

LIZZY GAYLE



Bitten ^{by} Betrayal

A PARANORMAL ROMANCE
BITTEN BOOK 3

Bitten by Betrayal

A Paranormal Romance

Bitten

Book 3

Lizzy Gayle



Copyright © 2023 by Lizzy Gayle

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Contents

[Dedication](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Find Out More](#)

[About the Author](#)

Dedication

To Leslie

Without you I couldn't have done this, and by "this" I mean everything writing related. Thanks for being my buddy since our "macabre" encounter. And thanks for the suggestion for tango #2.

Chapter One

Tropical Troubles



The rush of ocean waves lulled me into a half-dazed state. I lay back, toes sunk into sand so fine it felt like flour. Blinking up at the puffy wisps of white against the baby blue of the sky, I fidgeted so hard the entire bamboo mat I relaxed on sank down, powdery sand slipping warm against my skin.

“Are you being attacked by an invisible assailant, or do I need to sedate you to make you stay for the whole afternoon?” Zo asked from my left.

I flipped over and glared at my sister, currently propped on her elbow and staring at me over the tops of her sunglasses. She looked like the quintessential beach babe, posed perfectly on her towel with her long tan legs, smooth curls, and white bikini. It made me fidget even more, eventually sitting up cross-legged with my mat sank halfway into what I was convinced might be quicksand.

Blowing a strand of hair from my face, I resisted the urge to tighten my ponytail with my sandy fingers and get even more of the stuff in there.

Zoe pursed her lips before setting down this month’s book club pick, *Bite Me, Bloodsucker*, to sit, facing me.

“I think maybe I just need to hibernate in my bedroom for the rest of the weekend,” I said. Standing, I attempted to brush sand off the butt of my emerald tankini, only succeeding in spreading the mess around.

“Sit.” Zoe, pointed to the ground. “Actually, wait.” She stood, shook out my mat, and replaced it again on the other side of her setup. “Now sit.”

I chewed the inside of my cheek as I squinted out at the horizon where the sea met the sparkling iridescence of the magic shield protecting the secret island we lived on, probably half a mile out and twice as high. If I refused to at least try for a couple of hours, my weird, witchy sister would probably just portal my ass right back to the beach.

“I feel like there are so many other things I should be doing right now.” I sat, hugging my knees to my chest and looking at the white-capped waves clawing at the shoreline. “Tanning doesn’t feel right when I need to be solving a murder and exonerating my friend.”

Zoe made a *Thppt* sound that made me look at her. “The vampire who was killed was a murderer, too, and an attempted rapist—probably a real one at some time in his past centuries on this earth. Whoever did it should get a medal—not jail time.”

Frowning, I bristled. I should never have told her and Mama about the threats Carmichael had leveled against me, or the attack when he’d attempted to forcibly turn me into a vampire. But Zoe needed to be more careful about protecting the secret of her portal powers.

My own abilities were out since I’d had to use both gifts of telekinesis and mind-bending, an excessively rare combination, to defend myself and others. Thanks to that, I was in for a fight on Monday when Dr. Orpheus at the base wanted to continue to “study” me.

“Either way, Lydia doesn’t deserve punishment.”

“She won’t even talk to you,” Zoe snapped back.

She wasn’t wrong, and it stung. Lydia had been my lab assistant, my wing woman, my friend. But ever since she’d been turned into a vamp, she hadn’t seemed to want to connect with me. I couldn’t blame her when I still blamed myself for her being taken during the fateful attack on my lab when my

formula was stolen and turned into a murder weapon against vampires.

“I have a lot on my mind either way.” I flopped back down on the mat and blew out a breath, trying to relax and failing miserably.

“Come on then.” Zoe’s face loomed over me. She reached out a hand to haul me up.

“I just got comfy,” I complained as she tugged me toward the ocean.

“We need to tire you out so you can relax. Go for a swim.”

We stopped where the warm water rushed over our feet, causing us to sink into the wet sand. At least it wasn’t cold. I supposed being in the Bermuda Triangle had its perks. Still...

“I don’t really feel like—”

A portal opened below me, and I fell through, suddenly submerged. Panic gripped me as I kicked upward, breaking the surface less than 100 feet from the protective dome of magic. Sputtering, I turned in place until I spotted Zoe, standing at the shoreline, hands on hips, probably an infuriatingly smug expression on her face.

Spitting saltwater, I dove and started making my way back toward shore. She was so going in.

About halfway there, I became distracted by the view underwater. Brightly colored coral wove below me, along with shiny fish and even a sea turtle off to the left. It was a whole beautiful world I hadn’t even known I’d been so close to all this time.

To be fair, I’d been busy since being recruited to join the Supernatural Handling Agency’s Department of Equity, aka SHADE. Between a complicated relationship with my infuriatingly stubborn and unnaturally hot vampire boss, Julian, and solving murders, I’d barely had a moment to explore the island. Even in the village, I’d only gotten as far as the pub, The Rusty Shifter. I wondered what other treasures I’d find if I could carve out the time to do so. At some point, the pressure had to let up, right?

Sucking in a breath, I stuck my head back beneath the water to enjoy the sights, but as the ocean floor angled up toward the shore, something caught my eye. I decided on a last second detour and dove, fighting my way down to scoop up the strange object.

When I broke the surface again, I was able to stand and wade back to where Zoe lay back on her towel, reading the spicy vampire romance she'd brought along.

I dropped my prize on my mat and towed off as I considered it in the sunlight. It was clearly a child's toy—an ABC block made of red plastic, which I suppose could have easily been lost if dragged along to the beach. But something about it had me unsettled. To most people, it was a feeling to shake off, but for me, a psychic, it might mean more. I'd ignored things like this before and regretted it.

"How was the swim?" Zoe asked.

I flipped my loose hair back as I stood and swung to see her, mischief sparkling in her eyes.

"I will retaliate," I announced. "When you least expect it."

Zoe folded the corner of the page she was on and stood. "I did it for your own good. Tell me you don't feel better."

"That's beside the point."

"What's that?" she asked, pointing over my shoulder at the toy.

"I don't know. I found it down there." I gestured toward the ocean. "There's something about it I need to figure out."

"Then take a look!" Zoe snatched it up and tossed it to me.

Catching it awkwardly, I fumbled for a moment then took a breath and closed my eyes, willing myself to connect.

I clutched the toy to my chest. It was all I could grab before they rushed us out in the middle of the night. My heart beat fast as the woman holding my hand dragged me toward the water. I was scared. So were my sisters, I could smell it on them. I didn't like the ocean. It was big and dark. I didn't know how to swim unless I was in my wolf form, and I couldn't

control that yet. Tears stung my eyes as I tried to pry my hand from her grip, but it was as strong as the metal walls that kept us in our room all the time, the door only opening when it was time to see the doctor. No one liked being poked, prodded, or hooked up to cold machines, so we didn't even want to see it open. But this was different. We'd never come so close to the ocean before and definitely not when it was this dark.

At least they didn't bring the babies.

I gasped as she tugged me right to the water, showing no signs of slowing down. My sister, Dee, screamed.

"Please stop!" I yelled. "I'm scared."

The woman paused, and hope swelled as she looked down at me with soft brown eyes.

"Don't be scared. You won't be hurt. You're too important. Just hold your breath for a moment."

I tried to understand what she meant, but before I could figure it out, I was under the water. My arms and legs moved automatically, trying to find something to hold on to, and my toy fell, floating down and away from me.

Snapping my eyes open, I sucked in a breath like I'd been underwater for too long. Zoe caught my arms, concern mirrored in her face as I regained my senses.

"Someone has children—babies—held captive." I searched her eyes, gripping her back too tight. "They took him in the ocean. It felt like he was drowning, but I don't think they killed them. It doesn't make sense."

Zoe helped me to the mat and sat with an arm around me as I turned the small plastic block in my hand as though it could reveal more information.

"Who's doing this?" she asked softly.

"I don't know. They're on this island, though, obviously. Otherwise, they came through a portal with children just to get in the ocean. I need to do something." I glanced up into my sister's hazel eyes—mirrors of my own concern.

“This is not all on you, Char. You should tell someone and let the proper people work on it. At least include them.”

“Right.” I nodded. I’d wanted a day off, away from even Julian just as a reset. But my mental health was about to take a backseat if it meant finding these missing kids.

I’m bringing this back to you, I promised, clutching the toy to my chest.

Chapter Two

Pleasurable Distractions



Julian’s deep indigo gaze had me more relaxed than an ocean full of coral and wildlife. Something about his presence, his cool touch, grounded me. It also sent shivers of anticipation into regions of my body that had no business being awake at that moment.

We sat at his dining table on ornate velvet chairs as mismatched as the rest of his *eclectic to the extreme* décor. Over his centuries of life, he’d collected and held on to his favorite pieces. “The ones with the memories,” he’d told me when I’d asked.

I should have been with you to help you deal with the emotional strain, Julian lamented in my mind, stroking the back of my hand. We’d discovered the new ability to speak silently with one another after I’d connected to him when he’d been caught, fluctuating between dimensions and time, hooked up to a fae torture device. The silent communication required touching, but that didn’t seem to be an issue for us.

“Stop being overprotective.” Rolling my eyes, I leaned back and took a sip of coffee to distance myself. It didn’t help because he’d made it absolutely perfect—just the way I liked it.

“Apologies,” he said easily, knocking his fist on the table before rising and beginning to pace. “Was there anything in the vision that would indicate when this happened?”

I blinked. “I hadn’t considered that.” If it had happened years ago, the child could be an adult now. Hell, this base had

been around long enough that he could've lived his whole natural life already. Except... "He was a shifter. A wolf," I recalled.

"The only shifter children I know of lately were the quadruplets you helped deliver from their mother's body." Julian stopped pacing and met my eyes, preternaturally still.

I swallowed. "But Sam said the general had them placed with adoptive families. Besides, they'd still be too young, even with shifter advanced aging."

"The boy in your vision mentioned the babies," Julian said gently, sitting back down and reaching for my hand.

I shook my head. "No. Sam wouldn't have lied. He's the shifter sect leader, and he wanted them to be safe. He was so protective when they were born. Besides, if he had, I would have felt it. These have to be different babies."

"Unless it wasn't Sam that was lying." Julian's pitying gaze was too much for me.

It was my turn to stand. "You're accusing the general of lying. That's a very big deal. And if he's uncomfortable with your status as a double agent, then why would he turn around and do something underhanded?" I leaned over Julian and brushed his stray curl off his forehead, inhaling his bergamot and cloves scent. "I know you don't trust him, but I have to believe he's doing everything for SHADE."

"Is that statement based on your abilities or are you afraid of opening a can of pixies?" Julian asked.

Damn vampire. "I don't know," I said honestly, snatching my mug to wash out in the sink and keep my hands busy. "Logic, I suppose."

Humming softly, Julian tapped on the glass tabletop again. "Let's try a different angle. Where would they be from?"

I turned off the faucet and set my mug on the counter before spinning to face him. "His memories were cloudy since he was frightened, but I did see what looked like a makeshift nursery, no windows, metallic sliding doors.

“Like the base?” Julian stood using superspeed, but I was so used to it now, it didn’t faze me as much as his question had. Because the smooth silver metal had been familiar.

“But there are windows everywhere on base,” I argued weakly.

“Not in the brig,” Julian stated.

My shoulders sank. “Damn it. Julian if this has been going on behind my back this whole time—”

“I’ve been here far longer.” He pulled me into his embrace, clutching my head to his sculpted chest.

You aren’t the psychic, I protested, still reveling in his nearness. When Julian held me, I felt complete. And that realization scared the crap out of me.

He pressed a kiss to the top of my hair in response, and I let myself sink into him. Our bodies melded together, and for the first time in a while, the quick mentions of fated mates surfaced from my memories. It was a concept that also frightened me because it felt so final—so all-consuming. Not to mention the question of choice. So many vampires had tried to take my choices from me as they had from my father when they turned him. I didn’t want to consider that Julian could even inadvertently be the same.

Most of my life had been spent researching vampire genetics while I tried to create a cure for vampirism. I knew now that my drive to do so was my attempt to fix my father’s absence from my life. He’d run away after being turned in front of my eyes. But while I understood the science, I knew little about the social, emotional, or intellectual norms of the species. I’d never gotten close enough to one to find out without being attacked.

Until Julian, that was.

Sliding my palms along the back of his crisp white shirt, I adjusted my stance so I stood between his legs. I couldn’t help but smile into his chest when he inhaled sharply against the top of my head and his generous excitement poked me through his pants. My body vibrated as a growl rose from inside of him

and his fingers traced down toward where my own burgundy shirt was tucked into my skirt.

“We should be searching for the hidden nursery or trying to clear Lydia so she can leave the brig,” I said, more to convince myself than Julian as I looked up at him.

“We can search tonight when the general should be gone since we don’t know whether he’s involved.”

“He’s always there,” I commented. I wondered if he slept or ever left the base even on weekend evenings.

“Not tonight. He has an off-island meeting with the board. And as for Lydia, I’m afraid there is little we can do until the vampire estate is re-opened. Even I am prohibited from the scene.” He rubbed my arms as I digested his gentle reminder that the vamps had taken the murder of their sect leader on their property so seriously they blocked any outsider contamination, even from SHADE, including the vampire who worked with the agency.

I’d argued that we had jurisdiction since we were technically the policing body, but the general and Julian had agreed—a rare occurrence—that causing further tension was a bad idea. And as the general had said, “We always respect each sect’s personal traditions so long as they don’t cause harm to another sect.”

Julian cupped my cheeks, searching my gaze. The way the pads of his thumbs lightly traced the curve of my face sent tremors of pleasure through me.

“I can...try to take your mind off it,” he offered then lowered his full lips to mine.

My mouth parted as he slid his tongue along the inside of my bottom lip. This was so much better than a swim in the ocean. Why had I wanted space from him again?

To clear my head, I supposed. But why clear it when I could erase everything with lust? Was this lust, though? Or something deeper that stirred in my belly like a handful of hummingbirds? And why the hell did I keep asking questions when Julian was exploring my mouth so thoroughly?

He gripped beneath the thighs and lifted me, and my skirt rode up to my hips as I wrapped my legs around him. My arms hooked over his shoulders. The sensations in my body drowned out my wandering mind as he walked us into the bedroom, kicking the door shut behind him even though no one else was in the house.

Julian was a drug I couldn't get enough of, and I was addicted.

"Charlotte," he whispered, trailing kisses down my throat to my cleavage as he unbuttoned each inch.

His voice alone stoked the fire burning in my core. It was all I could do to keep my grip on his shoulders as I arched up to meet his ministrations. I wanted him inside of me, completing me.

Sensing my urgency, he smiled, eyes glowing blue-purple and fangs elongated. And before I could fully gasp, our clothes were tossed on the ground. Julian stood above me, drinking in my naked body with so much want his eyes glazed over. His scrutiny made me squirm as he climbed above me. When I tried to reach for him, he captured my hands in his, shaking his head slowly.

"Julian," I complained, wanting to touch the smooth muscles of his chest and arms.

"You are a goddess, my love," he said, scooping my hands into one of his so he could swipe a thumb over my hardened nipple.

I don't want flattery. I want to be fucked, I said in my mind. I shot upward, nipping at his lip.

"One does not fuck a goddess," Julian admonished, pulling just out of reach and lightly pinching my nipple. *One worships.* He lowered his head to the other breast, covering it with his mouth, running his fang over the sensitive tip.

I wanted to complain again, but all I could manage was a moan of need as he worked his way down over my stomach, gripping my hips as he approached the area begging for

attention. My fingers threaded through the silken curls on his head as he teased around the spot that would satisfy me.

“That’s torture, not worship,” I managed to get out between heavy breaths.

He paused to look at me, holding my thighs firmly apart.

“I could order it,” I said, desperate to make him comply.

“Mind-bending won’t be necessary,” he said and dipped his face so that only his beautiful gaze was visible, locked on me as his mouth finally made contact with the bundle of nerves waiting for him.

My body jerked as he sucked on me. He slid his fingers up the flesh of my thighs until they stroked the lips of my entrance, then spread me open to give access to his velvet tongue. He tasted me with long, languid strokes that brought moans of pleasure, replacing my words and threats. Gods he was good. He’d had centuries of practice, and prior lives filled with learning how to pleasure me specifically.

His hands joined in the practiced dance of exploration as ecstasy coiled inside of me, building toward the promise of release. I tugged harder at his head, muscles tensing in anticipation, then he stopped, replaced by a cool breeze as he zoomed to the side of the bed to cup my cheek.

“Wha...what are you doing?” I managed to croak out.

In answer, he zoomed off again, and before I could react was back with one of his silk ties. His tongue darted out to wet his lips. In a heartbeat, he’d secured my wrists to the headboard of his bed, firmly yet comfortably.

“There’s no need—” I protested, but with another gust of air, he was tying a second tie around my mouth.

“If you are opposed, I will undo this,” he said, trailing a finger down my body and landing between my legs. “In past lives, you enjoyed it.”

He waited until I nodded, then smiled, fangs out and eyes burning like coals in a fire. The vision of him standing over

me, naked, deadly, and completely at attention made me throw my head back and groan.

Two fingers slid inside of me, curling and pumping as his mouth settled over the inside of my thigh. A sharp prick told me he was ready to feast. The jolt of pleasure melted through me as always. Every stroke, every pull of his mouth, and now every circle of his thumb, were magnified.

All I knew was Julian, and Julian was all I wanted as the coil in my stomach exploded, launching me into a climax that had me seeing stars and losing complete control of my body. He did not stop or ease me down. Instead, new eruptions of bliss ratcheted through me, one over another, until I thought I'd lose consciousness.

Only then did he lick the wound on my thigh closed and slow his motions to a stop, leaving me a quivering mess on the bed.

“Charlotte?” he asked carefully, sliding up to cup my face. The magma still hadn't found its way out and continued to glow behind his eyes.

Unable to talk, and not because of the tie in my mouth, I lifted my jelly legs and hooked them over his hips. His grin told me he understood, and he slid inside of me, face flushed with my blood.

How was it possible that my body was ready for more? I didn't question, just enjoyed the wonderful sensation of him filling me—stretching me with each thrust as he built toward his own climax. He readjusted, guiding my legs up over his shoulders so he could bury himself as far as possible, hitting the spot deep inside of me that made me moan with pleasure yet again. My sounds were what he needed to truly let go. With perfect rhythm, he slammed inside of me until I screamed out another muffled orgasm. Only then did his release come as well.

He slowed, watching me as aftershocks zapped my body. He removed the tie from my mouth and replaced it with his lips, swollen, soft, and passionate. Or kiss lingered as he undid my wrists and lay back, pulling me against him.

“Did I hurt you?” he asked, brushing the hair from my face.

I laughed. “Only in the best way possible.”

“I love you, Charlotte.”

I froze. He’d certainly been saying that a lot lately.

“It’s okay,” he said with a sad sort of smile. “I trust that, eventually, you will feel it as well. And until that time, I will enjoy loving you.”

Pushing back the tears that threatened to escape, I answered him with a kiss.

“Let me get you some orange juice and biscuits,” he offered.

“Not yet. Let’s stay like this for a while.” I curled into him, feeling safe and cared for.

Pulling the blankets up over us, Julian held me to him.

I hated waiting to work on my investigations. It wasn’t fair to Lydia or the child in my vision. But if I had to hold off, there was no place I’d rather be.

Chapter Three

A Wolf and a Vampire Walk onto a Base



“Do you think we should let Sam know about my vision?” I asked, pacing between Julian’s kitchen island and green floral sofa from the 70s.

My vampire glanced up from the stove where he currently worked on making us dinner and considered. “I would rather rule out his involvement first.”

I stopped at the island. It was difficult to be mad when he was wearing a white apron and holding a wooden spoon covered in pasta sauce.

“I know you trust him,” he said. “And I trust you, so if that’s what you would like to do, I will support it.”

“Better,” I said, taking a sip of red wine from the glass he’d poured me when he started.

“I’m learning,” he announced and offered me a taste of Alfredo.

The creaminess made me flutter my eyelids and moan. Julian’s fangs extended slightly as he watched me, and I sensed that I might end up tied to the bed again instead of eating if I wasn’t careful.

“Would you be upset if I invited Sam to dinner?” I asked, grabbing hold of his hand on the spoon.

“I would do anything for you,” he said, not really answering my question, then added, “I better make more chicken.”

* * *

The last thing I expected upon opening the door was for Sam's hulking frame to be shifting nervously from foot to foot. Despite the casualness of his jeans and tight T-shirt, the werewolf's silvery gaze darted around the house worriedly.

With a sigh, I took his oversized hand and tugged him inside. "Thank you for coming, Sam."

"Well, I hardly ever turn down food," he said with a laugh, finally relaxing enough to meet my gaze. "And you said it was important."

"It is. It involves a vision I had and shifters. I'll tell you more over dinner. Julian's made a feast for us."

"I..." Sam didn't finish his thought, instead running a hand back through his golden-brown hair that fell to his shoulders then rubbing the stubble on his face.

"I have not poisoned the food," Julian announced with a clap of his hands as he entered the room. He, too, was dressed casually, for him anyway, with the top button of his violet shirt undone and no jacket. He stuffed his hands in his pockets, displaying open body language, even a slight slouch that looked horribly unnatural on his typically rigid frame.

I could have kissed him for trying so hard.

"I never said you did." Sam strode to the table, already set with Caesar salad and bowls of steaming pasta, sauce, and meat. A basket of garlic bread sat in the corner, filling the space with an aroma that made my stomach grumble.

Julian forced a smile that looked more like a grimace. "I would like to apologize for my assumptions regarding your behavior with Dr. Devaux the last time we...*saw* each other."

Translation: *Sorry I assumed you were raping my woman and attacked you.* In his defense, it had looked bad since Sam had been sucking baby kraken venom from my upper thigh after I'd been stung at the lake behind his house. But I was glad he'd offered an apology.

Sam yanked out a chair and sat with a grumble. “You had no business making assumptions in the first place, stalker.”

Julian’s eyes glowed for a moment, but he tamped it down before I could react, and as far as I could tell, Sam was too busy filling his plate to notice. The wolf paused to run a slice of garlic bread beneath his nose.

“Guess that’s a myth,” he said as he stuffed it in his mouth.

Julian pulled my seat out for me and began serving the two of us dinner as well. Sam was only being slightly rude, in truth, since werewolves ate dinner first and chatted later. Still, I wished he’d try a bit harder himself.

“Julian was there that night because he’d scented a killer and had come to tell me,” I said, placing my napkin in my lap.

Sam set his fork down and continued chewing his mouthful as he regarded me then Julian. He took a long drink of water, then wine. Then he nodded. “Thanks for dinner.”

“You are welcome,” Julian said, taking a sip of wine. He hadn’t touched the bit of food on his plate. I knew he didn’t need to eat like the rest of us, but he did enjoy it.

Twirling my fettucine, I launched into a recount of my vision at the beach.

“The kid was a wolf? You’re sure?” Sam asked, hand on my arm.

Feeling rather than seeing Julian tense, I reached my own hand beneath the table and set it on his knee. “Absolutely.”

“And how old?” Sam asked.

“I’d say about four or five. But shifters age faster than humans, so I can’t be sure.”

Sam pushed back from the table and dropped his gaze to his lap. I chewed my cheek as I waited for whatever his reaction might be. Shifters were notorious hotheads, and Sam was no exception.

“Thank you for sharing this with me,” he said, meeting my eyes and then sliding his over to Julian. “I can’t let whoever’s

doing this get away with it. It's my job—my responsibility to protect my people, and especially our children.”

The emotion behind his words shone in his aura as bright blue and I smiled. “We will find them. Together.”

“How?” he asked, once again looking between me and Julian.

“After dinner,” Julian said, swirling his second glass of wine. “We will search the base while the general is away at a meeting. With your nose, we should be able to find the location of the hidden area faster.”

“Are you admitting my nose is better?” Sam asked with a crooked grin.

Julian set his glass down and looked up through his lashes. “In this case, you will be able to scent the difference between wolves, whereas all I will smell is wet dog.”

My breath caught, and I gripped his knee hard, telling him exactly what I thought about that comment through our silent connection. But after a moment, Sam let loose a loud snort followed by laughter and I relaxed.

“I suppose I'll count us equal now after my garlic comment.”

Julian reached a hand across the table and, to my immense relief, Sam took it. I wondered how fiercely they both squeezed, but nothing indicated any issues as they shook and released each other.

Julian set a hand over mine on his leg. “Finish up then. I have a chocolate souffle to serve before we depart.”

* * *

Sam agreed to ride in the vamp mobile—as I'd dubbed Julian's matte black sports car that always reappeared as if by magic no matter how damaged I'd seen it the day before. Either it was magic, or he had a garage full of them on standby somewhere. Either way, Sam barely fit in the backseat but

insisted I sit in front, and even though Julian pressed the button that made the top of the car invisible, I knew Sam would hit his head on it if he sat up straight.

“Do you think the babies he referred to in your vision are Maryanne’s?” Sam asked, voicing the same question we had earlier regarding the little ones I’d helped deliver from their mother’s corpse.

“If they are, that means the general lied to you.” I twisted in my seat to watch his reaction.

Other than his eyes turning into molten silver, nothing showed. But I could see the spike of hot red anger that flared from his aura.

“I’ve never trusted SHADE,” he admitted. “I’m only here to serve shifters and make sure nothing impedes on our rights.” A muscle ticked in his jaw as the scarlet surrounding him melted into a pale yellow. “Looks like I haven’t exactly done a good job.”

“You are beyond a doubt the best sect leader the shifters have ever had.” Julian’s proclamation shocked both of us so much that our chins dropped.

“I don’t know what to say.” Sam shook his head like he was trying to clear it. “That’s quite the compliment coming from you, Lieutenant.”

“It isn’t as though you’ve had much competition,” Julian said, and I sank back down in my seat. “But from what I’ve witnessed, your heart is in the right place, and that is a characteristic sadly lacking in most politicians.”

“Now I’m not sure if that was a compliment, an insult, or something else entirely.” Sam grimaced. “But I’ll choose to say thank you and give you the benefit of the doubt that you did your best since compliments are so foreign to you bloodsuckers.”

Julian pulled into his usual spot on the tarmac and cut his engine, drowning the usually bright building in darkness.

“If you two are done acting like grade schoolers, we should go over the plan,” I said, popping open my door.

Julian zipped around to my side of the vehicle, leaving Sam to contort his way out from the backseat. “I will use my access to get us inside. The elevator may not be amenable to sending us to the place we seek, but we should attempt that first as all other avenues are far more difficult.”

The single base elevator worked on a combination of magic and science, using the passengers’ intent as well as predicting where they needed most to go to shuttle them from place to place within the building. On my first day at the job, Julian informed me it was a good way to keep people without proper clearance from going where they shouldn’t. But now I wondered if that meant bad news for us.

“I’ve been texting Daphne,” I admitted. “This building is on her turf, so she may have work arounds or at least be able to help us out.”

“I doubt the vamp and I need backup, even if the nymph does teach combat training. We should keep this visit more on the down-low.” Sam said, coming around my other side.

“I trust her,” I said.

“Look.” Julian pointed up toward the building where a dim light bloomed on the interior, wobbled, then disappeared. “It would seem we aren’t the only ones here.”

Growling rumbled from Sam’s chest as we moved forward, up the steps to the glass doors where Julian used the black pad on the right to gain entry. With a swish, they slid open to admit us, and we crept inside the darkened building. I paused, using Julian’s shoulder for balance as I removed my heels to prevent them from clicking against the tile floor, not wanting to alert whoever might be around in case they were in on holding children captive.

“I know you guys have super night vision,” I whispered, “but I can’t see a damn thing.”

Julian slipped his hand in mine and squeezed, leading the way, and I knew I wouldn’t trip.

When we arrived at the elevator, it slid open, revealing the soft blue glow of floor lights. Instead of helping, that made the

whole thing feel creepier. The second Sam stepped inside with us, the doors shut, and we were off. I was sure both men could hear my heartbeat quicken as we flew upward and then back. When the lift slowed to a stop, both wolf and vamp angled themselves in front of me, blocking my view.

Swinging my hip into Julian, I got him to move enough for me to see where we'd landed. My brows furrowed. Why would the elevator take us to Dr. Orpheus's lab? I wasn't due here for another thirty-six hours or so, and it wasn't as though I liked visiting. But I recalled another time the elevator had taken my friends and I to my own office instead of where I'd wanted to go. But that was because there had been information I'd needed to find.

"Come on," I whispered, heading into the lab.

I glanced at the bed where I'd sat through EEGs and other various tests, and where he intended to continue doing so. *Not happening*. I made my way through the bulk of the equipment to the flat glass terminal where Orpheus took notes as he worked.

"There's nothing behind that door but an office," Sam said, shutting the door on the left.

"We're here for a reason," I said, already attempting to figure out his password.

"See if you can get a vision of it," Julian suggested from over my shoulder.

"Good idea." I pressed my eyes closed and focused on the keyboard beneath my fingers. Within moments, I had it. I started typing again. Cocky son of a witch used N0bE1. As if they gave those out to supes.

Once I was in, I noted a folder with no label among the multitude of those with patient names. I didn't see my own name on there, but I had no time to investigate, so I double-clicked on the nameless one.

This time, it was Julian who growled low against my back, and I knew why. Five files stared back at us.

MorningStar

Pendulum

Subject Pool Generation

Genetic mutation trials

Charlotte Devaux

I swallowed back the lump in my throat and fished inside the belt Daphne had given me with the infinite compartment for my phone so I could take pictures of the contents, despite the shaking of my hands. Julian set a palm over the top of it and guided me back to the belt.

“I will send these directly to you. I have the general’s access code.”

Just when I thought I knew all his secrets, he surprised me with more. But that, we’d have to discuss later. For now, I asked, “What’s Pendulum?”

“The Russian parapsychological program,” Julian explained. “It’s been mostly deactivated since funding was needed elsewhere. That’s why we don’t deal with them as much as MorningStar.”

So, Pendulum was the counterpart to America’s MorningStar, whom Julian helped create, then spied on when their ethics had gone out the window.

When Julian finished sending the files over, I clicked on Genetic Mutation Trials. A scan of the contents made me want to vomit.

“What is it?” Sam asked as Julian put a hand on my shoulder.

“He’s been experimenting on supes,” I said, unable to believe my own words. “Using RNA infused with magic as a vehicle to mutate the DNA of various people.”

“To what end?” Sam moved closer, and Julian’s grip on my shoulder tightened protectively. But it wasn’t Sam he needed to worry about.

I steadied myself with another breath. “It looks like Orpheus is trying to give the abilities of one type of supe to

others, but he seems to be most interested in creating and boosting psychic powers.”

Now that I'd said it out loud, it felt oddly permanent.

“Wait.” I reached for the computer again and selected the folder labeled Subject Pool Generation.

“No.” I shook my head as I scanned the details. “My gods. They wanted fresh subjects.”

“The children?” Sam asked, voice breaking even as his gaze turned to liquid mercury.

I nodded. “But it goes beyond the kids. They've been not only keeping track of pregnancies on the island, but...” I stopped, recalling the argument Sam had with one of the murder victims in my last investigation. She'd told him her birth control pills had been moved from their usual spot on her counter. He'd assumed it was her way of letting him know she was on them since she'd been trying to seduce him, but what if someone really had messed with her medication?

“What is it?” Sam pressed.

I turned and buried my face in Julian's chest so I could speak just to him. *They've been impregnating women intentionally so they could harvest fetuses.*

“Tell me!” Sam growled, and I clutched Julian's waist to prevent him from responding physically.

He needs to know. At least half of the women are labeled shifters, including both our recent victims, Maryanne and Lauren.

I felt like a coward for being unable to tell him myself. But Julian did it for me. He spoke gently, gazing at the screen as though he'd gotten the information from it instead of me.

A thump made me release the comfort of Julian's embrace, and I turned to find Sam sitting in the middle of the floor, hands embedded in his hair.

“This is horrific,” I said. Worse than I could have ever imagined.

“It stops now,” Julian said in his quiet yet deadly voice that made the hair on my arms stand on end.

“Does it say where they are? The kids?” Sam asked.

I scrolled, searching.

“Somewhere called The Nest,” I spoke through the bile in my throat. “Where Orpheus has daily access to give them injections and runs tests.”

“Then they’re here somewhere,” Sam said, rising. His wolf was barely contained, judging by the unnatural rippling beneath his muscles and the claws elongating on his fingers. “And if we don’t find them in the next few minutes, I will rip through every wall of this building until we do.”

Chapter Four

The Letter M



“Hold on, I think I know a better way.” I spoke as I typed on my phone. In less than a minute, the elevator reappeared, and Daphne leaped off in her black armored bodysuit with her long blond hair tied up in a bun on her head.

“What’s the 911?” she asked in her breathy, Marilyn Monroe voice.

“We need help finding some children on base,” I said. “They’re being held against their will.”

Daphne took in the urgency of the situation and didn’t ask more questions, just shut her eyes to focus while I held out a hand to delay any complaints from the pacing werewolf in the room.

“I can’t believe I never felt them,” Daphne said as her eyes snapped open. She shook her head, worry and possibly guilt furrowing her brow. Then she shook herself, seeming to turn on business mode. “The area where they’re being held feels heavily warded to prevent anyone stumbling in on it, but that can’t keep out fae on their bonded land. I’m going to be opening a can of whoop ass on whoever’s responsible.”

“Get in line,” Sam growled.

“Feels like this way to the access point,” Daphne said, leading us through Orpheus’s office and slipping behind his desk.

She ducked down and disappeared for a bit then popped back up again, grinning.

“Trap door under the desk. Looks like there’s a stairway down, but I’m sure the second we take a step onto it, the security wards will be triggered, and we’ll be locked in. No other entrances I know of to this area, and the elevator sure as hell isn’t going to give us the element of surprise. Whoever is guarding it will come running either way. I count four adults patrolling, none of which I am familiar with, other than they work on base, so they wouldn’t have triggered any warning signs for me.”

“Now that’s reconnaissance,” I said. “Thanks, Daphne.”

“Anytime. And thank you for letting me know. How dare SHADE break our truce this way? I permit them on my land with the understanding they are working for our greater good, not holding children captive.” She trembled with barely controlled rage, her fists clenched and knuckles white.

“We don’t yet know if the general is aware,” Julian said. “But we cannot discount the possibility.”

I didn’t like the idea that the company I worked for and the sole governing body for supes could be crooked all the way through. Even the possibility of it made my stomach churn. But the more that happened under the general’s nose, the more I doubted that he could be so unaware.

Daphne crossed her arms. “Whenever you’re ready, I doubt they’ll be much trouble between us.”

“This is not your fight,” Sam said.

“The hell it isn’t,” Daphne countered.

“We should disable the wards so we aren’t trapped in there too.” I interrupted their argument as I circled the desk. “I can get Zoe over here to do it. That way, we’ll have more of a head start to get whatever kids in there as far away as possible.”

“I don’t want to wait another moment when they may be suffering,” Sam protested, but Daphne put a hand on his bulging chest, letting her emerald aura wash over him, visibly calming him. I’d seen her do it once with Julian.

“It’s fucking one in the morning,” Zoe said as I pressed my phone to my ear.

“I need you to portal here now and help me bring down some wards. It’s urgent. Julian’s dropping the outside ones he has access to remotely.”

“You know, SHADE should be paying me. You seem to need my help every other day.”

I laughed nervously as Zoe hung up. Moments later, her circular, blue portal appeared just before she did. She wore a bathrobe and bunny slippers.

“You didn’t tell me it was a party,” she quipped, looking at all the people in the room. I pointed her toward the trap door. “Tricksy,” she muttered as she stooped to inspect the situation.

Minutes passed as she worked, the rest of us silent and wound about as tight as straight jackets.

“Done,” Zoe proclaimed, popping up from beneath the desk.

But before the cavalry could rush in, a huge bang sounded from the ceiling.

“What the fuck was that?” Zoe asked.

“It may have to do with the light we saw earlier,” I said, glancing at Julian and Sam.

“I’m getting the kids out,” Sam announced, heading toward the passageway.

“You go,” Julian nodded to the rest of us. “I will investigate the intruder.”

The protest died on my lips as he zoomed past me and Sam disappeared from view.

“Wait here, Zo,” I said, following Daphne down the stairs.

“Wasn’t planning on going in the creepy, high-security dungeon anyway,” she said.

Unable to see as well as the other supes, I pulled a flashlight from my belt and shined it toward my feet. The stairs were made of cold metal, no banister to guide the way down the narrow, circular descent.

“Hey! Who’s there?” someone shouted from below.

I hurried to the bottom and nearly ran into Sam’s back. He stood still, head cocked and watching, as Daphne darted about the long, rectangular corridor with the grace of a dancer, taking down guard after guard until three were unconscious and the last one’s neck was between her muscular legs as she squeezed the air out of him.

“Damn, she’s good,” Sam whispered with reverence as Daphne swiped her hands together and gestured toward a door.

When it refused to open for us, Daphne bent to search for one of the guard’s keycards. But Sam punched the metal, denting it so hard it left the imprint of his fist. One more hit and the whole thing squealed and fell inward onto a bright yellow carpet surrounded by several bunk beds, all empty except for one straight ahead where a girl sat, mouth open, staring at the warped door.

“It’s okay,” I said, grabbing Sam and Daphne’s shoulders to stop them from rushing forward and terrifying the poor thing even more.

The girl on the bed cocked her head, sending her mop of dark hair spilling over her shoulder and onto the mattress. “I know.”

“You...know,” I repeated. Echoing was what happened when I didn’t know what to do.

Nodding, she flicked her eyes over my shoulder.

“Then come with us,” Sam said from behind. “We’ll get you somewhere safe.”

“Not yet. You need to fight some more of them first.”

Before I could respond, the sound of firearms racking came from behind. I spun, arms out, just as the first guard leveled the wicked-looking rifle at Sam’s half-shifted chest. With one flick of my finger, the weapon flew through the air, plucked from his hands and sent straight to mine.

The man’s shocked face blurred as an enormous silver wolf tackled him to the ground, dagger-like teeth ripping into

his throat. Blood sprayed like a fountain as chaos rained down around me. Daphne fought two guards at once with some form of martial arts to my left, and over the busted metal door, another three black-uniformed people ran through, guns braced. Sam tackled one with a snarl as a second swung the long black barrel of her firearm at his muzzle, meeting it with a crack that made me wince.

The last guard looked at me, glanced down at the gun in my hands and raised hers. But I'd already called it to me, and it jerked free of her grip obediently, landing in my other hand.

Instead of shock, her face registered frustration as her aura blazed red with rage. I dropped one gun as she launched herself at me. I wasn't about to shoot her—not only would I have nightmares for years, I had no clue how to handle a weapon like that properly. So, using the training Daphne had drilled into me over the last weeks, I dropped and swept out my leg. She might've been angry, but she was good. She wobbled, caught her balance, coming to a full stop, and dove on top of me.

Instinct kicked in along with my training, and I threw my weight to the side, forcing us into a continuous log roll where we vied for top position, leaving the other gun somewhere behind us on the yellow carpet.

I lost, ending up pinned by the hips between her unnaturally strong thighs. I opened my mouth to use mind-bending, deciding the inevitable headache would be worth it, when her fingers wrapped around my throat and cut off my air supply.

My fingers scrabbled at the heavy rug beneath me, accomplishing nothing but impaling sunflower-colored fibers beneath my fingernails. Thankfully, the weight of the carpet didn't matter when it came to telekinesis. In moments, the edges of the enormous thing rose up behind her like a tidal wave and crashed down over her face, tugging her backward off me and rolling her into a giant, gaudy burrito as I scurried out of the way.

By the time I stood up and dusted off, every black uniform in the room lay unmoving, and, in some cases, ripped into pieces and flung around the room. Daphne stood, hand on hip. Some of her hair had worked loose from her bun, and an angry slash colored her cheek. Sam nuzzled into the young girl's hand in wolf form, panting like a happy dog as she scratched behind his ear.

"What's your name?" I asked, regaining my breath.

"I'm Em," she said, blinking up at me with saucer-like burgundy eyes the color of maple leaves back home in the fall. They were completely unnatural yet suited her somehow.

"M like the letter?" Daphne asked.

She nodded in answer. "I picked the letter. They let me even though I was the first, so I really should've been A."

I thought back to my vision when I'd held the block. He'd been worried about his sister, Dee, but he'd meant the letter and not the name. Shuddering, I bit the inside of my cheek so I wouldn't blurt out how horrific that naming process was and hurt Em's feelings. There was no way I was thinking of her as a letter.

"How long have you been here?" Daphne asked, kneeling in front of the girl, one hand on her knee and one tangled in Sam's fur.

"Most of my life," she said immediately. "I'm almost eight."

"Where are the others?" I asked, searching for signs of hidden occupants in the empty bunks and bassinets shoved into the corner whose presence unnerved me.

"They've been moved and now I'm all alone until they get more."

Sam growled and Daphne translated, "He says, that's not happening."

"We're too late," I said, shoulders sinking. "We have to find the others too."

Before we could ask another question, Em looked behind me and smiled, revealing slightly crooked front teeth. I didn't have to turn to know it was Julian. The sudden breeze and scent of bergamot had already informed me of his arrival.

“It appears I missed the fun,” he said.

I glanced at him curiously. Surely, he'd heard the commotion. I supposed I should have been happy he hadn't zoomed in to my rescue immediately instead of trusting me. But something told me he would have if he weren't otherwise occupied. Which begged the question—what had he been doing?

“You'll have plenty of chances to fight the bad guys,” Em assured him, getting my attention. “You guys are going to do a lot of that soon.”

Chapter Five

An Uncomfortable Truth



“Now what?” I asked as Mama handed out cookies and cups of hot coffee, or in Em’s case, hot cocoa. As soon as we’d portalled back to our place, Zoe had gotten on her phone and started on extra magical protection for the house while Mama had taken charge of everyone else, which meant making them comfortable despite the horrible circumstances.

“The perimeter wards are so tight I don’t even think we’ll show up on the base’s radar,” Zoe announced, plopping down on the couch between Em and our newest group member, Hazel, the witch sect leader and Zo’s new girlfriend.

I hadn’t loved the idea of inviting more people into our mess, but we needed her to help with the magical protection while we figured out our next steps. To her credit, she’d jumped to help—though a string of swears had proceeded her “what can I do?” when we’d looped her in.

Besides, her shapeshifting familiar, Karma, had morphed into his black bunny form and curled up in my lap almost immediately, making me feel so much better. Now, I stroked his soft fur as I sipped my coffee.

“We should probably contact the general,” Daphne said on a sigh. She sat on the carpet near the sofa.

“We just did like an hour’s worth of work to prevent him from finding us,” Zoe said, throwing her arms up. “Hazel and I each took two restore charms to do it.”

We all seemed to have different opinions on whether or not the general was part of the problem. But whether I wanted to go there or not, it was a distinct enough possibility that it couldn't be ignored.

Julian stopped pacing on the other side of the room and avoided my gaze for at least the fifth time since he'd met Em. My need to know what the hell he was doing while we fought off the guards nearly eclipsed my concern about getting Em to safety before searching for the others. But where was safety?

"Daphne's right," Julian said. "We must operate under the assumption that the general was unaware of the genetic mutation experiments."

Sam barked out a laugh around his cookie. "You can't seriously believe that. He can't possibly be that blind to what's happening on his own base."

Julian fixed his unblinking stare on the wolf who'd changed into a spare outfit he'd had in his Jeep after morphing back to his human self.

"It doesn't matter if he knows or not. Acting as though he doesn't is the safest recourse for everyone else in the room. If we accuse him, you all become enemies of SHADE because we've either wrongly called the head of the base into question or, more likely, if we're right, forced his hand against us." He took the time to settle his gaze on each person in the crowded living room but barely passed over me.

What the hell is he avoiding?

"But if we report it and handle it through proper channels..."

"He has to respond like we did the right thing and finish taking the program down whether he wants to or not," Daphne concluded where Julian left off.

"I hate politics," Sam growled.

"Who likes them?" Mama said, hands on her hips. "But the priority here is to get Em to safety, so while it's a good plan for everyone else, I, for one, won't allow that child back in SHADE custody."

“Who can we trust to take care of her?” I asked, squeezing the girl’s hand as she worried the crocheted throw Mama had wrapped her in upon arrival. “She deserves a real home.”

“It wouldn’t be safe to keep her in the building or I’d volunteer,” Daphne said.

“She doesn’t smell like a shifter, but I’d take her in until we find someone,” Sam volunteered with a fist beat against his massive chest.

“And what do you know about child-rearing?” Mama challenged.

“Well... I would feed and protect her. I can teach her to defend herself too.”

Everyone started speaking at once as a buzzing sounded in my ears. Em glanced up at me with her big burgundy eyes, and something inside me clicked.

“She’s a psychic,” I said quietly, but somehow, the chatter stopped. “I have to be the one to help her.”

“And I’m pretty good at raising girls,” Mama added, putting a hand on my shoulder. “I’ll be her guardian. I was getting bored around here anyway.”

“That’s sweet, but they’ll find her if she stays on the island,” Daphne said, standing to stretch.

“Not if we have anything to do with it,” Hazel said then sipped her coffee. “We witches got this. The rest of you just forget she exists. She’s now part of our coven and under our protection.”

In case anyone doubted what that meant, Karma stretched, yawned, then roared in my lap, vibrating every cup sitting on the coffee table. His dragon sound was strange coming from a cute little bunny, but he could shift into anything anytime he wanted—well, except a human.

“I suppose that’s settled then,” Mama said. “Daphne and Sam, you go make the necessary incident reports for SHADE, omitting every mention of Em, while we fix up Zoe’s room for her.”

“Why my room?” Zoe whined.

Hazel punched her arm. “You can stay at my place until we figure it out.”

“I should prepare a report for the general as well,” Julian said, reaching for the doorknob.

“Oh no you don’t,” I said, standing and sending Karma darting into cat form and under the couch. “We need to talk. Now.”

Julian’s vamp face did little to intimidate me anymore I realized as I marched over to him and took his hand so I could speak in his mind.

You aren’t good at subtle, you know. I expect the whole story with no omissions, either.

A small nod was all I got as everyone else cleared out or went into Zoe’s room to see about setting it up for our new guest.

“You’d better sit down,” Julian said once we were alone.

Despite the lump that formed in my throat at those words, I sat and smoothed my pants as I waited for the bomb to drop. Julian paced a moment then knelt before me, placing a hand on my knee.

I found the intruder immediately. A male vampire that, though familiar, I did not recognize. He was headed for the brig.

“For Lydia,” I said, spine stiffening. “Was someone trying to eliminate her for supposedly killing Carmichael? Carry out some weird form of justice on behalf of that monster just because he was the sect leader?”

Julian squeezed my leg. *Quite the opposite, actually. It seems he was intent on breaking her out of prison.*

That shut me up. And he continued as I tried to wrap my brain around it.

We had a frank discussion since I know what Lydia means to you. It seems he’d heard about her professional background

and wanted to hire her as an assistant. Julian paused and tilted his head as though he was willing me to understand something.

“She’s my...*was* my assistant,” was all I could manage. I squeezed out the vision of the vampire who’d ripped into her neck before she was taken from our lab and turned into a vampire herself. The old feeling of failing someone I cared about threatened to tear me apart, but I walled it off inside so I could focus on the now.

“That’s exactly why he wanted her,” Julian said.

“Who is he? Some kind of Dr. Frankenstein wannabe?”

“He’s a geneticist,” Julian said, brows drawn slightly.

“Then I probably know of him,” I said. *Did he have anything to do with the experiments going on with the children?*

No. He wanted to continue his own research that had been...shut down.

“Well, what’s his name, Julian? Out with it.”

“Dr. Alfred Devaux.” His grip on my knee was almost painful, but that didn’t stop my vision from blurring with shock from hearing my father’s name.

“Where—” I whispered.

“Take a breath, Charlotte. Your pulse is far too fast.”

“Where is he?” I demanded louder, grabbing Julian’s shirt collar.

“I followed him when he left the base,” Julian said quietly. “He went to the Vampire Estate. I believe he and Lydia may have already made contact before Carmichael’s murder since they’ve both been staying at the mansion for a while—at least until her arrest.”

Taking Julian’s advice, I gulped at the air, yet somehow, it seemed not to get through to my lungs. My brain buzzed like it was stuck on a static radio station. I was barely aware of Julian sitting beside me and scooping me into his lap.

My father was on the island.

He'd spoken to Lydia. He'd tried to break her out of SHADE. But he hadn't so much as sent me a postcard in all these years. Not me, or Mama, or Zoe. Flashes of his pale face and blood-soaked clothes reminded me of the last time I'd seen him. The panic and pain in his dark eyes had provided nightmares my entire life and had been the source of my desperation to find a cure for vampirism.

Well, I'd found it. But the two people I offered it to had refused it. Would he? Would he even speak to me?

"Tell me what you're thinking," Julian whispered, nuzzling my hair.

How did I voice the fear that my father wanted nothing to do with me? He knew where I was—what I was doing with my life. But he still hadn't reached out.

Did he seem...okay? I asked.

Yes. Julian's answer was tentative, like he wasn't sure it was the right one. And I wasn't sure what I'd wanted to hear.

I'd also acted on the assumption he'd been trying to save us from his blood lust. But suddenly, it felt as though I'd been gaslighting myself. He could have controlled it. Hell, even if he couldn't or was afraid of that, he could have contacted us or come back when he'd gotten past it.

Huddling in Julian's calming scent of bergamot and cloves, I nodded against his chest, the back of my neck hot and prickly from the hurt and anger I'd avoided for so long.

I need to see him, Julian.

I spoke through our connection without giving it much thought. Whether Dad wanted to or not, I had to confront him. I deserved to know where he'd been and so did Mama and Zoe.

Then we will make that happen, he promised, kissing my head. *But perhaps we should wait to tell your family until we understand the totality of the situation.*

As much as I hated to hide something like this from my mother and sister, he was right. If they found out, they'd march right into the Vampire Estate, or portal in if they met resistance. It could result in death—whether vampire or witch I didn't know. And the man that left us all those years ago... well, he wasn't worth dying or going to prison for, whatever his motives were.

"First light, we will go pay a visit to the estate," I said, lifting my face from his shirt. I needed sleep before that and maybe a little time to try and clear the jumble of emotions that tossed my insides until I felt seasick.

"First light," Julian agreed as I wiped at my cheeks, trying to erase the signs of turmoil I'd just been through.

I cleared my throat. "We get in, find Dad, do what investigating we can on Carmichael's death, and get the hell out of there. If all goes well, we'll be back before Em wakes up."

"Simple enough," Julian said, standing and setting me on my own two feet.

"Vampires are terrible at sarcasm." I rolled my eyes. "Thank you for telling me."

"No more secrets," he said, voice vibrating in his sexiest tone.

"I'm holding you to that, Lieutenant."

Chapter Six

Answers and questions



I toyed with the bottom edge of my black blouse as we sped toward the Vampire Estate in Julian’s Vamp Mobile.

On my side, the dense green of the forest blurred in the early morning light, while on his, the ocean whizzed past in a never-ending blue almost as deep as the indigo of his eyes. In the distance, the mystical forcefield shimmered with iridescent sparkles, an ever-present reminder that Monster Island, so dubbed because of its inhabitants, was protected by SHADE. I thought the organization was the lesser evil—someone to hold groups like MorningStar accountable, but now I wasn’t so sure what I’d dragged my family into when I’d accepted the job.

If only my lab hadn’t been attacked. Would I have met Julian? Would we still be here? I slumped in the leather seat and bit the inside of my cheek. No use wasting energy on what-ifs. Better to move forward as best I could in the now. Besides, I couldn’t regret whatever I had with Julian. My gaze slid toward him and, without diverting his attention from the road, he squeezed my hand. I smiled. He knew I didn’t like it when he used his other senses to steer.

“Thank you,” I said.

“For what?”

“For being you. For caring so damn much what I think.” For loving me even if I wasn’t sure if I could manage to open my heart enough to trust that it wouldn’t be broken by another vampire. I had so many daddy issues.

His thumb slid over my knuckles, sending shivers of excitement up my arm that didn't belong in this situation. But I couldn't help my body's reaction to him. It was biology. He was the shiny predator, and I was the captivated prey.

"Thank you for trusting me," he said, then risked a glance over.

The building, a monstrous, gothic nightmare, rose from the distance at that moment, eliciting a very different kind of shiver from me. I had more than one taste of horror from the mansion—though both times it hadn't been the house but the sect leader, Carmichael, that had caused the issues. The worst he'd done wasn't even on the estate grounds, I reminded myself. No, it was in Sam's backyard while said werewolf and Julian were trying to tear each other to shreds.

Julian's grip on my hand tightened as though he were reading my mind. But I was the psychic here, and even I couldn't necessarily do that. Still, it wouldn't take a genius to figure out where my mind wandered.

"He's dead," Julian reminded me.

"Still making problems, though, isn't he?" I said softly. I referred to the fact that Lydia was found holding his head and covered in blood. Not that I'd been able to talk to her or visit the crime scene. Why had it taken my father's presence to ignore the bureaucracy? I should've immediately insisted we visit to clear Lydia's name.

Shame warmed my neck. I slipped my hand from Julian's as he pulled into the U-shaped, uneven drive, stopping in front of the entrance.

Using vamp speed, he opened the door before I could reach the handle and waited as I climbed from the car. At the top of the steps, the enormous oak door swung open and a petite vampire with long raven hair stepped onto the threshold.

"We are not receiving visitors from the base at this time," she said in a faint German accent.

"We aren't here on SHADE business," I said, stepping in front of Julian. "I'm here to see my father."

Her perfectly shaped eyebrows rose as she tilted her head in consideration when my voice hitched on the name.

“Dr. Alfred Devaux,” Julian supplied. “We...met the other night. You can remind him of that when you let him know we’re here.”

I glanced sidelong at him, but he didn’t so much as sniffle. It sounded friendly enough, but we both knew it was a veiled threat.

Try to run and I won’t be so restrained this time.

“Very well. Wait here.” The woman disappeared from the doorway in a gust of wind that knocked the heavy wood hard enough to make it creak.

“*Are* we going to wait?” I challenged, arms crossed over my chest.

“For now,” Julian said with a smile.

It didn’t take long for her to return, and despite her smooth appearance, she seemed disgruntled. Perhaps it was the way her long fingers tapped against her hip. “You may come in. The time of day is a bit...uncomfortable to the newer children.”

I’d hardly call young vampires children, but I kept that comment to myself since she’d invited us in. I’d hoped for something like this, but Julian’s already stiff posture seemed to pull tighter as he set his palm against the small of my back before climbing the steps.

Be on guard. They want us inside so they have the advantage if anything goes wrong.

What could possibly go wrong? I snarked, and he had to cover a snicker with a cough.

“My name is Greta,” our hostess said as she led the way over to a sitting room on the right of the grand entryway.

I was fine with not climbing the huge staircase again, since the last time I’d been here, Julian had leapt down from the top balcony with me in his arms and a horde of vampires in

pursuit. This time, there was no drugged champagne, and I wasn't bleeding at the moment, so that was an improvement.

"Pleasure to meet you," I said. "I'm—"

"You are Dr. Charlotte Devaux and Lieutenant Julian Carver. Your reputations precede you." She executed a slight head bow as she gestured for us to sit on a golden sofa situated on an enormous, white-and-gold rug that had to have been handcrafted and was probably worth a fortune. I didn't even want to step on it. Crystal goblets sat waiting on a mirrored tray with a decanter full of what was likely expensive wine. But none of the opulence detracted from the four vampires standing like royal guards against the walls of the room, between the heavily draped windows. Two men and two women—one of which I recognized as a young vampire named Pandora that I'd helped the night the vamps had been drugged and lost control by countering it with my magic. I thought I saw her lips turn up in a slight smile.

So that was one vampire on my side—maybe.

"Your father will be in shortly," Greta said. "Please help yourselves to refreshments. If there is anything else you'd like, just let someone know, and it shall be yours."

"Thank you," Julian said, pouring some wine into the goblets.

If he thought I was drinking that, he was two pints short of a cauldron.

Greta nodded and zoomed away. Julian sipped at the wine as I turned on the couch to get a better view of our company. It was times like these I wished the dead had auras. I thought I recognized one of the other young male vamps as someone from the night of the drugging as well, but I couldn't even get his attention.

The stairs creaked and I turned back toward the entryway, heart leaping into my throat. My stomach twisted and my head grew light. I was about to see him. What other vampire would warn of his approach like that? Was he letting me know to

prepare? There was nothing that could possibly make this easier, so I wished he'd just hurry up.

Julian handed me a goblet and, despite my earlier attitude, I downed it quickly, handing it back just as he came around the corner.

The little girl in me wanted to jump up and throw my arms around him. But the woman I'd become after he'd left stayed still as I took him in, fighting the torrid of emotions that grappled inside—everything from rage to relief.

He looked exactly as I remembered him. Unruly blonde hair, glasses that he no longer needed and possibly wore just for this occasion, and the same uniform consisting of an oxford shirt, collar unbuttoned, and khaki pants. If there was such a thing as a nerdy vampire, my father embodied it. Only his skin had the pale, deathly hue of a vampire, and his eyes shone too bright to be natural. He also hadn't aged a day, which made him look as though he was in his thirties.

I swallowed, not having tasted the wine. What did one say in this situation? I bit my cheek and squeezed my fists, letting the nails dig into the flesh without breaking it. Though I wasn't sure I could hold back the tears threatening or the personal earthquake building inside of me.

“Charlie,” he breathed the name only he'd called me, and I blinked hard, trying to keep the dam in place. “My gods, look at the woman you've become.”

This was a bad idea. A very, very bad idea. It wasn't like I could just forgive him. But I wasn't sure he deserved all my ire, either. I needed to gather my thoughts. To leave.

Julian put a cool hand on mine, grounding me, as my father took a few steps forward into the room.

“I had no intention of dragging you into this, Charlie. Please believe that.”

The dam broke.

“Oh, I believe it, Dad. You had every intention of never setting eyes on me—on any of us—again. But I guess your luck ran out, didn't it?”

He took a step back and slid his hands in his pockets, but I saw the scarlet ring flash around his irises. I'd struck some kind of chord.

"I deserved that," he said, looking away.

"Damn straight you deserved that and a lot more. But I'll tell you who really deserves your groveling—Mama. You left her. Left us!" I trembled as I stood, hot tears running down my face. But I didn't care. If I had to do this in front of an audience, so be it.

"I'd been killed and resurrected," he said, his voice gaining a sharp edge as his fangs poked through. "In the blink of an eye, I'd become the beast I'd tried so hard to protect you and your mother and sister from."

"And I saw it all. I was a child." The tears stopped as though someone had flipped a switch, and a cold calm fell over me. "Yes, you went through a trauma, but so did I, Dad. And you could have come back at any time. You could have contacted us." I strode toward him, stopping feet away.

"You're right." His shoulders fell and his eyes pinched as though crying invisible tears. When was the last time he fed? He looked so sallow and drawn. "I was afraid. I was afraid you'd think I was a monster. You would have been right."

My head shook of its own accord. Pity replaced the rage, and I inhaled sharply.

"It's your choices that make you a monster, Dad. Not your species."

He met my eyes then, something like hope flickering in his. "I've also been on the run for many years, Charlie. I didn't want the people who did this to me to be able to use you or your sister or mother to get to me. I'd never be able to forgive myself."

I swallowed hard. That was a thought I'd ignored, which seemed to be a thing I was good at. Selective thinking. His research. He wanted to continue it with my lab assistant, which meant it was related to what I was doing. What he'd been originally doing.

Genetics.

“Dad,” I stepped closer. “Who were the men who came for you? What were you involved in?”

Julian’s hand found my back again, only for a moment.

Not now. Remember where we are.

“I—” Dad’s mouth worked, but he seemed unable to find words.

The pain in his eyes broke something inside of me. He’d been my hero, my mentor. He’d given me the confidence to accomplish what I had as a scientist and a person. And more than my anger, more than the heartache, I wanted his love.

“Dad.” I threw myself the remaining distance into his arms and squeezed. He still smelled of antiseptic and paper, the scent of his lab, and it brought fresh tears to the surface.

Slowly, his arms crept around me until he was hugging me back, rocking us slowly and sobbing loudly into my hair, though not a single tear managed its way out of his dry body.

“Perhaps we should move somewhere more private,” Julian suggested after a while.

Dad released me, and I withdrew, wiping at my face with the back of my hand.

“I can’t risk leaving the safety of the house,” he explained with an arm around my shoulders. “My protector is here, and as long as he backs my research, I have plans to right all the wrongs I’ve made.”

“Who is your protector?” Julian asked smoothly, though I noted the way he flexed his fingers like a gunslinger waiting for a fight.

My father smiled slowly. “I cannot speak his name. It’s part of the agreement. But you’ll probably meet him soon enough. We just voted him in as the new sect liaison.”

“What?” I stepped away and to Julian’s side. “Without Julian? I thought everyone voted.”

“There was no competition. No one else wanted the position after what happened to his predecessor.” My father chuckled. “Why don’t you come up to my rooms so we can speak more privately, Charlie?”

Julian nodded encouragingly, and we followed him up the dreaded stairs while the others remained in the sitting room. But when we reached the top floor, my father turned one direction and Julian the other. I stopped cold in place, and Julian rushed back to my side to touch my shoulder and speak. *The Liaison’s office is on this floor. I want a quick look.*

I should go, too, in case there’s anything with a psychic echo there I can pick up.

There won’t be. It’s been too long. You need time with your father, and as much as I want to stay and protect you, you don’t need me imposing. Go. I will be within earshot if you need me.

I supposed I’d wanted his presence as a sort of crutch, but he was right, I needed to speak to my dad one-on-one. So I followed as my father continued to the corridor on the left and Julian sped off to the right.

Dad’s rooms consisted of a basic suite with a four-poster, mahogany bed. Matching Victorian-style furniture would’ve been bulky in a smaller space, but these proved generous living quarters. I trailed a hand over an intricately carved desk and dropped into the burgundy velvet chair in front of it.

“You know vampires can listen from pretty far away, so if you want private information, this probably isn’t the best spot,” he said, sitting on the edge of the bed and folding his hands together.

“I know. But I’m also guessing those who might hear us already know most of what you’re going to tell me. And make no mistake, I’m not leaving until I get the truth.”

To my surprise, he beamed at me. “I am so proud of you, Charlie. I’ve been following your work from a distance you know.”

“Focus, Dad.”

“Yes, of course. Where to begin?” He ran his hands back through his hair like he used to when puzzling something out in the lab. The blonde tufts that stood out gave me a melancholy feeling. He cleared his throat before beginning. “I should have questioned my funding. But I didn’t look a gift horse in the mouth. My benefactor turned out to be a wealthy vampire, maybe you heard of him? Lamar Bouche?”

I straightened with surprise. “He was the mob boss that died in a bombing around five years ago. I remember the TV reports.” The smaller gangs turned toward the big time, creating horrible groups like Mordock had, the vampire who’d turned Lydia and who I’d helped capture before his mysterious death.

“Yes, though it wasn’t a bombing. That was the human story. It was several firebomb charms.”

The kind that had destroyed my lab. I had to wonder if Mordock was behind the assassination of this Bouche vamp as well. “So once he died...”

“He wasn’t the only one after me. He wanted his answer, and when I refused to give it to him—having figured out he meant to use it for nefarious means—he had me killed.”

My head hurt. “But Carmichael brought you back immediately,” I argued.

“Yes. He was working for Bouche, but he was under different directions as well. Carmichael’s sire, and the other, more dangerous one who’s been looking for me all these years, instructed him to keep me alive at all costs so she could use my talents.”

“Wasn’t it risky to follow his sire’s orders when Carmichael had a witness? The man that killed you?”

“Carmichael killed that vampire shortly after leaving to cover his tracks. A vampire cannot resist a command from his or her sire, Charlie. I had to avoid Carmichael at all costs, as much as his sire.”

“But you’re here—” I stopped with the realization of the perfect timing. “Did you? Dad, did you kill Carmichael?”

He laughed, which disconcerted me, then booped me on the nose, which I chose to ignore in favor of the current conversation. “No, Pumpkin. It’s almost impossible to kill one’s own sire. But my new benefactor had no such issues.”

“The one who took his place? He framed Lydia!” I stood, exasperated.

“Sit down, Charlie. No, he didn’t frame her. Carmichael was under orders to either hire her or kill her, and she’d just refused his offer when my boss showed up. She isn’t giving him up because she owes him her life.”

I dropped back into the chair. “This is insane. She can’t go to jail or die for him. We can explain he was saving her life. We can get him off.”

The door burst open and Pandora appeared, eyes wide. “You must leave. Now.” She grabbed me by the arm and zoomed us down the stairs and out the door so fast I nearly vomited when she finally let me go. “Sorry.”

“What the fuck?” I demanded, but she was already back at the top of the stairs, shutting the door and cutting off access to my father.

I turned, but the Vamp Mobile was gone. Surely Julian hadn’t left me here. What was going on?

As though in answer, one of my sister’s portals opened in front of me, and Zoe reached through to drag me across, closing it—along with access to our father—behind us.

Chapter Seven

Whiplash



“**W**hat the hell?” I snapped and immediately regretted it when I saw Zoe’s expression. My sister didn’t rattle easily, and certainly not visibly. But she looked as though she was about to faint.

“What’s happening?” I amended, glancing around at Mama, who held Em protectively against her chest, and Hazel, seated on the top of the couch with her feet on the cushions, stroking Karma’s shiny feathers as he sat upon her shoulder in raven form.

“We got a message from your vampire,” Zoe said, tugging me over to join her on the sofa near Hazel’s feet.

“What? How? I was away from him for no more than twenty minutes.” My mind spun, and I pressed fingertips to my temples in an effort to ground myself.

Zoe wagged her phone in front of my face. “It’s not magic. It’s texting. But he erased it not ten seconds after it was read.”

“What did it say?” I asked. A cold fist squeezed my heart when I saw their worried expressions.

“Get Charlotte out. Stay away from the estate. Life or death.”

I turned the words over in my mind. What had he found in his investigation of the liaison’s office? Why wouldn’t he have grabbed me himself? And if it was dangerous, what about Dad? I couldn’t leave him there.

“I have to go back,” I said, standing.

Zoe grabbed my wrist as everyone else practically pounced on me with a chorus of “no’s”.

“Julian will be okay,” Mama said, misunderstanding. “He can take care of himself.”

“He’s not there anymore either,” I said, unable to keep the bitterness out of my voice. “His car was gone. And Pandora seemed to know whatever the hell was happening because she kicked me to the curb. If he’d had time to tell her, then why not me?”

“If the situation was that dire, why would you immediately go exactly where he said not to?” Hazel asked, posed as a legitimate question rather than sarcastic comment.

I drew a breath, glad someone was willing to hear me out. “Because there’s someone there I don’t want in danger. Mama, you need to stay calm.”

“What’s wrong, Char?” Mama soothed, taking my hand and sitting when Hazel swung her feet out of the way.

A glance at Em told me she knew what was happening, which unnerved me even more. Exactly how psychic was she?

Time to rip off the Band-Aid.

“Dad’s there.”

Silence rang. It was the eye of the hurricane and I braced myself for the storm.

Mama’s grip grew slack, her eyes glazed over, and her smile stretched wider like a creepy Halloween clown. Zoe stood and turned to stare at me over Mama’s shoulder, gaze filled with hurt and accusation. The silent *why didn’t you tell us* felt like a spear to the heart.

“I just found out,” I said, desperate to get past this part. “Julian saw him yesterday while we were getting Em from the base. He didn’t know how to tell me, and I didn’t know how Dad would be or what kind of situation we’d be walking into over there.”

“So you just decided for us? You know, like you’re always annoyed Julian does for you?” Zoe demanded, hand on hip,

hazel eyes flashing.

“You spoke to him?” Mama asked. Our attention fell to her.

“I did.” I held on to her hand, afraid to let go because she’d float away or something. “And for what it’s worth, I gave him an earful about leaving us.”

“How is he?” she asked.

“He seems to be okay, considering everything.” I launched into a rehash of the details I was able to get out of him. By the time I finished, Zoe sat at our feet with Hazel draped over her shoulders and Karma perched on top of the couch between Mama and I, watching with sharp eyes.

“He was protecting us,” Mama said, smile still too wide. “I should’ve known.”

“No one makes decisions for my own good without my input,” Zoe said, crossing her arms. “He’s not getting off that easily, and neither should you.”

“I’m more concerned about Dad’s mysterious benefactor that murdered Carmichael,” I said, glad to have people to voice the concern to. “He seems to practically worship the ground he walks on. But my gut tells me there’s more to it.”

“That’s your gift talking,” Em said. She’d gone to the table at some point and begun munching on pretzels.

“I always listen,” I agreed with a nod.

“Do you think that’s what happened with Julian?” Zoe asked, eyes narrowing. “He went to investigate in the sect leader’s office. What if he knows him or found out he’s dangerous to you somehow?”

“It definitely occurred to me,” I agreed. “But I don’t see how staying away from the mansion will protect me if that’s the case. He’s the new liaison, so staying away permanently doesn’t seem an option anyway.”

“He may not have been thinking about the future as much as getting you out of immediate harm’s way,” Mama said, patting my hand. She seemed to be fully recovered from the

shock of learning her missing husband was so close by. That worried me.

“I need to talk to Julian,” I said, pulling out my cell. But the call went to voicemail.

Maybe I should have been worried about him instead of Dad.

“Well, if Dad thinks this new vampire boss is the bee’s knees, then he’s probably safe enough for now,” Zoe said, standing along with Hazel, who gave her a quick kiss.

“I suppose,” I said absently as an email alert popped up from Julian.

Dear Dr. Devaux,

I apologize for interrupting our training, but I believe you are well-informed enough to continue your job at the base without my assistance. I will be off-island on assignment indefinitely. If you are in need of assistance, please contact General Fontaine, and he will reassign you a supervisor.

All my best,

Lietutenant Julian Carver

What the actual fuck? I’d risen while reading the email. Now finished, I dropped back onto my ass on the couch staring at my phone. Had Zoe pulled me into an alternate universe? He...he couldn’t have *left*. Not when he knew what that would do to me. I shook my head, and Karma morphed into the flop-eared bunny again, darting into my lap, where he reached up on his hind legs to lick my nose.

“What happened?” Mama asked. “Char?”

“He’s gone.” It was all I could say. Zoe yanked the phone from my hand and read it out loud as I stared into space.

He’d told me he loved me. I didn’t care what his reason was. If you loved someone, you didn’t just disappear. I thought of Dad and what Zoe had said about making decisions for her. Well, I wasn’t going to just lay down and let him ghost me! I’d find him if only to give him a piece of my mind and maybe a stake in the leg to boot.

“What is with men?” Hazel asked on a sigh.

A knock at the door made me jerk.

Zoe ran over and peered out the peephole. “It’s Binx.”

The Other sect leader, who happened to be an incubus, stood outside the door. Great.

“Let him in,” Mama said, standing and straightening her outfit. “I asked him to come over. He can help us with Em.”

“Are you insane?” I said, then bit my lip. “Sorry. But you can’t tell anyone else about Em.”

“Nonsense. Em told me he was safe to tell,” Mama scolded as she rushed over and opened the door, nearly smacking Zoe in the face. “Come on in, Binx.”

“Thank you, Darling.”

I flinched at his play on her name, Darlene. I really didn’t want to think about that too closely right now.

“I came as soon as I got your message,” Binx said, striding into the room and awakening my sex drive at exactly the wrong time.

I stood again, and excused myself while they filled him in. I needed space, so I went to my room, locked the door and the wards, then chased down my playful bathtub so I could take a good long soak.

* * *

By Monday morning, I was more than ready to beat something up, so I came to training with Daphne with enthusiasm. And after disarming her for half an hour, I asked if I could learn an offensive move for once. With a pat on my back, she took me down to the floor so fast I barely had time to blink.

“Like that?” she asked, straddling my hips.

“Yeah,” I agreed.

She helped me to my feet and proceeded to teach me to flip an opponent and how to use the heel of my palm to drive an assailant's bones into their brain by striking their nose. I managed to kill two dummies in the process and felt pretty damn good about it.

"You holding up okay?" she asked as I drank my magic water that would restore my physical energy. I'd told her about Julian leaving and that Binx was now included in the too-large group of people keeping Em's existence a secret while trying to figure out where the other children had been moved.

"I don't know, honestly. But when I catch Julian, I'm going to drag his ass back here and use this training on him. Any idea where he might have gone?"

Daphne tapped her chin in thought. "Probably undercover with MorningStar, if I had to guess. He could do that indefinitely without raising suspicion."

And that would almost guarantee I should stay away from him since that government program was after me and my psychic abilities and had attempted to kidnap me once already. Lovely.

"Don't worry," Daphne said as she walked me to the waterfall showers she'd willed into existence in the basement. "I know men, and that one can't stay away from you for long."

"That doesn't mean I'll take him back after the stunt he pulled," I said, crushing the empty water bottle in my hand.

"That's entirely up to you. I'd say he's at your mercy." Daphne blew me a kiss and sauntered off into the hanging foliage to let me get ready for my morning.

The elevator surprised me when it opened into Dr. Orpheus's office. But instead of the evil doctor sitting at the desk, it was Tittwell, the creepy little imp assistant to the general. I hesitated before exiting the lift.

"Ah! Dr. Devaux, please come into Tittwell's new office."

That got me moving forward. "*Your* office?"

The bug-eyed, wrinkly creature spun in the seat, letting his tail whip behind him. “Yes! Tittwell has been waiting for a promotion. Silly Dr. Orpheus went and ran an illegal experimentation lab and got himself in the brig. But Dr. Devaux knew that. She helped uncover it. Tittwell read the file.”

“How are you qualified to take over?” I asked, leaning across the desk and wondering if the general genuinely knew his imp was up here.

“Tittwell is a doctor. Doesn’t the good doctor remember how Tittwell assisted in the lab? No. She didn’t give Tittwell much of a chance.” He shook his head sadly. “Didn’t ask for Tittwell’s qualifications. But Tittwell is a medical doctor.” He pointed to the left and I gaped.

Framed on the wall was a certified degree in Supernatural Medicine from a college titled Fae University of Magical Sciences. I straightened and crossed my arms.

“Why am I here?” I asked.

“You have an appointment.”

“*Had* an appointment with the man in the brig. I’m not submitting to any more tests.”

Titwell stopped spinning and hopped up on top of the desk. It took everything I had not to jerk back.

“Titwell does not expect the doctor to do so. Titwell simply wants to check on your wellbeing.”

“I see. I’m fine, thank you. Now I need to get to work.” I turned toward the waiting elevator but stopped short at his next words.

“Tittwell was hoping you’d help with the research. If the good doctor helps, then it’s on the up-and-up. No brig for Tittwell.”

I sighed deeply. But perhaps this was a good opportunity to do things ethically for once. “What were you wanting help with?”

“Tittwell wants to find more psychics to talk to and help. Intel shows there’s a new one in Sedona, Arizona that MorningStar is going after.”

“You want me to get to them first? Isn’t that...Lieutenant Carver’s job?” I asked suspiciously.

Titwell’s giant eyes lit up as he bounced, making his white lab coat skim back and forth on the surface of the desk. “Yes! But the lieutenant has informed the general he is unable to execute the extraction or risk his cover.”

Alarm bells blared in my head as a dark shadow fell over Titwell. Reigning in my temper, I took my time speaking. “What aren’t you telling me?”

Tittwell’s pointy ears flattened against his head as I towered over him, even on the desk. His fingers twisted in his coat as he contemplated me. “The lieutenant asked the general not to send the good doctor. But Tittwell thinks she’d be perfect for the job.”

So Julian didn’t want me in on this. And he’d be around if he was working with MorningStar and trying to keep his cover intact. A smile spread over my face, and I wondered if it looked evil or more like Mama’s all-is-well mask.

“I think you’re absolutely right, Tittwell. I’ll take the job. Send me the details.” Then I spun on my heels and took the elevator to my own office.

Chapter Eight

Talk About Creepy Vampires



The last thing I expected was to find the general waiting in my office when I arrived. I'd never seen him anywhere other than the massive, football-sized command center and Daphne's basement when it was a murder crime scene. His enormous form hunched almost comically in one of my visitor chairs. I suppressed the amusement and met him with a serious face as I took my place behind my glass desk.

A glance showed me that my computer terminal was still asleep and locked, and I got no psychic impressions that he'd messed with it at all. Not that he needed to stoop to that route if he wanted to spy on me. I was sure he had access to everything and everyone here.

"General, how can I help you this morning?"

"I want to follow up on the report concerning the illegal experimentation Dr. Orpheus was running. You are the only one named on the paperwork who I haven't spoken to as of yet. I trust you are sufficiently recovered from the ordeal."

The formality of the words was far from a question concerning my well-being, so I nodded and folded my hands before me, waiting.

The general cleared his throat. "What was your business on base after hours the other night?"

I'd expected these questions and had read over the reports Sam and Daphne had sent me copies of the day before. "I had a vision while at the beach with my sister. I reported it to my

superior and the relevant shifter sect liaison. We immediately headed to the base with the hope of intercepting anything currently happening and letting you know, especially with the understanding that children might be involved. Unfortunately, you were out, despite your habit of being on base at all times.” I smiled politely and batted my eyelids for good measure. After all, it was happening right beneath his nose. Either he knew and sanctioned it, making this all pretense, or he was ignorant of a major operation mere feet away.

“And what led you to Orpheus’s office?” he asked, ignoring any inuendo on my part.

“The elevator. It only takes you where you need to be, so we knew we needed to be there.” The general dealt in crisp, no-nonsense facts, so I didn’t elaborate with the rage I felt, knowing something so horrible was happening on base.

“How did you break the wards?”

I paused. To my knowledge, no one had told him there were wards on the trap door. Though I supposed it was a foregone conclusion. I decided to go the safe route. “I come from a family of witches, General. Simple wards are a snap for anyone who knows what they’re doing, whether wielding strong magic or not.”

Grunting, the general stood and wrapped on my desk a couple of times with his massive fist. “I’ll let you know if I have any further questions.”

“Have a nice day,” I said with a little wave. But he didn’t move.

“There’s another topic we need to discuss. Are you aware the vampires have chosen a new leader? Silas Bentkirk. One of the ancient ones. Older than Carver by quite a few centuries—maybe millennia. He wants a meeting with you and has agreed to let us examine the crime scene, or what’s left of it. Go down there today.”

“Will do,” I said, standing to see him to the elevator.

The moment it disappeared, I leaned back against the wall of windows with a sigh. So much for keeping me away from

the mansion. Not that I planned on staying away anyhow. Silas Bentkirk... I rolled the name around in my mind, and it elicited a cold trickle down my spine. Before going down there, I needed to find as much as I could on my father's mysterious benefactor from SHADE's database. Cracking my knuckles, I went to work.

By lunchtime, I had exactly nothing of use on Silas Bentkirk. Not even a picture. Just plenty of filler about his philanthropic efforts with a whole host of random non-profits. It seemed Mr. Bentkirk didn't have a particular cause he cared to support, just plenty of old money to throw around to make himself look good. I tried checking into the old vampire angle, too, seeing what info there was on ancient bloodsuckers. The older, the stronger, seemed to hold true, as did the concept of less sensitivity to things like daylight and silver.

I was expected today, but I had one stop to make before I went down to the vamp's side of the island. It was the best place for lunch anyway, aside from the Rusty Shifter pub. Mama would have plenty of leftovers in the fridge while Zoe loaded me up with charms. And I could make sure everyone else was working on finding leads to the location of the missing kids.

* * *

It was strange standing in front of the door to the vampire estate without Julian at my side after Mabel, the island ghost taxi had screeched off. It wasn't like the ghost of a murdered witch tied within feet of her daisy covered VW bug could act as backup. Not that I needed anyone. I was fine on my own, and I had the official title of SHADE investigator to keep me safe.

I lifted the giant brass knocker. Before it fell against the wood, the door swung open. I staggered back as Lydia appeared. I hadn't been this close to her since the day the lab was attacked. And despite the fact she was a vampire now, despite her suddenly not being in jail, despite her not wanting the cure...it was good to see her pale, sassy, goth self. I flung

myself at her, hugging her to my chest so hard I might've crushed her if she wasn't indestructible.

"Let. Go." Lydia shoved gently at me until I stopped manhandling her. When I stepped back, she shook her head with the quirk of her lips.

"I missed you so much, Lyds."

"Not enough to break me out of prison," she snarked, leaning against the doorjamb so her cleavage threatened to pop out of the square, black bodice of her minidress. One big, booted foot rested against the building as well.

"I'm so sorry. I wanted to. Julian said we had to find proof of your innocence first, but I shouldn't have listened."

Lydia snorted. "It's okay. I'm out now. The boss made sure of it. That was part of the deal. He wants to find the real killer."

"But Lyds...he is the real killer. You saw him do it, right?" I leaned in and whispered, but she just snorted again and grasped my shoulders.

"Chill. It's okay. He'll give you the evidence to prove Carmichael's death was a suicide. Done and done. Now come on in." She led me inside and up the steps as she spoke. "Your dad is in his own world, busy in the lab, but now you'll practically be a regular here, so he'll see you again soon."

Suicide? By ripping off his own head? I didn't comment, but I wasn't so sure I liked it. I actually found it quite annoying that both Lydia and my father seemed so enamored with this Silas guy. My skin prickled as we climbed, and the air felt thicker. Without thinking, I initiated an energetic shield around myself as psychic protection. Every fiber of my being was telling me to run the other way.

I hesitated on the final step, hand lingering on the polished banister.

The voice in the back of my mind I called Pythia spoke up after having been silent for days. *Necessary*. Well fine then.

Shaking off the feeling, I followed on high alert. Despite Pythia's seldom and often cryptic bare-bones comments, if she thought it was important, then I would listen. Just like her namesake, the Oracle of Delphi, she had a reputation for never being wrong.

I found myself chewing on the inside of my cheek as Lydia pushed open double wooden doors with gilded accents and stepped aside with an expectant grin. I don't know what I expected—maybe an evil looking man made of marble wearing a Dracula cape? But what I got was a handsome guy of about thirty in an impeccable, striped business suit, with shiny dark hair parted on the side and slicked back like a dad from a 1950's sitcom. His golden eyes glowed unnaturally. I mentally added that to the list of ancient vampire characteristics. *The older the vamp, the more unnatural the eye color.*

“The infamous Dr. Devaux. Finally, we meet.” He reached out a pale hand with an onyx ring on it and waited with a dimpled smile.

Swallowing down my unease, I took his freezing hand. He shook it briskly before sitting on a velvet settee instead of at the massive maple desk. He crossed his legs at the knees and waited until I took a seat in a winged chair opposite.

“Thank you for getting Lydia out of prison—” I said. Best to be polite. “Since we both know she didn't kill Carmichael.” Okay, maybe I was incapable of politeness unless the person deserved it.

Silas chuckled. “Just as much of a spitfire as your father said. I like it! I appreciate honesty, Doctor. May I call you Charlotte?” He waited, glowing, golden eyes drinking me in.

The green heart necklace beneath my blouse warmed uncomfortably. It was the anti-glamour charm Zoe had given me. He was trying to hypnotize me.

Asshole.

“We should probably keep things professional, Mr. Bentkirk.” I smiled sweetly.

Showing not an ounce of surprise, he relaxed back in the seat and put his arms up on either side of him. “Not a problem. I look forward to working with you, Doctor Devaux. Honestly, though, between you and your father, it might get a bit confusing.”

“Call me Char then,” I relented. “I’m not sure how much we’ll actually be working together, though.”

“For a psychic, you seem rather short-sighted, Char.” He had the audacity to wink at me. “I’ve been around for a while, so trust me when I say I see several possible future partnerships for us. But in the meantime, I simply need you to deliver this to the general for me.” He motioned behind him, and a manila folder floated off his desk and through the air. I caught it automatically. I couldn’t keep the shock off my face if I tried. That was an ability I hadn’t known vampires could possess. I was psychokinetic and a mind-bender, but I never met another person, let alone a vamp, with both those gifts. What the hell else could he do? Did he have these skills because he was a psychic before being turned? A million questions raced through my brain.

“You seem surprised, Char,” Silas commented with another dimpled smirk.

I shrugged. “Just didn’t know you were a psychic.”

“Oh. I’m not anymore. Not since my rebirth. It’s taken me hundreds of years and a lot of scientists like your father and Lydia here to help me cultivate such talents. Forgive my flippant use of them. It is such a wonderful novelty to me that I sometimes behave almost childishly to revel in the joy of using them.” He leaned forward, elbows on his desk. “But I’m sure you know all about that.”

“Hmm,” I said noncommittally, looking through the file. Notarized by three doctors, the autopsy report read suicide.

“It seems someone glamoured the poor fellow into punishing himself in the worst way possible should he do something untoward. And as Lydia can attest, he attempted such a thing with her, then proceeded to rip his own head off.”

My blood ran cold as I met his gaze with shock and mortification. How had he known I'd used my mind-bending to tell Carmichael exactly that? Was this very specific reference some sort of threat to lay the murder on me? Worse yet, was my father just assuming Silas had done it when it really was my own command that had caused his death?

Faint. I felt faint as my mouth turned dry. My heart hammered so loudly in my own head I was sure every vampire in the building could hear my tell.

I nearly jumped out of my skin when I felt a cold hand slide up my spine. Either I'd blacked out a moment, or Silas had superspeeded over to my side to lean over me with a concerned expression on his handsome face. Then something even more shocking happened. He spoke in my mind like only Julian and I had been able to do.

It's okay, Mon Cher. I will protect you. I always protect my interests.

I jerked away from his touch, but he only blinked. "I...I have to go. Put in the report. The general," I stammered, standing and swaying slightly.

"Are you okay, Char?" Lydia was by my side in a flash, brows furrowed.

All I could do was nod, though I didn't relish trying to keep my balance on the stairs. As though reading my mind—and for all I knew he had—Silas offered his elbow to escort me.

I would have rather fallen down all four flights.

"I'm good, thank you," I said.

Take his arm, Pythia commanded.

What the actual fuck?

Fine.

I slipped my arm through his and let him guide me back downstairs. The scent of burning wood flowed over me as a vision clouded my mind.

Silas sat in a large chair near a roaring fire and sipped jeweled liquid that matched his eyes. To his left, Julian, dressed in a black tunic and covered in what looked like blood, knelt on the thick burgundy carpet, head bowed, hands fisted and trembling with rage.

Despite my anger and indignation at his abrupt departure, I longed to run to him. Yet I knew that this moment was one that happened long ago, far before I was born.

Silas grinned, fangs extended, and swirled the brandy in his glass. "She was delicious. I didn't waste an ounce."

"You are a monster," Julian spat, his accent far heavier than current day. He raised his head to reveal glowing scarlet eyes and dark veins protruding from his neck. Tears of blood flowed from his eyes.

Silas swiped a finger over Julian's face and licked it, sampling the carnage covering him. "We both are, it seems, and it's time you learned to accept your own nature. Where did the blood for your tears come from, Julian?" Silas leaned over to meet his eyes as he laughed. "It tastes very much like the blood of a young man in his prime. Perhaps a police officer that refused to investigate the death of a peasant girl?"

Julian growled low, fangs extended and monstrosly enraged. I had to fight not to gasp or grasp my own throat in defense. But still, he did not attack.

"She was my sister, not some peasant girl."

"Your sister was a peasant girl," Silas bellowed, rising and towering over Julian. He threw his glass into the fire where it crackled and exploded on impact. "Beneath us. Holding you back. Only one human girl matters to either of us, and you will bring her to me tonight."

"No." Julian's entire body shook as he fought some internal battle. Was Silas using telekinesis to hold him down? That had to be it.

Laughter met Julian's obvious pain. "Throw a tantrum if you wish, but you will do as I say because I command it."

My blood froze. Could Silas use mind-bending?

“Now, say it, son.” He squatted before Julian.

“Yes, sire.”

“Tell me she belongs to me.”

Now Julian shook so hard I was surprised he stayed upright as he coughed out, “She is yours.”

“Good. Then I shall have Dr. Welk prepare for your immanent arrival. Go fetch me my psychic like the good dog you are. Oh, and Julian? Once she’s been turned, I think I’ll have her rip your heart out. After you’ve watched me fuck her, of course.”

Julian roared so loud the flames in the brick fireplace shivered in response.

When I looked up again, Silas was opening the front door of the mansion for me.

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost, Char. Whatever could be wrong?” he asked.

No wonder Julian left. Silas was his sire and, according to my father and the evidence I’d just seen with my third eye, he couldn’t say no to him. He had every reason to believe Silas could make him hurt me as he’d threatened to do to the girl in the vision. So Julian’s solution was to remove himself from the equation.

This man killed Clare, Julian’s sister. What must it have been like for Julian to be indebted to him?

“I just remembered something,” I said with a smile of my own as I stepped into the dappled sunlight, still chilled to the bone. “The general will want a *full* report.” I wiggled my fingers in a goodbye wave and hurried down the steps to Mabel’s daisy-covered Volkswagen. She’d come back for me just as she promised.

“Have fun with the crypt walkers?” Mabel asked, materializing in the driver’s seat as she pulled away with a screech of tires.

“Not one bit. But I did get some information I needed. I don’t suppose you know anything about vampires?” I asked,

clicking my seatbelt into place as we hugged the curve of the road.

“Yeah, it’s best to stay away from them,” she said with a toss of semi-transparent hair.

Kind of hard to do when your father dragged you into their midst at a young age, but I kept that miserable assessment to myself. What had Dad gotten himself into now? Did he have the slightest inkling that Silas was evil?

I had to find Julian. He knew everything about Silas, and I’d need all the information I could get to stay out of his clutches.

Mon Cher. The name he’d called me in my mind made me physically ill and I hugged myself.

How had he so easily fooled both Dad and Lydia? Dad had already demonstrated questionable choices when it came to sources of funding. But Lyds? She had a level head on her shoulders.

“Where to? The house?” Mabel asked as we crested the hill toward the village.

“No. Take me to the base, please.” I needed to talk to someone who could think clearly, and I knew just who that someone was.

Chapter Nine

My First Mission



“**W**hat do I do with the file?” I asked as Daphne flipped it closed.

“Burn it,” she said. “You’re giving him something to hold over you if you turn it in.”

“But if I do that, then Lydia will take the blame.”

Daphne scrunched her tiny nose in thought as vines rose and twisted in the foot of fog behind her. “Then we nail him for murder instead. Two problems solved.”

I sighed and leaned back on the boulder bench she’d called out of the ground for me to sit on and gave voice to the issue that had been poking at me for hours. “What if it really was my fault?”

Daphne leaned over so we were face to face. “If, and that’s a big *if*, baby, it was your command that caused this, then that’s on him. He knew about the command, and he still tried to do gods-know-what to Lydia. You saved her life.”

“But we can’t frame an innocent man no matter how despicable he is,” I protested, fighting tears.

“Innocent?” Daphne snorted. “From what you told me, Silas killed multiple times without conscience, and *he* is framing *you*.”

“Well, when you put it that way...” I forced a smile. “How do we do it?”

“Hmm that’s the tricky part,” she said, sitting as the thick vines behind her twisted into chair support. “That’s going to

take some thought and strategic planning.”

“Which I don’t have time for. As it is, I feel horrible not being able to focus on finding the missing kids. I have to find Julian and run Tittwell’s errand to save another psychic from MorningStar.”

“You can’t do everything yourself, hon. Your mom, Zoe, Hazel, Binx, and Sam are all working on finding the kids. You find Julian and save a psychic while I dispose of this,” Daphne waved the folder. “And figure out how to prove Silas’s guilt.”

“Don’t dispose of it yet,” I said, standing. “It’s Lydia’s only insurance policy. We may be able to use it somehow.”

“Okay. I’ll hang on to it then.” Daphne pointed at the boulder I’d just vacated, and the center sank in, creating a compartment of sorts where she placed the file. Then she waved a hand and the rock slid over the top.

“Wow,” was all I could say as she swiped her hands together in a done motion.

“Take whatever supplies you think you’ll need in your belt,” Daphne suggested. “Wear something comfortable, too, in case you need to fight.”

“Thanks, Sensei,” I teased. I’d already mentally tallied the list of supplies I planned to grab from the lab and stash in the bottomless belt compartment she’d gifted me.

Thankfully, by the time I got home and packed up, Mama and Em were sound asleep and Zoe was presumably at Hazel’s, so without having to launch into another exhausting explanation, I stuffed some extra things in my belt and changed into black leggings and a forest green tunic-style top I had to admit looked killer with my black belt and high-heeled boots that felt like slippers. I braided my hair, something I rarely did, and finished off the look with a chameleon charm I snuck out of Zoe’s jewelry box. That way, no one would easily recognize me if MorningStar had my photo on a list or something. My body stretched upward by about two inches and my boobs swelled until my bra became uncomfortably tight and my cleavage spilled over the top. My eyes stretched

and thinned, turning coffee-colored, my skin deepened to a golden tan, and the auburn of my hair darkened until it resembled the shade of Karma's raven feathers.

I was hot. I'd wanted to be discreet, but now I felt like I'd attract more attention. At least I didn't look a thing like me. The obvious and completely unwelcome thought that Zoe used these charms for bedroom play had me gagging as I snuck outside to meet Mabel.

"Sorry, I'm waiting for an expected fare," the ghost said when I opened the door.

"It's me," I hissed as I climbed inside. "I'm in disguise."

Even barely visible, Mabel's eyes bulged, and her mouth shaped itself into an O. "You'd win the costume contest for sure."

"Thanks," I said, buckling up. "The portals, please."

"Any particular one?" she asked, squealing as she pulled a U-turn.

"Sedona, or as close as possible," I said, taking a deep breath. At least it should be easier to track a psychic down there than in a big city like New York.

"Oh, that's easy," Mabel commented. "That place is already full of natural vortices, so that was one of the first portals erected."

In less than half an hour, I was stepping through the metallic archway where the afternoon sun nearly blinded me. Luckily, I threw up an arm and steadied myself before accidentally stumbling off the dirt trail and down the side of the steep incline into a cluster of cacti.

The other portals I'd used with Julian had been hidden inside of buildings with security in place, so I'd expected something similar. Apparently, this one was old enough and out of the way enough that it didn't rate those kinds of measures. It was a major oversight I'd have to tell the gener—

Turning, I realized there was no portal back on this side. I reached out and set palms against the rock and dirt of the

shallow cave inlet I'd stepped out of. Huh. I was about to have a fit in the middle of a mountain in the desert when I spotted the shimmering crystal embedded at the base of the cave wall. I bent to inspect the piece of quartz and, when I touched it, the glowing green portal energy lit on the other side of the wall, and I could just make out the familiar forest beyond the base's tarmac. Clever. I straightened, counting, and the entrance faded in ten seconds. I could work with that.

I pulled out my cell and checked the GPS so I could start winding my way down toward the town before dark, not wanting to encounter any nighttime desert creatures like tarantulas, scorpions, or...I snickered at the thought of bats and the silly stories about vampires turning into them. Imagining Julian as a bat shifter instead of a vampire humored me enough to get me down the mountain with a good hour of sunlight left.

From there, I used an app on my phone that I hadn't since moving to the island and ordered a rideshare to a nearby hotel so I could grab some water and settle into a base of operations. The enormous red rocks were beautiful backlit by the sunset, but I had bigger things on my mind.

Sedona wasn't huge, which was both good and bad when it came to my mission. It would be easier to find the psychic, but it would also be easier for the enemy to find them. I wished Tittwell had given me more information on the target's name and appearance. As it was, I didn't even know if they were a man, a woman, or something else entirely.

A sudden veil of hopelessness fell over me as I sank into a chair in the lobby of the resort. I had no clue what I was doing. I wasn't a spy; I was a scientist. I couldn't use either mind-bending or telekinesis without risk of being detected. It had already been almost forty-eight hours since Julian and MorningStar had gotten a head start. For all I knew, they and the psychic were long gone. What was the point in trying?

It took me exactly two minutes of wallowing to realize that these strong emotions drowning me were coming from someone else. I sat up straighter, sipping the bottle of overpriced water I'd bought, and scanned the lobby. My gaze

flitted from the bored, young workers behind the welcome desk to the couple in tourist hats and sunglasses staring at their phones, to a young woman in the corner. A gold nose ring glinted from the tiny open portion peeking out of the navy sweatshirt hood drawn over her face. I squinted, and her aura swam into view, revealing dark gray bursts swirling with sickly yellow streaks. She was on serious broadcast despite trying to hide in her clothes.

Frowning, I put up my energy shield and stood to toss my empty bottle in the recycling. Pythia's voice piped up so loud it startled me.

Watch.

I sat back down and stretched, zeroing in on the hooded woman in my peripheral vision. Her long ebony fingers had once been polished red but were bitten down to stubs and tapped against the leg of her torn jeans. Her foot, clad in a worn black sneaker, jiggled so fast I was afraid she'd start a fire on the wooden floorboards.

Every few seconds, she glanced at the entrance as though expecting Godzilla to burst inside and level the place. When the sliding door to the outside pool whooshed open behind her, she flicked a finger. It snapped shut, barely missing the woman holding a toddler and striding through.

I leapt to my feet. She'd just used telekinesis. What were the odds that I'd chosen the very hotel she was in?

No accident. Pythia said.

But before I could work that out, the woman in the hoodie had locked on to my reaction and stood as well, fingers twitching at her sides. I opened my mouth to tell her I was no threat, but she bolted before I could get the words out.

Go.

Now Pythia was being downright unnecessary. I charged after the woman, my balance only slightly off-center because of my new body size. The front door slammed shut much faster than natural. It took me precious seconds to pry it open manually and continue the chase.

I couldn't mess this up. MorningStar probably spotted her use of TK, and if I added to it, they'd be out here that much faster. I had to get to her first.

She darted down a street lined with small shops and restaurants, weaving between tourists until I lost sight of her for a moment.

The psychic, Pythia said.

Yeah, I knew that. That was the whole fucking point—that's when I saw the neon fortune teller sign with a crystal ball blinking on and off in the window of the shop near where she disappeared.

I approached with caution, letting my eyes adjust to the darkened room as I entered the store. Tables lined the walls set with crystals and decks of tarot cards. To the back left, the cashier stared at her phone, ignoring me. Behind and to her side was a long red curtain swaying slightly as though someone had just gone through. Then it stopped too suddenly to be from the wind, and I groaned inwardly. *Keep using telekinesis and they'll find us faster.*

One step toward the curtain and the crystals sitting in wooden bowls at my sides began to tremble menacingly. I paused, one foot in the air.

Pythia hissed in my head.

Out of time.

The door behind me burst open as two men in black suits and sunglasses entered. One had a violent red aura and the other had none—a vampire.

Shit.

I needed a distraction.

Praying it would work, at least temporarily, I used my own TK powers to knock over a trashcan in the adjoining alleyway I'd seen as I passed. Both men froze as I pretended to browse through a selection of tourmaline palm stones, fisting the most jagged chunk I could find, just in case I had to fight them physically.

The man with the aura, that I was guessing was a shifter of some sort, nodded to the vampire who slipped back out the door. Okay, so down to one and not for long. I held a piece of selenite up to the light as the remaining man strode toward the curtain.

“Hey!” I said loudly, hurrying to catch up and grab his meaty arm. “I’m next for a reading. No cuts.”

A guttural sound vibrated from the man’s double-wide chest as he turned and glared down at me. I tried to keep my heartrate steady as I snatched my hand back. “Seriously. I’ve been waiting.”

The cashier chose that moment to become involved. “Madame Star isn’t in today, so you’ll both have to come back.”

“Oh,” I said, retreating a step and readying my fist. The man yanked open the curtain, and a hooded figure ducked beneath his arm and down the aisle of the small shop. “I’m here to help!” I yelled as she sent one of the tables flying sideways to block the shifter from pursuing.

He kicked it aside like it was a twig as the cashier screamed and the woman opened the door to come face-to-face with the vampire.

This was not going well.

“Freeze!” I yelled at the room in general, throwing out a burst of magic. Every one of them stopped in their tracks. Yeah, I’d already blown my cover, but sometimes I had to improvise.

I grabbed the hooded woman’s arm and spoke quickly. “I’m here to help you. I’m going to unfreeze you so we can run.” Then with a quick prayer to the universe, I told her she was free again.

“Come on,” I said, tugging her past the vampire taking up the doorway. “There will be more on the way now that I did that.”

We rushed up the street and down another alley, zigzagging through the small town until we were in a

subdivision of some sort. She yanked away her arm and bent over to catch her breath as I scanned the distance for pursuers. Then I pulled my phone to hail a rideshare.

“Who are you?” she asked once she was able.

“Char. You?”

She narrowed her eyes at me and shoved her hood back to reveal a blue buzz cut. “I meant like what organization are you with? What do you want with me?”

“SHADE,” I said, “and I want to save you. I’m also a psychic.”

“Duh. That was obvious.”

I glanced down the empty street again, not wanting to have this conversation until she was safely back on the island.

“What if I don’t want to join SHADE?” she challenged.

“It’s better than the alternative,” I said with a harsh laugh. But I had to wonder if that was true based on the little girl living at my house and the general and Silas and...

“Mmmhmm.” She started to back away.

“Stop,” I said, and she flinched. “I’m not using mind-bending on you, just asking you to hold on. I’m not going to force you to do anything, but at least let me get you somewhere safe.”

“Tabitha.”

I blinked.

“That’s my name. Tabitha Brinkley.”

Smiling, I offered my hand to shake. Unfortunately, the vision that flashed before my eyes was Tabitha thrown into a stone cell with what looked like a broken nose. We each gasped and backed away from the other.

“Did you...see that too?” I asked, scanning the street again.

She nodded, wide-eyed. “You’re going to get thrown in a cell with a vampire.”

“Um.” I had no intelligent words for that statement. So, we each saw the other thrown in a cell. In my case, there was undead company. Probably hungry company, considering there were only a few vampires I trusted, and none were likely to be inside of a cell.

“Isn’t that what you saw?” Tabitha asked.

Before I could respond, my phone buzzed, and I breathed a sigh of relief. “Ride’s almost here. Driver’s name is Chad.”

Sure enough, a white hybrid turned down the street. The second it pulled to a stop, I opened the door, shoved Tabitha inside, and joined her. “Get us as close as you can to the coordinates I’m airdropping,” I said to the driver as I tapped at my phone. “I’ll give you an extra fifty.”

Once the car was on route, I let my head dip back against the headrest, closed my eyes, and breathed. Whatever we’d seen had to be a possible future far away from now. There was no way they tracked us here.

“Hey, Char,” Tabitha said, and I popped open one eyelid to look at her. “What was it you saw?”

She’d been honest with me, and it was the least I could do, but I hoped she wouldn’t freak out.

“I saw you in a cell.”

Her brows furrowed.

“No vampires at least,” I added quickly.

“Silver linings,” she murmured. “Thank you for telling me.”

“Of course.” I smiled and patted her arm. “We’ll be to safety soon, and we’ll do everything we can to make sure it never happens.”

“I wish I could say the same.”

“Excuse me?” I sat up straight, immediately on edge.

“Marcus,” she said. I turned to look at the driver, a middle-aged man with a receding hairline and moustache decidedly not named Chad.

“Sleep,” he said, and before it registered as a command, I lost consciousness.

Chapter Ten

The Devil You Know



Consciousness crept in with an unwelcome headache, the kind I usually associated with using too much of my abilities. Slowly, I became aware of the cold, damp stone and the awkward angle of my body against it. I coughed and worked my way into a sitting position while trying to blink my way back to reality. The last thing I remembered was being in the car with Tabitha and...

I can accept that she and MorningStar played me, but you, Pythia?

I smacked the side of my head, but it remained stubbornly silent. If Pythia was my subconscious, I sucked. If she wasn't...well, the fact she was in my head made that a possibility I didn't want to look at too closely at the moment. I had enough to worry about.

It appeared I was in an underground cell lined with large gray stones. An iron door with silver bars covered the small opening at the top. The dim lighting appeared to come from fairy lights hovering near the ceiling of the fifteen-foot cavern that bathed everything in a creepy green glow. Something felt strange, and after a moment, I realized I was barefoot, and my belt was missing.

“Fuck!” The word reverberated around the space, making me feel slightly better.

It seemed Tabitha hadn't been telling me the whole truth of her vision, though, since I appeared to be alone.

Now what was I supposed to do? How had they found me? And where was the actual psychic I was supposed to find? It seemed unlikely I'd be able to help anyone else if I couldn't even keep myself out of a cell for a full day.

I'd have to use my abilities to get out. It wasn't like they didn't already know about me. I made my way awkwardly to my feet, my body sore and sluggish. I wondered if everyone I used mind-bending on felt this way after. Just another tick in the guilt box when it came to my abilities. So many times in my life I'd wished I was a normal witch like my mother and sister.

Glaring at the door, I jerked my head to the side. It didn't budge. Impossible. There were no physical limits to my abilities. They were based on energy movement, so it shouldn't matter. It was the science of magic.

Don't panic, I told myself. Just...try something smaller.

I waved a hand at the bars. Nothing.

Okay, the panic was unavoidable. I started pacing, tears squeezing from the sides of my eyes until the sound of footsteps echoing on the stone had me backing up against the wall.

The door swung open on its own as if to mock me. A woman strode in flanked by the same vampire and shifter from the shop and Tabitha trailing behind. She wouldn't meet my eyes, but the blonde woman in front certainly had no problem staring me down. Her hair, drawn tight into a bun, looked as severe as the rest of her with her own shiny black boots and brown camouflage fatigues. She was the only one in a uniform, but I got the strange impression it was for intimidation purposes more than to actually represent something since she was the only one of the group wearing one.

I chewed on my cheek as I waited for her to speak.

Hands clasped behind her back, she approached until she was an inch from my face. The too-strong scent of roses filled my nose and nearly made me gag.

Lay off the perfume, lady.

“Why are you posing as a missing psychic?” she demanded. Her southern accent startled me slightly. I guess I hadn’t expected it here in Sedona.

It took me a moment to figure out what she meant. I’d introduced myself as Char, but I’d taken Zoe’s chameleon charm. Okay, so I had one thing going for me, they still didn’t think I was who I was.

The slap came at me so fast I nearly fell back to the floor from the combination of shock and pain.

“You will answer my questions. I have no time for bravado. No one has ever escaped these premises. The only way out is with my permission. Understood?”

I swallowed and pressed the back of my hand to my lips. I’d bitten my cheek when she’d slapped me, and blood filled my mouth. The vampire behind her hissed lightly, his eyes burning scarlet.

The woman smiled and it was chilling. “Wonderful idea, Tomás. If she is less than forthcoming, we will put her in the cell with the starving vampire.”

I couldn’t help but glance at Tabitha since that sounded too much like her prediction. She still wouldn’t look at me, but she seemed to pale slightly.

“It was a coincidence,” I said, my voice thick. “I don’t know who that psychic is, but my name is Char. My full name is Cheryl Harrison.”

“I see.” But she didn’t look like she bought it. “You are a mind bender.”

I nodded, still bringing my hand away with fresh blood.

“Then who did you attempt to bend when no one else was in the room?” she asked, tilting her head and leaning in until I could smell the coffee on her breath.

“I...I...what?”

“You’ve been injected with a suppressant to prevent you from using your powers. But when you attempted it, that signaled an alarm which alerted me that you were awake and ready to chat.” She gripped my chin in her hand, nails digging into my skin. “You have multiple powers.”

Fear spiked through me. But I couldn’t respond with the grip she had on me. I supposed it wasn’t a question as much as a statement.

“There’s only one way that’s possible, and we’ve been trying to track down Dr. Devaux for a very long time.”

Dr. Devaux? That was me... My head spun.

“Clearly, he’s perfected his research on increasing strength and number of psychic powers in an individual. You’re going to tell me where to find him.” She tightened her grip and lifted until I was stretched on my toes.

What did my father’s research have to do with having more than one ability? I was born this way...wasn’t I?

My stomach turned and she backed up just in time for me to lose its contents at her feet. I clutched my abdomen in complete shock and horror.

No. No, he couldn’t have.

Yet both Zoe and I had unheard of abilities. Suddenly, the assumption they were inherited felt silly.

But the idea Dad had used his own family as lab rats...it was like losing the Dad I loved and trusted all over again, and I couldn’t handle it.

“Where is he?” she demanded, grabbing my braid and yanking me away from the puddle of vomit. “Do you think you matter? If I find him, I can make a thousand more of you. An army of them. But if you cooperate, you can be part of a greater future.”

I didn’t care that I was crying. I would never tell her where he was. Even if he deserved it. He’d told me about the vampire mafia connection, but how was he mixed up with MorningStar?

“Who are you?” I asked, looking her in the eyes. It felt good for the anger swirling inside of me to have a focus.

“My name is Major Marcia Honeywell. That’s a name you’ll soon learn to fear. I’m sure you already know who I work for, since you came for Tabby here. The truth is”—she leaned into my face and smiled—“there was no new psychic. Too bad you couldn’t figure that out, seeing as we supplied no details about them. It seems SHADE planted a mole in our project, you see, and we needed to weed them out. You showing up through the portal? That was just a bonus, Sweetcheeks.”

I launched myself at her, but the vampire wrenched my hands behind my back in a flash, not careful about his strength. The pain in my wrist blinded me as he crushed it in his grip, and I fell to my knees with a cry.

“Inject her with GodKiller,” the major ordered, stepping back. “Then feed her to the vamp to kill him. We can turn her later tonight. I have a feeling she’ll be a bit more pliable than our friend.”

GodKiller? No. That was the street name for the drug I’d accidentally created when trying to find a cure. It reverted vampires to their human state, which ended up killing them since they no longer had the virus to keep them undead. But I thought we’d eliminated all of it when we found Mordock’s stash after taking him and his cartel down. How... If they knew about and were after my father’s research, then the MorningStar program was connected to the vampire mafia.

All of this became blindingly clear as the shifter approached, knelt before me, and plunged a syringe into my shoulder. It stung going in but wouldn’t hurt me. It *would* kill the vampire who was about to kill me, then I’d be turned into one, too, and probably killed again the same way.

The vamp behind me dragged me to my feet, and they marched me out of the cell and down the glowing green hall to another door the shifter opened. I was tossed inside with so much force I faceplanted on the stone and had to scramble to my feet as the heavy iron swung closed.

“Lunch,” the shifter laughed as their footsteps retreated down the hall.

I crouched on the floor, cradling my wrist and searching the dark corners of the cell for what I knew was in here with me. He was seated, back against the far wall, his face sallow, sunken crimson eyes, and torn clothing that were little more than rags hanging askew on his perfect body.

It was a body I’d recognize anywhere. Seeing him so ruined—so damaged, every fiber of animosity I’d planned to unleash on him melted into shock.

“Julian, what have they done to you?” I sobbed, crawling one-handed toward him.

It was only when the dark veins in his neck protruded and his fangs elongated that I realized I didn’t look like Charlotte to him. I was a stranger.

I was...lunch.

Chapter Eleven

Double Agent



I froze like a rabbit in a coyote's sights. My abilities were suppressed by the drug they'd stuck me with. There was no way I could fight off his strength and speed, even starved as he was. Nor could I bear to hurt him if I were able.

Seconds passed. My heart pounded far too loudly. Yet he remained still, staring at me. I couldn't stay on my knees with a broken wrist forever. I'd have to do something and soon.

"No," he whispered, the fangs he couldn't hold back made it sound like he had a mouthful of pebbles.

Did...did he recognize me? I licked my lips. "Julian?"

Then he moved. Lightning fast, I was in his lap as he nuzzled my neck, holding my head to the side with a bit too much force. His tongue darted out and ran over my skin.

"Julian, no!" I yelled, beating against his chest. If he drank from me, he'd die.

He pulled back with a hiss, banging his head back into the stone behind him so hard the surface cracked. I flinched.

"Charlotte." My name was pure pain from his lips. "You can't be here."

Taking his face in my good hand, I tilted it toward me gently, but he kept his eyes squinted closed. I stroked the dark veins crawling up his face with my thumb as my tears fell.

"Well, I am," I said, and we both let out strained laughter. "How many times do I have to tell you to stop making decisions for me and trying to protect me?"

“If they leave you here, I won’t be able to stop myself. You’re already bleeding,” he said, taking my face in hand and blinking open sea-blue eyes rimmed in red. The dark lines began to fade, and his fangs shrunk to a smaller, more manageable size.

“How did you know it was me?” I asked.

The corner of his mouth ticked up. “I will always know you, Charlotte.” He leaned in and sniffed me.

Ah, so I smelled like me at least. I wondered how long the effects of Zoe’s charm would last and what would happen if I suddenly shifted back to myself while here.

We have to get you out of here.

We both said the same thing at the same time in our minds.

They gave me GodKiller, Julian. You can’t drink from me no matter what happens.

He growled low, and his too-light eyes flashed crimson again.

I backed off of his lap, accidentally putting weight on my bad wrist. When I cried out, he instantly pulled me back to his chest.

“You’re hurt.”

“So are you,” I said, cradling my hand.

He glared at me and lifted his arm to his mouth.

“No!” I shouted as he bit into himself letting a few drops of his precious blood well to the surface. “You can’t afford to lose any.” I knew the physiology of vampires. It was my life’s work. And if he didn’t feed before his supply ran out, he’d become the kind of monster you’d see in a horror film. A husk of a human, mindlessly searching for blood. It would take quite a few human lives to get him back to normal.

I also knew Julian, and he’d be devastated.

He held the welling blood to my lips, pressing the back of my head firmly but gently so I couldn’t move away.

Drink, Charlotte. It won't take much to heal you.

Reluctantly, I licked his wound until he released me. Immediately, the pain in my wrist and face melted away. It wouldn't counteract the GodKiller drug, since that was built to change a vampire's DNA, but I wondered...

"Julian," I said as he stroked back the hair that had escaped from my braid.

"Yes, love," he murmured.

"Freeze."

It was a huge chance I'd taken. Not that he'd be angry, but I was hoping they didn't have any sensors or alarms on his cell that would tell them I'd used my abilities.

Julian stopped in mid-stroke and remained unblinking as I breathed a sigh of relief. His blood had counteracted the suppression drug they'd used. It had been a long shot, but I'd hoped it was based on shutting down the neural pathways between thought and whatever area of my brain sent out the psychic energy. Apparently, I'd guessed correctly, and those pathways had been healed.

I pressed my lips to his with glee and said, "unfreeze."

"You could have just kissed me," he said with a smirk.

"I'm mad at you," I announced, standing, and offering him a hand. "And I know why you left and who Silas is, by the way."

He gripped my fingers, and I hauled him to his feet. "Then you know why I must stay away from you and that monster."

"Not buying it," I said, moving toward the door and standing on my tiptoes again to see through the bars. "No one's there."

"It's not something you have to buy, Charlotte," Julian said from right behind me. "It's a fact."

"Get ready to run. Do you know a safe way out of here?" I asked, ignoring him.

“I’m not sure I’m capable of maintaining speed for more than a few seconds,” he admitted softly. “Nor is my strength at full capacity.”

“You’ve only been here a couple of days,” I said, turning to look at him. Now that I thought about it, I couldn’t understand how he seemed so starved.

Julian looked away, wincing. “When they realized I was the double agent, they began slowly draining me. They use vampire blood for experimentation.”

“Julian,” I breathed, imagining him strapped to a table as tubes drained him of his precious life force.

“They left me alive enough to try and get information from me. I suppose until they found you. Now there is no reason to keep me alive.” He caressed my cheek again, and I leaned into his touch.

“They aren’t finishing off either of us or getting any information. Get behind me.” It felt strange to be the one protecting him. Gods knew I hadn’t done a great job at being a spy so far, but at least I’d accomplished both of my objectives. Sort of. I’d found out the psychic was fake, or at least already working for MorningStar, and I’d found Julian. Now I just had to get us out of here.

Before I could jerk the door back with my mind, it opened.

Tabitha stood in the doorway, hand outstretched. “Why aren’t you dead?” she asked, but it was curiosity not shock that laced her words.

“Let us go,” I said, putting power behind the words as I tugged Julian along behind me.

“That’s why I’m here. I saw myself releasing you in my vision earlier. I kind of left that part out.”

“Why?” I asked, keeping Julian behind me.

Tabitha shrugged. “I don’t want to be here. But I’d rather be on this side of the cell than the one you’re on.”

“Come with us,” I said without thinking. Julian hissed in my ear, but I ignored him.

Tabitha laughed, but it was humorless. “And get killed by SHADE? No thanks.”

“We won’t kill you,” I said. “Not if you helped me.”

“You are new to this, aren’t you?” She shook her head. “No way you could be doing this for any amount of time and still be such an optimist.”

A heavy door scraped the ground down the hall, and we all looked toward the darkness, straining to see anything in the dim green glow of the end of the corridor.

“Well shit, looks like you talked too much and lost your chance,” Tabitha whispered and made a slamming motion with her hand.

I stopped the door halfway then pushed hard enough to send her flying back. We dashed by her only to stop short in front of the two goons from earlier. The vampire grinned at Julian as his fangs elongated, and the shifter’s body moved in an unnatural way, telling me he was shifting into whatever his other form was.

The vamp lunged, and I shrieked, “Stop!” He ended up still as a statue with his throat in Julian’s fingers.

It distracted me long enough to be startled by an enormous black grizzly that leaped over me and pinned Julian to the ground.

Oh sure, ignore the barefoot woman. I’m no threat.

“Freeze and shift back,” I commanded, ignoring the growing pain behind my eyes that came with using too much power.

The naked man lying on Julian made an awkward picture, but my vampire wasted no time flipping him over and sinking fangs into his neck.

I looked away, trying to ignore the sounds of Julian feeding. It was important he regain his strength and what better target than one of the bad guys? Still, it disturbed me as the sounds of bones crunching accompanied the greedy

swallows. When I glanced back, Julian had crushed the werebear's arms in his grip.

"That's nasty," Tabitha said from the side.

Julian's head shot up, eyes glowing their normal deep indigo and blood coating his mouth and chin. His usual elegant grace had flown out the window after being nearly drained.

"Don't," I warned, seeing the look in his eye. It wasn't a command. I knew he'd listen to me.

"All of you, freeze." The Major's southern accent surprised me, but I couldn't turn to see her as my limbs stuck in place at her command. Clearly, she was a mind-bender too. She passed by me, turning to take in my face, then she glared at Tabitha. "Helping the prisoners?"

Tabitha's eyes grew wider as the major approached her. "Since you're on their side, you should get a good taste of what that means. Get in the cell."

Tabitha strode past her into the cell we'd previously occupied. The major glanced at the vampire I'd frozen, and he came back to life. How had she done that without speaking?

"Give our wayward friend a dose of the suppressant, then enjoy a snack before locking her in. I'll let you know when and *if* I feel like letting her out."

Tomás, who'd had no trouble breaking my wrist like a twig, stomped into the cell with a terrified Tabitha and pulled a syringe from his pocket. The door slammed closed. I would've startled had I been able to move. Who'd shut it?

"Looks like I'm going to need a new shifter." The major tsked as she looked down at Julian straddling his prey. "Get up and speak," she ordered, and Julian stood.

"He's not dead," Julian said calmly.

"Yes, he is. He's useless to me." The major jerked her chin to the right, and the man's head wrenched to the side. A hideous crack rang through the hall as Tabitha screamed from inside the cell.

How had this all gone so wrong?

“I don’t know how you managed to survive,” the major said, turning her too-sweet smile on me. “But maybe I’ve misjudged your usefulness. Perhaps I should reconsider whether you are worthy of joining our ranks. After all, with a little training, you could be my equal.” She stepped into my personal space and leaned in. “I took a version of the serum too. I know Dr. Devaux. I know how sweet and harmless he can act. But I also know how ruthless he can be.”

She tugged down the collar of her fatigues. My vision was filled with the nasty scars of a savage vampire bite. Had my father done that? It wasn’t like I wouldn’t have done the same, given the opportunity based on her lovely personality. And what serum had Dad developed that she’d taken? Had he continued his experimentation with psychics?

“We should chat,” she said, slapping my face lightly then turned to Julian. “Now, what to do with you?”

“You do realize you’ve made a mistake,” Julian said as calmly as one could dressed in rags with blood coating his chin.

“Do tell?” The major laughed.

Julian smiled—one of his amused yet dangerous ones—and relief flooded me. He was back, at least for now, to the man I knew. “I came to let you know a new agent,” he nodded to me, “a psychic with two powers, was being sent to the retrieval. Not that I had a chance to inform you since you decided immediately I was a double agent. Yes. I was. But *for* you. Precisely how do you think your superiors will react when I tell them what you did?”

“Then I shouldn’t give them a chance to react,” the major responded. “As far as I’m concerned, you are the mole, planted by SHADE to betray MorningStar, Jules. No one is as likely to double cross as a double agent. Your very nature is untrustworthy.”

The door to the cell shot open, and Tomás marched out, skin full of color and licking his lips. I barely caught a glimpse of Tabitha’s limp form on the ground before he swung it

closed. It eerily matched the vision I'd had when we'd touched hands.

Tomás walked behind the major and faced me, slowly running his tongue over his fangs in a not-so-subtle suggestion that he'd like to munch on me next.

Julian's growl grabbed my attention—and the major's.

“You care for her?” she asked, eyes lighting up. “Could it be? I know your type, Jules, you wouldn't have given up your ruse for anyone. Is she your mate? So very rare. Oh my. I've caught two for the price of one.” She strode back to me and threw an arm over my shoulder. “Well, this is going to be fun then.”

Chapter Twelve

Room Service and Conversation



“Here’s how this game works,” the major explained, pacing between Julian, bound by silver in the corner of the room, and where I lay, strapped to a table in a paper gown.

We’d been separated for a while as they’d prepped me for what I assumed would be experimentation. It turned out quite a few people worked in the space, all very businesslike and apparently used to the pleas of their subjects since they ignored mine. They’d wasted no time in giving me another dose of suppressant either, so I had little hope of escape. Not that I was going anywhere without Julian.

Her comment about me being his mate wasn’t the first time I’d heard it. But we’d never really discussed it—mostly because my aptitude for living in denial was unrivaled. But I thought—as I lay helpless on the cold metal table beneath fluorescent lights—perhaps we should discuss it when we got out of here.

“Jules will watch as we extract as much data as possible from the subject,” the major continued, patting my bare leg, “and if at some point he decides to talk, we will stop the experiments and listen. All very simple.”

“You’ll just continue the experiments again afterwards,” I said with a snort. It was bravado I didn’t feel.

She smiled at me and squeezed my leg until it hurt. “Perhaps. Or perhaps what he has to say will be worth your

life. We do have room for more talented psychics on the team.”

“I will never join up willingly,” I shot back, unable to raise my head more than an inch.

“No one said it had to be willingly.” She leaned over me. “You are familiar with mind-bending, right? You obviously haven’t been well trained by SHADE, which gives me fascinating information. Your ability can do so much more than you’ve dreamed of.”

A slim woman in a crisp white lab coat and goggles waited nearby, her sleek dark hair held back in a ponytail. When the general nodded at her, she strode forward and leaned over me, using her gloved hand to tilt my head to the right then the left.

“Subject has no noticeable surgical scars,” she said to no one in particular.

“Yet,” the major added with a smirk. “Let me know if our dear Jules decides to talk.” She strode out of sight as another pair of hands held my head down while the woman shone a laser in my eyes.

“Don’t talk, Julian,” I said, just before someone shoved a bite block in my mouth to prevent me from speaking. At least I hoped that was its purpose and not so I wouldn’t bite off my tongue during torturous electro-shock treatments. But what would be the point in that? These people, evil or not, wanted information, and they were scientists like me. Well...not *like me*, like me.

What would I do to extract information from someone I wrongly thought had taken a serum of some sort that gave them abilities? I hated that they referred to them as powers. I never liked that term...

The needle that came into view was big enough to tranquilize an elephant. I squirmed as the woman lowered it to my temple. My analytical brain tried to take over as the point sunk into the soft spot on the side of my eye and pain jolted through me. Hands held my skull steady as she watched a

monitor over my head all the while moving the needle as though searching for the right spot.

I'd extract DNA samples, I thought. But she's looking for something specific in the brain. Somewhere she suspects the abilities originate. It has to be the area the suppressant works on.

Blinding pain shot through my skull as she found what she was searching for. My vision blanked for a moment and my limbs convulsed. I must've made a sound in my throat because when my ears stopped ringing and the needle was pulled from my head, I heard the woman say, "...barely started. Are you saying you're ready to talk?"

"Yes," Julian said, pain lacing his words. "Please stop."

The woman nodded to someone behind me, and a metal strap was placed over my head, covering my eyes.

"I said I'll talk!" Julian bellowed.

"It's barely worth anything unless I finish the next step," the doctor explained calmly. "Then I'll let the major know you're ready."

"That's not the deal!" Julian screamed.

"Someone shut him up," she murmured over me.

I couldn't see what was happening, and the anticipation of something horrible sped my breathing until my chest pressed uncomfortably against the unforgiving straps.

"This may hurt a bit," the woman whispered in my ear. "I'd give you a sedative, but that would prevent us from doing the proper tests."

I barely had time to register the words before what felt like twenty fangs sunk into my scalp. Instead of the euphoria that followed Julian's bite, I felt only pain.

"Now the dye," she said, and an IV was pushed into my arm, followed by a cold pressure that flowed into my body. "Suppressant is working, here." She tapped the screen behind me as she continued. "Now let's stimulate the telekinetic center."

A zap of electricity flowed into my skull through one of the needles in my brain and I heard a crash somewhere in the distance.

“Good. On my mark, stimulate the mind-bending.” Her voice seemed to move as she walked around me.

Now, Pythia said.

Right. My mind-bending was about to work for a second. I focused with all my might.

“Now,” said the doctor.

Let us go. I screamed in my mind, pushing all my magic into the thought.

Silence.

My chest pressed harder into the strap until the fangs withdrew and the bar over my eyes was lifted. I blinked into the harsh light as the rest of the straps were undone. Struggling to sit up, I shielded my face, felt the IV in my arm, and yanked it free.

“Charlotte,” Julian said, lifting me from the table.

Blinking, I looked around. Every other person in the room was lying on the ground, some with their necks at odd angles, some with their throats torn out. Julian cradled me to him, and the familiar rush of speed made my stomach flip as we made our escape.

I lost track of time. The only thing in the world that made sense was Julian’s strong body against me and the scent of Bergamot that fought against the medicinal smell of the lab. When he finally set me down, I yanked out the mouth guard and retched, acid and blood pooling on the pebbled ground. Julian held back my hair until I finished, then scooped me up again, pressing me against his body, still somewhat warm from his recent feed.

“One more run if you can hang on,” he whispered against my head tucked beneath his chin.

I nodded against him, and we took off again, this time stopping inside what appeared to be a hotel room where he set

me gently on the king-sized bed.

“You need sleep,” he said, hand coming away from my head, covered in blood. “Food and water as well. But first...” He bit into his wrist and pressed it to my mouth.

I didn’t fight, I just lapped at his healing blood, hoping it would not only heal the wounds but also the trauma.

When I woke later, I was naked beneath the hotel sheets and curled into Julian’s warm body. *He fed again*, I thought, then I snuggled closer.

“Good morning, Charlotte,” he said, kissing the top of my head. “You look like yourself again.”

I glanced up at him. “You healed me with your blood,” I said.

He smiled—the genuine one that transformed his face into the most beautiful sight in the world. “I meant your disguise—whatever magic that was you used; I much prefer this version of you.”

I pulled a strand of matted auburn hair in front of me and sighed in relief. It felt good to be me again. “I need a shower.”

“Indeed,” Julian agreed, and I smacked his bare chest. That’s when I realized he, too, was naked.

“Did we?” I gaped at him. No way I would’ve screwed him without discussing this mess first.

“No,” he agreed, pulling off the covers so I could get to the shower. “Skin to skin contact is healing. At least, so I’ve heard. And you were shivering.”

It was likely a reaction to the trauma, but I didn’t say that. Instead, I nodded and shut the bathroom door. It was a stall shower with a good, heavy spray. At least I didn’t have to chase it to get in, I thought wryly. Though I missed my tub at home and Mama’s healing chicken soup.

When I emerged in the hotel’s soft white robe, Julian was dressed in a modern tuxedo, looking for all the world like some sort of royalty, seated at a table with what must have been room service delivery.

“Coffee?” he asked, gesturing to a pot and a cup already fixed the way I preferred, with cream and sugar. Beside it were full glasses of water and orange juice and a silver-covered platter with condensation on the outside that told me something steaming and delicious would be underneath.

“Yes, please.” I sat on the opposite side and guzzled the orange juice before diving into a stack of pancakes and scrambled eggs.

Once finished, I leaned back in the chair in a hazy food coma. “Thank you.”

“I have clothes for you,” Julian said in response and nodded toward the bed as he sipped his own cup of black coffee.

Laid out on the comforter was a sleek, sparkling red evening gown, a large ruby-and-diamond choker, and matching stilettos.

I glared at him with my eyebrows raised.

“It’s your size,” he commented and watched me over the rim as he sipped his coffee.

“Why does it look like we’re getting ready to go to a ball?”

“It’s a fundraiser, actually.”

“Julian, we have a lot to talk about before we head out for a night on the town.”

He set the cup down and leaned over the table. “You want to be an agent as well as a scientist? Then I will teach you how. We cannot afford to be captured again.”

“Then why let me try being a spy again?” I asked, leaning as well.

Julian chuckled. “Since when do I have a say? Besides, you’ve introduced yourself to MorningStar in the most spectacular way possible already. And they now know I am a double agent. What they don’t know is that they now have the DNA of Dr. Alfred Devaux’s daughter—who they have been searching for, for years. We have to retrieve or destroy it and get you to safety.”

I poured myself another cup of coffee as I worked through his words.

“You have questions,” he observed.

“You think?” I barked then drank some more caffeine. “Let’s start with *why me?*”

Julian leaned back and crossed his long legs. “Your father’s original backer joined with MorningStar, then was assassinated.”

I balked slightly but sipped some more coffee. That explained what happened to the vampire boss, Bouche, Dad had said was killed. But the program then knew about his research. The cup clattered against the saucer as I set it down a bit too hard.

“Julian, did my father experiment on my sister and I?”

Julian threw his head back to stare at the ceiling. “That would seem a logical conclusion.”

“How long have you suspected this?” I demanded. “How long have you known who my father was, what he was still doing, and that I might have been a lab rat?”

Julian faced me. “I have always known who your father is. I have been looking for you since MorningStar has. And when I found you and realized it was *you*, my soulmate reincarnated again at last, I vowed I’d never let them hurt you.”

“How sweet! You would have otherwise?”

“No! Of course not.” Julian stood vamp fast and began to pace. “Charlotte, I would have taken you to SHADE either way, but I was so overjoyed to see you again, so thrilled that you’d come back into my life—I didn’t care anymore if my cover was blown or if the general was the lesser of two evils. At that moment, it became us against the world.”

“If you care about me so much—” I challenged, standing and leaning on the table.

“*I love you so much,*” he corrected, kneeling beside me.

“Even better. If you *love* me so much, oh great vampire, then why wouldn’t you tell me everything? You said no more secrets.”

Julian flinched, and it felt kind of good.

“I knew it would hurt you. Why would I purposely cause you harm when, for all I knew, you’d never see your father again?”

“Don’t you get it, Julian?” I sat back down and looked at his beautiful face. “These things, they keep coming up and hurting me even worse because you didn’t tell me. How can I trust you when at every turn you’ve lied to me? No matter what the reason?”

Julian stood and wrapped his knuckles on the table. “I suppose it’s just as well then since we cannot see each other anymore after this job is over. I...won’t be returning to SHADE.”

Swallowing the sudden lump in my throat, I stared down at my coffee. “I see.”

“They won’t have use for me without my intel on MorningStar,” he said. “Not with the general’s feelings toward me.”

I ignored him leaning over me and resisted looking at him.

“You said you know about Silas,” he said.

I looked up. “That’s another issue, Julian. You ran away instead of talking to me about him and facing whatever happens together. You claim you love me.” I stood, forcing him to back up.

“I do love you.”

I laughed. “Bullshit. If you loved me, you’d include me in the discussion.” I shoved his stubbornly immovable chest.

“You don’t have the memories I do,” he said as I turned to march away—where to, I didn’t know.

I stopped. “Then for once in your life, *tell* me.”

It was like everything hung on that statement. Either he would understand what I was trying to say, or he'd stay the same stubborn vampire. I was beginning to understand why I hadn't been with him in that one life he'd mentioned. But damn him, I *wanted* him to do the right thing.

"You know," I said, turning back around and facing him so he could see the hurt he caused. "When you left? It wounded me badly. I have issues with the men I love leaving me. In this life. The one I *do* remember."

Julian jerked slightly then rushed to cup my face. "You said you love me, Charlotte."

I blinked. That's what he got from that statement? "I suppose I did."

He kissed me then, deep and slow and sweet. His full lips slid between mine, and his tongue swept tentatively inside, tasting me, testing whether I'd allow it. Damn, it felt good. All I wanted to do was sink into it and get lost.

But I couldn't.

I pulled back and waited.

Julian hung his head. "Silas killed my sister."

"I saw."

His head snapped up.

"In a vision when I touched his arm. I saw the conversation you had afterward."

Julian hissed, eyes flashing scarlet, but was back in control in the space of a heartbeat. "Then you know, Charlotte. If you saw that, then you know what I almost did."

"No. I don't know. I saw him order you to bring someone to him. Julian...was that...was that *me*?" I knew the answer in my heart. Of course, it was. It made too much sense.

"Yes. He ordered me to bring you to him. But when I got to you, you'd already seen what had happened. You've always been a psychic, Charlotte, thank the gods. You took your own life to prevent him from turning you."

A vision overcame me as I grasped his arm. I dropped to the plush carpet, dragging him with me as I watched my own body, limp in Julian's arms as he sobbed tears of blood. I'd slit my wrists and the dark red soaked the white gown I wore. It was me, my hair curled and pinned, but me. And Julian wore the same tunic he'd had in my other vision as he knelt, cradling me in tears.

"Charlotte?" Julian knelt before me again in the present, holding my hands to his unbeating heart.

Shaking myself, I stared at him. "Why did he want to turn me?"

"He's been looking for a way for a vampire to maintain psychic powers when turned for longer than either of us has been alive. It is difficult to find psychics to experiment on, Charlotte—especially powerful ones. And though you didn't have multiple abilities in that previous life, you were a powerful mind-bender. And an exceedingly beautiful one. He desired you in many ways. He wanted to make you his wife and find a way to maintain your powers after being turned. He thought he'd figured it out."

"And if he turned me, he'd be able to control me forever." I shivered. "But he knows who I am and that I'm on the island, Julian. He spoke to me."

"Indeed. I'd hoped he wouldn't learn of your whereabouts or even that you'd incarnated again. But when I left you outside with Carmichael, when investigating a murder—"

"He was the one you spoke to inside the mansion," I said, understanding.

"I convinced him to leave. Or thought I had." He shook his head. "When I opened that office door, when I found out he was the new sect leader, I had to leave immediately, or he'd demand I bring you to him. I couldn't lose you again, Charlotte." His voice trembled, and a single pink tear appeared in the corner of his eye.

"Why didn't he turn me when I was there?" I asked, standing and taking Julian with me by the hand.

“He doesn’t want to make an enemy of SHADE. And if there’s one thing Silas is good at, it’s patience.”

“So now what?” I asked, dropping back down at the table with the pancakes sitting heavy in my stomach.

“We can leave together. We can run,” he said, holding my hands between his.

“I’m not running. I will not abandon my mother and sister like my father did. I will not run away like you and he have. I won’t hurt others.” My words seemed to drive home, and Julian flinched once again, releasing me. Twice in one morning, I’d visibly gotten to him.

“The only other alternative is to have another vampire turn you,” he said. “One who isn’t beholden to Silas.”

“What? No. that can’t be the only other alternative.”

Julian gave a half-smile. “You never have wanted that. Or we’d still be together from another life.”

Standing, I paced back to the bed and ran a hand over the gown. It had a ridiculously high slit on the side, I realized as I studied it.

“Why do I keep incarnating, Julian? Does it have to do with what people say about us being mates?” It was hard to look at him when I said that word. It made me flush. Such a physical thing. At least for shifters.

“Yes,” he said, hands sliding over my shoulders. “Yes, if a vampire’s mate does not become a vampire as well, then they will continue to be reborn until that happens.”

I turned, leaning against his chest and hugging him to me. “But we were human when we met, right?” I thought about the vision I’d seen once of him and his sister talking. He’d thought he could outsmart Silas then by making him an equal. I was sure Silas hadn’t admitted the part about being able to control him afterward.

“Yes, he whispered in my hair. I ruined what could have been such a beautiful life with you. Mates are uncommon for vampires. But if they are truly in love before being turned...”

I hugged him tighter.

“I’m so sorry, Charlotte. I deserve to lose you over and over again. But you deserve no such thing.”

“Oh Julian. You did what you thought was best. It was Silas that caused all this.” I finally looked up at him, my own eyes wet with tears. “Let’s do it differently this time. Let’s work *together*.”

“I don’t want to lose you,” he said, pleading. “If he turned you...”

“Then we won’t let him,” I said, reaching up to guide his face down to mine for another slow kiss. “We have support, Julian. We can fix this.”

“Charlotte, I—”

I pressed a finger to his lips. “I get to choose this time. Not you. But first,” I glanced at the dress on the bed. “Apparently, we have a party to crash so we can get my DNA back.”

Chapter Thirteen

So Many Ways to Tango



Julian filled me in on the plan. Turned out, when I was put to sleep in the rideshare, they'd driven me to a lab outside Phoenix. Then Julian ran us all the way to Las Vegas when we left.

Tonight's event was a gala at the top of a new resort with a rotating roof in honor of blood cancer research. According to Julian, many of the high-level donors were supes, and the "blood cancer research" was a ruse for funneling money to various labs that focused on, well, exactly what I'd tried and succeeded in doing—creating a cure for vampirism. All that money and not one of them had managed it yet.

When I asked about it, Julian explained that most of them used the funds for other supe research and masked it as though searching for a cure. A double crime. Thus, the big players behind the psychic research would be present. The danger in this situation was the possibility that Silas would show. But Julian doubted it since he had a new job on the island and would want to appear benevolent to SHADE while focused on his pursuits there.

We were after the major in this case. For the plan to work, first, I had to look like yet a third woman—not me and not what Zoe's charm had created. So Julian ran out—literally—to get me a bottle of blonde dye and quite a bit of makeup. As I went to work on myself, he left on another errand, which made me insanely nervous and took far too long even with his super speed.

But when he returned safely from the Phoenix lab with my belt and a fistful of loaded syringes, I breathed easier. We needed the suppressant if we wanted this to work. I slipped it all in my belt, tucked my anti-glamour charm in my cleavage, and shuffled in the endless compartment until I found the charm I'd been searching for. I squeezed the tiny bead of pink, invoked the spell with the word "shrink" and watched the belt grow smaller. When it was done, I fastened it around my upper thigh like a garter just above the slit in the gown, then slipped on my heels.

"You are breathtaking," Julian said, reaching for me. "But I prefer the red hair."

"Can't be helped, but good to know," I said. I'd left my blonde hair loose and let it cascade over my bare shoulders. The ruby glinted along with the diamonds around my neck, and I tugged at it. "Is this what I think it is?" I asked.

"It is spelled to resist potions and charms," Julian said. "I have a contact who runs a supe resale shop in the area."

I fluttered my ridiculously long fake eyelashes at him and pursed my dark red lips. I felt like a hooker in this getup. It was way more glitz and skin than I was used to showing. I tended to prefer staying out of the spotlight. But tonight was about getting all eyes on Julian and his mystery woman. The major had to be thrown off-kilter for our plan to work. And she ought to be completely gobsmacked when she set eyes on the vampire who'd escaped parading around Vegas with a different woman.

"When all of this is over, and we are somewhere safe, I will be taking you dancing in Paris. And you will wear what you choose."

"Once Silas and the major are no longer threats, and we've safely recovered the missing children," I agreed.

With that, I took Julian's arm and we headed to the lobby.

Every eye was on us, and though I was sure Julian was used to it, I was not. Still, I had to play a part, so I focused on ogling my escort instead of the crowd as he led me out to the

valet. I was only slightly surprised to see the vamp mobile pull up to the massive fountain in front.

Julian drove with one hand clutching mine. When we arrived, the front of the resort was roped off. We were escorted into the building and to an enormous glass elevator—destination: twenty-seven stories to the top.

Julian spoke to my mind as I clung to him.

Are you nervous?

I answered in the same fashion.

Only about the attention part.

He chuckled and led—no, paraded me—out of the lift and onto the rooftop filled with glamorous people. Sleek neon lighting surrounded the edges with a bar that took up the entire side of the rectangle. The dance floor was in the center of a smattering of standing tables. A five-piece band was set up on a raised platform, lit from below with more glowing neon that slowly changed colors from green to blue to purple to red.

“Lieutenant Julian Carver,” announced a man by the lit shallow steps leading down from the elevator platform.

A few people glanced up, but for the most part, the black-tie affair continued without much notice.

I don't see her, I said silently, arm still hooked through his.

She will be here.

“May I get you a drink?” Julian offered.

I nodded and he steered us to the bar where he ordered a glowing blue martini for me and a shot of something clear for himself. I tipped the rim to my lips as I perused the room. I probably shouldn't have been drinking but I needed a little something to take the edge off.

“Lieutenant!” A deep, boisterous voice greeted.

I turned to find a large, older man approaching, hand held out for Julian's. A woman I assumed to be his wife narrowed her eyes at me and smiled with lips filled with Botox. Poor thing had gone overboard with the plastic surgery. When her

companion's gaze slid to me—or more accurately, my cleavage—I understood why.

“Dr. Sanders,” Julian said with a smile as he shook. I continued to sip on my drink.

“Mrs. Sanders.” Julian grasped the woman's hand and kissed her knuckles, making her blush. “May I introduce my companion this evening, Miss Miriam Striver.”

I tipped my glass in a toast and smiled. Then I tossed my hair over my shoulder and leaned back against the bar as it bathed us in red.

“A pleasure,” Sanders said.

“You certainly dressed to match the theme this evening,” Mrs. Sanders said.

I glanced to Julian. Was that an insult?

“Part of the reason I came was to tango,” Julian said with a laugh. “So of course, we dressed appropriately. Will you two be dancing?” he asked.

“I'm afraid my tango days are behind me,” Sanders said. “Though if someone as lovely as Miss Striver here asked me, I'd give it a go.”

“I'm afraid my dance card is filled with Mr. Carver,” I said in a low voice. Setting my drink on the bar, I tugged Julian toward the empty dance floor while I spoke our silent language.

She's here.

Julian smiled back at me as his gaze perused the room, landing on the elevator.

“Major Marcia Honeywell,” announced the greeter.

Julian looked to the band. They took up their instruments as he fixed his gaze on me and smoldered so hard I thought I might spontaneously combust.

Mouth dry, my heart pounded as he placed my arms around his neck and his around my waist, tugging me close.

Relax, and allow me.

The familiar rhythm of the tango I'd heard many times but never tried to actually move to took hold, and Julian began to glide over the dance floor, fingers on my hips, directing me one way then the other.

Just keep looking at my eyes and mirroring my steps.

The world spun as he expertly guided us around the exterior of the dance floor. My body flushed with heat as he twirled and dipped me back until my blonde hair swept the ground then had me upright moments later and marched me in the other direction, arms outstretched. A cheer rose from the crowd, but all I could see was the smile on his lips and the glow of his indigo eyes. Memories of him smiling down at me like that as he moved inside of me stole my breath.

This must be what it's like to be glamoured.

He spun me out multiple times then back into his arms where my chest heaved against his, and I wondered what it might be like to do this kind of a dance in private. I barely noticed our feet moving again as we glided around the dance floor, synchronized to the beat.

Julian's grace combined with the strength of the way he held me—guided me—aroused a carnal hunger in me with a life of its own. The scent of him, the feel of his body always connected to mine in some way no matter how we moved, and the way he took control, sent me into a tailspin of want.

As the music halted for a moment, Julian brought us to a stop, our bodies pressed along each other, his leg between my thighs, hand hooked around my lower back, fingers brushing the top of my ass. Based on what I felt, he was enjoying himself just as much as I was. And then the song swelled, and I was spinning again. He backed me toward the edge of the space, brushing body to body with each long stride. Every nerve ending became a live wire demanding his touch. Urging me to strip us both naked so I could feel all of him against my skin at once instead of the teases I was getting as his gaze bore into me, stoking fire in my core.

His hand whipped out and snatched a rose someone had thrown, which he placed between his teeth.

I wanted to release some of the pressure of these intense feelings with a laugh as he wagged his brow, but he dipped me again, one hand on my waist, one holding my thigh as I gave him all my weight. He lifted me, spit the rose to the ground, and spun me around his body. When the song ended, I was pressed against Julian chest to groin, dizzy, completely out of breath, and ready for him to take me right there on the wooden floor.

Applause roared around us, and I became aware of the way the partygoers had surrounded, yet not joined us.

“Wow,” a woman said from the side, and when I looked, she was as red as my dress.

Julian smiled and led me toward the bar where the crowd parted easily for him. “A glass of water for the lady,” he said as I tried my best to cool down.

I bit my bottom lip, considering all the things I planned to do with him when this was finished. Then I emptied my cold water and smoothed back my hair as I got down to business. The sooner we accomplished what we came for, the sooner I could get him in bed.

At the far corner of the dance floor, I spotted the major towering over her escort, Tomás. She wore her own blonde hair swept up, a black leather gown, and *my* boots. She glared at Julian. I had a hunch she was using her mind-bending. But we’d prepared for it.

Sure enough, he left my side and made his way around the outskirts of the party as everyone broke back into their small clusters. I pretended to be hurt and shocked at his abrupt departure. As we hoped, the major excused herself from Tomás and followed Julian. I began to shadow her.

We rounded the building until we were out of the public eye. Julian opened the stairwell door and headed down, the major following. I caught the door just before it clicked shut and slipped inside as well, then placed my heels outside to stay

as quiet as possible. When I caught up again, they were a floor down, Julian paused and looking up at her as she loomed above him.

His hand gripped the thin bar between the twenty-six-story drop down the center and the metal steps. I'd already retrieved the syringe from my garter and, without hesitating, I sent it through the air, using telekinesis, until it stuck out from the back of her neck.

Whipping around and grasping at the now empty needle, the major glared at me.

“Kill her!” she yelled.

“Oooh, that’s not going to work,” I said, practically bouncing down the steps toward her. “Actually, you’re going to listen to me this time, Marcia. And Julian, you are free of any mind-bending she put you under.”

“How dare—”

“Shut up,” I snapped. “And hold still.” I stopped three steps up from her to put us at eye level. “You will destroy all evidence collected from the psychic that escaped with Julian. You will forget this happening and forget she even existed. Then you will quit being such a bitch and working for MorningStar. You will no longer use your abilities to hurt others.”

I stopped short of telling her to punish herself like I had with Carmichael. Something inside told me it was all too plausible that command had been the cause of his death. I swallowed hard.

Julian didn’t notice, just beamed at me from behind her. “Good work, Doctor.”

“Thank you,” I said with a small bow, then I turned back to her. “Now give me my shoes, then go back to the party. You can put on the heels just outside the door to the roof. As far as you know, Julian got away.”

She nodded and left my boots on the step as she passed me on her way back up.

“You did it,” he said, stepping up to meet me.

“We did it,” I said. “See? We work well together. So from now on—”

Julian’s mouth smashed into mine as he lifted me from the ground and spun me in a circle. I melted into him, losing myself in the feel of him, the scent, the adrenaline of the moment. My hands sifted through his dark curls as he pressed me to the wall and cupped my ass, encouraging me to wrap my legs around him. My dress rode up over my hips and he growled even as he continued our kiss, thumb sliding up to tug the thin strap of red lace aside. When he found me slick and ready, he wasted no time slipping one then two fingers inside of me, swallowing every moan I made.

He shifted and must have freed himself from his trousers using superspeed because just as I whimpered at his removal of his fingers, he replaced them with something much better. I often wondered if it was a vampire gift or just the way Julian was always built, but he did not disappoint, stretching me with just the right amount of pressure and pace until my back bumped against the wall in a steady rhythm. His thumb circled the tender spot between us, and gods help me, I was ready to come faster than I ever had before.

Julian...I’m...I’m I stammered through our bond.

Come for me, love.

Those words purred inside my mind, sent me over the edge. Instead of letting up, he increased both his pace and pounding, and I groaned against his hungry mouth. He lifted one of my breasts from the tight confines of my dress and rolled the hard nipple between his fingers. *You drive me mad, Charlotte.*

At that point, I could no more form words than a coherent thought. He released my swollen lips, letting my head fall back as he trailed his fangs down the skin of my neck.

Julian, no. What if I’m still poisoned?

But he sank his teeth inside, timed with a deep thrust that hit my G-spot perfectly. Euphoria washed over me, and all I

could make sense of was the places we connected and the spasms of my body as an almost painful orgasm rocketed through me in waves that never seemed to ebb. I screamed out his name and several other incoherent words as he also cried out in release, lifting his face from my neck, eyes closed in ecstasy while my blood trailed from his lips. His hips slowed and he rocked inside of me, drawing every last shudder from my body. He licked the wound closed and clean as he withdrew, lowering me gently to the ground.

I felt like my bones had melted as I stumbled slightly against the wall, trying to recover. Julian adjusted his own clothing and then helped me reassemble myself before backing me into the wall once more, this time smoothing my hair and gazing down at me with glowing indigo eyes, flushed cheeks, and so much love my heart fluttered.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“For what?” I asked, grinning like an idiot. “It was amazing.”

“You deserve more than a stairwell, Charlotte. You deserve more than me.”

“Let’s go back to our hotel,” I suggested, wrapping my arms around his neck before he started brooding again. “Then you can show me exactly what I deserve, and I can show you the same. Let’s repeat our tango in that big bed.”

He smiled my favorite smile, kissed me much more softly, and lifted me into his arms like he was about to carry me over the threshold. Then he ran us back to the room as I nibbled on his neck. When he stopped, he tossed me onto the mattress where I bounced and laughed, holding out a palm to stop him from climbing over me.

“Let’s dance,” I said, and he offered his hand with the look of a hungry lion. In this case, I didn’t mind being the lamb.

Shivers of anticipation cascaded down my spine as he pulled me to my feet with a tug and I crashed against him, chest to chest. He raised my hands to his neck and slid the back of his hand slowly down my side, brushing over my

breast on its way to my hip. I swallowed as he swung me suddenly around and then dipped me back.

“There’s no music,” I breathed as he pulled me back up to face him, a whiff of bergamot and spice warming my insides.

“It won’t be necessary,” he said, whisking off his bowtie in one hand. He marched me back across the room, pressed me into the wall and stepped back to pull off his jacket and cummerbund to the rhythm in his head. Then he was back, fingers slipping behind my neck before he whisked off the charmed necklace he’d given me.

His eyes lowered to the chasm between my breasts, and he swung me around the floor again, pelvis to pelvis as he led me in a dance that took my breath away. With one arm, he spun me out. I barely felt his fingers on my zipper, but when he stopped me, my dress slid down to a puddle on the floor. He growled low, ripping open his shirt and stalking toward me to continue our tango. His hands on my skin, still hot with my blood, sent thrills through me head to toe. He turned me so my back was against him, and I felt rather than saw his pants drop.

But our dance wasn’t over. He turned me again, keeping me locked in his glowing gaze as he led us at a dizzying pace around the room. His hand splayed across my back, unhooked my red lace bra as he twirled me, catching me again and pulling me to him so our bodies joined, hot and flushed with need. The only thing between us, the matching lace panties, felt more like a nuisance than a necessity at the moment.

Julian held me there, our hands extended straight out to the side, his other caressing my cheek as I panted, aching for him. He grinned, eyes flashing scarlet for a moment, then lifted me into the air, spinning us both until he tossed me onto the bed and skidded to the floor on his knee in a grand finale.

“Thank you for the dance,” he said in his low, vibrating voice that nearly made me moan.

I bit my bottom lip as he crawled up over me and removed my panties with his teeth.

Our clothing lay scattered across the room, save the heart-shaped charm I never removed that hung between my breasts. He sucked my toe into his mouth, and I lost whatever train of thought I'd had, focused only on the way his lips and tongue trailed up my legs to land between my thighs.

I grasped his head as he lifted my ass until he had total access, and he didn't waste a bit of it, licking up my seam to taste my arousal and then parting me with his fingers so he could plunge his tongue inside.

"Oh, Julian," I moaned. But I wanted to pleasure him this time, and he was going to let me, damn it. "Get on your knees," I demanded.

He complied but not until he sucked me into his mouth and made me tremble again. Once he was in position, I crawled over to him, ran my hands down his sculpted chest to where his waist tapered toward his thick forest of dark curls and his cock, standing at attention, waiting.

I smiled up at him as I licked up his shaft to the tip and sank my mouth over him. He gasped, hands tightening in my hair as I glided down, teasing with my teeth as I rose back to the top. His gaze fixed on me as I increased my pace, gripping the part of him I couldn't manage to take until he threw his head back and moaned with pleasure.

"Charlotte," he breathed. "I need to be inside of you. Please."

I released him and smiled. "Since you asked nicely."

With a gleam in his eye, he turned me around like I weighed no more than a pillow and nudged my knees apart. Leaning against me, he put his head near mine, his arm across my chest to keep us both upright. His mouth covered my ear, and he whispered, "Do you trust me?"

"Yes," I breathed back.

"Give me control," he said then caught my earlobe in his teeth as he entered me slowly from behind. One of his hands splayed across my stomach then slid down until he could give his full attention to the pulsing nub crying for attention. His

other went to my breast and squeezed as he pinched my nipple between his fingers.

I jerked against him, but he held me steady as he rocked up into me at a torturously slow pace. “More,” I demanded. “Be rough with me, Julian. I won’t break.”

“Charlotte,” he spoke quietly but slid out of me and bent me forward until I was on all fours. Then he positioned himself at my entrance. “Stay still,” he demanded then entered me in one swift motion, filling me completely. Staying in place, he wound my hair around his fist and pulled it back, forcing me upward. His other hand slid down to my core, cupping me. “You want this?” he asked, voice rough as he pushed into me until I groaned.

“Yes,” I said, just as throaty. “Harder.”

Rubbing, pressing, and squeezing with his palm, he thrust in and out of me in a punishing way. I wriggled against him, trying for more leverage that was impossible in this position.

In answer, he turned me again and leaned over me, an ankle in each hand until I was practically bent double. “I like to watch you scream my name,” he said, then began thrusting once again, pounding into me at unnatural speed. I grasped his shoulders and dug my nails in as he pummeled me. The sounds of slapping skin and creaking bed engulfed me along with an almost painful pleasure that coiled in my core, promising an explosive release.

“More!” I yelled.

Julian grasped my hips and flipped backward so that I was suddenly straddling him, but he didn’t pause to let me set the pace, just thrust himself upward off the bed while pulling me down at the same time, fingers digging into me in so hard I was sure I’d have bruises. But it felt so good, I didn’t care. There was no way an actual human man could do what Julian was doing, half defying gravity with his muscles at an inhuman pace. But my body sang in response, like it craved exactly what he was giving, and I complied, screaming out his name as I climaxed.

He increased his speed as I came, finally calling my name in release as he pulsed, bent upward and buried inside of me. When he relaxed back to the bed, he rolled to the side, letting me slip off him, sore, panting, and completely giddy.

“Did I hurt you?” he asked, making lazy circles around my breasts.

“No. Well, yes, but once again, in a good way. I might walk funny for a while.” I laughed, jiggling us both.

“Thank you,” he said, as serious as always. “Being inside of you is the only time I forget what I am.”

I smiled at him and put my jelly arms around his neck to pull him down to my mouth.

“I don’t want to harm you if you are sore,” he said, between kisses, “but I do want to make you scream my name again. And again.”

I halted his wandering hand with my own. “Maybe give me some recovery time. I’m only human.”

The smile melted off his lips and he sat up in the bed like I’d flipped some sort of off switch. Confused, I joined him.

“What is it? Did I say something?”

“No.” Julian turned and cupped my face, stroking my cheek with his thumb. “You’re perfect, and I want you to stay that way. You will never be a monster like me.”

“Stop saying that. You aren’t a monster, Julian.” I sighed, searching his eyes that held so much buried pain. I remembered the flash I’d gotten of him and Silas. How he’d been soaked in blood from tearing out someone’s throat in anger. “I know you blame yourself, but as you well know, when a vampire is first turned, it’s extremely difficult to control your impulses with strong emotions. I learned that from my studies. Ultimately, it’s a trait that helps you survive.”

“Extremely difficult is not the same as impossible.” Julian’s lips tipped up, but it didn’t reach his eyes. He leaned in to press his forehead to mine and we stayed there a bit, thinking.

“Run away with me, Charlotte,” he said suddenly. “We can travel. You can have anything your heart desires. I have money enough for centuries stored all over the world.”

“I’m sorry, Julian.” I kissed his cheek. “There must be another way to solve our problems. I already told you I will not do that to my family no matter what.”

“I know. But I had to ask.” Julian’s fingers lightly brushed against my skin as they trailed lazily between my breasts.

When I realized he’d stopped touching me, I leaned back and found him cupping the anti-glamour charm that Zoe had crafted for me. The tiny green heart glinted in his palm as he studied it, tilting it this way and that so the magic-imbued crystal sparkled slightly. Then before I could react, he made a fist and opened it to reveal a pile of fine green dust.

“Julian! What have you done?” I asked, pulling away in horror.

Then he had my face in his hands, holding me still so he could look in my eyes. His indigo gaze glowed again, pulsing like a star, and I stopped wiggling to stare at the beautiful sight. It was mesmerizing.

“Charlotte,” he said as I watched the glow swell and dance. “I know you will never forgive me, yet I’d choose this again if it came down to it. I will *always* do everything in my power to protect you.”

I wondered what he meant as I stared at the kaleidoscope of his eyes. They were so beautiful.

“You hate me,” he said.

No, I wanted to protest, but...I did hate him, didn’t I?

“You want me gone and never want to see me again. You will go back to your family and live a happy life. You won’t torture yourself by thinking back on this more than necessary.”

I hated this man. I should try to get away. Half-heartedly, I tugged my arms, but the undulating glow...

“You will avoid Silas unless you are with a member of SHADE whom you trust. I will find a way to lure him far from

the island, but you must remain safe in the meantime. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” I heard myself say.

“I shouldn’t ask this, but kiss me one last time, love,” he added, and I pressed my lips to his even though I wanted to yell at him to leave me and never come back. I tasted blood and realized it was his tears.

He deserved to cry.

“Now call Zoe and have her portal you home,” he said and let me go.

A windstorm swirled in the hotel room, and I covered my eyes to protect them. When it stopped, I looked up and found a bathrobe and my cell phone on the bed but no sign of the rotten vampire who’d been here.

Good riddance, I thought as I quickly dialed my sister.

Chapter Fourteen

Forgotten Conversation



“**Y**ou’re sad,” Em said as I toyed with my cottage pie.

Mama had made it because she’d found out Em’s favorite foods were mashed potatoes and burgers and made the best of both while saying she was “sure they hadn’t given the child anything of quality in that room.”

“No, sweetie.” I smiled at her. “I just feel...weird. Like I’m forgetting something important.” I shoveled a bite of the delicious dinner in my mouth.

Em tilted her head, considering me. “What happened to Mr. Julian?”

“Yeah, what exactly did happen again?” Zoe asked over a mouthful to my right.

I glared at my sister then turned back to Em. “Sometimes people aren’t who you think they are.”

She chewed on her food as she thought about that.

“Shame,” Mama said, “he was the first vampire I liked.”

“You liked him?” My fork clattered against the plate as I gaped at her. “Maybe he glamoured you. I wouldn’t put it past him.”

Mama frowning was a rare sight, but I did my best to ignore it. “I’m not looking forward to reporting in to the general in the morning. I’ll have to notify him that the new psychic was a ruse, and that the lieutenant went AWOL. Though the general probably won’t mind that. He never trusted Julian either.”

“I feel bad for Tabitha,” Zoe said, pushing away from the table. “From what you described when you filled us in, she was trapped in that life and didn’t deserve her fate.”

My stomach turned. “I wish I could go back in and rescue her. I should’ve ordered the major to release her.” I would have if Julian hadn’t whisked us out of there so fast. Damn vampire.

“Well, at some point, I believe they’ll all get their due,” Mama said, clearing the table with Zoe. I believe in Karma.”

“I like Karma,” Em said. “He changes for me and he’s always so soft.”

“You should see him roast a bad guy when he shifts into a dragon,” I said, waggling my eyebrows. It wasn’t the type of dinner conversation appropriate for most kids, but poor Em had already seen too much, both in her head and in reality.

Em giggled.

“Bedtime for me,” I announced, standing and stretching.

“It’s only eight!” Em’s offense at an early bedtime made me smile. I couldn’t wait to delve into training with her when things settled down.

“I feel like I’ve been up for forty-eight hours straight and have to be up at the crack of dawn for training with Daphne.”

Em pouted then shrugged. “Adults are weird. Aunt Zo, let’s watch a movie!”

Smiling, I left them to it and ducked into the safety of my personal space. I changed, brushed my teeth, and crawled under the covers, inhaling the faint scent of bergamot and cloves that clung the sheets and instantly relaxing.

My eyes snapped open. Why would Julian’s scent relax me? *Ugh*. I got up, grabbed my favorite vanilla lotion and slathered it on before climbing back in. That was better. I’d change the sheets tomorrow.

* * *

As predicted, the general seemed only mildly surprised about Julian leaving indefinitely. Tittwell, it seemed, was in trouble for sending me on the mission without his permission. I couldn't help but be slightly happy that the imp was not in the general's good graces for once.

"You will be taking over some of the lieutenant's duties until I find a replacement as you are the most familiar with his day-to-day work," he said, arms held behind his back as he looked out over the field of screens and scurrying, black-uniformed SHADE officers below his raised platform. "Unfortunately, you disappeared at a critical time. The vampires have always been finicky and, to be frank, less than upright in their dealings. I want a good relationship with this new sect leader. He said he sent vital information back with you from your last meeting."

He turned back to me, expectantly, black tendrils of his aura reaching out like open hands. I bit my cheek, remembering the file Daphne had hidden. The closer he stepped, the more I was reminded of his unnatural size. Up close, he looked like he could've swallowed two of me whole.

"Sir, to be honest, I don't know if I'm comfortable with Silas," I said, deciding to be frank with the general. After all, he'd had Julian's number all along, never really trusting him. Clearly our doubt was misplaced, and it was the general I should've trusted from the beginning. "In fact, I will not go back there unless someone from SHADE is with me."

The enormous man's eyebrows shot up, but otherwise, he stayed motionless. "I see. Well, then I shall personally accompany you this morning to the meeting he's requested."

Shock made me take a step back. The general himself was coming with me? He should be more than able to protect me if anyone on the island could.

"Tittwell, get the car," the general barked, and from the shadowed corners, the creature jumped and scurried past, down the stairs and into the elevator, startling me. I hadn't known he'd been listening.

The general took two steps closer to me, his imposing form looming over me. “I expect you to treat the new liaison with respect no matter your personal thoughts. If he gives us reason, I will take appropriate action, but that is my call. Am I clear?”

“Crystal,” I said. It was good to know he had my back.

The general gestured behind me to where the elevator had appeared, and I followed him down to the front, where the office manager, Gladys, glanced at us with her mismatched eyes, a worried expression on her typically stoic face. I didn’t have time to wonder, though, as the general ushered me outside where Tittwell waited, holding open the door to a stretched black Hummer. I hauled myself up and in the back alongside the general, glad I’d worn my boots that morning.

I wanted to ask more about the general’s thoughts on Silas and maybe even where he thought the missing children might be, but the entire drive, he kept his gaze fixed out the opposite window in silence. When we arrived, I hopped down and followed as he led the way up the steps and was welcomed in by Lydia.

“Hi,” I said awkwardly when I trailed inside. “We should talk. Dinner at the pub?”

Lydia’s painted black lips quirked, and she nodded before leading us up all four flights to Silas’s office. My pulse pounded as I stepped inside, unsure how to handle what I might face if he tried to blackmail me but ready to use my mind-bending if necessary.

“I’m so pleased to see you both,” Silas said smoothly, straightening the tailored vest beneath his suit jacket. “Please have a seat. Lydia, would you get our guests something to drink?”

I frowned, not liking my brilliant friend being treated like a maid.

“No, thank you. I only have a half hour or so then I must return to the base,” the general said in clear dismissal.

Lydia shut the door behind her, and we took the seats opposite Silas at his desk. I noticed the fireplace in the corner going strong despite the air-conditioned room. Apparently, Silas appreciated atmosphere.

“Let’s get down to business, shall we?” Silas asked, leaning across the desk.

“Please.” The general sat back in his chair and Silas turned to me, his golden eyes swirling like fairy lights.

No! Pythia’s exclamation seemed far away as I gazed into two beautiful suns before me.

“Dr. Devaux, you will not use your abilities on me. Ever. Understood?”

That direct demand shocked me, but of course I wouldn’t do that to him. I nodded, still staring at the glow of his eyes. The memory of Julian’s indigo glow flashed through my mind as he continued talking, and Pythia’s warning faded into a distant thought.

“Furthermore, you have no reason to fear me. In fact, you like being around me. You can trust me.”

“Is this absolutely necessary?” The general interjected, but Silas did not turn away, and I was happy not to lose the view of his golden auroras. I liked him and his undulating irises.

“General, if you wish to work together on our very important research so we can finally pull ahead of MorningStar, it is,” Silas said, taking my hand in his. “But you can go now. Charlotte and I have much to discuss.”

“Very well.” The general stood and panic overtook me. I gasped, still unable to look away and Silas’s hand tightened on mine almost painfully.

“You can’t leave. I need someone I trust from SHADE with me at all times,” I said, desperate to keep the general there.

Silas smiled then, the pulsing gold swelling and turning red on the edges. “I see my problem child, Julian, has done some damage control with glamour of his own. No matter. You

no longer need worry about anyone else being with us, my dear.” He patted my hand, and I relaxed as the door shut behind the general.

“You won’t remember what we discuss here unless I tell you to,” Silas continued. “I’ve waited a very long time for this. Do you know why you reincarnate, *Mon Cher*?” he asked.

“I’m Julian’s mate,” I spit, hating that I was supposedly made for that vile man.

“No,” Silas said, just as upset as I was. “In my mind, it is because you were stolen from me, and I have waited centuries for this opportunity to right that wrong. I always get what I want, and I want you.”

I believed him but was confused.

“When you live as long as I have, you learn that people are predictable. You also face the inevitable hopelessness of time. But I discovered the thing that others missed—the reason to stay alert and alive. Do you want to know what that is?”

“Yes,” I said, wanting him to keep talking so I could watch his eyes some more.

He cupped my face. “Challenge, *Mon Cher*. Challenge and pursuit of power. I have spent ages with many scientists looking for a way to regain my psychic powers that I lost when I was turned. I found a way, but it is temporary. I have to feed from someone like you.” He lifted my hand and sniffed my wrist as though testing a fine wine. “The trouble is, humans only last a short time and psychics are ever so hard to procure.”

He set my hand down and patted it again. “Stay still and listen,” he ordered, then rose and began to pace the room. I wanted his eyes back but wouldn’t interrupt.

“As I said, people are predictable. But you and your lover have never been so. Thus, you are a challenge to me. But I see now that I’ve been made to be patient for a reason. You will provide both coveted powers to me for eternity, *Mon Cher*. Your father and the girl are the ones who will finally solve my

problem. They are close to an answer, and when they have it, all will come together.”

Silas stared into the fire then was back in his seat staring at me. His fingers traced my lips. “Do you have any questions?”

“What are they working on?” I asked.

“A way to ensure that a psychic will retain their powers when turned into a vampire.”

His plan was to turn a psychic so that they’d keep their abilities and provide him with an unlimited source of power. Clever. I trusted him, so it must be okay. “How do you drain psychics’ powers?” I asked, curiosity exciting my scientific brain.

“While their blood is in my veins, I have their abilities.” He stroked my throat.

“You feed off them until they die?” I asked.

“Yes. When I find a psychic, I keep them as a food source or pledge until either the secret to eternal power is discovered or they cease to exist. Humans are sadly quite fragile.”

I nodded, commiserating. “Who is your current source?” I asked.

“Unfortunately, he just passed away while you were gone, you naughty girl. I’ve been powerless for days. You should be terribly sorry.”

“I apologize,” I said, though I wasn’t sure why. Still, I trusted him.

“Stand by the fire,” he said. “Like our conversation, you won’t remember this either.”

I followed his direction. The heat from the flames licked uncomfortably at my side as he stalked toward me, fangs elongating and the veins in his neck rising darkly.

“Undo your blouse, pull it aside, and show me your throat,” he said around his fangs.

I followed his directions, stretching my head back to expose the tender flesh of my neck.

His fingertip trailed down to my pulse point, and he tapped there lightly. Then he dipped his head to the spot. I startled as he sank into the vein.

A familiar euphoria washed over me as he pulled at my life source. A strange, unsettled feeling accompanied the pleasure, and I wanted him to stop. But I trusted him...

“Please don’t,” I managed.

Instead, his palms found my breasts and squeezed painfully as he nearly knocked me over, sucking at my throat.

The door to the office burst open and Silas was off me in an instant.

“How dare you interrupt,” he bellowed at Lydia who stood in the doorway.

She glanced at me then back at him. “You told me to inform you immediately when we had a breakthrough.”

Silas’s entire countenance changed, and he was back to the golden-eyed businessman. “Excellent. You found a way to maintain a psychic’s powers when changed?”

Lydia swallowed. Oh. I must be disturbing her. My blouse was open, and blood still ran down my neck. How had that happened? I pressed one hand to the wound and buttoned with the other.

“Dr. Devaux believes it has to do with stimulating the parietal cortex with an electrical impulse at the moment of transition,” Lydia said. “Obviously, we need to test the theory, but we’d need a volunteer, and those might be hard to come by.”

“Not as difficult as you may think,” Silas said. “Leave us and don’t speak of what you’ve seen here.”

Lydia’s gaze unfocused for a moment before she nodded and left the room, shutting the door behind her.

“You can glamour other vampires?” I asked, rejoining him at the desk.

Silas made a disgusted sound and zoomed around to my side where he pried my hand away from my neck and licked the wound closed. I waited patiently.

“Once you reach a certain age, you can glamour vampires at least 500 years your junior. Where is Julian? I would like him to be here for our momentous occasion. That bitch spoiled the mood, but having him here would help rekindle the flame.”

I pulled a face. “I don’t know where that asshole is, nor do I care.”

To my surprise, Silas chuckled. “I see. He still sent you back to me, though. Why not whisk you far away? Silly child. In any case, I need to find a spare psychic in the event this trial goes awry.”

“I know where some are. But it wouldn’t be easy to get them,” I offered and told him about MorningStar’s lab outside of Phoenix.

“Thank you for the information. Perhaps I have a way.”

“You need a volunteer for the procedure my father discovered?” I asked, intrigued.

“Oh, *Mon Cher*. You are my volunteer.” He leaned in, golden eyes swirling. “They’ll be the spare. After all, I’ve waited so long for you to be the one. And if it fails? I’ll simply kill you and you’ll be reborn again. I’ve learned patience, after all. Now, go get cleaned up so no one knows what happened here and forget about all of it. Then return to me in three mornings. That should give me enough time to procure the spare.”

“Okay,” I said, standing.

“Oh, *Mon Cher*, one more thing,”

I turned.

“Call me sire when we’re alone together. I believe I’ll enjoy hearing it from your lips.”

“Yes, sire.”

Chapter Fifteen

Bickering Friends



For the life of me, I couldn't figure out where the day went. I hadn't been at the vampire estate for long, as far as I recalled. I'd hoped the sleep I'd gotten would've helped, but I still felt lightheaded and bit wobbly on my feet as I finally settled in behind my office desk. Unfortunately, I hadn't even started my computer when the elevator appeared and Sam stepped out.

His tawny hair was loose, his scruff as thick as ever, and his casual stance made me relax. I hadn't realized how wound up I was from the trauma I went through in Arizona. Tears welled in my eyes at the sight of him. I was a complete and utter mess.

Sam rushed over to me and pulled me into a hug. He smelled dependable like earth.

"Hey now, what's wrong?" he asked in his deep voice.

"I don't know. I'm so sorry." I pulled away and wiped at my face before sitting back down.

Sam shrugged. "You've been through a lot lately. I heard about Sedona—at least some of it. You get a pass. And since the vamp isn't here for me to beat to a pulp for whatever he did, I've got plenty of hugs if you need them."

"Thanks." I smiled at him as he leaned back on the edge of the desk. "What can I do for you?"

"I wanted to know if you've heard any more about the bust the other night. It's like SHADE disappeared Orpheus and wiped their hands of it."

I frowned. “Other than him being in the brig, I haven’t, but I’ve been busy. I was hoping we’d have found something by now. We should put some pressure on Tittwell and see if he can help in finding the kids that were already moved off the island. He may have access to things I don’t.”

“I don’t trust that little rat.”

The elevator reappeared behind him, and Lydia stepped through, even paler than usual in torn, black lace tights, her heavy black boots, and a black leather corset top.

“I need to speak to you privately,” she said, glancing between me and Sam.

“Then you’ll have to wait,” Sam said, standing to his full, intimidating height. “Entitled vampires,” he whispered under his breath, knowing full well she’d hear him.

“We’re having dinner at the pub, right?” I asked her, hoping to diffuse the situation. “Surely it can wait a few hours.”

Lydia shook her head, making her choppy onyx hair bounce. “It’s a matter of life and death and...undead.”

“You can say anything in front of Sam,” I offered. “He’s a friend.”

“He’s an alpha shifter,” she said, staring at him with unblinking eyes that softly glowed crimson.

“Yes, and a *friend*.”

Lydia sighed, taking a step backward. “Never mind, I’ll wait till later to speak to you in private. I...I can’t talk in front of anyone.” But the elevator had gone and not reappeared.

Well, this is awkward.

“Sam, this is Lydia. Lydia, Sam. Lydia was my assistant that was turned when my lab was destroyed. More than that, she’s my trusted friend.” I hoped explaining it to him would make him a bit less brash. I’d been wanting her back in my life for so long I didn’t want anything or anyone to ruin it.

“Ouch, I’m sorry that happened to you,” Sam said.

Lydia rolled her eyes and crossed her arms. “It’s not so bad, Wolfman. I actually like being stronger than men like you.”

Sam snorted. “Maybe human men.”

“Wanna test that?” she asked, tilting her head and showing a bit of fang.

“Let’s not,” I said firmly. “Lydia, please have a seat.”

She pulled out a chair and sat as far from Sam as possible. “Finish what you were talking about so I can have a turn. Obviously, I’m not supposed to leave. That should prove how important this is.”

“If it’s that vital then get on with it,” Sam said, making a you-first gesture.

“I told you I can’t.” Lydia’s eyes burned scarlet.

Jumping to my feet in an effort to prevent bloodshed, I swayed, and my vision blanked. I’d moved too fast for my current state.

Two sets of arms caught me on either side and lowered me to the chair.

“She needs a healer,” Sam said.

“No, she needs something sugary,” Lydia answered. “Make yourself useful and grab her some OJ and cookies.”

“Why? Did you bite her?” Sam growled. “That’s what helps with blood loss.”

“No,” Lydia’s voice deepened to an almost demonic tone. “Go get the snacks, Wolfman.”

Sam turned and the elevator appeared for him to take. When it was gone again, I gaped up at Lydia who perched on my desk.

“Did you just glamour him?” I asked.

She shrugged. “He was bugging me. Hot men like that think too much of themselves. Now listen, I can’t talk in front of others, but you’re one of us now.”

“One of who?” I asked, wincing through the fog in my head.

“Never mind. I need to know if you still have that cure you offered me.”

“Yes. I saved it. It’s in my belt.” I gestured at the buckle where the endless hidden compartment held both the cure to GodKiller and the Vampire virus. I only had a couple of each, and I wasn’t risking another person getting their hands on it by letting them out of my possession. “But if you want to take it, you’ll have to feed first or you’ll die. You aren’t as new as when I offered it.”

“It’s not for me,” she said. “But thanks. We need to do this tonight while Silas is off the island getting...supplies.” She started pacing.

I was about to ask why and where he went when Sam reappeared with my sugar rush, glaring at Lydia with molten silver.

“Thanks,” I said, taking the cookies and ripping them open.

“Anytime,” he said, still glaring at my friend.

“I should go.” Lydia backed toward the elevator. “After dinner, we’ll go back to your place and take care of this. I got your back, Doc.”

Smiling, I watched her disappear. She’d called me that to bug me when we worked together because I’d always insisted we were equals and it made me feel old. The part of me that had been frightened I’d lost her finally sighed in relief. I still blamed myself for her circumstances, but maybe it was time I started believing that she truly liked being a vampire.

“She distracted me with her hotness,” Sam grumbled.

“Excuse me?” I turned my attention back to him as I sipped the juice.

“I wouldn’t normally let my guard down enough to look one of them in the eye, but I was trying to avoid staring at her

cleavage. I don't like being rude, even to blood suckers." He stuffed a cookie in his mouth.

I giggled. "I see. Well, she only did it to talk to me." My smile fell. Was she in some kind of trouble? Whatever it was, we'd deal with it tonight. I wouldn't let her be hurt again.

"So, back to the missing kids," I said, pressing fingers to my throbbing temples. "Was Em able to tell us anything?"

"She doesn't know where the other children were taken, other than off the island. We think they used a submarine or some kind of ocean supe to get through the shield. We just aren't sure what could do that. But we need to figure out where they were going and what was done to them when they got there."

"I think it's time to visit the doctor in the brig," I said, standing on much stronger legs. "I have a few questions for him."

* * *

When we got to the brig, the stone walls and torches reminded me of the fight with a kitsune, and how Karma had broken through as a dragon and set her on fire. As we walked the winding tunnel of a hall, our steps echoing in the empty space, I remembered with clarity the sight of Julian lying prone on the table with the device on his head and the way I'd fought so hard to save him. Why had I done that? No one deserved that fate, that was why. Although, I fully expected the doctor to be attached to the fae machine since that was what the general did with dangerous prisoners, and I wasn't as bothered by that. I wasn't looking forward to seeing him naked, though, that was certain. It became obvious as we reached the end of the hall, however, that the cells were empty with no sign of Orpheus.

"I knew the general was behind this," Sam growled. His skin started to buckle, and I put a hand on his arm to calm him so he wouldn't go full wolf and attack.

"We still don't know for sure. But even if he is part of it, we have to be smart about how we approach this. If we charge

in the command center, we'll end up down here with that fae thing on our heads or dead."

"I'm tired of waiting while they do gods-know-what to those kids. Surely, he knows his prisoner is missing." Sam's anger flared red on his aura. I didn't blame him. I wanted answers too.

"Back to my earlier idea," I said, taking his hand and pulling him into the elevator.

It opened exactly where I'd intended—Tittwell's office. The imp looked up and his eyes grew even bigger at the sight of the growling man with sharp teeth.

"Sit," I commanded before he ran. "And answer all our questions truthfully."

Tittwell dropped back in his seat, fidgeting.

"You won't remember this conversation," I added, something about the sentence making me feel wrong. I'd always hated using my mind-bending because it stole people's free will—something I believed in strongly. Not for the first time, I wished I couldn't do it in the first place, so I'd never have to deal with the moral dilemma of its use.

I shook it off. We couldn't blow our cover to the general if he was indeed behind this, and it was looking more and more like he was as the events going on under his nose piled up. And if he knew, then it stood to reason his right-hand rat knew too.

"Where are the missing children?" Sam demanded, pounding a fist down on the glass desk so hard I was afraid it would crack.

"At the offsite laboratory," Tittwell answered.

"Where is that?" I asked, exchanging a glance with Sam.

"Greenland," he said.

My heart sank as I pictured the lonely, snow-covered land stretching out for miles around wherever they were kept. The hopelessness they must feel... It made me ill.

“What’s the security like?” Sam asked.

“Heavy. You’d need an army to get to the center where the subjects are. Guards are stationed all around the building, so there’s no chance of breaking in.” Tittwell grinned.

“So the security is on the perimeter,” I said, tapping my thigh. “If we can bypass it, we may not need an army.”

“Impossible,” Tittwell said. But he didn’t know my sister.

Sam nodded and looked at me. “Does the general know about this?”

“Yes. He is following direct orders even though he doesn’t like it. Tittwell would welcome the orders and should be promoted.”

“Orders from who?” I asked, disgusted.

“The board. They gave us the DNA samples to start the program so we could get ahead of MorningStar.”

“The board of SHADE?” Sam asked, brow furrowed. “I’ve never met them.”

Tittwell nodded excessively. “And you never will. Only the general knows them personally. Has visited them.”

“Where are they?” I asked. “And what DNA did they give you?”

“And where is Orpheus?” Sam added.

Tittwell’s eyes bounced back and forth between us. “Tittwell doesn’t know. Source DNA for psychics. He was moved to Greenland.”

“Can you show us the schematics for the Greenland lab?” I asked.

“Tittwell doesn’t know.”

“I think we’re done here,” Sam said.

“One last thing,” I said, leaning over the creature. “You will no longer do anything amoral. You’ll refuse on ethical grounds even if you get fired. Now forget about this visit.” I

turned and marched back into the elevator with Sam beside me.

He stared at me on the way down, so intently it made me blush.

“What?” I hissed.

“That was impressive,” he said, looking away. “I mean, I knew you were a psychic, but I hadn’t really watched you in action till now. No offense, but you’re so sweet I hadn’t expected the level of take-charge you unleashed on that imp’s ass.”

“Thanks.” I shifted my stance. “I need to go meet Lydia for dinner. Then I’ll see if I can find any information on the lab’s exact location.”

The doors opened, revealing Gladys reading the latest book club romance, this time with a shirtless vampire on the cover, blood trickling from his mouth. I frowned at it as she quickly shoved it to the side.

“Don’t judge,” she said. “You might know what it’s like, but the rest of us have to daydream.”

My cheeks burned as I headed out of the base, flustered. I had no good response to that. They might be fun in bed, but they were jerks. At least Julian was.

“Do you need a ride to town?” Sam asked, kind enough not to comment.

“Sure, thanks.”

Sam lifted me into his truck and took off through the forest for what he called a “short cut.”

“So,” he said, pointedly watching the trail lit by the moon. “Since you and the blood sucker are no longer an item—”

“That got around fast,” I muttered.

“No pressure, but if you feel like a second date at some point...” He cleared his throat.

I looked at him. Sam was sweet, honest, and temperamental. He wanted to do the right thing always. He

was handsome and had the kind of body that made women swoon. I'd seen the goods that night behind his house. But he felt more like a brother than a lover. Too bad, since it would be hard to replace Julian's skill in bed and Sam stood an actual chance.

"Sam, you'll find the right woman. But she isn't me." I sucked in a breath and bit my cheek waiting for his reaction.

To my surprise, he grinned, reached over, and squeezed my hand. "I figured. But I wanted to be sure you turning me down before wasn't because he'd glamourised you or something."

I laughed with relief. "No. He can't glamour me. I have my —" I reached toward my chest and stopped. He'd crushed it, hadn't he? I'd been avoiding thinking about that night in detail, probably because it hurt so much. "Well, I won't get close enough to him ever again to let him try," I finished, slightly unnerved. What had he done to me? Had he made me have sex with him like that? Why else would I have done it?

Throwing a hand over my mouth, I fought the bile that threatened to rise up. Had he raped me? My gods. I couldn't process this information. No. I had to believe even he wouldn't have stooped that low. A sickening memory of him kissing me as I wished I could break away surfaced in my mind, but an image of Silas with his mouth pressed to my neck replaced it. Then all of it was gone and I was left with a dull throb in my temples, not sure what I'd been mulling over.

Sam pulled to the front of the Rusty Shifter and leaned across me to open the door.

"Thanks," I said weakly and hopped down. I remembered hopping down from the general's hummer earlier. How had I gotten back to base? I...I couldn't remember.

"Are you okay, Char?" Sam asked, rushing to my side of the vehicle.

I nodded. "It's been a lot," was all I could manage.

"Come on, I'll take you inside."

"But your truck—" I protested.

“Let someone try and give me a ticket,” Sam said, eyes flashing silver, and I laughed with as much gusto as I could manage, which wasn’t a hell of a lot.

He helped me inside and to my usual table near the fire. Another fire flashed in my mind along with a strange mix of desire and repulsion. I dropped into the chair, head aching worse despite the soothing music and delicious smells of the pub.

Murphy, the small, white-bearded man who ran the place, hurried over to us with a big beer for Sam and a double shot of whiskey that he placed in front of me.

“Oh, I don’t think I can stomach it,” I protested weakly.

“Nonsense. I know what you need, and it’s a stiff shot.” He studied me with a darkened aura. “I’ll go get you some stew too.” He winked, but I didn’t miss the worried glance he shot at Sam, who planted himself firmly in the seat beside me and scooted close.

“Lydia’s going to have a fit if you stay for dinner,” I said without much gusto.

“Too bad,” Sam said and gulped some beer. “I’ll be as charming as possible. Don’t worry.”

I nudged him with my elbow and took a swig of the liquid before me. It burned going down but left a trail of heat all the way to my stomach that somehow helped. Lydia appeared at the table as I set the cup on a paper coaster. She ignored Sam’s presence and sat across from me, leaned over, grabbed my glass, and took a swig.

“Damn,” she said, setting it back down. “Yeah, Murphy knows what you need, Doc.”

I smiled at her and took another sip as Murphy appeared with two bowls of stew, which he set before Sam and I, and a tall glass of blood with a stick of celery for Lydia.

“Can I get one of those also?” she asked, pointing to my whiskey.

“I’ll see what I can do,” Murphy agreed solemnly before rushing off to another table.

“You can go anytime now,” Lydia said, glaring at Sam as she sucked the blood from her celery stick.

“Not until I’ve finished this,” Sam said, shoveling a bite of stew in his mouth. I had to agree it was delicious.

“I’m stressed at the moment,” I said after swallowing. “So I’d appreciate it if two of my closest friends would play nice and not add to it.”

“Message received,” Lydia said, saluting, then gulped some blood and smacked her lips at Sam. But this goad felt more playful than before, and I smiled to myself.

“I eat fresh blood too,” Sam commented, already half done with his meal. “And flesh and sometimes even bone when I’m enthusiastic.” He licked his lips and made a satisfied sound.

Lydia stuck her tongue out. “Gross. Our human is trying to eat.”

“I’m your human now?” I said, setting down my fork. “Like a pet?”

“No! It’s a term of endearment,” Lydia said, hand fluttering to her chest in mock horror as Murphy brought her the whiskey and handed me a second glass.

“Definitely a compliment,” Sam agreed, backing her up.

I downed my first glass and pulled the next one toward me, head starting to spin but feeling better than before.

“I’ll let it slide then, this time,” I joked, and we all laughed.

We finished dinner together, chatting about the similarities and differences between shifters and vampires. I hadn’t been that tipsy in a long time and blurted out, “What do you get when you mix a...a wolf with a...bat?”

“What?” Lydia demanded.

“I don’t know. A wolbat? No that’s not a thing.” I furrowed my brow, trying to grasp the thought just out of

reach. When I found it, I bounced with excitement. “I know! A wombat?” I asked then hiccupped.

Lydia shook her head and Sam rose from the table, throwing down a bunch of cash. “Come on. That’s our cue to get you home.”

“I’ve got her from here,” Lydia said, taking my arm and helping me navigate the table.

Sam frowned, but when I nodded, he acquiesced and opened the door for us.

“You’re strong,” I commented as Lydia, several inches shorter than me, kept me balanced down the steps.

“That happens when you’re a vampire,” she said wryly. “Bye, Wolfman.”

“Bye, Wombat,” he countered before climbing in his truck.

“This will be faster if I carry you,” Lydia said as I tripped over a crack on the sidewalk.

“Julian used to do that,” I said.

She sighed. “That bastard should’ve never abandoned you like this.”

“Right?” I said, excited that someone understood his true nature even if I didn’t want him here anyway. “He’s such an ass.”

Lydia tipped me over her shoulder and zoomed off, making me lose the contents of my stomach somewhere on the ride—hopefully in the forest where it wouldn’t disturb anyone.

Chapter Sixteen

Bloody Good



Lydia set me on my feet at my own doorstep and helped me onto the porch swing.

“Sorry about that,” she said, joining me.

“Not your fault Murphy got me sloshed.” I swatted her arm.

“You still have the cure?” she asked.

“Yeah.” I patted my belt, listening to the crickets and forest sounds from behind the house. I wondered if Mama and Zoe were both home.

“How long before it’s dangerous to use after someone’s turned?” she asked.

I scrunched my face in thought. “The blood has to still be in their system or they have to be well-fed. So maybe...a couple of weeks. Why?”

Lydia adjusted herself and made sure I was looking at her dead-on. “I want to turn you into a vampire.”

After a good five seconds of silence, I bust out laughing so hard I almost fell off the swing. Lydia waited until I was done. “I’m serious.”

“Why?” I asked, wishing I could clear my head somehow. “I don’t know if you remember, but except for present company, vampires have a history of causing me issues.”

“I’ll let that slide since you’re drunk off your ass, oh She-Who-Can’t-Hold-Her-Liquor. But here’s the thing—You are in

danger, and I'm pretty sure I can get you out of said danger by turning you."

I stopped smiling and tried to focus. "Is that what you want the cure for? To turn me back again? What's the point then?"

"You may not want to change back, you know," Lydia said, standing. "But, yeah, that's the backup plan. I figure after a few days h—" she choked on whatever she was going to say, then tried again. "The *danger* will have moved on."

"What is this danger?" I asked, standing and throwing out my arms for balance.

"I can't tell you," she said, trembling with restrained frustration.

"I'm just supposed to let you?" I countered, annoyed that everyone was always trying to save me without being honest. Maybe being a vampire had changed Lydia.

"If I wanted to do it without your permission, you'd already be reborn," Lydia hissed. "I need you to trust me."

"The only blood sucker I trust is Silas," I yelled. "At least there's one of you that's decent."

Lydia screamed and threw her hands up in the air. "Ask yourself why you trust him so fucking much."

"Well, I—" I stopped, puzzled. "I just do."

"That's logical," she snarked.

"What's he done that I shouldn't trust him?" I asked. "Tried to turn me? Nope, that's you."

Lydia's face burned red. "Fuck, Char. Think, would you? Has he done anything untrustworthy?"

I considered, expecting to defend him. But the memory of Julian's bloody tears over his sister's body flooded me. I shook myself. Why should I care if he was horrible to the man I hated?

But you do care, Pythia pointed out. I hadn't heard from her in a long time. Not since Arizona, or—wait, I think I heard her that morning at some point but, for the life of me, I

couldn't remember, so I focused on Lydia's question instead. What else had Silas done that was shady?

I recalled the file that Daphne had hidden in the basement of the base. Silas had tried to blackmail me. Yet...I trusted him—even liked him. It didn't make sense. Lydia was right. I grabbed the banister of the porch and sat down on the top step, hugging my knees to my chest.

Lydia sat beside me and rested her head on my shoulder. “The answer to your conundrum is the same as the answer to why I can't tell you anything.”

Something or someone was preventing her from doing it. Then the same someone or something had jumbled my thoughts into a contradictory mess. But what could do that?

“Who killed Carmichael?” I asked her suddenly then set to chewing my cheek.

“I...I...can't.” She shook her head, clearly battling with something. “I'm sorry.”

“My head hurts,” I said as the door opened behind me and both Zoe and Em came outside.

“You two are noisy,” Zo said, joining us on the steps as Em climbed on the swing.

“Where's Mama?” I asked absently.

“Out with Binx.” Zoe shook out her curly head. “What's going on?”

“Well, Lydia can't tell us and, for the same reason, my thoughts aren't making logical sense.” I sighed. “Also, she wants to turn me into a vampire.”

Lydia jumped up and put out her hands in defense. “Not without permission and only to save her ass.”

“It sure would solve your problems,” Em said.

We all looked at her.

“Who are you?” Lydia asked.

“Em. I’m a psychic. I don’t exist, though, so don’t tell anyone.”

Zoe opened her mouth, but Em said, “She won’t, don’t worry.”

“I am not letting you turn another family member into a vampire when the first one won’t walk two miles to see me,” Zoe said, pulling me into her arms. “Don’t try me.”

“Look, it’s frustrating as hell not being able to explain this in simple terms.” Lydia began pacing between the steps, swing, and front door of the house. “But I came here to try because I care about the doc, and I don’t want her to suffer.”

“How will being a vampire save her from suffering?” Zoe asked.

“Aaargh.” Lydia yanked at handfuls of her hair.

“Right, you can’t tell us. Sorry.” Zoe stood and offered me a hand.

“I’ll think about it,” I promised before following Zoe and Em back in the house.

Lydia tried to fall in behind us and met an invisible barrier at the door. “Ow.”

“Sorry,” Zoe said. “After we found out Dad was back, Mama put an invitation only barrier up on the house for all vamps.”

“Invite me in,” Lydia demanded.

“Mm, pass,” Zo said. “No offense, but you want to turn my sister in to a vampire without being able to explain why.” And with that, she shut the door on Lyds.

“That was mean. She’s my friend,” I argued.

“You’re drunk,” Zoe said then pointed to the couch, where I sank into the cushions and groaned.

“Have you found out anything about my adopted brothers and sisters?” Em asked, sitting beside me.

I gazed into her hopeful eyes and spilled everything. “They’re in a lab in Greenland. Orpheus is there, the perimeter is heavily guarded, but we don’t have an exact location. And the general is acting on the direct orders of the board.”

“Hang on,” Em said, leaping from the couch and hurrying over to the table where she grabbed a piece of paper and a pen and began scribbling.

“Sounds like a shit but informative day,” Zoe said, sitting on the arm of the sofa. “I don’t blame you for drinking.”

I leaned my head on her lap. “Everything sucks.”

My sister opened her mouth to say something when Em rushed back over and handed me the paper she’d been working on. Zoe and I exchanged a glance. It was a dome-shaped structure drawn at the top of a glacier with coordinates in the upper right-hand corner.

“This is the lab?” I asked, dumbfounded.

“Yep. That’s what they used me for. Locating hidden places and people,” she said proudly.

My heart sank. It seemed all anyone wanted to do was create and use psychics to their advantage. We weren’t people in their eyes, just weapons. At that moment, I’d never hated my abilities so much. I reached up and tucked her hair behind her ear where it promptly popped out again. My heart swelled with love and understanding. Em was a lot like me. She and her adopted siblings had been used as an experiment in someone else’s game. Just like our father had done to me and Zoe.

“Good job, sweetie. We’ll talk to Sam and Daphne in the morning and get a plan together. Now do me a favor and go to your room so I can have a private talk with your aunty.”

Em smiled and bounced off to Zoe’s old room. I waited until she shut the door then turned to my sister. “There’s something I have to tell you about Dad and our abilities.”

* * *

I didn't like the idea of visiting the vampire estate while Silas was away on business, but Zoe and I had things to discuss with our father. We portalled over early the next morning, a couple of hours before Sam, Daphne, and Hazel were due for our strategizing meeting.

"We're here to see our father," I told the vampire at the door.

"Follow me," the man said and led us down the stairs to a subterranean level where he guided us to a metal door.

"You sure you aren't trying to capture us?" Zoe joked, no concern in her voice. After all, she could get us out of pretty much anywhere.

"Your father's laboratory," the vampire responded then zipped away at superspeed.

"No humor," Zoe mused as I knocked on the door.

Lydia opened it and tipped her goggles onto her head. The shocking white of her lab coat contrasted with the black of her clothing. "What are you doing here?"

"Nice to see you too," I said. "We're here to talk to Dad." I shoved past her to where my father concentrated on a helmet-shaped hunk of metal that hung suspended over a tilted platform that might've been made to hold a Frankenstein's monster in place. It was something out of an old black-and-white movie about a mad scientist with all the steel, zapping energy streams, and blinking lights.

In the back corner was what looked like a sensory deprivation tank lined with silver. It had hollow tubes coming out of each side. One ended at an empty blood bag and a large cooler, the other ended at another cooler, but no bag was present. I didn't like the looks of it.

"Hey, Dad." I yelled to get his attention. He'd always been so intent on whatever his latest project was, it was hard to get through. Memories of sitting on the stool in his lab, watching him work when I was young, assaulted me, but I shoved them aside as I reached for his arm.

He caught my hand before it touched him, and he gripped it so tight I yelped with pain. He stopped, staring at me through his goggles like he'd just recognized me. It felt like he'd nearly snapped the bones in half.

"Girls! What are you doing here?" he asked, echoing Lydia's earlier question. I guessed they didn't want us snooping on their research.

"We need to talk to you," I said. "What's all this?"

"Top secret," he quipped and forced a placating smile. Too bad I was an adult and that wouldn't work.

"We know what you did to us," Zoe said, stepping up to join me. "You experimented on your own children, you nutcase."

His face fell, and he set down the soldering tool he'd been holding. "Lydia, please give us some privacy."

I heard the door shut. He gestured for us to sit at the nearest table where schematics and coffee stains littered the top. Zoe stayed put, but I shoved some of the papers aside and sat on the top.

"It wasn't an experiment," he said. "I'd been given the gift of very special DNA samples from a donor. It was guaranteed to work, and I wanted my children to have it."

"So you took an unknown chemical from someone and injected your kids with it?" Zoe asked.

"No." His eyes glazed over and his expression became wild—almost reverent. "It wasn't unknown, just so very rare. It hadn't been seen on earth since the first psychics were created. Witches, too, for that matter. It's where our kind came from. They explained everything. I knew it would work, and I wanted you to be blessed with the next stage of evolution." He opened his arms like he expected us to jump in and give him a hug.

"Evolution is natural," I said, hopping down from the table. "Whatever that was—it was foreign and dangerous."

“No,” he insisted, veins pulsing. “I saw the origin. They showed me. They gave me their blessing to do their work without warping it to my own ends like the others had. I knew exactly what I had.”

“What the fuck was it?” Zoe asked, blue light sizzling at her fingertips.

“It was a dose of their DNA, altered to bond to your own.” He smiled again, too big, looking absolutely mad.

“*Whose* DNA?” I asked, sliding from the table.

“The gods,” he whispered conspiratorially, then laughed, sudden and loud.

Zoe and I stared, slack-jawed. “They came to earth to help evolve man so that we can be at their level. That’s what my work was always about. Our work, Charlie.”

The world spun as I clung to the edge of the table. He was certifiable. “What’s this machine?” I asked, nodding to the helmet. “It can’t be more top secret than gods that want to alter human DNA, so spill.”

He scratched his head then rubbed it, making it stick up all over again. Suddenly, it wasn’t endearing, it was delusional. “It’s what my benefactor was funding me for. A machine that will allow a psychic to retain their abilities when changed to a vampire. Take a look.” He pulled the helmet over and tilted it so I could see the long needles on the side. I gasped and jerked away, remembering the torture I’d gone through at the lab in Arizona. The way it had felt like something just like this had been put on my head. It had stimulated my psychic center and allowed me to use my abilities when asked. It was how I’d escaped, but that didn’t change the fact that it hurt like hell and frightened me more than I could admit.

“That looks like an ancient torture device,” Zoe said, grabbing my arm. “And who are you testing it on?”

Dad did a little excited dance as he hugged the offensive object. “I don’t know yet. I believe my benefactor has gone to find a volunteer. He’ll be back in a couple of days.”

The echo of something made me wince. I was going to meet Silas here the morning he returned. I looked forward to it.

“Are you okay?” Zoe asked, grabbing my hand that held my head.

People kept asking me that lately.

“Just disgusted. How about that thing?” I nodded at the corner.

“What thing?” he asked, perplexed.

There was literally nothing else I could have meant. “That chamber with the tubes running out of it,” I clarified anyway, grabbing his chin, and pointing him right at it.

“I have no idea what you mean. There’s just some junk over there. This helmet is my finest invention, Charlie. You should be here with me when I put it on the subject.”

I shook my head with repulsion and frustration, “I think we should go.”

“One more question.” Zoe took a step into Dad’s personal space. “Does Mama know what you did to us?” She was tough, but she couldn’t keep her voice from breaking on Mama’s name.

I held my breath. If she did, then everyone I loved and depended on had lied to me or left.

“No,” Dad said. “Well, she thinks it was an accident when you were visiting the lab. And she thinks it was my own creation.”

Zoe nodded sadly and reached for my hand. “Goodbye, Dad.” And I knew she meant forever.

She opened a portal, and we stepped through. The last thing I saw was Dad’s crazed yet hopeful face as it closed behind us.

Chapter Seventeen

Vampires Ruin Everything



“I’m shook, Char,” Zoe admitted as we prepped for our assault on the lab. We were alone in my room, and I knew she wasn’t talking about Greenland and the kids.

“We can’t trust what he says.” I double-checked my belt contents and closed the chamber. “He was raving. He acted like he couldn’t even see that machine in the corner, and I believe him.”

“Maybe someone mind-bent him?” Zo asked, hopefully. “Like maybe none of it was his fault?”

I sighed. “I want to believe in him, too, Sis. But I’m pretty sure he knew what he was doing. Even if the ‘gods come to Earth’ aren’t real, he believes it and still decided to give us whatever the hell their alleged *gift* was.”

“You’re right,” she said, fastening the clip in her hair. “Let’s go save some kids. That’ll make me feel better.”

“Good plan,” I agreed, opening the door to the living room where Sam, Daphne, and Hazel waited.

Sam wore a black T-shirt and cargo pants that looked like they’d easily rip off if he shifted. He had a spare set of clothes waiting on the couch by a pouting Daphne.

“I’m sorry you can’t come,” I said.

“It’s not your fault it’s painful for me to be that far from my land,” she said with a shrug, but it clearly upset her.

“We’ll bring you back someone’s ass to kick,” Hazel promised with a grin as Zoe slipped a hand in hers.

“Okay, let’s do this,” I said. “Zo, the portal. Stay at the ready to close it if anything goes wrong. No matter who is left there. Got it?”

“Will do, Sis.”

I drew in a deep breath as everyone waited for my mark. “Now!”

Zoe drew the portal open. Sam jumped through first. A moment later, he yelled, “Clear,” and Hazel and I followed suit. We’d landed in a reinforced metal corridor as far inside the circular maze as Zoe could get us based on Em’s visions. I tensed, ready for guards to come rushing toward the sound, but nothing happened. Sam jerked his head at the large iron door and Hazel sent a zap of blue lightning at it, forcing it open.

Inside, a group of children, ranging in age from infant to teen, stared at us. Their heads were partially shaved, electrodes blinking from various patches on their scalps. Sam rushed to the middle of the circular space, where Dr. Orpheus stood gaping, and grabbed him by the neck. A clipboard dangled from the doctor’s fingers, and his thick blue glasses went askew as he purpled. The man’s shoes barely scraped the floor as Sam squeezed him with superhuman strength, growling and eyes lit like silver moonlight.

“Stop!” I yelled at him, but I didn’t put magic behind the word. I couldn’t afford to waste any energy in case we were discovered. “Sam, we need information from him.”

Sam released his hold, and the man slid to the floor, coughing. “Incoming!” Hazel yelled through the portal on the other side of the doorframe. She nodded to Sam, who lifted the man and tossed him through the air to the other side.

“That was easy,” Hazel said, hand on hip. “A little too easy. No one came running.”

“We can’t worry about that now,” I said, facing the children. “Hi. I’m a friend of Em’s. We’re here to save you.”

The kids looked at each other and then back at me expectantly.

“We’re going to get you to safety. Okay?”

Still, no one moved or spoke. I reached into my belt and pulled out the toy I'd found on the ocean floor. A small gasp came from the left. I zeroed in on a young boy and recognized the face I'd connected with at the beach.

"This is yours." I smiled and held out the block, waiting. After glancing back at some of the other kids he'd been standing with, he inched forward cautiously.

When he finally grasped the block, I let my hand fall to my side.

He hugged the toy to his chest. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. Will you please come with us? We'll do our best to make sure these people never find you again. But you can't use your abilities unless absolutely necessary. They'd be able to track you."

The boy nodded, looking determined. "I'm Jay."

"Can't hold this forever," Zoe shouted through the portal.

"Go," I motioned for the kids to climb through. To my relief, they filed out after Jay.

When the last teenagers climbed through carrying the four infants I realized were in fact the babies we'd helped deliver, I breathed a bit easier. "Okay, Hazel, do your thing and we're out of here."

She nodded, focusing on the instruments lining the walls. I braced myself for the explosion, but instead a rush of wind announced an unexpected arrival, and I turned to find Julian standing a few feet away. My heart skittered in my chest, which was ridiculous because I hated him. Strange feelings whirled inside of me as I stared at that poisonously beautiful face. My mouth dried up while I tried to work out what he was doing here of all places.

"Charlotte," he said, stock still, eyes glinting with something like pain.

"Not expecting *me* to crash the party? You knew all along where these kids were and what was happening to them, didn't

you?” I demanded. It was the only thing that made sense to me.

“No. No, I came to free them as soon as I found out where the lab was. We have to get them out quickly. Where are they?”

“Why should we believe that?” I challenged, angrier at my own warring emotions than him.

“I have...an informant—you have to believe me,” he begged.

“How very convenient,” I said as Sam stepped up beside me, and I turned, ready to leave.

“I texted him at his old number hoping he’d get it,” Zoe yelled through the portal, and I spun back around, shocked that my sister could be such a traitor.

“She thought I might be helpful, but I see you have this under control.” He took a step back.

“Why didn’t she tell us?” Sam asked, and Julian hesitated.

“I...suppose she didn’t want to cloud the situation when children’s lives were at stake. She knew things may become awkward,” Julian stammered.

“Great choice then,” Hazel said with a smirk. “Cuz this isn’t super awkward.”

“We have to go,” I said. “Zo can’t hold the portal for long.”

“Let me take the children. I have safe houses set up away from the island,” Julian said, reaching out but not quite touching me. *Good choice.*

“You aren’t laying a finger on a single one of them,” I said, moving between him and the portal.

“It will be easier and safer for all of you than taking them to your home when Zoe will be too tired to portal them out for hours.” Julian stepped toe-to-toe with me. “You hate me, but that doesn’t mean I’m wrong.”

Sam's hand fell on my shoulder. "He's right. I think we should let him, especially if Zoe called him in. And he'll give me the information so I can check on them. Right, Bloodsucker?"

Julian nodded. His eyes were a lighter blue than I remembered. He hadn't been feeding. I wondered why then shook myself. "I don't know."

"We have to decide now," Hazel said, glancing at the portal that seemed to be shrinking slightly by the second.

"The security—" I started.

"Are taken care of," Julian said.

That explained why we met no interference when we broke in.

"Send them back through," Hazel yelled through the portal.

I spun as the children trailed back into the room. How had I lost control of this situation? Had Julian glamoured my friends? When would he have gotten to Zoe?

"Come on, Char." Sam tugged my arm until I followed him and Hazel back to the portal.

I hesitated, glancing back at Julian. If I didn't know better, I'd say it was longing I saw in his eyes. But it was probably just a trick of the light.

Back in the house, Zoe collapsed before I could berate her, and Hazel helped her to the couch where she fell asleep. Daphne had Orpheus pinned to the ground beneath her boot, and Mama and Em were presumably in the backyard doing lessons where I'd asked them to stay during this operation.

"What took so long?" Daphne asked, eyes wide.

"Julian showed up, thanks to my sister, Benedict Arnold," I said, sitting next to Orpheus on the floor. "And these two decided he was a better choice to get the kids to safety than we were."

"Makes sense." Daphne nodded.

“Wait, you agree?” I asked, feeling completely betrayed by all of them.

“Well yeah. He’s good at handling delicate situations. He has more experience than us,” she said with a shrug.

“Let’s get some information from this one so I can break his neck,” Sam said, jerking his head toward Orpheus.

“Sam,” I warned. “You can’t just murder people. Even bad people.”

“Then what do we do with him? If we give him to the general, he’ll just end up back on the payroll of the board, and they’re the only officials who can bring him to justice.”

I considered the prisoner we’d taken. “I have an idea.” But I wasn’t thrilled with it.

“First, answer some questions,” I said, kneeling close to Orpheus and letting my magic loose. “Who is behind this study and what’s the purpose?”

“The board. The purpose is to create the perfect human hybrid.”

Daphne frowned and increased her pressure on his back. At least his answer on who was behind it was consistent with Tittwell’s. I suspected I’d have to get to the general to find out who they were. And that would not be easy.

“Okay, what type of hybrid?” I asked.

“The best of all the primitive creatures.”

“What creatures?”

“Shifters, vampires, witches, psychics, and humans.”

I sat back on my heels. “I guess fae aren’t primitive.”

Hazel snorted.

“And they’re primitive by whose standards?” I asked, trying a different tactic.

“The board’s.”

“I think that’s all we’re getting out of him,” Sam said.

Sadly, I had to agree. “Okay, Orpheus, you are going to forget everything about SHADE, the board, and the experiments, including this conversation. You are a... podiatrist for shifters.”

Hazel double-snorted this time and I smiled at her. “You live in Duluth, Minnesota and have a quiet life. The minute you step through the portal when my sister gets up, this will go into effect, and you’ll remember you lost everything in a flood and weren’t insured. You have to start over and find a place to live and work.” I glanced up at Daphne. “And you will sit quietly and wait without giving us any trouble until you are sent through the portal.”

“Thank you,” Daphne said, removing her foot. “I was getting tired of standing like that.”

Orpheus rose and sat on a chair that Sam put in the corner for him.

“That was amazing!” Hazel said, bouncing a little and scooping up Karma in cat form.

“I hate doing it. Taking someone’s free will is horrible.”

“Vampires do it all the time,” Sam said, putting an arm over my shoulder.

“That doesn’t help.” I leaned my head against his pecs and bit my cheek. “I just hope those kids will be okay.”

“Whatever happened between you and Julian, he’s never let us down on the job before,” Daphne said, worry creasing her brow. “We had a plan, but we aren’t the professionals here when it comes to that kind of logistics. He is, and he’s been doing it for a long time.”

I guessed that made sense. I shouldn’t let my personal feelings cloud my professional judgement. It was just so hard to tamp down my emotions concerning him. The hate simmered below my skin like a viper waiting to strike. That couldn’t be healthy. I needed to get over him and leave him in the past. But how was I supposed to do that when he kept showing up in my life? Even in fucking Greenland?

“I’m exhausted,” I said. It was still early, but that didn’t matter. It felt like I’d been fighting a battle for days.

“We should leave you to rest then,” Daphne said. “I need to get back to my land anyway.”

“Come on, I’ll give everyone a ride,” Sam said, opening the door. “You sure you got Orpheus under control?”

“He’s not going anywhere,” I said with a mixture of confidence and exhaustion from the day.

They all filed out, including Karma. I ordered Orpheus to go to sleep until I woke him because his silent presence became unnerving after a bit. I curled up next to my traitorous sister and closed my eyes, wishing I could give my abilities up in exchange for a normal life where I didn’t feel betrayed by everyone because of them.

Chapter Eighteen

Fucking Men



I woke to Zoe squeezing me in a hug. I turned to look at her. It was hard to stay mad when she was like this.

“I don’t want to alarm you, Char, but there’s a bad guy sleeping in the corner.”

“Yeah. I’ll wake him when you’re ready to send him to Duluth.”

“Duluth?” she laughed.

I shrugged. “It’s the best I could think of off the top of my head where SHADE wouldn’t go looking.”

She sat up and stretched “I’m hungry. Using magic gives me an appetite.”

“Yeah, me too. But I want to discuss why you felt the need to call Julian in on our operation without informing me.” I glared at her.

“We’ll talk over a meal,” she said then declared, “I could use a banana split.”

“Sounds like dinner to me,” I agreed and headed for the freezer.

Once we’d set up at the table with the supplies, we went at it like we were ten.

“This is exactly what I needed,” I said, squirting chocolate sauce all over my ice cream and bananas.

“These fix everything. Even broken hearts,” Zoe agreed, shaking the whipped cream.

I froze. “I said let’s talk about why you went behind my back, not why Julian is an ass. Besides, I can’t believe you’re going there right now.”

“If I shouldn’t include one of the best resources we have on dangerous missions, then don’t you think it’s about time you leveled with me about what happened?”

“I don’t know what happened!” I threw my spoon down on the table as tears came from nowhere. “All I know is I can’t stand him.”

“Funny, he’d actually grown on me,” Zoe said calmly, taking a bite of vanilla. “He’s a decent guy who seemed head over heels for you.”

“Oh yeah? If he’s so decent then why did he crush the charm you gave me?” I challenged, sick of everyone defending him.

Zoe swallowed and blinked. “What charm?”

“My anti-glamour charm.” I let the sobbing start. “I think he glamourised me into sex.”

Zoe’s eyebrows shot up like a cartoon character. “Why would he do that when you were already sleeping together? A lot. You two were like a couple of rabbits.”

I sniffed and shrugged as the river of chocolate in my bowl blurred.

“Char, did you sleep with him before or after he broke the charm?” she asked, gesturing with her spoon.

“Um, before...” I said, thinking back with relief. “But that’s even worse. Why would he break my trust like that?”

“Well, the only reason I can think of is to glamour you to do something that you wouldn’t otherwise do. But in his case, I’d guess it was for your benefit.”

I pushed back from the table, aghast. “How can you still be on his side?”

“I didn’t say he made a good choice—I’m just trying to figure out what and why. Besides, you buried the lead here—

you've been hanging around vampires lately without protection. That freaks me out. Especially with how weird you're acting."

Lost for words and feeling like a fish with my mouth opening and closing silently, I tried to process what she was saying.

"Putting a pin in that for a moment. Let's think about Julian logically," she offered, setting her spoon down and scooting closer. "What did he do that made you hate him so much?"

I thought back, trying to get past the strong emotions. We'd just made love in a way that I never opened myself up enough to do with anyone else. "Well, he asked me to run away with him. I'd already said no, but I said it again. I'd never leave you and Mama like Dad did."

"Okay, so that's something, but hardly something to hate him for. It's not like he forced you."

"Yeah, but then he crushed your charm," I reminded her.

"When you refused to run?" Zoe shoved her bowl aside and reached for my arm. "Then he must have glamoured you to hate him because he knew something—something that would happen if you continued your relationship here on the island."

I thought harder. "He kept calling himself a monster and saying he didn't deserve me, which really pissed me off. I made an innocent comment and his whole attitude changed..."

"What was it?" she pressed.

Squinting, I tried to recall. "I said something about still being human, I think."

"Hmm." Zoe sat back and pulled her bowl over to spoon some half-melted ice cream. "What's different around here that might've freaked him out? Other than Dad, obviously. And what tie does Julian have to it?"

"Maybe Silas? No. He is Julian's sire and can force him do anything, but..." I shake my head, digging back into my own

sugar feast.

Zoe froze with her spoon in her mouth, eyes bugging out.

“That can’t be it,” I argued. “I trust Silas.” I paused, then amended, “He’s changed. Silas wouldn’t do anything horrible like before.” Damn, my head hurt.

“What do you mean *like before*?” Zoe asked, and I could tell she was trying to stay calm like when we were kids and she needed me to give her the whole story even when she was mad.

“Well, it was lifetimes ago. I saw a vision of him and Julian when Julian was first turned. Silas killed his sister and ordered Julian to bring me to him. When Julian got to me, I’d committed suicide. Or, at least, that’s Julian’s claim. So silly of me to do that when obviously Silas is trustworthy, and I’d have had nothing to worry about.”

Zoe gaped at me, food forgotten.

“Don’t look at me like that. I’m sure there was a reason he killed Julian’s sister.”

“Holy shit. I’m going to kill that son of a bitch,” Zoe said, smacking the heel of her hand to her forehead.

“Who?” I asked, taking another bite.

“Julian!”

“Finally, you see my point.” I smiled, throwing my hands in the air.

“He left you unprotected with the most dangerous person possible.”

“Who’s that?” I asked, perplexed.

“Silas. Don’t you see? Without your charm, he glamourous you to trust him. That much is clear. Shit, what else did he glamour you to do?” Zoe tapped the table with her fingernails then halted. “Dad’s machine. Didn’t you say Lydia wanted to turn you but couldn’t say why?” She stood.

“Yeah. Why?”

“Can a vampire glamour another vampire?”

I shrugged, struggling to recall something that was at the tip of my memory.

“He must’ve somehow. Lydia is trying to protect you from wearing that horrible helmet and being turned into a psychic vampire. I’m sure of it.”

“That’s ridiculous!” I laughed at the absurdity of it.

“We have to break Silas’s glamour. What’s stronger than vampire glamour?”

“Mind-bending,” I answered, recalling how I’d managed to wake Daphne and Hazel from the trance that the fake Carmichael had put them in when fighting a psycho, shape-shifting kitsune. “Or, at least, it is with fake vamps.”

Zoe hauled me to my feet and shoved me toward my bathroom. “Have you ever used your abilities on yourself?” she asked.

“What? No. How would I even do that?” I asked as she planted me in front of the mirror.

“Look at your reflection and order yourself to remember everything that was taken.” When I hesitated, she added, “Or I swear I will portal you to the Sahara.”

Rolling my eyes, I turned toward the mirror and looked myself in the eyes. When had I gotten such dark circles? And I looked awfully pale. I had been through a lot lately. I drew a deep, cleansing breath and called up my magic.

“Okay, Char,” I told my reflection, “remember whatever they told you to forget.”

My reflection warped and split in two. On one side, Julian and I sat naked on a hotel bed as he told me to hate him and broke my heart. On the other, Silas told me everything about his plans to use me.

Gripping the edge of the sink I willed the conversation forward. That couldn’t be right. I never would have trusted him... I shook my head to clear it and forced more of my

magic to the surface as I glared at my reflection. *Remember*, I ordered again.

In the mirror, Silas sent me to his fireplace. I touched my cheek at the memory of heat and sucked in a breath as he lay his hands on me and sank his fangs into my throat, forcing the sensation of euphoria on me despite the wrongness of it.

Shaking, I released the vision and vomited into the sink, sobbing as Zoe clung to my back, holding on to me as I sank to the tile floor. She rocked me slowly as everything rushed back in perfect clarity, but nothing more so than the casual way Silas assaulted me near the fire. How Lydia had come in and he'd glamourised her not to speak of what she'd seen.

Lydia! She'd been trying to save me. But even knowing the horror that waited for me, she refused to force me.

Unlike Julian, who'd once again taken my right to choose for myself. I sobbed harder, my heart splitting in my chest as it broke yet again. He'd made a choice—and he *knew*. He knew I'd never forgive him, but said he'd do it all over again. How could we ever get past that? More importantly, how could I fix what was happening?

When I'd run out of tears, I lay nearly catatonic in Zoe's lap as she smoothed my hair back and my body trembled. She waited for me to speak first. But what could I say?

"Thank you," was what came out in my scratchy, hoarse voice.

"I'll always be here for you," she said. "Do you want to tell me what happened?"

Slowly, carefully, I righted myself and leaned back against the cupboard. I noticed my enchanted clawfoot tub had scooted as close as it could, like it meant to comfort me, so I reached out and stroked the porcelain like it was a pet.

"Silas. He...hurt me," I said, unable to get the real words out. "He would have done more, I'm sure, but Lydia walked in. He was livid. You're right, he glamourised her. She's been trying her best to rescue me from a horrible fate. Silas told me he can glamour any vampire at least 500 years younger than he

is. He's also psychic—or was in life. When he drinks from another psychic, the blood magic reignites that portion of his brain, and he regains his abilities while their blood runs through his system. He's been draining psychics slowly until they die. The monster is always in search of more to feed his obsession." I paused to grip my stomach when it spasmed, threatening to dry heave.

"That's horrifying, Char. I'm so sorry." Zoe reached for my hand and squeezed it.

"He wants me to be a vampire so his source will last for eternity. He wants me because I got away once, and he can't stand the thought of it."

"My gods. We have to stop him," Zoe said, standing.

But I remained sitting, new, silent sobs wracking my shoulders.

"Oh, Char. We need to take care of you first. Come here, I'm getting Mama." She reached for me, but I jerked away.

"No. Please don't tell her. I can't put her through any more."

Zoe sighed but nodded. "I get it. But think about how you feel when Julian tries to protect you from the truth. Maybe she'd feel the same."

The hate resurged at the mention of his name. I reached for Zoe, so she'd help me up to the sink. I rinsed my mouth and stared in the mirror. "If you hate him, or have any other feelings about him, it will be because you decide to, not him reshaping your thoughts," I told myself and though the emotions that swirled were painful and complex, that overarching, sharp bite of revulsion subsided. I nodded then added, "You will no longer be susceptible to vampire glamour."

I turned back toward Zoe. "I need a shower," I said, and the tub scurried to the corner by its pipes, willing to behave for once. "Then we should make a plan. We can't let Silas get away with this."

Zoe smiled, though her eyes glistened with restrained tears. “I’ll call in the troops. And don’t worry, we only have to tell them what you want to share. But I think we need as much help as possible to take him on. Do you want me to notify the general?”

“No.” I startled her with my conviction. “He brought me to Silas and left me there in exchange for a promise of cooperation. That was the flaw in Julian’s attempt to protect me from afar. He told me to bring someone I trusted from SHADE at all times when with Silas. I only trusted the general because he also hates Julian.” I barked out a bitter laugh. How was that for irony?

“I’m still going to kill that bastard,” Zoe said.

“Get in line,” I answered before shooing her from the bathroom.

Chapter Nineteen

Plans and Consequences



I said nothing when I realized the one person Zoe decided not to include in our revenge group was our father. She was right. He couldn't be trusted, and not just because he was likely glamourous as well. Okay, most certainly glamourous, based on the realization he couldn't see his own invention in the corner of his lab.

Daphne, Sam, Hazel, and Lydia were seated around the firepit in our backyard between the woods and our house. Mama had taken Em inside to bed. I'd probably tell her everything later, but that would be on my terms.

Sam's face appeared downright sinister in the flickering flames as he listened to Zoe's summary of the situation. When she got to the part where Silas glamourous me, he crushed his still half-full beer can in one hand. It sprayed Lydia, who sat a few feet away in black jean shorts and a tube top.

"Watch it, Wolfman," she said in her demon voice.

"Lydia saw him biting me," I interjected to get their attention back and also prevent Sam from saying something awful in response. I shoved away the unwelcome heat of shame and disgust that surfaced at the memory and pushed forward. They had to know how sick the man was. "He glamourous her, probably not for the first time. That's why she's been trying to help me but couldn't say anything in front of anyone—and not much to me either."

Lydia's shoulders dropped with relief as she smiled at me. I returned the favor, so happy to have my friend back.

“How did you break his glamour?” She wanted to know.

“I used mind-bending on myself,” I said. “Lydia, should I ___”

“Hell-to-the-yes, please, Doc.”

I nodded. “You no longer have to listen to Silas, no matter what he says or does. That’s retroactive too,” I added, using my magic.

She sprung to her feet and whooped as I drank from my water bottle. Unlike Sam, beer would have an effect on me. I needed a clear head.

“Thank you, by the way,” I said, and Lydia stopped her victory dance to look at me. “For still letting it be my choice.

“No problemo.” She grinned and crossed in front of the firepit to hug me. “I know what it feels like not to have a choice. And I thought I should return the favor. You let me decide to remain a vampire when you could’ve just jabbed me with the cure. So quit blaming yourself for me getting turned. I know you, Doc. You made it my choice in the end.”

I guess I had done that without even realizing it.

“So how do we get in to kill him?” Sam asked, standing.

“Getting in won’t be a problem,” Lydia said, sashaying by him to take her seat again.

“Hold on.” I stopped them as they started to plan a murder. “We can’t just go kill him.”

Everyone gaped at me.

Daphne spoke first. “Honey, sometimes there’s no other way.”

“But I think I have a way,” I said. “Hear me out. When we infiltrated Mordock’s nest, I ended up giving him the cure. We could do that to Silas.”

“Turn him human?” Lydia asked.

“You have a cure?” Sam shouted.

“Yes. But not much of it. I didn’t want another version of GodKiller on my hands,” I explained. “And yes, turn him human. He won’t be a threat any longer.”

“Yes, he will. If he’s a psychic in human form, that would be awful,” Hazel said. “No offense, Char, but someone with your gifts and no moral compass would be like a super villain.”

“But he is like me. Or will be if he gets ahold of me.”

“That’s why you should let me turn you. At least temporarily until we can take care of the threat,” Lydia said, striding forward until she could grasp my arms. “It’s temporary if you want it to be.”

“I think we can do this without me becoming a vampire,” I said, looking away at the fire. I couldn’t wrap my head around it. Not when I knew that many new vampires had serious control issues. If I hurt someone, I’d never forgive myself. Especially if the whole point was to save myself.

Lydia let me go and returned to the other side of the fire.

“So just mind-bend him into never hurting anyone again or drinking blood from psychics,” Hazel said.

“I can’t,” I announced on a sigh. “He glamour’d me to never do that to him, and before you ask, I tried to undo it when I realized it, but for some reason, that command feels... sticky. I’ve been trying it repeatedly, but I can’t seem to get past it.”

“It was probably the first he gave you,” Lydia said. “We don’t share this a lot, but glamour commands become weaker the more we give them to someone. Like their brain doesn’t hold on as hard the longer we keep going. It’s why commands are usually short. Combine that with his age and it might be all but impossible.”

“Ooh, I want to hear more vampire secrets,” Daphne said.

“You’re the first honest one I’ve met,” Sam said, opening another can of beer and raising it toward Lydia.

“I’d assume that wasn’t a backhanded compliment,” she said, “but I don’t know what else it could be.”

“I do have a plan, but it involves getting Julian back here. And he’s not planning on ever coming back, nor do I know where to find him. I doubt he’ll answer Zoe’s call a second time,” I said, sitting in an empty seat away from the fire.

“I can get to him,” Sam said. “I have a burner contact number so I can check in on the shifter kids.”

“You’d have to convince him to come back, which might be impossible,” I said on a sigh.

“Not if you tell him he royally screwed up and, because of him, Silas glamoured Char,” Hazel said, raising a fresh beer in a toast.

“A chance to needle him? Done and done,” Sam said, trying to lighten the mood. It didn’t work.

We went over ways to avoid Silas when he returned to the island with the “spare” psychic as he’d referred to them. But we had one day until he expected me to report in for the change, and that wasn’t a lot of time to get ahold of Julian and get him back here.

Not to mention the fact I wasn’t sure what I’d feel when I saw him again without the glamour interfering. Whatever happened, we had to finally deal with this terror from our past so we could both move forward, whether together or separately. And I wasn’t planning on killing myself again—even by turning undead.

“Does everyone know what to do?” Zoe asked when the group finally fell silent.

Sam crushed his empty can. “I like the backup plan where I tear out his throat.”

* * *

It was nearly impossible to sleep, so I decided to do something useful—or at least attempt it. Propping myself up in bed, I

took a few deep breaths, closed my eyes, and did something I hadn't tried since I was ten. I called to Pythia.

I need you.

You don't.

I startled slightly at her words. Truth be told, I hadn't expected an answer, and if I had, it definitely wasn't that.

Why do you only help sometimes? I pressed.

For a moment, I thought she'd gone silent. Then she spoke.

Only when needed.

But you got me captured by MorningStar. You didn't stop Julian from crushing my charm. I bit my cheek, not wanting to keep launching accusations, but I had to understand.

If you hadn't been captured, Julian would be dead. If he hadn't crushed it, Silas would have taken you by force. The future holds only possibilities. I guide toward the best. But they aren't always perfect.

I blinked my eyes open. I'd never heard her say so much. And what I didn't expect to find was a semi-transparent, glowing figure in white sitting on my bed with me. My mouth dropped open. She had long hair, huge eyes, and wore what looked like a chiton and a circlet on her forehead.

"Who are you?" I asked, wondering how this ghost or whatever got in through the wards.

She smiled. "I am your guide, Pythia."

"I thought you were me." Climbing onto my knees, I reached out to touch her, but my hand went right through as she laughed.

"This takes energy. I won't be able to speak for a while. But it was time to meet, Char. I am not perfect. But remember, I am here to help."

I watched as she faded into a dim glow of light then disappeared. The next thing I knew, the sun was streaming in through the window and I woke, wondering if it had been a dream or I'd actually, finally spoken to her.

Either way, I couldn't stop fidgeting all morning. Whatever that was, it hadn't helped my mood. When Mama realized I wouldn't stop moving, she pulled me aside into my room where everything I'd been through spilled from me like I'd turned on a faucet. She surprised me when I finished recounting everything, by pulling me into a tight hug then holding me at arm's length with the most serious expression I could recall ever seeing on her face.

"When your father left, it took me years to understand that he'd made a choice that had ended any possibility of ever reuniting us."

Sniffing, I thought back. "But what if I'd found the cure and tracked him down early on, like I'd planned?"

She smiled. "I'd be happy for him, but I'd never take him back. He left me with you girls without a thought. He was supposed to be my partner. We were supposed to make decisions together. It wasn't those vampires who attacked him that took that away. It was him."

"Are you saying it's over between Julian and I?" I asked, heart sinking a bit more. I was surprised it was still beating after all the abuse it had gone through.

"Not at all. In fact, if your father had reached out... Well, I could have forgiven him for something he'd done in the heat of the moment or under emotional stress. But he never even tried to fix things."

"Julian never plans on coming back," I said bitterly.

"Maybe. But I just felt the wards fall for a second, so I'm guessing he's the vampire your sister let in the living room just now."

Jumping up, I hurried through the door to find Julian leaning over Em, who was excitedly showing him her latest artwork. He was dressed far more casually than I'd ever seen him, in jeans and a short-sleeved, striped button-down tucked inside. The blue on it brought out his eyes when he turned to look at me and stiffened.

“I think Mr. Julian and Char need a little privacy,” Mama said, steering Em toward her bedroom. “And we have a potions lesson to work on. Even psychics need to be well-versed in all things magic.”

Despite the disappointed protests, Em followed her out and, Zoe, who’d been standing near the door, watching, walked between us, managing to shoot Julian a death glare on her way out the back door.

“She wants to kill you,” I said in greeting, folding my arms and sitting on the arm of the sofa.

“And do you agree?” he asked.

“I’m not under your glamour anymore.”

“So I’ve heard,” he said, not daring to move closer. “I only did what I did—”

“Yeah, I know,” I cut him off. “You ignored my express wishes for the umpteenth time and did what you thought was best—which turned out to be a horrible mistake.” I looked away, unable to meet his eyes when the memories of Silas at my throat came back for the hundredth time since I’d released them.

Julian was by my side in an instant, still afraid to touch me as he knelt by my side. “What did he do to you, Charlotte?” His voice cracked with emotion.

Good, I thought. You should feel bad. It was your fault.

“I don’t want to discuss it.” I stood and moved away from him toward the kitchen for a glass of water. “I asked you to come here to help solve this problem for both our sakes. I have a plan.”

“Which is?” he asked, zooming to the other side of the counter while I gulped at the glass, trying to stave off the tears that seemed never-ending when it came to him.

I looked him in the eye and used my churning emotions to fuel my magic, putting in as much energy as possible. “You will no longer do what Silas tells you.”

Julian's mouth dropped open as he stumbled back. I'd never seen him so off-kilter, and it made me smile. I did that. But the glory at my retribution faded quickly as I realized I'd just done to him what he'd done to me. In effect, I'd taken his choice. I chewed my cheek as he righted himself.

"What if it doesn't work?" he asked softly, sitting on a bar stool at the island. Gone was the cocky confidence he usually exuded. What I heard was the voice of a frightened boy, and my heart softened for a moment.

"It has to," I said. "Or we're giving him a weapon to fight us with. And I will fight you if I must, just so you know."

Julian looked up at me, surprise on his face, his eyes a lighter blue than ever and skin sallow.

"How long has it been since you've fed?" I asked, reaching across the bar and grabbing his wrist. It was like holding an ice cube.

He shrugged. "I don't know. It doesn't feel right to feed. I've been worried about you."

I snorted and removed my hand. "Why? Because you left me with a real monster?"

Julian winced. That had hit hard, as I'd meant it to, and I ignored the small stab of guilt I felt.

"Apologies will never be enough," he said, shoulders slumped. Where was the rigid vampire I knew? What was happening to him?

"You need to eat so you're strong enough to help fight him. We need you on our side," I said, letting go of the barbs I'd been attacking him with. It would do no one any good.

"But if I become the weapon, as you put it, I'd be more dangerous," he pointed out.

"But you won't. You'll fight him off because I told you to," I said with false confidence. "We have evidence that lends support to that theory. I can counteract vampire glamour. I did it to myself in the mirror. Go ahead, try it."

Julian furrowed his brow. “Is this a trick? Am I supposed to refuse ever to do so again?”

“You already told me you’d choose to again if you had the chance. So here it is, take it. I’m not wearing a charm.” Nor would I ever need one again. I trusted my own abilities, and I’d made sure of it in the mirror.

Julian glanced at my cleavage, which I’d left purposely low and uncovered to reveal my lack of a necklace. Desire sparked, but only for a moment, then he looked back up, meeting my eyes with his undulating blue gaze.

“Kiss me,” he commanded.

I laughed. “Nice try.”

“I didn’t expect it to work. You seemed sure. But Silas is my sire, which is a different kind of power than glamour.”

“He’s your sire, but I’m your mate. I’m betting that connection is stronger. It’s strong enough to bring me back to life over and over again after all. Even if we keep screwing it up.”

Julian stiffened, which felt familiar rather than uncomfortable. “You...called yourself my mate.”

“That’s the technical term, right?” I asked, refilling my water glass as I attempted to be as nonchalant as possible. “I expect that, scientifically, our chemistry somehow connects us. It explains the pull I feel—”

Julian’s lips crashed into mine, but I shoved him away.

“That wasn’t an invitation.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, rubbing his face and backing away. “It’s just... I’ve wanted to hear you say that for so long.”

“Julian,” I leaned forward with a sigh. “I don’t know if I can be with you even if we are successful with Silas. I’m being honest.”

“I know and I deserve that.” Julian deflated again. “Perhaps with time—”

“No.” I said, stopping him. “Trust is important to me. You didn’t trust me enough to let me in on your decision even though it directly involved me.”

“It’s me I didn’t trust, Charlotte. Not you.” Misery dripped from his words, but I shoved down the lump in my throat and pointed at the door.

“Please go feed. I’m waiting to hear from Lydia that Silas has returned to the island, and when he does, we have to move. He plans to turn me tomorrow morning.”

The pain Julian wore on his face tore at my heart, but I didn’t let it show. This was the consequence of his actions. Instead, I drank my water until I felt the wind that meant he’d left. Then I set the glass down and let the tears loose.

Chapter Twenty

Vengeance Stirs the Heart



Silas did not return until the next morning, almost at the last minute, which meant things had to go down in Dad's lab at the vampire estate. I didn't like it, but it was our only chance to act. I wasn't alone either. My friends and family were behind me, and though I didn't want them risking their lives, I knew I couldn't succeed without them.

I showed up as planned, pretending to remain glamoured. Zoe was on standby, ready to portal Sam, Hazel, and Daphne through at a moment's notice. And they had a voyeur charm activated so they'd hear everything I said.

"Good morning, Sire," I said brightly, walking into Silas's office. The hardest part was controlling the trembling in my body, so I shoved my hands in the back pockets of my pants and planted my feet. I'd finally returned my hair to my usual red color and felt more like myself.

"Ah, perfect timing, *Mon Cher*," he said, rising to greet me. "I have someone I want you to meet."

He led me to the fireplace, and I tensed, but he turned the statue of a raven on the mantle and the entire thing slid backward and to the side, revealing a winding stairwell. What would a vampire estate be without secret passages?

I followed him down the steps and through a metal door that led inside my father's lab from the rear. Dad was examining someone, his back turned to me, and Lydia waited to the side, near the awful machine they'd created.

Silas cleared his throat, and Dad turned, revealing a beaten and bloodied Tabitha on the table. I couldn't hold back my gasp.

“No worries, *Mon Cher*. This is Tabitha. She is a psychic that will be available should something go wrong with the experiment. If not, you have a first meal ready and waiting.” He turned to me, and his golden eyes danced like the flames of his fire. “You will do as I say.”

A rush of wind disturbed the air, and my father was between us.

“What are you doing?” he asked. “That’s my daughter. Tabitha *is* the experiment.”

“Shut up and do your job,” Silas hissed, and Dad stepped aside and over to the machine.

“Tabitha and I have met,” I said, glancing at her. She seemed dazed, and I assumed she, too, was under his powers of suggestion. If he’d fed from her, he may have her telekinetic abilities now as well. But how to let the others know? “She’s a telekinetic from MorningStar. Was it difficult to break her out?” I asked.

Silas stroked my cheek with the back of his hand. I held my breath so I wouldn’t move away.

“Don’t fear, *Mon Cher*. I was careful, and no one knew I was there. I’ve learned much over the years when it comes to stealth. And I do so enjoy the adrenaline of the hunt. Now be a dear and get on the machine by your father. I am anxious to finish here. I have plans for us.”

I walked slowly to the slanted platform, making eye contact with Lydia. “Good morning, Lydia,” I said, invoking Julian’s cue as I climbed on as slowly as believably possible and leaned back for my father to strap my ankles, waist, and wrists.

To my horror, Dad reached for my belt and yanked it off, tossing it to the ground so he could secure the waist restraint tightly. I needed access to that—and where was Julian? My

pulse pounded as I lay helpless, wondering how I'd thought this was a good idea.

"What's that do?" I asked nodding toward the strange machine with the tubes in the corner that Dad had been glamoured to forget.

"That is going to be your new home if all goes as planned," Silas said easily from my side, brushing my hair back as Dad lifted the helmet.

"What?" I asked, smile dropping from my face.

"You will be given transfusions from one side to keep you alive, and the other will collect bags of your blood in between my feedings so I can store a backup supply." Silas motioned for my father to hand him the helmet.

"You'll keep me forever in...that?" I asked, unable to hide my horror as I pictured an eternity of isolation and madness.

"I'll take you out as a reward when I feed on you, likely daily for the first decade or so. But otherwise, I'm afraid you are most useful to me in there. It's amazing, really. How did you manage to block my glamour, *Cheri*?" Silas took the helmet and leaned down over me as my heart tried to free itself from our bonds. "And why ever would you still agree to get on the platform?"

I searched around the room for help. Surely the others would portal in at any moment.

"You are looking for your friends?" Silas asked, peering over his shoulder then back again. "Did you imagine I wouldn't have safeties in place? I know all about your sister's abilities. Your father has shared everything with me. He helped me secure the lab so no portals can open inside." He tutted as he raised the helmet and peered beneath. "Oh, and you are probably waiting for your lover as well."

"Julian," Silas called so loud I winced.

Julian strode in through the front door and over to us. Lydia stood and rushed toward him, but before I could register what had happened, Julian held her above the ground by the

throat. Her feet scabbled for purchase as the sounds of cracking bones filled the air.

“No!” I screamed. “Julian stop!”

But he’d already dropped her broken body on the ground at his feet where she lay motionless, head at an angle that was very wrong. I looked into his indigo eyes and searched for any sign of the man I knew.

“Julian shared everything with me last night, *Mon Cher*. I had eyes in place, and he was spotted feeding in the village. I’m sorry you had to learn the hard way that a sire bond is stronger than any other. But you’ll experience it soon yourself.” Silas opened his mouth larger than he should have been able to and three-inch fangs descended so close I could smell the metallic tang of his last meal. He leaned toward me, and I fought against my bonds, trying to move my head and make his target more difficult. But just as the tips of his teeth grazed my skin, he halted for a long moment then pulled back.

“As much as I wish to turn you myself, the promise of such delicious pain and betrayal from the hands of your lover is irresistible—almost poetic. And how lovely for him to watch you suffer at his own hand. I’ve been trying to teach him for centuries that he has no humanity left, and perhaps this is the lesson that will get through that thick head of hair.” Silas reached over and knocked on Julian’s skull.

“You won’t do this. You won’t get away with it,” I said, again struggling against the bonds I’d foolishly allowed to be fastened.

Silas turned to my father. “Go prepare the transfusion chamber.” He looked back to me as he raised the helmet above my head. “I do hope this works. It would be such a crime if after all this time I wasted your death.”

Why hadn’t Pythia tried to warn me? Her words from my dream last night stirred in my memory. She’d be unavailable after using so much energy to answer my stupid questions.

Then he set it on my head, the needles sliding through the skin as it snapped back magnetically to the platform. I

screamed as he reached over to flick a lever that sent a jolt of energy through my brain so strong that my body began to convulse. It was MorningStar all over again, but worse. The sharp sounds of pounding broke through the sizzling in my head. It was my friends trying to get through the door. It had to be.

Hurry!

“Julian,” Silas said, watching me with glee. “It’s finally time to turn your mate. And don’t make it comfortable.”

Julian’s fangs elongated as he leaned over me. I couldn’t form a plea, not that it would work. I’d been wrong. I’d thought I was stronger. But I’d always doubted at some level, worried that it wouldn’t be enough.

Julian bit through my skin, his hands holding my arms. But no sense of euphoria gripped me. All I felt was pain in every fiber of my being. I think I managed to scream somehow but it was impossible to say.

As fast as it started, Julian was thrown from my body. Daphne had Silas in a chokehold as Hazel sent blue electricity at him. A giant silver wolf went flying past me with a growl as Julian rose from the side and stalked toward him.

Daphne was thrown through the air with a flick of Silas’s finger and landed hard against the door as he circled Hazel. Then he lunged at super speed. She sent a zap of lightning into the machine I was hooked to, shutting down the power and pain as Silas took her to the ground.

“No!” I fought against the straps until sense overtook me, and I used my telekinesis to unbuckle each one.

Hazel’s legs jerked beneath him as Silas bit into her neck. I threw my hands out, sending him off her and across the room. His impact knocked over the horrible transfusion machine he had waiting for me. I stared at my hands for a moment. Had the jolt of electricity somehow finally undone his glamour? Or was it the fact that Hazel’s life was more important? I wanted to believe the latter.

I knelt to check on Hazel while Lydia woke and crawled toward Sam and Julian's fight, head still at an angle like something from a horror film. Hazel still had a strong heartbeat, and I let out a breath of relief. Silas had meant to feed from her as a form of torture as opposed to ripping out her throat.

Anger swelled inside of me, like an ocean wave building far from shore. Asking why or how was irrelevant now that I knew I *could*. As I felt around for the sticky glamour I'd had so much trouble dissolving, I found not a single trace. It was all but obliterated.

I stood, the chaos surrounding me seeming to slow and quiet as I focused on where Silas had righted himself and tugged his shirt neatly back into place.

"It will be a pleasure to let you watch everyone you love die before turning you into my blood slave," he hissed, eyes now scarlet orbs leaking blood from the corners. Dark veins pulsed all over his face and neck, and his fangs elongated until they were the length and thickness of raptor claws.

"Careful, your true nature is showing," I said, the swell still building inside of me unlike anything I'd ever felt. The sheer power of it both frightened and delighted me.

I glanced to the side to be sure no one was in the way. Hazel was still on the ground, Dad and Tabitha stayed unmoving like animatrons waiting to be turned on. Julian was busy with Lydia who'd jumped on his back and Sam, who snapped at his legs.

"It's between us now," I said, meeting Silas's steps toward me, ready in case of a sudden burst of speed. Something told me his lust for pain would force him to approach slowly. He savored the hunt as he said.

"Then I'll turn you myself. I'll simply drain you to near death, hook you up and then finish it. Maybe I'll play with you for a while, while your father fixes the transfusion chamber you broke. Perhaps I can encourage Julian to join in the fun."

“I’m afraid you won’t be torturing anyone else. Ever again,” I said, an arm’s length away from the closest being to the devil I’d ever met.

He laughed, blood trailing in rivulets from his eyes. “And what do you suppose you can do to stop me, *Mon Cher?*”

I cocked my head, the storm ready to burst from me. Luckily, I had a target.

I squeezed my hands in the air like I was wringing a lemon. Silas lifted from the ground, struggling against an invisible force of nature. He threw his hand out, and I slid back a few feet into a shelf, but I kept squeezing.

“You will do as I say.” My voice boomed across the room as Silas stopped struggling. “You will no longer feed on psychics. You will confess your crimes and insist on punishment.”

I dropped my hands to my sides, and he fell to his knees, eyes bulging but starting to clear. I squatted beside him. “You will no longer control Julian. Call him off. *Now.*”

“Julian—you—may—stop,” Silas croaked on all fours.

A crash sounded from behind, but I didn’t look. I wasn’t done.

“You deserve death, Silas. But I will not stoop to your level.”

“I will.” Julian was at my side.

I stood to face him. “Julian—”

He lifted a hand to the wound on my throat that he’d created, still bleeding. The adrenaline had masked the pain until that moment as we both stared at his fingers glistening with my blood.

“Your power is incredible,” Silas gasped. “I must have it. You belong to me.”

He launched himself toward me at super speed, but Julian caught him by the neck.

“You are a child compared to me,” Silas hissed.

“You will not harm Julian,” I told the vampire who went limp in Julian’s hand. Then I set a hand on Julian’s arm, about to plead with him not to do it. But a slew of visions came so fast and hard that I froze.

I was with Julian through his first century until he was able to separate from Silas. Day after day, year after year, Silas forced him to do unspeakable things to anyone he came across. He starved him to near madness then berated him for losing control when he’d accidentally killed. Yet he’d ordered him in the next breath to maim or inflict pain on someone else. And I felt both of them—Julian’s horror and hopelessness as I touched his arm, and Silas’s pleasure and headiness through the physical connection between the three of us.

Disgust overcame me as I heard Silas recount in extreme detail what he planned to do to Julian’s love when next I reincarnated. My stomach turned as Silas forced Julian to join him and be intimate with both himself and a human woman he drained until dead. I gagged as Julian fought against him but lost every single battle. After the first decade, Julian had withdrawn, believing Silas’s constant insistence that he was evil.

I yanked my hand away, swallowing back the thickness in my throat. Julian’s face had fallen, and a blood-tinged tear trailed down his cheek. He knew what I’d seen.

“Do what you have to do,” I said softly, stepping back.

Julian nodded, focusing on the true monster who had abused him for so long. And I did not look away or feel revulsion as Julian pulled him close and tore out his throat, spraying the ground with the blood he’d stolen from Tabitha.

Spitting the mouthful on the ground, Julian sank his fingers into Silas’s eye sockets and twisted, tearing the rest of his head from his body. He tossed it into the broken tank and sank his fist into the corpse’s chest to remove and crush the shriveled heart for good measure. When he finished, he dropped it on the ground. The *splat* broke the silence I hadn’t realized had filled the room until that moment.

Sam and Lydia, her neck now healed as only a vampire could, gathered on either side of Julian, staring down at the carnage. Hazel, weak and hand pressed to her neck, made her way over as well. Daphne leaned on the wall across the room, unable to make it to us.

“We have some healing to do,” Julian said after a while.

“I got it,” Lydia agreed and headed for Daphne while she bit open her wrist.

We were all covered in blood, I realized numbly.

“Zoe will be frantic,” Hazel said as Lydia approached her with an outstretched arm. “We should leave this lab and go back to the house.”

“What about those two?” Daphne asked, jerking her head toward Dad and Tabitha.

“We can leave my father out of this,” I said. “He was glamoured into doing this.” Though the knowledge he’d only protested using me as a subject and not Tabitha made me wonder why I protected him. It was too much to think about now, though.

“I’ll take Tabitha here back to SHADE with me,” Daphne said.

I nodded and moved to follow Hazel out into the hall, but Sam caught my upper arm.

“Hey, I think Lydia and I have to take care of something,” he said, a flush rising up his thick neck.

I glanced at Lydia with brows raised, and she grinned lasciviously. “I hear shifters need to let off some steam after a fight, and I volunteered to help with that. I mean, who isn’t turned on by a good life-and-death battle? I know I am.”

“Have...fun,” I said and joined Julian and Hazel, who’d texted Zoe in the hall where the portal opened again.

I stepped through and stumbled off toward the shower without a single word.

Chapter Twenty-One

Ignorance is Not Bliss



By the time I reentered the living room, only Julian was left. I should have anticipated that, but the truth was I couldn't think farther ahead than the moment I was in. He'd cleaned off and changed into his lavender dress shirt and black slacks and waited for me on the couch with his ankle crossed over his knee. His stiff posture let me know he'd probably posed himself to look relaxed. I joined him but stayed clear of his outstretched arm as I fluffed my still-wet hair.

“Charlotte—”

I held up a hand and swallowed hard. “I...know what you went through.”

He shifted so that both feet touched the ground and his head bowed toward his hands.

“I don't blame you, you know.”

Julian chanced a glance. “You should.”

I shook my head. “I don't think I understood what you meant when you said he controlled you. It didn't sink in completely. Maybe I...lacked the imagination.”

He grimaced. “Silas had quite the imagination when it came to pain. Thank you for allowing me to end his miserable existence. I've dreamed of that moment for centuries.”

“It was the least I could do.” I readjusted so that I was angled toward him.

Julian waited, as still as a statue.

“I am still angry. I can’t be with someone who takes away my choices. And after what I saw...I don’t know how you could do that to someone else.”

Julian’s beautiful face collapsed into sorrow, but still, he remained silent.

“But at the same time, I get it. You believed everything he told you, Julian.” I reached for his hand, and he stared at mine like if he moved, I might fly away.

“That was the worst thing about Silas,” he said carefully. “He used the truth to inflict pain.”

“Julian, look at me.” I scooted toward him as he complied. “You were abused for a century—mentally, physically, and even sexually. In any way Silas could to cause the most harm.”

“Yes,” he agreed. “But nothing was worse than the thought of what he’d eventually do to you. It felt...inevitable.”

I cupped his face, and damn, it felt good to touch him like that. “He gaslighted you, Julian.”

“No, Charlotte.” Julian huffed and shook his head. “You have always thought the best of me, and I love your positive outlook. But you are the only one who has ever seen good in me—other than Clare. And look where that got her.”

Somewhere during his sentence, his French accent had doubled, and I wondered if it was the memory of his sister or the pain of that loss that caused this regression.

“I know you. The real you. And others may be frightened ___”

“You’ve been frightened too. And rightly so. You’ve seen it now, Charlotte. You’ve seen what I’ve spent the last six hundred years trying make up for.” He searched my face. “I am a demon.”

“You are a man who’s been manipulated by a *real* monster,” I said back just as strongly. “He broke you, Julian. He made you believe that about yourself.”

“He created me, yes. But he could not make me feel what I felt when—” Julian cut himself off when his voice rose in

anger. He stood and paced away from me, stopping at our fireplace mantle and setting a hand on it.

“When what?” I asked, moving over to take his hand. I pressed it to my heart, and he turned to face me.

“After that first decade, I stopped fighting it.”

“You couldn’t help it,” I warned.

“I *enjoyed* it, Charlotte.” He waited for me to stop protesting before continuing. “I took pleasure in the blood I stole from humans. I looked down on them like livestock. I let myself feel again, and what I felt was...good. You don’t want to hear it, but I did this to myself. I went willingly to Silas and asked to become a vampire. Like a fool, I thought I’d have equal power to him. He knew I had the same drive—the same hunger inside me as he did—and he took every opportunity to bring that out of me. I think he wanted to prove to himself that, deep down, we’re all as monstrous as him.”

The tears fell freely down my face as I listened. “You said you forget when you’re with me,” I whispered.

He smiled and gently stroked my cheek. “Like I said, I don’t deserve you. The only reason I hadn’t ended my miserable existence was the hope that, one day, I’d somehow permanently stop him so he couldn’t hurt you the way he did me. Because you would never feel what I felt, Charlotte. You are incapable of anything but kindness.”

I caught his hand. “You’re wrong. You are just as kind as I am.”

“Char—”

I pressed a finger to his mouth. “Because I felt it, too, and it didn’t take a whole decade to get there.”

Julian paused, cocking his head in question.

“When I saw what he’d done to you, I snapped. I told you to do what you had to do, but if you hadn’t killed him? I would have.”

Every bit was true. I waited as Julian stared, processing what I’d shared. “I felt nothing *but* pleasure when you ripped

him apart. No remorse, no guilt, no distress. Not even disgust. And that's the raw truth. So if you deserve to die, then so do I. I don't know. Maybe that's why we're mates."

Julian's head shook slowly from side to side as he searched my face. "Charlotte, are you...do you mean—"

I threw myself at him, wrapping my arms around his neck and pressing my lips to his. He caught me around the waist and spun me as I swept my tongue over his with unapologetic force. He met me stroke for stroke as he carried me to my room and kicked the door closed.

Clenching my fingers in his silken hair, I delved deeper and harder into his mouth, searching for a connection that had nearly destroyed me when he'd severed it. I didn't know if I'd ever forgive him completely, but I now understood why he'd done what he'd done. And Silas would never threaten our love again.

I released his mouth as he set me on the bed. "I love you," I said through even more tears. Then I laughed. "I love you, Julian, and I want to be with you. Fated mates or not, I choose this."

"You have no idea how long I've waited to hear those words flow freely from your lips," Julian said, ripping open his shirt and climbing over me. "When I thought I'd lost you again, I nearly threw myself into a volcano. That's not an exaggeration," he said at my expression. "I would do anything for you, Charlotte, even die."

I knew that. Touching, though creepy as it was, it couldn't replace the high strumming in my veins that came with the freedom of my admission. There was no one who could ever come close to Julian, the gorgeous man before me who felt so deeply, fought so hard to protect those in need, and loved me so fiercely. How could I have resisted a man like him falling at my feet for so long? My heart soared and my body hummed with heated desire. I needed to embrace him, breathe him in, hold him...touch him. And I couldn't stand it a second longer.

"It's a good thing you didn't jump." I lifted my palm to the large bulge in his pants and squeezed. "Or I couldn't do that

anymore.”

Julian ripped our clothes off in seconds and climbed back over me, kissing his way from my navel to my breasts where he sucked on my nipples until they were hard points.

“We should be figuring out how to deal with the general,” I gasped as he kissed up to my neck and rubbed his cock against the hungriest part of me.

“After,” he murmured in my ear then slid two fingers between us.

“Mmm,” I agreed, moving with him and guiding his mouth back to my throat.

“I hurt you,” he said, stopping just when I needed him to move faster.

“Not on purpose,” I said. “Bite me the right way now. To make it better.” I ground my hips, so he’d get my message loud and clear.

His fangs pricked lightly and then heaven welcomed me as he sank both teeth and cock inside of me at once. I groaned in ecstasy as he gave and took in a harmonious exchange. Nearly blinded by my building orgasm, I breathed over his ear, “I want to be with you forever. Make me a vampire.”

Julian was off me and at the foot of the bed in an instant.

“Come back,” I begged, reaching for him.

“You don’t mean that, Charlotte,” he said, eyes flashing red even as other parts of him seemed more than eager to oblige.

“I think I know exactly what I mean,” I said, rising onto my knees and moving toward him.

“You’ve never wanted—”

“That was the old me,” I interjected sharply. “The me that would sacrifice her own life. I’m not the same anymore, just like you aren’t who you were back then.”

I pressed my eyelids closed for a moment as I gathered my thoughts then opened them again. “Lydia wanted to turn me

without the machine to prevent Silas from carrying out his plan. It was a good idea. She even suggested I take the cure if I didn't like it. But I refused."

"Then why would you ask it of me?" He leaned over me, desperation in his tone.

"Because I didn't trust her to stop me from doing something I'd regret before I got a handle on things. But I trust you, Julian." I reached up and cautiously tugged him down beside me. "And I would give almost anything not to have to deal with these abilities anymore. The knowledge of what others are willing to do to get ahold of them is horrid. But it's more than that. I hate the powers themselves. I always have. Even now, something urgent and dark is tugging at my brain, fighting for attention that I don't have the strength to give it."

I couldn't stop the sobbing from overtaking me yet again, but Julian cradled me to his chest, waiting for me to calm and continue with seemingly infinite patience.

"I don't want to look at it," I cried, beating my fists into his chest that felt more like cold, smooth cement than skin. "I'm human and I can't keep this up all the time. It isn't fair. I can only process so much."

"My love." He kissed the top of my head. "Don't look at it if it hurts you. It's okay not to listen all the time. It should be a choice, not a—"

A loud banging at the front door made me gasp and Julian tightened his hold on me.

"Who is it?" I asked him.

Cocking his head, he considered. "Whoever it is doesn't have a scent. All I smell is you and the rest of your house. I will go look."

"No," I sniffed. "Mama's home. She can check the wards, and if it's someone she doesn't want here, she can push them out with magic."

"As I was saying then, you have these abilities, but perhaps they can be controlled be—"

The door banged so hard I thought it might bust in. Julian was off in a burst of wind, and by the time I pulled on a bathrobe and followed, he was standing before the open door in an extra pair of pants he kept here just in case, facing a crazed-looking Binx.

That explained the scent only being mine. I suspected for some time that the incubus smelled like whatever turned a person on. But...

“What’s wrong, Binx? And where are Mama and Em?” I spun in place, searching for the other occupants of the house who’d surely heard the commotion.

“That’s what I want to know,” Binx said. “I’m here because your mother never showed up for our date. She’s never been late and I needed to make sure—”

“Date?” I gaped at him.

“We’ve been seeing each other for a week or two now. Didn’t she tell you?”

I thought back to how she’d cozied up to him and how Zoe had said Mama was out with him when I’d asked that night on the porch. I’d just been so overwhelmed and drunk at the time that I hadn’t thought twice. But pushing aside the shock that my own mother was dating an incubus, I decided to deal with the current situation first. I’d have to talk to her about this later.

“Let me check.” I jogged over to the back of the house where the additional bedrooms were and knocked on Mama’s door.

A black shadow fell from ceiling to floor, covering the entryway with so much horrible energy that I was nearly knocked backward.

“Mama?” I shoved the door open and ran inside. First, I saw nothing except an empty bed and open window, curtains blowing gently in the evening breeze. Then I saw a shoe, toe in the air, peeking out from the other side of the bed.

Everything inside of me went cold as my heart beat into my throat. I felt the men enter behind me as I forced myself

forward toward the foot of the bed, praying that it wasn't as bad as I thought it could be.

But it was worse.

Mama lay with her eyes open, staring at the ceiling, hand clutched in a fist over her heart. Deep lines cut into her from neck to foot, her clothing shredded as blood pooled in each tear. Something had clawed her open with two hands.

Julian had me in his arms as I lost control, screaming, and reaching for her.

“Mama!”

“*Mon Coeur*,” Julian pressed his mouth to my head, holding me tight. “You mustn't touch her, there could be poison,” Julian said.

“I don't care!” I shrieked as Binx vaulted over the bed to kneel beside her, feeling for a pulse then passing a hand over her eyes to close them.

“We must preserve the scene. You want to know who did this, don't you?” Julian challenged, trying to reason with me even as he held me tight and rocked me in his arms.

I gulped at the air, trying to fill my lungs as his words sank in and I stopped struggling against him. I couldn't rip my eyes from her. Even when I was ready to kill Silas, I didn't feel the depth of anger and hatred that gripped me in that moment. I would rip whoever did this to shreds until there was nothing left.

Binx wailed, pulling her head in his lap. “She's gone. My Darlene.”

“Turn her,” I begged suddenly, grabbing Julian's arm. “Please.”

“Charlotte, I cannot. I vowed never to turn anyone against their will.”

“I'm giving you permission.”

Julian lowered his face until our eyes were an inch apart. “Please hear me, love. You are not her. And I cannot do this,

even for you. You would both hate me later.”

“Who did this?” I demanded, pushing away and trying to find another target for my growing rage other than Julian. This was not his fault.

“I do not know what could have caused this damage. It looks too even—too methodical to be from a shifter,” Julian answered, stepping closer to Mama and squatting beside her.

“Oh gods! Em!” I ran from the room and shoved open Zoe’s bedroom door. But Em was nowhere to be found. “She’s gone,” I yelled as I raced back to Mama.

“She might have run,” Julian suggested, standing, and examining the open window. “If she saw what happened, she’d be in shock. And she is psychic, so she may well have seen it either in person or elsewhere.”

“Or the killer took her,” Binx said, tenderly setting Mama’s head on a pillow he’d pulled from the bed.

I felt for the mattress as I sat back, hand over my mouth.

“Charlotte?” Julian knelt by me, placing a palm on my knee.

“I’m a psychic too,” I said through the pain.

“Yes...” Julian urged, and I grasped his bare shoulders and shook him.

“Julian, I had a warning and I ignored it. The dark thing I felt that I didn’t want to see...it had to be a warning. I could have saved Mama.”

“Charlotte, you cannot blame yourself for this,” Julian warned.

“But it’s true. I didn’t want to listen, but it was right there, trying to get in. What have I done?”

“I’ve sent an urgent call to the general,” Binx said, joining us. For once, his mere presence did not cause my sex drive to overheat.

“No. He’s not what you think. He handed me to Silas in exchange for cooperation,” I said, standing. Panic built as my

chest tightened. “Julian—”

“We will face this together.” Julian tightened his hold on me as though he could pull me inside of him. “But if you prefer to go, I will take you far from the general’s reach.”

“No. I can’t leave her.” I stared down at what was left of my mother as tears clouded my vision. It felt like I’d been crying for days.

“This is not Darlene,” Binx said carefully as he set a hand on my shoulder. “She is elsewhere now. She loved you and your sister more than anything. She would want you to be safe.”

I wasn’t worried about my safety, and they shouldn’t be either. No. They should be worried about whoever did this.

Because I would destroy the bastard who stole my mother’s life.

Acknowledgments

A thousand thank yous to my amazing support group of editors and beta readers: Heather, Theresa, Leslie, and Sarah. You all rock even though I had to entirely rewrite the book. It's way better now thanks to you.

To my friends who support me despite my strange mind and habit of drifting into story mode when I'm physically present. Shona—you especially.

And of course, to my readers, and those of you who help me by leaving reviews and spreading the word. I LITERALLY couldn't do this without you. If you aren't a part of my ARC team and want to be, go fill out the form at <https://linktr.ee/lizzygayle> and join us for lots of fun perks.

Find Out More

Like what you read? Don't forget to leave a review!! Authors live on them.

Sign up for her newsletter through her website: www.LizzyGayle.com

And be sure to check out her other books:

<https://www.amazon.com/stores/Lizzy-Gayle/author/B09FPQMYS>

About the Author

Lizzy Gayle loves paranormal so much, she lives it. She is both an author and a psychic. Between mothering her three kids, attempting to understand her rocket scientist husband, and consistently attempting to declutter her home (that she is convinced is a secret portal to a clutter-creating dimension), she does her best to use her creative gifts and share them with you.

