

A THORNE HILL WORLD NOVEL



NIGHTFALL

1

THE GRIM GATE SERIES

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
EMILY GOODWIN

NIGHTFALL

Book One in the Grim Gate Series

EMILY GOODWIN

Nightfall

Book One in the Grim Gate Series

Copyright 2021

Emily Goodwin

Cover photography by Lindee Robinson

Cover art by Covers by Christian



All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the written permission of the publisher except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events or places is purely coincidental.

✿ Created with Vellum

To Mom and Ashley-thank you for being my first readers

CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Thank you](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also By Emily Goodwin](#)

Chapter One

Well, shit.

I reach for my wine, needing a big sip of Pinot Grigio before I can turn and look at my date, who's apparently *not* the man sitting at the table across from me.

"Anora?"

"Yeah," I reply as soon as the wine goes down my throat. I push my shoulders back and smile, bracing for the inevitable look on my date's face, because there's a good chance he's been standing there a while, watching me have a conversation with a man he can't see.

In fact, I'm sure no one in this Mexican restaurant can see him...which explains why he didn't eat a single chip. No one can resist a fresh bowl of chips and house-made salsa. Well, apparently ghosts can. I quickly blink and inhale, forcing the mental shields back up. When I open my eyes, the man across from me is gone.

"You must be Gavin." The guy—who I know is Gavin because he actually looks like his profile photo—looks at the empty seat across from me for a moment and then glances back at me.

"I, uh," he starts, probably wondering if I'm too crazy to sit and have dinner with. Then his eyes go to my breasts and he nods. "I am." Hesitating another second, he slides into the booth across from me. "Sorry if I kept you waiting."

"It's okay." I take another sip of wine. "I got off work earlier than I thought I would."

“What do you do?” He reaches for the basket of chips and slides it from the center of the table so it’s directly in front of him.

“I’m a vet-tech,” I tell him, certain now that he only looked at my photos on my online dating profile. I proudly have my occupation listed twice, which might be overkill, I know, but it is what it is. “And you work in IT, right?” I did check out this guy’s profile, and then looked him up on social media. I call it being thorough, not stalking. I want to make sure the guys I’m going out with are not psycho killers. Well, not according to their Instagram at least.

“Right.” He pulls the salsa over as well, double-dipping his chip.

“So, um, what do you do?”

“Mostly tell people to unplug and plug back in their printers.”

I laugh. “Technology can be hard, right?”

The waiter comes over, bringing another menu. He eyes me curiously, and I’m sure he saw me chatting it up with a dead man, only to him it looked like I was talking to no one. I’ve been a medium my whole life, able to see and hear ghosts. Most of the time, the ghosts pay no attention to me, stuck in the loop of a memory significant to them for one reason or another. Every once in a while, I run into a spirit like the one I’d just been talking to. They appear corporeal, coherent, and are able to carry on a conversation.

With twenty-four years of experience at this, I’m normally better at sensing them. I get that *hair standing up on the back of your neck* feeling, and there’s a shift in the energy around me. I’ve tried to explain it, I know it’s hard for people to understand. If they can’t see it, then it’s not real, and I get it. I really do. It’s hard to believe in something you’re unable to see, and even harder when said unseen thing can be scary. People don’t *want* to believe in ghosts.

When vampires made the shocking *coming out* a few years ago, I thought people would become more open to the

supernatural, but I was sadly mistaken. There are a growing number of people who see vampires for what I know they are: the mysteriously sexy yet dangerous supernatural creatures we read about for centuries. Though there are still a lot who refuse to believe in that, my parents included. With my mother being a doctor and my father teaching physics, they insist there has to be a scientific reason for vampirism. Yet no one has been able to prove *scientifically* why someone would be able to survive only on blood, not age, and recover from what would otherwise be lethal injuries.

Because it's not science, it's some sort of dark supernatural force we'll never fully understand.

"What are you getting?" Gavin asks me.

"Combination number three. It's my favorite."

"You eat here a lot?"

I shrug. "Not really. It's close to work so we order from here at least once a month."

"I'll try it too." He closes his menu and rests his hands on the table. "Are you a natural redhead?"

"Yeah," I say, annoyed but used to getting that question a lot. "I am."

"You're very beautiful."

"Thanks." I set my wine glass back down.

"You look like my sister. I thought you were her when I first saw your profile. I couldn't swipe fast enough."

And now I'm picking my wine back up. "Oh. That's, um, interesting."

His eyes drop to my breasts again. "She wore green a lot too."

"You two must be close."

"We were." He sits up, eyes narrowing ever so slightly. "But then she got married."

I finish the rest of the wine in my glass. If I'm going to make it through the rest of dinner, I have a feeling I'm going to need the whole bottle.



“YOU WERE RIGHT. I SHOULD HAVE STAYED HOME WITH YOU.” I shoot the deadbolt in place and let out a sigh, crouching down on the ground to take off my heels but get bombarded with slobbery kisses from Hunter, my German Shepherd. “But the night is young, and we can salvage it with junk food and horror movies.”

As if he can understand me, Hunter excitedly runs from the front door and jumps on the couch.

“Give me a minute to change,” I tell him and pull off my shoes. “I swear, pushup bras are nothing more than modernized medieval torture devices.” I shrug off my purse and reach behind me, unbuckling my bra as I walk through my small brick house.

“Hey, little dude,” I say to my sleeping ferret when I get into my bedroom. Pulling my bra through the sleeve of my dress, I drop it on the floor, topping the pile of laundry I swore I was going to put away yesterday. Romeo wakes up, stretching and yawning as I strip out of my clothes. Someone dumped him off in front of the vet clinic my first year there as a vet-tech, and I'm a sucker for a sad, homeless animal. I change into PJs, refill Romeo's food and water, and go into my small kitchen.

“Need to go out?” I ask Hunter, who's sitting by the backdoor waiting for me. My yard is tiny but fenced in, not that I necessarily need it. Hunter is very well behaved, thanks to whoever owned him before. I found him wandering through my parents' neighborhood five years ago, and after getting him scanned for a microchip—he didn't have one—and contacting over a dozen shelters and vets in central New York, he officially became mine.

I open the back door, letting Hunter bound out into the night, and stick a bag of popcorn into the microwave. I grab a bottle of pink Moscato from my fridge and pour myself half a glass. I like wine as much as the next twenty-something-year-old-wino, but it's hard to keep the mental shields that block out the ghosts up when I've had too much to drink.

Taking a small sip of my wine, I step outside, standing on the small cement square I call my patio. It's relatively quiet on my street, and both neighbors on either side of me are in their eighties and keep to themselves. I look up at the sky, watching thin dark clouds slowly roll over the crescent moon.

Hunter bounds over, leaping up the three steps onto the patio and pushing his way inside. The microwave beeps a few seconds after I get the back door locked, and I grab the bag and go into the living room, settling on the couch with Hunter at my side.

"True crime or eighties horror?" I ask as I flip through my suggested shows on Netflix. "Or something light-hearted and funny?"

Hunter nudges me with his nose, wanting popcorn and not caring what I put on. I open the bag and give him a handful of popcorn. I decide on watching reruns of *Charmed* and fall asleep on the couch like the old lady I am only an hour or so later.

It's not uncommon for me to have weird, vivid dreams. I assume it has something to do with being a medium. Not only do I see and hear spirits, but I feel their emotions from their last moments on earth...which usually aren't pleasant. Most of the time, it comes on suddenly without warning as I pass by the emotional stain left on the earth.

I stopped trying to make sense of my dreams years ago, but I have one repetitive dream in particular that has always bothered me, not because it's any more cryptic than someone's last memory before dying, but because there's something familiar about it...which makes no sense. And tonight is no exception, as the dream starts to play out before me.

Like always, I'm walking through the woods. I'm not alone, yet I can't see who I'm walking with. I'm happy though, and always wake filled with a sense of family and belonging. Sometimes Hunter is with me, and sometimes a black cat trots along ahead of us, stopping between two large trees. A brilliant blue light starts to flicker between the trees, glowing behind the shadow of a door as someone chants.

"Invoco elementum terrae. Invoco elemuntum aeris."

I can feel someone's hand around mine, and the smell of sage and lavender hits me right when I wake up. It's always there, right before the door opens. I've never stayed asleep long enough to see what's beyond the door.

Except I do tonight.

"Invoco elemuntum aqua. Invoco elemuntum ignis."

Whoever is holding my hand lets go and steps forward, face hidden behind the hood of a black cloak. She pulls a knife from her pocket and presses it against the tip of her finger, carefully smearing the bead of blood on the blade, and then plunges the blade into the ground. The door swings open, and my heart hammers in my chest.

"Come along, Anora," a woman says, reaching behind her for my hand again. I inch forward, dry leaves crunching under my feet, stretching out my hand. I look through the door, seeing a large brick building past a dark courtyard. The familiar feeling of going home after a vacation swells in my chest, and for a brief moment, I feel like I'm right where I belong.

And then I suddenly wake up, with Hunter's head pressed against me and an overwhelming sense of missing a place I've never been. I run my hand over Hunter's head, slowly sitting up. It's a little after one AM, too late to text Laney, my best friend, to tell her about the dream. She's one of the few people I can be open and honest with, and one of the fewer people who actually believe me.

"I think it's time for bed," I tell Hunter, heart still aching. How can I be homesick for a place that not only have I never

been to, but I'm pretty sure doesn't even exist? The damn dream feels more like a memory, and that woman's voice is so familiar. "It's just a dream," I mutter as I pick up the bowl of popcorn and my wine glass, taking it into the kitchen and dumping what's left into the sink.

I put the popcorn on the counter, not wanting to waste it. I lie to myself, saying I'll eat it tomorrow, but will probably end up forgetting about it until it goes stale. Double checking that the house is locked up for the night, I flick on the porch light and then head to bed.



"HEY, MOM." I SIT UP, RUNNING MY HAND OVER MY FACE, and hold the phone to my ear with my shoulder.

"Did I wake you?"

"No. I've been up for hours." I have been. And then I fell asleep on the couch again. I tossed and turned until dawn last night, unable to get that dream out of my head. Frustrated with not being able to sleep, I got up and took Hunter for a walk and came back home with the intention of doing that deep cleaning I keep meaning to do. Instead, I passed out on the couch with my cup of coffee still on the coffee table in front of me. "Is everything okay?"

"Oh, of course. I wanted to make sure you're still coming over for dinner tonight. Harrison will be there, and it's been a while since we've had a family meal."

"What time?"

"Does six work for you? Dad is golfing and promised to be back by five."

"It does. I'll be done with work by then."

"I thought you had Saturdays off," Mom says. "You didn't go back to that circus, did you?"

I slowly inhale. Mom's correct to call my previous place of employment a circus, yet I have to remind myself to let it go. I

took the job as a medium thinking I could really help people, but my boss was just as big of a believer in the supernatural as my mother. I freaked him out big time, as well as most of the clients who came in. I did exactly what they asked me to do, but it wasn't all sunshine and roses.

"I have Saturdays off from the clinic, but I give riding lessons now. I got a new student," I tell her, knowing exactly where this conversation is going to lead...especially since Mom knows my lease is up on this house in December and I haven't signed a new one yet. Teaching riding lessons at Hollow Creek Stables is the only way I can afford to continue to pay the monthly board for my horse, Mystery, and most months are pretty tight.

"You're welcome back home so you don't have to work two jobs," she starts, and I close my eyes, reminding myself her heart is in the right place. "There's no shame in staying here for a year or so in order to pad your savings account. Paying rent on a house and board for a horse is a lot for anyone, Anora."

"I know," I say with practiced patience. It *is* a lot, and staying home the year after I graduated was tempting, but my relationship with my parents has always been a bit rocky, and I needed out of the house as soon as possible. It's been a good thing, and my relationship with my mother has gotten much better since I moved out.

A big believer in science, Mom insisted the spirits I saw were "all in my head" and I lost count of how many therapists she had me go see as a child. Eventually, I learned to keep my mouth shut, but there's something about your mother thinking you're crazy to ruin that mother-daughter relationship.

We got into a heated argument just last week about vampires. I insisted what I know to be true: vampirism is the result of a curse or some sort of dark magic, and she insisted magic isn't real and we'll *get to the bottom of the disease* that causes them to not be able to withstand sunlight, consume "typical" food, and be subjects to outbursts of dangerous rage. Being invited to dinner tonight is Mom's way of offering an olive branch, and the fact that she got Harrison, my twin

brother, to come lets me know she really does want to put this whole thing behind us.

“Do you want me to bring anything to dinner tonight? I cleaned out my pantry last week and found a bottle of blueberry wine I got last spring from that vineyard by Aunt Muriel’s place.”

“Ohh, that was good wine! Yes, bring that, but nothing else is necessary. When are you going to the barn?”

I look at the clock, suddenly panicked that I don’t even know what time it is. I let out a small sigh when I see that I didn’t sleep through my lesson. “In like an hour or so.”

“If you want to drop Hunter off here on your way, you can. Buster needs someone to play with. That dog is driving me crazy.”

“Probably because you let Dad name him Buster.”

Mom laughs. “It’s not the most original name, I’ll side with you there.”

“I’ll get dressed and will head over now.”

“I’ll see you soon then, honey. Love you.”

“Love you too,” I say and end the call. Sighing, I get up, raking my fingers through my messy hair as I walk into my bedroom. I change into boots and breaches, feed Romeo, and grab Hunter’s harness and leash.

My parents’ house is halfway between my little rented house and the barn, which is another point Mom has brought up a few times. I’d save on gas and time if I relented and moved back home. They live in an expensive neighborhood with gossipy neighbors who no doubt know me as the weird girl who talks about ghosts.

My phone buzzes with a text on my way over, but I don’t check it until I’m parked in the driveway. It’s from Mom, saying one of her patients is in the ER and she’s going to check on them. Hunter and I go inside through the backdoor, and I let him out into the fenced-in yard with my parents’

golden retriever, Buster. The dogs love each other and start wrestling and running around right away.

I go inside and head into the kitchen to find something to eat. A large cardboard box sits on the island counter, and I know it's from my great-aunt Estelle as soon as I see the shipping label. Her tiny cursive handwriting is hard to read, and it always surprises me anyone was able to read it and get the box delivered to the right house.

I grab a knife from the block on the counter and slice open the packaging tape. There are messily wrapped presents inside the box, with bits of what looks like cat fur stuck to the tape. The presents for Harrison are always wrapped in green paper, and mine are in yellow. I set his aside and grab the smallest yellow package, ripping it open and revealing a deck of well-used tarot cards. In the middle of the cards, between the Three of Wands and The Lovers is a handwritten note. I have to hold it close to my face to be able to discern what Aunt Estelle wrote. I have no idea how anyone is able to write so small.

Anora-

Put these under your pillow on the first night of the full moon phase. Leave them there for seven days. Then they'll be yours.

That's a little strange and might be uncomfortable, but I plan to do it anyway. I set the cards on the counter and reach into the box, pulling out the next present, which is a pretty jewelry box. Like the cards, it's old and worn. Stars and swirls are engraved in the dark wood, smoothed from years of being opened and closed. This just might be the most practical thing Aunt Estelle has ever given me. I open the box to see if the tarot cards will fit.

There's a necklace inside, with a round silver pendant hanging off a delicate silver chain. A triple-moon is engraved into the middle of the pendant, and some sort of foreign language is etched around it. The symbol is familiar, though I have no idea why.

I stare at it for another moment, trying to place where I've seen this before. Giving up, I put the necklace on, tucking the

pendant into my shirt and reach into the box, taking out the last present wrapped in yellow paper. I tear it open and tip my head. What the heck? It's a Mason jar full of white powder. There's no way this is a jar full of cocaine...right? Maybe it's baking soda or powdered sugar, and I'll find a recipe in the bottom of the box.

Carefully, I unscrew the lid and smell the powder. Definitely not sugar. It has a salty smell, which confuses me even more. I have no idea what cocaine smells like, and I'm not sure if I can trust a Google search to tell me one way or another.

"Whatever," I mumble and screw the lid back on the jar. I set it on the counter and peer into the large box, looking at the last gift. It's not wrapped in yellow paper, yet somehow I know it's for me. I pick up whatever it is and slowly unwrap it from a shimmery blue scarf.

"The fuck?" I whisper, when the scarf falls to the ground and I'm left holding a dagger. Swallowing hard, I slowly pull the dagger from its sheath. Something that looks mysteriously like blood is splattered along the tip of the blade, and the same triple-moon symbol that's on the pendant is etched into the blade right below the handle, which is plain, with a single Tiger's Eye gemstone set into the pommel. I wrap my fingers around the hilt and turn the dagger over.

I hold my hand out, watching the sunlight flash across the shiny metal. I can't explain it, but holding the dagger feels right. Inhaling, I turn it back over, staring at the triple-moon symbol engraved into the blade. Why is this so familiar? And why do I feel confident in wielding this thing? I can hardly cut an avocado in half without risking all five of my fingers. And speaking of fingers...I put one against the tip of the dagger, testing out just how sharp it really is. It would take little effort to break the skin.

The garage door that leads into the mudroom right off the kitchen opens, startling me. I feel the blade slice open my skin as I turn and see my brother walk into the kitchen. I bring my hand back, curling my finger into my palm to hide the blood. Harrison stops in his tracks, looking at the weapon in my hand.

He raises his eyebrows and shakes his head, and then takes his shoes off and comes inside.

“I won’t ask,” he says and immediately goes to the fridge.

I bring my hand forward to inspect the damage. There’s no blood. No wound. I thought for sure I cut myself.

I put the dagger back in its sheath and set it on the counter. “Aunt Estelle sent it. You got presents too.”

“Yay,” he says unenthusiastically and pulls out the leftover spaghetti from last night. “More crap to throw away.”

“It’s not always crap. Though speaking of crap—hang on.” I grab the jar of white powder and unscrew the lid. “Any idea what this is?”

Harrison takes the jar, looking at it with consideration for a second before taking a pinch and rubbing it between his fingers. He brings it to his mouth and I grab his hand.

“You’re seriously about to lick that?”

“I’m trying to figure out what it is, right?”

I roll my eyes. “Sometimes I wonder how you’ve lived so long. It could be rat poison for all we know.”

Harrison nods. “True enough.” He wipes his hand on his pants and goes back to the food.

“It’s weird, isn’t it?” I start and put my presents from Aunt Estelle back in the box. “That she never forgets our birthday yet we’ve never even met her.”

“We’ve met her.”

“No, we haven’t.”

Harrison looks at me incredulously. “She used to babysit us.”

“No, she didn’t,” I insist.

“Yeah,” he replies slowly. “She did, back when we were still living in Michigan. Mom was finishing her residency and Dad had just started teaching at MSU.”

I stare at Harrison for a few seconds, waiting for him to laugh and tell me he's joking. Because I have no memory of this.

"We'd stay at Nana and Pop's for the weekend," he goes on. "And Aunt Estelle would always drive up from Indiana. We went to her house a few times and she'd take us on nature walks through her property."

I shake my head. "When was this?"

"The year before we moved here. We were, what, seven or eight? You really don't remember?"

"I remember staying with Nana and Pop, but I have literally zero memory of Aunt Estelle."

Harrison's blue eyes narrow. "You're not drunk, are you?"

"Unlike you, I don't day-drink."

He shrugs. "If I have nowhere to be, why not enjoy a drink? But really, sis...you look like her. Mom's commented on it a few times, and Dad still jokes he's glad the redhead gene only effects females in the Fowler family line." I look at Harrison like he's crazy, though I know for certain he's not making this up. "Come here," he says and waves his hand. I follow Harrison through the house, going downstairs into the finished basement family room.

"See?" He points to a photo that's hanging on the stairwell. "That's us with Nana and Aunt Estelle."

"Holy shit," I murmur, looking at the framed photo. It's nestled in a gallery of other family photos, ones I've walked by a hundred times. How the hell did I not notice this? I lean in closer, looking at the photograph. There's no mistaking Harrison, with his light brown hair and bright blue eyes. He's standing with Nana—Mom's mom—with a cheesy smile on his face.

And then there's me, standing next to a woman with long red hair. It's Aunt Estelle. She's dressed in all black and has her hand on my shoulder. There's no denying our resemblance, and at least now I know I'm not the only redhead on Mom's side of the family.

“Wait a second,” I start, lips parting as I sharply inhale. There’s a dog lying by Aunt Estelle’s feet, and he looks shockingly familiar. A charm hangs from the dog’s collar, and while it’s too small to be sure, I’m willing to bet the charm from that dog’s collar is the same pendant that’s hanging around my neck. Slowly, I tear my eyes from the photo to look at my brother, expecting to see the same shock. “That’s Hunter.”

Chapter Two

“Okay,” Harrison says slowly, looking at me with concern now. “Not remembering something from our childhood is one thing, but thinking that dog is Hunter is another. That was nearly twenty years ago, and that dog was an adult back then.”

“But it looks like him.”

“He looks like a typical German Shepherd. And I’m pretty sure that dog was a female named Daisy.”

“How the hell do you remember all this?”

“How do you not?”

I let out a breath. “I don’t know. Did anything traumatic happen that would have blocked it from my memory?”

“Not that I know of. Unless it was...” He hesitates for a moment. “I always thought Aunt Estelle’s house was haunted.” He shrugs and we go back upstairs.

“Why are you here so early?” I ask, grabbing an apple from the fruit bowl on the breakfast table.

“I took a client out to brunch and was nearby. It’s always quiet here and good for napping.”

“You took a client out to brunch on a Saturday? It’s unsettling seeing you so grown up.”

“Hah.” He puts the spaghetti in the microwave. “It’s unsettling being so grown up. I turned down going out to the

bar last night with Bryan because I knew I had to get up early today.”

“What is wrong with you?” I tease, knowing Harrison lives for going out so he can bring a new girl home with him. “Are you going out tonight to make up for it at least?”

“Most likely.”

“I’m going out too. Laney’s boyfriend is playing at *Martini’s*.”

“He’s still in that band? I heard they were awful.” He makes a face and I shoot him one right back.

“Be nice. It’s Josh’s hobby, and they’ve gotten better since last year.”

“Did they replace everyone?”

I give Harrison a blank stare. “No. And I’m not going out just to listen to them. My date was a bust last night so maybe I’ll pick up a hottie from the bar to bring home.”

“You’re going to bring home a stranger?”

“Like you never do. Feel free to set me up with some of your single friends.” I take a bite of the apple.

“No fucking way.”

“Marcus from your office is cute. And I know he’s single.”

“You don’t want to go out with Marcus. He’s not the settling down type. You’re much too wholesome for that.”

“Wholesome?” I raise my eyebrows. “I feel like that’s a nice way of saying I’m a prude, which I’m not. Not at all.”

“Too much information, Anora.” He flicks his eyes to me, expression softening. “Be careful if you do decide to go home with anyone.”

“I’d take them home with me. And if they don’t pass Hunter’s test, I’ll shoo them out.”

“And you wonder why you’re single,” he says under his breath.

“I gotta run,” I tell him. “Can you let Hunter and Buster in soon? It’s too hot for them to be out for much longer.”

“Yeah. See ya, sis.”



“HEY, ANORA!” LESLIE, MY FRIEND AND ANOTHER RIDING instructor at the barn, calls as I get out of my car and cross the gravel parking lot. She’s leading her horse into the barn, coming from the indoor arena. Sundance spooks, able to sense—or maybe even see—the ghost standing at the threshold of the woods next to the arena. I’ve named him Bob, and he’s been appearing in that same spot for years, stuck in some sort of time loop.

He never looks at me, never speaks or moves more than that one step he takes from the woods. A deep sadness resonates from him, and he surveys the pasture with a pained expression as if he’s looking for a lost love. I’ve fallen deep down the rabbit hole trying to figure out who he is and why he’s tied to this place, but have come up empty-handed, making me think his body was buried somewhere in the woods. I’ve considered going to the police because if his body is in the woods, it deserves to be found.

But what would I say? *Hey, I think there might be a body in the woods because a ghost haunts the barn where my horse lives?* I’d sound crazy for sure and wouldn’t get taken seriously.

“Hey!” I call back, pulling the hair tie from my wrist, raking my hair into a messy ponytail as I walk. Bob slowly fades from view and Sundance settles back down. The barn is busy, as it always is on Saturdays, and it’s one of the rare places I enjoy the hustle and bustle of people. After hanging my purse up in my tack locker, I head out to the pasture to get Charlie, the pony I use for riding lessons.

I’m unhooking the pasture gate when I get the feeling of eyes on me. I turn, looking through the arena behind me for Bob. I watch Leslie and Sundance, half expecting him to

spook again. He canters around the arena twice, not so much as looking at the spot where Bob usually stands.

I turn back around and am suddenly face to face with Bob. My heart jumps into my throat and my lips part as I gasp in shock. Bob never moves from his spot. Never. What the fuck am I supposed to do? Twenty-four years of being a medium should have trained me for this, yet I'm rooted to the spot, unable to look away from the dead man that stands in front of me.

Say something. Right. I should say something. I suck in air, preparing to speak, but get hit with the sickening smell of death. I recoil, eyes watering, and then it's like Bob is suddenly stuck in reverse, reaching out for me right as he's yanked backward. His head jerks to the side and a noose appears around his neck as he's lifted into the trees. His body sways with the wind for a moment and then he disappears.

"The fuck?" I mutter, still not able to move. I blink rapidly, looking up at the trees. Nothing is amiss, and the half-dozen or so horses in the pasture before me are still grazing as if everything is normal.

And maybe it is—to them. But for the last seven years, Bob has stayed in exactly one spot and has never reacted to me, no matter how hard I tried, and I threw things at him before. They passed right through him, of course, but I felt guilty for days.

I let my eyes fall shut, shaking myself. I have to get Charlie and get him ready for a lesson. Focus, Anora. Bob is dead. My student isn't, and she's rather difficult. I can't lose her and risk having to choose between groceries or Mystery's board next month.

I'd choose Mystery over myself anyway, of course, and speaking of my white Arabian, he nickers softly when he sees me, and then gives me the stink eye when I go to Charlie, not him.

"I'll be back for you," I promise, and have to chase after the stubborn pony before I'm able to catch him. I hurry back to the barn and get Charlie ready just in time for Heather to

arrive. It's a bit of a mental fight to keep my attention solely on her for the next hour, and it's only once she's gone, Charlie's back in the pasture, and I'm leading Mystery toward the barn that I can relax.

"You know what?" I tell my horse, stopping halfway between the pasture and the barn. "Let's just go for a walk in the woods."

Mystery gently nudges me, wanting me to turn around so he can rub his head against my back. White fur sticks to my sweaty skin, thanks to the late-August heat. I tie his lead rope to his halter, making a makeshift bridle, and hop up on his back.

There are a few miles of winding trails through the forest behind the pastures, and it's always been my happy place. I relax as I feel Mystery move beneath me, knowing the path and needing little direction from me. I keep the lead rope loosely held on one hand and absentmindedly twist his mane through my fingers of my free hand.

Letting my eyes fall shut, I tip my head up once we get into the woods. Sunlight filters through the trees, warming my face every few paces. I love being out here, alone with my horse. I can let everything bad slip away for a little while.

Suddenly, Mystery's head shoots up, and his entire body tenses. I open my eyes and lean forward to keep my balance. Something moves through the underbrush beside us. I turn, taking a tighter hold on the lead rope. When I don't see anything, I urge Mystery forward.

"Come on, boy," I say in a calm voice. "It's probably just a bunny. And not the evil killer bunny you got scared of last week." I roll my eyes and pat his neck. "Though really, you could totally take that bunny."

Mystery takes a few steps forward before he comes to a halt. His ears twitch, listening to something that I can't hear. I urge him forward again, but he doesn't budge. Instead, he sidesteps off the path. Branches crash into my face, and I duck my head down.

“Mystery, whoa,” I say, but he’s too spooked to listen. I pull back on the lead rope, struggling to direct him onto the path. “Calm down, big guy, it’s okay.”

Branches snap behind us. I turn my head, my breath catching in my chest when I see a dog slink through the trees.

“Easy, baby,” I sooth, letting go of the rope with one hand to pet Mystery’s neck. “It’s a dog. We’ve come across them before. Remember, you’re bigger than he is.” I watch the dog move through the weeds, and my nerves shoot through me when the dog growls. If this dog attacks, it’s not going to end well. One kick to the face could kill this dog, and one bite from said dog could injure my horse.

I feel Mystery tense beneath me. He paws at the ground and raises his head up, preparing to rear.

“Easy,” I say and pitch forward, momentarily taking my eyes off the dog. “Walk forward, then run,” I pant as I fight against my pulling horse. I flick my eyes back in time to see the dog slowly step back onto the trail.

The familiar shape of a dog registers in my brain, but something is...off. Its muzzle is twisted and flattened against its face. Gray human-like eyes narrow as it growls at me, revealing razor-sharp teeth. Its legs are thick and hairless, ending in paws that look more like talons.

My eyes widen in terror, heart hammering, and I can’t look away. Mystery rears, striking out at the creature. Too scared to move, I feel myself sliding backward, falling off my horse. The lead rope burns as its yanked free from my hands. At the last minute, I try to regain my balance but fail, crashing through trees as I fall. I land hard, hip hitting the ground first and knocking the wind out of me. My head smacks against the hard ground next, and stars dot my vision for a split second.

And then everything goes black.

Chapter Three

A sharp bark echoes in my ears, stirring me awake. I plant my hands against the dusty dirt beneath me, nausea twisting in my stomach as I push up. My ears ring and pain webs through me, followed by dizziness that only makes the nausea worse.

Mystery is only feet from me, and I scramble back to avoid getting trampled by my own horse. The dog-like creature is still on the path, still growling with saliva dripping from its yellowed fangs. I could have sworn that bark sounded just like Hunter, but it had to have come from the creature before me.

I try to stand but falter, and the creature lunges forward. I close my eyes, preparing for the attack. Heart in my throat, I throw my hands out at the last second, covering my face. With a snort, Mystery rears again, hooves crashing to the ground inches from the creature. He strikes out again, clipping the thing on the face. Several inches of fur and skin tear off, hanging off of its cheek in a diagonal slash from its eye to its cheek.

Another bark echoes through the forest, and the creature slinks back, taking a final snap at Mystery before turning and running away. I stare unblinking at the spot where it had stood. My hands start shaking, and suddenly, I can't catch my breath.

Mystery nudges me, and I jump, thinking the thing came back. Frozen, I stare into the trees, looking for the dog. My heart is racing, beating so fast it might explode inside my chest. Leaves rustle just feet from us. Adrenaline surges through me, and I clamber back up and onto Mystery.

I squeeze his sides and he takes off, running to the barn. I slide off once his hooves hit the gravel path behind the barn, taking his lead rope and giving it a tug to get him to stop. He would run right into his stall if I let him.

Panic once again flashes through me when I see the red bloodstain on Mystery's shoulder. I reach up to feel for a wound and then realize the blood is coming from me. I bring my hand to my head and the pain registers. Shit. I blink and get a flash of tree branches as I fell. One no doubt sliced right into my forehead.

Head wounds—even those not serious—bleed a lot, and this is no exception. I wipe my bloody fingers on my pants, wincing from a sharp pain in my hip. Falling off a horse is never fun. I've had my fair share of falls, and most have never resulted in open wounds, yet I'm still stiff and sore the next day or two.

Mystery spooks, and his lead rope almost slips out of my trembling hands. I turn, fist clenched, and see Bob. He's yards from his tree, and the front of his t-shirt is soaked with blood again.

"God dammit, Bob," I grumble. "Go haunt someone else." I stare down Bob, hearing his voice echo in the back of my mind. He turns, locks eyes with me, and it's like someone dumped a bucket of ice water down my back. I squeeze my eyes closed, and when I open them, Bob is gone.

"What the hell?" I mutter and stumble back, bumping into Mystery. He nervously sidesteps and presses his head on my back. I'm shaking and feel like I'm going to throw up. A surge in electromagnetic energy tends to do that to me.

The sound of hooves on cement startles me, and I turn to see Leslie leading Sundance to the outdoor wash rack. She looks up and smiles, opening her mouth to say hi, no doubt, but stops. "Are you bleeding?" She quickly ties up Sundance and comes over.

"Oh, yeah, but I'm fine," I rush out, pressing my trembling hand against Mystery's side. "There was, a, uh, a coyote out there and Mystery sidestepped off the path." I blink my eyes

closed, shaking my head. I'm not a good liar, and the shock that's running through my system isn't helping. It's hard enough to form a coherent thought right now, let alone come up with a lie that actually makes sense. "We probably crashed right through one of those trees with prickly branches."

"Ugh those are the worst. I'll have to go out and make sure they're trimmed if they're that close to the path."

"Not now. The, uh, coyote might still be out there." I swallow hard, not sure what else to say to keep Leslie—and anyone for that matter—from going out in the woods.

"I'm sure it's gone. They're not usually out during the day like that anyway. Are you sure you're okay? You look...pale."

I'm far from okay, and it's taking everything I have not to freak the fuck out. First Bob wigs out on me and then something attacks me in the woods.

Blood drips down my face but I nod. "Yeah. Just a little shaken up. Mystery doesn't spook like that often."

"No, he's pretty calm for an Arabian," she jokes. "Want me to put him out in the pasture for you so you can clean that cut up?"

The thought of putting Mystery out in the pasture with that...that...*thing* makes my stomach twist. "I don't want the coyote to come back."

"It would be really freaking stupid to go after the herd."

"Right." I wipe some of the blood from my forehead. "Thanks."

Leslie takes Mystery from me and heads to the pasture. I shut my eyes and let out a slow breath, giving myself a minute before going into the barn. I try to keep my head down so no one else sees and questions me. I make it to the bathroom without notice, and turn on the water to warm it up. I stare at the water coming out of the faucet, not ready to look at my reflection just yet.

I blink, and get a flash of that thing. My heart speeds up and I grip the edges of the sink. It was real. I know what I saw,

and more importantly, Mystery saw it. But what in the actual fuck? It was dog-like, that's for sure. But its face was all wrong and dogs have paws, not finger-like talons. That thing was like a Tim Burton nightmare come to life, and I know without a doubt if Mystery hadn't clipped it in the face with his hoof, it would have attacked me. And for some reason—that makes no freaking sense, I know—I have a strong feeling that thing was there for me and me alone. It was the way it looked at me as if it knew me.

Fingers trembling, I tear off a paper towel and wet it with warm water. I lean over the sink, carefully rinsing the blood off my forehead. The cut isn't as bad as it looks, but I'm sure it'll get nice and swollen with some bruising later. I don't need stitches at least.

Turning off the sink, I grab the first-aid kit from under the bathroom sink and wince as I blot an alcohol pad over the cut. I press a piece of gauze over the wound next and do my best to tape it to my forehead. It's right along my hairline, making it hard to get the tape to stick, but at least I can cover it with my hair once the wound has scabbed over.

Leslie is walking back into the barn as I leave the bathroom.

“Mystery's out with the herd, and everyone is calm,” she says.

“Thanks,” I reply, voice thin.

“Are you sure you're okay?” she asks again. “You look like you saw a ghost?” She sharply inhales. “Did you?” she whispers. Leslie and I have gotten close over the years and she knows the truth about me. Well, some of it.

“Bob is always here.” I force a smile. “I'm good. Thanks again for taking Mystery. I'm having dinner at my parents' tonight, so I should head out.”

It's an awkward exit, I know, but fuck. I need out of here. I can't get the image of that thing out of my head. I'm fully aware of how much humans crave normalcy. How much people are willing to overlook the obvious and give things

“logical explanations”, and part of my brain is trying to tell me what I saw was just some ugly, inbred, deformed dog.

Because monsters don't exist.

Just like how ghosts don't exist...and how vampires didn't until a few years ago. I know what I saw, and I know it was something *not* from this world. Something evil.

So, what the hell did it want with me?

Chapter Four

“A nora?” Dad says in a tone that makes me think it’s not the first time he’s said my name.

“Sorry, what?” I look up from my salad, realizing I’ve completely zoned out. It’s either that or feel my pulse race as I think about what happened in the woods. I want to make sense of it but just can’t.

“I said, you’re quiet tonight.”

I stab a piece of spinach with my fork and shrug. “Just thinking about work.”

“How are things at the clinic?” Dad asks.

“Busy as always. We got seven of the dogs that were rescued from the hoarder in Camillus.”

“I read about that in the paper. How are the dogs doing?”

“Overall okay. Two will be ready for adoption soon,” I say.

“Don’t even think about it,” Mom tells Dad. “One dog is plenty.”

I laugh and take another bite of salad, making it a point to try and talk with my family. Mom will take my silence as me still being upset with her, and that woman can hold a grudge like it’s nobody’s business.

About an hour later, Harrison and I walk out of the house together carrying Tupperware full of leftovers. Hunter trots along next to me, waiting patiently as I balance the food on top of the box full of gifts from Aunt Estelle.

“Be careful tonight,” Harrison says, opening the door to his BMW.

“I will be,” I promise, though I could really fucking use a distraction tonight. “Night, Har. Love you.”

“You too.”

I get all my stuff piled in the passenger seat and then buckle Hunter into the back. I turn on my classic 80s rock playlist, calming my nerves a bit as I sing along to Def Leppard. I’m not the best at managing time, and should have left Mom and Dad’s a good twenty minutes before I did. Now it’s a mad rush to shower, get dressed, and do my hair and makeup.

I left the door unlocked so Laney can come in once she gets here, and Hunter lets out a soft *woof* when the door creaks open. Maybe it’s naive to rely on him as my sole protector, but he’s rather large for his breed and I have no doubt he’d fight to his literal death if it meant keeping me safe.

“In here!” I call, and a moment later Laney appears in the bathroom doorway.

“I thought you said you were ready.” She puts a hand on her hip and looks at me, amused.

“You should know by now that *I’m ready* means I need at least ten more minutes.” I look at her reflection in the mirror. “Just like *I’m on my way* means I haven’t even gotten dressed yet.”

She laughs. “That is true.”

“You look cute tonight,” I tell her.

“Thanks.” She wiggles her hips. “It’s not too much?”

“Hell no.” I wrap another section of hair around the curling iron. “I kind of hate you for being able to pull off something like that.” Laney is several inches shorter than me and has been genetically blessed with an hourglass figure and very ample breasts. I’m lacking in that department and have considered breast augmentation a few times since it’s something I’m rather self-conscious about.

“You could, though speaking of outfits, do you have something picked out or are you planning on going to the bar in your Slytherin bathrobe?”

“I wouldn’t be caught dead in public in this. I was placed in Gryffindor and must represent the house colors.”

She lets out a snort of laughter. “Want me to pick something for you?”

“Yeah, that would be great. I pulled out a couple of options and put them on my bed.”

“Want something slutty so you can get laid tonight?”

“I know you’re joking, but actually, yeah. It’s been too long since I’ve had sex.”

“Your date was a bust last night?”

I gather the last section of hair to curl. I have a love/hate relationship with my thick hair. Most of the time I love it... until it comes time to try and style it. “Oh, a total bust. To sum it up, he said I looked just like his sister and he couldn’t wait to take me home.”

“Ewww.” She laughs.

“Right? I mean, I try not to judge, but I gotta draw the line at incest.”

Laughing again, Laney turns and goes into the bedroom. I finish my hair, unplug the curling iron, and then do some last-minute touches to my makeup. Laney combined two of the outfits I couldn’t decide between, and I get dressed in heels, dark jeans, and a black crop top. I take my essentials out of my oversized everyday bag and shove them in a small Gucci purse Mom and Dad got me for Christmas last year.

I give Hunter a pat on the way out, lock up, and walk down the sidewalk feeling a little wobbly. It’s been a while since I’ve worn heels. “So I learned something weird today,” I say when I get into the passenger side of Laney’s car. “You know how my great-aunt Estelle sends me weird-ass stuff for my birthday every year?”

“Yeah. Did she miss your birthday this year?”

“No, the package arrived today. Just a week after my birthday. That’s not the weird thing though. Harrison said she used to babysit us when we lived in Michigan and my mom was finishing her residency. I have absolutely no memory of that. Until today, I didn’t even know we’d ever met.”

“You don’t remember anything?”

I shake my head. “Nothing. Har said we stayed at her house and everything.”

“Maybe he’s fucking with you.”

“I thought so too, until he showed me a picture of us with her. I was seven in the photo, so it’s not like it was so long ago I’d have no memory anymore.”

“Okay, that is weird.”

Nodding, I look out the window and have a mild heart attack when I see a large dog running along the road. It takes me a second to see the dog’s owner jogging along behind, with the dog on a retractable leash that allows it to be a good distance ahead of its owner.

I want to tell Laney about the dog in the woods. We’ve been friends since seventh grade and don’t keep things from each other. But she gets freaked out easily and I want us both to have a good time tonight.

The bar is already busy when we get there, and Josh is setting up to start playing. Laney and I order drinks and sit at a table in the back, talking and laughing while we wait for the band to start playing. I’m onto drink number two when Laney pulls me out onto the dance floor. The band has gotten a lot better recently, and the bar-goers are feeling it.

Three songs later, my legs hurt from dancing in these heels. Weaving my way through the crowd, I leave the dance floor and go back to the bar, getting lucky to snag a stool right as someone leaves.

“Anora Benson?” someone asks, coming up behind me. “Is that you?”

I turn and recognize the guy right away. “It is,” I reply. “And you’re Travis Peterson.”

“I’m surprised you remember.” Travis flashes a smile and steps in.

“I have a good memory,” I say, though I think it’s fair most girls from our graduating class in high school remember Travis. He was the stereotypical cool kid and hung out with the popular crowd...which included my brother.

“It’s been a long time, and damn, look at you.” He slowly runs his eyes over me. “You look good. Really good.”

“Why thank you.” Smiling, I angle my body toward his. “And you don’t look so bad yourself either.”

“I gotta ask, are you here alone?”

“No, but I’m not here with a guy, if that’s what you’re wondering.” Damn, I’m almost impressing myself with my flirting right now. “I came with a friend.”

“Can I buy you a drink?”

“I suppose.” I’m already two drinks in and need to take it slow, but I’m at that point of being tipsy where good decision-making goes out the window.

Travis moves in closer, signaling the bartender. “What do you want?” he asks me.

“Vodka and cranberry.”

“Well then.” He slides his hands over so his fingers brush against my forearm. “That’s what you’ll get.”

I smile again, and a little voice in the back of my mind tells me it’s stupid to feel special right now. Seven years ago, I might have given anything for someone like Travis to notice me, but it means nothing today.

Only it does...just a little.

“What have you been up to?” Travis leans on the bar, cocky smile on his face. “I’m a little shocked to still find you here. I thought a girl like you would have taken off, setting the world on fire or something.”

Dammit, I'm blushing again. "I'm a vet-tech at an animal clinic downtown, and I give riding lessons a few times a week."

"Oh, right. You were always into horses."

My heart swells. "Yeah. I was. I still have Mystery, my horse." The bartender sets my vodka and cranberry down and I pick it up, taking a big drink. "I got him when I was in middle school. He's my baby, well, next to my dog, Hunter." I take another drink. "And I should mention Romeo or I'll feel bad."

"Sure." Travis's eyes go to my breasts, which are pushed the fuck up in this uncomfortable pushup bra. Is it misleading to present my humble B-sized breasts as anything bigger? Maybe. But I'm too drunk to care right now.

"What about you?" I ask, taking a sip of my drink. The taste of vodka hits me hard, much harder than my previous drinks. "What are you up to?"

"Sports," he says, and I nod as if that makes sense.

"Cool." Cool? What the fuck? I take another drink and look out at the dance floor at Laney. She's right up by the band with a drink in her hand. "Do you want to—" I start but then cut off when I see Travis checking his phone. Taking a big sip of my drink, I slide off my stool. "I'll be right back," I tell him, needing to use the bathroom. I set my drink down only to pick it up and take one last drink, and then wobble my way to the ladies' room.

I compliment everyone who comes in as I wash my hands, and drunkenly fix my hair in the dirty mirror before leaving. I order another drink and turn around, leaning against the bar as I look for Travis, spotting him across the room. He's talking to some guy who looks familiar but I can't place his face.

I wobble a bit on these damn heels, slowing right before I get to Travis and his friend. I stop to adjust the hem of my crop top and don't mean to eavesdrop, but I can't help but overhear.

"Dude, the girl's a freak, and I don't mean it in a good way." Travis's friend lets out a snort of laughter and takes a

swig of his beer.

“I know,” Travis says. “She’s always been one, and used to talk about creepy shit back in high school. We voted her most un-bangable.”

I freeze, drunk brain slow to realize he’s talking about me.

“She’s too hot to be considered un-bangable.”

“Trust me. If you knew her, you’d agree. She’s fucking nuts, but girls like her give it up easy. It’s like they want to live out their high school fantasy where the prom king takes pity on the desperate nerd.”

Harrison was prom king our senior year, but that’s not the point. Angry tears fill my eyes, but I’m more pissed with myself than anything else. Because here I was feeling confident and thinking someone like Travis—who I knew to be an asshole in high school—might actually like me. And I hate that there was a part of me that wanted him to see I wasn’t the same weird loser that I was in high school. I’ve grown up, and while I’m still weird, I’m proud of the woman I’ve become.

Feeling stupid for thinking anyone else could see that, I take a big gulp of my drink and turn away, face burning with embarrassment. I’ve been called a lot of things, but un-bangable...never. I don’t want to be here anymore, and I want to go home now. Laney drove me here, and even though I’m drunk, I know I can’t expect her to leave like this. Though she’s a good enough friend I know she will, no questions asked. Which is exactly why I hike my purse up over my shoulder and spin on my heel. I toss my drink in the trash and trip, not making the grand exit I hoped for, but I’m on my way out of the bar before anyone notices me.

The night air is cool around me, and I drunkenly weigh my options. I could call Harrison and have him come get me, though there’s not a guarantee he’s not as drunk—or drunker—than I am right now. I could call an Uber and have someone take me home in just a few minutes...or I could keep walking, which seems like the best option in my mind after several drinks.

I'll call Laney later, after I've gotten safely home—somehow—and will finish that bottle of Moscato I've been nursing all week, allowing myself to wallow in self-pity until I pass out. What annoys me though is how my reputation held. Yeah, I was weird. But get the fuck over it, dude.

I angrily wipe a tear away and keep walking, not wanting to stop until I can't see the lights from the bar-front anymore. I get to a street corner and pause. I'm drunk but stop to look both ways at least. The air has cooled considerably now that the sun has set, and I wish I brought a sweater.

Something rustles in the overgrown flowerbed of the storefront next to me. Sucking in a breath, I jump, turning with wide eyes. A car drives by, blasting its music, right as whatever is lurking in the dark growls.

Fuck.

I run across the street as soon as it's safe, heels catching on the uneven sidewalk. I regain my balance before I fall. Heart hammering, I stop and turn around, looking at the flowerbed. Why am I running? That thing attacked me. Scared my horse. And would have done much worse if it were able.

Running away isn't going to solve anything. I have to face it and then...I don't know. I'm drunk and it sounds like a good idea right now. Balling my fists I take a step forward. I make it two more steps before I sense someone behind me. I come to a sudden halt, and shoes scuffle on the sidewalk behind me.

Oh, shit.

Lips parting as my breath leaves in a huff, I slowly turn my head, looking over my shoulder.

The shadowed outline of a man comes into view. "Hey," he says, deep voice rattling right through me. "It's not safe to be walking out here alone."

Chapter Five

“Seriouly?” I spit and whirl around so fast my heel catches on the uneven sidewalk. The man behind me rushes forward, catching me before I fall. It’s not until his hands wrap around my waist that I realize what he said sounds like a line right out of a horror movie.

“Yeah,” he says, brown eyes meeting mine. “Seriouly.”

I push off his firm chest, trying to stare daggers at him, but my drunk mind gets distracted with his stubble-covered sharp jawline.

“Especially dressed like that,” he adds, full lips pulling into a smirk as he runs his eyes over me.

“Okay, Mom,” I say, narrowing my eyes and crossing my arms. I’m wobbling as I stand here, trying hard not to notice how attractive he is. He’s tall and muscular, dressed in a dark blue t-shirt, jeans, and a black leather jacket.

He takes a step forward, eyes darting around as if he’s looking to make sure no one is watching. I jerk back, tripping over the same crack in the sidewalk.

“Goddammit,” I grumble, throwing out my hands and recovering my balance on my own this time.

“Are you okay?” the guy asks, inching closer still. Fuck. There’s a very real possibility that he’s a vampire, and as much as I’ve wanted to meet one, I’m suddenly terrified. My pulse bounds, and in the back of my mind, I know he can hear it.

“Do I look okay?” The words tumble out of my mouth on their own accord. A car drives by, going a good twenty over the speed limit with music blaring. There’s a good chance I’m going to die out here, and the people in that car didn’t even notice me.

“Not really,” he answers, and motions to a bench a few yards away. I sway on my feet again, regretting downing my drink as I angrily stormed out of the bar. “Maybe you should sit down.”

“With you?” I retort. “How do I know you’re not a psycho killer?”

“And how do I know you’re not?” His lips pull into another smirk and, dammit, he looks absolutely charming.

“I suppose you don’t, and after the day I’ve had, it probably wouldn’t take much for me to lose it and bludgeon someone to death. Though I need something to do the bludgeoning with.” I look around for something—anything—to use to defend myself with. The world swirls around me and my stomach churns. I really shouldn’t have had that last drink.

“Your shoe would work, and if you hit hard enough, you could do some stabbing with those heels.”

I look down and start to lose my balance again. The guy reaches out, fingers wrapping around my arm to steady me. His skin isn’t exactly warm, but it’s not cold either. I’ve heard people describe vampires as feeling cold, but really, they’d just be room temperature since their bodies don’t produce any heat.

“I’m Ethan,” he says and lets his fingers slide down my arm.

“Anora.”

“Is there anyone you can—” He cuts off abruptly, looking behind him. Something scurries in the dark parking lot of a bakery behind us. I blink and get a flash of that dog creature again. “You can call?” he finishes. “To take you home, I mean.”

“Yeah, I’m going to call an Uber.”

“I’ll wait with you,” he offers. “Or take you home.”

“I’m not getting in the car with a stranger.”

“Isn’t that exactly what you’re about to do with the Uber?”

I narrow my eyes. “It’s not the same. There’s proof I got in the car from the phone records.”

“Phone records?” He runs a hand over his head, ruffling his brown hair.

“Yeah, it gets recorded on the app that I requested an Uber and a certain driver responded. App records maybe? You know what I mean.” My eyes fall shut in a long blink as I wait for a wave of nausea to pass. Sitting sounds like a good idea right now. Inhaling, I look at the bench and start to walk forward when a dog barks, making me jump. Nerves prickling, I turn around and look in the empty parking lot with wide eyes.

Ethan, looking equally startled, steps forward. “There’s a café down the road that’s open. Let me buy you a cup of coffee.”

I know what café he’s talking about, and they’re notorious for their terrible coffee. I’m a *I’ll take my creamer with a side of coffee* type of person, and eating anything sounds terrible right now. Though if I do order food and Ethan doesn’t eat, then I’ll know he’s a vampire.

“Sure,” I say, eyes darting behind him again. Pulling my purse up over my shoulder, I fall into step with him as we go to the street corner. A man on a bike whizzes past us, sending an icy chill right down my spine. He’s a ghost, I’m able to sense it right away, and I’m too drunk to force my mental shields up. Turning my head down, I intently look at the cracks in the sidewalk with little bits of grass and weeds doing their best to grow. I don’t see it, but I hear the inevitable crash and feel a flash of pain as the guy on the bike gets hit by a truck.

“So you had a bad day?” Ethan asks. The light changes and we cross the street. I glance up at him and my insides respond on their own accord. He really is an attractive man.

“Very bad. It started with Bob and ended with Travis.”

“I’m not sure what to make of that, but I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.” I wave my hand in the air. “Bob’s dead.”

“Oh, shit. I’m really sorry.”

“Nah, it’s fine. He’s been dead for a while.”

Ethan looks at me dubiously for a moment. “But Travis is alive?”

“Unfortunately. Well, I shouldn’t say that. I don’t wish him dead. An STD maybe—as long as he doesn’t go around spreading it.”

“This guy didn’t hurt you or anything, did he?”

I look back up at Ethan, wondering why he cares so much. “No. We knew each other in high school and ran into each other for the first time since graduation today. I overheard him tell his friend I was the most un-bangable girl in high school and I still am today.”

Ethan actually stops walking and slowly runs his eyes up and down my body, mentally stripping me down. Dammit, I like it. “You are un-bangable? Was that asshole blind?”

“It’s a long story. I’m weird.”

“But hot.” A cocky grin takes over his face. “That’s enough for me to say you are very bang-able.” His eyes meet mine and his tongue darts out, slowly wetting his lips. I suck in a breath, remembering how only a few hours ago, I vowed to have a one-night stand tonight. If I was going to go home with anyone, Ethan has my vote.

“Well, thanks.” A bit of color rushes to my cheeks and I tuck my hair behind my ear, forgetting about the scab on my forehead. My nails scrape over it and I wince. “Fuck.” Way to ruin the mood, Anora.

“You’re bleeding,” Ethan says, brows furrowing.

“Yeah, I, um, see that.” I bring my hand away from my face and look at the little bit of blood on my fingers. “I fell off my horse,” I say, feeling like I need to offer an explanation. I’m being overly chatty, really, which happens when I drink.

“I’m fine.” I wipe my hand on my pants and keep walking. We’re almost to the café, thankfully, and once we’re there, I go right into the bathroom to clean myself up.

I’m not bleeding nearly as bad as before, since only a small part of the scab came off. I hold a paper towel over it to stop the bleeding, and then carefully position my hair to cover it up. When I come out of the bathroom, I find Ethan at a table. He took off his jacket, and the sight of his tattooed, muscular arms almost does me in. I’ve always been a sucker for some good arm porn. There’s one cup of coffee and a chocolate chip muffin on a plate in the spot across from him.

“I thought you could use this,” he says when I sit at the booth across from him, and slides the muffin over.

“You don’t want anything?” I ask carefully.

“I’m not hungry.”

I look at the muffin, which actually looks really damn good, and then back at Ethan. “Are you a vampire?”

“No,” he says, amusement on his face. “I’m not.”

“Prove it,” I say, leaning back and crossing my arms. He reaches forward, picking up the muffin, and taking a bite.

“That’s good,” he says with his mouthful and then takes another bite. “Enough proof for you or do you want to feel my ___”

“Pig,” I shoot, wrinkling my nose. “But nice try.”

“I was going to say pulse,” he finishes and extends his arm, turning his wrist over. “Though you can see my veins.” I look at the blue lines of his veins under his skin. “Vampires don’t have the same type of blood flow humans do. You hardly ever see their veins like this.”

“You know a lot about vampires.”

“I know enough.” He shrugs.

“Aren’t you going to ask me if I’m a vampire?” I push my shoulders back.

He cocks an eyebrow and laughs. “Really?”

“Yeah. Really.”

“I know you’re human.” He leans in, eyes zeroing in on mine for a moment before dropping his gaze to my breasts, tipping his head slightly. “You’re drunk,” he starts, eyes going back to mine. “And you’re bleeding. Vampires can bleed, but they don’t have hours-old wounds that scab and then bleed.”

“Dammit, you’re right.” I bring my hand up, rubbing my forehead, careful not to touch my cut again. “You must think I’m a basket case. I’m not usually like this.”

“What are you usually like?”

“Not drunk and rambling. Well, I have a tendency to ramble even when I’m sober. But I’m a tad more put together.”

Ethan laughs. “So, do you live in the area?”

“Not downtown,” I tell him. “But close enough. You?”

“For now.”

“For now?” I slide the muffin in front of me and break off a chunk.

“I’m helping my dad with a job but once things are settled I’ll head back to Chicago.”

“I’ve been there before. We used to live in Michigan and weren’t too terribly far from the city.”

“We meaning...”

“Oh, my parents and brother,” I say. “I moved to Syracuse when I was a kid.” My phone buzzes with a text, reminding me that I never told Laney I left the bar. It’s Harrison, not Laney, though.

“It’s my brother,” I tell Ethan and unlock my phone.

Harrison: Hey, you up?

Harrison: Fuck, sorry Annie. I meant to text that to Anne.

I grimace. It’s not the first time he’s accidentally texted me instead of his on-and-off again booty call, whose name is Anne. Harrison is the only person who calls me Annie, a

nickname he gave me when we were little and he had trouble pronouncing his *Rs*.

Me: Gross. Please change my name in your phone to Annie: MY SISTER

Harrison: That's a good idea.

Me: Since you're up, want to come get me? I'm ready to go home but Laney is still having fun.

Harrison: Sure, but you're buying me takeout on the way to your house.

Me: Fine. I'm at Cody's Café.

Harrison: I just left Jake's. I'll be there in five or less.

Jake has been Harrison's best friend since elementary school, and he lives only a mile or so away from the bar. "My brother is gonna pick me up," I tell Ethan, texting Laney now before I forget. I set the phone down and take another bite of the muffin. "Thanks for being nice to me."

"As opposed to being mean to you?"

I laugh. "You could have kept walking. I would have been fine out there."

The smirk disappears from his face. "You looked like you might walk right into oncoming traffic."

A weird sense of anxiety is coming off of him, and he looks out the large window next to our booth.

"I suppose you're right. So, uh...what do you do?"

"Not much of anything right now," he admits. "Since I'm helping my dad."

"Oh, right." His reply doesn't make much sense, right? Or am I still too drunk to follow along?

"Before, I taught martial arts." That explains why he's in such good shape. "What about you?"

"I'm a vet-tech and part-time riding instructor."

He nods and points to my forehead. "You mentioned a horse."

“Yeah. Mystery. That’s my horse.” It takes everything inside of me not to start showing Ethan photos of him. Instead, I grab several sugar packets and add them to the black coffee. “I don’t like the taste of coffee,” I say, compelled to fill awkward silence and usually make it even more awkward. “But I need it to function.”

“This coffee doesn’t smell the greatest, but I need it too. I always question people who don’t drink coffee.”

“Me too. Like what do they do, get eight hours of sleep a night?”

Ethan laughs. “I don’t know what that feels like.”

“I would if I didn’t stay up late most nights. The veterinary clinic opens at seven so I have to be at work by six three days a week. I work twelve-hour shifts,” I explain.

“What do you stay up late doing?”

“Reading or watching TV,” I reply and add creamer to the coffee. It helps a little, but I still grimace from the taste. “Nothing too crazy. I’m kind of boring.”

“You haven’t bored me yet.”

“Fine. I’m interesting in the most unexpected way you’d expect. And I just said expect twice.”

Ethan chuckles. “That piques my interest even more. What do you mean?”

I wiggle my eyebrows. “You’ll just have to wait and find out.”

Ethan holds my gaze, and there’s something intimate in the way he looks at me. It’s like he can see right through me, and it makes me feel vulnerable. I take a big drink of coffee, using it as a distraction, but then look at him too.

He has a scar along his hairline, similar to where my cut is, but this was from a much graver injury. I run my eyes down him, noticing another straight, long scar on his forearm.

“Did you break your arm?”

He looks down. “Yeah, a couple of years ago. Had to have surgery to fix it.”

“That’s what I was going to ask next. I’ve never broken a bone, you know.”

“Even though you fall off your horse?”

“I don’t usually fall off my horse,” I press. “It was kind of my fault for not paying attention and letting my guard down. Usually, I can handle anything I ride.”

Ethan’s lips pull into a smile and his brows go up. “Really?”

I cover my face with my hand. “Any horse I can ride,” I laugh. “At least I didn’t say fifteen hands between my legs is no big deal.” I bring my hand down, resting it on the table. “Horses are measured in hands. Mystery is fifteen hands tall.”

“The more you know,” Ethan laughs. “That guy who said you’re un-bangable is a fucking dumbass, you know. Because you’re quite—”

“Anora?” Harrison stops short at our table. I didn’t even see him come into the café.

“Hey, Har.”

“Is everything okay?” He looks from me to Ethan.

“Yeah. Why wouldn’t it be?”

He raises an eyebrow. “You left hanging out with Laney early and asked me to come get you.”

“Right. I did.” I shrug. “Remember Travis what’s-his-face from school?”

“Travis Morrison?”

“Yeah. That’s the one. He’s an asshole,” I say with a sigh.

“He’s always been one. Why are you—did you run into him at the bar? Did he touch you?”

“Pshhh. He wishes. It’s fine. I’m fine now. Thanks to—oh, this is Ethan.” I motion to him. “He’s not a vampire. And he knows I’m not either because I bleed.”

“Hi,” Ethan says somewhat awkwardly.

“How much have you had to drink, Annie?” Harrison asks.

“More than I usually have,” I admit with a grimace. “Don’t be a Judge Judy.”

“I’m not,” he tries to assure me, standing at the table for another few seconds as he eyes Ethan. “I’m going to order some food to go. Do you want anything?” he asks me.

“No,” I say, shaking my head. “Thanks, though.”

“It was nice to meet you,” Ethan tells Harrison, who grumbles a response and goes to the counter to order. “Your brother seems rather protective of you.”

“Yeah. He’s older than me by like ten seconds or however long it takes to grab the second baby during a c-section, and he takes being the older brother seriously.” I roll my eyes.

“Good,” Ethan says, surprising me a bit. “I have two sisters. Call me old fashioned, but I believe all brothers should look out for their sisters.”

“I look out for him more than he looks out for me.” I break off another piece of muffin and get chocolate all over my fingers. “He just doesn’t realize it.”

“Don’t ever tell him,” Ethan says with a grin. “I’m gonna take off. It was nice meeting you Anora.”

“Likewise.” Smiling, I hold his gaze. “Thanks again for helping me.”

“Of course. We both know you needed it.” He flashes that cocky grin again and my insides feel all squishy. “Goodnight, Anora.”

“Goodnight.”

He slides out of the booth and starts toward the door.

“Hate to see him go, but love to watch him leave, right?” I say to a waitress passing by. She gives me a forced smile paired with a weird look and keeps walking. I finish the muffin, which is evidence that I did have a lot to drink.

Normally, I'm very picky about sharing food or drinks with anyone. It just grosses me out.

I take another sip of coffee, choking it down in hopes it will sober me up faster, and then sweep the crumbs off the table into my hand, putting them back on the plate. I waited tables in college and try to do my best to make life easier for the waitstaff. I leave a tip and then join Harrison while he waits for his food.

"Who the hell was that guy?" he asks as soon as I stand next to him.

"I thought you weren't being a Judge Judy."

"Asking who that was doesn't make me a Judge Judy."

I purse my lips and then laugh. "This is the first time you've had to pick me up drunk. Do you know how many times I picked up your drunk ass?"

He frowns. "Don't change the subject. Who was that guy? Was he trying to take advantage of you because you're wasted?"

"I'm drunk, not wasted," I press. "And no. We just got to talking. He was nice and didn't even touch me or even ask for my number, which I suppose I could take as an insult. I'm hot enough to be taken advantage of, aren't I?"

"I'm not answering that. And I don't know, Annie. The guy knew you were drunk. If I hadn't shown up, he might have offered to take you home."

"Okay Anthony Bridgerton. No one is good enough for sweet little Daphne."

"What?" He looks at me, slowly shaking his head. "And fine, you sound easily swayed right now, so the guy just taking you to a cafe was a good move."

I nudge him with my arm. "I knew you'd come around."

A few minutes later, Harrison gets his food, and we head out to his car. There's a weird feeling in the air again, and the heaviness that usually sits on my chest is gone. It's an odd feeling, made even weirder by my lack of ability to hold my

mental shields up at the moment. I always thought the ghosts were the reason for the oppression, but I'm sensing them left and right as we drive to my house.

I change into PJs as soon as I'm home and go into the kitchen to steal a couple of fries from Harrison. I should have ordered something, dammit. Hunter is waiting by the back door.

"Need to go out, buddy?" I ask him and unlock the door. Hunter bolts forward as soon as the door is open, growling. My heart skips a beat and fear prickles down my spine. It's the dog-creature. It has to be.

"Oh shit," I say out loud and sprint out the door. "Hunter!" I call, but there's no way he can hear me over his own barking. "Hunter!" I call again, but then the energy shifts, hitting me hard and making me dizzy. I shake my head, trying to force the mental shields up, but no matter how hard I try, I can't block it out.

Red-hot fear shoots through me, and my eyes widen in terror. A shadow moves through the alley, visible through the chain-link fence. Hunter runs to me, standing guard as he growls at whatever is moving toward us. The shadow takes on a more human form. Energy buzzes in my ears.

I'm frozen, rooted in the same spot, as I watch the dark shape step through the fence as if it's not even there. It reaches out, taking electromagnetic energy from my body. The darkness melts away as the ghost shifts into a human appearance. He's a teenage boy, with scraggly blonde hair that ends above his shoulders.

He looks at me, his eyes pleading. Then he holds his arms out to the side and opens his mouth, trying to speak. His dead eyes meet mine, and he shakes his head. A chill goes through me, and I suddenly feel the ghost's emotions. He's giving me a warning...but I don't know why. He looks behind him, fear crinkling his young face, and then disappears into the night without a trace.

What the fuck? First Bob, then that dog-creature-thing, and now this cryptic spectral visit? Shaking myself, I reach down

and slip my fingers under Hunter's collar. "Come on," I tell him and turn, going back into the house.

Harrison is standing on the little patio, blue eyes wide.

"You'll never believe what was out there."

"I think I will," he says, voice a little breathy. "Because I saw it too."

Chapter Six

“**W**hat exactly did you see?” I usher Hunter inside and close the door behind us. Harrison either had the ability to see spirits all along or—more realistically—the spirit manifested strong enough for anyone to see.

“Some kid...walking in the alley.” Harrison’s eyes go to the little window at the top of the door. “And then he just disappeared.” He closes his eyes. “He, um, just run away really fast, right?”

“Come on, Har. It was a ghost and you know it. He walked *through* the fence. Did you feel the air?”

“Feel the air?”

“Yeah,” I say, still too drunk to do a good job explaining anything. “It felt different, didn’t it?”

Harrison slowly shakes his head. “It didn’t feel any different to me.” He steps back, rubbing his temple. “That was really a ghost?”

“It was.”

“Do they always look like that?”

“No. Most are just gray shadows or maybe a quick glimpse of how they used to look. It takes a lot of energy to manifest in that way.” I let out a breath, feeling dizzy, and I don’t know if it’s from the alcohol or the ghost. I get a drink of water and join Harrison at my little kitchen table. Four people can technically fit around it, if I slide it out from against the wall that is. But then there’s hardly any room to walk about the

kitchen. Laney and Leslie are the only friends I ever invite over, and most of the time we sit in the living room with the TV on while we eat.

“How often do you see them like that?” Harrison’s still looking at the back door as he opens his takeout bag.

I shrug. “Depends on how often I leave my house. I know the rent is a little high on this place for what it is, but it’s not haunted.”

“We just fucking saw a ghost.” He sweeps his hand out.

“That doesn’t make this place haunted.” I fill up my cup again and take a big drink. “He was passing through or something.” I set the glass down and run a hand over my face, remembering I have makeup on. I weave my way into the bathroom and do a half-assed job taking my makeup off, and then plop down on the couch.

“You’re not freaked out?” Harrison comes into the room holding what’s left of his burger.

“No. Are you?” I pull a blanket over my legs, eyes feeling heavier by the minute.

“Slightly. Are you going to eat your fries?”

“You can have them.” I pat the couch and Hunter jumps up next to me. I put the blanket over him and close my eyes. I swear only a minute passes, but the next thing I know, Harrison is shaking me awake.

“I’m gonna head out. Get up and lock the door.”

“I will in a minute,” I grumble.

“No, you won’t,” he laughs. “I already let Hunter out one more time for you, and the ghost wasn’t there anymore.”

“Thanks, Har.” In the back of my mind, I know he’s right. I need to suck it up, get my butt off the couch, and see him out. But my eyes fall shut again.

“Annie.”

“Okay.” I lazily throw the blanket back and get to my feet. “Thanks again, Har.”

“You’re welcome. It’s not that often you actually ask for my help.”

I smile. “It is nice having you come to the rescue, though it really wasn’t a rescue. Just a ride home that saved me from paying an Uber.” I make a face. “Board is due next week for Mystery.”

“You got expensive taste, sis.”

“Mystery is worth it.”

“Night, Annie. Make sure you lock the door.”

“I will. Night, Har.” He steps out and I close the door, shooting the deadbolt into place and then putting the chain lock in. “Come on, bud.” I pat my leg and Hunter follows me into the bedroom. I left Romeo out while I was at the bar and find him curled up on the center of my bed. I change into PJs and move him over and slide under the covers, falling asleep as soon as my head hits the pillow.



HUNTER’S WET NOSE PRESSES AGAINST MY CHEEK. “WHAT ARE you doing?” I grumble and roll over. He jumps on the bed and lies down on me, all his weight pressing me against the mattress. “Hunter, stop—”

My doorbell rings, and I shoot up. I always get a little freaked out when someone rings the doorbell or knocks. I never answer unless I know who it is, and my mind gets away from me, thinking that whoever is at the door now thinks no one is home and it’s a good time to break in.

Though Hunter is a pretty good deterrent. He’s larger than the average German Shepherd and has that classic Shepherd bark that’s deep and menacing. But right now, he’s staring at me, wagging his tail.

“Who’s here?” I ask, thinking it has to be my mother or Harrison or someone Hunter is familiar with. He bounds to the door, waiting for me to open it, and runs through the house. I put Romeo in his cage and trudge my way to the front of the

house. I haven't been awake long enough to know if I'm hungover yet or not, but I'm still tired.

Hunter is waiting by the door, sitting patiently. "If it's Harrison checking on me, he better have brought me a latte," I grumble, pushing my messy hair back. Yawning, I unlock the door and gently nudge Hunter aside so I can open it.

A man in a mud-brown suit is standing on my little covered stoop, clutching a leather briefcase. He startles when he sees me. The feeling is mutual, buddy.

"Can I help you?" I blurt, regretting not looking out the window to see who was at the door before opening it. Hooking my fingers under Hunter's collar, I expect him to bark, or at the very least, growl.

"Anora Benson?" the man asks.

"Um...why?" My pulse starts to pick up and for some reason I think I'm about to be sued, though I've done nothing wrong as far as I know.

"My name is James Pearson," he starts and hands me a business card. He is a lawyer. Oh god, I am being sued! "I was your great-aunt Estelle's lawyer. I'm very sorry to inform you that she has passed."

Wait, what? At least I'm not being sued, right?

"Oh. How, um, sad," I force out, knowing I need to say something. "When?"

"Early Friday morning."

I just nod, still totally clueless why Aunt Estelle even had a personal lawyer and why he's here, all the way in Syracuse, New York to tell me that she's dead. A phone call or even an email would have sufficed.

"Your aunt left everything to you."

"Everything?"

"Yes, everything."

"What does that mean?" I ask, remembering I did a crappy job taking my mascara off and no doubt have black rings

under my eyes. “Everything of what?”

“Everything she owned. I have all the paperwork here.” He pats his briefcase. “Consider it your inheritance.”

“But she was my great-aunt,” I blurt. “And she left it all to me?”

“As you know, she had no children to leave her fortune to.” He smiles nervously. “She spoke highly of you.”

Am I still dreaming? Things are getting weirder and weirder by the second. James props his briefcase up on the iron railing of my stoop and pulls out a piece of paper.

“This is an itemized list of everything she left for you.”

I reach for the paper and James flinches, as if he’s afraid of my fingers touching his. I glance down at the list, which isn’t anything official. I know because I can understand it. Legal jargon is lost on me. Aunt Estelle left me her house, the thirty acres it was on, an extensive antique collection and—“Holy shit,” I exclaim when I see the crazy amount of money. I had no idea Aunt Estelle was loaded.

“She wanted to make things as simple as possible for you,” James goes on. “I have a few papers you need to sign. The transfer of the titles will have to take place at a title company of course.”

“Of course,” I echo, still staring at the string of zeros at the end of the sum of money that’s supposedly mine now.

“And you’ll have to handle some of the official paperwork at the bank. I can set up appointments for you. It was also your aunt’s wish to have everything settled as fast as possible. She even had the house recently updated and remodeled.”

I blink and see the porch of the Victorian house in the background of the photo Harrison showed me. That house is mine now? I have to still be dreaming.

“If you’d like, I could go over everything in slight detail,” he offers. “As well as get the paperwork started so I can send it over to the appropriate parties.”

“Uh, sure.” I step back, still holding onto Hunter. He sniffs at James curiously, but stays calm. Hunter is a friendly dog, luckily since he’s massive. He’ll fight to the death to protect me, but overall, he likes people and getting attention from anyone who’ll give it to him.

“I bet you’re just like your aunt,” James says as he follows me into the kitchen.

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Right.” He laughs nervously. “Of course.”

I brush salt off the table, left from Harrison’s French fries last night. “Do you want coffee?”

“No, thank you.”

I nod again and let go of Hunter, plugging in my coffee pot. I *need* coffee. James is setting papers out on the table when I join him.

“I’m sorry,” I start, looking at a bank statement. “How did my aunt come into all this money?”

“Your aunt was very good at investment and playing the stock market.” I don’t know what *playing the stock market* means, so I just nod again. He slides another paper in front of me. “Here are her, uh, predictions, for you. It tells you when and what stocks to buy, as well as when to sell.”

The list is written in Aunt Estelle’s tiny handwriting and is pretty straight forward, with her “predictions” going for the next twenty years. I’m busy looking at the paper when James slides another over, snatching his hand back.

“This is from her,” he tells me, and I pick up the envelope. My name is written in the center in tiny cursive that I recognize at once. I grab it and flip it over. It’s closed with a wax seal, and the same triple moon symbol is pressed into the wax. I use my nail to break the seal. Carefully, I unfold the letter.

MY DEAREST ANORA,

I'm dead, which you already know by now. Well, assuming James has done his job. He's a bit of a coward, but you can trust him. He will assist you with all of the legal doings that neither you nor I know anything about.

Now, if you are reading this particular letter, it means I never got the chance to explain things to you. Don't be angry at me, my dear. I did what I thought was best to save you from a world of heartache. I may be dead, but in time I will tell you everything.

I am very proud of the young woman you have become.

Much love,

Estelle

WHAT THE HELL? I BITE MY LIP AND MOVE MY EYES TO THE top of the letter, needing to read it again. Before I can, James has more papers to carefully push in front of me.

“Your aunt lived in an assisted living facility for the last three years, so the house has sat empty.” He gives me another paper. “Per her wishes, an inspection was done just a week before her death. Everything is up to code now.”

“The house is old, right?”

“Yes. It was built in 1903.”

A few seconds of silence tick by. “When is her funeral?”

“It was your aunt’s wishes not to have one. Her body was cremated immediately after she died.”

“Oh.” I look at the papers again, not able to concentrate to read anything. “Does my mom know?”

James looks at me as if that’s a completely irrelevant question.

“It was her aunt,” I quickly explain. And at least Mom remembers meeting Aunt Estelle, unlike me. “Or my grandma? Estelle was her sister.”

“No, you are the only one I was told to inform.”

Neither of us say anything for a moment. The long silence is awkward.

“So where exactly is this house? I know she lived in Indiana, but that’s it,” I admit shyly.

James gets out a map. Man, he has everything in that briefcase. Up in the left top corner of Indiana is a star.

“Northwest Indiana.” He points at the star, as if I couldn’t figure out that is where I am supposed to look. “It’s a bit of a funny situation, really. The street your house is on is the divider from one town to another. The house is in Paradise Valley, but your mailbox is across the street in Thorne Hill.”

Your house. Your mailbox. This is all so weird.

“So the mailing address is Thorne Hill, but I believe you have Paradise Valley trash pickup due to the routes the trucks take. I’ll clarify on that when we’re back in Indiana.”

“Back in Indiana?”

“Yes, I was under the impression you’d want to finalize all the paperwork as well as see your house.”

“Oh, right. I, um, I do,” I say, eager to go into the old house and see if it jogs my memory.

“Let me know when and I will arrange transportation to the airport for you as well as book your flight.”

I stare at him, blinking. “I’m sorry.” I shake my head. “This is just...just a lot to take in.”

“I can imagine.” He forces a smile and pulls out a folder and a pen from his briefcase. “Now, shall we get the ball rolling?”

“Um, sure,” I say and pick up the pen. Aunt Estelle wrote that I can trust him. But since when do I trust Aunt Estelle?

Chapter Seven

“Hey, Mom.” I put my Prius in park in the hospital parking lot. “Do you have like five minutes?”

“I actually do. What’s wrong, honey?” she answers.

I turn the car off and switch the call from my car Bluetooth to my phone. “Why do you assume something is wrong?”

“You called to talk. You hardly ever call to talk.”

“I call you,” I counter. “And I was hoping I could see you. Dad said you were seeing patients and updating files today.”

“Now I’m worried.”

“Are you in your office?”

“What’s wrong, Anora?”

I get out of the car and close the door behind me. “I’m pregnant.”

“Hilarious,” Mom deadpans. “What’s really wrong?”

“Aunt Estelle died.”

“Oh,” Mom replies. “Well, she was quite old. How do you know?”

“A lawyer came to my house this morning and—I really need to show you something.”

“Okay,” she says. “I’m about to check on a patient in the PACU but will be back in my office shortly. I’ll meet you there. Bye, honey.” Mom ends the call and I shove my phone

in my purse. With the papers from James tucked under my arm, I brush hay off my breeches and walk into the hospital.

I spent the morning at the barn and everything was normal. If it wasn't so damn hot out, I would have brought Hunter to help calm my nerves. I blamed my jitters on too much coffee paired with the humidity of the morning. I'm not sure if anyone bought it, but no one was going to accuse me of being nervous because a monster spooked Mystery in the woods yesterday and the resident ghost went rogue.

I'm not sure what I expect Mom to tell me. She didn't know Aunt Estelle very well, but I'm having a hard time believing little old Aunt Estelle was a closet millionaire to the entire Fowler family. Getting in an elevator to go up to Mom's office, I look over the papers again, rereading the letter from Aunt Estelle for the hundredth time. I haven't found a hidden message in it yet, but maybe—just maybe—if I read it again I will.

Still looking at the letter, I step out of the elevator and crash right into someone's firm chest.

"Anora." Ethan's hands land on my shoulders, steadying me.

I look up, lips parting, but I'm unable to form a coherent sentence. Ethan takes a step back, and lets his hands fall from my shoulders, fingers running down my arms. "I...I'm not drunk," I finally blurt and then mentally kick myself.

"I'd hope not," he says with a laugh. "It's only noon."

I smile, eyes locking with his. A second passes before I realize there's someone standing next to Ethan. The man has to be Ethan's father, or a much older brother. They look alike, though Ethan is a bit taller. He has what appears to be claw marks on his face, and his arm is in a sling. I shift my gaze back at Ethan, noticing tiny scratches on his face, looking like he ran through low-hanging branches or something. His left bicep is a little bruised up too, though it's hard to tell against his tattoos.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

“I’ve been better,” Ethan says and the man next to him shoots him an annoyed look. “What about you? Did you fall off your horse again?”

“No,” I say pointedly, unable to keep the smile from my face. “I’m here to see my mom.”

“Oh, uh, sorry. Is she sick?”

I shake my head. “She’s a doctor. I have to show her these.” I hold up the papers, as if Ethan cares. The man next to Ethan looks from him to me and back again.

“I’ll be in the car,” he says and gives me a forced smile before breezing past and into the elevator.

“Are you more put together today?” Ethan asks. “Since you’re not drunk?”

“Oh my god.” I bring my hand to my face and shake my head. “I’m so sorry for how obnoxious I was last night.”

“You really weren’t. Though, I am curious if you really are as put together as you claim.” He leans back, letting his eyes wander over my body. I’m sweaty, with a grass stain on the left knee of my pale pink breeches. I didn’t check, but I probably have white fur all over the back of my black tank top from Mystery rubbing his head against me. My auburn hair is in a messy braid, all flat at the top from sweating under my helmet.

I definitely don’t look put together today.

“I suppose that would depend on your definition of put together.”

He laughs, smile splitting his handsome face. “I think being put together is overrated, if you ask me.”

“Me too. Mostly because I can’t get my shit together to save my life. Though I promise I’m not as rambley as I was last night.”

“I liked you being rambley,” he says, using my made-up word.

“Well, good. That makes one of us.”

“You got home all right last night?”

“I did.” *And then I saw a ghost, which isn't a rare sighting for me.* “I would say you did, but you look a little banged up.”

“This is nothing. My dad and I were hiking, and the terrain got rough.”

“Oh,” I say, mind racing to think of anywhere nearby that has *rough terrain*. “I enjoy hiking. Have you been to Green Lake yet? The lake is green, like literally the water is green. Hence the name.”

“I haven't but sounds interesting. Why is the water green?”

“It has something to do with the calcium levels or something. It's really pretty.”

“I'll definitely have to check it out.” He takes a step closer. “I want to take you out,” he says, and the directness takes me aback.

“Like on a date?”

“No, to murder you in the woods. Yes, Anora, I'd like to take you on a date. You're interesting.”

I smile. “I agree with you there. And yes, I'd like that.”

“Give me your phone.”

I reach into my purse and pull out my phone, holding it up to my face to unlock it. Ethan's fingers brush over my hand when he takes the phone, and I can sense the warmth of his skin this time. He's not a vampire, as I found out last night, but there's still something *off* about him. It should be a red flag, but it's drawing me in for some reason.

“I texted myself so now we have each other's numbers.” He hands my phone back and I laugh when I see he texted an eggplant emoji.

“Trying to hint at something?” I raise my eyebrows, feeling my pulse pick up. I'm not a good flirt, and I'm well aware of it.

“Hey, if the night leads to it...” He flashes that cocky grin again. “Friday night good?”

“Yeah, it’s—oh, dammit. I think I’m going to be in Indiana then.” I make a face. “My aunt died, and I’m supposed to go to her house there to, uh, get things in order.” It’s a fair enough explanation, I think.

“Shit, I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. I’ve never met her,” I say automatically. “Though I actually think I did. When I was really little,” I quickly add. “That’s why I’m headed to see my mom. I have paperwork for her to go over regarding my aunt.”

While I was at the barn, James texted me several available flights to and from Indiana. I get the feeling he’s eager to get me to the house and get all the papers signed so he can be done with me. I was able to move next Saturday’s lessons to Thursday and had him book me a flight to Indiana on Friday. I’ll arrive back here Sunday night.

“I’ll be back on Sunday and don’t have to work until Wednesday though. I’m not opposed to going out on a weekday, if you’re not.”

“I’m not at all. Monday night then?”

“Yeah,” I say, trying not to smile like a goon. “Monday will work.”

He holds my gaze for a few beats. “I’ll call you.”

“And I’ll answer.”

He laughs again. “Good, don’t crush my ego.”

“I’ll do my best. See you Monday.”



“AND YOU’RE SURE THIS IS ALL LEGIT?” LANEY POURS US both glasses of wine.

I take my glass and lean back, looking at Hunter, who’s running around the yard. The ghost with the scraggly blonde hair hasn’t been back, and I’m a little disappointed. Though, the sun is just now starting to set. Maybe he only appears at

night? “Everything checks out, and my mom said she’d heard rumors that Aunt Estelle was super rich. She just never understood how since Aunt Estelle worked as a teacher at some private boarding school, which isn’t exactly the highest-paying job.”

“Did your mom know her well? It was her aunt, right?”

“Right. And she said no, and that she didn’t even know she had an aunt until she was a teenager. I guess Aunt Estelle and my grandma had some sort of falling out, but then after my grandma was diagnosed with cancer, they made up.”

“She definitely seems like an interesting lady.” Laney takes a sip of her wine. “Too bad she’s dead.”

“Right? I’d love to talk to her.”

“Well, you can, can’t you?” Laney raises her brows. “The last time we had a séance, I couldn’t sleep for a week, but if you want to try and contact the spirit of your dead great-aunt, I’ll sit in with you. As long as you give me a cut of your inheritance.”

I laugh. “Come to Indiana with me next weekend so I don’t have to be alone and I’ll write you into the will.”

“Hah. I wish I could, but it’s my weekend at the hospital.”

I make a face. “I’ll hate myself later, but I might ask Harrison if he wants to come. Though he’ll just bitch about not getting a dime of the—”

“She didn’t leave anything to Harrison?” Laney’s brown eyes widen.

“Everything went to me.” I slowly shake my head. “It’s really weird, Laney. So fucking weird.”

“It is. And don’t be scared to travel alone,” she goes on, knowing me all too well. “I spent a semester in Italy and knew no one when I first got there. I survived that first week and then made some amazing friends.”

“I know.” I swirl my wine around in the glass, not wanting to drink since I drank quite a bit at the bar yesterday and because I don’t want to struggle any more than I do to keep the

shields up. “Being alone in that house for two nights kind of freaks me out. If I could take Hunter, I’d feel a lot better.”

“Can you? I’ve never traveled by plane with a large dog, but can’t you buy him a seat? Tell people he’s your emotional support dog. He’s well-behaved enough for people to believe you.”

“They would, but he’d hate traveling. I’ll suck it up and will do my best not to get kidnapped or murdered in my century-old farmhouse in the middle of nowhere.”

“You were right. That is so fucking weird. You own a house.”

“Everything checked out, but it still seems too good to be true.”

“You’re not going to leave me, are you? Don’t move to whatever-hill Indiana.”

“Thorne Hill, and no, of course not! You’re here, my family is here, and my job is here.” I set the glass of wine on the table. “If I was going to move away from Syracuse, I’d go somewhere warm at least.”

Laney laughs. “Too bad you didn’t inherit a house on the coast in California.”

“Right? A beach house in Southern California would have been amazing come winter. Or sooner. The temps are supposed to drop the next few days.”

“I love fall, but it goes by way too fast.”

“It really does. Let’s actually go to Green Lake this year to see the fall leaves. We say we’re going to but haven’t in, what, three years?”

“Maybe even four. Being an adult sucks sometimes. But yes, let’s go. I’m on a better schedule this year than last, and you are too. I wish the hospital would go to twelve hour shifts like your clinic does. Most do. They’re behind.” Laney rolls her eyes and takes another drink of wine.

Hunter, who’s been busy tossing a dog toy up in the air, suddenly drops it and races over, whizzing past us and pawing

at the door.

“What is it?” I ask him, scooting my chair out to get up and let him inside. No sooner am I up does the doorbell ring. “Oh, the pizza is here.” Laney and I grab our drinks and go inside.

“You know I gotta ask,” Laney starts, picking up a slice of pizza. “What exactly happened last night?”

I grab napkins from the cabinet I call my pantry, trade my wine for water, and join her at the little kitchen table. “To make a long story short, Travis Morrison from high school was all flirty with me, I got it in my head it would be fun and rewarding to prove that I’m not the loser I was in high school, and it turns out that’s exactly what I am to him and he thought I’d be begging for his dick in order to feel cool.”

“You’re not a loser, Anora. Not back then and not now.”

“I don’t think I’m a loser now, but thanks for the reassurance.” I grab a slice of pizza. “I felt stupid and just wanted to leave. And then I ran into this hot guy named Ethan.”

“What?”

“He was walking down the sidewalk too. I thought he was a vampire, so I let him take me to a cafe to see if he’d eat food.”

“You thought he was a vampire and you went somewhere with him?” she echoes. “Was he a vampire?”

“No, he’s human but...”

“But what?”

“Something felt...different about him. I can’t explain it.” I take a bite of pizza. “I randomly ran into him today though, and he asked for my number.”

“Shut up!”

“We’ll see if he calls.”

Laney shakes her head. “I still can’t believe you thought that guy was a vampire and you went somewhere with him. He

could have killed you.”

“People kill people too,” I remind her. “And as far as we know, humans have killed a lot more people than vampires have. Though they could be better at hiding the bodies,” I add with a shrug.

“I kind of want to be a vampire,” Laney admits.

“Really? I’d miss pizza. Though according to my mother, a cure might be found in the *near future*.” I can’t roll my eyes hard enough. “I don’t understand how she can be so smart and be such a good doctor and think vampires are the result of some sort of rare medical condition.”

“It’s easier to comprehend,” Laney says. “Though I’ll say it again, I’ll gladly catch whatever they’ve got. Have you seen the new Vampire Council rep for New York? It’s a good thing they can’t procreate because I’d get pregnant looking at him.”

I laugh, but my mind flits back to Ethan and his deep brown eyes.

“He is very mysterious, though I expected most VC reps to be old, like really old,” I admit.

“Me too, like that one vampire that’s rumored to live in the Midwest and is over a thousand years old. Can you even imagine being alive for that long? Sorry, undead for that long, I mean.”

“It would be so weird to see the world change over the years.”

My phone buzzes with a text from Harrison. “How much you want to bet he meant to text Anne again?”

“Did he sext you again?”

“Ew, thankfully no, but I am terrified I might get a photo I’ll never be able to unsee. Next time we go to our parents’ for dinner, I’m changing my name in his phone.”

“Hah, good idea.”

I wipe my hands and unlock my phone. “Okay, that’s weird.”

“It’s not a dick pic then?”

“Gross, no. He’s asking when I’m free to have dinner this week.”

“How is that weird?” Laney asks.

“Because he wants me to meet a girl he’s dating.”

Laney almost drops her pizza. “He has a girlfriend?”

“Not that I knew of,” I say as I text Harrison back, saying I’m free Thursday night. “I don’t want to make assumptions...”

“...but you’re totally thinking one of his one-night stands got knocked up.”

“Yeah,” I admit. I love my brother and don’t judge him for living the playboy lifestyle. It makes him happy and doesn’t hurt anyone. That’s all that matters, right? Shaking my head, I put the phone down. “Whatever. I’ll find out soon enough.”

We complain about work the rest of dinner, and I walk Laney to her car an hour later. I do a half-assed job picking up around the house, and then shower and get ready for bed. I turn on a movie and cuddle under the covers with Hunter by my side and Romeo curled up on my chest. I’m still exhausted from the eventful weekend, and fall asleep quickly, slipping right back into that familiar dream.

I’m back in the woods, and brilliant blue light glows before me. The door that appeared between two trees swings open, and I look inside the courtyard.

“Come along, Anora,” a woman says, black cloak billowing around her feet. I take her hand and step through the door. I inhale, breathing in the comforting smell of sage and lavender. Firelight flickers ahead of us, and I eagerly look through the large, open doors of the brick building we’re heading toward.

It’s familiar, and somehow, I know I’ve been here before. I try to pull my hand out of the woman’s, but she gives my fingers a squeeze and looks down at me. Her face is blurry, but red hair sticks out from under the hood of her cloak.

“Good evening, Professor,” someone says when we enter the brick building. The woman who’s holding my hand leads me down a hall, her boots clicking on the cobblestone floor. We pass by more people, who are dressed similarly to the woman holding my hand. A few kids run by, wearing what looks like school uniforms.

We stop in front of a closed door, and the woman knocks three times before waving her hand over the door, whispering something in another language. The door swings open, and the scent of lavender hits me harder. A snowy white fox is curled up on a velvet bed near a fireplace, and woman who has to be in her thirties looks up from her desk. She’s wearing a black dress with a silvery robe overtop. She’s gorgeous, and she smiles warmly at me.

“Good evening, Headmistress,” the woman says and ushers me over to the fox, telling me to pet her so she can talk. I nod, excited to pet the fox, whose name is Artemis. I sit on the bed next to her, running my fingers through her sleek fur. The fire cracks and pops, and not long later, we’re both hot. Artemis gets up, padding over to the window to cool down.

“She’s almost at the age to come here,” the headmistress says in a hushed voice. “We can teach her, protect her. She’ll be safe here.”

“I don’t want her to have my fate,” the woman counters.

“There’s no guarantee she will.”

“My visions are rarely wrong.”

“Even if they are right, we can change her fate.”

“But what if we can’t?” The woman turns to me, face still blurry, and starts to say something else.

I wake up to Romeo, who’s under the covers and scratching my feet. I blink several times, having to pull myself out of the dream and back to the here and now. I run my hand over my face and sit up, taking in a slow breath.

Because I know now that these aren’t weird repetitive dreams, but memories.

Chapter Eight

“What about a vasectomy? I think that’s less emasculating than cutting off his balls.” Mrs. Rogers covers her French bulldog’s ears as she talks.

“Some vets actually do that,” I tell her, making a note in her file. “But we always recommend neutering. It reduces the risk of prostate enlargement and prostate cancer, and eliminates any risk of testicular cancer. You can discuss it more with Dr. Burnette if you’d like.”

Mrs. Rogers bites her lip and looks at George, her dog. “Other dogs won’t make fun of him, will they? I like taking him to the dog park.”

“One of the best things about animals is they don’t judge,” I tell her. She might sound crazy to some people, but I get it, and more so, I appreciate her devotion to her dog. “If anything, it might help him get along better with other dogs, and you won’t have to worry about your baby becoming a father.”

“Oh, he’s much too young for that!” She kisses his head. “Thank you.”

“Of course.” I open the cupboard and pull out a bag of organic treats, making sure it’s okay with her before giving George one. “The doctor will be in shortly.”

I leave the room and let out a breath. It’s been a long day, and I wasn’t scheduled to work today but came in to assist with an emergency surgery and ended up staying to help get through the last burst of clients. My evening riding lesson

canceled, and I'm pretty sure it has to do with the fact that the lesson would end right around sunset, and I know for a fact Melissa's mom is very anti-vampire and was outraged when New York voted against the Vampire Exclusion Act.

Used to needing any and all extra hours I can get, it wasn't until I was wrist-deep in shit—literally—that I remembered I'll soon have access to a ton of money. I won't live paycheck to paycheck anymore, and it's going to be such a weird fucking feeling.

Half an hour later, I head to the barn, needing to give Mystery a hug goodbye. I'm leaving for Indiana in the morning, and this will be the first weekend in years where I won't see him. The last vacation I took was a girls' trip to Vegas two years ago with Laney, and we were only gone three days. It was still fun, though, and we keep talking about doing it again. Now I actually have the money for it.

There are only two cars at the barn when I pull up, putting my Prius in park. Leaving my purse in the car, I hurry inside, heart swelling in my chest the moment I lay eyes on my horse.

“Hey, big guy,” I tell him, sliding his stall door open. With a mouthful of hay, he steps over and I turn around, letting him rub his head against my back, no doubt getting white fur all over my purple scrubs. “I'm going to miss you.” I turn back around and run a hand down his muzzle. “Be safe,” I whisper, heart skipping a beat in my chest. Tomorrow will mark one week since that dog-thing attacked us.

One week and nothing weird has happened since.

The logical part of my brain is begging for me to chalk it up to an inbred dog, deformed and probably dead by now. But I know better. Just like I know vampires aren't sick with some yet-to-be-cured disease.

I lose track of time brushing Mystery and then leave in a rush to go home and change. We're having a late dinner tonight since Dad's at an event doesn't get out until seven. Once I'm home, it's a race to let Hunter out, speed-clean Romeo's cage, feed them both, and take a shower. I twist my

hair into a bun on the top of my head as I wait for the water to warm up, and then get in, washing away the smell of the barn.

Something crashes to the floor in my room as I'm drying off. "Dammit, Romeo," I sigh. "I don't have time for this." Wrapping my towel around myself, I hurry down the hall, leaving the bathroom and going into my bedroom.

Romeo is sleeping on my bed, and a box that I'd had on the top shelf in my closet is now lying on the floor. It was only a matter of time before that shelf broke, since I crammed so much stuff up there. Flicking on my bedroom light, I open the closet and peer inside, surprised to see the shelf intact, though it still doesn't surprise me something fell. I haphazardly threw shit up there.

The box is full of knickknacks, and I go to scoop them back into the box when a necklace catches my eye. It was another gift from Aunt Estelle, and I must have accidentally shelved it with the rest of the gawdy jewelry she gave me, because this is actually pretty.

I carefully untangle the thin silver chain from another necklace and hold it up, rubbing my finger over the purple gemstone to clean some sort of smudge off. I undo the clasp and put it around my neck. Then I get up and pull jeans and a t-shirt from my closet, getting dressed in record speed.

My hair, which is overdue for a trim, takes too long to style, so I keep it in the messy bun. It's not like I'm trying to impress this girl Harrison is currently infatuated with. He'll forget her name in a week, I'm sure.

"Sorry, dude," I tell Romeo. "I'll play with you when I get home. Promise." I kiss his head and give him a handful of treats before hurrying out of the house, telling Hunter goodbye in the process of course.

Harrison is already at my parents' when I arrive, shocking me even more. I'm only two minutes late, and Harrison isn't known for his punctuality. I want to give him the benefit of the doubt, but I'm starting to think more and more that he gathered us all here to say he got one of his random hookups

pregnant. Mom will be thrilled to get a grandkid sooner than she expected. It's not like I'm settling down anytime soon.

I kick off my shoes and ditch my purse on the kitchen floor, finding everyone in the living room. Harrison is sitting close to a pretty blonde woman, who's holding a glass of red wine.

"Sorry I'm late," I say, and sit on the loveseat next to Mom. "Work was crazy."

"I thought you were off today?" Dad asks and picks up a glass of sparkling water he poured for me since he knows I don't drink often.

"I was but went into help out with an emergency surgery." I look at Harrison, waiting for him to introduce us. His head is turned as he stares at her, eyes glossy. Is my brother actually in love? I never thought I'd see the day.

"Hi," I go on when Harrison just sits there. "I'm Anora. It's nice to meet you."

"Jenny." She smiles. "Nice to meet you too. Your necklace is pretty."

"Thanks," I say and reach up and touch the stone. It feels warm, like it's been tucked inside my shirt.

"Is it amethyst?" she asks.

"I think so."

"Mine too." She smiles again and points to the string of purple beads hanging around her neck. I take a sip of water and lean back. There's an awkwardness in the air, and Buster barks, standing at the back door. Dad jumps up a little too eagerly to get him in.

"How was work?" Mom asks, though I just said it was crazy.

"Busy. You know how it is. It's not just one emergency at a time, it's three."

Mom holds up a hand and nods. "Oh, how true that is. Did the other dogs from the hoarder get homed yet?"

“Not yet, though when they are ready, I still think you should take one. Or even you, Har.”

“If I were home more, I’d get a dog,” Harrison says. “I’m gone too long during the day.”

“You live close enough to the office. You could go home and let the dog out at lunch.”

“Most days I’m meeting clients for lunch.”

“That’s true. I’m lucky I can run home and let Hunter out, though he does well being alone on the days I do work. He’s a good dog.”

“He is,” Harrison agrees.

“He’s the best dog,” I say and get out my phone. “Hunter is my German Shepherd,” I start and pull up a photo, holding my phone out to show Jenny. “He’s my baby.”

“Oh wow,” she says, leaning forward. “He’s pretty. And big.”

“Thanks, and yeah, he’s big for a Shepherd. I should have brought him. He and Buster like to play and—”

“I told you,” Harrison whisper-talks, nudging Jenny with his arm. “I think it only took a minute before she showed you animal photos.”

“I don’t mind. I like animals,” Jenny assures me. The oven timer goes off, and we all get up, moving into the dining room. Dad comes back inside, letting Buster run ahead. The goofy dog greets me first, excited to see me, and then runs over to Harrison, stopping short when he sees Jenny. He sniffs her and then backs away, growling.

“Buster,” Dad scolds. “Go lay down.”

“Get him a treat from the pantry,” Mom calls as she gets the chicken from the oven. Buster growls again and retreats with his tail between his legs. “You were right.” Mom flicks her eyes to me. “We didn’t socialize him enough.”

“It’s not too late,” I say and help set the table. It’s been such a crazy busy day I haven’t had a chance to eat since

lunch, and I'm starving and devour my food pretty much as soon as we all sit down. I feel a little bad wanting to rush out right after dinner, but I have an early morning tomorrow and I haven't packed a damn thing yet.

"Leaving already?" Harrison asks when he sees me put my phone in my purse.

"Yeah, I have to get up early tomorrow," I say and realize that I haven't had a chance to tell Harrison about Aunt Estelle leaving everything to me. It's unfair, really, and I'm still so freaking clueless to why she chose me. "Jenny is really nice, though I will say I'm surprised you brought her over to meet the fam this early. I mean, it was just Saturday you accidentally texted me instead of your booty call."

Harrison laughs. "I met her that next morning, and she's great, isn't she? It's like she just gets me."

"That is nice," I reply with a smile, wondering if this is going to amount to anything. "Let's get dinner or something next week. I haven't hung out with you one-on-one while sober in a while."

"Sure. Text me. Thanks for coming tonight."

"Of course, Har. If I'm meeting someone who could potentially be my sister-in-law, you know I'm down to judge."

"You're good at that."

"I am," I say with a nod. "I should get going. Have a good night."

"You too."

I say a quick goodbye to Mom and Dad and then head out. The wind has picked up, bringing a chill to the air. I pull my sweater tight around my body as I walk down the sidewalk leading to my car. A familiar feeling creeps over me, making me come to a stop. I turn, wondering which of the shadowy spirits that haunt this street I'll see.

I gasp and almost drop my purse when I see a shadowed outline of a person standing against the side of my parents' house. For a second I think it's actually a person and not a

ghost, which scares me even more. But then he steps forward, and light from the porch lights illuminate his face.

“Run,” the scraggly-haired blonde boy says, brows furrowing. “Run before she finds you too.”

Chapter Nine

I sit on the couch, drumming my fingers on the romance novel that's in my lap. It's been years since I felt this unnerved from a ghost and I can't shake the feeling that something else is going on. Things aren't adding up, from that thing in the woods, to Bob going all psycho on me, to the blonde-haired ghost showing up at my parents' house and talking to me. Hell, something feels weird about Aunt Estelle's death and how she left everything to me.

"I need to get going," I say to Hunter, who's lying on the couch next to me, head pressed against my thigh. "I haven't packed your stuff yet either." I put the book down and wrap an arm around Hunter, burying my fingers in his thick fur. "Do you think he was talking to me?" I ask him, thinking about the ghost, and lie down. Hunter wiggles his way closer, squishing me against the back of the couch. "He was looking right at me. Places are haunted. Sometimes items. What would make him appear?"

Hunter nudges me, pressing his cold nose against my cheek.

"Me, I know, but that doesn't make sense. I say I'm haunted because I can see ghosts, but I'm not haunted in *that* sense." I run my fingers over his ear, where his fur is super soft. "And you know what else?" I turn my head and look into Hunter's gold eyes. "I'm hoping to find answers to at least one of my questions tomorrow when I get to Thorne Hill. It's stupid of me, right? Aunt Estelle is dead and I really doubt she left *another* cryptic letter." I let out another breath. "Why don't

I remember meeting her? It doesn't make sense. It's not like I was a baby. Harrison said we were seven or eight in that photo, and Mom didn't finish her residency until we were like nine, I think. I remember living in Michigan, and I remember moving. I just don't remember Aunt Estelle."

Hunter wags his tail and licks my face.

"You're right," I tell him and kiss the top of his head. "It doesn't matter right now. Right now I need to get my lazy ass up and pack our stuff. I don't even know where the small cage is for Romeo." Hunter jumps off the couch and looks back at me, as if making sure I really do get up off the couch.

I do, and I open Spotify on my phone, turning on my go-to playlist. The slightest noise is going to make me jump tonight, and I should probably take a double dose of Benadryl if I want to get any sleep tonight. I'll have to counteract it with a shit-ton of coffee in the morning, but I'll do what I got to do, right?

I bag up Hunter's food for the next few days and add it to a duffle bag full of dog toys, his favorite blanket, and another bag of ferret food and supplies. My basement is dark and unfinished, but I can't really call it *creepy* for any reason other than it's the basement. It's small, like the rest of the house. All I have down there is my washer and dryer and several storage bins full of holiday decor, junk I couldn't part with—including two large Rubbermaid bins full of random stuff from Aunt Estelle—and my winter clothes that I have to switch out at the end of the summer season since I don't have room in my tiny closet.

I find the small cage behind my Christmas tree and remember I put a load of laundry in the washer two days ago and forgot to switch it over.

"Dammit," I grumble, opening the top of the washer and getting hit with the smell of musky clothes right away. I can do a speed wash cycle and switch it over to the dryer before bed, crossing my fingers it actually dries before I have to leave. My dryer is on its last legs and sometimes requires two or three cycles to fully dry whatever is in there. I glare at the dryer, instantly annoyed at the dying appliance.

“Oh, right. I can get a new one now.” I blink a few times, still not wanting to let myself get too excited in case this all is some sort of big joke—which it almost feels like it very well might be. I’ll believe it when I’m at the bank and everything is confirmed to be true—really true.

Times were tough when we lived in Michigan and Mom was still in med school. My parents met in college and didn’t intend on having kids until Mom was closer to being done with her residency, but Harrison and I came along anyway. It took a few years, but my parents do very well for themselves now. Moving out and figuring out how to adult on my own was an adjustment, and being constantly tight on money is just something I’m used to, and that nervous feeling I get anytime I check out at the grocery store probably won’t ever go away.

Hunter stays by my side as I pack a suitcase for myself. I’m a chronic over-packer, afraid of forgetting something, though it’s not like there are no stores in Thorne Hill and I won’t be able to buy new underwear in case I somehow go through the ten pairs I packed for my three-day trip.

Half an hour later, I have everything I need all packed, including snacks for the airplane. I shower, get ready for bed, and then double-check my suitcase one last time before dragging everything by the front door. I snuggle in bed with Hunter, trying—and failing—to stop thinking about the blonde-haired ghost. His fear was tangible, though not in the normal way I sense a spirit’s emotions.

It was apparent on his face, making me believe whatever danger he was talking about was real...or maybe it still *is* real.



THE PLANE LANDS AT MIDWAY AIRPORT IN CHICAGO NEARLY two hours later than it was supposed to, thanks to a delay. It’s bright and sunny here, a sharp contrast from the rain that started back in New York as soon as the plane took off. Following a couple who was on the same flight as me, I walk through the airport to the baggage claim.

I text James as I wait for my suitcase like he requested. He sent a car to pick me up, and I'm not sure if he's supposed to be here or not. I'm hoping not, because it'll be really awkward to sit in the car with him for the hour or so it'll take to drive from Chicago to Thorne Hill.

He texts me back not long after I get my suitcase, telling me to head toward the doors leading outside. There's a limo waiting for me, with the driver holding a sign that says "Benson".

"Hi," I say with a wave. "I'm Anora. Anora Benson," I quickly add. "I think you're picking me up and taking me to Thorne Hill, right?"

"Right," the driver says and comes around to take my suitcase. I just gave him all the info he needs to drive me to a secluded area to murder me, but hey, I'll take my chances. I hate how much I second guess myself sometimes, though once I'm inside the limo I know I'm in the right one.

There's a folder on the seat with my name on it, and house keys taped to it. I drop my carry-on bag down onto the floor and lean back, opening the folder. It's basically a welcome package put together by James, with info on both Thorne Hill and Paradise Valley since my house is on the edge of town.

There are maps of both towns, along with lists of places to eat. Thorne Hill doesn't have a whole lot to offer, though I think I'm going to have to stop by Suzie's Café for dinner. It's in the downtown area, and it looks like there are a few little shops along Main Street.

Paradise Valley is about double the size of Thorne Hill, and it's hard to tell from the map which downtown the house is actually closer to. Both towns have a lot of farmland, making them take up a lot of room on the map even though they're considered "small towns".

There's a copy of what looks like the original blueprints to the house, and I eagerly unfold the paper, eyes going to the porch. I put my finger down and slowly move it up as if I was walking through the house. James said the house has been updated and modernized, and I wonder how much of the house

is the same as it is on paper. Bathrooms were added, and the tiny kitchen was probably enlarged somehow.

The house is a little under three thousand square feet, which is big in my book. I wonder what drew Aunt Estelle into a large, historic home when she was single with no children. Not that you have to have kids to warrant buying a large house. If you can afford it then go for it...but the more I learn the more questions I have.

I enter the address in Google Maps to check out the street. There are a few houses nearby, but the closest is nearly a quarter mile down the road. I go over the blueprints again, trying to familiarize myself with the layout of the house, and then go back to searching both Paradise Valley and Thorne Hill on the internet.

Neither town has a large vampire population, with only three registered vampires living in Thorne Hill. There are thirty in Paradise Valley, which makes sense given the fact there are more residents in general.

I put all the papers back in the folder and look out at the passing highway. We're making good time, thankfully, and I should arrive at Aunt Estelle's house sooner than I thought. The plan was for me to check out the house and go into town if I wanted to, and then meet up with James tomorrow to finalize everything else, including switching the bank account to my name.

I'm not much of a planner, but I like to have an idea of what's going to happen when I'm in a new situation, and I'd planned on ordering takeout or maybe even having some groceries delivered once I got to the house. When James said the house was on the outskirts of town, he really meant it, and now I'm a little nervous no one will deliver anything out here. I do have some snacks leftover, and Aunt Estelle did tell me in the letter to ask James if I needed anything. Certainly, he'd drop off dinner if I was desperate, right?

The limo slows, turning off a rural road and onto another, but this one isn't paved, and gravel flies up around the tires, clinking against the sides of the car. I scoot close to the

window, heart beating a little faster when the house comes into view. It's exactly what I imagined and yet it surprises me at the same time.

Both Mom and Harrison described the house as creepy, but the ostentatious Victorian reminds me of the Fischer-Price dollhouse I had when I was a kid. It's gorgeous, with light blue siding and white trim. The yard looks professionally landscaped, with colorful flowers and neatly trimmed bushes lining the house.

I peel the keys from the folder and shove everything I got out back into my carry-on bag and open the door to get out as soon as the limo comes to a stop. Sunlight warms my face, and the happy chatter of birds fills the air.

"Thank you," I tell the driver and internally panic if I'm supposed to tip him or not. I didn't think to ask James if he included gratuity when he booked the limo, and now I'm desperately reaching into my purse, cheeks reddening, as I pull out cash from my wallet.

"Would you like me to carry your bag up, ma'am?" the driver asks.

"No, thanks. It's not that heavy."

"Have a good day then." He gives the house another look and then gets back in the limo, slowly backing down the gravel driveway. Wrapping my fingers around the handle to my suitcase, I drag it behind me, eyes wide as I walk toward the porch. Three stone steps lead directly to the front double doors that have amazingly detailed stained-glass windows depicting pictures of different types of flowers.

The porch wraps around the side of the house, and a little white table and chairs is set up on the angled corner. I blink and can see myself having tea there...though it's almost like I *did* have tea there.

"Maybe I did," I say to myself and stop in front of the door, heart in my throat as I slide the key into the lock. It opens with a click, and the door swings in. I step inside the small vestibule that leads to the foyer and pause, looking in

and feeling almost as if the house is staring back at me, judging me and making sure I'm good enough to come inside.

Closing the door behind me, I set all my bags down and take the blueprints from the folder, glancing down at them before I start exploring. The familiar smell of sage and lavender hits me when I take a step forward, and I get a sudden vision of Harrison and me racing down the stairs and into the kitchen, grabbing freshly baked cookies from a plate. The same pretty woman with dark hair from my dream is standing near the stove, talking to a woman. She has to be Aunt Estelle, but I cannot remember her face.

It's a split second of a memory, and it jars something inside of me, making me feel a little uneasy. I close my eyes and shake my head, trying to rid myself of the feeling so I can get back to checking out the house. Moving through the small vestibule, I stop in the middle of the foyer. So far, the layout of the house seems to match the blueprints, as there's a parlor to my left and a dining room to the right.

I expected the house to either be empty or full of ugly old-lady-styled décor and boxes upon boxes of the weird, useless items Aunt Estelle sent me over the years. I never expected it to look like something out of a magazine. The dining room is furnished with a dark wooden table and eight matching chairs with pretty cream-colored upholstery that is sure to get stained the second I eat anything in that room. A simple yet pretty chandelier hangs above the table, and the build-in hutch is styled like something I'd see on Instagram.

The dining room opens up to a large kitchen, which must have been a recent addition since the blueprints originally had a breakfast room here instead. It's modern yet classic, with off-white cabinets, a white backsplash, and marble countertops. There's a window above the sink that looks out at the backyard, and another sense of familiarity hits me.

I go through a narrow hall off the kitchen, leading to a room the blueprints had named the library. It's set up like a formal living room, but there's an entire wall of built-in bookshelves around a fireplace, and my eyes light up. There

aren't any books on the shelves, but it wouldn't take long for me to fill them up.

The parlor is attached to the library and has only a couch and a coffee table in there. This would probably serve as a family room now, once a TV is added that is. I'm back in the foyer now and go upstairs. Several bedrooms on one side of the house have been combined to make a spacious owner's suite, complete with its own bathroom. Like the kitchen, the bathroom has been recently redone in colors and styles that are trendy right now, leading me to believe the updates had to have been done within the last year or two.

The bedroom is furnished and styled in a way that almost reminds me of my room back in New York, only much bigger and fancier. Like the rest of the house, the decor is light and girly. It fits the house, though I can't really put my finger on why. It's just the feel of this place, I suppose.

Across the hall are two more bedrooms, and the third bedroom has been reconfigured to make a bathroom as well as a laundry room. The stairs continue to the third story and has a little sitting room at the landing. The rest of the attic is unfinished and full of junk, looking as if whoever remodeled and decorated the house took everything from the main level and just shoved it up here. It's a hoarder's dream, and not something I'm up to dealing with.

It's a sharp contrast from the basement, thankfully, which is completely empty. I get my phone from my carry-on bag and go outside. The front yard has been mowed and manicured, but the backyard is a different story. There are several outbuildings, including an old barn that has to be original to the house. The covered carport looks newish, and Aunt Estelle's Cadillac is parked underneath. It's a typical old-lady car, purchased years ago and probably still in good working condition. I can only hope, at least, because it looks like that might be my only way to get into town tonight.

I take one more lap around the house, hoping something will jog my memory. It's quiet and peaceful here and feels very familiar, yet no more random memories hit me.

A little disappointed about that, I go back inside and start looking through all the cabinets and closets. The kitchen is fully stocked, and a handful of the utensils and dishes look brand-new. Again, it strikes me as odd. Why would Aunt Estelle go through the trouble of updating a house to this extent when she was just going to give it to me and not try and sell it for a profit?

The rest of the house is more or less staged, set up to look pretty but lacking the little things that make a house a home—like toilet paper in the bathroom. There are several cardboard boxes in the owner's suit closet, and I pull one out and over near the window so I can look at the contents in the light. The box is full of books, and I'm almost about to push it aside and look in another since I don't think Aunt Estelle and I both had a love of dark and twisted romance novels.

But then one of the titles catches my eye, and I pick up a book called *Herbs and Their Magical Properties*. I take it out and grab the next book, titled *The Magical Power of Stones and Crystals*. After that is *The Witch's Cookbook*. The pages show signs of usage, stained with ingredients and bits of food.

I go through the other boxes, feeling like I'm raiding a Hogwarts *back-to-school* list. Everything in here is magic related, from the book on psychic self-defense to the velvet bag full of runes.

“What the hell?” I mumble and open the last box and find several weapons, a velvet cape, and a round black mirror. I set it on the table, confused by my lack of reflection. I don't realize I'm slowly moving my face closer and closer to the mirror. Everything around me begins to fade, and the surface of the mirror ripples, as if it's dark water.

“The fuck?” I exhale and push the mirror away. Mirrors have always creeped me out because spirits can easily be reflected back when I least expect it. I lean away and blink, shaking myself. I imagined that. I'm sure of it. I set the mirror aside, remembering why I try not to look into mirrors at night.

There are a few jars of herbs, a box of white candles, and another jar full of what looks like chicken bones. I line them

up on the floor and grab the last thing in the box. It's wrapped in the same shimmery fabric the dagger was wrapped in, and I can tell by the feel in my hands it's a large book. Setting it on the floor in front of me, I pull back the fabric.

It's a leather-bound book, with the same triple-moon symbol that's on the pendant and stamped into the dagger. The leather is worn along the edges from being handled over and over. I undo the metal clasp and carefully open the book, not wanting to tear one of the yellowed pages.

I make it through three pages before knowing exactly what this is, thanks to my love of paranormal romance anything in pop culture. It's not as detailed as ones from movies, and the pages aren't elaborately painted with pictures of what was being described. Instead, messy handwriting is scrawled over the paper with the occasional badly drawn diagram.

But there's no doubt that this is a Book of Shadows.

"Was Aunt Estelle a witch?" I whisper and continue leafing through the book. I stop on a page titled *The Theban Alphabet* and actually gasp. It's the same symbols that are around the triple-moon symbol on the pendant, the dagger, and now this book. I stare at it for a second before closing the book to look at the symbol on the cover, using my finger to mark the page. I flip back and forth, translating the ancient language.

"Grim Gate. What?" I close the book, leaning back and feeling more confused again, which seems to be a common theme when it comes to anything to do with Aunt Estelle. I enter "grim gate" into a Google search, and not surprisingly, see only results that have to do with some sort of online fantasy game. I run my fingers over the old leather book and then text Mom.

Me: Did Aunt Estelle practice witchcraft?

I set the phone down, not expecting Mom to answer right away, and take the Book of Shadows with me onto the bed. I sit crossed-legged, slowly flipping through the pages before Mom texts me back.

Mom: Not that I'm aware of. She was Methodist and went to church with Grandma.

I didn't mean it in the form of a religion, but there's no point in trying to explain to Mom the difference between a Wiccan and someone with powers.

Mom: Why do you ask?

Me: I found a spell book at the house and was just curious.

I move the book to the nightstand and get up, taking a photo of the room to send to Mom. She wants more photos, so I record a video tour for her. About twenty minutes later, I grab the keys to the old Caddy and give it a whirl. The engine fires right up, and there's a full tank of gas. I'm on the border between both Paradise Valley and Thorne Hill and want to check them both out. Since I'm going to Thorne Hill tomorrow to settle everything at the bank, I decide on Paradise Valley for today.

It takes a lot longer than expected to get into town from the house. There's a Walmart here, and I make a quick run in to get some groceries and other necessities to get me through the weekend. I get takeout on the way back to the house. It's early in the evening when I arrive back, and I put the few cold items in the fridge and then take my food onto the porch, trying to figure out what exactly is so familiar about this little white table.

A red pickup truck drives down the road, and I watch it until it turns into the driveway of my nearest neighbor, who's about a quarter-mile away. The fact that there are a few others on this street, though far away, does bring me a little comfort. I take a bite of my taco and look at the yard, trying not to think too hard about how *not* creeped out I feel here.

I don't want to jinx it.

Honestly, I was worried about coming and being in this house alone and having free time like this can make me anxious, which is silly, I know, because I love having free time. But when I'm not doing something mindless like

watching Netflix for hours, or distracted with the hustle of work, my mind tends to get away from me.

And if there are any spirits nearby, well, their emotions become mine. I have to work to keep the mental shields up the rest of the day. It's tiring, and I'll be the first to admit I can get snappy when I'm exhausted from trying to tune out the dead all day.

But here...I don't get any bad feelings at all. I don't sense any spirits or anything else for that matter. I can't explain it since I can't remember ever being here, but it feels like I'm finally home.

Chapter Ten

I pull the blanket tighter around my shoulders and sit up, fluffing the pillow behind me. It's nearing midnight and I'm up in bed reading through the Book of Shadows. The house still doesn't feel creepy or haunted, but I'm now very much aware that I'm a single woman in a house in a rather isolated area. I triple checked that the doors were locked and took a set of throwing knives from the box in the closet, just in case I need to defend myself.

Though—let's be honest—my ninja skills are nonexistent, and I'll probably end up slicing my hand open in the process. Still, it makes me feel better. I'm tired but don't want to attempt to sleep until I can hardly keep my eyes open.

I flip to a page about tea-leaf reading. There are notes written in the margin, and I recognize the handwriting as Aunt Estelle's right away. I have good vision, but the tiny handwriting is hard even for me to read. I lean in, narrowing my eyes, and try to discern what she's written on the page. It doesn't help that the ink is smeared.

My phone chimes, startling me a bit, and I blink rapidly as I turn to grab it from the nightstand. Ethan sent me a text, and I stare at the screen for a few seconds, smiling, before I open his message and see a photo of a couple sitting at a table at what looks like a small-town diner.

Ethan: She ordered a muffin but hasn't touched it. She's probably a vampire, right?

I laugh and look at the photo again.

Me: And there's only one cup of coffee. Definitely a vampire. Better order some garlic breadsticks or something.

Ethan: Way ahead of you. I'll order the garlic mashed potatoes as well just to be safe. Are you in Indiana yet?

Me: Yeah. It's kind of creepy here.

Ethan: Indiana is creepy?

Me: Hah, maybe a bit. I mean the house where I am. It's old but I don't think my aunt died here.

Well, fuck. I wish I could unsend that text, because I can't remember if I told Ethan I was here, in my aunt's house, or if I even mentioned her passing. It's a bad habit of mine, not able to remember what I actually said versus what I thought about saying. I tend to repeat myself a lot that way. Shaking my head, I get up to change out of my clothes and into my pajamas. I'm holding my phone as I start to tug my jeans down. Another text comes through, and in my haste to see what Ethan said, I lose my grip on the phone and scramble to keep it from clattering against the hardwood floor.

And—of fucking course—accidentally FaceTime Ethan.

“Dammit,” I mutter and go to end the call.

“Anora?” Ethan's voice comes through the phone. “Are you—”

I hit the red button and drop the phone on the bed, squeezing my eyes shut. My jeans are halfway down my thighs, and I pull them down the rest of the way. I step out of them when Ethan calls me back. Hesitating, I tell myself it'll be more awkward to explain myself later, and answer.

“Hey, sorry. I was taking my pants off.”

“So you decided to FaceTime me?”

“Oh my god.” I bring my free hand to my face. “No, I, uh, I...fuck.”

“I mean, it's not expected but I'm not opposed,” he says seriously. “I will happily oblige if you want to take your pants

off while FaceTiming.”

“I didn’t mean to,” I finally rush out. “I was taking my pants off and holding my phone at the same time.”

“I’m still intrigued.”

I curl my lips over my teeth and shake my head at myself. Way to fucking go, Anora. “It’s not as kinky as it sounds. I’m changing into pajama pants. They’re fleece and printed with llamas wearing sombreros.”

“What if I was really into that?”

I pull my pajama pants from my suitcase and sit on the bed, tucking my legs under the covers. “Then I’d say that makes two of us.”

Ethan laughs. “You’re okay, though, right?”

“Yeah. It’s a little creepy knowing I’m alone, but the house is all locked up.”

“It was your aunt that died?”

“Great-aunt, technically.” I lie down and pull the blankets up. Now that the sun has gone down, the house is getting chilly. “I’ve never even met her,” I add, not wanting Ethan to think I’m broken up over my aunt’s death, but then realize how weird it might sound that I’m the one supposedly handling her affairs. “I mean I did when I was a kid. I, um, never met her recently. Saw her recently.” I roll my eyes at myself and a few seconds of silence tick by.

“The muffin,” Ethan says in a hushed voice. “They’re eating it.”

I smile. “Darn. I was kind of hoping one was a vampire.”

“I was too. It’s been a slow night.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“It’s not always a bad thing,” he goes on.

“I kind of like—” I cut off with a gasp when I hear what sounds like a car pulling into the gravel driveway.

“Anora?”

“I thought I heard something.”

“What kind of something?” Ethan asks, deep voice bringing me comfort for some reason.

Nerves prickling, I inch toward the edge of the bed. The windows face the driveway, and if someone did just pull in, they can see the lights on and will know I’m here. A car slowly drives down the road, and right away I assume they’re plotting my murder.

Though, logically, I’m sure the few cars that do drive down this road are going to a house nearby, and they’re surprised to see someone occupying this house since Aunt Estelle was in assisted living the last few years.

“Nothing,” I say with a sigh. “Just my imagination getting away from me.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. A car drove by.” I shake my head at myself. “I’m not quite used to this whole middle of nowhere, country living kinda thing.”

“Did you used to live in Indiana? You said you moved to New York as a kid.” Ethan asks and it sounds like a car door shuts.

“No. I was born in Michigan and lived near where I am now, but moved to New York when I was ten. So most of my life has been in New York. What about you? Did you grow up in Chicago?”

“No. I moved all over.”

“Military family?”

“No, but my dad was traveling a lot for work. As a kid, I went along for the ride.”

I hear a car start through the phone. “Do you need to go?” I ask, biting my lip. I hate talking on the phone, and while I had more than one awkward moment, I like talking to Ethan.

“No. I have a long drive ahead of me and could use the company.”



“I CAN’T BELIEVE I’M TELLING YOU THIS!” I LAUGH, CRADLING the phone against my ear. “But yes, I love wearing costumes. I have like five different ones just for the Renaissance Fair, which I go to at least once every summer, by the way.”

“You’re such a nerd,” Ethan teases.

“I am, and I admit it proudly. But the Ren Fair is really fun, I promise!”

“There is no way you’d get me to go to one of those,” he says.

“Don’t knock ‘em till you try ‘em. You’re just lucky this year’s fair is already over or I’d force you to go with me.”

“Say that did happen...I’m not wearing a fucking costume.”

“You actually stand out when you’re in regular clothes,” I insist, still smiling. We’ve been talking for nearly an hour now. “I think you’d look good dressed as Robin Hood, tights and all.” I roll over and pull the blankets tighter around me and yawn.

“You sound tired,” Ethan says.

“I am,” I admit. “It’s been a long day and I need to get up early tomorrow. I should get some sleep. It was nice talking to you. I don’t know the last time I talked to anyone on the phone for longer than five minutes.”

“Same here. Sleep well, Anora.”

“Goodnight, Ethan.” The call ends and I force myself up to get ready for bed. I leave the bathroom light on and get back into bed only to get out and turn the hall light on. Normally, I like to sleep in the dark, but I don’t want to wake up and freak myself out by any sort of shadow. Without Hunter, I’m going to be second guessing any sort of noise I hear.

Certain I’m going to toss and turn all night with a racing heart, I’m surprised when I wake up after a restful night’s

sleep. It's almost nine when I get up, and I'm supposed to meet James in town at ten AM. Rushing to get ready in the morning is normal for me, and I'm semi put together and out the door running only a few minutes late.

Downtown Thorne Hill is much closer to the house than downtown Paradise Valley, and I'm already in love with the aesthetic of Thorne Hill. It's about half the size of Paradise Valley, and looks like it could be the backdrop for a small-town romance chick-flick. I drive by a bookstore on my way to the bank. I'm definitely stopping there on my way back.

James is already at the bank and waiting outside when I arrive. He looks nervous again, and keeps glancing around as if he expects a ghost to pop up from around a corner and yell *boo*. I park the old Cadillac and get out. The second my feet touch the pavement, I'm hit with the weirdest sensation. It's like I'm standing in the middle of a cloud during a lightning storm, yet no wind rages around me.

The energy buzzing around me is strong, stronger than anything I've felt before. But it's not damning, not overwhelming or threatening like how it is when a spirit is near. There's no danger to this energy surge at all, and I resist the weird urge to bend down and plant my hands on the street, absorbing more of this raw energy.

"Hi," I say, shaking the feeling away. "Sorry I'm a little late."

"It's fine." James forces a smile and wave for me to follow him in. "Let's get started."

I hook my purse over my shoulder and follow him inside the bank. It's an older building that looks like it was updated and redecorated in the early 2000s and hasn't been touched since. We go into an office that's in the front of the building, and I try to pay attention to everything being said but my eyes keep going to the window, gazing out at the street.

The energy out there is strong and unlike anything I've felt before, yet it's familiar. If I've been to Aunt Estelle's before as a kid, then maybe I've been here too? I let my eyes fall shut in a long blink. Why can't I remember? We lived in the Midwest

area for ten years. How are big chunks of that just gone from my memory? As far as I know, I never suffered a head injury as a child, and I'm certain nothing overly traumatic happened that would cause me to block out large amounts of time from my mind.

Unable to focus, I sign a handful of papers, signing my soul over to the devil for all I know. The title company is upstairs in an office in the same building as the bank, and nearly an hour later, everything is officially in my name. It's a lot to process and *inheritance taxes* confuse me, but James assures me things are settled.

He does little to hide the relief in his eyes as he rushes out of the building, practically running to his Lexus. I drop all the paperwork off in the car and walk down the street, going slow as I look at the different shops. I take a couple of photos to send to Mom, and send one to Harrison as well, asking if this looks familiar to him.

I pause in front of an antique store, debating on going inside or not. I actually love sorting through the junk that consignment stores like this offer for sale. But as a medium, I almost feel like it's my duty to buy anything that has a spirit attached to it. A few years ago, I made it my job to drive around to as many antique stores in central New York and buy anything remotely haunted. I kept the items in a box in my basement for a while, and then started looking for a way to dispose of the junk without angering the spirits, which is how I met Madame Violet, the *fake* psychic I ended up working for.

Deciding to pass on the antiques for now, I cross the street and go into the cutest little coffee house called Curlew Café. Harrison texts me back as I'm waiting for my latte.

Harrison: That's downtown Thorne Hill, isn't it? Looks the same.

Me: How TF do you remember this?!

Harrison: Again...how do you NOT remember it? Aunt Estelle would take us out for breakfast almost every Sunday morning after church during Mom's last year of residency.

I close my eyes and try to think back. I remember going to church with Grandma and Grandpa, and I remember a café, and Grandpa complaining about how bad the coffee was. But it was in Michigan, where they lived.

I remember looking out the café windows and seeing Lake Michigan. The café was along the beach, and it must have closed not long after we moved. I've wanted to go back from time to time but can't find any information about it online.

Me: Are you sure?

Harrison: Stop fucking around, Annie.

Me: I'm not. I legit don't remember this.

Harrison: I always said you were dropped on your head when you were a baby.

I reply with an eye-rolling emoji as I mentally count back. I remember Mom's last year of residency. It was a hard year, and even as a kid I knew it. Dad was teaching at a local college and had a forty-five-minute commute each way. Mom pretty much lived at the hospital. Harrison and I lived with Grandma and Grandpa, and Grandma's cancer came back. She was sick and required a lot of at-home care...which makes sense why Aunt Estelle would have stepped in to help out.

"Why can't I remember?" I mumble to myself and let out a breath. My name is called and I go up to the counter to get my coffee, dropping a few dollars into the tip jar. Sipping my latte, I go back outside. It's a little overcast today, but warm. People are walking up and down the streets, going in and out of the little shops just like I am.

My phone rings when I'm just a few paces from the bookstore, Novel Grounds. I step to the side and answer.

"Hey, Har."

"Are you in Thorne Hill right now?"

"Oh, right. I did send you a photo." I take a sip of my latte.
"Yeah. I am."

"Why the fuck are you there?"

I suck in a breath. “Aunt Estelle died.”

Harrison pauses. “Are you at her funeral?”

“No, she was cremated. I think. I haven’t actually seen her ashes and I didn’t think to ask for them. I suppose I should, right? I mean, we’re the only family she has left. Crap, now I feel bad.”

“What the fuck is going on?”

“Aunt Estelle died, and she left me her house in her will,” I say with a wince. I’ll tell him about the gobs of money later. “I would have told you the other day, but Jenny was there and I didn’t want to bring it up in front of her.”

“You inherited her house?” he echoes.

“Yeah.”

“Good luck with that hunk of junk.”

Maybe the house was in poor condition when we came here as kids. I wouldn’t know—I can’t remember a damn thing. “It’s been updated. Look, I know how weird it is, and I don’t know why Aunt Estelle left me her possessions. Don’t be jealous.”

“I’m not. I’m, uh, confused. Like you said, it’s weird as fuck she willed her shit to you.”

“I know. And I’ll be home tomorrow. I just had to fly out here today to get things settled.”

“What are you going to do with the house? If it was updated like you said, you could probably make a decent profit off it.”

“I haven’t gotten there yet,” I tell him, though the thought of selling the house seems blasphemous. “I think the house has been in the family a while. I can’t sell a piece of Fowler family history.”

“Sure,” Harrison quips. “I gotta go. I’m taking another client out to brunch.”

“Look at you, working on a Saturday.”

“I fucking hate it,” he mutters. “I keep hearing talk of a promotion so I put in the work, yet it’s been a year of this fucking bullshit.”

“Maybe it’s time to look for a new job. There are quite a few marketing companies in Syracuse.”

“It’s something to consider. Talk to you later, sis.”

“Bye, Har. Love you.”

I end the call, drop my phone back in my purse, and go into the bookstore. I’m in love as soon as I step foot inside, inhaling deep. The scent of ink and paper calms me the same way the smell of sweet feed and hay does when I go to the barn. I take my time looking through the books, absolutely loving that this bookstore stocks a ton of indie books.

Twenty minutes later, I head up the counter with an armload of romance novels. A pretty blonde woman stands behind the counter.

“Did you find everything all right?” she asks as I accidentally drop a few books onto the countertop.

“Yes,” I say. “I found more than I intended.”

She laughs. “That’s easy to do.”

I try to neatly stack the books and notice several wedding magazines open on the counter next to the register. “Are you getting married? Congrats if you are.”

“No, my best friend is, but I’m still really excited.”

“Oh, fun!”

“I’m mostly excited to plan the bachelorette party,” she says with a laugh and continues ringing up the books. Her fingers sweep over mine when I hand her my credit card, and she looks at me a beat too long. Smiling, she quickly swipes the card and hands it back to me.

“Have fun at the bachelorette party,” I tell her and take my heavy bag of books.

“Knowing the bride, it’ll be a wild night.” She smiles again. “Have a good day.”

“Thanks, you too.”

I go back outside and continue walking down Main Street, going in and out of shops and spending more money today than I did all last month combined. I order food to-go from *Maria's*, a Mexican restaurant downtown, and go back to the house. I sit in the kitchen this time, texting Laney as I eat, and then spend the rest of my daylight hours walking around the property and exploring the house again, desperate for something to jog my memory again.

I have another early morning, so after packing up the snacks and washing the few dishes I used, I shower, change, and sit in bed so I can leaf through the *Book of Shadows*.

“Aunt Estelle?” I whisper and look around the room. “You said you’d give me answers somehow.” I wait a beat, as if she’ll knock three times to let me know she’s here. I roll my eyes when I get no reply. Of fucking course. Out of all the ghosts to inconvenience me over the years, the one dead person I want to talk to isn’t speaking.

Sighing, I get under the covers and fluff up the pillows to comfortably continue reading an entry in the book that reads more like a journal. The first few sentences are too faded to make out. I skip to the most recent entry, knowing it was written by Aunt Estelle by the tiny script.

“I predicted another disturbance in the Ley line before the High Priest was able to sense it. The cards are never wrong,” I whisper to myself as I read out loud. Ley line? I think I’ve heard that phrase before. Maybe? I carefully flip through the book as quickly as I can, certain I’ll find a page about Ley line.

I make it only three pages before I’m distracted again by a page about telekinesis. According to this, most witches are able to learn how to manipulate energy around them, in turn using it to summon objects to them or push them away. Some witches are born with the natural ability, using their telekinetic powers as a second nature.

There’s a note in the margin, thankfully not written by Aunt Estelle, saying the best way to get started is to put a bay

leaf in a bowl of water, wait until it stills, and then try to move it with your mind. There aren't any bay leaves in the house, but I can pluck a leaf off of the rosebush outside, which is exactly what I do.

Sitting at the island counter, I stare into the bowl of water and wait for it to go completely still. I give myself a headache trying to push the leaf around with my mind, and as a shock to no one, it doesn't move at all.

My phone rings right as I'm dumping the water in the sink. I turn the bowl upside down and set it on a towel to dry. Wiping my hands on my pants, I go back to the island and grab my phone.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Anora," Ethan says. "I thought you might want some company tonight so you don't get freaked out."

I'm glad he can't see the big smile that breaks out on my face. "I would very much like that."

Chapter Eleven

“It’s good to be home,” I say, patting the couch cushion next to me. Hunter jumps up, doing his best impression of a lap dog. “Ugh,” I huff, leaning back so I don’t get completely squished by my heavy dog. Romeo is bouncing around the living room, happy to be out of his little carrier.

I’ve been back in Indiana for several hours now, and had lunch with Mom and Dad so I could show them all the photos I took. I just got back to my little house, and I miss the old Victorian and the quaint town of Thorne Hill already.

“I missed you,” I assure Hunter. “I definitely sleep better knowing you’re with me.”

His tail thumps against the couch and he turns his head up to lick my chin. It’s been a long day already, and I didn’t get much sleep last night. Ethan and I talked for two hours, and then I couldn’t fall asleep until the sun was rising. I got up barely two hours later and can never sleep on planes. My plan is to take a quick nap, go for a short, three-mile run, and then go to the barn to see Mystery. I’ll fit unpacking in there eventually. Though I am eager to go through the occult books I brought back with me. I couldn’t bring them all, but I left Thorne Hill with a sense of *see you later* instead of a goodbye.

Not trusting Romeo to be loose in the house while I’m napping, I scoop him up and cradle him against my chest.

“I missed you too, little guy,” I tell him with a kiss on the top of his head. My room is more or less ferret-proofed, so I

let him stay out of his cage while I take a nap. I sleep for longer than I expected to and am all groggy when I get up.

It's sunny out today, but the temp has dropped significantly. Still yawning, I get dressed in breeches and a t-shirt with a fleece hoodie overtop. I open a can of rabbit meat and both Hunter and Romeo come running. I plop a spoonful in Romeo's bowl and close up his cage, and then give the rest to Hunter. I give him an extra hug goodbye and head to the barn.

"Hey, Anora!" Leslie looks up from Rose, the bay Standardbred she's grooming. "How was your weekend getaway?"

"Hah, I don't think I can really call it that. It was more of a business trip I guess?" I shrug. "But it was nice, actually."

"Your aunt died?"

"My great-aunt, and yeah. I didn't know her well or anything though."

Leslie nods. "I'm about to take Rose out on the trails. Want to join us?"

I blink and see that dog-creature in the woods. Swallowing hard, I force a smile. If Leslie is going out, I'd rather go with her than have her be alone. I should have brought that dagger Aunt Estelle gave me. It's not like I'm a weapons expert and know how to wield it, but having something to defend myself with in case I fall again would be reassuring.

"Yeah. I'm going to go grab Mystery and I'll meet you outside."

Two people are riding in the outdoor arena, and another horse is being worked in the round pen. I wave as I walk to the pasture, watching to see if Bob is going to slink out of the shadows but he's nowhere to be seen today.

Mystery looks up when he hears the gate opening and nickers as he trots over to me. I turn, letting him rub his head against me before slipping on his halter. He has grass stains on his white fur but it's too chilly for a bath today. I get him brushed and tacked up, and make sure to wear my helmet.

“How have things been around here?” I ask Leslie as we start out toward the trail. I run my hand over Mystery’s neck, trusting him to let me know if anything weird is going on. “No one has seen any other coyotes?”

“Not seen.”

“I don’t like the sound of that.” I turn and look at her.

“I heard howling last night. Sounded like they were surrounding the barn. Freaked me the fuck out.”

My heart skips a beat. They? “There was more than one?”

“It sounded like it, for sure. I was the last one here and had just closed up the barn for the night, thank god. It wouldn’t have scared me so much if the horses didn’t react the way they did.”

“How did they react?” I ask slowly and look out at the looming woods. We should turn back now. It might not be safe out there, but if there’s more than one dog-creature and they’re coming up to the barn...it’s not safe either.

“They all spooked at the same time, like a full few seconds *before* I heard the howling. I know they can sense things better than we can, so the coyotes must have been a lot closer.”

“Shit,” I mutter. What the hell am I supposed to do? What’s out there isn’t a normal coyote. I know it. But I can’t exactly go around telling people what I saw. Well, I can, but they won’t believe me. “If the horses act nervous today, let’s just head back.”

“Sounds good to me,” Leslie says and gives Rose a reassuring pat. I’m on pins and needles the entire ride, which in turn makes Mystery nervous. But we don’t get attacked, and I consider that a win in my book.

“I’m going out with a friend for Margarita Monday,” Leslie says as we walk back to the barn. With the woods behind us, I finally start to relax. “Want to join us tomorrow?”

“I would love to, but I have a date.”

“You do?” Leslie’s eyes widen. “Not another online date, though, right?”

“Right,” I laugh. “I’ve had more than enough bad experiences with that. I deleted all my online dating accounts at the airport yesterday, actually.”

“Who are you going out with? I need details. I’ve been with Adam since high school and want to vicariously live through first dates through you.”

“You and Adam are the perfect couple.”

Leslie waves her hand in the air and makes a face. “We’re boring and lame. High school sweethearts who got married young.” She rolls her eyes. “Even I want to gag at myself.”

“Just wait until you start having all those babies your mom wants you to have.”

Leslie tosses her head back. “Ugh, right? I do want kids, someday, but my job is training horses. Getting pregnant will pretty much eliminate everything but standing on the ground giving lessons.”

I twist Mystery’s mane around my fingers. “It would be sad not to be able to ride for nine months.”

“So sad. And it’ll also be sad not to get paid for nine months.”

“That is a bit of a bummer.”

“Now tell me about this guy,” she presses.

“His name is Ethan,” I say, unable to keep the smile off my face. “We ran into each other last week and have talked on the phone a lot, which sounds weird, I know.”

She looks at me and cocks an eyebrow. “It’s weird talking on the phone with someone you like?”

“Well, when you say it like that,” I reply, and we both laugh. “He’s easy to talk to, and also very easy on the eyes. But I don’t want to get ahead of myself. My track record with men isn’t the greatest.”

“That’s because you don’t let yourself get close to them. I know you have your...your abilities, Anora, but you’re a catch.”

“You’re way too nice, and it’s easy for the old married lady to say that.”

She laughs again. “That might be true, but don’t sell yourself short. And I expect details from your date, lady.”

My lips curve into a smile. “Deal.”



“THIS ONE?” I HOLD THE DRESS UP AND SHAKE MY HEAD before tossing it aside and going back to my closet. Hunter is laying on the bed, watching me agonize over what to wear to dinner tonight. It’s three PM and I’ve yet to hear from Ethan. He texted me last night right as I was crawling into bed, saying he’s looking forward to seeing me.

He’ll call, I’m sure of it. And it’s only three. Nowhere near time for dinner yet.

“What about this?” I pull a dark purple top out of my closet and shake out some of the wrinkles. It’s form-fitting with a low neckline. “With a pair of dark jeans?”

Hunter looks at me and wags his tail, which I take as a yes. I iron my shirt and lay out my outfit for later. Then I speed clean my house—paying special attention to the bedroom—in case tonight goes well and Ethan comes home with me. An hour and a half later my house is spotless. It’s a benefit of having a small house, I suppose, since it doesn’t take long to clean. The trick is finding places to cram all my stuff, which is usually Rubbermaid bins in the basement. I *try* to be organized. Life is easier that way, but I’m also pretty scatterbrained and half the time, I’m just trying to make it through the day without being bombarded with emotions belonging to a passing spirit.

Around five I do my hair and makeup. Ethan still hasn’t called, but the night is young. I stay in my loungewear, knowing I’ll get dog fur all over my dark shirt as soon as I sit down with Hunter. I turn on *Charmed* again, and when Ethan hasn’t called an episode and a half later, I grab my phone to

first double check that I didn't miss a call from him—I didn't—and then text him.

Me: Hey! We still on for tonight?

I stare at the phone for a moment, hoping he'll start typing. He doesn't, and I put my phone on my lap. An hour passes and I still haven't heard from him, making me feel like I'm getting stood up and ghosted. Why though? He called me Saturday night just to talk, and he texted me last night telling me he was looking forward to seeing me today.

It can't be another cruel joke, and I hate that my mind goes there. Leslie was right: I'm a catch. A catch who's slightly neurotic and comes across as crazy more times than not thanks to being a medium. I wouldn't call myself a ten, but I'm at least a solid seven, maybe even an eight on a good day.

I check my phone again, mentally rolling my eyes at myself. I'd know if Ethan texted or called. The phone is on my freaking lap, for crying out loud. Sighing, I text Laney.

Me: Ethan hasn't called, so I'm guessing we're not going out for dinner :-/

Laney: Oh no! I'm so sorry. Need me to come over so we can talk shit about him?

Me: Nah, that's okay. Thanks, though. I'm going to take Hunter for a run.

Laney: If you change your mind, let me know. I just got some of that chocolate wine and I can't drink the whole bottle by myself.

I smile and send her a heart emoji. I might not have the best luck with men, but my best friend is really the best. I stand up with the intention of changing into athletic clothes so I can go for that run but hesitate after one step. If Ethan does call, I don't want to be sweaty.

"It shouldn't matter," I tell myself. He said he'd call this afternoon so we could make plans. It's inconsiderate at this point, right? "Dammit. I'd still go out with him," I admit to Hunter, and get the Book of Shadows from my closet. I take it into the living room and sit cross-legged on the couch, opening

the book to a random page, which happens to be the section on telekinesis.

I run my fingers over the yellowed page and spot a piece of a broken bay leaf stuck in the binding. Using my fingernail, I dig it out and I'm suddenly hit with the memory of sitting in Aunt Estelle's living room. The shelves are full of books, jars of herbs, and various gemstones.

"Very good, Anora," someone says, and I look up from a bowl of water, smiling. A bay leaf spins in fast circles inside the bowl, and the same redheaded woman is next to me. Her face is all fuzzy again, like it's been wiped from my memory. But I know it's her.

It's Aunt Estelle, and she was teaching me witchcraft.

Chapter Twelve

Hands trembling slightly, I put the tiny piece of the bay leaf down and grab my phone and call my brother.

“Hey, Annie,” he answers.

“Hey, are you home?”

“No, I’m just now leaving the office. Everything okay?”

“I’m not sure. Want to come over? I’ll order a pizza.”

“Yeah,” he says with no hesitation, and I know I’ve officially freaked him out. “I’ll be there in twenty. I like pepperoni pizza.”

“I know. Garlic breadsticks too?”

“Of course.”

“I’ll order now. Thanks, Har.” I’m not going to dinner tonight anyway, though I’m almost hoping I get the pizza ordered, Harrison shows up, and then Ethan calls. I’ll decline his call with a smug smile...okay, I probably won’t, but only because I want to see what lame excuse he’s going to give for blowing me off.

He doesn’t call, though, and Harrison comes through the door just about twenty minutes later.

“I need you to tell me everything you remember about staying with Aunt Estelle when we were kids,” I say before he even takes his shoes off.

“Hello to you too.” He waits until Hunter calms down to join me in the living room.

“I don’t remember any of it, Har. I thought going back would jog my memory over the weekend, but it didn’t.”

“You’re serious?” he asks and comes into the living room, sitting on a gray armchair next to the couch.

“Yes,” I say and look up at my brother, pleading for him to believe me. “It’s like my memories are just...just gone. You said we went to church with Aunt Estelle and then went out to breakfast.”

“We did.”

“I remember going to church with Nana and Pop and then going to a café that overlooked Lake Michigan. I remember it in detail.” I close my eyes as I think back. “It was your classic small-town diner, with red pleather seats and fake marble tables-tops. You walked in right in the center of the restaurant, and there was a long counter you could sit at and watch the cooks prepare your food. To the right of the door was one of those old-fashioned horses. You know, the kind that cost a dime to ride and it basically rocked back and forth. And we’d always sit at a booth in the back because there was a painting of constellations that Nana liked. She said an old boyfriend painted it for her.”

Harrison’s blue eyes widen, and he looks at me with concern. “That’s the café, to the T.”

“See! Told you.”

He slowly shakes his head. “But that was in Thorne Hill, Annie. Not Michigan.”

“No,” I insist. “I remember looking out the window and watching the waves.” I close my eyes again and get a flash of my childhood memory. Suddenly, the tall grass and sand shimmers away, being replaced by a street. I gasp and open my eyes.

“Are you okay?” Harrison’s brows furrow even more.

“Honestly...I don’t know,” I admit with a sigh. “Something weird is going on. I know it. Do you remember the name of the café?”

“No. I think it was in town, though. Definitely not near Lake Michigan.”

“I saw a café.” I jump up and hurry into my room, getting the folder James gave me from my suitcase. “Suzy’s Café,” I read, seeing the name on the list. “Ring a bell?”

Harrison shrugs. “Maybe? I don’t remember the name, but at least I remember the place correctly.”

I give him a pointed look and pull my laptop out of the little basket I keep it in next to the couch. Suzy’s Café has a website that hasn’t been updated in years, but it has one interior photo on the home page.

“That’s it,” Harrison says with certainty. “And there’s the horse you were talking about.” He points to the bottom corner of the computer screen. And holy shit, it is there.

Just like I remember it.

“I have been there.”

“Yeah,” Harrison goes on. “We went there a lot.”

I put the computer on the coffee table and heft back against the couch, shaking my head. “Do you believe in magic?”

“Magic?” Harrison echoes. “No. Why?”

“I think Aunt Estelle was a witch, and I think she tried to teach me how to do magic. I can’t remember her, but I keep getting flashes and feelings, I suppose you can call it. And my dreams aren’t really dreams.”

A few seconds tick by. Harrison inhales and leans forward. “It’s not happening again, is it?”

I know exactly what he’s talking about, and it instantly pisses me the fuck off. “It never happened in the first place, and that’s a fucking low blow.”

“Sorry,” he says, and I know he means it. “I’m worried, that’s all. Magic isn’t real, Annie. Come on.”

“And up until a few years ago, you would have said the same thing about vampires, and don’t even try to tell me they’re suffering from some sort of disease. What disease

enables you to live forever, not get sick, heal quickly, and have to drink blood to survive?”

“I get it, and you know I agree with you. But if magic was real, wouldn’t more people be doing it?”

“I don’t think it’s something you can just pick and choose to do.” I motion to the Book of Shadows. “I found this in Aunt Estelle’s house. It’s a spell book.”

Harrison brings the book into his lap and leafs through it. “Indeed, it is.”

“Do you remember that from our childhood at all?”

“No. I’ve never seen this before.” He leans in. “That’s Aunt Estelle’s handwriting.”

“There are quite a few notes from her.”

Harrison puts the book back on the coffee table. “This doesn’t mean magic is real,” he says gently.

“I know. Contrary to what you might think, I’m not completely mental.”

“I don’t think you’re *completely* mental. Just slightly.” He smiles. “It’s odd, I’ll agree with you there. You have an annoying habit of remembering small details and bringing them up years later, so the fact that you can’t remember staying with Aunt Estelle, well, it’s weird.”

“Thanks.” I let out another sigh. Hunter jumps off the couch and goes to the front door, able to sense the pizza delivery driver before he’s even out of the car. Harrison stays for a while, and it’s nice hanging out with my brother. Mom makes sure to have family dinners a few times a month, but with the both of us working in the medical field, we don’t hold regular hours, and it’s not always easy to get everyone together at the same time.

I take Hunter for a run after Harrison leaves, still trying not to let myself get upset that Ethan never called. Did I misinterpret things that badly? I really thought we got along, at least on the phone. Talking to him came easily, and we both laughed almost as much as we talked. Even if his only interest

in me was getting in my pants, getting together for dinner would have to have happened first.

“Whatever,” I huff, slowing as Hunter and I get to the end of the block. I have a busy week ahead of me, which will help keep me distracted. I picked up an extra shift so I’d be able to afford Mystery’s board this month, but now that I know the money I inherited is indeed real, I don’t need to spread myself so thin.

“I don’t have to work anymore,” I tell Hunter. “As long as I don’t go crazy, the money in the bank will keep building interest and I’m set for life.” It’s a crazy concept and I’m totally torn on what to do. I like my job, but I also like free time. I can cut back on hours, but what will I tell Dr. Shelly? I’m not a braggy person at all, and in fact I don’t like being the center of attention in any way, shape, or form, and letting the clinic know I inherited a house along with a ton of money... nope. Talk about awkward. I have a while to figure it out, so there’s no need to worry about it now.

Which is exactly why it’s going to eat me away until I make up my mind.

I get that *hair standing up on the back of my neck* feeling when Hunter and I stop by the front door. I pull the key from inside my sports bra and turn around, gripping Hunter’s leash tight in my hand. He’s standing calmly at my side. If anything was lurking out there, he’d know.

Still, I get us inside as fast as possible and lock the door behind me.



I’M IN THE WOODS AGAIN, AND NOT THE FAMILIAR WOODS THAT leads to the magical door. No, this time I’m alone, and I’m running away from something.

Something that is going to kill me if it gets its hands on me. Part of me wants to stop and succumb to my fate, because once I’m dead this will all be over. No more pain. No more

running. No more living every damned day of my life waiting in fear.

A dog barks, and the deep and menacing sound echoes through the forest. My feet slip on the damp leaves beneath me, and I fall. Another dog snarls, and I turn just in time to see a large black dog leap from the shadows.

I wake with a start, hands flying to my chest to make sure I didn't just get mauled by a dog.

"Fuck," I mumble and flop back against my pillow. I stare up at my ceiling fan, reminding myself that I'm here.

In my bed.

In my house.

Alive.

I'm not dead.

I'm not being chased.

The emotions feel so real, and I can still smell the sweet scent of fall leaves. It still feels like there's damp soil jammed under my fingernails. The sound of the dogs barking still rings in my ear. I roll over and spoon Hunter, trying to fall back asleep. I lie there for another hour before I'm finally asleep again.

When I wake up four hours later, the feeling of my life being in danger still hangs heavy on my shoulders. It's not uncommon for a spirit's residual feelings to linger, but not this long and certainly not this strong. Typically, when I'm unnerved like this I go to the barn. Being around the horses is calming, and I can forget about everything when I'm riding.

Moving slow, I get up and get going, making coffee and drinking it on my little back patio while Hunter runs around the yard. It's sunny but cool again today, and it's supposed to start raining tonight and not let up for the next few days, bringing the temperature down even more. We get cold snaps like this toward the end of summer, reminding us that fall is just around the corner.

A jogger runs down the alley, startling me so bad I almost drop my favorite pink Minnie Mouse coffee mug.

“Get it together, Anora,” I tell myself under my breath. I finish the last bit of coffee—which is cold now—and go inside. I left the Book of Shadows on the coffee table, and open it up to middle. I haven’t gotten this far since I’m trying to go through each and every page. I let my eyes fall shut and carefully flip through pages until I get the feeling to stop and look.

“Removing warts with magic,” I read out loud. “Not helpful.” I turn one more page and smile. “Anti-nightmare charms. Now this is helpful.” I write down what I need and search for the closest new-age store, which is about half an hour away.

I change into breeches and a Hollow Creek Stables sweatshirt, intending to go the barn right after. I toss Hunter a handful of treats, check that Romeo has food and water, and head out.

It takes me longer than expected to get to the new-age store, thanks to downtown traffic. I have to park several blocks away, and my mind wanders to the quiet of Thorne Hill as I’m walking down the busy sidewalk. Willow’s Emporium, the store, is more than a little cliché, complete with an Instagram photo backdrop that’s heavy on the Halloween props. Whatever works for marketing, right?

I need lavender, sage, and three black crystals for the charm, but end up leaving with three full bags of witchcraft supplies. My phone rings as I’m loading my stuff into my car. It’s the vet clinic, and I hesitate for a moment before answering.

“Hello?”

“Anora, hey!” Tammy, the head vet tech, says in a voice that’s way too cheery. Yep. She’s definitely asking me to come in on my day off. “Are you busy?”

“Not particularly,” I say and hate myself for not being able to lie. “Is it crazy today?”

“No, not here, at least. A herd of cattle was attacked by coyotes or wild dogs a few miles from here, and the local vet put out a call for help. Dr. Shelly and Dr. Burnette are going out to help with a couple of techs, which will leave us short staffed.”

“Coyotes?” I echo, blood running cold.

“Yeah, crazy, right? People don’t take deforestation seriously. You can’t really blame them, though attacking a herd like that is ballsy.”

“H-how many cows got injured?” I shut the car door and stare straight ahead, eyes wide.

“About a dozen. Three are dead.”

That is not typical coyote behavior. Not at all. Because it wasn’t a coyote. Leslie said she heard multiple “coyotes” around the barn last night, and those weren’t coyotes either.

“Shit.”

“Right? Are you able to come in? I can give you tomorrow off if you come in now.”

“Yeah,” I tell her. “I’m out shopping but can be there in thirty or forty minutes.”

“Great, thanks so much.”



“No!”

I shoot straight up, claws of death still sunk into me. Hunter lets out a high-pitched whine and presses his head against me. My heart is racing, and I can’t catch my breath.

But it was only a dream.

Again.

And again, I’m trembling like I really was running through the cold forest at night, being chased by something I couldn’t

see. Though this time, I recognized something, and I passed the old, twisted tree right as the barking rang out in my ears.

“I’m awake,” I whisper to myself and reach down with trembling hands to hug Hunter. He tips his head up almost as if he’s hugging me back, and I feel a bit better. “I’m awake and not being chased through the woods.”

Early morning light glows behind my closed blinds. I forgot to turn off my alarm since I’m not working this morning, and it’s going to go off soon.

“I’ve seen that tree before,” I tell Hunter as I reach over and grab my phone to turn off the alarm. “At the barn. It’s at the very end of the trails, or at least it was. I haven’t taken Mystery that far in years.” The trail through the woods at Hollow Creek isn’t very long, and it used to loop around the big tree. There’s a ravine that gets dangerously slippery after a rainfall, and after someone fell and broke their arm when their horse slipped, Penny, the barn owner, fenced off the last part of the trail.

“That thing went after me at the barn. They seem to still be there, and the cattle farm that got attacked is only three miles from the barn too.” Shivering, I pull the blankets over my shoulders and hug Hunter. “And let’s not forget Bob freaked the fuck out on me recently.” I close my eyes, feeling exhausted as the adrenaline starts to wear off. Whatever the hell is going on...it has something to do with the woods behind the barn.”

I swallow hard, thinking back to that dog-creature in the woods. It spooked Mystery, scared the shit out of me, but it didn’t actually attack me. And it could have.

“I have to go back,” I say, and Hunter nudges me. “I don’t know what the hell I’ll do if I run into that thing again, but I have to go back.” I’ve always had a morbid curiosity for things, thanks to being born with the ability to see the dead, I’m sure. There’s a connection I’m missing between the dog-creature and the woods, and it’s driving me crazy.

The logical part of my brain is telling me to stay the fuck away from the woods. But I can’t avoid it forever, and if these

things are closing in on the stable *and* attacking nearby farms, I need to get to the bottom of this. What will I do then? I have no fucking idea.

But I can't sit idly by.

"You're coming with me," I tell Hunter and let out a shaky breath. I tuck him under the blankets with me and lie in bed, half terrified and half exhausted, for a good half an hour until I fall back asleep.

I get up for good this time, putting on breeches and a long-sleeved shirt. I eat a small breakfast, skipping the coffee since I'm all jittery. I'm just about to walk out the door when I stop and go into my room, retrieving the dagger Aunt Estelle sent me for my birthday. I know I'm more likely to slice open my own hand than I am properly defending myself, but it gives me a small sense of security.

Misty rain starts to fall when we get to the barn. I put on my jacket and hide the dagger in my sleeve when we walk inside so I can stash my purse in my tack locker. There usually aren't a lot of people here on Wednesday mornings, and the rain kept some of the regulars at home. I wave to Penny, who's in the indoor arena working a horse, and start out toward the woods.

I've never walked—on foot—out here, and I greatly underestimated the time it takes to get to the end of the trail. It's raining now, and I pull the hood up on my jacket. It's cold and this jacket is water resistant but not waterproof. I'm going to be an icicle by the time I get back to the car.

Going around the barrier that blocks off the dangerous part of the trail, I get a bad feeling. I pull the dagger from its sheath, gripping it tight. The urge to run threatens to take over and I have to force myself to take in slow breaths.

The big tree is only a few yards ahead. My eyes dart back and forth, heart speeding up. Hunter, who's been several paces ahead this whole time, stops and looks back, waiting for me. I've kept my mental shields up the whole time, and I need to drop them so I can see what's out there.

I'd be lying if I didn't say I was scared. Stopping right next to the big tree, I close my eyes and push down the mental walls. The bad feeling intensifies and it's like I'm split in two. I want to run as fast as I can back to the barn, but I'm also being pulled forward.

Nodding to myself, I open my eyes and keep going. I've never been past the ravine, since the trail loops back to the barn at this point. I don't know if this is still Hollow Creek property, but I suppose it doesn't matter. I carefully pick my way down and am out of breath when I climb up the other side.

Tucking my wet hair back, I peer through the trees, fighting against the overwhelming feeling that something terrible is going to happen. I consider myself an intuitive person, but it can be hard to determine what's actually a gut feeling and what's me sensing a spirit's emotions.

There's a pond with an old rickety dock at the bottom of the hill. I had no idea there was any sort of body of water out here. It's overgrown with cattails and lily pads, yet something looks off.

The water is too dark. Too still.

"Hello?" I whisper and push forward. "If you can hear me, know I can hear you too."

Adrenaline surges through me and I whirl around, slashing the dagger through the air and branches snap behind me. I want to run, and for some reason I know there's an old white barn on the other side of the pond. I'll see it as soon as I get up the hill, and it's safe there.

If I can get to the barn, then they can't kill me.

"W-who is trying to kill you?" I ask, hating how weak my voice sounds. Whoever was trying to kill *did* kill if I'm talking to a ghost. I won't bring that up just yet. Not all spirits are aware they are dead.

Swallowing my fear, I click my tongue, calling for Hunter to follow, and stop by the pond. It used to be bigger, I can tell by the erosion of the soil around it. I step onto the dock,

looking down at the water. Boards creak under my feet, and there's no freaking way I'm walking all the way out. If something doesn't reach up and grab me from the water, then I'll crash through the rotting boards and get stuck, coming out covered with leeches and an antibiotic-resistant infection.

Something crashes through the woods behind us, and Hunter growls, fur standing on end. Heart in my throat, I turn and my eyes widen in terror. Hunter moves in front of me, fangs barred. A dark gray wolf slowly descends down the hill, yellow eyes trained on me.

I suck in air but forget how to breathe. The wolf has a strip of missing fur on its face in the exact same spot where Mystery's hoof hit the dog-creature in the woods. It's the same one, isn't it?

I need to do something. Yell, scream, pick up a rock and throw it at the thing. Yet I'm rooted to the spot, too terrified to move. Hunter lets out a menacing growl, lowering his stance and getting ready to pounce. I blink, inhale, and tell myself I need to sprint forward and stab the thing before it hurts Hunter.

Before I can, something splashes in the water, and I turn to see a man emerging from the reeds right by the dog. I take a quick step forward, more terrified right now than I have ever been before. Water drips from the man, and dirt covers his face. His skin is tinged brown with decay, and there's something wrong with his eyes.

Paralyzed with fear, I stand motionless as the old man reaches out and puts his hands on either side of my head. A high-pitched screech rings in my ears and it's like I'm suddenly shoved under deep water and the pressure is going to crush me to death.

And then instincts take over. I raise the dagger and shove it into the man's chest.

"*Ignis*," I say as the word pops into my head. The dagger grows hot in my hands and I can feel power pulsing through me. "*Ignis!*" I repeat and twist the dagger. Flames erupt from inside the man, and black smoke pours from his mouth. I

throw my arms up to shield myself from the heat, stepping back dangerously close to the edge of the dock. Dizziness crashes down on me and my vision blacks out. The dagger slips through my fingers and clanks on the dock. The world around me fades, and I stumble backwards into the icy water.

Chapter Thirteen

My mind wakes up before I open my eyes. My head throbs, I'm really uncomfortable, and I can't move. Hunter must be lying on me. I blink open my eyes and see I'm wrong.

Hunter isn't on me.

I'm not in my bed.

I'm not even in my own house.

Blankets are tightly wrapped around me, and I'm lying on a couch that's been scooted up close to a fireplace. Logs crackle and pop beneath the flames. I'm close enough that the heat should be too much, but a chill has set so deep into my bones I don't think I'll ever get warm. Inhaling, I try to sit up. The headache intensifies, and the room spins.

I haven't been this hungover since—

“Anora?”

Startled, I push up way too fast. The blanket falls from my shoulders, and I think I might throw up. Ethan is sitting in a chair next to the couch, holding my dagger.

“Careful,” he tells me and gets up, right as I realize I've been stripped down to my bra and underwear.

“What the fuck is going on?” I get to my feet, pulling the blanket back around me. Hunter, who's lying on the floor near the fireplace, gets up and puts himself between Ethan and myself. Ethan flicks his eyes from Hunter to me.

“You don’t remember?”

“There’s so much I don’t remember.” I wrap the blanket around myself and go to take a step back but bump into the couch. My head is still spinning, and I lose my balance, falling onto the couch. Nausea twists in my gut, and I’m so fucking confused.

“Are you okay?” he asks, looking right into my eyes. His are full of concern. I open my mouth but my words die in my throat. My lungs burn, as if I’d inhaled smoke or...or *water*.

Suddenly everything comes rushing back. The man on the dock with the black eyes. I stabbed him and he burst into flames. But how I got here? I have no clue.

“Where are my clothes?”

“I put them in the dryer,” Ethan says and takes another step forward. “You fell in the water. Do you remember?”

I close my eyes in a long blink and shiver again. “I remember.”

“You were cold, and your clothes were wet,” he goes on. “I didn’t want you to get hypothermic.”

“Oh, right.” I open my eyes and reach for Hunter, comforted when I bury my fingers in his thick fur. “Wait...you saw me fall in the water?”

“Yeah. I’d say I got there right in the nick of time, but I was a minute too late.” He smirks. “I’ve had worse timing.”

I grind my teeth as that *fight or flight* takes over. Taking a slow breath, I stare at Ethan, not sure if I should be more scared of him or what just happened.

“Why were you in the woods? Were you stalking me or something?”

“No. I was hunting the Pricolici.”

“The what?” I ask and Ethan looks at me dubiously.

“Don’t play games, Anora.” The concern on his face disappears and he pulls the dagger from its sheath.

“I’m not,” I say, and another chill goes down my spine. This time, it’s not from the cold, but from the icy stare Ethan is giving me.

“I don’t like being lied to,” he says slowly as he inspects the dagger. His deep voice is calm and level, like he’s used to talking to people like this.

“I’m not lying,” I retort, surprised at the strength in my voice. “If anyone has the right to suspicious here, it’s the lady in her underwear.” I curl my fingers in Hunter’s fur. “And I want to leave.”

“You’re not going anywhere until I get some answers.” He sets the dagger on the coffee table between us, as if he’s daring me to try something. Something I know I’ll lose. “Who are you?” He inches even closer, and Hunter lets out a low growl.

“I’m apparently not the only one confused here. You know who I am.”

“I thought I did.” His brows furrow.

“I’m leaving now.” I make a move to get up and Ethan holds out his hand. “You can’t force me to stay here. You already kidnapped me and removed my clothes. Have fun explaining that to the police.”

Ethan tips his head. “Your solution is to call the police?”

“What else would I do?” My heart hammers in my chest. I’m confused, pissed, and starting to get scared that Ethan is a certified psycho. He sounded so normal when we talked for hours on the phone, dammit. It’s always the good-looking ones, right?

His expression softens a bit. “Who are you, Anora? Who are you really? Not just anyone has a weapon like this.” He looks at the dagger and back at me. “You’re not just some horse-loving vet tech, are you? Who. Are. You?”

Swallowing hard, I shake my head. “I’m a medium. I have been my whole life.”

“Seriously?”

“Yes! Why is it so hard to believe? Are you one of those people who insists vampirism is a disease that will be cured someday too? Because it won’t.”

Ethan cocks an eyebrow, amusement starting to take over his face. “No, I don’t think it’s a disease.”

“Tell me what the hell is going on before I start screaming.” I run a trembling hand over Hunter’s head. “You said you were hunting that...that thing in the woods.”

“You really have no idea, do you?”

“No,” I say, exasperated. “But you’re freaking me out, so along with screaming, I’ll let Hunter have at you.”

Ethan studies me a moment, conflict obvious on his handsome face. “Pricolici,” he repeats. “They’re demonic bounty hunters, sent after a target by a high-level demon.”

“The man on the dock. His eyes were black. Was he a demon?”

“Yes, but not a high-level one,” he answers, and I just nod my head. Everything is so fucking overwhelming, yet makes sense at the same time. “How did you turn him into a pile of ashes?”

“I...I don’t know,” I say honestly. “That word, ig—”

“Don’t say it,” Ethan interrupts.

“Okay,” I say slowly, feeling even more confused. “That word just popped into my head.” I tighten the blanket around myself, covering my breasts. “How do you know about Pricolici and demons?”

“It’s what I do,” he answers. “I hunt them.”

“You hunt demons?”

“Yes. That’s why I was in the woods. I’d been tracking the Pricolici, trying to figure out who the target is so I could save them and get the demonic mark off their heads. I think you’re the target, Anora.”

Again, I nod, thinking back to the first time one of those things—a Pricolici—went after me. I knew the way it looked

at me, the way it sniffed at me wasn't normal. It was like it was trying to identify me, and now I know it was. "More are going to come, aren't they?"

"Yes." He eyes Hunter, hesitating for a second before coming over and sitting on the opposite side of the couch. "Most people freak out when they're told demons are after them." It's a statement, but I hear the question in his voice. "But you don't seem fazed." His eyes narrow a bit, still not trusting that I told the truth. Who does he think I could be?

I twist a corner of the blanket in my hands. "It's not the first time I saw one of those dog-creature things."

"Pricolici."

"Yeah, that."

"You saw one before and lived to tell the tale?" He hikes his brows. "How the fuck did you manage that?"

"I don't know. It was that day we met. I told you I fell off my horse, which was true. The same Pricolici that attacked us today spooked him and I fell. If Mystery hadn't struck out and hit it in the face...I thought it was going to attack me, but it kind of just...just looked at me. It sounds crazy, I know."

"It doesn't." Ethan lets out a breath and his whole body relaxes. "I want to help you, Anora, and keeping secrets will only make things more difficult."

"I'm not keeping secrets. I've probably said too much as it is." I push my damp hair back. "Did you kill it? The Pricolici?"

"I didn't have to. Your dog ripped its throat out."

"Good boy," I whisper to Hunter and his tail wags, thumping against the couch.

"Where did you get the dagger?"

"My aunt sent it to me for my birthday."

"Your aunt that recently died?" he asks.

"Yes."

Ethan eyes me again, still looking like he thinks I'm lying, but also like he thinks I might freak out and attack him without notice. He stares at me for a few seconds, then inhales and shakes his head at his own thoughts. "Are you still cold? You're shivering."

I am, but it's also the shock of everything finally weighing on me. I've never even had regular bounty hunters after me before."

"Most people haven't," he says with a smirk. "I won't let them get to you, Anora." He rests his hand on my thigh. I can feel the warmth of his palm through the thin fleece blanket. Our gazes meet, and the contempt in his eyes is gone, replaced by a hunger that sends desire tingling through me.

"Here." He takes off the flannel button up he has on over a plain black t-shirt. "I doubt your clothes are dry yet."

"Thanks." I slip my arms through the sleeves, material warm from his body heat. "What exactly is a Pricolici?" I ask as I try to do the buttons. My fingers are trembling so bad I fumble. Ethan notices and moves closer, reaching out and taking my hands in his. The same rush goes through me, and I'm starting to warm up fast.

"They used to be men," Ethan starts and lowers my hands into my lap. I take in a shaky breath and look down, watching him pull the shirt together and push the bottom button through the buttonhole. "Evil men with tainted souls who are sought out by demons and turned into monsters. The more they kill, the stronger they become, transforming from men to wolves. The demon who created them controls them and uses them to do their bidding." He pops another two buttons into place. "If the Pricolici have been sent after you, someone powerful wants you dead. Can you think of any reason why someone would send them after you?"

I shake my head. "No. I don't have any enemies that I know of. I don't really have that many friends either, if I'm being honest, and if I pissed off a powerful demon, I did so without knowing it. I didn't know demons existed in this sense until today."

Ethan fastens two more buttons, leaving the top few undone. “You weren’t close to your aunt?”

“No,” I say with a shake of my head. My hair falls back over my shoulder and Ethan brings his hand to my face, tucking it back behind my ear. He runs his fingertips down my neck, and I want nothing more than to relent to him.

“You’re a witch, aren’t you?”

“I don’t know,” I tell him. “I mean, to my knowledge, no. But it would be pretty cool.”

“Cool?” he echoes incredulously.

“Heck yeah. I mean, who wouldn’t want to be able to do magic?”

“If only it were that easy,” he says ruefully. “How are you feeling? Physically, I mean.”

I actually have to think about it for a second. “The room isn’t spinning anymore, so, fine, considering. I’m glad you were ‘not stalking me’ in the woods and found me.”

Ethan smiles. “Me too. You were not who I expected to find.”

“Who were you expecting?”

His eyes search mine, and for a brief moment, I see longing reflected in his gaze. It’s a feeling I know well, the painful desperation to fit in—fully—somewhere. “I don’t know.” He inhales and flashes that damn smirk again. “Definitely not someone as hot as you.”

I let out a snort of laughter and shake my head. “Well, I’m three for three in looking ragged every time you see me.”

“True, and I still say you’re bang-able.”

I smile, a bit of heat rushing to my cheeks. It’s weird now to think back to our first encounter. I thought he was just some handsome stranger. “Thanks. The fact that I’m half-naked probably helps.”

“I tried not to look. You were really cold,” he adds. “I was a little worried you’d become hypothermic. Plus, that pond

water smelled like ass.”

I pull my hair around to my face and smell it, grimacing. Ethan is right. I let my hair fall back against my chest. “I have so many questions,” I say as I look around the living room. Whoever decorated it is fan of the farmhouse shabby-chic trend. It looks like an Etsy shop vomited in here.

“That’s understandable. I have more questions for you as well.”

“I don’t think I’ll have the answers you’re hoping for,” I say and look into Ethan’s brown eyes, realizing he’s not at all the man I thought he was. There’s a darkness to him, and the danger emanating from him should scare me. But, dammit, all it does is draw me in, making me want more. He holds my gaze for a moment, and my heart thumps in my chest.

“What do I do now?” The chill is back and my fingers tremble slightly. “How long before they attack again?”

“I don’t know,” he tells me honestly. “Demons do tend to get pissed off when you start killing them, and now they know who you are. I don’t think it will be long before they try again.”

“So I’m basically going to wait around to be attacked.”

Ethan makes a face and shrugs. “Basically. Go back to your normal life but be careful. Demons like staying in the shadows, so avoid going places alone.”

“Like walking through the woods?” I ask, wrinkling my nose.

“Exactly like walking alone in the woods.”

I pull my arms around myself and watch light from the fire reflect off the tiger’s-eye gemstone in the hilt of my dagger. “What’s so special about this?” I reach forward and pick it up off the coffee table. “You said not anyone has something like this, but you can buy daggers online.”

“True, but daggers you buy online aren’t tied to the occult.” He takes the dagger from me and pulls it from the sheath. “This triple-moon symbol.” He taps it. “It’s the crest of

a coven. I don't know what this says. I think the language is called Theban. If your aunt gave you this dagger, she probably belonged to the coven."

I'm sure she did, and I know without a doubt now that Aunt Estelle was a witch. I want to tell Ethan everything. He knows more about what's going on than I do, yet I know I can't let my guard down and trust him just yet.

"She might have." I bend my legs up, tucking them under the blanket and take the dagger from Ethan, looking at the triple-moon before setting it back down. "I wish I had the chance to get to know her. She could have answered some questions, that's for sure."

"When did she die?"

"I was told it was last Friday."

"The day before I met you?"

"Yes," I tell him.

"Your aunt dies. and then twenty-four hours later, Pricolici are sent after you. It's connected somehow, and if we can figure that part out, we can figure out why a demon wants you dead."

"Your guess will be as good as mine, considering I don't know a damn thing about what's going on."

"We'll figure it out," he tells me and rests his hand on my thigh again.

"Thanks."

"Of course. This is what I do, but I, uh, have special interest in this case." His lips curve into a half smile.

"Then I expect special treatment," I say back.

"Lucky for you, I'm quite good at that and can be really attentive." He's not talking about keeping me safe from demons at the moment.

"In that case, can I have something to drink? My throat kind of burns from almost drowning."

“Yeah, what do you want? Coffee? Something stronger?”

“Just water is fine. If I have anything stronger, it makes it hard to block out the ghosts.”

Ethan gets up and leaves the room, coming back with a glass of water. I take a few sips and set it on the coffee table.

“Thanks,” I tell him.

“You still doing all right? I know this is a lot to take in.”

“Yeah. I mean, it’s jarring to know someone wants me dead of course, but knowing demons are real...it makes me feel not crazy for thinking they could be in the first place. People still look at me like I need to be in a psych ward when I say ghosts are talking to me. I thought after vampires came out of the coffin a few years ago, people would be more open to other supernatural things, but apparently not.”

“I’ve been doing this for twenty-six years and I’m still surprised at how much people want to brush off or rationalize something that’s glaringly obvious and not normal.”

“Oh my god, yes! I’ve seen people totally ignore things that should freak them out. No, you don’t see dead Betty knocking books off the library shelf, but you see the books falling. Why the hell are you shrugging it off?”

“Dead Betty?”

“I don’t always know their names, but when I see them over and over again, I name them. There’s a ghost at the barn I named Bob.”

“You name stray ghosts?” He chuckles.

“I never thought about it that way.” I laugh and reach for the water, taking another drink.

“Do you want to go out to dinner tonight?” he asks, catching me a little off guard. “I never did take you out like I wanted.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“I was on a job.”

“A demon hunting job?” I click one of the buttons on the shirt against my nail.

“Yeah, a couple hours away, hunting wraiths.”

I’m not sure what a wraith is outside of fantasy novels. “So you just...didn’t call? You totally ghosted me, and that’s a dick move, Ethan.”

“I know,” he admits with no hesitation. “It was, and I’m sorry. I wanted to call you. Jobs don’t always run smoothly. What I thought was a one-day assignment to kill one wraith turned out to be much bigger. I couldn’t tell you that, obviously.”

“Why didn’t you just lie?”

“I didn’t want to lie to you,” he admits. “I don’t know why. I lie a lot and it never bothers me. Hell, this is the most honest I’ve been with anyone in a long time. There’s something about you,” he starts. “I like you, Anora.”

“Me too,” I say. “I mean, not myself—though, I do like myself but not in a self-absorbed way, but in a self-love kind of way that wasn’t always easy to do.” I cringe at my own words. “But, uh, yeah. I do have to eat.”

“Way to sound enthusiastic.”

“I, uh,” I start and cast my gaze to the fire. I just killed a demon. I can speak up and tell the truth without fear too. “I don’t like getting stood up. I haven’t had the best luck with men, so putting in the effort to dress up for a dinner date that never happened rubs me the wrong way.”

“Give me the chance to rub you the right way?” He knows exactly what he’s saying and is now figuring out how to get under my skin. “And I really am sorry, Anora. Going on normal dates like that isn’t something I typically do. Being a hunter makes any sort of normal lifestyle damn near impossible.”

“I can see how that can be true. There is a new Japanese restaurant downtown I’ve been wanting to go to. After I shower, that is. You did say I stink.”

“Hey, I said the water smelled like ass, not you,” he says with a grin. “Though you did fall in the water.” He leans back and my eyes go to the intricate tattoos on his muscular arms.

“Where are we?” I ask. “I mean, I’m assuming this is your house, but, uh, where is it?”

“The neighborhood is called Emerald Ridge. It’s not far from where I found you in the woods.”

I nod. “I know the neighborhood. It was a big deal when it was built a few years ago since the woods from the barn butts up to this subdivision. We were worried they’d cut down all the trees or people would start bothering our horses.” I look around the living room again. The overly-done-farmhouse style isn’t my thing, and I highly doubt it’s Ethan’s either. He said he was here helping his father get settled because he had just started a new job.

“Your dad,” I start. “Does he hunt demons too?”

“Yep. It’s how I got into it. Most hunters are born into this line of work. It’s not typically something you’d choose,” he adds bitterly.

“You come from a long line of hunters then?”

“Not as long as some. My great-grandfather was the first hunter in our family. He was possessed by a demon and killed his first wife and children.”

“Holy shit.”

“Yeah. Hunters showed up in time to save him—you don’t live long after being possessed by a demon—and he joined the Order. He got remarried, had three hunter children of his own, and created the family tradition.”

“The Order?”

“It’s an organization of hunters called The Order of the Mystic Realm. lame name, I know. It was founded back during the Crusades—supposedly.”

“Wow, impressive.”

Ethan shrugs. “Do you want me to take you home so you can shower?”

“Yeah, but, uh, not home. My car is at the barn. You don’t mind if Hunter goes in your car, do you?”

“No. I’ve had demons tied up in my backseat. I don’t mind a little dog fur.”

“It will probably be a lot of fur.”

“I’ll take my chances.”

“Can I have some pants?” I ask. “It’s frowned upon to walk into the barn without pants.”

“Frowned upon doesn’t mean illegal.” He stands and runs a hand through his hair, messing it up. “And yeah. I’ll get you some sweatpants from upstairs.”

“Thanks.” I move the blanket off my legs and stand up, but as soon as I’m on my feet, my head spins and stars dot my vision. I throw out my hand, trying to regain my balance, but trip over the blanket on the floor.

Ethan catches me before I crash into the coffee table. His large hands fasten around my waist as he uprights me, fingers gently pressing into my flesh. I have one arm around his shoulders with my other hand holding onto his bicep.

“You okay?”

“I got really dizzy all of the sudden,” I say, voice a little breathy.

Ethan slides one hand to the small of my back, pulling me against him. Heat comes off of him in waves, and I let my hand fall from his shoulder to his chest. “You used magic for presumably the first time today. It’s draining.”

“Right...magic.”

Hunter barks, startling me. I move closer to Ethan, and he tightens his hold on me, pulling me against him. I breathe deep, and my breasts crush against him. Fuck, it feels good to be pressed—get it together, Anora. Demons are after you, for fuck’s sake.

A door closes, and two blonde women come into the living room. They both look to be in their twenties and are definitely sisters since they look so much alike. They look from Ethan to me and then at each other.

“Seriously, Ethan?” one says, shaking her head. “We talked about this. I sit on that couch.” She shoots me a look, thinking Ethan and I just got done having sex on the couch. “Glad that lasted a whole three weeks. Should I get the Lysol?”

“Don’t be such a prude,” Ethan tells her, tearing his eyes off me. “This is Anora. Anora, that’s Sam and Julia.”

“Anora?” Sam’s brows hike up. “The chick you talked to like all night over the weekend?”

“How do you know that?”

Sam knocks on a wall. “Thin walls, Ethan. Though I’ll gladly be annoyed by you talking instead of having to hear you having sex.”

“Sam,” Julia scolds under her breath. “Oh, you brought a dog.”

“That’s Hunter,” I say, voice small. Hunter wags his tail, waiting for someone to come gush all over him. He’s a friendly dog and is oddly calm right now given all that happened. I hope he didn’t get injured.

“He killed a Pricolici,” Ethan tells his sisters. “I’ll fill you in later.” He lets his hands slowly slide down my body, eyes on me for another second. “In the meanwhile, can one of you let Anora borrow some pants?”

Chapter Fourteen

“I’m just gonna hop in the shower really quick,” I tell Ethan, dropping my purse onto the floor in the foyer. He offered to come over and keep watch while I changed, and I accepted since it seemed like a good idea at the time.

Now it just feels awkward.

“You can turn the TV on if you’d like.” I motion to the TV and bend over to unzip my boots. They’re still wet, and each step squished under my feet. “The remote is, uh, somewhere. I’ll find it.” I toss my wet boots by the door.

“It’s on the couch,” Ethan says.

“Do you want anything to drink?” I ask, wanting to be a good host despite everything going on.

“Nah, I’m good.”

“Okay. I’m going to wash the nasty pond water off me now.”

Ethan crosses the room and sits on the couch. Hunter jumps up next to him, resting his head on Ethan’s thigh. I hurry into the bathroom and turn on the water before stripping out of Ethan’s shirt and Sam’s PJ pants. I shower as quickly as I can and don’t realize until I’m out of the shower that I didn’t bring in clothes.

Wrapping a towel around myself I crack the door open and peer into the hall. The TV is on, and it sounds like Ethan is watching *FRIENDS*. I hurry across the hall, closing my bedroom door behind me.

Romeo, who's been in his cage all day, scurries down his ramp and waits by the door, wanting out.

"Sorry, little dude," I tell him when I open the cage door. "I didn't mean to leave you in for so long." He runs out of his cage and bounces around the room making the cutest little noises. He crashes into the wall and tips over. Ferrets are stealthy, but not the most graceful animals.

Going to my nightstand, I open the top drawer and look at my underwear. Part of my brain tells me to grab the sexy black lace thong, but another part says grab the period-stained granny panties, so I won't be tempted to remove my pants later.

It doesn't matter how attractive I find Ethan, or how good his large hands felt resting on my waist. I can't be sure if I can trust him and sleeping with him will only make it harder to sort things out. While I'm debating what to cover my ass with, Romeo climbs up onto my dresser. I see him push my jewelry box at the last second. I turn and try to make a mad dash over, dropping my towel in the process, but I'm too late.

"Dammit," I mutter after it clatters to the ground. "Thanks, Romeo." He looks up at me, little masked face too cute for me to stay mad at. "I'll get it later," I tell him right as my door flies open.

"I heard a crash," Ethan starts, and I scream, dropping to the ground to hide behind my bed. "Shit." He closes the door so fast he whacks himself in the face. "I heard a crash and wanted to make sure you're okay."

"I'm fine," I say through gritted teeth, eyes still wide. "My ferret knocked something over."

"I'll, um, go back to the TV now."

"Good idea." I let out a breath, shaking my head. The lock on my door is broken, which usually isn't a problem since I live alone. I raise up and peek at the door, and then wrap the towel around myself again. I blindly reach into my underwear drawer, picking out a pair of purple undies that aren't *black thong* sexy, but look a hell of a lot better on me than my period

panties. I don't agonize over which bra to wear, but I put on a gray one that just happens to give me great cleavage. But it's also comfortable, so I'm *not* doing it to look good for Ethan.

I put on jeans and a dark top and towel-dry my hair before going back into the bathroom to put on a little bit of makeup and half-dry my hair. It takes too long to fully dry my thick hair, and I feel bad making Ethan just sit in my living room.

Running my fingers through my semi-damp hair, I finally go back into the living room. Ethan is on the couch again, petting Hunter while he watches TV. Hunter's tail wags when he sees me, and jumps off to come over, greeting me as if I've been gone for hours.

"You do clean up nice," Ethan says, running his eyes over me. "And the first night we met, you weren't ragged."

"Emotionally, I was." I twist my hair around my fingers. "I take it nothing attacked while I was getting dressed. Just the killer ferret." I cringe at my words again. Why did I bring that up? "We don't have to talk about that."

"So, you don't want me to tell you I liked what I saw?"

"Usually someone has to buy me at least one drink until they see me with my clothes off, but you already have twice today."

"That first time I was saving you from freezing, you know."

"What a tough day at the office when stripping my clothes off constitutes saving my life."

"Right?" His lips curve into a grin. "I know it's not time for dinner, but do you want to get something to eat now? I'm starving."

"Yeah," I say quickly. "Let me feed the animals and then we can head out."

"Want any help?" Ethan asks, getting to his feet.

"Uh, sure." He follows me into the kitchen. I grab another can of rabbit meat from my tiny pantry and plop a spoonful down for Romeo.

“Is this for your ferret?” He takes the bowl from the counter while I fill a bigger dish with kibble for Hunter.

“Yeah. I’ll put a handful of hard food in there for him too.”

“I had two ferrets when I was a kid,” he says, following me to my room. I crack the door a few inches waiting a second to make sure I don’t hit Romeo. “I found them after their owners were killed by demons.”

“They’re lucky you found them.”

He nods. “I was able to keep them for a few years. They got into everything.”

“They’re troublemakers, that’s for sure.” I close my closet door and put Romeo’s food down, trapping him in my room while Ethan and I get something to eat

“Where do you want to go?” he asks as I pull a leather jacket from the hall closet. “The sushi place?”

“We can eat somewhere closer. Traffic will be bad soon downtown. There’s an Italian place about ten minutes from here.”

“That’s good with me.”

I give Hunter a hug goodbye and follow Ethan out, locking the front door behind me. The rain has let up, but the sky is still covered in thick gray clouds, darkening the day. I look up and down the sidewalk, heart skipping a beat.

“It’s hard to let your guard down, I know,” Ethan says.

“I feel like I should go back inside and stash the dagger in my purse.”

“That wouldn’t be a bad idea.”

I wait a beat for him to laugh. “You’re serious?”

“I’m armed, but an extra weapon never hurts. And I’ve heard rumors that certain daggers like that are enchanted.”

“It felt hot,” I tell him. “Before I said that spell to blow up the demon.”

“Then I’d bet it is enchanted.” Ethan opens the door to his Jeep for me. “Tell me where to go,” he says, firing up the engine. “I haven’t been around the city much.”

“You said your dad got a new job here.” I pull the seatbelt over myself. “But he’s a demon hunter.”

“He got reassigned by the Order. We’ve only been here three weeks.”

“Why here?”

“There are a few members of the Order who have learned how to scry for demonic activity or magical energy. I’m going to assume whatever your aunt did to you wore off when she died and was weakening before then. The demon set up shop while it waited so it could narrow down exactly who you were.”

“Wait, you’re saying you were sent here because of me?”

“Indirectly, yes.”

“This day keeps getting weirder and weirder.” I get my phone from my purse and see a few texts from Laney, saying she had a bad day at work and wants to hang out. I have to work in the morning, so I won’t be going to the bar with her tonight, but when she has bad days like this—which happens frequently since her boss is a grade-A asshole—she usually comes over for an hour or so and leaves feeling better. That’s what friends do, right? Cheer you up, be there for you when you’re down...that sort of thing.

I tell Laney everything, and I want to tell her about the demons and the magic. She gets freaked out when I tell her about a ghost, though, and I know how crazy it will all sound.

“Turn left at the stoplight,” I tell Ethan and look back at my phone. Might as well invite Laney over, bust out the junk food, and spit out the truth, right?

Me: When do you get off?

She doesn’t respond right away since she’s working, and I drop my phone in my purse.

“Can we listen to music?” I blurt, afraid the silence is going to get awkward.

“Sure, what do you like?”

“Either classic rock or Britney Spears,” I say, scrunching up my face. “It’s an odd combination, I know.”

“You really like classic rock?”

“Yeah, is that surprising?”

He nods. “You don’t look like someone who would.”

“You should stop stereotyping me, Ethan. You said I don’t look like someone who’d have demonic bounty hunters after me and look how that turned out.”

“Touché.” He laughs and opens a playlist, turning on *Kickstart My Heart* by Mötley Crüe. I watch our surroundings pass us by as drive, feeling increasingly paranoid. I thought everything hit me before, but the fact that I could have died—that Hunter could have been ripped apart—weighs on me and I get all jittery.

“Anora,” Ethan says slowly and reaches over, hand landing on mine, which is resting on my thigh. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” I say right away and force a smile. It’s such a natural thing to do, to cover up how freaked out I am. But then I realize I don’t have to lie around Ethan. “Actually no. I keep replaying it in my mind, and I feel really fucking stupid for going out on my own like that.”

“Why did you go out on your own?”

“Partly curiosity,” I admit. “And keep going, then turn right into the little plaza up there.”

“What was the other part?”

“I had a feeling those things were looking for me. A herd of cattle was attacked, and I assumed it was them, which makes me sound even more dumb for going after them. I guess...I guess if it wanted me, I wanted it to go after me and not hurt anyone else in a sense, though I didn’t really know what it was yet. Does that even make sense?”

“I think so. Look, it doesn’t matter. We all do stupid things, and we’re all guilty of not thinking things through. Besides, it’s not like you knew demons were in the woods. You didn’t die, and you killed two demons in the process.”

“Are the Pricolici demons?”

“Not in the technical sense, but anything evil can be lumped into the demonic category.”

“This is a lot to keep track of.”

“You’ll get it,” he assures me and pulls into the parking lot. We get seated right away since it’s that off time between lunch and dinner. I order a glass of sparkling water along with my cheese ravioli.

“What’s it like to be a medium?” Ethan asks, grabbing a breadstick from the basket on the table.

“Well, the pay sucks.”

He chuckles. “You worked as a medium?”

“For Madame Violet,” I say in the fake accent she used to use. “She thought I was a fake like her, and when I actually contacted the dead, people kind of freaked out.” I run my finger down my water glass, wiping a line in the condensation. “Mostly...mostly it’s isolating.”

I look up, meeting Ethan’s eyes for a moment. “It’s like there’s a war raging constantly in my head between our world and their world. I have to use so much energy to keep the mental door leading into their world shut. I pick up on spirits’ emotions and they become my own. I remember one time on a school field trip, the bus passed this site where a girl got murdered. Of course, no one else knew that, but I was overcome with these powerful emotions of just absolute terror. I had a panic attack, and we had to stop the bus.” I take another drink. “It made being a kid rather difficult since I was always so different but couldn’t explain why.”

“I know that feeling. Not fitting in but not being able to tell anyone why, especially when you know your secret makes you so much more badass than everyone else.”

“I don’t know how badass having a conversation with a ghost only you can see makes you. I’ll give you a spoiler: it just makes you look crazy.”

“No one knows about your ability?”

“Oh, people know, but only my brother and two friends believe me. My parents definitely thought I was just being defiant at first, and then legit insane. Obviously, I had trouble concentrating in school because ghosts are distracting when you’re a kid. I didn’t get the best grades and got in trouble for not paying attention in class. My mom was positive I had ADHD, and I saw so many different doctors who never diagnosed me since I don’t have it. Eventually, I learned to deal and stopped mentioning that I could communicate with the dead. It worked for the most part, but then Jessie Martin’s seventeenth birthday party happened.”

“What happened at Jessie Martin’s party?”

“Someone thought it would be fun to have a séance. We all got in the circle, and Jessie said we should summon her cousin, Jason, who’d recently died in a fire. Well, I got a vision, I guess you would call it, of him sitting in his bedroom. I described everything in perfect detail, from the color of his eyes to the design of the wallpaper. I even saw his girlfriend, and she was holding onto her necklace. It had two rings on it. Turns out, after he died, she wore his class rings on a chain around her neck. I knew what kind of music he liked and could tell you his hobbies. Everyone freaked out and Jessie’s mom called my mom to come pick me up. Needless to say, Jessie never invited me to another party again.”

“You got all that from a vision?”

“Yes and no. I don’t just see pictures, it’s like I download a file or something. I see an image and at the same time know a lot, and sometimes random, information.”

“I never knew how it worked.”

“Have you met other mediums?”

“The Order has worked with some over the years.”

“Are they witches too?”

“Some believe they have a witch in their family line years back, but they can’t perform spells or anything.”

“Interesting. I don’t mean to complain or say my life was rough, because it wasn’t. I never went without, but lying and never being understood just sucks sometimes. Most times I just feel like a loser who talked to a ghost thinking he was my blind date and then the real blind dates shows up, and I realize I’ve been talking to no one.”

Ethan laughs. “Sorry. It’s not funny but it is.”

“I can laugh now. And the ghost was a much better date than my actual date, who only went out with me because I reminded him of his sister, who was also a redhead.”

“That’s messed up.”

“Right?” I let out a breath and shake my head. “What about you? What was it like growing up in the Order?”

“It was my norm, but it’s isolating too. We traveled a lot, going from job to job. I couldn’t tell anyone who wasn’t in the Order the truth, of course, and being in the car with just my dad for hours on end got old fast.”

“Your sisters didn’t come with?”

“Sam and Julia aren’t my sisters through blood. Their parents were friends with my dad, and when they were killed by demons, my dad legally adopted them so they wouldn’t end up in foster care. They’ve been with us for ten years now.”

“Oh, wow. That was really kind of your dad.”

“We grew up hunting together. They felt like family before they legally became it.”

Ethan tells me a bit more about growing up in the Order, and I can tell he’s feeling the same sense of relief that I am. It’s so fucking nice to be able to open up like this, without having to worry the other person is going to go home and gossip about how looney-tunes you sound. We stop talking about demons and ghosts by the time our food comes, and it’s like how it was when we talked on the phone.

Ethan is easy to talk to, and he makes me laugh. Things seem so normal between us I almost forget he knows my secret of being a medium. And he's okay with it.



“WHAT ARE THE CHANCES I’LL GET ATTACKED IN MY SLEEP tonight?” I pull my keys from my purse, glancing at Ethan as we walk to my front door.

“If you stay inside and keep everything locked up, I’d say low to medium.”

“That’s reassuring.” I make a face and hesitate before I stick the key in the lock. “Do you want to come in?” I ask. I know exactly how my question sounds, and yes, I do want Ethan to spend the night. In my bed. Next to me. Naked.

But I shouldn’t, and I have to remind myself to keep my guard up. Men like Ethan are dangerous when it comes to matters of the heart, and much more lethal than demons.

“Sure.”

I unlock the deadbolt and push the door open. Hunter races over to greet us, and I hold my box of leftovers up so he doesn’t knock it out of my hands.

“Did any demons break in while we were out?” I ask Hunter, and his tail wags faster. I turn on the foyer light and go into the kitchen, looking down the hall to my bedroom and feeling a little nervous.

“Benefit to having a small house, I guess,” I start as I open the fridge to put my leftovers away. “There aren’t a lot of places to hide. Though the basement has always freaked me out a bit.”

“Want me to check it out?” Ethan asks.

“It would make me feel better,” I admit.

He reaches behind his back and pulls out a gun. “Just in case,” he says with a cheeky grin.

My eyes go wide. “You’ve had that on you this entire time?”

“I told you I was armed. I also have two knives. One is brass, and the other has a silver tip. You never know what you might find yourself up against.”

I blink. “I suppose *better safe than sorry* definitely applies to demons.”

“For sure. Where are your basement stairs?”

I point to a door off the kitchen. “It’s cluttered down there.”

“Perfect place for demons to hide,” he teases.

“Not funny,” I say, playfully nudging his arm. “I’ll come with you, and if there are demons down there, they should at least have the decency to do some laundry for me.”

He laughs and opens the door to the basement stairs. Hunter runs ahead, which is really all the reassurance I need to know if there are actually demons down there.

“Is your house haunted?” Ethan asks, turning on the light over the stairs.

“No, thankfully. I looked at like twenty houses before finding one with no traces of spirits. I pay way too much for this little place too, but what’s that lame phrase? You can’t put a cost on a piece of mind?”

“I think that’s it.”

“It’s true. It’s nice having this place to shut out the world, though I do worry about it becoming haunted later.”

He takes another look around the basement and turns back toward me. “There are spells for banishing ghosts.”

“Do you know how to do them?”

“No.” He puts the gun back in a holster, hidden under his flannel shirt. “And even if I did, it wouldn’t work. I’m not a warlock with spell books.”

“Right,” I say and go back upstairs.

“You could,” Ethan presses.

“I don’t know how to do magic,” I remind him. “What happened today...it was out of desperation.” Hunter is waiting by the back door, and I undo the locks and let him out. “If I could cast a spell to banish ghosts, I totally would. But I don’t know how either.”

“You can trust me,” he urges. “I’m one of the good guys, and I know you are too.”

“As opposed to being bad?” I shake my head, not following.

“Casting a protection spell on your house isn’t a bad idea, either,” he notes.

“I don’t know how. I think my aunt was the witch, not me.”

“I saw you turn a demon into a pile of ashes. We both know you used magic.” He angles his body toward mine and steps closer. My heart speeds up and my stomach flutters. He’s such a gorgeous man—a dangerous, gorgeous man—and I want so badly to trust him.

“I have my aunt’s Book of Shadows,” I confess and then feel jittery right after the words tumble out of my mouth.

“You do?”

I nod. “Yeah.”

“Can I see it? There might be something helpful in there.”

“Yeah,” I say, nodding my head. I stay rooted to the spot for another few seconds, and then jump when Hunter paws at the door, wanting in. If there’s a way to cast a real protection spell on the house, I’ll do it just to help me sleep at night.

I let Hunter in and then go into my bedroom, cleaning up a mess Romeo made quickly before grabbing the book from my closet. Ethan and I go into the living room. I set the heavy book on the coffee table and sit next to Ethan on the couch.

“I’ve never seen one in person before,” he starts, reaching out and apprehensively touching the book. “Most witches are

crazy protective of their books.”

“Should I not be showing you then?” I give him a sideways glance.

“I told you, you can trust me.”

“Which is exactly what someone I shouldn’t trust would say.”

“That is true.” He opens the book and twists to look at me. “If I wanted to hurt you, I would have, Anora.”

“That’s reassuring.”

“It’s true.” He goes back to the book, turning another page. “You said the spell to light the demon on fire just popped into your head?”

“Yeah, and I...I...” I close my eyes, letting my mental shields drop for a second so I can try to get a read on Ethan. I like him and find him attractive—very attractive. He knows more about demons and magic than I do, and if I want to get through this alive, I’m going to need his help. But trusting him? It seems just as risky as going back into the woods alone looking for more demons.

“You what?”

I open my eyes, not sensing anything malicious coming off Ethan, though, I’ll be the first to admit my desire to find myself naked and under him is overriding my sensibility at the moment.

“I think I used to be able to do magic, but I can’t remember it.”

“What do you mean?”

Sinking my teeth into my bottom lip, I shake my head. “I don’t really know, but for as long as I can remember, I’ve had these dreams about walking through the woods, going through some sort of portal, and now I’m getting flashes of being taught how to do magic. I met my aunt before when we were kids, and my brother said she used to babysit us while our mom finished her residency, but I have zero memory of that. And what I can remember is all wrong. I remember going to a

café with my grandma, and I described it perfectly, but in my mind it was in Michigan overlooking the lake, not in Indiana,” I rush out. “Nothing makes sense. Why are chunks of my memory just missing? Why are the few memories I have all mixed up? And why the hell did my aunt leave her entire inheritance to me, including this spell book?”

“It’s all connected to her.” He straightens up and tips his head as he thinks. “Too bad we don’t know a medium to try to contact your dead aunt.”

My lips part, and I don’t know why I didn’t think of it earlier, especially since Aunt Estelle said she’d explain everything—even now. “You want to have a séance?”

“Yeah, but done the right way. Séances are dangerous, as you know.”

“I do.”

“So?” he asks. “What do you think? Want to try it?”

My lips curve into a smile. “Yeah. I do.”

Chapter Fifteen

So much for my house not being haunted.

“This brings back memories,” I say as I set a white candle in the middle of the coffee table. “Of when I worked as a medium, I mean, though I’m not wearing my *uniform*, if you could call it that.”

“You had to wear a uniform to tell fake ghost stories?” Ethan asks, sitting on the floor across from me.

“Hey, the stories I told were never fake. Which is why I got fired.”

“What kind of uniform did they make you wear?”

“A Victorian-styled black dress.”

“That’s not cliché at all.”

“Right?” I smile and pick up the lighter. “Oh, I should probably put Romeo back in his cage. When I *ask for a sign* and he knocks something over, I’m going to be disappointed.”

“Good thinking.”

I light the candle and go into my room, feeling a little bad when I pick up Romeo, who’s sleeping on my bed, and stick him in the hammock in his cage. He goes right back to sleep, at least. I leave the door cracked and rejoin Ethan in the living room. He grabbed a few things from his Jeep *just in case* things go sideways. Two canisters of salt and an iron fire poker are on the floor next to us, and he clicks on an EMF meter.

“That’s almost insulting,” I tell him, raising my eyebrows. “I don’t need that to know if there are spirits around.”

“Don’t get cocky now,” he shoots back with a grin.

“This is my specialty. Remember, I used to do this for a living.”

“And then you got fired.”

“Yeah, for being too good.”

Ethan laughs. “Then I expect this to work.”

I put my hand on the coffee table and lean forward. “I will knock, but I cannot guarantee who will answer,” I say in what’s supposed to be a spooky voice, another thing Madame Violet criticized me for.

“Good thing I’m prepared.” Ethan looks at the salt and fire poker, which he said can repel ghosts since they aren’t fans of iron, and can stop them from entering a room. Though in my experience, nothing can really stop a ghost. They can walk through walls, after all.

“Do you want me to turn off the lights?” I ask.

“It would be more romantic that way.” He puts his hands palm-up on the table and slides them forward.

“Oh, so romantic.”

“If you don’t need them off, then no. Keep ‘em on.”

“Okay.” I put my hands on top of his, telling myself not to appreciate the roughness of them or wonder how they’d feel against my breasts. Closing my eyes, I let my mental shields drop and slowly count backward from ten. I might not know how to do magic—again—but I know enough about spirits and the danger of a séance that I’m not taking any chances.

“In a circle around us, I cast white light. Protect us from evil, keep us safe through the night.” The last word leaves my lips, like it has a hundred times before, but I feel something this time. I blink open my eyes and swear something just shimmered around us.

“You said you didn’t know any spells,” Ethan says, eyeing me.

“That’s not a spell. It’s something I made up as a kid to help me sleep when I was scared. But maybe it is a spell, one that my aunt taught me and one I can’t remember for some reason.”

“It sounded like a spell.”

“It felt like one too,” I confess and slip one hand off Ethan’s. I pick up the letter Aunt Estelle had James give me and close my eyes again, sinking further away from what’s in front of me and into the spirit world. I’ve never let myself go as far as I think I can because I’m terrified I won’t be able to come back. The whole thing confuses me as well, and it’s just not something I’ve ever been willing to risk.

“Estelle Fowler,” I say quietly, concentrating on the letter. “I would like to talk to you—”

“About your car’s extended warranty,” Ethan interrupts. If I could kick him under the table, I would. I open my eyes and glare at him.

“Maybe I should break the circle and let the ghosts possess you.”

“Fine. Sorry,” he says, brown eyes glimmering.

“Estelle Fowler,” I repeat, gently rubbing the letter between my fingers. “If you can hear me, please give me a sign. I really need to talk to you.” The candle flickers and both Ethan and I hold our breath.

“Anything?” he asks quietly after a few seconds have passed.

“No.” I put the letter down and rest my fingertips on top of Ethan’s again. “Spirits, heed my call. Bring forth the voice of Estelle Fowler to this time and place.” I think of the recurring dream about walking through the forest. Darkness surrounds us, but I’m not scared.

“Come along, Anora.” The woman next to me reaches behind, holding out her hand for me to take. The door that

appeared out of nowhere swings open, and I see the familiar brick building that brings a sense of belonging.

“Aunt Estelle,” I whisper and suddenly I get hit with another memory. I’m in the forest, just like in my dream, but this time I step through the door. Aunt Estelle looks down at me, smiling. It’s the first time I’ve clearly remembered her face. It’s jarring and my eyes fly open.

I open my mouth to tell Ethan, but then another familiar feeling creeps over me, causing my nerves to prickle down my spine. Hunter jumps off the couch, growling, right as the blonde-haired boy appears, standing behind Ethan.

The EMF meter starts to buzz, and Ethan makes a move to get up.

“Don’t break the circle,” I tell him, linking our fingers. “There’s a spirit.”

“Where?” He jerks his head around.

“About a yard behind you. It’s not my aunt, but I’ve seen him before.”

“I don’t like this, Anora.” Ethan’s brows push together, and his eyes go to the iron fire poker.

“No,” I tell him, giving his hands a squeeze. “Wait. Let me try to talk to him.” I swallow a lump of fear and stare at the blonde-haired ghost. “Can you hear me?” I ask, voice wavering. He looks completely corporeal to me, with his skin paled from death.

His head bobs up and down as he mouths the word “Yes”.

“What do you want?”

His lips move as if he’s talking, but no sound comes out.

“What’s he saying?” Ethan asks, looking at a spot on the wall that’s not at all where the ghost is standing.

“Shush,” I tell him and focus my concentration on the ghost. “What do you want?” I repeat and realize I’m holding up one more mental shield. I keep myself so tightly guarded, being tense all the time feels natural. I shut my eyes and shove

it down, and instantly, I'm hit with flashes of someone else's memory.

Screams echo around me, and the smell of damp fall leaves fills my nostrils. Pain plagues my body, and it's like I'm on fire. Letting out a yell, I jerk my hands from Ethan's, doubling over from the pain. More memories flash before me like a strobe light, going so fast it's hard to tell what's happening.

Blood.

Hands. Dark hands. Pulling me down.

Kill her.

More blood.

"Anora." Ethan's arms wrap around me and he pulls me against his chest. Hunter barks and the blonde boy vanishes. The pain subsides a second later, but the feeling that I was being brutally murdered hangs heavily on me. I'm shaking, sucking in air so fast I don't get any oxygen.

"Breathe," Ethan soothes and brings me into his lap. We're on the floor, crammed between the coffee table and the couch. Closing my eyes again, I rest my head on his firm chest. Ethan runs his fingers through my hair. "Is it gone?"

I nod, still too shaken up to speak. He holds me a little closer, combing his fingers through my hair again. A moment later, I open my eyes. Heart still racing, I direct my attention to Ethan's tattoos, using admiring them as a distraction. They're varying shades of black and gray, and the Lord's Prayer is tattooed on his right bicep. Maybe that's a hunter protection thing?

"I'm okay," I breathe.

"Are you?"

I tip my head up, looking into his eyes. "Yeah. I felt myself get murdered and I think dragged through the woods, but I'm okay. Oh, and I heard a voice saying *kill her.*"

"And now you're officially casting a protection spell."

"I don't think he wanted to hurt me."

“You just said you heard the ghost saying to kill her, but it doesn’t want to hurt you?”

“Yes,” I say and take in another breath, holding it for a few seconds before exhaling. I start to feel more like myself again, and it’s making me aware of just how very close I am to Ethan. “The ghost, which looks like a teenage boy, by the way, didn’t say it. It was just this...this voice. I can’t really explain it.”

“It was like one of those memories you download?”

“Kind of.”

“A protection spell isn’t a bad idea, you know.” He rests one hand on my thigh and brings his face closer to mine. “I hate the thought of anything bad happening to you.”

“I do too,” I breathe, heart speeding up.

“There’s still so much about you I don’t know. It really would be a shame if you got ripped apart by demons before then.” His tongue darts out and wets his lips, and he drops his gaze. Reaching out, he goes to push my hair behind my shoulder, fingers trailing along my collarbone.

“Yeah...that...that would be a shame. There’s so much I want to do before I die.” I swallow hard as Ethan brings his other hand to the small of my back, pushing me closer to him. He’s going to kiss me, and suddenly, I’m nervous.

Because as much as I want to feel his lips press against mine, there’s still so much I don’t know about him as well.

“I’m going to keep you safe,” he says, deep voice rattling right through me, and in that moment, I believe him. He leans in, lips just mere inches from mine. A tingle of desire goes through me, warming my entire body.

Fuck, I want him, and I know he wants me too. Given everything that happened today—and everything that I know is going to happen—the thought of Ethan scooping me up and carrying me into my bedroom is doing bad things to my body. If his lips touch mine, I’m done for.

Ethan rests his forehead against mine and my body moves on its own accord, feeling his cock beneath me. I need to get off him before I start—dammit. I’m squirming, fighting against the urge to straddle him and rub against his erection.

Three seconds, and I’ll move.

Ethan cups my face with his large hands.

One...two...three...

I shudder when his thumb sweeps over my bottom lip. Please God—or Goddess, because, let’s be honest, I’m not too sure of anything anymore—give me the strength to—

The EMF meter beeps, and we both jerk our attention to it. Only a second later, Ethan’s phone rings, hence the spike in electromagnetic energy.

“It’s your dad,” I say, reading the name on the screen, and move off Ethan to get the phone. I close my eyes and let out a shaky breath when I’m turned so Ethan doesn’t see. I need a cold shower. Or five minutes alone with my vibrator. I’m so hot and bothered, it might not even take five minutes. “Should you answer?”

“He’ll call back if it’s important.” Ethan declines the call and runs his hand over the back of his neck. We were two seconds away from ripping each other’s clothes off, and now the moment should be over, but it’s not. All it will take is one advance and I’ll be right back in the same position, and that position is bent over on all fours while Ethan grips my ass and fucks me hard and fast.

Ethan’s phone rings again and he gets to his feet. “I should take this.”

“Okay. I’m going to use the bathroom.” I get a head rush when I stand, stars dotting my vision. The sun is starting to set, and exhaustion weighs down on me. I peer into the tiny spare bedroom, heart in my throat. I don’t sense anything, but séances can open doors and you never know who will come out.

I use the bathroom, check on Romeo, and go back into the living room.

“She had no idea,” Ethan says, still talking to his father on the phone. “At all.”

I pause, telling myself I’m not eavesdropping, I’m giving him space.

“Yeah. I do.” He pauses. “I’m not wrong,” he says vehemently and then pauses again, listening to whatever his dad is saying. “Fine. Yes. We’ll be there.” He ends the call with a sigh, and I go into the kitchen, needing something to snack on. I take a wooden cheeseboard out of my overcrowded cabinet and start pulling stuff from my fridge to make a thrown-together charcuterie board.

“Need any help?” Ethan leans against the wall.

“How good are you at arranging charcuterie boards?” I ask with a smile.

“A what?”

“Charcuterie board. It’s one of those fancy things where you arrange food to look pretty.”

“I think I know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t worry, I’m not going to take an hour setting things up, but I do love cheese, crackers, and the other stuff that goes with it.”

“That does sound good.”

I set two blocks of cheese on the counter along with salami, pickles, and an open can of black olives.

“What’s the point of taking an hour to artfully set up food when you’re just going to eat it?”

I shrug. “So you can post a photo of it on Instagram?”

He laughs. “I wouldn’t be surprised.”

“I went to a charcuterie class with a friend last year. It was fun, but I kept eating my food while we were supposed to be arranging and at the end of the class, we had to present our boards to everyone. Mine only had half of what everyone else’s did.”

“Mine would have won.”

“If you put cheese in front of me, I’m gonna eat it.” I take the cheese from the wrappers and set them on the board.

“I can slice that up for you, if you want.”

“That would be helpful,” I tell him and pull a knife from the knife block on the counter. “I’ll get you a cutting board.”

“Isn’t this one?”

“It’s a cheeseboard. They look the same, but they’re different.”

“If you say so.” He goes to the sink and washes his hands. My cutting board is in the same cramped cabinet the cheeseboard is in, and I have to maneuver it around several other items before I can get it out.

Ethan cuts up the cheese while I add the salami and crackers to the board. I finished the last of my artichoke dip a few days ago and haven’t been grocery shopping since. The rest of the board is a little hodgepodge, but at least it’ll all taste good.

“This is supposed to be good,” I tell Ethan, reaching way back in a cabinet for a bottle of red wine. “It’s from a vineyard in Michigan, not far from where my aunt lived. Do you want a glass? I’m just going to have a little. It goes with the whole cheese-theme.”

“I’m not much of a wine drinker, but sure.”

I open the bottle and pour two glasses. “I like wine, but I don’t have expensive taste,” I tell him as we carry everything into the living room.

“My dad’s going to pull together some resources about the Pricolici,” Ethan starts, sitting on the couch and taking his glass of wine from me. “If we can call them off it’ll give us more time to find the demon who marked you in the first place.”

“Yeah, that would be nice.”

“You said you have to work tomorrow, right?”

“I do. Six AM to six PM at the clinic and then I have to teach a riding lesson at six-thirty.”

“Damn, that’s a long day.”

I take a small sip of wine and set the glass down, trading it for some cheese and crackers. “I don’t normally give lessons after work. I had to reschedule from last weekend, and I’m honestly surprised my student was able to come in the evening. Her mom is terrified of vampires.” I roll my eyes.

“And you’re not?”

I shrug. “I’d like to say I’m not any more scared of them than I am of other humans. A human can kill me just as fast as a vampire.”

“Yeah, but they’re undead. That’s not right, you have to agree about that.”

“I don’t know what’s right or wrong, only that most didn’t have a choice in becoming a vampire. I watch that special on CNN a few months ago,” I add and eat my cheese.

“You should call off work tomorrow. When I talked to my dad a bit ago, he said from what he knows, the Pricolici run in packs and the others won’t be happy that one of their own was killed. They could retaliate if their demon-master allows them to.”

“Well, shit.” I reach for the wine again. “I hate calling off when I’m not sick. I feel bad lying.”

“You’d feel worse if you were attacked.”

“That’s probably true.” I wrinkle my nose. “I’ll text my boss and say...say...”

“Say you got food poisoning.”

“I can roll with that.” Taking another drink of wine, I set the glass back down and open a text to send to Tammy.

Me: Hey, I got food poisoning and don’t think I’ll be able to come in to work in the morning. I feel so awful right now. I’m so sorry!

“Take out the ‘don’t think’ part,” Ethan says, looking at my phone. “That leaves it open for you to come in tomorrow.”

“I know,” I groan. “I’ve never lied about being sick before.”

“Never?”

“Not here, I should say.” I fix the text and hit *send* before I have a chance to chicken out. “What about giving a lesson tomorrow? I can’t say I’m too sick to give a lesson and then show up at the barn to check on Mystery. Can we just play that one by ear?”

“Yeah, and if anything, I can go with you and keep watch.”

“Thanks. I can introduce you to my horse.” I smile and pick up the remote, turning on the TV. “You like *Friends*?”

“I do. It’s one of those shows I watch over and over.”

“Me too,” I say and play the episode Ethan was watching before we went out for dinner. We finish the charcuterie board all within one episode, and I bring the bottle of wine into the living room, refilling both our glasses.

I sit close to Ethan, and he drapes his arm around my shoulders. It’s really nice, just sitting here with him, though I’m a little worried my willpower is going to fail, and I’ll be dragging him into the bedroom.

“This is one of the best episodes,” he comments, making me smile. I finish my wine and scoot a little closer to Ethan, resting my head against his shoulder. I love wine but don’t drink it too often mostly because it makes it hard to keep my mental shields up, but also because it makes me tired. Given everything that’s happened today, it shouldn’t surprise me that I end up falling asleep.

The TV is still on when I wake up, with the volume down low. Ethan covered me with a blanket and has one arm around me.

“I fell asleep,” I grumble sitting up.

“You did.”

“Have I been asleep long?”

Ethan taps his phone to check the time. “It’s one AM, so kind of.”

“Shit, I’m sorry to end our first date this lamely.”

“You killed a demon and led a seance. Today was anything but lame.” He pushes my hair out of my face and urges me back down so we’re lying on the couch together. “It’s been a long fucking day. Go back to sleep, Anora.”

I pull the blanket over the both of us and snuggle up with Ethan. He slips his hand under my shirt and runs his fingertips over my back. It doesn’t take long to fall back asleep.

Chapter Sixteen

“Good morning.”

“Morning,” I reply, still wrapped in Ethan’s embrace. He brushes my messy hair back and I move to the side, wedging myself between the couch cushions and Ethan’s body. “How’d you sleep? We’re kinda crammed.”

“I slept pretty well, which isn’t something that normally happens,” he admits, saying each word slowly. “Being a hunter has made me paranoid.”

“I’m paranoid enough with just seeing ghosts. I can’t imagine how you feel.”

“Sleeping with a gun under my pillow helps.”

“You’re not joking, are you?”

“Nope.” He stretches his legs out, hooking one over mine. “You learn to deal.” He holds me a little tighter. I bend my arm up and run my fingertip along one of Ethan’s tattoos.

“Do they have meanings?” I ask, tracing the outline of the bottom half of a shield on his bicep. “I know they all mean something to you, but do they have like secret hunter meanings?”

“This one,” he starts and pulls one arm up from under me so he can roll up his sleeve, revealing a tattoo of a cross inside a shield, but the cross ends with a point and there’s a creepy-looking eye in the middle of the cross, “is the Order’s symbol. It’s a rip-off of the Knight’s Templar’s crest if you ask me, but

it's supposed to represent good ruling over evil or some shit like that.”

“Did you have to get it?”

“Yeah. It was either that or be branded. The branding is smaller but that shit hurts.”

“You're not joking again either, are you?”

“I wish I was,” he says, and I can see the distaste on his face. It's not the first time he's looked rather bitter when talking about the Order.

“That's barbaric.”

“It is,” he agrees, and I run my finger along another intricately designed tattoo. There are scars scattered all over his arms as well, which I suppose shouldn't surprise me. Demon hunting must be up there on the list of dangerous jobs. “But, hey, I turned out just fine.”

“You did.” I look up, smiling when our eyes meet but also very aware that I fell asleep without brushing my teeth and probably have terrible morning breath. I need to get up and pee, but I'm so damn comfortable with Ethan right now I don't want to move.

Hunter, on the other hand, can't wait.

“I'm sorry, buddy,” I tell him, petting his head as he wags his tail. “I usually let him out before I go to bed.”

“He's been there all night. He's a good pup.” Ethan extends his hand and Hunter comes over, loving getting scratched on his chest.

“He really is. I found him too. Someone has to be missing their dog, but he's mine now. I tried really hard to reunite him with his owner,” I add. “Just in case. But no one claimed him.” Hunter puts his front paws on the couch, trying to weasel his way up with us.

“I'll let him out,” Ethan offers, hands going back to my waist. “So you can change or whatever. We should get going.”

“It’s nine o’clock already?” I say out loud when I see the time on the cable box. “How?”

“You slept pretty soundly,” he chuckles. “And using magic for the first time is draining, not to mention that you were almost hypothermic. That had to take a toll on your body.”

“I just hope you slept well too.” I sit up, sweeping my gaze over his body. His t-shirt has ridden up a bit, exposing his abdomen. He’s just as muscular as he felt, and the little trail of dark hair leading past his belly button and disappearing under his pants makes me want to undo his belt and see just where it leads. “I know it’s not the most comfortable to be jammed together on the couch.”

“I’ve slept in much worse places,” he assures me. “And this couch is comfortable and wide.”

“That’s why I got it.” I smooth my hair back when I stand. “I might not sleep through the night very often, but I am the queen of naps.”

“I do love a good nap,” he says, looking into my eyes and I know exactly what he’s thinking, because I’m thinking it too: we are so taking a nap together later, and by nap I mean have hot, primal sex.

Swallowing my libido down into the cold, dark place it should be right now, since demons are after me, I go into my room and strip out of my clothes, changing into fresh jeans, a black tank top, and my favorite emerald-green cardigan. I saw it in the window at a boutique downtown and knew I had to have it. It was way out of my price range though, and I had to pick up two extra shifts to help cover it. But every redhead needs something this exact shade of green, so who could blame me?

I let Romeo out, do a quick cage clean, and then go into the bathroom to brush my teeth and wash off yesterday’s makeup. I swipe on some mascara before I leave, holding my hairbrush, and find Ethan outside throwing a ball for Hunter. *Don’t explode just yet, ovaries.*

Running the brush through my hair, I stand on the patio and watch them for a moment, a smile on my face. I lean back against the patio railing and realize that I'm at a huge risk—not just of being attacked by demons, but of falling for Ethan.

And I don't know what's worse.



“IT'S NICE TO OFFICIALLY MEET YOU,” I SAY TO JULIA, stepping inside the kitchen at Ethan's dad's house. “With pants on.”

“Pants are nice.” She rinses a plate and puts it in the dishwasher.

“We brought donuts,” I go on, as if it's not obvious by the box Ethan is holding. “I think Ethan ate half of them in the car already.”

“I'm surprised he didn't eat all of them.”

“Hey, I have some self-control,” Ethan says, setting the box on the kitchen table and pulling out another donut. We both sit, and I put my Book of Shadows on the table in front of me.

Julia loads a few more dishes into the dishwasher and closes it up. “I got the CliffNotes version that Pricolici are after you for unknown reasons.”

“That's pretty much the only version I know.” I look at Ethan, who nods and grabs one of the books from the stack that's on the table. “It would be nice to figure out how to stop them so I can, uh, not die.”

Julia smiles. “Yeah. That would be nice. Ethan's been in a particularly good mood since he met you, so try to stay alive a bit longer.” She winks and goes back to the dishes.

“Thanks,” Ethan says dryly. “You make it sound like I'm usually awful to be around.”

“Your words, not mine,” she tosses right back, and I stifle a laugh. They may not be related through blood, but they sure

act like siblings. “I was going to make breakfast, but if there’s donuts, I’m good with just that. Are you guys too?”

“Donuts are plenty,” I tell her. “Thanks.

“Same.” Ethan flips through a handwritten journal.

“Good. Save me trouble. Anyone want coffee?”

“Yes, please,” I tell her. “I can’t function without it.”

“Hah,” she says and opens a cabinet to get a bag of coffee grounds. “You’ll fit in around here just fine.”

I go through my Book of Shadows, trying to find the last page I left off on, while the coffee brews. Ethan’s dad joins us right after Julia serves us all coffee, coming to the table with an armload of books.

“Hey, Dad,” Ethan says. “This is Anora. Anora, this is my dad, David.”

“Yes,” David says shortly, flicking his eyes to me. “I remember. I saw her at the hospital.”

“Hi,” I say, probably a little too chipper. David sighs and picks up a book from the pile in front of us. Ethan’s hand lands on my thigh and a rush goes through me. I narrowly escaped caving to my desire last night. My willpower isn’t that strong, and the more time I spend with Ethan, the more I want him.

“Tell me everything,” David says, not looking at me. “From the beginning.”

“Um, well, I was riding my horse and what I thought was a freaky-looking dog jumped out at us and spooked Mystery. I fell, then, uh, tried to get on with my life until demons attacked me again yesterday.” I make a face, knowing that was a terribly-summed-up version of what actually happened.

“And before then, you’d never seen a demon?” David asks.

“No.” I shake my head. “I’ve always been able to see ghosts, but I didn’t even know demons were real until yesterday. I’ve always wondered but wasn’t sure.”

“Something is attracting the demons to you,” David says and eyes me like he’s waiting for me to fess up and admit I

summoned them all on my own.

“That’s what we’re trying to figure out,” Ethan presses. “Why—all of the sudden—are demons after Anora?”

“You told me she performed magic,” David says pointedly, and Julia bows her head, all too interested in the donut on the plate in front of her.

“She did,” Ethan goes on, leaning forward. “But she didn’t know what she was doing.”

“Is that true?” David asks me. “You weren’t able to do magic before?”

“Well, I never really tried,” I reply.

“You’ve had no inkling that you could possibly be able to do magic?” David closes the book he’d been leafing through and stares me down.

“No,” I say back, standing my ground. “Though I suppose I’ve been really lucky more times than once. Like, I’ll really want to hear a certain song on the radio, and I’ll randomly choose a station and it will be on. Or if I forgot to do a homework assignment, the due date would get pushed back. And other little things like that...I never really thought about it much, but now that I am...there are lots of things that statistically can’t be pure luck.”

“You were casting spells without actually meaning to,” Julia says quietly.

“I guess.” I turn to Ethan, expecting him to share my excitement, but he avoids my eye contact all together. A weird feeling starts to take over, and I wish I brought Hunter with me. It’s the tale-tell sign of being antisocial when you wish you brought your dog, I know.

“Is that the book?” David asks pointing to my Book of Shadows. He leans forward, curiously staring at the book, and then reaches out and apprehensively touches it, almost as if he’s afraid it will give him a shock when his fingers make contact. “May I?” he asks me.

“Sure.” I slide the book to him.

“Ethan mentioned something about a great-aunt?” he asks and turns a page in the Book of Shadows.

“Yes...my great-aunt Estelle died and left me all of her possessions. That’s how I got the book.”

“She’s the root of this,” Ethan says. “The demons attacked Anora the day after her aunt died.”

“I think so too. I just...I don’t know how.” I look at Ethan again, wondering if he’s going to tell his family about my missing memories—he doesn’t.

“The book hasn’t been in your possession long then, correct?” David asks.

“Correct. I’ve been slowly going through it, trying to read everything, but the handwriting isn’t the easiest and some of it is worded weird.”

“It’s Old English,” David says without looking up.

“Are spells usually written that way?” I ask.

“Not anymore. This book is older than you think. Books like this have preservation spells cast on them.”

David closes the book and slides it in front of me. I put my hand on its surface, feeling an odd affection for it. This book has been in the Fowler family line for who-knows how long. The floor creaks behind us, and I whirl around, still on edge.

Sam, Ethan’s younger sister makes her way into the kitchen.

“It’s about time you join us,” Julia mumbles. “Must be nice to sleep in.”

“Oh, shut up. I was tired from patrolling all night.” She stops behind Ethan’s chair and puts a hand on his shoulder. “Who is this?” She looks at me.

“That’s Anora,” Ethan says dryly. “You met her yesterday.”

“Right. The girl who was wearing your shirt—and only your shirt—in the living room.”

“I had underwear on,” I quickly add and then wish I could take my words back. “But, um, hi.”

“What, no dog this time?” Sam forces a laugh. “I was looking forward to brushing dog fur off my clothes again.”

Ethan gives her a *what the fuck* look. “Anora’s dog, Hunter, killed a Pricolici,” he reminds her. “And he’s at her house.”

“Is that where you were last night?”

“Sit,” David orders, giving her the side-eye.

“What are you guys doing?” Sam opens the box of donuts and takes the last glazed donut.

“You would know if you hadn’t gone and hid in your room,” David mumbles with a bit of fatherly annoyance in his voice.

“I was tired. I just woke up,” Sam says one more time. She doesn’t look like someone who has just gotten out of bed. Her hair is tidy and in place, and her makeup looks freshly applied. It makes me feel a little self-conscious since my hair is messy and my makeup took me only five minutes.

“Let me sum this up,” Sam says after Ethan fills her in. “She’s in danger that she probably brought on herself and we’re expected to save her?”

“What is your problem?” Ethan asks.

“My problem?” Sam starts with a huff. “My problem is we’re dealing with a witch.” Her eyes narrow as she looks at me. “What coven do you belong to?”

“I don’t belong to any coven,” I tell her, refusing to waver. I don’t know what her deal is, but I’ve done nothing wrong.

“But you’re a witch,” Sam goes on, as if that’s an offense.

“If she is,” David says, eyeing Sam with contempt, “then she very well may be the last kin of her coven.”

I feel like someone socked me in the stomach. “What?”

“The Order has looked for witches over the last several decades and has come up empty-handed,” David explains. “For some reason, your powers have gone undetected, and you may be the last witch in your family line.”

“I have a brother,” I rush out. “A twin brother, but he doesn’t have any powers as far as I know.”

Silence falls over the table for a moment. “I’m no expert on magic or how magical heritage is passed down,” David starts. “Though I do know magic can skip generations, especially when the bloodline isn’t pure.”

“Is that why the demons are after me?”

“It could be,” David says, eyes meeting Julia. She shakes her head and looks away. What aren’t they telling me? “Ethan tells me you’re in possession of an enchanted dagger that seems to target demons, which would lead me to believe demons aren’t a fan of anyone hailing from your coven. Though that alone doesn’t explain why the Pricolici have been sent after you.” He looks at Ethan. “I agree, the timing of everything is too convenient.”

“I’m telling you,” Ethan starts. “It has something to do with her aunt.”

“Well, she’s dead and not talking,” I say ruefully. “So...so what do I do now?”

“Don’t worry.” Ethan’s hand lands on top of mine and I tip my head up to him. “We’ll figure it out. It’s what we do...and why we have all these books.” He makes a face, gives my hand a squeeze, and picks a book up from the pile.

I absent-mindedly flip through the pages of my Book of Shadows, trying to take it all in. If there are no other witches, then I’ll never get answers...but I’m starting to get my memories back, and I know I went somewhere with Aunt Estelle and there were other witches there.

A lot of other witches.

I go to turn another page in the book, but it sticks to the one behind it. Using my nail, I carefully separate the two pages that were stuck together.

“Holy fuck,” I say out loud when I read the spell.

Ethan looks over my shoulder. “Well, that answers a lot of questions.”

It’s a binding spell, and I know the handwriting to be Aunt Estelle’s. Nerves prickling, I plant my hands on the table and slowly shake my head back and forth as I read.

“Out of love and pure affection, I bind your powers for your protection. Destiny’s cruel fate will you never face, a normal life you can now embrace. I bind your powers, I bind your powers, I bind your powers. Anora Paige Benson, I bind your powers.”

“What is it?” Julia asks.

“It’s a binding spell,” I answer. “My aunt...she...she bound my powers.” I was right about everything. The dreams aren’t just dreams. The memories are real. And that place Aunt Estelle took me to...that place that felt like home the second I stepped through the door...it was real too. “Why would she do that?” I ask, feeling violated. I’ve been a witch this whole time? And Aunt Estelle knew? She had to know about the ghosts too, and after years of being in my life, of teaching me magic, she just left.

“So you wouldn’t get mad and curse a village someday?” Sam supplies, earning another glare from both her sister and David.

“She died and the binding spell broke,” Ethan says, ignoring Sam. “Maybe she didn’t account for that.”

“Or she did.” I pull my arms around myself. “Which is why she left everything to me.” I bite my lip, slowly shaking my head. A lot of emotions are surging through me right now, and anger is fighting its way to the front.

Not only did Aunt Estelle hide a huge part of myself from me, but she fucked with my memories too. There’s a reason I have a hard time recalling her face, and it’s because she did something, cast another sort of spell to make me forget. The same with the way I remember the café being in Michigan,

and why I don't remember going to her house at all when I was a kid.

She took it all from me.

"Why would she do this to me?" I repeat, knowing no one has the answer.

"Backup a minute." Ethan, sensing that I'm upset, closes the Book of Shadows. "You've always been able to see spirits."

I nod. "For as long as I can remember."

"But your powers were bound," he goes on. "It doesn't make sense."

"Not everyone who's a medium is a witch," Julia says. "Just like how some people can be psychic but not be witches as well, though they do tend to have magic in their bloodline at some point."

"The spell bound powers of magic," David agrees, bobbing his head up and down. "And the intricacies of how the spell was worked will never be known. If your aunt didn't consider being a medium part of your powers, then it wouldn't have been included in the spell. Either way, it takes a complicated spell to bind powers for such an extended period of time like this. It could have simply been too much work to weave blocking out your ability to see into the otherworld into this spell."

"The more answers I get, the more questions it arises." I let out a sigh and lean back against the chair. Ethan drops his hand onto my thigh again, and I rest mine on top of his.

"So, I am a witch." I tip my head. "Man, that's weird to say out loud. But I am, and obviously I haven't known about it for long enough to do anything to piss the demons off. It's just another damn puzzle piece to the puzz—dammit I said that wrong."

"All we can conclude is the demon wasn't able to locate you until it could sense your magical abilities," David says. "Which doesn't make this any different." He eyes Sam in a way that makes me think another unspoken message is being

said right in front of me. “A demon has sent Pricolici after Anora, and we—as demon hunters—are going to find the son of a bitch and kill it before it can hurt anyone else.”

“You make it sound easy,” I say nervously, knowing it’s far from it.

“Hey, I haven’t met a demon I can’t kill,” Ethan tries to assure me.

“Don’t get cocky,” Julia and David say at the same time, making me think it’s something they have to remind him frequently.

“The day that happens, you can say *I told you so*,” he says.

“At your funeral,” Julia adds pointedly.

I reach for my coffee cup, mind whirling. Ethan and his family are demon hunters. It’s what they do. But would they be going after this particular demon if Aunt Estelle had come clean with me? If I’d known from the start who I am, would I have been able to learn magic so I could defend myself?

I hate all the unanswered questions, and I hate even more that Ethan is in danger from the Pricolici. It’s not my fault, no, and I’m not going to play the role of a martyr, feeling bad for something I can’t control. But there is someone to blame here, and it’s Aunt Estelle.

I clench my teeth and steam starts to rise from my coffee mug. The ceramic feels hot against my skin and I jerk my hand back, gasping when I see the coffee boiling. “Holy crap.” Everyone looks at the coffee mug before me. “Did I do that?”

“Yeah, you did,” Ethan says.

“Whoa.” A smile takes over my face and I have to swallow the urge to start laughing. Because this is a little insane and a lot amazing. “Holy shit,” I say and then flick my eyes to David. “Sorry.”

“How did you do that?” Ethan moves the mug in front of him, needing to take a closer look.

“I don’t know.” I shake my head. “I was thinking about how much it pisses me off that my aunt thought it was okay to

toy with me like this and...I don't know. My hand felt hot." It's not much of an explanation, but it's all I have.

Ethan takes my hand in his and turns it over, making sure my palm isn't burned. "It's okay," he says.

"Is it?" Sam crosses her arms and hikes up her eyebrows. "I don't want the house to explode."

"Reheating a cup of coffee is a far cry from an explosion," Julia says, giving her the side-eye.

Ethan's chair scoots as he stands. "Come on, let's get some air."

Exhaling, I nod and let him pull me to my feet, thankful to be away from his family. They seem welcoming enough—save for Sam—but I need some time to myself...with Ethan, that is.

"You okay?" Ethan asks when we step onto the covered front porch. "That was a lot to take in."

"Yeah." I put my hands on the railing and exhale. The sun is out today, warming the air and bringing back the false sense of a late-summer return of nice weather.

"Really?" Ethan's hand lands on my back, and I have to work hard to repress the shiver that wants to run down my spine.

"I'm mostly just mad," I admit, straightening up. "Did my aunt not think I could handle it? That I'm not strong enough to deal? I don't want to cry about being abandoned, because I wasn't, but how could she just leave me like that? And I know you don't have the answers, and I don't expect you to." I let my eyes fall shut. "I mean...demons, come at me. But messing with my memory and binding my powers, it feels so wrong."

"Rightly so," Ethan says, surprising me a bit. "Your past is yours and yours alone. No one should be able to take that from you."

"Do you think there's a spell?" My eyes lock with Ethan's. "A spell that can undo everything she did so I can get my memories back?"

"I don't know," he says apologetically.

I let out a sigh and bring my hands up, flattening my palms against Ethan's chest. "Maybe I should go see a hypnotist and see if they can help me remember."

Ethan lets out a snort of laughter. "Most are full of shit, you know." His hands fasten around my waist.

"So are mediums. Or at least, that's what I've heard." I give him a half-smile.

"Good thing I know a reliable one."

"You believe me, don't you? About everything?"

"I believe you. I see *you*, Anora. And you're fucking beautiful," he says with a growl, and brings my hips to his in a sudden movement. The breath leaves my lungs and my lips part. "I believe every word you say." He tips his head down toward mine. "And I get the feeling you're not used to that."

"I'm not," I say, voice a little breathy. "Not at all."

"Well, Anora, get used to it." With no further hesitation, he puts his lips to mine and the world fades around me. Everything bad, everything wrong just slips away and all I can think about—all I care about—is the way Ethan feels against me. His full lips against mine, the heat that's rushing through me, and the way he's slowly cradling my body against his.

It's like night and day have their arms wrapped around me at the same time. The sense of darkness and danger comes off of him, yet he's the only thing that makes sense right now, the only thing that's helping me keep it together. It doesn't really make sense, I know, and I don't want to try and figure it out.

Because all that matters is how good it feels to have Ethan this close to me, to have his tongue pushing past my lips. He deepens the kiss, hand sweeping up my back, fingers trailing along my spine. Relenting, I throw my arms around him, holding him close so my breasts crush against him with each breath.

No one has ever kissed me the way Ethan is kissing me right now, and no one has ever seen me the way Ethan sees me.

I'm a medium with a first-class ticket on the hot-mess express, and yet he hasn't balked at me. If anything, knowing my true self has drawn him in more, as knowing his true self has done for me.

He hunts demons.

I see the dead.

I've always felt isolated from the rest of the world, and Ethan has been isolated. Together...together we just work.

"Ethan," Sam says sharply, opening the front door. I pull back, feeling like my oxygen mask has been ripped off when I separate myself from Ethan. He keeps a steady hold on me and rests his forehead against mine for a beat before turning to Sam.

"Yeah?"

"Your dad wants you. I think he found something about the Pricolici," she says and goes back inside, slamming the front door.

"I suppose we should get back inside then," Ethan tells me as he brushes my hair back.

"Right."

"Are you good?" His hands fasten around my waist again and he pulls me against him. I slide my hands from his arms to his chest, letting them fall until my fingertips rest on his belt. "We could walk around the block if you need more time."

"I'm good," I tell him. "If we can figure out how to get demon bounty hunters from coming after me, I want to give it my all. And maybe there's a spell I can do to make them all burst into flames at the same time or something."

"That would be pretty sweet."

"Right?" I smile and look at the front door. "I don't think Sam likes me very much."

"She doesn't like anyone very much," Ethan replies. "Don't take it personally."

"I thought it was because she had a crush on you."

Ethan wrinkles his nose. “She’s my sister.”

“Yeah, but only legally.”

“Okay, she’s like my step-sister.”

I raise my eyebrows. “You’ve obviously never read any step-sibling romance novels.”

“That’s a thing?”

“Oh, a huge thing, and there are some really hot step-brother romances.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” he chuckles and shuffles back, hands dropping from my waist. “And you’re more Sam’s type. Not me. The whole not having a vagina thing is a deal breaker for her.”

“Oh, cool.”

“Ready?”

“Yeah. Let’s go figure out how to kill those assholes before they kill me.”

Chapter Seventeen

“Anyone else need a break?” Ethan closes the book he’s looking through and leans back, rubbing his eyes. We’ve been seated around the table for hours, going through old hunter journals in hopes someone came up against the Pricolici before and can give us more insight on what we’re dealing with. David left a while ago, going to follow the only lead we have so far.

This must be business as usual for Ethan and his family, but I find this all fascinating. The journal I have reads more like a diary, and learning about all the different types of demons is both fascinating and scary. I don’t have the luxury of turning a blind eye anymore. Demons are real, and they’re out there.

“I do,” Sam sighs. “All this reading is giving me a headache. And I’ve gotten nowhere.”

“Same,” Julia puts her book down as well. “Might as well stop for lunch.” She turns to me. “Is soup and sandwiches okay? It’s nothing fancy, but we don’t really do fancy much around here.”

“Trust me, if you saw the charcuterie board we put together last night, you’d know I’m not fancy,” I say with a half smile, looking at Ethan. “And I love both soup and sandwiches. Want any help putting things together?”

“Sure, that’d be nice.” Julia smiles.

“I’m going to take a shower.” Ethan gets up. “Since I didn’t get to it last night.”

“You do stink,” I say without missing a beat.

“Not as bad as you did when I pulled you out of that pond.”

“Touché.” I laugh and get up from the table, following Julia to the kitchen. Like the living room, the decor in here is rustic farmhouse, with no shortage of Rae Dun dishes. I’m impressed, really, at how quickly this place got decorated. I’ve been in my house for years and still haven’t so much as hung a painting in my bedroom. They’ve been here, what, a few weeks and this place looks like it’s been lived in for a good year at least.

“Do you want turkey or ham?” Julia asks as I go to the sink to wash my hands.

“Either is fine with me. I’ll have whatever everyone else is having.”

“Turkey then.” Julia pulls out what we need for sandwiches from the fridge and goes into a pantry. It’s completely full and well organized, with pretty wicker baskets complete with labels. I catch a glimpse of one that says “kid snacks”, which is a little weird, right?

“I know Ethan said you guys do this on a daily basis, but thanks for helping me,” I tell Julia as I start putting sandwiches together.

“Of course,” she says, glancing away from the stove

“Let me know when lunch is ready.” Sam pushes her chair in a little too harshly and rolls her eyes when she passes me. “And I don’t need you to use magic to heat up my soup, thank you very much.”

“I’m sorry,” Julia says, and I wave my hand in the air.

“It’s fine.”

“It’s not, she’s being rude. She’s my sister, so I’ll be the first to call her out as being a bitch, but I promise she’s not always like this. Being a hunter is isolating, not that it’s any excuse for her behavior, but overall, we try not to take a personal interest in anyone we’re helping in case things don’t

work out and—oh shit.” She looks at me, eyes wide. “I didn’t mean it like that. You’re not going to die. Well, I can’t promise, because you know...you could die from anything. And you’re much more likely to die the next time you get in a car than from a demon. Oh, shit again. You drove here. I’m sorry. That all came out wrong.”

“It’s okay,” I assure her.

She opens a can of tomato soup and dumps it in a pot. “What I mean is, we don’t usually get close to anyone we’re working with. Not just because of the danger, but because it’s hard forming a friendship just to have it end. Most people don’t want anything to do with demons once they’ve been saved. Not that I can blame them, but it makes it hard for us to connect with anyone who’s not in the Order.”

“I get that,” I tell her. “I can relate a bit with the whole being able to see ghosts thing. It’s not dangerous like hunting demons, but people don’t like associating with anyone they think is weird or whatever.”

“How many people know?”

“Just my brother and two friends. My parents know but don’t believe me. My mom is a doctor and is all *science first* about everything. Which, don’t get me wrong, I believe in science, but not everything can be explained or understood by looking at it under a microscope.”

“You said your brother is your twin?”

“Yeah. And no, he can’t see ghosts,” I say because I know she’s going to ask. “I guess it skipped him like the magic. Now I kinda feel bad for him.”

“You like being a medium?”

“Yes and no,” I say as I finish putting together one sandwich. “I struggled as a kid being different, and I’ve spent so many hours of my life terrified of ghosts, but it’s all I know. And the ghost is still there whether or not I can see it, ya know?”

“That’s how I feel about being in the Order. I don’t know what a normal life would be like, and I’d rather know the

things that go bump in the night because sooner or later, something does end up bumping. This way I'm prepared."

We talk more about what it was like for her to grow up in the Order, and how she and Sam got to know Ethan and his dad. We set the table once the food is all ready, and I grab my phone from my purse as I wait for Ethan to come back downstairs.

I have two texts: one from Harrison and one from Laney—from last night. I forgot she wanted to hang out, and I feel bad right away. Luckily, she had texted to tell me Josh surprised her after work so she couldn't come over anyway. I open the text from my brother next, he asked if I'm at work, and text him back.

Me: No, I wasn't feeling well so stayed home.

Harrison: Damn, I was hoping you were there.

Me: Why? You don't have a pet.

Harrison: I stupidly agreed to pick up a client's medication for his dog. The guy's an asshole, but if I can get him to sign with us, I'll get a huge bonus.

Me: Oh, well, I hope it helps! Katy is working at the front desk today. She knows who you are.

Harrison: Thanks. Feel better, sis.

Me: I'm working on it.

I make a face as I send that last text since I hate lying. And I always feel like lying about being sick sets me up to jinx myself and then I'll really get sick.

"Hey." I look up from my phone and see Ethan come into the kitchen. His hair is damp and he's wearing dark gray sweatpants and a white t-shirt, making me feel a fluttering in my stomach. "You didn't eat without me, did you?"

"We were just about to," Julia tells him and sets two glasses of ice water on the table. "Sam! Lunch is ready!"

"Do I smell better?" Ethan asks, taking a seat next to me.

“Hmmm. I need a closer inspection.” I rest a hand on his thigh and lean in, closing my eyes and inhaling. He smells fucking amazing, like cedarwood and soap. “Yeah. You pass the test.”

“If you two want to head out after lunch, I’ll thumb through the books a bit more,” Julia offers.

“I can help,” I tell her.

“I don’t mind. It’s what I do,” she insists. “Sam and Ethan fight, I research and read. I’m not good with hand-to-hand combat. Plus, I’m kind of klutzy and have really bad asthma. Trust me when I say I’m better at researching what to kill and how to kill it.”

“Oh, well, that makes sense.” I take a bite of my sandwich.

“My soup is a little cold,” Ethan starts, sliding the bowl over. “Do you think you could heat it up for me?”

Sam huffs and I smile, holding out my hands. “Probably not, but I’ll try.”



“WHOA,” I SAY, SLOWING TO A STOP AS I LOOK AT WEAPONS laid out on a table in Ethan’s basement. We’re heading to the barn soon so I can teach the lesson, as well as check out the woods for any demonic signs. “That’s a lot of knives.”

“Better to be safe than sorry, right?” Ethan picks up a silver-tipped wooden stake, considers it for a second, and then puts it back down. “A good old-fashioned mauling can kill a Pricolici, which means any of these will do. The demon, however, that son of a bitch could be a little trickier.” He looks up from the weapons to me. “Do you get any feelings about picking one over another?”

“I’m sorry, I’m hung up on how casually you said *a good old-fashioned mauling*.”

He flashes that cheeky grin and holds up a small battle axe. “You don’t see too many maulings anymore. Those were the

good old days for sure.”

I laugh and start forward, eyeing what looks like a solid gold blade.

“Stop!” Ethan almost drops the axe in his haste to come over.

“What?” I freeze, thinking I accidentally triggered a booby trap or something.

“There are warding sigils drawn on the floor under the rug. Hang on.” He sets the axe down and lifts up the rug, looking at the different occult-like symbols spray-painted on the cement. “Right here.” He moves his hand in a circular motion. “Don’t step here.”

“What will happen if I do step there?”

“Render you powerless. It’s a warding against...against witches.”

“Why do you have to ward off witches?” I ask. “Do witches typically steal weapons or something?”

“We have to cover all our bases by rules of the Order. Anything giving you a good vibe?” he asks quickly.

“Umm...this one.” I go around the witch-warding and pick up the golden blade. It’s much heavier than I expected, and there’s something that looks like dried skin stuck to the tip of it.

“Good choice.” Ethan takes it from me, carefully wraps it up in a length of thick leather, and adds it to a bag of weapons. We head out, going first to my house so I can take care of my animals and change into barn clothes.

Ethan parks on the street in front of my house and we go in through the front door. I stick the key into the lock and get a creeped out feeling. I turn and look out over my shoulder.

“Everything okay?” Ethan steps closer.

“I feel like someone is watching us.”

“Get in the house.”

Nodding, I unlock the door and step inside. Hunter is looking out the living room window, staring out at the street right where I felt like someone was standing. He doesn't run over to greet us until the door is closed.

"Hey, buddy." I set my purse down and take off my shoes, moving out of the way to let Ethan in through the small entryway and into the living room.

"Do you still feel like you're being watched?" Ethan asks, going to the window and twisting the blinds so we can see out but no one can see in.

"No, but something feels...unsettled, I guess." I sink down onto the floor so I can pet Hunter, comforted almost instantly when I run my fingers through his thick fur. "Like I'm all jittery. It's not an abnormal feeling, but given everything going on..."

"Right." He sets the bag of weapons on the table and gets out a silver dagger. "If anything tries to come in, it's not going to make it far." He eyes Hunter. "It'll have to get through both of us before it can get to you."

"Let's hope it doesn't have to come to that." I put an arm around Hunter. "Do you think it's okay to take him for a walk? I usually do if I'm going to be out of the house a lot like this."

"Yeah, but if you get another bad feeling, let me know right away."

"I will," I tell him and get up. I let Romeo out of his cage, smiling as I watch him bounce around the room for a minute. Then I pull a jacket from my closet and meet Ethan back in the living room. "Want to go for a walk?" I ask Hunter, who gets all excited, prancing in place by the front door.

"You're armed again, right?" I ask Ethan as we start down the street.

"I'm pretty much always armed. Not having a weapon on me makes me feel like I'm naked."

I tip my head, totally *not* picturing him naked. "You're going to have to teach me how to use the dagger. I get the

basis of hold and stab, but I also know there are techniques for a reason.”

“There are for sure. Have you taken any sort of self-defense or martial arts classes before?”

“I have. I did karate as a kid, so that probably doesn’t count anymore, and last year Laney and I did a six-week self-defense course.”

“And Laney is...”

“My best friend. We’ve been friends since the sixth grade.”

“That’s nice you are still friends today.”

“She’s pretty much stuck with me whether she wants to be my friend or not at this point. We’ve been through some—holy shit. I have to tell her I’m a witch.”

“You don’t *have* to.”

I look at Ethan incredulously, trying to remind myself not to judge. Julia pretty much came out and said it’s hard to make friends when you’re in the Order. I don’t think Ethan knows what it’s like to have a person like that, a person who you trust with anything, who you know has your back no matter what.

“I’m not good at lying in general, and it’s pretty much impossible for me to keep anything from her. Though, I don’t know if I’ll tell her about demons.” My brows furrow, and I watch kids on bikes cross the street. “She’s terrified of ghosts.” I look up at Ethan.

“And demons are worse.”

“Right.” I twist Hunter’s leash around my hand. “I’m still trying to wrap my head around everything.”

“Take your time. Being told demons are after you is a shock to your system as it is. And now you’ve found out you’ve been a witch your whole life but weren’t allowed to remember. It’s a fucking lot to take in.”

“Of all the breakdowns I thought I was likely to go through, existential identity crisis wasn’t one of them.”

Ethan lets out a snort of laughter. “You know who you are now, and from what I’ve seen of it, I think you’re pretty fucking awesome.”

“Why thank you, kind sir,” I say in my best Southern belle voice as I bat my lashes.

“Was that supposed to be a southern accent?” he laughs. “Have you ever been to the south?”

“Hey, I’ve been to Florida a time or two. Plus, I watched *Hart of Dixie* twice. My southern accent is perfect.”

Ethan laughs again and puts his arm around me. “If you want to believe that, then go ahead.”

Laughing as well, I try and talk with another accent, but my British accent is worse than my southern. The tension slips away as we walk, and there’s just something so damn hot about a man who can make me laugh.

We’re two houses down from mine when Ethan’s dad calls.

“Yes, I’m with her,” he says only seconds after answering the phone. “Hang on, let me put you on speaker.”

“I talked to Isaac about the Pricolici,” David starts, and I assume Isaac is the retired hunter who mentioned them in one of his hunter journals. “We can kill every one that comes your way, but it won’t stop them. The demon who sent them will just create more. The only way to stop the Pricolici is to track one back to the demon who’s sending them, and then kill the demon.”

Chapter Eighteen

“Who is that?” Leslie’s eyebrows go up as she checks out Ethan, who’s standing by his Jeep, talking to his dad on the phone. I just finished teaching the riding lesson and am picking up the ground poles we had set up in the outside arena. “Please tell me he’s single.”

“You’re married,” I remind her.

“Right. Dammit.” She tightens the girth on Sundance’s saddle and gets on her horse. “He came here with you, though, right?”

“He did, and his name is Ethan.” I drag the last pole to the fence and line it up with the others. Sweating, I take my sweater off and hang it on a fence post.

“Are you two...” She raises her eyebrow and holds up one hand, making a circle with her thumb and pointer finger, and thrusts her other pointer finger in and out.

“No.” I look over at Ethan.

“Really? I’d be all over him. That is one fine-looking man. If you don’t want to hit that, I will.”

“Husband, Leslie. You have a husband.”

“Do I? Because I don’t remember getting married.”

“I was a bridesmaid at your wedding,” I go on. “And it’s not that I don’t want to, it’s more that the opportunity hasn’t arisen.”

“Make it arise tonight,” she says, wiggling her eyebrows again. “Though taking things slow is a good idea too. Sex can complicate things.”

“Yeah, for sure.” Things are already more than a little complicated too. Not really so much between Ethan and me, but with my life in general. I survey the woods, looking for Bob, and then go to the parking lot to talk to Ethan. He’s off the phone now and he pushes off the Jeep when I draw near.

“I’m done with my lesson,” I tell him. “Would you like to formally be introduced to Mystery?”

“I would very much like that,” he replies, lips curving into a half-smile. He comes with me to the back pasture to get Mystery, and I introduce him to Leslie on the way. We bring Mystery into the barn and Ethan helps me brush him.

“Do you want to get dinner again?” Ethan asks, running a brush over Mystery’s neck. “We can go to that sushi place you wanted to go to yesterday.”

I look over Mystery, eyes meeting Ethan’s. “We do need to eat, though I’ll have to change first. The place isn’t fancy, but I need to not show up in grass-stained breeches.”

“Too bad, because your ass looks really damn good in them.”

“It does, doesn’t it?” I give my hips a little shake and laugh. Once Mystery’s tail is combed out and braided, I put him in his stall.

“Cold?” Ethan asks when he sees goosebumps break out on my arms.

“I left my sweater hanging on the fence of the arena.”

“I’ll get it for you,” Ethan offers.

“Thanks,” I tell him and go down the barn aisle, heading to my tack locker so I can get Mystery a treat. I’m almost there when that creeped-out feeling washes over me. I whirl around and see the blonde-haired ghost walking out of the barn.

“Hey,” I say quietly, and the ghost turns, looking right at me. He can hear me, and if he can hear me, then he can answer

my questions. “Wait.” I turn on my heel and follow him out of the barn, going through a side door that leads to the path taking you to the trails. “Hey!” I call again. “Who are you?”

Feelings that aren’t my own push down on me, making me so dizzy vomit rises in my throat. Sharp, intense pain radiates from the center of my forehead, and something moves in the bushes just yards from me. I get a glimpse of it right before the pain intensifies even more, and my eyes fall shut as I double over from pain. When I straighten up and open my eyes, darkness surrounds me. I’m in the forest again, my heart is racing, and I can barely catch my breath.

But I can’t stop. I can’t give up. If I give up, then she wins. All I have to do is make it to the barn and I’ll be safe. I stumble forward, feet catching on fallen leaves and broken branches. The world spins, and pain webs through me again. Red-hot knives are dragged down my wrists, and warm blood drips down my arms.

I open my mouth to scream, and no sound comes out. I’m shivering, so cold everything hurts...until it doesn’t anymore.

And I know this is it. This is the moment I die.

“Anora!”

My eyes flutter open to see Ethan sinking down onto his knees next to me.

“Anora,” he says again, scooping me up. I gasp for air, feeling like I just popped up after being forced under cold water.

I’m not bleeding to death on the cold forest floor. I’m not bleeding at all...or in the forest. I’m only a few yards from the barn, and golden evening sunlight pours over the pasture.

What the fuck? Did I pass out? I close my eyes and recall everything so vividly it was like a dream.

Yet I’m awake.

Or, rather, I was awake.

“What the hell happened?” Ethan stops me before I sit up, looking into my eyes as if he’s worried I hit my head—again

—and am concussed. Hell, maybe I am? The wound is healed from when I fell off Mystery, but maybe it did more internal damage than I thought.

“I don’t know.” I rub my forehead. “The blonde teenage ghost boy was in the barn. He could hear me talking, and I followed him out. Then I was in the forest being murdered, only I wasn’t.” I close my eyes and shift my weight, bringing a hand up and resting it on Ethan’s chest, needing to feel his steady heartbeat to calm myself. “There was something before that.” I close my eyes and get a flash of the dark shadow in the bushes. “Over there.” I point to where I saw the thing. “I saw it and then got hit with a stabbing pain right between my eyes.”

“Did you see what it was?”

I let my eyes fall shut and think back again. “It looked human at first and then turned and it...it...” I shudder, feeling a little sick again. “You know those creepy bird masks doctors wore during the plague? It was like that but with no mask. Its face was shaped like it.”

“Fuck. Is it still there?”

“No,” I answer. “And it wasn’t a ghost.”

“Are you sure?”

“When it moved, the underbrush crunched. Ghosts walk through things.”

“Did it attack you?”

“No, or at least not that I remember.”

“Then how’d you get this?” Ethan’s fingers wrap around my arm, gently pulling it up. I look down and a red mark that look just like someone grabbed me.

“I don’t remember.”

“Get back in the barn. I’m going to canvas the area.” He gets to his feet, pulling me with him.

“Ethan, no. It might still be out there.”

“I hope it fucking is.” He keeps one arm around me, holding me against him.

“Whatever that thing was...I think it’s what caused the pain that made me, I don’t know, succumb to supernatural narcolepsy or whatever. If it does the same thing to you, you’ll pass out in the forest and be a sitting duck to the Pricolici. If you’re going out there, I’m coming with you.” I set my face and turn my head up, looking into Ethan’s whiskey-colored eyes. “I don’t know much—okay, anything—about demon hunting, but I have an enchanted dagger that makes demons go poof when I say the magic word.”

“Maybe I should just get you home.”

I jerk out of his arms. “Don’t talk to me like I’m fragile. I’m not.”

“I know,” he says and reaches for me. “I know you’re not. Being fragile doesn’t always mean you’ll break. Sometimes it means what you have inside of you isn’t something to be messed with.”

“Don’t tell me you’re afraid I’m going to blow the house up too.”

“No.” His brows furrow, and he cups my chin with his large hand. “I’m afraid the demons are attracted to your magic. Your powers were unbound only weeks ago, and you’re already doing magic. Whatever is inside of you is strong. Demons like power, and dislike anyone who has power greater than them. I never really thought about it before, but witches pose a threat to demons. Let’s go back to your house and I’ll see if Julia can find anything about demons that look like medieval plague doctors.”

“Okay.” I inhale, feeling all shaky again. “I still want to get dinner.”

Ethan laughs. “We can order in instead.”

“I want to put on a dress and go out with you,” I say and hook my arms around his shoulders. “And I don’t want to live in fear. I’ll live cautiously, and I won’t do anything purposely reckless, well, maybe a little purposely reckless, but I don’t

want to hide in my house if I don't have to. And I don't have to, right?"

"Going out to dinner should be fine." His hands slide down my waist. "I'll keep you safe, Anora."

I tip my head up, lips meeting his. "I know."



"THIS IS OKAY, RIGHT?" I ASK, PUTTING A BACK ON MY earring as I enter the living room.

Ethan is on the couch with Hunter, watching *Friends* again. "It's very okay." He drops the remote onto the spot next to him and gets up, stopping me in the hall. "Or maybe it's not, and I should take it off."

His hands land on my waist and he pulls me against him, and his body heat comes off in waves. I hook my arms around his neck. "So, I take it you like my dress?"

"I do," he says, voice deep with need, and pins me up against the wall. The last time I wore this dress, my date liked me only because I looked like his sister. It's a nice dress though, and I look good in it.

"I meant," I start, hating myself for the compulsion to keep talking, "is it okay to go out tonight with demons wanting to kill me and all?"

"Yes," he says with certainty. "Demons are more likely to attack here than in public, though we're safer here in regard to being prepared and having more weapons. I won't let you out of my sight, Anora, especially dressed like that."

"Do I look like monster-bait?"

His lips go to my neck. "You do, but it's not a bad thing. Not at all."

"I'm sorry I keep talking about demons. I don't want to ruin the little time we have to be normal, and I know you're probably sick of it too. It's your job and I don't want to talk about my work all the time."

“You don’t have to be sorry, and I can’t be normal. The fact that you know about demons and aren’t running for the hills makes this possible.”

“As long as you don’t go running for the hills as I learn more about who I really am.”

“Who you are,” he starts, and in a sudden movement, grabs my wrists and pins them above my head. My eyes flutter shut, breath hitching when he puts his lips to my neck. “Is so fucking beautiful. There’s power in you, Anora. I can sense it, and I promise you, I’m not going to run,” he murmurs, sucking at my skin. My heart speeds up and emotion bites at me, dangerously mixing with my physical desire. I try to free my arms, wanting nothing more than to unbuckle his belt and unzip his pants, but Ethan’s fingers dig into my flesh, pressing them harder against the wall. He steps in, widening his stance, and pushes his hips against mine. His cock is getting hard, and he knows I can feel it.

I’ve never been with anyone like this, anyone who’s domineering in the least. Who knows what they want and reaches out and takes it. I’m getting more and more turned on by the second, and my need to have Ethan on me—in me—builds at a dangerous rate.

He takes his mouth from my neck and puts his lips to mine, releasing my wrists. I bend my arms in, hands running down his chest, not stopping until I hook my fingers through his belt. Ethan slips one hand behind me, pushing me against him once more before pulling away. Lips parted, he locks eyes with me, holding my gaze for a beat. And then he drops down to his knees, parting my legs and pushing my dress up.

Holy fuck.

My lips part and I suck in air, eyes falling shut as my head falls against the wall. I place one hand against the wall behind me, steadying myself, and bring the other to the top of Ethan’s head, taking a tangle of his hair beneath my fingers.

My heart speeds up and heat grows between my legs. I want him. Now. Without warning, he stands back up, fingers trailing up the curve of my waist and slipping to my back. He

finds the zipper of my dress and slowly inches it down, forehead pressed against mine. My heart is hammering away in my chest, and my eyes flutter shut. His lips brush over mine and I fumble to undo his belt, but by the time I get it undone, he has the zipper all the way down.

He steps back, and my eyes go to the bulge in his pants. Good god, he has a big cock. How the hell is that thing supposed to fit inside me? My insides feel all squishy just thinking about it.

“Take your dress off,” he orders. “I want to watch you strip.”

Holding his gaze, I slowly sweep one hand up, fingers splaying over my breast for just a moment before I pull one strap down over my shoulder and shimmy out of the dress, letting it fall to the ground. I’m not wearing a bra, and I stand there, light from the living room illuminating my near-naked body. I should be nervous, self-conscious and hating the way my thighs don’t gap like they did when I was twenty-one. But the way Ethan is looking at me does me in.

“Fuck,” he groans, and then advances so fast I don’t see it coming. The next thing I know, he’s picking me up, pinning me between his muscular body and the wall. My legs fasten around him, pussy begging to be touched. His lips go to mine, and he kisses me as he carries me to my bedroom, laying me down on my bed and hovering over top.

I bend my legs around him, running my fingers through his thick hair with one hand, and reach down with the other, feeling his hard cock. I pop the button of his jeans, feeling the force of his erection. He lifts his hips up, helping me take his pants off. His tongue pushes past my lips and I slide my hand up his thigh, feeling the full length of his cock through his boxers.

Fuck, that thing is going to destroy me in the best way.

He moves back, kissing his way down my body, and I gasp when his tongue circles my nipple. Not stopping, he continues down, trailing kisses down my stomach, going right past my core, teasing me as he licks and sucks at the tender flesh of the

inside of my thigh. He turns his head, breath warm through the thin material of my lace underwear, making me shiver with intense desire for him.

I lift my head off the mattress, needing to see him as he hooks his fingers through either side of my underwear. He kisses my stomach at the same time as he pulls them down. Then he's back up on me, lips on mine with his hand between my legs. His deft fingers sweep over my clit, and I let out a soft moan. He rubs me slowly, teasing, building up my pleasure until I'm desperate for a rougher touch. As soon as I get to that point, he dives down, mouth against me.

I ball the blankets in one hand and put the other on Ethan's head, pressing his face against me. He spreads my legs, putting one over his shoulder, and goes back to work. Licking. Sucking. Kissing. My breath quickens as I get closer and closer to coming. Ethan, who knows exactly how close I am, slips a finger inside and goes right for my G-spot, putting slight pressure against my inner walls as he rubs me in rhythm with his tongue.

That's all it takes, and I moan as the orgasm makes its way through me. Ethan keeps his mouth on me, flicking my clit with his tongue and drawing it out even longer. Suddenly, I'm hit with another orgasm, and my body shudders from the overload of pleasure.

The only time I've come that hard was from a one-on-one session with my vibrator after I polished off two bottles of Pinot Grigio after re-reading a hot scene in my favorite romance novel three times. I'm far from a virgin, but I've had a hard time connecting with anyone on an intimate level like this. Usually, right when I'm about to come, my orgasm laughs and walks right out the door.

Things are different with Ethan, partly because he's well-versed in women's bodies, but also because he sees me—the real me—and hasn't run for the hills.

Gently, he pulls away and moves on top of me. My legs are shaking, and stars blur my vision. I wrap my arms around

Ethan and pull him to me, needing to feel his heart beating against mine.

He moves my hair out of my face and kisses me softly. I can taste myself on his lips and it's so fucking hot. I bend my knees and run my hands down his back and grab the waistband of his boxers. I push it down as far as I can reach, and Ethan quickly takes them off the rest of the way. He's back between my legs, and the wet tip of his cock presses against me.

His mouth goes to my neck and I bring a hand down, wrapping my fingers around his thick cock, aligning it with my pussy. I rub the tip over my clit, sending a pulse of pleasure through me. I'm still riding high on the last orgasm he gave me, but dammit, I want another. I'm a greedy bitch like that, I know, and I don't fucking care.

He lifts himself up just so he can take my hand and move it to the mattress at my side. Eyes meeting mine for a fleeting moment, he kisses me right as he pushes that big, beautiful cock inside me. I cry out, hands landing on his back and nails digging into his flesh as he thrusts in, slow and deep.

His cock is big, filling every inch of me. A bit of pain radiates through me but is quickly replaced by pleasure. Ethan slowly pulls out and pushes back in again. I buck my hips and drag my nails down his back, hands stopping on his ass. I give it a squeeze and push him into me. It's all Ethan needs to start fucking me hard and fast. My head bumps against the headboard of my bed as he moves his hips in a rhythmic, circular motion that is rendering me motionless as pleasure takes over my entire body.

He slows and slides back, moving to his knees. He grabs my legs and brings me to him, lifting my hips so he can fuck me at a new angle, and oh my fucking god, it feels so good. I slit my eyes open just to see him looking at me. He brings his thumb to his mouth and licks it, wetting it before he rubs slow circles over my clit at the same time he fucks me.

It doesn't take long for me to come again, pussy spasming around his thick cock. He pitches forward, holding himself right above me, and pushes in balls deep, I can feel his cock

pulsing inside me as he comes. His breath leaves in a huff, and he rests his head against mine, hearts both racing. He kisses me once more and then slowly pulls out, moving to the side and spooning his body around mine.

In the back of my mind, I know I should get up, go pee, and clean myself up before climbing back into bed, but dammit, I don't want to leave Ethan. His hand lands on the curve of my side, and I shiver, realizing now that I'm a little sweaty. Ethan drapes one of his legs around me and moves me closer to him. My eyes flutter shut, and I rest my head against his chest.

When I feel the semen start to drip down my leg, I begrudgingly get up and hurry to the bathroom. I pull back the comforter when I get back into bed, and cover the both of us up. Ethan envelopes me in his arms.

"You know you're more than just a job to me, right?" he starts.

"I'd hoped." I wiggle closer, eyes falling shut.

"I like you, Anora, and I didn't want to."

I tip my head up. "Is that supposed to be a compliment?"

Through the dark, I can see his smirk. "Yeah. It is. I don't allow myself to get close to people, but it was different with you since the day you drunkenly walked into me."

"Not my finest moment, but I'm not sorry about how things turned out."

"Oh, fuck, I'm not, either. But there's something about you," he goes on, and I know talking about his feelings isn't something that comes naturally for Ethan. "I don't know what it is, but I like it. I liked it before I knew the truth. Things just...they just...fuck. They're just better with you."

Smiling, I put a leg over his and rake my fingers up and down his tattooed bicep. "They're better with you too." My eyes flutter shut again. I could fall asleep right here, tucked under the covers with Ethan's naked body curved around mine.

“I came inside of you,” Ethan says rather suddenly. “That’s another thing I don’t do. I, uh, got carried away.”

“I did too,” I admit, realizing I didn’t even think about it. “Don’t worry, I’ve been on some form of birth control since I was like fourteen. Not because I’ve been having crazy sex for over ten years, but because I have really painful period cramps if things aren’t regulated down there.”

“Oh, uh, sorry?”

“Nah, I’m good. I have an IUD in now that helps.” A few minutes pass, and I’m getting closer and closer to falling asleep.

“Anora?” Ethan asks softly. “Do you still want to go out to eat tonight?”

“Do you?” I ask, slitting open my eyes.

“No,” he says bluntly. “I don’t want to leave your bed.”

My lips curve into a smile. “I don’t want you to, either.”

Chapter Nineteen

My alarm goes off, stirring me from a peaceful sleep. I'm naked and in my bed, wrapped in Ethan's arms. There's no place I'd rather be, and the thought of getting up to go to work is most unwelcome. I reach for my phone on the nightstand and hit snooze.

Ethan stirs but doesn't wake up. I lie back down and snuggle up closer with him again, feeling small with his large body spooned around me like this. Small, and safe. Hunter moved from my bed to his own on the floor, and Romeo is somewhere in the room, sound asleep as well, and rain patters against the window. It's a perfect sleeping-in day even if I didn't have a naked, tattooed man in bed next to me.

My eyes close, and I swear, only three seconds later, my alarm goes off again. I pull my phone onto the bed and hit snooze again.

"You have to go to work," Ethan grumbles, voice thick with sleep.

"Do I though?"

"If you're leaving it up to me, no." His arms go around me, and he slides me over, so my ass is pressed against his cock. It's not hard, but the feel of it against my bare skin reminds me how good it felt pushing inside me.

"I have vacation time," I say slowly, having a hard time forcing myself to open my eyes. "I need to use it by the end of the year." Mystery's board went up this year, and with things already tight on my budget, I couldn't afford to take time off,

let alone go anywhere for vacation. Money isn't an issue anymore, though.

“How much time?”

“Two weeks. I can see if I can get next week off...just to be safe. Or I could quit.”

“That'd be nice, right?” His lips go to the back of my neck, making it harder to find the motivation to get out of bed.

“I don't think I told you,” I start, arching my back so my ass presses against his cock. “I didn't, because it's not something I'm going to go around telling people. My aunt left me a lot of money too. I don't need to work, and if I continue with her investments or whatever, I'll keep making interest. Or something like that. It's all confusing to me.”

“Then quit your job and stay in bed with me.” His hand goes to my thigh. “I'll make it worth your while.”

Oh, he will. I blink my eyes open, praying for the willpower to get my ass out of bed. “If I did quit, I'd give notice. I like my job.”

“No one likes their job enough to do it when they don't have to. Trust me.”

“I did always say my ideal job was getting paid to do nothing.”

Ethan pushes up on his elbow and brushes my hair back. “Given who you are, it might be hard to hold a job with regular hours. Demons don't keep to schedules.”

“You're right.” I trail my finger up his arm, following a line of one of his tattoos. “You said you had a job in Chicago, right?”

“I did, and was put on probation by the Order for it.”

“For having a job?”

“The Order doesn't like hunters *doing their own thing*,” he says ruefully. “My entire family was almost excommunicated when I went to college.”

“What?” I say, though I heard him loud and clear. “Why wouldn’t they want you to go to college?”

“Because getting a degree in biology has nothing to do with protecting human life.” He rolls his eyes. “Since modern medicine has nothing to do with saving lives or anything.”

“You have a degree in biology?”

“I do, and that’s also why I had to get a job. The Order wouldn’t pay me while I *defied their orders and wasted my talents.*”

There’s a lot to unpack here, and I don’t have much time before work. “So, the Order is like an organization? I thought maybe you guys were, uh, more like a club that got together and shared demon stories and hunting tips.”

“They’re very organized, with ranks and offices and all that shit. The head of the Order supposedly lives in Rome and works close with the guy who’s a step down from the Pope, whatever his title is.”

“Oh, wow. And they pay you?”

“Yep. I used to think it was doing us a favor, letting us earn a living by hunting demons, but now I see it as more of a way to trap you in. Most Order members can’t really go out and get a regular job by putting *former demon hunter* on a resume.”

“That makes sense. And they sound like old-fashioned dicks.”

“That sums them up perfectly. And as much as I hate saying this, you need to get up and get ready for work.”

“Ugh. I know.”

“I can make you breakfast. What do you want?”

“As far as traditional breakfast food, I have stuff for eggs, toast, and coffee. I usually don’t have time to cook.”

He flashes a cocky grin. “Good thing I’m here. Now get up.”

“Fine,” I groan and stretch out, knowing it’s going to hurt to peel myself away from Ethan. But I have to pee, and I fell

asleep without taking my makeup off again last night, and I know my mascara is smeared under my eyes.

Knowing Ethan is watching, I get out of bed without grabbing a sheet to cover myself and walk into the bathroom. I take a super-fast shower, pull my hair back into a French braid, and put on a minimal amount of makeup, hiding the dark circles under my eyes.

Dressed in scrubs, I go into the kitchen, finding Ethan at the stove. He redressed in the clothes he had on yesterday, and he turns the burner off right as I walk in.

“Perfect timing,” he says and takes the frying pan over to the table, dishing up scrambled eggs on two plates next to pieces of buttered toast. Fresh coffee is in the pot as well. A girl can get used to this. Ethan let Hunter out as well, and filled his bowl with too much kibble, which of course, Hunter is happy about.

“Thanks for making breakfast,” I tell Ethan and pour myself a half cup of coffee with way too much creamer. “I feel spoiled now.”

“I like to cook,” Ethan tells me, taking a seat at the table. “Which is something else I don’t get to do much because of the Order. We’re on the move a lot and I’ve spent more nights at cheap hotels than I care to count.”

“You don’t like being in the Order, do you?” I pick up my toast and take a bite.

“I don’t like being told what to do.”

“I can tell...though I am curious.”

“About?”

Now it’s my turn to flash him a cocky grin. “What would you do if I told you to sit back and unzip your pants?”



“ANORA, RIGHT?”

I'm in the waiting area of my favorite Mexican restaurant, picking up a lunch order for the clinic staff. Turning, I see Marcus, one of Harrison's co-workers.

"Right. Hi."

"I'm Marcus, I work with your brother."

"I remember," I say with a smile. "How are you?"

"Good. And you?"

"Good too. Picking up lunch for work."

"Are you a nurse?"

"No, a vet tech."

Marcus nods. "That's probably why you have cats on your scrub top, right?"

"Right," I say as the hostess returns with two large paper bags full of food. "I better get this back before the tacos get cold. It was nice seeing you."

"Yeah, you too."

"Tell Harrison I said hi," I say as I head out the door, dashing through the misty rain to my car. It's one PM and I still have five hours of my twelve-hour shift left. I've been texting Ethan when I can throughout the day and cannot wait to see him again. He's back at home, helping Julia research the bird-demon thing I saw, which isn't much to go on, I know.

I'm sitting in the break room, scooping up the last of my rice and beans with a chip when Harrison texts me.

Harrison: Are you still interested in Marcus?

Me: No, why?

Harrison: He said he ran into you today and wants your number.

Me: Did you give it to him?

Harrison: Not without asking you first. Do you want me to?

Me: Thanks, and no. I'm seeing someone.

Harrison sends two laughing emojis.

Me: I really am! Remember Ethan from the diner the night you picked me up?

Harrison: You're not joking?

Me: Nope. I left him in my bed this morning so I could go to work.

Harrison: Gross, Annie.

Now it's my turn to send laughing emojis.

Harrison: You're feeling better?

It takes me a second to remember I'd told him I was sick and not at work yesterday.

Me: Much better.

I put my phone down and finish lunch. We have a busy afternoon of back-to-back appointments today, and I still need to talk to Tammy about taking all of next week off. There's an "aggreance spell" in the Book of Shadows, and I snapped a photo of it before I rushed out the door for work. I'm not sure what realm of right or wrong this falls into, but I'm taking a week off work so I don't get attacked by demons and so I don't attract said demons to my place of work, putting others in danger.

About an hour later, I get a small break between appointments and find Tammy in her office. Next week's schedule is on the desk in front of her, and it's totally blank.

Perfect.

"Hey," I start, knocking on the door frame.

"Oh, hey, Anora. What's up?"

"I know this is short notice, but is there any way I could take a week of my vacation next week? One of my cousins surprised us by coming into town and I hardly ever get to see her." The lie rolls off my tongue easily, yet I'm instantly afraid Tammy is going to drill me for info on this cousin I can't give her because it's all a lie.

“Yeah, that should work. Rachel just moved her vacation from next week to next month and I was trying to figure out how to put her back in the schedule. This is perfect.”

“Seriously?” I blurt.

Tammy laughs. “Doesn’t usually work out this way, does it?”

“Not at all.”

“So, I’ll get you back on not this Tuesday, but the next one?”

“Yeah, that’ll work.”

“Great. See you at six AM next, next Tuesday.”

I get back to work, assisting with spaying a cat and then several more appointments before I finally clock out and head home. I have a missed call from Dad and call him back as I drive.

“Hey, kiddo,” he answers.

“Hey, Dad. I was at work when you called.”

“I figured as much. Your brother is going to stop by to pick something up and is staying for dinner. Do you want to come over? I’m making your favorite enchiladas.”

“Thanks Dad, but, I—” Shit. I can’t say I’m not feeling well because I told Harrison I’m better. “I, um, I have plans with Laney tonight.”

“Oh, okay. Have fun. We’ll have a formal family dinner next week then when your mother is home.”

“Sounds good. Love you, Dad.”

“Love you too, sweetie. Take care.”

I end the call and turn up my favorite female eighties rock playlist, singing along to Joan Jett as I drive home. Ethan isn’t there, and I’m a little nervous when I park in my single-car unattached garage. I get out of my car and apprehensively look around, heart in my throat. I hike my purse up over my shoulder and hurry out of the garage, pausing when I get to the

back patio. That same *you're being watched* feeling starts to press down on me, but this time, I'm not scared.

"Hey," I say, whirling around, hoping to see that blonde ghost. "If you want something, tell me. Because I have a lot of other shit going on right now, and I don't want to sound mean, but I don't really have time for supernatural passing out, okay?"

Nothing happens, and I let out a sigh. I can sense Hunter right behind the door as I unlock it, and he rushes out, tail wagging like mad.

"I missed you too," I tell him, dropping to my knees to wrap my arms around him. He licks my face and then takes off, running into the yard to do his business. My phone rings as I'm standing there watching Hunter.

"Hello?" I answer.

"Hey, babe," Ethan replies. "You leaving work now?"

"I just got home, actually. What are you doing?"

"Driving back to Syracuse. I talked to Isaac about tracking Pricolici back to their master."

"And?" I wrinkle my nose.

"And it's dangerous, hard as fuck, but not impossible. I've had worse odds."

"That's, uh, reassuring. Do you want to go out for dinner tonight? We never got to last night."

"Should I be sorry about that?"

"Oh, definitely not." I smile, feeling heat rush through me as I think about last night.

"Then yeah, let's go out. It's Friday, after all, which I believe is a normal date night for people."

"Is it? I'm not familiar with normal stuff."

Ethan laughs. "I can be at your place in an hour and a half."

"Well, I better start getting ready then. I'll see you soon."

“Be safe, Anora,” he says, ending the call.

“Come on, boy,” I call to Hunter, who bounds up the back patio and comes into the house. I lock the door behind me. An hour and a half may seem like plenty of time, but I know myself and know how easily I can waste said time, so I hustle to get showered, take care of my animals, change my sheets, do a quick vacuum, and put makeup on.

I’m on the couch, several chapters into a new romance novel, when Ethan rings the doorbell. Butterflies flap in my stomach as I hurry to answer the door, and that feeling only intensifies when I see him.

He steps in and takes me in his arms, putting his lips to mine. Kicking the door closed behind him, Ethan spins us around and pushes me up against it, kissing me harder.

“I missed you too,” I pant between kisses, and we walk tangled together to the couch. There’s a good chance we’re not going to make it to dinner at the time we anticipated, but like last night, I don’t care.

Straddling Ethan, I push my hair out of the way and go in for another kiss. I’ve never been so turned on so fast before, and my body is begging to feel more of Ethan’s touch. His hands slide up my waist, and I widen my legs, feeling his cock get hard beneath me.

And then someone else touches me, and the cold fingers that land on my shoulder make me jump.

“Fuck,” I exclaim and dive against Ethan, turning around just in time to see a gray shadow moving across the living room.

“What’s wrong?”

“I felt and then saw a ghost.”

Ethan is immediately on high alert. “Is it still there?”

“No,” I say, but my heart is racing. “I didn’t get a good look at it. I think it was your run-of-the-mill, just passing through spirit.” I grit my teeth. I knew I shouldn’t have had a séance inside my house. “Fucker startled me though.”

“Yeah, it would startle me too.” Ethan combs his fingers through my hair. “You okay?”

“Oh, I’m fine. Sorry the mood was ruined. Do you hate me now?”

“Why would I hate you?”

“Because of cock-blocking ghosts, that’s why.”

“Well, you do already suffer from supernatural narcolepsy, so I’ll go easy on you this time.”

“This time?” I arch my eyebrows.

“Yes. This time. Next time, I fully expect a blow job no matter how many ghosts are in the room. Just burn some sage first.”

I try to keep a straight face as I nod but end up laughing. “Burning sage before we leave might be a good idea,” I say, so fucking grateful to have someone that not only believes me one hundred percent like this, but actually knows how to deal with the supernatural too.

Ethan’s hands go to my ass, giving it a squeeze. “Let’s do it then.”

Chapter Twenty

I wake up to my phone dinging on the nightstand next to me. Ethan and I are both naked in bed together again, and since I don't have to be anywhere until later, I reach for my phone so I can put it on silent. It's eight-thirty AM, and Harrison is the one texting me. Blinking my eyes open, I unlock my phone and read his message.

Harrison: I saw Laney last night.

Me: Okay?

Harrison: You weren't with her. You told Dad you were.

Shit. I did.

Me: Fine. I wasn't. I was with Ethan.

Harrison: Why did you lie? You don't like to lie.

Me: Long story.

Harrison: You're acting weird.

Me: I am weird.

Harrison and I have had our differences over the years, of course, like any other siblings, but we've always been close, as most twins are.

Harrison: Is everything okay?

I hesitate, not sure what to say. Harrison is right to say I don't like to lie, because I don't. My life has taken a dramatic turn, and I can't keep it from those close to me forever.

Me: It will be. Can you come over later? I'll fill you in on everything then.

Harrison: Sure. What time?

Me: Noon? I have a naked man next to me again and want to go back to sleep.

Harrison sends a barfing emoji and I put my phone back on the nightstand, snuggling up against Ethan. He wraps me in his arms and I fall back asleep, sleeping peacefully for another hour until my dreams shift.

It starts out with me walking through the woods. I know now the red-haired lady is Aunt Estelle, and this time, I know we're in Thorne Hill. It's late, and we drove across town only to park in a gravel lot and walk into the woods. Aunt Estelle gave me chocolate to eat in the car to help keep me awake. Blue light starts to glow in front of me, and then the dream shifts and I'm running through the woods again.

I'm going to die if I don't get inside the barn. I run past the big, twisted oak tree, lungs burning and legs about to give out. But I can't stop. I can't—something grabs me, and their touch burns.

“Say it again,” Aunt Estelle's voice rings out, and I blink as I'm being dragged backward through the forest and see her smiling face. “Feel it inside you.”

I put my hands on the white table. We're on the front porch of her house, and a pile of twigs and straw is in a metal bowl in front of me.

“*Ignis*,” I say, and the kindling starts to smoke.

“Concentrate,” Aunt Estelle urges. “Imagine the fire. See the flames in your mind.”

I close my eyes. “*Ignis*.”

When I open my eyes, I'm back in the forest. I'm bleeding, and I know I'm going to die. I don't want to be here. I don't want to relive this last memory. I want to go back to the porch, back to Aunt Estelle.

“This is a dream,” I grumble and try to sit up, but I’m stuck inside the dying body. “Wake up.” I push my hands down against the damp earth. “Wake up.”

Something moves next to me, and I try and fail to turn my head. Whatever it is draws near, and the outline of a bird-demon comes into view.

“Anora.” Ethan’s hand lands on my shoulder, gently shaking me. “You’re having a nightmare.”

My eyes flutter open, and I take a moment to convince myself I’m actually awake and am safe in my room. “I was.”

Ethan pulls me to his chest and runs his fingers up and down my back for a minute. “Do you remember what it was about?”

“A few things. My aunt teaching me magic, which wasn’t the bad part, and then dying in the woods again. One of those bird-demon things was coming at me right when you woke me up. I feel so shaken up by it.”

“You’re safe now.”

“I know.” I let out a deep breath and close my eyes, listening to his heart beating. “The ghost—the blonde one I’ve been seeing—I think these are his memories. Not the whole being taught magic and stalked by humanoid, demonic birds, but being murdered in the woods. Ghosts don’t typically come to me like this, not like it is in movies when they want someone to help them with unfinished business, but I think...I think that’s what he wants. What if his body is still out there and he wants me to find it?”

“Okay,” Ethan says, considering my words. “Do you have any idea where in the woods his body could be?”

“Yes,” I say and lift my head off Ethan’s chest. “The woods between the barn and your house. There’s this big oak tree at the end of the horse trail, and I’ve seen it in my dream a few times.”

“Then let’s go out there and look.”

“You’ll help me look for a body?”

Ethan pulls the blankets around us and rests his hand on the curve of my hip. “Of course, and as much as I can sympathize with this spirit, I really think you should cast some sort of spell to banish him—at least for now. If we don’t find a body today, we can come back to whatever it is he’s trying to tell you after the Pricolici are dealt with.”

“I agree,” I say. My case of supernatural narcolepsy was induced by the ghost, I’m sure of it. “I have another lesson today. We can body-hunt then.”

“What time is the lesson?”

“Four, but I can see if my student can come earlier, though I really need to go grocery shopping and do laundry.”

“Being an adult sucks, doesn’t it?”

“It does.” I splay my fingers over Ethan’s chest. “Though I do like this part of it.”

His hands move up and down my body. “I like it too.”

I close my eyes, soaking up another few blissful moments lying here with Ethan before we have to get up and face reality. We both fall back asleep, woken about half an hour later when Ethan’s phone rings.

“It’s my dad,” he says with a sigh. “I’ll call him back in a minute.”

“Okay,” I reply sleepily. “I should get up and get going too. And I’m going to tell my brother and best friend about everything. How they react will be interesting to say the least.”

“You know you don’t have to tell them.”

“I want to, because hiding something this big...I don’t see how we can still be friends. And Harrison already called me out for acting weird. It’s only a matter of time before Laney does too.”

“Good point.” Ethan kisses my forehead before forcing himself up. I move a little slower but get up too. I’m pulling clothes out of my overstuffed closet when an unwelcome thought enters my mind: I can’t keep a secret from my friends,

but will Harrison and Laney still want to be friends with me when they learn the truth?



“THANKS FOR COMING OVER.” I BRING TWO MUGS OF COFFEE to the table, giving one each to Laney and Harrison. We’re in my kitchen, and I’m going to open up and tell them everything. Ethan is back at home, doing something for the Order with his family. I’m going to his house before my lesson this afternoon so we can go to the barn together.

“You made it sound pretty urgent.” Laney slides her coffee over, wrapping her hands around the mug. “What’s going on?”

“You’re pregnant,” Harrison blurts, just to be an ass.

“Hah. I’m not, well, I don’t think so, at least. Anyway, it would be too soon to tell if I was,” I say.

“What?” Laney’s eyes widen. “Who are you sleeping with and why don’t I know about this mystery man?”

“Talk about that when I’m not around,” Harrison says.

“Oh, we so are,” Laney tells him. “Is that why we’re here?”

“No,” I go on. “But Ethan does have something to do with all this.” I lean against the counter. “It’s going to sound weird, so I’m just going to come out and say it. I’m a witch.”

Laney and Harrison exchange looks.

“You had us come over to tell us you’re into Wicca now?” Laney makes a face. “You know those *this could have been an email* memes? This applies.”

“I’m not into Wicca. I told you both how I can’t remember like anything from my childhood that has to do with Aunt Estelle, right? Well, it’s because she cast a spell on me that made me forget. She bound my powers too, but now that she’s dead, the binding spell broke, I’m starting to figure out how to use my powers, oh, and demons are after me, but Ethan’s a demon hunter and we’re working on how to have me not die.”

Laney opens her mouth only to close it, and Harrison's brows furrow.

"Should I call Mom?" he asks gently. "Or are you sensing the spirit of a crazy person?"

"I'm not crazy," I snap, and Hunter gets to his feet, coming over and gently pawing at me. "Thank you," I tell him. "Hunter doesn't think I'm crazy."

Laney eyes Harrison again, looking concerned. "Anora," she starts.

"I can prove it," I interrupt and grab a napkin from the counter, balling it up in my hand. Closing my eyes, I remember Aunt Estelle's voice, telling me to feel it. Feel the fire. "*Ignis*," I whisper and the napkin in my hand goes up in flames. I drop it on the table and little embers spark into the air. Eyes wide, I can't help but smile as I watch it burn, feeling a sense of familiarity.

"Holy fucking shit." Harrison jumps back so fast he hits the table, sloshing his and Laney's coffee out of their mugs.

"See? I'm not crazy."

Laney pokes at the charred remains of the napkin with her nail. "You're really a witch?"

"I am."

"And you've always been one?"

"I think so," I reply.

"Why would your aunt bind your powers and alter your memories?"

"I don't know." I let out a breath. "If there was a way to get my memories back, I'd probably figure it out."

Harrison slowly sits back down. "You said demons are after you."

"I did." I pull out a chair, sit, and take a breath. "I'll tell you guys everything."

Chapter Twenty-One

“Come in,” Julia says, answering the door. “I think Ethan’s in the shower. Well, someone is. I heard the water turn on.”

“Oh, okay.”

“Do you want coffee or anything? I was just about to put on a pot.”

“Yeah, that’d be great. I didn’t get as much sleep as I hoped last night.” I follow her into the kitchen.

“Really?” She turns and raises her eyebrows.

“I didn’t mean because of that, though it was a little because of that. But mostly because of creepy dreams.”

“Did that bird-demon thing happen to be in your dream? Sorry to sound eager. I just don’t have much to go on.”

“No, it was just an outline.” I shake my head. “Sorry not to be more help.”

“Oh, it’s fine. It was adult-sized, right?”

“Yeah. Maybe a little taller than me, and I want to say it had clothes on, if that helps. I think. And I get the feeling it was smart. Like it had a plan and things were calculated. Which probably doesn’t help, and I’m not even sure how to explain how I know.”

“Is that like a witch thing?” she asks, trying to sound casual, but I see the way she looks at me.

“Hell if I know,” I say with a snort of laughter. “I’ve been a witch for like two days now. Well, I’ve been aware I’m a witch, I should say, right?”

“You really had no idea you were a witch?” She plugs in the coffee pot and looks at me for a whole half a second.

“No. I wish I did. Things would have made a lot more sense, ya know?”

“Yeah. And your aunt...she never dropped any clues until after she died?”

“No,” I say honestly, because if Aunt Estelle did, I don’t remember them.

Julia gets a bag of coffee grounds from a cabinet. “And the rest of your family?”

“They’re the least magical people on the planet. My mom is a doctor and believes in science. And my brother...I’ll just say I love him, but it’s probably a good thing he doesn’t have powers.”

Julia laughs, sounding a little forced. “That can be said about a lot of people, I’m sure. What about the fact that you can see ghosts? No one else has any sort of other power like that?”

“Not that I know of. I used to tell my parents about the ghosts because it scared me so much, but they insisted there was a logical explanation and eventually, I learned to keep my mouth shut about it. I’m not ashamed to say I can see the dead, and I did work as a professional medium for like a hot minute, but it’s not something I go around telling people.”

“I get that, and it sucks having to hide part of who you are. We don’t really get to meet too many people outside the Order, but we can’t introduce ourselves as hunters from the Order, right?”

“Yeah, I’d imagine it’s not something you can share with too many people.”

“Not at all.” She gets two coffee mugs down from the cabinet. “It’s nice you and Ethan found each other.”

My heart does a weird skip-a-beat thing, and I try hard not to smile. “Me too.”

Julia’s gaze goes to the coven pendant hanging from my neck. Her smile disappears for half a second. “He’s really happy, I can tell. He’s one of the best demon hunters I know, and I’m not just saying it since we’re family. He has that whole natural athletic thing that’s so unfair. I mean, I can’t follow along to kids’ Zumba, but give Ethan some daggers and a room full of demons...” She rolls her eyes. “Like I said, not fair. He’s good at killing demons, but the whole taking orders thing...it’s not for him. Having to leave Chicago to come here was hard on him.”

“I kinda picked up on that.”

“So, what I’m getting at is, it’s nice seeing him happy again, and you make him happy.”

“Jesus, Jules.” Sam’s voice comes from behind me. “Are you encouraging him?”

Julia frowns at her sister. “Of course not.”

“Encouraging him?” I question.

Sam purses her lips and rolls her eyes, walking past me to the fridge. “You don’t understand the Order and I really shouldn’t even be talking about it.” She pulls out a beer, and Julia quickly takes it from her hands.

“It’s the afternoon,” she says dryly, shaking her head. “The Order is full of drama sometimes,” Julia tells me, putting the beer back. “It’s not that different than politics, really.”

“Oh, okay,” I say with a nod though her words only confuse me more. A powerful, large organization who knows about demons and magic is a little scary though. It’s like every conspiracy theory about the government and supernaturals come to life.

Julia gets coffee creamer out of the fridge and pours us two cups of coffee. She adds as much creamer to her cup as I do, and we sit awkwardly at the table together while Sam makes no attempt to hide her seething as she looks through the fridge for something to eat.

“Well,” Julia says after only a minute ticks by. “I have errands to run. It was nice seeing you again, Anora,” she says, crossing the kitchen and pulling her car keys off a hook by the back door.

“You too.”

As soon as the door closes behind her, Sam goes back to the fridge and gets out the beer.

“You and Ethan have been spending a lot of time together,” she states and pops the top off the beer. “And he seems really smitten by you.”

I smile again, feeling color rush to my cheeks. “Yeah, I guess so.”

She takes a swig of beer. “You didn’t put a love spell on him, did you?”

“What?”

“A love spell,” she repeats slowly, blue eyes wide. “Did you or did you not cast one on him?”

“No. Of course not. I wouldn’t and besides, I...I don’t even know how.”

“Interesting. I thought for sure you did. Ethan isn’t really the settle-down and date kind of guy.” She leans against the counter. “He’s dated—I shouldn’t even use that word because date implies he did more than just sleep with more women than I can keep track of.”

I stare at Sam for a few seconds, stunned, but refusing to let her get under my skin. Girls hating on girls—especially when it comes to the subject of love and romance—pisses me off in an instant. We’re judged enough by the rest of the world. We shouldn’t put extra judgement on each other.

“Let me get this straight,” I start, fingers wrapping around my coffee cup. “You think the only reason Ethan hasn’t fucked me and moved onto someone else is because I cast a love spell on him.”

Sam looks me right in the eyes. “Yes. I don’t see why else he’d want you hanging around. No offense or anything. You’re

super pretty and all, but you're not his type."

"And what is his type?"

"The type who leaves in the morning." She flashes a smile and turns around, grabbing cookies off a plate on the counter. The stairs creak and Ethan comes back into the kitchen. Sam jumps, getting an *oh shit* look on her face.

"Hey," Ethan says brightly, making me think he didn't overhear anything Sam just said. His eyes go from Sam to me, and he smiles. "Ready to go?"

"Yeah." I take another drink of coffee and get up, setting my mug in the sink. Ethan pulls me in for a tight hug and gives me a kiss. Sam makes a gagging noise that Ethan ignores.

"Let's go then." He gives my waist a squeeze and steps back.

"Ethan," Sam rushes out, catching his arm as we go to leave. "I saw in the paper a girl was found in a ditch not far from here. And most of her blood was drained, which sounds a lot like a vampire, doesn't it?"

"If it is, the Vampire Council will handle it. You know that."

Sam rolls her eyes. "They're too light on their punishments."

"You're the one always harping about following rules," Ethan replies dryly.

"Do the VC and the Order not get along?" I ask, somewhat apprehensively, knowing I'm risking opening a can of worms with my question. I have enough going on as it is without getting into the politics between the Vampire Council and a demon-hunter organization.

"The Order doesn't get along with anyone," Ethan grumbles and Sam shoots him a look. He laces his fingers through mine. "Let's go look for a body." Knowing he'd rather look for a decomposed body in the woods than talk about the Order just furthers my *can of worms* feeling.

"After I teach a riding lesson, you mean."

“Right. After.” He looks me up and down. “I’m really digging this whole teacher vibe.”

I let out a snort of laughter. “In breeches, right?”

“It’s like you can read my damn mind.” He pulls me to him, and suddenly, I want to teach a whole new type of *riding*.

“I’ll give you a private lesson later,” I tell Ethan, forgetting that Sam is still within earshot. Ethan has the way of doing that to me.

“Well, then, by all means, let’s go.”

This time, we do go outside, and he opens the passenger door of his Jeep for me.

“You brought your dagger, right?” Ethan asks after we’ve already left his neighborhood.

“Right.” I pat my purse, which has been on my shoulder this whole time. “And I wore a belt just so I can attach the sheath to it.”

“Good. Because making demons—what did you call it—*go poof* could come in handy. Chopping up and burning demon bodies is such a pain in the fucking ass.”

I turn, gaping at him for a moment. “I guess you have to get rid of them somehow.”

“I’ve heard rumors,” he goes on, “about witches having daggers that are enchanted and can incinerate demons with a single stab.”

“Sounds like it will come in handy.”

“Oh, for fucking sure, though I did bring some silver bullets just in case.”

“Silver bullets?” I question.

“Silver bullets are effective in killing a lot of demons.”

“Good to know. I thought it was just for werewolves.”

Ethan chuckles. “They do work on werewolves, in case you ever find yourself up against one.”

The fact that werewolves exist shocks me enough not to realize the weight of what Ethan just said right away. “Wait... you’ve seen werewolves?”

“I have.”

“And you shot them?”

“Yes.” He slows at a stop sign, body relaxed and tone normal. There’s no bragging or excitement. It’s just part of the job.

“I don’t know anything about werewolves, but aren’t they people half the time?”

He flicks his eyes to me and his jaw tenses ever so slightly. “Their humanity slips away.”

“Oh.” I suck in air, regretting asking. I don’t know enough to make a judgement call. I mean, the fact that werewolves actually exist shocks me, though when vampires came out a lot of people speculated other supernatural beings existed too. But more so, I can’t shake the feeling I should just keep my mouth shut—again.

Because the more I learn about the Order, the more I don’t like it.



“ARE YOU SORE YET?” I ASK ETHAN, STRUGGLING JUST A BIT to keep up with him. We rode Mystery together after I got done giving my lesson. It was Ethan’s first time on a horse, and all we did was walk and trot, but I know how sore you can be after riding.

“Not yet, and I don’t think I will be.” Ethan turns and slows, realizing I’m a good two yards behind him. I’m active and enjoy running, but my running is on the street, not on uneven terrain like this.

“Wait until you wake up tomorrow.”

“When I do, I’ll let you know.” He flashes that smirk again, and I know he’s thinking the same thing I am. We’re

going to wake up together again after having wake-the-neighbors crazy sex.

Hurrying to catch up, the dagger, which is attached to my belt, slaps against my leg. I reach down, steadying it, and the cool metal against my fingers gives me a jolt of confidence. We trek along in silence for a while, not slowing until the pond comes into view.

My hand goes to the dagger on my hip on its own accord, and a rush goes through me. If anything is here, I'm ready for it.

What?

I shake my head and a memory comes rushing back.

I'm sitting on Aunt Estelle's front porch again, seated at the white table. Harrison is in the front yard, throwing a tennis ball for a German Shepherd named Daisy.

"Not bad," Aunt Estelle tells me, moving a bowl of water from the table to the ground behind her. "You're getting a handle on it, but telekinesis doesn't come naturally for you. Not like—"

Ethan's hand lands on my shoulder. "Anora? Are you okay?"

I open my eyes, realizing just then than I'd closed them. "I...um...I'm fine." I bring my hand to my forehead. "Another memory just came to me."

Ethan stops and puts both hands on my shoulders. "What was it about?"

"My aunt again. She was teaching me how to move things with my mind. And I could."

Ethan's head bobs up and down. "You're telekinetic?"

"No," I tell him. "She said it didn't come naturally to me, but something else did. I can't remember what it was, though." I let out a breath and shake my head. "It doesn't matter now. We should be getting close to the barn."

“Anora,” Ethan says gently. “There isn’t a barn. I came through the woods the day I pulled you from the water and didn’t see a barn. There’s a storage shed not far from the pond, but that’s it.”

I shake my head, feeling the pull come from deep inside me. “There is a barn,” I insist. “I can feel it.”

“Maybe I missed it.” Ethan takes my hand, holding it tight as we go down the ravine and pass by the pond. My heart is in my throat the whole time, and it takes everything inside me not to run away when the dock comes into view.

“There’s nothing here,” Ethan tells me when we hike up the ravine on the other side of the pond.

“It’s here,” I tell him. “I can feel it.”

“Anora,” he presses. “There is nothing here. I checked on Google Earth too.”

I blink and see a vision from my dream. This is where I was running. I know it—and I can feel it. “It’s here.” I pull my hand from Ethan’s and walk forward. “I know it.”

“Anora,” Ethan starts as I walk a few more feet forward, unable to ignore the call I’m feeling deep inside my soul. “I don’t think this is a good idea.”

His words are a second too late, and the ground beneath my feet gives out.

Chapter Twenty-Two

“Anora!”

I hear Ethan call my name right as I crash to the ground below me. Dust, dirt, and pieces of rotten plywood rain down on me, getting in my mouth and eyes.

“Anora!” Ethan calls again and I blink, trying to clear my vision. I open my mouth to say something, but the wind has been knocked right out of me. Suddenly, Ethan lands beside me with a gentle *thud*.

“Fuck, Anora,” he says as he scoops me up, holding me tight against his chest. I close my eyes and suck in a breath, finally able to speak.

“I’m okay,” I choke out, blinking from the bright sunlight above us. The fact that Ethan jumped into a dark hole leading to God knows where hits me as hard as the impact of the hard dirt beneath me. Feebly, I bring a hand up and rest it on his chest.

“Are you?” he asks.

“I think so.” I force myself to breathe in deeply, and do a mental check for injuries. I can wiggle my fingers and toes, which is a good sign, right? My eyes flutter shut for a moment, and I can’t sort out my feelings.

I’m scared, because I just fell down a fucking hole. It smells like sulfur and mold down here, and I have no idea how we’re going to get out. But at the same time, I’m relieved. I made it to the barn...only I’m not in a —

“It’s a root cellar.” I push up against Ethan’s chest. “The barn used to be here. Holy fuck.”

“Holy fuck is right,” Ethan echoes, gently helping me to my feet. He gets his phone and uses the flashlight to look around.

“The ghost,” I start, swallowing my pounding heart. “He was here. I...I don’t know why, but this was a safe place for him.”

“Look,” Ethan breathes, shining the light of his phone into a corner of the root cellar. “It looks like an office.” He breaks cobwebs with his hand, going to an overturned desk in the corner of the root cellar. There’s a bookcase behind the desk, with soggy shelves and water-damaged books.

“Can you help me move the desk?” I ask Ethan. It’s oak and heavy but he lifts it with ease. Under the protection of the sturdy wood is a collection of photographs. They’re faded and yellowing, but their moments captured in time are still visible.

I flip through them as Ethan holds up his phone, providing me with light. The first photograph is of girl in a red-checked tank top standing next to a large brown cow, holding a first-place ribbon. A calf drinking milk from its mother is the next. The same girl from the first picture sits bareback on a black and white horse. I look at the third photo and inhale quickly.

“That’s him.” I hold the photo closer to my face. The blonde boy is smiling back at me, with his arm around the girl in front of a pickup. He looks so happy and so healthy, not at all like the ghost that appeared to me. No information has been written on the back. I carefully fold it and stick it in my back pocket.

“I want out,” I say, panic rising inside of me. It’s not my fear but is coming off these photographs, and I turn, looking behind Ethan. The ghost-boy isn’t there, but his emotions are quickly taking over. “Now.”

My hands start to tremble, and Ethan nods. It’s all I can do not to completely break down right now, either screaming or

crying in total fear. I remind myself to breathe, forcing my eyes open and looking at what's around *me* and not around my memory.

“You don't want to check out the rest of the cellar first?” Ethan asks, and I quickly shake my head.

“Okay,” he says and guides me back to where we fell in. It's a good six and a half feet up, but Ethan lifts me with ease. I grab onto the weeds outside the hole and yank myself into the daylight, feeling a million times better. Gasping in air, I turn, panicked once again that Ethan will be stuck down there. I'm not strong enough to pull him out.

“Ethan,” I cry out, scrambling back so I don't fall. I can't see inside the dark pit, and my heart lurches. What the hell did I just do? The blonde ghost boy's emotions took over, and I ran with my tail tucked between my legs, leaving the man I—

Something scoots across the dirt below me, and a second later, Ethan emerges. I grab his hand, holding on with dear life as he pulls himself out of the root cellar.

“You okay?” he asks, completely unfazed by the fact that he moved the desk and used it as a ladder to escape the dark hellhole that root cellar was. I grab onto the collar of his shirt and pull him to me, not stopping until we're several feet away from the entrance to the root cellar.

“I am now.” A crow caws and takes off, the flapping of its wings echoing on the now-silent forest, startling us both. Casting my eyes to the broken plywood, I start to feel fear that isn't my own threaten to take over. The barn was burned, and it wasn't by accident. It was easier to just block off the root cellar than to fill it. Darkness closes in on me, and it's all I can do to stay on my feet. Because I'm going to die, and she's going to enjoy my suffering.

“Breathe, Anora,” Ethan says softly, somehow picking up on my sheer terror. My body threatens to collapse in shock, both from physical pain and heartache. “Breathe,” he says again, deep voice rattling through me. He gently pulls the hair tie from my ponytail, helping me relax as he runs his fingers through my hair. “What just happened?”

I lift my head to look him in the eyes. “I don’t know, really, but suddenly I felt all this fear and panic. It took over.” I close my eyes and take another deep breath, pushing the fear away as I exhale. I feel almost like myself again.

“What exactly did you feel?”

“Hopelessness. I knew I was going to die, and there was nothing I could do to change that.” I close my eyes and get a flash of being dragged through the cold forest. “I think whatever happened...it happened down there. I can feel myself dying.”

“Do you think it’s the blonde ghost?” Ethan asks after a beat.

“Yes.” That’s another thing that’s hard to explain. I just *know*. “I kept hearing the name Ryan in the back of my mind.”

Ethan raises his eyebrows and sighs. He cups his hand around my face and tilts my chin up to him. “Well, I think we ___”

Before he can finish his thoughts, something jumps down from a tree, soaring through the air and landing on Ethan’s back. Clawed hands grasp his shoulders and yank him away from me. Ethan’s hands slip off my face as he’s shoved to the ground.

Horrified, I watch with wide eyes as my heart pounds in my throat. A cloaked figure turns its back to me, moving in on Ethan. In one graceful movement, Ethan kicks out, hitting the creature’s legs and knocking it to the ground.

In an instant, Ethan gets to his feet and pulls out his gun. With no hesitation, he pulls the trigger, sending a bullet right into the thing’s head.

But it doesn’t die.

“Well that’s just fucking great,” he huffs and kicks the thing in the stomach. He brings his foot up, ready to smash it down on the thing’s head, when his face goes tight with shock.

“Anora!” he shouts, but it’s too late. Something grabs a handful of my hair and jerks me back. My feet catch on

themselves, and I trip. As I fall, I see the face of our attackers.

The bird-demons. Sunken-in eyes, leathery skin, and a nose shaped like a long, sharp beak.

My breath leaves me, and time slows down. The forlorn feelings come back, and I feel like I'm going to die again. Everything is hopeless; there's no reason to even try. The sooner death comes, the sooner the suffering ends.

Fuck!

Those feelings aren't mine. I'm *not* dying, not here, and not now. Gritting my teeth, I push the emotions aside. I'm going to fight, and I'm not going to let these freaky motherfuckers get the best of me.

Another memory flashes before my eyes, and my body crashes hard against the dry earth.

"Ignis," I say, smiling as a small pile of kindling goes up in flames. I'm inside Aunt Estelle's house, and Harrison is on the couch behind me.

"No fair," he grumps. "Why can't I do magic too?"

"Life isn't fair, my sweet child," Aunt Estelle tells him, and then looks back at me. "Do it again, Anora. This time, don't hold back."

I suck in air, eyes flying open. *Ignis*. The word echoes in the back of my head. Like the memory, something else flashes through me, and without thinking, my fingers wrap around the hilt of the dagger, which is hanging from my hip.

Something flashes through me, and before I hit the ground, the dagger is in my hand. I roll back, scrambling to my feet. Brandishing the dagger in front of me, I hurry closer to Ethan, who turns, keeping his back to mine.

Another bird-demon closes in on Ethan and me, circling us. Ethan reaches behind him, his fingers gracing my wrist. The gun is useless on these things, and we're surrounded.

The flash of energy turns into a jolt, and I throw my left hand out, feeling heat radiating from my fingers. The closest bird-demon rushes toward us, and flames erupt around my

hand. I don't have time to think. I just react, throwing my hand out and sending the flames from my fingers to the bird-demon's chest. It stumbles back, madly patting at its chest to put the fire out.

Adrenaline pumps through my veins, pushing my fear to the side. These motherfuckers are going down. Setting my face, I raise the dagger and stare down the other two demons. They hiss and lurk closer, talons out, waiting to make a move. Ethan strikes first, punching one of them so hard it stumbles back a few steps.

The other rushes me. I hold out the dagger but falter. I close my eyes in fear, and my wrist weakens. It comes at me with inhuman speed, knocking me onto the ground so hard that I can't breathe. The dagger falls from my grasp.

The demon crouches over me, staring into my eyes as if it's searching for something. It lowers its face to mine and runs the end of its beak along my cheek. Panicking, I thrash under it.

Its clawed hands press against my chest, crushing me. Madly, I slap the ground in a desperate attempt to find the dagger. Just inches away from my face, the demon opens its beak and lets out an ear-piercing screech.

The dagger is too far away. I can't get to it in time, and if I don't do something now, the bird-demon is going to kill me. Inhaling deep once again, I summon something from deep inside me, causing embers to spark around my fingers. Finding a strength deep inside me, I will the dagger to slide across the dry earth and into my hand. Thrusting my hand up, I plunge the dagger into the demon's neck.

"Ignis!" I shout, and feel the dagger heating up.

With a scream, smoke starts to billow out of its eyes, choking me. I grip the dagger harder, twisting the blade, fire burning so hot around my hands it's blue. Flames swallow the demon, and I can feel their heat, yet it doesn't burn me.

Fire circles around the bird-demon, encasing it in flames. With one final harrowing cry, the demon collapses into a pile

of charred skin and bone. I scramble up, brushing demon ashes off of my clothes.

Killing the demon gives me a rush, and I want to do it again. The demon I'd first set on fire is back on its feet now and coming at me fast. I throw my hand in front of me, and a thin wall of fire appears before me. The thing pushes against it, unable to break through. I hold my ground, keeping my hand outstretched.

I turn my head, frantically looking for Ethan. He's several feet away, fighting off another demon. It swipes its razor-sharp claws at Ethan's face. He leans back, out of its reach, and counters with a strike of his own. His fist collides with the side of the demon's face, and the demon stumbles back.

"Ethan!" I yell, holding up the enchanted dagger. He quickly glances up and extends his hand. I toss it to him and turn back to the demon in front of me, which sidesteps back several feet after getting burned from the flames erupting from the dry earth in front of me. I look back just in time to see Ethan ram the dagger into the demon's chest. Thinking it's going to be paralyzed in pain and then go up in flames, he turns to me.

"Anor—" he starts. But then the demon in front of him screams and, with the dagger still in its chest, launches itself on Ethan. Ethan puts both hands on the dagger, sending the blade in even deeper and twisting it at the same time.

Nothing happens.

Taking advantage of his shock, the creature steps back, and the bloody dagger clatters to the ground. It thrashes its talons across Ethan's chest, tearing through his shirt and skin. It claws at him again, this time ripping open a gash on his bicep.

"No!" I scream, anger boiling inside of me. Without thinking about what I'm doing, I throw my hands out again, fire burning hot around my fingers. The demon looks at me and hisses, recoiling from the flames. My heart lurches in my chest, and I watch in slow motion as Ethan falls to his knees, clutching his bleeding chest.

“*Ignis!*” I scream, and the fire burns brighter, flames licking against my face. I thrust my hands out in the direction of the bird-demon, and the fire leaves my fingers. The next thing I know, fire surrounds the thing, and it screams right before it collapses into a pile of ash.

I clench my fists, putting out the fire I’m holding. Adrenaline surges through me, and Aunt Estelle’s voice echoes in my head.

Very good, Anora.

Blinking, I tear myself away from my memories and run to Ethan.

“Oh my god.” I put my hands onto his chest, trying to stop the bleeding.

“It’s okay,” he tells me, struggling to sit up. One hand goes to mine, and he looks down at himself. “I’ve had worse.”

“We need to...to...fuck. What’s closer? Your house or the barn?”

“Horse barn,” he replies, and lets me help him to his feet. I thought the wound on his chest was the biggest concern, but blood is dripping down his bicep at a worrisome rate.

“Don’t move,” I tell him as I carefully pull down his flannel button-up so I can look at the cuts on his arm. As a vet tech that assists in surgery on a weekly basis, I’m no stranger to blood and gore. It doesn’t bother me, and my ability to deal with what others deem as “gross” has always been a source of pride. But this...right now...I don’t know if I can handle it.

Though I don’t have a choice.

“I’m fine,” he presses, putting on a brave face that would turn me on if circumstances weren’t so dire. Blood trickles down his arm, streaming past his elbow and down his fingers, dripping onto the ground. The wound is deep. Fear for his wellbeing makes me sick. I unzip my fleece jacket and use the dagger to cut off the sleeve to use as a tourniquet. I tie it around his arm, and it quickly becomes stained with blood.

“Fuck. You’re losing too much blood.” I swallow hard, feeling like I might pass out, though what good would that do? I squeeze my eyes shut.

“I’m fine,” Ethan presses and pulls me to him. “Are you?”

“Yeah,” I say, though it seems crazy even to me that I got out of this unscathed. I put my hand around Ethan’s arm, trying to stop the bleeding. “I need to get you to a hospital. You need stitches.”

“It’s nothing Julia can’t patch up,” he tells me and looks out at the forest around us. There were three bird-demons, weren’t there? I burned two into nothing but ash, but the third? Did it run away? If it did, will it come back now that it knows we’re injured?

Not wanting to find out, I pick up the dagger and hook my arm around Ethan.

“You...” he starts. “You’re pyrokinetic.”

“I don’t know what that is,” I say, though the very word jolts something inside of me again, and I’m suddenly back in that room. The smell of sage and lavender surrounds me, and I’m sitting on the cobblestone floor, petting a white fox.

“We both know fire magic can be unpredictable,” the pretty woman with black hair tells Aunt Estelle. “It would be in her best interest to attend the Academy. We can teach her how to control her powers. She’ll excel here, which is another thing we both know.”

“The cards don’t lie,” Aunt Estelle presses.

“The cards are just—” A sharp knock on the door causes the woman to stop. She moves around her desk, robes swirling around her feet, and opens her office doors. Two girls, who look to be about my age are ushered in by another adult, who for some reason, I know to be a professor.

“Callie and Kristy,” the dark-haired woman sighs. “I’m not surprised. What is it now?”

I gasp, pulling myself back into the here and now. Blinking several times, I feel sparks flickering around my fingertips,

and I know Ethan is right, though I don't fully understand it.

I am pyrokinetic. I can create and manipulate fire.

And Aunt Estelle knew it.

Chapter Twenty-Three

“Sit,” Julia tells Ethan, pointing to a kitchen chair. We just got back to his house, and thankfully, Julia was home from running her errands. She brings a first-aid kit to the table, quickly opening it up and pulling out supplies.

I help Ethan take off his jacket, and I pull his t-shirt over his head. The three claw marks on his chest have stopped bleeding, and a sticky scab is starting to form. Julia is going to have to scrub them open to clean. I’m sure hand-hygiene isn’t at the top of the demon’s priorities.

She sets a bottle of whiskey on the table and sticks her hands in latex gloves. Ethan unscrews the lid from the alcohol and takes a swig. Sighing, he sets the bottle back on the table, looking more annoyed than anything, like taking the time to get patched up is more of an annoyance than anything else, because we both know he’d rather be back out there, hunting down the one bird-demon that got away. Fuck, he’s out of my league.

“You’re lucky,” Julia says, inspecting the wounds on Ethan’s arm. “This almost went to the muscle, which is out of my realm of care. I don’t have professional medical training and know you don’t want to lose any sort of function of your arm.”

I do know someone with more training. A *lot* more training. But asking my mom for help is the last thing we can do. She’d think I’d gone insane—again—and would most likely get the police involved. I don’t know how we’d explain

this. An animal attack? There hasn't been a sighting of anything bigger than coyotes in this area for decades.

"I'll be fine," Ethan insists again and reaches for the whiskey with his uninjured arm. Julia cleans the cuts and then takes a sewing needle and thread from the box. Blood doesn't bother me, but the sight of Julia piercing Ethan's skin over and over with that big-ass needle makes me lightheaded. I look away, concentrating on my breathing. A minute later, I'm feeling better, and the next time I look up, Julia is wrapping gauze around Ethan's arm.

"Change this bandage tonight," she tells Ethan, who brushes her off. Julia flicks her eyes to me. "Maybe you'll have better luck. Wounds like this tend to have a certain amount of drainage and easily get infected."

I nod. "I see it with animals."

"You work at a vet, right?"

"Right."

"Good, then you're not squeamish."

"Not normally," I tell her, wondering just how many injuries she's patched up over the years. "I'll make sure he's taken care of."

"Thanks. If anyone can talk sense into him, it's you."

My eyes meet Ethan's, and I smile. "I don't know about that."

"Lean back," Julia tells Ethan, going back to cleaning the wounds on his chest. Thankfully, those don't need stitches. "Are you sure you're okay, Anora?" She glances over at me as she dabs ointment on the scratches.

"Yeah. Physically, at least. I—"

"Got lucky," Ethan interrupts, eyes meeting mine for a fleeting moment, but that's all it takes for me to know he doesn't want Julia finding out about my fire powers. Hell, I still don't know much about it.

“Right.” I force a smile. “I got lucky Ethan was there to defend me.”

Nodding, she steps back and tosses a bloody piece of gauze on the table. “Good.” She opens a cabinet and sorts through pill bottles, shaking out two in her hand and setting them on the table. Ethan picks them both up, puts them in his mouth, and downs them with whiskey. “You need to—” She lets out a sigh.

“What?” Ethan asks, and she shakes her head.

“You need to wait until the whiskey is out of your system before taking a narcotic for pain.”

“Oh, oops.” Ethan shrugs.

Julia waves her hand in the air. “You’ll pass out in about twenty minutes.” Her eyes go to me. “Take him to bed?”

Ethan gives me a cheeky grin. “I don’t think having her take me to bed will be very restful.”

Julia rolls her eyes. “I’m not stitching you back up if you pop those open. Rest, and then we’ll hit the books again. Since the *bird-demons*, as you put them, almost killed you, you definitely got a closer look.”

“Closer look and a closer smell,” Ethan says, getting to his feet. “They reeked like sulfur.” That must mean something, but I’ll ask later.

“Careful,” Julia says.

“I told you, I’m fine,” Ethan counters. “I don’t think I needed stitches in the first place.”

Now I roll my eyes. I grab Ethan’s hand and tug him forward. My arms go around his neck and it’s only then I let myself feel the fear I was holding back. I could have lost him. The demon could have ripped him to shreds, leaving him to bleed to death on the forest floor.

And I can control fire.

What the fuck?

“Where’s your room?” I ask Ethan when we get to the bottom of the stairs.

“First door,” he tells me, and I go up in front of him, pausing for a second at the landing. The stairs empty into a loft area, which is totally empty, unlike the rest of the house, which is decorated to the max. It’s odd, and I get the sense I’m missing something, but it doesn’t matter.

What matters is Ethan got hurt and will probably be fast asleep soon. He needs to get in bed and out of his clothes so he can sleep comfortably.

“I’m sorry you got hurt,” I tell him as soon as we get into his room. Like the loft, it’s oddly empty. One wall is painted navy blue while the rest are light gray, and a full-sized bed is centered under a window. There’s a dresser, a TV mounted on the wall, and an Xbox on the floor underneath it, but that’s it. “The demons were after me, and it’s not fair that you—”

“This is what I do, Anora.” Ethan wraps one arm around me and pulls me onto the bed with him.

“I know, but we both thought the dagger would have some sort of effect on the demon, and when it didn’t, you got hurt.”

“It’s my fault for assuming. It must only work when you use it.”

“Or maybe...maybe it wasn’t the dagger at all. Maybe it was me the whole time.” I hold up my hand, feeling heat gathering around my fingertips. “And I’m starting to remember.”

“Remember what?”

“That I can do this.” I close my eyes and think of fire, of the blue heat that glows around my fingertips. When I open my eyes, a single flame gently flickers against the palm of my hand. My lips part and my eyes go wide.

“Does it hurt?” Ethan asks softly, leaning in.

“No. It’s hot, I can feel the warmth, but it doesn’t hurt, which is wild, I know.” I close my hand and the fire goes out. “Is being pyrokinetic normal for witches?”

“I have no fucking clue,” Ethan says, eyes looking a little bloodshot. Whatever pain pill he took must be mixing with the alcohol already. “But it’s really fucking hot, and I don’t mean that in the literal sense. You fucking destroyed those demons, Anora.”

“It was all instinct,” I admit, sucking at being able to just take a compliment.

“Whatever it was, I like it,” he says and reaches for me again.

“Are you afraid of me...of what I can do?” I ask slowly.

“No,” he says with no hesitation. “You have power inside of you, Anora. It could be dangerous, but you...you’re not. Not unless you want to be. And honestly, I find that so fucking hot.”

“You’re drugged up.”

He shrugs. “Maybe a little, but I’d still find you just as hot if I wasn’t. Everything about you...” He trails off, bringing me to his lap and burying his face against my neck. “I’ve never wanted anyone as much as I wanted you—as much as I still want you. There’s something about you, Anora, something I can’t fucking resist no matter how hard I try.”

My eyes flutter shut, and I go to bring my hand to his chest, forgetting for a second that he’s all bandaged up.

“I don’t have tattoos,” I start, looking at the bandage on his chest.

“I noticed,” Ethan replies, hand slipping from my waist to under my shirt.

“So I don’t know what happens when you get cut. Does it ruin your tattoo?”

“It depends on how deep the cut is.” He leans away and points to the bottom of the Order symbol he has tattooed on his bicep. “See how it’s faded there? It’s from getting scarred.”

I run my finger over his skin, feeling the scar. “Can you get the tattoos drawn back on over scars?”

“Depends as well. I have quite a few covering up scars. Getting injured is part of the job description.”

“Those will scar for sure, won’t they?” I move my gaze to his other arm, trying not to grimace when I remember Julia sewing his skin together. She’s going to have to pull the thread out, and the thought alone makes me want to vomit. If I could, I’d bring home medical-grade sutures from the clinic.

“Yeah,” he says with a shrug.

“I’m sorry. It’ll mess up your tattoo there too.”

“Don’t be. Chicks dig scars, right?” He looks at me, flashing that smirk and making me laugh.

“Well, this chick does.”

“That’s all that matters.” His lips go to mine and he lies back, pulling me on top of him. I shift my weight to the side where he’s not injured. He kisses me and then I pull away, moving down, sweeping my hands over his abdomen, not stopping until I get to his belt, undoing it and popping the button on his jeans. I bring my lips to him, kissing my way down to his cock as I urge his pants and boxers off. Wrapping my fingers around his thick cock, I slowly bring it to my mouth, tongue lashing out and circling the tip. Ethan’s hand lands on the top of my head, balling my hair in his fist as I put my lips around his cock, sucking as I take him in my mouth. He’s way too big for me to fully fit him in without choking, but I impress even myself by how far I get. I move my head back, swirling my tongue around the tip of his cock again, and repeat the same motion over and over, building speed.

Ethan’s grasp tightens on my hair, pulling it so it hurts a little, which turns me on. Keeping one hand on his cock, pumping it up and down in rhythm with my mouth, I slide the other under him, gently cupping his balls. He groans again, close to coming. I have every intention of finishing him off this way, since he’s drugged and injured and probably isn’t up to having sex, but he gives my hair another tug and sits up.

Wiping my mouth, I let him urge me onto him, raising my hands over my head so he can strip me of my shirt. It comes

off gracefully and lands on the floor with a whoosh. My pants, however, don't come off as easily, and I almost fall off the bed trying to be all sexy as I shimmy out of them. Ethan and I both laugh, and he cups my ass, positioning me over top of him. Precum gleams around the tip of his cock again, and I inch myself closer, hovering right above him. His hands go to my waist, ready to push into me, but I pitch forward a bit and take a hold of his dick, rubbing it against me.

I'm already all wound up, and feeling it rub against my clit almost does me in right there. A moan escapes my lips, and I slit my eyes open to catch Ethan watching me get off, which sends a rush through me, and I need to come. Now. I wiggle my hips slightly as I continue to rub him against me, orgasm building deep inside me, feeling like a tightly wound coil that needs to be released. Tingles make their way through me, and my lips part.

"I'm...I'm so close," I moan as my inner muscles tighten. One hand falls to Ethan's side as I come, and as soon as the orgasm hits me, Ethan grips my hips and pulls me down onto him. My pussy spasms around his cock, sending another wave of pleasure through me. He holds me tight against him, bucking his hips.

"Fuck...Ethan..." My entire body trembles and he doesn't let up. I let my hands fall to the mattress behind him and start riding him hard, until a second orgasm ripples through me. I'm writhing against him, body in overdrive. His fingers dig into the flesh on my thighs as he comes as well, cock pulsing inside me.

Panting, I let my forehead rest against his, holding myself on him for a moment before moving off and falling to his side.

"I think you're bleeding," I say, voice still breathy, when I see little dots of blood on the bandage on his arm.

"It was worth it," he replies sleepily and turns on his non-injured side only to wince and lie on his back again.

"It was," I reply with a grin, body still humming.

“Come under the covers with me,” Ethan says, eyes fluttering shut as he fights against the pain medication.

“I’m going to use the bathroom first,” I tell him and slip out of bed, picking up one of his flannel shirts from the ground. I slip it on and go to the door, cracking it open and looking out in the hall before I dash out and into the bathroom. I pee and clean myself up and make it back into Ethan’s room without anyone seeing us. Julia said she was off to run errands, but I have no idea if anyone else came home while we were occupied. Not that I care, really. We’re both consenting adults who enjoy good sex—and sex with Ethan is *very good*—and there’s nothing to be ashamed of there.

Ethan is passed out when I get back into the room, silently closing the door behind me. I take his shirt off and climb in bed next to him, pulling a fluffy white comforter over the both of us. It’s been another long fucking day, and exhaustion crashes down on me, pulling into a peaceful sleep, tucked into bed all snugly and warm next to Ethan...who I think I’m starting to fall for.

I rest my head on his shoulder and close my eyes, wanting nothing more than to drift to sleep only to wake up together later. But I’m me, and things don’t go as planned.

I’m almost asleep when I hear the bird-demon screech. My eyes fly open, and I sit up, heart racing. Running my hand over my face, I look at Ethan. He’s sound asleep, and a bit of blood stains the gauze on his arm.

Shaking my head, I try to push away that feeling...the one where the most obvious story has been laid out before me and I’m missing the biggest plot twist in the history of plot twists.

The ghost...the bird-demons...I know they’re connected now. But how? And why? Careful not to wake Ethan, I get out of bed and pull the picture from my pocket.

“What happened to you, Ryan?” I ask, looking down at the blonde ghost. “Why are you coming to me? Did those bird-demons go after you too?”

If they did, it didn’t end well for him.

I put the photo down and get my phone instead. I open a Google search and blank on what to even look for. I type in *Ryan, murder, Syracuse* and get nothing. Biting my lip, I look at the search results. “Maybe you weren’t murdered,” I say out loud and change my search criteria to *Ryan, suicide, Syracuse*.

An article pops up, and I sharply inhale. Years ago, a boy name Ryan was found in the woods by his father. Ryan’s wrists had been slit, and the article—dated and insensitive by today’s standards—goes on to say that Ryan was a bit of an outcast and that was suspected reason for the boy to have taken his own life.

Did he kill himself? The way he died matches with what I feel, and the sense of hopelessness could be from the weight of his depression.

But what was he running from?

I don’t think it was symbolic running, like he was running away from mental demons. Was he running away from the bird-demons? Feeling overwhelmed, I go back under the covers, finding comfort next to Ethan. The Pricolici seemed bad enough, along with the demon who sent them. Now there are creepy-ass bird-things.

In his sleep, Ethan drapes an arm over me, and my pounding heart starts to slow. Was he right to suggest I temporarily banish Ryan’s ghost so we can focus on one issue at a time? At the rate demons are coming after us, I don’t think I have much of a choice.

Chapter Twenty-Four

“Ethan?” Someone knocks softly on the door, waiting a beat before opening it a few inches. “Anora? Are you awake?”

“I am,” I say, sitting up and holding the covers over myself. I’ve been dozing off and on for the last few hours, and had finally fallen asleep right before Julia knocked on the door—of course, right? It’s dark out now, and I can’t see the person standing in the doorway. It sounded like Julia, but then again, Sam and Julia’s voices are practically identical. Though, Sam wouldn’t be asking so nicely, I’m sure of it. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah,” Julia says, and my eyes start to adjust to the hall light spilling in behind her. “David is home and wanted to talk to Ethan. How’s he doing?”

“He’s still asleep.”

“Don’t wake him. Though if you could come down and take a look at some books, it might help us identify the bird-demon things.”

“Sure.” I run my hand through my hair. “Let me, uh, find my clothes.”

“Your shirt was a little bloody,” Julia reminds me. “Your clothes from the other day are here. I washed them. I’ll bring them up for you.”

“Oh, right. I forgot about that. Thanks.”

The door clicks shut, and I lie back down, resting a hand on Ethan's chest. My heart swells, and I feel so fucking much for him. *Keep a level head, Anora*, I tell myself, though I know it's a moot point. A few seconds later, Julia returns, and sets my clothes on the dresser. I get up, fumbling in the dark. My phone is...somewhere, and with the curtains drawn, the room is pitch black.

Though it doesn't have to be. I hold my hand out in front of me, imagining the fire surrounding my palm. Nothing happens. I close my eyes this time, remember the way the heat of the flames felt against my fingers. Again, nothing.

"Dammit," I grumble and let out a sigh. I bump into the dresser and feel around for my phone. I grab Ethan's instead, but turn the flashlight on and get dressed.

"Anora?" Ethan breathes, slowly sitting up. "Are you leaving?"

"Your dad's home and, uh, I think he has some books about the bird-demons."

"Oh, okay." He starts to sit up.

"You should rest," I tell him, and he shoots me a look.

"I'm fine."

My brows go up. "I watched Julia sew your skin together. With green thread."

"She used green this time? It's better than pink, I guess." He's trying to make a joke, but I just stare at him incredulously. Yawning, he slowly uncovers himself, and I can't help but admire his naked body. Goddamn, he's a good-looking man.

"Rest, Ethan," I tell him.

"I'm hungry," he persists and gets out of bed, turning on the lamp on the nightstand. We both get dressed, I find my phone, and we go downstairs. David is in the living room, and my dagger is unsheathed on the coffee table in front of him.

"Ethan," he says when we come downstairs, and goes over, looking at his son with concern. He pushes up the sleeve of

Ethan's t-shirt, looking at the bandages and annoying Ethan, who pushes his dad away.

"I'm fine," Ethan huffs, rolling his eyes. "And starving."

"I already ordered takeout," David says and motions to the couch. "Sit." He eyes me almost suspiciously, and for some reason, it reminds me that Ethan didn't want Julia to know I was able to summon fire and hold it in my hand—which sounds so fucking wild, I know.

"Julia briefed me on what little she knew," David starts and motions to the dagger. "You stabbed the demon with this and nothing happened?"

"Right," Ethan says, putting his arm around me when we sit on the couch. "I stabbed the fucker right in the chest and nothing."

David picks up the dagger, eyes narrowing as he looks at the blade. "It was forged in magic, yet we were wrong about it the whole time. How disappointing. The dagger isn't magic but appears to be a medium for magic."

"Well, that fucking sucks," Sam huffs, coming into the room.

"Yeah, it does," I say slowly, and she looks at me with surprise. "If anyone could use the dagger to cause demons to go up in smoke, it would be very handy."

"And you had no idea it didn't work for anyone else?" Sam asks me, raising her eyebrows. "You just let Ethan take it and think he'd incinerate a demon only to have nothing happen?"

I shrug. "I was too busy casting love spells to mention it."

Ethan cocks an eyebrow and looks from me to Sam and back again. "I was the one who told her the dagger was enchanted. Wishful thinking on my part."

Sam purses her lips and looks away. David looks at Ethan in question, and Ethan shakes his head.

"Did you find anything about the bird-demons?" I ask David.

“We still don’t have much to go on. Do you think you could draw what you saw?”

“Oh,” I wince and look at Ethan. “I’m a terrible artist.”

“Me too,” he says. “I’ll try.”

“Right,” I say eagerly with a nod. “I’ll try too.” I let out a breath. “One got away. It’ll come back, right? If it does, maybe I could get a picture. Or try to kill it without it burning to ashes.”

“Wait.” Sam’s eyes narrow. “You said the dagger didn’t make the thing go up in flames. So how did you make one burn to ash?”

“After I stabbed it, Anora grabbed the hilt and was able to use magic to burn it,” Ethan says, which isn’t an exact lie. He tips his head my way and smiles. “Lucky for me. If Anora wasn’t there, who the fuck knows what would have happened?”

“If Anora wasn’t there, demons wouldn’t have attacked.”

“We don’t know if the bird-demons are after Anora the same way the Pricolici are, and if so, it’s not her fault,” Ethan shoots back, arm tightening around me.

“Nothing good comes from getting involved with witches,” Sam mutters under her breath, earning a glare from David.

“When is the food coming?” Ethan asks.

“Soon,” Julia calls from the kitchen. “I got an alert that it’s on the way like five minutes ago.”

“What did you order?”

“Pizza,” she replies and comes into the living room, a pleasant smile on her face, which only further annoys Sam. “What do you guys want to drink?”

“I’ll take a beer,” Sam tells her. “Please.”

“Make that two.” David is still holding the dagger, turning it so light reflects off the blade.

“Three,” Ethan says, and Julia shakes her head.

“You took a morphine pill only a few hours ago. No booze for you. Anora, do you want anything? I have red wine.”

“No, thanks. Water’s good. Alcohol makes it hard to keep my mental shields up, and then I’m seeing ghosts all over town.”

“Mental shields?” David questions.

“It’s what I’ve always called them,” I say, wrinkling my nose. “If I try hard enough, I can silence the voices. If not, it’s all I hear, and sometimes it’s really hard trying to distinguish between what’s real and what’s a ghost. I’ve had conversations with people in public only to realize they’re dead and I’m the only one who can see them.”

“That sounds...kind of awful,” Sam says, surprising me with the empathy in her eyes.

“It’s not fun,” I say. “But others have it worse.” I cast my eyes down, feeling a little awkward. I’ve never wanted sympathy, just understanding. Thankfully, before anyone else can get further into it, the doorbell rings.

“Pizza’s here.” Julia smiles and hurries to the door. “Wash your hands, and go to the table,” she calls over her shoulder.

Ethan gets to his feet much faster than I expected, given his wounds. “How did your friend and brother take the news? I forgot to ask.”

We slowly head into the kitchen. “Okay, I think. Laney was more shocked to find out I have a boyfriend I hadn’t told her about,” I say and then realize what I said. Color rushes to my cheeks. “Not that we discussed that or anything, and I didn’t mean because you and me, and I don’t expect—fuck.”

“Boyfriend?” Ethan turns, flashing a smirk. “I like the sound of that, and that means I’m the only one who gets to fuck you,” he says, not caring who can hear. “That is what you want, isn’t it?”

Heat rushes through me, and I nod. “It is. I don’t want anyone else, and I don’t want you to want anyone, either.”

“Trust me. I don’t.”



“DO YOU WANT TO GO BACK TO YOUR PLACE TONIGHT?” Ethan laces his fingers through mine and carefully wraps his arm around me, trying his hardest not to wince. His arm is hurting, I know, and it’s killing me that he hasn’t gone to the hospital. He needs real medical attention, though I am grateful Julia is making sure he takes a full week of antibiotics to keep his wounds from becoming infected.

My mind goes right to my mother, the surgeon, who’d be able to take one look at this wound and know exactly how to care for it. She’d give Ethan a lidocaine injection before stitching him up so he wouldn’t have to chug whiskey to dull the pain, and would minimize the amount of scarring on his beautiful, muscular arm.

“Yeah,” I say, putting the crust of my pizza on to the plate. Ethan and I are cuddled up together on the back porch, trying to keep warm under a fuzzy blanket. “I need to let Hunter out and take care of Romeo. But I can do that and come back here, if you want.”

“I prefer your place,” Ethan says and rewraps his arm around my shoulders. “It’s...it’s busy here.”

“You said you lived alone in Chicago before this, right?”

“Right.”

“And the Order didn’t approve of that?”

“Hell fucking no,” he scoffs. “They said I was wasting my talents.”

It’s dark on the back porch, and the sounds of crickets echo around us. “The more I hear about the Order, the more I don’t like them.”

“You and me both. But don’t worry about them. It is what it fucking is, and I’ve made the best of it.” He turns, going to bring his other hand to me and winces.

“Does it hurt?” I ask, brow furrowing because I know it *has* to hurt like fucking hell.

“I’m fine,” Ethan replies so smoothly I almost believe him.

“There was a spell,” I start, sucking in a breath and biting my bottom lip. “In the Book of Shadows. I just glanced over it, but basically, if I put a quartz crystal over the wound, I might be able to speed up the healing process.”

Conflicting emotions cross Ethan’s face for a brief moment. “It can’t hurt, right?”

“I mean, I don’t think so. I’ve never tried anything like it.”

“I’ll be your guinea pig.”

I purse my lips. “I’m a witch, not a mad scientist.”

“Is there a difference?” This time, his hand lands on my waist.

“Oh, yes. Do I need to put on a black dress and pointy hat to prove so?”

“Just put on the pointy hat.” I laugh and Ethan goes in for a kiss, taking my breath away all over again. “Let’s get going,” he says.

“Right,” I say, wanting nothing more than to be alone with him again so I can sink onto that big, beautiful dick. “We should, um, get a head start on our rest for the night.”

“Yes, how responsible of you. We should shower and go right to bed. Together.”

“It’s safer that way.” I nod, and Ethan kisses me. Right as I start to lose myself in him, a car door slams and loud music thumps from the neighbor’s house.

“They have no idea,” I whisper, lips brushing against Ethan’s as I talk. “They have no idea who you are, and you live right next door.”

“It’s weird, really,” he confesses. “So many people don’t know the truth about the world around them. Sometimes I feel privileged to know the things I do.”

“I can see that,” I say back. “Though at the same time, ignorance is bliss, right?”

“It is until it gets you killed.”

“I can’t argue against that.”

Ethan gets up, holding out a hand for me to take. I grab my plate on our way in, and use the bathroom while Ethan gathers overnight items, including both clothes for the morning and enough weapons to infiltrate Fort Knox. Since I drove to Ethan’s this afternoon, we take my car back. Julia made sure Ethan took one more antibiotic before we left and gave me a little pill bottle with his morning meds. The way she’s on top of things and totally unfazed by everything really drives in what Ethan tells me earlier: getting injured is part of the job.

I pull out of Ethan’s neighborhood when my phone rings. Mom’s name and number comes up on the screen, and Ethan looks at me.

“You should answer it,” he says, sensing my apprehension.

I hit the green button and slow at a stop sign. “Hello?”

“Oh, hey, honey! I didn’t wake you, did I?”

“It’s not even ten PM yet, so no. Is everything okay?” I rush out.

“It is,” Mom says quickly. “I’m just now leaving the hospital. Your dad has university friends over for poker night so I thought I’d see if you wanted to hang out, just us girls.”

I hesitate, flicking my eyes to Ethan. Normally, I’d jump all over this. If I wasn’t working and wasn’t with Laney, then I wouldn’t have plans. It’s been that way for years, and I know when Mom calls me like this, she’s trying.

Trying to get over the pain of the past. Trying to apologize without actually saying sorry.

“Or not,” Mom says quickly when I don’t respond, and it kills me a bit on the inside. “Not if you’re busy.”

“She knows about your aunt, right?” Ethan whispers, and I nod. “Invite her over.”

“I’m not busy,” I rush out. “I’m just on my way home.”

“From the barn? Isn’t it late to be there when coyotes have attacked nearby farms?”

My eyes widen. “How do you know about that?”

“It’s in the paper,” Mom tells me. “The Fish and Wildlife Service is looking into it now.”

I glance at Ethan, both of us knowing if anyone goes looking for the Pricolici, they’re not going to like what they find.

“I have a boyfriend,” I blurt. “And he’s coming over. Want to meet him?”

I can imagine Mom gaping. “Of course. Are you hungry? I can pick up take-away.”

“We just had pizza,” I tell her. “But if you happen to pass by a store and somehow end up buying a cheesecake, I wouldn’t object.”

“Is everything all right?” Mom asks.

“Fine, Mom. I’ll see you soon?”

“Yes, I’ll be over in half an hour. Love you.”

“Love you, too,” I say and end the call. I let out a sigh before looking at Ethan. “I’ve asked her about Aunt Estelle before, and she doesn’t really know much about her.”

“Or maybe she does but doesn’t know it.”

“You think Aunt Estelle spelled her too?”

“I do. You said your brother was with you when your aunt babysat, right?”

“Right. But he has his memories.”

“But he doesn’t remember anything about you doing magic. I suppose your aunt could have made sure you were alone before teaching you magic. Altering that many memories would involve a lot of complicated spell work, though.” Ethan shrugs and winces from the movement of his left arm. “If your aunt bound fire magic within you, she was

one bad bitch packing a lot of power so altering your entire family's memories might not have been a big deal for her."

I feel all skeezy inside again when I think of my memories being tainted. "You're right. She *had* to have altered Harrison's memories too. We were there, together, while my mom finished her residency and my dad started teaching at a university. I'm sure he would have seen something, or I would have told him about it even if Aunt Estelle took me into a secret room every time we practiced magic.

"And you don't remember him having powers at all?"

"No. I think I have this memory, or maybe a dream which was really a memory of him saying it's not fair he can't do magic. The more I think about it, the more I remember, but I also feel like I'm forcing memories that aren't real into my head...if that even makes sense." I turn my gaze from the road before me to Ethan for half a second. "Har was right about it not being fair, though. We're twins, and I'm the only one who got the magic gene?"

"I suppose not," Ethan says, and a few minutes of silence tick by.

"You don't mind meeting my mom?"

"Why would I?" Ethan flashes that sexy smirk again. "I am your boyfriend, after all."

"She can be...a little overbearing, just to warn you," I say.

"She's a doctor who thinks vampires are suffering from a yet-to-be-cured disease. See? I pay attention."

"Good." I smile. "Things are weird between us, which is why she randomly comes over like this. She's never going to come out and say she's sorry, because in her mind, that would mean admitting she was wrong about me saying I failed every single seventh-grade history test because the classroom was haunted, not because I didn't study. She wants to be close, I can tell, but things are...are strained."

"I can only imagine. You're, well, you and your mom doesn't want to believe in it. It's her loss, really. She's missing out on how fucking incredible you are."

Again, I'm blushing. "At least you know."

"Yeah." His hand lands on my thigh. "I do."



"HE'S YOUR BOYFRIEND?" MOM'S EYES WIDEN AS SHE LOOKS at Ethan, who went to the backdoor to let Hunter in.

"He is, and he can hear you," I whisper, thankful Ethan is doing a good job of pretending he's totally unaware of this exchange. With this house being so small, it's hard to have private conversations without going into my bedroom and closing the door. "Why do you sound so surprised?"

Mom takes her Crocs off and looks at Ethan once more. "He's not your usual type. You go for safe guys. And he...he is not safe." Her eyes meet mine, and the approving look she's giving me catches me off guard. "He's very attractive and reminds me of a tattooed biker I dated right before I met your father. Good job, hun."

"Mom!"

"Introduce me, Anora." Mom winks and hands me the raspberry-topped cheesecake she actually did pick up. She really is trying, and I wonder if she thinks I blew off coming over for dinner to purposely avoid her, which is something I've done before. Not because I want to be an ass, but because it's easier on everyone sometimes to just avoid a situation before it turns toxic.

"Mom, this is Ethan. Ethan, this is my mom."

Hunter, who was waiting as patiently as he could to greet Mom, barrels forward, tail wagging so hard his whole body wiggles.

"It's nice to meet you, Mrs. Benson," Ethan says, and Mom beams.

"Please, call me Lauren. Or Doctor," Mom jokes. "I worked hard to earn that title."

“Hey, if I were a doctor, I’d make everyone call me that,” Ethan replies without missing a beat. “I’d probably wear a stethoscope around my neck at all times too.”

Mom laughs. “I might have worn my lab coat *on accident* when I’d run errands right after I finished my residency.”

“I can’t blame you.”

I hold up the cheesecake. “I’m dish this up. We finished my only bottle of wine, but I might have vodka in my freezer, if you want me to make you a drink,” I offer.

“Sure,” Mom says, surprising me.

“I have some sparkling water. Is that what you mix with vodka?”

“In my day, we mixed it with energy drinks,” Mom says, and Ethan laughs.

“I like your mom.”

I just shake my head and go into the kitchen, dig out the vodka that I’m pretty sure is over a year old. It doesn’t go bad, does it? I make Mom a cocktail—if you can call vodka and sparkling water a cocktail—and pour Ethan and I just plain sparkling water. He shouldn’t drink anymore tonight if he wants to take another pain pill.

Though, knowing Ethan, he won’t want to take anything that will make him not be able to spring up and defend me at a moment’s notice.

“I think I can defend myself,” I whisper to Hunter, holding up my hand. Red-hot energy buzzes around my fingers, and I clench my palm to keep fire from springing from my fingertips, though that’s one way to show Mom, right? I look at Hunter again and I swear he nods as if he can read my mind.

Mom denies that ghosts are real, says vampirism is a severe allergic reaction to the sun...but how can she tell me the fire I’m holding in my hand is anything but that—literal fire?

“Another time, I know,” I mouth to Hunter. I plop a few ice cubes in each glass of sparkling water and take them into

the living room, and then go back into the kitchen to serve the cheesecake.

“I won’t stay long,” Mom says, taking a tiny sip of her drink. Mom’s a wine drinker, and I actually can only recall one or two times where I saw her drink hard alcohol. “I know you two want to be alone.”

“I’m not sure how you want me to respond to that,” I say, making a face as I sink onto the couch next to Ethan and stick my fork into the cheesecake. It’s delicious.

“I was young once.”

“Gross.” I wrinkle my nose, and Mom laughs.

“How did you two meet?”

“Uh,” I start, looking at Ethan before I smile and go with the truth. “I went to a bar with Laney, ran into some asshole I went to high school with who really is still an asshole, and left to get some air. Ethan was just there. Like a creep,” I add.

Ethan nods. “I was just standing there waiting for some hot chick to walk alone down a dark alley.”

“See?” I nudge him with my elbow. “Creep.”

Mom laughs. “How’d you really meet?”

“That’s how,” I say. “We just ran into each other without him being a creep though. We got to talking and...” —and Ethan ghosted me, followed a deadly demon into the woods, and pulled me out of freezing cold water— “...and we just hit it off.”

Mom smiles, looking from me to Ethan again, and I know where her thoughts are going, and for some reason she thinks if I meet a nice guy, get married and settle down, I’ll become normal, forgetting about ghosts because I’ll be too busy with a family.

Ethan would do the opposite of that.

“What’s our family history?” I blurt, feeling so obvious right now, though only Ethan knows why I’m asking. “On your side, Mom, I mean. After Aunt Estelle passed, I realized I

don't know much about the Fowlers. Nana and Papa retired to Florida when we were still kids, and I don't remember going to family reunions or anything before then."

"There's not much family on my side," Mom adds. "Not since your uncle and his family moved to Seattle."

"You have a cousin?" Ethan asks, and I nod.

"Max. He's seven now, I think? Or was it his seven-year adoption anniversary?" I wince. "I should know this."

"You should. And yes, he's seven and the adoption anniversary is next month. Make sure you send him something."

"Remind me what he likes and I will." I look at Ethan, knowing he's wondering if anyone else related to me on my mom's side has shown any signs of magic. "My uncle and his husband are both pathologists. Being doctors runs in the Fowler family, apparently," I say, and hope Mom doesn't bring up how I could try again to get into vet school. We both know I didn't get the grades for it, and any mention of my bad grades that were caused by distracting supernatural forces is a sore subject. "Wasn't Papa a medic in the army?"

"He was," Mom goes on. "And it's interesting you said Fowler family. We weren't always the Fowlers."

"What?"

"Your great-grandmother, Nana and Aunt Estelle's mom, was JoAnna Lancaster. She moved from New England to the Midwest as a single mother and changed their last name to Fowler."

"Why?"

"I'm not sure. Nana suspects it was because being a single mother in that time was looked down on. Great-grandma JoAnna never married Nana's father, and he was never around. Having not one, but two babies out of wedlock must not have settled well with her family, and coming here, she took up the ruse of being a widow. Well, that's what Nana remembers."

"That's interesting. I had no idea."

“You never took an interest when Uncle Noah and I put together family scrapbooks.”

I make a face. “That’s not my thing, though next time I’m over I’m definitely taking a look at that scrapbook.”

“Come over for a family dinner on Thursday?” Mom asks. “Ethan, you are more than welcome. I know Anora’s father would like to meet you.”

“I’d like to meet your dad,” Ethan says, smiling at me, which makes Mom beam. She stays for a while longer, and Ethan and I walk her to her car, making sure she gets in all right and demons don’t attack.

“Lancaster,” Ethan starts when we’re back in my house. “I’ve heard that name before. Maybe it’s more common than we think, but knowing who you are and what you can do, it can’t be a coincidence.”

“What do you mean?” I lock the door and join Ethan on the couch.

He tucks my hair behind my ear. “There’s a line of witches and warlocks hailing from the New England area. They’re an old-school, pure-blood kind of family.” His eyes meet mine, searching for something not even I can find. “And their name is Lancaster.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

“A nora?” Ethan sits up, covers falling from his chest. “What are you doing on the floor?”

“Making a family tree,” I say, looking up. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“You weren’t here. I got worried.” He blinks several times.

“Go back to sleep,” I press, knowing he’s tired. It took a bit of convincing for him to take that second pain pill because he didn’t want to be groggy, just like I suspected. But the more sleep he gets, the faster he’ll heal and there’s a good chance we’ll be fighting off demons in the near future. With Hunter at the foot of the bed keeping guard, Ethan grumbled but obliged, taking the medication so he could get a full night of rest.

“It’s four AM. Why are you making a family tree?”

I grab my phone and my notebook and sit on the edge of the bed. “Because it makes sense.” I show him the list of interconnected names. “JoAnna Lancaster was my great-grandmother. Her family was basically the Malfoys and didn’t approve of her dating someone not of pure blood—or who wasn’t even a warlock. If her baby daddy wasn’t magical, it would make sense that one of her kids wasn’t magical either, right? My nana didn’t have magic. My mom certainly doesn’t, and I don’t think my uncle Noah does either. He adopted his son, so if the magic skipped a generation like it did with me, we’d never know.”

“That does make sense.”

“I suppose it doesn’t matter.” I close the notebook. “If the Lancasters were so fancy they excommunicated my great-grandma, they sound like a bunch of assholes and I don’t want anything to do with them. But it explains why I have magic... though it still doesn’t explain why Aunt Estelle bound my powers.”

I let out a sigh. “I just need to stop probing, right? It raises more questions.”

“It’s a lot to take in,” Ethan opens the covers for me to slip back under. “I’d want to know all I could too.”

“How are you feeling?” I ask, pushing his hair back.

“How lame is it for me to say better now that you’re next to me?”

“Super lame,” I reply, unable to keep from smiling. “But I like it.”

“Good, though it would be better if you were naked.”

“I got cold sitting on the floor.” I turn off the flashlight on my phone and lie down. “But I’m not on the floor anymore.” I put on my favorite llama PJ pants and Ethan’s t-shirt. “It’s more comfortable to sleep naked. I hate when my pajama pants twist around my legs.

“That is annoying,” he says slowly, and his eyes fall shut and he slips his hand under the shirt, resting his fingers on my hip. He’s asleep again in just minutes, and I stay awake a while longer, unable to shut off my brain. If JoAnna Lancaster fled to the Midwest to escape an overbearing and disapproving family, she still taught Aunt Estelle how to do magic. I think about it until my head hurts, and don’t fall asleep again until the sun starts to rise.

When I get up, Ethan is in the kitchen making breakfast. He’s wearing those dark gray sweatpants again, and I pause in the hall, admiring his muscular backside. And then Hunter runs over and gives me away.

“Morning, sunshine,” Ethan says, looking over his shoulder. The smell of coffee and bacon fill the air. “I raided your fridge. I hope that’s okay.”

“It’s more than okay, and I’m really glad I went grocery shopping yesterday.” I come into the kitchen, stopping behind him and resting my hands on his sides. “And seriously, Ethan, you’re going to spoil me and make me expect this. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

He turns down the burner and sets the metal tongs on the counter next to the oven. “If making you breakfast means I get to wake up next to you, then I’ll gladly cook every damn morning.” He turns and takes me in his arms, lips going to my neck. My eyes flutter shut, and I arch my neck, moaning softly as I bring my arms up, fingers catching on the bandage on his arm.

“Shit, sorry,” I say and open my eyes. “I should change that, and did you take your morning antibiotic yet?”

“Not yet. I’ll wait until breakfast is done.” He looks at the gauze around his arm. “You’re not bothered by blood?”

I cock an eyebrow. “I feel like we just had this *don’t stereotype me* talk,” I joke. “And I better not be bothered by blood since I assist with surgeries at work.”

“Right.” He starts to ball up his t-shirt, which I’m still wearing, and kisses me again. The bacon on the stovetop pops, and we break apart so I can get my first aid supplies and he can flip the bacon. I put everything on the table and motion for him to sit.

“Does it hurt?” I ask as I carefully unwrap the gauze.

“It doesn’t feel good,” he replies. “But it’s not too bad.”

“Sure,” I say, not believing him. “I hate when I get a paper cut, and here you are acting like three deep cuts from demon claws are no big deal.”

“Paper cuts are fucking painful,” he says, and we both laugh. “And you use your fingers for everything.”

“Yeah, you do.” I wiggle my eyebrows, and he brings his non-injured arm around me. I get the gauze off and grimace when I see his skin. “This looks bad, Ethan. Really bad. I think you should go get real stitches.”

Ethan looks down at his arm. “It’s not pretty. Jules usually does better than that.”

“I think she did pretty well, considering.” I toss the bloody gauze in the trash and twist the cap off a bottle of peroxide. “This screams infection. Can I please take you to the ER for real medical treatment?”

“We don’t have time for that.”

“Right now, we do,” I go on and try to appeal to his logical side. “And say this does get infected and you become septic. You can’t protect me when you’re dying of a blood infection.” I wet another piece of gauze with the peroxide and dab it against the wound, which bubbles immediately. “I’m worried, okay?” I look into his eyes. “What if it were me?”

Ethan’s jaw tenses and then he sighs. “I would have driven you to the hospital right away.”

“Exactly. Can I take you?”

“After breakfast?”

I smile. “Yeah. We can’t waste that bacon.”



“INVITE THEM OVER,” ETHAN SAYS, GLANCING DOWN AT MY phone. Harrison started a group text along with Laney, asking if I’m still alive since I dropped a bomb on them yesterday, telling them demons want me dead, and haven’t said a word since. “It’s hard to maintain friendships once you’re involved with monsters,” he adds gently. “But Laney has been your friend for years and your brother is family. Being open and honest is probably the best way to go, and I kinda can’t believe I’m suggesting that.”

After spending several hours waiting in the ER for Ethan to get properly patched up, we went to his dad’s place to look through more books. I tried drawing the bird-demon for Julia, but it ended up looking like something a child drew when trying to illustrate their nightmare. It’s late in the evening now, and we’re back at my house, going through my Book of

Shadows for any sort of clue to why Aunt Estelle would bind my powers, but so far, I haven't found any other spells specific to me other than the binding spell.

“Let's go ahead and assume we kill the high-level demon who sent the Pricolici after me. Do you think other demons will attack?”

“I suppose it really comes down to why this demon wants to kill you in the first place.”

I tap the screen of my phone to keep it from locking, then look up at Ethan. “If the demon sending bounty hunters after me is so powerful, why doesn't it just attack me itself?”

“I wondered that too,” Ethan admits. “And I'm guessing it has something to do with your fire power. Being able to—” He throws a hand out, holding it up like his fingers are on fire. “—burn something to the ground easily makes you dangerous.”

“I'd be a lot more dangerous if I knew how to control the firepowers.”

“You'll get a hang of it. I don't know how to teach you how to use your powers, but if we think of it like any other skill, just keep trying.”

“And hope I don't burn the house down.”

“Do you own a fire extinguisher?” he asks, completely serious.

“I have two. One in the kitchen and one in my room, in between my nightstand and the bed. We went on a family vacation years ago and the cabin we stayed in had caught on fire like seventy-five years prior and killed a few people. I had the pleasure of being haunted by the ghosts of the residents who burned to death. Needless to say, it's made me a little scared of my house catching on fire in the middle of the night.”

“It doesn't hurt to be prepared,” Ethan says and nudges me with his elbow. “And text your friends back.”

“I don't know what to say.”

“Start with letting them know you're not dead.”

“That is a good starting place.” I inhale and rest my head against Ethan’s shoulder. “I feel weird. I don’t really like being the center of attention, and things sound so pretentious.”

“Then don’t make it pretentious,” Ethan says like it’s simple to just say something without overthinking. I look back at the text conversation.

Harrison: Are you alive, Annie?

Laney: ???

Harrison: Seriously, sis, the fuck?

Laney: You’re starting to make me worry. Let us know you’re okay.

I’m making a bigger deal out of this than it actually is, but this is awkward. Hunter jumps up on the couch, crowding in next to me. I run my hand over his sleek fur and am instantly comforted.

“Good boy,” I tell him, and his tail thumps against the couch. I lean down, letting him lick my face.

Me: I’m dead. This is my ghost you’re talking to.

Laney: Not funny, Anora. If anyone’s ghost haunted a phone, it would be yours.

Harrison: Tell me something only Anora would know.

Me: My ghost would still know everything I know.

Harrison: Damn, you’re right. You’re okay?

Me: Yes. I’m home and Ethan is here. Do you guys want to come over so we can talk about anything?

Laney: Yes, please. I need to see your face to make sure you’re actually okay. And I want to meet this mysterious boyfriend of yours.

Harrison: Give me a few minutes to come up with an excuse to get my booty call to leave and I’ll be over.

Me: Gross.

He sends a GIF that says *payback*, and I know he’s referring to me mentioning Ethan being naked in my bed.

Laney: I'm at Josh's, so I'm only fifteen minutes away. See you soon.

"They're coming over," I tell Ethan. "I should order food. What do you feel like?"

"Whatever you want is fine. I still don't know what delivers here."

"Chinese is always a good option. Lo mein is good comfort food," I say and pull up a delivery service app. "I don't normally order food this often, and I haven't been running like usual. If I keep it up, I'm going to gain a hundred pounds."

"Staying in good shape comes in handy when you're running away from demons."

"You are in very good shape," I say, needing to look him over to prove my point.

"It's quite literally part of my job. Along with finding a place for us to live, the Order makes sure we have access to a gym, not that I mind." He shrugs. "Though we do eat takeout a lot when we're on the road for work."

"Yeah, but you're one of those guys who gives up soda and loses ten pounds."

"Soda?" he questions with a laugh. "No one calls it 'soda'. It's pop."

"Pop? No." I shake my head. "We're not in the Midwest. Us New Yorkers call it soda."

"That sounds so weird."

"I like my soda, even though I don't drink it very often. I had a Sprite addiction a few years ago that led to several cavities so I had to give it up. Wait, you lived in Chicago before coming here, but you also traveled all over. But saying pop instead of soda is a Midwest thing, isn't it?"

"I was born in Chicago and it'll always be home, in a sense. My dad was able to work local cases until I was about six or seven and then I started going on hunts with him."

“And your mom?”

“Didn’t want anything to do with me. She actually wanted to terminate the pregnancy until my dad said he’d take the baby once she had it. So, she had me, signed her rights away, and left the hospital less than twenty-four hours after giving birth.”

“Fuck, I’m so sorry.”

“Why?” Ethan shrugs again. “Things worked out. I know how my dad can come across, but I think more than anything he just wanted a family. It’s not something most hunters are lucky to have.”

“It’s not a very family-oriented lifestyle,” I say and of course have to get way ahead of myself and wonder what would happen if Ethan and I had a kid. I wouldn’t want my children to grow up the same way Ethan did, and from what little I know about the Order, I wouldn’t want my children to touch that organization with a ten-foot pole.

Though it’s not like I could expect Ethan to hang up his demon-hunter hat given all that he knows and has been through. And even more so, I don’t know why I’m getting all anxious thinking about this.

“What do you want?” I hold up the phone so Ethan can look through the menu. We order enough to have leftovers tomorrow, and then take Hunter for a walk. I bring my dagger and Ethan is armed to the teeth, but for some reason, I just have a feeling Hunter will tear anything that attacks us to shreds—again. I’d rather not put my pup at risk, of course, and I know Hunter’s loyalty and protectiveness could be the literal death of him.

The familiar *being watched* feeling starts to creep over me when we go down the alley behind my house, and I whirl around, narrowing my eyes as I look into the dark.

“Is the ghost back?” Ethan asks, taking my hand in his.

“Not that I can see, but something feels...just odd,” I say with a shake of my head. “I can’t place it, though getting this creeped-out feeling happens a lot.”

“Burn some sage when we get back inside, just to be safe.”

“Okay,” I say, and guilt starts to rise in me along with feeling creeped out. I haven’t seen Ryan’s ghost in a full day now, and it shouldn’t worry me, right? I mean, he’s dead. What’s going to happen? But his unspoken warning, the pleading in his eyes...I have to help him.

After I kill the demons before they kill me, that is.

“I don’t have any sage,” I tell Ethan when we get inside. I unclip Hunter’s leash, hanging it on a hook by the back door.

“I brought some.”

“There’s a new-age store downtown. Should I go tomorrow?”

“Yeah, that would be a good idea. You need stuff to cast protection spells, too, don’t you?”

I nod, and Hunter races forward, prancing excitedly at the front door a moment before the doorbell rings. It’s Laney, and I look around the front yard nervously as she comes in.

“I brought wine,” she says, holding up a bottle of red wine. “I figured we might need it if we start talking about...about demons,” she says quietly.

“You don’t have to whisper,” I tell her and lead the way into the kitchen to get wine glasses. Ethan is still in there, looking out at the backyard. “No one here is normal. Well, besides you.”

“Hey, I’m friends with you,” she teases.

“True. Just remember it’s your choice.” We both laugh and Ethan turns away from the door. “Laney, this is Ethan. Ethan, this is my best friend in the whole wide world, Laney.”

“Nice to meet you,” Ethan says. “Anora has spoken highly of you.”

“She better,” Laney jokes.

“Our food should be here soon.” I open the dishwasher only to realize I loaded it but didn’t turn it on, and now the dishes inside stink. Dammit. “And Harrison will probably be

here some time after, but we're eating without him." I quickly get the dishwasher started and pull four mismatching wine glasses from the cabinet.

"You probably shouldn't drink," I say, looking at Ethan before I pour wine in a third glass. "Oh, and don't forget to take your antibiotic after dinner."

"I'd pass on the wine tonight, anyway," he replies. "Though if you had beer or whiskey..."

"I'll get some next time I go to the store," I laugh. "I wish I liked beer. It looks good but tastes so gross."

"It's an acquired taste," Laney notes. "You'll like it if it you give it more of a try."

"Nope," I say and take a small sip of wine. As much as I'd like to welcome the carefree feeling that comes from a good buzz, I can't let my guard down. Not now. "Anything that's so gross I basically have to get used to it is a big no for me."

"Well, when you put it that way," Laney laughs and sits across from me at the table.

"I'm going to get the sage," Ethan tells me, kissing my forehead on his way past. "It's in my Jeep."

"Okay," I reply and put my wine glass on the table, not wanting to drink anymore.

"Is Ethan sick?" Laney asks. Right, I mentioned him taking medication.

"No, he had to get stitches after we were attacked by demons," I say, just putting it out there like Ethan suggested.

"Holy shit. When?"

"Yesterday."

Laney looks at me, blinking, not sure what to say next. Truth be told, I'm not either. I don't want to keep secrets, but a *need-to-know* basis should apply here. There's no need to scare her with the nitty-gritty details.

Something falls to the ground in my room, and I stand, letting out a sigh. "What did you do now, Romeo?"

Hunter barrels through the kitchen as I go to leave, almost knocking me over. He paws at the door, whining like he desperately needs out.

“Hang on,” I tell him, but he paws at the door again, nails scraping against it. “Fine, you win,” I say, not remembering if he actually went potty on the walk. He bolts outside as soon as he can fit through the open door and runs to the very back of the yard. It’s chilly again tonight, and the wind blows, rattling the trees that line one side of my yard.

The creeped-out feeling comes back tenfold, and I desperately want to get inside—but not without my dog.

“Hunter!” I call, looking out in the dark. Usually, he’s very obedient and comes running as soon as I call him. “Hunter!” I call again, patting my leg. I didn’t turn the back lights on yet, and I think I can make out his dark outline near the garage. “Hunter!”

I narrow my eyes, trying to see if the gate is closed. We came in that way...fuck! I don’t remember closing it. My heart speeds up, and I hurry down the patio steps. Dew soaks the bottom of my pants as I walk barefoot through the yard. I call Hunter again, finding him sitting by the open gate on the other side of the garage. “What are you doing?” I ask him, watching him stare into the darkness. Reaching down, I run my fingers over his smooth fur and feel brave enough to close my eyes and let my shields drop. There’s always part of me that’s scared to do this, terrified of what I’ll see when I open my eyes again.

“Ryan?” I ask, trying to read the energy around us. It’s manic and dark. I don’t like it. Hunter growls. He doesn’t like it either. I close the gate, take a hold of Hunter’s collar, and give him a gentle tug. He stands and turns, following me to the house.

I get back onto the patio when Hunter stops. Growling, he takes off back into the yard. It takes my eyes a few seconds to adjust to the dark again, but once they do, I see him.

A tall, hooded figure, with a long, pointed beak sticking out into the darkness. My heart skips a beat in fear, and for a

moment, I'm paralyzed with fear. Realizing what danger I'm in, Hunter bounds over and stands in front of me, barking and snarling at the bird-demon.

I stand there, stunned for a second as I realize I have nothing to defend myself with. Hunter growls again, showing his teeth and looking menacing. The bird-demon inches closer, clawed hands raised and pointing at me.

Hunter turns, eyes meeting mine for a fleeting second before he lunges forward, strong jaws clamping around the bird-demon's arm, throwing it off balance. The bird-demon jerks back, and Hunter shakes his head, teeth sinking into the thing's arm.

I might not have a weapon, but I'm far from defenseless. Eyes wide, I hold out my right hand, feeling energy gathering around my fingers. I close my eyes, feeling the power rush through me, and snap my fingers, sparking the fire to erupt around my hand. I stare down the bird-demon, anger coursing through me, causing the fire to grow brighter.

Hunter backs up, bringing the demon closer to me, and somehow, I know what he wants me to do: burn this motherfucker down. I raise my left hand, feeling the same energy pulse through me and rush forward before I have time to hesitate. Hunter gives the bird-demon a final tug and lets go as soon as I press the fire into the things chest. Red hot flames travel down its brown robe, and the bird-demon stumbles back, madly slapping itself in an attempt to put the fire out.

Don't be afraid of the fire, Anora. Aunt Estelle's voice echoes in my head, and suddenly I remember standing in the backyard of her Thorne Hill home. It's the middle of the night and a fire pit is before us. *Fear leads to mistakes, and we don't have room for mistakes when you're holding fire in your hands.*

Remembering what she taught me that night, I thrust out my hands, magically fueling the flames. "*Ignis!*" I yell, and the fire swallows the bird-demon whole. Smoke pours out of the bird-demon's mouth and eyes. It lets out a final high-pitched shriek and bursts into flames, burning bright in the night

before collapsing to the ground in a smoldering pile of ash and blood.

I lower my hands and clench my palms, trying to put out the flames on the ground, but only the ones around my fingers go out. Shit. In the back of my mind, I know the dry, slightly overgrown grass will catch on fire. My heart is still racing and adrenaline surges through me. I turn to get the hose but am face to face with someone else.

“What the fucking fuck?” Harrison stands completely frozen, blue eyes wide in terror as firelight flickers on his face. He parked in the driveway behind my garage and was coming in through the backdoor, like he tends to do.

“Anora!” Ethan bounds out of the house, jumping down the patio steps all at once. His gun is drawn, and he grabs my shoulder with one hand, spinning me around, needing to see for himself that I’m okay.

“I’m fine,” I reassure him. Hunter yips and we turn, seeing the fire spreading. Ethan stomps out a trail of flames and I make a mad dash for my hose, which is all twisted and tangled from me being lazy and just throwing it aside. Harrison rushes to my side, helping me pull the hose free, and turns on the water as I run back to the fire. Smoke billows up and the fire broadens at a terrifying rate. Embers rise into the air, carried by the wind, and land on the roof of my garage.

Ethan takes the hose from me and starts spraying the fire. I squeeze my hands closed again, trying to put out the fire I started, but I can’t. Maybe once the fire is out of my hands, I can’t control it anymore.

“Anora!” Laney yells, stepping onto the patio with the fire extinguisher in her hands. Harrison runs over and takes it, right as a small fire starts in the gutter of my garage. It’s not attached to the house—thank fucking god—but if that thing goes up in flames, it could take out my house and the two surrounding it.

“Take the hose,” Ethan tells Harrison, holstering his gun and then grabs the fire extinguisher from his hands. He climbs up the chain-link fence and pulls himself onto the roof of the

garage. Smoke wafts in his face, but it doesn't stop him, and he pulls out the pin and sprays the fire with white foam.

Harrison pulls on the hose, putting water on the center of the fire, but then the hose kinks and the water stops.

"I got it!" Laney runs through the yard, and something else takes over. I throw out my hands, channeling the same energy I use to hold up my mental shields, and push it toward the fire, and for some reason, it works and keeps the fire from spreading.

Laney yanks the kink free, and Ethan comes back down, spraying what's left of the bird-demon. I keep the fire contained and don't dare drop my hands until the last ember is put out. The hose falls from Harrison's hands, and I can feel both him and Laney staring at me.

"Holy shit," I pant, and Ethan takes me in his arms. I don't know what I'm more shaken up over: the fact that a demon attacked me or that I almost burned my garage down.

Blinking a few times, I tear myself away from Ethan and turn back to Harrison. "Are you okay?"

"I...I don't know. I'm not hurt," he says.

"We need to get inside," Ethan says, looking around the yard. "There could be more."

I nod and step away to check on Hunter. He's sitting calmly, watching us as if he knows exactly what's going on. We all hurry into the house, and Ethan closes and locks the door behind us.

"Where's your salt?" he asks, and I point to a cabinet next to the sink. He opens it, knocking a few plastic jars of spices down in his haste, and then goes back to the door and pours a line of salt in front of it.

"Is that going to keep that thing out?" Harrison asks, eyes still wide.

"Probably not," Ethan says. "But it will at least slow it down."

I let out a breath, hands trembling a bit. And then the doorbell rings and we all jump.

“The food,” I pant. “It’s our food. Unless demons ring doorbells.”

“I’ll get it,” Ethan says, handing me the salt. Hunter trots along with him, and I take the bottle of wine and a glass for Harrison into the living room. Ethan gives the delivery driver a tip and takes the food, shutting the door before the guy has a chance to turn around and leave. He puts the bags of takeout on the coffee table and starts opening them, because, unlike the rest of us, what just happened didn’t make him lose his appetite.

“That was a demon, right?” Laney asks and takes a big drink of wine.

“Yes,” I say and look at my best friend. It’s one thing to be told that demons are real, but another to witness it. Her world has just been turned upside down and I’m not sure if I should feel guilty about being the one responsible for it.

“I’m going to make sure no more are out there.” Ethan takes a bite of an egg roll and goes to leave but I grab his arm.

“There aren’t any more,” I say. “I can sense it, or more I can’t sense it. And Hunter is calm too.” Ethan looks at me, jaw tense. It’s in his nature to go after the bad guys, I know. “Stay with me?”

He nods and takes another bite of the egg roll. “I’m going to get plates.”

I lean back on the couch and let out a breath, looking at Harrison and Laney. A few seconds of silence ticks by and Harrison picks up my wine glass, drinking it all. I know for a fact my brother hates red wine.

“I have vodka,” I offer.

“I want to drink, but I don’t,” Harrison says, not looking at me.

“I know what you mean,” I tell him. “Like you want to dull your senses but want to keep your mind sharp.”

“That’s where I’m at.” He blinks a few times, slowly shaking his head. “How did you set that...that thing on fire?”

“Your sister is pyrokinetic,” Ethan answers, coming into the room with plates.

“Pyro-what?” Laney echoes.

“Pyrokinetic,” Ethan repeats.

“Fire magic,” I say, Aunt Estelle’s voice echoing in my head again, and another memory crashes down at a dizzying rate.

I’m back in that office, sitting in front of a fireplace while I pet the white fox named Artemis.

“Fire magic is dangerous and unpredictable,” the woman with the pretty brown eyes says. “Without proper training, she could hurt someone or even herself.”

“I won’t let it come to that.”

“Estelle,” the brown-eyed woman says sternly. “She’s your family but know I strongly disagree. She belongs here with us.”

“She already missed the beginning of her first term.”

“You know that doesn’t matter. Our most promising student started last year after missing her first term as well and had no prior training. Don’t do this to her, Estelle.”

“Anora?” Ethan’s hand lands on mine. “You okay?”

“I...I remembered something else.” I get another flash of Aunt Estelle and me leaving the office. We pass by a group of kids, who for some reason I know are students. “*Good evening, Professor Fowler,*” a boy with dark hair says.

“They called her Professor Fowler.” I close my eyes, willing the memory back into my head. “And the lady with brown eyes...she’s...she’s the headmistress.” Memories rush into my head, and it’s like I’m watching my childhood in fast forward, yet I’m only getting glimpses of it.

I see a large room with pews, set up almost like a church. There’s an altar, and a triple-moon symbol—the same one

that's on my Book and the coven pendant—is displayed in beautiful stained glass.

Grim Gate.

I'm walking into a cafeteria now, and dozens of children my age are sitting around large wooden tables. They're talking and laughing as they eat, and are wearing matching uniforms. My eyes fly open and I gasp.

“Grim Gate isn't just a coven.” I plant my hands on the table, replaying it all in my mind so I won't forget. “It's an academy.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

“**L**ike Hogwarts?” Laney asks, and I nod.

“But real.” I hold up my hands. “Aunt Estelle knew. She knew I could do fire magic.”

“Maybe that’s why she bound your powers,” Harrison offers, almost sympathetically. “They seem slightly dangerous.”

“They are,” Ethan and I say at the same time, and he looks at me in surprise.

“I remember this woman with brown eyes, the headmistress, saying so. She wanted me to attend the academy but Aunt Estelle didn’t for some reason.” I close my eyes and rub my forehead. “Ugh! It’s so fucking frustrating. The memories are here. Right here.” I jab my forehead with my index finger. “But she blocked them. If I could remember, then we might be able to know why demons are after me.”

Silence falls over my little group of friends again.

“That thing,” Harrison says, circling back to what just happened. I need to push my mystery memories to the side and focus on my friends right now. “What was it?”

“We’re not sure,” Ethan says. “Anora calls it a bird-demon, but what type of demon it actually is...we’re still trying to figure that out.”

“You mean there is more than one *type*?” Harrison interrupts.

“Yes,” Ethan says, leaving it at that. Both Laney and Harrison wait for an explanation. “You know how there are different breeds of animals? Demons are like that. We generically call any sort of evil, supernatural being a demon, but true demons are the black-smoke kind of deal that rises directly from Hell and has the ability to possess a human body.”

“Fuck,” Harrison says under his breath and reaches for the bottle of wine.

“And that’s what spooked Mystery?” Laney asks.

“No,” I tell her. “What spooked him is a type of demon called a Pricolici. They’re demon bounty hunters, and were sent by another, more powerful demon to find me. And we don’t know why,” I add.

“So...what are you going to do?” Laney pulls her arms in around her body.

“Basically sit around feeling really paranoid while I wait for another to attack me,” I say, knowing it sounds sarcastic, but it’s not.

“And we’re not sure if the Pricolici and those bird-demon things are working together or not.” I push my thick hair back out of my face and let my eyes fall shut for a second. I’m tired from using magic again, and so fucking overwhelmed. Opening my eyes, I get a plate and load it with lo mein.

“Let me get this straight,” Laney starts. “Pricolici are the demon bounty hunters. They spooked Mystery and are tracking you down for another demon. And that ugly-ass bird thing is another demon but you don’t know what it wants either, other than the obvious murderous rage in its eyes.”

“Yeah,” I say. “That sums it up perfectly.”

“And you’re just going to wait for it to attack you?” Harrison’s brows pinch together.

“Yeah,” I say and make a face. “With my track record, it shouldn’t be too long.”

“Then what?”

“We find the demon sending the bounty hunters,” Ethan tells him. “And kill it.”



“THAT WAS LANEY,” I TELL ETHAN, QUICKLY REPLYING TO HER text message. “She’s staying at her boyfriend’s tonight. I know she’s freaked out. Harrison too.”

“They reacted the way most people do,” Ethan says, although whether or not that’s supposed to be reassuring, I don’t know. “Give them time.”

I nod and scoop another spoonful of fried rice onto my plate. We’re in the living room and I’m on round two of my comfort food. Harrison and Laney left not long ago, probably more than a little desperate to get out of my house. They were both worried about demons attacking them—and rightly so—but Ethan assured them the demons were after me and have no reason to attack my friends.

“Tomorrow,” I say, feeling better when I have a plan in place. I’m not an organized person by any means, but there’s something reassuring when you know what’s going to happen, and with how unpredictable things have been lately, I need a routine to look forward to. “I’ll go to the new age store and then to the barn. I need to work Mystery, plus getting on and riding sounds so nice. I forget about my troubles when I’m riding.” I spoon orange chicken onto my plate and push it over, making room for more lo mein. “And I’ll stay out of the woods, I promise.”

Ethan finishes loading his plate and scoots back on the couch. “You know I won’t promise anything, but so far both the Pricolici and those bird-demons have attacked when out of sight, though the one coming to your house today...it was a ballsy move, even for a demon.”

“How did it get here?” I open a little package of soy sauce and put it on my rice. “Do demons drive? It’s not like that thing could just jump on public transport. I imagine demons ride horses, like zombie horses.”

“Are you asking this as a serious question?” Ethan cocks an eyebrow.

“I don’t really think there’s a zombie horse just chilling in the alley, but I do want to know how demons travel.”

“They’re good at lurking in the shadows, and most will only travel after nightfall. And the more powerful demons can just appear.”

“Even when they’re possessing a body?”

Having just taken a bite of food, Ethan shakes his head.

“Three bird-demons attacked us in the woods, and now three are dead,” I say and let out a breath, feeling my blood pressure rise. “What do you think the chances are there are only three of them, and more won’t come after me like the Pricolici?”

“I have no clue,” he says honestly. “We still don’t know what we’re up against.” He sets his fork on his plate and rests a hand on my thigh. “We’re safe for the night.” He can’t guarantee that, but I know he’s trying to keep me from getting too upset. “I’m not going anywhere, the house is outlined in salt, Hunter is an excellent watch *and* guard dog, and we can keep the sage burning.” He eyes the Book of Shadows on the coffee table. “Plus, you can cast a circle. You don’t need anything to do that.”

“I can summon and hold literal fire in my hand,” I start. “But I still doubt my ability to cast a legitimate circle of protection around the house. The fire happened out of desperation, and it was like instinct took over so I wouldn’t die. I know it doesn’t—” I cut off with a gasp as a thought enters my mind.

“What?” Ethan’s eyes widen and he straightens up, looking around the living room for a demon or ghost.

“Every once in a while, I like to get my nails done.”

“And that’s surprising?”

“Well, no, but if I’m holding magical fire in my hands, will the acrylics melt?”

Ethan stares at me in silence for a few seconds. “That’s actually a good question. Melted plastic on your nails would hurt like a bitch.”

“Right? I feel like I should know this before I magically start a fire after I get a manicure.”

“Anora,” he starts, looking away. “Maybe you shouldn’t start any fire. Not yet. You agreed with me that fire magic is dangerous. You killed a demon today, and it was fucking insane in the best way, but you also almost set your yard on fire.”

“I know.” I curl my finger into my palms, missing the way the flames felt against my skin. “And maybe that’s why Aunt Estelle bound my powers. She said something about the cards not lying or being wrong or...or something. Maybe she saw me burning down a village.”

“Maybe.” Ethan squeezes my thigh. “We should get ready for bed after we eat so we can get some sleep while we can.”

“Good thinking.” I’m exhausted again, and it’s not just from using magic, but from my mind running a mile a minute, which will make it hard to sleep even though I’m so freaking tired. “Oh, and don’t forget to take your meds.”

“Yes, Mom,” he grumbles, playfully nudging me with his elbow.

I give him a pointed look. “I’ll try the healing crystal thing too. I bought a handful of little gemstones when I was at the witch-store last week. Two weeks ago?” I sigh. “Everything is blurring together in my head.”

“You’ll feel better after sex and a good night’s sleep.”

Smirking, I look at him. “I like how casually you slipped sex in there.”

“I can casually slip something else in later,” he says, and I laugh. I don’t know what I’d do without Ethan. I’d be dead, that’s for sure, and who knows how long it would have taken for someone to find my body at the bottom of that pond?

Ethan turns on the TV, playing *Friends* again. It's a feel-good show that goes perfect with my comfort food, and I'm a little more relaxed by the end of this episode. Ethan puts the food away and I start making a list of magical supplies needed for protection spells.

My eyes start to get heavy, and a cloud of darkness surrounds me. I fight through it, feeling like I'm running underwater. I can see the sunlight just ahead of me, and I reach out my hand, feeling the warm of the sun on my fingertips.

But suddenly, I'm violently yanked back. A hundred dark hands pull me down, down through the earth and into utter darkness. The more I struggle, the darker it becomes. The darkness doesn't just surround me; it engulfs me inside and out. I'm suffocating, trapped, alone and scared for all eternity.

Hunter barks, and I jerk my head back up, blinking rapidly. My heart is pounding and a deep chill sets in my bones. Hunter bumps the notebook with his nose and I look down right as Ethan rushes into the living room.

"Is everything oh—" He cuts off when he sees the notebook. The pen falls from my fingers, hitting the notebook and rolling to the floor. I blink again, making sure I pulled myself out of the vision. Because staring up at me is a perfectly drawn picture of the bird-demon.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

“I’m telling you, there is no way I drew this.”

Julia takes the notebook page from me, brows pushing together. “It’s creepy. Like really freaking creepy. This is what it looks like?”

“It’s exact,” Ethan tells her, opening the box of donuts. True to his word, we had sex—amazing, had-me-screaming-like-a-porn-star sex, and then fell asleep snuggled up together. I woke in Ethan’s arms feeling much calmer. We had a semi-lazy morning, taking our time getting out of bed, and then took Hunter for a walk around the block before heading out to his dad’s, getting coffee and donuts on the way.

“Who drew it then?” Julia puts the drawing down and joins us at the kitchen table.

“Me,” I say, knowing I just contradicted what I just said.

“She was auto-writing,” Ethan explains. “It hit her all of the sudden. We were together and I left for maybe a minute to clean up dinner. Hunter barked, and I came back to find her looking a little out of it.”

“It just came over you?” Julia echoes, and Sam pauses at the threshold of the kitchen, eyes narrowing when she sees me. She’s supposedly a good demon hunter, but that girl has the worst poker face.

“Yeah. I felt like I was dying and then Hunter helped pull me from whatever vision I was having. When I looked at my notebook, that was staring back at me.”

Julia nods, making sure she's following along. "And you'd already killed the third one when you drew this?"

"Yes," I answer, and see the apprehension in her eyes. If there were only three of these bird-demons, and I'd killed them all, then why channel something that made me draw them?

"Do you think that's enough to go on?" Ethan asks, shoving half a donut in his mouth.

"It's definitely helpful," Julia replies and tears a small bit off a chocolate glazed donut. "I'll ask around, and if anyone can match this description, I'll question them further."

"Thank you," I tell her and hope I'm conveying just how thankful I really am. I'd be dead—literally dead—if it wasn't for Ethan and his family helping me with everything.

"Of course." She forces a smile and then stands, popping the small bit of donut in her mouth as she checks on the coffee pot.

I brought the magical dagger—just in case—and it's on the table next to the box of donuts. Ethan wipes his hands on a napkin and picks it up.

"You smoked a few demons with this thing," he starts, pulling the blade from the sheath. "And when you stabbed then, they burst into flames but the surrounding area didn't go up in smoke." He slowly turns the dagger, and light reflects off the Grim Gate pendant that's engraved into the metal. "You used it as a medium and safely—and efficiently—channeled your powers."

"You're right," I say as it occurs to me. Ethan had already stabbed the dagger into the chest of one of those bird-demons and all I did was take hold of the hilt.

He puts the dagger back in the sheath and flips it around, offering me the hilt of the dagger. "I usually am." Looking at me, he winks, and my fingers wrap around the dagger. Is that why Aunt Estelle sent this to me? Did she know I'd be able to channel my powers into a weapon like this? Can I incinerate

demons with a single stab and won't burn the house down in the process?

"You think it's okay to...to use fire magic as long as I have the dagger in my hands?" My eyes go to the tiger's eye gemstone and another wave of familiarity washes over me, immediately followed by anger. Why the fuck did Aunt Estelle think it was okay to alter my memories like this? Remembering how to use magic and not set my yard on fire would come in handy right about now.

"As long as it's just the dagger in your hands," Ethan replies, flashing that panty-melting smirk.

"There have been long-circulating rumors about a dagger than can kill demons with a single stab," Julia says as she brushes her hair back into a messy ponytail. "It's typical for something to get lost in translation, and it seems the key factor is the dagger needs a witch to power it, which makes the whole *magic demon-killing dagger* thing not a dud, just...uh... just limited in who can use it."

"Let's test that theory." Ethan gets up and Sam glares harder at me before pushing off the wall and angrily staring down the donuts. She wants one but doesn't want to eat anything I brought over. She gets a cup of coffee instead, and I'm impressed with her willpower. I don't even like powdered donuts that much, yet I already ate half of one since they're in front of me.

"Do you have a demon stashed in the basement or something?" I look from the dagger to Ethan, realizing my joke could very much be real since I'm sitting in a house full of hunters.

"Not today," Ethan replies and takes a package of chicken breasts from the fridge. He puts one in a ceramic pan and brings it over. "Try it."

"I don't think it's going to work," I say, knowing he means trying to cook the meat and not eat it.

"You won't know until you try."

“Right.” Nodding, I square my shoulders and stab the piece of raw chicken. I close my eyes and try to...well...I don’t really know. I don’t want to burn Ethan’s house down, and the fear of how fast the fire got out of control last night makes me clam up.

Very good, Anora.

Aunt Estelle’s voice echoes in my mind, and it’s like a flip is switched.

Breathe.

Focus on the way the dagger feels in my hand. Feel the tiny magical vibrations. Take hold of them and—

I open my eyes and see steam rising from the pan. The blade of the dagger glows red from the fire, which is safely contained in the blade.

“Fuck,” Ethan says under his breath. “You’re doing it.”

I watch as the chicken cooks before our eyes, and in only a matter of seconds, it goes from a raw hunk of meat to well-cooked.

“Impressive,” David says, startling me a bit. I didn’t hear him come in the house after an apparent run. He’s wearing athletic clothes and is all sweaty.

“The dagger channels her powers,” Ethan tells his father. “It makes it safe for her to—”

“Your arm,” David interrupts, striding forward and taking hold of Ethan’s bicep. “It’s healed?”

“Yeah,” Ethan replies, looking at his arm. The healing process accelerated, making the faded scab look at least two weeks old. “Anora did that too.”

“How?” David’s eyes narrow as he turns his cold gaze to me. He doesn’t trust me, not any more than Sam does.

“Crystals,” I offer with a shrug. “Quartz can amplify healing and health, so I figured I’d try it.”

“That...that could come in handy,” David says, each word sounding forced. Sam inhales, eyes going to me. Right as she’s

about to say something—and not something nice, I’m sure—everyone gets a text message at the same time.

“Go ahead,” Ethan says, looking at his phone. “I’m staying with Anora.”

“You just got off probation,” Sam huffs. “You want to get back on it?”

“What’s going on?” I ask, pulling the dagger out of the cooked chicken.

“The Order summoned us,” Ethan replies, jaw tensing. “I doubt it’s anything serious. They do dramatic shit like this all the time. They want to say *jump* just to see who responds with *how high?*”

“You don’t know it’s not serious,” Sam counters. “For all we know, they could have found out you’re—”

“Enough,” David interrupts. “Ethan, I advise you come with us, but I cannot force you.”

“Go,” I urge, not sure what exactly is going on. “I’ll be fine. I’m going to go to that new-age store and then the barn, but not in the woods. I’ll be around people the whole time, and if it makes you feel better, I’ll bring Hunter.”

“And say he’s your service dog?” Ethan asks.

“I think he could pass for one,” I say with a nod. “But the new age store had a “leashed pets welcome” sign on their door.”

“That would make me feel better,” Ethan says.

“I’m capable,” I remind him, wiping the dagger with a napkin before putting it back in its sheath.

“I know you are,” he tells me, coming over and taking me in his arms, not caring that his entire family is in the room with us. “But that doesn’t stop me from worrying about you.”

“I worry about me too,” I admit, hooking my arms around his shoulders. “But I’ll be fine.”

“Take my Jeep,” he says since we drove together. “And I’ll meet you back at your house later.”

“Okay,” I tell him.

“And call me if anything feels off. Anything.”

“I will,” I promise, aware that everyone is staring at us.
“And let me know the same too?”

Sam scoffs, but Ethan ignores her and puts his lips to mine in a quick kiss. “I’ll walk you out.”



I DROP SEVERAL ARMLoads OF BROWN BAGS IN THE PASSENGER seat of Ethan’s Jeep, having just left the new age store in downtown Syracuse. Hunter waits patiently and gets in the back when I open the door for him. He lies down on the backseat and I pull the seatbelt through his harness, buckling him in.

I call Ethan as I head to the barn, not expecting him to answer.

“Hey, babe,” he says, voice low.

“Oh, hey. I wasn’t sure if you’d be able to talk or not.”

“Eh, I’m talking, one way or another.”

“Is everything okay in Order-land?” I ask and slowly pull out of the parking spot. I parallel parked and am so damn proud of myself it’s almost a shame to leave this space.

“Yeah. Like I said, they’re dramatic for no reason. There’s a haunted apartment complex in Rochester the Order has been hired out to handle.”

“Hired out?” I echo. The more I learn about the Order the more confused I get as well. The whole *ignorance is bliss* phrase is really starting to make sense now.

“The real estate tycoon who bought the complex is willing to pay a lot. Don’t worry, though, I’m not leaving you, Anora.”

It hits me then that’s how Ethan and his family are able to get by since demon hunting is their literal job. The Order is hired by anyone with a supernatural problem, and hunters are

sent to take care of it. And like any good MLM, I assume the higher-ups at the Order take a big cut of the money and pay what's left over to the hunters who do the dirty work.

“If you have to work a job, then work a job. I'll be fine,” I insist, though I feel like I'm lying. “Or I could come with. Ghosts are kind of my specialty.”

“You would make it easy, though this sounds like a routine haunting. Two construction teams were spooked off the property after they heard strange noises and had their equipment moved around.”

“Like you said before, it's too bad you don't know a medium.”

“Right? It's a damn shame.” He sighs. “Are you going to the barn now?”

“Yep. I might have purchased half the store, but I think I have all the basics a witch needs now.”

“Good. I think you should cast that protective spell and banish all spirits until we get things under control,” he insists, and that guilty feeling takes over. This time, it comes with a weird sense of warning.

“I have the stuff to do it,” I reply. “When do you think you'll be back in town?”

“Not until the evening. I'll pick something up to make for dinner.”

“Make?” I smile. “You mean, we're not ordering junk food?”

“Sorry to disappoint,” he laughs. “What kind of wine do you like? I'll find something that pairs with dinner.”

“Ohhh, look at you, Mr. Fancy Pants,” I say with a laugh. “And Pinot Grigio is always good. Though a sweeter red is never a bad choice. I'm not picky or snooty when it comes to wine, really, and as long as the bottle has a cool looking label, I'm good.”

“That doesn't help this non-wine drinker narrow it down, Anora.”

“Fine. Get a red blend. It’s usually sort of sweet. I think.”

He laughs again. “How about I surprise you?”

“Okay, I like the sound of that. See you later then?”

“See you later. Can you let me know when you’re home so I don’t have to worry?”

“Of course,” I say, finding his protectiveness to be a turn-on. “I’ll even redraw the salt lines.”

“A girl after my own heart,” he chides and we both laugh. “Be careful, Anora. I really want to fuck you again tonight, so don’t let the demons get you.”

“I care about you too, Ethan.” We end the call and I’m still smiling when Laney texts a few minutes later. I check it when I’m at a stoplight, and call her instead of texting back.

“I’m driving,” I start, “so you’re going to have to listen to my beautiful voice.”

“Darn,” she chuckles. “Where are you driving?”

“The barn,” I reply.

“Is Ethan with you?”

“No, just Hunter. What’s going on? Is everything okay?”

“Yeah,” she says quickly. “I got to thinking last night...you said weird stuff started happening the same day you met Ethan, right?”

“Well, weird stuff always happens, but the really weird stuff did start that day.”

Laney hesitates, and I can imagine her twisting her shoulder-length black hair around her fingers. “I love you, Anora. You’re my bestest friend in the whole fucking world, and I know sometimes you try to see the best in people you shouldn’t.”

“What are you getting at?” I ask as I flick the turn signal on.

“I like Ethan, and it seems like he really cares about you. But I...I wanted to be sure his story checked out, so I tried to

find him on social media and there's nothing. Not under the name he gave you at least."

"He's a hunter. I don't think he's allowed to have any sort of social media."

"Right, and that makes sense. But I found something on my internet deep-dive, and well...check your text when you get a chance."

"Give me a sec." I slow to another stop at a light and look at the text Laney sent. It's a screen shot of an article about an armed assault, complete with a mug shot of the suspect accused of kidnapping and battery.

And the suspect is Ethan.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

“Do you have plans tonight?” Leslie asks as we trot our horses around the outside area. Both of our horses spook when Bob steps out of the woods, back to his usual routine. It’s comforting in a really messed-up way, I know.

“Ethan is going to make me dinner.”

“Ohhh.” She wiggles her eyebrows. “That sounds romantic. Are you going to finally hook up?”

“We have and let me tell you, he’s good at what he does.”

“A man like that just screams big-dick energy.”

I bite my lip and nod. “He’s very well endowed. Like I didn’t think it would fit.”

“Lucky.”

I laugh. “Aren’t you happily married?”

“You know I am, but a girl can dream.”

Laughing again, I push Mystery into a canter, glancing down for a second to make sure he got the right lead. Leslie urges her horse, Sundance, to go faster, staying a pace behind us. We ride—and continue gossiping about our sex lives—for nearly an hour, and for that hour, I almost forget about all the chaos around me. Hunter lounged in the grass near the arena while we rode, chewing on a bone I brought for him, and his presence was comforting.

“Hunter,” I call, patting my thigh as I make a kissing nose. I get off Mystery, pull the reins over his head, and lead him to

the gate. Leslie and Sundance follow behind us, and another half an hour later, I'm ready to go.

"Go home and enjoy that big dick with a side of dinner," Leslie says a little too loudly.

Stifling a laugh, I purse my lips and wiggle my hips. "You know I'm going to. And you should do the same."

"I plan to." Smiling, she goes to the front of Sundance's stall and waves me to come over. "We decided to start trying for a baby...and I know...I was just saying how it would ruin my life, but the more I thought about it, the more I'm ready for us to start a family."

"Oh my god!" My hands fly to my face, and it's all I can do not to jump and down with excitement for my friend. "You are going to be the cutest mom ever, and if you don't do a pregnancy announcement with little cowboy boots, I'm going to be disappointed."

Leslie laughs. "I've already found a Shetland pony to buy for my not-yet-existent baby. But I don't want to jinx anything."

"Of course. I won't mention it."

"Thanks," she says, lips pressed into a smile. "Now go get your man."

I say bye to Mystery one more time and buckle Hunter into the backseat of the Jeep again. I'm very much looking forward to seeing Ethan, but Laney's words echo in the back of my head. Is it too big of a coincidence to think we met by chance?

Ethan said he was tracking demons, and the demons were tracking me. Of course they led him to my exact location.

"I trust him," I tell Hunter, flicking my eyes up to see him in the rearview mirror. I put the Jeep in reverse and back out of the parking spot, gravel crunching under the Jeep's tires.

I *do* trust Ethan. Both with my life and with my heart. But dammit...I can't help the feeling that creeps over me, saying I'm going to get hurt one way or another.



“DON’T SAY I DIDN’T WARN YOU, BUT YOU’VE MADE ME ONE spoiled brat.” I lean back, hand going to my stomach, having just finished the best steak I’ve ever had in my entire life. The mashed potatoes and roasted asparagus were a close second, and the red wine Ethan randomly picked is hitting me in the right way.

“And I said I like it.” Ethan puts the last dish in the sink. “This is the closest to normal I’ve felt in a long time, and I use that term relatively.”

Inhaling, I get up and go to him, locking my hands around his waist. “Being normal is overrated, isn’t it?”

“So fucking overrated.” He turns, hands settling on my hips, and bows his head down to kiss me. “You said you can get used to this.” His lips brush against mine. “So could I.” In a swift movement, he picks me up and carries me to the couch, sitting down with me on his lap. I can feel his cock start to get hard beneath me, and I rock my hips, grinding my core against his.

In only a matter of minutes later, we’re both naked and I’m bent over the couch, as Ethan grips my waist and pushes his big cock inside me. I cry out, arching my back as he fucks me hard. He reaches around, fingers sweeping over my clit, stroking me in the exact right way. It doesn’t take long for him to make me come, and the orgasm shudders through me, my entire body reacting.

He doesn’t let up, doesn’t stop to give me a minute to recover. Instead, he flips me over and puts his head between my legs.

“Fuck, you’re soaking wet,” he groans, licking up every drop I give him as my pussy spasms. My lips part but words fail me when his tongue lashes out against my sensitive clit.

“Ethan,” I mumble, fingers raking through his hair. My body is humming, pleasure floating through me. And—holy hell—I’m about to come again. He licks and sucks, turning his

mouth away from my core to kiss my inner thigh. It's driving me crazy, and I'm so wound up I almost push him away, reach down, and finish myself.

But right when I can't take the teasing anymore, Ethan puts his mouth over me and works his tongue like magic until I'm squirming against him, coming so hard wetness spills from me. This time, he moves slower, giving me the few seconds I desperately need before moving over top of me.

"You said you're on birth control," he whispers between kisses, cock hovering over my entrance. It's a little late to clarify that now, but we've gotten swept up in the moment more than once, and unprotected sex feels better, dammit.

"I have an IUD," I whisper back, hardly able to keep my eyes open. I just came twice but my body is craving to have that big cock inside me, rocking me into oblivion as I come yet again. "The chances of me getting pregnant are really low."

"Really low?" he echoes, kissing my neck again. Precum beads around the tip of his cock, and he rubs himself against me, aching to push inside.

"I think it's like ninety-nine percent effective or something." I run my nails up and down the back of his thighs. "Fuck me, Ethan," I say, and it's all he needs to hear to push inside, thrusting in hard and fast. I come again only moments before he does, and after collapsing on the couch together for a while, we get up and get ready for bed.

"This really is the closest I've felt to normal," he says lazily. "From making you dinner to having someone I can formally call a girlfriend, this is new territory, but I fucking love it."

"You never had a girlfriend?" I question.

"Not in a more-than-one-night sense," he admits, and I remember Sam's words. "Relationships aren't possible when you're in the Order. But it's different with you, Anora. Demons aren't a one-and-done thing for you. Being who you are...it makes this possible."

“I’m glad it does.” I snuggle closer to him. “You believed me about the ghosts before we knew for certain I was a witch. And that’s never happened before.”

“I guess we both can get used to this.” He walks his fingers up and down the curve of my hip, and I could so easily fall asleep. But then the mugshot Laney sent pops into my head. Dammit, I hate my brain sometimes.

“Have you ever been arrested?” I ask, slitting my eyes open.

“Many times.”

“Really?” I tip my head up to look at his handsome face.

“Yeah. Hunting demons and illegal activity go hand in hand. You have to break and enter more times than not, and it’s kind of hard to explain to the police why you beat the shit out of someone who was possessed and trying to kill you.” His voice is calm and level, seemingly not bothered by being arrested. “The Order has connections to get us bailed out in a timely manner, though I have spent several nights in prison.”

“I shouldn’t find that hot,” I say, smiling and feeling the biggest sense of relief. I trust him. I have to...which would be an issue if Laney were onto something, but she’s not. “I’m tired,” I mumble. “And I didn’t let Hunter out.”

“I’ll do it,” Ethan says, kissing the top of my head before forcing himself out of bed. I close my eyes, giving in to the pull of sleep, and am in that hazy state of almost falling asleep when Ethan and Hunter come back into the room. I snuggle up close to Ethan, with Hunter on my other side.

Sandwiched between my two boys, I fall asleep and don’t wake until late the next morning. Ethan and I lounge around in bed together, cuddling and drifting in and out of sleep. It’s a little after ten AM when I tell myself I have to get up. But first, I grab my phone off the nightstand to scroll through social media and check my email, and I see one that makes me sit up.

“Everything okay?” Ethan gives my thigh a squeeze, opening his eyes for a second to look at me.

“Yeah,” I tell him. “I got an email from the lawyer my aunt hired. He’s reminding me the utility bills are due.” I let out a sigh. “I need to figure out something to do with that house. I’m not sure if JoAnna Lancaster was the original owner or not, but Aunt Estelle has owned it for years, and I don’t want to sell it, yet I can’t have it sitting empty.”

“You could rent it out,” Ethan suggests. “You said it’s not far from Chicago, right?”

“Right.”

“More and more people are moving out of the city and commuting to work since the cost of living in Chicago is beyond ridiculous.”

“That’s something to consider,” I say, though I know I cannot have strangers inside that house. “The house was empty for years and was fine. Another month or so won’t hurt, right?”

“Right,” Ethan agrees, though we’re both more than aware a big house sitting empty for a couple of months could spell disaster.

“What should we do today?” I put my phone on the nightstand again and lie down, resting my head on Ethan’s bare chest. The wounds there have almost healed as well. “Demon-wise, I mean.”

Ethan’s hand goes to my back, and he traces my spine with his fingers. “You should practice using magic. If you’re attacked again, being able to defend yourself is key, especially if I’m not around.”

“You don’t happen to know a Dumbledore, do you?”

“Shockingly, I don’t. Nor do I know an Obi-Wan to show you the way of the Jedi.”

“I thought Yoda did that?”

Ethan lifts his head off the pillow. “We’re going to watch *Star Wars* later, because it’s obvious you haven’t seen it.”

“I’ve seen it! Just not for like years and years and years and I think I fell asleep during like all of them. My dad is a

huge *Star Wars* fan.”

“Good. I’ll have something to talk about at dinner.”

I smile and hook my leg over Ethan, not wanting to leave the bed. We lounge around for another hour and then force ourselves up, only to make coffee and move to the couch. So much for being productive, right?

Though the second half of the day actually is, and we go through more of my Book of Shadows, I make an attempt to cast a protective circle around the house, and I sit with a bay leaf in my hands, trying to unlock more memories.

We go to the barn in the evening so I can take care of Mystery, and go into the woods, stopping at the threshold of the trail. Ethan is armed to the max again, and I have my magical dagger. We’re more than prepared to fatally injure a Pricolici, but none come. After an hour and a half, I’m cold and have to pee, so we go back to the barn.

Leslie is putting her grooming supplies away, and she eyes me curiously, no doubt thinking Ethan and I went off to have sex in the woods. Maybe next time, we’ll go the other way through the woods, coming from Ethan’s dad’s house instead.

We repeat the same thing the next day: practice magic, Ethan gives me a basic training lesson on hand-to-hand combat using the dagger, and we walk through the woods. And again, nothing happens. It’s nice, that’s for sure, to have a couple of days off, but the whole sitting around waiting to be attacked thing is driving me in-fucking-sane.

I’m wishing for demons by Thursday and keep looking into the woods while I ride Mystery around the outdoor arena. Bob is in his place, being creepy and awkward like usual, and none of the horses grazing in the pasture next to us are on high alert.

Ethan is at his dad’s, doing something for the Order again. His dad, Sam, and Julia just got back from the job of clearing ghosts out of that apartment complex, and I can just hear Sam giving Ethan shit for staying here when things have been mellow.

“It’s not even winter and I’m already sick of the cold,” Leslie says when I get back into the barn. She has her horse in the cross-ties and turns on the warming light above them.

“The temperature did drop a lot,” I reply, debating if I should bust out Mystery’s blue blanket. He looks so handsome in it, but I know he shouldn’t wear it just yet. I like him to get a longer winter coat of fur so he doesn’t get too cold when we go on rides through the snow later in the season.

“And I was the idiot who didn’t wear a jacket,” she grumbles.

“Take mine,” I tell her and pull it off. “I’m leaving anyway. Ethan is having dinner at my parents’ tonight.”

“Ohhh, sounds serious.”

“Really?”

“He’s meeting your parents, totally serious.” She takes my jacket and puts it on. “Thank you. You are seriously a life saver. I have two more horses to work and you know how much I hate the cold. I seriously don’t know why I live here.”

“It’ll warm back up...and then get cold again. I question New York winters every year too.”

“If California weren’t so damn expensive, I’d be there in a heartbeat.”

“Hah, me too,” I say, though Aunt Estelle’s house flashes in my mind. I miss that place for some reason, and it’s the same feeling I get when I dream about the magical door that appears in between two trees. “I’m gonna take off. I need to rush so I can make it home in time to shower and get ready.”

“Have fun at dinner!”

“I’m sure I will.” I give her a wave and hurry out, realizing we’re the some of the last ones at the barn. Now that the sun is starting to set later, not as many people as usual are here at this time. I don’t think Hollow Creek Stables is of any interest to vampires, but whatever, right? If people want to stay home once the sun sets, then that’s their issue and they can miss out on life.

I call Ethan once I'm home and about to get in the shower needing to wash the smell of horse off my body. He's on his way, and arrives right after I get out, answering the door in just a towel...which comes off only seconds later.

Once I'm finally dressed and semi-put together, I get into Ethan's Jeep and direct him on how to get to my parents' house. To be safe, we decide to take Hunter. It's been a while since he and Buster have had a playdate, anyway.

"Harrison is here," I note, seeing his black BMW in the driveway, and then I laugh.

"What's so funny?" Ethan parks behind Harrison's car.

"This is the first time I'm having a family dinner where the number of believers outnumbers the nonbelievers. Well, it does if I count Hunter."

"So, I take it you don't want me to introduce myself as Ethan Bailey, demon-hunter."

"You know what? I wouldn't mind at this point. My mom will think you're crazier than me and I don't know what it's like to be the second-least sane person at the dinner table."

Ethan laughs. "I'll keep that detail until our second dinner then."

I unbuckle Hunter, and he runs ahead, going around to the side gate. Buster is outside and starts yipping with excitement.

"That's Buster," I tell Ethan. "He's friendly but a little spastic. He will jump on you, so sorry in advance."

"I don't mind," he says as I let Hunter through, stepping in behind him. The dogs take off, chasing each other and wrestling right away. Taking Ethan's hand, I lead him into the house, coming into the kitchen. Harrison is at the island counter, drink in hand, and Mom is at the oven, checking on whatever she made for dinner.

"Hey, honey!" She closes the oven and comes over for a hug. "And Ethan, it's good to see you again."

"You too," he tells her.

“Where’s Dad?” I ask.

Mom rolls her eyes. “Answering student emails. He’s such a workaholic.”

Harrison gets up, taking a drink of his beer, and looks at Ethan. “I was about to turn on the game. Wanna watch?”

“Yeah. My money’s on the Bears for this one,” Ethan says.

Harrison laughs. “Get ready to lose then.”

They go into the living room and I stay in the kitchen with Mom.

“They’ve met before?” she asks, and I nod.

“Twice now.”

“They seem to get along,” she says with a smile.

“They do. Ethan is a pretty interesting guy, and we get along well.” I fill a glass with water. “Need any help with dinner?”

“If you want to start getting salads ready for everyone that would be great. The chicken is almost done, so I’ll get your father.” Mom smiles again. “This is nice. I like having my children home for dinner.”

“And you like when I bring a guy with me.”

“Not just any guy, but yes, I do like seeing you with someone who makes you happy.”

“Ethan definitely does.” I get stuff for salad out of the fridge and assemble bowls for everyone. I set the table, fill water glasses, and let the dogs in. Dad has joined Harrison and Ethan in the family room, and he and Harrison are heckling Ethan for being a Chicago Bears fan. I stand back for a moment, letting myself acknowledge how fucking nice it is to have this little moment of pure normalcy: my boyfriend is watching football with my brother and father, and everyone is talking and laughing and getting along just fine.

“Dinner is ready,” Mom calls, and we all go into the formal dining room—which is hardly ever used—and dig in. Dinner is delicious, the conversation comes easily and no one

brings up vampires, ghosts, or politics, my usual hot-button issues.

After dinner, Ethan and I go into the living room. Mom bought a pie and wants to warm it up before serving it, and I'm way too full to eat anything right now anyway. Ethan's phone rings, and I go to let the dogs out again while he answers.

"That was Julia," he says when I come back into the living room. A bad feeling presses down on me. "She saw a lot of police cars going through the neighborhood."

"Is everything okay?"

"No. A body was found by hikers in the woods in between the barn and my dad's house." His brow furrows, and I know that's not the bad news he was referring to. "I'm sorry, Anora."

"Why?" I ask, breath hitching in my chest. Nerves prickle along my body and my stomach immediately flip flops.

"Through a connection from the Order, Julia was able to get the identity of the body before it was released to the public. It's...It's your friend, Leslie."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

“No.” Blinking, visions of the Pricolici flash before me. Why would they go after Leslie? They’re supposed to be looking for me. “Why...why would they go after her?”

“I don’t know.” Ethan cradles me to his chest. “Pricolici go after their targets. Killing anyone else goes against what we thought we knew about them.”

My breath leaves in a ragged huff. *Their targets.* She wasn’t their target. Are the demons trying to draw me out? Picking off my friends...my family...

“Oh my god.” Tears fill my eyes and guilt cripples me. I look up at Ethan. “I gave her my jacket.”

“What?”

“My jacket.” I blink and tears stream down my face. “I took it off and gave it to her right before I left.”

“Anora, that doesn’t mean...” Ethan trails off, confirming my fears. The Pricolici smelled me on her. They thought they had located me and when they realized they hadn’t...they got mad. Very fucking mad. Mad enough to drag her into the woods and tear her apart.

“Oh my God,” I say again and start crying. How could I be so stupid? I wasn’t thinking at all. Ethan tightens his hold on me.

“Anora?” Mom’s voice comes from the kitchen. “Honey... what’s wrong?”

“Leslie,” I start and then lose it. Ethan holds me as I break down in tears.

“Her friend Leslie was attacked,” he answers for me. “And killed.”

“Oh, honey!” Mom gasps, hand flying to her chest. “I am so sorry.” Mom’s hand lands on my shoulder, and she and Ethan usher me into the living room. Ethan sinks onto the couch, pulling me down with him.

“What’s going on?” Dad asks, coming into the room after hearing me cry.

“Anora’s friend died,” Mom says in a hushed voice.

“Laney?” Harrison asks, appearing behind Dad, blue eyes wide with fear.

“Leslie,” Ethan answers.

“What happened?” Dad asks, and I see Mom shake her head. Then I start crying again, grief and guilt hitting me all at once.

“It was a wild animal attack,” Ethan says. “Her body was found in the woods not long ago by hikers.”

“How terrible.” Mom rubs my arm, trying to comfort me.

I squeeze my eyes shut, imagining her running away from the Pricolici. She must have been terrified.

“I was just there,” I say, voice shaking. “And I left her. I shouldn’t have left her.”

“Honey, you can’t blame yourself.”

But I can, and I will. Because it is my fault. The Pricolici want me, and me alone. Leslie got in the literal way, and she paid the price for it with her life.

“It was still light out when I left, but if...if I’d stayed...if I made sure she got in her car before I left, she would still be alive, wouldn’t she?”

No one says anything, and another tear rolls down my cheek. Leslie should be okay right now. Those fucking demons

were after me, and it should have been me they attacked.

Squeezing my eyes shut tighter, I welcome the rage that's filling my heart. The vase sitting on the center of the coffee table starts to vibrate. Mom gasps and Hunter barks, jumping onto the couch and wedging himself in between myself and Ethan. The vase tips over and Ethan catches it the second before it falls.

"Trains." Ethan uprights the vase and forces a small smile. "They vibrate everything in our house too."

Mom tips her head. "I didn't hear a whistle."

"I'm really sorry, sis," Harrison says, sitting on the couch next to me. Blinking, I look up and see his face, blurry through my tears. He knows it wasn't a wild animal attack, and he looks fucking terrified, as he should be. I promised both him and Laney the demons were after me and they were in no danger.

Now they know I'm wrong—and I'm wrong to be here now.

"I need to go," I say, confusing everyone.

"Where do you need to go?" Mom asks, keeping a level tone.

"Home." Though my home isn't far enough. I need to leave town. Go somewhere far away and get a house in the middle of nowhere, away from everyone, where I can keep my demon-magnet ass isolated until the bounty hunters are called off...or until I die. I can't risk anyone else, and if I had a place like that to escape to, I would.

I close my eyes and get a flash of the old Victorian in Thorne Hill. I do have a place to escape to.

"I'll take her home." He gives me a reassuring squeeze.

"I think she should stay here," Dad insists. "We don't have dangerous wildlife in this area."

"It wasn't a vampire," Harrison says sharply before Dad has a chance to suggest it.

“It wouldn’t be the first time a vampire was—”

“Let’s not get into it, Jake,” Mom insists.

I lean into Ethan, taking comfort in his strong arms. “I just want to go home.”

“I’ll take you,” Ethan says again. “And I’ll stay to make sure she’s okay,” he tells my mom, who’s probably worried I’ll invite a vampire in just to prove they weren’t the ones to rip Leslie to shreds.

Mom packs up leftovers for us and gives Ethan the entire pie to take to my house.

“We need to go after it,” I tell Ethan as soon as we’re in his car. I dry my tears with the back of my hand.

“I agree.” He starts the engine and puts a hand on my thigh. “And we will.”

“Let’s go now. They could attack again. Kill again like they killed Leslie.”

“Anora,” he says gently, looking at me before he backs out of the driveway. “You have a lot to process. Let’s just...let’s just get to your house and then come up with a plan.”

He’s right. I’m not thinking straight, haven’t allowed myself to fully process things. It’s easier to be pissed the fuck off and go looking for a fight than it is to accept what really happened. Ethan’s phone beeps with text messages the whole way to my place, and he checks them at a stoplight.

“The Wildlife Department did a sweep of the woods,” he tells me. “And the hiking trail off the neighborhood is closed.”

“I want to check on Mystery.”

“The barn is safe,” he says, showing me the text. “The doors were already closed, and someone named Penny said she’s keeping it that way.”

“Penny owns the barn.”

“Authorities are saying it could be a mountain lion attack. There hasn’t been one in years, but they’ve been spotted

before so it's not totally impossible, and it would fit in with the cattle being mutilated and eaten."

I nod, not sure what to make of that. It's good the authorities are following a lead that won't amount to anything. I twist my hair around my fingers, unable to get one of the last things Leslie said to me out of my mind.

Why the hell did I leave? I should have known better.

But she wasn't alone. There were a few other people at the barn.

She was wearing my jacket.

It's all my fault. The Pricolici are after me. They're here because of me.

They killed Leslie because of me.

Both Ethan and Julia spoke about how hard it is to have any sort of normal life or relationships giving their line of work. It's more than not being able to tell people the truth about what they do. What they do is dangerous, and sometimes work can follow you home. I didn't see the writing on the wall before.

I thought I could have my cake and eat it too.

Be a witch. Kill demons. And still go on with my day-to-day life.

"Do you want to watch a movie?" Ethan parks in front of my house.

"Sure."

He gives my thigh a squeeze and gets out, unbuckling Hunter for me. Moving on autopilot, I carry the leftovers Mom packed for us into the house. Hunter runs in ahead of us, and I put the food on the coffee table and then sink down on the couch.

"You can't blame yourself," Ethan starts.

"I can, though. I know I didn't send the Pricolici to attack Leslie, and I didn't tell her to go outside toward the woods for whatever reason, but the blame is on me. The demons are after

me for one reason or another, and she got caught in the crossfire and it's not fucking fair."

My face crumples and Ethan pulls me to him, running his fingers through my hair. "I know," he agrees. "It's not your fault the demons are after you. You didn't summon anything or put Leslie in harm's way on purpose. But you're right. It's not fair, not at all, and I'm sorry this happened, Anora. Demons don't care. They'll kill whatever is in their way, but it's not your fault."

"I thought the hardest part about this was having my friends believe me. Now I know it's hoping they don't get mixed up and hurt."

"It's a lonely lifestyle," he says quietly. "But I'm not going anywhere, and a demon has yet to kill me." He kisses my forehead. Eyes falling shut, I swallow the lump in my throat and try not to think about anything. Ethan turns on the TV.

"Do you want any comfort food?"

"No," I tell him. My appetite is gone, and I don't know when it will ever come back. "You can eat though."

"Nah, I'm good. I'll put the food away." He kisses me and gets up, taking the leftovers and putting them in the fridge. He comes back, covering us both with a blanket. The next hour passes in a haze, and the rollercoaster of emotions I'm on is making me nauseous.

Ethan's phone rings, and he reaches across me to pick it up off the coffee table. "It's my dad. I should take it." He goes into the kitchen to answer, and Hunter takes his place. I wrap my arms around him, burying my face in his fur.

Ethan comes back a moment later.

"My dad was able to get Isaac, the hunter who dealt with the Pricolici before, to come into town to help us track those fuckers down and kill the demon sending them. He's at the house now."

"Then let's go." I get to my feet, eyes wide and heart set on revenge.

“Isaac is old and paranoid and won’t talk if there are outsiders around. I’ll go, find out what I can, and will come back.”

Feeling like I got another punch to the gut, I nod. “Okay.”

He kisses me, tongue slipping past my lips. My hands go to his waist, fingers hooking around his belt. I pull him to me, kissing him harder.

“Anora,” he starts, pulling away and resting his forehead against mine. “I...I...be careful, okay?”

“I will.”

I walk him to the door and lock it behind him once he leaves. Hunter, who’s still on the couch, lets out a soft whine, tail wagging. I go back to him, pulling my Book of Shadows from the coffee table and into my lap.

“They want me,” I tell Hunter. “And I’m not just some damsel in distress.” I close my eyes, feeling heat gathering around my fingertips. Holding my hand up, I look at my fingers and feel a sense of clarity. Tiny flames ignite from each finger, burning steadily for a minute before I close my fist and put the fire out.

I have power, the ability to kill demons without breaking a sweat. I might not have grown up as a hunter, but dammit, I’m capable.

There are few things in life I’m one hundred percent certain about, but one is and always will be that I’m loyal to a fault when it comes to my friends and family. I’ll do whatever I can to support them...to protect them.

And I know what I have to do right now.



THE PARKING LOT IS COMPLETELY EMPTY AT HOLLOW CREEK Stables. I was almost worried there would be a police officer here, patrolling the pasture, waiting for the mountain lion to

attack again. It started raining on my way here, and the oncoming storm drove the search party home.

I put my Prius in park, grab the enchanted dagger, and get out of the car. Something comes over me as I attach the dagger to my belt. I can't explain it, but it's like my shell has broken and I know without a doubt who I am.

And I am a witch.

The empty parking lot holds nothing but shadows that jump and shift with the blowing wind. The cold, damp air sends a chill throughout my entire body, and whatever drove me to come here starts to fade. Every fiber of my being tells me to get back in the car, drive home, tuck myself under my comfy blankets, and go to sleep.

But I can't. I shouldn't. And I'm already here.

With a deep breath, I take a step toward the barn. An odd feeling of empowerment washes over me. Another step and I'm feeling brave. I slowly open the barn door and look around.

A few horses are lying down, ready for a restful night's sleep. I close the door behind me and feel a false sense of security from the familiar setting. I reach into my pocket and pull out a handful of roots and string. I tie a piece of Devil's Shoestring above every door. According to the Book of Shadows, it will help repel evil forces.

I go around the back of the barn and scan the horizon. A loud crack of thunder makes me jump. Dammit, my bravado has escaped me already, but all it takes is thinking of Leslie getting dragged into the woods by demonic bounty hunters to fuel the anger inside me, driving me to push forward.

I step outside, and nothing but darkness and fog stands in front of me. Courage surges again, and I head towards the woods.

Drops of rain fall from the sky with so much force that they sting my cheeks, making me wish I'd worn a hat. The pitter-patter of rain on the fallen leaves masks the sound of anything lurking about in the dark forest. Breath clouding

around me as I exhale, I cling onto the last bit of remaining courage I have.

“Just get it together,” I tell myself, unsheathing the dagger. I can magically summon fire, for fuck’s sake. “You are a badass witch. You can do this.”

Swallowing my fear, I push into a jog, thankful for all those times I took Hunter running. I’m panting by the time I reach the end of the horse trails, and the big, twisted tree comes into view. Halting, I put my hands on my thighs and lean forward, gulping in air. Giving myself a minute to catch my breath, I straighten up and then yell, “Okay, you stupid demons! Come and get me!”

I regret saying that the moment the words escape from my lips.

A low growl comes from a few feet to my left. Heart racing, I turn, unable to see anything through the dark trees. Another growl, this one low and taunting, drifts through a tangle of weeds right in front of me. Coming here alone was a stupid idea. I slowly turn to face my insidious enemy.

Lightning flashes across the sky like a strobe light, and in each brief moment of light, I can see a huge, black, wolf-like shape looming closer. My heart pounds in my chest. My eyes widen, and my breath leaves me. Another boom of thunder rings out above us.

With a warning snarl, the Pricolici lunges at me. I throw out my left hand, summoning fire around my fingers. I thrust my hand forward, sending the flames in its direction. They hit the Pricolici in the face, burning its fur and making it yelp and slink away, but only for a moment. I pull the dagger from its sheath, heart racing a million miles an hour.

I wrap both hands around the dagger, getting ready. Instinct takes over, and I thrust my hands forward the same time the Pricolici comes at me. The force of its own body working against it, the dagger slides into its chest with ease. I focus all my energy into the fire, perfectly channeling it through the dagger.

One high-pitched whine is drowned out by a clap of thunder. The fire erupts from its stomach, and a second later, the whole thing explodes, covering me in ash and blood.

“Sick,” I say, standing up and flicking a glob of fur off my coat.

Twigs snap a few feet in front of me. Adrenaline pumps throughout my body, and I’m ready for another attack. My breath quickens, and I brace myself, holding the dagger in front of me. Something feels familiar. I stare into the woods, trying to get a better reading.

“Anora?” a deep voice calls.

“Ethan?” I call back.

“Thank God.” He rushes over and puts his hands on my shoulders. “What the hell are you doing out here? I went to your house and you weren’t there. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” I tell him. “And I’m sorry to worry you, but I can’t sit back and let the Pricolici kill anyone else.”

“I know.” He cradles me to his chest.

“How did you know I was out here?”

“Demons killed your friend and you want revenge,” he says. “I would have done the same.”

“I have to do this,” I tell him. “I have to stop waiting and face them.”

His eyes meet mine and his jaw tenses. “You don’t have to do it alone.” He takes my hand, and not too far away, a Pricolici howls. “What was that flash of light?”

“I killed a Pricolici, and it kind of exploded.”

“That’s...that’s awesome,” Ethan tells me. The Pricolici howls again. “It’s coming closer. We need to be ready.”

The rain starts to come down harder, making it even more difficult to hear what’s lurking around us. Suddenly, something jumps out of the shadows, growling. It moves too fast to be the one we heard howling in the distance. They’re starting to surround us.

Ethan draws his gun, aiming it at the demon. The Pricolici is silver and would have been beautiful save for the fact that it's pure evil and wants nothing other than to bring me to its demon master. It sniffs the air in front of Ethan and moves on, teeth bared, towards me. Slimy drool drips from its yellowed fangs.

Ethan puts his arm out to block me from harm and fires his gun three times. The thing collapses. I let out a ragged breath and take Ethan's extended hand. More eerie howls echo throughout the silence.

"We're being surrounded," I exclaim in a state of panic. Ethan turns away from me.

"Keep your back to mine. We can see better that way."

"Okay," I say weakly. I take a deep breath and swallow my fear.

A huge gray shape gallops toward me. I hold up my hand right as it lunges, and a shield of fire surrounds me, just long enough to push the Pricolici away.

Angry, it slowly circles us, and lightning flashes again. It's tall, maybe a few inches taller than Hunter. Its long legs end in huge talon-like paws. Its dark eyes drill into mine. It moves its gaze to Ethan, snarls, and then lunges.

Ethan fires his gun, the shot echoing throughout the stormy forest. It isn't enough to stop the Pricolici. The demon soars through the air, landing on top of Ethan. Ethan staggers back, right into me. I'm shoved forward and fall hard on my knees, sliding on the muddy ground.

I frantically scramble to get up without cutting myself on the dagger's sharp blade. Wet hair falls into my eyes, and I can't see. Strangled growls come from deep within the Pricolici. I push my hair back to see Ethan struggling to hold it away from him.

A dark shadow moves through the forest, whooshing right past me. I scramble to my feet, and my fingers slip as I try to tighten my hold on the dagger. It falls to the ground, thudding

in the soft mud, and I bring my hand up, fingers soaked from the rain, and fail to summon the fire.

The dark shadow surrounds Ethan, but instead of attacking him, it knocks the Pricolici off and snaps its neck. Suddenly, the shadow creature lurches forward in my direction and then reshapes itself.

“Hunter,” I exclaim, eyes going wide. My German Shepherd stands before me, golden eyes locking with mine. “You...” I start, mind going back to a page in the Book of Shadows about familiars. They are spirits who take the form of an animal that has some sort of significance to their master but aren’t actually corporeal beings.

Hunter inches forward, and in that moment, I know it to be true. He’s my familiar, and suddenly, it all makes sense. The way he just showed up. Why he’s so well behaved. How he just always seems to know when I’m in a bad mood or need cheering up.

We’ve been bonded since the day he walked into my life, and he’s been waiting patiently ever since for me to come to this very conclusion.

“Anora!” Ethan yells, and I tear my eyes away from Hunter, though somehow, we’re still connected. I pick up the dagger, and another Pricolici races over. Hunter lets me know there’s one more coming up behind us.

“Get it,” I tell him and raise my dagger. The Pricolici goes for Ethan, who’s still on the ground. He brings his gun up and shoots the demon right in the chest, but the thing keeps coming. Blood pours from its wounds, only slowing it down a little. The dagger grows hot in my hands, and I bring it down into the Pricolici’s back.

Another explosion leaves us covered in smoldering demon parts. Ethan sits up enough to wrap an arm around me and grabs his gun.

“Duck!” he yells and pulls me into his lap. I lower my head. The shot rings in my ears. I twist and see another Pricolici limping away. We scramble up and Hunter comes

over, turning into the shadow-creature that is his true form, and then shifting into the familiar shape of a dog.

“He’s my familiar,” I say, eyes wide.

Ethan slowly looks from Hunter to me and back again. “Fuck.”

“Right?”

I hold my hand out and Hunter presses his nose into my palm. “He’s not actually a dog.” He snaps his head to the side, and somehow, I know that he can hear other Pricolici closing in on us. “He says there’s more. A lot more. Does that mean —”

“The demon sending them must be close,” Ethan finishes for me. “Yes.” He takes my hand. “We need to run, Anora.”

“Run? What about fighting?”

“We have no idea what we are fighting. The Pricolici are nothing compared to their master.”

A single howl causes my skin to break out in goosebumps. The sound echoes off the tall trees. Rain loudly patters on the leaves. Another clap of thunder rolls above us. Dozens of howls answer the call, floating through the air, and Hunter nudges me, agreeing with Ethan. I’m not ready to face whatever is commanding the Pricolici. Not yet, at least.

“Where should we go?” I ask, not sure where we are. “The barn?”

“We’re closer to the trails that lead to the neighborhood. We’re not too far,” he says, trying to reassure me. “We’ll make it.”

We only make it a few steps when another demon dog leaps from the darkness. I hold up the dagger, flames surrounding my hand for a few seconds before the magic is channeled through it, and the blade grows red hot in my hands, only to fade. Shit. I’m running out of energy. Ethan steps in front of me and raises his gun.

Then another growl comes from behind us. Ethan twitches but doesn’t take his eyes off the Pricolici advancing on him.

I slowly turn, putting my back to Ethan's. *Come on...you can do it.* I need to find energy somewhere. I have to do this. The Pricolici raises its head, sniffing deeply. It looks more human-like than the others, which means it's younger, hasn't killed as many people.

It will never kill again.

I rush forward and slip in the slick mud, tripping over my own feet. Ethan takes the dagger from me and sinks it into the Pricolici's neck. Blood pours from the wound, and the Pricolici yelps and backs away, making it a few feet before slouching down.

"You okay?" Ethan asks, giving me the dagger.

"Yeah," I tell him, inhaling deeply and feeling my energy come back. "You?"

"I'll be better once we get out of here," he says right as another Pricolici jumps from the shadows at us. Ethan fires the gun again, but only one bullet shoots out before I hear the gun make an empty *clink*. Shit. I know from movies what that sound means.

I turn my head to see a black mass barely moving on the ground. And another not far behind that.

Hunter.

He's our only hope to get away right now, because it doesn't matter how well I can channel my powers or how good of a demon-hunter Ethan is, we can't take on an entire pack of Pricolici. Hunter circles us and then shifts into the black shadow again. He's going to buy us time, killing as many Pricolici as he can while we try to make our escape.

I look up, my eyes meeting Ethan's in the dark. He puts his gun in its holster and nods. He tilts his head in the direction we need to go. I blink away raindrops and take off, falling in step behind Ethan. Cold mud splatters under my feet. We push forward, struggling over the natural obstacles of the forest.

I slip as I climb a ravine. Ethan turns and helps me scramble to my feet. Too out of breath to say thank you, I nod and push forward. My lungs burn. *Please let us be close to*

Ethan's house. I'm not sure how much longer I can last before I collapse onto the ground, gasping for air and exhausted. It already feels like we've been running for miles and miles.

Suddenly, Ethan stops and spins around. He puts his hands on my shoulders. "Catch your breath," he pants.

How did he know I was dying back here? I look into his eyes and gasp for air. Once this is over, I need to up my workouts. Well...if I make it out of the woods alive.

A howl comes from the woods along with a crackle of thunder. My body tenses, and I suck in a breath only to quickly let it out, close to hyperventilating.

Ethan steps over closer and kisses me. Everything disappears for that small moment—the wind and the rain, the Pricolici, the fact that I'm always going to be in danger—it all melts away with the warmth of Ethan's kiss.

He pulls back, eyes looking right into mine. "Better?"

I let out a slow breath. "Yes. Thanks."

"Close your eyes and breathe," he whispers.

I close my eyes, focusing on my breathing. A few seconds later, I'm ready to keep going. Ethan takes my hand and starts forward, going slower than before. Hunter leaps from the forest behind us, giving me an encouraging yip.

When more howls echo behind us, we sprint ahead at full speed. Slowing, we emerge from the woods, ducking under police caution tape, but it's not until we're on the road leading to Ethan's dad's house that I allow myself to semi-relax.

"Are...they...following us?" I start.

"I don't think they'll come this close to the road. Too many cars."

We inch forward and bright headlights from a car blind me. Lungs burning, I feel like I'm suffocating when I try to take in air. Hunter's cold nose presses into my hand, calming me. By the time we reach the road, I can breathe again. We have a few blocks to walk before we get to Ethan's dad's house, and the wind picks up blowing rain into my face. My

breath clouds around me, and I wonder if it's cold enough for frostbite.

The modern-farmhouse house never looked as welcoming as it does right now. A yellow glow shines through the front window. Water splashes under our feet as we hurry up the porch steps. Ethan retrieves the key from his pocket and opens the door.

"Where is everyone?" I ask.

"I was halfway here when my dad said Isaac would only talk after they took him out for dinner."

"He sounds pleasant," I grumble and Ethan laughs.

"He's a grumpy old man, that's for sure."

Hunter shakes water off his fur before coming in, and I step in behind him, shivering.

"Sorry I got you into this mess," I tell Ethan through chattering teeth as I unzip my coat. It's dripping with water. I hold it in front of me, trying to catch the drops that patter onto the hardwood floor.

"If it wasn't *this mess* it would be another," he starts, peeling off his own wet jacket. "And I'd rather be in it with you than anyone else." We go upstairs and into his bedroom, where he pulls a laundry basket from his closet, stripping out of his wet clothes, standing before me in only his boxers. I can't help but notice how beautiful a man he is.

I throw my jacket on top of his clothes and struggle with the button on my jeans, my fingers too cold to work right. My cheeks are warm from running, and my body is an annoying mixture of hot and cold. Trembling, I peel the wet denim from my legs and pull my sweater over my head.

"Want to take a shower?" Ethan asks.

"That sounds wonderful." Ethan grabs my hand and leads me into the bathroom. He turns the shower on and pulls the curtain closed, waiting for the water to warm up. "You could have been killed, Anora."

“But I wasn’t,” I counter, though I know how close we came. “Hunter,” I start, able to sense him in the living room below us.

“Is your familiar,” Ethan finishes. “Him killing a Pricolici makes sense now.”

“I didn’t know they looked like that...like...like ghosts,” I say, thinking of the black shadow. “My book called them spirits who bond with witches, aiding them in their magic. I assumed it meant a friendly black cat would help me pick out which herbs to burn for good luck, not have a killer German Shepherd that can rip apart demons.”

Ethan tests the temperature of the water and I suddenly remember Daisy, Aunt Estelle’s German Shepherd. It was a female dog, just like Harrison said. She was a retired show dog, adopted after years of being relentlessly bred.

And she looked just like Hunter.

“The book said they take on a familiar shape, which is how they got the name, *familiar*. My aunt had a German Shepherd. It wasn’t magical, but I liked her,” I say slowly as the memory comes back. “She really liked peanut butter, and Harrison and I wanted a dog, but our parents wouldn’t let us get one since they weren’t home enough.”

“So, he took on the form of the dog you wanted.”

“Yeah,” I say and feel a little emotional again when I think about my beloved pup—who’s not a pup at all. Steam from the shower starts to billow out at us. Ethan pulls back the curtain and we step in.

“I know things fucking suck right now,” Ethan says, pulling the curtain closed. Hot water pours down on me, and Ethan’s hands go to my waist. “But it’s going to be okay. *You* are going to be okay.”

I nod, believing him. *I* will be okay, somehow, I just know it. But it’s not me I’m worried about.

Chapter Thirty

I wake up alone in Ethan's bed, with Hunter sleeping on a folded blanket on the floor next to me. The door to the room is shut, and Ethan left his closet light on so I wouldn't wake in pitch black. Since my clothes are wet and in the laundry, I wrap the comforter around myself and go to Ethan's dresser, pulling out a pair of athletic pants. They're way too big of course, and I roll up the waistband a few times and hope they don't fall down. I feel a little invasive rustling through his closet, finding a black t-shirt to pull over my head.

The dagger is on the dresser, next to Ethan's phone. I tap the screen to check the time. I've been asleep for over an hour and my head feels all foggy. Resting my hands on the dresser, I try to push everything away, but it all comes rushing back.

Leslie is dead.

I'll never see her smiling face again.

We'll never ride together again.

And she'll never get the chance to start her family.

"Fuck." Tears sting the corners of my eyes and I take in a slow breath, trying to keep from bursting into tears. Hunter gently paws my leg and I sink to the ground, throwing my arms around him. "You're not really a dog, but you certainly look and feel like one," I tell Hunter. "And you comfort like one." I bury my face in his fur and someone softly knocks on the door.

"Come in," I say, blinking away the tears that roll down my cheeks.

“Hey.” Sam steps in, flicking on the light. I close my eyes, blinking from the harsh light. “Oh, sorry,” she says but doesn’t sound that sorry at all. Wiping my eyes, I get to my feet.

“Is Ethan downstairs?”

“He’s talking to Isaac about the Pricolici. We’ve never heard of them attacking anyone but their target.”

“Does he know anything about that?”

“I’m not sure yet, but if he does, we’ll find out. And, um, you know, he, um, doesn’t like...um...”

“Outsiders?” I supply.

Her eyes meet mine. “Witches.”

For a second, I think she’s being catty with me, but then I realize she’s telling the truth. “Does he know I’m a witch?”

“No, but if you talk to him, you’re going to have to alter some details. Starting with your dog being just a dog.” She eyes Hunter nervously.

“Ethan told you?”

“He gave me some rushed details. You really went out in the woods alone with the intention of killing the Pricolici and finding the demon?”

“Yes. They’re after me, and I don’t want anyone else to get hurt because of it.”

“I respect that,” she says, still being honest. “I’m really sorry about your friend. It’s never easy to lose anyone.”

“You say that like you have.” I twist my damp hair over my shoulder.

“I have. Quite a few times. It’s...it’s partly why I don’t like any newbies coming into our little circle. They tend to die.” She gives me a half smile and nudges me with her elbow. “But you seem pretty resilient.”

“I’d call myself scrappy,” I say and Sam laughs. “Should I stay upstairs?”

“No, come down with us.”

I force a smile and follow Sam downstairs, with Hunter trailing right behind. What does Isaac have against witches? David and Ethan are in the living room, standing by the window that looks out over the back yard.

“You better hope no one else finds out,” David says harshly, and Ethan shakes his head, jaw set as he angrily stares down his father. “This is our life. Don’t jeopardize it for a good time. We know how they are, and you know we can’t trust them. If it was anyone else, the Order would—”

“Hey, guys,” Sam says loudly, clearly interrupting a conversation I wasn’t supposed to hear.

“Anora.” Ethan steps away from his father, crossing the room. “You okay?”

“Physically, yes. Mentally...that’s another story.”

He brushes my damp hair back. “I know,” he says gently.

“Did you find anything else out?” I ask, flattening my palms against Ethan’s chest.

“Yes and no.” He motions to the kitchen. “Instead of relaying the message, let’s talk to Isaac.”

“That’s not a good idea,” David says.

“I talked to her,” Sam says quietly. “She won’t say anything.”

I’m definitely missing something here, but now’s not the time to get into it. The Pricolici have to be tracked so I can kill the demon before someone else gets hurt.

“Sit,” David says and motions to the couch. “I’ll bring him in.”

Ethan and I sit together on the couch. “It’s okay not to be okay,” he tells me, putting his arm around my shoulders. “For a little while, at least.”

“I know.” I rest my head on his shoulder, feeling better to be close to him like this, but dammit, I’m starting to question things again. “Why doesn’t Isaac like witches? Actually,” I start and sit up straight, “your dad said there are no more

witches in my coven, but then you said the Lancasters are still alive and well, and how can Isaac hate witches if there aren't any left for him to meet?"

Ethan's brows furrow and he inhales. "Anora, I—" He cuts off when his dad, Julia, and an old man who has to be Isaac comes into the room.

"So, this is the pretty little redhead that's gotten our boy here in a twist." Isaac unscrews the lid to a well-worn metal flask. "I can see why he likes you."

"Her name is Anora," Sam interjects.

I meet her eye and give her a tiny nod of thanks, noticing the glare Julia gave her, making me wonder if the Order is big on the whole *respect your elders* thing, even when said elders are drunk creepy old men.

"Well, Anora," he starts and takes a drink from his flask. "I can see why Ethan likes you, but not why the demons have been sent after you. You have no idea why?"

I shake my head. "I didn't know demons existed until they attacked."

"You didn't make a deal with one?" His eyes narrow.

"We already went over this," Ethan says, apparently not the only one annoyed by Isaac. "She didn't do anything that would have caused a demon to put a bounty on her head."

"I see." Isaac takes another drink, and the smell of whiskey hits me, making my stomach twist. He screws the lid back on and gives me a hard look. "I suppose the root of the problem isn't as dangerous as the branches. We snap those off and the tree will shrivel and die."

His tree analogy doesn't make the most sense, but I get what he's saying. "We were surrounded," Ethan starts. "If we hadn't made it back inside, well, we'd be fucked."

"How many would you say were out there?"

"Over a dozen, at least. We killed a good handful, but they kept coming."

Isaac nods, tapping his fingers on the flask. “And they killed her friend?”

“They did,” Ethan answers. “She was wearing Anora’s jacket, and they’d already gotten Anora’s scent.”

“In all my years, I haven’t heard of the Pricolici killing anyone but their target. Brings too much attention to them. They had a fresh kill, and then hours later, went out in droves after her.” He points a finger at me.

“Right.”

“They’re mad and desperate,” Isaac goes on. “And so is the demon sending them. I’m guessing the demon is mighty mad after several failed attempts to capture her.”

“What do we do?” Sam asks. “How are we supposed to injure and track one when dozens are attacking?”

“You try,” Isaac says back bluntly. “And I’d suggest leaving it to Ethan and David.”

Sam’s eyes widen, and she opens her mouth to protest, but Julia gives her another look. Pressing her lips together, Sam huffs back in her chair. She’s not my biggest fan, but I’m pissed for her, since Isaac basically told her to leave it to the men.

Fucking bullshit.

“I think it’s also safe to say the demon sending the Pricolici is one bad dude,” Julia says almost meekly.

“You can bet on that,” Isaac says and takes another drink. How he’s still functioning is beyond me.

“It’s been a long, bad evening.” Ethan moves his fingers in little circles on my arm. “We’re not going to track anything tonight, so I’m going to call it a night.” His eyes meet mine, knowing I’m close to breaking down again. “Want to go to your place?”

“Yes. I need to take care of Romeo.”

“Romeo?” Sam questions.

“He’s a ferret,” I answer, and usually fight the urge to show pictures of his cute face on my phone. I don’t have my phone with me, and I don’t feel much of anything inside, which is a temporary reprieve from the pain of losing a friend.

“I’m going to grab my shit.” Ethan kisses me and gets up, hurrying up the stairs. Not wanting to be the subject of scrutiny, I mumble that I have to use the bathroom. Hunter follows, stopping outside the door. Now that I think of it, he’s always been rather respectful of my privacy, though he’s very much a bed hog.

Isaac is standing in the hall when I come out of the bathroom, startling me. I’m still on edge and probably will stay on edge for the rest of my life.

“Sorry,” I say, thinking he was waiting to use the bathroom, but instead of saying it’s okay or something of the like, he grabs my arm, eyes narrowing. Hunter growls and Isaac lets go but continues to stare me down.

“You might have Ethan fooled, and David may be turning a blind eye for the sake of his son. But you don’t have me fooled. Packs of Pricolici wouldn’t go after just some person, and the demon sending them wants you but doesn’t want to risk coming after you themselves. So, tell me, Anora, who are you? Or should I say *what* are you?”

“Who or what I am is none of your damn business,” I snap and stride forward, finding Ethan coming into the kitchen. “My car is at the barn,” I tell him. “I should get it so no one questions why it’s there in the morning.”

“Good thinking,” he says and hands me a hooded sweatshirt to put on before going out in the cold. My boots are soaking wet—again—and I’m shivering from the short walk from the house to Ethan’s Jeep. Hunter trots ahead, looking and acting so much like a real dog, the real dog I thought he was for years, I almost doubt what I saw not that long ago.

“I left the dagger in your room.” I pull the seatbelt over my torso, feeling numb inside again.

“I brought it,” Ethan tells me and starts the Jeep, turning up the heat. He doesn’t try to start a forced conversation or tell me how things are going to be okay on the short drive to the barn, and it’s one of the things that he just gets about me.

“Let me check things out before you get out,” Ethan says, and as soon as he opens the door, Hunter shifts into his black shadow spirit form and moves out of the Jeep.

Definitely didn’t imagine that.

Rain is still falling, forcing the chill to set deeper in my bones. I curl my fingers into my palms, feeling heat prickle my fingertips. Not wanting to set the barn on fire, I get out of the Jeep and close my eyes, letting rain fall on my face.

When I open my eyes, Bob is only a few feet from me, staring off into space.

“Dammit, Bob,” I mutter, jumping once again. Little embers fall from my hands, sizzling as soon as they hit the wet gravel. Hunter shadows over, shifting back into dog-form. He can see Bob too and lets me know he doesn’t think he’s posing any risk.

“Where are your keys?” Ethan asks.

“I left them in the car,” I say with a shrug. Bad idea, I know, but it’s not like I cared at the moment, and I’m still finding it hard to care. My car getting stolen is nothing compared to losing your life. “I’m going to check on Mystery.”

“I assumed you would.” Ethan takes my hand and Hunter runs ahead, waiting for us by the door. Everything is quiet and as it should be in the barn. Mystery is laying down resting, and I don’t want to wake him up. Sundance nickers softly when he sees me, and tears immediately spring to my eyes.

“I’m so sorry,” I whisper to him. Animals grieve the loss of their humans in a similar way as humans do, and Sundance has been Leslie’s horse since he was only three years old. Remembering Ethan’s words that it’s okay to not be okay, I don’t try to stop the tears from coming, and break down when we get to our cars.

Ethan envelops me in his arms, holding me as I cry. Sniffling, I bring my head away from his chest and let out a shaky breath as I look at the forest.

The demon is out there, watching and waiting. Don't confuse my tears with weakness, because no one messes with my friends or family and gets away with it. *I'm coming for you, motherfucker.*



I WAKE WITH A START, HEART RACING. I WAS IN THE WOODS again, being dragged over damp leaves. I'm so cold, warm blood spills from my wrists. It's two AM and Ethan isn't in bed with me, but Hunter is, taking up too much room at the foot of the bed.

"I'm okay," I tell him. "It was just another dream." I let out a breath and look for Romeo since the bedroom door is open and I left his cage open. I haven't been able to play with him as much as I normally do, but luckily, he's sleeping soundly tonight, or at least for now.

"You're up." Ethan comes into the room and closes the door behind him. He sets a glass of water on the nightstand. "I didn't wake you, did I?"

"No," I say as he gets back under the covers. "I had another dream about having my wrists slit and bleeding out in the forest." I sigh. "I'm fine."

Ethan pulls me to him and I resituate, resting my head on his chest. "You feel hot," I say, pushing up on my elbow and put my hand over his forehead. "You are hot. I'm going to take your temperature."

"I'm fine," he insists but then turns his head to cough.

"You didn't take your antibiotics today, did you?"

"The wound is healed. I don't need to anymore."

Swinging my feet over the side of the bed, I shiver as soon as I'm away from Ethan's body heat. My thermometer is in the

bathroom and there's a good chance it's out of batteries. I rustle through my very full medicine cabinet and find it. The low battery warning pops up, but it has enough juice to let me know Ethan has a fever.

"I'm going to get you some Advil," I tell him and turn on the light. "Your scratches don't look infected. Does your arm hurt?"

He shakes his head. "I'll be fine. Come back to bed and I'll sleep it off."

"It's a fever, not a hangover, and if you're coming down with something, it's best to treat the symptoms right away so you can recover faster."

"Hot water, a splash of lemon juice, half a teaspoon of cayenne pepper, and a shot of whiskey is the tried-and-true hunter cold remedy."

"That sounds disgusting."

"It is, but it works."

"In what sense? It sounds like a mix between a cleansing drink that clears you out and a Hot Toddy." I wrinkle my nose. "I'm getting you Advil."

That *hair standing up on the back of your neck* feeling starts to settle on me, and I close my eyes, forcing my mental shields up as high as I can get them to go. Ethan sits up when I return with the medicine and sounds all stuffy. I know colds can hit you hard and fast, but for something to come on this all of the sudden, it's more likely he has the flu.

"Thanks," he says with a cough.

"Go back to sleep," I urge. "I don't want to put any pressure on you, but I kinda need you not to be sick so we can fight demons."

"I'll be fine in the morning," he insists again, and we both settle back down. I rub his back until he's asleep, and then roll over, trying to get comfortable so I can fall asleep, but I can't turn off my damn mind.

I miss my friend, of course, but there's something else nagging at me, and the feeling that I'm missing something glaringly obvious is starting to eat away at me as well. The creepy dreams, the ghost Ryan, the bird-demons, and the Pricolici...they're all connected somehow. I just don't know how. I roll back over, hooking my leg over Ethan's and close my eyes. If Ethan has the flu, it's only a matter of time before I get it. I need to sleep.

Aunt Estelle...if you can hear me, I could really use you—I sit up as the thought enters my mind. For years, Aunt Estelle has been sending me weird presents. I wonder if I'll find them weird anymore. Careful not to wake Ethan, I pad out of the room, Hunter in toe, and go into the basement. It doesn't take long for me to sort through the boxes in the storage room before I find the one I'm looking for. It's too big and heavy to carry upstairs, so I drag it to the little clearing in front of my washer and dryer, sitting cross legged on the floor as I pull out random items.

"I remember getting this," I tell Hunter as I pull a tattered and worn book from the box. It's the size of a large chapter book, and the cover is sage green with no text or image on it. "I thought it was about creepy fairytale creatures and this pig-thing with fangs on the first page freaked me out. But it's not about fairytales. It's a book about demons." Tucking the book under my arm, I go back upstairs and into the living room.

My hands shake as I flip through the pages, silently praying I'll find answers. Starting to get nervous I won't get so lucky, I quickly flip through page after page. Nearly halfway through the book, I find them.

The bird-demons.

"Harvesters," I read out loud to Hunter. A rush of excitement flows through my veins. I finally know what the hell these things are. "An ancient, evil being summoned to collect, or 'harvest,' powers of other magical creatures. Often seen working alongside a more powerful demon, the Harvesters stop at nothing to obtain their goal. The Harvesters have a special ritual to extract one's powers, which usually results in the victim's demise. While these creatures possess

the strength of a man, battle is not their domain.” I sit still for a minute, letting that sink in. I want to tell Ethan, but he’s asleep and needs to rest. This isn’t anything that can’t wait until morning.

If Harvesters are after me, then someone wants my powers. But who? And how did they know about my powers when I only found out about them myself a few weeks ago?

Suddenly, darkness encases me. I feel the book slide off my lap and onto the floor. My heart pounds in my head. I lean against a tree, trying to catch my breath. I don’t know what they want from me. I’m so terrified. White-hot fear courses through my body, making me tremble. The barn is so close... I’ll be safe when I get there. After another few seconds, I sprint forward. I can see the dark silhouette of the barn and feel relief wash over my heart. I fall to the muddy ground to find the spare key. It’s been so long since I’ve used it, but it has to be around here somewhere. Frantically, I turn over stones and root through fallen leaves.

I feel the key just before hands with razor-sharp nails grasp my shoulders, throwing me back with such force that it knocks the wind out of me. My head cracks against the root of an oak tree. Once my fuzzy vision clears, the face of a Harvester looks down at me, hissing in delight.

My eyes fly open. I’m back in my living room.

“Oh my God,” I breathe shakily. Hunter is standing protectively at my side. “Ryan,” I say to Hunter. “The Harvesters were after him too!” I put my head in my hands, feeling terrible. Has he been trying to warn me the whole time? “I knew they were connected.” Hands trembling, I move to the floor, kneeling in front of the coffee table and opening my Book of Shadows, leafing through it to a spell about summoning spirits. I know the danger of casting a spell like this, especially for someone like me. I can alter it to make it safer, just to cover my bases.

Moving as quietly as I can, I pour a circle of salt on the floor and light four white candles. I mix lavender and sandalwood together in a small cast-iron cauldron and set it on

fire, using a lighter just to be safe. The smoke wafts around me. Inhaling, I whisper my spell.

“Spirits of the in-between, I conjure thee to be seen. You’ve whispered to me in the night, now come to me, be in my sight. Appear before is my command, in my sight is where you’ll stand. When I tell you to depart, go at once and leave no part of your world that can do harm. And hurt no one with this charm.”

A big cloud of smoke blows into my eyes, making them water like crazy. When I open them, I see that an eerie grayness has been cast over the room. Am I dreaming?

I try to stand, but there’s tremendous pressure pushing down on me. It’s like moving through deep sand. The candles in front of me are still, the flames frozen in place. I put my hand over it and feel no heat. Everything is silent. Hunter is here with me, but in his shadow form. It’s the first time I’ve gotten a good look at him like this, and in the back of my mind, I know he should terrify me. He has no definite shape, and his golden eyes glow more of a burnt-orange color.

He’s terrifying, the stuff of nightmares, yet I know he won’t hurt me. I’m his witch and he’s my familiar, just like he’s been this whole time, patiently waiting for my powers to become unbound.

“It’s okay,” a voice echoes through the gray. I turn back and find myself a few inches from Ryan. I open my mouth but don’t know what to say. “Hi,” won’t cut it.

“Anora.” His voice is a little stronger than a whisper. “I’m so sorry for what I’ve put you through, but I can only appear here or in dreams. I’ve been trying to warn you.”

“I’m sorry too. I couldn’t piece things together until now. Where...where are we?”

“The spirit realm. I can’t come to you without alerting her. But you, you’re able to come here.” He looks at Hunter. “And your familiar too.”

If Ryan knows about familiars, then he has to be a warlock...or something.

“The Harvesters,” I say, knowing we don’t have much time, and he flinches. “What did they want from you?”

“My powers. I can magnify the powers of crystals.”

“It was you who healed Ethan, wasn’t it?”

“Yes. And that night when she was there—” He starts to fade.

“Ryan?” I reach out for him, but my hand slides right through his arm, feeling like I stuck my hand in an electrified rain cloud.

“I don’t have much time, Anora.” Fear takes over his face. “You are in danger, the same danger I was in. Asaroth collects powers. She hunts people like us and sends her Harvesters to collect them. There’s something special about you, Anora. She was very excited when she found you. She even sent out the Pricolici to make she sure got the right one.” He looks at me as if he’s expecting me to tell him why I’m so special.

I shake my head. “I have no idea what she could want. I’m not the chosen one or anything like that.”

“Don’t agree to the ritual,” he rushes out.

“I never would.”

“They can’t take your powers unless you say yes. Surrendering your will is the first part of the ritual.” He looks down. “For me, they promised to stop the torture. But here I am, more than ten years later...”

“They won’t let you move on.” I remember the dream where I got sucked back into total despair.

Ryan nods. “There are others too. She won’t let us go, and we can’t move on. An aspect of ourselves is locked to this plane.”

“The powers.”

“Right.”

“If she has your powers, then how did you heal Ethan?”

“We can still tap into them from time to time, but it’s risky. Asaroth has been too distracted with finding you. It’s like she has a vendetta.”

“I have no idea what I could have done.” Now would be a really good time for my memories to come back, though I don’t see how ten-year-old me could have pissed off a demon this badly.

Ryan whirls around. “She’s coming. They can’t know we spoke.”

I blink. When I open my eyes, Hunter is standing over me, licking my face. I’d fallen backward on the salt circle, missing a candle by a mere few inches.

“Holy shit.” This changes everything.

Chapter Thirty-One

“Anora,” Ethan says, voice hoarse.

I blink my eyes open, and it takes effort to keep them open. Exhaustion hit me as I was cleaning the salt circle, and I barely made it into bed before passing out. The first time I used magic, my energy was drained. Traveling to the spirit world was even more draining.

“You sound terrible,” I grumble and sit up, feeling his forehead. “Shit, you’re burning up.” I get the thermometer from the nightstand and check his temp. Shit is right. He has a hundred-and-three fever, which went up since last night. It might be from being under the covers next to me. I hope.

“Your phone,” he says as he swallows hard. I can tell his throat hurts. Yep. This is definitely the flu. “It was ringing.”

“Oh. I’ll get it in a second. It’s probably my mom, checking on me.” I get out of bed, head still hazy, and refill Ethan’s water glass and return with his antibiotics as well as more Advil. My phone is in my purse in the living room, and the battery is almost dead since I didn’t charge it last night.

I have a missed call and a voicemail from an unknown number, and in my haste to plug my phone in before it dies, I accidentally call back the unknown number. Shit.

“Anora?” A male voice comes through the phone.

“Uh, yes?”

“It’s Marcus. I work with your brother.”

“Oh, uh, right.” Harrison said Marcus wanted my number. It’s only nine-thirty in the morning. Even if I was single, calling me this early would be a deal breaker.

“You’re Harrison’s emergency contact, which is why I’m calling.”

“Did something happen?” My blood goes cold and each rapid heartbeat hammers in my ears.

“That’s what we’re trying to find out,” Marcus says. “He never showed up for work today and no one can get ahold of him.”

My mouth opens but I can’t get any sound out. My brother is missing. Leslie was killed by demons yesterday and now my brother is missing.

“We went to *Martini’s* last night, but your brother checked out early. I’m guessing he’s passed out with a chick in his bed—sorry if that’s TMI.”

“No,” I say, somehow pulling myself together. “You’re probably right. I’ll go to his place and check things out.”

“Thanks. Keep me posted.”

I nod, not realizing that Marcus can’t see me, and let the phone slip from my fingers.

“What’s going on?” Ethan slowly sits up, looking like he might puke.

“Harrison never went to work this morning.” I pick up my phone again and call him. My breath leaves in ragged huffs and I wait, and the panic hits when I get Harrison’s voicemail. “I’m going to his apartment.”

“I’ll come with you.”

“Ethan, no,” I say and get to my feet. “You look and sound terrible. Har probably had too much to drink last night and is still passed out on his couch. He drinks too much when he’s upset, and I know last night really rattled him. I have a key so I’m going to go.”

“Okay,” Ethan says, which worries me. Relenting so easily isn’t like him. He must really be sick. “Take Hunter.” He lowers himself back onto the bed, coughing. I hate leaving him when he’s sick like this, especially when it came on so suddenly. What if he contracted some sort of demon disease from when the Harvesters scratched him?

“Rest,” I tell him, kissing his lips before I go to leave. Hunter reminds me I stripped out of my pants before crawling into bed last night, and I yank on black leggings, and trade Ethan’s oversized t-shirt for something a bit more form fitting and easier to move around in.

The rain has stopped, but it’s another cold day. Not taking the time to put on a jacket, I race to my car and speed the whole way to Harrison’s apartment. I call him ten more times, and the calls all go to voicemail.

The drive to his apartment almost kills me from anxiety, and by some miracle—or maybe magic—a car pulls away from a spot right in front of his building. I punch in the code to get in and run through the lobby. The elevator doors have just closed, and I stand there, breathing hard with a racing heart for what feels like forever as I wait for it to come back down and then up to Harrison’s floor.

I fish the key out of my purse as I run down the hall, but as soon as I get to his apartment, I know I won’t need it. The door is slightly ajar.

“Harrison!” I yell, bursting in without a second thought. “Harrison!” He’s not passed out on the couch, and he doesn’t answer. “Fuck.” I run to his room, throwing open the door. He’s not in bed either. In a mad rush, I look through his entire apartment, including the balcony. “Harrison!” I spin around, hoping and praying I somehow missed him, but he’s not here.

I take my phone out of my pocket and call Harrison. Set to vibrate, I jump when I hear his phone buzzing on the cold granite countertop behind me. I stumble back, leaning against the wall for support. What do I do? This isn’t a regular missing persons case and calling the police would only slow things down.

Panicking isn't going to help either and I need to think clearly if I want to find my brother—which I will. Demons took him, I know that for sure. Ryan said the transfer of power only works if I agree to the ritual.

The demon is using my twin as leverage.

If I find the demon, I'll find Harrison. And if the demon is going to use Harrison to get me to agree to anything, then Harrison is still alive—for now.

I call Ethan as I hurry out of the apartment. He doesn't answer, and I don't remember if his phone was in the bedroom or not. If he's sleeping, then he didn't hear it.

"Hey," I say, leaving Ethan a message. My voice shakes. "Harrison isn't here, and demons took him, I know. I have to tell you about the Harvesters. It's all connected. They want me to agree but I won't and they took Harrison." I end the call, not caring that my message was crazy rambling. My pulse bounds the entire way home, and adrenaline surges through me, making my entire body shake.

"Ethan," I call when I get into the house. "I don't know what to—" I cut off when Hunter doesn't come running to greet me. I close my eyes, and I can't sense him in the house. "No!" I run into my room. The bed is empty, and the smell of sulfur lingers in the air. This demon—Asaroth—has it out for me. He's pulling out all the stops to get me to agree to surrender my powers. Taking my familiar, my brother and my boyfriend are perfect bargaining chips. But Ethan...he's no easy target. He grew up hunting demons. He knows their tricks. He's able to defend himself.

But not when he's sick.

"Fuck," I mutter and drop to my knees, blindly reaching under the bed, and find a small clay disc with some sort of symbol etched into it, with blood smeared over top. It's a hex, and it must have been put under the bed while we were away at Ethan's house last night. I break the piece of clay in half and stand back up.

Saving Hunter, Harrison, and Ethan means walking right into a trap, but what choice do I have? I'm going to find them, and I'm not going to agree to any sort of power-stealing ritual. I'm going to kill Asaroth, and I'm going to make it hurt.

Romeo pounces across the bed, startling me. I pick him up, kissing his furry little head, and take him with me into the kitchen, grabbing a can of rabbit meat. I give it all to him and lock him in his cage for safe keeping.

Ethan's bag is on the floor by the bed, and I pull out the dagger along with several other weapons. I attach my dagger as well as a set of throwing knives to a belt. But now what?

"Ryan?" I whisper. "Where are they?"

The image of the old white barn flashes into my head. The barn is gone, but the root cellar is still very much there.

"Thank you," I say. Pulling my hair into a ponytail, I look around for Ethan's phone. I don't have his dad's number. "Dammit." I dump the contents of Ethan's bag onto the ground, but his phone isn't there. I waste precious time looking for it but give up and move on.

I speed to Ethan's house and run up the porch steps, getting weird looks from a group of moms out pushing their babies in strollers, and ring the doorbell. A few seconds pass and no one answers the door. I ring it again and cup my hands around my face, looking through the glass on the door.

But the house is empty.

Panic rises inside of me, and I turn around, wanting to both scream and cry. Heat gathers around my fingers, and I press my hands to my thighs as I run back to my car. I drive to the back of the neighborhood, parking along the street. I get out and sprint right into the woods.



I SHOULD HAVE FOUND THE ROOT CELLAR BY NOW.

It feels like I've been walking for hours, aimlessly in circles at that. Every second that ticks by is one second too many, and the desperation to find my friends makes it hard to concentrate or think clearly.

The barn is only a few miles from Emerald Ridge if you go in a straight shot. There are hundreds of acres of woods out here though, and I could spend all day looking in the wrong places, walking right past the entrance to the root cellar. If I can find the pond, I'll be able to find the root cellar.

And then I can find Harrison, Ethan, and Hunter.

I stumble my way down a ravine and splash through a shallow creek. I have to be getting closer to the pond. Mist rises from the water's surface, looking unnatural. Creepy is good, right? Creepy means I'm closing in on the demon. I slip on the slick muddy bank and throw my arms out to regain my balance. As soon as I have my footing, a snowy-white Pricolici steps from the fog. It shows its fangs, and for a brief moment, I consider letting it grab me and take me to the demon, but it's not like the Pricolici is going to be gentle on our way there.

I hold out the dagger, heat collecting around my hand. I square my shoulders and stare down the Pricolici. It lunges for me, leaping over the creek. I thrust the dagger up, cutting deep into its chest. Fire ignites inside the Pricolici, and I scramble back just in time to see it explode into a smoldering pile of fur and guts.

My sense of direction has been thrown off—again. If I close my eyes, Ryan might be able to show me where to go. But if I close my eyes, I'll be an easy target for another demon dog. I think of Ethan and my brother and Hunter. My eyelids fall shut, and I take off in the direction that feels correct in my heart.

I lean against a tree to catch my breath, peering through the woods. My breath clouds around me, swirling into the cold air. Goosebumps rise over my arms, and my cheeks are flush from fear. Every noise makes me jump, and I feel eyes on me. The ground is slick from yesterday's rain, and I slip as I hike

up another hill. Something feels familiar and muted sunlight reflects off the pond. Yes! I'm almost there!

My nerves prickle as I run to the disturbed ground where I fell through the covered root cellar. I resheathe the dagger, turn the flashlight on my phone, and sit on the ground, feet dangling in the opening. I'm fucking terrified, both of demons and of losing those I care most about in this world. Closing my eyes, I drop down, landing on the wobbly desk that Ethan had moved over.

"Ethan?" I hold up the light, whirling around. "Harrison?"

But no one answers. The basement is empty.

Chapter Thirty-Two

No, this can't be. This is it. I saw it. Ryan confirmed it. *This* is the spot. If they're not here, then...I have no idea where they are. I blink back tears and fight off the dizziness that crashes down on me.

I don't know what to do.

"No," I say to myself, refusing to give up. I climb down off the desk and shine the light around the cellar one more. This place is full of broken furniture and pieces of the original barn, which probably fell in while they were burning it down.

Slowly, I shine the light from my phone around the cellar and notice a literal hole in the wall. I move pieces of wood away from what looks like an old, boarded-up-door frame, and step down a couple feet onto a hard dirt path leading to a roughly dug-out tunnel. Following the creepy demon-made tunnel is a surefire way to die, I know, and I'm about turn around when I notice light flickering ahead.

I turn off the flashlight and pocket my phone, not wanting to give myself away. I press up against the dirt wall and slowly edge forward. The tunnel turns sharply into a large cavern. Stained and tattered sheets hang on the dirt walls, dividing the large room into little sections.

I slip behind one of the curtains, shaking, terrified of finding Harrison and Ethan strung up with their throats slit, blood draining into dirty buckets. A large, rusty metal cage holds back a huge dog.

Hunter.

He lets me know the metal of the cage is enchanted and will hurt me if I touch it. I don't know exactly how the turning into a shadow-spirit works, but I was hoping he'd be able to shift right out of the cage.

Hunter growls, and I whirl around. Three Harvesters, a Pricolici, and a pretty blonde girl stand behind me.

She looks familiar. "Jenny?" I question. The girl Harrison brought home for dinner? If the demon thinks she's important—oh shit.

"Anora Paige Benson," she coos. "How nice for you to come see me."

"You're the demon."

"Ding-ding-ding, we have a winner. Took you long enough to figure it out. I guess I can see why. I am trapped in this, this disgusting *vessel*."

"Asaroth." My voice shakes. Rage burns in Jenny's eyes. She rushes forward and is in front of me in the blink of an eye.

"How dare you say my name, you filthy little witch!"

She slaps me, extending her fingers and dragging her nails across my face, cutting my flesh. She steps back and licks the blood off her fingers. "Mmmm." She closes her eyes. "I can taste the power." Her eyes fly open, and they aren't the pretty blue they had once been. Cold, black eyes threaten me. "I want that power."

"I'll never give it to you." I slowly move my hand to the dagger, gathering heat around both hands. I need to buy time and keep her talking until I can find Harrison and Ethan. If Hunter is here, then they have to be too.

"That's what they all say." Her Pricolici comes to her side.

I take a step, eyes darting behind Asaroth. "Why me?" I ask, inching back another step. "Why go through all this trouble just for my powers? Why not just kill me?"

"I do like that idea, but it would be too easy." She strides forward. "You see, years ago, Estelle Fowler took my powers. Bound me to this hideous, powerless vessel. I swore I'd break

her hold and get my revenge. Not on her, though, but on you, the person she cares most about in this world. But then I couldn't find you, and I looked and looked. I thought it might be your idiot brother—”

“Hey, Harrison isn't an idiot!” I spit out, too offended to be scared. She comes to a sudden stop. The Harvesters are watching her, waiting for her command. They won't attack unless she orders them to. She controls the Pricolici too. If I can take her out first, maybe I'll have a chance.

It's now or never, and hitting her with a surprise attack might be my best bet. I bring my hand up, summoning fire. It burns hot around my hand, and I bend my fingers in, shaping the flames into a ball. Bringing my arm back, I throw the fireball as hard as I can. Embers spark as it flies through the air, and it hits Asaroth in the chest, sputtering out.

“Such power!” She's suddenly right in my face. The pretty purple stone pendant she had on before dangles off her chest.

Amethyst.

Amethyst has many properties: courage for travelers, stress relief...and blocking witchcraft. Since she has Ryan's powers, those properties are magnified. My powers aren't going to work on her.

Asaroth cocks her head, looking intently into my eyes. “Give me your powers, Anora.”

“No. You'll have to kill me first.”

She licks the blood that's dripping down my cheek and shivers in delight. “Well, there's a problem. Your powers die with you.”

“Then I guess you're not getting them.”

“I knew you'd say that,” she rushes out. “So, I brought insurance.” She motions for the sheet behind Hunter's cage to be torn down, and I scream.

Bound and gagged, Ethan is tied to a chair, bloody and bruised. “Ethan!” I make a move to rush toward him. Jenny

throws out her arm, stopping me with unnatural strength. I can't break free from her grasp.

"Can you imagine my luck?" she says and pushes me back. "I was looking for a witch and stumbled upon a member of the Order of the Mystic Realm. Stupid humans messing with powers beyond their comprehension. Talk about a thorn in your side. But then something interesting happened, and I saw how much you cared for him and how much he cares for you." She rubs her hands together. "One little hex was all it took to capture a big bad demon hunter."

She stands behind Ethan, hands going to his neck. "Give me your powers now, Anora."

"Don't say yes," Ethan yells, his voice muffled by the dirty gag. Asaroth moves around and hits him hard in the face.

"In case that wasn't enough," she goes on and waves her hand, bringing two more sheets down. "I brought extras, and threw in your *precious pup* as well," she says in a voice meant to mock my own.

Harrison and Laney huddle close together, bound and gagged as well, on the dirt floor. Laney is crying, and Harrison looks terrified.

"So, here's the deal," Asaroth continues, her voice thick with venom. "You can choose one, just one, for me to let live in exchange for your powers." She runs her hands over Ethan's chest. "Who's it going to be? Your boyfriend, your brother, your best friend, or your precious dog?"

That's the second time she referred to Hunter as just a dog. My eyes go to him as I realize she doesn't know. And that's why Hunter hasn't shadowed out of the cage yet. We have to strategize and kill the demons before they kill my friends.

"Well, who's it going to be?"

"My dog," I rush out, and Laney and Harrison protest, thinking I picked a dog over them.

"Interesting," Asaroth says and waves her hand at the cage. The rusty door swings open and Hunter runs over, standing

loyally at my side. I run a hand over his head and look at Asaroth with a smirk.

“Kill her,” I say and Hunter lunges forward, shifting into shadow form as soon as his paws leave the ground.

Asaroth’s black eyes go wide and she throws her arms up. “Kill the witch!” She takes a quick step back, and the big Pricolici jumps toward us, but it’s no match for Hunter in his shadow form. Hunter throws the thing to the ground, and I bring my hand up again, summoning another ball of fire and throwing it at the Harvesters. They hiss and shriek, frantically running around.

“Get her!” Asaroth bellows and lunges for me, shoving me back into the dirt wall. I fall down, roots and stones scraping at my skin. Before my butt even hits the ground, her foot lands on my stomach.

Pain shoots through my ribs. She raises her foot to do it again. Expecting it, I grab her ankle and pull her down. It doesn’t work to my advantage since she lands on top of me and punches me hard in the face.

Blinded by pain, I extend my hand and grab at anything I can. My fingers close around a lock of hair, but it slips from my fingers as she hits me again. I push myself up, reaching out, and wrap my fingers around the amethyst pendant. I yank it back until the chain snaps and the stone breaks off in my hands. Terror takes over Asaroth’s face as the gemstone falls to the ground. I look her right in the eyes and thrust my hand forward, sending a red-hot wave of fire right onto her chest.

I scramble to my feet, madly grabbing a throwing star to throw at the Harvester that’s barreling toward me. I throw the star, hitting the demon in the arm.

The Harvester looks down, annoyed if anything. It’s enough time for me to pull the dagger from the sheath and rush forward. I don’t allow myself to hesitate. I skid to a stop a foot in front of the Harvester. Raising the dagger, I shove the blade through its sternum and into its heart. The Harvester erupts in bright blue flames. I dodge its smoldering body to

run over to Harrison and Laney. Using the dagger, I slice through the ropes and free their arms.

“Are you guys okay?” I ask and help Laney untie the gag.

“Define okay,” Harrison says. His voice is shaky, but that’s enough of a yes for me.

“Get Ethan and get out of here.” I give him one of the throwing knives. “Hurry!”

I spring back to my feet. Hunter has the Pricolici on the ground and has his jaws clamped around its throat. Blood drips down the Pricolici’s muzzle. I look away as Hunter bites down. With a final yelp, the Pricolici’s body goes limp and Hunter runs back to me.

“Good boy,” I pant, sucking in air and watching Asaroth and the remaining Harvesters run out of the cavern.

Is she retreating? Or calling for more demons?

Not taking time to think about anything else, I race to Ethan’s side. Harrison’s working on getting him untied.

“I found a hex tablet or something,” I say, pulling the gag from his mouth. “I broke it in half and don’t know if that was enough to—”

“It was,” Ethan says, wincing as he gets up, and I realize he’s even more banged up than I thought. “I’m not sick anymore, but I—” He winces again, hand going to his side. “—have a few broken ribs.”

“You guys get out of here. I’m going to find Asaroth and kill her.”

Howling echoes through the tunnel. The hair on the back of my neck stands up. Hunter growls, edging toward the opening of the tunnel. Dammit. She had called more demons. If they come down here, we’re all sitting ducks. I’m the one she wants. I’m not risking another friend.

My eyes meet Ethan’s.

“Go,” he says, knowing exactly what I’m thinking. He bends down and picks up one of the throwing knives to use to

defend himself with. “Kill the bitch.”

“I will,” I promise.

Without a second look back, I sprint away with Hunter close behind. We climb out of the tunnel, emerging into the root cellar again. Light pours in from the hole above us, and if I can get out, I can stop the Pricolici from coming in and going after my injured friends.

I climb up on the desk, reaching for anything to grab onto to hoist myself up with, when a hand grasps around my ankle. With nothing to grab on to, I lose my balance and fall, landing hard on the cellar ground. Hunter stands protectively over me, and I look around in the dark for whatever grabbed me. My hand flies to the dagger as I stare into the dark. I can't descry what lurks behind the wooden stairs, but the rattling hiss tells me that a Harvester is only a few feet away.

Hunter, no doubt able to see perfectly in the dark, springs forward. His growls echo off the crumbling brick walls. I take a deep breath. My right wrist pulses with pain, making it hard to grip the dagger. My heart pounds in my throat. I need a plan. Something—anything—to help me see in the dark. I hold my hands out and take a small step away from the stairs.

Suddenly, my vision changes, and I'm looking through Hunter's eyes. The world is shades of green and gray, and I can see everything. I wrap my fingers around the dagger, pulling it free, and rush forward. Hunter drags the Harvester across the root cellar, right next to a broken wooden shelf. I pull all the energy I can from the air and direct it to the old shelf.

Now!

Hunter lets go of the Harvester, and I shove the dagger into its chest. It throws its hands up to push me away, but it's too late. I twist the dagger, feeling the heat from the blade. I yank the dagger out and kick the Harvester back. It stumbles and crashes into the shelf. Already hot with energy, it ignites when the Harvester burst into flames, lighting up the basement.

Panting, I whirl around the room. Waiting in the shadows are five Pricolici, Asaroth, and the last remaining Harvester. Seven on two; the odds aren't in my favor. I tighten my fingers around the dagger. Yes, the odds are against us, but that doesn't mean I'm not going to try. I lock eyes with Asaroth.

Bring it, bitch.

They lurk forward, slowly circling us. Asaroth crosses her arms and steps back to watch me get my ass kicked. I push aside my fear. Hunter growls and shows his fangs, ready to defend me even if it means his end. My heart beats a million miles an hour as I try to see a way out of this.

The demons pause in front of us, sizing us up. And then, all hell breaks loose. They rush forward, fangs and claws slashing the air. I jump out of the way, dodging the jaws of a Pricolici by inches. Hunter leaps, colliding with it and knocking it to the ground.

I scramble up, turning around to be face to face with the Harvester. I throw my hand up, fire erupting from my fingers. The Harvester halts, swiping a clawed hand through the air in an attempt to put out the flames.

Another Pricolici springs at me, saliva foaming at its mouth. I drop my hand and dive to the side and out of the way of the demonic dog's attack. I slash the dagger through the air and miss.

The Harvester steps back, its sunken black eyes triumphant. It holds out its taloned hand and hisses. The Pricolici circles it, mocking me.

There's no way that I can fight them all. Not even with Hunter's help. With me gone, Asaroth has no reason to spare the lives of any of my friends.

Something covers the hole leading into the root cellar. The steel gray Pricolici that had been advancing toward me stops, turning around to see who had shut them. I seize the moment to sink the dagger into his back. He crumbles into ash and dust, but two more are quickly in his place. I take a step back and trip over my own feet.

Slowly, the Pricolici inches closer, growling and snarling, teasing me. I push myself up, wincing at the pain it causes my wrist, so intense it's hard to grasp the dagger. There's no way I'm making it out of this.

"Hey!" a familiar male voice shouts. The energy shifts, and every creature in the room turns to look. Ryan stands at the bottom of the stairs, along with a very young girl in a yellow dress and a middle-aged man. They're ghosts, trapped to this earth and this madness by Asaroth's possession of their powers.

Flickering in movement, Ryan appears before Asaroth. His hands spark with electricity. Asaroth's face blanks in disbelief as Ryan clamps both hands over her ears, jolting the electricity and causing her to shriek in pain. The other two spirits, also sparking with blue energy, take on the Pricolici that are in front of me.

With the feeling of despair melting away, I jump up and go for the Harvester. The dagger slides easily into his back, and soon, he's nothing but a pile of smoldering ash. Hunter pounces on another Pricolici, shifting into shadow form and killing the thing in an instant. He shadows to the last two left, who are being held back by the ghosts.

I look up, eyes darting around the dark room, which is quickly filling with smoke now that the broken doors have been shut. Ryan is flickering again, fighting against Asaroth.

"I can't hold her much longer!" he says through gritted teeth. Coughing, I walk through the smoke and raise the dagger in the air, fire springing from my hand, igniting the blade.

"Go to fucking hell!" I wrap both hands around the dagger and shove it into Asaroth's back, right between her shoulder blades. She screams, echoing a hundred gruff voices at once as fire swirls around her, engulfing her in billowing flames. I turn my head, knowing if I let go too soon it won't be enough to kill her.

I twist the dagger, sending a final blast through her, and step back, eyes burning from smoke. The fire swirls faster

around Asaroth, burning her until there's nothing left. I jerk back, dagger falling to the ground.

The cellar is quiet again, and my lungs burn from inhaling smoke. Hunter shadows through the doors, swinging them open. I tip my head up, desperate for fresh air.

“Thank you, Anora.” I snap my head back down and see Ryan standing just a few feet in front of me. “You set us free.” Slowly, his body becomes more and more transparent until I'm looking at the blank wall behind him. I whirl around. The other ghosts are gone too, finally able to move on.

Coughing, I bend over to pick up the dagger. I wipe the sticky blood on my pants and stick it in the sheath. Hunter pads over and nuzzles my hand.

“It was a team effort,” I tell him, and turn my head and cough. “We need to get everyone and get the fuck out of here.”

Chapter Thirty-Three

“Hey,” I say with a forced smile and sit at the little round table with Harrison and Laney. It’s nine-thirty at night and they met me at a coffee shop near the hospital, where Ethan still is. “I’d ask how you’re doing but I think I know the answer to that.” Laney pushes a white-chocolate mocha latte in front of me, having ordered my favorite drink on my behalf. “Thanks,” I say and take a drink.

“I’m alive,” Laney answers, nervously picking at the label on her cup. “And not injured. How’s Ethan?”

“He’ll be fine,” I say honestly, because he will be. “He has three broken ribs but told me he’s had more at once before, along with a broken collarbone. Whatever sickness Asaroth cursed him with is gone but left him pretty dehydrated, and the doctors are confused since none of his symptoms really make sense together. They want him to stay overnight for observation. It took a lot of convincing for him to agree to that.”

“That’s good.” Harrison eyes me for a second and then takes a drink of his coffee. He has red marks and bruises on his wrists from having his hands tightly tied behind his back.

“I’m really sorry,” I rush out, apologizing again.

“It’s over, though, right?”

“Yes. Asaroth is dead.”

“I can’t believe I dated a demon.” Harrison slowly shakes his head. “Why did I like her so much only to basically forget about her?”

“She had to have cast some sort of hex to make you get all infatuated, so you’d take her home. She knew we’re related to Aunt Estelle and wanted to see if we had powers for her to take. And then when she didn’t need you, she just...I don’t know. Cast a different hex, I guess.”

“I heard her say your aunt took her powers,” Laney starts, looking around the café. If anyone overheard us, they’d think we were batshit crazy, that’s for sure.

“Right.”

“Aunt Estelle had secrets,” Harrison muses.

“She did, and she still does...which is why I think I should go to Indiana. There has to be more clues there, and I need to find out why she bound my powers in the first place.”

“When are you going?” Laney asks.

“In a few days,” I answer. “Or whenever I get all my stuff ready to go.”

“You don’t mean go to Indiana for a weekend trip again, do you?” Harrison asks, and I look up, meeting my twin’s eyes.

“No,” I say, heart hurting at the thought of leaving my friends. But it will hurt even more if something else happens to them. “It makes sense, really.” I blink a few times, telling myself I’m not going to cry. “I inherited a house that’s paid off and my lease is up in December. My rent is ridiculous, and there’s a barn and plenty of land in Thorne Hill. I won’t have to pay board for Mystery, which will save me a fortune. And it will put a safe distance between us in case another demon attacks.”

“Do you think it will?” Laney’s face pulls back with fear.

“I have no idea,” I tell her. “There’s just so much I don’t know. I didn’t send the demons after you or Leslie, but it all happened because they were trying to get to me. I couldn’t live with myself if I stayed and someone else got hurt.”

“What are you going to tell Mom and Dad?” Harrison asks.

“That it makes financial sense to go to Indiana. I can’t leave that house just sitting empty, and I’m not selling it. And a Victorian farmhouse with room for horses is my total dream house.”

“It is,” Laney agrees. “I’ll miss you.”

“It’s just Indiana,” I say, forcing myself to smile again. “I’m not moving overseas. Assuming things are calm, you know you’d be welcome to visit.” I look at Harrison. “You actually remember Thorne Hill.”

He gives me a half-smile. “Better than you.”

“What about Ethan?” Laney asks. “Have you told him you’re leaving?”

“No,” I say with a shake of my head. “I will tomorrow, once he’s home.” If anyone understands making a sacrifice to protect the ones you love, it’s him.



SAYING BYE TO EVERYONE WAS HARDER THAN I EXPECTED, AND I expected it to be pretty damn hard. To everyone else, it makes sense why I’d move into a house with no mortgage and low taxes, and I was almost able to spin it to make it sound like I had a sense of duty to move in and care for a historic home that’s been in my family for generations. I think everyone was a little blindsided to why I rushed out only four days after my friend’s funeral, though Mom thinks my sadness is driving me to make a big change in the hope that it will help me feel better. She’s right in one sense, but she doesn’t know the whole story, and as much as it kills me not to tell her, I can’t. Not now...not yet.

Leslie’s husband, Adam, came to me only yesterday and said he can’t handle taking care of Sundance. He doesn’t know anything about horses, and seeing his wife’s horse is too painful, but he knows Leslie would want someone to make sure he’s taken care of. He wanted to just give Sundance to me instead of selling him and said we’d revisit things later when he was able to process everything better.

So, I loaded Sundance up in the new horse trailer I bought, along with Mystery, promising Adam he could have Sundance back if he wanted him. Grief can make people do things they might regret, and getting rid of his wife's horse might be one of them.

And now I'm almost to Thorne Hill after twelve hours of driving. I cried the first hundred miles, missing my friends and feeling stressed to be driving a new truck that's pulling two horses in a large trailer, but the closer I got to Indiana, the more I felt a sense of peace. It doesn't make sense, I know, to feel welcome in a place I don't remember growing up. By all accounts, I'm an outsider in this small town, yet it feels so right, so familiar, so safe, when I drive through town on the way to Aunt Estelle's house.

To my house.

The sun is starting to set when I finally pull into the driveway, and my heart swells in my chest when the blue house comes into view. "We're home," I tell Hunter. I have him buckled in the backseat again, though now that I know he's not really a dog, I suppose he doesn't need it. I park in the driveway and put the strap of Romeo's carrying bag over my shoulder, taking him into the house before I unload the horses and bring them into the barn. It's big and empty, not really ideal for horses, but it will do for the next few days until I can have some sort of temporary fencing up, while I shop around for someone to install something permanent.

I fill up two water buckets and open up the side door in the barn, letting fresh air and light in. It's cold tonight, and I took my coat off in the truck. Shivering, I go inside to get Romeo set up. I brought what I could fit in the truck and trailers, and the rest of my stuff is arriving in two days. I donated a decent amount of stuff so I wouldn't have to deal with moving it, and also because I don't need the furniture here.

Double checking there are no holes behind the sink in the downstairs powder room, I spread out a blanket, fill up a bowl of water, and toss a handful of treats down for Romeo. He runs out of his carrying bag, making cute little *dook* noises as he

hops around the room. Smiling, I watch him for a minute and then close the door so I can get back to unpacking.

Someone knocks at the door, and I freeze, eyes going to Hunter. He trots through the foyer, tail wagging as he stands by the door.

“If it’s a demon, you’re fired,” I tell him and open the door. It’s not a demon, but who stands there surprises me just as much. “Ethan!”

“Anora.” His lips pull into a grin.

“What...what are you doing?” I ask, overwhelmed with emotion. “It doesn’t matter.” I stand to the side, letting him come in, and then throw my arms around him. He puts his lips to mine, kissing me hard. We stagger back, tangled together, and Ethan pins me between his body and the wall. He’s not in as much pain as he was before, but his ribs aren’t healed yet.

“You’re here,” I whisper when we break apart, and my eyes get all misty.

“I am.” He kisses me again and then cups my chin, turning my face up. “I told you that you wouldn’t have to go through this alone, and I meant it. I don’t want to lose you.” His lips brush over mine again, sending tendrils of desire through my body. “I love you, Anora.”

A tear rolls down my cheek. I rest my forehead against Ethan’s, and it’s like everything just clicks into place and I’m standing exactly where I’m meant to be. “I love you, too.”



Two weeks later...

“Did you find everything okay?”

“I did, and then some,” I tell the cashier at Novel Grounds, the indie bookstore in downtown Thorne Hill. “I just moved into a new house and finally have the space to do a rainbow bookshelf like I’ve always wanted.”

“Oh, those are so pretty. I rearrange my shelf at home but then get all OCD and have to alphabetize them again,” she says, and we both laugh. She starts ringing up my books when another Novel Grounds employee comes in the store. I recognize her because I’ve been here four times already since we moved. I have a library and *have* to fill the shelves. It’s a crime to leave them bare for any longer than they have been. “Hey, Kristy,” the woman ringing me up says as Kristy comes around the counter.

Kristy.

I blink and get hit with a memory. I’ve already remembered part of it, but this time, I see more.

“The cards don’t lie,” Aunt Estelle presses.

“The cards are just—” A sharp knock on the door causes the woman to stop. She moves around her desk, robes swirling around her feet, and opens her office doors. Two girls, who look to be about my age are ushered in by another adult, who, for some reason, I know to be a professor.

“Callie and Kristy,” the dark-haired woman sighs. “I’m not surprised. What is it now?”

“We were just practicing for tomorrow’s test,” a blonde girl rushes out, and her blue eyes flick to mine. She hesitates, not wanting to say anything in front of me.

“It’s not our fault,” the other girl chides. She has dark brown hair that’s pulled into a messy braid. “We did everything the book said, so we can’t get in trouble for it.”

“You cast a warding on your entire dormitory that prevents everyone but Kristy from entering,” the professor goes on, crossing her arms.

“All I did was prevent anyone who wishes me harm to not be able to enter. Obviously, they have it out for me,” the girl with the braid shoots right back.

I blink, realizing the cashier said something to me. “Sorry,” I say and shake my head. “I spaced out.”

She laughs. “I do that all the time.”

My eyes go to Kristy, who’s putting her coat under the register. Is she the girl from my memory? That would mean she’s a witch too. I can’t exactly ask, so after paying for my books, I take one lingering look and go home with the intention of going right into my library to start arranging the books.

“Hey, babe,” Ethan says, and I smile when I see him. He’s at the stove, working on dinner. We’ve settled into a routine already, and he’s continued to spoil me by making me breakfast and dinner most days. “Get enough books?”

I heft my bags onto the counter. “This will fill a few shelves. I’ll go back next week to get more.”

Ethan turns the burner off and picks a leatherbound notebook up off the counter. “I found this in the attic.” We’ve been slowly going through the boxes of crap up there, certain we’ll find something that will shed some light on my forgotten memories.

“What is it?”

“It’s mostly random notes and to-do lists, but at the end, there was this.” He holds up a folded piece of paper, and I recognize Aunt Estelle’s handwriting right away.

“What is it?”

“It’s a letter that looks like it never got sent.” He comes over and puts it on the counter so I can see. “It’s a list of demons your aunt helped locate and bind to human bodies.

And according to what she wrote, she used spells similar to the one she used to bind your powers.”

I quickly scan the letter, and the demon Asaroth is one of the first demons on the list. “Wait,” I say, looking up at Ethan. “If the spell is similar to the one she used on me, does that mean—”

“The binding spells on the other demons broke too? Yeah. And there’s a good chance more are going to want revenge.”



Starfire, Book Two in the Grim Gate Series is coming Fall
2021

[Click here to preorder!](#)

Thank you

Thank you so much for taking time out of your busy life to read *Nightfall*, which started out as *Unbound*, the first book I ever wrote. I've wanted to rewrite Anora and Ethan's story for years, finally giving them the justice they deserved.

I appreciate so much the time you took to read this book and and would love if you would consider leaving a review. I LOVE connecting with readers and the best place to do so is my fan page. I'd love to have you!

www.facebook.com/groups/emily.goodwinbooks

About the Author

Emily Goodwin is the New York Times and USA Today Bestselling author of over a dozen of romantic titles. Emily writes the kind of books she likes to read, and is a sucker for a swoon-worthy bad boy and happily ever afters.

She lives in the midwest with her husband and two daughters. When she's not writing, you can find her riding her horses, hiking, reading, or drinking wine with friends.

Emily is represented by Julie Gwinn of the Seymour Agency.

Stalk me:

www.emilygoodwinbooks.com

emily@emilygoodwinbooks.com



Also By Emily Goodwin

Contemporary romance:

Stay

All I Need

Never Say Never

Outside the Lines

First Comes Love

Then Come Marriage

One Call Away

Free Fall

Hot Mess (Love is Messy Book 1)

Twice Burned (Love is Messy Book 2)

Bad Things (Love is Messy Book 3)

Battle Scars (Love is Messy Book 4)

Cheat Codes (The Dawson Family Series Book 1)

End Game (The Dawson Family Series Book 2)

Side Hustle (The Dawson Family Series Book 3)

Cheap Trick (The Dawson Family Series Book 4)

Fight Dirty (The Dawson Family Series Book 5)

Paranormal romance:

Dead of Night (Thorne Hill Series Book 1)

Dark of Night (Thorne Hill Series Book 2)

Call of Night (Thorne Hill Series Book 3)

Still of Night (Thorne Hill Series Book 4)

Curse of Night (Thorne Hill Series Book 5)

Queen of Night (Thorne Hill Series Book 6)

Immortal Night (Thorne Hill Companion Novella)

Dystopian Romance:

Contagious (The Contagium Series Book 1)

Deathly Contagious (The Contagium Series Book 2)

Contagious Chaos (The Contagium Series Book 3)

The Truth is Contagious (The Contagium Series Book 4)