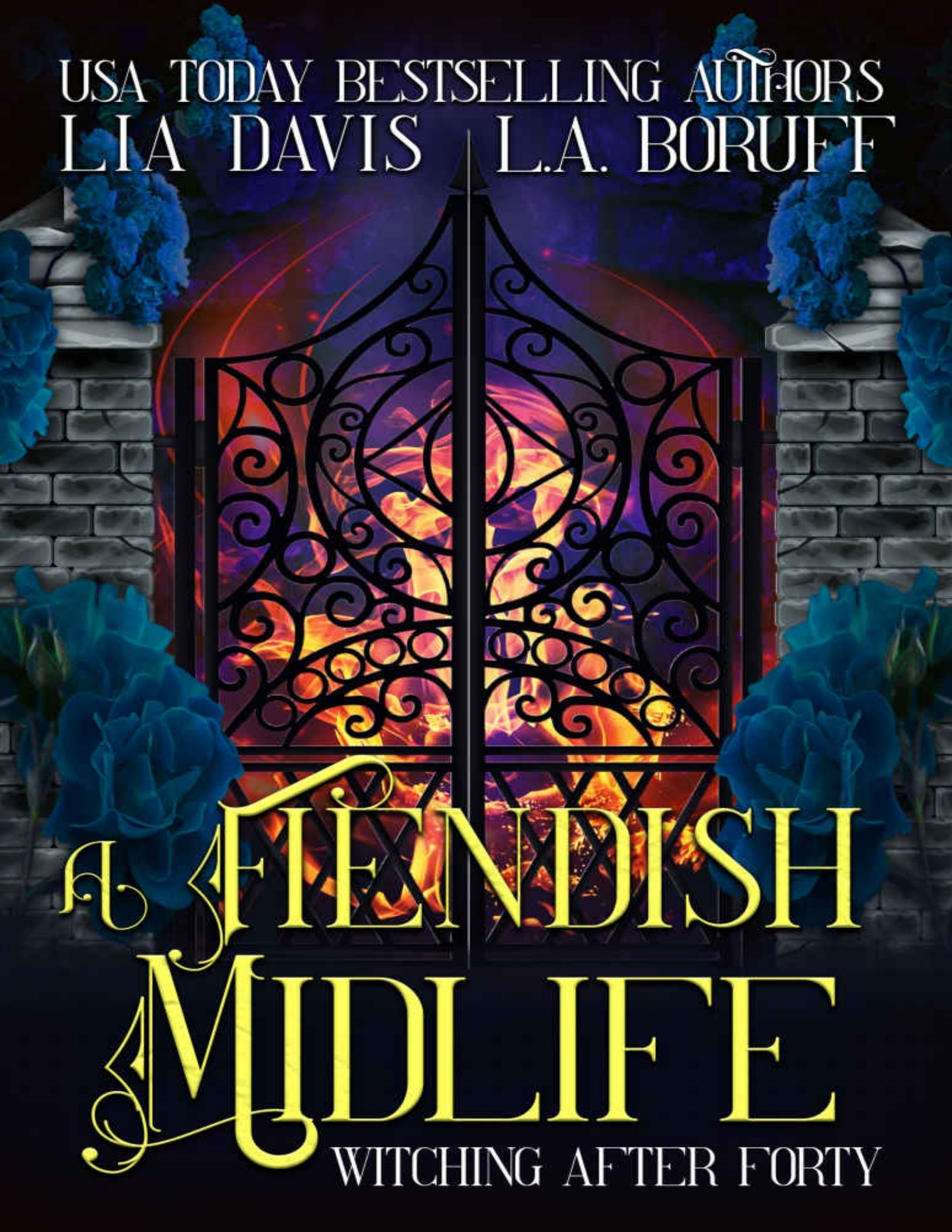


USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHORS
LIA DAVIS L.A. BORUFF



A FIENDISH
MIDLIFE
WITCHING AFTER FORTY

A FIENDISH MIDLIFE

WITCHING AFTER FORTY

BOOK SIXTEEN

LIA DAVIS
L.A. BORUFF

A Fiendish Midlife

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LUCY-FUR

THE CAT, NOT THE DEVIL

"I GUESS I'm sorry I haven't been in to see you." I paused and studied Alfred's prone form on the bed. He was so still that if I hadn't noticed his chest rising and falling, I'd dismissed him as being dead. Hell, he wasn't undead anymore. Whatever that meant. "To be frank, I've only just missed you."

With a sniff, I inspected my right foot. The first claw there felt like it was loosening. Ugh, so annoying. I'd asked Ava several times to schedule someone to come give me pedicures, but each time I'd asked, she'd shaken her head and rolled her eyes.

As if I were *amusing* to her.

Pfft. She didn't know the struggle. Besides, there were plenty of cat owners who gave their cats petties.

"Ava said you've been in here since November." I nibbled at the loose claw and considered the date. "I think we're in March now, so it's not like you've been missing all that long." Ava was so dramatic sometimes, seriously. "Four months? That's nothing. How am I supposed to keep track of everyone all the time, anyway?"

Alfred didn't respond, which I tried to ignore. It wasn't exactly fair to be annoyed at a sleeping man, even if I was halfway sure he was a big fat faker. Seriously, if he needed a vacation from all of Ava's craziness, he just had to say so.

See? I'm a good cat. I do *try* to be nice, and at least twenty percent of the time, I succeed. Maybe fifteen...

For a cat, that's excellent, right?

It doesn't really matter if you think it's excellent or not. *I* think it is, and my opinion is the one that matters.

"Anyway, it's been such a boring few months since you've been snoozing away up here. The man named after me, Luci, with an I, has been running around like a maniac. I've never seen him look so frazzled and, ugh, sweaty."

It'd been disgusting. I mean, come on, was it too much to ask to blot his ugly hairless face once in a while? Maybe take one of those water baths humans were so attached to.

Alfred didn't even snore in response, but that was okay. When I spoke, people listened. No doubt he was processing and absorbing my words.

A muffled sound, like a grunt or something, came from somewhere in the room. I paused in the grooming of my tail and listened. "Is someone in here?" With a long stretch, I stood and cocked my head to hear better. "Hello?" It almost sounded like someone was whispering to me. "Am I on camera?"

If someone was pranking me, I'd scratch their face off.

The volume of the whispering increased. I squinted as if that could help me hear better, and Alfred's voice differentiated itself from the whispers. "*Tell Ava it's the...*" It faded out. I knew it was him because he sounded like a squirrel on helium even from wherever he was talking to me.

"What?" I yelled. "Alfred, is that you? Why are you whispering? Can't you speak up? Just wake up for fuc—"

"*Shut up!*" he whisper-yelled.

How rude!

"*Tell Ava it's the necromancers!*"

"Okay, okay, you don't have to be so rude about it, geez."

I hopped off of the side of his bed. "Anything else, your majesty?"

The whispers had disappeared, along with Alfred's annoying high-pitched voice.

What a whiner.

I strolled out of his bedroom and down the hall.

"Hey, Lucy," Ava said as she passed me going toward Alfred's room.

With a massive sigh, I replied, "Hey." Ugh, why did she always have to talk to me? Was talking *that* important?

At the top of the stairs, something bugged me, so I looked back at Ava in time to see her enter Alfred's room. Seemed like there was something I was supposed to have told her.

Oh, well.

AVA

"ALFRED," I whispered near his ear right before placing a soft kiss on his forehead. "I'm so sorry it took me so long to get up here. I hate leaving you alone in here."

Although he wasn't really ever alone for long because Winnie refused to leave his side unless one of us made her take a break. Sitting on the rocking chair beside the bed, I glanced over at Alfred's still form. "I trust you won't rat me out to Winnie." I snorted, but then the snort nearly turned into tears. "I'm sorry. I want more than anything to get you up and about. I hope you know that."

He didn't respond, but I hadn't expected him to. "I doubt you can even hear me, but on the off chance you can, I want to keep you up to date on our lives."

Not that they'd been particularly riveting over the last four months. Once Alfred conked out, we'd pretty much gone on hiatus, spending all our spare time trying to find a cure for him or trying to help Luci with his little problem of being locked out of Hell.

Trying being the operative word there. Nothing had worked. I was beginning to think that there was a bigger issue at work. What that could be, I hadn't a clue.

"Luci still hasn't come back." I pulled a blanket over my lap and grabbed my latest release. I'd actually had time to finish it in between the failures of helping Alfred and Luci. "He is so freaked out." He'd been MIA for a couple of weeks now. Olivia was getting really worried.

Rocking the chair, I tried to remember the last thing I'd told Alfred. "Did I tell you Luci got this little statue from a shaman in the Amazon? Um, he's

been carrying it around like a security blanket." He had been the last time I'd seen him, anyway. I rolled my eyes and laughed. "The last time I saw him, it was tied around his neck, but he either didn't want to try or couldn't get a hole in it, so he'd weaved a leather string-thing around it, then tied it around his neck. It looked ridiculous. I'm still trying to figure out if he was actually trying to channel the shaman's magic or being a weirdo." I snorted again.

"Anyway, none of that matters right now." I stopped the rocking chair and grabbed Alfred's hand. It was cold, but I held it anyway. "What matters is..." What mattered was that we'd hit a dead end in helping him. We'd tried everything we could think of and everything anyone we knew could think of. I didn't want to tell him that, so I said, "...that Winnie's coming up in a few minutes. I made her take a long lunch and an hour's nap."

Setting his chilly hand back on the blanket, I tried for the thousandth time to heal him.

For the thousandth time, it didn't work. "Yeah, okay, so—" I was trying to think of something to tell him that I hadn't said, probably twice already, when Winnie stuck her head in the door.

A flash of pain crossed her face when she saw Alfred. She'd been completely, utterly wretched the last four months without Alfred. "Hey," she called, her voice soft and sad. "Just letting you know I'm grabbing a sandwich, then I'll be in here."

"Take your time." I waved my novel at her. "I haven't even started reading yet."

She nodded once, then ducked out.

I sighed and got myself together before I tried to read, taking a moment to make sure my voice wouldn't shake. "Chapter Three." I read loudly and steadily and made it through the chapter without looking at one of my favorite people in the whole world in what amounted to a coma beside me.

When I turned the page to chapter four, I glanced up to find Drew leaning against the doorway. "Hey, you." I smiled as he walked toward me. My breath caught as I drank him in. How did I get lucky twice in a lifetime in the husband department? "I was focusing so hard on the chapter," and on not crying, "I didn't hear or feel you come up." We were bonded, which meant I generally knew where he was at all times. It wasn't an exact science, but it sure was handy to see whether he was safe or not. As an officer's wife, worry was my job while he was busy at his.

"It's a good chapter," Drew said, sitting in the second chair we'd brought

it in weeks ago. His presence was like a tiny wave of calm in this storm.

I smiled at him, then back at Alfred. "It's taking too long."

Drew reached over and put his hand on my knee. "We don't need to talk about that now."

He was right, of course, but I was upset and growing more so every single day.

"I do have some news." The smile on his face made me hopeful for a distraction.

"Oh, yeah?"

He rocked his chair and squinted at me. "Ian's coming."

His words had said good news, but his tone now said dread and woe. "Why doesn't that sound like you're happy about it?"

"No, no, I am, of course. I'm the one who invited him here."

He needed to inform his face of said happiness. "This is about the job opening? Not a visit?"

Oh, there went his face again. "Yes, he uh." Drew sighed. "He says he's getting tired of the instability of the hunter lifestyle. He wants to settle in one place like Lily did."

Drew's sister Lily had taken a permanent hunter job in Florida, kind of close to her step-grandchildren. To my great luck, Drew had retired here to Shipton Harbor many years ago. He still took the occasional hunter job when they really needed him, but they were few and far between.

"Why here?" I asked and stood to retuck Alfred's blankets around him. My constant healings had kept him from wasting away here in the bed, even though they did absolutely nothing toward waking him up. Even so, Winnie did exercises with him three or four times a day, keeping his body moving. She didn't want him to get sore lying there in the bed. After all, he was completely human now, so we had to worry about blood clots and stuff like that.

"I guess because I invited him." Drew helped me, lifting Alfred so I could fluff the pillows under him. We adjusted him slightly on one side rather than flat on his back, using a few spare pillows.

"I'm glad," I said, smiling at Drew when we were done. "It'll be great for you to have your brother here."

Drew grimaced a smile that brought a giggle to my lips. "What's that face about?"

"I love my brother. You know I do."

After I folded the blanket that had been on my lap, we settled back in our rocking chairs. "I do know."

"The thing is, Ian and I work best in small doses. The occasional hunt, sometimes hanging out. That's how we're at our absolute top brotherly shape."

I could understand that, sort of. I didn't really have anyone in my life like that, but I could imagine. "If he lives here full time, you're afraid you'll get sick of each other?"

He shrugged. "It's not forever. Once he's fully trained at the police department, I can focus on retiring and leave him to it."

"That is a good point." I grabbed his hand and grinned. "After that, you can drive me crazy."

He squeezed my fingers. "That's the goal."

"You feel good about Ian being voted in as sheriff?" I asked.

He nodded and shrugged at the same time. "He's definitely competent, and now that Sam's a vampire, there's nobody else who is the right age or has the right qualifications. Or who isn't an idiot."

I chuckled as I imagined the deputy who had prompted that statement. The poor man was a bit more Barney Fife than Andy Griffith. A total sweetheart, but not so much in the common sense department.

Drew stood and leaned over me, caging me in my chair. A spark of desire fluttered through my insides. "Sorry, my love. I have to go to work. Ian isn't here and working yet."

"Which means you're still pulling extra shifts." I sighed and held my face up for his smooch. "I'll miss you."

"You, too," he whispered.

"Oh, Alfred," I said softly once Drew left. "Would you please just wake up?"

I stared at him for a few seconds before a loud noise outside the door pulled me from my seat.

"I'm going to *kill* you!"

Uh-oh. That was Zoey's voice, and she only ever got that tone when she was furious with Lucy-Fur, our sassy white cat. I opened the door in time to see a streak of white go by. *Lucy*.

Quickly behind her came Zoey, my nineteen-year-old semi-adopted tiger-shifter ghoulish daughter.

Her boyfriend and my semi-adopted ghoulish son, Larry, hurried soon after,

holding onto his head. He was fully fleshed out, but his head never had properly reattached when I'd accidentally animated him. He'd been a skeleton back then, and his head had an unfortunate habit of falling off. It couldn't fall off now that he was fully human-looking again, with skin and all, but it did like to flop over on him. It was disturbing.

"Puke on the bed," he called.

Ew. Not again. Lucy really had to stop doing that.

I turned to the right to watch him run down the stairs after the two cats and found Winnie pressed against the wall, waiting for the chaos to pass before she came into the room.

She came in with a big ball of yarn and a partially knitted...something... in a big canvas bag. "Blanket?" I nodded toward the bag.

"Scarf."

Erm. "For who?"

"Winston." She said it so matter-of-factly that I nearly accepted her words at face value.

"Winston, the *house*?" I asked.

She rolled her eyes. "It's a blanket, Ava. I thought you sold all those books because they were funny?"

Hmph. I *was* funny, thanks very much. "You're cranky."

She shot me an apologetic glance. "Sorry. I am cranky. I miss Alfred."

I squeezed her shoulder. "I know you do." My phone pinged from my back pocket with Olivia's custom tone. "And I'm so sorry, but I have to go."

She waved me off. "Go. Me 'n Alfie have catching up to do. I haven't talked to him in several hours."

At the door, I looked back at my aunt. She looked completely different from how she'd looked as I grew up, but that was because she had a brand new body. One with spectacular boobs.

Over the last four months, she hadn't flaunted them, not once. Even now, she wore an oversized sweatshirt. She'd lost interest in her excitement of her new body.

Who would've thought that would be disappointing?

OLIVIA

"HELLO?"

Ava's voice floated up the stairs from the foyer of Luci's house. Oh, good, I'd been hoping she'd get here sooner than later. "Coming!"

I rushed out of my bedroom and grabbed the bag full of notes and things I'd been accumulating to take to the school. "Coming, coming."

Descending the stairs, I watched every step because it didn't matter how many stairs I'd come down successfully, that one time I'd fallen down the stairs at school, bouncing like a freaking bouncy ball ass over teakettle was the only thing that stuck in my head.

Once safely at the bottom of the stairs, I ran through the living room and down the hall that seemed longer than it had yesterday, and why wouldn't it? This house was nuts. Finally, I burst into the kitchen to find my best friend Ava looking at a nasty burn on my biological father's arm.

My father, Lucifer.

What are you, new here? My dad is the devil. Move on.

"Where have you been?" I fixed Luci with a glare and marched forward to put my stuff down on the table, then round it and snatch his arm out of Ava's hands. "Why are you hurt? I didn't even realize you could get hurt like this." To be completely honest, I didn't have the foggiest clue what would or would not hurt the man. Any time I attempted to bring the subject up or anything else personal, he got cagey and changed the subject.

Not suspicious at all.

"It was my own dumb fault."

Ava pulled his arm back and worked her magic to heal it. "You're lucky I can do this," she muttered. "My magic still isn't working right."

Luci studied her as she bent over his arm. "Indeed. I still can't see why. If I weren't so focused on getting back into my domain, I might be able to figure it out." She glanced up at him, and he smiled fondly down at her. Aw, my dad liked my bestie. How sweet.

Another way to look at it: The devil was fond of his necromancer.

Potayto, potahto.

"How did you say this happened?" I asked pointedly. "And more importantly, where in the world have you been?"

"Oh, that. I found a weakness in the barrier between here and Hell and tried to exploit it."

"I see that worked out really well for you," I said dryly.

With a wink, he continued, "As for where I've been, you know where. I've been trying to get through the barrier. I spent a week or so trying to bribe Cerberus, but he's too well-trained." He rolled his eyes. "He should be. I trained him myself."

"Who's Cerberus?" Ava asked.

"He's the three-headed hound that guards the gate to Hell," I answered, then directed my next statement at Luci. "You've disappeared for extended periods before," I said as the burn slowly began to disappear. "But not weeks. Please don't do that again."

"You were worried?" He reached over with his good hand and tweaked my nose. "My sweet girl."

"Yeah, yeah. Phira was worried, not me." Big, fat lie. I'd been absolutely bothered. "Why is it taking so long?"

Ava shot me an exasperated look. "You're in a mood. My powers suck, and I'm trying to heal a minor god here."

Luci gasped dramatically. "Excuse me? *Minor*?"

Ava dropped her hands and stared at him. "Do you want me to heal, or do you want to lecture me?" She crossed her arms. "Actually, I'm intensely curious about what kind of god you are, so go ahead. Lecture."

He pursed his lips and sniffed, then held the now-smaller burn out. "Fine."

Ava got back to work on the burn while I tried not to let my nostrils flare too much. "As soon as you're healed, you go find Phira, you hear me?"

Luci held up his other hand and saluted me. "Yes, ma'am."

Ugh. There was only about a seventy percent chance he'd do as I said.

"You're an incredibly lucky man, you know." I pointed at him. "If Phira

weren't so independent, you'd be all alone."

"You think I don't know that?" His gaze left me as he winced down at Ava. "We were made for each other, but, dear daughter, don't worry about your mother. She'd been with me on most of my trips. She's been helping me try to get into Hell, and still, I have not been able to get in."

I stared at him for a long moment. "She has? Why hadn't you kept me up to date? I haven't seen much of either of you lately, and no one stops to update me on if you're alive or not."

He nodded with a frown. "I know, and I'm sorry. You're right. I'll try to keep you updated."

Ava released his arm, and he stood, stretching for a moment. "Thank you, my dear."

She smiled up at him and waved away the thanks. "I'm just glad I could *do it*."

"I didn't manage to get into Hell," Luci said as he inspected his perfect-looking arm. "However, that doesn't mean I was wholly unsuccessful. I managed to lock *this* world. Nobody can get in or out without my permission. No more monsters appearing for us to fight over." He grinned. "That hunter friend of yours in Florida, Blair?"

Ava nodded. "Yeah, she's Drew's friend. I haven't actually met her. Well, more Lily's friend now, but Drew knows her from his hunter days."

Luci beamed at Ava. "Well, she had the key to Earth. Can you believe it? We thought it was lost centuries ago. How it ended up in a little shop in St. Harmony, Florida, I'll never know." He turned to me again, his expression serious. "I promise I won't disappear like that again without checking in with you or at least leaving you a note. You have my word."

I gave him a long look, then sighed and forgave him. "Thank you."

He nodded and set off into the house, leaving Ava and me in the kitchen.

"Never in a million years could I have said I'd be here healing the devil." Ava chuckled and looked at the back door when someone knocked on it. "That should be Mom and Dad."

Ava's parents were heading to the school with us. They'd been involved, especially her dad, from the get-go. The Howe family home, a real-life castle tucked in the mountains of West Virginia, had been sitting empty for decades. The only reason it hadn't crumbled while vacant was *magic*. When we'd been trying to figure out where to put the school, John had immediately volunteered the castle.

We'd been working on renovations and getting everything set up since then, and I'd learned one thing.

I did *not* want to be a full-time headmistress.

Teach a class? Sure.

Help them get the school off the ground? Absolutely.

Play substitute when needed? Heck, yes.

Five days a week run the whole shebang?

Ew. Not a fan.

Opening the door, I smiled at Ava's parents. Her dad, John, we'd thought was dead for most of her life—turned out he'd been captured by evil vampires for thirty-some-odd years.

Her mother really had been dead since she was ten, but once she knew how to use her powers, she raised her; then when Winnie found a new body to jump into, Beth had as well.

"Great, the gang's all here," I said brightly. "Everyone ready?"

John wore a big backpack, and Beth had a messenger bag slung over her shoulder. "Ready," she chirped. She looked as excited as she could be.

"You guys really should run this school together," I said. "I'll stick around until we find an appropriate replacement, but I still think it's you two."

Beth looked at John and smiled. "We've been talking about it, and as long as you can get us a portal from the house to the school, we're in. We want to be around a lot for the new baby."

Ava beamed at them. "Of course you'll be around for the baby. She's going to need her great-grandparents."

Ava's son, Wallie, was having a baby soon. Well, his girlfriend, Michelle, was. We loved her.

"I can't tell you how happy I am to hear that." I couldn't help myself. I gave Beth a big hug. "Let's go see your school." It was such an immense relief to know I wouldn't have to do this all the time. Beth had just made my day times ten.

"I'm really excited," Ava said as we stepped into the pantry Luci had created to be a portal room to the school. "I haven't been here since you started renovating."

Didn't I know it? I'd been *dying* to show her. We stepped through the portal into a small closet near the administration offices.

My enthusiasm only increased when Ava stepped out of the closet and into the hallway. She gasped, her mouth dropping open in awe. The hallway

was grand, with marble floors and a bright red runner leading through the building. Every window had been filled with stained glass depicting various magical scenes and creatures.

"Come on. Quick tour?"

Ava nodded eagerly. John and Beth had been here lots, but they tagged along anyway.

"When are we set to open?" Ava asked.

"If all continues to go this well, and we get enough teachers hired, we might be able to do a few summer classes, but the official first term will be in September." Five or so months to go.

The classrooms were all decked out with the newest technology. Just because we were all magical and stuff didn't mean we could do without Wi-Fi or television.

Nobody should have to miss watching Jensen.

I stopped in a doorway and turned on the lights. "Potions classroom."

With a sharp intake of breath, Ava looked around with stars in her eyes. "I've never seen anything like it."

The room was filled with cauldrons waiting for bubbling ingredients, shelves full of said ingredients, and a long smartboard. We'd thought about doing whiteboards but ultimately wanted to use the latest technology. That was the most modern thing in there, though. The stone walls gave the room a sense of history.

"We're going to have so much fun here," Ava said, and I couldn't help but agree.

We were going to make something amazing.

I was certain of it.

"Come on, let me show you the dorms."

We were almost sure to have a few live-in students. We'd considered making it a daytime-only thing, but between us, we'd been able to name three children who would probably love to stay here. If Zoey were a few years younger, she might've wanted to as well.

"We just finished the eight to twelve wing." I opened the door to the spiraling staircase that went up the tower to the girls' side.

Ava looked around in admiration. The spaces were open and sunny, the top the brightest, with a skylight at the top of the staircase. The walls were stone, like pretty much everywhere else, and in each bedroom was a bed, desk, and dresser.

"There was enough room in this gigantic tower to put a three-bedroom dorm on each floor. Each dorm has its own common area, kitchen, and bathroom."

"This is amazing." Ava peeked into the bathroom and sighed. "Can we live here, too?"

"Winston would revolt," Beth said as she opened the fridge. Empty.

"We're working on stocking it." I grinned sheepishly.

Ava just shook her head. "This place is going to be amazing for the kids. I'm so happy for them."

My heart swelled with pride. We had something special here and were about to open the doors for some lucky magical children. It was going to be fantastic.

"Let's go check out the grounds before we go," I said. "There's a wonderful place for the gardens, which—"

Beth clapped her hands and practically jumped up and down. "John and I are starting the garden today." She hurried out of the room, dragging John behind her.

Ava and I exchanged a glance. I smiled and shrugged. The two of them would be thrilled to work outdoors. Beth liked gardening and growing herbs more than Ava.

We stepped outside and were immediately surrounded by beautiful trees, flowers, and a stream flowing right through the middle of the grounds. I pointed out the spot Beth had in mind for the garden, and Ava's face lit up.

"Perfect." She beamed at me as her parents walked away and started pointing at the garden and talking about what should grow where. "Are you sure you don't want to do this full-time?"

"Don't get me wrong. I've loved getting the castle ready." I really had. It'd been a blast. "But I miss my kids and my husband. I even miss my parents, both sets."

"Well, thanks. Mom and Dad, once they made the decision to take you up on the job, have spoken of nothing else."

She looked up at the castle and pointed to the side. "What's going on over there?"

I swung around to see what she meant. "Oh, that's the wing the godmothers asked for."

"Eh?"

A giggle fought its way out of my mouth as I looked at her confused face.

"I was as surprised as you look like you are. There is a branch of fae who are fairy godmothers. They're technically the Tian, but they like the name godmothers and get this." I grabbed her hand and squeezed. "The women go by fairy godmothers, right? The men go by *sugar daddies!*" I collapsed against Ava, laughing my butt off. I'd hee-hawed about the sugar daddies from the moment the head Tian had told me about them.

We shared a good laugh but finally calmed enough for her to ask, "They're having classes here?"

"Yeah, that whole wing will be for their students to live in and their classes. Apparently, the Tian don't come into their powers until middle age. Usually forties to fifties. They have to be thoroughly trained, and their current facilities are worn down, so I offered to incorporate them here."

"Whoa," Ava said, staring up at the tarped roof of the godmother wing. "That's nuts."

"Not so nuts when you hear how much they offered to kick in of the remodel." I raised my eyebrows. "It covered seventy-five percent of the *whole* thing."

After a low whistle, Ava said, "Sugar daddy fits, then, eh?"

Indeed.

AVA

THE BUZZING COMING from my phone put a frown on my face. At this rate, I was never going to get this paragraph done. I turned over my phone to see who was calling. *Melody*. *Hm*. Why was she calling me at nearly midnight? Couldn't be a good reason.

"Hello?"

"Ava, you gotta get over here to my house." Melody's voice was panicked. As the leader of the local witch coven, she wasn't one to easily get rattled. That was partly why I'd chosen her to pass the leader mantle on to.

By her worried tone, something had spooked her.

"Umm, sure."

"I just saw lights on in Penny's dark, empty house. Penny's on the run, isn't she? It could be her getting something from her house. I mean, it could also be a break-in, but we should check it out," she whispered.

"Where are you?" Hopefully, she wasn't heading over to Penny's house without backup. Penny and her brother Bevan were dangerous.

"I'm in my kitchen, peeking out the window." Again, she whispered her words.

So, I lowered my voice and whispered back. "Why are you whispering?"

"Oh." She laughed and spoke at a normal volume. "I don't know. Can you come over?"

I hesitated for just a moment before agreeing. I'd had a busy day with Olivia at the school, helping Mom and Dad get settled in. We hadn't returned home until well after dark. I just wanted to get one little chapter done before going to bed.

Drew was still at the station, but any strange activity in our small town

could mean trouble. Any strange activity at Penny's house almost definitely meant big trouble. "Stay put. We'll be right there."

If I was being dragged out at midnight, then my bestie was coming with me. No way I was going alone. Olivia and her handy-dandy portal-making ability. Luci might've been a better choice, but who knew if he was still around? He'd be in big trouble if he wasn't, but that was his problem.

I dialed Olivia's number and waited anxiously for her to pick up.

"Chello?" she said sleepily.

My heart rate quickened as I explained the situation. "We might have a real lead. If Luci is there, bring him along."

"Ten-Four. Be there as soon as possible."

I hung up the phone, slightly relieved but still a little freaked. We needed to hurry.

I texted Drew as I went downstairs. **Melody saw lights at Penny's. Olivia's coming to take me to check it out.**

His reply was quick and firm. **You WILL wait for me at Melody's before going in.**

Oookaaay. Mr. Alpha Walker was putting his foot down. Shew, I wasn't mad about it. I typed a quick reply. **Yes, sir. Can you be this commanding tonight once we're both here together?**

This time the reply took a few seconds as I stood in the kitchen doorway and waited for Olivia. Eventually, he sent back two emojis. An eggplant and a peach.

Hehehehehehe. Yessir. I was about to catch a case of the tingles.

"Mom?" Wallie walked out of the living room. I hadn't even realized he was there. "What are you giggling about?"

And there is the kid to chase away the tingle.

"Nothing, dear. You and Michelle having a movie night?" Now that I wasn't absorbed in Mr. Drew Walker's texts, I heard the sounds of some action flick or another. The kids had been spending a lot of time here when they weren't in school.

"Yeah, we have a long weekend and are out Friday." He checked his watch. "Er, we're out today, that is. It's midnight."

"It's also April Fools' Day." I winked at him. "In this family, you better be on your toes."

He drew himself up and puffed out his chest. "How about it is you who should be on your toes?"

Pushing at him, I chortled. "You better not prank your mama."

He walked back to the living room. "We'll see."

I didn't know where the other inhabitants of my house were, but Olivia and I didn't need a big entourage for this.

The front door opened a crack with a slight groan from Winston. I turned to see Olivia inching through the tight opening in the door.

"Uh, Winston?" She looked up at the ceiling. "Little help here?"

The house hadn't liked Olivia at first, but he'd since grown to be pretty fond of her. He almost always opened the door for her now.

"Winston," I scolded. "Why are you being rude to Olivia?"

Winston groaned again, and the door opened another inch or so. With a huff, I hurried forward and yanked on the door. It gave without a bit of resistance, sending me careening backward.

Air rushed past me like a strong breeze carrying the scent of some spicy cologne, and Sam caught me before I butt-planted hard on the floor. He set me firmly back on my feet.

"Thanks for the assist," I muttered, glaring around at my house. "What is the deal?"

Winston groaned again, sounding almost pitiful.

"Okay, I get it. You're sorry. If that was an accident, I forgive you. If it was intentional, you're in big trouble, mister."

The last groan he gave was barely audible and definitely felt contrite.

"Sam, are you going with us to check this out?" I asked.

He snorted. "Drew called. He got held up by a drunk and disorderly, so I'm your muscle."

"What a nice muscle you are," Olivia said, looking at her husband-slash-my lifelong best friend with starry eyes.

"Yeah, yeah, he's handsome. Let's go." I winked at her as I waited for her to open a portal to Melody's backyard. We'd portaled there more than once for various reasons. Mostly coven meetings.

As soon as we stepped through the portal, a familiar rush of energy pulsed through my body. That sometimes happened with Olivia's portals, like a zing. I glanced over at Olivia, who was already looking around with a grin on her face, and Sam adjusting his sleeve. Melody's backyard was just as beautiful as ever, with a garden that I knew was vibrant in the daylight, not so much under the new moon. A cozy patio area stretched out from the back door. We'd portaled so many times it had become second nature to us. No

nerves, no worries. Just us and her portals. Simple as that.

"Hey," Melody said, rushing off of the back patio. "The light went out about ten minutes ago. I never saw anyone leave, but I think we missed the mark."

I knew we hadn't hurried enough, darn it.

"Let's still go." I started walking around Melody's house. "They could still be there, or there could be some clue or something."

"It's the cook, in the library, with the candlestick," Olivia said with a giggle.

I snorted but kept walking. Sam hurried in front of me, shooting me an exasperated look as he did. He was here to be protective, and he was going to take his job seriously.

Not that I'd expected any less.

So, I wouldn't remind him that I could control him at any moment. Not that I would do that to him.

We tiptoed across the street toward the empty house, and I couldn't stop a shiver from running down my spine. I didn't scare easily, but this place was eerie. Knowing Penny or Bevan could be there even now. They weren't powerful enough to cause me any alarm, or at least they shouldn't have been, and yet somehow, they'd evaded us for months.

Granted, Luci had been focusing more on getting into Hell than finding his two runaways, but still. I'd given considerable attention to finding them, as had Olivia, the coven, and my parents... and Winnie when she wasn't with Alfred.

As Sam pushed open the creaky door, my heart raced with anticipation. Please let this be something helpful. It would've been really nice to tick the Penny and Bevan line off of my to-do list. Crystal was presumably still trussed up in Hell. That was if whoever had taken over the reins hadn't let all of the prisoners loose.

Now that was a scary thought I tried to stay away from. If every bad soul was loose in Hell... ugh. Hopefully, that was something Luci could handle. At least they couldn't get to Earth now.

The house was dark and a bit musty, like it'd been closed up for a while. Which it had been. We hadn't been here since we'd nabbed Crystal. Melody'd been keeping an eye out, but we had no reason to come here and dust. The house definitely needed a good dusting. Cobwebs covered every corner of the place.

Dead silence itched at me, and I couldn't shake off the feeling that we were being watched.

Sam closed his eyes and inhaled. "There's nobody here," he said. "But someone was recently."

"Duh," Olivia muttered and poked him in the side. "We knew that."

He gave her a scathing look that only people in love could get away with. "I mean, my vampire senses and smells are confirming it."

"Thank you." I grinned at Sam. "I appreciate it, even if your cranky wife doesn't."

"I'm not cranky," she grumbled, then cocked her head. "Maybe a little cranky."

We started searching, but the house was just... a house. DVDs in the entertainment center, books scattered on shelves, pictures of Penny, Crystal, and Bill, her late husband who'd been killed when I first returned to Shipton. Lots of other people were pictured, too. Presumably, extended family. "Have we looked into these people?" I asked. "Penny and Bevan could be staying with them."

Pulling out her phone, Olivia typed on the screen. "I'll send Luci a note to make sure. If he hasn't, it's something we can work on."

We quickly searched the house, looking for any sign of why someone had been there. I followed Olivia, Sam, and Melody as we made our way through Penny's house.

We searched every room but found nothing until we reached the office. The lack of dust on the desk showed us exactly where something should have been. There was an outline where a book-shaped object had once rested. Someone had taken it from here not too long ago.

"I can't be positive," Olivia said, "but I think that was a day planner."

"Where this clean spot is?" The dust was perfectly outlined in a rectangle. It was the perfect size for a day planner.

"Yes, or maybe it was an address book." She shrugged. "That has to be what they came for. Nothing else has been disturbed."

Sam inhaled deeply. "I can almost smell them. Just a hint of something..." He cocked his head. "Fruity? Like berries."

I had no idea what that meant, but at least we had some idea of why they'd come.

"What's that?" Sam pointed to the area around my feet.

I bent and grabbed the small piece of paper I'd totally missed, even

though I'd almost stepped on it.

"It's torn off of a bigger piece of paper." There was no way to tell what kind. "It just says June twenty-fifth."

I looked over at my friends. Olivia's eyes went wide, and Sam's nostrils flared as a growl rumbled through his chest. He'd always been so protective of me.

"June twenty-fifth?" Melody looked at the three of us. "Why do you seem so freaked out?"

With a shiver, I looked at the coven leader. "June twenty-fifth is my birthday."

AVA

"WHERE'D YOU PUT IT, you stupid furball?" Zoey screeched from upstairs.

Oh, not again.

Stepping out of my office, I peered around the corner, stopped, and waited while Lucy-Fur thundered down the stairs. How did such a small cat manage to sound like such a large elephant?

Lucy streaked by as Zoey rounded the corner and came into sight upstairs. Instead of running down the stairs, Zoey leaped and shifted into her tiger form. How could one cat make a tiger so mad? I had to keep a straight face, but it was difficult.

A crash from the living room spurred me into action. I flew across the foyer and into the living room to find Zoey chasing Lucy around in circles while they batted at each other. Two cats smacking at one another wasn't usually a big deal, but Zoey was a two-hundred-pound tiger. Even though she was on the small side, she'd knocked over the end table and was dangerously close to demolishing a stack of books.

Flinging my arms out to either side, I used my magic to stop both cats in their tracks, freezing them for a moment. If they hadn't both been ghouls, I probably wouldn't have been able to, and even though they were, my powers felt like a rubber band about to snap. Not good.

"Zoey! What is going on here?" I demanded.

Zoey shot a glare at Lucy and hissed. I released my hold on her so she could shift back to her human form. She glared at Lucy as she answered my question. "She stole my blanket!"

I groaned and looked at the small cat. "Why can't you leave her alone?"

Lucy yawned, unimpressed by my reprimand.

"Fine," I said, "Lucy, give Zoey back her blanket. Now."

Lucy stared at me for a moment like she wanted to argue, then sighed and hung her head. "It's in the attic."

Zoey huffed in Lucy's face, which blew Lucy's downy white fur back. "Oh, disgusting." Lucy gagged and jumped up on the back of the couch to put some distance between Zoey and her.

Zoey retaliated by turning back into a person, then reached over and shoved Lucy off of the back of the couch. "Brat."

Lucy screeched but didn't come out from behind the sofa.

Enough of this circus and these monkeys.

As I turned toward the kitchen to go get some breakfast started, the doorbell rang. I looked around. "Uh, Winston? Can you get that, or is it a non-magical being?"

Nothing. He didn't even groan at me. So odd.

I walked over to the door and peeked out the window beside it. "Oh!" I called up the stairs. "Drew, Ian is here."

I'd completely forgotten he was coming after the eventful day we'd had yesterday. Once I'd hit the bed, I'd crashed and slept straight through until this morning. Drew had worked late again. I hadn't even realized he'd come in last night.

He thundered down the stairs with a big smile as I opened the door to find Pearl on the other side of Ian. Glancing back at Drew and his smile, which was a bit dimmer now, I bit back a chuckle.

He loved his grandmother, but her appearance never meant anything good. "Hey, hello."

Ian walked in and hugged me. "I'm glad you're here," I said warmly. "It's so nice to see you."

"You too, little sister."

I couldn't help but beam at him for that comment. He wanted me to feel welcome in the family. I didn't exactly *not* feel welcome, but his family hadn't been overly concerned with reaching out. In fact, Ian had his own concerns when we first met. It was nice to see that he got over that.

Drew said his family was just like that. They hunted, and they didn't do much else, so I didn't take it to heart.

"Grandmother," Drew said as he took Pearl's hands. "What are you doing here?"

She turned her cheek up for him to place a kiss on it, which he did

dutifully.

They were about as warm as a river rock, and I shivered at the thought. "What brings you here? Please, come in."

"Family business," Pearl said in her no-nonsense tone.

"Speaking of family business," Drew said.

At the same time, I motioned toward the living room. "Please, sit down."

She shook her head at me, then looked at Drew. "Yes?"

"Why did you send us on that hunt after Scotland?" He raised his eyebrows at her. He'd been stewing on this for a while. I'd talked him out of calling her and confronting her, but he obviously was going to use her visit as the ideal time to bring it up. "Any hunter could've done that."

I wasn't sure I agreed with that assessment. That monster had nearly kicked our butts, and together we were pretty strong.

Pearl sniffed and reached into her little leather handbag. "In my considerably knowledgeable opinion, you two were the best for the job." She pulled something small out. "Here, hold this."

As she held it out to Drew and his hand rose up to take it, Ian yelled. The whole scene played out in front of me like I was watching some random comedy movie. Drew took the object as Ian hollered, "No, don't!"

Too late. Drew held up a small cat figurine. "What?" He blinked a couple of times, looking stunned. After about a second, I knew why. Through our bond, I felt a muted version of what was happening inside him. I was used to feeling the ebb and flow of magic around me. This was unreal, as though a bolt of lightning surged through our connection, igniting a fire within me. Power coursed through his veins, pulsing with a vitality that was both daunting and exhilarating. It was like the first time we had connected all over again. Our love was not just physical but mystical. Nothing would tear us apart.

While he stood there looking flummoxed, Pearl grinned from ear to ear. She plucked the cat figurine out of his hand. "Thank you." She drew out the vowels in the words, clearly pleased with herself. "I'll see myself out." She walked outside with Ian on her heels.

I rushed to Drew's side and grabbed his arm. "Are you okay?"

He looked at me with wide eyes. "I think so? What in the world was that?"

Ian returned and closed the door. "She portaled back to North Carolina."

The power moving between Drew and me began to dim. I helped him into

the living room and onto the couch. By the time we sat, it was at a manageable buzz.

"What was that?" he asked again.

Ian sighed and sat across from us. "You know Lily took that job in Florida with Blair at the antique shop?"

Drew nodded. "Yeah."

"Blair has a knack for finding mystical objects. Do you remember when we were kids, something was stolen from the artifact room?" Ian arched one eyebrow as Drew smacked his face with the palm of his hand.

"The cat figurine." He moaned. "She unlocked my powers."

"*What?*" I stared at Drew, my mouth hanging open a bit. It'd been pretty clear some sort of power had been given, but I'd assumed it was temporary or a burst of energy from the cat.

He sucked in a deep breath and shuddered. "This is a power that was already within me. Thirty years ago, that object was used to unlock powers for every hunter who hit maturity. If it hadn't been stolen this would've been done years ago."

"But what is it?"

Drew furrowed his brow. "It would seem I have the ability to boost others' magic."

That made sense because that is exactly what it felt like.

Noise in the kitchen drew my attention, so I made my way there. I found my dad at the stove, stirring something in the stew pot. Whatever it was smelled amazing.

"Whatcha cooking?" I hadn't even known anything was cooking until I stepped into the kitchen.

He didn't look at me right away, which made me a little suspicious, but then he turned and smiled at me. "It's time to do an extra powerful spell to find Penny and Bevan. So, I'm making a stew to give us enough power to do the spell. This should help your little magic problem too."

A stew that helped boost my magic, huh? "What's in the stew?"

He waved me off and stirred the mystery stew. "A little of this and that."

I crossed my arms. He was so full of crap. "What is it?"

Dad picked up a fork, stabbed a piece of meat from the stew, and then held it out to me. "It's human. Necromancers need to eat human flesh and meat to become strong enough to perform the most powerful spells."

Oh, yeah, he was *full* of crap. "I don't think so."

Ian sauntered into the kitchen and sat at the table. “No, it’s true. I researched necromancers once and ran across that and a few other weird stuff they do.”

I studied my brother-in-law for a few moments, gauging whether he was telling the truth. My empathy didn’t detect a lie. That meant at least he believed it.

“How come no one told me about this? Seems like I would’ve at least heard about it by now.”

Everything I knew about being a necromancer up to this point was self-taught through trial and error. Most of the time, I made it up as I went along. So, this human meat thing could’ve been true. Too bad Owen wasn’t here to verify it for me. Not that my dad had any reason to lie to me.

Stepping closer to Dad, I took the fork and smelled the meat. The scent wasn’t unlike the animal meat we normally ate. In fact, it smelled pretty good. I brought the fork to my mouth and nearly gagged. Bile threatened to come up and out of my throat. “I can’t eat human meat!”

That was when Dad and Ian burst out laughing. Dad took the fork from me and shoved the piece of meat into his mouth. After he chewed it—and chewed it, and chewed it again, gag me—to my shock, he said, “April Fools!”

Ugh, good grief. They were complete and utter buttfaces. “That is *not* funny. I almost ate that.”

He grinned at me and forked up another bite. “It’s pork roast.”

I was so done with my father for the day.

Done.

OLIVIA

"EVERYBODY READY?" I leaned over and pressed a kiss to Sammie's forehead. "Young man, do not talk your grandmother Phira into letting you stay up late. You know she can't say no to you."

With a cheeky grin, Sammie blinked his eyes, fluttering those long eyelashes at me. "I promise, Mommy."

"Mmhmm." He was full of a bunch of hooey. "I mean it, young man. Bedtime is eight, and that's with brushed teeth and a washed face."

Suddenly I didn't want to go with Sam and Wade to interview a new bartender candidate. I wanted to snuggle up in bed with my little long-lashed boy. I pulled him into an extra tight hug. "Sleep well, babe. I'll see you in the morning."

Sam gave him a big hug, too, then held out his hand to me. Taking Sam's hand with mine, I finger-waved at Phira. "Thanks again."

"It's my pleasure." She tugged on Sammie's hair. "Come on. I think we should eat dessert and then eat dinner."

Oh, yeah. Sammie wasn't going to miss us at all.

Sam grinned and led me toward the door. "Let's go get Wade."

We didn't have to go far. He lived in a small apartment under Winston, but he was walking across the field between Ava's house and Luci's, where we'd been staying since we all manifested our powers. It was a lot easier to have us here, sort of cushioned away from society.

Wade smiled as we neared each other. He was tall and burly in a fit kind of way. His salt and pepper hair had grown out over the months since moving to Shipton, so it started to curl. "I'm more excited than I thought I would be to go interview a bartender."

Sam chuckled. "Same." They started chatting about qualifications and salaries as I created a portal into the back room of their bar. I had to admit, I was excited for them.

They'd been working so hard on this venture. I'd been trying to stay out of it mostly, but man, was it hard. My instinct was to jump in all gung-ho and help with the nitty-gritty. Cute as it was to see them so passionate, I wanted to make sure they didn't bite off more than they could chew. Hehe. Bite.

Red Lipped Mary was going to be quite the spot. They weren't just trying to attract vampires. They'd been working hard to get the information out to all of the supernatural community within a couple hundred-mile radius.

"When does he get here?" I asked as we exited the office.

The bar looked amazing. The darkness engulfed us, and I relished the sensation of the dim lighting, the sultry ambiance that beckoned us to indulge in our deepest desires. The beautiful stone walls were partially lined with red velvet, and the air was thick with the scent of cinnamon and incense.

Wade reached around the bar and picked up a remote control. Soon the sound of throbbing bass music resonated throughout the room, and I couldn't help but sway to the rhythm. Sam and Wade both grinned from ear to ear, their eyes gleaming with excitement. After spending time in Faery, I was no stranger to the enchantment of a beautifully designed space, but this was different. It was dark and dangerous, a haven for creatures like us. I was ready to lose myself in it, and my husband could tell.

He pulled me close and swayed with me a bit. "I'm ready for a night off," he whispered. "Maybe we can sneak away."

Ignoring Wade, I pressed myself close to Sam and gave him a deep, passionate kiss.

"Ahem," came Wade's voice from behind us. "Our candidate will be here any minute."

Drat. It was kinda rude to make out with Sam in front of Wade anyway. I made myself behave.

Good timing, too. The door opened, and a figure stepped in. He was tall and slim, with piercing jade eyes that seemed to glow from within. His hair was slicked back, and his lips were plump and pink, contrasting the paleness of his skin. He surveyed the space before he stepped forward.

"Name's Hank," he said in a smooth voice. "I have an appointment?"

Sam and Wade both made their way around the bar and greeted him with a smile.

"Hank, it's so nice to meet you," Sam said warmly. "We're looking for someone to manage the bar. Please, sit down." He motioned toward one of the closer tables. I'd helped them get interview questions together. We didn't exactly have to follow the same HR rules and laws humans did, but we also didn't want to say something rude.

Hank nodded, his eyes never leaving Sam's face. We all took our places around the table, and Sam began to ask Hank questions.

"So, what made you interested in managing our bar?"

Hank grinned. "I'm a vampire," he said as if that should explain everything.

A smile tugged at my lips.

"I'm sure you can guess why," he continued. "The idea of a safe, welcoming place for creatures like me is attractive. I'm sure this bar will be a great success."

Sam nodded, clearly satisfied with Hank's response.

We went through the other questions, then Wade asked, "Can you tell us about yourself?"

I couldn't help but feel a bit sorry for Hank Talbert as he sat across from us, completely still. He had come so highly recommended by Jax, the vampire leader of the United States, and seemed like the perfect candidate for the head bartender position at our new club. We were set to open in a month's time, so Sam and Wade needed to get the staff trained.

Anyone with such an unfortunate backstory deserves some compassion. "I was turned by a vampire in New York City more than two hundred years ago," he began. "My family..." He shook his head. "Even after all this time, it hurts. I eventually confessed to them what happened to me. I'd hoped my wife would choose to join me, but she rejected me, as did my children." The shadows in his eyes told me he still mourned them.

"Were you turned against your will?" I asked quietly.

Sam and Wade shot me sharp glances.

"I'm sorry. Is that a rude thing to ask?" I wasn't sure at all. Sam had only been a vampire for a short time, so all these rules were completely new for us.

Hank smiled warmly. "Not really. It doesn't bother me, at least. Yes, I was turned violently." He shuddered. "The man who sired me put me through unimaginable torture before finally turning me. I was devoutly religious as a human, so turning me into a vampire was just about the worst thing he

could've done to me."

My chest tightened, and I swallowed a lump in my throat. We sat in stunned silence for a moment. It was hard to hear stories like that, and there wasn't much any of us could say in response.

Finally, Sam spoke up and asked Hank to expand on his working experience. He was an experienced bartender. "This is a job that makes decent money while allowing me to work exclusively at night."

Sam and Wade exchanged glances as they read through his resume one more time before making their decision. As far as qualifications went, there was no doubt that Hank would do an excellent job behind the bar.

"One question I expected you to ask was why I hadn't accumulated a fortune." Hank looked nervous now. "I'll tell you honestly: I'm terrible with money."

A laugh bubbled up my throat. "I do admire honesty."

"I've tried investing, but I always end up investing in the wrong companies. I can't bring myself to compel anyone to give me money."

"Compel them to handle yours," I suggested. "And if they do a good job, give them a cut."

He cocked his head at me. "I never thought about it that way."

With a shrug, I grinned. "I'm a problem solver."

The look on Hank's face changed from nervousness to relief when Sam offered him the position of head bartender at our new club.

We were all confident that with Hank's help, our new bar would quickly become popular among vampires and humans alike.

Hank accepted the offered salary with enthusiasm, and an hour later, I headed home, leaving Wade and Sam there to keep working. They had far more people to hire, and it was time to start getting their first order ready.

As I climbed the stairs to the second floor and my bedroom, the sound of Sammie crying reached me. I rushed past my bedroom, past the hall closet, and into his bright blue room. "Sammie?"

He sat up and rubbed his eyes.

"What's wrong?" I asked and pulled him into my arms.

"It was so scary, Mommy," he said, his voice trembling as he tried to fight back tears. "A woman was coming after Daddy."

I hugged him tightly. "It's ok, sweetie, it was just a dream."

"This is my fault." Phira walked in and sat on the other side of Sammie's bed. "We watched that vampire slayer TV show before bed."

"Yeah." Sammie's lip trembled. "Biffy is going to come put a wooden stake in Daddy's heart."

"She's not going to come hurt Daddy." I rocked him back and forth. "She's not real, honey."

"But I've heard you and Aunt Ava talk about how Uncle Drew is a hunter. Is that the kind that's going to stake Daddy and make him turn into dust?"

I couldn't help my chuckle. "No, my love. The hunters don't do that sort of thing." Anymore. "They only go after evil vampires, and Daddy is certainly not evil."

"Besides," Phira added. "If she did exist, Grandpa Luci would know her."

Sammie brightened up. "That's true. He wouldn't let her hurt my daddy."

"No, he wouldn't." I pressed a kiss to the top of his head and then settled him back against his pillow. "Now, you go back to sleep, and if Biffy shows up again, tell her she can deal with Grandpa Luci."

His eyes began to drift shut almost immediately. Poor little guy. This had to be a big scary thing. He now had powers and magical grandparents. His life was certainly not going to be anything like normal.

Phira and I left the room. I pulled the door to, leaving it cracked a little.

"I'm sorry," Phira said. "I didn't know it would give him nightmares."

I took her hand and gave it a little squeeze. "It's not your fault. I let him watch stuff like that all the time. I think it had more to do with the newness of learning about the paranormal than a TV show."

Looking back at the door, I frowned and worried that he wasn't dealing well with his new powers. That was when Phira squeezed my hand. "He's a strong little man. He'll be okay."

A smile tugged my lips. She must have known what I was thinking. A mother's intuition. I pulled her into a hug, and she squeezed me back. "Thanks for being here. I really couldn't get through half this stuff without you, Luci, Sam, Ava, and everyone."

We pulled apart, and she framed my face. "I'm so happy I found you."

AVA

"WHERE'S EVERYONE AT?" Zoey asked as she plopped down beside me on the couch.

"Olivia and Sam should be here any minute. Drew is showering, and Mom and Dad are at the school."

Dad could stay his funny butt there after his little pranky-prank yesterday. Pfft. Trying to make me think I was eating a person.

"Larry is with Wallie doing something on the PlayStation," she said. "Michelle's at her mom's."

I paused and thought about who else lived here. Most days it was like I didn't even know who was staying here and who wasn't. "Ian is in his room, I think, and of course, Winnie is with Alfred." I stretched over and scratched the top of Snoozer's head. "Where's your pretty lady?" Lucy was as crazy as a soup sandwich, but she *was* gorgeous. No denying that. Snoozer didn't answer, but then I hadn't expected him to. We had no idea why Lucy could talk, but if Snoozer was anywhere as snarky as Lucy, we didn't *want* him talking.

"Is something wrong with Winston?" Zoey asked as she picked at her fingernail.

That same question had been on my mind, but I'd kind of figured it was just a fluke. If I wasn't the only one noticing it, though... "Why do you ask?"

"Well, he always closes my window if I forget, and he hasn't the last two nights. Plus, my floors never used to creak, and all of a sudden there's a super squeaky floorboard." She shrugged. "Doesn't seem like a big deal, but it's like he's been quiet all of a sudden."

I looked around the living room and tried to reach out with my magic. I

wanted to see if I could sense Winston's magic, but all I got was darkness. Winston had gone silent.

My heart sank. Winston had been a part of our family for so long I couldn't believe that something had happened to him. Something bad enough to make him go this quiet. What had happened to him? He'd stopped opening doors, and hadn't been arguing with me in his creaky, moany way.

"Let's try something," I said, standing up and turning toward the kitchen. "I'll see if I can sense Winston's magic." My magic was such crap right now. Maybe Olivia could figure something out when she got here.

We walked into the kitchen, and I closed my eyes, focusing on my breathing. Nothing.

"Helloooo?" Olivia's voice came from the conservatory. "Anybody home?"

"Come in," I called as though she needed permission. "I take it the door didn't open for you?"

"No." She dangled her keys at me. "I had to let us in." She had a key to our house, just in case. Like times like this, apparently. "What's up with Winston?"

Sammie ran past his mother and straight up the stairs. "Zoey!"

"She's in the living room," I called, then looked at Olivia and Sam, who had joined her. "That's what I was hoping you might sense." I gestured around. "My magic is so unpredictable I can't tell if it's me not sensing the chasm magic or if there's no chasm magic to sense."

Drew walked down the stairs. The clomping sound of his boots gave him away.

To my surprise, it wasn't Drew who walked in. It was Ian. "Hello, there."

"Hey, what's going on?" He nodded toward Sam. "How are you out in the sun? Aren't you a vampire?"

"We don't want this information becoming public knowledge." Sam looked at Olivia with raised eyebrows.

Olivia nodded. "I think we can trust Ian."

"It boils down to it being very convenient to be a vampire married to a demigod." Sam grinned. "With her not being full god or fae, I can control myself, but something about her blood makes it so I can be in the sun."

"I don't know what I am," Olivia added. "Demi-god? Nephilim? I have no idea. What we do know is it's not my fae side, or every vampire would hunt down every fae, not just for the taste of their blood, but to be able to go in the

sun."

"If you could bottle that..." Ian rubbed his hands together. "Cha-ching."

Sam and Olivia exchanged a glance. "That's why we don't want it getting out. I can't make enough blood to sell it. I barely make enough to keep Sam in business."

"Maybe a spell could replicate it," I mused. "It's an interesting thought."

"For another day," Sam said as Drew joined us. "Are we playing cards tonight?"

"Actually..." I held up a hand. "I'm worried about Winston." Looking at Olivia, I said, "Can you sense any power coming from the chasm?"

She cocked her head and closed her eyes, then after a long minute, said, "No. Well, a little, but it's like it's being blocked."

"Should we go check it out?" Ian asked. "I've always wanted to see it, anyway."

"Sure. I was going to see if we could attempt another spell to wake Alfred, then cards." I smiled. "A trip to the chasm sounds like a good alternate plan, and then we can attempt the spell."

"Heck, yes," Ian said. "Let's go."

"I wanna go!" Sammie stood in the kitchen doorway and scrunched his eyebrows. "I like the chasm."

Zoey stuck her head in to see who was all in the kitchen, then pointed up to indicate that she was going upstairs. Most likely to hang out with Larry and Wallie while they played video games.

I looked at Olivia. There wasn't a real reason he couldn't go down there with us as long as he wasn't scared. I was half-convinced Sammie wasn't scared of anything, except maybe *Biffy*, the vampire hunter.

She shrugged. "It's okay with me."

Sammie jumped up and down. "Let's go!"

I wasn't sure who was more excited, Sammie or Ian.

"Quiet," I cautioned as we descended the stairs, mostly talking to Sammie and Ian. Everyone else knew to keep quiet in the basement during daylight hours. Wade slept until dark still and probably would for decades unless he happened to find himself a demi-god like Olivia.

That seemed unlikely.

I led the way as we tiptoed through the basement and past the door to Wade's bedroom. Sam brought up the rear.

When Sam's voice echoed through the basement hallway, I jumped and

whirled around, my heart beating a mile a minute. "You know we don't have to be quiet?" he yelled at the top of his voice. "Wade wouldn't wake up if a tornado went through his bedroom."

I sighed and shook my head. Drew laughed and shrugged, used to Sam's antics by now.

Olivia swatted his arm as Sammie doubled over in laughter. "You made them jump high, Daddy!"

We continued down the hallway, less tip toey this time, and out the hidden bookshelf-door that led to the cave system underneath the house. I formed a ball of light to float ahead of us, but it almost immediately flickered and went out.

Olivia took pity on me and threw one in the air as I led the way to the cave room that held the smaller magic cache.

Sure enough, the small source of power directly under the house wasn't glowing. "Crap," I muttered. "Am I the only one who doesn't see the glow?"

"No, it's not there," Olivia said. "It's not your faulty magic."

"It looks like the power is out," Drew said. "What would make that happen?"

I had no clue, but the thought of never talking to Winston again made my heart hurt.

Drew took my hand, probably feeling my despair through the bond. "We'll figure it out."

Sam stepped forward and squinted at the small stone table that held the small, clear quartz gemstone. It had glowed white and blue all the other times I'd been here. Now it just looked like a dime-a-dozen piece of pretty rock.

"Am I the only one who sees the red?" He looked back at me as Sammie pushed forward and peered at the stone.

"No, Daddy, I see it, too."

Sam straightened and looked down at his son. "Can you describe it?"

Little Sammie scrunched his nose. "It looks like string. It goes that way." He pointed in the direction of the larger chasm.

Sam nodded. "Yep. It looks like string to me, too, but glowing. He definitely sees it."

"How?" I asked and pulled on my power and Drews to try to sense or see this glowing red threat.

Nothing.

"Well, I'm not sure," Sam said. "But it's definitely troubling. Why can my

son and I see something the rest of you can't?"

"I didn't think vampires had powers like that," Ian said.

"Some do." I pulled out my phone. "No service. I was thinking I'd call Jax and ask."

"Get on Wade's Wi-Fi," Drew said. "It should work here."

After pressing a few buttons on my phone, I was able to get service. "Nice. I forgot he'd installed that."

I pulled up the contact info for Hailey, the mate to the king of the vampires, and called her. She answered after the second ring. "Hey, Ava, how are you?"

She was sweet. She'd bought my house in Philadelphia, and we'd stayed in touch since. She and Jax even came to our wedding. Plus, Jax was a silent partner in Red Lipped Mary's.

"I'm well." I paused for a moment. "Actually, I'm kind of crappy. My powers are on the fritz, but that's not why I'm calling."

"What can I do for you? You sound like you need to get down to business."

"I guess I do. You remember Sam?" I put the phone on speaker then so everyone could hear. "I have him here with me."

Her voice brightened. "Of course. How are you doing as a vampire, Sam?"

"Great, thanks. We just wanted to ask if vampires can have magical abilities."

"Yes, as a matter of fact. I can manipulate metal, though it's extremely hard to master. Another vampire I know can sense things about people. What kind of paranormal creature they are, how they got their powers, and so on."

"Sam here is seeing some sort of magical thread. It's red," Olivia said.

"Hang on, let me ask Jax." The line went dead for a couple of minutes while we stood around and shuffled our feet. Then she came back. "That isn't something that he's familiar with. He says if you had any sort of magical ability before, or if it was in your DNA, it's possible for it to be enhanced now that you're a vampire."

"Okay, Hailey, thank you. I do appreciate your time." I grinned at the phone like a dummy, as if Hailey could see me. It wasn't a dang video chat.

"Anytime. You should invite us out sometime this summer. I'd love a Maine vacation."

That sounded nice. I liked Hailey and Jax. "You got it."

As soon as I hung up, Olivia said, "It's got to be something from before. Sammie has it too." She pointed at Sam. "Do you have any witches in your family?"

He shook his head. "No. My parents don't even know Ava is a witch. They're completely human, and as far as they know, everyone else is, too."

"I've been calling Luci from the moment you saw it," Olivia said. "He's not hearing me, or he's ignoring me."

"I'm not ignoring you."

I barely managed to keep from jumping out of my skin again as I turned to find Luci in the cave with us. "Nice of you to join us," I said with only a little bit of sarcasm in my tone.

"You rang?" He looked at his daughter expectantly.

"Can you see any sort of magical ability in Sam and Sammie?" Olivia asked. "I know you can sometimes read that on people."

Luci cleared his throat, then made a big production of squinting at Sam and Sammie as he walked slowly around them. He hemmed and hawed, looking high and looking low, circling them three or four times as Sam rolled his eyes up to the cave ceiling.

The drama this man gave us. How had we gotten through life without it before I'd accidentally summoned him?

After a solid minute of his dramatics, he stopped and clapped his hands together once. "They're psychic."

As though it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"What?" Same said, shocked.

"Yep. I can barely see it, but when I try very hard, it's there. Psychics are sort of reddish most of the time."

"Reddish?" Oliva asked. "What do you mean?"

Luci cocked his head and held up one finger. "Hold on..." He seemed to be listening to something or someone that we couldn't hear. "Yes, okay. I must go. Cheerio." With that, he disappeared.

"Damn," Ian muttered. "That dude is so weird."

Indeed.

AVA

WHILE OLIVIA TOOK Sammie to her adoptive parents' house for the night, we followed Sam, who was following the red thread. We ended up in the big chasm of power.

It was also dark.

"What do you see?" Ian asked Sam.

"The whole thing is wrapped in the red thread." Sam shook his head and gestured toward the gigantic quartz stone. "It goes down into the chasm in the stone, but it also wraps all the way around it."

"Anything else?" I gently prodded as Olivia walked into the cave. "That was fast," I muttered.

"Yeah, I told them I was in a hurry. Stopping to remind Sammie he can't do any magic around them took the longest."

"The thread leads up and that way." Sam pointed toward what I was pretty sure would be the main road once we got outside. "Maybe I can see it once we go out there." We traipsed out of the cave, going toward the beach instead of toward Winston.

Once out on the beach, Sam turned and peered. "I can't see it from here."

"Come on. I'll port us to the top of the cliff." Olivia opened a portal, and we walked through.

The cave was well down the beach from our house, though still on my family property. "When was the last time you were down here?" I asked Sam, who was squinting into the small copse of trees between the beach and the main road. It wasn't *quite* a forest, though I'd always thought of it as one.

He turned and looked at me, then jumped and rushed to my side. "Ava!"

I cocked an eyebrow at him. "Sam!"

"The red threads. They're all over you."

I looked down at myself, as did everyone else. "Um."

He circled me, reminiscent of how Luci had gone round and round him and Sammie. "All over you. Twined around your body. It looks like they should be constricting you to the point of knocking you over. If they were literal ropes or thread, you'd be trussed up like a mummy."

I stared at him in shock. "You're messing with me. This is another April Fools' joke, isn't it?" I glared at Drew. "Did you put him up to this?"

He held his hands up. "No, I swear I didn't. I'm as surprised as you are."

Okay, okay. I could tell through our bond that he was feeling shock and the beginnings of rage. He did *not* like the thought of me being messed with.

How I loved that man and his protectiveness.

"You have a string leading away. It meshes with the string coming from the ground." Sam jogged a few yards away and pointed to a seemingly random spot on the leafy ground. "Here."

"Let's follow it." I squared my shoulders. "I want to know who in the world could have red strings of power all over me." Drew's fury had mingled with my own. I hadn't been this mad in... I wasn't sure how long. Lightning crackled around my fingertips.

We walked until the power thread got to the main road. Sam pointed away from town. "It goes that way."

"Hang on," Olivia said. "Stay right here. I'll go get a vehicle."

"Get my SUV," Drew said and tossed her the keys. "We'll all fit."

She saluted him and then disappeared through one of her portals. I sat on the side of the road on a big rock and tried not to spontaneously combust. After a few minutes, Drew's SUV came roaring up the road. We weren't that far from home.

We climbed in, and Olivia moved so Sam could drive. "Now I can just follow it," he said.

It wasn't easy sitting still in the back seat while Sam and Drew sat up front. My bond with my husband was like boiling water rushing back and forth between us. My anger fed his, and vice versa. Both of us were careful not to trigger his new power-boosting ability.

"Why couldn't you see the threads on me before?" I asked.

Sam glanced at me in the rearview mirror. "I have no idea. I've never seen anything like this before tonight."

"Sammie obviously has," Olivia said. "And he might have seen these but

maybe didn't know how to say it."

She was his mom, but my Sammie would've told me if he'd seen me being constricted by magical rope—no need to say that out loud, though.

The SUV veered right as Sam turned on a dime. "Sorry. That turn came up quickly."

Olivia peeled herself out of my lap, and I pushed away from Ian. I hadn't quite ended up in his lap, but definitely, he'd kept me from falling all the way over.

The road turned into a gravel drive until it stopped in front of a largeish RV.

It clicked. "I know who is going to walk out that door." Lightning rose to my fingertips again as we clambered out of the car.

Ian, Drew, and Sam tried to stay in front of Olivia and me, but I shoved my way forward as the door to the RV opened.

The Viking elder Arne stepped down the little metal stairs, followed by his two henchmen, who were apparently not important enough to introduce me to, as he never had. "What are you doing here?"

Sam stepped back and leaned close. "The red strings are going directly into him."

White-hot anger coursed through my veins. I tried to call my lightning, but all it would do was dance across my fingers. I wished fervently I had something besides Drew I could draw on for power to give me enough of a boost to fry these mother effers.

My truth stone appeared in my hand. Okay. That was weird. It pulsed, sending power into my palm.

A lot of power.

A whole freaking lot of power. I screamed as it filled me and danced with my fury.

Lightning rained from the sky like a freaking fireworks show. Every bit of it went directly into Arne and his two associates. Our hair stood on end, and even I had to shield my eyes from the brightness of the electricity.

When I opened them, Arne and the tweedles were nothing but greasy black tar.

My magic slammed into me like a freight train. I screamed again, but this time it was out of surprise and at least a little bit of fear. Once my magic was inside, the fear lessened as a rush of energy through my body electrified me, the feeling indescribable. It was like a door had swung open in my mind, and

all of the power that had been taken from me came crashing back in an overwhelming surge. I gasped as it continued flooding through me, a feeling of electricity coursing through my veins, filling me to the brim. It was like a shock to the system, and for a moment, I was paralyzed by the sheer intensity of it all. But then, I let it wash over me, grinning widely and feeling invincible. I was myself once more, and no one would take that away from me again.

I hoped.

"Ava, it's okay." Drew had his arms around me, and warmth rushed through me. "Are you all right?"

I nodded, my mind spinning from the sudden overload of power. "I'm good. Just give me a second."

Once they knew I was okay, Olivia, Sam, and Ian went inside the trailer to search it. Drew sat me down in the passenger seat of his SUV, then stood beside me, squeezing my hand. "They were getting to my power through you," he said. "I never realized."

I took a moment to look past the storm inside me to feel our bond. Sure enough, the power I sensed there was quite a bit stronger. "We're going to be unstoppable together," I said with a grin. "Let 'em come after us now."

Ian led the way with Olivia and Sam right behind them. "Nothing but this amulet," he said and handed it to Drew. I didn't take the time to look at it just yet. I was doing well to stay upright.

"Let's go home," I muttered. "I want to check on Alfred." The necromancers draining me, and the chasm couldn't have been unrelated to Alfred's long nap. It was far too coincidental.

Drew tucked into the backseat beside me with Ian on my other side. Sam drove us back to Winston.

Halfway there, I pulled out my phone and texted Winnie. **You okay?**

She didn't answer.

"Hey," Olivia said. "It wasn't the baby."

I stared at her blankly for a second, and then my brain caught up to her words. "It wasn't the baby draining me."

"That makes me wonder how powerful the baby will be," Drew said. "With your heritage plus Michelle's water magic added in."

"We won't know for a while," I murmured as I tried texting Winnie again. I pulled the truth stone out of my pocket and prodded it with a little bit of power.

It absorbed it.

"This isn't just a truth stone," I said, my voice a bit awestruck. "It's a power reservoir. There's no telling how long the power it gave me today had been in there, waiting to be used."

"Was it fae magic?" Olivia asked. Her uncle, the king of Faery, had been the one to give it to me.

"I couldn't tell. It happened so fast, and it was so incredibly potent."

Sam drove us right up to the front door, and I was ecstatic to see the front door open. "Winston," I said happily. "You're back."

He moaned at me in his way, and the sound of the kitchen cabinets opening and closing brought a big smile to my face. "I love you, too, Winston."

"Winnie?" I called up the stairs as everyone came in behind me. "Win? Alfred?"

I had one foot on the stairs when I realized what I was hearing.

Rhythmic thumping. From right above our heads.

Alfred's bedroom was right above our heads.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

Oh, my goodness.

"Well, then," Olivia said in a loud, too-bright voice. "How about we wait to see Alfred out on the patio?"

We practically sprinted out there to find Wade already in a chaise lounge. "It's loud in there," he said.

"Alfred?" I asked.

"Yeah. I'd just come upstairs to see where everyone was when I heard her shout that he was awake. I tried not to listen, but soon after she shouted, the, umm, other sounds began."

Sam covered his face and moaned. "I can still hear them."

Wade grimaced. "I'm trying really hard to sing the alphabet song in my head."

Suddenly I was grateful not to have vampire hearing.

AVA

SAM JUMPED UP. "I'm going to go see if the chasm has its power back." He ran toward the beach.

"Wait for me," Wade yelled, then used his vampire speed to catch up to Sam.

"Well, then." I settled back into a chair, glad I wasn't a vampire.

A few moments later, Larry and Zoey walked out of the kitchen. Larry was laughing, and Zoey said, "Did you guys hear—"

"Oh, yeah," Drew cut her off. "That's why we are all out here."

"Is that Alfred and Winnie?" Larry asked around his chortles.

"We're pretty sure." Olivia grinned. "Ava killed the necromancers."

I let my friends tell the story, but they had to start it over a few minutes later when Wallie and Michelle walked outside. "Hey, um, it's really inappropriate in there," Wallie said. He nodded toward Larry. "Thanks for the text." Then he glared at me. "Next time maybe you can tell me when Alfred wakes from a mystical sleep."

"Us too," Mom said as she and Dad followed Wallie and Michelle out. The back deck was getting crowded.

Sam and Wade walked across the yard super slow, especially for vampires. "We still hear them," Sam called. They stopped halfway across the lawn. "The chasm is back, though!"

That was a relief.

"I wonder why the chasm didn't take power from the ghouls?" Mom asked after we told her the whole story.

"I thought about that," I said. "But the stones they wear hold their own power, and it's a considerable amount. I don't think they're still connected to

the quartz in the cave." They'd become self-sufficient once they'd been separated from the big stone.

Sam and Wade began to creep forward. Once on the porch, Sam said, "I think it's over."

After cocking his head, Wade nodded. "Yeah, it's safe to go in. They're dressing."

I looked at Drew in horror, then at Wade. "Can you always hear things... like *that*?"

Wade grinned. "Yes, but when in the basement, I have really good headphones. Plus, Alfred and Winnie are particularly, ah, voracious."

Ew, ew, ew.

We clambered into the kitchen in time to see Alfred and Winnie walk down the stairs.

"It is so good to see you," I said as I rushed to hug my good friend and ghoul. "So good."

He hugged me tightly. "It's so good to hug you."

My heart swelled as I clung to Alfred. I hadn't quite realized how worried I'd been. He'd become like a brother to me, and my life had been a little less colorful in the four months since I'd last heard his squeaky voice.

"Come, sit," I said, swiping at my eyes to brush away the tears. "Talk to us. Tell us what happened."

"Have you been aware?" Olivia asked as we moved into the living room, which became crowded very quickly. "Were you in pain?"

"No pain," Alfred said as he took a seat of honor in the middle of the sofa with Winnie plastered to his side. "But I was aware, yes."

After taking a deep breath, he started his story. "I was conflicted about the necromancers. Not because I was waffling about whether or not to sacrifice someone, but because I didn't want to completely lose touch with my former coven members because I wasn't willing to sacrifice a human." He shrugged. "Part of me was drawn to them. I hadn't seen anyone who could remember the things I could in so long."

Winnie squeezed his hand. "That's understandable, hon. You could've talked to us about it."

Poor Alfred. "We would've understood, yes."

I leaned forward and put my hand over his and Winnie's. "I'm sorry to tell you, in the process of getting our powers back and confronting the necromancers, I..." I grimaced. "I sort of fried them to a crisp."

"More like fried them to a sludge," Ian said, then snickered.

Drew shot him an exasperated look. "Not helping," he muttered.

Alfred sat for a second, absorbing the information. "I guess it doesn't matter now."

"As it turns out, they were draining the chasm and Ava," Drew said. "They had to be dealt with."

Alfred met his gaze. "I know. I was aware. Every time you came in and sat with me, catching me up on what was going on, I knew it. What was more, from the moment I fell into the chasm, a few bits of information were suddenly completely clarified to me. I knew the necromancers were draining Ava."

"How did you fall in?" Sam asked.

Before Alfred answered, Lucy sauntered into the room and hopped up onto the coffee table and began licking her right front paw.

Alfred fixed her with a glare. "Four months? You didn't know I was missing for *four* months? *And* I asked you to tell Ava it's the necromancers, and you didn't."

She paused her licking for a second to say, "How am I supposed to keep up with the drama of the two-legged?" Then she resumed her licky-licking of her paw.

It would've been completely fair if Alfred had knocked her across the room, but he took the high road and turned back to Sam to answer his question. "I don't have any idea. I just went for a walk. When I got near the cave, I had the strongest urge to go in. The last thing I remember is walking in."

"Once we pulled you out, when did you wake up?" Drew asked. "We know the necromancers weren't draining the chasm then, or Sam would've seen the threads."

"No, Sam didn't go, remember?" I pointed out. "He and Wade were asleep."

"It started after that," Alfred said. "I was able to go away from my body for short stints. They felt the power surge when you got me out of the chasm. Within an hour, they were there, doing their rituals to connect the power in the chasm to Arne."

"Darn," Olivia said. "Rotten luck, but why didn't you wake up?"

"I assume because the chasm needed to finish me."

Winnie grinned. "I felt a big surge of power right before he woke up."

"Wow," I whispered. "That's a series of unfortunate events."

"What about your powers?" Mom asked. "Are you human or witch?"

"Necromancer." Alfred grinned. "As far as I can tell, I'm fully myself again. As though I never died. I think I'm around thirty, though that's hard to tell." He looked down at himself. "It's the best feeling."

"Isn't it?" Mom said. "I don't know what it's like to wake up in my real body again, but waking up in this one was like... well, like coming back to life."

"This talisman was in the trailer the necromancers were staying in," Drew said and pulled it out of his pocket. It looked like a silver snake with an emerald embedded in it. A thick red ribbon hung through a hook at the top.

Alfred took it but shook his head. "I don't recognize it." He bounced it around in his hand, then closed his eyes and focused. "It doesn't have any power."

Ian stepped forward and grabbed it. "Wait, let me look at it." He held it up and studied it. "I don't sense anything either." He handed it to Drew, who did the same.

"No, if it had magical properties, I think we'd sense it. Still, let's keep it put up." He slid it back into his pocket as Alfred gave an affirming nod.

Lucy walked across the coffee table, drawing my attention. She gingerly stepped into Michelle's lap as we all watched in shock.

To our even bigger surprise, the crazy, ornery cat curled up into a ball and put her head down with a contented sigh.

What in the world?

We looked at Michelle, who shrugged. "I have no idea," she said softly.

That made two of us.

I smiled at the girl who was fast becoming a part of our family. "You should invite your parents over for dinner soon."

Alfred perked up at that. "I'd love to cook for us."

Everyone spoke at once, trying to figure out what night would be good so that Michelle's mom and dad could meet the whole crew. "Guys, they might get overwhelmed with this bunch."

As everyone spoke over everyone else, the house moaned and rumbled.

That shut everyone up in a hurry. We looked around the living room. "Winston?" I called. "You okay?"

Slowly, with much groaning and fanfare, Winston expanded the living room to double its original size. It hadn't been overly small to begin with, but

we were quite the crowd.

Olivia grinned from ear to ear, waved her hand, and another couch appeared, along with a plush recliner and a couple of nice-looking end tables.

"Nice," Larry said. He and Zoey went to cuddle in the recliner as we inspected the new half of the room.

"Thanks, Winston. It's nice to see you're feeling better." I sent loving feelings out at my house.

I mean, how did one express to a sentient house that he was very loved?

Drew found a nice way. "I'll give you a good pressure washing soon. How's that sound?"

Winston clattered the kitchen cabinets in response.

Apparently, that sounded nice.

OLIVIA

"Aw, HONEY, DON'T BE NERVOUS." I smoothed Sam's hair behind his ear. It amazed me that it still grew when he was officially undead. He was so much the same as he had been when he was human. I forgot sometimes, but then there were times like these... I held out my hand and leaned into my wonderful husband as his fangs descended, and he sank them into my wrist. The first time he drank from me, I felt a tiny pinch and a bit of discomfort. Now, it gave me joy knowing that I provided for him. I barely felt his bite.

"Thanks," Sam whispered a few moments later. He licked the bite marks to heal them, then pulled away with a sigh. I tucked my arm back into the sleeve of my robe. We stood in silence for a moment, sharing a look that said so much without words.

We had been together for years now, and our love only seemed to grow stronger as the days went on. It was beautiful, but it also scared me at times. I felt like we both knew that if something happened to one of us, the other would never be the same. We didn't talk about it, but we both felt it.

Today was not a day for sadness though, so I smiled and put my hand on Sam's shoulder.

"Ready?" I asked, and he nodded. We had a lot of work to do today. The club's soft opening was tonight. I'd gotten Sam up in the early afternoon, thus the need for my blood.

"I am. Yes, I'm a little nervous but also confident." He beamed at me before bending to tie his shoes. "It's going to be so much fun. It's nice to feel like becoming a vampire doesn't mean everything has to stop or be ruined. There's going to be a future for us, for me."

The future was something that had been a pretty sensitive subject for a

while, but now that it was clear we'd be able to spend it together, the sky was the limit.

"Let's go."

After we said goodbye to Sammie and Phira, I opened a portal directly in the back room of Red Lipped Mary.

It really was an awesome name.

"Wade's in the dark room," Sam said. "He'll be out the moment the sun goes down."

"Did he sleep here?" I peered down the hall toward the rooms in the very back: storage, the fridge, freezer, and a light-tight room for any vampires who might end up here during the day.

"Yeah, we worked until dawn the last few nights. I was able to make it home, thanks to you, but he crashed here."

"Good thing someone had the idea to include it." I looked at him out of the corner of my eye.

"Yes, Olivia, you're the best, with the best ideas, and what would I ever do without you?" He spoke with a big smile, pulling me into his arms and placing a kiss on my throat. A shiver of desire fluttered through me. The words were sarcastic, but love shone in his tone.

"What's left?" I asked. "What can I do?"

"We got the final drink delivery today. I paid the delivery guy extra to put it in the big storage bin outside. I'll bring it in if you'll get it organized behind the counter."

"Can do."

He carried box after box while I organized and stocked the shelves and refrigerator. We worked in silence for a while, just enjoying being together in our new place.

When everything was put away and the boxes broken down, I took the duster and gave the place a once-over while Sam checked out the sound system. "Are you hiring a DJ?" I asked.

"Not tonight. Just playing this playlist I made." He waved his old cell phone at me.

"Smart, using that one." I began pulling the chairs off of the tables. "Did the VIP sofa get here?" I couldn't quite see it from here.

Sam nodded and turned the music on low. "Yep, and since it was late, they gave us twenty-five percent back."

"Score."

Twenty minutes later, I stopped and shook off my hands. "Now what?"

Sam grabbed my hand and pulled me onto the dance floor. He tilted his head back, eyes closed, and we swayed to the music. I laid my head on his shoulder and enjoyed the feeling of being in our new club. It had all come together just as we'd dreamed, a real purpose for Sam. Hopefully, a bit of money, though that wasn't the biggest concern.

All of our friends were coming tonight, along with the full staff. If there were any more kinks to iron out, we'd know after the next eight hours or so.

"Hey, guys." Wade walked out of the backroom door and then rolled his eyes. "Do you do anything besides act all lovey-dovey?"

I giggled. "Yeah, but it'd be even grosser to you than our PDA."

Wade turned in a circle, looking around the bar. "I shouldn't have asked." He grinned, then stopped circling. "This place looks fantastic."

Over the next half hour, the employees came in. Hank, our new head bartender was first, he lined glasses up, then moved all the liquor bottles around to his preference.

I wasn't offended. After this was his job, and he had a lot more experience than I had.

Soon after, the servers and two more bartenders arrived. We didn't really need the bouncers with it being only our friends, but we'd asked them to come in anyway, just to make this as much like the real opening night as possible.

"Did the mailers go out?" I asked Sam as the servers tied on their aprons.

"Yep. Fifteen thousand to households who have people ages twenty-five to thirty-five. Jax sent out notifications to the leader of the North East vampires, Clinton, and he's going to send the information out to his vampires."

Ava and Drew walked in the front door, followed by pretty much their entire household, and my mother and father.

"I told you to call," I said. "I would've come and got you."

"Luci and Phira stopped by and offered," Ava said as she scoped out the place.

Wade leaned across the bar. "Olivia, if you could set up a permanent portal from the basement to the light-tight room here, that'd be great."

"You got it." Then I walked Ava around, showing her how we'd gotten everything finished. As we rounded back to where we started, the front door opened, and Jax and Hailey walked in with Kendra, their witch friend. "Come

on in," I called. "Welcome." Jax was a partial investor in the club. It was great to have his support. Plus, it was good to see Hailey. I'd met her a few times now. They'd asked me to make portals for them a time or two, which I'd been happy to do.

Hey, it's kinda cool being one of the only people in the world who could make portals.

I'm special. My daddy said so.

Said daddy is the devil, though, so grain of salt and all that.

"Where's Luke?" I asked.

Ava widened her eyes at me. Oh, crap. I'd forgotten. Luke's boyfriend and Jax's right hand man was missing. He'd been missing since November, nearly about the same amount of time we'd been dealing with the Alfred and Luci locked out of Hell fiasco. "I'm so sorry. He didn't feel like coming, I guess."

Ava shook her head with sad eyes, and Jax grimaced.

"It's been hardest on him," Kendra said. "Though none of us realized how much Jax depended on Ransom."

"Hell, I didn't realize how much I did."

"You still don't have any leads?" Ava asked.

Hailey shook her head. "We assume it's his sire who has him, but none of our efforts to find him have panned out." She shook her hair back. "I hear you finally had a breakthrough with Alfred?"

Ava pointed him out in the small crowd. Of course, Winnie was plastered to his side, but he certainly didn't look disappointed in his situation. He had one arm around her, his fingertips flirting with the side of her mostly-exposed breast.

Ewww. I loved them, but they were some next-level PDAers.

"I'd be happy to try searching for him," Ava said. "I have my powers back now."

Jax brightened up. "I rarely think of you as a witch. To me, you're the most powerful necromancer, but you do have a witch side, don't you?"

She nodded. "Sure do, and not to sound braggy, but I'm pretty good. Come on. We can scry in the office."

After making sure Sam and Wade had things covered, I headed to the back room. Jax hadn't asked me to look for Ransom either, but I would volunteer. Might as well try to help out our friends.

By the time I made it to the back, Ava was staring at a world map in frustration.

"Not working?" I asked.

She shook her head. "No, and I tried it a couple of different ways." Every witch tended to have a particular way of doing locator spells that they preferred, but there were lots of ways to try to locate someone.

A watch sat on the map. Jax motioned toward it and said, "That's Ransom's. I keep it on me, and the map, just in case I have a chance to scry for him."

"Smart," I said. "Let me try?"

Ava scooted over and squeezed Hailey's arm. "Olivia is a special kind of witch. You never know what she might pick up." She scooted around. "I'm going to go get my son's girlfriend. She's a water elemental. She might be able to do a reflection."

Kendra popped her head in. "Any luck?"

We all shook our heads.

"We're going to try a couple of different things," I said. "It might be helpful for me to have Luke here. Do you think he'd come?"

Hailey nodded. "He might."

"I'll go get him," Kendra said brightly, then disappeared.

I picked up the watch and sat in one of the chairs so I could focus. Thinking about Ransom, I tried to picture his face, his build, his voice. I hadn't met him all that many times, and I honestly couldn't say I'd ever heard him speak. He was the polar opposite of Luke, but sometimes that was the way things worked out.

Sam and I weren't too far from that.

No matter how much magic I pushed into the watch, nothing came back to me. Time dragged as I kept trying. How cool would it have been if I could've found Ransom for them?

Eventually, I had to stop. Opening my eyes, I started as I realized the room had gotten much fuller. Luke sat across from me in the other chair, leaned forward, and nearly touched me. "Anything?" he asked hopefully.

"I'm sorry, no."

Luci and Phira stood in the doorway. "Let me try," Luci said. He looked even more exhausted than he had the last time I saw him when Ava healed his arm.

Luke jumped up and snatched the watch out of my hand.

"No, hang on," I said. Holding out one hand, I smiled at my father. "Let's try working together." Before he'd been so distracted by trying to get into

Hell, we'd been working on magic together, and both found our powers boosted by one another. I held my other hand out to Luke. "Think about him hard," I said. "Everything about him, physically."

A gleam of humor flashed in Luke's eyes, chasing away the panic for a split second.

"Everything but *that*," I said.

Everyone chuckled but quickly quieted down as we stepped forward. I did the same thing I'd been doing with the watch, but this time focused on Luke.

Nothing. Not even a tickle. Wherever Ransom was, he was extremely well-guarded. We tried for a good half hour before finally admitting defeat.

Luke stepped back with tears in his eyes. "Thank you for trying." He looked at Luci, then pursed his lips for a moment before saying, "If he were dead..."

"I'd know." Luci reached over and squeezed Luke's shoulder. "I've been locked out of Hell, but I can still sense the inhabitants. I built that realm. They can't completely sever me from it. If Ransom were there, I'd be able to sense him."

"What about... *not* Hell?" Jax asked.

Luci grinned. "You're vampires. Don't you worry. You'll be coming to hang out with me when you die."

There was a sobering thought. Hell wasn't *quite* as bad as some religions made it out to be, but I also hadn't noticed it being a walk in the park, either. "Uh, maybe don't scare them?"

Luci chuckled. "Don't worry. Your eternity is still dependent on what kind of person you are when you die. If you don't want to be tortured for all of time..." He shrugged. "Don't be a dick."

"Did someone ask to see me? Sorry it took so long. I'd just gotten back home." Michelle walked in and smiled. She was such a sweet girl.

"I'm sorry to pull you back out," Luke said. He smiled at her baby bump. "Congratulations, by the way."

Wallie followed her in and shook Luke's hand. I didn't realize they knew one another. They'd probably met at Ava and Drew's wedding.

The room was full of people now, but none of us really wanted to leave.

Wallie pulled a bowl and bottle of water out of a backpack. "Here you go."

Michelle set the items on the desk, filled up the bowl, then turned to

Luke. "Do you have something of his?"

Luke handed her the watch. "Should I hold your hand or anything?"

She nodded. "That might help and definitely couldn't hurt."

Wallie pulled a chair up for her, and she perched delicately at the end of it. There wasn't any fanfare or drama, but after a minute or two, she gasped. A split second later, Luke did, too.

"It's the baby," Michelle whispered. "She's boosting my power."

The bowl began to glow, and everyone rushed forward. I caught myself trying to push to the front, then remembered this wasn't my battle and made room for Jax, Hailey, and Kendra.

Still, I *had* to see what was going on in that bowl, so I tiptoed around until I could see over Ava's shoulder.

A reflection appeared in the still water. Luke sobbed as Hailey clutched his shoulders. Jax looked choked up and said, "Luke, he's desiccated. Depending on what he's been going through, that's a good thing. He's in a dream-like state."

Luke nodded as tears streamed down his face. He reached toward the bowl as if he wanted to touch it, but Wallie gently stopped his hand.

"Don't touch," Wallie whispered. "It might sever the connection."

Instead of touching the bowl, Luke grabbed Hailey's arm and bit back his tears. He was close to breaking down.

"I can't tell where it is," Michelle said in a dreamy voice. "Can you see anything from the image?"

We took turns moving forward and studying the scene, but nobody had any insight. When it was my turn to look, I understood why. Ransom looked like a mummy. I wouldn't have recognized him if I'd been in the room with him. What I could see of the surrounding room was just stone. Stone floor, stone walls. "Maybe a castle?" I suggested. "It reminds me of an old castle."

"That doesn't narrow much down," Jax said. He sounded so defeated.

"This is still progress," Ava said. "And we can try again, join more power. Anything to try to help."

Michelle let go of the bowl and Luke with a sigh. "That was intense," she said and looked up at Ava. "This baby has got some power in her."

The party dwindled after that. The Philadelphia guests departed with the understandably shaken Luke. Luci and Phira left to get some rest, and we went out to the main part of the club to help until our other guests decided they'd had enough.

By the time we cleaned up and went home, dawn was peeking over the horizon.

Despite the setback in attempting to locate Ransom, the night had been a smashing success. The real grand opening was going to go well, I just knew it.

Sam and I collapsed into bed and snuggled into each other as sleep claimed us.

AVA

"THAT WAS FUN LAST NIGHT," I said as I buttered my toast. It was nearly noon, but at least it wasn't just me who'd slept in this time. Even Drew had only gotten up a few minutes before me.

"That club is going to be amazing," Winnie said. She tossed her long blonde hair over her shoulder.

"I like that robe," I said, hoping to encourage her whenever she wore something appropriate. The robe in question was pink and fuzzy.

Most importantly, it covered all the private parts.

Drew's phone buzzed loudly, startling us all. He grabbed it and grimaced. "It's Pearl."

Ian chuckled. "That's never good."

They loved their grandmother, but she wasn't their favorite person in the world, to say the least.

Drew put the phone to his ear, and though we couldn't hear what Pearl said, it was easy enough to guess from Drew's expression. His face became graver with each passing moment, and when he hung up the phone, he looked like a man who had just been given an unenviable task. I knew what was coming before Drew even opened his mouth. "Pearl needs us. She's asking us to do a hunt with Lily." We hadn't seen Drew's sister in a while. It would be nice to catch up with her. She'd moved to Florida, which meant she was closer to her grandchildren.

Ian and I exchanged an apprehensive glance. "What kind of hunt?" I asked, breaking the uneasy silence that had descended upon us. "I hope no more monsters have escaped from Hell?"

Drew exhaled heavily. "No, nothing like that, but it's not exactly a walk in

the park either. Pearl's been having some trouble with a coven of witches that's been causing serious havoc in New Jersey. She thinks they're up to something big, something dangerous."

"Thus, why we're meeting up with Lily," Ian said. "Do we have any more information?"

Drew nodded. "Pearl emailed me some files." He tapped on his phone, then read us what he found. "Apparently, this coven has been performing some sort of dark ritual. She thinks they're trying to summon the Jersey Devil."

"That's real?" I asked, shocked.

With a chuckle, Drew winked at me. "Oh, yeah."

"Come on, Ava," Ian said. "Haven't you figured out by now that pretty much every legend has a root in truth if it isn't completely true?"

I rolled my eyes at Ian's comment, but I couldn't deny that he had a point. In our line of work, we had come across some pretty strange things. Summoning a legendary creature like the Jersey Devil didn't seem too far-fetched. "So, what's the plan?" I asked. "The Jersey Devil? That's just, I don't know, too surreal."

Drew shrugged. "Whether it's real or not, we have to go. Pearl wouldn't have called us if it wasn't important."

Ian nodded in agreement. "Yeah, we can't just ignore this. So, what's our next move?"

Drew pulled up a map of New Jersey on his phone. "We need to head to this town where the coven has been spotted. We can meet up with Lily there."

"All right," I said. "Let's do this. How are we getting there?"

"Yoo-hoo," Olivia called as the back door opened.

Nice to see Winston back to his old polite habits.

"Good timing," I said. "Care to give us a portal?"

"Sure." She leaned over and snagged a piece of toast. "I was coming to see if you wanted to spend the afternoon with me at the academy, but I can schlep you guys somewhere. Where are we going?"

"To investigate witches who are summoning the Jersey Devil." Drew watched her absorb his words with a gleam in his eyes.

"The what?" She stopped chewing and stared at my hubby.

"The Jersey Devil is real?" Olivia mumbled around her toast.

Ian chuckled. "What a newb."

As Olivia made a face at him, Ian got up and took his plate to the sink. To

my amazement, he rinsed it, opened the dishwasher, slid the plate in, and closed it back.

Wow. Even Drew would only set his dishes in the sink, and he was about as perfect as a man could get. Go, Ian. He was going to make some lady very happy one day.

At least in the kitchen, which was about all I could speak to.

"Can you open a portal we can drive a car through?" Ian asked.

With a shrug, Olivia nodded. "I can."

"Great. That way, we have a way to get around in New Jersey." Drew nodded at Ian. "Good thinking."

Ian looked at Drew for a half tick, then narrowed his eyes. "Are you being sarcastic?"

"No," Drew protested. "I'm serious. That was a good idea. Plus, if we can't get ahold of Olivia later, we could drive ourselves home."

"I'll go ahead to Jersey and find a good spot for the portal," Olivia said. "Where are we going?"

"Asbury Park." Drew consulted his email, then gave her a more specific area of the town.

"Meet me in your driveway in ten." She opened a portal, stepped through, then the portal closed.

"What should we take to something like this?" I asked. "It's not like I keep a supply of Jersey Devil killing potion."

Drew chuckled. "I doubt there's such a thing as a Jersey Devil killing potion. We'll have to rely on our skills and wits for this one."

Ian nodded in agreement. "I'll grab my crossbow and some iron bolts."

I raised an eyebrow. "Iron bolts?"

He shrugged. "Iron seems to bother a lot of magical creatures."

Okay, then.

We traipsed out to the driveway and got in Drew's SUV. He turned it around, and a few minutes later, a gigantic portal opened. Drew pulled forward, then rolled his window down. Olivia climbed in the backseat with me. "I could go to the school later. Fighting a Jersey Devil sounds too fun to pass up, so I'm coming with you."

"Okay, cool." My phone pinged in my pocket. It was Wallie sending me a picture of a cute baby outfit they'd bought.

I showed the picture to Olivia, who sighed. "I love shopping for babies."

Then I showed it to Drew and Ian, but they didn't get nearly as mushy as

Olivia and I did.

Men!

I texted back with a heart emoji, then pocketed my phone.

The portal spat us out into a parking lot behind an abandoned building. Drew drove around to the front of the building, and I spotted Lily leaning against a light pole. Drew parked the SUV next to the pole, and we got out.

"Hey, guys," she said with a big smile before giving each of us a hug, saving Ian for last. When he made a face at her, she punched him in the arm. "I just saw you a few months ago."

"Ready to do this?" Drew asked.

We all nodded and followed his lead as he opened the door of the building and stepped inside. The darkness was broken by a few small lights along the walls, creating an eerie atmosphere just perfect for our mission. We crept in quietly, alert to any danger that might be lurking ahead of us.

Chanting echoed down the hall that I recognized as a summoning spell. "We need to stop that spell," I said picking, up my pace.

The closer we got, the louder and more intense the chanting became. Magic rippled through the air, nipping at my awareness.

We reached a large metal door at the end of the hallway, and Drew motioned for us all to wait while he tried to open it. After a few minutes of struggling with the door, he finally managed to pry it open just enough for us to slip through.

We stepped inside to be met by a strange sight: a group of cloaked figures standing in a circle around a large pentagram drawn on the floor, their voices rising in unison as they chanted. This wasn't generally how these things were done, but they seemed to be making good progress.

"Stop!" I yelled, but it was too late. In the center of the witches' circle, a Jersey Devil appeared. I mean, I was pretty sure that was what a Jersey Devil was supposed to look like. It was a large deer-like creature with bat-like wings and stood upright. If that was a Jersey Devil, then we had one bonafide JD here in our midst.

The witches whirled around to face us, their hands shaped into claws with magic flowing from their fingertips.

Not good.

I stepped forward and raised my arms, summoning a strong gust of wind that pushed the witches and the devil back several feet. The witches scrambled to their feet as I continued to hold the Jersey Devil at bay with my

magic. Oh, wait. I had access to insane amounts of power now. Pulling a little from Drew, I wrapped magic around the lot of them, freezing the witches and the devil in place. Ha. Take that bi...witches. “They can’t move. Go kill the devil.”

As Lily and Ian strode forward, Olivia and Drew stayed by my side. “Take all the power you need,” Drew said quietly.

“Thanks, but so far, so good.” I watched with a bit of revulsion as Ian lifted a machete that had appeared out of nowhere and slicked it down toward the devil’s long, hairy neck.

We all froze and stared in shock as the machete froze in midair and the devil transformed with a lot of pomp and circumstance—and glitter. Why glitter? —into a—

“Aunt Evie?” Olivia gaped at the gorgeous fae now standing between us and the coven of witches. “What are you doing here?”

Now that Olivia said the name, I remembered meeting Evie right after we freed Phira from the Inbetween.

Evie smiled brightly at her niece and walked over to pull her into a hug. “I’m just having a little fun with these witches. They are up to no good and needed to be taught a lesson.”

Olivia laughed. “Okay, then, but be careful, Auntie. You almost lost your head.” She nodded toward the witches. “We got it from here. The hunters will take care of these fools.”

Evie shrugged and waved bye before teleporting away.

“What in the world?” I asked. “Why was your aunt pretending to be the Jersey Devil?”

“The fae are a big source of the trickster mythology across the world.” Olivia grinned. “They like to play.” She squinted and pursed her lips. “Come to think of it, so is Luci.”

Now Luci, I would’ve understood. If the Jersey Devil had turned into the *real* devil, there would’ve been no surprise here.

“That makes you...” Ian pointed at Olivia.

With a wide, mischievous grin, Olivia said, “Trouble.”

Nailed it.

AVA

THE NEXT EVENING, in the hours before Michelle's parents' visit, I bustled around the kitchen, making sure everything was perfect. Wallie helped too, but Alfred was the one really running the show, to nobody's surprise.

Why was I so nervous? We'd agreed to have a nice dinner at our house with everyone together. This way, both families could get to know each other better.

"They're coming at six?" I asked Wallie.

He stopped wiping down the cabinets and stared at me. "For the fourteenth time, yes. Why are you freaking out?"

"Hopefully, you'll only do this once." I pointed at him. "Which means we're going to eat with these people for the foreseeable future, hopefully for a good eighty years."

He opened his mouth, no doubt to tell me I'd probably be dead before eighty years went by, but the doorbell rang.

I checked my phone. "It's five forty-five. They're early." He turned toward the door, but I held up one hand. "No, I want to answer it."

Oh, sweet ghosts, I still had an apron on. Without a second thought, I tried untying the knot behind my back. Oh, my geez. It wouldn't budge. I tugged and tugged, then gave up and grabbed the strings on the knot around my neck. To my dismay, the apron caught in my hair. As I tugged, somehow, miraculously, the lower knot unraveled.

How? I don't freaking know. That thing had been glued three seconds ago.

The strings hit the ground, and as I struggled with the knot and my hair, I tripped on the dangling cloth. Laughter bubbled up my throat as I stumbled

into the kitchen table.

"Hello?"

A woman's voice made me freeze in place. Winston had opened the front door to let our guests in.

My hair was a rat's nest in the back, with my apron still tangled in it. Alfred and Drew stood near the stove, staring at me in complete shock. This wasn't like me, the clumsiness and falling over. Wallie, on the other side of the table, looked at me like he was trying to figure out a way to disown me. He was a little too old to emancipate. He was stuck with me.

Michelle rushed forward. "Are you okay?"

She was such a sweet girl. I straightened, waved my hand, and made it all better. My apron disappeared—I'd actually transported it into a volcano in Hawaii. That apron would pay for tangling me up like this. It was already lava fodder.

With the same hand sweep, I fixed my hair back to a perfect coif.

Oh, yeah. It was good having my powers back. "Come in, please." Striding forward, I held out my hands.

Michelle's mom put her hands in mine and beamed at me. "I was so happy when Michelle told me you'd invited us over."

"We're delighted to have you here." I didn't even care if that sounded fake. We were having dinner together and having a baby together. Well, not us. Our kids were having the baby. Anyway, I was delighted to have them here. "Please, come in."

"Official introductions," Michelle said. "Mom, this is Wallie's mom, Ava." I shook her hand again as Michelle said, "This is my mom, Kathy."

"So happy," Kathy and I said at the same time, then dissolved into giggles.

"Dad, this is Drew." Drew stepped forward to shake hands. "Drew, this is my dad, Mark."

"Nice to meet you." They shook hands and nodded. It was going to be okay. I could already tell. Drew's feelings in the bond told me his hunter senses were happy, thank goodness.

Michelle pointed at me. "Dad, Ava. Ava, Mark. Drew, Kathy. Kathy Drew."

"I'm Wallie," my dorky son said. It might've been super corny, but it worked. Everyone laughed.

We headed into the living room. "I'm going to apologize in advance, but

our entire extended family is coming tonight. It might get overwhelming, but I wanted you to get a full picture of our insane life, so you'd know exactly what Michelle's getting into."

Kathy laughed. "She warned us already. I'm looking forward to placing the people with the names and stories."

"Well, here they come." I grinned at my dear aunt Winnie as she came down the stairs. Alfred met her in the hallway, and they came into the living room.

Oh, Winnie. She'd dressed so well for the evening. Her long, blonde hair was pulled into a bun, and her beautiful blue eyes flashed. The best part was that her dress wasn't revealing at all. It was still sexy, clinging in a way that made her movements sensual, but it lacked the distinctly trashy vibe she'd been putting off for the last several months.

Something about Alfred's sleep had mellowed her. Like a reality check. If nothing else good came from it, at least we had that.

"Oh, I know this one," Kathy said happily. "Alfred and Winnie?"

They beamed and shook hands with Kathy and Mark.

Larry and Zoey came in behind them. Zoey's ears twitched on top of her head. Ah, these two would be easy for her to guess, especially since Larry's head wobbled when they stepped forward. "Larry and Zoey," Kathy said warmly. "You two we've met, of course."

"Aha, you get a pass on that one," I teased.

Alfred disappeared and returned a few moments later with a tray with a teapot and cups. I stepped forward to serve, but the sweet man waved me off.

"It's my pleasure," he said with a wink.

Over the next half hour, Kathy and Mark met Mom and Dad, Olivia and Sam, along with Sammie, who almost instantly ran upstairs to find Snoozer and Ian. I'd told them that Wade wouldn't be up until after dark.

Oh, no. I forgot to do something to distract Lucy. I'd meant to get her a movie started so she'd ignore everything downstairs.

Thinking of that little devil...The white cat herself sauntered down the stairs. "Was nobody going to tell me we had company?"

I glared at her, trying to mentally threaten her life if she said a cuss word.

She jumped onto the coffee table, then delicately stepped over into Michelle's lap, rubbed her head against Michelle's belly, and sat, staring at Kathy and Mark.

"Hello, Lucy," Kathy said. "Michelle has told us so much about you."

Michelle looked at me and winked. "I warned them," she said wryly. Lucy sniffed, looked at Michelle's parents, then said, "I'm sure she did." Michelle laughed. Oh, thank goodness the cat was on her best behavior. Wallie reached over and touched the top of Lucy's head, clearly intending to pet her.

"Hey," she screamed. "Don't touch me!"

Wallie jerked back as Lucy jumped back to the coffee table. She turned and glared at him. "You son of a—"

"Lucy!" Olivia, Drew, Sam, Michelle, and I yelled at once.

She froze, then turned her narrowed eyes on us. "I'm going upstairs. Send my dinner." With that command, the hot-tempered feline jumped off of the coffee table and stalked out of the room, across the foyer, and up the stairs.

"So," Kathy said. "That was Lucy?"

Laughter spread through the group at the insane cat's antics.

"Ava, guess what we found out?" Olivia asked.

I raised my eyebrows. "What?"

Leaning forward, Sam continued, "I went to my parents' house yesterday and went through their old family records and pictures. My mom went through a whole ancestry thing a few years back, so there was a lot of good information."

I sensed some big revelation coming. "And?"

"And we have a psychic in the family." Sam smiled bigly. "She's like seven generations back, but it explains my and Sammie's newfound abilities."

Leaning over, I pushed at his shoulder. "That's awesome. Has anything else happened since the chasm thing?"

He shook his head. "No, but I'm going to try to find some psychics through the school to help Sammie and me navigate this whole thing."

"Dinner is ready," Alfred said from the doorway. We stood and shuffled to the kitchen. So many of us were here at once it seemed to take an eternity to get everyone from one room to another. I wasn't quite sure how Alfred had managed it, but the kitchen table was extra-long with plenty of chairs to accommodate us all. He was powerful, that much I could feel resonating off of him, but he didn't have the sort of powers to expand a kitchen table.

"It seems we have perfect timing," Luci said as he and Phira walked from the conservatory doorway.

"As always," I muttered, and sat between Drew and Olivia.

Luci sent me a wink and led Phira to their seats directly in front of Olivia,

which I realized was also in front of me.

We ate and laughed and told stories about the kids because there's a rule that moms have to embarrass their kids on a regular basis to keep them on their toes. It's not my rule. It's in the mom book they give all new mothers in the hospital.

I don't make the rules.

Just before Alfred brought out dessert, Wallie stood and cleared his throat. I watched my son while holding my breath. He was nervous, and I had a sneaking suspicion why. Holding in my squeal was too hard.

He pulled a small black box out of his pants pocket, and Michelle sucked in a breath as Wallie turned to her and dropped to one knee. I clutched Drew's hand in joy.

"Michelle, I've loved you from the moment I saw you in the administrative office. I'd planned to do this sooner, but we found out about the baby, and things have been crazy at school and here." He paused and glanced at me. I mouthed, "Just ask her."

Wallie took her hand and slid the ring onto her finger. "Will you marry me?"

Michelle threw her arms around Wallie. "Yes, yes, yes!"

It was the perfect ending to a wonderful evening.

OLIVIA

"WHAT A DAY." I looked at John and Beth and sighed. "How many more interviews?"

After consulting the list on my desk, Beth said, "Three."

"We can do this." I picked up the folder with the teachers' resumes. It turned out there was a surprisingly large number of people in the supernatural community who were either qualified to teach or interested in teaching.

There were *not*, however, a large number of people in the supernatural community who were *both* qualified to and interested in teaching. Today had proven that.

Some of our teachers came quickly and easily. Our friend Carrie would be one of the teachers for the youngest of our children. The godmothers would provide all of their own teachers and had graciously offered up their course list for anyone who was interested to join them for any classes. That was nice, though I had made them promise to send me detailed information about all of their teachers.

They'd be in a school with our children, after all. I had to vet them.

I opened Jeanne's folder and glanced over her resume. Psychic Studies? I'd never heard of that before. Still, her credentials looked impressive. After getting what I could from her resume, I opened the door. "Jeanne Maclay?"

"Welcome, come in." I offered her a chair and motioned for John and Beth to sit down as well. We'd have to make this quick. I was stinking exhausted.

Jeanne looked nervous, but she exuded an aura of confidence.

"First of all, can you tell us about yourself?" I smiled as encouragingly as I could.

Jeanne took a deep breath, obviously gathering her thoughts. "Well," she began, "I've been studying psychic abilities for the past twenty years, traveling around the world to learn from some of the best teachers in the field. I've held seminars, taught classes, and even written a few books. Mostly humans think it's hogwash, but everything in my books is completely true."

"May I ask what your abilities are?" John asked.

"I am telepathic, though it is something I can turn off and on. I'd never use that power inappropriately." She chuckled. "I learned long ago that breeds heartache." The pain in her eyes told me there was a big story there, one I probably wasn't allowed to ask in a job interview. "I'm also telekinetic. I can move small objects with my mind. That one is harder to master. If I'm upset or shocked, sometimes they fly without warning. From what I understand, that's very common among people with this power."

Beth leaned forward. "We'd love a demonstration if it's not too much trouble." Her kind eyes twinkled.

Jeanne smiled and held up her hands. The paperweight on my desk slowly rose, hovering in the air for a few seconds before gently settling back down.

I glanced at John and Beth and they both nodded in approval. We went through the standard questions, and she answered them perfectly. After half an hour or so of chatting, I said, "Welcome to the team, Ms. Maclay," I said. "Provided all the paperwork goes smoothly and the background check, we'll be in touch."

Jeanne grinned and shook my hand before saying her goodbyes. As she left, I felt a wave of relief wash over me. We'd found our psychic studies teacher.

It had been a long day. "Two to go," I said with false cheeriness. "Who is next?"

John held up another folder. "John Eaton. He applied for Elemental Studies. This says he's best with fire but has limited abilities with all elements."

"Oh," Beth said. "That's pretty rare."

"Does he have any teaching history?" I picked up the file to glance through. "He's currently a science teacher in Vermont. Nice." Opening the door, I stuck my head out and looked at the last two people. Presumably John and our last interview. "John?"

He came in and got settled, and I began the same questions. John had a calm, gentle air about him that was different from Jeanne but no less

impressive. He told us all about his studies and experiments, showing off a few of the items he had created with fire. After asking him to demonstrate his powers on one of the plants in the corner, it was quite clear that he was a whizz of elemental studies.

"What makes you want to leave your school in Vermont?" I asked, then glanced at his file again. "It says you've been there twenty-three years."

He sighed. "As you know, witches live longer than humans, generally. I'm seventy-seven years old, and to you that's not such a big deal. My coworkers and bosses, though, know my age, and while they think I look amazing for my age—" He did look sixty at best "—they've been pressuring me to retire. I think they're afraid I'll drop dead in front of the kids."

John snorted, then covered it with a cough. "Sorry," he muttered.

"Welcome aboard," I said after we finished, then gave the paperwork spiel again. "We'll be happy to have you here for another twenty-three years, should you choose not to retire."

John beamed on his way out.

I didn't even pull the last file, just stuck my head out the door. "Come on in."

As I sat, I glanced at her name. "Catrin Lawson, tell us about yourself."

"Well, I'm a shifter," she said. "I don't have any powers I can teach, but besides the core studies, I can teach a shifting class."

As she told us about her time as a homeschooling mom and teacher amongst her pack, I looked at her credentials. No official teaching license, but she'd seen over a dozen children through to college. "I like what I see," I said. "We have workarounds here, so the lack of license won't be a problem, though we've been doing trial runs for any unlicensed teachers."

Catrin nodded eagerly. "I'd be totally fine with that."

After twenty more minutes of chatting, I looked at John and Beth. They both nodded in approval, so I smiled and said, "Welcome to the team, Miss Lawson. I think you'll fit right in."

Catrin beamed as she shook my hand and thanked me before she left.

As the door closed behind her, I let out a sigh of relief. We had our teachers, and now it was time to make this school a reality.

AVA

"LUCI?" I stepped into the kitchen and looked at the world's most confident man—demon? demigod? —in concern. "Are you okay?"

Drew closed the front door behind us and put the keys in the bowl beside the door. We'd been in town having dinner alone. Date night.

"What are you doing here?" Drew asked. "Not that you aren't welcome, but..." He trailed off as Luci looked up at us. "What is it?"

"I don't know what to do." Luci shrugged and looked down at his hands. "I can't get into Hell. I don't know what's going on in there. I can sense all the souls, of course, but not what they're doing, whether they're happy."

Drew and I exchanged a glance. "You want them to be...happy?" I asked.

The devil looked at me, clearly horrified. "I didn't say that. What if they *are* happy though? That would be a travesty." He scoffed. "I can't believe this is happening."

"We're here for you," Drew said, patting a hand somewhat awkwardly on Luci's shoulder. "What do you need us to do?" It was a nice gesture on Drew's part, and Luci rose to the occasion.

Not literally. He reached back and patted Drew's hand then pushed it away. "I'm the worst ruler of Hell ever."

"There have been more?" I asked. Not that it mattered in the current situation, but I was curious.

He shook his head with his forehead on the table. "No, but I'm still the worst."

"With that logic, you're also the best." As he moaned, I pulled out my phone and opened the group chat that had pretty much everyone local and supernatural on it, including Melody, the coven leader. **Luci's at my house.**

I've never seen him so low. Everyone should come. We need to put our heads together and figure this out.

"I can hear you typing," Luci muttered as the text pinged on Drew's phone. "Was that about me?"

"Yes," I said and moved to the stove to boil water for tea. "I'm calling in reinforcements. You sit tight. Everyone will be here soon."

Thankfully, it was a Friday evening, so most of them should be off work. I hoped I didn't interrupt any important plans, but this trumped all other plans. Luci needed all the help he could get. I'd grown rather fond of the infuriating man over the last several months.

The tea kettle whistled, and I made a pot of calming chamomile tea, just what Luci needed now. I even added a little magic to Luci's cup to give him calm and clarity. We needed him focused to help solve this problem.

He was still despairing when people started to arrive. The kitchen table was still huge from our dinner with Michelle's parents, so we all gathered around it as people trickled in. Alfred soon arrived and took over the hosting duties, to my relief and only a little guilt. Winnie sat at the head of the table in an only sort of skimpy outfit. Definitely still an improvement.

After a little while, I ended up having to expand the table again. I changed it to an enormous round table, and Ben and Brandon conjured extra chairs from their B&B storeroom as more people arrived.

In the end, I stood with Drew and looked at the gathered people.

It was abso-freaking-lutely insane how many people had turned up. "Can I ask, what made you all so willing to come out tonight?" It wasn't that I doubted their willingness to help, but this was *Luci* after all. I wouldn't have thought so many would help the man downstairs.

"We owe you one." Ben and Brandon smiled at Luci appreciatively. "What you did by getting our B&B on that travel show? That made all the difference to our business. We're booked months out and talking about expanding."

Melody nodded. "I still appreciate you showing up with that turkey on Thanksgiving."

Everyone looked at her with big questions written all over their faces. She shrugged and blushed a little. "I burned mine and my mother-in-law was there. It was the first time she'd relented and let me host Thanksgiving, so ruining dinner would've been..."

"Awful," I finished for her.

"Yes." She nodded toward Luci, who still looked dejected, even with Phira's arms around him and her head on his shoulder.

A young fae woman I hadn't met before had come with Phira. "The fae are in your debt. You found my lost child in moments. If you need warriors, they will come, and I am here to offer any magical aid I can." She bowed her head slowly and respectfully.

Wow. I had no idea Luci had helped so many people.

Zoey smiled shyly. "Luci helped me start researching my family. I was orphaned very young, and I don't know any relatives. Plus, it's not like I can do a DNA test like humans can." Her ears twitched as she spoke.

Holy crow, I hadn't realized that either. I had asked the ferret shifter couple, Dana and Rick to ask around the shifter communities, but no one was able to find anything about Zoey's parents or family.

Snoozer yowled loudly from the corner. Lucy-Fur, sitting beside him, sighed. "He says he never would've met me if Luci hadn't told him where to look in the forest." She rolled her eyes and huffed. "Thanks, I guess."

Wade had come up as soon as the sun went down. He cleared his throat. "Yeah, um, he helped me with some investments, and now things are setting up nicely."

Owen, who had appeared from the conservatory with Lily, nodded his dark head. "He got me talking to the right people and even helped with a few contacts. Now the hunters hold me in higher esteem, and I've been getting better jobs, which usually pay well."

I couldn't believe it. All these people had come out of the woodwork to help Luci. My heart warmed as I listened to them talk about how Luci had helped them.

He'd helped Jess get into a different college. I'd known that she'd changed but not that the dean owed Luci a favor, so he called it in.

"Pearl sends her support," Lily said. "She couldn't come herself, but the hunters are available if you need more of us."

Luci looked at her with his face unreadable. After a few minutes, he cracked one of his signature, winning smiles. "It sounds nice when you say it like that, but now you all owe me a favor."

Hank, the new manager at Sam and Wade's bar, snorted. "Yeah, and we're all paying you back right now. We like you but we're not stupid."

Leaning back, Luci looked at him appraisingly, then roared with laughter. "That you are not. None of you. Thank you for coming, but I don't see how

your being here will help me. You've all individually tried already."

We sat in silence around the big table, everyone looking in a different direction. I tapped my fingers rhythmically on the wood.

"What about a ghost?" John asked. "Have we tried to see if a ghost can get in?"

The group looked at my dad at the same time.

Luci's jaw dropped. "That is a *fantastic* idea."

"Does anyone know a ghost?" Olivia asked. "I guess we could try to get back to the Inbetween."

Phira shuddered. "Ew, no, please. Let's try to avoid that."

"We do." Dad smiled at me. "My grandfather. He's just hanging out at the family home."

"At the academy," Olivia said brightly. "That's genius."

"I can go get him," Dad offered.

"I'll go, too." Alfred stood. "I've been listening to you guys talk about getting it ready while I was asleep. I'd love to see it. Plus, I used to have the ability to command ghosts, which is rare amongst necromancers. I haven't had an opportunity to test it out since I woke."

Dad smiled. "It's my ancestral home, but it's your, uh, descended home."

Descended home didn't quite sound like a real phrase, but we all knew what he meant.

"While you're there, I'll head over to the hunter headquarters and look through our artifact room. Maybe we have something there that could help that we've overlooked," Ian said.

Luci sighed. "Thanks, everyone. Even if none of this works, it means a lot that you're willing to try."

Was that a tear I saw in his eye?

He blinked and it disappeared. Must've been a trick of the light. The great Lucifer couldn't possibly be choked up by friendship, right?

OLIVIA

"LET'S NOT WASTE ANY TIME," I said and stood. "Ian, I can take you to North Carolina."

He nodded eagerly. "Thanks, I didn't bring one of the portal stones with me."

Phira and I had figured out how to enchant crystals to allow people to portal to a set location. We hadn't really had time to keep messing with it so a stone could allow the user to portal anywhere. Right now, they had limited uses before they needed a refresh. We'd gone to North Carolina to enchant a big bowlful of stones for the hunters, all of them leading back to the Boone headquarters.

"Anybody else want to go?" I offered.

Ava, John, and Alfred were going to head to the school to see if their great-grandfather could go try to get through Hell's gates while Ian and I went to the hunter compound.

"Sure," Lily said. "I'll go. I can help go through the artifacts a little faster."

Ava held up one hand. "Everyone else, meet back here in two hours. You're welcome to stay while we're gone, or you can go and come back."

With a slight bow, Luci cleared his throat. "I appreciate you all very much." Instead of one of his normal jokes, he sat back down. Phira put her arms around him again.

"Ready?" I nodded to Ian and Lily. "Let's hurry, there's no telling how long it'll take to find whatever this artifact is."

We stepped into the conservatory, and I whipped up a quick portal. "Don't try to go inside the compound," Lily said. "It's spelled so you can't."

"Noted." I'd been there once before, so it was pretty easy to open one up right at the gates. We stepped through and I looked up at the tall metal gates. My magic allowed me to see the huge ward covering the place. It was pretty extreme. "Don't I need some sort of charm thingy to repress my power?"

Lily shook her head as she placed her hand on a metal square on the gate. "Nope. That was before. Now, witches and shifters and fae and anyone else is welcome here. We even have a necromancer living here." The gate swung open, and we stepped through. Power hummed in the air, a strange mix of hunter magic, protective spells, and something older.

"Hello," Pearl called as she stepped off of the front porch of the closest building. The place had several within the gates. "Welcome."

"Did you tell her we were coming?" I asked softly.

"No," Ian and Lily said in unison.

"How'd she know?" I glanced at them, but they kept their gaze on their grandmother.

"We've been asking ourselves that question for years," Lily said while barely moving her lips.

Ian glanced at me briefly, then said, "She's creepy. We know better than anybody."

Pearl moved into earshot then, and both of them smiled broadly.

"Hello," Ian said.

Lily echoed his words, then said, "Lovely to see you."

"Please, come. You're here for the artifact room?" Pearl air kissed their cheeks, then turned to me. "Olivia, lovely to see you again."

"You as well." Ugh, so awkward and formal. How did Pearl's family do it, especially those who lived here at the compound?

"Ian," Pearl said commandingly.

Seamlessly, Ian and Lily switched places. "Yes?" he responded.

"There's a necromancer we need to keep our eyes on. I fear he's going to become a problem."

Ian nodded as we stepped onto the porch. "Okay, that happens. Why don't you have Owen take the case?"

She hummed low in her throat. "Owen is busy with other matters. I would like you, your brother, and Ava to handle it."

Ian sighed. "We'll see. I can talk to Drew and Ava about it, I suppose."

Pearl's face softened. Well, it didn't look quite so icy, at least. A teensy bit less hoity, though still plenty toity. "That would be nice."

Ian walked a bit faster, leading us down a hallway. We'd only been in the building thirty seconds, and I was already lost. Pearl turned her frosty gaze on me. Oh, crap. "Olivia. Tell me how you're getting on with your newfound fae family?"

Who had told her about that? Ava and Drew wouldn't have. I shot Lily and Ian quick glares. It had to have been one of them. "It's been an adjustment," I said carefully. I didn't want to give too much away. "It's a good one, though. They've been very welcoming."

Pearl's brows creased. "Nice of them. I understand they've been helping you with your training?"

I cleared my throat to reply, but she kept going.

"We don't know much about the fae. Secretive people, aren't they?" Her tone was light but had an edge to it. She had a very specific reason for asking.

"Yes, they—"

"And you, as their kinswoman, are uniquely poised to help the hunters establish a relationship with them."

Crap! "Well, I don't know all that much about them. I learn more every time I go to Faery."

Pearl stopped short in the middle of a dim, somewhat dusty hallway. "You've been to Faery?"

Lily and Ian, still ahead of us, stopped a few feet away when they realized we weren't following.

"Yeah," I drawled. "I kind of have to."

Pearl stepped forward, just barely getting into my personal bubble. "Why?"

Oof. "Because I'm one of the heirs to the throne," I whispered. Why was I telling this woman my life story? I was a strong confident princess. Nobody intimidated me.

Except, apparently, Pearl Walker. "You're a fae princess?" Oh, geez. Her voice had gone all low.

"I'm kind of a double princess." I looked at Lily for help, but she just widened her eyes and shook her head. Some friend. "I'm Lucifer's only daughter, so I'm the Princess of Hell, technically."

Pearl's face shut down like someone had flipped her switch. All emotion left.

Gone.

This probably wasn't a good thing...

"Come," she said briskly. "Let's see if we have any artifacts connected to Hell."



AVA

Luci opened a portal for us to step through into the closet at the castle. "I'll get one set up for you here," he offered. "While you're gone."

"Thanks." I gave him a little finger wave and stepped out into the beautiful castle hallway.

Silently moving down the hall, I looked at Dad. "How do you know where to find Grandpa Lynn?" I'd taken to calling him that, even though the ghost was my great-grandfather. It was still neat to have access to a family member who remembered that far back.

"He likes to hang out in the big library," Dad said.

Alfred's facial expression caught my gaze. He walked beside and a little behind me with an astonished expression. "This place is great," he said all high-pitched when he caught me watching him. "I would've loved living here."

"You could," I said. "Not that I'd ever want you to move out of Winston, but this is your family home as well. Plus, you and Winnie could always help with the school."

I was pretty sure this school was going to end up being all hands on deck. I already saw the potential for dozens of different magical studies.

"I don't know," Alfred said. He waved his hands in front of him like he was shrugging off the idea.

We turned a corner and came face to face with a huge library door. It looked like it belonged in an ancient castle, but the inside was quite modern with all sorts of magical artifacts. Grandpa Lynn stood behind a desk and waved when we pushed the door open. "Hello, come in!" he said.

We stepped in and Dad walked forward first, followed by Alfred and me.

"Grandpa, this is Alfred. Alfred, meet Lynn Howe."

Alfred shook Grandpa Lynn's hand. I wasn't totally sure if Lynn being touchable was due to our necromancer powers or him just being a particularly strong ghost. Probably both.

"Gramps, Alfred is our ancestor," Dad said.

Grandpa Lynn gave Dad a confused look. "So, he's a ghost, too?"

"No," Alfred said. "I was animated as a ghoulish for many years, but then I fell into this chasm of power and now I have my original body back."

"The best we can tell, he's fully human and a necromancer again," I explained.

Lynn stepped back and looked at Alfred in amazement. "How far back of an ancestor?"

"That's a long story, and we don't have a ton of time," I said. "Alfred's been wanting to come to meet you, though."

Grandpa arched an eyebrow at me. "Give me the condensed version."

"Ah, okay, um..." Alfred clasped his hands together. "I was a Viking necromancer. Came to America and went very dark. Died in a cave. Last century a local necromancer to Shipton Harbor found me and animated me. My body hadn't decayed, I'd sort of mummified. Ava ended up with custody of me as a necromancer, and now here I am."

With an uproarious laugh, Grandpa Lynn clapped Alfred on the back. "I am definitely going to want to hear the full version of that story."

"Gramps, we're here because someone has locked Lucifer out of Hell. He was wondering if you'd be willing to see if you can get through the gates as a ghost."

"Ha!" Grandpa clutched his stomach and chortled. "That old cuss is still running around causing trouble?"

"You know Lucifer?" I asked.

"Oh, yes. He's quite the social butterfly. I suppose I might owe him a favor. He helped me out with a tight financial pinch I was in many, many moons ago. I'd be happy to come, but I'm afraid I'm attached to this old castle. I can't leave it."

"Part of my powers when I was alive before was the ability to command ghosts."

I looked at Alfred in surprise. "You've never mentioned that."

He shrugged. "I couldn't do anything as a ghoul, and since I've been alive there haven't been any ghosts around to command."

"Do you think you can help me leave the castle?" Lynn asked.

Alfred grinned. "I think I can. If you're willing to let me try."

"Hot dog, let's get to it." Lynn straightened up and walked around the desk. "I haven't left this place since before I died." He squinted at Alfred and lowered his voice. "If this works, I'm going to be asking for quite a few trips out and about in the world."

Alfred sighed. "Now you know why I don't tell many people. All the ghosts in the world and probably in the Inbetween would be coming to me for

help."

"It's too much for one person. I wonder if this is something you could teach me?" I grinned at him. "Cause I could always use another power."

He snorted. "We can certainly try."

Five minutes later, he'd done something to Grandpa Lynn that made it so Lynn could leave with us. I hadn't been able to see what it was, but Alfred had walked around the middle of the library with his eyes closed. "Basically, I'm looking for the connection," he'd whispered when I'd asked.

Sure. Of all the weird things that had happened in my life over the last year or so, this wasn't a scratch on the surface, so I rolled with it. Why not?

AVA

TWO HOURS LATER, everyone had gathered back at my place. The living room was full, the kitchen was full. Even the conservatory had a couple of people in it. I meandered around, talking with everyone like this was some sort of party rather than a solemn group of people going to attempt to break the devil into Hell.

I say "attempt" because, let's face it, the odds were stacked against us. Most everyone here had tried at least once. Tried and failed, and yet, here we are again. We liked to believe in second chances around here. Sometimes third and fourth.

Ian sat perched in a kitchen chair. He'd pulled it to the wall nearest the large arched doorway from the foyer. From my vantage point in the living room, I could see both Ian and Zoey, who was stalking down the stairs in her tiger form.

She loved doing that when we had guests. They either oohed and aahed or completely freaked out.

At the moment, nobody had noticed her. Coincidentally, everyone was turned away from the foyer at this exact moment

Everybody but me.

I kept my spot and hid a smile as Zoey looked around, clearly irritated that nobody had noticed her. She stepped forward into the kitchen, within inches of Ian.

With his hunter senses, I was really surprised he hadn't felt her behind him, but he was turned slightly to the left, with his head turned away from the doorway, talking to Alfred as the ghoul stirred something on the stove.

Zoey's tail twitched as she looked around. Still, everyone was engrossed

in their conversations and hadn't noticed her yet.

She huffed, which Ian must've heard, because he turned his head slightly, though not enough yet for his peripheral vision to pick up the tiger shifter.

I knew what was coming and plugged my ears. Zoey opened her gigantic mouth and roared.

Everyone in the kitchen and living room jumped, but Ian... oh, poor Ian.

Ian's ear was inches away from Zoey's big mouth. He squealed and jumped, falling off of his chair and conjuring a sword at the same time. As he bounced off of the kitchen tiles, the sword sliced his leg and his squeal turned into a scream of pain.

I rushed forward, completely unable to control my laughter. Ian was hurt, and I shouldn't have been doubled over as I hobbled over to him to heal his leg.

It made everything worse when Zoey fell over in laughter too, except she was still in tiger form. She collapsed on her side in between the foyer and kitchen and chuff-roar-huffed as she wiggled her paws and rolled around on her back.

That was all I could take. I collapsed to the side and clutched my ribs with one arm, and with the other reached over to grab Ian's leg in an iron grip.

Laughter didn't prevent me from pushing healing magic into his leg. As soon as the blood stopped pouring, I rolled onto my back and looked up at the ceiling as I tried to catch my breath. Everyone else was laughing, too, and the sheer number of people in the room made the volume loud.

"That was *rude!*" Ian yelled and jumped to his feet. He looked at Zoey in consternation, then around the room at the people in various stages of trying to reign in their laughter. "Can we just go?"

Luci, who had laughed as hard as anyone else, stood. "Yes, let's go." He wiped tears from his eyes and gave Ian an apologetic look. "I'm sorry Ian, but that was too good." Luci waved his hand and the blood disappeared. Ian's pant leg fixed itself at the same time.

"Yeah, yeah." Ian crossed his arms and gave the perfect imitation of Sammie pouting.

As soon as everyone had gathered their wits, we stepped out onto the back porch. "Do we have everything?" I asked.

They'd come up with bupkis in North Carolina. The two artifacts they'd found relating to Hell had been a necklace that hid the wearer from

hellhounds and a weird, small stone tablet that nullified Luci's power.

That one might come in handy someday. I certainly wasn't going to forget it existed.

"I've got my potions," Melody said. "Maybe they'll work, who knows?" She'd mixed up some potions that would melt metal, cancel out a variety of spells, and one that worked like a small bomb.

Everyone else was pretty much relying on their powers. Drew, Ian, and Lily had various weapons at their disposal if we got inside, but otherwise, the plan was to batter the gates with power. Now that I had my full magic, I hoped I'd be able to make some kind of impact. I hadn't tried since Alfred woke. What was the point of being the most powerful witch in my family if I couldn't open a measly gate?

Luci opened a portal and we stepped into... nothingness. It was unnerving. Instead of a floor, white smoke curled around our feet. I had to trust that Luci knew where he was going and hope our footing wouldn't disappear as soon as we moved too far away from the portal.

I stepped to the side to wait for everyone to enter, but some commotion at the back of the group drew my attention. I returned to my backyard to find Alfred holding Winnie in his arms. She blinked sleepily.

"What happened?" I asked.

"She passed out." Mom put her hand on Winnie's forehead. "Not for long. Alfred caught her before she hit the ground."

"Take her inside." I put my hand on her arm and walked in with them. Luci closed the portal and the whole group went in with us. As we walked, I tried to use my healing magic to dive in and see what was wrong.

Whatever it was, I couldn't pinpoint it. Something wasn't right in her body, but it wasn't like a break or cut. Nothing so straightforward as when I'd healed Ian's slice on his leg.

"I haven't eaten today," she said as Alfred settled her on the couch. "That's probably all it is. Low blood sugar."

"I'll stay with her," Beth said. "You guys go ahead. Our power isn't significant enough to help, anyway."

"I'll stay, too." Alfred crouched beside Winnie and brushed her hair out of her face.

"No," I said. "Sorry, but you're incredibly powerful, and we might need you. Mom will take care of Winnie."

Alfie looked reluctant.

“Plus,” I continued. “Grandpa Lynn is tethered to you.” I nodded toward the real-looking ghost. “If you stay, he stays.”

With a sigh, Alfred nodded. “That’s true.”

“I could stay,” Wade offered. “I’m not sure why I was going in the first place. It's not like I have magic to open the gates. At best, I could provide some muscle to force them open?”

Hank, the new bartender, stepped forward. “Me, too. Would it help if we stayed with the ladies to be potential muscle if they needed it for something?”

Alfred still looked worried, but after a few seconds, he leaned forward and pressed a firm kiss to Winnie's forehead. "Eat and rest, and let these vampires wait on you hand and foot. If you still feel bad when we get back, we'll contact a healer."

That was no joke. Something wasn't right inside my aunt's new body. It was likely just a cold or something, but she'd be following up on it even if that meant I had to drag her to a human doctor. It wasn't like they'd find anything weird in her bloodwork. If witch abilities showed up in medical records, we'd have been outed a long time ago.

Everyone looked at Sam. He shrugged and pointed at Olivia with his thumb. “Where she goes, I go. Plus, I’m psychic now. That might help with something.”

Fair enough. I hadn’t really expected him to leave Olivia’s side. He wouldn't have even back when he was human. “Wallie, Michelle, Larry, and Zoey are upstairs,” I said. “Any of them could help if you needed them.”

Wallie and Michelle had popped in a few minutes after we got back from our errands and wished everyone luck, but Wallie wouldn't let Michelle go, a decision I wholeheartedly approved of. Michelle had, in turn, put her foot down. If she couldn’t go, neither could Wallie.

I supported that as well.

It took a few more minutes to get Alfred to leave Winnie, but after several kisses and promises to be back soon, we made it through the portal again and began to walk forward through the weird mist.

This whole thing was a gamble, but one we had to take if we wanted to help our friend and get Hell out of the grips of whoever had enough power to lock the devil out of his home.

The group of us looked more like a bunch of scared kids than the badass magic users we were. Luci walked confidently forward, but the rest of us sort of huddled and shuffled.

As we moved through the foggy smoke, the outline of what had to be the gates formed in the distance. It was definitely a sight to behold. I couldn't tell if it was metal or stone, but either way, the gates had been built by someone with power beyond what I could fathom: Luci. He seemed so... not weak exactly, but the man I knew and if not loved, was fond of, didn't seem capable of this. Yet here was the pudding proof that he had powers unrevealed.

If nothing else, he was a mystery.

We moved closer and my heart began to race. All of a sudden, this didn't seem like a good idea. If things got too hairy, Olivia or Luci could just teleport us away. We weren't in any real danger out here. Still, something inside me said this was going to go very wrong.

A few minutes later, we stopped in front of the freaking *massive* gates. Holy crow, they were ginormous. This close, the materials were more obvious, and it was a mix. Stone, metal, and even bits of wood had been melded together. It was amazing and totally terrifying.

It seemed impossible that we'd be able to get through this, but... in for a penny.

"Who wants to go first?" I asked. No one answered. I glanced over at Luci, and he gave me a look. "Are you volunteering? I've already tried six ways from Sunday."

I sighed, steeling myself with a deep breath before walking forward. My hands shook as they touched the gate. I expected alarms to go off or something, but nothing happened. I glanced back at my friends, who watched with wide eyes.

I pressed forward, trying to find some way of getting in. The gate didn't budge, no matter how hard I pushed or pulled, or blasted it. I ran my hands and my magic along the seams and grooves of the gate, searching for any kind of opening or latch that would let us in.

After another few seconds of failure, I stepped back and tapped into my necromancer side. Using all of the death magic at my disposal, I held my hands out and said, "Open," in my most commanding tone.

Nada.

Ghost-grandpa Lynn stepped forward. "I don't know what I can do other than try to go through."

Luci shrugged. "If you can get in, maybe you can find a way to open it from the inside or gather intel."

Lynn nodded and walk-floated toward the gates. He stopped short a couple of inches shy of the enormous structure. He tried and tried to push forward, but there was nothing he could do to get past the barrier.

After that, Owen, Dad, and I linked our magic and tried again. Didn't work.

They tried individually, then we *all* linked our magic together, everyone but Luci and Olivia. They'd tried many, many times already. I pulled on the group's power and for a second, the gates rumbled but then they stopped and no matter how I exhausted myself trying, they didn't budge.

Melody came forward with her potions, and the explosion one was particularly fun, but when the smoke cleared it was as though she'd never even tried.

Drew tried lending his boosting ability to everyone in turn.

What happened? Not a darn thing, that's what.

Sam, Ian, Drew, Lily, and Phira tried to physically move the gates. They were the strongest in the bunch, but it might as well have been Wallie trying.

The weaker witches in the coven came forward and individually attempted it since we had no idea what small thing could trigger a change.

Nothing triggered, nothing moved.

Finally, everyone but Olivia and Luci had given it their all. I looked at the devil and his daughter, exasperated. "You two give it a whirl or let me link up to you and pull on your magic. Maybe between me, you two, and Drew, it'll work."

Olivia stepped up and put one hand on the gate. "Open up, you absolute piece of sh—" She stopped talking because to my amazement, and by the sounds of the gasps of the people behind me, their amazement as well, the gates opened.

Luci stumbled forward and stared into the darkness behind the gates. "It looks normal," he whispered.

"What can you see?" I stood on my tiptoes and stared over his shoulder. As far as I could tell, it was pitch black beyond the gates.

Luci turned and looked at me. His face slowly morphed from shocked to devilishly pleased.

"Pure Hell."

AVA

"ARE WE ALL GOING IN?" I asked.

Luci shook his head. "Oh, no. I can't have this big of a group traipsing around in there. I don't know who has been let out of their cells or what sort of chaos they've managed. I don't even know who is responsible for this lock. I'd love some help, but too many would make things worse, not easier."

"Why did it work?" Olivia asked. "Why now? I've tried, how many times?"

Luci stared at her with the wheels turning behind his eyes. "At least a dozen. Probably more."

Olivia sighed, her shoulders slumping. "Then why this time?"

Luci shrugged and then gestured towards the door. "I've got to get in there. We can figure out why later."

With a glare at the gates, Olivia turned toward what still looked like pure inky blackness to me. "I'm going, too."

"And me." I stepped forward. "You might need me."

Drew put his hand on my shoulder, and his brother and sister stepped up and crossed their arms. The hunters would be joining us.

Where Olivia went, Sam went. There would be no arguing that.

Phira looped her arm through Luci's. "I'll come to help you, dear."

He pressed a kiss to her temple. "My queen."

Alfred stepped forward with Dad by his side. "I am very powerful, but I would like to go check on Winnie."

Luci held up one hand. "Go. If we need another necromancer, Olivia or I will come for you."

"Is the portal still open?" I asked. "Can they get home?"

"Yes. Go now, please. As soon as I step through these gates, that portal will close."

Dad pressed a kiss to the side of my head. "Be safe." He hurried after the crowd, which was already almost out of our view.

Luci waited a few more seconds with his head cocked, as though he were listening to them all leave. "Okay," he finally said. "They're gone."

With a determined look, he turned toward the still-open gates of Hell. "Let's do this."

Staying on their heels, Drew, Ian, Lily, and I followed Luci, Phira, Olivia, and Sam through the gates.

Stepping into the darkness felt icky, like walking through cobwebs. "What is this?" I asked, shuddering as the sensation passed.

"The powers of Hell," Luci answered gravely. "Let's be careful."

The group stayed close together. As quickly as the gross sensation had hit me, it was gone, and I could see properly.

We were in a courtyard. It wasn't as big as I might've imagined, but creatures meandered everywhere. "What in the *literal* hell?" I asked.

"I suppose you'd call them zombies," Luci said. "They're souls that have been trapped here." He paused. "Well, it's more than that. They've been here a very long time and are past the point that torture would do them any good. In a way, I've broken them, and they are no longer sentient. Not really."

"Were they evil?" Drew asked.

"Oh, yes. I don't torture those who do not deserve it, nor do I allow anyone else to do so." Luci shook his head. "I said something about all vampires ending up here, which is true, but those who lived a good life and tried to be good people don't have the worst afterlife." He chuckled. "At least, not when I'm in charge. I have no idea what's happening to them now, though it's a good sign that these souls are still roaming about, somewhat free to go where their mindless brains take them."

I shuddered as one came close, then reached out with my necromancer magic. "Stop."

It stopped. "Turn around." Slowly, the creature shuffled in a circle to face the opposite direction.

I blew out a breath. "Wow."

"You can command them, but you cannot animate them the way you could a ghoul." Luci smiled at them a little bit... was that fondness in his expression? Seriously, what a weirdo. "If you're ever here and need

protection, they can assist you, but any necromancer could use them. If you encounter one more powerful than yourself, watch out."

I arched an eyebrow at him. "Are there necromancers more powerful than me in here?" As far as I knew, I was the most powerful on Earth, save maybe for Alfred now that he had his human body and magic back. We hadn't yet put that to the test.

Luci tapped the side of his nose. "We'll see."

Why was I not comforted by that answer?

Luci strode toward a gigantic castle-like building. How had I not noticed that immediately? I looked around, trying to focus on everything in sight, but the buildings and beings were somehow slippery. If it wasn't within a few feet of me, I had a hard time keeping my gaze on it or really processing what I was looking at.

Before he put his foot on the bottom step, the big door at the front of the castle cracked open. My heart froze as I moved closer to the steps. Everyone stayed close, and we all stared, apprehensive about what we were about to face.

The giant door creaked open before us, revealing a dark path made of black stone. Out from the shadows came a figure cloaked in black robes, leaning on a wooden staff. She threw the hood back, revealing a pale face and bright blue eyes. Her wrinkled skin was somehow both saggy and pulled tight against her skull. It was an odd sight. Luci growled deep in his throat, then said her name. "Helga."

The name sounded familiar, but I'd definitely never seen this old crone before.

"This is who locked you out of Hell?" Olivia asked.

"I wouldn't have thought her powerful enough," Luci said softly.

The woman shuffled forward and pointed her staff at us with an evil smirk on her face. She muttered one word and as she spoke, the staff glowed a menacing red. "*Mori.*"

I threw up my hands and tried to blast her with power. I didn't have time to put any form to it, but enough raw magic would knock her on her butt.

My magic hit hers with a thunderclap, then, to my utter shock, we froze in place as she unleashed powerful bolts of energy. They shot through the air and threatened to tear apart our very souls if they touched us.

I fought as hard as I could, barely recognizing that Olivia, Phira, and Luci were doing the same beside me. Drew's power filled me, more than I'd ever

felt, yet still, it wasn't enough. I couldn't break us free of her immense power.

As we struggled, one of those bolts of magic hit its mark. Electricity—lightning—shot right into Lucifer's chest and he fell.

The loss of Luci's power meant we couldn't hold against this Helga, yet, she didn't try to harm us further. She let out the most stereotypical witch laugh I'd ever heard as she sprinted past us and out the gates. I would've tried to stop her, but Phira began to scream as Olivia staggered backward into Sam's arms.

"No," Phira howled. She dropped to her knees beside Luci with tears pouring down her cheeks.

When I looked at the devil's face, my stomach dropped to the ground. I echoed Phira's word in a whisper. "No."

Olivia blinked several times with her hand covering her heart. "Power," she said softly. "I'm full of power."

With a wave of her hand, the gates swung shut behind us with a mighty clang.

"Olivia?" I asked.

She clung to Sam and looked down at her biological mother and father. "He's dead," she said in a voice filled with despair, as though she'd lost all hope.

I ran forward and dropped to my knees to heal Luci, but when I touched him and delved to find the problem, I recoiled in horror. There was nothing there. Olivia was right.

The devil was dead, and there wasn't even enough left of him for me to animate.

"He's dead," Olivia repeated, "and I have the power of Hell."



IF YOU ENJOYED SEEING Hailey and Jax again, make sure you check out their series, Fanged After Forty.

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ABOUT LIA DAVIS

USA Today bestselling author Lia Davis spends most of her time writing racy romance and witty women's fiction, the majority of which takes place in fantasy worlds full of magic and mayhem. She prides herself on her ability to craft strong and sassy heroines, emotionally intelligent alpha heroes, and rich, expansive universes that readers want to visit again and again.

She is the mastermind behind the bestselling Ashwood Falls Series and the co-author of the beloved Witching After Forty Series.

She currently resides in Florida where she's working on her very own happily-ever-after with her supportive husband and spends her free time doting on a pack of feisty felines and her loving family.

Find all of Lia's online hangouts here: <https://solo.to/authorliadavis>

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