

STAR TOUCHED  WOLF BORN 2



SHADOW MOON

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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Shadow Moon

STAR TOUCHED: WOLF BORN

BOOK TWO

MICHELLE MADOW



Ruby



IN THE SMALL town of Pine Valley, nestled in the Adirondack mountains of New York, I'm sitting at a bar with Hazel, the most powerful witch in the local coven. She's sixteen—three years younger than I am—and yet, her experience with magic spans a lifetime.

I, on the other hand, only found out about the supernatural world a few days ago.

It feels like an eternity since then.

Unlike Hazel, I'm a wolf shifter. However, I've only been able to shift once, and I can't use the element wielded by wolf shifters—earth.

But I'm not powerless. A different, never-before-seen magic courses through my veins.

I can create illusions with my mind.

The witches say I've been blessed by a cosmic goddess. Or, as they prefer to call it, star touched. It's a plausible theory, considering the mysterious star tattoo that materialized on my right hip the same night I received my magic, bestowed by an ethereal woman who appeared out of nowhere and disappeared just as quickly.

But other than seeing if I could create an illusion to make Hazel's fake ID have a picture of me instead of her so I could get served alcohol at the bar, she didn't bring me here to teach me more about magic.

She brought me here to introduce me to her boyfriend, Benjamin, and his best friend Tristan. Both of them *human*.

She wants to set me up with Tristan to get my mind off the craziness of the past few days.

Little does she know that there's a slim-to-none chance I'll be interested in Tristan. Because I have a mate. Connor.

A mate who *rejected* me.

The cold way Connor looked at me when he rejected me seared my heart and left a scar there for all eternity. Sure, Connor and I barely know each other, but it doesn't matter. He's my mate. The other half of my soul.

And he doesn't want me.

He hates the fact that I'm his mate, since he's promised himself to his long-term girlfriend, Autumn.

Autumn, who I'm pretty sure would rather see me dead than anywhere within Connor's vicinity. She's a powerful shifter, and she's made it abundantly clear that she could end my life with a flick of her wrist if I dare to cross her.

Luckily, the witches took me in as one of their own. They told me I can trust them, but I'm well-aware that it would be foolish to let my guard down around any supernaturals in Pine Valley—or the rest of the world.

“Ready to meet Tristan?” Hazel slurs.

She's had a lot to drink in the short time we've been here. And, from the way she's using her elbow to prop herself up on the bar, she's clearly a lightweight.

“Sure,” I say, despite the wave of guilt that crashes over me at the thought of considering anyone other than Connor.

It's ridiculous. I need to get a handle on my emotions. If I ever want to experience love, I can't spend the rest of my life brooding over Connor.

I owe it to myself to give Tristan a chance.

Hazel's eyes, shimmering like liquid glass, shift toward the entrance. They light up as two guys walk in, and she waves

them over.

The first has sandy blond hair and a confident stride, like he owns the place. With a broad smile, he seems like the kind of guy who could be the star quarterback of a football team, surrounded by adoring cheerleaders vying for his attention.

The other one has light brown hair, chiseled features, and golden eyes that pierce through my soul the moment his gaze locks with mine.

My breath catches in my chest.

He's mesmerizing. And from the way that a few of the other women in the bar glance over to check him out, I'm not alone in my opinion.

But his focus remains solely on me, seemingly oblivious to everyone else.

I almost reach for Hazel's arm to say something to her, but I stop myself just in time.

Because she hasn't told me what Tristan and Benjamin look like.

For all I know, the guy with the golden eyes is her boyfriend and not his best friend.

I need to snap out of it and keep my cool. Autumn already hates me for being mates with her boyfriend, even though it was totally out of my control. The last thing I need is for Hazel to think I'm pursuing hers.

The guys reach us, and the blond one takes the spot next to Hazel. The chairs at the bar are high, and he wraps an arm around the back of it, right below her shoulders.

"Hi." He smiles down at her, and she's looking up at him with total adoration. He gives her a short kiss, and she all but melts into him.

I feel a visceral sense of relief when I realize the guy with the golden eyes is Tristan, not Benjamin.

Unsure what to do with my hands—or with any part of my body—I pick up the beer in front of me and take a sip, even

though it's far too bitter for my taste.

"Hi," Hazel says to Benjamin, her cheeks pink either from kissing him or all the alcohol she's consumed. Probably both. "This is my cousin, Ruby. She's visiting from out of town." She directs her attention to me. "This is my boyfriend, Benjamin, and his friend, Tristan."

At the sound of Tristan's name, I look to him again. He's standing right next to my chair, his arm only inches away from mine. I swear I can feel a surge of electricity pulsing between us.

"Ruby," he says, my name sounding like music when it escapes his lips. "It's nice to meet you."

The three of them are watching me, and it takes me a moment to realize they're waiting for me to respond.

"You, too," I say. "I'm glad Hazel dragged me out tonight."

"That makes two of us." He flashes a perfect smile, and a feeling of victory soars through my chest.

Because I'm attracted to him.

I thought it was going to be impossible to be attracted to anyone after the intensity of my connection to Connor. Nothing's supposed to be able to compare to a mate bond. But here I am, not even a day later, already proving myself wrong.

Maybe there's hope for me, after all.

The pull to Tristan isn't quite as strong as it was with Connor, but it's enough that I can work with it.

"When did you get in?" Tristan asks.

"To the bar?" I almost reach for my phone to check the time. Then I remember that I have no phone, courtesy of Jax—the alpha of the Pine Valley pack—crushing it after telling me that contacting anyone from my old life is forbidden.

Because they think I'm *dead*.

It feels like a sledgehammer to my heart every time I think about it.

So I don't think about it, instead returning my focus to Tristan.

"When did you get *into town*," Tristan clarifies, smiling again, as if he knows how he's affecting me and finds it endearing.

That makes one of us.

"Oh. A few days ago," I say, trying to sound casual about it. Hazel and I didn't work out an official story before coming here, but it's probably best to stay as close to the truth as possible.

I take another sip of my beer, grimacing at the taste.

"That bad?" Tristan asks.

"It was on the house," I explain. "They showed that news clip on TV about the third human going missing, and it got everyone pretty down, so Frank decided to lift our spirits with a round of free drinks."

Tristan raises an eyebrow, and my pulse quickens as I realize my mistake.

I referred to the missing people as *humans* instead of *people*.

No one talks like that. At least not anyone who isn't in the supernatural world.

He probably thinks I'm a total weirdo. But I can't think of anything to say that won't bring more attention to my mistake, so I stay silent.

Benjamin looks at Hazel in concern, seemingly oblivious to my slip-up. "There was another one?" he asks.

"Yeah." She frowns. "But don't worry. I'm being safe."

She reaches for her mostly finished beer and downs the remainder of it, placing the empty glass back on the bar with a resounding thud.

She sways a bit in her chair, leans against Benjamin for support, and he lowers his arm to wrap it around her waist to steady her.

“Promise me you won’t go anywhere alone?” he asks her.

“I promise.” She giggles, hiccups, then covers her mouth with a hand, giggling once more.

“Please be careful,” he says. “For me.”

“I will.”

If Benjamin knew how powerful of a witch Hazel is, I doubt he’d be as concerned. Although, Hazel’s so drunk that I don’t know how helpful her magic would be against anyone right now—even if the person doing the kidnapping is a human like her coven believes.

One of us needs to keep a clear head, so I focus on drinking my water, accepting the role of designated driver for the night. I don’t mind, since I’m not a big drinker. But when Hazel invited me out, I didn’t think she was going to get this toasted.

She slides out of her chair and nearly crashes into me, managing to stop herself by grabbing onto my arm for support.

“You okay?” I ask her, even though it’s a bit of a rhetorical question.

“Be right back,” she mumbles, the words slurred with alcohol. “I have to go to the bathroom.”

“I’ll go with you,” I offer, already rising from my chair to accompany her.

“No,” she snaps, but then her features soften, and she smiles. “Stay here and chat with the guys. I’ll be back in a minute.”

Despite her unsteady state just moments ago, she navigates her way to the back of the bar with surprising grace, leaving me alone with Benjamin and Tristan.

What am I supposed to say to them?

Given the fact that I have to lie to them about practically everything going on in my life, I have no idea where to start.

Maybe I should go after Hazel anyway? But she snapped at me pretty intensely, and despite how much she’s had to

drink, she's still a powerful witch who can stand her ground.

She'll be back in a minute.

For now, I just have to act cool, calm, and... human.

Ruby



“HOW ARE YOU LIKING PINE VALLEY?” Tristan asks before I can further worry about the situation.

A tricky question.

I found out I'm a wolf shifter, was relegated to be an omega in the pack, found out I have magic that's never been seen before, my fated mate rejected me, and his girlfriend wants to kill me.

This is clearly one of those instances where honesty isn't going to be the best policy.

“It's been good,” I say one of the biggest lies in my entire life. “It's different from where I grew up.”

“Where's that?” He leans forward. His golden eyes are locked on mine, as if my answer will be the most fascinating thing he's ever heard.

My heart races, and I need to take a moment to remember his question.

“Naples. In South Florida,” I finally say.

At least I don't have to lie about that one.

“Never been,” he says, which doesn't surprise me, since Naples isn't nearly as touristy as other parts of Florida.

“Did you grow up in Pine Valley?” I ask, glancing at Benjamin. I don't want to leave him out of the conversation.

“No,” Tristan says with a chuckle. “New York. Manhattan,” he clarifies, as if Manhattan is a different country

than the rest of New York.

“And I’ve never been *there*,” I say, adding a bit of a laugh. “Actually, I’ve never left Florida before coming here.”

“To stay with your cousin?”

I almost ask what he’s talking about, but then I remember Hazel’s lie.

“Yep,” I say. “Hazel’s great.”

“She is,” Benjamin agrees, a dreamy smile playing on his lips. He glances at the bathroom, clearly anxious for her to return.

He’s smitten with her, and I’m happy for her. From the little Hazel’s told me about her life, she deserves someone like him, who appreciates her for who she is instead of how much power she has.

“So, *you’re* from Pine Valley?” I ask Benjamin.

“Nope,” he says. “Also from Manhattan. But I have a place in Spring Creek. It’s about fifty minutes away.”

“I’ve heard of it,” I say, keeping it to myself that I know about it because another pack of wolves and a coven of witches live there. A pack and coven that, from the little I’ve heard, don’t have the best relationship with the pack and coven in Pine Valley.

“It was my grandfather’s, but he passed away a few months ago and left it to me,” he says.

“I’m sorry.” I lower my eyes in respect, and at the mention of death, I’m suddenly reminded about how everyone I know thinks *I* died less than a week ago.

I swallow down the ball of tears in my throat, praying that neither of them asks me what’s wrong.

I have no idea how to answer if they do.

“Tristan’s staying with me for a few weeks to help fix the place up,” Benjamin continues, seeming like he wants to avoid the topic of death as much as I do. “Might as well sell it and make some money. And share some of the profits, of course.”

He glances at Tristan when he says that last part.

“Happy to help.” Tristan raises his glass of what looks to be whiskey—Benjamin apparently ordered for them when Tristan and I were first chatting—and they clink their glasses together and drink.

“So, how do you two know each other?” I ask, attempting to steer the conversation away from any more awkward revelations.

As I speak, I lean closer to Tristan, unable to resist the pull I feel toward him.

From the way he gravitates toward me, I think he feels the same.

Why can't Tristan be my mate instead of Connor?

I shake the thought away. I shouldn't be obsessing over Connor when there's a charming, gorgeous guy in front of me.

Connor doesn't want me.

Tristan might.

I need to get myself together.

“We're old friends,” he says simply, and as he speaks, my eyes land on the cross pendant hanging around his neck.

There's a dark red gemstone embedded into the center of it, and it's so intricate that it looks like something someone would pick up at an antique store. It's unlike anything I've ever seen, but at the same time, he pulls it off flawlessly.

“I like your necklace,” I say, since I'm sure it's obvious that I'm staring at it.

“It was my brother's.”

From the way he says it, I have a sinking feeling that his brother isn't alive anymore.

Why does death keep coming up over and over again? First Benjamin's grandfather, and now Tristan's brother.

I have no idea how to reply. Because while all loss is hard, the loss of a grandparent is far more typical for someone our

age than the loss of a sibling. I have no way to relate to what he went through, and I know better than to attempt to try.

Tristan doesn't elaborate about his brother. Instead, his gaze drops to my lips, and I wonder if he's going to move closer and kiss me in the middle of the bar.

My heart speeds up at the thought. Especially because if he does try, I don't think I'd stop him.

"All right, guys," Benjamin breaks the silence, bringing his hands together. "I need to check on Hazel. I trust you'll be okay without me?"

He looks at Tristan, then me, then back to Tristan, his eyes swirling with mischief. He's clearly as determined as Hazel is to set the two of us up.

I'm not sorry about it in the slightest, especially because it's helping me get my mind off of Connor.

Sort of.

"Maybe it should be me..." I say slowly, even though I like the idea of having some time alone with Tristan. "I don't think people will be too happy if you barge into the ladies room."

"They're single-holers," he says with a wave of his hand. "It'll be fine."

He's gone before I can say anything more, leaving me and Tristan standing at the bar together, our eyes locked on each other's in a way that makes the butterflies in my stomach flit around like crazy.

"So, Ruby." Amusement dances in his eyes when he says my name, making it clear that he knows *exactly* what kind of effect he's having on me. "What are you normally doing when you're not visiting small towns in the mountains?"

Panic leaps in my throat at how unsure I am about what I can say without giving the truth of the past few days away.

How has Hazel kept her identity secret these past few weeks with Benjamin? I want to get to know Tristan, but how can I do it without lying about everything going on in my life?

How can I have a normal, honest relationship with someone who's not in the supernatural world?

I can't.

But maybe it won't hurt to pretend. Just for tonight.

"I'm a student at University of Florida. A few hours north of Naples." I smile, forcing myself to relax and act like normal.

"What's your major?" he asks, and I'm amazed by how normal the question feels.

"I haven't picked one yet, since it's only my first year. But I think I want to study English."

Thought, I correct myself in my mind. *Past tense*.

Because I'm not sure I'll ever be able to return to school.

I'll never be able to declare a major, never be able to graduate, and will likely never be able to have a normal job.

My life before finding out that I'm a shifter is as dead as the human world thinks *I* am.

"An English major. I assume that means you enjoy reading?" he asks, and the question immediately jolts me back into present.

"I *love* reading."

We spend the next few minutes chatting about our favorite books. We have a surprising amount of them in common, and it's easy to get lost in the conversation—and in him.

Men are immediately ten times more attractive when they enjoy books.

"So, when do you head back?" he asks.

"Back where?"

"To school." He smiles with that twinkle in his eyes that I've grown to love in the short time we've been chatting. "Surely winter break is almost over?"

I take another sip of my soda, contemplating how to answer somewhat truthfully, while also not giving anything

away.

“I’m taking the semester off and staying here with Hazel and her parents for a bit,” I say the first thing that pops into my head. “There have been a lot of changes in my life recently, and it’ll be good to get some space from it all.”

“I know how that goes.” He reaches for the cross hanging from his necklace, and I want to ask him more about it.

But I feel like he’s about as willing to share more about his brother as I am about my family.

Meaning, he doesn’t want to share anything at all.

Benjamin comes back to join us before the conversation can continue, with Hazel clutching onto his arm and nearly stumbling over her feet. There are a few drops of sweat on her forehead, and her pale face has a sickly cast of green over it.

Despite how powerful she is, she looks so fragile and small.

“Are you okay?” I ask her, even though she clearly isn’t.

“I think I drank too much,” she mumbles, not meeting my eyes.

No kidding, I think, although I don’t say it out loud.

“Do you want to leave...?” I say instead, pointing my thumb toward the door.

We haven’t been here very long, and I don’t want to leave, since I’m enjoying talking with Tristan. But no matter how enticing Tristan might be, my loyalty is to Hazel. She’s the closest thing to a friend I have around here, and I intend on sticking by her.

“Benjamin and I are going to sit outside for a bit so I can get some air,” she says. “But it’s cold out there, so I totally understand if you two want to stay in here.”

She gives me a look that I know is girl code for *I want some alone time with my boyfriend, and you and Tristan seem to be hitting it off, so you should stay inside with him.*

Luna used to look at me the same way whenever we were out and she met a guy she was into.

My chest pangs with grief over the loss of my best friend, even though she's technically the one who thinks she lost me.

"We'll be right outside," Benjamin adds, pulling Hazel close. "Nothing's going to happen to us."

I glance up at the TV, knowing he's referring to the people who've gone missing. And I know he's right. They were all in secluded areas—jogging at the edge of town, snowboarding in the back of a mountain, and bringing trash out to a back alley. I saw the restaurant's outside porch when we walked in, and there was nothing unsafe about it. Cold, but not unsafe. They'll be fine.

Which is good, because I definitely want more time alone with Tristan.

Meanwhile, Benjamin's watching me, waiting.

I decide to follow my gut instinct with this one.

"Okay," I finally say. "I'll stay."

"Just what I was hoping to hear," he says.

Hazel gives me a grateful smile, and she and Benjamin head outside, leaving me alone once more with Tristan.

Ruby



I'M relieved when Tristan and I easily return to the topic we have most in common—books. And it's not just books we have in common. It's also movies, television shows, and music. Our shared interests are like invisible threads binding us together, and the energy between us builds with every sentence exchanged.

Either we share strikingly similar tastes, or he's the most well-rounded person I've ever met.

Both options are insanely attractive.

His golden eyes light up when he talks, and he leans in closer as he listens to my thoughts, the conversation flowing so easily that it isn't long before I've finished my soda. When I check my watch—an old analogue type that Hazel loaned me, since I no longer have a phone—I'm surprised to find that an hour has already passed.

“Do you want another?” Tristan asks, glancing at my now-empty glass.

The deeper meaning behind his question is clear.

Do you want to spend more time with me? Are you as captivated by this connection as I am?

“Yes,” I say, not needing to think twice about my answer.

“Sticking with Coke?”

I could get something stronger to help cool my nerves. A hard seltzer, like Luna likes to drink.

It's tempting.

But I'm going to have to drive home. Plus, I'm at a bar with a guy who's basically a stranger, in a town full of wolf shifters and witches, both with reasons to fear and question me.

Maybe I shouldn't have left Hazel's side to begin with, even if she is just outside. And she is indeed still outside—a glance out the front window confirms it.

Tristan's apparently so captivating that I'm losing all logical thought around him. And despite how nice it would be to unwind with a stronger drink, I'm not going to add more alcohol into the mix. It would be basically begging for trouble.

I have enough of that as it is—in so many areas of my life that it feels impossible to keep track.

“Are you okay?” Concern flashes in Tristan's eyes, and I realize I've been thinking way longer than normal about what type of drink I want to have next.

“All good.” I give him what I hope is a carefree smile. “Another Coke sounds great.”

“Coming right up.”

He motions to Frank, who comes over and pours me a fresh drink. He places it in front of me, and I can almost swear the bartender *winks* before moving on to help another customer.

“I never thought this would happen,” Tristan murmurs, his voice velvety smooth as I take a sip of my soda.

“What do you mean?” I barely manage to whisper.

“I mean that when Hazel told Benjamin to bring me out tonight to meet you, I didn't expect us to connect like this.” His eyes are locked with mine, expressive and vulnerable. It's like he's baring his soul to me, offering his heart for me to do what I want with it, and the electrifying pull between us intensifies so much that I think I'm going to explode.

“I didn't expect this, either,” I admit, my cheeks growing warm with each passing moment. “It's kind of crazy how

much we have in common.”

“It’s definitely crazy,” he agrees, the corner of his mouth lifting in a small, knowing smile.

We’ve been slowly moving closer to each other, and as his gaze drops to my lips, my breathing slows.

What’s coming over me?

It’s like Tristan’s casting a spell over me... and I’m more than happy to let him.

Anything to give myself a break from these past few days.

A second after making the decision, everyone but Tristan blurs into the background. It’s just me and him sitting at this bar, and every inch of my skin hums with electricity as he closes the space between us and brushes his lips against mine.

Fire ignites inside me, and I kiss him back, slowly and gently. It’s a sweet sort of kiss, soft and tender, as if he’s expressing feelings for me that words can’t say. He tastes like sugar, and I swear I’m getting a buzz from him, like he’s some sort of magical elixir far more potent than any drink offered at this bar.

His fingers trace delicate patterns across my lower back, and I shiver with pleasure at his touch, my stomach flipping with excitement. I’m running my thumb over his necklace without realizing I’ve reached for it, and touching it is somehow so intimate, enhancing the connection between us even more.

How’s this happening?

How can someone I just met have such a strong effect on me?

It shouldn’t be happening, a voice growls inside me. *It’s wrong*.

My wolf.

She’s pushed herself out of where I locked her down, and she’s angrier than ever. Her fury courses through me like

bristles poking under my skin, extinguishing every ounce of pleasure I was experiencing from Tristan's touch.

Go away, I think, but it's no use. She's waging war against my feelings, and she's not going anywhere anytime soon.

No, she insists. *We belong to Connor. Not Tristan.*

Red hot anger rushes through me.

Because I don't *belong* to anyone. I decide who I want, what I want, and when I want it.

And I want to be here.

With Tristan.

We belong to our mate, she argues, refusing to give up that easily.

No.

I fight against her and try to lose myself in the moment again, but it's no use. Because as much as I hate it, my wolf's right. Connor is my mate.

I don't know what's going on here with Tristan. I think it's real—I *hope* it's real. It's so easy to talk to him that there must be something truly here.

But ultimately, does it matter?

Tristan's human, and I'm not.

Sure, our tastes in books, movies, and television are the same. But it'll never be enough. Because at the end of the day, if this spark between us turns into anything, the lies I'll have to tell him to keep my real life a secret will eventually destroy us.

It's not fair to him, or to me.

Which is why I need to end this, before it has a chance to get too far.

Ruby



I'VE STOPPED KISSING Tristan without realizing it, and he pulls away, looking down at me in concern.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, his brow creased as he tries to figure me out.

Tough luck with that.

“I have a bit of a headache,” I say, which isn’t a lie.

The way my wolf is fighting me is literally giving me a headache.

“Oh.” He frowns.

“It’s not you. I’m having a great time with you,” I say quickly, scrambling for an excuse that might make sense. “It’s just that I don’t actually live here, and neither do you. I have no idea how long I’ll be here, and I like you, and...” I lower my eyes and twist my fingers around themselves, hating myself more and more with every word I say.

“Okay,” Tristan says simply. “I understand.”

“You do?” I raise my gaze to his, not having expected him to be so accepting. Pretty much every guy I’ve ever interacted with would have tried to convince me to give him more of a chance.

Not Tristan.

Which is somehow making me feel even guiltier—and more attracted to him.

“Yes,” he confirms, and he reaches for his credit card and slides it over to Frank before I can offer to pay for myself.

Well, technically it would be Hazel’s money from the bag she loaned me. Close enough.

Tension crackles between me and Tristan, and a huge part of me wants to lean back into him and tell him that never mind, I want to keep spending time with him.

But I like him too much. The kiss proved that. And the more involved I get with him, the more it’s going to hurt when I have to push him away to protect him from the truth.

Maybe Hazel can stand it with Benjamin, but after how Connor broke my heart, I refuse to torture myself any further. Add on top of that the way my wolf is fighting against me, and the difficulty of adjusting to my new life, and it’s too exhausting to handle.

Coming out tonight was a mistake.

Frank brings the check, and as Tristan signs it, I can’t help noticing his generous tip. A hundred percent of the total bill.

I’ve never seen someone tip that much. *Ever*. And that says a lot, since I’ve occasionally helped at the restaurant where my mom’s worked since I was thirteen.

What does Tristan do for a living that he has so much money?

We chatted so much about the things we like, but I know next-to-nothing about *him*.

“Come on,” he says. “Let’s find Benjamin and Hazel.” He reaches forward, like he wants to help me out of the chair, but then he pulls abruptly back.

My heart sinks with disappointment. But when I hop out of the seat and make sure I have all my stuff, I remind myself that it’s for the best.

Nothing good can come out of starting something with Tristan.

He follows me out of the bar, making sure to open the door for me, and I'm pleasantly surprised that it's not as cold as I expected. Wolf shifters can tolerate the cold better than humans. Tristan doesn't seem overly affected either, even though he's only wearing a bomber jacket that isn't practical for this weather.

After stepping outside, I wrap my arms around myself and glance up at the nearly full moon. The sliver of shadow grounds me, bringing a sense of calm I haven't felt since meeting Tristan. It's as if the moon itself is whispering reassurances to me, telling me everything's going to be okay.

Hazel narrows her eyes when she sees us, watching us with suspicion as we approach the table.

"Hey, guys," Benjamin says. "Want to pull up some chairs?"

The patio is only about a quarter full, so there are plenty of chairs available to bring over.

"No, thanks," I say, looking back over at Hazel. "I'm actually ready to head back."

"So soon?" she asks, her brow furrowed.

"I have a headache," I say, causing her frown to deepen.

"It's probably the altitude," Tristan chimes in, shocking me even more by *supporting* my decision to leave. "Going from sea level to the mountains is a tough adjustment. Especially when you're not used to it."

I brace myself for Hazel to get angry at me for cutting her time with Benjamin short.

"That makes sense," she says instead, filling me with relief. "I'm still not feeling great, either. Do you want to drive us back?"

"I was planning on it," I say, and she happily hands over the keys to her SUV. I've never driven a car this large before, but given how much Hazel's had to drink, it's better off in my hands than in hers.

The guys walk us to the parking lot, and, unable to look Tristan in the eyes, I'm happy to let Hazel and Benjamin do most of the chatting. The walk to the car feels endless, charged with unspoken tension, and I keep glancing up at the moon for comfort.

My wolf—thankfully—is silent.

“It was nice meeting you, Ruby,” Tristan says when we finally get there. “Have a safe drive home.”

“Thanks.” I fumble with the keys, my hands shaking as I find the button to unlock the car. “You, too.”

As Tristan reaches forward to open the door for me, his arm brushes against mine.

His touch sends a jolt of electricity through me. I take a sharp breath inward, the cold air burning inside my lungs, and my eyes meet his golden ones. They're somehow even more captivating under the light of the moon, and regret fills me at the possibilities of what might have been if he wasn't human—or if I wasn't supernatural.

“I'm sorry I couldn't stay longer,” I say, since it's the truth.

“Don't worry about it,” he says smoothly, although his smile is tinged with sadness and longing. “Have Hazel text Benjamin when you get back, to let us know you're home.”

“Will do.” I slide into the car, wait for Hazel to get situated, and drive out of there without speaking another word to Tristan.

I should never speak another word to him. It would be better that way for both of us.

But I can't shake the feeling that it's not going to be as easy as that.

Connor



MY GIRLFRIEND—NO, my fiancée—is stunning as she stands up in front of me, bathed in the soft glow of the moonlight, her clothes pooled at her feet. She’s a living goddess, and for the past few years we’ve been together, I’ve felt so lucky to call her mine.

But Autumn isn’t mine.

Ruby’s mine.

The mysterious, beautiful girl who burst into my life a few weeks ago, tearing apart the carefully laid plans of my future. Like a wildfire, Ruby’s consumed my thoughts, and I can’t seem to push her away, no matter how hard I try.

Autumn and I get dressed in the gazebo where I kissed her for the first time all those years ago—the gazebo where I proposed to her about an hour ago—and I stare out at the horizon where the mountains meet the sky. The winter air is crisp and fresh, and an owl hoots in the forest ahead.

This night should be one of the happiest in my life. Yet, there’s a weight sitting on my chest that I can’t shake away.

Autumn sits on the bench and twirls the engagement ring I gave her tonight around her finger. It was the ring my grandfather gave my grandmother when he proposed to her, and it’s slightly too big on her. We’ll have to take it into town to get it resized.

Given that I’ve known her for my entire life, I can tell there’s something on her mind.

“Are you having second thoughts?” I ask her, guilt immediately washing over me when I realize I want her to say yes.

Probably because if she’s having second thoughts, I won’t feel as bad about the doubt digging into my skin like sharp fingernails refusing to let go.

She turns her gaze up at the moon, looking to it for comfort, then finally looks at me. There’s something harsher about her pale features—colder. A sharp glint in her hazel eyes that I’ve never seen before.

“You’ve changed,” she says softly, her voice a whisper in the night.

“What do you mean?”

I sound defensive, and she tenses up, as if preparing for a major blow. So, I sit down next to her and reach for her hand with the ring on it, relieved when she doesn’t pull away.

She gazes out into the distance, as if at war with herself, unsure how to start. Eventually, she turns back to me and chews her lower lip. It’s a habit she kicked a few years ago, and she looks younger and more vulnerable than ever, as if something inside of her is close to breaking.

“You can talk to me,” I tell her. “I’m here for you. Always.”

“I know,” she says, and then she forces a small smile, and continues. “But things feel different between us recently.”

“What things?” I ask, even though I know she isn’t wrong.

“You don’t seem as confident that we’ll be mates,” she starts, barely meeting my eyes. “And when I went to Jax’s to help Ruby with her magic, she had all these questions about mate bonds.”

I tense when she says Ruby’s name... and because I fear where she might be heading with this.

“Ruby’s new to the supernatural world,” I say carefully. “She has questions about *everything*.”

“Did you mate with her?” she asks so quickly that the words almost blend together.

The question is a punch to my gut, and for a moment, it hurts to breathe.

I can't lie to Autumn. Especially not about this.

The silence is heavy between us, the world as I know it shifting on its axis. The time it's taking me to reply is likely an answer unto itself, but I won't do Autumn the disservice of not speaking directly.

“I did.”

Her expression crumples, and I want to take her in my arms to shield her from the pain I've caused. But I have no idea how that would be received. Instead, I sit there like a statue as I break the heart of the woman I thought would be by my side forever.

“This changes nothing,” I tell her, even though it's more of a wish than anything else. “We promised each other that we'd stay by each other's sides, even if one of us mated with someone else. We've been together for years. You know me. You know that I stick to my word. I chose you all those years ago, and some girl I just met isn't going to change my mind about that, mate bond or no.”

“But you touched her,” she says, the hurt in her eyes piercing my soul.

There's no point in denying it. Skin-to-skin contact is how mate bonds first form.

“She was trying to run away,” I say slowly. “But she doesn't have control over her shifts yet. She's not allowed to leave pack territory. So, I caught her and stopped her.”

I think back to how Ruby used her magic to make herself invisible in the woods. How I pounced on her to force her to show herself and pinned her to the ground, and the bond that formed between us when I was hovering over her, our faces a few inches from each other's as the mate bond took hold.

The self-control it took to stop myself from fully making her mine was a test from the gods unlike any I've experienced before.

"Did you kiss her?" Autumn's voice is strained, and she looks like she's bracing herself for another blow to the heart.

This night is going downhill quickly.

I need to fix it.

I'm the future alpha of this pack. Fixing things is my job. I refuse to let Autumn or anyone else in this pack down, no matter what.

"I would never betray you like that," I tell her. "The mate bond wasn't my choice, but you are. I just proposed to *you*. You're the one I want. Not her."

"But do you still love me?"

The question takes me by surprise. Autumn has never doubted my love. She's always been the strongest, most confident woman I know.

This side of her—on edge and insecure—is one I've never seen before. It's almost like I'm looking at a stranger.

"Of course I do," I say, and she nods, blinking the shadow of doubt from her eyes.

"Good." She leans forward and kisses me, her lips soft and familiar. But there's something sad about the kiss, too. Like there's something lost between us that we'll never get back, no matter how hard we try.

When she pulls away and looks into my eyes, I can see that she feels it, too.

"We'll get through this," I tell her. "I promise."

"How can you be so sure?" The vulnerability in her question lingers in the cold night air, making the space between us feel larger than before.

I immediately regret my previous words. Because the truth is, I can't be sure. I pride myself on my logic, plans, discipline, and control, but none of those qualities allowed me to

extinguish my feelings for Ruby. Sure, they helped me not *act* on those feelings, but they can't make the mate bond disappear.

I know it, and Autumn does, too.

It's why she's so doubtful—so *scared*.

As much as I hate thinking it, I'm scared, too. Scared that this mate bond with Ruby will eat away at my relationship with Autumn. It's already tearing Autumn apart, revealing a side of her I never thought existed.

I'm also scared of the feeling gnawing away at my heart that tells me that by rejecting Ruby, I'm missing out on the best person to have ever walked into my life.

The mate bond is changing me, and I hate it.

At the same time, there's an undeniable curiosity about Ruby pulling at my heart, begging me to pay it more attention. Pleading with me to give her an actual chance.

"Ruby's not coming back here," I say, trying to assure Autumn as much as myself. "Her magic has no place with us."

"Does it have a place with *anyone*?" Autumn's voice is cold and cruel, full of angry resentment.

Maybe even hatred.

My skin prickles with warning.

I've always known that Autumn's a force to be reckoned with. I just never expected that I'd ever have to protect someone from her.

"Ruby's not our concern anymore. Her place is with the witches," I say, trying to sound as calm and collected about it as possible. "They took her to live with them."

I'd been so intent on proposing to Autumn—and then on defending my mate bond with Ruby—that I still haven't told her about what happened with the witches at my grandfather's house earlier tonight.

But Autumn and I are a team.

She deserves to know everything. Even the hard stuff.

Especially the hard stuff.

“What I’m about to tell you stays between you, me, and my grandfather,” I say sternly, looking her straight in the eyes so she knows I’m serious. “Understand?”

“Yes,” she says, waiting patiently for me to continue.

“The witches say that Ruby has her magic because she’s been blessed by a goddess,” I begin. “They’re calling her star touched.”

“I’ve never heard of that before.”

“Neither have I,” I say. “But the witches have sources we don’t, and what they said adds up with everything Ruby’s experiencing. They said she belongs with them—not with us. They’re going to take care of her. She isn’t our responsibility anymore.”

I sound cold and heartless, and Autumn studies me, her eyes searching my face for any hint of deception.

She’s never doubted me. Not ever.

The possibility of that changing because of something out of my control hurts my soul on a level I’ve never felt before.

“How do you feel about her leaving?” she asks cautiously.

I take a few seconds to think about my response, since my next words have the power to change everything—for better or for worse.

“I’m glad she’s gone.” It pains me to say it out loud—or maybe that pain is because it’s not as true as I want it to be. “The longer Ruby and I are away from each other, the more the bond will weaken. Eventually, it’ll barely exist at all.”

Autumn knows this. But I’m saying it for assurance—for both of us.

However, the unspoken words hang in the air. Because while the mate bond will weaken, it won’t disappear.

She presses her lips together, and I prepare for her to argue with me. Instead, she looks away, the icy moonlight tracing the curve of her cheekbone as she gathers her thoughts.

“Okay,” she finally says, surprising me.

“We’re good?” My grip around her hand tightens, cautiously hopeful.

“Yes. You chose me, and I love you even more for it. We’re going to be together forever.” The warmth returns to her eyes, and for the first time since this conversation began, I’m seeing *my* Autumn.

The girl I’ve known for my entire life.

The woman who will eventually be my wife.

We can’t marry her, my wolf’s voice echoes in my mind, taking me by surprise and shattering my moment of peace.

I’ve always been in control of my wolf, just like I’m in control of everything in my life. He only comes out when I ask him to.

Who I choose to be with is my decision. Not his.

I tell him as much.

Wrong, he pushes back. *Ruby was chosen for us. She’s meant for us. You know it, I know it, and Autumn knows it. Fighting fate will only make all of us miserable.*

I don’t want to believe it.

But another part of me—a part I wish would disappear—can’t help wondering if he’s right. Because the future feels more uncertain than ever.

Still, I refuse to let the bond with Ruby destroy my loyalty to Autumn.

Autumn would never turn her back on me. I know her, I love her, and I’m not throwing what we have away as if these past few years didn’t matter at all.

I’m in control here. I make my own choices. I decide my future.

And I'm not going to let fate or my wolf stand in my way.

Autumn



I GIVE Connor's hand a light squeeze to affirm that we're good.

But inside, I'm crumbling.

No—I'm already shattered.

My worst fear is true: Ruby's his mate. Connor and I will *never* be destined for each other. As long as he has that bond with Ruby, his loyalty will never be one hundred percent with me. He might tell me otherwise, but if his mate bond with her remains, she'll own a piece of his soul forever.

His eyes, once a comforting warmth, now betray him as they gaze down at me. They're filled with uncertainty. He might not say it directly, but I've known him for my entire life. He's making all these promises to me, but he isn't fully *here* with me.

My inner wolf snarls.

We have to get rid of her, she says. It's the only way.

Ever since that fateful night of the blood moon when Ruby stepped into our lives, my wolf has been different. Her rage is all-consuming, and it's hard to pinpoint where her fury ends and mine begins.

She wants me to kill Ruby.

I won't do it.

I don't trust Ruby. More specifically, I don't trust Ruby's magic. She isn't one of us. She never will be.

But that doesn't mean I want her dead.

I just don't want to lose the man I love because of a force of nature that neither of us can control. I believe that Connor wants to choose me, but how can I ever trust that he's truly mine when fate insists on tethering him to her?

I can't.

My wolf is right that his mate bond with Ruby needs to be broken. I just don't agree with her opinion about how to make it happen. Sure, it was fun to scare Ruby when I flaunted my powers the other day in Jax's yard, but that doesn't mean I want to murder her.

I'm not a monster.

I refuse to let my wolf turn me into one. Which means the faster I can fix this, the better.

"Will you stay with me tonight?" Connor asks, his voice soft, sweet, and hopeful.

I want to. Especially given the longing in his eyes, the promise to continue the passion we just shared in the gazebo.

But I have more pressing matters to attend to tonight.

"I have some more studying to do." I hate myself for not being honest with him, but I also know it's necessary. "We have that paper due at the end of the month, and I still haven't decided what topic I'm going to write about."

"The one about the most important value for Guardians to uphold?" he asks.

"Yes, that one," I say, since it's the only paper we have assigned right now.

Connor stiffens, his voice filling with resolve. "The answer is integrity. Understanding, respecting, and following through on our responsibility to maintain the laws of our kind. Keeping order is how we stop the world from descending into chaos. We owe it to everyone to do that, even when it means putting the law above our own wishes and desires."

The seriousness of his answer hums in the air between us. I shouldn't have expected anything less, since Connor's always been the most intense person I know.

But I'm not in the mood to discuss homework or have a deep conversation about the morals we're supposed to fall back on as Guardians. Because the faster I get out of here, the faster I can get started on what needs to be done.

"All excellent points." I smile, playfully nudging him to lighten the mood. "But I can't write the exact same thing as you."

"I know," he says, tucking a strand of my hair behind my ear. His fingers brush against my skin, sending shivers down my spine, and I'm suddenly back to when I was fourteen years old, when he asked me to be his girlfriend in this gazebo. "Your dedication to your studies is one of the many things I love about you."

My heart flutters at his words. He may not have said he loves me when he proposed to me, but he *does* love me.

We wouldn't be here right now if he didn't.

"There's only one thing I'm more dedicated to than my studies," I say, turning serious again.

"And what's that?" A playful glint dances in his eyes, as though he already knows what I'm going to say.

"You." I raise my left hand between us, the ring on my finger catching the light. "No, more than just you. The thing I'm the most dedicated to in the world is *us*."

The conviction in my tone silences him.

"I know you are," he finally murmurs. "I've never doubted you. Not for a moment."

I almost say the same back to him, but I can't. Because Ruby has planted seeds of doubts inside of me that I never thought I could experience.

I owe it to Connor and our relationship to make sure those doubts never surface again. That means giving him back his freedom to choose his future instead of leaving him to

constantly be fighting the universe's pull toward something he doesn't want.

It's unnatural for mates to follow through on fully breaking their bonds. I've studied enough about mate bonds to know this.

Which leaves this responsibility to me.

I can save him from the chains of this bond. He deserves to have free will, and I'm going to do everything in my power to give it back to him.

Everything that will still allow me to live with myself when all is said and done.

"I love you," I say instead, and I lean forward to kiss him, hoping to get across all the feelings that I'm not yet ready to put into words.

Once I finish what I'm setting out to do, I'll tell him everything. He'll understand. More than that—he'll thank me for giving him back his freedom.

Until then, his feelings will be clouded by the mate bond. No matter what he might say or do, I can't let myself forget that.

"Well," he says, pulling away from the kiss to look at me again. "Don't let me keep my fiancée from her studies."

Fiancée.

Not mate.

I know he doesn't mean for the word to sting, but it does. It's a painful reminder of what will never exist between us.

Because even if I succeed in breaking his bond with Ruby, I'll never be Connor's mate.

"I have to go," I say, trying to ignore the regret gnawing at my heart for leaving Connor to sleep alone on the night he proposed. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"See you tomorrow," he repeats, and then I shift into my wolf form and run into the woods before he can see the tears glimmering in my eyes.

But I don't run home.

I can't fix things at home. I can't fix things in *Pine Valley*. Our witches have taken Ruby in, and they view her as one of their own. They don't see her as the threat that she is. They won't prioritize my feelings and desires over hers.

Which means it's time to seek help somewhere else, from someone who might share my goals.

And I know exactly who that person will be.

Autumn



THE MOONLIT SHADOWS dance around me as I race through the forest, my heart pounding with anticipation.

It takes me just over an hour to reach Spring Creek. Not only am I a stronger magic user than most shifters, but I'm also a faster runner. Only Connor and Jax can match my pace within the pack.

I've studied the map of Spring Creek, and I've always had an excellent sense of direction, so I navigate the woods with ease.

My destination soon comes into view—an ancient Victorian mansion that's been passed down for generations within the Spring Creek coven. Once a symbol of their power and influence, the grand estate now stands as a sad reminder of the coven's waning strength.

Now, only one of their witches is known to possess significant magic. Their leader, Calliope.

Hopefully her power will be enough to help me achieve what needs to be done.

And it does *need* to be done.

This is about more than securing Connor's commitment to me. It's also about protecting the Pine Valley pack from the potential fallout if the worst happens and he ends up with Ruby. Because despite Ruby's illusion magic—her *unnatural* magic—she has no earth magic. She's an omega.

On the off chance that Connor loses himself to the mate bond, the Pine Valley pack deserves better than their female leader being an omega.

She's unsuitable to lead.

What I'm trying to do will benefit us all.

Shifting back into my human form, I approach the house with determination. As I draw nearer, its state of disrepair becomes increasingly apparent. Paint peeling from the walls, uneven floorboards lining the covered porch, and crooked doors and windows that hint at years of neglect. The house exudes an eerie, almost haunted aura, making me shiver involuntarily as I prepare to confront the coven's mysterious and infamous leader.

I have no idea what to expect from Calliope.

She's notorious for thinking outside of the beaten path. Most packs look down on her because of it, since we're taught to value rules and order above all else. But the help of someone who thinks for herself is exactly what I need right now.

I refuse to let her creepy house intimidate me.

It's late, and she's likely sleeping, but this is the only time I'm able to leave Pine Valley without someone noticing I'm gone, so I hope she'll understand. And so, I straighten and make my way up the creaking stairs to the door, take a deep breath, and use the large brass knocker to signal my arrival.

The sound echoes through the cold night air, startling a few creatures in the nearby woods.

I keep my hand on the knocker, preparing to sound it again, but a light on the first floor turns on.

A silhouette moves toward the window adjacent to the door, and with a swift tug, the drapes are pulled open. Calliope's piercing gaze meets mine through the glass panes. Her silver hair flows down to her waist, and the moonlight glows against her aging skin in a way that makes her look like a ghost in a horror movie.

But I refuse to let her scare me. So, I hold her gaze steadily, as if I'm asserting my dominance to another member of the pack, unwilling to reveal even a hint of the anxiety coursing through my veins.

Finally, she releases the drapes and opens the door, its hinges groaning in protest as she reveals herself in full. She's a few inches taller than me, and her white nightgown hangs to the floor. She doesn't speak, and I shift slightly on my feet, unable to hide my unease.

However, I can't just stand here saying nothing.

If I want her to take me seriously, I have to get myself together and speak my purpose.

"Sorry for waking you up," I begin, my voice steadier than I feel. "I needed to talk to you, and this was the only time I could get here without my pack noticing I'm gone."

"You're from Pine Valley." Her voice is surprisingly youthful for a woman her age, as if time has yet to claim her spirit.

"I am."

"A wolf shifter," she says.

"Yes." I glance at the porch swing swaying eerily off to the side. "Can I come in?"

"Is anyone else with you?" Calliope's eyes sweep across the yard, her gaze sharp as she searches for any other members of my pack.

"It's just me."

She studies me again, as if trying to determine if she trusts me or not.

"They don't know I'm here," I add, even though I have no way to prove I'm telling the truth.

"And why *are* you here?" she asks.

"I'm engaged to the future alpha of the Pine Valley pack—Connor Ward—and I need your help." I lift my left hand and show her the ring, keeping my gaze locked on hers the entire

time, daring her to defy me. “After you hear me out, you’ll be glad I came.”

She takes a few seconds to think.

“Very well,” she finally decides, opening the door wide to allow me entry. “Make yourself comfortable. I’ll go prepare us some tea.”

* * *

I sink into the aged velvet sofa, my discomfort growing as I wait for Calliope to return from the kitchen. The cavernous living room is musty, with a Turkish rug in the center fading from age, and startling amounts of half-used candles and dusty antique clocks displayed throughout the room.

It’s half past one in the morning, and it seems like the entire world is asleep, except for Calliope and me.

Finally, she returns carrying a tray with a kettle and two cups perched upon it. Setting the tray on the coffee table between us, she pours the tea and hands me my cup.

I’m not a big tea drinker—I’ve always been more of a coffee girl—but I know better than to refuse her offering. Still, I wait for her to drink her tea first, since she poured it from the same kettle as mine and I want to make sure she didn’t add any questionable herbs into the brew.

“So, young shifter,” she begins, her keen eyes studying me. “Explain why you’re here, what you believe I can do for you, and why you think I’d be willing to help.”

I lower my cup, my hand shaking slightly as I ready myself for what I’m about to do.

Tendrils of guilt threaten to seep beneath my skin, but I can’t back down now. What I’m doing will benefit the pack in the long run.

It’s the only way for Connor to be free to love the person he wants to love—*me*.

It’s not the only way, my wolf reminds me.

She's right.

It's not the *only* way.

But it is a more peaceful way.

My wolf's anger is a force unlike I've ever felt before. The Pine Valley witches are on Ruby's side, and I fear if I don't get help from someone else with power—someone like Calliope—then I might succumb to my wolf's dark desires and take care of Ruby on my own.

If I do that, I'm not sure I'll ever be able to live with myself.

"A few days ago, a new girl arrived in town," I start, praying to every force in the universe that Calliope will be open to helping me. "She's a wolf shifter, but she's not one of us. Her magic is dangerous and unnatural. She's a threat to us all, and if we don't stop her, she might end up leading the Pine Valley pack by Connor's side instead of me."

The rest of the story spills out of me like a dam that's finally burst, and Calliope listens attentively, sipping her tea and studying me over the rim of her cup.

The relief that floods me after I'm done is so intense that I feel like I've reached the end of a therapy session.

"What, exactly, do you think I can do for you?" she asks when I'm finished.

"I want you to help me break the mate bond—*without* killing Ruby," I say, my voice thick with conviction.

She frowns, and my heart sinks with dread that what she has to say next isn't what I'm hoping for.

"A witch can only break a mate bond if one of the members in the pair willingly asks to be stripped of their magic," she says, confirming my fears. "From what you've told me, Ruby's not willing. I'm not quite sure I can help you."

"You're the oldest witch alive," I plead, desperation seeping into my tone. "There has to be another way. Please."

She purses her lips and sets her cup down, giving my request some thought. “I appreciate you coming to me with this information, and there might be something I can do for you,” she finally says. “But it will involve a significant amount of open-mindedness on your part.”

“I’m listening.”

“You’ll have to go against one of the core beliefs of your kind.”

“Like I said—I’m listening.”

Calliope raises a hand, palm-up, and with a flick of her fingers, every candle in the room ignites. The flames burn so brightly that their reflection dances in her eyes, like she’s some sort of demon, and a lump of fear forms in my throat as I pray that whatever she says next doesn’t make me regret coming here.

“It just so happens that you came to the right place,” she says, her lips curling into a dangerous smile. “As you see, I’m growing old. It’s no secret that the few remaining members in my coven are weak. But I refuse to let our line die out. Which is why, to immortalize our magic, I’ve made some... unorthodox alliances.”

“Unorthodox, how?” I ask.

“I’ve joined forces with the very creatures we’ve been trained to hate,” she says, and I swallow hard, sensing where she’s heading with this.

It’s why I came here, isn’t it?

Because deep down, I know that while I don’t have the connections to make what she’s about to suggest happen, she might.

It’s unspeakable. I can barely think it, let alone say it. Everything I’ve learned tells me that what she’s likely about to propose we do to Ruby would be a fate worse than death.

If it works, and if Connor ever finds out that I was involved, I don’t think he’d forgive me.

But if Calliope's proposal is what I think it is, then no one will be dead at *my* hands. And, if you don't consider someone to be dead if they still walk this earth, then they won't technically be dead.

Isn't that ultimately what I want?

"Go on," I say, wanting her to speak plainly instead of beating around the bush.

"Where do you think I'm heading with this?" she asks sweetly, and I realize she isn't going to make this easy for me.

I can do this. It goes against everything I've ever believed, but it's either this or losing the love of my life.

Connor's highest value might be integrity, but mine is determination.

And I'm determined to save our relationship, no matter what.

So I brace myself, hold her steely gaze, and say, "You're talking about working with vampires."

Her eyes twinkle with amusement and a hint of respect. "Indeed, I am. But you must understand that my involvement will come at a cost."

I hesitate, realizing the gravity of my decision. But I'm here, and I'm committed to saving my relationship with Connor, no matter the price.

"I understand," I say with a determined nod. "I'll do whatever it takes."

"As I hoped," she says, and then I sit back and listen as she lays out a plan so twisted that I wonder if I'm making a deal with the devil herself.

Ruby



“THERE YOU GO,” Hazel says, and as I look into her full-length mirror, the last part of my body—my feet—goes invisible.

All that remains is the reflection of her ornate four-poster bed and the window looking out to the moonlit, cloud-strewn night sky. My head buzzes with magic, but other than that, I feel perfectly normal.

I walk forward until the mirror is a few inches in front of me and raise my hand to press my palm against its cool surface. The cloudy shape of the outline of my palm appears, like the mirror is being touched by a ghost.

A knock on the door interrupts my concentration, and I shimmer back into existence. The eyes staring back at me, brown instead of their natural turquoise, have been unfamiliar since the night I received my magic.

It startles me every time I see my reflection.

For unknown reasons, the goddess who star touched me changed my eyes from their natural turquoise to brown. The last thing I remember before passing out was her instruction to tell no one that my eyes aren't naturally brown. So, even though I trust Hazel and her parents, I've kept the secret to myself.

I turn around to see who's here.

Hazel's mom, Seraphina, opens the door and peeks in. “Hope I wasn't interrupting anything,” she says, soft and hesitant.

“Just Ruby making herself invisible,” Hazel says, light and teasing. “No big deal.”

“Glad to hear you’re making progress,” Seraphina says as she opens the door fully and steps inside. Her wild, curly brown hair tumbles past her shoulders, and the splattering of freckles across her cheeks and nose mirrors Hazel’s. “I just received word from Jax and Connor. They want to see you.”

She directs that final part to me.

My stomach flip-flops at the sound of Connor’s name, and all the air leaves my lungs at once.

“Why?” I ask, my voice barely a whisper.

“He didn’t say.” She shrugs. “But Perry and I are finishing something up here. Hazel—would you mind driving Ruby to Jax’s place?”

“Not at all,” she says.

“As I thought.” She nods, then returns her focus to me. “Best of luck.”

She’s out of there before I can ask her anything more.

I turn to Hazel, praying she has answers. “Why do they want to see me?” I ask.

“I don’t know,” Hazel says, but then a knowing smile crosses her face. “Maybe because he’s your mate?”

I freeze in place.

Because I never told her that.

“How did you know?” I ask, since I feel like she’d see through any attempt of mine to lie.

“It would take a blind person to miss the way you look at him,” she says with a gentle laugh.

“Oh.” I frown, suddenly feeling exposed and vulnerable, as if my every emotion is laid bare for the world to see.

“What happened with him?” she asks.

“It doesn’t matter, because he’s with Autumn,” I say simply. “They’ve been together for years. He chose her—not

me. He made it more than clear that he'll *always* choose her." The ache in my heart intensifies as I say the words aloud, making them feel all too real.

She watches me with deep, knowing eyes, as if she has wisdom far beyond her sixteen years.

"You're underestimating the power of mate bonds," she finally says. "Mates are destined for each other. He's correct that the bond will weaken with distance, but unless he breaks it, he'll never truly feel complete."

Her words strike a chord within me, resonating with the emptiness I've been trying to convince myself is only temporary.

"And it'll be the same for me. I'll never feel complete," I say, tendrils of fear taking hold at the prospect of always chasing happiness but never finding it.

It's a depressing, hopeless future, and I don't want it.

"I need to break the bond," I say, determination lacing my tone.

The thought of severing the connection with Connor is a dagger in my heart. But at this point, what other option do I have? Live in despair for the rest of my life?

I refuse to accept such a grim future.

There has to be a way to make sure it doesn't happen.

"I'm afraid that breaking a mate bond is far easier said than done," she says.

"But it's possible?"

"Anything is possible. It just depends on how many sacrifices you're willing to make."

There's something sinister to her tone, and I feel like I'm seeing the dangerous witch she showed me the first time we met instead of the lovesick girl who drank too much at the bar.

I almost say I'll do anything to break the bond, but I stop myself. There are things too horrible to think about, let alone carry out.

Things like hurting Connor.

I would rather live the rest of my life with a piece of my heart belonging to him than do anything that might cause him pain.

“You look like you’re at war inside yourself,” Hazel observes, her keen eyes studying me. “Are you really that convinced he won’t end up choosing you?”

My throat tightens, but I speak through it. “He doesn’t *want* to choose me,” I say. “Even if he gives into the bond, it doesn’t change the fact that if it were fully up to him, he’d want her and not me.”

Again, the truth of it all is a blow to my heart. A reality that will never allow me to find total happiness.

“Perhaps,” she says, and my hope crumbles, since it wasn’t what I wanted to hear. “But maybe instead of standing here wondering, we should go over there and listen to what he has to say ourselves?”

Her gaze lingers on me, patient and expectant.

I take a moment to gather my thoughts, but who are we kidding? Of course I’m going to say yes.

“You’re right,” I finally say, and she gives me a small, reassuring smile.

“I’ll be there with you the entire time,” she promises. “You’ve got this.”

“Thanks,” I say. “It’s just... hard.”

That’s the understatement of the year.

I have no idea how I’m going to face Connor without feeling the pain of his rejection all over again.

Still, we might as well get this over with. Like Hazel said, the longer we stay here wondering, the worse it’s going to get.

Catching sight of myself in the mirror, the dark circles under my eyes serve as a stark reminder of the toll that spending the entire day honing my magic has taken on me.

Maybe leaving this very instant isn't the best idea.

"Can I have some time to freshen up?" I ask, since if I'm going to see Connor again, I want to look my best. Hazel left some makeup in my bathroom when we got ready to go out to the bar, and it's time to put it to use again.

"I was going to suggest the same thing," she says, which makes me wonder just how tired I look. "I'll be downstairs when you're ready."

"I won't take long," I tell her, and keeping to my promise, I'm downstairs in less than fifteen minutes. Her parents are nowhere to be seen, and I can't help but wonder if they have some sort of secret chamber where they concoct potions, cast spells, and practice the ancient witchcraft that fills this house with an aura of mystery.

Hazel looks me up and down, her smile approving. "You look beautiful," she says, and even though I doubt the bit of makeup I applied can erase the stress of the past few days, I appreciate the compliment.

"Thanks," I reply, swallowing hard. "So, are you ready to get this over with?"

"As ever," she says, leading the way out of the house.

The moon casts its soft, ethereal light upon the world, making the shadows dance and shimmer as we walk to her car. With each step we take, my heart races, pounding in my ears, knowing that each step we take is another one closer to Connor.

Once inside the car, Hazel starts the engine, and we begin our drive toward pack territory.

The silence isn't doing anything to calm my nerves, so I reach for the radio and turn it on.

Hazel apparently listens to her music *loudly*, because a woman's steady voice blares through the car, making me jump.

"...still looking for information regarding Lindsay Davis, Jason Cooke, and Carly Katz," she says, and I reach for the

knob again, quickly changing the station.

The familiar voice of my favorite singer fills the car, and I take a deep breath, trying to relax.

It's going to be okay, I tell myself. There's nothing Connor can say to me that can be more shocking than everything that's happened these past few days.

At least, I hope there isn't.

Now that there's music on, being in the car is somewhat soothing, and I lean back to watch the passing scenery through the window. The streetlights create a blur of colors that meld together like a kaleidoscope, and the trees cast eerie shadows on the pavement, their bare branches swaying in the night breeze.

After a few minutes, Hazel turns into a smaller street that I don't remember from before. It veers sharply off the path, and she pulls to the side, bringing the car to a sudden, jarring stop.

My heart pounds with anxiety.

Something isn't right.

"What's wrong?" I instinctively look over my shoulder and out the back window of the SUV, worried that someone might have been following us. I don't think there was anyone behind us, but my thoughts have been so far off that I haven't been paying the best attention.

"Sorry, Ruby," Hazel says, although she doesn't sound a bit apologetic. "But I promise this will all make sense soon."

Before I can ask what she means, there's a prick against my neck, my vision blurs at the edges, and everything goes dark.

Ruby



I WAKE UP IN BED, groggy and disoriented. For a moment, I think I'm back in my shared dorm room with Luna. My head is so heavy that it feels like it's melting into the pillow, and I don't feel like waking up to get to my first class of the day.

But I don't remember what class I have first today.

I don't even remember what day it is.

And the bed is harder than the one I have at school. The thin, itchy cover isn't nearly as thick and warm as my comforter.

As I'm lying there, the past few days slam into me at once. The last thing I remember is Hazel apologizing to me before pricking something onto my neck that knocked me out cold.

Hazel *drugged* me.

Panic kicks in, and I sit up, looking around. I'm in a small, dimly lit room with a green tasseled rug, a small table and chair, and a full bookshelf. The air is stale and oppressive, and I realize with a jolt that there are no windows.

Most startlingly, only three brick walls surround me. The fourth "wall" consists of vertical metal bars, revealing another nearly identical room beyond. There, a girl with curly brown hair pulled up in a bun sleeps, her face turned toward the wall.

I'm trapped in a prison cell.

Sure, it's a fancy prison cell, but it's still a cell.

Terror pulls at my chest, anxiety threatening to choke me. I try to swallow it down, but my mouth is as dry as a desert, so the attempt is futile.

This can't be happening.

I didn't think anything could be worse than waking up cold and alone in the woods, but I was wrong.

So, terribly wrong.

I push myself out of bed, make a mad dash to the glass of water on the table, and swallow half of it down in what feels like one large gulp. The cool liquid soothes my parched throat. There's a bagel and cream cheese on a plate next to it, but the panic clawing at my insides makes it completely unappetizing.

Especially because I think I recognize that girl's hair from the news.

I walk up to the bars of the cell, wrap my hands around them, and pull, hoping some of my supernatural strength helps me out. No luck.

"Lindsay?" I try, my voice rough with sleep.

She stirs, but doesn't wake.

"Hey, Lindsay!" a male voice calls from the cell next to hers. "There's a new girl here."

Lindsay groans, pushing herself up and rubbing sleep out of her eyes. Her t-shirt is wrinkled, as if she's been wearing it for days, and her warm brown eyes focus when they lock with mine, sad and defeated.

"You're Lindsay Davis," I say. "The one from the news."

She offers a slow nod and a weary smile. "Yeah, that's me. Didn't know about the news part, though."

"And I'm Jason," the guy in the cell next to her chimes in. "The other one from the news."

I press my face against the cold metal bars, craning my neck to get a look at him. The cell extends far enough that I can see him on the other side, also standing close to the bars. His blond hair is a disheveled mess, and his eyes are sunken

and hollow. He looks like he's aged years since the photo of him they showed on TV.

"What about Carly?" I ask, expecting her to speak up from another cell.

"She's not here," Jason says. "She was gone when I woke up."

My heart sinks, and I chew on my lower lip, worried about what that could mean.

They killed her, I think, although I try to push away the thought, not wanting to jump to conclusions.

"What happened to her?" I ask.

"We don't know," Lindsay says. "They won't tell us."

"Who's 'they?'"

I already know Hazel's involved, but I have no idea who she's working with.

Jax? Connor?

My heart clenches at the thought of my mate who rejected me.

Please don't be Connor.

"Gwen," Jason says, and I feel a tinge of relief at the unfamiliar name. "Benjamin. And the witch they're working with. Hazel."

"Benjamin's not human," I say, which brings me to another realization. "Neither is Tristan."

"We haven't met a Tristan. But how do you know Benjamin?" Lindsay asks, a sudden protective edge in her tone.

"He's Hazel's boyfriend," I say. "She introduced him to me two nights ago. She said he was human."

"She lied," Lindsay says flatly.

"Yeah. I figured that out," I say, immediately cringing at how snarky I sound. "Sorry. It's just..." I pause for a second to look around the cell. "I wasn't expecting her to do *this*."

“Knock us out and lock us down here to become living blood bags for vampires?” Jason says, stunning me into silence.

It’s not possible.

Witches hate vampires. It’s why they created shifters all those centuries ago—to protect themselves from vampires.

“Don’t worry. It’s not as bad as it sounds,” he continues, his words far from comforting. “They’re keeping us here to make sure we’re safe. After we prove we’re loyal to them, they’ll let us out. Like they did for Carly.”

“I thought you never met Carly?” I ask, immediately suspicious.

“I didn’t,” he admits. “But Gwen said Carly was able to help them with something, so they let her go. And Gwen wouldn’t lie. Not to me.”

I have no idea who Gwen is, but I do know he’s being stupid to trust her. So, I glance at Lindsay for some insight, but she just gives a noncommittal shrug, revealing no opinion on the matter.

I’m not getting far with this.

Time to pivot to try finding out more information.

“How long have you both been here?” I ask, even though I have a bit of an idea about the timeline of events from the news.

“Three days? Maybe four?” Lindsay answers, rubbing her temples as if she’s trying to squeeze out the memories. “It’s hard to keep track of time in here.”

Jason nods in agreement. “I’ve been here a few days longer than she has. I have to admit—it was a relief to get some company.”

“Shut up,” Lindsay says, although her voice is light and teasing. It’s the sort of tone someone would use when talking to a close friend or a sibling.

“You guys knew each other before this?” I ask.

“He came into the diner sometimes,” Lindsay says, reminding me that she was a waitress there who disappeared while taking trash out to the back alley. “I always thought he was a bit of a jerk, to be honest. A typical city boy with enough spare cash to move out to the mountains to become a ski bum.”

“A *snowboard* bum,” Jason corrects her, a smirk playing on his lips.

“Same thing.” She shakes her head in mock annoyance, rolling her eyes again.

We lapse into silence for a moment, the air around us heavy with unspoken thoughts.

“They send vampires down here to feed on you?” I ask, involuntarily bringing my fingers to my neck at the thought of that being in my near future.

Horror rushes through me, and I quickly lower my hand back to my side.

“They do,” Lindsay says. “Benjamin drinks from me. Gwen drinks from Jason.”

“I know how I made it sound before, but don’t worry—it’s not so bad,” Jason says, his voice taking on a more animated tone. “I mean, before Gwen fed on me, I was terrified. But it didn’t hurt. And she’s different. I don’t know. It’s hard to explain.”

“You like her,” I realize.

“I do,” he says, running his fingers through his unkempt hair. “You’ll understand when you meet her.”

I shiver at the idea of meeting her. Because I don’t believe him. Vampires who lock people in their basement to feed from them can’t be “not so bad.”

Gwen’s manipulating him somehow, and I don’t like it one bit.

There’s also another big thing that doesn’t make sense.

“You’re both human?” I ask, looking from Lindsay to Jason and back again.

“As far as I know.” Lindsay chuckles and glances around her cell. “That’s why they’re keeping us down there.”

“Interesting,” I say.

“You’re not?” Jason guesses.

“I thought I was up until a few days ago,” I say, trying to keep it simple. “Then I found out I’m a wolf shifter.”

I don’t have the energy to tell them about being star touched and having illusion magic, so I figure that’s enough information for now.

“An actual wolf shifter?” Jason’s eyes widen in amazement. “You can transform into a wolf?”

His surprise about the existence of shifters is amusing, given the casual way he was talking about vampires a few minutes ago.

“I did once, about a week ago,” I tell him. “Haven’t been able to since.”

“Wow,” he says. “That’s cool.”

“I guess,” I say, since “cool” is far from how I’d describe these past few days.

“Can you shift into a wolf right now?” he asks.

“Didn’t you hear her? She said she hasn’t been able to,” Lindsay says, although the intrigued look she’s giving me suggests she’s as curious as he is.

I reach for my wolf, figuring it can’t hurt to try again, but she’s silent. It’s like she’s hiding, trying to get as far away from this nightmare as possible.

I don’t blame her.

I’m still trying when the sound of a door slamming shut interrupts my concentration. Footsteps echo from down the hall, and the three of us fall silent as we wait for whoever it is to show themselves.

Benjamin comes down the hall and stops near my cell. He has an eerie grace as he moves, and his eyes look me up and down, far deadlier and sharper than they were the night we met.

“Good morning,” he says, his voice smooth and relaxed. “I see you’re all getting to know each other.”

I swallow hard, the hairs on the back of my neck standing on end. “Where are we?” I manage to ask, my voice steadier than I feel.

This is *not* the same Benjamin I met at the bar.

The Hazel who pulled me to the side of the road and drugged me isn’t the same girl who shared a pizza with me at her house and confessed that she had a human boyfriend, either.

“Spring Creek,” he says, surprising me by directly answering my question. Although, I suppose the answer isn’t overly surprising, given that he and Tristan *did* tell me the other night that they’re from Spring Creek.

Tristan, who I assume is one of them, too.

I was so stupid to have trusted him like I did, and to have let him kiss me. But what’s even stupider are the butterflies that flutter in my stomach when I think about how much it truly felt like we connected that night, and how the entire world disappeared around us when his lips brushed against mine.

Benjamin’s silent as he studies me, the smug look in his eyes downright infuriating.

It’s like he’s reading my mind, and I hate it.

“You’re a vampire,” I say what Jason and Lindsay already told me.

I want to hear it from him, not from them.

His smile is cold and predatory. “Did you really think a witch as powerful as Hazel would fall for a human?”

The amusement in his tone makes my blood boil, and I want to reach through the bars and strangle him. But I take a few deep breaths instead, controlling myself.

“And Tristan?” I ask, bracing myself for the answer I know is coming.

“You like him, don’t you?” Benjamin answers my question with another question, toying with me.

I press my lips together, refusing to answer.

“I saw it when you looked at him,” he continues. “The entire bar did. You need to work on hiding your emotions better, Ruby.”

I nearly growl at the condescending way he says my name.

“But enough about Tristan,” he says. “I didn’t come down here to stand around and have a gossip session. I came down because it’s breakfast time, and I’m hungry.”

I step back and curl my hands into fists.

No way am I going to let this monster feed from me. I might not have any practice with combat, but if he comes near me, I *will* fight him off, if it’s the last thing I do.

And he’s going to regret the moment that he, Hazel, Tristan, and whoever else they’re working with drugged me, kidnapped me, and threw me in this cell to begin with.

Ruby



“DON’T WORRY, WOLF GIRL,” Benjamin taunts, his mouth twisting into another cruel smile. “I don’t want you. I want her.”

He strides purposefully toward Lindsay’s cell. She’s sitting on the bed, her eyes wide and alert. She licks her lips slightly as she gazes up at him, and even though it’s crazy, it looks like she *wants* him to feed from her.

Benjamin removes a key from his pocket, and when he goes to open the door, his hand passes through something that shimmers. Only slightly, but enough for me to tell that there’s a magical barrier keeping us inside.

It reminds me of the barrier that trapped me inside Pine Valley.

The cold metal bars, it seems, are just for dramatic effect. An extra level of intimidation. Which makes sense, since otherwise, we could try to barrel through anyone who tries to enter. The humans probably wouldn’t have a chance of succeeding with that, but me?

Who knows.

Benjamin closes the door behind himself and walks slowly toward Lindsay, pulling me out of my thoughts.

“Stand up,” he commands, and she slowly does as he asks.

I glance at Jason’s cell, but he’s no longer leaning against the bars, so I can’t see his reaction.

Turning my attention back to Benjamin and Lindsay, I watch in horror as he moves toward her and gently wraps a hand around her neck.

I need to stop him.

Maybe I can use my illusion magic?

But what, exactly, can I do with it?

Sure, I can try making Lindsay invisible. But that won't make her non-corporal. It won't stop Benjamin from feeding off her.

"Stop," I call out to him, my voice desperate. "Feed from me instead."

It's likely the stupidest thing I've ever said in my life. It's the exact opposite of what I was thinking a minute ago when I decided to fight him off no matter what. But I'm supernatural and Lindsay's not. I heal faster than humans. And I can't help myself from thinking about Carly, and her mysterious disappearance.

I can't stand by and watch Benjamin drain Lindsay's life away.

Benjamin looks over his shoulder and sneers at me. "You're not worth the risk," he says simply, and he pushes Lindsay up against the wall, sinking what I imagine are his fangs into her neck.

She relaxes into him, and I watch in horror as he drinks his fill. Even worse—I can smell a tinge of blood in the air, like rusted metal. I take shallower breaths to block it out, but it doesn't matter. The metallic taste still lingers in the back of my throat.

Eventually, Benjamin pulls away. The twin puncture marks on Lindsay's neck heal, and she stares up at him, like she's in a trance.

"You liked that?" he asks, his voice low and seductive.

"Yes," she breathes, trembling, and she tilts her face up, like she's longing for a kiss.

He moves closer, stopping mere inches from her lips. “No, Lindsay. I have a girlfriend,” he says gently. “Remember?”

Desire continues to swirl in Lindsay’s eyes as she stares up at him.

“Hazel’s not down here. She won’t know.” She tries to move closer to him, but he presses his index finger to her lips, stopping her.

“Thanks for the meal. It was quite satisfying,” he says, smirking. “But I have to run.”

With a final, lingering glance at Lindsay, Benjamin turns and exits her cell, locking the door behind him. He looks over at me, a smug expression plastered on his face.

“See that? She liked it,” he says, nodding toward Lindsay as she sits down on the bed again, her eyes glazed and distant. “When it’s your turn, you will, too.”

His words send a shiver down my spine, but I refuse to let him see it.

I *hate* him.

“I thought you said I wasn’t worth the risk?” I shoot back, my voice steady despite the fear gnawing inside me.

I’m unsure of the risk I pose to him, but it probably has something to do with me being a wolf shifter, star touched, or both.

“Did I say that *I’ll* be the one feeding from you?” he asks, his tone dripping with condescension.

I straighten my shoulders and hold his icy gaze. “No,” I say. “But who will?”

He chuckles darkly, the sound echoing through the dimly lit cells. “Do you really think I’m going to answer that?”

No. I didn’t.

But I won’t give him the satisfaction of admitting it.

I don’t have time to push Benjamin for more information, because from the shadows of his cell, Jason speaks up.

“Where’s Gwen?” he asks, gripping the bars of his cell again, craning his neck to get a better look at Benjamin.

Benjamin turns to face Jason, smirking. “Relax, Jason. Gwen fed from you last night. She’ll be back tonight,” he says in a way that I think is supposed to be calming, but makes my skin crawl.

Desperation shines in Jason’s eyes, and he clings to the bars tighter, his knuckles turning white. “Tell her that I’m thinking about her, okay? And that I’m looking forward to seeing her.”

He sounds nothing like the confident guy who was bantering with Lindsay earlier.

A cruel smile plays on Benjamin’s lips, clearly amused by Jason’s plea. “Sure, I’ll pass along the message,” he says, although from the way he seems to be mocking Jason, I don’t believe him. “In the meantime, the three of you should relax. Read some of those books we gave you.” He looks to me specifically when he says that last part. “I know how much you enjoy reading.”

I glare at him again, since he’s directly referencing my conversation with Tristan.

He’s teasing me. Playing with my mind. And while I didn’t think it was possible to hate him even more, he just managed to prove me wrong.

“I’ll take a look at them,” I say coolly, since asking him questions clearly isn’t getting me anywhere. “Thanks.”

He narrows his eyes at me. “You do that,” he says, and then he’s down the hall, up the stairs, and out of the basement before any of us can say another word to him.

I stand there in shock for a few seconds, trying to process what just happened, then turn my attention to Lindsay. She’s still sitting on the bed, and she allows her hand to rest on the place where Benjamin fed from her neck.

“Lindsay,” I say softly, not wanting to startle her. “Are you okay?”

A stupid question.

Of *course* she isn't okay.

"All good," she says, letting her arm fall back to her side and giving me a weak smile. "It's not as bad as it looks. You'll see."

Hell no I won't.

"We'll get out of here," I promise, even though my words feel empty.

But how will we escape? I'm just as trapped as they are. I might be supernatural, but I can't shift, I have no earth magic, and my illusion magic is all but useless to do anything to get us out.

"How?" she asks exactly what I'm wondering myself.

"I don't know yet," I admit. "But I'll figure something out."

She shrugs, and I glance at Jason, hoping he might have something to add.

He says nothing.

"Benjamin might eventually let me out," Lindsay continues. "He cares about me. I know he has a girlfriend, but that doesn't mean I'm not important to him, too."

I study her, looking for any signs of doubt, but I find nothing.

She's delusional.

That, or he did something to her when he fed from her. I'm betting on the latter. Judging by the way Jason talks about Gwen, she did the same to him, too.

The question is: how long after feeding from them will it take for the effects of whatever they did to them fade?

Will it fade?

And even though I'm not human, will it happen to me if a vampire feeds from me, too?

So many questions, and no answers.

Maybe Connor will come for me. Despite how much he hates it, we do have our mate bond. We're connected by fate, or the universe, or however it works.

What if he can sense that something's wrong, and tries to get me out of here?

Or maybe he's working with Hazel.

The intrusive thought crawls into my mind, sinking its hooks into me and refusing to let go. After all, Connor *does* want to get rid of me. He hasn't made a secret of it.

Which means the only person who can help me is myself.

Unsure what else to do, I reach for my wolf again, but trying to find her is like trying to push through molasses. My head feels fuzzy, my body weak.

How long has it been since I've eaten?

I glance at the bagel sitting on the table. It looks far from appealing, but I need to keep my strength up. Connecting with my wolf and figuring out how to better use my magic might be my only way out of this place.

And I need to do it before one of the vampires does whatever they did to Jason and Lindsay to me.

Because I've lost a lot recently, and I don't intend on losing my sanity, too.

Tristan



I WILL ALWAYS STAND by the fact that Calliope Thornhart's library in her ancestral home in Spring Creek, New York, is the best in the state. The rambling house itself, with its peeling paint and creaky floorboards, sprawls over twelve thousand square feet, not including the basement. Its library, a vast sanctuary of knowledge, harbors thousands of books, from freshly minted to ancient. Some are so old that they date back to before Gwen was turned into a vampire.

As for me, I gravitate toward science fiction. Fantasy usually hits too close to home, and I generally enjoy reading about possible futures rather than dwelling on the past.

The worn velvet armchair has come to know the shape of my body in the past few weeks, and the silence in the room is only interrupted by the occasional rustle of pages and the soft creaking of the floorboards beneath me as I shift in my seat.

That is, until an unexpected knock on the door shatters the stillness, and the person on the other side comes in before I can give her permission to enter.

Calliope. Her silver hair glints in the sunlight as she strides toward me, her boots clicking on the floor.

I'd be annoyed that she's storming in here as if she owns the place, except that she does, in fact, own the place.

I close the book, not bothering to mark it. I always remember exactly where I left off.

It always feels surreal to look at Calliope. Because even though she appears decades older than me, I'm the one who

has years on her.

Many, many years. Granted, I'm nowhere near as ancient as Gwen, but if I weren't immortal, I'd have long since turned to dust.

"Good morning," I say pleasantly, despite being annoyed at the interruption.

Ever since I met *her*, I've been in no mood for anything but reading.

Ruby.

I was supposed to be the one seducing her, not the other way around. But there's something about her—something otherworldly, captivating—that has ensnared me. The memory of the sparkle in her eyes and the fire in her voice during our conversation has haunted me since that night at the bar.

I've kept this to myself, of course.

I trust Benjamin and Gwen with my life, but Calliope and the other witches?

We're supposed to be loyal to them above all else. I doubt they'd be thrilled about this new... infatuation of mine.

That's what I'm feeling for Ruby, isn't it? Infatuation. I've never been in love, but I refuse to subscribe to the naïve belief that love can be sparked at first sight. Even with shifter mate bonds, I feel like it must only be intense attraction—not love.

Love takes time, patience, work, and communication. Though I've never experienced it myself, I've witnessed enough in my long lifetime to know that much.

So why am I constantly having to remind myself of this logic now?

"Have you had your morning meal yet?" Calliope asks, never one for small talk.

"Not yet," I say. "I was trying to enjoy the quiet before the others wake up."

In truth, the thought of feeding on the animal blood I've been subsisting on lately holds little appeal. I've been reduced

to feeding from animals because it's too risky to continuously feed off humans in the nearby town, but we can only stomach animal blood for so long before growing restless.

Thus why we were all relieved when Hazel suggested keeping some humans from Pine Valley here with us for consistent feedings.

“Good,” Calliope says, a knowing smile playing at her lips. “Because we’ve brought someone for you.”

At the mere mention of a human waiting for me, I set the book on the side table and rise to my feet, all irritation from the interruption vanishing in an instant.

“Take me to her,” I command, my gums aching at the thought of human blood.

“Not so fast.” The gleam in Calliope’s eyes makes it clear she’s up to something. “There’s a catch you’re going to want to brace yourself for.”

“What catch?” I remain still and calm as I wait.

“The person we brought for you isn’t a human. It’s Ruby.”

My breath catches in my throat, and my heart stutters.

She can’t be serious.

Ruby’s a shifter. She’s star touched. We have plans for her. Plans that don’t involve kidnapping her and locking her in the basement.

On top of that, the thought of Ruby being locked in one of those cells... well, I don’t like it. Not one bit.

“Why did you bring her here?” I ask, since the idea of Ruby being captured for me to feed on is preposterous.

They wouldn’t put one of us in danger like that.

Especially not *me*.

“To drink from her, of course.” Calliope has the audacity to look proud of herself, as if she’s just unveiled a brilliant plan.

“That’s insane,” I say, my voice a low growl.

It's more than insane.

It's illegal.

"There's been a change of plans," she says casually, as though she's discussing a minor inconvenience instead of breaking one of the biggest laws of the supernatural world. "We need you to make progress with Ruby sooner rather than later."

"No," I say, but she just stands there, her loose white blouse fluttering in one of the many drafts that constantly haunt this ancient house. "If I do what you're asking, I'll be marked for death. You know it. The others know it." I glance at the door, half expecting Gwen and Benjamin to burst through at any second to right this terrible wrong.

My magic stirs, tempting me to blast Calliope aside and confront the others, but she's no pushover. Despite her age, she's far from weak.

As if to emphasize this fact, she holds up her hand and conjures a ball of fire in her palm.

It's warm against my skin. Something about it calls to me to look closer, but I avert my gaze, well aware of the hypnotic effect a witch's flames can have. Especially ones created by a witch as powerful as Calliope.

"No one will ever find out," she says, snuffing out the fire as if she's already made her point. "And, if they ever do, our coven will already be the most powerful in the world. *We'll* make the laws then. You're safe with us. You're one of us. We're family now. And we're all in this together."

Tristan



CALLIOPE'S WORDS that we're family now ring true, but still...

"I won't follow in my brother's footsteps," I say. "Especially when our plan with Ruby was going so well. I told you how... receptive she was." My heart aches at the memory of Ruby's responsiveness to my kiss, and I touch the cross pendant around my neck—the one that belonged to my brother. "This is a terrible way to gain her trust."

If reminding her of the risk to my life isn't enough, perhaps an appeal to our long-term strategy will be.

"You will never capture the girl's heart," she says plainly. "It already belongs to someone else."

"Who?" Every muscle in my body tenses, but I maintain control, never one to act impulsively out of emotion.

"I had a visit from a wolf in the Pine Valley pack," she begins. "Autumn Blackwell. The one the same age as Ruby? She says she's going to be their alpha female someday."

She watches me, waiting to see if I recognize the name.

"I don't know much about the wolves in other packs," I admit. "They all blend together to me."

All except for *her*.

But, given the fact that she's star touched, Ruby is hardly an ordinary shifter. She's far more special, and anyone with eyes can see it.

“A quick lesson about the Pine Valley pack: Autumn is in a relationship with their future alpha male, Connor Ward,” Calliope says. “They’ve been together for years. They’re engaged to be married, but a recent obstacle has appeared in their path.”

“What ‘obstacle?’” The words escape my mouth in an angry hiss. Once more, I have to rein in my urge to blast her against the wall. As it is, the crystals in the chandeliers chime overhead as the drafts in the room blow stronger, a testament to the magic rising inside me.

However, I’ve lived long enough to know that asserting force on the old witch isn’t going to get me anywhere. So I release my hold on my magic, and when the chandeliers go silent again, Calliope nods in satisfaction.

“Connor has a true mate,” she says, her voice cutting through the air like glass. “Ruby.”

Her words strike me like a dagger to my heart, and I have to breathe deeper to ground myself.

“We need to break the mate bond before they solidify it,” she continues, as if she didn’t just shatter my world.

“Autumn’s lying,” I say, refusing to believe it. “Why else would their future alpha remain engaged to her?”

I can’t bring myself to say his name.

Connor.

The name of the man whose existence threatens to derail everything we’ve set out to achieve.

“She’s not lying. She wouldn’t have agreed to my condition if she were,” Calliope says, and then she proceeds to outline the terms Autumn made with her.

Terms no shifter would accept unless they were desperate to be with the one they claimed to love.

“You believe me,” she says when she’s done, since I’m sure my hard expression gives away that I do.

“Yes.” I keep my voice steady and calm, unwilling to give into the emotions threatening to boil to the surface.

I shouldn’t care this much. Ruby must have hypnotized me, the same way I’m doing to her. It’s the only explanation for this... protectiveness I’m feeling for her.

The mate bond makes it so Ruby will never feel the same way for me that she does for Connor.

And yet, that knowledge makes me want her even more.

“As I’m sure you now understand, we need to break their bond as soon as possible if we want the girl to join us,” Calliope continues, looking extremely satisfied with herself for catching me off-guard. “The necklace won’t be enough. A blood bond will be a good start, bringing us closer to our goal, but it still won’t be enough. The only thing that will be enough is—”

“If she volunteers to turn,” I finish her sentence, knowing exactly where this is going.

A person can only be turned if they’re willing. For me, over a century ago, it was a choice between turning or dying.

Not a difficult decision at all.

“But why would she volunteer to turn or join us?” I ask. “You’ve kidnapped her, locked her in a cell, and given her every reason to hate us.”

“To hate *us*, perhaps.” Calliope absentmindedly twirls a strand of her silver hair around her boney finger. “But we don’t need her to like us. We only need her to like *you*. To *love* you. To do anything to be with you forever.”

“Even though she has a fated mate.” The words come out in a deadpan, since I hate that they’re true.

The pendant around my neck feels like it’s pulsing with emotion, as if insisting that Ruby belongs with me.

I know she isn’t mine.

But I *want* her to be.

The question is—how far am I willing to go to make it happen?

“She has a fated mate who rejected her,” Calliope reminds me. “The pain of a shifter being rejected by a mate is supposedly one of the worst things they can experience. It’s an emptiness they’ll never be able to fill. If you offer to turn her, you’ll be offering her freedom from that pain. You’ll be offering her love and safety. How could she possibly say no?”

I press my lips together, because even though what she’s suggesting is treason, I can’t deny that a large part of me yearns to have Ruby by my side—forever.

This might be my one and only chance to make that happen.

“Fine,” I give in. “I’ll do it. But I have one condition.”

“And what’s that?” Calliope asks, her eyes narrowing with curiosity.

It’s hard to believe this is happening—that she’s made an offer like this, and that I’m saying okay.

But it *is* happening. So, with precision, I explain exactly what I want to do after Autumn fulfills her part of the deal and delivers on her promise.

And, much to my satisfaction, Calliope says yes.

Ruby



I SPEND the next hour or so getting to know Jason, as Lindsay is sleeping again due to the blood loss she suffered at Benjamin's hands. His warm and outgoing nature is infectious—he's the type of guy who makes friends easily—and he easily chats with me about his love for snowboarding and other adrenaline-seeking activities.

He speaks fondly of his younger sister, who's studying to be a nurse, and they're clearly very close. His parents, both accomplished lawyers, have always been supportive of his passion for snowboarding, even though they don't completely understand it. Their love mirrors the support my parents have always given me, encouraging me to go for my dreams, no matter what.

My heart hurts when I think of them, like it has every time since learning that they think I'm dead.

It makes me even more determined to get Jason and Lindsay out of here, so their parents never have to suffer the pain I know mine are experiencing right now.

Suddenly, the door at the top of the stairs swings open, interrupting my conversation with Jason.

My breath catches in my chest at the sight of Tristan walking down the stairs, with Benjamin, Hazel, and a woman I haven't met yet.

Their footsteps echo in the hall, the woman's high heels clicking with authority as she takes the lead. There's something ageless about her, in her tailored blouse and black

trousers, and her dark, wavy hair makes her already pale skin appear nearly translucent. Her eyes are a striking shade of violet, and from the way Jason grips the bars of his cell like a lovesick puppy, I have no doubts who this woman is.

Gwen.

But my attention is stolen by Tristan, his golden eyes piercing my soul like they did the night we met. He's wearing the same bomber jacket he had on then, and as he pins me down with his sharp gaze, his strong features tense into pure anger.

He quickly tears his focus away from me. "What's *she* doing here?" he asks Gwen, disgust dripping from his tone.

I step back, startled by how much it sounds like he hates me.

But I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. The Tristan I met before doesn't exist. That Tristan was a human, not a vampire. That night was an act to him—a game. None of what happened in that bar between us was real.

I clearly mean nothing to him.

Just like he should mean nothing to me.

"I told you we brought someone for you," Gwen replies, her accent a curious blend of British and something else.

"You were supposed to bring me a human," he says. "Ruby isn't human."

"I thought you liked her?" Hazel chimes in, her sweet demeanor from our time together at her house now hidden beneath black jeans and a tight leather jacket.

She looks like some sort of evil twin of the girl I thought I knew.

"I'm hungry," he says. "Whether or not I liked her is irrelevant. I can't feed on her. And you can't keep her here. It's... degrading, to say the least."

His eyes flick back to me, determination blazing within them.

My heart leaps with hope.

Maybe my attraction toward him wasn't so unrequited, after all.

And, if it wasn't, there might be a chance he can help get me get out of here.

"Gwen," Jason says, interrupting their conversation. "I missed you."

Gwen barely spares him a glance. "I'll join you soon," she promises, which seems to placate him for the moment. "Like Tristan, I'm hungry."

I've been a silent observer so far, and I know I should have said something by now. But begging them to let me go isn't going to convince them have a sudden change of heart. So, what else is there?

"You drugged me," I say to Hazel, going for the obvious.

"I truly am sorry about that." Her apology echoes the one from the car. "I needed to get you here, and it was the easiest way."

"You don't think I would have happily strolled into this cell?" I ask, sarcasm dripping from my words.

"Sorry," she repeats. "But this entire thing is complicated. I promise you'll understand soon."

"Understand what? That you want him to feed off my blood?" I glance back at Tristan, his icy gaze sending shivers down my spine.

So much for him not hating me.

"Don't worry," he says. "I'm not going to do it."

"This is orders from above," Gwen says. "You have to do it."

"This is *illegal*," he snarls, and a breeze passes through the stuffy hall, even though there are no windows to let it in.

Vampires have power over the element of air, I remember from everything Penny told me during the short time I stayed

at her house.

Tristan clearly isn't an omega, or whatever term the vampires use to describe the members of their species who can't connect with their assigned element.

Gwen's violet eyes narrow, her lips pressed into a thin line as she regards Tristan's defiance. "No one will find out," she says. "You know the others will protect us, no matter what. They made an oath to us."

"That doesn't change the fact that if we *are* found out, I'll be hunted and killed." Tristan's voice is tight with barely contained anger, back to talking with them as if I'm not here.

My heart hammers in my chest as a desperate idea takes root in my thoughts. Maybe I should make it so I'm *not* here. At least, make it look like I'm not.

Turning invisible won't help me escape. But it might remind them that I'm *not* human—I'm star touched.

It beats standing here doing nothing.

So, I reach deep inside myself, searching for my magic. But just like when I looked for my wolf, it's like navigating through a thick fog.

Hazel's drug is still in my system.

It *must* be.

"We won't be found out," Gwen repeats. "You're my son. I care about you—I created you. Would I ever put you in danger like that?"

"You might do it for *him*." Tristan's snarl is vicious, and Gwen shoots Hazel a meaningful glance.

In a blur of motion, Hazel reaches inside her jacket, pulls out a dagger, and plunges it into Tristan's stomach.

"No!" I scream, and I'm suddenly at the very front of the cell, my hands wrapped around the bars in a desperate, unsuccessful attempt to wrench the door open.

Tristan sucks in a sharp, painful breath, his eyes wide in shock as he stares at Hazel.

Benjamin springs into action, striding towards my cell. With one hand, he hurls a blast of wind at me, propelling me back onto the bed. With his other, he retrieves the key and unlocks the door.

Determination surges through me, and I rise to my feet, ready to make a break for it.

He forces me back with another gust of wind.

At the same time, Gwen and Hazel drag Tristan over and toss him into the cell. Hazel's removed the blade, and Tristan rolls onto his back, his hands clutching the wound as crimson blood spills through his fingers.

I curse and hurry toward him, carefully moving his hands so I can get a look at the injury. As I watch, the hole in his stomach begins to knit back together, the flow of blood slowing until the wound is sealed.

Stunned, I stare at the smooth skin now visible through the tear in his black t-shirt.

Tristan uses his elbows to sit back up, and he pushes me away, eyes blazing with anger as he stares down Hazel.

She's studying the blade in her hand, which is now smeared with Tristan's blood. It's an ancient-looking thing, and her fingers wrap around the handle, hiding all but an intricately carved skull at the base.

"What did you *do*?" Tristan growls, rising and pulling at the cell bars like a caged animal.

I cautiously back away from him, my own focus also on Hazel and the others, my heart pounding with fear.

They locked me in here with a vampire.

One who hasn't yet had his breakfast.

Terror rushes through my veins. Because sure, Tristan claims to like me and not want to feed from me. But if they keep him in here with me for long enough...

"You'll eventually get hungry enough that you'll need to feed," Gwen completes my thought as Hazel returns the

bloodied dagger to the inside of her jacket pocket. “Especially after losing all that blood.”

“I won’t do it,” Tristan says, his voice strained and desperate.

“You will,” Gwen says with chilling certainty. “If it comes down to feeding from her or killing her... well, I know you well enough to know what you’ll choose.”

“You might as well get started, brother,” Benjamin says, shifting his attention back to me. “I saw the way you looked at him at the bar. You can’t deny that you want it.”

It sounds so vile and demeaning when he says it that way, and I want to reach through the cell bars and wring his arrogant neck.

“I want to get out of here,” I say, trembling with frustration and fear, and then I turn my plea to Hazel. “You said there was something you want me to understand. I can’t do that if you don’t explain what it is.”

“I will, eventually,” she says, her eyes distant. “But you’re not ready yet.”

“I *am* ready,” I insist, trying to remain calm despite the fact that they’ve locked me in here with a hungry vampire. “I’ve been through enough these past few days that I’m open to anything. You know that.”

My heart races as I lock eyes with Hazel, searching for any hint of sympathy or understanding.

There’s nothing.

So, I turn my focus to Tristan.

His jaw is set, his eyes ablaze. But despite his anger, there’s an undeniable concern in his gaze as he studies me. It’s as if he’s torn between his instincts and whatever pull he feels toward me, weighing the consequences of defying Gwen and her ruthless plan.

I think I can get through to him.

I just need to play my cards right.

“You’re not ready,” Hazel repeats, snapping me back to the present. “But you will be. Soon.”

With that, she turns and heads for the door, Benjamin and Gwen following close behind.

“Gwen,” Jason pleads from his cell, halting her in her tracks. “Stay.”

She pauses, considering his request with a cold, calculating gaze. “Don’t worry. I’ll be back for you,” she finally says, her words a chilling promise. “For now, these lovebirds need some time to get reacquainted.”

Her smile sends a shiver down my spine, and then she, Benjamin, and Hazel are up the stairs and out the door. It echoes through the dimly lit space as it slams shut, emphasizing our isolation.

I take a shaky breath, attempting to steady my racing heart. The air in the cell is stale and cold, heavy with the scent of fear and blood. It’s only a matter of time before Tristan’s hunger takes over.

I can’t let that happen.

He wants to resist.

I just have to figure out a way to help him... or, if it comes down to it, defend myself against the monster lurking beneath his dangerously alluring surface.

I can do it.

My life—and probably Jason and Lindsay’s—likely depends on it.

Ruby



TRISTAN LEANS AGAINST THE COLD, stone wall on the opposite side of the cell, the dim light casting shadows across his conflicted expression. He's gazing at me like I'm the most tempting thing in the world, his golden eyes smoldering with a mixture of desire and fear.

I stay put on the bed, careful not to startle him.

"You don't have to do this," I say, trying to stay calm and steady.

"I won't hurt you, Ruby." His voice is smooth as silk, laced with a dangerous edge. "I can keep it under control."

"For how long?"

My eyes dart to the dark red stain on the worn rug beneath us, the memory of Gwen's words about Tristan's intensified hunger after losing so much blood sending a shiver down my spine.

"I can last about a month without blood," he admits, running his fingers through his soft, brown hair. "I'll lose myself to the hunger in about three days. Maybe less, due to the blood loss."

Every fiber of my being goes on high alert. "What happens when you lose control?"

I swallow hard, having a feeling where this is going.

"I won't be able to resist feeding from you," he says exactly what I thought he might. "And, once I start, I won't be able to stop."

His gaze locks on mine, and I swear I can see the monster lurking beneath his perfect exterior, like a beast biding its time in the shadows.

Tristan's dangerous, and I can't let myself forget it.

"You'd kill me," I say, and his eyes harden, confirming my fear.

"We won't let it come to that." He glances at the stain on the rug, a flash of anger crossing his face. "I can't believe Hazel stabbed me."

"And I can't believe she drugged me," I snap back, my anger mirroring his.

"She wasn't supposed to do that." He reaches for the cross pendant hanging from his neck, as if looking to it for protection.

"Then what was she 'supposed' to do?" I ask.

He hesitates, his jaw clenched. "It's complicated," he says. "But trust me, Ruby, I care about you. And I swear on my brother's life that I'll never hurt you."

Silence hangs in the air between us, thick and suffocating. From the desire swirling in his eyes, I'm unsure if he wants to kiss me or kill me.

My heart races as I remember the taste of his lips, and I feel my face flush, warmth spreading through me like an all-consuming fire.

"Benjamin referred to you as his brother," I say, hoping to break the tension.

"He's not my brother by birth," Tristan says. "Gwen turned us both, so we have the same sire, but this necklace belonged to my true brother. The one who shared my blood."

"He's gone," I say carefully, not wanting to push him, but also getting the impression that he's open to talking about it.

"Murdered by shifters," he says, bitterness lacing his tone. "Their punishment for his feeding on a supernatural. They hunted him down and killed him for it."

A chill fills the air, as if his brother's spirit is in the cell with us.

"So that's why you don't want to feed from me," I say, piecing it all together. "You'll be hunted down if they find out."

"Exactly."

I can tell by how vulnerable he looks that he's telling the truth. But also...

"If they don't let us out of here, it sounds like we won't have much of a choice." I hold his gaze, daring him to lie and say otherwise.

He presses his lips together and drops his hand back down to his side. "I'll figure out a way to fix this," he promises, although I have no idea how, exactly, he'll be able to do that.

"The Pine Valley pack will eventually realize I'm gone and come looking for me," I tell him, hoping it's true.

Connor will realize I'm gone and come looking for me.

Although that would mean he cares, and he's made it more than clear that he doesn't.

"They won't," Tristan says, a hint of sympathy in his eyes. "Hazel sides with Spring Creek. So do her parents. They'll be able to hide your disappearance. Anyway, it's best that the Pine Valley pack doesn't come here, for all their sakes."

A knot forms in my stomach. "What do you mean by that?"

"If they come here, they'll be facing a force they can't imagine." He pauses, as if unsure to share more, then continues, "The Blood Coven."

My body turns cold after he says it.

"What's the Blood Coven?" I ask.

"I can't tell you more," he says, his voice tight. "I'm sorry."

I want to push him for more information. At the same time, I'm in no position to anger him, so I nod instead. "No problem," I say. "I understand."

Our conversation fades, and he sits down on the only chair in the cell, refusing to look at me. The unspoken tension crackles like a live wire between us, charged and dangerous.

My gaze drifts to the cell across from ours, where Lindsay is still sleeping. Her chest rises and falls in a peaceful rhythm, although I know that will be shattered when she eventually wakes up.

"I watched Benjamin feed on her." I lower my voice, as if not wanting her to hear, even though she's clearly not waking up anytime soon. "After he finished, she was entranced by him. Just like Jason is by Gwen."

"The blood bond," Tristan says darkly, confirming what I already suspected was true.

"How does it work?" As much as I hate it, I need to prepare myself for what might happen if Tristan and I are unable to get out of this cell and it comes down to the inevitable.

I need to stay alive, no matter what I have to do—or offer—to make it happen.

"The more a vampire feeds from someone, whether they're human or supernatural, the more that person will trust them," he tells me. "The more they'll... desire them."

He leans forward, his gaze burning with the same desire he's speaking of right now.

Even though he said he'll do everything he can to stop himself from feeding on me, I have no doubt that if I walk over there right now and offer myself to him, he wouldn't say no.

And, most disturbingly, why is a part of me... excited by the thought?

No, I think. I don't want that. I don't want him doing to me what I watched Benjamin do to Lindsay.

Yet, my gaze drops to his lips, and memories of our electrifying kiss dance through my mind, tempting me with the possibilities of what could happen if I let down my guard.

We both stay exactly where we are, but the space between us feels like it's growing smaller, as if something between us is trying to pull us together. A force that tugs at my soul almost as much as it did when I was around Connor.

From the way Tristan's eyes dilate and his breathing slows, I know he's feeling it, too.

How long can we possibly last in here together before giving in?

"How many times does it take?" I ask cautiously.

"The first time isn't bad," he says. "They'll shake it off in a day or two. It's why it's best for our kind to only feed from someone once, lest we have hoards of obsessed humans intent on tracking us down. It's easiest to accomplish that in large cities, which is why most of us congregate in them."

"Makes sense," I say, remembering what Penny told me about shifter Guardians being sent to cities to protect humans from the vampires that live there.

Key word: humans.

"What happens when a vampire feeds off a supernatural?" I ask, since that's the situation we're dealing with right now.

"The same bond forms with supernaturals as humans," he says. "It's why the witches and shifters are determined to keep us in line—why our feeding on any of them results in an immediate death penalty. They don't want to be bound to us. They don't want us to have that sort of control over them."

"Understandably so," I say, thinking about Connor and the bond I resent between the two of us, the one that only seems to exist for the purpose of causing us constant pain.

I'm already bound to one person. I don't need the same with another.

"I'll do everything I can to resist drinking from you," he says, his expression pained. "But I'll only last for so long, and

I refuse to reach the point of killing you.”

“Trust me—I don’t want you to kill me, either,” I say. “If it comes down to killing me or feeding from me, I want you to do the latter. I just want you to know that, before... well, when you still know it’s *me* saying it and not because of anything else.”

“I appreciate it,” he says, and he sits back a bit in relief. “Truly.”

“Why are they so determined to have you drink from me, anyway?” I ask. “They know the law. Why would they put you in danger like this?”

A shadow crosses his eyes, and he rips his gaze away from mine, conflicted and torn. Whatever truth lies behind my question haunts him.

I let the silence linger between us, giving him space to organize his thoughts.

Finally, he meets my eyes again.

“They want us to grow close,” he admits. “They know about your magic, and they want you to choose to stay with us. To stay with *me*.”

I stare at him in shock, unable to believe he admitted to that.

“So, let me get this straight. They imprisoned me, forced you to share this cell with me, and plan to starve you until we have no other choice than for you to either form a blood bond with me or kill me,” I say, the ridiculousness of it astounding me. “All in an effort to get me to fall for you so I don’t want to leave you, and therefore, not leave them?”

“I don’t want this anymore than you do,” he snaps, stunning me into silence. “I genuinely like you, Ruby. I didn’t expect to feel anything for you, but I do. If you ever end up feeling the same way about me, do you think I want it to be because you were forced to love me? What kind of relationship would that be? How would I ever know if I could trust it or not? How would I ever know I could trust *you*?”

My mind races, trying to process everything he just said. It's a lot to take in, but one word of his hangs in the air, echoing in my thoughts.

Love.

Tristan, with his haunting, golden eyes, claiming that he likes me? That he could maybe even love me?

Sure, we had one good conversation—and one amazing kiss—but we barely know each other. This is crazy. The entire position we're in right now is positively *insane*.

The silence that stretches between us is tense and heavy, the weight of his words threatening to crush us both.

"I'm sorry," he eventually says, and he sits back, releasing a long, defeated breath. "I shouldn't have said that."

Understatement of the century.

I struggle to figure out a response, but eventually, it comes to me.

"You literally just accused a future version of me of lying about feelings that *I don't even have for you*. Ones I've never *claimed* to have for you, and ones I'm never *going* to have for you." My anger about it boils to the surface, and he flinches at my words. "So don't worry—you'll never have to wonder if I'm lying to you or not. Because if we're forced into this blood bond, and if I ever claim to love you afterward, you can trust that it's most certainly *not* true."

Hurt flashes across his features, but he masks it before I can tell if it was ever there at all.

"I understand," he murmurs, his voice cold and strained. "You'll never feel anything for me but hatred and disgust. You won't have to worry again about me thinking that anything else is possible."

My heart twists in my chest, torn between wanting to comfort him and wanting to protect myself.

But he stands and walks to the bookshelf in the far corner of the cell before I can make a choice, his back turned as he

browses its contents, and I know he's closed himself off from whatever open conversation we were starting to have.

We're two strangers trapped together, the illusion of whatever connection might have existed between us shattered and scattered like broken glass.

And, in this moment, I make a promise to myself.

Tristan and I might be prisoners in this cell, and I may eventually have to let him feed from me so I can stay alive. But I will never allow myself to be a prisoner to my own heart.

Not for Tristan, not for Connor, and not for *anyone*.

I don't care if it's a blood bond, and I don't care if it's a mate bond. My thoughts belong to me, and my feelings are mine alone.

I refuse to ever accept anything else.

Ruby



AS THE HOURS TICK BY, Tristan and I settle into an uneasy silence. The quiet is stifling, interrupted only by the occasional rustling of pages as we immerse ourselves in books at the opposite sides of the cell, avoiding all eye contact and conversation.

There's a small bathroom attached to the cell, and I try to escape into it for a bit. But it's beyond claustrophobic, since it has no windows and is smaller than a closet, so that doesn't last very long.

I want to ask Tristan about the book he's reading—a recent work of science fiction—but I refuse to be the one to break the oppressive tension crackling in the air between us. He's the one who was a jerk to me. Sure, I reacted intensely to his words, but given the entire situation, I don't think it's crazy for me to be upset.

Lindsay eventually wakes, and I give her a summary of what happened. She seems to know better than to pry for more information than I'm willing to provide, and I'm grateful for that.

I assume Jason is brooding over Gwen's continued absence.

The day slowly fades into evening, and Hazel comes back downstairs, delivering sandwiches and bottles of water. Tristan gets nothing, since as we've all been made well-aware, his food is already in this cell with him.

Me.

Hazel's wearing the same all-black outfit as earlier, and I'm positive that the creepy dagger is still inside the pocket of her leather jacket.

I remain standing, since I'm taller than her and don't want her to feel like she's on higher ground.

"Hungry yet?" she asks Tristan.

He lowers the book he's reading just enough to meet her gaze with a glare that could cut through steel. "I'm doing fine. Thank you for asking," he says, and he quickly returns to reading, seemingly unaffected by her attempt to pick a fight with him.

"Anytime," she says, turning her attention to me. "How have you been holding up?"

She can't be serious.

And yet, she is.

I muster a fake smile. "Fantastic. Absolutely loving the five-star accommodations here. In fact, I'm considering making this my permanent residence."

She smirks at my comment. "Well, I'm glad you're enjoying your stay at the Spring Creek Inn," she says, her gaze lingering on me as though she's weighing her next words carefully.

I cut in before she can speak. "Do you let Benjamin feed from you?" I ask, curiosity getting the better of me.

Her expression falters for a moment, and then a wistful smile crosses her lips. "No." She shakes her head gently, reminding me of the fragile girl who confessed her insecurities to me over a shared box of pizza. "I love Benjamin freely, without the influence of a blood bond. There's only one vampire I'd ever let near my neck."

Her gaze locks onto mine, and I sense that she's baiting me.

"Who?" I ask, since I can't resist trying to learn more.

The mysterious smile on Hazel's face grows, and her eyes hold a hint of amusement. She glances briefly at Tristan, still absorbed in his book, before turning her attention back to me.

"You're not ready to know that yet, but you'll find out soon enough," she says cryptically, and then she reaches inside her jacket, pulling out the dagger from earlier. The intricately carved metal handle depicts a creepy, smiling skeleton with a snake coiling around its feet. The blade, now clean of Tristan's blood, gleams in the dim light as she cradles it with a tenderness that sends an icy shiver snaking down my spine.

She raises it, the tip aimed toward the ceiling, and a delicate helix of fire spirals up the blade. The dancing flames reflect in her eyes and cast flickering shadows on her face.

"What is it?" I ask, since it's clearly no ordinary dagger.

"The Blade of Erebus," she says simply, as if that should hold any meaning for me.

Although, I can *sort of* put my finger on the name, from a fantasy book I read a few years ago...

"Erebus is a god," I remember. However, my knowledge of him stops there.

"Correct." She smiles, and the fire sputters out, leaving behind a wisp of smoke that spirals toward the ceiling and a burnt scent that lingers in the air. "He's the ancient Greek god of darkness and shadow. His blade is imbued with the power of darkness, and it's been in my family for generations."

As she speaks, I feel the darkness radiating off the dagger, like it's poisoning the air around it.

"In case you're about to ask, I'm not going to let you touch it," Hazel adds.

I most definitely *wasn't* about to ask. But her words remind me that it's been a while since she drugged me. I haven't tested my magic since then, but her statement gives me an idea.

I hold my hand in front of me, palm up, and visualize the dagger floating above it. I imagine the eerie skeleton handle,

the gleaming blade, and even the spiral of fire magic Hazel summoned around it.

Then I delve inside myself for my magic, relief flooding me when I sense it flowing beneath the surface. It's not as solid as usual, but it's *there*.

I call it forward. My mind tingles with the familiar sensation of my magic bending to my will, and I project the illusion of the dagger above my palm. It flickers and wavers, and it's slightly transparent, but it's a start.

I smile in satisfaction, then glance back at Tristan to see if he's watching. He hasn't seen my magic yet, and I can't deny that there's a part of myself that wants to impress him with it.

He's as engrossed in his book as ever, as if Hazel and I don't exist.

It must be a *really* good book.

Irritation surges through me, hot and fierce.

I need to stop looking at Tristan, and instead focus on what I'm doing. But when I return my attention to my palm, the illusion is gone.

"Nice try." Hazel shrugs. "But it looks like that little cocktail I gave you last night is still in your system."

I glare at her and lower my hand, not in the mood for her games. "Why are you still here?" I ask.

"I have news for you," she says, sliding the dagger back inside her jacket. "Connor and Autumn are engaged."

My stomach drops, the floor swaying beneath me.

"What?" I ask, even though her words rang painfully clear.

"Connor proposed to Autumn," she repeats. "They're going to be getting married. They haven't told the pack yet, but Jax thought it was important for my family and the other witches in the Pine Valley coven to know that a pair as strong as the two of them will be the future leaders of the pack that protects us. Given the history between you and Connor, I thought you'd want to know, too."

Ruby



I TRY to picture Connor getting down on one knee and proposing to Autumn. The image makes me feel physically ill. My heart pounds in my chest, the throbbing echoing in my ears, and my breaths become shallow and quick.

His decision is clearly a reaction to learning that I'm his mate.

It *has* to be. Why else would he be hurrying things along with Autumn? He's only nineteen, and she's only eighteen. Aren't they too young to be engaged, let alone married?

"You're upset." Hazel frowns, her voice barely cutting through the ringing in my ears.

If I didn't know any better, I'd think she genuinely feels bad about it.

Luckily, I do know better. So I swallow hard, somehow managing to hold back the tears burning behind my eyes. I refuse to let her see me as weak.

If she realizes how much she upset me, she'll rub it in even more. And I can't bring myself to look back at Tristan again. If Hazel's already told him that Connor and I are mates—which she might have, since she knew about it before bringing me here—then I don't want to see how smug he probably looks at the fact that Connor rejected me more harshly than I just rejected him.

I need to seem confident and unfazed.

“Connor and I aren’t together,” I say, forcing strength into my voice. “He can propose to whoever he wants.”

From the way she studies me, like she’s waiting for me to crumble, I can tell she doesn’t buy it.

“I just thought it was important for you to know,” she continues. “So you realize they’re not on your side.”

“Are you implying that *you’re* on my side?” I ask, shocked that she might be serious.

“Is that so hard to believe?”

“I’m currently locked in your basement with a hungry vampire.” I gesture around the cell in irritation. “So, yes. It’s *impossible* to believe.”

“Tristan won’t kill you,” she says simply.

“Maybe not,” I say. “But he might feed off me. You know what will happen if he does.”

“The blood bond.”

“Yes.” I stare her down, the air crackling with tension between us.

She doesn’t falter.

“Your mate rejected you and is engaged to be married,” she says slowly, as if I need a reminder of the news that just crushed my soul. “Would it be so bad to bond with someone else? Someone who might actually like you, and from what I saw at the bar, you like in return? Especially if it numbs the pain of being unwanted by your mate?”

Unwanted.

The word is a sledgehammer to my heart. It steals the air from my lungs, and it hurts to breathe.

But no good will come from letting her see me like this. I need to pull myself together. Now.

“I’m already bound to one person,” I say slowly, steadily. “I don’t want to be bound to another.”

Hazel hesitates, her eyes filled with a strange mix of concern and something else I can't quite place. "Bonding with Tristan will make this easier. Give it time. You'll see," she says, and then she turns and walks away, the sound of her footsteps echoing as she leaves.

The door creaks shut behind her, and the basement is once again plunged into silence.

Throughout this entire exchange, Lindsay's been nibbling on her food as if she's watching a twisted horror movie.

"Want to talk?" she asks carefully, like she's afraid one wrong word will break me.

Honestly, she's not wrong.

"No," I say, and she lowers her gaze, not pushing further.

Stunned by the weight of Hazel's news, I sink down into the chair at the table and stare numbly at the sandwich and bottle of water on its surface. I didn't think there could be any worse feeling in the world than my fated mate rejecting me to my face.

Apparently, I was wrong. Because his getting engaged less than a week afterward is *definitely* worse.

I reach for my water, stopping at the feeling of someone watching me.

Tristan.

I'm unsure whether to be grateful or annoyed that he's gazing at me like he wants to scoop me into his arms and hold me until his touch erases every last bit of my pain.

Like Hazel said, he's capable of doing exactly that. But with his bite, not his touch.

As much as I hate to admit it, even to myself, it's tempting. So, very tempting.

"I bet you enjoyed that," I say bitterly to Tristan.

The openness in his eyes vanishes in an instant.

“Then it’s a good thing I’m not a gambler, because you would have lost,” he says, and his gaze shifts to the water bottle in my hand before I have a chance to respond. “I wouldn’t drink that if I were you. I wouldn’t eat the sandwich, either. Both are drugged. The poison will numb your magic, like it did before.” A small, unexpected smile plays on his lips. “That was an impressive show of magic, by the way. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“It sucked,” I say, although I can’t deny that the compliment gives me a small sense of satisfaction.

“You’ll improve,” he says. “Just avoid the food and water.”

“If I don’t eat or drink, I’ll die,” I say, stating the obvious.

“You can survive for about a month without eating, and three days without drinking,” he informs me. “I’m going to try getting us out of here before then.”

“By reading?” I raise an eyebrow and glance at the book in his hands.

“By being patient.”

He sounds frustratingly done with the conversation, and I refocus on the food and water, weighing the advice he wasn’t obligated to give. “Why are you telling me this?” I finally ask.

He sets his book down on his lap, his face once again a mask of guarded emotions. “I know it’s hard for you to believe, but I do care about you, Ruby. I don’t want to see you hurt,” he says. “But you can do with my advice as you please.”

I frown, saying nothing.

Instead, I open the bottle of water, figuring it won’t hurt to smell it. Hazel likely wouldn’t use a detectable poison, but as a shifter with heightened senses, it’s worth a shot.

The cap offers no resistance.

It’s already been opened.

Tampered with.

I stare at it in annoyance. Because as much as I hate it, Tristan’s right. There’s a definite possibility that it’s been

drugged. And, if he manages to get us out of here, I won't be of good use to either of us if I can't access my magic.

"Fine," I give in, dropping the water bottle back down onto the table. "I'll starve myself. You're doing it, so I can, too."

"I believe in you," he says, and then he returns to his book, ending the conversation.

This is ridiculous. All of it.

But, in a twisted way, at least we're in it together.

Ruby



A FEW HOURS CREEP BY. Gwen comes and goes, leaving Jason fully satisfied. Lindsay knows about the food being tampered with, but she's eating it anyway. Either she doesn't think the drugs apply to her, since she doesn't have magic, or she doesn't care.

I'm struggling. Luckily, the running water in the bathroom is safe to drink. And while I do trust Tristan about the food and water bottles, the last thing I ate was the bagel this morning, and the gnawing hunger in my stomach is already becoming nearly unbearable.

Given that Tristan didn't have breakfast *and* that he lost all that blood earlier, I imagine he's suffering far worse than I am.

We're both quietly reading, the sound of rustling pages occasionally breaking the silence. However, I continuously glance over at him to check how he's holding up. I feel him doing the same to me, which makes me smile, even though I've resolved to hate him.

Minus the times when he turns the pages, he's as still as a statue as he makes his way through his book.

Suddenly, he drops it onto his lap and leans his head back on the hard wall, releasing a low groan of pain.

He's hungry. He must be.

This isn't good.

"Are you okay?" I ask hesitantly.

His jaw clenches, his voice strained when he finally meets my gaze and speaks. “The blood loss from earlier left me hungrier than usual. I haven’t felt this famished in a long time.”

He says it so calmly, as if he isn’t admitting that he’s on the verge of killing me.

I swallow hard, and my stomach growls, so hollow that it feels like it’s eating away at me from the inside out.

If it’s like this for me, then how much harder is it for him?

“Is there anything I can do?” I ask softly, even though there’s only one answer I can think of.

Let him feed on me before he loses control and kills me.

Disgust ripples through me, since I hate the thought of giving him any bit of control over my heart.

But is my stubbornness worth my life?

From the pained look in his eyes, I suspect he’s thinking the same thing.

He inhales deeply, his voice barely a whisper. “Your blood smells... delicious,” he says, not really answering my question. “It’s harder to resist than I thought it would be.”

The admission sends a shiver down my spine, and I press myself against the wall. My heart pounds harder, the sound echoing in my ears, and I can only imagine how it taunts him further.

How much longer can we realistically carry on like this?

“I meant what I said earlier,” I finally bring myself to reply. “If your hunger gets to be too much, then I want you to feed on me.”

My reminder of the offer brings us both to silence.

His eyes, like golden storm clouds, seem to look right through me. “If we do that, at least I wouldn’t have to worry if any feelings you develop for me are your own or due to the bond, since you’ve made your disgust for me quite clear,” he finally says, and I stiffen at the resentment in his tone. “But no

need to worry about it yet. I can hold out for a day—maybe longer.”

“Are you sure?” I ask.

His features harden, his skin pales, and the hollows under his eyes darken.

“I’m sure,” he says, and I sit back in defeat.

That didn’t go well.

I want to reach for him, to say something to break this wall between us. But what can I do?

Nothing more than I already have. Or that I will, if it comes down to it. The best thing I can do is stay as far away from him in this small cell as possible, to try not to tempt him further.

So, we return to our books, the tension in the room thick and suffocating. But I can’t focus. I force my eyes to skim the words, but my mind is elsewhere.

Two places, if I’m being honest.

One here with Tristan, trying to ignore the tension pulsing between us, the pull of this attraction that feels like it’s going to end any sense of self-preservation I’ve ever had.

The other is back in Pine Valley, with Connor.

Hazel could be lying about his engagement to Autumn. But hoping it’s not true feels more like a wish than anything else. Connor made his devotion to Autumn quite clear to me. He plans on spending the rest of his life with her. Engaged or not, what difference does it make? He chose her, and I’m going to have to deal with the pain of being rejected by my fated mate for the rest of my life.

Maybe...

I glance at Tristan, who’s perfectly still as he reads, his sharp features illuminated by the faint light of a nearby lamp.

If he feels the weight of my gaze, he makes no sign of it.

Feeling as torn as ever, I look back at the book in my hands. I'm so lost in my thoughts that I'm not even bothering with trying to read the words on the page anymore.

Could Hazel be right that it's better to be bound to someone who chooses me than to someone who rejected me? I'd obviously prefer neither, but the worse of the two options is clear. Especially because being in this cell with Tristan has been making me think of Connor less and less. I feel a pull to him, even without a blood bond, and Tristan gives me a sense of security that I never felt around Connor.

Maybe I should apologize for the way I snapped at him this morning. He does seem like he has true feelings for me. And while he could have had more tact earlier, I enjoyed my time with him at the bar, and I *definitely* felt something when we kissed.

I certainly feel an undeniable tension between us now. A smoldering fire that threatens to consume us both if neither of us addresses it.

"Tristan?" I finally say, my voice piercing the silence.

"Yes?" His response comes quickly, as if he's been waiting for me to speak.

"I'm sorry about earlier. I don't hate you."

My apology hangs there, heavy in the air, and time seems to stretch into an eternity.

His hand goes for his cross necklace, his fingers brushing over it as if seeking solace or guidance from his brother.

"Okay," he says simply. "Thanks."

I'm not sure what kind of response I was expecting, but it certainly wasn't that.

"Okay," I echo his sentiment, a strange sense of relief washing over me.

We share a look of understanding, and then return to our books as though nothing ever happened.

But something *did* happen. A shift in the air between us, like a change in the direction of a gentle breeze.

I can't pinpoint exactly what it is, but the first word that pops into my mind is *respect*. A newfound trust that Tristan will respect my wishes for as long as he can, even if it means torturing himself in the process.

As we continue reading in a strangely comfortable silence, I can't shake the feeling that this small moment of understanding might have the potential to be a solid foundation for something more between us. And, in this dark and uncertain world I've found myself in, maybe that can be enough.

Connor



MOONLIGHT FILTERS THROUGH THE CURTAINS, casting an eerie glow on Autumn as she sleeps beside me in my bed, wrapped in my arms. The shape of her body is familiar, the scent of her lavender shampoo one that I'll always associate with her.

My fiancée. The woman I'm going to spend the rest of my life with.

I should be at peace, but something feels off. In the darkest corner of my subconscious, I can feel it—a nagging sensation that refuses to be silenced.

I haven't been able to get rid of this feeling of *wrongness* since I watched Ruby leave Jax's house with the witches and not look back.

Of course something's wrong, my wolf's unwelcome voice taunts in my mind. You rejected your fated mate and proposed to a woman who isn't meant to be yours.

Autumn is mine, I think back, releasing a low, protective growl in the back of my throat.

She stirs in my arms and I pull her close, wishing we could return to the period two weeks ago when questioning the love between us seemed impossible.

I need a break from my warring thoughts. And so, using every bit of force I can, I wrangle my wolf into the deepest part of my soul and close my eyes, praying for sleep to come quickly.

As I drift off, a dream takes hold, and I find myself standing in a dimly lit basement cell. The furniture is hazy, the walls fuzzy, the ground barely there.

The only thing I see clearly is *her*.

Ruby.

My heart clenches at the sight of her—my mate, the one I rejected. She’s huddled in a corner, but her beautiful turquoise eyes are sharp and brave.

“Connor,” she pleads, her voice heavy with desperation. “Help me. Please.”

Her eyes flick to look at something over my shoulder, and I try to turn to see what it is, but I can’t budge. My feet are cemented to the floor.

A shadow moves from behind me, and an icy chill rolls over my spine. It’s a creature of the night, gliding toward my mate. I can’t make out his face, but I know what he is.

A vampire.

He descends upon her, and I use every ounce of force in my body to move to stop him, but it’s futile. I’m trapped, an outsider looking in, watching helplessly as he lowers himself next to her and brushes her soft brown hair away from her delicate neck, exposing her smooth skin.

She doesn’t resist him.

Instead, she sits there calmly, her eyes locked on mine as he sinks his fangs into her neck. Slowly, he begins to drink, draining her life force as I stand there, helpless to intervene.

This can’t be happening.

I need to stop him. But when I try screaming Ruby’s name, nothing comes out.

He continues to drink as I watch helplessly, a moan of pleasure escaping his throat. Eventually, she falls limply into his arms, her skin so pale that it’s like looking at a corpse.

It feels like my soul is being emptied along with hers.

If he doesn't stop soon, he'll drink her dry, leaving her lifeless and cold.

No.

"Ruby!" I finally manage to scream her name.

In a burst of sheer determination, I break free of the force holding me down and rush toward the vampire, ready to shift into wolf form and use my jaws to rip the monster's head from his body.

Before I can, the dream shifts, and the basement cell fades away.

I jolt awake, my heart jumping in my chest as I sit up in bed, pushing Autumn to the side. Cold sweat dampens my brow. I can barely catch my breath, and I feel a raw ache in my vocal cords, along with the faint echo of my scream.

I didn't just call out Ruby's name in my dream.

I did in real life, too.

Autumn tentatively sits up beside me and rests a hand on my shoulder. Her touch should be warm and comforting, but I can't bring myself to look at her.

I can't bear the thought of seeing the devastation in her eyes when I do.

"What happened?" she finally asks, her voice tight and cold.

Her anger is thick in the air, and when I look over at her, she's as heartbroken as I feared.

But nothing can compete with the fear from that dream. Ruby's face, her terror, and the vampire stealing her life in front of my eyes.

Still, Autumn's watching me, waiting.

I have to tell her.

More than that, I have to act.

"It's Ruby," I say, swallowing down the guilt that logically, I shouldn't feel. "She's in danger. We have to help her."

From the hard way Autumn's looking at me, I brace myself for her to snap.

Instead, she glances out the window and composes herself. When she turns back to me, she's cool and calm. The same level-headed girl I fell in love with all those years ago.

"It was a dream," she finally says. "It wasn't real."

"It felt real."

"All right." She straightens and pulls herself together even more. "Tell me what happened."

I nod in appreciation of her offer to listen, then recount the nightmare as quickly as possible. "Ruby was in a cell. There was a vampire with her. He was drinking from her. He was *killing* her."

"You stopped him?" she asks, like she's speaking to a child.

"I couldn't move." I hate how weak and helpless the words make me feel. "All I could do was watch as he drained her dry."

It was all so vivid that I don't think I'll forget it for as long as I live.

Autumn takes a deep breath and reaches for my hand, holding it gently. I want to feel something—the connection to her that used to always be there—but her touch is cold and empty.

"Connor," she says, her voice softening. "Ruby is with the witches. The Pine Valley coven is the most powerful in the country. If she was in trouble, they would let us know."

She's right.

But I shake my head, unconvinced. The dream felt too real, too raw. I can still feel the chill that ran down my spine when I saw the vampire's shadow, and I can still see the terror in Ruby's eyes as she pleaded for my help.

On the other hand, I saw Ruby leave with the witches. They know how important she is. They wouldn't let anything

happen to her.

There's only one thing I can think to do.

"I need to visit the witches and check on Ruby. I need to see her with my own eyes, to make sure she's safe."

"Connor," Autumn repeats my name, growing frustrated. "Take a deep breath and *think* for a second. Don't you think that if something was wrong, the witches would have immediately called Jax? And then he would have told you?"

Her words sink in, grounding me for a moment.

So, I pick up my phone from the nightstand and check it.

Nothing. No missed calls or messages.

"Vampires can't get through our barriers," she continues, her voice soft yet firm as she takes the phone from my hand and places it facedown onto the nightstand. "Pine Valley is the most protected town in the country. There are no vampires here."

The conviction in her voice is reassuring, but I can't shake the unsettling feeling.

"What about those humans that have gone missing?" I ask.

Autumn's eyes narrow, her expression guarded. "The witches have investigated it. It's a human crime," she says, suspicion rising in her tone. "Unless you're accusing the witches of lying to us?"

Her words hang in the air like a challenge.

Shifters are loyal to our witches. They take care of us, and we take care of them. Doubting them is the same as doubting the laws that have kept us safe for centuries. The laws I've vowed to follow to the grave.

"No," I say, and she relaxes slightly, releasing a relieved breath.

"Good. I was worried about you for a second," she says gently, and the tension between us starts to ebb. "But if you're *that* worried about Ruby, why don't you call Hazel in the morning to check in with her?"

Contacting Hazel isn't a bad plan. And while Autumn's right that it's too late to call, I also don't have to sit around doing nothing.

"I'll text her now." I pick up my phone again and open my text thread with Hazel, which isn't very long.

How's Ruby doing? I write, and then I press send.

Simple and to the point.

I watch as the message delivers.

I want to call her. I'm not sure how I'll sleep until I know for sure that Ruby's safe.

Luckily, even though it's just past midnight, the bubbles start bouncing on the screen, signaling that she's typing.

She's doing great!

I keep looking at the screen, waiting for more.

There's nothing.

"See?" Autumn says, snapping me out of my trance. "Everything's fine." She pauses, then continues. "Do you think the dream could have been a metaphor about your mate bond with Ruby?"

That idea throws me for a bit of a loop.

"What type of 'metaphor' would it be?" I ask, confused about where she might be going with this.

"I'm not experienced with dream analysis, so I don't know exactly," she says, and she glances out the window, as if looking to the moon for answers. "Maybe a part of you worries that by walking away from Ruby, you're leaving the mate bond to get drained away? The dream could be a reflection of your fear—not a sign from the universe that she's in danger."

"Interesting," I say, since she has a point. It's considered unnatural for shifters to reject our fated mates. The internal struggle is said to be one of the hardest and most haunting things a shifter experiences.

Dreams like the one I just had are proof of that.

“It’ll get easier as the mate bond continues to fade,” Autumn assures me. “The more you fight the bond, the weaker it will become. But if you react to this dream and go to see her again, you’ll be letting the mate bond win.”

She’s so gentle, warm, and caring when she speaks. As if she understands exactly what I’m going through.

I glance at her left ring finger, a small reminder of the promise we made in the gazebo. We brought the ring into town to get it sized, so she’s not wearing it now, but she will be soon.

Autumn is the one I chose, and I *will* stand by my commitment to her. I refuse to let the mate bond mess with my head and make me question my decision.

I won’t let it control me.

“You’re right,” I finally say. “I need to fight it.”

She smiles and pulls me closer.

“I’m here for you while you do,” she says, trust and adoration shining in her eyes. “I’m here for you, always.”

“I know you are,” I say. “Just as I’m here for you.”

Eager to leave the haunting dream behind, I lean forward and brush my lips against hers. She’s immediately responsive—as she always is to my touch—and soon we’re laying down on the bed again, my body hovering inches above hers.

It’s not long until I lose myself in my fiancée’s embrace, and much to my relief, the lingering images of the dream fade as I finally drift back to sleep.

Ruby



I WAKE up in the cell bed, this time having zero trouble remembering where I am and what's been going on. The gnawing hunger in my stomach makes it impossible to forget.

Last night, Tristan told me to take the bed. He was still reading when I went to sleep. He's still reading now, at the opposite side of the cell, although he's moved onto another book—the second of the series he started yesterday. While he reads, he's idly holding the cross pendant hanging from his neck, his thumb brushing against its textured surface as if it's his lifeline.

Watching him sitting there, absorbed in his book, it's impossible to deny how beautiful he is. Every angle of his face is shaped to perfection, and there's something timeless about him that makes him look like he could easily be the star in an old Hollywood movie.

I push myself up so I'm sitting in bed, and he raises his gaze to look at me. The hollows under his eyes have grown worse, and there's something eerily predatory in his gaze that reminds me that I'm in an increasing amount of danger every minute I'm trapped in here with him.

Still, he gives me a small, warm smile. "You're awake," he says simply.

"Did you sleep?" I ask, calmly and cautiously, as if any word I speak might cause him to break.

"A bit."

He doesn't elaborate, and I don't ask for more details. Instead, I stand and make my way to the tiny bathroom to freshen up. All the important basic hygiene items have been supplied for us, and while it's only a small thing, it's certainly one I'm grateful for.

Tristan's breath catches when I re-enter the cell, and he immediately returns to playing with his necklace.

It's a coping mechanism, I realize. One to help him control his urge to feed on me.

Aware of his struggle, I sit back down on the bed. It's the farthest I can possibly get from him, aside from the bathroom, which won't keep me safe for long if he decides to go on a starving rampage.

"When did you last feed?" I ask, since while he didn't feed yesterday morning, I don't know when he last ate *before* that.

He pauses for a second, releasing the necklace. "Wednesday morning," he admits.

It's Friday morning.

Two days have passed. He said he could last for three days, but with all that blood loss...

We're pushing it with timing. He's trying to hold out, but I know the facts as well as he does.

Something's going to have to give. And that "something" will have to be me.

But it's not just my life that's at risk.

"If the witches knew the details about our situation, do you really think they'd kill you for feeding on me?" I ask.

His eyes darken, as if he's lost in thought, and he places his book down on the floor. "The witches follow the law no matter what," he says. "Dominic—my brother—never fed on Jessica. They had no blood bond. They were together in secret for years, and in those years, I grew to love her like a sister. But she was a shifter, like you. She was already in love with Dominic when she met her mate. She wanted to escape the mate bond, and she wanted to be with Dominic forever... so

she asked him to turn her. He did. They were so consumed by their love for each other that they thought they could leave the country and start fresh somewhere else, but they weren't even able to leave the state before being hunted down and killed by Guardians."

My mind's only halfway present for most of the time he's speaking. Because those names... Dominic and Jessica...

"Jessica was in the Pine Valley pack," I say, remembering the story Connor told me at Jax's house.

Jessica was the sister of Connor's father's best friend, Xavier. Xavier had a mate, Abigail, although Abigail was part of the Spring Creek pack before mating with Xavier.

"I didn't realize any of the Pine Valley wolves would dare to speak Jessica's name," Tristan says bitterly, reaching for his necklace again. "To them, she's more than dead. She's a traitor, wiped from existence."

Something about his words make me shiver.

"Connor told me about her," I say. "His parents and grandmother died in that cave with her."

The cave where Xavier and Abigail were helping her hide out.

"Only one person walked away from that cave alive," Tristan says, his voice dripping with pure hate. "Jax."

"I'm not the biggest Jax fan, either," I admit.

"Oh?" Tristan raises an eyebrow, waiting for me to elaborate.

"He cut me off from the outside world and asked the witches to fake my death," I say, my chest hollowing with pain as I think about what that must have done to my parents. "I understand that he doesn't want me returning to the human world until I learn how to control my shifting, but the way he went about making that happen..." Anger rages through me as I remember the way he crushed my phone, just like he crushed my parents' hearts. "He was cruel about it. And he became even crueler after realizing I'm an omega."

“You have no earth magic,” Tristan says, and I nod. “But you *do* have magic. And on top of your magic, you’re unique, smart, and fierce. Anyone with eyes can see it.”

His compliment catches me unaware, and gratitude washes over me. I feel that magnetic pull toward him again—the one I felt at the bar—and I want to go over there and comfort him.

But it’s not my comfort he needs.

It’s my blood.

“Are you doing okay?” I ask.

His weak smile tells me everything I need to know. “I’m doing my best.”

“So far, ‘your best’ means you haven’t killed me or drank from me without my consent, so I’ll take it,” I say.

“I don’t want to drink from you, no matter what,” he says.

“Well, it doesn’t seem like we’re going anywhere anytime soon, so you’re going to have to.” I scoot to the edge of the bed, my heart hammering like crazy. Then I take a deep breath, forcing out the words I never thought I’d say. “And I think you should do it now, before it gets any worse.”

Ruby



I HOLD TRISTAN'S GAZE, daring him to contradict me, the air between us crackling with electricity as the weight of my words sinks in.

He doesn't challenge me. Instead, he simply studies me, his gaze contemplative, weighing the implications of my offer.

"Are you sure?" he finally asks.

I meet his gaze steadily. "If I wasn't, I wouldn't have suggested it."

He takes a deep breath and nods. "All right. Thank you."

My face flushes as he keeps his eyes locked on mine, well-aware of the consequences this decision will have on me.

I won't lose myself to the blood bond, I promise myself. I don't know how, but I won't.

After all, there's no knowing *how* I'll react. I'm star touched. Blessed by a goddess. This might not affect me the same way it does for everyone else.

I have to hold onto hope that it might be true. Right now, it's the only thing I've got.

"So..." I say, laughing awkwardly. "What do I do?"

Do we do it standing? On the floor? On the bed?

Warmth radiates through me at the thoughts, since they bring forth images of us doing *far* more than his just feeding from me.

At least I know the attraction I feel for him is real, and not because of the blood bond.

“Don’t move,” he instructs, and then he stands up and cautiously makes his way toward me. He keeps his haunted eyes locked on mine, and I’m entranced, like I’m under some sort of spell.

My heart races as he sits down on the bed next to me, each of his moves slow and calculated. The few inches between us crackle with tension, and as he looks over at me with a mix of gratitude and apprehension, I know down to my bones that this decision was right.

I can resist the blood bond.

I won’t accept anything else.

Tristan’s gaze drifts to my neck, and I swallow, hard.

“It’s going to be okay,” he murmurs, and I can’t tell if he’s talking to me or himself.

I manage a small, brave smile. “Just don’t drain me dry, okay?”

He chuckles softly, the sound tinged with sadness. “I promise.”

“I trust you.” The words slip out before I can stop them, and I’m surprised by how much I mean it.

His golden eyes flicker with surprise, the corners of his mouth curving up in a small, appreciative smile. “I was captivated by you the moment I saw you,” he says, and then he adds, “Every word I’ve spoken, every moment we’ve shared... it was all real. I won’t let you down. I swear it.”

It was real for me, too.

The words are on the tip of my tongue, but I hold them back. “I know you won’t,” I say instead.

His face softens with understanding, and the silence that follows is full of shared secrets and unspoken words.

“I’m ready,” I tell him, and then, with careful, measured movements, he reaches out to gently brush my hair away from

my neck. His touch is cool against my skin, and I find myself leaning into it, my heart pounding in my chest. I close my eyes, inhaling deeply to steady my racing pulse, bracing myself for the sting of his fangs.

But his lips brush against my skin, and he kisses my neck softly, gently. The unexpected tenderness sends a current of warmth radiating out from the pit of my stomach. My arm winds around his back instinctively, anchoring me in this moment and steadying myself in his embrace.

Then, the sharp prick of his fangs pierces my neck.

It doesn't hurt.

Instead, a strange, almost euphoric sensation washes over me like a wave. His fingers trace their way up my spine, and he cradles the back of my head with his hand, as if I'm made of glass and he's making sure I don't break. It's a touch laced with care, brimming with an intimacy that takes my breath away.

It's the touch of someone who *loves* me.

I've never felt this vulnerable in my life, and what I said to him continues to prove true—I do trust him.

I'm not scared.

Maybe I should be, but I'm not.

As he takes what he needs from me, time slows down. The room around us fades away until all that exists is the connection between us, as if we're bound together by an invisible thread, and I never want this feeling of intimacy with him to end.

My hand drifts to his chest to run my fingers against the cross pendant hanging from his necklace. The metal feels cool against my touch, amplifying the warmth coursing through my veins, and deepening our connection. I'm consumed by him, and I lean closer into him, trusting him with my life.

Eventually, he pulls away, pressing a soft kiss to the puncture wounds before looking down at me. His beautiful golden eyes are no longer haunted, but filled with a deep,

intense warmth that sends a jolt of electricity through my body. I feel like I've stripped down every layer of myself, bearing my soul to him, and that he protected it as if it was his own.

My heart's racing at a million miles a minute, and as I stare up into his loving gaze, I find myself completely and utterly speechless.

His hand reaches up to gently cup my face, his thumb tracing my cheekbone as if I'm the most precious person to him in the universe. "Thank you, Ruby," he murmurs, his eyes searching mine. "Are you okay?"

Okay?

The earth just shifted beneath my feet, and my world is spinning faster than ever.

With no idea how to accurately get across what I'm feeling right now, I take a few seconds to center myself.

"Yes," I finally manage, and I move closer to him, drawn to him in a way I've never felt with anyone before. My gaze drifts down to his lips, and I remember how soft they were when they kissed me—how warm and gentle.

I want him to kiss me again.

I close the space between us, my heart pounding in my chest, and his eyes are wide and apprehensive, but hopeful at the same time. We're so close that I can feel his breath on my lips. My hand rises to trace the outline of his jaw, and his eyes flutter shut as he leans into my touch.

Just as our lips are about to meet, I pull back.

This is the blood bond, I remind myself. It's not real. It's not me.

Or is it? I loved kissing him at the bar. I've been drawn to him the entire time we've been in this cell together. His drinking from me just now might have intensified those emotions, but they were already there before that.

Still, I can't let this happen.

So I pull back, and disappointment flickers in his eyes, now so dilated that they're nearly swallowed by darkness.

"Thank you," I whisper, my throat still tingling on the spot where his fangs pierced my skin. "For not killing me."

Instead of being upset, he smiles. A soft, genuine smile that sends a jolt of warmth through my chest. "You don't have to thank me for that," he murmurs, his fingers lingering in my hair, tracing soothing circles on the nape of my neck. "I could never hurt you, Ruby."

"I know," I somehow manage to say.

Suddenly, a voice cuts through our moment.

Lindsay.

"It feels good, doesn't it?" she asks, her voice dreamy. "Really, really good."

She must have woken up sometime while Tristan was feeding from me. Her eyes, distant and glazed, make me think she's lost in memories of Benjamin.

How many times has he fed from her?

Tristan recovers quickly, dropping his hand from my hair and moving back slightly.

The gap between us feels empty and cold.

"It did," I admit, unable to look at Tristan as I speak.

"Letting him feed before he lost control was a smart move," Lindsay continues. "I was wondering how long it would be before you gave in."

Of course she was. She'd kept her opinions to herself during all of this, but she was watching and listening to Tristan and me the entire time.

"Aren't you tired?" she asks, and I remember how hard she crashed after Benjamin fed from her.

"Not really." I shrug, then look to Tristan for an explanation.

“All supernaturals have fast healing,” he says. “Your body has probably already replenished the blood you lost.”

“But yours didn’t do that after Hazel stabbed you,” I point out.

“As a vampire, I lack the ability to produce my own blood,” he says. “The blood coursing through my veins is all borrowed.”

And now it’s my blood that fills him.

The realization sends a thrill through me, binding me to him in a way I never thought possible. And, as I continue studying him, his eyes meet mine again.

No longer haunted, but full of desire.

Another wave of heat rushes through me.

Oh my God. If I don’t get a handle on my emotions, I’m going to lose what little control I apparently have left.

I get up and sit at the table chair, trying to ignore the coldness I feel with each step I take away from Tristan.

“So,” I turn to Lindsay, forcing myself to sound casual. “Tell me more about Ned.”

She’d started talking about her boyfriend the other day, but we didn’t speak much after Tristan was thrown into my cell.

“Ned...” She blinks rapidly, as if trying to grasp a fleeting memory.

“Your boyfriend?”

“Right. Of course.” She gives me a strained smile, and I can tell that my question troubled her. “He’s a mechanic,” she starts. “We’ve been together for five years, and plan on getting engaged soon...”

I continue listening, but my mind is only halfway there.

Because blood bonding with Benjamin is clouding her memories of Ned, to the point where it seems like she’s no longer thinking about him at all. It’s unsettling.

And I can't help but wish for the same to happen with my feelings for Connor.

Ruby



I SPEND the rest of the day reading, trying to keep my distance from Tristan. Not because I want to lessen the temptation of my blood, but because I'm trying to reduce my own temptation to go back over to him and finish what we started with that almost-kiss.

Jason continues to brood about Gwen every moment she isn't there with him. When she does go to feed on him, it's clear from their moans, gasps of pleasure, and variety of other sounds that there's far more happening in that cell than just feeding.

Benjamin continues resisting Lindsay's kiss, and her frustration is more than evident. She spends quite a bit of time in bed, curled under the covers as she cries herself dry. But she doesn't want to talk about it, and I don't push her.

As the hours wear on, I find myself growing more and more tired. My eyelids feel heavy, the words on the pages blur, and I reluctantly close the book, marking my spot.

"I'm going to bed," I say, getting up to grab the fresh pajamas that the witch who regularly makes our deliveries—Thalia—left with my dinner.

Tristan's gaze meets mine, his eyes glowing softly in the dim light. "Sleep well, Ruby," he says, his attention quickly returning to his own book. He's seated on the cold floor, his back resting against the wall, and I can't imagine it's comfortable.

I head to the bathroom to get ready, and when I emerge, he's in the same place, still engrossed in his book.

My gaze drifts to the bed, then back to him.

"Are you tired?" I ask hesitantly.

He stops reading to turn his gaze up to look at me, and my breath hitches at the intensity burning in his eyes.

"Not yet," he says simply.

I glance back over at the bed.

I should offer. He shouldn't have to sleep on the floor for another night in a row. Sure, there's a rug, but it's thin and worn, offering no padding at all.

"Do you want the bed..." I ask, pointing awkwardly toward it.

His lips twitch into a half-smile. "Are you offering to share?"

"No," I say, stumbling over the word. "I can sleep on the floor."

"You absolutely will not." He leaves no room for argument, and I press my lips together, knowing better than to try.

Because there it is, that determination, that fierce protectiveness that makes me feel safe and cherished. My heart lurches in my chest, and I swallow hard, taking a shaky breath.

I want to make him feel as cared for as he does for me.

"You can share it," I say, barely realizing what I'm saying until the words are out of my mouth. "The bed. With me."

His eyebrows rise in surprise. "Are you sure?"

That question again. It seems to be his favorite recently.

But he's already fed on me. Sharing a bed can't possibly be any more intimate than when he pressed his lips to my neck and let my blood flow out of my body and into his.

“We’ve already come this far.” I shrug, trying to sound casual. “Might as well add this to the list of things we’ve done to break the rules today.”

His rich laughter fills the room, a warm, soothing sound that chases away the echoes of hesitation. “You do make rule-breaking so incredibly tempting,” he says, making my cheeks heat even more.

“It’s apparently a new habit of mine that I developed after coming to Pine Valley,” I say, trying to keep the mood light. Then I cautiously make my way toward the bed, my breaths feeling heavier as I pull on the covers and slip beneath them, nestling myself as close to the wall as possible.

I’ve never shared a bed before. Not with a man... not with *anyone*.

And this bed isn’t exactly large.

He rises from the floor, the fluidity of his movement a stark reminder of his vampiric nature. “Just to clarify,” he says, his voice a velvet caress that sends shivers down my spine. “We’re sharing a bed, not breaking it, right?”

My breath catches, my heart pounding in my chest.

He did *not* just say that.

“Relax,” he says, although the images of Tristan and I entangled on the bed are far too ingrained in my mind for me to relax. “I was joking. I’ll be sure to stay as far on my side as possible.”

“Cool,” I manage, my words stilted. “Thanks.”

With a small smile playing on his lips, he gets up to grab his pajamas and get ready for bed.

I stare up at the ceiling, waiting, my body a bundle of nerves. Hopefully this doesn’t turn out to be a huge mistake, but I don’t think it will be.

It isn’t long until he returns. I can barely bring myself to look at him as he joins me on the bed and flicks off the light. The room is plunged into darkness, and I feel him slide under

the covers, making sure to keep a respectful distance between us.

I face the wall, my heart thundering in my chest.

And he has supernatural hearing. He can hear it.

He knows *exactly* the effect he has on me.

I do my best to breathe steadier and calm my heartbeat. And, as I do, I hear something I didn't expect.

His heart is racing as well.

I need to relax. Be still. Pretend I have no idea that he's being driven just as crazy as I am.

I can do this.

As I lie there, memories of our almost-kiss loop in my mind. The thought of his lips against mine only makes my heart race faster, and I clench my hands into fists, trying to push away the urge to turn towards him. It would be so easy to curl into his body, to have him wrap his arms around me, to hold me and make me feel safe in this dark, stifling cell.

But I resist.

"Goodnight, Ruby," he murmurs, his voice barely above a whisper.

"Goodnight," I reply, my voice shaky, and then I close my eyes, the warmth of Tristan's body somehow making me feel safe enough to drift off to a deep sleep.

Ruby



I GRADUALLY COME to the next morning, and the events from the night before hit me like a freight train.

The almost-kiss with Tristan. The way my heart had pounded in my chest, my nerves singing with anticipation. The disappointment in his eyes when I pulled back.

His getting into bed with me after I *offered* to share it.

I hear his breathing next to me, soft and steady.

He kept a respectable amount of distance between us all night. I had a feeling he would, and the fact that he didn't make any moves on me makes me trust him even more.

I roll over, unable to resist the pull at my chest to see what he looks like sleeping beside me.

He's so devastatingly gorgeous. Something about him urges me closer, tempting me to close the space between us and nestle myself in his arms until the world disappears around us like it did while he fed from me.

Before I can, he stirs, his eyelashes fluttering against his cheeks before his eyes slowly open. He blinks a few times before his gaze lands on me, a soft smile tugging at his lips.

"Morning, Ruby," he murmurs, his voice thick with sleep.

As he speaks, my mind replays the moment from last night. Our faces inching closer, the warmth of his breath against my skin... and then the sharp way I pulled back.

Regret tugs at my chest.

“Morning,” I reply. “Thanks for not killing me yesterday.”

Tristan’s smile fades, replaced by a look of intense sincerity. “I never want to hurt you. I promise,” he says softly, his golden eyes searching mine. “I’d never forgive myself if I did.”

I believe him.

And I can’t help but compare this moment to the one with Connor a few days ago when he told me he’d never choose me. The pain Connor’s words caused me were the opposite of what I’ve been hearing from Tristan, and I can’t deny that being around Tristan makes me feel... loved.

Which is crazy. He can’t love me after only a few days of knowing. But still... he and I are getting off on a much better start than I did with Connor, minus how he lied about not being human, and the whole “almost killing me” part.

My gaze drifts to Tristan’s necklace, its garnet centerpiece twinkling in the dim light. I can’t imagine him without it. It’s mesmerizing, the intricate carving begging to be touched.

But I resist.

“What’s on your mind?” he asks, and his eyes search my face, pulling my attention away from his necklace and back to him.

I roll over and stare up at the ceiling, unable to figure out where to start.

“You heard what Hazel said,” I begin. “About Connor—my mate—being engaged.”

“I did.” His voice gives away no emotion one way or another.

“He never wanted me,” I say. “Not like...”

Not like you do.

The words hang in the air, unspoken but understood.

“I’m sorry,” he says simply. “He has no idea what he’s missing out on.”

“Thanks,” I say, trying to shake it off. “Anyway, I’m going to freshen up. I trust you’ll still be here when I get back?” I smile at him, somehow playful despite the serious turn our conversation had taken.

“I *guess* I’ll stick around,” he teases. “Since you asked so nicely and all.”

I roll my eyes, and instead of crawling over him, I make my way to the end of the bed and slip off.

As I freshen up, I examine my neck for any traces of yesterday’s bite. There’s nothing there. It’s as if it never happened at all.

Eventually, I focus on my now-brown eyes, and a crazy thought pops into my mind.

Should I tell him that my eyes changed color on the night I received my magic?

Maybe he has an idea what happened.

But I quickly shake myself out of it. The goddess who star touched me specifically instructed me to tell no one. And, despite how close I’m starting to feel to Tristan, I know intrinsically that I need to listen to her.

So, I open the door and head back into the cell, finding Tristan on the bed with a book in his hands.

He looks up and smiles when he sees me, his eyes lighting up as if we weren’t together only a few minutes ago.

“Miss me?” I ask, trying to keep my tone light.

“You have no idea,” he says. “The minutes you were gone were pure agony.”

I can’t help but smile more.

“Your company isn’t turning out to be as awful as I thought it would,” I say, and then I head to the table, tracing my fingers across its smooth surface. There’s nothing on it right now—Thalia takes the uneaten sandwiches away each day so they don’t rot—but I know she’ll be back soon.

Eventually, I'm sure Hazel will come down to check on us instead, to see how things are progressing between me and Tristan.

And now that I'm thinking about Hazel again...

"The Blade of Erebus," I start, and Tristan sits straighter, dropping the book onto his lap. "What does it do?"

"I'm bound to an oath to the Blood Coven to not say too much," he says with a hint of regret. "But I can tell you this: the blade is ancient. Powerful. In the hands of a witch as strong as Hazel, it can do the unthinkable."

Chills run up my spine at the word.

Unthinkable.

It's such an evasive term, vague and menacing all at once.

Can the blade warp time? Steal magic? Control the minds and bodies of others?

The final idea is somehow the most terrifying of them all.

"So, this 'unthinkable' thing the blade can do is why you, Benjamin, and Gwen joined forces with Hazel?" I guess.

"Correct," he says. "The vampires have been hunted and controlled by the witches for centuries, and the laws of the witches are designed so they can stay in power. It's time for a regime change. Hazel and the rest of the Blood Coven want to help us make that happen."

"What's in it for them?"

Given what he said, it doesn't sound like the witches would want to work with vampires, let alone help them.

"More power than they ever dreamed possible," he says, as cryptic as ever.

Suddenly, he sets the book aside and rises from the bed. He crosses the small space separating us and slides gracefully on the table to sit on top of it, taking my hands in his and gazing down at me as if he's begging me to trust him.

His touch grounds me amidst the whirlwind of my thoughts.

“They want you to be part of it,” he says, firm and steady. “I want you to be part of it.”

His eyes blaze with sincerity, and my heart leaps at the thought of having someone on my side in this crazy supernatural world who wants me there. Of being part of a group that wants me, instead of one that deems me as less than them and shames me, like how I was treated by Jax and the Pine Valley pack.

I don't want Tristan's offer to be tempting.

Yet... it is.

A ghost of a smile crosses his lips, and I can't help but wonder if he knows exactly what I'm thinking. Because something undeniable connects us together, and no matter how hard I try to fight it, there's no making it disappear.

I suddenly realize that I'm doing exactly what I promised myself I *wouldn't* do.

I'm softening to him.

The basement door opening breaks us out of the moment, and we turn to see Hazel walking downstairs with a pack full of water and food.

I pull my hands out of Tristan's, but we're still sitting incriminatingly close to each other when she's near enough to see us. I scoot my chair away from the table, but I know it's too late.

“I see you two are getting comfortable with each other.” A knowing smile plays on her lips, and she focuses on Tristan. “You look healthier this morning. Much more... satisfied.”

“He fed on her,” Lindsay chimes in, and I glare at her. She's just getting out of bed, and she shrugs in apology, but she doesn't look like she feels all that bad about it.

“Good,” Hazel says, refocusing on the two of us. “Who convinced whom?”

“It was me.” I raise my chin, determined to stay strong and not let her get to me. “He didn’t want to do it. He values your laws too much. Which you apparently don’t, since we wouldn’t be locked in here otherwise.”

“Those laws won’t apply to us soon.” She shrugs it off, unconcerned. “But do *you* want to eat? Tristan’s looking better, but you look like you could use some nourishment. I brought something hot this morning. Meatball subs.”

“Who eats meatball subs for breakfast?” I ask, even though my stomach *does* rumble at the sound of it.

“Who decided that breakfast has to have a totally different menu than all other meals?” she counters, and then she drops the pack on the floor and pulls out a bottle of water and a hot, footlong sub from a familiar fast-food chain. She opens the cell door again, the magical barrier glimmering when she slides the water and food through, taking extra caution to not put any part of *herself* at risk. “Enjoy.”

She glances over at Lindsay and Jason’s cell, and continues, “Benjamin and Gwen will be down soon with your meals. I’m sure you’re missing them deeply.”

Then, without another word, she heads down the hall and up the stairs, the door closing behind her as she leaves before I can ask any questions.

Connor



MAGIC THRUMS off the forest floor as I face off against Autumn. Her eyes glint with excitement, and the wind blows her red hair around her, making her look like the supernatural force she is. We move in a calculated dance, two predators circling and ready to pounce.

The others our age in the pack who are training to be Guardians—Brandon, Tyler, Thomas, and Nicole—watch eagerly from the sidelines. They’ve all had their turns tonight—against me, and against each other.

I took each of them down without any trouble.

Now, it’s time for the showdown I’ve been waiting for since the start of training today.

“Ready?” I call out, my voice echoing through the stillness.

In response, the ground beneath my feet trembles. A distinct signature of Autumn’s earth magic.

“I’m always ready.”

Her voice is a challenge, a dare. She holds her hands up, palms out, and a barrage of hardened soil erupts from the earth and flies straight at me.

I’m already braced for the attack, my earth magic swirling inside my veins. I latch onto the dirt she’s aimed toward me, stop it mid-air, and let it fall to the ground between us.

A grin tugs at my lips. “You’re going to have to try harder than that.”

“Challenge accepted.”

The forest floor rumbles again, but my feet are rooted to the earth. She’s not going to knock me over anytime soon.

With a wicked grin, I retaliate, yanking the dirt from under her feet as if tugging a rug out from under her.

She stumbles, but catches herself before falling.

Sparring like this is tricky. We’re not actually trying to harm each other—thus why we’re aiming dirt at each other instead of sharp stones.

The goal is to get the other person on their back.

Which is exactly where I like Autumn to be.

We continue like this for a few more minutes, each trying to use the earth in various ways to knock the other over. Autumn’s a force to be reckoned with, and I love watching her use her magic. However, we can anticipate each other’s moves—a byproduct of having sparred many times before—and it’s more of a choreographed dance than anything else.

Eventually, she calls upon the rocks at her feet and brings them up in an elegant spiral around her body. It’s one of her signature moves, making her look like a goddess in the center of a storm, and she knows how much it riles me up to see her power on display like this.

“Show off,” I say, and I prowl around her, ready to pounce the moment she lets her guard down.

“You know you love it.” She gives me a devilish grin, then lets the rocks fall back down to her feet.

Game on.

I pounce, fur sprouting from my skin as I shift into my wolf form—a large, muscular creature with a sleek black coat.

Autumn, always quick to react, leaps aside with the grace of a ballerina.

In a fluid transformation that takes my breath away every time, she too shifts into her wolf form—majestic and lithe,

with fiery fur that matches her hair. She's beautiful, as both a human and a wolf.

The two of us together are unstoppable.

But right now, we're fighting against each other—not together.

So, we dart and weave around each other, our movements a blur in the moonless night. Her every move is a challenge, a dare to catch her. She even gives me a playful nip two times, while still managing to evade my capture.

She's a tease, and I love her for it.

Getting more riled up by the second, I narrow my eyes at her and go in for the final pounce.

Just as I launch myself at her, she tries to do the same.

We crash together in mid-air.

Where she's lithe and graceful, I'm brute force. My jump overpowers hers, and I pin her to the ground, leaving her underbelly exposed and vulnerable.

Victory.

With the fight over, we shift back into human forms. She's sprawled beneath me, her chest heaving, her skin glowing with the thrill of the fight. We stare deep into each other's eyes, the thick tension between us exciting me even more, and a wave of desire passes through me.

If the others weren't standing around as onlookers... well, let's just say that Autumn and I wouldn't be wearing our training gear for much longer.

As it is, I lower myself further down and crush my lips to hers. But only for a second.

We are, after all, being watched.

I pause while pulling away, allowing my nose to nuzzle hers. "We're continuing this later tonight," I promise, and then I stand, holding my hand out to help her up.

Another wave of love rushes through me as I drink in the beautiful, brilliant woman who's going to be my wife. I glance at her hand—her finger is still bare as the ring gets sized—but it's been over a week since the proposal.

The magic of this moment leaves me not wanting to wait another second to share the news.

And so, I wrap my arm around her waist, pull her close, and turn to face the others.

Nicole's watching us knowingly, her light blonde hair glinting under the stars. Tyler and Thomas are careful and reserved. Brandon, however, has a smirk pasted on his face, and I suspect he knows what's coming.

“Autumn and I are engaged,” I tell them, my voice strong and sure in the crisp night air. “I thought the four of you should know first.”

At first, silence.

Then Tyler, Thomas, and Nicole tell us various versions of congratulations.

“When's the wedding?” Brandon asks, always the one to get straight to the point.

His question catches me off-guard. Mainly because it's a good one, and one I haven't given much thought to yet.

I glance at Autumn, her eyes shimmering with love and anticipation, and I know she'll do whatever I command.

As she should, since I'm her alpha.

I swallow, then look back to the others.

“Two weeks from now,” I decide. “When the moon is full.”

“Before you have a chance to mate?” Nicole asks, her confusion overpowering her hesitance to question her leader.

My focus, however, is only on one word she said.

Mate.

My chest hollows in guilt at the sound of it.

I haven't thought much about Ruby this past week. It's been a huge relief, and I assume it's because with her not around, the mate bond is weakening.

I don't want or need her shiny brown hair, warm eyes, and perfectly pouty lips in my life, distracting me from my planned future. She's been a menace to me since her arrival, and it's been good for me to have her away from pack territory.

Autumn's tense beside me, and I know she's thinking about Ruby as well.

There's still time to take this back. My wolf's thought is unwelcome in my mind. Your previous plans are irrelevant. Autumn will never be our true mate. She's our past. Ruby is our future.

Luckily, it's a new moon, so quieting my wolf's voice is no problem. Especially because the bond with Ruby is weakening. My wolf knows it, and I suspect he's slightly grateful for it, too.

It'll be easier this way. Better. It already *has* been easier this past week, and I believe that the longer Ruby and I remain separated, the more the pain will subside until it dwindles down to practically nothing.

Meanwhile, the others remain silent while I wrangle with my thoughts.

I stand strong and firm. "Autumn is my future wife," I say, my eyes scanning over each of them, daring them to talk back to me again. "We'll marry when I decide we'll marry. And that's going to be on the next full moon."

In the following silence, the tension wraps around us like a shroud, whispering doubts and questions.

Thankfully, they know better than to press me further.

"Well then, congratulations, Connor," Brandon says, the first to break the silence. "You too, Autumn."

From the careful, calculated way he watches me, I can't help but get the feeling that he knows the truth about what's going on here. After all, he saw my interaction with Ruby at

the party. He knows how protective I became over her. How I all but claimed her as mine.

I hold his gaze until he lowers his eyes, reminding him of his place in the pack. He—and the others—submit to *me*.

Nicole and Tyler echo Brandon's sentiment, their words sincere but their eyes guarded. Thomas just nods, his expression unreadable.

"Thank you," I say simply, having no need to explain myself further.

Autumn gives me a grateful look, her fingers squeezing mine. She's my rock, my anchor, the one constant in my ever-changing world. She's loyal to me, and I won't let anything come between us.

Not even the call of a mate bond.

I pull her closer, and she leans into me, her body fitting perfectly against mine.

"I love you," she tells me, although as she says it, I swear there's a hint of guilt in her eyes.

My chest hollows at the obvious reason why. She knows she isn't my mate, and that she never will be.

I refuse to ever let her doubt herself.

"And I love you," I reply, my words a solemn vow. "Always."

I kiss her again, and when I look down at her smiling face afterward, I know I've made the right decision. Autumn is my future. She always has been, and she always will be.

"So..." Brandon says, breaking the silence. "How about a run to celebrate?"

"That's a great idea," I say, mainly because I don't want to continue this conversation, and a run is the perfect way to do that.

I give Autumn a mischievous smile, and she knows me well enough to know *exactly* what I'm thinking.

And so, keeping our hands clasped together, we turn around and leap into the air, shifting into our wolf forms at the exact same second.

The others shift behind us, Autumn and I at the head of the pack as we lead them into the forest, our howls ringing through the mountain air as we become one with the night.

In two weeks, this beautiful woman will be my wife.

And I refuse to let anything—not even my fated mate—come between us.

Ruby



NINE DAYS.

That's how long Tristan and I have been in this cell together.

He's able to safely go two days without feeding, which means he drank from me this morning. Somehow, through sheer willpower, I've kept myself from kissing him. Sharing the bed makes it tougher, especially since a few days ago, I gave up on trying to keep myself from snuggling with him.

It feels so good to be held and cared for. With his arms around me each night, I feel so *safe*. The fact that he's been so respectful of my boundaries makes me trust him even more.

Some nights, the temptation feels like it's going to rip me apart. But I have no idea if this feeling of safety is because it's what I truly feel, or if it's the blood bond taking over.

Plus, Lindsay is still there in the cell across from us. If Tristan and I ever kiss again—and, as much as I hate it, the thought sends butterflies flapping like crazy in my stomach—I want the moment to be private.

Thalia continues to regularly give me, Lindsay, and Jason our meals. She always wears her brown hair in a loose wave down her back, and while she's pretty, it's in more of a soft way. She also doesn't talk much. But from what I've learned from Tristan, she has a decent amount of magic. Not as much as Hazel, but no one would ever describe her as weak.

I want to like her.

But I liked Hazel, and look how *that* turned out.

As for the drugged food, I eventually had to make a choice. The first option was to hold out and be so physically weak that I could barely get out of bed each day. The second was to eat it to give myself energy, accepting the fact that it's repressing my magic.

I chose the second option. Because if we ever manage to get out of here, I'm not going to do anyone any good if I can't walk up the stairs without passing out.

And I long past got over the fact that they're consistently giving me meat, even though before coming here, I was a vegetarian. The fact of the matter is that my wolf needs meat to survive.

I will *always* choose to survive.

I finish eating lunch—a hot, gooey, delicious cheeseburger—and I place the plate next to the bars of the cell, where Thalia will eventually come to take it away.

“You're really not hungry at all?” I ask Tristan, who's currently lounging on his favorite place—the bed. “For actual food?”

Even though we've had this conversation before, I can't wrap my mind around the mechanics of it.

“Not one bit,” he says, his eyes dilating a bit when he looks at me. “Food tastes good, and I enjoy it greatly, but I have all I need to survive right here.”

Because he has *me*.

My cheeks flush, and I take a sip of water to cool down.

“I still feel bad whenever I eat and you just sit there watching me,” I say.

Instead of responding, he lifts his hand and does a little wave with his fingers, pointing them in the general direction of the book placed on the nightstand. The wind he creates blows the cover open, and the pages follow, flipping quickly until the book is halfway open.

Then, to prove his point further, he aims some of his magic at the dim light hanging from the ceiling. It swings back and forth like a pendulum, as if there's a ghost in the room with us. I feel the cool breeze on my cheeks, like a gentle caress, and the moment feels strangely intimate.

"You'd rather my magic be suppressed as well?" He raises an eyebrow, already well-aware of my answer.

"You know I don't," I say.

"Good," he says, and he adjusts himself on the bed, making himself more comfortable. "We've read a lot today. Tell me a story."

"What type of story?"

"The craziest thing that happened to you in college."

This is how our days have gone recently. Reading, and talking. Sometimes with Lindsay or Jason, but most of the time with just the two of us. Tristan's a good conversationalist, when I'm not actively trying to ignore him.

Which I haven't done since the first night he drank from me.

"Let's see," I say, wracking my mind for something I haven't told him yet. "There was that one time when Luna and I ran through the halls of our dorm naked."

"Oh?" His eyes scan my body, as if he's mentally undressing me, and my breath catches in my chest at the sudden intensity of his gaze.

I glance away and take another sip of my water.

"It wasn't on purpose," I say quickly, rushing to continue before he gets any ideas about me that aren't true. "The girls' bathroom was broken for a bit, so Luna and I decided to risk it and shower in the guys' bathroom. We thought that with the two of us there together, we'd be safe from any pranks they might try to pull."

"Then you severely underestimated the determination of college-aged boys," Tristan finishes for me, a smirk playing on his lips.

“Or overestimated their maturity,” I reply rolling my eyes. There’s a pause, and then I admit, “But yes, you’re right. Two of them stole our towels *and* our clothes. I had no idea what to do, but Luna’s always quick on her feet. She pulled both of our shower curtains down, and we ran back to our room with them wrapped around us like togas, screaming and laughing the entire time.”

“That’s one way to meet your neighbors,” he says, smiling softly. It’s a smile that reaches his eyes and warms his entire face, and I can’t help but return it.

“It happened the first week of school. It was mortifying, but I guess it’s more of a fond memory now. It was the moment Luna and I became best friends.”

I shrug and glance away, the sadness hitting me all at once. The air between us shifts, becoming charged and heavy.

“You okay?” Tristan asks.

“I just can’t believe that Luna and my parents think I’m dead.”

“I’m sorry,” he says. “I know it’s hard. Especially right now.”

“It is,” I say, since we’ve had enough conversations in this cell that I know he’s all too familiar with the pain I’m feeling.

On the night they were turned, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Tristan, Dominic, and Benjamin were at an underground bar. They got trapped in a terrible fire. Gwen was there, and she dragged them into a back room and told them that the fire had spread too severely. There was no getting out of there alive—at least not for humans. They’d die of smoke inhalation before they could get far.

Then she quickly told them about the existence of vampires, and that she could either turn them, or they’d die.

They chose to survive.

Then they made the hard choice to let everyone they loved think they hadn’t made it out, to protect them from the supernatural world.

It was the noble thing to do.

I don't think I'd have had the strength to do the same.

"What are you thinking about?" Tristan asks, yanking me out of my thoughts.

"You," I reply, the truth coming out before I can stop it. "How much I respect the decision you made after you were turned."

"If I could go back and do it again, I don't think I'd do the same thing," he says, his confession taking me by surprise. "Not after experiencing the pain I did after Dominic was killed. Nothing's worse than losing someone you love. Absolutely *nothing*. I wouldn't put my family through that again."

He's so adamant when he talks, and I can feel in the air how much love this man has inside himself to give. Tristan's the type of person who keeps his distance from most people, but when he loves, he loves fiercely.

And he loves me.

He hasn't said it, but I know it's true. I sense it with everything he does—the sound of his voice when he talks to me, warm and inviting, and the adoration in his eyes when he looks at me, as if something about me lights up the darkness he harbors deep inside his soul.

These are things I've experienced from him, first-hand, here in this cell. I'm not seeing him this way because of the blood bond. I'm seeing him this way because it's the person he's consistently shown me he is this past week we've been locked in here together.

I have a sudden urge to go over to the bed, sit down next to him, and snuggle up against him.

It's so incredibly tempting.

Why am I resisting? It's the same thing we do when we're sleeping. Is it really all that different to be so close to him during the day than at night?

Decision made, I get up from the chair and walk over him, not saying a word.

His breathing slows, and he simply watches me with those mesmerizing golden eyes of his, waiting to see what I do next.

As I settle into the bed next to him, he wraps an arm around me, pulling me close. His body is familiar and warm, and it's so incredibly easy to sink into his embrace. His heart beats steadily against my ear, a comforting rhythm that lulls my worries away, if only for a moment.

Coming over here was the right decision. I have zero doubts about it.

“Thank you,” I whisper, not entirely sure why I'm thanking him. For his company, for his understanding, for his warmth?

Probably for all of it.

He doesn't say anything—he just tightens his grip around me. We stay like that for a while, the silence between us heavy with unsaid words and shared fears, but it's a comforting silence. One that speaks of understanding and solidarity.

And I've never felt this close to anyone in my entire life.

Ruby



SLOWLY, I tilt my head up to look at him. His gaze is intense, sending a shiver down my spine and making my heart pound faster.

Because he's looking at me with *love*. Pure, unfiltered love.

I want to kiss him. No—I want *him* to kiss *me*.

My eyes dart across the hallway, catching sight of Lindsay engrossed in her book. From her position, she can definitely peek over the pages to watch me and Tristan. I'm sure she's been doing just that.

There's not much else to do in this place.

But is it really so horrible if she sees me with Tristan? I've seen her throw herself at Benjamin every day we've been here. She's not going to judge me for kissing a vampire.

As for Jason, his cell is at an angle where he can't see to the back of mine, where Tristan and I are sitting on the bed.

And it's not like kissing Tristan is something I haven't done before.

I turn my gaze back to Tristan's. There's so much uncertainty in his eyes, along with vulnerability, as if he's torn about what to do next.

That makes two of us.

Suddenly, the sound of footsteps approaching our cell disrupts the silence.

I break away from Tristan, the moment shattered.

It doesn't make sense. It's too early for Thalia to come down to clear our lunch plates and give us dinner.

Tristan's expression mirrors my confusion, his eyes clouded with uncertainty.

The footsteps grow louder, echoing through the hall. But it's not just one person I hear. It's two.

They get closer and stop in front of my cell.

It's Hazel. She's accompanied by a man I've never seen before—tall and broad-shouldered, with a commanding presence. His eyes are a piercing ice blue, and his dark hair is cropped short.

There's an air of authority and danger about him, sending every nerve in my body on edge.

This feeling... it's familiar. It's the same instinctual alertness I felt around Jax.

I know deep in my gut that this man is an alpha wolf shifter.

I attempt to hold his gaze, but it feels like an army of ants is burrowing beneath my skin, a relentless itch that's impossible to ignore. Finally, the discomfort becomes too intense, and I'm compelled to glance down at the cold stone floor.

That uncomfortable feeling vanishes, the relief washing over me stronger than my irritation at myself for the involuntary submission.

"I didn't mean to interrupt," Hazel says, and when I look back up at her and the man, I want to rip his smirk right off his face. "I wanted to introduce you to Riven, the alpha of the Spring Creek pack."

"Ruby," he drawls, his condescending tone making me tense up further. "I've heard so much about you."

"I hope the stories were good," I say, trying to sound as nonchalant as possible. "I'd hate to think I've been boring

you.”

Riven’s smirk widens. “I assure you—you’re far too unique to be boring.”

“So I’ve heard,” I say, and then I turn my attention back to Hazel, not wanting to be a source of amusement for Riven for a moment longer. “What do you want?”

“Firstly, I wanted to check on you to see how you’ve been holding up,” she says, and then she waits for me to respond, sounding annoyingly like she cares.

“You locked me in a cell with a vampire to force me to be his only food source, and you’ve been drugging everything I eat to repress my magic,” I say. “How do you *think* I’m doing?”

“Are you still heartbroken?” She tilts her head slightly, curious.

“What?” I say to her, and then I glance at Tristan, since he’s hardly been breaking my heart these past few days. If anything, he’s been making his way into it, becoming the only light I have in this dark, dreary place.

“I’m not talking about Tristan,” she says. “I’m talking about Connor. Your mate.”

“Oh.” I open my mouth, then close it, realization flooding my veins.

I haven’t thought about Connor in a while. I did for the first few days I was locked up here, but the more time I’ve been spending with Tristan, the more he’s been the one consuming my thoughts—and my heart.

He hasn’t just been here for me physically, but emotionally as well. I’ve been enjoying my time with him.

It’s the blood bond, I think, but deep down, I know it’s more than that. Because after this past week together, I know Tristan far better than I’ve ever known Connor. The time we’ve had together is real.

It counts. A lot, actually.

From the way Hazel's eyes light up with approval, it's clear that she knows exactly what I'm thinking. "You trust each other," she says, as if she's stating a fact instead of asking a question.

"Yes." The word escapes my lips involuntarily, and I don't take it back. Because it's a truth that's been growing inside me, like a flame flickering to life from a single spark, and taking it back would be a blatant lie.

Tristan reaches for my hand and gives it an assuring squeeze.

The single motion speaks volumes.

My admission means everything to him. And, in that moment, a silent understanding passes between us, a connection deeper than words.

He loves me. I have zero doubts about it. But I release his hand, not wanting to look dependent on him in front of Hazel and Riven.

Because I'm *not* dependent on him. Just like I'm not dependent on Connor, or on anyone except for myself.

Hazel doesn't reply. Instead, she looks to Riven, giving him a silent command with a single glance.

Riven sniffs the air, a deep, deliberate inhale, his eyebrows furrowing in concentration. Then he exhales slowly, a small smirk playing at the corners of his lips.

"She's telling the truth," he declares, crossing his arms over his broad chest.

Approval washes over Hazel's face, and she gives me a genuine smile.

"Good," she says. "I knew the two of you would get along. I told you so before bringing you to that bar."

"I'd say you have a good sense of character... except for the fact that you're with Benjamin." I glance at Lindsay after saying it, thinking about how Hazel's boyfriend has been toying with her this past week.

Hazel doesn't so much as flinch. "Doesn't it feel good to not be brooding over Connor anymore?" she continues, as if I didn't say a word against her boyfriend. "To care about someone who wants you in return?"

I hold her gaze, torn. Because she's right. She knows it, I know it, and there's no point in denying it.

My wolf remains dormant, repressed due to the drugged food.

"Yes," I finally admit. "And, if I had it my way, I'd get rid of the mate bond forever."

Another truth.

She glances to Riven again, who nods in confirmation that I'm not lying, and then looks back to me with the most approval she has since the day we met.

"I'm happy to tell you that we can help you with that," she says. "But first, you'll have to join us."

Ruby



“I ASSUME THAT BY ‘US,’ you mean the Blood Coven?” I ask, my voice echoing in the dimly lit chamber.

“I do,” Hazel confirms.

“And why, exactly, do you think I’d ever be able to trust you?”

She sizes me up, then continues, “You can trust us. But many times, it’s more important to consider who you can’t trust rather than who you can.”

“You mean not being able to trust someone who drugged me and threw me in a basement cell with a hungry vampire? And who’s been doing the same to humans?”

“I apologized for that many times,” Hazel says with a frown. “I don’t know how else I can say I’m sorry.”

“If you’re truly sorry, then you’ll let me out of here,” I say.

“So you can run back to Pine Valley and tell them everything?”

I take a moment to think about it. Because the only person I *can* trust—from the limited selection of those who don’t think I’m dead—is Tristan. And he’s right here, with me.

On instinct, I step closer to him, my arm brushing his.

A jolt of electricity surges through me at the contact, and my breath catches in my throat.

I don’t want to leave him. He’s the only person in the supernatural world who’s on my side and has my back no

matter what. Walking away from him would be foolish, even self-destructive.

And just the thought of it makes my heart ache.

“I don’t know where I’d go,” I admit, unable to look Hazel in the eyes. I avoid Riven’s gaze as well, who’s continuing to stand by her side like a loyal guard dog.

Which, I suppose, is exactly what shifters are to witches.

“Well, you can’t go back to Pine Valley,” she says. “Your mate rejected you. His girlfriend—wait, his *fiancée*—hates you. Jax doesn’t consider you a pack member, because your illusion magic makes you different. You have no place with them.”

“And you think I have a place here?” I ask. “With you?”

“I know you do,” she says, determination burning in her eyes. “If you join us, we’ll protect you. You’ll be able to better protect yourself, too.”

There’s a smugness to her smile, like she’s goading me. And I’m too curious about what she’s talking about to resist learning more.

“What do you mean by that?” I ask, knowingly falling right into her trap.

“I mean that the Blood Coven is the most powerful coven in the world,” she says. “Soon, we’ll be even more powerful. If you join us, not only will we keep you safe, but you’ll share in that power, too.”

“Is that why you joined them?” I ask. “Power?”

“Power, and love,” she says. “Two of the most important things in the world. But you already know that. You know what it feels like to be deemed lesser—to be deemed an *omega*. And you know what love feels like—both the pain of it, and the joy of it.”

Her implication is clear.

Connor is the pain.

Tristan is the joy.

And the most frustrating thing about everything she's saying is that she isn't wrong.

As I stand there, trying to process it all, Tristan links his pinkie finger with mine. It's a small gesture, but it grounds me in a way I desperately need.

"She's telling the truth," he murmurs, his cool breath against my ear making me grow warm with desire.

I swallow, feeling like I'm being pulled in countless directions, each of them threatening to rip me apart.

"Look at me, Ruby," he says, and I obey without hesitation. His golden eyes are blazing down at me, offering me a sanctuary, a guarantee that whatever he's about to say is the sincerest truth in existence. "I'm here for you. I'll protect you. Choose me, and I swear that you'll be my number one priority, always."

His number one priority.

It's exactly what Connor will never give me.

And I know, with every fiber of my being, that Tristan can—and that he *will*.

"I believe you," I say, and then turning back to Hazel, I ask, "If I say yes, will you let me out of this cell?"

"I'll have to speak with Tristan in private first," she says, noncommittal. "The others will likely want to talk to him as well. But yes, it should be possible."

Possible.

It's not a guarantee. But it's a start—a glimmer of hope in the darkness that surrounds me. And for now, it's the only lifeline I have.

"Thank you," I tell her, although I also find myself pulling Tristan closer, unwilling to let him go.

"It's going to be okay," he says, and then he releases my hand and brings both of his up to his necklace. Carefully, he lifts it off over his head and holds it out to me. "Here. Hang

onto this for me, until we see each other next. Which will be soon—I swear it.”

“Your brother’s necklace,” I say, barely louder than a whisper. “But it means everything to you.”

“No,” he insists. “*You* mean everything to me.”

I’m rooted to the spot, my heart pounding in my chest. Because this—what he’s offering me and telling me right now—holds more significance than if he were to tell me he loves me.

Taking a deep breath, I reach out and accept the necklace. As it rests in my palm, a subtle warmth radiates from it, somehow binding me to Tristan on an even deeper level.

“I’ll see you soon,” I tell him.

“Soon,” he promises, and then he walks to the front of the cell, preparing to leave.

Hazel unlocks the door and extends her hand to him. “You know how this works,” she tells him, and then he takes her hand, the usually invisible barrier shimmering slightly as he steps through.

He immediately releases her hand after crossing the barrier, and he looks back at me, his eyes filled with warmth and affection. “Once you’re out of here, I’m going to take you on a proper date,” he says. “One without a captive audience. And one where I can actually enjoy a meal with you instead of just watching you eat.”

“You mean I won’t be the food?” I tease, although I’m surprised by the disappointment I feel at the realization that I won’t have to provide for him anymore.

I suppose, in a way, I kind of liked it. Providing for him. Being here for him, like he’s been for me.

Knowing that he needed me.

“Not if you don’t want to.” He gives me a sheepish smile, and my cheeks heat at the memories of the intimate moments we’ve shared this past week.

I want to.

The words are on the tip of my tongue, but I hold them back.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself,” I say instead. “I haven’t even said yes to that date yet.”

A playful glint appears in his eyes, and he flashes a confident grin. “Remember, Ruby—absence makes the heart grow fonder,” he says. “Unfortunately for me, I won’t be gone for long enough for you to experience it yourself.”

“I think my heart’s fond enough for you as it is,” I say automatically, which earns me another smile from him.

“Good,” he says, his eyes burning with intensity again. “Although there’s no way it can be as fond for me as mine is for you.”

His declaration leaves me breathless.

How many different ways can this man tell me he loves me? And how does each of them manage to be even more endearing than the last?

With a final, lingering glance, he turns to leave the cell. Hazel follows him, and Riven, ever the dutiful enforcer, trails behind.

The door shuts with a heavy, resounding thud, and I’m alone with Lindsay and Jason once more.

I slip the necklace around my neck, feeling the cool metal settle against my skin. It’s as if Tristan’s presence envelops me, offering solace and strength in the darkness. I wrap my fingers around the pendant, and it’s almost like his love for me is pulsing out of the garnet in the center, filling my soul with a sense of security and steadiness I’ve never felt before.

“Well,” Lindsay says, breaking the silence. “That was intense.”

There’s a strong yearning in her eyes, and I know why. She’s desperate for the type of romance with Benjamin that I share with Tristan.

I look over at her, nodding. “Yeah, it was.”

Jason clears his throat, walking to the front of his cell so I can see him. The hollows in his cheeks are deepening, his eyes not quite as bright as they were when we first met. “So, what now?” he asks.

“We wait,” I say, running my fingers over the cross pendant again. “Hazel and the others will talk to Tristan, and then they’ll let me out of here. Once they do, I’ll do everything in my power to get you guys out, too.”

“You don’t have to worry about us,” Jason says. “Gwen hasn’t spent as much time with me as you have with Tristan, but once she does, she’ll realize how much I love her. Then she’ll let me out of here, too.”

“Right,” I say, since it’s impossible to argue with him about anything involving Gwen. “Of course she will.”

Lindsay sits down on the floor, her back against the cold stone wall. “I hope it all works out for you, Ruby,” she says. “You deserve a chance to be happy.”

“So do you,” I tell her. “And you will be. Soon.”

“Thanks.” She gives me a small smile, and I can tell she doesn’t believe me.

But it doesn’t matter if she believes me or not. Because I’m going to get them out of here. I’m not sure how, but I will.

We fall into a comfortable silence, and I close my eyes, finding solace in the pendant hanging around my neck. The warm pulse of it gives me hope that no matter what comes next, I’ll be ready to face it head-on.

I’ll learn more about the Blood Coven.

I’ll make them think I want to join them.

And then I’ll figure out how to have a future with Tristan—one where the two of us can finally be safe and free.

Together, forever.

Tristan



HAZEL and I step into the library, the soft creak of the door echoing through the air as she closes it behind us.

It should be a relief to be back in my favorite room in the house, the hushed whispers of knowledge and secrets enveloping me. Yet, I find myself yearning for that basement cell. Well, not particularly for the cell—but for the person who was sharing it with me.

Ruby.

From now on, my favorite room will likely be whichever one she's occupying at the time.

“You did a good job,” Hazel says, yanking me out of my thoughts about Ruby. “With both the blood bond and giving Ruby the necklace.”

“What would you have done if she refused to offer me her blood?” I ask the question that's been gnawing at my mind for a while now.

“Would you have allowed things to get to the point where you'd have actually killed her?” Hazel asks.

“I would have resisted for as long as possible.”

“What about when it was no longer possible?”

I stare her down, daring her to push further. “I wouldn't have allowed it to get to that point.”

“How would you ensure it didn't?” She raises an eyebrow and conjures a ball of fire in her palm, the flickering flames

casting eerie shadows on her face.

I make sure to look into her eyes instead of directly at the flames.

She's so calm, so detached. I've always been one to keep my guard up, but it never ceases to amaze me how cold Hazel can be for someone so young. I suppose that's what happens when you're held at arm's length from everyone in your community—including your own parents—from the time you're a child.

"I would have fed from her by force," I say with a dangerous edge to my tone, since I have no shame about it.

It's true that my preference would have been for Ruby's feelings for me to have progressed naturally, without a blood bond. But it's far better for her to be bonded to me than not in this world at all.

"Without killing her," Hazel continues.

"Yes."

"Therefore, forcing the blood bond upon her."

"Yes."

I summon my air magic, feeling the cool, invisible currents swirl and dance around me, responding to my unspoken command. Then I blow it toward Hazel's flame.

The fire sputters and dies, leaving only tendrils of smoke in its wake.

It's a dangerous game—goaded a witch. Especially one with as high of status as Hazel.

But I've done all that she's asked of me.

I will *not* allow her to toy with me.

"Interesting." She stands down, seeming to have gotten the answer she wanted, making no retaliation to my assertion of dominance.

"You know, it was a very interesting touch you added there," I tell her, taking back control of the conversation.

She studies me, seemingly unable to read where I'm going with this.

“What was?” she finally asks.

“Stabbing me.”

“Right. That.” She shrugs. “We needed it to look convincing. The entire plan would have been ruined if there had been even a hint that you knew it was coming.”

“I've been alive for over a century,” I remind her. “You underestimate my acting skills.”

The corners of her mouth curl into a sly grin, and she tilts her head ever so slightly. “Is that what you've been doing with Ruby?” she asks. “Acting?”

My jaw clenches as I hold her gaze. “Never.”

“You're in love with her,” she says, as a fact and not a question.

“I am.”

“I'm happy to hear that,” she says. “As you know, I had a feeling the two of you would be good together. Just like me and Benjamin. And, after Ruby joins us, I want us to all be friends.”

She truly does.

Benjamin entered his relationship with Hazel to bring her to our side, just like she had me do with Ruby. Hazel doesn't know it, of course. However, he loves her now—or at least I think he does. He's impressed by power, and Hazel wields it in abundance.

She's determined to be with him forever, which is why she eventually joined us. Love conquers all—even if that means conquering beliefs that were ingrained into you since childhood.

“We will all be friends,” I assure her. “You and Ruby got along well before you brought her here. You just need to give her some time to adjust to all the changes.”

I'm unsure if I believe it, given the way Hazel's treated her, but saying anything else won't get me anywhere right now.

"I can always get trapped with her somewhere for a week," she says with a chuckle. "It seemed to work for you."

Every muscle in my body stiffens. "You won't harm her," I warn, ready to call on my magic at a moment's notice if necessary. "Not ever."

"Relax," she says, though it does nothing to calm my nerves. "I never said I'd harm her."

"And you never will." I let the threat hang heavily in the air.

She appears unshaken. "You truly do love her," she says.

"Yes. I do."

"Do you think your feelings are returned?" she asks, continuing before I can reply. "We know she trusts you. We know she's bonded to you. But does she love you?"

It's a good question. One that I hope I have the answer to, but I have no way of knowing for sure.

"You could have asked her while Riven was there," I tell her.

"Which means she hasn't told you she loves you. Yet," she adds that final word with a twinkle in her eyes, and I have a feeling she *does* believe that Ruby loves me.

Sometimes you can simply see the love between two people when they look at each other and interact with each other. And, while I'm biased, I'd like to think that's how Ruby looks at me.

But I refuse to allow Hazel to shake me.

Still, I can't deny that she's getting under my skin. I've never been in love before, and I'm finding that I dislike the uncertainty of it all.

"She trusts me," I say, since Riven confirmed it. "And she's bonded to me."

“All true.” Hazel nods, considering it.

“You completed your goal of creating a blood bond between us,” I continue. “It’s time to let her out of that cell. It’s not like she’ll be able to leave this house. You can create a boundary to keep her inside, just like you kept her inside the Pine Valley pack territory.”

“I can, and I have,” she says. “But I’m curious if you think that trust she has in you is because of the blood bond, or if she came upon it naturally after spending all that time with you.”

Another good question. One that I’ll never truly have an answer to, thanks to them forcing me to bond with her.

“There’s no way to know for sure,” I admit, even though it pains me. “But blood bond or no, the time Ruby and I spent together was real. And I firmly believe that if you let her out of that cell, I’ll be able to make more progress with getting her to feel more comfortable with opening up about her true feelings for me.”

“Why do you think that?” Hazel asks.

“Because we need her to be intimate with me,” I say. “She won’t be in that cell. She’s too uncomfortable—both with being seen and heard by the humans, and by being locked in a cell in general. But if you allow us to be alone together—truly alone—then I believe the connection between us will deepen, and she’ll open herself up to me.”

“Open up what, exactly?” Hazel’s eyes glitter with mischief. “Her heart, or her body?”

My glare is icy enough to wipe that smile from her face.

“For Ruby, the two will go hand and hand,” I say, strongly and firmly.

Hazel watches me, waiting for a crack in my armor, one that will cause me to waver.

There is none.

“Okay,” she says. “I’ll speak with the others. I can’t force them to do anything, but I do think your point is valid, and there’s a good chance they’ll see things our way.”

“*Our way?*” I ask, since Hazel’s given no signs of us being a team.

“I don’t want Ruby locked in there, either,” she says, like it should have been obvious this entire time. “It makes it hard for me to continue building a friendship with her.”

No kidding.

However, I sense that Hazel is sincere, so I suppress any sarcastic remarks that threaten to surface.

She wants friends. She *needs* friends. She might be powerful, but so am I—and I have a century of experience over her. Sometimes, I think she forgets that we convinced her to join us instead of the other way around. “We,” as in me, Gwen, and Benjamin.

“Great,” I say instead. “I’m glad we’re working toward the same thing.”

“As am I,” she says. “Now, why don’t you go grab some food in the kitchen? I’m sure it’s been a pain to not be able to enjoy solid food recently. We have cheeseburgers. And tater tots. They really are the best form of potato, don’t you think?”

The mention of food stirs a familiar craving inside me. Even though vampires don’t need solid food to survive, it’s hard to feel fully satisfied without it.

It’s a habit most of us find hard to shake from our human days.

“Thank you,” I say. “After watching Ruby and the humans eat this past week, I could use a bite.”

“Enjoy your meal,” she says. “I’ll let you know when the others reach a decision. If you’re not still in the kitchen when we do, I trust I’ll find you here in the library?”

The message is clear—don’t return to the basement until she’s given me a verdict.

And, as much as I want to check on Ruby, I know better than to do anything that might jeopardize our chances. Short term, impulsive thinking rarely gets people anywhere.

“Absolutely,” I say instead. “You know me well.”

“You better get used to it,” she says with a friendly smile, motioning for me to exit the library first. “Because we’re going to know each other for a long, long time.”

Ruby



I WAIT in my cell for what feels like the longest few hours of my life.

Are they hurting Tristan? Hazel *did* stab him, so I can't put it out of the realm of possibility.

But that wouldn't make any sense. They threw him in here with me because they wanted him to feed on me. We did exactly what they wanted. Plus, they want me to join their coven.

Which means they have no reason to punish Tristan—or me.

“Do you think he's turning on you?” Lindsay asks. She's sitting on the worn rug, her fingers nervously braiding and unbraiding the frayed fringe, her eyes focused on the repetitive task.

I stare at her in shock.

What kind of crazy question is that?

Tristan's pendant around my neck throbs with irritation, as if Lindsay's words personally offended it.

“Of course he's not turning on me.” I wrap my fingers around the pendant, my lifeline that ties me to Tristan. “He loves me.”

“He never said it directly.”

“Come on.” I roll my eyes. “You've seen us together for over a week. He's on our side.”

“He’s on *your* side,” she says. “Not ours. You’re a supernatural. We’re not.”

I frown, since while she has a point, I don’t want to admit it.

“There’s no way he’d ever turn on me,” I say instead.

“Okay. Sorry I asked.” She continues to focus on the fringe that she’s braided and unbraided hundreds of times since we’ve been down here, still not looking me in the eyes.

“Don’t listen to her,” Jason speaks up from his cell. “He loves you. He’ll be back for you.”

I can’t see him, but I can tell from his tone that he means it.

“Thanks,” I say, and then my stomach growls, and I glance at my empty lunch plate.

Thalia should have come with our dinner by now.

Something isn’t right.

Unfortunately, given my current position, there’s nothing I can do about it.

So, to distract myself, I curl up in bed with a book—the first sci-fi one Tristan read while we were down here. It’s a bit heavy on the spaceships and dense science stuff for my taste, and I’m too anxious to focus on reading anyway, so I just end up scanning the words without much comprehension.

Finally, the door to the basement creaks open, and Hazel comes back downstairs. She stops in front of my cell, ignoring the others, and I place the book down next to me without bothering to mark the page.

“Hey.” She smiles at me, like she’s talking to a friend.

“Hi...” I trail off, waiting for her to say whatever she’s come down here to tell me, and bracing myself for anything.

Anything, minus Lindsay’s idea about Tristan turning on us. Because while there are a lot of things that could be going on up there, I’m sure that isn’t one of them.

“After talking with Tristan, I chatted with the others,” she says, bouncing on her toes like a kid ready to share good news. “I fought for you, and they agreed to let you out of here.”

Her voice rises with excitement at the end. She sounds genuinely happy about it, as if we’ve been on the same side this entire time.

“Right now?” I ask.

After so many days and nights in this cell, all of them blurred together, this barely feels real.

“Yes, right now,” she says. “Dinner’s almost ready, and the sisters hate it when anyone’s late.”

I watch, stunned, as she removes a key from her jacket pocket and unlocks my cell door. It clicks open, and she places her palm on the barrier, which shimmers and fades away.

With nothing standing between us, every hair on my body stands on end, warning me to always stay alert. Hazel’s a wild card. I can’t let myself forget that.

So, I rise to my feet, bracing myself for an attack.

None comes.

“I can just walk out of here?” I ask.

It seems too easy.

“Out of the cell—yes,” she says. “You’ll have free roam of the house from now on.”

“Which means I won’t be able to *leave* the house.”

“We placed a boundary around it. Sorry,” she says. “The others don’t know you yet, so they want to spend some time with you to make sure you’re on our side.”

“You mean the three sisters?”

The more information I can get, the better. You never know when someone might accidentally give you something valuable that you can use against them later.

“Yep,” she says. “Morgan, Zara, and Willow. They’re excited to meet you.”

“If you like them, then I’m sure I’ll like them, too,” I say, and then I go a step further and add, “You knew how much I’d like Tristan.”

Hazel chuckles softly, a sparkle in her eyes. “I knew you liked him from the second you saw him,” she says. “You should have seen the way your eyes lit up when he walked through the door.”

“So did every other woman’s at that bar,” I remind her.

“They did,” Hazel says. “But he was only focused on you.”

My heart flutters as I remember that first moment—the way Tristan trapped me in his gaze, mesmerizing me with his beauty and charm—and I know Hazel’s right. Tristan had my heart from the moment I saw him.

No vampire blood bond or dulled shifter mate bond will ever change that.

Hesitantly, I make my way to the front of the cell and step through the open door. Nothing zaps me.

I’m free.

And, even though I’m still the basement, the air feels fresher than it has in over a week. It’s like a weight has been lifted from my chest, and I know I never want to be confined in such a small space ever again.

“Thank you,” I say to Hazel, not needing to fake my gratitude.

“I’m glad I was the one who got to do it,” she says, and again, I have the impression that she means it.

I say bye to Lindsay and Jason, and then Hazel leads me out of the basement and up the narrow, creaky staircase. The scent of fresh herbs and cooked meat wafts through the air, making my mouth water.

Even though I can’t see it yet, the food smells fancy.

“Will Tristan be at dinner?” I ask Hazel, shutting the door behind us.

“No,” she says, and I swallow down disappointment. “The sisters want to spend this time getting to know you without anyone else there. Other than me, of course. But don’t worry—you’ll see Tristan after dinner.”

The assurance immediately calms me. Tristan’s somewhere in this house, waiting for me.

But before seeing him again, I have to get through this dinner with three—likely evil—witches.

They want to like me, I remind myself. Go along with whatever they say, and all will be okay.

It’s the best—and only—way I can think of to gain their trust.

“Are they okay with me wearing this?” I ask, motioning to the warm flannel pants and tank top that Thalia dropped off this morning.

“They know we haven’t been giving you clothes straight from the runway,” she says, and she smiles warmly, amused. “But like I said, they don’t like to be kept waiting. Come on—follow me.”

The house is a labyrinth of dimly lit hallways lined with antique paintings and dark wooden furniture. It’s both eerie and intriguing, and it *feels* like witches live here, as if past generations of them haunt these halls. Quite literally, in the case of many of the old portraits on the walls.

Finally, we reach a set of ornate double doors that lead into the dining room. Hazel pushes them open, revealing an extravagant feast laid out on a long, polished oak table. Silver candelabras cast flickering shadows on the walls, illuminating the intricate wallpaper and high, arched ceilings, making me feel like I walked into a royal banquet.

As we enter, the three women in the room stand to greet us. Their bewitching beauty combined with the matching silver pendants around their necks that pulse with power and magic leave no question that they’re powerful supernaturals. They’re also dressed far more formally than I am, but there’s nothing I can do about that.

I have far more important things to worry about than what I'm wearing, anyway.

So, I take a few deep breaths to steady myself, reminding myself to remain cool and calm, no matter what they might throw my way.

After all, my life may depend on it.

Ruby



“RUBY, I’d like to introduce you to the original three members of the Blood Coven,” Hazel begins, and then she gestures to the petite, youthful-looking woman with sun-kissed hair that cascades in loose curls to the middle of her back. “This is Morgan.”

“Hi, Ruby,” Morgan says, her voice light and inviting. “We’ve heard so much about you.”

As everyone apparently has around here, I think, although I know better than to say it out loud.

“Nothing too bad, I hope,” I say instead, which earns a smile from her.

“No.” Morgan smiles warmly. “Nothing bad at all.”

Strangely, I believe her.

Next, Hazel introduces me to the tallest of the three. “This is Zara,” she says, motioning to the woman with long, jet-black hair and piercing, fiery orange eyes. Her sharp, angular features give her an air of determination and intensity, and she stands strongly and proudly, like someone who feels like she should be well known enough to not need an introduction.

She has a small, silver flame tattoo on her left cheekbone, which she likely chose because of the elemental magic that witches possess.

Fire.

“Welcome,” Zara says, her voice cool yet guarded.

“Thank you for having me.” I lower my eyes, hoping the gesture will make her feel like I’m not a threat.

When I look back up, I’m relieved to find that she looks incredibly pleased with herself.

A woman who finds joy out of intimidating others.

Noted.

Hazel quickly moves on to the final sister, who has warm, amber eyes and wavy, auburn hair that frames her heart-shaped face.

By process of elimination, I know before Hazel introduces us that this is Willow.

“It’s nice to meet you, Ruby,” Willow says with a genuine smile. “Please, join us.”

Zara’s at the head of the table, her sisters flanking her sides. There are place settings next to Morgan and Willow. Clearly, one is for me, and one is for Hazel.

I want to sit next to Morgan, but I also don’t want to offend Willow.

“Which seat is mine?” I ask, since it feels like the safest move to make.

“Sit next to me,” Morgan says, and I’m more than happy to oblige.

They take their seats at the same time as Hazel and me, and I try to ignore the weight of their gazes. Well, mainly of Zara’s gaze. Out of the three sisters, she’s the only one who fits the description of “evil Blood Coven witch” that I was expecting to find when I walked through these doors.

The other two seem... nice?

Then again, Hazel seemed nice at first.

I need to keep my guard up.

Across from me, Willow reaches for her water glass to take a sip, and I notice an intricate phoenix tattoo that wraps around her left wrist.

A phoenix—a bird that rises from the ashes.

I have no doubt that the bird's relation to fire isn't an accident.

My stomach growls, and I focus on the food in the center of the table. Roasted vegetables glisten with herbs and olive oil, while tender cuts of meat sit beside steaming, fragrant rice.

When I was a vegetarian, I barely would have been able to look at the meat, which is cooked so rare that there's still blood in its center.

Now, it looks and smells like one of the most delicious foods on Earth.

But, most notably, the platters are family style. Which means that unless these witches are willing to dull their magic—which I bet they aren't—there's no way that the food is drugged.

“As you see, we have a few more members who aren't here with us this evening,” Willow says, gesturing to the empty seats at the long banquet table with her left hand in a way that shows off her tattoo again. “We wanted to keep it small tonight, as to not overwhelm you, and to give us a chance to get to know each other more intimately.”

“Thank you,” I say, and then, because I get the impression that she wants to hear it, I add, “I like your tattoo.”

She beams at the compliment. “I designed it myself.”

“It's beautiful.”

Before the conversation can continue, someone walks through the door. Thalia. She's wearing all black, as always, and she's carrying a bottle of red wine.

“Brunello di Montalcino,” Zara says as Thalia uncorks the bottle. “It's one of the greatest Italian reds, and one of my favorites. I sent two of our shifters to bring it in from the city for this exact occasion.”

The deliberate way she says it makes it clear that refusing a glass would be a great offense.

“That was very kind of you,” I say instead, and she gives me a sharp smile, the silver flame tattoo on her cheek seeming to glow when she does.

I know nothing about wine, since the restaurant where my mom works in Naples is more of a “red or white” sort of place. But I know that no matter what I think of this particular vintage, I need to pretend like it’s the most delicious wine I’ve tasted in my life.

It shouldn’t be too hard, since it most likely will be. And luckily, we’ll all be drinking from the same bottle, so I know it hasn’t been drugged.

Thalia allows Zara to take the first taste, which she says is excellent. She moves on to pour for the rest of us—starting with me—refusing to look me in the eyes as she does.

The wine is a rich, dark red, like blood, and I can’t help but think that’s a reason Zara favors it.

“Thank you, Thalia,” Zara says when our glasses are full and the bottle is empty. “I’ll message you when we’re ready for dessert.”

Thalia simply bows her head slightly, then turns around and leaves without saying a word.

Zara reaches for her glass and holds it up, her silver rings glinting in the candlelight. “Now, for a toast,” she says, and the rest of us raise our glasses as well. “To the one sent to us from the stars.”

She holds her gaze with mine, and I know she’s referring to me.

I lift my glass a few inches higher, mimicking the others, then bring it to my lips and take a sip.

The wine is an explosion of dark, velvety fruit in my mouth. The flavor somehow fills my entire head, and while I’ve never been a wine girl, this might be the one to change my mind.

“Well?” Zara raises a perfectly plucked eyebrow, waiting for my verdict.

“It’s delicious.” I savor the lingering taste as I contemplate the appropriate thing to say next. I feel like I’m in one of my fantasy novels, and I know that every word I say to this woman could be the difference between freedom and being locked back up in that basement cell. “Thank you for going to such lengths to bring it here tonight.”

“My pleasure.” She gives me an approving look, apparently pleased, and I relax slightly.

I can do this.

It’s going to be a dance of words, and perhaps a battle of wits, but I can make these women believe they’re convincing me to join their cause.

The conversation easily flows as they ask about my story—my first shift, how I discovered my magic, and the work Hazel and I did together so I could learn how to better control my powers. Even though they previously said they’d heard all about me, I suppose they wanted to hear things directly from the source.

Zara’s just beginning to ask me about something I have zero desire to discuss—my mate bond with Connor—when Hazel gasps and hisses in pain, a curse ringing through the air.

All eyes are immediately on her, where she’s cradling her left index finger, whimpering slightly.

“What happened?” I ask, although from the way Hazel’s knife is laying in the center of her half-finished meat, it’s obvious that she cut herself with it.

“It’s nothing,” she says, although from the way she winces when she talks, it doesn’t sound like nothing. “My knife slipped. No big deal.”

“Let me see,” Willow says, gently taking Hazel’s hand before she can protest.

Hazel’s finger is slashed from her nail bed to her middle knuckle. Blood wells up, trickling down the rest of her finger, and I stare at it in shock.

How could a girl who so deftly handled the Blade of Erebus have accidentally cut herself with a dinner knife?

I have no idea, but I definitely don't think it was an accident.

Ruby



“THAT’S NOT NOTHING,” Willow says. “Let me help.”

She downs the rest of her water until only a few ounces remain. Then she takes her knife to her palm, slices it open, and squeezes, allowing her bright red blood to drip into her glass.

I watch in shocked silence, unable to tear my eyes away from whatever she’s doing.

“Your cut’s pretty shallow, so this won’t take much,” she says to Hazel. Then, once her blood has colored the water like dye, she stops squeezing. Her own cut heals in seconds, and she brings the glass closer, cradling it in her hands and staring intently into the blood-filled water.

As she does, magic pulses through the room, thickening the air and creating a quiet hum in my mind.

She lifts her gaze from the glass and hands it to Hazel. “Here. Drink this.”

Hazel takes the glass, wrinkling her nose as she stares down at it. Then, gathering her courage, she raises it to her lips and downs it like a shot.

I watch, transfixed, as Hazel’s cut seals itself and the blood vanishes, leaving her skin smooth and unblemished.

“The Blood Coven...” I say, piecing it together. “You have blood magic. Healing magic.”

“I’m the only one with healing magic,” Willow says, reaching for the pitcher and refilling her glass. “Morgan can

screy for things, and Zara creates powerful blood oaths.”

“You always make mine sound so boring.” Morgan huffs and turns to me, her green eyes bright with excitement. “I can use my blood for divination, to receive visions and messages to gain insight into the past, present, or future. The more blood spilled, the stronger and more useful the message.”

“You’re a prophet,” I say, and when she sweeps her hair over her shoulder, I glimpse her tattoo—a small, shimmering comet behind her right ear.

“Exactly,” she says. “It’s not always easy to control what I see, and the universe enjoys being as cryptic as possible, but the Blood Coven wouldn’t be anywhere near where we are today without my help.”

“How so?” I ask.

“We’re still just getting to know each other, but we’ll tell you eventually,” she says, grinning playfully.

I nod, figuring she’d say something like that. But it didn’t hurt to ask.

“And you?” I ask, turning my attention to Zara.

It feels great to move the focus away from me and onto them. Finally, I’m learning something. *A lot* of things.

Zara swirls her wine in her glass, takes a sip, and says, “The blood oaths I create bind two individuals together, ensuring that the promises made are kept. If they’re broken, the consequences are severe.”

She sits back in her seat, her gaze hard.

I barely have time to process what she said before Morgan leans forward, her eyes glittering with curiosity.

“So, Ruby, why don’t you show us your magic?” she asks. “We’ve been talking about it so much—I think it’s time we see it for ourselves.”

I hesitate and glance at Zara, since she seems to be the one in charge around here. “I can’t use my magic right now. It’s been... dulled by the drugs you’ve been giving me.”

Zara raises an eyebrow, a small smile playing on her bright red lips. “Oh, Ruby, we stopped giving you the drugged food last night. You should be able to use your magic just fine by now.”

I blink in surprise. “You did?”

“Yes,” she confirms. “Go ahead. Show us what you can do.”

Before agreeing to anything, I take a deep breath, steady myself, and dig deep inside myself to search for my magic.

The familiar stirrings of it respond within me. It’s not as strong as it was before I was drugged, but it *is* there.

“All right,” I say, relief rising in my chest at the fact that my magic is returning. “What do you want to see?”

Morgan’s the first to jump in. “Make it look like Willow’s tattoo is gone,” she says, bright and excited, as if she amused herself with her own suggestion.

I glance at Willow to see if she’s okay with it.

She pulls down her sleeve and rests her arm on the table, the detailed phoenix on display for us all to see.

“Do your best,” she challenges, making me even more determined not to mess up.

“Don’t worry. I will.”

Steeling myself, I take a deep breath and concentrate on Willow’s tattoo. It takes longer than I’m used to, but soon the energy of my magic courses through me, tingling in my mind as I direct it with my eyes toward Willow’s wrist.

Using every ounce of focus to push through the traces of the drugs lingering in my system, I weave the magic around her wrist like an invisible silken thread. As the illusion takes hold, the once-vibrant phoenix fades until it vanishes completely, leaving Willow’s pale skin smooth and unmarked.

She stares blankly at her now-bare wrist, a mixture of fascination and annoyance playing on her soft features.

“Wow,” she says, not sounding pleased with the result. “It’s like it was never there.”

She pokes her skin a few times, as if it will make the ink reappear. But, as Hazel and I learned from our time experimenting with what I can do, the illusion will stay in place for as long as I want it to, unless Willow leaves the room.

Zara reaches over the table, her fingers tightening around Willow’s wrist, examining the skin where the tattoo used to be. “Your magic is fascinating, Ruby,” she eventually says, dropping Willow’s wrist and returning her sharp gaze to mine. “There’s so much potential for how it can be used.”

A wave of unease washes over me as I observe the calculating glint in Zara’s eyes. I get the feeling that she’s scheming up countless ways that my magic can be used to benefit the Blood Coven’s agenda, and my heart races with the realization that I’m not just their guest—I’m their potential weapon.

Instinctively, I reach for Tristan’s necklace to ground myself.

“Change it back,” Willow says, breaking the silence with her harsh tone. She catches herself, softens her expression, and adds, “Please.”

I nod and reverse the illusion.

The phoenix on Willow’s wrist gradually reappears, as if emerging from her skin, the vibrant colors blazing back to life.

“Thank you.” She examines the tattoo, her eyes narrowing as she makes sure every detail’s intact. Once satisfied, she pulls her sleeve farther up her wrist than before, as if desperate to erase the memory of her tattoo’s temporary disappearance.

Zara clears her throat, drawing our attention back to her. “Ruby, as I’m sure you’ve figured out, there’s something we need your help with,” she says.

No kidding.

“I’m listening,” I say instead, taking another sip of my wine. The liquid does little to calm my nerves. I haven’t had too much of it, since I want to keep my wits about me, but it helps to have something to do with my hands.

“I hoped you would,” she says. “Because we’re looking for a powerful artifact—one that we’ve already located, but need your magic to help retrieve.”

“What artifact?” I place my glass back down on the table and lean forward, my heart pounding as I wait for the answer that might help me continue piecing together the puzzle of the Blood Coven’s ultimate goal.

“One that hasn’t been seen for centuries, and has been hidden in a place that will be close to impossible for us to safely reach without your help,” she says, her gaze cutting through me like a sharpened blade. “The Key of Hades.”

Ruby



SHE SAYS it as if I'm supposed to have a general idea about what the Key of Hades is.

I don't.

"What's the Key of Hades?" I finally give in.

Zara sighs, as if she expected the question. "A powerful artifact," she repeats. "It can raise the dead."

An icy chill runs up my spine, causing the hairs on the back of my neck to stand on end. I don't know what I expected, but it certainly wasn't this.

"Who are you trying to raise from the dead?" I ask, looking around at each of them in a new light.

A darker light.

Willow takes another sip of her water, her eyes averted. Morgan uses her fork to poke at the vegetables on her plate, the clinking sound sharp in the tense atmosphere. Hazel plays around with a small helix of fire around her index finger, as if she's checking to see if her magic still works after her injury, and the fire reflects in her eyes, making her look pleased with the result.

Zara's lips curl into a secretive smile. "I'm afraid I can't tell you... yet."

My curiosity grows, and a nagging unease settles in my stomach. "When will you tell me?"

“After you gain more of our trust,” she says simply. “You don’t have to know how we intend to use the key to help us retrieve it.”

It’s a fair point, so I don’t pry further.

“I understand,” I say, trying to keep my voice steady. “But I’d like to know where we’re going to find it.”

“You, Hazel, Tristan, and Benjamin will be going to Central Park in New York City—the entrance to the Summer Court of the fae,” she says, and I exhale in relief at the fact that Tristan will be coming with us.

If he’s coming with us, it means they haven’t hurt him or sent him away.

“You’re staying here?” I ask.

“Correct.”

Very interesting. It shows that the sisters don’t want to risk themselves. However, they are okay with risking me, Tristan, Benjamin, and Hazel.

Of course they’re okay with risking me. I’m their weapon. It’s why they want me on their side, why they went to all this trouble to bring me here in the first place.

As for Hazel...

“You’re going to put yourself in danger like that?” I ask, since from the little I know about the fae, they aren’t friendly to other supernaturals. Luckily, the Summer Court isn’t as bad as the Winter Court, which is known for being downright cruel, but the mission will still be dangerous.

“Benjamin’s going, so I’m going, too.” She extinguishes the fire in her hand, a wisp of smoke curling from her fingers. “Plus, you never know when a little bit of fire magic might come in handy.”

Her mention of magic reminds me that they need mine.

I look to Zara again, who’s taking a slow, deliberate bite of her meat. “Why *exactly* do you need me to help you so badly?” I ask her.

“We can’t risk the fae knowing that the four of you are there,” she answers. “You’ll have to go in disguise. Your magic will make those disguises as convincing as possible.”

I have a bit more wine as I take it in.

“I was only gifted with my magic a few weeks ago,” I remind her. “And, for a portion of that time, I had no access to it. What makes you think I can pull this off?”

“I’ve worked with you enough to know that you’re talented with altering appearances,” Hazel chimes in. “You’re more than capable of doing what we need. Especially under the pressure of our lives being on the line.”

She’s right—I do work best under pressure. Like when I turned invisible to stop Connor from seeing me in the woods.

Tristan’s necklace pulses, as if reminding me to not dwell on Connor... and it works.

I feel no pain when I think of my mate’s name.

Incredible.

“Okay. Let’s say I do this,” I say, and Morgan stops playing with her food, her bright eyes lighting up in excitement. “What do I get from it?”

“For starters, you won’t have to stay in the lovely accommodations downstairs,” Zara begins, sarcasm dripping from her tone. “But, most importantly, you’ll be inducted into the Blood Coven as an equal member. Once we achieve our goal, you’ll enjoy the benefits with the rest of us. And trust me when I say that the benefits will be worth it.”

“I suppose that means you’re not telling me what they are right now?” I ask.

“Help us retrieve the key first,” she says. “Then, depending on how the mission goes, we’ll let you know more.”

“You’ll have a family with us,” Hazel adds, although it only serves to remind me that the family I’ve always had—my parents—thinks they’ll never see me again. “We’ll protect you.

Which, as we've discussed, is far more than you'll ever get with the Pine Valley pack."

"I know," I say, and then for their benefit—and because it's the truth—I continue, "Jax views me as an omega and an outcast. Connor rejected me. Autumn turned me in. I will never, ever trust the Pine Valley pack, for as long as I live."

"You can trust us," Morgan says as she reaches for my hand, her fingers soft and comforting as they wrap around mine. The gesture should feel overly intimate from someone I just met, but from her, it's kind and welcoming. "The Blood Coven is a family. And we protect our family. Forever."

There's an added emphasis on the final word, as if there's far more meaning behind it than I know.

I offer her a tentative smile before pulling my hand away from hers and reaching for my water glass. The cool liquid soothes my parched throat, but it does little to quench the thirst for answers burning inside me.

"You'll also get more power," Willow repeats, something I've already heard multiple times. "A *lot* of it." She leans forward, and I can tell she wants to tell me more, but that she's holding back.

I place my water glass back on the table, my gaze sweeping over the four of them.

Zara maintains a carefully neutral expression, giving away nothing of her thoughts or desires. Morgan fidgets with one of the many gold rings on her fingers as she waits for my response. Willow devours the vegetables on her plate so quickly that I wonder if using her magic earlier drained her energy, leaving her desperate to refuel. Hazel's fingertips dance with tiny flames, her eyes challenging me from over the flickering fire. They create mesmerizing patterns, their warm glow casting an almost calming atmosphere over the dinner table.

The power in the room crackles with energy that hums and shimmers against my skin. It's a testament to the Blood

Coven's strength, a force that beckons me with promises of belonging and purpose.

Maybe they're right. Maybe there's a place for me here, with them.

As I ponder their offer, my gaze drifts to the window, where the night sky stretches out like an inky canvas dotted with countless stars. And, as I stare out into the darkness, the facts of the situation resurface in my mind, a sobering reminder that these witches are not on my side.

Hazel drugged me to bring me here.

The Blood Coven locked me in a basement cell for a week.

They're kidnapping humans and keeping them captive as living blood bags for the vampires.

They forced a blood bond between me and Tristan.

At the thought of Tristan, I wrap my fingers around his pendant. It's like his love for me fills me, reminding me that he's the only one I can trust.

And he's part of the Blood Coven.

The people at this table may never feel like family to me. But Tristan?

A part of me—one that's larger than I care to admit—already feels like he is.

And the four of them are all watching me with hawk-like eyes, waiting for my decision, clearly wanting me to make one—now.

Ruby



“I’LL HELP you find the Key of Hades,” I tell them, and Hazel pulls the flames back into her fingers, looking as proud of me as she did when we were working together in my room to improve my control over my magic. “As for joining the Blood Coven... I need time to think about it.”

“Understandable,” Zara says. “The universe agrees. Because it’s currently the new moon, when the moon is in shadow. To induct you into the coven, it needs to be a full moon. Which means you have two weeks to make your decision.”

Two weeks.

She says it as if it’s a generous amount of time.

But it feels suffocatingly short.

“You’ll make the right decision,” Hazel assures me. “Then, once you do, I’ll use my magic to make your parents and best friend remember your existence.”

I stare at her, shock and dread coiling in the pit of my stomach.

“What did you just say?”

“I said that I’ll make your parents and best friend remember your existence.”

“I heard you the first time.” I raise a hand and shake my head, an unspoken plea for her to stop talking. “But they think I’m dead. Not that I don’t exist.”

“That’s a lie,” Hazel says plainly. “Another lie told to you by Jax. He didn’t think you were ready to know when he first talked to you, but he wanted you erased.”

“But... why?”

The full implications of what she said hasn’t set in. Because if I thought it was painful for my parents and Luna to believe I was dead, the realization that they don’t even remember my existence is a hundred times more agonizing.

The scent of the food on the table turns sickly sweet, and the sounds of cutlery scraping plates feel like needles against my eardrums as I wait for Hazel’s response.

“He thought that if they believed you were dead, you still might eventually go back to them and tell them you’re alive,” Hazel explains, her eyes filled with a mix of pity and understanding. “So, he asked us to erase their memories of you instead.”

The room shrinks around me as the weight of her words settles in.

“But it doesn’t make sense,” I say, struggling to put it all together. “Even if you’re telling the truth, and my parents and Luna don’t remember I existed, other people will. My mom’s friends at the restaurant will have asked her how I’m doing at school. The other people in my dorm will have asked Luna where I am. They’ll think that my parents and Luna have gone insane for not remembering me.”

“All true,” Hazel says. “Which is why, with the help of the entire Blood Coven, and with using Carly as a sacrifice, I erased your existence from the human world altogether.”

I blink a few times, unable to believe what I’m hearing.

“You killed Carly,” I finally say. The words taste bitter on my tongue, and I swallow hard.

Out of everything she said, it shouldn’t be the one on the forefront of my mind.

Yet, it is.

“Carly didn’t know it, but she had powerful blood, thanks to the deep connection to the spiritual world passed down to her through her ancestral line,” Hazel continues, as if she’s not admitting to *murder*. “I was able to tap into that power—albeit, in ways her ancestors would never approve of—to pull off the most impressive spell I’ve done to date.”

“I’m erased... from existence,” I say in shock, unable to look at any of them as I speak. “And you murdered someone to make it happen.”

“We did,” she confirms.

“How could you do that? How could you just... erase me from their lives?”

Hazel’s expression softens. “I know it seems cruel, but it was Jax’s decision, not ours,” she says, and then she continues, her voice firm. “But I promise you, Ruby, if you decide to join the Blood Coven, I’ll use my magic to reverse it all. I’ll give you back the people you love. And if you need more proof that I’ll follow through on this promise, Zara can forge a blood oath between us. That way, you’ll know for sure that I’m telling you the truth.”

“Proof,” I repeat. “Yes, I need proof.”

“Wonderful,” Zara says, bringing her hands together. “I can create the blood oath now, if you’d like.”

“No,” I say, and she frowns, taken aback by my rejection. “I don’t need proof that Hazel will reverse the spell. I need proof that you’re telling the truth about the world forgetting my existence.”

“Not the entire world,” Morgan says, in what I think is an attempt to be reassuring. “It’s only the human world. Not the supernatural one.”

“Up until three weeks ago, the human world was the only world I knew,” I snap, and she sits back, looking physically hurt by the harsh way I spoke to her.

I feel bad. I do sort of like her, and I don’t want her taking the brunt of my anger and grief.

But Hazel said the entire Blood Coven participated in the spell. Morgan is part of the Blood Coven.

She's as guilty as the others.

"If it's proof you want, then it's proof you'll get," Zara says breezily, looking to Hazel. "Take her to Florida. Tomorrow. Let her see the truth with her own eyes."

"A good plan," Hazel says. "Benjamin will come with us."

"And Tristan," I add quickly.

If they're telling the truth, and I think they are, then this is going to be devastating. I want Tristan there with me. He'll be the only person left in the world who loves me.

He'll be the only person in the world—at least, in this version of it—who's *ever* loved me.

The realization makes it feel like the world's closing in on me, eating my soul alive from the inside out.

"Of course," Hazel says with another understanding smile. "And Tristan."

Zara regards me with a glint in her eyes that reflects the silver flame tattooed on her cheek. "For tonight, we've prepared better accommodations for you," she says. "A penthouse suite, if you will."

She's goading me.

"Is that a fancy way of saying the attic?" I ask.

She raises an eyebrow. "Would you prefer your cell in the basement?"

"Fine," I say, since the last thing I want to do is return to that cell—especially without Tristan in it. "I'm sure it'll be a real 'rags-to-riches' experience."

Zara smiles. "You know, I kind of like you, Ruby," she says.

That makes one of us.

"Well, Zara, the verdict's still out on whether or not I like you," I say, since she seems like a girl who can handle a little

rough talk. “We’ll see with time.”

“Don’t worry.” She flashes me a dangerous smile. “After we finish what we’ve set out to do, the one thing we’re not going to be lacking is time.”

Again with the annoying cryptic stuff.

“I suppose you’re not going to explain what you mean by that?” I ask.

“You’re already getting to know me so well,” she says. “Hazel will bring you to your room once we’re done here. Now, since we’re having such a lovely time here, how about we have Thalia bring us some dessert?”

Ruby



I GET NO MORE information from the four of them during dessert. Instead, Willow and Morgan are all over me, prying into my mate bond with Connor and my blood bond with Tristan. They're like a pair of high school girls, all giggles and whispers, trying to unearth the latest juicy secret.

It's nearly impossible to focus, since *everyone I've ever known has likely forgotten my existence*, but by some miracle, I manage.

After dinner, Hazel leads me up a grand staircase, and I can't help but glance around, taking in the opulent decorations and ancient artifacts that fill the creaky old mansion.

What secrets does this place hold? What dark magic courses through its foundation?

Finally, we reach the attic, and Hazel pushes open the heavy wooden door with a flourish.

It's nothing like I imagined. It's more of a royal suite than an attic, adorned with plush armchairs and a grand canopy bed. Velvet drapes add a regal touch, and tall windows with cozy reading nooks offer a view of the sprawling gardens below, which are artificially lit in the moonless night.

Zara's 'penthouse suite' comment suddenly doesn't seem that sarcastic. The place even has an ensuite bathroom. Sure, the tub, sink, and toilet scream Victorian, but Hazel assures me they're as good as new.

I'll have to see about that later.

“When will I get to see Tristan?” I ask her, since she promised I’d see him after dinner, and I intend on holding her to it.

“I was thinking we could hang out for a bit first?” she asks with a hopeful smile. “Like we used to?”

From the way she’s making it sound, you’d think I stayed at her house for three years instead of three nights.

But I don’t think it’s going to get me anywhere to tell her no.

“Sure,” I say, forcing a smile. “Sounds great.”

“Cool.” She saunters over to the bed and perches herself on the end, seeming genuinely pleased. “I’m so glad we’re working with each other and not against each other now. We’re both freaks of the supernatural world, so it makes sense for us to be friends. Don’t you think?”

She watches me carefully, a silent plea in her eyes for me to agree.

I know from what she told me when we first met that she’s never had any close friends.

If I can convince her that I want to be her friend—not just her friend, but her *best* friend—then it will likely increase my chances of gaining the Blood Coven’s trust. The more they trust me, the more freedom they’ll give me. Plus, the only thing it’ll do if she thinks I hate her is make things more difficult for me.

Still, I don’t want to sit next to her. So, I choose one of the plush chairs, facing her and preparing to give the performance of my life.

Hopefully the alpha wolves aren’t sent to sniff out my lies.

“Ruby?” Hazel asks. “Are you okay?”

She’s tenser than before. More on edge.

Time to get this show on the road.

“Yeah,” I say, holding her gaze with what I hope is conviction in my eyes. “And I want you to know that I

understand.”

Her face brightens with hope. “Understand what?”

Looking at her now, with her small frame and the smattering of freckles on her nose and cheeks, she seems almost childlike.

But I know better. She might look like an innocent lamb, but she’s a wolf through and through.

She *murdered* Carly. And she didn’t sound even slightly sorry about it.

“I understand why you brought me here. I’m actually grateful for it. The Pine Valley pack...” I pause for a second, my eyes far off, because this is one part where I won’t have to lie. “After everything they did to me, I’ll never be able to trust them. You and the Blood Coven are more on my side than they’ll *ever* be. And even though you did that spell to... erase me from existence,” I say, and I swallow, hard, since it hurts to say out loud. “I know you’ll reverse it. I trust you.”

“Interesting.” Hazel’s eyes, as sharp as a hawk’s, study me intently. After a brief pause, she scoots forward, the antique bed creaking under her weight. “So, tell me—how much of this is because of our chat over dinner, and how much of it is because of your connection to Tristan?”

Her question is a spider’s web glistening in the moonlight, a trap waiting for unsuspecting prey.

At least, I think it’s a trap.

If I was lying, I’d say it was because of our dinner conversation. That’s what Hazel wants to hear—that it’s about her. That she’s special in some way.

But she’s no fool. She’s aware of the bond Tristan and I share. She orchestrated it, after all.

Probably because she thought it would make me more likely to trust the Blood Coven.

Little does she know that I didn’t need the blood bond with Tristan to grow to trust him. After all that time together, I care about him.

Deeply so.

“It was Tristan,” I admit, and then to make it more convincing I add, “I love him.”

The words echo in the room, and strangely enough, they don’t feel like a lie.

There’s a beat of silence before Hazel finally speaks her eyes searching mine. “You love him?”

“I do.” I reach for his necklace, the warm pendant acting as my anchor in the storm of emotions swirling within me. It’s my proof, my constant reminder that this isn’t an illusion. That it’s not just the influence of the blood bond.

No blood bond could fabricate those stolen moments in our cell. The electric charge that pulsed between us, the trust that gradually grew... the way he cradled me in his arms every night we slept in that bed together.

And now, saying it out loud makes me feel more vulnerable than ever.

Hazel swings her feet that are dangling over the edge of the bed, like a child ready for a bedtime story. “How do you know you love him?” she asks.

“How do you know you love Benjamin?” I turn the question back to her, having a feeling she won’t mind answering.

“I knew it from the moment I saw him,” she says, her eyes dreamy, her tone ringing with honesty.

Her answer is a naïve confession, the kind given by someone who’s never been in love before.

Not like I have any more experience than she does in the realm of love. After all the intimate, stolen moments with Tristan, I’m more convinced than ever that my feelings for Connor were lust—not love. The mate bond was nothing more than an illusion, as fake as the ones I create with my mind.

Nothing more.

“That’s very romantic,” I tell her, which earns me a smile. “But it was different with me and Tristan. Yes, I was attracted to him. I’d have to be blind otherwise. But we had a lot of time to get to know each other. And around him, I felt safe, cared for, cherished, and understood. I trust him. What else could that be, if not love?”

She contemplates my words, her gaze intense. “Do you think he loves you back?” she finally asks.

“Yes.” The word fills me with relief after I speak it, because I know in my heart that it’s true.

Her face softens as she studies me, and she tucks her hair behind her ears. “I think so, too,” she says shyly.

“Now you understand why I want to see him so badly,” I say. “I know it hasn’t even been a day, but... I miss him.”

This, too, isn’t a lie.

I hold my breath, praying she’ll take the bait.

She hops off the bed, a glint of mischief in her eyes. “Well then, who am I to stand in the way of love?” she says, surprising me by how easily she concedes. “I’ll bring Tristan up here.”

“Yes,” I say. “Please.”

“Anything for a friend.”

With a final impish grin, she stumbles slightly as she hurries out the door, leaving me alone in the dimly lit attic.

Once she’s gone, I drop my head into my hands, hardly able to believe what just happened.

I pulled it off.

But the craziest thing about all of it?

I didn’t have to do much acting.

Because despite the uncertainty of this entire situation, one thing is clear to me above all else: I’m in love with Tristan. And I’m ready to face whatever comes next, as long as he’s there with me, by my side, forever.

From the Author

Hi! I hope you enjoyed reading *Shadow Moon*, the second book in the Wolf Born series. If you did, I'd love if you wrote a review. Reviews are extremely important to authors, because they encourage more readers to pick up the book. Plus, I read every review I get, and they motivate me to write faster!

Reviews for the first book in the series are the most helpful.

Here's the link on Amazon where you can leave your review
→ mybook.to/wolfborn1

* * *

PRE-ORDER WOLF BORN 3: CURSED MOON

The next book in the Wolf Born series, *Cursed Moon*, is available for pre-order now. DON'T PANIC when you see the release date on Amazon. I initially set all of my pre-orders super far in the future, since I don't work well under pressure and I don't want to rush writing the book.

I currently plan on actually releasing *Cursed Moon* in July 2023.

Pre-order your copy now:

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* * *

THE VAMPIRE WISH

As you wait for *Cursed Moon*, I recommend checking out my Vampire Wish series. Especially because for a limited time, the first book in the Vampire Wish series is 99c! You can also grab the box set of all five books in the series for only \$9.99.

Check out *The Vampire Wish* on Amazon:

Book One → mybook.to/vampirewish

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You can also turn the page to see the cover, description, and read the first few chapters of *The Vampire Wish*.

Thank you again for reading my books, and I'm so glad you enjoyed *Blood Moon*!

-Michelle

The Vampire Wish



TURN THE PAGE TO SEE THE COVER AND
READ THE DESCRIPTION.



***Twilight* meets *Aladdin* in a whirlwind of forbidden love, hidden secrets, and a vampire kingdom that thrives in the shadows of the night.**

For Annika Pearce, winter break with her family was usually a boring affair. Not this year. Everything changes in an instant when vampires attack Annika's family and abduct her to the hidden kingdom of the Vale.

In the Vale, her normal life is turned upside down. Her role?
To give blood whenever vampires demand.

As Annika desperately searches for a way to escape, she meets a mysterious stranger named Jake who captures her heart and might be her only hope. But as Annika peels back the layers of the mystery surrounding her abduction, she learns that things aren't as they seem. Everyone seems to be hiding a secret.
Including Jake.

It turns out that his name isn't even Jake.

It's Jacen.

And he's a vampire.

A vampire prince.

With time running out, Annika races to unravel the mystery of the Vale—and decide who to trust. With her heart pulling her in one direction, and her instincts in another, she faces an impossible decision.

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Prologue



“RACE YOU TO THE BOTTOM!” my older brother Grant yelled the moment we got off the chair lift.

Mom and Dad skied up ahead, but beyond the four of us, the rest of the mountain was empty. It was the final run of the trip, on our last day of winter break, and we’d decided to challenge ourselves by skiing down the hardest trail on the mountain—one of the double black diamond chutes in the back bowl.

The chutes were the only way down from where we were—the chairlift that took us up here specified that these trails were for experts only. Which was perfect for us. After all, I’d been skiing since I was four years old. My parents grew up skiing, and they couldn’t wait to get me and Grant on the trails. We could tackle any trail at this ski resort.

“Did I hear something about a race?” Dad called from up ahead.

“Damn right you did!” Grant lifted one of his poles in the air and hooted, ready to go.

“You’re on.” I glided past all of them, the thrill of competition already racing through my veins.

Mom pleaded with us to be careful, and then my skis tipped over the top of the mountain, and I was flying down the trail.

I smiled as I took off. I’d always wanted to fly, but obviously that wasn’t possible, and skiing was the closest thing I’d found to that. If I lived near a mountain instead of in

South Florida, I might have devoted my extracurricular activities to skiing instead of gymnastics.

I blazed down the mountain like I was performing a choreographed dance, taking each jump with grace and digging my poles into the snow with each turn. This trail was full of moguls and even some rocky patches, but I flew down easily, avoiding each obstacle as it approached. I loved the rush of the wind on my cheeks and the breeze through my hair. If I held my poles in the air, it really *did* feel like flying.

I was lost in the moment—so lost that I didn't see the patch of rocks ahead until it was too late. I wasn't prepared for the jump, and instead of landing gracefully, I ploofed to the ground, wiping out so hard that both of my skis popped off of my boots.

“Wipeout!” Grant laughed, holding his poles up in the air and flying past me.

“Are you okay?” Mom asked from nearby.

“Yeah, I'm fine.” I rolled over, locating my skis. One was next to me, the other a few feet above.

“Do you need help?” she asked.

“No.” I shook my head, brushing the snow off my legs. “I've got this. Go on. I'll meet you all at the bottom.”

She nodded and continued down the mountain, knowing me well enough to understand that I didn't need any help—I wanted to get back up on my own. “See you there!” she said, taking the turns slightly more cautiously than Grant and Dad.

I trudged up the mountain to grab the first ski, popped it back on, and glided on one foot to retrieve the other. I huffed as I prepared to put it back on. What an awful final run of the trip. My family was nearing the bottom of the trail—there was no way I would catch up with them now.

Looked like I would be placing last in our little race. Which annoyed me, because last place was *so* not my style.

But I still had to get down, so I took a deep breath, dug my poles into the snow, and set off.

As I was nearing the bottom, three men emerged from the forest near the end of the chute. None of them wore skis, and they were dressed in jeans, t-shirts, and leather jackets. They must have been freezing.

I stopped, about to call out and ask them if they needed help. Before I could speak, one of them moved in a blur, coming up behind my brother and sinking his teeth into his neck.

I screamed as Grant's blood gushed from the wound, staining the snow red.

The other two men moved just as fast, one of them pouncing on my mom, the other on my dad. More blood gushed from both of their necks, their bodies limp like rag dolls in their attackers arms.

"No!" I flew down the mountain—faster than I'd ever skied before—holding my poles out in front of me. I reached my brother first and jammed the pole into the back of his attacker with as much force as I could muster.

The pole bounced off the man, not even bothering him in the slightest, and the force of the attack pushed me to the ground. All I could do was look helplessly up as the man dropped my brother into the blood stained snow.

What was going on? Why were they *doing* this?

Then his gaze shifted to me, and he stared me down. His eyes were hard and cold—and he snarled at me, baring his teeth.

They were covered in my brother's blood.

"Grant," I whispered my brother's name, barely able to speak. He was so pale—so still. And there was so much blood. The rivulets streamed from the puddles around him, the glistening redness so bright that it seemed fake against the frosty background.

One of the other men dropped my mom's body on the ground next to my brother. Seconds later, my dad landed next to them.

My mother's murderer grabbed the first man's shoulder—the man who had murdered my brother. “Hold it, Daniel,” he said, stopping him from moving toward me.

I just watched them, speechless. My whole family was gone. These creatures ran faster than I could blink, and they were strong enough to handle bodies like they were weightless.

I had no chance at escape.

They were going to do this to me too, weren't they? These moments—right here, right now—would be my last.

I'd never given much thought to what happens after people die. Who does, at eighteen years old? I was supposed to have my whole life ahead of me.

My *family* was supposed to have their whole lives ahead of them, too.

Now their lifeless, bloody bodies at the bottom of this mountain would be the last things I would ever see.

I steadied myself, trying to prepare for what was coming. Would dying hurt? Would it be over quickly? Would I disappear completely once I was gone? Would my soul continue on, or would my existence be wiped from the universe forever?

It wasn't supposed to be this way. I didn't want to die. I wanted to *live*.

But I'd seen what those men—those *creatures*—had done to my family. And I knew, staring up at them, that it was over.

Terror filled my body, shaking me to the core. I couldn't fight them. I couldn't win. Against them, I was helpless.

And even if I stood a chance, did I really want to continue living while my family was gone?

“We can't kill them all,” the man continued. “Laila sent us here to get humans to replace the ones that rabid vampire killed in his bloodlust rampage. We need to keep her alive.”

“I suppose she’ll do.” The other man glared down at me, licking his lips and clenching his fists. “It’s hard to tell under all that ski gear, but she looks pretty. She’ll make a good addition to the Vale.”

He took a syringe out of his jacket, ran at me in a blur, and jabbed the needle into my neck.

The empty, dead eyes of my parents were the last things I saw before my head hit the snow and everything went dark.

Annika



I HELD OUT MY ARM, watching as the needle sucked the blood from the crease of my elbow and into the clear vial. I sat there for ten minutes, staring blankly ahead as I did my monthly duty as a citizen of the Vale.

Like all humans who lived in the kingdom, I was required to donate blood once a month.

This was my twelfth time donating blood.

Twelve months. One year. That's how long it had been since my family had been murdered in front of my eyes and I'd been kidnapped to the Vale.

When I'd first been told that I was now a blood slave to vampires, I didn't believe it. Vampires were supposed to be *fiction*. They didn't exist in real life.

But I couldn't deny what I'd seen in front of my eyes. Those pale men, how quickly they'd moved, how they'd ripped their teeth into my parents and brother's throats and drained them dry, leaving their corpses at the bottom of that ski trail.

Why had I been the one chosen to live, and not them?

It was all because I'd fallen on that slope. If I hadn't fallen, I would have been first down the mountain. I would have been killed. My mom would have been last, and *she* would have been the one taken.

But my mom wouldn't have been strong enough to survive in the Vale. So even though I hated that I'd lived while they'd

died, it was better that I lived in this hellish prison than any of them. I'd always been strong. Stubborn. Determined.

Those traits kept me going every day. They were the traits that kept me *alive*.

At first, I'd wanted to escape. I thought that if I could just get out of this cursed village, I could run to the nearest town and get help. I could save all the humans who were trapped in the Vale.

I didn't get far before a wolf tried to attack me.

I'd used my gymnastics skills to climb high up on a tree, but if Mike hadn't followed me, fought off the wolf, and dragged me back inside the Vale, I would have been dead meat. The wolves would have eventually gotten to me and feasted upon my body, leaving nothing but bones.

Mike had told me everything about the wolves as we'd walked back to the Tavern. He'd grown up in the Vale, so he knew a lot about its history. He'd told me that they weren't regular wolves—they were shifters. They'd made a pact with the vampires centuries ago, after the vampires had invaded their land and claimed this valley as their own. He'd told me about how the wolves craved human flesh as much as the vampires craved human blood, and how if a human tried to escape—if they crossed the line of the Vale—they became dinner to the wolves.

At least the vampires let us live, so they could have a continuous supply of blood to feast upon whenever they wanted.

The wolves just killed on the spot.

That was the first and last time I'd tried to escape. And after Mike had saved me, we'd become best friends. He'd offered me my job at the Tavern, where I'd been working—and living—ever since. All of us who worked there lived in the small rooms above the bar, sleeping in the bunks inside.

He and the others had helped me cope with the transition—with realizing I was a slave to the vampires, and that as a mere human amongst supernaturals, there was no way out.

They were my family now.

“You’re done,” the nurse said, removing the needle from my arm. She placed a Band-Aid on the bleeding dot, and I flexed my elbow, trying to get some feeling back in the area. “See you next month.”

“Yeah.” I gathered my bag and stood up. “Bye.”

On my way out, I passed Martha—the youngest girl who worked at the Tavern. She slept in the bunk above mine, and along with being the youngest, she was also the smallest.

It took her twice as long to recover from the blood loss as it did for me.

“Good luck,” I told her on the way out. “I’ll see you back at the Tavern.” I winked, and she smiled, since she knew what I was about to do.

It was what I always did on blood donation day.

I held my bag tightly to my side and stepped onto the street, taking a deep breath of the cold mountain air. It was dark—us humans were forced to adjust to the vampires’ nocturnal schedule—and I could see my breath in front of me. The witch who’d created the shield to keep the Vale hidden from human eyes also regulated the temperature, but she could only do so much. And since it was December in Canada, it was naturally still cold.

I hurried to the busiest street in town—Main Street, as it was so creatively named. Humans manned stalls, and vampires walked around, purchasing luxuries that only they were afforded. Meat, doughnuts, pizza, cheeses—you name it, the vampires bought it.

The vampires didn’t even *need* food to survive, but they ate it anyway, because it tasted good.

Us humans, on the other hand, were relegated to porridge, bread, rice, and beans—the bare necessities. The vampires thought of us as nothing but cattle—as blood banks. And blood banks didn’t deserve food for enjoyment. Only for nourishment.

Luckily, Mike had taught me a trick or two since the day he'd saved me from the wolves. After seeing me climb that tree, he'd called me "scrappy" and said it was a skill that would get me far in the Vale.

He'd taught me how to steal.

It was ironic, really. Stealing hadn't been something that had ever crossed my mind in my former life. I used to have it good—successful, loving parents, trips to the Caribbean in the winter, skiing out west in the spring, and an occasional voyage to Europe thrown in during the summers. I'd had a credit card, and when I'd needed something, I would buy it without a second thought.

I hadn't appreciated how good I'd had it until all of that was snatched away and I was left with nothing.

Now I walked past the various booths, eyeing up the delicious food I wasn't allowed to have. But more than the food, I was eyeing up the shopkeepers and the vampires around them. Who seemed most oblivious? Or absorbed in conversation?

It didn't take long to spot a vampire woman flirting with a handsome human shopkeeper. I'd seen enough of vampires as a species to know that if the flirting was going to progress anywhere, it would lead to him becoming one of her personal blood slaves, but he followed her every movement, entranced by her attention.

They were the only two people at the booth. Everyone else was going about their own business, not paying any attention to me—the small, orphaned blood slave with downcast eyes and torn up jeans.

Which gave me the perfect opportunity to snatch the food that us humans were forbidden to purchase.

Annika



I PRESSED up against the stall, brushed a pile of candies into my bag, and scurried away.

Not bothering to glance behind, I stayed to the side of the street, scuttled through an alley, and passed through to the other side. Once there, I leaned against the wall, finally able to breathe again.

Every time I stole, I feared getting caught.

But that wouldn't stop me from doing it. After all, this was the only revenge I had against the vampires. They might have taken away my family, and they might have taken away my freedom, but I refused to let them take away my dignity.

As a human, I was weak and they were strong. I hated them for it, but at the same time, I *envied* them for it. Because after they'd murdered my family in front of my eyes and I was powerless to stop it, I never wanted to feel that helpless again.

But I *did* feel helpless. Every day since I was taken here. How could I not, as a human amongst such powerful creatures? To them, we were animals. We were slaves.

I wish I had the power to change that.

For now, all I had was the power to take from them. Small things, and they never even noticed, but it was the only revenge I had.

I leaned against the wall and smiled, since once again, I'd gotten away with it. And so, after taking a few more deep

breaths and steadying the pounding of my heart, I turned the corner and approached the bookstore.

It was empty inside besides the owner, Norbert. He sat at his desk, his eyeglasses on as he read a book. He was an older man—I always imagined that if we weren't prisoners in the Vale, he would have been a professor at some fancy college. Perhaps even a college I might have chosen to attend.

The moment the door closed, he looked up and smiled at me. "Annika," he said, placing his glasses down at the table. "Anything specific you're looking for today?"

"Just browsing," I told him. "Have you gotten in a new shipment yet?"

"It's only been a few days!" He laughed and leaned back in his chair. "I swear, you read faster than new books can arrive."

"I'm sure I can find something I missed before." I smiled and made my way over to my favorite shelf—the fantasy section—and got started on examining the spines, pulling out the titles that looked interesting and reading the back covers.

Before coming to the Vale, I hadn't been much of a reader—at least, I'd never read books that weren't assigned for class. Between school, gymnastics practices, homework, and spending time with my friends, I didn't have time to read for fun. If I needed to relax after a long day, I usually went straight to the television.

But us humans in the Vale didn't have access to televisions—or to the internet at all. And even with my work at the Tavern, now that I was no longer training for gymnastics competitions I had a lot more extra time on my hands. So I'd discovered the one pastime that humans in the Vale *were* allowed—books.

The books I found at the store here were much more to my taste than the books I'd been assigned to read at school. It hadn't been long until I'd discovered that I loved getting lost in the lives and stories of other people. I loved exploring their hardships, their trials, their love, and how they overcame most everything, despite what seemed like impossible odds.

These days, books were the only things that gave me hope. I treasured them and the stories within them more than anything else in the world.

“That’ll be five coins,” Norbert said once I placed the book I’d chosen on the counter.

“I don’t have coins,” I told him. “But I do have something I can trade.”

He watched me, waiting, and I pulled one of the candy bars out of my bag. His eyes widened, and he leaned forward with such enthusiasm that I imagined he could practically taste the chocolate already.

It worked every time.

“You’re going to get yourself in some serious trouble one day,” he said, his eyes full of warning.

“Perhaps. But that doesn’t stop you from enjoying the candy,” I teased. “So... are you willing to trade, or not?”

“You know I am.” He smiled, and as he passed me the book, I handed him the chocolate.

I pulled the book to my chest to give it a small hug, placed it in my bag with the rest of the candies, and headed back to the Tavern.

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About the Author



Michelle Madow is a *USA Today* bestselling author of fast-paced young adult fantasy novels full of magic, adventure, romance, and twists you'll never see coming. She's sold over two million books worldwide and has been translated into multiple languages.

Michelle grew up in Maryland, then moved to Florida, and now lives in New York City. She wrote her first book in her junior year of college and hasn't stopped writing since! She also loves traveling, and has been to all seven continents.

Someday, she hopes to travel the world for a year on a cruise ship.

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