

STAR TOUCHED  WOLF BORN 1



BLOOD MOON

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MICHELLE MADOW

Blood Moon

STAR TOUCHED: WOLF BORN

BOOK ONE

MICHELLE MADOW



For the readers in my Facebook group, who asked to read about a specific type of magic. I hope you enjoy it!

Ruby



“RUBY GRACE!” Luna exclaims, grabbing my hand as I step out of the bathroom. “Connor and Brandon asked us to play beer pong.”

My heart skips a beat at Connor’s name.

Truth be told, he’s half the reason I’ve stayed at the party this long. Actually, who am I kidding? He’s the whole reason I’m still here.

Luna knows him better than I do. She’s my best friend and college roommate, and for the past few years, she’s been coming to this small town in the Adirondack Mountains for ski trips.

I only met him a few hours ago, but that was enough. He’s tall. Muscular. And the proud owner of a pair of dark eyes that sent a cold shiver through me the instant I saw them.

As for Brandon—the other beer pong contestant—I can’t remember who he is.

I do know this: I’m terrible at sports. And my lack of coordination is unlikely to impress Connor.

“Are you sure you want me to be your partner?” I ask Luna.

“They asked for the birthday girl,” she says, grinning.

“Are there any other birthday girls?”

Instead of answering, she digs her nails into my upper arm and pulls me out of the house and into the backyard, where

twenty or so people are chatting in circles and lounging in the steaming hot tub.

I shiver in the winter clothes Luna loaned me and glance up at the sky, where the full moon glows overhead. It seems bigger than usual, casting down an eerie light. Maybe that's normal up here in New York. I wouldn't know. This is one of the few times I've ever left Florida.

Most of the people outside are wearing all-leather clothing that shouldn't give them nearly enough warmth in early January. Some of the girls even have skirts on, their legs bare except for boots that reach their knees.

"How are they not freezing?" I ask, running my hands up and down my arms to chase away the chill.

Luna shrugs. "They grew up around here. They're probably used to it."

It's as good of an answer as any, and as we saunter over to the ping-pong table on the deck, I can't help but notice the heads turning to follow us.

I almost feel like prey.

But they're not looking at me. They're looking at Luna, with her light blonde hair and tall, willowy frame. My best friend looks like she belongs on a runway in Milan—not on her way to a game of beer pong at a house party in a small town.

In her presence, I'm just part of the background. What I have going for me are my eyes—the unique turquoise color gets some second looks and compliments—and my brains. But I don't like being the center of attention, so I'm perfectly happy letting Luna take the spotlight.

We approach the ping-pong table, where pyramids of red plastic cups are ready to go on each end.

"There she is." A guy with light brown hair heads over to me and drops a ping-pong ball in my hand. He must be Brandon. His eyes roam up and down my body, and I take an uneasy step back, not wanting to give him the wrong idea. "It's only fair for the birthday girl to shoot first."

“Sure.” I hurry to the opposite side of the table, glad to put some space between us.

On the other side of the table, Connor crosses his arms over his black leather jacket and glowers at me, as if he’s annoyed I’m even here.

“Are you going to take your shot or not?” he snarls.

His antagonistic tone takes me by surprise, but I manage to compose myself. “I’m just analyzing my competition,” I say, trying to sound cool and collected even though my heart’s beating so fast that it’s about to burst out of my chest.

I center myself and line up my shot, glad to have something to focus on besides the intense way Connor continues to stare at me.

I take a deep breath, and with a flick of my wrist, throw the ball in what I hope will be a perfect arch.

Instead of landing in one of the cups, the ball hits Connor directly in the crotch.

Oh.

My.

God.

My face flushes with embarrassment.

“Keeping your eyes on the prize?” he asks, and my cheeks burn even more.

Everyone’s staring at me, waiting for my response. Even Luna, who’s usually quick to back me up on everything, is sitting this one out.

I have two options. Own it and try to fire back, or embrace the embarrassment and apologize.

I’m not usually one to fire back, but I’ll probably never see these guys after tonight.

Maybe it’s time to be daring for a change.

“You call that a prize?” I tilt my head slightly and give Connor a small smile that I hope looks flirty and mischievous.

There's a second of utter silence, like a record stopping, and I immediately question my sudden moment of boldness.

Because Connor's glaring at me like he wants to rip my head off my body. And from the way some of the guys nearby crack their knuckles and move in like hawks, I have a feeling they wouldn't stop him.

His gaze sweeps around at the onlookers surrounding us, who look ready to obey whatever command he gives them. His arm muscles tighten, he clenches his jaw, and I wonder if I should run before he and his friends attack me like a pack of wolves.

His eyes stop on Luna, and his voice is a whisper, but still clear in the night. "Continue."

She bites her lip and glances over at me, question in her eyes.

I nod at her to take her shot. I've probably lost any chance I might have had with Connor—if I even had one at all—but hopefully we can move forward and forget this awkwardness ever happened.

She squares her shoulders and tosses the ball, but it goes far too far, flying past the end of the table and landing a few feet behind the guys.

Strange.

Unlike me, Luna's a natural at sports.

"What was that?" I ask her.

"I *might* have taken a tequila shot or two while you were in the bathroom." She giggles, and I'm surprised, since Luna's not the type to get drunk at parties. She'll nurse a can or two of hard seltzer throughout the night, but that's all.

A few girls wander by, and I can't help thinking about them like gazelle, moving slowly and gracefully as they graze on their Solo cups, their stares lingering on Conner a little too long. A particularly pretty one with light red hair doesn't even try to hide her leering.

He smiles at her, igniting an angry fire in me.

What's wrong with me?

I barely even know this guy.

Somehow, I force myself to refocus on the game. Both guys miss their next shots, and I wonder if they're going easy on us.

When it's our turn, I grip the ball, trying to ignore the alcohol buzzing in my head. Above, the moon glows like a lantern, half covered in shadow.

That's strange.

"The moon was full a bit ago," I tell Luna, my voice low.

"There's a lunar eclipse tonight. It won't be long until it'll be blocked completely," she says, and as the shadow continues to creep across the moon, shivers prick up my neck.

"Come on, Scarlet," Brandon goads me. "Your turn."

"It's Ruby," I correct him.

He rolls his eyes. "Oh, my bad. Still though, it's your turn, Ruby-Scarlet."

I miss my shot, as does Luna with hers.

The guys obliterate us in their next round. Soon, all our cups are gone, the beer they once held sloshing in our stomachs. The alcohol makes me feel far more relaxed and warmer than when the game began, and Luna's eyes are glassy and unfocused.

Brandon holds his hands up. "That's game, ladies! Time for the victors to claim our prizes." He saunters over me, his gaze fixed to my chest. "Want to join me in the hot tub?"

I take a step back.

"No, thanks," I reply, trying not to inhale his beer breath.

He grabs my wrist and jerks my body toward his.

"What's the matter? No bathing suit? That's okay." He lowers his face closer to mine. "We're not shy around here."

"I said no." I try to free myself from his grip, but he's stronger than he looks.

Feeling slightly panicked, I glance around and search for Luna, but she's disappeared.

A split-second later, Connor is somehow by Brandon's side. He wraps a hand around his friend's bicep, squeezes, and Brandon's hand goes limp.

"Don't touch her," Connor growls, staring down at Brandon like he's ready to throw him down if he so much as thinks about moving.

"It's all good," Brandon says sheepishly, even though I take the opportunity to give him what I hope is a particularly withering glare. "We're just having some fun."

"I don't think she's having fun." Connor stares at Brandon, who looks down and away, shrinking before my eyes.

"Whatever, man," Brandon says under his breath. "She isn't even one of us. You want her? Take her."

He yanks his arm out of Connor's grip, glances back at me with hate and resentment, and strides over to the hot tub.

But my attention is on Connor. His dark eyes lock onto mine, swirling with such intensity that I can barely breathe. There's only a foot of space between us, and the fog from our breath in the freezing air is so close that it's nearly touching. His body feels magnetic, like it's latching onto mine and drawing me closer with a force I can't resist.

The moment's cut short when the red-headed girl from earlier glides over and frowns at me. She places her hand on Connor's shoulder, as if to claim him for herself. "Hi," she whispers to him, pressing herself against his chest.

Every cell in my body urges me to rip her off him. But I stand strong, not wanting to make another scene.

He yanks his gaze away from mine and looks down at her, his eyes softening. "That game got me all riled up," he murmurs, and he brushes his lips against hers as if he can't get enough of her. "Want to go inside?"

"Always." She gives me a victorious smile and flips her hair over her shoulder, leading him away from me and into the

house.

He doesn't look back at me, and my heart sinks with disappointment.

He has a girlfriend. Of *course* he has a girlfriend. I shouldn't have expected anything less.

Anyway, it doesn't really matter. In a few days, Luna and I will be back in our dorm at the University of Florida for another semester of classes, all thoughts of everyone in this town forgotten.

Speaking of Luna, I don't see her anywhere. But she can't have gone far. So, I dig my phone out of my jacket pocket and tap to call her, grateful for the gloves she loaned me that let the screen sense my fingers.

It rings a few times, then goes to voicemail.

I don't bother leaving a message. Instead, I switch to send her a text. But as I begin tapping out the message, my head throbs and the letters blur, making it hard to see what I'm doing.

It's not the beer. It can't be. Or maybe—

The pounding in my head intensifies, and my stomach swirls. I can't keep the sick feeling down. Everyone at the party is chattering, but their voices blend together until the sounds assault my brain like strobe lights.

Did Conner and Brandon drug the beer?

My stomach clenches and thrashes, and I flee the deck to the edge of the woods, not wanting anyone to see me be sick. Along the way, my phone slips from my hand, falling into the snow.

Desperate for something to ground me, I look to the moon.

It's full again, the shadow gone.

But it's red. Blood red, like something out of a nightmare.

How's that possible?

I don't know, but a moment later, pain hits me like a freight train. Light sears through my brain, and I keel over as my bones shatter and break through my skin, shredding me apart from the inside out.

I try to scream, but no sound comes out.

Then, as suddenly as it came on, the torture stops and I'm running through the woods, the bare trees blurring like paint strokes in the corners of my eyes. I don't know where I'm going, but I'm running on instinct, deeper and deeper into the forest, so far that I have no idea how I'll ever find a way out.

Let go of control, a voice inside me urges. Hand it over to me.

The voice is quiet, but familiar in a way I can't explain.

No, I think, trying to resist.

Relax, she coaxes. I can help you, but only if you let me.

I can't explain why, but I believe her.

And so, trusting my instincts, I surrender control and hand it over to her.

The next thing I know, I'm lying on the ground, staring up at the sky. The moon is full again, but the red is gone, leaving it a perfectly normal color. Totally normal... except I swear I see the outlines of a *wolf* carved into its surface.

I blink, and a person shimmers into view above me.

Luna?

No. They're both blonde, but this person's hair is so blonde that it's practically silver. Her eyes are violet, unlike Luna's warm brown ones, and her pale skin is supernaturally dewy. She's barely corporal—she seems more like an angel than a person—and if I squint, she shimmers in the moonlight.

Her hair blows in the wind like silver ribbons, and she reaches down, pressing her thumbs against my temples. "Everything's going to be okay," she whispers, her voice musical and soothing. "But I need you to remember that no matter what happens, don't tell them your eyes aren't brown."

Before I can ask what she means, electricity explodes in my head, bright white light floods my vision, and everything goes dark.

Ruby



SUNLIGHT WARMS MY FACE, and as I slowly float back into consciousness, fear floods my body as the events of the past few days fill my memories.

Luna inviting me to go skiing with her in the Adirondacks. Lying to my parents and telling them I was going back to school a week early, but coming to New York with Luna instead. Luna trying to teach me how to ski, eventually giving up, and the two of us going back to the hotel for an early dinner.

A guy approaching us at the restaurant and inviting us to a party at his house.

Connor.

His dark, mysterious eyes float through my mind, and my heart does that skipping thing it always seems to do at the thought of him.

But he has a girlfriend. The redhead. And I have much more to worry about than my crush on a guy I can't have.

Like how I felt so sick that I collapsed near the woods in his backyard.

Now, my bed is cold beneath me. But there's no pillow under my head, and no comforter covering my body.

And, most startlingly, my clothes are cold and damp.

My eyes shoot open, and I'm staring up at the sky, the sun peeking out behind the bare tree branches and casting them in bright silhouettes.

No.

I push myself up, use my hand as a visor to block the light from my eyes, and look around.

I'm in the middle of the woods, with no evidence of civilization anywhere around me. It's just me, the birds chirping, and the occasional squirrel climbing up a tree. A breeze passes by, blowing my hair across my face, and the air is fresh and clean in the way it only gets up in the mountains.

Which means everything I remember from last night—drinking all that beer with the guys, stumbling to the edge of the woods, and my body exploding in unfathomable pain—was real.

I vaguely remember a woman being here with me last night, but she's nowhere to be seen.

I have no idea what's happening, but one thing's for sure—I need to get out of here.

I reach into my jacket pocket for my phone, but there's nothing there. I'm not even wearing a jacket anymore.

Shouldn't I be freezing?

As I continue looking around, unease settles over me. Because without that jacket, I shouldn't have survived the night. I should have died of hypothermia.

Yet here I am, very much alive, and feeling far more refreshed than I should after all the beer I drank last night.

I need to get back to the hotel.

Except I have no idea where the hotel is. The only thing nearby is probably Connor's house.

Connor—who drugged me.

No. Who *might* have drugged me.

Logically, I shouldn't go back there. Situations like this are how people end up on the news, declared missing until they're found dead.

If they're ever found at all.

But the way Connor looked at me last night when he warned Brandon not to touch me flashes through my mind. He was so protective. And for reasons I can't pinpoint, I know he'd never hurt me. Brandon might, but not Connor.

I'll be safe at Connor's.

Since it didn't snow last night, I look around for my footsteps, figuring I can follow my path back to Connor's house.

There's no trace of them.

There are, however, paw prints so large that I can't imagine what animal they might belong to.

Follow them, a voice echoes through my mind.

I recognize the voice.

It's the one from last night. The one that asked me to let go of control and hand it over to her.

It's not normal to hear voices. It's especially not normal to listen to them.

Brandon *must* have drugged my beer.

But something pulls at me to trust her, and since I don't have any better ideas, I stop fighting and do as asked.

I wander for at least thirty minutes. Then, eventually, the roof of Connor's house comes into view.

Please don't be a serial killer, I think, and I follow the last of the prints to the end of the tree line and step into his backyard.

It's trashed. Totally and completely *trashed*.

I make my way to where I stumbled over to during my last minutes at the party and spot the remains of my jacket on the ground.

It looks like someone stuffed a bomb inside of it and that it *exploded*.

Why would someone destroy it like that? Sure, it wasn't the best jacket in the world, but it certainly didn't deserve to

be mutilated.

Dazed and feeling like I'm in a strange dream, I pick up what I can of the jacket, forge my way through the red plastic cups and beer cans littering the ground, and step onto the back deck.

A memory of the red-headed girl leading Connor inside flashes in my mind, and hot anger courses through my body.

They don't belong together, the voice from earlier whispers in my mind.

No.

I *cannot* deal with voices in my mind on top of all the other insane things going on here. So, I push the voice down and approach the glass doors. The blinds on the inside are closed, along with the blinds on all the windows, so I can't see into the living room. It's like someone turned the house into a cave.

It's something a serial killer would do.

But Connor's *not* a serial killer.

Yes, there's something undeniably dangerous about him. He was hot and cold last night, and from the way he pulled Brandon away from me, he's clearly strong enough to overpower anyone who gets in his way.

But I can't imagine him hurting me.

And so, not wanting to overthink it any further, I shake off my nerves and knock.

At first, all is silent.

I knock again.

A light in a second-floor window turns on.

There's no movement beyond that, and I wait for what feels like the longest few minutes of my life. Then the blinds on the sliding door open slightly, and a pair of dark brown eyes I'd recognize anywhere peek through the slits.

Connor.

Time stands still, and we stand there staring at each other, neither of us moving.

Eventually, he closes the blinds again, and I worry he's going to ignore me and go back up to his room.

Instead, he opens the door and slides it open.

He's wearing plaid cotton pajama pants, as if he's ready for Christmas morning, and a plain gray t-shirt. His hair is messy, but in the way that makes it look like he styled it to make it seem like he rolled out of bed instead of having *actually* just rolled out of bed, and he smells like a warm campfire on a cold night.

The redhead sits on a chair behind him, her arms crossed over her chest and her eyes narrowed at me. Her hair is also disheveled, but in the sexy sort of way that makes it clear I interrupted them in the middle of an activity she was less than thrilled to be pulled away from.

Meanwhile, my clothes are wet from the snow, I'm cold, and I don't even want to know what the rest of me must look like after my impromptu night in the woods.

"What do you want?" The redhead sneers, disdain dripping from her tone.

"Autumn," Connor warns, and I'm glad to finally have a name to put to her haughty face.

"What?" she asks. "A tourist you invited to your party last night re-appeared at your doorstep, looking like she spent the night sleeping in the woods. It's perfectly normal to ask her what she wants."

Connor ignores her as he sizes me up, concern flickering in his eyes. "*Did* you sleep in the woods?" he asks.

Embarrassment rolls over my skin at the way they're looking at me—like I'm a rodent that crawled up onto his doorstep begging for crumbs.

It's humiliating, but I need to answer instead of just standing here saying nothing.

“Yeah.” I bite my lip and lower my gaze, since it sounds crazy. Especially because I have no idea how I got there. “I think.”

Connor continues to study me, as if he isn't sure what to make of this.

“What do you mean that you *think* you did?” Autumn says. “You either got lost in the woods and passed out, or you didn't. There's really nothing in between.”

“I did. But I didn't mean to,” I say, and the rest pours out of me before I can stop myself. “I drank too much, and I went to the edge of the backyard, and then the moon turned red, and then I was waking up in the middle of the woods. Someone else was there, but I didn't—”

Alarm crosses Connor's face. “You saw the blood moon?” he asks.

“Yeah,” I say. “It was hard to miss.”

“You shouldn't have been able to see it.” His body goes rigid, and he's somehow guarded and confrontational at the same time.

“Well, I did,” I say, because I know what I saw. I might be feeling like I'm going crazy, but I can't be going *that* crazy.

He studies me again, as if he's seeing something different this time, then steps aside. “You need to come in sit down,” he says. “Because we clearly have a *lot* to talk about.”

Ruby



I TAKE the seat across from Autumn. Immediately afterward, I realize it was a bad decision, since now we'll be facing each other the entire time, and she's all but shooting daggers at me with her eyes across the table.

"Did either of you see Luna last night?" I ask, praying one of them can tell me something helpful, since Luna wouldn't have left the party without me.

"The last time I saw her was after our game," Connor says. "Then I was sort of..." he trails off, as if he regrets whatever he was about to say.

"He was busy for the rest of the night," Autumn finishes. "In his room. With me." She sits forward, like she's about to bring her claws out, and the warning is clear.

She's either staking her territory on Connor, or trying to incite jealousy in me. Probably both.

But I'm too concerned about my best friend to care.

"I need to call her." I look to my destroyed jacket, then remember I dropped my phone before blacking out.

I hurry out of the house and follow the path I made last night, relieved to find my phone face-down in the snow.

I pick it up, but it doesn't turn on.

"Crap." I tap the screen to no avail, harder and harder, frustration coursing through my veins when it remains black.

Desperate, I hold down the power button as hard as I can. But still, nothing.

It's dead. Maybe permanently, since I have no idea if iPhones can survive a night buried in the snow.

"Ruby," Connor says from behind me, apparently having followed me out. He reaches for my shoulder, but stops himself before touching me. "It's freezing out here. Come back inside."

"No. I need to call Luna," I say, and I press the power button again, even though I know it's futile.

"Your phone isn't working." He sounds so stupidly calm, and he reaches forward to take it from me, but stops himself again. "We'll figure this out. Just come back inside. Please."

I shouldn't trust him.

But his eyes are so warm and concerned, and every instinct in my body urges me to believe he'll keep me safe.

Being around Connor calms me. And even though I haven't even known him for twenty-four hours, I believe him when he says he'll help.

"Fine." I release a defeated breath, stand up, and follow him back inside.

Autumn is still sitting at the table, arms crossed, as hostile as ever.

I think about asking one of them to borrow their phone, but I haven't memorized Luna's number. Why would I when it's stored in my phone? And she doesn't use social media, so I can't contact her there.

"I need to charge my phone." I hold up the dead phone and wait for one of them to offer me their charger.

Plus, once my phone's juiced up, I can call an Uber and get out of here.

"Sure," Connor says. "There's a charger in my room. I'll grab it and bring some warm clothes down for you. You look like you could use them."

“Thanks,” I say, and we stare at each other, silent for a few seconds. He’s giving me the same look from last night—the one that takes my breath away—and I feel so captured in his gaze that I can’t move.

“I texted Jax,” Autumn tells Connor, breaking whatever moment was happening between us. “He’ll be over soon.”

Connor steps back and snaps back into focus. “Good,” he says, and they share a silent look, giving me the distinct feeling that they know something I don’t. “Can you get the coffee started?”

“No problem.” She gives me a final glare, flips her hair over her shoulder, and heads to the coffee maker on the counter.

Without another word, Connor hurries up the stairs, leaving me and Autumn alone.

I brace myself for the claws to come out, but she simply turns her back to me and starts making the coffee. The beans smell delicious, and I take a deep breath, somehow feeling warmer already.

“Who’s Jax?” I ask, because even though Autumn doesn’t seem like she wants to talk, I’m too curious to not say anything.

“Connor’s grandfather,” she says, keeping her back to me.

“Why’s he coming over?”

“You’ll see when he gets here.” She returns to her task, clearly not wanting to chat any further.

Point taken.

Needing something to do with my hands, I try to turn my phone on again, but it remains as dead as ever.

Luckily, Connor returns less than a minute later. He’s carrying plaid pajama bottoms that look like the ones he has on, a long-sleeve t-shirt, and a phone charger.

“Here you go.” He plops the items on the table instead of handing them directly to me. “These are too small for me. If

you tie the pants tightly, they might be able to stay up.”

“Thanks.” I reach for the charger first, stick it into the nearest socket, and plug in my phone.

I press the power button again, hold my breath, and wait for it to turn on.

Nothing happens.

So I jiggle the charger in the phone’s socket, as if moving it around will fix whatever’s broken in there.

“It’s not working.” My voice breaks, and it takes all my effort to not throw the phone across the room in frustration.

“It was buried in the snow,” Connor says calmly. “The socket is probably wet. It won’t be able to charge until it dries off.”

“How do we dry it off?”

“Remove the plug so it can air out,” he says. “Other than that, we just have to wait.”

“How long?” I remove the plug and fan my hand around the socket, praying it’ll dry quickly.

“Last time it happened to me, it took about half a day.”

“No.” My heart drops, all hope of contacting Luna sometime soon gone.

“You’re safe here,” he promises, firm and steady. “We’re going to make breakfast. In the meantime, how about you change into those dry clothes?” He glances at them again, and I shiver at the reminder of how cold I am.

I also don’t mind the idea of having some space to get my thoughts somewhat together.

“Sure.” I pick up the pajamas and pull them close. “Where’s the bathroom?”

“Down the hall and to the right.”

I make my way there and close the door behind me. It’s a standard powder room, decorated in generic browns like I’d

expect from a guy living alone, and I go about changing into Connor's pajamas.

They smell like a campfire on a winter's night—exactly what *he* smells like—and I tie the pants as tightly as possible. They're loose, but as he predicted, they do stay up. And even though my underwear is damp, I keep them on, since anything else feels way too intimate for whatever's going on here.

Once satisfied that the pants aren't going to fall down, I turn around to see how I look.

Big mistake.

As Autumn said, I look like I spent the night sleeping in the woods. My hair is matted with the occasional twig in it. There are circles under my eyes. As for my eyes themselves...

I lean closer to the mirror, balancing my hands on the sides of the sink and staring at my reflection in shock.

The eyes looking back at me aren't mine.

They're brown.

Not turquoise.

I blink a few times, feeling like I'm seeing a stranger in the mirror, and glance at the ceiling to check the lighting. It's a normal yellow bulb. Nothing that would make my eyes change color.

No one's eye color changes overnight—or at all. It's impossible.

I take a deep breath and try to calm myself. I must be seeing things that aren't here. Maybe Brandon *did* drug my beer, and this is a residual side effect of whatever he put in it.

If so, I need to snap myself out of it.

I run the water, making it as cold as possible, hold my hands under it, and drink. After guzzling down as much as I can, I pat some of it onto my face, too.

But when I look back up at my reflection, nothing's changed.

No matter what happens, don't tell them your eyes aren't brown, the woman's voice from last night echoes in my mind.

Did she do this to me?

How would she do that? Why? And who was she?

I don't know. But every bone in my body urges me to trust her.

What else can I do? Tell Connor and Autumn—and Connor's grandfather—that my eyes changed color overnight? They'll think I'm crazy.

Maybe I am.

Or maybe I'll wake up soon and this will have been a long, strange dream.

Until then, I have to stay calm until my phone dries out and can charge. I'm sure I'll have loads of texts from Luna. She's probably back in town and has already told the cops I'm missing. I just need to hold tight until then.

So I gather my wet clothes and return to the kitchen.

The only person there is Autumn, who seems totally at home at the stove as she cooks breakfast.

"Where's Connor?" I ask, and my stomach rumbles at the delicious smell of bacon.

But I'm a vegetarian.

My parents are vegetarians, and I've been one my entire life. Never in my wildest dreams have I found the smell of bacon to be *delicious*.

"Jax got here, and Connor's talking with him in the other room," Autumn says.

"Oh," I say. "Okay." I plug the charger back into my phone, but still, no luck.

Crap.

I reach for my coffee, which is now lukewarm, and drink it as I wait for Connor to come back.

“Where are you from again?” Autumn asks, surprising me by attempting conversation.

“South Florida,” I answer.

“Where in South Florida?”

“Naples. In the Southwest.”

“Hm.” She presses her lips together, studies me, and returns to scrambling the eggs.

“Have you been?” I ask, hoping to fill the awkward silence.

“No,” she says. “And I’ve never met anyone else from there.”

“It’s a small town.”

“I’m sure it is,” she says in disdain.

I get the distinct feeling that the conversation is over, so I go back to sipping my coffee and wait.

Eventually, Connor returns with a man who’s equally as tall as he is... and who looks *far* too young to be anyone’s grandfather. I’m not the best at guessing ages, but I’d put him in his mid-forties, at the most. It also doesn’t hurt that he’s wearing tight dark jeans and a leather jacket. His skin is tan like Connor’s, and his features are sharp and strong, making it obvious they’re related.

Jax takes a long, deep breath, his eyes locked on mine.

I try to hold his gaze, but unease prickles my spine, and I glance down at my broken phone in defeat.

He lets out a sound of satisfaction, and I look back up at him.

“You saw the blood moon last night,” he says, not bothering with introductions.

“It was hard to miss.” I shrug, unsure why it’s such a big deal that I saw the moon turn red, given that anyone outside would have seen it.

“The blood moon wasn’t visible to human eyes,” he says simply.

The meaning behind his words only half-registers. “Excuse me?”

“Only supernaturals were able to see the blood moon,” he says. “Which means you’re one of us. A wolf shifter, to be precise, given the story of yours that Connor just told me.”

Ruby



I STARE at him like he's gone mental.

Because either he's gone mental, or I have. Probably me, given everything that's happened this past day.

"You truly had no idea," Jax observes.

"You just said that I'm a wolf shifter," I repeat, unable to believe the words coming out of my mouth.

"Correct."

"I want to go back to the hotel."

They're playing a joke on me. They *have* to be.

Then again, I read a lot of books—many of them fantasy. Everything that happened to me is in line with what happens to wolf shifters in the books I read.

This has to be a dream. The most realistic dream I've ever had, but once I wake up, it'll fade like all dreams do.

"You don't believe us," Connor says.

I glance back at Autumn, who's cooking so much food that you'd think she's preparing a feast.

"I'm not a *wolf shifter*," I say, unable to believe we're having this conversation. "I drank too much last night, wandered into the woods, and passed out. That's all."

"You saw the blood moon," Jax repeats.

"It was up in the sky." I motion to the ceiling. "*Everyone* outside saw it."

“Only supernaturals could see it,” he repeats his statement from earlier.

I hear him, but I don’t truly *hear* him.

“This is crazy,” I finally say.

“You need to relax and listen to me,” he says, and calmness floats through my veins, as if my body’s obeying him without my consent. “You’re a wolf shifter. It seems the blood moon made you shift for the first time.”

I pause to soak it in.

This can’t be possible.

“You’re lucky you were here when it first happened instead of... where are you from again?” he asks, as if this is a totally normal conversation.

“Southwest Florida,” Autumn supplies for me.

“There aren’t any packs in Florida.” Jax clears his throat and looks at me curiously. “Where are your parents from?”

“They’re from Florida. The panhandle,” I clarify, even though basically no one has been to the panhandle—including me. Neither of my parents have any family left, so there was never any reason to visit their hometown.

“They’re human?” Jax asks.

“Of course they’re human.”

“Hm,” he muses, and I can tell he doesn’t believe me.

Just like I don’t believe him.

Although, I have to admit that I’m curious...

“If you’re really wolf shifters, then shift.” I motion to the center of the room, ready to put this craziness to rest. “Right here, right now.”

“Sure. Although I don’t think the kitchen is the right place to do it,” Connor says, and he strolls over to the back doors, opens them, and leaps onto the deck.

One moment he’s a human, then he’s leaping through the air... and then he’s landing on all fours and turning to face me.

As a wolf.

An actual wolf nearly twice the size as any wolf I've ever heard of, with inky black fur that gleams in the sunlight and eyes so intense that it's like they're gazing into my soul.

My breath catches in my chest, and I freeze, unable to believe what I'm seeing.

I simply stare at the majestic wolf that was Connor a few seconds ago, my mind barely able to process the fact that he changed forms in front of my eyes.

"You have to be kidding me," I mumble, bracing myself to wake up from this stupidly realistic dream at any moment.

"I assume that's proof enough for you?" Jax says, and Connor shifts back into human form, strolls into the kitchen, and shuts the door behind him as if he didn't just shift into a supernatural creature in broad daylight.

I think back to the paw prints I followed back to the house. They were large—about the same size as a wolf around Connor's size would have. There were no regular footprints leading up to where I passed out in the woods. Which means...

"I shifted into a wolf last night."

I can't believe I'm saying it, let alone considering it.

Yet... here we are.

"Yes. It sounds like that's what happened," Jax says.

"And you came here because you're the alpha." I swallow, realizing that's why it was so hard for me to meet his eyes without lowering mine in submission.

"You catch on quick," he says.

"I like to read."

"Books rarely get everything right, but it makes sense that you'd be drawn to read about your kind," he says.

I glance at my ruined jacket, then back to where Connor is standing fully clothed.

“Only natural items can shift with us—ones that are either made from animals or come from the earth,” Connor explains. “That jacket is polyester. Thus why it...” He trails off and makes a motion with his hands of a bomb exploding, with a sound to match.

“Right,” I say, surprising myself with how easily I’m handling this. “How many of you are there?”

“In the Pine Valley pack?” Jax asks, and I nod. “Almost a hundred. We’re the biggest pack in the area. Over half of us are here in town, and the rest are serving as Guardians in cities across the country.”

I blink, unsure exactly what he’s talking about. “Guardians?”

“You’ll learn more later,” he says. “But first, your parents. Are you sure they’re not shifters?”

“I’m sure,” I say. “I think they would have told me otherwise.”

“I’ll have the witches look into it,” he says.

“The witches,” I repeat, dumbfounded. “Of course there are witches. I guess it wouldn’t make sense for shifters to be the only supernaturals out there.”

“Precisely.” Jax either doesn’t catch onto my sarcasm, or he’s ignoring it. “Which is good, since until we learn what pack you were born into, you’re our responsibility. You’ll be safe and provided for here in Pine Valley.”

“How can we be sure she’s not lying?” Autumn sneers, and I notice she’s finished cooking breakfast and has placed the food into bowls and plates, buffet-style on the countertop.

“A lie that big is something I’d be able to smell,” Jax says. “She’s not lying.”

“Hold up.” I raise a hand for them to stop talking, and they look to me to continue. “I’m not staying here.”

“You have to stay here.” Connor growls and grips the back of the chair in front of him so tightly that I worry it might break. “You’re one of us.”

“But my parents...”

“We’re your family now.” His voice is hard and final, filling the room with crackling tension.

Autumn looks back and forth between the two of us, her forehead creased with worry.

She hesitates for a moment, as if fighting an internal battle, then glides to Connor’s side and links her arm with his. “Connor’s right,” she says. “You’re untrained, and it’s going to take time for you to learn how to shift on command. Until you do, you’re a liability to everyone out there. Like Jax and Connor said—you’re our responsibility now.”

She strains when she says the last part, but Connor steps closer to her and gives her an appreciative nod, and she relaxes a bit.

Jax gives them an approving look, then gets up and starts helping himself to the breakfast display on the counter.

Connor’s watching me, waiting for my reaction, but I can’t tear my gaze away from Autumn. She looks so smug standing next to him—as if she owns him.

The two of them together are *wrong*.

I feel it deep in my bones.

It should be me standing next to him, touching him in a way that’s so casual, yet intimate at the same time.

Not her.

I don’t know where the thought comes from. I shouldn’t feel this way about someone else’s boyfriend.

But I can visualize myself standing next to him instead of her, my arm linked with his as he stands close by my side. I can *literally* see myself there—my brown hair replacing Autumn’s red, my heart-shaped face there instead of her oval one, and the silky slip nightgown she’s wearing changing into Connor’s pajamas loosely draped around my small frame.

She moves closer to him, he glances over at her... and his eyes widen in alarm, as if whatever he’s seeing startled him

into shock.

Ruby



AUTUMN FLINCHES BACK. “WHAT?” she asks, and at the sound of her voice, the fantasy of myself standing next to Connor shatters.

Connor glances at me, studying me for a few painfully long seconds, then returns his focus to Autumn. “Nothing,” he says, and he pulls her closer and kisses her head, which seems to placate her.

But he looked so startled...

He couldn't have seen what I did, of me standing there instead of Autumn.

Could he have?

I shake the thought away. The idea of Connor and I sharing some sort of weird vision is insane. My imagination's getting the best of me. It has to be.

Before I can think about it further, Jax brings his breakfast plate piled high with food over to the table and plops down into the chair next to mine.

My stomach growls as the mouth-watering smell of it floats over to me.

“You should eat,” he says, stabbing a sausage with his fork. “You have to be starving after your first shift.”

My stomach growls again, and since he's right—I *am* starving—I get up and help myself to some of the food. Connor and Autumn help themselves as well, and I can't help

but feel like Connor is staying as far away from me as possible as he does.

When we sit back down, Connor glances at my plate and frowns.

“What?” I ask, annoyed at how something as small as the food I chose for breakfast bothers him.

“You didn’t take any meat.” He motions to his plate, which has bacon, ham, *and* sausage on it.

All three of them took so much meat that it fills over half their plates.

“I’m a vegetarian,” I say, cutting into the toast piled with eggs and beans that I made for myself.

“Seriously?” Autumn stares at me like I’ve grown a second head, spears a sausage with her fork, and takes a bite of it.

“Yeah. Seriously.”

Connor just smirks, snaps a crispy piece of bacon in half, and starts eating it.

“Why’s this such a big deal?” I ask, looking back and forth between them in irritation.

“Now that you’ve shifted, you’re not going to last long as a vegetarian,” he says. “Our wolves need meat to survive.”

I want to say he’s wrong, but the bacon smells even more delicious up close than it did from the other side of the kitchen. I’m practically salivating as I stare at it... and at the stupidly sexy sight of Connor eating it.

Jax stops eating and studies me. “It’s not natural for our kind to refuse meat,” he says.

“My parents are vegetarians,” I explain. “I’ve been one my entire life.”

“Are you sure you’re not adopted?”

“If I was adopted, they would have told me,” I say, although after everything I learned this morning, I don’t sound as confident as I’d like to be.

“Except that you’re a shifter,” he says. “After our first shift, we need meat to survive. Not eating it will slowly kill us. Which means your parents are human.”

My stomach drops, and I stare down at the barely touched toast concoction on my plate, suddenly not hungry anymore.

Is Jax right? Have my parents been lying to me for my entire life? Are they not really my parents?

No. They’re my parents no matter what. They raised me.

But if he’s right, it means they lied to me about my blood heritage.

I don’t want it to be true.

However, now that he’s saying it, I feel stupid for not suspecting it earlier. Neither of my parents share my eye color *or* my hair color. I always chalked it up to recessive genes, especially because other than that, there aren’t any other glaring differences in our features.

“You look shocked,” Jax observes.

“Can you blame me?”

He chuckles, and Connor tosses a piece of bacon onto my plate.

“Try it,” he dares, his eyes light and teasing. “You might like it.”

A large part of me yearns to pick it up and take a bite.

Do it, the voice from last night insists.

No, I think back.

Somehow managing to get myself together, I slide the plate away from me and force myself to think about something else.

“What are we going to tell my parents?” I ask, since they’re right that I can’t go back home like everything’s normal. The thought of staying here for a few weeks makes my chest tighten with anxiety, but the last thing I need is to

wolf out like I did last night and hurt someone, especially someone I love. “And what about Luna?”

“The witches are experienced in handling supernatural relations with the human world,” Jax says. “They’ll investigate it and come up with a plan. I need you to hang tight while they do. Once everything’s figured out, you’ll be the first to know.”

“Okay,” I say, since there’s not much more I can ask. “Thanks.”

“Like I said, you’re our responsibility now,” he repeats. “I’m the alpha of this pack, and it’s a role I take seriously. Everyone here is taken care of under my watch, including our guests. You’re safe here. I promise.”

“Thanks,” I say again, and I look to Connor, as if I need his assurance as well.

He’s glowering at me, just like he did at the party last night.

“What?” I ask, fed up with his stupid mood swings and how he can’t decide if he wants to help me or hate me.

He motions to my plate. “You’re not eating.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“You shifted for the first time last night and slept in the woods.” He stares at me in challenge, so intensely that I wonder if he’s going to reach across the table and stuff that piece of bacon down my throat. “You need to eat.”

I don’t want to give in.

But despite having lost my appetite after the discussion about my parents, my hunger suddenly returns with double the force as before.

“Fine,” I concede, and he nods, apparently pleased. “But I’m not touching that bacon.”

Ruby



“LET’S go outside and see how much earth magic you have,” Jax says after we finish eating.

“Earth magic?” I ask.

“Shifters are connected with the element of earth,” he explains. “We can harness it from the time we’re young, at various ages dependent on the strength of the shifter. The amount of elemental magic we have determines our place in the pack.”

“That’s not in any of the books I read,” I say.

“Fiction doesn’t get everything right.” He stands, leads the three of us outside, and points to the ground. “Sit,” he tells me, making me feel like a dog being given a command.

Autumn crosses her arms and smirks, and I can tell she’s hoping I’ll fail.

Jax’s instructions are tough to resist, so I sit crisscross on the ground, determined to do well enough at whatever he’s about to ask me to do to wipe that smirk off Autumn’s face.

Connor’s as stoic and hard to read as ever.

Jax sits about three feet across from me, and Connor and Autumn situate themselves on both sides between us, so we’re in a circle. The sun’s up, making it warmer outside than last night, especially since I’m no longer wearing wet clothes.

“Close your eyes and connect with the earth,” Jax instructs, and I do as asked, focusing on the grass and dirt beneath me.

I don't feel anything magical—no tingles, no buzz of energy from the ground—but I'm not sure if that's supposed to happen, or if it's also something that's only in books. So I focus on grounding myself, remaining still and calm, trying to do as directed.

“Open your eyes,” Jax says after about five minutes pass.

I look to Connor, my breath catching when our eyes lock. But, remembering that Autumn is watching us like a hawk, I focus on Jax instead, who's holding a small pile of dirt in his hands as if it's something holy.

“Cup your hands together like this,” he says, and I create a small bowl with my hands, mirroring his position.

Slowly, he pours about half of the dirt into my waiting hands. Then he pulls his arms closer to himself, and I do the same, bringing my elbows to my waist so the dirt is right in front of me.

“Watch,” he says, and the dirt rises about two inches above his palms, forming a sphere the size of a tennis ball. It swirls around, and the sunlight bounces off the minerals in the soil, making it sparkle as it moves. There's even a green glow around it—magic come to life.

I'm in awe, amazed that something as simple as *dirt* can be so beautiful.

“You won't have as precise of control over it as I do,” he says. “But I want you to try levitating it in your hands.”

“Child's play.” Autumn smiles smugly.

I narrow my eyes at her, then look down at the pile of dirt in my palms. It doesn't have the same magical quality as the one in Jax's hands. It simply looks like dirt.

Float, I think, trying to connect it with my palms and make it obey my command.

Nothing happens, so I hold my breath and push harder, willing it to follow my order.

“Connect with the earth below you,” Jax says. “Pull its magic into your body and release it into the dirt in your

hands.”

“Okay.” I focus on the ground, but don’t feel the magic he spoke of.

Eventually I give up and try getting the dirt in my hands to float again.

It doesn’t work.

“Do you feel any magic?” Jax probes.

I frown and try again. “No,” I admit, unable to look at Autumn.

The disappointment in Connor’s eyes makes me want the ground to open beneath me so I can disappear inside of it. Not like I’d be able to make that happen, since I have no magical connection to it to speak of.

Jax allows the sphere of dirt floating above his hands to fall back into his palms, and he pours it back onto the ground.

I pour out mine as well, since I’m clearly not getting anywhere with trying to do anything magical to it.

Jax eyes me up and down, like he’s sizing me up.

I failed.

I don’t need to see his expression to know it’s true.

“Come inside,” he says, and we do as instructed, taking our seats around the table. “I’ll place you with one of the omega families,” he continues. “They’ll help you find a job during your stay here. You’re very pretty, so I’m sure many of the royal families will be happy to have you serve in their household.”

“You want me to be a *servant*?” I do a double-take, unable to believe I’m hearing this correctly.

“Serving in a royal household is the most prestigious position an omega can hope for,” he says.

“I thought I was a guest here.”

“You are. But given that you have no magic, you won’t be training to be a Guardian, and you need to pull your weight

somehow.”

“I know how to wait tables,” I volunteer quickly, desperate to find another solution. “I occasionally help out at the restaurant where my mom works.”

“Your mom’s a waitress?” Autumn scrunches her nose, like it’s a bad word.

“She is.” I hold her gaze, daring her to say a nasty thing about it. My parents work hard, and I refuse to let a snob like her put them down.

“We have two restaurants in pack territory,” Connor says. “I’ll check if there’s an opening at either one of them.”

“Thanks,” I say in relief.

“No problem.”

“I also want to take some online classes,” I tell Jax. “I don’t want to get behind in school.”

He watches me like I’m a lost puppy, and I have a feeling I’m not going to like whatever’s coming next. “I need you to realize something, Ruby,” he says slowly, and I place my hands on my knees to brace myself. “Once you learn how to shift, you can go wherever you please. But you’re not going to fit in with the human world anymore. You see, shifters have an instinctive need to be part of a pack. Once we figure out what pack you were born into, you’ll likely choose to live with them, or you’ll decide to remain with us. Both options will be open to you, but I’m confident that as you spend more time here, you’ll realize you belong with your own kind and not with the humans.”

“Once I’m ready, I’m returning to my life,” I say, since he has no way of knowing what I’ll decide, even if he thinks otherwise. “And I’m not dropping out of school.”

I haven’t chosen a major yet, but I’m not giving up on my education. Neither of my parents are college-educated, and it’s their biggest dream for me to get my degree. I refuse to let them—or myself—down.

“Like you said, Ruby won’t be training as a Guardian,” Connor jumps in. “I don’t see what an online class or two will hurt, as long as it doesn’t interfere with her getting her job done.”

Jax pauses to think, and I hold my breath, praying he’ll say okay.

“Until the witches get everything settled, you can’t have any contact with the outside world,” he finally says. “No computer. And no phone.” With that, he picks my phone off the table, tightens his grip, and crushes it.

The glass breaks, and the phone twists so much that it’s nearly unrecognizable.

He drops it onto the table in a mangled heap, and the cuts on his hand quickly heal, leaving his skin good as new.

A ball of panic rises in my throat, followed by raging hot anger. “Why did you do that?” I ask, staring at the twisted metal in shock and disbelief.

That phone was my only way to connect with my parents and Luna, and now it’s gone.

“The witches will cover up your disappearance,” he says. “They’re experts with this sort of thing. We can’t have you reaching out to humans and ruining everything.”

“I wasn’t going to ruin anything,” I say. “I just want my parents and best friend to know I’m okay.”

And I want to know that *they’re* okay.

His gaze is hard and unwavering. “I’m the alpha of this pack. You’re my responsibility now, and I promise that everything will be figured out soon enough,” he says, and I hate how assured his calm tone makes me feel. It’s like he’s casting a spell on me, and I try to fight it, but the anger I felt when he crushed my phone is gone. “In the meantime, I know what family I want you to stay with during your time here. I’ll call them and drop you off there soon. But first, there’s a mess in here from breakfast, and you need to do your job and clean it up.”

Just like that, I realize that any respect Jax might have had for me went out the window the moment I couldn't connect with earth magic. In his mind, I'm an omega.

A servant.

He's destroyed my one way of connecting to the outside world, and a sickening feeling rises in my throat at the realization that he's keeping me prisoner here.

I need to learn how to shift as quickly as possible. Then I can leave and take whatever I can of my life back.

Although I can't deny the sinking feeling that Jax is right. Even if I could reach out to my family and friends, what would I say? I have no idea. Because last night, everything changed. Pretending otherwise would be impossible.

Which means as much as I hate it and want to fight it, nothing in my life will ever be normal again.

Connor



AFTER RUBY and my grandfather leave, Autumn and I go back to my room, presumably to finish what we were starting before Ruby pounded on the back door and interrupted our fun.

She sits on the end of the bed, and her eyes are hard. She's aggravated, just like she was when we were all in the kitchen.

"What's wrong?" I ask, even though I have a pretty good idea what's wrong.

"I don't like the way you look at her," she cuts to the chase.

"Ruby?" I say casually, as if the undeniably beautiful girl didn't send my head spinning the moment I saw her.

As if I didn't imagine her taking Autumn's place while we were standing in the kitchen. As if I didn't wish I was staring into her brilliant turquoise eyes instead of my girlfriend's warm hazel ones.

But Ruby's eyes aren't really turquoise. She was clearly wearing color contacts last night. The contacts wouldn't have shifted with her, which is why her eyes are back to their natural brown. The turquoise suited her better than her real eye color, although she won't be needing contacts anymore, since she surely has perfect wolf vision now that she's had her first shift.

"Who else would I be talking about?" Autumn asks, snapping me out of my thoughts of Ruby's eyes.

An excellent question.

I need to put an end to this conversation—quickly.

“How do I look at her?” I smirk and take my shirt off, hoping to distract Autumn’s train of thought. Especially because my girlfriend looks as sexy as ever sitting on my bed in her silk pink nightgown, her cheeks flushed from being so emotionally heated.

“You look at her like you want to rip her clothes off.”

So much for distracting her. Autumn is nothing if not outspoken and determined. It’s one of the many reasons I was drawn to her all those years ago and decided to make her mine.

“There’s only one person whose clothes I want to rip off,” I say. “And she’s sitting on my bed in front of me.”

It’s a lie.

I don’t want it to be, but it is. However, whatever attraction I feel toward Ruby is irrelevant. I’d never act on it. I care about Autumn, and I wouldn’t hurt her like that.

Besides, once Autumn turns nineteen, the mate bond will form between us, and I won’t be attracted to anyone else ever again.

I prowl over to Autumn and pull her into a kiss, her lips soft and familiar as they move against mine. But there’s something different about the way she’s kissing me. She’s more reserved, as if she’s unsure about how much I want her.

Autumn’s never unsure about anything.

I don’t like it, and as her future mate, it’s my job to put a stop to it.

So I pull slowly away from her and look into her eyes, determined to wipe any trace of doubt away from them.

“What?” she asks, soft and curious.

“You’re my future mate,” I tell her. “You’re the strongest magic user of our kind in decades, you’re a better fighter than many of the Guardians who have been serving for years, and I admire your fierceness and determination more than anything. We made a promise to each other all those years ago because

we're meant to be together, and I never want you to doubt that. I never want you to doubt *me*."

Guilt flood through me after I say the words. I think back to the moment I pulled Brandon off Ruby—the trusting way the girl looked at me, and how *right* it felt to protect her.

How I purposefully avoided touching her, multiple times.

Just to be safe.

"You're right," she says. "I trust you, and I love you, just like I know you love me."

"Good," I say. "Because no one on the planet could ever compare to you. Especially not that little omega. She'll learn her place in the pack soon enough. Just you wait."

The words taste like metal in the back of my throat, but I swallow the bitterness down.

At least they do their job and appear to placate Autumn.

"Hopefully Jax figures out who her true pack is soon, so she can be out of our hair," Autumn says.

"Agreed," I say, even though I don't like the thought of Ruby leaving so quickly.

After all, she shifted for the first time in our territory.

She belongs to us.

But I need to stop thinking about her. Because Autumn is here in my bed, ready to let me do whatever I want to her. That little omega should be the last thing on my mind.

"Take this off." I pull at the strap of Autumn's nightgown, and she gives me a mischievous smile and follows my command, letting it drop into a pile around her feet.

"Better?" She tilts her head and bites her lower lip, teasing me with her naked body.

"I can't wait until your birthday so I can truly make you mine," I say, and then I push her down onto the bed, hover above her, and force myself to drive the thought of Ruby's

hypnotizing eyes out of my mind as Autumn and I finally finish what we started when we woke up this morning.

Ruby



JAX BARELY SPEAKS to me as he drives me to the small ranch house at the end of town where I'll be staying for the time-being.

I don't mind the lack of conversation. I'm so angry at him over my phone that I don't want to speak to him, either. He might claim to be looking out for me, but I think the only thing he cares about is getting me out of the way as soon as possible.

As for Connor, I have no idea what to make of him. It's like he can't decide if he wants to be welcoming, indifferent, or irritated at me.

Being attracted to him shouldn't be enough of a reason to make me trust him. Especially because Autumn wants to claw my eyes out if I so much as look at him. And I mean that literally, given the whole shifter thing and all.

I don't know when all of *that* will set in, but it certainly hasn't happened yet. It feels like I'm in an alternate reality. Like I'm living in one of the books I read instead of in real life.

I follow Jax inside the dreary house, and he brings the omega family up to speed about what's going on. They're a family of three—two parents and a sixteen-year-old daughter. They tell him they're more than happy to take me in, although I don't know if it's because they *want* to host me, or because it's their job as omegas to follow their alpha's command.

The mother—Felicity—looks at Jax with a timid sort of desire in her eyes, and I can't help but think that there's history

between the two of them.

She looks heartbroken when he leaves.

“Thanks for letting me stay here,” I tell them as he pulls out of the driveway. “This has all been very...” I pause, searching for a word to describe what it feels like to have my entire world turned upside down in less than twenty-four hours. “Shocking,” I settle on, even though it doesn’t come close to describing the myriad of emotions waging war inside my body.

“You can stay in my room,” the daughter—Penny—offers. She’s bouncing with excitement, clearly happy to have a guest stay in the house with them.

“Don’t be silly,” her father—Garrett—says. He’s a short man with dirty blond hair and a matching scruffy beard, and he was drinking a beer when we arrived, even though it’s before noon. “We’re not hosting royalty. Ruby is an omega, like us. She’ll sleep on the couch.”

Apparently viewing the decision as settled, he sits down on the big armchair in the living room, turns on the TV, and returns to his beer.

I nearly growl at his swift dismissal, but given that I don’t have anywhere else to go or stay, I rein it in.

Causing fights with these people isn’t going to get me home any faster.

“I appreciate the offer, but I’m fine on the couch,” I tell Penny, since they’re being nice by taking me in at all. Plus, it’s not her fault that her father’s acting like a jerk.

“Okay.” She pouts. “But you’re going to need some clothes, and I think you’re about the same size as me. Want to come try some stuff on?”

“That’d be great,” I say, and Felicity gives me an encouraging smile before I follow Penny to her room.

The room isn’t large, and the furniture is falling apart in places, but she’s brightened it up with flowers and plants anywhere the light hits.

“I thought omegas couldn’t use earth magic?” I ask.

“We can’t,” she says. “But I’m perfectly capable of growing and taking care of plants. And I’m never going to stop trying to use magic. Who knows—maybe after I have my first shift, everything will change.”

“Does that ever happen?”

“Not really.” She shrugs. “But it doesn’t stop me from hoping. Just like how I’m going to train to be a Guardian up until our final exam, even though most omegas don’t bother, since we’re never chosen.”

“Jax mentioned the Guardians a few times,” I say. “What exactly are they?”

Her blue eyes light up, and she’s clearly excited to fill me in. “We start training to be Guardians in our first year of high school,” she begins. “Then, after graduation, we do an intense year of training to prepare for the big test. If we perform well on the test, we’re sent to a city to serve as a Guardian for the next twenty years. Some cities—usually the bigger ones—are more dangerous than others. The shifters who perform the best on the test are sent to those. If you fail, you stay in pack territory and serve the pack.”

“Wow.” I take a moment to let it all sink in. “What makes a city dangerous?”

I’m guessing that since shifters are sent to guard the cities, she doesn’t mean your average bank robber or mugger.

“Supernatural activity,” she confirms. “Mainly vampires. Sometimes the occasional dark witch or fae, but we need approval from the covens to go after those.”

“The covens?”

“Each pack serves a witch coven,” she explains. “They make the rules, and we follow their rules to keep the world safe.”

“So, shifters are soldiers.”

“Exactly.”

“Interesting,” I say, still trying to wrap my mind around the fact that there are actual vampires in cities across the country.

It makes me appreciate the fact that I grew up in a small Florida beach town.

Penny pulls some clothes from her closet that she thinks will fit me. Her casual style is similar to mine, and I’m grateful for that as I try things on.

Eventually, her mom knocks on the door to check on us.

“Don’t you have homework to do?” she asks Penny.

“It’s Saturday,” Penny says, rolling her eyes. “I can do it tomorrow.”

“You’ll do it now,” she says. “Ruby, would you like to help me prepare lunch?”

It feels like an instruction more than a request. So I say okay, and we make our way into the small, dingy kitchen, where she gets the ingredients out for whatever she’s about to prepare. I don’t cook often—we live mainly on cereal, sandwiches, and microwave meals in my house—so I watch and wait for instructions.

“Penny’s really nice,” I say, wanting to break the silence.

“Let me guess—she told you she wants to be a Guardian?” she asks.

“She did.”

Felicity lets out a sad sigh. “I’m glad she’s so motivated, but I’m worried about how hard it’s going to be when she doesn’t get selected,” she says.

“It’s that impossible for omegas to be chosen?” I ask.

“No magic, no chance,” she says. “No matter how good of a physical fighter you are, omegas aren’t deserving of being blessed by the gods. Some even think of us as cursed.”

There’s a sadness in her worn eyes, and it hurts my heart to see her so broken.

“That’s awful,” I say. “I’m sorry.”

“You’ll get used to it,” she says. “It’s not bad here. We’re given food and shelter, and we’re kept safe by the pack as long as we provide for them. There are far worse fates than being an omega.”

“But you’re allowed to leave if you want?”

“Technically, yes,” she says. “But few want to. It’s too dangerous out there, especially for lone wolves with no magic. The ones who leave tend to never be heard from again.”

I shiver, not liking the sound of that.

“Anyway, let’s get started.” She gives me a forced smile. “We’re making a casserole. It should be more than enough for both lunch and dinner.”

“Is there meat in it?” I ask, remembering the incident at breakfast.

“Of course there’s meat in it.” She looks at me like I’m crazy, and I know she’s waiting for an explanation of my question.

“I’m a vegetarian,” I tell her.

Her brows knit, and I can see I’ve absolutely befuddled her. “Well.” She takes a deep breath, like she doesn’t know what to say. “We can keep a section of the casserole meat-free. But now that you’ve shifted, you’re eventually going to need to eat meat. You’re not going to survive otherwise.”

“So I’ve been told,” I say, and while she still looks confused, she doesn’t say anything more on the subject.

As we prepare lunch, she turns the television to a local news station. An overly greased up middle-aged man in a cheap navy suit sits at the desk, fake concern shining in his eyes.

“We just received word that a second person has gone missing,” he says, keeping his expression solemn in a way that looks overly practiced.

I pause what I'm doing and stare at the television, prepared to see my face displayed on the screen.

Instead, it's an attractive man with blond hair and bright blue eyes.

"Jason Cook, age twenty-five, was snowboarding in the back bowls yesterday and never came home," he says. "If you have any news of his whereabouts, please come to the police station immediately. Jason is the second person to go missing in the past three days, preceded by Carly Katz, who went out for a jog near her home in the eastern part of town and never returned." Another photo flashes on the screen—a twenty-two-year-old woman of Native American descent with short hair and mysterious gray eyes. "Again, if you have any information about where either of them might be, please go to the police." He clears his throat, and then continues, "In other news, get ready for higher temperatures next week as a warm front passes through the area..."

He continues to talk about the weather, but I tune him out, my mind on the two missing people.

"Do you think it could be vampires?" The word feels ridiculous after it comes out of my mouth, but after everything I learned, I have to consider the possibility.

Felicity tsks at my question. "Vampires can't get into Pine Valley," she says. "The witches maintain a barrier spell around the town to keep them out, and they've never gotten through."

"Hm," I say. "Then could it be a shifter?"

She balks in offense. "Shifters don't attack humans, or eat humans," she says. "Whatever's going on with those people is a human crime. If our witches find out otherwise, they'll give us instructions for their decided course of action. Until then, we proceed as normal."

"So, you follow everything the witches tell you to do?"

"That's our job," she says proudly. "It's why they created us in the first place."

"They created you?" I ask, becoming more intrigued by the second.

“A long time ago, in the Dark Ages, when the vampires started to get out of control,” she says. “We’ve protected the witches since, and they provide for us in return. But enough on all of that.” She picks up the remote and changes the channel to Home and Garden Television. “It’s far more important for you to learn what to expect on a day-to-day basis around town, and this casserole isn’t going to make itself.”

Corner



THE GUYS and I were supposed to go into town tonight for drinks at our favorite bar. College still hasn't started up yet for most of the east coast, which means a lot of human girls around our age are still on vacation here. They were hoping for a final night of trying to get lucky before the season slows down.

But the pent-up energy I have after the events of this morning with Ruby and Autumn is insane. So, I call off our Saturday night plans for a last-minute training session. As the grandson of the alpha—which makes me the future alpha of the pack—the guys have no choice but to listen.

Brandon's already had a beer or three, but I don't let him off the hook. In a real-world scenario, if a vampire attacks the city we're serving, we'd have to fight them no matter how much we had to drink. It's why Guardians aren't allowed to drink on the job.

We're pretty lax about it in our final year of training, which some also call our final year of freedom, but there's no time like the present for a reminder about why our rules exists in the first place.

We practice only with knives and claws, and after two hours go by, I notice the guys getting antsy.

"That's enough for tonight." One of my jobs as future alpha is to anticipate the needs of my pack, so I pull my claws back into my left hand Wolverine-style and sheathe my knife with my right. "Good session."

Brandon's breathing heavily, his hair soaked with sweat. "There's talk around town about that girl from last night," he says. "The hot one we beat at beer pong. Scarlet."

"*Ruby*," I correct him, and I curl my fingers into fists, waiting for him to continue.

"Yeah, her," he says. "She's staying with that omega family with the hot daughter that lives at the edge of town. The Lawrence's."

I'm immediately on guard.

"Where did you hear that?" I ask, even though I'm not surprised. Shifters are naturally social, so word spreads fast around here.

"Garrett Lawrence. He was drinking at the pub earlier, and I heard him talking to some of the other omegas. He says Ruby didn't know she was a shifter until shifting last night at the party. Apparently she was adopted or something. She's also an omega, so she's staying with them until a more permanent situation is arranged for her."

His eyes go hungry at that last part, putting my nerves on edge as an intense need to protect her sets in.

"What's it to you?" I ask.

"So, you knew about it?" one of the other guys—Tyler—speaks up. His identical twin Thomas stands next to him, quiet as he waits for my response.

"Of course I knew," I say. "Jax and I dealt with her this morning. Like you heard, she's staying with the Lawrence's until we learn more about her heritage."

"And you didn't think to tell us?" Brandon blows out a frustrated breath.

"I didn't think it was relevant," I say, although the moment it's out of my mouth, I know it's a lie.

It's not that it isn't relevant.

It's because after the way Brandon treated Ruby last night, I wanted to keep her a secret from him for as long as possible.

“She’s an *omega*,” he says, as if he hasn’t already made that clear. “A hot one. One we haven’t had a chance to have any fun with yet.”

Anger fires through me, and I have an intense urge to punch that arrogant look off his face.

Instead, I take a few long breaths to compose myself. “You know the rules,” I say, sharp and clear. “Everyone in this pack gets the respect of giving their consent—including omegas.”

The same can’t be said for how some of the other packs treat their omegas, especially the more feral ones out west. But the Pine Valley pack is civilized and law-abiding. We value rules and structure above all else. That means respecting even the lowest members of our pack by not treating them like toys for us to play with.

“Ruby and I are only just starting to get to know each other.” Hunger flashes in Brandon’s eyes again, and he rubs his hands together, glancing back at Tyler and Thomas for their support. “She was shy last night, but I bet she just needs a bit of breaking in.”

Another surge of red-hot anger passes through me, and the next thing I know, I’ve tackled Brandon to the ground and my knife is out, the flat end of it flush against his throat.

Fear flashes in Brandon’s eyes, followed by challenge.

“Don’t touch her,” I growl, and I glance up at the twins to make sure they get the message as well. “She’s mine.”

Brandon simply raises an eyebrow. “What do you mean that she’s *yours*?” he says, his voice scratchy thanks to my knife pressing on his windpipe.

Shit.

It’s a good question. The words escaped my mouth on instinct, and I scramble for a believable explanation.

“I mean that once she learns her place as an omega, she’ll be serving me, and by extension, my family.” I raise the knife and slowly release my hold on him. “Giving her anything but

the utmost respect is an offense not just to her, but to the ruling family of this pack.”

Brandon raises his hands in defeat. “Chill, man,” he says. “I didn’t know.”

“Now you do.”

We both stand up, and I glance to the twins again.

They lower their eyes in respect.

Good. Message received loud and clear.

Brandon removes a twig from his hair and tosses it to the ground. “So, what does Autumn think about the little omega coming to live with you?” he asks.

A good question.

Especially because *I* didn’t even know this was going to happen until saying it right now. But no matter what, Autumn and I must present a united front. It’s our responsibility as the future leaders of this pack.

“I have Autumn’s full support,” I lie. “Ruby shifted for the first time on my property, and she came to me for help, which makes her my responsibility.”

The reason sounds flimsy, but it’s true.

Why else do I feel so protective over the little omega who showed up at my door this morning, scared and confused, begging for help?

Being protective is the instinct of an alpha, especially for the most vulnerable in the pack.

There’s nothing more to it than that.

There *can’t* be.

“As the future alpha, it’s my duty to take care of my pack,” I add, trying to convince them as much as myself. “Out of all of us, Ruby needs more help than anyone.”

“It doesn’t change the fact that a woman who’s not your girlfriend will be living in your house until you move to the city to become a Guardian,” Tyler points out.

I glare him into silence.

“Autumn is my future mate. She’s not threatened by a little omega servant girl,” I say, although I flash back to how concerned she was in my room this morning after Ruby left, and I’m not so sure about that.

But it doesn’t matter. Like I just told them, all will be well after Autumn and I officially become mates.

Thomas has been quiet throughout all of this—he’s always been the most introspective of the four of us—so when he speaks, we all turn to listen.

“What makes you so sure that you and Autumn will be mates?” he asks softly.

I narrow my eyes at him, angry at him for questioning such a thing.

Tyler and Brandon watch me carefully, also curious about my answer.

“Autumn is the strongest magic user of our kind in generations,” I remind them. “I’m the strongest fighter, and our future alpha. We make sense together. You know it, as does everyone else in this pack who’s supported us for the past few years.”

“I’m aware of that,” Thomas says sadly. “But sometimes loving someone isn’t enough.”

He’s talking about his ex-girlfriend, Kara. The one he loved, then never heard from again after she mated with a member of the nearby Spring Creek pack and left to live with them.

She broke his heart, and he hasn’t been the same since.

“You and Kara were only together for a few months,” I point out.

“And in those few months, I loved her with every piece of my soul.” His eyes are open and honest, and I feel for him, truly.

But it doesn't change the fact that his relationship with Kara was very different from my relationship with Autumn.

"I know you loved her," I say carefully. "But Autumn and I chose each other. We made a promise to each other. We're the strongest members of this pack, and we're going to stand by each other, whether we're fated mates or not."

I've never shared this with anyone.

But telling them makes the pact Autumn and I made feel more real. It gives me more of a reason to stand by my promise than ever.

I'm a man of my word, and I will never betray her.

"You'd really go against fate?" Thomas asks.

It's quiet in the clearing, the only sound the chirping of the crickets in the nearby forest. Thomas's question hangs in the air, and I feel Tyler and Brandon's continued curiosity as they wait for my answer.

"I'll do whatever's necessary to strengthen our pack, and Autumn is powerful, respected, and deserves to stand by my side." I stand strong, daring them to question me again.

For the first time in the years we've been friends, Brandon's expression is unreadable to me.

"You're the future alpha," he finally says. "Whatever you say goes."

I simply nod at him, and he lowers his gaze in deferral, as my beta should.

Tyler clears his throat and shuffles in discomfort. "So, how about those beers?" he asks with a chuckle, although no one laughs with him.

"You guys go," I say. "I'm done for the night."

I shift into my wolf form before they can ask anything more, intending to go straight home. But after that confrontation, I need to blow off some steam.

So I run through the woods with no destination in mind, eventually coming to a stop when I realize where I've ended

up.

The house at the end of town where Ruby is staying with the Lawrence's.

Corner



MY SENSES ARE ENHANCED while in wolf form, so I can hear the Lawrence's and Ruby chatting from where I'm standing in the backyard. The small window that I assume is in the kitchen is cracked open, so I smell what they're eating—some sort of hot dish with ground beef.

The teen girl who Brandon referred to as their “hot daughter”—Penny—is asking Ruby what it's like to go to school in the human world.

Brandon might not have known Penny's name, but I make it my personal mission to know the names of everyone in the pack, along with general details about them. Someday they'll be *my* pack, and a good alpha knows enough about all their pack members to ensure we live in happiness and harmony.

The window is high up—it's the type that's usually above the kitchen sink—so I can't see inside. But there's a tree in the backyard with a trunk and branches thick enough for climbing. It's far enough from the house that I should be able to climb it without them seeing me, especially since it's night.

I shift into human form behind the trunk, climb it so swiftly that I make zero noise, and settle in the branches about six feet above the ground. From up here, I see Ruby, Penny, and Felicity eating what looks to be some sort of casserole.

Has Ruby given in and started eating meat yet?

I hope so.

I can't tell with my human eyes, so I shift my eyes into the eyes of my wolf. Partly shifting is an advanced skill, and one

we can't hold for extended periods of time, but it's useful in moments like this.

With my wolf vision, I see them as clearly as I would if I was with them in the room.

Ruby is so beautiful that she takes my breath away. There's something so sweet and innocent about her, but thoughtful and grounded at the same time. Her warmth pulls me into her orbit whenever I'm around her, and even now, I ache to knock on the door and check on her to see how she's been settling in.

She smiles at something Penny says, and seeing her like that makes me smile as well.

I shouldn't feel this way about someone I just met.

The only time I've ever heard about anyone feeling this sort of attraction to someone is when they're initially around their mate. That urge to touch them... to ignite the mate bond...

My wolf's excitement grows as he urges me to dig deeper into the feeling.

No, I shake the thought away.

Ruby is *not* my mate.

Autumn and I share the sort of deep trust that only forms when two people have spent years getting to know each other. She's my number one ally in life—someone who will stand by my side no matter what.

Autumn would never betray me, and I'll never betray her by giving in to whatever pull I feel toward Ruby.

Mate bonds don't form until first touch. If Ruby is my mate, all I have to do is make sure to never touch her.

Except I scrambled back at training and told the guys that I intended on having Ruby serve at my house as an omega.

I'll have to think up a reason to tell them about why I changed my mind. Because I can't let myself get within arm's length of that girl, let alone have her live in my house.

On top of that, despite what I told them, Autumn wouldn't be happy with Ruby staying with me.

I'll think of something.

Suddenly, Ruby turns her attention away from Penny and glances out the window.

I duck behind the trunk quickly enough that there's no chance she had time to see me, especially because it's dark and she's only using human vision. But I stay perfectly still just in case, holding my breath and making no sound.

Eventually, I peek around the tree, relieved that she's returned to answering Penny's questions about the human world.

I need to get out of here.

But there was a reason I came up here. I need check to see if Ruby's eating meat yet.

So I zero in on the plates on the table, easily making out the chunks of ground beef on Penny and Felicity's plates.

There's no meat on Ruby's plate. Just noodles, vegetables, and cheesy sauce.

She's eating a glorified mac and cheese.

Stupid girl. She's going to slowly starve her wolf if she keeps this up. Eventually she'll crack, but until then, weakening herself isn't going to do her any favors.

As it is, the smell of their food makes my stomach growl. It's been hours since I've eaten, on top of the calories burned by training. Not only do I need to get out of here to make sure they don't notice me, but I need food.

More than that—I'm fired up and need to hunt.

So I take a leaping jump out of the tree, shift into wolf form, and run into the woods, following the scent of a nearby deer that's about to become my dinner.

* * *

After releasing my stress with a good old-fashioned hunt, my belly is full and my excess energy is sated. I run back home in wolf form, only shifting back to human form when I reach the door.

My phone buzzes in my pocket as it receives the texts I missed while out. It's impossible to truly apply science to the laws of magic, but the consensus is that since phones are made mainly of metals derived from the earth, they're able to shift with us as easily as simple pieces of jewelry.

I get inside, grab a sports drink from the fridge, and check my phone.

There's a missed call from Autumn, followed by a text.

The guys told me you went on a run instead of coming out. Everything okay?

I curse, realizing I didn't tell Autumn I wasn't going to be at the bar, because I was so consumed with my conflicted feelings about Ruby. She tried being relaxed about it in her text, but I know Autumn. She's organized and a good communicator, like I normally am.

She isn't happy about this.

Sorry, I reply. Had a lot on my mind and needed to clear my head.

It's not a lie. But it's also not a good enough explanation, and I know it.

Her reply comes quickly.

Anything you want to talk about? I can come over if you want.

There's a lot I want to talk about. But I can't talk about it with her. I can't talk about it with *anyone*.

Autumn's always been the person I go to with anything. Whenever I need to get something off my chest, she listens patiently. She can somehow tell the difference between when I need to vent and when I need to brainstorm solutions. She's always been my rock, no matter what.

Ruby's arrival might as well have kicked that rock off a cliff and buried it deep in the ocean.

A part of me hates her for it. Because I can't talk to Autumn about Ruby, which means I have no one to go to about this, and it's lonely as all hell.

I look back at her text.

Is there anything I want to talk about?

Yes.

But I can't say that.

All good, I write instead. I'm just going to relax and go to bed.

The type bubbles start on her end. They continue for a while, and I can barely breathe as I watch them, bracing myself for anything.

Then they stop.

I hover my thumbs over the keyboard. I want to assure her that everything's okay, but how can I say that when I'm not sure it's true?

Luckily, the text bubbles start again, and she sends the message.

Okay :(

That can't be all she was typing before. Whatever she was about to say, she changed her mind and sent that instead.

My chest hollows with guilt.

I could tell her that I changed my mind and invite her over, but honestly, I'm not in the mood. And I don't want her to press for more information about what's bothering me, since I'm not ready to share it.

I can't imagine *ever* being ready to share it.

Somehow, I have to push my conflicted feelings aside and act like everything's normal tomorrow. Hopefully it won't be long until Autumn chalks this up to my having a bad day and forgets about it.

Sorry, I apologize again. I'll see you tomorrow. Sleep well.

You too, she says, but as I lay down in bed and start drifting off, those bright turquoise eyes are the last things I see before falling asleep.

Ruby



PENNY WATCHES A LOT OF TELEVISION—MAINLY teen dramas—and all through dinner, she wouldn't stop asking me about the human world. Answering her questions kept my mind off all the craziness from the past twenty-four hours, so I engaged myself in the conversation as best as possible.

We finish eating, and Penny's dad still isn't back from the bar. She and her mom don't talk about his absence—I have a feeling this is normal around here—so I don't bring it up, either.

“Do you want to shower and change?” Penny asks after we finish cleaning up.

The last time I showered was before Luna and I headed to the hotel bar, and given that I spent last night in the woods, I'm sure I've smelled better in my life.

Hopefully I'll get word about Luna soon. Penny and Felicity wouldn't let me use their phones—they said they couldn't go against Jax's orders—and I don't know their passcodes to try to steal their phones and use them myself.

I wish there was something I could do other than waiting for Jax to pass on whatever the witches tell him, but until that happens, I need to hang tight.

“Ruby?” Penny tries to catch my attention.

“Sorry,” I say. “I was thinking.”

“What about?”

“About my friend,” I say. “Luna. I'm worried about her.”

“Jax will let us know when he has news,” Felicity says what I already know. “In the meantime, I agree with Penny that you should take a shower.”

Wow—I *really* must smell.

“Sure,” I say, and Penny gets me set up with pajamas and towels, and I head to the bathroom to clean up.

They were right. The warm shower feels amazing. I shampoo my hair twice to get out all the grime, digging into my scalp extra hard, then move onto lathering the puff with lavender soap to clean my body.

I glance down to wash my stomach and spot a large smudge of mud on my hip.

Gross. I apparently got dirtier in my night in the woods than I realized.

But when I examine it closer, it’s obvious that it’s not mud.

It looks like a brown henna tattoo of the North Star. It’s about an inch long, with eight points coming out of the center.

I stare at it in shock, as if it’ll go away the more I focus.

Unsurprisingly, nothing changes.

I scrub it with the puff, but it doesn’t come off. So I use my nail and scratch at it instead, but all I do is leave the skin around it pink and irritated.

This isn’t possible.

I’d remember if I got a henna tattoo, and I’d *certainly* remember if I got a real tattoo.

Then again, my eyes are now brown instead of turquoise, and I shifted into a wolf last night. What’s one more weird thing to add on top of everything else?

I finish the shower quickly, then change into the pajamas Penny supplied. I don’t consider yoga pants and tight workout tops to be “pajamas,” but that’s what she wears, and I’m not in any position to be picky.

I knock on her door once I'm finished, and she invites me in, looking me up and down. "You okay?" she asks.

"Yeah," I say quickly. "Thanks for the clothes."

"No problem." She doesn't add anything more, and I can tell she knows I want to talk with her about something.

I almost show her the star mark on my hip. But I'm not supposed to tell anyone about my natural eye color, and my instinct tells me to keep the star a secret, too.

"Are wolves connected to the North Star?" I ask instead.

"No." Her brow creases in confusion. "Why?"

"No reason," I say, since asking anything more than that might cause suspicion. "Do you want to watch TV? I know you said you're a fan of Elementals, and I think there was a new episode last night."

"Yes!" she all but squeals. "Do you want popcorn?"

"We just ate..."

"I know." She rolls her eyes. "But buttery popcorn is a great dessert."

"I'm more of a chocolate girl," I say. "But sure. Popcorn sounds great."

She gets to making it, and I flip on the TV in the living room, which is set to the local news channel. Again, the faces of the two missing people flash across the screen, with the newscaster reminding people to go to the police if they have any information about their whereabouts.

Hopefully it's not my and Luna's faces up there next.

"Creepy, isn't it?" Penny asks as she joins me on the couch with a giant bowl of popcorn.

"Yeah," I say. "Do you guys not have any way of helping the police find them? Can you shift into wolves and try to track them down by scent?"

"Maybe," she says. "But we try not to get involved in human affairs. Our job is to keep the supernatural world under

control, and we let the humans handle their problems themselves.”

“But you could be helping them...”

“The witches make the rules—not us.” She picks up the remote, switches to the streaming channels, and selects *Elementals*. “Ready?”

“Yeah,” I say, but even though it’s a great episode, I can’t focus on it. My brain’s too busy thinking about all the craziness that’s happened in the past day.

And when we wrap up and go to bed, it’s Connor’s dark brown eyes that I see in my mind before falling asleep.

Ruby



I SPEND the entire next day watching television with Penny. Her dad went into town to watch a football game with his friends, so we have the television to ourselves.

It's unproductive.

I should be trying to learn more about the pack and the town. Or trying to learn how to shift, or trying again with earth magic. But I'm tired, and my brain feels numb and sluggish. It's like I'm glued to the couch, and it's easier to zone out than to get stuck in a loop of repetitive anxious thoughts about the fact that my life as I knew it doesn't exist anymore.

Someone rings the doorbell, and Penny looks at the front door, confused.

"Are you expecting someone?" I ask.

"No. At least, I don't think so," she says. "Maybe my mom is?"

But Felicity looks equally as confused as she hurries from the kitchen—where she was making dinner—to answer the door.

Connor stands in the entrance, and his eyes immediately go to me.

My breath catches in my chest, and I feel more trapped in his gaze than I've been to the couch all day. But I force myself to stand, not wanting him to see me as weak, although so much blood rushes from my head that it takes effort to not fall over.

“Connor.” Felicity all but lowers herself into a curtsy. “I assume you’ve come to check on Ruby?”

“I have.” He’s still looking at me instead of at Felicity, his eyes burning into my soul.

I have no idea what to say.

Luckily, Felicity continues. “Your timing is perfect—I’m just finishing up making dinner,” she says. “Do you want to join us?”

“Did you make enough?” he asks.

“It’s sloppy joes on the menu tonight, and there’s more than enough. Plus macaroni and cheese for Ruby,” she adds, glancing over at me in concern.

I give her a small smile, grateful to her for going out of the way for me.

“Sloppy joes are my favorite,” Connor says, and a few minutes later, we’re all gathered around the kitchen table as Felicity doles out our food.

The macaroni and cheese looks good—extra cheesy, just how I like it.

But the smell of the sloppy joes makes my mouth water.

Connor’s sitting across to me, his eyes boring into me as we go over the initial pleasantries.

“I have good news,” he says to me after Felicity sits down to join us.

“Yes?” I stop eating my food, waiting for him to continue.

“There’s an opening for a waitress position at Park Tavern,” he says. “You’ll start tomorrow afternoon.”

Park Tavern—the sports bar where Penny’s dad is watching the game with his friends right now.

“Thanks,” I say, although I’m so tired that I can’t imagine being on my feet all day.

Concern splashes over his face. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” I force a smile, hoping I look bright-eyed and awake. “I’m good.”

“She hasn’t gotten up from the couch all day,” Penny outs me, and I give her a look to tell her to stop, but she either doesn’t understand or doesn’t care. “I think it’s because she isn’t eating meat.”

Connor puts down his sandwich and studies me. “Is this true?”

“I’ve been tired,” I admit. “But I’ll be fine tomorrow after a good night’s rest.”

A lie. Because from the way my stomach growls at the mention of meat, and how a part of me wants to reach forward and snatch that sandwich from Connor’s plate, I have a feeling that Penny’s onto something.

I glance at Felicity, but she simply shrugs.

“You look exhausted. Sick,” she says. “I think they’re right. It’s why I made extra beef tonight.”

“I’m fine.” I shovel a forkful of mac and cheese into my mouth in protest, but it’s frustratingly unsatisfying.

“Do you feel sluggish? Hazy?” Connor asks. “Like you have severe brain fog?”

“I’m fine,” I repeat, although it doesn’t sound convincing, not even to me.

“You’re literally starving the wolf side of your body,” he says, apparently unwilling to drop this. “It won’t get better unless you eat meat.”

“When you put it that way, it sounds like I’m a vampire deprived of blood,” I say.

“It’s a good comparison,” he says, and he gets up, prepares another sloppy joe, and drops it onto my plate. “Eat.”

It’s a command—not a request.

My mouth waters again at the smell of meat, my stomach growls, and every cell in my body is screaming at me to pick up that sandwich and devour it.

Connor sits back down, his eyes locked on mine.

Felicity and Penny look back and forth between us, silently waiting.

I try to keep my breaths shallow to stop myself from smelling the meat, but it's no use. They're right. I know they are. I've never felt this sluggish in my life, and Connor's description of what I'm going through was right on the nose.

Eat it, my wolf says, and I realize I haven't heard from her all day. *We need it. We're no good to anyone when we're this weak.*

She's right, too. How am I supposed to get out of here if I barely have enough energy to stand?

I won't. I'll lay around on the couch and starve.

I refuse to dig my own grave.

So I pick up the sandwich, take a giant bite of it... and it's *the* most delicious thing I've ever eaten in my life. Energy floods my veins as it fills me up like no food ever has before, and soon, the entire thing is gone.

Felicity is already coming over with another, and I devour it as well.

Once finished, I feel more satiated than I have after any other meal in my life.

"Good?" Connor asks with a satisfied smirk.

"Yeah," I admit, and I pick at the mac and cheese, but it has zero appeal after that sloppy joe.

He continues eating his sandwich, and I can tell by the way he occasionally glances at me that he thinks he won.

Which, admittedly, he sort of did.

"Have you heard anything about Luna?" I ask, praying the answer is yes.

"I have," he says, and with that, all thought of my food is forgotten.

“Where is she? Is she okay? Can I talk to her?” The questions come out in a rush, and I watch him closely, as if it’ll encourage him to answer them faster.

“She’s okay.” He brings out his phone, taps the screen a few times, and places it on the center of the table. “See for yourself.”

I pick it up and see a photo of Luna walking through campus. She’s wearing all black, and she’s heading toward the library steps. Even though her face is angled away from the camera, I know it’s her.

I slide to the next photo, and there’s Luna sitting on a bench in one of the courtyards in a similar black outfit, reading a book.

I tap on the photo and see it’s dated from this morning. There are a few others, all of Luna around campus, with various time stamps. They end in the afternoon.

“What happened to her?” I ask, since it’s absurd that she simply flew back to campus and is acting like everything’s normal.

“Jax spoke to the witches after dropping you off here, and they headed to the hotel where the two of you were staying,” he says. “They used their magic to get into Luna’s room, and she was still sleeping when they found her. They said she looked like she’d had a rough night.”

“You expect me to believe that she headed back to the hotel without me, like it was no big deal?”

“She said she was drunk,” he says. “She didn’t remember getting back.”

I almost tell him that’s impossible. Luna doesn’t get blackout drunk. Then again, I’ve never seen her drink as much as she had during the party.

“What happened from there?” I ask, since I’m not going to stop asking questions now that I’m finally getting some answers.

“They used a spell to alter her memory. She now believes she came here to ski alone, and that you left the country a week ago to study abroad. The witches were able to get her to give them enough information about where to find your parents, and they now believe the story as well.”

Alarm rushes through me. “They spoke to my parents?”

“Relax,” he says. “Your parents are fine. The situation is handled.”

He shows me more photos, these ones of my parents, with time stamps about four hours after the photos of Luna. The photos are taken from outside a window of our house, and I’m relieved to see that they look okay.

I drop the phone back down on the center of the table. “How am I supposed to know these are real?” I ask.

“You’re just going to have to trust me,” he says. “Like my grandfather told you, you’re being treated as a member of this pack until we learn more about your heritage. We look out for our own, no matter what.”

I glance at Penny, and she nods in encouragement.

I don’t like this. Something about it feels off in a way I can’t explain.

But getting on the bad side of this pack won’t do me any favors. It might be best to just nod and agree until I figure out how to get out of here.

“Where do they think I’m studying?” I ask, since the more information I can get, the better.

“Perth, Australia. One of the farthest places away from Florida you can get.”

“And why do they think they haven’t heard from me since I left?”

“Time zone changes? Jet lag? The length of the trip?” He shrugs. “I don’t know. That’s the sort of thing the witches figure out. But like I said, they’re experts at dealing with supernatural relations with the human world, and they have this handled.”

It sounds sketchy to me.

“So, you just follow the witches’ rules without questions?” I ask.

“The witches and the wolves have a symbiotic relationship. Rules are what have kept the supernatural world in order for over a thousand years,” he says, his expression stone cold. “It’s our job as shifters to enforce them.”

He’s clearly not changing his mind, so I go back to picking at my mac and cheese.

The silence is insanely tense, but Penny breaks in, stopping it from getting even more awkward.

“What’s it like to train as a Guardian?” she asks Connor, her tone light in comparison to the previous conversation. “Have you killed any vampires yet?”

“Not yet,” he says with a small smile. “We don’t kill any vampires until we’ve passed our final test and are serving in the city streets.”

“Then how do you know if you can kill them or not?”

“Consider our first year in the city to be the *actual* final test,” he says. “Although I suppose that every vampire we face is a test.”

“It sounds exciting.” She frowns, her gaze lowering to her food. “I wish I could be a Guardian.”

“Penny,” Felicity warns.

“Sorry.” Penny shrugs, although she doesn’t sound sorry. “It’s the truth.”

Another awkward silence descends upon the table, but this time, no one tries to break it. Instead, we focus on finishing our food as quickly as possible.

Eventually, everyone’s done, and Felicity starts collecting our plates.

“I need to speak with you,” Connor suddenly says to me. “Alone.”

My stomach flips at the thought of being alone with him.
“Why?”

“Because there’s something I want to tell you privately.”

I feel like an idiot after he says it. Of course he wouldn’t ask to speak to me alone otherwise.

“You can go to my room,” Penny pipes in, and when she looks back and forth between me and Connor, it’s obvious from her expression that she thinks something’s going on between us.

Logically, I know there isn’t. There can’t be. He has Autumn, and Penny’s filled me in on enough that I know royals—especially alphas—don’t date omegas. The only exception is if they mate, which happens rarely, and when it does happen, it’s not viewed upon highly at all.

“Ruby, do you remember where Penny’s room is?” Felicity asks, snapping me back into focus.

My cheeks blush, since the house is small enough that I’d have to be an idiot to not remember where it is. “I do,” I say, and I push out my chair and walk down the hall, trying not to think too hard about the sound of Connor’s footsteps behind me, and about how this will be the first time the two of us will ever be alone together.

Nothing’s going to happen, I tell myself, and I open the door to Penny’s room and step aside, letting Connor go first.

He hurries through, staying as far as possible from me and barely looking at me. It’s like he thinks I have the plague, but that doesn’t stop tingles from rushing down my spine as he passes.

And even though every logical thought says he’ll never see me as anything other than an omega, from the way he sucks in a sharp breath when there are only inches between us, I can almost swear he feels the electricity there, too.

Connor



THAT WAS CLOSE, I think after making my way through the door.

I should have insisted she enter first. Then there would have been no chance of accidentally coming into contact.

I can't risk slipping up like that again.

Technically, I shouldn't still be here. I already did what I came here to do—passing along my grandfather's message about her parents and Luna. There's no need to stay around for any longer.

But I saw the way her pale face filled with color after eating that meat, how the hollows under her eyes disappeared, and how much more focused she seemed than earlier.

What if she isn't an omega? What if she couldn't harness earth magic because she was nutritionally deficient? What if her body was using up all its energy to keep her alive, so she hadn't been able to expend an ounce more to connect with the earth?

If I left without answers, I wouldn't stop wondering. And I hate the thought of leaving her with omegas if she has more potential than that. Especially because if she isn't truly an omega, Brandon and the other guys will leave her alone.

I need to know the truth for my own sanity and peace of mind.

So, here I am, alone with her in Penny's dingy room.

It's dangerous territory. But I feel a thrill of excitement about it at the same time.

She shuts the door and crosses her arms, remaining near it as if she might need to make a quick exit. The tight yoga pants and tank top combination she's wearing accentuates all her curves, and as I drink her in, my mind wanders to my dream last night.

The dream where she wasn't wearing any clothing at all, where I felt her warm skin against mine, and she melted into my arms as I claimed her as my own.

The memory makes my body pulse with animalistic need.

Touch her, my wolf's voice echoes in my mind. Take her as ours.

My blood pumps faster, and it takes every effort to stay where I am.

She's not ours, I tell my wolf. Autumn's ours.

How can we know if we don't try?

My eyes are locked on Ruby's, and from the way her breathing slows and her cheeks flush, I have a feeling she's fighting her desire as much as I am mine.

Just a touch, my wolf continues to goad me. So we can know for sure.

No.

I need to stop this.

Now.

I don't want to know, I think, and I push my wolf down, step back, and rein in my desire. Even though I've never been as attracted to anyone as I am to Ruby, I don't know her. These feelings aren't real. They're lust—not love.

I'm stronger than such basic, primal instincts. I will *not* let wolf control me.

My loyalty to Autumn is too strong for me to hurt her like that.

At the thought of my girlfriend, I snap myself back into focus.

“Why are we here?” Ruby asks me, and she’s breathing normally again, apparently yanked out of the spell as well.

“I wanted to talk to you,” I say.

“I gathered that.”

She says nothing more, waiting for me to explain. I have no idea how she’s remaining so calm. I’ve never known of a shifter who grew up without knowing what they are. Everything she’s been through these past two days is basically unheard of.

Her bravery and strength in such a difficult, likely scary situation is highly admirable.

“I want to test your magic again,” I tell her.

She raises an eyebrow in an unfairly tempting way. “I thought I didn’t have any magic.”

There’s a hint of challenge in her tone, and even though I haven’t proven anything yet, I have a strong feeling that I was right to do this.

I glance around the room, since I was so focused on Ruby that I hadn’t paid attention to my surroundings. It’s a tiny room, with a twin bed, one nightstand, and a small bookshelf. The window is small, only allowing a bit of natural light inside, but a bunch of plants are lined up on the windowsill anyway.

Even omegas have a natural draw toward greenery, and I’m happy to see that Penny isn’t an exception.

I pluck a barely budding rose from one of the pots, examine it, and turn to face Ruby again. “The meat made you stronger,” I say. “Visibly so. Now that you’ve fed your wolf, I want to see if your inability to connect with earth magic yesterday was a mistake.”

I walk over to hand her the rose, but stop myself when I’m halfway there.

If I hand it to her, I'll risk touching her.

So I lay the rose on the gray, carpeted floor between us instead.

"Thank you?" She says it as a question, glancing at the budding rose and back at me.

"Pick it up," I tell her. "Make it bloom."

She gives the flower a wary look. "Okay," she finally says, and then she kneels to pick it up.

The little tank top she's wearing doesn't leave much to the imagination, especially while I'm staring down at her from above. My breath hitches, desire coursing through me, and I force myself to look at the wall until Ruby is safely standing again.

"Are you okay?" she asks, and she has the audacity to sound *amused*.

"I'm fine." I don't feel a need to add any more than that. Instead, I stare at the rose, waiting for her to start.

The sooner she proves she isn't an omega, the sooner I can get out of here and go on a run to shed all this excess energy that builds inside me whenever I'm in Ruby's presence.

She brushes the stem of the rose with her fingers, studying it. "How am I supposed to do this?" she asks.

"It's hard to explain how to use magic. It's more of an instinct than anything else," I tell her. "But you should connect with the flower's energy. Imagine it opening up so the petals inside it can be free to grow and bloom."

"All right." She studies the rose bud again, although she keeps glancing up at me, checking to see if she's doing it right.

Am I distracting her?

Is it wrong of me to like it if I am?

"Close your eyes and picture it blooming in your mind," I say.

“Here goes nothing,” she says, and she takes a deep breath and closes her eyes.

The skin between her brows furrows as she concentrates, and I find myself studying her face. It’s heart-shaped, and her features are delicate, making her look almost more fae than shifter. Her entire frame is delicate, but there’s also a strength to her that makes her seem unbreakable. And when a ray of light shines through the window, warming her skin, there’s a glow to her that’s downright radiant.

Energy buzzes between us, and the pull I feel to her is unreal. I want to take her hands in mine and let my magic flow into her, so she can get a taste of what it feels like and recreate it herself.

But I can’t do that. I can’t touch her.

I *won’t* touch her.

Suddenly, the rosebud flickers.

It slowly starts to open, and I lean forward in excitement. “There you go,” I say. “Keep going. Just like that.”

She opens her eyes, her gaze meeting mine, and the rose returns to its original state.

She looks down at the bud in confusion. “What happened?” she asks.

“It was starting to bloom,” I say, but then I think back to *exactly* what happened.

The energy I felt between us. My urge to reach out and help her.

Did she actually do anything? Or did I unconsciously project my magic onto the rose because of how badly I wanted this to work?

“Did you feel anything before you opened your eyes?” I ask.

“I was picturing the rose blooming, like you told me to,” she says. “I felt a tingle in my head.”

“Anything in your palms?”

“No.” She flips her hand over and studies her palm. “Was I supposed to?”

Her hand is so small.

I want to reach for it and find out if her skin is as soft as it looks.

But I need to control myself. I’m a person who follows logic—not emotions. And even if Ruby isn’t an omega, what should it matter to me? She technically stopped being my problem the moment my grandfather dropped her off with the Lawrence’s. Once he figures out what pack she belongs to, she’ll be out of here, and this pull I feel toward her will fade into oblivion.

Hopefully he gets answers sooner rather than later.

Until then, I need to stay as far away from her as possible, to escape this driving force inside me that’s begging me to take her in my arms and claim her as mine.

Ruby



I'M WAITING for Connor to answer my question, but he's staring at my hand, his mind gone to another place.

"Conner?" I say, and he snaps back into focus. "Was I supposed to feel something in my hand?"

"You were." His words are clipped and harsh, as if he's angry at me for failing to make the rose bloom. "My grandfather's assessment of you yesterday was correct. You're an omega."

His disappointment in me is clear, and I hate the way he's looking at me. As if I'm worthless. Lower than dirt.

I place the rose at my side and leave it there, not wanting to see the evidence of my failure for a second longer.

But this isn't right. He's wrong about me. I'm not an omega. I feel it with every inch of my soul.

"I have to go," he says, making his way slowly to the door.

He can't leave.

If he leaves now, who knows when I'll be able to talk to him again? Especially because the entire time we've been alone in this room together, there's been a burning question I've been dying to ask him.

I need answers, and as the grandson of the alpha, he might know enough to give them to me.

"Wait," I say, relieved when he stops and looks at me to go on.

It's now or never.

"I'm not an omega," I say quickly, continuing before I can second-guess myself. "In the shower last night, I found this." I pull the waistband of my yoga pants down to reveal the North Star on my hip.

He studies it in silence for a few seconds.

His expression is unreadable. I have no idea what he's thinking, but instead of asking, I wait for him to speak first.

"You have a tattoo," he finally says.

"I don't," I say. "I have no idea what this is, but it wasn't here before I shifted."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes." I all but roll my eyes. "I'm sure."

He reaches out his hand, fingers outstretched, but quickly pulls back. "I've never seen anything like that in my life," he says.

Disappointment floods me, but I'm not going to give up that quickly. "Have you ever heard of a shifter being marked?" I ask.

"No." He studies me a bit longer, his eyes raking over every inch of my body, and his gaze hardens.

Any hint of friendliness is gone.

All that's left is suspicion.

He backs away, as if I'm an enemy, and for the first time in his presence, I feel cold, raw fear.

I release my waistband, covering the mark again. "You know what it means," I say steadily, since he wouldn't act this way if he didn't.

"I don't."

"Then why are you looking at me like that?"

He relaxes slightly, but it's too late to hide his true reaction. "How am I looking at you?" he asks, distant and cold.

“Like I’ve done something wrong.”

He inhales, and his eyes soften again. “You haven’t done anything wrong,” he says smoothly—too smoothly. “You were right to show me this. I’ll help you figure out what it means. Just hold tight, okay?”

The mark buzzes so much that it stings.

It’s warning me. I’m not sure what it’s warning me about, but his suspicion is setting me on edge, and my gut instinct says I need to get out of here.

The shifters stick to the laws and rules the witches put on them. From my conversations with Penny and Felicity, I know that if there’s one thing the shifters hate more than anything else, it’s the unknown.

Showing this to him was a mistake.

I feel like an idiot for trusting him.

“Sure,” I somehow manage to say. “Thanks.”

“Anytime.” He smiles grimly, and my heart pounds with anxiety. “Goodnight, Ruby.”

“Night,” I say, and he hurries out of the room, leaving me alone and confused.

I don’t believe that he doesn’t know what the mark means. He wouldn’t have looked at me like that if he didn’t.

And whatever it means, it isn’t anything good.

He’s undoubtedly going to tell someone about it. Probably Jax. And if Jax was unfriendly to me when he decided I was an omega, what’s going to happen when he finds out about this?

More importantly, how stupid was I to trust Connor? I’ve known him for less than two days. It’s like he’s cast a spell on me, making me open up when I should be on guard, and I don’t like it one bit.

I’m standing there in a daze when Penny bursts into the room.

“What happened?” she asks.

“I’m not sure.” I stare at the door where Connor just left, wishing I could go back in time and stop myself from showing him the mark.

She walks over and kneels to pick up the budding rose. “What were you doing with this?”

“Oh. That,” I say, relieved to be reminded about why Connor brought me in here before things went south. “Connor wanted me to try using earth magic again.”

“And...”

“I couldn’t.” I shrug. “Looks like I’m an omega. Like you.” I try to smile, but I’m sure it looks forced.

“I’d say that being an omega isn’t bad, but...” she trails off, since the rest of the sentence goes without saying.

“Have you ever wanted to get out of here?” I ask. “To leave and never come back?”

“I don’t know.” She shifts uncomfortably. “Sure, I’ve thought about it. But where would I go? I’d never fit into the human world, and no pack would take in a runaway omega. I belong to the Pine Valley pack, and I will for the rest of my life.”

“You talk about it like you’re their property,” I say.

“As an omega, I basically am.”

After she says it, the reality of my situation sets in. If I stay in Pine Valley, I’ll be trapped here, like Penny and the other omegas. Or worse, if Connor’s reaction to my star mark is anything to go by.

I need to get out.

I glance at the window, set in my decision, then look back at Penny. “It’s been a long day,” I tell her, yawning for emphasis. “I’m exhausted. Will you let me sleep in here tonight? Alone?”

The corners of her lips turn up into a small smile. “Are you saying you want me to sleep on the couch?”

“Would you mind?” I hold my breath, praying she’ll say yes.

She glances at the rosebud in her hand, and I worry I’ve overstepped my welcome.

“Sure,” she finally says. “Just promise me one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“Try not to kill any more of my plants.”

Ruby



PENNY'S DAD comes back around nine, and everyone goes to bed at ten, since Penny has school in the morning and her parents have work.

I should be going to bed as well, to make sure I'm well-rested for my first day working at Park Tavern. But there won't be a first day at Park Tavern for me, since I'll hopefully be well on my way back to Florida tomorrow.

I wait until after midnight, when I'm sure everyone is asleep. Then I grab a fleece from Penny's closet and a pair of sneakers. The shoes are a size too big, but I tie them tightly enough that it should hopefully be okay.

I'm as careful as possible as I remove the plants and flowers from the windowsill, placing them gently on the floor next to me.

My body is a bundle of nerves as I stare at the window. I can't mess this part up. If they hear me, it's game over. So I steady my hands, unlock the window, and slowly push it up to open it.

It creaks, and I pause and hold my breath, praying they didn't hear. Penny's parents sleep with the television on, but who knows what she can hear from the living room?

It'll be okay, I think, trying to talk myself down.

If she comes in, I'll tell her I needed to let in some fresh air. She'll probably ask why her plants are on the floor, but I could say I was being extra careful to not knock them over.

A minute passes, then another, and another.

No one comes in, and I give a silent thanks to whatever force in the universe is looking out for me.

Pretty sure I'm in the clear, I open the window the rest of the way, slowly enough to not make any more noise. The crisp winter air feels fresh, like it's welcoming my escape. And while it's not the biggest window in the world, I'm small enough that I'm able to scoot through it without making any noise.

I land on the ground, crouching next to the house so no one can see me through the windows, and my heart pounds with exhilaration.

I did it.

I'm out.

But I still have a long way to go.

Even though it's likely a long shot, I close my eyes and call on my wolf.

If we're going to figure out to shift on command, now would be a great time to make it happen, I think.

As strange as it is, I feel her *bristle* inside me, as if her fur's standing on end.

No.

I don't hear her voice, but her disagreement reins me in, stopping me from shifting.

Come on. I grind my teeth together and try to push out of my skin to recreate the feeling I had when I shifted two nights ago.

She pulls me back again. And while she doesn't say anything, a picture floats through my mind.

Connor. Specifically, how concerned he was when he realized how tired I was feeling, and how he looked out for me by insisting I eat meat.

He fed my wolf, and she loves him for it.

She doesn't want to leave him. To be honest, a part of me doesn't want to leave him, either.

But the way he looked at me when he saw the star mark burns in my mind—like I'm his enemy—and I know I need to get out of here.

Luckily, my wolf doesn't seem to have any physical control over me when I'm in human form. And while it would be nice to have her help, I can do this on my own.

Not wanting to waste any more time, I sprint across the backyard and into the trees. The moon is full enough that it casts light into the forest, and since the tree branches are bare of leaves, I have enough light to see as I hurry deeper into the woods.

I was hoping to shift and use my wolf's natural sense of direction to find my way back to town, but since that's not happening, it's time for the backup plan.

The main town is at the bottom of the mountain, which means I need to follow the mountain down. Once there, I can go to the hotel or to the police station, get in touch with my parents, and have them buy me a plane ticket home.

It's far from a perfect plan. If anyone realizes I'm gone, wolves have a strong sense of smell and will likely be able to track me down. But it's the best I've got.

Staying in the same place isn't helping anything, and overanalyzing my plan isn't doing my nerves any favors. So I look both ways and run down the mountain as fast as I can go, which ends up being decently fast, given that I've never been much of an athlete. I don't even find myself running out of breath.

It *has* to be thanks to my newfound wolf powers.

Eventually, I hit a stream. The water's flowing down the mountain, so I can likely follow it into town.

Then an idea strikes me.

I've seen enough movies and television shows to know that when someone's being tracked by animals, the animals

lose their scent if they get into water and run with the water.

There are, however, a few issues with the idea. Firstly, I won't be able to trek through the water for long, since it's likely freezing. Secondly, if I'm followed into the water, they'll probably be able to smell where I left the water and pick up my trail from there.

What if I do something unexpected and run upstream instead of downstream? Then, once I'm a decent way up the stream, I can resume my journey on land and throw off anyone who might be tracking my path.

As far as plans go, especially ones created on a whim, it doesn't feel terrible.

So I step into the water and suck in a sharp breath at how *freezing* it is. It's like pins poking my skin, but after about a minute of trudging upstream, the pain numbs and I can't feel my feet and shins anymore.

If I keep this up for too long, I might get hypothermic.

I'll give it ten minutes. Maybe fifteen, depending on how I feel.

Then I'll continue down to town, get in touch with my parents, and finally go home.

Connor



I RUN in my wolf form until after midnight, happy to release all thoughts of Ruby and the mysterious mark she showed me at the Lawrence's house.

My wolf doesn't want to turn Ruby in. He doesn't want to resist our pull toward her.

But my wolf is wrong. He's affected by whatever dark magic Ruby is casting on us, just like I am.

Autumn is going to be our mate.

The sooner we figure out what Ruby truly is, the better.

Eventually, I end up at my grandfather's house and shift back into human form. His lights are off, but it doesn't matter. As alpha, he's responsible for this pack and what happens in our territory, no matter what time it is.

Turning Ruby in tears at my heart, but I push the feeling down. I only feel this way because of whatever she's doing to me. Turning her in is the right thing. Not just for me, but for Autumn, and for the pack.

They're my priority. Not Ruby.

And so, set in my decision, I march up to my grandfather's doorstep and ring the bell.

He answers less than a minute later. Even though he's in his pajamas, he's alert and ready to go, as an alpha always should be.

I aspire to be just like him someday.

“Connor.” He opens the door wider and looked me up and down. “Come in.”

I step into his large living room—even though my grandfather lives alone, he has the biggest house in town—and start pacing. My wolf continues to protest what I’m about to do, and moving around helps me control him.

“Something’s bothering you,” my grandfather observes, as calmly as ever.

He doesn’t say anything more. He simply leaves space for me to speak.

I force myself to stay still, take a deep breath to calm myself, and face my grandfather. “I visited Ruby and told her what you asked me to,” I say. “We spoke privately, and she showed me a mark on her hip that she got after her shift, in the shape of a star.”

I wait for a hint of recognition on his face.

There’s nothing.

“Do you know what it means?” I ask.

“I’ve never heard of such a thing happening to any of our kind,” he finally says.

“I wonder if she isn’t our kind,” I propose what I’ve been thinking since leaving on my run. “There’s something different about her. Something...”

I want to say *magnetic*, but I don’t want to share the draw I feel toward Ruby with anyone. Not even my grandfather.

“I can’t explain it,” I say instead. “But I don’t think she’s what she appears to be.”

My heart twists at how I’m betraying her.

But I’m doing this for my pack. My loyalty is to my pack.

Ruby isn’t one of us.

“I need to see it,” my grandfather decides, swiftly and surely. “We’ll go there now.”

“It’s past midnight...” I trail, not liking the thought of barging in on them like that.

“I’m the alpha of this pack.” His eyes narrow, warning me not to speak against him. “If I want to go there now, then the Lawrence’s will wake up and let me see her now.”

“Fine,” I say, and I hold his gaze to make it clear that what I’m going to say next is a statement and not a question. “But I’m going with you.”

* * *

We take his car to the Lawrence’s, since it can get there faster than we can while running as wolves. Minus the flickering of a television in one of the bedrooms, all the lights inside their house are out.

“What are you going to do to her?” I ask, keeping my voice low.

“It’ll depend on what she says when we speak with her.”

“That’s fair,” I say, and we get out of the car, and he slams the door so loudly that an owl hoots nearby in response.

He rings the doorbell, and Penny answers a few seconds later. Her hair is tangled, and her eyes are half awake. But she snaps to it when she sees my grandfather, her mouth forming into an O of surprise.

“Jax,” she says. “What are you doing here?”

Her parents hurry over, and they look equally surprised by my grandfather’s late-night call.

“Let me guess—it’s about Ruby,” Garrett says, continuing before my grandfather can reply. “I knew that girl was only going to us bring trouble.”

“I need to see her.” My grandfather marches inside before they can invite him in. “Where is she?”

“She’s in my room,” Penny says quickly, and she leads the way to the room where I spoke with Ruby privately a few

hours earlier.

She opens the door, and cold air rushes out of it. It smells like trees, and the window is open, the plants on the sill set down on the floor.

Ruby's nowhere to be found.

Stupid girl.

People run when they're guilty. She's only making things worse for herself when we inevitably drag her back from wherever she's run off to.

"She left." My grandfather turns his angry gaze to me. "What did you say to her?"

"Nothing," I snap, although that's not actually true. "I said I'd help her figure out what the mark means, and that she should hang tight until I do."

"Then she's clearly incapable of listening to her superiors," he growls. "But we'll find her. She couldn't have gotten far."

"On it," I say, and the window's too small for me to fit through, so I run out the front door, shift into wolf form, and follow Ruby's deliciously sweet scent into the forest.

I need to get to her first.

Because I don't know what my grandfather will do to her if he catches her before I do, and I have zero intention of finding out.

Ruby



I CAN ONLY RUN in the stream for about ten minutes before the cold seeps into my bones and slows me down.

Hopefully it'll be enough that if anyone's tracking me, they'll lose my trail. So I step out of the water and run down the mountain again, relieved when I spot lights from the town poking through the trees in the distance.

I'm almost there.

I'll have a lot more to worry about once I'm back home, but for now, I need to get out of the Pine Valley pack's territory. If I let my mind wander beyond that, I'll crack from the pressure of it all.

I just have to take it one step at a time.

I hurry down the mountain, getting so close to the town that I can all but taste freedom.

Then I slam into a wall, my shoulder luckily stopping me from getting whammed in the face. The impact pushes me back, and I trip over my feet and land on my butt on the snow-packed ground.

When I look back up, there's nothing there. No wall—nothing.

Once the throbbing in my shoulder calms down, I reach forward. My fingers hit some sort of invisible wall, and when I push on it, it doesn't budge.

The Lawrence's mentioned a magical barrier around the main town to keep out the vampires. I'd think this is it, but I

haven't reached the main town yet.

If this is a barrier, then it must be a second one inside the main barrier, possibly to protect wolf territory.

To keep people out... and to apparently keep them in.

Panic clings to my lungs, tightening until I can barely breathe. I'm trapped in here. There's no way out.

Maybe.

Because I'm assuming that this thing wraps around the entire pack territory.

There's only one way to find out if I'm right. I have to follow it and search for a break.

So I get up and brush the snow off my legs, realizing that along with my sneakers and the bottoms of my thin yoga pants being soaked from the stream, the rest of my pants are now damp as well.

If I hadn't survived the night sleeping in the snow, I'd think I was risking freezing to death. But being a wolf shifter has its advantages, like tolerating cold weather better than humans, so I keep my hand on the invisible barrier and walk alongside it.

I don't get far before something snaps in the trees off to the side.

Crap.

Someone's there.

The trees are thick, so I have no idea how I know that. But I *feel* their presence behind me, and I know it's a person and not an animal.

But there are a lot of trees here. Maybe I can hide until they pass, which will be better than making noise and alerting them to my presence.

So I lean against one of the trees—the trunk is wider than I am—and go as quiet as possible.

Don't see me, don't see me, don't see me, I repeat in my mind, praying to whatever gods are out there that they'll help keep me safe.

I don't move. I barely even breathe. I just focus on blending with the woods and becoming invisible.

A beautiful black wolf emerges from the trees.

Connor.

After seeing him shift at his house, I'd recognize him anywhere.

He sniffs in my general direction, but doesn't seem to see me.

It's too late to move from my hiding spot. It would only draw attention. I need to stay hidden and hope he moves on quickly.

Then there's the more important question—what's he hunting for? I want to think it's something as simple as a late-night snack, but I've been out here for a while. Did he somehow realize I sneaked out, and is searching for me?

He turns his head and looks straight at me, although his brown eyes that gleam in the moonlight seem unfocused. He sniffs a few times and looks around the area, but somehow doesn't seem to see me.

My heart's pounding a million miles a minute, so loudly that he must hear it.

Why's he pretending not to see me? Because he *must* be pretending. There's no way he could miss me from this distance.

Maybe there's an entire search party out here, and someone else is watching him.

Does he want me to escape? Is he going to return to the search party and lie to them, telling them he didn't see me?

I'd think so, but he gives no hint that I should play along.

I don't know how, but he truly doesn't see me.

It's impossible. But a lot of impossible things have happened to me recently. So, not wanting to test my luck, I remain still, focusing on going unnoticed and unseen.

Suddenly, Connor's wolf sprints toward me in a flash, shifts into his human form, and he body slams me down to the ground so hard that he knocks the wind out of me.

I gasp, trying to get air back into my lungs, and try to roll out from under him. But he grabs my wrists, pinning me to the ground with so much strength that I can't move.

That's not the only reason I can't move.

Because the skin on my wrists that his fingers are wrapped around buzzes with so much energy that it feels like our bodies are being fused together. It's like the matter that makes him up is melding with mine, and when his eyes glow yellow, I suddenly know without a doubt that this beautiful man above me will forever be the center of my world.

Cornor



ELECTRICITY CRACKLES THROUGH MY BODY, and Ruby glows like an angel below me, her silky brown hair splayed around her head like a halo as she gazes up at me with amazement and desire.

Her eyes glow yellow, and smokey magic travels between our eyes, linking our souls. Our hearts beat in tandem, and in that moment, there's no one else in the world that matters but *her*.

My wolf howls in excitement inside me at the feeling of being complete.

There's no greater joy for a shifter than finding our other half. It doesn't happen to all of us. This is the moment my wolf and I have wanted for our entire lives, and it feels better than I ever could have imagined.

The pull to Ruby is magnetic, and I lower myself down to her, ready to finally feel her soft lips on mine. My body pulses with desire, and I need to claim this beautiful woman, right here and right now, and lose myself in her for days.

From the awestruck way she's looking up at me, I know she'd let me if I tried.

Good. She should let me do anything I want to her. Because she belongs to me.

My mate.

The thought feels warm and right, and as her soft breath mingles with mine, she's so tantalizing... so *tempting*.

No.

An image of Autumn flashes through my mind, and I snap myself into focus and force myself to pull back.

This can't be happening.

It's everything I wanted to avoid.

It's why I was extra careful to keep Ruby at arm's length and never touch her. I was doing so well. But one slip-up a moment ago, and all that effort was for nothing.

I moan in frustration. Because my mate is underneath me, our faces inches away from each other's... and I can't let myself kiss her.

Why is the universe doing this to me?

It's the devil's work. It must be. Why else does Ruby have that mark on her hip, and how else could she have done whatever she just did?

Anger overruns my desire, and I happily let it.

"How did you do that?" I growl, satisfied when her eyes widen in surprise at the sudden shift of my energy.

"How did I do what?"

I push her wrists into the snow-covered ground—hard. "You know what I'm talking about."

"I truly don't," she says, begging me to believe her. "All I know is that your eyes glowed, and then there was that mist between us, and my skin's on fire where you're touching me." She swallows, then gets herself together enough to continue. "I don't know what's happening, but I think you do, and I want you to tell me."

My heart softens at how frail and innocent she sounds, yet fiery at the same time. Every bone in my body urges me to believe her. To help her.

But I don't. Because what she just did... no shifter has that type of magic. Not ever in the history of our kind.

“I’m not talking about that,” I say. “I’m talking about how you were invisible.”

The words sound crazy, but I can’t deny what I saw.

Well, what I *didn’t* see.

Realization shines in her eyes.

She knew.

Obviously she knew. She was the one who did it.

But she’s still staring up at me like a deer in the headlights, like she’s worried I’ll break her if she so much as tries to move.

“Is that why you didn’t see me?” she asks, her voice barely louder than a whisper.

Is she scared?

I want to loosen my grip around her wrists, take her in my arms, and figure this out together. She needs me. I hear it in her voice and see it in her eyes. There’s a reason why she shifted for the first time on my land, and why she came to my door for help.

It’s because she’s mine, and she knows it.

Ours, my wolf’s voice echoes in my mind.

But still... she’s not one of us. And I can’t let myself forget it.

“You expect me to believe you don’t know what you did?” I ask.

“I didn’t know,” she insists. “I swear it. I don’t even believe it myself...”

“You’re lying,” I say, although I know in my heart that she isn’t. Because a lie that big is something I’d smell, like rusted metal in the back of my throat.

Still, I don’t loosen my hands around her wrists. I can’t risk her running. I could easily catch up to her, but she belongs to me, and she’s not going anywhere until I have answers.

“I didn’t do anything,” she repeats, firmer than before. “Besides, if I was invisible, how did you see me well enough to pounce on me?”

“I didn’t see you. I smelled you.” I inhale slowly, since her scent—like roses on a spring day—is so unmistakably *hers*. “And you forgot to hide your shadow.”

“What do you mean?” she asks, even though I think it’s pretty damn obvious what I mean.

I also know she isn’t asking because she’s confused. She’s asking because she wants me to further explain.

How I know these things, I don’t know.

Except that’s a lie.

I’m in tune with her feelings because of the bond.

The bond that must be some sort of cruel mistake.

“You hid yourself,” I say slowly. “You blended into the trees like a perfect camouflage. But the moon’s almost full, the tree branches are bare, and my sight in wolf form is impeccable. Your shadow was there on the snow in front of you, plain as day.”

“Okay.” She takes a deep breath, gathering her thoughts. “You’re saying I was invisible. I guess I can maybe believe it, because you really didn’t seem like you saw me. But how was I able to do it?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “But if you’re going to go all superhero on me, you really should have done it *right*.”

She laughs at that, and I can’t help but smile, too.

Then the pieces click together, and I can’t believe I didn’t realize it sooner.

This isn’t the first time she’s done something like this.

“When I tackled you, you flickered back into existence,” I say, unable to believe what’s about to come out of my mouth. “Just like when you created the illusion of the rose opening up... and the illusion of yourself standing by my side in the kitchen instead of Autumn.”

Ruby



CONNOR IS HOLDING ME DOWN, pinning my wrists to the ground, with no hint of letting go.

And, while I never thought I'd be into this sort of thing, it's hot as hell. Especially the way his dark eyes feel like they're cutting into my soul.

"You think I'm making you see things?" I ask, caught majorly off-guard by his accusation.

"Or *not* see things," he mutters.

"With the whole invisibility thing."

"Yes. That." He studies me closer, like I'm a mystery for him to figure out. "The question is—are you only making *me* see things, or can you do it to other people as well?"

He still seems to think I know more about this than he does.

Well, he's wrong. And somehow, I need to make him see it.

"I wouldn't know, since I didn't realize I was doing anything at all until you pointed it out right now," I say.

I prepare myself for him to accuse me of lying again, but he doesn't.

"I'm telling you the truth," I add, praying he'll believe me.

"I know." He doesn't sound happy about it, but at least it's a step forward.

Feeling him relax a bit, I try to wiggle free. But he's strong, and he stops me before I can.

"Ruby." The intense way he says my name sends shivers down my spine. "Your mark and your magic are unheard of. I'm going to bring you back to my grandfather's, because I have no other choice right now, and I need you to go along with everything he wants. Fighting him will only make this more difficult. Do you understand?"

"You told him about the mark." My chest pangs with betrayal, even though I expected him to do as much. It's why I ran in the first place.

It's just that now, after whatever happened to us when we touched, the betrayal stings worse than I imagined.

"It was my duty as a member of the pack." He lowers himself closer to me, as if it will help me better understand, but all it does is send waves of desire through my body. "I wouldn't turn on my pack just because a pretty little omega wants me to keep her secret."

Ouch.

"I'm not an omega," I say swiftly, the words feeling *right* after I speak them. "I have magic. Maybe not earth magic, but it's still magic. Which, according to everything I've learned so far, means I'm not an omega."

"Hm." He pauses, considering it. "You might be right."

"I *am* right."

There are only a few inches between our faces, and his breaths are slow and calculated, as if he's fighting every instinct to stop himself from getting closer.

I know the feeling, because I'm experiencing the same thing.

I've never had a boyfriend. At least not anything serious. No guy has ever caught my interest, and I always thought I might end up being an old cat lady—minus the fact that I don't like cats.

No one has ever set my insides on fire like Connor's doing right now.

"What did you do to me?" I barely speak louder than a whisper, afraid that anything sudden might push him away.

His eyes harden, but he doesn't move. "I don't know what you're talking about," he says stiffly.

"When you touched me, it was like an electric shock. Your eyes turned yellow," I say. "There was some sort of smoke or magical haze that *connected* us together."

He glares down at me, silent. But I don't say anything more, leaving space for him to answer my question.

"I needed to stop you from getting away," he finally says.

"So you used magic to hold me down?"

"I did."

I don't know why, but there's something off about his answer. It doesn't feel right. However, I'm not sure accusing him of lying is going to get me far right now.

"Whatever you did wasn't earth magic," I say steadily.

"It wasn't," he agrees, his eyes glinting with warning. "Which is why you can't tell anyone about it."

"So you're asking me to tell no one about your magic, even though you're going to tell your grandfather about mine?"

It hardly sounds fair to me.

"My grandfather is going to figure out your secret one way or the other," he says. "But as long as you keep what I did to you to yourself, I'll keep you safe in return."

"Why should I believe you?"

"Because in case you didn't notice, I'm all you've got right now."

Tension crackles between us, and I know he has me cornered.

“Great.” I huff. “You’re all I’ve got, and you’re threatening me and pinning me to the ground.”

He says nothing. Instead, his grip around my wrists tightens, his pupils dilate with desire, and he gets so close that I swear he’s about to kiss me.

I’m lightheaded, and his heart is pounding so hard that I can feel it.

Mine’s beating at the same rate. And despite the voice in the back of my mind reminding me that he has a girlfriend, I need his kiss more than anything in the world.

For a moment, I think he’s going to give me what I need.

But instead of kissing me, he growls and pushes himself off me.

The sting of rejection floods my veins, and coldness travels through my body now that he’s no longer touching me.

I sit up in a daze and try to catch my breath.

“Don’t tell anyone else in the pack what you did with your magic, either,” he says. “It’s not their business unless my grandfather makes it their business.”

“Your grandfather doesn’t *have* to know,” I say, even though I know getting him to keep anything from his alpha is a lost cause. “You don’t have to tell him.”

“You’re right. I don’t have to do anything,” he says. “But I assume you want answers?”

“I do.”

“Then you need to lay low—if you’re even capable of doing that—and let me help you get them.”

Cornor



RUBY STARTS TO STAND UP, and even though I want to help her, I don't. Because each time I touch her, I'll feel more drawn to her. And I refuse to let that happen.

Best scenario is that my grandfather figures out what her mark and magic means, and she goes far, far away from here. The farther she is, the weaker the bond between us will be.

But for the time being, she's my responsibility. And, like all my responsibilities, I won't take it lightly.

"Your shoes and pants are wet," I observe now that she's standing.

"I walked in the stream to hide my path," she says. "So, yeah. They got wet."

I look her up and down to see if she's injured, relieved that she appears to be okay. She looks more than okay—she looks *strong*. Determined. Proud.

Three very admirable qualities, along with the fact that she seems to be intelligent as well.

At least the universe didn't have the audacity to give me a weak, stupid mate.

"You went upstream instead of downstream, even though it's not the direction of the town," I say.

"I thought it might throw you off my path." She shrugs. "Apparently, I thought wrong."

“It was the less obvious choice,” I say. “My grandfather went downstream, but I had a feeling you might go upstream. We split up to cover more territory.”

I also had a gut feeling she’d go upstream—like I could sense her tracks, even through the water. Which makes sense now that I know we’re mates.

“Not like I could get out of here anyway.” She frowns. “I hit that invisible wall.”

“The barrier,” I tell her.

“That’s what I thought it was.”

“After the witches heard about your arrival, they thought it best to keep you in pack territory until you learn how to control your shifts,” I say. “They were apparently right, given that you were close to leaving town and putting endless people in danger—including your friends and family, if you got that far. What were you *thinking*?”

I don’t realize how angry I am until the words come out.

“I was thinking that when you saw my mark, you looked at me like I was evil, and I had no idea what you were going to do to me,” she says. “I felt like I was in danger. I needed to get out of here.”

She’s not wrong, which is why I don’t correct her. Especially since I’m still not convinced she’s not a sorceress or demon. The mate bond made me soft to her—it made me want to protect her no matter what—but I need to continue to be on guard.

“I’ll keep you safe until we figure out what the mark means,” I say simply. “You have my word.”

She raises an eyebrow. “And if you don’t like what we find out?”

“We’ll deal with that if it comes to it.”

She nods, looking surprisingly satisfied. Which makes sense, since the mate bond will make her feel like she should trust me, just like it’s making me feel like I should trust her.

“In the meantime, you need to come back with me to my grandfather’s,” I continue. “As long as you cooperate, you won’t get hurt.”

I hope it’s true.

I’ll do everything in my power to make *sure* it’s true.

“You’re making it sound like he might kill me,” she says, dark fear crossing her eyes.

My heart twists at the thought of it. Even though we’ve only known each other a few days, I can’t imagine my life without Ruby in it. I want to learn what makes her smile, what makes her laugh, and I want to be someone she’s comfortable coming to for anything she needs. I want to be here for her in every possible way. I want her to feel safer with me than she does with anyone else.

I want to get to know her like I’ve gotten to know Autumn all these years.

But I feel like I’m betraying Autumn for simply *thinking* about it.

Maybe it’ll be easier if I let my grandfather kill her. If he does it before Ruby and I consummate the bond, the bond will be destroyed. I’ll be free from this curse the universe forced on me, and free to be with Autumn without Ruby getting in the way. It will hurt at first, but Autumn and I will be happy together, and I’ll get over it eventually.

I hate myself for thinking it.

Especially because Ruby’s watching me with those wide, innocent eyes of hers, waiting for me to say something.

I won’t resort to having her killed. Autumn and I chose each other. We promised to be together even if either of us formed a mate bond with someone else. I care about her, and I refuse to break that promise.

I’m strong enough to resist the mate bond with Ruby. I won’t accept anything else.

“Connor?” Ruby says, my name sounding musical when it escapes her lips.

“My grandfather’s not going to kill you,” I promise, since even if he *wants* to kill her, I’ll make sure he fails.

We’ll kill him before he kills her, my wolf’s voice growls in my mind.

Disgust rolls through me at the fact that my wolf would consider killing a man who’s not just our grandfather, but our alpha.

Neither of them is going to die—at least not by my hand, I think, and then I successfully bury my wolf deep down inside myself, where he can’t assault me with such treasonous thoughts anymore.

I bring myself back to the present, where I just promised Ruby I’ll keep her safe at all costs.

“I need you to come back with me,” I tell her. “Please.”

She says nothing for a few seconds, and I have no idea what to do if she refuses.

“You promise I’ll be safe with you?” she asks, and from the willingness in her tone, I know I’ve won.

“I promise.” I don’t have to think twice about it.

“Okay.” She nods and takes a deep breath, and for the first time since pinning her down, I feel somewhat relieved. “Then by all means, lead the way.”

Ruby



JAX'S HOUSE is a log cabin mansion that reminds me of the ski lodge I stayed at with Luna. The inside is decently modern, with tall ceilings, wooden floors, paneled walls, and large windows.

Instead of feeling rustic, it feels majestic.

I know Jax is the alpha, but I didn't realize that also means he's rich, especially since Connor's house is decently modest.

"A gift from the witches," Connor explains.

"Where do the witches live?" I ask.

"They're near town. They don't need land like we do, since they don't shift and go on runs."

"But don't the Guardians live in cities for twenty years?" I ask, since Penny talked about the Guardians constantly.

"A sacrifice to keep the supernatural world in order," he explains. "Guardians who return home after the required twenty years are gifted ample land and living space as a thank you for their service." He motions at Jax's giant house for emphasis.

"Got it." I shiver and wrap my arms around myself, suddenly aware that I've been dripping water onto Jax's luxurious Turkish rug.

"You need to shower and warm up," Connor says. "I'll grab you some of my grandmother's old clothes."

When he says it, I realize he's told me nothing about his grandmother. Or his parents, for that matter.

"Is your grandmother..."

"She's dead," he finishes. "It happened when I was a baby, at the same time as my parents. I grew up in this house with my grandfather, and he gave me my own place when I started high school."

My heart breaks for him, especially given the sadness in his eyes when he says it. "I'm sorry," I say carefully. "That sounds awful."

"It was a long time ago." He tries sounding nonchalant about it, but I can tell it hurts him. "You can shower in my old room. Come on."

He's already halfway up the steps, and I follow his lead. His bedroom here is similar to the one in his current house—a king-sized bed with a green comforter, lots of wooden furniture, and floors to match. His shelves are lined with books, and I smile at the fact that he likes to read. Maybe we have more in common than I initially thought.

"There should be towels and stuff in there." He motions to the ensuite bathroom. "I'll leave some of my grandmother's clothes in here for you for when you're done. I'll wait to let my grandfather know we're back here until you're finished, but I still recommend you be quick about it."

"Sure," I say, still in a daze after everything that happened tonight. "Thanks."

"Anytime."

Connor's bathroom is all marble and traditional, with a walk-in shower more luxurious than any other shower I've seen in my life. It's the sort of shower you'd expect to find in a five-star hotel.

I finish up in ten minutes, wrap myself in a fluffy towel, and catch my reflection in the mirror.

My brown eyes startle me every time I see myself. Because who was that woman in the woods? Why did she

change my eye color? And how did she do it?

I know she told me to tell no one, but eventually I'm going to need answers. Especially since the answers are probably related to my star mark and illusion superpower.

Thankfully, the clothes Connor set out for me are regular loungewear—not old lady pajamas. I brush my finger over my star mark, as if it can give me good luck, then get dressed and head back downstairs.

Connor's made coffee, and I follow the scent into the kitchen. It's a huge kitchen with marble countertops and an island in the center, and he pours me a cup when I enter. He looks amazing in his low-slung jeans and tight t-shirt, and it takes all my effort to not obviously check him out as he hands me my steaming mug.

He ensures his fingers don't brush mine.

Disappointment flutters in my chest, and I sit at the table, trying to put a lid on my crazily intense attraction to him.

He joins me at the table, taking the seat across from me. "I texted my grandfather's beta when I heard you coming downstairs," he says. "He'll track down my grandfather, let him know you're here, and my grandfather will come over."

"You mean wolves can't speak in each other's minds?" I ask.

"No." He chuckles. "That would be a bit intrusive. Don't you think?"

"I suppose so."

I'm also relieved that no one can see into my mind—especially Connor. I'd want to sink into the floor and disappear forever if he knew how much I've been pining over him since the night we met.

We're both silent, and I have no idea what to say to fill the space.

"Looks like the clothes fit," he says. "From what I've heard about my grandmother, she'd be glad for her stuff to finally get some use around here."

“What happened to her?” I ask, realizing only a second later that it might be an insensitive question. “Sorry. You don’t have to answer that.”

“It’s okay,” he says. “Everyone in the pack knows. You should know as well.”

I sip my coffee and wait for him to continue.

“My parents were some of the best Guardians of their time, along with their best friends, Xavier and Abigail,” he begins. “They served their twenty years in New York City, came back here to settle down, and my mom soon gave birth to me.”

“Because shifters aren’t fertile until they hit forty,” I repeat what Penny told me in one of her many lessons about their kind.

No—not *their* kind.

Our kind.

“Exactly,” he says. “Everything was going well for them until Xavier’s sister Jessica disappeared while serving as a Guardian in the city. We didn’t know it at the time, but Jessica had secretly been in a relationship with one of the vampires in New York—Dominic.”

“I thought the Guardians were supposed to kill the vampires?” I ask.

“Our relationship with vampires is complicated,” he says. “There are two types of vampires that live in the city. The uptown vampires, and the downtown vampires. The uptown vampires have an organized clan, and an uneasy alliance with us. They keep willing humans as blood slaves and don’t cause chaos in the city. In return, we let them be. The downtown vampires, however, are a different story. They’re more spread out, and some of them hunt to kill. The majority of Guardians are stationed downtown so we can keep them under control.”

“So there are good vampires, and bad vampires,” I say.

His eyes darken. “There are no good vampires,” he says. “Vampires have no soul. There are only rabid vampires, who are consumed with bloodlust, and vampires who can keep their

urges under control. Neither are good, but we maintain an uneasy truce with the latter as long as they remain civilized.”

“Got it,” I say. “Which clan was Dominic in?”

“The downtown vampires,” he says, and for some reason, I’m not surprised.

“And what happened with him and Jessica?”

“They were together secretly,” he continues what he started to tell me earlier. “But then a new shifter was assigned to be a Guardian in the city, and he and Jessica formed a mate bond. Soon afterward, Jessica disappeared.”

“Dominic’s doing?” I guess.

“Correct. He wanted her for himself, so he turned her into a vampire, since that’s one of the two main ways to destroy a mate bond.”

“What’s the other?” I ask.

“Death.”

His body stiffens, chills travel up my spine, and the tension in the room is so strong that I can barely breathe.

“Anyway, it wasn’t long until the New York Guardians learned what happened to Jessica,” he continues. “They tracked down Dominic and killed him, but Jessica escaped before they found her.”

“Did they want to kill her, too?” I ask, appalled at the thought of the Guardians killing one of their own.

“Either Jessica chose to become a vampire, or she was turned against her will,” he says. “If it was by choice, she betrayed her people, and the punishment is death. If it was against her will, she lost her soul. All Guardians make a vow that it’s better to die than live without a soul, so it was their duty to reunite her body with her soul so she could receive safe passage to the Underworld.”

“Oh. Wow.” It sounds barbaric to me, but then again, I’ve never come face-to-face with a vampire.

He nods grimly, then continues, “Jessica returned to Pine Valley, hid out in a cave outside town, and got word to her brother Xavier about her location. It’s unclear what she said to him, but Xavier decided to help Jessica escape. Abigail was in a nearby pack before mating with Xavier—the Spring Creek pack—and that pack is suspected of being vampire sympathizers. So, she agreed with Xavier to help Jessica. However, my grandfather and grandmother knew something wasn’t right, and they followed Xavier and Abigail to the cave. It was their duty to release Jessica from the curse of being a vampire, but Xavier was desperate to save his sister, so he and Abigail turned on my grandparents. A fight broke out between the five of them in the cave, and my grandfather was the only one who made it out alive.”

He speaks neutrally while he relays the story, like he’s keeping the facts separate from his feelings.

“That’s awful.” I blink a few times as I take it in. “I’m so sorry.”

There’s a *lot* that’s awful in there, including how Xavier was expected to help murder his sister, but I don’t feel like my opinion about that would be appreciated right now.

“Like I said, it happened a long time ago,” Connor says. “My grandmother died while upholding her vow to the Guardians. She died a hero.”

“She sounds like a strong woman,” I say.

“She was.”

I want to ask about the Spring Creek pack—the ones he called vampire sympathizers—but the front door opens before I can.

My lungs tighten, and my heart races.

There’s only one person it can be.

Jax.

And even though Connor promised to keep me safe, I have no idea what the alpha of this pack might want with me once

he learns about my strange, mysterious, and possibly dangerous magic.

Ruby



JAX BURSTS into the kitchen and stares me down, looking insanely intimidating in his leather pants and biker jacket.

“Stand up and show me the mark,” he commands.

There’s something supernaturally forceful about his voice, and I find myself standing up without realizing it, my hand going to the waistband of my pants to pull it down.

Before I finish, he snarls, his angry gaze going straight to Connor.

“She’s in her clothes,” he growls, and I worry he’s about to rip out his grandson’s throat.

“Ruby’s clothes were wet from walking in the stream,” Connor explains, slowly and steadily. “She needed to change.”

Jax holds Connor’s gaze for what feels like an entire minute, and neither Connor nor I say a word. “Don’t touch her stuff ever again,” he finally warns, and his stormy eyes return to me. “The mark. Now.”

There’s no point in resisting, so I pull the waistband down just far enough so he can see the star inked on my hip.

Jax steps forward and studies it, his fingers hovering above the eight-pointed symbol.

“This wasn’t here before your shift?” he asks.

“No.”

“And you don’t know what it means?”

“No.”

He inhales, sniffing the air, and I remember what Connor said about being able to smell lies.

I wonder if that’s a skill I’ll be able to learn, too.

He breathes out and stares me down, and I brace myself for more questioning. “Very well,” he says instead, and he takes out his phone, snapping a picture of the mark. “I’ll show it to the witches so they can investigate. In the meantime, you’ll stay in one of the guest rooms here.”

“I’ll stay here as well,” Connor volunteers.

Jax’s gaze bores into Connor, like he’s trying to figure out why he cares.

“I want to learn how to shift, and Connor wants to help me,” I say before Jax can question Connor—or worse, tell him to leave. “The sooner I can shift, the sooner I can go home.”

Jax sits down and stretches, cracking his knuckles one-by-one. “You’re not going home,” he says. “Not ever.”

“What do you mean?” I ask, even though it’s pretty clear what he means.

I just don’t want it to be true.

“I think you should sit down.” Connor motions to an empty armchair, and I get a feeling that I’m not going to like whatever they have to say.

“Sure,” I say, trying to sound calm as I take a seat, even though my insides feel like they’re trying to jump out of my skin, needing to escape.

I watch Jax, waiting.

“Yesterday, I sent Connor to the Lawrence’s to tell you that your family and friends think you’re spending the semester abroad,” he begins. “However, that isn’t the truth.”

I swallow down a giant ball of worry in my throat. “Okay...” I say, wrapping my fingers around the armchair and gripping it tight, as if it can hold me steady.

“The truth is that to the outside world, you’re considered dead,” he says simply.

No.

The world around me freezes, my blood turns to ice, and my heart stops. I can’t breathe. I can barely think, let alone process the meaning behind his words.

It can’t be true.

I look to Connor, and while he looks pained, I doubt it compares to the horror and anger burning through my veins.

“You lied to me,” I say to him, betrayal stabbing at my heart.

“You weren’t ready for the truth.” His voice is strained, and from the sad way he’s looking at me, I can tell he’s ashamed about what he did.

Good.

He deserves to be.

“We were going to wait until you were more settled in,” Jax says. “But after that stunt you pulled tonight, you’re clearly stronger than we gave you credit for.”

I think he’s trying to give me a compliment, but it’s so backhanded that it falls on deaf ears.

“It’s being said that you died in a drunk driving accident in Florida late Saturday night,” he continues, either not noticing that he’s sent me into shock, or not caring.

His words buzz in my mind, barely making sense.

“I wasn’t in Florida on Saturday night,” I say. “I was here.”

“Your friend Luna doesn’t remember coming here with you,” he says. “She believes you both went back to school early for intersession week, which is the lie you told your parents.”

“How?” I ask, unable to find any other words.

“The witches spoke with Luna, and she answered their questions, since she wanted to help them find you,” he says.

“Then they used their magic to make her believe the lie they spun was the truth.”

“And then they convinced her that I’m *dead*?”

It’s crazy.

It can’t be real.

How much power do the witches have to be able to pull off something like that?

“Correct.” He gives me a small smile, like he’s proud of me for figuring it out. “The story is that you went to a bar next to campus, and when you were walking home, you were hit by a truck while walking across the street.”

My eyes widen, since I wasn’t expecting *that*.

“I thought you said it was a drunk driving accident.” It’s a silly thing to focus on, but I need something solid to hold onto. Otherwise, the reality of what this means will hit me like an *actual* truck, and I’m not sure I can handle it without breaking down completely.

“The truck driver was drunk,” he says. “There was so much damage to the body he hit that it was impossible to identify on sight. Two of our witches, however, came forward as witnesses and confirmed it was you.”

“No.”

“Yes.” He taps on his phone screen and holds it out to me. “Here’s the article. See for yourself.”

I reach for the phone, but he pulls it back.

“No touching,” he says.

I glare at him, then read the article.

Everything in it is as he said.

As I read, it’s so quiet that I can practically hear the silence. My eyes tear up, and a sob threatens to escape my throat, but I push it down. I refuse to let them see me cry.

After reading the article another time, I somehow gather myself enough to speak.

“They made this truck driver hit a person,” I say, my words hollow to my ears.

“Another witch was behind the wheel,” he steadily explains. “After the job was completed, they ensured the actual truck driver—who was, in fact, drunk—believed he was there the entire time.”

“So, they ran over an innocent girl and made a man believe he killed her.”

It’s so disgusting that I think I might be sick, but again, I swallow it down.

I refuse to lose my composure in front of Jax.

I won’t let him see me as weak.

Jax holds my gaze, his expression hard. “These are the lengths we must go to ensure our world remains a secret. You might not understand it now, but you will in time.”

“It’s not right.”

“It’s *necessary*,” he growls. “We have our rules, and we abide by them, no matter what.”

I remain steady and narrow my eyes. “You blindly follow whatever the witches tell you to do,” I say, my voice sounding venomous to my ears.

“Enough!” He slams his hand down on the table, and I jump in my seat. “Someone needs to keep you under control, and while you’re here without knowledge of your true pack, I’m your alpha. You may not understand it yet, but I look out for my own. Right now, that includes you. Which is why I’m bringing this photo of your star mark to the witches so we can learn what it means—for the sakes of you, the pack, and the supernatural world as a whole.”

There’s so much rage racing through my body that I fear I might snap and try to strangle that superior look off his face on the spot.

But even though I’m new here, I know better than to attack the alpha.

“You’re one of us now,” he continues, as if he’s trying to ram it into my brain. “It’s time for you to leave the human world behind and take your place in this pack.”

“You mean my place as an omega,” I say darkly.

“Precisely.”

Again, he gives me that smug smile. But it doesn’t irritate me as much as before, since even though my magic isn’t earth magic, it *is* magic.

Which means I’m not an omega.

It’s a card I have hidden up my sleeve. And even though I don’t know what to do with that card quite yet, I do intend on using it. I just need to wait for the right moment.

This isn’t it.

And if I want to continue to keep my magic secret, I need to pretend I’m truly an omega.

So I lean back in my chair and lower my gaze like a good, submissive wolf. “I understand,” I say softly.

It doesn’t sound believable to me, but when I glance up, Jax looks appropriately satisfied.

“I hoped you would,” he purrs. “Now, I’ll show you to your room. It’s almost three in the morning, and after your adventure tonight, I’m sure you’re tired.”

My eyes suddenly feel heavy, and as much as I don’t want him to be right, I know he is. Plus, after everything he just told me, I wouldn’t mind some space to process what this means for my family and best friend.

They think I’m dead.

It doesn’t feel real.

Someday, it won’t be real. Because someday, I’ll set this right. I’ll see them again. I’ll make sure of it.

But that day isn’t today.

I glance over at Connor, annoyed that seeing his face brings me a bit of comfort. “You’re definitely staying here,

too?" I ask.

"I wouldn't dream of doing anything else."

My gratitude for him fills me with warmth, and I want to run over to him and hug him. I want to sink into his arms and have him tell me everything's going to be okay. Just the thought of it brings me relief, especially because he's looking at me like he wants to comfort me as well.

But as much as I want to go to him, I need to remember that while he promised to help me, his allegiance is to the pack. He's not on my side. His loyalty will always be to his grandfather first.

To his alpha.

And it's best that no matter what happens, I don't let myself forget that.

"Thank you. Truly. It means a lot," I tell him, and then I let him show me to the guest room, where I fall asleep faster than should be possible after the life-changing revelations of tonight.

Ruby



I'M WOKEN the next morning by someone knocking on my door. The knock is jolting—I was sound asleep—and I pull the comforter over my head to block out the noise.

I want to slip back into the oblivion of my dreams so I can avoid reality for as long as possible.

But whoever's there knocks again—louder this time.

“Ruby?” Connor calls through the door. “Are you awake?”

I throw the comforter off my head, open my eyes, and sigh in irritation. “I am now,” I say.

Sunlight peaks through the blinds, and a glance at the clock on the nightstand shows it's just past nine.

Six hours of sleep. I can technically survive on that, but from the exhaustion I feel right now, I could easily sleep for six more.

“Can I come in?” Connor asks.

“No.” I have bedhead and my eyes are crusty, and as silly as it is, I don't want Connor seeing me like this.

“No problem,” he says, and I'm relieved he didn't burst in anyway. “My grandfather just left to talk to the witches. I'm going to start making breakfast. Can you come down when you're ready? With my grandfather gone, it's the perfect time for us to see what you can do with that new magic of yours.”

“What do you mean?” I ask, my brain still half-awake.

“I mean that as far as I’m aware, every time you’ve used your magic, you haven’t been aware you’re doing it,” he says. “We need to see if you can control it, and try to figure out its limitations. All *before* my grandfather comes back. So, the sooner you’re able to drag yourself out of bed, the better.”

I sit up and rub the sleep out of my eyes. Because as much as I want to go back to bed, I need to learn about my magic, and I can’t deny that Connor’s idea is a good one.

“Fine.” I huff. “Give me five minutes.”

“That’s what I was hoping you’d say,” he says, and while I can’t see him, I can practically hear the smile in his voice. “I’m making bacon. From the way you were staring at it the other day like it was about to drive you feral, I have a pretty good feeling you’re going to like it.”

* * *

It takes me ten minutes to freshen up and get downstairs.

The kitchen smells *amazing*, and the bacon tastes incredible. So does the sausage patty and the ham.

My parents are going to be appalled when they find out I’ve been eating meat.

No. They won’t be.

Because they’ll be too shocked about the fact that *I’m not dead*.

I drop the bacon onto my plate, suddenly not hungry anymore, and glare at Connor.

“What?” he asks.

“You lied to me.”

He places his fork down, regret splattered across his beautiful face. “I know,” he says. “I’m sorry.”

“You told me my parents thought I was studying abroad,” I continue, barely hearing his half-hearted apology. “Meanwhile, they thought I was dead—and you knew it.”

My stomach swirls from just saying it, and I focus on swallowing a few times to make sure the breakfast meats stay put.

“I know,” he repeats, and he breathes out slowly, gathering his thoughts. “Look—everything changed last night in the forest. I’m on your side now.”

“Why?” I ask. “Because we know I’m not an omega?”

Hurt crosses his eyes, and he looks like he wants to say no. But he stops himself, pauses, and recollects himself.

“I don’t know,” he says instead. “But when I realized what you were doing with your magic, I realized how special you are. If we figure out exactly what you can do and how to control it, you can use your magic to help this pack. You might even be able to become a Guardian.”

“Last night, you were worried that your grandfather might want me dead. Now you think he’d let me become a Guardian,” I deadpan, since after everything Penny told me about how intense Guardian training is, it sounds crazy.

“I don’t know,” he says again, and I’m getting *really* tired of hearing him say that.

“What *do* you know?” I ask, watching him in challenge.

He sits straighter, daring me to back down. “I know that I kept my word to you that I’d protect you, and I didn’t tell my grandfather about your magic,” he says. “As it is now, I don’t know what my grandfather is going to find out from the witches. But if they connect your star mark to your illusion magic, we’re going to have to show him that your magic can be beneficial to our kind. We have to prove you’re useful to the pack.”

“Or what? He’ll kill me?”

“I won’t let him kill you,” he growls, and from his tone, I have a feeling he’ll go to *any* length to keep that promise.

I don’t need to be able to smell lies to know he’s telling me the truth.

On top of that, he's right. I need to learn more about my magic. He's willing to help me do that right now, and it would be crazy for me to refuse.

After all, if I end up in a position where I need to defend myself, this illusion magic is my best method of protection.

"Okay," I finally say. "I'm in."

"Great." He gives me a knowing smile with those incredibly sexy lips of his, as if he knew I was going to agree this entire time. "What were you thinking when you went invisible?" he asks.

"I was thinking that I didn't want you to see me," I say simply. "I was *begging* the universe to not let you see me, and praying I could somehow blend into the forest."

"Interesting," he contemplates. "What about with the rose?"

I flash back to the moment in Penny's room and think about what was going through my mind during it. "I was picturing the rose blooming, like you told me to do, and begging the universe to make it happen so I didn't have to be an omega."

"Hm." He frowns. "And what about when you made me see you next to me in the kitchen instead of Autumn?"

My cheeks heat at the memory, and I glance down at my plate, embarrassed at the idea of telling him the truth.

"Ruby." My name sounds lyrical when he says it, his voice sending shivers up my spine. "I can only help you if you're honest with me."

When I meet his gaze again, his pupils are dilated, and he's looking at me like he's hungry for my next words.

I was wishing that you were looking at me the same way you were looking at her.

It's embarrassing. I don't want to tell him.

But keeping it from him isn't going to do either of us any good. Plus, it's pretty obvious what I was thinking, given what

was going through my mind the other two times I used my magic.

“Fine,” I say, willing my voice to remain as steady as possible, so he won’t see my embarrassment.

Here goes nothing.

“I was wishing that I was the one standing next to you instead of Autumn.”

Ruby



CONNOR NODS IN ACCEPTANCE, and if he's surprised, he doesn't show it. "Were you *picturing* yourself standing there?" he asks.

There's no point in denying it.

"I was."

"Okay." He doesn't appear fazed, but one thing I've learned about Connor in the short time I've known him is that he's good at controlling his emotions. "There's a pattern here. Each time you created an illusion, you wished for something to happen, and pictured it happening at the same time."

"That sounds right."

"So, we're getting somewhere." He picks up his coffee, takes a thoughtful sip, and places it back down. "What does it feel like when you use this magic?"

I think back to all three times in question.

What connects them?

"My brain tingled a bit," I realize.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that it tingled a bit." I'm not sure how else to explain it, and I search for another word to help get it across. "It buzzed. Like electricity, but it didn't hurt."

He pauses to think, studying me like I'm a puzzle he's trying to figure out. "It sounds similar to how it feels when we

use earth magic,” he says. “But it happens in your brain instead of your body and palms.”

“I’ve never used earth magic, so I wouldn’t know,” I say.

“I do know,” he says, stronger now. “And even though I’m no expert, my guess is that your magic is coming from your mind instead of your body. So, it’s mental magic instead of physical magic.”

He watches me, waiting for me to confirm it.

“You *are* the expert on this,” I correct him. “You’ve known about magic your entire life. I only learned about it two days ago.”

Two days.

It feels like far longer than that.

“I’ve never heard of this kind of magic, which is why I’m far from an expert, but let’s continue to roll with my theory,” he says.

“Sure,” I say. “I have nothing else to roll with.”

Oh my God.

Did I really just say that?

Maybe this “mental magic” of mine is driving me mental.

“What next?” I ask, changing the subject. “Any other questions for me?”

“No more questions—at least not at this moment,” he says. “Because I want you to recreate what you did those other three times, right here, right now.”

“You make it sound so easy,” I say.

“You have natural talent.” He smiles, like he’s proud of me and believes in me. “You can do this.”

His encouragement is warm and contagious, and with him smiling at me like that, I believe I can do this, too. “All right.” I straighten my shoulders, ready for anything. “What should I try first?”

He studies my face so intensely that I feel like a piece of artwork on display, and it takes all my effort not to look away. “When I realized you transformed Autumn to look like you, the first thing that popped into my mind was that you could be a useful spy for the Guardians,” he says carefully.

A spy.

I’m not sure how comfortable I am with that. But like he pointed out earlier, if the shifters see me as having a purpose, they’re less likely to try harming me.

Anything that helps keep me safe is good in my book.

“So, you want me to make myself look like someone else?” I ask.

“The previous times you used your magic, you were experiencing intense emotions.” He clears his throat and looks away, as if something about that makes him uncomfortable. But when he refocuses on me, he’s back to business. “Let’s start smaller and work our way up from there.”

“Sounds like as good of a plan as any,” I say. “Do you have something specific in mind?”

He tilts his head and studies me so intensely that I squirm a bit in my seat. “Have you ever thought about going blonde?” he asks.

“My dad’s blond,” I say. “My mom’s a redhead.”

Like Autumn, I think, although I don’t say it out loud.

“Brown hair’s perfect on you,” he says with so much passion that my heart leaps into my throat. “But let’s see if you can make it blonde.”

“Sure.” I take a deep breath and close my eyes.

I need my hair to turn blonde, I think at the same time as I imagine what I might look like if I dyed my hair.

I don’t need him to say anything to know nothing’s happening.

But failure isn’t an option.

So I take a deep breath, center myself, and try again.

I need to learn how to use this magic, and I want my hair to turn blonde, I try again, and I focus harder on what I'd look like as a blonde. Please. Work this time. Make me blonde.

The tingly sensation spreads through my brain, and I smile, knowing it's working.

Once finished, I open my eyes and pull a piece of my hair over my shoulder to take a look.

It's the same blonde color I was imagining—the white blonde that the Targaryen's have in Game of Thrones. And it's startlingly realistic, as if it's truly dyed instead of just being an illusion.

“Hey there, Stormborn,” Connor teases with a glint of amusement in his eyes.

“You're a Game of Thrones fan?” Out of everything going on, that's the last thing that should surprise me, but it does.

“Why so surprised?” he asks.

“I don't know.” I can't help but smile. “You just seem like such a... jock.”

He runs his fingers through his silky brown hair, and I have a sudden urge to feel it for myself, although I somehow manage to control myself and stay in place. “You're not wrong,” he says. “But you also might find that you and I have more in common than you think.”

The way he's looking at me makes heat rush to my cheeks, and I take a sip of my now-cold coffee to cool down.

“Can you change it back?” he asks.

“What?”

“Your hair.” He chuckles, and I have a feeling he knows exactly what effect he's having on me. “Make it brown again.”

“Right.” I try to shake off whatever spell he put me under, although I doubt it'll ever go away. He's stolen a piece of my heart, and as crazy as it is, I don't think I'll ever get it back. “Sure. Of course.”

I barely think about wanting to remove the illusion—let alone close my eyes—before the tingles travel through my mind once more.

I examine a strand of my hair again, relieved to find that it's back to its normal color.

“Reversing it was easier than creating it,” I tell him, proud of myself for completing his first challenge.

“It looked so realistic.” He leans forward, as if he wants to touch it, but he stops himself and leans back in his seat.

Disappointment fills me when he does.

“Now try it with your eyes,” he says, jolting me back to focus.

“Why my eyes?” I'm immediately on-guard, since my eyes aren't exactly the color they should be to start with.

“Easy.” He gives me a small smile, as if we share a secret, and it makes my heart flutter like crazy. “Because they looked really beautiful when they were turquoise.”

Ruby



MY HEART STOPS in my chest.

He knows.

Of course he knows.

But I assumed it might come to this, which is why I have a lie ready and waiting.

“You mean like the contacts I wore to your party?” I ask, trying to sound as nonchalant as possible.

“Exactly,” he says, not seeming to think it’s strange in the slightest. “I guess you haven’t needed the contacts since the shift?”

“They weren’t prescription.” I shrug. “I just liked the way they looked.”

It seems like a safer bet than assuming the shift would change my vision, since if that doesn’t happen to other shifters, it would be yet another thing suspicious and different about me.

“I liked the way they looked, too.” He sounds mesmerized, and my breathing slows at the way he’s looking at me, but he quickly snaps back to attention. “Not like the brown isn’t pretty,” he scrambles. “It is. Your natural eye color is great.”

I tilt my head slightly, amused by how he’s tongue-tied over his words.

“Don’t worry about it,” I say, and he relaxes slightly. “I prefer the turquoise as well.”

“I guess you wouldn’t wear those contacts if you didn’t.”
He gives me a sheepish smile.

“Exactly.”

We’re both quiet for a few seconds, and the tension buzzing between us amplifies. My heart pounds, and I freeze, not wanting to break this moment.

From the intense way he’s looking at me, he seems to feel the same way.

But he shakes himself out of it and glances out the window, and just like that, the moment’s gone.

“Anyway, now that you have this magic, you might not need contacts to change your eye color,” he says, and the energy between us dims, although it’s not fully gone. “Give it a go.”

“All right,” I say, and I close my eyes, imagining myself with my natural eye color. This is easier to do than when I changed my hair, especially because I love my natural eye color and wish I could have it back.

But no matter how hard I picture it and wish for it, my magic doesn’t buzz through my mind.

When I open my eyes again, I know they’re unchanged.

Connor’s frown supports my assumption.

“Try again?” he says.

“Sure.” I close my eyes and do as asked, but again, nothing happens.

“Hm.” He presses his lips together in contemplation. “Maybe you used up your magic for the day.”

“What do you mean?”

“Magic is a muscle,” he explains. “We can only use so much before we run out of energy. We like to compare it to running. Some people have more of a natural ability for long distance running than others. Training increases endurance, but eventually, everyone will run out of steam and need a break to recharge.”

“That makes sense,” I say. “But I feel like I can do more. Let me try something that might be easier.”

“Go for it.”

I close my eyes, then open them again. Because while I closed my eyes with the rose and my hair color, I was looking directly at Autumn when I saw myself standing in her place.

I hold my hands in front of myself and look at my nails. The white polish is chipped and in desperate need of getting redone, so I picture a fresh manicure in my mind and try to project the image into reality.

My brain tingles, and in seconds, the white polish looks brand new—just like it did in my mind.

“So, you didn’t hit your limit,” Connor says. “You made that look easy.”

“It *was* easy,” I say. “Maybe eyes are harder to change?”

Or maybe I can’t change them because brown isn’t their color to start with.

“Possibly,” he says, and he’s staring into my eyes so deeply that I can’t move. “I have another idea.”

“What’s that?” I ask.

“So far, your illusions have built off things that already exist—or made them disappear, in the case of making yourself invisible,” he says. “I wonder if you can create something out of nothing.”

“Like what?” I ask, interested in exploring this idea further. “Make it look like there’s an apple in the center of the table?” It’s the first thing that pops into my mind, and while it’s random, I’m curious now that he’s brought it up.

“It’s worth a try,” he says, motioning to the space on the table between us.

“Okay.” I take a deep breath, stare at the center of the table, and imagine a shiny red apple sitting in the center of it. I can easily picture the apple in my mind—I’ve always had excellent recollection of what things look like, along with a

great imagination—and I focus on *projecting* the image of it onto the table.

My brain tingles, and the apple shimmers into existence just like I pictured it, down to the specific downward turn of the stem.

“The shadow,” Connor reminds me, and his voice is low, as if he doesn’t want to break the spell.

“Right.” I note the direction the light is shining and try to imagine the shadow the apple would cast in it.

A shadow appears, but it’s unnaturally long.

I try to adjust it, and it’s too short.

Ugh.

I do a bit of experimentation, and eventually, the shadow looks natural enough that I don’t think someone would question it.

“You can work on that,” Connor says.

“I will.”

I continue to focus on the apple, and my mind tingles as I hold the illusion in place. It’s easier to hold it there than to create it. But if I stop focusing, I’m sure it will disappear, just like what happened with the illusion of the rose blooming and my invisibility.

The apple looks so solid that it’s impossible to tell it isn’t real, and I reach forward, wanting to know what my creation feels like.

Connor apparently has the same idea, because he reaches for it at the same time as I do.

The apple isn’t tangible, and our fingers go straight through it, connecting in the middle.

Electricity buzzes from my finger where it touches his, up my arm, and all the way to my mind.

The apple blinks out of existence.

All that's left is my index finger wrapped around Connor's.

Neither of us is letting go.

I don't *want* to let go. Because his touch gives me warmth and safety, as if he's filling my soul with a light that I never knew I needed.

Our eyes are locked, and our breathing slows, so our chests are rising and falling at the same time. With our fingers intertwined, it feels like our bodies are one, and I can't bring myself to pull away.

He, however, doesn't have the same feeling, because he yanks his finger out of mine and pulls his arm back to his side.

The longing in his eyes turns to disgust. "I'm with Autumn," he says, and the reminder breaks my heart. "This needs to stop."

"What even *is* this?" I ask.

"It's nothing," he growls. "Absolutely nothing."

From the way he says it, I wonder if he's trying to convince himself as much as he's trying to convince me.

"Autumn is my girlfriend," he repeats, as if he's trying to drill it into my brain. "I'm not going to let you get between us."

"I'm not trying to."

It's true—I'm *not* trying to.

It's more like an invisible force is bringing us together, and I know it's affecting him as much as it is me.

He wouldn't be so combative if it wasn't.

His body stiffens, and his eyes go hard. "It doesn't matter if you're trying to get between us or not," he says. "Because once my grandfather figures out what pack you were born into, you're going to leave Pine Valley for good and live with them instead."

His words are a blow to my heart, and ice floods my veins, numbing me to the core.

“You want to get rid of me,” I say.

“I think it would be for the best.” He remains as cold as ever, as if he’s a different person than the one who was helping me learn how to use my magic for the past hour. “Don’t you?”

No.

The thought of living somewhere far away from Connor tears at my soul. Which is ridiculous, since we barely know each other.

It’s probably one of those trauma-bond connections that are in books and movies. I just went through a massive change in my life, and Connor’s been helping me understand it.

A part of me might even be feeling like I can rely on him. Like I can trust him.

But I’m not about to tell him all—or *any*—of that. Especially given how coldly he’s watching me right now.

“Sure.” I try to shrug it off, hoping to look as unaffected as he does. “Whatever.”

He’s silent for a few seconds, and I wonder if the careless manner of my words hurt him.

A part of me hopes it did—just a little bit.

Because I couldn’t have hurt him even half as much as he did me.

“I think that’s enough for today,” he finally says, standing up and running his fingers through his hair. “I’m going to go check on Autumn. You can continue testing things out with your magic here, or there’s the TV in the living room, if you’d rather do that.”

Don’t leave, I want to say.

I want to continue practicing my magic with *him*.

But I’m not about to beg for his company, especially given the circumstances.

“Sounds good,” I say instead, feeling like I’m listening to someone else speaking instead of myself. “Thanks.”

“Anytime.” He nods, gives me one last glance, then is out of there before either of us can say another word—all but shattering my heart in the process.

Connor



I RUN through the woods to Autumn's house, hoping that being in my wolf form will help me escape the torrent of thoughts swirling in my mind. But my wolf is eerily quiet, which is making my thoughts impossible to shut out.

I want to help Ruby. Truly, I do.

But every moment I spend with her increases the pull of the mate bond. If I didn't get out of there when I did, I don't know what would have happened next.

No—I do know.

It would have been something I'd deeply regret for the rest of my life.

At least I helped Ruby learn more about her magic. That has to count for something.

As for what her mark and her magic might mean... that's an entirely different can of worms, and I have no idea what to make of it. Now that I know we're mates and have spent more time with her, I don't think she cast some sort of spell on me. I think she's telling the truth about not knowing what the mark means, and I don't think the mark means anything bad.

Why would she be my mate if it did?

My mate.

Ruby is my fated mate.

I can't keep this from Autumn. She and I promised to always be honest with each other, and that we'd stay together

even if we found out we had a mate that wasn't each other.

I'm a man of my word, and I'm keeping my promise to remain loyal to Autumn no matter what.

Before I know it, I'm exiting the woods, shifting back into human form, and heading toward Autumn's house where she lives with her parents. Her house is on a hill, so the basement is actually a semi-basement, with one half aboveground with a sliding door entrance to the inside. The basement is basically a mini-apartment, and she's lived down there since starting high school, to assert her independence to her parents.

My girl is strong like that. A born leader. I've always admired her strength and determination—those qualities are two of the many that will make her the perfect partner to stand by my side when I'm the alpha of this pack.

They're qualities that Ruby has, too. But Ruby's softer and warmer, and there's something about her that makes me feel welcome and safe in a way Autumn never has. Being around Ruby makes me feel like I've come home.

The thought feels like a betrayal to my girlfriend, so I push it from my mind and continue forward.

I see Autumn through the sliding glass door, at the kitchen table with the codex of rules for Guardians in front of her. We have a test next week, and Autumn is the most diligent student I know. She looks beautiful with her red hair draped over her shoulder, ensconced in memorizing the responsibilities of the Guardians, and she's oblivious to the fact that I'm standing out here watching her.

No one in the pack locks our doors, since it would show distrust, so I slide the door open and step inside.

She looks up and smiles, and my heart breaks knowing that what I'm about to tell her will wipe that happiness from her face in an instant.

"Hi," she says. "I missed you last night."

It's impossible not to notice the tinge of worry in her tone.

Autumn is never insecure, and it makes me uneasy to see her like this.

“Sorry I didn’t call,” I say, since I know that’s what she means. She and I call each other every night, but so much was going on last night that I couldn’t pick up my phone. “Something happened. Something big.”

I formed a mate bond with the new girl.

Autumn’s going to be devastated. After I tell her, our relationship will never be the same.

“Want to sit?” she motions to the chair next to her, and I’m unable to look her in the eyes as I sit down.

Instead, I look at the codex laid open on the table. She’s reading about shifters who get their wolves—and therefore their magic—stripped by witches, and how they’re never supposed to set foot into pack territory or the Guardian safe houses in the cities again.

Her eyes flit to the page as well. “I don’t understand what could make a shifter want to do such a thing,” she says.

“It’s an insult to our birthright,” I agree, and we stare at the book in silence, as if mourning all the shifters who threw away their heritage like it meant nothing.

“Anyway,” she says, moving uncomfortably in her chair. “What’s going on?”

I dread what I’m about to do, but I need to get on with it. The sooner, the better.

“It’s about Ruby,” I say, and Autumn stiffens after hearing her name.

The warmth disappears from her face, and I suddenly realize that if she knows the truth, she might never show me that warmth again. She might never kiss me the same way again or trust me the same way again.

Ruby could be a wall standing between us forever.

Despite all our promises to be honest with each other no matter what, I might lose Autumn because of this.

Again, I curse the universe for putting me in this god-awful position. My heart is being split in two, and I have no idea what to do about it.

“What about her?” she finally says, slowly and cautiously.

She’s my mate.

The words are on the tip of my tongue, but I can’t bring myself to say them. Not when it might erase the openness in Autumn’s eyes when she looks at me for forever.

But I can’t bring myself to lie to her, either.

For now, telling her half of the truth will have to do. Because now that I’ve come this far, I have to tell her something important. She’ll be suspicious otherwise.

The only thing I can think to tell her to make sense of why I barged in like this without warning is Ruby’s secret.

Autumn is loyal to me. She’ll keep Ruby’s secret if I ask her to. I have zero doubts about it.

“Promise me you won’t tell anyone,” I say, dreading what I’m about to do. But I choose Autumn over Ruby, and this is how I’m going to show it to her.

I owe Ruby nothing.

I owe Autumn *everything*.

“I promise.” She leans forward, her beautiful eyes wide as she waits for me to continue.

I take a deep breath, then force out the words.

“Ruby has magic.” A knot forms in my chest after I say it, but I push myself to continue, needing to prove I’m more loyal to the girlfriend I *chose* than to the mate who was unwelcomely thrust upon me. “It’s not earth magic. She has a different type of magic.”

“Oh?” Autumn raises a perfectly arched eyebrow, and I can tell she’s intrigued.

“She can make people see things that aren’t there,” I say, and the awful feeling of betrayal grows the more I speak,

tasting like metal in the back of my throat.

This is wrong.

I shouldn't have come here.

I shouldn't be telling her this.

But it's too late to take it back now.

“What can she make people see?” Autumn is calm—scarily calm. She glances at the codex, as if we might find answers there, but I've read the book front to back and know there's nothing in it that will help make sense of Ruby's ability.

“It's all illusions, so they're not tangible. It's nothing dangerous,” I backtrack, since I don't want Autumn to think Ruby's a demon, like I did when I saw her mark. “She made a rose look like it bloomed. She changed her hair color to blonde. And she made it look like there was an apple in the center of a table, even though there was nothing there.”

I hold back the part about Ruby making it look like she was standing in Autumn's place, since I don't want to stir up jealousy between them. And I don't tell Autumn about how Ruby can make herself invisible, because I don't want Autumn to worry that Ruby could be spying on her—or on anyone.

“How do you know all of this?” she finally asks.

“My grandfather sent me to the Lawrence's yesterday to see if I could try again to see if Ruby has earth magic.” It's not a lie, but it's close enough to the truth that she shouldn't question it. “She couldn't make a rose bloom, but she could create the *illusion* that the rose bloomed. We tested it some more, but she got scared, and she tried to run last night, so my grandfather's having her stay at his house for the time-being.”

“He knows what she can do?”

“Not yet,” I say. “But as my future partner who will stand by my side when I'm the alpha of this pack, I owe it to you to tell you what's going on. And I trust you to keep it secret until we decide how to move forward.”

Autumn says nothing for a few seconds, and I worry she's going to question one of the many holes in the story—especially why I feel the need to keep Ruby's secret from the pack's alpha.

Then she looks down and picks at her cuticles, which is something she only does when she's nervous.

“What's wrong?” I ask, and I take her hands in mine, to show her she's safe with me.

When she looks back up, her hazel eyes are wide and vulnerable. “You just called me your future partner,” she says, and she glances down before continuing. “Not your future mate.”

Shit.

She's right. Before this moment, I've only ever referred to her as my future mate.

Now that I know she'll never be my mate, it feels wrong to say it out loud.

But she's watching me, waiting for an answer, and I need to figure out a way around this—quickly.

“Don't you think ‘partner’ is more meaningful?” I ask. “It means we chose each other, instead of the universe forcing us together.”

I pray she believes it.

Which she should, since it's true.

“I guess.” She continues to study me, and I have a sudden wave of doubt if she truly believes me or not. “Thanks for telling me the truth about Ruby,” she says, and while I'm surprised by the change of subject, I'm glad she seems to be putting the partner/mate switch-up behind us. “Would you mind if I try helping out with her?”

“Help out how?” I ask, on edge about the two of them being near each other, never mind alone together.

“You said she still hasn't demonstrated any earth magic,” she says, sounding more and more confident as she speaks.

“I’m the strongest magic user in the pack for decades. If she has even a trace of earth magic inside her, maybe I can help bring it out.”

“You’d do that for her?”

“It’s our duty as pack members—and as future leaders—to ensure that all members of the pack are trained to their maximum potential,” she says, and she glances at the codex, as if looking for approval for following our laws so diligently. “If she has earth magic along with illusion magic, she’ll be a major asset to us. I’m happy to help in any way I can.”

A wave of love and appreciation for Autumn rolls through me at how she’s putting the pack above her own biases toward Ruby. It’s one of the many reasons why I chose her, and why I’ll continue to choose her as the one to stand by my side for the rest of our lives.

“That’s really generous of you,” I say. “Thank you.”

“Anytime.” She slowly gets out of her chair, lowers herself onto my lap, and buries her fingers through my hair as she looks deeply into my eyes.

Desire courses through me, and I’m no longer focused on anything other than her hips pressing against mine.

“Now, I think I need a break from studying,” she says, and she lowers her lips to mine, and all thoughts of anything other than the current moment disappear around me.

But when I close my eyes, it isn’t Autumn’s face I see in my mind.

It’s Ruby’s.

And I can’t get rid of the worry eating at my soul that unless I go to extremes, I might never be able to shut out the mate bond, no matter how hard I try.

Ruby



I'M PRACTICING CREATING illusions of objects and trying to make their shadows look natural when the front door opens and someone walks inside.

I immediately drop the illusion of the small potted cactus I was working on.

Is Connor back already? Does he want to apologize for telling me he wants me out of here as soon as possible?

God, I hope so. I keep seeing the cold look in his eyes when he told me he wants me to leave Pine Valley, and I feel rejected all the way down to my soul.

But even though I want Connor to be the one who walks into this room, I know it's likely Jax returning after talking to the witches.

Dread pools in my stomach at what Jax might have discovered, and my bones rattle with fear at the thought of being alone with him.

But I have to believe that Connor wouldn't have left me alone here if he truly thinks Jax wishes me harm. And if Jax *does* intend me harm, I'll have to be quick on my feet and figure out a way to use my magic to get out of here.

Or I can do what Connor recommended and tell Jax whatever he wants to know. That's probably my safest bet right now.

I stand and ready myself to face Jax... but it's not Jax who enters the room.

It's Autumn. She's wearing an all-black leather outfit, and when she sizes me up, it's clear she doesn't like what she sees.

I shiver even though there are no drafts in the room.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, bracing myself for her to pounce on me and try to claw my eyes out because of the way I look at Connor.

As much as I hate it, she wouldn't be totally wrong for doing so.

"I want to help you connect with earth magic," she says, catching me majorly by surprise. "I'm the strongest magic user in generations, and Connor thought it would be a good idea for me to see if I can bring anything out of you."

"Connor sent you?" I have a hard time believing it's true, but it makes more sense than Autumn volunteering out of the kindness of her heart.

"Is that so crazy?" she asks.

"No," I say quickly. "I just thought he'd come with you."

Or did I just *want* him to have come with her?

"He has Guardian training right now. I do, too, but he wanted me to come by before Jax gets back." She looks me up and down with her sharp eyes, sizing me up. "So, are you just going to stand there, or should we head outside and get started?"

Despite my surprise, I'm in no position to turn down anyone who wants to help, no matter how intimidating they might be.

"I'm ready if you are," I say, and even though I doubt I have any earth magic, I'm glad to try again—even though Autumn looks like she'd rather throttle my throat than help me improve.

It's way warmer today than yesterday, so the snow on the ground is mostly melted, leaving wet grass and mud in its wake.

Autumn motions to the table on the deck, and I take a seat on one of the chairs. It's slightly damp, but I don't complain.

She remains standing.

"We can use our magic to manipulate more than just dirt and plants," she begins, as if she's a teacher in front of a classroom. "My go-to is something that can create far more damage."

"What's that?" I ask, half-intrigued, and half-scared.

"Rocks." She grins. "Stay still. Connor won't be happy if you end up getting hurt."

There's an edge in her voice at the last part, but she turns to face the woods and holds both palms out toward the trees before I can ask any more questions.

At first, nothing happens.

Then rocks float toward her, twelve of them in all, each one about the size of a fist. Soon they're moving in a circle around her body, as if she's the center of a giant clock, and green energy crackles around them, her red hair blowing around her as the rocks create a vortex with her in the middle of it.

Even though she's in her human form, it's clear in this moment that she's far more powerful than a mere mortal.

"Remember—stay still," she warns, and suddenly one of the rocks is hurtling in my direction faster than I can blink.

Wind whooshes by me as it passes by my face and hits the outside wall of Jax's house with a loud thump.

I flinch, and the only thing keeping me from bolting out of that chair when she throws the next rock is the knowledge that if I move, the rock might smash into my head instead of the house.

She throws another above my head, the next to the deck floor a few inches away from my right foot, and the next a few inches from my left. My heart's pounding, blood rushes to my head, and I wrap my fingers around the arms of the chair, praying for her terrifying demonstration to end soon.

I'd make myself invisible if I wasn't trying to hide my illusion magic from her.

Finally, she pauses.

Seven rocks remain. But instead of throwing them near me, she lets them fall to the ground in a circle around her feet.

I remain still, not wanting to make any sudden moves in case she tries something else.

She tosses her hair over her shoulder and smiles again, as if nothing out of the ordinary just happened. "That's one of my favorite tricks," she says brightly. "And if you keep trying to seduce my boyfriend, you might find yourself at the wrong end of one of those rocks."

My stomach drops, and my tongue feels like a brick in the center of my mouth. "You didn't come here to help me," I realize. "You came here to threaten me."

"I came here to warn you to keep your paws off my boyfriend." Her gaze is locked on mine, and she narrows her eyes, as if she's trying to get me to lower mine in submission.

My body tenses, and I instinctively know it's some sort of wolf dominance thing.

I can't let her win.

If I do, she'll consider me subservient to her. And I refuse to give her the upper hand, no matter how terrifying her magic might be.

So I stand up, wanting to be on equal footing with her.

Satisfaction courses through me when she steps back in surprise.

"You have nothing to worry about," I say, feeling stronger with each word I speak. "Because Connor wants me out of Pine Valley as soon as possible."

"As he should, given your demon illusion magic," she snarls.

Betrayal rips at my heart. "He told you?"

“Of course he told me,” she says. “He trusts me with everything. I’m his future mate.”

An intense feeling of *wrongness* crashes through me, and I can’t stop my next words before they escape my lips.

“How do you know?”

She tenses, my question apparently catching her off-guard, and I brace myself for another rock to come flying my way.

“Connor and I are connected,” she says so steadily that I fear she’s about to snap. “He’s going to be my mate. I turn nineteen in a few weeks, and when the mate bond ignites, he won’t so much as look at you anymore.”

Her words sting, but I force myself to not show it. “How does the mate bond ‘ignite?’” I ask, unable to resist the need to learn more.

“You’re full of questions today.” She glares at me again. “Why do you want to know?”

“Why don’t you want to tell me?” I challenge in return.

I don’t know where this sudden boldness is coming from. But I refuse to let Autumn see me as weak, no matter how much more powerful than me she might be. So I wait for her to elaborate, knowing that if I remain silent for long enough, she’ll be pressed to say *something*.

I have a sneaking suspicion—or hope—about what she might say. It’s been on the back of my mind since Connor tackled me in the woods, but I thought it was too crazy to voice out loud.

Now’s my opportunity to find out if I’m right, and despite the fact that Autumn is capable of killing me with a flick of her wrist, I’m not going to throw it away.

Ruby



“FINE. I’LL TELL YOU.” Autumn tosses her hair over her shoulder and smiles, as if she’s envisioning the moment when the mate bond between her and Connor will happen. “As soon as both shifters in the pair have turned nineteen, the bond happens at first touch,” she says. “Skin-to-skin contact—it doesn’t matter where. I’ve heard it feels like fireworks, and I’ve seen it happen a few times. Their eyes glow, and the magic visibly connects them. The eyes are the windows to the soul, and they’re the gateways for the bond to join the souls of the mated pair together.”

I’m frozen, my mind back at that moment in the woods instead of in the present where I’m standing here with Autumn.

When Connor tackled me, it was the first time he touched me.

Autumn will never mate with Connor.

Because *I’m* mates with Connor.

The reality of it hits me like a bomb, and I’m shellshocked as I soak it in.

But why did Connor lie and tell me that the magic I saw was a spell to hold me down?

The answer is painfully and unbearably obvious.

He doesn’t want me to tell anyone about what happened between us because *he doesn’t want anyone to know we’re mates.*

And he wants me to leave Pine Valley.

He doesn't want me.

We're supposed to be destined for each other, and he doesn't even want to give me a chance.

The realization hurts deep in my soul. It's like someone's ripping out my heart, throwing it to the ground, and stomping it to smithereens. I can't focus. I can't breathe. All I can think about is the coldness in Connor's eyes when he told me he wanted me to leave town for good.

The pain is a million times worse after learning that he knows we're mates.

And I have a sneaking suspicion that if Autumn finds out, she might carry through on that threat and put me on the wrong side of one of those rocks.

Is that why Connor wants me gone? Is he trying to protect me from Autumn?

It's far better than the alternative.

But if he truly thinks she might hurt me, maybe it's best that I do whatever I can to protect myself—even if it means walking away from the person who's supposed to complete my soul.

Unless there's another option... one that might be far less painful.

"Is it possible to break a mate bond?" I ask, hoping I sound neutral and not like someone who just learned that her fated mate rejected her.

Rejected.

The word crushes my soul.

I hate the thought of severing the tie with Connor. I feel so safe around him, and I know that with him nearby, I'll always have someone in my corner.

But he rejected me, and his girlfriend will likely have it out for me if she discovers the truth. And at the end of the day, Connor and I don't really know each other yet.

Maybe it'll be for the best if we break the bond before it goes any further. Then he can have his perfect life with Autumn, and I can leave Pine Valley with nothing tying me down to this godforsaken place.

It would be a win-win.

If it's possible.

"You have a lot of questions about this," Autumn observes, tilting her head as she studies me with those unnervingly conniving eyes of hers.

"It's interesting." I shrug, hoping to look and sound casual about it. "But you don't have to tell me if you don't want to. I can always ask someone else."

Someone like Connor.

The unspoken threat hangs in the air, and I brace myself, praying that if she launches an attack, my wolf will come out and somehow know how to fend her off. If not, I can always try to go invisible again. She can't hit what she can't see.

I'm playing with fire. I know I am. But I'm desperate for answers, and I'm so shaken by what I just learned that I'm willing to push to get them.

"Not everyone meets their mate in their lifetime," Autumn finally says, and I relax at the fact that she's talking instead of trying to smash my head into a pulp. "Having a mate is a blessing from the gods. But there are occasional instances where someone wants to break their mate bond. If that person wants to keep their own magic, then the only way to break the bond is for their mate to die."

Ice-cold horror floods through me as her words set in.

Because that's *not* an option.

I can't imagine living in this world without Connor in it. The pain of the thought hurts a million times more than his rejection ever could.

"Usually they get someone to do it for them, because it's nearly impossible to kill your own mate," Autumn continues, either not noticing how much her words distress me, or not

caring. “Those who try and succeed end up shattering their souls in the process.”

She doesn’t elaborate, and I wonder if she knows someone who’s experienced such a thing.

The thought of hurting Connor at all—let alone killing him—is enough to put cracks in my soul. I can’t imagine how painful it would be for someone who goes through with it.

How desperate and cruel would they have to be to resort to something so terrible?

“You said death is the only way to break the bond if they want to keep their magic,” I say, wanting to keep her talking. “Is there another way? One that involves getting rid of their magic?”

“Correct. The mate bond is magic, and it feeds off magic to stay alive,” she says. “If one or both of the mates get their magic stripped, the bond will sever with it.”

“How does a wolf strip their magic?” I ask.

“Why?” She raises an eyebrow. “Are you interested?”

“I want to go home and get my life back,” I say, although I can’t bring myself to say that I’m interested in stripping my magic.

My star mark aches at the thought. Because I just got my magic. I’m just learning how to use it. My magic is a part of me, and getting rid of it would be like carving out a piece of my soul.

And now that I know about the supernatural world, I’ll never be able to return to my old life, no matter how much I wish I could.

“All you have to do is ask the witches,” she says simply. “The spell can only be done by extremely powerful witches, but we have some here in Pine Valley. I can take you to them if you want.”

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” I say.

“I’d be happy to help.” The smile she flashes me this time is downright feral.

“Well, I’m not doing it,” I say. “But thanks for the offer.”

“Anytime,” she says, the word dripping with venom.

She’s like a poisonous snake, and I have no idea how Connor doesn’t see it.

“Why are you so interested in mate bonds, anyway?” she asks, and I tense at the possibility that she’s figured it out.

“You brought it up.” I try to stay calm, focusing on slowing my racing heart. “It’s interesting.”

“It is,” she agrees. “And it’s highly looked down upon to try getting between someone and their mate. You understand, right?”

I push down a smile at the irony of her statement. Because if anyone’s trying to get in the way of a mate bond right now, it’s her.

“I do,” I say, hoping I sound equally as dangerous as she does. “And I hope it goes well with you and Connor on your birthday.”

I can’t help but feel a slight thrill at the fact that it’s going to go anything *but* well. And while I normally don’t like wishing harm on people, she did threaten to smash my head in with a rock, so I don’t feel overly bad about it.

“Connor and I are meant for each other. It *will* go well,” she says, the confidence in her tone astounding me. “Anyway, I’m done here. I expect you know that this conversation needs to stay between us?”

She wipes the dirt off her hands, as if reminding me of her threat.

“Don’t worry. I have zero interest in getting between you and your mate,” I say.

It’s not a lie, given that Connor isn’t her mate.

She nods in approval, looking strangely satisfied. “I’m glad we worked that out,” she says, and then she shifts into her

wolf form and runs into the forest without looking back, somehow leaving me with more problems than I already had when I woke up this morning.

Ruby



I NEED TO FIND CONNOR.

I have to tell him that I know.

But Autumn likely went straight back to him, and I have no way of contacting him. Plus, a part of me dreads facing him. He already rejected me once, and I doubt that will change now that I know the truth. It might even make him want to get rid of me faster.

Plus, if Jax comes back and I'm not here, he'll be furious. I've already induced enough of his anger so far. I'm lucky he's letting me have free roam of the house. For all I know, he has a basement cell or something, and I don't want to risk having my freedom stripped from me even more.

Instead, I wander around, exploring a bunch of the rooms until finding the library.

The small, traditionally styled room smells like old books, and there are no windows in it, which makes it feel like a secret cave. An intricately carved wooden desk faces outward, and shelves of books both old and new climb up to the ceiling. I doubt any of them hold information about my star mark, since if they did, Jax wouldn't have needed to go to the witches. But I have nothing else to do right now, so I figure it won't hurt to poke around a bit.

The library is divided into sections—world religions, mythology from different cultures, and history, among many others. There's even a small section for fiction, and the books there appear to be surprisingly well-read.

I eventually find the section with books about shifters, and I settle in to start reading. The information in them is interesting, but there's nothing about star marks or any sort of magic that shifters have other than earth magic—not even in the books about the original shifters who were created by witches to protect the world from the ever-growing population of vampires.

I read about vampires next, tracing all the way back to the original vampire, Ambrogio. His story fascinates me, specifically because he was rejected by the woman he loved—the goddess of the moon, Selene.

I'm absorbed in the book when I hear the front door open, and I slam it closed, shoving it back into the slot where I found it. Once making sure everything in the room is exactly how I found it, I hurry out of the library, down the hall, and into the living room.

Jax is there with three people—a man, a woman, and a petite girl with brown hair and a splattering of freckles on her face. She looks slightly younger than me, and judging by her resemblance to the man and woman, she's their daughter.

All three of them radiate confidence and power.

“Ruby.” Jax sizes me up suspiciously. “Where were you?”

“The library.” The truth seems like the best way to go, given that I wasn't doing anything wrong, since I had free reign of the house and the doors weren't locked.

“And what were you doing in the library?” he presses.

I glance at the girl and her parents, unsure who they are and how much I should say in front of them.

“Just looking for information about the thing we were talking about earlier,” I say, figuring it's vague enough to not get me into any trouble.

The girl smiles, as if she knows something I don't. “Do you mean your star mark?” she asks, her voice light and airy.

I look to Jax, and he nods to let me know it's okay to continue. “Yeah,” I say, refocusing on the girl and her

presumed parents. They're dressed differently than anyone I've seen in pack territory, with the girl and her mom are in conservative skirts and blouses, and her dad in slacks and a blazer. "Are you witches?"

"Correct," she says. "I'm Hazel. These are my parents, Seraphina and Perry."

"You call your parents by their first names?"

Out of everything going on here, that shouldn't be the most shocking. Yet, it somehow is.

"Hazel is the most powerful witch born in centuries," her mom—Seraphina—says. "She calls everyone by their first names, as is proper for someone of her station."

"Interesting," I say, although it's not nearly as interesting to me as the reason why they're here. "Do you know what my star mark means?"

I direct the question at Hazel, since she seems to be the one in charge here.

"I believe so," she says. "But first, can we see it?"

"Of course." I pull the elastic band of my lounge pants down slightly, revealing the mark on my hip.

They walk toward me to get a closer look. Seraphina's lips part in surprise and amazement, and she brushes her finger against the mark without bothering to ask if I mind.

I almost step back, but I stay put, since these people seem to have the answers I need, and I don't want to do anything that might offend them.

I can barely breathe as I wait for them to finish inspecting it.

"What is it?" I ask, unable to wait any longer.

"It's the mark of Selene." Seraphina steps back, and I pull my waistband up to cover the mark. "Which means you've been blessed by the cosmic goddess of the moon."

Selene.

The goddess I read about in the book.

It can't be a coincidence. If this mark is truly Selene's, I must have been drawn to that book for a reason.

"But Selene's in an eternal sleep with Endymion," I say, recalling the story of the man Selene chose to be with after rejecting Ambrogio. It's crazy to think that these ancient gods exist, but my life is full of crazy now, so I'm just rolling with it by this point. "Zeus cursed Endymion into an eternal sleep, and Selene joined him so she could be with him forever. How could she mark me if she's sleeping? And if she's the goddess of the moon, why's her mark a star?"

"You know your history," Hazel says in approval.

"I've been doing some reading."

Respect flashes in the young witch's eyes. "Very interesting," she says. "As for your first question, you're right that Selene couldn't have marked you. But she and Endymion have many daughters. Four of them have taken on Selene's cosmic duties and rule in her place, splitting the jobs between themselves. It could have been one of them."

"As for the mark being a star instead of the moon?" I ask again.

"We wondered that as well," Seraphina says. "We believe it's because Selene and her daughters represent not just the moon, but the cosmos as a whole. The North Star—which is the specific star you're marked with—also represents fulfillment, purpose, and destiny. Being marked with it likely shows that you have an important role to play in the supernatural world. And while we don't know what that role is yet, we intend to figure it out."

"Wow," I say, stunned nearly speechless. "That's... a lot."

"It is," she agrees, but before she can say anything else, someone opens the front door and hurries into the living room.

Connor.

My heart clenches at the sight of him.

His dark hair is messy, as if he's been running. His eyes go to me first, and he studies me up and down, as if he's making sure I'm okay.

As if he cares.

You're being silly, says an inner voice that I know is my wolf. *Of course Connor cares. He's our mate.*

He doesn't want us, I think, and I push her voice down as far as possible, not wanting her to distract me from the facts.

It feels strange to talk to my wolf, since hearing voices isn't exactly something that's looked upon highly in the regular world. But Penny told me that this is completely normal, and that as I continue connecting with my wolf, I'll be able to control my shifts.

Right now, I don't care about my shifts.

I only care about getting her to shut up.

"I heard you were back with the witches," Connor says to Jax. His tone is all-business, and his concerned eyes flick to me again before returning to his grandfather. "What's going on?"

Seraphina looks to Jax in question.

"It's okay," Jax says. "My grandson already knows quite a lot. We can trust him."

"Very well." She straightens her shoulders and quickly gets Connor up to speed.

As she repeats the part about suspecting that one of Selene's daughters marked me, my thoughts flash back to the blonde woman in the woods.

"The goddess who marked me," I say, and all their eyes go to me. "I met her. Sort of. In the woods, on the night I shifted for the first time."

"The night of the blood moon," Hazel says, and I nod in confirmation. "What did she say to you?"

"She told me that everything was going to be okay," I say, purposefully omitting the part about my eye color. "Then she

touched my head, and it was like an electric shock, and I passed out. I think that was the moment she marked me.”

“Did she tell you her name?”

“No.” I shrug. “That was all.”

“Interesting,” she says slowly. “Can we speak with you? Privately?”

I glance to Connor, as if I need his permission, then quickly realize that I don’t. Because firstly, I don’t need his approval for my decisions. Secondly, the witches are higher ranked than the wolves. What they say goes around here.

From Connor’s stiff stance, he’s thinking the same thing.

“You can go to the library,” Jax says, and he looks to me, his eyes hard. “Since you already know where it is.”

I shift uneasily on my feet, although I quickly stop and stand still again, not wanting Jax to think he intimidates me.

“Great.” I give Connor a final glance, immediately regretting it after seeing his ambivalent expression.

He’s a mystery to me, and I hate it.

I tear my gaze away from him, not wanting to look at him for a moment longer than necessary. Then I lead the witches to the library, my heart pounding in anticipation about what they want to ask me that can’t be said in front of the others, and unsure how much to tell them when they do.

Ruby



HAZEL'S FATHER—PERRY—IS the last to enter the library, and he shuts the doors to lock us in.

Before I realize what's happening, Hazel holds her hands out, and a blaze of fire ignites in a circle around us. The flames are so high that they lick the ceiling, hot against my skin as they crackle and pop so loudly that I can barely hear my thoughts.

Panic grips my chest and throat, tightening so much that it's smothering me.

The witches are trying to kill me. They're like hungry hawks surrounding me, zeroing in on me like I'm their prey and they're ready for a feast.

I need to get out of here.

I scan the area, searching for a break between the flames, but there's nothing. The room has no windows, so there's no escape there, which means I need to run for the doors and pray to escape with the least amount of burns possible.

Better burned than dead.

I make headway for the doors, but Seraphina grabs my wrist, stopping me. Her grip is stronger than expected, and even though I try to free myself, my attempts are unsuccessful.

"Connor!" I scream his name. "Help!"

"They can't hear you," Hazel says calmly, the flickering flames reflecting in her eyes like she's the devil in disguise.

I narrow my eyes at her and try again to pull myself out of Seraphina's grip.

Again, I'm unsuccessful.

These witches are stronger than they look.

Maybe if I can manage to shift, I'll surprise them enough to get away. But when I try to connect with my wolf, I get nothing.

Seraphina pulls me closer. "We're not trying to hurt you," she says. "We're here to help you."

"By burning me alive?" I glare at her, hoping she sees my rage instead of my fear.

"Are the flames touching you?" she asks. "Are they burning you? Is there smoke in your lungs choking you?"

I take a deep breath, surprised by how clear the air feels. And while the fire is warm enough to make beads of sweat form on my forehead, it isn't so hot that it hurts. And none of the furniture in the room is catching on fire. Even the books are immune—much to my relief.

"No," I admit, relaxing slightly.

"As you know, witches control the element of fire," Hazel says, her voice clear and bright. "I created this fire, and I can easily contain it, as you see now. Nothing will burn that I don't want to burn."

"But *why* are you doing this?" I ask. "To show off how strong you are?"

"That's a plus. But it's not the reason." She gives me a small smile, seeming to enjoy this. "Do you hear how the fire crackles?"

"I do."

"It blocks out sound," she explains. "It'll prevent our conversation from being heard by anyone who's not standing in this circle."

"Oh." I gaze around at the fire surrounding us, seeing it in an entirely new light as the pieces click into place. "It's a

sound barrier so Jax and Connor can't listen in on our conversation."

"Correct."

"That's... convenient," I settle on the proper word, then turn to Seraphina, whose death grip is still locked around my wrist. "You can let me go. I'm not going to run."

"A smart move." She releases my wrist, and I pull it toward my chest and step away from her.

She remains on guard for a few seconds, then relaxes when she sees I'm not going anywhere.

"What did you want to ask me?" I look to Seraphina, then Perry, then finally settle on Hazel.

"Jax told us you haven't presented with any elemental magic," Hazel says. "He thinks you're an omega. Or, as we call our witches with no elemental magic, a cinder."

"Because cinders don't give off flames," I guess.

"Exactly." She smiles again, and now that I know she's not trying to burn me alive, I have a sudden feeling that if we met in the normal world, we could become friends. "But given your star mark, we think it's highly unlikely that you have zero magic to speak of."

I glance at the floor, realizing a second later that my reaction likely gave me away.

"You can trust us," Hazel continues. "Being touched by a goddess is a gift. As witches, we value all gifts—especially rare ones. But we can't help you if you don't tell us what's going on."

I think back to my conversation with Connor. He asked me to not tell the *pack* about my magic, but he didn't say anything about the witches. Plus, he betrayed me when he told Autumn my secret. He's loyal to her. Not to me.

The witches know more than the shifters. They have more clout in the supernatural world. If anyone can help me, it's them.

I meet Hazel's gaze—her eyes are the same color as her name—and she says nothing more as she waits for me to speak.

“I only got my magic a few days ago, so I don't know much about it, but I can make people see things that aren't there,” I say, feeling a wave of relief from telling her the truth. “I can create illusions.”

She presses her lips together as she takes it in, and I worry she's going to think it's demon magic, like Connor seemed to when he first found out.

“Interesting,” she finally says, and I release a long breath. “Show us.”

No point in holding back now.

“Okay,” I say, and keeping my eyes locked on hers, I use my magic to make my hair blonde, like I did while practicing with Connor.

Hazel's eyes light up like a child watching a spectacular act at a circus. “Fascinating,” she says, and she looks to her parents. “Can you see it, too?”

“We can,” Seraphina confirms.

“So, you're not planting the illusion in my mind,” Hazel says, returning her focus to me. “You're creating it for everyone to see.”

“I haven't thought about it one way or the other, but yes, I suppose that's what it feels like when I do it.” I release my magic, allowing my hair to return to its normal brown, and the tingling in my brain subsides.

“I've never seen or heard of anything like this before,” Hazel says, and I'm not sure if that's a good thing or a bad thing. “What more can you do?”

I tell them everything, minus making myself appear in Autumn's place. They do *not* need to know about my feelings for Connor, especially because the humiliation of admitting that my fated mate rejected me would be too much for me to bear right now.

Or ever.

“Thank you for sharing this with us,” Hazel says when I’m done, and she releases her hold on her magic, the flames disappearing into thin air. “I think we’re done here.”

“That’s it?” I ask.

Seraphina opens the door to the hall. “Follow us,” she says. “We’ll chat with the shifters and handle this from here.”

I glance at Hazel, who nods in encouragement, and follow them back out to the living room where Connor and Jax are anxiously waiting.

Connor stops pacing, looking relieved at the sight of me.

“Is everything okay?” he asks.

“Yes,” I say, even though I have more questions now than ever.

Hazel moves to stand by my side, and I feel stronger with her next to me. “Ruby’s coming with us,” she says confidently, as if it’s already been discussed and decided.

“What?” Connor and I say at the same time.

“You can learn more from us than you can with them,” she tells me. “You’ll be *respected* more with us than you are with them.” She directs that part to Jax, her distaste for his treatment of me clear, and I like her more by the second. “Out of all the supernatural species, the witches are the most in touch with and devoted to the gods. You’ve been star touched by a goddess. As far as we’re concerned, that means you belong with us.”

“Wow.” I take a few seconds to digest what she’s saying, caught completely off-guard. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Say yes,” Connor says, watching me with total detachment.

The rejection burning through me is so intense that I can barely stand it. “You don’t want me here,” I say, even though I already know he feels that way, since he told me as much this morning.

“Like Hazel said, you’re better off with them than with us,” he says. “You’ve caused us nothing but trouble, and it’ll be a relief to get you out of our hair.”

The words are his worst gut-punch yet, hurting so badly that it feels like he’s knocked the wind out of me.

He hates me.

Just the fact that I exist screws up his long-term plans with Autumn, and he *hates* me for it.

And he’s completely unaware that I know the truth.

I can’t leave without telling him. If he’s going to reject me, then he deserves to know that I’m aware of exactly what he’s doing to me.

“Understood,” I say, trying to sound as aloof as he does. “But I need to talk to you first. Alone.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.” He keeps his gaze fixed on mine, his tone sharp with warning.

“Talk to me, or I don’t go with them.”

He wants me gone so badly that it seems like the best threat I can make.

“Fine,” he gives in, and he glares at me, spins around, and walks toward the library, motioning for me to follow him without bothering to say another word.

Ruby



AS I FOLLOW Connor to the library, I feel separated from my body, and each step fills me with dread.

What am I doing? How will it help anything to tell him that I know we're mates?

Maybe I should forget about it. Telling him won't change anything.

It won't make him want me more than he wants *her*.

My jealousy disgusts me. He met her first—he *chose* her. I have no right to him.

Wrong, my wolf says in my mind. *We're his mate. We have more claim on him than she ever will.*

The fact that my wolf thinks about us as a "we" seriously freaks me out. Does she think we're the same person? Or does she think she's a separate entity living in my body?

I don't know, but for now, I push her down as far as possible.

This is *my* body. I'm in control of it. Not her.

Suddenly I'm in the library with Connor, the door closed. He stands across the room, as far away from me as possible, as if he's afraid I might bite.

"What do you want?" he asks.

"I know about the mate bond," I say quickly, wanting to get it out before I can second-guess myself any further.

I don't know what kind of reaction I expected, but he stays perfectly still, unfazed by my statement.

His apathy hurts more than anything else possibly could have.

"How did you find out?" he asks.

"I read about it in the library."

It's a lie, but telling him I got the information from Autumn will likely do more harm than good. Especially since he might ask me about the time Autumn and I spent together, and I have zero interest in telling him that his girlfriend threatened to kill me.

I don't want it to sound like I'm trying to turn him against her.

If he ever decides to be with me, it will be because it's because it's what he wants, and not because I tried to manipulate a decision out of him.

His breaths are slow and steady, his eyes twist with pain, and I feel a sliver of hope that he'll stop trying to fight the bond.

"This doesn't change anything. I'm not breaking up with Autumn," he finally says, shattering any hope I might have had. "Autumn and I made a promise to each other. I care about her, and I respect her. The pack views us as their future leaders. Turning away from her would be the same as turning my back on the pack."

"The pack respects mate bonds," I say, unable to stop myself from standing my ground.

I'm not trying to make him do anything, but mate bonds are sacred to wolves. I know it, my wolf knows it, and I'm sure Connor knows it, too.

It's why he's so conflicted that he looks like he's about to burst out of his skin.

"They can't respect what they don't know exists," he says steadily. "Because no one is going to know about this. Especially not Autumn."

“Don’t worry. I have no intention of telling her,” I assure him. “If she ever finds out, it should come from you and not me.”

“I’m not breaking up with her,” he repeats, as if he’s trying to drill it into my brain.

Or maybe he’s trying to drill it into *his* brain. As if the more times he says it, the more he won’t want to do it.

“I understood you the first time you said it,” I say, frustration building in my blood at the fact that I’m in this position at all. “But you never said you loved her.”

“What?” He jerks back, looking truly surprised by my statement.

“You said you respect her. You said you care about her. You said you made a promise to her. But you never said you love her.”

The more I say, the more I’m convinced it’s true.

Or maybe I just *hope* it’s true.

This whole situation is breaking my heart, and I hate it.

“Autumn and I have been together for years. Of course I love her,” he says, although for reasons I can’t place, I’m not convinced. “I’m a logic-oriented person, and Autumn’s the logical choice for my future wife. I made a promise to her. I’m not backing out of it.”

His future *wife*.

The word stings far more than I imagined it could.

“I understand,” I say, because what else am I supposed to say?

I want someone who wants me. Who appreciates me.

Connor clearly doesn’t. He doesn’t even want to give me a chance.

Regardless of the universe trying to push us together, I deserve better than that.

“Oh,” he says, sounding almost... surprised. “Thanks.”

“Sure.” I shrug, trying as hard as I can to not look like my heart is breaking. “I just thought it was important that before I leave, you knew that I know.”

“So, you’re going with them?”

“Trust me—I’m happy to get out of here.”

I don’t expect him to care, but he looks like I slapped him in the face. And while I don’t consider myself a vengeful person, I’m glad of it.

“It’s best for us to be apart,” he says, quickly composing himself. “The bond will weaken the longer we’re away from each other. The farther the better, but staying with the witches will do for now. And it might be enough, since we haven’t consummated the bond, or even done as much as kissed.”

His eyes drift to my lips, as if he wants to change that, and my heart pounds faster. A sudden thought crosses through my mind of him closing the space between us and kissing me like the world depends on it.

I’d melt into him if he did.

But despite the temptation of the mate bond, he hasn’t succumbed to it and cheated on Autumn. I respect him for it. He’s loyal to the people he cares about, and he keeps his promises, even if it causes him pain.

Right now, being here with him is causing *me* pain.

I need to get out of here.

“You’re going to make an excellent alpha one day,” I tell him, and then I hurry out of the library and go with the witches, not looking behind as I leave him standing in my wake.

Ruby



THE WITCHES LIVE across the river on the opposite side of the town, on a street with a court at the end of it, about a ten-minute drive away from the main drag. Their houses are closer together than the ones in pack territory, because unlike the wolves, they don't need open space to shift and go on runs.

Hazel and her parents live in the largest house at the end of the court. It's a white, Victorian mansion with a wraparound porch, a large turret tower, and a steep roof to cap off all three stories. It *looks* like a place where witches would live, and I can't help but wonder if it's haunted.

They set me up in a guest room that overlooks the gardens in the backyard and have me tell them about everything that happened to me these past few days over cups of tea. They listen intently as I go over every detail, not saying much. As we're finishing up, my eyelids feel like they're being weighed down by sledgehammers, and I barely make it back to the room before falling into a dead sleep.

I'm awoken the next morning by someone knocking on my door, and I glance at the clock, surprised when it says 4:30.

Why are they waking me up so early?

Except it's not pitch dark outside, like it should be at this time in the morning. Rays of dim sunlight are coming through the window.

It's *sunset*, which happens stupidly early this far north in the winter.

I slept for over twelve hours.

The knock on the door sounds again.

“Come in,” I say, sitting up and running my fingers through my messy hair.

It’s Hazel, and she enters with a box of delicious-smelling pizza.

“Sorry for waking you up,” she says sheepishly. “It’s just that you’ve been asleep forever, and the pizza’s hot.”

The room is more of a suite, and she places the pizza box on a small table near the window.

“It’s from the best pizza place in town,” she continues. “Extra cheese. And pepperoni. The cupped kind that holds in the grease.”

My stomach growls at the mention of pepperoni, which is a meat I’ve yet to try.

I’m a traitor to all the vegetarians in the world. But judging by how delicious the pizza smells, I’m not sorry about it.

“Thanks,” I say. “Give me a minute.”

I walk across the room and enter the ensuite bathroom, which is supplied with every amenity I could ask for, down to scented candles to freshen up the space. I brush my teeth and hair, still surprised every time I see my brown eyes in the mirror. I kept my changed eye color from Hazel and her parents, since whoever marked me—apparently a daughter of the goddess Selene—instructed me not to tell anyone. Until I hear otherwise, I assume that includes the witches.

When I re-enter the room, Hazel’s sitting down, and there are two bottles of Coke on the table. She looks so *normal* in her jeans and long-sleeve black top that it’s hard to believe she’s an all-powerful witch capable of lighting an entire room on fire.

She opens the pizza box and pulls out a massive slice. “Sit down and dig in,” she says, and her eyes light up as she takes the first bite.

I join her, and she’s right—the pizza is delicious. Even more so because of the grease sitting in the center of each

pepperoni.

“Good, right?” she asks, and I can only nod in response as I finish chewing.

“What have you been up to all day?” I ask.

“Just a few errands. Nothing interesting.” She shrugs. “I grabbed the pizza on my way home.”

“Thank you. It’s great,” I say, which earns me a smile. “And I know I said it last night, but thank you for letting me stay here.”

“You’ve been touched by a daughter of Selene,” she says. “You deserve a place with us.”

“Even though I’m a shifter and not a witch?”

“Being touched by a goddess is more meaningful than being a shifter *or* a witch.” She polishes off her first slice of pizza and starts on a second, and I do the same. “You’re special, and you deserve to be treated like it.”

I know she’s trying to give me a compliment, but it doesn’t feel as great as I think she intends.

I continue eating my pizza, not saying anything.

“What’s wrong?” she asks.

“I’ll never fit in with the humans again,” I start, figuring that’s as good of a place as any. “I’m clearly not a witch, and I thought I’d eventually fit in with the shifters, but I’m pretty sure they think my magic makes me some sort of demon.”

Let alone the fact that my mate rejected me, but I have zero interest in getting into *that* right now. Or ever. It would be best if I could erase all the feelings I have for Connor out of my heart for good.

Maybe the witches have a potion that can help me, but I’m not anywhere close to ready to talk about it yet. Even though Hazel feels like someone who could quickly become a close friend, I’ve only known her for less than a day, and I’m not one to pour my heart out to people I just met.

“You’re not a demon,” Hazel says, as confidently as ever.

“I know. But I’m the only person alive who’s been star touched, which means I have no one.” I take a large bite of my pizza, since if I’m wallowing, I should do it right and wallow into my food.

“You have me,” she says, a sad look crossing her eyes. “I know a thing or two about not fitting in.”

“But you’re a super powerful witch,” I say.

“Which makes me different. And people tend to avoid those who are different.”

“What do you mean?”

“First of all, there’s my parents,” she starts, and she sits straighter, like she’s getting ready to share a prepared speech. “They view me as a prized possession instead of an actual person, and they use me as a tool for power more than anything else. And let’s not get started on the others our age in the coven. The girls shy away from me—I’m not sure if they’re jealous of my magic or scared of it, but I think it’s a bit of both. And the guys... well, I’m far from the most attractive of the girls for them to pick from.”

“What are you talking about?” I ask, although I’m just trying to be nice. Hazel’s not hard to look at, but she’s someone who’d be described as “mousy” in the books I read, with no distinguishing features other than the freckles smattered across her cheeks and bridge of her nose.

“It’s okay. We both know it’s true.” She gives me a small smile to show she’s not offended, then creates ribbons of fire in her palms and plays with them, letting them slither around her fingers like pet snakes. “But beyond that, I think the guys are intimidated by my magic and don’t want to be with someone stronger than they are. Why would they, when there are other, more beautiful girls to choose from who won’t *emasculate* them by being so powerful?”

She brings the ribbons of fire together to form a ball of it in her hands, then closes her fingers around it so it vanishes into her palms. The remaining smoke trails up to the ceiling and disappears.

“I’m sure there’s someone out there for you,” I tell her, hoping to sound encouraging instead of like someone who was just rejected by her fated mate. “You just haven’t met him yet.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” she says with a mischievous smirk.

“*Have* you met someone?” I ask.

She glances around the room, as if checking to make sure no one’s listening. “If I tell you something, you have to promise to tell *no one*. Understand?”

“I promise,” I say, and I lean forward, ready for her to continue, since it’ll be nice to focus on someone else’s drama for a change instead of dwelling on my own.

Ruby



THE TURN of the conversation feels so *normal*, like one I'd have with Luna in our dorm room, and it's surprisingly easy to forget how much my life changed in the past few days.

"I have a boyfriend," she says quickly, her eyes lighting up with excitement. "He lives in town. He's *human*." She whispers the final word, like she's risking getting in trouble simply by saying it out loud.

"Witches aren't allowed to date humans?" I ask.

I know that shifters only date shifters. But witches seem more human than shifters, so dating one doesn't seem like it would be totally outside the realm of possibility.

"Some do, although it's highly frowned upon," she says. "But I'm not a normal witch. Regular rules don't apply to me."

"I'm sorry," I say, since it clearly bothers her greatly.

"Don't be," she says, perking up again. "Benjamin's great. He doesn't know what I am, and I intend to keep it that way."

"Forever?"

"I don't know." She chews on her lower lip, as if she hasn't thought it through. "But definitely for as long as I can. If he *does* ever find out, hopefully we'll have known each other long enough that he sees me for who I am instead of as the prodigal witch who's too powerful for her own good."

"People really think that about you?" I ask.

If they think that about Hazel, who at least has elemental fire magic that witches are supposed to have, then what will they think about me and my weird magic?

Hazel and her parents said they were on my side, but what about everyone else?

“They do,” she says, a trace of bitterness in her tone. “It’s why they want to keep me here, even though I eventually want to go to NYC and help oversee the Guardians there. I’ve been cooped up for my entire life—I’ve never left Pine Valley. But the city seems so exciting, and I want to be part of it. I belong there. I *know* I do.”

“You’ll get there,” I say. “I have faith in you.”

“Thanks.” She picks up another slice of pizza, and we both enjoy our food for a few more minutes.

As we eat, my mind drifts to Luna and my parents.

“My parents think I’m dead,” I say after polishing off my third slice. “As does my best friend.”

“I know,” she says solemnly.

“Do you think I’ll ever be able to tell them the truth?”

“I don’t know.” She shrugs, and my heart drops, since it’s hardly a promising response. “I wish I had a better answer. But even though I’m the most powerful witch around here, I don’t call the shots about anything that has to do with politics between the supernatural and human worlds.”

“Got it,” I say, since it was at least worth an ask.

“But there’s a reason why we did what we did,” she continues. “Your parents and best friend have no magic. They have no place in our world. The more distance you put between yourself and them, the safer for them it will be. Especially since you’ll have more eyes on you than ever if word about your magic gets out.”

“I understand,” I say, since I don’t want the people I love getting mixed up in the supernatural world, either. If they get hurt—or killed—because of me, I’ll never forgive myself.

“I wish I had better news for you,” she says.

“It’s not your fault.” I give her a small smile to show I truly do get it.

She looks down at her plate, and I have a feeling she wants to say something else.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

She takes a deep breath, then looks back up at me with her wide, child-like eyes. “I know I can never replace your best friend,” she says hesitantly. “But if anyone knows what’s it’s like to be different around here, it’s me. You and I are two of the most powerful people around, and I think we could be a pretty awesome duo, if we want to be.”

“*You’re* one of the most powerful people around,” I correct her. “I’m a shifter with no earth magic who doesn’t know how to shift, and I barely know what I can do with my illusion magic.”

“You can use it to trick people,” she says with a devious flash in her eyes. “The possibilities are endless. It’s going to be fun to find out what you’re capable of.”

“You’re going to help me?” I’m grateful, but also surprised about how easily Hazel seems to trust me.

Although considering everything she’s told me, I imagine she’s desperate for a friend.

“Of course I’m going to help you,” she says. “You bring a lot to the table. It would be foolish to let that go to waste. Plus, the goddess who star touched you brought us together for a reason. I can help you harness your magic so you can have more power than you’ve ever dreamed possible. Together, we’ll be unstoppable.”

“I haven’t had time to dream about much of anything, since I just found out about this magic a few days ago,” I remind her.

She gives me a sympathetic smile. “I can’t imagine how overwhelming it must be,” she says. “You need a break from it

all. What do you say we get out of here and have a bit of *human* fun?”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m meeting Benjamin in town in about an hour,” she says. “Want to come with? I can tell him to bring his friend Tristan. Tristan’s *hot*. I think you’ll like him.”

I can’t imagine myself being attracted to anyone other than Connor, since the mate bond created a connection between us that I’ll never experience again in my life.

But my other option is to stay here and brood about how the man who’s supposed to be my perfect match rejected me, and how my family and best friend think I’m dead.

Wallowing in my misery will only make me feel worse.

And maybe this Tristan guy *will* help me get my mind off Connor.

I won’t know if I don’t try.

“Will your parents mind?” I ask.

“They’ll be happy you’re getting out and seeing the town,” she says. “We won’t be in danger there, especially with my magic to protect us.”

“All right,” I say, feeling more excited by the second to do something normal for a change. “When do we leave?”

Her eyes light up instantly. “Forty-five minutes,” she says. “There are clothes in the dresser and makeup in the vanity. And trust me—once you see Tristan, you’re going to be glad I dragged you out.”

“I really hope so,” I say.

“I *know* so,” she says, and then she grabs the pizza box and leaves my room, giving me privacy to get ready for whatever adventure this night on the town might have in store for us.

Ruby



FORTY-FIVE MINUTES LATER, Hazel comes back into my room and looks over my all-black outfit in approval.

I've never been one to love fashion, but it's hard to go wrong with black. And she's wearing jeans and a conservative long-sleeve top, which actually makes me feel a bit *overdressed*.

"One final thing," she says, and she reaches into her back pocket and hands me an ID card. "You'll need this."

I take it from her and look at it. It's her New York ID, except it's horizontal—not vertical like the ones given to everyone under twenty-one.

A glance at the birth date makes the reason why clear.

It's a fake ID that says Hazel is twenty-three, even though there's no way that the small girl in front of me could ever pass as being older than eighteen, let alone older than twenty-one.

"Why are you giving this to me?" I ask.

"This is mine. I used it the first few times I went to this bar, but now all the bartenders know me and don't ask to see it," she says. "We could try to give them a large tip to see if they'll look the other way when you order a drink, but it'll be easier for you to just use this."

"Except I'm obviously not the one on the ID..." I say, unsure where she's going with this.

“You’re not the one on the ID right *now*,” she says, her lips curling up into a mischievous smirk. “But you have illusion magic. How about you put your new power to use and make it look like it’s your ID instead of mine?”

It’s not a terrible idea. I’ve never been one to drink a lot—the game of beer pong at Connor’s was one of the few exceptions—but being able to forge identification cards could be a good use of my magic.

So I take the ID card, focus on the photo of Hazel, and picture myself there instead.

My brain tingles, and within seconds, I’m staring at a picture of myself.

Hazel takes the card from me and studies it. “Very cool,” she says. “But why did you make your eyes turquoise?”

Crap.

I look at the photo again and use my magic to make my eyes brown.

“I usually wear color contacts.” I use the same excuse I told Connor. “Not prescription—just for fun. I lost them when I shifted.”

“Interesting,” she says, and for a moment I worry she doesn’t believe me. “You should probably change the name to yours, too.”

Relieved at how quickly she dropped the subject of my eye color, I quickly make the adjustment on the ID so it says my name instead of hers.

She examines it in approval. “How long will it last?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “The longest I’ve held an illusion has been a few minutes.”

She holds up the ID, as if trying to find any imperfections, then brings it back down. “I want to try something. Keep focusing on holding the illusion in place,” she instructs, and then she flips the card over so the photo is face-down on her palm.

I do as asked, and continue focusing on the illusion.

When she flips it back over, it still has the photo of me instead of her.

“The illusion doesn’t have to be in your field of vision for you to hold it,” she says. “It makes sense, since you were able to make yourself invisible and change your hair color, and you couldn’t see all those parts of yourself when you did it. But there’s something else I want to try. Keep holding onto your magic.”

“Okay,” I say, and she turns around and leaves the room.

She closes the door, and the tingling in my brain stops. I try to reach for it again, but it’s gone.

She re-enters a few seconds later.

“The illusion disappeared,” I say, since I’m sure that’s what happened. “I lost my hold on it when you closed the door.”

“It could be a distance thing,” she supposes, closing the space between us. “Or it could be because I was in a different room. We’ll have to keep testing it out. But let’s not tax you too much in a day. We want you to be able to create the illusion when you hand this thing over to the bartender.”

“I could just order a Coke instead,” I say, since I’d truly be fine with that.

“Where’s the fun in that?” she says. “You have this magic—you might as well put it to use.”

Her energy is infectious, and I can’t help but feel excited at the prospect of applying my magic to something in the real world. I won’t be hurting anyone by ordering a drink at a bar. And after everything I’ve been through these past few days, it might be good for me to have a little fun.

What *else* am I going to do—sit around in this witchy tower room and brood myself to death?

“I might as well start somewhere,” I say, and Hazel grins at my decision.

“I knew I liked you,” she says, and we finish getting ready, hop into her car, and head out to town.

* * *

The bar is cozy and rustic, with wood floors and exposed beams lining the ceilings. Vintage ski equipment decorates the walls, about half the people inside are still wearing their ski gear, and the distinct smell of yeasty beer permeates the room. It’s a totally different vibe than the fancy cocktail bar at the hotel where I stayed with Luna, but I kind of like it.

Hazel nabs us two seats at the bar, in front of an impressively large display of beer offered on tap. A few televisions are mounted on the wall below the ceiling, most of them showing various sports games, and one with the local news.

The bartender walks over to us—a tall, broad man in a plaid shirt, with a bushy beard and a blue baseball cap with “Bills” written across the front in large red font.

“Hazel,” he says to her, slowly filling up a pint with dark brown beer. “Who’s your friend?”

He glances at me, clearly expecting me to answer even though he directed the question to her.

“I’m Ruby,” I say, figuring the fewer details I give him, the better.

“Pretty name. I’m Frank,” he says, and then he looks back to Hazel. “What’ll it be?”

“Baby Guinness shots,” she says. “Make them doubles.”

He refocuses on me. “ID?”

Panic shoots through me—I’ve never used a fake ID before. And sure, I knew coming in that I was going to do this, but it’s a totally different ballgame when put on the spot.

But the longer I wait, the more awkward it will be, so I open the purse Hazel loaned me and dig through to find the ID.

Since it was out of sight for so long, the photo reverted to being of Hazel. So I take my time, as if making sure I'm pulling out the right card, and use my magic to change the photo and name to mine.

"Here you go." I give him a smile and hand it over, focusing on keeping the illusion in place.

He brings it close to his face and squints, and I hold my breath, feeling like time's slowing down.

He's looking at it for too long. I must have messed something up.

Still, I hold the image in place in my mind, praying to the goddess that this works.

I don't even care about drinking alcohol. I just don't want to fail at my first try of using my magic in the real world.

"I think it's almost time for me to invest in some glasses." He smiles and hands the ID back to me, and I pocket it as quickly as possible. "Two baby Guinness shots, coming right up."

Ruby



“IS THAT A SHOT OF BEER?” I ask, since all I know about Guinness is that it’s a popular beer from Ireland.

“There’s no Guinness in a baby Guinness shot,” he says proudly. “It’s Irish cream and coffee liqueur.”

“Sounds fancy.”

“A baby Guinness shot is anything but fancy.” He brings out two extra tall shot glasses, reminding me that Hazel asked for doubles.

“Make mine a single,” I say quickly, and he gives me a nod, pulls out two bottles, and gets to work.

As he does, Hazel gives me a knowing look. “Good job,” she says, and from the sparkle in her eyes, I can tell she’s having a great time with this.

There’s far more spunk to her than you’d guess from first look, and I like her more and more because of it. She reminds me of Luna in that way.

My chest pangs at the reminder of my best friend. But I push the thought away, focusing instead on the present, where Frank is pouring dark liqueur into a regular size shot glass like an old pro.

“Enjoy,” he says, placing the double in front of Hazel and the single in front of me.

Hazel raises hers in a toast. “To new discoveries and wild adventures,” she says, and I clink my glass with hers and down it in a few gulps.

It's sweet—it tastes more like a dessert than alcohol.

“That’s good.” I wipe a drop off my lips and place the glass back down on the table.

“Right?” Hazel looks back over at Frank. “Let’s top it off with some tequila. Another double.”

He looks at me for my reaction.

“I’ll pass,” I say, since I already completed my goal of using the ID I manipulated with my magic. There’s no need to get toasted. “How about a Coke?”

“You’re no fun.” Hazel rolls her eyes.

“I’m not a big drinker,” I say. “But you go ahead.”

“Hazel’s not usually this big of a drinker, either,” Frank says, looking back to her. “What’s going on with you? Did that boyfriend of yours break up with you?”

“Everything’s good with Benjamin,” she says. “It’s just been a long week.”

“We’ve all been there.” Frank pours a double shot glass with tequila and slides it over to her. “Be careful. With those people going missing... well, I don’t want you getting hurt.”

“I can hold my own,” she says, and then she holds the shot glass to her lips and downs it. “Wow.” She blinks tears out of her eyes. “That’s strong.”

Frank puts glass of Coke in front of me and gives Hazel a look that says *I told you so*. Then he hands Hazel a cup full of water. “Might not be a bad idea to have some of this,” he says.

“Thanks.” She pulls the water closer, but makes no move to drink. “I’ll slow down. How about a Truly?”

“You sure about that?” he asks.

“Yes. I’m sure.”

“Don’t blame me for your hangover tomorrow.” He digs around beneath the bar and puts a white can of Truly next to Hazel’s water.

She pops open the tab and takes a large sip.

It's a good thing I stopped drinking after that first shot, since I'll clearly be driving us home tonight.

"You okay?" I ask Hazel under my breath as Frank goes to help another customer.

"Sure," she says. "Why?"

"All the drinking..." I motion to the Truly as she takes another sip.

She sighs and stares down at her drink. "Benjamin's been distant these past few days," she admits, not meeting my eyes. "Something's wrong, and he won't tell me what. I thought everything was solid between us, but now I'm not so sure." She shrugs, and I fight the urge to give her a giant hug.

"I'm sorry," I say.

"Not your fault." She manages a small smile. "I just hope he'll be more normal tonight."

"I hope so, too," I say, relieved when she seems comforted by my words, even though they couldn't have been that much help.

"Hey man, turn it up," a middle-aged man sitting at a table behind us says to Frank, pointing to the television showing the local news.

The same greased up anchorman is on the screen as the other day, with the caption, "Another local woman goes missing," at the bottom of the screen.

A photo appears above his head of a pretty girl with blonde hair and striking blue eyes.

"Lindsay Davis, a twenty-three-year-old woman, was last seen during her morning shift at the Stardust Diner taking the trash out to the back of the building," he says. "She's the third local of Pine Valley to go missing, along with Jason Cook and Carly Katz."

Photos of Jason and Carly appear on the screen next to Lindsay's. The three of them are all in excellent shape and very attractive—the types that would stand out in a small town like this.

“We have every reason to think that all three of them are still alive,” the anchorman continues. “The police are continuing to search for answers, and they ask that if anyone has any information that might be helpful, they go to the station to share it. In the meantime, we advise everyone in town to take precautions. Until we apprehend the person behind these abductions, try to be aware of your surroundings and not to go anywhere alone, even during the day. There’s strength in numbers. The local store has generously decided to donate pepper spray to anyone who wants it, and we recommend stopping by to pick some up at your earliest convenience.”

The screen flashes to the owner of the local store holding a small can of pepper spray while being interviewed, and Frank turns the volume back down.

The happy chatting from the other customers turns into low talks of worry.

“How about a round of ale on the house?” Frank offers, instantly distracting everyone from the troubling television broadcast.

Since Hazel and I are seated at the tap, he puts the first two glasses in front of us and gets busy handing more to the waitresses so they can drop them off at the tables.

Not wanting to be ungrateful, I take a sip of the light-colored beer, surprised when I don’t hate it.

“What’s going on with these disappearances?” I ask Hazel, hoping the witches have more information than the shifters.

“We don’t know yet,” she says, lowering her voice. “The boundary around Pine Valley is in place, so it isn’t vampires. My parents have been interrogating the shifters and other witches in the coven, but we haven’t found anything remotely suspicious. The most likely explanation is that it’s an ordinary human crime. But don’t worry—humans don’t mess with witches or shifters. They instinctively know to keep their distance. You have nothing to worry about.”

“I’m not worried about myself,” I say. “I’m worried about the next person who might go missing around here.” I’m unsure when I got so protective over this place, but it seems crazy for the witches and shifters to sit around doing nothing. “Can’t you use your abilities to find whoever’s doing this?”

“Our job is to protect the human world from supernatural occurrences, to keep our world hidden from theirs,” she says. “The humans take care of their problems, and we take care of ours.”

“Even if those human problems are drawing attention to the town?”

“We’ve been doing this for centuries,” she says firmly. “We can handle it.”

“Okay,” I say, although it still doesn’t sit right with me.

Her phone lights up with a text message, and she picks it up to read it, clearly finished with our conversation. “The guys just parked,” she says, and then she waggles her eyebrows in excitement. “Are you ready to meet Tristan?”

I almost ask who Tristan is, but I quickly remember—Hazel’s boyfriend’s friend who she wants to introduce me to.

“Sure,” I say, reminding myself to be openminded, even though Connor’s face flashes through my mind, and a wave of guilt crashes over me.

As if by meeting another guy, I’m *cheating* on the man who rejected me.

It’s ridiculous. I need to get a handle on my emotions. I’ve always wanted to fall in love, and it’s not going to happen if I’m brooding over Connor for the rest of my life.

I owe it to myself to give Tristan a chance.

And when Hazel waves over the next two guys who walk in, my breath is instantly taken away by the one with light brown hair that gleams in the low lighting and golden eyes that pierce through my soul, and I wonder if moving on from Connor might not be so impossible, after all.

Autumn



I'M SITTING at the table with the Guardian codex open in front of me, researching what I've been focusing on since Connor's party—mate bonds.

Mainly, information on how to break them without killing the other person or having them volunteer to have their magic stripped, since magic can't be stripped involuntarily—at least from what I've ever learned.

Because while I don't know anything for sure... I just have a feeling. A feeling I don't want to think about too much, because it's likely just stress and nerves.

With my birthday coming up so soon, it's normal to get jittery about my mate bond with Connor. Right?

But the way he looks at that girl every time they're together... I don't like it. Not one bit. And if the worst happens, and if that feeling is right, then I want to be prepared.

It never hurts to be prepared. Especially because if I'm right, I don't want to resort to the worst.

If we have to, then we will, my wolf's voice echoes through my mind.

She's grown as attached to Connor as I have these past few years. And while we know the mate bond is holy, not *every* wolf gets a mate.

As things are now, we want *him*.

Only him.

She's okay resorting to things I don't want to think about. Things I don't want to believe I'm capable of considering, let alone doing.

Which is why there *has* to be another way.

I won't accept anything else.

So far, the codex has given me nothing I didn't already know. I sort of knew that would happen, since I've been studying this book left and right since Connor and I started dating. We're from the two strongest royal shifter families in the country, and my job as Connor's mate—as the future alpha female of this pack—involves upholding the rules and traditions of our kind.

I intend on being the best alpha our pack has ever seen.

It's what the goddess chose me to do. She wouldn't have gifted me with such powerful magic otherwise.

Leading this pack is my birthright. I refuse to let anyone take it from me, let alone that little omega... or whatever type of demon she is.

She can't take anything if she's not alive, my wolf says again.

"Stop it," I say out loud, slamming my fist onto the table next to the open book.

I might be tough, and I'm clearly powerful, but I'm *not* a murderer.

It's not going to come to that. Ruby's with the witches now. She's not one of us.

She was sent here to test the love between me and Connor. Once I turn nineteen and our mate bond solidifies, he'll forget all about her.

Still, I have to be prepared.

Just in case.

I'm ensconced in reading the codex when my phone buzzes with a text.

My heart leaps when I see it's from Connor. He's been so distant these past few days, and I hate it. Each time I see or hear from him, I pray things are about to change for the better.

I need to see you, his text says. *Come to the gazebo.*

I smile at the screen.

The gazebo is where he kissed me for the first time, when we were fourteen years old and he asked me to be his girlfriend. It's our place. It always has been, and it always will be.

We don't go there often—mainly only when one of us needs the other when there's something serious on our mind.

He's going to end things, my wolf's voice says in my head.

Ice-cold dread courses through me.

You saw the way he looked at her, she continues, goading me. *We both did.*

Shut. Up, I think back, and then I slam the book shut.

I usually trust what my wolf thinks. Her instincts are almost always correct.

I refuse to believe she's right about this one.

But there's only one way to find out.

On my way, I reply to Connor's text, and then I hurry out of the house, shift into my wolf form, and run to the gazebo perched on the side of the mountain that overlooks the town, which has a perfect view of the nearly full moon shining overhead.

Connor's already there, gazing out at the town. His dark hair glows in the moonlight, but he's barely moving, and I can tell from here that something's bothering him.

My wolf can't be right about his bringing me here to break up with me. I've given my entire heart to him—to the future of our pack.

He's *mine*.

Unwilling to put it off for any longer, I run the final few yards to the gazebo, shift back into human form, and step onto the platform.

He spins around when he hears me, his dark, serious eyes meeting mine.

He looks nervous. It's not something I've seen from him often, and I'm immediately on guard.

"Autumn," he says my name, sounding tense. "Thanks for coming."

He sounds like he's welcoming me to a business meeting—not like he's meeting the woman he loves at the spot we've always viewed as ours.

"Hi." I do my best to sound casual, and I walk toward him, but stop myself from taking his hands. "What's going on?"

Before I can comprehend what's happening, he closes the space between us and pulls me into a kiss. Not a violent one, like on the night he had me come over after midnight, but not a passionate one, either. It's soft, but distant, like he's going through the motions but doesn't really feel anything.

But that's not true. Because I do sense an emotion coming from him.

Sadness, my wolf provides for me.

I shake the thought away, step back, and look up into his soft, caring eyes that are more familiar to me than my own.

He loves me.

I know he does.

He hasn't kissed us the same way since she came to town, my wolf continues. He doesn't want us like he used to. And there's only one way to get the Connor we know and love back. We need to get rid of her. Permanently.

She won't stop getting in my head. She hasn't stopped since we saw Connor pull Ruby away from Brandon at the party.

She's driving me insane.

“I needed to see you,” Connor says, and I push my wolf’s nagging voice down—where it belongs.

I force a light smile. “I figured that,” I say, and he smiles back, which I take as a good sign.

But he’s the one who brought me here, so I wait, giving him space to say what he needs.

Instead, he drops down onto one knee, reaches into his jacket pocket, pulls out a small velvet box, and pops it open.

I suck in a sharp breath at what’s inside.

It’s a gold engagement ring, with a diamond in the center and two small, carved wolves flanking the gem’s sides. Simple, but intricate.

It’s beautiful. It’s perfect. It’s what I’ve always wanted.

Connor’s staring up at me with steely determination in his eyes, and I’m trapped in his gaze, barely able to breathe.

“Autumn Blackwell,” he says, and even though I’m pretty sure what’s happening, I can hardly believe it. “Ever since we first kissed in this gazebo, I knew you’d be the perfect woman to have by my side to ensure that the Pine Valley pack remains the strongest in the country and continues to produce the best Guardians alive. You’re a force to be reckoned with. You’re confident, beautiful, smart, and strong. I’ve admired you since the moment we met, and it would be the greatest honor if you’d accept my proposal and agree to become my wife.”

I hang onto every word, but at the same time, it passes in a blur.

Connor’s proposing.

He’s asking me to marry him.

This... isn’t the order we planned for things to happen.

“Autumn?” he questions, and I realize I’ve been standing here speechless while he waits for my response.

“What about our mate bond?” I blurt out before I can think twice.

His body goes rigid—defensive. “What about it?”

Crap.

I shouldn't have said that. I might have just messed this up, all because I couldn't smile blindly, put that ring on my finger, and say yes.

Stupid, my wolf's voice echoes inside my mind.

But I don't care what she thinks. I need to speak my truth.

“Haven't we always wanted our mate bond to happen before we got engaged?” I ask, even though I know the answer is yes. We've talked about it many times before and have always agreed on the order that this would go.

His eyes harden, and I'm afraid he's going to take back the proposal.

“I changed my mind,” he says firmly. “My commitment is to you, mate bond or no, and I want to marry you *before* you turn nineteen to prove it.”

I think he intends for the statement to be romantic, but instead, it makes me consumed with worry.

Does he not think we're going to have a mate bond?

Correct, my wolf answers. *And you know why.*

Anger rises inside me as my wolf thinks about Ruby. I don't want to think about that girl ever again, but my wolf refuses to let it rest. I'd strangle her if she wasn't a part of me.

I need her to stop.

If she doesn't, she's going to drive me crazy. But she doesn't seem to care, and that scares me more than I'd like to admit.

I've always had control over myself and my wolf, and I won't let that change. I refuse to become prey to the animal inside me.

“Autumn?” Connor asks, and I refocus on the beautiful ring on display, which is mine for the taking.

“Yes.” I stand straighter, forcing confidence into my tone. “Of course I’ll marry you.”

He nods, as serious as ever, and removes the ring from the box. “Hold out your hand,” he instructs, and I hold my left hand out to him.

Gently, he slides the ring onto my finger. The stone sparkles in the moonlight, but the ring is slightly loose, and I make a note to myself to bring it into a shop where they can size it properly, so it won’t fall off.

“It was my grandma’s,” he tells me. “Designed by my grandfather for the alpha female of this pack.”

“It’s beautiful,” I say, with a true smile this time.

“Not as beautiful as you.” He pockets the empty velvet box, stands, and pulls me in for a kiss.

I try to melt into his touch, but my wolf is clawing at the inside of my skin, like she’s trying to break free.

I won’t let her.

So I bury her deep inside myself, pull Connor onto the floor of the gazebo, and show him just how much I love him.

But my wolf’s final thought won’t leave my mind, and it stops me from being able to lose myself in what should be one of the happiest nights of my life.

When he proposed, he never said he loves us.

From the Author

Hi! I hope you enjoyed reading *Blood Moon*, the first book in the Wolf Born series.

The Wolf Born series is going to be the first of four series' set within a larger world called the Star Touched universe. What you read in *Blood Moon* is only a fraction of the tip of the iceberg for what's coming in Star Touched.

I spent a lot of time developing the mythology and overarching storyline for the Star Touched universe, and I'm excited to embark on this twist-filled adventure with you. Because let me assure you—it *will* be an adventure.

In the meantime, if you enjoyed *Blood Moon*, I'd love if you wrote a review. (One or two sentences is fine!) Reviews are extremely important to authors, because they encourage more readers to pick up the book. Plus, I read every review I get, and they motivate me to write faster!

Here's the link on Amazon where you can leave your review → mybook.to/wolfborn1

* * *

BONUS: CONNOR AND AUTUMN SEX SCENE

In the original manuscript, after Connor returns home from training with the guys and texts Autumn to not come over, he wakes up a few hours later and changes his mind. She goes to his house, and what happens from there was a bit too heated for me to include in this book.

So, I'm offering it as a short bonus scene instead!

Read the Connor and Autumn bonus scene:
michellemadow.com/blood-moon-bonus-scene

* * *

PRE-ORDER WOLF BORN 2: SHADOW MOON

The next book in the Wolf Born series, *Shadow Moon*, is available for pre-order now. DON'T PANIC when you see the release date on Amazon. I initially set all of my pre-orders super far in the future, since I don't work well under pressure and I don't want to rush writing the book.

I currently plan on actually releasing *Shadow Moon* in June/July 2023.

Pre-order your copy now:

mybook.to/wolfborn2

* * *

THE VAMPIRE WISH

As you wait for *Shadow Moon*, I recommend checking out my Vampire Wish series, which is set in my Dark World universe. Like *Star Touched* will be, Dark World is a supernatural universe with four separate series' set within it.

For a limited time, the first book in the Vampire Wish series is 99c, and you can also grab the box set of all five books in the series for only \$4.99.

Check out *The Vampire Wish* on Amazon:

Book One → mybook.to/vampirewish

Box Set → mybook.to/vampirewishset

You can also turn the page to see the cover, description, and read the first few chapters of *The Vampire Wish*.

Thank you again for reading my books, and I'm so glad you enjoyed *Blood Moon!*

-Michelle

The Vampire Wish



Escape to a world of vampires and danger in this thrilling tale of survival, betrayal, and forbidden romance.

For Annika Pearce, winter break with her family was usually a boring affair. Not this year. Everything changes in an instant when vampires attack Annika's family and abduct her to the hidden kingdom of the Vale.

In the Vale, her normal life is turned upside down. Her role?
To give blood whenever vampires demand.

As Annika desperately searches for a way to escape, she meets a mysterious stranger named Jake who captures her heart and might be her only hope. But as Annika peels back the layers of the mystery surrounding her abduction, she learns that things aren't as they seem. Everyone seems to be hiding a secret.
Including Jake.

It turns out that his name isn't even Jake.

It's Jacen.

And he's a vampire.

A vampire prince.

With time running out, Annika races to unravel the mystery of the Vale—and decide who to trust. With her heart pulling her in one direction, and her instincts in another, she faces an impossible decision.

How far is she willing to go to escape the vampire kingdom?

With over 2,000 reviews on Amazon and 5,000 ratings on Goodreads, the Vampire Wish series is a must-read for fans of addicting fantasy, swoon-worthy romance, and twists you'll never see coming.

Check out *The Vampire Wish* on Amazon:

Book One → mybook.to/vampirewish

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Or turn the page to read the first few chapters!

Prologue



“RACE YOU TO THE BOTTOM!” my older brother Grant yelled the moment we got off the chair lift.

Mom and Dad skied up ahead, but beyond the four of us, the rest of the mountain was empty. It was the final run of the trip, on our last day of winter break, and we’d decided to challenge ourselves by skiing down the hardest trail on the mountain—one of the double black diamond chutes in the back bowl.

The chutes were the only way down from where we were—the chairlift that took us up here specified that these trails were for experts only. Which was perfect for us. After all, I’d been skiing since I was four years old. My parents grew up skiing, and they couldn’t wait to get me and Grant on the trails. We could tackle any trail at this ski resort.

“Did I hear something about a race?” Dad called from up ahead.

“Damn right you did!” Grant lifted one of his poles in the air and hooted, ready to go.

“You’re on.” I glided past all of them, the thrill of competition already racing through my veins.

Mom pleaded with us to be careful, and then my skis tipped over the top of the mountain, and I was flying down the trail.

I smiled as I took off. I’d always wanted to fly, but obviously that wasn’t possible, and skiing was the closest thing I’d found to that. If I lived near a mountain instead of in

South Florida, I might have devoted my extracurricular activities to skiing instead of gymnastics.

I blazed down the mountain like I was performing a choreographed dance, taking each jump with grace and digging my poles into the snow with each turn. This trail was full of moguls and even some rocky patches, but I flew down easily, avoiding each obstacle as it approached. I loved the rush of the wind on my cheeks and the breeze through my hair. If I held my poles in the air, it really *did* feel like flying.

I was lost in the moment—so lost that I didn't see the patch of rocks ahead until it was too late. I wasn't prepared for the jump, and instead of landing gracefully, I ploofed to the ground, wiping out so hard that both of my skis popped off of my boots.

“Wipeout!” Grant laughed, holding his poles up in the air and flying past me.

“Are you okay?” Mom asked from nearby.

“Yeah, I'm fine.” I rolled over, locating my skis. One was next to me, the other a few feet above.

“Do you need help?” she asked.

“No.” I shook my head, brushing the snow off my legs. “I've got this. Go on. I'll meet you all at the bottom.”

She nodded and continued down the mountain, knowing me well enough to understand that I didn't need any help—I wanted to get back up on my own. “See you there!” she said, taking the turns slightly more cautiously than Grant and Dad.

I trudged up the mountain to grab the first ski, popped it back on, and glided on one foot to retrieve the other. I huffed as I prepared to put it back on. What an awful final run of the trip. My family was nearing the bottom of the trail—there was no way I would catch up with them now.

Looked like I would be placing last in our little race. Which annoyed me, because last place was *so* not my style.

But I still had to get down, so I took a deep breath, dug my poles into the snow, and set off.

As I was nearing the bottom, three men emerged from the forest near the end of the chute. None of them wore skis, and they were dressed in jeans, t-shirts, and leather jackets. They must have been freezing.

I stopped, about to call out and ask them if they needed help. Before I could speak, one of them moved in a blur, coming up behind my brother and sinking his teeth into his neck.

I screamed as Grant's blood gushed from the wound, staining the snow red.

The other two men moved just as fast, one of them pouncing on my mom, the other on my dad. More blood gushed from both of their necks, their bodies limp like rag dolls in their attackers arms.

"No!" I flew down the mountain—faster than I'd ever skied before—holding my poles out in front of me. I reached my brother first and jammed the pole into the back of his attacker with as much force as I could muster.

The pole bounced off the man, not even bothering him in the slightest, and the force of the attack pushed me to the ground. All I could do was look helplessly up as the man dropped my brother into the blood stained snow.

What was going on? Why were they *doing* this?

Then his gaze shifted to me, and he stared me down. His eyes were hard and cold—and he snarled at me, baring his teeth.

They were covered in my brother's blood.

"Grant," I whispered my brother's name, barely able to speak. He was so pale—so still. And there was so much blood. The rivulets streamed from the puddles around him, the glistening redness so bright that it seemed fake against the frosty background.

One of the other men dropped my mom's body on the ground next to my brother. Seconds later, my dad landed next to them.

My mother's murderer grabbed the first man's shoulder—the man who had murdered my brother. “Hold it, Daniel,” he said, stopping him from moving toward me.

I just watched them, speechless. My whole family was gone. These creatures ran faster than I could blink, and they were strong enough to handle bodies like they were weightless.

I had no chance at escape.

They were going to do this to me too, weren't they? These moments—right here, right now—would be my last.

I'd never given much thought to what happens after people die. Who does, at eighteen years old? I was supposed to have my whole life ahead of me.

My *family* was supposed to have their whole lives ahead of them, too.

Now their lifeless, bloody bodies at the bottom of this mountain would be the last things I would ever see.

I steadied myself, trying to prepare for what was coming. Would dying hurt? Would it be over quickly? Would I disappear completely once I was gone? Would my soul continue on, or would my existence be wiped from the universe forever?

It wasn't supposed to be this way. I didn't want to die. I wanted to *live*.

But I'd seen what those men—those *creatures*—had done to my family. And I knew, staring up at them, that it was over.

Terror filled my body, shaking me to the core. I couldn't fight them. I couldn't win. Against them, I was helpless.

And even if I stood a chance, did I really want to continue living while my family was gone?

“We can't kill them all,” the man continued. “Laila sent us here to get humans to replace the ones that rabid vampire killed in his bloodlust rampage. We need to keep her alive.”

“I suppose she’ll do.” The other man glared down at me, licking his lips and clenching his fists. “It’s hard to tell under all that ski gear, but she looks pretty. She’ll make a good addition to the Vale.”

He took a syringe out of his jacket, ran at me in a blur, and jabbed the needle into my neck.

The empty, dead eyes of my parents were the last things I saw before my head hit the snow and everything went dark.

Annika



I HELD OUT MY ARM, watching as the needle sucked the blood from the crease of my elbow and into the clear vial. I sat there for ten minutes, staring blankly ahead as I did my monthly duty as a citizen of the Vale.

Like all humans who lived in the kingdom, I was required to donate blood once a month.

This was my twelfth time donating blood.

Twelve months. One year. That's how long it had been since my family had been murdered in front of my eyes and I'd been kidnapped to the Vale.

When I'd first been told that I was now a blood slave to vampires, I didn't believe it. Vampires were supposed to be *fiction*. They didn't exist in real life.

But I couldn't deny what I'd seen in front of my eyes. Those pale men, how quickly they'd moved, how they'd ripped their teeth into my parents and brother's throats and drained them dry, leaving their corpses at the bottom of that ski trail.

Why had I been the one chosen to live, and not them?

It was all because I'd fallen on that slope. If I hadn't fallen, I would have been first down the mountain. I would have been killed. My mom would have been last, and *she* would have been the one taken.

But my mom wouldn't have been strong enough to survive in the Vale. So even though I hated that I'd lived while they'd

died, it was better that I lived in this hellish prison than any of them. I'd always been strong. Stubborn. Determined.

Those traits kept me going every day. They were the traits that kept me *alive*.

At first, I'd wanted to escape. I thought that if I could just get out of this cursed village, I could run to the nearest town and get help. I could save all the humans who were trapped in the Vale.

I didn't get far before a wolf tried to attack me.

I'd used my gymnastics skills to climb high up on a tree, but if Mike hadn't followed me, fought off the wolf, and dragged me back inside the Vale, I would have been dead meat. The wolves would have eventually gotten to me and feasted upon my body, leaving nothing but bones.

Mike had told me everything about the wolves as we'd walked back to the Tavern. He'd grown up in the Vale, so he knew a lot about its history. He'd told me that they weren't regular wolves—they were shifters. They'd made a pact with the vampires centuries ago, after the vampires had invaded their land and claimed this valley as their own. He'd told me about how the wolves craved human flesh as much as the vampires craved human blood, and how if a human tried to escape—if they crossed the line of the Vale—they became dinner to the wolves.

At least the vampires let us live, so they could have a continuous supply of blood to feast upon whenever they wanted.

The wolves just killed on the spot.

That was the first and last time I'd tried to escape. And after Mike had saved me, we'd become best friends. He'd offered me my job at the Tavern, where I'd been working—and living—ever since. All of us who worked there lived in the small rooms above the bar, sleeping in the bunks inside.

He and the others had helped me cope with the transition—with realizing I was a slave to the vampires, and that as a mere human amongst supernaturals, there was no way out.

They were my family now.

“You’re done,” the nurse said, removing the needle from my arm. She placed a Band-Aid on the bleeding dot, and I flexed my elbow, trying to get some feeling back in the area. “See you next month.”

“Yeah.” I gathered my bag and stood up. “Bye.”

On my way out, I passed Martha—the youngest girl who worked at the Tavern. She slept in the bunk above mine, and along with being the youngest, she was also the smallest.

It took her twice as long to recover from the blood loss as it did for me.

“Good luck,” I told her on the way out. “I’ll see you back at the Tavern.” I winked, and she smiled, since she knew what I was about to do.

It was what I always did on blood donation day.

I held my bag tightly to my side and stepped onto the street, taking a deep breath of the cold mountain air. It was dark—us humans were forced to adjust to the vampires’ nocturnal schedule—and I could see my breath in front of me. The witch who’d created the shield to keep the Vale hidden from human eyes also regulated the temperature, but she could only do so much. And since it was December in Canada, it was naturally still cold.

I hurried to the busiest street in town—Main Street, as it was so creatively named. Humans manned stalls, and vampires walked around, purchasing luxuries that only they were afforded. Meat, doughnuts, pizza, cheeses—you name it, the vampires bought it.

The vampires didn’t even *need* food to survive, but they ate it anyway, because it tasted good.

Us humans, on the other hand, were relegated to porridge, bread, rice, and beans—the bare necessities. The vampires thought of us as nothing but cattle—as blood banks. And blood banks didn’t deserve food for enjoyment. Only for nourishment.

Luckily, Mike had taught me a trick or two since the day he'd saved me from the wolves. After seeing me climb that tree, he'd called me "scrappy" and said it was a skill that would get me far in the Vale.

He'd taught me how to steal.

It was ironic, really. Stealing hadn't been something that had ever crossed my mind in my former life. I used to have it good—successful, loving parents, trips to the Caribbean in the winter, skiing out west in the spring, and an occasional voyage to Europe thrown in during the summers. I'd had a credit card, and when I'd needed something, I would buy it without a second thought.

I hadn't appreciated how good I'd had it until all of that was snatched away and I was left with nothing.

Now I walked past the various booths, eyeing up the delicious food I wasn't allowed to have. But more than the food, I was eyeing up the shopkeepers and the vampires around them. Who seemed most oblivious? Or absorbed in conversation?

It didn't take long to spot a vampire woman flirting with a handsome human shopkeeper. I'd seen enough of vampires as a species to know that if the flirting was going to progress anywhere, it would lead to him becoming one of her personal blood slaves, but he followed her every movement, entranced by her attention.

They were the only two people at the booth. Everyone else was going about their own business, not paying any attention to me—the small, orphaned blood slave with downcast eyes and torn up jeans.

Which gave me the perfect opportunity to snatch the food that us humans were forbidden to purchase.

Annika



I PRESSED up against the stall, brushed a pile of candies into my bag, and scurried away.

Not bothering to glance behind, I stayed to the side of the street, scuttled through an alley, and passed through to the other side. Once there, I leaned against the wall, finally able to breathe again.

Every time I stole, I feared getting caught.

But that wouldn't stop me from doing it. After all, this was the only revenge I had against the vampires. They might have taken away my family, and they might have taken away my freedom, but I refused to let them take away my dignity.

As a human, I was weak and they were strong. I hated them for it, but at the same time, I *envied* them for it. Because after they'd murdered my family in front of my eyes and I was powerless to stop it, I never wanted to feel that helpless again.

But I *did* feel helpless. Every day since I was taken here. How could I not, as a human amongst such powerful creatures? To them, we were animals. We were slaves.

I wish I had the power to change that.

For now, all I had was the power to take from them. Small things, and they never even noticed, but it was the only revenge I had.

I leaned against the wall and smiled, since once again, I'd gotten away with it. And so, after taking a few more deep

breaths and steadying the pounding of my heart, I turned the corner and approached the bookstore.

It was empty inside besides the owner, Norbert. He sat at his desk, his eyeglasses on as he read a book. He was an older man—I always imagined that if we weren't prisoners in the Vale, he would have been a professor at some fancy college. Perhaps even a college I might have chosen to attend.

The moment the door closed, he looked up and smiled at me. "Annika," he said, placing his glasses down at the table. "Anything specific you're looking for today?"

"Just browsing," I told him. "Have you gotten in a new shipment yet?"

"It's only been a few days!" He laughed and leaned back in his chair. "I swear, you read faster than new books can arrive."

"I'm sure I can find something I missed before." I smiled and made my way over to my favorite shelf—the fantasy section—and got started on examining the spines, pulling out the titles that looked interesting and reading the back covers.

Before coming to the Vale, I hadn't been much of a reader—at least, I'd never read books that weren't assigned for class. Between school, gymnastics practices, homework, and spending time with my friends, I didn't have time to read for fun. If I needed to relax after a long day, I usually went straight to the television.

But us humans in the Vale didn't have access to televisions—or to the internet at all. And even with my work at the Tavern, now that I was no longer training for gymnastics competitions I had a lot more extra time on my hands. So I'd discovered the one pastime that humans in the Vale *were* allowed—books.

The books I found at the store here were much more to my taste than the books I'd been assigned to read at school. It hadn't been long until I'd discovered that I loved getting lost in the lives and stories of other people. I loved exploring their hardships, their trials, their love, and how they overcame most everything, despite what seemed like impossible odds.

These days, books were the only things that gave me hope. I treasured them and the stories within them more than anything else in the world.

“That’ll be five coins,” Norbert said once I placed the book I’d chosen on the counter.

“I don’t have coins,” I told him. “But I do have something I can trade.”

He watched me, waiting, and I pulled one of the candy bars out of my bag. His eyes widened, and he leaned forward with such enthusiasm that I imagined he could practically taste the chocolate already.

It worked every time.

“You’re going to get yourself in some serious trouble one day,” he said, his eyes full of warning.

“Perhaps. But that doesn’t stop you from enjoying the candy,” I teased. “So... are you willing to trade, or not?”

“You know I am.” He smiled, and as he passed me the book, I handed him the chocolate.

I pulled the book to my chest to give it a small hug, placed it in my bag with the rest of the candies, and headed back to the Tavern.

Get it now:

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About the Author



Michelle Madow is a *USA Today* bestselling author of fast-paced young adult fantasy novels full of magic, adventure, romance, and twists you'll never see coming. She's sold over two million books worldwide and has been translated into multiple languages.

Michelle grew up in Maryland, then moved to Florida, and now lives in New York City. She wrote her first book in her junior year of college and hasn't stopped writing since! She also loves traveling, and has been to all seven continents.

Someday, she hopes to travel the world for a year on a cruise ship.

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BLOOD MOON

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