act of unity, our spirits become one, twining for eternity.

EPILOGUE: MENAGERIE

NINE YEARS LATER

RUSH

I sit on the edge of the swamp in my wolf form, watching the child wade into stagnant water, his flask clutched in his hand as he searches for tadpoles. He makes a sound of frustration as he tries and fails to catch his prey. The urge to burst through the brush and help him is strong, but he won't allow it.

My son, Zenneth Wolven-North, is a seven-year-old Warlock.

He prefers solitude, only coming to his family for meals and a warm place to sleep. It's been a struggle for me to give him the space he needs to grow into the man he'll one day become, but Magdalene assures me that he's happy and healthy as he is.

Magdalene is more okay with our son's anti-social behaviours, but then, she understands magical folk. Warlocks prefer a solitary existence, no matter how much their parents love them. I grew up in a wolf pack, surrounded by four brothers, two parents and countless cousins. We lived in a village filled with wolf shifters. Though I was always more of a lone wolf than any of my brothers, I knew my pack had my back if I needed them. I hope my son will know that too as he grows.

“Yes!”

His happy shout draws my attention and I snuffle my relief as he holds his flask up to the light, examining the creatures captured within. He climbs out of the swamp and sits on the ground, gathering his spell bag to him. Magdalene gave him her old leather spell bag with the stitched-on wolf for his fifth birthday and it's become his greatest treasure.

One day, hopefully far in the future, Zenneth will walk into the swamps and not return home. He will embark on a solitary immortal life of sorcery and witchcraft. It is the way of Warlocks, or so I'm told. I don't know what I'll do when that

day comes, but for now, I'm content to watch over him, protecting him as he fulfills the promise his mother and I see in him every day.

As I continue to watch, he lifts his small hands and mutters an incantation. The magical energy swirls around the area and I watch in fascination as he draws all manner of creatures to his side. It's his favourite spell, one his mother taught him early. He uses it every time he comes out here by himself.

After assuring myself that he'll be fine, I turn tail and head back to the tower, entering the clearing to find my wife and two of our daughters rolling around in the grass.

Magdalene is on all fours, pretend barking and laughing while our twin daughters, both in their wolf forms, lunge at her, fake nipping at her clothes. Magdalene grabs both of them and tumbles backwards onto the grass in a pile of flailing limbs.

Victoria hops to her feet and, catching sight of me, hurtles in my direction barking like her tail is on fire. Clarissa leaps up, staring around quizzically until she spots me too and follows her sister. Victoria is a yellow streak as she races toward me while Clarissa is a rust-coloured klutz who trips twice before making it to my side.

Climbing to her feet, Magdalene smooths down the ass of her jean shorts and affectionately watches as we tumble onto the grass, me pretending my three-year-old daughters are capable of taking down a full-grown shifter. They're allowed to play rougher with me than their mother, and they don't hold back, snapping at me and pretending to tear out my throat.

When my neck is good and soaked from their drool, I push them away and let nature take over, growing to my full human height as I stride toward my wife who holds her arms out to me, her lips stretching in a wide grin.

We linger over our kiss, sparks igniting as our lips meet, the world fading to a pinpoint as a feeling of rightness comes over me. It's the same feeling I've had every day since I married this woman; that feeling deep in my soul that tells me everything is exactly the way it should be.

That feeling has only grown with the births of each of our children, our home expanding with both love and magic. A lot of magic. We've had to add additions onto the house to accommodate everyone, several of which are attached to the tower in a gravity defying spectacle.

"Ew, gross Dad, put some clothes on."

Magdalene laughs and pulls away from me, turning to greet our eldest daughter, Lillian Good Witch. It's Friday afternoon and she's back for the weekend. She spends Tuesday through to Friday afternoons with her Aunt Beatrice, mentoring as a Good Witch.

"Don't be such a prude, Lils." Magdalene pulls our nine-year-old into her embrace and then snaps her fingers. I grunt as a pair of jeans magically appear on me. She always makes them just a tad too tight in the crotch.

I wait impatiently for Magdalene to step aside, then drag Lillian into a bear hug, our three-year-old wolf daughters jumping and nipping at us until their favourite sister drops to the ground and gives them each a pet, laughing as they lick her face.

Magdalene wraps her arm around Lillian's shoulders. "Come on, let's go inside. You can tell me how Aunt Bea is doing while I fix some supper."

"She's awesome! She taught me how to knit grandma's favourite kind of chain mail and she said she'd show me how to summon spirits next week so I can visit with Lyra Good Witch any time I want." Lillian's excited voice continues into the tower as they disappear through the door. "Uncle Fallon! Eighteen!"

Later, after we've eaten a supper of roast pork loin for Fallon, Clarissa, Victoria, and me, and butternut squash soup and watercress salad for Magdalene, Zenneth and Lillian, we settle into our weekend evening routine.

Fallon is sprawled out on the hearth rug with an elderly Eighteen, a three-legged cat, and several chickens. Though I would prefer the chickens stay outside, having an adoring

menagerie following him around seems to calm Fallon, so we allow it. Magdalene has an excellent scouring spell for the droppings.

Lillian sits in a chair next to the fire, her twin sisters at her feet, one in human form, the other still in wolf form, both looking at her with adoration as she wows them with magical sparkly rainbows and ribbons. Zenneth sits separate from his sisters but close enough to hear them, his precious spell bag clutched to his chest, his wide black eyes watching with fascination. He'll have all of Lillian's new spells memorized by the end of the weekend.

Pride swells inside me as I memorize each of my children's faces. They change so quickly; I don't want to miss a single detail.

Lillian is vivacious and fun, more like her mother than any of the others. Victoria is sure of herself, fast and fierce. She'll make a fine wolf shifter female one day. Clarissa is softer, more of a dreamer. She spends more time with me than any of the others, learning from her father while maintaining the softness of her mother.

And Zenneth... our mystery child. The one with the most potential, his high intelligence complementing his skills.

"He'll be fine," Magdalene reassures me, reading my thoughts as she drops onto the couch next to me. "He's more than fine. He's our son, which means he can't go wrong. No matter what happens, we'll watch over him and be there for him if he ever needs us. We're both professional-level stalkers, so we'll have no problem tracking him."

I laugh. "You're right. Between your crystal ball and my unparalleled sniffing abilities, we'll make sure he never wants for anything."

She kisses me, then grows serious. "Nothing means more to me than this family. I'll use every ounce of power I have to ensure our safety."

I drag her into my arms, settling her back against my chest where we can watch our family, the warmth of the fire

washing over us, the laughter of our children the best accompaniment we could hope for.

I murmur, “I always knew you would break Lyra’s spell.”

She tilts her face up, looking at me quizzically. “But I didn’t break the spell. You remember? I passed out before I could talk to her.”

“You did break the spell,” I insist, waving my hand at the tableau in front of us. “I’m living my happy ever after with my fated mate, which is only possible if the spell was broken.”

Her troubled gaze lands on Fallon. “We don’t know how the spell was broken for us. What about him?”

I suspect the spell was broken the moment she changed; the day Magdalene Good Witch died and Magdalene Rage Witch was born. She changed, which broke the spell and allowed us to fulfill our destiny.

“I’m not worried,” I tell her.

I look at Fallon, whose coat is full and glossy, his muscles strengthened from spending time outdoors with his nieces, teaching them how to hunt and run with a pack; all under my supervision of course.

I say with confidence, “We saw Lyra with our own eyes. She’s out there somewhere and I believe they’ll find each other eventually.”

“You remember what happened the first time he tried to mate with her?” Magdalene asks skeptically. “What’s to stop Lyra from cursing him into wolf hell again?” Then she gives me an exasperated look. “And since when are you the optimistic romantic and me the pessimist? There’s something wrong with this picture.”

Laughing, I force her back to my chest, absorbing her heat and drawing her comforting scent into my lungs. “You did exactly what you set out to do all those years ago when I knocked your house down and took you captive. You made me believe in love.”

She grins at me. “You didn’t stand a chance.”

“And neither will Lyra when Fallon finally catches up to her.” I hold her close as I watch my brother. “This time we won’t let him fuck it up.”

An explosion startles all of us as one of Lillian’s new spells goes wrong. Fallon leaps to his feet, sending chickens screeching in every direction. Silence falls over the group as we stare at each other in surprise, then Zenneth starts giggling, which startles us even further. His laugh is such a rare and beautiful thing. It becomes infectious and soon we’re all laughing, including Fallon, who snuffs and dips his large wolf head.

Magdalene attempts to stand, but I refuse to let her go. She laughs, shakes her head and commands her phone to fly from the kitchen into her hand. She’ll spend the next few hours playing games on her device while I nap with the comfort of her body against mine and our children playing around us. Then, we’ll tuck everyone into bed and make our way up to the tower where I’ll worship every inch of my witch.

I couldn’t imagine a more perfect mating.

THE END

SNEAK PEEK: WOLF'S ETERNAL BRIDE



VANESSA

“I am successful. I am confident. I am powerful. I am strong.” I chant the same words while staring at myself in the mirror, accepting and loving the woman I see in front of me.

The dryer buzzes behind me, causing me to jump and bang my elbow on the counter. “Damn it,” I mutter, turning in the tiny washroom and yanking the door open, pulling out my costume and holding it up to the light. Wrinkle free!

I pull it on, tugging it into place, muttering my lines as I lean into the mirror while applying makeup. “Hi, my name is Lucy. I’m a friend of...” I check the card balancing on the edge of the sink. “I’m a friend of Gail’s from work.” I pause, waiting for the other person to speak, then say, “I’m a software engineer. And you?”

Once I finish with my makeup, I turn a critical eye to my hair. It always looks the same, long, straight, and red. Not the pretty auburn red, but the fire engine, carrot-top red. Still, I’m loath to change it. My mother loved it like this and keeping it as it is makes me feel closer to her.

I run a brush through the locks and step away from the mirror, trying my best to get a sense of the full picture in a square frame that only has the capacity to show about a fourth of me at a time.

“It’s not going to win me an Oscar, but it might get me there one day,” I say to myself in the form of a pep talk, but it makes me feel more depressed. I’ve been in Los Angeles for eight years and this re-occurring gig is the only thing I’ve managed to land besides a few commercials and some minor modeling work.

Glancing at the time on my phone, I rush out of the bathroom, snatching up my keys and purse before heading out the door. I live on the fourth floor of a four-story apartment building that was built sixty years ago and never updated. The door won’t close when I try to lock it behind me and I have to

put my weight into tugging on the handle while bracing my feet against the floor. Finally, the door aligns and I'm able to slip the lock into place.

Worried I'm going to be late and get a bad review, I cannon down the stairs, apologizing to a startled Mr. Bowerman who's forced to leap out of my way as he comes up the stairs with an armload of groceries.

I burst through the front doors of the building and rush into the parking lot, yanking open the door to my beat-up 2006 Volkswagen Jetta hatchback. It's past it's prime, but it belonged to my mother and I can't bring myself to get rid of it. I'll drive it until it dies then I'll turn it into a monument in my living room.

Before I can climb in the car, intuition has me freezing as my heart picks up. Someone is watching me.

I swing my head around in an attempt to catch the peeping Tom, but there's no one. There never is. This has been going on for most of life. My mom used to tell me it was my imaginary friend watching out for me, but that never made sense. Shouldn't I be able to see my own imaginary friend?

I even went to therapy to resolve my paranoid feelings, but the therapist was baffled. Said I was mentally sound in every way and wondered if there was more to my persistent feelings than my imagination. It was weird to get validation that I wasn't being paranoid from a therapist, but her words inspired me to move into an apartment building where I'd be surrounded by other people. The ramshackle building I'm in is all I can afford, but the locks work. Most of the time, anyway.

Still, it's hard to shake the eerie feeling of being watched. I slide into the driver's seat, my eyes scanning the lot. I glance at the time as I turn the car on.

"Damn it, I'm going to be late. No more daydreaming, Vanessa."

I pull the car out of the lot, waving at a pedestrian, and settle into traffic, heading toward the posh Brentwood area of

Los Angeles. Most of my murder-mystery gigs are in upscale neighborhoods where the host can afford to hire an actor.

It's a re-occurring acting job and those are hard to come by so I try not to mentally diss the work. It's no blockbuster film, or a leading role in the next big streaming show. It's money in my pocket. A semi-steady paycheck whenever a client needs a red-headed woman as their victim.

"Not so bad," I say unconvincingly to myself. I meet my eyes sternly in the mirror. "And this time you absolutely won't point out that their Monet is a knock-off. Because, as we learned that one time, some people don't want to know. Just because you know your 19th century Impressionists, doesn't mean they have to." I nod decisively. "All you have to do is go in, eat some pretentious food, talk to some pretentious people, die horrifically, and pick up your paycheck on Monday."

I park my car up the street, so my Jetta doesn't embarrass the wealthy hosts. After all, I'm supposed to be the friend no one's heard of. I have to fit in with the other guests so no one suspects I'm actually a down-on-her-luck actor with \$23.47 in her bank account.

I look at myself in the mirror and apply a deep red dramatic lipstick, using the nail on my pinky finger to tidy the line. I press my lips together, then blow a kiss at my appearance.

"Showtime," I mutter, shoving the tube back in my purse and reaching for the door. It's going to be a long night.



KEENAN

She freezes, standing next to her car, her gaze sweeping the lot. She can't see me. She's never seen me, but she's sensed my presence from the moment I began stalking her. The concern in her gaze makes my heart ache, but it's a dance we've been caught in for two hundred years. Not that she knows anything about it. This reincarnation of my mate is only 27.

A shudder runs down my back and I have to push away the panic that threatens to cripple me. So close to her 28th birthday. I can't help her if I don't keep my shit together.

She climbs into her vehicle and starts the engine, pulling out of the parking lot. I cringe as she cuts off an elderly gentleman with a walker. He waves his fist at her and shouts obscenities while Vanessa smiles and waves back, unaware of her near miss.

If I were to claim her as my mate, the first thing I would do is hide her driver's license.

I follow as she weaves her Jetta in and out of traffic with reckless abandon, keeping my Jeep Wrangler a few cars back. It goes against instinct to track prey in a vehicle instead of on foot in my wolf form, but people are bound to notice a wolf shifter sprinting through LA traffic and we're supposed to keep a low profile while the King works on improving shifter-human relations. I have a personal investment in his success; my mate is human.

She pulls off the freeway and into the upscale Brentwood area, quickly finding her destination and parking. I drive past so she doesn't become suspicious and park further up the street, watching her vehicle in my rearview mirror until the gorgeous redhead climbs out.

My mouth waters as her full glory is revealed in the dying afternoon sunlight, the rays shining on her hair and turning it

to a waterfall of fire. She's tall, over six feet in her heels. Still shorter than my 6'5", but taller than most women. She's wearing a floor length bronze satin sheath with a forest green wrap thrown over her arm.

I expect her to go into the house she parked in front of, but she doesn't. Instead, she rushes up the street toward my Jeep, her heels echoing on the pavement as she jogs. I hold my breath as she comes even with me, then stops and bends over, her hand on my door.

The window is open a crack and I inhale her scent of fresh laundry and chamomile, hear her musical voice as she mutters to herself, "How am I supposed to keel over in this thing? Who requests the actor wear a tight but classy dress. Gross assholes with too much money, that's who."

Unable to resist, I turn my head to watch her, absorbing every detail with glee. This is only the second time I've been this close to Vanessa. I've been in her home, followed her, been to her place of work, and inspected her friends and family, but it's rare that I'll get close enough to reach out and touch her.

She straightens, runs her hands down her hips, then turns her head, finally noticing me. She gasps, her hand going to her throat as she stares at me, her green eyes wide with fright. Then she laughs, the sound chaining me to my seat, and shakes her head at herself.

"Sorry for borrowing your car to adjust my shoe," she says cheerfully, waving as she steps away. "Have a nice night!"

She continues up the street, approaches an upscale home with several vehicles outside, knocks, and then disappears through the door. I pull my Jeep closer until I can see the gathering of people through the front windows. Crossing my arms over my chest, I slouch in the seat, preparing for a long evening of ensuring the safety of my mate.

I can't pin her down, despite watching her for most of her life. She lives in a trash heap of an apartment building but often goes to the nicest areas of the city. She socializes with the richest of the rich, but her best friend is a professional

beach bum, and her deceased mother was an art thief. Perhaps if I was around more often, I'd understand this mate of mine better, but my duties to the people of Wolf-Haven often call me away.

I straighten in my seat when I catch sight of her fiery head as she steps in front of the window, a cocktail glass in hand. She sips the drink, closing her eyes, her shoulders relaxing.

I needed that. Her voice whispers in my head, intensifying the ache in my heart. The mating bond. Sometimes I can hear her thoughts when I'm close enough to her.

Bonding with her had been an accident. When she was a child she used to like swinging herself as high as she could on a swing set before leaping off and soaring through the air. Sometimes she would land on her feet and sometimes she would take a tumble. It was the most idiotic thing I've seen a human do, and I'd wondered at my mate's intelligence. When she was six, she attempted one such flight, pushing herself as high as she could go before flinging herself in the air. I'd been close then and had seen the concrete block she was about to land on. I'd rushed toward her, using my shifter speed, and caught her in my arms.

She'd looked up at me in surprise, her green eyes sparkling with mischief.

I couldn't help but ask, "Why do you do that?"

She shrugged and struggled in my hold until I set her on her feet. "I like to fly," she replied before turning and racing toward her mother, who was absorbed in a magazine and hadn't noticed our interaction.

Since that day, I've been bonded with my mate. I feel her emotions, can track her with ease, know when she's in trouble. It's a gut-wrenching thing to have the woman I love, a woman who doesn't know I exist, whispering in my head, sharing her happiness, sadness, anger, and joy, while knowing I'll never get any closer to her than this.

A scream echoing through the night has me sitting up in my seat, adrenalin rushing through me. It's not the voice of my

mate, but it's coming from the dwelling she went into. I shove my door open and leap out, striding closer to the house.

A confusing tableau unfolds in front of me through the windows of the house. My mate is stumbling around, her hand at her throat, foam dribbling from her mouth. Then, clutching at a tablecloth, she falls to the floor, dragging it with her, dishes falling and smashing. There, she spasms before going still, her eyes wide and staring blankly while people rush to her side.

My mate is in trouble!

My wolf takes over as instinct drives me and I shift right there on the street, uncaring of any humans who might see. I must get to her, find out what's wrong and get her help. My clothes split at the seams as I run toward the commotion, my paws sinking into the lush grass of the yard.

I leap, calculating the distance with precision. The glass of the bay window shatters around me as I go through, people screaming and running as I land on the floor crouched over top of my mate. I stare at her unmoving form, eyes unseeing, foam at her lips.

Dead.

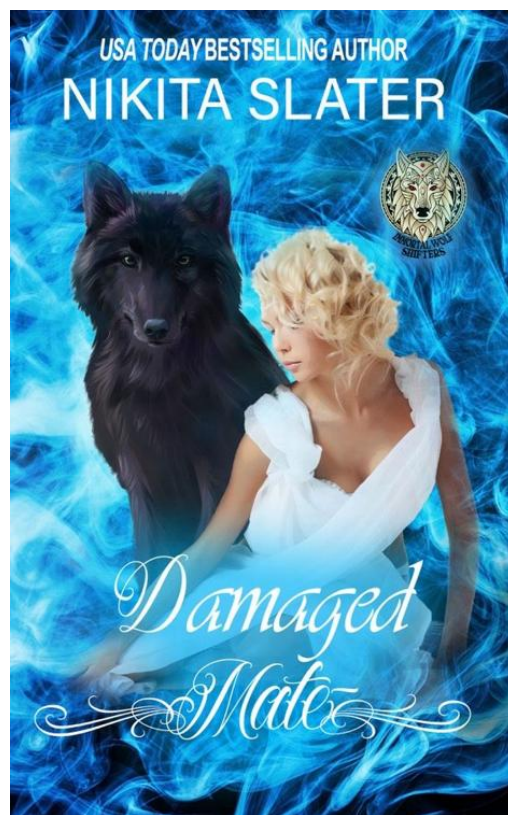
Poisoned.

I swing my head around, pinning the humans with a lethal stare before letting out a roar of rage that sends the humans scrambling in every direction. I will kill every single one of them for harming my mate.



[CLICK HERE for the Wolf's Immortal Bride Pre-order](#)

BONUS: DAMAGED MATE



As my vision clears, every instinct in my body knows exactly where to look. I seek her out as she steps gingerly past a puddle and into the clearing. She's beautiful. More beautiful than I could've imagined. Her body is snowy white, the fur wet and sleek across her chest and back. The only colour on her is a black patch that surrounds her left eye, covers part of her face and extends upwards to her ear.

She doesn't look at me. It's as if she can't see me through the pounding rain, but that's impossible. Her soul should have

shifted with mine, twining together. She should be able to feel me.

She lifts her head and sniffs the air, then stiffens. Her head swings around and she spots me. She freezes and stares at me with such intensity, I feel another shifting deep within. It's uncomfortable, like my guts are being rearranged. Her icy blue eyes pin me to the spot and, for a second, I think she's going to attack.

"I thought you were dead," I say hoarsely.

She lowers her head between her hunched shoulders, bares her teeth and lets out a low warning growl. But why would she be warning me off? I'm her mate, she must feel it.

Then she's gone.

Just like that, in a whirl of snowy tail, she turns around and leaps back into the woods, disappearing as if she were never there.

I lose precious seconds to shock as I stare after her, my mouth open, the pounding rain hitting me. Shaking my head, I clear the fog and lunge after her, tearing at my clothes as I go. I won't be able to catch her in my human form, so I have to shift.

I don't understand why she's running, why she looked at me as if she feared me. I'm her mate. The last thing I want is to hurt her. She should know that... unless she doesn't recognize me. But that's impossible. She should have felt what I felt. Her guts should've twisted, her soul should've recognized mine. It's instinct. Something we're all born with. Even before we find our mates, we know when they exist in the world. There's no denying the feeling.

It's why I thought she was dead. I felt the moment she was born two hundred years ago, then I felt the moment she died, seventeen years later. There was nothing left of her presence in my head after she was gone. Yet, here she is, alive and scared.

Anger surges through me and I know it's my wolf, impatient that I haven't shifted, that I haven't begun the chase.

“Alright, go get her,” I say, dragging off the last of my clothing, my bare feet sinking into the muck of my yard as I step out of my boots.

She’s small, less than half my size. I shouldn’t have too much difficulty catching up with her.

My wolf changes in an instant, jubilation rushing through him, now me, as we leap into the air and land on four paws. Everything in me shifts and happiness soars through my body as familiar feelings of aggression rush through my veins. I take a back seat to my wolf, giving him free rein, which he immediately seizes.

He’s after the snowy wolf like a shot from a rifle, swerving past trees and leaping over brush. He lives for the chase and I’ve given him the ultimate one. He must find his mate and claim her.

He catches her scent, an intoxicating combination of honey and wildflowers. As I drown in the nectar, my wolf pushes closer to the surface, closer than I’ve let him get since I hit puberty, some seven hundred years ago.

I rarely let him out to play because he’s too aggressive. He would go to war with the surrounding villages if I allowed him. He’d clear the forest of wildlife in days. The furry asshole has no sense of moderation.

Now he’s in control, and I don’t care. I need him. He’s going to bring our fated mate home. She’s wiry and quick, but a limp slows her down.

Anticipation adds wings to my feet as I take the final leap, knowing she’s just ahead of me. My human and wolf are merging once more, I’m no longer feeling what he feels, I *am* him.

My paws land on her back and I shove her hard into the earth, driving her onto her belly. Instinct slams through me, and as she struggles to push me off, I snap and snarl, telling her in our language to settle down. I won’t hurt her, but she needs to submit to the bigger, more powerful wolf, to her mate.

She doesn't listen. She fights until she's on her back beneath me, her paws shoving at my chest, her teeth flashing as she snaps at my throat.

My wolf senses something in her, something wrong, something unnatural. He leashes his aggression without a single push from me. In all the years I've lived with my wolf, he's never once leashed himself.

I place one paw on the side of her head, turning her muzzle into the wet brush. Then, almost gently, I set my teeth against her throat. She doesn't yield but continues to fight.

I crowd her further into the ground, laying my much larger body across hers, crushing her without hurting her. She can't do anything more than growl at me. I try to shove my mind into hers, to force her to recognize her mate, but her brain is too wild. It's the mind of a wolf. It's as if there's no human inside at all. As if she hasn't shifted from her wolf form in a very long time.

We lay that way for several long minutes, her body vibrating in fear, her growls turning to whimpers.

I hate treating my mate this way, but I don't know what else to do. She's damaged in some way. She doesn't recognize me. In all the years I've been alive I've never heard of one mate not recognizing another. I didn't know it was possible.

She's small enough that I think I can risk turning human. I'm a big man, 6'5", with plenty of muscle from years of working with my hands, hunting, and chopping wood.

I separate my mind from my wolf and, though he resists, he's ultimately forced into retreat, allowing me to shift back to human. I place one hand on her neck, making sure her teeth are nowhere near my throat as I turn human.

Her eyes roll up as I shift and her body tenses, readying for an attack. She thinks she can take me in my human form, thinks she has a chance. She doesn't. I lift logs regularly and she weighs less than some of those logs, even in her wolf form.

She's beautiful, but there's something wrong with her. Some kind of damage.

Years ago, I'd fantasized about what it would be like to finally meet my mate, and never in my wildest dreams had I imagined it would be like this. A mate that not only doesn't recognize me but is actively trying to kill me.

I squeeze my fingers into her neck and shake my head. "Don't try it."

She freezes, and her eye rolls up to stare at me. She's terrified, wants nothing more than to run from me. She regrets coming so close to my yard, but she'd been drawn by the scent of rabbit stew... and something else, a powerful pull that she didn't understand, but drew her to my doorstep regardless.

I pause. How do I know what she's feeling? Then I realize I'm in her mind. It's the mating bond. I've weakened her enough that she's no longer able to shield herself. I feel exhaustion beating at her. I can't read her thoughts, but somehow I know that she's been travelling for days and days. That she left her home... or something drove her away from it. Then I sense a barrier; its weak but effective. In my human form I can't infiltrate any further into her head.

Frustrated by her silence, I demand, "Turn, little wolf. I want to speak to your human."

She continues to stare at me, fear brightening her blue eyes.

"Why won't you turn?" I growl, but more to myself.

Wolf shifters are born with certain instincts that allow us to know things without being told. I knew that I would recognize my mate when I saw her. I knew that I would be able to climb into her mind. And I know that I can force her shift if I must.

But when I try, she doesn't shift, and when I push myself further into her head, I feel nothing but silence. I don't sense her human. It's as if that part of her is dead. It's impossible.

Baffled, I lean closer and look her in the eye. Her lip peels back and she bares one long fang at me. Anger and humour collide, and I remember that my wolf is watching this

interaction, feeling the things I feel. He's annoyed that she's refusing my commands, but I think her small defiance is cute. She can't hurt me.

I wrap my fingers around her snout and hold her mouth closed so she won't bite me, then I lean in until my face is inches from her eye. I push again with my mind, forcing myself inside her. I don't give her the opportunity to shield, but barge past her resistance.

What I find is unexpected and horrifying.

She's falling... we're both falling. Flashes of sky and water as we twist and turn, then the icy wall of pain as we're engulfed by cold, wet, black darkness. Terror rages through both of us. We fight, but we're drowning.

Her wolf surfaces, forcing the human back. She's fighting for her life in a losing battle.

The human is ready for death, but her wolf isn't.

Unable to take any more of whatever I found in her mind, I shove myself away from her, stumbling back and landing on my ass. I try to shake the fuzziness of her memory from my head, but I take a few seconds too long. She regains her feet and turns on me with a snarl.

She lunges.

I reach for her, but before I can catch her, something streaks between us, smacking her ears with a wing and driving her back.

Thorny flies through the trees, then lands gracefully on his feet behind her as he shifts into a human.

His gaze is curious, but unconcerned as he looks her over.

She tries to back away from us, but she has nowhere to go. She's trapped and she knows it. Her tail is tucked between her legs and she lets out a frightened whimper.

"I see you found your mate," Thorny says, as if he's commenting on the weather. "She's quite a pretty creature."

“Keep your eyes off my mate!” I snarl at him, an unfamiliar feeling of jealousy storming through me, my wolf urging me to tear out Thorny’s throat for daring to look at my mate.

He looks startled, then lets out a hooting laugh. “What would I want with a bedraggled wolf?” He chortles as if it’s the funniest thing he’s heard. “Not only is she the wrong species, but she is a she. I prefer the males of my own species, thank you very much.”

I stare at him. I’ve known the shifter for many years and I hadn’t known he was gay. It simply never came up.

My jealousy diffuses and I admit, “She’s terrified of me. She doesn’t recognize me as her mate.”

He cocks his head to the side and watches her thoughtfully. She’s hunched into a small bundle of shaking wolf, her blue gaze rapidly going back and forth between us as though she expects an attack.

“Now that is unusual,” he says. “Why do you think she doesn’t recognize her mate?”

“I don’t know,” I say, allowing my frustration to show. “She showed up in my yard and my wolf knew who she was right away. Even before I saw her. It was the soul shift.”

He nods, then asks, “So your soul is twined with hers?”

I almost say yes, then I think about it. I felt the soul shift, but did I feel the twining? I look inward, allowing my wolf to surface for a moment as we search each other. No, no twining. She’s there, inside us, but she’s pacing, restless, scared.

“No twining,” I admit.

“So she really doesn’t recognize her mate,” he murmurs. “This is highly unusual.”

“But you’ve heard of it?” I ask hopefully. For once, I’m grateful for Thorny’s penchant for absorbing gossip.

He nods, but says, “What should we do with her? She doesn’t look like she wants to stay with you.”

I sigh.

There's no help for it. I can't let her go; she'll bolt and I'll have to hunt her down, which isn't great for relationship building.

“We have to get her inside.”

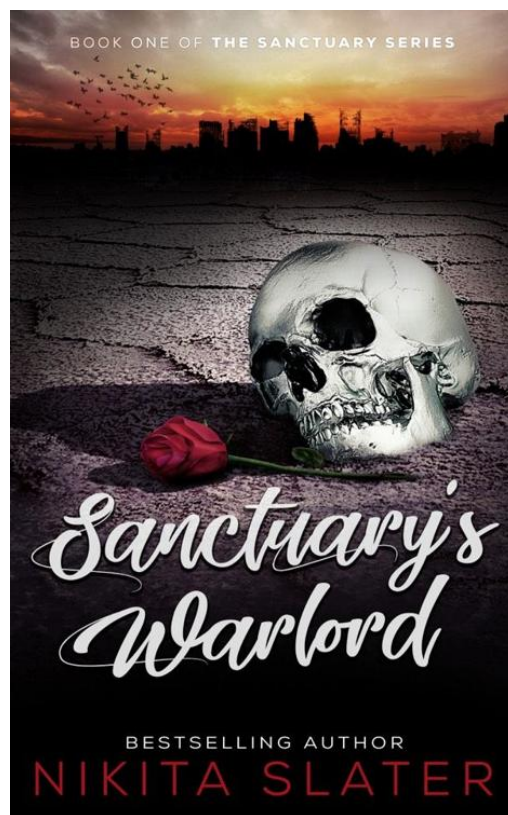
He shakes his head emphatically. “Birds don't kidnap wolves.”

“We're doing this,” I say grimly.



[CLICK HERE for Damaged Mate](#)

BONUS: SANCTUARY'S WARLORD



I stare down at the woman, finally within my reach. The Desert Wren.

Named after the elusive prey animal because this mysterious woman is able to flit through my security with the speed and ease of a small bird and lead her flock to safety. She is also rumoured to be small and plain, like the wren. I believe the woman in front of me to be one and the same, though none of my people have managed to set eyes on her. A thorn in the side of both military and police for years, she's managed to avoid capture, her identity a complete mystery. Though we

suspected she was rebel allied, she could've been an elite. Hell, she could've been an officer.

Not at all as I'd imagined her, this woman seems a pathetic creature. Shaking, barely lifting her eyes off the ground when I speak. Her face is purposely covered in dirt, her clothes are those of the poorer factions of the city, worn and frayed. She is small, not a characteristic that is highly regarded in a society that needs big, strong people to survive.

Yet when I hold her arm I sense a stiffening, a reserve, not the subservience she's trying to sell me.

My blood rushes in anticipation. After years of searching for this woman, this legendary enigma, I finally have her in my hands. I can detect her delicate scent, made more noticeable by the heat of the sun and the heavy clothes she's chosen to wear for protection.

“Give me the papers now.”

She tilts her chin fractionally, her eyes lifting to mine for a second before dropping. That second was long enough for me to see fire, rage and defiance in those intriguing grey depths. I want to eat her alive, throw her in the dirt and show her how well-earned my brutal reputation is. I want to accept her as the prey animal I've caught in my trap and allow the savage hunter inside me free reign with this sweet little morsel.

“Do you know who I am?” Though I soften my voice slightly the menace is still there.

She doesn't speak.

I glance down her body. Though rough, her clothes are not ill-fitting. Thick, hardy and snug to her form, they are built to protect her from the wall and the blazing sun as she walks a distance into the desert.

Without warning, I drag the rifle from her and toss it away. Then I spin her around so she's facing away from me. She squeaks in protest and struggles, wriggling in my hold as I run my hands over her body. First her pants, looking for pockets. There are none. I run my fingers across her middle, running them inside her waistband to see if there's anything tucked

away. She grips my wrist and tries to yank as I slide my hand down the front of her pants. Her strength against mine is negligible, like a child's.

“Stop it!” she hisses, her fingernails scrabbling at my skin.

I ignore her fight, turn her back around and reach for her vest, gripping the fabric at the neck. I tear down the front until the entire thing is shredded and laying open. As I bare her, papers tumble out, falling to the dirt at our feet.

I reach for them as she dives for her rifle. I catch her by the back of her hood, no doubt catching hair too, and drag her with me as I grab a fistful of papers. Some are caught by the wind and carried away. It doesn't matter. I have more than enough evidence right here to arrest and prosecute the little rebel. I keep a tight hold on her, ignoring her flailing arms while I flip quickly through the papers. Yes, these are exactly what I need.

I wave them in front of her face. “Explain,” I demand, using my grip on her hood and hair to tip her face up.

The dirt smeared all over her creamy face bothers me. I can't tell what she truly looks like. Just the general features. Sharp chin and wide grey eyes that dominate a petite face. I shove her hood back and pull a handful of hair from where it's been tucked into the back of her vest dragging it foreword. It straggles down around her shoulders, a dull brown colour, but I can tell that it's dirty, filled with desert dust. It'll probably shine much brighter when it's clean. The curves of her small breasts are just visible from beneath the two halves of her torn vest. Her breastbone and ribcage are clearly visible. I have an urge to see her cleaned up. See what she really looks like.

“I was meeting some friends before my hunt. They asked me to hold onto their papers until we meet up, so they wouldn't be lost or destroyed.” She's speaking fast, her voice is strong, though there is a quaver to her tone.

“You lie.” The untruth makes me angry. I despise liars. I shake her by the hair. Her hands fly up to grip my wrist, but she can't loosen the hold.

“I’m not,” she insists.

“These,” I shove the papers in her face, “are a forgery. I know this because I set up the entire scenario. I made up the Puerto Ricans. Gave them names, lives, a past. Whatever you needed to play your little game.”

Her mouth opens but she doesn’t speak. She has nothing left to say. She’s been caught red-handed. The look of horror that flashes across her face before she can smother it is sweet to behold. I have finally captured the illusive Desert Wren, the woman I’ve been seeking for so long I was starting to doubt she actually existed. Now she belongs to me.

Somehow this idea has taken on new meaning. I’ve wanted to get my hands on her for so long that my motivation to do so has grown unclear, fuzzy. Through the years, her daring and intelligence had morphed from annoying to intriguing. With each new report that she’d somehow managed to smuggle more people into the city, my anger had gradually turned to curiosity and finally pride. The police mandate has always been to capture and prosecute rebels involved in illegal activities. My plan should be to extract information on the growing rebel faction in the city. My methods are not nice and I don’t soften for women, particularly criminals. If I deal with her as a traitor of the city, she will be tortured and then expelled or killed.

But even before I came here today, took on the task of capturing this rebel leader, I knew this wasn’t going to be the plan. I’ve admired her from afar for years. Such a creature can’t simply be torn apart by our city justice. It would be blasphemy to dispose of her once she’s deemed no longer useful. Her bright spark, the daring and defiance, the steel core of morality that I’ve seen in her actions shouldn’t be snuffed out by the heavy hand of the Authority. I won’t allow it.

She still has vital information that I need. And though the idea doesn’t sit well I know I’ll have to hand her over for processing. She’ll need to be charged and prosecuted. I am the highest representative of the very Authority I want to save her from.

“What is your name?”

She remains stubbornly silent, her eyes now fixed on the distant horizon, no doubt planning her next move.

I grip her neck and tip her head forward, looking for her marker. She gasps and stiffens under my harsh grip. No tattoo mars the flesh of her shoulder, only a small, pale scar. Not surprising as she’s a suspected rebel and the first thing they do is find a way to get rid of their identification tattoo.

I’m deeply curious about her. I want to know everything. Her name, her place of origin, her placement in the rebellion. I will get these things out of her. But it appears I may have to be more patient than usual if I don’t wish to damage her. Looking down at the delicate creature, I realize that harming her is the opposite of what I want from her.

“You will regret not giving me what I want now, Wren.” She frowns, her lips parting as though she wants to say something, but then her face smooths out and she continues to stare away from me. Though she’s no longer fighting me, I feel that this small act is a defiance. That she’s placing herself above me by refusing to speak. She will regret this as well. I drag her face up to mine, forcing her onto her toes and growl, “By the time I’m done with you, I’ll make you beg to give me the information I seek.”

Her eyes finally move to mine. Instead of fear I see only fire. “And I will make you wish you’d never met me, Diogo Fuentes.”



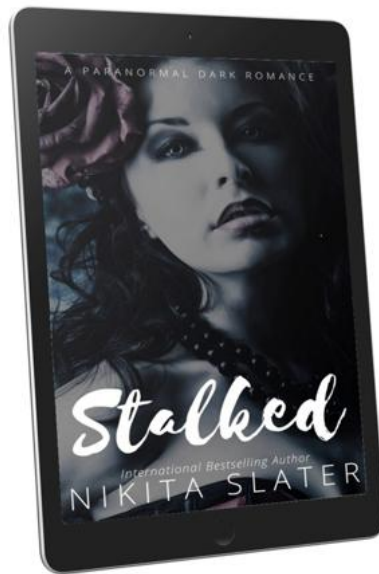
[CLICK HERE for Sanctuary’s Warlord \(free book!\)](#)

NIKITA'S NEWSLETTER!



Sign up today for [Nikita's newsletter](#) and receive a FREE copy of Nikita's bestselling dark romance novella, *Stalked*!

[CLICK HERE to sign up today!](#)



ALSO BY NIKITA SLATER

If you enjoyed this book, check out some other works by USA Today Bestselling Author, Nikita Slater. More titles are always in progress, so check back often to see what's new!

IMMORTAL WOLF SHIFTERS

[Book 1 - Damaged Mate](#)

[Book 2 - The Witch and the Wolf](#)

[Book 3 - Wolf's Eternal Bride - Pre-order available!](#)

Book 4 - Protected by Her Mate - Coming soon!

Book 5 - The King's Mate - Coming soon!

SINNER'S EMPIRE

[Book 1 - Sin of Silence](#)

[Book 2 - A Silent Reckoning](#)

[Book 3 - Goodnight, Sinners](#)

[Sinner's Empire Complete Trilogy](#)

THE QUEENS SERIES

[Book One – Scarred Queen](#)

[Book Two - Queen's Move](#)

[Book Three - Born a Queen](#)

[Book Four - The Red Queen](#)

Book 5 - The Queen's Bodyguard (coming soon!)

[Alejandro's Prey \(a novella\)](#)

[The Queens 4 Book Box Set](#)

PSYCHO LOVE

Book One - Psychopath's Kiss

KINGS OF THE UNDERWORLD

[Billionaire's Captive Mistress](#)

[Mafia's Savage Obsession](#)

[Mercenary's Dark Obsession](#)

[Bratva's Captive Assassin](#)

[Bounty Hunter's Innocent Prize](#)

[Italian's Captive Beauty](#)

[Bodyguard's Forbidden Obsession](#)

[Mafia's Savage Boss](#)

[Kings of the Underworld Complete Collection](#)

THE DRIVEN HEARTS SERIES

[Book One - Driven by Desire](#)

[Book Two - Thieving Hearts](#)

[Book Three - Capturing Victory](#)

[Novella - The Princess and Her Mercenary](#)

[Driven Hearts 4 Book Box Set](#)

THE SANCTUARY SERIES

[Book One - Sanctuary's Warlord](#)

[Book Two - Sanctuary on Fire](#)

[Book Three - The Last Sanctuary](#)

[Book Four - The Road to Wolfe](#)

[Book Five - Skye's Sanctuary](#)

[The Sanctuary Series 3 Book Box Set](#)

LOVING THE BAD BOY SERIES

[Loving Vincent](#)

[Loving Jared](#)

Loving Rico (Coming Soon!)

STANDALONE BOOKS

[The Assassin's Wife](#)

[Because You're Mine](#)

[Luna & Andres](#)

[Kiss of the Cartel](#)

[Stalked](#)

[Toxic Love Story - Coming soon!](#)

Visit nikitaslater.com for more information
and the latest updates!

ABOUT NIKITA SLATER



Nikita Slater is the USA Today Bestselling Author of action-packed suspenseful romance. She writes dark romance, mafia romance, and post-apocalyptic dystopian romance. She lives on the beautiful Canadian prairies with her son and her crazy awesome dog. She has an unholy affinity for books, wine, pets and anything chocolate. Despite some of the darker themes in her books (which are pure fun and fantasy), Nikita is a staunch feminist and advocate of equal rights for all races, genders and non-gender specific persons. When she isn't writing, dreaming about writing or talking about writing, she helps others discover a love of reading and writing through literacy and social work.

For more information about Nikita and her work, please see her website at www.authornikitaslater.com.