

katmere academy

AN INSIDER'S GUIDE



The school with bite.

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

TRACY WOLFF

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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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Note to Readers:

Spoiler alert!

If you haven't read all the books in the series, then keep an eye out for timeline notes that will tell you where within *Crave*, *Crush*, or *Covet* the content falls. You may want to skip over sections that take place in any books you're unfamiliar with. Happy reading!

For all the Crave series fans, who have taken this series and me into their hearts, I love you all. Thank you, thank you, thank you from the bottom of my heart.

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Dear Student,

Welcome to Katmere Academy, the school with bite! Set in an ancient dragon stronghold on the side of a mountain in isolated Denali, Alaska, we've been educating the best and brightest minds in the paranormal world for nearly a thousand years.

Our students are challenged daily by rigorous academics designed to consistently push them to be their best. A Katmere Academy education—led by the most talented and decorated faculty in existence—truly is beyond compare.

Of course, a top-notch education isn't the only thing Katmere has to offer our students. We believe in a whole-child approach, one that integrates the academic, emotional, social, and magical needs of our students into one comprehensive program. Magic and power are addressed both in the classroom and through a variety of mandatory extracurricular activities while regular checkins with advisers, the headmaster, and onsite school therapists help us keep track of our students' emotional well-being. Our weekly student mixers, monthly school-sponsored activities, and a wide variety of clubs, sports, and other extracurriculars help build alliances and engage even the most introverted students.

If a beautiful castle, the best academics in the paranormal world, and the chance to make lifelong friendships with some of the most powerful beings in existence sound like your kind of school, we're thrilled to invite you to apply. But don't let our fun-filled curriculum fool you—the application process is rigorous, and only the best of the best are accepted here.

Yours Truly,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Finn Foster". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial "F".

Finn Foster

Headmaster

Character Bios



GRACE FOSTER

Grace Foster

Q: What sound does a sneezing gargoyle make?

Paranormal identity: Gargoyle

Special abilities: I turn into a big, flying rock. I have other gargoyle powers, water magic and healing and stuff, but that's the real headliner.

Astrological sign: Aries

Favorite features: My super-curly hair and the glowing, magic tattoo that takes up most of my arm.

Favorite class at Katmere Academy: History of Witchcraft

Least favorite class at Katmere Academy: Physics of Flight (super important and SUPER HARD)

Best thing about living in Alaska: My friends

Worst thing about living in Alaska: I would say the lack of beaches, but Alaska actually has the longest coastline in America. It's not the rest of the state's fault that some ancient paranormal educators decided complete isolation in an uninhabitable wilderness builds character. (Okay, the mountains are pretty. From a window. Inside.)

Favorite snack: Frosted Cherry Pop-tarts, the breakfast of champions.

Irresistible midnight snack: A pint of Cherry Garcia (shared with Macy, of course).

Favorite childhood memory: Probably my dad teaching me to surf in Coronado when I was six. At the time, I thought I was a natural, but now that I know he was a warlock, I'd guess magic had a lot to do with me staying on the board that day. But the three-year, full-blown surfer girl persona that followed...that was all Grace.

Honorable mention goes to gardening in the backyard with my mom. I used to have my own little gardening set, and I would be in charge of cutting all the calendula flowers. I had a

little basket to gather them in and everything. I told Flint about this once, and he said I was “just like the chick from the Bee Movie.” I dive-bombed him in the next Physics of Flight class—perks of being a big, flying rock.

Favorite color: Purple (though I’ll admit that hot pink is starting to grow on me)

Favorite beverage: Dr Pepper

Favorite Food: Any kind of taco

Most embarrassing moment: When my best friend (Heather) from San Diego was auditioning for a play junior year, I went with her for moral support. But the drama teacher insisted that everyone in the room audition, no excuses, so I ended up onstage, stumbling through *Hamilton* lyrics (the only theater phase I had gone through) in front of fifty people. This was two years after *Hamilton* was cool, of course. By the end of it, my legs were shaking so hard that I tripped going offstage and fell flat on my ass in front of everyone. And just to top it off, I made direct eye contact with my crush at the time. I understand why they didn’t reciprocate my feelings after that, I really do.

Dream vacation: I think I’d go to England because I really want to see Stonehenge. I know that’s not a very exciting answer, but I’m drawn to it. There was a brief period in middle school where all I did for fun was read about and watch conspiracy videos on Stonehenge. Thinking about it now, ancient paranormal construction workers actually seem quite plausible. Consider this my formal apology to [hengetruther655](#) on YouTube.

You are best known by your friends for the time you: Turned to stone for almost four months in the middle of the hallway?

Favorite morning beverage: Definitely coffee. I used to try and watch my caffeine consumption, but after everything that’s happened, I think I deserve to drink whatever I gargoyle-damn want.

If you were a kitchen utensil, you would be: Probably a

spork. I'm not glamorous, but I am versatile. I can do just about anything a little bit worse than the person who's actually meant to do it.

Dream date: Going to a library or museum where we can talk about our favorite books and art, followed by a food-truck dinner and stargazing on the beach. I think it goes without saying, but that last part does *not* take place in Alaska.

Biggest fear: Not being able to protect the people I love.

Pet peeve: People trying to kill me.

A: Sta-choo

Fun Facts About Grace:

1. When she was in middle school, Grace had a collection of over a hundred flavors of lip gloss. Her most used: cherry, of course.
2. As soon as Grace and Heather got their driver's licenses, they implemented a weekly Diner Dinner tradition.
3. Grace has always been obsessed with all things ocean-related, including but not limited to lighthouses, shells, sea creatures, and surfing.
4. Grace's favorite pizza topping is black olives.

GRACE + HEATHER TEXTING

(Timeline: the beginning of *Crave*)

Heather: How's Hogwarts?

Grace: Wouldn't know

Heather: How long does it take to get to Alaska???

Grace: I'm in Alaska already

Grace: And I have an answer

Heather: For what?

Grace: If hell has frozen over

Heather: And?

Grace: Depends... is there something more definitive than yes?

Heather: Fuck yes?

Grace: Then fuck yes!

Heather: And it's only the beginning of November

Heather: Novembrr

Grace: That was awful. I loved it

Grace: But why must you remind me of my fate?

Heather: Just campaigning for your return

Heather: jk

Heather: Where are you then?

Grace: About to board the tiniest plane in existence

Grace: No way this thing stays in the sky

Grace: I give it 15 minutes

Heather: You'll be fine. You've read Hatchet

Heather: It's taking you to Katmere?

Grace: No, some town called Healy near KA

Grace: So this is my cosmic punishment for spark notes-ing my 6th grade English final?

Heather: Probably! :)

Heather: Buuut, I've got info

Heather: To take your mind off your imminent dismemberment by gravity or bear

Grace: You're supposed to tell me everything's going to be fine!

Heather: Oh

Heather: Everything's going to be fine

Grace: Very sincere

Heather: It's a text!

Grace: It had a tone

Heather: Do you want to know or not?

Grace: Yesss

Heather: Marcus wanted to know where you were today

Heather: And he looked really upset when I told him

Heather: Like, freshman year, cut from the basketball team upset

Grace: Wait? Seriously???

Grace: Since when does he care where I am?

Heather: Since you're not in APUSH for him to ignore, I guess

Grace: He hasn't said a word to me since my parents died

Heather: He's a tool

Heather: But apparently a tool who still had his eyes on you

Grace: Yeah, well, the feeling isn't mutual

Grace: At. All.

Heather: Totally

Heather: Dumping him was the smartest thing you ever did

Heather: Just thought you should know he's still pining

Grace: I'm sure

Grace: It was kind of a mutual dumping, though...

Heather: Take the win

Heather: You need it

Grace: Fair enough

Grace: Find a hot pic from our beach day. I'll post

Grace: My revenge dress moment >:-)

Heather: Eyyooo

Heather: Where was this Grace when I was trying to get us invited to upperclassmen parties??

Grace: She still had parents following her on Instagram

Grace: *dabs*

Heather: sklfhlsfjo

Heather: Jesus Christ

Heather: Grace

Heather: You're trying to /make/ friends, remember?

Grace: I'm being ~ironic~

Heather: I physically cringed. With my real body

Grace: Sorry?!?! I don't listen to my haters xD

Heather: You hurt me

Heather: Text me right when you get there, okay?

Heather: And send a photo

Heather: I bet someone 5 bucks it didn't exist

Grace: WHO

Grace: You bet AGAINST me???

Heather: If it existed it would be on Google, Grace.

Grace: Not if it's a top secret spy school that'll teach me how to kick your ass

Heather: My money's on cult

Heather: Literally <3

Grace: Knowing Uncle Finn...

Grace: Now I'm even more nervous

Heather: It'll be fine

Grace: There's that tone again...

Grace: Losing signal

Grace: In case I die, I love you!

Heather: You'll be FINE



MACY FOSTER

Macy Foster

Q: What noise does a witch's cereal make?

Paranormal identity: Witch

Special abilities: I can build portals to travel to any place I've visited before.

Astrological sign: Libra

First thing people notice about you: My hair, which changes colors a lot.

Favorite part of Katmere Academy: My secret passage and the witches' tower.

Favorite class at Katmere Academy: Drama of the Paranormal (That's drama as in "the theater," but if the Katmere rumor mill was a class, it would easily be my favorite. I won't apologize for who I am.)

Least favorite part of living in Alaska: How long I have to wait for Ben and Jerry's ice cream. Also, it's very difficult to find a boy/girlfriend in a school we've all attended since kindergarten.

You are best known by your friends for the time you: Sophomore year (in a particularly competitive game of truth or dare) I charmed a broomstick into flying and rode around Jaxon's tower thirty times in my bathing suit. He and I have never spoken about it.

Favorite childhood memory: The time my mom took me down to Seattle for a girls' weekend. We got mani/pedis and went fancy dress and shoe shopping. Then, when we were all dressed up, she took me to a nice hotel for high tea. I still remember what kind I got—blackberry summer—and it was the most delicious tea I've ever had. We sat at this tiny little table with a lace tablecloth and talked for hours. I was eight, so it's the last really good memory I have of her before she left.

Morning rituals: Shower, do a quick glamour, and head down

to the dining hall. Grace resents this deeply, but it's not my fault glamours don't work on gargoyles.

Irresistible midnight snack: Ben and Jerry's Phish Food (don't tell Grace) and also cheese quesadillas—not together, except on really bad days.

What makes you laugh every single time: My friends. I may be a bit biased, but I personally think we've curated the funniest friend group at Katmere.

Most embarrassing memory: See the bikini broomstick story above.

If you were a kitchen utensil, you would be: Measuring spoons, because I add flavor to things. Also because I use them for witch's potions, which have to be very precise. A little too much frog saliva can turn almost anything into a dual-purpose stink bomb.

Favorite morning beverage: Caramel cappuccino

Dream vacation: Hawaii, I think. I know it's kind of cliché, but I love the idea of lounging on the beach, drinking mai tais, and watching a bunch of hot people surf.

Biggest fear: Spiders. And something happening to my dad. Or Grace. Or anyone I love.

One secret you never want anyone to know: I *hate* hot pink.

Favorite food: Blueberry pancakes with maple syrup and whipped cream.

If you were a car, you would be: A Jeep, one of the ones you can take the top off of. Because they're easy-breezy and lots of fun.

If Katmere had a yearbook, you would be voted: Best dressed, imho. But in reality? Most school spirit.

Most beloved daily ritual: Grabbing five minutes with my dad in his office, just so we can check on each other. Also the extra fifteen minutes I get to sleep while Grace gets ready the old-fashioned way.

Pet peeve: Mean people suck.

Dream date: I want someone to sweep me off my feet. Like a pretty-boy vamp or a buff dragon gf who'll get all dressed up with me and go dancing till morning. And then we'd get a crack-of-dawn blueberry pancake breakfast at some twenty-four-hour diner. And there would be lots of kisses, too. I mean, lots.

A: Snap, cackle, and pop

Fun Facts About Macy:

1. Macy has a subscription to every single streaming service: Netflix, Hulu, Crunchyroll. You name it.
2. She absolutely loves scented candles. Her favorites are lavender, orange blossom, and vanilla.
3. When Macy is in the middle of an intense study session, she likes to snack on pretzels, but only the sticks. Don't even suggest the twisty kind.
4. Macy has a ridiculously large collection of animal slippers. The axolotls are her current favorite.

GRACE + MACY TEXTING

(Timeline: between chapters 8 and 9 of *Crave*)

Macy: I forgot to ask what you want to eat

Grace: I'm not really hungry

Macy: You keep saying that

Macy: You need to eat or you'll never kick the altitude sickness

Grace: Ok

Grace: Bring me whatever looks good

Macy: Everything looks good

Grace: It's a school cafeteria

Grace: How good can it be?

Macy: You'll see

Macy: Anything you hate?

Grace: Not really

Macy: Ok I'll bring a bunch of stuff then

Grace: You don't have to do that

Grace: Just grab me some fries

Macy: So you can pass out at the party because you haven't eaten anything but a handful potatoes in 2 days?

Macy: I don't think so

Grace: I could just not go to the party

Grace: Solves all the problems

Macy: Solves NONE of the problems

Macy: I know what I'll get you!

Macy: I'll make you a quesadilla in the kitchen

Macy: Good thing you taught me to make them ;)

Grace: I did?

Macy: When I was eight

Grace: Oh, right!

Grace: You came to visit

Macy: And our parents were so busy whispering in the other room that they forgot to get us lunch

Macy: And you said not to worry bc you knew how to use the quesadilla maker!

Grace: Oh yeah. And then I burned the crap out of my hand trying to heat up the chicken

Grace: And you told me that you didn't like chicken

Grace: Which was a lie because I saw you eating chicken the next day

Macy: Well I didn't want you to hurt yourself

Macy: Besides, I loved your cheese quesadillas

Macy: You served them on hot pink plates with sparkles in them and I thought you were sooooo fancy

Grace: Those were left over from my birthday party

Macy: I thought you ate from them every day

Macy: Like hot pink glitter plates were your signature accessory or something

Grace: lol

Macy: lol

Macy: I begged my mom for plates just like those

Grace: Did you get 'em?

Macy: Nah

Macy: She left right after that trip

Grace: I'm so sorry

Macy: You should be

Macy: It was actually the plates that pushed her over the edge, told me herself

Grace: MACY

Macy: I'm kidding!! Totally not the plates

Grace: I'm still sorry

Macy: Don't be

Macy: It was forever ago

Grace: Hey, Macy?

Macy: Yeah?

Grace: Thank you.

Macy: Two cheese quesadillas, coming up <3



JAXON VEGA

Jaxon Vega

Q: Why did the vampire die alone?

Paranormal identity: Vampire

Nickname: Jaxy-Waxy (I am only including this for the sake of factual correctness. Use it and you die).

Special abilities: Telekinesis, which allows me to move objects, start earthquakes, and even fly (yes, fly, not what my very jealous older brother used to call it).

Favorite features: I don't know that I have a favorite feature. I do have a least favorite—the scar on my cheek—but I'm slowly coming to terms with it.

Favorite part of Katmere Academy: Not being at the Vampire Court.

Favorite class at Katmere Academy: Blood Chemistry.

Least favorite part of living in Alaska: Extra-long summer daylight hours.

You are best known by your friends for the time you: Killed my brother. I'm not proud of it—at least most days.

Favorite childhood memory: When I was younger, I used to train my telekinesis on empty mountaintops. I would climb up, start an avalanche, and wait for it to hit me. I know it sounds bad, but after a while I figured out how to use my power to surf right over the top of the snow. It was the most fun I ever had as a kid.

What makes you laugh every single time: Grace's corny jokes.

If you were a kitchen utensil, you would be: A mallet (that's a utensil, right?).

Morning rituals: Exercising my telekinesis a bit by rearranging my room and then putting it all back in less than a minute. Getting a little fresh air outside my window before having to endure that werewolf stench in first period.

Dream vacation: Usually when I have a “dream vacation,” I just go on it. But things have been a little crazy lately, so I haven’t been able to make it down to Patagonia. I would love to go during South America’s early winter months. Maybe ride another avalanche. I saw *The Art of Flight* recently, and I’ve been dying to see that place ever since.

One secret you never want anyone to know: I asked Lia to find a spell to bring Hudson back. I had no idea it would mean blood sacrificing my mate.

Favorite food: B-positive blood.

If Katmere had a yearbook, you would be voted: Most likely to destroy the school.

Favorite gift: A compass given to me by the Bloodletter, “so I can always find my way.”

When you want to relax, this happens: I lock myself in my room, turn the music up really loud, and bang away on my drums until every muscle in my body aches. And I’m a vampire, so that takes a while.

Dream date: I’d spend all night wandering around New York City with my date. We’d start out walking the High Line and catch a gallery opening before spending a few hours at my favorite underground club. (New York has the absolute best clubs for paranormal creatures. Human parties are fun, too, but my perfect date is definitely a fangs-out affair.) We’d end the night walking the streets, talking about anything and everything, and I’d buy us little souvenirs from the all-night bodegas. (I just think they’re cute, okay, please don’t tell Hudson that part)

Three things you would bring to a deserted island: I wouldn’t. I’d just get my ass out of there.

Something only your best friend would know: I have a super-secret obsession with comic books. My favorite is X-Men. Flint is the only one who knows. I never even told Grace.

A: Because he loved in vein.

Fun Facts About Jaxon:

1. Sometimes Jaxon secretly sketches and writes little poems. No one has ever seen them.
2. Jaxon's favorite place on earth is a mountaintop while snow is lightly falling.
3. Jaxon has always wanted a dog.
4. Jaxon hates that it was up to him to keep the peace at Katmere after what his brother did—which meant always walking with the biggest stick. (And no, he didn't keep that stick where his brother liked to suggest he did.)

GRACE + JAXON TEXTING

(Timeline: between chapters 24 and 25 of *Crave*)

Grace: Should I bring anything?

Jaxon: ???

Grace: When I come to your room later

Jaxon: Yourself?

Grace: Obviously

Grace: Other than that

Jaxon: Like what?

Grace: I don't know. Like food?

Jaxon: Are you hungry?

Grace: No

Grace: I just figured it's the polite thing to do

Jaxon: I'm a vampire.

Jaxon: I don't eat food.

Grace: I know that!

Grace: But you ate that strawberry at the party, so I wasn't sure

Jaxon: That was a one-time thing...

Jaxon: My stomach hurt for two hours afterward.

Grace: Seriously?

Grace: Why did you do it then??

Jaxon: I was trying to make a point.

Grace: And what point was that?

Jaxon: I don't think it matters anymore.

Grace: But I want to know

Grace: Wait... Were you preening?

Jaxon: I'll see you in a couple hours.

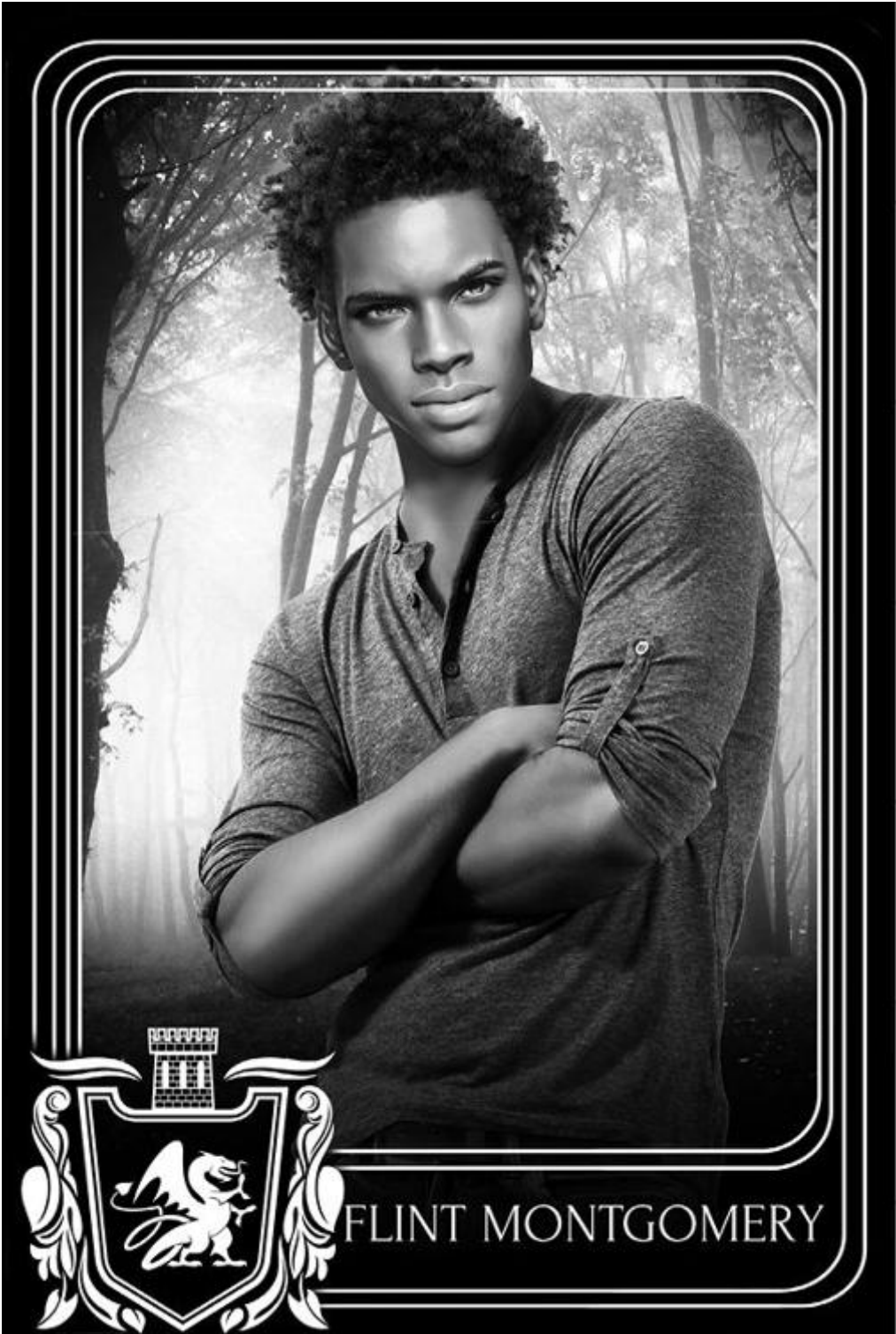
Grace: Were you trying to look decadent in front of your court, Prince Jaxon?

Grace: I think the gesture is a bit less suave when everyone in the room knows you're giving yourself indigestion

Grace: Fine, don't respond

Grace: But know that I take this silence as an admission of guilt

Grace: See you in a bit



FLINT MONTGOMERY

Flint Montgomery

Q: Why are dragons such good musicians?

Paranormal identity: I'm a dragon, baby!

Nickname: The Dragonator (nobody's called me this since I was seven, but I'm thinking of bringing it back)

Astrological sign: Leo

Favorite features: I've got lots of burn marks on my chest and shoulders, plus some scars from talons on my back and legs. For a dragon, battle scars are major street cred.

Favorite part of Katmere Academy: The dragon tunnels under the school

Favorite class at Katmere Academy: Physics of Flight, obviously.

Favorite part of living in Alaska: I can fly for miles without having to worry about being seen by anyone.

You are best known by your friends for the time you: Used my flames to defrost the academy's pond in December so all the shifters could have a cannonball contest. Eden won, which I am not bitter about at all. But by this time next year, I'll be known for executing the world's greatest snowball battle strategy. I need to retaliate against Jaxon for upstaging me and threatening my authority as Katmere's MVP snowballer. You know what they say: all's fair in love and winter sports.

Favorite childhood memory: My dad bribed the guards at the Empire State Building to let us on the observation deck after hours. We had a picnic up there, overlooking the city, and then Dad used an invisibility potion so we could fly right off the top (thank god for a magical roof there!) and soar over all of Manhattan. I still wonder what that guard must've thought when he came back to get us and found a totally empty observation deck.

Irresistible midnight snack: French fries are a feast for any hour.

What makes you laugh every single time: Me. Modesty be damned, I'm my own favorite comedian.

Most embarrassing memory: I was about ten when my flames first started to come in. I was so excited, I rushed into the center of Court to show my mom. Everyone in the room was watching, and all I got out was a tiny little spark.

If you were a kitchen utensil, you would be: A bottle opener, 'cause the party don't start till I walk in.

Favorite morning beverage: Hot chocolate with dragon-roasted marshmallows.

Dream vacation: Camping in the desert near Egypt. I love flying low, almost like I'm surfing the waves of sand, until I'm breathless, and then camping under the stars. The sky never looks as big as it does in the desert.

Biggest fear: Ending up alone because I'll always love the wrong person. Is that too deep? How about "the ocean." We have no idea what's down there. I don't trust that shit.

Dream date: I'd pack an early morning picnic and fly us up to the top of Denali. We could eat and watch the sunrise and then snowboard straight down the side of the mountain. It would be a total rush. Oh, and also I would make a fire for us to sit around.

One secret you never want anyone to know: I fell in love with my best friend when I was fourteen and never told him. It's probably for the best...

If Katmere had a yearbook, you would be voted: Life of the party

Pet peeve: People who pretend to be something they're not.

When you want to relax, this happens: I go flying. It centers my dragon and gives me time to think. Plus, moving my muscles makes everything better.

A: They really know their scales.

Fun Facts About Flint:

1. Flint loved growing up in New York City. He once traded

his bike for courtside Knicks tickets.

2. When he was younger, Flint loved absolutely every kind of sport with a ball: football, baseball, basketball, cricket...

3. His guilty pleasure is Mountain Dew, but only when he really needs to study.

4. Flint can be incredibly generous. He once treated his entire floor at Katmere to a vacation in Cancun for spring break.

FLINT + MACY + JAXON + GRACE

GROUP TEXT

(Timeline: Between chapters 21 and 22 of *Crave*)

Group Text

Macy: I thought I'd start a group chat

Macy: I hope that's okay

Jaxon: Who is this?

Jaxon: And why do I want to be in a group chat with you?

Macy: It's Macy, btw

Macy: Sorry I didn't lead with that

Grace: You're good, Macy

Side Text

Macy: I'm an idiot

Macy: Jaxon hates me

Grace: He doesn't hate you

Grace: He just didn't know who was texting him

Macy: He's had my number since the sixth grade!!!!

Grace: It's fine, I swear

Side Text

Grace: Could you be a little nicer to my cousin, please

Jaxon: Not used to random numbers texting me.

Jaxon: Sorry.

Group Text

Flint: Hi ladies!!!

Jaxon: Sorry, Macy.

Jaxon: I got a new phone and the old numbers didn't transfer.

Macy: Thanks for inviting us to the snowball fight, Flint

Macy: I just wanted to let you know Grace's ankle is feeling a little better now

Flint: That's great

Flint: Sorry again that you got hurt

Jaxon: Don't walk on it yet.

Grace: I wasn't planning to

Grace: But thanks for the order, doc

Flint: That's Vega for you

Flint: A total charmer

Jaxon: Fuck off, Montgomery.

Flint: Tsk tsk

Flint: Language

Jaxon: Fuck further off.

Grace: Is that grammatically correct?

Macy: Soooooooooo

Macy: I thought maybe we could have lunch together tomorrow

Flint: I would love to have lunch with you and Grace

Macy: I meant the four of us?

Grace: Jaxon?

Jaxon Vega has left the chat

Macy: Well, that went well

Grace: Ignore him

Grace: He's being a jerk

Flint: Vega's good at that

Flint: Don't take it personally

Side Text

Grace: Seriously?

Jaxon: I don't do group texts.

Grace: She's trying to be nice

Jaxon: I don't do nice either.

Grace: Yeah, I'm figuring that out

Jaxon: Better late than never.

Grace: Is this what you meant when you said this wasn't going to be easy?

Jaxon: ...

Jaxon: ...

Jaxon: I should have said this isn't going to work.

Grace: Seriously, Jaxon?

Grace: Do you seriously mean that?

Jaxon: I don't know what I mean anymore.

Grace: Great, well, let me know when you figure it out

Jaxon: ...

Jaxon: ...

Jaxon: ...

Side Text

Macy: So are we meeting for lunch?

Grace: I don't know if I'll be able to walk

Grace: But I'll try to make it

Flint: Me too

Flint: Thanks for the invite, Macy

Macy: No problem



MEKHI HARRIS

Mekhi Harris

Q: Why do vampires never use autocorrect?

Paranormal identity: Vampire

Favorite features: I've got a tattoo of a compass on my left pec. It took me a long time to find a real home, and I'm never going to lose sight of it again.

Astrological sign: Aquarius

Favorite part of Katmere Academy: The castle thing is pretty cool, but so is being part of the Order.

Favorite class at Katmere Academy: Blood Chemistry—I'm thinking about becoming a doctor, and the science behind how different blood types react differently in vampires is so interesting!

Best part of living in Alaska: I like the snow a lot. The cold is way better than the heat for vampires.

What makes you laugh every single time: Live-action anime remakes. I love them. They're always so bad. So terribly, beautifully bad.

Most embarrassing memory: Freshman year I got my ass kicked by a couple of seniors. The only thing that saved me was Jaxon deciding to even the playing field. We've had each other's backs ever since, but I still remember what it was like to learn I wasn't nearly as tough as I thought I was. Katmere is a wild place, man.

If you were a kitchen utensil, you would be: A pair of tongs, because I'm always around to pick my friends up when they need me.

Morning rituals: I don't need much sleep, so I'm usually up by five. I like to work out in the weight room, take a shower, and then grab some breakfast—either in the dining hall at Katmere or—if I feel like hunting—in one of the nearby forests. Then it's usually time for class.

Dream vacation: Rio during Carnival. I love big crowds, loud

music, and parties that go on forever. I'd love to get the Order down there one of these years. I've just a few sticks to remove from asses before I can convince them.

Biggest fear: Betraying my friends. My dad betrayed my mom when I was little, and knowing that shaped who I became. Loyalty is really important to me, and I don't ever want my friends—or my mate, one day—to worry for a second that I don't want to be exactly where I am.

One secret you never want anyone to know: Even though I'm not the little, ninety-pound kid I was freshman year, sometimes I still feel like him. Especially when I got injured and couldn't help my friends on the Unkillable Beast's island. When I heard that shit had gone wrong...I felt like a total failure.

Introvert or extrovert: Extrovert

Favorite item in your possession: A watch that my grandfather gave me. Before the Order, he was the only person I could ever just be myself with.

A: They love Type-O's.

Fun Facts About Mekhi:

1. Mekhi loves to play Words with Friends. The rest of the Order downloaded it to make him happy, but it quickly became an extremely competitive pastime.
2. Mekhi once thought his shadow was trying to kill him. Mind you, he was only seven, but still, that shit was scary.
3. Mekhi loves manga. Right now he's reading *The Way of the Househusband* by Kousuke Oono, but he's still a shonen boy at heart.

MEKHI + JAXON TEXTING

(Timeline: between *Crave* and *Crush*)

Mekhi: Rise and shiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiine

Jaxon: Fuck off.

Mekhi: Ready to lift?

Jaxon: Pass.

Mekhi: Wait what?

Mekhi: You love lifting

Mekhi: And the weights are in your room...

Jaxon: Use the gym.

Mekhi: omw

Five minutes later...

Mekhi: I know you hear me knocking

Jaxon: ...

Mekhi: Not going away

Mekhi: So you might as well open this door

Jaxon: ...

Mekhi: ...

Mekhi: Come on man open the door

Mekhi: We got shit to do before class

Jaxon: ...

Mekhi: That's me pounding on the door

Mekhi: It only gets louder from here

Mekhi: Still here

Mekhi: I can do this all day

Jaxon: Seriously, fuck off.

Jaxon: I'm up, now go away.

Mekhi: Nah we got weights with our names on them

Mekhi: Or I guess we could go for a run instead?

Jaxon: Not interested.

Jaxon: I just ran to the Bloodletter and back yesterday.

Mekhi: And?

Jaxon: And I'm tired.

Mekhi: Now you seriously need to let me in

Mekhi: You might have that vampire flu that was going around

Mekhi: I hear it shrinks the size of your balls if you're not careful

Jaxon: Ass.

Mekhi: No, just your balls

Mekhi: Aha! I heard laughter through the door!

Mekhi: Now stop acting like a whiny shit and open the door

Jaxon: Tell me why we're friends again?

Mekhi: Obv my charm and winning attitude

Jaxon: Fuck all.

Jaxon: Fine.

Jaxon: Coming.

Jaxon: You better be ready to lift double the weight for this drama.

Mekhi: Says the guy with a dramatic huff

Side Group Text

Mekhi: The eagle has landed

Mekhi: Or in this case, he's gotten up and opened the door

Liam: About time

Rafael: How'd you do it?

Mekhi: Told him he had a virus that was gonna shrink his

balls

Liam: Classic

Luca: honestly i can't wait to be mated

Luca: i'd even take being mated to a statue if it had wings at this point

Rafael: Right? I'd happily trade that ball shrinking virus for a mate.

Byron: Being mated sucks.

Mekhi: Read the room, B



LUCA GARCIA

Luca Garcia

Q: Did you hear about the vampire who wanted to be a violinist?

Paranormal identity: Vampire all the way

Favorite features: Both my nipples are pierced. I did it myself! Okay, I didn't do it myself, but it'd be sick if I had.

Astrological sign: Aries

Favorite class at Katmere Academy: Anything Dr. White teaches. Seriously.

Favorite part of living in Alaska: I like the glaciers—sometimes when I can't sleep, I fade to the coast and just kind of hang out on a glacier for a while. It helps me clear my head.

You are best known by your friends for the time you: I stole Flint's boxers sophomore year and hung them like a flag from the battlements outside Jaxon's tower.

Irresistible midnight snack: I'm partial to dragon...

What makes you laugh every single time: The way people act around Jaxon. They run away or freeze like deer in headlights every time he walks into a room. He doesn't even notice them—or their fear—but I'll admit I get a chuckle out of watching the freshmen squirm.

If you were a kitchen utensil, you would be: A sifter, because I'm good at sifting out the heavy stuff.

Dream vacation: I'd love to go to Australia. I'd scuba dive, parasail, cliff jump, go whale watching, and surf during the day. Then I'd like to hear the Sydney Symphony Orchestra at the Sydney Opera House. I would wine and dine myself at some fancy little rooftop spot before returning to my beachfront bungalow for a soak in the hot tub. You asked for a dream, after all.

Biggest fear: Someone never loving me the same way I love them.

One secret you never want anyone to know: Who I like. I fell for him the first time we talked sophomore year and I've been crushing embarrassingly hard ever since. If the rest of the Order found out how bad I've got it for this guy, they'd never let me live it down.

Pet peeve: People who chew with their mouths open. (This is obviously not a problem for vampires, who are, on the whole, a classier bunch.)

When you want to relax, this happens: See the glaciers above. Also classical music. There's something about a violin that really hits the soul.

A: His Bach was worse than his bite.

Fun Facts About Luca:

1. Luca was the very first member of the Order. He and Jaxon have been friends since middle school.
2. Luca's been to over 100 concerts.
3. Luca can play almost any instrument he picks up.
4. Luca loves amusement parks, and he always rides the teacups first.

LUCA + THE ORDER TEXTING

(Timeline: Between *Crave* and *Crush*)

Luca: jaxon won't leave his room again

Mekhi: And that's news?

Luca: we need to do something

Luca: we can't just leave him there to rot

Byron: He'll come out when he's ready.

Rafael: He'll come out when he wants to see *her*

Mekhi: Good thing Foster didn't let him keep her statue in the tower like he wanted

Mekhi: We'd never see him again

Rafael: Also that's just kind of creepy

Luca: we need to get him out of there

Luca: he's not eating or going to class

Mekhi: Would you?

Mekhi: She's his mate, man

Byron: I get it. He's desperate to help her. I'd be the same way

Mekhi: We all would

Luca: that doesn't make it any easier to watch

Luca: he spends every minute reading obscure books on gargoyles

Rafael: Last I saw he was 200 pages deep in the Google search results for "spontaneous girlfriend petrification"

Rafael: You really can find anything online these days

Mekhi: Anything but a cure for rapid-onset gargoylification, apparently

Byron: What a horrible word. Never make me look at it again.

Rafael: Gargoylification

Mekhi: Gargoylification

Luca: r/vampirerelationships “My girlfriend (17G) was gargoylified!! For context, my (V) brother’s (V, I killed him btw) ex tried to sacrifice her a few weeks ago, but everything since then has been good. I think my brother had something to do with what happened to her, so I’m really freaking out rn. Any advice on how to turn a gargoyle back to human or soothe a lonely heart is welcome.”

Byron: LUCA

Rafael: HAHHAHA

Rafael: How did you write that so quickly??

Luca: “EDIT: I didn’t list my age, bc I knew you guys would fixate on it. Yes, there’s an age gap but it’s complicated, okay? That’s not relevant here!!!”

Byron: LUCA!!

Luca: just trying to lighten the mood

Byron: Mekhi?

Mekhi: LMAO

Mekhi: Sorry, By, that shit was good

Mekhi: Jaxon would kick your ass, though

Rafael: When the cat’s away!

Byron: I long for the peaceful days before Jaxon brought you miscreants into the Order.

Rafael: No you don’t

Luca: all right, all right

Luca: back to the task at hand

Luca: how do we lure count dracula out of his lair?

Mekhi: Sounds like the beginning of one of Grace’s jokes...

Byron: We get her back, Mekhi.

Byron: I’d die before I let anything happen to Jaxon’s mate.

Rafael: We know you would, By.

Rafael: So we won't let you go in alone.

Mekhi: Yeah, the Order's got each other's backs.

Mekhi: Day one to day done.

Luca: actually I might have an idea where to start our search

Rafael: You?

Luca: hey, it happens

Luca: so I called my great-grandparents last night to see if they remember anything about gargoyles

Luca: since they were alive before they disappeared and all

Byron: And you're just bringing this up now because...?

Mekhi: Any luck?

Liam: Sorry, just got out of Blood Chem. Gimme a sec to catch up.

Luca: they said shifting is up to the gargoyle so she should be able to turn back anytime

Luca: unless something is keeping her from doing it

Rafael: What about *someone*?

Mekhi: Fucking Hudson

Byron: Fucking Hudson

Luca: fucking hudson

Liam: Fucking Hudson

Liam: Luca, as always, ur hilarious and going to hell.

Luca: we can keep each other company <3

Liam: So how do we get rid of Hudson if hes in there w her?

Luca: they've got no fucking clue on that one

Liam: So thats what we need to figure out then

Rafael: How to neutralize whatever's in there keeping her from turning back

Liam: Did u tell JV?

Luca: not yet

Luca: will it just make him more obsessed?

Byron: I'm not sure that's possible.

Mekhi: No shit

Luca: my great-grandma said she'd make some calls

Luca: see if any of her friends remember more

Liam: In the meantime

Liam: How do we get him out of that godforsaken pillar of his?

Byron: We can't. Nothing's worked since that one day Mekhi managed it.

Mekhi: Yeah well I didn't mean to bring her up while doing reps.

Luca: it's all good, M

Mekhi: Well we need a new plan, his humor is long gone now

Mekhi: He needs to feed and take care of schoolwork and shit

Liam: Sounds like fun

Liam: Telling JV to do his homework

Rafael: Who's going first?

Mekhi: ...

Luca: ...

Byron: ...

Liam: ...

Rafael: Yeah, I figured

Mekhi: Fuck it

Mekhi: I volunteer as tribute

Liam: I thought we agreed we were never bringing 2012 back. Like, for eternity.

Luca: let the kid dream

Luca: if this were the hunger games he might actually stand a chance

Mekhi: Fine. You go first then

Liam: Never mind

Mekhi: That's what I thought

Mekhi: I'll cover today

Mekhi: If I make it out alive, one of you gets tomorrow

Luca: and if you don't?

Mekhi: Then I guess you'll have to start today



BYRON LORD

Byron Lord

Q: Where do vampires eat their lunch?

Paranormal identity: Vampire

Favorite feature: I have a tattoo of my mate's name on my biceps. It's in her handwriting and everything. The guys used to rib me about it, but that stopped when...you know.

Astrological sign: Scorpio

Favorite class at Katmere Academy: Paranormal Literature. I read most of the books on the syllabus back when Viv and I had our little two-person book club. She'd be so pleased to hear how often I use her ideas in class. Especially the ones I used to fight her on.

Favorite part of living in Alaska: The vastness. It's kind of nice, right? How small we are. It makes my problems feel a little smaller, too.

Favorite childhood memory: The day I met my mate. Her name was Vivian. The second she walked into the classroom, I knew we were meant for each other. She knew it, too. We were inseparable from that day until the one when she died.

What makes you laugh every single time: Reading my old love letters to Vivian. I went through a frankly insufferable emo phase in middle school. I still can't believe she put up with me. Her letters were always so lovely and bright, just like her—pretty much the opposite of me, if I'm being honest.

If you were a kitchen utensil, you would be: A measuring scale, because I keep my affairs precise and Orderly (the guys say I have no sense of humor, but they're wrong. Clearly, I love a good play on words). If I didn't keep them in line, those delinquents would have blown themselves up years ago.

Morning rituals: I don't sleep, so morning doesn't have much meaning to me, to be honest. Go to class, I suppose.

Dream vacation: I want to go to Villa Diodati in Geneva. It's where Mary Shelley wrote *Frankenstein*. It's also the place

where John Polidori wrote “The Vampyre,” holed up with Byron and Shelley on a rainy weekend in 1819. You can rent a place in the house. I’d like to spend a summer there, wandering the town and writing freely. I don’t do many things freely.

Biggest fear: It already happened.

One secret you don’t want anyone to know: How it felt to watch Jaxon and Grace fall in love. I try not to show it—I detest the way people pity me—but losing Vivian still hurts just as much as the day it happened. I’m so happy for them, I really am. But it’s agonizing to know that they have eternity... and I have memories.

Pet peeve: Ideas that disappear just before you write them down.

A: At a Casketeria

Fun Facts About Byron:

1. Because he doesn’t sleep, Byron has lots of time for his hobbies. Currently, he’s teaching himself to knit. He’s already made a hat, scarf, and mittens for Grace (she’s his only friend who gets cold).
2. His favorite art style is pointillism.
3. Byron has all thirty-eight plays by William Shakespeare memorized. His favorite is *Taming of the Shrew*.

BYRON + THE ORDER TEXTING

(Timeline: Middle of *Crush*)

Byron: How did it go?

Luca: ...

Luca: this was a huge mistake

Luca: why did you two gas me up like that??

Luca: fucking traitors

Mekhi: You were miserable

Luca: i would have lived

Luca: now I'm not sure

Byron: What happened?

Mekhi: He said no??

Luca: he didn't say anything

Byron: Nothing?

Mekhi: Nothing?!?!?!?

Luca: he looked at me like I was speaking elvish

Luca: then he just started babbling

Luca: about ludares practice

Luca: and the tournament

Luca: then he left

Mekhi: ?????

Byron: So he didn't say no?

Luca: are you fucking serious, By?

Luca: when you ask someone out.

Luca: and they start talking about sports.

Luca: it's a no.

Mekhi: You obviously caught him off guard

Luca: i'm sure

Byron: Sorry. I guess I'm out of practice.

Luca: you fight dirty, Lord

Luca: he definitely isn't interested. he nearly tripped over his own giant feet running out the damn door

Luca: it was very obvious he had never even thought about me like that

Luca: like insultingly obvious

Byron: I'm sorry, bro.

Luca: yeah

Luca: i'm gonna go for a run

Mekhi: Want us to come?

Luca: no

Byron: You sure?

Luca: yeah

Luca: i need to wallow for a while

Luca: then I'll get over it

Mekhi: You should ask someone else out

Mekhi: You know what they say...

Mekhi: The best way to get over one man is to get under a different one

Luca: yeah, won't be doing that

Byron: I don't blame you. That's shit advice, Mekhi.

Mekhi: ...

Mekhi: Hey, I'm sorry, B, but it's not the same. They're not mates

Byron: They're not mates *yet*

Luca: i've been crazy about him for years

Luca: i don't think it's gonna go away in a two-hour run

Byron: You deserve better than someone who dives out the door.

Luca: he wasn't trying to be an asshole

Mekhi: So it just comes naturally to him?

Byron: A coward, then?

Mekhi: Isn't that one of those red flags we're supposed to watch out for?

Byron: I see you're still reading Cosmo before bed.

Mekhi: It has good articles!

Byron: Could you lend me a pair of sensible, day-to-night pumps? I've got a dragon-stomping event after class.

Luca: look he didn't say anything mean

Mekhi: From what you told us, he didn't say anything at all

Byron: Except about sports. Which, apparently, isn't a ringing endorsement.

Mekhi: So fuck him

Byron: Yes, screw him.

Luca: that's what I was trying to do

Byron: lmao

Mekhi: Harlot

Mekhi: lmaooo

Luca: i'm going for that run now

Byron: Good.

Mekhi: You may expect a registry of eligible bachelors upon your return

Luca: dude, nooooo

Mekhi: It can't hurt

Byron: Sigh, he's right. If he's not your mate, M could be right.

Mekhi: Look, Byron is going along with one of our schemes

for the first time in...possibly ever

Mekhi: If you reject him now, he might never come back

Byron: I'm not a stray cat.

Luca: compelling case, but no dice

Luca: and no list

Mekhi: How bout just a short one?

Luca: NO LIST

Mekhi: Fine

Mekhi: We'll spend the next couple of hours hunting him down

Mekhi: And kicking his ass!

Luca: leave him alone

Byron: Enjoy your run.

Luca: bro

Luca: don't

Luca: I mean it

Luca: hello?

Luca: fuck you both

Luca: just make the damn list

Mekhi: :D



RAFAEL TULOK

Rafael Tulok

Q: What is a vampire's favorite fruit?

Paranormal identity: Vampire

Astrological sign: Pisces

Nickname: Rafa

Favorite features: I've got claw marks down my back from a run-in with a wolf shifter at my preschool. Baby's first blood match. You should see the other guy. (No, really, you should see him. He goes here. We try to spar every couple of months, actually. I should call him.)

Favorite part of Katmere Academy: I'm pretty fond of the castle. It's got, like, a million different rooms. I've been exploring this place since before my fangs came in, and I still haven't mapped it all.

Favorite class at Katmere Academy: World History of Witch Trials. That class was messed up but fascinating.

Worst part of living in Alaska: In Alaska, the sun doesn't completely set during summer, which makes it hard to drink human blood. It's not like I can't go without it, but the animal stuff is just bland. Bear is my favorite.

You are best known by your friends for the time you: Had a motorcycle delivered to Katmere via helicopter. Foster had a fit, but it was totally worth it. Plus, I make a killing selling snacks from town.

Biggest fear: Snakes.

If Katmere had a yearbook, you would be voted: Most likely to succeed, obviously.

Pet peeve: Blood breath. Like, brush your fangs, my guy.

Favorite item you have in your possession: My motorcycle keys.

When you want to relax, this happens: Go for a ride around town on my bike.

A: A neck-tarine.

Fun Facts About Rafael:

1. Rafael never met a card game he didn't like—or one he didn't win. The Order officially canceled poker night when he added it to the monthly revenue streams in his budget.
2. Rafael is great with money. Which is useful, since his family did not come from money—well, not until Rafael started playing the stock market at ten with his dad's online stock account. They're real flush now.
3. Rafael built his first motorcycle when he was fifteen. He and his mom worked on it all summer.

RAFAEL + GRACE TEXTING

(Timeline: Very beginning of *Crush*)

Rafael: You're back!

Grace: In the flesh

Rafael: Good one

Rafael: Welcome back to the land of the living

Grace: Ugh. Don't jinx me

Rafael: How're you feeling?

Grace: Weird

Grace: Physically, I'm fine. But I can't seem to wrap my head around the fact that almost four months have passed

Rafael: You didn't feel it AT ALL?

Grace: No

Grace: Like, not even a minute in that whole four months

Grace: It feels like I blinked and woke up in a different timeline

Rafael: Trippy

Rafael: Maybe you did

Rafael: Maybe you were abducted by time travelers and swapped with a different Grace.

Grace: Oh no

Grace: Am I someone's "if I could go back in time and kill one person" person?

Rafael: You're still alive, aren't you?

Rafael: Think positive. You might have an epic, interdimensional space destiny to fulfill

Grace: Idk sounds like a lot of work

Grace: I think I'll give the stone thing another try first

Grace: See if they cancel each other out

Rafael: You shouldn't

Grace: I know that, Rafa

Rafael: I mean you REALLY shouldn't

Rafael: I don't think Jaxon would survive it

Grace: What do you mean?

Grace: And why does he look so terrible?

Grace: He won't tell me a thing...

Rafael: He stopped drinking, stopped eating, stopped going to class

Rafael: All he did was look for a way to turn you back

Rafael: It was bad, dude

Rafael: He even went to Cyrus for help

Grace: His dad?

Rafael: Yeah

Grace: I don't know much about him

Rafael: Keep it that way. He's stone-cold evil

Rafael: If there is a devil, I'd bet my last dollar he lives in Cyrus

Rafael: It was a really bad idea for Jaxon to go to him

Rafael: You never show a man like that your weakness

Grace: I assume you mean me?

Rafael: Yep. You're Jaxon's weak spot

Rafael: And now Cyrus knows it

Rafael: Which means he'll use it against him

Grace: His own dad?

Rafael: Family doesn't mean shit to that bastard

Rafael: Not when they threaten his power

Rafael: Jaxon was a powerful adversary already, and now he's got a gargoyle on his side

Rafael: There's no way Cyrus would ignore that

Grace: Then why did you guys let him go??

Rafael: We couldn't have stopped him

Grace: That does sound like Jaxon

Grace: What can I do??

Grace: To protect him

Rafael: Stay safe

Rafael: Don't turn into stone

Rafael: And don't go near Cyrus, no matter what tricks he pulls

Grace: Oh shoot, and I had brunch plans at the Vampire Court and everything

Rafael: Don't feel too left out

Rafael: If he's intrigued enough, he'll come to you

Grace: Why?

Rafael: Because you're an unknown piece on the board

Rafael: And you're on Jaxon's side, not his

Grace: Jaxon's my mate!

Rafael: Another strike against you both

Grace: Why didn't he tell me any of this?

Rafael: He just got you back. I'd wager that he's convinced himself he'll scare you away again

Grace: I think you have a gambling problem

Rafael: Besides, he plans to protect you

Rafael: And knowing Jaxon, he plans to do it alone

Grace: Which we won't let happen

Rafael: Of course. But we can't help him if he dies from sleep deprivation before then

Grace: So don't put him in that position, is what you're saying?

Rafael: Yeah

Grace: Thanks for telling me, Rafael

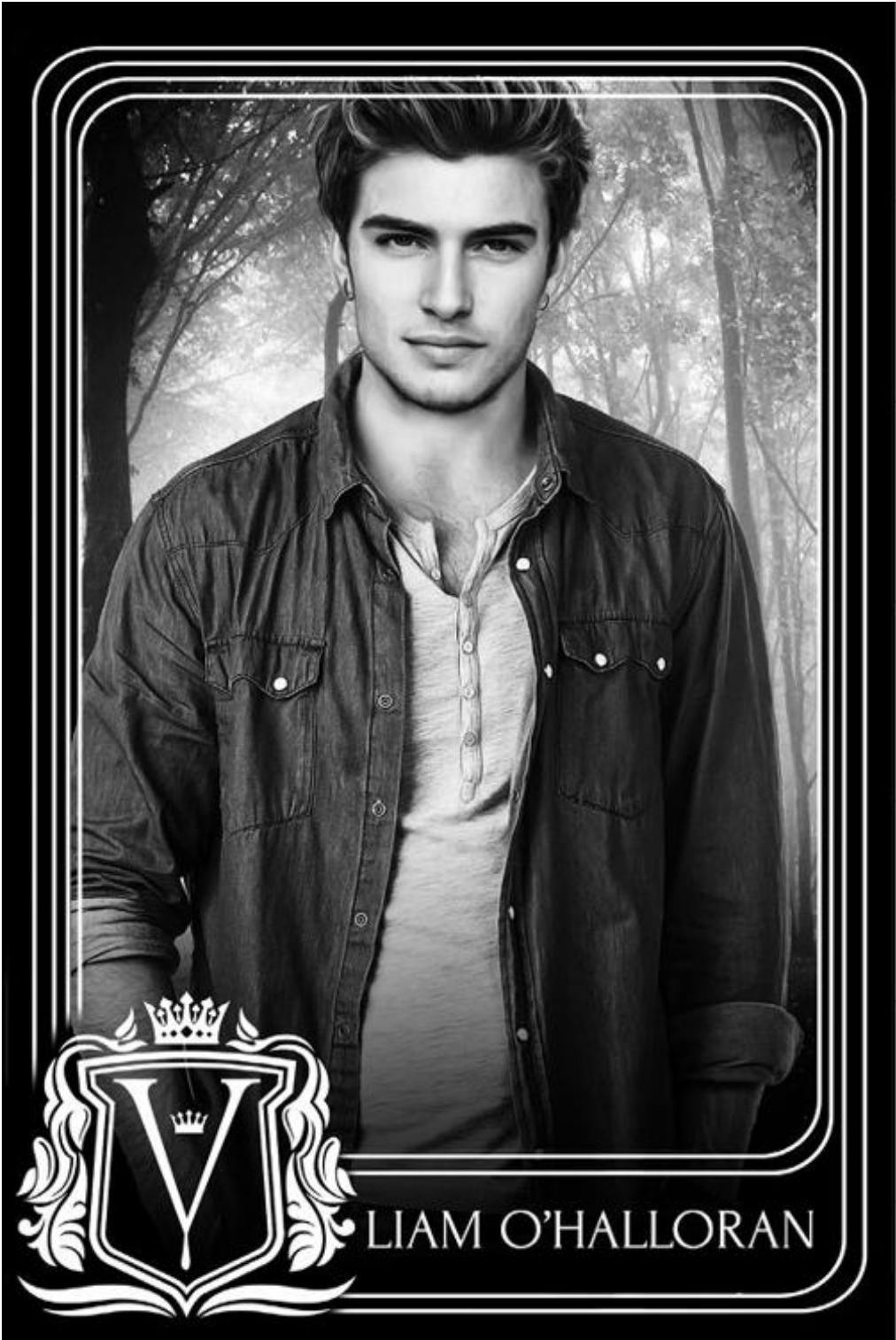
Rafael: Someone had to

Grace: Yeah. I just wish Jaxon had

Rafael: He wants to protect you

Grace: But I want to protect him too

Rafael: Me too



LIAM O'HALLORAN

Liam O'Halloran

Q: What do you get when you cross a vampire with a laptop?

Paranormal identity: Vampire

Astrological sign: Taurus

Favorite features: I like my eyes.

Best part of living in Alaska: The wildlife. Animals are a lot easier to understand than most people. Except racoons. I don't get those assholes at all.

You are best known by your friends for the time you: Were attacked (brutally and unprovoked!!) by a savage racoon. I made Jaxon take me to Anchorage to get rabies shots. I don't know if vampires can get rabies, but I wasn't gonna be the one to find out.

What makes your friends laugh every single time: That goddamn racoon story.

Favorite morning beverage: B-pos in my *Star Trek* mug.

Biggest fear: That my pets will eat me when I die. I can't explain it...but it haunts me.

When you want to relax, this happens: Imagine I'm anywhere but stuck in Alaska at boarding school.

If Katmere had a yearbook, you would be voted: Most likely to die by wild-animal attack.

Something most people don't know about you: I have a pet axolotl. His name is Peeve because he always looks peeved. Peeve wouldn't eat me; his teeth are too small.

Something only your best friend would know: I had my heart broken by a dragon my sophomore year. I was totally wild about her, but she went home for Christmas and met her mate. She didn't even bother to break up with me. She just forgot all about me. Only the Order knows I spent the whole break watching Hallmark Christmas movies in my room. They even joined me sometimes.

One secret you don't want anyone to know: Cyrus is paying my tuition to Katmere so I can stay with Jaxon and the Order. My family fell on hard times, and I'd have to leave my best friend otherwise.

Favorite item in your possession: A vintage Katmere Academy class ring that belonged to my dad. I wear it every day.

A: Love at first byte

Fun Facts About Liam:

1. Liam is a total sneakerhead. He's got more than a hundred pairs of vintage Nike and Adidas sneakers. His favorite is a pair of Air Jordans.
2. Liam has sworn off all romance for life. What's the point in dating if they could find their mate tomorrow and leave you high and dry anyway?
3. Liam has a reputation for nursing injured animals that he finds around Katmere back to health. Every so often someone will come up to him with a shoebox, and he practically fades back to his little menagerie to take care of it.

LIAM + MEKHI TEXTING

(Timeline: After chapter 97 of *Crush*)

Liam: Headed into town. Can I get u anything?

Mekhi: I'm good

Liam: U just got half gutted by a werewolf guard

Liam: How good could u be?

Mekhi: Grace fixed a lot of it

Liam: And yet ur still laid up

Liam: So what can I get u?

Mekhi: I'm good, I swear

Liam: Bunny slippers it is, then

Mekhi: I think I'd prefer racoon

Liam: Ha. Ha.

Liam: Now u get nothing

Mekhi: That's no way to treat an ailing, bedridden old friend

Liam: So u admit ur ailing, then?

Mekhi: Shit

Liam: Seriously, can I get u something from town?

Mekhi: Fiiiiineeeeeee

Mekhi: Get me one of those heated blankets the witches are always walking around with in the winter

Mekhi: I think they're at the hardware store

Liam: Some cold-blooded predator you are

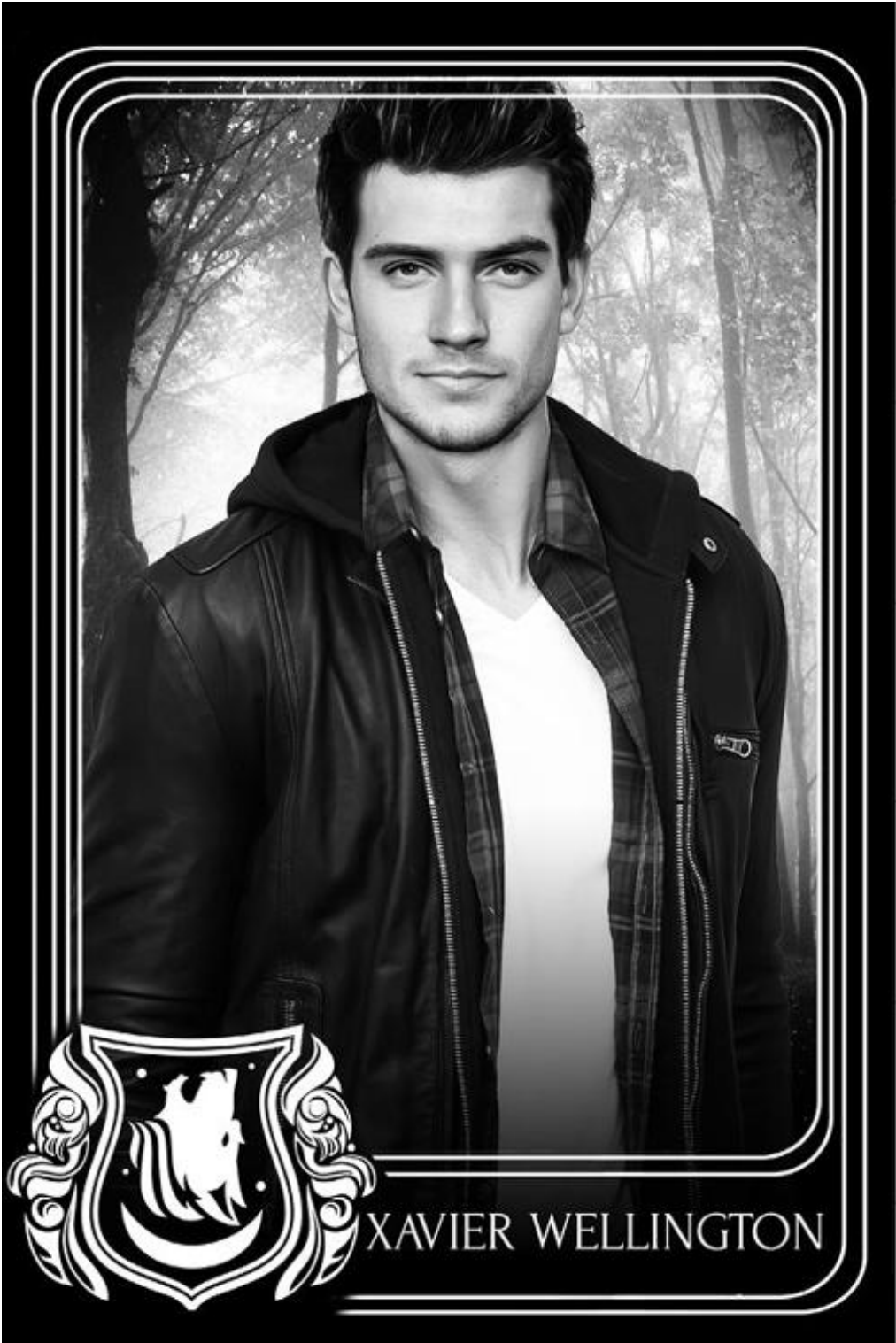
Mekhi: Oh, to be a lizard

Mekhi: Sunning myself on a rock

Mekhi: Blissfully unaware of the existence of paranormals and their deadly political games

Liam: When u put it that way...

Liam: Ill grab two



XAVIER WELLINGTON

Xavier

Q: What do you call a wolf that's lost?

Paranormal identity: Werewolf

Astrological sign: Gemini

Favorite features: Besides being a wolf, you mean?

Favorite part of Katmere Academy: Hanging out with the pack.

Favorite class at Katmere Academy: Lunar Astronomy.

Best part of living in Alaska: The forest. I can run for hours in any direction. It's heaven.

Favorite childhood memory: My first time transforming. We were at the park, and my mom was trying desperately to get me back into clothes. But I was so excited to be able to shift that I just kept going, back and forth, until I collapsed in the grass. It took an unfortunately long time to master shifting the clothes *with* me.

What makes you laugh every single time: Macy has these magic stickers on her laptop that change every week. We sit across from each other in ParaLit, so I spend every Monday session reading them. I try to be subtle, but I think she's on to me. This week there's a full-moon sticker with "Shift Happens" written in the center.

If you were a kitchen utensil, you would be: Those little plastic chopsticks they give to kids, the ones that are connected at the top. I may not lead the pack, but I sure am happy to be included.

Morning rituals: Sleep in as late as possible, roll out of bed, and catch up on the pack group chat (morning people. Ugh). Then grab some food as either a wolf or a human, depending on my mood.

Favorite morning beverage: Monster Energy Drink, favorite flavor Mango Loco.

Dream vacation: Bilbao, Spain, for surf, turf, and the art district. Also, lots of cool places to let my wolf out for a run.

Biggest fear: The spirits of all the rabbits I've ever hunted teaming up and coming back for revenge.

A dream first date would be: Wandering downtown Anchorage in the springtime. Stopping somewhere for some good food and checking out the street art festival. Then getting ice cream. You can tell a lot about someone by what kind of ice cream they order.

One secret you don't want anyone to know: When I was little, I wanted to be a wizard because I wished I could use magic.

Favorite food: A bowl of cereal any time of day. Preferably Froot Loops or Cinnamon Toast Crunch. NOT rabbit. In case any spirits are listening.

Pet peeve: People who think they're smarter than everyone else. Get over yourself and just be a decent person, man.

Report card comments might read: Plays well with others, talks too much, needs improvement in math.

Something only your best friend would know: I left my old pack because there was something...off about them. Now that I'm at Katmere, I'm beginning to wonder if it isn't just them. These wolves are acting really freaking weird, too.

Favorite item in your possession: An heirloom moonstone ring passed down from my great-grandma for my future mate.

Competitive streak comes out when: I face Mekhi in *Words With Friends*.

A: A where-wolf

Fun Facts About Xavier:

1. When Xavier lived in LA, he was sometimes scouted for modeling gigs, but he always turned them down.
2. Xavier had his eleventh birthday party in an ice-cream factory.
3. Xavier pretty much only owns superhero boxers. Iron

Man, Hulk, Cap, you name it. His dad's given him a new pack every Christmas for as long as he can remember.

XAVIER + FLINT TEXTING

(Timeline: Between chapters 63 and 64 in *Crush*)

Flint: What's up, my man?

Xavier: Who dis

Flint: Flint

Xavier: Oh?

Flint: I'm putting together a Ludares team

Flint: You want in?

Xavier: Huh

Xavier: All the dragons said no?

Flint: I only asked one, thank you very much

Flint: And she said yes

Xavier: Interesting

Xavier: What's your motive. Social experiment?

Xavier: Charity project?

Flint: You heard of the Westminster Dog Show?

Xavier: Heard of it?

Xavier: I've got a full box of blue ribbons in my dorm

Flint: I knew I made the right choice

Flint: C'mon, join my team

Flint: You'll fit in great

Xavier: Why me?

Flint: I need at least one wolf

Flint: And you're the only one in this place who seems like a decent person

Xavier: I'd be offended...

Xavier: But fair enough

Flint: So you'll be there?

Flint: Practice field, tomorrow morn

Flint: I'll introduce you to everyone

Xavier: Should I bring anything

Flint: Just your sunshiny attitude

Xavier: Well that's a given

Flint: Then we'll be good

Two hours later...

Xavier: Hey, I forgot to say

Xavier: Thanks for asking

Xavier: I haven't exactly made a lot of friends here yet

Flint: Gotta start somewhere

Flint: You'll like the rest of the team

Flint: They're cool

Xavier: See you tomorrow

Flint: See ya



GWEN ZHOU

Gwen Zhou

Q: What do you get if you cross a witch with ice?

Paranormal identity: Witch

Astrological sign: Virgo

Favorite features: My arms! They're really strong from all the stirring.

Favorite part of Katmere Academy: The social scene. There are a lot of really cool people here.

Favorite class at Katmere Academy: Alchemy. I'm a real potion perfectionist.

Least favorite part of living in Alaska: I get really bad cell service. I'm beginning to think someone hexed my phone.

You are best known by your friends for the time you: My friends and I charmed all the potions in Ms. Veronique's room to do the opposite of what they were supposed to do. She was so frustrated by the time she was halfway through her first class of the morning that she gave all her students the day off.

What makes you laugh every single time: Macy and I have a long-running dirty-limerick competition. Every Monday morning, we start the school day by swapping a new one.

Most embarrassing memory: When Dr. Veracruz heard my phone go off and read my limerick to the whole class...

If you were a kitchen utensil, you would be: A wooden spoon, because I may not be the most exciting member of the group, but everyone prefers to have me around. Especially when baking!

Dream vacation: I'd love to travel to all the capitals of magic. The three axes of light magic are Accra, Ghana; Shanghai, China; and Turin, Italy, while the axes of dark magic are Prague, Czech Republic; Turin, Italy; and Buenos Aires, Argentina. I'd like to explore the ancient magic in all those cities while working on fine-tuning my own.

A dream first date would be: Bowling and veggie burgers. I think it's fun to go on a low-pressure date at first, where there's something to do besides try to come up with awkward conversation.

Favorite food: A potato tornado!

If Katmere had a yearbook, you would be voted: Most organized.

Report card comments might read: Excels at potions, good at spells, talks too much.

Something only your best friend would know: I've had a crush on Rafael forever but am too scared to do anything about it.

Favorite item in your possession: A wand that's been passed down in my family for five generations.

A: A cold spell.

Fun Facts About Gwen:

1. Gwen is the Connect Four champion on her dorm floor.
2. Gwen loves watching K-dramas and reads a lot of fan fiction.
3. Gwen also loves playing magical tennis—which is basically just tennis, but you use a spell to get the ball back and forth.

GWEN + MEKHI TEXTING

(Timeline: Very end of *Crush*)

Mekhi: Hey

Mekhi: Thanks for earlier

Mekhi: You really saved my ass with those guards

Gwen: Don't worry about it!

Gwen: You'd do the same for me

Mekhi: Of course

Mekhi: But still, thanks

Gwen: Of course

Gwen: ;-)

Gwen: You need anything?

Mekhi: Why do people keep asking me that!

Mekhi: I'm not dying!!

Gwen: Sorryyy

Gwen: I didn't mean to bug you

Gwen: We're just worried about you!

Mekhi: No, I'm sorry

Mekhi: I'm worried about you guys, too

Mekhi: And it's turning me into a total dick

Gwen: I know how you feel

Gwen: I'm pretty much climbing the walls myself

Mekhi: I just wish I knew what was happening

Mekhi: It's driving me nuts

Gwen: If you want, I could stop by

Gwen: Maybe we could wait it out together?

Mekhi: ...

Mekhi: ...

Mekhi: Yeah

Mekhi: I'd like it if you came by to hang

Gwen: Really?

Gwen: I mean, cool

Gwen: I'll swing by and get some blood

Gwen: And be there in a few

Mekhi: I'll pick out a movie

Mekhi: Anything you want to watch?

Gwen: Surprise me

Mekhi: Never say that to a vampire

Gwen: I trust you

Mekhi: Never say that either ;-)

Gwen: With the movie

Gwen: I trust you with the movie

Mekhi: Aw, now you're just trying to hurt my feelings

Gwen: Keep tormenting me and I'll hurt more than your feelings

Mekhi: Nice

Mekhi: I don't mind a girl who's not afraid to use threats to get her way

Gwen: I'll keep that in mind

Gwen: See you in ten

Mekhi: Looking forward to it



Hudson Vega:

Q: Why do vampires always dress so nicely?

Paranormal identity: Vampire

Astrological sign: Scorpio

Favorite features: My winning personality obv.

Favorite part of Katmere Academy: Grace

Favorite class at Katmere Academy: Immortal Thought (it's a philosophy class about the nature of mortality. After a few hundred years, people tend to get into a slump).

Least favorite part of living in Alaska: I hate snow. Detest it.

Favorite childhood memory: One time, Jaxon and I were playing together—before he was sent away—and we got into our father's office while he was gone. He had a giant board in the center of the room filled with little miniatures of different paranormals (now I know that this was his war table, but we didn't know that at the time). Jaxon and I waged a giant battle with the miniatures that lasted for hours (though I hate to think we're like father, like sons) that decimated the board and ended with us signing a very complicated peace treaty (that move is nothing like Cyrus, of course). It was the most fun I can ever remember having in that hellhole.

What makes you laugh every single time: The way Grace goes through portals headfirst. I've really got to show her an easier way.

If you were a kitchen utensil, you would be: A knife, because I'm bloody good at cutting through bullshit.

Dream vacation: Anywhere that isn't the Vampire Court.

Biggest fear: Losing Grace.

One secret you never want anyone to know: I have too many secrets to narrow it down to just one. How I got my powers. Why I can't tell Grace about our time frozen together. What really happened to me when Jaxon tried to kill me. Oh,

and why I will never, ever, ever watch *Snakes on a Plane* again. Grace knows what she did.

If Katmere had a yearbook, you would be voted: Most likely to destroy the school.

When you want to relax, this happens: I usually go off by myself. I put on a hard-rock playlist, throw some axes until my arms give out, and then read in my bed to unwind.

Something only your best friend would know: Grace doesn't remember this, but I once told her how my abilities work, and she made me swear to never, ever use them again. It's the only time I've ever not kept a promise I made her.

Dream night on the town: I would love to take Grace to London, out to a fancy restaurant and a show—something funny that makes her laugh, because I love the way she looks up at me when she wants to share a joke—her eyes shining and a huge smile on her face. Afterward, I would take her for a walk along the Thames in the Hammersmith Bridge area, since it is a lot less crowded than the usual area where tourists walk the river. I'd end the night with a pub crawl. We'd visit three or four of my favorite paranormal pubs, grab a cozy booth in the back of each, and spend the rest of the evening talking and people watching.

Report card comments might read: Above grade level, doesn't play well with others.

A: Because they're so vein!

Fun Facts About Hudson:

1. When Hudson was a kid, he made friends with a guard's son at the Vampire Court, and they invited him to dinner one night. Their whole house was decorated like a fancy catalog, with family photos on the walls chronicling their lives together against bright white walls, and he made a promise that one day he was going to have a home just like theirs. He never saw them again after that night, but he still hasn't given up on that dream.
2. Hudson prefers wearing jeans to dress slacks, but he just got tired of listening to Cyrus rant about his "royal image."

3. Hudson used to love carving sculptures, but he hasn't made anything after that little horse for Jaxon.

HUDSON + GRACE TEXTING

(Timeline: Week before *Covet* begins)

Hudson: Did you see the snow last night?

Hudson: This is Hudson, btw

Grace: I know who it is, you dork

Grace: So. Much. Snow.

Hudson: I was thinking of going for a walk

Hudson: ...

Hudson: ...

Hudson: Want to go with me?

Grace: In the snow?

Grace: No, thanks. I like staying warm on the weekends

Grace: Plus I'm working on my art project

Hudson: The painting?

Grace: Yeah

Hudson: ...

Hudson: There's a new art documentary on Netflix that looks really interesting

Hudson: If you're not busy later, want to watch it?

Grace: The abstract art one?

Hudson: Yeah

Grace: I watched it last night

Grace: It was really good

Hudson: ...

Hudson: ...

Hudson: ...

Hudson: ...

Hudson: What about the new One Direction retrospective?

Grace: What about it?

Hudson: We could watch that

Grace: You like One Direction??????

Hudson: I mean

Hudson: You like them

Grace: How did you know that?

Grace: Oh, right. From before

Grace: I promised Macy I'd watch the retrospective with her tomorrow

Hudson: ...

Hudson: ...

Hudson: ...

Hudson: How about lunch then? We could meet up about 12?

Grace: I thought the plan was for everyone to meet at the dining hall at 1:30?

Hudson: It is

Grace: Soooooo why would we meet at twelve?

Hudson: Are you being deliberately obtuse or am I just not getting the hint?

Grace: ???

Hudson: I was hoping to hang out with just you for a while

Grace: Oh

Grace: ...

Grace: ...

Grace: ...

Grace: I'm going to the library after lunch

Grace: Want to come with me?

Hudson: I should have too much pride to say yes

Hudson: But I don't

Grace: So that's a yes then?

Hudson: It's a yes

Grace: Cool

Grace: See you at lunch

Hudson: Yeah. See ya



EDEN SEONG

Eden Seong

Q: What kind of show does a dragon compete in?

Paranormal identity: Badass dragon

Astrological sign: Capricorn

Favorite feature: My wings, duh.

Favorite class at Katmere Academy: Ancient History of Dragons. Both years of that class were great. I'm always floored by how brilliant the great dragon generals were.

Least favorite part of living in Alaska: I'm not wild about the isolation. I much prefer the crowds in New York. There's always something to do, and everyone appreciates my fashion sense. As they should.

You are best known by your friends for the time you: Walled Cole, Quinn, and Marc up in an ice fortress that was too high to jump out of. They'd been picking on some freshman dragons, and I thought they should get a taste of their own medicine. How was I supposed to know it would take two hours before anyone came along who actually liked them enough to get them out?

Favorite childhood memory: Before my parents died, they took me to Coney Island one Sunday. We spent the whole day exploring and riding rides at Luna Park. My dad and I ate so many hot dogs that we nearly threw up off the side of the Ferris wheel, but it was so much fun that we didn't care (Mom pretended to care, but she was laughing right along with us).

Irresistible midnight snack: I'm a chips and salsa girl, the spicier the better.

What makes you laugh every single time: Surrealist memes. I can't explain them, but you'll know when you find one.

If you were a kitchen utensil, you would be: A can opener. I'm tough, I'm sharp, and I can get you out of nearly any situation.

Favorite morning beverage: Black coffee all around.

Dream vacation: I would love to go to Egypt (the Egyptology obsession to queer youth pipeline strikes again, I know). I want to see the Great Pyramids, the Valley of the Kings, and especially the Temple of Hatshepsut (she's one of my favorite historical figures, even if she was the king of wolf territory). I want to fly down the length of the Nile, taking detours through the deserts, mountains, towns, and cities I pass. I've wanted to go ever since we studied it in Ancient History of Dragons. We were at our height in 5000 BC; we helped build Mesopotamia and develop the first maps and math, and eventually we migrated west and founded the first official Dragon Court in the area now known as Luxor. There's just so much rich dragon history that I want to see for myself.

Biggest fear: Not being fast enough. Losing my parents taught me just how quickly the people you love can be ripped away. I promised myself that I'd always make it in time to save my friends, but I'm terrified someday it won't be true.

A dream first date would be: She could come to Egypt with me? Nothing introduces you to a person better than seeing how they fly (in dragon form, of course, but I've heard this applies to humans, too).

One secret you never want anyone to know: I watch a ton of cartoons. I've got enough to be stressed about without adding fictional characters' issues into the mix. Sometimes you just wanna unwind and watch the girlies do magic, you know? I'm not ashamed, but I'll take it to the grave. I've worked too hard cultivating a kick-ass reputation to let Disney+ bring me down.

If Katmere had a yearbook, you would be voted: Most likely to win a fight.

Pet peeve: People who think I'm weak because I'm a girl.

Report card comments might read: Good problem solver, takes issue with authority.

Something only your best friend would know: That after graduation, I want to join the Dragon Guard. It's all I've ever wanted to do since I was a kid and my dad took me to Court for the first time.

Favorite item in your possession: A scrapbook my mom put together when I was a kid. Sometimes I look at it just to remind myself what my parents look like and what our lives together were like.

A: A talon show

Fun Facts About Eden:

1. Eden has five piercings in one ear and seven in the other. She also has a very large collection of rings and bracelets.
2. Eden is a huge cat person. She even got special permission to bring her family cat to school with her.
3. The cat's name is Toad, and he's big and orange and very round, just as a cat should be.

EDEN + THE GROUP TEXTING

(Timeline: Between chapters 149 and 150 of *Covet*)

Macy: We gotta go to New Orleans

Eden: That's where they are for sure?

Macy: I talked to my dad and he agrees

Macy: They have to be at the Aethereum

Macy: Nothing else makes sense

Macy: He's trying to work diplomatic solutions

Jaxon: Yeah my dad doesn't believe in diplomacy.

Jaxon: Unless it's the walk softly and carry a vicious Vampire Guard kind.

Mekhi: That sounds like him, yeah

Eden: No need to ask me twice

Eden: Give me ten minutes to pack a bag and drop Toad off down the hall

Macy: No, bring Toad

Mekhi: Like a mascot

Eden: Fine, but if it comes down to it, I'm saving him over any of you.

Mekhi: Fair. Between the two of us, I'd save him, too

Luca: i'm in too

Luca: three cheers for king toad! long may he reign

Mekhi: Are we flying or portaling?

Eden: Did you learn to fly?

Eden: Or are you asking me to haul all your asses across the continent for free?

Eden: Classic vampire

Luca: hey, what'd jv and i do?

Mekhi: I'll give you a ring pop for it

Eden: Hmm

Mekhi: It's cotton candy flavored

Eden: Deal.

Eden: A lovely addition to my horde

Macy: I can get us to New Orleans, just not the Aethereum

Jaxon: Portal it is.

Luca: choo choo! all aboard macy's trip train

Macy: Spiritual awakening sold separately

Jaxon: Go pack.

Jaxon: I know for a fact two of you don't have vampire speed.

Jaxon: And Luca, get your ass down here.

Luca: aye aye, cap'n

Ten minutes later...

Eden: What was that you said about vampire speed?

Macy: Eden's here

Macy: She didn't bring Toad :/

Luca: :/

Mekhi: :/

Jaxon: :\

Jaxon: :/*

Mekhi: Solid try, bro

Jaxon: Fuck off.

Eden: Portal leaves in 10

Eden: 9

Eden: 8

Luca: here!!

Eden: 7

Eden: 6

Mekhi: Arrival imminent

Macy: Don't fade in the halls!

Eden: 5

Eden: 4

Eden: 3

Jaxon: Stop texting and pay attention.

Eden: 2

Eden: 1

Luca: blastoff!



REMY VILLANOVA

Remy Villanova

Q: What was the name of the Wizard Science teacher?

Paranormal identity: Warlock

Astrological sign: Libra

Favorite features: I can control magic at will with the innate power stored inside me...but I like my pretty eyes <3

Favorite class at Katmere Academy: Never been to class. The prison guards used to take turns teaching me everything I know, which is why my education is...spotty.

You are best known by your friends for the time you: Took out the Aethereum's magic for twelve hours. We couldn't escape, but every other rule in the place was suspended. It was a total free-for-all.

Favorite childhood memory: I was born in the Aethereum, but since there's no way out, the guards kind of adopted me when my mom died. I used to hang out with them every day watching movies and listening to stories about the outside world. Those films were the closest I ever felt to freedom.

Irresistible midnight snack: Peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Reminds me of my mom, I guess. She made the best ones.

What makes you laugh every single time: Every time we get a new guy in the prison, he spends the first few weeks tripping all over himself to get Calder's attention. She lets it slide for as long as they'll do her chores, and she threatens to eat them when they get annoying. It works out great for me. I get a freshly cleaned cell, and I get to watch Calder artfully avoid flirtation for hours at a time. She's a damn prodigy at shutting down creeps; she could teach a webinar for women at the club.

If you were a kitchen utensil, you would be: A spatula, because I'm flexible and really good at getting things that nobody else can.

Favorite morning beverage: Iced coffee with milk.

Dream vacation: I've been here my whole life, so let's start with anywhere that isn't the Aethereum.

Biggest fear: Dying in prison without ever getting the chance to see something outside these walls.

A dream first date would be: Beignets and café au lait at Café du Monde. The guards used to bring me beignets to-go, so I can only imagine how good they are hot and fresh. Next we would walk around the French Quarter and have some caricatures drawn (I just think they're funny). And we would laugh—my dream first date would have lots and lots of laughter.

One secret you never want anyone to know: There's a part of me that wonders...if I got the chance to leave, would I be too scared to take it?

Favorite food: Pecan pralines

Favorite instrument: The piano. We have one in the Aethereum that my mom taught me to play.

Pet peeve: When Charon decides to fuck with the prison rules just because he can.

When you want to relax, this happens: I go sit at the piano on the top level of the prison and play until my hands and wrists ache. As a kid, the other inmates humored me because I was well-liked, but now when I start playing, a whole crowd gathers around to listen, sometimes for hours at a time. It makes me really happy to be able to share a piece of Mom's memory with everyone.

Something only your best friend would know: Pretty much everything. No one else has ever bothered to ask.

A: Al Chemy.

Fun Facts About Remy:

1. Remy loves to read poetry. His favorite poets are Langston Hughes, Sandra Cisneros, Pablo Neruda, and Walt Whitman.
2. Remy secretly loves doing Sudoku puzzles.

3. Remy loves travel documentaries, because they make him feel like he is really at those places. But the truth is, he has never seen an ocean or a mountain or even a forest in person.

4. Remy is a total film buff and can rewatch the same movie over and over again if he's in the right mood, which is why he's seen *Strictly Ballroom* 27 times (but totally tells everyone he only watched it for Calder).

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Calder (and all the baby Calders),

My name is Remy Villanova, and I am your daughter's cell mate in the Aethereum. I just wanted to let you know that she's doing okay—or as okay as she can be while imprisoned at such a young age.

Caroline's fitting in well here (although she insists I call her by her last name only). She's made friends with several people (besides me) and has dazzled most of the guards with her charm—though she does keep threatening to eat the one who brings us dinner. But Naipaul is a pretty easygoing sort, so she doesn't get in trouble for it. He does refuse to bring her the barbecue sauce she keeps asking for, though. Did I mention he's smart as well as easygoing?

I know you would much rather hear from Calder than from me, but she hasn't been here long enough to earn postal privileges yet. Until she does, I'll send letters as often as I can. Also, please feel free to address any letters you have for her to me for the foreseeable future.

To prove that I am writing this on behalf of Calder, she asked me to remind you that she gets to name the upcoming baby. At the moment, she's deciding between Cleo or Carley, though she is still thinking about it.

She wanted me to tell you that she is not sorry for what she did. She hasn't said any more than that, but she insisted you know not to blame yourselves. She did what she did and she'd do it all over again if given the choice. If it helps you to have any peace of mind, I have the gift to see the future, and I know that Calder will not spend the rest of her days here. I don't know when she will be released, but I am certain that she will. So please take some comfort in that knowledge. I promise I will keep her safe until that time comes.

I'll write more from her soon.

Sincerely,

Remy Villanova



CAROLINA CALDER

Caroline Calder

Q: What do you call the center of a manta ray?

Paranormal identity: Manticore

Astrological sign: Taurus

Favorite features: It's a toss-up between my luxurious red hair, my perfectly bow-shaped lips, or my gorgeous brown eyes. Honestly, all of me is my favorite feature.

Favorite class at Katmere Academy: Never been, but I'm gonna guess it would be Hudson.

Least favorite part of living in Alaska: Alaska? No thanks...

Favorite childhood memory: Taking my baby sister out on the Louisiana Bayou. We used to have a big fan boat that I'd drive around while she looked for alligators. When we found one, we'd cut the engines and watch it swim around. We spent hours just like that. Floating and chatting and howling with excitement whenever we saw a tail twitch above the water. I miss her.

What makes you laugh every single time: When Remy tries to tell me what to do. Isn't he just precious?

If you were a kitchen utensil, you would be: A ladle, because I'm filled to the brim with goodness.

Favorite morning beverage: I'm an orange soda kind of girl.

Dream vacation: I'd like to take Remy to Paris. I think he'd really like the Eiffel Tower. And the cherry trees. And all the famous sites where old movies were filmed. Oh, and the bakeries... Honestly, I don't think there's anything in Paris Remy wouldn't like. It would be fun to be the one to bring him there for the first time.

Biggest fear: I've seen what happens to women around here when they stop looking so young and pretty. I've worked hard to earn the respect of my fellow inmates, and I'm terrified that some stupid, shitty, sexist assholes are gonna try to take it away one day.

One secret you never want anyone to know: When I was little, I would spend hours chasing a laser pointer around our living room. Even now, when I see a rope or something dragging across the ground, I have to stop myself from pouncing on it.

Favorite pastime: Listening to Remy play the piano.

Pet peeve: People who don't take me seriously.

When you want to relax, this happens: I like to paint my nails when I'm stressed. It gives me something small to focus on, instead of thinking about all the big, big problems around me.

Something only your best friend would know: That the more I flirt, the more scared I am.

A: The manticore.

Fun Facts About Calder:

1. Calder has a lot of self-confidence but she has a scrap of her childhood blankie—made by her grandmother—that she keeps on her at all times for good luck.
2. Calder isn't afraid of anything, except lightning. She doesn't like to talk about why.
3. Calder has always wanted a pet unicorn. She is sure she'd look really good riding a unicorn.

Inside Katmere Academy

The Campus

Come join us at a school as unique as the teachers and students who live here. Set in one of the most isolated regions of the world—the mountainous Denali region of central Alaska—it is a perfect place for your child to learn the ins and outs of their power. The campus has state of the art facilities for the four most populous factions, and plenty of room for them to stretch their legs—and wings.

Things you can expect from Katmere Academy include:

- ~ State-of-the-art, professionally designed obstacle courses to improve maneuverability and agility and challenge magical abilities of all kind
- ~ A top-quality Ludares program created to give your child the best chance to challenge for a seat on the Circle
- ~ A high-tech blood bank for vampires with even the most discerning tastes (including rare blood types in both human and animal varieties)
- ~ A world-renowned astronomy program and planetarium, with a strong focus on lunar studies in all phases
- ~ Fully stocked, completely organic, full moon harvested pantry of herbs and other potion ingredients, including extremely rare specimens from some of the most obscure corners of the globe
- ~ The castle itself is a former dragon stronghold with a collection of rare and powerful gems as well as limited access to the sacred Dragon Boneyard
- ~ The most accomplished and powerful faculty of witches, werewolves, vampires, and dragons ever assembled

Meet the Faculty

Dr. Finn Foster, Headmaster, Warlock

Specializing in Portal Construction and Magical Instruments

Dr. Noah Al-Kenanah, Science Instructor, Dragon

Specializing in Gemology and Draconian Anatomy

Mr. Raj Bader, Science Instructor, Werewolf

Specializing in Lunar Astronomy and the Science of Portals

Ms. Giulia Bianchi, PE Instructor, Witch

Specializing in Ballroom Dancing for Magical Occasions

Mr. Pascal Blanchet, PE Instructor, Vampire

Specializing in Ludares Strategy and fading

Ms. Serafina Chavez, Math Instructor, Dragon

Specializing in Paranormal Statistics and Long-Term Economics (100 year plus)

Ms. Alma Cisneros, Nurse, Witch

Specializing in Healing Draughts and Magical Injuries

Ms. Lucia Contreras, PE Instructor, Werewolf

Specializing in Strategy and Agility

Mr. Vincent Damasen, Art Instructor, Giant

Specializing in Mystical Architecture and Cauldron Composition

Dr. Cristobal Escanuelas, History Instructor, Dragon

Specializing in Dragon Lineage and Circle History and Law

Mr. Pietro Esposito, PE Instructor, Dragon

Specializing in Combat Flight Maneuvers

Dr. Tre Green, Math Instructor, Warlock

Specializing in Witch Circles and Portal Physics

Ms. Cynthia Kaufman, Art Instructor, Vampire

Specializing in Paranormal Artists and Artistry

Dr. Davina Kim, Drama Instructor, Dragon

Specializing in Paranormal Texts Through the Ages and the Magical Linguistics

Dr. Veronique Lyons, Science Instructor, Vampire

Specializing in Serology and Blood Types

Dr. Belinda MacCleary, Art Instructor, Werewolf

Specializing in Advanced Painting and Lunar Art

Ms. Alora Maclean, English Instructor, Witch

Specializing in Paranormal Texts and Ancient Spell Books

Dr. Stefano Marquez, Science Instructor, Dragon

Specializing in the Physics of Flight and the Economics of Hoarding

Dr. Saloma Natia, Math Instructor, Werewolf

Specializing in Magical Math and Its Engineering Applications

Dr. Xi Nguyen, Science Instructor, Werewolf

Specializing in Paranormal Anatomy and Shifting Injuries

Ms. Farrah Robles, Science Instructor, Witch

Specializing in Potion Composition and Rare Ingredients

Mr. Vikram Romanov, Art Instructor, Warlock

Specializing in the Art of the Tarot and Mystic Materials

Ms. Amka Royce, Librarian, Witch

Specializing in the Etymology of Spells and Mystical Manuscripts

Dr. Alyssa Veracruz, History Instructor, Witch

Specializing in the History of Witch Trials and Charm Casting

Ms. Helena Virago, Ethics Instructor, Dragon

Specializing in the Ethics of Power and Advanced Draconic Linguistics

Dr. Tyler White, Music Instructor, Vampire

Specializing in the Music of Mind Control and Orchestral Compositions

Ms. Marise Yanoski, Nurse Practitioner, Vampire

Specializing in the Healing Arts and the Chemistry of Bite Wounds

Dr. Marina Wainwright, School Counselor, Witch

Specializing in Anxiety Disorders and PTSD

The Traditions

Homecoming Week

A Halloween tradition here at Katmere Academy. On Monday, the Werewolves put on a huge campus carnival, complete with rides, games, and all the carnival food and prizes a student could ask for. Tuesday's festival is a dragon extravaganza—the Fire and Flight night show where Katmere's dragons light up the night sky with their special brand of magic. Witch and Warlock Wednesday sees this faction playing host to the only student Wingo game of the year, while Thursday night is the Vampire sponsored Fall Ball, where students dance the night away in their finest attire. Friday night is the culmination of the Homecoming festivities with a giant pep rally in the morning and an evening filled with the biggest Ludares game of the year, where the best and brightest Katmere students meet a rival school in our brand new, state-of-the-art arena.

Portal Search Party

As part of their training, witches at Katmere create practice portals all over campus. Twice a year, in October and March, the factions join forces for a huge bonfire and portal search party, where brave souls seek out stray portals. Katmere lore tells stories of students who have never returned, but Headmaster Foster enforces a strict buddy system that assures all students are healthy and accounted for.

New Year's Aurora Borealis Beach Blast

In the vein of interfaction cooperation, here at Katmere we kick off the New Year right with our very own Aurora Borealis Beach Party. All four factions join magical forces and turn the area in front of the castle into our very own beach for twelve hours, complete with bonfire, beach volleyball, dragon-roasted hot dogs and marshmallows, sandcastle contests, and pond surfing and water skiing. One of the students' favorite days of the year.

Castle Games

February sees the Katmere staff hosting Castle Games for the students. A fifty-year tradition to help students blow off steam in the freezing cold winter months, the castle is transformed into various obstacle courses, paranormal hide-and-seek areas, and magical tag arenas. It's an all-out battle as students are divided into interfaction teams and make their way through the games to see who will win bragging rights and the Castle Crown!

Ludares Tournament

In March, students once again team up in interfaction teams—this time for the day-long Katmere Ludares Tournament! While the tournament isn't mandatory, participation is strongly encouraged for juniors and seniors, who go head-to-head in Ludares games over the course of the day to see who will finally win!!

The Classes

Plan Your Schedule at Katmere Academy

Because KA caters to paranormal children, the basic requirements for graduation are (obviously) a little different than a high school for non-paranormals. While the core curriculum is still there (math, English, history, science) it's a little different here than anywhere else on earth. So take a look through the classes listed below and choose one of each type to plan your perfect semester at Katmere Academy.

SCIENCE

Gemology and the Dragon

In this special class, taught every other year, we will discuss the geology of gems of all types, as well as the effects of different gems in dragon lairs and on dragons in different parts of their life cycles.

Physics of Flight I, II, III

The ability to fly is different for all winged paranormal creatures, and in this class we'll discuss it all. There is a special focus on dragon anatomy and the physics of dragon flight, but during the three-year course, we also explore the flight dynamics of fairies, gargoyles, gryffins, valkeries, and other winged creatures.

Blood Chemistry I, II, III

Being a vampire is about a lot more than just sucking blood. In this course, learn the fundamentals behind blood and the vampire body. While the focus is on human blood and the effects of different blood types on the vampire body, we also explore the effects of animal blood on vampires.

The Chemistry of Potions I, II, III

Potion making goes well beyond mixing some ingredients in a cauldron. This class explores everything from how to source the best and freshest materials for your potions to the subtleties of ingredient combination to achieve desired results

to the varying results based upon cauldron choice. There is a special emphasis on teas, potions that affect the emotions (yes, this includes love potions) and antidotes to spells.

Lunar Astronomy I, II, III

In this course, which starts sophomore year, you'll explore the solar system, with an in-depth focus on Earth's moon and its effect on wolf shifters in all stages of their lives. Field trips are required during full moons several times a year.

Paranormal Anatomy I, II, III (Anatomy I is a required course for freshmen)

This course covers all four paranormals at Katmere Academy, which means you'll be studying everything from the anatomy of a dragon wing to the digestive system of vampires, as well as the neurology of shifting and magic and the circulatory system.

HISTORY

History of Vampires—Fallacies, Facts, and Fangs

This year-long course focuses on the four-thousand-year history of vampires, born and made. Special attention is given to the biggest advancements in vampire culture, the Vampire Court, and the most powerful rulers in vampire history.

History of Magic

This exciting class explores the origins of everyday magic, from portal building to the beginnings of potions. Class discussions will focus on the different periods of magic, as well as important advancements and leaders in each period.

Witch Hunts in the Atlantic World

Lest we forget, witches have been hunted throughout history. This class focuses specifically on witch hunts in the states bordering the Atlantic—the politics that went into them, the witches and covens that were destroyed, and the inevitable problems that arose from the witches' destruction.

World History of Witchcraft Trials

A deeper study of witch hunts through the ages, this class

divides witch hunts into five periods throughout history and provides an in-depth focus on each of those periods, including the various figures who attempted to stop the witch hunts and/or provide safe havens for witches. This class also has an emphasis on the hunting and destruction of other paranormals through the ages.

Ancient History of Dragons I, II

Dragons rose to prominence in the fertile crescent over seven thousand years ago. This class focuses on the rise of the dragon clans and their contributions to science and technology as well as the near decimation of their population with the expansion of the Roman Empire. There is also an emphasis on internal power struggles, the Great Dragon Hunts, and the legendary dragon warriors who arose during this time period.

Cults and Covens through the Years I, II, III

This exciting class examines world history through the eyes of witches. Each six-week period will examine a different continent and the covens of great prominence in that region. The class has a special emphasis on the varieties of witchcraft, cauldron histories, and the medieval art of potion-making.

Lycans Around the World I, II, III

This series of classes focuses on the history of wolf shifters and werewolves throughout the ages. We will examine the present-day Wolf Court and monarchy, as well as previous courts and monarchies through the ages, in addition to the most important events and alphas in wolf history.

Political Science: Circle Laws and Etiquette

A required class for all juniors, Circle Laws and Etiquette discusses the history of the Circle and its current and past leaders as well as a brief understanding of laws for paranormals, etiquette at the various courts, the monarchies, and the process for gaining entrance onto the Circle.

ENGLISH

Etymology of a Spell

This course focuses on spells through the ages—from ancient

times until today. What goes into making a spell? What word choice makes spells and charms most powerful? What similarities do we see in spells of different ages, and what evolution have we seen in spells and charms over the last two thousand years?

The Poetry of Spells and Charms I, II, III

Writing powerful spells and charms is often the most fun—and the most challenging—part of witchcraft. This intensive series of classes concentrates on writing spells and charms that will take your magic to the next level.

Fairy Tales: Fact or Fiction I, II

For much of the world, knowledge of paranormal creatures comes to them in the stories of their childhood. This class examines fairy tales from around the world, focusing on similarities and differences from numerous cultures, as well as the truth and fiction in each of the stories read.

British Literature with an Emphasis on Paranormal Stories I, II

Storytelling is one of the most powerful ways to pass down traditions through the ages. This class focuses on important works of British Literature that also have strong paranormal presences. (e.g. *Macbeth*, *The Duchess of Malfi*, *The Fairy Queen*, *Dracula*, etc.)

American Literature with an Emphasis on Paranormal Stories I, II

American literature is rife with stories of magic and paranormal creatures. This class will provide an in-depth examination of the paranormal in American works through the ages, starting with early American stories and progressing through modern day.

From *Dracula* to *Interview with a Vampire*: An In-Depth Study of the Vampire Novel

To all you vampires and vamp lovers out there, this course is for you! A deep and immersive look at vampire novels and movies throughout the ages, this class puts a special emphasis on the myths and truths of vampires portrayed in fiction.

The Complete Works of Jack London: A Study in Wolves

Jack London is arguably the most prominent writer of fictional wolves in American literary history (and a suspected wolf shifter, himself). This class provides a deep dive into his literary works from beginning to end, with a special emphasis on those stories where wolves focus prominently in the conflict and characterization.

MATHEMATICS

Engineering Math for Magical Architecture I, II, III, IV

A powerful series of courses that focus on the math, spells, history, and broad knowledge base necessary to create lasting magical monuments. In these classes, students will learn the math behind the magic of some of the world's most mystical construction, as well as the math and magic necessary to build their own structures (in the more advance courses).

The Geometry of Witch Circles and Portals I, II

This class focuses on creating the perfect circle for your magic, whether you are practicing alone, with a few friends, or with an entire coven. A special emphasis will also be on the math that goes into building long-range portals, especially those that provide for intercontinental travel.

Paranormal Statistics I, II, III, IV

This series of courses will provide students with an understanding of statistics in the paranormal world while preparing them to solve problems that involve collecting and analyzing data. This includes understanding what data is meaningful, measures of variation, correlation, probability, sampling, and hypothesis testing.

FINE ARTS

Mystical Architecture

This course is about magical architecture through the ages. From gargoyles to Gothic arches, from Stonehenge to pyramids around the world, this class focuses on both the architecture of power and the paranormal architects behind some of the greatest architectural marvels in history.

The Art of the Tarot

This class focuses on appreciation of some of the most powerful, diverse, and beautiful tarot decks in history. During the course of this year-long class, students will come to understand the different tarot suits and types of decks, as well as create a tarot deck of their own as the final project.

The Paranormal Eye I, II

This class focuses on art appreciation, particularly in works that spotlight the paranormal. From the muses of Ancient Greece to modern-day artistic renderings of paranormal creatures, this class looks at the good, the bad, and the sublime.

The Paranormal Hand I, II, III, IV

A series of hands-on courses that will focus on painting, drawing, sculpting, and graphic design. While these courses focus mainly on creating works of a paranormal nature in different mediums, students are encouraged to follow their muses wherever they may lead them.

The Artistry of Witchcraft I, II, III

Led by some of the best instrument makers in the world, this class focuses on the creating of different instruments for the practice of modern witchcraft. Over the course of three years, students will study different types of magical art objects, from wands to athames to cauldrons and bolines, their history, effects on history, and styles of creation.

Drama of the Paranormal I, II, III

From the works of Shakespeare to Miller and Busch to Balderston, each semester of this class will study three plays about the paranormal. Each semester, students will be expected to put on a full production for the school, with third-year students writing and performing in their own one-act plays.

Paranormal Photography I, II, III

These classes focus on beginning and advanced concepts in photography. While the focus in all three classes is paranormal

topics, students are encouraged to photograph their choice of subjects. Each year does require a special photography project dealing with some aspect of paranormality as the final exam.

Paranormal Music Appreciation I, II

These courses bring out the music in you! With a special focus on both paranormal composers and paranormal artists, these classes will give you an appreciation of the finest paranormal music has to offer.

Orchestra I, II, III, IV

Students will learn to play instruments individually and in an orchestra setting, with numerous performances at school events throughout the year. While students learn music of all types, a special emphasis is placed on music written by and/or about paranormals.

PHYSICAL EDUCATION

Flight I, II, III, IV

These courses start at the very beginning aspects of flight and continue through more and more complicated maneuvers, including combat aviation. Requirement: only for students who can fly under their own power.

Wolf Agility Courses I, II, II

Whoever said fun had gone to the wolves, obviously knows about these courses. The beginning class starts with a series of sophisticated obstacle courses that will challenge even the fastest and most agile wolf and continue to build in complexity. While these courses are designed to increase wolf skills, all paranormals are welcome.

Portal Building

A senior-level course meant to be taken after the Math of Portals, this class focuses on building portals of increasing complexity. Though meant specifically to enhance witch skills, anyone with a grasp of earth magic is welcome to take this course.

Speed Fading I, II

Meant for Katmere Academy vampires of all ages, these two courses help with the practice of fading. Increases in speed, strength, and endurance over the two years are to be expected. Regular field trips throughout North America are included.

Ballroom Dancing (with special concentration on holiday celebrations)

Ever feel like a dud at the Wyvernhoard Ball or the Blood Cotillion? If so, this class is for you. Students will learn several ballroom and line dances and will participate in a performance at the end of the school year. Open to all paranormals.

Interfaction Competitions

This is one of the most exciting courses offered at Katmere Academy. A one-year course that utilizes the skills of wolves, vampires, witches, and dragons in increasingly complex competitions. Techniques for hand-to-hand combat will also be taught. Open to all paranormals and often taught for those students wanting to compete in a sporting event without participating in the more dangerous Ludares competitions.

Ludares I, II, III

Have you ever dreamed of being Katmere Academy's Ludares champion? Ever wanted to increase your speed and endurance on the field of play while also learning to cooperate with other types of paranormals? In line to one day succeed to the throne and compete yourself for a place on the Circle? If so, our Ludares classes are for you. Learn all the best techniques for winning at Ludares through hands-on play and monthly games.

OTHER ELECTIVES

The Care of Dragon Eggs

Hatching dragon eggs is one of the most satisfying and precarious experiences in the world. Less than one half of dragon eggs laid are ever hatched, often due to mistakes and ignorance on proper egg incubation. This class teaches you everything you need to know to care for your dragon egg, pre- and post-hatching. Meant for dragons only.

Wands 101

Some witches choose to use wands, some don't. This class will focus on whether a wand is right for you and, if it is, how to choose the best wand to amplify your magic. We will also spend time discussing ways to store your wand and how to withdraw it quickly when needed. Meant for Witches only.

Shifting

Are you at the mercy of the moon or your emotions? Is shifting difficult for you? Do you wish you could shift when you want, how you want, with no complications? If you answered yes to any of these questions, these classes are for you. Over the course of two years, we will work on the ins and outs of shifting so that you are always in control of when and how you transform.

The Ethics of Power

A mandatory six-week senior seminar, this course deals with the dos and don'ts of utilizing your power. Mind control, potions that control emotions (yes, we include love potions in this list), feeding from humans, and other ethical quandaries for paranormals will be explored in this course. This is the class at Katmere Academy that will raise all the difficult questions that come with having power and help you figure out how to answer them.

Sybilism/Fortune Telling

This class focuses on the tools of fortune telling. Tarot, palmistry, shells, runes, crystal balls, and other methods of seeing the future will be explored. Along with learning how to utilize the tools of the trade, there is also a strong ethical component to this course—just because you can see the future doesn't always mean you should share your knowledge, or try to change what you see.

First Aid for the Proactive Paranormal

In this course, learn how to treat bites, burns, and spells gone awry. A class for every paranormal. During this year-long course, we will look at the downside of magic—the injuries that come from wolves, vampires, dragons, and witches just

learning how to control their power. Home remedies as well as recommendations on when to see a professional will be covered thoroughly.

Spellcasting

Do your spells go awry? Are they not as powerful as you would like them to be? If so, this class is for you. Learn dozens of different techniques to cast spells that do more and last longer. Meant for witches and other purveyors of earth magic. Field trips required.

Q &A with Tracy Wolff

How did Katmere get its name?

Katmere is actually my homage to Harry Potter and the Lion King combined. Hogwarts is Warthog rearranged, so Katmere is Meerkat rearranged. I actually spent a long time thinking about a name for the school and when I hit on Katmere, I couldn't get it out of my mind, so I decided that it had to be the name.

Why did you set *Crave* in Alaska?

I actually hit on Alaska really early in the brainstorming process. I had originally thought maybe I would write a boarding school on the East Coast—since there is a long history of that—but it never felt right to me. So I started thinking outside the box and was brainstorming with my agent when she suggested it. The moment she said it, it clicked in my head as the right place to set the story.

Grace is from San Diego—like me—and I really wanted her to feel like a fish out of water. I can't imagine how I would have felt being plunked down in the middle of Alaska when I was seventeen. I would have felt totally out of my depth, with no appropriate clothes and no idea of what even to wear outside, considering San Diego is pretty much a tank top and shorts kind of place when you're a teenage girl.

I had originally planned to set *Crave* way up in the northernmost town in Alaska, out in the middle of the frozen tundra, but my editor wasn't crazy about the setting given the simplicity of the landscape. She'd just gone on a cruise around Alaska and suggested Healy as a starting off point instead, and eventually I moved it into the mountains around Denali. I remember watching *The Art of Flight* documentary several years ago and one of the snowboarders saying they were dropping into parts of Denali and the surrounding mountains that no human being had ever walked on. Just the idea of it blew me away.

How did you end up deciding to use chapter titles? How do

you write those—at the beginning or at the end of your process?

The chapter titles were actually my editor's idea. *Crave* is an incredibly long book (and yet the shortest of the series) and she felt chapter titles would help with pacing. Considering I totally fell in love with the title (and still think it's the best chapter title I've ever read) "I Accidentally Vaporize My Pre-Algebra Teacher" from the first Percy Jackson book, I was totally up to try something fun for *Crave*. And while some of the chapter headings are challenging, it's one of my favorite things about the books!!!

Since the original manuscript drafts change so much during the editing process, my agent keeps a document with the final chapters and a brief summary of each. After editing is complete, I go through the document and title each chapter, sometimes with the help of my amazing family. You can all thank my middle son for his idea of "Carpe Kill-em" for a chapter title in *Crave*!

How do you keep track of all the many characters, species, locations, etc.?

In some ways, it's really hard to keep track of everything, and in other ways it's really easy. For my main characters, I don't have trouble keeping track at all—I know Grace, Hudson, Jaxon, Flint, Macy, Mekhi, and Eden really well—who they are, what they look like, what's important to them, so all of that is kind of in my head. But for secondary characters or characters we only see once or twice per book (or even less) I do have trouble. For example, what color are Linden Choi's eyes? Or how do I spell the name of one of the wolf queens? That information and all the world-building information, as well as family tree type stuff, is all kept in a series bible that is now nearly 400 pages long.

Where do you find inspiration for all the amazing jokes, sticker sayings, etc.?

I have so much fun with that. The chapter titles are a family affair—some come to me really easily while others are a bit harder to get. For the harder ones, I brainstorm with my agent

and with my sons and partner. It's a lot of fun tossing ideas back and forth before we hit on one we think is perfect. The jokes and stickers are much the same way. Some are ones I have heard at one time or another, but a lot of them are puns my middle son (who is the comedian) and I toss back and forth at each other.

Do you have a playlist of all the songs used in the series, and how do you decide which ones to use?

This is another time where some of them come really easily—like I just know which song I want to use. But the song Hudson plays in *Covet*—“Grace” by Lewis Capaldi, I went looking for. I listened to probably thirty songs with Grace in the title before I heard that song and it gave me chills. I just knew I had to use it. I do have playlists for each book—I use different ones to set different moods. But most of those songs don't make it into the books.

Do you have a reading list of all the books/poems used in the series, and how do you decide which ones to use?

I don't have a list that I use. I'm a former English professor, so I tend to just pull something from my head that I think fits the scene or emotions of the moment.

Are any of the characters based on real people in your life? Are you a Grace, a Macy, a Calder, or someone else?

I'm definitely a Grace. I didn't set out for it to be that way, but after I finished *Crave*, I realized Grace is the closest to me of any character I've ever written. But there's also a lot of Macy in me—I'm totally the cheerleader of my group of friends.

How long did it take you to write *Crave*?

It took me about two months to write *Crave*, but I had done some preliminary work on it when my editor first came to me saying she wanted to bring vampires back. I wrote a scene for her that she didn't like, lol, and then I came at it from a different direction, and she liked that one much better. We did some brainstorming—we both really wanted a boarding school, for example—and then I was off and running. I added some more fun things during editing, but for the most part it

was about two months of solid writing.

How did you decide which characters to pair up with whom? When did you decide to swap who Grace's mate was? Was that the plan from the beginning?

We had a plan from the beginning of what we wanted the series to be. My editor had a daughter in college when we first brainstormed *Crave*, and we both were lamenting the YA novels she'd devoured in high school did not properly prepare her for her first major relationship to end. This genre typically teaches young girls that their first love is the one you'll spend the rest of your life with, which is terribly romantic, but also unrealistic and honestly depressing when you realize you'll probably never have a romance like the ones in a novel in real life. Not necessarily because the first person you fall in love with may not be right for you, but because you don't even know who *you* are yet, much less what you need in a partner. So instead, we wanted to show young readers how each person you love teaches you something else about yourself, which will ultimately lead you to the perfect person for *you*.

So yes, the plan was always to have Hudson be a second love interest. But as I was writing *Crush*, we were all really nervous about whether or not we were going to like him when he showed up—up until that point I'd never written anything with him in it. Like, I had a vision of who he was in my head, but until he really showed up on the page, I think we were all on tenterhooks, waiting to see if he was going to be a hero who could carry the series and be the perfect fit for Grace. And then the day I wrote the Bloodletter cave scene, where Hudson first opened his mouth, I called both my editor and my agent, and I was like, “Oh my god, I LOVE HIM SO MUCH!” They both begged me to send pages, which I did, and all three of us were like, yeah. This is everything we wanted him to be. Let's go for it.

Flint's love interest was also always known to us, and if you go back and read *Crave*, we think it's fairly obvious to the astute reader as well. I'll give you a hint—Flint only ever *isn't* grinning to cover his emotions around one character...

Which of the characters was the hardest to write? Which

was the easiest?

Grace is definitely the easiest. She came to me fully formed, just started talking to me within a day of me starting to brainstorm the story. I've always known who she is and what she wanted. Calder is another character who came to me really easily. I just loved her so much from the moment she showed up on the page that everything about her came really easily. As for the hardest character for me to write...I don't know. That's a hard one. I think Cyrus was the most difficult. I didn't just want him to be evil for evil's sake but to really think he was doing the right thing with his evil agenda. A bit of a narcissist with a messiah complex but ultimately someone convinced they're leading their people to a better life, albeit in the very worst way possible.

How did you decide to add extra characters' POVs at the end?

My editor and I decided that we really wanted to be inside the hero's head early on in *Crave*. We wanted to know what Jaxon was thinking in pivotal moments, and she really, really wanted to know where he went when he left school that one time during the novel. And then with Hudson, I just love him as a character and I really wanted to be in his head for a while.

Why did you choose to write so many different characters in the books? Wouldn't it have been easier to concentrate on just a couple?

I love writing ensemble casts. I love, love, love it. I love the banter, the problem solving, the complex relationships, the different life experiences, and the additional plot opportunities that they add, so I always knew the *Crave* series was going to have a rich and diverse cast of characters. There was so much I wanted to explore—plot-wise and thematically—with this series that I really needed an extended cast to do that. But also, feminine power in all its forms is a very important theme to me, and I wanted to create a cast that showed that. Grace, Macy, Eden, Gwen, the Bloodletter, Nuri, Calder—they are all strong women who find and use their power differently, which I love.

Which bonus content was your favorite to write: vamps, witches, dragons, or gargoyles?

I actually really enjoyed writing all of it. I have written a lot of different types of books in my career, but the one type I've never written is historical. So I actually really enjoyed writing the historical bonus content in both *Covet* and *Court* because it was so different than anything I've ever done before. Although, I also really enjoyed writing the Grace and Hudson extra content, too.

Did you go into writing this series with the characters or the plot in mind first?

The characters. Always the characters. There are four different ways to enter story—language, character, world, or conflict. I always enter through character, so while I knew I wanted to write a vampire story, I had to get to know Grace, Jaxon, Macy, and Flint before I really knew where the story was going.

Do you have a favorite character?

That's another hard question for me to answer. I really love a lot of the characters in this series—including characters that you guys won't meet until *Court* comes out. But I think I'll always be Team Grace first and foremost. She has been an incredibly fun and exciting character for me to write.

What was your favorite scene to write?

I have a favorite scene from each book, actually. In *Crave*, it's the aurora borealis scene. That was one of the first scenes that came to me, and I wrote most of the book just trying to get to that scene. I love it so much.

In *Crush*, it's harder for me to choose because I love so many scenes in that book. The Boneyard Scene is definitely one of my favorites in that book. Our family dog died the day before I wrote that scene (which was awful) and I took so many of the emotions around that experience—for myself and for my boys, who were absolutely devastated—and brought them to bear in that moment when Flint and Eden are looking down into the graveyard, before they go in. Another favorite from *Crush* is

the laundry room scene, of course. It was so nice to be able to talk about the strings for the first time, and also to just let Hudson and Grace have a moment of fun together.

In *Covet*, my favorite scenes are all tied up with the Dragon Court. I had so much fun writing that whole sequence of events—the ball, the scenes with Hudson and Grace, the celebration the last night in New York. I also loved writing the scene where Flint is drunk, and Hudson has just fought half the prison. I smiled the whole time I was writing it. Also, with *Covet*, I love the ending. It was painful and I cried while writing a lot of it, but I'm very proud of it as well.

How did you decide which classes would be featured at Katmere? If you could take a Katmere class, which one would it be?

I just let my imagination run wild while I was coming up with classes for Katmere. I spent a lot of time thinking about what courses would be of use for paranormals—things like physics of flight or spellcasting. But I was also concerned with what they needed to know while living in a world with humans and not in an alternate universe. What did they need to know to protect themselves—The World History of Witch Trials, for example? And what did they need to know to keep humans safe—which is why I created the Ethics of Power course.

The Ethics of Power and Anatomy of Paranormals seem to me like the two most important classes at Katmere. I think about the importance of health and biology classes that all humans have to take that teach us how our bodies work, and I figured that in a world with so many different part-human species, it would be important to understand how each of their systems work as well. And then the Ethics of Power class seems incredibly important to me—if you wield the kind of power that Jaxon, Hudson, Grace, and even Macy and Flint wield, I think a discussion about what is and what isn't appropriate to do with that power is incredibly important.

If you could be a paranormal creature, which would you want to be?

I would be a mermaid. Or a vampire. Or a dragon. Or a

witch...ugh. There are waaaaay too many choices on this one.

Quizzes

Which Crave Character Are You?

1) What is your favorite snack?

- a. Phish Food Ice Cream
- b. Marshmallows
- c. Waffles
- d. Poptarts
- e. Granola Bars

2) What course sounds most appealing to take?

- a. Spell Casting
- b. The Art of Flight
- c. Politics of the Paranormal World
- d. Art Class
- e. History of the Paranormal World

3) What would you do at a party?

- a. You planned it, so just enjoy your hard work
- b. Talk to everyone
- c. Hold court in the middle of everyone
- d. Find the snacks and hide
- e. Be the life of the party

4) What paranormal would you most want to be?

- a. Witch
- b. Dragon
- c. Vampire
- d. Gargoyle
- e. I'd hate to have powers

5) What adjective would your friends use to describe you?

- a. Loyal

- b. Funny
- c. Quiet
- d. Resilient
- e. Witty

6) Which musician is your favorite?

- a. Harry Styles
- b. Hozier
- c. Savage Garden
- d. One Direction
- e. Lewis Capaldi

7) What would be your favorite snowy day activity?

- a. Join in on the snowball fight
- b. Have a snowball fight
- c. Build a snowman
- d. Stay inside and read
- e. Help your friends strategize to win the snowball fight

8) What would you use to help win in a fight?

- a. A Wand
- b. Anything with fire
- c. Your Strength
- d. Your calming abilities
- e. Your wit

9) Which of these paranormal abilities would you want during Ludares?

- a. Your ability to create portals/use spells
- b. Flight
- c. The ability to fade
- d. Your ability to withstand heat

e. Your ability to disintegrate things

10) What's your favorite color?

a. Anything rainbow and bright

b. Green

c. Anything Dark

d. Hot Pink

e. Armani Black

11) Where would you want your Paranormal Court to be?

a. Somewhere with a lot of history

b. Somewhere busy and fun

c. Somewhere dreary and cold

d. Somewhere warm and sunny

e. Somewhere that's different than it seems

12) Which activity would you use to wind down?

a. Watching tv and eating ice cream

b. Flying

c. Seclude myself from others

d. Paint

e. Throw some axes

13) What is your drink of choice?

a. Coffee

b. Water

c. Hot chocolate

d. Dr Pepper

e. Blood

If you selected mostly A's, you're **Macy!** Creative, loyal, and fun- Macy always brings good energy and magic to any situation. You love a night in with some Cherry Garcia and can't miss your morning coffee. Macy is strong, resilient and

always there to be a shoulder to lean on, just like you!

If you selected mostly B's, you're **Flint**! Full of fire, passion and hilarious comebacks, Flint always knows how to cheer you up when you need it most. Whether it's with some toasted marshmallows for your hot chocolate or flight around the school to take your mind off things, he's always there to cheer you up. You light up a room with your charm and jokes, just like Flint!

If you selected mostly C's, you're **Jaxon**! Strong, steady, and reserved, Jaxon is always observing and trying to play out the next three moves. He loves to be one step ahead and will always protect those he loves. You might be quiet, but you're fierce and a force to be reckoned with, just like Jaxon!

If you selected mostly D's, you're **Grace**! Quiet, creative, and a dark horse, Grace will always surprise you. You keep your hand close to the vest, but aren't afraid to throw down a full house to win. Full of pop culture references, a great taste in music, and determination, Grace is always willing to try anything, just like you!

If you selected mostly E's, you're **Hudson**! Misunderstood, witty, and bold, Hudson can bring levity and a great idea to any situation. You don't tend to correct people when they're wrong about you, you'd rather prove it. Hudson is different than what he seems, but what's underneath is incredible and worth getting to know, just like you are!

Which Crave Court Do You Belong To?

1) What class would you enjoy the most?

- a. History of Magic
- b. The Art of Flight
- c. Spell Work
- d. How to Shift 101
- e. Power Development

2) What's your favorite place?

- a. San Diego, CA
- b. New York, NY
- c. Milan, Italy
- d. Denver, CO
- e. London, England

3) What do you value?

- a. Family
- b. Hoards of Jewels
- c. Runes and Wands
- d. Moonlight
- e. Power

4) What's your strength?

- a. Perseverance
- b. Wit
- c. Loyalty
- d. Determination
- e. Conviction

5) What's your go-to power-up meal?

- a. Cherry Pop-tarts & a Dr Pepper
- b. Fire-roasted Marshmallows
- c. Waffles & Coffee
- d. Anything meaty
- e. Blood, any kind

6) What element do you relate to the most?

- a. All
- b. Fire
- c. Earth
- d. Water
- e. Air

7) What can you be found doing during the weekend?

- a. Bingeing Netflix
- b. Finding a party to attend
- c. Playing Wingo
- d. Hiking
- e. Going out to eat

8) What's your preferred method of transportation?

- a. Planes
- b. Flight
- c. Portals
- d. Running
- e. Fading

9) What's your ideal pet?

- a. A dog
- b. A bird
- c. A cat
- d. A bear

e. A cow

10) What's your favorite season?

a. Summer

b. Spring

c. Fall

d. Winter

e. Impartial/don't have a favorite

11) What would you want on your crest?

a. Scales

b. A Dragon, duh

c. Stars

d. Scratch marks

e. A Crown

12) How would you win a fight?

a. By calming everyone before it could even start

b. Flying above them

c. Spell casting

d. Brute strength

e. Persuasion

If you selected mostly A's, you're a member of the **Gargoyle Court!** You're loyal, strong, and in tune with the earth. You're a protector who stands up for those who need help, and you always prioritize doing what's right.

If you selected mostly B's, you're a member of the **Dragon Court!** You're fun-loving, headstrong, and the life of the party. Always quick with a joke or the one to lighten the mood, you prioritize friendships and never turn down a shiny trinket or two.

If you selected mostly C's, you're a member of the **Witch Court!** You're smart, caring, and always a step ahead of the competition. Creativity is your bread and butter, and you'd do

anything for your family and friends.

If you selected mostly D's, you're a member of the **Wolf Court!** You're tough, resilient, and loyal to your friends above all else. You never back down from a fight, and though you're sometimes misunderstood, underneath your tough exterior you have a pure heart.

If you selected mostly E's, you're a member of the **Vampire Court!** You're clever, book smart, and underneath a tough exterior, you've got passion in spades. Cool as a cucumber even under pressure, you always think numerous steps ahead to stay on top of the competition.

Deleted Scenes

~1~

Kiss and Spell

MACY

(Timeline: between chapters 68 and 69 of *Crush*)

My phone buzzes, and I surreptitiously pull it out of my bag. Normally I wouldn't risk it, and definitely not in Portal Physics, but Dr. Green is gone today and the kitchen witch they have subbing for him seems fine with anything as long as we finish the assignment.

I turned it in ten minutes ago, and now I'm bored out of my mind. Counting the divots in the ceiling can only take me so far.

I swipe my phone on, expecting to see a text from Grace, who's in art right now, or maybe Gwen, who needs help decorating for the witches' tea after school today. But it's not Grace or Gwen.

It's *Xavier*, and he wants to know if I'm free to get together this afternoon.

Butterflies do the flamenco in my stomach at the thought. I've been waiting for some kind of grand romance to happen to me. What if Xavier is it? He's certainly handsome enough. Plus, he's really sweet and funny. Which already puts him ahead of Cam. By *a lot*.

I want to jump on the invite, but I really did promise Gwen I'd help her decorate. And no matter how hot Xavier is, I'm a sisters-before-misters kind of girl. Or at least, that's who I want to be. I haven't had much opportunity to test that out before today, but I'm going with it for now. Even if it hurts a little.

Macy: I'd love to!!!!

Macy: But I have to help Gwen decorate for the witches' tea for a couple hours

Macy: Another time?

Xavier: Sure

Xavier: Or I could help with the decorations

Xavier: I'm pretty good with a helium tank

I didn't think it was possible, but somehow my heart beats even faster. Cam wouldn't walk across a ballroom to hang out with me. But Xavier wants to help blow up helium balloons? It seems too good to be true.

But it's not like I'm about to let that stop me. You never know what you're going to get until you go for it, so I might as well make the leap.

Macy: Won't your claws be a balloon hazard?

Xavier: Not a problem

Xavier: I'm pretty good with my hands

My eyes go wide at that. Is he trying to flirt? Going straight to gross? He doesn't seem like that type, but—

Xavier: I mean when it comes to building things

Xavier: I'm good with my hands when I build things like balloon arches and stuff like that

I'm grinning so wide now that my cheeks ache. He's adorable. Absolutely, one hundred percent adorable. And I definitely want to spend the afternoon making balloon arches with him.

Among other things...

Macy: Then feel free to meet me in study room

Macy: That's where the witches' tea will be tonight

Xavier: What time should I be there?

Macy: I'm heading up as soon as school's out

Macy: So four or so?

Xavier: See you then

Macy: See you

I shove my phone back in my bag before I spend the next fifteen minutes mooning over it, waiting for Xavier to text again when he definitely, probably won't. Then I pinch myself because I can't believe this is happening. A really cute, really nice boy wants to make balloon arches with me. Me!

Which may not *sound* super romantic, but it *feels* romantic. Especially knowing that, no matter what he says, I'm sure there are a million other things he'd rather do after class than blow up balloons.

By the time the end of the day rolls around, I'm all but jumping out of my skin with excitement. In fact, I'm so wired that I convince my history instructor that there's something wrong with me and I get to duck out of class fifteen minutes early. Which I use to run to my room and change, because if things go well between us, there's no way I want to look back at our first date and think of myself in my school uniform.

Okay, yes, I've been planning my outfit all afternoon, so it only takes about two minutes to change into my favorite pair of ripped jeans. I add a bright blue sweater and a pair of fun earrings and, after brushing my teeth, I'm out the door just as the bell starts playing the score from *The Nightmare Before Christmas*.

My dad really is a dork.

I do a super-quick glamour on my way to the study room, giving myself a pep talk as I make my way down the crowded front staircase. I'm going against traffic, so it takes twice as long, and I start to panic about being late.

But geez, if the boy is willing to decorate for our monthly witches' tea, he should be willing to wait five minutes for me to get there, right? And if he isn't, he's not worth my time. Cam totally taught me that much.

It'll be fine, Macy. Just chill out and remember to smile. Everything else will take care of itself.

It's not a bad pep talk, and it has the butterflies leaving the flamenco behind for a fast waltz. Still not optimal, but better. Definitely better.

I burst into the study room six minutes after school got out, and I figure I'm ahead of the game. Which is good, because I need a minute or two to squeal with Gwen about Xavier. But one glance around the crowded room tells me I'm going to have to put a hold on that—because Xavier is already here.

And he is looking *fine*. The boy can really rock a purple hoodie and black uniform pants.

Then again, I'm pretty sure he can rock anything with his carefree grin, expressive eyes, and rangy wolf body that I know from Ludares practice is both super strong and super ripped.

He's already standing next to the helium tank, blowing up a giant gold balloon. My heart does a flip—okay, many flips—as I cross to him after giving a wave to Gwen, even as I rack my brain for a cool opening line.

Turns out I don't need one, because Xavier wiggles his brows and says, "I'm going for the gold."

And how cute is that?

"And here I thought you already had the gold," I tease, taking the balloon from him and tying off the end as he starts on another one.

"I was just thinking the same thing." His eyes run over me in a more-than-friendly, much-less-than-insulting way. "You look really nice."

I do my best to ignore the way his compliment makes my cheeks burn. "So do you."

"It's my uniform," he says with a laugh. "How good could it look?"

"Take the compliment," I answer. "And don't question it. Once you do, it's a slippery slope."

This time, when he lifts his brows, they stay up. "You say that with an impressive amount of authority."

"Because I'm the queen of second-guessing compliments." The instant the words are out, I have to fight the urge to slap a hand over my mouth. I can't believe I just admitted that when

I've been trying to look so confident.

"You?" Now he just seems incredulous. "What do you have to second-guess?"

I shake my head, not wanting to get into the fact that I'm nowhere near as confident on the inside as I look on the outside.

At first I think he's going to press me, but in the end, he just smiles and says, "Well, I think you're really cool."

It's a much better compliment than if he said I looked good again, and I feel myself getting a little tongue-tied. Instead of giving in to it, I nod to the balloon in his hands and ask, "Are you planning on blowing that up today, or are we just going to look at it?"

"Big words for someone whose sole contribution so far has been tying a knot in one balloon." But he fits the balloon over the nozzle and fills it up.

I snatch it from his hands and tie that end up, too. "Two balloons, thank you very much."

"Oh, excuse me." His eyes gleam wickedly. "My mistake."

"Exactly my point." It's my turn to arch my brows at him.

But he just laughs, and we spend the next two hours blowing up balloons and attaching them to the ridiculous balloon arches Gwen insists on having for every tea. Usually I complain about them, but it's pretty hard to think of something negative when I stand on a stool to reach the top part of the arch and Xavier crowds in below me.

He steadies me with a muscular arm around the front of my knees and a firm chest against the back of them, and my hands are trembling so badly now that it's all I can do to fasten the balloon to the arch. I manage it, though, over and over again, until the thing is finally complete.

Xavier helps me down then, his hands gentle as he lifts me off the stool and lowers me to the ground.

For a second, I'm right there, my body pressed against his, our lips a few scant inches apart from each other. Our gazes

meet, and for the first time since I've met him, there's no laughter in his eyes. Instead they're dead serious as he looks straight at me, and the butterflies become giant eagles.

I lean in—I can't help myself—and he leans in, too, like he really is going to go for the gold and kiss me right here, right now, in front of everyone. Not that I care. I was never big on PDA with Cam, but with Xavier I want to shout, *Bring it on!*

But he steps back at the last second with a wicked little grin that should annoy me but instead makes me burn just a smidge. Okay, a lot, but who's counting?

“What's next?” he asks, and for the first time I realize he's got a little dimple in his left cheek. Somehow, it makes him even more attractive.

I have some suggestions, of course, but none of them has anything to do with decorating for the tea. And since a quick look around tells me Gwen has things firmly in hand, I decide to go for it.

“How about a walk?”

“A walk?” I've caught him by surprise, and I'd be lying if I said I didn't like knowing I can do that. The surprise must not last long, though, because only a few seconds go by before he nods. “I'm in.”

“Good.” I take his hand, my brain screaming *what are you doing?* at me the whole time, and tug him across the room to the door. “I've got just the place.”

He comes without any resistance, and as we slip out the study room door, his fingers slide between mine. And suddenly, we go from me tugging him along to holding hands.

His skin is smoother than I thought—something else I like about him. And as we wander down the stairs and out the front door, I find myself wondering where we're going. Which isn't a great question, considering I'm the one doing the leading right now.

But I know this campus better than pretty much any place on earth, so it doesn't take me long to figure out where to go. Normally I'd take us outside, but neither of us is dressed for

the weather, and I don't want to ruin the moment by suggesting we break to go get our coats.

So instead I take him to a place I like to go when I want to think. And I decide it's the right move when his eyes go wide the second the doors close behind us.

"Katmere has its own planetarium?" he asks as I flip a switch that has stars appearing above our heads.

"We do." I hit another switch, and planets join the stars, lighting up the room just enough to illuminate the seats in the center of the room.

One more switch and the moon shines brightly as a comet shoots by directly overhead.

"That's pretty cool," he tells me as I start toward the chairs, acutely aware that his fingers are still laced with mine.

"Just wait," I say, hitting a button on Mr. Bader's podium before ducking into the second row.

Music starts to play as, above us, the stars and planets begin to circle. "It's not as beautiful as the Alaskan sky," I tell him as we sink into our seats. "But it's a lot warmer."

"A *lot* warmer," he agrees, and then we're leaning back in the planetarium's way-too-comfortable chairs and staring up at the show currently going on above our heads.

Xavier is still holding my hand, and the outside of his thigh is pressed to the outside of mine. He's warm and solid and he smells really good—like wide open wilderness and sandalwood. The combo has me fighting the urge to bury my face in his collar and just breathe him in.

"This is really nice," he whispers a few minutes later, his thumb stroking the back of my hand as the planetarium continues to put on one heck of a show.

"It is," I agree, rubbing my fingertips softly across his knuckles.

I have a million things I want to ask him, a million things I want to tell him, but for now it just feels super good to sit here and watch the heavens go by.

Which is why when Xavier turns to me a few minutes later, his face illuminated by the starlight, and leans in to me, I meet him more than halfway. And when our lips brush against each other's, I feel my heart go spinning just like the stars above us.

And it's better than I ever could have planned.

Keep Dragon Me Along

FLINT

(Timeline: after chapter 73 in *Crush*)

“I made a total ass of myself,” I tell Eden as I pace back and forth in front of her at the edge of the Ludares field.

“You don’t know that,” she answers, holding up a cautioning hand as she sits down on a bleacher. “Why don’t you take a couple of deep breaths and try to relax.”

“Relax? Luca asked me out, and I squawked like a damn chicken. Then babbled on for a few minutes about *sports*—like, why?—and then backed awkwardly out of the room without saying a damn thing like, I don’t know, *goodbye*. How can I relax?”

“Because one of two things is going on in *his* head right now. One, he feels even sillier than you do because he asked out a guy he likes and the guy totally ditched him. Or two, he understands how freaked out you are and would really like the chance to talk to you about it.”

“Or he’s sitting around with the Order right now making fun of what a jackass I am.” Just the thought makes my skin itch. Not that I don’t deserve to be made fun of—I acted like a total jerk. Or a loser. Or both.

“Who runs away when a hot guy asks him out?” I ask, shoving a hand into my hair.

“Someone who’s been in love with that hot guy’s best friend for a really long time,” Eden answers quietly.

I whirl around to face her, my eyes wide and more than a little wild, I’m sure. “How did you... I mean, where did you... I never said—”

“I’m sorry, I thought we were done with the self-delusional part of the evening and figured I’d just cut to the chase,” she

says. Her brows are raised and her lips are twisted into a small smirk, but her eyes are sympathetic. “But if that doesn’t work for you, I can go on pretending I have no idea that you’ve been in love with Jaxon Vega for a really long time.”

“I—it’s—he—” I shut my mouth and take a deep breath to let my thoughts untangle. “That obvious, huh?”

“Not to everyone. But to me? Yeah. So of course you freaked when Luca asked you out. That’s a little too close to Jaxon for comfort.”

“Yeah, it is.” I blow out a breath and sink down onto the bench next to her. We were supposed to be practicing for Ludares this afternoon, just the two of us. But Luca really threw me for a loop. Or two loops.

Hell, I’m pretty sure he threw me for an entire three-ring circus. I just wish I knew what the hell I’m supposed to do about it.

“You know what I find interesting, though?” Eden says, stretching her long legs out in front of her now that I’m in no danger of tripping over them.

I’m almost afraid to ask. “What?”

“You didn’t tell him no.”

“I told you! I freaked out and fell all over myself trying to get out of the room—”

“Because you were flustered. And yeah, a little freaked out,” she says with a grin. “But definitely flustered.”

“I wasn’t flustered!” I growl.

“Dude, don’t pull that shit on me. You’re still flustered now. It’s written all over your face.”

“You know why I’m flustered!” I tell her.

“I know why you freaked out *at first*. But the rest of this?” She points at me, making a little circle with her finger to encompass all of me. “You’re intrigued.”

“No, I’m not,” I tell her even as her words hit home, deep inside me.

“You are. Otherwise you would have told him no.”

“I was too shocked—”

“That a hot guy thinks you’re hot, too?” She rolls her eyes. “Give me a break. You’ve been asked out by a lot of people through the years and you’ve never had any trouble turning them down with a wink and a smile. So what’s so different about Luca?”

“Jaxon—”

“Fuck Jaxon,” she snarls.

“Pretty sure he’s busy with Grace right now...” I tell her, trying to lighten the mood that’s suddenly gone dark.

“You know what I mean. Yes, you have feelings for him. Yes, you’ve had those feelings for a while.”

I nod, because I have. Even when I thought I hated him for what happened to my brother, I loved him. I’ve always loved him.

“But he’s mated to Grace now,” Eden continues, the words salt in my already raw wounds. “And there’s a part of you that knows that’s it. That whatever you had hoped would happen between the two of you isn’t going to happen now. Which means, subconsciously, you’re in the process of moving on. And maybe the idea of moving on with a guy as hot and smart and nice as Luca isn’t exactly repellent to you.”

I can acknowledge that her words make sense. Since I realized Jaxon and Grace are mated, I’ve pretty much gone through the stages of grief. I haven’t gotten to acceptance yet—or at least, I didn’t think I had, but maybe that’s not true.

It still hurts thinking about Jaxon, and about giving up on the dream I’ve had for the two of us for longer than I want to admit. But after I talked to Grace this morning before anyone else had made it to the field, it’s hard to think of Jaxon as anyone but hers. Especially when she was so incredibly kind to me. I felt like an asshole even thinking about being in love with her mate. Especially after everything they’ve been through.

Then I came back to my room, clearly upset, and just blurted it all out to Eden—who seemed to have always known more about me than I realized. And now Eden is saying the same thing Grace did, that maybe I need to start thinking about saying yes instead of no. Because Jaxon is never going to happen, and the sooner I choose to accept that—the sooner I find a way to move on—the better off I’ll be.

I don’t know. It makes sense, but it’s hard to think rationally about a subject when your heart suddenly feels like it’s going to pound right out of your chest.

“When I asked her about this, Grace said—”

“Wait.” Eden sits up straight, and now she looks full-on incredulous. “You asked Grace’s advice about being in love with her mate?”

“It just kind of happened. And it’s not like I told her it was Jaxon.”

Eden smirks. “I kind of wish you had. Just to see what she would do.”

I shoot her an annoyed look as I stand back up. “Is this your idea of helping?”

“I didn’t know that was my job,” she shoots back. “I’m just here to practice for Ludares.”

Her words piss me off, but deep down I know she’s right. About everything. “Sorry, I’m being a jerk.” I give her a half grin, which is about the most I can manage right now. “What do you think I should do?”

She narrows her eyes at me. “You want the truth? Or for me to just feed you more of the same bullshit you’ve been feeding yourself?”

“I wouldn’t have asked if I didn’t want the truth.”

“Okay, then.” Eden pushes to her feet and gets right in my face. She’s not as tall as I am, but she’s not exactly short, so the message is received. “What I think is that you should say yes to Luca. Or, if he doesn’t float your boat, then find someone who does and ask them out. Jaxon is off the market.

He's mated to Grace, and that shit is forever. So it's time for you to move on. I know it, and if you're willing to be honest with yourself, you know it, too."

She claps me on the shoulder. "Now, if we're not going to practice Ludares, I'm going to get something to eat. I'm starving."

I turn to watch her leave, and as I do, Jaxon walks by. He's texting on his phone, and so absorbed in what he's doing that he doesn't even notice me standing three feet away from him. Which, to be honest, feels like every other time I've wanted his attention and haven't been able to get it.

And that's when I know. It's over—not just on his side, but on mine as well.

Filled with a resolve I never expected to have, I reach into my pocket and pull out my phone. Then I scroll until I find Luca's number.

Flint: Sorry I was such an ass earlier

Flint: If the invite is still open, I'd love to go to dinner with you

I expect to have to wait a while to hear back from him—I did run away like my hair was on fire—but he texts back right away.

Luca: you look cute when you're being an ass

Luca: i'd love to take you to dinner

Luca: how about tonight?

It's exactly what I need right now. Hell, maybe *he's* exactly what I need. I don't know. But I think I'm ready to find out.

~3~

Here's to the Girls

GRACE

(Timeline: between chapters 78 and 79 in Crush).

Grace: Hey! How are you feeling?

Gwen: I'm okay

Gwen: Just sad I missed the victory celebration because my stupid arm wouldn't cooperate

Macy: We missed you

Macy: I'm sorry your arm still hurts

Gwen: It'll be better tomorrow

Gwen: Or at least that's my story and I'm sticking to it

Eden: Want some company?

Gwen: You don't have to do that

Gwen: I know you're celebrating

Macy: We skipped out of the celebration early

Gwen: Why?

Grace: Answer your door and find out

I knock on Gwen's door right after I hit Send, and the three of us wait patiently for her to hobble to the door. And hobble it is, I realize, as the door swings open and Gwen does some kind of off-balance tumble to cover the last couple of feet to the threshold.

"Oh my gosh!" Macy exclaims as she bustles in. "You look awful!"

"Thanks," Gwen says wryly. "Exactly what I want to hear."

"You know what I mean," Macy tells her with a wave of her hand. "You look like you're in pain!"

“Let me help,” I say quietly, moving next to Gwen so she can drape her healthy arm over my shoulder. “I’ll get you back to your bed, and we can kick this celebration off.”

Gwen looks confused. “I thought you and the guys already had your celebration?”

“We did,” Eden answers with a roll of her eyes. “But guys are so boring, don’t you think?”

“Ummm—” Gwen looks totally confused at this point, especially when Eden pops open the pizza box she’s carrying and lays it on her bed. “I never thought so.”

Should I be offended? Hudson asks as he leans against a wall near me even though really he’s still stuck inside my head. *I’ve never been called boring before.*

“Pretty sure you weren’t who Eden was calling boring,” I shoot back in my head.

Oh, well, carry on, then. He fakes a yawn. *Because if she’s talking about Jaxon and his ridiculous little crew, then Eden is right on. They were born boring, and apparently life has done nothing to change that fact.*

“The guys are fine,” Macy says. “But we figured we could all use a night of face masks, mani-pedis, and all the rom-coms we can watch before morning.”

“Are you sure?” Gwen asks, looking among us like she can’t comprehend why we would ditch the guys to hang out with her. “I don’t want you to feel like—”

“We don’t feel anything,” I interject. “Except excited about Macy’s special face masks. She’s been talking them up for weeks.”

“They *are* amazing,” my cousin says. “I brought four different varieties, so find the one you think works for you, and let’s get this party started.”

Apparently we have different definitions of the word “party,” Hudson interjects dryly.

“That’s because you’ve never experienced a good old-fashioned girls’ night in,” I tell him. *“But luckily, all that’s*

about to change.”

Do I get my nails painted, too? he asks in a faux-excited manner. *I’m very intrigued by that hot-pink polish Macy just slipped out of her pocket. As I’m sure you are,* he adds wickedly.

“Bite me.”

I deposit Gwen gently on her bed, making sure to position her far enough away from Eden’s pizza box and Macy’s comprehensive array of masks to ensure that she can still put her arm up. “Do you need me to arrange your pillows or anything?”

She’s not eighty, Grace, Hudson snarks. *She just hurt her arm.*

“What is it about basic human kindness that gets under your skin so badly?” I demand as I stalk back over to where he’s leaning. *“Is it just that you’re totally incapable of giving it, or is there something else lurking around in your head that I should be aware of?”*

This time when he yawns, it’s a total *fuck you. I’m a vampire, Grace. Basic human anything eludes me. Or have you forgotten?*

“I haven’t forgotten anything. In fact—” I start, but before I can finish, Eden turns the TV on.

“What do you feel like watching?” she asks.

“No action movies,” I tell her, so tired from the Ludares tournament that if I don’t see another person get punched in the face—ever—it will be too soon.

“And no artsy movies,” Macy adds, and I’m pretty sure it’s directed at me.

But Eden just snorts. *“As if.”* She starts flipping channels and doesn’t stop until she gets to one of my favorite classics: *The Cutting Edge*. *“How about this?”*

“Anytime I get the chance to say ‘toe pick,’ I’m taking it,” I tell her with a laugh.

Toe pick? Hudson repeats, but I ignore him in favor of watching Moira Kelly complain about her new ice-skating partner. *Is that some kind of fungus?*

“*However did you know?*” I ask sarcastically, then take the brightening mask Macy is currently holding out to me.

I unfold the sheet mask and drape it over my face, then settle on the floor beside Macy just as Doug learns exactly what a toe pick is for.

The rest of the night goes by in a sea of laughter, pizza, popcorn, and beauty treatments. After we do masks and paint our nails, Gwen breaks out a bunch of hair stuff, and we end up giving each other makeovers.

Macy does mine in a giant beehive updo from the fifties and slaps some red lipstick and false lashes on me that make me feel like I’m in the middle of *Mad Men* or something.

I do Eden’s hair in cascading mermaid waves with ribbons, then do up her eyes and lips with special glitter shadow and gloss from Gwen. Eden looks a little horrified when I’m done, but the rest of us think she looks gorgeous.

Eden does Gwen’s hair in a ponytail and hands her a ChapStick to put on, which makes the rest of us laugh uproariously. Not because Gwen looks bad in a ponytail and lip balm, but because it isn’t exactly the kind of makeover we were going for.

“What’s so funny?” Eden demands, looking confused. But that just makes us laugh harder until she rolls her eyes and ends up laughing along with the rest of us.

Gwen does Macy’s makeover, slicking her short hair back like some model from the sixties and doing her makeup in psychedelic colors that somehow end up fitting my cousin perfectly. She even uses neon eyeliner to draw some flowers on Macy’s cheek, and by the end, she looks like she could walk right out of a VW van into Woodstock.

It’s the most fun I’ve had in a really long time, and even Hudson leaves me alone once the lipstick and glitter come out. For the first time since coming to Katmere, I feel a little like

I'm back home in my bedroom with Heather.

There's no talk of paranormals, no worries about my mate—or his evil brother trapped inside me—no trying to figure out what it means to be a gargoyle. It's just three of my friends and me hanging out, and it feels amazing. Well, and Hudson but he passed out sometime around the third 'toe pick'.

The good feeling lasts through *The Cutting Edge* and *13 Going on 30*, through makeovers and bowls of popcorn, and even through the walk back to Macy's and my dorm room.

But as we settle into bed somewhere around three in the morning, all the worries and fears I pushed to the side come rushing back. As I lay there staring at the ceiling, I can't help wondering if this one brief moment of my old normal is all I'm going to have.

And if so, how long will it be before this new life—this new normal—feels right to me?

Guys Gone Wild(er)

THE ORDER

(Timeline: between chapters 108 and 109 of *Crush*)

Mekhi: We need to do something for Jaxon

Luca: i agree

Luca: we can't just leave him like this

Rafael: What do you have in mind?

Liam: I'm not sure he's up for anything

Byron: Would you be?

Byron: He just lost his mate.

Mekhi: Which is why we can't leave him in that damn tower alone forever

Mekhi: Have you seen what he's done to the place?

Rafael: Yeah.

Rafael: He's a mess.

Liam: So what are we talking about doing here?

Liam: Staging an intervention?

Byron: I value my head on my body, thank you very much.

Luca: no shit

Rafael: So what do you want to do, M?

Rafael: Kidnap him and take him to Vegas?

Mekhi: If I thought that would work, I'd do it

Rafael: What about taking him down to Seattle?

Byron: Or to London.

Byron: We could hit all our regular haunts.

Byron: Maybe even find a couple new ones.

Luca: and remind him things were pretty good before grace

Liam: if by pretty good you mean he couldn't feel anything

Rafael: And was isolated from everyone but us

Luca: and had the worst fucking parents in existence

Liam: To be fair, he still has those same parents

Liam: So we shouldn't have to try to solve that too

Luca: good point

Mekhi: Yeah, but the rest of the stuff is true.

Mekhi: So maybe not London...

Byron: Why don't we just go deeper into the mountains?

Byron: No one goes past a certain point anyway.

Byron: We'd have the whole area to ourselves.

Luca: jv loves doing shit like that

Mekhi: Yeah, he does

Mekhi: We could hike, snowboard, outrun an avalanche or two

Mekhi: It could be fun

Liam: Plus endorphins are a thing

Rafael: Seriously? Endorphins are a thing????

Liam: What? They are!

Byron: No shit, Sherlock.

Liam: I'm just saying

Liam: It's pretty hard to be depressed and devastated when you're racing an avalanche

Liam: Maybe he just needs to remember what it feels like to have good chemicals pumping through his brain.

Rafael: That seems a little simplistic to me

Mekhi: Do you have a better idea?

Rafael: I would have mentioned it if I did

Luca: so we're doing this

Luca: taking Jaxon all the way up the mountains

Liam: Extreme Sports Vampire Style!!!

Liam: Sounds pretty kick-ass to me

Byron: And if this doesn't work?

Mekhi: If it doesn't work, we try something else

Mekhi: And we keep trying shit til we find something that does work

Mekhi: Because I'm afraid of what happens if we leave him like this much longer

Byron: I do want to say one thing.

Byron: We all want to help Jaxon.

Byron: I certainly do.

Byron: But there's no timeline for this.

Byron: We can't just snowboard down a few mountains, wait a few weeks, and then do it all again.

Byron: Losing a mate doesn't work like that.

Byron: Instead, it just fucking eats away at your soul and hits you when you least expect it.

Byron: You're going along, think you're not drowning, and then something happens and it just pulls you back under.

Byron: Jaxon isn't just going to "get over" losing Grace.

Mekhi: ...

Luca: ...

Liam: ...

Rafael: ...

Byron: Sorry.

Byron: Didn't mean to drag shit down.

Mekhi: You didn't

Liam: I'm sorry, man

Rafael: We weren't trying to be insensitive

Luca: can we do something to help?

Byron: Don't do that.

Byron: I'm not making this about me.

Byron: I just wanted to point out this shit doesn't fucking go away.

Byron: There's no easy fix.

Liam: So no guys' night on the mountain?

Byron: Sure, we do a guys' night.

Byron: Just be prepared to do a lot of guys' nights.

Byron: One isn't going to cut it.

Mekhi: No shit

Luca: maybe i should buy a tent

Liam: Maybe you should buy six tents.

Liam: I'm not sleeping with your feet in my face

Luca: dude

Luca: buy your own damn tent

Mekhi: I'm not buying a tent.

Byron: Me either.

Byron: I don't sleep on the ground.

Liam: There are air mattresses, you know

Rafael: Yeah, you want to be the one telling Jaxon Vega he needs to sleep on an air mattress?

Liam: You make a good point

Rafael: I usually do

Luca: modesty looks good on you, rafa

Rafael: Everything looks good on me.

Rafael: It's a gift and a curse

Byron: Careful or you're going to end up sounding like Liam.

Liam: What the fuck does that mean?

Mekhi: So we've got a plan?

Luca: yeah

Byron: Jaxon, snowboard, mountain, avalanche.

Luca: rinse and repeat as needed

Rafael: Don't forget the endorphins, guys

Rafael: Endorphins are very important

Liam: Fuck you

Liam: And what the fuck did you mean earlier about him sounding like me?

Mekhi: Last question.

Mekhi: Who's telling Jaxon?

Liam: What do you mean last question?

Liam: I have questions

Liam: Don't mine count?

Byron: I'll tell him.

Byron: Maybe he'll take it better from me.

Luca: may the force be with you

Byron: Yeah, because Star Wars is going to help me in this situation.

Luca: to be fair, star wars helps every situation

Rafael: True story

Mekhi: Tomorrow night?

Byron: Sounds good.

Byron: I'll run by and talk to him later tonight.

Byron: So you might plan on standing under a doorway for a while.

Liam: Forget a doorway. I'm leaving the vicinity

Luca: i'll scout the area, find a good place

Rafael: I'll put together a cooler

Mekhi: And I'll go by and check on him after he's had a chance to cool off from Byron.

Liam: I feel like we should do a little chant to break the huddle

Liam: At least a 3, 2, 1 break

Liam: Who wants to lead it?

Liam: ????

Liam: You could have at least said you'd brb

Let Her Eat Cake

GRACE

(Timeline: beginning of *Crush*)

I trail off as Jaxon moves aside and I finally get a good view of my—still hot pink—side of the room. And the heavily loaded tray currently sitting on the end of my bed.

“When did you do this?” I ask, brows arched as I walk closer to check it out.

“You were with Marise for what felt like forever. I had to do something, or I was going to lose my mind.”

“So you decided to make me a four-course meal?”

He grins. “More like decided to badger the chef into making one for you. Food’s not exactly my strong suit.”

“I don’t know about that. I remember some really delicious waffles that came from you.”

“Also made by the chef.” He nods toward my bed. “Aren’t you going to try it?”

“I will in a minute.” I go up on my tiptoes so I can wrap my arms around Jaxon’s neck. “You’re very sweet,” I whisper.

He rolls his eyes. “Yeah, well, don’t spread that around, please. The last thing I need is for the werewolves to get any ideas.”

I kiss his cheek. “Your secret’s safe with me.”

Jaxon snorts, then starts to say something else, but he’s interrupted by yet another long, prolonged growl from my stomach.

This time we both laugh as Jaxon ushers me toward my bed.

“Eat!” he tells me.

“Okay, okay.” I plop down on my bed, and my whole body relaxes for what feels like the first time in forever. I don’t know how he did it, but the tray Jaxon brought me is loaded with a bunch of my favorite foods—cherry Pop-Tarts and chocolate cake, chicken tacos and piles of strawberries. There’s also a chicken sandwich, but, in my opinion, that’s the least interesting thing on the tray.

I grab one of the two sparkling waters—orange flavor, of course—and pop the top. I only plan on taking a small sip, but the second the water touches my throat, I realize I’m parched. Like *desert in the middle of July* parched. I end up guzzling the entire thing.

When I’m done, I lower the can to find Jaxon watching me with a mixture of concern and amusement. My cheeks flush with embarrassment, but what is there to say, really? I mean, besides, “Apparently being a gargoyle is thirsty work.”

“Apparently.” He reaches over and pops the top on the second can before holding it out to me. “Want me to run down and get you a few more?”

“No.” I reach over and take his free hand in mine. “I want you to stay here with me.”

“Yeah. That’s what I want, too.” He reaches up and brushes a stray curl back from where it’d fallen over my eye.

I grab the second can from him and take a much more sedate drink. As I lower it, Jaxon sticks my fork in the chocolate cake and brings a giant bite to my mouth.

“How did you know I planned on starting with the cake?” I ask, leaning forward to accept the bite.

He doesn’t answer, but his eyes gleam so wickedly that I find myself blushing again. What is it about this boy that turns me into such a mess?

As soon as I’m done chewing the first bite of cake, Jaxon shovels in a second piece that’s even larger than the first. I’m laughing before I even swallow it—an attractive look, I’m sure—but when he starts to fork up a third piece, I put my hand on his wrist.

“If I didn’t know you were a vampire before, I’d definitely know you were one now,” I tell him.

He looks confused. “What does that mean?”

“It just means it’s pretty obvious you’re used to drinking your meals.”

“So what you’re saying is I’m not doing it right?” His left brow goes up.

“I’m saying maybe you should let me take over from here.”

“Sorry.” He holds the fork out for me. “It always looks... enjoyable when a guy feeds his romantic interest in the movies. I just thought, you know...never mind.”

He looks embarrassed as he shakes his head, and just like that I melt. Like full-on, *ice cube on a hot day* melt. “You’re enjoyable,” I tell him with all the epic cheesiness he brings out in me as I grab his hand and press it to my mouth for a kiss. “That’s way more important.”

This time both brows go up. “You know, you left me a huge opening there, right?”

“I do know, yeah.” I bat my lashes at him exaggeratedly. “And you’re a total gentleman not to take it.”

“Just making sure you understand that.” He’s got a huge grin on his face now, maybe the biggest one I’ve ever seen from him. It distorts his scar a little, pulls it tight, but he’s too busy teasing me to notice—or care.

The rest of me joins my heart in a puddle on the ground, but I’m smart enough to know that letting him see it—especially over this—is the fastest way to get him to close back up again.

So instead of wallowing in it like I want to, I just send him an arch look and say, “Believe me, I do.” Then I hand the fork back to him. “Think smaller bites this time, okay?”

He pauses for a second, looks from me to the fork and back again. I realize I’ve surprised him, that I’ve thrown the all-powerful Jaxon Vega off his stride.

It’s a good feeling, especially since he’s been throwing me

off mine from the second I laid eyes on him.

He doesn't say anything, though. Instead, he forks up another bite of cake—this one much smaller than the last few—and holds it to my mouth.

I take it. Of course I do.

After three and a half months without Jaxon, there isn't much I wouldn't do for him. Or for us.

By the time I'm finally full, I've managed to finish the entire piece of chocolate cake, half the strawberries, and both tacos. I also drink the second sparkling water and then break into Macy's small supply of Dr Peppers, but something tells me she won't mind.

Jaxon and I talk through the whole meal. He catches me up on what I've missed at Katmere Academy, and I catch him up on...absolutely nothing. Yeah, this no-memory thing really freaking sucks.

But that's okay. After the emotional roller coaster of earlier, it feels good to just sit here and stuff my face while I listen to him talk about Mekhi and Macy and how much he hates his Latin class.

Eventually, though, the alarm on his phone starts beeping. Jaxon swipes it off with a grimace but pushes off the bed. "I've got to go," he tells me as he shoves his phone back in his pocket. "It's midterm week and I've got a test in Latin in ten minutes. If it wasn't worth thirty percent of my grade, I'd totally blow it off."

"Don't worry about it." I set the tray aside and walk him to the door. "I'm going to hop in the shower and then head to my next class, too. I just want to get the whole *gawk at the gargoyle* thing over with so tomorrow can go back to normal."

"No one is going to 'gawk at the gargoyle.'"

"Give me a break. You can't even say it with a straight face." I roll my eyes. "Everyone is going to gawk at me, and you know it."

"So gawk back," he says with a shrug. "It works for me."

“It works for you because you’re a prince. And because they’re all terrified of you.”

“You’re a gargoyle now. I promise you, they’re way more scared of you than they are of me.”

“Yeah, right. All I can do is turn to stone. Sooooo scary.”

Jaxon gets a weird look on his face, but he doesn’t say anything else. Normally, I’d push, but he’s got to get to class and to be honest, I’m anxious to get going myself. The sooner I get through my first class, the easier it will be to go to my next one.

That’s probably why my stomach clenches a little when Jaxon leans down to kiss me goodbye—because I’m worried and nervous and more than a little freaked out. I mean, it can’t be because of Jaxon, not when he’s been nothing but wonderful since he walked into my uncle’s office two hours ago.

Still, I flinch when he leans down to brush his lips over mine, and though he doesn’t call me on it, I can see the question in his eyes. I don’t know what to say to him, though, not when I don’t understand what’s going on myself.

So in the end, I just smile and say, “Good luck on your test.”

He smiles back, but he doesn’t try to kiss me again. Instead, he gives me a little wave as he steps into the hallway. “I’ll text you later. Maybe we can meet up for dinner if you still feel okay?”

“Yeah, of course. I’ll be fine. Except maybe you just should come by the room when you’re free? I don’t know what happened to my phone, so I can’t text right now.”

He looks surprised. “You lost your phone?”

“I guess? I mean, I had it on me the day I turned to stone, but when I went to text you this morning, I realized it was gone. And since I have no memory of what I’ve spent the last four months doing—I mean, besides impersonating a statue—I don’t have a clue where to start looking for it. So yeah, I’ve lost my phone.”

“I didn’t even think about it. I should have.” He reaches forward like he’s going to brush my hair away from my face but then stops mid-reach...which makes me feel a thousand times worse and about a million times more awkward.

“Go to class,” I tell him. “Latin tests wait for no man.”

“Yeah.” He gives me a little half grin. “I’ll see you later.”

“I’m counting on it.”

I walk him to the door, then sink to the floor after I close it behind him. Losing three and a half months is hard—harder than even I expected it to be. And as I look over at the thoughtful meal my thoughtful, wonderful boyfriend brought me, I can’t help but wonder if those months were too long. And if we’ll ever be able to get back what we missed.

True North

a novella

(Timeline: beginning of *Covet*)

~Prologue~

Faint Heart, Fair Headmaster

FOSTER

A knock sounds on my office door and my stomach clenches before I can stop it. Which is absurd. He's a student. Maybe the most powerful student this school has ever known, but still just a student. And I am his headmaster. This visit is more than just necessary. It's long overdue, and I owe it to him.

"Come in," I call, ignoring the uneasiness creeping down my spine as I get up from my desk to meet him halfway.

But vampires are fast when they want to be, and he's standing in front of me before I can so much as round the corner of my desk.

Our eyes lock and my uneasiness grows, despite my best efforts to the contrary. There is weariness in his eyes, and wariness, and so much power that it's disconcerting even for a man who has spent his life dealing with the children of the very rich and very powerful.

It's not the weariness or the power that makes me uneasy, though. It's the pain lurking in the very depths of his eyes that has me worried—not for myself but for Katmere. For my students. And for him.

Pain is a normal part of life, and for students who have lived a normal life—extraordinary, yes, but also normal in its own way—such pain doesn't bother me. All growth requires some unease. But in students like Hudson Vega, who have suffered nearly every minute of their existence and who know little of anything *but* suffering, it terrifies me.

There is no telling what they are capable of. And no telling what others are capable of doing to them from fear, either.

All of which means I'm in a no-win situation here. Then again, so is he. It's that thought, that knowledge, that has me tamping down my nerves once and for all and gesturing to the

chair in front of me.

“Please sit down.”

Hudson does as he’s asked. He is nothing if not polite.

I expect him to say something, to ask a question or two about why I’ve called him to my office. But I’ve underestimated him. This is Cyrus Vega’s son, after all. If he knows anything, it’s how to play the long game—something he’s definitely doing now. He’s waiting for me to make the first move before he decides how he wants to approach this meeting.

Too bad I was counting on doing the same thing.

I *am* the one who brought him here, though, not to mention the only adult in the room, so I guess it’s only fair that I get the ball rolling. Which is why I clear my throat, adjust my tie, and say, “I’m sure you’re wondering why I asked you to meet me here. I want to assure you that you’re not in trouble.”

I expect at least a fleeting look of relief to cross his face at my assurances, but all he does is lift a brow while his ice-blue gaze stays locked on mine. It’s a look meant to inform me that he isn’t worried in the slightest about getting in trouble—and that he’s here, in my office, because he chooses to, not because he feels compelled.

Considering he still hasn’t uttered a word, I have to admit I’m more impressed than I want to be.

“No students were hurt in your...” I pause, trying to figure out the right word to describe what happened after the Ludares trial this morning and settle on, “Demonstration earlier today. The arena itself can be rebuilt—having a few engineers adept at witchcraft on staff will help with that—and trees can be replanted in the clearing. The ground around the area will take a little longer to heal, but our earth witches will be working on that as well.”

Now both brows are up, and his face isn’t blank anymore. Instead, it says more clearly than any words could that if I think he gives a shit about the damage he caused today, then I am even more clueless than he thought.

Sometimes this job really sucks. The whole reason I became headmaster at Katmere was because I want to help guide these kids into the best adult paranormals they can be. And for the most part, it's been a pure joy. Sure, these kids pull their fair share of pranks and yes, there's all the parental pressure and cheating and other stuff that goes on in any other school. But, in general, my job is mostly doing what I love—helping kids reach their full potential.

But every once in a while, a difficult kid comes along, one who is bursting with so much power and potential that the world *should* be their oyster. I can see the most amazing future unfolding in front of them if they'll just allow themselves to reach out and grab it. But something is holding them back, or they keep getting in their own way, and it's a struggle to reach them at all.

Hudson is one of those kids. I know he's not the only thing getting in his way—being raised by a vicious bastard like Cyrus would mess any kid up—but still. I wish I could get him to lower his guard just enough to let me in. Just enough to trust me a little bit. I could work with that. We both could. And it would be so much better than sitting here wondering if he's going to make me disappear if I say the wrong thing.

Still, faint heart never won fair maiden—or anything else of value. So I take a deep breath and dive right in to what I really want to talk about. “I'm not sure if you're aware of this, Hudson, but there's a spot for you at Katmere Academy if you would like it.”

And there it is, in the sudden jerk of his body and the first flicker of emotion that crosses his face since he came to my office. I've surprised him. Good. Maybe if I can keep him off guard, we can actually make some progress.

“Due to the unfortunate circumstances of your last weeks here—”

“Unfortunate circumstances?” he asks sardonically.

I get the sarcasm, considering those “unfortunate circumstances” include him causing the deaths of several Katmere students and culminated in his own demise at his

brother's hands. In fact, "unfortunate" might be an understatement.

I rub at an ache in my chest and force myself to focus on today's problems.

"We both know what happened," I tell him after a moment of silence. "I don't think it behooves either of us to dwell on it."

"Just like it doesn't behoove us to dwell on the fact that I just brought down an arena and turned the vampire king's bones to dust."

I try to think of a diplomatic reply to that, but there really is none. So instead, I just say what I really think. Which is, "We both know Cyrus had it coming."

That surprises him for real this time, and I can see his guard drop just a little bit. Which makes me happy, because it finally feels like I have a chance to get through to him.

"Cyrus had a lot more than that coming," he replies in his crisp British accent.

"True. But that's another reason that I want to talk to you. I want you to know that as long as you are a Katmere student, you're under the school's protection. Under my protection. I can make sure you're safe from your father's retaliations. And we both know he will retaliate."

"He can try," he answers as he stretches his legs out in front of him.

My gaze holds his. "You didn't graduate when you were here last." His gaze goes wide, and I press forward. "There are three more months in this school year. If you can finish up the classes you missed, make up any gaps in time spent in those classes, you can graduate with this year's senior class."

"With my brother," he replies, zeroing in on one of the biggest risks of this whole situation. "I can graduate with Jaxon."

"Yes," I say cautiously. "But I do need to warn you that retaliation won't be tolerated. I know things ended badly

between the two of you—”

He snorts. “If by ‘badly’ you mean he did his best to murder me, then yes. Things ended badly.”

I sigh and decide to lay my cards on the table, considering this kid clearly sees through any diplomacy I try anyway. “I need you to keep your shit together, Hudson. You’re on thin ice with most of the faculty anyway, considering what happened with Damien Montgomery and the other students, so you have to toe the line. Don’t do anything that would get you kicked out, okay?”

“So in other words, don’t kill Jaxon?”

“Yes, for the love of God, please don’t kill Jaxon. Or anyone else.”

“Trust the headmaster to take all the fun out of school,” he replies.

I know he’s joking—the wry amusement in his eyes proves that—but I still feel the need to issue another warning. “Hudson—”

“You can relax, Foster. I’m not planning on killing anyone who doesn’t try to kill me—or Grace—first.”

“Grace?” I ask, astonished by the intensity in him when he says her name. “What does my niece have to do with you sticking around to graduate from Katmere Academy?”

He doesn’t answer—big surprise. But being stuck inside someone’s head for weeks, or months, is bound to create some kind of connection. Maybe that’s what he’s talking about. Either way, I’m not exactly thrilled with the idea of Grace hanging out with the most dangerous paranormal to ever walk the halls of Katmere Academy. She’s already with Jaxon, and that is more than frightening enough for me.

She’s been through more than any seventeen-year-old should have to experience. She doesn’t need to add Hudson Vega to the list of things that will hurt her.

“Here’s your schedule,” I tell him, sliding the paper Mrs. Haversham gave me earlier across my desk. “It’s exactly the

same as before..." Again, I stumble over how to phrase what happened last year.

"I died?" he fills in, having no such trouble.

"Your room is still the same—we never got around to clearing it out, so you can feel free to move back in." I reach into my desk drawer and pull out the keys. But as I reach over to put them in his open palm, I can't stop myself from warning, "You need to concentrate on school for the next few months. And so does Grace."

"Are you asking me to stay away from your niece?" he queries, and both brows are at his hairline now.

"I'm asking you to do the right thing, for both of you."

He laughs, even as his fingers close over the keys. "As if there's any such thing."

I start to ask what that means, but before I can get the words out, he's gone.

As the door closes behind him, I almost follow him and tell him to forget the whole thing. But the kid needs a chance, and no one else is exactly stepping up to give him one. So I need to.

I just hope it's not a huge mistake.

If You Kant Be Good, Be Careful

HUDSON

My palms are damp, and if I didn't know better, I would think I was nervous. But I never get nervous, which means something else is wrong with me. Maybe the flu? A rare tropical fever? Ebola? Sure, vampires don't normally get that shite, but there's always a first time for everything. And with the way my luck has been running, today would definitely be the day for me to be struck with one—or all—of them.

And you never can be too careful. Heck, it's only been an hour since Foster gave me my class schedule, and I don't want to get everyone else sick, so maybe I should just go back to my room and—

Jesus. I really have turned into a naff-arsed wanker, haven't I? Wanting to run away from the mess my life has become instead of facing it?

I did that once when I let Jaxon think he killed me. I'm bloody well not doing it again.

It's that thought that has my shoulders going back and me reaching for the classroom door. Fuck it. What's the worst thing that would happen? Jaxon will try to kill me? I survived once. I can do it again. And this time I just might fire back at the fucker. It's not like he doesn't deserve it.

Still, it's a sucker punch to the gut when I walk in and find Grace and Jaxon huddled together over her desk. Despite having nearly died yesterday, she looks beautiful. Really, really beautiful, with her curly hair tumbling down her back and some of the dark circles gone from beneath her eyes.

Instinctively, I head toward her, but I stop about two rows away. She's sitting with Jaxon and Flint. No way any of them want me to join them. And I don't want the first time I talk to Grace since I blurted out she was my mate to be in the middle

of a crowded classroom anyway. So much of her life is already a public spectacle. No reason to make whatever is happening between us into one, too.

I end up sliding into one of the desks in the back row. Then I pull out my brand-new ethics book and start reading in an effort to catch up on what I missed. And to avoid eye contact with anyone else in the room. Grace hasn't spotted me yet, but a hell of a lot of other people have, and I've got no interest in talking to any of them.

I'm here for Grace and to graduate. Everyone and everything else can go to hell.

The first twenty minutes of class pass without incident, and I'm beginning to think we're all going to make it through this exercise unscathed. But then Ms. Virago—bastion of compassion and understanding that she is—calls on me to answer a question about Kant.

I know she thinks she's going to catch me out—she's the kind of teacher who delights in that—but I've read everything Kant ever wrote, not to mention a lot of interpretations of his work.

So when she asks me to explain his moral imperative, I shrug and answer, "Kant believes people have the moral imperative to do the right thing—even if it causes bad things to happen."

Grace's head whips around when she hears my voice, but I notice neither my brother nor Flint looks my way. Which means they've known I was here all along and were just choosing to ignore that fact.

Which is fine. It's not like I'm running to Jaxon with open arms, girl-stealing tosser that he is.

"But what does that mean?" Ms. Virago asks, walking down the aisle toward me. "That is a good summation of his theory, but what does it actually mean if you apply it practically?"

I start to give her some benign answer, but it's at that moment that Grace's big brown eyes meet mine. There is such confusion there, such fear and hurt and worry, that it

completely derails me. Not only do I forget my answer, I practically forget my own bloody name.

But then, she's always had that effect on me. When we were together before, even at the beginning, I never could resist—

I cut off that train of thought before it can go any further. I'm in the middle of a classroom with an instructor and thirty other students staring at me. The last thing I want to do right now is think about the way things used to be with Grace and me. And how much it fucking hurts that things aren't like that anymore. Feeling it is one thing. Letting the whole bloody world see what I'm feeling is something else entirely.

Unfortunately, Ms. Virago mistakes my sudden silence for an inability to answer and asks, "Is there anyone who wants to help Hudson out?"

I'm pretty sure the answer to that question is a resounding no, but apparently I've underestimated my baby brother. Because he jumps in so fast that it's obvious he's had the answer on the tip of his tongue all class, just waiting for a chance to use it.

Too bad I just handed it over to him on a diamond platter.

"Killing your brother can be the moral thing," he says so virtuously that it's impossible to miss the fact that he's taking a stab at me—again.

Ms. Virago's eyes go wide, and she darts a look between the two of us, like she's trying to decide if World War Vega is about to go down in her classroom. Which I suppose is understandable, given the circumstances.

But I'm not about to give Jaxon the satisfaction of throwing a punch during the first half of my first class in more than a year. The bloody nob doesn't fucking deserve it. Instead, I just smile at him in a touché kind of way. And if my smile happens to be cold enough that several people in the room actually shiver, all the better.

Especially since Ms. Virago apparently still hasn't learned her lesson. Because instead of moving past this subject—and Jaxon's answer—as fast as her five-inch heels can carry her,

she doubles down on the question.

“So if that’s the right and moral thing to do,” she says—and thanks for the fucking support, teacher mine—then pauses to clear her throat. “What’s the bad thing that comes from it?”

“How about your girlfriend”—I refuse to call Grace his mate—“nearly ends up being a blood sacrifice to bring your brother back and it’s all your fault?”

Jaxon’s eyes narrow, and the floor beneath our feet starts to tremble. Apparently, he still hasn’t figured out the self-control thing. Then again, the kid was raised in a fucking party palace—ice cave or not. Why should he bother to control himself when he doesn’t have a clue how much it can hurt if he doesn’t?

In the meantime, Ms. Virago’s bravado deserts her and she all but scampers to the front of the room.

“I think we should spend the rest of class writing a personal reflection on Kant’s theory,” she tells everyone. “Talk about a time you did the technically correct thing and it caused a bad outcome, and whether you think you made the right decision or not.”

“Is this a group project?” one of the wolves asks from the front row, her ponytail bobbing with each word.

“Which part of personal reflection means group essay, in your mind?” Ms. Virago asks sharply.

The wolf doesn’t answer, but she does duck her head and start writing really bloody quickly.

I do the same, not wanting to spend one more second in this classroom than I have to. But it’s pretty hard to write about a morally correct decision that I made when my mate—who is currently in love with another guy—keeps glancing at me out of the corner of her eye.

She doesn’t think I notice her looking, but that’s just because she still doesn’t understand how attuned to her I am. She breathes and I feel it; she blinks and I hear it. I was in her head for months, and that’s after everything we went through to find each other the first time. There’s nothing she does that I

don't feel in my soul.

I finish my essay in record time. It's not like it's a hard assignment—I've done a lot of shit I thought was right that ended up going sideways—then turn it in and make my way to the door. I'm halfway down the aisle when Grace makes the mistake of trying to surreptitiously glance at me again.

And just like that, I'm sick of pretending that I don't see her.

That I don't feel her.

That she isn't my mate.

So this time when her eyes flicker over to me, I catch her gaze. And hold it.

Class Warfare

She gasps, and it's just a little sound—just a quick, indrawn breath—but it rockets around the room like a shot.

Jaxon's head comes up, eyes narrowed and hands clenched into fists. Flint looks up, too, and so does everyone else in the room.

Which is the last thing Grace needs right now. So even though I have a million things I want to say to her—a million things I want to hear her say to me—now isn't the time.

So I keep moving toward the door. But I'm not strong enough to tear my eyes away, and apparently neither is she. Which just makes walking away harder. But I do it all the same.

Eventually I make it to the back of the classroom and shove my way out the door. It closes behind me with a whoosh, and I start making my way down the empty hallways. Classes don't officially end for five minutes, which means I've got just about that long to get my shite together. Which might be easier if my blood wasn't roaring in my bleeding ears while every instinct I have screams at me to go back in that room and get Grace.

Because she's my mate.

She belongs to me the same way I belong to her.

The need to do it is a beating in my blood, a sinking in my stomach, and it takes every ounce of willpower I have to keep walking. To just—

“Hudson!” The door flies open, slamming against the wall so hard, the bang echoes through the hall. “Wait!”

Fuck waiting. I'm already whirling around and fading back down the hallway straight to her while my heart beats like a fucking marching band. “Grace.”

There's a tiny part of me that can't help thinking this is it. She finally remembers what happened between us. She finally remembers that—

“You didn't have to say that to Jaxon,” she says, and it douses every hope I have. “He's going to be beating himself up for hours because of it.”

And just like that, every defense I have slides right back into place. Because how is this happening? How is my mate seriously going off on me for clapping back at Jaxon after he talked about murdering me like he deserved a fucking medal?

“You're giving me too much credit,” I tell her coolly. “Jaxon's never spent longer than thirty seconds thinking about anything I say.”

“You don't know that. Jaxon is a lot more sensitive than he looks.”

“And here I didn't think that was possible,” I scoff.

“Why do you have to be like this?” She makes a frustrated sound deep in her throat.

Maybe because you keep ripping my heart out of my chest and stomping on it? The words are on the tip of my tongue, but while I'm masochistic enough to think—and feel—them, I'm sure as shite not masochistic enough to say them.

“Because arseholes never change their spots,” I finally answer. “I would think you'd have figured that out by now.”

Grace studies me for long seconds, her golden-brown eyes I love so much drifting over my own eyes, my mouth, the hands it's a fucking effort not to clench. And then she just shakes her head, like she can't believe any of this is happening.

I feel the same way, though I'm fairly certain it's for different reasons. So I shake my head right back and start to turn away. I don't know what to say to this Grace, the one who is soft and confused and just a little accusing, like somehow it's my fault that things have turned out as they have.

Then again, maybe it is. I don't know anything anymore.

“I came out here because I wanted to say thank you.”

Grace's words hang in the air between us, surprising me enough that I turn around. "For what?" I ask incredulously.

Now she's the one looking at me like I'm confused. "For saving my life yesterday—twice. For lending me your powers for Ludares. For...everything you've done for me."

She waves her hand with that last bit, as if trying to encompass everything from the last four months, including the stuff she doesn't remember. But without her memory, her gratitude only makes things worse—and a hell of a lot more awkward.

And since it also feels like a second gut punch—or a third, who can keep track at this point—all I can think about is getting out of here. I need to be as far away from her and Jaxon as I can get right now.

"It wasn't a big deal." I say the first thing that I think will get me out of here quickly and turn around again. I don't fade because I don't want her to know how much this whole thing is fucking with me, but I'm not slow, either, as I start to walk away.

"It was a big deal to me," she calls after me. "Considering I'm still alive because of you."

I wave a hand in acknowledgment and keep walking. I can't think of anything else to say right now, and I don't want to make the mistake of saying something wrong that will come back to haunt me later. We've got more than enough things between us that do that already.

Except, apparently, Grace does have more to say, because she races down the hall until she can get in front of me. When I shift to try to walk around her, she puts a hand on my chest to physically stop me.

The second she touches me, it's like my whole body goes on red alert. Heat slams through me, electric sparks dancing along my every nerve. I don't know if it's our new mating bond doing this or just muscle memory from before, but for one solitary moment, it feels really fucking good.

But then Grace jerks her hand away, and everything goes

back to how it was. Or almost how it was, considering there's an awareness in the air now. An electricity that neither one of us can deny.

At first, I think she's going to try. Grace is nothing if not good at burying her head when she doesn't want to deal with something. But in the end, she just looks at me and whispers, "How did this happen?"

There's a part of me that wants to tell her, that wants to talk about everything that went on when we were trapped together. The words are on the tip of my tongue, all the emotions from that time tearing through me and setting my blood aflame.

But then I see her face—and all the pain and fear swirling just below the surface—and know that I can't say anything to her. At least not yet. Not when learning everything we said and were to each other in another life will only drive her away, will only sit between us like a wall, confusion and anxiety and expectations piling on brick after brick, day after day, until it's eventually too high for either of us to scale.

Telling her would be giving up on us, and I'm not ready to do that yet. But that doesn't mean I don't feel the loss of her like a drowning man misses oxygen.

So, in the end, I let the memories and all the emotions they evoke stay exactly where they are. And instead whisper, "It's going to be okay."

Then, because I can't stop myself, I reach a hand out and stroke it down her hair, pausing to tuck a few stray curls behind her ear.

Her whole body trembles at my touch as she lets out a long, slow sigh. And for a second, I think maybe she remembers *something*. Especially when she turns her cheek so that my palm brushes against the softness of her skin.

But then the bell rings—this time with the chorus of "I Put a Spell on You" because some things never change around here—and Grace pulls back, obviously stricken. "I need to go," she tells me, stumbling over the words as she pulls open the classroom door just as Jaxon walks out.

My brother's eyes meet mine even as he hands Grace her backpack, and in them is a deadly warning that I have absolutely no intention of heeding.

Maybe You *Can* Go Home Again

The rest of the day passes in kind of a blur. I go to each of my classes, spend lunch in the library alone, and head back to my room as soon as school is officially over.

It's a weird feeling to walk down the steps, weirder still to find everything just as I left it. It's been a year since I set foot in this place, though it feels much, much longer.

And yet it looks like it was just this morning that I rolled out of bed.

Just this morning that I left the turntable open and an album cover on the table next to it.

I drop my backpack near the bottom of the stairs and move deeper into the room, not bothering to turn on the lights. There is a Kerouac book lying open on my coffee table, a bottle of water sitting on a coaster next to it.

This is what it looks like when someone dies, I realize as I trail a hand along the back of the chair I used to like to read in. A half-finished book, a half-drunk bottle of water.

A life interrupted, as half finished as everything else in this room.

The thought pisses me off, as does the memory of Grace's face in the hallway this afternoon. She's my mate—my *mate*—and she's horrified at the fact that she enjoys my touch. So horrified, in fact, that she went running back to my brother like he's the only thing standing between her and a dark abyss threatening to swallow her whole.

I used to be the person she ran to in times like that. I used to be—I cut the thought off before it can really form. That was then. This is now. I need to remember that and stop dwelling in a past she has no knowledge of. A past I'm completely alone in remembering.

Fuck. Just fuck.

This whole mess reminds me of that old question about if a tree falls in the woods and no one is around to hear it, does it actually make a sound?

If two people went through what we did and I'm the only one who remembers it, does it even matter at all? Or is it just fluff floating in the ether, destined to disappear as readily as the sound waves in that forest?

It's a depressing thought, but then this whole fucking situation is depressing as shite, so what's new about that?

With a sigh, I walk toward my bed at the end of the room, and while there's a part of me that wants nothing more than to stretch out on it and sleep until this whole nightmare runs its bloody course, I know that's not going to get me anywhere.

Not with Grace and not with the piles of homework currently waiting for me in my bag.

So instead of crawling into bed and burying my head under the covers, I go to the dresser set up against the side wall and pull out a T-shirt and a pair of sweats. I change quickly, grab a bottle of water from the mini fridge, and get to work on my third-year Blood Chemistry homework.

Normally it would only take me about fifteen minutes to work through these equations, but then again, it's been a *very* long time since I took this course, so I pause and do a little bit of a refresher through the textbook first. Or as much of a refresher as I can manage, considering thoughts of Grace continue to sneak into my head at the most inopportune times.

By the time I've finished Chemistry and Paranormal Brit Lit, I'm as fucked up as the rest of this mess. I'm a pretty smart guy, and I can usually figure out what to do in any given situation. But this one? This one is so screwed up, I can't even begin to figure out how to get my feet under me, let alone how to work the problem. Solving it seems like a distant pipe dream right now, and that just pisses me off all over again.

I tell myself that dwelling on this shit isn't going to make it any better. It sure as hell isn't going to fix anything. But I can't

seem to stop thinking about Grace's face when she turned back toward that classroom—back toward my bloody tosser of a brother like he's the lifeline she never wants to let go of.

Fuck!

I pick up my untouched bottle of water and throw it against the wall as hard as I can. It's not glass, though, so it doesn't shatter. Instead, it just bounces harmlessly off the wall and then ricochets back to hit me in the shoulder before landing on the floor and rolling harmlessly away.

It feels like a metaphor for everything else that's wrong in my life, and I start to pick it up, to throw it harder and farther away just to prove to myself that I have some semblance of control in my own life.

But before I can, someone clears their throat from a few feet behind me, and I realize in horror that I've been so wrapped up in my own shite that I didn't even realize someone had walked into my lair. What the hell, Hudson?

I whirl around, prepared for who the fuck knows, but it's just Macy standing there, a small box in her hands. "I'm sorry," she says, immediately throwing a hand up as if she wants to ward off an attack from me.

I want to tell her that she's safe, that I've never attacked anyone unprovoked in my entire life. But she's holding out the box like she wants to get rid of it as soon as possible, so I reach over and take it from her.

"That came for you," she whispers. "Mrs. Haversham asked me to run it down here."

"Thanks, I appreciate it," I answer, and I mean it. Considering I haven't been in a true human form in more than a year, I've completely misplaced my phone. It cost a fortune to have one delivered out here today, but I don't care. It feels good to be connected again, even if I don't currently have anyone to connect with.

"No problem." Macy takes a couple of steps back, looking for all the world like she wants to be anywhere but here. But then she surprises me by asking, "Have you had anything to

eat today?” She catches herself, blushes. “I mean anything to drink.”

“Are you offering?” I ask, raising a brow.

“No! Of course not. I just—I thought—I mean—” She stumbles over the words, face pale, eyes wide and horrified.

“I’m good,” I tell her, deciding to put her out of her misery as I rip the top of the box open. Sure enough, my new smart phone is waiting for me.

“That’s not an answer.” She comes closer as I pull out the phone. “Oh, hey. That’s the brand-new one.”

“Yeah, well, it’s pretty hard to keep track of your phone when you’re ‘dead’ for a year.”

“I can see that.” She comes even closer, her eyes focused on my face. “You don’t look so good.”

“Apparently, death will do that to a guy.” So will having his heart ripped out of his chest by the girl he loves, but whatever.

“Do you need anything?” she asks. “Maybe you should see Marise—”

“I’m good. Just tired from—” I break off because I’m not one to talk about my power.

“From bringing down the arena yesterday and saving Grace’s life?” Macy fills in. “Thank you for that, by the way.”

I lift a brow. “You hated the arena that much?”

“I meant saving Grace and you know it.” She rolls her eyes, and as she does, it’s impossible to miss the dark circles beneath them. “I know Jaxon is in no state to talk about it, but we appreciate what you did so much. I can’t stand the idea of losing my best friend so soon after getting her back.”

“Grace saved herself. I just gave her some space to heal.”

“Is that what you call that?” She moves her hands in the same motion as the trees exploded in yesterday.

I laugh because she expects me to. “I should probably get back to work. I’ve got a lot to catch up on.”

“Oh yeah. Right. Sorry to bother you.”

“You didn’t bother me.” I give the polite response, but even as I say it, I realize it’s true. Besides Foster, Grace, and Ms. Virago, Macy is the only person who has spoken to me today. And unlike everyone but Grace, she did it because she wanted to, not because she had to.

I appreciate it. So much so that I say what’s been on my mind since I first saw her. “I’m really sorry about Xavier.”

She looks away for several seconds before nodding. “Thanks.”

“You okay?” I shake my head as soon as the words leave my mouth. “Of course you’re not okay. Is there anything I can do?”

“Not really.” She shakes her head. “But thanks for asking.”

“Yeah, of course.” I can’t imagine how I’d feel if something happened to Grace, but I know it wouldn’t be good—for anyone. “If that changes, let me know, all right?”

“Yeah, thanks.” She turns away and heads for the stairs. But right before she exits, she turns back to me and says, “We’re meeting at the dining hall for dinner around seven. Want to join us?”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“I didn’t ask if it was a good idea,” Macy answers with a smirk. “I asked if you wanted to come. Besides, you’ll never know if it’s a good idea or not until you try it.”

“Oh, I’m fairly certain I know already.” I turn back to setting up my phone. “But thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” She starts up the stairs, but before she gets to the top, she calls down, “Jaxon and the rest of the Order have plans tonight. So it’ll just be Grace and me at dinner. You know, in case you’re curious...”

And just like that, my plans for the rest of the night go up in flames. Just, I’m beginning to suspect, as Macy intended.

Stuck Between a Rock and a Pissed-Off Vampire Kind of Place

This is a bloody bad idea.

I can feel it in my bones, but I keep walking toward the dining hall anyway. Not that that's exactly a surprise. I would follow Grace anywhere—the dining hall barely registers as a blip on the radar.

“You came!” Macy says as she walks up on my right side. “I wasn't sure you would.”

She's lying. She'd all but guaranteed I'd show up with that last comment of hers on the stairs, and we both know it. But I don't call her on it as we walk into the dining hall. I'm too busy scanning the crowded tables for Grace.

“She likes to sit in the back, away from the chandeliers, when we're alone.” She moves in front of me to lead the way.

A quick stab of memory flashes through me—Grace standing under a falling chandelier and Jaxon pushing her out of the way. She took us there for a brief moment when we were in the shadows together, but she didn't talk much about it. At the time, I didn't push, but now—standing here, looking up at the giant crystal light fixtures—I can't help but wish I had.

“There she is,” Macy continues, nodding toward the back corner of the fancy cafeteria. “Why don't you go join her, and I'll grab some dinner for me and blood for you?”

I start to tell her that I can grab my own food, but the thought of a few minutes alone with Grace—with my tosser of a brother nowhere around—is too much for me to resist. I barely remember to nod my agreement before walking toward Grace.

She looks up, obviously startled, when I stop in front of her.

“Hudson! What are you doing here?”

“Macy invited me,” I answer, watching her face closely for any sign of displeasure. “But I don’t have to stay.”

“No, of course you should stay!” She looks uncomfortable, but not unhappy, as she gestures to the chair across from her. “I should have invited you myself.”

It’s more than I expected from her after this morning, but I’m not about to complain. Especially since her big brown eyes are filled with a surprising amount of warmth as she looks at me. There’s wariness, too—a lot of wariness—but the warmth can’t be denied.

Then again, I’m probably looking at her the exact same way.

“How was—” Her voice breaks, and she clears her throat before beginning again. “How was your first day back?”

Lonely. It’s the first word that pops into my head, but I banish it as soon as it comes. No one likes a whiner, least of all me. “Good. I remember more than I expected.”

Grace chokes on her water and ends up coughing so hard that I feel the need to elaborate. “Of my classes, Grace. I remember more of my classes than I expected.”

She coughs for another ten seconds before once again reaching for her water glass. This time, she takes a much more tentative sip. “I knew that,” she finally answers.

“Yeah, I could tell.”

She rolls her eyes at me. “Do you ever get tired of being a know-it-all?”

“Do you ever get tired of having brown eyes?” I counter with a raised brow.

She gives me a look. “It’s not the same thing at all.”

“Sure it is,” I answer. “Some things just are.”

My words startle a laugh out of her, exactly as I intended.

She raises one brow at me. “And you thinking you know *everything* is one of those things?”

I shrug. “You just said it yourself. I don’t think. I *know*.”

She laughs, and the sound crashes against me like waves. “Oh my God, Hudson. You’re the worst.”

“So you keep telling me.” It’s my turn to smile at our old joke, at least until Grace gasps, her whole body jerking like a shock went through her.

I feel it, too. The charge in the air, as if a live wire stretches between us.

“You really don’t remember anything?” I whisper before I can stop myself.

Grace’s cheeks are flushed and her eyes glassy as she stares at me, stricken. “I’m sorry. I really don’t.”

It’s not the answer I want, but it is the one I’m expecting. And still I don’t get it. Still I don’t understand how we got here. I know that I could never forget her, even if I wanted. So how can she so easily have forgotten everything that’s passed between us?

It doesn’t make any sense...unless... Unless she *chose* to forget.

My heart pounds in my ears so hard that everything around me sounds like it’s distorted or underwater. Trays banging against tables, other kids laughing and chatting together, chairs scraping against the floor. It all feels as though it’s happening miles away.

My mind races as I think back and realize I don’t actually know *how* we got back here.

I mean, I know we were on borrowed time toward the end. We knew we had to come back, that everyone’s safety depended on it. But the mechanics of our return... I can’t believe I didn’t consider it before...

I swallow down bile as I realize she must have tried the awful, terrible idea we both pledged we would never attempt.

And in turn, she sacrificed *us* so that we could save everyone else.

I try to console myself that she couldn't have known the mating bond with Jaxon would come back, too. She always thought there was something wrong with their bond, always told me what she felt for me made those feelings pale in comparison. But maybe that's just what she wanted to believe. Maybe that's what she convinced herself was true since really, was there any other option? Trapped with me, did she just make the best of her only choice?

The thought hits like a fist to the chest, confusion turning to anger. Anger turning to pain. And pain...yeah, pain settling on my shoulders and wrapping itself around me like my favorite coat back in London. As familiar and omnipresent as the gray fog that envelops my hometown on so many, many early mornings.

And the thing is, I can't even ask. *Because she really doesn't remember.*

"I've tried to figure out what happened a thousand times in the last two days," she whispers after a moment. "Since you said what you said on the field. But I just can't."

I nod, like she hasn't just ripped my heart out of my chest and crushed it beneath her boot yet again. "Okay."

"Marise says it's natural. That the memories will come back in time. I just have to be patient."

I nod again, because what else am I going to do? And also because I'm clenching my jaw so tightly that I don't think I could open it, even if I wanted to.

The memories are pouring through me, one after the other.

Grace laughing at me when I got so caught up watching her do yoga that I nearly dropped an ax on my foot.

Grace begging me to give her feet a massage during movie night.

Grace dancing at the festival under twinkling lights, her curls floating on the breeze.

Grace yelling at me for not listening to her and trying to fix the microwave on my own—and setting the kitchen on fire.

Grace smiling up at me with wildflowers in her hair after we escaped the smoke and had a picnic instead.

Grace whispering to me that I was her forever.

For a moment, I think, *To hell with it all*. She's never going to love me again with Jaxon still in the picture; she'd never choose me if given the choice, so why not just tell her everything? Why shouldn't she feel at least a fraction of the pain I feel? Especially if she *caused* it?

But she isn't the only one who has talked to Marise, and the nurse practitioner seems to think that Grace needs to remember everything at her own pace. That telling her too much, too fast—on the heels of learning she's a gargoyle—might end up hurting her more than it helps her if this is, indeed, some traumatic psychic injury for her.

And since the last thing I want to do is hurt Grace, I'm stuck—right between a rock and a pissed-off vampire. It's not a good place to be, especially considering I'm just as pissed off as Jaxon. Maybe even more. Because now she's mated to me but still in love with *him*.

"I'm sure Marise is right," I finally manage to grind out. Even though I'm far from sure. Even though it's the last thing I want to hear—the last thing I want to believe.

"Me too." Except she doesn't look very certain, either. "Unless—"

"Sorry it took me so long!" Macy says as she drops a heavily laden tray on the table. "I didn't know what blood type you liked, so I brought four different kinds."

She lays four travel mugs out in front of me, and no matter how helpful Grace's cousin usually is, I'm seriously considering using my persuasive power to make her keep her mouth shut for a minute or five.

Because Grace just said "unless." Unless what?

Unless Marise doesn't know what she's talking about?

Unless she wants to disregard Marise's advice and hear all about it from me?

Unless what?

I turn back to Grace, hoping she'll look as frustrated as I feel. But she's grinning at Macy's discussion about the merits of rolls versus corn bread like it's the most interesting thing she's ever heard. Whatever opportunity I had to figure out what she's feeling about this is gone—at least for now.

I end up sipping on the first travel mug I pick up for most of dinner, while Grace and Macy catch up on the who's who of Katmere dating. It's not the most scintillating conversation, largely because I either don't know who they are talking about or I don't care about them, but as Macy finally winds down, she focuses on me.

Then she smiles. "Tomorrow is Portal Search Party. Do you want to join our team?"

"That's tomorrow?" I ask, surprised, though I don't know why. It's a school tradition, one that happens every March.

"It is. And right now, we're an odd number. We could use one more person on the team."

I start to turn her down—I'm not so sure how Jaxon will feel about me being a part of their team, but then I decide, fuck it. Why should I worry about his delicate, hothouse-flower feelings when it's obvious the arse doesn't give a shite how I feel?

Besides, being on that team means more time to interact with Grace. Maybe that's masochistic, but it's not like I can get my mate back by wallowing in my room all the time. And I do want her back, more than I've ever wanted anything—even this second chance at building a life, and *even if* she chose to forget me. Because without Grace, this second life doesn't mean much. Nothing does.

"Yeah, sure. I can do that. Where are we meeting? And what time?"

Macy looks surprised but not unhappy that I took her up on the offer.

And neither does Grace, who answers, "That's awesome. We'll all be by the front door around nine a.m."

“Okay, then. I’ll see you there.”

“Sounds great.” Macy smiles. “I’m so glad you’re joining us.”

“Me too,” and I realize it’s true. Hanging out in Grace’s head for the last two weeks, I feel like I’ve gotten to know her friends pretty well. Macy is definitely Grace’s favorite, which kind of makes her mine as well. She feels a little like the sister I never had—even if I was tempted to persuade her not to talk for a few minutes.

“Do I need to bring anything?” I skipped Portal Search Party in previous years. Not much fun to try to team up when most of the school is terrified of your existence.

“Just yourself! It’s pretty low-key—except for the whole *falling through portals* thing, of course.”

“What’s not low-key about that?” Grace deadpans as she stands and gathers her tray.

“Right?” Macy laughs as she does the same.

After grabbing a bottle of water, I walk Grace and Macy to the stairs before heading back to my room to finish my homework—I’ve still got statistics and history to do. But I can’t concentrate, not when I keep thinking about that “unless” Grace threw into our conversation earlier.

Plus the fact that she seemed genuinely happy I agreed to be on their portal-hunting team. That’s something, right?

Maybe she was just being polite. Maybe Grace hates the idea of me being on her team more than she hates lima beans and Yoo-hoo combined. But maybe she doesn’t...

Either way, I’m done sitting around down here letting Jaxon have her despite everything that’s happened between us.

Because the elephant in the room neither of us seems to want to bring up, the thing I’d almost let myself forget today, and the thing I know Jaxon is aware of but definitely doesn’t seem inclined to mention to Grace...

Grace is my mate now—which means she *did* choose me even if she may not remember why—and it’s time I start

acting like it.

Forget Me, Forget-Me-Not

I wake up hungry for the first time in a very long time. It's such a foreign feeling that I don't recognize it at first, but then I remember the dream I was having just before waking up. I'd been feeding on Grace, and she had been delicious.

Just the memory has my fangs exploding in my mouth, thirst raking its ravenous claws down the back of my throat. But since I'm pretty sure Grace isn't going to let me feed on her anytime soon, I'll have to make do with something from Katmere's blood bank.

Throwing back the covers, I put on some joggers and running shoes, grab my brand-new phone, and head for the door. Breakfast and an early-morning run seem like a good way to clear the cobwebs from my brain.

Three mugs of blood later, and I'm out the door and running down the steps. I love early morning in Alaska, especially in the months where it takes the sun a while to rise. There's something so relaxing about running through the melting snow in the dark, with only the wind and a few wild animals to keep me company.

I run through the trees and down next to a nearby stream. It was one of my favorite paths to take when I was here before, and my muscle memory still remembers every rut and bump in the trail.

When I get down to the water, I find exactly what I was hoping to—a small copse of wildflowers just beginning to push through the snow. Usually wildflowers don't bloom until June in Alaska, but I'm pretty sure the witches have this area charmed, because there are flowers growing here at least six months of the year.

I stop to pick a few handfuls of them—mostly whites and purples, though I do throw in a few yellow because I like the color and a couple of the blue forget-me-nots because I can't

resist. I've never picked flowers before, so I should probably feel more than a little silly doing it now. But all I can think about is how much Grace loves wildflowers, not to mention nearly anything purple.

Once I'm done, I fade back to campus before the cold wind can blast the petals off their stems. I charm the kitchen witches out of a vase for the bouquet, as well as a basket of cinnamon rolls, and take both to Grace's door. I think about leaving a note, but that seems extra cheesy, so I just knock and then fade down the hallway before they can get to the door.

There are stages to winning my mate back, and while stage one involves flowers and pastries, it does *not* involve awkward moments standing over said flowers and pastries while my mate struggles to figure out what to say. For now, baby steps seem just the right size—even if they bloody well kill me.

Once I'm back in my room, I take a quick shower before getting dressed for the day. Since we're portal hunting, I opt for jeans, boots, and a black Armani sweater, then grab another hoodie on my way out the door.

It only takes a few seconds for me to reach the castle entryway, but the others are already there, or at least I assume everyone's there, since the group is an odd number and includes everyone Grace talks to on a regular basis.

I find my mate in the crowd right away, mainly because she's wearing a hot-pink ski jacket and knitted vampire hat in a sea of black and navy jackets but also because she's Grace. She'll always be the first one my eyes go to.

As I walk toward her, I'm nervous again. Not because of the open hostility I see on most of the Order's faces—I don't give a shite what my brother and his lapdogs think of me—but I am wondering how Grace is going to react to me being here now that it's obvious Jaxon isn't happy about it. And also if she liked the flowers I brought her earlier.

I brace myself for a rude comment or twelve from my baby brother, but Jaxon doesn't respond at all when I walk up to the group with a quiet, "Hi."

“Hey,” Macy responds with a grin that doesn’t quite make it to her tired-looking eyes. “Glad you decided to join us.”

“Yeah,” Grace says quietly. “We all are.”

I lift my brows in an *oh yeah* kind of way, since it’s pretty obvious that’s not the case, at least if the way Flint and the Order are glaring at me is any indication.

Grace rolls her eyes and whispers, “Ignore them,” as we all file outside and down the stairs. As we do, I realize they waited for me. Despite the fact that half of them very clearly don’t want me here, they still waited around until I showed up before heading out to Portal Search Party.

It’s a stupid thing to focus on in the midst of all the dirty looks I’m getting, but it’s the first time anyone except Grace has ever waited for me. For anything.

“So,” Grace says as we wander across the courtyard to where Foster is standing in front of several other groups of students. “Tell me what we’re supposed to do again?”

“We spend the next four hours searching all over campus for portals—” Macy starts to explain, but Grace interrupts before she gets more than a sentence out.

“How do we do that exactly? Is there a portal detector or something?”

Flint laughs. “Yeah, *you’re* the portal detector.”

“I don’t know what that means.” Grace looks from him to Jaxon and Macy and then back again.

The fact that she doesn’t look at me at all stings, but it doesn’t stop me from stepping up. Hell, maybe it even encourages me to, since I’m not normally a joiner, let alone a mansplainer.

“It means you know you’ve found a portal when you fall through it,” I tell her. “Then, after you make your way back through it to where you started, you can mark it, and one of the witch instructors will come along and close it.”

My mate looks unimpressed. “Seriously? I have to fall through *more* portals?”

“Yeah.” Mekhi looks almost as glum as she does. “And trust me, the ones done by most students are nowhere near as sophisticated as the ones the witches made for Ludares. So look out.”

Grace’s face goes from unimpressed to downright concerned. “What exactly does an unsophisticated portal look like?”

“It’s not what it looks like. It’s what it feels like,” Macy says. “And it’s not that bad, I swear.”

“Yeah, if ‘not bad’ means feeling like pulled taffy without the stretchiness of taffy,” Flint grouses.

“Ignore him.” Macy gives her most winning smile. “No one would do it if it was that bad. Plus, we get to end the search with a giant bonfire and marshmallow roast. It’s a lot of fun.”

“Sounds like a lot of fun,” Grace responds with a grimace.

I can’t exactly fault Grace for her lack of enthusiasm. She did just survive the worst Ludares game in history—complete with more portals than any person should have to go through on their own.

“I’ll stay with you if you want to sit this one out,” I offer.

Jaxon glares at me, but I don’t give a shite. If he’s not going to step up and take care of my mate, then he has no business being pissed when I try to.

“Thanks, but I’m sure it will be fun,” Grace says. “Besides, what’s the worst that can happen?”

Live Long and Portal

Turns out, the worst isn't so bad. We break into pairs—Grace couples up with Jaxon while Macy and I team up—and then we start combing our assigned part of the forest for portals.

Macy and I fall through one that feels like a giant electric shock the entire time we're in it, and we hit the ground about fifty feet away—with every hair on our body standing straight up.

She cracks up the second she sees me. “You look ridiculous!”

“At least my hair is meant to stand up,” I tell her, brows raised at the way her entire hot-pink pixie cut is also standing on end.

“It's a new trend,” she tells me even as she tries to smooth some of it down.

“Apparently,” I answer as two more students fall through the portal and have the exact same thing happen to them.

Macy starts to say something to them, but they take one look at me and dive straight back through the portal without giving themselves more than a second or two to recover from the sting of all those electric shocks.

“Don't worry about them,” Macy tells me as she loops an arm through mine and pulls me closer to the portal. “People can be assholes.”

“I've learned there's no ‘can be’ about it,” I answer right before we get electrocuted again. “Arsehole is pretty much most people's default setting.”

“True story,” she tells me, and it's the last thing I hear as we tumble back out onto the ground, right where we started.

“They didn't even mark it,” Macy says, all but crackling with indignation as she looks at the dirt around the portal.

“Who’s got time to post a flag when the bogeyman is on your arse?” I answer with a snort.

“You’re not the bogeyman!” She shakes her head in annoyance. “People need to get over their shit.”

“People need to get over a lot of things,” I answer as Jaxon stalks toward me with a glower on his face.

“What’d you do to her?” he demands as he gets in my face.

“Do to whom?” I ask, shooting him a *what the fuck* look. At least until it registers on me that he’s alone. “Grace? You lost Grace?”

For the first time, he looks uncertain. “She’s not with you?”

“Bloody hell, man!” I shove a hand through my hair in frustration. “Why the fuck would she be with us?”

“I don’t know. She was right behind me one second, and then she was gone. I stopped to answer a text, and we heard you and Macy laughing through the trees. I figured she just came over to see you for a minute.”

“We fell through a portal,” Macy says. “We never saw her.”

“How long’s she been gone?” I move away from him, scanning the area as best I can considering we’re surrounded by trees in all directions. But Grace is wearing hot pink—how bloody hard could it be to spot her if she’s actually here? I’d wager you could spot that coat from space on a clear day.

“I don’t know. Five minutes or so?” He glances toward the portal Macy’s just finished marking. “You’re sure she didn’t fall in there with you?”

“It’s pretty narrow.” Macy shakes her head even as she pulls out her phone to text Grace. “And short. We definitely would have seen her.”

“So where is she, then?” I ask, moving deeper into the trees in an effort to glimpse some hint of her curly hair. But I don’t see anything.

“She didn’t answer my text.” Macy hits Call, and we all listen intently for Grace’s ringtone. But there’s nothing, save

the whistle of the wind through the trees.

“She had to have fallen through a portal,” I say grimly, my stomach sinking as a bad feeling invades me.

“Yeah.” Jaxon blows out a long breath. “Which means she could be literally anywhere on the planet.”

“Not anywhere,” Macy says in an obvious attempt to soothe our nerves. “When they’re doing portals out here, the witch instructors limit students to a three-hundred-mile radius.”

“And here I was thinking they’d limit students to Katmere’s grounds,” I growl. “Considering students aren’t supposed to leave campus without checking out at the front office.”

“They do limit the first-year portal class,” Macy answers. “But they give the seniors a lot more leeway.”

“Apparently.” Jaxon prowls past me like a fucking wanker, and it’s obvious from the look on his face that he doesn’t trust that I’m doing a thorough-enough job. I think about calling him on it, but I don’t want to waste the time right now. Not when Grace is missing and we have a shite-ton of area to cover.

Instead, I change direction, turning right to check out the eastern portion of our area. I’m still scanning the forest for her pink jacket, but now I’m checking for portals, too.

“I don’t get it,” Macy says after a few minutes of unsuccessful portal hunting. “She’s been gone almost fifteen minutes now. Why doesn’t she just step back through it, like we did? It’s not like she doesn’t know how to go through portals by now.”

It’s a good question, but the answer has been haunting me ever since we figured out how she’d disappeared. “She tends to dive in headfirst,” I say as I cover the ground around me in a quick back-and-forth pattern meant to cover every inch. “She nearly injured herself a couple of times during Ludares.”

They both look surprised, but that’s because usually Grace went through those portals alone. I’m the only one who was with her every second of the tournament, so I’m the only one who felt the way she landed when she came out of one—

which was normally on her face or with her hands braced in front of her.

“Let’s split up,” Macy suggests. “I’ll take this area. Jaxon can cover that big patch to the right, and Hudson can cover the patch to the left. If she was just waiting on Jaxon to answer a couple of texts, she couldn’t have gone far.”

That’s what I think, too—or at least, what I’m hoping.

I start to run—I’m not quite fading because experience has taught me that sometimes you can go so fast that you actually skip *over* a portal opening, but I’m definitely moving faster than usual as I try to cover every inch of the area I’m in charge of as quickly as possible.

So far there’s been nothing, though, and I’m starting to get nervous. What if she did wander off farther than we thought? And worse, what if she’s actually badly hurt? How long is it going to take us to find her?

The thought pushes me to go faster, even though I’m meticulous in the area I’m covering. A couple of long minutes pass before Macy calls out to ask if either of us have found anything. Jaxon answers in the negative and so do I, and I can feel the anxiety growing deep inside me.

She has to be here, I tell myself, determined to stay calm. Which means we’ll find her, even if we have to ask for help from the others. We just need to be precise in what areas we’ve covered and what we haven’t. If we do that, then—

My foot goes right through the ground in front of me and disappears—a sure sign that I’ve found a portal. Praying it’s the same one Grace fell into a little while ago, I throw myself straight into it without another thought.

Old Charms, New Harms

I come out of the portal at a run to find Grace standing several feet away with her back to me.

She whirls around as I hit the ground. “Don’t let it go!” she yells.

“Let what go?” I brace myself for an attack, head turning back and forth as I search for a threat.

“The portal!” she says, racing toward me with her arms outstretched. “It keeps moving!”

As soon as her words register, I turn around and dive for the portal as requested. I have no idea if it’s even possible to hold on to the bloody thing, but I’m more than willing to give it a try. Especially since the one glance I had of this place has me wondering if we’re even on the Katmere campus anymore—or if one of the seniors took their instructors up on that three-hundred-mile-radius limit.

Not having any idea of where we are makes me bloody nervous, especially considering just how many things that go bump in the night are pissed off by Grace’s very existence—starting with my not-so-dear-old dad.

Moving fast, I manage to get my hand into the portal before it disappears completely, but that must not be enough to activate it because instead of reopening, the thing disappears, leaving Grace and me stranded.

“Damn it!” Grace shoves a hand through her wild curls and pushes them back from her face in that way I’ve grown to love. “I’ve been looking for that thing for fifteen minutes now. I’ve covered every inch of this place—twice—and I haven’t hit on it. Until you got here.”

“Sorry.” I feel guilty for letting the portal go, but I had no idea portals could even disappear and reappear like that, let alone that a student could be skilled enough to make one.

I look around, trying to come up with an idea that doesn't have to do with a portal at all, and realize we have a bigger problem. My first impression was correct—wherever we are, it's not Katmere Academy grounds, or at least not any part that I've ever been to before.

The problem with not being at Katmere, however, is that I can't fade us back to the castle and Grace can't fly us there, not when we have no idea which direction to even head.

"What is this place?" I ask, moving toward the closest of the four stone walls that surround us.

"I have no idea. There aren't any windows and the door's locked, so I'm not sure what we're supposed to do." She looks super frustrated and super cute, and it's taking everything inside me not to pull her toward me, to hold her and kiss her and tell her everything is going to be okay.

But I don't think she's ready for any of that with me yet, so I settle for running a hand over her hair the way I used to as I walk by her to examine the door.

"I already tried it," she says. "It's locked."

"I know. I was just trying to figure out if it was easier to get this door off its hinges or disintegrate the thing."

I squat down to look at said hinges. The rest of this place looks pretty run-down and decrepit, so I expect one good hit and I can knock the door right off. But these hinges are industrial-strength and they look brand-new—as do the three locks on the door.

"What the hell is this place?" I ask.

"I don't know," she answers. "But it gives me the creeps."

"I can see why." My brain is whirling, trying to figure out why a portal at Katmere would lead to someplace with no windows and three locks on the door. None of the scenarios I come up with are exactly reassuring, though.

"We need to get out of here," I say, and Grace gives me a *no shit* look.

"Should we try to find the portal again?" she asks. "Or

should...”

Her voice trails off, but I know what she was going to say. “Or should I blow this place up.”

“Yeah.”

“I’m leaning toward the second, but since we have no idea where we are, that could cause a big problem—depending on who happens to be outside the door, possibly guarding it.” Then again, every instinct I have tells me that just waiting here like sitting ducks is an even bigger problem.

So fuck it. Whatever’s out there—even if it’s a bunch of humans who are going to freak out at the sight of a vampire and gargoyle walking down the street—is better than sitting around here waiting to see what happens.

“Let’s go,” I tell Grace, holding out a hand and *feeling* the door disintegrate. Seconds later, I close my fist and it does just that.

“I thought you were going to destroy the whole place?” Grace comments as we walk toward the opening.

“I was going for subtle.”

“Good plan,” she says as she walks through the opening.

As I follow her, I can see why she said it like that. Because while we’re not in the middle of downtown Anchorage, we’re on the outskirts of some kind of town. One that has cars on the road and people walking out of a nearby restaurant—all of which is to say, they definitely would have noticed if I’d disintegrated the entire shack.

“So what do we do now?” I ask, looking around for some distinguishing characteristic.

Grace pulls out her phone. “My first instinct is to fly up and get an aerial view of the place. But I’m pretty sure me growing wings wouldn’t go well. But getting directions to Katmere doesn’t work, either, considering Google Maps doesn’t know it exists.”

“No, but I’m pretty sure it knows that café exists,” I say, pointing to the restaurant across the street.

“Exactly what I was thinking.” A few seconds later she adds, “Looks like we’re in Healy, though at the opposite end from the airport where I landed when I first got here.”

“Healy?” I ask, because I’ve been here before. Everyone from Katmere has at one time or another. “And no offense, but don’t you think calling it an airport is a bit much?”

She rolls her eyes. “Says a vampire who’s probably never been on a plane in his life.”

“Why would I need an airplane when I can run faster than most of them?”

“Because as far as I know, vampires can’t walk on water,” she answers, brows arched.

“Not yet,” I reply.

Grace just shakes her head and rolls her eyes at me again. It makes me want to kiss her—makes me want to hold her so badly that my fingers ache—so I take a cautious step back. And say, “I know what that shack was. And why the portal moves the way it does.”

“Oh yeah?” She looks around like she’s afraid we’re in danger. “Why?”

“It’s nothing to worry about. A couple of decades ago, a few witches charmed a portal in the forest outside Katmere. They did it so that they could sneak off the school grounds whenever they wanted, since curfews were so much stricter back then. When they graduated, they left the portal for the next generation of Katmere students to find, but rumor has it that no one ever has.”

“Until us,” Grace says with a grin.

“Until you,” I answer. “I’m just along for the ride here.”

“As if.” She glances at the mountains that loom huge in the distance. “If I remember correctly, Katmere is straight up the side of that mountain.”

“Yeah, but we need to get to the mountain first. And the only way to do that without attracting attention—”

“Is to walk,” she finishes with a sigh as we both look down the long stretch of road in front of us.

“Exactly.” I bow a little, waving my arm with a flourish.
“After you?”

Totally F*cked Is the New (Para)Normal

“I’ve got to say,” Grace comments after a full ten minutes of walking barely gets us to the next mile marker. “This whole ‘normal’ human thing is a total drag.”

“Says the girl who thought she was one of those ‘normal’ humans less than six months ago,” I counter.

“Yeah, well, a lot can change in six months.”

She shoots me an arch look, but I just shake my head and answer, “Bloody true story, that.”

Grace laughs, but this time it sounds awkward. So awkward, in fact, that I glance at her out of the corner of my eye, just to gauge what she’s thinking—or feeling.

But it turns out she’s doing the same thing to me, and our gazes catch. Hold.

Just like that, I forget to breathe.

She tries to look away—I can see it in the way her eyelashes twitch, the way she ducks her chin and leans forward.

It doesn’t work. Her eyes stay pinned to mine so long that I don’t just forget to breathe—I forget *how* to breathe. A problem that it seems like she’s having, too, judging from the way she’s gone completely still.

The need to touch her has become an all-consuming ache inside me, this girl who doesn’t remember anything about me but whose body—whose soul—remembers enough to mate with me. I start to reach for her, to brush the curls away from her face and skate my knuckles down her cheek like I’ve done so many times before.

I go so far as to lift my hand before it hits me that, mate or not, she hasn’t given me the right to touch her like that. Worse,

she may never give me that right.

The thought breaks the spell or whatever it is that arcs and trembles between us, and I shove my hands in my pockets as added protection against temptation.

Grace, in turn, breaks eye contact as she takes an unsteady step backward. Then another and another, until she stumbles off the shoveled road and onto the snow-packed earth.

She throws a hand out to steady herself and as she does, her fingertips grab on to the sleeve of my hoodie. Ridiculous as I know it is, my biceps starts to burn where she touches—even with two thick layers of clothes between her fingers and my skin.

“Are you all right?” I ask as she slowly lets go of me.

“I’m fine.” She forces a rusty-sounding laugh. “Sorry, I still haven’t gotten as used to the snow as I should have.”

“You don’t ever have to apologize to me,” I tell her.

“I don’t think that’s true.”

“It is,” I insist, but she just shakes her head.

“I’m pretty sure I owe you several apologies right now.”

“For what?” I ask, then hate myself for showing that I care. Nearly as much as I hate myself for the hope deep inside me that bursts free from the stranglehold I’ve kept on it for the last three days.

“For a lot of things,” she whispers. “For starters, for forgetting what you obviously need me to remember.”

“It’s okay,” I tell her, because for the first time, it feels like it might be. “I can wait.”

“That’s just it. I don’t want you to wait. I don’t want either of us to wait like this, in some kind of weird limbo. I just want to know what happened during those months we were locked together. Were we really friends? Were we *more* than friends? And if we were, how did it happen? Why did it happen when I was obviously still mated to Jaxon?”

My heart is racing like a forest fire, but I fight to keep my

voice steady as I ask, “Do you want me to answer your questions?”

“Yes!” she tells me, her voice filled with determination. Then, seconds later, she says, “No!” just as enthusiastically. “Ugh, I don’t know! That’s the whole problem, isn’t it? I want to know, but knowing won’t really change anything.”

It’s not quite the answer I was hoping for, but I try to unravel it as slowly and carefully as I can. “Won’t it?”

“Of course not!” She throws up her hands. “Because even if you tell me, it won’t change anything. Because no matter what you say happened, I won’t remember it. No matter what you say I felt, I don’t still feel it. So will it actually help anything if I know? Or will it just make everything harder—for both of us?”

She’s asking good questions, logical questions. And still it feels like she’s ripping my heart out all over again. Because she’s right. Just because I tell her what we did, just because I tell her how we felt and how it happened, doesn’t mean she’ll feel it all over again. No matter how many things I say—no matter how many stories I tell or months I span—it won’t be the same as if she remembered.

It won’t be the same as if we were living it together, one day, one minute at a time.

But it’s no better living like this, waiting for her to remember. Waiting for her to understand why we’re mated. To understand why she loves me.

And she does still love me, somewhere deep inside her.

If she didn’t, the mating bond wouldn’t have sprung into place the same day her bond with Jaxon broke. If she didn’t, I wouldn’t still be here, hanging on—not in limbo, as she suggests, but in hell—waiting for her to love me back.

If she didn’t, I would *know*.

And so I don’t do what every instinct inside me is screaming for me to do. I don’t tell her what happened between us, and I definitely don’t tell her about how she promised to love me forever.

Instead, I take a step back and say, “Okay.”

“What do you mean, *okay*?” She looks startled.

But I just shrug. “I mean okay. Those are good points. I won’t tell you any of it.”

“None of it?” she asks, and now she sounds incredulous. And more than a little annoyed.

I don’t know why the annoyance makes me feel better, but it does. So I shrug nonchalantly as I agree, “None of it.” Then I nod toward Denali. “We really should get moving if we’re going to get up the mountain in time for the bonfire.”

“The bonfire?” she repeats, offense dripping from every word. “You’re worried about the bonfire right now?”

“Actually, what I’m really worried about is getting a bloody sunburn,” I tell her with a grin. “But yeah, I like bonfires. So let’s go.”

“Let’s go? Just like that?”

“No offense, but you’re beginning to sound like a parrot.” I know I’m smiling an inappropriate amount considering the things she just said, but I can’t help it.

What started off as a way to save face is turning into so much more. Namely a chance to see that Grace wants answers even if she doesn’t think she does. More, she wants to understand what we feel for each other—what we are to each other, independent of my pain-in-the-arse brother.

And that feels pretty good to me, not to mention to my bruised, battered, and *bloodied* heart.

“And you’re beginning to sound like—” She bites off the words and, judging from the strangled sound she makes deep in her throat, practically bites off her tongue along with them. Eventually, though, she takes a deep breath and says, “Fine. Let’s go. I’m sure everyone is worried about us, and it’s not like I can get any service out here anyway.”

She takes off down the street like the hounds of hell are after her. I follow close behind, and we end up walking in silence for several more minutes. Or, to be more precise, I walk.

Grace marches, with her chin in the air, all the way through town.

Eventually we get to the forested outskirts of Healy, and we leave the road for the first time in an effort to get into the trees, where we can stop pretending not to be paranormals. “If we cut through here—and you fly low—we should make it back to school pretty quickly,” I tell her.

At first, I don’t think she’s going to answer me, but then she does with a quick cut of her eyes to mine and then away. “How fast is ‘pretty quickly’?”

“I don’t know.” But since she sounds like she’s almost back to normal, I decide to push my luck. “Wanna race?”

At first I think she’s going to ignore me, but then she laughs despite herself. “I may not have learned much at Katmere yet, but I do know better than to race a vampire anywhere.”

“I promise to cut my speed in half.”

“Oh, do you now?” Grace looks more than a little skeptical.

“I do,” I answer. “But I also know a shortcut. So we’ll see if you can keep up.”

“Oh, I can keep up,” she answers, and there’s a sudden look of recognition in her eyes that has my heart beating triple-time once again.

This isn’t the first time we’ve had this conversation. It isn’t even the tenth time. And for just a moment, I can’t help thinking that she knows it. That even if she doesn’t remember everything, she remembers this *one* thing.

But the recognition is gone as quickly as it came, and then she’s taking off without so much as a warning. Just like always, because apparently some things never change. The cheater.

“See you at Katmere!” she calls down to me with a laugh, right before she starts flying straight up the side of the mountain as fast as her wings can carry her.

I can beat her—of that, I have no doubt. But despite the challenge I just issued, I’m not interested in racing ahead of

her at all. Partly because I want to keep an eye on her and partly because it's fun to be out here, racing through the snow. My mate is above me, the wind is at my back, and for just a little while, my world feels like it's been set to rights.

Charmed and Dangerous

It takes us about half an hour to get back onto Katmere grounds. Once we get close to the forest where we were hunting for portals, Grace drops down beside me. She's smiling, her eyes dancing, and she looks totally recovered from her anger down in Healy.

"That was a lot of fun," she says, pulling out her phone to text someone. "I haven't had much chance to fly just for the sheer fun of it."

"I never would have guessed you were having fun up there," I tease, "considering the number of barrel rolls and spins you were doing."

"The first time I ever flew that wasn't in a plane was on Flint's back. Is it any wonder I've got a little daredevil in me now?"

"I'm pretty sure you've always had a little daredevil in you," I answer, not bothering to correct her about the first time she flew. It's not like she remembers anyway.

"I don't know about that," she says as she finishes up her text and hits Send. "Oh, thank God, I've got service back again. I couldn't get anything in Healy."

Her phone chimes a few seconds later. "Macy says they've had the whole school looking for us since you disappeared."

"That doesn't surprise me at all." If Jaxon didn't turn the whole bloody mountain upside down looking for her, *then* I would be surprised. And he still wouldn't deserve her.

Her phone chimes again. "Now that they know we're safe, they're going to head over to the bonfire. We can meet them there."

"Fantastic."

I do my best to keep the sarcasm out of my voice, but I must

not do a very good job of it because Grace shoots me a look. “I thought you liked bonfires.”

“I do,” I answer. What I don’t say is that I’ve really enjoyed the last hour—and I’m not ready to give her back to everyone else yet. I’m definitely not ready to give her back to Jaxon.

Grace frowns at my answer, looking like she wants to push a little. I almost wish she would, but in the end she doesn’t say anything. She just starts walking again. So I walk with her.

It feels nice, strolling through the trees with a smiling, laughing Grace, especially when we end up near the wildflower stream I like to run by. She glances down at all the little flowers popping through the snow and glances at me out of the corner of her eye.

“I never thanked you,” she half whispers. “For the flowers this morning. They’re beautiful.”

“They made me think of you.”

She blushes. “I also need to thank you for the cinnamon rolls. Even though Macy ate most of them.”

“Hey, nothing wrong with charming your roommate, too.” The words escape before I realize I’m going to say them. Once they do, though, I’m not sorry. She may not want to hear about what happened during the time she was frozen, but that doesn’t mean I can’t remind her of how I feel. And what I want.

“Is that what you’re trying to do?” she asks, her voice cautious as we turn down the trail that will take us close to the castle. “Charm me?”

“You’re my mate,” I answer, even though that’s only half the story. And maybe not even the most interesting half, compared to what those months together gave us.

“I know. But—” She blows out a long breath as she looks anywhere but at me. “I’m with Jaxon.”

“I’m aware of that.” Believe me, no one is more aware of that fucking shite than I am. I did just spend the last two weeks inside her head, after all. And it’s all Jaxon, eighty percent of

the bloody time in there. Maybe even ninety.

“I just—” She stops, blows out a breath. “I don’t know what that means for us. I mean, forget about what happened during those three and a half months for a minute. How can I be mated to you right now, in the present, when I’m totally in love with him?”

I understand what she’s asking. Hell, I even thought I was prepared to have this talk with her. But each word hits me like a body blow, stealing my earlier joy and reminding me of everything we’ve lost and everything we may never have again.

I’m more than ready to fight Jaxon for her—brother or not—but how the fuck do I fight her feelings for him? How the fuck do I make her love me the way that she used to?

“I don’t know.” My voice is hoarse. “Maybe the universe screwed up.”

“Do you think that’s what happened?”

“No,” I answer.

I have more to say, so much more, but before I can say any of it, we make our way around the last curve in the trail and come face-to-face with a furious Jaxon.

“What the fuck did you do?” he demands as he bum-rushes me so hard and fast that I end up flying backward through the air.

Never Bring a Warlock to a Vampire Showdown

“What the fuck!” I roar, throwing him off me and leaping to my feet the second we hit the ground.

“Did you really think that was going to work?” he snarls. “You steal my mate and then when she doesn’t come running to you, you fucking kidnap her?”

“Jaxon, that isn’t what happened!” Grace says, trying to get between the two of us.

Not that we let her. She may be a gargoyle, but we’re both vampires. And we’re a hell of a lot faster than she is.

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” I snarl as we circle each other. “Then you can just go on thinking I’m the bad guy. Go on thinking you were right to fucking try to kill me.”

“I *did* kill you,” Jaxon growls right back.

He rushes me again, but this time I see it coming and step aside, giving him a kick in the ass to send him flying several feet in the other direction.

He lands on his feet in the middle of a huddle of witches and springs right back to where I am. I fade several feet to the side to get out of his way, but he manages to change course in midair and still lands on top of me.

I fall to my knees under the sudden force of him slamming into my shoulders and start to throw him off. But somehow, he gets his hands around my throat and starts to squeeze, the arsehole.

And fuck. Just fuck. I knew this showdown was coming, but this was not how I wanted it to go. I wanted to be in control of it, so no one actually gets hurt. Right now, he’s completely out of control and I’m being forced to react to whatever the hell he’s doing instead of controlling the situation. It sucks, but if

this is how Jaxon wants it to go down, then fine. I'll fucking adjust.

"Jaxon, stop!" Grace yells, trying to pry him off me.

She doesn't stand a chance, but since he's currently choking me, I can't exactly say that. What I can do, however, is suck it up and let him choke me until Grace finally takes a step back. The last thing I want, after all, is for her to get hurt in the middle of all this.

She holds on longer than I expect her to, but the second she finally goes to readjust her grip, I move. I flip Jaxon over my head and send him slamming onto the ground in front of me as hard as I can.

Students are crowding around us from all sides, but I'm too busy punching my fist into my brother's face to pay them any attention. "You didn't really think I was just going to let you kill me again, did you?" I taunt. "You only get one free pass on that."

I hit him again and again, but on the fifth punch, he manages to move his shoulders to the side and throws me off him.

I slam into a nearby tree and hear the trunk snap from the force of the hit. It knocks the breath out of me for several seconds and, while I'm struggling to breathe, Jaxon lands in front of me.

"Everything was better when you were dead," he says as he delivers a solid kick to my ribs. "Why didn't you just stay that way?"

He kicks me again.

"So sorry to inconvenience you by being alive," I wheeze when I can finally breathe. And when he lifts his foot to kick me a third time, I grab on to it.

"What the fuck—" he starts but doesn't get the chance to finish because I send him soaring over the heads of the gathered crowd.

He lands a few feet in front of the bonfire and skids across the ground. It takes him a few seconds to roll over, and by the

time he does, I'm already standing over him.

"Fuck you!" he yells as the ground trembles beneath us. "You don't get to act like the victim here."

"Neither do you!" I shout back. "You're walking around, whining like a bloody wanker, and I put up with it because I get it. You're hurting and you're pissed. But you're not the only one in pain, asshole. So get the fuck over yourself so we can end this."

"I'd rather kick your ass," he says, pushing to his feet like it costs him.

I narrow my eyes at him, shake my head. "If that's the way you want this to go down, then fine."

"It's the way it *is* going to go down," he answers. And this time when he throws a punch, I don't dodge. Instead, I catch it with my hand an inch in front of my face and squeeze it until the ground around us starts full-on shaking.

Jaxon starts to throw a punch with his other hand, and I catch that one, too. And squeeze and squeeze and squeeze until I hear bones grind together.

"Hudson, stop!" Grace says, and this time I'm the one she grabs on to. "Don't do this. Please!"

I want to shake her off, want to put an end to my brother's bravado once and for all. But I can't ignore Grace when she asks me for something, especially not when I can hear the tears in her voice that she's trying so hard not to shed.

So I do the only thing I can do in this situation. I push Jaxon away, letting go of his hands as I do.

"Just stop!" I say as he starts toward me again. "That's enough!"

"You don't get to tell me what's enough," he sneers.

"Maybe not," Foster shouts out as he rushes down a path toward us. "But I do." And with a wave of his hand, he sends both of us flying in opposite directions.

Of Blood and Brothers

“Get up!” Foster roars, then stands us both on our feet with another wave of his hand. “This kind of behavior will not be tolerated at Katmere!”

There’s a part of me that wants to make a snarky comment about all the other behavior he seems okay with tolerating at his sanctified institution, but since I’m responsible for more than a little of it, I decide to keep my mouth shut.

But I’m not okay with being slammed around by some warlock, whether he’s my headmaster or not. And so the next time he starts to wave his hand, I use my persuasion to say, “You don’t want to do that.”

He stops instantly, but his eyes narrow. “You really want to play with me like that right now, Mr. Vega?”

“I don’t want to play at all. I just want to go back to my room.”

“Good. Why don’t you do that.” He turns to Jaxon. “You can stay here for ten minutes, and then you can go back to your room, too. We’ll talk about this tomorrow, after Portal Search Party is over.”

Jaxon rolls his eyes like the little punk he is, but I just nod and head across the bonfire area to the path that will take me to Katmere. As I do, I watch as Grace crosses to Jaxon. As she puts her hands on his face. As she kisses him gently.

And just like that, something inside me breaks. Because even after he started this ridiculous fight and ignored the way she implored him to stop, she chooses him.

Even after he screamed in front of everyone that he wished I had stayed dead, she chooses him.

Even after she *knows* I’m not the bad guy here, she chooses him.

It hurts more than I thought it would, hurts more than I imagined possible.

I thought I was hardened to this after spending the last two weeks in her head as she fawned over my brother. In fact, I was pretty sure there was nothing she could do—nothing either of them could do—that could get under my skin after that.

Turns out I was wrong.

Here I am trying to do everything right, trying to treat my mate the best way that I know how. And she's so busy with Jaxon that she doesn't even notice.

Too bad I'm just figuring out now that she's never going to notice. More, she's never going to choose me. Jaxon was the guy she fell in love with. He's the one she wants to be with. Trying to pretend otherwise—to pretend that I might have a chance with her even after she's told me that I don't—is pathetic.

I've been a lot of things in my life, but until now, pathetic was never one of them.

And, if I have my say, it will never be again.

So fuck the universe and fuck the precious mating bond everybody is willing to wait forever to find. In my mind, it's highly overrated. And I'm done.

Done with the mating bond and whatever fucked-up magic let me actually believe she chose me, on some level at least.

Done with being stomped on by the only two people I've ever really given a damn about in my whole life.

I'm sure as shit done with being my little brother's whipping boy because he thinks the universe has fucked him over.

I'm not waiting around any longer for Grace to see me. She and Jaxon can have each other.

Chess and Balances

I can't sleep. I need to just admit it and get up. I could read a book, do some homework, listen to some music, throw some axes—anything but staring at the ceiling and thinking about Grace.

It's been thirty-six hours since I walked away from her and Jaxon at the bonfire, and I haven't been able to sleep since. Not last night and not tonight.

Foster didn't enforce consequences after our fight because of "extenuating circumstances," although he was none too happy to learn that Grace is mated to me and in love with my brother. Yeah, well, join the club, buddy.

He also made it very clear that Jaxon and I are holding on by a thin fucking rope. But that's not why I can't sleep. It feels like I've spent my whole life balancing on dental floss, so this is nothing new.

No, I can't sleep because Grace texted me late last night, asking if I was okay. Asking if we could talk. I didn't answer then and I didn't answer her this morning when she texted to check in. She's my mate, but I don't think I have anything to say to her right now.

I'm not sure I'll ever have anything to say to her again.

And there it is—the thing that's keeping me up all night, that's haunting me every time I try to close my eyes. Walking away from Grace is like having my skin flayed from my bones one tiny strip at a time.

But staying near her and watching her with Jaxon—having her choose Jaxon in front of me again and again— isn't any better. I'm between a very big boulder and a very hard place and it feels like they're both closing in.

Fuck. Just fuck.

I toss the covers back and climb out of bed. After changing into a pair of sweats and a T-shirt, I take to the halls. Maybe a walk, or a cup of warm blood, will tire me out.

But when I get to the first floor, I find Macy sitting at the chess table at the bottom of the stairs. She's not playing or even looking at the set. Instead, she's sitting with her arms on the table and her face buried in the crook of her elbow as she obviously sobs and sobs.

It's a personal grief—and a terrible one—and I think about slipping soundlessly back upstairs before she knows I'm here. If I was in her situation, I wouldn't want anyone to see me like that.

But to be honest, that's bloody well what I'm feeling like on the inside right now, and while I'd never let anyone see it, there's no denying I'd like someone to reach out to me. So instead of fleeing back up the stairs, I walk over to Macy and crouch down next to her. Then I lay what I hope is a comforting hand on her back.

"I'm sorry," I whisper.

She jerks upright, her hands going instinctively to her cheeks to wipe away the tears. But then she sees that it's me, and instead of hiding her grief, she throws her arms around me and buries her face in my shoulder. Then she cries like her very heart is breaking.

For a moment, I'm frozen under the onslaught of all her pain. Combined with the pain of losing Grace, it's nearly too much to handle. Nearly.

Awkwardly, I lift my arms and wrap them around Macy, patting her on the back in what I hope is a soothing manner. "I'm sorry," I whisper again as she sobs all the harder. "I'm so sorry."

She just cries more, like her heart is breaking for Xavier all over again. I hold her even tighter, rocking her the way I've seen mothers rock hurt children in movies. It seems to work, because a few minutes later, the sobs lessen, and eventually she stops crying altogether.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers, pulling away from me. “I didn’t want to break down in the room with—” She stops abruptly.

“Grace.” I fill in her name, ignoring the hole deep inside me that somehow grows bigger with just the mention of her. Just the thought of her. “You can say her name.”

Macy shakes her head, tries to surreptitiously wipe her nose with the back of her sleeve, and I set her gently back in her chair. “Give me a sec,” I tell her, then fade to the closest restroom and grab some paper towels. At the last second, I decide to wet a couple so she can wash her face.

I’m back in about ten seconds, towels in hand, and she gives me a grateful look as she takes them. She blows her nose a couple of times, then wipes the damp towels over her cheeks and eyes.

“Thank you,” she tells me.

“You’re welcome.”

The tears are over, but I don’t feel comfortable leaving her alone yet, so I ease into the chair on the other side of the chess table. And ask, “Is there anything I can do?”

“No.” She shakes her head. “I can’t sleep, and I couldn’t stand the idea of staring up at the ceiling for one second longer. Some days are good, you know, and I can almost forget how sad I really am, almost forget the pain I’m trying to hide from everyone.”

“I know how that feels.”

She studies my face through tear-swollen eyes. “I bet you do.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

This time she shakes her head vigorously. “There’s nothing more to talk about. He’s dead, and I have to figure out a way to learn to live with that.”

I nod.

“Do you want to talk about why *you’re* wandering the castle in the middle of the night?” she asks.

“There’s nothing much to talk about there, either,” I tell her.

“Yeah, I figured.” She glances up the staircase. “I can’t go back to bed yet.”

“Absolutely not.”

She nods at the pieces in front of us. “Want to play?”

I hadn’t even thought about it—it’s been a long time since my tutor and I sat in my room playing chess, but the moment she asks, I realize I do want to play. I’m up for anything that might keep my mind off Grace for longer than thirty seconds at a stretch.

“Yeah, I do.” I nod to the dragon pieces on her side of the board. “You can go first.”

She nods again, then moves one of her pawns—diagonally two spaces.

For a second, I just stare at the piece, dumbfounded. Then I start to tell her that pawns only move that way when they’re capturing a piece, but the minute my gaze connects with her still tear-streaked one, I decide it doesn’t matter. Instead, I capture it with one of mine.

She does the same thing to mine a second later, only she *doesn’t* move her pawn diagonally this time—like she’s supposed to. Again, I start to point it out and again I decide it’s not worth it.

Instead, I move my bishop, and she follows up with her rook—*which she also moves diagonally*.

“You can’t—” I start to say, but she looks so confused that I don’t have it in me to explain. Not tonight, when she just cried all over me. And when there’s a part of me that feels like returning the favor.

So instead, I move my bishop diagonally—exactly as I am supposed to—and capture her rook.

Macy stares at the board in confusion. “Are you sure you can do that?”

“Yes,” I tell her, because I have no idea what else I’m

supposed to say to that.

“Oh.” She shrugs. “Okay.”

Then she moves her bishop forward two and over one, and I give up any vague notion of actually trying to explain to her how the pieces really move.

Instead, we play in silence for ten minutes, the only sound the movement of the heavy chess pieces on the board between us.

In fact, it’s only after I capture Macy’s second knight—after she’s taken my bishop with a very odd and blatantly illegal maneuver by her queen—that she says, “You know, I would do anything to have a little more time with Xavier.”

“I’m sure,” I agree.

She moves her bishop straight backward into what is obviously a sacrifice to lure my queen into a trap—if any of the pieces she was planning to use to spring the trap actually did what she thinks they do.

“You shouldn’t squander the time you have with Grace,” she adds. “You don’t know how much of it you’ll have.”

“It’s not the same thing,” I tell her, moving my queen where she wants it just to see what she’ll do, even as her words go off like bombs inside me.

She knocks into my queen with her king, which she moves five spaces to do, then snatches the vampire queen off the board like she’s a prize—which I can very much assure you, she is not.

Then, outrageously, she looks at me with just a spark of triumph in her eyes. “I knew you weren’t over Grace. I knew you were just licking your wounds.”

“And how exactly did you reach that conclusion?” I ask, brows lifted.

“You’re wandering the school in the middle of the night; you look like hell—”

“Thanks,” I insert dryly.

“I’m sorry, but it’s true. When do you of all people walk around in a holey T-shirt and ugly-ass sweats?”

“It’s the middle of the night.”

“I’m still not buying it.” She pins me with a knowing stare. “Plus, I’m about to win this chess game, and I *never* win at chess.”

“Now, that is shocking. I wonder why.”

She totally misses the sarcasm—or chooses to ignore it—as she answers, “Because you miss Grace and you’re brooding.”

“Of course I miss Grace,” I answer. “She’s my mate, and she consistently rips my fucking heart out of my chest. But I’m not brooding. I’m wallowing. There’s a difference.”

It’s more than I intended to say—more than I’ve ever said to anyone besides Grace about what’s going on inside my head—but Macy doesn’t look like she’s judging me. She just looks sad, in a different way than when I first came down the stairs.

“I know it’s fucking brutal right now,” she says, and it’s so rare to hear Macy swear that I kind of sit back in my chair. “But, barring some terrible accident or murder, you’re going to live forever. I think you need to really contemplate how long forever is. And decide if a couple of months—or maybe even a couple of years—of pain is worth an eternity without your mate.”

And then, when I’m still reeling from those words, she neatly skips the dragon queen over four pieces so that it lands in front of the vampire king. Then she says, “Checkmate.”

As if I hadn’t already figured that out.

Breathing Room

Macy's words haunt me for the rest of the night—and well into the morning, if I'm being honest. It's not like I haven't thought those same things a million times before. It's why I'm here, after all. Why I accepted Foster's invitation to complete my senior year at Katmere instead of going somewhere—anywhere—else. It's not like I don't already have the equivalent of a much higher degree from my studies with my tutor.

But hearing it from Macy—from someone who just lost the person she was in love with for an eternity, with no hope of getting him back... I'd be lying if I said it didn't make me think. And hurt.

Maybe that's why I pull out my phone to text Grace good morning, even though I know I'm going to be seeing her in class in a few minutes. And maybe that's why I swallow my pride when I walk into class and see her sitting with my brother, her head down and the two of them whispering about who the bloody hell knows what.

The urge to say *fuck it* and walk right back out the door is strong, really strong, but I force myself not to do that. Force myself to keep walking into the classroom to the first empty desk.

There are several empty desks near Grace and Jaxon, but I'm not quite that masochistic yet. So I camp out in the back row again and wait for class to start.

A couple of minutes pass until, right before the bell rings, Grace pulls out her phone. She must be looking through her texts because she stiffens all of a sudden and starts looking wildly around the room. She freezes when her eyes meet mine, but instead of looking away, she holds my gaze for several seconds.

When she finally looks away, it's only to glance down at her

phone again as her thumbs fly across the screen. A moment later, my phone buzzes with a text.

Grace: Good morning

Grace: I'm glad you came to class today

I start to answer that I'm glad, too, but I'm still not sure that's the case. So I give her the best smile I'm capable of right now—which may or may not resemble a death grimace—before opening my textbook and pretending to read yet another ethics philosopher I've already studied.

I keep my mouth shut when Ms. Virago asks questions, and she goes out of her way not to call on me, which seems like a good system all around.

When the bell rings, I'm the first one out the door. I may not be giving up on Grace, but that doesn't mean I need to watch her and Jaxon hold hands in the hall, either. But I've barely made it halfway down the hallway when Grace grabs my arm from behind.

“For a guy who lived in my head for two weeks, you sure seem like you can't get far enough away from me these days.” She's smiling, but I can see the hurt in her eyes. It looks eerily similar to the pain I'm afraid is reflected in mine as well.

“Just giving you space,” I answer as nonchalantly as I can.

“I appreciate it, but I feel like you're putting an entire continent between us.” She still has her hand on my arm, and I can feel the warmth of it burning through my Katmere dress shirt and into my skin below.

I take a step back—away from the warmth of her skin—and ask, “What do you want from me, Grace?”

But the second the words are out of my mouth, I feel awful. She looks stricken, and that's the last thing I want. I'd never deliberately hurt Grace no matter how much she, and this situation, is hurting me.

I start to apologize, but before I can, she whispers, “I don't know. I just—” She stops and blows out a shaky breath. “I miss you. I know it's bullshit; I know I have no right to say it

to you. But I miss you.”

And then she turns and runs back down the hall toward her next class—and Jaxon. Always Jaxon.

But before I can get upset, Macy’s words come back to me about eternity. And for the first time, I know—really know—that she’s right. Because yeah, I’m suffering right now and so is Grace.

But I know her inside and out. I know everything about her—what she likes, what she hates, her good points and her bad ones, and wrapped up in all of that is the understanding that I have to hang on as long as it takes. Because while I don’t know much right now about what’s going to happen or how it’s going to happen, I know that she will remember our time together one day. I know that she’ll remember what she told me all those weeks ago. That I am her true north and that as long as she has me, she’ll always find her way.

And if I don’t hang in there and wait for her to realize she loves me again, when she gets her memories back, Grace—my Grace—would kick my ass for giving up on her. And worse, for giving up on us.

So I tuck the hurt and the anger away as I continue down the hall and promise myself that, no matter what, I’ll be here whenever Grace is ready for what comes next.

About the Author

New York Times and *USA Today* Bestselling author [Tracy Wolff](#) collects books, English degrees and lipsticks and has been known to forget where—and sometimes who—she is when immersed in a great novel. At six she wrote her first short story—something with a rainbow and a prince—and at seven she forayed into the wonderful world of girls lit with her first Judy Blume novel. By ten she'd read everything in the young adult and classics sections of her local bookstore, so in desperation her mom started her on romance novels. And from the first page of the first book, Tracy knew she'd found her life-long love. Now an English professor at her local community college, she writes contemporary romance and erotic romance as Tracy Wolff, paranormal romance and urban fantasy as Tessa Adams and young adult novels as Tracy Deeb.

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