

MAGICAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION



# HOMECOMING HOMICIDE

ALBANY WALKER

# HOME COMING HOMICIDE

MAGICAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION BOOK 1

# ALBANY WALKER



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# CHAPTER 1

SORRY I'M LATE. I DIDN'T WANT TO COME.

“*I*f you run out of gas, I’m calling a tow truck to haul your ass to the junkyard.” I’m two miles from my hometown and running on fumes. It’s not where I want to be, but I dropped everything when Dad called—not like I had a lot going on anyway. His words still echo in my head. “Hey, Frankie, we need ya.”

If he called, it must be serious. He knows why I left and why I haven’t been back.

I breathe a sigh of relief when the glow of the service station on the edge of Hill Crest comes into view. If I would have been paying attention, I would have fueled up in the last town. I need to be smarter if I plan to get out of here without anyone noticing.

Thankfully, my car isn’t recognizable, just an older beat-up Dodge Charger I keep promising myself I’m going to turn in, but I never get around to doing it. I pull into the farthest pump from the station and keep my head down as I fill up. I could pee, but there’s no way I’m going inside. In this town, news spreads faster than Tammie Turnbuckle’s legs.

When I get back in the car, I shoot a text off to Dad to warn him I’m in town so he can clear out the crime scene. I agreed to do this on my terms. That means no prying eyes. I wish I had the luxury to wait around and make sure he’s going to follow through, but I only have until midnight to get into Mickey’s Bed and Breakfast before she’ll lock my butt out. She’s a mean old broad, but one who has secrets of her own, so I hope she won’t tell anyone I’m in town for a few days.

Dad’s police issued truck is parked near the front steps of the town library. It’s a grand historical building that matches the school next to it. Hill Crest used to be a big deal. Several high-powered magical bloodlines came from my little town, but that was a long time ago.

I park behind him, ignoring the meter, and grab my satchel to loop over my head. My messy hair gets caught on the strap, and I end up losing a few strands in the wind. “Great, it’s like I’m sabotaging myself.” I slam my car door shut with a huff and hustle up the concrete stairs.

Thankfully, it’s dark, and I don’t see anyone around. News hasn’t spread

yet, or something else is keeping the looky-loos away. I'm betting Dad dropped a charm, knowing that makes me feel better.

The door swings open freely, and I'm hit with the odor of moldy books and decomposing flesh. It's not a pleasant combination. I scrunch up my nose and take a second to get used to the stench.

"Frankie!" Dad bellows, sounding way too jovial, considering the situation.

"Hey, Pop. You been cooking again?" I tease, letting him pull me into his barrel chest and pat the back of my head. My hair is always a messy nest, so it doesn't really matter anyway.

"Let me get a look at ya, would you?" He pushes me back with a meaty hand on my shoulder and gives me a scrutinizing stare.

"I just saw you a few weeks ago, Pop." I may not come back to Hill Crest, but that doesn't mean I don't see my dad.

"This new?" He toys with the metal chain that holds my badge. I look down and smile. I'm damn proud of that badge.

"Yeah, just something I picked up." I pretend it's not a big deal to be wearing an MBI special agent shield.

"Looks good on you." Not only does his tone convey how pleased he is, but it's on his face too.

"Enough about me." I shoo the emotion away. "Tell me what happened and why you need me." My dad has been a cop for the better part of thirty years. Murder might be rare in Hill Crest, but this isn't his first rodeo.

"Come take a look for yourself." He tilts his head to the right and turns to walk away. I follow behind him, letting my eyes linger on the old place. I used to study here when I was in high school. A grin tips my lips when I see the scorched wall before I can stifle it. The guys were always getting me into trouble back then. I remember the day Felix blackened the stone with a spell that went awry.

My smile falls as quickly as the memory invades my thoughts. Instead of walking down memory lane, I focus on Dad's back and try to figure out where he's going. He's huffing a little when we reach the upstairs floor. The entire space is empty, except for heavy bookcases and their filled shelves. All the furniture that used to be up here is missing, so it feels strangely empty.

He continues walking to the back stacks and the smell gets stronger. "You might want to plug your nose." Dad glances over his shoulder, but I'm already ahead of him—I can taste the death in the air.

We stop a good twenty feet from the body, and I blow out a breath. “His head popped,” I mutter. The blood splatter reaches all the way out to our feet. It’s like one of those stupid videos where they put dozens of rubber bands on a watermelon and watch it burst. His body is still completely intact, however, other than the gore decorating his suit.

“See why I called?” Dad points to the mess. I nod wordlessly. It would take a lot of magic to do something like this, and focused magic at that. We may have something big on our hands here.

“I need to get closer. Did your guys already get everything they need?” I can feel magic brushing my skin, but it doesn’t feel powerful enough for this. Maybe they used a cloaking charm.

“We took pictures and bagged a few things, but I wanted you to be able to see everything,” Dad tells me, waving his hands to encompass the back forty feet of the room. After seeing this, his phone call makes sense.

Not many people have my kind of magic. It’s what got me a place in the MBI, and it’s also made my personal life a bit of a nightmare.

My classification is psychometry, or touch magic, but that can be misleading. I don’t necessarily need to touch anything. Instead, I can read the magical signature left behind by the user. It makes me very valuable when the MBI has a suspect for a magical crime. I can usually tell them if their suspect is the one who created the magic. Things can get tricky with produced charms, but this was no apothecary spell.

Creating a mental shield was one of the first things I learned after my magic manifested. My barriers are solid, and I have to think about pulling them down more than I have to worry about erecting them anymore, but just to be safe, I always wear a piece of jewelry or two that I’ve spelled. I slide the simple silver band off my thumb and place it in my pocket, then I lift my necklace out of my shirt and over my collar so none of the metal is touching my skin. Normally, I would excuse myself to the bathroom to remove it, but Dad is familiar with the thin, rose gold chain and protection pendant, so I don’t need to hide it from him.

There’s a part of me that just didn’t want to take it all the way off either—being home is making me nostalgic and shit. I feel Dad’s eyes on me, but I ignore it. Without me telling him to, Dad takes several steps away. It’s not that I can’t feel the signature through his own magical aura, but it makes it easier.

One by one, I drop my shields. I expect the magic to hit me like a

tsunami, but I can only feel a trickle of magic when I take down my final defense. Dad must see something on my face, because he risks breaking my concentration and asks, “Everything all right, Frances?”

I hold up my hand to indicate I need more time. I’ve been on a few jobs as an official agent, and I already lost my mojo. Just my luck.

Making sure not to step in the pool of blood, I inch forward, hoping it’s just a proximity issue. The undercurrent of magic is there, but it feels delicate. The power that would have been necessary to cause this kind of damage should have created a sonic echo that I could feel for days. I squint up at the high ceiling, examining that, and then I look down and study what I can see of the floor, searching for sigils. I can’t think of any other reason why I wouldn’t be able to sense the signature unless I’m being blocked, because people’s heads don’t just explode naturally.

After looking long and hard, I turn around to face Dad. “I felt the cloaking charm outside. Did one get activated in here?” I already know the answer, but it’s worth a shot.

“No.” Dad crosses his arms over his wide chest and gives me the hairy eyeball. I feel like I’m sixteen again and I just got caught with the guys at the pit.

“I can’t find a power signature big enough to cause this. Did you tell anyone I was coming?” I’m grasping at straws. Even a concealing spell shouldn’t erase the signature, it would just mute the magic.

“No, but I made everybody clear out,” Dad admits. I guess it could be an easy leap to assume he would have called me in to assist.

“Walk me through what you know. You got an ID on him yet?”

“Murrey’s working on an ID with prints and DNA, but that can take a while. The vic didn’t have anything but a money clip with a few hundred bucks in his pocket, not even a phone.” Dad looks more worried now than he did a few minutes ago. I’m a little worried too, if I’m honest. If I were on an MBI case and this happened, I would be in a pile of shit.

“Did anybody see him come into the library or walking around town? Not many people stroll around Hill Crest in a suit, plus he seems like he’d be hard to miss.” The guy appears to be well over six feet and as wide as a linebacker. The single football thought reminds me of Remy. Damn, I haven’t thought about the guys this much in ages. I need to get out of this town. It’s like my snatch has dickdar and knows there’s quality cock nearby. Fucking hormones—literally.

“Why is your face getting all red? Are you okay, Frankie?” Dad makes a move to come over, but I jump back like he has an itching spell aimed at me.

“I’m good, just trying too hard.” I can’t look at him when I lie, he would know it right away, so I pretend to find the area behind us interesting.

“Well, damn, Frankie. I’m sorry I made you come all the way out here and it was a bust.”

I snort and glance over my shoulder. “Are you kidding? I’d rather find out my magic is on the fritz here instead of when I’m on an MBI case. Plus, it doesn’t mean I can’t help. I cut my teeth on old-fashioned police work, Pop.”

He gives me wide, hopeful eyes. “You sure? I would love the help. I miss working with ya, kid.”

My heart swells. When I *worked* with Dad, I really was just a kid. I didn’t do much other than keep him company, but I did learn a hell of a lot. “I can stay a day or two. I already requested the time off.” I give him a shrug. *As long as nobody finds out about my homecoming.*

## CHAPTER 2

## BUSY MAKING BAD DECISIONS.

“*Y*ou could always stay at the house, you know. I never did turn your room into a gym.” Dad’s nose is tilted slightly in the air. He’s already affronted, and I haven’t even given him shit yet.

“You don’t say.” I lean my butt on the bumper of my car and purposely scrutinize my dad. He’s a big man, always has been. He’s a little squishier around the middle than he used to be, but that just means his hugs are nicer. I have to give him a hard time though, because no one else will. I watch him suck in his gut and puff out his chest, and then I wait him out for a few seconds, knowing he won’t be able to hold his breath for long. “You’re turning a little blue. Should I call Murrey?”

Dad huffs out, and his stomach flops over his belt a little. “Shut it, kid,” he snarls with no heat.

“I’m staying at Mickey’s, already all booked. If I don’t show up, she would tell everyone in town I was here just to spite me.”

Dad nods knowingly. “All right, well, I’ll give you a call in the morning after we get the body back to the hospital. Maybe we’ll get lucky and Murrey will have an ID by then too.”

“You don’t want to send the body over to the pathologist in Monroe?”

“Nah, Murrey knows what he’s doing, and this way, it will be quicker.”

“ALL RIGHT, send me your interviews so I can give those a look.” I open my door and drop into the seat. Dad follows me and props one arm on the top of my car and the other on my open door.

“I’ll send them in the morning. I want you to get some sleep.” He knows me too well, but he should also know I need something to keep my mind off my magic not working. If he won’t send me the interview notes, at least I can wheedle some information out of him. “Who found the body?”

“Belinda—Ms. Miller,” he corrects. “But she didn’t have anything to do with it.” It isn’t like him to volunteer information that isn’t founded in fact, especially when it comes to his work, and it’s too early to make that claim, so



it makes me curious why he would do it now.

“What makes you so sure?”

Dad averts his eyes and looks toward the sidewalk. “She’s a librarian,” he scoffs.

“Uh-oh,” I say in a mock serious tone. Dad side-eyes me. He only gets defensive about people he cares about. “Pop’s got a girlfriend,” I singsong.

“Real mature, Frances.” He starts to back away from the car.

“Says the man who’s running away. That’s okay, we can talk about it tomorrow when I meet her.” That has him stopping in his tracks. I’m not dumb. I know my dad has dated and hooked up—internal skeevies—but he never brought any of them around, which makes me wonder if this Belinda is special, or if he really has reason to believe she wasn’t involved.

“You really going to bust my chops over this, Frankie? She’s new in town. I’ve showed her around a bit.”

The way his eyes plead with me makes me drop the subject. Dad doesn’t ask for much, plus I’m not sure how I feel about this. It feels more serious than he’s letting on. I mean, I want him to be happy and all, but it’s a big change.

“Send me those files.” I shouldn’t be bribing my dad, but I’ve been trained by the MBI, so manipulating a conversation to get what I want isn’t even a conscious thought when it involves work. I feel kind of shitty after saying it though, since this isn’t just work. “Never mind, send them in the morning,” I add before he can respond.

Dad closes my door, and I pretend like it’s important to find my keys so I have a reason not to look at his face. The Charger stutters to life, and I do a quick check to make sure Dad’s stepped back before pulling away from the curb. The drive to Mickey’s is uneventful, since I don’t see anyone I know, so I consider it a win.

The porch light is still on when I turn into the driveway to park behind the old boarding house. There’s only one other car—a shiny new black SUV. Either Mickey is moving up in the world, or she has another guest.

The gravel crunches under my shoes as I make my way to the back of my car. I open my trunk to get my overnight bag and laptop, and when I slam the lid down, a dog barks in the distance. It’s so quiet. It took me forever to get used to how loud everything is in the city, and I almost forgot what the absence of noise sounds like. I didn’t realize how much I missed this.

The steps moan and creak under my weight when I head to the backdoor.

I rap lightly but open the screen right after. The knob turns freely, and I say a little silent thank you to Mickey for not locking me out.

The thick reek of cigarettes hits me as soon as I pull the door open. I scrunch up my lips to cover my nostrils for a second to try to adjust to the stench. As if the *eau de decay* wasn't enough, now I can smell like an ashtray too.

I set my bags on the ground of the small mudroom and brush my feet on the rug. The place may stink, but I know it will be as clean as a whistle. If you ask Mickey—a lifetime smoker—she would insist she can't smell a thing.

There's a light on in the kitchen, so I make my way over, hoping I didn't keep her awake. Just as I suspected, I could eat off the floor, but the room is empty. I hear a noise near the front room by the main staircase, so I change course. A door opens right as I'm about to pass, and I nearly piss myself.

Mickey gives me a suspicious glare. Even at her age, she's imposing. She has a good four inches on me and a short cap of stylish gray hair that offsets her dark eyes. I haven't seen her in years, but she doesn't look like she's aged a day.

"Cutting it close, ain't ya?" She slams the door of the room she just exited and looks me over with a scrutinizing gaze.

"It's not midnight." I know being defensive isn't going to help, but wilting like a flower would be worse. Mickey squints her eyes even more. After a long standoff, she produces a key from who the hell knows where and shoves her palm at me.

"Same room. I'm about to go to bed, so I suggest you keep it down." I almost remind her she's the one going around slamming doors, but I manage to keep my mouth shut. "You remember the rules?" She arches one thin dark brow.

How could I forget? I spent my summers and some evenings at Mickey's when I was a kid. Even though she's almost a damn recluse, Dad always trusted her, which is how she became my babysitter. When I got older, I would come over and help her with yard work, but she never needed me. Her old lady crap is an act. "Doors are locked at midnight, no spells in the house," I say, repeating the words she would needlessly tell me pretty much every day. Dad always tried his best to pick me up before she locked up, but there were nights I had to stay. The rules even applied to him, so I know she won't bend them for me.

Mickey nods once, and the skin under her chin quivers. “Remember to keep it down. Just because I won’t let anyone in after the witching hour doesn’t mean I won’t kick your narrow behind out.” With those last parting words, she disappears behind the door she came from, dismissing me.

“My behind is not narrow,” I grumble under my breath after retrieving my bags from the mudroom and heading up the staircase.

“I beg to differ,” remarks a deep voice I would know anywhere, no matter how long it’s been since I’d heard it.

## CHAPTER 3

I'D AGREE WITH YOU, BUT THEN WE'D ALL BE WRONG.

Freeze, one foot on the bottom step and one still on the landing. “Not all of us are blessed with an ass that needs its own backup alarm, Remy.”

“Your ass is perfect, Frankie, when you eat. When was the last time you had a decent meal?”

I lower my head. Was it too much to hope it was just Remy? That voice belonged to Felix, and if they are here, so is Gray.

I silently curse Mickey. That old broad sold me out. It shouldn't matter that she's Remy's great aunt. Isn't there any loyalty among women? I fucking paid her! That should count for something.

I set my bags on the step and turn to face the three guys I was trying my damndest to avoid. I have to pretend not to be affected, but holy hell, I almost swallow my tongue. When I left, I couldn't really call the guys boys anymore, but they weren't this.

Felix is on the far right. His arms are crossed over his chest, and he looks pissed. His rimless glasses are almost distracting enough to keep me from noticing the emerald green of his eyes, but I've been up close and personal too many times not to notice. He's bulked up a lot, not surprising when your best friend spends so much time in the gym.

I look away only to see Gray in the middle. His face isn't as readable as Felix's, but it's just as devastating. There's a shadow on his rigid jaw, and I'm struck by the fact that I don't know what it feels like against my palm or my inner thighs. He's so damn beautiful, I'd expect to see him in movies or some fancy cologne ad, but that's the last thing Gray would do—well, it used to be anyway. I can't pretend to know him anymore, even though my heart remembers him, remembers them all.

My throat starts to ache, like I need to swallow a lump, but I hold my breath and look over at Remy. It actually hurts to see them. Remy's short dark hair is messy, not the artfully styled mess either. It's the *I might not have brushed my hair in days, and I don't give a fuck* look, and it's sexy as hell, the bastard. His blue eyes are narrowed on me like I'm a stranger. It makes my stomach clench.

My fingers twitch, and Remy tilts his head a millimeter to the side, proving he noticed. “I’m only in town for a few days,” I murmur, finally finding the courage to speak while facing down the firing squad.

“Doesn’t matter. You knew you’d have to deal with us when you chose to come back here.” Remy’s reply comes quickly, as if he was anticipating my argument.

“I’m here for work,” I counter, trying again. Why did I ever think I could come here and not get caught?

“I don’t give a fuck if you’re here because the rest of the world has frozen over.” Remy’s trying to sound unaffected, but his vocabulary would suggest otherwise.

“You really would have dipped out without letting us know you were here?” Felix is frowning and looking at my bags on the stairs behind me.

“Look, I don’t want to cause trouble. We all have lives now, so there’s no point in dredging up the past.”

“The past?” Gray speaks for the first time. “What fucking lives?” He swivels his head as if he’s looking for someone else. Remy tips up one brow that says, *Now you’ve done it*. “You see anyone with a life here? Because all I see is the person that stole mine!” Grayson booms.

“I knew it. I knew you would be trouble,” Mickey says from right next to the stairs, where she must have been eavesdropping. She takes two steps and shoos me with her hands as if I’m the one hollering. “Get your stuff, go on. I can’t have you here disrupting my night.” The front door flies open, and I feel a whoosh of air pushing me from behind me.

I grab the banister as my bags bump down the step and skids across the floor. “I paid for two nights,” I snarl at the old broad, refusing to give in so easily.

She nods once. “We’ll call it even for my troubles.” My left leg starts to lift into the air. I can’t believe she’s going to send me flying and all the guys are just standing here watching.

I hold the banister tighter. Damn it, I should have put my protection charms back on. “You ratted me out,” I growl with clenched teeth. “You knew exactly what was going to happen when you told them I’d be here.”

“Precisely, and you knew what would happen when you returned, little miss. Now get out!” Her shout puts more power behind the spell, and I lose my grip. I snap my eyes shut when my body goes flying toward the door. Landing is going to suck.

Instead of feeling the hard, wooden front porch or the stairs like I expected, I hit a cushion of air and bounce off right before dropping to the ground like a sack of potatoes. “Oh shit.” Felix winces, but it’s Remy’s dark chuckle that hurts more than the touchdown.

“As graceful as ever.” Gray shoves his hands under my arms and hauls me upright like I weigh nothing, and then he steps back the moment I’m on my feet. I’m not going to lie, it stings a little that he wanted to get away from me so quickly. I scowl to hide my hurt and brush off my shirt and pants.

“Thanks for getting me kicked out.” I snag my overnight bag and laptop, which landed next to me. I’ll be lucky if it’s not broken.

“Let’s be honest, you did this to yourself.” Remy hoists my bag right off my shoulder and gives me a look, daring me to take it back.

“Me? What did I do?”

“You came back!” Grayson is yelling again, except this time, he’s only inches from my face. I want to recoil, but the honey color of his eyes pulls me in. I see my agony mirrored in the depths of his gaze, and my heart aches.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper. “Pop needed me.”

“What about what we need? Does that ever matter to you?” Felix asks softly. I look at him, but all I can see is his back as he walks away from me. Ouch, everything hurts, but the ache in my chest is way worse than my slightly bruised body.

## CHAPTER 4



F C K

ALL I NEED IS U.

“Stop being so damn stubborn, Frances, and get in the stupid car.” I drop my arms from over my chest and look over at Felix. He’s never called me Frances.

“Where are you taking me?”

Hands wrap around me from behind, and I try to fight, but it’s no use.

“What about her car?”

Over my shoulder, I hear Remy say, “If I didn’t think Mickey would have it towed, I’d say leave it here.”

“Hey,” I snap, still struggling to get out of his death grip.

“Better yet, leave the keys. I’ll call the junkyard myself.” I feel Remy’s dark chuckle rumble against my back. I know I threatened the same thing earlier, but I wasn’t serious.

“If you have my car towed, I’ll—I’ll...I’ll tell my dad.” I sound like I’m fifteen again.

“Go ahead. He won’t care.” Gray snorts and opens the door so Remy can toss me into the backseat. I bump my elbow again, but he already stepped out of the way so Gray can climb in after me.

The door behind me opens, and Felix gets in on my other side, trapping me between them. I lean toward the front seat. “Wait, you’re not really going to have my car towed, are you?”

“Hell yes I am. Sit back and buckle up.” Remy hits the gas, and I slam back into the seat.

“Goddamn it, Remy,” I snarl, but it just makes him laugh. I’m too pissed off to really pay attention to where they are taking me. It’s not like I’m really in any danger—well, for more bodily harm, that is. My heart is another matter.

I can think of one part of me that would like to be badly battered though—my cobwebbed pussy. She would do Kegels for two days straight if it meant she would get some real peen, and not just an eight-inch girthy boy

dildo I bought on a whim because it reminded me of Felix.

Sitting next to Grayson and Felix isn't helping matters. They smell amazing, and I can feel the heat coming from their bodies, tempting me to get even closer.

Remy keeps looking in the rearview mirror, but I'm pretending to ignore him. It's hard to do when I want to squirm. The car jerks to a stop, and Felix does the old boob grab to make sure I don't eat the center console in the front seat, but he doesn't let go. I look over at him, glance down at his hand, then back at his face again.

He gives a gentle little squeeze, and I'm sure he can feel my nipple under his palm. I finally knock his hand away, but the high beams are on for the world to see. Remy twists in his seat and gives my chest a hard look. "I guess some things never change." His smile is vicious.

"Let me out of this car," I demand, expecting a fight, but Grayson opens his door and glides out smoothly, leaving it open. Just as I'm about to get out, he slams it in my face.

I wilt. Grayson has never been cruel, and that was downright mean. I reach for the handle, but not before I notice Remy watching me. He's not smiling anymore either.

Tentatively, I step out and look around. We're in the middle of a clearing with only one monstrous house to be seen. It's modern and classic at the same time. I know it's Felix's design the moment I see it.

I wish it wasn't dark so I could really take in the beauty, but even the moon has tucked itself away for the night. My next thought is the comforting wave of magic that envelops me. I lower my natural shields. I'm almost as familiar with these signatures as I am my own. Feeling them brush against my fingers and kiss my skin is like the big welcoming hug the guys never gave me.

My eyes start to water, but I pretend to rub my hands over my face so no one knows how emotional I am right now. Stupid feelings.

"We're seven miles from town. No one will pick you up, and those don't look like walking shoes," Remy comments, looking at my feet. Little does he know, I have learned to walk in my little kitten heels over the years, and I'm happy to report I haven't even fallen in two solid weeks.

"Give me my bags." I drop my voice low to sound as menacing as him.

"Come and take them." Remy folds his arms over his chest. My bags are at his feet, but I know there is no way I'm going to get them if he doesn't

want me to.

“Meh, meh, meh, meh.” I mock his words and stance like the child he’s behaving as. Felix snorts and grabs my laptop bag off the ground as he walks toward the house. That gets me moving. Felix could crack the MBI’s encryption code in a matter of seconds if I leave him alone with my laptop. Not only could that get me fired, but he could also hack my email and social accounts.

“Wait, Felix!” He doesn’t even bother looking back at me, so I jog after him to keep up. I twist my ankle at one point, but I don’t let that stop me from trying to catch him.

The door unlocks the moment Felix steps on the welcome mat. Well, what it actually says is, “Fuck off. You don’t need to be here,” which is not so welcoming after all, but the thought is there.

“Felix, please, may I have that back?” I try being civil, since my playground tactics aren’t working. We’re all adults and can handle this like adults.

Felix turns around, and the light catches his glasses, showing off his pretty eyes, but they are narrowed on me now. “Got something on here you don’t want me to find, buttercup?” His lips press into a line as soon as the old endearment is out of his mouth. I don’t think he said that on purpose.

I ignore it so he won’t get even madder at me. “It’s for work. It has confidential documents, and I could get in a lot of trouble if anyone found out you have it.” Admitting the truth is easy, now I just have to hope he won’t use it against me.

Gray moves to stand next to Felix, so close, their shoulders touch. I lick my lips. Damn them. They know me better than I know them anymore. This is a calculated play. They are a united front. I was always at a disadvantage when they ganged up on me. I slap my hand over my eyes because now I’m picturing a gangbang. *Yes, please.* It’s truly been ages. How is it fair that my sexual peak was before I was twenty, and now I’m like an eighty-year-old? Betty White gets more action in a day than I’ve had in years.

I should have left my bags and ran for it, but I know they would have stopped me anyway. I take a super deep breath, drop my hand, and shake out my fingers. “Okay, tell me what you want from me so we can get this over with,” I concede. I never stood a chance against them anyway.

## CHAPTER 5

IF WISHES WERE FISHES, WE'D ALL CAST NETS.

“*Y*ou would give in so easily?” Felix asks.

“Yeah, just so she could walk away again.” Grayson spins away from Felix and heads deeper into the house. Remy and Felix follow. I’m left standing in the foyer, looking around and wondering what the hell I’m supposed to do next. Here I thought my magic being on the fritz was my biggest concern tonight. I hate being wrong.

When I realize they aren’t coming back, I slowly follow after them. It quickly dawns on me that was a mistake. I have no idea where they are or how to find them without searching this huge house from top to bottom. As fun as snooping sounds, I don’t have time for it right now. I have too many things I need to deal with.

“Remy!” I yell into yet another unoccupied room. He’s the most vocal, and he can barely keep his mouth shut when he’s mad, so he’s my best bet. The other two would probably ignore me until I died of starvation. An idea strikes me—if I can find the kitchen, they will eventually come to me.

As elusive as the guys are, the kitchen isn’t. I decide to hedge my bets and start cooking. Kill two birds—or three dodos, as it were—with one stone. I’m hungry, and food always brings all the boys to the yard.

The horrible consequence of that thought is getting the stupid song stuck in my head while I’m cooking. “My milkshake brings all the boys to the yard,” I sing and shake my hips while flipping an egg.

The fancy ass toaster beeps and my toast rises, perfectly burnt just the way I like it. When I spin with my plate of goodness in hand, all three men are standing in the doorway, watching me with varying expressions on their faces. Remy is scowling, Grayson is as blank faced as I’ve ever seen, and Felix looks sad.

My appetite disappears almost as quickly as my desire to be anywhere but here rises. “You’re cooking.” Felix lifts his chin a little, and I see him smell the air. “You still like burnt toast,” he sneers and waves his hand in front of his face. They used to think it was cute that I liked my toast dark and extra buttery. Not so much anymore.

Instead of responding to his statement, I make my way over to the nook

near the back of the kitchen. There's a circular booth that would rival any restaurant's seating nestled into the corner, making a cozy dining space. I place my plate down and scoot into the plush leather seat.

Remy storms over to the stove and flips on the burner under the pan I just used. He makes a big fuss about getting eggs out of the fridge and making himself something to eat. I pick at my food until he comes to my side of the circular table and starts to sit, forcing me to scoot in more or risk getting crushed under him.

Grayson lets out a weighty sigh and sits on the other side, making room for Felix to join him, which brings him closer to me. I'm trapped between them, my only escape would be to crawl under the table, but they could thwart that too if they wanted to.

I leave my eggs mostly untouched and nibble on my toast. It's cold now, but still edible. Remy hovers his food, not much has changed there. He looks over at me, then down at my plate. "Eat," he demands.

"I am." I hold up my half eaten toast to prove it, and an awkward silence falls over the table. I can't manage to do much but stare down at my plate. The rift between us feels like it's widened to a chasm. It's almost beyond my comprehension that I'm with the three people I've longed to see and speak to so badly over the years, and I don't have a flipping clue how to talk to them without snark and bitterness coloring my words.

I wonder if they feel the same way. Taking a chance, I glance up at Felix. He's looking at the tabletop also. His glasses have slipped down his nose a little, and I ache to right them, but I don't have that privilege anymore.

My breath catches in my throat as I look around the kitchen again, this time for evidence of someone else other than the three of them. In the back of my mind, I know they have all probably moved on, but that's very different than seeing it. I've been so blinded by familiarity I didn't even allow myself to think they might be sharing this house with someone else, or more than one someone. That was why I left, after all—so they could find someone they didn't have to share.

"What?" Grayson looks around.

"You all live here," I surmise, taking in all the little touches that I know come from each of them. The fancy coffee maker is Remy's, the neatly scrawled notes on the side of the fridge are Felix's, and the booth we're all in right now is from Gray. He always had to have a booth when we went to a restaurant. There were several times when we'd wait just to make him happy.

There are four white canisters on the counter. Each one is labeled, but I can't decide which, if any of them, would have picked those. When I look back at the guys, Remy has his chin tipped down and he's watching me shrewdly. "Why are you looking around like a ghost is about to jump out of the fucking cabinets?"

"I'm just admiring Felix's work," I hedge.

"Don't try to butter him up." Grayson crosses his arms over his chest and glares at me, while Felix lowers his head a little more.

"I'm not buttering him up. Am I not allowed to call it as I see it?" Grayson's only response to my question is to scoff and avert his gaze from mine. "Look, me being here is about as comfortable as having itching powder in my asshole. How about you give me a ride to my dad's, or better yet, I'll just call him to come get me? What's the address? Never mind, I'm sure he already knows." Sometimes, I forget how life goes on here without me. Dad would often try to bring up the guys and what they were up to, but it was just too painful for me to hear.

I make a move like I'm trying to get out of the booth, but Remy doesn't budge an inch. I look over at Grayson, but he just lifts one fucking perfect eyebrow, daring me to try to get past him.

I scoot my butt down, bend my knees until I'm under the table, and crawl out. A sneer of victory curls my lips when none of them try to stop me. *Bet they didn't see that coming!* But then I feel the flare of Felix's magic well up around me, and I go deaf for a millisecond before my ears pop and sound returns.

I know without being told he just locked down the house. There are benefits to building your own home, and imbuing the walls and foundation with magic is just one. It would take a squad of MBI agents or a demolition crew to bring down his barriers. There is no way I'm getting out of here unless he lets me. I'm not even sure if my phone will work.

Still on my hands and knees, I look over my shoulder and see Grayson and Remy checking out my ass—must not be too narrow since they can't take their eyes off it—and Felix staring down at the table, pretending nothing just happened.

I lean back so I'm kneeling on the floor then look up at the ceiling, praying for patience. "Since I'm clearly not leaving until you let me, why don't you tell me why you brought me here in the first place?"

"Get up off the floor." Grayson nearly shoves Felix out of the booth so he

can come over and haul me, none too gently, off my knees.

“Better?” I do a little mock curtsy, which makes him roll his eyes. At least it got some reaction out of him.

Remy takes both of our plates over to the sink and rinses the dishes before placing them in the dishwasher. Someone has trained him well. I get pissed off just thinking about it. He turns and leans his nibble worthy ass against the counter and crosses his arms. Felix and Grayson both end up on either side of him, creating a united front—or a completely lickable wall of yumminess in other circumstances.

“You asked if we all live here—”

“No, I didn’t,” I interrupt. “I stated you all live here. I *asked* why you brought me here.”

I can hear Remy’s growl clear across the room. Even aggravated, it makes me want to smile. He’s like a big ole lion you know could take your head off with one bite, but you also want to run your hands all over him and see if you can make him purr like a house cat. For the record, I can—or I could anyway. “You knew the deal, Frankie. When you stepped foot back in Hill Crest, you were ours.”



## CHAPTER 6

## BIGFOOT SAW ME, NOBODY BELIEVED HIM.

“Clearly, you’re joking. You look like you want to mount my head in the den, Grayson would sooner pluck out his nose hair, and Felix can’t even look at me.”

Grayson reaches up and pinches his nostrils, obviously bothered I brought up his nose hair.

“We don’t have a den,” Remy deadpans, and Felix continues to avoid my gaze.

I lean my head back and let out a growl of my own, and when I return my attention to the group in front of me, I swear I see the ghost of a smile on Remy’s lips before he squashes it. If I didn’t know the three of them as well as I know myself, even after all this time, they might be intimidating, but no matter how long it’s been since I’ve seen them, I do know them. They are inside me no matter how hard I tried to dig them out.

“Okay, whatever you have to say or do to feel better, let me have it.” I square my shoulders and tip up my chin.

“Going to let you have it,” Gray mumbles under his breath, but I still hear him. I roll my wrist to urge them on, but none of them do anything but look at me.

“It’s late, I put your things in your room,” Felix murmurs, breaking his silence.

“My room?” I look between the three of them.

“Unless you want to go old-school,” Remy offers with a leer. I scoff, knowing exactly what he means. I used to frequently sleep between them, and sleeping wasn’t even close to the best part, but it was pretty damn epic. I haven’t slept that well in ages, but I haven’t had three eager males to tire me out either.

“I have some place I need to be in the morning. Pop needs my help.” I’m slightly defeated, but I know when to call the game and lick my wounds.

“I spoke with your father. We will make sure you’re available to him,” Grayson announces formally.

“Will you now? How very magnanimous of you.” I wrinkle up my face as I make fun of him. Grayson’s family is one of the original descendants of Hill

Crest. He's old money, but you would never know by just looking at him. I never could anyway, but how the hell someone can tell the difference between a ten-dollar white T-shirt and a two hundred dollar one, I still don't know.

Felix rolls his lips in to keep from smiling, and I feel like the sun just peeked out from the clouds. I don't even realize I'm taking a step closer to him until he backs up so fast, his hip hits the counter and he curses.

"I'll take her up." Grayson huffs and stalks out of the room. I assume I'm supposed to follow him, but I stand my ground and stare at his back as he walks out of the kitchen. "Frances!" he shouts, and my spine snaps straight and my feet carry me after him. I poke my tongue out at Remy as I pass him. My God, now it's as if I'm twelve.

I follow Grayson up a flight of stairs, but I don't look around too much because his ass is much more interesting than my surroundings. I already know I'm stuck here, so I might as well enjoy the view. I miss the third step and end up tripping up the stairs. Thankfully, I catch myself on my hands before I eat carpet. I hear a chuckle from behind me and look over my shoulder to see Remy and Felix standing at the bottom of the stairs.

"Eyes up, buttercup." Remy jabs his elbow into Felix's side when he uses his personal endearment again. Damnit. They know I fell because I was checking out Gray's butt. I face forward and rise so I'm not crawling up after Grayson with my nose lifted in the air.

Gray's brooding near the top step, waiting impatiently. "Is there anyone else here?" I try to sound casual, but I'm not sure I pull it off.

"Why? You think you'll be able to convince them to let you out so you can run off again?" I stop mid stride and turn to look at Grayson. He was always a little jaded, it came from growing up with his family, but he never treated me like I was one of the people he had to protect himself from.

"No, Gray. It's just a big house for the three of you." My words are spoken softly, ruefully.

"Yeah, well, it was supposed to be four." He stops next to an open door and lifts his arm in an invitation. I poke my head in and spy a well-appointed room. It shouldn't surprise me how nice it is, considering everything in this place is nice, but it does. There's a four-poster bed made from dark wood, with sheer cream curtains pulled back to reveal matching bedding and way too many pillows. *I bet all four of us could fit on that mattress.*

I avert my gaze from the bed and ignore all the thoughts that want to take

root, and bounce my eyes around the room, taking in the furniture and French doors to the left. “We’re not going to lock you in,” Gray grumbles when I don’t breach the doorway.

I finally spot my bags near a closed door on the other side of the room. I’m hesitant to enter, but I can’t really say why. “We have other rooms,” Felix offers.

“There’s nothing wrong with this one,” Grayson counters.

“Where are your rooms?” I ask and immediately want to take it back, especially when Grayson’s face darkens.

“Fucking us isn’t going to make it easier for you to leave.”

“That’s not—”

“That’s enough,” Remy snaps, looking at Gray. It’s not like he didn’t just tease me about the same thing downstairs, but the delivery of Grayson’s jab was meant to hurt, whereas Remy’s wasn’t. I take two steps into the room just to get away from him. He’s not the same man I knew. Grayson wouldn’t speak to anyone like that, least of all me.

He must be able to read the thoughts on my face, because he leans forward and shouts, “Goddammit, Frankie, you left us! What did you think would happen when you finally showed up?”

“Don’t pretend I didn’t leave for you, for all of you!” I scream back, finally reaching a breaking point. My heart feels like it’s being ripped out of my chest. I never wanted to relive that moment of rejection. “I felt what you did. I tasted disappointment in your magic, knew that you all wished things were different.” My hand fists in my shirt over my heart.

“We were fucking kids!” Remy bellows, proving I’m not the only one ready to blow.

“So you took one second in time, chose that to be the defining moment for all of our futures, and ignored everything else?” Felix shakes his head as if he can’t understand. At least he’s calm and not shouting.

“You left because you were scared,” Grayson adds with a sneer of disapproval.

“I left because I wanted to give you a choice, you jerk face. And I wanted you to choose me! Not one of you did.” I slam the bedroom door in their faces and squat down immediately. I drop my head into my hands, and if thoughts alone were enough to create magic, I would teleport myself out of this house, out of this town, to someplace far, far away and pretend I never stepped foot back in Hill Crest, dead body be damned.

## CHAPTER 7

I'M GREAT IN BED.

Surprisingly, they leave me be after the yelling match. Usually, Remy needs the last word, but maybe that's another thing that's changed about them.

I snoop around the room, opening each drawer and door, finding a closet nearly as big as my bedroom back in the city and a bathroom I would kill for. I know there's no point trying to sleep, so I set my laptop up at the desk and find it's already been hooked into the Wi-Fi. Who knows what else Felix managed to do in the small time frame he had it? But I have to assume he has a copy of everything on my hard drive. Sexy bugger. There's nothing I need to hide from him other than work stuff, and I'm fairly confident Felix wouldn't leave any trace of himself behind for MBI to find. Who knows what's going to happen to my job anyway if my magic is acting screwy.

I check my email to see if Dad sent over the interviews. I'm strangely relieved when I find he hasn't. I don't think even the interviews could take my mind off of where I am and who I'm near.

I sort through my bag and slip on an oversized shirt and leave my pants on the end of the bed. Not only is it the only thing I brought to sleep in, but I'm hoping it will torture the guys as much as they are torturing me if they happen to see me. I mean, really, who has to look that good and smell so damn yummy on a Tuesday night?

My door creaks when I turn the handle. I wait a breath before opening it the rest of the way and peek my head out. Grayson wasn't lying—they didn't lock me in. The hall is quiet and dark, so I rush back to the bed and grab my phone to use as a flashlight.

My heart beats fast as I slip out of my room. I count the doors on the left side and leave mine cracked just a few inches to make sure I can find my way back. I can't decide if I should open the doors and peek inside or move farther into the house. Half of me thinks they would have put me near their rooms, but the other half believes they would have stowed me as far away from them as possible.

I try the handle of the door directly across from mine and the knob turns silently. When the door opens, I shine my light on the floor first and note the

light gray carpet. After a quick glance, I determine it's a deserted room. The idea that they put me on the other side of the house takes root, and I don't bother with any of the other doors near mine. Instead, I head downstairs and start snooping.

I'm bored after opening more doors for empty rooms and bathrooms than I can count. Felix probably built them some super cool underground bunker or a secret passage to get to their rooms that I'll never find. It's not that I'm specifically looking for them, though I wouldn't mind finding something that felt lived in. This place is like a tomb.

I test the front door when I happen upon it, knowing what I will find, but I'm helpless not to try. It's locked up tight. Felix's magic brushes my palm, along with thinner, intertwined tendrils of Remy's and Gray's. It shouldn't even be possible, but it is, probably because they are so close.

What feels like hours later, I find myself in a large room with overstuffed furniture and a fireplace I could walk into. It's like something out of a gothic dream. There's a table lamp near a chair, so I click it on. My phone battery warned me it was at ten percent ages ago, but I ignored it. I'm lucky it hasn't died yet.

I fluff the pillow to make sure no creatures have taken up residence in the chair and curl up in it.

The walls are dark, leaving most of the room in shadows, even with the soft glow of the lamp. My eyes grow heavy after a short time, and I let them fall closed, determined to figure out what I'm going to do about tomorrow.



“IT'S NOT like she could have left, just find her.”

I blink quickly. It takes me a moment to get my bearings and realize I just heard Grayson's aggravated voice, not my noisy neighbor hollering at his kids.

“Ouch,” I groan when I try to turn my head. My chin was on my right shoulder, and my shirt is bearing the drool stains to prove it. I must have passed out, and my body is aching from the stupid position I slept in.

“I think I heard her!” Felix shouts eagerly, and I hear his footsteps on the floor. I sit upright quickly and wipe my shirt. Damn it, if I had something to drink, I could pretend I spilled it, but everyone is going to know I was

drooling. *Sexy.*

I don't make any more noise as I stretch out my limbs. Maybe I can sneak back up to my room before they find me.

"Morning, sunshine." Remy tries to sound aggravated, but I see the way his eyes are traveling over me and feel the heat in his gaze.

I grumble and rise to my feet. His eyes go from my green painted toes all the way up to my chest, where they get stuck. My nipples are hard. The T-shirt doesn't do anything to hide it, and neither do I. He looks downright delectable in a pair of dark wash jeans and a T-shirt that says, "My favorite place is Beaver Valley." There's even an image to go with it that shows two titty mounds and a puss that could be confused for a waterfall if you're an idiot, all surrounded by trees. I love it and want one for myself. But then I start to think about how many valleys he's visited in the past few years, and I get mad. Now I want to burn the shirt and maybe set his ass on fire too.

"I thought you might have tried to escape, but here you are, curled up like a kitten. In my chair," he says, announcing the last part as if I've committed some kind of crime.

"I farted in it too." Remy blinks a few times, seeming a little bewildered by my statement. I'm a little surprised myself. I blame them. It's like my brain is misfiring.

"What time is it?" I blurt before he can address my flatulence proclamation.

"Nine AM. I thought you had someplace to be?"

"Shit sticks." I spring into action, passing Remy and heading for the door. I look over my shoulder to tell him I'll be ready in five minutes, but I should have been watching where I was going.

I hear "Whoa!" just in time to turn and see myself barreling right at Felix. I try to put on the brakes, but my socks slip on the wood floor, and I end up tackling him to the ground and landing on his chest.

It's a nice chest. It's wider than it used to be and firm. "Quit molesting him, Frankie." Remy huffs. I look up from my roaming fingers and see Felix gazing at me. His glasses are gone, and his lips are parted as he cranes his neck forward. Our lips are only inches apart, and I can smell his minty toothpaste. My mouth waters, and there's a tingle between my legs.

Felix's pupils dilate, and I feel his hand on my butt, kneading the round flesh with his fingers.

"What the fuck is going on here?" Grayson bellows.



I look up at him, and the sneer on his face is like a cold splash of water. My knee bashes against the floor as I scramble to get off Felix. I end up flashing them all my panties as I scoot away, and there's nothing I can do but hope they don't see a wet spot.

Grayson reaches down and helps a dazed Felix to his feet.

"I'm sorry, Felix. I should have been paying attention."

He reaches up and rubs the back of his head, and his shirt lifts, showing off his toned stomach. Gods, why am I noticing that right now? I should be concerned about the goose egg that's probably on his noggin.

"I didn't expect you to attack him." Grayson glares at me.

"I bumped into him. It was an accident." There's some indignant rage simmering inside me at the accusation, but also a little guilt. I probably didn't need to rub all over his chest and stay sprawled on him for so long. It was just a surprising position to find myself in, and being that close to him felt good, right.

"Looked more like you were about to take what you wanted to me." Grayson shrugs like he didn't just accuse me of nearly raping Felix.

My stomach drops, and I get a sick feeling, like I may throw up. I take another step back and start shaking my head.

"Knock it the fuck off, Gray," Remy snarls.

"I wouldn't..." That's all I can manage past the vomit threatening to surge up my throat.

"I know, buttercup, he didn't mean it." Felix lifts his hand and takes a step toward me, but I jerk away, my eyes focusing on Grayson. His lips are curled down in a frown, but he's not taking it back.

I tug at the hem of my shirt with one hand and cross my arm over my chest with the other. I feel like crying, but I'm not going to let that happen. My voice is thick when I say, "Excuse me." Nobody says anything else as I make my way around them and to the door. I have no fucking clue where I'm going, but it's vital I get out of this room.

My sense of direction must be better than I thought, or my instincts alone correctly guide me back to the room they gave me. I hit the bathroom first, going through the motions. When I wash my hands and face, I don't even look in the mirror. The little bit of my reflection I can't avoid is more than enough. I'm a mess.

Not having time for a shower, I change into clean panties and pull on some black slacks and a white button-down shirt. If it were a real MBI case, I

would have a blazer too, but I skip that and my badge, opting for just my wallet identification. I check my phone, only to find the battery is still dead from last night. *Great.*

I absolutely hate that I'm going to have to go back down there and rely on one of them to take me to the hospital or wherever Dad is, but I don't really have a choice, plus it's a way to get out of this house.

After cramming the crap I can't live without into my laptop bag, I fold my blazer over my arm. Once I'm out of here, I have no intention of coming back. When I reach the bottom of the stairs, I look around and listen for any sounds to help me decide where they are, but even knowing they are here and moving around, this place still feels empty.

Instead of searching for them, I stand at the front door and wait. It may be counterproductive, but I don't think my ego could handle another jab from Grayson this morning without me either losing my shit on him or breaking down into tears. I don't have time for either.

A solid ten minutes pass before I hear Remy declare, "I'll go get her." When he rounds the corner and sees me, he stops before reaching the stairs. "Do you want anything to eat?" He looks me over.

I shake my head and mutter, "No, thank you," then grab my laptop bag from the floor near my feet.

Remy's shoulders slump, and he scowls. "She's ready to go."

Felix joins us from the same hall Remy exited from with Grayson trailing after him. I avert my gaze from him and face the door. Feeling their eyes on my back makes me want to twitch, but I don't.

The magic barriers drop, and my ears pop again. Remy and I both reach for the doorknob at the same time, and I jerk my hand back when our fingers brush. There is no way I'm falling into that snare again. Remy mumbles under his breath as he wrenches the door open and motions for me to exit ahead of him.

## CHAPTER 8

DEAD SERIOUS.

I pray to the gods it's just Remy taking me, but I'm quickly met with disappointment. We all pile back into the SUV. This time, it's only Felix who shares the backseat with me. He keeps trying to get my attention, but I pretend not to notice and keep my eyes trained on the back of Remy's seat.

After a short drive, I find myself parked near the rear entrance of the hospital. Dad is standing by the loading doors. The moment I see him, I want to jump out of the car and run into his arms, but I refrain as I notice Murrey, who's in his white lab coat, at his side. I suppose there's no need to hide that I'm back in town now.

"Thanks for the ride." My voice is devoid of emotion, but only because I'm forcing it to be. I grip the short handle of my bag and exit the car. My head clears after an inhale of fresh air, but coffee would be a blessing right now.

"Hey, kiddo." Dad's greeting is hesitant. He knows how badly I was trying to avoid this situation, and he also knows he's the reason it happened.

"Hey, Pop." I try to smile, but it's so fucking brittle.

Dad's brow drops, and he scans the area behind me with a sneer. "Fuck off, the lot of you. If, in the future, I ever see my daughter walking away from you looking like she does right now, I will skin you and make sure you never see her again."

My heart swells, and I don't stop myself from face-planting into his chest. "I'm fine, Dad. It's not just them." My words are meant for him, but I'm sure the others hear me. I know I have some blame here. I haven't handled things well over the past few years, and it shows. I guess all that stuff about avoidance not being healthy is true.

I hear three car doors close, and Dad wraps his arm around my upper back before guiding me into the hospital. Without looking behind me, I know they haven't left. The car never started, but every step I take means I'm closer to getting away from them, so why does my heart hurt so badly? And why am I sad they gave up so easily, again?

The morgue is cold, but the smell is tolerable. The mostly headless body

is on a silver slab with edges high enough to keep the fluids from leaking out onto the floor, but this guy lost most of his bodily fluids in the library.

“Got an ID on him yet?” I get right to business.

“Not yet. I uploaded his prints in the system, but they haven’t come back with a hit. DNA will take a few days,” Murrey answers for Dad.

“Hi, Doc,” I finally greet.

“Hey, Frankie, it’s good to have you back.”

“It’s good to see you too.” I don’t correct his assumption and tell him I’m only sticking around long enough to help Dad before I get the hell out of town.

“Murrey thinks this might not have been magic,” Dad informs me, drawing my attention.

I look at the body again. Someone would have to possess superhuman strength to have caused this kind of damage, so maybe instead of using a spell directly on the victim, the murderer used a charm on himself, and that’s why I didn’t detect it. The magic wasn’t cast at the library. I cling to the idea, hoping that’s why my magic failed me.

“I suppose it’s a possibility. That would mean premeditation. Any missing person reports that match his description?”

“We don’t have a lot to go on, other than approximate height and weight. He has some tattoos I took pictures of, and there’s some scarring on his back, but nothing definitive enough for an ID as far as I can tell,” Dad replies.

“What about time of death? Were there any witnesses?” I ask. I should have checked my email to see if Dad sent anything over this morning, but it wasn’t really top priority.

“Belinda found him after she came back from lunch yesterday afternoon. She doesn’t remember seeing him come in, and she thought the place was empty when she locked up.”

“Belinda?” I question the familiar way he’s addressing her.

Dad darts his eyes over at Murrey, then corrects, “Ms. Miller.”

Murrey pretends to be busy looking at some paperwork. That’s all the confirmation I need that he already knows about Dad and this woman’s personal relationship.

“Have you set up the formal interview yet?” I hope he wasn’t the one who took her statement yesterday. That could be an issue.

“No, she already told me everything she knew. She’s pretty upset. I’d like to leave her out of this if it’s possible. I sent you the notes,” he offers.

“Pop, you can’t let your personal feelings cloud your judgment here. If she found the body, she needs to be interviewed by somebody other than you.”

Murrey snaps a metal clipboard case closed and gives my dad the *I tried to tell you* look.

“Fine, but I want to be there,” Dad retorts.

“Are you going to be able to be unbiased?” I challenge.

“I know how to do my job, kid.” He sounds disgruntled, but not angry.

I take him at his word. “I’m going to give the body another go with the new information and see if I sense anything. Why don’t you give her a call and ask her to meet us at the station? You can tell me about her on the way over.” It’s weird giving my dad instructions, but he just nods and walks out of the room with his phone already in his hand.

“How long have they been dating?” I ask Murrey while making a lap around the table.

“Your old man was smitten with her the day she came to town.” Murrey tilts his head to the side and squints his eyes. “Four months ago. Maybe.”

“I’m assuming the feeling’s mutual?”

“I wasn’t so sure at first. She’s really quiet, and I didn’t see them out much together, but I think they spend most of their time together in private, or maybe she’s just shy,” Murrey answers with a shrug.

“What can you tell me about him?” I redirect the subject to the man lying on the table covered in a white sheet. I don’t want to think about my dad and what he and Belinda do in private. I continue to circle the table slowly while lowering my natural shields.

“Male, two hundred and sixty-three pounds without his noodle. I’m betting he was about six foot five before the trim.”

“Any idea what kind of weapon could have been used if it wasn’t magic?” *Please don’t say hands*. I’m already envisioning someone even bigger than this guy popping his head like a giant pimple.

I’m still only picking up traces of magic. There is a little more residue near where his head should be, but nothing definitive.

“I’d need more of the other tissues to have a better idea.” With his gloved hands, Murrey picks up a few loose tendrils of skin and matter that dangle from the guy’s neck like fettuccine. I have to force myself not to look away. “I’m going to run some of this material under the scopes and see if I can find anything left behind, but I wanted to do the autopsy first. The guy was in

pretty good condition, other than having a fatty liver and a few ulcers.”

“What about his suit, get anything from that?”

“You’d have to ask your dad about that one. I just handle the wet work.”

Murrey grins at me. The fact that he’s been a doctor nearly as long as my father has been a cop lends to his demented sense of humor.

I stop searching the body and focus on Murrey to ask about his wife, my old kindergarten teacher. “How’s Mrs. Nevers?”

Murrey peels off his gloves and tosses them into a biohazard bin with a red liner. “She’s good. They talked her into managing the summer program again.” He rolls his eyes affectionately.

“Will you tell her I said hello?”

“Sure will, unless you get the chance to tell her yourself.” Murrey waggles his brows at me.

“Not likely, I’m not sticking around that long. Give me a call if you find anything.”

## CHAPTER 9



## I'M KIND OF A BIG DEAL.

Dad still has the phone to his ear when I find him in the long quiet hallway. He's nodding as if he's listening intently to whomever is on the line. He looks over his shoulder at the sound of my footfalls. "It's no problem, Belinda, we'll meet you there in just a few." His voice is all soft and sweet. *Blah.*

Moments later, Dad shoves his phone in his pocket after finishing his call. "Do we have time to stop for coffee before we head back to the station?"

"I told her we would come to her place. She's understandably upset after yesterday, and I don't want this to seem too formal."

I start to tell him it's not a good idea and formal is exactly what it should be, but he continues before I can interject.

"I know what you're thinking, but she's not involved in this, Frankie. You'll understand when you meet her."

"If that's true, it's all the more reason we should handle this by the book, Pop. You don't want questions coming up that will bite you in the butt later."

"If you still think we need to take her to the station after this interview, we can. I'll even have one of the other guys sit with you while you question her, but let's give this a shot first, huh?"

"It's your case." I lift my hands in surrender. "I'm not an official consultant, but if I were, I would advise you that you're making a bad decision."

"Noted." Dad sighs, and we make our way over to the elevator and then out to the main parking lot. The sun feels good on my skin. Hospitals are always so cold, even more so in the morgue.

"So do you wanna tell me what they did?" Dad asks, tilting his head toward mine. Just the mention of the guys has me looking around, and sure as shit, I find the black SUV parked next to Dad's work truck. Remy is leaning against the driver's side door, looking in our direction with his hand shielding his eyes from the sun. After a quick search, I find Grayson in the passenger seat, staring straight ahead, as if he would rather be anywhere else but here. *Me too, buddy.* Felix is perched on the rear seat with the door open and his feet propped up on the running bar, and there's a laptop open across his

knees. He glances up when my eyes are still on him, and a ghost of a smile curls his lips before it quickly melts.

My face falls too. “You mean other than getting me kicked out of Mickey’s and holding me hostage last night? I can’t believe she sold me out.” I shake my head.

Dad’s lips twist in a wry grin. “I find she rarely does anything without a good reason.”

If he’s defending her, then maybe his judgment on women is skewed. I give him the side-eye, but he ignores me. “Here they come. You want me to get rid of them again? You know it won’t last for long,” he warns.

“I’m going to have to deal with it sooner or later,” I mutter and cross my arms over my chest as I wait. Remy dips his chin to my dad, then stands in front of me, mimicking my stance. “Why are you still here?”

“When did you start asking questions you already know the answer to?” he quips.

He’s got me there. “I have some things to take care of. I’ll let you know when I’m done.”

Remy leans forward so his face is only a few inches from mine. “I’m not letting you out of my sight, plus Gray will probably have an aneurysm if I let that happen. Do you really want to be responsible for killing the mayor?”

My eyes go to Grayson, then my dad, then back to Remy. “Come again?” I blurt, because I don’t know what else to say. My sweet, never wanting the spotlight Gray is the Mayor of Hill Crest?

“You heard me.” Remy uses my distraction to wrap his arm around my back and guide me over to his car.

“You chumps didn’t get her any coffee. Fix that and meet me at the old Wompler place,” Dad calls and lets Remy load me into the back of the Land Rover.

“You’re the mayor?” I question the moment the door is closed. Damn it, Remy knows me too well. I was so busy processing the new information I didn’t object to him putting me in the car instead of riding with Dad. “What happened to becoming a veterinarian?” Gray wanted to be a vet from as early as I can remember.

“Why are we going to the Wompler place?” Grayson asks, ignoring me.

My first instinct is to shout at him, but I bite my tongue. I really don’t even have the right to demand answers from them, especially when I’m not giving any of my own.

Remy looks in the rearview mirror after getting in the car, waiting to see if I'll answer, and when I make no attempt to, he puts the car in gear and heaves a sigh. "It must have something to do with the case she's working on."

Without moving his torso or even looking at me, Felix wraps his pinky over mine. I don't know if I'm comforted by his touch or bothered by the fact that he's making sure no one else knows he's doing it. Nevertheless, I curl my finger around his because I'm a glutton for punishment.

Remy takes us through some drive-thru coffee shop that looks like a log cabin. The girls inside are all decked out in little lumberjack outfits that look like they came from the sexy aisle of a Halloween store. The one at the window grins widely when she sees the car or Remy—I'm not sure which—and then it slips when she looks down at the cup. "This isn't your usual." She's probably a few years younger than me, her lips full and shiny as she pouts.

I roll down my window and shove my arm out with a five-dollar bill gripped between my fingers. "That's because it's mine." I'm probably glaring, but I don't give a fuck.

"Hey, Melony," Grayson coos. The girl leaves my five dangling from my fingers so she can lower her head and smash her perky tits against the windowsill, making sure everyone has a fantastic view of her rack.

"Hey, Mayor Hale."

"It's just Grayson." He gives her a sexy grin that makes my stomach hurt. Her cheeks actually flush, and she briefly lowers her eyes. I wave the bill as close to her face as I can get it, and she finally looks back at me.

"My drink," I remind her, though I'm tempted to toss it in her face at this point, but she can probably work the wet look and I need the caffeine too fucking badly.

"Oh, silly me." She shoves the cup my way. "On the house."

I fumble for the cup so it doesn't spill and end up dropping the cash. The girl and I make eye contact for just a moment before she tips her head to the side, seeming to say, *Oh well*, and returns her attention to the front seat.

It takes me about two seconds to decide what to do. "Remy, can you pull up please?" Five bucks is five bucks. I'm not too prideful to get out and pick it up.

"Just a second," Grayson tells Remy while still chatting up the girl at the window.

“Felix, do you mind jumping out?” I can work around Grayson’s jerk face.

“Uh, okay.” He looks at Remy but opens his door, and I scoot over to get out on his side.

“What are you doing?” Remy twists until he’s half in the backseat. I jog around to the driver’s side of the car and wedge myself between the big SUV and the building and bend down. Thankfully, the money is lying right where it fell. I hold it up, feeling victorious.

“Get your ass in the car, Frankie.” Remy shakes his head. Felix is still standing by his door, holding it open as I get back in and slide across the seat. I pocket the cash and grab my coffee from the cupholder where I placed it, pretending to ignore Grayson flirting with the lumberjackie. It takes a lot of willpower, and the coffee isn’t even good. Not that I needed more proof, but it’s obvious why they come here and it’s not for the drinks.

“We need to go,” Remy states in the middle of lumberjackie blathering to Grayson, and when he pulls away from the drive-up window, I use my cup to hide my grin.

Grayson gives Remy a glare. “You could have let me finish.”

“Nah, it wasn’t important,” he responds just as glibly.

## CHAPTER 10

LIBRARIANS DEWEY IT BETTER.

The Wompler place isn't far from town, so the ride over is short. I manage to choke down my shitty coffee on the way, but I carry my cup with me when we get out of the car. Dad's truck is already near the front porch on the circle drive, and there's a newer dark blue sedan parked in front of it.

Dad steps out of the front door like the man of the house and watches our approach. "You ain't all coming in here." I hadn't even thought about the fact that they all got out when I did.

"Why don't we meet up later? I'm sure you guys have things to do," I tell them, looking between Felix and Remy, since they seem to be the more reasonable of the three. Plus, I still want to punch Grayson in the throat for flirting with the girl right in front of me.

"We all cleared our schedules," Felix replies. His lip is curled up in the slightest of smiles.

"Yeah, at your beck and call," Grayson mumbles, not looking in my direction.

I can actually feel the muscles along my back and shoulders tighten. "No, really, I insist. You can meet me at Pop's this evening." I work hard to make my jaw move so I'm not just clenching my teeth and snarling at him.

"Take your time, Frankie. We'll be here when you're ready." Remy lifts his handsome as sin face up to the sun and closes his eyes as if he's enjoying being outside.

"Come on, kiddo, leave them to it." Dad gestures for me to join him on the porch with a wave of his hand. I take a moment to look around. The old place has had a recent coat of paint, and the flowers all look freshly planted. The wooden boards groan under my weight when I climb up and meet Dad near the open front door.

"Let's keep this business for now, okay, Frances? We can talk about the other stuff later." Dad keeps his voice soft but firm.

I give him a warning glare, but I know it's the best course of action. "Don't think you're getting out of talking to me."

He lets out a huff and pulls open the screen for me to enter ahead of him.

“You’re my kid, I know you’re not going to drop it.”

A pleasant aroma hits me when I enter the house. It smells like baked goods or some of those fancy candles you can get from the spell shop. The tension in my shoulders eases, and I know it’s the latter of the two. The charm is subtle and light, not enough to shift perspective or alter perception, but just enough to relax you and make you comfortable. I glance over at Dad quickly to see if he’s reacting to the spell and notice his features are more relaxed.

“It’s for her benefit, not to influence us,” he answers before I can even voice the question.

“Is that an everyday thing or...” Calming spells can become nearly as addictive as alcohol to a drunk if you rely on them too heavily.

“She’s not a charm junkie, Frankie,” Dad hisses. “She’s had a hard couple of days.”

“Okay, okay.” I hold up my hands after placing my empty cup on a small side table near the entryway. “Defensive much?” Dad doesn’t answer me, but he does guide me into a comfy sitting room. The walls are lined with old books, and the thrum of the candle pushes on my shielding jewelry hard enough to let me know the spell is a strong one. If she stirred this herself, she’s a powerful caster.

In the corner, I find a petite woman with delicate features sitting in an oversized chair with her back ramrod straight. Her hair is coiled up into a messy bun with soft tendrils teasing her jaw and cheeks, and the shade is a rich caramel color that usually only comes with a hefty price tag and frequent highlights. Her full lips are turned down in a slight frown that is mirrored in her eyes as she gazes at me.

“Ms. Miller, Agent Frankie Bishop, sorry about the circumstances.” I take in her fitted blouse and dark slacks as I lower myself into the chair across from her. Dad moves to stand at her side, placing a hand on the high back of her chair.

“You may call me Belinda,” she says softly. Her dark brown eyes meet mine, and I feel a swirl of magic in the air. It’s faint, yet familiar. Her magic was used in the library near the body. *Damnit*. I wanted to come here and rule her out, but unfortunately, I can’t do that now.

“Do you mind going over what happened yesterday?”

Belinda looks up at Dad pleadingly, but he gives her a reassuring nod. “If you need me to,” she finally answers.

“Chief, do you mind recording the interview?” Dad blinks a few times, then drags his phone out of his pocket and hands it over to me. The scowl on his face is enough to tell me he’s not happy, but he doesn’t argue either. I tap a few buttons, hit record on the voice memo, and place the phone on a low table between us.

“Whenever you’re ready.” I nod, purposely being vague with my instructions about what to discuss. I find if you give someone a rope, they will usually hang themselves.

Belinda looks up at Dad again, then clears her throat. “Shortly after returning from lunch yesterday, I made my way upstairs and found it—him,” she amends.

I give her a second to see if she’s going to add anything else before questioning, “What did you do then?”

“I ran back downstairs and called Marty,” she tells me, and Dad’s already nodding and placing his hand on her shoulder.

“I told her to exit the building and find someplace safe to wait for me,” Dad informs me.

I ignore him. “How did he obtain entry into the library?”

“I...I’m not really sure,” she stutters. “I was certain the place was empty when I left for lunch.”

“But you didn’t check?” I ask.

“No, I was upstairs cleaning most of the morning, so he could have come in when I was occupied, but I usually hear the bell.” She looks over at Dad for confirmation, and he pats her shoulder.

“Had he been to the library before?” I watch her for any obvious tells. I can see she’s nervous, but most people would be uncomfortable after finding a dead body.

“I don’t think so, but I didn’t get a very good look at him. There was a lot of...of blood.” She swallows, and her face gets a little green. “Would you excuse me for a moment?” Before I can answer, she gets up from the chair and bolts from the room as fast as her heels will carry her.

Dad lets out a loud huff. “Not everybody is used to seeing headless corpses, Frankie.” Dad drops himself into the chair Belinda vacated.

“Not everybody leaves traces of magic on headless corpses, Pop.” I keep my voice low but deadly serious.

He makes a scoffing sound of dismissal, but then gazes right into my eyes. “What are you saying?” His brows are pinched over his hazel eyes.



“I’m not saying anything *yet*.” Dad leans back in the chair and withdraws into himself. The way his eyes are moving from left to right makes me think he’s going over everything in his head and trying to piece things together. Problem is, we don’t have all the pieces to the puzzle yet.

“I’m sorry I kept you waiting,” Belinda says softly, and my dad leaps out of the chair before ushering her over.

“It’s no bother, thank you for going over this again.”

Belinda nods and straightens her back, as if she’s pulled herself together and is ready to talk again. “I can honestly say I don’t think I’ve ever seen the man before yesterday. He’s not one of the few regulars I’ve gotten to know since taking over, and it didn’t strike me as a student from next door.” I take note of the fact that she’s referred to the victim as “it” more than once, dehumanizing him.

“Let’s go back to how he may have gotten in. You said you don’t think he arrived while you were there. Do you have any idea how he may have gotten inside the building?”

Belinda curls her fingers in, making a fist over her thigh. “I’m not sure. I’ve only been employed by the library for a short time. I’ve tried to familiarize myself with the entire building, but it’s fairly large.” Her voice is as confident as I’ve heard her, and she seems like she genuinely doesn’t know how he got into the library.

“I noticed all the furniture had been removed from the upper level, was that your doing?”

“Yes, I’ve been making room for a technology grant we received. We’re getting a computer lab of sorts.” That lifts one corner of her lips in a little smile, but it’s quickly replaced with a frown. “I may need to rethink the location now. I don’t know if I will ever be able to go up there again without seeing...”

“It’s okay, Bee, we’ll sort it out later.” Dad rubs her shoulder.

“Did you touch the body at all, physically or with magic?”

Dad snaps his head forward to scowl at me. I ignore him and keep my eyes on Belinda.

She leans back the slightest bit, either to get closer to my dad or to get farther away from me. “No, no I don’t think so.” Her voice is shaky, uncertain. She glances up at my dad. “Are we almost done? I don’t think I was ready for this.”

“Ms. Miller, would you be more comfortable at the station, maybe with a

lawyer?” I offer.

“Am I under arrest?” Her horror filled whisper has Dad responding before I can.

“No, no, absolutely not,” he soothes, dismissing her worry.

I, however, can't be as confident. “Not currently. I understand this isn't comfortable, but his family and loved ones deserve answers, and unfortunately for you, you are our only known witness and we need your cooperation to help us solve his murder.”

“Murder? How do you know he was killed?” Belinda looks down at her lap briefly before meeting my stare.

“Unless this was a case of spontaneous human explosion, which I've never heard of, I don't see any other explanation. Do you?”

“Do you have any more questions, Frances? Real questions?” Dad gives me the eye, warning me I'm on thin ice. Well, tough titties, mister. He's the one who brought me back here, and now it seems we're both paying for that mistake.

“It's important that you tell us everything, so take a little time and think about everything that happened yesterday. Nothing is insignificant. This kind of traumatic event can make our minds process things strangely. We need to make sure you're not leaving anything out.” I stand slowly. “Come down to the station tomorrow afternoon, and we can get everything sorted. If you think of anything else in the meantime, I'm sure you have my dad's number.”

“Come down to the station?” she echoes, but it's clear she's questioning why she would need to go to the station.

I lean down and tap the red recording icon on the phone, then return the device to Dad. “If you wouldn't mind sending that over to me, I would appreciate it.” His lips pinch together, but he jerks his head once in a nod.

“Am I a suspect?” Belinda asks, looking between my father and me.

“No,” he answers, again, too quickly.

At the same time, I reply, “Officially, I would say you're a person of interest.” Belinda closes her eyes and lets out a weighted sigh. “Only until we can rule you out, and Pops thinks that will be easy,” I add, feeling slightly bad for the woman. I need to ensure I'm not letting her relationship with my father color my opinion of her any more than I want Dad to allow his opinion to influence him.

Belinda looks over at my dad and her expression softens, but she appears sad too. I hope this didn't blow his chances with her, at least I do if she isn't a

murderous librarian.

## CHAPTER 11

SAY: I

SPELL: MAP

SAY: NESS

*I* excuse myself from the room, telling Dad, “I’ll meet you outside,” so he can say his goodbye in private. He’s muttering words of reassurance before I can clear the doorway.

It’s easy enough to find my way back to the entrance of the home. I stand in the foyer for a few moments, thinking I’m avoiding a prolonged conversation with the guys, but then I start to wonder if they really did stick around.

My departure from Hill Crest wasn’t unplanned, but the fact that I went alone was. They were supposed to be with me, each with our own plan for the future, but then everything changed in a single night. I didn’t stick around long once the dust settled, and none of them even tried coming after me.

My curiosity gets the better of me, and I pull open the wooden door. A wave of warm air pushes through the screen and curls past me. Remy and Felix are both looking in my direction, their gazes drawn by the sound of the door, but Grayson is making it a point not to glance my way. He looks half pissed off and half bored, if his scowl is any indication.

Now that I know they waited, I have a petulant desire to slam the door, but I refrain and step out to the shade of the porch. I’ve never been one for the heat. I thought about moving north once I was done with the academy, but I just couldn’t bring myself to move that far away from home, even though I haven’t been back in years.

Remy lifts his hand and shields his eyes from the sun. The move tightens the fabric of his shirt over his bicep, and I can’t help but notice. It’s the off season, but you’d never know it by looking at him. His body is like a finely tuned race car—nice to look at but even better to drive. Simply put, professional sports look good on him.

I act like I don't keep tabs on the guys. However, my private browser would tell a multitude of secrets. In my moments of weakness, I've searched for info about his team and stats, and googled all of their names. I have no idea how I missed the fact that Grayson was the Mayor of Hill Crest. I suppose it wasn't big enough news to have landed a story in the paper, which is surprising since he's got to be the youngest mayor in the history of our small town.

"Where to next?" Remy does a mock bow. I snicker as Felix pulls open the rear door and stands off to the side for me to enter.

The door behind me opens, and Dad stomps out. "She's done for the day."

My gasp hisses through my lips at his abrupt announcement. I didn't think he would be happy with me after the hard conversation with Belinda, but I didn't think he would be so pissed he'd toss me to the wolves.

Dad looks over at me, and his face falls. "Frankie," he adds much softer, but I just shake my head and walk away from him. His sigh is heavy in my ears as I make it to the bottom of the steps. What I did inside wasn't personal, what he just did was. "Uh, you can take her to the station," he amends.

"Not necessary. If you've sent the preliminary reports and interviews to me, I'll go over everything on my laptop." My tone is flat. He knows what he just did was wrong, but I'm too mad to accept his offer of going to the station. "I'll type up a report and send it back this afternoon." Before he has a chance to respond, I slide into the backseat of the SUV, and Felix climbs in behind me, closing the door. He wraps his pinky over mine while looking straight ahead. The silent comfort sends a pang through my heart. It's hard to see just how much I lost by leaving that night.

"Why don't we grab some lunch?" Remy says after getting behind the wheel.

"I'm not hungry," Grayson mutters.

"I am, unless you have a reason you want to get back to the house sooner?" Remy challenges. Grayson turns his head slowly and gives his best friend the evil eye. "That's what I thought." Remy puts the car in gear, and we pull out of the old Wompler place—well, I suppose I should start calling it the Miller place now. It seems Belinda has made quite a home for herself here.

The destination for lunch isn't discussed. In fact, the car is nearly silent except for Grayson's heavy sighs expressing his obvious disapproval of the

situation, and I'm pretty sure I'm the situation that has him so disgusted.

As we hit the main strip, I notice all the new development. When I left town, half the storefronts on Main Street were empty, but now it's bustling with even more buildings which fit the same architecture of the original town square. "Wow," I whisper, ducking to look out the front and side windows.

Farther down the road, I can make out the heavy gray outline of the school. It's large enough to block most of the library, but I can just see the stone steps leading up to the doors. I don't see anyone gathered around, and I wonder if the cloaking spell is still in place.

"Really?" Grayson deadpans as Remy parks the truck in front of the old hardware store.

"What? We come here almost every day when I'm home." Remy tries to sound nonchalant, but I hear a note of something in his tone. I hate that I don't know why Grayson is upset or why Remy seems to be goading him. I guess that's what happens when you grow apart though.

Grayson grabs the door handle and wrenches it open while shaking his head. As soon as he slams it closed, Felix says, "You knew this would piss him off."

"Better to be pissed off than pissed on, I always say." Remy hops out of the car as if he doesn't have a care in the world.

Felix looks me dead in the eye. "A lot has changed, but he's still the same Gray underneath. Give him a chance."

"A chance for what? He doesn't even want to be in the same room as me, Felix," I retort, and it hurts.

"That's not true. Not by a long shot. He's just afraid of getting hurt again." Felix exits the car after his words, and I'm left to absorb and process them. After a long second, I follow him and find all three guys waiting for me at the curb.

"Frances Louise, is that you?" My shoulders fall. How did I forget we were downtown? We are probably going to run into twenty people I haven't seen in years. I turn to face the voice. "Well, as I live and breathe. It is you. I thought I was having an episode." Old Ms. Wilkins lifts her brows high on her forehead and widens her eyes.

"Hello, Ms. Wilkins," I greet, speaking loud and slowly. She's got to be ninety-nine if she's a day. She's one of those people who has always been old, but you have no idea how old they really are.

"Are you here to solve the murder?" She leans forward. "Imagine a killer

loose in our town!” I wasn’t expecting to be asked if I was involved in the case so directly. I should have known how fast news travels in this town.

“Do you know the gentleman who perished?” Might as well get some info from one of the many town gossips.

“Oh no, dear, can’t say as I did, but” —she leans in even closer, and I get a whiff of mothballs and brandy— “there’s been talk of a *big* man snooping around town.” She leans back and watches my face.

“Interesting.” I narrow my eyes to make her think I’m really invested in the information she has to offer. You have to feed the beast sometimes. “An observant woman such as yourself wouldn’t know where he’d been snooping around, would you?”

“The Pirelli family reported a prowler just a few nights back.” She gives me a smile and a wink. “Good to have you home, dear. I’ll expect to see you for tea since you’re back.” She pats my hand and walks away before I can tell her my stay in town is only temporary.

When I look away from her, I notice several other people staring in our direction. Some of them are trying to hide the fact that we are the topic of their conversations, while others don’t bother.

“Come on.” Grayson stalks down the sidewalk.

“You didn’t have to wait,” I mutter to his back. Remy and Felix keep pace with me as we follow in Grayson’s wake. He enters a shop several doors down, not bothering to wait for us. The bell chimes merrily when Felix grabs the door and holds it for Remy and me to enter. I mouth, “Thank you,” to him before focusing on the restaurant.

The familiar scent hits me first. The heavy aromas of bacon and eggs swirl around, and my stomach growls. The next thing I notice is the overwhelming female patronage. Nearly every table has a woman or two seated at it, and every head is turned in our direction.

I hum the *Twilight Zone* theme song under my breath. This is not the kind of joint you would expect to see so many well coiffed women. A yoga studio or a smoothie bar, yes. A diner that specializes in clogged arteries and heartburn, not so much. “What the hell?” I look over at Remy, but he’s ignoring the situation completely. There are three empty seats at the bar and the guys head straight for them. I’m left to stand at the “Have a seat” sign near the front desk. I should have known they would still come here. The traitors. This is my restaurant.

Surprisingly, Grayson is the one to turn and look for me. When he



realizes I caught him looking, he scowls and pretends he was staring at someone to the left of me and gives them a fake smile and a polite wave.

Remy places his hand on the back of the high-backed stool next to one of the open seats. He leans down and says something to the brunette seated there. I can't hear his words, but I can see his smile. It's a sin to look that devilish and have those dimples that make him look so sweet.

The woman's mouth falls open a little as she gazes into his eyes. I move a little closer, needing to hear what he's saying. Is this his girlfriend?

"...would be in your debt," he finishes. She continues to stare up at him as if she can't believe he's actually speaking to her. Instead of waiting, I slide into the seat clearly meant for him and prop my chin on my hand, watching the two of them.

Remy looks over at me. "Apparently, she has other ideas. This works too." Remy grabs me under my arms, lifts me, and then plops himself down in the seat I was just removed from before depositing me on his lap. My knees are touching the counter, and I'm completely uncomfortable, but it's something the old us would have done.

I'm so struck by the moment, I'm probably sporting the same gape as the girl next to us—who I've decided is not Remy's girlfriend. I can't even manage to look at her now.

A round man with a limp hobbles over to the counter with a mug that only a mother could love. "Jimmy," I coo softly.

"You know I appreciate the business, Remy, my lunch sales are" — Jimmy brings his hairy, meaty hand up to his lips and kisses his fingertips in a chef kiss— "but you're going to bust my chair and leave this lovely creature on her butt."

"Come on—" Remy starts, but his words get lost as I stare at the man who is more like an uncle to me than just a fry cook.

I reach out and place my hand over Jimmy's on the scarred bar top. I've probably had more meals here than at home. For some reason, I feel like crying. Hell, I missed him. I didn't even realize how much until this moment. We don't share any more words, just looks that say so much. Eventually, he places his hand on top of mine and gives my fingers a long squeeze.

"You want the usual?" He doesn't even wait for a reply. When he hits the swinging doors to the back, I swear I see him dab the corner of his eye with the stained towel on his shoulder.

Remy grabs my hips and adjusts me. It brings my position on top of him

to the front of my mind. From the state of his hard-on, I'm thinking it was already in the front of his.

"Shush," he whispers near my ear when I twist to look over my shoulder. I damn near groan, but then I find myself looking over at Grayson. I don't want him to accuse me of forcing myself on Remy this time. He's looking at me, but not with the same disdain that's been present since we were at Mickey's, however the softness in his gaze shatters when his lips curl and he looks away.

"Ignore him," Felix whispers from the seat next to me. It's not easy, but being in Remy's lap helps keep my mind and other parts of my body occupied. I'm probably going to need a fresh pair of panties after this, or I'm going to have to get comfortable with the wet spot.

Lunch is, in fact, divine. Jimmy made me a burger the likes of which I haven't had in years. I made sure to tell him that too. He made me promise to come back and see him, but didn't pretend I wasn't planning on leaving town again, which I was grateful for.

As the door chimes, I glance over my shoulder, knowing I will be back. I'm not going to let anything keep me from the things I love anymore, and that includes Jimmy.

## CHAPTER 12

IT'S ALL FUN AND GAMES UNTIL THE COPS SHOW UP.

I linger on the sidewalk, looking into some of the old stores I'm familiar with and the newer additions. There's a trendy coffee shop and a bead boutique, but the most intriguing store is a spell shop. It's not one of the big chain ones, but a small place where everything seems to be handcrafted.

A curly mop of red hair draws my attention, and I recoil. I know that hair almost as well as I know my own name—it's Tammie Turnbuckle. What the hell is she doing behind the counter in a place like this?

"Was that...?" I hook my thumb over my shoulder, indicating the store I sped past.

"Tammie." Felix nods and presses his lips into a line. "Sure was."

"There's got to be a good story there. What happened to her?" I glance between Felix and Remy.

"Shit changes, Frankie. You'd know that if you ever cared to find out," Grayson snaps.

Ignoring him, Felix tells me, "Winston caught her cheating. Not that he didn't already know, but it was so obvious, he couldn't ignore it anymore. He finally kicked her out, and she shacked up with the Curtis brothers for a while, but I think she was seeing one of the uncles on the side, so it didn't last long."

"What happened to Winston?" If there was anyone I expected to be the mayor, it was him. I can't help but look at Grayson.

"You have a lot in common with my brother, actually. He cut town and ran. Sound familiar?" Grayson looks me dead in the eye, and I can see just how angry he is. It feeds my own irritation. I open my mouth to say something to him—it would probably be nasty and only half deserved—but I manage to snap my lips closed.

The car locks disengage, and Felix opens the rear door. Instead of climbing in, like he was offering, I walk around to the other side of the SUV and open my own damn door. I'm about to get whiplash between the three of them. I need to remember things are definitely not the same between us.

The delicious food in my belly turns to lead once we're all back in the

car. The tension is as thick as proverbial pea soup. I want things to be better between us, but they are acting like I'm the only one to blame for our separation. Nothing stopped them from coming to me. Hell, I barely left my shitty apartment for the first month because I was certain they were going to show up.

I stare out of the window for most of the drive. At night, everything blended together, but now in the light of day, the area is more familiar. I sit up a little straighter when Remy slows his vehicle and turns into a drive I'm certain wasn't here years ago. That makes sense, because their house wasn't here years ago, but it's so close to our spot—our secret oasis that we went to whenever we had a spare minute or skipped out of school, which wasn't often. Having a cop for a dad can be a downer in certain situations.

I'll never forget the night we snuck out and came here. Of course Dad caught us. I had no idea how at the time, but it turns out he was way smarter than I gave him credit for. Looking back now, I'm sure he knew a lot of the shit we got up to, but he just let it slide. It wasn't like we were bad kids, but I'm sure no father wants to find his daughter skinny dipping with three boys.

"This is..." I croak, looking at the trees on the side of the lane in a new light. I wonder how far the pond is from the house.

"Grayson bought it," Remy states, looking over at his friend.

"It was a good price," he defends.

"It wasn't even for sale," Felix counters.

"I stand by my statement." Grayson tips his chin in the air a little bit. That posh breeding we all know is under his casual exterior is coming out to play.

"It's really amazing, and the house, Felix...you really outdid yourself."

"You knew it was mine?" He gives me a shy smile.

"The moment I laid eyes on it," I admit.

"Wait until you see my contribution." Remy turns in the seat and grins at me. For a moment, I forget all the mess between us and meet his smile with one of my own.

"Let me guess, you designed the sex dungeon?" I tease.

He looks over at Grayson. "I knew we were missing something."

Grayson cracks the smallest of smiles, but it disappears just as quickly as it appeared. "Familiar with those, are you? We shouldn't be surprised. You always did like variety."

His words cut to the quick. I actually react physically, like I received a blow to the stomach. My shoulders hunch, and my head lowers. I guess I

can't be too mad, I kind of walked right into that one. "That's the root of the problem, right, Grayson? I never could choose between the three of you, but..." I pause and tap my chin, even though my chest hurts and all I want to do is get the hell out of this SUV so I can't see or smell them anymore. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but weren't you the one who promised me I would never have to?"

Grayson jerks around in his seat so he's facing the rear. His cheeks are red and ruddy, as if he's been holding back this entire time and he's about to let loose. "No one asked you to choose!" he shouts.

I examine every inch of his handsome face, which is contorted in an enraged sneer. I hate that I'm the reason he feels like this. I hate that my heart aches with loss while he's right in front of me. "Just because you never said it doesn't mean I didn't hear it—feel it," I reply with a shake of my head.

Remy stops the car in the middle of the circle drive and opens his door. I feel my ears pop from the pressure shift. Grayson damn near shoves himself out of the car, and he's jerking my door open seconds later. It's obvious he's not done yelling at me yet.

I stand on my own two feet and cross my arms over my chest, waiting for him to say whatever he needs to say. It's going to hurt, but it's the least I can do. Plus, maybe then I won't see his smiling face when I close my eyes anymore or feel his sweet touch on my skin when I think about him.

"It must be nice to *think* you have all the answers," Grayson starts. We're only separated by a few inches. Those inches are needed for me to look him in the eye without craning my neck back.

"Oh really? I was thinking how nice it would be not to have answers to questions I never asked shoved down my throat," I snap back.

"You never should have tried to stir that spell."

I take a step closer to Grayson, encroaching into his space. "I suppose you've forgotten who asked me to. Isn't that convenient for you? Must be nice putting all the blame on my doorstep."

When Grayson makes a move to step even closer to me, Remy stops him with a hand on his chest. The slight pressure is enough to keep him in place, but it doesn't keep his mouth from running. "I was young and *thought* I was in love." His eyes are wild and angry as he glares at me.

I take a step back. There's a lot of shit I can take, but him saying that he never loved me and only *thought* he did isn't on the list. "Well then, I suppose I did you a favor. I guess that answers why you never came after

me.” I glance around, sharing the look with all of them, mostly because I can’t stare at Grayson right now without wanting to burst into tears or punch him in his pretty face.

“Frankie, we—” Felix starts, but the front door of the house opens. My head automatically turns in that direction, and the sight in front of me makes everything else fade away.

“Surprise!” an unfamiliar woman shouts. Her voice is way too high, and the smile she’s sporting is more brittle than a glass cage. Her eyes are darting around as if she’s waiting for a reaction. When her gaze finally lands on me, her smile slips. The move is too quick, too practiced. She may be pretending she didn’t look right past me to get to the others, but it’s clear she knew exactly what she was doing. It’s not far-fetched to assume the news is out that I’m back and she wanted to make her presence known.

“Julia?” Grayson says somewhat softly.

“I should have called,” she replies, taking turns looking at my guys—I mean *the* guys. She lifts her hands to cover her face, but she spreads her fingers so she can peek out in mock embarrassment. “I got back early. I didn’t know you’d have company.” Lowering her hands, she turns to face me and winces. “I’m Julia.” She steps off the porch and walks right up to me with her hand out, offering to shake mine.

I can’t do anything but stare down at it and her long, bare toned legs. Realizing I’m not going to return the gesture, she steps closer to Grayson. “Gray, I am so sorry.” I look over at Grayson when she uses his nickname, the nickname I gave him. It caught on with Remy and Felix too, and before long, we were all calling him that, but no one else outside our circle used it—until now, apparently. He’s too busy staring down at the woman who curled herself around him to notice me gaping.

Stupid shit starts going through my mind, like I should get back to that spell shop to see if they carry memory elixirs and about the property search I did in Montana a few months back. I really did like that house, and moving up north suddenly sounds very appealing. Instead of giving into the weakness of running away, I push my hand forward in a super delayed reaction to return her handshake.

Awkwardly, she places her hand in mine. I meet her eyes and give her a placating smile. “You caught me off guard there. I’m Agent Bishop,” I announce when I release her hand. I have the urge to rub my palm on my pants, but I curl my fingers into a fist to prevent myself from doing it.

“Agent?” Julia looks up at Grayson, a question clear on her face. “Did something happen?”

“What are you doing here?” he asks instead of answering her. He quickly darts his gaze in my direction but averts his eyes just as fast.

Julia runs her fingers over his chest. “It’s Wednesday.” She gives him a pointed look, as if that should explain everything. It must clear something up, because Grayson’s lips thin and he closes his eyes briefly.

“Why don’t we head inside?” Felix places his hand on the small of my back and urges me forward. It’s not a move I’m used to from him, since he wasn’t quite as assertive in the past. My feet start to move forward, but I can’t take my eyes off Grayson and the woman. Remy steps closer to Grayson after I’m several feet away and says something to him too low for me to hear.

Grayson’s lip curls up slightly as he snarls at Remy’s back when he walks away, but he doesn’t say anything to him. I wish I knew what Remy said that pissed Grayson off so badly.

The heavy front door is still ajar from Julia’s exit, so the air in the foyer is slightly humid yet much cooler than outside. “Want something to drink?” Felix sounds too cheerful.

I don’t realize how thirsty I am until he offers, but there’s some part of me that doesn’t want to leave the door before Grayson comes in. “Do you know how long he’s going to be? I need to review those interviews and get the report to my dad before heading out of town tonight.” It’s my way of telling them if they have something to say to me it needs to be quick without actually saying the words, plus I can’t stand the thought of Grayson with the woman, so if this gets him away from her until I’m gone, even better.

“He won’t be long,” Remy replies, his voice flat.

“Frankie, there’s something we should tell you,” Felix offers, but I can’t focus on his words or even his face. All I can see is Grayson with Julia. She’s pretty, beautiful really. They are the kind of couple you see walking down the street and you can’t help but stare because they almost don’t seem real.

Things must be serious between them if she has a key to their place. She didn’t seem worried about greeting all three of them, which makes me think it’s not an unusual occurrence.

“She’s clearly not paying attention.” Remy snorts and waves his hand right in front of my face. I swat his meaty paw away and scowl at him, partly because he was right, and partly because I want to hit something and he’s the



nearest thing.

Remy bends his knees so he's eye level with me. "You look aggravated, Frances. Something bothering you?" he asks coyly.

"Your face is stupid," I blurt, and Remy just lifts one dark brow, not backing away.

"You must be really mad if you can't come up with something better than that," he taunts.

I search the face I just called stupid, even though it's the last thing I should be calling him, and lock eyes with his beautiful blues. After a long pause, some of my pretenses fall away, and I'm left staring at one of the only men I'll probably ever love. "Do you really hate me this much?" My voice is small but clear.

Remy's mouth parts, and I hear the gasping breath he sucks in. "I couldn't hate you if I wanted to, doll."

"Seems like you might have tried," I admit with way too much emotion in my voice. Remy's expression softens, and he wraps one hand over my shoulder and tugs me against his chest in an embrace. I let out a soft sigh that I would deny if questioned and inhale his scent.

I feel the weight and heat of Felix's palm as he makes soothing circles on my back. The only thing missing is Grayson. I feel his absence even more keenly, knowing where he is. A phone buzzes and I pat my pocket out of habit, but it's not mine, mine is still dead. I step back from Remy's warm embrace, and he lets out a soft huff before retrieving his phone from his pocket.

"It's your dad." He holds the phone out to me.

"Thanks." The call is already connected, so I place the phone to my ear. "Hey," is my greeting.

"Frankie." Dad's voice is filled with emotion. There's a pause, as if he's waiting for me to say something, but I don't fill the silence. "Murrey called. He doesn't have an ID yet, but he thinks the victim's head was crushed, something about the tears in the flesh being too jagged to be caused by a tool." He pauses again. "I was thinking about going back to the scene. Would you be interested in having another look around with me?"

It's his form of a peace offering. "Can you pick me up?" It might be dirty to use it to my advantage, but what can I say? It's part of my training.

"Wait, pick you up from where?" Felix asks, proving he's eavesdropping.

"Nah, we'll take her," Remy tells him without any concern. "She's not

getting rid of us that easily.”

“What time are you going to be there?” I huff.

“How about six o’clock? Most of the shops will be closing up, and we won’t have to worry about the looky-loos.”

“I’ll be there at six. Can you drive by Mickey’s and see if my car is still in the lot? I’m going to need it this evening to drive home.” I don’t look at Remy or Felix when I ask this. I don’t want to see their faces, and I’m a chicken.

“Okay, kiddo.” Dad sounds a little sad, but agreeable.

“See you in a few hours,” I reply and end the call, returning the phone to Remy. “I left my bag in the car. I’m going to run out so I can get my charger and laptop.”

“I’ll get it,” Felix pipes up quickly and takes off before I can.

Damnit. I wanted to check on Grayson, not that I would see anything that would make me happy, but it may make me more resolved. Every time I mention leaving town, I get this sick feeling in my stomach that keeps getting worse.

I watch Felix’s back as he heads to the door in a near jog. He picks up an overnight bag near the entry that I didn’t notice when we came in and totes it out with him. Once he clears the door, I glance at Remy, who’s standing in front of me as if he’s been waiting for my attention. “Sorry I intruded on your plans,” I snark tartly.

“Not my plans.” He shrugs. “I’ll let Gray explain that one.” He’s acting as if it’s not a big deal, but it is to me.

I hear the door open again, and Grayson and Felix both enter. Grayson has his eyes lowered like he needs to watch his footing, but knowing him as well as I do, I think it’s shame that has him averting his gaze.

I look away because watching him makes me want to reassure him that everything is fine, but I can’t do that because nothing is okay. Felix is carrying my bag over his shoulder. His stance is a little rigid, but not as uncertain as Grayson’s.

I meet Felix halfway across the room and take my bag, using the excuse of looking for my phone charger as a reason to avoid analyzing their every move. I’d much rather submerge myself in work than talk with them, but I know I wouldn’t be able to concentrate anyway, not that I will be able to after either. *What a mess.*

“You can set up in my office if you want,” Felix offers.

“Sure,” I accept, gripping my bag close to my side and holding my charger in my other hand. I follow Felix down the hall, and we pass the study I slept in last night. Felix eventually pushes a door open and stands back, allowing me to catch up and enter before him, while the guys are trailing behind me.

## CHAPTER 13

ALCOHOL MAY NOT BE THE ANSWER, BUT IT'S A GOOD START.

If I would have stumbled across this room last night, I would have known it was Felix's. The air smells of ozone, clean yet charged, and underneath that is the slightest scent of his woody soap. The floor has a wood grain effect, but I'm confident it's tile, something easy to keep clean and dust free, unlike carpet. The room itself is pretty stark, however, all the workbenches scattered throughout are a complete contrast to the unadorned room. Some are littered with computer parts, while others have stacks of drawings and rolled up schematics here and there. There's also a desk that has a couple of monitors, but I can't even see a keyboard.

"Sorry about the mess." Felix rushes over and shifts a few things around, not really cleaning anything up. Only he would think this is a mess. "Take the desk," he suggests, nodding in that direction.

"Thanks, Felix." I don't bother telling him not to risk messing anything up on my account, he wouldn't listen anyway. I lower myself into his chair and search the area for a plug or USB port. Sensing my issue, Felix abandons his task, hustles over to the desk, and then touches the corner where there's an inlaid circle. It pops up, revealing several plugs and ports.

I busy myself by plugging in my phone and computer just to have something to do. I have no idea how to start the conversation that is desperately needed.

Movement from the guys draws my attention, and I see Remy elbowing Grayson and jerking his head toward me.

Grayson gives Remy a nasty glare and steps forward from the group. "Remy wants me to tell you that Julia wasn't here for him or Felix. She was here to see me." He seems to be having a hard time looking at me while he says this, his attention focused above my head.

"Okay," I drawl. As much as I know the confession is going to scorch my tongue, I add, "You don't owe me an explanation, Gray—son." I amend my slipup of nearly using his nickname. "I understand you have lives." I was right—saying it makes me want to hurl.

Remy shoves Grayson's back, and he stumbles forward. "What about

you? What's your life like now?" he asks when he recovers.

"Uh..." I hesitate, because telling them all I've done over the past few years is study and work probably isn't the greatest idea, even if it's the truth. "I've kept myself busy."

"Have you now?" Remy mumbles, narrowing his eyes on me.

I nod jerkily.

"Doing what?"

"Stuff." I flip the top of my laptop open and enter the password. My screen saver has been changed from the MBI logo to a picture of the four of us out at the pond when we were kids. It was taken just a few days before I left town, and I can barely relate to the girl in the photo. She looks so happy, so sure. Remy is standing behind me with his chin on my shoulder, so his face is close to mine. Grayson is at my side with his arm around my waist, while Felix is leaning his much slimmer frame against my other side. I lift my finger to touch the image, but it shifts to another. This one is just Felix and me. It was taken without my knowledge, and I've never seen it before today. I'm looking up at him with what can only be described as adoration. The only reason it isn't embarrassing is because he's looking back at me with the same emotion all over his face. Another picture pops up, and I glance across the room to Felix. He's the one to blame for infiltrating my computer, not that I'm mad. I'm a little sad, but not mad.

He searches my face, and I'm reminded of the way we were gazing at each other in the picture, so I look away, hitting the icon for my email instead. There's an email from Dad and a few others, but I skip over those and open the important one.

There are download icons, so he must have taken photos of the hardcopies. "Damnit," I curse when I realize none of it is in order and I'm going to have to sort through them all.

"What is it?" Felix rounds the desk.

"Do you have a printer I could use? These files are a mess."

"Yeah, sure." Without another word, he leans past me and puts his hands on my keyboard, taking over the job. After a second, he turns to look at me. Our faces are close enough that I can see my reflection in his glasses. I find myself looking down at his lips, wondering if they still feel the same or if so much has changed that his kiss won't even be familiar anymore.

"Sorry," he whispers softly. "I didn't mean to take over."

"It's okay." I push my feet against the floor to shove myself back in the

chair to give him a little room, otherwise I might have given in to the temptation of kissing him.

The sound of a machine coming to life gives me a reason to look away from him. On one of the workbenches sits a printer, and next to it is a very large plotter that can print blueprints. Remy walks over to the machine and retrieves several sheets. He gives them a cursory glance before handing them over to me.

I start sorting all the papers on the desk, and Grayson mutters, “Whoa, that’s pretty gruesome,” from over my shoulder.

“It looks like a bomb went off in this guy’s head,” Remy adds.

I look back at them. “It’s not the worst I’ve seen, but pretty bad. Any of you guys see him around town? It’s hard to tell from this picture, but he was pretty big. Murrey thinks around six-five and nearly three hundred pounds.” I glance around, noting all their attention is on the few grim photos Dad included.

Felix is the first to answer. “I don’t go out as much as they do.” His eyes scan the picture. “What’s this?” He points to a small area that would have been hard to notice in person, because it’s more about the lack of evidence than anything else. To the left of the body is a clear outline where there seemed to have been something in the way that blocked the blood from marring the floor, leaving behind a right angle of empty space that would not happen naturally.

“Looks like there was something there that got moved after the fact.” I glance up at him and grin. He just found my first lead.

“Is this the kind of thing you see every day?” Grayson uses the tips of his fingers to cover one of the pictures of the body with another image Dad snapped of handwritten notes.

“Not every day,” I defend. I do see more than my fair share of murder scenes though. Having someone who can rule out a suspect at a glance—or a twinge of magic, really—is pretty useful to the MBI. It’s part of why I was available to come down and help my dad. I never get my own caseload because I’m too busy consulting on everyone else’s.

“I can’t believe this happened here.” Grayson looks over at me, his eyes soft. “Or that your dad called you to deal with it.”

“It’s my job to deal with it,” I remind him.

“What kind of magic caused this?” Remy asks, leaning his muscular ass against Felix’s desk. Seated as I am, it leaves his waist and what’s below it at

prime eye level. I force myself to look away from his bulge after confirming he's still a lefty.

"This isn't officially my case, but I shouldn't be talking to you guys about it. I could get in trouble for even allowing you to see this."

"It's not like we're going to tell anyone, plus you just said you're not officially on the case, so there's no one to get in trouble with." Remy waggles his eyebrows.

I heave a sigh, knowing I'm easy. I always have been, especially with these three, and I'm not just talking about getting in my pants. We never had any secrets, or I never thought we did. "Murrey suspects it wasn't magic, or not direct magic anyway, and it's looking that way to me too," I share.

"What do you mean?" Felix grabs a stool from one of the workbenches, hauls it over to the desk, and takes a seat next to me. His legs are spread wide as he plants his sock covered heels on the bottom riser. Grayson is now the only one fully standing. He's on the opposite side of the desk, but there doesn't seem to be the same wall between us as there was when we entered the room—that is until I remember him and Julia standing out front.

I avert my gaze from him and answer Felix. "He thinks his skull was crushed by an object, not magic."

"Like what, a car?" Remy snorts.

"We're still trying to sort out if there was magic enhancement used."

Remy whistles. "That's dangerous shit." He would know, considering he plays professional sports. The councils outlawed anything beyond glamor when it comes to body mods. You can look like a guy who can bench press a house, but there's no actual strength behind the visage.

It doesn't mean it doesn't happen. It's just risky. Enhancement spells can get your magic stripped. Guys like Remy and his teammates are tested for stuff like that all the time. Hell, even the public has to go through a nullifier to get into an arena. It also means people can't hex or curse any of the players. Fans can get heated at events, so the nullifier ensures no one does anything they would regret the next day or cause them to land in prison or worse.

"It does look like there was something there, the outline is just too perfect." Felix continues to search the picture.

"Think you could give me a ride over so I can check it out in person and see if I can sort out what was there?" I'm looking directly at Felix, but it's Remy who answers.



“Sure. Do you need to let the chief know?”

“Actually...” I draw out the word while I gather up all the papers they printed for me and stack them up. “He asked me to meet him there at six. We should probably talk before I head out. That way you can just drop me off at the library, and I’ll be out of your hair.” I try for a smile, but it’s forced. I don’t drink that often, but I have the urge to down a bottle of vodka right now.

“You think we can settle our differences in—” Remy looks down at a heavy watch on his wrist. “A couple hours, give or take?” His dark brows are high on his forehead, showing me just how doubtful he thinks the idea is.

“I’m ready to listen to what you have to say,” I answer, even though it’s the last thing I want to do.

The hard glint returns to Grayson’s eyes, and he crosses his arms over his chest. Everything in his posture just shifted, and it makes me want to lower my gaze. I hold fast and pretend not to notice, but I know I’m about two seconds away from him railing into me. I hope I really am ready for this.

## CHAPTER 14

MY PATIENCE WAS TESTED. IT CAME BACK NEGATIVE.

*B*efore Grayson can say anything, Felix asks, “Why don’t you tell us why you left? Why you really left?”

I open my mouth to give him an immediate response, but I stop myself from saying the same thing I’ve already said more than once—or alluded to anyway. I close my lips and take a moment to really think about an answer that might satisfy them and myself once and for all.

I’ve thought about the moment I made the split decision to leave a hundred times. I regretted it the moment the thought formed in my head, but I didn’t know the consequences it would cause.

I look down at the desk, because I can’t bear to see them while I hand over what feels like the last piece of me, but in truth, they already owned it. I’ve just been holding onto it. “I’m not going to lie and say I didn’t take the ritual seriously, because that would just be an insult to all of us, but what I will say is that I should have taken it *more* seriously. I can’t believe I thought it was a good idea to bind us like that when we were so young.” I shake my head, remembering how selfish I was being. It’s not that I didn’t want to be imprinted to them, I’m just not sure if it was for the right reasons.

“I was terrified of losing you, any of you.” I finally look up and glance at all three of them. Grayson’s brows are furrowed deeply, while Felix is watching me with what looks like understanding in his eyes.

“Yet you stopped the ritual right before finishing it.” Remy snorts, making sure I hear his skepticism.

I nod once and swallow, lowering my eyes back to the desk. “I wasn’t the only one questioning if it was the right thing to do. The moment we cast the circle, I could feel all of your magic and emotions.” It shouldn’t be a surprise to them, though it may be to others who don’t know me so well. I can’t just read a magical signature. If the emotions that drive the magic are strong or if I have a personal connection, like I do with all three of them, then I can feel it. We formed a bond well before that night, and no ritual was required for me to sense we all had reservations about what I was about to do.

“And?” Remy prompts.

“And I wasn’t the only one who was worried about the outcome,” I snap

defensively.

“Of course we were worried,” Grayson scoffs, “but none of us cut and ran like you did!”

I plant both of my balled up fists on the desk. Patience isn’t my strong suit, but I call upon what little I have. My words are spoken through my teeth. “I didn’t cut and run—”

“That’s sure what it seems like to me,” Grayson challenges before I can finish.

“That night, I was a little overwhelmed, to say the least.” I slide my hair behind my shoulder. “I told you I needed some time.”

“I don’t think any of us expected it to be years,” Felix chimes in.

“Neither did I.” I look him dead in the eye. “Imagine my surprise when I found out none of you came to see me the next day, but you were with *Tiffany*.” I can’t even say her name without sneering it.

Remy lets out a heavy sigh and folds his arms over his chest as if he’s been waiting for this exact issue to be brought up. “We were giving you the space you asked for.”

I snort so hard, I almost choke on it. “When did you three ever give me space when I asked for it?”

“When you left our circle in tears,” Felix pipes up. “I never once saw you cry before that night.” My eyes leap up to Grayson because he has. Even now, when I can see how angry he is at me, I would bet a hex he never told anyone. He kept my secret all this time. He tilts his head to the side as if to say, *I’m not that big of an asshole*.

I can’t hold his stare, because over the past two days, I kind of thought he was. Feeling guilty, and many other emotions I can’t put into words, I decide to give them the rest of my truth, even though it’s going to make me look like an immature jackass. “I was scared. I thought because I didn’t go through with it, you guys wouldn’t want to be with me anymore, and when I found out about Tiffany, I kind of freaked out.”

Felix grabs the back of his neck and uses it as an excuse to lower his eyes. He looks uncomfortable. It makes a pit form in the bottom of my stomach. All these years, I suspected something happened between them that day, but I never had my suspicions confirmed. I feel like they just were.

I glance at Remy and Grayson, but both of them remain quiet. I bite the corner of my lip, then put the rest on the table. “I left because I wanted to show you how mad I was and to...I don’t know, punish you, but in the back

of my mind, I always thought you would come for me, but you never did.” I shrug, but it’s just my body’s reaction to saying words that still hurt to this day.

Remy reaches out lightning fast and smacks Grayson on the chest. Grayson’s response is immediate as he rubs his palm over the place his friend just walloped while he gives him a nasty glare. “I’ve got one for you too, dummy.” Remy narrows his eyes on Felix, who isn’t within striking distance.

My phone buzzes, and I look down. Now that the battery is charged enough to power on, I see a few missed calls. When I look up, Grayson is turning away.

“I’ve got something I need to do,” is all he says before quickly strolling from the room. I look at the two remaining men with questions clear in my gaze. I wasn’t expecting him to take off so abruptly. I didn’t think we were even remotely close to being done with the conversation.

“Should we get over to the library?” Felix stands up, ignoring the fact that Grayson left.

“Uh... If we’re done... I mean, sure.” I gather the papers and close my laptop before unplugging my phone from the charger to slide the USB into my computer, since the battery is strong enough to charge my phone for the moment. If that was all they needed from me to put this behind us, I should feel lucky, but that’s not the emotion I’m experiencing now.

“Don’t leave without us.” Remy jogs out the door. His comment makes me think he’s going after Grayson, but I’m a little too distracted with my own shit to give it much thought.

## CHAPTER 15

EVERYONE WAS THINKING IT. I'M JUST THE ONE WHO SAID IT.

Felix and I make our way toward the front door. He opens a door I had assumed was a coat closet, but it's much too large for that. He enters the space after flipping on a light switch and my eyes immediately search the room. There are jackets and coats all neatly hung, but I can't tell from this distance if there are any women's garments, so I drop my eyes to the floor to check the shoes. I skip over the sneakers and heavy boots, but the room darkens too quickly after Felix grabbed what he needed for me to have made a full pass. I'm certain I didn't note any heels, but that doesn't mean much.

When he closes the door, he gives me a tight smile. There's an awkwardness between us I want to dispel, but I don't really know how to at this point. How can I feel like I know him so well and feel like an interloper at the same time?

I rock on one heel, trying to think of something to say. "The house is beautiful."

Felix looks around and pulls a face that means he disagrees with me. "It's okay, but thanks."

"Why do you say that? It's more than okay, Felix."

"It's always felt like it was missing something," he says softly, looking up at the high ceiling.

I clear my throat. "Where did you end up going to school?" I change the subject.

"Albion. All three of us were there for a couple years before Remy signed to the team." Albion is a small private college a few towns over. It was never even on my radar. I didn't know it was on theirs either.

"Frankie, there's something I wanted to tell you." I turn to face him. There's a serious note in his tone I can't ignore.

"Ready!" Remy's heavy steps precede him as he meets us in the foyer. Felix's shoulders dip a little, and he reaches for the door. He must have wanted privacy for whatever he was going to say, because Remy's arrival seems to have quelled his desire to tell me.

I look down at my arm, confirming I have my jacket and bag, even though their weight is evident. My departure feels final this time, and I'm a little sad I won't get to see the rest of the house or find out what Felix thinks it's missing.

The heat and humidity hit me the second the door opens, but so does the familiar scent of the damp forest. A smile tugs at my mouth. I'm happy they chose this place, that it still means something to them.

"What's that for?" Remy asks when he opens the front passenger side door. "The grin," he clarifies when I give him a dubious glance.

I touch my fingers to my lips as my smile falters. "I didn't realize I missed the smell of the country. I'm just glad you guys built out here." What I don't say is I wouldn't want anyone else building out here. No matter what happens, this will always be our place. "Felix, I'll take the back." I move around Remy, but he puts his arm out, blocking me.

"Nope, he's had you all to himself a few times already. Don't think I didn't notice the hand holding, Bishop." Remy changes his voice to sound like an unapproving father.

I click my tongue, then turn and climb into the front seat. It's not like I have much of an option, plus I don't really want to talk about Felix's silent comfort, even though I could use some right about now.

On the way to the library, I try to focus on the case. I even pull out the papers and start scanning the *two* minuscule statements and the pictures Dad sent over. One of the statements is from Belinda, the other is from a school secretary. I can't believe she's still alive, let alone still working.

It looks like Belinda went over to the school and waited for Dad after she found the body, which makes it even more surprising it wasn't a three-ring circus last night when I arrived. A dead body that close to a school usually causes a stir. I think the fact that it's a stranger makes it less salacious.

Remy parks the SUV right out front, and I note the large white sheet of paper taped to the inside window that reads, "Closed until further notice." I probably should have expected this. I grab my phone, making sure not to disconnect the charger, and dial Dad's number. He answers on the second ring with a gruff, "Hello?"

"Hey, Pop. I'm at the library a little early."

"I could meet you," he responds, and I hear the metal clang of a file drawer closing.

"Are you able to come over now, or should I come grab the key?" Remy



and Felix both wait patiently for me. I'm probably not giving them the best first impression of how I work, especially since it was Felix who had to point out the clue that brought us here in the first place.

"Can you give me ten?"

"Sure, there's no scene tape up, we—I mean, am I okay to walk the perimeter?"

"Yup, you know what to do if you find anything," he tells me, and I don't feel so incompetent.

"Okay, see you soon." I hang up the phone and tuck it back into the pocket in my bag. "I'm going to have a look around. Dad will be here soon, so..." I can't bring myself to tell them to go ahead and leave, so instead, I half-ass it. "Thanks for the ride. It was good seeing you guys even if... Well, you know what I mean." I bounce my gaze between Remy and Felix. It stinks that Grayson isn't here, but it's okay too.

Remy actually rolls his eyes at me and opens his door to exit. "I don't know why you keep thinking you're getting rid of us," he replies. I'm at a complete loss for how to respond. "I'm going to get offended. Are you coming?" he adds, which spurs me into action.

I notice a few heads turn in our direction as we approach the library steps. I don't know if it's because they know what happened inside, or if it's just Remy drawing their attention. He's always been a big deal around here, but I'm sure the fact that he plays ball professionally adds to that. Felix joins us near the front walk.

"The librarian didn't think he was inside when she locked up for lunch. I need to see if there's another way he might have gotten in." Most private and public buildings have protection sigils over doors and windows, or the entire property might be protected, such as the guys' house, but I have a feeling the symbols here lost their potency a long time ago or were annulled. It's not uncommon in places like this, especially since it's so close to the school and kids might have snuck in and out of here over the years.

Remy and Felix follow me without instruction, each of them looking at the building for any weak spots. "Do you guys know Ms. Miller?" I look back at them as we make our way around the stone structure.

"Never met her, but Grayson probably did," Remy supplies. I nod. That makes sense if he's the mayor. The library is technically owned by the town, even though it was built along with the school. I'm still blown away he's the mayor.

“How did that happen anyway?” I tuck my hair back. I shouldn’t be asking this question, but I want to know.

“Him meeting her? No clue. I’m just assuming.” Remy steps up near a window and tries to push it open from the outside.

“No, Grayson becoming the mayor.”

“Oh, that.” Remy gives up when the window doesn’t budge.

“An unyielding sense of duty?” Felix offers, which makes Remy snort.

“Try his mom guilted him into it after Winston left town. Dude finally grew some balls and ended up screwing over the one person who had his back.” It’s clear Remy thinks Winston left his issues on Grayson, but I always thought Winston really wanted to be a part of this town. I’m sure leaving was hard on him, or maybe I’m just projecting my own feelings onto the situation.

“You said he was a big guy, right? So he probably wouldn’t have fit through there.” Felix points to one of the lower-level windows. The glass is broken out of half of the small window. I don’t think I could even fit through the gap without getting cut up.

I crouch down to get a better look. There’s some hair or fur stuck to the sharp edges in a few spots, making me think the broken window isn’t a new addition and that something has been using it to come and go for a long time. I grab a tuft of dark, silky fur and rub it between my fingers.

The magic it’s imbued with reaches out to me, and the next thing I know, I’m on my ass and looking up at a perplexed Felix. I glance at Remy and ask, “What just happened?”

He looks half pissed and half freaked out. “You grabbed something and flew back about three yards. Can you stand?” He reaches for my arm before I can respond and picks me up off the ground. I look around, and I am indeed several feet away from the window.

The fur I was touching is gone, but I can still feel the lingering effects of the magic on my fingers, making them all tingly.

“Does this kind of shit happen to you all the time when you’re working? What if you were alone?” Remy demands. I don’t even think my feet are touching the ground. I can feel his hard body against mine. The dampness of sweat under my clothes makes my shirt cling to my stomach, and his too, so I can feel every ridge of his abs.

*Great. I wait all these years for my witch, and all she can think about is bonking the ogre.*

“Pardon?” I’m looking at Remy, and I know the voice didn’t come from him, but what other explanation is there?

“She needs a healer.” He turns and lugs me down the grassy hill at a surprisingly quick pace.

“Wait,” Felix calls.

I look back at him and note the creature near the window. It must have just arrived. There is no way I would have missed its long, silky body. “Remy,” I whisper.

*I know I’m a sight, but collect yourself, child,* it scolds.

“Remy,” I say again, louder this time, and he finally slows and looks down at me. When he sees my face, he turns to follow my gaze.

“Is that a rat?” Remy’s lip lifts in a sneer.

*Imbecile, I’m a mink.*

I look at Remy to see if he’s going to react to the insult, but he didn’t even hear it. Only I did. “Shit!”

*Such a lady,* the little bugger snipes.

“Hey!” I plant my hands on my hips and give the little beastly a scowl.

“Hey what?” Remy looks around.

I point down at the creature, and he stands on his back legs. I watch his little nose and whiskers twitch as he scents the air. *I guess it could be worse,* I hear before he drops back down, apparently not impressed with me. *Nearly eight years old, and I get paired with a lustful baby witch.*

“I am not,” I scoff. Remy’s brows lift higher and higher on his forehead as he grows more confused by what he thinks is my one-sided conversation.

“Am not what?” he asks slowly.

“A lustful baby witch,” I answer without thinking about how it might sound.

*Are too. I can smell you from here,* the mink replies.

I squeeze my thighs together. “You don’t smell so hot yourself,” I retort, even though I can’t smell anything foul coming from him.

Felix scratches the side of his head, and a grin tugs at the corner of his mouth. If I didn’t know better, I would think he can hear the little bugger, but he must be reacting to what I foolishly blurted.

“What am I missing?” Remy asks Felix.

“I think Frankie just found her familiar.” He points down to the animal Remy mistakenly called a rat.

“No shit?” Remy takes another look at the mink. I hate to admit it, only

because he seems like an asshole, but he's quite beautiful, all sleek and shiny with dark little eyes that seem way too smart.

"It's a weasel?" Remy tilts his head to the side.

"Mink," Felix, myself, and the animal all correct at the same time.

"Looks like a weasel or a ferret," Remy comments. "What's its name?" He moves a little closer and crouches down like he might try to pet it.

"I wouldn't..." I start, but he doesn't listen.

My familiar lowers its body to the ground but lifts his head as if he's going to sniff Remy. As Remy reaches out, the little fucker strikes and bites the tip of Remy's finger. "Ouch!" Remy jerks back, but then he reaches for the mink again, probably ready to strangle the thing this time.

It makes a hissing sound and backs away. "Aw, you scared it," Felix coos.

"Scared him? How?" Remy demands, squeezing the tip of his finger. Several drops of red blood fall to the ground. I use the bottom of my shoes to rub it into the soil. We don't need someone coming along and finding it. I'm sure it would sell for thousands. I can think of about twenty spells and hexes it could be used for. A personalized love potion comes to the forefront of my mind, even though they are outlawed.

"I tried to warn you," I mutter.

"Imagine if you were him, and a huge guy came along and shoved his meat mitt in your face." Felix keeps his voice low, coaxing.

*I might like this one...if he stops acting like I'm a domesticated feline!* the mink hisses, causing Felix to jerk back this time.

"You got a name, sassy britches?" I take a few steps closer to the beast. As near as I am, I can see a few stark white hairs blending into his chestnut fur.

*Percival Prodders*, he states proudly. It almost looks as if he lowers his head a bit in introduction.

I'm taken aback that such a little guy would have such a big name. "It's nice to meet you, Percival. My name is Frankie." I extend my hand out toward him, palm down and fingers relaxed. His nose twitches as he sniffs me. After an extended moment, he moves closer and actually bumps his cheek against my knuckles a little like a cat might.

"Well, at least he likes you," Felix comments.

*I'll reserve judgment on that.*

I snicker at Percival's comment. He's about as friendly as a honey

badger. He actually reminds me a lot of Mickey—old and grumpy.

*Aren't you going to ask me about the window?*

“Uh, sure. What can you tell me about the window?” I swear it looks as if he rolls his beady little eyes.

*The meat bag didn't use it,* Percival deadpans.

“I kind of figured that. It's too small for him. Do you know how he got in?” I inquire.

*No, I was sleeping. All the commotion upstairs is what woke me.*

“What's he saying?” Remy questions.

“He doesn't know how the victim got in. Did you see or hear anyone else?” I ask Percival after answering Remy.

*Just the caretaker.* Percival turns and scampers back toward the window.

“The librarian, Belinda? Where are you going?” I call.

*To gather my things. Unless you're homeless and we need to reside here.*

He says the second part skeptically, like he may have been teasing but now he thinks it might be true.

“I'm not homeless,” I defend. “I have an apartment.” I don't know why, but I look at Remy and Felix as if they were the ones who asked. When I look back down, Percival is gone. I'm assuming he went in through the window.

“Pretty neat that you found your familiar. It's like you're meant to be here.” Felix shoves his hands into his front pockets and gazes at me. I don't know how to respond to that, other than I like his comment a little too much, if the giddy butterflies in my stomach are any indication.

“Too bad he's as mean as Remy's aunt.” I tip my head toward Remy with a grin. “I bet they would be the perfect match.”

“No wonder you tried to warn me,” Remy mutters.

## CHAPTER 16

SOME DAYS, THE SUPPLY OF CURSE WORDS AVAILABLE IS INSUFFICIENT TO MEET MY DEMANDS.

*W*e wait around for a few minutes before Percival pokes his head out of the broken window. I wince at how close he is to the sharp glass.

*Are you going to put these two to use and help me gather my things, or do I have to do everything myself?* he asks impatiently.

“How was I supposed to know you wanted help? How much stuff are we talking about here? It’s not that big of an apartment,” I confess, not looking at the guys.

I hear a string of mumblings I can’t make out, but I don’t think any of the words coming from the mink are flattering. “We’ll come inside. Would that work?” I inquire, trying to sound kinder.

“What are you three doing?” Dad asks with a little huff from walking up the hill. “I was on the porch waiting for you.”

*Oh great, it’s Casanova. Now I know where you get it,* Percival spouts.

“Get what?” I should learn to keep my mouth shut.

*The lasciviousness,* Percival quips. He rises onto his back legs again and scents the air. *Father, right?*

“Oh no, stop that.” I shake my head and back away from my dad and the mink. “I don’t want to hear about that!”

“Who the hell is she talking to?” Dad asks, bewildered.

“Her familiar.” Felix uses one hand to cover what I think is a smile and the other to point at the animal.

Dad looks down. “That’s great, kiddo!” He pops me on the back, and I stumble forward a little. I appreciate the fact that he treats me like one of the boys—most of the time. “A mink, huh? A little unusual, but still perfectly acceptable.”

*Acceptable?* Percival questions snootily. *This coming from a man who spreads more pheromones than a gypsy moth?*

I stomp my foot on the ground. “Come on, Percival, I don’t want to hear this stuff.”

*Six more months without a witch, and I probably would have died*

*peacefully, but now I have to deal with this and she doesn't want to hear it.* He scurries back into the lower level of the library.

I look up to see all three men staring at me. "We should head inside, he... he asked for help moving his things."

"What was he saying that you didn't want to hear?" Remy questions as we make our way back to the front of the building.

"Traumatizing crap I don't want to think about or repeat," I mutter as Dad unlocks the door to the library. I hear Felix chuckle, but when I glare at him, his face is a mask of innocence.

Dad pushes the doors open, and the smell that belches out is even worse than yesterday.

"Hexing hell." Remy nearly gags as he waves his hand in front of his face to dispel some of the odor. You'd think removing the body would have helped, but there was a lot of blood and gore left behind. I don't envy whoever has to clean this place. I bet the smell has seeped into all the books.

"You guys can wait out here," I offer, keeping my upper lip stiff, even though I want to cover my nose.

"We're fine." Felix swats Remy's back, silently telling him to toughen up.

"Don't puke on my scene, Broussard," Dad chastises.

"I'm not going to puke." He lifts his chin, and although he still looks a little green, it's a matter of pride now, so I know there's no way he's going to hurl.

"Why don't you guys go see if you can help Percival? We really can't have you upstairs anyway. Having too many people on the scene can contaminate it." Feeling bad, I offer them an out. I remember the first time I was on a bad one, it's not fun. I could see the room when I closed my eyes, and the phantom odor of decay hounded me for days.

"I'm fine," Remy replies.

"I know you're fine, but I could use your help with the mink, plus I still need to know if there is any other way to get in the building. You'd be helping me." I'm not just placating him, it really would be a help.

"We'll head downstairs and keep our eyes open for anything that might be out of the norm." Felix steps in front of Remy, holding my gaze. He's more confident, sure of himself. I like all the new little things I'm learning about him. Too bad I can't say the same for Grayson.

"Thanks," I tell him softly.



“You ready to head up?” Dad asks after a prolonged moment of silence.

“Yeah, yeah, let’s see what we can sort out.” I push away old regrets and focus on why I’m here in the first place.

When we reach the top of the stairs, I tell Dad, “Felix pointed out something strange in one of the photos.” Dad gives me the eye. “I know, I know. I shouldn’t have let them see the pictures, but you don’t have much room to talk.” It’s a little bit of a low blow, but it’s also the truth.

“Go on,” he encourages, dropping the fact that both of us messed up.

“There’s a break in the blood pattern, like something might have been moved after the incident. I wanted to check it out and see if we can figure out what’s been moved. It might be a clue, or maybe we’ll get really lucky and it will give us a motive.”

“Lead the way.” Dad lifts his arm after giving me a nod. I know he wants this solved even more than I do, especially since his girlfriend might be in the middle of it.

I survey the scene, wishing I’d grabbed my bag from the car. I’m not in top form. Being around the guys has definitely scrambled my brain cells *and* reminded me how much I miss sex. Who am I kidding? I only miss sex with them. It’s not like I haven’t had the opportunity with others, but I always find a reason to walk away before it gets to that point.

“Where was it, Frankie?” Dad asks, and I realize I’ve just been standing in the same spot daydreaming for several long seconds.

“Sorry, I’m trying to think. I left the photo in the car,” I hedge, even though I know it’s not the truth. “Over this way, right near the edge of the splatter.” I make my way across the room, watching the floor. I’ll know the spot when I see it. Sure enough, the clean right angle shows up not too far from where I expected it to be.

“See this here?” I point down and look around for what could have been blocking the blood splatter. The only thing it might have been is one of the many heavy bookshelves lined up in even rows.

Upon closer inspection, I see the nearest shelf is slightly out of line with the one across from it. “That definitely didn’t occur naturally, it’s too smooth,” Dad surmises after inspecting the area.

“You know, I don’t remember anything being up here but the shelves and old tables and chairs. Ms. Miller said all the furniture was moved out, so that leaves just the shelves.” I walk over to the one that seems slightly out of place and take a good look at the bottom to see if there’s any blood, but it’s

as clean as a whistle. I mean, there isn't even a speck of dust along the bottom row of books.

"What are you looking at?" Dad walks over and examines what I'm inspecting.

"Are all the shelves this clean?" I ask while already moving to examine another. Dad heads in the opposite direction, and after a few passes on either side, we make eye contact. "Does it seem strange to you how clean all these shelves are?"

"A bit, yeah," he admits reluctantly.

"Someone did some tidying up after the fact."

"It looks that way." Dad plants his hands on his waist and drops a heavy curse.

## CHAPTER 17

PROFESSOR GREEN IN THE LIBRARY WITH A PIPE  
WRENCH.

“*I* know she didn’t have anything to do with it, Frankie,” Dad tells me for what must be the third time.

“Okay, then let’s figure out who did,” I reply, speaking the words slowly so hopefully they will sink in.

I hear distant chattering and look over the railing to view the main floor. The sound of echoed footsteps comes next. Felix and Remy are walking down a hall, each holding tattered boxes filled to the brim with...well, junk. From here, it looks like trinkets and baubles, most of them shiny yet old or damaged in some way.

*Careful, you nitwits.* Felix looks over his shoulder and gives Percival a scowl. In return, the mink makes a little screech-like noise that resonates through the large space.

“Thanks, guys. You can put it all in Dad’s truck.” I wave over the railing.

“It’d be better in the dumpster,” Remy mumbles loud enough to be heard by everyone—including Percival.

*Try it, you overgrown stump weed. I’ll chew through your Achilles tendon and hollow out your body for my new den.*

“Percival!” I snort, half laughing and half outraged at the imagery, not that I think he could take Remy down, but it’s funny to hear from such a small creature.

*He refused to carry half my things. I need my things.* Percival sounds more worried than angry.

I get a sudden pang in my chest. I have a little experience with picking up and starting over. If having more of his crap will make him feel better, then so be it. “We’ll get the rest of your stuff, just stop threatening to kill him, okay?”

Remy stops dead in his tracks and looks down at the small animal. “Vicious thing, huh? Good, she needs all the help she can get. I’ll get your shit,” he tells Percival. Men baffle me sometimes. That was not the outcome I expected.

All three of them head out of the front door, pretty much ignoring my

presence. Felix makes sure to hold the door open for Percival, but the little bugger is so quick, he slipped out the door right after Remy without any issue, leaving Felix to look around for him.

“I screwed this up good,” Dad says, pulling my attention back to the murder at hand.

“Nah, we’ll figure it out, Pop. We just need to look at the evidence.” For his sake, I hope he’s wrong. I hope I’m wrong too, because I have a suspicion Ms. Miller has more to do with this than she’s admitting.

Dad’s phone rings, and he plucks it off his hip. “Yeah?” A few seconds pass as he listens to the caller, then he asks, “Where?” There’s another lapse, and he nearly growls, “I’ll be right there. Stall.”

“What’s going on?” I ask the moment he ends the call.

“Scotty just pulled over a car with out of state plates for speeding, and they are heading out of town.”

“And?” I prompt.

Dad starts heading down the stairs. “And he has no ID or paperwork for the vehicle. When Scotty pressed him, he admitted he borrowed the car from a friend, but can’t tell us his name or how to reach him.”

“You think it’s a stolen car?” I ask, following after him.

“Could be, but Scotty also mentioned the guy is dressed like the decedent, with a full suit and tie. Our mayor doesn’t even wear a suit.” Dad lifts his hand as if to indicate Grayson, who is now standing near Felix and Remy in a pair of dark blue slacks and a white button-up shirt. I have no idea how or when he got here. All three of them are looking in my direction—make that four, including Percival.

It takes me a minute to regain my bearings after looking at them. “Wait, you think it has something to do with this?”

“It would make a hell of a lot more sense than thinking Belinda did,” Dad quips.

I reach for Dad’s arm and pull back a little so he’s forced to look at me. “You can’t go in with assumptions.” I stare right into his eyes, hoping he will see reason. One of his shoulders sags, and I take it as my opening. “Let me talk to him,” I offer.

“Talk to who?” Grayson stalks over with a scowl on his face. Great, he’s pissed again. I thought things were okay when he left earlier. Yeah, it was a little abrupt, but I thought we were good.

“I don’t have time for this,” Dad says before jogging over to his truck and

hopping in.

“Damnit! Remy, we need to follow him.” I’m already running to the SUV. Felix shuts the hatch on the back and scoops up Percival. The animal seems about as shocked as I am, but he doesn’t attack Felix for it, so that’s good.

“Where is he going?” Remy demands, starting the car as I slide into the backseat.

“A traffic stop, but I don’t know where.” Felix places Percival on the seat between us.

*A little warning would be nice next time.* Percival curls into a ball like a cat and settles.

“Sorry, I knew we were in a hurry and just reacted,” Felix offers.

I turn my head slowly to face Felix. He pushes his glasses up the bridge of his nose and blinks at me a little owlshly. “You can hear him,” I accuse. There’s no way he responded so perfectly to Percival any other way. “How can you hear him?”

“That’s bullshit, and you didn’t tell me?” Remy looks over his shoulder at Felix with a scowl. “What did he say about me?” His tone is much lighter for the second question.

“Watch the road. I need to make sure Pop doesn’t make a mistake,” I instruct Remy.

Grayson turns so he’s looking right at Percival.

*How many men do you consort with?*

“Three,” I answer without thought. “I mean none.”

*Are humans really so daft? I can smell you all over them, and them on you.* If minks can roll their eyes, he just rolled his eyes at me.

“It’s complicated,” I defend.

“Why can’t we hear him?” Grayson asks Remy.

*This one’s bond is stronger,* Percival replies, but I keep the response to myself, even though I look over at Felix.

With subtle movements so as not to disturb Percival between us, Felix wraps his pinky around mine, looks straight ahead, and tells Remy, “You’re going to lose him if you don’t speed up.”

My head hits the seat behind me when Remy smashes the gas pedal. “This conversation isn’t over,” he states but remains quiet after.

## CHAPTER 18

MY BRAIN HAS TOO MANY TABS OPEN.

“*R*ight up there.” I needlessly point to Dad’s truck pulling up behind a patrol car. There’s a black coupe pulled to the side of the road in front of it. The brake lights flare for a brief second before the vehicle takes off, kicking up dirt and pebbles from the shoulder of the road.

Dad, who was already getting out of his truck, hops back in, hits his flashers, and peels out, giving chase to the car. Remy reacts without me telling him to and does the same, while Scotty stays parked on the shoulder of the road.

“Should have told Scotty to tag the car,” I mumble, wishing we had the forethought to disable the electronics with a charm, but you need cause for something like that. Good news is Dad has it now, so as long as he can get close enough, he can send out a spell. Taggers are standard issue on police vehicles, but landing a spell while speeding isn’t an easy thing to do.

“What is he waiting for?” Grayson grabs a hold of the handle near the windshield like he can’t sit still. Seconds later, I feel the disabling spell land. A tiny tremor of a shockwave passes through me, and Grayson jerks his head to the left to look back. Our eyes connect, and it’s like it was earlier at the house. He doesn’t seem angry, and he appears more like the person I used to know.

He blinks after a short second and braces himself as Remy slams on the brakes to park next to my dad. We all sit frozen for a moment until I release Felix’s fingers and announce, “Stay in the car.”

All three of them open their doors before I have the chance to open mine. “I should have known that wouldn’t work,” I mumble.

Patting my breastbone, I feel the lump of my necklace under my shirt. It does a whole lot more than work as a barrier for my mind, it’s also imbued with protection spells straight from the MBI archives that are so secret, they are inaccessible until you graduate from the academy. Even then, they are strictly monitored.

“What are you doing?” Remy angles himself so he’s in front of me when I try to pass him.



“My job,” I tell him and move to the side again.

“I’m not letting you walk up there. I don’t even know what the fuck is going on.” His eyes are a little wild, almost panicked.

Dad ignores us and unholsters his weapon. It’s most likely loaded with nonlethal rounds, but they are still strong enough to disable most, unless they are loaded with illegal defensive spells. “Put your hands outside of the vehicle,” he demands.

Nothing happens, and Dad gives the instructions again, this time louder with a little more edge in his tone. After a brief pause, I see a hand reach out of the window, then another.

“Open the door from the outside,” Dad shouts. Keeping his gun in his right hand, he uses his left hand to pull thin iron cuffs from his belt. The metal is deceptively strong, even though it looks delicate, but more importantly, it will block the wearer from casting any spells or using their natural abilities while wearing them.

After giving the man in the car several more instructions, which he follows, Dad extends the cuffs out to his side and wiggles them in a clear call for assistance. I try to push past Remy, but Grayson jogs up to Dad while Remy blocks my path.

“You’re really not going to let me do my job?” I snap.

Dad looks at Grayson, then back at me. “Let her go. She knows what she’s doing.” Dad jiggles the cuffs in his hand again.

I finally push past an irritated Remy and avoid Grayson to grab the cold metal from Dad. “MBI agent,” I announce as I approach the guy lying face-first on the ground after all Dad’s instructions. “Put your hands behind you and lace your fingers together.”

The man does as he’s told, not even looking over his shoulder to acknowledge me as I approach. “I want a lawyer,” are his first words.

“For a failure to yield at a traffic stop?” I try to make light of what he’s done. Maybe it will get me more information. “Lift your arms please.” A little niceness can go a long way too, and I’m all about using the tools at my disposal.

That has him turning his head and looking at me. I meet his eyes, keeping my expression calm. After a brief second, he lifts his hands a few inches off his back with his fingers still laced, allowing me to slip one of the cuffs easily over his wrist, and then the other, barely even touching his skin.

Once he’s secured, I step back and ask, “Do you need help getting up?”

The man rolls over to his side and moves smoothly into a sitting position. It's not his first time in cuffs, if I had to guess.

"You going to pick me up all by yourself?" He looks me up and down and gives me a little bit of a flirty grin, but his eyes are flat and cold.

"Why'd you run?" Dad demands before I can answer, then he reaches under the guy's armpit and assists him to his feet. Once he's standing, I can take in his presence better as Dad pats him down for weapons or spells. He's a few inches taller than me and wider, but nowhere near close to the size of the guy from the library. His dark suit has a few scuffs and some debris from the ground, but it looks clean and well fitted otherwise. His shoulders are relaxed, as is his jaw. The only thing that gives him away are his eyes. The hue is a soft brown, but they are as flat and as lifeless as I've ever seen.

"Lawyer," the guy repeats, not even bothering to look at Dad.

"Sure, right after I figure out exactly what I'm charging you with." Dad hooks his hand in the man's inner elbow and tugs until he's frog-marching the man back to his truck. He opens the rear door for him and demands, "Have a seat."

The guy ducks his head and slides smoothly into the back and looks straight ahead. The brief once-over he gave me has been the only show of character, and it was probably faked to get a response from me.

Dad reaches into the front of the truck and unhooks his radio from the dash. "I need a squad car with a cage on Highway 37, near the Hasting place, north side of the road." Once the static clears, he gets a response.

"Officer Moore en route. ETA seven minutes." The static picks up again, and Dad replaces the handheld on his dash.

Grayson, Felix, and Remy have all migrated over to Dad's truck, and they are taking turns examining the man and me. It's the first time they've ever really seen me work or anything close to it, and I feel a strange sense of pride. Dad trusted me to get the man locked down, and I did it. Even though the guy presented with no problems, you never know what's going to happen, so the kick of adrenaline that fired up my system is still bouncing through my veins. I can think of a lot of ways to use it, none of them appropriate for our current circumstances, considering my dad is here and he has a suspect in custody, but that doesn't stop me from fantasizing.

I bet the back of the SUV is big enough for at least two or three of us if we really tried. We've made do with smaller.

*Hexes, witch! Can you not handle your sexual impulses?* I hear Percival

before I see him. *One would assume that finding the dead man's companion would momentarily curb your urges*, the little prude chastises.

“Oh shut up. I’m not doing anything about it, am I?” I glance at Felix to gauge his reaction, knowing he can hear Percival. This is so embarrassing, but Felix is a total gentleman and pretends he can’t hear my mink calling me a slut puppy.

Once my familiar is visible, I take a few steps closer to him and grate out, “Can you not comment on that kind of stuff, please? It’s not like I can control my biological reactions.”

*I suppose*, he agrees with a sigh, as if I’m asking so much of him. *I do forget how unrefined human senses are. To me, I’m just stating the obvious.* I do believe there was an insult in that statement, however, I’ll take it if it gets him to shut up about my sex life—or lack thereof.

Now that I’m not so focused on my mortification, I can concentrate on what Percival said. “You know this guy?” I ask, using my head to gesture to Dad’s truck.

*No, never seen him.* Percival wiggles his little nose. It’s a good thing he’s so damned cute.

“But I thought you said he was *the dead man's companion*,” I reply, trying to mimic Percival’s rather formal tone.

*I did*, he states.

I pinch my temples with one hand, shielding my eyes. “Can you explain why you think the men knew each other then?”

*I really don't know how you get on without us!* Percival’s tone would suggest he’s exasperated. *Their scents are mingled, not as much as yours and your trove of men, but enough to know they spent long spans of time together.*

I look over at the guy in Dad’s truck. He’s completely relaxed, and I wonder if he knows his friend is dead or if he had something to do with it.

“Thanks, Percival.” I make sure he knows I’m grateful, even if he insulted me while helping.

## CHAPTER 19

## JUST THE TIP.

*I* keep the information from Percival to myself as Dad starts asking the man about his identification. “I’m going to need some form of ID if you want that lawyer, otherwise I’ll hold you until I can sort out your identity.”

“I don’t have an ID,” the man says, sounding bored.

“You have nothing that will tell me your name?” Dad asks skeptically.

“Other than my word, no.”

“Okay, name and birthdate?” Dad questions routinely, as if he’s not expecting the guy to tell the truth.

“Mark LaPointe,” he answers, then rattles off some numbers I don’t catch. Dad makes a note of it on his notepad.

“Why did you leave the traffic stop before Officer Baldwin released you?”

“I gave you my name, now I want a lawyer,” Mark, if we believe that’s his name, answers.

A squad car pulls up from the opposite direction and blocks off most of the road, though it’s not a heavily traveled one. Dad motions for Mark to slide out of his truck as the arriving officer gets out of his patrol car and opens the rear door. “I did a quick pat down, but he needs to be searched at the station,” Dad tells the officer, then adds, “I need to take care of this car. Make sure our guest is comfortable until I get back to the station to talk to him.”

The cop, who I’m assuming is Officer Moore, nods his head in understanding, then he checks to make sure Mark is all tucked into the backseat behind the cage before closing the door and facing my dad again. “I’ll call ahead and let them know I’m on my way so they will be ready to assist.” The cop is young, probably my age, but he’s not anyone I know.

“Good. Call Scotty in too, I told him to hang back when I pursued the car, and I want all hands on deck. Something doesn’t feel right with this one.” Dad sets his gaze on Mark, who’s now locked up in the back of the patrol car. I’d have to agree. He’s too cold, too calm, and it makes me feel like he knows something we don’t.

As the squad car drives away, Dad pulls out his cell phone and makes a call. "Hey, JJ, I need you to haul a vehicle over to the yard for an impound." JJ runs the only service station in town. At least I'll be able to find out if Remy had my car towed. If he didn't, I'm betting Mickey probably did, the cagey old broad. I don't think Dad had the time to cruise by her place to check before coming to the library to let me in early.

Dad gives JJ our location and hangs up. Before he even tucks the phone back in his pocket, he's approaching the late model two door and ducking his head inside to start a preliminary search. He hits the button to pop the trunk, and I'm not the only one drawn over to see what we can find.

"Wait," I caution Remy when he reaches for a small duffle bag. "Any of this stuff could be spelled. The charm to kill the electronics and shut down the car wouldn't have cleared anything else."

"What are you doing? You just told him not to touch it," Grayson demands when I go to reach for the same bag.

"I have protection spells, plus it's my job, my risk to take." I meet his stare. I'm not sure why he even spoke up. You'd think he would be happy if I pulled a spell, since it would save him from having to deal with me.

"Can't you tell if there's a spell?" Felix asks, nudging his way between Grayson and Remy.

"Most of the time, but you know how some charms work. They have to be engaged with a catalyst. Hence the protection." I wiggle my fingers, showing off my rings.

"Somebody else should be doing this, someone more qualified." Grayson looks at my dad. "Are you going to let her do this?" His eyes are wide, almost like he's nervous.

"Nothing is going to happen to you, but step back if you're worried," I mutter, then grab the bag out of the trunk. A hand wraps around the handle right next to mine and tugs the strap clear from my fingers. When I look over my shoulder, Grayson is holding the bag and breathing hard.

"What the hell?" I ask angrily, even though the brief touch was enough to know the bag isn't spelled.

"I thought you were going to drop it," Grayson says after a tiny pause. He looks around at everyone staring at him. It's clear none of us believe him, but he pretends we do.

"Give me the damn thing," Dad urges and reaches out to nab the duffle from Grayson. "Go stand over there, son, before you get somebody hurt."

Dad is in full boss mode. He would give me the same tone when I did something wrong as a kid. He may be a softy, but you don't become the chief of police without the ability to intimidate. Problem is, Grayson isn't a kid, nor does he work for him. However, the respect he holds for my dad must be enough to get him to listen, because he walks back toward the SUV without a word in response.

"I thought you were supposed to be the hardhead?" Dad glances at Remy, who shrugs his shoulders.

"I'm privy to more information than he is. I've had time to come to terms with the situation."

"What *information* and *situation* are you referring to?" I ask Remy.

"I was expecting more than..." Felix pauses and waves his hand near his face. "Dirty laundry." The comment makes me look at the bag Dad now has spread open on the asphalt instead of pushing Remy for the answer to my question.

Dad pulls a pen from his front pocket and uses the covered end to move things around and lift items from the bag. "Oh, that's nasty." I wrinkle my nose at a pair of boxers that look like they'd seen better days a decade ago.

There are two more bags in the trunk. One is a large garment bag that looks kind of bulky, but I don't get to inspect it because JJ pulls up in his old blue car hauler. He grins when our eyes meet and hops down out of the cab. "Frankie Bishop," he drawls.

"Hey, JJ." I wave almost shyly. I used to have the biggest crush on him when I was a kid. He's at least ten years older than me, but that didn't stop me from daydreaming when I was eight, before I realized I already had three of the best guys a girl could want for playing in my backyard.

Remy steps in front of me as JJ opens his arms and steps forward like he might give me a hug. "You've still got a thicket of boys surrounding you." He chuckles.

"Not boys," Felix corrects.

"Knock off the bullshit and get my car hooked up, JJ. You three drive Frankie back to the station," Dad grumbles.

JJ grabs the bill of his worn-out ball cap and tips his head to Dad, then he sends a wink in my direction. I can't help it, I giggle. He's still handsome in that rough, dirty hands, torn jeans way, but I know he could never hold a candle to any of the three guys I still think about way too often.

As we walk back to the SUV, I see Remy looking over his shoulder. He's

probably giving JJ the evil eye, and that makes me smile too. Looks like I'm not the only one who still gets jealous.

It's only once I'm in the car that I realize I've been bamboozled again. I should have just rode with Dad. When I groan, Grayson peers back at me. "Did you just notice the ring? He's married with two kids."

I'm sure my face is a mask of confusion when I mutter, "Huh?"

"His wife wouldn't be happy to know you were ogling her husband," Grayson continues, and I realize he must be talking about JJ.

"I wasn't *ogling* him," I defend indignantly.

"Sure looked like it to me." He crosses his arms over his chest.

"You should probably get your eyes checked then," I mumble sullenly. First, Grayson accuses me of molesting Felix, now he thinks I'm a home-wrecking floozy because I smiled at someone. My anger rises with every second that passes. By the time we get to the police station, I'm about ready to rip his head off or scream in his face. Neither are appropriate or worth my time. I can't control the way he feels about me. Now, if only I could make my heart stop caring so much about what he thinks, his words might not hurt so badly.

I take a deep breath to ensure my voice comes out even when I say, "Thank you for the ride. Sorry this was so...disruptive. I'll see you around."

Felix grabs my hand before I can get out of the backseat. "We're not letting go so easily this time, Frankie."

I frown at his words.

"What else do you want?" I glance around but skip my gaze quickly over Grayson.

"We still have more to talk about," Remy chimes in.

I see Dad pull into his reserved parking space, and it's the only excuse I need to get out of the car. I tug my fingers from Felix's, even though I really don't want to lose the physical contact. "You should have thought about that earlier. I need to get to work," I reply. This time, I don't hesitate to climb out of the SUV. I have a small, giddy feeling in my stomach that makes me want to hurl. Knowing they still want to talk to me, see me, shouldn't make me so damn happy, but it does. I need to get the hell out of this town.

Dad stands by the side of his truck, waiting. His expression says too many things and asks too many questions I don't have the answers to. "Let's focus on the case. Personal stuff later," I tell him, repeating his words from earlier. Hexes, that feels like a lifetime ago, not this morning. He gives me a stiff



nod, and I know I bought myself a little more time.

Walking into the lobby of the small police precinct, I'm hit with so many memories all triggered by the smell of burnt coffee and the aroma of artificial pine trees. I get a warm feeling in my stomach. This place was my second, maybe third home when I was a kid. I knew every desk that hid candy in its drawers and where to find the fire prevention coloring books. Fire safety is a big deal when you have twelve-year-old kids setting circles and pulling magic.

Everything looks exactly the same at first glance, but then I notice the little things—new computers, and a fresh coat of the same light green paint to cover the black smudges left behind from the chairs rubbing against the wall.

Deloris' desk is still standing sentry, along with the half wooden fence separating the lobby from the desks in the back. Dad is the only one with a real office, but he rarely uses it. When I would come in, I always found him sitting behind one of the front desks with his team.

Scotty is the only one around. He walks over and opens the little gate, beckoning us to enter. "Hey, Frankie, good to see you." His eyes crinkle around a genuine smile as he greets me.

"You too. How are the boys and Cat?"

"Getting too big too fast. You want to see?" He pulls his phone from his back pocket and opens the photos before I can even respond.

"This is them?" I look up at Scotty. When I left, the twins were still little guys. I babysat for them a few times, but now I wouldn't even recognize them if they walked past me.

"I know, I swear they eat more than my mortgage payment." He grins proudly.

"I bet, tell Cat I said hello."

"Will do, it sure is nice having you home. I know your dad is happier than a pig in shit." He whispers the last part conspiratorially.

"I heard that!" Dad hollers from the coffee maker. The smell alone is enough to get my feet moving in his direction. It's late for me to have caffeine, and I shouldn't have any, but there's no way I'm strong enough not to, plus it might help clear my head.

## CHAPTER 20

HOLD ON... LET ME OVERTHINK THIS.

“*M*onroe and Charlie did a full search. The guy didn’t have anything but a pocketknife and some cash, a lot of cash, but nothing else. I booked it into evidence,” Scotty informs Dad after he sits on the edge of one of the empty desks.

“Has he said anything besides asking for a lawyer?” Dad sips from his mug.

“Nope, he hasn’t said a word.”

“What about when you pulled him over?” Dad questions.

“I didn’t think he was going to stop when I lit him up,” Scotty tells us. “He actually sped up for a second, but then he changed his mind and pulled to the side of the road. When I approached the window, he had both hands on the wheel and a chip on his shoulder. You could tell it wasn’t his first rodeo with the police.

“He wouldn’t produce a license, and the out of state plates sent up some red flags. I told him I was running the vehicle and walked back to the cruiser and called you. I pretended to be busy until you showed up, and you know the rest better than me,” Scotty finishes.

Dad stews on the little bit of information for a minute, then sets his mug down. “I’m going to do a probable cause search on the vehicle. I don’t want a lawyer coming in here and putting an injunction on it before I can get a better idea of why he ran in the first place.”

“I’ll join you,” I offer and follow him out of the back of the building. Hill Crest doesn’t impound many vehicles, not enough to have a dedicated yard for that sort of thing, so the cars are usually just towed to the back lot of the police station for the drivers to collect later.

JJ’s hauler is visible when we exit. Perfect, I forgot to ask about my car. As we approach, I see JJ working the levers on the side of his truck to lower the front end of the car. “She’s just about ready,” he announces.

“Hey, JJ.”

He turns when I call his name, and I get a good look at him. Now that I’m not wearing the rose-colored glasses of the past, I see him for the man he is today and not the guy I had a crush on as a kid. He’s still good-looking, but a

little of the shine has worn off. I think it has more to do with me being an adult than anything else.

“Did you pick up a car from Mickey’s place, a Dodge Charger?”

“No, can’t say I have.” He shakes his head. “You need me to run over there and hook it up?” He looks between me and Dad.

“No, no. It’s my car. I was worried Mickey might have called because I left it there overnight.”

“Nah, she’d probably push it into the street before calling me.” He grins.

I chuckle, accepting the truth of his words. “Well, if she does and you get a call, don’t take it to the junkyard. She may not look too pretty, but she still has a few miles left in her.”

“You’ve got it. How’s city life?”

Dad ignores us for the most part. He opens the driver’s door and kneels inside as he starts to rummage around. I’m only half paying attention to JJ as I answer, “Loud and smelly.”

“You’re right there. I took Beth over to Longport for our anniversary and it was fun, but I was happy to get home.”

His words sink into my skin a little deeper than I think he intended. It’s hard to forget how much I like my hometown when I’m standing smack in the middle of it. I plaster a placating smile on my lips. “I’m going to help Dad out. Thanks for watching out for my car.”

“Of course. Give me a call if you need anything else,” JJ says louder, talking more to Dad than me.

I make my way around to the passenger side of the car and focus my attention on the search. That has to be better than thinking about how much has changed and the fact that life just keeps moving forward, even without me.

Dad and I are both quiet as we perform the task. I search the glovebox and under the seat but come up empty. “This guy doesn’t even have a dime-store spell in here. It’s completely clean.”

“Nothing in the back either. Let’s sort the stuff in the trunk,” Dad grumbles as he pulls his head out from behind the front seat he pushed forward to get a look into the back. “You get anything from back here?” Dad motions to the now open trunk.

“Nothing active, but that doesn’t mean it’s clear.” I reach for the garment bag and unfold it so I can get to the zipper.

There’s a white button-up shirt on top of the pile. The sheer size of it

seems wrong for Mark. “This could be our victim’s.” I don’t want to pull it out and mar any trace DNA that Murrey might be able to get off it. Dad uses the tip of his ever ready pen to pull down the front collar to inspect the tag. “Why don’t we take this stuff inside where we can examine it better?”

Dad makes a grunting sound. “I thought we might find something more incriminating to hold him on. I’m not going to be able to keep him in custody longer than overnight once his lawyer gets here.”

“I’m not picking up on any sanctioned magic, but we might be able to prove he’s connected to our body if we can get Murrey to run a quick sample on these.” I motion to the clothes.

Dad zips the garment bag back up and gathers it along with the other bag before slamming the trunk closed. “I’ll let Scotty go over the car with a probe to see if he can pick up anything we missed.”

I follow him back into the building. He pauses at a door barred with a push pad numeral lock, then steps to the side so I can get to the pad. “Code same as it used to be?” I question. He nods in answer. “You should change it once in a while, Pop,” I caution. Hell, the seven and nine are barely visible anymore from repeated use. A quick charm reveal spell would show the other two numbers in the code, and then it would just be a matter of elimination for anyone to get inside the evidence lockup.

“What for? Plus, I’d probably forget it.” He motions for me to open the door again.

I enter the four-digit code, and the lock springs free. Their storage room is large, with metal shelving lining three of the four walls. There’s a small desk to the right of the door and a large table in the center of the room. Dad plops the bags on the table and reaches for a pair of blue gloves from a box on the shelf.

The gloves work as a barrier to keep any magic from touching his skin. Ambiguous magic needs something to latch onto to activate, like contact with a host. Magic cast with a purpose or a target needs a catalyst too, like a strand of hair or blood, if you want the spell to be really strong and focused on the intended recipient. The gloves will also keep any of his DNA from contaminating the items in the bag.

I slip on my own gloves as Dad starts to take everything out of the garment bag. The suits, which seem freshly laundered, are underwhelming to say the least. Even the pockets are empty. Our only saving grace is the sheer size of some of the items. They are way too big for Mark.

Dad moves on to the second bag. This one holds two shaving kits and what I'm guessing are dirty clothes. Dad plants both of his hands on the table and lowers his head. "If there's something here worth running for, I sure don't see it."

"Maybe that's why he decided to stop for Scotty." I sort through the shaving kits and pull out the razors. "These look used. Murrey should be able to compare the DNA and connect them if this stuff really does belong to the body. He also may get a solid identity for *Mark*."

Dad rips off his gloves and tosses them in a nearby bin. "I'll call him." His back is rigid as he exits the room, telling me he is pissed.

I leave everything on the table after giving it another thorough once-over. When I exit the room, the hall is empty, but I can hear voices, familiar voices. "You need to tell her. She isn't going to be happy when she finds out what you two have been up to." Dad has a slight edge to his tone.

"I keep trying, but the timing—"

"Is never right," Remy says, finishing Felix's sentence after a short pause.

"She's not going to care about timing, you morons. Just tell her." Dad turns the corner and comes face-to-face with me. I look at him for a long time. He knows something, something about the guys that involves me, and he didn't tell me. A sense of betrayal washes over me, making it hard to breathe.

I watch his face as his lips tighten and his eyes narrow, but he snaps his head to the left and sends his glare toward the room he exited. I push past him and level my own glare at Remy and Felix, who stare back with wide eyes. "Care to fill me in on what you were discussing?" My words are civil, but my tone is anything but.

Felix uses his pointer finger to push up his glasses. "I mentioned there was something we wanted to tell you."

"And?" I plant my hands on my hips. My feet hurt, I'm hungry again, and my emotions are all over the place. Whatever news he's about to deliver probably isn't going to make me feel better, considering how everyone seems to be avoiding it, but the Band-Aid needs to come off.

The front door of the station opens with a happy tinkle of bells, and a woman's voice can be heard calling out, "I want to speak with my client," in a no-nonsense manner.

"Hexes!" Dad growls. "Who let that man call his lawyer?"

Scotty pokes his head into the hall. "Chief, you better come out here."

“How’d he notify her?” Dad asks again, keeping his voice low.

“No idea.” Scotty looks over his shoulder before adding, “It’s Bonita Carter from Smithville.”

“What the hell?” Dad takes a few steps toward Scotty.

“Don’t keep me waiting, Chief. My client has rights that you are violating.”

“This isn’t over,” I snarl at Felix, then turn to walk into the lobby with my dad.

## CHAPTER 21



IT DEPENDS. EVERY LAWYER'S ANSWER.

“*T*ake me to my client,” Ms. Carter demands the moment she lays eyes on Dad.

“Who’s your client?” Dad crosses his arms over his chest.

“Don’t play coy with me, Chief. We know each other *far* too well for that.” She mimics Dad’s stance, and I want to vomit at the innuendo she put into her words.

“Not coy. The only person I have in custody is an unconfirmed Mark LaPointe, and since I haven’t been able to confirm his identity and he hasn’t had access to a phone, I’m wondering how you’re here.”

“And you know I don’t have to relay any information to you regarding my client, who, I can confirm, is indeed Mark LaPointe. Under what grounds are you holding him?”

“He was being detained until I could verify his identity,” Dad retorts.

“Is he under arrest?”

“He is now that I know who I’m charging.”

Ms. Carter narrows her eyes. “What are the charges?”

“Fleeing and eluding, driving without a license. I’ll have to review the footage, but I’m sure I have him on at least five other traffic violations.” Dad waves his hand in a welcoming gesture. “Let me take you to your client.”

Ms. Carter lifts her chin just a tiny bit and takes her eyes off Dad to focus on the long hallway he invited her down. As we approach the one interrogation room in the station, I get my first look at Mark since we arrived here. He’s sitting in a metal chair at a metal table, completely relaxed with the iron cuffs still around his wrists. Charlie is in the room with him, leaning against the wall and keeping his distance from the man.

“I want to speak with him alone, Marty,” Ms. Carter says when she sees who is in the room.

“Charlie,” Dad calls when he opens the door. “His lawyer is here.” Charlie pushes off the wall and exits the room. Instead of watching the officer leave, Mark has his attention on me through the window. The vacant stare in his eyes is enough to give me the creeps, but I keep my features

schooled—there’s no need for him to know how much he unnerves me.

Dad closes the door behind Ms. Carter, but Mark still keeps his eyes locked on mine. I watch as the lawyer places a leather satchel on the table and extends her hand in greeting. Eventually, he takes his eyes off me and looks at the aging yet attractive woman in front of him. There’s no recognition in either of their gazes.

“They don’t know each other,” I observe out of the side of my mouth, not that they would be able to hear me, but I do it anyway.

“I didn’t find a phone. Unless he threw it out of the car at some point, he didn’t call her before he stopped. How did she know he was here?” Dad questions.

“Maybe he’s LoJacked?” I offer. There are some powerful magic users who treat their apprentices like property and mark them with sigils so they can find them anywhere. It’s arcane blood magic that comes with a hefty price, but the people who do that sort of magic don’t care. “Too bad he’s dressed.”

“I’m sure he would be happy to oblige you if you asked,” Remy snarks.

I ignore him and look over at Charlie. “Did you conduct the search?”

“Yes, with Monroe. He’s got tats. Any one of them could hide sigils,” he answers, understanding my reference to him being clothed.

“Did you call Murrey?” I look over at Dad. I don’t want to watch Mark and Ms. Carter anymore. He gives me the heebie-jeebies.

“I did, but he was in surgery, so I left a message. I’m expecting a call back anytime.” Dad turns away from the window. “We need to know why he’s in Hill Crest and what he has to do with the body in the morgue.”

“I mean, that’s not a leap, but we need to confirm he does have something to do with what happened and not just assume,” I remind him.

“I’m going to call Belinda and let her know not to come in yet. I need time to sort this out,” Dad says, and I know that means he’s ignoring my suggestion not to make assumptions. I don’t bother arguing. It’s not that I even disagree with having Belinda wait to come in, I just don’t want him to have a one-track mind.

“We’re not going to get anything out of him, especially now that she’s here. I’m going to hold him until he sees the judge tomorrow. I’ll call you if I hear anything.” After Dad dismisses me, he heads toward his office.

“Is he always so stubborn?” I ask the three remaining men, but I don’t really expect an answer.

“Pot, meet kettle.” Remy grins down at me, and it makes me melt a little.

I start to smile, then remember I’m mad at him. “Put those dimples away, Broussard.” I shove his chest to get him to step back, but it just makes him smile wider. I should have kept my mouth closed. It’s never been a secret how much trouble those dimples could get me into.

Remy wraps his arm around my shoulders as I try to pass him to follow my dad. “The chief said he would call when he found out anything, so let’s go finish that talk. Plus, I will feed you.” He whispers the last part close to my ear as if to tempt me more.

“What kind of food are we talking about?” It’s dumb, but that’s what comes out of my mouth first. Food is easy, feelings and secrets are hard.

“It’s a surprise,” Remy tells me while leading me back toward the front of the building. I look over my shoulder to see Felix following us. Dad isn’t anywhere to be found, and Scotty is standing diligently near the window to keep an eye on Mark. I wouldn’t trust him with Ms. Carter either, even if she is his lawyer.

“Fine, but it better be good and...and I want to know what you guys were talking about,” I insist, even though the feeling invading my chest would argue.

The SUV is parked out front next to Dad’s truck. I half expect to see Grayson pouting in the front seat, but they must have dropped him off somewhere else, because the vehicle is empty. My stiff shoulders relax a little. I can’t remember a time when I was happy not to see Grayson.

“You can have the front,” Felix says as I open the rear driver’s side door.

“Nah, I’m good. Go ahead.” When I climb in, I see my bag on the seat. I’m so scatterbrained, I didn’t even realize I didn’t have it with me. I pull the strap over so it’s resting against my thigh. I should probably check in with the MBI tonight. It seems like this case is more complex than I expected, and it will probably take more than just the two days I requested off. My supervisor might even be interested if it turns out Mark is LoJacked, because that in itself is against magical regulations. There must be a good reason someone would expose the fact that he was by sending an officer of the court before any charges were even brought against him.

I assess my surroundings for the first time. We’re not heading into town like I expected. Grabbing the back of Remy’s seat, I pull myself forward. “Where are we going?”

“The house.” Remy’s answer is upbeat.

“I thought you were taking me to get food.” I sound pouty, even to my own ears.

“No, I said I would feed you, and I am. I’m going to make dinner,” Remy tells me like it’s an everyday occurrence. I’m not quite sure how to feel about it. It feels like another thing I didn’t know about him, and it demonstrates how much has changed, yet I’m also intrigued. When I left, the only thing Remy cooked that didn’t involve the microwave was eggs.

“You cook?” I look over at Felix, expecting him to make a face or give me some sort of clue that Remy is exaggerating his abilities, but he doesn’t.

“You sound so doubtful. You know I don’t bother doing something unless I do it well.” Remy makes eye contact with me through the rearview mirror. There’s heat in his gaze, and it makes me think of something I know he does very well. Good thing Percival isn’t here, or he would— “Where’s Percival?” I look around in a panic, as if he’ll pop out of thin air.

“He’s okay. Grayson took him to the house to get settled.” Felix turns in the seat as he answers. A wave of guilt washes over me. I can’t believe I forgot about him. I’m a horrible witch. Felix must be able to read the emotion on my face, because he adds, “Don’t worry, he was anxious to get his things sorted. Apparently, minks are very particular about their dens, and having his stuff boxed up made him uncomfortable.”

I nod and look out the window. It doesn’t really make me feel better, but I appreciate Felix’s effort. I know our bond isn’t sealed yet—that will only happen once we stir a spell together—but I still feel like shit for forgetting about him, because that’s exactly what I did. I was so eager to get out of the car when we got to the station, I didn’t give him a single thought.

“If driving across town with his stuff in boxes bothered him, he’s really going to freak out when he has to pack up again to drive all the way back to the city.”

Felix and Remy share a glance with each other, but they don’t include me in their silent exchange. The SUV slows, and Remy makes a turn into the lane that leads to their house. I make sure to look out the front window. I don’t think this is a sight I would ever tire of. The large house comes into view, and I try to take it all in, just in case I don’t get to see it again.

Remy parks the car near the side entrance and cuts off the engine. I’m a little reluctant to get out and face not only Percival, but Grayson too. Once the guys exit, I follow suit and walk with them up the short path to the door. It’s unlocked when Felix turns the handle, and he motions for me to enter

before him.

Their mingled scents waft out of the house to greet me. It's familiar yet new, since they didn't live together when I left town. After taking another deep breath, I follow Remy deeper into the house. With a few quick turns, we end up in the kitchen. Grayson is already seated on a stool, turned to watch our approach. He stands when our eyes meet. "I took Percy's things to your room," he informs me almost awkwardly.

"Percy? You already reached nickname status?" He's nicer to my familiar than he is to me.

Grayson looks down briefly, then meets my eyes again. "He seemed really happy about the size of the closet."

I snort. "Wait until he finds out it's bigger than my entire bedroom back home." I say it mostly in jest, though it is true. Grayson's brow furrows deeply, and he shoots a glare at Remy and Felix.

"I thought MBI agents made good money." Grayson sounds accusatory when he focuses back on me.

I tuck my hand in my pocket and cock out a hip. "I make okay money, and I've only been out of the academy for a few months." My tone is defensive, but I can't help it.

"He's just worried about you," Remy says, walking past Grayson and me to get into the kitchen. Along the way, he bumps shoulders with his friend, and Grayson stumbles a little. "He just doesn't know the right way to show it," Remy finishes.

Grayson gives Remy a sideways glare and rubs his shoulder. "Maybe somebody could have mentioned it."

"Maybe somebody could have pulled their head out of their ass and found out for themselves," Remy retorts.

I bounce my gaze between them, confused about how this is progressing. "Ignore them, I always do. Want to see more of the house?" Felix keeps his voice low as he steps closer to me.

I look up into his emerald eyes, shielded behind his glasses, and give him a nod. Felix wraps his pinky around mine and tugs me out of the kitchen. Grayson and Remy are still bickering when we leave, so I don't even think they notice.

"This is my space." Felix pushes open a door and reveals a large room with minimal furniture. The windows are huge, letting in bright rays of natural light from the setting sun. I glance up and notice skylights cut into the

high ceiling, giving it a light and airy feel.

Felix closes the door behind us, and I'm drawn deeper into the room so I can examine it better. As much as the chaotic workbenches in his office speak of his character, this sparse space tells of his dual nature, just like his empty desk.

Felix has always been the most reserved of our group. I always teased him that his earth magic gave him an old soul. Well, what I really said was it made him as old as dirt, but the sentiment is the same. Nothing about the room feels old though, it's fresh and ripe with limitless possibilities. His circle is near, and the energy is so strong, I can feel it humming against my protection wards. It's so familiar, it almost feels like part of my own magic.

I'm drawn to the large living oak that seems to be growing right from the floor, reaching much higher than the ceiling. The closer I get, the stronger Felix's magic becomes. Embedded in the wooden floor and circling the tree is a copper ring. Any charms stirred in that circle would be much more potent than a circle drawn with chalk or another tool.

There are ferns and greenery around the trunk of the tree that seem to be flourishing, even with the wooden flooring only being a few inches away. I reach for the bark of the tree, thinking my fingers will meet with some sort of invisible magical barrier, but instead, I brush the cool rough bark.

Now that I'm closer, I look up to see how far the canopy of the tree is, but I'm not able to see past the circle cut into the ceiling allowing for only the trunk to be inside the house. "How do you keep the rain out?" I look over my shoulder, and Felix is standing very close to me.

He leans forward just an inch and whispers, "It's magic," before sealing his lips to mine.

I knew it was coming, and I did nothing to stop it.

The moment his lips touch mine, I exhale. It's like coming home after a long trip away, like slipping into cool sheets and snuggling under warm covers. Emotion wells in the back of my throat, but I don't let it stop me from kissing him back.

Felix takes hold of my shoulder and turns me so we're facing each other. The sound that leaves his throat is achy and bittersweet to my ears as our chests connect. We each move to get closer to one another. The worry of no longer knowing his lips, his kiss, is erased.

He prods at the seam of my mouth with his tongue, and I open for him as he deepens the kiss. My heart is beating so fast, I feel like he should be able

to feel it, or maybe I'm feeling his thumping above mine just as quickly. My hands are on his sides, and all I can think about is touching more of him, feeling more of him.

My back hits the rough bark of the tree, and it tugs on a few strands of hair as I shift my head to keep up with Felix, but I don't care, there's not much that could pull me from this moment.

"Hexes, I missed tasting you," Felix tells me between kisses. I press my lips along his jaw, then down his neck when he lifts his head to give me better access. I slide my tongue up near his ear, and he shivers. I want to grin, but he palms my tit and rubs his thumb over my nipple as if to prove he knows exactly how to drive me crazy too.

Our mouths meet again, this time more eagerly as we nip and taste each other. Felix leans his lower body against mine, and I feel the ridge of his cock through his pants. Hexes, I think I underestimated his size. He feels even thicker than I remember.

Soft as a bird's wing, Felix reaches up and cradles my cheeks in his hands. Below the waist, I can tell how badly he wants me, but his touch exhibits a tenderness that speaks of his reverence. I push forward and meld my lips to his.

Belatedly, I become aware of a tingling feeling covering my flesh, making it feel like all the hair on my body is standing on end. My scalp even feels twitchy. When Felix adjusts his touch and brushes the tips of his fingers down my jaw and neck, I can't fight the shudder that racks my body.

I feel as if I'm connected to a live wire. I slit my eyes open, expecting to find some sort of energy being directed at me, but whatever it is, it's invisible. I give Felix a lingering peck after closing my eyes, and he places his forehead against mine. The staticky feeling doesn't abate, in fact, it feels even stronger when Felix continues to trace his fingers down my throat and over my chest.

"You've learned some new tricks, I see." I'm breathless, and while I'm enjoying it, the knowledge also stings a little.

Felix rocks his forehead against mine in denial. "That's not me, it's us." He's breathing just as hard as I am.

I tilt my head back and meet his eyes. "What do you mean?"

Felix licks his lips, and I'm entranced by the movement of his tongue. "That night, even though we never finished the ritual, we sowed the seeds. The bond is still waiting to be completed."

I stumble back, even though the tree is behind me. My legs feel heavy, and so does my chest, like my lungs no longer work to pull in oxygen, or maybe it's the fact that I'm hyperventilating. I can't take a deep breath. The moment I step out of the circle with Felix, all the energy brushing against my skin evaporates. If I had any reservations about what he said being true, they just died.

No wonder Grayson is so pissed at me. I always imagined I was so stuck on the guys because I loved them so deeply, but what if...what if it's only because I half bound them to me? "I never broke the circle," I whisper, horrified. How could I have not realized I never broke the circle? There are only two ways for a spell like that to dissipate—the ritual would have to be completed, or the circle would need to be broken.

Felix approaches me slowly, as if I'm a wounded animal. "We never did either, Frankie," he tells me.

"Yeah, but I left and didn't give you a choice." My view of the last two days shifts. They didn't want me here because they missed me, and the reason they kept following me around and insisting I didn't leave until they talked to me makes more sense now. "I'll break the circle, I'll break it. I'm so sorry." I'm still backing away from him, even though it's the last thing my body wants to do.

The jabs Grayson sent my way about taking what I want sink even deeper, because on some level, it's true. I didn't give them a choice.

"Wait, Frankie. That's not—You misunderstood."

I search the space behind me for the doorknob so I can get out of this room. "Why didn't you just tell me? I would have come back and fixed it."

"Because we wanted you to be ready." Felix is matching my retreating steps, making sure there's never more than a few feet between us.

"Ready for what? It's simple, a child could break the circle. You could have done it." I lift my finger and point at him. My hurt and anger are looking for a place to land.

"I know, and we didn't, so what does that tell you?" He raises his voice a little.

"That the spell influenced you not to," I retort. What other reason would they have not to break it other than that? I reach the wall and find the doorknob.

"You're not leaving, not like this. I let you run last time thinking you would come back to us, but I'm not making that mistake again." Magic



tingles over my skin, and the entire house locks down again. I feel it through my palm as it passes through the door I'm touching. He's not going to let me out of this room.

## CHAPTER 22

I NEED A COCKTAIL.

HOLD THE TAIL.

We're locked in a stare off when I hear pounding on the other side of the door. "Felix, what's going on?" It's Grayson. Anger unfurls in my stomach, even though he's the one who has every right to be mad at me.

"I'm not assaulting him, if that's what you're worried about!" I shout.

"It feels like you might want to hurt someone," he says quietly, but I don't have any problem hearing him.

"Don't pretend you can read my emotions, *Grayson*. I'm shielded." I twist the ring on my finger to prove a point, though he is half right—I do want to do something with the hurt living in me, and anger is way easier to deal with.

It's probably just a good guess on his end. Empathic magic runs in Grayson's family. Some people think that's how his father came into such power, because empathy can be a two-way street. Not only can he feel others' emotions, but he can also push emotions onto people. Grayson was always against using the latter of his talents, but not all empathic magic users have such a strict code of conduct. That's part of why he wanted to be a veterinarian. His natural abilities are so strong, he can even read some animals, and he seemed to like them more than most people anyway.

I hear one solid thump against the door. "Not against me, you're not."

I cut my eyes to Felix. His expression is guarded, not giving anything away, but I have a feeling Grayson is telling the truth. Great, as if I wasn't mortified enough. "Well, stop it right now!" I holler.

"I can't. Not with you so close. I've tried," he admits, sounding rather unhappy.

"I can fix that for you right now if you let me out of this damn room." I turn and jiggle the handle.

"Don't open that fucking door," Felix warns. I glance over my shoulder. He rarely curses—or rarely used to, anyway. "You wanted to know what

your dad was talking about?”

I toss my hands in the air. “It’s a little late for that, isn’t it? The cat’s already out of the bag,” I state, referring to the fact that our bonding ritual had an effect on them.

“That’s not what he was talking about.” Felix crosses his arms over his chest. It makes his biceps look even better.

“Keep it up, whatever you’re doing. She’s not so...so...” Grayson lets his sentence hang.

I ignore the fact that Grayson can’t put what I’m feeling into words—neither can I, to be honest—and urge Felix on. “Okay, I’ll bite. What was he talking about?”

“This involves all of us. I’m coming in,” Remy announces. I didn’t know he was out there. Maybe I should invite Percival in too, he might want to remind me how desperate I am for attention.

The door opens, and Remy is the first to enter. He looks around as if to assess the damage. Grayson is right behind him, but I didn’t look too closely at him. Knowing he felt every strong emotion I experienced over the last two days—and let’s be honest, there were a lot of them—is tough, especially considering he was the cause of quite a few.

“Dinner is almost ready. Do you want to eat?” Remy offers, changing the topic as if he’s trying to avoid the subject.

I couldn’t force myself to eat if I wanted to. “No, thank you.” I shake my head.

“I need to go shut everything off so the kitchen doesn’t burn down.” He winces.

“Fine, we can finish this there.” I lift my hands in a shooing gesture to get everyone moving. Remy heads out first at a jog, while the rest of us walk in awkward silence.

I smell the food much sooner than we reach the kitchen. Fortunately, it doesn’t smell burnt. Remy’s back is to me as we enter the kitchen, and his arm is moving as he stirs a pan on the stove. Instead of going over to the booth, I climb onto one of the stools near the island counter.

“Let me just turn all this off,” Remy mutters, moving around the kitchen. Grayson joins him and puts a bowl of chopped tomatoes and lettuce in the fridge.

“You can eat, you know,” I tell them. Even though I’ve lost my appetite, that doesn’t mean their dinners should be spoiled.

“I plan to later.” Remy covers the two pans on the stove with lids and turns to face me.

“So...” I drag out the word, expecting Felix to make good on telling me what they were talking about with Dad.

His eyes jump from mine to Remy’s, where they stay for a long moment.

“It’s probably going to piss you off,” Remy warns.

I lean my head back and stare at the inlaid ceiling, giving myself a second to get comfortable with whatever they might say. When I feel as calm as I can, I lower my eyes, give them my attention, and say, “It can’t be worse than me trapping you all in a partially completed ritual. I’m sure I’ll get over it.”

“We’ve been checking up on you since you left,” Felix blurts.

I’m slow to turn my head because I know I must have heard him wrong. “Huh?” I squint in his direction.

“We kept expecting you to come back, but you didn’t, so we” —Felix points between himself and Remy— “eventually went to see why.”

“When?” I scoff disbelievingly.

“Four months after you left, and at least once a month since,” Remy supplies without an ounce of reservation.

I snort and shake my head. “Yeah, right.”

“They did.” Grayson slides his hand into his pocket and leans back on his heels a little. If I didn’t know any better, I would think he’s uncomfortable.

“You’re telling me you came to the city, once a month *for years*, and never once chose to speak to me or let me see you. Why?” I don’t understand why they would tell me this if it’s not true, but I don’t understand why they would do it either.

“He told you why.” Remy lifts his hand and gestures toward Felix. “We wanted to know why you didn’t come back, what was keeping you there.”

“But you kept coming back monthly?” I’m baffled.

“Well, we couldn’t figure out why you didn’t come home. You were miserable and barely left your shithole apartment, so we let you be and gave you the space you asked for.” Remy shrugs his heavy shoulders.

“If you knew I was miserable, why not talk to me? Why didn’t you show up at school like we planned?” I accuse. That was the point when I realized everything had truly changed, that there was no going back. Remy sends a pointed look in Grayson’s direction, so I turn to face him too.

“Because I told them you didn’t want us to.” Grayson lifts his chin just the tiniest bit, as if he’s bracing for something.

“Why the fuck would you tell them that, and why would you just believe him?” I glance between the three of them but end up focusing back on Grayson.

“You may be able to sense *some* emotion when it’s tied to magic, but that’s just a taste, a moment. You can act like it was us that made you change your mind that night, but you were terrified before you even got into that circle, *Frances*.”

I think it’s one of the first times he’s spoken my name since I’ve been back. It’s too bad he made it sound like he’s mocking me. “Since you have so much more experience deciphering emotions than me, would you care to tell everyone why I was so scared?” I challenge.

Grayson makes a raspberry sound when he scoffs. “Because you didn’t want to go through with it.”

I shake my head slowly. “For someone who thinks they know emotions so well, you sure don’t know shit about mine. I was freaked out because I thought I was trapping you all to be with me, like I was stealing your chance at something better.” I end up raising my voice, even though it’s not my intention.

“Bullshit!” Grayson snaps at me.

“Oh, great comeback, Grayson. You sound pissed. Is it because you were wrong back then, or because you can’t accept it now?”

His eyes narrow on me, and I know I’ve struck a chord.

“I fucking told you we should have followed her that day. I don’t know why I let you convince me not to!” Remy points his finger at Grayson. Hearing the anger in his voice unnerves me. This isn’t like earlier when they were squabbling. After all this, I won’t be responsible for them hating each other just to prove why I left, so if Grayson needs to believe he was right, so be it.

“Stop please, just stop. I was too afraid to tell you I didn’t want to go through with it,” I say hurriedly, moving to stand between Remy and Grayson, holding my hands out to keep them apart.

Grayson pulls in a breath through his teeth. “You’re lying.”

“What?” I glance at him, pretending to be confused.

“You said that so he wouldn’t be mad at me.” Grayson takes a slow step backwards. His eyes are guarded, and he’s blinking way more than necessary. “Why would you do that?”

“Because it doesn’t matter.” I wipe a tear off my cheek. I’m so angry and

filled with emotions, there's no holding them back, and that pisses me off, so I grit my teeth and I feel my chin wobble. "Nothing is going to change what any of us did or didn't do, and the last thing I want is you guys fighting about shit that happened in the past."

"Don't cry, Frankie," Felix murmurs softly and tries to approach me.

Sidestepping him, I argue, "I'm not," even though it's obvious I am. "I'm just tired."

"Now that is some bullshit," Remy intones. I cut my eyes toward him, and he doesn't even have the decency to look intimidated as he walks over and wraps his arms around me. I struggle for just a moment, then bury my face in his chest as a few shuddering breaths leave me.

"I know there's still a lot of shit swirling around in your head, doll, but I need you to understand a few things." Remy strokes his hand over the back of my head. It's easier to listen to him while I'm enveloped in his arms. "We never gave up, not even Gray. Now, I know you want to argue with me, but just hear me out," he says when I make a noise of disbelief.

"You're right about a lot of shit, but not all of it. We all made some bad choices. We can chalk it up to being young and dumb or just dumb, I'll let you decide, but we were all hurting from those choices and it affected each of us differently."

"How are you the voice of reason right now?" I lean back and show him my shocked face.

Remy flashes his dimples and waggles his eyebrows at me. "I'm just good like that."

"I can see you still think an awful lot about yourself," I mumble.

"Frankie." Felix's voice is solemn, and it prompts me to step out of Remy's arms. "I need you to understand why we never broke the circle or unmade it, and it wasn't because we wanted you to do it. We didn't break it because we still want it. We want to finish the ritual. It was always supposed to be the four of us."

I hear his words and have no problem comprehending them, but still, something doesn't compute, because I can't wrap my head around them. I make a sound that could be a scoff, but it's really just me trying to breathe past the tightness in my throat and chest.

"See? I told you she didn't get it," Felix says, pointing at me.

"I suppose you were right. She looks thoroughly confused," Remy agrees as if I can't even hear them.

“Of course I’m confused,” I snap. “I just found out some part of the ritual worked, and I’ve essentially been holding you captive all this time—which is exactly what I was trying to avoid—and now you’re telling me you want to finish it? How do you know it’s not just the spell making you feel that way and influencing you because of what we did?”

“Now you’re just insulting us.” Remy crosses his arms over his chest, but he doesn’t really look bothered at all.

“It doesn’t have that kind of influence,” Grayson chimes in. “I could have broken it at any time.”

“Then why not do it?” I challenge.

“I thought about it. A lot,” Grayson confesses. “A few times, it was only those two who stopped me from doing it.” He points at the other guys. “But in the end, I was too afraid—afraid I would lose everything.”

I take a moment to examine him. It feels like he’s telling the truth, like they are all telling the truth, but maybe it’s just what I want to believe. “This doesn’t make sense. If you still wanted to try, to be together, then why didn’t you ever come to me?”

“We would have eventually.” Felix pushes his glasses up on his nose. “We had a timeline.”

“A timeline? Like, what, if none of us were married by the time we were thirty or some shit?” I snarl indignantly.

“I asked them to wait.” Grayson admits. “I convinced them you would come back when and if you wanted to.”

“Why was it all on me, huh? I mean, you guys could have given me a sign, an inkling you still wanted that, a fucking smoke signal!” I wave my arms in the air. I probably look like a psycho. “Instead, I waited for you to show up at school, but you dropped out. I even went to the registrar to check.”

“It wasn’t just you leaving. There was other stuff that happened after.” Felix looks at Grayson.

“That’s putting it nicely. My family basically imploded after Winston decided to leave town. It left my family scrambling to find a replacement figurehead.” Grayson rolls his eyes.

“It was more than that. His family wasn’t going to let Winston go that easily. Not after all the training and grooming they did to get him into that position. Gray stepped up so Winston could have some peace and run his own life for once,” Remy tells me. I look over at Grayson, but his head is



lowered. That's something I would expect him to do.

"Dad is stronger than him, always has been, and that's why he was the one chosen to carry on the family name. But they really don't give a shit who does the job as long as the Hale name is still important in Hill Crest," Grayson grumbles bitterly.

"You've done some real good, though, since you were elected last year. The town is doing better than it has in a long time," Felix offers, to which Grayson scoffs, making me think he doesn't really agree.

"Albion also offered to make me first string as a freshman, and not many other schools would do that, and my goal was always to get picked up as early as possible, so it made sense. I knew we would have our time," Remy adds with a shrug. He's always so sure of himself.

"Okay, I get all that, and I would have understood you guys deciding to go somewhere else for school, but again, why not talk to me?" I can't help but feel left out, like I'm the backup plan.

"We almost did a few times." Felix motions between himself and Remy.

"But I never went with them to see you," Grayson adds.

"And we thought it should be all of us," Remy continues, completing their statement. It's just more proof of how close they still are.

"This is... This is a lot to take in. I'm not sure how I feel about any of this. Frankly, it's hard to believe you'd want this after all this time, especially you." I gesture to Grayson. "You are borderline hostile when you decide I'm worth speaking to. And don't you have a girlfriend?" It's not like I can forget about her.

"She's not my girlfriend," Grayson denies.

"Does she know that?"

"She's not his girlfriend," Remy insists.

"How many *not girlfriends* have keys to your house?" I try to make my face look innocent, but I'm sure they can hear my skepticism.

"Only a couple. Witchy Maid, Remy's PA—"

"Ash," Remy interjects, giving his PA's name.

"I think that's it." Felix nods.

"And Julia," I remind them. Let's not forget her.

"Not anymore, I asked for it back." Grayson levels me with a stare. "We can talk about her if you want to, but I wasn't sleeping with her, no matter how bad it looks."

Hexes, I want to believe him, but it's not that easy. "I really, really don't

want to talk about her.” I shake my head. It was hard enough to think about them with other people at a distance, but seeing her wrapped around him was hard to swallow. I think leaving the past in the past will be best for all involved in this circumstance. We were apart for a long time, and things happened—things I never want to know about, like ever.

Grayson blinks a few times as if I’ve surprised him with my answer. “Uh, okay,” he mumbles.

“He was only being a dick because he was afraid of how you were going to respond. Now that it’s settled, we should eat. This should still be warm,” Remy says conversationally, then returns his attention back to the stove.

“What exactly is settled?” I ask.

“That you’ll finish the ritual and come home.” He looks over his shoulder at me like I’m crazy for even asking.

I choke on a breath, and Felix pats my back with his palm. “When did that get settled? Who settled that?” I look around at the three of them, wondering how the hell he reached that conclusion.

“We did just now. Are you trying to say you don’t want to be with us?” Remy scowls and crosses his arms. “Because that would be a lie, Bishop.”

He’s kind of got me there. “I’m saying I don’t think we should jump into anything. What if we don’t even like each other anymore?” I can’t help but peek at Grayson.

Remy spins to face the stove again and waves his hand in the air. “Let the courting commence! Gray, you have a lot of work to do. For starters, quit being a dick.” I’m stuck staring at his back. He makes it all seem so easy. When he turns to face me again, he extends a plate with two tacos stuffed to the brim with meat and veggies and topped with cheese, a side of beans, again topped with cheese, and a small helping of Mexican rice. My mouth waters. “Not to gloat, but I’m already winning.” Remy smirks as I take the weighty dish from his hands.

Not going to lie, he kind of is.

## CHAPTER 23

WHEN MASTURBATION HAS LOST ITS FUN, YOU'RE  
FUCKING LAZY.

I'm staring at the computer screen, but my mind is a million miles away. After eating, I excused myself to my room under the guise of needing to work and speak with my supervisor. I still haven't called in. I thought if I went over the case notes again, it would help me focus on the reason I returned home and not the three men somewhere in the house and the prospect they presented me with.

I shove my laptop away and pick up my phone. Avoidance only works for so long. The line rings twice before a gruff, female voice picks up. "Lo." She doesn't even get the full word out. I've worked with her for a few months now though, so I'm used to that. SSA Lewis is always busy. I swear I don't know how she keeps everything straight, since it seems like she runs our entire field office from her phone at any given time.

"Evening, Lewis, this is Agent Bishop. I'm checking in." As soon as the words are out of my mouth, I cringe. Why did I say agent?

She sends a harrumph through the line, and I hear her shifting papers. She's probably still in the office. "Which translates to 'I need a little more time,' correct?"

"Well, yes, the case is more complicated than I assumed. We still don't have an ID on the victim, but we just picked up someone we think he was traveling with who might give us more to go on. I was hoping I could see this through, maybe even in an official capacity?" My shoulders are up high around my ears, and I'm wincing. I hope she can't hear it in my voice.

"This is your hometown, right?" Lewis asks, not seeming overly interested. "What makes you think they need MBI backup on this?"

"We haven't confirmed it yet, but I suspect the man we picked up last night might be LoJacked."

SSA Lewis makes a noncommittal hum. "I'm not ready to sign off on official involvement yet, but we don't have any pressing matters as of now that need your attention. Why don't you see what assistance you can offer over the next few days unofficially? You can reach out if you need any resources," she offers, and her permission to stay is all I really need, but the

suggestion of using MBI resources is a bonus.

“That’s great, thank you,” I say, then quickly add, “Hypothetically, if I wanted to commute to the city, would that be possible in the future?” I feel anxious even posing the question.

“Officially, you need to be within forty-five minutes of the field office. Off the record, you’re a valuable member of the team.”

I wait a long second, thinking she will continue, but I understand what she’s saying. “Uh, okay, thank you?” I try to make it a statement, but it comes out more like a question.

“Exceptions can and are made, especially considering your current role at the agency. You might apply for use of a slipkey.” My mouth falls open at her suggestion. Slipkeys are reserved for senior agents who need to be able to travel quickly to different places. They can be programmed to take you anywhere on the continent you’re on, since moving over large bodies of water is tricky with magic.

It takes me a second to unscramble my brain and remember she’s on the line. “Thank you again,” I profess.

“Don’t thank me yet, Bishop. Keep me updated on the situation back home. If he is LoJacked, we would want to know,” Lewis tells me, and I know it’s time to end the call.

“I will, have a good night.” I pull the phone away and hang up.

I swallow and look at the door. Excitement is brimming under my skin. I want to tell someone, but it’s not a good idea, especially before I even know if I will be granted special permission for use of a slipkey. I shouldn’t even be getting my own hopes up. Wait, am I getting my hopes up? Is coming back here really what I want?

That’s a dumb question. It’s what I always wanted—well, I wanted to be with the guys, and that could have been in the city or here, but I don’t know if I can truly trust that the reason we still feel this way isn’t because of the spell.

“Gah!” I fall back on the bed with a groan, nestling my head into the ridiculously soft pillows. I should not be thinking about this right now. My priority should be the case, and that’s what I need to make it from right now until it’s solved. I can figure out what happens after, later. Now, if I can just convince my cooch of the plan, I’ll be all set.

I turn my head and spy the bag I thought I wouldn’t be seeing again sitting on a chair. A shower may be just what I need to clear my head, not to mention I could put that removable showerhead I noticed earlier to good use.

Percival left the room a little after I returned to scope out the house, so this might be the only opportunity I have alone for a while.

I roll off the bed, avoiding my laptop near the end, then tiptoe over to the door to flip the lock. I have no idea why I feel the need to be stealthy to lock the door. It's not like they will know what I'm going to do just because the door is locked.

I sort through the few meager things left behind and see the shirt I slept in last night crumpled next to the last pair of clean panties I have. I really should have packed better. I'm going to need to make a run to Target if I'm going to be here any longer. Thankfully, I have a pair of black jeans I can wear tomorrow. I lift my arm and smell my pit. "Ugh." Yeah, a shower is a must. Maybe Felix has a shirt I can borrow. It will be oversized, but that's better than smelling like a farm animal.

After grabbing my things, I step onto the cool tile floor of the bathroom and flip on the light. The freestanding copper tub looks like pure heaven. It only takes me a moment to convince myself to take a quick shower and then run a bath. I can wash my hair and scrub up in the shower while the tub is filling, then have a nice long soak. I don't even feel a little bad about using the excess water. I don't have a tub in my apartment, so I'm not passing up this chance. Thinking the occurrence might not be a one-off sends another wave of excitement through me.

The first splash of water in the tub is loud. I look over at the door, as if it will tell me if someone heard it. "Knock it off, Frankie. Everybody showers. Quit being so weird." I check the water temp, then strip out of my slacks, top, and underclothes. I ball everything up and place it on the back of the toilet so it doesn't get wet, then slip into the shower stall.

I keep an eye on the water level in the tub as I shower, and I end up scrubbing the conditioner out of my hair as soon as I rinse the soap from my body because the tub fills so fast. Must be one of the perks of a nice new house, now let's just hope I didn't use all the hot water in the shower.

I shiver as I twirl my wet hair into a bun and make my way dripping wet over to the tub. Holding the edge, I sink one foot in. "Hexes, that's hot."

It takes my body a moment to adjust to the heat. Right before shutting the water off completely, I let cool water run for a few seconds. My upper lip sweats almost immediately, but it's the most relaxed I've been since arriving back in town.

I let my arms float up to the surface, and the cooler air swirls over my

skin, creating goosebumps, and even my nipples pebble. I slide my back up and let my chest rise until the tips of my breasts are peeking from the water.

My hands shake as I run my palms over my nipples and cup my tits. My core tightens in response. I never really needed to masturbate after we started having sex. Having three guys who were always ready and willing made it pretty obsolete, but sadly, I've become a pro over the years, so my hands and fingers know exactly what to do to get myself off. The new images I have of the guys help, and the fact that I'm in their house makes it feel even more exciting.

Keeping the fingers of my left hand on my nipple, I skim my right down my body and slide my finger between my legs. I'd love to have something other than my fingers to fill me, but I didn't pack any of my toys—thank hexes. Felix would have found those when he went through my bags. That actually makes me smile. I wonder if he would have noticed the one resembling his dick, it's one of my favorite dildos.

“Frankie.” I jump and cover myself when I hear Grayson's muffled voice from the outer door. My heart is fucking pounding, so when I respond, my voice is breathless.

“Yeah?”

“Uh,” is all he says before I hear the sound of something thumping against the door.

“Did you need something? I'm in the bath,” I say loudly to be heard through the space.

“Do you have everything you need?” he asks. Now that's a loaded question. I almost did before he interrupted me.

“The soap and stuff were already out, thanks.”

“Sure, okay. If you're good, I'll leave you to it.” I swear he sounds half strangled.

“Oh, Grayson?” I call louder in case he already walked away.

“Yeah?” I hear the doorknob jiggle like he's trying to get in.

“Can you ask Felix if I can borrow a shirt for tomorrow? Just a T-shirt until I can get a few things.”

I hear the thud again, and a groan accompanies it this time. “No problem,” he mumbles.

“Thank you,” I reply, then use the towel to wipe the sweat from my face. My clit is still swollen, I can feel it when I squeeze my legs together, but I'm worried about getting caught now. Damnit, this shouldn't be such a big deal.

We were always very comfortable with our sexuality. I'm not doing anything wrong.

I slide my fingers between my legs. It still feels good, but nothing like it did before. Somehow, it doesn't feel worth the effort anymore. With a disgruntled sigh, I heave myself out of the water and pull the plug. "Should have just used the showerhead, fast and easy," I mumble to myself.

I glance up at the foggy mirror, and a stark realization hits me. Grayson admitted to being able to sense my emotions. I clap my hand over my necklace in an effort to prove that couldn't be the case, but it's useless. Even the MBI protection isn't enough to keep me shielded from them, not with the link from the spell.

The embarrassment hits hard and fast, quickly followed by indignant annoyance with myself. I shouldn't be ashamed I got caught getting all hot and bothered. Why did he even have to come to my door in the first place?

Fucking great. Isn't it enough that I have a familiar that points out my thoughts every time they get a little less than pure, and that Felix can hear him? And now I know Grayson has a direct line to all my emotions. I need a magical chastity belt on steroids, and I still don't think that would be strong enough.

Eventually, I dry off and brush out my hair, then I slide on my panties and shirt. My skin is still rosy and warm, but I'm definitely not as relaxed as I was hoping. At least I don't stink, yay me.



## CHAPTER 24

## CAREFUL WHAT YOU WISH FOR.

Last night before going to bed, I unlocked my door and left it cracked in the event Percival wanted to return to the den he created in the closet. He must have after I fell asleep, because that was where I found him this morning. I was surprised at how little space he ended up claiming as his own after seeing the overstuffed boxes the guys helped him tote out of the library. I have no idea what he did with half of it.

As quietly as I can, I dress in my jeans and the plain white T-shirt I found on the end of my bed this morning—it seems Percival isn't the only one who sneaked in quietly last night. The shirt is a little big, so I pull the excess fabric behind me, tie it into a knot, and tuck it under, then I roll up the sleeves a little. The V-neck makes it hard to conceal my necklace, but it looks more stylish. Turning from left to right in front of the mirror, I accept the more casual look. It's definitely not something I would wear into the MBI, but I'm okay with it here. Worst case scenario, I can throw my jacket over it if need be.

Percival is still sleeping soundly when I exit the room. I need to make more time to get to know the little guy. I also need to pick his brain about what he knows about what happened at the library. I bet he will be a font of information on Belinda Miller. I hope he can refrain from giving me the sordid details of her and Dad's relationship though. I shudder.

"Are you cold?" Felix asks, and his voice startles me. I didn't even realize he was around.

"No, where did you come from?" I look past him.

"My room." He points down the hall.

"Oh, are all your rooms nearby?"

Felix pushes his glasses up his nose. "We're actually downstairs right beneath you. I just used the back stairs." He motions down the hall again.

"Oh." I grin. "So you weren't just casually passing by, huh?" I bump my shoulder into his arm as we continue down the hall.

"I wanted to make sure the shirt worked out okay." He clears his throat. "It looks way better on you than me, by the way."

"An early morning walk by and flattery. Are you trying to butter me up

for something, Felix?” I tease.

When we reach the bottom of the stairs, he sends his heated gaze in my direction, then takes a step closer. I have a moment to be thankful that I already brushed my teeth before his face is only centimeters away from mine. “I can’t get the taste of you out of my head.” He looks down at my lips and licks his own.

My stomach does a flip-flop as my back hits the wall. He’s right there in front of me, filling my entire vision with him and his amazing emerald eyes. Hexes, he’s gorgeous and looking at me like he wants to devour me whole.

I lean up and close the tiny space between us, fusing our lips together. Felix snakes his arm around my back and jerks me tighter against him so I can feel just how badly he wants to taste me. At least I know I’m not the only one walking around aroused all the damn time.

Reaching between our bodies, I run my palm over his dick. He tilts his hips back just an inch or two to grant me more access, and I give him a little squeeze in response. Felix pauses mid swipe of his tongue and makes a growling sound in the back of his throat. *Oh, that’s new.*

Felix bites my lip just enough to make me gasp, then kisses the side of my mouth before continuing down my jaw to my neck. I tilt my head back as he teases me with his mouth and teeth. My fingers ache from trying to grip him through his pants, but I don’t care, I just want to feel him. I try to get to his zipper, but he bends his knees and pulls out of my reach. I feel the pout on my face, but it doesn’t last when he jerks the neckline of the shirt and my bra cup to the side, exposing my breast to his waiting mouth.

I palm the back of his head to hold him in place as he toys with my nipple. I feel his nose and the frame of his glasses against the swell of my tit as he kisses and sucks on me. Slitting my eyes open, I look down to watch him, only to see Grayson standing on the other side of the hall. His eyes are locked on mine.

The embarrassment I felt last night is nowhere to be found. I trail my fingers through Felix’s hair and down his neck, remembering how much Gray liked to watch. I don’t take my eyes off him as I lean forward and whisper into Felix’s ear. “Please make me come.”

Seemingly up for the task, Felix groans and slides his hand down my body and between my legs. Even through my jeans, his touch feels amazing. My eyelids sink closed for just a second, and then I open them to focus on Gray again.

His hands are down at his sides and balled into tight fists. I take note of the sizeable bulge in the front of his pants. Seeing how affected he is only makes me more desperate for Felix's touch. I swivel my hips, and Felix answers by reaching for the button on my pants and dragging my zipper down.

Grayson takes a large step forward, but he halts his approach. "Step to the side," Grayson suggests softly, but Felix listens as if it were an order. The heat of his body leaves mine, but it doesn't stop his fingers from delving into my pants and under my panties.

The first touch of his fingertip against my lower lips to part me has me widening my stance. With uncanny accuracy, he makes a lazy circle around my clit, and my knees want to buckle. I fight to keep standing just so I don't lose his touch.

"Hexes and hellfire, you are soaked," Felix mutters and pulls his hand out of my pants, only to bring his finger to his lips and suck it into his mouth. I want to be mad that he stopped touching me, but how can I when he closes his eyes on a slow blink and makes that growling sound again?

"Quit being greedy and make her come," Grayson demands.

"You're one to talk," Felix retorts, but he takes the advice. When he dips back inside, he explores more, working his fingers back and forth. Apparently, he's not ready to stop teasing. My core tightens when he circles my opening with his finger and uses his thumb to push against my clit. My eyes roll back in my head as my jeans slide farther down my hips, giving Felix more room to maneuver. He sinks his finger inside me, and my mouth drops open so I can let out a pleased sigh.

The dual stimulation is something I've missed. A dildo or vibrator can do the job, but not like this, not like a partner can.

"Gods, Gray, wait until you feel how she squeezes." Felix lets his forehead drop to the wall.

"I *can* feel how badly she needs it," he reminds Felix. "Take care of her or get the fuck out of the way."

I start to crack a smile, but it slips when Felix accepts the challenge of making me come, pushing in and out of me faster after adding a second finger.

I don't last long after that. Honestly, I'm surprised I made it as long as I did. Gritting my teeth to keep my sounds in check, I clench around Felix's fingers as he finger fucks me while Gray watches.

The sated feeling I was chasing last night crashes over me, and I would like nothing more than to crawl back in bed—well, almost nothing more. Ideally, I would have a couple of people join me.

Felix waits until the spasms of my inner muscles slow before he drags his fingers out of my pussy. I make a soft sound that could be a protest, but I'm just going to pretend it wasn't. I lean my shoulders against the wall and allow Felix to help me pull my pants up and right my shirt. Hexes, I forgot how well they always took care of me. Good thing too, since I'm not sure my muscles are ready to function yet.

“Oh, come on!” Remy tosses his hands up in the air after darting into the hallway. “I was in the shower. You couldn't have warned me?” His dark hair is damp, proving his words.

“Warned you about what?” I ask innocently.

“I'm not talking to you.” He pouts and points in my direction. Remy stalks over to Felix, who's still nearest to me, and grabs his hand and sniffs it.

“Remy!” I cry in outrage.

“I already said I'm not talking to you. What's this?” He wiggles Felix's hand near my face, forgetting the fact that he just said he's not talking to me.

Felix tries to pry his hand free, but Remy's too strong.

“It looks like a hand to me,” I answer.

“One that smells like your pussy, and you left me out?” He looks genuinely sad. He tugs Felix's hand to his face and sniffs again. “Yup, that's her pussy, you fucker.” Remy levels his glare on Felix.

I shove Remy's chest to get him moving. I am sympathetic though, so I lean up and plant my lips quickly on his as I pass by. If he wasn't so surprised by the move, he might have caught me, because I barely manage to evade his hands when he reaches for me.

“I need to call Pop and see if he has any news.” I walk backward to keep out of Remy's grasp as he continues to reach for me. He shoves Felix so abruptly, it makes me wonder if he really was trying to catch me, because if he would have used the same speed, he surely would have grabbed me. Felix stumbles, but it doesn't wipe the satisfied smirk off his face.

“I turned on the coffee pot before I got in the shower.” Remy crosses his arms over his chest dejectedly.

“Oh, now you really are trying to win.” I continue to back away. “Food and coffee, how do you know me so well?” I tease.

“I make it a point to know my opponent and my prey,” Remy retorts with

narrowed eyes.

“Prey, that sounds kind of fun.” I round the corner, then spin to start walking faster so I can get to the kitchen. If I don’t, I might end up tangled with all three of them, and I don’t think that would be the smartest idea...yet.

I do a little snooping when I reach the kitchen to find the mugs. Right after I pour myself a cup, Remy reaches around me and snags it. Without reacting, I grab another mug and start the process again. He doesn’t bother with cream or sugar, just leans against the counter and brings the mug to his lips while watching me over the rim. I pretend he’s not a huge distraction as I doctor my coffee.

I’m already second-guessing what just happened in the hallway. I want to think they really did want to be with me, and that it’s not just the bonding ritual we never finished, but I’m having a hard time convincing myself it’s the truth.

“What’s the plan for today?” Felix asks. He’s standing really close, like so close, I can smell his clean scent, and it may just be my imagination after Remy’s blatant assertion from earlier, but he smells like sex too. I dart my eyes over to him. He’s holding his own mug, so I back away to give him access to the coffee maker. I suppose I shouldn’t be too surprised he drinks it now, but it feels strange not knowing everything about them.

“Uh, I’m not really sure yet. I’m going to give Pop a call and go from there. I did get clearance from my supervisor to stay longer to continue with the case though.” I don’t mention that I’m looking into getting a slipkey that would allow me to stay even longer, even indefinitely. That feels like it’s too big, like I’m making assumptions.

Remy eyes me over the rim of his cup as I continue to back away. He’s watching me like he knows what I’m thinking. It’s unnerving. Having one of them who can sense my emotions is enough, I don’t need Remy reading me too.

“What are you guys doing today?” I change the subject.

“We’ll know when you tell us.” Remy gives me a saccharine sweet smile. It’s at total odds with his bad boy persona, but I know he has a heart of gold anyway.

Turning, I place my mug on the table. “You know you don’t need to follow me around. I’m not going to skip town on you guys.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time,” Grayson mumbles under his breath as he brushes past me to get to the cabinets. His tone is gruffer than I would have

expected after last night and this morning. He's moodier than a cat that wants to be stroked but bites your fingers for trying.

I narrow my eyes on his back. "Silly me, I thought we might have been past this. I gave you the explanation you asked for. How long are you going to hold a decision I made years ago over my head?"

"When are you going to stop acting like there was something preventing you from going to her? She's not the only one responsible for us being apart." There's an edge to Felix's tone, making me think there's also some underlying anger behind them.

"I think we're all getting a little tired of your shit, Gray. We get that you have a lot going on in that head of yours, but it's time you stop taking it out on Frankie. Stop blaming *her* for your choices." Remy gives Grayson a look that seems to say so much more than his words, which already divulged a lot.

Grayson turns so he's facing off with Felix and Remy. "That's probably easy for a dud to say."

I gasp, and it catches Grayson's attention for the briefest moment before he's staring down Remy again. I can't believe he would use the fact that Remy doesn't have much natural magical ability against him like that.

Remy lets out a dark chuckle. "Low blow, bro, but I can take it. I know you're really just pissed at yourself and need someone else to take it out on." Remy opens his arms wide as if to invite an assault.

Grayson narrows his eyes even more. The air is charged, like the right words or a single move could make the entire room explode.

"Why don't you give us all a break and call Julia? It's obviously been too long since you've been drained." Felix presses his lips together the moment the words are out of his mouth, then looks over at my confused expression.

"Drained?" I question. What could he mean?

Remy moves to stand next to Felix as if he thinks he might need to intervene between the two men. "Grayson decided a long time ago he'd rather be empty than deal with his emotions or anyone else's. Julia is just one of his regulars." Remy lifts a single brow while staring right at Grayson after laying down what clearly seems like a challenge.

"Fuck you, Remy," Grayson snarls between his teeth.

"Yeah, I've heard that before. Too bad the only emotions you never seem to lack, even after they strip you, are self-loathing and hopelessness."

Grayson springs forward as if he might attack, but I was already anticipating the move, so it's easy to get right in his path. I plant my hand on

his chest, and Grayson freezes. He's so raw, I don't even need skin contact for his emotions to infect me, but it's not the anger I was expecting. It's sadness, bone-tired sadness and loneliness, and it amplifies my own.

Slowly, he lowers his head to look down at me. The rage that was contorting his features softens until I can see crinkles in the skin around the corners of his eyes and mouth. "Grayson," I mutter softly, because I don't know what else to say in the moment. I want to ask why he never came to me, but I know. He was scared, scared of losing me and the guys. He's convinced himself we're going to leave him anyway, so he's pushing us away first.

Grayson knocks my hand off of his chest, breaking the connection when he realizes just how deep I delved into his motives. "What?" he asks defensively. "Can you blame me? I don't have anything to offer. You don't need my money or connections, and that's all anyone wants from me." He backs away slowly.

"Hexes and curses, Gray! We've been telling you for years that's just the shit they leave you with that makes you think that bullshit." Remy huffs in exasperation.

"Then why didn't you go to her all the times you said you were going to?" Grayson points at me. I'm still in so much shock, I don't know what to say.

"Because you wouldn't come with us, and she chose all of us, not just the two of us," Felix snaps. "We didn't want to ruin our chance because you couldn't pull your head out of your ass."

"She freaked out when she realized the ritual was still open. If we showed up at her door and explained everything without you, she probably would have believed what you've been trying to convince her of since she showed up—that you don't want anything to do with her. We're trying to save all of us, you fucker. Quit making it so much harder," Remy argues, continuing where Felix left off.

"Fuck you," Grayson says again, but this time, there's no anger behind his words.

"Yeah, yeah, say it again for those in the back. You might actually feel better if you let me," Remy mutters and picks up his coffee, using it to salute Grayson as if some big shit didn't just go down.

Grayson peeks at me from the corner of his eye as if he's afraid of how I'm going to respond, but he needn't worry. I have no clue how to react to



any of what I just heard.

## CHAPTER 25

## DO WHAT TO WHOSE CHICKENS?

Here's an awkward pause when Remy seems to remember I'm still standing in the same room. He looks over at me and licks his lips. "There was probably a better way to hash that shit out, sorry."

I tuck my wild hair behind my ears. "Um, there's probably a lot of things...we need to talk about. Stuff that's going to come up. That is, if we... you know," I stammer.

I'm having a hard time looking at Grayson now that I know why that woman, Julia, was here. I have so many questions, I'm afraid I'll blurt them out and make him even more uncomfortable.

My phone rings, and I nearly sigh with relief as I fumble to pull it from my pocket.

"Agent Bishop," I answer, not recognizing the number.

"Morning," Dad greets in his gruff voice. He must already be at work and calling from the station.

"Hey, any news?" I turn my back to the guys and shuffle toward the door so they can continue with their routine, plus it gives me some much needed separation.

"We have a hearing with the judge after lunch, that was as long as I could put it off." I hear the frustration in Dad's tone. "I'm sure his *lawyer* will be here by nine to bitch that it's not sooner."

"Have you heard back from Murrey about the DNA?"

"I'm expecting a call anytime. If I can link them, I might be able to convince the judge to set his bail high so I can hold him a little longer. I feel like this one is slipping through my fingers."

"What can I do to help?" I offer as the squeak of Dad's chair filters through the line. I imagine him twisting from left to right as I've seen him do other times when he's thinking.

"I don't know, kid. Nothing is adding up here. Are you sure you didn't pick up any magical signatures from the body that could lead back to LaPointe?"

"I wish I could say I did, but it just wasn't there. The only thing I picked

up from the scene was from Ms. Miller, and even that wasn't enough to say anything definitive because there wasn't enough magic present to have caused that kind of damage."

Dad releases a sound that makes me think he doesn't want to hear what I have to say about Belinda, not that I blame him. None of us want to think we know someone who would be involved in something like this. "I'll get one of the guys to bring me up to the station. We can go through everything we have. Keep me updated if Murrey calls," I tell him.

"They pull their heads out of their asses yet?" Dad mumbles.

I look over my shoulder to see all three of the guys seated at the table, watching me. Grayson looks down as if he doesn't like that I caught him looking, but Felix and Remy don't seem to mind. "Maybe a little," I answer Dad.

"Good. I like you being home. Tell them I said not to screw it up." The line goes dead right after his words, but I have no intention of repeating his request.

"We can take you to work, but you need to eat first." Felix places his palm on the table and stands once I return my phone to my pocket. I half expect him to walk over and open the fridge to offer what's inside, but he was just getting out of Remy's way.

"What would you like? An omelet? Oatmeal?" Remy glides right past me, and I feel the brush of his fingers along my hip.

"I usually just—"

"Skipping isn't an option," he says before I can finish.

I plant my hand on my hip. "How often were you watching me?" I say mostly as a joke, but I watch Remy's back as he lifts one shoulder sluggishly.

"Enough to know you need to eat more." He opens the fridge and drags out the carton of eggs without me telling him what I will eat. "Go sit down, it will be ready in a minute."

"Bossy," I mumble under my breath, but on the inside, I'm beaming a little. It's been a long time since anyone took care of me or worried about whether I was eating or not.

When I sit down, I end up across from Grayson. I feel like I'm understanding him a little bit better every day, but it doesn't take the sting out of his recent nasty comments. If anything, I feel them more keenly, knowing he experienced how the comments made me feel.

I notice when he shifts in his seat and rubs the side of his face as if he's

uncomfortable, and I quickly realize I'm more than likely the reason. I'm probably telegraphing my emotions to him, considering the shields I have are not effective through the semi-bond we have.

I panic, trying to think of something to get my mind off Grayson and his reactions to me. Instead of coming up with something else completely, I end up picturing his face just a short time ago when we were in the hall and he was watching me with Felix. I feel heat rise in my face. *Baseball, baseball, baseball.* Why do people say this helps you not think about sex? I know nothing about baseball, except some of the guys look pretty good in those tight pants. "Hexes." I rub my palms over my eyes to get rid of the image of Grayson in nothing but those tight pants with a nice large bulge on display.

"What? Did you just remember something?" Felix asks, not knowing why I cursed.

Grayson adjusts in his seat again, and someone's foot kicks mine under the table.

"Sorry," he says out of habit as I apologize at the same time, but for an entirely different reason.

"Um, hotels," I answer as a valid thought actually forms in my undersexed brain.

"You're staying here," Remy says without even looking over at me.

"No, I mean LaPointe, he had to stay somewhere if he's been in town a few days. Maybe someone can tie him and the victim together."

While the idea is fresh, I pull out my phone and shoot a text off to Dad.

**Me:** I'm going to hit the hotels in town, see if LaPointe stayed local.

**Dad:** Keep me updated.

"Can one of you take me to pick up my car? I really am worried about Mickey having it towed," I request as Remy sets a big fluffy omelet in front of me. It's covered in gooey cheese and my mouth waters. I look up at him, and my mouth works before my mind. "I love you."

"I know." He leans over the table and plants a quick, hard kiss on my lips and says, "Dig in."

I really didn't mean it the way he's taking it, or maybe it was a slip because I kind of do still love him. I never stopped, but it was meant to be more of a joke.

"I can cook too," Felix says, scooting a little closer to me.

"Do you want some?" I offer, more than willing to share the huge portion.

"No, he does not. Eat," Remy intones.

When I slice the end off, cheese and slivers of ham slide out of the inside. I close my eyes after the first bite and let out a little moan of appreciation. It's that good.

"I'm making dinner," Felix announces.

"Whatever, be quiet," Grayson grumbles, hushing him.

I pause with a bite poised at my lips, realizing they are all watching me. "Aren't you guys eating?"

"Already did this morning." Remy slides into the bench next to Grayson.

"Not hungry." Felix licks his lips, and I would swear he is. I flick my eyes to Grayson and wait for his answer.

"I ate with him earlier." He tips his head toward Remy.

"I hate working out alone," Remy comments in way of an answer, "and I thought it would help let off some steam. He gets breakfast out of the deal. It's a win-win."

"For you, maybe. Normal people don't get up at four in the morning to shove shit around," Grayson replies, but his shoulders are relaxing. That more than anything makes me take another bite of food. I like watching the three of them interact. That's how I ended up with them in the first place. I always wanted to be in their group.

Remy lived across the street from me. I would play ball and stuff in my front yard to try and get his attention, but he always had Felix and then Grayson, so they mostly ignored me. That is until Dad took me to the batting cages a few times. I'm pretty sure he knew exactly what he was doing, because the guys were always there at the same time, but he acted like it was just a coincidence. I showed off a little, letting them see I would be a good player, and the next thing I knew, Remy was knocking on my door asking if I wanted to play ball.

I don't think Dad realized at the time what he was setting up for the future. He might not have been so keen to help me get what I wanted if he knew it would end up with me falling in love with all three of them. I have no regrets though. Even when I left town, I wouldn't have traded a single minute I had with them for anything else.

After my last mouthful, I let out a groan. I'm so full, but I'm not embarrassed to say I ate every single bite of my breakfast. I have a food baby that makes me look three months pregnant, but damn, it was delicious, and I'd do it again in a heartbeat.

"She ate the entire thing," Remy whispers, as if he can't believe it.

“I would do it again.” I let out a small burp that I’m too late to cover, so I sheepishly add, “Excuse me.”

Remy tips his head back and lets out a roar of laughter. Grayson is smiling next to him, watching his friend.

I nudge Felix out of the booth so I can rinse my dish and place it in the dishwasher like I watched the others do. Remy’s laughter is still ringing in my ears, so I grin the entire time. When I turn to face the table, they are all watching me again, so I wipe my lips off, making sure I don’t have anything on my face.

“Who gets the unlucky job of dropping me by Mickey’s?” I inquire. I need to get out of this house. The reasons why I don’t want to jump into completing the ritual are getting harder and harder to remember.

“You should know we come as a set.” Remy eases his way out of the seat, and Grayson follows.

“I really don’t need to interrupt all of your days. If you can just give me a ride to my car, I’m good,” I offer again.

“We want to.” Felix makes his way over to my side and settles next to me. The slight touches are so mundane, yet so intimate. Hexes, I’ve missed this more than I allowed myself to realize.

My phone vibrates, and I use the distraction to look away from him. His eyes alone work like a spell.

**Pop:** Update from Murrey. Found some of the victim’s DNA on the clothes and razor. Still no hit on an ID. Trace on the car shows it’s a rental out of Vegas.

**Me:** Good news on the DNA! I’ll head in. We can see about questioning LaPointe. Make sure his attorney is present.

**Pop:** She’s already here.

“Change of plans,” I announce. “I need to go to the station first. Murrey found a connection between LaPointe and our body. I want to question him before he sees the judge this afternoon. There’s a good chance he will cut him loose.”

“We’re ready,” Grayson answers for all of them, surprising me a little.

“Okay, but you guys should probably just drop me off, I don’t know how long this will take and you can’t be present for the interrogation. I can call you when I’m ready to check the hotel?” My response comes out as a question, revealing the fact that I still feel a little strange about making assumptions.

Grayson looks over at Remy, and his face is pinched. He doesn't look happy. "You'll call if you want to leave the station," Remy tells me, but looks over at Grayson, who gives him a tiny nod.

Their behavior is strange, but I agree. "Uh, okay."

"Do you need to grab your bag?" Grayson asks.

"Yeah, I'll be right back." I hustle back up to my room.

*I hope you're not planning on leaving without me, witch.* I hear Percival before I can even push the door to my room open.

"How did you even know I was leaving?" I question while gathering my bag and checking to make sure my computer is inside.

*I have my ways,* he tells me cryptically.

"I was hoping you would come," I tell him, though in truth, I'd forgotten about him again. I'm a horrible witch. "I'm eager to question LaPointe about the dead body. Any information you have would be really useful, and we can get to know each other better." I say the last part shyly.

"Frankie, you ready?" Remy calls up the stairs.

"What do you say?" I ask Percival, ignoring Remy.

*I'm agreeable,* Percival answers, and I take a few steps closer to him.

"Do you mind?" I reach my hands out to show my intent to pick him up.

*I would prefer to climb into your bag,* the mink states.

"Oh, okay." I slip the bag from my shoulder and place it on the ground in front of him. "Are you okay with my computer in there? I could probably round up another bag."

*This is adequate,* he assures me after disappearing inside. I'm extra careful when I pick the bag up and place it on my shoulder. I can't even feel his added weight.

"Frankie," Remy bellows.

"I'm coming. Keep your pants on," I mutter.

*Yes, please do. I should not like to see that,* Percival comments, and it makes me snicker.

"I'm going to tell him you said that."

*That would be a bad idea. I have a feeling he would do it just because I asked him not to, then it would become awkward when you started drooling.*

"I would not drool," I snap, and Percival makes a tscking sound of disbelief. "I wouldn't."

"Wouldn't what?" Remy asks, and I take a long look at him.

"Maybe I would, but just a little. Can you blame me?" I say out of the



corner of my mouth, then to Remy, I add, “Nothing, we need to go.”

Remy’s brow furrows for a moment, but he shakes it off and opens the front door for me.

## CHAPTER 26

YOU WOULDN'T BELIEVE ME IF I TOLD YOU.

When Remy pulls up in front of the police station, my dad's truck is parked in the front space, and there's a luxury sedan parked next to it. "Thanks for the ride. I really would feel better if I had my car though."

"Why would you want that beater when you have three perfectly fit men to ride...you around?" Remy gives me a naughty grin over his shoulder.

"I'm sure you mean *drive* me around," I deadpan.

"No, I really didn't. Have a good day at work catching killers and shit, doll."

*I'm about to suffocate, Percival grumbles.*

"Hexes, I'm sorry." I flip open the top of my bag.

*Not from lack of oxygen, you ninny. On pheromones and sexual frustration.*

Felix lets out a bark of laughter.

"What's so funny?" Remy investigates the backseat.

"My witty familiar." I flip the cover of my bag back, hoping to really deprive him of oxygen.

"I'll tell you later." Felix is still chuckling. Wonderful. At least he's not only calling me out this time.

"We'll be around. Call if you need to leave...or anything else." Grayson sounds a little gruff, but also a little unsure. It's kind of cute.

I'm smiling when I step into the parking lot. Dad must have been waiting for me, because he's standing at the front door, watching my approach. "Much better, jackasses!" Dad hollers and waves to the guys in the car behind me.

"Pop," I groan.

"What? I'm giving them positive reinforcement."

"You also called them jackasses." I reach for the door and tug it open for both of us.

"Just calling it like I see it." Dad puts his hand high on the door and ushers me ahead of him. "I've been meaning to tell you, your car isn't at Mickey's. I drove past yesterday, and it's not there."

I stop my progress toward Dad's office and wilt. "Crap, did JJ bring it here?" I ask with little hope.

"Nope, the only vehicles out there are LaPointe's and the cruisers."

"I'm going to kill them. I know the guys must be behind this," I sneer.

"I shouldn't be surprised the corruption at this station runs much deeper than just trumped-up charges for traffic violations." The same lawyer from yesterday is leaning against the wall, nodding her head as if my words should be taken seriously.

I don't bother responding to her goading. The door chimes, and Dad and I both turn to look over our shoulders at the sound. I'm half expecting to see one of the guys, and I'm about to demand the location of my car, but it's not Remy, Felix, or Grayson.

"Belinda?" Dad murmurs softly, and I hear his surprise.

She's wringing a piece of fabric between her fingers and looks like she's aged ten years in the past day.

"I need to talk to you," she says, tears brimming on her lower lashes.

"Of course." Dad rushes to her side and opens his arm to tuck her under before leading her toward the back—I'm sure to his office. I scoot around him and hurry down the hall, passing the lawyer and the only interrogation room. The large window shows an uber calm Mark sitting on one side of a table.

Instead of opening Dad's office, I opt for the breakroom. There's a large desk, and it will provide more room than his office and keep things a little more professional.

Dad eyes me but leads Belinda toward the room. Her head turns when she passes the interrogation room window, and she lets out a heavy gasp, then clutches the material she was holding to her lips as if to cover the sound. She stands frozen in place, and her entire body tenses until her frame seems somehow smaller, frailer.

"Belinda," Dad calls her name softly, but when she responds, I don't think it's to him.

"He really has found me then." Belinda and Mark are locked in some sort of stare off. She looks terrified, and he appears almost blank, yet there's still a threat in the air.

"Do you know him? Who is he to you?" Dad asks while glancing between them.

Belinda finally breaks the trance and looks over at my dad. A few tears

have spilled down her cheeks, and she looks sad, sadder than anyone should just from seeing another person.

Dad tucks her farther under his arm and scowls at the man behind the glass. His protection doesn't need to be stated, his body language is loud enough. A tiny grin tips Mark's lips before he looks away, seeming bored again. I won't say it out loud, but I can see why Belinda is so freaked. That guy is creepy as hell.

Dad guides Belinda into the breakroom, but she pauses before she breaches the doorway as if she's debating even going in as Dad pulls out a chair for her. Eventually, she squares her shoulders and walks over to Dad. He places his hand on her lower back until she's settled before lowering himself into the seat right next to her.

I place my bag on the counter, making sure not to crush Percival with my laptop, and lean against the wall so I don't interrupt. There are times when a personal connection helps to cut to the bottom of things quicker, and I'm hoping this is one of those times, because it's clear she knows a hell of a lot more than she let on yesterday.

"What's going on, Belinda?"

Slowly, she looks up and meets Dad's eyes. "I came to tell you the truth and let you know I was leaving town, but...there's no point. He'll find me again, he always does."

"Who? Mark?" Dad has his hand on the table, looking like he's ready to rise. I'm sure he's thinking about getting answers straight from the man himself. Belinda reaches out and lays her fingers gently over Dad's arm, and he lowers into the chair.

Watching them interact makes it even clearer that this thing between them is way bigger than I thought or hoped, considering the circumstances. "Not him, he's just a tool for my husband."

Dad's back hits the chair abruptly when the air whooshes out of his lungs. "Your husband? You never told me you were married."

Belinda scrubs her hand down her face. "Not by choice, not in a very long time." Her words and tone convey her exhaustion.

"I don't know what the hell is going on, but that man ran from the police. I have a suspicion he was involved in the murder, and now you're telling me you know him?"

He's not asking the right questions, but I'm not going to interject yet. Once the can of worms is open, it's much harder to cram them back inside, so

I'm sure we'll get to the truth. "I'll explain, but there's so much I didn't tell you." Belinda is gazing at my dad as if he's holding her very life in his hands, or maybe it's her heart, because while she appears worried, she doesn't look frightened like she did of the man in the interrogation room.

Dad reaches out and takes hold of her hand, stopping her from wringing the fabric. "Talk to me," he implores.

I almost feel like I should leave, since this seems so private, but I know I can't, if only to protect my dad in case this goes south. "I told you I was from Ohio, and that's true, but I moved to Nevada for school a very long time ago, and that's where I met William." Belinda's eyes are on her lap. I don't think she could look at Dad even if she wanted to.

"I was barely twenty when we married. Things were good for a while." She lifts one shoulder in what could be called a shrug, but it's more like she's shrinking into herself. "William is intense and determined in everything he does, whether it's work or his personal life. There were signs before we got married, showing me the type of man he was, but I ignored them. I'm not sure it would have mattered if I didn't. William gets what he wants." She lets out a deep, mocking laugh. She leaves out the details about her life, but she doesn't really need to give more than she already has, her words and body language are speaking volumes about the kind of marriage they had.

Dad rearranges himself in the chair. I can see how rigid his back is and how stiffly he's holding himself. "I tried to leave him a few times." She reaches up and touches her jaw absently, and as her fingers pull away, I notice a long thin scar. "He always found out. Everyone in the house worked for him, so I wasn't surprised. Eventually, he placed protection spells everywhere that prevented anyone from getting in. I believed him when he said it was because his work was dangerous, but it also stopped me from getting out." My stomach drops. The tiny bit of experience I have with that feeling from last night comes back to me, but I was never once afraid of the guys. I can't imagine how powerless she would feel locked up like that, like a prisoner in her own home.

Dad's leg starts to bounce, but otherwise, he seems calm. Belinda pushes some hair away from her jaw in a sweeping gesture and finally lifts her face. "It took me a few years of planning, but I finally escaped him. I've been looking over my shoulder, waiting for him to find me since. That man, he works for William. I can't even say I know him because I don't know his name. I wasn't allowed to speak to any of his employees, nor they me. But he

was sent here to take me back. Him and the man who died in the library,” she confesses in stunted sentences.

Dad nearly hops to his feet. “Then it was self-defense,” he blurts, jumping to the conclusion that Belinda did have something to do with the man’s death after all.

Belinda reaches for my dad’s hand while remaining seated. “Marty, it doesn’t matter. I would rather go to prison than go back to him anyway.” She gives Dad the saddest smile I’ve ever seen. “I just wanted you to know the truth. I almost told you a hundred times, but I think I knew it would come to this, and I didn’t want to waste what little time we had together. Call me selfish.” She makes a noise between a chuckle and a sob.

I finally move to pull out a chair, and Belinda looks over at me as if she’d forgotten I was even there.

“Tell me what happened in the library, what really happened. I don’t want to hear some garbage about you willing to go to prison because you’re giving up,” I challenge. If this woman has really been through hell, and I think she has, then there’s no way I’m going to stand by and watch her husband win.

Belinda blinks at me a few times, then looks up at Dad as if she’s asking him if she should.

“You were strong enough to leave, so be strong enough to fight for that freedom,” I remind her.

Belinda’s face scrunches up for just a moment before she hardens her features and gives me a slight nod.

“Good, now tell me what really happened.” I don’t tell her I know she used magic on the body. I need to know if she’s telling the truth, and that’s the one thing I know for certain in all this.

Belinda’s fingers shake as she brings them up to blot the fabric under her nose. “I’m not sure if he was waiting for me or if he followed me inside after lunch. After I put my bag in the office, he was just there.”

“Did he try to hurt you?” Dad interrupts.

I give him a look that I hope respectfully tells him to shut the hell up. “As soon as I saw him, I ran,” Belinda admits.

“So you did know him, or at least of him.” I really pegged her wrong. That was one part of her statement I believed.

“No, I’d never seen him before, but I knew William sent him the moment I laid eyes on him.”

I’m not sure if she’s telling the truth, but if that man was anything like the

one we have in custody, I can believe she would know his type on sight. “What happened next?” I prompt.

“He was blocking the door, but I’m not even sure if I thought about going out it at the time, I just wanted to get away from him, so I ran. I ended up in the mezzanine upstairs—so stupid.” She shakes her head. “He wasn’t far behind me, but I was able to hide behind the stacks. There was nowhere else to go, so I climbed on top of the shelf. I thought if I hid long enough, he would go back downstairs and I could escape.”

Silent tears begin racing down Belinda’s cheeks.

“I didn’t mean for it to fall. Honestly, I didn’t even know he would be standing there.”

“Are you saying you were climbing one of the bookshelves to hide and it fell and crushed his skull?” My first thought is instant karma, but secondly, I wonder if it really is possible it was an accident.

Belinda nods and lifts her arms at the elbows, her palms facing out. She uses her left hand to drag down her sleeve, exposing a wide bruise across her wrist and another black line right near her elbow. Hexes, she must have still been climbing when it fell. “The buffer charm I use to move the shelves must have still been engaged when I climbed up it...” She uses her hand and makes a motion of something tipping over. “I didn’t even know it landed on him at first. Not until I saw...”

This is almost too insane to be made up. Who could come up with a story like this? “How could there be no evidence of the books or shelf having been in the blood pool?”

“Once the shelf tipped, the buffer charm engaged, keeping the shelf and all the books from the floor by an inch or two.” Belinda demonstrates the space with her fingers, but it’s more like a quarter of an inch. No wonder there was nothing left of the SOB’s head. “The books on my side were a bit scattered, but that’s a simple replacement spell. I do it five times a day, that was just on a bigger scale. After that, I used magic to right the shelf and a little more to clean the books and shelf.” She makes it sound simple. All the spells she used were so mundane, it didn’t even tip my radar that they could all be combined and make one grizzly outcome.

I look over at Dad. “That’s why we couldn’t find any dust on the books.” I bite my inner lip to keep my face straight. This is too fucking bizarre for words. I must admit, I lost a little sympathy for the guy when I found out he was an errand boy taking a woman back to her abusive husband, so that



might be why I can find the humor in the situation.

“Are you willing to be put on a truth probe to verify this?” I ask Belinda, and she nods immediately without hesitation. “It’s intrusive, but I’m going to be honest. Without that as a tool, I don’t know if anyone is going to believe this story.”

*She’s telling the truth*, Percival speaks through our connection. I nod, agreeing with his statement.

“I’ll do it, I don’t have anything to hide anymore.” Belinda looks over at my dad with wide, hopeful eyes. He reaches forward and pats her knee softly, making me think this might turn out okay after all.

## CHAPTER 27

I COULD TELL YOU, BUT THEN I'D HAVE TO KILL YOU.

*A*fter talking with Belinda for a few more minutes, Dad takes her to his office. I don't have the heart to remind him this is far from over. It may have cleared things up for him, but there's still a lot Belinda needs to answer for, not to mention there's also the threat of her husband. If he's as dangerous as she seems to believe, I don't think he's going to give up so easily.

I close the door to the breakroom and make a call. Lewis offered resources, and now I need to find out if she's going to make good on that.

"Lo," she mumbles, giving her trademark greeting.

"It's Bishop." I never know if she'll know who's calling, like if I'm programmed into her phone.

"What's up?" I hear chattering in the background, but I have no clue where she is.

"New developments and a request. This is a strange one."

"Hit me with it," Lewis tells me.

I spend about three minutes condensing the story, making sure to also include my dad's personal relationship with Ms. Miller—I don't want it to seem like I'm leaving anything out. Finally, I explain, "I was hoping if a truth probe was made available to them, we could forgo a lengthy investigation and possible prosecution."

"What's the husband's name?" Lewis questions.

"William Bursa," I supply. After hearing what Belinda had to say, I knew that would be an important tidbit, so I asked after she agreed to the truth probe.

"Any confirmation on the LoJack?" she asks, then demands, "Pen," to someone that must be with her.

"Not yet. I haven't even spoken to LaPointe yet today, but it's definitely my suspicion. Things have been developing quickly."

"I'll send Agent Decker down with the equipment and a seer," Lewis replies, sounding slightly distracted.

I'm taken aback, not only because she's sending a seer and the probe, but because she's sending it so quickly and with Ambrose—Agent Decker.

“I’m fully trained on the use of a truth probe,” I offer, partly to make it a little easier and partly because it feels a little weird to mix a piece of my new life with my old life. Ambrose and I have hung out outside of work a few times, just as friends and colleagues, but I get the impression there’s some interest there, and it could have been more than a friendship if I would have allowed it.

*What has you all in a tizzy?* Percival asks, and I miss a little of what Lewis says. I pinch my fingers and thumb together, telling him to hush.

“...a few hours away. And it will get him out of my hair,” she finishes. Ambrose is a juggernaut when it comes to work. He’s always looking for the next case as soon as one is finished.

“Okay, if you’re sure,” I agree.

“I’ll send Decker the details, you send him the address. I’m going to take a look at this Bursa fella too, see what kind of shit he’s into,” Lewis says, and I can tell the call is wrapping up.

“Thanks, I appreciate your help on this one.”

“That’s what I’m here for—oh, and Bishop, your request for the slipkey was approved.”

“What?” I chuckle disbelievingly. “I haven’t even submitted the—”

“I fast tracked it since you’re in the field,” she divulges like it was the simplest solution.

“That’s... Thank you?” To say I’m surprised would be an understatement.

“My motives are selfish, Bishop. You help close cases, and that’s my goal.” Her no-nonsense tone makes it clear she’s telling the truth, but she has to know what she did for me is a pretty big deal.

“Thank you,” I reply with more confidence this time. “I really do appreciate it.”

“Let me know how this shakes down,” she says before the line goes dead. I stand in the breakroom for a long minute, just staring down at my phone, astonished at how easy that was. A grin tugs at my lips until I remember I have to forward the address to Ambrose.

*May I speak now, highness?* Percival deadpans.

“Oh stop, that was my boss and I was trying to hear her.” I sort through my contacts for A. Decker and tap the text icon next to his name.

**Me:** SSA Lewis is going to brief you on details. I’m at the Hill Crest Police Station. 1910 Main Street, Hill Crest. Make sure you fill up your tank

at or before Billings.

**A. Decker:** Already clued in. No need for gas when I have a fancy slipkey to get me where I'm going. Might need a ride home though.

"Crap!" I mutter.

*I thought you only had three consorts?* Percival states.

"I do—I mean I don't. Yet. Why are you asking about this right now?" I look over and see my mink sitting on top of my computer bag.

*You're nervous and thinking about mating.*

"Gods, I am not."

Percival just gives me a look that says he doesn't believe me. I have no clue how his little features can convey so much.

"Okay, but not with him. Ambrose is a flirt. I'm not sure how the guys would handle that," I admit.

*Humans.* He slinks away, clearly losing interest in my dilemma. I watch him scurry over the counter, stopping in a few places to smell or decide where to go next. My phone vibrates and I look down.

**A. Decker:** The seer is en route, shouldn't be more than an hour or two.

**Me:** Sounds good. I'll be waiting.

I don't know why the guys possibly seeing and meeting Decker has me so nervous. It's not like I have anything I need to hide. Nothing ever happened between us except that one kiss. That thought makes me cringe.

I'm honestly more worried about them putting up a stink about who I work with and giving me a hard time about it, but there's a small piece of me that's worried about them seeing Decker and how friendly he is. I don't want it to bother them enough to challenge the slight truce I think we've formed and what may come of it.

Maybe I'll get lucky and avoid the situation altogether. I mean, this could be the day they don't insist on micromanaging every aspect of my life since I came back. I did tell them they didn't need to worry about me leaving town. Grayson made it seem like they would come if I called, so the simple solution is not to call and to stay at the station. Easy.

"I'm going to let Pop know the MBI is sending over a seer," I tell Percival. "Want to come with?" He's holding something small and shiny in his little paw. I can't quite make out what it is.

*I think you can manage without me for a little while,* he says snootily, barely looking away from his bauble.

"You just want to see what you can dig up and pilfer." I snort. He may

have me pegged as a horny witch, but I think I know his weakness too. He doesn't even bother denying my words, just lifts his little face and looks at me expectantly, waiting for me to leave.

"Hexes, I'm going to need to bribe him to like me."

*I like crayfish and duck eggs*, he calls after I leave the room, proving his hearing is very keen.

"Unbelievable," I mutter but take note of the information for future use.

I tap on Dad's door before turning the knob. He leaps back from the desk, where Belinda is sitting, and scrubs his hand over his lower face. Belinda makes herself busy looking down at the desktop.

"So..." I rock back on my heels, wishing I would have waited for him to respond to my knock before coming in. This is so awkward. I think I caught them kissing. *Gross*. After clearing my throat, I tell them, "MBI is sending over a seer with a probe. If all goes as expected, you can use that in lieu of a trial for self-defense."

"If they even charge you." Dad looks at Belinda. "With that kind of info, they may not even move forward with a trial."

"That's what I'm hoping. They are also going to look into your husband." I wince around the word. "Do you know if he does forbidden magic?"

Belinda nods. "Definitely, I've seen him," she confirms. It makes me wonder why he wouldn't LoJack her if he's willing to do so to his apprentices.

As if she can read the question on my face, she stands up and lifts her shirt, then pushes down her slacks to expose her hip. There's a brand stamped into her flesh. The skin is raised and rough, but there's a wide gash that runs through the image that looks fresher. I bounce my eyes up to hers.

The pain of the brand would be enough, but what she had to do to herself to nullify it would have been even worse. I swallow, not breaking our connection, and find a new respect for the woman. She may seem mild mannered, but she's got a spine of steel under all that meekness.

"What the hell, Bee?" Dad shouts. Belinda flinches and lets her pants spring free from her grip to cover the scars.

"It's fine, Marty. I don't even remember it's there all the time." She gives him a placating smile.

"He did that to you?" My dad is seething. I'm worried it's going to freak out Belinda—considering the shit she's probably been through, I wouldn't be surprised—but she handles his rage with grace and not an ounce of fear.

“He tried,” is her only reply.

Dad stands stock-still for a breath, but then he’s reaching for her. With a gentle touch, he gathers her in his arms and nuzzles the side of her head near her ear.

I excuse myself from the room and close the door softly behind me. “What’s wrong?” Remy asks, and my eyes pop open to find him just a few steps away.

“What are you doing here?” I push off the wall.

“I asked you first,” he counters.

I narrow my gaze. Our childishness isn’t going to work forever. “It has nothing to do with me, I can tell you about it later,” I hedge, keeping my voice low. I won’t chance anyone overhearing what I just learned. Hell, I probably shouldn’t even tell him since it’s Belinda’s private business, but it’s hard to keep such shit to yourself.

Remy roams his gaze over me, and after a moment, he gives me a tiny nod, agreeing to drop it for now. “Are you going to tell me why you’re here?” I ask, stepping away from Dad’s office door.

“I’ve been away from you for years. Isn’t that enough reason to want to see your ass—face?” he replies with a twist of his lips.

“I thought my ass was too narrow.” I deepen my voice to mimic his words from the first night I came back to town.

Remy’s hands wrap around my hips, and he tugs me backward so I’m snug against him. “I’ll take your ass any way I can get it,” he murmurs near my ear. My body relaxes against his, and he steps away, leaving me missing the feel of him pushed up against me. “Besides, I’m going to have it filled out in no time.” He delivers a quick, but stinging crack to my ass cheek with his palm.

I tuck my butt in, and my hand goes to the spot to rub the ache away.

“What the fuck, man?” I hear from behind me. I close my eyes and refrain from stomping my foot. It hasn’t even been a half hour since I texted him and he’s here. What happened to an hour or two?

“Ambrose—Agent Decker.” I spin to face him, realizing I should have opted for the blazer when he looks down at me and tilts his head to the side.

“Frances?” He says my name as if he might have the wrong person.

“Who the hell are you?” Remy steps up behind me again, lining his body up with mine.

“Remy, this is my colleague, Special Agent Decker.” I move to step to

the side so I'm still between the two men.

Ambrose gives me the stink eye before focusing back on Remy.

"Ambrose, this is Remy, my... Remy Broussard," I finish when I don't know what to call him. A friend, and old boyfriend, part of my future harem?

I feel Remy glare at the side of my head, then he turns his attention back toward Ambrose. I hear the chime from the front door tinkle, and then Grayson's and Felix's voices as they speak to whoever is out front.

I tug at the V-neck of my shirt, even though it's loose, but I'm hot. This hallway must be shrinking or something.

*At least you're always entertaining*, Percival supplies jovially. I feel his little claws digging into the fabric of my jeans as he circles his way up my leg.

"You're such an asshole," I grit out through a smile, like having a mink crawl up my leg is no biggie for me.

Ambrose wrongly assumes I'm talking to Remy. "Yeah, you can't do stuff like that, guy. She is fully capable of arresting you."

"Oh no, not him. He can do that." I spin to face Remy and glare at him. "I mean he can't do that when I'm *working*." I face Ambrose again.

"It's not okay just when you're at work?" Ambrose tucks his hand in his pocket and scrutinizes me.

"Did you bring the seer?" I try to look around him, hoping for a subject change, but I end up finding Felix and Grayson holding brown bags in their hands.

Grayson takes one look at my face, then brushes past Ambrose so he can step up next to me. I can feel how red my face is by the heat rising over my cheeks. Felix joins our group, and I start introductions again.

"Agent Ambrose Decker, this is Grayson and Felix. We all grew up together." Now why the hell couldn't I think of that thirty seconds ago? "Guys, this is Ambrose. We work together sometimes."

*Testosterone is getting thick. Each of them would be able to provide you young*, Percival announces, as if that's the end-all and be-all.

"Not helping," I singsong.

*You could always make them fight it out*. Percival makes the short jump from my shoulder to Felix's and perches there.

"No, no." My voice goes deeper as I respond, shaking my head.

"Are you feeling all right?" Ambrose asks, acting like the guys aren't even around.



“I’m good. I just wasn’t expecting everyone at once. Sorry, it’s been a long few days.” I dismiss my awkwardness with a wave.

“The seer will be here soon. He had his own travel plans,” Ambrose informs me, answering my earlier question.

“Good. Why don’t we get set up back here, and I can fill you in?” I tip my head toward the breakroom.

“We brought lunch.” Felix lifts the bag a little, and I can see grease stains. “It’s from Jimmy’s,” he tempts.

“You’ve got time to eat, right, doll?” Remy wraps his heavy arm over my shoulders and pulls me in close to his side while continuing to stare at Ambrose. “I’m sure your colleague won’t mind.”

Ambrose’s eyes narrow at that. “These wouldn’t be the world-famous burgers from Jimmy’s I’ve heard so much about, would they?”

Grayson looks down at me as if I’ve somehow betrayed him because Ambrose has this knowledge.

“You know what they are,” I say with too much enthusiasm. “I would be more than happy to share some with you, but I just need a minute with the guys. Do you mind?”

“She’s not interested, man.” Grayson folds his arms over his chest and tips his chin in the air while glaring at Ambrose.

“Grayson,” I warn and grab his arm while Remy is still wrapped around my neck. It’s only the second time I’ve touched him since I’ve been back, and his emotions, along with everyone else’s, fill me until I can barely tell whose is whose. It’s a jumbled mess. All I can think is, *Please don’t do this. Don’t embarrass him or me. Ambrose knows.*

“This is them.” Ambrose scans the guys again. “I thought there was one, but three?” He shakes his head as a slow smile forms on his lips. “I shouldn’t be surprised, but I can’t compete with that.” My shoulders relax. “You want me to wait back here? I can, patience is a virtue of mine. I have all the time in the world.” The way he says it makes me think he’s talking about more than just waiting for me to get done talking to the guys.

“Not letting her go this time,” Remy challenges as Ambrose breezes past, proving I’m not the only one who picked up on his double meaning.

“Right in there.” I nod, smiling, then I jab my elbow back into Remy. He doesn’t even budge. Once Ambrose is out of sight, I release my hold on Grayson and spin on Remy. “That was out of line,” I snarl.

Remy takes a step forward and pushes me backward with his body until

I'm pinned between him and the wall. I look to the left to make sure Ambrose can't see us. "Why?" Remy demands.

"Because we work together, and this is...personal stuff," I answer.

"He made it personal." Remy isn't giving me any room, he's surrounding me. "Is he competition, doll?"

"What? No," I scoff, although this is exactly what I was worried about.

"I know you know that, but clearly, he doesn't. We were making things obvious for him. Doing him a favor," Remy reasons, attempting to make it sound simple, but it never is.

"Well, that's enough. Leave it be." I make my voice firm.

"Unless he needs a reminder." Remy starts to back away from me with his hands raised in surrender, but I know better. He doesn't have a submissive bone in his body.

Remy spins on his heel and wraps his arm over Felix's shoulders much in the same way he did mine, and they walk in the direction Ambrose went. *Great.*

"He has feelings for you," Grayson tells me when we're alone.

I look up at Grayson and don't try to deny it. It would be useless. "You know it doesn't matter if he does. I could never return them."

"You wanted to though." Grayson frowns.

I can't deny that either. It would have been so much easier if I could have moved on. I don't really know how to respond, so I keep quiet instead. I'm sure he's reading everything I'm feeling anyway.

"I..." Grayson opens his mouth to say more, but Remy pokes his head out of the hall leading to the breakroom.

"Come eat," he demands and disappears again.

I chuckle. "He's obsessed with feeding me."

"He said you weren't eating right. It made him crazy. That's why he learned to cook."

"Really?" I ask shyly, tucking my hair back behind my ears.

"Yeah, he bitched about it all the time." Grayson cracks a smile. "We better go before he comes out here with a fork to hand feed you."

That makes me laugh. Remy is just crazy enough to actually do it.

## CHAPTER 28

MY JOB IS TOP SECRET. I DON'T EVEN KNOW WHAT I'M DOING.

Lunch was awkward, but not nearly as bad as it could have been, considering the company. Felix and Gray brought enough food that I didn't even need to share mine with Ambrose.

Dad joined us shortly after we sat down, and I think he helped defuse some of the tension in the room. He's met Ambrose a time or two, so I don't have another introduction to muddle through. We spend most of the time getting Ambrose caught up on what we know about the victim and talking about how to move forward with LaPointe. It's clear he's involved with William Bursa, but from Belinda's own confession, we know he didn't have anything to do with the other man's death.

"At this point, the only thing we have on him is the evasion and traffic violations." Dad pushes his chair back to give himself some leg room under the round table we're seated at. "I'm going to push for a high bail just because the guy's an asshole. The judge might agree with him being a flight risk, but with Carter for a lawyer, I doubt it will matter. She's not cheap, so somebody who likes that psycho has a big bankroll."

"SSA Lewis is taking point on Bursa. Maybe you could get LaPointe to flip on his boss," Ambrose suggests after wiping off his hands with a rough paper napkin.

"If Bursa has the kind of control over LaPointe we suspect he does, it wouldn't matter. He wouldn't be able to roll on him if he wanted to," I reply. Felix is toying with the ends of my hair behind my chair. It's distracting, but not enough for me to move or ask him to stop. "I'll let Lewis know he's probably going to get sprung. She might have an idea on how to deal with him."

"Chief, we've got some more agents from the MBI out front." Scotty pokes his head into the breakroom.

"That will be the seer." Ambrose stands up from the table, grabbing his burger wrapper as he does to toss it in the trash. "Is there somewhere I should have them set up?" He looks between me and Dad.

"We're going to need some space, boys," Dad announces. It's funny that

he still calls them boys, but I guess that's part of watching them grow up.

"When should we come back to pick you up?" Grayson asks, already standing.

"I'm not sure. I can give you a call later." I push in my chair and glance at the door. Ambrose and Dad already left, but the guys are standing around as if they are waiting for something. "If everything goes okay, it shouldn't be more than a few hours," I add when they seem reluctant to leave.

"Come on, we've managed the last few years. We don't need to have eyes on her at all times." Felix brushes past me, making sure our hands touch as he does.

"Speak for yourself." Remy pouts, but then he makes like he's going to follow after Felix. When he reaches my side, instead of the inconspicuous hand brush, he wraps his arms around my waist and back, then shifts me to the side as if he's dipping me. I'm left staring up at his roguishly handsome face before he slams his lips down on mine in a hot, but too quick kiss.

When he rights me, I'm breathing heavily. "A little something to remember me by," he murmurs, then saunters out of the room with a swagger that would look forced on anyone else but Remy.

Grayson is still standing in front of me when I look away from Remy's backside. "I'm not going to pretend I think I could get away with that, but be safe and call us if you need anything. I'll see you tonight." His approach is slow, measured. I take in his distinct scent and the nearness of his body, and my skin actually prickles with anticipation while I wait for him to touch me.

Grayson finally wraps his arm around me in a half hug and kisses my temple, lingering just long enough so I feel the cushion of his full lips and I think about tipping my face up to offer my lips instead.

Once he releases me, he rushes from the room, leaving me to stare after him. That man is giving me a serious case of whiplash, but I think it might be worth it.

As he clears the hall, a man I've only seen in pictures fills his void. He's dressed in a crisp fitted suit. I brush my side to straighten my shirt, but my fingers meet with soft cotton, not my white dress shirt. *Crap*. Just my luck I would meet the head of the seers when I'm in a T-shirt and jeans. When he tilts his head to the left, I catch the slight graying of his dark hair near his temples. If I had to describe him using only one word, it would be somber. His dark eyes are deep set, and his mouth rests in a flat line, neither frowning nor smiling.

I step forward to meet him when he reaches the door. “Agent Bishop.” I extend my hand.

“Assistant Director Wuornos,” he replies. He takes it in a firm grip, giving me one solid pump in return, then drops my fingers to look around. Belatedly, I feel for my protection ring, wondering if my shields are strong enough to block him.

There’s a woman behind him with a satchel over her shoulder. She must have the probe. “Where’s the subject?” AD Wuornos asks, getting right to business.

“She’s in the office. I’ll go collect her.” I sidestep him, finding Dad in the hall.

“I had Scotty take LaPointe back to his cell. We can use the interrogation room,” Dad offers. “Decker is setting up.”

“If you could show me where that is, I can get the probe ready,” the woman says, speaking up for the first time, looking at Dad.

“Sure thing,” Dad says, but I can hear the tension in his voice.

“I’ve been looking forward to meeting you,” Wuornos says after Dad and the woman disappear down the hall. I pivot to face him. I’m sure he can read the surprise on my face. I didn’t even know he knew I existed. “Interesting magic you wield. It’s certainly lightened my caseload.”

I don’t know if I should apologize or tell him he’s welcome by his tone, so I decide to keep quiet.

“What’s it like always knowing why people do the things they do?” He tilts his head to the side as if he’s studying me.

The fact that I feel emotions when I read signatures isn’t something I really advertised at the academy, so the question catches me a little off guard.

“I only ask because always knowing everyone’s deepest secrets can be... as exhausting as it is exhilarating. I wonder if it’s the same for you?”

The fact that he divulged something personal makes his question less intrusive. “It’s like watching a movie as opposed to someone telling you about it,” I tell him, and tuck my hair back behind my ears. “The full picture is clearer, if that makes sense, but I don’t experience the feeling the same way a caster or even an empath does, because I don’t have a connection to the magic I’m reading.”

“Fascinating.” The way he says it so softly under his breath makes me think he would like to cut me open and put me under a microscope. It gives me the creeps.

“They should be ready now.” I hook my thumb over my shoulder while keeping my eyes on him. He dips his head once in a nod, and I take it as my dismissal. I can feel his eyes on my back as I walk away from him. The hair on my nape tingles as if he may reach out and grab me, but it never happens.

Dad is standing next to his office door, while Belinda is still seated behind his desk. She rises as I approach. “Your dad said they would be ready for me soon,” she murmurs.

“We have a minute while they set up. Do you have any questions about the procedure?”

“Not really about the test itself, but will you be there?” She looks at my dad, even though I’m the one who asked the question.

Dad’s lips thin, and he shakes his head. “The best way to get this over with quickly and to avoid a trial is with me not being involved any further. I should have been protecting you from the beginning by making sure someone else questioned you and did all the follow-ups.” Dad darts his eyes over to me, but focuses back on Belinda.

“You may have broken protocol a few times, Pop, but nothing that would cause any issues with adjudicating this.” It’s not an *I told you so*, but he gets the message. “I’ll be there, and so will another agent I’ve worked with several times. You’ll be vulnerable to the seer, but no one else in the room will be privy to what he sees other than the recording device, and that would only be reviewable by court officials should there be a need.” I know she said she knows how a truth probe works, but people rarely grasp how intrusive it can be to be placed on one. I don’t think I’ve ever witnessed one where the subject didn’t cry.

She nods, telling me she listened to what I had to say, but then she walks over to my dad and grabs his hands. “I know you were trying to shield me the entire time, and I lied to you. I’m sorry for that.” She lets go of his fingers long enough to wipe under her eye, then clasps his hand again. “I don’t ever want you to question if anything else that happened between us was a lie, because it wasn’t. Thank you for believing in me, and thank you for showing me what love should be.”

“Why are you talking like you’re not going to come back?” He reverses her grip so he’s the one holding onto her hands.

“I can’t stay here, Marty. William will come for me and bulldoze everything in his wake.” She shakes her head.

Dad’s brow furrows. “You think I can’t protect you?” he asks softly.

“No, I’m trying to protect you,” she tells him earnestly.

“That would be funny if I couldn’t see how serious you are. Bee, I don’t need protecting. I promise I can handle anything he throws at us, and it’s an us, babe, because I’m not letting you go that easily.”

Ambrose waves at me from down the hall. “We need to get going,” I say, interrupting their moment. Later, I can tell her that MBI is already investigating her husband and it’s only a matter of time before he gets picked up. Lewis doesn’t give up, and she has him in her sights.

Dad wraps his arms around her in a quick, tight hug, then stands back. “I’ll be waiting for you when you get done,” he states.

I guide her down the long hall to the interrogation room. Ambrose is waiting near the door, as is the female agent who accompanied AD Wuornos. The man himself is seated at the table, and the metal device near his hand is a cross between old magic and new. There are sigils and runes etched into the shiny surface, and a small LCD screen that is currently blank, but once Belinda sits down and the potion is administered, her brain waves will be displayed along with Wuornos’, so there’s verifiable proof they are connected. Inside the box is a recording device, but I have no idea how it works—only seers are privy to that information.

“Ms. Miller, have a seat,” Wuornos says.

Ambrose closes the door behind us, and the room feels so much smaller for it. I’m not nervous per se, but I’ve never known the person being probed. Being in the room with her feels invasive.

“I’m going to close the circle now and begin the test. Once it’s begun, I cannot stop it for any reason. Do you understand?”

Belinda nods and croaks out, “Yes.”

“Would you still like to go forward with the truth probe?” he asks in a routine way that seems habitual rather than having any true interest in the answer.

“Yes,” Belinda agrees with a little more certainty in her voice.

“If you would please, Bender.” Wuornos looks over at the female agent. She bends down and finishes the circle, encompassing the table that’s already been mostly chalked into the floor. I feel her magic bubble to life, and there’s a slight sour note behind it. She’s upset about something.

“Now then, if you can think of the day we’re all here to learn about, I won’t have to sort through your thoughts, and that will be much faster for all of us.”



“Okay.” Belinda adjusts in her seat.

Wuornos takes a small vial of purple liquid from his inner breast pocket. “Please drink the spell.” He hands it over to Belinda, who takes it with shaking fingers and uncorks the top. She hesitates with it near her lips for just a moment, and then she closes her eyes and tosses her head back, drinking the spell like a shot of strong liquor.

After swallowing, she returns the vial to Wuornos, who discards it on the table. “If you would, please.” He pushes a small pad, which is attached to the machine by a cord, toward Belinda. She places her palm over it, and the LCD screen blinks to life.

“And we begin,” Wuornos announces, placing his palm over a similar pad of his own.

The next thirty minutes pass with Wuornos and Belinda barely moving or speaking. If I didn’t know how this worked, I would assume something went wrong and they were both stuck in some sort of stasis.

Finally, without any warning, the seer lifts his hand off the reader and lets out an audible breath. Belinda blinks rapidly right after and wipes away the tears streaming down her face. They started within minutes of the test beginning and showed no signs of slowing throughout it.

“Tiredness is a common side effect. Allow yourself time to recover,” Wuornos says, while Agent Bender reaches down and breaks the chalk circle on the floor with her finger.

“It’s over?” Belinda asks in a whisper.

“Yes.” Wuornos pushes back his chair and stands.

“What now?” Belinda looks around the room.

“You are free to leave. I would not suggest driving yourself. If anything more is needed, which I doubt, we will be in contact.” He pauses, then really focuses on her. “It’s clear your only thought was to protect yourself.”

Belinda’s face falls as more tears drip from her eyes. “I wish he never found me,” she mutters.

## CHAPTER 29

BEAM ME UP, SCOTTY.

Dad drove Belinda home ages ago. He didn't even attend LaPointe's hearing, instead sending Scotty along, not that it mattered. The judge let him go with a return court date. It will be a waiting game to see if he actually shows up.

Ambrose and I get a briefing from Wuornos, while Bender packs away the equipment. "Officially, I will send my reports about the case directly to the prosecutors so they will know how to proceed. Unofficially, my findings and suggestions will be to drop it. This was purely accidental, only him not being there could have prevented it."

I breathe a sigh of relief. "Thank you for letting us know."

"Lewis gave me a little background on this and how she's planning to look into the husband. That needs to happen. He's into some dark stuff, and I don't think she even knew the half of it," he continues, meaning Belinda being in the dark about William.

Abruptly, the assistant director reaches out, and I respond on instinct, grasping his palm in a firm but brief handshake. "It was a pleasure. I'm sure we'll see each other again." He turns and walks away with Agent Bender following in his wake.

"Was it just me or was that ominous?" Ambrose asks once the door closes after them.

"You mean it wasn't just me?" I try for a chuckle, but it gets caught in my throat. I look over at the clock and note it's nearly dinnertime. I'm torn if I should invite Ambrose to eat with me or just call the guys. I know what I want to do, but I have better manners than that.

As soon as I open my mouth to ask Ambrose if he would like to eat dinner with me and the guys, my phone rings. I answer it without looking, assuming it will be Remy or Felix.

"Hello?"

"Seems like you made an impression on Wuornos," Lewis says in greeting. What could she know? The guy just left.

"Uh," is my inarticulate response.

"I need a debrief. Program the slipkey to headquarters and meet me as

soon as you're finished up there," she continues.

"We're done here." I look over at Ambrose.

"Perfect. See you in my office in twenty." The line goes dead.

*Crap.* I wasn't expecting to actually have to get Ambrose back to the city, though I should have. "We need to go to the field office," I tell him.

"Damn, I was hoping to get another burger before leaving. Looks like I have a reason to come back and visit." He grins at me. "Let me grab my bag."

I give him a reassuring smile in return, but really, I'm just thinking about how I would much rather be heading home to the guys.

"Coordinates are set to the intake room." Ambrose hands me a device that could be a fancy wristwatch. "I'm ready when you are."

"Hey, Charlie, I'm heading out!" I holler down the hall after collecting my laptop bag. The sight reminds me of Percival. "Hey, mink, want to go for a ride?" He's been snooping around the station all day. I'd catch glimpses of his tail as he snuck about.

*Not really, but I fear it's my duty to keep you out of trouble.*

"I do not get into trouble," I mumble, which makes Ambrose snort. "I don't," I argue. "Now hold on." I extend the slipkey so Ambrose can grab onto the object after Percival is safely secured in my bag.

The jump is exhilarating. It's like an artificial dose of adrenaline mainlined into your system. We materialize in the intake room. There's only one person at the desk, who barely even looks in our direction. I pocket the slipkey when Ambrose releases it.

"Meeting is in Lewis' office," I divulge, and we make our way up to the eleventh floor of the building.

Lewis' door is ajar when I knock, and she calls out, "It's open."

Ambrose drops into one of the chairs in front of her desk like he's exhausted. I'm a little more reserved.

Lewis lowers the papers she was looking at and peers at us from behind stylish frames. Her eyes are a deep brown, nearly black in appearance. "The AD said no charges should be filed." She places the papers down on her desk.

I nod, even though there's no need to. "Yeah, I'm sure he also shared with you that Bursa is indeed into dark magic."

"He did," she confirms. "He also said he wants you for a case he's working on." She doesn't sound happy. Neither am I.

"Seers work cases?" The question flies from my mouth.

Lewis opens her palms. "He's the AD, he can do anything he wants."

“What case?” I sit forward. He seemed way too interested in my magic.

“Don’t know. He said he would forward the details directly to you, and you should report to his office immediately following this meeting.”

“Today? Now?” I ask, stupefied.

“Apparently.” She tilts her head, and her tight curls bounce. “I made it clear you are under my command and that you working with him is a onetime thing, a favor, because he cleared up the Hill Crest matter so quickly.”

I lean back in the chair and huff. There’s a lot more I would like to say, but none of it would change the outcome.

“I’m going to give you some unsolicited advice, Bishop. Clear the job he wants you on and do it quickly. In and out. I would tell you to keep your head down, but it’s too late for that, you’ve already been noticed.”

Hexes, she’s not making me feel any better. “This isn’t something I can opt out of?” I’m only half joking because I know the answer.

“He’s expecting you within the hour,” she tells me with a serious expression. “I will check in with you and him daily. Feel free to remind him that I want you back soon.”

“What about me?” Ambrose sits forward a little.

“He only requested Bishop, and to be honest, I can’t spare you anyway. We just got a double sacrifice, and I need everyone on this.” Lewis lifts a brow, looking at me like it’s my fault I have to work with another team.

I plant my hands on the arms of my chair as Ambrose asks for details on the sacrifice case. Once the conversation dies, I speak up. “May I go? I have a call to make.”

SSA Lewis nods. “Clear the case,” she reminds me as I rise. I leave her and Ambrose in the office and head to my small cubicle. There’s nobody around right now, so I dial a number I know by heart but haven’t called in years. Remy picks up on the first ring.

“You ready? We’re starving.”

“About that. I’m back in the city.” I sound crestfallen, even to my own ears.

“Say that again, I just put you on speaker.” His voice is tight, so I know he heard me.

“I had to come back to the city for a debriefing and they put me on another case.”

“You couldn’t even stick around long enough to tell us?” Grayson accuses.

“That’s bullshit, Frankie!” Felix snaps, and I close my eyes. He’s been on my side pretty much since I’ve been back. I feel like shit for disappointing him.

“I didn’t know they were putting me on anything else until I got here. I thought I was just debriefing my supervisor and I would be back in time for dinner.” I sound defensive when I should be apologizing because I should have called.

“How late will you be back?” Felix’s voice is a little softer, but I can still hear the undercurrent of anger.

“I don’t know, they put me on another team for this case. I can’t tell you more than I know, and even if I did, I can’t discuss open cases.” I plant my cheek on my palm after dropping into the hard chair behind my desk.

*Watch it, witch,* Percival snaps when my bag bounces against my torso.

“Sorry.” I wince and remove my laptop from the bag to place it on my desk so he has more room. To the guys, I reply, “I was granted a slipkey though, so I should be able to make it back...at some point.”

“You said you would call if you left.” Grayson chooses to focus on that. I feel better prepared to hear this from him, since it’s more expected.

“I did, but this wasn’t someplace you guys could go with me, and I already said I thought I would be right back.” I’m trying to keep my voice just above a whisper, but my frustration is putting a bite into my words.

I look over at the clock. “I don’t have much time, I just wanted to tell you. I wasn’t planning on leaving. I should have called.”

“Agent Bishop.” I already know who it is when I hear his placid voice.

“Who’s that?” Remy demands, clearly hearing Wuornos.

“Guys, I have to go. I’ll talk to you as soon as I can,” I whisper, then louder I add, “Sorry about that,” while hitting the end button. The phone rings almost immediately after.

Wuornos looks down at the phone clutched in my hand as I ignore it. “I was expecting you in my office,” he remarks, and it comes off a little chastising.

“I had a personal call to make, sorry to keep you waiting.” I push the phone against my leg to absorb the buzzing sound still coming from my phone, even though I flipped off the ringer.

“Persistent.” Wuornos raises his dark brow when the phone continues to go off. “The case we’re working is high clearance and even higher priority. Leave the phone and let’s get to work.”

I hesitate for just a moment before placing my phone in my desk drawer and jogging to catch up with the AD. The comforting weight of my bag with Percival tucked away inside is all I have left with me.

*SHIT*, this is not how I expected to end my night.

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Albany lives in Michigan where she's happily married to her high school sweetheart. She spends most of her time juggling her four children's extracurricular activities, with her nose stuck in a book. When not reading you can find her writing her very own book boyfriends. Albany's passion is writing romance with real characters that are far from perfect, but always seem to find their own happily ever afters.

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