

BECKY MOYNIHAN



CURSE TOUCHED

A TOUCH OF VAMPIRE

Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[PROLOGUE](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Also By.](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

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A TOUCH OF

BECKY MO'

Text and cover design

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*In loving memory of Rosie,
who reminds me that family goes beyond blood and love can
beat the odds.*

PROLOGUE

LOCHLAN

With every shallow inhale, the bullet burrowed deeper into my heart.

Agonizingly slow. Burning. Charring. Melting.

Troy reached for my chest and I batted his hand away.

“Touch me and I’ll break your fingers,” I grunted, the words like sandpaper against my throat. My younger brother rolled his eyes at my stubbornness but acquiesced all the same.

For the last several hours, pain had been my constant companion.

White hot. Razor sharp. Splintering my vision.

The tiny piece of silver blazed and blazed, scorching the one vulnerable organ in my body faster than it could heal. The other bullets had been dug out shortly after I’d regained consciousness, but this last one required a little more finesse than jabbing a finger into my flesh.

If I were a Feltore, the bullet would have killed me by now. Silver was a vampire’s kryptonite. Even the most powerful Venturi were susceptible to it. Not as quickly, but silver left in the heart for too long was always fatal.

“At least dull the pain,” Troy said, returning to my bedside with a tumbler of amber liquor in hand. “You look like death.”

I accepted the alcohol without comment, still too furious with him and my older brother for niceties. Troy may have pulled us to safety while Kade distracted the sheriff and his deputy. He’d even pried the bullets from my back. But I didn’t trust him. Not with this. Not after the crap he’d pulled earlier today.

And I still had time. Not much, but I’d been in this situation before. I could hold out a little while longer.

With the sun’s departure had come the forced transition into our true forms. I didn’t bother cloaking myself in shadow, and neither did my brothers. We never hid our vampire nature from each other, and I was in too much pain to show them just how angry I was.

In this state, it was hard to tell my brothers and I apart. Our eyes were equally red, our skin the same shade as our pitch black hair. Only our hair’s length differentiated us, with Everett’s being the shortest and Troy’s the longest. Mine was currently plastered to my forehead, soaked through with sweat.

Everett watched me from his spot by my bedroom door—more like his *post*, since he refused to let me leave. He fiddled with the gold-banded ruby ring on his pinky finger, shrewdly studying me.

“Loch, speak to us. Why the unnecessary pain? You know Troy and I have your back. We won’t let the bullet kill you,” he tried to reason, his earlier beef with me all but forgotten. If only I could forget so easily. If only I could make everything go back to how it used to be.

But that was the problem.

Everything had irrevocably changed, and I didn't believe they had my back anymore. Not with this.

Our impenetrable brotherly bond was crumbling to ash, and I knew why.

Ignoring his question, I set the glass on my bedside table and picked up my phone. My hands shook as I called Kade again, further slowing my breathing to buy me more time. When he picked up, I spoke first, voicing the same question I'd asked him over and over for the past several hours. "Did you find her?"

The sound of my drothen's sigh caused my heart to thud in trepidation. Darkness threatened to drag me under as the bullet shifted again, scorching a deadly path. I rode the pain, focusing on the only thing that truly mattered.

On finding McKenna Belmont.

On making certain she was alive, safe, and well.

My heart could very well stop beating for all I cared if she was lost to me. I had promised to protect her and failed miserably. The least I could do was make sure she was okay before I let someone pry a bullet from my heart. If the extraction wasn't successful—if even the tiniest sliver of bullet was left behind—at least I'd know she was safe before the silver slowly killed me.

Everett was right to question me though. I hadn't acted this unhinged in over a century. His suspicion was valid. But in the one hundred and forty-nine years of my existence, I'd never *felt* like this. The helpless pull to be near McKenna—the

desire to protect, to bond, to *claim*—was real. Her blood sang to mine, a luring call stronger than any rhyme or spell. And I needed it. I needed every last inch of her to forge a connection with me.

It drove me insane, these wants and feelings I was powerless to resist. I shouldn't want her. I should hate that I felt anything at all. That, after a century of trying to forget, she was unearthing emotions long since buried.

My entire being raged at the twisted irony of this bond we shared. But I knew, no matter how hard I fought against it, I would keep going back to her. I would torture myself, break every last vow, and endure any level of pain just to be near her again. No matter how badly I didn't want our bond to exist, I couldn't reject her.

She was silver to me, potent and lethal. A weakness I couldn't afford. Yet, I craved to consume her.

I'd been honest with her last night. Curse or no curse, she wasn't just a job to me. We had a connection. It took me a month to realize how deep, but I hadn't shared the details with her. I almost had though. My traitorous instincts had blurted aloud a single word.

Solemae.

She hadn't commented though. Hadn't questioned me when my composure slipped. She had no idea what she was to me, and it needed to stay that way. If she knew, everything would fall apart. If she knew, I didn't think either of us would have the power to reject our bond.

And I needed her to. I needed her to reject it before I begged her not to. Before I convinced myself that the pleasure of it far outweighed the suffering. Before I lost my tenuous hold on control and allowed my body to seal our fate.

And if I were to die while trying to complete the bond, she would be left exposed and unprotected. And if Everett or Troy were to find out the reason behind my death, they'd kill her in a heartbeat, dooming the entire vampire race. No amount of desire, of soul-sucking want and need, was worth that outcome.

I had made a solemn vow for a reason, publicly swearing never to break it under pain of death. No matter how conflicted I currently felt, I knew that a relationship with McKenna Belmont was out of the question. Convincing her to reject our bond was the *only* foreseeable option. Its very existence spelled disaster for us all, maybe even more so than the curse itself.

But first, I had to know that she was safe. Safe and *alive*. Or none of this would even matter—including removing the silver from my heart.

And so I waited with bated breath for Kade to speak, his prolonged silence more painful than the bullet slowly eating away at my life force. Finally, he said, "I've got good news and bad news. Which do you want to hear first?"

"Everything," I rasped, struggling to sit up so I wouldn't miss a word. "Tell me everything."

1

KENNA

Bang, bang, bang.

“Hello?”

As always, silence answered my knocking and shouts. The heavy, deadbolted metal door was probably too thick to hear through anyway. I turned, squinting at the nearly undetectable red light tucked in the room’s upper left corner.

“Anyone there? I have the right to make a phone call!”

At least, I was pretty sure you were allowed to contact the outside world while inside a mental institution.

“How about a sketchpad? Books? An encyclopedia? I’m not picky!”

I waited—a minute, five minutes, ten. No one came.

Anger, fueled by helplessness, raged through me. Aunt Tess couldn’t do this. I was four days away from becoming a legal adult, for fate’s sake!

As far as I could tell, nearly a day had passed since the big blowup with my aunt. We’d finally been honest with each other, and I was still coming to terms with the awful truths she’d hurled at me. She hadn’t returned though, leaving me shaken to the core by her parting words.

He only wants to kill you. The sooner you accept that, the sooner you can put this obsession behind you and do what you were created to do. Destroy them all.

Not only that, she thought I was under Lochlan's thrall. I would have dismissed her words as paranoia—if she hadn't also told me that he was one of the three dark princes.

A fact that changed everything.

I should have known. I should have seen it. The way he commanded a room simply by stepping into it. The natural way he ordered others around. Leadership oozed from his pores, along with a learned arrogance I assumed all royals bore, human and supernatural alike.

And he was a Venturi, a born vampire, an *elite* of his race. Of course he was a prince. It made perfect sense.

What didn't make sense was the way he'd pursued me. Yes, he had hunted me down because of the century-long curse placed upon his kind and the supposed part I played in breaking it. I was the elusive maiden with a touch that slays, after all. But his intentions toward me over the last two months had gone far beyond duty.

He had wanted *me*. My body. Every last inch. Despite the dangers my skin presented to him, he had pushed the limits of his control on more than one occasion, almost giving in to his bloodlust and, well, lust in general.

My face immediately heated as I recalled our time together at the cabin. I had never felt so utterly consumed, so perfectly connected to someone than in those handful of hours with him. And yet ...

I hadn't been the only Syphon in his life.

And yet ...

He was a liar. A killer. A *murderer* of my kind.

And yet ...

I couldn't stop thinking about him. Couldn't stop worrying that he was dead. There had been so much blood. On his back, on my hands. Who knew how many silver bullets had buried themselves deep into his flesh. And when I'd fallen on top of him, knocked unconscious, I couldn't tell if his heart was still beating.

As panic threatened to constrict my throat once again, I began to pace my small prison, staring sightlessly at the bright reinforced walls.

I should hate him. I should want to rip out his heart with my bare hands before he could do the same to me. Why hadn't he? Why hunt me for years on end only to seduce me? Even his brothers, in the very short time I'd known them, seemed baffled by his behavior toward me.

Fates, I needed to stop *thinking* about him already. I couldn't eat. Couldn't sleep. The worry and questions were eating me alive.

I dug my fingers into my thick chestnut hair, wincing when they got stuck. I hadn't brushed it, let alone showered, since arriving here. The curtained-off showerhead in the room's corner taunted me, but I refused to strip naked. Who knew how many hidden cameras were trained on me this very moment.

Instead of dwelling on Lochlan's behavior or current predicament, I should be planning a way to escape this place. But there were no windows, nothing to even hint at where I was. Through a slot in the room's only door, I'd received three meals so far. But the only person I'd seen was my aunt.

Had she finally rid herself of me then, like I always thought she would? I couldn't really blame her, not after what had happened on our front lawn the other day. If our house hadn't been warded against vampires, Lochlan's brothers probably would have gone after her too.

Then again, she wasn't exactly helpless. When had she learned how to shoot a crossbow? An unexpected pang of sadness pierced my chest. Fates, I didn't know her at all. The woman who'd raised me was a complete stranger. What did that say about me? That I was naive and clueless, completely inept at getting to know someone in the ways that truly mattered?

I stumbled to a halt in the room's center as an awful thought swirled in my gut.

What if *I* was the reason for my lack of close connections? Not the constant moving and nomadic lifestyle, but *me* and me alone. What if I wasn't capable of understanding people on a deeper level?

What if ...

Something was wrong with me?

And that was why Aunt Tess, my caretaker for all these years, had knocked me out, kidnapped me, and locked me in a room. She had given up on me ...

Because I was defective.

Just like my powers.

Numbly, I shuffled backward and sank onto my bed. When I had grabbed Everett's wrist, nothing had happened. Not even the tiniest bit of red had flared up where our skin touched.

So ... who was I?

Was I even a Syphon?

So distracted by my self doubt, I wasn't prepared when the door unlocked and swung open.

I sat up straight, but didn't jump up and bolt for freedom like I'd imagined myself doing dozens of times. Not when my visitor had a big black *bird* perched on her shoulder. Was it fake? A throaty *caw* from the thing startled me, confirming that it was very much real. Uncomfortable under its beady-eyed stare, I swung my attention to the woman instead.

She looked to be in her mid forties, tall and striking. Her porcelain skin was paler than my aunt's, her pixie-cut hair even paler. Fashionable gold half-rim glasses adorned her thin elegant nose, and a sharp black pantsuit hugged her lithe frame.

A bout of self-consciousness assailed me when I realized how drab I looked in comparison, with my baggie white shirt and gray pants.

Before I could decide what to do next, she said, "Hello, Kenna," in a slightly European-accented voice I vaguely recognized. She must be the woman who'd spoken to my aunt when I'd first woken up here. "I'm Headmistress Mayweather,

or Clarice, if you like. I'm assuming you have questions as to why you're here."

Duh, I wanted to snap but didn't. Instead, I blurted, "Where's my aunt?"

"She had business to attend to. You're in my care now." Ouch. Hearing the truth stung more than I thought it would. When I wordlessly pursed my lips, her expression softened. "I understand your resentment, Kenna."

Yeah, right. Have you ever been dumped at a creepy facility by your caretaker before?

"Tess only wants what's best for you, as do I. She thought telling you the truth about who you are would put you in even more danger, but I know that doesn't make this any easier. If you let me, I'd like to educate you on your ancestral history. This is a school for supernaturals, after all, where you can learn about and master your natural-born abilities."

Wait, this wasn't a mental institution? I was at a school for *supernaturals*?

Curiosity reared its head, which I quickly shoved back down. I was still a prisoner here. *Prisoner*. When both the woman and crow stared at me expectantly, I grasped the bracelet on my left wrist, habitually twisting the key-shaped silver charm round and round. Her gaze fixed on the nervous habit and I immediately dropped it.

"Do you know what that is?" she said, shifting her keen brown eyes to mine.

"Um, a bracelet that can protect you against vampire thrall?" I assumed she must know about vampires or this was

going to be an awkward conversation.

“Correct, but it’s so much more than that. A powerful Cosmic witch infused the silver charm with a spell created just for you. It prohibits you from stealing the essence and magic of other supernaturals through physical touch. It also prevents supernaturals from using their abilities on you.”

Oh. *Oh*. That would explain why my touch hadn’t affected Everett. Maybe I wasn’t completely defective after all.

But wait a freaking second. A *witch* spelled this bracelet? Just for me? Did that mean this bracelet and the broken one before it hadn’t belonged to my mother?

A fresh wave of hurt and resentment toward my aunt welled up, nearly choking me. Was *everything* she ever told me a lie?

“My aunt,” I gritted out through clenched teeth. “Is she a witch?”

“Oh, no. She’s as human as they come. Your parents were too.” Clarice smiled sympathetically. “Syphons are extremely rare and mostly born from human parents. That isn’t to say witch blood doesn’t run in your family tree, of course.”

“So, how did anyone know that I was a Syphon when my touch only affects supernaturals?” I couldn’t help but narrow my eyes in suspicion.

“Josephine, the Cosmic witch who spelled your bracelet, used to be friends with your mother.”

My entire body went rigid. “W-where is she?” I stuttered, disbelief and hope rising within me. Maybe I could contact her. Ask her questions and get *real* answers about my past.

“Sadly, Josephine died some years ago.” Real sorrow clouded the headmistress’s expression, and my hope plummeted. “When you were just a baby, your skin made contact with hers. With one simple touch, she knew what you were and did what she could to protect you. She even warded your house against vampires. Witches always look after their own.”

“But, my parents ...” I swallowed with difficulty. “Did they know what I was? Before they ... before they ...”

“I’m sorry, Kenna. But no, they weren’t made aware of what you were for their own safety. That way, they wouldn’t get caught up in the ongoing feud between vampires and witches.”

And yet, they had died anyway. And yet, my *human* aunt knew everything.

Maybe if my parents had known, they wouldn’t have left me that fateful day their airplane crashed. Maybe if they’d known, they would have told me who I was and prepared me for the dangers ahead.

It was so unfair. All of it.

I wanted to be mad at Clarice for whatever part she had played in this—if any at all. I wanted to be mad at the Cosmic witch who’d discovered me but left my parents in the dark.

All I felt though was a bone-crushing loss. So many secrets. So many lies. All because of who I was.

“I ...” I cleared my throat, desperate to steer the conversation away from my tragic past before I started crying. “When I came into contact with a werewolf a couple months

ago, I had a reaction, even with my bracelet on. I became feverish and grew claws.” I shuddered, recalling how I’d lashed out and scarred August’s face with those claws—who was now dead. Fates, I still couldn’t believe he was dead. *Murdered*, more accurately. By Lochlan’s diabolical older brother.

“Yes, Tess informed me of your close encounters with vampires and werewolves as of late. It’s a good thing Josephine thought to make a spare bracelet for you. The spell must have weakened over time, allowing traces of essence and magic to seep through the block. This particular spell discourages the wearer from removing the bracelet, but it doesn’t mean others can’t remove or break it. Silver is a natural werewolf and vampire deterrent, but it isn’t indestructible.”

Clarice paused to study me over the rim of her glasses with a small smile. “Magic can always be broken, if the will to is strong enough. The supernatural part of you obviously wanted to be free of restraint, despite your ignorance of its existence. I’m very glad you’re here, Kenna. With the proper training, you’ll be a force to be reckoned with.”

Um, okay then. I couldn’t decide if her words were a compliment or creepy. “Am I a prisoner here?” I asked point blank, gratified when her smile slipped.

“I know the method of your arrival to Thornecrest Academy wasn’t ideal, but you must understand. Left unchecked and undisciplined, Syphons can be very dangerous. I’m sorry, Kenna. My top priority is to protect the students on this campus. In fact, every new student goes through a trial

period of sorts to test their control. We take safety here very seriously.”

I raised a brow, gesturing around me. “Is that why you have this padded room? In case a student loses control? Or is it simply to contain what *you* can’t control?”

She blinked, clearly surprised at my blunt honesty.

Point for me. My days of being cowed into complacency were over.

Recovering admirably, the headmistress removed her glasses and tucked them into the breast pocket of her jacket. I noticed with surprise that she wasn’t wearing gloves, despite knowing what I was. “Yes. If a witch is deemed dangerous, then we have no qualms with subduing him or her. The supernatural world may be hidden from most humans, but we still have laws to follow.

“Our justice system might even be more stringent than what the majority of the world is used to. It has to be, what with the nature of our abilities and how they could jeopardize our way of life. Without order, events like the Holy Inquisition and Salem Witch Trials would seem like a slap on the wrist compared to how humans of today would react to our presence.”

Now it was my turn to blink. “So ... this school is for witches?”

She inclined her head with a proud tilt and the crow mimicked the action. Creepy. “You’re where you should be, Kenna, amongst your own kind. If you let me, I’d like to show you what you’ve been missing out on.”

It was like she could read my mind. Her words struck a highly vulnerable part of me, an insecure spot that had always felt excluded. Ostracized. She was offering me inclusion, something I'd never been given until recently.

Until Isla.

I leaned forward. "Can I make a phone call?"

She hesitated. I tried not to look desperate, tried and no doubt failed as she eyed me dubiously.

"Kenna, I must ask—" she began, but a throat cleared from behind her and she turned. I glimpsed a burly black guy as she retreated from the room, closing the door behind her. When I didn't hear the lock engage, I sprang from the bed and tiptoed to the door. Holding my breath, I carefully turned the handle, listening for any sound as I cracked it open.

"... vampire at the northwest perimeter," a deep male voice said in low tones.

"Which one is it?" Clarice replied sharply.

"The prince's drothen."

He continued to speak but a ringing had begun in my ears at the mention of that word. Drothen. Were they talking about Kade? The last time I'd seen him, he was being thrown several yards by an unseen force. The only thing I could decipher was that Isla's dad must have supernatural powers.

The thought of Kade being here, someone I knew and trusted, sent hope rushing through me once again. *Should* I trust him though? He and Lochlan had known each other for a century. Not only that, they shared a mystical blood connection, a drothen bond that enhanced each other's abilities

and supposedly allowed them to feel one another's emotions. He would have known all along who Lochlan really was, yet had never bothered telling me. Never warned or prepared me.

Was everyone in my life bent on keeping me in the dark?

Clarice seemed ready to talk though. I chewed on my bottom lip, wrestling with what to do. On the one hand, I needed answers, which the headmistress would hopefully supply. On the other hand, she'd kept me locked in this room an entire day without outside contact. I could stay and discover what this place had to offer or see for myself if Kade was outside waiting for me.

There's a third option, my mind supplied. Make a run for it and break all ties. Start a life of your own like you've been planning to do for years.

My arms and legs trembled with the need to move. To run. To forge a path on my *own* terms. I was ready. *So* ready to be the sole decider of my fate.

So I stopped thinking. Simply acted on what my instincts were screaming at me to do.

I opened the door wider and slipped through, sliding to the right when I spotted Clarice and the burly guy still in deep conversation to my left. I turned to slink down the hallway, but not before a loud *caw* blew my cover. Burly Guy's head shot up. His dark eyes locked with mine.

Crap.

I bolted.

"Hey," he barked, but I didn't slow. My bare feet slapped the cement floor as I frantically searched for an exit. I yanked

on a few door handles in passing. All locked. What was *with* this place?

Booted steps gave chase and my heart thundered, spurring me onward. I charged to the end of the hallway, rounding the corner at breakneck speed. And slammed into a wall.

Scratch that. A human who only *felt* like a wall.

At the impact, all the air left my lungs in a violent whoosh and I stumbled back. Before I could fall, though, hands grasped my upper arms. “Let me go,” I wheezed, struggling to pull free.

Instead of releasing me, my captor snorted, saying, “I was expecting someone a little more timid.”

Confused, I paused long enough to glance up. And blinked in surprise when dark, stormy-blue eyes connected with mine.

They were the same shade as Isla’s.

More than that though, the man looked exactly like a younger Sheriff Andrews.

2

KENNA

“Noah?” I knew what he looked like from a family portrait at Isla’s house, but what was her brother doing *here*?

“In the flesh,” he replied with a sardonic smirk, then glanced over my shoulder. “Lose something?”

“Thank you, Noah,” Clarice said from close behind me, and I inwardly cursed, knowing I’d lost my window of escape. “Malcolm and I have the situation under control. You may go now.”

Situation? I definitely didn’t like her choice of words. I pulled away to face the headmistress.

“Yeah, looks like you have everything well in hand,” Noah said, his tone insinuating otherwise. “I heard there’s a disturbance outside the wards. Anything I can do to help?”

Clarice pursed her lips, clearly annoyed with him, which for some reason amused me. After a moment of silently staring him down, she replied, “Actually, there *is* something you can do. Please escort Miss Belmont back to—”

“I’m not going back in there,” I quickly interrupted, retreating a step when the big black guy looked ready to lunge for me. I threw an accusatory glare at Clarice. “So I *am* a prisoner here.”

Sighing, she pinched the bridge of her nose. “Malcolm, stand down. I apologize, Kenna. Due to the circumstances of your arrival, the institute’s staff is a little on edge. Vampires have never breached our wards before, but with you here, I have no doubt they will be severely tested in the weeks, possibly months to come. We are safe, I assure you, but most here have never dealt with a threat of this magnitude.”

Dread sapped the blood from my face. Was the school under vampire siege ... because of me?

Seeing my expression, she dropped her hand and stepped toward me. “Now, none of that. This isn’t your fault. You didn’t know any better, and despite the circumstances, I’m very happy you’re here. I would like the opportunity to explain everything to you, Kenna. Will you give me that chance?”

Crap, how could I say no to that? She’d spoken the words I’d longed to hear for *years*. I would be stupid to shoot her down when she was offering me more than anyone else ever had.

Slowly, I nodded, saying, “Okay, but I’m not going back into that room.”

Her lips curved into a small smile. “All right. I’ve already set up accommodations for you elsewhere, so that won’t be a problem. Noah will escort you to the Red Wing.”

“But, Headmistress—” Noah began.

“And he will remain nearby at all times until I say otherwise,” she interjected, throwing him a sharp look.

Whoa, I could practically feel the tension between them.

Her expression softened when she turned back to me. “I apologize for leaving so soon, but I have an important matter to attend to. Noah will make sure to provide you with everything you need in my absence.” I opened my mouth to ask if she was going to see Kade, but she was already turning toward the giant brute behind her. “Malcolm, with me.”

With the crow still fixed to her shoulder, she and the black dude swept forward, leaving me to silently gape after them.

“Clarice,” Noah called to her swiftly retreating back. “Let me join you in the field. It’s what I was trained to do.”

Her spine stiffened and she slowed to twist her head around. “Kenna’s safety is more important than anything, Mr. Andrews. Put your skills to use by making sure nothing happens to her.” With that, she left, Malcolm close on her heels.

Okay, there was some seriously bad blood between those two.

I expected Noah to be upset, possibly even angry, so when I glanced up to find him studying me curiously, heat rose to my cheeks.

“So, you’re my little sister’s new friend,” he said, cocking a dark blond brow at me. The one difference between him and his father was his long blond hair, currently tied back in a messy man bun. In his early twenties, he already filled out his starched white shirt to capacity.

When his assessing gaze took in my bedraggled state, I felt all of two inches tall. Especially when his casually confident posture practically shouted, “I’m hot and I know it.” Squaring

my shoulders, I did my best to look down my nose at him. “So, you’re my new friend’s big, troublemaking brother.”

Both brows arched. He barked a sardonic laugh, clearly not offended. “She told me you were this sweet, innocent thing. Obviously, she forgot to mention the claws.” I suppressed a shudder, remembering my short time as a werewolf. Before I could respond, he added, “But whatever she told you about *me* is probably true. C’mon, let’s get out of here. This sublevel gives me the creeps.”

He took off down the hallway, but I hesitated, wary of where he was taking me. Just because he was Isla’s brother didn’t mean I trusted him.

“Can you show me how to get outside?” I called after him, holding my breath while I waited for his response.

I needed to know. I needed to know if the drothen they’d been talking about was Kade. If he was here—and if he was okay—I knew in my gut that I’d start to feel a little better.

“Yeah, uh, we’re not going outside,” Noah said over his shoulder, stopping to glance back at me. “It’s no secret that I’ve got a nose for trouble, but I’m not a *complete* idiot. There’s a powerful drothen-bonded Feltore stalking the wards. Now’s not the time for a sightseeing tour.”

My heart pumped double time. It *was* Kade. It had to be.

“Do you have a phone?” I asked, undeterred.

“Yeah, why? Need to call the vampire hotline? I’m sure they’d *love* to hear from you.”

I spluttered, completely caught off guard.

“Lighten up, K-Bug. It’s called sarcasm,” Noah said, jerking his chin for me to follow him. “I’ll let you use it, but let’s ditch these creepy hallways first.”

I flicked a glance at my bare feet, but quickly decided that having access to a phone was much more important than my appearance. I hurried after him as he took off again. “Wait. I really need to check that my friends are okay.”

“Isla’s fine. My dad called me.”

Relief almost bowled me over. “I ... That’s so good to hear. But I need to check up on a few others.”

He whipped a phone from his pants pocket and held it out to me over his shoulder. When I reached for it though, he dangled the electronic just out of reach. “There’s only one catch. Promise not to booty call any vamps. Promise me that and you can have it.”

My silence must have given away my intentions. He palmed the phone with a snort and continued down the hall at a fast clip.

I ground my teeth together, holding in a frustrated sigh. Then a thought came to me. Leverage, if you will. “Does Isla know that her dad is a witch? That *you* are?” I didn’t know for sure if they were, but Sheriff Andrews’ hands had lit up like mini suns the last time I’d seen him, and his son was at a school for witches.

Wait. I almost tripped over my own feet as an awful thought hit me. What if Isla *did* know? What if the one person in my life not keeping secrets was the biggest secret keeper of them all?

“Warlock.”

“Huh?” I said, hesitantly entering a creepy windowless stairwell as he held open the door for me.

“I’m a dude. I like to be called a warlock, not a witch,” he explained dryly, his voice echoing as he passed me to climb the stairs two at a time. “And no, Isla doesn’t know. At least, not concretely. She was born magicless. It happens sometimes. But witch law states that non-magic users in the family aren’t to know about our activities. She’s had suspicions over the years, of course, mostly because of my teenage impulsive behavior. That’s why I got sent here my senior year of highschool. Thornecrest is sometimes seen as a magical reform school for juvenile delinquents. Helps shape us to fit into society.”

Glancing back at my slack-jawed expression, he waved away my shock dismissively. “It’s not that bad. I stayed on as an instructor here, after all.”

Yeah, not reassuring. I was liking this place less and less. Maybe I needed to learn all I could from Isla’s brother, then hightail it out of here. Discovering the truth at all costs may not be worth it if my freedom paid the price. I still had personal goals. Dreams. Namely finishing highschool like a regular teenager with a few friends by my side, then getting into art school.

I wanted to decide my future, even if I screwed it up along the way.

In four days, Aunt Tess—or Headmistress Mayweather, for that matter—couldn’t legally keep me here against my will. They had to let me go if I wanted out.

Right?

“So, what’s with the crow?” I randomly blurted, recalling its black, intelligent eyes with a grimace.

“Nautilus? He’s Clarice’s familiar.”

“Fam—what?”

“Familiar. A spirit in animal form. They’re pretty elusive, but on rare occasions bond with witches and warlocks.”

“W-wait, hold up,” I stuttered. “Spirit? Like a *ghost*?”

Noah snorted. “No such thing as ghosts, baby witch. Spirits are celestial beings. According to the Witch Origins textbook, all witches are gifted a sliver of spirit at birth, hence why we’re able to create and wield magic. It’s believed that spirits who wish to join the corporeal world must sacrifice a piece of themselves. They can never be whole again, but by embodying an animal, can seek the missing part of themselves that was given to a witch or warlock. Guess you could say it’s like a twisted version of finding your soulmate.

“And, no,” he continued, “familiars aren’t guardian angels. They aid and protect their witch or warlock, but for their own selfish purposes. Many can be downright malevolent.”

“So what does that mean exactly? That witches have little pieces of demon inside them?” I suppressed a creeped-out shiver.

He threw me a smirk over his shoulder, drawling, “Not all of them. But there’s a good chance the troublemakers do.” Meaning *him*. With that rather shocking bit of news, Noah opened the stairwell door.

As we stepped into a sea of chattering people, he said, “Whoa, hold on,” and sharply tugged on the back of my shirt. Caught off balance, I stumbled against him. Instead of freaking out at my nearness like I thought he would, Noah placed his gloveless hand on the small of my back as the throng rushed by. “The students have extracurricular magic competitions on Sundays. They must have just finished. Not the best timing for a meet-and-greet.”

I wanted to pull away. To remind him of what I was. What close contact with me could do. But a part of me hesitated, curious how my body would react to being touched by someone, *anyone*, other than Lochlan. I had to know. I needed to. Life would be so much simpler, *safer*, if I could fall for a man not bent on killing me.

As the seconds ticked by and Noah’s warm palm remained pressed to my spine, though, I felt little more than a faint hum. It was nice, pleasant even, but dull in comparison to what Lochlan made me feel with the barest of touches.

How could I settle for safe when I’d experienced something so recklessly dangerous? So wild and freeing, so utterly consuming?

Wow. I required therapy pronto.

Dozens of people—witches, I assumed—shuffled past, several casting curious glances my way. Great. First impressions and I had *not* been getting along lately. The students all wore stylish black and red school uniforms, with a gold-stitched T and A crest on their blazers. I could only imagine what they thought of me, disheveled and pressed up against a *teacher*, of all things.

Skin, hair, and eyes of varying color streaked by, which made me wonder how many schools like this existed, and where this one was located. Was I still in Maine? I had no idea where Aunt Tess had taken me.

“How did you know who I was when you first saw me?” I asked Noah, who seemed perfectly at ease with cozying up to a near stranger. What had Isla said about him? Oh yeah, that he’d dated pretty much every girl in his class and then some. He was older now, and a teacher, but I felt my guard going up all the same.

“My dad alerted me to your presence here. Said to keep an eye on you. That’s why I was down in the creepy dungeon earlier.”

“You should have stopped by and said hi,” I muttered darkly. “No one spoke to me for almost an entire day.”

He snorted. “They did the same thing to me when I arrived here. For different reasons, but they’re very strict about who’s allowed to walk the halls of this institute. If they thought you were dangerous, you’d still be locked up downstairs.”

Wow. I had no idea how I felt about that.

The breath that warmed my ear and stirred my hair was too much, though. It felt strange. Wrong. Frustrated at my body’s unwillingness to even try, I shifted to stand along the wall next to him. He easily let me go, seemingly unconcerned at my need for space.

When the crowd began to thin a few minutes later, he gestured for me to follow him once again. As we walked, I let silence settle between us, too focused on taking in my

surroundings. The sublevel had definitely been creepy compared to this one. Warm wood graced the floors, rising halfway up the walls. Dark wood beams crisscrossed the ceiling high above. But the soaring cathedral-style windows that made up the entire right wall held my attention.

Namely, what was *outside* the windows.

Without thinking, I crossed to them, earning myself a few muttered curses as I cut through traffic. Normally, my face would have heated with embarrassment, but I was in too much shock. What I was seeing didn't make sense.

There were *pink flowering trees* in the large square courtyard. And green grass. And ...

"Where's the snow?" I asked Noah in disbelief the second he joined me. "It's December. This doesn't ... Where are we?"

"You're not in Kansas anymore, Dorothy," Noah said dryly, and I had the sudden urge to smack him. No doubt sensing my growing distress, he added, "It's still winter, but you're no longer in Maine."

"What?" I shot him a startled look. "Then where—?"

"Canada. Just over the border, south of Quebec City."

"B-but," I spluttered. Did I even have a passport? "That doesn't make sense. Canada is cold and—and *wintery* this time of year. What—"

"It is," he interjected with a shrug, "but the school and grounds are protected by a weather-controlling spell. Step foot outside the ward boundaries and you'll be knee deep in snow."

Uh ...

“It’s a lot to take in all at once. Most witches learn that magic exists around the age puberty strikes or sooner, depending on when their magical abilities manifest. I learned earlier than most, which was a struggle, since I had to keep it from Isla.”

“Oh. Um, that must have sucked.”

“Yes, indeed. Still does. Especially since I have to lie about the true nature of this school.”

I tore my gaze from a monarch butterfly fluttering in the clear blue sky to gape at him. “So she’s never visited you here?”

Another shrug. “Humans aren’t allowed. They don’t even know this school exists. The spells around it prevent them from seeing it.”

I blinked. “Wait, we’re invisible?”

He scratched his head, making a few strands of blond hair escape their tie to frame his face. “Sorta, but not really. This place is corporeal. You just can’t see it from the outside, unless you know what to look for.”

Okay, then. That didn’t make any sense, but neither did people turning into wolves or shadow men with superhuman speed. My life had taken a turn for the weird, and I could either accept it or check myself into a mental institution. The latter didn’t sound very productive, though, and I had things to do.

“So the vampire outside the wards right now. The drothen. Can he see inside?” I watched Noah closely, hoping he’d verbally or otherwise give away who the drothen was.

His gaze turned curious again. “Interesting.”

I frowned. “Huh?”

He wiggled his fingers at me. “There’s no fear when you talk about the bloodsucker. Is it true, then? Were you under a Venturi prince’s thrall?”

Out of nowhere, anger surged through me. I dug my nails into my palms, glaring daggers at him. “First, don’t call them that. They have *names*, you know. Second, I’m not obsessed with or being controlled by vampires. I’m *not*. My thoughts are my own and I make my own decisions.”

Although, that last part wasn’t exactly true. Too many people had been trying to decide things for me lately.

Only four days until I can legally make my own decisions.

Noah held up his hands in mock surrender. “I meant no offense. It’s just shocking to hear of a witch not being afraid of vampires.” He glanced around us before whispering, “Especially since you’re a Syphon. It’s never happened before.”

I crossed my arms. “Well, Isla isn’t either.” Except for maybe Pizza Dude. Err, I mean, Troy.

Noah stilled and I realized too late my mistake.

Freaking crap, I had *not* meant to say that.

“I mean, like in a general sense. But if she actually knew a vampire, I’m sure—”

“What are you trying to say?” His voice was quiet, yet I could tell he was seconds away from exploding.

Crap, crap, *crap*.

“Nothing. I was just trying to—”

“*Rigescunt indutae!*” he interrupted, flicking a hand at me.

My eyes widened as a blinding bright light encompassed his outstretched fingers. “W-what?”

His gaze dropped to my left wrist. Cursing, he lowered his arm and the light fizzled out. “Right. Your spell-blocker charm. Forgot that little bit. Look, I need you to stay where you are and don’t make a sound. I need to make a phone call.”

With that, he yanked out his phone and strode a few paces down the now empty hallway. As he waited for someone to pick up his call, it dawned on me what he’d just tried to do.

Um, no. I was *so* not cool with that.

I marched up to him and poked his bicep. “Did you just try to use witchy voodoo on me?”

He waved me away, turning to speak into his phone. “You didn’t tell me that Isla was personally involved with them. Oh, you didn’t think it concerned me? That’s rich. I want to speak with her. *Now*, Dad.”

A teacher poked her head out of a doorway, probably wondering what all the ruckus was about.

Noah grabbed my upper arm and stalked down the hallway. Normally, I’d go all kung fu on him for daring to manhandle me, but if he was speaking to Isla, then I wanted to hear it. I let him drag me into a nearby classroom and shut us inside, but wrenched my arm free the second we were alone.

He barely seemed to notice my agitation, too busy pacing the length of the room. His free hand suddenly lit up again and

several chairs loudly scraped across the floorboards, clearing his path. My jaw dropped at the open display of magic, but I remained silent. Hopefully, he'd forget I was here so I could continue eavesdropping on his conversation.

Seconds later, he said, "Isla? It's me. What's this I hear about you and vampires? Are you hanging out with them? No, I'm not talking about the thrall incident. That wasn't your fault —" Yelling on the other end. Go, Isla. "Yeah, I *know* we should have told you. I'm sorry. What? Nothing. I'm not hiding anything else—"

"Yes, he is!" I suddenly shouted, startling both Noah and myself. "Don't believe a word your brother says, Isla. He's lying to you about everything."

Noah hurriedly ended the call and shot me a death glare. "Do you realize what you've just done? She could be put on trial if the wrong person finds out she knows too much."

I cringed, murmuring, "Oops?" Noah was probably going to blast me across the room now, but it was worth it. I knew all too well what it felt like to be kept in the dark. To be *lied* to. Isla didn't deserve to be treated like that, no matter *what* their witch laws said.

Noah's phone rang, extra loud in the silent tension filling the room.

On the second ring, I gestured at the phone. "Want me to get that?"

Wow. I was *really* pushing my luck here. I had no idea if this dude had a volatile temper or not. So when he snorted,

saying, “Have at it. You make a mess, you clean it up,” I barely had the sense to accept the phone being offered to me.

Giddy with anticipation, I quickly answered the call, then froze. What if it was Sheriff Andrews? Freaking crap. Grimacing, I raised the phone to my ear. “Hello?”

“Noah Bartholomew Andrews, what are you up to now?” Isla’s voice shrieked through the phone. “I thought I heard my best friend shouting at me not to trust you. What is—”

“I’m your best friend?” I cut in, a smile blooming on my face a mile wide. Despite the hollow feeling inside my chest, my heart swelled to bursting. I’d never called anyone my best friend before, let alone had someone return the sentiment.

Silence came from the other end, then, “Kenna? Is that really you?”

“It’s me.”

A pause. Then, “Girl. *Girl!* How—? Where—? I-I thought you were *dead*. I lost your number when that jerk vampire destroyed my phone, and Dad won’t tell me anything. And after what happened to August ... Oh, Kenna, I assumed the worst. Are you okay? Wait. Why on God’s green earth are you hanging out with my *brother?*”

I glanced at Noah, expecting him to snatch the phone away from me at any moment. Instead, what I saw made my eyes practically fall out of my head. He was sprawled across three chairs with his eyes closed. *Fake* sleeping. Fates above, was he fake-snoring too?

“Isla? Your brother is really strange.”

A snort. “Tell me something I don’t know.”

“I will. I’ll tell you everything. And Isla?”

“Hmm?”

A tear struggled to slip free, and I let it. “You’re my best friend too.”

3

KENNA

I swept my thumb over the charm on my bracelet, watching as rivulets of water caught in the etched surface. I had studied the back-to-back crescent moon design thousands of times over the years, but never once questioned why I didn't take the bracelet off. I assumed it was because the piece reminded me of my mom, making me feel closer to her memory.

A stray thought trickled in, a highly distracting one that had no business pestering me right now. I'd been wearing this new bracelet for a month. A *month*. Which meant, for weeks now, I could have safely touched Lochlan. Like *really* touched him. Kissed him even. Maybe more.

Fates alive, I should *not* have had that thought. My body suddenly throbbed at the lost opportunity, at the needless suffering. The ache intensified, and I squeezed my thighs together. We could have had sex and completed the bond between us.

Wait, *whoa*.

No freaking way, body. Do *not* go there.

I didn't want to have sex with Lochlan, and he certainly didn't want our bond to be completed. He wanted me to reject it. And him. He didn't want that kind of connection with me.

Why was I even debating this? I didn't know if he was alive or dead, yet an image of us in this shower, naked and feverishly pressed together, stubbornly popped into my head. His fingers were trailing down my quivering body, slipping lower, and lower, and lower. Driving me crazy. Making me feel gloriously alive and cherished and *wanted*.

Fates.

I shook my head to dispel the image. He killed *Syphons* for a living, I reminded myself with a disgusted huff.

Something was seriously wrong with me.

Maybe *I* had a sliver of demon spirit inside me. It would explain why I was so irresistibly drawn to such a dark and dangerous soul.

Cringing at the disturbing thought, I scrambled for a way to distract myself. Refocusing on my bracelet, I fiddled with the clasp, curious what would happen if I tried to undo it. A sense of loss immediately halted my movements, so intense that I almost sobbed. I didn't *want* to remove it. The mere thought soured my gut. I'd rather cut off my hand.

"So messed up," I muttered, releasing the bracelet to finish rinsing the conditioner from my hair.

The "Red Wing" turned out to be a girl's dormitory, complete with a communal bathroom. I'd opted out of joining the students for dinner in the dining hall, explaining to Noah that I wasn't feeling up to being stared at. Truthfully though, I didn't have much of an appetite. I knew that I should eat anyway to keep my strength up, but a part of me truly didn't want to be ogled right now.

I was used to being the new girl. I was used to the stares. But this was different.

The students here were witches, and their curiosity toward me would run much deeper. They would want to know what kind of witch I was.

Noah had shown me my new dorm room, complete with clothing and toiletries meant for me. I'd immediately missed my old room in the basement, creepy reinforced walls and all. At least there, I had the space to myself. Here, I had two roommates—who I still hadn't met.

A tad nervous about meeting them, I'd decided to take a shower and head to bed early. That way, they'd only have time to say a quick hello in the morning before rushing to breakfast and their classes. I wasn't here to make friends. If I didn't like Headmistress Mayweather's explanation, I wanted out.

Speaking to Isla for an hour had eased some of my worries, but she hadn't seen what happened to Kade and Lochlan after I'd shoved her into my house. The need to know was chipping away at my calm, leaving me edgy and distracted. After recovering from the influence of Troy's thrall, she'd spent hours trying to weasel information out of her dad.

"He practically has me under house arrest now, so I'm not speaking to him," she had confided, her voice quavering with emotion. "I've never not spoken to him before, but he won't tell me *anything*. Just keeps saying how disappointed he is in me. But what about *him*? He's been lying to me the same way your aunt's been lying to you. I don't even ... I don't even *know* him anymore."

My heart ached for her. For the loss of trust she was experiencing. I knew how deeply lies could cut. Considering her love of solving mysteries, the discovery of her family's huge secret after all these years must have been extra shocking.

I didn't know how to fix the injustices we were both facing, but I wasn't going to let the deceitful adults in our lives have the final say. Somehow, we'd find our way back to each other, sooner than later—even if I had to coerce her brother into helping me. I'd seen the guilt on his face, the remorse. Good. I could use that.

Feminine laughter snapped me back to the present, to the reality that my world had been reduced to nothing more than unknowns once again.

I was about to turn off the water when I heard, “She looks so sickly, like a drug addict or something. Better keep her away from your opium poppy, Jordan.”

“If she touches my plants, she'll find herself puking up worms,” a droll voice said, followed by tittering laughter.

“Do you think she's a solitary witch? It would explain that lost look in her eyes. There should be a law against witches willingly living without a coven. A friend of my mom's did that. She went crazy and they had to bind her magic.”

“And they're letting her *room* with us? What was the headmistress thinking?”

“Maybe she's bound? I noticed her wearing a charm bracelet.”

“Well, it would explain why she looks that way.”

“Guess we’ll find out soon enough. Hopefully she’s already asleep though. Anyway, enough about her. How do *I* look?”

“Who cares. You’re getting ready for bed, Mei.”

“Um, hello? Did you see who’s lounging against the wall right outside our *room*?”

A pause. “Oh. Good point. Hand me that lipgloss.”

More laughter.

By the time they left, my trembling legs could barely support me. There wasn’t a doubt in my mind that the two girls had been talking about *me*. Which meant ...

I had just met my roommates.

Standing under the shower’s spray until the water chilled, I turned over their words again and again, my stomach a mess of knots. Sickly? Did I really look that bad? I held up my arm and studied my bracelet once more. Was I bound? What did that mean exactly?

I prolonged my time in the bathroom, waiting for a lull in traffic when only a couple of girls were present. They were at the sinks, so I chose the farthest one away from them and hurriedly brushed my teeth. But I made a mistake then. I glanced at my reflection in the mirror.

Familiar silver-gray eyes stared back, but there was something wrong about them. They were too big for my face. The weight loss was painfully obvious in the sharpness of my cheekbones, and there was no masking the dark smudges beneath my eyes, despite my olive skin tone. My one day with Lochlan at the cabin hadn’t been enough. If being apart from

him really was causing the loss of appetite and restless sleep, then my health would only decline further.

Unless ...

Unless I rejected him and our bond.

“No,” I immediately hissed at my reflection, baring my teeth. Startled at my fierce reaction, I looked away, only to find a few sets of wide eyes on me. Cursing under my breath, I gathered my supplies and quickly left the bathroom.

Noah was still waiting for me in the hallway, looking half asleep on his feet. Poor guy. He should have eaten something like I asked him to, yet he refused to go anywhere without me. But he’d also refused to let me use his phone to call my “other” friends, so a tiny vindictive part of me gloated at his tiredness.

When I approached, he took in my school-issued black yoga pants and red sleep shirt with a faint smirk. “Thornecrest red suits you.”

I glanced down at the T and A crest emblazoned on the shirt’s left breast pocket. “It’s better than what I woke up wearing,” I replied with a shrug. If I wasn’t seriously thinking about leaving in three days’ time, I’d ask for some of my belongings to be sent from home.

If I even *had* a home anymore.

My throat tightened and a sense of loss swept over me, this time genuine. Where would I go after this?

Anywhere you want, my mind tried to assure me.

Yes. Anywhere. But what if I didn't know where I wanted to go?

I mean, I wanted to see Isla, but she still lived with her dad—who I didn't want to see. I'd rather finish out my senior year at Rosewood High like a regular human, but my very presence could put my friends there in danger. I couldn't for a second forget what I was or who was still after me. As soon as I stepped foot outside these walls, I would be hunted again. If not by Lochlan, then by some other vampire.

Lochlan.

How twisted was my head that I still wanted to see him? No, not just see him. I wanted to be wherever he was. My skin, my bones—every drop of blood in my body—wanted to be near him. It had to be this bond between us making me feel this way. Aunt Tess had been right. She'd taught me to be on my guard, to be *safe*. Yet here I was, daydreaming about a guy who'd spent a century hunting down my kind, only to kill them.

I needed to reject this, this *thing* between us, before I stupidly got myself killed over someone who'd brought countless dangers to my doorstep.

But how? What was I supposed to say or do? *I reject thee, Lochlan D'angelo, henceforth and forevermore?* Maybe a tad overdramatic, but rejecting a bond seemed to be an archaic ritual by the sounds of it.

“Where'd you go?” a voice said directly in front of me. Startled by the sound, I flinched, and a tube of toothpaste slipped from my grasp. Noah flicked out his fingers and the

toothpaste froze midair. I gawked as it slowly rose again, hovering inches from my hand.

A little wiggled out, I gingerly plucked it up with a nervous laugh. “Well, that’s kinda useful. Can you do that with anything?”

“No, but I’m working on it. Magic takes a toll on the wielder, and exerting too much energy can have fatal consequences. It’s why most parents enroll their magically-inclined children into supernatural academies such as this. Learning how to properly control your magic and understand what you can and cannot do is beneficial for everyone. Magical accidents are hard to cover up, especially since the invention of camera phones.”

“So, what do you do if a human sees your magic?”

“Use a mind-altering spell on them. But sometimes it backfires, and ... well ...” He coughed, muttering, “It can take away too many memories and, in extreme cases, cause brain damage.”

“*What?*” I hissed, and a few girls passing by gave me strange looks. I almost cajoled Noah into continuing this conversation inside my dorm room, but my super-judgmental roomies were no doubt in there. Instead, I lowered my voice, murmuring, “I actually prefer the way vampires protect their identities. At least thrall doesn’t harm you.”

Noah’s devil-may-care expression morphed into startled bewilderment. “You’re joking, right? Doesn’t *harm* you? That’s bull. It lowers your inhibitions, for one thing. What did those bloodsuckers do to you?”

Heat slapped my cheeks. “They’re not *bloodsuckers*. They have names—”

“Yeah, yeah. So does the devil,” Noah interrupted with a sardonic snort. My eyes narrowed to slits, but before I could say anything, he held up a hand, cautioning me with a look. “Let me be real with you for a sec. Defending vampires is a surefire way to get lynched at this school. Witches and vamps don’t mix. There’s too much bad blood, too many instances of one race trying to control the other. We keep our own council, and so do they. The only neutral supernatural party is the werewolves, who usually stay far away from the ongoing feud. It’s been like this for centuries, long before the curse that forced all vampires to expose their true forms at night.”

My breath hitched. “Wait, curse? So you know about the prophecy?”

He gave me another “you’ve got to be kidding” look. Then proceeded to recite the prophecy from memory.

“Three dark princes, monsters were they.

Cursed in their true forms, they must pay.

Bound to the night, along with their kingdom.

‘Til the hundredth year, or a cure can free them.

Beyond that time, the curse remains.

But night becomes day, a monster to stay.

Only one can free all, before it’s too late.

An elusive maiden, with a touch that slays.

Drawn to her blood, the three must choose.

As one follows another, but never two.

Together or divided, they must agree.

A threat, she is, but also the key.

A sacrifice must be made, to end this curse.

A choice given, the hardest to learn.

Without this choice, doomed their kingdom be.

And in shadow it falls, for an eternity.

“Yeah, all witches know of the prophecy,” he went on. “First Years are required to memorize it, but most have already learned about the vampire curse and the sole witch powerful enough to break it from their parents. It’s a matter of pride, being able to tell your children that a single witch could bring the entire vampire race to its knees.”

Well, then. A tad tyrannical. And overwhelming, when put that way. “Kind of ironic that a werewolf was the first to tell me about it then,” I muttered.

Noah made a strangled, choking noise. “Lord almighty, leaving you in the dark was *not* the right move. You’ve experienced everything backwards.”

“Yeah, kinda like Isla.”

He rolled his eyes, but acknowledged my jab with a good-natured grunt. “Just do me one favor so my sister doesn’t kill me for letting you get hurt. Don’t defend vampires here. In fact, don’t even mention them.”

I frowned. “But you’re a teacher here. Even if I say the wrong thing, can’t you just tell everyone that I’m new at this? Maybe if they know that I’m a—”

“*Sana obstructionum,*” Noah uttered swiftly, closing his eyes as he raised a brightly glowing hand. This time, electric blue crackled between his fingertips. I blinked, too surprised to speak. When he lowered his arm and reopened his eyes, the stormy blue of his irises were filled with exasperation. At my questioning look, he said, “Sound-blocking spell. Witches thrive on gossip and we’re standing in a girl’s dormitory, for heaven’s sake. No one can hear us now.”

He shuffled closer to me anyway, lowering his voice. “Here’s the thing, K-Bug. You’re here so we can keep you out of vamp captivity. The staff has been alerted to your presence and know who you are, but the students don’t. If they did, they’d either do one of three things: treat you like a celebrity, fear you, or shun you.”

Uh ...

“But I’m just a Syphon. I-I’m a witch like everyone else here. I’m not that different.”

He barked a laugh, then another, shaking his head at me like I’d said something stupid. I squeezed the tube of toothpaste in my hand, tempted to chuck it at him. “Sorry to break it to you, baby witch, but you’re not like the rest of us. Prophecy aside, history has *always* revered or ostracized your kind. But if you lay low—and don’t start spouting off to everyone that you’re the one and only Syphon—then you might have a chance of surviving this place.”

Goosebumps erupted across my skin. Well, crap. So much for fitting in.

* * *

The second I stepped foot inside my dorm room, I knew a warm welcome wasn't in the cards. Both of my roommates were still awake, but the lights were off. I spotted them by the glow of several flickering black candles placed in a circle on the floor.

The black girl tucked in the far left corner was practically drowning in a sea of green. Potted plants adorned the window's ledge and her bedside table. Some even hung from the ceiling. Her springy black hair shot out in every direction, wild and untamed like the vines creeping freely up the wall behind her. I could have sworn the vine arched toward her as she lovingly caressed its leaves.

The other girl was sitting cross-legged on the floor surrounded by the candles. Hunched over a deck of cards—tarot cards, maybe—it was hard to guess her Asian descent. Her hair was dyed cerulean blue, swept atop her head in twin space buns. Instead of school-issued pajamas, she wore a midriff-baring white tank and polkadot underwear. Nothing else.

The tension rose the moment they spotted me in the doorway. Their eyes sharpened, openly scrutinizing me from top to bottom. As they took in my wet hair and arms laden with toiletries, realization slowly dawned on their faces.

They knew. They knew I'd overheard them in the bathroom.

The usual instinct to avert my eyes, to avoid confrontation, shivered through me.

No more being cowed, I inwardly chided myself. I could lay low without allowing people to walk all over me. Right?

Straightening my spine, I firmly shut the door and ambled over to the unoccupied bed, pretending for all the world like their stares didn't affect me. Dumping my stuff on the red and black bedspread, I turned to them. "Hi, I'm Kenna, your new roommate. And you must be Jordan and Mei."

Despite how badly my knees were quaking, I wanted to do a little victory dance. The looks on their faces. Pure shock! Isla would be so proud.

A lump formed in my throat, threatening to expose my internal state. I missed Isla. I needed my best friend. She would undoubtedly handle this situation so much better than I could.

The silence stretched a little too long. Crap. Reeling in my emotions, I swallowed the lump, saying, "Anyway, nice to meet you. I'm pretty tired though, so ..." I let the sentence hang, letting my actions say the rest.

Every rustling noise was agonizingly loud in the continued silence as I readied for bed. Doubt niggled at me that I'd gone too far. I shut that thought down posthaste. I'd met all types of people during my years of moving across the country. Instinct told me these girls spoke one language: self confidence. Whether it was fake didn't matter, only that vulnerability wasn't visible through the mask. So I wouldn't let it. I could endure them for three days. I seriously doubted anything Clarice could say would convince me to stay longer.

Not waiting for or expecting a reply, I crawled into bed, facing away from them. Thank the fates my bed wasn't wedged in between theirs. An hour slowly ticked by, one where I listened to the occasional squeak of bedsprings and flip of a turning card. No one spoke though, not even a whisper.

Trying to sleep was pointless. I could feel their eyes on me, like prickly thorns poking at my skin. Even with Noah right outside the door, forced to keep vigil until Headmistress Mayweather relieved him, I felt all sorts of uncomfortable. I wished he wasn't there though. His presence heightened my awareness—and probably everyone else's—that I was different.

My churning mind kept me wide awake, thinking about all I'd learned today. If only I knew who the headmistress had gone out to speak to. Did Lochlan's brothers have drothen too?

A bell suddenly shrilled in my ears, and I bolted upright in bed, heart in my throat. I glanced at my roommates and was startled to see their mildly amused expressions at my reaction.

"Lights out," the springy-haired girl said, whom I guessed was Jordan, based on her voice's bored inflection. She exchanged a sly look with Mei before adding, "Sweet dreams," then snapped her fingers.

Just like that, the room plunged into darkness.

Mei snickered under her breath. The hair raised on my arms as I listened to the wood floor creaking and sheets rustling while she crawled into bed. Only when the sounds quieted did I finally settle back against my pillow, pulling the bedspread

up to my chin. It was a long time before my death grip on the blanket loosened and my eyes drifted shut.

4

KENNA

“What is she?”

“I don’t know. It’s weird. I can’t feel her aura at all.”

“Do you really think she’s bound?”

My roommate’s hushed voices had immediately woken me up, but I didn’t move an eyelash. I nearly gave up the ruse though when a finger feathered over my left wrist. It took all of my concentration to keep my breathing even, to not jerk away from the touch. Even with the newfound knowledge of what my bracelet could do, I still didn’t want to risk contact with another supernatural.

“Could be. I’ve never seen that symbol used for a binding spell though. Should we try taking the bracelet off?” The higher lilt of Mei’s voice sent alarm bells clanging through my skull.

“She could be dangerous. If the rumors are true that she was sedated when they brought her into solitary, then she might not have control over her magic.”

A light flickered behind my lids and I couldn’t keep still any longer. My eyes shot open and both girls froze above me. A green orb of glowing light illuminated their faces as they both eyed me warily.

“What—?” I began, but Jordan held a finger to her lips. When I scooted back against the metal headboard and opened my mouth again, something shot toward my face. A scream lodged in my throat, but before I could scramble away or utter a sound, a long strand of something snaked around my face—once, twice, three times—gagging my mouth.

“*Shhh*,” Jordan commanded. When I reached up to yank the *thing* off my face, she grabbed my arm, Mei the other. “Settle down, it’s just a vine. You can still nod or shake your head, which is all I need you to do. First off, were you brought to this school because you’re dangerous?”

What the freaking *crap*? I struggled against their grip, frightened and furious at their joint attack. The vine tightened around my face, painfully digging into the corners of my mouth. A muffled scream garbled out of me, which only forced me to lick the plant. *Yuck*.

“She’s stronger than she looks,” Mei grunted when my knee connected with her side.

“Stop struggling and the vine will loosen,” Jordan hissed at me, digging her nails into my arm. At the point of skin contact, I willed the red glow of my ability to burst forth between her fingers. Nothing happened. Clarice must have spoken the truth: my bracelet stopped me from stealing other people’s magic.

I stilled, breathing heavily through my nose. They had gotten the drop on me, but I wouldn’t let it happen again. My bracelet was coming *off*, once and for all. I was sick of feeling helpless, of feeling weak when my life was threatened.

Lochlan wasn't going to swoop in and rescue me. Not this time. Maybe never again. I needed to start defending myself, but I couldn't do that without supernatural leverage.

After a moment, Jordan nodded and the vine stopped biting into my face. "Good. Now, tell me. Are you dangerous?"

I hesitated, remembering Noah's warning. But what was I supposed to do? I was an interrogated hostage in my own bed. *Plants* were attacking me. I very much doubted they'd let me go without answers.

So I nodded. Mei gasped, almost dropping my arm.

Jordan's eyes narrowed and the glowing orb of green shot toward my face, halting inches away. A crisp scent permeated the air, similar to how a forest smelled during winter. Must be the magical ball. I squinted to see past it, wondering who had conjured the orb. My guess was Crazy Plant Girl.

"What subset of witch are you?" was her next question. "Mei's an Oracle. I'm an Earth Elemental. Nod when I say yours."

Crap. So much for laying low.

"Elemental? Cosmic? Oracle?" Her brows inched upward at each head shake. "*Darken?*" At my head shake, her brows slammed downward. "You're lying. Mei, pry the truth out of her."

Blue hair dangled above me as the girl crawled onto the bed and straddled my hips. I was too shocked to react when she lowered her head toward mine, our mouths a breath away from touching. "Open to me, witch of mystery," she crooned seductively, trailing a pointed nail down my cheek. "Spill all

your secrets, let me see. Who you are, what you can be. Do not deny me, this one thing.”

The vines loosened, allowing me to speak, and she straightened with a self-satisfied smirk. But when all I did was gape at her, her lips formed a pout.

“She resisted my truth spell.”

Jordan made a frustrated sound and dropped my arm. “It has to be that bloody bracelet. Take it off.”

“But—”

“Just *do* it, Mei. Are you really going to rest easy at night not knowing what she’s capable of? If she’s an unhinged Darken, she could slit our throats with a single thought while we sleep.”

Mei squeaked in fright, but fumbled to remove my bracelet anyway. “Fine, but get your vines ready in case she goes psycho when I remove—” The second my bracelet slid off, she stiffened above me. Instead of pushing her away, I watched with morbid fascination as her eyes glazed over and she intoned, “In three days’ time, an event shall occur. Three shall go out, but only one will return. Tread carefully, for only two shall survive. They have no need for three alive.”

“What in the—?” Jordan sputtered, her green orb nearly fizzling out. “Mei, get off her. She’s—”

“Noah!” I screamed as loud as I could before the vines could gag me again. Both girls froze, then whipped their heads toward the door as it burst open. But it wasn’t Noah who framed the doorway and flicked on the room’s overhead light.

It was Headmistress Mayweather.

Mei immediately scrambled off me and the vines quickly slithered away. Blinking rapidly against the brightness, I took in the headmistress's thunderous expression as she assessed the situation.

“What is the meaning of this?” Her tone was razor sharp as she fixed her gaze on Jordan. The crow on her shoulder released a displeased *caw*. At least, it sounded that way.

Jordan straightened from her position by my bed. “I ... it was a misunderstanding, headmistress. We tried to wake Kenna from a nightmare and must have startled her. We apologize for the outburst.”

Say what?

Mei, her face as white as a sheet, nervously wrung her hands but remained silent.

Clarice studied the two girls for a lengthy amount of time, long enough for them to squirm on the spot. Finally, she said, “Lying is not tolerated at this institute. Both of you, report to my office in the morning. Kenna, please collect your bracelet and come with me.”

I didn't need to be told twice, all too willing to escape these two psychopaths. I was off the bed in a flash, releasing a quiet sigh of relief when the door snapped shut behind me. Instead of Noah, though, Malcolm loomed directly outside. He fell in behind me while Clarice spun on her heel and took off down the hallway.

No one spoke as she led the way, her shoes clipping smartly against the wooden planks. I padded behind her, still barefoot and in my pajamas. At least everyone was in their

rooms this time of night. Questions welled on the tip of my tongue, namely about her earlier meeting with who I hoped was Kade. I gnawed on my bottom lip to keep my mouth from opening, nervous about the heated temper still pouring off her.

The lights had been dimmed, but cast off enough light to see by. Still, shadows eerily surrounded us. Combined with the crow who kept peering over its shoulder at me and the hulking man bringing up the rear, I struggled to tamp down my nerves. I actually wished Noah was here right now to break the icy silence.

Entering a stairwell, we descended a floor, then another, traveling down hallway after hallway until I was thoroughly lost. Just when I was about to break the silence out of sheer desperation, the headmistress stopped at a tall set of double doors, producing a ring of keys before fitting one in the lock. It scraped loudly against the metal, setting my teeth on edge. With a flick of her hand, the doors swung inward all by themselves and she stepped through.

“Come on in, Kenna,” she finally spoke, anger no longer detectable in her voice. The crow startled me by taking to the air in a flurry of flapping feathers. A soft orange glow lit the dark room as Clarice turned on a desk lamp, revealing the bird alighting on a perch in the room’s left corner. “This is my office. You’re safe here. Malcolm, the doors?”

I looked over my shoulder in time to see the man shut the doors with a reverberating thud before taking up a post along the wall. Gulping, I turned back to the headmistress, who had come to stand in front of me.

“Here, let me help you with that,” she said softly, reaching for my bracelet. I thought about pulling back and telling her that I didn’t want to wear it anymore, but she swiftly snatched it up and clasped it to my wrist before I could. “There, all better. Now, please be seated. We have a lot to discuss.”

Gesturing at a seat behind her, she rounded a gleaming mahogany desk to settle onto a high-backed chair. I hesitated, studying her face closely, but the anger from earlier had vanished completely. Darting my eyes around the room, I crept forward on silent feet, grateful when my chilled toes landed on a rug.

The room was massive, with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves spanning both ends. A mural decorated the ceiling high above, difficult to make out in the dim lighting—celestial-themed, maybe. Arched windows loomed straight ahead, dark and exposing us to the outside. I suppressed a shiver, wishing there were curtains covering their length.

When I was situated in the chair, Clarice propped her elbows on her desk and leaned forward with a sympathetic twinkle in her eye. “First, I apologize for how the girls treated you. They will be thoroughly questioned and disciplined accordingly. Are you injured?”

I blinked, resisting the urge to touch the tender corners of my mouth. “Um ... no.”

“Did you use your abilities on them?”

My heart tripped nervously. “I-I don’t think so. It all happened so fast. Am I in trouble?”

Clarice waved away my concern. “Of course not. You did nothing wrong. But Jordan Holt’s and Mei Chang’s reckless actions could have caused someone grave injury. Removing a witch’s talisman, whether it be used for protection or simply good luck, is highly frowned upon and for good reason. These objects are often tied to the balance of nature, and stealing or destroying them can cause devastating consequences.”

She shook her head with a sigh. “I should have known they couldn’t handle the mystery of your arrival. I’m afraid witches, especially Oracles with their prophetic gifts, can be highly superstitious at times. Until things calm down, you will stay in the room adjoining my office. It will afford you privacy and protection.”

I opened my mouth to protest, then shut it. If ostracizing me brought them peace of mind, then so be it. As long as I received answers and permission to leave this place in three days’ time, I could deal with being the freaky new girl. “Was it Kade?” I blurted instead. “The drothen outside the wards. Was it Kade Carmichael?”

As soon as I said the words, I knew that I’d made a mistake. The headmistress sat up straight and Malcolm shifted behind me.

“You know his full name?” Clarice asked, clearly shocked at the news. Crap. I thought she *knew*. I thought Aunt Tess had told her everything about the last two months.

I cleared my throat. “Yes. I mean, we attended the same school this fall. I got to know him pretty well.” My stomach dipped uncomfortably at her widening eyes. “You didn’t know?”

Sighing, she removed her glasses and pinched the bridge of her nose. “No. Tess failed to mention that detail. Or maybe she didn’t know. I’m surprised Bill Andrews didn’t figure that out though. I’ll have to give him a call.” She looked up at me again with an assessing gaze. “I can imagine that after your upbringing, you’re tired of being kept in the dark. Am I right?”

Wow. Okay. This woman already knew me way too well. I couldn’t decide if that was a good or bad thing. “Yes,” I replied honestly, curious where she was heading with this.

“Well, I don’t like being in the dark either, so let’s promise each other something. You don’t keep secrets from me and I won’t keep secrets from you. I want to help you, Kenna. I want you to realize your full potential so that you can go out into the world someday with confidence. But that won’t happen unless we can trust each other. So how about it. No secrets?”

I slipped a hand down to pinch my thigh, relying on the pain to center me, to help me make the right choice. I didn’t exactly trust her. Then again, I may not fully trust anyone ever again after the many ways I’d been betrayed lately. But if I agreed, this woman might give me the tools needed to survive the crazy supernatural world thrust upon me. If I agreed, maybe, just maybe, I wouldn’t feel so helpless and lost all the time.

“No secrets,” I finally said, to which the headmistress smiled approvingly. Warmth filled my gut at her expression. I wasn’t used to positive adult attention.

“Glad to hear it,” she said, settling her glasses back onto her nose. “In that case, yes, the vampire called Kade

Carmichael was indeed outside our wards earlier today. I spoke to him at length and we've come to an agreement."

At the confirmation, a torrent of emotions rushed through me. It took all of my willpower not to leap out of my chair and demand she tell me everything she knew. To hide my internal reaction, I pinched my thigh harder, desperate to keep the tears of relief at bay. "What was the agreement?"

"That he won't inform Ambrose, the vampire king, of your whereabouts as long as he's allowed to see that you're alive and well."

At that, my heart skipped a beat and I leaned forward way too eagerly. "So, I can see him?"

Her mouth pulled into a frown. "Unfortunately, I couldn't agree to his terms. Vampires are expert manipulators and I can't trust that he won't find a way to kidnap you the moment he sees you. For all I know, the princes are hiding nearby, ready to attack the wards. To ensure this school's safety, I set terms of my own. That you be given a cell phone to communicate with so they may know you're being well taken care of."

I tried to hide my disappointment, knowing that she was probably right and wanting to see Kade was dumb. Of course they would kidnap me—or kill me, if my aunt was correct. Still, I struggled to keep my voice even as I asked, "And he accepted your terms?"

"Yes, but only temporarily. They still need you to break their curse, and time is of the essence."

I straightened. “My aunt thinks they don’t want me to break it. That they only want to kill me.”

That I’m meant to destroy them all.

Clarice’s lips thinned. “Tess is part of a secret organization that strives to protect humans from what they consider the supernatural threats of the world. At the moment, their sights are set on eradicating all vampires. The last thing Tess wants is for a Syphon to break the century-long curse placed upon them. Once the curse is permanent, vampires will be forced to expose their true forms day and night, making it easier for them to be found and killed. It’s no secret that witches and vampires have been feuding for centuries, but I don’t believe they want to kill you. I truly think they want you to break the curse.”

When she paused, I jumped in. “What if you’re both right? Or wrong, depending on how you look at it. What if some of the vampires want the curse broken, and others don’t? Which means that some want me dead while others do not.”

Which could mean there was a slim chance that Lochlan didn’t actually want me dead. I tried not to let foolish hope rise within me at that thought.

Clarice nodded, a small smile returning. “You could be right. But the question is, what are we going to do about it?”

I blinked. “Uh ... you’re asking *me*?” Aunt Tess never asked for my opinion, let alone listened when I had one.

“You’re the key to solving this problem, Kenna, if you so wish. You can stay here for as long as you like under Thornecrest Academy’s protection, but if the curse becomes

permanent, the world *will* succumb to war. If that happens, I fear vampires won't be the only supernatural casualties."

Goosebumps rose on my arms and legs. "You think humans would hunt witches?"

"They've done so in the past. It's easier for us to hide what we are, but if vampires are made real to the world, all supernaturals will become suspect. It'll only be a matter of time before scientists figure out how to detect the inherent magic inside us. When that happens, I fear a massive witch genocide will occur."

I leaned forward in my seat. "But we—humans have evolved. They wouldn't do that. We could talk to them."

Clarice gave me a pitying look. "I'm sorry, dear, but people have always feared what they can't understand. Humans are used to being on top, and our powers will seem threatening to them. Time will never change that. To ensure the continuation of our people, we must protect ourselves. The vampire's curse affects us all, which is why I'd like to set up a meeting with a few of our elders, if that's okay with you. We could all use some wise counsel at a time like this."

My head spun and I reached up to massage my temples. "So you're saying that I should help the vampires break their curse? But didn't my aunt bring me here so the three princes couldn't get their hands on me?" I grimaced, not liking the sound of Lochlan being spoken about so objectively.

"You misunderstand, Kenna. I don't want you in the Demonic Trinity's clutches any more than she does. It's true that countless witches have died at their hands, including Syphons, which is why Tess trusts me to look after you. But

she's human. She can't possibly understand what exposing vampires would do to the rest of us. Which is why, if you and the elders agree, I'd like to propose we meet with the vampire king and his sons on neutral ground. If we strike a mutually beneficial agreement with them, we could all get what we want without blood being spilled."

But what about what I want? I desperately thought, yet didn't dare voice. *I turn eighteen in a couple of days!* But that fact didn't seem to matter at the moment. My throat constricted, panic overtaking me at the realization that becoming a legal adult might be irrelevant in the grand scheme of things.

I wasn't just a teenage girl trying to find a small kernel of normalcy in her life anymore. In fact, my life might *never* be normal, all because of this stupid curse.

I cleared my throat, blinking rapidly against the burn in my eyes. "Do you know how to break it? The curse, I mean."

"Unfortunately, no. The witches—a group of powerful elders, actually—who cursed the three princes and their entire kingdom for their brutality toward our kind, died in order to complete the spell. Any clues as to how to break it died with them. All we have is the original prophecy that was woven into the spell. The first part has been figured out, but the latter half about a sacrifice and choice given has not. There have been countless studies and predictions over the years, of course, but no one can know for certain. Personally, I believe only the three princes and Syphon they seek can figure it out."

At the dire news, a bone-crushing weariness stole over me. I sank back against the chair with a sigh. "Can I have some

time to think things over before I make a decision?”

“Of course,” Headmistress Mayweather said, standing from her chair to round the desk. Approaching, she rested a hand on my shoulder, squeezing gently. “I know I’m asking a lot from you, Kenna, but you’re the only one who can complete this task. In the end, I believe you’ll do the right thing for your people.”

No pressure, I wanted to scoff. All I could do was nod though, too exhausted for much else.

She gestured to the right where a closed door was carved into the bookshelves. “You’ll find a small bedroom and adjoining bath through that door. The only way in or out is through my office, which will be guarded by Malcolm. You can rest easy tonight.”

She started to leave and I tried to hold my tongue. Tried to be the grateful, subservient girl she oh-so-obviously wanted me to be. But I couldn’t. I blurted before she could step from the room, “Can I call Kade now?”

Her heels stopped clicking against the wood floor. Silence reigned. I didn’t dare turn around, afraid to find that her earlier anger had returned. Eventually, the sound of her shoes resumed, thudding softly against the rug. “Of course,” she replied, and a black phone slid into my line of vision, along with a phone number scribbled on a scrap of paper.

With trembling fingers, I reached for the device and paper. When I gripped the cool metal, though, Clarice didn’t immediately let go. I glanced up to find her carefully studying me. After a moment, she quietly said, “Please use this wisely, Kenna. Remember, no secrets.”

I gulped, nodding quickly, and she relinquished the device. Turning sharply on her heel, she swept from the room, Malcolm following her to no doubt guard from the hallway. The crow remained on its perch though. Was it sleeping? I waited until the doors sealed shut, waited until deafening silence enveloped me. Then scrambled for the side door.

Yanking on the door handle, I stumbled inside the room, feeling for a light switch. The second the bedroom was lit, I secured the door behind me and fumbled to turn on the phone. The tremble in my fingers had worked through my hands and arms, until my whole body shook. I cursed my sloppy attempts to tap the buttons, exhaling loudly when I finally succeeded in placing a call on the fifth try. Pressing the phone to my ear, I held my breath as I listened to the rings.

One ring.

Pick up.

Two rings.

Pick up, pick up!

Three rings.

PICK UP!

Crackling sounds suddenly came from the other end. My heart leapt into my throat.

But I wasn't prepared. I wasn't prepared for my reaction when I heard the deep, familiar voice say, "Little Kenna?"

5

KENNA

I was sobbing.

Like the chest-heaving, aching-lungs kind. The kind I pretty much never let myself do.

But his voice. My *friend's* voice—the friend who'd betrayed me with his silence—unlocked a dam of emotions I'd been holding back all day, and now couldn't seem to stop.

“H-how? How did you find me?”

“I took off in Loch's car shortly after you did. I'm an excellent follower. If I'd known you were being taken here though, I would have intercepted.”

“Well, I'm—” Relieved. Glad. “*Mad* at you,” I cried, hiccuping. *Yeah, way to sell it, Kenna.* “You didn't tell me who he was. The vampire king's son? *Really?* I trusted you!” Stupid me for trusting a *vampire*. And now I was hurt. More hurt than I realized.

“I'm sorry, Kenna,” I heard Kade say through my gasping breaths. “He wanted to do things differently with you. He wanted to test how you'd react to him, and find out how much you knew before—”

“*Test?*” I choked out, stumbling across the room to the bathroom. “He wanted to *test* me? What the *crap*, Kade?” I jammed on the light and cranked on the sink faucet, hoping the sound would keep Malcolm from eavesdropping.

“Kenna,” he said calmly, *too* calmly. “You can chew me out all you want later. First, I need to know that you’re okay.”

“I’m fine,” I growled. “Is Lochlan with you?”

“No. Kenna, listen to me. I need to know without a shadow of doubt that you’re being well taken care of. Tell me if—”

“Kade,” I interrupted, panic raising my voice. “Where. Is. He? Did the bullets—? Did he not ...” Fates, I couldn’t say it. Then it would feel real, and I wasn’t ready. Could never be ready. Despite the loathing and rage I felt toward him, if Lochlan D’angelo was dead ...

“He’s alive, little Kenna. Loch’s alive.”

I sagged against the wall, covering my mouth to keep the sobs at bay. While fresh tears squeezed from my eyes, I didn’t immediately register the somberness of his voice. Something was wrong. I could feel it in my bones. My hand fell. “Kade?” I said, my voice trembling and small. “What aren’t you telling me?”

Silence.

I gripped the phone tightly, fighting off a sudden wave of vertigo.

“He ...” Kade began haltingly. “He still has a bullet inside him.”

Oh fates.

“W-what does that mean? It’s almost been two days since he got shot. Why isn’t it out? Where is he? Why—?”

“He never left Rosewood, Kenna. His brothers won’t let him travel. Not with the bullet ...” He paused.

“The bullet *what*, Kade? Don’t you dare keep me in the dark, or so help me, the next time I see you—”

“It’s in his heart, okay?” Kade’s voice rose passionately.

A numb chill spread through my limbs, freezing my tongue. I tried to speak but couldn’t. My knees buckled and I slid to the floor.

“The other bullets were removed, but he didn’t want to take a risk with this one. Not until ...” Kade fell silent again, but not before I heard the catch in his voice.

Reaching down, I pinched my thigh extra hard and whispered, “Until what?”

His pent-up sigh pierced my chest.

“Please tell me. I need to know.”

Kade carefully cleared his throat. “Until you’re safe. He needed to know that you were unharmed and well taken care of first. Because he needs to be perfectly calm while the bullet is being removed. One slip-up and ...” He didn’t finish, but he didn’t have to.

A ringing silence filled my ears. Everything in me went cold. It was like the walls surrounding me fell away, leaving me to flounder in pitch black nothing. The hole inside me swelled, threatening to consume me completely. I clutched at my chest as it tightened painfully.

“Kenna? Are you okay? Kenna, answer me!”

“I ... I can't breathe.”

“I'm sorry. I shouldn't have—”

“*Stop*. Just ...” I inhaled a ragged breath and the pain lessened, but not the panic building with each passing second. “I need you to do something for me, Kade. I need you to go back. Go back to Lochlan and get that bullet out *now*.”

He released a weary sigh. “Believe me, I want to do that more than anything. But now that he knows where you are, he explicitly ordered me not to return without you.”

“*What?*” I hissed, fisting my free hand. “Well, I'm *countering* his order. Tell him I won't step foot outside this school until I'm certain that bullet has been removed.”

Kade chuckled weakly, a sound that I had missed hearing. “You have no idea how perfect you are for him. I wish you two could have met under different circumstances.”

I swallowed hard, uncertain if I agreed with him. Lochlan and I had chemistry, no doubt about it, but there were so many things that drove a wedge between us. I didn't think it was possible for us to overcome them all, or if I even wanted to try. Still, I couldn't bear the thought of that bullet killing him. Couldn't stand the thought of him in agony all this time while he waited to hear of my well-being.

“Stop deflecting, Kade. Will you return to him or not?”

“Depends. Can you actually leave the institute, or are you a prisoner?”

“I’m working on that part. I just ... I haven’t decided what I want to do,” I admitted quietly, chewing on my lip when he didn’t respond right away.

“We need you, Kenna,” he said just as quietly, and I chewed harder, drawing blood.

I wanted to yell at him that this wasn’t fair, that the only thing vampires brought me was confusion and heartache. Helping them, being *near* them, was undoubtedly a death sentence. But I stuffed the feelings down, too drained and numb to argue right now. I released my lip. “How long do you have until the curse becomes permanent?”

I wasn’t sure if he’d answer. Out of the two, he was vastly more forthcoming than Lochlan, but this was a question requiring trust. I could easily share this conversation with Headmistress Mayweather and give the witches leverage over the vampires. But he did answer, and it shook me to my core.

“Two months.”

* * *

I felt for his heartbeat and finally found it beneath my fingertips.

But my relief became fear as it slowed to a faint whisper.

“Save yourself,” I desperately cried. “You have to live.”

He was in so much pain. The agony was tearing him apart.

I could feel it.

His pain became mine.

It grew, and grew, and grew.

Until there wasn't a heartbeat. There wasn't anything at all.

Except pain.

A whimper burst from me the second I awoke. I clutched at my chest as the dream lingered, along with the phantom pain I'd felt. *His* pain. It had been so real. Fates, was he really enduring that right now, all because he needed to know I was okay first?

But *why*? Why was Lochlan doing this? Was I really so important to him, or was it simply that he needed me to break the curse?

Two months. They only had *two months* until the human-looking part of them vanished completely. I still didn't know how to process that news.

With a sigh, I fumbled to pick up my phone from the nightstand and check the time. Six o'clock. Ugh, too early. If Kade had listened to me and left for Rosewood after our conversation last night, then he should be there by now.

Wait. How would he get through the border checkpoint in his vampire form?

I rolled my eyes. Duh. With thrall. No wonder most people didn't know about vampires.

I selected his number, needing a status update. The call didn't go through though. I tried a few more times with no luck. Frowning, I tapped in Isla's number, but nothing happened. What the crap?

My thumb hovered over the buttons as I debated calling Lochlan. Yes, I'd memorized his number because there was something seriously wrong with me. Seconds ticked by. Minutes. I couldn't do it. Frustrated, I tossed the phone on the bed and flopped onto my pillow.

What if Kade didn't get back in time? What if Lochlan stubbornly refused to have the bullet removed because Kade returned without me? What if they couldn't get it out and ... and he died?

A knock sounded at the door, startling me from my anxious thoughts. Why was I getting a six-thirty wakeup call?

Rolling out of bed, I padded to the door and opened it, not surprised to find Malcolm on the other side.

His gaze was penetrating, yet wary, as if he didn't trust me after yesterday's escape attempt. Couldn't blame him, really. "I trust you slept well?" he said, his deep voice gravelly with tiredness. I held in a wince, realizing I was the cause for his lack of sleep.

"Decent," I replied with a shrug, although the night had been fitful, filled with disturbing dreams about death. Probably better than a night spent with Jordan and Mei, though.

"Headmistress Mayweather wanted you to have this," he said, thrusting a silver tray toward me. I accepted it, assuming the covered plates contained breakfast judging by the delicious smells wafting from them. "And this," he added, draping a set of clothes over my arm and depositing a toiletry bag, backpack, and black, low-heeled shoes just inside the door.

"What's—?"

“If you wish to remain at Thornecrest Academy, you will attend classes,” he said, his tone brooking no argument. “We will depart for your first class in an hour, so please be ready by then.”

Not giving me a chance to speak, he swiveled and strode across Clarice’s office to stand by the double doors once again.

Uh ...

When it became clear he wasn’t going to answer my questions, I nudged the door shut and set the tray down on my bed. I mean, I *was* curious about the type of education witches received. Even yearned for it. I couldn’t help but wonder what my life would have been like if Aunt Tess had chosen to send me here years ago instead of dragging me across the country. Old resentment threatened to bubble up, but I didn’t have room for it right now. For the first time in my life, answers were flowing freely, almost more than I could process.

I decided something, then. For however long I remained here, forced or otherwise, I’d make the most of it by soaking up as much knowledge as I possibly could. If that meant attending classes, dealing with bully witches, and meeting mysterious elders, so be it. Whether I wanted it to be or not, my destiny was tied to the vampire’s curse, and being prepared was the only way I could secure my future.

And not die. That too.

Forty-five minutes later, I was fed, dressed, and nervous out of my mind.

I scrutinized my reflection in the room’s floor length mirror, remembering Jordan and Mei’s words from last night

about my appearance. The red and black plaid skirt I wore was a little too loose, sitting low on my hips. At least the black tights and ribbed long-sleeved black shirt that I'd tucked in helped keep the skirt in place.

I'd opted not to wear the blazer, hoping I wasn't breaking a dress code or something. I had only ever attended public schools. Who knew what kind of rules this place had—besides a really loud lights-out bell. I'd been provided with a few hair necessities, but no makeup, so the dark circles under my eyes were on full display.

Sighing, I turned away, knowing the only solution was to take better care of myself. Not that I didn't want to. The scrambled eggs and bacon had smelled heavenly when I'd lifted the plate lids earlier. After years of burnt breakfasts, courtesy of my aunt's lack of culinary skills, I should have scarfed the food down with gusto. Instead, I'd barely managed to choke down a piece of buttered toast.

I blamed it on Lochlan, on this extremely unhealthy bond we shared.

End it, my mind whispered. Free yourself.

Bile churned in my gut, threatening to upheave my meager breakfast. Clenching my teeth, I grabbed the rather heavy backpack and strode across the room to rip the door open. Better to endure Malcolm's company than my own messed-up self.

What I found on the other side, though, froze me in my tracks.

Headmistress Mayweather was in her office—and she wasn't alone.

Sitting in the chairs in front of her desk were Mei and Jordan. The moment I stepped from my room, their conversation halted and all eyes turned my way, including the crow's. I blinked, my confusion over why I hadn't heard them speaking overriding any embarrassment. A second later though, I had my answer. Clarice waved a hand, dispelling the sound-blocker spell. The air slightly shimmered around them, like a brief static blip on a screen.

The frown I'd seen on her face vanished as her gaze swept over me. "I'm so glad the clothes fit," she said by way of greeting, a smile of undiluted pride crinkling the corners of her eyes. "Malcolm will escort you to your morning classes." Jordan and Mei exchanged an unhappy look before fixing twin glares on me. Crap. This teacher's pet thing wasn't exactly going to help me blend in here.

I edged toward Malcolm who was still standing by the double doors. "Yeah, um, thanks for breakfast," I quickly muttered, slipping my arms through the backpack's straps. The girl's gazes narrowed further. *Fates*. Wrong thing to say. "I'm just going to ... go."

"Have a good morning, Kenna," Clarice called after me as I beelined for the exit. "I'll meet up with you after lunch."

Great. More special treatment.

The girls were obviously getting questioned about last night, and seeing me like this no doubt rubbed salt in the wound. Not that I felt sorry for them. My mouth was *still* a bit sore from where Jordan's vine had dug into it. But I also

understood their reservations toward me. I was an unknown, a possibly dangerous one. My time spent with vampires had taught me how disconcerting that was. It didn't excuse their behavior though.

As soon as I exited the office, I breathed a bit easier. Malcolm went right, and I paid close attention to where we were going this time. Maybe if I learned my way around the place, I wouldn't need a babysitter anymore. Although, calling a big brute like Malcolm a babysitter was laughable.

After several minutes of watching him pave a path through the busy hallways, I said to his back, "So, what are you?" Crap, that sounded weird. "I mean, what kind of witch—err—warlock are you?"

He slowed just a little, the only sign that he'd heard me. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a handful of stones. Red ones, like rubies.

Um ...

When I remained silent, he glanced over his shoulder at me. "Fire Elemental. Crystals and stones enhance my power over the element."

I blinked. "Oh. That's ... cool. So how many witch types are there?"

He faced forward again, his deep baritone easily carrying his words back to me. "Five main subsects, each representing a point in the Pentacle." He flicked a backward glance at me again. "Some don't recognize Syphons as being authentic witches though."

I gaped at the back of his bald head for several moments before sputtering, “Then what do they think we are?”

Without turning around, he muttered, “Leeches.”

I nearly tripped over my own feet as my limbs went numb with shock. He had *meant* to shock me, I realized, when he didn’t slow. Did *he* think I was a leech?

No longer interested in questioning him, I lapsed into silence—which he seemed perfectly fine with. By now, the hallways were teeming with students. Most were teenagers, but some as young as ten were scattered throughout. I cast glances at them with renewed interest, expecting to see little displays of magic. No such luck.

Not surprisingly, I was garnering even more stares than yesterday. But unlike yesterday, unease prickled my skin at their probing looks. What if everyone here was like Jordan and Mei? No wonder I needed a hulking babysitter. Except, I was beginning to doubt how useful Malcolm would be if a confrontation arose. I had the sneaking suspicion he didn’t like me much.

Before my unease could morph into full-blown panic, he stopped at the entrance to what must be my first class. “History,” he said by way of explanation, waving me inside dismissively.

Okay, then.

I stepped into the room and immediately stiffened as several pairs of eyes swiveled my way. A few narrowed in confusion, turning in their seats to whisper to the person beside them. Lowering my head, I made for a seat in the far

back corner. When I sat down and the whispers hadn't ceased, my chest tightened miserably. There was no Isla here to welcome me into her world. No sidekick friends like Hailey and Peyton. No Kade or Reid with a friendly smile.

And there was *definitely* no Lochlan. The ever-growing pit inside me yawned wide, painfully reminding of how true that was.

6

LOCHLAN

Come, my love, you are mine.

To take pleasure in, for all time.

Your blood is the key, to unlock immortality.

A vial a day, keeps the aging away.

With my lethal touch, you are my slave.

Every command, you will obey.

Come, my love, you are mine.

To take pleasure in, for all time.

I struggled to reach the surface of consciousness where the spell's pull couldn't drown me. Her mocking laughter followed in my wake, echoing inside my skull. *You'll never escape me*, she taunted in her lyrical voice. *You're mine. Always mine.* Just when I began to fear the dream was real, I awoke with a start to an overcast new day.

Crippling pain immediately greeted me. But I embraced the realness, knowing it meant I wasn't *there*. I was here, held hostage in my own bedroom. But at least it was by my insufferable, overprotective brothers.

It was the second morning of not knowing how McKenna fared. I keenly felt her absence, even with the constant pain, like a fist buried in my chest. The feeling gave me hope that she was still alive, though. Kade hadn't answered my calls last night, so it was a wonder I'd managed to sleep at all. Blinking the sleep from my eyes, I focused on Everett's glaring face from across the room. Sighing, I shut my eyes again.

"Morning to you too," Everett groused, letting me know that his patience had finally run out. I was surprised it had lasted this long, actually. "Just so you know, if you don't let us remove the bullet today, I'm contacting Father. I've already let this nonsense continue for far too long. We're wasting precious time and should already be back home with the Syphon in our possession by now."

At the threat, I rolled my eyes under their lids, muttering, "Touch me and I'll find somewhere else to hole up." I knew I couldn't get past him though. Not in my current condition.

My eyes slid open at the sound of his chair slamming against the wall. It dented the plaster as he shot upright and stormed over to the bed. Tension rippled through me at the determined glint in his pale green eyes. "Troy, would you like the honor of knocking him out, or should I?"

"Huh?" Lounging on my black loveseat, Troy glanced up from his phone, clearly not paying attention. Probably too busy planning his next hookup. I could smell the pheromones coming off him, even from here.

"She better not be a local," I warned him, pretending to ignore Everett's threat while preparing to spring from the bed if need be.

Troy threw me a smirk. “I’ve been in Rosewood under your nose for over a month, bro. This isn’t my first sip and bang. In fact, I’ve had several.” At my disgusted look, his smile only grew. “Relax. With that trigger-happy sheriff onto us, I’ll do it the human-approved way. Well, besides the choice of beverage part.”

“No one’s going anywhere until Loch gets his head on straight,” Everett said through clenched teeth, still looming over me.

“You know it doesn’t work that way, Ever,” Troy drawled, rolling his amber-brown eyes to the ceiling before returning them to his phone. “I’m growing bored of your big bro routine.”

Everett silently seethed, yet didn’t argue the point. He may have fifty years on us, but that meant nothing when it came to the chain of command in our family. None of us had authority over the other. Only the king could dictate what we could and couldn’t do.

Which was exactly why Everett so often threatened to contact him. Problem was, his threats weren’t usually empty. The memory of his fingers digging into McKenna’s slender neck as he threatened to end her life awakened my earlier rage. The anger spiked my heart rate and I grunted as the bullet sent agony roaring through me.

When I was able to wrestle the pain under control again, it was to find Everett’s lips pressed firmly together. “What is this madness, Loch?” he said tightly, the tone softened by underlying concern. “Why are you refusing our help?”

“Would you have killed her?” I said, my breathing shallow and irregular.

He frowned. “Who?”

Still holding my phone, I heard the casing creak and forced my fingers to release their death grip. “You know who. You also know she’s our last chance. If she dies, we’re finished.”

His nostrils flared. “Is that why you broke protocol? Is that why you *attacked* me the other day?” he said, his voice dangerously low. “Is that why you lied to me and Troy, your own flesh and blood? Because she’s the *last* Syphon before the hundred years are up?”

He gripped the headboard above me in a show of dominance. My upper lip curled back in silent warning, but I wasn’t exactly in top fighting form right now, which he very well knew and took advantage of.

“Or maybe,” he continued, “you foolishly attempted to break the curse without us. ‘Together or divided,’ right? We haven’t been successful together, so you decided to leave us out. But you had months alone with her and the curse remains, so here’s what I think. I think that pretty little seductress got under your skin.”

A growl rumbled deep in my chest. My claws shot out, gouging holes in the mattress.

He ignored my growing agitation. “You said ‘kill her and you kill me.’ I haven’t forgotten the last time you said that. It’s why I let her go, so you wouldn’t do something stupid. She’s utterly bewitched you, Loch. But *how*? You have a drothen.

After everything you went through—after everything we *did* for you—how could you let this happen?”

My breath came in ragged pants, causing pain to sear my insides. Everett’s words were like bullets piercing my flesh all over again, dredging up memories I fought to bury on a daily basis. “Don’t *ever* compare them,” I grunted, grasping at my chest. “It’s not like that.” My claws caught on my shirt, tearing the material.

“She’s *toying* with you, Loch. Warping your mind. She grabbed my wrist without using her abilities against me. Which means she must have an agenda. She knows more than she’s letting on.”

“Stop,” I gasped out, blinking to clear my darkening vision. “She’s innocent.”

“*Innocent?*” he scoffed incredulously. “She’s a *threat*. All Syphons are. You know that more than anyone. She’s got you by the balls, brother.”

“Back off, Everett,” Troy said sharply, but his voice was distant. Muted. The fire blazed hotter and hotter.

“I’d rather the curse be permanent than let you become enslaved again,” Everett hissed fiercely over the thundering of my heart. “I’d rather walk the earth as a shadow than see you in the hands of a manipulative witch. I *won’t* let that happen, even if I have to kill the last Syphon.”

“No!” I bellowed, sending him soaring back with a shove. Troy barely managed to leap clear as Everett crashed into the loveseat, flipping over the top.

My heart all but exploded then. Crying out as the pain consumed me, I doubled over, only to tip off the bed. I landed on my side with a thud, barely feeling the impact over the heat roasting me alive.

My time was up.

I struggled to stand, but darkness took me.

I didn't know how long I was out, but when I regained consciousness, the unexpected sight of sky blue eyes and wavy caramel hair filled my blurry vision. "Kade?" I croaked, fighting against the powerful urge to pass out again.

"I'm here, my drothen," he said, clasping my hand.

"Where—?" I rasped, knowing he'd figure out the rest.

He looked away, but it didn't matter. I could feel his guilt through our drothen bond.

"Kade," I said, struggling to sit up.

His hands shot out and firmly grasped my shoulders. I was still on the bedroom floor, a pillow tucked beneath my head. "Stop moving, Lochie. Now listen good, because I'm only saying this once. Kenna is still at the institute, but I was able to speak with her. She's safe and unharmed. They've been telling her things though. She knows who you really are. I can only imagine what else they've said, but we *will* fix this. We'll get her back. Not until we get that bullet out, though. It's coming out now, Loch. Right. Now."

I bared my teeth at him, hating that I was too weak to do much else. Hating that she was learning about me this way. I should have told her everything when I'd had the chance.

“You’re disobeying a direct order then?” A wet cough punctuated my words. I turned my head and spat out blood.

Kade fixed me with a grim, determined look. “I was given *new* orders. And she deserves to have them followed.”

Shock doused my anger. This wasn’t the first time he’d overstepped his position on account of McKenna. Before her, he’d never so thoroughly tested the limits of our bond. She was changing us both, and I couldn’t help but secretly admire Kade for his newfound courage.

But, despite his recent actions, I didn’t question his loyalty to me. I knew he would protect me with his life, as was his blood-sworn duty. Our drothen bond also afforded me an unobstructed view of his psyche. Unlike the normal sibling bond I shared with my brothers, ours was a connection forged from pain and hardship, where mutual understanding assured our survival and trust was everything. Our blood ties were stronger than shared DNA.

The ritual that bound us together a century ago had demanded a sacrifice of self, promising in return a connection thicker than blood. Kade, more than any natural-born sibling could be, was my brother. One I could trust with every aspect of myself. Which was why I grasped his sleeve and pulled him close, whispering so low that only he could hear, “If I die, protect her.”

He jerked back, his expression pained. But after a moment, he nodded, replying just as quietly, “With every breath, I will serve. Even unto death.”

A sense of peace settled over me then, and I finally, *finally*, wrestled my fear over McKenna’s safety into submission.

Kade was right. We *would* fix this. And I wouldn't let a bullet in my heart keep me from getting her back.

“Then let's do this,” I firmly said, preparing myself for the inevitable pain to come.

7

KENNA

I was surrounded by witches. And not because they were all clambering to be my friend.

At least twenty girls crowded in close, some flicking colorful balls of magic that fizzled out before they could reach me.

I'd tried all morning to blend into the background. I'd solely focused on the bizarre class lectures about historical events I'd never heard of before. On books called grimoires that contained recipes for spells, potions, and herbal remedies. On how to safely portal—as in, disappear inside a magical hole and reappear somewhere else.

Yeah, I was still in denial about that one, even after seeing the teacher do it.

But although the instructors had treated me as if I were invisible, the students hadn't. Their initial curiosity had turned into dark suspicion.

“Just tell us what you are,” a heavy-set girl cajoled, her pierced nose inches from mine. “That's all we want to know.” No one touched me, but I felt their fear and hostility like nails gouging my skin.

I'd safely made it through my morning classes, even lunch hour, probably because Malcolm had always been close by. But I'd been instructed to change into a red t-shirt and black shorts for Defensive Arts class—the witch's version of physical education, I supposed. Taking advantage of the closed locker room door, the girls had pounced, amassing as one to corner and pepper me with questions the second I'd emerged from a stall.

Worst of all, Jordan and Mei were hovering nearby, fanning the flames with their vicious gossip.

“She was sedated upon arrival.”

“Her magic is bound.”

“Mei had a dark foretelling about her.”

“She has a guard at all times, probably so she doesn't hurt any of us.”

“She's dangerous. She said so herself.”

“We should get her cast out of the institute before she kills someone.”

Each word cut deeper and deeper, but I refused to be cowed. Noah had been right. Trying to fit in here wasn't going to happen. Even laying low wasn't working. But surviving this place? I was determined to.

And maybe the only way was to reveal the truth. On *my* terms.

So I reached for the clasp of my bracelet and fumbled to undo it. Despair immediately foiled my attempts, followed by

loss and heavy sorrow. Still, I fought to push past the spell, to convince my brain that these emotions weren't real.

Growing desperate, I yanked on the bracelet, and a whimper slipped past my lips. I yanked again, only then realizing that tears were trickling down my face.

The whispers buzzed louder, and I heard Jordan hiss, "She's trying to unbind her magic. Stop her!"

Several bodies surged forward, grappling to pin down my arms.

"Let go!" I yelled, crying out as someone wrenched my left arm behind me.

"*Rigescunt indutae!*" a voice suddenly snapped, and everyone froze. Like *literally* froze, not even blinking. The heavy-set girl with the nose piercing was still inches from my face, her lips pulled back in a snarl. I wiggled an arm free and reached up to poke her cheek. No reaction.

Hearing movement, I looked up to see Noah pushing his way through the frozen bodies toward me. "What are—? What happened to them?" I stammered, still standing with my left arm wrenched behind my back.

Noah reached me and pried my arm loose. "Freezing spell. A weak one though. It'll wear off in a few minutes. You okay?"

I blinked up at him, massaging my sore arm. "Am I bound?"

He cocked his head at the unexpected question. "Your magic? I wouldn't say it's bound, since you technically don't

have any of your own. More like you're blocked from receiving magic."

I thrust my bracelet in his face. "But this *weakens* me. I have no way of defending myself against vampires and werewolves, or even my own kind. I want it off. I want—"

"You wish to defend yourself?" a new voice interjected. "To learn to control and strengthen your abilities?"

Noah stiffened, turning as Headmistress Mayweather swept into the room, Nautilus on her shoulder and Malcolm at her heels.

I dropped my arm to straighten my t-shirt, still self-conscious in her meticulous presence. Clearing my throat, I firmly said, "Yes, I want to do all of that. I *need* to."

She arched a manicured brow, replying softly, "No matter the risks?"

Without hesitation, I gave a sharp nod.

Her lips twitched imperceptibly in approval. "Then follow me. Noah, bring the rest of your class once they've regained use of their limbs." With that, she swiveled on her heel and departed swiftly from the room. A muscle ticked in Noah's jaw, but he nodded for me to follow her.

Curious as to what the headmistress had planned, I trailed her down a long hallway, Malcolm once again bringing up the rear. We walked in silence, even though I ached to tell Clarice how awful the students here were. Seriously, what was their *deal*?

When she opened a door at the end of the passageway, light flooded in. Realizing it was *outdoor* light, all thoughts of

oppressive peers fled my mind.

We were going outside. *I* was going outside.

Struck speechless, I slowly crossed the building's threshold into glorious sunshine. As warmth struck my face, my first instinct was to search for Kade. My eyes tried to take in everything at once: the lush, expansive grounds, the manicured hedges, the birds flitting overhead. In the far distance, a wall of thick, green pine trees circled the perimeter.

Between me and them, there were no fences. No barriers to the naked eye. The desire to take off running raced through my veins. To find Kade, and ... and what? Return to Rosewood? To Lochlan? To his insane brothers who wanted to stuff me in a trunk and cart me off to their witch-killing father? To an aunt who had given up on taking care of me?

Kade probably wasn't even here anyway. I had no idea what I'd find beyond those trees. My shoulders fell.

Headmistress Mayweather turned to face me several yards out. Nautilus launched into the air with a short caw, landing on the branch of a nearby tree. They both watched me, as if waiting to see what I'd do. Inhaling a fortifying breath, I marched forward to stand in front of the headmistress. Her smile practically shouted that I'd passed some sort of test.

Seconds later, I felt the prickle of eyes on my back and swiveled to see the girls from the locker room file outside, plus an equal number of guys. I stiffened, but relaxed a little when I saw Noah bringing up the rear. His expression wasn't reassuring though. He kept darting glances between me and Clarice, a deep crease bisecting his brows.

Behind them, the institute rose majestically. Thick vines climbed the light brick structure, and above the impressive four-story height, several turrets sliced at the perfect blue sky.

“Gather ‘round, class,” the headmistress said, her accented voice ringing with authority. Everyone except Malcolm joined us on the manicured lawn, but the girls noticeably gave me a wide berth. When the shuffling of feet settled, Clarice continued. “Rumor has it you’ve all been wondering what kind of witch our new arrival is.”

My chest tightened as all eyes swiveled my way, all except Noah’s, whose narrowed gaze remained fixed on Clarice.

“Although I’m displeased at your aggressive behavior toward Miss Belmont, I understand your concern. Still, she is to be respected, and you’ll soon find out why. Kenna, if you please?” She motioned me forward, and I hesitantly stepped closer. Before I could guess her motives, she lifted my left wrist and undid the clasp of my bracelet.

A collective gasp went up, including mine, when she let go of my arm with the bracelet still clutched in her hand.

I immediately grabbed my naked wrist, tucking it close to my chest. I felt utterly exposed as fierce whispers and murmuring rose around me. Nervously, I glanced at the students nearby, then up at the headmistress. “Um, m-maybe this isn’t—”

“You wanted to learn about your abilities,” she interjected quietly. “The quickest way to spread the truth is with a public display of action. Why not show them what you’re capable of?”

A chill raced up my spine at the clear challenge in her eyes. I could continue hiding who I was and endure persecution, or stand up for myself by showing them all. The choice was mine. My heart pounded a furious beat as she calmly waited. The whispers grew in volume until I couldn't stand the tension any longer.

“What do I do?” I asked her, lowering my arms and straightening my stance.

Good, her twinkling brown eyes seemed to say.

Instead of answering, she looked past me and motioned with her head. After a few beats, bodies shifted as Noah came to stand beside me.

“As the Defensive Arts instructor,” she began, clasping her hands behind her back, “Mr. Andrews will provide you with some of his Cosmic magic for the purposes of conducting a demonstration.”

The whispers died completely.

Her words didn't register at first. The shock of them was too great.

“W-wait.” I backed up a step, holding out my hands. Then quickly tucked them beneath my armpits. “Bad things happen when I touch supernaturals. I don't want anyone to get hurt.”

The murmurs started up again, louder and more urgent than before.

“Syphon,” someone hissed.

“No way,” said another.

“There's only *one* currently in existence. It can't be *her*.”

Ouch.

“Prove it!” a familiar voice shouted. Jordan. I grimaced, wishing the ground would open up and swallow me whole.

“Yeah, prove it.” Mei this time.

Neither the headmistress nor Noah stopped the student’s goading, although the latter’s skin looked paler than usual. When I continued to hesitate, seconds away from bolting like a freaked rabbit, Noah turned to me. My eyes widened as he slowly approached. I backed up another step.

“Noah, don’t—”

“I’m a warlock, K-Bug, not a werewolf or vampire,” he said softly, easing into my personal space. “You won’t alter or kill me. Think of it as borrowing. You’re simply taking a little of my magic.”

My feet were glued to the spot, stark panic setting in as he stretched out his hand toward me. “Whoa, wait wait wait,” I rushed to say, leaning away from him. “What if I take too much? What are the side effects? Are you sure this is safe?”

He flicked a glance at the headmistress, which only heightened my nerves. “I’ll need time to replenish my magic, but a bit of food and rest should do the trick. No harm, no foul.”

Nervous laughter burst out of me. “Yeah, that’s not reassuring for some reason.”

“Just do it,” someone impatiently shouted.

“Do it!” several others chorused, until a chant went up.

I hugged myself hard, wishing I was anywhere but here.

Wishing Lochlan would swoop in and rescue me.

I bit my quivering lip and banished the impossible thought. *This* was my world now. Magic and witches and freaky foretellings. And if I was going to survive it, I had to stand on my own two feet.

So, before any more fear could overtake me, I uncrossed my arms and grabbed Noah's outstretched hand. Heat immediately engulfed my palm and fingers. Recalling Peyton's pain when we'd touched, I tried to snatch my hand away. Noah held on fast, just like she had.

The heat intensified and a red glow smoldered between our joined skin. I shot him a panicked look and tugged harder. He set his mouth in a grim line and shook his head, pulling me closer.

No, no, no!

I dug my heels in, but the soles slipped on the grass. Locking an arm around my waist, he pressed me firmly against him, taking away my ability to yank my hand free.

Sweat broke out on my forehead, slithering down my spine as warmth cascaded through me. I met Noah's stormy blue gaze, silently pleading with him to let go. I was hurting him. Somehow, I just knew that I was.

"Wait," he said tightly. "Just wait."

Wind gusted around us, whipping hair across my face and his. Billowing tendrils of red completely engulfed our hands and I clenched my teeth, expecting the heat to become unbearable. But as the seconds passed, it remained a steady thrum beneath my skin, like basking in a hot tub.

Noah suddenly grunted and stepped back. His touch slid away and our hands fell apart. My legs wobbled, but I locked my knees, refusing to embarrass myself in front of all these people.

After a moment, the wind died, and my ragged breaths evened out.

It was only then that I realized the crowd had gone silent. Forty-plus faces gawked at me, staring like I was a body-snatching alien.

Then, someone slowly clapped, startling me. “Beautiful,” Headmistress Mayweather said, her expression filled with wonder. She approached, and I held still while she circled me. “How do you feel?”

I blinked, focusing on my trembling hands. How did I feel? “I feel ...”

Nervous. Overwhelmed. Afraid.

Rejuvenated. Wired. *Alive*.

“Great,” I simply replied, looking at Noah. At the sight of his ashen complexion, guilt wormed inside me. I couldn’t help but remember Malcolm’s earlier comparison, about Syphon’s being leeches. I opened my mouth to ask if he was all right, but the headmistress spoke before I could.

“After all these years of doing without, you must be starved for magic. Which is why the spell on your first bracelet must have worn thin,” she mused, pausing to assess me. After a moment, she nodded and smiled as though happy with what she saw. “Well, your days of restriction are over. It’s time you embrace who you are. Your training begins today.”

“Wait, training? Like what kind of training?”

“Think of it as muscle conditioning. Your connection to magic is weak from lack of use. In order to strengthen it, you need exercise.” She turned to the rest of the class, her voice rising as she addressed them all. “Who will partner with Kenna?”

Everyone appeared to be as shocked as I was. No one raised their hand.

When the silence stretched, Noah cleared his throat and stepped forward. “Maybe she should train with me until—”

“And what would the students learn from that?” Clarice interrupted crisply, pinning him with a cool look. “You saw them earlier in the locker room. A lesson must be taught here, as I’m sure you would agree.”

His lips thinned, but he didn’t back down like I thought he would. “These are *my* students. Their safety is my concern, and I don’t think Kenna is ready to train with them.”

As Clarice’s eyes narrowed, I tensed, expecting her to give him a tongue-lashing in front of his class. Apparently, so did Noah. Despite his sallow complexion, he straightened to his full height, puffing out his chest.

But she suddenly turned to me.

“What do you think, Kenna? Are you ready to train with your peers?”

My mouth fell open.

Oh. Crap.

My first instinct was to say no and ask for my bracelet back—or a pair of gloves, at least. I had no freaking clue what this borrowed—more like *stolen*—magic inside me would do. Someone could get seriously hurt, including me.

But when I heard snickering, and peeked to see where it was coming from, my brain emptied of all uncertainty. “Sure,” I said, speaking loud enough for the students in back to hear. “But I’d like to choose my partner, if that’s okay.”

At my unexpected request, Clarice looked pleasantly surprised. Noah, on the other hand, subtly shook his head in silent warning. Before I could reconsider my decision though, the headmistress said, “Of course. Name the student and you’ll spend the next hour training with them.”

I gulped, but didn’t hesitate as I zeroed in on a head of black, springy curls and blurted, “I choose Jordan Holt.”

8

KENNA

I'm screwed, I'm screwed, I'm screwed.

The explosion knocked me clean off my feet. I flew through the air before crashing to the ground in a tangle of bruised limbs.

“Still glad you picked me?” Jordan called as I groaned, gingerly probing my throbbing hip bone.

I wasn't. I was regretting the decision with every fiber of my aching body, but I wouldn't let her know that.

Gritting my teeth, I rose without comment, pointlessly brushing dirt and grass from my stained outfit. I'd soon discovered that as an Earth Elemental, Jordan was highly attuned with nature. With a flick of her wrist, she could summon roots from the ground, which was how she'd easily taken me down.

Several times.

“You have cosmic energy, Kenna, which means you literally have the universe at your fingertips. Draw on the sun's power to block her strikes,” Noah said from the sidelines, pacing rather nervously as if he wanted to call an end to this match. He didn't though, not with Headmistress Mayweather on the outskirts overseeing his class—or *me*, more accurately.

Yeah. Okay, sure. I'll get right on that, I wanted to tell Noah sarcastically. But taking my eyes off Jordan for even a second to acknowledge him would be a mistake.

Her blows were vicious, and she struck without mercy. No one intervened though. Several students had paused in their own training to watch the unfair match, boldly cheering Jordan on. I could see their skepticism toward me.

They didn't think I was a Syphon.

Even after the glowing red light display, I could hear snatches of conversation, of doubt about who I was. Couldn't really blame them. I was sort of pathetic, as far as witches went. No matter how hard I'd tried to conjure my borrowed magic for the last hour, not a single thing had happened. All they saw was a powerless girl getting thrown around like a ragdoll.

"Give up," Jordan said quietly, having approached while I caught my breath. "Admit defeat before I embarrass you further." Our gazes clashed, and I realized then what her intent was. Payback. She wanted to see me humiliated the way she'd been this morning in Headmistress Mayweather's office.

I pursed my lips, shaking my head. "Not gonna happen."

She huffed a dry laugh. "Have it your way. But don't say I didn't warn you."

Before I could straighten, I was airborne again, savagely jerked off my feet by something clamped around my ankle. As I dangled upside down in midair, several students laughed boisterously at my predicament. The blood rushed to my head, my embarrassment complete.

What felt like a thin root coiled tighter around my ankle, grinding against the bone. I bit my tongue, refusing to let Jordan hear my distress. Her gloating face appeared before me as she basked in her victory. “Concede and I’ll set you free,” she said, lazily twisting her green-glowing hand. The root responded to her command, twirling me in a circle.

“No,” I ground out when I was facing her again.

Her expression flattened. “Do it or who knows. You might slip and—*oops*—fall on your head.”

I snorted. “Seriously? That’s the best you can do?”

Why the freaking crap was I goading this girl?

With a devilish smirk and flick of her wrist, she yanked me higher into the air. Then dropped me. I sucked in a scream and braced for impact as the ground came up fast. A split second from eating dirt, the root wound around my ankle again, jerking me to a halt. Pain streaked up my leg and I furiously blinked back tears.

Jordan let me dangle for a moment, then thrust me several feet into the air again, clearly toying with me.

I knew I should tell her to stop. I knew I should concede.

But the longer she played with me, the angrier I became. And the angrier I became, the more alive I felt. Not just from the adrenaline, fear, and pain, but from a foreign energy that was practically sizzling in my veins. I let it build. I let it grow until it began to feel corporeal. Like I could reach inside myself, and ...

The root unraveled and I plummeted toward the ground.

Caught off guard, I didn't brace correctly. My entire weight landed on my left wrist. I heard the snap as I thudded to the earth, the wind completely knocked out of me. Searing pain hit. Unable to suppress it, a scream tore from my lungs. I cradled my injured limb close, all thoughts of humiliation fleeing my mind.

"Noah, get Kenna to the infirmary," I heard the headmistress say from somewhere above me. "Jordan, clean up this mess. I mean it. Not a speck of grass out of place. Class is dismissed for the day."

A hand touched my back and I stiffened.

"Let me help you up," Noah said, and I accepted his assistance. But even through the pain and tears, I saw how he avoided directly touching my skin. My heart sank.

I really was a leech.

I didn't look at anyone while we made our way back inside. Thankfully, the infirmary was on this side of the massive building. Made sense, since I assumed injuries were a commonplace thing in the Defensive Arts class. Or maybe it was just me. Me and my stupid pride.

"You did good," Noah said from beside me, his expression tight-lipped. "You didn't cower or give up. Witches respect strength."

I didn't reply, too focused on supporting my throbbing wrist to care what anyone thought.

A few minutes later, we pushed through a set of doors and entered a clean, brightly-lit space. Partitions and cots lined both walls, most of which were empty. From a desk to the

right, a woman glanced up at our arrival. Upon seeing Noah, she waved us on without comment.

“Come here often with injured students?” I muttered, giving him a bemused look.

His lips twisted wryly. “A time or two. The nurses know that I like to take care of the injuries myself, if I’m able to.” He motioned for me to sit on a cot covered in a white sheet, then proceeded to wheel over a cart laden with colorful glass bottles.

I settled onto the cot’s edge, confused when he selected a dark blue bottle and popped the cork to sniff its contents. “Uh ... what is that stuff?”

“Sano, a fast-healing potion. Let’s see your wrist.” He held out his hand, then seemed to remember who I was and dropped it.

Hurt pricked my chest, which was stupid, since I completely understood why he didn’t want to touch me. Sighing, I carefully straightened my arm so he could see the injury.

He grimaced. “Definitely broken.” Reaching for a stack of plastic cups on the top tray, he poured an inch of dark liquid into one. “This should fix you right up.”

He handed the cup to me and I took it gingerly, sniffing at the contents. And instantly recoiled, wrinkling my nose in disgust. “This smells like vomit.”

With a snort, he leaned against the wall. “Tastes like it too.”

“Ew! What are the ingredients?”

He cocked a brow. “Sure you want to know?”

“Um, not really. But tell me anyway.”

He started ticking the ingredients off on his fingers, continuing even when my face leached of color. “Toe of frog, wool of bat, tongue of dog, adder’s fork, blind-worm, lizard’s leg, owlet’s wing.”

“What the freaking *crap*, Noah? You want me to *drink* this stuff?” I barely restrained myself from chucking the cup at his head.

He pressed his lips together, but I clearly heard him snicker. *Snicker*. At my furious look, he held up his hands. “Sorry, insider’s joke. They’re just herbs, roots, and plants. Contrary to popular belief, body parts aren’t needed to brew potions. Wool of bat, for example, is holly leaves.” When I continued to glare suspiciously, he added, “Promise. There’s no baby fingers or virgin skin mixed in there. And we don’t perform hexes or any level of black magic at this school.”

“Hexes? Hexes are *real*?”

“How do you think the vampires were cursed a century ago?” he drawled sarcastically.

“I don’t know,” I spluttered, feeling both frustrated and stupid. “I’m new to all this supernatural stuff. It still seems so unreal.”

He rubbed a hand over his mouth, his expression growing thoughtful. “Tell you what. Drink every last drop of that Sano, and I’ll tell you anything you want to know.”

My jaw dropped. “For freakin’ real?”

Grabbing a nearby wooden chair, he straddled it and rested his forearms on the back. “Abso-freaking-lutely.”

Well, that settled it. “If I grow two heads after this, I will hunt you down,” I warned him, holding my breath as I placed the cup to my lips. Despite his snickering response, I downed the liquid in one go, almost spewing it across the room as the taste hit my tongue. Fighting with my gag reflex, I barely managed to swallow the pungent stuff.

I exhaled a ragged breath, immediately sucking in another as the liquid speared down my throat like ice. I could actually feel it, *feel* it, as the potion traveled through my body. Less than a minute later, it slipped down my arm to my wrist. Acting like a numbing agent, the frozen liquid submerged the broken bone completely before I felt something shift. When I realized it was my bone that was moving, slowly sliding back into place where it belonged, I gaped up at Noah in pure shock.

He shrugged. “You’ll find there are many perks to being a witch.”

I focused on my healing wrist again, wishing I could believe that statement. So far though, the witch part of me had brought nothing but suffering.

“So. What do you want to know?” Noah said when the pain had all but melted away.

A million different things. So much that I didn’t know where to start.

“There was this witch. A friend of my mother’s,” I found myself saying, unsure why I was telling Noah about her, other

than the fact that he was also a Cosmic and had grown up in Rosewood. “She was the one who discovered that I was a Syphon and gave me the spelled charm bracelet. I guess what I’m asking is, did you know her before she died? She knew my parents while they lived in Rosewood, and ... I’m just hoping for information about them. Anything at all. My aunt—well, I don’t know if what she’s told me about them is true. If *anything* she told me is.”

While I spoke, Noah had grown more and more still. So still that I couldn’t see him breathing.

“Noah?” I questioned with a frown, when all he did was stare at me.

As if waking from a trance, he quickly blinked, then shot a look behind him before fixing me with a hard stare. “Do you know the witch’s name?”

“Josephine. Apparently, she was a powerful Cosmic witch.”

Noah’s face paled.

Alarmed, I leaned forward. “What? Noah, what is it?”

He suddenly raised a brightly glowing hand and murmured, “*Sana obstructionum.*”

My alarm grew. “Was that a sound-blocking spell? Why do we need a—?”

“Because I’ve never told anyone what I’m about to say,” he interrupted, facing his chair forward. All seriousness now, he propped his elbows onto his knees. “Fifteen years ago, when I was only six, I saw something I shouldn’t have. There was this family my parents were friends with—a husband, wife, and

daughter. Isla and I were never allowed to play with the little girl though.

“Anyway, on the day of the girl’s third birthday, my mom drove Isla and me over to their house to drop off a present. It was early, because I remember eating a Cheerio breakfast in the car. When we arrived, my mom freaked out. She got out of the car, but quickly returned. I remember her hands were smeared red as she called someone. Then we took off, the present for the girl still on the seat beside me.

“But as the car reversed down the driveway, I happened to look out the window and saw something I’ve never been able to forget.”

“What? What did you see?” I whispered, dread gnawing a hole through my gut.

His throat bobbed as he answered quietly, “Two bodies, lying prone in the snow. Covered in blood.”

Oh fates.

“Soon after,” he continued, “my parents told me the family died in a plane crash. I was so young that it didn’t take much for me to believe I’d dreamt up the murder scene. But I’ve never forgotten. And I’ve always wondered what really happened to that little girl.”

“W-why?” I said, my voice shaking. “Why are you telling me this?”

But I already knew. I knew what he was going to say. I needed to hear it though. I needed to know the truth.

“Because my mother Josephine was a powerful Cosmic witch who specialized in spelling objects,” he replied. “And I

think the little girl whose parents were murdered was you.”

9

KENNA

I pressed redial. Again. I tried to text. Again. But no matter how many times I attempted to reach my aunt, nothing went through.

I wasn't stupid. I'd already considered the possibility that Clarice had disconnected my phone to discourage me from conversing more with vampires. And that, whether true or not, only amplified my distress. Until the painful emotions pressing on my chest became unbearable and I threw the phone across the room, screaming my frustration and rage.

"Useless phone!" It struck the wall and cracked against the floor.

I'd spent hours with Noah, grilling him for details until I knew, without a shadow of doubt, that the family he'd talked about had been mine.

My poor parents.

Murdered.

They hadn't died in a freak plane crash, but were killed in my own front yard. In the very spot I'd been in only two days ago.

But where had *I* been on that day? Inside, completely oblivious that my mom and dad lay dead just yards away? I couldn't remember. I couldn't remember *anything* about that day.

Aunt Tess did though. She said she'd been babysitting me the day they died. But on my birthday? I'd been told their plane went down a month *after* my birthday. I had even looked up information about the crash online.

January fourth, a Boeing passenger airliner crashed into the Atlantic Ocean from engine failure. Due to the icy temperature, there were no survivors. My parents' bodies were never recovered.

I had *believed* her. I had believed my aunt's stories without question. Why had she kept this from me? Did she know who had murdered them?

The mystery behind my parents' deaths was ripping open old scars. It was like losing them all over again.

Unable to call my aunt due to the dud phone that now lay cracked on the hardwood floor, I had no outlet for my boiling emotions. Worse, the sizzling in my veins that I could only guess was Noah's magic had intensified with each passing hour.

Because of my injury, I'd been excused from the rest of my afternoon classes and had taken dinner in my room. But resting was impossible. I needed *out*. Out of this room. Out of this isolation. Out of my *skin*.

I stopped pacing, suddenly knowing what I needed.

A distraction from the pain. A goal. A *purpose*.

Marching from the room, I sought out Malcolm. Sure enough, he was directly outside the office, guarding the hallway. Surprise flickered in his dark eyes, but other than that, he didn't react to my disheveled presence.

"Aren't you ever going to sleep?" I told him, then sighed when he mutely stared at me. "Never mind. I need you to take me to Noah." At his blank look, I snapped, "The Defensive Arts instructor? Mr. Andrews? The guy with the long, blond *hair?*"

Okay, I might have gone a bit too far.

Malcolm studied me impassively a moment more before saying, "It's almost lights out."

"Okay, but it'll only take me a few minutes. I just need to *speak* with him."

It was another torturous moment before he nodded, beckoning me to follow him. I paid close attention to the path we took, knowing that I planned to traverse it again. Maybe several times, depending on how this evening went.

Malcolm remained silent, which was perfectly fine by me. He didn't have the answers I now sought. I didn't need him for anything other than being my personal GPS. If a student chose this moment to corner and bully me, I wouldn't need Malcolm to protect me.

I had enough rage festering inside that I knew anyone who approached me would immediately regret it. I was *not* in the mood.

So when Malcolm paused at a doorway and said, "He should be in there. He usually works out in the evenings," I

made a shooing gesture, replying, “Thanks, I’ve got it from here. I know the way back, so you can go take a nap or whatever.”

I didn’t wait to see how he’d react to the dismissal, already shoving through the door. The sound of someone wailing on a punching bag greeted me upon entering what looked to be an exercise room. An impressively large, rounded space with a domed ceiling. We must be in one of the terrets.

Noah’s back was to me, and I ground to a halt when I saw that he was naked from the waist up. Sweat glistened on his corded muscles, sliding down the groove of his spine. When I realized how long I stood there watching him hit the bag, heat crawled up my neck. I could appreciate sweaty muscles as much as the next girl, but being alone with him like this felt kind of ... intimate.

And wrong.

I shouldn’t be here. It felt like a betrayal, although I had no idea why. It’s not like I was dating anyone.

Unless the intense bond you share with a darkly brooding vampire counts. Unless his pursuit in giving you orgasms means more than just lust.

Freaking *crap*, why did my mind have to go there?

“Earth to Kenna. Where’d you go?”

I bit back a yelp at the unexpected voice, realizing too late that Noah had caught me staring. Somehow, I’d missed his approach. He was waving a hand in front of my face like I’d zoned out. Except I *had* zoned out, too busy remembering the

ways Lochlan had pleased me. Okay, this had been a bad idea. Now Noah probably thought I was a creeper.

“Uh, yeah, sorry about that,” I stammered, scrubbing my damp palms on my pajama pants. Crap, I was in my pjs! I’d officially lost it. “I wasn’t staring at you or anything. I mean, I *was*, but I wasn’t—”

Okay, someone *please* bury me.

It didn’t help that Noah’s toned chest was on full display, glittering enticingly. More hair had escaped its tether, sticking to his jaw and neck. And when I peeked up at his face, his lips were twisted with wicked amusement.

“As a rule,” he said, undoing the velcro on his boxing gloves, “friends of my kid sister are off limits. Isla would kill me if I made a pass at you. I’m tempted, don’t get me wrong, but it’s not worth risking her wrath.”

My eyes practically bugged out of my head. “That’s not ... I didn’t come here to ... Okay, no. Don’t worry, I’m not interested.”

“Ouch. Must be off my game,” he said, removing his gloves with a pout. “Or maybe you’re already taken. Yes, that explains it. Who’s the lucky fellow?”

“What? No,” I sputtered, unable to stop a blush from staining my cheeks. “I just—”

When he snickered under his breath, I immediately stopped flapping my mouth, realizing that he’d been teasing me this whole time.

“*Jerk*,” I cried, punching his arm. He staggered back and I gasped, checking my hands for any sign of the red glow.

“Sorry. I shouldn’t have—”

“Relaaax, baby witch,” he drawled. “You didn’t hurt me. I was only playing. You’re wound up tighter than a nun in a stripclub.”

“What the—? I can’t believe you just said that!”

“What?” he said with a shrug. “I’m off the clock. What I say in my free time can’t be held against me.”

“How old are you again? Ugh, you’re like the male version of Isla with the inappropriate jokes.” When he opened his mouth, clearly ready to spew more, I yanked up a hand. “Okay, stop. I can see now why you’ve been dubbed a troublemaker. Lesson learned. But I came here because I need you.”

He cocked an eyebrow. “Need me to do *what*, exactly?”

I narrowed my eyes. “Don’t start again. I need you to train me.”

“Well, that’s what my Defensive Arts class is for. It won’t always be like today. Clarice just wanted to—”

“No, no, I need you to train *me*,” I said, jabbing a finger at my chest. “Just you and me. I need to learn how to be a Syphon. To control what goes in and out. I’m afraid of touching people, Noah. I know that I hurt you today. No, don’t deny it. I. Hurt. People. My skin is toxic and I hate it.” I took a moment to steady my erratic breathing, adding more quietly, “So I need you. I need you to teach me how to control who I am so I won’t accidentally hurt anyone. Can you do that?”

Noah studied my face, all traces of teasing gone. Then, a slow smile curved his lips and he said, “Can I do it? Well,

those just happen to be the magic words, baby witch, because my response will *always* be ‘of course I can.’”

* * *

“Concentrate, Kenna. You won’t be able to control anything if your emotions are distracting you. Are you remembering your anchor? Feed your abilities through that imaginary sieve. Don’t suck up the magic all at once.”

“I *know*,” I gritted out, releasing the glass orb with a frustrated sigh. In a matter of minutes, I’d sucked the thing dry of all magic. No amount of breathing exercises had helped slow down the intake. It was like my skin was parched for all things supernatural. It greedily inhaled every last drop of magic and essence.

Noah was still recovering from touching me yesterday, so our first one-on-one lesson after classes involved me trying to control how much energy I took from magically-imbued objects. Needless to say, it wasn’t going well. I’d drained every single one.

“Where’s all the magic going anyway?” I asked him, flopping back onto the training mat. “You’d think it would be spilling out of me by now, like an overflowing gas tank.”

“Maybe you have a hollow leg.”

I glared up at him.

“Look, magic isn’t tangible like water. It’s more molecular. A feeling. Kinda like the force.”

“Huh?”

“Don’t tell me you’ve never watched *Star Wars*.” At my blank look, he rolled his eyes to the ceiling. “Think of magic as particles of energy. You can’t see it, except for when it’s released—or absorbed, in your case. Magic is infinite, impossible to measure. Now, if you’re wondering what absorbing magic from different sources in a very short amount of time will do to you, I have no idea. Usually too many ingredients in a science experiment cause an explosion, so ...”

“What?” I snapped into a sitting position. “I could *explode*?”

“Um ...”

“Noah!”

“Cool your jets, K-Bug, you won’t explode. Probably. Look, no one knows much about Syphon abilities and their limitations. They’ve always been rather reclusive in the past and reluctant to share their secrets. What we do know is that they’re insatiable. Without the ability to produce magic of their own, they instinctively latch onto anything that does. Kind of like—”

“Leeches?” I quietly finished for him, my panic replaced with shame.

He frowned down at me, then crouched to my eye level. “Are the students still giving you a hard time?”

I snorted. “What do you think? I’ve been asked at least a dozen times today to prove that I’m a Syphon. Despite that, most give me a wide berth in the hallways, afraid I’ll bump

into them. I get it, though. I can handle their hostility. What I can't handle is being a leech."

"You're not a leech."

"Oh?" I raised a hand toward him and he noticeably stiffened. I dropped my arm in defeat. "I don't want to be like this. But I don't want to be weak and defenseless either."

"Then you don't give up."

"I'm not. I'm just—"

"Feeling sorry for yourself?"

I gaped at him, hurt by his censor.

He stood, towering over me. "Do you know why I'm the Defensive Arts instructor? Because I never back down from a challenge. I know my strengths and play to them. As a Cosmic, I'm able to draw on both the sun and moon for power, even the universe itself under the right conditions. But the stars have to be properly aligned first. If I attempt a spell and the timing isn't right, my magic will be weak. I have to listen and trust that my magic knows better than I do.

"But I've failed plenty," he continued brusquely. "I've failed hard and had to try again and again. And what I want to know is can you handle that? Can you handle failing over and over? Because you will. You'll fail, and rumors will fly, and gossip will be vicious. But you won't stay knocked down. You won't hide who you are and you won't admit defeat. Think you can do that?"

I blinked up at him, realizing then that I'd underestimated Isla's big, troublemaking brother. Perhaps Headmistress

Mayweather did too. He deserved a lot more respect than he was given around here.

So, without hesitation, I stood to squarely face him. And despite my confidence being shot—despite my fear and uncertainty—said, “Of course I can.”

10

KENNA

Finally, after years of waiting, the day had arrived.

I was eighteen years old.

I'd dreamt of this day for so long, planned how I would execute the first hours of my legal adult freedom. Maybe move in with a friend, or rent a cheap apartment. I'd have to get a job to pay the bills, of course, but no one would stop me from doing so.

That was the thing about big dreams and plans, though. They often fell apart. At least for me, anyway. And today was no exception.

It didn't unravel all at once, but in torturously slow increments. First came the whispers that *vampires* were outside the wards. Up and down the halls, in every classroom and dark corner, the rumors flew. Until the school was in an uproar. Classes were dismissed early. Students were ordered to their dormitory wings until further notice.

Cut off from everyone, alone in my isolated room with no way to communicate, I nervously paced for hours.

Had the vampire king found out I was here? Was the school under attack? What if Kade had returned? What if he came to tell me that Lochlan was ...

No. Don't think it, don't think it.

But I already had. That Lochlan was dead. And the weight of that possibility suffocated me.

The thought of never hearing his silken voice again, of never gazing into his darkly intense eyes or seeing that elusive left dimple of his. Of never witnessing his fierce protectiveness or rare show of gentleness. Of never feeling his touch ...

I couldn't breathe.

But my bodily reaction was illogical in light of everything I'd discovered about him. I knew this, but couldn't suppress how I felt. And the more I thought about him, the deeper the pit grew behind my sternum until I had to press both hands over my chest, afraid that I'd get sucked into the vast empty hole.

Malcolm delivered my lunch and dinner, but I had no appetite. I'd tried to pester information out of him to no avail, and without answers, even the new sketchpad I'd received held no appeal. Without the ability to keep my mind busy, all the old hurts and traumas of the past came back to haunt me.

By the time night crept through the room's window, I was a mess of loneliness and anxious exhaustion.

The moment I heard hushed voices coming from Clarice's office, I rushed to the bedroom door and yanked it open. Nautilus cawed at my abrupt intrusion, lifting into the air to seek refuge on his corner perch. The headmistress turned from her conversation with Malcolm, her usual smile for me absent. In its place was a quizzical frown.

“Kenna, come in. I need to speak with you.”

I watched her glide across the room toward her desk, a small package tucked beneath her arm. But there was something off about her movements. Stiffer. Less confident. She waited for me to join her, then settled into her chair, placing the wrapped parcel on the desk.

“I have some troubling news to share,” she began, removing her glasses to rub the bridge of her nose. “The drothen, Kade, has returned. But he didn’t come alone. The princes are here too, and they are far less agreeable. They’re demanding you be released to them right away.”

My throat closed, and I gripped the armrests of my chair. It took everything in me not to ask which princes were here, to demand she tell me if Lochlan was one of them. “And what did you say?” was all I asked, hoping she’d tell me on her own.

“That for the purposes of your safety, our elders and their king must be made aware of the situation first. I cannot in good conscience allow you to leave Thornecrest Academy without a few protocols in place. For too many years, the Demonic Trinity has used Syphons with not enough input from us witches. That ends now. They won’t go anywhere near you without my consent.

“That is,” she added softly, “if you decide to help protect the supernatural world from exposure by finding a way to break the curse.”

Wow. Apparently the time for decision-making had come to an end. I knew what Clarice wanted me to do. She’d made that perfectly clear. Still, I wondered what would happen if I

said no—to *all* of it. A big part of me was dying to know, to announce that I was eighteen and chose option C: none of the above.

But I needed someone in my corner. I needed someone to smile at me and express their gratitude for all that I did. I wasn't a child desperate for an adult's attention and approval anymore, but I also didn't want to keep disappointing them. I'd thrown away everything Aunt Tess had done for me by keeping secrets and making selfish decisions. I'd ruined any connection I could have had with her and didn't want to make that same mistake with the woman across the desk from me.

So, as much as it pained me to put my future plans on hold, I heard myself say, "I'd like to meet with the elders as soon as possible. I want to do what I can to help."

Sure enough, she beamed at me. The sight both warmed and chilled me.

"I'm so happy to hear that, Kenna. Witches everywhere will be most grateful for your sacrifice to the cause. Also, I hear congratulations are in order. Happy Birthday. Your aunt phoned me and said to pass on the sentiment."

Stunned, I didn't immediately respond. Aunt Tess had called ... and didn't ask to speak to me? I knew she was upset with me, but not *this* much. She'd always celebrated my birthday with cake and presents, even if it was only the two of us. Now, she couldn't even be bothered to speak with me? I tried to swallow, and couldn't. "Um ... thanks."

Clarice's smile turned sympathetic. "It's been a stressful day. Get some rest. I'll contact the elders and set up a meeting first thing in the morning. Oh, and this is for you," she said,

sliding the package toward me. “I agreed to give it to you if the princes agreed not to test our wards. And before you worry, I made sure there was nothing harmful inside. The contents are safe.”

Numb with shock, I wordlessly accepted the package, only managing a weak smile in reply.

Her gaze followed the package for a moment, as if she were debating snatching it back. As if waiting for me to open it in front of her so she could gauge my reaction. I tucked it close to my chest, not about to let her do either.

Blinking, she picked up her glasses and stood. “Right. I’ll just be going then. Again, Happy Birthday, and thank you on behalf of all your brother and sister witches.”

I must have nodded, because she left then, leaving behind her creepy bird once again. I stared at him for a moment, my gaze as unblinking as his. But as soon as the office doors snicked shut, I rose from my chair and crossed to my bedroom. Closing myself inside, I tried to steady my trembling limbs to no avail.

I took one step toward the bed and lost my battle with gravity. The deep, desperate need to know what was inside the package drove me to the floor. With my legs splayed across the hardwood, I tore into the brown paper. In seconds, its contents were spilled out before me. Déjà vu hit me hard as I slowly picked up the first item.

In a clear plastic container was a slice of cheesecake. With strawberries on top.

Tears blurred my vision.

“Oh, Kade,” I whispered, my chin wobbling.

I reached for the note next, lifting it open with one hand. When I saw the handwriting, my heart began to race.

McKenna. I am well. Happy Birthday, and stay safe. -L

I read the words over and over again, waiting for them to sink in. Waiting for my mind to accept their truth. When it did, my breath came in ragged gasps. I shook uncontrollably from the slew of powerful emotions washing over me, glad that I wasn't standing. When I could breathe again, I set down the items and gingerly grasped the next. A single red rose. I avoided the thorns, carefully stroking the soft petals.

There was still one item left. One that promised to unravel me completely.

It wasn't the item itself that had my heart beating erratically, but what I hoped was *on* it.

Unable to stop myself—not *wanting* to—I brought the black shirt to my face and deeply inhaled.

As the familiar scent of amber, sandalwood, and musk filled my nose, I fell apart. Great sobs racked my body and I curled up on the floor, clutching the shirt to me like a lifeline.

Everything came rushing in. Everything I'd been trying to suppress. Hurt over my aunt's abandonment, loneliness from missing my friends, despair over my uncertain future, grief that my parents had been murdered. But most of all, pain. Pain from wanting, from *needing* to see Lochlan again. To have him hold me while I cried like I hadn't cried in years.

I cried over my conflicted feelings for him. I cried for the loss of trust and connection.

But I also cried because he was alive.

I cried in abject relief, because he was *here*.

* * *

My bedroom door banged against the wall and I jerked awake, utterly disorientated.

“K-Bug, wake up. You need to take this call.”

Something was shoved in my face and I blindly batted it away, mumbling incoherently.

“Why are you sleeping on the floor with a half-eaten cheesecake?” said an incredulous voice that I now recognized as Noah’s. “Never mind. Look, this is urgent. I think Isla’s in trouble.”

At the mention of my best friend, I shot upright, rubbing the sleep from my eyes. “What happened?”

“Someone called me from her number. They won’t tell me anything though. Just that I need to let them speak to you.”

Alarmed, I met his worried gaze and reached for the phone. He readily passed it over, his nervous energy ratcheting up my own. Swallowing, I pressed the phone to my ear. “Hello?”

“McKenna Belmont?” an unfamiliar male voice said.

“Yes?”

“We have your friend. She’s alive, for now, but only if you turn yourself over to us at midnight tomorrow.”

All the blood drained from my face. Noah was giving me a “what did he say” look, but I slowly shook my head, whispering, “Who is this?”

“A group of Feltore who don’t see eye-to-eye with King Ambrose. That’s all you need to know.”

I started trembling. *Vampires*. A group of unknown vampires had Isla. Noah looked ready to rip the phone from me and demand answers, so I hurriedly said, “How can I know for certain that you speak the truth?” That you have my best friend. That she’s in *danger*.

I heard a muffled sound, like a hand blocking the speaker. Seconds later, an unmistakably female voice, one I knew well, stammered, “K-Kenna? Kenna, if that’s you, don’t do it. I’m dead either way. They’re going to—” Her words ended in a yelp of pain.

“Isla!” I cried, clambering to my feet.

“What’s happening?” Noah bellowed at the same time, grabbing me to shake my shoulders. The stark fear in his eyes mirrored my own.

“Tomorrow at midnight,” the strange male reiterated in my ear. “Meet us inside Black Mamba, a nightclub located off route seventy-three. Come alone. If you don’t, we’ll kill your friend. And if you involve the princes, we’ll make sure she suffers first. Slowly.”

The line went dead.

Noah pried the phone from my numb grip and redialed, only to get Isla’s voicemail. Cursing, he hung up. “Kenna,

what's going on? Where's Isla?" When I didn't answer, he shook me again.

"Sh-she's," I stuttered weakly. "She's been kidnapped."

"What?" he hissed, jerking back. "No, that's ... *No*. I'm calling my dad."

"Noah, stop!" I shouted, lunging for his phone. Stunned at my ferocity, he let me grapple it from him.

"Kenna, what's—?"

"You can't. If I don't show up alone, they'll kill her."

"Who? *Who* will kill her?"

"I-I don't know. A rogue group of vampires who aren't in league with their king. They want me in exchange for her at midnight tomorrow."

"Where's the meetup?"

"A place called Black Mamba. I don't know how far away it is or how to get there though."

Noah swore loudly, shoving both hands through his already disheveled hair. "It's fine, it's fine. I know where it is. Okay, let me think," he said, pacing the room. "They obviously don't think I'm a threat to their plans, which is in our favor. That gives me twenty-four hours to find a way to get her out on my own."

"Wait. Noah, no way!" I said, panic rushing through me. "Who knows how many there are. I have to go. My touch can kill them."

He shook his head, barking a humorless laugh. "I'm a dead man if I put you in harm's way. Isla's my sister, and—"

“And she’s my best friend!” I argued vehemently. “She’s in *danger* because of me. I won’t be able to live with myself if I stay here, safe and sound, while who-knows-what is happening to her. *Please*, Noah. Help me get out of here.”

He paused to fix me with a tortured look, clearly warring with himself. I held my breath, waiting for his decision. After several beats, his shoulders fell and he gave a small nod. “Fine. We’ll—”

“No one’s going anywhere,” a voice interrupted. We both wheeled toward the bedroom door to find Headmistress Mayweather there, Nautilus on her shoulder and Malcolm lurking behind.

Noah snapped to attention. “Clarice, I can—”

“No need to explain. I heard enough. While I sympathize with your plight, this is a matter for the SCA. I suggest you contact your father and let him deal with this.”

Noah clenched his trembling fists. “But she’s my *sister*.”

“Yes, and might I remind you that she’s human. Witch law states—”

“*Screw* witch laws,” he bit out. “They’re archaic and unjust. I’ve allowed them to control me for too long. I’m leaving.”

Before he could move, Clarice said, “Step foot outside the wards without my permission and you know the consequences. I won’t let you jeopardize all witches for one human.”

Noah froze, seething in place. Veins throbbed in his forehead and neck.

“Good,” Clarice said, lifting her chin. “Malcolm, would you please escort Mr. Andrews to solitary? He needs some alone time to remember his place. I’ll call Bill myself. We’re overdue for a chat anyway.”

Expecting him to resist, I tensed as Malcolm squeezed past her and approached Noah. When all he did was fix the burly guard with a scathing look before allowing him to grasp his arm, I wordlessly gaped in shock. The two men left quietly, leaving me to face Headmistress Mayweather alone.

Weariness filled her expression as she turned to me with a sigh. “I’m sorry you had to see that, Kenna. Noah has always been a bit of a loose cannon. His carelessness is what drew the elder’s attention in the first place. He knows the laws and chose to break them. He has no one to blame for his predicament but himself.”

I frowned. “What predicament?”

“If he leaves this school without authorization, he forfeits his right to a coven. And if the elders find him, they’ll bind his magic and officially declare him an outcast. It’s a harsh law but necessary to keep unruly witches in line. Reckless public exposure of magic is a capital offense, circumstances notwithstanding. He may have been grieving the loss of his mother, but Noah spent years abusing his magical privileges. Luckily for him, his father was able to do damage control most of the time.”

I stared, gobsmacked at the news. Poor Noah. My heart went out to him as I realized how hard he must have taken his mother’s death. The tension between him and Clarice made so much sense now. He was more of a prisoner here than me.

“But his sister’s in trouble,” I reasoned quietly, hoping to win her over with a level head. “She’s my best friend and wouldn’t be in this mess if it weren’t for me. If I don’t show up, they’ll kill her.”

“And what do you think will happen if they get their hands on *you*?” she said, reaching up to stroke her familiar’s head. He leaned into the touch like a cat. “The secret organization your aunt is associated with—the Supernatural Containment Agency—will be made aware. They specialize in dealing with these unfortunate situations. For now, you should get more rest. We have a busy day ahead of us. I’ve already contacted the elders and they’ll be here first thing in the morning to discuss how we should proceed with the vampire royals in regards to your future.”

Too much information, too fast. My head was spinning and I didn’t react right away. So when she grasped the door with a “Sleep well, Kenna” and proceeded to close it, I didn’t move quickly enough.

“Wait!” I said. Too late. The door clicked shut.

I rushed across the room and yanked on the handle, but it wouldn’t turn.

The door was locked.

The headmistress had locked me in my room.

11

KENNA

Hairpins didn't make the best lockpicks. Not that I had any experience picking locks.

"Crap," I hissed, as I bent another one beyond use. Sweat beaded my upper lip and dampened my palms, but I kept at it without pause. Something told me that once morning arrived, I'd be under close surveillance. Any chance of escape would be lost.

This was my one opportunity, if I could just get this blasted door open. Hopefully Malcolm hadn't returned yet from the creepy sublevel where he'd sent Noah, because getting past him would be a challenge.

Even after several minutes of contemplation while I worked on the lock, I still couldn't believe a *teacher* was being treated like a prisoner here. If this was how the witch world worked, then I wanted nothing to do with it. Isla needed me, and I'd much rather disappoint Headmistress Mayweather than let my best friend suffer at the hands of bloodthirsty vampires.

My only regret was that I hadn't learned how to control, let alone use my Syphon abilities. That and I'd miss Noah. Somehow, despite my efforts not to form any attachments here, he'd become my friend.

Yeah, and look what being my friend had gotten him. Putting my friends in danger was becoming a pattern I couldn't escape. How on earth was I going to rescue Isla on my own? A couple days of training hadn't exactly prepared me to face a horde of vampires.

I thought about Lochlan and Kade then, how they could be less than a mile away from me right this very moment. But could I risk finding them? Could I trust that they'd help me save Isla instead of whisking me away to King Ambrose?

I didn't know, and that doubt hurt more than I thought it would.

Minutes later, when the door still wasn't unlocked and desperation was creeping up my throat, a sharp plinking sound startled me. I whirled, searching the room. When the sound came again from the direction of the window, I shot up and hurried over to it. Darkness still blanketed the outside. I couldn't see a thing, so I pried open the window, grunting as it stubbornly refused to give. Eventually, I wrangled it open enough to stick my head out.

As soon as I did, I heard a "*Psst!*" from down below. Squinting, I searched for the source, just able to make out a thatch of blond hair. I squinted harder in disbelief. "Noah? How did you—?"

"Shhh," he whispered. "I hit Malcolm with a sleep spell and portaled outside. I would have portaled inside your room, but Clarice must have put up a ward. You'll have to climb down."

"*What?*" I hissed, eyeing the hard ground a solid two stories below. Despite being on the main floor, the backside of

the building faced a steep slope. If I fell, there was a good chance I'd break something, plus enjoy a reckless tumble down the hill.

"I'll catch you if you fall," Noah said, correctly reading my hesitation. "Use the vines. They're thick enough to hold you. C'mon, we don't have much time before Nautilus hears us."

"The bird? You're worried about the *bird*?"

Even from here, I could see the exasperation on his face. "What, did you think he was a benevolent angel in disguise? He's a *spy* for Clarice. Everything he's overheard you say, he no doubt reported back to her. Now hurry before he tells her what we're up to."

Oh fates. *Everything*? Was that why he'd slept in the office the past few nights? To *spy* on me? Wait, had the headmistress *planned* for this to happen? Had she set me up with overly superstitious roommates so that I'd end up here under her surveillance? My resolve to leave this place hardened further.

Ducking my head back inside, I scrambled to collect my few belongings. The items I'd received from Lochlan and Kade, plus a few toiletries, went into my school-issued backpack. I grabbed my blazer, hesitating for a split second before slipping it on.

I couldn't be worried about stealing right now. Saving Isla was my sole focus, and I needed protection from the harsh weather once we got past the wards. I glanced down at my leather school shoes with a grimace. Hopefully we wouldn't need to trek through snow. I still wore my uniform, the plaid skirt and tights the only protection my legs had. Nothing I could do about that right now.

Hurrying back to the window, I made sure Noah saw before throwing him the backpack. He easily caught it, which didn't reassure me in the least. I was much heavier and bulkier. Still, I swung a leg over the ledge, making sure I had a good grip before swinging the other over. They immediately got tangled up in the vines, which scraped uncomfortably against my tights.

As I slowly lowered myself, clinging to the window ledge for dear life, it immediately became clear that I lacked upper body strength. My arms started to burn and shook like crazy, but I managed to grab a thick vine and release my death grip on the building. I swallowed a shriek when the vine swayed under my weight, but thankfully held.

Before I could breathe a sigh of relief though, a shrill alarm lit up the night.

"Kenna, jump!" Noah shouted over the ear-splitting blare.

"Are you crazy?" I squeaked.

"I promise you won't get hurt!"

"Freaking *fates*," I bit out, then made the mistake of looking down.

Nope. Definitely not going to jump.

Seeking a foothold, I ever so slowly inched down the vines, doing my best to ignore my burning palms and muscles. A few seconds later, Noah growled, "Screw this," and something slammed into me.

Knocked sideways, my foot slipped and I lost my hold on the vine. I fell, my body hurtling toward the ground. There was nothing I could do but scream. So I did. *Loudly*. Just as

quickly, I jolted to a halt, so suddenly that I bit my tongue. Then Noah was there, a hand encased in bright crackling blue reaching toward me. My floating body righted, and my feet gently touched the ground.

“Told you I’d catch you,” Noah said, then grabbed my arm and pulled me close before I could fully process what had happened. “Now, whatever you do, don’t let go.”

It was the only warning I got before blue light flared around us in undulating waves. Wind whipped me from all directions, blowing hair into my eyes and mouth. Some instinct screamed at me not to swipe it away though, to instead dig my fingers into Noah’s shirt.

Nothing made sense as the world spun and blurred. Everything shot past impossibly fast, reminding me of the times I’d experienced vampire speed in Lochlan’s arms. Seconds that felt like minutes later, we stepped from the swirling gale onto solid ground. I immediately tipped sideways as my world continued to spin, but Noah’s hold on me forced me upright.

“Please don’t puke on me. We don’t have time for that right now,” he said loudly, the blaring alarm clueing me in that we were still at the institute. He allowed me another moment to adjust before letting go.

I didn’t reply, too busy trying to keep my cheesecake down. When I noticed our surroundings though, the nausea ebbed. “How—? Where are we?” Rows of expensive-looking cars lined the echoey, cavernous space.

“Staff-only underground parking garage beneath the academy,” he said over his shoulder while striding toward a

fiery red Dodge Challenger. Reaching it, he lovingly ran a hand down the black streak on its sleek hood. “I would have portaled us farther away, but there’s no way I’m leaving Ruby behind. Hop in.”

“You named your car?” I said, a smile twitching my lips despite the dire circumstances.

He paused with the door open to throw me a confused look. “Doesn’t everyone?”

“Yeah, sure,” I replied, hurrying over to the passenger side.

Before I could get in though, a voice from across the garage rang loud and clear. “Stop!”

I jerked my head around to find Clarice framed in the stairwell entrance. Behind her were two more figures. A sour taste filled my mouth when I saw who they were. Mei and Jordan.

“Noah Andrews,” the headmistress said with authority. “Stop right now or you will be excommunicated. No coven will ever take you in.”

“Kenna, get in!” Noah shouted from the driver’s seat. Frozen with indecision, I continued to stare at Headmistress Mayweather. She flicked her wrist and Nautilus launched off her shoulder into the air. He flew like a bullet, directly at me.

One moment I was gawking at the beady-eyed crow, and the next, yanked into the car. We were off like a shot before I could recover, tires squealing against the concrete. Gathering my wits, I scrambled to close the door, almost tumbling out of the car in the process.

“Are you crazy?” I screeched at Noah, my voice several octaves higher than normal.

“Always,” he yelled back, punching the gas as we cleared a corner. Up and up we went, hugging the winding inner wall as we looped up the parking ramp. The car’s engine roared angrily but Noah didn’t slow, even for a second.

“You’re worse than Lochlan,” I shrieked, desperately trying to buckle my seatbelt.

“What?” he said loudly, leaning to the side as he expertly skidded around another corner.

When the car straightened, any further words died on my lips. Because there, directly ahead, was a sealed garage door.

“Noah,” I whimpered. Then, “Noah!” as the door loomed closer and closer and he didn’t slow.

“Take the wheel,” he said, and before I was ready, he let go.

Gasping, I lunged over the console and grabbed the wheel. As I struggled to keep the car from glancing off the concrete walls, Noah raised his hands encased in crackling blue.

“C’mon, you hulking piece of rust,” he grunted, flexing his fingers.

“We’re going to crash, Noah. Noah? *Noah!*”

A scream lodged in my throat as the unforgiving door filled my vision. I braced for impact, stark terror locking my limbs in place. Inches away from getting squished like a pancake, the door exploded outward in a loud display of flaming sparks and shrieking metal.

“Woooo!” Noah hollered as we shot through the gaping hole into the starry night. He grabbed my face and planted a sound kiss on my cheek, nearly making me lose my hold on the wheel. He whooped again, taking control of the wheel to my utter relief. “Lord almighty, that felt good! I’ve been wanting to do that for ages.”

It took me a moment to realize he meant breaking out of the institute, not clobbering me with a wet one. With my heart still in my throat, I managed to stammer, “Now what? Noah, I know what will happen if you leave here. The elders are arriving in the morning. When they find out you’re gone, they’ll search for you and bind your magic.”

He looked at me sharply. “The elders are coming to the *institute*?” At my nod, he swore colorfully. “Why?”

“Clarice said they’ll help us know what to do next about the vampires. She wants to make a deal with the vampire king and break the curse.”

“She *what*?” he shouted, smacking the wheel. “More reason why we should hightail it out of here. The elders will *use* you, Kenna. And if they don’t get what they want, they’ll lock you up, or worse. It’s too late for me, but I’d rather be an outcast on the run if it means saving my baby sister. She’s been cheated out of too much already.”

“What do you mean?” I grabbed onto the door as he swerved sharply around a row of hedges.

“You can’t tell her I told you this, okay? It would destroy her.” Noah glanced at me, and when I nodded, he continued. “Our mom didn’t die of cancer. She was killed by the elders.”

Shock sparked through me. “*What?* But how is that possible? Isla said—”

“My dad used a spell to alter her memories. The elders wouldn’t allow her to know the truth.”

“B-but ... why? Why did they kill your mom?”

“I wasn’t privy to the specifics. Only that she was sentenced to death for what they deemed the ultimate crime against our kind. When they gave me no further explanation, I spiraled into what you could call a supernatural depression. I got into all sorts of trouble, hoping to get their attention. Well, I got it all right. Not that it gave me any more answers.”

My stomach churned miserably. The more I discovered about witches, the more I wanted nothing to do with them. “I’m so sorry, Noah. I never would have agreed to a meeting with them had I known.”

“It’s—” His eyes suddenly widened and he grabbed the rearview mirror. “Kenna, hold—!”

The ground erupted beneath us before he could finish, violently pitching the car sideways. I screamed as the Charger rose up on two wheels, threatening to tip over. Noah jerked hard on the wheel, throwing himself against the driver’s door, and the car bounced back onto all fours with a jarring thud.

“Malcolm’s awake,” he yelled, punching the gas again. “He’s drawing on his crystals to liquify the earth beneath us like lava. We’re in for a bumpy ride.”

I whipped my head around, just able to make out a figure standing in front of the institute with an aura of flaming orange about him. “And what are you drawing on?”

“Mainly the moon right now, but it’s not full, so I’m not at full strength. I don’t think I can manage another portal.”

I turned to him. “What can I do? I still have magic inside me. Tell me how I can help.”

The gravel road beneath us pitched again and Noah swore, swerving sharply. Narrowly missing a tree, the car bounced onto the lawn at a reckless clip.

“What can I *do*, Noah?” I cried, bracing a hand against the roof as my teeth threatened to chatter out of my head.

“I don’t know!” he shouted, fear leaking into his voice. “Using magic is like learning how to ride a bike. You just have to *do* it. Once you do, muscle memory kicks in. But if you’re afraid, you’ll never learn.”

“I’m not afraid!”

“Then *prove* it,” he said forcefully. “Knock Malcolm off his feet. No complicated spells or incantations needed for that. Just brute strength.”

“Fine, I will,” I replied with equal force. Unbuckling my seatbelt, I scrambled into the cramped back seat, nearly busting my nose on the cushion when the car lurched sideways to avoid another tree. I thrust my hand out toward the orange-glowing speck that was Malcolm and barked, “Freeze!”

“What are you *doing*?” Noah shouted.

“I don’t know!” I bellowed back.

“Even First Years can knock down an opponent with little to no training. Get your head in the game, K-Bug!”

“I’m *trying*,” I screamed, letting go of the seat to raise both arms. They trembled violently as I put every last ounce of concentration into forcing magic from them. I tried so hard that tears blurred my vision, blinding me to the impending danger until it was too late to warn Noah.

The monstrous tree root struck the right side of the car, shattering the windows upon impact.

Then everything was chaos.

Shrieking metal. Flying glass. The world flipped upside down, over and over. Too fast. Too violent.

The pain was everywhere, my body battered and bruised as the car became a death trap of destructive metal. And then I was free. Flying. Soaring.

Falling. Crashing.

Darkness yanked me into oblivion.

12

KENNA

Time and space held no meaning.

I swam in a sea of pain, not knowing up from down. I grasped at everything and found nothing.

Fighting against the dark pull, I struggled to the surface of consciousness. My eyes cracked open first. To a world of flames and metal carnage.

Ruby's on fire, was my first thought. Poor Noah.

My eyes widened. The car was on fire. Noah. Where was he?

“Kenna!” someone yelled, yet the sound was muted, as if I was underwater. I tried to respond but couldn't. Movement caught my attention and I watched as someone rushed toward me. “Kenna, are you okay?” Noah's face swam before me, a nasty gash on his forehead dripping blood.

“You're ... you're hurt,” I managed.

He waved my concern away. “I've been in worse crashes. I'm more worried about you. I tried to soften your landing when you went through the window, but you look pretty banged up. Can you stand? We need to get out of here before —”

He was suddenly yanked backwards. As he crashed to the ground, several roots sprang up and tightly wrapped around him. I immediately rolled over with a groan to help him. Woozy from the crash, I could only manage a pathetic crawl, doing my best to avoid the broken glass scattered throughout the grass.

When I neared, Noah ceased his struggles to grunt, “Go, Kenna. We’re almost to the wards. I’ll distract them while you find someplace to hide in the woods.”

“But what if you can’t—”

“Focus on Isla,” he cut in, straining against the roots to drop his phone in the grass. “Take this. Call my dad if I don’t show, but no one else. Don’t go into that nightclub alone, baby witch. Promise me. Those vampires won’t hesitate to—” He cried out as the roots squeezed him unmercifully.

Hearing him in pain, I pried at the roots to no avail. When I caught movement several yards away and discovered who was behind Noah’s misery, my helplessness quickly morphed into fierce protectiveness.

“You,” I hissed. She slowly approached with a victorious smirk on her face, green magic encasing her raised hands.

“Give up, *Syphon*,” Jordan called. “You know I’m the superior witch. You don’t even know how to use magic.”

At the bald taunt, determination gushed through me. I didn’t think. Only reacted. Like my body finally awoke and knew just what to do. So when I staggered to my feet and faced off with Jordan Holt, instinct told me that I was taking this witch *down*.

Thrusting my arm out, I shouted, “Enough!” A red glow encircled my hand a second before energy shot through my fingertips. Too enraged to be scared, I let it burst forth in an invisible wave. It struck Jordan square in the chest and she flew back with a shriek, flipping head over heels.

“Yeah, baby!” Noah crowed, struggling in earnest to free himself.

As he wrestled the roots off him, I touched my faintly red fingers, still warm with magic. “Cool.”

“Incoming!” Noah suddenly bellowed. “Get your butt out of here, K-Bug.”

I looked up to see Headmistress Mayweather and Malcolm appear in a flash of dark violet light. “Stand down, Noah,” the headmistress immediately commanded, stepping from the fading portal. “This is a fight you can’t win.”

Tossing aside the last root, he stood, angling his body in front of me. “Oh, you know me better than that, Clarice. I never back down from a challenge.”

Her nostrils flared and I blinked as a deep purple billowed around her clenched fists. “So be it. Nautilus?” she said, flicking a glance at me. “Detain the girl.”

For a single moment, time slowed to a crawl. And in that moment, several shocking things occurred. The huge crow launched himself toward me with a mighty caw, his beady eyes flashing wickedly. The headmistress raised her darkly glowing hands, slicing them downward in a punishing sweep. Noah threw up his arms encased in crackling blue, thwarting the blow in the nick of time.

Then things began to speed up, faster and faster, as Malcolm added his brand of magic to the equation. The ground rumbled menacingly and I knew that my window of escape was quickly dwindling. Casting a regretful glance at Noah, I scooped up his phone and bolted for the trees.

I made it several yards before a seductive whisper filled my mind. *Stand still, naughty witch. It's time to admit. You've fallen from favor. A fact I will savor.*

My legs grew heavy and I stumbled to a halt, clutching my fuzzy head. "Get out," I groaned, knowing from my brief time here that I was under a witch's mental attack.

Stand still, naughty witch. It's time to admit, the voice began again, and I recognized it this time.

Turning in a circle, I frantically searched for her. Explosions of blue, orange, and dark violet made it hard to see, but a faint trail of cerulean sparkles—the same hue as her hair—gave her away.

"Get out of my head!" I roared, whipping a hand out toward Mei as if to physically strike her. A powerful blast of magic swallowed up the distance between us and punched her in the gut.

"Mei!" Jordan cried, scrambling to her feet as her friend staggered back, then fell to her knees.

When I turned to run again, a sharp caw from above drew my attention. Without hesitation, Nautilus dove, his claws outstretched to scratch my face. I ducked, wincing when he managed to snag and rip out several strands of my hair. I tried shooing him away, but he was too fast—and clearly on a

mission to detain me. Ignoring him as best I could, I picked up speed, the trees looming closer and closer.

Seconds away from reaching their protection, a tree branch came out of nowhere and sidelined me. The impact knocked me clean off my feet and I went rolling across the grass.

Until I wasn't.

I sucked in a startled breath as snow smacked my cheeks and filled my mouth. The volume of it quickly slowed my tumble. I scrambled to my feet, slipping as I went. Wind and snow buffeted me from all directions, making it nearly impossible to see.

Great. I was in a freaking snowstorm with nothing on my legs but *tights*.

Despite how useless my shoes were, I plowed through the snowy drifts, determined to get as far away from here as possible. I had no idea which direction I was going—if I was traveling closer to my best friend or farther away—but I'd figure that out later. Right now, I had a creepy bird to evade, along with a witch who had a vendetta against me.

“Kenna,” Jordan shouted over the wind, her voice echoing faintly through the woods. “I won't let you best me. Do you realize what I am and where we are? The trees are my *weapons*. You're not going anywhere, you poor excuse for a witch!”

Another branch shot toward me and I ducked. With a whoosh, it swept past my head. Before I could straighten, several more branches shot toward me all at once from different directions. I cried out as one pierced my arm, forcing

me to stop. I protected my face with my hands as best I could so none would stab my eyes. A moment later, I was completely surrounded, dozens of jagged sticks facing me like spears. They dug into my skin with every ragged breath I inhaled.

Jordan barked a low and wicked laugh, and I watched through the snowy gale as she slowly approached. “I knew you were nothing but trouble,” she said with a sneer. “Now the headmistress does too. And when I bring you back, she’ll sing *my* praises, not yours. Maybe she’ll lock you up in solitary where you belong. Then we can all go back to—”

A sharp *whoosh* startled her into silence. Despite the falling snow and darkness, I saw the whites of her eyes grow as she whipped around, hands still lit a bright, glowing green. Another *whoosh* had her turning toward me with a stifled yelp.

Only one thing could move that fast without being seen.

Vampire.

Hope and trepidation rose within me, grappling for my attention. It could be Lochlan. Or Kade. But if it was them, how would I get to Isla? If it was them, could I trust that they’d listen to me?

And if it *wasn't* them ...

Mei’s creepy foretelling suddenly niggled at my brain.

Three shall go out, but only one will return.

“Jordan,” I said quietly, so as not to further spook her. “Get back inside the wards.”

“Shut up,” she hissed, whirling with a gasp as something dark blurred past her. She clenched her hands and the branches tightened painfully around me.

“Jordan, let me go,” I said, trying not to move or even breathe as I felt a branch press into my neck. “You’re hurting —”

In an explosion of movement, a dark form wrapped around her, yanking her head back. Twin flashes of white descended, sinking deep into her neck. Her terrified scream rang through the night. All I could do was helplessly watch as the vampire ravenously fed on her.

The branches surrounding me suddenly fell away as she lifted her hands. Snow sprayed into the air, along with a network of roots. They whipped around the vampire, prying him away. As soon as she was free, she clenched her fist and the roots squeezed and squeezed. The vampire bellowed in fury and pain.

I was just about to move toward her when it happened. The unthinkable. Another vampire barrelled into her, and, without the slightest pause, snapped her neck. I heard the chilling sound, a sound I’d hoped to never hear again. I saw her lifeless expression. The magic died on her fingertips—snuffed out, just like her life. The vampire threw her body to the ground like discarded trash.

“NO!” a high-pitched voice screamed, startling us all. For a moment, I thought it was me, but the sound came again from several yards away.

I spotted Mei, completely frozen, her mouth open in horror as she stared at her friend’s lifeless body. My thoughts flashed

back to another time. To another shocked girl witnessing a brutal murder. She could have died as well. Isla could have died if I hadn't intervened. And she needed me again. She needed me, and so did Mei. And, fates help me, I knew what I had to do.

Ignoring the warmth seeping through my coat sleeve, ignoring the fiery pain, I lifted my arms and *pushed*. I pushed whatever energy, whatever magic still lingered within me, toward the petrified girl. My hands burst into undulating waves of red, and magic shot from me. She was still staring at her dead friend when the blast shoved her backward. Back, back, back. Until she abruptly disappeared.

I breathed a ragged sigh of relief.

Safe. Mei was safe behind the wards.

But my relief quickly morphed into terror as the two vampires turned toward me, their blood red eyes flashing eerily. I didn't even get a chance to scream before one of them was on me. He snaked an arm around my midsection from behind, forcing my head back with a firm grip on my hair.

"It's her," he said, his breath hot on my neck. He paused to inhale deeply, emitting a low growl. Fear spiked through me. "Mint and fresh snow. Definitely her. Call it in."

"Wait," the other said, the one who'd fed on Jordan. He sauntered forward, cocking his head as he slid his eyes down my body. "She's bleeding. Her scent will carry to the princes if we don't take care of it."

Hope tripped inside my chest, accelerating my heart rate.

He jerked his eyes to mine. “That’s an interesting response to their presence. You’re not afraid.”

I gulped as he infiltrated my personal space, effectively making me a vampire sandwich. “They’re not that scary. Neither are you,” I managed to say, despite my growing dread at his close proximity.

As his head dipped toward my vulnerable neck, I forced myself to hold still. But when he flashed his fangs and cruelly gripped my injured arm, hissing, “Then let me show you how scary we can be,” I made my move.

Jerking my hands up, I grabbed his face. “No,” I spat, viciously digging my nails into his cheeks. “Let me show *you*.”

His roar shook the trees.

He tried to jerk away, but I desperately held on. If I let go, he’d probably rip out my throat. As our joined skin glowed a fiery red, the other vampire shook me so hard that I saw stars. Still, I stubbornly refused to relinquish my hold. Fingers tipped in claws tore at my hands, then immediately withdrew. Sharp hissing filled the air. Warmth surged through my palms, but I was too desperate, too panicked to care what that meant.

This was life or death. Screw the consequences.

But I didn’t anticipate what would happen next. I didn’t see it coming, only felt it as two sharp points sank into my neck. I froze in shock and horror, still gripping the vampire’s face before me. But when it hit me—when I realized what the vampire behind me had just done—I screamed.

My wail rose into the air, echoing through the trees. The fangs plunged deeper into my flesh, triggering an avalanche of pain. Hot. Searing. Burning like acid. It coursed through my veins, and I trembled violently. Uncontrollably.

Pain from all three of us saturated the night air, yet no one moved. We were trapped. Suffering. Each experiencing our own personal hell.

Seconds passed. Maybe minutes. The vampire in my grip was the first to crumble. He fell to his knees, taking me with. The fangs in my neck tore at my skin and I choked back another scream.

Despite the agony he was in from touching me, the vampire behind me knelt too, feeding with a wild ferocity. It wasn't like when Everett had fed from August. No, it was much worse. Brutal. Desperate. I could feel the savage pulls of his mouth. Feel the blood being sucked from me in great gulps. And I couldn't stop him. I was helpless as I doggedly sucked the life from the swaying vampire before me.

Finally, he sagged under my touch, slumping sideways into the snow. His dark body contrasted sharply with the white snow surrounding him, his wide red eyes fixed on a distant point. I peeled my hands off his face. A faint red outline marred his cheeks where they'd been, the only sign of what I'd done.

Slowly, slower than I should have, I struggled to break free of the feeding vampire. But he was ravenous, clinging to me like glue. He squeezed me tightly to him and released a growl-whimper against my neck. He was dying, in excruciating pain, and couldn't bring himself to stop.

And I was growing weaker and weaker. Darkness, darker than the blackest shadows, edged my vision. My neck angrily throbbed from the bite, matching my erratic pulse. My breathing grew labored with each passing moment. He was going to drain me, I realized dazedly. He was going to suck me dry, even if it killed him.

How twisted was that? My heavy lids pulled shut. How freaking insane was—

A loud caw reached my ears, followed by the frantic rustle of wings. The vampire abruptly jerked back with an agonized bellow, the action further tearing open my neck. Feeling the warmth of my blood gush from the wound, I pressed a shaky hand to the bite mark. Numbness spread through me. Shock, maybe. It dulled my panic and fear, enough that I calmly turned toward the flailing vampire.

Nautilus was relentlessly attacking his face, aiming for the eyes. Weakened from his prolonged contact with me, the man uselessly batted at the air. The crow struck again and again, raking his sharp talons across the man's exposed skin.

I stayed and morbidly watched for far too long, wasting precious seconds.

Go. Go! my mind screamed at me, and I finally forced my body to move. I stumbled through the snow without aim, solely focused on surviving, on losing myself to the woods so no one could find me.

I was running from witches, spirit demons, and vampires. Fates, how had this become my life? Might as well add werewolves to the mix and call it a party.

As soon as I had the sarcastic thought, a distant howl shivered through the trees. Renewed fear spiked through me, and my legs nearly gave out.

It's just a wolf, it's just a wolf, I inwardly chanted, relying on the fact that tonight wasn't a full moon. Werewolves couldn't change at will ... could they?

I continued to blindly crash through the woods, listening for sounds of pursuit. I kept running and running, knowing that I was freezing, that I was weak and in pain. That I barely had enough blood in my body to keep me going. But the farther I went, the less windy it became. The trees grew denser, providing more cover.

I couldn't feel anything anyway. I could lose a toe to frostbite and wouldn't even know. Adrenaline was the only thing keeping me upright, but even that eventually gave out. When it did, I simply fell in a tangle of limp limbs. Half buried in snow, I was tempted to let nature consume me. Alone and terrified, I couldn't think of a reason not to. But as I struggled to fill my starved lungs, to slow my dangerously thundering heartbeats, reason trickled back in.

I had a purpose.

Isla.

My best friend needed my help. I couldn't let myself die here.

So I struggled to rise. When that failed, I dragged myself to the nearest pine tree, its low-hanging branches laden with needles and snow. I crawled underneath for shelter, allowing

myself a few minutes of rest before plotting my next course of action.

Suddenly desperate for something familiar and comforting, namely a shirt that held a certain irresistible scent, I reached behind me to remove my backpack. Only, it wasn't there.

“No, no, no,” I whimpered, racking my tired brain. Had it fallen off while I'd scuffled with the vampires? Then it hit me. The *car*. It was in Noah's car that was now burnt to a crisp. And that fact—not the fact that I'd witnessed Jordan's death, or got bitten by a vampire, or *killed* someone—was what broke me.

A gut-wrenching sob tore from my lungs. I curled up on the frozen pine needles, clamping both hands over my mouth as more sobs threatened to reveal my location. I was crumbling inside. Breaking down over a lost t-shirt and half-eaten cheesecake. But that was all my mind could think about as I cried myself into nothingness.

13

KENNA

I jerked awake some time later, keenly aware of a rustling sound in the distance.

My breathing slowed as I zeroed in on the noise, picking out the clear crunch of shoes on snow. I thought of Noah and almost stood from my hiding spot, but paused when the hair raised on the back of my neck—warning me to stay put. Confused, I squinted past the pine needles, surprised to discover that I could see clearly. *Too* clearly, since I was pretty sure it wasn't morning yet. It was like my eyes had been enhanced by night-vision goggles.

I carefully reached up to rub them and was startled yet again when I could barely feel the cold, nor the various aches and pains in my body. Not even the bite mark. Worry that I was suffering from hypothermia trickled through me, but I could still feel my fingers and toes. Plus, I was alert. Like, *really* alert. Didn't hypothermia make you drowsy?

"I lost her," a female voice suddenly said. A familiar, accented one. I winced at how loud Clarice spoke, but didn't move to cover my ears. "Her trail has gone cold. Not even my familiar can pick up any sign of her tracks. There was too much snowfall." A pause, then, "It wasn't our fault. If you kept your subjects on a tighter leash ..." Another pause.

“Regardless, we’ve struck a *pactum*, Ambrose. Even if your sons find her before I do, our binding agreement in regards to McKenna Belmont still stands.”

Icy fingers of dread gripped my throat at the mention of that name. *Ambrose*. The five-hundred-year-old vampire king who had ordered the eradication of all Syphons.

Headmistress Mayweather was already working with him? I felt the sting of betrayal. Sure, she’d tried to keep me from leaving against my will, but I thought it was to *protect* me. Now, I wasn’t so sure. I wasn’t sure about *anything*.

Lochlan had warned me that nearly half the supernatural world wanted to use me or see me dead. But my own *kind*? Was I nothing more to them than a means to an end?

I blinked as my mind focused on another problem. If she was here, then what had happened to Noah? Should I try to find him, or call Sheriff Andrews like he instructed? Crap, I *really* didn’t want to see his father again, not after what he’d done to Lochlan.

While Clarice and the vampire king continued to discuss me over the phone, I slowly scooted backward, careful not to make a sound. It wasn’t hard. In fact, I moved almost gracefully, my limbs responding readily despite how frozen they should be by now. Deciding to worry about that later, I crawled out from beneath the tree’s protection.

As soon as I did, the wind kicked up, blowing hair across my face. I turned to sneak away, but froze in my tracks when a scent hit me. My body reacted violently to the smell, trembling uncontrollably. My throat seized with a desperate, irrational

need, so powerful that I couldn't swallow the spit pooling in my mouth.

Warm, rich toffee and clean mountain air.

The scent invaded my senses, drowning out everything else.

I need it, I need it, I need it.

Nothing else mattered but finding the source of that smell. I had to have it. I had to ... I had to *taste* it. To devour it. To—

Pain sliced through my top gums and I sucked in a startled breath. Clarice whirled toward me. We stared at each other for a stunned moment, each taking the other's measure. As the pain in my gums throbbed like a second heartbeat, I whimpered, reaching up to feel them.

What I found made the world disappear beneath my feet.

Clarice's eyes widened as she too saw what I'd discovered. She slowly tucked her phone away and raised her hands non-threateningly. "Don't be scared, Kenna. We can fix this. Let me portal you back to the academy where it's safe, then we can discuss how best to help your abducted friend."

I quickly shook my head. "No. I heard you on the phone." Twin points jabbed into my bottom lip and I yelped.

Dark purple billowed from the headmistress's fingers. "I'll explain everything, Kenna. But let me take you back first."

I shook my head again. "You're lying. You—"

Wind swirled around us, shoving the scent up my nose once more. I lost track of my thoughts, clutching my throat as it seized painfully. I gasped for breath, which only exasperated

the problem. Need screamed through me, pounding through my veins, scraping across my skin.

I need, I need. I needed ...

Her.

My gaze sharpened on Headmistress Mayweather, seeking out the thundering pulse in her neck.

Found you, my instincts purred. I licked my bottom lip, wholly focused on my prey.

“Kenna, snap out of it. I don’t want to hurt you,” my prey commanded, which didn’t sit well with me at all. My upper lip curled back in a silent snarl and I stepped toward her. Instead of running like I anticipated, my prey simply flicked her fingers.

Pain immediately bloomed on my right cheek and I stopped short, reaching up to touch the spot. Shocked when my fingers came away red with blood, I gaped at the headmistress in disbelief. Wait. She was the *headmistress*, not my prey. What was wrong with me? “You ... you cut me,” I whispered, cringing away from her.

“Only to stop you,” she replied softly, as if she’d done it for my own good. “You haven’t learned control, Kenna. I’m sorry for not training you myself these past few days. I thought we’d have more time. If you come quietly, we can begin training right away.”

I retreated another step. “Where’s Noah? Did you hurt him?”

Her expression flattened. “Enough of this. It’s time to go, Kenna,” she firmly said, circling her hand in the air. A black

portal edged in dark violet sprang into existence behind her. She reached for me and I backpedaled, shaking my head. When her lips thinned in determination, hands raising to do who-knew-what to me, I bolted.

My instincts almost won out. I almost returned to fight her. To prove my dominance. But if I did that, I knew something awful would happen. I'd nearly lost myself to her scent a minute ago, delirious in my need to have it. No, it wasn't her *scent* that I needed, I realized with a jolt of horror.

It was her *blood*.

Something was happening to me, something that I was too afraid to face.

So I ran and ran, faster than I'd ever run before. Except, I wasn't just running. I was *flying*, my feet barely touching the ground.

Oh fates, oh fates.

I was a freaking *vampire!*

Sheer panic shot through me and I fled the horrible thought and all that it meant. Wind whooshed past, whistling sharply in my ears. Boulders, roots, and low-hanging branches threatened to take me down, but I easily dodged them, my sharp vision alerting me to their presence.

But distance didn't dull my need. My *hunger*.

For blood.

I thought about going back again, if only to inhale that delectable scent one more time.

No, no, *no*. One whiff and I'd be lost again, a slave to need. Was this what vampires endured every second of every day? Was this how Lochlan felt around *me*?

My chest started to ache. Not from the running, but from sadness as the truth slapped me hard. He'd never wanted *me*. He'd only wanted my blood. I knew that now. I knew because I was feeling exactly what it meant to be a bloodthirsty vampire.

When I'd been a werewolf, the craving for raw meat had been strong. But not like *this*. This blind, mindless haze of lustful need to sink my fangs into a pulsing vein and suck it dry. It was all I wanted. To feed. To revel in the taste and texture of life-giving blood as it slid down my parched throat.

"Oh, God." I slapped a hand over my mouth as bile raced up my throat. Still running at full tilt, my legs suddenly gave out. I fell hard, recklessly rolling down a steep hill. My body struck several snow-encrusted rocks, until I finally came to rest at the bottom. Pain and exhaustion threatened to drag me under, but the thirst was stronger. A shuddering cough racked my frame, and I curled into a ball, half buried in snow.

"Stop," I moaned, gripping my burning throat. "Please, stop."

So consumed by the relentless need, I didn't hear the approaching footsteps. Didn't see or feel the presence until it was too late.

Something cold brushed my cheek and I jerked back with a startled cry. Fiercely blinking away my hunger haze, I spotted a blurry form crouched nearby and lunged without thinking. The momentum sent us both sprawling into the snow. Before I

could get the upper hand, though, the dark form flipped me beneath it. I bucked against the grip pressing both my wrists into the snow, kicking out only to have my hips firmly straddled.

I hissed in my captor's face, snapping at him with my fangs.

Fangs. Oh fates, I had *fangs*.

“McKenna.”

So incensed with the need to escape, I didn't register the familiarity of the male voice. I snarled and struggled, even while knowing my captor's strength was superior to mine. I wouldn't be bitten again. I wouldn't be bullied or used or kidnapped. And, above all, I wouldn't *feed*. I wouldn't let my hunger overpower my humanity and force me to drink this man's blood.

“Let me go!” I desperately roared.

“*Kenna*.”

The command in his voice—the authority—gave me pause. Enough that I finally registered who was looming over me, inches from my face.

“Loch—” I choked out. My throat was too swollen, too raw for me to utter his full name. He was in his vampire form, his skin matching the black hair falling into his eyes. Eyes that were blood red and studying me intensely. Wisps of shadow curled around the edges of his features, but not enough to hide his thunderous expression.

Witch killer, a part of me screamed. *Run before he kills you too!*

He came for you, another part reasoned. He wants to protect you.

Overwhelmed with indecision, every inch of me began to tremble. I tried not to breathe in his scent, but the need for air was too strong. I gulped in several lungfuls and, sure enough, the scent I knew so well invaded me completely. Amber, sandalwood, and the unique male musk belonging only to him. But I picked up another scent too, a deeper one that made all others pale in comparison. Decadently sweet yet slightly burnt, it reminded me of white chocolate mocha.

“Oh no,” I whimpered, my eyes widening in dismay.

It was his blood. Lochlan D’angelo’s blood smelled exactly like my favorite drink. Even worse, I’d never wanted to consume something as much as I craved to consume him right now.

“Who did this to you?” His voice crashed over me like a roiling wave, urging me to drown in its depths. When I didn’t respond, he released one of my wrists to gently touch the skin near my bite mark.

I flinched away, uncertain how I felt about him touching me. “Don’t,” I said, grimacing when my fangs scraped my bottom lip again.

His eyes darkened. “McKenna, tell me who bit you. I need to know *now*. How did it happen? Where else are you injured?” His gaze swept over the cut on my cheek.

Panic fluttered against my ribs. Not at his intimidating presence, but at my unmistakable desire for his blood. He was too close. Too real. Too warm and whole and filled with what I

wanted. I could hear it. Fates, I could hear the *thump-thump* of his heart beating, forcing blood to flow throughout his body. Teasing me. Taunting me.

“Please,” I gasped. “Go away.”

But of course he didn't listen. Of *course*. So arrogant. So *stubborn*. I wanted to shove him off me, but was afraid I'd pull him closer instead. Unable to read his expression, I waited several torturously long seconds for him to do something.

Finally, he pulled out his phone and quietly said, “Kade, I found her. Meet me back at the car.” A second later, we were both on our feet. Still trembling, my legs gave out, but he caught me before I could hit the ground again.

Not prepared for the abrupt change, I sucked in a breath. *Big* mistake. His scent invaded my mouth, my throat, my very lungs. A searing need roared through me, demanding that I take, take, take. Not just his blood, but *him*. I didn't understand, but I didn't have to. Instinct kicked in with a vengeance, dulling any and all rational thought. It overrode my fears and simply acted, pushing me toward his exposed neck. My top gums were on fire as my fangs descended even more.

Bite him, every inch of me screamed. *Take what's yours*.

I struggled against the pull, but the need was too strong. I bared my fangs and angled them toward his neck.

Lochlan released a warning growl and firmly gripped the nape of my neck, halting me in my tracks. “McKenna, no.”

A fierce possessiveness took hold of me and I angrily hissed at him, “*Mine*.”

The moment that unexpected word tore from my throat, we both froze. Shock transformed his features, probably mirroring my own expression. I closed my mouth with an audible click, jolting back to my senses when two sharp points painfully sliced through my bottom lip.

Why the crap had I said that? What was *wrong* with me?

I tried to step away, tried to run, to hide, to flee this situation before I lost all control of myself. But Lochlan swept me into his arms and took off at vampire speed before I could even think of protesting.

14

LOCHLAN

Mine.

Never in a million years could I have prepared myself to hear her say that word.

A word I loathed like no other. A word I never thought McKenna Belmont would utter.

The shock was slowly wearing off as I sped through the woods with her in my arms. I waited for a bolt of fury or disgust to hit me. Even fear. I belonged to no one, especially not a *witch*.

Instead, a male sense of pride heated my blood. Not to mention the sudden tightening of my pants.

Stop thinking with your dick, I berated myself. *That's what got you into this mess in the first place.*

But I couldn't deny how right the word sounded coming from her lips. Hell, I wanted to hear her say it again. So I ran even faster, needing to escape these irrational thoughts and feelings. My determination to keep her at arm's length had crumbled to ash the moment I'd taken her into my arms. I couldn't get to Kade soon enough.

“Let me down,” she said stiffly, her earlier desire now subdued. Still, I was prepared to intervene again if I saw even the slightest hint of fang. I knew she was shocked and confused about her outburst, but I kept silent on the subject for both of our sakes.

“We have to get you out of the cold. You may not feel it, but you’re freezing,” I told her instead, still struggling with my need to know what had happened to her. Who had *bitten* her. I could smell him beneath her skin like a cancer. Instinct demanded that I erase his foul scent, but doing so was impossible for more than one reason. I could kill him though, which should help ease some of this desperate restlessness. If I ever crossed paths with him, his life was forfeit.

McKenna thankfully lapsed into silence, but after a few moments, worry tightened my chest. I glanced down at her and, sure enough, she was pinching her thigh.

“I’ll help you through this,” I quietly said, knowing her amplified hearing would pick up the words. My worry grew when she didn’t respond. “McKenna.”

“I need blood,” she eventually whispered.

The hardness in my jeans swelled painfully as my mind immediately conjured illicit thoughts. Grimacing, I roughly replied, “Just hold on. We’re almost to the car.”

“I ... I can’t. It *hurts*. Help me,” she whimpered, curling in on herself.

My heart lurched in response to her misery. I slowed, cursing myself for my weakness, but I couldn’t stand it.

Couldn't stand seeing her in pain. My Lexus was only a mile away, but it was a mile too long.

I could tell she'd been through a lot in the few short days we'd been apart, days that had felt like years to me. Not only was there dried blood encrusted on her skin and clothes in several places, but she was drenched in the acrid, earthy scent of magic. What had they done to her at the institute? Not having the answers was driving me insane.

As I searched for a place to stop, I inwardly willed Kade to hurry. If he didn't arrive soon, this could get out of hand quickly. Still, I pressed toward an outcropping of rock semi-protected from the wind, listening carefully for any sound before setting McKenna on her feet.

She was fading fast, swaying so that I had to steady her again. Malnourishment amplified bloodlust, and I could easily feel how thin she was, even thinner than the last time I'd held her. Anger at the bond flared up, but I firmly set the emotion aside for later. The only way this would work was if I buried my feelings beneath a mask of indifference.

Backing her up against a man-sized boulder, I shucked off my jacket and rolled up my right sleeve, exposing my forearm.

"W-what are you doing?" she croaked, her expression openly vulnerable and filled with a need I knew all too well.

"Giving you what you need until I can get you more," I replied, inhaling a fortifying breath before viciously biting into my arm.

As my blood welled and spilled over, trickling onto the snow, McKenna gasped. She quickly slapped a hand over her mouth and shook her head, clearly understanding my intent.

“It will satiate you, nothing more,” I explained evenly, ignoring the influx of emotions pouring from her. “Vampires don’t crave one another’s blood like they do other supernaturals and humans. You’ll be able to control your bloodlust. This is only meant to ease your pain.”

Even as I said the words, they rang false. She wasn’t really a vampire and the rules didn’t apply to her. Still, if it would ease her misgivings enough to feed from me, then I’d say just about anything.

She squeezed her eyes shut, gasping out, “I can’t.” Her fear was electric, raising the hair on my arms. Not fear of me, I realized, but of herself.

“McKenna, look at me,” I said, forgoing thrall so she wouldn’t spook further. When she wouldn’t, I continued anyway. “You won’t hurt me. Trust me, I won’t let you.”

She opened her eyes to glare at me. “*Trust* you? After all the secrets you’ve kept from me? After all the—” Her words ended in a strangled sound as I tipped my arm, letting the blood pool onto my gloved palm.

I watched, satisfied as she lowered her hand and audibly inhaled my scent. “You can be mad at me all you want. You can hate me, rage at me, and never speak to me again, but you *will* drink my blood,” I said firmly when she continued to fight her instincts.

Her upper lip curled back, exposing those small, wickedly sharp fangs. “No, I won’t,” she growled.

The sound went straight to my cock, and I suppressed a frustrated groan. Time to end this fight for dominance before she addled my brain further. Before she could stop me, I dipped my thumb in the blood and smeared it across her bottom lip.

She recoiled with a snarl, baring her teeth like a cornered animal. I clenched my jaw, refusing to give an inch, even when tears clouded her eyes. My teeth ached from the pressure, but I wouldn’t comfort her. She had to feed, and pulling her into a hug wasn’t going to make that happen.

I watched as her willpower slowly crumbled, as her tongue instinctively darted out and caught a droplet of blood. She froze, eyes widening as several emotions flitted across her face. I focused on the ones that mattered, the ones that would help me break down her defenses.

“More?” I asked quietly.

Her tongue darted out again, and I muffled a pleased growl. Then, almost faster than I could track, she lunged for my hand. An overpowering urge to push her away barreled through me, but I forced myself to hold still as she grabbed my gloved hand and brought it to her mouth.

15

KENNA

Pleasure exploded on my tongue, slipping down my throat to instantly soothe the raw ache.

Moaning, I lapped up every last drop of blood on Lochlan's palm like a parched dog. Before I could panic when it was all gone, he bit into his arm again and offered me more. A part of me knew I should be horrified at what I was doing, but I couldn't seem to care. His blood tasted so *good*. It was everything I wanted and more, which was another thing that should scare me.

He said vampires didn't crave each other's blood. Then why did his blood glide through me like warm honey, whispering, *singing* for me to take what was mine?

There was that word again. But now that his blood was running through my veins, melding with my own, I felt it in the deepest part of my being.

Mine. He was mine. Not just his blood. *Him*.

I dragged my tongue along his palm, licking all the way up his index finger to the clawed tip. A deep, rumbling noise came from Lochlan's chest and I glanced up to find his eyes hooded, a look akin to hunger in their depths. His attention was fixed on my mouth, and I took advantage of the

opportunity to reach for his other arm. Before my fingers could touch his skin though, before I could press my lips to his healing bite mark and draw the delicious blood from him, he grabbed both my wrists.

At my displeased hiss, he released a warning growl, freeing up a hand to grip the nape of my neck. “Don’t get greedy, *solemae*,” he gruffly said, pinning my body against the boulder with his.

“Don’t boss me around, *prince*,” I snarled in return. My breath hitched as he deliberately pressed his hardness between my legs, suddenly making me eager for *other* things besides blood.

“I like you like this,” he purred, slowly grinding himself against me.

My entire body exploded awake at the friction, and all thoughts of freeing myself flitted away. “Like what?”

“Horny and angry. It’s driving me crazy.”

I couldn’t respond, too angry and *horny* for words. It was moments like this—when he lowered his guard and freely spoke his mind—that I wished things were different between us. That our connection was real and we had a healthy, fulfilling relationship. That the mysterious bond was of our choosing. That he actually *wanted* it. That something far greater than raging hormones drove us together again and again.

In moments like this, I could almost forget all the hurt, lies, and betrayal. Could see past the curse tying us together and believe we shared something special.

Even as he pleased me, heightening my senses in every way possible, my heart broke bit by bit. We were using each other, nothing more. Taking advantage of our situation to satiate our hungry bodies. At the end of the day, this moment was a fleeting shadow, destined to be lost and forgotten. Then why didn't I stop him? Why didn't I shout that I hated him and never wanted to see him again?

His fingers released my neck and gripped my hair. Tightly enough to hurt, as if he was punishing me. Still, I allowed him to roughly, almost desperately rock against me until we were both panting with need. "I missed you," he said, his guttural tone scraping across my sensitive skin.

"Don't say that," I gasped out, even as my stomach fluttered with hope. Stupid, *stupid* hope. "You don't ... you don't mean it."

He gentled his hold on my hair. "I wish I didn't, but I do."

"Jerk," I hissed unconvincingly, too blissed out to put any weight behind my ire. "You're only using me. Then you'll kill me." *Like all the others.*

"Never," he growled, releasing my wrists to wrap my right leg around his lower waist.

I instinctively lifted my other leg and locked both ankles behind him, clinging to his shoulders as the new angle sent even more pleasure rocketing through me. "Liar," I said breathlessly. "What do you want from me?"

"Nothing." His ragged breaths ended in a defeated groan. "*Everything.*"

Startled, I peeled my eyes open to find him already watching me. His expression, so raw and vulnerable, left me shaken and confused. It was like he was asking—no—*begging* me to help him. I silently questioned him, searching for answers in the hidden depths of his gaze, even as he brought me to the brink of ecstasy.

Moments later, I plummeted over the edge into a sea of utmost bliss. My body arched into his as I unabashedly moaned his name. He came a second later, crushing me to him with a muffled shout.

I squeezed my eyes shut and held on to the moment for as long as possible. Listening to our thundering heartbeats gradually slow, I pretended that this was our world and nothing else existed.

We were so effortless like this. So perfectly in sync.

I didn't want it to end. Why couldn't this be *real*?

“Well, well, well, I see you're taking very good care of our girl,” an amused voice suddenly spoke from above. “Looks like I worried for nothing.”

I jerked, emitting a startled yelp, but Lochlan's only reaction was to turn toward the voice with me still wrapped around him.

“About time you showed up,” he calmly acknowledged the newcomer, tilting his head toward the dark form on the ridge above us.

“Had two pesky flies on my tail that I couldn't get rid of,” the male voice drawled, a very *familiar* male voice. “Bummer that I missed all the fun.”

Still clinging to Lochlan like a monkey, my embarrassment over being caught in our current predicament vanished when I realized who'd joined us. "Kade."

He jumped from the ledge, landing agilely beside us despite the lengthy drop. Although his caramel brown hair was muted and his sky blue eyes were a deep red, I'd recognize that mischievous grin anywhere. "Hey, little Kenna."

Tears blurred my vision and I blindly reached for him. Expecting Lochlan to resist, I was surprised when he passed me over without comment, letting Kade fold me into a bear hug.

"Still mad at me?" he said after a moment, propping his chin on my shoulder.

"Yes," I sniffled, yet hugged him harder, simply relieved that we were all together again. I'd never taken the time to breathe in his scent before, but did so now. When a distinct fruit cocktail aroma wafted up my nose, a chuckle rolled out of me.

He pulled back to study my face. When I only laughed harder, he frowned, muttering, "Not the usual response I get when hugging a female. I think you gave her too much blood, Lochie, among other things. She's drunk."

"Kade," Lochlan quietly growled, clearly warning him to shut up.

Fighting off a fierce blush, I steered the conversation to safer waters. "It's just so fitting that your blood smells like fruit. You know, since that's pretty much all you consume."

His mouth fell open. “What? I don’t smell like—Loch, tell her I don’t smell like fruit.”

It was hard to see the shadowy planes of Lochlan’s face, but with my enhanced vision, I caught the slight indent in his left cheek. “More like a fruit and cheese platter,” he said.

“Oh, yeah,” I agreed, taking another whiff. “Must be from all the—”

“Cheesecake,” Lochlan and I said at the same time.

Our eyes met, a look passing between us. Then I snort-laughed and he cracked a small smile. When Kade remained silent, I glanced at him, surprised to find a pleased expression on his face. Before I could puzzle over it, he said, “So, who bit you?”

Lochlan’s smile faded.

“Um ...” I cleared my throat, uncomfortable with how sharp their gazes had become. Suddenly remembering why I was out here in the first place, I blurted, “Noah. *Isla*.”

Kade threw me a quizzical look. “Isla bit you?”

“Who’s Noah?” Lochlan demanded.

“No, I mean, I have to ...” I pulled Noah’s phone from my blazer, cursing when I realized I couldn’t call him. Noting the time on the lit screen, I froze, then whipped my gaze to the sky. My heart started to pound. “Oh, crap.”

“McKenna?”

“I have to hide!” I squeaked, scurrying for cover. I tried flattening myself against the outcropping of rocks, but it

wasn't enough. I whirled toward Lochlan in a panic, stammering, "You said you would help me, so *help* me."

"With what?" he said, his brows drawing together in confusion.

"The *sun!*" I yelled, wildly gesturing at the ever-brightening sky. "I'm a vampire now. I'll freaking *burn.*"

His expression cleared as understanding dawned. When he didn't burst into action to find me cover, though, my panic morphed into dread.

I stumbled back as hurt welled in my chest. "Was this your plan all along? To let nature dispose of me so you wouldn't have to?" I should have known. Aunt Tess had tried to warn me, but I'd let my guard down around him *again*. When would I stop allowing my emotions to overrule common sense?

There was no time to flog myself over it, though, not when I was minutes away from going up in flames. I prepared to jet out of there using my vampire speed, but Lochlan held up a hand, saying, "Wait. Don't run. Let me explain."

Anger shot through me, and I snapped, "You must think I'm stupid. All you are doing is stalling me. Well, I'm done falling for your tricks, Lochlan. *Done*. Isla needs me and I'm not letting anything get in the way of that, including you."

I took off, putting all of my energy into getting away before he could stop me, but I should have known better. He was always one step ahead in this game of ours, outmaneuvering me at every turn. He looped an arm around my waist and swung me around to face him, skidding us to a halt in the snow.

“Let me go, you—”

“I would never, *ever* allow something to hurt you,” he growled, passionately enough that I stilled and blinked up at him. “Yes, I kept my true identity a secret. Yes, I fed you half truths, even avoided your questions entirely. I tested you because I don’t want our outcome to be the same as all the others. To have you fear and hate me. To let betrayal and bloodshed signal our end.

“But there’s something you should know, McKenna. Something that I swear is true. For every breath I take, I will do everything in my power to protect you.”

Overwhelmed and confused, I broke eye contact. Every word he said sounded genuine, but I’d been lied to so much. And no matter how hard I tried not to fall for the lies, I couldn’t seem to stop. Sighing, I muttered, “Because you need me to break the curse?”

When he didn’t reply, the tiny ray of hope that had bloomed inside of me withered. I pulled free of his hold only to have him grab my hand and press it firmly to his pounding chest.

“Because you *mean* something to me,” he ground out, gripping my chin with his other gloved hand so I was forced to meet his fiery gaze. “Because it would kill me if something happened to you.”

Cursing, he jerked back and severed our connection. “Kade, explain to her how Syphon abilities work. I won’t be far.”

My chest ached as he took off, leaving me more confused than ever.

Kade whistled softly, sauntering over to drape an arm across my shoulders. “Wow. That was ...”

“Upsetting? Infuriating? *Stupid?*”

“Hot,” he said. “You two are like tinder and fire.”

I rolled my eyes. “Thanks.”

He lapsed into thoughtful silence for a moment, then, “He’s being honest with you. You really do mean something to him.”

I snorted, crossing my arms. “And what about all the Syphons before me? Did they mean something to him too?”

He stilled. “Not like this. You’re different.”

“Different, how?”

More silence. “Just ... different. ”

Huffing, I shrugged his arm off me and faced him. “Did he kill them?”

He eyed me warily. “Who?”

“The other Syphons.”

His mouth opened and closed. “Uh ... it’s not that simple.”

“Well, he either did or he didn’t. So which is it?”

Darting a hand up, he rubbed the back of his neck. “What did you mean earlier about Isla needing you? Is she okay?”

“Don’t you dare deflect on me, Kade Carmichael,” I said, jabbing a finger at his chest. Groaning, I threw my hands in the air. “Ugh, I can’t do this right now. All I can think about is the sun coming up and burning me to a crisp.”

“You’re doing very well, you know,” he replied nonchalantly. “I expected hysterics, like when you went through your werewolf phase. Maybe some frothing at the mouth.”

“I didn’t ... *Kade*. Can you focus here? Me. Vampire. The *sun*?” I was so going to kick his butt after this.

“Oh, don’t worry. You’re not a real vampire, remember? Weaknesses like the sun and silver don’t affect you.”

“Are you sure? Like one hundred percent certain?”

“Pretty sure.”

“Kade,” I squeaked, flapping my arms in a panic. When he snickered, I whacked his stomach. *Hard*.

He curled forward, grunting, “You’re safe, little Kenna. Loch has done a lot of research on Syphons over the years. You still have human blood running through your veins, which is why the curse didn’t force you into vampire form. You have our strengths, though. Enhanced speed. Healing. That hit actually hurt a little.”

“Good,” I grumbled. “So if I’m not susceptible to your weaknesses, then why did I need to drink blood?”

He straightened with a wince, rubbing his stomach. “You didn’t.”

I gawked at him, feeling like he’d just hit *me*. “What?”

“Your craving for blood is only an instinct. An incredibly strong one, but you have the ability to control your bloodlust and abstain from feeding, unlike newbie vamps. That is,” he added with a wink, “if you really want to.”

“But ...” My mouth uselessly flapped like a fish out of water. “But Lochlan—”

“Eased your suffering?” he interjected with a knowing look. “He doesn’t like seeing you in pain.”

“Well,” I spluttered, not knowing what to do with that piece of information, “*tough*. He shouldn’t have made me drink his blood.”

“Did he really make you? Or did you *want* to drink it?” Kade said with another infuriatingly knowing look.

Argh!

“What does *solemae* mean?” I blurted, desperate to change the subject. “Is it like a nickname or something? Lochlan’s called me that twice now.”

Kade went deathly still. “What did you say?” he said, so quietly that I strained to hear him.

“*Sow-luh-may*,” I enunciated, wrinkling my nose in confusion when he looked two seconds away from keeling over.

“Holy mother of Moses,” he whispered, dropping to his knees in the snow.

“Kade?” I dropped down beside him, still barely able to feel the chill seeping through my tights. At his glazed look, worry tightened my throat. “What happened? Are you okay?”

“I can’t believe it’s true,” he said, blinking rapidly as he swept his gaze over me. “I mean, I suspected. I *hoped*. But I never thought ... Wow.” He slowly raised his gloved hand to touch my cheek, almost reverently.

Uh ...

“Kade?”

“Hmm?”

“You’re creeping me out.”

He released a throaty laugh, then pulled me into a bone-crushing hug. My squeaked protest was muffled against his chest.

“What’s going on here?” a voice said from close by, startling us both.

A growl vibrated through Kade’s chest, but abruptly cut off. “I don’t know, Lochie, you tell *me*,” he replied, standing with me in tow. “I’m not the one keeping secrets.”

I peeled my face off his jacket, shocked to find Lochlan halfway through the change into his human form. I watched, unable to tear my gaze away as the darkness lifted inch by inch, exposing more and more deeply tanned skin. The thorned vine tattoo on his forearm became visible, disappearing beneath his rolled-up shirtsleeve. His eyes were once again the last to change, fading from a rich red to a bold black. They darted between me and Kade, narrowing the longer we stayed pressed together.

“You will explain yourself, drothen,” he said quietly, bending to retrieve his leather jacket, “but we have to get out of here first.”

“Why, what happened?” Kade said, also now in his human form.

Lochlan's attention fixed on me as he replied, "My brothers have locked onto her scent. They're headed this way."

16

KENNA

“How far away are they?” I heard Kade say through the wind whistling past my ears.

“I don’t know. Everett called me. He figured out that we tampered with her trail,” Lochlan replied, glancing back to make sure I was keeping up with their vampire speed. I was struggling, but wouldn’t dare admit to it. He’d ask to carry me again, and I couldn’t allow that. Being near him messed with my senses, and I needed to remain alert.

They still didn’t know why I was out here, and telling them would put Isla in even more danger. I had to come up with a plan, now that waiting for Noah in the woods wasn’t an option. I still had so many questions about Lochlan and his brothers, but they’d have to wait, maybe indefinitely if my rescue attempt ended with me being captured instead.

Lochlan had been right though. I didn’t feel the cold, but my fingers were bright red and trembling uncontrollably. I worried that my toes were in even worse condition. If I didn’t get warm soon, I could lose a digit or two to frostbite.

Which was why I didn’t try to escape. I needed Lochlan and Kade, however briefly. I tried to suppress the guilt that I was using them like so many of the people in my life had been

doing to me lately. Despite the secrets they'd kept from me, they didn't deserve my betrayal. Still, I would do just about anything to get my best friend back. She, more than anyone, didn't deserve to suffer because of me.

In no time, we stumbled upon a secluded road. Lochlan's black Lexus was just off the shoulder, and what I recognized as Troy's car behind it. Lochlan swiftly approached the expensive gray vehicle, a model I didn't recognize. Before I could guess his intentions, he removed his right glove. Extending his black claws, he thrust them into a tire, one after the other until all four were rapidly leaking air.

Still trying to catch my breath after our run, I sputtered, "He's *that* strong?"

"Pssh, that's nothing," Kade said, ushering me toward the Lexus. "He could fold that car in half like a sandwich if we weren't in a hurry."

Okay, then. Knowing that made me curious about my own borrowed strength. Maybe I stood a chance against these rogue vampires who had Isla if I could figure out how to use my abilities some more.

"Where are we going anyway?" I asked, trying to sound only mildly curious.

"Somewhere my brothers won't think to look," Lochlan interjected before Kade could say a word. I bit back a curse. I could weasel information from Kade. Lochlan, not so much.

Waving away Kade's offer of the passenger seat, I slid into the back. Doors slammed and the engine revved a moment later, followed by a blast of warmth as Lochlan cranked up the

heat. We peeled out in a spray of snow and dirt, and I quickly buckled my seatbelt, remembering Lochlan's reckless driving. Instead of commenting on it this time though, I used the opportunity to slip out Noah's phone again.

Black Mamba, I typed into the map app, breathing easier when my search proved fruitful. It wasn't too far away. As long as we stayed in the general area, I could walk there. Maybe even hitchhike. Did I have the ability to thrall someone into giving me a ride?

Holy crap. If so, mind blown.

So busy making plans, I didn't realize how quiet the guys had become until it was too late. Glancing up, I jumped when I found two pairs of eyes staring me down, especially the one reflected in the rearview mirror.

"Who're you texting?" Kade said, with an underlying note of suspicion.

I quickly shut the phone off. "No one."

His eyes narrowed to slits, then he lunged, completely catching me off guard.

I shrieked when he snagged the phone and flicked it on. "Kade Carmichael, give it—"

His eyes rounded and he roared, "McKenna Belmont, why are you searching for a *feeding* den?"

The car swerved sharply, fishtailing on the sleek road. Gasping, I clutched the panic handle for dear life. Even as the car precariously slid sideways, Lochlan turned in his seat to pin me with a look. "Explain," he said, his voice a low growl.

“Watch the road!” I frantically yelled.

Sparing the road a brief glance, he straightened the car, then locked eyes with me again. “Explain *now*, McKenna.”

“What? *No*,” I snarled, feeling like a scolded child. “Just give me the phone back, Kade.”

“No way,” he said, holding the electronic out of reach.

“For fate’s sake,” I shouted, feeling my fangs descend. “Give me the phone, or I’ll ... I’ll *bite* you!”

Neither of them reacted to the threat in the way I’d hoped. Kade made a strangled, choking noise, and Lochlan slammed on the brakes. I yelped as the seatbelt dug into my sternum and thrust me back against the seat. An awful silence followed as the engine idled and the guys looked everywhere but at me.

Tension filled the car, thick enough that I could *smell* it. There was something else too, a scent I’d picked up once before during my time as a werewolf. Lochlan suddenly swore and stomped on the gas. We took off to a chorus of squealing rubber.

Uh, what just happened?

“What did I say?” I said, when no one seemed inclined to speak.

Kade groaned and faced forward. After a moment, he cracked his window open.

“Lochlan?” I pressed, more bewildered than ever when his hands tightened on the wheel.

He didn’t speak for several moments, clenching his jaw so hard that I worried for his teeth. Eventually, he said, “Don’t

threaten to bite a vampire unless you intend to follow through.”

“W-why?” I stammered. “Is it a challenge to see who’s more alpha or something?”

Another strangled noise came from the passenger seat.

“No,” Lochlan replied, leveling me with a heated look in the mirror. “Being bitten is a vampire’s greatest desire. It’s the ultimate pleasurable experience. We crave it more than blood. So it’s gravely insulting to offer it up when you have no intention of actually giving it.”

I was pretty sure my face couldn’t get any hotter. My throat tightened with need all over again, and I quickly dropped my gaze. “Oh.”

“Yeah, oh. Now, are you going to tell us why you’re looking for a feeding den?”

I tucked my hands between my legs for warmth, still unable to look at him. “I don’t know what that is. I was only ...” I squeezed my legs together. “Someone told me to meet them there, but I can’t tell you who. If you let me go without asking questions, then I’ll go with you wherever you want me to, even if it’s to see the vampire k—err, your father. Deal?”

Crap. His father already knew about me and had made a who-knew-what kind of deal with the headmistress. Somehow, I didn’t think Lochlan knew about this deal. Deciding not to complicate matters further, I kept my lips firmly shut.

Not surprisingly, Lochlan growled, “No deal. You’re not going anywhere *near* that den.”

Anger shot through me, and I snapped my fiery gaze to his. “I’m not a child, you know. You can’t just tell me what to do.”

“No, you’re not,” he agreed, but before I could claim my victory, his eyes darkened suggestively. “I’m *very* well aware that you aren’t a child.”

Kade guffawed.

I pinned my angry glare to the back of Kade’s head, fighting off an even fiercer blush. “Whether you want me to or not, I’m going to the Black Mamba. I don’t care how dangerous it is. I *need* to go.”

Lochlan and Kade shared a look, one lasting long enough to make me fidget. If Lochlan wasn’t driving so fast, I’d contemplate jumping from the car before they could stop me. I was *that* desperate.

“Then we’re going with you,” Lochlan abruptly said, shocking my socks off.

“B-but,” I sputtered, floundering with what to say. “You can’t. I have to go alone.”

Two sets of frowns swung my way. *Crap!* I was screwing this up royally.

“Why?” Lochlan demanded, switching his gaze to the mirror again.

I pressed my lips together, refusing to say more. They knew way too much already.

It was Kade who broke the silence, quietly saying, “I don’t think this is about Kenna finding someplace to feed on humans.”

I jerked my head back, wrinkling my nose in disgust and confusion. “What? *No*. Why would—? Is *that* what a feeding den is?” Nausea roiled in my stomach and I swallowed hard.

Kade nodded. “Technically, feeding dens are legal, since humans aren’t brought there against their will. They often double as nightclubs, except that vampires run them and humans leave high as a kite without the aid of pills—and with a little less blood in their veins. The biting part is erased from their memory, but not the pleasurable experience, hence why these places are quite popular.”

My mouth dried. I didn’t know whether to be sick or aroused. I couldn’t help but remember my own experience being bitten, which had been anything but pleasurable. “B-but won’t the humans, you know, *turn* if they’re bitten?”

“That’s a myth. Our fangs are only useful for feeding and injecting venom.”

I gulped. “Venom?”

A wicked smirk twisted Kade’s lips. “It’s what makes you feel pleasure instead of pain. Vampires can decide when and how much to secrete. Receiving too much can cause addiction problems, kind of like being shot up with dopamine.”

Oh. I tried hard not to squirm as warmth infused my cheeks. “But what about the bite mark? Don’t humans notice it?”

I felt the burning intensity of eyes on me then, and switched my attention to the rearview mirror. Sure enough, Lochlan’s gaze was fixed on my neck where I’d been bitten. Self conscious, I tugged my blazer up over the spot. After a

moment, he tore his gaze away and said, “Our blood has healing properties. If you smear a little over the puncture wounds, they’ll close within minutes.”

Wow. Well that explained a lot. Between that and thrall, no wonder vampires were able to remain undetected. I lapsed into silence, trying to digest all this new information and realizing how utterly out of my depth I was.

“You mentioned Isla earlier,” Kade broke into my thoughts after a bit. “Does any of this have to do with her?”

I looked down at my lap again, but not before tears sprung to my eyes. The car slowed as Lochlan clearly detected my distress. *No, no, no*. They couldn’t know about my plans! I panicked and lunged for the door, yanking on the handle. With a *snap*, it came off in my hand. I simply stared at the metal piece, too stunned to react.

“McKenna.”

At the soft use of my name, a lump formed in my throat. Still, I couldn’t tear my gaze away from the broken door handle. The longer I stared at it, the more hopeless I felt. It reminded me too much of myself, of how impossibly fragile and helpless I was in the face of so much power. Who was I to swoop in and rescue Isla? With my luck, I’d get us *both* killed.

“Kade, you drive,” I heard Lochlan say. Movement came from the front seat, but all of my focus was on keeping my tears at bay. So when a hand touched my shoulder, I jumped, whimpering like a small child. Embarrassed, I bit my lip and peeked up at Lochlan. He was now in the back with me, having climbed over the middle console, I guessed.

“I-I’m sorry,” I whispered guiltily, showing him the broken handle.

A deep crease formed between his brows. “That doesn’t matter. What matters is that you’re upset. And when you’re upset, I’m upset. And I can’t properly focus on keeping you safe when I feel this way. So I’m asking you to please tell me what’s bothering you.”

Don’t cry, don’t cry, don’t cry.

His words, filled with so much caring, hit me right in the gut. I struggled not to reach for him, to curl up in his arms and bawl my eyes out. I’d been doing that a lot lately. Crying. Which was really weird for me and disconcerting. But a lot had happened this past week. A lot of bad. Combined with too little sleep, I supposed having a mental breakdown made sense.

“You can’t ...” I started, my voice wobbling like crazy. “You can’t protect me. Not this time. I have to do this alone or ... or people will get hurt.”

His expression didn’t change, but his alarm was clear, like a short blast of cold air to the face. “Is this about Isla?”

I froze, unable to suppress a deer-in-headlights look.

When he added, “Is she in danger?” I cracked completely. My chest heaved, and no amount of willpower could keep a sob from escaping. A second later, I was dragged across the seat by a pair of strong arms. I didn’t pull away, still desperately trying to control the sounds coming from me.

Somehow, we ended up sprawled across the seats, Lochlan’s legs on either side of me while I cried into his chest.

But being held in his arms—feeling the steady rhythm of his heart against my cheek—drained my resistance. *Fates*, I had missed this. I had missed him terribly, no matter how much I wanted to deny it.

When my sobs at last quieted, my body growing lax against his, he again said, “Tell me.”

So I did.

* * *

Warmth cocooned me. I finally felt *safe*.

I had no idea where I was, but didn’t care. Not if it meant I could stay like this a little while longer.

Voices spoke, muffled and distant. I let them roll over me like gently lapping waves, oddly comforted by them. I must have drifted asleep. The last thing I remembered was telling Lochlan that vampires had kidnapped Isla and it was all my fault.

“No,” he had said, running his gloved fingers through my hair, “it’s mine. I should have protected her too.”

He hadn’t pressed me for more details after that, even though I sensed his need to know all that I’d been through during our separation. But I wasn’t ready to talk about how out of place I’d felt among my own kind, how even more scared I was of my own skin. So much of my innocence had been stripped away in the past few days. Not only had I witnessed a second murder, but I was now a killer. It didn’t matter that I’d

been trying to defend myself. I took a life. Snuffed it out with a simple touch.

Maybe the truly cursed one was me.

A door closed and my eyes popped open. When I blinked a strange room into focus, I shot upright. I was on a bed, swaddled in an ugly-patterned coverlet. Beside me was a dingy bedside table with a dusty lamp. Another bed used up the rest of the small space. Yellowed shades covered the only window, and my shoes were on the stained carpet near the door. The room itself had a strong musty smell that wrinkled my nose.

As a tall form pushed off the wall beside the door, I sucked in a startled gasp.

“It’s just me,” Lochlan quietly said, coming to stand in the room’s center. Just the sound of his voice was enough to calm my nerves.

I swallowed, grimacing when my throat spasmed with need. *You’re not a vampire. You don’t need to feed*, I inwardly chanted, remembering how it had helped deter me from transforming into a werewolf. But this was different. I was *scared* of turning into a wolf. I wasn’t scared of drinking blood. Not anymore. Not when I knew how absolutely incredible the taste of Lochlan’s blood was.

The only thing I feared was hurting him, of losing control and taking more than I needed.

Before I could stop it, my gaze flicked to his neck. As I located a thick, pulsing vein along the strong column, my mouth dried, all but begging me to *take*. I squirmed in place,

tearing my eyes from the mouthwatering sight to look everywhere but at him. “Where are we? Where’s Kade?”

“We’re holed up at a cheap motel not far from the nightclub. My brothers won’t think to look for us here. Kade went to buy you some clothes and necessities.”

I glanced down at my soiled top and blazer, then at my grimy hands. I assumed the rest of me looked just as bad, if not worse. My face and neck were stiff with dried blood. “How long was I asleep?”

“Only an hour. You should sleep more while you can. I doubt we’ll be getting any tonight.”

I stopped breathing. “So you’re letting me go to the club?”

He crossed his arms over his chest. “Against my better judgement, yes.”

Shocked yet still skeptical, I asked, “Why?”

“Because Isla means something to you.”

My heart gave a tiny flutter at that unexpected response. He would really do this for me? The vampire prince who’d spent a century hunting witches was letting me save my best friend?

“But what about your duties? What about breaking the curse?”

“It’ll keep for a few more days,” he simply replied.

This was too good to be true. Lochlan was never this agreeable. My eyes narrowed in suspicion. “What’s the catch?”

“Kade and I are going in with you, and you’ll follow our plan exactly.”

“But I already told you why you can’t,” I argued, feeling my blood pressure rise. He was so infuriatingly *stubborn*. “If they detect your presence, they’ll kill Isla.”

“Not if we kill them first.”

I threw my hands in the air. “How? We don’t even know who they are or what they *want*.”

His eyes darkened. “Oh, I know exactly what they want. To take you out of the equation so the curse can become permanent.”

I stilled. “What? Why would ... But they’re *vampires*.”

“Who are tired of living in the shadows, hiding who they really are. They’re Feltore. They live a half life already, unable to go out during the daytime because of the sun. Being stuck in their true forms for an eternity isn’t a concern, not if they can have control of the night.”

A chill shook me from head to toe. “But your secret would be exposed. You wouldn’t be able to hide who you are from humans anymore.”

“Which is exactly what they want. To expose us all so that we have no choice but to join their revolution. They *want* a war, and they plan for us to win. If that happens, the entire human race will be under vampire rule.”

Holy. Freaking. Crap.

This was so much bigger, so much more *dangerous* than I could have ever imagined. If vampires managed to dominate the world, nothing would stop them from making humans their slaves. I rubbed my pounding temples, wholly exhausted. My

brain wasn't currently capable of processing the magnitude of this information.

"Is there a bathroom?" I asked weakly.

He gestured to the right, silently watching as I extricated myself from the blanket cocoon. Incapable of speech, I slid past him and into the bathroom without comment, carefully closing the door. I leaned against it for a minute, blankly staring at the room's flickering light fixture.

Summoning a tiny amount of nerve, I shuffled forward to stand in front of the mirror. When I looked up and saw my haggard reflection, my whole body began to tremble. There was blood everywhere, the thickest congealing in the crook of my neck. No wonder Lochlan was acting so overprotective. I looked half dead.

Reaching up, I peeled back one side of my blazer, revealing the spot where I'd been bitten. Twin puncture marks greeted me. Hot and cold currents flashed through me, and I struggled not to be sick. I gingerly touched the spot with shaky fingers, surprised to discover that it no longer hurt. Had my temporary abilities allowed the bite to heal already? Or maybe drinking Lochlan's blood had done the trick.

Even so, I could still remember the feeling of fangs sinking deep into my flesh, a memory I wasn't soon to forget. If ever.

A sudden, feverish need to be *clean* surged through me. I yanked on my blazer, desperate to remove it. To remove *anything* that was covered in blood. The material caught and ripped, but I was too incensed to slow down. The destroyed blazer was dangling off one arm when I heard a sound. I

whirled toward the door, my heart skipping several beats when I found Lochlan framing the doorway.

He silently took in the scene, resting his gaze on my neck more than once. When I noticeably flinched each time, his expression darkened in response. After a moment more, he stepped forward, his presence completely filling the cramped space. My heart pounded harder when he reached behind him and firmly shut the door.

Not knowing what he wanted, my mind went straight to thoughts of his blood. Would he offer to feed me again? Did I have the strength to say no this time? But he didn't remove his jacket or roll up his shirtsleeve. Instead, he reached for my ruined blazer and gently tugged it off.

Nerves shot through me, and I gulped, barely able to hold still. When his gloved fingers lightly gripped the hem of my shirt, butterflies erupted in my stomach. He watched me intently, as if asking for my permission. Reading some sort of consent in my eyes, he slowly lifted my shirt. I let him, raising my arms so that he could slip it off, leaving me exposed in a black bra.

He'd seen me like this before, but the way his gaze dipped, taking in every inch of bare skin as if seeing me for the very first time ... I couldn't breathe. His fingers fell to the side zipper of my skirt next, working it free with ease. His touch was careful, not in the least bit sexual. But it didn't matter. An ache still pulsed between my legs, growing infinitely stronger as he slid the skirt down my legs. It pooled on the floor, along with my blazer and shirt.

Just when I thought he would go for my tights next, he reached around me and turned on the shower. The plumbing moaned and creaked for several seconds, but eventually spit out a stream of water.

Lochlan backed up a step, his voice low and rough as he said, “Go ahead and clean up. I’ll stand watch outside. Nothing will get through this door.”

Except that he made no move to leave, as if doing so was beyond his ability. Good. Because as his eyes swept over me once more, a look of pure want simmering in their dark depths, the last thing I wanted was for him to leave.

My heart threatened to jump out of my chest when I brazenly decided to erase the space between us. Every nerve ending was on fire, every hair on my body raised with anticipation. I slowly reached for his hand, giving him time to pull back. When he didn’t, I grasped it, wishing more than ever that our skin could touch. That leather and scraps of clothing didn’t have to stand in our way. But that didn’t stop me from placing his hand on my hip, wordlessly asking him to finish undressing me.

His chest heaved, eyes brightening to a wine red. For a second, he did nothing, shock written across his face. Then he released a ragged breath and dug his fingers into my hip, pulling me closer. While the water sprayed in the background, he slowly slipped a finger into the waistband of my tights and dragged the material down. My poor heart beat out of control as he lifted one leg, then the other, sliding the tights free.

When he was finished, my entire body throbbed with need.

Keep going, I silently begged, looking up at him through my lashes. *There's more clothing.*

His expression grew pained. He squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head. "I can't, McKenna," he said hoarsely. "If I go any further, I won't be able to stop."

But I don't want you to, I ached to reply. *I want you to numb my pain with pleasure. I want you to burn the filth away, the disease now trapped beneath my skin. I want you to bite me, to feed from me, to bring me high as a kite so I can't remember the nightmares I've lived through.*

He released a strangled groan, opening his eyes to once again let me see that rare show of vulnerability. *Don't tempt me*, he seemed to plead.

I didn't press him, but I didn't back away either. After another moment, he came to a decision. Ever so slowly, he bent and scooped me into his arms, as if going any faster would make him lose control. He carried me the short distance to the shower, pulling the curtain back and carefully setting me inside.

"I'll be right outside the door," he said in soothing tones when my eyes widened as he stepped back. "I won't leave you alone. Ever again."

I watched him until the door closed, struggling with the need to go after him. After a few moments though, I removed the last of my clothing and stepped under the spray. As the blood and grime of the last several hours slid down the drain, I clung to Lochlan's final words like a lifeline.

I won't leave you alone. Ever again.

17

KENNA

“She didn’t come alone. Drain the girl,” I heard one of my captors say.

“With pleasure,” said the other, turning with a wicked grin.

“No, please,” I said, struggling against my restraints.

But he flashed toward me, all darkness and red eyes and fangs.

The bite seared through my skin and flesh.

I threw my head back and screamed.

“No!” I wailed, thrashing against the hands that held me captive. I yanked an arm free and blindly hit something. A growl cleaved the air. In seconds, I was trussed up tighter than a Thanksgiving turkey.

“McKenna,” Lochlan’s voice boomed, his hot breath striking the back of my neck. “Wake up.”

My eyes immediately snapped open. Panting, I wildly looked about, expecting the vampire to rush me at any moment. “Where is he?”

“Who?”

“The man. The vampire. He was right here.” A shiver trembled through me, and I renewed my thrashing. “I can ... I can still feel it. The bite. The *pain*.”

The wall of muscle at my back stiffened, but the arms didn't let me go. “It was only a dream, McKenna. I'll never let that happen to you again. *Ever*.”

“But it wasn't *me*,” I cried. “It was her. Isla. They drained her, Lochlan. All because I didn't go alone. I never should have told you. I just felt so helpless, and ... fates, I'm so *stupid*.”

The dream had been so vivid and real, like a premonition. My subconscious had a knack for playing out my worst fears while I slept, but this one hit me extra hard.

“You're not stupid,” Lochlan said, finally letting go. I rolled onto my back and he met me halfway, rising onto his elbows to hover above me. Watery light from the window bathed the handsome planes of his face, now tight with concern. And *close*. Way too close, considering how hyper-charged the tension between us had been all morning.

Who knew how long I'd slept this time, but Kade *still* hadn't returned. He was either buying me a whole store's worth of clothing, or was up to his old “force Loch and Kenna together” tricks. His absence was keenly felt, especially after I'd exited the shower earlier and found Lochlan's shirt in place of my soiled clothing. Wearing his shirt, constantly breathing in his scent, was making it *really* hard not to bite him.

“Stupid would be walking into a dangerous situation without backup,” Lochlan added, breaking into my thoughts.

Realizing my gaze had fixed on his neck again, I focused on his sculpted bare chest instead, so close that I could see every last detail of his hauntingly beautiful rose tattoo. It was wholly intact, no sign of a bullet having been under the surface days before.

“Kind of like how being shirtless next to a girl with lethal skin is stupid?” *Especially since the girl wants to run her hands over your chest right this very moment and make certain for herself that the bullet is truly gone.*

He stared at me without expression. Then, “Yes, kind of like that.”

With a small snort, I relaxed against the lumpy mattress, oddly comforted by his dry humor. Despite my words, he remained where he was, absentmindedly fingering a strand of my hair. My eyes widened, and I tensed all over again. “You’re not wearing your gloves.”

“No. I’m not,” he affirmed, coiling my hair around his finger like it was totally fine and normal. Like *we* were fine and normal. “I’m sorry your aunt took you from your home.”

At the unexpected, softly spoken words, I bit my lip to keep it from trembling. “I’m sorry you got shot.”

His throat bobbed, and he responded huskily, “I’m sorry I didn’t come sooner. That I didn’t protect you from being bitten.”

Warmth filled my bones. “I’m sorry that your brothers are such dicks.”

He barked a surprised laugh. I blinked, trying to remember if I’d ever heard him laugh before. The sound was deep and

rich, deliciously vibrating through my chest. I wanted him to do it again. “They weren’t always this way,” he said, his smile slipping. “Neither was I.”

I immediately wanted to assure him that he was nothing like his brothers, but paused, remembering the first line of the prophecy.

Three dark princes, monsters were they.

I had a feeling “monster” wasn’t simply referring to their vampirism. And Headmistress Mayweather had called them the Demonic Trinity. Lochlan was shrouded in shadows, even while in his human form. I knew so little about his past.

“Tell me?” I whispered, daring to hope that maybe, just maybe, he’d open himself up to me.

His expression shuttered and he looked away, slowly unwinding my hair from his finger. “You need rest, McKenna. Sleep. I’m not going anywhere.”

Sighing, I dropped the subject. For now. But I wouldn’t stop trying to find out more about him. Wouldn’t stop until I knew everything.

“They won’t drain Isla,” he said when I’d begun to drift asleep again, content to let him play with my hair. “We won’t go in without a solid plan. By the time they figure out you’re not alone, we’ll have already found her.”

I slowly blinked up at him, fighting my battle with sleep. “You have to let me be there, no matter how dangerous. Promise me, Lochlan. Promise that you’ll let me save my best friend.”

His jaw tightened. I could sense how hard this was for him. Knew more than ever why protecting me was so important. The vampire race was divided, each side growing more desperate as time ran out. And whether I wanted to be or not, I was stuck in the middle of it. Putting myself in danger was beyond reckless and stupid, but it was *Isla*. Sweet, caring, fun-loving *Isla*. I couldn't live with myself if I just let her die.

And Lochlan must have known that, must have set aside his own needs for mine. Because he quietly said, "I promise."

I released another sigh, this one filled with all the gratefulness I felt. "Thank you," I whispered, wholeheartedly meaning the words. Right before sleep pulled me under again, I mumbled, "Lochlan?"

"Yes?"

"I missed you too."

* * *

"What the freaking crap, Kade?" I grumbled, tugging on the impossibly short hem of my new clubbing dress. Although "dress" was an exaggeration for the skintight *thing* I was now wearing. The red number was completely backless, barely covering my butt. Side cutouts showed off my ribs to the hip, and the thin spaghetti straps keeping my boobs from popping free of the low top were one thread away from snapping.

Then there were the heels. *Heels*. Gold stilettos with diamond-studded ankle straps. How was I supposed to rescue *Isla* in these?

He'd also bought me a small mountain of expensive makeup and hair products, along with several jewelry pieces. I'd never been doted on like this before, and didn't quite know how to feel. I appreciated the under-eye coverup more than he could know, though.

Someone knocked on the bathroom door. "You okay in there?" Kade hollered. "You've been in there for an hour."

Which meant there was less than an hour to go until midnight. Nervous butterflies cartwheeled through my stomach. I focused on my breathing. In and out, in and out. I wouldn't faint and ruin all of our plans. Isla needed me.

"Yeah," I replied, taking one last look at my reflection. I barely recognized myself. False lashes and smokey eyeshadow made my gray irises appear extra silvery bright. My lipstick was blood red, a shade I'd never worn before. Under the circumstances though, the color fit. I'd left my thick hair down but added a few wavy curls, feeling a bit self-conscious about exposing so much of my back. The only jewelry I wore was gold hoop earrings and a few gold wrist bangles, leaving my neck completely bare.

An intentional move, one that I'd made on my own. I had every intention of following the plan we'd discussed earlier this evening, but if things went sideways, I'd be ready.

Inhaling one last breath, I turned for the door. When I opened it, Kade was there, leaning against the wall. Even though he'd transitioned into his vampire form for the night, I could still clearly see the shock on his face when he saw me. Releasing a low whistle, he inspected me from top to bottom before drawling, "That should be illegal on so many levels."

Willing myself not to blush and epically failing, I muttered, “No thanks to *you*.”

“Don’t you mean *all* thanks to me? Either way, you’re welcome,” he said with a wink. “Every male eyeball will be on you. Female too, for that matter.”

“Kade,” Lochlan warned from somewhere in the room.

“You’re incorrigible,” I groused at Kade’s snickered response, his teasing only heightening my nerves. The whole point of this outfit was to draw attention to myself, to distract, but was it *that* scandalous? Only one way to find out. Gathering the last of my frayed nerves, I stepped around the corner and into the room.

Lochlan’s back was to me, his attention on the view outside the dirty window. But at the sound of my approach, he turned toward me. When I felt his gaze alight on my body, the breath stuttered out of me. I held perfectly still, letting him look his fill.

After only a few seconds though, he tore his gaze away. “Good. Let’s go,” he said in clipped tones, then stormed out the door.

I gawked at the spot where he’d been, beyond flustered and confused. Normally, when my legs were exposed like this, he couldn’t take his eyes off them. Before doubt and insecurity could creep in, Kade chuckled, coming up behind me to drape a fluffy faux fur wrap over my shoulders.

“He’s angry. *Really* angry. Which means that I did my job well.”

I frowned up at his smug face, accepting the gold clutch he handed me. “What does that even mean?”

“It means, my sweet innocent Kenna, that he thinks you look mind-blowingly hot but isn’t happy that everyone’s going to be drooling over you.”

Oh.

That realization pleased me more than I wanted to admit. But if he felt that way, then how would he react once we were inside the club? “What should I do?”

“Nothing,” Kade replied with a devilish smirk, ushering me toward the exit. “Absolutely nothing.”

Lochlan’s anger didn’t lessen on the car ride over. He wouldn’t even look at me in the rearview mirror. His negative emotions weaseled their way under my skin, ratcheting up my anxiety. I had to pinch my thigh several times. By the time we arrived at our destination, I was sporting a massive bruise from accidentally using my enhanced strength.

When the ignition died, Kade turned in his seat, holding something out to me. “Here. Drink this. You’ll need it.”

I accepted the glass vial, stilling when I saw its contents. “Is this blood?”

“Yes. Even though you have a lot more control than an actual vampire, you’ll have a hard time concentrating once you’re inside the feeding den. The smell of humans and blood will be overwhelming.”

My mouth dried, but I quickly swallowed, shoving down the rising cravings. “What about you two?” I asked, more nervous than ever about entering this den.

“We’ve already prepared ourselves,” Kade said, the simple answer only making me wonder how and where they got their blood. Did they ever feed directly from humans?

The thought soured my stomach, and I thrust the vial back at him. “Thanks, but I’ll make do without it.”

“Drink the blood, McKenna,” Lochlan suddenly spoke up, stiff as a statue in the driver’s seat.

My eyes narrowed on the back of his head. “No. I don’t need it.”

“Yes, you do. Don’t be stubborn,” he quietly growled.

“Why don’t you say that to my face?” I growled back, matching his heated temper.

He had our doors open in a flash, pulling me out of the car and onto my feet before I could dig in my heels. “Like *this*?” he hissed, softening the harsh words by cradling my face in his gloved hands. Staring into his blazing red eyes, I could sense the desperation, the *fear* he was trying so hard to hide behind a wall of anger. As he unconsciously swept his thumbs across my cheeks, my own anger fizzled out.

“Don’t worry about me,” I tried to reassure him, hoping that I’d read him right. “I’ll be okay.”

He stared at me for a long moment, the fire in his eyes slowly dimming. Then, with a sigh, he folded me into his arms. Not caring if my makeup smudged, I pressed my face to his shoulder, securing my arms around his waist. As the tension and anxiety gradually ebbed from us both, he confessed, “I can’t stop myself from worrying about you.”

Only because you still need me to stop a war from starting,
I automatically thought.

But the longer he held me, the more I doubted that was true. Not entirely, anyway. Was our mysterious bond producing these feelings? I'd been too afraid to mention it, certain that he'd ask me to reject it again. Reject *him*. But the moment we'd been reunited, the moment I'd seen and felt him, rejecting our connection had been the furthest thing from my mind.

Fates above, I actually *cared* about this insufferably bossy, secretive, stubborn man. And I didn't think the bond had anything to do with it.

A throat cleared. "As much as I hate to interrupt this touching moment, we still have a frightened girl in there who needs our help." At Kade's words, we broke apart, albeit reluctantly. Kade placed the gold clutch in my hands again, eyeing me sternly. "The vial's in there if the cravings become too strong. Don't be a hero, little Kenna. Not with this. You'll lose."

My lips tightened, but I only nodded.

Satisfied, he joined Lochlan at the car's open trunk. Curious what they were doing, I peeked inside.

"Holy crap, what's all this?" I blurted, my eyes rounding at the certifiable arsenal hidden in Lochlan's car.

"You think we'd sneak into a hostile vampire nest unarmed?" Kade said, tucking several throwing knives into the folds of his black clothing.

"But ... but it's all *silver*. You could get hurt."

Kade paused to glance back at me. He would have pulled off the sympathetic look, if it weren't for the teasing twinkle in his eye. "We'll be fine, Kenna. Don't worry about us."

I rolled my eyes, not in the least bit reassured.

Lochlan turned from strapping a gun harness across his chest to eye me up and down. "You should carry something too."

I spread my arms wide and mockingly twirled around. "Where? There aren't many places to hide things in this dress. I'm not even wearing a bra."

Ah crap, I should *not* have said that. As soon as I faced him again, his gaze went straight to my breasts. And one glimpse told me what I already knew: my nipples were hard and raised, straining against the thin red material. Seeing the heat build in his eyes, I gathered the fur wrap around me, covering my chest.

Kade reached around Lochlan and slapped a dagger into his gloved palm. "Her purse, my friend. There's no way that dress is hiding anything."

For once, Lochlan didn't chastise him for the innuendo. He silently reached for my clutch instead, placing the dagger inside, along with a card he pulled from his pocket. "Your fake ID. Getting inside shouldn't be a problem. They'll have a thrall human at the front entrance for appearances, and these places never have security cameras. That way, the police won't have physical evidence of what goes on inside. All you have to do is stay away from the shadowed alcoves along the perimeter once you're in."

“Is that where they feed on humans without being seen?”

“Yes.”

“Among other things,” Kade muttered.

“Kade,” Lochlan sharply warned, but it was too late. My curiosity was piqued.

“Like what?”

“You don’t need to—”

“Sex,” Kade baldly replied, chuckling when Lochlan threw him an annoyed look. “She’s going to smell it, Loch. Better to warn her now so she can be prepared.”

“*Smell* it?” I squeaked, desperately wishing I hadn’t asked. What kind of nightclub *was* this?

He shrugged unapologetically. “Even humans can smell sex. But with your heightened vampire senses, it’ll be unmistakable.”

“But ... why would humans allow it?” I said, wholly uncomfortable with this conversation but unable to keep my mouth shut. A terrible thought came to me then, and I had to swallow the bile rising up my throat. “Fates, are they *thrilled* into submission?”

That was wrong. *So wrong.*

Lochlan intervened then, saying, “I won’t deny that it sometimes happens, but most feeding dens follow the law for fear of being shut down. They have a reputation among human circles though. Most go in expecting to experience a night of uninhibited pleasure. To keep what goes on a secret, they abide by the old saying ‘What happens here, stays here.’”

Freaking fates, this was *so* out of my comfort zone. A dozen more questions pressed on my windpipe, but our time was up. This conversation wasn't over though. I was dying to know if and when Lochlan had visited these dens himself. Just the thought of it boiled my blood, especially when I envisioned him and a random female passionately coiled around each other in a dark corner.

Fingers encased in leather grasped my chin, startling me back to reality. I blinked up at Lochlan's worried frown. "What were you thinking just now?" he quietly asked, searching my face.

"Nothing," I said, quickly pulling away. "Let's just go. It's almost midnight."

I swiveled on my heel and began walking at a fast clip. We'd chosen to park on a quiet street a block away in case any vampires were out canvassing the area. Once we hit the main road, I would walk alone, with Lochlan and Kade watching from the shadows.

The trunk slammed shut, but I didn't check to see if they followed. I could feel them both with my heightened senses, coming up on either side of me.

"Better put this in," Kade said, dropping a small wireless earpiece onto my palm. "We'll all be able to hear and speak to each other through these. Just tap on the earpiece to talk."

I nodded and fitted the communicator into my ear, suddenly too nervous to speak. When the time came for us to part ways, my heart was beating faster than a snare drum.

“Hold up,” Lochlan abruptly said, grasping my arm. “Kade, go on ahead and scout the area. McKenna and I need a minute.”

No, Kade, don't leave! I wanted to cry out. He was our buffer when things got too intense, and something told me that Lochlan planned to pry open a can of worms the moment Kade left.

When Kade turned toward me, I silently begged him to stay. Instead, he gave my shoulder a comforting squeeze and whispered, “No heroics, Kenna. Just stay in the crowd and we'll do the rest.”

I managed a nod and weak smile as he backed away. Before disappearing from sight, he and Lochlan exchanged a look. A million words were spoken in that single glance, a special language that I was only just beginning to understand. When Kade was gone, my nervous energy increased tenfold.

“McKenna.”

Gah! I felt myself soften, giving in to him when he said my name like that. Every. Single. Time.

“Something's upsetting you again and I want to know what it is.” He turned me to face him but I refused to meet his probing gaze.

“I have nothing to say.”

He paused, as if trying to read my emotions. I willed my mind to go blank. A sigh fled his nose. “We're not leaving this spot until you tell me.”

“What?” My eyes flew up to his. “You can't do that. You *wouldn't*. We don't have time for this right now. This might be

our only chance to rescue Isla.”

“Then tell me and we’ll be on our way. But I’m not letting you walk into a dangerous situation if you’re not completely focused.”

“I *am* focused,” I snapped, unable to keep the panic from my voice.

He studied me and I knew, just knew, that he was seeing far more than I wanted him to. “If it were up to me,” he said slowly, “you’d be safely locked inside our motel room until this is over. But I know you wouldn’t allow that. You’d find a way to help, no doubt putting yourself at great risk in the process. You’re loyal and care deeply for your friends, two traits that I respect. Which is the *only* reason why I’m allowing you to be a part of this rescue mission.

“But if something happens to you,” he continued, his voice lowering an octave, “there’s no telling what I’ll do. I could put us *all* at risk, and I know you don’t want that. So I’m asking one last time—please talk to me, McKenna.”

I stared, unblinking. Wow. I hadn’t expected him to be so open with me. I was stunned. Shaken, even. That he was beginning to understand me. That he respected who I was. That he put aside his own agenda to accommodate mine. And it was enough. Enough for me to be open in return. Enough for me to say, “I’m worried that you’ve been to feeding dens before. That you feed on humans this way, and then have ...” Fates, I couldn’t say it out loud.

“Have sex with them?” Lochlan finished for me.

Straightening my spine, I nodded. I'd never felt more awkward and vulnerable than I did in this moment, but I somehow managed to hold eye contact, needing to see his reaction. To know if he'd tell me the truth or not.

Shadows curled around the edges of his features, as if he wished to hide from the probing questions. But before dread could build in my gut, he said, "Back when I hadn't yet reached my age of maturity, Everett took me and Troy to a feeding den against our father's wishes. He told us the experience was a rite of passage for all vampires, and that we'd never mature unless we completed it. Of course, Troy and I believed everything our big brother said back then and readily went, but the day ended in disaster. It was the first and last time I've ever been to a den."

I held my breath, waiting for him to continue, but he lapsed into silence. "So you've never ... fed from someone there?"
Had sex with them?

"No," was all he said.

I should have felt nothing but relief then. Instead, disappointment settled over me. There was so much he wasn't saying. An entire lifetime of stories was locked up inside of him, and he didn't seem eager to share them with me. "Oh," I pathetically replied, more discontent than ever.

He caught my chin, urging me to look at him. "My past is dark, McKenna. I wish to protect you from it. I've done things, and things have been done to me. Terrible things. I've tried my best to forget them. No good will come from remembering such horrors. Knowing will only upset you further."

But I want to know, I desperately wanted to say. Please. Please, let me in. I want to know everything about you.

Because the more I knew, the closer I felt to him, and I couldn't seem to get close enough. He probably thought I'd hate him all over again if I knew the truth. Run away, even. But that was the thing. I'd never actually hated him. And despite the countless secrets and heartbreaking revelations I'd learned over the past couple of months, I had no desire to leave him. The mere thought drove icy shards of panic through my chest.

But before I could say anything, Kade's voice rang through my ear. "Twenty minutes until midnight. You two coming?"

Lochlan tapped his earpiece, responding, "Heading your way now."

18

KENNA

The moment I joined the line waiting outside Black Mamba, I knew I was in trouble.

There was *blood*.

Everywhere.

Rich and warm, flowing like mini rivers inside the bodies surrounding me. Each person had their own unique scent, some appealing to me more than others. The voluptuous redhead directly in front of me held the most appeal though. Her blood carried the spicy tang of apple cider. Saliva pooled in my mouth as I wondered if she tasted exactly how she smelled.

“What’s your status, little Kenna?” Kade’s voice suddenly came through my earpiece, startling me out of my growing fixation.

Using my hair as a curtain, I pressed on my earpiece and rasped, “Almost in. Only a few people ahead of me.”

Lochlan’s voice abruptly came on the line. “What’s wrong?”

I cast a quick glance around me, hoping to catch a glimpse of him. Situated just south of Quebec City, the area wasn’t

exactly a bustling metropolis. There were more people here than buildings. Still, he and Kade continued to avoid detection with ease, watching me from the shadows. The Black Mamba was several stories high, faced in concrete panels and practically windowless. I had no idea how they were going to follow me once I got inside.

“McKenna?”

I pursed my lips, but finally admitted, “The blood. It’s really strong.”

A pause. “How bad?”

Bad enough that my upper gums were on fire and my throat was burning. Bad enough that I was dreaming of sinking my *fangs* into someone’s neck.

“I can handle it,” was all I said, because I would. A little bloodlust wasn’t going to stand between me and my best friend.

They both went radio silent as my turn came to go in. The big muscly dude at the double doors barely glanced at my ID card, instead eyeing me up and down. Apparently passing inspection, I was ushered in without comment. There was no time for relief though. The moment I stepped through the doors, music blasted my eardrums.

Not fast-paced and fun, but deep and erotic. It pulsed and moved like a living, writhing snake, twining around my body with seductive intent. I passed through a dark, narrow hall without incident, coming out at the top of a staircase. And there, I froze, not in the least bit prepared for the scene before me.

“McKenna. Report.”

I continued to stare, oblivious to how exposed I was. The open space below was huge, the high walls and ceilings painted black. In the center was a dance floor lowly lit with pulsing red lights. Scantily-clad bodies were tightly crammed into the space, swaying and grinding against each other. A colorfully-lit bar took up the opposite wall, along with several red and white sofas.

But it was the shadowed niches along the rest of the room’s perimeter that grabbed my attention. With my enhanced night vision, I could make out the shape of *bodies* behind the curtained-off alcoves. Sensually moving. To a dance I wish I could unsee.

My face burned with humiliation and I tore my eyes away. But I made the worst mistake then. I gasped for breath. And sucked in an overpowering concoction, one that Kade had warned me about. Blood and sex. He’d been right. The smell was unmistakable. What he hadn’t mentioned was how intoxicating it would be. I quickly stopped breathing, but it was too late.

“McKenna.”

Oh fates, oh fates, oh fates.

“Yeah,” I replied weakly, my voice trembling. “I’m in.”

“Are you okay?”

No. “I’m fine.”

“Get into the open where the traffic is thickest as soon as you can. I’ll have eyes on you in a moment.”

I nodded, too shaken to speak. Grabbing the black iron railing that would lead me to relative safety, I willed my wobbly legs to move. *One step. Two. Three steps. Four. Good. Just keep moving. You can do this.*

But when I hit the bottom, the smells invading my senses nearly drove me to my knees. Sweat beaded my forehead and slid down my spine as I carefully picked my way forward, darting quick glances at the writhing shadows. For each pair, there was at least one vampire. A few groupings contained three or more though. I tried extra hard not to stare at those. To a human's eyes, the shapes would be undetectable. It was too dark for them to see the predators they were so eagerly consorting with.

As I moved, the music swelled, enticing me to join the experience. Over the thumping bass, I could pick out scandalous noises. My ears, along with my face, now burned as I caught the occasional moan and cry of pleasure.

Just a few more feet. A few feet and you'll be safe among the humans.

Yeah, the humans that I wanted to *eat!*

I can't do this, I can't do this. Yes, you can. You have to! Stay strong for Isla.

But the closer I got to my destination, the harder it became to ignore my thirst. Bodies were everywhere. So delicious-smelling and ripe for the taking. If I could just have a taste, just *one*, I could concentrate on my role as the distraction. Suddenly remembering the vial in my clutch, I slowed to retrieve it. I didn't care how drinking it would make me look. I needed it. *Now.*

Struggling to undo the bag's clasp, I didn't feel the presence at my back until a hand squeezed my shoulder. "You look like you need a fix, pretty thing," a male voice purred in my ear. "Why don't you come with me and I'll give you a night to remember?"

I tore away from him, so fast that I left my fur wrap in his clutches. "N-no, thanks," I stuttered, trying to pass off my nerves as first-time jitters. I snuck a backward glance at him, afraid that he'd figured out who I was. But he was already gone. Trying not to panic, I stumbled toward the dance floor and plunged into the fray.

Moments later, I almost burst into tears at the sound of Lochlan's voice in my ear. "We're in. I have eyes on you. Kade's going after Isla."

Relief washed over me, followed by a fresh wave of anxiety. "I still think you should go after Isla too. I'm safe here in the crowd."

"We've been over this, McKenna. Kade will communicate if he needs backup."

"But—"

"I'm not leaving you alone, remember? There's no way I'm letting you get kidnapped. I can't go through that again."

My heart expanded at his words, even as I silently cursed him for his stubbornness. Rescuing Isla was more important to me than my current safety, but I couldn't fault him for being protective. I knew how high the stakes were now.

But as the minutes ticked by and nothing happened, my worry grew. Not only for my best friend, but for the terrible

thirst ravaging my body. The longer I stayed pressed against the multitude of bodies oozing sweat and pheromones, the hazier my mind became.

As I struggled to control myself, a guy brazenly gyrated against my backside. I caught a whiff of his arousal and my senses went on high alert. Unconsciously, I leaned backward, seeking the scent of his blood. Seeing it as an invitation, he slid a hand over my lower stomach, pressing me against his rock hard boner.

“McKenna,” Lochlan’s dangerously low voice rumbled in my ear. “Remove that guy’s filthy hands from your body before I do.”

But I didn’t. I wanted to, desperately so, but my need for blood had completely fogged my brain. I reached back and grasped the nape of the guy’s neck. He readily bent, breathing hotly in my ear. So close. Just a few more inches and my mouth would align with the pulsing artery in his neck. As my fangs began their painful descent, his groping fingers slid down my body and under my dress’s short hem.

I let him, instinctively knowing that his distracted state would allow me to more easily make *my* move.

“Kenna!” Lochlan barked, loud enough that some of the fog lifted.

With shaky fingers, I pressed on my earpiece. “Help,” was all I could manage. I didn’t want this. I didn’t want this! A strange guy was inches away from touching between my legs and I was even closer to biting into his flesh. No part of me wanted this outcome, but I couldn’t seem to stop.

“Come to me,” Lochlan commanded.

“I can’t,” I whimpered. “The need is too strong.”

“Come to me *now*, solemae,” he growled, “before I charge in there and rip that guy’s throat out. His death will be on *your* hands.”

The words instantly slapped some sense into me. I weakly struggled to pull away, but the guy held onto me. With a desperate burst of strength, I ripped free. Still woozy with unmet need, I drunkenly staggered through the crowd.

“To your left,” Lochlan said. “Northwest corner.”

In too much pain to reply, I wordlessly followed his instructions, relying on him to get me there safely.

“That’s it. You’re doing good, McKenna. Keep coming.”

I felt him then. The familiar cold awareness skating up my spine that meant his shadows were near. I plunged into the darkness, desperate to see him, to feel him, to breathe him in. Out of nowhere, a gloved hand snaked out and pulled me behind a black curtain.

Before I could scream, Lochlan murmured, “It’s just me.” Bright red eyes peered down at me from a face completely obscured by thick shadows.

At the familiar sight, all the fear and tension drained out of me. “I-I should have listened to you earlier about the blood. I’m sorry.”

“You couldn’t have known,” he replied, taking the clutch from my hand and easily undoing the clasp. “We’re beside the

bathrooms. If anyone's spotted you yet, let's hope they think you went in there."

I nodded, watching as he deftly removed the vial of blood. "Any word from Kade?"

"No. But his silence is a good sign. He's probably caught Isla's scent and gone dark."

The second he uncorked the vial, my throat painfully closed. Trembling violently, I reached for it, only for Lochlan to block the attempt. Overcome with need, I bared my fangs at him and hissed.

He was suddenly behind me, trapping me between his arms. "Let me give you what you need," he breathed against the shell of my ear, causing me to shiver.

I stilled as he lifted the vial, carefully tilting it to my lips. Surrendering, I parted my mouth and anxiously waited for the first drop of blood to touch my tongue. When it did, I shuddered against him, my eyes rolling back in blissful relief. Right away, I knew the blood wasn't his—a fact that greatly disappointed me—but it slid wonderfully down my throat all the same.

As I slaked my thirst, heightened awareness of our surroundings returned. We were in one of those private, curtained-off alcoves. I could feel the soft texture of a rug beneath my shoes, and the outline of a low chaise lounge against the wall.

A breathy moan, followed by frantic panting, suddenly reached my ears. The sounds. The *smells*. Were coming from the alcove beside us. There was no mistaking what was

happening mere feet away. My body flushed hotly, but not from embarrassment or revulsion. No, it was turned on.

Stupid, idiotic body. *Stop.*

This was so wrong. But my body didn't care, continuing to light up in all the wrong places. In no time, the scent of my arousal coiled in the air.

Ah crap.

I stopped drinking. Stopped breathing. Desperately hoping that Lochlan couldn't smell it.

No such luck. He stiffened, releasing a soft hiss. Before I could pull away, he splayed his free hand across my stomach and pressed me against him. My eyes shot open as I felt his hard length running up my backside.

Holy fate babies, we were in so much trouble.

My body began to move in sync with his as he swayed to the beat. With each rolling hip thrust, his hand slid lower and lower. My thighs clenched with a sudden violent need, and I couldn't hold back a moan.

Crap, crap, crap.

"We should go," I panted, licking the last of the blood from my lips. "Before they find us together."

He hummed a noncommittal response, slipping a gloved finger beneath the hem of my dress. "You shouldn't have worn red."

I helplessly arched against him, which only drove his finger closer to its clear destination. Fates, he was gone. Lochlan was lost in the moment and it was up to me to bring him back.

“The mission,” I rasped, my heart thundering like a runaway horse. “We can’t do this.”

“Stop me,” I barely heard him whisper over the pulsing music. He dragged his claws up my inner thigh, pausing just shy of my throbbing apex. I trembled uncontrollably, gasping for breath. “Please, McKenna.”

There was that plea again, as if he needed me to save him from himself. As if he didn’t *want* this.

And that was all it took for me to put on the brakes. If he didn’t want this—if he didn’t want *me*—then neither did I. Screw what my body wanted. He was clearly still fighting the bond between us, rejecting it by pleading with me to reject him.

I still wasn’t ready to say the words he so obviously wanted to hear, though. Did that make me cruel and selfish? I bit into my lip, hard enough to draw blood. The pain helped harden my resolve and I pulled away.

“I’m heading back to the dance floor,” I said, unable to keep the emotion from my voice. Not meeting his eyes, I retrieved my clutch from the chaise lounge and brushed past him.

“McKenna,” he called after me, but I’d already slipped through the curtain.

I’d almost reached the dance floor when Kade’s worried voice came through my earpiece. “Guys, we’ve got a problem. I’ve searched all the upper floors. Isla isn’t here.”

Several dark forms suddenly loomed before me, blocking my path. I looked up and gasped. Because there, right in front

of me and surrounded by vampires, was Isla.

19

KENNA

“Hello, Syphon,” the vampire holding a limp Isla purred. He tossed my fur wrap on the floor near my feet. “You’ve been a naughty girl. I’m disappointed.”

My pulse went through the roof as I quickly counted at least a dozen vampires barring my way. Most were male, but there were a couple females too, I noted with surprise.

“She’s bleeding,” one of them hissed, stepping toward me.

“Control yourself, Rachel,” the first, who I guessed was their leader, ordered. “No one feeds from her.” She fell back in line, baring her teeth at me. I quickly licked my bottom lip where I’d bitten it, making sure not to reveal my own fangs.

“What did you do to my friend?” I said, darting a glance at Isla’s pale complexion. She was being kept upright by an arm wrapped around her ribcage, but the way her head lolled concerned me.

“What I said I’d do if you failed to come alone. I would have spared her, had you not brought a *prince* with you,” he replied, then dropped her.

“Isla!” I cried as she crumpled to the floor, striking her head on the concrete. I rushed forward, my only thought on pulling her to safety. When the leader moved to stop me, I

yanked the silver dagger from my bag and plunged it hilt deep into his chest.

Our eyes locked for a moment. Shock held us in place.

Then, with a bellow of rage, he backhanded me. The powerful blow sent me tumbling across the floor. Fiery pain shot through my face, so intense that I saw stars.

Then I heard it.

A thunderous roar.

It shook the floor, vibrating through my bones.

Screams filled the air, followed by utter chaos. Groaning, I lifted my pounding head, just in time to watch a dark form surrounded by angry, writhing shadows tear off a head and hurl it across the room. I gaped as the headless body collapsed to the floor, spraying blood everywhere.

The body that still had a silver dagger stuck in its chest.

As the shadows continued to whip around the dark form, cold awareness shivered up my spine. And I suddenly knew. Knew that the violent, raging vampire before me was Lochlan. He roared again and pulled two silver guns from beneath his jacket.

Then faced the remaining vampires and unleashed a volley of bullets.

Panic reigned. Humans shoved and trampled over each other to escape the carnage. I rolled to avoid several pounding feet, knowing that I had to do something. More vampires were emerging from the shadowed alcoves to assess the situation.

There was no way Lochlan could fight them all if they decided to attack.

I found Isla's prone form on the floor. A vampire was bending over her and I reacted instinctively, scrambling to my feet to shoot forward at vampire speed. I shoved him back, startled when he actually flew through the air several feet and crashed into a pillar. Not wasting any time, I looped my arms underneath Isla's and began pulling her to safety. Faster than I thought possible, I had her tucked inside the alcove we'd just vacated.

"Kade," I yelled into my earpiece, rushing back out. "Get down here. We need you."

"Already here," came his immediate reply.

I glanced around and, sure enough, more silver glinted as Kade added his knives to the mayhem. Lochlan was now fighting hand-to-hand, and I was forced to pause, mesmerized by his brute strength. He whirled and lunged at his opponents so quickly that I could barely see him. Everyone he touched fell at his feet, writhing in a pool of their own blood. But there were injured humans as well, too shell-shocked to move out of the way.

I frantically renewed my search and found what I was looking for near the bathrooms. Yanking on the fire alarm, I cringed at the loud blare. Just as I'd hoped, though, the familiar sound jogged some sense into the gawking humans and they scrambled to escape the building.

When I was confident that Lochlan and Kade had things under control, I rejoined Isla in the alcove. She was still on the chaise lounge where I'd left her, ghostly pale and unconscious.

“Isla.” I brushed the pink-tipped blonde hair from her face, gasping at how cold her skin felt. “Isla, wake up,” I pleaded, checking for a pulse with trembling fingers. “I need to tell you something. I need to tell you how sorry I am that you’re in this mess. Please. *Please.*”

The curtains parted and I whirled, baring my teeth at the intruder.

“It’s me,” Kade said, striding in. Heedless of my warning growl, he pulled me to my feet. “You need to go to Loch *right* now.”

“What? No, I can’t. Something’s wrong with Isla. I—”

“I’ve got her, Kenna. Now go to Loch before he causes any more damage.”

As if to punctuate the words, another thunderous roar cleaved the air, followed by a resounding *boom*.

Alarmed, I crossed the rug and yanked back the curtain. Expecting to see Lochlan fighting off a horde of vampires, I was doubly shocked to find only him. Well, and the dozen or so mutilated bodies strewn across the dance floor. He didn’t appear to be injured, but something was definitely wrong.

“What is he doing?” I said to Kade as Lochlan picked up a red couch and sent it soaring. It crashed into the bar, taking out an entire shelf of glass bottles.

Kade nudged me forward, firmly grasping my arm when I balked. “He’s fully succumbed to the Lochness Monster, that’s what. We need to take care of these bodies before the police arrive, but I can’t get through to him. So now it’s your turn.”

“What?” I squeaked, pointlessly digging my heels in as Kade continued to push me toward the raging vampire. “B-but you said not to go near him when he’s like this.”

“Things are different now. He would never hurt you.”

“But how can you know?” When all he did was drag me closer to my doom, I sharply twisted out of his hold. Rounding on him, I snapped, “How do you *know*, Kade?”

He grabbed my shoulders and shook me. “Because you’re his *solemae*.”

“But I don’t even know what that *means*,” I shouted at him.

“*Soulmate!*” he yelled back, shaking me again. “The bond pushing you two together is your souls trying to merge. And right now, your soulmate is suffering, locked inside the darkest parts of his mind. He *needs* you. Please, little Kenna. *Go* to him.”

His passionate words shook me to my core. I didn’t fully understand, couldn’t possibly. Didn’t even know if I believed in such a thing. I’d recently learned to believe in far more impossible things, though. Learned to accept that a whole new world existed beneath my very nose.

But *soulmates*?

Just thinking of the word sent a pang through my chest, as if it were begging for my attention. *Don’t ignore me*, it seemed to plead. *You know it’s true*.

I rubbed at the ache, more confused and uncertain than ever. But more than that, I was scared. Freaking terrified of what this meant.

Kade suddenly stiffened. The club's red lights flashed across his face, illuminating his wide eyes. "I shouldn't have touched you. He's going after me now. Get back, Kenna."

As he slowly stepped away from me, raising his hands, I became aware of the silence. The music, the blaring alarm, the roars and raging. Everything had stopped. Turning, I spotted Lochlan near the perimeter, still as stone. He'd obviously been ransacking the alcoves, tearing up the curtains and chaises. They were in tatters, shredded to pieces by his claws.

But he'd stopped. All of his focus was on Kade now. Fates, I'd seen him angry before, but not like this. *This ...*

It was feral. Desperate. Unhinged. Like all he saw was red, and that red had to be eliminated at all costs.

And Kade just waited, waited like he knew and was willing to face the darkness, because Lochlan was his friend. His drothen. And he'd do anything for him, even if it killed him.

Because of *me*.

And there was no way, *no way*, I would allow that to happen. Not if I had even the slightest chance of stopping it.

So I ran. I ran straight at Lochlan using my enhanced speed. And before he could attack his best friend and later regret it, I barrelled into him. Not knowing how he'd react, I clung to him tightly and squeezed my eyes shut. He could tear my limbs off like flimsy toothpicks. He could run his claws through my heart. He could snap my neck faster than I could blink.

And yet, I held onto him. I breathed in the spilled blood and rage and violence, knowing that he was so much more

than those things. I'd seen glimpses of his gentler side. I'd seen vulnerability and tenderness. I'd seen caring and kindness and protectiveness. I held onto those things, willing him to remember. To come back to himself. To come back to *me*.

It was an eternity of waiting, of doubting I had the power to help him. But then he moved. Not to attack, but to slowly pull me against him.

"McKenna," he whispered, his voice lost and uncertain.

Tears sprung to my eyes at the sound. Something told me that he'd been stuck in his own personal hell for the last several minutes.

"McKenna," he said again, as though questioning if this was real. If *I* was real.

"I'm here," I replied, hesitantly running my hands up and down his back.

He shuddered violently in response, then buried his nose in my hair, deeply inhaling my scent. The intimate, almost possessive act made my heart flutter happily.

Whoa, okay. That was new.

"You were hurt," he said after a long moment, swallowing audibly. "I lost control."

"It's okay," I assured him. "It's over now." I wasn't used to being the strong one. I wasn't used to comforting him. It both scared and thrilled me, this new dynamic between us. Things were changing, and once again, I didn't know what that meant.

"How's Isla?" he finally said, lightly brushing his fingers through my hair.

“She’s ...” I stilled, suddenly at a loss for words.

“She’s dead,” said a strangled voice behind me.

I jerked around to see a distraught Kade with Isla hanging limply in his arms.

Every inch of me went numb with cold.

20

LOCHLAN

“*No!*” McKenna wailed, rocking her friend’s lifeless body in her arms.

Every cry, every sob and scream, mercilessly tore at my heart. Even while knowing that the unbearable pain was hers and not mine, I clutched at my aching chest.

Our bond was growing stronger. I’d tasted her blood and she’d tasted mine. The mutual mixing of our life essence had only knit us tighter together, a fact I hadn’t thought through until it was too late. I’d only been thinking of easing her pain, because nothing hurt me more than seeing her suffer.

Now, instead of sensing her emotions, I could actually *feel* them, as if they were my own—just like I could with Kade’s. His pain was acute as well. Helplessly, he stared down at the dead human girl my solemae was grieving over.

At first, she hadn’t believed him, frantically checking for her friend’s pulse. The sight had constricted my lungs, making it hard to breathe. Instead of confirming out loud what I already knew, instead of pulling her back into my arms, I’d let her drag her friend to the blood-flecked floor and discover the truth for herself.

I'd never hated myself more. For failing her again. For the raw agony she was in. For what I was about to do.

"Kade," I said quietly, hating myself even more when he lifted his sad eyes to mine. "She was drained. It hasn't been too long."

He stilled. I watched as my words slowly sank in.

"I need you to do it," I said more firmly when hesitation clouded his expression. "You know why."

His face fell. "She'll hate me. They both will."

"No. They'll hate *me*. Because I'm giving the order. You have no choice."

His jaw hardened. "Is your order final?"

I steeled my voice, even as my heart twisted in misery. "You know it is."

He lowered his gaze, but not before I saw the hurt I'd caused. "Very well, my prince. I'll see that it's done."

The formality was like a punch to the gut, but I wouldn't rescind my order. My mind was made up. Not wanting to burden him further, I was the one to approach McKenna. To crouch before her and gently yet firmly release her grip on Isla's body.

"No," she whimpered, resisting my hold. "Lochlan, I'm not ready. I'm not—"

"Go. And take our remaining blood supply," I commanded Kade, who scooped Isla up and took off.

"*Isla!*" McKenna screamed, lunging to follow. When I restrained her, she fought me like an angry demon. Her fangs

flashed. Even her black claws came out, scrambling to inflict damage. Only my gloves and clothing kept me from feeling the full brunt of her wrath. But I still felt it, flaying me open from the inside.

“I’m sorry,” I said, even as I refused to let her go. “It had to be done.”

“How could you? *How could you!*” she roared, arching her back as I pinned her beneath me on the floor.

“I’m sorry,” I said again, unable to bear the accusation in her eyes. She felt betrayed. Again. I had sworn to never let anything hurt her, yet here I was, doing just that.

She abruptly stilled, releasing a shuddering sob. “I didn’t get to say goodbye.” Tears slipped from her eyes, dripping to the concrete below. “Is this my fate? To never get to say goodbye to the people I love? To be abandoned? To watch as everyone I know *dies?*”

A mournful sound left her, one that threatened to rip out my heart.

I almost did something unforgivable then. I almost looked deeply into her eyes and thrallled her to forget. To forget the pain of this moment, the nightmare of this evening. And every moment before this one that had caused her to suffer.

But as much as her pain killed me, taking away any part of her, even the painful parts, felt like the worst kind of betrayal. A betrayal she would never forget, let alone forgive.

“That won’t be your fate, McKenna,” I said instead, freeing a hand to touch her cheek. “I won’t let it.”

She quieted, not because she believed or trusted me, but out of sheer exhaustion. Her emotions weighed me down, but I forced myself to move, knowing the night's work had only just begun. Relieved when she let me carry her to a white couch left unscathed, I carefully placed her on the cushions before turning to face the damage I had caused.

Bodies littered the floor, but I couldn't make myself feel remorse for killing them. They were part of the movement bent on taking McKenna away from me. Anyone who did that deserved a swift end.

What I didn't understand was why none of them had tried to kill *me*. It was a relatively new movement, one I knew little about. They only surfaced when a new Syphon was found, making my job beyond difficult. I hadn't been prepared when they'd swooped in out of nowhere eighteen years ago and killed the Syphon in my care. She'd only been twelve years old.

The group tonight had all been Feltore. It had been easy to cut them down, even their leader. Although, I suspected the chain of command went far beyond him. Someone with a set of steel balls had to be at the top. Anyone less than that wouldn't dare stand against the royal family. So far, I hadn't found any leads as to who it could be though. Maybe next time, I would keep one alive for questioning.

Fishing out a lighter I kept on me at all times for emergencies like this, I headed to the bar and found an intact bottle of vodka. There was nothing I could do about the humans who'd seen us, but hopefully the dim lighting and

overall chaos had made it hard for them to see what we truly were.

I got to work dousing the bodies and lighting them on fire, a necessary task to keep our secret intact. When all twelve bodies were lit, I stepped back, letting the smoke and heat dull my senses for a moment. None of them had tried to kill me. None had tried to escape either. With McKenna's life on the line, I needed to find out more about them before they attempted something like this again. They'd been smart, going after Isla like that. Whoever was in charge knew my solemae well, which boiled the blood in my veins.

Through the rising flames, I could see her. Wrapped in that sinful red dress, her graceful form contrasted sharply with the white couch she laid on.

She was already staring at me.

I met her molten silver eyes, eyes that never failed to enchant me. She had no idea how beautiful she was. Perfect in every way. That perfection went beyond the surface, touching the very heart of her. She was fierce and brave and stronger than she knew. She'd been through so much, and yet, she was still looking at me. Unflinchingly. Boldly. Challenging me with every precious breath she took.

I stared back, letting her see a sliver of the darkness within by reining in my shadows. She didn't look away. She never had. A fact that had immediately drawn me to her, unlike the previous Syphons. Even when she should have been, she was never afraid of me. Never cowered or ran. I'd relentlessly tested her, seeing if she'd reveal her true colors. Seeing if

she'd prove to me that witches and vampires would forever be mortal enemies doomed to destroy each other.

But she hadn't.

She'd kept our secret from her guardian. She'd befriended us. Trusted us. Defended us. She'd opened herself up to pain and heartache, allowing us in even when she hadn't understood. She still didn't.

By a cruel twist of fate, our souls were intertwined. Whether the curse caused it to happen or fate had intervened, I didn't know.

Not a minute had gone by over the past week where I hadn't thought about telling her everything. About my past and hers, about our soul connection, about the long road ahead. She deserved to know. I knew that now. No more tests, no more half truths were needed.

But telling her would mean facing my darkness. Telling her would mean baring my soul to the one being who could destroy me completely.

And I'd spent over a hundred years protecting myself. Letting her in would be like stripping naked and asking her to touch me. Skin-to-skin. No barriers. Nothing to stop her from killing me.

I didn't know if I had the strength. I didn't know if I had it in me to trust again. To trust *her*. Even after everything we'd been through together.

My sensitive ears picked up the distant wail of sirens and I forced myself to look away. To finish what I'd started so that one piece of my nightmarish past could be laid to rest. A piece

that often kept me up at night, pushing me to replay it over and over and over.

I grabbed a few more bottles and got to work.

21

KENNA

I knew what the five stages of grief were. Right now, I was in denial.

Denial that my best friend was dead.

Denial that I hadn't saved her.

Denial that Lochlan was torching the place.

It was a lie, but one that promised a moment of reprieve. I could pretend that nothing bad was happening. That there was nothing to be sad about. I could focus on other things instead, like how comfortable this couch was. Like how heavy my body, my very *soul* was right now, and how desperately I wanted to sleep it all away.

But Lochlan wouldn't let me. Just like he hadn't let me say goodbye to Isla. Resentment threatened to tear away my blissful state of numbness, so I shut down that thought.

"McKenna, we have to go. The police are here," he said, crouching before me. The acrid stench of smoke stung my nostrils and I recoiled from him. A pang of hurt suddenly twisted inside my chest, there and gone again so quickly that I almost missed it. Confusion trickled through me. The feeling didn't make sense. It felt foreign. Like it wasn't even mine.

Before I could puzzle over it though, Lochlan swept me into his arms. His touch, his closeness, immediately awoke my senses. Making me *feel*.

“No,” I said weakly, but he was already moving at vampire speed, carrying me far away from that room ablaze in death and sorrow.

The ride back to the motel was silent. When I’d briefly panicked and asked where Kade was, Lochlan had simply assured me that he was safe. I hadn’t pressed for more details, almost certain I already knew where and what Kade was doing.

Burying Isla.

And my brain couldn’t accept that reality, so I didn’t ask.

“You should shower,” Lochlan quietly said.

I blinked up at him, then at our dingy surroundings. I’d been staring vacantly at the motel room’s carpet. When had we arrived here? Realizing he was waiting for my reply, I nodded woodenly and headed for the bathroom. Once inside, I turned on the shower and then sat on the toilet lid.

Minutes crawled by but I couldn’t force myself to get up. So it was no surprise when Lochlan poked his head in to check on me. What I didn’t expect was for him to toe off his boots and remove his hooded jacket and gun harness while coming inside. I watched him with a detached sort of curiosity, allowing him to grasp my hand and pull me up.

When he bent to unbuckle my stilettos though, I couldn’t help but ask, “What are you doing?” I placed my hand on his shoulder for balance as he removed one shoe, then the other.

“Helping you,” he said, rising to his full height so I had to tip my head back. “Comforting you. If you’ll let me.”

I felt it again. That foreign pang. It was different this time though, like a thrum of nervous energy. Was I nervous? I didn’t think so, which was why the feeling confused me. When I didn’t answer, the energy sputtered like a candle flame in the wind.

“Please, McKenna. Let me comfort you,” he said more softly, the words laced with so much need that I knew I couldn’t say no.

When I nodded, the relief I felt almost bowled me over. Okay, this wasn’t normal. I wasn’t feeling nervous or relieved. I wasn’t feeling much of anything other than confusion. So why was I feeling these things?

Cold leather skated across my skin as Lochlan brushed my hair back, and suddenly, I knew. Just like that. Without a shadow of doubt, I knew exactly what I was feeling. “It’s you,” I whispered.

Confusion panged through me, and this time, it wasn’t mine. My heart sped up.

“What is?” Lochlan said, the light scrape of his claws over my collarbone drawing a shiver from me.

I grabbed his hand and held it against my chest. “I can feel you. Right here.”

Alarm. Desire. Hints of fear.

All feelings that weren’t mine.

“It’s the bond, isn’t it,” I pressed, already knowing that it had to be. Nothing else made sense. “It’s grown stronger.”

Dread. Relief. More fear.

“Yes,” he finally admitted, almost too softly to hear. “When you consumed my blood.” He paused, thoroughly searching my face. “I can feel you too.”

Goosebumps pebbled my skin. “What am I feeling?”

His gaze lowered. Reaching up, he hooked his finger under the strap of my dress and slowly slipped it over my shoulder. I shivered again, releasing his hand when he focused on the other strap. “Grief. Sorrow.” He worked the second strap down with infinite care. “Desire.” My breath hitched as the top of my dress inched downward, exposing more and more skin and cleavage. “Growing excitement.”

Fates, this wasn’t fair. He could feel everything. Which meant that he’d soon know—

“Nervousness.”

Yeah. *That*.

“I only want to comfort you, McKenna,” he said again, meeting my eyes. Even as he spoke, the dress continued to slip down my body. “I want to take your pain away. Make you feel cherished, warm, and safe.”

A tremor shook me as my breasts spilled from the dress. My *naked* breasts. No man had ever seen me in this state of undress before. Without taking his gaze off mine, Lochlan slid the dress over my ribcage and stomach, pausing a moment to peel the tight material from my hips and thighs. Then he let

go. The material fell to the floor, leaving me in nothing but a tiny red thong.

Yes. *Thong*. Curse you, Kade.

More nervous energy trembled through me when Lochlan pushed back the shower curtain and ushered me inside. Crossing my arms over my chest, I stepped under the warm spray, surprised when his eyes didn't stray from my face. For a moment, I thought he would go, leaving me alone to scrub the night's failure from my skin. Instead, he deftly removed his gloves and joined me in the shower.

"Lochlan," I gasped, almost losing my footing in my haste to retreat.

"Let me do this," he quickly said before I could jump out of the shower. "I promise to be careful. I just ... I need to be close to you."

My heart frantically pounded as he drew the curtain closed, sealing us inside. What was he *thinking*? Yeah, he still had on a t-shirt and jeans, but one slip-up of his hand was all it would take. "How?" was all I could manage, my throat closing.

"With this," he simply said, revealing the bar of soap and washcloth in his hands.

I stopped breathing. Oh fates, I was so not ready for this. I'd *never* be ready. This was crazy stupid. *Dangerous*.

"Do you trust me?"

At the question, my eyes shot up to his. He very well knew it wasn't fair to ask me that question. Not after all his secrets and half-truths. There were still so many things I didn't know about him, things that he was keeping from me. But *this*?

“Yes,” came my trembling response, because this was something I knew. Something he’d proven he could be trusted with. I had nothing to doubt or fear. Nothing to feel other than safe.

“Then turn around,” he whispered, and I felt another pang of nervous energy. His. He was nervous too. Maybe for different reasons than me, but it was still reassuring, knowing we felt the same.

So I turned, making myself vulnerable before him. Nervous, but trusting him to take care of me. Moments later, the cloth slid over my shoulder. I tensed, waiting for him to hiss, to pull back, to realize this was a mistake. But he didn’t, continuing to gently wipe the smoke and ash from my skin.

Eventually, my eyes drifted shut as I let myself enjoy the soothing motions. Gathering my hair over a shoulder, I gave him complete access to my back. Only then did I fully realize how *naked* I was. The thong did nothing to hide my nudity from him, a conclusion that we both seemed to reach at the same time.

A sharp stab of desire pierced me, so intense that I couldn’t suppress a gasp. Lochlan’s hand paused on the middle of my back. His breathing sped up. I could only imagine the view he was getting of my backside right this very moment. Several seconds passed before he breathed, “You’re so achingly beautiful, solemae.”

At the deep sincerity in his voice, my stomach swooped with butterflies.

I almost told him then that I knew what the word meant. Almost asked why he hadn’t told me what he thought we

were. *Soulmates*. I had so many questions, but the words stuck in my throat. The timing didn't feel right and I didn't want him to pull away. Because I selfishly needed this moment. To submerge myself in denial a little while longer. The grief and anger and guilt would consume me soon enough. But I could have this. A moment of comfort. With the man I was somehow linked to—and hopelessly falling for harder than ever.

So I let my head fall back onto his shoulder, sighing when he swept the cloth up my arm. When he reached my neck, he slowed, repeatedly scrubbing at the spot where I'd been bitten as if to erase the memory.

“It should have been me,” he gruffly said, splaying his free hand on the wall near my head. “Only my mark, my *scent* should be on you.”

As his clothed body brushed the length of my back, a thrill shivered up my spine. “You want to bite me?”

“I want to do a whole lot more than bite you, McKenna,” he quietly growled. “Sinfully wicked things that would burn your ears to hear.” Holy *fates*. My body reacted to the suggestive words by shooting a blast of heat straight between my legs. Another growl rumbled deep in his throat and he pressed even closer, sliding the cloth down my neck. When he continued the downward path, my breath came in ragged spurts. “Lower your arms, *solemae*.”

Fates above, I was going to melt into a pile of mush at his feet if he kept talking that way.

I complied to his soft command, biting my lip as he swept the cloth across the tops of my breasts. But when he circled the cloth around one of my sensitive nipples, I couldn't hold back

a whimper of pleasure. He did the same to the other nipple, until I was shaking uncontrollably with need. With both nipples sufficiently hardened, he grasped one and rolled it between his fingers.

My back arched and I cried out, unprepared for the sharp jolt of pleasure. He heightened the feeling by gently squeezing and tugging, repeating the process on both nipples until I saw stars. “Lochlan,” I panted, reaching a hand behind me. “I want you.”

Need exploded through me, so powerful that my legs almost gave out. Some of it was mine, but even more was his. As he ran the cloth down my stomach, his breathing as desperate as mine, I found what I was looking for.

The moment my fingers closed around his erection, he violently jerked against me. Breathlessly expelling my name, he whipped me around to face him. I gasped and met his gaze, expecting to find that silent plea again. That look telling me he didn't want this. Want *me*.

But all I found was dark, unbridled desire.

Even so, he didn't move a muscle, the steam from the shower plastering strands of hair to his forehead. “This isn't why I came in here, McKenna,” he said huskily, never once taking his eyes off mine. “You're grieving. I don't want you to regret this later on when—”

“I won't,” I interrupted, shaking my head. “I need this. I need *you*.” When he continued to hesitate, as if afraid he was taking advantage of my emotionally weakened state, I swallowed hard and whispered, “Please.”

Please comfort me. Please make me forget. Please take away the pain.

As tears sprung to my eyes, I felt his resolve slip. Felt his renewed desire to be close to me. *Yes*, I continued to silently plead. *I need you, I need you, I need you.* A tear spilled unnoticed down my cheek, or so I thought. The moment it did, he slowly backed me against the wall. Gently prying my thighs apart with his, he slipped his fingers between my legs.

At the sudden rush of contact, I threw my head back and moaned, unable to control my reaction. He stroked me firmly, bringing me high so fast that I didn't realize he'd dropped the washcloth. I opened my mouth to warn him, but nothing came out. I was too far gone and his bare fingers sliding over the wet satin fabric felt too good. I reached my hand out again and cupped him, pleased when he emitted a low hiss.

But I wanted more. Wanted to *feel* more. So I fumbled to unbutton his jeans. His nervous energy pinged through me again, swift and sharp. But when he didn't stop me, I released the button and slowly undid his zipper. My nervousness joined his, along with a rush of mutual excitement. I'd never done something like this before, never intimately touched a man. My fingers trembled. Nerves and inexperience almost made me pull back. But I needed this too much. Needed *him*.

The second my hand connected with his manhood, he loosed a guttural groan. Just like that, all of my doubts fell away. With only a thin layer of cotton between us, I was able to properly explore the impressive length. Hard yet somehow soft, I familiarized myself with him. Careful not to touch his skin, I grew braver with each stroke, basking in his reactions.

Every pant, every hitched breath, every twitch and moan heightened my own pleasure.

As his shaft swelled beneath my touch, he pressed himself into my palm, rubbing against me. I followed his lead, slowly and a bit awkwardly learning what he wanted. He patiently coached me, matching his movements to mine.

A deep ache gradually built, one we mutually felt. We desperately fed the ache, letting it grow and grow and grow until it could no longer be contained. Ecstasy simultaneously exploded through us, the combined sensation powerful enough to render me deaf and blind.

When I could see again, it was to find him watching me.

A pang of wonder, of awe shivered through me, one that matched his expression.

More tears scalded my cheeks. Tears of relief, of gratitude.

We let the moment last for as long as we could. The water ran cold. Even then, we remained where we were, loath to leave this unexpected haven where something so earth-shattering had happened. Once this moment ended, reality and all its hardships would come crashing down around us. So I clung to this moment, relieved when he did too. Savoring every precious second.

Even while knowing that it wouldn't last.

* * *

For as long as I could remember, sleep was a struggle for me. I was forever jerking awake from a nightmare or perceived threat. The dreams had only grown stronger with age, more vivid, more detailed. More real. Like the one I'd dreamt of Isla.

But when Lochlan was near, close enough to touch, it was like he could block the dreams. Like his body was a physical barrier, protecting me from the dark things that wanted to crawl into my subconscious.

After our shower, I'd tried to hold onto denial a little while longer with some sleep. But I'd tossed and turned, unable to get comfortable, unable to quiet my mind.

Until he'd slipped into bed with me.

Gathering me against him, he'd whispered for me to sleep.

That's all it took.

I'd drifted away into nothing, peaceful nothing.

I awoke hours later to the sun peeking in through a broken blind. Expecting Lochlan to have arisen early like he had in the past, I was shocked speechless to still feel him behind me. Before I could turn to see if he was awake, he lazily looped his arms around my middle and pulled me against him.

"Morning," he said, his voice low and husky from sleep. My toes curled at the sound, at the way he snuggled up against me and buried his face in my hair.

Holy fates, I could get used to this. Really, *really* used to this. Which was bad. Really, really bad. Wait, why was it bad again? I couldn't seem to remember.

Even though we were both fully clothed now, his heat penetrated my pajamas, making me feel more content and safe than I'd ever felt before. One of his hands suddenly went rogue, sliding down to cup me between my legs.

Freaking fate babies.

Instantly awake, I moaned breathlessly and arched against him. "Lochlan," I gasped as he pressed down on the sensitive bundle of nerves. "What are ... what are you—"

"We've never done it in the morning," his languid voice purred in my ear. "Or on a bed."

What the ... Was he keeping *track*? And why did that completely turn me on?

But before his talented fingers could begin their magic, making me utterly useless, I rolled over on top of him. Straddling his hips, I slowly sank down onto his erection. "You've also never let me lead before," I said, shocking us both with my boldness. With him now in his human form, I watched as flecks of red brightened his dark eyes. When I ground myself against him, he hissed and grabbed my waist.

Stilling my movements, he propped himself up so that our faces were inches away. "That's because I need to be in control," he answered, using his hands to rock me against him.

Sucking in a gasp, I gave him what he wanted, digging my fingers into his shoulders as he increased the pace. "Why?" I panted, trying to maintain eye contact. "Why do you need control?"

Vulnerability darkened his gaze. "So I can't be hurt again."

My breath hitched as pain tightened my chest. *His* pain. I instinctually wanted to comfort him, to touch his cheek and run my fingers through his hair. I curled them into his shirt instead. “I won’t hurt you,” I whispered. “I promise.”

He slowed, still tightly gripping my waist. “I can’t take that chance, McKenna. I’m sorry.”

We stared at each other, long enough for me to see, to *feel*, more than he probably wanted me to. When he abruptly started to pull away, I squeezed my thighs to hold him in place. “Who hurt you?” I demanded, undeterred when he clenched his jaw and looked away. “Was it a witch? A *Syphon*?”

I heard it then, the thundering of his heart. The instant panic. And I knew, just *knew* that I was right.

“Tell me, Lochlan. *Please*,” I said, softening my voice. “I want to help you.”

He bared his teeth in a trembling grimace, still refusing to look at me. “You can’t. Your kind broke me.”

My heart twisted miserably as I felt his cold resentment. Even if it wasn’t directed at me, it sure felt that way. I didn’t give up though, desperate to know what had happened to him. “Is it because they cursed you?” Silence. “Is that why you vowed never to trust or care about a witch ever again?”

“Stop, McKenna,” he quietly said.

“Is that why you want me to reject our bond? Because I’m a disgusting witch and you hate us all?”

“Stop,” he said again, louder this time. But I was hurt now, hurt and confused. My own voice raised.

“Is this the only thing witches are good for? A little fooling around before you dump them? Is this what you did with all the other Syphons? Use them, then kill them when your hatred for them became too strong?”

“*Stop!*” he roared, flipping me beneath him in one fell swoop. His fiery gaze effectively pinned me to the mattress. “I was never intimate with the other Syphons I hunted. Never even had a desire to. And I haven’t intentionally tried to kill one in nearly a hundred years. I tried to *protect* them, even when they tried to kill me. I only ever wanted to break the curse and be done with witches forever. But then ... then *you* came along.”

“Yeah. *Me,*” I spat, giving in to my anger despite how easily he could kill me right now. “The witch who ruined all your plans. The Syphon you can’t trust or be honest with. The *solemae* that you never wanted. But I should feel *lucky*, right? Because I can save the world from a supernatural war. Because a sexy vampire prince wants to get inside my pants. Yeah, *lucky* me.”

He’d gone absolutely still while I raved at him, the blood slowly leaching from his face. When I’d finished, only my harsh breathing filled the silence.

Several emotions pricked at my chest, all of them his. None of them good.

Horror, disbelief, fear, dread.

Just as I felt the beginning of tears threaten to fill my eyes, he breathed my name. There was so much *feeling* behind the sound that I stopped breathing, desperately trying to figure out

what it meant. He did it again, searching my face as if it held all the mysteries of the universe.

Then he reached for me.

With his bare hand.

Reached for my face, his fingers inches away from touching it.

The door banged open. Splintering against the wall.

Two forms rushed in, and neither of them was Kade.

My bones turned to ice when I recognized who they were.

Lochlan's brothers had found us.

22

KENNA

Lochlan was clearly only thinking one thing.

Protect.

The emotion poured from him in pulsating waves. The second his brothers burst in, he had me pressed against the wall, his body shielding me from view.

An unearthly growl rumbled through him, growing louder the closer his brothers came. I rose on tiptoe to see them over his shoulder.

Troy, the one wearing a baseball hat with longer hair and sharper features, rolled his eyes and muttered, “I knew it. He’s totally screwing her.”

“Watch your mouth, Troy,” Lochlan snarled, bristling with fury.

I peeked at Everett, the older brother whose body looked like it was chiseled from rock. The sight of him dredged up horrific memories I’d tried to suppress, of him snapping August’s neck and slowly squeezing my own. Fear crawled up my throat.

“Hand her over, Loch,” he said, curling his gloved fingers into fists. “If you go peaceably, I won’t take my frustration

with you out on her.”

Lochlan went predatorily still. “Touch her and you’ll regret it.”

Everett’s pale green eyes flashed. “What will you do, kill me?”

“If I have to.”

“Okay, *enough*,” Troy groaned. “You two are worse than roosters in a cockfight. Just tell him about our prisoner so we can be on our way, Ever.”

“What prisoner?” I spoke up, despite my fear. If they had Kade—if they’d harmed him in any way—no one would stop me from seeking vengeance, not even Lochlan.

Everett narrowed his eyes on me and I shivered at the promised violence in their depths. Instead of answering me, he jerked his chin at Troy. “Go get him.”

It didn’t take long for Troy to return with a bound and gagged man, so beaten up that he was unrecognizable. I winced as Troy tripped the man’s feet and he crashed to his knees.

“Who is he?” Lochlan said, which eased some of my worry. Surely he’d know if it was Kade.

“We found him in the woods trying to follow the Syphon’s trail,” Everett replied. “Said he’s grown quite close to her this past week. That he helped her escape the institute. He was able to resist our thrall though, so it took us longer to get information out of him. He eventually told us about his kidnapped sister and where you were headed. Then all Troy had to do was track his phone to this rat-infested hole.”

“Noah,” I gasped in dismay, wriggling out from behind Lochlan. He stopped me from rushing forward, drawing me into the safety of his arms.

Everett glared at the arms around me, curling his upper lip in disdain. “You would so readily protect the witch, even after discovering that she’s slept with this warlock?”

Lochlan stiffened against me. Before he could reply, I rallied my courage and snapped, “I’m a virgin, douchebag, not that it’s any of your business. But Noah *is* my friend and I want to know why you’ve taken him prisoner.”

Everett shot his brother an incredulous look. “You allow her to freely speak this way?”

Lochlan secured me more tightly against him as I tried to lunge for his chauvinistic brother. My fangs threatened to descend, and I barely curbed the instinct to hiss. I paused when I felt a mixture of shock and relief coming from Lochlan, though. Because of my words?

“Answer her question, Everett,” was all he said, which made Everett’s pale green eyes bleed to red.

Yikes.

“The warlock is our insurance,” he quietly hissed. “If you care about the witch as much as you seem to, then you’ll come home with us in order to keep her *friend* alive. Especially when rumor has it you failed to keep the sister alive.”

He might as well have punched me. All the air fled my lungs in a powerful rush at the reminder of what I’d lost.

“You just crossed a line, brother,” Lochlan replied in an eerily soft voice I’d never heard him use before. “I won’t

forget this.”

Everett’s jaw hardened, but his gaze briefly wavered as if he too had never heard Lochlan use that tone. “Take it up with Father. He’s been trying to get in touch with you since yesterday. Apparently, there’s been an unexpected development, and he needs us back right away.”

Uh oh.

Lochlan’s whole body tensed. “Does he know about McKenna?”

“I didn’t tell him, if that’s what you’re asking. I wouldn’t take that away from you, no matter how angry I am at the decisions you’ve been making.”

I didn’t have time to ponder over Everett’s words, not when I was so busy internally freaking out. I needed to tell Lochlan about the deal his father had made with the headmistress. That he already knew about me.

“Are we done here?” Troy spoke up in a bored tone. “I’m tired of propping up this guy.”

I bit my lip, willing it not to tremble as I took in Noah’s ruined face again. Both eyes were swollen shut. Blood matted his blond hair and covered most of his face. I could only guess how bad the rest of him looked, or if anything was broken.

And then I remembered what Everett had just said. All but implying that Isla was dead. How he’d found out, I didn’t know, but now Noah knew. And he’d been told the news in the worst way possible. So flippantly. So callously. I wanted to weep for him. Could only imagine the pain and confusion he was in right now.

Lochlan ran his thumb up and down my clothed arm, as if he could sense my growing distress. No doubt he could, now that we were feeling each other's emotions. "We'll go with you," he finally said, "as soon as Kade returns."

"Your *drothen* can catch up," Troy drawled. "I'm not staying in this dump a second longer than I have to. Smart of you though, choosing this place. We wouldn't have thought to look here."

"Troy's right," Everett said, backing away. "You have five minutes to collect your things. Any longer than that and we take out our impatience on the warlock. Try to escape and he dies."

Helplessness filled me as he and Troy left the room, dragging Noah with them. The second their footsteps faded, Lochlan turned me to face him. One look at my crestfallen expression and he tucked me against his chest. "I'm so sorry," he murmured into my hair. "I've failed you again."

I clung to him as tightly as I could, suddenly terrified that this would be our last embrace. "It's my fault. If not for me, Noah would still be safe behind the institute's wards."

If not for me, my best friend wouldn't be dead. My throat closed with unshed tears.

"But they're *my* brothers. And it's my fault they act this way."

"What? How?" I peeled my cheek off his chest to look up at him.

His gaze wavered. I felt his guard go up. Felt the wariness, the need to protect himself.

“Lochlan,” I breathed, imploring him to let me in.

Trust me. I won't hurt you.

He closed his eyes. Midnight hair shadowed his face as he lowered his head. “If not for me, a war wouldn't be brewing,” he started haltingly, as if he had to pry the words from his mouth. “If not for me, my kingdom wouldn't be divided. If not for me, there wouldn't be a curse.” He lifted tortured eyes to mine. “It's my fault all of this is happening, McKenna. It's my fault that you're here.”

It's my fault that we're bonded, that we're soulmates, his eyes seemed to say.

But I was glad he hadn't spoken the words out loud. If he had, I would have crumbled. Would have broken to pieces on the stained carpet. Because if I was completely honest with myself, our bond was the only thing holding me together. The stronger it became, the stronger I felt, like I could face the dangers ahead of me and actually survive. I didn't want to know how weak, how *alone* I'd feel without it.

“We have to go,” Lochlan said before I could respond, the raw emotion he'd shown me slipping behind that aloof mask of his. As if he'd regretted opening up to me. My heart sank.

Nodding, I reluctantly pulled away and slipped into the bathroom. Not bothering with makeup, I hurriedly donned a cropped burgundy sweater, distressed jeans, and ankle boots that Kade had purchased for me—which surprisingly fit well.

Why hasn't he returned yet? I couldn't help but worry.

If being separated from Lochlan was like having a hole inside my chest, then being separated from Kade was like

losing an arm. I cared for them both. Not in the same way, but Kade's friendship was more important to me than ever, especially now that ...

Now that I'd lost Isla.

Nope. I still wasn't ready to deal with her death. I carefully tucked her memory away, keeping it safe until I could properly grieve. Hopefully at a time when no one else was around.

Less than five minutes later, we were heading toward Lochlan's car, our arms laden with shopping bags mostly filled with my new stuff.

"I need to tell you something," I whispered as softly as I could, covertly watching his brothers from the corner of my eye.

"So do I," Lochlan replied just as softly. "But not here. Wait until we get inside the car." Before he could pop the trunk though, Everett blocked our way.

"Leave the car. You're riding with us."

Lochlan released a warning growl in response.

"You think I'm giving you the freedom to ditch us again?" Everett hissed. "Guess again. Now get in Troy's car."

Lochlan went rigid and so did I. He looked two seconds away from attacking his brother, which was so not good. If he lost the fight, who knew what his brothers would do to me and Noah. Reaching out, I touched his jacket. He immediately broke his staredown with Everett to look at me.

"It's okay," I quietly said, forcing a small smile for his benefit. "This way, Kade will have a car when he returns."

He searched my face, probably my emotions as well. I tamped down my dread, pushing as much calm through my body as I could. Eventually, he gave a curt nod, responding, “Fine. But McKenna rides next to me.”

“Not happening. I’ll be watching her in the backseat. I wouldn’t put it past you to try something.”

My heart trilled with fear. I couldn’t stop my fingers from tightening on Lochlan’s jacket at the thought of sitting next to Everett with no way to escape for hours on end.

“I swear I won’t,” Lochlan suddenly gritted out, clenching his fists. “You have my word. I won’t attempt to escape with McKenna. Just let her sit beside me.”

My eyes widened, while Everett’s narrowed.

“Seal your oath with a pactum and we have a deal,” he said, removing his gloves.

Lochlan’s nostrils flared, but after a moment, he removed his as well. Then, quick as a striking snake, his black claws shot out and slashed open his palm. I flinched when his blood spilled, dribbling to the asphalt. While Everett repeated the gesture, meeting Lochlan’s bloodied palm in a firm handshake, my instincts honed in on the scent of blood.

Lochlan’s blood.

The need to have it, to have *him*, exploded through me in punishing waves. Invisible fingers viciously squeezed my throat. My stomach hollowed out, cramping painfully. I suddenly realized how long I’d gone without eating food. I was starving and hadn’t even noticed, too focused on suppressing my new cravings.

“What’s wrong with her?” I heard Everett say, right before my legs gave out.

Strong arms wrapped around my middle, halting my fall. “McKenna,” Lochlan’s distant voice said, tight with worry.

I blinked up at his blurry face, trying to focus. “Need ...” was all I could croak out. I mentally pushed my hunger at him, hoping he could feel it through our bond.

As understanding crossed his face, Everett said, “You’re too close, Loch. It’s a trick.”

Lochlan firmly shook his head. “She needs blood. Did you bring any with you?”

It took him a moment, but when Everett finally realized what Lochlan was implying, he roared, “Did she touch you? *Hurt* you? Is that why she’s transitioned?”

I was up in Lochlan’s arms a split second later, held tightly to his chest as he squared off with his brother. “Calm down, Everett. She hasn’t touched or hurt me.”

“Then what?” Everett barked, loud enough that I ached to cover my sensitive ears. “Did she seduce you into touching *her*? If so, I’m going to rip her—”

“She didn’t do *anything*,” Lochlan bellowed, his anger whipping through my chest. “A rogue *bit* her the second she fled the institute. I don’t know what else was done to her before I got there. I couldn’t protect her because I had to deal with *you* two. But she’s been through enough pain. So if you don’t have any blood to give her, I’ll take care of her myself.”

Everett went deathly still. “You wouldn’t.”

“I already have,” Lochlan said, his voice low and sharp, “and I’ll gladly do it again if she needs it.”

Shock, followed by horror, contorted Everett’s features. “Willingly? You *willingly* shared your blood with her?” He stared at his brother as if he were a complete stranger.

Lochlan’s jaw hardened. Before he could reply, Troy called, “Let her feed on the warlock. He’s not good for much else anyway.”

A growl of hunger tore through me, even as I balked at the thought of feeding from Noah.

“Not happening,” Lochlan said, his tone brooking no argument. He purposefully stalked toward Troy’s car with me in his arms.

“Don’t do it,” Everett bit out, trailing us closely. “I forbid you.”

“You don’t have that kind of authority,” Lochlan threw back, managing to wrench the back door open and carefully set me inside. He crouched before me and removed a glove, positioning a black claw over the vein in his forearm like last time.

Before he could make the first cut though, Everett shouted, “Stop!”

Lochlan paused.

“She’ll get all the blood she needs. Just don’t do this to yourself.”

For a moment, I thought he would anyway. And I desperately wanted him to. Desperately wanted more of his

blood warming my insides, strengthening our bond. But he withdrew, tugging his glove on again to face his brother.

“She feeds now, before we leave. That’s nonnegotiable.”

I tried to suppress my feelings of hurt and disappointment, knowing they were ridiculous, but they pressed down on me anyway. It wasn’t until Lochlan gently wrapped my hands around a metal thermos that I had the strength to look up at him.

“Drink,” was all he said, but his eyes said so much more. *They can’t know about us. About our bond. It’s dangerous for us to be close.*

I understand, I silently sent back, even as I struggled to. Wouldn’t his brothers treat me better if they knew we were soulmates? Or maybe he was too ashamed to admit that he was tied to a witch. A lump formed in my throat, and I barely managed to choke down the blood. When the thermos was half empty, I gave it back, unable to stomach more.

Lochlan’s brow furrowed with concern, but he didn’t question me. He didn’t say much of anything as he loaded our stuff into the trunk and joined me in the backseat. A barely conscious Noah was shoved into the seat on my other side after Lochlan firmly insisted he wasn’t riding in the trunk. The brothers had argued for several minutes, but Lochlan had eventually won.

As I sat there, unable to escape the car’s thick tension and silence, a shocking fact slowly dawned on me. They respected him. Despite the brother’s rocky relationship, I couldn’t help but notice the subtle signs. They cared for each other in a tumultuous “we’ll always be family” sort of way.

It was *me* the brothers didn't like.

Me, who disrupted their brotherly dynamic. Who could hurt their brother.

Who was needed—but not wanted—to break a curse they themselves had instigated.

Yeah. This was going to be a *long* car ride.

23

KENNA

They were arguing again.

Mostly Lochlan and Everett.

This time over whether or not to stop for a short break.

You could learn a lot about someone's personality when stuck in a cramped space with them for several hours. Everett was the short-tempered, "in charge" one, majorly suffering from oldest child syndrome. He was bossy, even bossier than Lochlan, if that was possible. But he wasn't entirely unreasonable, oftentimes bending to his younger brother's will after hearing him out.

Lochlan was the rebel, the lone wolf. Always challenging his older brother like any good middle child would. His stubbornness made a lot more sense now.

Troy was the indulgent, easygoing one, clearly exasperated albeit amused by his brothers' antics. The way he stared at me in the rearview mirror sent goosebumps erupting over my flesh though. It was invasive, like he was undressing me with his eyes. I almost preferred Everett's violent, hateful glares. At least I knew exactly how he felt about me.

As an only child, I'd always been curious about the sibling dynamic. How some got along and others didn't. How each

were vastly different yet oddly alike. As far as brothers went, these three seemed fairly typical. Under normal circumstances, I could see how their unique personalities would blend well together. As vampire princes dealing with a century-long curse, however, their differences were causing all sorts of problems.

“She hasn’t had food to eat in over twenty-four hours,” Lochlan was saying, clearly not taking no for an answer. “She’s not like us. Blood can’t solely sustain her.”

“Do you think I care?” Everett responded from the front passenger’s seat. “I’d rather her be weak and subdued anyway. Makes me want to kill her less.”

At Lochlan’s furious growl, I rested my hand on his jean-clad leg without thinking. The growling immediately stopped.

“I’m fine,” I whispered up at him, trying to calm him further with a reassuring smile. My own hunger pangs aside, I worried for Noah. He’d dozed on and off for the last four hours, not once uttering a sound. Even through the border checkpoint back into the US, he’d remained quiet. Troy still had to use his thrall on the officer who’d seen Noah’s poor condition, though.

“Pull over, Troy,” Everett abruptly snapped. When his brother only threw him an inquisitive look, he grabbed the steering wheel and wrenched the car sharply off the road.

Swearing, Troy slammed on the brakes, and I jerked forward. Lochlan’s arm pushed me back, saving me from whiplash. Before we could come to a complete stop, Everett was out of the car and ripping open Noah’s door. In a flash, he

had him by the throat. I screamed as he tore him from the vehicle and savagely bit into his neck.

Noah's cry of agony jerked me from my stunned stupor and I scrambled after him. I'd barely cleared the vehicle when steel arms encircled my waist, halting me in my tracks. "Stop!" I yelled, struggling to break free of Lochlan's ironclad hold while my friend weakly writhed in pain. With his hands still bound behind him, he couldn't use magic to defend himself.

"Everett, *enough*," Lochlan roared, remaining where he was to keep me in check.

Troy joined us, but only to lean against his car and watch the scene as if it were a spectator sport.

As swiftly as he'd grabbed him, Everett released Noah, letting him crumple to the snow. I tried to go to him, but Everett pinned me in place with a death glare. "That was a warning, witch," he hissed, allowing blood to drip from his chin as he stalked forward, halting too close for comfort. "Never *ever* touch my brother like that again, or the warlock dies. The only reason he's not dead now is because Loch has so far kept his word. But I won't tolerate your manipulations like he does. So keep. Your hands. *Off*."

I could feel his hatred like a thousand bee stings. Boring into my flesh. Releasing its venom. I was paralyzed under its force, unable to blink or breathe.

Even as I felt Lochlan's fury rise within me, I could do nothing but stare.

"Give it a rest, Ever," Troy said before Lochlan's fury could erupt. "I've had witches do far worse to me. Under the

influence of my thrall, of course.” He threw me a sly smirk and tipped his hat before sauntering over to retrieve Noah.

Everett’s lip curled back in disgust. “Don’t remind me of your many foul kinks, Troy.”

“Hey, it’s the pleasurable company I’m after. I don’t care where it comes from.”

“Well, you should,” Everett rebutted, apparently done with me as he slid back into his bossy big brother role.

When he released me from his stare, though, I still couldn’t move.

“You okay?” Lochlan said tightly the moment Everett turned his back on us.

Tears burned my eyes but I refused to cry. “Are you?” I choked out instead of answering.

“No,” he immediately said, and if the tremble in his arms was any indication, he wasn’t even a little bit okay.

I could still feel his fury, swirling in my chest like a fiery inferno. Dread filled me. Maybe I should be more afraid of Lochlan’s growing wrath than Everett’s threats. Because if he decided to unleash it, there would be no stopping the Lochness Monster that emerged.

* * *

Curiosity got the best of me when we hit Bangor, Maine less than an hour later.

“Are we going back to Rosewood?” I whispered to Lochlan as quietly as I could.

Troy snorted, and I cursed their heightened hearing. “Not a chance. You’re not far off though.” Everett shot him a warning look, but he only shrugged, drawling, “What, it’s not like she’s going to tell anyone. It’s just weird that her hometown ended up so close to ours.”

“That reminds me,” Everett said, glancing back at me. “Hand over the warlock’s phone.”

My stomach bottomed out. How did he—? Oh. Right. It’s how they found out where we were staying. I half expected Lochlan to intervene, but he’d grown eerily quiet after the earlier confrontation. Although I felt a fresh pang of ire coming from him, he remained silent as I fished Noah’s phone from my pocket and handed it over.

When Everett glanced expectantly at Lochlan next, he finally spoke in a dangerously low tone, “Don’t even think about it. You know I wouldn’t jeopardize our home.”

Everett’s lips thinned, but he turned around without a word, swiftly crushing Noah’s phone in his fist.

With the electronic’s loss went another piece of my hope that I’d be getting out of this mess alive. I was the proverbial lamb about to enter the lion’s den. A den of really hungry lions that wanted nothing more than to tear out my throat.

An hour later, when we’d reached the coast, butterflies were doing nauseating flips inside my stomach. Were we catching a boat or plane? The thought of an entire ocean between me and everything I knew sent my anxiety through

the roof. I hadn't realized I was brutally pinching my thigh until cold leather skated across my knuckles.

Jerking, I glanced down to see Lochlan's gloved hand cupping mine. I shot him a panicked look, only to find his gaze fixed out the window. I peeked at the front seats, but no one was paying attention to where our hands were. Still, my heart beat faster when Lochlan slowly threaded his fingers through mine, hiding our linked hands in the space between us.

As his reassuring warmth seeped through the leather, some of my fear ebbed. Despite the unknown dangers ahead of me, I still had him. And although I was uncertain about many things, I didn't doubt that he would do everything in his power to protect me.

Problem was, the closer we got to the coast, the more I could feel *his* fear. Maybe more than I'd ever sensed from him before. Because we were meeting his father? For not the first time, I wondered what kind of man he was. I mean, he'd ordered all Syphons be put to death, if that said anything about his glowing personality. But he wanted the century-long curse broken enough to keep me alive ...

Right?

When the suspense became too much, I blurted, "Where are we going?"

Neither Troy nor Everett bothered to answer, but Lochlan quietly said, "Sanctum Isle. It's a sanctuary for our kind. Humans don't have jurisdiction there."

I gulped, tightening my hold on his hand. “So we’re going to an island full of vampires?”

“Correct,” Everett decided to speak up. “The only way in or out is a heavily-guarded bridge, so I suggest you behave, witch. There’ll be no escaping.”

My pulse skyrocketed. Lochlan squeezed my hand, but there was no reassuring me this time. I was in freakout mode, especially when I caught sight of the bridge. It was long. Long enough that swimming to shore wouldn’t be an option. As the car hit the bridge, I felt the world close in around me, suffocating me.

No way to escape. None.

Once we crossed this bridge, I would be at the mercy of my supernatural enemy. There was no running from my fate this time, no decision other than to face a predestined future with an uncertain outcome. As bleak as my fate seemed, though, Noah’s was even bleaker. What would they do with him now that they had me exactly where they wanted me?

I checked on him, startled when I found his right eye cracked open, watching me. Careful not to hurt him, I gently laid my hand on his shoulder. “I’m sorry,” I mouthed, guilt tightening my throat. I never should have befriended him. Bad things always seemed to happen to those around me. Things that wouldn’t have happened if they hadn’t known me.

I really was a leech, sucking the life out of everyone I cared about.

Noah shook his head and closed his eye again. Before I could worry that he hated my guts now, he pressed his leg

against mine. At the reassuring weight, as if he was trying to comfort *me*, tears filled my eyes. I bit my lip to keep them from falling. Lochlan's brothers would no doubt look down on me even more if they saw me cry.

The bridge ended at a security checkpoint of sorts, complete with a gate arm. All Troy had to do was roll down his tinted window and the guards let us pass. They looked human this time of day, but I knew better. Come a few hours, their true selves would emerge.

I'd never been to an island before, despite the dozens of moves I'd endured over the years. Maybe Aunt Tess had thought they were too small, too open with limited ways to escape should vampires finally catch up with us. But my idea of what an island *should* look like was dashed the moment we hit the first street. For one, it was paved. Cars and street lights, shops and houses dotted the thoroughfare, reminding me of a decent-sized town. A *rich* town, by the look and size of the colonial-style homes.

Vampires lined the sidewalks—or what I assumed were vampires—going about their daily lives like ordinary humans. I gawked at the unexpected sight, completely caught off guard. At the first mention of an island run by vampires, I'd expected to find something dark and sinister, not *this*. There was order here, not the lawless pirate lifestyle I assumed vampires would live.

The island was actually huge, and it took us another hour to arrive at our final destination. The last several miles had been all pine trees and snow and windy roads. The secluded stretch was well taken care of though, and Troy's foreign-made car

had no trouble keeping traction. The farther we got from the bustling town, the more nervous I became. Ironic that I'd rather be surrounded by hundreds of vampires than face their king in a remote stretch of woods.

Even the thought of him chilling in a tiny log cabin by the fire didn't ease my nerves. So when I caught sight of the giant structure perched on top of the rocky coastline, I nearly had a heart attack.

It was a castle. *A castle.*

Like the kind you see in fairy tales.

The pale stone walls soared high into the sky, at least six stories, maybe more. Several turrets protruded from the steep roof, so high that I wondered how they didn't topple over. The arched windows were tall and narrow, and I shivered at the thought of the king at one of them this very moment, watching our approach.

As we pulled into the circular drive, I couldn't help but notice the roses. They were everywhere. Rose trees lined the drive, the flowers in full bloom, even in the middle of winter. Bushes surrounded the castle, full and well-manicured. Not a single white or pink rose graced the premises. They were all red, deep and rich as blood, the same hue as the ones Lochlan had given me.

I still didn't know what the significance of the action was, but I was beginning to think that roses played a part in who Lochlan was. Maybe the entire royal family, actually.

As we rolled to a stop, Everett turned to me. "Welcome to our world, witch." The beginnings of a smile curved his lips. It

was cold and cruel, devoid of all warmth. “I suggest you make peace with whatever gods you serve. Your life is ours now.”

24

KENNA

The air inside the castle was saturated with blood and opulence.

I'd never seen such a naked display of wealth before. Jewels and gold and crystal dripped from every surface. Marble, antique furniture, and priceless paintings adorned every hallway.

But what shocked me most was that every room we passed contained *humans*. If not for their smell, I might not have known, but my reaction to their scent was unmistakable. Other than Lochlan's, I'd had no desire for vampire blood.

Striding close beside me down the wide hallway, he studied my troubled frown. Seeming to understand my confusion, he murmured, "The royal family has staffed humans for hundreds of years. Most were born into this way of life and know nothing else. They are well taken care of for their many services."

Many services.

I swallowed hard, imagining all the ways they could *service* vampires. I had to bite my tongue so I wouldn't say something inappropriate, like how slavery and human trafficking were despicable actions. But if the king was five

hundred years old and as set in his ways as Lochlan suggested, then I doubted the chastisement of one girl was going to change the system.

Still, I could see the appeal from a vampire's perspective. No need to outsource or step foot off their island.

I glanced back to check on Noah for the umpteenth time. He was walking on his own, but barely. Troy had him by the arm, forcing him onward. Everett, of course, was leading the way at a fast clip, as if he couldn't wait to present me to the king. My feet grew heavier with each step, but I continued to follow, knowing that running at this point would be stupid.

If only I could have privately warned Lochlan ahead of time that his father already knew about me. I had a gut feeling that any leverage-worthy information was greatly needed right now.

"Three things you should know before entering the throne room, McKenna," he said quietly, his low voice echoing up the flight of marble stairs. "Do not approach my father's throne unless summoned, and bow when you reach the dais."

Oh fates, this was really happening. I was really going to meet the vampire king.

"A-and the third thing?" I stammered, my palms dampening with sweat.

"Do not look directly into his eyes. He will see it as a challenge."

"And you might want to keep that feisty mouth shut, too," Troy uttered. "The king has burned more than one witch at the stake for irritating him."

My legs almost gave out.

Lochlan shot his younger brother a death glare, but didn't correct him. Which meant that it must be true. Ah crap, I was so going to die.

When we reached the second floor, Everett led us down a long hallway lined with golden-framed mirrors. The effect was startling, making the space seem endless—not to mention the jarring feeling of being watched. I peeked at my reflection, only then realizing with horror that I hadn't brushed my hair today.

I was meeting a *king*, for fate's sake.

Even if the human world didn't recognize him as a powerful entity, this castle alone proved that he was. Trying not to appear conspicuous, I gathered my hair to the side and combed my fingers through the thick mass.

"You look beautiful," Lochlan's voice rumbled in a low murmur, sliding across my skin like silk.

Up ahead, Everett snorted in disgust. A fierce blush rose to my cheeks, not because his brother had heard, but at the sincere statement. I could feel that he wholeheartedly believed the words, and it was enough to shorten my breath.

His booted steps drew nearer, and I half-hoped that he'd take my hand. But his brothers were definitely paying attention now, a fact he seemed to realize in the nick of time. Still, my heart sank when he pulled away again, enforcing a respectable distance between us.

I couldn't tell if he was frustrated or relieved at this turn of events. Last night, there'd been a shift in his behavior toward

me. He'd allowed himself to be vulnerable in a way he hadn't before, and he'd openly communicated his deep desire for me.

But our interrupted conversation this morning was still bothering me. Despite the accusatory words I'd hurled at him, I didn't think his goal was to simply use and then kill me. There was too much between us. Too many whispered confessions and intimate moments. Not just lust-filled ones, but ones wrapped in tentative hope and promise.

Then why had he held himself back? Why was he still keeping secrets?

If he wanted me to reject our soulmate bond, then he was doing a crap poor job of telling me.

My stewing over our relationship status came to an end when the ornate doors ahead swung open. As we neared, the two male guards stationed there audibly inhaled, then shot me twin looks of hunger.

Gah!

"Stand down," Lochlan quietly growled at them, edging closer to me.

Even as they snapped straight and averted their eyes, Troy said, "Can't blame them. I'd like to sink my fangs in her too. Among other things."

Lochlan exploded. Whirling, he gripped his brother's throat and threw him before I could finish gasping. Troy slid across the marble floor into the throne room, laughing like a maniac as he went. Lochlan charged after him, but Everett shoved him back with a sharp warning.

“*Boys,*” a deep voice thundered, raising the hair on my arms. They immediately stopped, jerking their heads toward the far side of the room.

Oh crap, oh crap. There he was in the flesh. Ambrose. The vampire king.

Just like any good fairy tale, he was perched on a gold, velvet-cushioned throne. But that’s where the fairy tale ended and the nightmare began. I’d expected him to be old and crotchety, not arrestingly handsome and looking not a day over thirty. He was dressed in blacks and muted reds, managing to look casual yet elegant in perfectly pressed slacks. Even from here, I could see the family resemblance to his three sons. Medium olive skin and pitch black hair that was short on the sides and longer on top.

Even more alarming than his appearance, though, were the scantily clad women draped over the dais. There were five of them, all extremely attractive and wearing little more than silken negligees. The fabric was so sheer that I could see the dark outline of their nipples. Two were straddling the arm rests of the king’s throne, leaning into him with glazed expressions. It was then that I noticed where his hands were. Between their legs. Moving rhythmically under their thin dresses. My face burst into flames.

What the crap was this? An *orgy*?

He suddenly stood, bringing the two women with him. “Leave us, my darlings,” he purred, running his nose up both their necks. “We’ll continue this later. I’ve business with my sons to attend to.”

I gaped as the five women quietly left en masse, slipping down the dais steps and through a side door. Never in a million years did I expect to see something like *that*. My retinas were scarred for life.

Before I could collect myself, a sharp *whoosh* sounded. I yelped as fingers encircled my upper arms and whirled me around. I looked up and blanked. Every thought in my head vanished. *Poof*. Gone. Because there, inches from my face, was the king.

Wait, was I supposed to bow or something?

Oh, right. His eyes. I wasn't supposed to stare into his *eyes*.

But that's exactly what I was doing and couldn't seem to stop. The burnished red depths of his irises sucked me in, leaving me wholly vulnerable in his grip. He abruptly inhaled, releasing me from his stare when his eyes slid shut. "Finally," he breathed, reopening his eyes to scan my face. "It's been too long since a Syphon's cloying scent has graced these halls."

He released me, only to step back and carefully assess the rest of me. I held perfectly still, even as I ached to pinch my thigh. Daring to peek at Lochlan, I found him ramrod straight, his expression unreadable as he watched his father. I tuned into his emotions, immediately feeling his panic and fear. Did he always hide such intense emotions behind a mask of indifference?

"You are lovely," the king finally said, flashing me a crooked half smile. On anyone else, the smile would be charming, but I'd just seen his hands up two skirts. I wasn't exactly swooning over his attention. "Absolutely breathtaking,

really, if not a little tired and malnourished. Nothing my staff can't fix."

Um ...

"Tell me," he continued after a moment, leaning forward slightly to capture my gaze again. "Is it true that my middle son has been keeping you a secret these past two months?"

Oh no. Oh no, oh no, oh no.

He was using *thrall* on me!

I could feel the pull to answer him, like something was reaching inside me and tugging on the unformed words. I pressed my trembling lips together, fighting against the unrelenting urge to respond.

His gaze sharpened. "Tricky witch, you've ingested vampire blood recently. Well, I have a little secret of my own to tell you. I'm a very old and powerful Venturi with centuries of practice breaking down mental shields. So," he said, his voice sliding into a silken purr, one that Lochlan often used, "tell me what I want to know before I pry it from your pretty mouth by force."

"Father," Lochlan said softly, but with a hard edge.

Ambrose waved a dismissive hand, his penetrating gaze breaking me down bit by bit. "A simple yes or no is all I need."

My throat convulsed as the red in his eyes deepened, *demanding* I answer. And I had no choice. No choice but to blurt, "Y-yes," in a strangled voice.

His lips curved wickedly, reminding me so much of Everett that I full-body shivered. “Good girl. And why is it that he kept you a secret?”

“*Father,*” Lochlan said more sharply.

The king’s eyes reddened further, boring into mine so intensely that tears blurred my vision. “*Answer* me, girl.”

I choked, nearly biting my tongue off as my teeth chattered incessantly. “I-I’m—”

“Because of *this,*” Lochlan roared, suddenly beside me. He nudged me back a step, breaking my connection with the king. I inhaled a ragged breath and blinked the moisture from my eyes.

“The pressure is too much for them,” he continued, his fear and anger colliding inside my chest. “Every time we bring a Syphon here, disaster follows. They’re so terrified, so filled with *hatred* toward us, that the last thing they want is to help us break our curse.”

Ambrose’s eyes narrowed on his son. “And what would you have us do? *Coddle* them?”

“No, but treating them like prisoners of war isn’t helping either.”

The king paused for several beats, scrutinizing his son’s face. “You’ve never spoken like this before, not after all this time. What brought on this sudden change of heart?” His gaze, now filled with glittering malice, slid to me. I struggled not to cower behind Lochlan. “Is it her? Has she bewitched you?”

“No. She didn’t even know what she was until recently. She —”

“She touched my skin without using her abilities on me,” Everett interjected. “Lochlan is blinded to who she really is. Don’t let the innocent act fool you.”

Lochlan’s fury pumped through me. “You know *nothing* of who she is.”

“Because you *kept* her from us.” Everett rounded on his brother, his jaw set like stone.

“*Enough.*” The king’s voice cracked through the air like thunder.

“The drama,” Troy groaned from a few paces away where he was once again guarding Noah.

Ambrose turned to me again, his gaze like flint steel. “Did you put my son under a spell?”

Sweat slid down my spine, but I quickly shook my head. “No.”

“Did you lie to, manipulate, or otherwise enchant him?”

Another head shake.

He stared at me for a long moment, then he was suddenly in front of me. Grabbing a chunk of my hair, he forced my head back so that I had to look at him. Lochlan’s fierce growl drowned out my pained gasp, but the king didn’t even blink. “Answer me one last thing, McKenna Belmont. Do you wish to harm my son?”

Shock panged through my chest—Lochlan’s—at the mention of my name.

But as the king’s fingers tightened in my hair, sending pain shooting through my scalp, my focus narrowed to a fine point.

To answering him with all the conviction I felt, *without* the aid of thrall. “No. I would never hurt Lochlan. I wish to *help* him.”

25

KENNA

The silence was deafening.

I'd only just met Ambrose, but I knew a shocked expression when I saw one. He released my hair, his arm falling to his side. As quick as his surprise came, though, it vanished behind a contemplative look.

"That remains to be seen. But I hope, for your sake, that you're telling the truth. Guard," he said, snapping his fingers at the vampires stationed at the doors. "Fetch a lady's maid who can escort Miss Belmont to her room. I'd like her to freshen up and be well rested before she joins us for dinner this evening."

He abruptly turned his back on me, setting his sights on Noah. "Now, who is this sad oaf and why is he in my home?"

"He's no one of consequence," Troy spoke up, rolling his eyes to the ceiling as if bored. "We had to kidnap him. It was the only way we could get Loch here."

The king was silent for a moment, then, "Kill him. I have no use for a warlock."

"No!" I screamed, lunging toward Noah without thought. I hadn't been able to save his sister, but he was still alive and would *stay* that way. I wasn't going to lose another friend.

Before my vampire speed could kick in though, Lochlan's arms were around me. "No, Lochlan, let me *go*. I won't let them kill Noah!"

But he wouldn't release me, his hold around my middle almost painful as he squeezed me to him.

"*Silence*," the king snapped, with enough irritation that I froze. Remembering Troy's earlier warning, my heart skipped several beats. Freaking fates, I'd really done it this time. He was going to kill *me* now. "What is this?" he demanded, eyeing me, then Noah, then Lochlan. "Is he her lover or something?"

I nearly choked on my tongue.

"He's her friend," Lochlan replied, and it was Everett who rolled his eyes this time. "I ask that you not kill him. She's been through a lot lately, and killing him will only make it harder for her to concentrate on breaking the curse."

A tiny dart of hurt pricked my chest at his words. Words that came out impassively, like I was but a duty to him. I kept my mouth shut though, knowing he had a better chance of talking his father down than I did.

The king's attention drifted to Lochlan's hold on me. When suspicion darkened his eyes, Lochlan's arms dropped. He scrutinized his son for a lengthy amount of time, then fixed his gaze on me. "I'll make a deal with you, Syphon. Break the curse before it becomes permanent and I'll spare your friend."

My stomach hollowed out. I didn't like this deal, not one bit. Not if it meant gambling with someone's life. But as I

once again held his gaze, refusing to be cowed, I didn't see any other alternative. "A-and if I can't break the curse?"

"Then you *both* die," he said with finality.

Terror gripped my throat, made all the worse by the addition of Lochlan's tumultuous emotions. Inwardly, he was raging, a frothing sea of panic and fear. Outwardly, he was still as stone. I did my best to mimic his false calm, fisting my trembling hands.

When I was confident my voice wouldn't shake, giving away how utterly petrified I was, I replied, "Deal."

* * *

So far, my introduction to vampire island was less than amazing, but at least no one was dead.

Yet.

Noah was stuck in a cell somewhere inside the castle.

Lochlan was stuck in a meeting with his father and brothers.

And I was stuck on the fourth floor in the most luxurious room I'd ever seen.

I couldn't appreciate the airy, peaches-and-cream design though. Nor the king-sized canopy bed shrouded in light gauzy fabric. Or even the enormous attached bathroom, complete with a sunken tub large enough to swim in.

None of these amenities captured my attention, not when my friend's life was in danger and I'd been separated from Lochlan. He'd been about to protest when the maid had come to take me away, I was sure of it. But one look at his father and he'd allowed me to leave. Was he scared of Ambrose? Ever since his brothers had found us this morning, he'd been subdued—most of the time—hiding his emotions as well as he could. If I couldn't actually *feel* them, I'd think he was submitting to his brothers' and father's will with little fuss.

But it wasn't just a case of caving to a higher power. I felt the conflict within him. The suppressed energy he could barely contain. He was still fit to explode, and I worried what releasing all of that energy would do to him. I also worried what keeping it inside would do, more to *us* than him. I ached to talk to him, to help soothe his inner turmoil, but worried that the few strides we'd made were now smothered beneath the weight of his responsibilities.

An ornate clock on the antique ivory dresser helped me keep track of time as I paced the large room. I couldn't think of what else to do. The door was locked and guarded, and taking a nap was out of the question. The plush cream rug beneath my bare feet tested my resolve though. How could a rug be this *soft*?

An hour passed. The sun set outside the room's arched, paned windows. Fatigue tugged at my limbs, but I refused to lay on the gold-trimmed, thick bed comforter beckoning to me. The moment I did, I knew that I wouldn't be able to get up again. I'd succumb to my grief, unable to stop the beast from exploding from its cage. And when that happened, I'd be

useless. It would tear me to pieces, and I wouldn't have the strength to defend myself.

There was too much. Too much pain balled up within me. Too much loss. And if I let it all out, I would suffocate.

So I continued to pace, to distract my mind with every mundane thing I could think of. How was I going to graduate highschool if I was trapped here? Did the castle have internet access? Would the king give me art supplies if I asked? I really needed a pair of gloves too with so many vampires around.

I couldn't help but wonder what Everett had meant about me knowing more than I let on, though. He hadn't known about my spelled bracelet, so did that mean I really *could* control my abilities when I touched supernaturals?

Another hour dragged by. When the darkness outside was complete, I heard voices in the hallway. One in particular snagged my attention. No sooner did I recognize the voice than he came bursting through the door. I froze on the opposite end of the room near the windows, which allowed me to fully take him in. He did the same, sweeping his blood-red eyes over every inch of me as he quietly shut the door.

He was here. Lochlan was here.

Relief hit me hard. I shook all over from the force of it. My body screamed at me to go to him, to demolish the cruel space between us. But I hesitated, uncertain of his current feelings toward me. With his presence, I could feel his emotions once again, but they were all over the place. So chaotic, so powerful that I simply stared at him in mute silence.

Then he moved. So fast, so swiftly, that he devoured the space between us like it was nothing. Like it shouldn't exist. Like it was *offensive*, so he'd expunged it completely. A whimper caught in my throat when our bodies collided and desperately tangled together. He hugged me so hard that my feet left the ground. I wrapped my legs around him, locking my ankles behind his back.

Home, both my body and mind sighed, as his strength and warmth cocooned me. I didn't question it, too happy to have him near. To have my doubts erased. To physically feel that he still cared.

He held me impossibly close, one gloved hand splayed across my lower back, the other cradling my head against his shoulder. I buried my nose in his leather jacket, inhaling his scent like a deprived junkie. As peace settled over me, I allowed my composure to slip. Just an inch. But enough to let a shuddering sob free.

Lochlan pressed his face to my hair, his mouth inches away from touching my ear. He didn't seem to notice though, too focused on comforting me.

How did he do it? Make me feel so utterly cherished and wanted with a single touch?

Everything else faded, becoming inconsequential the moment he blessed me with his undivided attention. I could stay like this, wrapped in his embrace for an eternity, and be perfectly content. I'd always want more, because I could never get enough of him, but I'd be happy. If only remaining exactly where I was for all time were an option. But reality always caught up to us.

“Are you okay?” His voice washed over me like the sun on a warm afternoon.

“I am now,” I mumbled against his jacket, basking in the tingly sensations that came from being held in his arms. “Is Noah okay?”

“He’s fine. My father honors his deals. As long as the curse doesn’t become permanent, your friend won’t be harmed.”

Relief trembled through me.

“I’m sorry you were brought here,” he began, but I cut him off.

“Don’t be. It’s better than being on the run. I’m so sick of running. The situation isn’t ideal, but not completely hopeless. I just have to figure out how to break the curse before February. Easy, right?”

Yeah, I wasn’t very convincing.

He gently pulled my head back so I could see his face. “You won’t have to do it alone. I’ll be here, as will my brothers. It’s protocol to remain on the island once I bring in a new Syphon.”

I hid a wince, some of my happiness slipping at the reminder that I was one of many. “Are you scared of them? Your father and brothers, I mean.” I chewed on my bottom lip, worried that the question was too invasive and he’d throw up his shields again.

Despite the midnight shade of his skin, I caught the dimple forming in his left cheek. “No. But I’m terrified of what they could do to you, especially if they find out what we are to each

other.” The dimple vanished as his gaze intensified. Fates, it was like staring into a boiling hot oven.

He continued to search my face, as if he’d find a hidden answer there. Then his words suddenly hit me. My eyes widened.

Oh. *Oh.*

Satisfied at whatever he’d found, Lochlan released me from his probing stare and brushed a gloved thumb over my cheek. “When did you find out?”

I gulped, suddenly overcome with nerves. Still, I managed to stammer, “L-last night. Kade spilled the beans when you were hulked out.”

He huffed a quiet laugh and shook his head. “Of course he did.” After a moment, he sobered again. His uncertainty panged through my chest, but he spoke his mind anyway. “Does it scare you?”

Startled that he’d asked me, my first instinct was to say no. I’d never felt this close to anyone my entire life. We had a connection I’d only ever dreamed about but thought I’d never have. If being his soulmate was what kept this bond alive, then I was okay with that.

Right?

Then why did I nod *yes* instead?

“It scares me too,” he said after a while, tucking wayward hair behind my ear.

Because you don’t want it? I tried to say, but couldn’t. Because, I realized with certain clarity, it was why our

soulmate bond scared me. Because this was always going to be one-sided. He'd never truly want me. Not in the way I imagined two souls would want each other.

So, instead, I took a more cautious approach. "Because of your vow?"

"Yes," he openly admitted. But before I could feel the sting of hurt, he grasped my chin and softly said, "Because, with each second I spend with you, my resolve weakens. I'm terrified, because I'd rather break every last vow I've ever made than be separated from you. A lifetime's worth of ironclad purpose and duty, all crumbling to dust because I desperately want what I shouldn't have."

My heart threatened to tear free of my ribs. Was this real? I couldn't breathe, too overcome by his confession. No. I must have misheard. I must have, because Lochlan D'angelo would never admit such a thing to me. "You," I whispered, my voice quavering. "You want me? You want our bond?"

He swept his thumb over my bottom lip, dipping his head as if to kiss me. My heart leapt into my throat, but I didn't bridge the miniscule gap between our lips. Neither did he. His voice was strained, as if that small space was slowly killing him. "More than anything I've ever wanted. More than anything I'll ever want for the rest of my immortal life."

Joy erupted inside of me. So much joy that it hurt to breathe.

This was real. He really wanted me. Not just my body, but *me*.

At the realization, I felt a sharp tug. As if a hand reached inside of me and grabbed my very soul. Lochlan jerked against me, as if he felt it too. When the feeling subsided, we were both left breathless, staring at each other in shocked amazement.

“What,” I panted, “was *that*?”

Equally out of breath, Lochlan said, “I think our souls ... briefly connected.”

“*What?*” I squeaked, freaked out and elated at the same time. Lochlan *wanted* me! “So, what, they *touched* each other?”

“Something like that.”

“So not fair.”

He suddenly laughed. The sound was so light and carefree that all I could do was stupidly gawk at him. I ached to touch him, to run my fingertips over every inch of his beautiful face. His laughter subsided and he studied me thoughtfully—thoroughly—before saying, “You wish to touch me?”

My heart stopped. “D-did you just—?”

“No, I didn’t read your mind, McKenna. I still can’t do that.” A ghost of a smile graced his lips. “I’m just good at guessing your thoughts.”

“Oh, really?” I quipped. “Then what am I thinking right now?”

“That you’d like to kiss me.”

I flushed scarlet. “Wait, no. That’s what *you’re* thinking. Not me.”

“I won’t deny it. I’ve wanted to kiss you ever since you showed up at my house in the pouring rain, sopping wet and demanding answers. Your bravery was the first thing I admired about you.”

“You ...” Fates, I was so lost. So lost in him that I forgot what I was going to say.

With me still wrapped around him like a koala bear, he stepped toward the antique dresser and set me on top. Disentangling my hands from his jacket, he guided them to the dresser, but let me keep my legs around him.

“I want to try something,” he said softly, “but I need to be in control.”

I nodded, struggling to swallow as my mouth dried. What was he ...?

When he leaned forward, solely focused on my lips, I panicked and placed both hands on his chest to stop him. “Lochl—”

He gripped my wrists and had them pinned to the wall on either side of my head before I could finish expelling his name. “No sudden movements, McKenna.”

“But ... but we *can’t*. We can’t do this, Lochlan. You said so yourself. I’ll hurt you.”

I’ll kill you! Just like I killed that rogue vampire a couple days ago, my mind screamed.

Ah crap. I knew that look in his eyes. *Determination.*

“Do you want to hurt me?”

“No, of course not. But—”

“Then don’t. That’s the first step to learning control. You have to want it. *Really* want it. And if you don’t want to hurt me, then you won’t.”

My breath hitched. “Wait, are you saying I can control my abilities?”

“Of course you can. But you can’t be afraid of or fight who you are. Accept your abilities. Only then can you master them.”

My heart fluttered with reckless hope, even as my eyes narrowed suspiciously. “How do you know all this?”

He smirked widely, and I’d never wanted to kiss the secret-keeping idiot more. “Research. Lots and lots of research. And a bit of personal experience.”

“And you know for a fact that I can touch your skin without hurting you?”

“That’s what I’m saying.”

“Then why didn’t you *tell* me?” I cried, wanting to strangle and hug him at the same time. He had the decency to look guilty, at least.

“Because you could use the knowledge against me. Because I feared you’d try to touch me. I still can’t shake that feeling. It’s been ingrained in me for so long.”

Sadness squeezed my heart, the emotion solely mine.

“But I want to touch *you*,” he continued in hushed tones, soothing away some of my hurt. “Just for a moment. To see if it’s possible.”

Nervous energy shivered through me. So many things could go wrong. I had no idea if I could stop the instinct to pull his essence into myself, just like I had with the magic-infused objects. I would die if I did. Utterly die of shame and mortification. I could hurt him terribly. But I didn't want to. Fates, I'd rather peel off my own skin than hurt him.

And maybe that was why I said yes.

Both our hearts began to pound at that one whispered word. He searched my face as if he'd heard me wrong.

Yes, I let my eyes emphatically say. Touch me. Please, touch me.

I wanted this. I wanted this with him so badly that I struggled to breathe.

He swallowed roughly, silently asking once more if I was certain. When I nodded, his relief rushed through me. Then he slowly, ever so slowly, lowered his head.

Oh fates. Oh fates. Don't hurt him, don't hurt him, I inwardly chanted, every inch of me trembling with nervous anticipation. I conjured up my anchor, imagining my skin as a sieve. But this time, I blocked up the holes so that nothing could pass through.

When the tip of his nose brushed mine, I sucked in a gasp. He paused, tightening his hold on my wrists. "Just breathe, McKenna. Stay calm and focused."

Stay calm. Don't fight it. Don't suck the life out of him, I chanted harder, trying not to hyperventilate.

He dipped lower, until all I could see was him. I shut my eyes, wholly concentrating on the charged air between us. Any

moment now. Any moment and his lips would touch mine. Skin-to-skin. No barriers. Just him and me, the way it should have been all along.

When that moment finally came, my world shifted.

And I knew I'd never be the same again.

26

LOCHLAN

The moment our lips touched, everything I knew flipped on its axis.

The pressure was featherlight, barely a kiss at all, but I allowed my skin to touch hers. Freely. Without fear or coercion. Something I never thought I'd be capable of doing. And what stunned me most was that I *wanted* to. Not because of our bond, but as a man wanting to kiss a woman. I marveled at the uncomplicated feeling, a feeling that set aside our many differences and let us simply be in the moment.

I expected her unique power to kick in, forcing me to retreat. But it didn't. She was anything but calm, though. Her hands trembled. Her heart beat out of control. Still, she didn't move. Barely even breathed. Doing her utmost not to harm me.

So I dared to test her.

Slowly caressing her bottom lip with mine, I applied more pressure, fully sealing our mouths together. She shuddered at the contact, clenching my hips between her thighs. I growled softly, pleased by her reaction. My confidence grew and I pressed my luck even more, stealing a quick taste of her parted lips.

Exquisite, like raindrops on a moonlit night.

At the pleasure it gave me, I nearly lost my own control. Nearly drowned in the heady taste of her skin. In the aching softness of her lips.

She was perfect. Like the universe had created her just for me.

I'd imagined this moment hundreds of times, but nothing compared to the real thing. To feeling her skin's warmth seep into mine. To hearing her breath hitch. To basking in the flood of emotions assailing me, some of them mine and an equal amount hers.

She was pure innocence and light and wonder, the opposite of my cold, dark shadows. But in this moment, she was sharing a piece of that light with me. Chasing my darkness away, simply by being her.

I pulled back far too soon, unwilling to push her control further. My body roared its displeasure. It wanted to devour her lips. To pillage her mouth inside and out until we were both gasping with need. But it didn't want to stop there. Every inch of my body wanted to complete our soul bond. Right here. Right now. Not to mention the insatiable thirst it had for another drop of her blood.

Take her, it incessantly demanded. Claim your mate before anyone can stop you.

Because they would. My father and brothers would be *furious* to know that I'd made a detour here on the way to my own suite. They were already suspicious. *Way* too close to

guessing the truth. I'd been more secretive than usual, and they in turn were as well.

How my father had already known about McKenna was still a mystery. I'd questioned him and he'd questioned me, but neither of us wanted to give up our leverage. One misstep, one hint of our bond, and he'd tear us apart. Maybe even kill McKenna in a fit of shocked rage.

I couldn't let that happen. Even with the bond still incomplete, it would kill me to lose her. She was part of my soul now. I'd felt it earlier, the moment our souls had merged as one. Only for a split second, but long enough that I yearned for them to be joined together again. Forever.

I knew then that the battle was over. I could no longer resist her; my fight was gone. The vow I'd sworn never to break lay in tatters at my feet.

She was my world now. My whole world. And I'd no doubt let the rest of the world burn if it tried to keep us apart.

But I couldn't claim her today. Or tomorrow. She was decidedly untrained and needed a firmer grasp on control if we were to complete the bond. And I needed to come clean. About our mutual past history. About what Kade was doing.

There was still a chance she wouldn't want me after she knew everything. Still a chance that she'd reject our soulmate bond. And I wouldn't blame her, even if the rejection tore my soul in two.

"I should go," I said, reluctantly ending the perfect moment. "My father and brothers can't discover me here."

With her eyes still closed, she took a moment to catch her breath. I released her wrists but didn't step back, enjoying how our closeness affected one another. She reached up and touched her bottom lip, blinking open her beautiful silver eyes.

“What?” she dazedly said, as if waking from a trance.

A self-satisfied smile tugged at my lips. *Oh, we're just getting started, mate*, I inwardly purred, wishing we were still holed up in that dingy motel room. The things I wanted to do to her. Things that would make her scream my name.

“I have to go,” I repeated, ignoring the way my pants tightened uncomfortably. “A maid will be in shortly to help you prepare for dinner. I'll find a way to visit later this evening though. I have something important to tell you.”

She blinked again, clearing her throat. “So do I, actually. But it can't wait. I overheard Clarice, the headmistress at Thornecrest Academy, on the phone with your father. They were talking about me and some kind of deal they've made. A ... a *pactum*, I think.”

Alarm shot through me, followed by wild disbelief. My father? Forming a pactum with a *witch*? A powerful, manipulative Darken at that. She'd kept me, my brothers, and Kade at bay with a temporary protection spell while we'd fruitlessly cajoled her into releasing McKenna. She had made it sound like McKenna was content at the institute and didn't want to leave. Hopefully, I'd someday learn what really happened the week we were apart, but there were more pressing matters to discuss.

Wrestling my worry and anger at my father under control, I focused on calmly saying, “Why didn't you tell me sooner?”

Her gaze dropped. “I worried that if you knew, you’d take me directly to the king and wouldn’t let me rescue Isla.”

At the pain in her voice, guilt pressed down on me. She was still deeply mourning her friend, and I couldn’t blame her continued suffering on anyone but myself. I opened my mouth, desperate to ease her pain, but quickly closed it. Kade hadn’t called back yet. It was only a matter of time though. He wouldn’t drag this on longer than necessary.

“I understand why you’d think that,” I said instead, gently tilting her chin up. One glimpse of her tear-filled eyes and my gut clenched miserably. Still, I plowed on, knowing she deserved an explanation.

“Duty and loyalty to my family and kingdom have ruled my life for over a century. They’ve molded my decisions, good and bad, falsely freeing me from the consequences of my actions. I had no desire to question my responsibilities, which allowed me to live an emotionless half life. Then I met you. And now, I want nothing more than to be fully alive, to *feel* each moment in every day. You woke me up, McKenna. For that, I will do anything for you. I hope you know that.”

Her chin wobbled, and she quickly brushed a tear away. Before she could reply, a knock sounded on the door.

“Miss Kenna? I’m here to help you get ready.”

The maid poked her head in a second later, but I was already across the room, pulling the door open. She jerked back, squeaking in surprise. When she saw that it was me, fear saturated the air and she hastily bowed her head. “Prince Lochlan, I-I didn’t know you would be here.”

“I’m not,” I responded, and she hurriedly nodded in understanding, stepping aside as I exited the room. Before she could scurry inside, I added in a low voice, “Give McKenna anything she needs. Her comfort is your priority.”

Startled, she broke protocol and looked up at me. In the past, I would have firmly put her in her place with a warning growl and flash of my fangs, but all I did was lift a brow as she boldly searched my face. After a moment, she curtsied, a clear sense of curiosity replacing her fear. “As you wish, my prince. You can count on me.”

I left without saying goodbye to McKenna, knowing that doing so would raise the maid’s curiosity even more. The humans in our castle didn’t often gossip for fear of the consequences, but I wasn’t about to test their loyalty.

Less than an hour later, I was heading down to dinner, freshly shaved, showered, and dressed in black slacks and a matching jacket trimmed in gold, with a burgundy red shirt underneath. My father would be pleased to see me wearing the royal family colors, which should hopefully make him think twice about questioning my loyalty.

There was nothing I could do about Everett and Troy though. The ragged remains of our brotherly bond was the only thing keeping them from telling our father everything. If I destroyed that completely, there was no telling what they’d do. Maybe it was time for me to rebuild that bridge, even if the new frame was fashioned from lies and deceit. The only thing that truly mattered was keeping them away from McKenna while she figured out how to break the curse.

If I had to betray them in order for that to happen, then so be it.

McKenna entered the dining room last, wearing the same clothes she'd arrived in. I suppressed a smile, knowing that it was her attempt at a "screw you" to my father. The maid had no doubt stressed how formal these family dinners were, suggesting a wide array of appropriate dresses for her to wear. She tilted her head back to admire the room's decor, completely oblivious to the four pairs of eyes on her.

"Miss Belmont," my father said, rising from his spot at the head of the dining table. "So good of you to join us. There's a spot for you next to Troy."

My brothers and I rose as well, watching as she froze just inside the doors. She was clearly overwhelmed, probably by the fact that all four of us were in our true forms, and I worried that she'd bolt. My father wouldn't look kindly on what he considered a prey's weak instinct. He'd probably force her to come back, kicking and screaming.

I willed her to look at me. When she did, easily distinguishing me from the others, I pushed calming thoughts toward her through our bond. Telling her with my eyes that I was here and would protect her. With my very life if I had to.

The tension in my shoulders eased as she took a step, then another, heading for the red-upholstered chair across from me. Before she could touch it, I pinned Troy with a look. He caught my stare and rolled his eyes, but pulled the chair out for her anyway.

When we were all seated, she promptly slipped her hands beneath the table. I immediately knew she was pinching her

thigh, something she did when she was nervous or afraid. The habit probably helped her body release endorphins, which would minimize the stressful feelings. I hated when she did it though, because it meant she was in pain.

“I’m surprised you didn’t run screaming from the room at the mere sight of us,” my father mused with a wry tilt of his lips, picking up his drink. “The Syphons who get this far usually do.”

I stiffened at the jab, one meant to remind her of the previous Syphon’s untimely demise. She answered before I could intervene though, saying with a shrug, “This isn’t the first time I’ve been surrounded by vampires at night. And running isn’t really my style.”

“Neither are dresses, I see,” my father countered, throwing her cropped sweater a disdainful look.

Instead of shrinking under his judgmental stare, she straightened in her seat. “Oh, I like dresses. Just not sheer ones that show everyone my nipples.”

Troy spat his drink across the table. Everett glared at him as a few droplets hit his jacket.

My father tipped his gold goblet toward McKenna. “Touché. I’ll see that your wardrobe is adjusted to better suit your tastes.”

She nodded in return. “Thank you.”

I settled back in my seat, stunned at how well she was handling the situation. Pride warmed my chest, and as it did, she flicked me a glance. Keeping my expression neutral, I let the pride swell, making certain she could feel it. Flustered, she

blushed, her cheeks turning a rosy hue. She reached for her drink, but paused with the goblet inches from her lips.

“This is blood.”

My father drank deeply from his own goblet of blood before saying, “So it is. My sons informed me of your temporary *condition*. I didn’t think you’d mind.”

“Not at all,” she replied and took a tentative sip, even as unease filled her at having four pairs of eyes on her. As the blood slid down her throat, she began to noticeably tremble. In no time, she drained the entire goblet.

“There will be food too,” I told her quietly, sensing how hungry she was. “Vampires, especially Venturi, don’t need to eat or drink as frequently as mortals, so we often make poor hosts.”

I shot Everett and my father pointed glances.

My father chuckled good-naturally, but I still caught the underlying note of resentment at having to house his enemy. “We will do our utmost to accommodate your needs, Miss Belmont. You’re our *guest*, after all.” He practically hissed the word.

“And what about Noah?” McKenna blurted. “Will he get enough to eat and drink too?”

When the king flashed his fangs in barely concealed contempt, I answered before he could. “I’ll make certain that he does, along with anything else he needs.”

As she shot me a grateful look, Everett aggressively leaned forward in his chair. “But our hospitality ends the second you fail to break the curse, witch. Don’t forget that.”

She flinched, noticeably enough to put a cruel smirk on Everett's face. A warning growl ripped from my throat before I could contain it. My father's attention locked on me. When his gaze narrowed shrewdly, I inwardly cursed my instinctive need to protect McKenna.

The food came then, brought in by human servers. Instead of breaking the tension though, their presence heightened it. My brothers barely ate food anymore, which was common for older Venturi. I ate on occasion, but not nearly as much as Kade. My father didn't eat at all, but I wasn't worried about him at the moment. He wouldn't publicly drink from his staff members. My brothers, on the other hand, had no such qualms.

Sure enough, as soon as a pretty young female server came within range, Troy snagged her waist. She didn't make a sound as he hauled her into his lap and set her serving tray on the mahogany table with a loud *clunk*. Neither Everett nor my father batted an eyelash, so accustomed were they to this behavior. But McKenna flushed scarlet, staring in horrified silence as Troy adjusted the girl's legs to straddle him.

"You may begin," the king said when each of us had been served. An empty plate was set to the right of McKenna, but before I could question it, Troy chose that moment to dig in. Literally. He bared his fangs and sank them deeply into the server's neck. The girl stiffened for a moment, then moaned breathlessly and sagged against him.

As I felt McKenna's horror morph into panic, I tried to distract her by picking up a spoon and urging her to do the same. Only richly flavorful foods appealed to my tastebuds, but unlike Kade, I preferred savory over sweet. The chef had

prepared me a heavily spiced soup chock full of pork, potatoes, and carrots. I'd barely taken a sip of the broth when Troy decided to take things too far. He grabbed the server's breast over her uniform and roughly kneaded the flesh. She moaned again, clearly intoxicated by his venom.

McKenna's face went white as she got an eye and earful, her chair mere feet away. I clenched my utensil, bending the metal until it broke with a loud *snap*. My father looked on with amusement, casually sipping his drink. Everett ignored the scene completely, choosing instead to down his glass in one gulp, then waggle his fingers for more.

When Troy's hand left the girl's breast and slipped out of view beneath the table, I lost my patience, snapping, "*Troy*."

He paused, sliding his fangs from the girl to glance up at me. By the drunken look on his face, I knew it was pointless to talk sense into him. He clearly didn't care if his actions made McKenna uncomfortable. He may have in fact done it on purpose, just to show her how easily he could control humans. He went back to feeding, but at least I could see both his hands now.

"So tell me, Miss Belmont," my father finally said, swirling the blood in his goblet, "what kind of life have you lived during your short time here on earth?"

She tore her gaze away from the scene beside her to blink at the king. "Um, I ... a normal one?"

His chuckle this time was pure amusement, as if she was a child who'd said something adorably dumb. I picked up my fork, ready to chuck it at his head.

“She’s been on the run for fifteen years with her guardian,” I interjected, hoping to divert his attention so she could finally eat. “She hasn’t been able to live much of a life at all, no thanks to us.”

He threw me a slightly annoyed look. “No thanks to us? Our ancestors didn’t place a curse on her kind.”

“No, but we started the bloodshed.”

His expression grew thunderous in the blink of an eye. “Need I remind you what was *done* to you? We had a tentative peace with the witches before one of them swooped in and—”

“*Enough*,” I roared, shooting to my feet. My chair noisily clattered to the floor, jolting Troy from his bloodlust.

I clenched my hands into fists, waiting for my father to put me in my place. All three of his sons were dominant alpha males, a fact that he was proud of. But we weren’t allowed to treat him with disrespect. I waited. We all did. But he simply stared at me with his head cocked to the side.

He made us wait some more, drawing out the suspense before saying in a soft voice, “She doesn’t know.”

Every inch of me froze.

His eyes widened. “You don’t *want* her to know. But why? You’ve never kept a Syphon in the dark before. Unless you’re protecting her from the truth for some reason.” He studied my closed-off expression, concern knitting his brow. “What aren’t you telling me, son?”

Before I could concoct a half-truth that would throw him off the scent, a crackle of energy, of *magic*, filled the room. Immediately recognizing the dark signature smell, I lunged for

McKenna the quickest way I could. Bowls, plates, and utensils went crashing to the floor as I hurtled over the table and drew her into my protective embrace.

The energy grew, forming a billowing ball of purple shadows. When it was man-sized, a silhouetted figure gracefully stepped through.

As the woman and her crow familiar emerged, a growl tore from my throat.

“*Darken,*” I hissed.

The witch turned my way and smiled.

“Sorry I’m late,” Headmistress Mayweather said in her low, accented voice, striding into the dining room like she belonged there. “The coordinates were slightly off and I nearly ended up in the ocean.” At her husky laughter, Lochlan clutched me to him, as if he expected her to whisk me away.

His brothers were now on their feet too, hissing at the unexpected guest. Nautilus flapped his wings at them, but remained on his mistress’s shoulder. The poor server girl had ended up on the floor, dazed and confused. When the portal closed, Clarice didn’t even flinch, seemingly unconcerned.

“Stand down, boys,” the king said, waving for them to sit again. “I invited her here. Clarice, welcome to my home.”

She inclined her head toward him. “Thank you for having me, Ambrose, and for honoring your word.” Her eyes briefly swept the room before landing on me. “I’m relieved to find you unharmed, Kenna. I was so worried when you took off.”

“What is going on here?” Everett barked, refusing to sit. We all did.

“The headmistress and I have struck a deal. A pactum, actually,” the king replied.

“*What?*” both Everett and Troy shouted, talking over each other as they demanded answers.

“What’s a pactum?” I quietly asked Lochlan.

Apparently, the king was more interested in our exchange than answering his sons, because he said over the noise, “A pactum is a verbal oath sealed in blood. Once the blood of all participating parties intermingles, the deal is binding. It can be broken, but at great cost to the offending party.”

“Which is why I don’t understand how you could have bound yourself to her,” Lochlan said, his tone accusatory. “What could you possibly gain by doing this?”

“She agreed to hand over the Syphon,” he said, pinning his son with a look. “Something you refused to do.”

“And what do *you* get out of this deal?” I tossed at Clarice, my anger at being spoken about like a pawn in a game lending me confidence. I pulled free of Lochlan’s hold to stand on my own two feet. He allowed it, but remained close enough to warm my back.

“I am sorry for my deceit, Kenna. You weren’t supposed to find out about the deal this way.” The headmistress removed her glasses to rub the bridge of her nose. “If Noah hadn’t foolishly helped you leave the academy, we would have met with the elders, then convened with the king and his sons on neutral ground as agreed upon. Everything would have gone much smoother.”

“Noah told me about the elders,” I spat, shaking with barely concealed rage. “About what they did to his mom. Did

they kill my parents too? I know that the plane crash was a lie. I know that they were *murdered!*”

Her eyes darted to the king, so fast that I almost missed it. “Kenna, please calm down. Noah Andrews has always hated the elders. He wants the witch community to do away with them, so of course he’d falsely accuse them of murder. It’s true that they reprimanded his mother for keeping you a secret, but she died of natural causes.”

Her words punched me in the gut. I clutched at the nauseating pain building in my stomach. “They came after his mother ... because of me?”

Sympathy softened her sharp features and she moved as if to comfort me. Lochlan immediately blocked her, growling a warning. He didn’t need to though. If she touched me, I’d grab her hand and do what I did best.

Leach the magic from her.

“So much drama,” Troy groaned, slumping into his chair. He picked up the fallen girl and set her on his lap again before adding, “Let’s get this surprise meeting over with so I can finish my dinner in private.” He slid his hand up the girl’s thigh, clearly letting us know what his evening plans entailed. I would have worried for the girl, had she not spread her legs and urged his hand higher.

Fates, the PDA in this place was almost worse than the feeding den.

Eventually, we all reclaimed our seats, with one exception. Lochlan pulled me to his side of the table, situating my chair within inches of his. No one said a word, but there were plenty

of exchanged looks. Lochlan didn't seem to care. A pair of servers scurried forward and cleaned up the mess, while another replaced any spilled drinks or destroyed dishes. Lochlan nudged my full plate closer to me, but I'd officially lost my appetite. Again.

"Shouldn't the rest of the council be a part of this meeting?" Everett asked his father when the servers had left the room.

The king didn't immediately reply, quietly dividing his attention between me and Lochlan. At the contemplative look on his face, like he was trying to solve a puzzle, I started to scoot my chair away. Lochlan grasped the seat of my chair before I could. Feeling his protective instincts go haywire, I suppressed the urge to comfort him. Instead, I folded my hands into my lap.

"I'd like to do things differently this time," Ambrose finally said, stroking his chin. "Even if that means working peaceably with our enemy. Lochlan might be onto something."

Everett's jaw slackened in disbelief. "But you never do things differently. Protocol states—"

"Protocol states whatever I want it to state," the king interrupted with a flick of his fingers. "This is our last chance to get things right, so a little change might be a good thing. The council hasn't helped us break the curse in the past. In fact, their suggestions usually result in a swift, bloody end to the Syphon involved."

I dug my fingernails into my palms, trying to hide my alarm. Lochlan must have felt it though. His fingers brushed

against my thigh, the only comfort he could offer without being seen.

“So what do you suggest we do then?” Troy said, oblivious to the way Clarice was side-eyeing him and the serving girl with disapproval.

“Keep our own council—which now includes Headmistress Mayweather,” the king stated.

“But why *her*?” Everett growled. He slammed his fist on the table, rattling the dishes.

“Because we want the same thing,” Clarice replied, unruffled by the violent display.

“And what is that?” Everett openly sneered at her.

“To protect the supernatural world from anarchy by breaking the vampire curse. If the curse becomes permanent, who do you think humans will target first? Our leaders. Cut off the head and the rest will crumble. It’s a tried and true war strategy. Without a ruling body, humans will persecute us all, maybe even eradicate supernaturals completely. They outnumber us and have superior technology. Fighting them would be a death sentence. I’m sure your council and my elders would agree, which is why Ambrose and I decided to join forces for the sake of supernaturals everywhere.”

And I was the linchpin, whether I wanted to be or not. Whether *they* wanted me to be or not. And in that moment, it finally hit me how important I was in all this. Which was why I decided to do something incredibly stupid.

Here goes nothing.

My legs wobbled as I stood and cleared my suddenly dry throat. When five powerful gazes turned to me, I gripped the table's edge, barely able to stand under their combined force. "Um, I just want to say that although it wasn't my choice to come here, I support your cause. Breaking the curse will allow for the least amount of bloodshed, and I'll do whatever I can to make that happen."

Freaking fates, this was so much harder than I thought it would be. *Just rip off the bandaid and get it over with, Kenna!* I plowed ahead before I could lose my nerve. Or pass out.

"I-I didn't grow up in the supernatural world, but I've come to understand a few things about it. Which is why I'd like to make a deal of my own in exchange for my full cooperation. First, I want Noah Andrews to be set free." I didn't miss the shocked look on Clarice's face. "Second, I want the freedom to roam the castle as I please. No being treated like a prisoner. And third, I want Lochlan to teach me how to control my abilities. I-if he agrees to, that is."

The room exploded in protest the moment I sat back down, my legs unable to hold me any longer.

Everett was the loudest, of course, outraged that I'd have the gall to demand anything at all. Troy was the most upset about me having freedom to roam the castle at will, and Clarice kept asking about Noah. Lochlan was silent, but the moment I sat down again, I felt his pride warm my insides.

When the room eventually quieted, all eyes went to the king, who also hadn't spoken. He continued to stroke his chin, studying me thoughtfully. "Is that all?" he simply said, lifting a brow.

I squeezed my thighs together, worried that any second now, he'd laugh in my face. Then probably throw me in a cell next to Noah. "I'd like some art supplies. And I don't want to be killed if I fail to break the curse. I promise that I'll try my hardest to free you all. I won't try to escape. Just ... please don't kill me."

He stilled. My heart rate skyrocketed. Crap, I'd asked for too much. He hated me, so of *course* he wouldn't agree to this. I was already at his mercy, so why would he feel inclined to accommodate me?

He suddenly smiled. Not in a congenial way, but in a disconcerting "I'm on to you, witch. Tread very very carefully" way. So it was all the more shocking when he leaned forward and replied, "I say deal. What say the rest of you?"

A chorus of "absolutely not" and "no way" came from Everett and Troy.

"Deal," Lochlan said, which earned me a hateful glare from Everett.

"Clarice?" Ambrose inquired, and all eyes turned to the headmistress.

I held my breath, uncertain how she would vote. I still didn't know what her endgame was, and I was pretty sure she had one.

"Deal," Clarice replied after a moment. Nautilus cawed as if in agreement. "But with one stipulation. I want Mr. Andrews to act as my emissary. He'll keep an eye on Kenna for me while she resides here and report to me with any progress.

After that, he may go free. Unfortunately, the moment he steps foot off this island, he will be excommunicated. But I might be able to convince the elders not to bind his magic if he completes this final task I'm asking of him."

"How?" I said sharply, not hiding how much I distrusted her. "How do I know you're not just saying what I want to hear? How do I know the elders will listen to you? How do I know they'd even *approve* of this deal you've made with King Ambrose?"

She smiled at me almost sadly. "Because I am one, Kenna. I'm an elder."

* * *

Because I am one.

She was *one* of them. Clarice Mayweather was a freaking *elder*. I should have known somehow. I should have *seen* it, even though I knew so little about them. I trusted her even less now, making that abundantly clear the entire rest of the evening.

The meeting had ended somewhat amicably, with the king agreeing to release Noah from his cell in the morning, provided he adhere to a list of house rules. Clarice had portaled back to the academy, with promises that she'd return for future meetings. I'd been allowed to walk the halls on my own as promised, but instead of revelling in my newfound freedom by exploring the dozens and dozens of rooms, I'd hurried to my bedroom.

Hours later, I turned from the fire crackling in the ornate marble fireplace and finally readied for bed. Nothing short of complete exhaustion would allow me to sleep tonight though. There were too many things troubling me. Like how Clarice had glanced at the king when I'd mentioned my parent's murder, not even denying my accusation. Like how Lochlan had stopped his father from telling me about his past. I knew he had demons—everyone did—but the longer he protected me from them, the more frustrated I became.

Was he really protecting me, or was he protecting *himself* from me?

I rifled through the dresser drawers the maid had stored my things in, searching for the shirt Lochlan had let me “borrow.” I hadn't given it back, of course, knowing that I'd need it in moments like this. The second I found it, I greedily inhaled his lingering scent before slipping it on. The small comfort instantly soothed my harried emotions, and I felt some of the tension drain out of me.

Allowing myself a fleeting moment of whimsy, I switched my focus from the many things I couldn't control to something I could. I touched my lips and recalled every last detail of the kiss I'd shared with Lochlan.

A kiss that had been nothing short of magical.

I'd been kissed a few times before by inexperienced boys with sloppy lips. But Lochlan was all man with more than a little experience. His expertise never made me feel inept though. In reality, his confidence boosted my own, making me feel sensual and desirable. And when he'd kissed me ...

The world had literally ceased to exist.

Nothing mattered but the feel of our skin touching. It was everything, the only thing that made sense in the world. It was want and happiness and *home*.

Lochlan had been right. All I had to do was focus on what I wanted and my abilities could be controlled. I'd wanted nothing more than to feel his lips on mine, so I'd made it happen. And now that I'd had a taste, there was no going back. I'd master my abilities if it was the last thing I did, all so that we could kiss again. And again. And again.

A dopey smile tugged at my lips. Yup, I had it bad. Lochlan D'angelo had utterly bewitched me.

Sighing, I fell back onto the bed. As the mattress hugged my body like a freaking cloud, I blinked up at the dimly-lit crystal chandelier, wishing we had met under different circumstances. I blinked again, remembering when Kade had said that very same thing not too long ago. Tears blurred my vision. I missed him terribly. He would have no doubt defused the tension in the room this evening with a few inappropriate jokes.

But thinking about him only made me think of Isla and the fact that I hadn't mourned her yet. Not properly anyway. As a tear escaped my eye, I almost let myself fall apart. It was time. If I didn't let myself grieve for her loss, I'd never start to heal. But Lochlan had said he'd try to visit me later tonight, so I wrestled the tears under control once again and closed my eyes.

At the sound of the door handle turning, I jerked awake. Surprised that I'd actually dozed off, it took me a moment to orientate myself. The fireplace still blazed cheerily, so I hadn't

been asleep for long. When a tall, dark figure with blazing red eyes silently entered the room, I smiled sleepily. “You came.”

As he slowly closed the door and locked it without saying a word, my smile faltered. Unease shivered up my spine.

“Lochlan?” I sat up to better see him, and when I did ...

Fear roared through me and I shot off the bed.

“*Hel—!*” I started to scream, but a gloved hand covered my mouth before I could finish. I immediately put up a fight, searching for any inch of exposed skin. But he’d come prepared. The only skin left unprotected was his face.

The second I reached for it, he shoved me, so hard that I crashed into the dresser. A glass vase shattered, and the ornate clock tipped over, emitting a dull *gong*. Before I could pick myself up, fingers gripped my throat. He slammed me against the wall where Lochlan and I had shared our first kiss.

I tried to call for help again, but his fingers dug into my windpipe, effectively cutting me off. When I desperately used my enhanced strength to kick out at him, he repaid my efforts by shoving up against me, rendering my legs useless. Before I could reach for his face again, he locked both my wrists together in a punishing grip.

My mouth opened in a silent cry of pain, but he didn’t let up.

“You’re terrible at making deals, just like that power-hungry Darken,” Everett hissed in my ear. Goosebumps erupted over my skin. “You want freedom? Well that means no guard at your door to protect you. This is what happens when you get *greedy*. When you play us all for fools. But I am no

fool. I can see right through you, little sorceress. And every time you step out of line, I will be here to remind you of your place.”

My ears started to ring as the oxygen slowly left my brain. I ceased struggling, focusing my efforts on forcing precious air into my burning lungs.

Everett suddenly released an enraged growl. “You’re wearing my brother’s *shirt*?”

Horror filled me as he grabbed the collar and tore the material from my body with one swift jerk. Tears of humiliation burned my eyes when he exposed my bare breasts.

“You think I have an interest in your body? Guess again,” he said, his tone dripping with condescension. “I only care about my brother. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do to protect him, including protecting him from himself. His judgement has clearly been impaired and I won’t stand for it. You may have asked him to train you, but I think it’s only a ruse to get closer to him. To bind him to you somehow. I think you’ve already been trained, either by that fake aunt of yours, the Darken, or that useless warlock. Consider this a final warning to keep your distance from Loch before I start breaking bones.”

He released me then, leaving as silently as he came. I slid to the floor in a trembling heap, coughing and heaving in great gulps of air, more terrified of him than ever.

I was ready for him this time.

The second Everett stepped through the door, I bludgeoned his skull with a heavy candlestick holder. When he dropped like a sack of grain, I hit him again. If only they had *silver* in this blasted place. I wouldn't hesitate to stake him through the heart. Yeah, the king would probably kill me if I did that, but it would be worth it.

I hated the terror still pumping through me, even as he lay unconscious at my feet. Why he had returned so soon, I didn't know. Maybe he'd forgotten one of the lines he wanted to threaten me with. No matter. I wasn't sticking around to find out. With him temporarily subdued, I'd have a better chance of finding Lochlan's bedroom. I had no idea which floor he was on, but I wouldn't stop looking until I found him.

The moment I stepped over Everett's prone form though, his hand shot out and grabbed my ankle. I squealed and tried to yank free with no success. Raising the candle holder, I brought it down on him again. Only this time, he caught it. A split second later, he swept my leg out from beneath me and I crashed down on top of him. Not to be outdone so quickly, I attacked his face. Only to be thwarted again.

“McKenna, *stop*,” Everett ordered, easily flipping me beneath him and restraining my hands.

Dread suddenly filled me, not because Everett had the upper hand again, but because it wasn't *him*.

“Lochlan?” I choked out, gasping in dismay when I at last focused on his face. “I-I’m so sorry. I thought ... I thought you were ...” Tears clogged my throat and I began to tremble uncontrollably.

“Don’t worry about it. I heal quickly,” he said, trying to calm me with his soothing voice. When it didn’t work, his eyes shot up to take in the room. He stiffened, a growl rumbling in his chest. “What happened?”

When air hitched in my lungs with every breath, making it impossible to speak, he picked me up off the floor and moved us farther into the room.

“Someone’s been in here,” he snarled, his grip on me tightening possessively. “Who, McKenna? Who do I need to *kill*?”

I shook my head, unwilling to tell him. Everett was his brother, after all.

Lochlan suddenly stilled. I looked to where his gaze had gone and stopped breathing. Oh fates, his shirt. He’d spotted his torn shirt. Without a word, he released me and bent to retrieve the ruined material. I hugged myself, worrying my lip as I watched him slowly figure it out. First the glass shards, then the dresser, then ... he inhaled.

Panic swarmed my insides. Some mine, some his.

He slowly faced me again, scanning every inch of my clothed body. But I made a mistake, then. I gripped the collar of my replacement shirt. He was instantly in front of me, tipping my chin up with a gloved finger. As soon as he saw my neck, he began to shake with rage. “Everett,” he growled, the sound more animal than man.

My eyes widened. *Crap*, was I losing my healing abilities already? That should have kicked in by now.

“What did he do?”

I shook my head again, too nervous, too ashamed to tell him. But of course he *felt* the emotions, which only intensified his fury. “Lochlan, p-please don’t—”

“Did he tear this shirt off you? Did he *touch* you?”

“Yes, but n-not like that. He was only trying to scare—” I gasped as he tore from the room in a swirl of shadows. “Lochlan!”

I ran after him, barely able to track the writhing shadows trailing him, even with my enhanced sight and speed. I lost him on the fifth floor, but not for long. A resounding boom, followed by exploding wood, led me directly to him.

The air stalled in my lungs when I finally caught up, only to see Everett pinned against the wall of his bedroom, Lochlan holding him off the floor by his throat.

“She’s *mine!*” Lochlan roared in his brother’s face. “When you hurt her, you hurt *me*. She is everything. My *world*. It’s not her who can’t be trusted, Everett. It’s *you*. And I won’t let you hurt her again. This ends now.”

Everett couldn't have looked more shocked, so shocked that he didn't struggle when Lochlan grabbed his head as if he had every intention of ripping it off.

"Lochlan," I cried, rushing forward. "Stop! He's your *brother*."

When I reached him, I clutched at his arm. The corded muscles beneath his shirt trembled as fury coursed through him. As the Lochness Monster roared to the surface.

"It's okay," I whispered, desperately trying to calm him. "He won't hurt me again. Just let him go. Please, Lochlan. Don't do this."

It took several long moments, but his breathing eventually slowed. When his grip on Everett loosened, my knees weakened with relief. He set his brother down and let him go, but didn't back away. Indecision warred within him. The need to finish what he'd started.

Before he could hulk out again, I placed my hand in his and gently squeezed. Slowly, he turned, lifting his eyes to mine. There was still anger in them, but relief too.

Thank you, they seemed to say. Thank you for stopping me.

I smiled tremulously as I felt the warmth of his gratitude.

My hand was suddenly ripped from his.

"You want to touch my brother?" Everett barked, yanking up Lochlan's shirtsleeve to expose his bare skin. "Then *here*." Before either of us could fully grasp what he planned to do, Everett forced me to grab Lochlan's wrist.

It happened so fast. So unexpectedly. We couldn't break apart in time.

Everett gripped my hand and Lochlan's wrist tightly enough that I cried out from the pain.

The pain. The *pain*.

It triggered my abilities like a gushing waterfall. The second that heat warmed my palm, Lochlan jerked, emitting a strangled sound.

"This. *This* is what happens when you touch him, Syphon," Everett bellowed, digging his claws in to prolong the connection. "You can't help but hurt him. You can't help but *destroy* him."

"Stop. *Stop!*" I shouted when my palm grew hotter and hotter. Red flames engulfed my hand and his wrist.

Lochlan's eyes rolled back and he crashed to his knees. Everett and I were yanked down with him as he groaned and convulsed, his jaw clenched in agony.

"*Please,*" I screamed, frantically prying at Everett's gloved fingers. "He's in pain! I'm *killing* him. Oh God, I can *feel* it. Please make it stop. Please. *Please!*"

Sobs racked me as Lochlan curled forward, as if trying to hide from this nightmare. The sight ripped out my heart and shattered my soul.

Everett suddenly broke the connection with a stifled cry. He scrambled backward until he hit the wall. "I ... I'm ... Lochlan, I'm ... I shouldn't have ..."

“Leave,” Lochlan rasped. Still trembling, he slowly lifted his head to stare at his brother. Everett flinched at whatever he saw there. Guilt lined his face as he nodded and climbed to his feet. He studied me for a moment, tracking the tear that fell down my cheek, then left.

The worst kind of silence followed.

My emotions were too raw, too heavy. I couldn't properly feel his. I didn't know if he wanted me to leave too. I didn't know if he loathed me now that I'd hurt him, now that I'd done the one thing he feared I'd do. So I kept my head down. Didn't dare look at him in case his eyes were filled with hatred. For me.

“Come here.”

The words were whispered so softly, I thought I'd imagined them. It was stupid, thinking he'd want to be near me after what had just happened.

“Come here, solemae. I need to hold you.”

I sucked in a tight breath as the words squeezed my splintered heart.

He came to me, then, slowly gathering me against him as if each little movement caused him pain. I resisted at first, my pulse pounding frantically at the close contact. But when I couldn't detect any fear or hatred coming from him, I gave in. If he wanted to hold me, I'd give him that. I'd give him anything, *everything* for what I did to him.

“Stop,” he quietly chastised, bringing both legs up to cradle me between them. “I don't blame you. It wasn't your fault.”

My lips quivered. “But I h-hurt you. I f-felt your pain.” I tucked my hands close to my chest so they couldn’t touch him.

“But you tried to stop it. You tried so hard that I felt the keening of your soul. It broke me when I couldn’t respond.”

“Because of the pain,” I choked out, curling into a tighter ball. “You couldn’t r-respond because I was killing you.”

“No,” he said, gently running his fingers through my hair. “I didn’t respond because I was trapped in a painful memory of my past.”

I held my breath, waiting for him to continue like I always did. Hoping, always hoping, that he’d finally open up to me.

“Please,” I said, when he let the silence stretch. “Please tell me.”

He continued to stroke my hair, refusing to speak as if he didn’t know how to.

So I opened up first, tilting my face up to his. Guilt hit me hard when I saw the pain lining his eyes, whether from my touch or some unforeseen memory. Maybe both. But I held his gaze, even though I ached to look away and hide my shame.

“I know you want to protect me,” I began, clearing my throat when my voice cracked. “I admire and appreciate that about you, but this is different. This is something that I want to face head on. I can handle it, even if I seem pathetically frail at times. So I’m asking you to trust me. Trust that I don’t need protection from this. Trust that I will protect *you* whenever you decide to let me in. I never, ever want to harm you, Lochlan. I hope you know that.”

His chest deflated as he heaved a tired sigh. “I do know. You’ve proved that tonight. But this will change the way you look at me. It ... won’t be easy to hear. Or tell.”

“It won’t change anything. But if it’s too painful, I can wait.”

His gaze caressed my face, paying ample attention to each small detail. “I’m in awe of you,” he suddenly said, reaching between us to pick up my hand. When it dawned on me what he was about to do, panic fluttered inside my chest.

“You’re selfless,” he said, brushing his lips across my knuckles. I sucked in a breath, focusing hard on controlling my ability. “And kind.” He pressed his mouth to my fingers without an ounce of fear. “And tenaciously courageous.” When he flipped my hand over and kissed my palm—the same one that had hurt him—tears spilled down my cheeks. “You make me want to be a better person,” he said, then added with a slight smirk, “Or vampire.”

I sniffled noisily and huffed a laugh. “Does this mean you’ll talk to me?”

“Yes,” he said, smiling wide enough that I caught a flash of fang. “But we’re going to my room first.”

He was on his feet with me in his arms before I could protest, stumbling a little, but quickly righting himself. I held my tongue, sensing that he needed to do this, to prove that he was still strong and capable of keeping me safe. He didn’t need to prove what I already knew, but I let him carry me without complaint anyway.

His room wasn't far, only one hallway over. I wondered if Troy was on this floor too, finishing what he started earlier at dinner. Renewed thirst tightened my throat, a reminder that I'd touched and hurt Lochlan, that the consequence was another week of craving blood.

“You okay?”

I blinked up at him as he deftly opened his bedroom door and closed it without setting me down. “You're asking me? I'm the one who nearly drained you of your life force.”

Crap. Now that I'd said the words out loud, it hit me how close I'd come to losing him.

“I'm fine, McKenna. Just a little tired and sore,” he tried to reassure me, carefully watching my face. After a moment, he said, “You're thirsty.”

My mouth fell open. “How did you—?”

“Good at guessing, remember?” He didn't hide his satisfaction at having guessed correctly, openly smirking as he dropped me off in the center of his gigantic room.

“Holy ...” My eyes widened.

Two of my rooms could fit into his. It was more of a suite, really, with a sunken-in lounge area and stainless steel kitchenette. Lochlan headed for the fridge, removing his gloves as he went. He was almost at ease, now that he was in his private domain. Me, not so much. This was Lochlan's *bedroom*, with his scent saturating the air and his personal effects scattered throughout. I had the craziest itch to explore every nook and cranny until they gave up their secrets about the enigmatic man before me.

“Why red?” I asked, still taking in the elegantly modern space. Was that a shelf chock full of Lochlan diaries? Err, I mean, journals?

“Red is my favorite color,” he said over his shoulder, oblivious to my slack-jawed expression.

Red was his favorite color?

Well, crap, that explained a lot. Like why Kade kept buying me red freaking *clothing*. That sly devil.

Mostly everything else was either cream-colored or black, but the massive bed in the room beyond was covered in red satiny fabric. My mouth dried even more. Sure, we’d shared a bed a few times, but this setup felt different. More intimate. *Far* more intimate.

Maybe because things had changed a lot between us in the last twenty-four hours. It felt like days, *weeks* had passed since I’d woken up in Lochlan’s arms this morning. We were no closer to breaking the curse, but *we* were closer.

Surprisingly, though, our bodies weren’t calling all the shots anymore. They obviously still wanted to have sex, *lots* of it, but now that our bond had strengthened in other ways, the need to complete it through the conjoining of our flesh had lessened. Not by much, but at least I didn’t want to jump him every two seconds.

“What are you thinking about?”

I yelped, heat roasting my cheeks when I realized he’d been staring at me. “Just ... things,” I sputtered, tossing around for a distraction. His movements were languid as he moved toward me, quadrupling my nervous energy. He was way too

hot and I was way too— “Oh,” I said, accepting the drink he offered me. “Thank you.”

“I took the liberty of adding a little rum to your drink,” he said, heading back to the kitchen. “You’ve had a trying day.”

A snickering laugh slipped past my lips before I could stop it.

He threw me an inquisitive look before opening the fridge again. “What’s so funny?”

I hesitated, then blurted, “Sometimes you just sound so ...”

He cocked a brow. “Old?”

I clamped my lips together, hiding a smile.

“Does that disturb you?” he asked casually, removing a tupperware container. I knew better though. I could feel his uncertainty.

“No,” I didn’t hesitate to say, smiling again when I felt his relief. While he busily prepared a plate of food, a thought came to me. “Where’s your mother?”

He stilled, then resumed his task. “Dead. She was mortal. As were Everett’s and Troy’s mothers. Our father has never taken a vampire as a wife, hence why our kingdom has never had a queen. She would need to be a Venturi, and there aren’t many female Venturi in the world. It wouldn’t work anyway. Ambrose wanted heirs, and vampires can’t procreate with one another.”

I plunked into a chair at his small breakfast table, trying to wrap my brain around this bit of news. “Wow, so your mother was human? And Everett and Troy are your *half* brothers?”

Wait, I thought vampires could have children. Isn't that how Venturi are born?"

"Correct," he said, joining me at the table with his own drink and a heaping plate of assorted meats and cheeses. He nudged the plate toward me with a pointed look. *Eat*, the look said. *So bossy*, I silently threw back, but picked up a wedge of sharp cheddar.

Satisfied when I took a bite, he continued. "It's true that Venturi are conceived, but only of a male vampire and female mortal. We grow at a similar rate to humans for the first eighteen years or so, but once we reach our age of maturity, the aging process all but stops. At that point, our immortality is complete. No trace of humanity remains in our DNA."

I was nowhere near a science nerd, but this was fascinating stuff. If humans ever found out about vampires, they'd force them into labs, for sure. The thought soured my stomach, but when I moved to set down the cheese, Lochlan narrowed his eyes. *Fine*, I inwardly huffed, wrinkling my nose at him.

Another thought came to me then. An extremely awkward one. Still ... I took a large gulp of my drink, nearly choking in the process, before saying, "So the women who were with your father earlier today. You know, the half naked ones that were, uh ..." Wow, I did *not* word that properly.

His left cheek dimple appeared. "They're his wives."

My jaw fell on the table. "Wives? *Plural*? How many does he have?" Wait, was that an offensive question in their world?

"Fourteen now, I believe. All human, of course. He usually only keeps two or three, but he's been wanting another heir.

Chances of conception are higher with more females.”

Okay, mind blown. Especially since Lochlan said it all so casually, like having a *harem* was totally normal. I mean, I knew they still existed in some countries, but this was freaking *America*.

Wait. Did *he* have a harem?

My blood heated to a raging boil faster than I could blink. The crystal glass in my hand shattered, spilling droplets of blood everywhere. I gasped as a shard embedded deep into my palm. Cringing, I opened my hand and reached for the shard.

“Let me,” Lochlan said before I could touch it.

Already flustered and embarrassed at the mess I’d made, I hesitated.

“Consider this part of your training,” he added, a challenge twinkling in his blood red eyes. “Pain is a distraction, but it doesn’t have to weaken you. Push through it. Don’t let it control you.”

He held out his hand, patiently waiting for me to decide. Blood dripped from my fingers as I inwardly warred with myself. The pain was manageable, but I could still hurt him if I lost control, even for a split second.

“I-I can’t,” I stammered, my heart thundering at the thought of hurting him like that again.

“You can,” he countered, softly yet firmly. “But not if you don’t try.”

I continued to struggle, wanting to master my abilities but afraid of losing control. And then he said it, words that

changed everything for me.

“I trust you.”

My breath caught.

“I trust you, McKenna,” he repeated, letting me clearly feel his confidence. “So let me help you.”

My heart swelled with so much emotion that I thought it would burst. He trusted me. Lochlan D’angelo—the cursed vampire prince—trusted *me*, the witch with a lethal touch.

The invisible hand reached inside me again and gently wrapped around my soul. My lips parted in startled wonder as the strangest sense of peace filled me. Of rightness. The feeling lingered longer than last time, and when it finally faded, it did so almost regretfully, like it wanted nothing more than to stay.

I slowly blinked back to reality, watching as Lochlan did the same. He was as shaken as I was, fighting to catch his breath.

“Our souls,” I panted, “touched again?”

“Yes.” He released a shuddering sigh, then refocused on me. “And I think they want us to as well.”

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. He was right. I had felt a nudge toward him. The call to touch him, to further strengthen our bond. I couldn’t let fear keep us apart. We’d come too far, gone through too much together. The only way forward was to place my hand in his and trust that it would all work out.

So I did.

29

KENNA

The pain was brief.

His fingers were gentle, removing the glass with infinite care. My freshly enhanced healing immediately began to knit up the wound, but not before a small pool of blood formed on my palm.

Lochlan's swallow was audible as he stared at my blood. I could feel his powerful desire to have it. Still, he tamped down the urge and shifted in his seat to retrieve a towel. Until I stopped him with a single word.

“No.”

His eyes shot to mine. They were half-wild with barely suppressed need. He was so valiantly trying to fight it, but he didn't need to.

“It's yours.”

I wholly meant the words, but they still surprised me. Not as much as they surprised Lochlan though. His hand beneath mine began to tremble.

“McKenna.” He breathed my name like a prayer, searching my face for any sign of doubt. When he found none, his breathing sped up. I saw the moment his guard went down,

witnessed the second he gave into his need. He brought my palm to his lips, darting his tongue out to capture my blood.

A thrill shivered up my arm when he closed his eyes and quietly groaned. The second he swallowed, though, his desire spiked like a raging fever. Grabbing my wrist, he sealed his mouth over my skin, sucking and licking hungrily. I needn't have worried that my abilities would flare up in response to the possessive act. Desire engulfed me instead. Wholly mine. To give him *more*.

He suddenly dragged me across the table and into his lap. I was dimly aware of a plate clattering to the floor and more glass shattering, but I couldn't concentrate on anything but him. On making sure I didn't hurt him as he greedily fed. On his erection pressing between my legs. On our soulmate bond exploding like fireworks.

The sensations thrumming through my body were heady. Overwhelming. I fisted his shirt with my free hand and desperately held onto my control. *Stay focused, stay focused*. After a while, I started to relax. I was doing good, *great* even, enjoying the feel of his mouth and tongue on my sensitive skin. I was in complete control of myself. He wasn't in any pain—if his emotional high was anything to go by.

But then he switched gears, catching me off guard. He stopped suckling my hand and guided it to the back of his neck.

I gasped when he slid my fingers into the soft hair at his nape and left them there. “Lochlan—”

“I need more of you, McKenna,” he said, his voice both guttural and breathless. “I'll pull away if you lose control.”

He met my eyes, and through his lust-filled haze, I could still see his confidence in me. His *trust*. And so I weakly nodded, needing more as well.

He rewarded me with a toe-curling kiss. It was unlike anything I could have ever imagined. He cupped the back of my head and fitted our lips together like two perfectly matched puzzle pieces. My stomach swooped giddily, making me feel untethered and drunk.

I slid my other arm around his neck and arched against him, pressing my core into his erection. His free hand gripped my waist and pushed me down on him even more. I moaned into his mouth as sharp need throbbed through my center. My thighs shook, instinctively rocking to the rhythm of his answering thrusts.

Pleasure consumed every inch of me. It was everywhere, in and around me. The world fell away and only this moment remained. Yet, somehow, I clung to the ragged threads of my control.

Then he pushed me—no, *shoved* me—into a new stratosphere by tilting my head back and deepening the kiss. Fates alive, he tasted like manna from heaven. With the first sweep of his tongue across mine, I lost all focus. All sense of control. Pleasure shot straight to my core, making me tremble even harder.

He abruptly pulled back with a hiss. “McKenna.”

I immediately yanked my hands off him when I heard pain in his voice. “I’m sorry,” I gasped. “I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be,” he panted, gentling his hold on me. “This was beautiful. *You* are beautiful. Your control will only grow stronger with time.” He tugged on a lock of my hair. “And with practice.”

Despite the panic still fluttering in my chest, I snorted. “This wasn’t what I had in mind when I asked you to train me.”

He cocked a brow. “Are you saying this training method is ineffective?”

“No, but ...” I snapped my mouth shut before I said something stupidly embarrassing.

“It does come with a need for cold showers though,” he muttered, lifting me off him in one fluid move. He supported me while my legs wobbled unsteadily, then put some much needed space between us. “Be right back. Make yourself at home.”

I pressed my lips together as he turned and rather stiffly headed to where I assumed his cold shower awaited. He suddenly paused to unbutton his shirt. Good grief, was he trying to *kill* me?

“Here,” he said, tossing it to me. “To replace the ruined one.”

As the shirt and his overpowering scent hit me, my fangs descended in a powerful rush. They jabbed into my lip, but I barely felt the pain. Not when my mind was suddenly consumed with thoughts of sinking my fangs into Lochlan’s neck. Crap, not *this* again. I hadn’t even tasted his blood recently.

Clearing my throat, I spoke carefully around my lengthened canines. “Um, you should go. Like right now.” His mouth slowly curled into a knowing grin. “*Now*, Lochlan.”

He did, but not before saying, “I don’t have any wives, by the way. Or anyone, for that matter. Only you.”

He left then, leaving me to speechlessly gape after him, which he’d clearly done on purpose.

Only you.

Did he consider me his? Well, *duh*. He’d shouted in his brother’s face that I was.

Did I *want* to be his?

Don’t ask stupid questions, Kenna.

It took several minutes of standing in the middle of his kitchen before I could finally move. When I did, I threw my head back and groaned. He wasn’t the only one who needed a cold shower right now.

* * *

I woke to a featherlight touch on my cheek.

Not cold. Or leather.

But warm. Soft.

My lashes fluttered open, and I sleepily blinked Lochlan’s face into focus.

“You fell asleep before storytime,” he softly said, crouching before the cream-colored couch I’d accidentally

passed out on. “But it can wait.”

“No,” I mumbled, rubbing the shirt he’d given me against my cheek like a blankie. “Story.”

He chuckled quietly and leaned forward to scoop me up. We were halfway across the room before I realized where he was taking me. The bed. *His* bed. And, holy crap, was it made for a giant? Maybe the king had given his sons extra large beds in hopes that they’d form their own harems. And now my tired brain wanted to figure out how the whole polygamy thing worked. Did they all sleep together or take turns? Because that could get really—

“Does that brain of yours ever stop churning?”

I blinked up at his crooked smile. “Um, not really. It likes to figure things out.”

“Good. I’m sure my father will test its usefulness first thing tomorrow. But right now, it doesn’t need to do anything but listen.”

“It can do that,” I said as he crawled onto the bed and laid me in the middle. I tried to block my brain from thinking, from freaking out that I was in his *bed*. Kind of hard to do when the satin comforter and pillows smelled like him. His mattress was a body-hugger too, the dozens of pillows behind me equally so. I snuggled against them, immediately feeling the tension leave my body. If I didn’t want to hear Lochlan’s story so badly, I’d probably be half-asleep by now.

He settled in next to me, propping his back against the upholstered headboard. A long sigh was the only sound he made for several moments. Sensing his need for space, I didn’t

touch him like I wanted to. Didn't curl up against him and offer my comfort. I let him internally struggle, knowing that he had to want this on his own. No amount of cajoling on my part was going to make him let me in.

When he finally did, uttering that first word barely louder than a whisper, I hardly dared to breathe. This was his story. *The* story. The one that defined so much of who he was. The one that, in the end, brought our worlds crashing together. I soaked up every single heart-wrenching word, willing to bear the weight of them. To listen and understand and accept.

His voice was strained, but he didn't falter. Determination lent him strength as he slowly yet surely unraveled his story, allowing me to see the darkness, the monstrous truth he'd carried within him for so long. "It began at that feeding den I told you about. Everett took me and Troy off the island—it was our first time, actually. I was seventeen and Troy was only fifteen. Father didn't want us exposed to the rest of the world until we reached our age of maturity, when we'd be at our strongest. But Everett insisted that the worldly experience was the key to maturing, so we went.

"The biggest mistake we made that night was splitting up. Everett let us find our own humans to consort with while he pursued his. Back then, Troy was different. Cautious and shy, especially around females. So ... I helped him out. I saw a girl eyeing him from across the room, and since we weren't trapped in our true forms back then, it was easy to set them up. I ... I all but *pushed* him into her waiting arms.

"Pleased with myself for getting my kid brother his first lay, I hung out at the bar instead of finding my own hookup. I

wanted to see him the moment he finished so I could thoroughly embarrass him. You know. Stupid, big-brother crap. Well, after an hour, he still hadn't emerged. Everett was already on his third female by that point, too drunk on blood and sex to realize anything was wrong. I didn't either, until the girl emerged from behind the curtains ... and Troy didn't.

“When I got to him, he was ... I thought he was dead. Which didn't make sense. He hadn't been stabbed with silver. His heart was intact. Nothing was broken, including his neck. So I couldn't understand why his skin was cold and his heart barely beat. In my panic and confusion, I didn't know she was behind me until her hot fingers were on my neck. The pain was instantaneous and debilitating. I couldn't even cry out for help. Within seconds, she'd drained enough of my life that I fell unconscious. When I woke up, I was in silver chains, far away from everything I knew.”

As Lochlan paused for breath, I struggled to keep my composure. To stay strong for him when all I wanted to do was weep. Because something told me the story was only going to get worse. And it did. Fates, it was so much worse than I could have imagined.

“Her name was Edith. She was the first Syphon I'd ever met or even knew about. I had no clue a creature existed that could kill vampires with a single touch. She kept me as her slave. *Blood* slave, actually. She'd discovered that the key to immortality was in our blood, so she used me to keep her young. I wasn't the only one she'd enslaved over the years, but according to her, I was the strongest.

“She usually preyed on the weaker, easier to handle ones, which was why she had targeted Troy. But when I came along, she couldn’t resist entrapping me. At first, she only drank my blood, keeping me docile with the silver chains. But as time went by and I continued to put up a fight, her interest in me grew. She ... she used magic and spells to warp my perception. She made me believe that I loved her. After a while, she no longer chained me up. I willingly went to her, allowing her to abuse my body. She would toy with me, bringing me to the brink of death over and over with her touch, only to stop so I could heal.

“I endured this for two years until Everett found me. A bloody trail of witches and warlocks were left in his wake as he scoured the earth for my whereabouts. He had to knock me out, though, because I refused to leave. I was so thoroughly under her spell. It took me years to accept that I’d never loved her. That she’d planted false information in my head. That she’d only ever caused me pain and misery.

“Meanwhile, I watched as my family changed. Everett became cruel and overprotective. Troy grew jaded and impulsive. I stopped feeling and swore off all witches. My father demanded that justice be done, but since Edith had escaped Everett’s wrath, the order went out for the death of all Syphons.

“For thirty years, my brothers and I terrorized witches, demanding they give up the location of all known Syphons. We killed any we could find, showing no mercy. We became known far and wide as the Demonic Trinity, and we revelled in their fear at the very sight of us. Until the day they rallied

together and cursed our entire race. We've been trying and failing to undo the mistakes we made ever since."

When the story ended, words failed me. I was too shocked, too *horrified* at what he'd been through. No wonder he'd made that vow. No wonder he needed to be in control. No wonder he hadn't trusted me and had wanted to reject our bond. I was a living, breathing reminder of everything he feared and hated. Of everything he *lost*. Words failed me, but emotions tore through me like a riptide, and I could no longer hold them in.

"C-can I ... can I cry for you?" I said, already choking on a sob. "You l-lost so much. You—"

I felt his pain in my chest, melding with mine. Then his sorrow and guilt and regret. The second I reached for him, he didn't hesitate to wrap me in his arms. So tightly. So completely. That I knew he no longer viewed me as a threat or enemy. Somehow, despite the horrors of the past, here we were. A vampire and a Syphon. Finding solace in each other.

Sobs racked my body as I finally let myself fall apart. I mourned his losses, but also my own. The dreams and family and friends that had been taken from me. I let my anger and hurt and helplessness pour out of me in the form of tears, holding nothing back.

Long after the tears dried up, leaving me utterly drained, I lay in Lochlan's arms. Through my closeness, I offered him what little comfort I had. Assured him that I was here, that I cared. That I forgave him for past wrongs.

It wasn't until sleep tugged at me that I realized my hair was damp. I hadn't been the only one crying.

He'd walked through so much darkness, but I was here for him now. Any light that I possessed was his, and I'd blast that foul darkness away if it ever dared reach for him again.

30

KENNA

“Holy mother of Moses. I keep missing out on all the good stuff.”

The familiar, teasing voice nudged me from a deep sleep. A sleep so calm and peaceful that I was loath to leave it.

“When did you get in?” another familiar voice said, rumbling pleasantly beneath my ear.

“About an hour ago. Had to meet with your father first. I’ve been trying to reach you all morning.”

A pause. “She had a rough night.”

“Must have been pretty bad if you let her stay in your room.”

“Yeah.” Fingers gently slid through my hair, stirring me further awake. “Everett attacked her.”

At that name, my eyes popped open. The first thing I saw was a pair of bright blue eyes and wavy, caramel brown hair. The mouth attached to the face was scowling, but the moment I moved, it morphed into a huge grin.

“Kade?” I mumbled in disbelief, rubbing the sleep from my eyes. As the bed shifted beneath me, I lifted my head, startled to find Lochlan there. What the—? I was fully on *top* of him.

Our legs were tangled together like a pretzel, and—my eyes widened—he was most definitely sporting a mega morning boner.

The second my gaze jerked up to his, those sensuous lips of his curled into a lazy smile. “Morning.” As I wordlessly opened my mouth, still struggling to fully awaken, he rose up and captured my lips in a scorching kiss. *Fates!* I sucked in a sharp breath, scrambling to find my control. It was instantly there, protecting his skin from mine. I relaxed, allowing myself to blissfully drown in his warmth and scent and taste.

“Sweet. Mother. Of. Moses.”

Startled at the words spoken beside us, I tried to pull away. But Lochlan dug his fingers into my hair and continued to shower me with mind-drugging kisses. I moaned breathlessly, only able to focus on him, on the delicious sensations sparking through my body in response to his touch. When heat pooled between my legs, urging me to rub against his hardened length, I did.

“Okay, guys? As much as this majorly turns me on, I need answers. Plus, I kind of have something important to tell you.”

Lochlan growled, nipping at my bottom lip before letting me go. I mewled in disappointment, my body still throbbing with need. Gently rolling me off him, Lochlan pressed a lingering kiss to my forehead before whispering, “Make that sound again and I’ll pleasure you so hard, you’ll be screaming my name. And I won’t care who’s watching.”

Gulping, I clamped my aching thighs together, as well as my mouth. Because it finally dawned on me that we had company. And he was currently chuckling under his breath.

“Behave,” Lochlan warned him before pushing off the bed. I tore my gaze away from the noticeable bulge in his sweatpants when Kade guffawed.

“*Me?* I’m not the one defiling our innocent little Kenna. How long have you been able to touch each other, by the way?”

“Since early yesterday evening,” I replied, trying not to blush. If he pried me for details, I was going to straight up die.

“Well, you’ve certainly made good progress,” he said with a suggestive wink. His smile suddenly slipped and he added huskily, “It makes me happier than you could ever know.”

“Oh, Kade,” I whispered, emotion tightening my throat in response to his. I crawled toward him and threw my arms around his neck. “I’m glad you’re here. I was so worried about you.”

He immediately crushed me against him in a bear hug, squeezing the air from my lungs. I held on tightly, sensing that he needed this closeness as much as I did. “Me too. I didn’t think I’d find you in one piece.”

“You almost didn’t,” Lochlan said, a hard edge to his voice. “Everett’s been a bigger dick than usual. He’s threatened her life more than once.”

“And you put him in his place, I hope?” Kade ran his hand soothingly down my back.

“You could say that.” Lochlan paused, then quietly added, “I almost killed him.”

Kade stiffened. “Does he know about your bond?”

“Probably. I made it pretty clear how I felt about her last night.”

I pulled back to shoot Lochlan a panicked look. “What if he tells your father?”

He shook his head. “He won’t. Unless he thinks I’m in immediate danger. It’s part of our brotherly pact.”

“Which you’ve been breaking lately,” Kade reminded him. “Who’s to say he won’t too? Especially if you complete the mating bond. Unless you have already?” He waggled his eyebrows at me, and this time I did blush.

“You’d know if we did.”

“He would?” I asked, curious, despite my embarrassment.

“He would feel the completed connection through our drothen bond. At least, that’s what I’ve read. There aren’t many documents on soulmate bonds paired with a drothen bond. It’s too rare an occurrence.”

“Would Kade and I be able to feel each other? Each other’s emotions, I mean.” That would be kind of weird. Right? Like being in a relationship with two men. Although, it didn’t *feel* weird to me, now that I thought about it.

“I’m not sure,” Lochlan said, scrubbing a hand through his stylishly messy hair. “But we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.” At the promise in his voice, my face warmed even more. “Kade, what’s your news?”

I blinked. Kade had news?

“Yeah, um,” he said, releasing me to stand beside the bed, “I think I should just show you.”

Lochlan stilled. I frowned as several of his emotions suddenly hit me. Panic. Guilt. Fear. His nervous energy was off the charts.

“What’s going on?” I said slowly, trying to capture his gaze.

Kade looked between us, uncertainty stamped across his face.

“I didn’t want to give you false hope, so I didn’t say anything,” Lochlan began, avoiding my eyes.

My heart started to pound. “Say what?”

He shared a look with Kade, who nodded as if to reassure him. With each silent moment, my trepidation grew. Until I couldn’t stand it any longer.

“Can someone please speak to me? This is really freaking me—”

“Isla is alive.”

I stared at Lochlan, wishing I could unhear what he’d just said. Because what he said was a lie. And it *hurt*. Fates, it felt like a hot knife was in my chest. I pulled my knees up and hugged them tightly, making myself as small as possible—just the way I felt.

“It’s true,” he said softly, joining me on the bed again.

Before he could touch me though, I threw up a hand, warding him off. “I saw her. She was cold. I-I couldn’t find a *pulse*.”

How? How could he say this to me? It was cruel. And it hurt so freaking much. I savagely swiped at the tears on my

cheeks.

“She did die, but she was *drained*, McKenna,” Lochlan persisted, even when I shook my head. “Draining a body of blood is the first step. Isla wasn’t gone for long, so Kade was able to bring her back.”

My breath hitched, and I threw an accusing glare at Kade. He was in on this sick joke too? “What did you do?” I seethed. “I thought you left to *bury* her.”

Sympathy filled his eyes, which only made me want to lash out at him. “I would have, if I couldn’t save her. Sometimes it doesn’t take for whatever reason. The body can’t cope with the change, too weakened or in shock to allow the transformation. But hers accepted my blood, thankfully. She’s young and healthy, so the process went fairly smoothly. She’s hungry all the time and struggling to adjust to her new diet, but is otherwise well.”

I couldn’t breathe. Couldn’t process his words. Couldn’t *accept*.

“What are you ...” I briefly closed my eyes and forced air into my lungs. “What are you saying, Kade?”

His lips thinned. He flicked a glance at Lochlan, who nodded at him reassuringly this time. Sighing in resignation, he looked me square in the eye and said, “Isla is a vampire.”

My head emptied of all thought. It went silent. Deathly so. Refusing to believe the words as truth. No. It wasn’t possible. My quirky, bubbly best friend—my perfectly ordinary *human* best friend—wasn’t a vampire. She was dead. Nothing could

come back from death. Death was final. Death made *sense*. But this?

I shook my head, firmly in denial, even as I said, “Show me.”

Prove it, I challenged them both with my eyes. *Prove to me what terrible liars you are.*

Kade’s shoulders slumped. “I knew she was going to hate me.”

“She doesn’t hate you,” Lochlan said, wisely choosing to stand instead of reaching for me again. “She just doesn’t believe us.”

Ignoring both of their sad, sympathetic expressions, I scooted off the bed and forced my wobbly legs upright. “Show me,” I repeated, stubbornly jutting out my chin.

Lochlan nodded for Kade to lead the way, so he did. We walked in silence, passing a few staff members who were already busily cleaning at this early hour. I guessed that it was around seven, which meant that for the first time in *weeks*, I’d received a solid night’s sleep. On Lochlan’s chest. I resisted the urge to look back at him, already having a hard time dealing with his conflicted feelings. He wanted to talk to me, that much was clear, but I couldn’t listen right now.

My mind was stuck on repeat.

Isla is dead. Isla is dead. Isla is dead.

I’d only just begun to accept her loss, and now *this*? I willed Kade to pick up the pace, nearly stubbing my bare toes on the backs of his boots. The faster we got this over with, the sooner I could jump into the shower and cry this cruel torture

down the drain. We descended back to the fourth floor, slowing when we reached a door not too far from my own bedroom.

“Before we go in,” Kade said in hushed tones, turning to me, “know that Isla’s personality hasn’t changed, but her DNA has. If she acts out of character, it’s only because of her new instincts. A newly created Feltore can be unpredictable at times. Mostly because they’re learning how to control their bloodlust.”

I clenched my jaw and viciously pinched my thigh, giving him a curt nod that I understood. But I didn’t. I couldn’t. *Isla isn’t a vampire. Isla is dead.*

He sighed miserably, but turned and knocked on the door. “Isla? It’s Kade. I’m coming in.”

My heart jumped into my throat and I was suddenly terrified.

Lochlan pressed his hand to the small of my back, whispering, “Don’t be afraid. She’ll smell your fear. Just remember that she’s your friend. She cares about you and doesn’t want to harm you.”

Fates, what was happening? This wasn’t real. This was a lie. A cruel, terrible lie.

But then Kade was opening the door, and Lochlan was gently nudging me forward. And then ... and then I saw her. She was standing near the window in a white, frilly dress. The sunrise’s golden rays fell just behind her, illuminating her silhouette like a ring of fire. She was radiant. She looked like an angel.

My breath caught. Was Isla an *angel*?

My mind grasped at the idea and held on tight. That made sense. Of course Isla would be an angel. She was benevolent and good, always looking out for others. My heart began to pound, this time with hope.

“Isla?” I breathed, taking a tentative step into the room, then another. *Please don't disappear, please, please. I just want to say goodbye. Then I can let you go.*

When she didn't move—when all she did was reach toward the sunlight as if to touch it—my hope soared and I rushed forward. I made it halfway across the room when she whipped her head toward me. Her placid expression changed. To one of fierce, wild hunger. She hissed, baring her teeth. I slammed to a halt. No, not teeth, I realized with sudden dread.

Fangs.

Her dusky blue eyes bled red. And then ...

She charged.

31

KENNA

In a flash, Kade locked his arms around Isla before she could reach me. As she growled ferociously, Lochlan pulled me to his chest and retreated several steps.

“Let me go!” Isla roared, struggling against Kade like a crazed animal when he bodily lifted her.

“Not until you remember yourself,” he said through clenched teeth as she clawed at his arms. “Kenna is your *friend*. Not food.”

I pressed a trembling hand over my mouth, horrified. This wild creature couldn't be my sweet Isla. She was more like a demon from hell. I watched for several more minutes, wide-eyed and numb with shock as she fought to get to me. There was nothing human in her eyes. No recognition of who I was. Only mindless hunger.

Eventually, she sagged in Kade's grip, panting from exhaustion.

“I'm ... I'm sorry,” she gasped out. “I couldn't control it. I'm just so—”

“Thirsty. I know,” Kade said. When her chin began to quiver, he folded her into a hug. “It's okay. You didn't hurt anyone. It'll get easier.”

“I’m just so tired of fighting,” she cried against his chest, heaving a sob.

At the sight, my heart began to splinter. She really was Isla. A raging, bloodthirsty Isla, but it was *her*. I could see her now, in the way she shed tears of remorse for almost attacking me. I ached to comfort her, to tell her that everything would be okay. That she was *alive*, which was the only thing that mattered.

As if reading my thoughts, Lochlan tightened his hold on me, saying softly, “Give her some time. She needs to adjust.”

My heart splintered even more, but I nodded and allowed him to lead me from the room. Stopping at my bedroom door, he turned me to face him and carefully inspected my face.

“You can be mad and hate me all you want, if that makes this easier,” he said after a beat. “I’m the one who ordered Kade to turn her. I gave him no choice.”

I shook my head sadly. “I don’t hate you. I’m not even mad. But ... why? Why Isla?”

His gaze dropped, and he released a quiet sigh before looking at me again. “Because she brings you joy. You’ve endured so much pain and heartache lately. So if I have an opportunity to bring happiness into your life, I’ll take it. I don’t regret asking Kade to turn her, not if her presence can put a smile on your face. Maybe not today, but it will. Soon. I promise you’ll get your friend back, McKenna.”

His words soothed the hurt in my heart. Enough that I found myself smiling up at him. Just a little. “I’d like to kiss you now. If that’s all right.”

Surprise flitted across his face, then a smile. One so endearing, so full of affection, that I forgot to be sad. Leaning down, he whispered, “My lips are yours. You never have to ask.”

A shiver swept down my spine. A happy one. Still smiling, I raised up on tiptoe and brushed my lips across his, then shyly retreated.

He released a soft growl and wrapped an arm around my waist to halt my retreat. “You call that a kiss? That was a cruel teaser. *This* is a kiss.” Cupping my cheek, he tilted my face up and brought his mouth down on mine. Fully. Possessively. My toes curled.

Before I knew it, the kiss grew heated and we were crashing through the door into my room. The desire to strip naked and press my body against his burned through me, so intensely that my arousal coiled into the air.

“McKenna,” Lochlan groaned against my mouth. “I need to touch you. I need to make you feel better.”

Even as every inch of my body lit on fire at his words, guilt niggled at me—that my best friend was just down the hall, going through hell while I sought to chase my sadness away. But, after a beat, I let the guilt go. She would want me to have this moment of comfort. I knew she would.

“It’s okay,” Lochlan breathed when I hesitated. I fought to stay in control as he trailed soft kisses along my jaw, then down my neck. “I’ll stop if you need me to.”

I shuddered, biting back a moan when his tongue flicked out, circling my thundering pulse. I clung to his shoulders,

focusing every last drop of energy on keeping my abilities at bay. When I'd settled down enough for him to proceed, he didn't waste any time. His hand went straight to my pants and slipped inside my underwear. At the first brush of his bare finger against my center, I arched into him, swallowing a scream. His arm kept me from collapsing as my legs gave out.

He paused, waiting while my trembling body adjusted to the shock. Then did it again. My head lolled, falling against his shoulder. Bliss became my world with each languid stroke, stripping the sadness away. He'd pleased me this way before, but not skin-to-skin. *This* was a whole new level of ecstasy. Of intimacy. Of connection. I desperately dug my nails into his shoulders as he slid his finger farther back.

"So wet," he rumbled, clearly pleased.

I panted, holding onto him for dear life as he slowly dipped his finger inside me. "Lochlan," I gasped, involuntarily convulsing around his finger. He curled the tip, applying pressure, and I nearly came. Sliding his finger out through my wetness, he stroked me again. I bit my lip hard to keep from crying out as the added wetness only increased my pleasure.

I almost came undone. Almost lost all sense of time and place and control. But I wanted this too much. I wanted his touch. His comfort. This new, mind-blowing experience. I wanted this moment that was bringing us closer together. So I held on. I held on while his fingers brought me to impossible heights. I held on while my body shattered into a million glorious pieces.

I held on.

For him.

* * *

One look at Troy's blasé expression from across the table and I assumed Everett hadn't told him about last night. I expected to feel Everett's hot glare the second Lochlan and I walked into the dining room together, but he barely glanced at us.

"Father's running late," he said by way of greeting as Lochlan pulled out a chair for me and deliberately sat close enough that our legs touched. "He said to start the meeting without him."

Servers immediately bustled forward with food and goblets filled with blood. The thought of drinking blood first thing in the morning didn't make me cringe the way I thought it would. Fates, I was acclimating to this whole temporary vampire thing way too quickly.

"What about Noah?" I dared to ask, surprised when Everett still didn't react negatively to my presence.

"What about him?" Troy spoke up instead, flicking me a bored expression over his phone.

"He's supposed to report back to Clarice with any progress we've made," I reminded him, but he only rolled his eyes and refocused on his phone. "Has he even been released yet?"

"Don't know, don't care," Troy quipped, leaning back in his chair to plonk his boots on the table.

I curled my fingers around a fork, two seconds away from stabbing his leg with it, when Kade waltzed in.

“Hey, what did I miss?” he said casually, immediately easing some of the tension, just like I thought he would.

“This is an exclusive, club-members-only meeting, Feltore,” Troy said, halting Kade in his tracks. “Something you’d be aware of if you’d been doing your *duty* and not creating a little girl vampire for the Syphon to play with. Or is she for *you* to play with?”

My chair scraped back as I shot to my feet and scowled at Troy. “Don’t talk down to my friends that way. Isla is an innocent victim in all this. She didn’t ask to be kidnapped and drained by those rogue vampires. And I *want* Kade to be here. He’s loyal, intuitive, and we could use his help in trying to decipher this prophecy.”

Everett finally looked up, scrutinizing me carefully through narrowed eyes. Troy had set aside his phone to eye me up and down. I thought for sure anger would spark in his amber eyes for chastising him that way. I couldn’t have been more wrong. He bit his lip suggestively and purred, “You’re incredibly sexy when you get all hot and bothered. It almost makes me want to rile you up more so that you’ll bite me.”

Lochlan’s chair crashed to the floor as he lunged across the table at his brother. Kade raced forward to stop him but wasn’t quick enough. I cringed back as, once again, Lochlan sent plates and cups flying. He had Troy pinned to the wall, held up by his shirt collar, in two seconds flat. “Say that again,” Lochlan quietly growled in his brother’s face.

Troy unapologetically smirked and didn’t even try to get free. “Come on, Loch. You’re obviously banging her. It’s not fair that you get all the fun. Let one of us have a turn.”

“*Troy*,” Everett barked, surprising us all. “Enough. We have business to discuss.”

King Ambrose chose that moment to sweep in. He took in the scene and blew out an exasperated sigh. “Again? What is up with you boys lately?” He snapped his fingers and a pair of servers scurried forward to clean up the mess. “We’ll get to the bottom of this, but at another time. There’s been a change of plans. I’ve invited the council and my most trusted courtiers to attend a ball tonight in Miss Belmont’s honor.”

“You *what?*” Everett and Lochlan spoke at the same time, the latter releasing his younger brother to face the king.

“Somehow, word has gotten out of Kenna’s arrival,” Ambrose said, looking sternly at his sons. “The council is furious that I haven’t consulted them thus far, especially considering that she might be the very last Syphon we’re going to get. To appease them, I’m allowing them to meet her tonight.” He held up a hand when Lochlan opened his mouth to argue. “The invitations have already been sent and preparations are underway. I suggest you take this time to coach Miss Belmont on what to expect. We don’t want any *accidents* to occur.

“Oh,” he added, swiveling toward me, “and Clarice doesn’t need to know about this little social event, so we won’t be releasing your warlock friend today. I’m sure you understand.” He turned on his heel before I could reply, not that arguing would change anything. At the door, he paused to glance over his shoulder at me. “And Kenna? Be sure to wear a dress tonight. I’ll be highly displeased if you don’t.”

* * *

I spent the day in my room, standing for hours on end while I was measured and poked and prodded. Three maids worked feverishly around me, trying to finish the dress before this evening. I wasn't allowed any input, but when they began holding up different colored fabrics, I'd asked that my dress be red.

I wished so badly that Isla wasn't sequestered in her room. Kade had explained that being around so many humans would cause her to lose control. Until she could rein in her bloodlust, the staff—and me—weren't allowed to be near her. I ached for her predicament. Ached to know how she was feeling, if she resented me for my part in not saving her in time. I wanted to help her, to distract her mind from thoughts of blood. To tell her about everything I'd been through myself. That Noah was here.

She must feel so alone, unable to see her family or friends for fear of harming them. At least she had Kade. They'd obviously formed an attachment of some kind through this traumatizing event. It was the only thing keeping me from sneaking across the hall to check on her. I knew Kade would take good care of her.

It was half past seven before a knock came at the door. I immediately pushed off the wall where I'd been nibbling on grapes and reading a rather steamy historical romance novel that one of the maids had let me borrow. I quickly fanned my flushed cheeks and bent to slip on my shoes. The black,

strappy pumps were thankfully a lot more comfortable than the last high-heeled shoes I'd worn.

When I straightened, Kade's wide-shouldered frame filled the doorway.

"Wow, little Kenna," he said, his low voice filled with open appreciation. "Loch won't know what hit him."

I looked down at my dress in a vain attempt to hide the renewed flush to my cheeks. It really was a beautiful confection. The full, floor-length underskirt was a deep red satin. Over that, a filmy tulle layer embellished with thousands of tiny diamonds twinkled brightly. The neckline plunged to just below my breasts, and the boned, sparkly top was stiff enough to remain upright without the help of straps. Thankfully, that meant my nipples were safely hidden. But the tops and sides of my breasts were on full display, not to mention my cleavage.

Simple gold jewelry and black satin elbow gloves completed the outfit. My hair was upswept with golden combs, except for a few loose curls cascading down my bare back, and my lips matched the hue of my dress. All-in-all, I'd never felt more like a princess.

"Thanks," I murmured, peeking up at him again. "You look pretty great yourself. I bet you didn't have to stand for the past several hours so your pants wouldn't wrinkle though." Not to mention what I was supposed to do if I needed to *pee*.

Kade barked a laugh. "True. I've been keeping a newbie vampire stocked up on blood instead."

My smile slipped. "How is she?"

“Okay, considering. She misses you.”

My throat tightened, making it hard to breathe. The dress’s constrictive boning only made it worse. “Thank you for taking care of her. For ... saving her.”

He stepped into the room, but stopped just shy of touching me. “What matters to you matters to me, Kenna. You’re my drothen’s soulmate. My life is tied to yours now too. Anything you need, just ask.”

My heart expanded at his words. I struggled not to cry and ruin my makeup. Sniffling, I said, “Why did you become Lochlan’s drothen?” When he hesitated, I added, “He told me about his past. About Edith and everything that led to the curse.”

Kade looked beyond shocked. As he scrubbed a hand down his face, a telltale sheen glistened in his eyes. “Wow, I ... I didn’t think he’d be able to tell you. He’s never gotten this close to someone before.”

Warmth filled my chest. “He’s close to you too.”

“Yeah, but ... not like this. With me, he had no choice. After he was rescued from Edith, Lochlan was forced to make a decision. Either accept a drothen bond or live out the rest of his days on this island. Although not as rare as soulmates, there aren’t a lot of drothen bonds in existence, especially nowadays. The bond is usually forged out of necessity when a Venturi has a need for added protection. Venturi almost never bond in this way with each other, but on occasion will select a strong Feltore to aid them.

“I was chosen specifically for my virile personality. My strength, humor, and energy—even my healthy sex drive—were meant to lend Loch a boost when he stopped allowing himself to feel. Unfortunately, by the time Ambrose thought to instill our bond, Loch had buried his emotions too deep.

“But being tied to me has other perks as well. I can sense if he’s being manipulated by a spell, for one. I’m like a built-in alarm system, which Lochie definitely needed after ... you know. At first, he resented me. Our bond felt too much like a mind invasion, which he’d experienced enough with Edith. I was a necessary evil to him, since he didn’t want to be trapped on the island forever. He tolerates me now, though,” Kade finished with a wink.

I snorted, despite the urge to cry again. “He more than tolerates you. I can tell that he loves you. You’re good for him.”

He smiled. “I love him too.” Then, before I could prepare, before I could ever be ready, he said, “Do you?”

All the air whooshed out of me.

“D-do I ... Do I what?” I stammered, feeling my face heat to a million degrees.

“Do you love him?”

Oh fates, I *so* wasn’t expecting this. My palms dampened inside my gloves, which suddenly felt ten sizes too small. “Um ...”

Did I? I mean, I definitely cared about him. I lit up whenever he was near. I felt safe and protected in his arms. Cherished, accepted, and wanted. He infuriated me as much as

he thrilled me. I couldn't imagine my life without him anymore. Just the thought sent agony through my soul.

Holy crap, was I in love with Lochlan D'angelo?

Kade chuckled softly. "No need to answer. I've got a pretty good idea. But since it was unfair of me to put you on the spot, I'll give you a little insider's info." He reached out then and gently touched my cheek, initiating skin contact for the very first time. "I've never felt Lochlan so at peace, like he's finally put his demons to rest and is allowing the light back into his life. And I believe with my whole heart, dear Kenna, that you are that light."

As Kade and I paused at the top of the grand staircase overlooking the ballroom, my heart felt full. I didn't think it could get any fuller. But when I peeked over the bannister and spotted Lochlan below, socializing with the guests, I knew that it could.

I could barely tear my eyes away from him, but I did, quickly familiarizing myself with the elaborate room. It was richly breathtaking, from top to bottom. The soaring ceiling, chandeliers, columns, candelabras, sweeping staircase, and polished floor all shone a burnished gold. There were too many sculptures and intricate details to take in all at once.

“Mask on, little Kenna. We all must play our part,” Kade crooned in my ear before sliding a silken mask over my eyes.

As he tied the strings, I muttered, “Isn't it kind of obvious who I am though? I'll be the only one wearing a black mask. Oh, and the only one not sporting dark as midnight skin and ruby red eyes.”

“But that's the whole point. You're honoring us by wearing a black mask, and we're honoring you by hiding our hideous appearances behind shiny, golden suns.”

I whacked his chest. “Stop it. You're not hideous. What do the gold masks really represent?”

“Hope,” he said seriously, tying his own mask on. “That you’ll save our world from falling into darkness.”

I swallowed hard. Fates. No pressure or anything.

“You ready for this?”

No. Not in a thousand years.

Tilting my chin up, I inhaled a fortifying breath and nodded.

“Then go show them what you’re made of,” he said, stepping back so that I was on my own.

I wasn’t *alone*, though, I reminded myself as I took a wobbly step forward, then another. I had Lochlan and Kade. And somewhere in this castle were Isla and Noah. I actually had people in my life who cared about me. Enough to be honest and no longer keep me in the dark. Sure, none of them were human. And they were *all* dangerous. But that didn’t bother me in the least.

Because so was I.

I reminded myself of that as I reached the top stair and stared out at a sea of unfamiliar faces. There were at least fifty vampires below, a lot more than I’d been anticipating. They turned en masse and raised their blood red eyes to mine. Fangs flashed and noses lifted to catch a whiff of my scent.

But I wasn’t their prey. I wasn’t *anyone’s* prey.

I was a one-of-a-kind apex predator. I could kill with a single touch. I could steal magic and use it as a weapon. I could transform into dangerous creatures of the night.

I lifted my chin higher and glided down the stairs. I wasn't afraid. Not of them. They were the ones who should be afraid of *me*. I let my thoughts pierce the gazes of all who looked upon me. Some lowered their eyes. Some openly hissed. But I didn't falter. Didn't look away. Didn't let them find a single weakness.

Because I was the Syphon witch who could free them all.

They needed me. And I wouldn't let them forget it.

When I reached the bottom of the stairs, King Ambrose was there to greet me, right on cue. I recognized him by the confident way he carried himself—plus the gold and ruby ring flashing on his pinkie finger as he held out his unprotected hand toward me. I was the only one here wearing gloves. They represented my commitment to do no ill will toward any vampire I touched. Of course, no such assurance was given to *me* should anyone here wish to do me harm.

This was a political event just as much as a social one. The dozens of vampires in attendance were either advisers to the king or lords and ladies of his court. Most were Venturi, but there were a few respected Feltore and even a couple of drothen like Kade. That was about all Lochlan had been able to tell me before I'd been whisked away for dress fittings.

All I knew was that these vampires would consume me—literally—if I screwed up tonight. They still wanted the curse broken, of course. But their distrust of witches, especially Syphons, was strong. If I did anything even remotely threatening, I was toast.

I accepted the king's hand with a gracious smile and small curtsy, to which he nodded approvingly. That wasn't the only

thing he “approved” of though. He made a show of twirling me this way and that, making my full skirt flare out.

“This dress is striking, Miss Belmont. All the more with you in it. If you weren’t a witch, I’d consider making you an offer of marriage.”

I nearly died on the spot when several vampires within hearing distance—which were a *lot*, since they had excellent hearing—started to chuckle.

Okay. I was going to say it. The king was creepy. I mean, he was *five hundred years old*, for fate’s sake. Sure, he looked great for his age, but still!

I smiled demurely and dipped my chin. “You’re too kind, Your Grace.” Yeah, yeah, I was leaning heavily on the historical romance novel I’d just read. Hopefully it was accurate.

“Let us dance and get this celebration underway, shall we?” he said, sweeping his arm toward the room’s center.

My show of confidence faltered. Uh, I had no clue how to waltz—which I assumed we were about to do, judging by the string quartet gathered in the corner. Crap, I was *so* screwed. That didn’t stop me from following him though, from lightly placing my hand on his shoulder and allowing him to grasp my waist. When the music started, he leaned into me and my eyes flew wide.

“Just follow my lead, Miss Belmont,” he said quietly with a note of amusement in his voice. He moved again and I followed this time, desperately trying to memorize the steps. “Chin up. Let your body find the rhythm.”

Yeah. Sure. No problem. Now I just had to look into the face of the man who'd ordered the genocide of my people. And in the process, not step on his toes.

“What do you want with my son?”

I nearly swallowed my tongue, completely missing a step at his abrupt question. Scrambling to recover, I stammered, “I-I want to help him break the curse.”

“Yes, you've said that, but what do you want with *him*? I've seen the way he looks at you, and the way you look at him. If not for his drothen's insistence that he's under no spell, I would have assumed you bewitched Loch's mind. It's not the first time this has happened to him, which is why the stipulations of the prophecy are so repugnant. My sons don't deserve to be cursed, not after everything they went through at the hands of witches.”

I could barely concentrate on my footing as I racked my brain for how to reply. This was an opportunity to speak my mind, to make him see things in a new light. But I couldn't forget the fact that he was set in his ways. Even if I told him the entire truth and laid my heart out before him, I doubted he'd see things my way. Still, I had to try, for the sake of both our people.

“I promise that I'm not manipulating Lochlan with a spell. I wouldn't even know how to if I wanted to, which I don't. We've ... grown to respect each other. I know that's hard to believe, considering what happened in the past, but ... I want him to be happy. I care for him, enough to remind him that not all witches are the same, and neither are vampires. We don't

all want to destroy each other. We aren't all filled with blind hatred.

“And although I don't think it's fair that I was chosen to break this curse simply because I'm a Syphon, I've come to realize that I'm glad it happened. It's allowed me to meet some incredible people—both vampires and witches alike, even a few werewolves. I even consider some of them my family now. And I never would have made these connections if it wasn't for the curse, so ... I'm glad it happened. I'm glad, and I fully believe that fate brought me here. This is my destiny, and I have no desire to run away from it.”

It wasn't until I'd finished speaking that I realized the music had stopped. And so had we. So had *everyone* who had been dancing, turning to eavesdrop on our conversation. Then it hit me. This had been a setup. The king had *wanted* everyone to listen in, to know what kind of person I was.

Problem was, I didn't know if I'd passed the test or not.

The king suddenly smiled, so wide that his fangs peeked out from beneath his golden mask. “Good answer. I'm not sure if I believe you just yet, but I'm beginning to like you. Can't say that I've ever liked a witch before. You're just so ... *refreshing*. No Syphon has ever dared look me in the eye and speak as if they were my equal.” Before I could figure out if his words were a compliment or not, he stepped back and tipped his head at me, saying, “I look forward to working with you, Miss Belmont. I expect our future findings will be ... interesting.”

He swiveled on his heel and snapped his fingers for the music to resume. The crowd parted for him, but they didn't

continue dancing. No, they continued to stare at me like I was a strange exotic animal they couldn't decide whether to pet or kill. I suddenly felt alone. Alone and terrified. Any second now, they'd scent my fear and realize that I was nothing more than a little girl playing pretend. And when that happened, I'd become just one more casualty. One more dead Syphon in their desperate race to break the curse.

But if that happened, there wouldn't be time to find another Syphon. The curse would become permanent. Vampires and humans would wage a war. And this world would never be the same again.

Fates, I couldn't let that happen. I needed to pull myself together. I needed to stay strong, to remain in control, or everything was going to fall apart. But I couldn't suppress my fear. And the crowd was closing in. And I couldn't breathe. I couldn't ... I couldn't ...

A murmur rose up and the crowd suddenly parted again.

And there he was. Tall, dark, and imposing. Silhouetted in wisps of shadow. A black, three-piece suit accentuated his lithe frame, a single red rose pinned to his lapel. His pitch black hair was artfully wild as usual, falling against his forehead and golden mask.

His eyes—blood red, like the rest in this room—bored into me with a deep intensity. They took in every inch of me, caressing and heating my skin as they went.

I shivered, and his gaze snapped to mine.

He was suddenly inches away, placing my hand on his shoulder and the other in his. I sucked in a gasp as he pulled

me against him. Completely. Possessively. Then he moved and we were dancing.

Just like that, my fear vanished. So did the room and everyone in it. He swept me confidently across the floor, guiding my steps with sure footing. The violins played a haunting tune, their plaintive notes drifting to the ceiling high above. I was enchanted, wholly caught up in the moment. He continued to look down at me and I at him. Nothing else existed.

“You are the bravest, most breathtaking creature I’ve ever met,” Lochlan finally said, with such open adoration that tears sprung to my eyes. “When you descended those stairs earlier, I felt my heart stop. But when you spoke those words to my father, I came alive, more fully alive than I’ve ever felt before.” He searched my face, as though desperate to find an answer. “Did you mean what you said? Do you consider some of us your family?”

I swallowed hard. “Yes.”

“And me?” he said softly, so that those around us couldn’t hear. “What am I?”

My heart threatened to leave my chest as he waited for my reply. He was so many things. So many that I struggled with how best to respond. He was my stalker turned rescuer. He was my enemy turned protector. He was my frustration and pain, my comfort and joy. He was my friend. My desire. My *soulmate*.

He was so many things, but I only told him one. The one that encompassed them all.

“You’re my home.”

He fell to his knees before me.

Right in the center of the ballroom, in front of everyone. Gasps and whispers filled the air, but I was in too much shock myself to pay much attention.

“Lochlan, what are you—?”

He took my hand, and then did the unthinkable. He removed the gloves from both my hands, one finger at a time. When the silken material fluttered to the floor, exposing my bare skin, the hushed murmurs rose in volume.

“McKenna Joy Belmont,” he said, loud enough that the entire room fell silent, “I offer thee this sacred vow tonight in front of the esteemed members of my father’s court, so that all may bear witness to the solemnity of my promise. I start by revoking the previous vow I made over a century ago, one that no longer aligns with my beliefs. One forged from blind hatred and self destruction. I make a new vow today, to respect, honor, and protect you for the rest of your days. I offer you this rose”—he plucked the rose from his lapel and took my bare hand, placing the flower on my palm—“as a token of my sincerity. May it be a reminder that I do not make this vow lightly and fully intend to uphold it always.”

The moment he stopped speaking, the room erupted into chaos.

He stood and pulled me against him as a hulking male vampire began shouting too close for comfort. When another nearly bumped into me, Lochlan stepped between us with a growl. I heard King Ambrose bellow over the din, but the shouts only intensified. Kade and Everett were suddenly in front of us, pushing the crowd back.

“That was quite the show, Lochie,” Kade yelled, throwing us a grin over his shoulder.

“Yeah, one that incited a *riot*,” Everett snapped, blocking a few ticked-off vampires from getting to us. “Get her out of here before someone accidentally kills her, Loch.”

Lochlan didn’t have to be told twice. He scooped me up and took off at vampire speed. Thankfully, no one followed us as he sped to his bedroom on the fifth floor. The moment the door was locked and he’d set me on my feet, he whipped his jacket off and stalked to the kitchen. I watched as he poured himself a glass of what looked like whiskey, then tossed it back in a single gulp.

“That didn’t go as planned,” he muttered, before pouring himself another glass.

Still reeling over what he’d said and the crowd’s violent reaction to it, I fiddled with the rose he’d given me. “Will they hate me more now?”

“I don’t know.” He tossed his drink back again. “But I doubt my declaration endeared you to them. Most were in

attendance the day I publicly vowed to swear off all witches. They're probably confused. And suspicious."

As he poured a third drink, I cautiously approached. When he didn't stop me, I laid a hand on his back. His muscles bunched beneath my touch, then slowly relaxed. I rested my forehead between his shoulder blades and whispered, "You broke your vow for me. In front of everyone."

He paused, the drink halfway to his lips. "Yes."

"Do you regret it?"

"No," came his immediate reply.

At the sincerity in his tone, the tension along my spine eased.

"The roses," I said, lifting the flower to inhale its scent. "The ones you gave me in the past. What did they mean?"

He slowly set down his glass, but didn't turn. It took him a moment, but he finally said, "Presenting a red rose is a tradition my father started many centuries ago. They are only given to someone you view with high regard, often in a way that represents your current feelings for them. The moment you asked me to spare that human's life, the one trying to hurt you in the graveyard, I felt admiration toward you. I left a rose on your windowsill as a sign that I would protect you."

He turned then. Leaning against the counter, he gently grasped my hips and pulled me against him. I met his eyes, hardly daring to breathe, as he said, "Time went by and my feelings for you changed, as did the meaning behind the roses. The rose I left on your pillow at the cabin represented my

growing affection toward you. As did the rose I gave you for your birthday.”

My heart pounded frantically inside my chest. Lifting the rose between us with trembling fingers, I whispered, “And this? What does this one represent?”

His expression softened and he reached up to touch my cheek. “My love for you, McKenna.”

A tear slipped down my cheek and he gently wiped it away. As the invisible hand reached inside my chest again, welding our souls together, a certainty unlike anything I’d felt before washed over me like warm sunshine. “I wish to be bonded to you now. Fully. Completely.”

I’d never been more certain of anything in my entire life.

Shock flooded me, followed by sharp fear.

“Lochlan?” I pulled back, startled at the strong feelings pouring off him. Hurt pierced me as he looked away, as he tried to *hide* from me. “I thought ... I thought you wanted me.”

“I *do*. I just ... I need a minute.”

More hurt dug its talons into me, along with confusion. I pulled back even more, until we were no longer touching.

Cursing under his breath, he shoved a hand through his hair and pushed off the counter. “Let me draw you a bath. When you’re done, we can ... talk.”

A bath? He wanted me to take a bath right now?

He left without another word, disappearing around the corner into the bathroom. Sure enough, I heard water running

a few seconds later. He didn't emerge right away, which gave me time to collect myself. Except that I was too numb with shock to cry, or be angry, or be anything at all. I simply stared at nothing, twirling the rose's short stem round and round as I desperately tried to figure out what had gone so horribly wrong.

When he returned, neither of us looked at each other.

"It'll be ready soon," he said, his voice strained. When I simply nodded and headed for the bathroom, he added, "Wait. Let me unzip you." I stopped. As he approached, I stiffened, wondering if I should just bolt for the bathroom and slam the door. But I didn't, because I wanted to be near him too much. Wanted his comfort, his reassurance that we were okay. That he still wanted me and our bond.

That he *loved* me.

His knuckles grazed my naked spine and I almost lost it. Almost melted into a puddle on the floor and begged him to take me back. I was losing him. I could feel it. Like he'd looked me in the eye and verbally rejected me. He silently undid the dress's zipper, stopping just shy of my underwear. I held the front to me so it wouldn't fall and whispered a quick thank you before hurrying to the bathroom.

When the door was closed, my composure crumbled.

I sank to the floor in a pile of silk and tulle, clutching at my bleeding heart. I didn't make a sound though. Not a single sob or snuffle. I didn't want him to hear. I didn't want him to *pity* me.

When I could stand again, I removed the dress and set it on the counter. It was too pretty to toss it in the corner in a fit of self-loathing like I wanted to. I set the mask and rose down beside the tub's edge before turning the faucet off, then stared at the inviting water. I debated taking a cold shower instead. Somehow, the thought of soaking in this gigantic sunken tub all by myself felt extremely lonely. But I did it anyway, sitting on the ledge before slipping into the steamy pool.

I *deserved* a good soak. And, holy fates, this tub was heavenly. It had seats along the edge, so I settled into one and laid my head back. It wasn't long before grief pressed down on my chest though. Fates, every part of my being still wanted him. Still desperately wanted to complete our soulmate bond. I ached all over just at the thought of it, at how utterly perfect I imagined our union would be.

But he didn't want me. He didn't—

The door opened.

I squeaked and tried to cover myself, almost slipping off my seat. When Lochlan filled the doorway, I froze, blinking up at him. He wordlessly entered and began to unbutton his red vest. “Lochlan, what are you—? Lochlan, *stop*. You don't want this.”

“Yes, I do,” he said determinedly, removing his vest, then unbuttoning his shirt. “I want this more than anything in the world. But I'm still *scared*, McKenna. Scared of standing naked before you. Of being wholly vulnerable and allowing you complete control over me. I'm scared out of my mind, but here I am, asking you to accept me.”

His shirt slithered to the floor and he began undoing his belt. “I’m broken, McKenna. Darkness still plagues my thoughts and dreams. I’ve been a monster for so long that I struggle to let others in. But I want to. I want to let *you* in, fully and completely. I want to make love to you and seal our bond. I want to be wholly connected to you, my other half. I want our souls to be one, now and forever. I want you, Kenna. God, you have no idea how much.”

In the wake of his confession, a ringing filled my ears. Speechless and lightheaded, I tried to process, to *accept* all that he’d said. My heart pounded a frantic beat as I watched him remove his belt, then unbutton his pants. Fates, he was serious. He was *really* doing this, despite how utterly terrified he was.

And I knew then, without a shadow of doubt, that I loved him. Every single dark, broken, flawed piece of him.

So I lowered my arms and let myself be vulnerable too, pushing all the love I felt for him through our bond. And whispered, “Then come here, solemae, so I can help you heal.”

A sigh shuddered from him, long and deep, as if it had come from his very soul.

He briefly closed his eyes, then stripped off his pants, standing completely naked and vulnerable before me. Only his golden mask remained. I didn’t suppress my gasp, wanting him to see and hear my reaction to him. Every inch of him was raw power and gloriously male. He was the first man I’d seen nude, and I couldn’t seem to tear my eyes away from the juncture between his thighs. A part of me was intimidated by

his size, nervous that I wouldn't be able to hold him. But mostly, I was fascinated.

He must have guessed my thoughts, because his mouth suddenly curled at the corners. "Like what you see, mate?"

I nodded mutely, even as my face flushed scarlet. When I reached for him, he immediately came, sliding into the tub with feline grace. With him this close, this *naked*, nerves tumbled through my stomach. He didn't give me a chance to retreat though, reaching forward to brush his fingers along my cheek. I sucked in a sharp breath, startled at how sensitive, how *alert* my skin was. At that simple touch, my nipples hardened and an ache pulsed between my thighs.

Making sure my abilities were firmly under control, I lifted my own hands out of the water and slowly undid his mask. When it fell away, revealing his face to me, our gazes locked. A look passed between us, one filled with so much vulnerability, and want, and love that I could no longer hold myself back from him.

The mask slipped from my grasp, plunking into the water as I reached up and touched his lips. He grew preternaturally still, watching me closely as I stroked the soft skin. When he didn't shy away from my touch, I eased my hand behind his neck and urged him closer. "I wish to kiss you."

The words snapped him out of his sharp focus and he smiled softly. "There you go again, wishing for things you already have."

My huff of laughter was cut off as he pressed an achingly sweet kiss to my lips. He cupped my jaw, tilting my face up so he could kiss me more fully. My head spun as I breathed in his

delicious scent. When he kissed me again, I felt the outline of one of his fangs. A thrill shivered up my spine and I opened my mouth for him. His tongue immediately swept inside, caressing mine in languid circles.

My hold on his neck tightened as I fought for control, desperate not to ruin this moment. With each brush of his tongue, my arousal increased, until pain bloomed in my core. I moaned into his mouth, instinctively lifting my legs to wrap them around him.

He grasped one of my thighs before I could, lightly digging his claws in. “Slowly,” he said, his voice low and rough with desire. “I need to know what you’re doing.”

“I want to be closer,” I breathed against his lips, my desperation growing the longer he held me in place. “I’m in control. I’m ready. I need more of you.”

He growled, clearly pleased with my words, but didn’t pull me closer. I whimpered and he chuckled cruelly, nipping at my lips before running his nose along my jaw and down my neck. When he reached the juncture between my neck and shoulder, he nuzzled my skin, murmuring, “You think you have control?”

I dug my other hand into the hair at his nape and arched my neck for him. “Yes.”

He cradled the back of my head and said against my skin, “Then let me claim you.”

My eyes popped open. “W-what does that mean?”

“It means that I bite you. Right here.” His fangs scraped my sensitive skin and I sucked in a gasp. “It’s a vampire’s way of

marking what's theirs. My scent will penetrate your skin, warning all other males away."

My stomach went crazy with nerves and excitement. "That's ..."

"Barbaric?"

"Hot."

I felt him smile against my skin. "Is that a yes?"

I hesitated, remembering the last time I'd been bitten. "Will it hurt?"

"Yes. But only for a moment. Then you'll feel nothing but ecstasy."

Holy fates. I was so turned on right now. I almost combusted right then and there, and we'd hardly even done anything.

"Then yes," I replied shakily. "As long as you don't suck me dry."

"I promise," he whispered, right before he plunged his fangs into my neck.

My eyes flew wide as pain zinged through me, hot and sharp. I opened my mouth to scream, but froze when an incredible sense of euphoria gushed through my body. My eyes rolled back and I choked out a moan. I felt the first pull on my neck, long and deep. Lochlan released a guttural groan and gripped my hair tightly.

As he drank, my euphoria lifted me higher and higher until I left my body completely. I was floating, swimming in a sea of bliss. This was heaven. Nothing could reach me up here.

Lochlan growled, as if to remind me of his presence. Of my need to stay focused. I hung on by a thread, drifting between exquisite bliss and reality.

When my grip on him slackened, he shifted his hold on my thigh, sliding his hand up higher and higher. I screamed his name as he dragged a claw up my center and shooting pleasure-pain rocketed through me. I bucked against him, but he pinned my legs with his, anchoring me in place.

I shuddered and moaned as he relentlessly pleased me, driving my control to the brink. This. It was too much. Too *much*. But he drove me onward anyway, stroking and sucking on me until I nearly blacked out from sheer ecstasy.

Just when I thought I couldn't hold on any longer, I came *hard*. So hard that I trembled uncontrollably and screamed, gouging my nails into Lochlan's neck. He immediately withdrew his fangs and licked the bite mark while my body quivered with aftershocks.

Eventually, I sagged against the tub and opened my eyes to find him watching me. He tenderly brushed damp hair off my forehead, pressing a kiss there before scooping me into his arms. He carried me to his bed dripping wet and carefully placed me in its center, then leaned back to look his fill of my body.

After what he'd just done to me, I felt anything but shy. I felt beautiful and powerful, and the longer he stared, the more amazing I felt. He spent an ample amount of time gazing at my legs, then between my thighs, so long that heat began to simmer in my core again. He swept his eyes over my stomach next, then my breasts, taking in each hill and valley. He sent a

lingering look to my bite mark, *his* bite mark, before meeting my eyes. His pupils were dilated. Red blazed along the rims, burning intensely.

“You’re perfect,” he said, the words hoarse with emotion.

Emotion tightened my own throat and I sat up to kneel before him. “Can I ... touch you?”

Flickers of his fear pinged in my chest, but he slowly nodded anyway, swallowing audibly.

“I won’t hurt you,” I promised, reaching up to touch his cheek. “You’re safe.” I could hear his heart thundering as I let myself explore his silken skin, marveling at how hard he was beneath. He closed his eyes as my fingers tripped down the thick column of his throat. His pulse jumped beneath my touch, but he didn’t pull away. When I reached his chest, I pressed my palm over his heart where the rose tattoo was, hidden within the darkness of his skin. He jerked, hissing lightly between his teeth.

I had the sudden urge to kiss him, so I did. Not on the mouth, but over his heart. I felt him stiffen as my lips met his skin, felt him shudder as I kissed lower and lower, then darted my tongue out to capture his nipple.

“Kenna,” he barked breathlessly, shooting a hand up to grip my sodden hair. When he didn’t stop me though, I took the nipple into my mouth and bit down.

Lochlan’s roar shook the bed.

I was suddenly on my back again, blinking up at him as he lowered himself on top of me. The moment our bodies connected, every inch of me burst awake. I stared up at him in

silent wonder, at a loss for words. There were no barriers between us. Just his skin on mine. His chest heaved against my breasts, our stomachs flush together. When he settled his hard erection between my thighs, I arched into him and moaned softly.

He watched my reaction to him as if I were the most fascinating thing in the world. As if I *was* his world. Before I could catch my breath, he cupped my backside and slowly rocked against me. I dug my nails into his back and groaned his name. He did it again and again until I was a trembling ball of need. Then he lifted up and positioned his erection at my entrance.

My eyes jerked open and I gasped.

He paused, carefully searching my face. “Are you scared?”

“N-no.” I bit my lip. “Maybe a little.”

“Are you worried that you’ll lose control?”

I shook my head. “No, I think I can handle it. But ... I don’t know if I can handle ...”

His brows knit together when I refused to finish. A blush rose to my cheeks. He studied me a moment more, then slowly smiled. “Me? You think you can’t handle me?”

My blush deepened. “Well, I mean, you’re *huge*. And I’m ...” I shrugged, suddenly unsure of myself. It felt so weird, talking about his penis like it was going to *attack* me. Well, it kind of was. *Gah*.

He laughed softly, then pressed a kiss to my forehead. “You can handle me, McKenna. We’re soulmates. Our bodies were

created for each other.” When I still looked uncertain, he whispered in my ear, “Let me prove it to you.”

My heart skittered as he circled the tip around my entrance, teasing, *challenging* me. He continued to do it until all I could think about was having him inside me. Filling me. *Completing* me. I wanted this ultimate connection with him. I wanted to experience all that our bodies could give to each other. I wanted to be his, and I wanted him to be mine.

So I pressed upward, enough that he slid in an inch. He immediately stretched me tight and my thighs clenched around him, trembling uncontrollably.

“Relax, McKenna,” he soothed, nuzzling my neck as he pressed down, stretching me further. “The pain will be fleeting.”

I didn’t respond, too busy trying not to panic as he filled me more and more. When he was finally seated fully within me, I struggled to breathe. He waited patiently, stroking my hair while I adjusted. The sensation of having a piece of him inside my body was overwhelming, to say the least. It felt both utterly foreign and perfectly *right*. Like he was indeed created just for me.

When he began to move inside me, guiding us into a steady rhythm, I was calm enough to handle it. To handle *him*. Somehow, my body had made room for his, letting us both experience a closeness that words couldn’t express. It was transcendence. It was music without sound. Thunder without rain. A dance only our bodies knew.

And when we were both panting, *singing*, with the highest form of pleasure, our bodies carrying the notes higher and

higher, we became one.

One body. One mind. One soul.

We were no longer our own. We were each other's. Our bond was complete.

A feeling unfurled inside my chest, one I couldn't quite describe. But as it settled into place beneath my sternum, warmly pulsing with contentment, I knew that it was him.

My soulmate.

34

KENNA

The distant shattering of glass jolted me from a deep, dreamless sleep.

Lochlan's arms flexed around me, letting me know that he had heard it too. A thin sheet had divided our bodies while we slept, but nothing else. The moment he felt me stir awake, he snuck a hand beneath the sheet and cupped my breast. I moaned as warm tingles erupted over my skin, his touch instantly hardening my nipples.

"Morning," he mumbled, although it wasn't quite dawn yet, judging by how dark the room still was. He nuzzled my neck where he'd bitten me and pinched my alert nipple.

I gasped, coming fully awake.

My toes curled as he began to lazily play with it, gradually heating my blood to a simmering boil. "Lochlan," I said, biting my lip when his fingers drifted to my other nipple. "I heard something break."

"A maid probably dropped a breakfast tray." He pressed his erection against my backside, making it very clear where his mind was at. My eyes closed when his hand slid downward to caress my stomach, moving lower and lower with each stroke.

An ear-splitting shriek shattered the moment.

Lochlan was off the bed and jerking on pants a second later. Still in his vampire form, he fixed his glowing red eyes on me and said, “Stay here. I’ll be right back.”

As he whooshed from the room, I gaped after him for a moment, then scrambled out of bed. No way was I going to be the damsel in distress. Something might be wrong. My blood ran cold when I envisioned Isla wandering out of her room, unable to stop herself from attacking one of the staff.

I yanked open drawers, putting on the first shirt and boxer briefs I could find. Then I dashed across the room and into the hallway. The moment I did, someone rammed into me. I hit the wall, crying out as sharp pain bloomed in my shoulder. Before I could reorientate myself, hands hoisted me up and over a shoulder. As I lashed out, trying to break their hold on me, a furious roar shook the hall.

I felt Lochlan’s terrible wrath in and around me as he bore down on us. A second later, he pried the hands off my body. A loud snap cleaved the air as bones broke. My would-be captor screamed and dropped to his knees. I scrambled away and ducked behind Lochlan, who reached behind him to pull me close. My eyes darted around, widening when they saw masked figures closing in from both sides. There were at least a dozen, and they were all pointing weapons at Lochlan.

Silver ones.

My heart stopped. Memories crashed into me, of Lochlan being shot over and over by silver bullets. Fear rose up, nearly choking me. And then everything slowed as Lochlan whipped around. He grabbed my arms, fear blazing in his own eyes.

But not for himself, I realized. For me. And then ... he did the unthinkable.

He shoved me backward into his bedroom and slammed the door shut. Leaving him to face the threat alone.

Horror froze me in place. Then I found my voice.

“*No!*” I screamed, lunging for the door handle. I twisted and yanked, but it wouldn’t budge. I was trapped. Trapped inside while Lochlan—my *soulmate*—was left fighting for his life. I relentlessly pounded on the door, screaming for Lochlan as chaos reigned outside. Pain bloomed in my chest, *his* pain, and I howled, nearly falling to my knees.

Silence descended beyond the door and I stopped breathing.

“Lochlan?” I whispered, frantically searching for any trace of his emotions inside me.

But they were gone. Snuffed out. Like he was ... he was ...

“*Nooo,*” I wailed, crumpling to the floor. I clutched my chest as pain consumed me—*my* pain—and curled into a tight ball, trembling uncontrollably.

Before I could fully succumb to my grief, the door handle rattled. I froze. Seconds later, the entire door shook as someone kicked it. Again and again, until wood splintered and the door flew inward with a resounding *wham*. I scooted away before the door could hit me, but remained on the floor, too distraught to stand.

Everett stumbled in, catching himself before he could trip over me. He took one look at my face, then grabbed my arm and hauled me upright. “He’s not dead. Stop crying.” He

blinked hard, as if struggling to focus. His expression abruptly sharpened as he leaned forward to smell me. “You reek of sex. And ...” He pulled back, disbelief stamped across his face. “He claimed you.”

I didn’t deny it, too focused on what he had said about Lochlan not being dead. “W-where is he?”

“Taken.”

My stomach dropped. “By who?”

“By your fake *aunt*, that’s who. Which is why I need you.”

I jerked my head back. “Aunt Tess was here? But ... why do you need *me*? You hate me.”

His expression flattened. “It seems that I was wrong about you. Tell me one thing: Are you Loch’s mate?”

The air sputtered from my lungs.

At my deer-in-headlights look, his lips pulled back in a silent snarl. “Great. Well, at least your usefulness has increased. You’re coming with me.”

Before I could protest, he dragged me out the door and down the hallway. I craned my head around to see the damage left behind, surprised when I couldn’t find any bodies or discarded weapons.

“The SCA is known for their efficiency,” Everett said, correctly reading my troubled frown. “They almost never leave behind evidence of their presence.”

“But ... how did they even get in here?”

“The correct question is, who told them that you were here?” He ripped open a stairwell door and forced me to

descend.

My mind reeled at his words. They'd come here, because of me? Fresh pain squeezed my heart. That meant Lochlan had been *taken* because of me.

"Where are we going?" I finally thought to ask, my bare feet scrambling to keep up with him.

"First, we're getting you some clothes," he said with a sneer, glancing down at my borrowed apparel. "Then, we're going after Loch."

My breath hitched. "But how? I can't leave this island."

He snorted. "I know a little more about this island than you do. As for leaving, you're not trying to escape, right?"

"Well, not exactly. But—"

"Then you won't be breaking the deal you made."

As we burst from the stairwell onto the fourth floor, I dug my heels in, yanking free of Everett's grip. "Wait. We need more help. We should take Kade with us at least. He's good at tracking."

Everett rounded on me, not bothering to hide his annoyance. "Kade is still unconscious, as are my father and Troy. I was too when this all happened. We had a private meeting last night after the ball, and someone managed to lace our drinks with silver. This was an *inside* job. Someone has betrayed us, and until I find out who, it's just you and me, witch."

I blinked, horrified. Fates, this was getting worse and worse. "But ... but Kade wouldn't—"

“I don’t trust *anyone* right now,” Everett interrupted, his ire rising.

I fisted my hands and blurted, “Well, how am I supposed to trust *you*? You’re the one who threatened to kill me, remember?”

He released a frustrated sigh and shook his head. “Because I would do anything to protect my brother from harm. And if you are his mate, then you’re under my protection as well.”

I stared at him, caught off guard by his sincerity. Sure, he was still a violent egomaniac in my book, but I didn’t doubt his words. Which was why I found myself saying, “Then lead the way.”

He shook his head again, an actual smile curling one side of his mouth. “No, Miss Belmont. *You* lead the way.”

I frowned. “I don’t understand. How?”

His brows lifted. “You had *sex* with him. The mate bond is complete, which means that your minds are now telepathically linked. You have the ability to share thoughts and images with each other, and can therefore track each other’s whereabouts.”

Shock couldn’t even begin to describe what I was feeling. Did Lochlan know this would happen? If so, why didn’t he *tell* me? “But I ... I-I don’t know how to—”

“Do you love my brother?” Everett abruptly said.

My mouth fell open. Holy *crap*. How was I supposed to answer that question?

“Well, do you?” he persisted, his blood red eyes picking me apart piece by piece.

I squirmed in place, realizing he wasn't going to accept anything less than the naked truth.

So I blurted, "Yes." Then swallowed a gasp, surprised that I'd actually admitted to it out loud. And to *Everett*, of all people.

When his jaw hardened, I braced myself for the inevitable violence. But it never came. He simply stared at me, as if to make certain I spoke the truth. Then he slowly nodded. And said something I never in a million years thought he would say.

"Then find him, Kenna. Save him. Because without him, there's no way in hell you'll be able to break the curse. He chose you, whether he meant to or not, and your bond is now the only hope our kingdom has."

The story continues in book three of the steamy, pulse-pounding A Touch of Vampire series ...

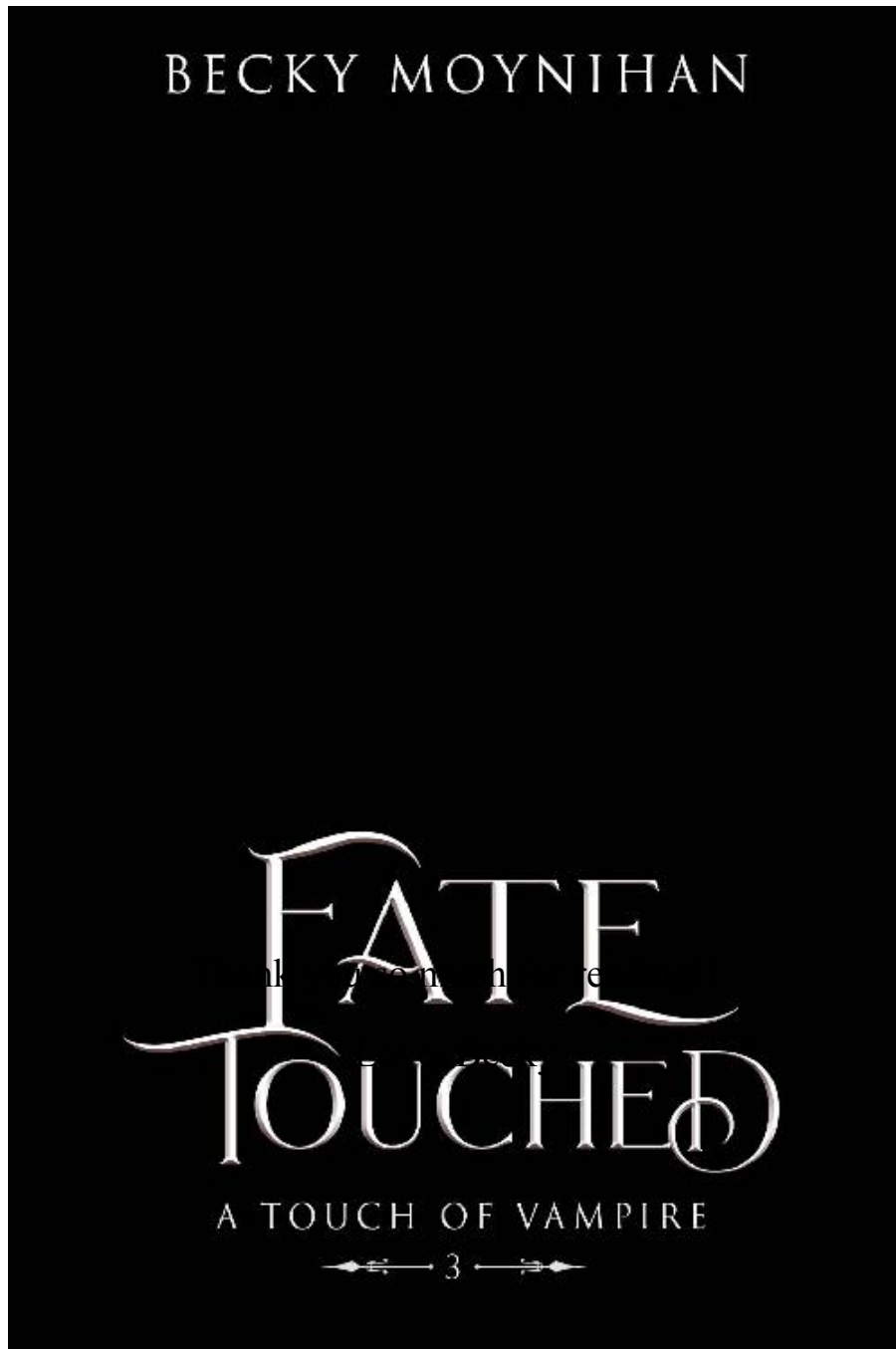
Dear Reader,

At least the cliffhanger wasn't as bad this time, right? Right???

Thanks so much for hanging in there, and I truly hope you're enjoying this journey! If you are, I would be forever grateful if you could leave a [short review](#) on Amazon (doesn't have to be fancy, every review makes a difference). I am also thrilled to

say that book three, *Fate Touched*, is available for pre-order!

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I really had to stretch my imagination with this book, and I honestly had a lot of fun. Although witches and vampires aren't a new concept, I enjoyed putting my own supernatural spin on things and changing up some of the norms. Continuing to add the loose fairy tale retelling element was also tricky, but I hope you were able to pick out the subtle (and not so subtle) nods to my favorite fairy tale, Beauty and the Beast!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Becky Moynihan is a bestselling, award-winning author of YA/NA Fantasy & Science Fiction. Her debut series is *The Elite Trials*, a YA dystopian romance. Her newest series, *A Touch of Vampire*, is a steamy paranormal vampire romance. She's also co-written the *Genesis Crystal Saga*, an urban fantasy romance series.

Becky's stories contain strong, snarky females and hot, alpha males. Expect to find several romantic tropes in her books, especially enemies-to-lovers. Her stories are fast-paced and filled with lots of high-stakes action, tension, angst, and mystery.

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